"When did you start to remember?" He asked next, relaxing further in his seat, which Kyo found calming.

Kyo wakes up in a strange place, not sure what year it is or what is going on or if anything she remembers is actually reliable. So she just does what she's always done; live her life. It soon enough becomes more about survival than anything else.

In which another lease on life is a bit more complicated than Kyo had at first anticipated.
This story's existence can't be credit only to me, because if it hadn't been for Worldtravellingfly and Shadowblayze, I doubt I would have come this far. I regret nothing.
Chapter 1

Her first few memories were fuzzy, indistinct, with brief moments of clarity in between.

Like the dark eyes of the man who would sometimes hold her with infinitely tender care, as if he was quietly terrified of accidentally breaking her.

Or the warm voice that would hum to her when she was feeling particularly distressed and uncomfortable.

Full self-awareness, as it turned out, wouldn't come until shortly after she turned one.

"Kyo-chan!" A familiar voice called out, drawing her attention from where she'd been contemplating the baby blanket she was sitting on.

It was a soft yellow, like the sun in early spring.

Or at least what had passed as such in her memories.

Looking up at the smiling woman who was crouching in front of her, she once again took in the clean, familiar features, the smile that softened dark, otherwise sharp eyes.

"Kaa-san," she returned clumsily, her tongue feeling thick and uncooperative in her mouth.

Her voice was high, light and *unrefined* in a way she still wasn't used to, and it'd been months since she realised what all this was.

What it must be.

"Are you hungry, Kyo-chan? Kaa-san's made you breakfast," the woman said, in a shade too dignified to be a croon.

She managed a nod, lifting her arms in the universal request to be lifted.

Something the woman, her- her mother, gladly answered, effortlessly lifting her off the floor and into strong, secure arms.

As she was carried to the small kitchen table, she couldn't help but compare everything she was now experiencing to what she could remember before... *Before*.

She was reluctant to call it a different life, because she couldn't remember dying. But what else could it be?

Not that her previous existence had been *perfect*, or anywhere close to it, the thought of having actually *died*...

God, her mother must be a wreck.

Had her siblings cried for her? Where they doing so even now, more than a year later?

Were they even alive? How much time had passed between her supposed death and rebirth?
Not that reincarnation was a new or at all foreign concept to her. She'd been a rather firm believer of it, in fact. In an off-hand, casual sort of way.

But she'd never actually expected to experience something like this herself. Not with memories of half a life-time intact.

Ra- No. The woman who was her mother here called her Kyo, and that was what she must go by. At least until she knew for certain what was going on.

She'd always remember her real name, of course. The one her mum had given her, that everyone had always had trouble pronouncing -for some inexplicable reason, it wasn't like it had been that hard -and everyone always asked where it came from.

Kyo was nice enough, even though it sounded strange in reference to herself.

At least the food was good; she'd always loved rice.

Stubbornly ignoring the woman's attempt to feed her, Kyo stuck a poorly coordinated hand into the bowl of the soft white grains and brought a small fistful of them to her mouth, sucking them off her fingers with what was without a doubt abysmal motor skills.

She didn't mind as much as anyone else in her position probably would; she'd always loved eating with her hands, and her 'kaa-san' made sure to keep her relatively clean, so it wasn't like her fingers were filthy.

Ah, well. Some dirt went a long way to clean out your stomach and build up the immune system. It'd always been a strong belief in their house, Before.

“Such a stubborn little lady,” kaa-san mused, not so much as blinking at the less than stellar table manners she was displaying. “Don't forget the fish; protein is important for growing children,” she smiled, pushing another plate a bit closer.

Kyo eyed the fried fish with interest, even as she stuck another handful of rice in her mouth.

She ignored the minor mess she was making, focusing instead on more important matters. Like the fact that she didn't have enough control of her own hands to grab the fish without crushing it.

Well. It would look worse in her stomach, so.

As she ate, kaa-san gave a pleased hum, leaning back in her chair to observe. Taking note of her every move.

Kyo wasn't used to this level of attention fixed on her person; not even when she'd been a child the first time.

Having been the middle child, born between two loud, very demanding siblings, she'd gotten used to being content to amuse herself in the background. Intervening occasionally -or a lot- as mediator when her older sister had reached her limit with their baby brother.

Someone had had to stop her from accidentally harming him when tempers and emotions ran high and there wasn't an adult conveniently close at hand.

Most of the time nowadays, she felt like she was living with a spotlight following her every move. There wasn't anything of the sort, of course, just her kaa-san's hawk-like gaze.
“So,” kaa-san said once Kyo had decimated her breakfast. “What would you like to do today?”

“Park,” Kyo piped back, turning towards the woman to make it easier for her to wipe her face clean.

Toddlers were messy eaters, and Kyo was determined to regain her hand-eye coordination as soon as possible, which meant she wanted to do as much as possible by herself.

It had been something of a personal motto already her first time around, and she saw absolutely no reason to change that now.

God, the story with the soup had haunted her even in her twenties. Eat soup with your thumb instead of a spoon one time as a baby and everyone insisted on bringing it up for the rest of your life.

It had been done with love and warm amusement, but still. It got old after the hundredth time or so.

Her kaa-san tilted her head, eyeing thoughtfully, before flicking a considering eye towards the living room window, visible through the doorway to the kitchen.

“Very well then, Kyo-chan,” she said, picking her up and taking her into 'her' room.

She was dressed quickly and efficiently for a day spent outside, a white, rather nice little sun hat shading her eyes, and a shoulder bag was packed almost too fast for her to see what went inside.

When they were both ready, her kaa-san picked her up again, carrying her on one arm so that she was leaning comfortably against her chest and shoulder, and then they were off.

Kyo watched everything with wide, intent eyes.

She'd only been outside a few times so far, that she could remember clearly, and she found it equal parts fascinating and mildly unsettling.

It was warm here, far more so than back home. The sky was a deep blue it'd rarely even gotten at the hight of summer Before, and the people looked different.

Oh, it wasn't anything blatantly obvious, but little things here and there. Things that were just ever so slightly off.

The way some people dressed was foreign. And she meant that in a literal sense. Combined with the food -almost always accompanied by rice- and the seemingly constant heat, she wondered if she'd been reborn somewhere in Asia.

The language, somewhat familiar, seemed to enforce the impression.

Soon enough, the busy street changed into soothing greenery, with far less people hurrying about and less noise grating on her small, sensitive ears.

Kyo took in her new surroundings, though they were slightly more familiar; she'd been here twice before already.

She was soon enough sat down on pleasantly cool grass, and amused herself by pulling up fistfuls of it while her kaa-san took out the yellow blanket, shook it out on the grass and then settled herself on top of it.

Kyo looked up to meet the woman's gaze, wondering if she'd be relocated away from the grass, but her kaa-san seemed content enough to leave her at it.

Bolstered by this development, Kyo continued her quest towards fully functioning, dexterous digits and pulled up another clump of grass.

She could admit, when she stopped to think about it, how little it took to fascinate her nowadays. Just the sight of the butchered blades of grass falling from her pudgy fingers was enough to near-entrance her.

They were a very pretty green, admittedly, but she was used to slightly more exhilarating stuff.

The soft rustling of paper drew her attention away from her own activity back to her kaa-san, who had withdrawn a book from the bag and was now scanning the pages with the quiet competence she did almost everything.

*Shit*, she was so vastly different from her mother it wasn't funny.

She couldn't help but love her, though.

Kyo was aware that she was a very young child, and that this woman was her biological mother. It was only natural for there to be a connection, for there to be love, there.

And it wasn't like she'd ever been zealously guarded with her love. Before, not in a familial sense, but... it didn't feel quite right. She could remember her mother bringing in strays left right and centre, their home always open for those who needed it, and she'd always aspired to grow up to be like the woman who had shaped her entire being; who had made her the person she was.

She'd been *proud* to be that woman's daughter. Had thought the world of her mother even after she was old enough to realise she was just as fallible, just as human as everyone else.

Reassured that her kaa-san was where she'd indicated she would be, Kyo turned her attention to the rest of the park.

There were a few other mothers around with one or several children that presumably belonged to them, all running around or playing in the sandbox.

Hm. She'd liked playing in the sand when she'd been little.

Why not give it a try?

Actually, to be entirely honest, she'd liked playing in the sand even as an adult. It was fun, and strangely therapeutic.

With a new spark of determination, Kyo slowly managed to push herself onto wobbly legs, keeping her hands on the ground for as long as she needed until it felt like she wouldn't fall right over if she tried to stand up properly.

She *could* walk, thank you very much, she just... needed a bit of time to get upright. Once she was there, however, she was mostly good.

“Kaa-san,” she said, attracting the woman's attention instantly.

“Yes, Kyo-chan?” She asked, holding the book open with one hand.

Scrunching up her face as she tried to remember the word for sand, she eventually just pointed in the direction of the sandbox with an inquisitive expression, even though this was more along the lines of her telling her kaa-san where she was going.
Something the woman seemed to appreciate and approve of.

“Of course,” she said with a slight smile. “Go have fun.”

Kyo grinned at her kaa-san and then made her way across the grass until she could pull herself over the wooden frame keeping the sand from spilling all over the place.

There were already a couple of kids there, one of whom seemed to be eating the sand more than playing with it.

Kyo was perfectly happy to ignore him in favour of burying her hands as deep in the sand as she could get them, smiling a little to herself at the feeling of the tiny, tiny grains of rock against her skin.

It didn't take long at all before she was gathering sand in a steadily growing pile in front of her, determined to attempt to build one of the huge sandcastles she could remember making with her mother and little brother in the sandbox they'd had in their garden when she was little.

Her brother had been more of a hindrance than a help, to be honest, as he'd been mostly interested in tearing the thing down than help build it, and she could remember how frustrated and angry she'd been with him, no matter how silly it seemed in retrospect.

Frowning a bit as she patted the sand to make it more compact, Kyo contemplated her own feelings.

Missing people hadn't really ever been something she'd done. Much to her sister's despair, but it'd just been how it was. She supposed she'd always lived very much in the present when it came to the people around her; enjoying the ones she had close while it lasted.

She could feel the gaping absence, though. No one was just a phone-call away any more. Not here.

As she didn't have any tools to work with save for her hands, she began to painstakingly dig out a cave at the bottom of the mostly cone-shaped pile she'd made, finding herself wishing for the impressive collection of toy cars she'd had as a child.

This would have made a perfect garage.

Kyo had just started on a smaller cave, or maybe a window, higher up on the sand construct when a foot came down on the thing and sent the sand cascading down into a sad-looking pile that didn't look like anything other than a crumbled ruin.

Staring dispassionately at the mess, Kyo wasn't exactly heartbroken at the loss of the less-than-impressive castle she'd attempted, but it was still annoying.

When she looked up at the gleeful, smug boy who was still stood before her, she felt her annoyance tick up a few notches.

He was older than her, by at least a year, more likely two, she estimated critically; she wasn't exactly an expert on children. And he was grinning to himself, all but dancing on the spot.

“Mean,” she told him quite bluntly.

The kid paused, and then turned to her to give her a mildly confused and dismissive look. As if she didn't matter.

Frowning at the boy now, Kyo pointed at the pile of sand. “Help fix,” she demanded firmly.

“I'm too big to play with babies,” the boy declared with a sniff.
And oh, that was just insulting. Who was the baby, destroying other people's projects?

With a scowl, that no doubt looked more like a pout - toddlers' faces weren't made to scowl - Kyo scanned their immediate surroundings until she spotted what she'd been hoping for.

Getting to her feet, indifferent to the amount of sand clinging to her bottom and clothes in general, she reached out to grab the boy's shirt in her pudgy, dirty hand, Kyo put all of her rather inconsequential weight into pulling the boy with her out of the sandbox.

“Hey! What are you doing? I don’ wanna,” the kid whined, trying to get her to let go, though she was pleased to note that he was largely unsuccessful.

If that was because she'd managed to build up enough strength in her hands during the last few weeks to make it difficult, or because he was just incompetent, she didn't know.

The boy tried to jerk away from her, and while it was enough to disrupt her balance and land her on her butt, she didn't lose her hold on his shirt, which she was pleased to see looked a bit stretched as a result.

Without a hint of remorse, she used it to pull herself back onto her feet and continue her trek.

When she reached the bench placed strategically close to the sandbox, she slapped a hand onto one of the women's knees to get her attention. And why wasn't she keeping a better eye on her son, anyway?

The kid sure seemed to need it, if his actions had been anything to go by.

The woman in question blinked her brown eyes and then turned to look at her, having to look down even when she was sitting.

“Ah, yes, dear?” She asked tentatively, taking in the sight of her son struggling to make the little child let go of his t-shirt.

“He breaked my sand,” Kyo told her quite clearly, even though she was pretty sure she'd gotten something wrong. Such were the hazards of learning a new language, she knew, and that wasn't even mentioning the fact that she was learning how to speak again in general.

“Er-” the woman looked quite blind-sided, to be honest.

Not that Kyo cared overly much. She'd gotten enough of spoiled children at work, and she really thought this woman ought to put in more effort into raising her spawn. Instead of gossiping with her friend, she should keep an eye on him and make sure he didn't terrorise the rest of the playground.

Not that she had any actual proof this wasn't his first offence, but it was best to nip these things in the bud.

Presumably.

Kyo was aware that it might be a bit hypocritical of her, considering the fact that she hadn't had any children of her own, but it sounded like common sense.

“Where's your mother, little one?” The other woman asked, leaning over her with an overly concerned look on her face that made Kyo want to frown uncomfortably.

“That would be me,” kaa-san's familiar voice said smoothly from a little ways behind Kyo, and she
instantly relaxed. “Your son was bothering my daughter in the sandbox, infringing upon her personal boundaries with no provocation.”

Kyo nodded, because yeah, that was one way to put it.

Now that she'd brought the issue to the adults’ attention, she gratefully released the hold she had on the boy's t-shirt, feeling the strain in her ridiculously fragile fingers.

The two women shrank back when they looked up and laid eyes on her kaa-san.

Kyo blinked, took in their suddenly rigid postures, the way Sand Boy’s mother made an aborted move to grab her child, as if to pull him behind her.

She wasn't stupid, but she couldn't quite grasp the reason for the sudden fear.

Her kaa-san hadn't done anything to warrant it; hadn't so much as raised her voice or puckered her brows into the mild frown she sometimes got when she was displeased with something.

Looking over the two women carefully, Kyo took in the feminine dresses they were wearing and their long, loose hair, reaching half-way down their arms. They had simple sandals on their feet, more leather straps securing soles to the bottom of their feet than anything else.

In comparison, her kaa-san was wearing sensible trousers, a t-shirt similar to the one Kyo herself was wearing and a pair of sturdy-looking almost-boots. Admittedly, the toes were bare, but it was warm and it really only made sense to try and let some air in.

“We're very sorry to have disturbed your day,” the woman hastily apologized, pushing her son’s head down in a rushed bow.

Kyo blinked.

Okay?

Her kaa-san made a soft noise she might have been tempted to call a scoff, though she looked more amused than anything.

“Kyo-chan?” She questioned, crouching down to be closer to her level, ignoring the two women and the boy now, focusing instead fully on her own daughter.

“Was rude,” she grumbled, disgruntled, wiping her hands on her shorts in a half-hearted attempt to make them less dirty. Her kaa-san held her hand out expectantly, and Kyo happily held out both of her own hands in response, perfectly pleased to let the woman wipe them clean with the wet-wipe she'd pulled out of somewhere.

“There are a lot of rude people, Kyo,” she said calmly. “There'll be plenty of time to work on how to handle them, though.”

Kyo peered at the woman who was her mother, trying to take the words to heart.

-x-x-x-
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Kyo learns more about her new circumstances, and the kitchen sink is far more interesting that it ought to be.

Chapter Notes

I'm gonna be posting these chapters until I catch up to how far we've gotten on ff.net

Life moved on, as it always does.

She slept a lot, which shouldn't really come as any kind of surprise, though she dreamt startlingly little.

The few hours a day she was actually awake were mostly spent inside their home, whether that was spent playing in her own room, exploring the kitchen and living room, or being cared for by her kaasan.

Then their comfortable routine was nicely invaded.

Kyo woke up with her face pressed into the pillow and slowly pushed herself up until she was sitting in the middle of her bed. Crib? Thing.

The thing wasn't quite a crib, but there were bars, reaching almost to her chest if she stood up. Supposedly to prevent her from falling out of bed, she gathered.

Waiting a few moments, her kaasan didn't come to collect her, like she usually did.

Considering the virtues of staying put, compared to trying to get out of bed on her own, Kyo eyed the wooden bars keeping her securely in place.

After some contemplation, she grabbed the railing, pulled herself to her feet and then carefully crawled over the edge and slowly lowered herself as close to the floor as she could get. Which meant that her toes touched the floor by the time she finally let go of the smooth wood.

Feeling pleasantly accomplished, she walked to the door. It was lucky her kaasan always left it cracked open, because she wouldn't have had a chance to reach the handle. Kyo grasped the door and pulled it further open and peeked out of her room into the living room.

Her kaasan wasn't anywhere in sight.

Pulling the door open enough to let her through, Kyo padded across the wooden floors until she reached the carpet, from where she continued into the kitchen.

Which was also empty.
Frowning uncertainly to herself, Kyo wondered what was going on.

He kaa-san had never not been there, not so far.

She was just a year and a few months old; you weren't supposed to leave children that young alone and unattended, even she knew that.

Wrapping a hand around one of the kitchen table legs, Kyo leaned a little to the side to peer at the door to her kaa-san's room, but it was stood ajar like usual, open just enough for her to get a glimpse of the floor and the far wall, but nothing more.

Kyo wasn't allowed in kaa-san's room, and she'd respected that rule so far. There was probably a good reason, she'd reasoned.

Hesitating for a long moment, she walked in under the kitchen table -and boy was it strange that she barely had to duck to fit under there?- grabbed one of the chairs and pushed it over to the counter.

It didn't make much in the way of sound, because basically all the furniture in the whole place had been outfitted with little fabric cushion-like things on the bottom of the legs, to prevent noise.

That done, Kyo set about the task of crawling... dragging herself up onto the chair.

Being this small was a marvel. Especially when she could clearly remember being tall enough the seat of a chair was situated in the region of her knees, rather than her shoulders. It was honestly more fascinating than annoying, which she found to be a bit strange in itself.

Reaching her goal of standing on the seat of the chair, she could actually see the top of the counter. Yay! Mission accomplished!

Grinning a little at her own thoughts -and success- she realised the next issue.

The were no glasses within reach, which sort of ruined her plan.

Since her kaa-san still hadn't come running, Kyo frowned at the clean, shiny metal sink. Reaching a hand out to touch it, it was cold and smooth and really shouldn't be this fascinating.

Soon enough, she'd managed to position herself so that she was actually sitting in the sink, which she found amusing.

It was a comfortable fit, and she could sort of remember this from Before. Her mother had used to bathe her like this when she'd still been small enough.

Not feeling in the mood to make herself wet, Kyo pushed the tap thing until it was situated over the other sink, and then managed to push up the lever that made the water run.

It was all hard work when you couldn't make your fingers and hands do what you wanted them to, half the time.

Making sure the water was cold, she leaned down and drank straight from the tap. Or, more accurately, from the steady flow of water below the tap.

When she was satisfied, she slapped a hand on the lever to turn the water off and wiped the excess liquid from her face with both hands.

The hands that slipped under her arms and lifted her out of the sink were quite the surprise, and made her let out a small, startled squeak.
Heart beating furiously in her chest, she flailed a bit, making a loud, distressed sound that was almost a sob.

By the time she was brought to a warm, solid chest, she realised she was full out crying, which, was a bit embarrassing. If not very surprising.

She'd had countless episodes of acting like an actual child already, so this was just part of the deal, apparently.

A large hand rubbed up and down her back, and deep voice murmured soothingly at her, and it wasn't until she calmed down that she realised two things.

One, this clearly wasn't her kaa-san.

Two, this person was almost familiar.

Taking deep breaths and trying to make the tears stop dripping from her eyes, Kyo dragged her forearm under her runny nose and blinked up at the person holding her.

“Ah, sorry,” the man murmured quietly, still rubbing her back. “Didn't mean to scare you, Kyo-chan.”

She blinked, taking in the brown hair, the smooth, young face and handsome features she couldn't say she recognized.

“Kaa-san?” She asked, voice wobbling pitifully despite her best efforts.

“She just stepped out for a moment; she'll be back soon.”

Kyo blinked tearfully up at him and he gave a wan, tired smile.

It made her feel a bit guilty for her outburst, to be honest, because he looked like he hadn't slept in a week. At least not anywhere near an appropriate amount, judging by the bags under his eyes.

The man wandered out of the kitchen and into the living room, where he gracefully sank down on the sofa, sinking into the soft cushions in an almost boneless manner.

Kyo settled quite comfortably on his chest, and she tentatively rested her cheek against his shoulder. The sound of his slow, steady heartbeat was calming and doing its best to lull her back to sleep.

Her eyelids grew heavier with every blink, until she found herself snuggling closer to the warm chest, curling up slightly and one hand fisting the soft, well-worn fabric of his shirt.

When her eyes opened again, it was to the sound of her kaa-san’s soft, amused laughter.

“Oh, would you look at that,” she teased gently, which was followed by the crinkling of plastic and a thunk of something hitting the kitchen table.

Kyo lifted her head, peering blearily around, trying to determine what was going on.

“Kaa-san?” She asked around a yawn.

“I'm here, now,” her kaa-san assured fondly. “And you were afraid she wouldn't recognize you,” she added, though clearly not directed at Kyo.

“I've been gone a while,” a deep voice responded, originating from the chest Kyo was still mostly
lying against. She could feel the vibrations clearly. “I found her sitting in the kitchen sink, Isshun.”

“Hm?” Her kaa-san turned around from where she'd been packing groceries away into their appropriate cupboards. “Well, I usually notice when she wakes up, so she was probably confused when I didn't come get her for breakfast. Is that what happened, Kyo-chan?”

Kyo nodded slowly, blinking up at kaa-san, and mulling over what was quite obviously her name.

Isshun? Sounded a bit weird, if you asked her. Not that they had asked her.

“Kaa-san gone,” Kyo said quite primly, in her opinion.

The man holding her snorted softly.

“That's one way to put it, I suppose,” he mused, a warm undercurrent to his voice. “And why were you in the sink, Kyo?”

“Thirsty,” Kyo answered promptly.

“You had to sit in the sink for that?” The man wondered amusedly.

“No glass,” Kyo defended herself with a slight pout. After a brief pause, she grudgingly added, “And fun,” because that was true.

The man chuckled softly, one of his hands rubbing up and down her back once, as if he couldn't help himself, and Kyo hadn't noticed it was still there, like a warm blanket.

“Well,” kaa-san laughed, “we'll let your tou-san sleep a few hours more, and then, if you feel comfortable enough,” Kyo wasn't sure if she said that part to Kyo or her tou-san, “you two can spend the day together.”

“Isshun?” Her tou-san questioned after a slight pause.

Kaa-san turned to finish her task, busying herself by putting away the last of the groceries. “Your mother's been pestering me about spending time with Kyo-chan,” she eventually said.

Her tou-san - and what was his name?- hummed a little, before he rose to his feet with a sigh.

“I suppose I can take a few hours to go visit them,” he said. “What do you think, Kyo?” He asked, looking down to meet Kyo's gaze.

She tilted her head, feeling a bit confused. “Okay?” She tentatively offered. She had grandparents? And her kaa-san didn't like them?

“There you have it,” kaa-san said, sounding vaguely amused.

Tou-san sighed, but didn't say anything about it. “I think someone mentioned something about breakfast,” he said.

“Food!” Kyo agreed, turning her head to look expectantly at her kaa-san.

She was hungry, and kaa-san's food was delicious.

“Breakfast,” her kaa-san repeated, and it sounded like a promise.
A few hours later, tou-san had slept a while longer, disappearing into the room he no doubt shared with her kaa-san, and Kyo had amused herself with some of the toys she had at hand and then eaten again.

“I'm not sure how long we'll be gone,” her tou-san said, standing off to the side and watching kaa-san -Isshun?- putting a pair of tiny shoes on Kyo's equally small feet. “Anything specific I should keep in mind?”

Kaa-san hummed thoughtfully, and Kyo craned her neck to see her face. She looked almost pensive.

“Nothing I can think of. I will most likely not be here when you get back, regardless,” she said, standing up and handing Kyo over into her father's arms.

Kyo didn't mind.

Her father from Before had been nothing like this man; shorter, with black hair and pale blue eyes. Her new tou-san was taller, as far as she could tell, younger, with brown hair and warm brown eyes. Like chocolate.

Looking at both of her parents, Kyo blinked and, for the first time, wondered what she looked like now.

She highly doubted she would look the same; different parents would equal a different appearance.

“You enjoy your time to yourself,” tou-san smiled, and he still looked pretty tired, though nowhere near as worn as he'd looked this morning.

Her kaa-san smiled, reaching out to caress Kyo's chubby cheek. “You two get to know each other better,” she leaned down to press her forehead to Kyo's, who blinked at her kaa-san's dark, almost black eyes. “And, Kou, remember that Kyo's too young to use anything other than the roads.”

And with that cryptic reminder, Kyo and her tou-san were off.

Once they were down on the street, Kyo blinked up at her dad, wondering where they were going.

“You're remarkably agreeable, little one,” tou-san said, glancing down at her before he went back to scanning the somewhat busy street around then. “My sister's son was far fussier the few times I visited,” he muttered to himself.

Kyo tilted her head and patted her tou-san's shoulder before she was distracted by all the people moving about.

She could admit that she was a bit surprised by how at ease she was with this man, whom she couldn't quite remember.

He'd no doubt been around a whole lot before she'd... come back online, so to speak, and that must be what influenced her responses now. The most important thing was; she felt safe.

A world away from her father from Before, at least so far.

She'd withhold judgement on that part, because not all men were the same and until this man did something to terrify her, she'd tentatively classify him as a far better father than her Before one had ever been.

Leaning her head against her tou-san's firm, steady shoulder, she snuggled into his hold and watched
the rest of the world from the safety of his arms, feeling perfectly content to wait out the moment and see where they were going.

She wouldn't say he relaxed, because there was still something about the way he held himself that made Kyo think 'tense', but it felt like something in his shoulders slowly unwound itself.

Measuring time had proven a bit difficult, like this, but she supposed he must have been gone several months. And kaa-san had mentioned something about him having thought she'd forgotten about him?

Had he been afraid she wouldn't let him hold her?

Well. It was a well-grounded fear, she supposed, because her little brother had been the biggest mama's boy and had done nothing other than cry and scream for his mum whenever their father had tried to hold him, back then.

Not that it'd been strange; her Before father had worked a lot and the few times he'd actually been home, well. Let's just say it hadn't been surprising.

Eventually, her tou-san turned down a much calmer street, moving away from the shopping district and into what looked like a mainly residential area.

Kyo watched the free-standing houses with some interest, the gardens looking to be relatively well-tended and cared for, sporting everything from flowers to vegetables and what else you could think of.

Soon enough, her tou-san was walking down the stone path towards one of the houses, clearly aiming for the front door.

He shifted his hold on her ever so slightly, and then raised his free hand and knocked.

A moment later, steps approached on the other side and the door opened.

“Kou-kun!” The woman who opened the door exclaimed, her whole face lighting up when her eyes landed on him. “Oh, it's been so long,” she gushed, enthusiastically ushering them inside, not noticing how tense her tou-san got and how uncomfortable it clearly made him.

Kyo leaned more firmly into the man's hold, listening to the woman -her grandmother?- prattle on about what sounded like everything that had happened since she'd last seen her son. Which involved anything from her own daughter, her children and the neighbours' latest projects.

“Kaa-chan!” Kou, her tou-san, finally managed to get a word in edgewise, bringing the woman's steady stream of words to a stop. “Isshun told me you’ve wanted to spend more time with your granddaughter. Well, here's Kyo,” he said with a small, almost indistinguishable huff, moving Kyo so that she was standing on his thighs.

They'd all sat down by the kitchen table, and Kyo wasn't especially comfortable being put on display like this, but she was willing to bear it if it meant that her tou-san got a bit of breathing room.

“Oh, she's just adorable, almost doubled in size since I saw her last,” the woman gushed, smiling at Kyo, who blinked back. “Such a sweet little girl.”

“Hi,” she greeted politely, trying to ignore the desire to squirm out of her tou-san's grip and duck under the table. Not that she was shy, she was just a tad overwhelmed by the veritable storm of words that had been flung in her general direction.
Was she really being used as a meat shield by her own father?

The woman all but squealed and leaned over the table to pinch her cheek.

Kyo stared, rubbing one hand against her now-tender cheek. No one had ever done that to her before.

She couldn't stop herself from craning her neck to give her tou-san a wide-eyed, slightly accusatory look, because whatever that had been about, she hadn't liked it and she certainly hoped it wouldn't happen again.

The man's gaze flicked to her, and she'd like to think he looked sympathetic to her plight, but he didn't say anything about it.

“How old is she now?” Her grandmother continued to ask, not having noticed anything off about Kyo's reaction. She poured the two adults a cup of steaming tea each, and then seemed to finally settle down properly in her seat.

“Seventeen months,” tou-san said evenly.

“Such a wonderful age,” the woman instantly returned. “I remember when little Kenji was that little, and Kana gave birth just the other month!” She added, as if just remembering. “You must go visit her and Ichirou, congratulate them.”

“Yes, kaa-chan,” Tou-san sighed. “What was it this time?”

“Another son,” her grandmother practically beamed, and should Kyo feel insulted? “They're naming him Taichi.”

She was well aware of the fact that daughters weren't valued very highly in some parts of the world, but she hadn't gotten that impression from either her kaa-san or, brief as their acquaintance had been so far, her tou-san.

“I'll make sure to take the time to pop over and visit them,” her tou-san promised, though Kyo thought he sounded tired.

Thankfully, he took the opportunity to shift her so that she could sit back down on his lap, leaning her back against his front. Which also freed up the man's hands so that he could pick up his tea.

“Are you staying for dinner? I could ask one of Suzume's boys to run over to Kana's and tell them you're here; they'd all love to see you, Kou-kun,” her grandmother said, perking up at the idea.

“Very well,” her tou-san said, perfectly evenly and agreeably, but Kyo felt like he rather would have liked to go back home.

It was the first day he was back from wherever he'd been; shouldn't he be resting? He seemed pretty tired, still, if you asked Kyo.

The two adults chatted a while, but Kyo wasn't paying all that much attention; she'd let her gaze and attention wander when her grandmother had started talking about the family business. Which, apparently, Kana's husband had taken over and was running together with her grandfather.

And then her grandmother said something that made Kyo's attention snap back into focus.

“I've been offering to babysit, but that woman keeps turning me down,” she said, sounding
disapproving and looking mildly insulted. “As if she thinks I don’t know how to care for children,” she groused.

Tou-san sighed. “You’re well aware that’s not the case,” sounding like they’d had this conversation several times before.

“I still don’t see why you couldn’t have married a nice girl from the neighbourhood, Kou,” his mother said, a small frown pulling on her brows. “A nice, sensible woman to care for the house while you’re gone, to take care of your every need when you’re actually home.”

And wow, that sounded both inappropriate and highly insulting. To both of her parents.

“I’m not talking about this again, mother,” her tou-san said firmly, and for the first time, the woman blinked and seemed to really look at her son.

“I know you’ve said you’re fond of her, son,” she said, almost cajoling. “But I’m sure you can find yourself a woman who doesn’t deal with quite-“

“And what if Kyo wants to follow in her mother’s footsteps?” Tou-san returned calmly, though there seemed to be a thin, hard edge to his voice as he cut his mother’s words off.

Her grandmother looked quietly horrified.

“But surely you must see that that isn’t something a little girl should get involved in, Kou,” she stared at her son, who looked supremely unimpressed when Kyo glanced up at him.

“Kyo is my daughter, kaa-chan. Mine and Isshun’s. And the two of us decide how to raise her, and any other children we may or may not eventually have,” he said firmly, quite clearly closing that line of conversation.

Other than the fact that she wasn’t sure what it was, exactly, they were talking about and kept referring to something they refused to state out loud, which was incredibly irritating, Kyo couldn’t help but approve of her tou-san’s words.

She loved her kaa-san, and she was quickly realising that that was no doubt true about her tou-san, too.

Seeing nothing wrong with how they were caring for and raising her so far, Kyo was most definitely on their side in this.

Her grandmother looked like she’d tasted something sour, but relented and started talking about something else.

An exhausting few hours later, Kyo was carried home by her tou-san, who walked home with a quietly fatigued sense clinging to his form.

Kyo was draped over his chest, head pillowed on his shoulder, and she was practically asleep.

“Home, now, please,” she mumbled sleepily once they finally left the house of her grandparents.

Her aunt and her two sons, her cousins, had arrived and wow, it had all been exhausting. At least her grandfather seemed likeable enough; quiet, composed, almost withdrawn. But he’d had kind eyes, and Kyo hadn’t had anything against sitting on his lap for a while, letting her tou-san catch up with
his older sister.

“Yeah,” tou-san agreed, shifting her a little so that she lied more comfortably against him, “home.”

And that was that.

Kyo didn’t remember getting back home, and over the next few weeks, tou-san stayed home, spending quite a bit of time with Kyo and her mother.

-x-x-x-
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

There are realistions, but it's not all bad; there's also poison. Chakra is an actual thing?

Chapter Notes

Have another one!

She didn't realise quite the severity of her situation until a few weeks after her second birthday, which, funnily enough, was still on the last of December.

Interesting how that had worked itself out.

Anyway, back to her situation.

She may or may not have figured out exactly where she had been reborn by now. Maybe. Possibly. Supposedly.

She had trouble even thinking it, because, just- what. Okay, she could accept the idea of her old self dying; everyone died. She could even accept being reborn, with her old memories intact. It had taken some time to digest, but she could accept it.

The thing that was giving her some real trouble, however, was the small, fascinating detail of the fact that she seemed to have been reborn in the world of a story she'd once read.

Just.

What the hell?

Was this what happened when you died? You were reborn into an alternate reality that had been nothing more than a story in the last place you'd been?

Oh, and also; she hadn't just been reborn in the Naruto-verse. She'd been reborn to actual shinobi parents!

Her new parents were professional killers. Mercenaries. Soldiers. Whatever you wanted to call it.

Her Before mother had been a goldsmith, then an art teacher, and her father had been a waiter before his joints had gotten bad enough he'd taken a job at the local school!

There may have been clues here and there; the way both of her parents tended to disappear a few hours every now and then -not to mention for weeks at a time, in tou-san's case- and how incredibly fit they both were. Things they'd mentioned in casual conversation.
The way her tou-san might have mentioned 'the Hokage' within her hearing when he talked to her kaa-san before leaving this morning.

In her defence, Kyo hadn't expected this.

Being reborn, fine, but she'd been expecting the good old world of back Before! She hadn't seen either of her parents in whatever served as uniform, and she hadn't seen any sign of shinobi around the town.

Village... whatever!

Then again, Kyo had grudgingly accepted that she was more child than adult right now; a child's brain was only so developed, memories of being a grown-up or not.

Okay, so. She'd realised she'd been reborn into a story she'd read and loved back Before, that she now lived in the Naruto-verse. In Konoha.

And thank all the Gods for that blessing. She dreaded thinking of what would have happened had she ended up in, oh, say, Ame. Or Kiri. Enough said.

She had already established that her parents were both shinobi, but they were quite clearly not part of any prominent Clan from the manga. Kyo had had to think back on everything that'd happened since she became aware of herself almost a year ago, and, well.

Her tou-san definitely seemed to be a civilian-born shinobi, what with his parents being as they were. Running some sort of merchant business with her Aunt's husband.

Her kaa-san was a bit harder to figure out, because she hadn't met a single member of her new mother's possible family.

Then she learned her surname, three days after finding out the name of the country she now lived in.

Shiranui.

Her name was Shiranui Kyo.

Shiranui.

The one problem she had with this fact, Kyo mused mildly hysterically, was that her father's name wasn't Genma. His name was Kou.

Had Genma had siblings in the manga? She didn't know. Didn't have the first clue.

And no matter how much fanfiction she'd written about the many and varied characters in Naruto, she quickly realised she didn't remember everything. The author had screwed up the time-line, too, so who knew what the hell could happen!?

And that was even assuming that her birth here hadn't changed something astronomically huge.

...what if she somehow ruined everything and all of humanity was doomed to fall to Black Zetsu's nefarious plan.

Holy shit, she might have doomed mankind. Somehow.

Where in the time-line had she even been born?
Had Genma procreated after the series officially ended and Kou was somehow the man's son? No, wait, she'd already established that her grandparents were civilians.

Fuck.

Kyo was all of two years old and she was having an existential crisis.

With good reason, but still.

She didn't realise she was crying until her mother, Isshun, swept her up into her arms.

“What's the matter, Kyo-chan?” She asked softly, pulling a hand over her short hair in a soothing gesture.

Kyo buried her face in her kaa-san's shoulder, wished it was her mother from Before and sobbed against the dark t-shirt the woman was wearing.

“When's tou-san coming home?” She eventually managed to ask, more for something to possibly blame her somewhat uncharacteristic outburst on, than a burning desire to know.

Kaa-san sighed. “He's not going to be back until next week, I'm afraid,” she said, carrying Kyo into her room.

She pulled out one of the books from the small bookshelf they'd put against one wall, and then sat down in the chair beside her bed.

“Come now, Kyo. I'll read you a story,” she offered, no doubt as a means to cheer her up.

Isshun and Kou had both started teaching her how to read, and Kyo loved it.

She'd actually studied a bit of Japanese in her past life, but she hadn't known enough to get by. And even if she had, she had a feeling that there were distinct differences between the languages, even though they were similar enough she didn't have any concrete proof.

But getting to learn real things again made her feel more like a real person and not just some sort of echo of the woman she'd used to be, floating in a strange dream. A very long, incredibly detailed dream.

Kyo sniffled and tried to calm herself down enough to stop the waterworks and even out her ragged breathing.

“Okay,” she managed, sounding truly pitiful, even to her own ears.

Isshun let out a small sigh, but helped her settle down in her lap so that she could see all the pictures. And, more importantly, the words.

She always tried to follow along when either of her parents read to her, to familiarize herself with the characters.

Hiragana and Katakana were relatively familiar, and the more she practised the more secure she became in the knowledge.

Kanji, however, were a bit more difficult.

Listening to her kaa-san's voice, Kyo slowly managed to calm down, even though one of her hands were clenched in her mother's shirt and the other was clasping the back of her hand.
When the story was over, Isshun slowly closed the colourful book and put it aside, giving Kyo a considering look.

“How do you feel about going on a little trip with me, Kyo-chan?” She asked.

Kyo wiped a forearm over her eyes and peered up at her, feeling curious despite herself.

“Trip?” She parroted softly.

Her kaa-san nodded. “A little trip, just you and me,” she smiled encouragingly.

“Okay,” Kyo sniffled again and then decided she was done crying.

Crying could be good, cathartic and emotionally healing, but enough was enough. She couldn’t just sit here and feel sorry for herself for the rest of this life. Whether she wanted it or not, she’d gotten a second chance here, and she knew with all her heart that her family from Before would have wanted her to make the most of it and try to be happy.

“Come on, then,” her kaa-san said, picking her up and preparing for this impromptu trip.

Isshun took them away from the apartment complex they called home, walked briskly through town until they reached the Village gates.

They were even larger and more impressive than they’d been in the manga, because these weren’t drawn with ink on paper, Kyo mused dazedly as she stared up at the massive wooden constructs as her mother walked through the opening.

“Can you hold on tight for me?” Isshun asked, having moved her from her hip to riding piggyback.

“Yeah,” Kyo returned firmly, wrapping her small arms around her kaa-san’s throat, careful not to obstruct her breathing.

One of Isshun's arms was under her bottom, making sure she wouldn't slip off, and it felt almost like something glued itself to her front and, oh, was that chakra?

Kyo barely had time to blink before they were running through the trees, far faster than what should be possible, but her kaa-san didn’t seem to find it even mildly physically straining.

When the woman leapt up to a low-hanging branch on one of the trees, Kyo had to press her mouth against her kaa-san’s shoulder to prevent an exalted squeal of laughter from escaping her.

By the time Isshun came to a stop in a small, peaceful clearing, she was still giggling helplessly to herself.

“Liked that, did you now?” Her mother asked amusedly when she swung her off her back so that she could look at her.

Kyo grinned, unable to help herself.

It'd been like going on a roller-coaster! Only the roller-coaster could go wherever it wanted and was her mother rather than a machine, bit still!

That was awesome!

“It felt like we were sticky,” she said once she’d caught her breath a little, looking around when Isshun put her on her own two feet on the grass.
The woman hummed, “That was to make sure you wouldn't fall off,” she said after a moment. “I used my chakra.”

“Chakra?” Kyo chirped, staring up at her kaa-san, hoping for an actual explanation. For all that she had read a lot about what you could do with the energy, she couldn't remember reading anything about how to go about it, or what it actually was.

Isshun stopped walking and crouched down in front of her. “Chakra is your life-force; it's something every living being has. It's physical energy,” here, she touched Kyo's solar plexus, “and mental energy,” and she tapped her gently on the forehead, “and with training, you can mix it and use it for things like sticking onto all kinds of surfaces.”

Kyo blinked a few times. “Like magic?”

The question was out before she could stop it, because it had always sounded a bit like magic to her. Not like the kind in Harry Potter, but pretty damn close.

Isshun laughed, low and quiet but clearly delighted.

“Not quite,” she smiled. “What you use it for is rather personal, but you can do anything from walking up walls, to healing yourself and others.”

And she'd conveniently skipped the 'using it to kill people' part, which, admittedly, was rather sensible considering Kyo was supposed to be no more than two years old.

“Can I learn?” She wondered curiously.

If she'd now been born here, that meant she could, right?

“I suspect,” her kaa-san began fondly, straightening out of her crouch to resume walking, “that you've been using it a bit subconsciously for a while now, Kyo.”

Kyo froze.

Because, what?

Isshun paused and looked down on her, raising one eyebrow slightly at what must have been the positively befuddled look on her face.

“When?” She eventually asked, though it may have come out more like a demand.

Isshun eyed her thoughtfully. “Chakra can be used externally, and internally,” she explained.

They had stopped walking again, and her kaa-san gracefully sank down to sit in the grass, mentioning for Kyo to do the same.

Kyo eagerly did her best to copy her mother's posture and position. She doubted she managed it with anywhere resembling the same amount of fluid grace.

“Close your eyes, Kyo,” Isshun instructed in a slow, calm voice that was soothing and comforting all at the same time. “Take deep, slow breaths and turn your focus inward.”

Kyo did her best to do as told, even though it felt a bit like she was listening to one of those meditation CDs that had been pretty popular a while in the Before.

“Now, everyone feels their chakra differently,” her kaa-san explained softly. “Mine feels cool and
fluid, like water, while your tou-san's said his feels like scorching winds.”

Kyo took a deep breath.

“There should be a pool of energy at the base of your stomach,” Isshun said after a few minutes, and Kyo suspected that there was a frown growing on her childish face. “You are very young, Kyo-chan. There will be plenty of time for this later, if you can't feel anything right now.”

Her frown grew. Her kaa-san thought she'd already been using her chakra subconsciously! She should at the very least be able to feel something then, shouldn't she?

Kyo was full out scowling by the time she felt a small stirring of... something in her gut. As if there was a live fish in the middle of her stomach that had just flipped its tail.

Kyo was so surprised she almost fell over.

“I felt something!” She exclaimed excitedly, opening her eyes to stare at her kaa-san with eyes as large as saucers. “That was chakra, right?” She added, because what if it'd just been gas or something?

“Hm,” Isshun hummed. “What did it feel like?”

Kyo jumped to her feet and excitedly explained the sensation she thought she'd felt.

Isshun gave her a small, but positively glowing smile. “My little girl,” she said, and quick as a snake, pulled her into her arms for a hug, planting a quick kiss on her cheek while she was at it. “Now, come. Let me show you what we're here to do.”

Kyo practically skipped after her kaa-san, melancholy mood all but forgotten at the moment.

“Ah, here we are,” Isshun murmured quietly, crouching down at the base of a tree and waving Kyo over with a wave of one hand. “Look here, Kyo,” she said, gently running her fingers over the fuzzy leaves of the plant growing in the shade of the massive tree trunk. “We're collecting this plant, but don't put anything in your mouth, you hear me?"

“Yes, kaa-san,” Kyo dutifully replied, curiously watching from behind and slightly to the left of her mother.

Isshun gave her a quick look, withdrew a small, sharp-looking knife and cut off the whole plant a little over the ground.

“Pick the leaves off the stalk, without tearing them, if you please, and put them in this,” she instructed, producing a small basket seemingly out of nowhere.

Kyo wondered if this meant her kaa-san had fuuinjutsu seals somewhere on her person. That was a possibility, right? She was in the Naruto world; anything was possible, wasn't it?

With her instructions clear in mind, Kyo crouched down and began to carefully pull the leaves off of the slightly prickly stalk.

She paused momentarily when kaa-san began to dig into the dark soil, no doubt to get the roots.

A slight itch made her glance down on her palms, and she blinked at the bright red skin that met her sight. Raising one hand to her face to inspect it, the itch grew worse, as if it knew she was looking at it, and the skin definitely looked irritated.
Casting another look at Isshun, Kyo decided that the woman knew what she was doing, and didn't say anything. Instead, she determinedly finished her task.

“Done!” She announced when the last leaf landed in the basket, lifting her gaze and taking in the surprisingly large and lumpy root her kaa-san had just pulled from the earth. “What do I do with this?” She asked, lifting the sad-looking, naked stalk.

“Put it in with the rest,” Isshun said warmly. “Very good, Kyo.”

Kyo grinned, for some reason ridiculously proud of her accomplishment, even though she rationally knew it hadn't been anything special; she'd just picked the leaves off a stalk, for crying out loud.

She was still proud, though.

“Let me see your hands,” kaa-san said once she'd removed most of the dirt clinging to the root, and then put it away in a bag she'd produced from presumably the same place she'd gotten the basket.

Kyo held out her hands, her palms and fingers an angry red and a little swollen.

They hurt a bit now, pulsing dully in time with her heartbeat, but most of all, they itched. A lot.

Biting her lower lip in an attempt to keep still, she watched her kaa-san inspect her hands quite intently, running her fingers experimentally over her much smaller ones.

It felt a bit like stinging nettles, Kyo mused, but worse, because the rash-like reaction seemed to spread out from the spots that had touched the plant.

She frowned at her kaa-san's hands, taking in the complete and utter lack of any sort of reaction, and her face pinched into a slight pout.

“You didn't turn red,” she pointed out, and she wouldn't go so far as to call it a whine, but it came close.

“I've handled this plant since I was a little older than you, Kyo,” Isshun smiled amusedly. “It takes a bit of time, but you will build up immunity to the poison.”

Kyo's eyes boggled.

Poison?

Well, she thought rationally, stinging nettles were technically poisonous, too... that was what her kaa-san meant, right? Right.

“Don't put your fingers in your mouth until we get home and we can wash your hands, alright?” She said next, making Kyo's heart skip a beat.

Silently wondering what the woman who was her mother was thinking, Kyo allowed herself to be picked up so that they could return to the village.

Once they were back at the apartment, Isshun sat her down on the kitchen floor, having pushed the table and four chairs to the side to give them more room to work.

“How are the hands?” She asked, throwing a quick glance up at Kyo, before turning most of her attention back to what she was doing with the plant they had left the village to collect.
“Itchy,” Kyo told her bluntly, very determinedly not scratching at her palms.

Her kaa-san smiled, as if it was amusing and not highly annoying and uncomfortable.

“It'll go away before bedtime,” she told her instead, and slightly mollified, Kyo turned her attention to the plant parts her kaa-san was laying out onto the floor. “Listen now, Kyo-chan. The leaves are the least poisonous, while the root is the most potent. The stalk can be added to the leaves to make them a bit more effective, or to the root to make it more slow acting, understand?”

Kyo, feeling a bit wide-eyed, but genuinely intrigued, nodded.

“Go get me the big pot from under the sink, would you, dear?” Isshun asked, and Kyo quickly did as asked, though she struggled a bit with the pot due to the size. “Thank you. Now, this time, I don't want you to touch the leaves, but watch how I tear them, okay?”

“Okay,” Kyo said, leaning forward slightly to watch intently as her kaa-san tore each leaf up into strips that were about as wide as Isshun's fingers. All going into the pot.

For the next hour, Kyo listened intently while her Kaa-san taught her how to brew what she called her most basic poison.

Which was... interesting.

“After it's reduced a few hours, it can either be used directly, or left to dry,” Isshun finished, disposing of the last of the soggy, boiled out plant residue. “Once it's dried, it can be scraped out and made into a powder. I'll show you how to do that once you're a bit older,” she concluded with a small, almost secretive smile.

Kyo blinked, trying assimilate all the information she'd been given.

“What about the root?” She asked, throwing a quick glance at the bag with the mentioned item, lying on the kitchen counter.

“That's a later lesson,” Isshun laughed lightly, lovingly running a hand over her hair.

Which, Kyo belatedly realised, was probably only something she'd done because she'd rinsed her hands quite thoroughly in the sink a while before.

At the thought, she lifted her hands until they were in front of her face to inspect her palms and fingers. They were just an irritated pink now, instead of angry red, which was clear progress. The swelling had gone down, too.

“Look!” She said, holding them out to her kaa-san, who dutifully inspected the offered limbs.

“Very good,” she praised. “You've managed not to scratch them, too.”

Kyo grinned. It'd been hard, but she'd managed. The last hour and a half, she'd been too engrossed in kaa-san's lesson to even notice the itch, but other than that, it'd been nothing more than stubborn determination.

“Let's clean everything up, and then it's time for dinner,” Isshun declared.

Something Kyo was more than agreeable to.

It didn't even occur to her that all thoughts of her situation and everything it brought with it had been chased out of her head. Which had, without a doubt, been kaa-san's intention.
By the time Kou came back from what must have been his latest mission, kaa-san had brought her out of the Village several more times on similar excursions.

Her hands no longer got quite that red whenever she handled just the leaves, but the one time Isshun had let her help with the root, her skin had gotten aggressively red all the way up to her shoulders, and it hadn't faded entirely until the next evening.

Her skin was back to its normal self now, though. Something she was grateful for, no matter how interesting she found her kaa-san's lessons.

The itching sucked.

The only consolation was the promise of becoming immune. Eventually.

Despite -mentally- being an adult, that sounded pretty cool. And useful. Especially in a world where someone thought it necessary to make their two year old kid immune to poisons.

“Tou-san!” Kyo exclaimed when the door opened and Kou came trudging inside, looking rather worse for wear.

She didn't care one wit, though, because she had honestly missed him.

Being an only child was weird, but Kou was a great dad. If a bit awkward at times. Or a lot. But at least he tried his best, and Kyo was mature enough to appreciate the effort he put forth, and the love that was behind it every time the man did something he wasn't very comfortable with, even when that might be something as inane as going to the park with her to push her on the swings.

Kyo was, admittedly, perfectly capable of using the swings on her own, even though she was a bit too small to get very high right now, she got higher every time she tried. But she hadn't been able to resist asking her tou-san the last time he'd been home.

“Kyo,” Kou said quietly, and despite his obvious exhaustion, the dried blood splatter covering parts of his clothing, he readily enough bent down to scoop her into his arms when she ran up to him to give him a hug.

If he held on a bit tighter than he normally did, pressing his cheek against her hair, Kyo said nothing and just hugged him back, her short, thin arms barely making it around his neck with the sturdy Chuunin vest in the way.

“Missed you, tou-san,” she said, quite honestly.

“Ah, I missed you, too,” he sighed, kicking off his sandals and going further into the apartment until he could collapse onto the couch, letting himself fall almost flat on his back, head pillowed on the armrest. “Tell me about what you've been up to with your mother while I was gone?” He requested
wearily, rubbing one hand over his face before he scrounged up the energy to smile at her.

If the man needed her to be his innocent little two year old daughter right now, then that's what she would be.

“Kaa-san took me to the park, and she pushed me on the swings, but not as good as you,” she began to prattle, keeping her voice soft but cheerful. “And there was this lady at the market that was very rude, so kaa-san maybe was a bit scary to her, but she deserved it.” Kyo told him solemnly.

Because Isshun definitely did not deserve to be called a whore, to her face, and in front of her daughter, just for wanting to purchase a few wares.

That woman had been a bitter, mean old thing, and she had clearly not appreciated the sacrifice her kaa-san made for her country when she went away on missions, rare and relatively short as they had been so far.

Kyo hadn't lived in a country that prided itself on its' military force, Before, but even she knew that you respected people who put their lives at risk to protect others. And that's what she liked to think Konoha's shinobi did.

It was perhaps a bit naïve, but she preferred it over the alternative.

By the time she had told her tou-san about everything she could think of, including the lessons Isshun had begun to give her, Kou had tucked her head quite neatly under his chin and seemed to have fallen asleep, arms wrapped securely around her.

Falling silent, Kyo took a moment to contemplate the smell of old and new sweat, of forest with a slight hint of smoke that clung to her dad. There was a shadow of stubble on his chin and she didn't know if she was imagining it or not, but he seemed a bit thinner than she remembered.

“Kyo-chan?” Isshun's voice asked from the direction of the kitchen.

Kyo wondered if it would wake her tou-san up if she said anything, and she didn't want that; he looked like he more than deserved the rest.

She did look up when Isshun leaned ever-so-slightly over the sofa to peer down on the two of them, though.

“Tou-san's tired,” she said quietly.

Her kaa-san eyed her husband -or was that boyfriend? Were they even married?- with solemn eyes and then reached down to tap his shoulder gently.

“Kou, you should take a shower and then sleep in a proper bed,” she said kindly when he jerked awake, his hold tightening almost painfully on Kyo for a moment, before he sat up with a deep sigh.

“Yeah,” he muttered, and then lifted Kyo and handed her over to kaa-san, seemingly purely by automatics, before he rose to his feet and disappeared into her parents' shared bedroom. He reappeared a moment later, having discarded most of his clothes and slipped into the bathroom.

When the door closed behind him, Kyo turned to Isshun.

“Tou-san looked bad,” she said seriously. Because he had never showed up at the apartment with blood on his clothes before, at least not when she'd been awake and there to see. And there had just been this look in his eyes that suggested this was something more than just fatigue.
“I’ll talk to him once he’s gotten a chance to rest a bit,” Isshun assured her, though she seemed distracted, still staring at the closed bathroom door. “Let's go to the kitchen; we’ll take a look at our project.”

Seeing the distraction for what it was, Kyo still allowed the woman to carry her off for yet another unplanned lesson. Hopefully, her skin wouldn't get quite that bad this time.

Kyo woke up early the next morning, like she always did this time around.

Back Before, she’d always had a tendency to sleep in, had done so even as a child, no matter how much she’d resented it and wanted to get up as early as everyone else. Mainly because of the kid’s show on TV on Saturday mornings.

But even when she’d been older, she’d always wished she’d been an early bird, and not a night owl.

It looked like she’d gotten her wish, now, as she sat up in bed and glanced around her dark room.

Admittedly, she didn't usually wake up quite this early; the sun wasn't even up yet.

Scratching absently at her arms, Kyo finally stood up and climbed out of bed, deciding to go looking for either of her parents.

Reaching up to pull the handle on the door to her room, Kyo paused, taking note of the murmur of voices on the other side.

Straining her ears, she could just about make out the words.

“-s not just increased activity on the border, but they're expecting a declaration any day now.” Kou's voice said tiredly.

“So that is the direction we're moving in,” her kaa-san answered on a sigh, as if she wasn't really surprised.

“We're both going to be sent out a lot more,” Kou said pensively, and he didn't sound happy about it.

“Kyo?” Isshun said, and for one second, Kyo thought she was addressing her.

“I'll talk to my parents,” Kou said, and Kyo grimaced. “She's a bit young to start school already, and I'd like to avoid placing her at the orphanage when I've got family.”

“She won't like it,” Isshun warned, and Kyo silently had to agree, though she was more than distracted by what she'd overheard.

The way they talked; it sounded bad. Really bad.

Heart fluttering like a sparrow in her chest, Kyo finally pushed the door open and padded out into the kitchen, crawling up into her dad's lap without a word.

“What are you doing up, sweetheart?” Isshun asked, though neither of her parents looked the least bit surprised to see her.

“Woke up,” Kyo said simply, curling up and tucking herself firmly against her tou-san's front. Warmth spread through her chest when he automatically curled one arm around her, holding her securely against him. “You're going away,” she said, because she didn't want to pretend not to have
“Not right now,” Kou promised, though there was a resigned quality to his voice.

“I don't wanna stay with obaa-san.”

“I know,” Isshun said, a small, sad smile pulling on her lips. “But it will hopefully not be for very long periods of time. The Hokage knows Kou and I have you to care for, so they'll try to make sure at least one of us is in the village whenever it's possible.”

Kyo took in that information with a small measure of comfort.

That didn’t change the fact that what they were talking about was, without a doubt, war.

She’d known, of course, that the Naruto world was dangerous, that people died all the time in the fighting and conflict. The Village system was very young; not even a century old, and that had been at the start of the manga. She still had no idea when exactly she’d been born.

Which war was this?

Shivering a little at the thought, Kyo tried to bury herself deeper into her tou-san's hold.

“You're coming back, right?” She asked, and there was no denying how small she sounded. “Tou-san?”

Her parents were silent for what felt like a long moment, exchanging a long look over the table, before her mother let out a heavy sigh.

Kyo's heart skipped a beat.

“I can promise you that both of us will do our very best to come back, every time,” she said solemnly, meeting Kyo's gaze intently.

When she looked up at her dad, he nodded in agreement. “Absolutely, Kyo.”

Kyo took a deep breath, determined that that would have to be enough. She knew that no one could promise not to die, but-

The breath came out as a sob, and Kyo buried her face in her dad's shirt.

She'd been wondering for a while if she had somehow usurped Genma's place in the series; if she should have been born a boy and named Genma instead of Kyo.

And if that was true, then she couldn't even console herself with the fact that her mother, at least, would survive long enough to bear another child.

She hated not knowing.

Had Genma's parents still been alive in the manga? Had both Isshun and Kou survived the war?

With too many questions she couldn't answer swirling around in her head, Kyo cried herself back to sleep and when she woke up later that morning, she found herself, for the first time in this life that she could remember, lying in her parents' bed, wedged between her kaa-san and tou-san.

It made it both better and worse, because right now, she had them both beside her, feeling warm, safe and content. But it just emphasized how much she didn't want to lose either of them.
“Are you awake, little one?” Isshun asked softly, raising one hand to smooth back her hair.

Kyo made a small, affirmative noise.

“Come, let's go make breakfast,” her kaa-san said, lifting her up and getting out of bed.

Kyo slumped tiredly against her mother's shoulder, taking in the simple bedroom with tired, sore eyes.

Kou’s eyes cracked open a small fraction, taking in their departure, but he just closed them again and rolled over to go back to sleep.

In the kitchen, Isshun put her down in her high-chair, and set about whipping up something simple for breakfast.

Kyo watched dispassionately, feeling like the familiar routines were making a mockery of her feelings.

Nothing and everything had changed.

Kyo and her mother ate in silence, and when Kyo finally finished the last of her vegetables, Isshun collected the plates and put them in the sink, and then returned to her seat, giving Kyo a considering look.

“Your father and I both love you very much, Kyo,” she began firmly. “And it's unfair to put this on you when you're so young, but you've always been more observant than anyone could've expected.”

Kyo chewed on her lip, feeling a bit guilty, on top of everything else, because it wasn't like she was particularly smart or anything. She just had the advantage of having memories of a life, of being an adult, before being Kyo.

“Things will most likely not escalate right away, so we still have time,” Isshun smiled reassuringly, but Kyo couldn't quite return the expression. “What do you say about more lessons?”

“Okay,” Kyo said, dragging a forearm over her eyes and taking a deep breath, determined not to make things harder on her parents.

They couldn't be that old, either, and this was without a doubt harder on them than on her.

Kyo paused. Was she... mentally older than her parents?

Wasn't that a frightening thought.

She eyed her mother, considering, trying to gauge how old she might be. Isshun most definitely wasn't older than thirty, but was likely not even twenty five.

...she probably was mentally older than her parents. Because she could remember being twenty six, and that wasn't even taking the foggy, uncertain stretch of time before her supposed death into consideration.

Kyo had her suspicions about that, too, but she tried not to think about it.

“Let's take a look at your arms, then,” Isshun said, holding out her hands expectantly, and Kyo dutifully placed her much smaller hands in her mother's.

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Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Tou-san shows her the moves and there are sadly bunnies :( 

Kyo was a bit too busy to worry after that.

Lessons with her kaa-san escalated until it was something they spent at least a few hours on every other day, and that included getting her used to the poison of the plant they'd started with.

Kyo was now consuming very small amounts of it daily.

It made her feel a bit queasy at times, but she was honestly used to worse. Accidentally eating gluten in her past life had been about three times worse, and the poison at least hadn't made her puke yet. So there was that.

The marvel of being able to eat whatever she wanted, without having to worry about it making her sick was enough to leave Kyo almost ecstatic whenever she stopped to think about it.

She wasn't quite two and a half years old here, but she was healthier than she'd ever been back Before.

And wasn't that sad?

The lessons didn't stop there; she was still learning how to read and write, which was fun, and tou-san had begun to teach her, too.

“I don't want you coming here without me or kaa-san, understand?” Kou said as he set her down on her feet in front of him.

Kyo blinked around the sunny clearing, taking in the field of bare, packed dirt and gave a distracted nod.

This was somewhere she hadn't been before, and that was interesting enough on its own to entertain her. But she was more curious about what tou-san had planned, though.

“Oh, okay,” she chirped.

When the sun was shining like this, and everything was peaceful and both her parents were home, it was hard to remember that there was a potential war brewing outside the Village walls.

“I'm going to show you something, and I want you to try and copy me as closely as you can,” Kou said, and he smiled briefly when Kyo nodded seriously.

And he then proceeded to show her what she instantly knew were katas.

Katas!

This was something she was purely excited about. Because she'd always wanted to learn martial arts, and the few styles she'd tried back Before had never worked out. The one style she'd found that she'd
loved hadn't been possible for her to continue, because she'd had to move away and lessons in that style hadn't been offered anywhere close to her new area.

Kou had to correct an arm here, a foot there, but overall, she didn't do too poorly, if she dared say so herself.

It was hard, though, and her limbs were all but shaking from effort when they were done.

“You did very well, Kyo-chan,” tou-san praised as he helped her back to her feet from the pile she'd collapsed into the moment the man had said they were done. “Now, your kaa-san gave me strict orders to show you how to stretch,” he continued, an amused spark in his eyes.

Kyo giggled and dutifully did exactly as Kou showed her.

Being so young, stretching wasn't much of a chore, but she knew it was in preparation for when she got older; to make sure she'd get in the routine and get used to it.

“Tou-san, I'm hungry,” Kyo informed him when they were walking back towards the town proper, away from the training fields.

Kou glanced down at her, and it was a bit weird to see him in full shinboi gear; he was even wearing the green Chuunin vest, with the hitai-ate proudly displayed on his forehead.

Or was that Jounin vest? What rank did her parents have?

Not that it really mattered, she was just curious.

“I suppose we could get something before going back home,” he mused, as if he hadn't quite decided yet. “What would you like?”

“Dango!” Kyo instantly chirped. She'd wanted to try for years and now that she could actually eat the treats without getting sick... there was no reason to resist.

Kou snorted, held out his hand for her, which she latched onto with both of her own. He sent her an amused look, and then swung her up onto his hip.

“Hold on tight,” he warned.

Kyo wrapped both arms around him and couldn’t help but let out a muffled squeal of delighted laughter when he leapt up onto the roof of the closest building.

The effortless manner with which he navigated the roof-tops of Konoha, not to mention the inhuman feat of leaping the distances he did, was something Kyo might have lingered on more if she hadn't loved the thrill of it so much.

It reminded her a bit about the one time her uncle had taken her on a ride on his motorcycle, once upon a time. But ten times better.

When tou-san jumped back down to the ground, Kyo was flushed with laughter and joy, and she couldn't wipe the exhilarated grin from her face if she so tried.

“Again!” She cried before she could stop herself, and it drew the attention of more than one stranger passing them by, which included the occasional shinobi.

Kou gave her a wry, thoroughly amused look. “I thought kids were supposed to scare easily,” he muttered jokingly.
Kyo snickered quietly, pressing her hands to her mouth in an attempt to smother the sound.

“But it's fun,” she told him as seriously as she could manage, despite there still being a wide grin on her face.

Kou shook his head as he walked into what looked like a small restaurant with one wall missing, which left it mostly open out towards the street.

“Sit. Don’t move,” her tou-san instructed, gave her a firm look, and then walked over to the counter to order.

Kyo watched him avidly, legs swinging back and forth where they hung suspended in the air between the bench and the ground.

The man who may or may not be the restaurant owner greeted him cheerfully, listened to whatever he said and then whipped together the order with quick efficiency. Which he then handed over to Kou in exchange for a few coins.

“Here you are, princess,” tou-san said when he sat down next to her, placing the paper plate on the table in front of her.

Kyo wrinkled her nose. “’M no princess,” she said firmly. She hadn't even wanted to be a princess the first time she was a child; why would she want to be one now?

“No?” Kou asked, and there was laughter in his voice. “I though all little girls wanted to be a princess.”

“Sounds boring,” Kyo said frankly, peering at the dango with curious interest. It looked good; some sort of fried dough with sauce on top. “And I like me better,” she added, because that was true.

She might not know all that had happened to result in her being here, but her life was far from horrible. She had two parents that loved her and did everything they could to take care of her and prepare her for whatever this life might throw her way. She was healthy, hale and relatively happy. Nothing to complain about.

“Are you going to try the dango or just stare at it until it gets cold?” Kou asked, gently ruffling her short, soft hair.

“I'll take this one,” she decided, picking the closest one and then pushed the plate towards her dad with the remaining two. “Those are yours.”

“Generous, too?” Kou mused teasingly. “I'm gonna have to beat the boys back with a stick when you're older.”

Kyo grimaced, giving her tou-san a sceptical look. Then she finally tasted the dango and was sufficiently distracted.

A few days later, tou-san took her on another excursion.

Katas were something she practised about every other day, it seemed, with at least a day in between for her to rest, recuperate and play in.

Some days, there wasn't anything in particular planned, and other times, Isshun would give her poison lessons or either of her parents would teach her some sort of game.
She'd learned a whole host of them by now, and Kyo was intellectually aware of the fact that they were all, in some form, supposed to prepare her for a life as a shinobi. Kunoichi, whichever.

That didn't stop them from being fun.

Like the game that was like a more complex variation of rock-paper-scissors, which was without a doubt to help her practise her dexterity, for the day when they began to teach her hand seals.

Or the bastardized version of Hide and Seek.

“What are we doing today?” Kyo asked as she slipped her hand into her father's, walking beside him down the street from their apartment.

“We're going on a little trip,” Kou said, which didn't really tell her anything.

That could mean anything from going to the training fields for katas, collecting herbs and plants with Isshun outside the Village walls and anything in between. Her tou-san had even said that when they'd just gone to his parents' house, once.

“To do what?” Kyo pressed, not worried, but definitely curious.

She absently jumped over a small pothole in the road, and then looked up at her tou-san's face.

Kou hummed, eyeing her thoughtfully a moment, before he leaned down to scoop her up with one arm.

“I guess there's only one way to find out,” he said, and jumped up onto the closest roof.

Kyo quickly latched onto her dad's shoulder with both hands and gave him an accusing frown. It was ruined slightly by the wild smile she was also sporting.

“That's not true! You could tell me,” she argued.

“I suppose,” Kou agreed gravely. “But I won't.”

Kyo's pout lasted for all of two seconds, before tou-san make a series of jumps that made her break out in thrilled giggles.

Soon enough, they arrived in a forested area that looked almost like it could have been outside the wall. She didn't think that was the case, though, because they hadn't passed through the massive gates.

“I'm going to show you how to make camp, today,” Kou said once he had put her down on her feet, giving her an intent once-over.

Kyo blinked, but nodded readily enough.

Wasn't this a bit too early? Really, she was just two years old, but... who was she to question the plan her parents had made for her potential shinobi education.

And yes, she did realise that that was what they were doing.

Kyo wasn't sure how she felt about it, but she'd decided not to think too much about it right now, and just enjoy the time she got to spend with both her new parents.

Learning new things had always been something she'd loved, and it hadn't ever mattered all that
much *what* it was she was learning so much as the fact that she soaked up new information like a sponge.

That held true even now.

“Okay,” Kyo said, sitting down on the dry grass to watch.

Kou nodded and then began to gather fallen branches, telling her exactly what he was doing while he was at it, explaining why the branches had to be dead and dry -to avoid smoke- and what to do if dry wood wasn't available.

Then he got out a knife, kunai, and cut out a circle in the grass, pried up the thick top-layer of dirt, grass and grass roots, and then dug what he called a fire-pit. All with the ease of years of practise.

“How deep you make it depends a little, but it's to make sure the light from the fire is harder to spot,” he said seriously, starting to place a few of the smaller branches and a few twigs in the bottom of the hole.

Kyo nodded; it all made perfect sense so far.

She still wasn't quite sure why they were doing this already, when she was so young. Wouldn't it have been better to do this later, when she could actually help dig the fire-pit and everything?

Regardless, she did her best to be an attentive student, listening carefully to her dad's lecture.

“Now,” Kou said once he had set up the fireplace, where flames were eagerly licking at the dry wood. “I need you to keep an eye on the fire for me, Kyo. I'll be back in just a few minutes, okay?”

He said, pausing to give her a look she knew meant he was waiting for any potential questions she might have.

Kyo hesitated. “You'll be back quickly?”

“Yes,” Kou said without pause. “I need to go get us something for the next part of our lesson,” he explained.

Feeling sufficiently reassured, Kyo nodded and watched as her tou-san turned around and stalked off without a sound, quickly and efficiently disappearing between the trees far faster than he should have.

Kyo had always liked the forest, Before, but there was just something about this whole situation that made her slightly nervous.

It didn't help that she'd hardly spent more than a handful of minutes alone since she'd 'woken up' after she'd turned one.

Instead of staring out between the trees for her tou-san, who she no doubt wouldn't spot until he stepped back into the small 'camp' they'd made anyway, she settled for staring at the fire.

She'd just put another piece of wood in the fire-pit when Kou jumped down from a tree, landing two metres away from her with nary a sound, making her jump.

“Tou-san!” Kyo smiled, jumping to her feet and bouncing over to him to wrap her arms around one of his legs in a semblance of a hug. He hadn't been gone long, but it was nice to see him!

“You kept a close eye on the fire?” He confirmed warmly, smoothing back her hair with one
calloused hand. Kyo nodded. “Good job,” he praised, smiling faintly and guiding her back to the fire, where they sat down. “I’ve gotten us lunch.”

Kyo blinked and finally noticed what he was holding in his other hand.

A pair of rabbits dangled from his fingers, held by the ears and- they were trembling with fear, blinking dark, shiny eyes at her.

Still very much alive.

Kyo watched the two small animals solemnly, feeling like she knew where this was going now.

Kou gave her a considering look, before he tucked one of the petrified bunnies under one of his thighs and put the other one on the grass in front of him, effortlessly pinning it in place with one hand.

“Come here, Kyo,” he said, nodding down at his lap.

Kyo quickly crawled over her tou-san's thigh to settle in his lap, staring down at the bunny with clear curiosity and almost-fascination.

She was well aware of where her food came from, whether that was vegetables or meat, and she had never understood people who proclaimed to love animals, were particularly squeamish about slaughter and then still gorged themselves on meat.

Kyo preferred to know exactly what she ate, and it may have something to do with the food allergy she'd had Before, but she felt it was just common sense. If you ate something, you should know and acknowledge where that food came from.

Doing otherwise was rather insulting to the animal that gave its life to feed you.

You should at least acknowledge that it was a formerly living being you were consuming.

“Hold it down for me a moment,” Kou told her, and his voice was soothing, as if he was expecting a tearful tantrum any second now.

“Okay,” Kyo said seriously, burying her fingers in the soft, brown fur on the bunny's neck, pressing down.

She could feel the frantic pulse fluttering under her fingers, and the bunny's chest rose and fell rapidly, over and over again as it panted in clear terror.

“Hold with the other hand,” Kou instructed softly, waiting until Kyo had done as told. “Good, girl. Now take hold of the handle of the kunai, Kyo-chan.”

Kyo did so, feeling reassured when tou-san's large, warm hand closed around it over her small fingers, guiding the knife until the tip was resting over the bunny's throat.

“We cut the throat quickly and smoothly, Kyo,” he said, holding the little animal firmly in place with the hand not helping her hold the knife. “That way, it dies quickly and with as little pain as possible.”

“Okay,” Kyo said again, feeling a bit out of her depth but perfectly willing to learn.

She'd contemplated gaining a hunter's license back in the Before, but her health had gotten in the way and this was something she would have had to learn back then if she'd gone through with it. This was part of life, really.
With no further delay or fuss, Kou brought the knife down on the bunny's throat, slicing through it with hardly any resistance.

It was easier than cutting up a half-frozen chicken fillet, though the bunny did twitch a few times as it bled out.

Kyo would like to think it was a pretty peaceful way to die; far better than being transported for miles and miles to a slaughter house by car and then killed that way.

“Is it dead now?” Kyo asked quietly, staring at the bunny's unmoving form.

“Yes,” Kou wrapped an arm around her in a half-hug. “You did very well, Kyo.”

“What about the other one?” She asked, overly aware of the second bunny caught under her tou-san's thigh.

Kou eyed her a moment, taking in whatever expression she was currently wearing. “We could either do the same thing, killing it together, or you can try to do it by yourself.”

Kyo blinked, turned the offer over in her head and then glanced down at the dead rabbit, then the still alive one she could barely see from her position.

“You'll help me if I can't do it, right?” She asked. She didn't want to hurt the animal and then not be able to go through with it; the bunny would be their lunch, but that didn't mean it had to suffer needlessly.

“Oh of course.” Kou smiled, though there was a look in his eyes she couldn't quite name.

He ruffled her hair with one hand and then moved the dead rabbit to the side to replace it with its' still-living companion.

Like chopping chicken, Kyo thought determinedly, taking hold of the kunai.

It was awkward, because it had clearly been intended for an adult's use and it was heavy, but with both hands, she could make it work on her own.

Leaning forward, Kyo placed the wickedly sharp tip over the bunny's throat and then pushed down. She may have ended up pushing the tip of the knife into the ground under the rabbit, but at least it got the job done.

When the bunny stopped twitching, Kyo leaned back with a relieved sigh.

That hadn't been too bad, she told herself, ignoring the way her fingers trembled ever so slightly. Which was most likely because of adrenaline, she realised.

“Very well done, Kyo,” tou-san praised kindly, rubbing a hand up and down her upper arm, before he pulled up the kunai and slit the bunny's throat properly. “Now watch while I skin them and prepare the meat, okay? What do you say about stew for lunch?”

“We can bring the leftovers home to kaa-san,” she offered with a somewhat weak, but sincere smile.

Kou smiled back and nodded. “That sounds like a great idea.”

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Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Arguing about the technicalities of tears with an emotionally stunted adult.

Tou-san had left again; after almost a month at home, he was gone. And this time, kaa-san said he wouldn't be home until three months later.

Kyo wasn't exactly looking forward to the long wait, but she wasn't planning on making things more difficult for all of them by throwing tantrums.

Halfway through the long wait, Isshun got a mission of her own.

“I'll just be gone for two weeks, Kyo,” her kaa-san assured her softly, patting her comfortably on the back when Kyo buried her face in her mother's shoulder. “I'll be back before you know it.”

“Don't like it,” Kyo muttered softly, clinging even tighter to the woman.

What if she didn't come back? What if neither of her parents came back?

What would happen, then? Would she have to stay with her grandparents until she was a legal adult?

Whether that was as a Genin or a civilian, she had no idea, and frankly didn't have the energy to contemplate right now.

“I know, dear,” Isshun sighed softly. “Your ojii-san's promised to look after you properly and I've prepared a training schedule for you.”

Kyo smiled a little.

She wasn't even three and her kaa-san had already thought to make her a schedule.

“Can I see?” She asked, lifting her head and shifting in her mother's hold to better see the paper the woman slipped from one of the pockets on her vest.

It was colour-coded. Red for katas, blue for chakra meditation, purple for poison training, and green for reading and writing practise.

Fairly simple, but it made sense, with how young she was.

“I've prepared the dosages for our little lessons, and I need you to follow the rules carefully, Kyo,” Isshun said seriously, giving her a firm look. “If you take the wrong one, or feel sick, I need you to tell an adult to bring you to the hospital right away, okay?”

“Okay,” Kyo nodded, looking the schedule over one last time, before she relented with a sigh. “Come back home, okay?”

“I'll do my very best,” Isshun swore solemnly, and then turned to knock on the by now familiar door to her grandparents' house.
“Isshun-san,” her grandmother greeted when she opened the door, stiffly polite.

“Haname-san,” kaa-san returned evenly, not so much as blinking at the less than stellar reception. “I want you to do your best while I'm gone, Kyo,” she continued to say, setting Kyo down on her feet outside the door.

“I will, kaa-san,” Kyo promised, eyes burning suspiciously and her hands didn't seem to quite want to let go of her mother's clothing.

“Here's your bag; I packed your favourite books, and enough clothes to last you,” Isshun helped her sling the dark blue bag over her shoulders so that it settled comfortably on her back. “Here's your schedule, and what you need for your lessons while I'm gone.”

And she handed over a decently sized bag that looked like it could be comfortably worn by a child a few years older than Kyo, strapped onto the small of your back.

“Okay. Thank you,” Kyo returned, almost automatically as she accepted the bag with both hands.

Isshun leaned back fractionally, watching her intently.

Kyo glanced up at her grandmother, whose face looked slightly pinched; as if there were several things she wished to say that were less than charitable.

She was grateful she held her tongue, though.

Setting the bag down on the doorstep, Kyo turned around and threw herself into her mother's arms, wrapping her in the tightest hug she could manage.

“Be careful, kaa-san,” Kyo asked. “Love you,” she added, because everyone deserved to know that they were loved and she quietly resolved to tell both her parents more often.

“Oh, Kyo,” kaa-san sighed, though she sounded a bit affected, her arms tightening around Kyo's back. “I love you, too. Be a good girl, and I'll be back before you know it.”

Kyo reluctantly stepped back and with a last smile, Isshun disappeared in a small, quickly-dissipating cloud of smoke.

Kyo blinked.

Had that been a shunshin?

When the last of the smoke had dispersed in the wind, Kyo sniffled a little, took a deep breath, and then turned to her grandmother.

“Hello, obaa-san,” she greeted, subdued.

“Hi, Kyo-chan,” Haname-obaa-san cooed, leaning forward to peer at Kyo's face. “Let's go inside and get you some lunch; you look like you hardly eat, dear!”

And Kyo was ushered inside.

It didn't even take a day before Kyo realised how fortunate she really was, having the parents she did.

Her grandmother treated her like a baby. Acting like she couldn't even understand normal conversations.
Kyo felt like tearing her hair out, and she had to stay here for two weeks.

Would it be morally reprehensible to accidentally-on-purpose poison her own grandma?

Not that she'd ever do it, but the thought was enough to get her by.

 Barely.

“Kyo-chan?” Haname called into the garden and Kyo unashamedly scrambled to get to a hiding place before her grandma spotted her.

Slipping behind one of the large bushes she didn't know the name of, Kyo peered under the foliage to watch the older woman's slippers as she walked by.

“Kana and the kids are here, so come out and say hi,” she added, raising her voice, as if she thought Kyo hadn't heard the first time. In the end, she gave an aggravated huff and then returned to the house.

Soon enough, Kenji came wandering out into the garden.

Feeling it was relatively safe to come out now, Kyo left her hiding spot and approached the boy. Her cousin.

“Hi, Kenji,” she said on a sigh.

Kenji was two years older than her, but you wouldn't know that by looking at how he acted.

“Hey, Kyo-chan,” he returned, blinking at her, as if he hadn't expected to see her. “Obaa-san called for you.”

“I know.” Kyo shrugged and fell into step next to her cousin.

Kenji's eyes widened, as if the thought of not listening to what their grandmother said was outside the realm of possibilities.

Kyo didn't agree.

Especially when Haname had tried to take the bag with the poison her mother had given her away from her the first night here. That was not okay. And it didn't endear the woman to Kyo any more, either.

“Wanna play?” Kenji finally asked, giving her a hopeful look.

“Sure,” Kyo chirped. Anything was better than being alone in the house with Haname. “What do you wanna play?”

“Tag?” Kenji offered eagerly.

“Okay!”

It might seem silly, but tag could be fun. And it was good training, actually.

Kyo was definitely more coordinated than her cousin, but Kenji still had the advantage, being two years older; four years old to her two.

And that was how Kyo spent her second afternoon after both her parents had left on missions at the
same time, for the first time.

After a few days, her grandfather brought a set of crayons and paper home with him when he returned from work, and if Kyo hadn't already been fond of him, then *that* definitely would have confirmed him as her favourite grandparent.

She'd been passably decent with a pen before, so she was a bit disappointed to learn that the skill hadn't transferred over.

Not that it was particularly surprising; all it boiled down to was practice.

Kyo still enjoyed drawing again.

“Kyo-chan,” a familiar voice called from the direction of the hallway.

Two weeks had passed and Kyo was more than ready to go back home.

“Kaa-san!” Kyo all but screamed and scrambled down from the chair she'd been sitting in, in the middle of eating dinner.

A second later, she threw herself into her mother's waiting arms.

“Hey, baby,” Isshun murmured against Kyo's hair, folding her tightly into her arms.

“Welcome back, Isshun-san,” ojii-san said, rising from his seat by the table and waving her over.

“Come sit down, have some dinner before the two of you go back home.”

“Thank you, Kentarou,” Isshun returned, and she sounded tired.

Though not as tired as tou-san had been the last time he came home, but still enough for it to be audible in her voice.

She kept Kyo on her lap when she sat down, something Kyo was more than happy with as she dug into her dinner with renewed enthusiasm as her grandmother served up a portion for Isshun.

It had gotten so late, she'd thought she'd have to wait until the next day before her mother came to collect her, assuming there'd been no serious delays.

The thought that she wouldn't come at all had been firmly squashed, ruthlessly pushed to the back of her head where it had been left to collect dust until next time.

About two months before Kyo turned three, her father was supposed to come back from his latest mission.

She hadn't seen him for three months and she was itching to tell him about everything she'd learned in his absence. Commiserate with him about his mother.

Kyo hadn't realised how much her parents *didn't* treat her like a two year old; seemingly going much more by maturity rather than age.

The same could not be said about her grandparents.
Kyo was amusing herself with a few of the toys she actually owned, sitting on the carpeted floor in the living room, when it knocked on the door.

Pausing what she was doing, Kyo turned to stare at the door; it was the first time in her memory that anyone had ever visited their home. She hadn't actually thought about it, but surely her parents must have friends. Right?

Isshun came out of the kitchen, a small frown on her face as she walked to the door, so she clearly wasn't expecting anyone.

Kyo quickly got to her feet and trailed after her mother, which meant that she got a good look at the shinobi standing on the other side of the door. He was just a bit taller than her kaa-san, with dark brown hair, just as dark eyes and what could only be the Uchiha crest sown onto his uniform.

“Shiranui-san?” He asked, though he looked like he knew he was at the right place. “I'm here to inform you that your husband is at the hospital for surgery,” and that was about how far he got before Isshun rushed back into the apartment. No doubt to turn off the stove and put the food she'd been cooking for lunch to the side.

While her mother was busy, Kyo put on her shoes.

“Kaa-san,” Kyo said, raising her arms the moment Isshun skidded back into the hallway, which resulted in her being swept up and automatically settled on her mother's hip.

Isshun stepped into her sandals and then slammed the door behind them, barely taking the time to lock the thing before she was running down the stairs. Leaving the Uchiha behind, though Kyo didn't think he'd hold it against her mother.

The moment they were outside, Isshun took to the roofs, and while it still made her stomach flutter with excitement, she didn't so much as smile.

Her father had been hurt, was at the hospital. For surgery.

Which could basically mean anything. Had he a badly broken leg? Had he almost died?

Kyo clutched at her mother and stared unseeingly at the familiar scenery that rushed passed them faster than ever before.

It seemed she hadn't more than blinked before Isshun jumped down to land in front of the hospital front doors, striding inside with enough purpose that the few people they met steered well clear of her, despite the fact that she wasn't in uniform and had a child on her arm.

Isshun was a kunoichi on a mission.

It was the first time she was in the hospital that she could remember this time around, and Kyo was a bit too distracted, taking in their surroundings and by her own thoughts that she missed entirely what the lady at the reception desk said in response to her mother's sharp questions.

Not that it mattered, because they were striding down a corridor before Kyo had even gotten a chance to take in all of the reception area and the connecting waiting room, leaving the nurse at the desk staring after them with a sympathetic frown.

Kyo turned away from her, focusing instead on what was in front of them.

She lost track of how many turns they'd taken, and she was pretty sure there'd been a flight of stairs
too, before they finally came to a stop in front of what was quite clearly an operating theatre.

They weren't the only ones there, either.

“Isshun,” one of the men sitting on the benches along the left wall said. He looked exhausted; like death warmed over.

Kyo took in the dirt on his uniform, the tears in the cloth and the bandages she could see peeking out at the edge of his sleeve and at the neck of his shirt. His clothes were also covered with blood. A lot of it.

Most of it looked old; either rust red or brown, but there were stains that looked newer, too.

“Yuuta,” Isshun all but sighed, walking up to the man, who stood to his feet, never mind how much he looked like he really should've remained sitting. “What happened?”

Yuuta grimaced, his lips twisting down in an unhappy frown.

“It's pretty bad,” he ran a hand through his dirty hair, giving Isshun a deeply apologetic look. “He took a wind-jutsu to the chest, in my stead.”

“Which was no doubt fortunate, or you would've died,” Isshun returned sharply, keen eyes taking in the bandages and drawing what was no doubt the correct conclusions. “What did the medics say?”

“We got him here as fast as we could, but he's lost a lot of blood,” Yuuta murmured, gaze sliding away from her mother's face to land on Kyo. He blinked, as if noticing her for the first time.

Isshun took a deep breath, closed her eyes for a second, and then released the air in her lungs and moved to take a seat on the bench next to the only other man aside from Yuuta, who looked like he was seconds away from falling asleep where he sat.

Kyo noticed that he looked to be in a similar condition to Yuuta; dirty, exhausted, covered in mostly dried blood and with bandages covering parts of his body.

Isshun sat down, leaning back and settling Kyo in her lap, clearly prepared for a long wait.

Yuuta stood for a second longer, and then joined them, retaking his seat next to Isshun, boxing the two of them in between what must be her dad's teammates.

Kyo curled up in kaa-san's lap and tried to be as silent and still as possible.

Almost two hours of mind-numbing, soul-deep anxious waiting later, the door to the operating theatre opened and a nurse paused in the doorway, looking over the small group.

“Shiranui-san?” She finally asked.

Isshun stood, handed Kyo over to Yuuta with minimal fanfare and then followed the other woman through the door.

Kyo blinked at the man her kaa-san had just handed her off to, taking in the almost deer-in-headlights look on his carefully blanked face.

He had brown hair, a few shades darker than tou-san's and eyes that looked almost violet in the light from the fluorescent lamps shining down from the ceiling. There was currently stubble shadowing his chin and cheeks and his skin was pale and clammy with fatigue, pain and worry.
He frankly looked like shit.

“Hi,” Kyo greeted awkwardly.

Yuuta blinked at her, where he was holding her suspended over his lap, hands wedged securely enough under her arms. As if he’d accepted her from Isshun purely per automatics and then didn’t have the first clue what to do with her.

“Oh, hi there, kid,” Yuuta said, clearing his throat and casting a quick glance at his friend, who was watching them with a quiet sense of weak amusement. “I'm, ah, Oueda Yuuta. Your tou-chan's teammate.”

Kyo tilted her head. “Kaa-san must trust you a lot since she just handed me off to you without a word,” she said sagely.

Which was perhaps a bit of a weird response, but it'd been the first thing that popped into her head. And Yuuta also looked like he could do with a bit of reassurance.

For some reason, Yuuta didn't look all that comforted by her words.

“So don't piss off the poison specialist,” the other man murmured with a quiet laugh.

Kyo blinked, looking from one to the other and back again. “Kaa-san's too worried about tou-san right now, anyway,” she said. “I don't think you have to worry very much.”

“How old were you again?” Yuuta asked, sounding vaguely uncertain.

“Almost three,” Kyo returned, not missing a beat.

“Shouldn't you be crying or something?” Yuuta muttered speculatively, looking like he was trying to figure out the answer to some obscure, complex question.

Kyo blinked. “Do you want me to?”

“No,” the man returned quickly, looking mildly panicked just at the thought. “That's fine;” he hurriedly added.

“Okay,” Kyo said, feeling tired of this already.

Her gaze wandered over towards the doors her mother had disappeared through, and then, in an attempt to distract herself, turned to watch the other man, who calmly met her gaze.

“I'm Ryota,” he said simply.

Kyo nodded. “How come I haven't met either of you before?”

“Isn't really something you do,” Yuuta muttered, exchanging another look with Ryota. “Most people wait at least until the kids start the Academy to introduce them.” He shrugged minutely, as if to say it was what it was.

Kyo tilted her head as she thought it over.

It sort of made sense. A little. If you tilted your head and squinted.

“You can set me down,” she told Yuuta quietly when it didn't look like the man was going to do anything of the sort anytime soon on his own.
“Right,” Yuuta muttered to himself and gingerly sat her down on the bench next to him. After a long, awkward pause where he glanced down at her with a slightly conflicted expression, he finally leaned back against the wall with a sigh.

When he silently offered her his hand, Kyo gratefully slipped her own small one in between his rough, calloused fingers without hesitation, accepting the wordless comfort for what it was.

-x-x-x-
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

There are knives. And blisters. Stupid nicknames need to leave Kyo the hell alone.

“Should you really be doing this, tou-san?” Kyo asked dubiously, watching her dad rather sceptically as he gingerly moved around the kitchen. “Kaa-san won't be happy.”

Kou winced quietly when he raised one arm too fast, giving her a quick look over his shoulder.

“I can't stay in bed for the rest of my life,” he said simply, as if he hadn't almost died a little over two weeks ago. Been released from the hospital just the other day. “I'm taking it easy, Kyo,” he added when she continued to stare worriedly at him.

“Okay,” she reluctantly followed him to the door. “Will you tell me what we're doing?”

“You'll see soon enough, kitten.”

Kyo made a disgusted face.

She still had no idea where the sudden nickname had come from; it wasn't like her tou-san had called her that before he went on that disastrous mission. It was like he had just woken up from surgery with it in his head.

She hadn't been able to make him stop using it, either, and she figured that the bigger the fuss she made, the more amusing he'd find it.

So.

“If you start bleeding, I'm telling kaa-san,” she decided firmly, taking tou-san's hand and all but bouncing down the stairs from their apartment door, taking care not to tug on her dad's arm while she was at it.

“Fair enough,” Kou mused.

Kyo was both excited and worried when the man steered them in a familiar direction.

The look she gave him when they walked onto the training field they usually used to practice katas made him snort.

“No worries, I'll just observe, today,” Kou promised with slightly exaggerated solemnity.

Kyo squinted up at him, but eventually shrugged. He was supposed to be the adult here.

“So what are you teaching me today?” She asked, all excitement now.

It'd been a while since she'd learned anything new; it'd all been either repetition or lessons building on earlier ones. Kaa-san had been busy and stressed enough to deal with tou-san, his hospital stay as well as taking care of Kyo, to focus very much on anything else.
Kou smiled and carefully eased himself down onto the ground, crossing his legs and pulling a carefully wrapped package from his hip pouch.

Instead of handing it to her, he put it on the ground between them, mentioning for Kyo to sit down as well. When he opened it, the thick paper peeled back to reveal a set of-

“Kunai?” Kyo asked slowly, blinking with surprise at the shiny metal knives.

“Exactly,” Kou said, sounding rather pleased with himself. “I asked Yuuta to get them for me.”

“Why?” Kyo asked, curious despite herself.

After a look at her father for permission, she reached down to pick one of them up, and it wasn't until then that she realised how well they fit her hand.

They were small; child-sized.

“To get you started on target practice,” Kou said. “But first; the grip.”

And he proceeded to gently correct her hold on the weapon in her hand, positioning her fingers just so before letting go.

Thankfully, the knives had been blunted, Kyo was distantly pleased to note.

“Is this my birthday present?” She asked, because her birthday was just a little over a week away, so it would make sense.

“Yes. One of them, at least; I've received some very reliable intel that your mother's planned something, too,” Kou whispered conspiratorial, even going so far as to add a wink.

Kyo grinned and turned back to her gift.

Or, part of her gift, at least, because she would definitely count the lesson her dad planned to give her to the gift. Especially considering his less than perfect health.

“Now,” Kou continued, “stand up and get into the starting kata I showed you, Kyo.”

“Okay!” Kyo chirped and jumped to her feet, eagerly getting into position, the kunai still held in hand.

And it felt weird to do it with the added weight in her hand.

Hopefully, she wouldn't end up accidentally stabbing herself.

Considering how clumsy she'd been in her last life, especially as a child, it was a legitimate concern.

After going through the katas she'd been taught, which all served as an excellent warm-up exercise, she realised, Kyo bounced back to her dad with a wide grin.

Kou gave her a pleased nod. “You've practised,” he commented, smiling approvingly. “Okay, see that wooden post over there?”

Kyo nodded. “Should I try to hit it?” She asked, tilting her head, considering, as she peered over at the post in question.

“That is the plan,” tou-san mused. He looked her over once, still sitting in the same spot he'd first
settled down in. “Widen your stance, make sure you're holding the kunai like I showed you, take aim and give it a try.”

“Okay,” Kyo said, squaring her shoulders determinedly.

She'd had a decent aim in her Before life. Mostly because her then-father's side of the family had all been nuts about competitions and games. Much to her ever-lasting exasperation and despair.

She might get something out of it, here, though.

Kyo was well aware that nothing other than her memories had really transferred over into this body, but that didn't mean she didn't have a better understanding of some things than another child in her position.

Taking careful aim, Kyo raised her arm, threw the knife and-

Missed by a long shot.

Grimacing, she sent her tou-san an apologetic look.

Kou didn't even look mildly surprised, though, and merely smiled back at her. “Go get it and I'll show you how to do it properly this time.”

“Sneaky,” she mumbled before she ran off to get the kunai lying on the ground a little further than halfway between where she'd been standing and the post.

It was covered in dust and had gotten a few shallow scratches from sliding on the ground, and she felt a slight twinge of regret. It was more than a bit ridiculous, she knew, because the kunai was meant to be used. Didn't change how she felt, though.

“Okay,” she said, skidding to a halt in front of her dad, giving him an expectant look.


Kyo quickly did so, and then paid careful attention while her tou-san poked and prodded her into the correct position.

“Now,” he said once he appeared to be satisfied with her stance. “There are several ways to throw a kunai, but we'll focus on the most basic one for starters, okay?” He waited long enough for Kyo to nod before he continued. “The over-hand throw,” and he proceeded to show her how to bring her hand almost up to her shoulder. “The trick is to flick your wrist,” he finished, leaning back and rubbing a hand absently to his chest, studying her stance critically. “Try again.”

Kyo nodded, following her dad's directions as closely as she was able and tried to end the motion with a proper flick of the wrist before she let go of the kunai.

“Better,” Kou said. “Again.” And he pushed the package with the rest of the kunai closer to her.

Kyo determinedly grabbed a new one, and turned to stare the wooden post down. The kunai had gone wide, missing by well over a metre and falling slightly short.

She wasn't sure how long she kept at it, throwing again and again, pausing only long enough to collect the knives when she'd thrown all of them and starting anew. She kept at it until her arms ached.

“Last throw, Kyo-chan,” tou-san finally said, watching her throw the final kunai. Which veered way
off target. Out of all the attempts, she had managed to hit the wooden post once, and the kunai had buried itself just off the ground; not even close to where she'd been aiming.

With an unhappy, tired frown, Kyo walked to collect every single one of the scattered kunai and then returned to her dad.

“Here, kitten,” he said, holding out a holster that looked almost identical to the one he was wearing, if smaller in size.

Kyo accepted it and tentatively began to put the knives in it, shooting her tou-san questioning looks every now and then to make sure she was doing it right. When she was done, he helped her strap it onto her leg.

“Now I want to see those hands of yours,” he said, holding out one hand expectantly while the other one reached into the pouch strapped on the back of his right hip.

Kyo dutifully held out her sore hands, fully aware of the blisters she’d gotten during the last few hours.

Kou rubbed experimentally at one of the worst ones, giving her a speculative glance when she winced.

“You work very hard, Kyo, and that's good; something to be proud of,” he said, finally withdrawing a jar from his pouch. “But you also need to take proper care of yourself.”

“Sorry, tou-san,” she sighed, watching while the man rubbed some sort of fatty salve into her palms, coating the skin and making sure to get every blister and cut. “I'll do better.”

“We'll continue tomorrow, and I'll show you how to care for your gift properly, too,” Kou smiled, ruffling her hair and playfully almost pushing her over.

“Hey!” She protested, trying to smooth her now-static hair down with a small scowl, before she remembered her hands were all sticky with an unhappy grimace and stopped.

The smile on her tou-san's face made her pause, though. Kyo slowly lowered her arms, feeling a bit self-conscious.

“Come on; let's go home,” Kou said and stiffly climbed to his feet, and Kyo definitely caught the wince he had to bite back. “Your kaa-san's no doubt waiting and you should get something to eat after working so hard.”

“Okay,” Kyo agreed, slipping her hand into Kou's, and tiredly trudged next to him back home.

Her birthday was a quiet affair, followed by her mother being called out on mission.

It would be the first time Kyo and her dad would be left to themselves for more than just a couple of days.

“But when will you be back?” Kyo asked Isshun with a frown, sitting on her parents' bed. She didn't like not knowing.

“I'm not sure, sweetheart,” Isshun sighed, not even pausing in her packing, going through her pockets and pouches and adding things every now and then. “Probably a month.”
Kou was standing in the doorway behind her, watching the two of them with his hands in his pockets and a serious cast to his face.

“But—"

“Kyo, this isn't something we can argue about,” Isshun said firmly. “You know I have to go, and I'd much rather not spend the last few minutes with my family fighting.”

Kyo bit her lower lip, blinking back tears.

“Isshun,” Kou said quietly, and there was a quiet reprimand hidden in his voice, making the woman pause what she was doing to frown at him.

He gave her a pointed look.

“Don't get hurt, okay?” Kyo asked wetly, voice trembling and she was quickly losing the fight against her tears.

“Oh,” Isshun blinked, threw a quick glance at Kou, and then stopped what she was doing to crouch down in front of her. “I'm sorry, Kyo.” She sighed and pulled her into a tight hug.

“Just because I got hurt last time doesn't mean your kaa-san will do the same,” Kou said gently, walking up to them to smooth a hand over her hair. “She's very sneaky, your kaa-san, Kyo.”

Kyo muffled a sob against her mother's shoulder, which wasn't as comfortable as it usually was, because she was wearing the thick, sturdy green vest that either designated her as a Chuunin or Jounin. She didn't even care any more which one it was.

“I promise I'll be careful, love,” Isshun told her soothingly, pressing a quick kiss to her temple. “Be good to your father and make sure he doesn't land himself back in the hospital by straining himself too quickly, okay?” She smiled faintly.

Kyo took a deep breath and wiped her face with one blistered hand.

“I'll do my best, but no promises,” she said, managing a weak smile.

“That's my girl,” Isshun cupped her face with both hands, giving her an intent, lingering look. As if she was trying to sear the sight into her memory. “I love you, Kyo-chan.”

“Love you, too, kaa-san,” Kyo returned, and sadly watched her mother finish her packing and then pulled Kou down into a deep, almost desperate kiss.

Kyo wasn't the only one affected by her tou-san's near-death experience.

“I'll see you two in a month,” Isshun said, sounding a bit breathless, and before anyone could say anything else, she was gone.

Kyo took in the heavy silence, trying to catch any hint of her mother, but when a full minute had passed, she turned to her dad, gave him one look and then burst into tears.

Kou sighed, picked her up -despite the pained wince the action pulled from him- and carried her to the living room, where he sank down on the couch.

“She'll be back before you know it,” he said, though it sounded more like a prayer than a promise.

Kyo shamelessly sobbed into her tou-san's shirt.
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Three men and a toddler and no one knows how to cope.

The first morning after Isshun had left on her mission, Kyo woke up in her parents' bed.

Which made sense, because she'd asked Kou if she could sleep with him last night when he'd been helping her prepare for bed.

Her tou-san hadn't had the heart to say no.

Kyo slowly pushed herself into an upright position, peering around the room, taking in the soft sunlight from the window. It was clearly very early; barely passed dawn, judging by the light.

“Good morning, Kyo-chan,” Kou murmured beside her, making Kyo glance down at him.

The man rolled over onto his stomach and buried half his face in his pillow, peering up at her with one half-lidded eye.

A moment later, one of his arms had snaked around her waist and pulled her down next to him.

“Tou-san!” Kyo complained, though there was the potential for laughter in her voice.

“What?” Kou grumbled. “It's far too early to get up,” he declared and proceeded to cuddle her like a teddy-bear, trapping her quite efficiently against his chest. Gently.

“It's not early,” Kyo lied, giggling when her father's fingers twitched at her sides.

Kou snorted. “The sun's hardly up,” he pointed out dryly, rolling onto his back and bringing Kyo with him so that she was lying on her back on his chest. “Look; it's practically dark out.”

Kyo dutifully looked at the window, and couldn't help but laugh. Because the sky was a pale but cheerful blue and sunlight was clearly streaming into the room.

“Liar,” she couldn't help but snicker.

“ Weird. I can't see anything,” Kou mused drowsily, and when Kyo craned her neck to look up at him, it was easy to see why.

“You need to open your eyes, tou-san,” she managed to get out between helpless giggles and the occasional snort.

“Ah,” Kou sighed. “My daughter is too smart for her own good.” And he cracked his eyes open to peer down at her.

Kyo let out a small shriek and tried to worm out of his hold when he began to tickle her.

A while later, they were both dressed and ready for breakfast.
Kyo curiously watched her father stare dispassionately at the stove, as if it had personally insulted him. He'd already gotten out and prepared the ingredients for a simple breakfast.

“But you know how to cook,” she finally blurted, the words on her mind slipping out of her mouth before she could stop them.

“I can make a perfectly decent meal over a campfire,” her tou-san muttered wryly. “Got less experience cooking in a proper kitchen, though.”

Kyo blinked, slipped off her chair and then skipped up to her dad, twisting the knobs on the stove until the gas turned on and ignited and was turned up to an appropriate level.

“Kaa-san does it all the time,” she explained simply, glancing up at her dad's bemused expression.

Kou shrugged and got the frying pan. “It's a good thing we make such a good team,” he mused, ruffling her hair and nudging her back towards the table.

Kyo grinned and bounced back to her seat.

“Are we going back to the training field today?” She wondered once she'd eaten her fill. Not as good as Isshun's cooking, or even as good as the food her tou-san tended to make during their camp practise lessons, but definitely edible and perfectly alright.

“Yes, so go get your kunai holster,” Kou said, collecting the dishes and putting them in the sink. He looked like he was contemplating whether to wash them now or later, but in the end, he turned the water on with a sigh. “And then I want you to put plasters on all the blisters you got yesterday!” He called after her when she ran to her room.

“Okay!” Kyo shouted back.

She got the holster from the bedside table in her room, then went by the bathroom to get the small medical kit they had there, before returning to the kitchen and putting her armful onto the kitchen table.

“Tou-san, can you help be with the holster?” She asked as she crawled up onto the closest chair and settled down.

“Sure,” Kou agreed easily, not taking his eyes off the dishes he was quickly and efficiently going through. “Get started on your hands, though, and I'll help you when I'm done with this.”

“Okay,” Kyo said, turning her attention to the first aid kit.

By the time her tou-san was done, she had put plasters on the worst of the burst blisters she'd gotten over the course of the last week; she was fairly sure she'd gotten blisters on top of her blisters.

Tou-san was taking care of putting the salve on them after every practise, though, so it wasn't that painful. At least not as painful as it could have been.

“Let me take a look,” Kou said after he'd wiped his hands dry.

Kyo held up her hands, which were mostly covered by white medical tape and the occasional plaster.

Her father hummed. “You'll build up the callouses soon enough,” he assured her at the unhappy pout she knew she was sporting but couldn't really get rid of.

She sighed. “But my aim is getting better?” She perked up a little, and Kou smiled.
“It would be hard for you to get worse, kitten,” he teased, winking at the outraged look she sent him in response. “Okay, stand up,” he directed next, picking up the thigh holster. “Look at how I do it.”

“I know, but it's too heavy, tou-san,” Kyo groused. “If I try holding it with one hand, I drop it.” She scowled.

“You'll grow into it,” Kou assured her, laughing softly.


And she knew it was true, but why did it have to take so long? The bouts of impatience were coming more often now that she could do more on her own. Like getting a taste of the real deal before having reality crash down on her head again.

“That's because it's true, Kyo-chan.” Kou smiled and then lifted her down to the floor, keeping any pain he might be feeling at the action off of his face. “Now let's go.”

“Yes, tou-san,” Kyo said, walking towards the hallway, followed closely by her father.

While Kyo practised her aim, throwing kunai after kunai in a dull, repetitive manner that was rather monotonous but necessary, Kou worked on getting back into shape.

It was fascinating to watch him, whenever she had to collect her knives, or when she needed a breather or risk bursting into tears from growing frustration levels.

Kyo kept at it, though. Right up until it felt like the skin was coming off her fingers, her arms ached and it felt like her stomach was gnawing on her spine.

“Tou-san!” She called once she had put her kunai away, hands held to her mouth to help her voice carry. “Lunch!” She added when the man paused what he was doing to glance over.

Kou glanced up at the sky, to get the sun's position, relaxed out of the kata he'd been in the middle of -a different set from the ones he had taught her- and walked towards her.

Kyo eyed him carefully, taking in the perspiration on his brow and the way his chest worked to provide him with enough oxygen.

“Kaa-san said to take it easy,” she reminded him carefully, not completely sure how he would take the sort-of-reprimand.

“I know, kitten,” Kou sighed heavily, grimacing a little, but not at her, she didn't think. “This is it for me today, unfortunately.”

“Okay,” Kyo said. “Should we stretch?” She asked, partly because she thought her arms might need it, and partly because her tou-san definitely looked like he should. “My arms feel like they're gonna fall off,” she added with a frown.

Kou huffed out a quiet laugh. “I'll show you how to stretch them out properly,” he promised.

Once they were done with that, the two of them set off back towards Konoha proper.

“We're meeting up with Yuuta and Ryota for lunch today,” Kou eventually said, making Kyo blink and look up at him.

“Does that mean I'm old enough to meet them properly?” Kyo wondered curiously.
Kou glanced at her. “What do you mean?”

“Yuuta told me I hadn't met them before because it's customary to wait until children start the Academy,” she told him easily, near enough skipping along beside her dad.

She didn't get it; a moment ago she'd been exhausted, but now she was fine? Being a kid again was honestly baffling.

“Did he?” Kou muttered, and there was a small, wickedly amused smirk on his face. “That's interesting.”

Kyo glanced up at him, but when he didn't say anything else, let it go to jump in a water puddle that had survived from the rain they'd gotten two days ago.

Kou led her to what looked to be a bar or restaurant.

When he moved to enter, she slipped her hand into his and made sure to walk close to her dad's leg. That didn't mean she wasn't curious; just a bit cautious.

Her tou-san seemed to know where he was going, though. He even greeted the man working behind the counter-thing like he knew him. Which probably meant he'd been here before.

A lot.

“Kou!” Yuuta called once they'd gotten half-way through the restaurant, and her tou-san steered them towards that table without pause.

“Hey, guys,” Kou greeted them with a smile, helping Kyo climb onto the booth seat with one hand and then sitting down next to her. “I've been told you've already met Kyo.”

“Yup,” Kyo chirped, curiously trying to look everywhere at once, staring around the restaurant and the customers with wide eyes. “At the hospital.”

“Yeah,” Yuuta said slowly, blinking a bit at Kyo before turning to her dad. “What happened to the kid's hands?” He sounded like he somehow doubted Kou's parental skills, now that Isshun was no longer in the village.

“Blisters,” Kyo chirped before her dad could so much as blink.

He sent her an amused glance, before turning back to his two teammates. “I heard that the two of you would've liked to wait with the meet and greet until Kyo start the Academy,” he drawled casually, slumping back in his seat and eyeing his two friends with blatant amusement.

“No offence to your kid, of course,” Ryota returned evenly. “But it's not like we have much in common with her until then.”

Kou snorted. “Kyo, did you remember to bring part of kaa-san's lesson with you?” He asked, not taking his amused gaze off his teammates.

Kyo tilted her head, but instead of answering, she began to go through her pockets. She was pretty sure she had remembered...

“That's better than me, kitten,” her tou-san replied amusedly.
Kyo blinked, thought it over and slowly nodded. “Kaa-san said we're almost done with this one, so it would probably be better,” she mused, and proceeded to carefully open the folded paper packet. A task made harder by all the medical tape and band-aids on her sore, stiff fingers.

Then, with little fanfare, she tipped the fine powder into her mouth and swallowed it down, the bitter taste familiar by now and hardly enough to make her so much as blink.

When she had tucked away the paper into one of her pockets and turned back to the three men sharing the table with her, two of them staring intently at her.

“What?” She asked, blinking confusedly.

Instead of answering her, Yuuta and Ryota turned on her tou-san.

“Tell me that wasn't what I think it was,” Yuuta near-demanded. “Isshun isn't even in the village.”

Kyo tilted her head, peering at the man. “Kaa-san's been giving me lessons almost a year now,” she informed the man primly, smiling sweetly. “Tou-san's teaching me to throw kunai properly, too,” she added happily, proudly showing off her battered hands.

Kou ruffled her hair, making her frown and bat at the offending paw. “What do you want to eat, kitten?”

“You choose,” she returned, not even having to think about it.

If her tou-san really had been here a lot before, then he'd know what was good and it wasn't like she had any dietary restrictions here. Which always managed to send a spark of glee through her.

“So what else have your parents been teaching you?” Ryota asked, giving her a curious look.

Kyo peered back at him, sent her father a questioning look and when he nodded, seriously thought about it.

“There's lessons with kaa-san, which is fun,” she smiled, “katas, camping and throwing kunai with tou-san.” She frowned a second. “Meditating?” She offered quizzically, peering at her dad again.

“Isn't that a bit much? The kid's only three,” Yuuta asked carefully.

“Oh, and the chakra thing!” Kyo added with a grin, having just remembered. It was almost disturbingly easy to forget, sometimes, because chakra was such a normal thing here.

When she practised with her kaa-san it felt like just another game, really.

Kou paused. “What 'chakra thing'?” He asked, peering curiously at her.

Kyo eagerly held out her hands towards her father, palms up. “Put your hands on top of mine, tou-san,” she instructed eagerly. She'd actually wanted to show him, but had forgotten all about it when the man had gotten injured.

Kou readily enough did as asked, sliding his much larger hands over hers so that their palms were touching.

Or, rather, Kou's palms were covering all of Kyo's hands and then some.

Kyo closed her eyes, face screwing up in concentration before she managed to direct a small layer of chakra to her hands.
Chakra was strange; it was a bit like having an extra set of muscles, but at the same time, it was more like an extra sense. Flexing it took practise and focus.

It was getting easier the more she practised, but after having identified it that first time, she was almost always aware of it on some level now. It was just there, like a small pool of comforting warmth in the pit of her stomach.

Kyo opened her eyes and pulled her hands downwards, grinning with satisfaction when her father's hands were pulled down with hers, effectively stuck together by her chakra.

A small, barely noticeable pulse of chakra from Kou had them separated in a jiffy, and Kyo looked up at him with a wide, proud smile.

Kou grinned right back. “You've been holding out on me, Kyo,” he accused, ruffling her hair again until she couldn't help but laugh.

“Stop it!” She whined, pushing his hand off her head, and she just knew her hair was standing on end now. “You're making it static,” she grumbled, still managing to sound out the word her kaa-san had informed her was the correct term just the other week. “Didn't you bring me here for food, tou-san?” She asked next, trying to make her hair lie flat again. “I'm hungry,” she informed him with a sniff.

Kou sighed with exaggerated disappointment. “Bossy little thing, isn't she?” He asked Ryota, who just blinked back.

“Are you sure you're Kou's daughter? Isshun I can sort of see, but this guy?” Yuuta asked with a small, teasing smile playing around the corners of his mouth, jerking his thumb at Kou, who rolled his eyes.

“I'm gonna order the kitten and me something to eat, so keep an eye on them while I'm gone, Kyo,” he requested with a smirk.

“Okay,” Kyo chirped, smothering a giggle into the crook of her arm, peering up at the two shinobi who were staring after her Tou-san with bemused looks on their faces.

Kyo leaned her arm against the table and rested her head against it. “Are you two doing missions on your own when tou-san's re-cuper-ating?”

Ryota smoothly turned back to look at her. “We can work together with other teams, though not as well,” he said blankly. “So basically, yes.”

“Oh,” Kyo blinked wondering what that would mean for them. “Tou-san's probably going to be well enough to go back to work soon,” she admitted, drooping at the thought.

“We'll do our best to bring him back to the village, kid,” Yuuta said after an uncomfortable lull in the conversation.

“I know,” Kyo returned solemnly. “But if both tou-san and kaa-san are away, I have to stay with obaa-san,” she told them, scowling at the thought.

Ryota began to laugh, a low, rusty-sounding thing that nonetheless conveyed his cheer and good humour well enough.

“Ah, yes. Good old Haname.” He shook his head. “I bet she's happy about you following in your parents' footsteps,” he mused with a wicked grin, showing a bit more teeth than strictly necessary.
“Ecstatic,” Kou said with a snort, putting a plate of something that smelled heavenly in front of Kyo, who perked up, practically drooling at the sight of food.

She was perfectly happy to listen silently to the three adults' conversation while she consumed her lunch.

It felt like quite the feat, but she managed to eat all of it.

When she was done, she put the chopsticks on the plate, pushed it further onto the table, away from the edge, and then crawled into her dad's lap and almost instantly fell asleep.

She wouldn't wake up until the next morning, and she could only hope her tou-san had gotten one of his friends to carry her home, because he really shouldn't carry any weight until his wounds were fully healed.

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Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Kyo keeps growing. Things are changing and she's apparently in need of more structured activities.

Another year passed with little change.

The only thing she could think of that was really different was the fact that Yuuta and Ryota came around to visit every now and then now, joining them for dinner at least once between missions.

Something that Isshun seemed to enjoy, too.

Kyo's lessons intensified and progressed, but much of it were things she had to do on her own, because as the year went, both her parents got sent out more frequently and for longer stretches of time.

But that just meant that she cherished the time she got to spend with her mum and dad all the more.

“Kyo, come here,” Isshun called from the kitchen, and Kyo put down the book she'd been thinking of reading, readily enough trotting out of her room to join her parents. For once home at the same time; a rare treat these days.

“Take a seat, kitten,” Kou said, mentioning at one of the chairs around the table.

Kyo hesitated before she did as asked.

Was she in trouble?

She couldn't think of anything she could have done to warrant a serious talk.

Isshun smiled reassuringly as she sat down as well. There were lines from stress and too little sleep on her face, and the bags under her eyes seemed to have become something of a permanent feature.

Kyo knew that she just needed rest, but that wasn't possible with the Village at war.

Her kaa-san always looked better when she'd been home a while, but then she'd be sent out again and it'd start all over.

“You've turned four now, dear,” Isshun began, rubbing one hand against her neck. As if it was paining her. “And since Kou and I are out of the village so much, we feel we can't teach you enough to really keep you occupied.”

“We know you're bored a lot at my parents' house,” Kou added with an apologetic look.

“So,” Isshun smiled, “we've enrolled you at the Academy for the next starting class.”

Kyo blinked, looking from her mum to her dad and back again.

“And when is that?” She asked tentatively, not sure how she felt about this. It was a bit sudden, to be
“In a few weeks,” her tou-san said, smiling a little, as if he thought he knew what she was thinking. “It would reassure the both of us to know there are shinobi around you you could ask for help and guidance from when we’re not here.”

“We'll keep up our lessons with you whenever we can, of course, so that wouldn't change,” Isshun added, and it felt like they had rehearsed this.

“Okay?” Kyo tilted her head.

“I know your tou-san and I haven't been here a lot this last year, but hopefully, this year will be better,” Isshun said, though everyone in the room knew that that most likely wouldn't be the case.

From the bits and pieces she'd been able to overhear, the war didn't seem like it was letting up anytime soon, and from what she could remember from Before, there would be more difficulties even after it was over.

“You'll get the chance to make friends your own age,” Kou added, and she suddenly realised what it was they were doing.

“I'm not upset, tou-san,” she told him, smiling a little despite everything. “I know why you've been gone so much.”

It wasn't their fault; she knew. She understood it, but that didn't mean she had to like it.

Kyo wasn't ignorant of the fact that both her parents were coming home with injuries more often, either. Not serious enough to warrant an extended stay at the hospital -like before her third birthday- but enough for her to notice their pain.

She'd tried her best to be at her very best behaviour to make it easier for them, but it was hard.

Memories from another life or not, she was currently a child, and that reflected in her behaviour. To some extent.

Her kaa-san sighed. “We know,” she assured her tiredly. “It still makes us feel sad to leave you so often.”

“I like it best when you're both home,” Kyo admitted softly. “But I know-” she bit her lip and glanced between her parents. “I know why you have to leave.”

“You're going to grow up into a frightening woman,” Kou mused fondly, giving her a slightly wry grin.

“She's our daughter; of course she is,” Isshun sniffed, though it was mostly teasing.

“Listen, I'm heading back out tomorrow, and I won't be back until you've already started,” Kou said, leaning forward to smooth a hand over her hair, pushing it out of her face. “Have fun and don't let the Clan kids push you around, okay?”

“Okay.” Kyo smiled weakly, leaning into her dad's touch. “And you do your best to stay safe,” she shot back.

“Absolutely, kitten.” Kou smiled.

And true enough, Kou left on a mission early the next morning, waking her before sunrise long
enough to say goodbye and wish her good luck.

Kyo had gone back to sleep, and gotten up at her normal time a few hours later, eating breakfast with her mother.

Isshun had to work even when she was in the village, and that sometimes meant she had to stay away a few days at a time.

As they drew nearer to the start of term for the Academy, Kyo fell victim to a bout of nerves.

She was definitely excited, because school, but also... she hadn't really interacted much with people outside of the small sphere of adults in her life during the last four years. Three, if you counted from when she'd become self-aware enough.

There were Isshun, Kou, Yuuta and Ryota, her grandparents, occasionally her aunt, and Kenji and Taichi, her cousins being the only other children she had regular contact with.

...what if no one liked her?

It made her feel silly, because Kyo had never really cared about what anyone thought of her, now or before, but. She was a very independent, somewhat introverted person, but that didn't mean she didn't want friends.

And she wanted friends.

She'd be happy with just one good one.

And that wasn't even touching on the rather loaded subject of the fact that the Academy was there to produce the next generation of shinobi and kunoichi. And Kyo wasn't sure how she felt about that.

For now, it worked better if she didn't think on it too much. Or at all; whichever really.

“Ready for tomorrow?” Isshun asked, making Kyo look up from her poison pack. It was the same one she'd gotten from her mother when she was two, though it contained quite a bit more now than it had back then.

“Kaa-san!” Kyo jumped to her feet and ran for her mother, throwing her arms around her. “I was afraid you wouldn't make it back in time,” she murmured.

“I know, but I did,” Isshun kissed the side of her head and rose with her still in her arms. “Thank you for looking after Kyo-chan, Kentarou,” she said, raising her voice slightly to address her grandfather, who was sitting by the kitchen table going over what Kyo had assumed were papers related to his business. “Go collect your things, Kyo,” she added quietly before she set her back down on the floor.

“Be right back,” Kyo said and dashed off to get the overnight bag that was waiting up in the room she slept in when she was staying here. She slung the backpack over one shoulder and then ran back into the kitchen, where she collected her poison kit and then came to a stop before her mother with a happy grin. “Done!”

“Excellent,” Isshun smiled tiredly, picked her up and gave her grandfather a polite nod before she left.

They took to the roofs the moment they were clear of the house.
Kyo clung to her kaa-san, too happy to have her back in one piece to really enjoy the ride.

Isshun didn't set her down again until they had reached their apartment door.

Home was always dark, empty and felt a bit hollow when none of them had been there for a while, but Kyo would rather be here than at her grandparents' any time.

Not that Isshun and Kou would ever leave her on her own if they could help it.

“Have you eaten?” Isshun asked, placing her sandals off to the side and giving her a look. At Kyo's nod she rubbed a hand over her face. “Then go to bed; you've got a big day tomorrow.”

“Okay,” Kyo said putting her own sandals next to her mother's. “Good night.”

And she ran off to brush her teeth and change for bed.

When she paused to glance over her shoulder before going into the bathroom, it was to see her mum standing slumped against the wall, head tipped back and her eyes closed and it tore at Kyo to see her so exhausted.

Hurrying to get ready for bed, Kyo got out her step-stool, and brushed her teeth. Staring at her own reflection, she took in all the differences from the person she'd used to be before she was Kyo. Instead of long blond hair that was an unruly riot of curls, she now had straight brown hair, the colour of chocolate. Her eyes, unlike both her parents', were a deep blue, remarkably like her eyes from Before. Her skin was tan from all the time she spent outdoors, but there weren't any freckles.

She looked like a pretty even mix of both her parents, and she supposed that would mean she'd grown up to be a reasonably attractive woman?

If she survived that long, anyway.

Spitting and rinsing her toothbrush in the sink, Kyo quickly pushed the small step-stool back under the sink when she was done, and walked to her room.

Finally ready for bed, she peered out of her room to see her mum still in the same position.

“Kaa-san,” she said softly, making Isshun open her eyes and tilt her head to look at her. “You don't have to come tomorrow; I can go by myself.”

She even knew where the Academy was; Ryota had showed her once when tou-san had had to leave abruptly when they'd been having lunch together, asking his teammate to take her to his parents'.

“Of course I'll come,” Isshun said, blinking at her a little, before she managed to push herself off the wall. “It's your big day; I wouldn't miss it for the world.”

“But you're so tired,” Kyo mumbled. And she couldn't help but be worried, because being exhausted and going on dangerous missions, going out into the middle of war, didn't sound like a good combination.

“That's just something that can't be helped,” Isshun sighed, caressing her cheek and straightening. “Now, go to bed. I'll feel better in the morning,” she assured her, and Kyo reluctantly did as told.

Waking up especially early, mainly due to an interesting mix of nerves and worry, Kyo got dressed with somewhat uncharacteristic care, choosing a dark-green t-shirt and brown shorts that reached her
knees that looked pretty good together.

She eyed the kunai holster -which had seen a lot of use in the last year- before leaving it where it lay. She doubted the Academy instructors would be allowing a bunch of children to bring their own weapons on the first day.

Once she was dressed, Kyo left her room for the kitchen, taking care to be extra silent in the hope she wouldn't wake her mother up; Isshun deserved to sleep a while longer, and they wouldn't have to leave for the Academy for well over two hours.

Her kaa-san could sleep.

Kyo spent some time poking around the kitchen for something simple she could have for breakfast, all the while wondering if she should make some sort of lunch for herself, too.

She was pretty sure she remembered the kids in the manga bringing their own lunch...

And that was something of a Japanese custom, wasn't it?

Not that Konoha was the same as Japan; not even close! But it was still something to bear in mind.

An hour and a half later, Kyo had made herself -and her kaa-san- breakfast, eaten, and made herself a simple lunch to bring. She'd even wrapped the bento up in a neat little package using the cloth she'd found in one cupboard.

Bringing it back into her room, Kyo packed her backpack, making sure to add pencils, erasers and a notebook, because she had no idea whether that was something the Academy would supply them with or not.

That her chosen backpack also happened to be the pack that contained her poison kit didn't even cross her mind, and she absently rearranged the various jars and containers to make room for the new additions.

When she was done, Kyo strapped the pack onto the small of her back, and while it was still too big for her, she had just lengthened the straps as far as they would go and wrapped them twice around her middle instead.

It worked out rather beautifully.

Her hair was short, falling around her ears, so that wasn't anything she had to worry about.

Deeming herself to be ready, Kyo left her room and walked to her parents' bedroom. She creaked the door open, stuck her head inside and eyed her mother's form in the bed, and wondered if she should just go alone.

"Is it time to go?" Isshun asked quietly, her voice rough with sleep.

"In a while," Kyo returned softly, coming into the room and climbing onto the bed, crawling up until she could collapse on the mattress next to her mother.

Isshun drowsily freed an arm from the covers and wrapped it around her. "Did you wake me with enough time for a shower, I wonder?"

"Yup," Kyo chirped quietly, burying her face in what she absently realised was her mum's chest. "Kaa-san?"
“Hm?” Isshun hummed, and when Kyo glanced up at her, her eyes were closed.

“You still don't have to come,” she said seriously. “I'd much rather you rest, and we could celebrate later.”

Isshun sighed. “You're far too mature for your age, Kyo-chan. You know that, right?” Her words were heavy, though she sounded wryly amused. “Too observant,” she breathed.

“Sorry,” Kyo buried her face in the covers again.

“Never apologize for who you are,” Isshun replied instantly, sounding far more awake than she had a second ago. “What we do, Kyo, isn't something most people understand, or approve of, but there's nothing dishonourable about it,” she said firmly.

Kyo blinked confusedly at her kaa-san.

What were they talking about now? She felt that they had veered off into a direction she hadn't anticipated and was quite off topic from where they'd started out.

“Okay,” she said when her mother clearly waited for her to say something.

Isshun's lips twisted briefly, into something that wasn't really a smile, but she finally sat up and put her feet on the floor.

“Give me a few minutes and then we'll go,” she said, sounding far more cheerful than Kyo felt the situation really called for.

As they were walking out the door, Isshun swept Kyo into her arms and settled her on her hip, pressing a quick kiss to her temple.

Kyo gave her kaa-san a questioning look, but settled into her hold happily enough, relishing the physical contact.

She'd always been rather tactile; never turning down the chance to cuddle.

And being carried was like one big hug that could last for what felt like forever.

Isshun calmly made her way through the village, keeping to the streets and taking her time, enjoying the pleasant morning. Kyo had made sure they had plenty of time, so there wasn't any reason to hurry.

When the Academy building came into sight, Kyo raised her head from her kaa-san's shoulder, unable to entirely contain her growing excitement.

When Isshun finally ambled into the Academy yard, there were plenty of other parents and children around. Some in shinobi uniform, others clearly civilian, the latter category looking an interesting mix of proud and mildly uneasy.

Kyo quickly turned her attention to the children, though. She tilted her head a little, because it looked to her like most of them were older than her.

“Kaa-san,” she said, making the woman glance at her. “Am I going to be the smallest one?” She asked.

“Possibly,” Isshun shrugged, clearly not concerned. “The civilian-born tend to be a little older.”
She supposed that made sense, if the way Haname-obaa-san treated her was anything to go by. The woman still insisted on treating her like there was nothing between her ears, talking to her like she was still one, rather than four.

Never mind that Kyo had never been the average child.

“Name?” A bland voice inquired, making Kyo start and turn to look at the shinobi her mother had approached while she'd been busy staring at what she assumed would be her future classmates. The man was dressed in what she realised was considered the standard uniform, wearing his hitai-ate on his forehead and holding a clipboard in one hand, pen in the other.

“Shiranui Kyo,” Isshun replied easily.

The Academy sensei scanned his list. “Classroom 1B,” he said after a brief pause. “Parents are advised to leave after greeting the sensei,” he added with a sharp look, as if he thought Isshun would insist to stay.

Kyo blinked, perplexed.

Why would kaa-san stay? She had better things to do, and it wasn't like she didn't know what the Academy entailed.

She frowned to herself and glanced down at her mum, for the first time taking in what she was wearing.

A pair of uniform trousers, a simple t-shirt and her sandals.

She still looked tired, too; worn down to the bone in a way that spoke of too little sleep and too much stress over a long period of time. Kyo supposed the casual observer might think she was an over-worked housewife, though. Possibly married to a shinobi.

The instructor blinked and then turned to the next approaching parent.

Isshun didn't seem the least bit bothered, and just walked into the building, one sure step at a time.

It seemed like no time later when Isshun walked them into classroom 1B, which already held a gaggle of excited children and a handful of straggling parents, some concerned and anxious, and some merely giving a last few parting words.

“Good morning,” a relatively friendly voice said, pulling Kyo's gaze away from the clusters of children and onto who she instantly knew was her new teacher. “Name?”

“Shiranui Kyo,” Kyo said, answering for herself, this time.

“I'm Nara Kouki,” he introduced himself in return. “Please address me as Kouki-sensei.”

Kyo nodded and wasn't surprised when her kaa-san finally set her down. “Yes, sensei.”

“You're free to remain until the class has received the formal introduction speech,” Kouki-sensei said with a glance at her kaa-san, though he didn't look like he expected Isshun to actually stay.

She gave him a small, quick smile and then crouched down to be closer to Kyo's level.

“Remember what we talked about this morning, and remember to take your next dosage with lunch, okay?”
“Yeah.” Kyo smiled, wrapped her arms around her mother's neck for one last hug and then stepped back. “See you later, kaa-san.”

“Have fun,” Isshun gave her a sharp, quicksilver grin before she stood back to her feet and stalked off, no doubt to go back home and return to bed.

Kyo looked after her until she disappeared around the corner and then turned back to the waiting Kouki-sensei.

“Are there designated seats?” Kyo asked, having to crane her neck to look her new sensei in the eyes. He was rather tall, now that she was back on the ground.

“No, you can sit wherever,” Kouki said, giving her a sharp but brief look before he turned back to the doorway a second before the next student and parent pair arrived.

Kyo walked further into the classroom and snagged herself a seat in the back of the room closest to the windows, which would give her a good overview of the room, and the option to zone out and stare out the window if the situation demanded it.

Which it would, no doubt.

School was awesome, but it could also be mind-numbingly boring at times.

Kyo settled down to wait, watching the children that arrived and amused herself by trying to see if she found any of them the slightest familiar.

She'd really like to know where in the time-line she was.

Oh, God, what if this was supposed to be the First Shinobi War? Then Genma may very well end up being her son, rather than the other way around...

Would her children get her surname, though? Or would she just not get married, Kyo wondered with a bizarre sense of morbid fascination. That would give any children she had the Shiranui name for sure.

“Everyone settle down!” Kouki-sensei finally said, causing the excited chatter to die down almost instantly, every single child -and the few parents- fixing him with their full attention. “Unless you missed it when you came in, I am Nara Kouki. You will address me as either Kouki-sensei, or just sensei while you are here,” he said, brown gaze sliding from child to child. “While you're here, my word is law, and I don't want to deal with anyone who thinks that's negotiable. Understood?”

“Yes, sensei,” Kyo answered completely by rote, along with two others.

Some of the other children snickered quietly, making Kyo blink.

Kouki-sensei gave them all an unimpressed look. “I said; Understood?”

This time, the whole class answered him.

“Better,” the Nara nodded. “You're all here to become Konoha shinobi, and that is the standard I will hold you to.”

He gave a nod to the four parents that had stayed, clearly signalling that it was time for the four civilians to leave, and didn't continue his introductory speech until they were gone.

By the time her kaa-san came to pick her up at the end of the day, Kyo was exhausted.
She hadn't been surrounded by this many children since... since her last life.

And yeah, she definitely wasn't jealous of the Academy sensei; having to deal with all these children, with eventual access to lethal weapons. No, thank you, being a stand-in teacher at a normal school had been bad enough.

Kyo was pretty sure if anyone ever tried to make her work at the Academy, she'd start a revolt.

Or end up being the shittiest teacher ever. Or just poison the local water source.

Whichever worked best.

“How was it?” Isshun asked, picking her up and giving her a congratulatory hug. She looked like she'd spent the hours since they’d last seen each other in bed, and she looked slightly better as a result.

“Interesting,” Kyo answered honestly. “Kouki-sensei didn't tell us anything I didn't already know, though.”

“He's got to save something for the rest of the year, sweetheart,” Isshun smiled, pressed a quick kiss to her temple and then walked in the direction of home. “Hungry?” She asked.

“Starving,” Kyo grinned.

“Then let's get something to eat,” Isshun declared. “If you feel like you're up to it, there's something I want to do afterwards.”

Curiosity sufficiently piqued, Kyo nodded and settled into her mother's arms, savouring the feel of a very good day.

The only thing that could have made it perfect was if her dad had been there, too.

Fed, watered and having gotten a few hours to recuperate from her first day at the Academy, Kyo was eagerly following her kaa-san as she led the way towards what she knew was the closest training ground.

Kouki-sensei had told them that their schedule meant that they'd normally have longer days, but since it'd been the very first one, it'd been shorter. Because of all the paperwork that had to be taken care of, and the preparations for the mandatory medical examination they'd all have to submit to in the course of the week.

Kyo wasn't overly worried about that; she'd hardly even had a cold that she could remember, here. And she felt fine, so she didn't think it was anything to dread.

It was most likely just so that they knew if any of the kids had any unexpected health issues, make sure they got blood samples and get them used to procedure, probably.

“Okay!” Isshun said once they reached their destination, turning around so that she was facing Kyo, who straightened expectantly. “Now that you've taken the first official step to becoming a Genin,” she began with a gently teasing grin, “I feel it is time to show you a technique of mine that my mother taught me.”

“Really?” Kyo couldn't help but ask, feeling eager and excited, because she didn't think her kaa-san
had ever mentioned her own parents before and Kyo hadn't thought to ask.

Isshun nodded. “Show me how far you've gotten with your aim,” she ordered, pulling Kyo’s child-sized kunai holster from a pocket.

Kyo took the heavy bundle, pulled out a kunai and, after checking the distance to the closest target, threw it with far more success than when she'd first started.

Having had so much time to herself had at least meant she'd had plenty of opportunity to practise her aim, which showed.

She very rarely missed anything she aimed at now, and nine times out of ten, hit dead centre.

It'd gotten to the point where throwing practise was more about the force she could put behind and how fast she could throw the knives.

“Very good,” Isshun praised, eyeing the kunai lodged firmly in the wooden post.

Kyo watched curiously as Isshun settled on the ground, pulling a scroll from her other pocket. Without having to be asked, she quickly settled down next to her mother to see what it was.

Isshun unrolled part of the scroll, which revealed a rather complex looking collection of kanji and marks she was fairly sure weren't part of any alphabet.

With a start, she realised what it was she was looking at; fuuinjutsu.

Isshun pressed her fingers against the edge of the seal, pulsed her chakra once, which resulted in a small cloud of thin smoke. Clearing quickly, it revealed a pouch that looked somewhat similar to Kyo's poison kit.

She was actually pretty sure she'd seen Isshun handle pouches like this one before, while preparing for missions.

Her kaa-san rolled up the scroll and put it away before she opened up the pouch and tilted it to show Kyo was was inside.

Kyo peered down at what looked like-

“Needles?” She asked, blinking a bit.

“Senbon,” Isshun agreed, pulling out a bundle of thin, shiny, wickedly sharp needles, about as long as her hand, from the base of her palm to the tip of her middle finger. “And needles, yes,” she finished, pulling out a second bundle, this one smaller, if only because the needles were what at a glance looked like regular sewing needles.

At a closer inspection, Kyo could see that they were a bit sturdier-looking, lacked an eye and were pointy in both ends.

“This is a family technique,” Isshun said, sliding one each of the needles out of their respective bundles, and Kyo watched her twirl the senbon expertly between her fingers. “Watch carefully, Kyo-chan.”

And she proceeded to flick her hand in a seemingly harmless manner, leaving her hand empty.

Kyo jumped to her feet and ran over to the wooden post, where the senbon was struck firmly, half of it sunken into the worn wood. The only reason she knew the smaller needle had hit at all was
because there was a tiny mark in the wood, and she could only assume the entire thing had lodged itself entirely in the post, leaving nothing more than a pinprick hole behind.

After trying -and failing- to pull the senbon out, Kyo rushed back to her mother, unable to keep from grinning.

“That was awesome, kaa-san!” She couldn't help but gush, because it really, really was.

“Thank you,” Isshun smiled sedately, though she looked pretty pleased with her reaction. “Here,” she continued, handing Kyo one of the senbon. “This is how you hold it.” And she carefully arranged Kyo's small fingers around the cold, smooth steel needle.

It looked so much bigger in her hand.

“Do I throw it like a kunai?” Kyo wondered, looking over her hand and trying to memorize the positioning of her fingers.

“It's similar enough, though this is far more of a precision weapon,” her kaa-san explained gently. “The wind resistance is different, so you'll have to practise to get a feel for it.”

“Okay,” Kyo nodded, because that made sense. “Can I try?”

“Of course,” Isshun laughed. “That’s why we're here. Try a few times, and then I'll show you how to handle the needles,” she promised.

Kyo grinned and turned to the wooden post.

It was so easy to ignore the reasons behind this training, the aim for all these skills her parents were imparting to her. She loved to learn, she did, and it felt like her mother and father were merely doing their best to hand down their life-skills.

And they were.

It was just, the way those skills were intended to be used weren't exactly something that would have been... socially acceptable in her life Before. Would have been ethically and morally abhorrent, actually.

It was just easier not to think about it.

Kyo concentrated, checked that her hold on the needle -so different from a kunai; slimmer and lighter- was still correct, and then tried to throw it like she'd grown accustomed to do with the knives.

It went wide.

With a small frown, Kyo picked up another one and tried again. And again, until one at a time, the entire bundle of senbon had been thrown at the post. At least she seemed to have adjusted some and had started hitting her target, even though it wasn't anywhere near as impressive as her mother's casual demonstration.

Without prompting, Kyo bounced over to collect all the senbon, gathering them from the ground around the post and pulling a few from the wood.

She still couldn't budge the one her kaa-san had thrown.

Putting down the handful of senbon, Kyo turned expectant eyes on her mother, and Isshun smiled.
“There are different ways to do this, sweetheart, but this is my preferred method,” she said, picking up one of the smaller needles and showing Kyo how she placed it in her hand, holding it between her fingers in a way that made it almost disappear entirely from sight.

With a small grin at her daughter, Isshun flicked her hand, though her fingers stood for most of the motion, and sent the needle at their wooden target.

Kyo tilted her head. “That looks difficult,” she commented absently, picking one up for herself and trying to place the needle just so.

It didn't quite work, because even though the needles were much smaller and shorter than the senbon, they were still longer than the length of her fingers. Which meant she couldn't hide them entirely like her mother had done.

“You'll grow, Kyo,” Isshun assured her warmly, adjusting her hold a little and then gently turned her in the direction of the target. “And it'll feel more natural once you've gotten used to it.”

“Yeah, I know,” Kyo muttered distractedly, frowning as she prepared to give it a try. “It feels a bit weird.” Like she wasn't really holding anything at all.

Isshun hummed, pushing her elbow a fraction closer to her body. “I know your tou-san's told you before, but it's all in the wrist. Now, give it a try.”

Kyo took aim and made an attempt, doing the best she could to flick her wrist in the small, sharp motion her kaa-san had done.

“Did it miss?” She asked, squinting at the post.

“It fell a bit short, I'm afraid.” Isshun chuckled, ruffling her hair gently. “It was a very good first attempt, though.”

“They're so small,” Kyo groused, but her mother's words made her straighten slightly. “It's hard to see.”

“It's all about practise,” Isshun repeated for what felt like the hundredth time, making Kyo sigh.

She knew it was true, but that didn't change the fact of the matter; she could see hours upon hours of training in front of her.

At least it would give her something to do while her parents were away if the Academy turned out to be as horrifyingly boring as Naruto had seemed to think.

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Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Who needs friends, anyway?

There was so much to learn.

The manga hadn't ever gone into enough detail to really cover all of this, instead giving the reader a general overview, a simplified, dumbed-down version of what was without a doubt a highly complex situation.

The base of it all was; the Elemental Nations were a mess.

Politically speaking. And Kyo felt it was mainly due to the fact that the system was so new; the high tensions between the countries and the constant power-plays were all symptoms.

Admittedly, most of that was based on the knowledge she'd gotten from reading the story, and not from what she'd learned in the Academy so far, but she felt like it was true enough.

For now, her class was busy covering the more basic stuff. Like simple katas in taijutsu class - a different style from the one tou-san had taught her- and how to hold a kunai properly.

And she knew it was to make sure all of them had learned correctly, or, in the civilian-born cases, learned at all. That didn't change the fact that it threatened to bore Kyo to tears.

Thinking about it; it'd been the same in the Before when she'd started school. Only instead of weapons handling and martial arts, it'd been reading and writing.

In the theoretical lessons, they'd started on the history of Fire Country and Konoha in particular, though Kyo was relatively certain they were given an abbreviated and censored version.

It may or may not have something to do with the fact that Kyo associated the word 'ninja' with 'sneaky'.

All in all, it wasn't so bad; she rather liked her new sensei, too.

Kouki-sensei was stern and expected them to behave, but was otherwise pretty laid-back and almost kind. So long as no one crossed him.

The Naruto manga had always portrayed the Nara Clan to be made up of nothing more than lazy bums. Admittedly, they'd seen hardly anyone - of any of the Clans- other than the heirs, their parents and potentially someone more, so it wasn't like that was a necessarily accurate summary.

Kyo was no more than four here, but even she knew that you couldn't survive as a shinobi for long if you were truly lazy.

If it was a front you showed outsiders, however, that was a different matter entirely. Being underestimated was sometimes a great advantage.
So all in all, the Academy wasn't horrible.

Most of what they learned was interesting, the added guidance was appreciated and she was really looking forward to the sparring they would no doubt eventually get to in taijutsu class.

Ninjutsu sounded exciting, too, though Kouki-sensei had told them quite sternly, in no uncertain terms, that he wasn't teaching anyone *anything* related to chakra before he was satisfied they could handle it.

And Kyo was pretty certain he hadn't meant physically.

Which, speaking of.

Most of her classmates were six years old, a few Clan kids were five, but Kyo was most definitely the youngest one at four.

Not that that was bothering her; no, there were far more important issues on Kyo's mind. Which her dad found out quite abruptly a little over two weeks into her Academy career.

“Have you made any friends?” Kou asked curiously, giving her a proud smile as he rubbed a towel over his hair. She'd just finished telling him about the things Kouki-sensei had started teaching them so far.

He'd gotten back from his latest mission -with minimal injuries- and had moved directly from the front door to the shower.

Kyo blinked at him and then, with no prior warning, burst into tears, her small frame racked with heavy, painful sobs.

Her tou-san dropped the damp towel in alarm, at her side in an instant.

“Kyo? What's the matter?” He asked, hands moving gently but urgently over her form, as if searching for injuries.

“I don't know how-” she sobbed, wiping a forearm angrily over her eyes, “how to be like the other children!”

And it was so stupid!

Stupid, *stupid*.

“Oh, Kyo,” tou-san sighed and scooped her into his arms, sitting down on the floor where he'd been crouched in front of her.

His strong, familiar arms were enough to calm her a little, but nowhere near enough to stop her tears.

Curling up and burying her face in the side of his throat, Kyo felt like she was doing nothing but cry whenever her parents were home.

What was wrong with her? She was a grown-ass woman! She hadn't cried this much in ages and she was frankly starting to feel like it was enough.

“It's okay, kitten,” Kou murmured, smoothing a hand over her hair before rubbing her back in an attempt to calm her further. “It's not your fault.”

Kyo pressed her face a bit firmer against her tou-san's damp skin. “Can't make any friends,” she
muttered, and she was a bit embarrassed by her own words.

Though it wasn't necessarily that she couldn't make any friends so much as the fact that, well... all her classmates were immature little brats that tended to grate on her nerves on the best of days.

No matter how much she was a real child, she was also an adult trapped in a child's body, and there wasn't any changing that.

She hadn't noticed quite as much before, because she'd been spending virtually all her time with adults who -mostly- treated her according to her own behaviour. Kyo hadn't quite realised how blatantly different she was.

She was mostly okay with it, but she had wanted at least one friend.

Was that too much to ask?

One friend?

There'd been friends in the Before. Few and far between, and somewhat scattered, but they'd been there. She'd had especially one friend she'd talked to practically every day, and she missed it. Missed her.

Someone who was on the same wavelength, someone who understood her, had the same interests and just... was there for her.

Someone to listen to her when she was whiny, tired and did nothing other than complain. Or someone to discuss her dreams for the future with.

Never mind how useless those old dreams were now, the issue still stood.

Kyo had wanted someone that was hers; someone that wouldn't go away for weeks at a time and leave her behind, someone she could train with. Play with. Have fun with.

She loved her parents and she had loads of fun with them, but it wasn't the same.

“You're a special girl, Kyo,” her dad murmured soothingly, voice soft and almost tender, despite the rather helpless cast to it. “You're so, so smart and mature and it's not your fault your peers can't quite keep up.”

And that made Kyo feel even worse.

Because it wasn't true.

She wasn't particularly smarter than the average person; she just had an unfair advantage over her fellow children. She was cheating.

“They'll catch up eventually,” Kou promised her weakly, caressing her cheek and smearing a few tears over her skin.

“But I wanted a friend now,” Kyo sobbed helplessly, feeling ridiculous.

“Are the other kids mean to you because you're younger?” Kou asked suddenly, as if grasping for something he could actually deal with. Something he could fix.

Kyo shook her head. “They think I'm a baby, tou-san,” she told him disdainfully, the word all but searing her tongue on the way out. “But no one's been mean.”
And they hadn't. The other kids just weren't particularly interested in making friends with someone a couple of years younger than they were.

The few she'd interacted with so far had been amicable enough, but that wasn't the same as friendship, or even companionship.

Kou gave a deep, frustrated sigh, leaning his cheek against the crown of her head, his arms tightening around her.

Kyo tried to burrow even deeper into his embrace.

“Sorry,” she eventually muttered.

“What for?”

“You're tired and I wanted us to have a nice evening,” she admitted. Kyo hadn't seen him for so long and the first thing she did was cry on him? Over something she had already sort-of-accepted? “I didn't mean to be difficult.”

Kou stilled. “Did someone tell you you're being difficult, Kyo?” He asked softly, voice even and calm.

“No,” Kyo clenched her eyes shut, because why was she just making everything worse? Writing had never been an issue, but talking? She always made a mess of it.

“Kyo,” Kou pressed firmly.

“Grown-ups don't like it when children cry!” She huffed angrily, though it was mostly directed at herself. “I'm being difficult and ruining the little time we get together, and I hate it!”

Kou didn't move for a long moment, merely holding her quietly and seemingly listening to her pant with anger and half-formed sobs.

“It's not your fault your mother and I have been away so much the last few years,” he finally said quietly. “You know that, right?”

“It's because of the stupid war,” Kyo cried. “You're both so tired all the time and what if you don't get to rest enough when you're home because of me and you die the next time you go away?” She asked wetly, voice trembling and shaking with pent up emotions and worries.

Kou didn't say anything for the longest time, and it felt like Kyo's chest might actually seize up and freeze solid.

“When I'm away,” Kou eventually said, voice quiet and barely audible over her harsh breathing. “And things are at their worst, you're one of the few things that always manage to keep me going, Kyo.” He carefully pulled her a little ways away from his chest to look at her. “You're just four years old and you're dealing with this much better than someone many years older. You're allowed to feel these things, and no one should ever tell you differently, okay?”

Kyo stared up at her dad's serious face, new tears dripping from her eyes every time she blinked. “I don't want you to die, tou-san,” she whispered weakly.

“I know,” Kou pulled her back into a hug. “I don't want that either, but sometimes it just can't be avoided. All we can do is our best, but you should know that kaa-san and I will do everything in our power to come back to you, every time.”
Kyo curled up into a small, miserable ball, wrapping her arms around her knees. “What if that isn't enough?”

Kou sighed heavily. “You're too mature for your own good, kitten,” he joked half-heartedly, sounding like he didn't know what else to say.

There wasn't anything he could say, really, because in that scenario, there was only death waiting at the end.

However much she'd loved to read Naruto, writing for the fandom and making up her own intricate stories about the amazing characters... this wasn't a story. This was her life.

Her family's life.

And life was unfair; she'd learned that lesson beyond any reason of a doubt in her last life. Not quite in the same way, but it had stuck.

She'd actually rather take permanent illness and obstinate doctors who refused to listen to her over this. At least her loved ones hadn't been in danger before.

“What do you say about skipping school today to hang out with me instead?” He suggested after a long pause.

Kyo laughed wearily, wiping tears from her face. “It's Saturday, tou-san.”

“Ah.” Kou blinked. “All the better. This way, your sensei won't hunt me down to demand an explanation.”

“Kouki-sensei would probably go through official channels instead,” Kyo admitted wetly, smiling and wiping at her nose.

“Even worse,” Kou muttered with a dramatic shudder. “Those paper-pushing ninjas are terrifying, and don't let anyone ever try to tell you otherwise.”

“Got it.” Kyo finally looked up to smile weakly at her dad, who smiled sadly back.

“Come on, kitten; let's get something to eat and then spend some time on your favourite activity.”

“My what?” Kyo asked, blinking a little. She hadn't thought she'd developed a favourite anything here, though there were definitely plenty of things she loved doing.

“We never told you about when you were a baby?” Kou asked, actually pausing on his way into the kitchen. “Huh. Well, you tended to cry a lot, and the only way to make you stop was to hold you,” he said giving her a warm, affectionate squeeze. “Just so, firm but not suffocating and Isshun swore it was to make sure you knew you weren't alone.”

“Does that mean we'll get to cuddle?” Kyo asked hopefully.

It sounded silly, but she didn't give a single fuck. Her classmates could call her a baby all they wanted; they were clearly the ones missing out.

Kou and Isshun were away a lot and Kyo was determined to enjoy her time with them as much as she could. Because she had no guarantees that their time wouldn't be cut short.

“Of course it means cuddles.” Kou winked at her. “We could even go bother Ryota so that you can laugh at his constipated face when you hug him,” he offered magnanimously.
“What about Yuuta?” Kyo piped.

“We'll make a cuddle pile,” Kou decided easily, hefting her a bit higher and then opening the fridge to see what they had.

Kyo knew her parents tended to stock-pile non-perishables, because they got called away on missions with little notice too often to do otherwise, but she was fairly sure her kaa-san had bought a bunch of groceries before she got called out a few days ago.

“The broccoli probably needs to be eaten before it goes bad,” she offered, leaning forward to peer into the vegetable box.

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Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

The inevitable happens because kids are stupid.

“Class dismissed,” Kouki-sensei declared after yet another day.

Five months had passed since she'd started the Academy and things were going well.

Other than the fact that she'd gotten utterly trounced during the first real sparring session, it'd been pretty smooth sailing. And that incident, not surprising Kyo in the least, was easily explained by the simple fact that she hadn't ever had a real sparring partner before.

And she'd improved by leaps and bounds by then, anyway.

Kyo wasn't anywhere near the top of her class when it came to taijutsu; that spot was quite firmly held by an Uchiha boy by the name of Jirou. But she did very well in the academic parts, as well as ninjutsu and weapons handling.

It was almost funny, because she wasn't sure she'd had this good a memory in her old life. But then again, after so many years of being sick, she wasn't sure she'd even known what was normal and not any more.

Kyo got up from her seat, made sure she had all her things, and then calmly walked towards the door, quickly leaving the building.

“Kyo-chan!” A voice greeted her the moment she stepped out into the sunlight.

She perked up and quickly located her mother. “Kaa-san!” She grinned and ran up to her for a hug. “I didn't think you would come back until tomorrow,” she said.

“It does happen that mission parameters are met early,” Isshun said, taking her hand and starting for home.

Kyo smiled; in war times, at least, that seemed to be exceedingly rare. And it must depend on the type of mission, too.

Her mother was wearing her uniform; dark grey trousers, bandages tying down the fabric below her knees to her sandals. She wore a matching, long-sleeved shirt and a Chuunin vest, as well as an impressive collection of pouches.

Over her hair, she wore her hitai-ate as a bandana with the metal plate on her forehead.

“We got the test back from Kouki-sensei and I did pretty well,” Kyo told her mother, bouncing along beside her. “And I beat Hideki in taijutsu practise,” which she felt unimaginably proud about, too.

“And how did his Hyuuga pride take that?” Isshun asked amusedly.

“He was sulking the rest of the day,” Kyo admitted with a cheerful smile. Admittedly, she readily
acknowledged that she'd only won due to the older boy underestimating her quite severely, but a win was a win. “And sensei asked me to give you a note when either you or tou-san got back, whichever returned to the village first,” she added, remembering the small, sealed roll of paper Kouki-sensei had given her last week. “I have it in my pack.”

“I'll take a look at it when we come home,” Isshun promised. “Did you get in trouble?” She asked teasingly, sending Kyo an amused, light-hearted glance.

“Not that I know of,” Kyo admitted, and the thought had crossed her mind.

She hadn't been able to think of anything she could have done to warrant it, though.

Isshun hummed.

When they'd gotten back to the apartment, Kyo took off her sandals and put them away, then ran into her room to get a change of clothes, before rushing into the bathroom for a quick wash while her mother put away her gear.

Which would leave the shower free for her once she was done with that.

Having so many physical lessons had made it something of a routine to take a shower everyday after she came home from school. Mostly to get rid of the sand and dirt, because she was young enough sweat wasn't really an issue. Yet.

When she was done, she went to retrieve the note and wandered into the kitchen to wait for her mum.

“Did you get my things from grandma's or should I go there and get them?” She called when she heard the shower turn off.

“They're on your bed!” Isshun called back, her voice echoing slightly between the tiled walls of the bathroom.

“Okay!” Kyo called back, snickering quietly to herself.

Kicking her legs absently, she didn't have to wait much longer, though Isshun had definitely taken more time to wash than Kyo. Not that she blamed her or found it at all strange; it'd probably been a while since her kaa-san had gotten a proper wash.

“The note?” Isshun asked when she came into the kitchen wearing one of Kou's old t-shirts and a pair of comfortable-looking sweatpants. She was drying her hair with a towel, but hung it on the back of one of the chairs when Kyo held out the rolled up paper.

Kyo watched curiously while her mother used her chakra to open the thing, unrolled it and began to read, her face inscrutable.

The note had been a constant weight at the back of her head, because she was curious what it said. That didn't mean she'd try to read it herself, though.

“Your sensei wants a meeting,” Isshun finally said, though Kyo felt that that wasn't everything. “I'll come pick you up tomorrow, too and have a word with Kouki-sensei while I'm at it,” she decided.

“Okay.”

“But for now,” Isshun continued briskly, perking up and giving her an eager smile, almost making
the bags under her eyes unnoticeable. “We're having a lesson.”

Kyo felt her lips stretch into a grin. “I'll go get my stuff!” She said, already running across the living room to her room.

When she came back, she settled on the floor in front of her mother.

“Have you kept up with the needles?” Isshun asked, quickly glancing up from where she was taking out several of her kits.

“Yes, kaa-san.” Kyo nodded. “I'm even better than the last time you were home!” She couldn't help but brag a little. Because she'd put a lot of hours into training with throwing the senbon and needles, like her mother had showed her.

“Very good,” kaa-san praised with a smile. “Then it's time to advance to the next step.”

Kyo tilted her head. “Okay?” She wasn't sure what her mother meant, but was more than willing to learn. These lessons were always so interesting!

It was awesome.

“Get out your poisons, Kyo,” Isshun instructed, as she placed out a number of tools Kyo hadn't seen before and three piles of the small needles in front of her.

Kyo opened her pack and got out the various poisons she'd learned to handle over the past two years, quickly placing the jars, bottles and bundles on the floor in front of her.

Isshun hummed as she eyed the various containers, before picking the very first poison she'd started her on. The jar with the powder version of it.

“I told you that the powder form is the most concentrated,” Isshun began, opening the jar, licked a finger, dipped it in the poison and wiped the powder off on her tongue. She gave a satisfied nod. “That makes it very effective when applied to the needles. All it takes is a single needle hitting your target and, depending on where you hit them, it can take anything between one and fifteen minutes before it comes into effect.”

Kyo blinked, taking that in for a long few seconds, watching carefully as Isshun poured a small amount of water into one of the shallow, square bowls she'd prepared. She then added a generous dose of the poison powder.

“You could just dry the leaves, crush them and get a similar powder to this one,” Isshun said, tilting the still-open jar towards Kyo, who nodded. “And while that would work for poisoning via ingestion, it wouldn't be as effective for the purpose I have in mind. The way we prepared it means that it dissolves in water, which makes it easier to apply to the needles.”

And she used her fingers to stir the water and powder mix until it had all dissolved, like she'd mentioned.

Then, licking her fingers clean, she unrolled what looked like an old, worn and stained piece of leather, placing it on the floor beside her.

Isshun picked up five needles, brought four of them to her mouth, where she held them firmly between her teeth, and submerged the remaining one in the liquid poison.

“Doing it this way also means it's easier to vary the strength of the poison,” she lectured while she
worked, coating one needle at a time and putting them on the leather to dry. “You don't always want to kill your target, or there might be reasons to make sure it takes a while before the poison comes into full effect.”

Kyo nodded, feeling strangely calm about the whole thing.

She'd sort of known where her kaa-san was heading with all of this from the start, of course, but she'd sort of figured she'd have more of a freak-out once it was stated outright.

Right now, she just felt calm.

“I have a sedative on some of my needles, because it happens that I'm sent on retrievals rather than assassinations,” Isshun continued, carefully and slowly going through the motions of lacing the needles with the potent poison.

“You haven't mentioned sedatives before,” Kyo said, tilting her head in thought.

Isshun nodded. “We've been focusing primarily on poisons. For a very good reason,” she took the last needle from between her lips, dipped it and then put it to dry, facing Kyo with a serious expression when she was done. “It's very important that you remember this rule, Kyo, understood?” She paused long enough for Kyo to nod. “Don't bring a poison to battle you're not immune to.”

“Yes, kaa-san,” Kyo promised quietly. “Why not just bring antidotes, though? There are antidotes, aren't there?”

Isshun smiled, as if her question was something to be proud of. “There are, to most poisons,” she inclined her head. “But handling needles, it's easy to nick yourself, especially in the heat of battle. And if that happens, there will still be effects before you get a chance to take the antidote -if your enemy allows you the time- and that leaves you vulnerable.” She paused. “Then there's the chance that your enemy will realise he's been poisoned, and if he kills you -for the antidote or otherwise- that means your sacrifice has been for nothing.”

Kyo hesitated. “What if I accidentally hit an ally?”

“That's what all the target practice is for,” Isshun informed her solemnly. “Next poison, Kyo.”

“This one?” Kyo tentatively offered, picking up the one they'd made from a pale white flower and had given her some trouble to get used to eating. “You said it's really strong, worked pretty reliably and it's also in a powder?”

“A good choice.” Isshun smiled, taking the jar and inspecting its external condition before she unscrewed the lid. “This one's got a very consistent reaction time.”

“Couldn't we just dip the needles in one of the extracts we've made?” Kyo couldn't help but ask, interrupting her mother when she moved to fill another of the square bowls with water and the new poison.

Looking at it, she abruptly realised that the tray bowl things were just about large enough to comfortably fit a senbon needle.

Isshun finished her preparations for the second batch of needles, giving her a considering look.

“We could,” she conceded. “The extract is more or less as concentrated as the powder, depending on the plant it's made from, but it's a bit harder to measure out dosages. Just dipping the needles directly into the extract is rather wasteful, because it's poisonous enough to kill several people at once, though
it will all be used on one target.”

“So it’s easier to measure out the powder, and it’s,” she hesitated a little, “more consistent in strength?” She offered with a thoughtful frown.

“Yes.” Isshun smiled approvingly. “Now, did you ingest any poison today?”

“No; I finished the set dosages you left me with last night,” Kyo chirped, for some reason absurdly proud, even though it was just her eating prepared packs of poison kaa-san left for her.

“Excellent,” Isshun picked up the first needle bath. “Drink this.”

Kyo took it and quickly drained what remained of the liquid poison, swallowing it down with somewhat startling ease.

It had been almost too bitter, at first, leaving her mouth dry enough it felt like she'd need to drink two full bottles of water to get rid of it.

Now, it tasted... if not good, exactly, then definitely familiar and almost comforting. It made her think of kaa-san.

“Can you mix poisons to get 'special blends'?” She wondered curiously, picking up a few needles and handing them to Isshun, who placed them in her mouth. “Would that help, or just waste poison?”

“A bit of both,” Isshun replied once she'd doused all the needles that had previously been held between her teeth. “It depends on the poisons, really. Some complement each other rather well, depending on the effects you're after, and you can do some truly fascinating things with hallucinogens.” At Kyo's incredulous look, she laughed and gave her an almost mischievous look. “My grandfather was quite skilled with them, though he died before he could teach me much.”

“Kaa-san?” Kyo asked a few minutes later, watching the woman finish with the second batch of needles.

“Hm?” Isshun hummed questioningly, handing her the second tray-bowl, the contents of which Kyo readily enough drank.

“Are we from some sort of Clan?” She wondered, carefully putting into words something she'd been wondering for a while now.

Isshun paused what she was doing to look up at her.

“My name before I married your tou-san was Torikabuto,” Isshun finally said with a small sigh. “We’ve always been a small Clan, though a rather old one. Most of the Clan was actively hunted and killed off in the First Shinobi War, because the other Villages didn't like our particular set of skills in the hands of the newly formed Konoha and the Senju-Uchiha alliance.”

Kyo listened silently, watching her mother with wide eyes.

She'd never heard any of this before.

Picking up one of the poisoned needles, Kyo carefully touched the sharp tip with one finger. “They-we were assassins, weren't we?” She asked quietly.

“Very skilled ones.” Kaa-san nodded. “They picked us off, one at a time, until there were just me, my brother, and our grandmother left.” She was silent a long moment, eyes distant. “Give me your
third poison, Kyo.”

Kyo startled at the abrupt change of subject, but readily enough handed over a weaker, more slow-acting poison.

Isshun prepare the liquid, picked up a needle and then paused. “My brother died two years before you were born, leaving me the last one.”

“I'm sorry, kaa-san,” Kyo said quietly, and she didn't know what to do.

She'd never encountered such all-encompassing loss before, not personally and not in anyone she'd known.

Isshun didn't say it was alright, didn't give any empty platitudes, but she did give her a small, sad smile. “You would have liked him, I think. Isshi was very calm and rational, loved learning more than he loved the work.”

Kyo licked her lips. “What happened to him?” She tentatively asked, unable to stop herself. She wanted to know what had happened to this uncle of hers she hadn't known about.

“Killed in action,” Isshun admitted, subtly rolling her shoulders. “There wasn't a body, so his name is on the Konoha Memorial Stone.”

Taking a moment to absorb the absolutely horrifying facts of that simple statement, Kyo took a deep breath. “Could we go visit it?”

Isshun blinked at her a moment, before something in her face softened and Kyo abruptly realised just how cold and distant her expression had been up to that point. She hadn't even noticed.

“I'll bring some flowers when I come pick you up tomorrow,” she promised warmly, leaning over their gathered supplies to press a kiss to her forehead. “We'll go after my meeting with your sensei.”

“Okay,” Kyo said, managing a tentative smile. “Are all these needles for me, or will you keep them?” She asked next, bringing the conversation back to safer waters.

Which just so happened to be about lethal, poisoned weapons.

It was absurd that this was her life now.

Kyo was moved up a couple of years.

That was what the meeting had been about; apparently, Kouki-sensei had felt that Kyo would very soon grow bored with his class, so he'd recommended the transfer. According to her now-previous teacher, it was better to move her two years ahead and let her stay longer in one class, rather than to move her up one year for a few months only to move her again later.

And he had, according to her mother, sounded very sure in his belief that that would happen.

So, Isshun had readily enough signed off on the suggestion.

It meant new classmates, even older than the ones before; most of the children in this class were eight, rather than six, and Kyo was still only four, soon to be five.

She felt like a sore thumb, if only oddly inverted, because all the other kids were so much taller than
her so she wasn't *sticking out* in that sense.

It made *taijutsu* practise interesting; they all had the advantage of height, reach and weight, but at least Kyo was fast. Which basically boiled down to her at least not getting the snot beat out of her on a regular basis.

Her new sensei was another man, by the name of Kurama Souma, slightly older than Kouki-sensei had looked to be. Kyo suspected he was stuck in the Academy due to a serious injury, because he moved and held himself as if he was in pain, sometimes.

Other than some extra work she had to do, mostly in her free time, things didn't change much. Life went on, practise got harder, in all subjects, and her parents disappeared at irregular intervals, hardly ever getting to spend time in the village at the same time any more.

She turned five.

Sitting in her classroom, Kyo had just taken out her bento, placed it on her desk and sprinkled her daily dose of the newest poison on her rice.

It attracted less attention that way, rather than if she had just straight up poured the small packet's contents into her mouth directly, and Kyo could frankly do with as little attention from her classmates as possible.

Not that anyone was outright bullying her, but they weren't particularly kind to her either. She just preferred to fade into the background and stay out of whatever ridiculous drama occupied them all this week.

Last week, Takako and Daichi had 'gotten together' and then two whole days later, had a messy 'breakup'. It had been very traumatic for everyone involved and the worst gossips hadn't talked about anything else all week.

Kyo sometimes wondered if she had landed herself in a soap opera. But at the same time, she could remember all the *ridiculous* drama amongst the children in the school she'd been working at Before, and- well. Children were children, apparently.

Eyeing the omelette her kaa-san had made for her -one of Kyo's favourites- she had just picked up her chopsticks to start in on her lunch.

“Shiranui-kun?” Hyuuga Yoshi -incidentally, Hideki's older brother- said, pausing in front of her desk. “Souma-sensei asked to see you,” he said and then wandered off, presumably to eat his own lunch.

With a small sigh, giving her lunch a regretful look, Kyo put down her chopsticks and went to see what Souma-sensei wanted. It was probably just another batch of extra work for her; she'd finished the last one last week.

It took almost ten minutes before she could go back to her classroom, and, more importantly, to her lunch.

Holding the two scrolls with her extra assignments under one arm, Kyo walked back to her desk, stuffed the scrolls into the pack on the small of her back and then turned to her bento box.

Which, it turned out, was empty.

Kyo blinked.
Uh-oh. This was not good.

Glancing around the older children around her, it wasn’t hard to notice the few that were snickering under their breath and giving her what they no doubt believed to be furtive looks; they might as well have worn signs.

Resisting the urge to rub at her face, Kyo absently calculated the chances of them reacting well to any confrontation she might attempt.

Instead of doing anything of the sort, Kyo turned on her heel and marched right back to the staff room.

She knocked on the door, patiently waiting for someone to answer.

“Kyo-kun? Weren’t you just in here?” Kouki-sensei asked, peering down at her.

“I need to speak with Souma-sensei again,” she confessed.

“Oi, Souma!” Kouki called over one shoulder, not taking his eyes off Kyo. “Kyo-kun's back.”

“Did you forget something, Kyo?” Souma asked, not really looking up from the papers he were sorting through.

“No, sensei, but someone ate my lunch.”

She could practically see the wheels turning in his head and he finally turned around to face her.

“Is there a reason you bring this,” he paused wryly, “issue to my attention?”

It wasn't like her to complain, and she wasn't like some of the civilian-born kids who brought any and all grievances to their sensei before the habit was soundly discouraged.

“Unless there's a medic in the building, the one who ate it will have to be taken to the hospital, sensei,” Kyo explained awkwardly, trying her best not to fidget.

Souma and Kouki were both silent a moment, and then Souma sighed. “Alright, I'll bite; why?”

“There was poison in it,” Kyo said honestly.

“What kind of poison?” Souma asked, sounding so done with everything Kyo felt a bit bad for him.

“A small dose of powdered Oldroot, some Winter red leaf and Witch's breath,” she recited dutifully, watching with interest as the two men's eyes slowly widened.

“And would the doses be lethal?” Kouki-sensei asked idly, deceptively calm and unworried.

“Well,” Kyo frowned and thought about it. “I'm not sure who ate it, or if they were several who shared, but unless it's treated, I suppose it would.”

Which was weird to say out loud.

Souma-sensei got to his feet with a heavy sigh, as if he was lamenting his existence. “Kouki, you willing to come with? Someone's got to take this brat to the medics.”

“Sure.” Kouki shrugged and trailed after Souma and Kyo as they walked back towards the classroom.
“Okay, which one of you morons ate something you shouldn't have?” Souma-sensei demanded the moment he stepped into the classroom. “You have two seconds to step forward so Kouki-sensei can take you to the hospital.”

The last of the lunch-time chatter instantly died down.

“The hospital, sensei?” One girl asked confusedly, looking like she didn't have the first clue why that could possibly be the case.

“Let this be a lesson to all of you; unless you've prepared the food yourself; you can never be sure of what's in it,” Souma said dryly, shrewdly eyeing his gathered students. “Takahiro, Yuu, you two come here before the both of you throw up on my floors and start convulsing.”

“Sensei?” one of the boys in question asked, looking quite pale and unwell, in Kyo's humble opinion.

“Kouki-sensei will take the two of you to the hospital to flush your systems of the poison,” Souma said, giving the two boys an unamused look. “This is ridiculous,” he added in a quiet mutter only Kyo was close enough to hear. “Have to add this idiocy to their files, now.”

“May I return to my seat, sensei?” Kyo asked into the silence, drawing the man's attention.

“Yeah, go sit down,” he said, waving her off. “I want to have a word with your mother the next time she's in the Village, Kyo,” he added with a snort.

“Tou-san's slated to come back first; do you want me to mention this incident to him, or would you like me to wait for kaa-san?” She wondered.

“Whoever shows up first,” Souma said, and he was clearly done with this subject seeing as no one had died and it was still lunch break.

Kyo watched him wander off, shaking his head to himself and no doubt cursing out his gig as Academy sensei in his head.

Left with no lunch, Kyo resigned herself to go hungry for the rest of the school-day, stubbornly ignoring the scrutiny and speculative whispers of the children around her.

With nothing better to do, Kyo took out one of the scrolls and got started on her extra assignments.

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Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Kyo's gender is established and there are flowers. Familial bliss, but also ANBU

“All the girls will gather in the field outside the Academy,” Souma-sensei drawled the moment he had stepped through the door.

Kyo finished tucking her empty lunch box away and then stood up with the rest of the kunoichi-to-be.

She didn't think much of the long glances and occasional snicker, and it wasn't until their kunoichi sensei arrived that she realised just why her classmates were making such a big deal of this.

“Sensei, why's Kyo-kun here? I thought Souma-sensei said only the girls should attend?” One of the girls, Sayuri, asked importantly, sending Kyo a superior look.

The kunoichi, an older woman who could possibly be retired, raised one poised eyebrow. “Your mother speaks very highly of you, Kyo-chan,” she said, voice smooth and cultured and combined with the beautiful kimono she was wearing, made her look like a proper lady.

“Thank you, sensei,” Kyo returned, though she hadn't known this woman knew Isshun.

“Wait,” Takeko said, looking shell-shocked. “Kyo-kun's a girl?”

Kyo blinked, taking in the way her female classmates were staring at her.

She would like to say that the fact that they'd all mistaken her for a boy was surprising, but... Well, in her last life, the last time anyone had mistaken her for a boy had been when she was nineteen.

And that had been post-puberty with boobs and everything!

So it wasn't anything new.

“Settle down, girls, and follow me,” their sensei said, leading them to a nearby flower field, which had clearly been set up for today's lesson.

Which turned out to be flower arrangement.

Kyo stared with budding disbelief.

Okay, she could vaguely remember something about Sakura and Ino doing flower arrangements during their Academy days but seriously?

There was a war out there!

And if this now was so very important to their education, why weren't the boys here with them? Kyo's inner feminist was highly offended.

Managing to keep the frown off her face, Kyo sat down to at least listen to what Tomoe-sensei had
to say. It felt more like this was an excuse to play with flowers than anything else, though Tomoe-
sensei did have a few interesting insights into life as a kunoichi to impart, if you knew what to listen
for.

Kyo suspected she was the only one who caught the subtext, though.

“That is one ugly bouquet, Kyo-kun,” one girl told her with a sniff, giving the small handful of
flowers Kyo was holding a mildly disgusted look.

Kyo blinked, wondering why the hell Kikyo was even talking to her. “I'm not trying to make it
pretty,” she explained patiently.

“Why not?” Kikyo asked, looking genuinely baffled by the concept of not making things pretty. As
if it was their duty as girls to care about such things.

Kyo kindly refrained from rolling her eyes.

“These were the only flowers Tomoe-sensei gave us with any sort of poison,” she explained with a
shrug, absently rearranging the foxglove.

After a beat of silence, Momo shrieked and threw her own flower bouquet away from her, bursting
into tears.

“Some of these are poisonous?” One girl asked in a hushed, horrified voice, staring at the bundle of
flowers in her hand as if it could turn into snakes or spiders at any moment.

“None of them are very dangerous, though,” Kyo continued, picking at one of the petals with a
mournful air. “The most dangerous one could only kill someone if they've already got a heart-
condition, or is really little.”

And why the hell would that even disappoint her? Kyo had always known she had a proclivity for
being something of a nerd, but this was ridiculous. Why was she sad about none of the poisons being
lethal, she wondered.

“Most children aren't used to poisons, Kyo-chan,” Tomoe-sensei said amusedly, and then launched
into a slightly more interesting lecture on a slightly different aspect of kunoichi life.

Which was how Kyo got her first sex-ed class. Sort of.

Tomoe-sensei kept it very basic, general and merely informing them about the fact that the subject
existed, but it set Kyo thinking.

The next time Isshun came home, Kyo took the opportunity to ask her something the first kunoichi
lesson had made her contemplate.

“Kaa-san?” She spoke up during dinner, making both her parents look at her. “Can I ask you a
question?”

“Of course,” Isshun said, putting down her chopsticks and giving her a curious look.

Kyo took a deep breath, gave her tou-san a brief glance before she turned her full attention on her
mother. “Have you ever been on a seduction mission?”

Kou stilled, seizing to move as if he'd been turned to stone.

Isshun tilted her head, giving the question the due consideration it deserved. “I have,” she answered
slowly, “though not one of the traditional ones, I suppose.”

“There are different kinds?” Kyo frowned. Seduction mission sort of just sounded like you had to sleep with someone to her.

“I'm an assassin, sweetheart,” Isshun reminded her gently. “So I've been sent on a fair few missions where I had to 'seduce' my target to get him to a private location so I could kill him without making a scene.”

Kyo nodded. That made sense, really.

“What's it like?” She couldn't help but wonder. Being female, she couldn't see a scenario where she wouldn't be sent on a similar mission if she made it past puberty.

Unlike many of the girls in the manga, she wasn't part of a precious Clan, with a valuable kekkei genkai, and she wasn't an heiress.

Isshun hummed. “It's part of the job,” she finally said, looking thoughtful. “Not particularly enjoyable, but far from the worst thing you could do.”

Kyo grimaced involuntarily, because that wasn't exactly encouraging, but-

“Aren't men sent on seduction missions?” She wondered. There would definitely be people attracted to their own gender here, just like it had in the Before. Not to mention there had to be ladies someone might want seduced for one reason or another.

Kou made a small noise like he might be dying.

Isshun ignored him and gave Kyo a small smile. “They are, though most people aren't aware of that until they at least reach Chuunin.”

“Why?” Kyo frowned, feeling genuinely perplexed. “It's not any different from kunoichi being sent on missions like that, and it feels like everyone knows about that.”

Which was why her kaa-san had been openly called a whore a few times in her presence.

“You shouldn't have had that lesson yet!” Kou finally said, unfreezing enough to put his chopsticks down. “Isshun, it's not funny,” he snapped when kaa-san chuckled. “She's five.”

“She's also going to be a kunoichi, Kou,” Kaa-san sighed. “It's just as well she starts to get used to the idea, the possibility, right now, rather than the day she's handed the mission scroll.” She raised a pointed eyebrow.

Kou rubbed a hand over his face, but clearly conceded the point. “Just, if anyone ever tries to do anything to you, you stab them with one of your needles, Kyo,” he told her, and there was real worry in his eyes.

Kyo bit her lip and nodded, slightly freaked out and a bit worried herself, now.

Was that something she'd have to be on the look-out for? Okay, she knew ninja were touted to lack morals and everything -her grandmother talked of little else whenever shinobi in general were brought up- but she hadn't really believed it. Not all of it.

Paedophiles had been an issue Before, too, around the world, so it wasn't that she had been unaware of the problem. She just hadn't thought it would be... common.
“It shouldn't be an issue for quite some time yet, but it's good to keep in mind,” Isshun agreed, returning to her dinner.

Having lost some of her appetite, Kyo pushed her food around for a moment before she determinedly resumed eating.

She was just five; she wouldn't be going outside the village walls for quite a few years yet.

And it wasn't like she could actually do anything about it, so, why worry about it now?

After dinner, she still crawled into tou-san's lap with one of her extra assignment scrolls.

They got to spend more time together as a family for a while.

Kaa-san and tou-san seemed to need it just as much as Kyo, and even when either of her parents went on mission, they got back relatively quickly and she hadn't actually spent any time at her grandparents for almost two months.

Kou eventually had to go on one of the long missions to the border; he'd finally told her that's what happened when he went away for months at a time.

Which made a whole lot of sense.

Regardless, kaa-san was slotted to leave in just a few days, and Kyo had begun to gather the things she wanted to bring to her grandparents' house, from a couple of books to school assignments.

“Kyo?” Isshun called out, and Kyo could hear the front door click closed.

“In here, kaa-san!” Kyo called back, looking for the scroll on mission procedure Souma-sensei had handed her the day before yesterday. She'd been so sure she'd put it in the drawer of her bedside table, but she couldn't find it.

“Kyo,” Isshun said, and she sounded slightly breathless.

Kyo looked up to look at her mother where she stood in the door to her room, wide-eyed and a small, disbelieving smile on her face.

“What is it?” She asked, a spark of worry lighting in her stomach, despite the fact that the woman's expression was far from indicating bad news. “Did something happen? Kaa-san?”

“You don't have to pack; I'm not leaving the village,” Isshun admitted and her smile grew. “I had my pre-mission check up today, and--” she took a deep breath. “The medic discovered I'm pregnant!”

Kyo stared.

Then, she dropped the book she was holding to bounce up to her mother.

“Really?” She asked, unable to stop herself from checking her kaa-san's stomach, despite the fact that she rationally knew nothing would be visible for quite some time.

“You're gonna be a big sister, Kyo,” Isshun laughed, picking her up and twirling around as she held her close. “Kou's going to be so surprised!”

Kyo couldn't help but be carried away by her mother's exuberant happiness.
“So you're going to stay home with me until the baby's born and I'm going to get a sibling?” Kyo asked, feeling like something was slowly unwinding in her chest.

It felt like pure, unadulterated joy. Excitement.

“If I manage to carry to term,” Isshun said, smile dimming a little. “And I won't be able to help as much with your poison lessons for a while.”

“That's okay,” Kyo beamed, wrapping her arms around her mother in the tightest hug she could manage. “I've always thought the lectures are really interesting, too,” she confessed.

Isshun laughed, kissed her cheek and buried her face in Kyo's slight shoulder.

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Three months later, Isshun was still pregnant and the look on Kou's face when he came trudging into their apartment and kaa-san threw the news in his face with a wide grin, basically doing what Kyo could only describe as tackling him to the ground in a fierce hug, was something Kyo would treasure and remember until the day she died.

“We're pregnant?” Kou finally managed, Isshun sitting on his stomach and Kyo leaning over her mother's shoulder.

“Yup,” Kyo chirped.

“But- How?” Kou's hands slipped around Isshun's waist, giving her stomach an intent, focused look, as if he was trying to see through to the tiny little growing embryo inside.

“The contraceptives failed.” Isshun shrugged, as if that part wasn't really of any concern. “The medic caught it before I did.”

And Kyo didn't know how she felt about her parents having an active sex-life.

...best not to think about it.

“We're having another baby?” Kou finally asked, gaze flicking back up to Isshun's eyes, a smile growing on his face.

Isshun nodded and leaned down to give him a kiss, not caring one wit about the dirt on his face, or the smell of old sweat and what was probably blood.

Kyo let out a small squeak when her support disappeared and she ended up on the floor next to her dad.

“And how do you feel about this, kitten?” Kou asked next, seemingly perfectly content to lie on the floor.

“I'm gonna be a big sister,” she told him seriously. There was still a wide, proud grin on her face.

“You are, aren't you?” Kou grinned, snaking out one arm to pull her into the cuddle pile.

The familial bliss could only last so long, though.

The war didn't go on hold just because her mother happened to be pregnant.

After a few weeks, Kou was sent back out, though he promised this meant he had even more
incentive to come back.

And despite the major shift in their family, Kyo still had to go to the Academy, leaving her mum home alone for most of the day.

Isshun was doing a few administrative duties during the first one and a half trimesters, though she liked to watch Kyo train after the Academy let out for the day.

She treated it almost like a picnic, bringing food and everything.

Kyo loved it.

She'd never had something like this before; she'd been too young to remember her Before mother ever being pregnant, though she had one vague memory from the birth of her then-younger brother. She'd just been two, so she figured that was still pretty impressive.

Kyo was moved up another class.

She wasn't quite sure how her sensei had come to that conclusion, but Souma-sensei had seemed quite sure of himself.

So, Kyo took a deep breath, steeled herself and knocked on the door to what would become her new classroom.

“Come in,” a deep, self-assured voice answered.

Kyo gathered her courage and pulled the door open and got her first look at her new class.

“Souma-sensei told me to come here, Takuma-sensei,” she said.

“Oh, yes.” He frowned minutely, gave her an intent once-over that made her feel spectacularly lacking, and then turned back to the class. “This is your new classmate, Shiranui Kyo. Go take a seat,” he said, waving her into the room.

Kyo closed the door behind her and walked to the closest empty seat; front row, the seat the farthest away from the window.

At least it was close to the door, she mused.

Takuma-sensei continued with his lesson, launching straight into a lecture about a test they were supposedly having next week. Dedicated to tactics and what sounded to Kyo as logical thinking and almost a form of IQ test?

If nothing else, lessons would become more interesting again.

Taijutsu continued to be her worst subject, and she wasn't entirely sure it was just because of her size and age. She hadn't exactly been confrontational and aggressive in her past life, which she felt held true here as well.

On the other hand, she had her classmates beat when it came to marksmanship, age gap be damned.

It was always nice to see all that training had been good for something.

Just a few weeks before her sixth birthday, Kyo woke up unusually early.

Frowning up at the dark ceiling of her room, she wondered why she was awake.
She didn't have to pee, the sun wouldn't rise for at least a few hours, and she hadn't had a nightmare.

Too awake and keyed up to go back to sleep, Kyo got out of bed and pulled on the shorts she'd worn the day before.

That done, she padded out of her room to take a look around, see if she could find any indication that there was a tangible reason she was awake.

The apartment was dark and quiet, though.

Frowning to herself, Kyo finally decided to check on her mother; she'd been a bit listless the last few days and Kyo was starting to get worried.

“Kaa-san?” Kyo spoke softly, not wanting to startle her mother if she was still asleep, before she pushed open the door and crept inside.

With the room just as dark as the rest of the apartment -it'd looked like there'd be rain when she'd gone to bed- it was a bit hard to see.

“Kaa-san,” Kyo repeated, a bit louder now, because Isshun still hadn't so much as stirred.

Truly worried, she walked up to the bed and placed her hand on the woman's shoulder.

No reaction.

Feeling her heartbeat begin to speed up, she shook her mother's shoulder. “Wake up, kaa-san,” she urged tersely.

When that didn't get her any reaction either, Kyo brought a trembling hand to her kaa-san's neck and her heart almost stopped when she didn't immediately find a pulse.

It was there, though, fast and shallow.

Staring wide-eyed at her mother for a long second, Kyo wondered what she was supposed to do. She couldn't wake her kaa-san, she was at least alive, but something was clearly wrong.

She pulled down the covers.

Taking one look at what had been underneath, Kyo ran out of her mother's room, barely paused long enough to pull on her sandals, and then raced down the hall to one of their neighbours' door.

An older, rather cranky shinobi lived there, but she didn't even know if he was home, because she hadn't seen him in a while.

Kyo pounded a fist on Yamaguchi-san's door, hoping against her fears that he'd be there.

When ten seconds had passed and she hadn't heard so much as a footstep on the other side, Kyo turned on her heel and ran as fast as she could down the stairs, carelessly jumping two, three, four steps at a time until she reached ground level.

She didn't think she'd ever run as fast in her life. In either of her lives.

She had no idea how long it took her, but she finally burst through the hospital doors, startling the nurse behind the desk into a defensive stance.

“My kaa-san's bleeding!” She blurted, panting hard enough it was a minor miracle she'd been able to
speak at all. “She's pregnant and she's bleeding! I can't wake her up!”

“Where's your kaa-san?” A masked shinobi asked, standing beside her when she turned to look for the source of the voice, even though she was sure no one had been there when she'd entered.

“At home, in our apartment,” Kyo returned, chest heaving but trying to regulate her breathing like tou-san had taught her.

“Can you give me directions?” The ANBU -holy shit, that was an ANBU operative- asked sharply.

“I can show the way,” Kyo returned without missing a beat, giving him what she hoped was a firm, rather than panicked, look.

The ANBU tilted his head the slightest fraction, before he nodded and crouched down in front of her.

Kyo got on his back without hesitation.

“Notify the Iryo-nin on duty that I’m bringing a pregnant woman, I want them on standby.”

The nurse gave a firm nod, and then they were back outside in the dark.

Kyo focused solely on giving directions to the shinobi, eventually pointing out the window to her parents' bedroom from the outside.

“I don't think there're any traps,” she finished, leaving the man -she was pretty sure it was a man, at this point- with the choice of what to do.

The ANBU said nothing to that, though jumped to the wall next to the window, managed to work it open in a matter of seconds and then slipped inside.

Kyo didn't make a sound when he slipped his arms under Isshun's listless form and straightened with her in his arms.

She tried not to think about the fact that kaa-san should have reacted poorly to a complete stranger trying to pick her up and carry her off. Her mother hadn't so much as moved while Kyo had been gone, either.

The ANBU finally landed in front of the hospital entrance, and a nurse opened the door for him before he could take more than a step. Inside, one of the medics were waiting with a stretcher, which the ANBU placed Isshun on without so much as a pause, and Kyo watched them rush her away, going boneless against the ANBU’s shoulders.

She probably would have slid to the floor anyway, but the man crouched down so it seemed like she was just reacting to that, rather than almost collapsing.

“Can you tell me your name?” The nurse from earlier finally asked, giving the ANBU a grateful nod.

“Shiranui Kyo,” Kyo said, blinking blankly at the woman, before she pulled herself together. “My mother's name is Shiranui Isshun, and she's a Konoha kunoichi.”

“Thank you,” the nurse said, looking like she'd been about to march off before she paused. “ANBU-san, could you wait a moment-?” She wondered tentatively, sending the masked operative a slightly uncertain look.

The man gave a short nod, which sent the nurse on her way.
“Thank you,” Kyo said, glancing up at the man, whose mask turned towards her.

And wow, were those masks far creepier than the manga had made them out to be? You couldn't even make out the eyes of the person beneath it, making it seem like there wasn't one.

The man was still for a long moment, before he placed one hand on her shoulder in a surprisingly gentle manner, before he returned to his silent vigil.

Kyo took a deep, shuddering breath and slowly sank down to sit on the floor.

Her body hurt, and part of it was no doubt from running like a maniac across half the village, while the rest of it felt like it was emanating from her heart.

Eyes and lungs burning, Kyo determinedly took slow, deep breaths. She wouldn't cry, she wouldn't cry, she wouldn't cry!

She could cry later, she told herself, stubbornly refusing to give in to the tears burning behind her eyelids.

Taking a deep, trembling breath, Kyo finally managed to press her emotions down enough she could open her eyes and focus on her surroundings again.

Struggling back to her feet, Kyo moved over to sit on the closest chair, trying to remember when tou-san had been supposed to come back to the village.

She was drawing a blank, though.

It felt like she spent hours sitting in that chair, the silent ANBU her only companion, but it was most likely closer to just the one. Maybe an hour and a half, at most.

“Shiranui Kyo?” The nurse from before asked, coming striding back into the room.

“Yes?” Kyo jumped to her feet, feeling like she was prepared to run wherever it was they'd taken her mum.

“The Iryo-nin would like to speak with you,” she said with a small, sympathetic smile. “Your kaasan is alright, and so is the baby.”

Kyo let out a deep breath, almost collapsing to the floor again from the sheer relief.


Because she didn't have a clue; the only time she'd been here before had been almost three years ago when tou-san had gotten hurt.

The medics always came to the Academy when they had their medical checks.

“Just a moment and I'll take you, dear,” the nurse said, casting the ANBU yet another nervous glance. “Thank you very much, ANBU-san, for your assistance tonight.”

The man inclined his head and then disappeared in a silent shunshin, not even leaving the smallest hint of smoke behind.

“Come, child,” the nurse said, and led the way down one of the corridors.

It turned out Isshun hadn't had the easiest time during her pregnancy so far.
Perhaps not so strange when you took the long-term stress, lack of sleep and rest into consideration, but Kyo was still unreasonably upset not to have noticed.

Complete bed-rest was what was one the menu for Isshun for the rest of the pregnancy.

It felt weird, positively absurd, to be informed of that by a tired-looking, harried iryou-nin, as if she were an adult instead of not even six years old. Kyo had just nodded, though, and asked if it could be arranged for her dad to be informed the moment he stepped back into the village.

She didn't want him to go back to the apartment to find it empty.

Oh, she should probably go back and take care of the bloody sheets, or tou-san might actually have a heart-attack if and when he saw them.

“I will make sure it's taken care of,” the iryou-nin promised, giving her a small, brief smile before he let her into the private room Isshun would be staying in for the next few months.

The moment she was alone, Kyo climbed up on the bed and collapsed next to her mother's sleeping form, burying her face in the sheets.

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Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Kyo goes hunting for laundry advice

At the first light making its way through the single window in the room, Kyo reluctantly slipped off kaa-san's hospital bed and made her way back home.

She wasn't even surprised to see she had left the front door wide open in her rush to get help.

Kyo carefully closed the door behind her and, clenching her hands into fists, marched straight to her parents' bedroom to see how it looked.

There was a lot of blood, and when Kyo stripped away the bedclothes, her hands were trembling.

Not that it helped all that much, because the dark, sticky liquid had seeped into the mattress, and she didn't know what to do to get it out.

Deciding she couldn't deal with that right now, Kyo carried the bedclothes to the bathroom, where she stuffed them into the washing machine and turned it on. She'd take care of it after school.

Changing into clean clothes, Kyo got her things and then swung by the kitchen to make herself breakfast and lunch.

She didn't realise she probably didn't have to go to class today until she was already sitting at her desk, quite unsure of how she had gotten there.

She'd obviously walked, but she couldn't remember anything between leaving home and taking a seat.

"Are you okay?" Someone asked, and Kyo turned to the left and stared.

A blond boy with teal eyes peered back, a curious cast to his young, childish face.

"No," she told him bluntly. "But I don't want to talk about it."

"Oh," the boy blinked a few times, as if she'd thrown him for a loop. "Okay." He eyed her a moment longer with clear interest. "I don't think we ever met properly; I'm Yamanaka Inoichi," he introduced, smiling cheerfully.

"Shiranui Kyo," Kyo returned flatly.

She knew what time she was in now. Sort of.

Because Ino's fucking dad was standing next to her desk and he kept smiling at her.

The worst part, Kyo mused absently, was that she didn't even have the energy or the emotional capacity to freak out about it right now.

"Everyone take their seats," Takuma-sensei strode into the room and the moment the students had
scrambled to sit down, he launched straight into the morning lecture.

Kyo had no recollection of what they had covered, though the moment Takuma-sensei released them for lunch, she got up and wandered to the staff room. She knocked and studied the wood of the door until it was opened by the person she'd wanted to see.

“Kouki-sensei, do you know how to get blood out of a mattress?” She asked idly, blinking tiredly up at the man.

Kouki cocked his head. “...Depends on the kind of mattress.”

“A big one,” Kyo said after a moments contemplation.

“Chances are you might have to throw it away,” Kouki replied slowly, a frown pulling on his brows. “Did you sleep last night, Kyo-kun?”

Why were so many people calling her ‘-kun’ anyway? She was aware that you could use it for girls, if some mysterious qualities she'd never managed to figure out were met. After the rest of the children had figured out she was a girl she'd sort of figured they'd start to call her ‘-chan’, though.

Apparently not.

“A little,” she belatedly answered, realising Kouki was still waiting for a response.

Kouki slowly crouched down in front of her, placing one hand on her forehead. “You don't seem to be running a fever,” he muttered to himself.

“I'm fine,” she said, though her voice broke a little at the end. “Physically,” she added, because it wasn't like she had a cold or anything.

“Okay,” Kouki said, voice dry. “Wanna share?”

Kyo blinked at him for a few seconds before she cleared her throat. “I'd probably cry,” she admitted.

Kouki sighed. “I've had worse body fluids stain my clothes, kid.”

“Kaa-san's in the hospital,” Kyo finally said, feeling her breath stutter in her chest and her face screw up as her eyes burned.

“What for?” Kouki asked, almost warily, though he did put one hand on her shoulder.

It reminded her of the way the ANBU had comforted her early this morning. “She's pregnant, and she started bleeding and I couldn't wake her,” Kyo sobbed, bringing up one hand to rub irritably at her eyes. “So I need to know how to get the blood out of her mattress before tou-san comes home,” she pressed out, making the effort to meet Kouki-sensei's dark gaze. He looked all blurry from the excess water in her eyes.

The man sighed deeply, ran a hand over his hair and grimaced.

“Come on, Kyo-kun,” he said, leading her into the staff room and helping her take a seat in the chair by what she knew was his desk. “Sit. I'm going to find Takuma and tell him you're not gonna be in class for the rest of the day and tomorrow,” he explained. “Then, I'm bringing you back to the hospital, understood?”

“Okay,” Kyo sniffed, breaking out into new sobs.
Kouki ruffled her hair gently and then walked off to find her current sensei.

He was even kind enough to carry her, not saying a word of protest when Kyo clung to him all the way to the hospital and got tears and snot on his Chuunin vest.

Kyo wandered back into her mother's hospital room, crawled onto the bed and fell asleep the moment her head came to rest on Isshun's warm shoulder.

Kouki tracked down the closest nurse to get the full story before he left, but Kyo was none the wiser.

When Kou actually came back, Isshun was doing better, though she was still on bed rest.

And slowly losing her mind to the boredom, despite Kyo's best efforts to bring her plenty of reading material and various other things to do.

Holding poison lessons in the hospital was a bit of a challenge, too. Especially since Isshun wasn't supposed to have any contact with any harmful substances and Kyo refused to chance it, bringing something against the doctor's recommendation. Medic, whatever.

That didn't stop her kaa-san from giving her very informational lectures and giving her tips on new training methods.

Which brought them to this.

"Am I doing it right?" Kyo asked, sitting at the foot end of her mother's hospital bed, legs crossed and eyes closed.

Kou hummed from the chair next to the bed. "I'd say so; I can't feel anything."

"The difficult part is to keep it up and not slip," Isshun said, and she sounded pleased. "The surest way to stay alive as an assassin is to become a master of stealth."

"So no one can find you?" Kyo blinked her eyes open to peer at her mother.

"People are generally not all too happy about an assassination, successful or otherwise," Isshun mused dryly. "Making it harder for them to track you down can only be a good thing."

"Do you think Takuma-sensei will get irritated if I practise this in school?" She asked curiously, carefully keeping part of her focus on keeping her chakra... not quite suppressed, exactly, but. Under wraps? Kyo was fairly sure she'd still be able to use her chakra like this, even though it'd be harder and would sort of blow her cover during the seconds it took to perform the jutsu itself. Other than that, it'd still leave her hidden from most people's senses.

Unless she had the misfortune to come across a sensor.

"It's not something he can complain about," Kou dismissed her concern with a shrug. "It's training."

"Oh, give me your hands," Isshun said, pulling Kou's hand -which she had been holding- onto her rounded stomach.

Kyo quickly leaned forward to do the same.

"It's kicking," Kyo observed, feeling moderately wide-eyed.
She'd never really spent any time around a pregnant woman before, so there were a lot of new experiences on all fronts right now.

There was a tiny human growing in Isshun's stomach.

"You lost your concentration, kitten," Kou said once the baby had stopped kicking, leaning back in his chair again and squeezing his wife's fingers with a smile.

Kyo frowned when she realised he was right.

With a sigh, she concentrated on getting her chakra back under control.

It was fairly interesting to accidentally sneak up on the Academy instructors, though. She didn't do it on purpose; it just happened.

She hadn't realised how much they relied on all the children's chakra signatures to keep them all in line, and they clearly weren't used to their students suppressing them.

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When Isshun went into labour, tou-san -of course- wasn't in the village.

"Was tou-san here for my birth?" She asked, partly out of interest and partly to distract her kaa-san from the pain.

"Yes," Isshun said after a brief pause, waiting for the latest contraction to pass. "He cried when he held you for the first time." She smiled.

"Really?" Kyo had never seen Kou cry. Thinking about it; she'd never seen either of her current parents cry.

In the Before, she'd experienced it with both her then-mother and then-father. For different reasons.

"You're almost fully dilated, Shiranui," the midwife informed briskly, sending Kyo a brief look, but she didn't tell her to leave, like Kyo had expected."A bit more and you can finally push."

"Looking forward to it," Isshun gave a strained smile, sweat beading on her forehead and the skin around her eyes was pinched with pain.

"Should I wait outside?" Kyo asked after a moment, somewhat surprised no one had thrown her out already.

"You can do as you please, sweetheart," Isshun said, before she made a low, pained, keening noise as another contraction hit.

Sending the midwife, iryuo-nin, medic, whatever she was, a wide-eyed look, Kyo moved closer to her mother.

She didn't want to see... anything where the action was, so to speak, but she'd rather stay than leave her mum on her own.

If tou-san had been here, it would have been different, but he wasn't.

"I'll stay with you, kaa-san," she said determinedly.

A long three hours later, there was the first cry of a newborn.
The midwife placed a tiny, red, wrinkly, slightly slimy human shaped creature on Isshun's heaving chest and Kyo got her first look at her new baby brother.

He was pretty ugly, to be honest, screaming at the top of his tiny lungs and there weren't any teeth in his mouth, which looked weird, but Kyo was fairly sure she was in love.

“Kyo, say hello to Genma,” Isshun panted tiredly, running one trembling finger over the baby's cheek. “Genma, meet your big sister.”

“Hi, Genma,” Kyo couldn't help but whisper, utterly entranced by the thing that would turn into a proper human one day.

He looked more like a squashed alien right now.

She resolved never to tell kaa-san that had been her first thought about her son.

“Do you want to hold him?” Kaa-san asked a some time later, breathing back mostly to normal, though she still looked exhausted and wrung out.

Kyo's eyes widened. “What if I drop him?” She whispered, horrified by the prospect.

Isshun smiled. “Just like your father,” she sighed amusedly. “You won't drop him, Kyo.”

“Okay,” she said, watching as her mother gathered Genma in her arms and gently handed him over to Kyo, arranging her arms just so until she held him properly.

Kyo gazed down at the baby. He'd stopped screaming now, and seemed to peer out of the small gaps his slightly swollen eyelids left him to see through.

“He's so small,” she mused, utterly transfixed.

She hadn't realised how much she'd missed her younger brother up to that point, but right now, the feeling slammed into her with all the subtlety of a kick to the stomach.

This little boy wasn't a substitute, not ever, but she felt she'd treasure him all the more because of the memories of another boy crowding at the forefront of her mind.

The age-gap was bigger, and she was growing to be a different kind of person, but she'd try to be the best big sister she could be.

She would do her best to help Genma grow up to be the amazing shinobi she knew he had every potential to be.

To do that, she had to survive, though.

She was gonna do her damn best to do so, that was for sure.

The Second Shinobi War, and the Third, she would do everything she possibly could not to die.

“I promise,” she said solemnly, staring at the unfocused slice of baby blue she could catch from beneath Genma's nearly closed eyelids.

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Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

There are surprises all over the place, and what's this? Possible friends?

Chapter Notes

I'm just spamming everyone, but there are a lot of chapters to cover before we catch up! :)

Kyo stared down at the test in front of her, taking in the questions and her own scribbled answers.

She'd filled out every single one of them, even the ones she hadn't been sure of.

There wasn't anything more she could do, though, so she deliberately put her pen down and leaned back, ending up staring at the clock on the wall instead.

Fifteen minutes later, Takuma-sensei gave them all a sharp-eyed scan. “Pens down,” he declared firmly. “You will now be called out to perform the three Academy ninjutsu; henge, kawarimi and bunshin. First up; Aburame Aoi.”

A quiet girl, mostly covered up by her clothes, rose and walked to the door to wait for Takuma-sensei while he collected all the tests.

“The rest of you wait in here until you're called.” He fixed them with a rather gimlet eye. “I don't want any incidents, understood?”

“Yes, sensei,” they all chorused.

Satisfied, Takuma-sensei nodded and left with Aburame Aoi, taking the pile of tests with him, presumably so they could get graded.

Kyo waited silently, feeling surprisingly calm.

She wasn't worried.

None of the students that exited the room came back again, most likely so they couldn't blab about what it was like. But also not to humiliate the ones who hadn't passed, Kyo liked to think.

That would just be mean.

“Shiranui Kyo,” Takuma-sensei said from the door, impatiently waving her over.

Kyo quickly got to her feet and followed the man a door down the corridor and then into the examination room.
Souma-sensei was sitting by the single table in the room, reclined in his chair and looking supremely bored, uninterested. He sat up more properly when he spotted Kyo, though.

“Hey, kid,” he greeted with lazy smile.

“Hey, Souma-sensei.” Kyo smiled. “Should I just start?” She asked, giving Takuma-sensei a questioning look.

When the man nodded, she brought her hands together and carefully formed the correct hand seals for a henge.

It was a bit like covering yourself with an elastic layer of chakra that you could shape however you wanted.

What it boiled down to, really, was your attention to detail.

Kyo chose to henge into her current teacher, making sure to keep her face severe and unamused, the posture the tense-relaxed mix she'd noticed in most shinobi she'd come across in the village.

When the two men spent first one, then two second to scrutiny her, Kyo crossed her arms over her chest and gave them the impatient look Takuma-sensei gave his class when he thought they were taking too long on something.

Souma-sensei gave an amused snort, and even Takuma looked vaguely entertained.

“Next one,” Takuma-sensei finally said, and Kyo dispersed the henge, which dissipated into smoke.

Kyo grabbed one of her -not poisoned- senbon, tossed it over her shoulder and then used a kawarimi to change places with it.

The sound of it falling to the floor in the spot she'd just been in was highly satisfying.

The kawarimi was weird, because it was like... latching on to something with your chakra, to switch places with.

She walked back to the spot in front of the table, picked up her senbon and sped through the hand seals for the bunshin.

Which was basically just a chakra construct of yourself; an illusion.

The kage bunshin Naruto had favoured seemed much more useful, though Kyo didn't delude herself into thinking she had enough chakra to make even one.

She was comfortably average when it came to chakra capacity.

“Very well done,” Takuma-sensei said when the three bunshin she'd made had been dispelled. “You pass.”

Kyo blinked, a small, involuntary smile on her face as she accepted the seemingly innocuous piece of metal with the Konoha crest, fastened onto a piece of thick, durable fabric.

“Thank you,” she said, mostly by route.

“Come back in a week's time for team assignments,” Takuma said, giving her an approving nod. “Dismissed.”
Kyo gave them both a quick bow, and then made her escape, hitai-ate clutched in one hand.

“Congratulations, Kyo,” her tou-san greeted her when she stepped outside.

Temporarily snapped out of her daze, Kyo grinned and threw herself at her dad, delighted when he wrapped her up in a tight hug.

Before she knew it, she was back home, sitting by the kitchen table for the celebratory feast kaa-san had prepared.

“Hold Genma-chan for me a second, Kyo,” Isshun said, handing her the almost three months old boy.

Kyo took him and managed to settle the little menace against her chest before he got hold of anything on the table he could potentially send to the floor.

Absently running a hand soothingly over Genma's light blond, almost white, wispy hair, she tried to assimilate her day.

“Are you alright, kitten?” Kou finally asked. He’d been sending her concerned glances ever since he’d surprised her at the Academy

Kyo shrugged, staring down at Genma, who gave her a toothless grin, trying to reach up to pull her hair.

She deftly caught his tiny hand before it could reach her face and potentially poke out an eye. Or make her bleed; baby nails were awfully sharp.

“I thought I was too young to be a Genin,” she finally blurted, peering up at her parents through her lashes.

That was why she hadn’t been worried during the tests! She'd figured that they wouldn't let her graduate no matter how she did; she was just six!

“Well,” tou-san said, blinking a little, as if that wasn't what he had been expecting. “They won't keep you at the Academy if they feel there's nothing more they can teach you. Especially not in war times.” He grimaced at the reminder, giving her a worried once-over.

“Konoha needs all the manpower she can get,” Isshun agreed, sighing sadly.

“Even a Genin like me?” Kyo asked weakly.

“Especially Genin like you,” Kou answered, though he looked faintly conflicted about it. “You're very intelligent, Kyo.”

Kyo shrugged uncomfortably, tickling Genma a little when he squirmed. “I just read the assignments,” she muttered.

Kou and Isshun exchanged a mildly amused, exasperated look. “If that was all, then your sensei would not have pushed you up for early graduation,” kaa-san said frankly, shaking her head and finally taking her seat. “Now, let's enjoy dinner and celebrate the occasion, okay?” She smiled.

“Okay,” Kyo sighed, thought there still felt like there was a cold, heavy lump sitting in her stomach.

She'd been counting on several more years before she'd have to- before she became a Genin.
Kyo just couldn’t see herself surviving in the middle of this war when even her tou-san had almost died! Probably more often than she knew or would like to even think about.

“You should be proud of yourself, Kyo,” tou-san said softly, reaching out to pull a hand over her hair. “I know I am.”

Kyo couldn’t help but smile at her tou-san, who seemingly couldn’t resist ruffling her hair before he turned to his food, smirking at the annoyed look she sent him.

Genma made happy baby noises, though, so at least someone found it amusing.

The week passed far too quickly for her tastes, and soon enough, it was time to return to the Academy.

To be placed on a Genin team.

Kou and Isshun had both given her a few graduating gifts.

Tou-san had given her three sets of new kunai, with accompanying holsters; one for each leg, as well as ninja wire, shuriken and a few other things it was good to have with you on missions.

Kaa-san had given her a full kit, everything she’d need to make her own poisons, prepare needles and what else you could think of. She’d also given Kyo several sets of needles and senbon, and a pair of cuff-like holster things to store the small needles in for easy reach in the field.

Kyo loved it all, but it hadn’t helped soothe her inner turmoil. Much.

Settling down in what she assumed was now her former classroom, Kyo waited for Takuma-sensei to arrive to announce the teams.

The weight on her forehead made it impossible to forget why she was here, or how her life would change from this point on.

“So you graduated, too,” a cheerful voice commented, making Kyo start.

The only person to have ever really talked to her in this class was-

“Yamanaka Inoichi,” she returned, giving the boy a curious look. “I didn't steal it, if that's what you're wondering.”

Inoichi blinked, his eyes practically lighting up with amusement. “Wouldn't that qualify you to be a Genin, though? If you could manage to actually steal from sensei?” He mused.

Kyo huffed what was almost a snort. “We're just supposed to steal from other Villages,” she told him solemnly.

In her old life, she would've said you weren't supposed to steal at all, but the rules were different here. Stealing from the enemy was quite encouraged.

Inoichi snickered quietly. “Who do you think will end up on your team?” He asked curiously, not seeming even half as bothered about it as Kyo felt.

She’d been thinking about it all week, and there weren't anyone in this class she could see herself working successfully with. Possibly Inoichi, but yeah, he was already taken, wasn't he?
Kyo glanced quickly at where Shikaku and Chouza sat, respectively.

“No idea,” Kyo shrugged. “It’s up to the sensei, I suppose,” though she was fairly certain there were even higher ranking people involved in arranging the teams.

She wasn’t sure if the Hokage got involved when one of the students weren’t the resident Jinchuuriki, but it sort of sounded a bit far-fetched. And she’d already come to the conclusion that she couldn’t just assume that everything from the manga was entirely correct.

She’d get killed that way.

And besides, with her being here, just that was bound to change a few things. Inconsequential as they might be.

Kyo frowned and tilted her head. She couldn’t see herself doing all that much of a difference, if she was honest. She was realistic enough that she was fully aware her biggest concern was her own survival, followed by that of her family.

She was selfish, and she didn’t have any desire to die for some hair-brained plan that might not even work.

Kyo was one person, of no particular importance or consideration.

“I just hope I won’t end up with Satsuki,” Inoichi admitted with a small grimace.

Yeah, that girl could be... taxing to deal with. She’d still managed to graduate, though, and was proudly wearing her hitai-ate.

Kyo gave him a weak, sympathetic smile and turned to the door when it opened, revealing Takuma-sensei’s stern visage.

“Quiet down,” he said, though the slightly diminished class had mostly fallen silent the moment he’d appeared in the door. “You’re all Genin now,” he began once he’d taken his customary position at the front of the room. “And as such, you’ll be held to a higher standard than you’ve enjoyed so far.” Takuma gave them all a serious look, sweeping his gaze over the room.

“Team one,” he began, glancing down at the clipboard he’d brought with him.

“Team five; Yamanaka Inoichi, Nara Shikaku and Akimichi Chouza. Your Jounin sensei is Sarutobi Shinzu.” Takuma-sensei paused long enough to make sure they were all still paying attention, before he continued. “Team six; Inuzuka Taku, Shiranui Kyo and Minami Maki. Your Jounin sensei is Yamanaka Katsurou.” And he went down the list for the remaining three teams.

Kyo blinked a few times, trying to come to terms with this.

“You will now wait here until your assigned Jounin comes to collect you,” Takuma finished simply. “I wish the lot of you the best of luck in your future endeavours.”

And with one last nod, Takuma-sensei left to do whatever it was he did when he didn't have a class.

“Good luck, Kyo-kun,” Inoichi said, getting to his feet and giving Shikaku and Chouza a speculative look.
“And to you, Inoichi,” Kyo returned absently, eyeing her own teammates.

The blond wandered off and Kyo wondered if she should approach her own fellow Genin. She supposed they’d have to pass whatever test this Yamanaka person who would be their potential sensei threw at them before they were official.

In the end, she figured she could be the mature one and approach the two boys first.

“Hello,” she greeted the Inuzuka politely, giving the other boy -who was sitting nearby- a friendly nod.

“Yeah, hi,” the Inuzuka grunted, and he didn't look particularly pleased.

The other boy, Maki, was a civilian-born, she was fairly sure.

With a mental shrug, Kyo just sat down, figuring that at least they were sitting more in a group now.

They didn't have to wait long for the Jounin to start arriving. The Sarutobi man in charge of team five being the first to collect his children.

Three teams later, a blond man with short-cropped hair and sea-foam coloured eyes a shade lighter than Inoichi's appeared in the door.

“Team six,” he called out in a pleasant but firm voice.

Kyo stood up and walked down to him, followed shortly by her two potential team members.

Yamanaka Katsurou ran his pupil-less gaze over them and then turned around and walked towards the exit.

Since they'd been given no other instructions, Kyo followed at his heels.

He ended up leading them to a training field she had never been to before. It was pleasant enough; more grass than she was used to, and with a cluster of trees at the far end.

“Take a seat,” the man said, turning to face them once more.

Kyo sank down to sit on her behind, legs crossed loosely in front of her and hands clasping her own ankles, giving him an expectant look.

The Inuzuka's ninken, a very pretty, white dog about the size of a golden retriever, was the second to join her, leaving the two boys last.

“My name is Yamanaka Katsurou,” he introduced himself, giving them each an intense, penetrating look, one after the other. “I'm the Jounin you could quite possibly end up with as your sensei.”

The words hung between them, and Kyo got the feeling he was waiting for one of them to speak up.

“What do you mean 'possibly'?” Maki finally asked, frowning up at the man.

“Just because you passed the Academy test it doesn't automatically make you fully fledged Genin,” Katsurou-sensei said evenly. “Normally, there's a test you have to pass from the individual Jounin, too. Or get sent back to the Academy until the next graduating batch.”

“Normally,” Kyo repeated curiously.
Katsurou's gaze cut to her, meeting her gaze a second before he nodded. “I'm personally of the belief we can't currently afford to reject any possible additions to the Konoha forces.” He paused. “So we will work together as a team for a week, meeting here every day for training and team-bonding and then we'll see.”

“That sounds like bullshit,” the Inuzuka declared loudly, crossing his arms in front of his chest. “Not only do I have to be on the team with the baby, I also get the stupid sensei?”

Kyo sent the boy an incredulous look.

“The 'baby', as you so aptly put it, got far better test results than you, Inuzuka Taku,” Katsurou returned evenly, not so much as blinking.

The boy scoffed. “Just because ya do good on the paper test doesn't mean ya can do shit in a fight.”

Kyo wondered if she should feel insulted, but didn't care enough to work up the energy for it.

“Which is why we will do some extensive training exercises this week,” Katsurou declared in a way that Kyo found quite intimidating. Not that he sounded threatening or anything. He actually sounded entertained, which was far more worrying.

It was like that time kaa-san had asked tou-san, Yuuta and Ryota to help with their semi-regular games of Hide and Seek. Only, in this version, one person hid and the rest tried to find them. Obviously, Kyo had been the one hiding.

All to train up her stealth.

Yuuta had been particularly gleeful about chasing her about the forested training ground they'd been using whenever he'd found her.

Stupid sensor.

“We will get started right away, but first,” Katsurou-sensei paused to smile thinly. “Introduce yourself. Name, age, speciality. You can start, hot stuff,” he said, pointing at Taku.

“Inuzuka Taku, ten, and I specialize in taijutsu and my clan techniques,” he declared, lifting his chin boldly.

“Shiranui Kyo,” Kyo continued. “I'm six years old and I specialise in poisons.”

Their last member hesitated a little before he gave his own introduction. “Minami Maki, ten, and I don't have a specialisation,” he admitted, embarrassed.

“You never told us your specialisation and age,” Taku said, squinting suspiciously up at the Yamanaka, who merely stared back in reaction, eyes sharp.

“We'll see how you've done at the end of the week,” was all he said on the subject. “Now, get to your feet; we have much to do.”

“How did it go?” Isshun asked when she stepped through the door.

A pained groan was all she got in response.

Katsurou-sensei had had them sparring against each other all day, and Kyo felt like she was one
massive bruise.

At least Maki had been having trouble, too, she consoled herself sourly.

Taku had been far too gleeful about the entire thing, and Kyo sort of just wanted to pit him against Katsurou and see him receive a severe reality check.

As if being a Genin made him the most powerful ninja in the entire village.

“Whose your sensei, at least?” Isshun asked amusedly when Kyo failed to properly answer her question.

“Yamanaka Katsurou,” she sighed, gingerly getting up from where she’d slumped down to take her sandals off. “I'm taking a shower,” she added, trudging past her mother towards the bathroom.

“Don't drown yourself, dear,” Isshun called after her lightly and Kyo barely resisted tossing something rude back.

Almost an hour later, she felt more human again as she settled down at the kitchen table for a late dinner; Katsurou had kept them at it until the sun was setting.

Genma would have gone to sleep long ago at this point.

“He made us spar,” Kyo groaned. “All day.”

“Well, your teammates would be about four years older than you,” Kaa-san mused lightly, putting dinner down in front of Kyo, who gratefully dug in. “It's not to strange that you're struggling.”

She was starving.

“I'm with an Inuzuka and a civilian-born,” Kyo divulged once she'd cleared her plate. “Taku is pretty stuck up and thinks I'm a baby, while Maki acts like he wishes he was on any other team than ours.” She thought about it for a second. “He looks like Taku annoys him just as much, though, so I'll have to see how that relationship develops.”

“At least you won't be bored,” Isshun chuckled, placing Kyo's plate and chopstick in the sink for tomorrow.

“No,” Kyo reluctantly agreed. “I might end up dead if Katsurou-sensei keeps up this pace, though,” she groused, slumping over the kitchen table. “I hope we'll end up doing something else tomorrow.”

“He didn't give you any test?” Isshun asked after a considering silence, a small smile playing on her lips.

“Said he doesn't believe it's logical to keep up with them when Konoha's at war and needs more people. He'll decide at the end of the week if he wants to spend his time teaching us.”

Isshun hummed. “If you stay on a team with them, I'd like you to invite them all over for dinner,” she decided pleasantly.

Kyo snorted into the table and peered up at her mother. “Okay,” she agreed, voice coloured by wry amusement. “I'm going to bed now, because Katsurou-sensei said to meet up at six tomorrow morning.”

“I'll prepare a lunch for you before I go to bed.” Isshun nodded. “Sleep tight, sweetheart.”
“Night,” Kyo muttered and managed to make her way to the bathroom to brush her teeth.

She barely had time to place her head on her pillow before she was dead to the world.

.

Getting up the next day had been harder than usual, but Kyo was still up with time to spare before she had to meet up with her new team.

Before breakfast, though, Kyo took a few minutes to carefully, and painfully, stretch out her aching muscles and stiff limbs.

Feeling like she could at least move, now, she walked out into the kitchen to make herself some breakfast.

It was a routine they had established during kaa-san's pregnancy; Isshun had needed the extra sleep, and Kyo didn't mind making her own food, so it all worked out for the best.

This would leave kaa-san with more energy to give Genma and her time spent with him.

Kyo felt it was only fair; her parents had been able to focus almost entirely on her when she'd been that young. And her little brother was small enough he needed it.

She didn't say goodbye before she left, because she didn't want to disturb either her kaa-san or brother so early in the morning.

Making her way through the still mostly sleepy village, Kyo arrived at the training ground Katsurou-sensei had chosen for them to find the man already there.

“Good morning, sensei,” she greeted cheerfully, feeling much better now than when she'd woken up.

She had been the only one of her teammates to have stretched yesterday, but stretching this morning too had clearly been a good decision.

“Morning,” the man returned after a slight pause, giving her a curious once over.

Kyo waited a couple of seconds to see if he would give her any directions, but when he didn't, decided to spend the time they'd have to wait for Taku and Maki by stretching some more.

She'd learned quite quickly that there was no such thing as stretching too much, and considering how yesterday had gone, she could do with the extra warm-up.

Maki showed up next, looking practically dead on his feet, shortly followed by Taku and his dog, whom he still hadn't given them a name for.

“Good morning,” Kyo greeted them politely, making Maki blink blearily at her while Taku scoffed and turned his face away.

Rude.

“Today, we're going to continue where we left off yesterday,” Katsurou-sensei said, instantly drawing all of their attention. His gaze lingered on Taku, before sliding over to Kyo. “Instead of sparring, I want you to treat these bouts like real fights,” he said serenely. “No serious maiming or life-threatening injuries, and I will intervene if things are about to spin out of control,” he added. “Taku, you'll be starting by facing Kyo.”
Kyo eyed the other boy's confident grin, found it offensively irritating and flicked one of her needles at him.

Taku blinked, looked down on his forearm, pulled the small, innocuous piece of metal out of his arm with a frown after a brief pause. He opened his mouth, no doubt to say something vaguely insulting, before his eyes rolled into the back of his head and he fell backwards, ending up sprawled on the ground.

“I win,” Kyo chirped cheerfully.

Maki looked sort of freaked out, but Katsurou-sensei gave an amused snort. “Do I need to take him to the hospital?” He asked idly.

“It's just a sedative.” Kyo shook her head. “He'll wake in,” she eyed the boy thoughtfully, “about an hour. It was my weakest dose.” The most fast-acting, though.

Katsurou eyed her with clear amusement, though his expression was mostly serious. “That gives the two of you plenty of time to have a go,” he said, as if everything had worked out according to plan. “No needles this time, Kyo,” he added, making Maki let out a thoroughly relieved breath.

Kyo gave the man a sunny grin before she turned to Maki, who nervously fell into the Academy style starting kata.

Instead of mirroring him, Kyo let her body fall into the much more familiar and comfortable style her tou-san had been teaching her since she was two.

Maki waited until she was visibly ready -such a gentleman- and then moved to attack.

He scrambled away from her when Kyo met him with a kunai in one hand and a senbon -not poisoned- in her other.

Tou-san had always stressed the importance of being able to draw quickly, which Kyo used to her full advantage as she threw her kunai at Maki's feet, successfully marshalling him into a position where it would be easy to take him out with the senbon.

Before the needle could hit, though, Katsurou-sensei plucked it out of he air in front of Maki's neck.

“If you knock out both of your teammates, you won't have anything to do until they wake up, Kyo,” he said with a slightly long-suffering sigh.

Kyo shrugged, and then paused. Should it really be this easy to render her fellow children unconscious?

Well... violence was sort of embraced here, wasn't it? Especially compared to back Before and she had been conditioned for these things since she was a toddler.

Blinking a couple of times, Kyo focused back on Katsurou-sensei.

“So what do you want us to do now?” She asked curiously, not so much as glancing over at Taku. His ninken had lied down next to him, head pillowed on his chest as it watched the rest of them with pale yellow eyes.

It really was a beautiful dog.

“Maki-kun, how's your marksmanship?” Katsurou asked, giving the boy a glance.
Maki, startling, turned to their sensei. “Uh, sufficient?” He offered tentatively with a wary glance at Kyo, who went to retrieve her kunai and put it back in her holster.

“Let’s take a look,” their sensei said and ushered them over to the wooden posts buried firmly in the packed earth a little ways away from where Taku was ‘napping’. “I want both of you to demonstrate your skill-level.”

“Okay, sensei,” Kyo said, pulling a senbon from one of her holsters.

Frowning at the target, she concentrated and threw, making sure to put as much strength into it as she could safely manage while still maintaining an acceptable level of precision.

She'd already showed him she could aim pretty well, she thought, so this was enough for now unless he told her otherwise.

She didn't want to appear to brag, especially since it was obvious Maki hadn't had anyone outside of the Academy to teach him stuff.

Kyo had been truly fortunate in that respect.

She spent the next fifteen minutes giving Maki tentative pointers, carefully studying him to make sure she wasn't pressing too much.

Some people were touchy when it came to stuff like this. Especially from someone younger.

Taku groaned.

“You back with us?” Katsurou-sensei asked, walking up to the boy to peer down at him.

“What happened?” Taku asked, rubbing a hand over his face.

“You lost your fight, is what happened,” Katsurou said simply, watching as Taku slowly managed to sit up and look around himself with a confused expression.

He brought a hand to his head and Kyo didn't doubt that he had something of a headache right now.

That had been one of the biggest pains about getting used to that particular sedative.

“If you drink plenty of water the headache should go away in a few minutes,” she told him helpfully, skipping up to and crouching down in front of Taku, who blinked dazedly at her.

His eyes looked relatively clear and he didn't seem to be having any adverse reactions. Good.

“I've been meaning to ask, but we were a bit busy yesterday,” she continued with a smile. “What's your partner's name?”

“...Kisaki,” Taku replied after a brief pause, giving her a long, squinty look.

Kyo gave him a smile and then turned to the ninken.

“Hello, Kisaki. I'm Kyo!” She introduced herself to the dog, who eyed her curiously. “Would it be alright to pet you?” She asked, politely holding out a hand for the pretty little ninken to smell if it so wanted.

“Yes,” she said, voice clearly female.
Slightly startled by the verbal response, Kyo still beamed and buried her fingers in the white fur, scratching eagerly all along Kisaki's neck and down her chest, watching as her yellow eyes closed with pleasure.

She'd had dogs in the Before. Several really big ones.

It was too bad people didn't seem to have pets here in Konoha the same way people had in her last life.

Not that it would've been practical as a kunoichi, but still.

“You're really pretty,” she told Kisaki, who gave her a doggy grin in response. She didn't look fully grown, and considering Akamaru's size in the manga, Kyo felt it was safe to assume she had some growing left to do. The fur around her eyes was a pale tan, now that she got a closer look, but most of her was white.

“Stop it; she's not a pet!” Taku finally snapped, though he looked mildly embarrassed, for some reason.

“I know.” Kyo blinked. Hadn't she made that clear from the start? “I just love dogs,” she said honestly, curiously watching Taku's cheeks pink.

“You sound like a kid when you say that,” he muttered, scowling off to the side.

“I am a kid,” Kyo returned without missing a beat, still watching the older boy curiously. “So are you. The only one here who's not a child is Katsurou-sensei.”

Taku gave her a perplexed frown. “What did you even do to me?” He finally asked, and Kyo settled herself properly on the ground in front of him.

Kisaki lied down with her head in her lap, and Kyo happily rubbed the area around her ears.

“I told you; I'm a poison specialist.” She smiled, glancing up at the Inuzuka boy, who was giving his ninjken a rather disgruntled, disapproving look. “I also have a few sedatives, and a mild hallucinogen, too.”

“I'd ask you not to use that last one on your teammates, Kyo,” Katsurou interjected, and there was a vaguely constipated look on his face, as if just the thought of having to deal with that was giving him a headache.

“Yes, sensei,” Kyo chirped, before she turned back to Taku. “This needle is laced with a sedative,” she explained, picking up the needle from the ground where Taku had dropped it when he'd succumbed to its' effects earlier.

She held it up in front of Taku, who shrank back. “Take that away from me!” He snapped and bared his teeth. At Kyo's raised eyebrows, he added a grudging “Please.”

Kyo hummed, inspected the needle, wiped the dried blood off and tucked it away into one of her packs to reapply with more sedative later.

“Aren't you afraid of accidentally stabbing yourself?” Maki asked hesitantly, having gravitated closer while Kyo talked.

“That's okay,” Kyo smiled, “I'm immune.”
“Really? To the poisons, too?” Taku asked, cocking his head in a rather dog-like manner as he considered her. “Is that why you smell so weird?”

“Maybe?” Kyo wrinkled her nose. How would she know what she smelled like? “What do I smell like?”

“Sort of like bitter herbs, sometimes you smell more like certain plants, though.” Taku shrugged, scratching absently at the pinprick scab the needle had left on his arm.

“Oh,” Kyo blinked, “I suppose that's a yes,” she mused. “So right now I probably smell like this, right?” She asked, digging one jar of poison out of the pack strapped to the small of her back. She unscrewed the lid and carefully held it out to the Inuzuka, who took a hesitant whiff and nodded, wrinkling his nose in disgust.

“Yeah. What is it?”

“Poison,” Kyo chirped happily. “This one's pretty interesting; it attacks the nerves very quickly, so if the dose is small enough, it can paralyse a grown man without killing him.”

When she’d put the jar back in her pack and looked back up again, both Taku and Maki were giving her rather alarmed looks.

“What?”

“I heard a rumour that you poisoned two classmates once. I didn't believe it before, but is it true?” Maki asked slowly, exchanging a look with Taku.

“Well.” Kyo cocked her head. “Sort of? They stole my lunch, ate it, and poisoned themselves, really.”

“Why would they be poisoned by eating your lunch?” Maki looked honestly confused.

“Because I eat a lot of poison?” Kyo offered blankly.


Kyo eyed him amusedly for a second, before she took the nerve poison back out, unscrewed the lid, licked a finger and dipped it in before wiping the powder off on her tongue.

Then she very carefully screwed the lid back on and tucked the jar away.

“Smelled like it, though.” Taku muttered with a thoughtful frown. In combination with the clan marks on his cheeks, it made him look rather severe for a ten year old.

“This is nice, but the three of you have already earned yourselves five extra laps for laziness,” Katsurou-sensei drawled from where he was leaning against one of the wooden posts. “You should get to it or I'm adding another five.”

“Yes, sensei!” Kyo and Taku both said, Maki not quite managing to join the chorus.

“How many laps?” Taku asked as he climbed to his feet, rubbing at his forehead again, which
reminded Kyo that he still hadn’t drunk any water.

“Until I say stop,” Katsurou said serenely.

Kyo bit back a sigh and resigned herself to be just as tired and sore tonight as she had been the evening before.

-x-x-x-
Katsuou-sensei ran them through all kinds of exercises, ranging from pure physical endurance to battle scenarios they had to work together for. All of it was interspersed with sparring, as well as the four of them facing off against the man himself.

It was all very interesting, though it made Kyo painfully aware of how much worse her stamina was. Taku held up the best in the purely physical stuff, with Maki somewhere in the middle between them.

On the other hand, Kyo was doing very well with the tricky assignments, where they had to figure out and improvise solutions and sneak around.

It was hard to make Taku even try to aim for stealth, no matter how much Kisaki tried to help her. Maki was perfectly willing to listen to her most of the time, though.

“Well, the week is up,” Katsuou-sensei said, standing in front of them and giving them all a sharp once-over.

Kyo, Taku, Maki and Kisaki were all sprawled in various positions on the ground in front of him, wheezing for air and trying to catch their breaths.

Katsuou tilted his head in a considering manner and then nodded to himself. “I suppose we're stuck with each other from now on.”

“Well, I'm not going to accept any missions for us for another month,” he began firmly. “I'd rather waste a bit of time right now than end up dead later,” he mused idly, making all four of them groan. He let them rest for a few minutes before he continued.

Taku had actually managed to sit back up by the time Katsuou demanded their attention, though he was supporting most of his weight on his hands and looking like a stiff breeze might knock him back down.

“You shut up,” Maki muttered back in a barely audible voice.

Kisaki huffed and rolled over onto her side, stretching out and seemingly falling asleep.

Katsuou snorted quietly and took a seat on the ground in front of them. “We clearly have to work more on your stamina,” he mused idly, making all four of them groan. He let them rest for a few minutes before he continued.

“I'm not going to accept any missions for us for another month,” he began firmly. “I'd rather waste a bit of time right now than end up dead later,” he told them gravely, bringing down the mood.
straight into grim, serious reality.

That was right.

It was easy to forget about the war inside the safety of the village walls. Even for Kyo, who saw proof of it every time tou-san came home from his latest mission, saw it in the bruises on his skin, various injuries and the stains on his clothes.

He would have the massive scar on his chest until the day he died. Preferably of old age.

“We're going to focus on teamwork, and getting all of you to expand your jutsu arsenal by at least one. And speaking of,” Katsurou-sensei paused to pull out three small squares of paper from one of the pockets on his vest. “I want each of you to channel your chakra into these.”

Kyo gingerly accepted what she realised must be chakra paper. Or whatever it had been called.

Taku yelped and dropped his paper when it caught on fire.

Maki sent his own paper a concerned look before he shrugged and got to it. The paper crumbled to dust between his fingers.

Kyo took a deep breath and directed her chakra to the tips of her fingers.

The paper split in two, and then surprised her by sagging with water.

She stared. “Is it supposed to do that?” She asked with a small frown.

Katsurou hummed. “You've been training with chakra for quite a while, haven't you, Kyo?”

Kyo nodded. “Not for anything like this, though,” she said, waving the wet pieces of paper at her sensei. Her now official sensei.

“The more you work with it, the more refined your control becomes.” The man shrugged, before turning to Taku. “You've got a fire affinity, which means you'll have an easier time learning fire jutsu.”

Which Taku looked pretty pleased about.

Kyo wouldn't be surprised to learn the boy had quite the pyromaniac tendencies.

“Maki, you've got an earth affinity, and Kyo, you've got a primary affinity for wind and a secondary affinity for water.” He paused to eye her intently a moment. “An unusual combination in Konoha,” he acknowledged.

“Kaa-san's got a water affinity, while tou-san's got fire and wind,” she informed him evenly.

Katsurou nodded. “I'll find each of you a jutsu to work on during the month we've got, but we're also gonna have to get started on tree walking.”

Kyo perked up. “Really?” She asked excitedly.

She'd always loved it when her parents had taken her on their breakneck races across Konoha and occasionally the surrounding forests, and she couldn't wait to be able to do it herself.

Katsurou sent her an amused look, but nodded. “Among other things.” He turned to Maki. “Is there a specialisation you'd like to consider getting started on, Maki-kun?”
Maki hesitated, sent Taku a mildly embarrassed glance before he cleared his throat. “I'd like to learn how to use a sword, sensei,” he confessed, clearly expecting his words to be met with laughter.

Kyo tilted her head. “Would you classify Taku as a close range fighter or mid- to long range?” She wondered out loud.

“Close- to mid range,” the boy in question muttered, frowning questioningly at her.

Kyo nodded. “I can't put up much of a fight in close combat yet,” she admitted frankly. She could hardly go toe to toe in close combat with Taku, a grown enemy ninja would slaughter her. “But I would work very well as mid- to long distance support.”

Katsurou hummed with interest. “Poison your teammates' opponents to make them easier to take out, or take them out directly when they're distracted?”

“Yeah,” Kyo nodded, stubbornly pressing down the uncomfortable feeling that rose inside her at talking about something like this so glibly.

“It's a sound strategy,” Katsurou-sensei acknowledged approvingly. “We'll still have to work on your taijutsu, though,” he warned firmly. “In a few years, you will have caught up.”

Kyo nodded; she hadn't really expected anything less.

Katsurou turned back to Maki. “I'll see what I can do about kenjutsu lessons; there are a few shinobi in Konoha who use a sword, whom would be perfectly capable of at least getting you started. Give me a few days to ask around, and then we'll see.”

“Yes, sensei. Thank you,” Maki smiled tentatively at the blond man, whose eyes warmed a fraction in response.

It was the closest they'd seen to a genuine smile so far.

“Now, tree-walking,” Katsurou-sensei declared, making all four of them struggle to their feet.

“Oh!” Kyo smiled, remembering something. “Now that we're an official team, my kaa-san said to invite you all over for dinner.”

The three males were silent a moment, before Maki shifted uncomfortably.

“The food won't be poisoned, right?” He asked haltingly, looking like he couldn't believe he had to ask.

Kyo gave him an incredulous look. “Neither tou-san nor my little brother are immune,” she told him, voice completely deadpan.

“Why not? It might be an interesting team-building exercise and I want to meet with all of your parents anyway,” Katsurou-sensei finally said, scoffing quietly at the betrayed looks Taku and Maki sent him.

As if going to Kyo's house was a death-sentence.

“Tree-walking, sensei?” Kyo asked, forcefully changing the subject.

“Tree-walking,” Katsurou agreed, leading the way over to the handful of trees.

It seemed the man had put a lot of thought into choosing this particular training ground.
Kyo was surprised at how... little trouble with tree-walking she had.

In the manga, Naruto and Sasuke had both been at it for days.

It had still taken her the better part of a day to get any consistent results, so it wasn't like she was a natural like Sakura had been, either.

Comfortably average, Kyo mused from the top of her chosen tree.

It was a good thing she'd never had a trouble with heights.

Taku was shouting something, either at her or at Maki. Most likely the latter, she decided when the other boy snapped something back.

Both of them were having a bit more trouble.

Crossing her arms over her chest where she sat, Kyo swung her legs back and forth and thought it over.

Taku most likely had the most chakra out of the three of them. He was a Clan kid, and she had a vague recollection of reading or hearing somewhere that the Inuzuka clan techniques were fairly chakra extensive.

And Maki, as a civilian-born, would have the least practice, regardless of how big or small his reserves were.

So it was just natural that Kyo learned it faster.

She grimaced and shook out one leg as best she could where she sat, carefully sticking her butt to the tree-branch with a thin layer of chakra; she wouldn't want to fall off. She might have gotten the chakra part down, but that didn't mean her muscles were on the same page.

Walking vertically up a tree was far more taxing on your muscles than Kyo had ever really considered.

Gravity sucked.

“Ready for the next step?” Katsurou-sensei's voice asked from next to her, making Kyo jump and almost slip off her perch.

“Sensei!” She hissed, clutching both hands to the branch in a white knuckled grip. “Don't do that!”

“Situational awareness, Kyo,” the man returned lightly, looking far too amused at her expense, despite the lack of a smile.

“What next step?” She asked after a brief pause, where she'd mostly tried to bring her heartbeat back to normal.

“Water walking,” Katsurou said.

Perking up with interest at the reminder, Kyo nodded and climbed to her feet before slowly and carefully making her way down the tree trunk, one sure step at a time.

The one thing she'd have to train herself out of was the way she was sort of expecting to trip and fall to the ground in an undignified heap.
That would've been embarrassing. And painful.

Not that she'd been even half as clumsy in this life as she'd been in her previous one, but the reflex was still there, in the back of her head.

Katsurou-sensei, the show-off, just jumped from the top of the tree down to the ground, landing with hardly a sound.

He made it look so easy, Kyo mused a bit enviously.

“Don't we need water to do water walking?” She asked. Absently stretching out her legs now that she was back on the ground, bending forward to press her hands flat to the ground. When she straightened up again, Katsurou was watching her amusedly.

“Situational awareness,” he said again, shaking his head.

Frowning confusedly, she readily followed her sensei through the small cluster of trees and shrubbery, and when she came out the other side, gave an amused giggle.

“Oops?” She offered with a sheepish grin.

There was a decently sized pond in front of them, strangely round in shape.

Katsurou's lips twitched minutely. “Water walking,” he said, stepping onto the surface of the water as if it was solid, effortlessly strolling onto the calm pond. “Is similar and nothing at all like tree walking.”

Kyo settled down on the grass by the bank to listen.

“The water may look still on the surface, but it moves in a way trees do not. Movement you have to compensate for with your chakra,” Katsurou paused to consider her. “It will be harder to walk on moving water, such as in a river or stream, but this is a good place to start.”

Nodding, Kyo turned the information over in her head.

She hadn't actually taken walking on water into consideration when she'd thought about life as a kunoichi.

...did that mean Jesus had been a shinobi? She wondered amusedly.

“Is this pond man-made, sensei?” She couldn't help but ask.

Katsurou-sensei nodded. “There are plenty of them all throughout Konoha.”

Which would be good for multiple reasons, she realised. Not just as an extra source of drinking water in an emergency, but also in the eventuality of an invasion or attack. Konoha didn't have a majority of shinobi with water affinities, but the few they had knowing exactly where to find water to use as a weapon would far outweigh the risk of having an enemy use the same resource.

Or in the case of fire.

And then there was the added bonus of moments like this; training.

Getting to her feet, Kyo eyed the water and then herself.

With a shrug, she began to take off the cuff-holsters for her needles, followed by her various
pouches, her poison pack and normal holsters. She finished it all off by pulling her t-shirt over her head, then the mesh shirt she wore underneath and her shorts.

Leaving her sandals on her feet, Kyo finally felt ready to brave the water.

Getting her needles wet would mean she'd have to reapply all the poison, and though the many, various containers holding her poison powders and such were water-proof, it would still be a pain to go through it all to make sure nothing had been ruined.

Holding no illusions, she felt it would be better to keep her clothes dry rather than fall in with them on.

This way, only her panties would get soaked.

_Hah! Dirty joke!_

“So I just try the same thing as with the tree?” Kyo asked, peering a bit warily at the dark water.

She _could_ swim. She just thought it looked rather cold. And muddy.

“Only one way to find out,” Katsurou-sensei returned without missing a beat.

Kyo sent him a wry, reluctantly amused look and his eyes were practically laughing at her.

With a small sigh, Kyo sat down on the bank and began by carefully setting the soles of her sandalled feet against the surface of the water.

Frowning with concentration, Kyo directed her chakra to her feet and tried to press down.

Her foot sank down to the ankle before she pulled it back up and tried again.

And again.

Using too much chakra ended up giving the same effect as if she'd slapped the water with her foot. Hard.

She was already drenched and she hadn't even tried to stand on the thing.

Katsuou-sensei was still standing out in the middle of the pond, calm and relaxed-looking and definitely mocking her.

_Water was flexible in a way wood wasn't, so wouldn't that mean she'd have to make sure her chakra was the same?_

Kyo wiped water from her face and tilted her head as she considered the idea.

It would be hard, she realised, but that wasn't any reason not to try. _Anything_ you didn't know how to do was hard.

Firming her resolve, Kyo unknowingly scowled with concentration and pressed her feet against the water's surface once again.

She couldn't just coat her feet in chakra and expect it to work here; she had to keep... keep the connection open, so to speak.

Man, this made more sense when she wasn't trying to put it into words, even if it was only in her
head.

Some indeterminable time later, she had managed to keep her feet from sinking under the surface when she pressed down and felt she had to try to stand up.

She just knew she'd end up in the pond, but... It was just as well to get it over with.

At least it wasn't winter.

Taking a deep breath, Kyo concentrated on her chakra and pushed herself to her feet.

It worked. For all of a second, before the water began to give way beneath her and she ended up sinking through all the way.

Blinking rapidly, Kyo scowled at the murky water all around her and kicked her feet.

She broke the surface with little fanfare and swam back to the shore. To try again. And again. And again.

By the time Katsurou-sensei told her to get out of the water and get dressed, she felt tired down to her bones and was shivering with cold.

Taking pity on her, Katsurou ambled slowly through the trees and kept to a pace Kyo wouldn't have trouble keeping up with.

When they reached the trees Taku and Maki should have been doing their best to run up, Kyo blinked incredulously and not a little blankly at the sight before them.

Taku and Maki were... tangled in a heap of limbs in the grass and looking to be doing their best to strangle each other.

“Shouldn't you stop them, sensei?” She asked, feeling a bit like she should care more about the violent display.

Katsurou hummed neutrally.

Kisaki slunk over to sit beside Kyo, managing to look remarkably embarrassed on behalf of her human.

Kyo shuddered again, and scratched Kisaki behind the ear with a mutter of, “Boys,” and then turned to Katsurou-sensei. “May I leave for today, sensei? I need to tell kaa-san you're all willing to come for dinner.”

“Sure,” Katsurou waved her off, “I'm unfortunately gonna have to stay longer to deal with that,” he said, shaking his head with a sigh when Taku growled and bit Maki’s arm. The other boy yelped and slapped the Inuzuka quite noisily across the face.

“I suppose that's your job as the sensei,” Kyo said gravely, teeth chattering slightly. “Bye!” She chirped, gave Kisaki one last pat between the ears and then trotted off.

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“You live here?” Taku asked curiously, peering up at the apartment complex as if he'd never seen
anything like it.

“Yup,” Kyo replied, though she mentally had to snort. “Come on,” and she led the way up the stairs.

Maki was walking closest behind her, followed by Taku and Kisaki with Katsurou-sensei bringing up the rear.

“I'm home!” She called when she opened the door and stepped inside, toeing out of her sandals and walking inside.

“Welcome back,” Isshun returned from the direction of the kitchen. “Can you check on Genma-chan for me, Kyo?”

“Okay,” Kyo called back and wandered into her parents bedroom, leaving her teammates to take their shoes off.

It wasn't until she had found Genma awake -though sleepy-looking- in his crib that she realised she probably shouldn't just have left the rest of her team without a word like that.

Picking her baby brother up, Kyo walked back to the hallway and gave her team members a sheepish smile.

“Sorry, habit.” She shrugged. “Please come in,” she bid them eagerly. “Feel like home,” she added, because teammates were supposed to be like family, weren't they? That was at least what Yuuta and Ryota felt like; an extra pair of weird, socially awkward uncles.

Kaa-san came wandering out of the kitchen then, smiling politely at the no doubt motley crew that Kyo and her team were.

“Nice to finally meet you; Kyo's told me a lot about you,” she greeted placidly.

“Why did that sound like a threat?” Taku asked, exchanging a look with Kisaki, who flicked her ears.

“Don't be rude,” Maki hissed at him before he bowed at Isshun with a polite smile. “Thank you for inviting us into your home, Shiranui-san.”

“Ah, you would be the civilian-born,” Isshun commented curiously, before she turned her gaze on Katsurou-sensei, who gave her an amicable nod.

“So, this is my kaa-san,” Kyo said into the following silence, lamenting all the socially awkward people crammed together in the same room in her head. Maki was the only one with any real competence in the subject. “And this little guy is my baby brother!” She introduced proudly, turning Genma towards the strangers and waving one of his chubby little arms in a mockery of a greeting.

“Well, it's nice to meet ya and all, I suppose,” Taku shrugged, clasping his hands behind his head.

“I'm assuming all of you are hungry,” Isshun said, waving them further into the apartment. It felt a bit cramped with all the people, but no one seemed like they minded.

Though, she wasn't sure with Katsurou-sensei, because he might just be a very good actor.

“Kaa-san, that's Inuzuka Taku and Kisaki, Minami Maki, and Yamanaka Katsurou-sensei,” Kyo belatedly introduced her teammates, feeling a flush work its way up her cheeks.

She hadn't ever been all that sociable, but damn, her manners had officially gone down the drain.
Then again, she didn't think she'd introduced anyone in this life before now... huh. Wow, her social life was almost more pathetic here than it had been in the Before.

“Let's go sit down in the kitchen,” Isshun said with a smile, and Kyo just knew she was internally laughing at her.

Not that Isshun was any better when it came to dealing with people, but still. She'd seen her mum threaten both Yuuta and Ryota with needles to get them to do what she wanted on occasion. Never tou-san, though, curiously enough.

Genma slapped one of his hands on Kyo's mouth, and she grimaced. “I think he wants something, kaa-san,” she muttered, trying to prevent Genma's fingers from getting into her mouth. “He's doing the thing again.”

“He's probably just hungry,” kaa-san chuckled, sending her an amused look. “One moment and I'll take him.”

“How old is he?” Maki asked, giving Genma a curious look.

The baby's hair had darkened to brown by now, though still a shade lighter than Kyo's, and his eyes had turned the same shade of brown as their father had.

“Almost four months,” Isshun replied easily, starting to ladle up rice into bowls and placing them on the table in front of their guests.

“I didn't know you had siblings, Kyo,” he said after a moment.

“I told you, though,” Kyo stared confusedly at him, “when you asked if the food would be poisoned,” she reminded him.

She blinked a bit when Maki's face turned bright red and he shot her kaa-san a wide-eyed, slightly panicked look.

“Yeah, but you didn't say he was so tiny,” Taku commented, leaning forward to give Genma a curious once over. “I've only got older siblings, so I don't know what ya could do with something like that.”

“He's a someone, Taku,” Kyo corrected with frown. “And he's too little.”

“Give him a few months and he'll be crawling all over the place.” Isshun hummed. “I don't think we'll be fortunate enough to have another child like you, Kyo,” she added cheerfully. “So Kou and I need to be more on our guard, or he might wander off.”

“Well behaved?” Katsurou-sensei asked idly, sounding like he was only barely interested in hearing the answer.

“Not as such,” Isshun mused, finishing serving up all the food and taking her seat, picking Genma out of Kyo's arms. The baby settled almost instantly once he was in his mother's embrace. “She was just thoughtful enough to announce where she was going.”

Kyo peered at her mother, uncertain how she was supposed to react to that.

It wasn't like she was embarrassed, but this was fairly new territory.

“Please, go ahead and eat,” Isshun continued.
“Itadakimasu!” Taku said, instantly perking up and digging in, as if he had been waiting eagerly to hear exactly that.

Kisaki joined him, eagerly attacking the plate Isshun had placed in front of the ninken on the floor.

Once they'd finished eating, Isshun sent Kyo, Taku and Maki off to entertain themselves while she did the dishes and cleaned up, leaving Katsurou-sensei to grill her on Kyo's training, no doubt.

Which would also give kaa-san the opportunity to get a feel for the kind of man sensei was.

Having no clue what she was supposed to do in this situation, Kyo ended up leading Taku, Maki and Kisaki into her room.

“So, this is my room?” She said uncertainly, turning to face to two older children.

“Yeah, sort of figured,” Taku snorted, though he looked around curiously enough.

“Looks a bit,” Maki hesitated, “sparse.”

Kyo shrugged, not offended in the least. “I spend most of my time outdoors, anyway. Only really sleep in here.”

Taku nodded, as if he was on the entirely same page.

Maki looked startled, though. “Doing what?”

“Training,” Kyo replied, blinking at the older boy. What did he think she was doing? “Or collecting and preparing poisonous plants,” she acknowledged. But that was a form of training in itself. “Haven't really been able to do that here at home for a while, so I've been using either one of the training grounds or tou-san's team members' houses.”

Maki looked mildly overwhelmed.

“Ya ever do anything for fun, chibi?” Taku asked, sending her an almost pitying look.

Kyo tilted her head. “Training is fun.”

Taku rolled his eyes, sighed as if he thought she was hopeless, and let himself collapse onto her floor.

“Your mother's food was pretty good,” he muttered.

“Yes,” Kisaki agreed, tail thumping the floor a couple of times where she had lied down next to her person, chin resting on his thigh.

Kyo grinned at the pair, accepting the compliment for what it was; a tentative olive branch.

Taku hadn't been nearly as antagonistic towards her ever since she'd knocked him out with a single needle. He seemed to be focusing his efforts more on Maki now.

“So both your parents are shinobi?” Maki asked into the not-quite awkward silence.

“Yeah.” Kyo sighed. “Tou-san's out at the border most of the time,” she frowned, “and kaa-san's probably gonna be sent back out the moment she's recovered fully from Genma's birth.”

“Your parents are shinobi, too?” Maki asked, tilting his head in question.

Taku grunted an agreement, looking like he was about to fall asleep. “An’ my two big brothers.”

“I have two little sisters,” Maki offered tentatively, looking like he thought it was only fair.

“How old are they?” Kyo asked curiously.

“Seven and four,” Maki said, looking relieved that she was actually having a conversation with him.

Kyo smiled and listened to him prattle a bit about his younger sisters. Just, normal stuff.

It was a nice break from the hectic week they’d had.

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“Here you go, you little animals,” Katsurou-sensei said, tossing out three scrolls.

Taku and Kyo caught theirs easily enough, but Maki had to scramble not to drop his. Or let it smack him in the face. Not that he was any less coordinated than them; he’d just been busy making googly-eyes at the sword Katsurou had gotten him the day before.

Kyo eyed her scroll with blatant interest, wasting no time to open it up and take a look inside.

Setsudan Bakufu.

A wind jutsu that could apparently cut through almost anything, depending on how well executed it was.

The scroll described a big, devastating attack, but the thing that first popped into her head was how it could be used on a smaller scale. Which was very, very interesting.

...in a worryingly morbid sort of way.

A scoff from next to her made her tear her eyes away from her scroll to eye Taku, who didn’t seem to have so much as glanced at the scroll held loosely in his left hand.

Kyo frowned; she would have thought Taku to have been the most eager to learn. He’d been particularly gleeful the last time Katsurou had brought it up. Which had been yesterday.

She watched the boy send the scroll a dark, almost resentful look and reached out and snatched it from him.

“Hey!” He protested with a scowl, looking like he was contemplating tackling her to get it back.

Kyo ignored him in favour of opening the scroll, which she proceeded to read out loud.

Both of her siblings in her past life had been dyslexic, and there had been plenty of kids at the school she’d worked at with the same problem when it came to reading. Most of them had acted out whenever they’d been asked to read, and while she thought Taku was a bit too proud to throw a tantrum, the way he’d reacted had made her think back on those memories.

“It sounds awesome, doesn’t it?” She asked, looking up with a smile, only to start at the way Taku was staring at her. “What?”

“Nothin’,” Taku muttered, leaning closer to her to peer down at the scroll, taking in the drawn picture
of a vaguely shinobi-like figure performing the great fireball jutsu.

“Don't you know how to read?” Maki asked, and there was a rather amused note to his voice that instantly made Taku go rigid.

Kyo scowled at the boy and threw a pebble at his forehead, right between the eyes.

“That’s going to be a needle next time,” she told him firmly, raising her chin a fraction in silent challenge.

Maki rubbed his forehead, scowling at her, and then his eyes widened in the second he got before Taku tackled him with a growl.

Kyo jumped to her feet to get out of the way, turning to Katsurou-sensei with a sigh. “They’re doing it again, sensei.”

“I’d have to be blind and deaf not to notice, Kyo,” Katsurou replied dryly, slipping his hands into his pockets as he gazed dispassionately at the pile of flailing limbs that was Taku and Maki. “Let’s leave them at it and get started on your jutsu.”

“Okay,” Kyo agreed slowly, giving the two boys one last look before turning fully to their sensei.

About half an hour later, Taku and Maki became aware enough of their surroundings to realise they were missing out on a lesson.

Katsurou-sensei’s severely unimpressed look when they came to join them made both boys look like disobedient puppies.

Kisaki eyed her person with part sympathetic and part disappointed eyes. She'd been settled with Kyo and Katsurou, listening in on the lecture with her fellow female. While getting her ears rubbed.

“You get started on that,” Katsurou said, quite clearly sending her away to talk to the two boys.

Kyo sent Taku and Maki a quick glance, and then ran off to the other side of the training ground to start working on elemental manipulation.

Which ought to turn out to be interesting.

The two boys were working on their tree walking.

Kyo was nearby attempting to get the hang of her wind jutsu. Or, you know, make it work at all.

“Should I go and give them a few pointers?” She asked, giving Katsurou-sensei a questioning look where he lay a few paces away from her, seemingly asleep.

“No.”

“Okay,” Kyo muttered, frowning down at her stupid scroll.

She understood what it said, knew what she supposedly had to do, but it still wasn't working.

Katsurou sighed. “They need to learn to ask for help,” he explained, opening one eye to give her a brief glance before he looked over at Maki and Taku. “Working hard is well and good, but if you don't know what you’re doing it can be more harm than most people realise.”
Kyo couldn't help but agree.

But that didn't mean it was frustrating having to watch her two teammates go at it, though.

She tilted her head. “Do I have to do it exactly as the scroll says?” She asked curiously, urged to ask by Katsurou's words and her own thoughts. “It feels weird, and I'd much rather try it differently.”

“Different how?” Katsurou asked, sitting up to give her an intent, curious look.

“These hand seals feel a bit,” she grimaced, tapping two of the seals written out in the scroll, not sure what word she should use, “redundant?” She tentatively offered.

“They're there to make this particular jutsu more easily controlled for beginners,” Katsurou said idly, cocking his head minutely as he studied her. “Shaping and forming the chakra before its released with your breath.”

Kyo wrinkled her nose. “It's my chakra, though. It's part of me and it's not like it's gonna do anything I'm not directing it to do,” she reasoned sensibly. It wasn't like chakra had a mind of its own; it did as directed and nothing more, nothing less.

All these hand signs felt like they were clogging up her system. Restricting her.

Katsurou regarded her intently for a long moment before he shrugged and waved a hand towards the unoccupied part of the training ground.

“By all means; go ahead and try,” he said. “Do your best not to hurt yourself while you're at it,” he requested wryly.

Kyo smiled, jumped to her feet and slowly went through the hand seals she wanted to use, meanwhile moulding the chakra she'd need and directing it to her lungs.

Taking a deep breath, Kyo's eyebrows pulled together with concentration and one of her hands raised to her mouth to help shape the jutsu at the final stage before release.

The closest description she could give as to what it felt like was that she 'spat' the air in a condensed ball that flattened out and formed itself into a sickle-like shape about the size of her hand when it left her mouth.

Having aimed at the ground a few meters in front of her, Kyo watched with immense satisfaction as the chakra infused wind attack tore a deep, if short, gouge out of the dirt before it dissolved.

She'd have to add more chakra, evidently, but that had clearly been her best result so far.

Turning to Katsurou-sensei with a happy grin, she clapped her hands together and bounced a bit on her feet.

“It worked!”

“...yeah,” Katsurou agreed, sounding vaguely impressed and a little surprised. “Did you intend to make it that small?”

Kyo nodded. “I think it would suit both my chakra reserves and fighting style better to go for small but devastating attacks rather than large and ostentatious. It's not like someone will be more dead just because you take out all the surrounding trees together with your target.”

Katsurou actually laughed, a short, sharp sound, before giving her a thoroughly amused look.
“You're refreshingly rational, kid.”

“Thank you,” Kyo returned primly, too happy to try and analyse that comment right now. “Can I go practice my water walking after a few more tries of this?”

“Of course,” Katsurou said, shaking his head as if he didn't know what else to do. “I need to have a talk with the boys anyway. Take Kisaki with you if she's alright with it.”

“Okay!” Kyo chirped bouncing over to where the ninken was watching Taku's increasingly abysmal and violent attempts at climbing his tree.

Unlike her person, Kisaki had mastered tree walking about a day or so after Kyo had moved on to the pond. She absently wondered if sensei had asked the ninken not to give Taku any pointers...

“Yes,” Kisaki readily agreed to the proposal, and after Kyo had tried her wind jutsu three more times, followed her to the pond and tried her... paw at water walking along-side Kyo.

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Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

Straightening out misunderstandings and D-ranks!

It was the first day of the last week of their month.

Kyo arrived a few minutes late to training, because Genma had been a bit of a mess this morning and she'd ended up having to help kaa-san with him.

Walking onto their training grounds, it was to the sight of Taku and Maki in the midst of one of their daily scuffles.

After the morning she'd had, Kyo was pretty done already.

She walked up to Katsurou. “Can I please poison them, sensei?”

“Don't tempt me,” her sensei muttered tiredly, rubbing a hand over his eyes before he strode off towards the two boy. “Alright; enough's enough!” He bit out sharply.

Kyo jumped at the tone he'd taken.

Katsurou-sensei wasn't exactly gentle or anything, but he'd hardly been all that stern with them either, having taken a bit of a distant but helpfully guiding role when teaching them so far.

It'd sort of been clear he'd been trying to make them turn to each other for help and get closer as a team for the last month, but it had obviously backfired between the two boys.

Kyo and Kisaki got along fantastically, though.

Kyo had been teaching the ninken some of her stealth moves in the time they'd gotten somewhat to themselves.

It was pretty interesting to teach some of what she'd learned over the years to someone else. Even if that someone happened to be a dog.

“You two are going to sit your asses down, shut up and listen,” Katsurou-sensei said quietly, looking quite menacing where he stood over the two boys, who had frozen on the spot at his sharp words. “It might not seem like it inside the safety of the village walls, but there is a war out there, and if you two don't get your fucking acts together, you're going to get not just yourselves, but the rest of us killed, too.”

Katsurou eyed them with a deep frown, eyes hard and unamused.

Sensei's patience had run out, it seemed.

“You're all Genin now, but the most mature people on your team are the six year old and the ninken puppy,” the man continued harshly. Uncompromising.

Kyo might've taken it as an insult, if it didn't give such a clear, accurate picture of how sad this
scenario really was.

“You are going to sit down like the adults you've been supposed to be since you graduated and talk things out, or Kami help me, I will do something drastic.” Katsurou paused, mouth pulled taunt in a frown. “And you won't like it one bit,” he promised. “Kyo, Kisaki, come over here,” he called over his shoulder.

Doing as told, Kyo soon enough settled down on the ground next to the boys, who looked a bit like they'd been dropped at the deep end with no warning.

“No,” Katsurou said firmly. “Talk. Why are you fighting like this?”

Taku mutinously clenched his teeth, crossed his arms over his chest and frowned off to the side. The very picture of uncooperative body-language.

Maki scowled stubbornly at the ground.

Katsurou merely sat down in front of them, and it looked like they might end up sitting there for the rest of the day, Kyo mused irritably. Was it so hard to just talk it out?

It wasn't like Katsurou was asking them for classified information!

“He keeps looking down on me because I don't have shinobi parents!” Maki finally burst out angrily, evidently unable to hold his tongue any longer.

Admittedly, he'd lasted almost an hour.

A very boring, long and boring hour.

“I do not!” Taku growled back. “He keeps provoking me!” He spat back, sending Maki a venomous glare before focusing at Katsurou. “The idiot won't get a clue, even when he keeps-” and he clenched his jaw again.

Kyo frowned, trying to figure out what he was talking about.

Yeah, she could get the first part of it. Taku was an Inuzuka, and she'd always gotten the feeling that the dog Clan tended to operate more by... animal standards than human ones. To a certain extent.

Maki wouldn't know that, though, and being a civilian-born, until he acknowledged that, he was quite firmly stuck.

“It's not my fault you can't even read, you utter anima-” Maki began to say, and there was an alarming amount of vindictiveness in his eyes.

Kyo threw a pebble at his face.

Carefully making her way to her feet, Kyo took a deep breath in an attempt to calm herself.

Maki looked decidedly wide-eyed and he was cradling his cheek -which was no doubt going to bruise- and staring at her as if he'd never seen her before.

“You do not get to do that,” she told him quietly, a deep frown on her face. “Whether you acknowledge it or not, you're the one on this team that knows the least about shinobi culture and tradition. Kisaki knows more than you do, and she's a puppy,” she said. “You may know more about the civilian way of life, and no one here's trying to tell you otherwise. But if you don't want to die, then you need to shut the hell up and wise up.”
“You're just a kid,” Maki threw back, looking like he was scrambling for something hurtful to verbally hurl in her face.

“Yeah,” Kyo flicked a needle at him, which pinged off his hitai-ate. “But at least I know not to tell a person that should be as close as family, that they don't even deserve to be counted as human because of something as inane as trouble reading!” She hissed.

Giving the boy an utterly derisive look, Kyo turned to Taku.

“Taku, stuff the pride where the sun won't shine; I'm giving you a few pointers for your fire jutsu, that you would have been able to figure out on your own by now if you hadn't been too busy butting heads with the idiot over there,” she declared firmly, took the older boy's hand and dragged him off towards the trees without another look at Maki.

“You can be pretty scary, you know?” Taku blurted awkwardly once they were amongst the trees.

Kyo blinked and gave him a mildly incredulous look. “Thank you?” She offered tentatively, because the way he'd said that it sounded like he'd meant it as a compliment.

Taku nodded. “Where are we even going? I mean, it's pretty stupid to try a katon in here.” He looked around at all the vegetation.

“If you hadn't been so busy with Maki, you would've found out that there's a pond back here. Sensei's been having me practice water walking on it.”

“Water walking?” Taku repeated with interest, a speculative glint in his sharp, rather animalistic eyes.

Kyo nodded. “It's the next step to tree walking, and I figure sensei wants us to get as good at both of them as possible before we have to leave the village.”

For obvious reasons, really.

Taku snorted and Kyo was very pleased by the fact that he hadn't let go of her hand yet.

“Ya wanna show me?” He asked hesitantly after walking a few seconds in silence.

“Sure!” Kyo chirped with a wide smile.

Because, finally!

Instead of pulling out the fire jutsu scroll -which she'd ended up sort of just... keeping- Kyo began to strip out of her gear and clothes.

Taku took one look at her, shrugged, and then followed suit.

Once she was done, Kyo wobbled onto the surface of the pond, pleased at the fact that she didn't have to dedicate her full focus to the task of staying over the treacherous liquid beneath her feet, before she carefully turned around to face Taku, who eyed her with clear interest.

“It's sort of like tree walking,” she began. “But it's always moving and it isn't still, because water,” she sighed exasperatedly. “So you have to compensate for that with your chakra. All the time. Or you get a bath.” She grimaced down at the water.

“Sounds easy enough,” Taku declared and then attempted to jump onto the water, acting like he'd be able to land as expertly as she'd seen Katsurou-sensei do.
Taku disappeared beneath the surface of the water with a splash.

Kyo yelped and had to windmill her arms quickly not to join him, scrambling to adjust to the unsettled water. And she still ended up sinking almost to her knees before she managed to get it under control.

Taku broke the surface with a splutter of laughter.

Kyo sent him what was no doubt a pathetic pout, and he unashamedly splashed her with even more water.

“Hey,” she complained, because she had actually managed to stay sort-of dry this time! “I'm being nice to you, you meanie.”

Taku snorted and swam back to the edge of the pond, where he could comfortably stand with the water reaching no higher than his knees.

“A bit of water can't kill ya,” he returned without a shred of regret.

Kyo mock-frowned at him and then carefully angled one of her feet and sent a strong pulse of chakra down the limb.

The minor explosion of water it resulted in drenched the other boy and though it had made her lose her concentration, which had dropped her into the pond, Kyo couldn't help but snicker amusedly.

Taku wiped the water out of his eyes.

“That's a neat trick,” he observed magnanimously.

“It's what happen when you apply too much chakra. A bit more annoying that just breaking the bark,” she snickered and slowly pulled herself back onto the water's surface. Something Taku watched with clear fascination.

“Alright! Let's do this thing.” He grinned and set to it like the maniac Kyo had sort of figured he was.

An hour later, Kyo couldn't help but stare at him with something akin to petulant incredulousness.

“How?” She demanded, staring intently at Taku, who was wobbling around on the water. About as steady on his feet as a newborn foal, but keeping well out of the liquid. Most of the time.

How had he gotten it so quickly!?

“You're way too scared of fallin' in the water, ya know,” Taku told her distractedly as he took another few unsteady, drunken steps.

Kyo scowled.

She didn't particularly enjoy bathing in freshwater. It smelled, was murky and full of mud, not to speak of all the other various kinds of debris and partly decomposed plant-matter, and it was the colour of unhealthy pee.

Nope. Saltwater was far more her kind of jam.

“You're saying I'd be better if I was as enthusiastic about bathing in this soup as you?” She couldn't help but fire back.
At least it made Taku laugh, which dumped him right back into said soup.

The Inuzuka emerged from the water with a gasp for air, still laughing.

“Kyo, Taku!” Katsurou-sensei called from the edge of the water, drawing both of their attention and making them realise how far out onto the pond they'd wandered. He waved a hand for them to come to him, so Kyo waited long enough for Taku to climb back onto the water's surface, and then walked back towards dry land and the rest of her team.

“What is it, sensei?” She asked curiously.

“Maki's got something to say to the both of you,” Katsurou said, giving her a mildly amused look.

Kyo blinked and turned to Maki.

Who was beet red in the face and looking anywhere but at her.

“Is he alright?” She asked, a tad concerned. He hadn't managed to actually stab himself with that needle she'd thrown at him earlier? That had actually been one of her poisoned ones...

Maki shrank back fractionally and raised both hands to cover his eyes. “Why aren't you wearing any clothes?” He asked in a barely audible voice.

Kyo tilted her head. “I'm not actually naked,” she pointed out sensibly. She was still wearing her panties. “And even if I were, it's not like we look different enough you'll die. I'm six; I don't really have anything yet, you know?”

If anything, Maki's face got even brighter red. Something Kyo wouldn't have thought possible a second ago.

She'd never actually seen anyone blush that bright before.

“We don't really look all that different yet,” Taku agreed as he climbed out of the water, having opted to slosh through the liquid the last bit. “Only Kyo hasn't got the dangly bits,” he grinned, showing off his sharp canines.

Maki made a noise like he'd been mortally wounded.

“Can you put on some clothes, please?” He managed after a few seconds.

Kyo shrugged and turned to her pile of clothes and weapons pouches.

Briefly contemplating whether or not to take off her drenched underwear first, she decided not to. To spare Maki the 'horror' if nothing else. The sacrifices she made for her team-mate's delicate sensibilities.

Now her trousers would end up wet. Ah, well. She'd survive.

“You wanted to tell us something, Maki?” Kyo finally asked, turning to look at the boy while she put her collection of holsters and packs back into place around her body.

Taku, the cheat, had just shook himself -like his family namesake- and then pulled his clothes back on and was mostly done.

His shirt was slowly but steadily getting wet from the water dripping from his hair and left-over moisture on his skin, though.
“Sorry,” Maki said, staring intently at the grass at his feet. “For being an ass,” he added, a bit grudgingly, but sincerely enough.

“Oh,” Kyo chirped, giving him a smile when he directed an incredulous glance her way. Her smile faded and she gave him a serious look. “Don’t do it again.”

“I’ll try not to,” he promised quickly, giving her a slightly nervous look. “Please don’t poison me,” he added.

“And you’ve learned your first unwritten shinobi rule, it seems,” Katsurou-sensei mused, patting the boy in question on the shoulder. “Don’t piss off the poison specialist.”

“That’s a rule?” Maki asked, looking quietly despaired. As if he had just realised how much he hadn’t known.

“More like common sense,” Kyo returned cheerfully. “Ryota-oji always complain about that one time kaa-san made him sick for a whole day for ‘being an insensitive prick’,” she informed him sagely.

It was a great story, actually, and one of tou-san’s favourites to tell, because it led up to the moment he realised he was in love with kaa-san.

Much to Ryota’s disgruntled exasperation.

“Ya gonna stop challenging me now?” Taku asked idly, watching Maki with thinly veiled dislike.

“Yeah. Sorry,” Maki said again, back to looking apologetic. “I don’t- I mean, I’m not sure about everything, so, can you just tell me if I do something wrong?” He asked miserably, giving both Kyo and Taku an uncertain look.

Taku glanced at Kyo and then shrugged. “Sure.”

“Oh,” Kyo smiled, “we can do that.”

“Excellent, because I’m going to drill you on teamwork exercises for the rest of the week,” Katsurou-sensei said. “In addition to everything else we’ve got planned.”

Kyo felt her smile become fixed on her face, while Taku outright groaned.

Maki silently accepted his fate.

They were already having long days filled with nothing but training!

“Let me just tell kaa-san not to expect me back home until the end of the week.” Kyo sighed. “And grab a few changes of clothes,” she added, because that just made sense. She should probably grab her ‘camping’ gear, too.

“You’ve got an hour,” Katsurou said with the air of a truly generous man. “Scram.”

All four of them ran off, Kisaki hot on Taku's heels when he turned down in the direction of the Inuzuka compound.

At the end of their month, after a long week of having spent both days and nights in each other's company, Katsurou brought them to the Hokage tower.
Because he was secretly evil, he brought them there first thing in the morning, before Kyo or Taku had been able to catch breakfast.

Which meant that all four of them were tired, a bit on the dirty side and very hungry, in addition to feeling generally disgruntled with life at large and with sensei in particular.

“Kyo!” A semi-familiar voice called, making Kyo blink and scan the people around them again, this time to look specifically for anyone she might know.

Tou-san and his team hadn't been supposed to come back to the village quite yet, so it couldn't be any one of them.

Kaa-san would be home with Genma and that left the people she was already standing with.

“Ah, Inoichi,” Kyo muttered when her gaze landed on the Yamanaka in question and his team. “Been a while,” she added after a pause that was perhaps a second too long to be polite.

“Wow, you look like crap,” Inoichi observed with a small smile. “Hi, Katsurou-oji!”

“Inoichi,” Katsurou returned evenly, barely looking away from the boy's sensei.

Hadn't he been a Sarutobi? Kyo wondered sluggishly.

She was just six; she needed her sleep, damn it!

“How've you been?” Kyo asked as their teams moved towards the mission room together.

“Okay.” The boy shrugged, eyeing Taku and Maki curiously a moment, before turning back to Kyo. “Been running a few in-village missions, but mostly training.”

“Only training,” Kyo returned in what was almost a grunt. “This'll be our first mission.”

“Huh.” Inoichi blinked. “Good luck, then, I suppose? We should totally meet up when you've got the time, though, Kyo.”

“Hm?” Kyo tilted her head and eyed the boy curiously.

They'd talked a few times, but it wasn't like they were actual friends. Inoichi had been one of the few children in her class that'd been... tolerable. Which meant he at least wasn't a whiny, rude brat.

“You like plants, right?” Inoichi asked eagerly. “My clan's got large green-houses where we grow things for the hospital. I can show them to you if you'd like?”

Kyo peered at the older boy.

Okay, he was friendly, extroverted and definitely a social butterfly, but that didn't justify the offer. Kyo was well aware that she was a six year old girl, he a ten year old boy and there really shouldn't be any appeal for him to spend time together.

What was his angle? Was he fishing for some kind of information?

“Okay,” Kyo finally agreed, because at least it sounded interesting and was something to focus on that wasn't either training or worrying about eventual missions outside of Konoha. “I don't know when I'll have the time, though.”

“Yeah, me neither.” Inoichi grinned, carefree in a way Kyo wished she could be, too. “Just keep an
“Bye,” Kyo returned bemusedly, watching Inoichi, Shikaku and Chouza all wander off with their sensei, who'd gathered their mission scroll. And then turned back to her team, which was ready to accept their own mission now.

Kyo eyed the mission desk, took in the handful of stressed-looking shinobi manning it and mused that the Hokage must be far too busy to deal with things like this himself in the middle of a war.

She couldn't help but be curious about Sarutobi Hiruzen.

He'd been a major part not only in the Naruto story, but also in the shaping of this entire world.

Seriously, the guy had survived three wars, and Kyo was worried to hell and back about surviving just the one.

She very much ignored the potential of her having to fight in another one, if she actually did survive this one.

Kyo seriously didn't think the odds were in her favour.

“In-village mission for Team Six,” Katsurou-sensei requested blandly to the ninja sitting behind the table.

“If you're sure,” the man muttered distractedly, “I think there was one- ah, yes. Here you go,” and he tossed a scroll at Katsurou, who caught it and gave a short nod, before turning around and herding them away from the table.

“That was a bit rude, wasn't it?” Maki asked quietly, sending Kyo a vaguely uncertain look.

“No.” She shook her head. “Everyone here's either injured or over-worked, or both, and it's polite to take up as little time as possible,” she explained, keeping her voice just as quiet.

Maki had made good on his promise to try and do better, and Kyo was perfectly willing to explain things to him when she could, with Taku picking up the slack when he asked about subjects she wasn't entirely sure of herself.

It'd just happened twice so far, but they were making progress!

“So what sort of mission do we have, sensei?” Kyo asked once they'd left the building behind and were quite obviously heading in a certain direction. Where that would lead them, she wasn't at all sure, because the village was a bit too wide-spread for her to guess.

“Your first D-rank,” Katsurou said, holding the scroll up for them to see, “is running missives between Intel and the Archives.”

Kyo felt her eyebrows pull together in a small frown as she readjusted her expectations. No missions weeding and re-painting fences for her, she supposed, a bit resignedly.

Civilians were no doubt less likely to commission Genin teams for things like that in war-times, and it wasn't like Konoha had the man-power to spare, anyway, if what she'd taken away from tou-san talking to kaa-san about it had been anywhere near correct.

Officially, the war had been going on for four years, now. And Konoha was starting to feel it.

“I'm going to show you the way for the first run, but after that, I will hang back and observe,” sensei
warned, and they all nodded.

What followed was a long day where Kyo and her team ran back and forth between Intel and the Archives, which, just so happened, lay on completely opposite ends of the village. Probably for a good reason, but Kyo's legs didn't appreciate it.

The fact that they hadn't gotten to eat breakfast made it all all the more fun, and when Katsurou-sensei finally informed them they'd stop for lunch, Kyo almost hugged him.

Maki looked like he was about to collapse from hunger, while Taku had grown exceedingly more grumpy as the day progressed, snapping and snarling at anyone who dared try to talk to him.

Kyo made a mental note to make sure she always had a lot of either ration bars -she could ask kaa-san for a few- or various other energy bars on her person in the future.

Katsuou took them to a restaurant sporting the Akimichi Clan mark on the sign over the door and ordered them all plenty of food.

Then it was back to running missives.

Kyo understood that what they were doing was important, that the village couldn't function without this small contribution; the different departments couldn't function to their full extent if they weren't communicating with each other.

It just felt like a lot of missives.

“See you four first thing tomorrow morning,” Katsurou-sensei declared after they had run their last message for the day.

Even Kisaki looked beat, and she'd been getting a ride via Taku's shoulders for the last hour.

Kyo, and her fellow team-members, all wandered off without so much as a word of goodbye.

When she finally got home -for the first time in a week-, Kyo ate the meal Isshun had prepared for her, took a shower, and then collapsed into bed, dead to the world before she even hit the mattress.

-x-x-x-
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

First out of village mission! Actually, several new firsts.

“Be careful, Kyo,” tou-san said solemnly, picking her up and wrapping her into a tight hug.

Kyo hugged him back as hard as she could, burying her face in his shoulder. “You, too, tou-san.”

Kou chuckled hoarsely and pressed a kiss against her hair. “I'm not leaving until tomorrow, and I do believe you're going in the opposite direction, kitten,” he said, voice far lighter than the situation called for.

“It's just a week-long mission,” Kyo muttered against Kou's shirt, not sure if she was trying to reassure her dad or herself. “We're going to one of the villages to pick up a merchant's son and then coming back here.”

“Listen to your sensei, and do your best to stay safe,” Kou said, putting her on her feet. “Let me get dressed and I'll come see you off,” he smiled, ruffling her hair a bit sadly. It made his left eye squint almost completely shut. The bruise around it was starting to fade to green, but it was still too swollen for Kyo's taste.

“I'll go say bye to kaa-san and Genma,” she said, before scurrying off towards her parents' bedroom.

She supposed it was Genna's bedroom, too, for now. Though kaa-san had asked her if she'd mind sharing with her brother in a few months, and when Kyo had said no, plans had been made.

“Kaa-san,” Kyo whispered, causing the woman in question to stir. “I'm gonna leave now.”

“Oh, you should have woken me up,” Isshun sighed, sitting up in bed to pull her into a tight, sleep-warm hug. “Finish your mission and come back home,” she whispered.

“Okay,” Kyo said weakly, feeling a bit like she might cry.

Taking a deep breath, she stepped back from her kaa-san and leaned over Genna's crib, running quick fingers along his cheek, and then returned to the hallway.

She didn't have to wait long for Kou, who picked her up, settling her on his hip and then left, using the rooftops to get them across Konoha as quickly as possible. He didn't touch back down on the ground until he reached the main gates.

“Hey, sensei,” Kyo greeted from her father's arms, managing a small smile at Katsurou, who took in the sight of her and Kou and gifted her with a faint, barely noticeable smile back.

“Good morning, Kyo. Shiranui-san.” He gave her tou-san a nod.

“It's nice to meet you,” Kou sighed, managing a bleak smile, raising a hand to smooth over Kyo's hair, as if to ascertain himself she was still there, even if it was just for another few minutes.
“Hey, sensei!” Taku came running up to them, wearing an excited grin and Kisaki hot on his heels. “Oh, morning, Kyo,” he added when he spotted her, blinking at the stranger holding her. “Ya dad?”

“Yeah. Tou-san, this is Inuzuka Taku and his partner Kisaki,” she introduced, perfectly happy to remain in her dad's arms a bit longer.

“Maki's not here yet? Man, I though I was gonna be last,” Taku mused, crossing his arms over his chest with a slight frown.

“That's because kaa-chan didn't want me to step out the door,” Maki said as he trotted up to them. “Morning, Katsuou-sensei,” he added at the Yamanaka. “Where's Kyo?”

“Right here,” Kyo piped up, putting her head down on tou-san's shoulder.

Maki turned and blinked at her, looking suddenly troubled. “Sensei, maybe Kyo should stay in the village?” He muttered out of the corner of his mouth.

Kyo raised her head to stare at him, raising one eyebrow.

“Kyo's your teammate,” Katsuou-sensei answered simply. “We'll need her.”

“Well,” Kou sighed, setting her down on the ground in front of him. “Good luck on your first mission, kitten. If anyone gives you any trouble, you stick your most potent needles in them, okay?”

“Okay.” Kyo smiled, feeling her lips wobble just a little. Instead of bursting into tears, though, she just wrapped her arms around his neck for one last hug and then followed Katsuou-sensei when he walked over to the guard desk to show them the procedure of leaving the village on official business.

Kou slipped his hands into his pockets, watched her a moment longer and then headed back home. No doubt to enjoy what little more time he had with Isshun and Genma.

“Your dad didn't look too well,” Maki commented once they'd set out and the village was twenty minutes behind them.

“He gets less and less time to recuperate between border patrol missions,” Kyo said with an unhappy frown. “At least he hasn't gotten seriously injured in the last few years.”

Taku hummed pensively where he was running beside her. “Teki-nii almost died last year,” the boy offered, shrugging casually before he leapt from one tree to another. “An' Akashi-nii almost lost an arm and Tenshi three months ago.”

“I'm sorry,” Kyo said, and she couldn't help but sigh quietly to herself because how could this be her life now? How could this be life, period?

It was horrible.

“Pay attention, brats,” Katsuou cut in, giving them a sharp but understanding look. “Just because we're close to the village doesn't mean there can't be enemies around.”

With that encouraging reminder, Team Six continued their trek in silence.

It would take them two days to reach the village they were picking up their client at, and a little over double that time on the way back. Because of the civilian, they'd have to set a pace he could actually keep up with unless Katsuou-sensei opted on carrying him.

Something Kyo didn't think would've been very wise, considering he was by far their strongest
When they made camp that night, they easily settled into now familiar routines, taking up certain tasks without the need for words.

“Don’t think about keeping watch,” sensei said, settling down by the fire-pit Maki had dug and started a fire in. “I’ll take care of it.”

“Okay,” Kyo said with a nod.

It sort of made sense; this was their first real mission and Katsurou probably wanted them as alert as possible, even if that meant little to no sleep for himself. He’d most likely be able to rest up in the village they were meeting the merchant's son in.

Taku and Maki both got out their sleep rolls and settled down on the other side of the fire.

Kyo took one look at them, weighed her own roll in her hands and with a nod, marched over and settled herself quite firmly between them.

“Uh, what are you doing?” Maki asked, sitting back up to give her an incredulous look.

“Going to sleep,” Kyo replied as she wormed her way into her blankets.

“Yeah, but why are you over here?” He tried again, shooting Taku a look.

For all that it did him, because the Inuzuka just snorted and moved closer to Kyo, kicked his feet a few times to find a comfortable position and then went boneless.

Kisaki took the opportunity to settle mostly on top of him, draping her body along his legs with her head cushioned on his stomach. Had she grown? Kyo couldn't remember the ninken being that big when she’d first met her.

It looked both pretty nice, and also a bit painful and restrictive, Kyo thought.

It made her miss her dogs from Before something fierce.

“We’re children, Maki,” Kyo told him quietly, doing her best to snuggle into Taku's side for comfort and warmth. “We might die on this mission, so I’d rather just cuddle if that's okay with you.”

Maki was silent for a long time, and then let out an aggravated sigh. “Fine,” he relented and lied back down, awkwardly shuffling closer to her.

Before she fell asleep, Kyo could’ve sworn she heard Katsurou mutter something that sounded suspiciously like 'puppy-pile'.

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They reached the village with minimal fuss.

Kyo took in the wooden buildings, looking rather primitive and practically medieval compared to what she was used to. Konoha had definitely progressed far beyond this point.

Did these people even have electricity? Running water? She highly doubted it.

The people they encountered all watched them warily, as if they were terrified they'd start killing people with no provocation. Or, if they were slightly more rational human beings, sent Kyo and her
Katsurou took them to the biggest building in town, which looked like it might be an inn, a restaurant, or perhaps a combination of both.

Kyo felt rather self-conscious about the amount of stares her hitai-are attracted. It felt weird to have people's gazes fix themselves on her forehead rather than her eyes, or even face in general.

While Katsurou-sensei went to talk with who she assumed must be the owner -an older, greying woman with a straight back and firm lines around her mouth- Kyo, Maki, Taku and Kisaki waited near the door.

The patrons of the place had all hushed when they'd entered, and no one seemed comfortable enough with their presence to resume their conversations while they were still there.

Taku frowned, scanned the room and opened his mouth.

Kyo elbowed him lightly in the side, stopping him before he could utter a word.

In response, the Inuzuka boy sent her an annoyed look, but thankfully decided to be patient and wait for sensei.

When Katsurou finally finished talking to the rather impressive-looking woman, he strode back to them and mentioned them back outside without a word.

“He wasn't there?” Kyo asked quietly, hurrying her step until she was walking almost next to him.

Katsurou briefly glanced down at her, before he went back to scanning their surroundings, taking in the people moving about and anything else he might find interesting.

“No.”

Kyo sighed. Because of course their first real mission couldn't just be easy.

With a shiver of dread trickling down her spine, she dearly hoped this wouldn't turn out like Naruto's first C-rank.

This may just be a D-rank, but it was quite a few years until that point in time would come to pass, and war changed the rules.

When it became clear Katsurou-sensei wouldn't explain anything anytime soon, Kyo fell back to her fellow Genin, exchanged a look with both of them and simply followed their sensei as he walked towards what seemed to be the edge of town.

The moment they'd cleared the last of the buildings, sensei took to the trees with the rest of them hot at his heels.

Katsurou jumped a small distance and then stopped, coming to rest on a large tree branch that was wide and sturdy enough to hold all five of them.

“Our client never made it to the village, and there hasn't been a caravan through in weeks,” he told them evenly, crouching down to be more at their eye-level. “The woman I talked to informed me they've had something of a bandit problem in these parts for about a month or so,” Katsurou sighed, pale green eyes flicking from face to face.

“So it's most likely he's dead?” Maki offered tentatively, frowning. As if the thought of failing their
first mission didn't sit right with him, even by a technicality. “We're going back home?”

“He may be dead, kid, but we should at least try to find him,” Katsurou explained patiently. “Konoha doesn't have a reputation for half-assed shinobi.”

“It would be bad for business to not even try,” Kyo explained when Maki still looked confused. “Wouldn't inspire confidence from our clients if we gave up right away,” she muttered, a frown growing on her face.

“So we're going after the bandits,” Taku summarized succinctly, crossing his arms over his chest with a speculative look on his face. There was a spark of excitement in his eyes, but he also looked ever so slightly wary. “Do we even know they're nothin' more than bandits?”

“No, we don't,” Katsurou shook his head, an unhappy look creeping onto his features. “It's most likely they are, though. We're deep in Fire Country and the borders to the other major Villages are far from here.”

“There're no guarantees, though,” Kyo muttered, absently running a finger over her needle-cuffs.

Katsurou-sensei nodded shortly. “I need you three,” Kisaki huffed and he corrected himself with a twitch of the lips, four, to do exactly as I say. If I tell you to run for Konoha, that is exactly what you will do. Kyo,” he fixed her with his pupil-less gaze, “I trust you'll do your best to keep these three in line.”

“Yes, sensei,” Kyo replied firmly, even as her insides threatened to freeze up.

*Why was he putting HER in charge!?*

When neither Taku nor Maki contested their sensei's decision, Kyo was a little thrilled but mostly felt like she was in the twilight zone. It didn't help that they were about to hunt down bandits.

“We need to track these bandits down, scope out the situation and decide what to do based on what we find. Any questions?” Katsurou gave them each a weighty look. “Very well, then. Taku, Kisaki, I have a scent sample of our client; I want you to memorize it and try to find any hint of it as we move on from here.” And he pulled out the mission scroll, opened it enough to reveal a small, basic storage seal in one corner.

Soon enough, he held a square of fabric in one hand, looking like a very small handkerchief, which he held out to the Inuzuka and his ninken.

Kisaki pressed her snout to the piece of cloth and took a few deep breaths.

“Ohay,” she said when she stepped away from it, watching as Taku brought it to his face to do the same.

“Maki, Kyo, stay close to Taku and make sure to guard him while he focuses on trying to track our client down,” their sensei instructed next.

“What about you, sensei?” Maki asked, nervously gripping the handle of the short sword, a wakizashi, strapped to his side.

“There are more than one way to track people,” Katsurou said, lips stretching in a small, humourless smile. “If anyone isn't ready for this, I need you to tell me now.”

Kyo felt like her heart was beating so hard against the inside of her ribcage she was sure sensei
would be able to see it. Her breath was loud in her own ears, but she didn't think she'd be any more ready a year from now.

She'd been training for this since she was two, never mind what she felt about it.

“Then let's go,” Katsurou said, turning and continuing in the direction he'd started them in. Presumably heading in the general direction the townspeople thought the bandits resided in.

As they ran, Kyo checked over her equipment, meticulously going through her weapons with sure, quick fingers.

It felt natural. Normal.

She did it every day. Most often several times.

She knew exactly what was where, without looking and without much, if any, thought.

Finishing off with the cufflinks, holding a selection of her needles, Kyo knew without pause which ones were lethal, which ones were sedatives and which ones would merely make someone immensely miserable and probably wish they were dead.

When had that happened?

The impact when she pushed off from the next tree-branch jarred her back into the present.

She couldn't afford to get lost in her own head right now; she'd die.

She wanted to go back to kaa-san and Genma, she wanted to return to the Village and wait for the next time tou-san came home.

She even wanted to see Inoichi again so he could show her his stupid greenhouses.

Taking deep, slow breaths, Kyo felt herself settle, little by little.

There hadn't been much choice involved, but she'd been overall happy in this life. She'd enjoyed most of the training she'd been doing, and a lot of it had been outright fun.

She could do this.

That wasn't even in question, really. Kyo highly doubted she was the kind of person who'd rather kill themselves than hurt anyone else.

She was too selfish.

She wanted to live.

Even at her worst moments in her past life, suicide hadn't even been a conscious option. She'd been crying her eyes out, had panic attacks and felt like things were never going to get better. But the idea of ending it had never so much as popped into her head.

What she was really afraid of, she mused distantly as she did her best to scan the forest around them, making sure to be prepared to protect Taku and Kisaki while they focused on filtering through whatever scents they found, was that it would be... easy.

Kyo had never been a very emotional person, now or Before, and-
She didn't particularly miss people when they were gone, she didn't cry often or easily, she didn't worry particularly much in general.

There had been moments when she'd wondered if she was actually a normal human being. If she was somehow defective because she didn't react the same as other people. So many people seemed so overly emotional to her and she just didn't understand.

No matter how much she'd tried.

Before-her had lost both paternal grandparents, and she hadn't even cried. She had felt a bit sad of course, however briefly, but it hadn't been... what she'd been supposed to feel, had it? Hadn't been anywhere near the emotional reaction she felt she should have had.

Clenching her hands a few times before relaxing her fingers, Kyo firmly pushed her thoughts aside.

She could have a mental crisis later, but this certainly wasn't the time for it.

She'd promised kaa-san she would do her best to come back, and tou-san expected it of her.

This was her second attempt at Life, and Kyo had been determined to do the most of it. That would mean doing her damn best to survive as long as she possibly could, even if that meant painting herself in other people's blood.

Lips twisting in a wryly amused expression at her own morbid humour, Kyo swallowed and pressed on.

Katsurou-sensei looked like he'd actually found something and was leading them along his chosen path with a new sense of purpose and determination.

Taku hadn't said anything, but they had no idea where their client had been intercepted and potentially killed, so there were no guarantees the guy's scent would be present.

They'd been running for about an hour when Katsurou-sensei slowed to a stop, mentioning for them to be silent.

Kyo automatically checked that her chakra was fully concealed and crouched down in front of the man to hear what he had to say.

“What do you see?” Katsurou asked in a barely audible voice, gaze flicking to the area in front of them.

“Trees,” Maki breathed in a rather weak attempt at humour that fell entirely flat.

“Signs of people,” Taku interjected tersely, sharp eyes scanning the forest floor, which was located startlingly far beneath them.

Kyo was still sometimes startled by just how huge the trees around here were.

There were paths in the foliage beneath them, though, and they didn't look like they'd been made by the local wildlife. Dead branches and other debris that usually littered the ground was absent, and the animal presence seemed to be minimal.

All signs suggesting there were people nearby. People who had been staying here for a while.
“How close?” Katsurou-sensei asked idly, and he hadn’t let up on his vigil for a second, seemingly aware of everything around them.

“I can’t hear anything,” Taku grunted quietly. “So not too close.”

“They’re close enough they traverse this part of the forest often enough to make paths,” Kyo observed, trying to keep her voice clinically neutral. “It should be easy for Taku and Kisaki to pick up their scents and track them down that way. Unless you have other plans, sensei?”

Katsurou sent Taku and his ninzen a considering look. “You think you can do it without forgetting the client’s scent?”

“No problem,” Taku returned firmly. “Ground level or from up here?”

“If you can pick up the trail from up here it would be preferred,” sensei said, implying it wasn't the most important issue at hand.

“We’ll do our best, sensei!” Taku promised, exchanging a look with Kisaki, who nodded.

“Yes,” the ninzen agreed, tongue lolling out of her mouth in a doggy grin, before she flicked her ears and turned her full attention on their task.

Kyo followed silently when Taku and Kisaki took the lead, Maki at her left and sensei bringing up the rear.

It made her feel safe; having Katsurou behind her, even if it felt slightly irrational at the same time.

She hadn’t known him that long, and while she got the feeling he was somewhat fond of them, Katsurou-sensei had been rather distant with them so far.

Which was perfectly normal shinobi behaviour, in her experience -Ryota still tried to go with the emotionless robot routine with her sometimes- but it did leave something to be desired. Sensei was a Jounin, though, and he must have survived a lot of friends and colleagues and such, so... Trying to protect yourself from any potential future loss was only natural. Human.

“Unwashed bandits up ahead, sensei,” Taku murmured over his shoulder, making Kyo look over her shoulder at the man, too.

Katsurou nodded. “I’ll go in first, you three on my six. Understood?”

“Yes, sensei,” Kyo and the boys chorused, Kisaki nodding along, eyes and ears fixed on the group of men they could see between the trees now.

There was a camp. Of sorts.

Part of Kyo was a bit offended to claim it as such, because it was hardly more than a large fireplace surrounded by rocks in front of a small rock-face, which turned into something of a very low hill. Possibly made by a potential earth jutsu, once upon a time.

“Don’t get killed,” Katsurou-sensei said, giving them each a heavy look, and then jumped off the branch towards the bandit camp.

Kyo took a deep, trembling breath and followed him.

The first man had already died by the time she touched the ground, lying on his back a little to the right of where she landed, with his throat cut cleanly.
She hadn't expected the chaos.

This felt like a small affair; a far cry from the battles she had been envisioning her father fighting in the few times she contemplated tou-san's missions.

Katsurou-sensei had felled the first man, though, which had sent the rest of the bandits into a frenzy, grabbing all sorts of weapons -makeshift and otherwise- and scrambling to defend themselves.

Kyo didn't think they had much of a chance against Katsurou, no matter how much they struggled.

Taku rushed passed her, teeth bared and a snarling Kisaki at his side, fingers curled like claws before he began to flash through seals to what she recognized as one of his Clan techniques.

The second she'd lingered had been more than enough -would have no doubt gotten her killed if their opponents had been shinobi- so Kyo rushed after her teammates, determined not to fail to do her part.

She could feel Maki close behind her and when one of the men, eyes wide with panic and thoughtless fear, turned towards her, a rusty old sword already swinging at her head, Kyo reacted.

It was reflex at this point.

Muscle memory ingrained so deeply into her body she didn't even have to think.

One moment, the man had been trying to take her head off, the next, Kyo had a kunai in her hand and was slipping beneath the bandits' frankly abysmal guard. Burying her knife in his groin -there were large blood vessels there that would ensure he bled out in seconds- before she headed for the next one, barely waiting long enough to make sure her first target had gone down.

By the time silence returned, Kyo was breathing hard enough the air almost wheezed through her windpipe, and her hands were sticky with blood.

Feeling particularly wide-eyed, Kyo quickly looked around to make sure everyone was alright, focusing exclusively on Taku and Kisaki, Maki and Katsurou-sensei.

The ones who counted.

“Everyone alright?” Sensei asked calmly, voice even and smooth and just as normal as it'd been since the very first day.

Kyo managed a nod.

Glancing at the boys, both looked relatively calm but pale, though Taku had blood smeared across his face which made it a bit hard to tell.

Maki looked green.

“Good, because we need to try and figure out what they did with our client,” Katsurou said, and his voice was almost relaxed, slow in a way it hadn't been before their attack. “Kyo, look through the things they've got stashed over there,” he directed smoothly. “Maki, go sit down before you faint. You two, help Kyo.”

“Yes, sensei,” Kyo said and turned to the pile of what looked like haphazardly stacked merchant goods.

She latched onto the new task with something that felt like relieved desperation.
Deep breaths, slow and easy.

Ignoring the way her breath trembled ever so slightly, Kyo clenched her teeth and set to it.

It turned out to be mostly food, fabrics and a few luxury items Kyo absolutely could not see the reason for the bandits to have kept. Other than for foolish vanity and possible gloating rights?

Once they’d gone through everything, Kyo, Taku and Kisaki returned to Katsurou, who they found crouched next to a bent over, heaving Maki.

“That's okay; a perfectly normal reaction,” sensei was murmuring quietly, though he sent them a look when they approached, showing he was aware of more than just the boy in front of him.

“Nothing that particularly stands out, sensei,” Kyo reported firmly, keeping her lips from wobbling with nothing more than stubborn bull-headedness and the promise of later. “Mostly food and fabrics, a few spices and some salt.” She shrugged. “There's also a few things that look like they stole from a noble or something.”

“Couldn't find anything that smelled like our client, either,” Taku added, and he was staring fixedly at one of the corpses littering the area. As if transfixed.

It made Kyo wonder if it was one he had killed himself.

Then again, it might have been her, but she sure as hell wasn't gonna look to find out.

In combination with his still pale face, it looked like Taku might end up joining Maki in his quest to empty his stomach of all contents.

Kisaki let out a small whine and pressed herself up against her human.

Kyo returned her gaze to Katsurou-sensei, who was an island of familiar calm in a suddenly rocky and unfamiliar world.

She felt a bit light-headed. Not like she was about to faint, but rather like she was floating a foot off the ground, not quite flying but threatening to drift away at the slightest breeze.

“You can put your kunai away now, Kyo,” sensei told her kindly, rising from his crouch next to the still-gagging Maki, and approached her.

Katsurou leaned down to slowly and deliberately close his larger hand around hers, and oh, look at that.

The kunai was still clutched in a white-knuckled hold in her hand. She hadn't noticed.

With slow and careful movements, Katsurou-sensei peeled her fingers off of the handle and then slipped the sharp steel knife back into her thigh holster. Wiping as much of the drying blood off it on the grass, first.

“It's alright, Kyo. You can let it out now,” Katsurou-sensei said softly, putting a hand on her head.

Kyo took a sharp breath, tried her best to keep back the flood, but. It was a losing battle and she knew it.

Her face screwed up and a heavy, painful sob wrenched itself from her chest.

Trying to breathe somewhat evenly despite the hysterics, Kyo brought one hand to her face to rub at
her eyes and she couldn't help but relax infinitesimally at the somewhat familiar feeling.

Ah.

She'd experienced this before.

Not killing people, obviously, but shock. This was shock.

There had been an incident in the Before, in her past life. She'd been working with elders for a year, and one of them had died when she'd been with her. It had been very sudden and unexpected; massive heart-attack, she'd learned after the fact. The old woman had died instantly.

Hadn't made it any less traumatic, though. Especially considering she'd only been on the job for a month at that point.

She'd been so relieved to note her own reaction afterwards, because it had confirmed her as solidly human. Affected by the world around her just as much as anyone else.

“He was going to kill me if I didn't kill him, right?” Kyo sobbed, managing to get the words out between breaths. “Or they'd killed Taku, Maki or Kisaki, right? I did the right thing, right, sensei?”

Katsurou sighed and his hand on her head slid down to her cheek, tilting her face up so that he could look at her.

“I don't know if what we do as shinobi can be classified as the 'right thing', but it's certainly the truth that there are countless people in this world that won't hesitate to kill you and people you care about for no other reason than because of the insignia on your hitai-ate,” he said, tapping a finger gently on the stylized leaf on Kyo's forehead, nail clicking against the metal.

It wasn't useless platitudes, and while it wasn't what she wanted to hear, perhaps, it was the truth.

Kyo would take the truth over soothing lies any day.

“Okay,” she managed, breaking out in another burst of near-hysterical crying.

Katsurou sighed and, after a brief hesitation, curled his arm around her and pulled her close to his chest in a slow, awkward manner that still made Kyo want to smile, despite everything.

With no hesitation at all, Kyo threw her arms around sensei's neck and buried her face in his shoulder.

Katsurou twitched, but he accepted the hug readily enough, arm still curled firmly around her back.

After a few minutes, she managed to calm down enough that she was just sniffling rather than the gross sobbing she'd been doing prior to the hug.

“I didn't even think to use my needles,” Kyo admitted, wiping the back of a hand at her cheeks.

That first man had come at her with a sword, and Kyo wondered if some part of her reptile-brain had gone for the larger, less-fragile weapon she had access to in response.

“There's always room for improvement,” Katsurou-sensei said simply, patting her back a few times and eyeing her like he wondered if she'd burst out in new tears if he'd try to stand up. “It will be easier next time.”

Not exactly comforting words, but Kyo accepted them all the same.
“Taku, sit down a few minutes and take a breather,” sensei added, giving the Inuzuka a seemingly-casual once over before he turned back to Maki. “Feel better?”

“No,” Maki muttered, though he had collapsed down to sit on the grass, no longer throwing up and the colour of his cheeks had improved quite a bit. “That was horrible.”

“It was easy,” Kyo admitted quietly. “Like killing rabbits with tou-san,” only the thought of cooking this kill for lunch made her sick to her stomach.

“Yeah,” Taku agreed at a whisper, fingers buried so tightly in Kisaki's fur Kyo suspected it was rather painful for the ninken.

The dog didn't make a sound of protest, though.

“Actual shinobi opponents will be harder,” Katsurou warned, surveying the area with something like grim satisfaction. “But you all did well,” he praised.

Kyo sort of hated the way her insides warmed at the compliment.

She took a deep breath, wiped her puffy eyes one last time and straightened her back. She was a Genin, she'd known this was coming since the start and she could deal. Better sensei spend more time helping the two boys who were actually just as old as they looked.

“What now, sensei?” She asked, wondering where they'd go from here.

It might be the recent trauma, but she couldn't see any obvious actions from here to find their wayward, most likely deceased, client.

“Think you'd be up to searching the bodies?” Katsurou asked idly, eyeing her almost curiously.

Her cheeks felt cold, as if the blood had drained out of them quickly, but she gave a jerky, determined nod.

“What am I looking for?” She asked.

Katsurou shrugged. “Who knows? Anything that looks interesting,” he said, sitting down next to Taku. No doubt to offer whatever comfort the Inuzuka would currently accept.

Which would no doubt not be that much, judging by the look on Taku's face.

Kyo nodded, took a deep breath and then took a firm step towards the closest corpse. The following ones came easier, and if she didn't think too hard about it, it was like the man was sleeping rather than dead.

Ignore the blood, and she felt more like a thief than a murderer.

Or, she mused with a small dose of highly inappropriate humour, like she was trying to find personal contact information for an injured person she'd found. To call for an ambulance, of course.

Biting her lower lip to keep from giggling quietly to herself -what the hell was wrong with her?- Kyo went through the corpse's pockets.

Finding nothing more than a handful of coins and a few odds and ends, Kyo went over to the next one.

If she happened to studiously avoid the ones she herself had killed, then no one mentioned anything
about it, and Katsurou ended up checking those ones over for her, so it worked out for the best.

“Taku, I want you to check the whole camp over for anything with our client's scent, okay?” Katsurou finally ordered, bringing the boys back to their feet.

“Okay, sensei,” Taku replied, and he sounded listless to Kyo.

Not that it was weird or anything, considering the situation, but it still made her worried.

Kyo, Maki and Katsurou-sensei watched as Taku and Kisaki began to circle the camp, inspecting every surface imaginable, with Kisaki sticking her snout in the most random places. Even if that happened to be one of the corpses' pockets.

Kisaki gave a low chuff-noise, instantly drawing Taku's attention from where he'd been poking through what looked like a bag of personal affects.

Taku removed whatever had been in the bandit's pocket, brought it closer to his nose and nodded.

“You're right. Sensei!” He turned to the rest of them. “Kisaki found what smells like our guy's wallet.”

“Charming,” Kyo muttered but followed Katsurou-sensei readily enough when he stepped forward. “You okay?” She asked Maki quietly, falling into step next to him.

“Yes.” Maki sighed. “No.” He sent her a look. “How can you be so calm?”

Kyo gave him an incredulous glance. “You did see me crying earlier?” She asked a bit sourly. She hated crying.

“Yeah, but you're fine now,” Maki muttered uncomfortably, giving her a quick glance.

“Not really.” Kyo shrugged. “There's just not a whole lot I can do about it; I've been trained to do this since I was two.”

Maki sighed. “Sometimes, I don't know if I should be jealous of you Clan kids or not,” he muttered, and he sounded troubled.

Kyo reached out to take his hand, internally pleased by the physical contact and happy that the older boy didn't pull away.

They watched Katsurou-sensei gather up all the valuables and seal them up in a storage scroll for easier transport back to Konoha, and that was that.

They found what remained of their client a few kilometres to the north east, together with what looked like the remains of the merchant caravan he had been supposed to arrive to the village with.

“Do we bury the bodies?” Maki wondered in a slightly tremulous voice.

“It'll be hard to move them after so many days left in the sun,” Katsurou-sensei said, and he sounded like it was just another fact of life. “It'll be hard enough to collect our guy without him falling apart.”

“Sure smells like it,” Taku choked out, looking like he was a hair away from puking his guts out.

Kyo had to agree, having to force herself not to try and cover her nose, despite the fact she rationally knew that would do very little to help with the smell. She could only imagine what it was like for Taku, whose sense of smell was amplified many times her own.
"You're sure this is our guy, Taku?" Katsurou asked, crouching down next to the bloated, green-ish, near-unrecognisable form that had once been a living human being.

It was crawling with insects.

"Yep," Taku grunted, both hands now pressing down over his mouth and nose. Little that it no doubt did to help.

"Excellent; well done. Kyo, Maki, get over here."

Kyo forced herself to step closer to the closest source of stink of decomposition, managing to pull Maki with her as she went.

"This here," Katsurou began, withdrawing a small scroll from one of his vest pockets and holding it up in front of them, "is what's generally called a body scroll. Black with red lining is for enemies, black with gold is for allies, and black with green is for anything else."

Kyo nodded. It made sense.

And he proceeded to show them how to use it.

"You need to place any part of the body on the seal on the scroll, and then you activate it with a pulse of chakra, like so," and their client's body disappeared in a cloud of smoke. "It will store the body without decomposition, or further decomposition, in this case, for up to a year."

"So we're just gonna go back home now?" Maki asked, staring sadly at the carnage around them.

It looked like wild animals had eaten on a few of the corpses. Their guy had been mostly spared from that due to the place they'd found him; caught beneath one of the broken wagons, which had acted like something of a protective cage.

"We'll stop by the village and inform them of what happened here," Katsurou said, shaking his head, but it was what it was. "They can do what they wish with the information."

Which meant that these people would no doubt be left here; it was dangerous to travel in these times. And to do it for people who were already dead...

"At least it's beautiful," Kyo murmured softly, taking in the nature around them.

The signs of the... she was loath to call it battle -nothing as sophisticated as that had taken place here- had faded in the days since the bandits had attacked and killed the merchants, and the trees around them were all tall and proud. Insects buzzed contentedly in the sunlight and birds chirped peacefully.

"There are far worse places to rest," sensei agreed and straightened out of his crouch. "Let's head back."

"Yes, sensei," the three Genin replied quietly, and jumped back into the trees after Katsurou.

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Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

Coming home and everything that comes with it

Returning to Konoha felt absurd.

The village looked to be as peaceful as always from the front gates, and Kyo did her best to pay attention when Katsurou-sensei walked them through the registration process that came with finishing a mission.

The look on the old man's face when he was handed a scroll instead of his son was something Kyo knew she wouldn't forget.

Anticipation and joy falling so quickly into grief and crumbled hope it was enough to give anyone whiplash.

“I'm sorry for your loss,” she told the grey-haired man quietly.

The grieving father closed his eyes and brought the body scroll up to his forehead, pressing it to his skin. “Thank you for bringing him to me,” he managed to return, voice strangled.

Katsurou inclined his head to their Client and mentioned for them to leave.

“That's awful,” Maki commented bleakly when they walked off to collect the paper-work they'd need to fill out.

Funny how the manga she'd read what felt like more than a life-time ago hadn't mentioned much in the way of the administrative side to the ninja life.

“We fulfilled our mission the best we could under the circumstances,” Katsurou-sensei said simply. “It had been different if we'd been tasked to protect the man from the start.”

“Yeah,” Kyo agreed sadly. “Are you going to show us how to fill this out now?” She asked, waving the papers she'd been handed in their sensei's direction.

“The Academy is supposed to teach you that,” Katsurou said, raising a pointed eyebrow at her.

Kyo blinked tiredly and tilted her head. “I might have missed that lesson,” she muttered, because she couldn't remember anything of the sort. “Should be simple enough, though. I just write down everything that happened, right?”

“Yes. It will be a bit more complicated when you move up in experience and rank, because the things you'll be expected to notice and remember rises.”

Which made sense.

“Let's all fill them out together,” Kyo declared, giving Taku and Maki a look. “That way, we can ask each other if we're uncertain about anything.”
Katsurou-sensei smiled faintly, barely an upturn of the corners of his mouth, but it was there, and followed sedately when Kyo turned them in the direction of their training ground, seemingly perfectly willing to go along and help with any potential questions, despite his initial reaction.

If Kyo snagged Taku's hand, holding it all the way to their destination, no one said anything about it.

She was worried, okay? Because the Inuzuka hadn't returned to his normal self yet, even days after their first kills. He was still subdued and distant, as if he was lost in his own head whenever he didn't have to focus fully on the task in front of him.

The paperwork did turn out to be relatively easy to fill out, but Kyo figured that was because they'd been given the Genin forms.

Sensei's own report was bound to be far more extensive and complicated. At least in comparison; it had been a fairly straight-forward mission.

"Take the day off tomorrow, and we'll meet back up here at the usual time the day after," Katsurou finally said, hefting their combined paperwork in one hand. He'd generously offered to turn it all in together with his own. "Enjoy the rest; you've all earned it." He smiled.

A proper smile.

With that, he disappeared in a shunshin, leaving them to make their ways back to their various homes at their own pace.

"See you," Kyo bid the boys farewell and ran off, eager to go back home to see kaa-san.

Tou-san might have left on his mission, but at least kaa-san and Genma were there.

She was early, they'd only been gone five days, rather than the expected full week, but she didn't think anyone would mind, least of all Isshun.

"I'm home," Kyo said when she stepped into the hallway of their apartment, absently taking off her sandals as she relished the feel of home.

She could smell what was no doubt lunch cooking in the kitchen, and she could see—and hear—Genma playing on her old yellow baby blanket in the middle of the living room.

"Hey, Genma-chan." She grinned and wiggled her fingers at the baby, who made a delighted noise and waved his chubby little arms in her direction.

He wasn't quite old enough to sit up on his own for very long yet, but was quickly getting there. He liked lying on his stomach a lot, though, and he always seemed to have one plush toy or another in his mouth.

Padding barefoot towards her little brother, Kyo crouched down and reached for Genma, fully intending to pick him up for an affectionate hug.

The sight of old, rust-red splatter on her sleeves made her freeze in her tracks, though.

For the first time since the day they'd found the bandits, Kyo realised that there was blood on her clothes, and the fact that she no doubt smelled.

There was dirt on her hands and clothes, and she definitely shouldn't be touching her baby brother like this.
There was *blood* on her clothes. On her skin.

Blood from people she had *killed*.

Kyo blinked and stared intently at Genma, who made unhappy noises now, waving his arms more insistently in her direction, before he began to try and push himself into a sitting position.

Genma's arms where small and soft with baby fat, each finger tiny and fragile.

The boy managed to get his legs under him and pushed his upper body off the blanket with seemingly gargantuan effort. Then, he raised his arms at Kyo, making a demanding noise.

Kyo couldn't unfreeze her limbs enough to so much as lower her arms.

Genma opened his mouth, and had he had that one tooth before she'd left? He opened his mouth in a mostly-toothless smile, waving his hands around as he tried to reach her. Or make her react in any way.

Kyo didn't snap out of her own thoughts until strong, familiar hands reached down to pick up a crying Genma from right in front of her.

She blinked twice and took in her brother's scrunched up, red face and the angry cries she'd been entirely oblivious to a second ago.

“Kyo?” Tou-san asked, making Kyo blink again.

“Shouldn't you be out of the village?” She asked blankly.

“I was, yeah, but there was a change of plans,” Kou said, eyeing her intently as he tried to soothe Genma's unhappy tantrum. “I'm leaving in a couple of days instead.”

“What happened?”

“Yuuta's got the flu, so,” tou-san shrugged, “they decided it was better to wait to send us off a few days rather than split us up.”


Kou sighed softly and sat down in front of Kyo, cradling a sniffing Genma to his chest. “I figured as much,” he admitted, holding out one arm towards her in a silent invitation.

Kyo didn't hesitate for more than a second before she scrambled into her dad's lap, careful to mind her brother, who reached out and stubbornly fisted a handful of her short hair.

“Ow.” She smiled helplessly at the baby, who whined and wiggled in Kou's hold until he shifted the boy closer to his sister.

“I think he missed you,” Kou observed gently.

Kyo reached up to carefully disentangle her hair from surprisingly strong fingers, and then leaned against her tou-san's chest.

“Where's kaa-san?” She asked, overly aware of the fact that she was avoiding the elephant in the room.

Kou seemed perfectly willing to indulge her and give her the time she needed to build up to it,
“She's started working on getting back into shape, but she's probably going to be coming back from the training grounds soon.”

“Okay,” Kyo said, fiddling with one of her cuff-holsters. “There were bandits. They killed the man we were supposed to escort to the village. We had to hand over a body-scroll to his father instead of reuniting him with his son,” she explained quietly.

Kou hummed, but said nothing, letting her work through what she wanted to say.

“We killed all the bandits,” she blurted, frowning down at her hands. “I killed four of them.”

“Was that before or after you were introduced to your client?”

“Before. He wasn't at the meeting point, so we had to go looking.” Kyo curled in on herself slightly. “He'd been dead for about five days when we found him. At least, that's what sensei said. Taku almost threw up.”

Kou sighed and smoothed a hand over her hair, carefully pulling her hitai-ate off her head. “Did any of you get hurt?”

“No.” Kyo's frown deepened. “It was easy, tou-san.”

“I know.” Kou pulled her even tighter against his front, humming a little when Genma made a disgruntled noise. “You came back, though. You're not hurt, you're still alive and you kept your teammates safe.”

“Yeah,” Kyo agreed miserably. “It still doesn't feel right, tou-san.”

“I know.”

“I didn't even think to use my needles,” she admitted quietly. “I just grabbed a kunai like you taught me.”

“That's a good thing, Kyo,” Kou said seriously. “If it means you come back here, I'm gonna tell you to kill as many people as you have to every time you leave the village.” He paused. “It's probably not what I should say, but I care much more about you than a handful of men who made the decision to become bandits.”

“Sensei said it'll be harder with enemy shinobi,” Kyo whispered.

“Yeah,” Kou sighed heavily, “it always is when you're fighting someone more evenly matched to your own skills,” he said, hold tightening almost painfully on her.

Kyo found it strangely comforting.

“But, tou-san,” she said after a while. “It was easy. Like with the bunnies, and what if I accidentally hurt Genma?” She asked in a hushed voice, feeling shame curl hotly in her stomach.

It was a largely unfamiliar sensation.

“It would be easy,” Kou agreed heavily after a long moment of silence, broken only by Genma's occasional baby noises. “But you have to remember that we're the ones in charge of our actions.” He gently took hold of one of Kyo's hands and placed it on Genma's foot. “It may not feel like it in the heat of battle, but you just have to trust yourself not to hurt the people you truly love.”
“I didn't think this would be the hardest part,” Kyo admitted wetly, voice trembling and having to blink the building tears from her eyes. She could feel them drip down onto her leg.

“It may not feel particularly comforting to hear right now, but you get used to it, Kyo,” tou-san promised sadly.

That just made her cry harder, because she didn't want to get used to it.

It was awful and horrible and Kyo wished she didn't understand why this was happening.

This place had never felt as real as it did right now.

It had been a gradual thing, she knew, but this life felt more real than her past one now. As if the Before was just a dream she sometimes remembered, fading more with every passing week, despite whatever she might feel about it.

This was her reality now, and she wasn't ever going back.

Different family, different face, different life.

For better or worse, Kyo was a Konoha kunoichi and she would have to make the best of it.

“Come on, go take a shower and then we'll eat. Isshun's going to be so happy to have you back home again, kitten,” tou-san murmured, helping her to her feet and gently putting Genma back on the baby blanket.

Kyo spent her day off at home, playing with Genma and trying to get used to this new status quo she'd tentatively found.

She could still be kind and gentle with her brother and everyone else she cared about. Being a murderer didn't change that at least.

She felt the most comfortable when tou-san or kaa-san was within easy reach while she was at it, though.

*Just in case.*

The next day's training was a nice return to what felt like routine, going through exercises, sparring with Taku and Maki and working on her wind jutsu some more. All under their sensei's careful observation.

Katsurou-sensei even dismissed them early, for once.

...more like for the first time ever, actually.

“'I'll stay a bit longer to work on this,’” Kyo said when Maki asked if she wanted to go buy dango together. “I'd love to go tomorrow, though.” She smiled, hoping the boy would realise she wasn't saying no because she didn't like him or something.

Sure, he'd been a bit of an ass at first, but he was working on bettering himself, and that was the important part.

“Okay,” Maki returned with a relieved smile. “See you tomorrow then, Kyo.” And with that, he ran off.
Kyo paused what she was doing to contemplate how it must have felt for Maki to return home. To his civilian parents, whom wouldn't understand the first thing about what shinobi life was like, and couldn't relate at all to Maki's recent trauma.

That would also explain this sudden, unexpected change in behaviour.

Resolving to invite her teammate home the next time she saw him, hopefully before tou-san had to head back out -Yuuta had his check-up today, but tou-san hadn't known what the medic would say- she pushed the thought to a side and continued to go over the second jutsu Katsurou-sensei had provided her with.

This one was also intended to be pretty large-scale.

Unlike the first one, which she liked to just call Cutting Blast in her head, this one seemed to be slightly less agreeable to small-scale adaptation.

Hageshii Osu, translating roughly to 'violent push', was intended to throw your opponent in whatever direction you chose. Which was great for either ambushes, getting some distance between you and your enemy or throwing opponents into the path of an ally they weren't expecting.

Or, Kyo mused dryly, to counter another wind user.

After about two hours extra work, where the most she'd managed was a slightly stronger than average breeze -which wasn't exactly what she was aiming for- Kyo decided she'd had enough, giving up for the day.

If it hardly rustled the leaves of the bush she was aiming at, then it wouldn't do much more than be mildly annoying to a shinobi.

If even that.

Feeling disheartened and tired, Kyo gathered up her things and prepared to go back home.

Sweeping her gaze over the training ground one last time, she turned and started back towards the village.

“Kisaki?” She murmured confusedly when she spotted the white ninken trotting towards her on the path.

Scanning the area behind her, she couldn't see Taku anywhere close to his partner.

“Kyo!” The dog said once she'd come to a stop in front of her.

“Kisaki? What's wrong?” She asked, automatically crouching down in front of the dog and burying her fingers in her thick fur. “Where's Taku?”

“Taku is,” Kisaki began slowly, clearly struggling with her words. The ninken was learning more and more when it came to human speech, but it was pretty slow going. “Sleeping bad.”

Kyo blinked. “Taku is sleeping bad?” She repeated confusedly, peering into Kisaki's yellow eyes.

The dog huffed irritably and shook herself.

“Taku is,” she said firmly, making it easy to forget just how young she was. “Kyo help?”

Kyo frowned in thought, staring at the dog as she tried to figure out what she meant. “Help,” she
parroted quietly to herself.

Thinking back to the last couple of days, Kyo tried to figure out what could possibly be wrong with Taku for Kisaki to ask her for help rather than his Clansmen or even sensei.

The boy had been a bit pale, distracted and rather quiet, but that had been the same ever since they’d...

Kyo felt like smacking herself.

“He’s having nightmares?” She asked, peering at Kisaki, who visibly sagged with relief.

“Yes!”

“So Maki can’t talk about any of this to his parents and is probably feeling isolated, and Taku can’t sleep,” Kyo summarized bleakly, covering her face with her hands. “I’m so stupid.”

Taking a deep breath, Kyo scrambled for anything she could possibly do to actually help. Empty platitudes about things getting better with time were worthless.

“Okay!” She said, letting her hands fall from her face and straightening out of her crouch. “Let’s do our best, Kisaki.” She smiled determinedly at the ninken, who wagged her tail hopefully, looking confused but supportive.

“Yes,” she agreed.

“My place first, then Maki’s and then you can bring the both of us to the Inuzuka compound, okay?”

“Okay,” Kisaki agreed readily enough, looking very pleased with herself about Kyo actually trying something and taking her concern seriously.

Kyo smiled at the young dog, and then took off running towards home, Kisaki right behind her.

“Kaa-san?” She called once she’d slipped inside, kicking off her shoes and running into the kitchen. “I’m gonna sleep at the Inuzuka compound tonight!” She grinned at her mother, who raised an eyebrow in response.

“Hello, Kisaki-chan,” Isshun said with a smile at the ninken, before she turned back towards her daughter. “That’s a bit unexpected, isn’t it?”

“I know, but Kisaki asked,” Kyo explained. “Taku's having nightmares and can't sleep,” she confessed, smile fading quickly from her face.

Isshun sighed quietly but nodded understandingly. “Alright. Want me to pack you some snacks?”

“Thanks, kaa-san,” Kyo said, throwing her arms around her mother's waist in a tight hug. “I'll be back tomorrow after training,” she promised.

Isshun had been a bit more clingy than usual after Kyo's out-of-village mission.

The woman smiled. “I know, sweetheart. You're just growing up so quickly.” Kaa-san sighed again. “It feels like no time at all has passed since you were as little as Genma-chan,” she confessed.

Kyo smiled. She didn't agree, but time was always a relative thing.

She stepped back from kaa-san and rushed to her room, Kisaki trotting faithfully at her heels, looking
around curiously.
Perhaps looking for Genma. Who was probably napping, actually.

It took no more than two minutes to throw together an overnight bag, leaving some room for the snacks kaa-san had mentioned.

“I don't need to bring my own pillow and stuff, right?” She asked Kisaki, who gave her an amused look.

“No,” the dog said.

“Oh, that's good. All set, then!” Kyo smiled, slinging her bag over one shoulder, made sure she had all the equipment she'd need tomorrow, and then bounced back out to the kitchen.

“Here you go, Kyo,” kaa-san said, placing a few bags of crisps on the table, together with some other treats.

Oh, chocolate!

“Thank you, kaa-san,” Kyo said, stuffing the things into her bag. “We'll go now. See you tomorrow, love you!”

“Have fun!” Kaa-san called after her.

“Will do!” Kyo grinned, basically ran into her shoes and was back out the door.

It was a good thing Maki had invited them all over to his place for dinner a few days before they'd gotten their latest mission, or she wouldn't have known where he lived.

“Hello, Minami-san,” she greeted her teammate's mother politely. “Is Maki home?”

“Ah, Kyo-chan,” Maki's mother -what was her name again?- said after a surprised second. “He's in his room. Would you like to come in?”

“Yes, please.” Kyo smiled, easily stepping through the door when the woman held it open for her.

“Thank you, Minami-san, I just have to ask him something real quick.”

“Oh, just call me Sachiko-oba-san, dear.” The woman smiled indulgently. “Do you remember the way or do you want me to show you again?”

“I remember,” Kyo replied easily.

It grated to be treated like a child all of a sudden, but it wasn't like she was unaware of what she looked like.

Still six years old.

She was getting closer to seven, though!

Kyo knocked on the door to Maki's room.

“What?” Maki's voice asked, and he sounded rather down.
Kyo opened the door and stepped inside, carefully closing it after her again, keeping it open only long enough to let Kisaki pass through after her. “We're having a sleepover at Taku's place,” she said by way of greeting, making Maki fall off his desk chair in surprise.

“Kyo?” He asked from the floor, eyes boggling. “What are you doing here? I thought it was kaa-chan again,” he added in a disgruntled mutter. “Wait, sleepover?”

“Yeah.” Kyo nodded, glancing over at Kisaki, who had waited just inside the door. “Kisaki says Taku's having nightmares, so I figured we should all try to help.”

Maki slowly sat up, a slightly conflicted expression on his face. “And Taku isn't actually aware we're coming?” He asked worriedly. “He's not gonna like that.”

“He can deal.” Kyo smiled, inordinately pleased by that automatic ‘we’ out of Maki's mouth. “If anything, he'd have to get mad at Kisaki, and he'd never be able to keep that up for long,” she said cheerfully.

Kisaki gave a doggy grin in agreement.

“Okay?” Maki said slowly after a second spent blinking at Kyo. “I'll ask kaa-chan.”

Kyo wanted to say that, technically, Maki didn't have to ask. Since he was legally an adult now as a Genin.

She kept quiet, though.

Civilians, in her experience -thanks grandma- weren't particularly happy when the differences between them and shinobi were brought up in conversation unexpectedly.

Like pointing out that your ten year old son was now a legal adult and technically didn't have to listen to what you said unless he felt like it.

While she waited, Kyo sat down on Maki's bed, kicking her feet a little and frowning up at the ceiling.

Then Maki was storming back into his room, throwing things into a bag he pulled out of his closet, tossing a grin at Kyo while he was at it.

“Kaa-chan looked really relieved about me doing something normal,” he confessed when they'd left his house. “She said yes before I'd even finished asking.”

Kyo slipped her hand into Maki's and squeezed his fingers gently. A smile just wouldn't cut it.

It was a bit strange to think it -because what the hell?- but not everyone had such a secure, understanding and supporting home-life as she did. In this life.

Kisaki led them to the Inuzuka compound, and then appeared to have a short conversation with the seemingly laid-back gate guard and his ninken before they were waved inside without issue.

“This place is a bit bigger than I imagined,” Kyo muttered under her breath as she looked around. She hadn't really ever visited one of the Clan districts yet.

The closest she had gotten had been the one time tou-san had brought her along to Ryota's place. That had been on the very edge of the Uchiha compound, though, so it wasn't like she'd gotten a good over-view.
Maki made an acknowledging noise, staring around with wide, curious eyes.

There were plenty of people walking around, most of them with the Inuzuka Clan markings on their faces. The most common colour was red, but Kyo saw one with deep blue marks instead.

She wondered if the colour had any specific meaning, or if it was personal preference.

“I think Taku said this place also has a veterinary clinic,” Kyo observed as they walked after Kisaki, who definitely looked like she knew where she was going.

Which was absolutely a good thing, because neither Kyo nor Maki had a clue.

“That’s pretty cool,” Maki said. “Think he’ll show us if we ask nicely?”

“Maybe. Depends on the mood our surprise sleepover leaves him in.” Kyo snickered quietly, swinging her and Maki’s hands back and forth between them.

Kisaki ended up leading them to a nice-looking house, rather generous in size, but instead of just running off to join her human, she sat down by the front door and gave the two of them an expectant look.

“Okay, then.” Kyo nodded, stepping up and knocking decisively on the door.

A few seconds later, foot-steps approached quickly and then the door was thrown open, revealing a frantic-looking Taku.

“What?” Was his eloquent response to the sight of them. And then, “Have either of you seen Kisaki?”

“Yes, she's right here,” Kyo said, pointing at the dog in question, who wagged her tail and looked as innocent as a new-born as she peered up at her partner. “She came to get us.”

“Get you,” Taku repeated blankly, staring uncomprehendingly at them.

Kyo silently thought he'd be a bit quicker on the uptake if he weren't so tired and distracted.

“For the sleepover Kisaki's planned,” Kyo informed him promptly. “So? Will you let us in?”

Taku stared for another second, before he gave Kisaki a rather wry look and then stepped to the side.

“Alright, come in, then,” the boy finally said.

Kisaki was the first through the door, walking in like she owned the place, which... wasn't all that far from the truth, actually.

Kyo and Maki right behind her, pausing only to take off their sandals before Taku led them into the kitchen, where they all settled awkwardly around the kitchen table.

“I still don't get why you're here,” Taku said when he could no longer stand the silence, arms crossing defensively in front of his chest.

“Kisaki told me you can't sleep,” Kyo told him honestly, deciding to be frank. “So I wanted to help.”

Taku bristled. “That's none of ya business!” He shot Kisaki an angry frown, before he turned back to glower at Kyo.
“I'm having nightmares, too,” Maki admitted in a rather rushed manner before Taku could say another word, and he looked embarrassed by the confession. “About- About k-killing those bandits.”

Kyo reached over to take his hand again.

Taku said nothing, but stared off to a side, as if he didn't want to look at them.

“None of this is easy,” Kyo sighed, but before she could continue, Taku scoffed and hunkered down further in his seat.

She frowned confusedly at him, but it was Maki who elaborated.

“You don't seem very affected, though,” he said hesitantly, looking slightly shamefaced. “And you're younger than us, Kyo. It's a bit-” he trailed off.

“It shouldn't be a big deal,” Taku ground out irritably, visibly wrestling with his temper. “I've been training for this my whole life.”

“You think,” Kyo began slowly, trying to wrap her mind around the idea, “that I'm not affected?” She asked.

“Well, it doesn't seem like it,” Maki muttered, frowning down at the table. “You're behaving just like always.”

“In front of you, maybe.” Kyo laughed humourlessly. She fell silent quickly, however, lost in thought. “I couldn't make myself touch Genma when I came back home, you know.”

When she blinked back to the present, both boys were staring at her.

“All I could think about was how easy it had been to kill those men, and what if I accidentally-” she swallowed, “did the same to my brother?”

“What did you do?” Maki asked quietly.

“Tou-san talked me through it,” she said, clasping her hands together. “I cried some more, and I'm still not very comfortable touching him when my parents aren't there, but.” She shrugged. “I'm getting better.”

“But you're not having nightmares,” Taku grunted, still sounding sour, but at least willing to talk now.

“I've never been prone to nightmares.” Kyo shrugged. She'd hardly ever had them in her past life, either. “And this wasn't-” she cut herself off, wondering if she really wanted to tell them.

“What?” Maki asked, looking curious now, leaning forward slightly in his seat.

“I've had a few experiences before that were a bit traumatic,” she admitted uncomfortably, squirming where she sat when even Taku looked interested. “I deal with trauma through tears.”

“But what happened?” Taku asked with a speculative frown. “What could be considered traumatic inside the village?”

“Well. Tou-san almost died just before I turned three.” She shrugged. “Kaa-san rushed to the hospital and that's how I was introduced to tou-san's team.”

“I don't think I remember anything from when I was three,” Maki muttered under his breath, making
Kyo smile wanly at him.

Her smile faded quickly when she considered the next part. “And kaa-san,” she cleared her throat, “kaa-san almost lost Genma and her own life when she was pregnant. She started bleeding pretty badly in the middle of the night.”

“So I've practised a bit.”

“Your tou-san?” Taku asked.

Kyo shook her head. “Mission. I- I ran to the hospital,” and this was really hard to talk about. She hadn't told anyone about this after she'd cried all over Kouki-sensei at the Academy the day after.

“Wait. Was that that day you disappeared after lunch?”

Kyo stared at him. She hadn't known anyone had noticed that, other than Inoichi and possibly Shikaku. Not that the latter one had shown any outward interest in much of anything during their shared time at the Academy.

“Why the hell would you go ta school after something like that?” Taku demanded gruffly, sounding angry but looking deeply unsettled.

Kyo shrugged, curling in on herself.

“I didn't realise I probably shouldn't go until I was already in the classroom. Kouki-sensei took me back.”

Taku slumped over the table with a deep sigh, head cushioned on his folded arms. “Why didn't they ever tell us how fucked up this all is?” He wondered bitterly.

Kyo smiled humourlessly. “They did, several times. Most kids in class interpreted it the way they wanted.”

Much to the various sensei's perpetual exasperation.

Not that she could entirely blame any party; shinobi life did sound awfully exciting from an ignorants' point of view. Even Kyo, who had known intellectually at least hints about the truth, had been caught somewhat flat-footed by reality.

“Hey, Taku,” Kyo spoke up into the growing silence. The boy shifted his gaze to look at her, looking rather listless. “Is your family home?” She asked.

“Kaa-san's working in the clinic until tomorrow, and Teki-nii should be around somewhere.” He shrugged, not really shifting his slumped position.

“Then let's make dinner, and then get to the sleepover part! I brought snacks.” She grinned, jumping out of her seat and walking over to the fridge to see what they had to work with.

“A couple of hours later, they were all ready for bed and stretched out on the floor in Taku's room.

Kisaki was quite happy to claim the bed all to herself, which also gave her a nice vantage point over
the three of them and the door.

“It makes me nauseas whenever I think about it,” Maki admitted quietly. “As if I'm gonna throw up again.”

They were all lying on their backs, close together and staring up at the darkening ceiling.

It was pretty early, but they'd decided to get ready for bed and talk if the mood struck them. Kyo fit quite comfortably between the two bigger children, and her small size meant they had plenty of space to go around.

“I knew it was gonna happen, you know?” Taku added his own pieces. “It just sounded more...” He made a frustrated sound in the back of his throat. “Different. It sounded different.”

“It was easy,” Kyo whispered. “I thought it'd be harder.” And she couldn't let it go; murder shouldn't be easy. “Like hunting rabbits with tou-san.”

Taku grunted and shuffled closer. “You realise we're that fragile, too, right?”

He raised a hand to stare at his nails. Nails that could sharpen into claws with just a few hand signs.

“Kaa-chan asked me why I was acting so strange, and I couldn't even tell her why,” Maki breathed miserably. “I don't want them to look at me differently.”

“That's perfectly understandable,” Kyo replied sincerely. “Taku and I are lucky that our parents understand.” Which reminded her. “You could come over and talk to my tou-san if you want? He's civilian-born, too.”

“Really?” Maki lifted his head off the pillow Taku had provided him with to stare at her.

“Yeah,” Kyo nodded, “I'm not sure if he'll still be here, but you can come with me tomorrow after training to see if his team got cleared for duty or not.” At the curious looks that got her, she elaborated with a shrug. “Yuuta came down with a fever.”

“Right,” Maki huffed and let his head fall back down on his pillow with a muted thump. “We have to worry about stuff like that, too.”

“Great.” Taku sighed. “I'm really glad we got the baby on our team.” He snickered.

Kyo snorted. “I'm flattered, Taku.” She smiled. “I'm glad to be on this team, too. You're not as bad as I feared.”

“Hey,” Maki protested half-heartedly. “We're awesome.”

“We're something.” Kyo snickered. “Do you think we could con sensei into hosting the next sleepover?”

“No way,” Taku immediately disagreed. “Ain't gonna happen.”

“Unless you poisoned him and blackmailed him with the antidote?” Maki offered with a laugh.

Kyo couldn't help but join in. “Only problem is that I don't have any antidotes,” she managed once the worst of her laughter had died down.

The boys' stilled.
“Wait, what?” Taku asked, sitting up.

Kyo blinked at him. “I don’t have any antidotes? I thought you knew?”

When both boys paled, Kyo couldn’t help but snicker and bury her face in her pillow.

“That’s not funny, Kyo!” Maki exclaimed, grabbing his pillow to hit her with it.

-x-x-x-
“What is it this time, sensei?” Taku asked, mostly back to his normal self.

Admittedly, it'd been quite a few weeks since their sleepover, having run three missions in between. Two in-village and another short escort, this time bringing a man to his home village rather than a pick up.

It'd been pretty interesting when Taku's mother had come to wake them all up in the morning and Kyo had found herself in the middle of a big puppy-pile. Even Kisaki had joined sometime during the night.

“Courier run to a border station and back,” Katsurou-sensei said, and Kyo didn't think he looked very happy about it. “A more experienced Genin team was supposed to get it, but their sensei got pulled for another mission rather abruptly.”

“Why are you explaining this so thoroughly?” Kyo asked, peering up at Katsurou.

“Because I need all three of you to realise how serious this is,” the man said firmly, steering them to their claimed training ground. “We have a few days until we need to leave, and I plan to use them wisely.”

“More training,” Maki sighed.

“You'll be glad for it when we're out there,” sensei said sharply, giving them all an intent frown. “The closer to the border we get, the bigger the chance of enemy action. You all need to step up your games, which is why we're running extensive team exercises and doing stealth and evasion manoeuvres until you drop.”

It was a sign how serious they took it that none of them groaned.

It was a close thing, though.

Three hours later, they were all lying stretched out panting on the ground, grateful for the break Katsurou had so generously granted them.

“I still can't believe you've been teachin' my ninen stealth shit, Kyo,” Taku huffed, bordering on indignant.

Kisaki huffed right back, managing a snort, too, despite the fact she was just as wiped out as the rest of them.

“I had to do something with my time when you two were busy fighting like idiots,” Kyo returned, without an ounce of regret. “Also, girl-power,” she declared, raising one fist half-heartedly in the air above her.
“Yes,” Kisaki agreed amusedly, kicking her paws until she’d gotten close enough to lick Kyo’s cheek.

“Betrayal,” Taku muttered, trying to suppress the grin that was threatening to break out on his face.

“You two should try and pay attention to the girls,” Katsurou-sensei interjected, watching them all with far too much amusement. “Kyo’s the only one doing decently at the stealth exercises.”


Taku slapped a hand over his mouth, eyes wide and looking slightly panicked. “You can’t do that!” He hissed at his teammate, sending Kyo a quick, deeply apologetic look. “He doesn't know what he's on about; ignore him, Kyo!”

“It's okay, Taku,” Kyo smiled a little bemusedly, “I'm not offended.”

“I don't get it,” Maki admitted, pushing Taku's hand off his face and sitting up.

“Obviously,” Taku all but growled at him, and even Katsurou-sensei sighed heavily.

“Is this another unwritten rule?” Maki asked, tiredly. As if he was wondering if he'd ever learn all of them.

“Yes. Don't ask about Clan techniques!” Taku enunciated clearly, leaning forward to point his finger in Maki’s face. “It'll get you killed! And us by association!”

“It can't be that bad,” Maki objected weakly.

“It's not something that's encouraged, but if someone did kill you over a secret Clan jutsu, no one would really be all that surprised.” Katsurou shrugged. “Not to mention it's pretty stupid to try something you're not sure how it works.”

“Some jutsu only work for certain families, dude,” Taku explained when Maki looked largely clueless. “I heard kaa-san say once that the last person who tried to perform a Yamanaka Mind-Walk who wasn't blood lost his mind.”

“But,” Maki blinked at Katsurou, who nodded, “I thought that was just kekkei genkai and stuff?”

“Some Clans have special abilities that aren't quite blood-line limits,” sensei explained. “Like Kyo, here.”

Kyo blinked at being mentioned as an example. “What about me?”

“The Clan her mother comes from have always worked with poisons. She's already immune to a frankly staggering variety of poisons. She's worked on it for years, but if anyone not of her heritage would've tried the same, chances are they would have died painfully long ago.” Katsurou eyed them all in turn. “That doesn't mean it's classified as a kekkei genkai, though.”

Kyo peered at Katsurou. Had kaa-san told him that?

She'd known, of course, because Isshun had told her shortly before she became a Genin, during one of their lessons. She'd gone more into their history while she'd been unable to handle any poisons herself, in addition to the theory lectures.

“The Yamanaka, Nara and Akimichi abilities aren't considered kekkei genkai, either, but that doesn't
mean just anyone can use them,” Kyo added, feeling rather singled out. “So be careful, okay?”

“Okay,” Maki replied faintly. “So does that mean your stealth techniques are secret?”

“Not really, I just don't know how well they'd suit you.” Kyo shrugged. “Kaa-san said they're adapted to fit our kind of chakra.”

And she wasn't entirely sure what the woman had meant by that. Because Kyo and kaa-san's chakra weren't all that similar.

Sure, Kyo's secondary element was water; which matched kaa-san's primary, but...

“But Kisaki’s chakra was okay?” Taku asked, sending her an annoyed frown.

“She's well-suited for stealth.” Kyo smiled sweetly at Taku, knowing he was more inclined for large-scale, up close and person attacks, rather than small and sneaky. “I can still give the two of you pointers if you're willing to listen,” she promised.

“You still need to work on your stamina, Kyo,” Katsurou-sensei reminded.


Katsurou ruffled her hair and got to his feet. “Break's over. Come on, brats; back to work.”

“If you keep this up we're gonna die before we even leave, sensei,” Maki groaned as he pushed himself to his feet, having rested just long enough for his muscles to have begun to stiffen up.

“You two really need to start stretching properly,” Kyo muttered as she, too, rose.

“Dodging practice,” Katsurou declared. And that was the only warning they got before he threw his first volley of shuriken at them.

“Which border, sensei?” Kyo asked while they waited on their turn to sign out of the village early the day they had to leave. It wasn't even dawn yet, the last stars still dotting the sky far above them.

“Kawa,” Katsurou said evenly.

Kyo felt her mouth go dry.

Most of the second war was supposed to be fought in Ame, but that didn't mean it was the only battle-field.

And no matter their relationship in the manga in some far-off, obscure future that might never even happen any more, Suna and Konoha were currently very much bitter enemies.

And their team was going to run straight to the Fire Country border closest to the desert nation.

Great.

Once procedure had been taken care off, Katsurou led them into the trees surrounding Konoha in a mostly west-ward direction.

They ran for about ten minutes before he slowed down and then stopped.
“Sensei?” Maki asked quietly, voice barely more than a whisper.

“These scrolls are our package,” Katsurou-sensei began, pulling three scrolls from his vest. “Our job is to deliver them to the border station or die trying,” he told them grimly. “Do any of you three feel up to the task of carrying them?”

“What?” Taku blurted, eyes widening. “Why the hell won't you take them, sensei?” He hissed, sounding a bit like an offended cat.

“Because I'm the most obvious target any enemies out for the scrolls will aim for,” Katsurou explained evenly, not so much as blinking.

By that logic, the least obvious target would be... “Oh, no.” Kyo paled, shaking her head in denial. “No. Sensei, you can't be serious—"

“I am,” Katsurou said firmly, holding the scrolls out to Kyo. “No one would expect it, and despite your less than ideal stamina, you're the best at stealth out of your team.”

“Because kaa-san's been teaching me how to be an assassin since I was old enough to walk!” Kyo hissed at him, feeling increasingly cornered. “I don't- I can do support, sensei! I know poisons, but I have no idea how I'll hold up in a real fight!” Against shinobi. Not just the glorified slaughter they'd committed on those bandits.

“You know your stealth, you can orient yourself; you won't lose your way. If we're confronted by enemy shinobi and it looks like we'll lose,” Katsurou-sensei told her unflinchingly, “I expect you to slip away and do your best to fulfil the mission objective.”

“If they can kill you, then what sort of chance would I have, sensei!?” Kyo couldn't help but demand quietly, eyes wide as she stared imploringly up at Katsurou, who met her gaze with solemn eyes.

“A small one,” he said honestly, pressing the first of the scrolls into her hand. “Put them in your pack; we need to get going.”

Movements stiff and feeling entirely off kilter, Kyo jerked her hand out of Katsurou-sensei's and stuffed the scroll into her poison pack.

“I don't even know if all of them will fit,” she muttered under her breath as she rearranged her containers and extra needles to make room for the two remaining scrolls.

“Let's go,” Katsurou said once the last scroll had disappeared into Kyo's pack, turning back in the direction they were heading.

Kyo ran after sensei, Taku and Maki on either side of her, but she wasn't paying as much attention as she ought to.

Her heart felt like an erratically fluttering bird in her chest, and anxiety was threatening to make her stomach turn. If an enemy saw them now, she didn't doubt that they'd be able to guess what she was carrying from just the look on her face and the stress she was all but radiating.

So Katsurou figured Kyo would be the least likely person on their team pegged by enemies to carry their scrolls.

Sure.

All nice and dandy.
Didn't change the fact that Kyo felt like she had three lead weights in her pack, pulling on her and threatening to make her hands tremble.

Hours passed as they ran, and nothing happened.

Four hours in, Katsurou-sensei glanced over his shoulder.

“Kyo,” he said, making her snap to attention. “Come on, I'll carry you for a while.”

There'd be no breaks on this run.

“Okay, sensei,” she said, and the next branch she landed on, Kyo gathered her legs beneath her and leapt onto Katsurou's back.

It mostly worked because he'd slowed momentarily, waiting for her to make her jump, like they'd practised.

No longer moving by her own power, Kyo noticed just how tired she was.

Pulling an energy bar from a pocket, she peeled the wrapping off and stuffed it back in another pocket and then quickly ate the thing. She washed it down with a mouthful of water.

After she'd offered her water canteen to sensei, she finally relaxed against the man's shoulders.

“But what if I fail, sensei?” She asked quietly.

Kyo didn't feel like his strange and daunting trust in her had any basis in reality.

“That's always a risk. Even for me,” Katsurou returned after a small pause. “We can only do our best; even the Hokage acknowledges that.”

“I don't like it,” she admitted softly, well aware that the only reason sensei heard her at all was because she was speaking right next to the man's ear. “It feels like it's too much.”

Katsurou sighed. “It's only for the absolute worst case scenario,” he reminded her. “We're all going to do our best to stay alive and finish the mission together, and I'm not telling you to abandon the rest of us at the first hint of danger.”

“Okay,” and strangely enough, that did manage to make her feel a bit better.

The chance might be there whenever they left the village, but that didn't mean it would happen, not necessarily this time, and maybe not even the next one.

But then again, it might...

With a quiet sigh, Kyo rested her chin on Katsurou-sensei's shoulder and focused on the forest around them. She wasn't running, but that didn't mean she could just zone out and leave everything to the rest of her team.

- 

They didn't draw near to their goal until dusk that night, and Katsurou had ended up carrying each of them in turn to give all three Genin a chance to rest.

He'd carried Kyo three times, all in all, while Maki and Taku had only gotten one hour's rest each, but neither of the boys had complained about it.
They hadn't really talked during the run, all of them too tense and apprehensive for casual conversation. But there was still a marked difference to the air between them when they were about an hour away from the border.

“Everyone try and clamp down on your chakra,” Katsurou instructed quietly, proceeding with more care than he had so far.

Kyo knew that if anyone planned to ambush them, this would be the easiest stretch to do so.

Dampening her chakra was something of a second nature by now, but Kyo concentrated and smothered her own signature as much as she could, all but erasing her own presence.

Sensei gave her a pleased nod and then glanced expectantly at the boys.

Maki was doing fairly well with the stealth exercises their teacher had introduced him to; all he needed was practice.

Taku was having a bit more trouble, but he tried his best.

The forest was starting to look different, Kyo mused as she scanned their surroundings, following Katsurou forward.

The waning light didn't exactly help, making her even more unsettled and on edge.

From Academy lessons on the Elemental Nations, she'd learned that Kawa no Kuni, the Land of Rivers, was less deep forests and a bit more... hilly. With plenty of rock and rivers to cut through the landscape until it became more sparse and dry the closer to Suna you got.

They had their own shinobi village, too, but it was small and considered largely inconsequential by Konoha and the other major villages.

“Almost there,” Katsurou-sensei told them in a barely audible voice.

Ten minutes later, Taku and Kisaki both cocked their heads, almost simultaneously.

“I can hear sounds of fighting, sensei,” the boy informed them tersely, though he looked more determined than scared.

Kyo wished she could say the same about herself.

Katsurou shot him a sharp look, but nodded. “Where?”

“A bit south-west of our current direction,” Taku answered after a brief pause, pointing.

“Change of plan, kids,” sensei said, adjusting their course accordingly. “You four stay out of the fight and stick to each other, understood?”

“Yes, sensei,” all of them chorused quietly.

It felt like time sped up, because they reached the battle-field far too quickly for Kyo's tastes.

The first thing that registered other than the outright terror coursing through her veins was; chaos.

This place was complete and utter chaos!

There seemed to be shinobi everywhere, men wearing the Konoha hitai-ate and the standard
uniform, but also shinobi dressed quite differently.

_Suna_, Kyo noticed faintly, and then she had to get her head back on straight, because Katsurou-sensei jumped right into the thick of it without hesitation or pause.

Kyo grabbed the boys and pulled them closer to her, tugged them deeper into the shadows.

Everyone was moving faster than what should be physically possible, flitting around the forested area, clashes between opponents making the noise close to deafening.

There were shouts and screams, that sharp clang of metal on metal and the loud roar of jutsu being executed, fire, wind and earth.

As she watched, Kyo saw a Konoha Chuunin struggle against the beefy Suna shinobi he was fighting. He didn't look like he could be more than fifteen, and before she realised what exactly it was she was doing, Kyo had sent off one of her needles.

She watched wide-eyed as her harmless-looking projectile buried itself in one of the Suna shinobi's calf muscles.

He might not know it, but she'd just killed him. That was one of her lethal needles.

“Remember what sensei said,” Taku hissed at her, barely loud enough to be heard over the sounds of battle all around them.

“I'm staying out of it,” Kyo returned dazedly. “But some of them look like they'll die,” and she threw another needle.

Taku eyed her a moment and then with a shrug, withdrew a handful of kunai from his holster and tried to hit the enemy shinobi closest to them.

With varying levels of success.

Kyo didn't hit with all of her needles either, but a needle was harder to notice than a kunai, and most shinobi wouldn't be used to register things that were smaller than a senbon and didn't carry any chakra.

The first man she'd hit staggered and his Konoha opponent took the opportunity to slice his throat with the short sword he held in one hand, and then immediately rushed to help one of his comrades.

“Can any of you see sensei?” Maki asked from beside them, having taken up the job of look-out without prompting in an attempt to make sure no one attacked them while Kyo and Taku were doing their best to support the fighting Konoha shinobi.

“No,” Kyo answered distractedly, scowling as she threw another needle at a guy who flitted around enough he was really hard to hit. “But he looked like he was heading into the thickest of it,” she added when her latest needle finally grazed the guy's arm.

A scratch was enough.

“He's kicking ass in the middle,” Taku agreed as he threw a shuriken at what must be an enemy Chuunin.

The Jounin all moved too fast and were too experienced for them to have much chance of hitting.

“Look out!” Maki shouted, grabbing both of them and pulling them backwards off the branch they'd
been perched on a second before it was cut to bits by a violent wind jutsu sent their way by a Suna
Jounin rushing passed them.

Katsu‌rou-se‌ns‌e‌i w‌a‌s h‌o‌t‌ o‌n t‌h‌e g‌u‌y'‌s h‌e‌e‌l‌s, tho‌u‌g‌h.

“Thanks,” Kyo panted and threw another two needles, barely taking the time to right herself on the
tree trunk she was now sticking to with chakra.

Maki was too distracted by watching the chaos to answer her.

She had no idea how much time had passed since they'd gotten there, but it could be anything
between ten minutes and two hours -she honestly couldn't tell- when the Suna shinobi finally started
to back off, successfully pushed back towards Kawa by the Konoha side.

The Suna shinobi grabbed injured and their dead and turned tail, leaving panting Konoha shinobi,
injured, dead or just exhausted in their wake.

“Wait,” Kyo said softly when Taku made a move as if to jump down from their perch and go look
for Katsu‌rou. “Not yet.”

Everyone was a bit too high-strung right now, and Kyo didn't want anyone thinking they were Suna
shinobi waiting for one last sneak attack.

Friendly fire was just as dangerous as enemy fire. More so sometimes, because you weren't
expecting it from people who were supposed to be on your side.

After another few minutes, Katsu‌rou gave a low whistle and Kyo released her hold on both Taku
and Maki's arms.

The boys and Kisa‌ki jumped down to join their sensei and the shinobi who hadn't pursued the Suna
nin to make sure they were really going back over the border and weren't trying to just circle around
to attack them from behind.

“Kyo, you too!” Katsu‌rou-se‌ns‌e‌i called when she took too long.

“Sorry, sensei,” she apologized, still feeling rather wide-eyed and shaky now that the worst of it was
over, jumping down to join them on the ground.

“So this is your team, Katsu‌rou?” One man, who looked to be around their sensei's age, asked,
giving them all a quick, assessing once-over. “That one's a bit too small, isn't he?” He added,
nodding at Kyo with a slight frown.

Kyo blinked at him and glanced at Katsu‌rou, whose lips twitched minutely. “Don't mind him, Kyo.
He's been out here so long his manners have slipped.”

“Who the hell threw the bloody needles?” Someone asked, reaching down to pick one up from
where it'd gotten stuck in a dead branch.

“I wouldn't touch that if I were you,” Taku drawled, braiding his fingers together behind his head,
watching the guy with idle curiosity. “Specially not if ya've got any open wounds or scratches,” he
added with some interest.

“Kyo, go collect the needles you can find,” Katsu‌rou-se‌ns‌e‌i sighed exasperatedly. “We don't want
anyone accidentally nicking themselves, since I have this feeling you were using the actually lethal
ones,” he muttered fondly.
Kyo couldn't quite defend the grin stretching her lips, but it just sounded hilarious. “Okay!” She chirped and began to track down the needles she'd missed with.

At least she'd tried to take note of where they landed, which she was grateful for now.

She didn't become aware of the handful of subtle stares on her person until she returned to Katsurou-sensei with a pretty hefty fistful of needles.

Oops... she hadn't quite realised she'd thrown so many.

By the raised eyebrow Katsurou gave her, he was aware of it too.

“Maki, can you hold them for me while I sort them?” She asked the boy, who froze, eyes widening and looking quite cornered all of a sudden. “Come on, if you stand still none of them will do anything. It's just for a minute!” Kyo cajoled. She didn't want to sit down out here in the open.

“Fine,” Maki grudgingly gave in. “But if I die, you get to tell my parents.”

Kyo smiled and placed her needles in the boy's raised palms.

The way he froze and looked more like a statue than a living human was far more amusing than it had any right to be, Kyo mused absently as she picked up the first needle and brought it to her mouth to lick it.

Ah, oldroot.

Kyo put it where it belonged and moved on to the next one.

Soon enough, she was done and Maki took a deep, relieved breath.

“Thank you, Maki,” she said, grabbing his hand in hers and swinging it a bit back and forth between them.

Maki snorted, looking embarrassed, but indulged her. He secretly love it, Kyo just knew it.

“Right,” the stranger said, sounding mildly perplexed, before he turned questioning eyes on Katsurou.

“Akaro, meet Shiranui Kyo; my poison specialist,” Katsurou sensei introduced with plenty of dry amusement. “Her teammates are Inuzuka Taku and Minami Maki,” he added, because fair's fair.

Kyo waved at the man, who raised an eyebrow ever so slightly, and then snorted.

“Alright, let's get back to base,” Akaro declared, shaking his head, most of the humour bleeding out of his eyes. “Bring the dead.”

Kyo glanced around and realised that the injured had already been whisked away while she'd been distracted.

...she needed to pay more attention to what was going on around her.

“Come on,” sensei said, mentioning for them to follow him when he jumped back up into the trees.

The border station was very well hidden, and Kyo had no trouble at all admitting that she would
have continued right passed it if no one had been there to show her the way.

It was an underground bunker.

Katsurou and his team were led inside by Akaro, who seemed to know exactly where everything was, despite the pitch black room just inside the door. The only source of light came from the door, and that closed pretty quickly behind them.

Kyo automatically reached out to fist a hand in Katsurou's shirt, latching onto Taku with her other one.

It was a simple but effective enough first defence, she supposed, blinking blindly at the dark.

After the door closed, there wasn't any difference between having her eyes open and closed, which was a bit freaky just on its own.

The were led through what felt like a corridor, through a few twists and turns, and then a door opened in front of them.

Kyo clenched her eyes shut at the sudden bright light. She still hadn't gotten the worst of it, because she was right behind sensei, whose body worked like a shield.

“Crude, but effective,” Katsurou mused lightly.

Akaro shrugged. “S not even close to all we've got, but it's something.” And he took them through what looked like it could have been any number of different buildings back in Konoha with one distinct difference.

There weren't any windows.

“Ya got any antidotes, kid?” Akaro asked after a moment. “The iryou-nin would be glad to take a look at them; Kami knows the Suna scum are fond of their concoctions.”

“Sorry,” Kyo said after a brief pause. “I don't.” It was the first time she'd felt really guilty about it. “I could give them a few samples of my poisons, though?” She offered hesitantly.

That would help, wouldn't it? If the medic got a chance to study her poisons they might be more prepared?

Akaro shrugged, though there was a speculative glint in his brown eyes. “Better than nothing, I suppose.”

And he opened the door to an office and marched up to the desk, taking the chair behind it and turning to face Katsurou-sensei.

“The latest missives?” He asked briskly.

Katsurou waved Kyo closer, and she quickly handed back the three scrolls, glad to finally be rid of them.

Akaro raised an eyebrow, eyed their team and accepted the scrolls with amused approval.

“You always were a crafty bastard,” he said fondly as he placed the important delivery on his desk. “I have a few things to send back with you, but I suppose you'd like to rest up here for the night.”

“It would be preferable.” Katsurou rolled his shoulders with a shallow nod.
Akaro inclined his head. “There's room in the barracks; I'll have someone take you to an unoccupied room once we're done.”

“Brats, wait outside the door,” Katsurou instructed promptly. “Kyo, keep an eye on them and make sure no one dies while I'm busy.”

“Yes, sensei!” Kyo promised with an amused smile and pulled the offended boys with her when she headed back for the door.

“He always does that,” Maki grumbled sullenly as soon as the door had closed between them and their sensei.

“We're not stupid,” Taku added hotly, crossing his arms and scowling at the opposite wall.

“You're just a bit impatient,” Kyo agreed. “And I think he mostly does it to mess with people,” she added thoughtfully. And because he no doubt thought it was great fun.

“People,” Taku repeated flatly. “You mean me an' Maki.”

“Not just you.” Kyo snickered. “Haven't you ever noticed the look on people's faces when he does that? It messes with their perception of us and makes them question themselves, whether they're aware of it or not.”

“Ah, you're a pretty smart cookie, aren't you?” An unfamiliar voice asked, dripping with good humour and suppressed laughter.

Kyo jumped and turned to face the... teenager that was suddenly standing in front of them. He looked a bit familiar, and she had just pieced it together when he leaned forward to peer curiously at her.

“I came by to say thanks, because that guy from earlier was really giving me trouble, and I might'a died or something equally unpleasant if you hadn't done your neat little needle trick, chibi.” He grinned.

Kyo could feel Taku bristling protectively beside her. “Hey, back off, creep!” He growled before she could do anything to calm him.

“It's fine, Taku,” she hurriedly placated her sometimes rather prickly teammate. “And you're welcome, I suppose,” she added to the stranger.

He had pale red hair and tan skin, blue eyes that were a shade more towards grey than her own.

“Say, how old are ya? Look a bit young to be a Genin yet,” the teenager mused, looking completely unperturbed by Taku's glare and Maki's growing uncertainty.

“Six,” Kyo answered honestly, peering with growing curiosity at the guy. He was a bit rude, perhaps, but he wasn't making her uncomfortable.

“Oh, you're just tiny,” the guy laughed, reaching towards her with his hands as if he was going to lift her up, but the door opened behind them, making him freeze.

“Aita, good. You can show Team Six to one of the unoccupied rooms,” Akaro's voice said, and the man was eyeing the teenager with a slight frown when Kyo glanced over her shoulder. “Don't bother the Genin,” he added with a long-suffering sigh.
“Too late for that,” Taku scoffed irritably and crossed his arms over his chest.

“Come by my office before you head out in the morning,” Akaro added to Katsuou-sensei, who nodded and ambled out into the hallways to join the rest of them.

‘Aita’ laughed awkwardly and scratched at his cheek. “Sorry, sorry,” he apologized. “It's just, I've been the youngest guy around here for a while now, so it was just nice to see someone else who's not a stick in the mud, ya know?”

“How old are you?” Kyo asked curiously, trying to gauge the guy's age. She'd thought he was fifteen, sixteen maybe, but she could be wrong. She'd always been terrible at guessing people's ages.

“Almost fourteen!” Aita said, perking up. “I'm here with my uncle, but he's no fun. I'm Uzumaki Aita,” he belatedly introduced himself, a wide grin on his features.

“The barracks,” Katsurou reminded him, and he sounded resigned to the fact that this would no doubt take a while.

“Shiranui Kyo,” Kyo returned mostly without conscious input, because what? He was an Uzumaki? *What?*

There were Uzumaki in Konoha outside of Mito and Kushina? Wait... was Kushina even in the village yet?

Had Uzushio been destroyed yet? That would be big enough news she was fairly sure she would hear of it, even before she'd become a Genin.

Kyo blinked and tuned back into the present only to realise that Aita had begun to lead them through the corridors with familiar ease, prattling on about nothing and everything while he was at it.

“Uncle gets sent out here a lot and he just dumps me on the closest border station whenever he does. It's pretty boring, unless I get to fight like today!” He fairly bounced. “Not that that happens very often,” he added, deflating again. “And there aren't really any interesting people around here.”

Which Kyo took to mean there weren't anyone around his age here he could hang out and or play with.

“How come you're sent out with your uncle, anyway?” Maki asked curiously.

“Oh, he's not really my uncle, actually. More like...” Aita scrunched his face up in thought. “Eh, he's a relative. And I'm his apprentice, so he doesn't really have much of a choice, ya know? Only he says his missions are too dangerous to drag me along, so here I am.” He shrugged. “Well, here we are,” he stopped in front of a smooth wooden door, which stood open to reveal a simple room taken up mostly by four bunk-beds.

Big enough for two teams, Kyo realised.

“Bathrooms and toilets are down that way,” Aito pointed further down the hall, “and the Mess is down to the left at the first turn down that way,” and he pointed down the other way, the direction they'd actually come from.

God, this place was confusing. It was like a maze.

Which was no doubt entirely on purpose, she realised tiredly.
Thinking about it, she was *exhausted*.

Katsurou-sensei gave them a scrutinizing look. “Food, then sleep,” he decided after a brief pause.

“Want me to show you to the Mess Hall, too?” Aita asked, quite eagerly.

Sensei sighed, but waved him on in the direction he'd pointed at earlier.

The Uzumaki boy practically lit up and bounced ahead to show them the way, barely taking the time to breathe between the constant monologue he somehow managed to keep up.

Kyo frankly didn't listen to a word of it, too busy to keep awake and look like she wasn't falling asleep on her feet.

It'd been a long day; up before the crack of dawn, running all day and then the battle earlier.

Sure, Katsurou-sensei had carried her a few times, giving her semi-regular breaks, and she hadn't participated in the battle as *such*, but it had still left her positively drained of energy.

Someone placed food in front of her, and Kyo ate quickly and mechanically, hoping to finish before her eyes betrayed her completely and refused to open the next time she blinked.

“Come on, Kyo,” sensei murmured, picking her up.

Kyo jerked her eyes open, blinking around in confusion. “Hm?”

“Bedtime,” Katsurou said firmly, settling her on his hip with a sigh.

Kyo might have protested -they were on a *mission*- but she was too tired, and it was pretty comfortable.

Her head came to rest on Katsurou-sensei's shoulder as if of its own volition and she was out cold before they'd left the dining hall. Mess hall, whatever.

-x-x-x-
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

Going back home, near-disasters and a visit to the onzen. Shinobi life is many things, but boring isn't one of them.

The run back to the village wasn't quite as tense.

Kyo ended up carrying the missive once again, despite her half-hearted protests. At least they felt more and more secure the closer they got to the village. Much to Katsurou-sensei's long-suffering exasperation.

“Konoha isn't the paragon of safety you lot seem to think it is,” the man told them frankly. “She's secure, but she's not impenetrable. And that only applies when we're actually inside the walls, so stay sharp.”

“Yes, sensei,” Kyo returned with a small sigh.

She was tired.

Even after sensei had carried her back to their room and tucked her into bed -oh, she would've liked to see the look on his face!- she'd gotten a full night's sleep, but she was still not quite on top.

Despite all their training, her body just wasn't suited to the constant high tempo and lack of rest.

Knowing that it would get better with time was poor comfort when she needed to be more alert and energetic now, damn it. It would have been one thing if she was still an Academy student, but she wasn't. She was a Genin, and Konoha as a whole expected her to behave like all the other Genin, never mind their ages.

It was frustrating.

She couldn't turn seven fast enough.

With no further incident, they reached Konoha's gates by sun down.

Coming upon that battle had apparently been enough surprise for the universe. For this time, at least.

“Come on, let's sign in and then deliver our package,” Katsurou-sensei said, herding them towards the guards' desk.

Kyo was perfectly content to trudge along behind the rest of her team, far more at ease now that they were back home.

An hour more, perhaps, and then she could go home and sleep. In her own bed.

“Kyo,” a familiar voice called, followed shortly by the soft tap of feet touching down on the ground.

Turning in the direction of the voice, Kyo spotted Ryota right away, eyes widening and tiredness forgotten in an instant.
“Here, sensei,” she said, fumbling momentarily with the strap to her poison pack before she managed to get the clasp open. She threw the whole pack at Katsurou, who caught it effortlessly with one hand, gaze flicking from Kyo to the rather beat-up shinobi who had just called her name.

And then she ran the short distance to Ryota and jumped into his arms. Ryota caught her, nodded exactly once at her sensei and then took off.

“Tou-san?”

“Alive,” Ryota said shortly. “Pretty bad, but alive.”

Kyo slumped with relief, resting her forehead against her unofficial uncle's shoulder. “You look injured,” she said after a few seconds.

Ryota grunted. “Nothing the medics couldn't fix up in a few hours,” he muttered, but he sounded off. “How long?” She asked, unsure how to phrase what she really wanted to ask.

“Got back in three days ago, Kou's still in a medical coma and Isshun's left on a mission. Genma's at your grandparents.”

“Oh,” Kyo blinked a few times and tightened her arms around Ryota's neck. She didn't say anything else before they reached the hospital and Ryota seemed content with the silence.

He took her straight to tou-san's hospital room.

Kyo couldn't relax until she placed her hand on tou-san's chest and felt the slow but steady rise and fall with every breath. Feel his heart beat under her fingers.

“What happened?” She asked, not tearing her gaze away from tou-san's pale face.

Ryota sighed and sat down in the chair beside Kou's hospital bed.

This wasn't a private room, but every patient was either unconscious or kept in a medical coma; Kyo didn't know enough to be able to tell the difference.

“Poison,” Ryota grunted. “Luckily, it was slow acting, and Kou seems to have worked up something of a slight resistance after all the years with Isshun. He should make a full recovery,” he said bluntly.

Kyo blinked quickly a few times, taking a deep breath. “That's good,” she managed somewhat steadily.

After a few more deep breaths, Kyo took half a step back and looked around the mostly quiet room.

“Where's Yuuta?” She asked, the auspicious absence of another chair by her father's bed making her stomach drop. “Is he okay? Is he in another r-”

She looked at Ryota's face.

He didn't have to say anything. The cold, blank mask and seemingly emotionless eyes said it all. He looked like he hadn't slept since he got to the village and though he was clean and impeccably dressed, there was just something about the way he sat that made her think there should be blood and dirt on his face.
Kyo walked around the bed and climbed into Ryota's lap, feeling a few tears slip past her guard when the man's arms slipped around her without prompting and his chin carefully came to rest on the top of her head.

“I'm so sorry, oji-san,” she whispered, leaning her back against the proud shinobi's chest and pretending she didn't notice the slight tremble going through his frame.

“Your tou-san's going to be alright,” Ryota said evenly, voice entirely void of any hint of grief.

Kyo cried.

For Yuuta, for tou-san, who might not know one of his teammates were gone, and for Ryota, who couldn't even cry for himself.

She wasn't sure how long they sat like that, staring at Kou, who looked like he was sleeping peacefully. If it hadn't been for all the medical equipment, that was.

Either way, by the time Katsurou-sensei opened the door, Kyo's tears had long since dried.

“Kyo?” He asked softly from the door, having come inside, but not taken a single step closer.

The way Ryota's arms had tightened around her might have had something to do with it, but Kyo was perfectly willing to ignore that for now.

“Sensei,” she returned tiredly. “Sorry I took off like that,” she said. “And threw my pack at you,” she added when she spotted the item in question clutched quite securely in the man's left hand, reminded of the actions that had put it there.

Katsurou shrugged, all casual. As if they weren't in a hospital room filled with six unconscious shinobi who may or may not make full recoveries. One of whom was her dad.

“Can I come over there and give it back?” He asked idly, gaze mostly resting on Ryota's face, judging by what Kyo could guess.

The lack of a clearly defined pupil made it surprisingly hard to tell what he was looking at, sometimes. Which was no doubt the whole point.

Kyo craned her neck and peered up at Ryota, who glanced down at her briefly.

“Sure,” Kyo said after a short pause. “Just, no sudden movements,” she added. Perhaps redundantly, but Ryota was tense enough it felt like he might snap.

“Gotcha,” Katsurou murmured, not sounding surprised in the least.

Kyo watched the Yamanaka slowly, almost lazily stroll across the room until he got to Kou's hospital bed.

Slowly, Katsurou-sensei gently placed her poison pack on the foot of her tou-san's bed, before just as slowly stepping away from it.

“You have the day off tomorrow,” he said, letting both hands hang by his sides, relaxed and -most importantly- in full view. “I'd like for you to meet up for training the day after, though, understood?”

“Yes, sensei,” Kyo returned softly. She hesitated a moment, “Did you tell Taku and Maki not to visit
“I thought it best.”

“Thank you,” she said, giving a relieved sigh. She didn't think it would be a good idea for her teammates to come here right now, never mind how much she might appreciate it. “See you the day after tomorrow, sensei.”

Katsuou nodded, gaze flicking to Ryota one last time, assessing, before he turned around and casually strolled away, closing the door silently behind him.

“Yamanaka tend to have good sense,” Ryota commented rather flatly a minute later.

“Sensei hasn't done anything foolish yet,” she assured him, wrapping her arms around his forearms as best she could where she sat, technically quite stuck, in a semblance of a hug. “He can seem a bit cold, but he does his best to look out for us and make us strong.”

And that seemed to satisfy Ryota, who gave an acknowledging grunt.

“You should go home, Kyo,” he finally said, seemingly taking note of the fact that the sky was pitch black outside the room's single window.

“I can stay with you,” Kyo instantly replied, trying to keep her eyes open. “No one's home and I don't want to go to grandma's house.” Just the thought was enough to make her grimace.

Sure, Genma was there, but he was too young to really have anything to say about their grandmother's constant comments and tedious opinions.

Kyo craned her neck to look up at Ryota, who sent her a wry glance.

“You need to sleep, too, oji-san,” she pressed quietly. “And I don't want to be alone.”

“The Clan's not very fond of outsiders staying in the compound,” Ryota muttered after a long pause, which was a far cry from the instant refusal Kyo had sort of expected.

“You don't care much about what the Clan thinks, Ryota-oji,” she returned softly.

Ryota snorted. “Kitten's got a point,” he said, either to himself or to no one in particular. He sighed. “Kou's always going on about how you're so much like Isshun,” he said, staring absently at Kou's slack face. “Don't tell anyone, but I think you're more like your idiot father than anyone likes to acknowledge.”

Kyo smiled weakly. “Does that mean you think I'm an idiot, too?”

“The biggest,” Ryota returned promptly, standing to his feet and turning her around so he could carry her on his hip. All without fully releasing her from his semi-hug. “An intelligent person would never ask to stay in the Uchiha compound.”

“Brains are overrated,” Kyo said sagely, leaning her head on Ryota's tense shoulder. “Heart's more important.”

“You should stop talking now, kitten,” Ryota ordered coldly as they exited the room, but Kyo didn't mind.

He’d used her nickname, no doubt to try and soften the impact of his words. Tou-san had told her that Ryota cared a lot, that he was very fond of her; he just didn't know what to do with himself
when it came to 'emotional crap'.

The definite tremble in his hands was a dead give-away, too.

No one stopped them or said so much as a word to them while they made their way through the hospital, though Ryota did attract a few worried glances from the nurses.

She might have drifted off for a bit as Ryota transported them across the village, but she jerked back to full consciousness when they stopped moving.

“-ou cannot be serious!” An unfamiliar voice hissed quietly. “It's looks like kidnapping.”

“Don't be ridiculous; it's Kou's kid, Hoshu,” Ryota snapped back. “And like hell I'd just snatch a brat off the streets!”

“I asked to stay with Ryota-oji,” Kyo told the gate guard sleepily, rubbing a hand at one gritty eye. “Kaa-san's on a mission and tou-san's in the hospital,” she said, blinking at the grumpy Uchiha guard and widening her eyes.

She couldn't cry on command, but perhaps this would be enough.

“...fine,” Hoshu spat, giving Ryota a dirty look, but stepping aside.

Ryota signed something with one hand too quickly for Kyo to see, and Hoshu scowled after them.

“Sorry for getting you in trouble, Ryota,” Kyo apologized drowsily.

“Don't think about it, kitten,” Ryota grunted, shifting her a bit so that she could rest more comfortably against his shoulder. “What sort of mission did you have, anyway?” He asked, rather belatedly, but Kyo didn't blame him.

“Courier run to the Kawa border.” Kyo yawned. “Mission success and no one was hurt,” she added tiredly.

Ryota hummed absently. One of his hands was resting on her back, conveniently close to her heart.

“Can I sleep with you?” Kyo asked, half asleep and barely managing to keep her eyes open, but the thought of sleeping alone felt impossibly daunting.

Ryota paused whatever he was doing, and when Kyo pried one eye open, she could see they'd reached his house. The front door, to be precise.

“Aren't you too old for that?” He asked stiffly, and if she had been more awake, Kyo might have laughed at the awkwardness he was all but exuding.

“I'm six, oji-san,” she pointed out, lifting one hand with splayed fingers for him to see.

“That's five,” Ryota pointed out after a beat of silence.

Eh, close enough.

“Tou-san lets me sleep with him sometimes,” she protested when Ryota temporarily set her down to take off her sandals.

“I'm not your tou-san,” Ryota scoffed, setting her sandals to the side before he took off his own and then picked her up again. “You can sleep on the couch.”
“Okay.” Kyo yawned again. Ryota had a super soft, comfortable couch, so that was nice. She still would have preferred to sleep next to someone warm, breathing, comforting. “I think I forgot my pack on tou-san's bed.”

“We'll get it tomorrow,” Ryota promised. He paused in front of the couch and gave her an intent look Kyo could do no more than blink at in return. “Bathroom?”

She tilted her head in consideration, which no doubt would have threatened to topple her over if Ryota hadn't been holding her. “Yeah,” she finally decided.

She couldn't even remember the last time she'd peed today.

Ryota sighed and walked over to the bathroom, opened the door and set her down. “Don't fall asleep on the toilet,” he ordered and then stalked off.

Kyo went about her business and then staggered back out into the living room, to find Ryota had made the couch. Sort of.

He'd put a sheet over the seat, to make it more comfortable and supplied her with a pillow and a thick blanket.

Forcing her eyes to stay open a bit longer, Kyo took off her hitai-ate and put it on the coffee table. Which was followed by her weapons pouches, most of her clothes and her mesh shirt.

Clad in nothing more than her underwear, Kyo crawled down under the blanket, pulled it up over her shoulders and promptly fell asleep.

When she woke up the following morning, Ryota was sitting slumped on the floor next to the couch, arm propped up on his raised knees and head resting on his arm. His other arm was on the couch, leaving his hand resting on Kyo's back.

He was also deeply asleep.

Kyo squinted tiredly at him a few seconds, before she closed her eyes and decided to sleep some more.

It was her day off; she had nowhere to be and could sleep in for once.

Two days later, tou-san still hadn't woken up, but he was doing much better.

The medic had even been able to tell them that he wouldn't have any lasting after-effects, and that he would make a full recovery.

Ryota had been so relieved he'd actually looked like he'd cry.

After the medic had left, of course.

And then Kyo had had to run off to meet her team for training. But she felt much better about leaving Ryota now that he didn't have to worry about Kou as much, and after he'd gotten some much needed sleep and sustenance.

“Hey!” Taku jumped to his feet the moment he caught sight of her, Kisaki and Maki half a second behind. “Are you okay?”
“Yeah.” Kyo smiled and ran up to them, sending Katsurou-sensei a smile, too. “I'm okay. Tou-san's going to make a full recovery!” She beamed.

“Oh, that's good,” Maki sighed, looking relieved.

“So who was that guy?” Taku demanded next, since Katsurou seemed content to leave them at it for a while.

“That's Ryota-oji; he's tou-san's teammate,” Kyo explained, her smile waning a fraction.

“He looked pretty scary,” Maki said in a hushed voice, as if it was a secret.

Taku nodded seriously.

Kyo snickered under her breath, unable to stop herself. “He's an Uchiha,” she said, as if that explained everything.

“What?” Taku blinked, looking close to dumbfounded. “But I didn't see his Clan mark!”

“Yeah, he doesn't like to wear it on his clothes outside of special occasions,” Kyo said cheerfully. “The rest of the Clan gives him quite a bit of grief about it, but he says it's stupid to advertise his abilities to our enemies.”

Taku and Maki both stared at her, speechless.

“Man,” Taku finally said. “I thought all Uchiha were supposed to be assholes.”

“Taku!” Maki hissed, clearly offended by the words. “They're a highly respected Clan; they helped found the Village!”

“Yeah, and they're all arrogant assholes.” Taku nodded, as if it all made perfect sense.

Kyo couldn't help but snicker at them. Her good humour was pretty short-lived, though. “A lot of them are pretty arrogant,” she admitted, which made Taku grin victoriously at Maki, “but not all of them. And a lot of it is emotional incompetence.”

“Say-what now?” Taku's attention snapped back to her and he looked incredulous.

“Tou-san explained that, since they're taught not to show any kind of weakness, they don't know how to show emotions in a way that other people can understand.” She shrugged. It was a very sad thing, Kyo thought. “So they tend to come off as cold, arrogant and insensitive.”

“It's not only the Uchiha who suffer from the misconception that shinobi are supposed to be nothing more than emotionless tools,” Katsurou-sensei cut into the conversation, adding his own piece.

“I thought that was one of the shinobi rules.” Maki frowned. “The written ones,” he added, because he was still hyper-aware of the unwritten parts of life as a shinobi.

“It is, and you should keep them in mind,” sensei said, inclining his head. “Unfortunate things tend to happen to the human mind when emotions are suppressed too well, however.”

“We can pretend we don't feel anything, but that doesn't mean it's true.” Kyo shrugged. “I think you should just try and find a balance that works best for you.”

“What sort of torture have you planned for us today, sensei?” Maki asked with a polite smile, turning to the man with exaggerated attentiveness.

“Brats,” Katsurou snorted, lips twitching. “Let's see how well you can do at the shinobi version of Hide and Seek;” he decided. “Go!”

Kyo used a kawarimi to change places with a small, fallen branch she'd spotted close to the trees when she'd walked up to the training grounds, quickly clamping down on her chakra and activating one of her favourite stealth jutsu.

In the next breath, she appeared to fade into the background.

The next few days were all the same, with Katsurou-sensei focusing on stealth, stamina and speed.

“You're all smaller than the average shinobi, which means less weight and less muscle-mass. Your one saving grace is speed,” he said as he drilled them ruthlessly.

“I can't move,” Kyo groaned pitifully after almost a week had passed. Five days of constant training until it felt like she couldn't lift her arms, until she could hardly get out of bed in the mornings.

Tou-san found it offensively amusing, because “That makes two of us, kitten.”

Ryota was laughing at both of them.

Whenever the two men weren't grieving for Yuuta, at least. The funeral was set to be in a few days, and Kyo wanted to go with them.

Yuuta's family had waited for Kou to wake up and released from the hospital, so that was a small highlight to the situation. Not that it was much.

“Need help?” Katsurou asked, leaning over her to give her an amused look.

Kyo stuck her tongue out at him, but then sighed. “Yes,” she admitted. “Thanks, sensei.”

“No problem,” Katsurou returned. “What about you two?” He asked, ambling over to where Taku and Maki had collapsed. “Need a hand?”

“You're enjoying this too much, sensei,” Kyo accused him miserably.

“There's no such thing,” Katsurou smirked. “But I do happen to have something planned to help you out,” he added.

Even Kisaki lifted her head hopefully.

“What?” Taku demanded in a half-hearted manner.

“We're going to the onzen,” their sensei said magnanimously.

Kyo blinked.

That... sounded like an awesome idea! She loved the onzen! She went with kaa-san all the time!

Wait. “But I'm the only girl!” She said, abruptly displeased. “I don't want to be alone. Can I come with you on your side?” She asked, staring hopefully up at Katsurou-sensei.
Who considered her a moment before he shrugged. “Sure.”

Kyo grinned. Success!

“Wait- wha- sensei, you can't do that!” Maki objected, looking scandalized. “We'll be naked!”

“So?” Kyo asked. “So will I.”

If anything, Maki looked even more outraged.

“Bu- there might be more people than just us there!” He argued, sending Taku a slightly desperate look.

The Inuzuka just shrugged; he didn’t care.

“Maki, I would've understood your concerns if I'd been ten years older,” Kyo said sensibly. “But I'm six.” and how often did she have to repeat that? “The only difference between me and a boy is that I don't have a d:”

Maki slapped a hand over her mouth, cheeks bright red. “No!” He hissed at her. “Please don't say it,” he practically begged.

Kyo smiled against his palm.

So sensitive.

“You're such a prude, man,” Taku spoke her thoughts out loud, though he used a slightly different word choice. “Are we going anytime soon, sensei?”

“Yeah,” Katsurou said, smiling. “You know, no one told me getting a Genin team would be so entertaining.”

Maki looked highly disgruntled with the lot of them.

“This is so nice,” Kyo sighed contentedly as she relaxed against the side of the pool, arms hooked over the edge since she was a bit small to be able to sit on the bottom without accidentally drowning herself. “We should do it more often,” she decided, giving a very amused Katsurou a look.

“Maki might mutiny,” he mused, a hint of laughter hidden in the depths of his voice.

Kyo grinned. “He'll get over it, sensei.”

The boy in question had his back to her, arms crossed petulantly over his chest and refusing to so much as look in her general direction.

“You're a girl, Kyo. You shouldn't be in the men's section of the bath,” he said stubbornly.

“I'm not listening to you,” Kyo informed him pleasantly.

She didn't see what the big deal was. She didn't have boobs, hips or even any body hair. She was here with her team; all people she trusted to keep an eye on her and help her if any serious issues popped up.

Like, some strange grown man trying to creep on her.
She had a feeling Katsurou-sensei would murder anyone who dared to try.

So she felt perfectly safe.

And it wasn't like it was entirely unheard of for fathers to bring their children -daughters included- with them into the men's bath. It was a far better option than to leave the children on their own on the women's side.

“I don't get the fuss,” Taku mumbled where he looked to be very nearly sleeping. “If he's like this now, I don' wanna be around when puberty hits,” he grumbled.

Kyo snorted and almost inhaled a mouthful of water.

“When what hits?” Maki asked, confused and curious enough he actually turned around to peer at Taku.

Kyo stopped laughing.

Oh, dear.

“Taku,” Katsurou-sensei said slowly, posture not changing at all, but still fractionally more attentive than he had been three seconds ago, “didn't you have that class at the Academy?” He asked calmly.

“What class?” Maki asked, looking from one of them to another.

“I did, but that might have been with another year,” Kyo said, not feeling particularly amused any more. “And it was one of the girl classes. Which is a bit stupid, actually, sensei. I mean, why do they split them up? It's not like we're gonna start having sex with each other before we're even ten,” she said frankly. They'd had them together in school back in the Before and no one had thought that was strange.

An older gentleman sitting a few metres away choked on his own breath.

Katsurou sighed like he regretted ever saying anything about having a Genin team being anything other than a bother.

“I can't believe I'm gonna have to have the Talk,” he muttered. “I don't even have kids.”

“Sure you do; you've got us.” Kyo smiled sweetly at the man, who gave her a wry, reluctantly amused look.

“Menacing little beasts that you are.” He shook his head, crossing his arms over his chest.

Kyo grinned. Before she thought of something.

“Wait, if Maki is this awkward already,” she paused, pointing at the boy in question and exchanging a look with Taku, “then how will he be after?”

“He might spontaneously combust.” Taku grinned, eyeing Maki like that eventuality was highly appealing.

“Enough,” Katsurou sighed. “I'll deal with it tomorrow, and then we have another Courier mission the day after.”

“Another one?” Kyo asked distractedly, watching Taku and Maki do the verbal equivalent of poking at each other.
“Apparently, Akaro had nothing but praise to say about us,” Katsurou told her, voice threatening to dip into sarcasm when Maki pushed Taku's head under the surface of the water. Supposedly in an attempt to drown him.

Kyo watched the building fight with part amusement and part sympathy with Katsurou.

“I thought they were supposed to be older than me,” she commented idly.

Not really, of course, but it was getting harder to remember that, sometimes.

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Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

Kyo possibly makes a new friend and there's some serious talk with Katsurou-sensei

The new mission meant she missed Yuuta's funeral.

Tou-san and Ryota both assured her it was okay, that it wasn't her fault, but Kyo still felt bad about it and made the two men promise to take her to the grave as soon as she came back.

They all got so incredibly busy it felt like no time at all before she turned seven.

Kyo felt like they'd been running back and forth to the border so many times they might as well have run thrice around Fire Country by now.

She'd gotten a few scars, accidentally gave Maki food poisoning once - it was very important to remember to wash your hands after handling poisonous plants - and Taku had broken his leg during one mission when they'd been intercepted by a small group of Iwa Chuunin when they'd made a run up to the Kusa border.

Earth jutsu were scary, and it was lucky Taku hadn't lost his leg, rather than just broken it.

Genma had turned one year old, and got a small party.

Tou-san and kaa-san were both home, for once, Ryota was there and Kyo invited her team. Katsurou sensei had politely declined but Maki, Taku and Kisaki had all showed up. With presents.

Genma loved his stuffed dog, and Isshun had very much appreciated the very cute t-shirt Maki's mother had sent with him.

“I can't believe we never got time for that tour of the green houses,” a familiar voice said cheerfully behind her.

Kyo turned around with a bemused smile. “Hello to you, too, Inoichi,” she greeted placidly. “How've you been?”

“Busy,” Inoichi said. “Did you get taller?”

“I'd hope so,” Kyo snorted, giving him a slightly narrow-eyed look. She didn't want to be as short as a six year old for the rest of her life; that'd make her current career rather difficult.

“Since your team's not with you, does that mean you're not busy?” He asked curiously, glancing around as if waiting for her teammates to pop up out of nowhere.

Which didn't sound outside the realm of possibilities, actually, now that she thought about it.

“Sure,” she said. “You still want to show me your green-houses,” she guessed. She'd planned to go visit one of the many blacksmiths in Konoha to buy more needles, but she could do that later.

“Yeah,” Inoichi grinned a tad self-consciously. “That, and also make friends. You seem like a person
it would be nice to keep on your good side, you know?"

Kyo's lips stretched in a smile. “I'm sure Taku and Maki would agree with you,” was all she said. “I take it that means you're not busy either? You want to go right now?"

“If you don't mind?” Inoichi perked up at the prospect of actually getting this done. Almost a year after he'd first brought it up, but better late than never!

“Sure,” Kyo agreed, readily enough falling into step when the eleven year old Inoichi began to lead her down the street towards his Clan compound.

“Most Yamanaka don't actually live in the compound any more,” he confessed on the way. “They've been converted mostly to farm lands.”

“I always figured Katsurou-sensei lived somewhere in the Village on his own,” Kyo said. And this confirmed it, didn't it?

One step closer to figuring it out!

She really wanted that sleepover at Katsurou's place, okay? He'd agreed... on the condition that she figured out where he lived on her own, and she wasn't allowed to stalk him.

Katsurou-sensei was such a party-pooper.

“You don't know where your sensei live?” Inoichi asked, blinking confusedly at her.

“No, because Katsurou is a stubborn, grumpy old man who hates to have fun,” Kyo told him seriously. “You should look into that; he's your uncle, right?”

“We're related,” Inoichi corrected absently, before he snorted. “Shinzu-sensei lives in the Sarutobi compound so that's pretty easy.”

“Lucky you,” Kyo teased. “Hey, do you ever hang out there?”

“Rarely,” Inoichi shrugged, “but it has happened.”

“Have you ever bumped into the Hokage?” She asked curiously. Kyo still hadn't gotten to meet Sarutobi Hiruzen, herself.

It might have something to do with how busy he must be as the war dragged on, the fighting getting more vicious and the slowly but steadily dwindling numbers of active shinobi kept stretching the rest of them thin.

“Once,” Inoichi admitted with a slight grimace. “It was... awkward.”

“Tou-san says he really likes the Sandaime, though,” Kyo mused, crossing her arms over her chest and absently following the outline of a few hidden senbon with the tip of her index finger where they rested under her clothes.

“He seemed nice,” the blond boy hurriedly assured. “It was just a bit intimidating.”

Kyo smiled. “I bet. So is this it?” She asked, peering up at the rather nondescript gate.

“Yes.” Inoichi instantly regained the full force of his good mood.

“No guard?” She asked curiously.
“Not a Yamanaka one,” Inoichi said, smiling innocently when Kyo glanced at him.

So ANBU, then? Kyo supposed it would make quite a bit of sense if this was where they grew stuff like medicinal herbs for the hospital and food for emergencies.

“I seem to recall being lured here with the promise of poisonous plants,” Kyo said instead of pestering Inoichi to tell her more about a subject she was pretty sure she'd already figured out on her own.

Inoichi pouted at her for all of a second, before quickly pulling her towards one of the green-houses in the very back of the compound, placed in a shadier spot than the rest.

Kyo could admit to being rather intrigued.

“Here, put these on,” Inoichi said, handing her a pair of thick leather gloves with an interesting collection of stains when they stepped through into the moist, almost sweltering heat inside.

Kyo stared bemusedly at the much-too-large gloves and then put them aside.

Inoichi was already walking down the stone path, so he didn't notice.

She followed eagerly, paying close attention to the plants they walked passed. Most of them had dark, thick leaves, often large and fuzzy. Other plants looked like innocent flowers, almost misplaced amongst the more visibly toxic vegetation.

“I know most of these,” Kyo admitted, running fond fingers over the leaves of a Bloodroot. “And even the ones I don't know by name I'm familiar with.”

“This is the Fire Country section,” Inoichi admitted cheerfully. “Don't touch that!” He added hastily when he saw what she was doing. “It'll give you a bad rash. Why didn't you put on the gloves?”

“It's fine,” Kyo grinned and held out her hand for Inoichi to see. Not the slightest discolouration in sight.

“How?” Inoichi asked, staring at her hand, inspecting every finger he'd seen touch the Bloodroot leaf. “I've touched that one; it's super itchy!”

“Immune,” Kyo chirped happily. Was this how her mum had felt all those years ago?

Inoichi's eyes boggled. “Immune?” He repeated confusedly.

“Mhm,” Kyo hummed, reached out to pick a small leaf off the stem of the Bloodroot and put it in her mouth, crushed it between her teeth and then swallowing.

“Oh, Kami.” Inoichi sounded faint, “I have to take you to the hospital. Tou-chan's going to be furious with me,” he fretted.

“Relax. I told you; I'm immune,” Kyo shrugged, not as bothered as she probably should be. If anything, she was rather amused by the blond's reaction.

Ah, her past self would probably be appalled. Or, she mused uncertainly, inappropriately entertained. She couldn't quite decide.

“I still think we should seek out a medic,” Inoichi insisted, watching her closely for any signs of an adverse reaction.
“I promise I will let you take me to the hospital if I get the least bit sick, okay?” Kyo compromised, looking further down the green-house. “What else have you got in here?”

“Uh, we have some plants from other countries, too,” Inoichi said slowly, giving her a worried look, before he began to go further into the oblong space. “These ones are from Kiri,” he said, a measure of his earlier enthusiasm slowly seeping back into his voice.

Kyo peered at the plants, wondering if it'd be alright to ask for samples. Not that it would be enough to get herself used to them, but still.

“How potent are they?” She asked, poking a bit experimentally at one of them, until Inoichi’s nervous fluttering was enough to make her back off. She didn't want to accidentally damage a rare plant from another country.

That would've been awkward. And probably expensive, not to mention the possible grudge from the Yamanaka Clan and any potential medics that would need the plant for their work.

Right, better not to touch anything she couldn't replace.

“Not very, I think. They're mostly meant for the hospital, remember.” The boy smiled. “Wouldn't want to accidentally kill the patients.”

“As far as I've understood it, the most dangerous plants can sometimes do the most good,” Kyo mused. Not that she knew anything about how that worked; she could only kill people with them.

The rest of the tour was interesting, but since Kyo's knowledge of the local -and not so local- vegetation was limited to ending people's lives rather than helping them... she felt it was largely wasted on her.

“What were you even doing when I ambushed you?” Inoichi asked when they finally left the humid heat of the green-house behind.

“Heading to the blacksmith.” Kyo smiled. “And I still have to go; wanna come?”

“Sure.” Inoichi seemed rather happy she had asked. “Are you getting anything in particular?”

“My order should be ready by now, so I'm picking it up.” Kyo barely resisted the desire to laugh. She'd placed her order a couple of months ago, actually, and she just hadn't had the time to swing by until now. Team Six had been swamped with missions lately, running all over the country.

“Oh.” Inoichi blinked, looking vaguely sheepish. “Sorry.”

“That's okay; this was a very nice break from training and missions,” she said honestly. Which was what most of her days consisted of. “I just need to re-stock, is all.”

“Yeah.” The boy sighed. “It feels like I've been out of the village more than in it lately.”

“Us and everyone else,” Kyo muttered.

Kaa-san was doing missions again, her maternity leave having been cut rather short. Kyo had been two before Isshun had been sent back out, but Genma hadn't even gotten to turn one.

She hated this war.

“Welcome,” the man behind the counter said when Kyo pushed open the door and stepped inside, Inoichi right behind her.
“Hey, ossan.” Kyo smiled.

“Ah, young Shiranui-san, you finally grace me with your presence!” Toumi-ossan exclaimed affably, getting to his feet with a friendly grin. “Let me get your order, sweetie.”

“Thank you,” Kyo said, waiting calmly by the counter.

Inoichi browsed the store while pretending not to be itching with curiosity.

“You know, you can come over here if you want to,” she said idly, watching Inoichi startle minutely from the corner of her eye, before he approached her with a sheepish grin.

“Sorry. Tou-chan says I'm too curious for my own good.” He shrugged, but didn't seem particularly apologetic. If anything, he looked a bit chagrined at having been caught out.

Kyo shrugged.

“Here we are, young miss.” Toumi-ossan came back, quite the hefty package held in one hand. “Your selection, as ordered,” he said, and proceeded to place the package on the counter, unfold the leather wrappings to reveal quite the few bunts of needles.

Kyo picked up a few random ones, each one from a different bundle, and tried them carefully like kaa-san had showed her.

Weight, quality and shape were all important when you used as much precision as their particular specialisation required.

“If you'd like to try a few,” Toumi-ossan said, removing a few tools to reveal a wooden post that was littered with plenty of marks from a wide variety of weapons.

“Thank you, if I may?” She asked, mentioning towards the post with a hand, two needles already slotted between her fingers.

“Of course, Shiranui-san,” Toumi-ossan said, backing away and well out of the firing line. “Go ahead.”

Kyo flicked her wrist and fingers, sending the needles through the air with little effort. They stuck quite firmly in the wood, too, though she hadn't used enough force for them to be difficult to get out.

“Excellent as always, ossan.” Kyo smiled. “How much do I owe you?”

While Kyo and Toumi discussed prices, Inoichi picked up one of the small needles, inspecting it curiously.

Kyo didn't mind; the thing hadn't been coated in poison yet, and was obviously no more dangerous than your average sewing needle. If more durable.

“Always a pleasure doing business with you, Shiranui-san! Give my best to your mother,” Toumi-ossan said once she'd handed over the agreed upon amount of money. Quite the sum, admittedly, but this was a rather large batch.

She'd been running low, so she'd decided to splurge.

Not that Kyo was spending much money on other things, and having had a steady pay for a little over a year now, she had more than enough saved up it wasn't an issue.
Unlike most people, Kyo made all of her own poisons, so that wasn’t an expense. Unless you counted time as an expense, but... eh. It was fun, if a bit tedious at times, but she was so used to it by now she hardly even thought about it.

Her parents paid for living expenses, obviously, so she just had to buy the occasional snack, her own weapons and anything else she might want to get.

Isshun had sat her down and discussed what she should spend her pay on and what she and Kou would provide a few months after she’d made Genin.

Kyo had been more than willing to get her own weapons, but had asked if it was alright for them to help a bit with her wardrobe, depending on how much she had to spend on it.

She was still growing, and that wasn’t even counting the amount of clothes that had to be thrown away due to pure, simple damage.

Taku had even managed to burn one of her shirts to a crisp during training a few months ago, so.

Kaa-san had smiled and told her, for all that she was legally an adult and earning her own wages, she was still their child, and should try to keep that in mind.

“You're not getting anything?” Kyo asked Inoichi, who shook his head. “Okay.” She shrugged and wrapped her purchase up again.

It was heavy, but nothing she wasn't used to or couldn't handle, so that wasn't a problem.

“Well, I have a lot to do now, Inoichi, but it was nice to spend time with you.” Kyo smiled at the boy, who grinned back.

“Let's do it again, sometime,” he agreed eagerly. “It was surprisingly nice to spend time with someone who isn't either of my stupid teammates.”

“Right?” Kyo snickered an agreement. “See ya later, Inoichi!”

“Bye!” The boy returned.

Kyo gave him one last nod and then ran up the side of the closest building. She wanted to get home as soon as possible and get started on the rather overwhelming task in front of her.

She had a lot of needles to coat with poison.

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About a month later, Katsuou-sensei spoke up before they could scatter after the day's training.

They'd been focusing mostly on elemental jutsu, which was interesting, because Kyo and Taku were devastating together, so Katsuou had taken them to a rather sizeable lake to practice over; no one wanted them to set all of Konoha on fire.

Turns out, fire jutsu amplified by wind jutsu were absolutely terrifying.

Kyo's inner pyromaniac was silently but gleefully ecstatic.

“Kyo, wait a moment; there's something I wish to discuss with you,” Katsuou sensei said, making her stop in her tracks and give him a curious look before she could dash back home to kaa-san and Genma.
Taku and Maki both glanced questioningly at her, but Kyo merely shrugged; she had no idea what this was about.

“What is it, sensei?” She asked curiously, absently scratching at the healing burn on her left forearm, watching her teammates reluctantly wander off. Accidents happened, and Taku had apologized several times, despite her assurances that it was alright.

It wasn't like he'd burned her on purpose.

“Come,” Katsurou said instead of giving her any sort of explanation.

With a mental shrug, Kyo happily fell into step next to him. Or, more like bouncing along next to him, munching on one of her energy bars while she was at it.

She'd planned to eat something first thing when she got back home, but with this delay -for who knew how long- this would tide her over until she got access to real food.

Katsurou gave her an amused glance, wordlessly handed her a rations bar when she finished and walked on in silence.

Grinning at her sensei, Kyo bit into the less tasty, but definitely more nutritionally correct treat. She was a young, small, growing girl who spent most of her time physically active; she needed to eat as much as she could.

And it never hurt to have something edible to throw at Taku's head whenever he got grumpy as his blood-sugar fell.

“Are you gonna tell me what this’s about, sensei?” She finally asked, stuffing the empty wrappings in one of her many pockets to throw away later.

“No,” Katsurou said, sounding all casual and not at all bothered by the frown Kyo graced him with as she peered up at his calm face. “Not yet,” he added after a too-long pause, mouth curling into an amused smile.

Kyo huffed a sigh. “You can be so annoying, sensei,” she told him honestly, though she was rather entertained in addition to being mildly vexed.

“It's my only joy in life,” the man mused, scanning the street around them in a seemingly-casual manner she'd seen him do during missions often enough it made her follow suit automatically.

Looking for a threat that most likely wasn't there.

Konoha was safe, but it wasn't air-tight. At least it made the chances of being outright attacked minimal.

Kyo sighed, but didn't stop walking next to him. She blinked a little when she realised where he was taking her.

Or, maybe not exactly where, specifically, but what type of area they were in.

There were houses and a couple of small-ish apartment complexes a few streets further on, which made her realise this was without a doubt a residential area.

She perked up. “Am I going to get to see where you live?” She asked, latching onto Katsurou's hand before she could consider the possible repercussions of the action.
Right. Don't grab Jounin without warning.

Thankfully, Katsurou merely gave her an amused look and slowly curled his fingers around hers', tentatively but readily enough.

It made her grin happily and bounce on the balls of her feet, swinging his hand back and forth slightly.

Her sensei let her, with an indulgent snort.

"Come on," he said, turning off the street, quite clearly heading towards one of the houses. "Don't touch anything," he added before he opened the door.

Kyo gave him an offended look. "I'm not stupid," she muttered under her breath, letting go of Katsurou to take off her shoes and put them neatly on the floor in the sparse hallway.

She had learned the lesson of see-but-not-touch very early on in her first life; her mother then had been a goldsmith. Lots of small, shiny, very expensive trinkets to go around and her then-mother would have without a doubt cried if she or either of her siblings had displaced something.

She'd spent enough time crawling around on the floor looking for dropped diamonds and other kinds of precious jewels as it was.

They hadn't been allowed to touch anything on her work bench, but Kyo had quickly figured out that if she put stuff back exactly as she found them, her then-mother wouldn't notice, and -most of all- wouldn't mind.

"Tea?" Katsurou-sensei asked idly as he wandered into the house, Kyo trailing a bit nervously after him.

"Yes, thank you," she said, peering around at the rather Spartan home. "What's this about, sensei?" She finally asked, settling down at Katsurou's kitchen table.

She was small enough it was more comfortable to sit on her folded legs on the chair, which gave a few extra centimetres of height.

"You," Katsurou returned evenly, taking a sip of his tea, eyeing her calmly, a considering look on his face.

"Me?" Kyo blinked confusedly.

"You've been my students for a little over a year now," he said. "I am very good at what I do, and there are some things that just don't quite," he paused to tilt his head, "add up. About you, Kyo."

Kyo stared at Katsurou, fingers tightening around the tea cup she'd been provided with and mouth feeling like it had dried up the moment those words left Katsurou's lips.

"You're not in trouble, if that's what you're worried about," the man continued sedately, bringing his mug to his lips for another sip of tea. "If that'd been the case, I would've brought you to T&I rather than my house."

Which was only mildly reassuring.

Kyo swallowed thickly and couldn't think of a single thing to say.

Couldn't really think much of anything, actually.
She was drawing a blank.

When it became apparent that she wouldn't be able to speak anything comprehensible for a while, Katsurou-sensei put his tea down and gave her an intent, considering look.

“I'll speak and you'll listen,” he said, and it wasn't quite an order, but it was clear that he expected his words to be followed.

Kyo nodded jerkily.

“You're a very intelligent young girl; bright, curious, polite, surprisingly mature and even-tempered. Patient. All things that, together, are very rare to find in prodigies,” Katsurou mused, tone casual but eyes sharp.

All Kyo could think in response to that was, “I'm not a prodigy,” she blurted.

Katsurou tilted his head. “I admit that you're not as intelligent as the Nara heir, for example, but you have something young Shikaku does not,” he leaned forward a fraction in his seat. “You're wise, Kyo. That's very rare for a child your age.”

Wise.

The problem was that she was wise?

Okay, she was maybe having a small mental freak-out, but that didn't mean she couldn't appreciate the irony of the situation.

She'd been called that her first life, too. Along with precocious and things like brainy and 'know-it-all', however fondly it'd been said. That last one always made her want to snort. She liked to learn, that didn't mean she knew everything!

Contrary to what her sister had always insisted.

Katsurou-sensei looked content to wait her out, because when she finally returned to the present, he was calmly sipping his tea, looking like he didn't have a care in the world.

“Are you sure I'm not in trouble?” She couldn't help but ask quietly, trying and failing to unclench her fingers from around the poor ceramics cup that she might accidentally break before this conversation was over.

Katsurou gave her a long, serious look before he nodded. “You've been my student for a year now, Kyo,” he repeated solemnly. “If anyone tries to claim something ridiculous like you're an infiltrated enemy shinobi, they'll have to answer to me, understood?”

Which was mildly reassuring.

“I figure I died.”

The words just slipped out and Kyo let go of the cup to slap both hands over her mouth instead. Her palms were too hot from having pressed them to the tea cup for so long and it felt like they were threatening to burn her.

When Katsurou did nothing but gaze patiently at her, she cautiously lowered her hands.

“Before I was Kyo,” she tentatively elaborated, watching her sensei with wary attention.
Katsurou hummed, slowly lowering his tea cup back down to the table. “Reincarnation. Very rare, but not entirely unheard of,” he mused. “How much do you remember?”

“All of it?” Kyo offered slowly, twisting her fingers together nervously in her lap. “Except the last bit; that's still a bit foggy, but I think I know how I died anyway.”

“How old were you?” Katsurou asked, a spark of real interest in his eyes.

“Twenty six. Possibly twenty seven.” She sighed. She'd been young; hadn't really gotten the chance to live properly, either.

Yeah, she was slightly bitter about it.

“When did you start to remember?” Sensei asked next, relaxing further in his seat, which Kyo found calming.

Which was no doubt intentional, but she'd always taken her cues from body-language more than anything else. Something Katsurou knew.

Kyo frowned. “When I became aware of myself, you mean?” She asked, and it was admittedly weird, bordering on the absurd, to be talking about this with anyone after so long. “Sometime after I turned one.” She shrugged. “It was weird learning to walk and talk again,” she muttered, more to herself.

Katsurou hummed. “Kyo, would you agree to let me perform a Mind-Walk?” He eventually asked.

Kyo bit her lip, staring up at sensei. “To look at my memories,” she concluded apprehensively.

Katsurou nodded, but didn't say anything. Or move other than that, really.

“They're not really all that interesting,” she said softly. “It's a bit sad.”

Sensei's lips curled into a small, humourless smile that made her feel all kinds of bad.

Her Before life was nothing compared to the average shinobi life, she fully realised, but... there was just something sad about a life not really lived. Youth squandered, and all that.

“Okay,” she said.

For all that it was worth, she trusted Katsurou-sensei.

The man blinked, actually looking faintly surprised, as if he'd expected having to cajole and gently wheedle her to agree.

“Let's move this into the living room, then,” he only said.

“Okay, sensei,” Kyo answered, leaving her cooling tea on the table as she wandered after the Yamanaka to the other room.

Kyo settled nervously on the floor in front of her sensei, watching the man a bit warily, despite her best efforts.

She trusted him.
She really did.

It was just scary, sharing something she hadn't spoken about in the last seven years with someone she really respected. Something not even her parents knew about.

“You ready?” Katsurou-sensei asked.

“Yeah.” Kyo replied shakily. At least she wouldn't have to tell him everything; he'd be able to see for himself.

“I will do the hand signs for the Mind-Walk and then place my hand on your forehead,” Katsurou told her soothingly. “It won't hurt, but it might feel mildly disorienting.”

“Okay,” Kyo said quietly, taking a deep breath. “Do you need me to take off my hitai-ate?”

“It would make it easier, but it's not a requirement,” Katsurou said dismissively, giving her a small smile.

Kyo pulled the piece of metal and durable cloth off her head, wiping a hand over her forehead to make sure it wasn't unreasonably sweaty.

“I'm ready, sensei. I think.” She smiled nervously, having to fight not to fidget. “Is it going to take long?”

Katsurou-sensei hummed neutrally. “It will feel longer than it'll really be,” he said with a small twitch of one shoulder that served as a shrug.

“Okay,” she breathed, taking another deep breath. “Do I have to watch them, too?” She understood why sensei would want and or need to, but she didn't particularly want to watch her boring past life when she already knew what had happened.

“No, not if you don't want to,” Katsurou said kindly, reaching out to tentatively ruffle her hair.

What was with people and her hair?

“Okay, you can do it now, sensei,” Kyo finally said, feeling marginally more sure about this.

Katsurou eyed her carefully a moment, before he nodded.

He formed a quick series of hand-seals, and then gently placed his palm on her forehead.

Kyo closed her eyes and slowly released the breath she'd been holding in her lungs.

It felt strange.

Like meditating. She was aware of the memories in her head being examined, though she didn't 'watch' them as Katsurou-sensei no doubt did, she was still very much aware of them.

By the end of it, no more than fifteen minutes had passed, and while Kyo hadn't done anything other than sit there, she felt exhausted and her cheeks were wet.

Katsurou slowly removed his hand from her forehead, a small frown on his face as he gave her a thoughtful look.

“You were sick,” he said quietly.
Kyo nodded and wiped the tears from her cheeks. “I was tired all the time.” She snifflled. “I tried really hard, but it was never enough and the medicine wasn't working as it should.” She shrugged.

“It does explain why you hold up so well in the face of exhaustion,” Katsurou mused. “You had family,” he said next, not really giving her any time to adjust to the abrupt shift in topic.

“Yeah,” she rubbed at her eyes one last time and then picked up her hitai-ate from the floor beside her. “I really miss my then-mother and the siblings I had,” she admitted quietly.

“Not your father?” Katsurou asked neutrally.

Kyo’s expression twisted briefly. “Not really. He was...” She frowned, trying to find words to explain. “Happy to pretend our childhood basically never happened. That our relationship was perfect and he never did anything wrong.” Which had never sat well with her. She’d been perfectly willing to disregard all of that, mostly, to play nice and do her best to get along -for her brother’s sake more than her own- but she’d never been able to stomach just ignoring everything. As if it hadn't happened.

Katsurou's mouth flattened ever so slightly.

“...Sensei, what does this mean?” She finally asked, voice small and barely audible.

“For you? Not much,” Katsurou said on a sigh. “There will be a note in your personal file, though the highly classified version only, for basically just the Hokage’s eyes and a few more potentials, depending on what career path you end up on.”

Kyo sighed and pulled her knees up to her chest, contemplating the rather bizarre situation she found herself in.

“There was a story, in the Before,” she eventually said, voice barely audible. “It was about this place.”

“Hm?” Katsurou made an inquiring noise, and when she glanced at him, he was watching her intently.

“There was a theory, back in that place; I read it somewhere,” she paused, “it said that every story in existence was merely a reflection of a world out there,” she bit her lower lip hard enough she had to consciously make sure she didn't accidentally make herself bleed. “It's the only explanation I have,” she whispered.

She could tell that Katsurou was processing the information she had just given him, what it might mean.

“It's not been very accurate so far, though,” she continued on a small, breathy laugh. She wiped at her face again. “But that story was written for children,” she admitted.

Katsurou scoffed, giving her an incredulous look.

“No matter what Academy children claim, shinobi life is not a bed-time adventure story,” the man said disapprovingly.

Kyo snickered. It was very true.

“Are you gonna treat me differently now, sensei?” Kyo asked after a long stretch of silence.
“Absolutely not,” Katsurou said without pause. “If anything, this just means you're even more annoying,” he grumbled brusquely.

All bark and no bite. Kyo smiled up at her stupid sensei, taking in his relaxed, open body-language. He wasn't holding himself differently, but-

“You're a very good actor, though, sensei,” she said with a slight smile. “I won't really know.”

“And you're wise to realise it, my dear little monster Genin,” Katsurou drawled, amusement all but dripping from his voice. “Now let's get you home, before you make a nest or something; I'll never get rid of you then.”

“Oh, yeah, sensei.” Kyo perked up a little. “We're definitely having our next sleep-over here, now. You have to join in.” She grinned half-heartedly.

The look Katsurou sent her was enough to make her laugh.

It was weak and just a fraction of her usual cheer, but it was better.

She felt better. Lighter.

If anyone had to know, Katsurou-sensei was the person she'd pick.

-x-x-x-
“I'm home,” Kyo called out tiredly, having returned from the latest courier mission. Kusa border, this time.

“In the kitchen, Kyo,” kaa-san replied softly, and yeah, it was late; Genma was no doubt asleep.

The last few weeks had been hectic, but at least Katsurou-sensei had kept to his word and not treated her the slightest bit different from how he always had.

It was actually a weight off her shoulders, someone finally knowing.

She hadn't realised how much the secret was pulling on her conscience until it had been lifted, at least partially. Kyo felt happier now.

“Hey, kaa-san,” she said once she'd stumbled out of her shoes and trudged into the kitchen.

“Oh, sweetheart,” Isshun sighed once she got her first look at her. She put her mug down on the kitchen table and rose to her feet. “Are you okay? Katsurou brought you by the hospital, yes?”

“Yeah.” Kyo rubbed at her eyes, blinking blearily at her mother. “It's not that deep; 's gonna be healed in a few days, medic said so.”

“Good.” Isshun sighed, tracing a careful finger over the bandages on her left arm and shoulder.

Iwa nin were vicious, and she'd been hit with high-velocity stone fragments. At least she hadn't been crushed by the earth jutsu like the Iwa Chuunin had intended before Katsurou-sensei killed him, so that was a plus.

“Are you hungry?” Kaa-san asked softly, cupping her cheek and pressing a quick kiss to her temple.

“Mhm,” Kyo hummed tiredly. When was she not hungry? Never, that's when. “Food?”

“Of course,” Isshun replied. She didn't ask if it was okay for her to eat it cold, because neither of them cared much about something like that. “Here you go, Kyo,” she said, putting a plate down in front of her.

Kyo dug in with remarkable gusto considering how exhausted she was.

When she was done, she turned her attention to Isshun, who smiled at her.

“What are you drinking?” She asked. It didn't smell like tea, though she was vaguely aware of having smelled it before.

“This?” Isshun tilted her mug, her smile taking on an fond tint. “This is something of a family tradition, I suppose.” She gave Kyo a considering look, took another sip and then got up to get the kettle. “The tradition, as it was taught to me, is that you get to start to drink this once you've had your
first kill.”

Kyo blinked. “But-” She'd had her first kill already, about a year ago, actually.

“You're so very young, Kyo,” her kaa-san sighed softly. “This is highly poisonous, and in our family, we've always waited longer to send our children into the field compared to other Clans.”

“So I'm too young?” Kyo asked belatedly, realising her mum had been waiting for some sort of response.

“I didn't start my poison lessons as early as you did, so I think it would be alright if you had a little.” Isshun hummed thoughtfully. “I'll show you how to make it later, when you're more well rested, okay?”

“Okay,” Kyo agreed easily, accepting the one quarter full cup and took a sip. “This tastes good,” she murmured around the rim of the mug, blinking with surprise.

Poisons tended to taste bitter, but this was sort of sweet.

Well, more spicy than sweet, but there was a definitely pleasant taste to it.

“It's Bloodroot.” Isshun smiled, taking a sip of her own mug.

Kyo paused in the act of taking another sip. “The actual root?” She couldn't help but ask.

Because that was seriously potent stuff.

Isshun hummed an affirmative with a secretive smile.

“Now, drink your tea and then off to bed,” she urged her gently. “Genma's been missing you, so he'll want to spend as much time with you as possible tomorrow.”

“Oh, Kyo” Kyo drained her 'tea' and then hopped off her chair and wandered off towards the bathroom. “G'night. Love you, kaa-san.”

“Love you, too, Kyo,” Isshun returned softly, getting up to clean up the kitchen and go to bed herself, too.

The next morning, Kyo woke up relatively late.

She got up, didn't bother to get dressed, and instead just wandered sleepy into kaa-san's room and climbed up onto the mattress, finally collapsing next to her mum.

“Good morning,” Isshun said softly, snaking one arm out from under the covers and around Kyo, pulling her closer into a semi-hug.

Kyo grunted a vague response, feeling something press against her hair quickly. “What are we doin' today?” She asked quietly an indefinable time later, feeling slightly more human.

“If the weather was nice, I was planning on the park, and then I need to pick up groceries on the way home,” Isshun told her lightly. “Did you have something different in mind?”

“No,” Kyo assured her easily. It sounded nice. “I need to get some reading done, too,” she admitted, absently rubbing at one of her eyes. “Sensei gave us a few scrolls to memorize,” she added at kaa-
san's inquisitive glance.

Isshun hummed and pulled her into a tight hug. “Let’s get started on breakfast,” she said.

“I’ll get Genma,” Kyo offered and sat up.

The skin around Isshun’s eyes crinkled with a suppressed smile and she dropped another quick kiss onto her hair before she got out of bed, walking over to the closet for a set of clothes.

By the time they finally left the apartment, it was around ten thirty in the morning.

Isshun was carrying Genma, but Kyo had insisted on taking the bag with everything they might need in the span of the day.

On the way through the village, Kyo spotted one of her teammates on the other side of the street.

“Be right back, kaa-san,” she said, and jogged across the street. “Hello, Maki.” She smiled at the boy who startled at the sound of her voice and turned towards her with a small, involuntary smile.

“Hey, Kyo,” he greeted. “What are you doing here?” He glanced down at the bag she was carrying and then looked around, as if wondering if Taku would pop up somewhere, too.

“We’re going to the park,” she said, pointing over to where kaa-san was waiting with Genma on her arm, watching them with a fondly amused look on her face. “Wanna come?”

“Oh, uh,” Maki blinked, clearly blind-sided by the offer, “won’t that be me butting into your family time?” He asked tentatively.

Kyo tilted her head. “You’re family too, so not really.” She shrugged. “What are you doing here, anyway? You like to spend time with your sisters on your days off, right?” She asked, taking hold of Maki’s hand and towing him over to her mum.

“Chisa-chan's got a cold, so kaa-chan’s busy.” Maki shrugged, scratching absently at the healing scrape on his elbow. “And I don't really want to get sick,” he added in a mutter.

Kyo squeezed his fingers and turned to Isshun, who was watching them curiously. “It’s okay for Maki to spend some of today with us, right?” She asked with a hopeful smile.

“Yes, of course,” Isshun replied, unfazed and calm.

Kyo beamed at her mother and then turned back to Maki, who's hand she was still holding. “Did you bring your scrolls with you?” She questioned curiously.

Maki grimaced. “I'd like to say no, but I always end up with them in my pockets, because I'm somewhat terrified sensei's going to cross-examine me about how hard I tried to learn it all, way before I'm ready,” he confessed.


“Please,” Maki agreed with a relieved air.

They walked in silence for a while, the only one making any noise being Genma, who was babbling enthusiastically at Isshun, their kaa-san nodding solemnly at appropriate intervals.

“You realise we're gonna have to get together and teach Taku all of this once we've got it down,
right?” Kyo asked casually, eagerly watching for Maki's reaction out of the corner of her eye.

The boy nodded along, until he actually registered the words, and froze. He remained motionless for all of a heartbeat, before he slumped with a heavy sigh and resumed walking.

“Sensei's gonna call it a great opportunity to reinforce the lesson and learn it even better, isn't he?”

“Most likely, yeah,” Kyo agreed with a cheerful grin. He would be right about it, too, because teaching someone else what you'd learned was proof that you'd really learned it properly.

When they finally walked into the park, Isshun spread out the trusty baby blanket in an out-of-the-way spot and settled down with something to read, while Kyo took Genma and went to the sandbox, Maki trailing after curiously.

They ended up building weird constructs for Genma to smash to pieces with small, eager hands until the little boy ran out of energy.

While Genma napped, Isshun provided Kyo and Maki with lunch and then watched them settle down with their identical scrolls.

“So what is Katsurou having you learn?” She asked idly, tucking the thin blanket more properly around Genma where he lay beside her, sleeping. Isshun glanced up when they didn't immediately respond.

Kyo exchanged a look with Maki and gave her mum a sheepish smile. “...are we allowed to tell you?” She asked uncertainly, because sensei hadn't said anything about it, but at the same time... things like these weren't something you spread around.

Maki was frozen on the spot, looking like he was contemplating making a run for it.

Thankfully, her kaa-san just smiled, looking amused. “I'm fairly sure anything deemed safe enough to give a Genin will be safe with me,” she said.

Put that way, it made a lot of sense and made Kyo feel all kinds of embarrassed.

She giggled shortly and scooted over to her mother to show her the scroll.

Isshun scanned the page they were on with interest, making a small, curious noise in the back of her throat. “Katsurou's having you learn code? Already?” She mused thoughtfully, turning her gaze on first Kyo, then Maki, who squirmed uncomfortably under the attention.

“He wants us to memorize it,” Kyo huffed, pulling the scroll back to herself to scowl down on it. “And he won't even tell us why,” she complained half-heartedly.

She was sure Katsurou-sensei had a very good reason.

That he wasn't sharing.

Isshun hummed. “Well, that's not one I'm familiar with,” she said, causing both Kyo and Maki to slump disappointedly. “But I can still give you a few tips when it comes to memorization,” she added, raising an eyebrow at them.

Kyo grinned at her kaa-san, and even Maki perked up.

“You're awesome, Isshun-san, thank you,” Maki said fervently, shuffling closer until they were all sitting in a tight group, listening to Isshun's impromptu lecture on memorizing large amounts of
By the time Genma woke up, Kyo and Maki were both deeply concentrated on their task and barely noticed Isshun picking the little boy up to take him to the closest restroom to change his nappy and clean him up a bit.

When she eventually came back, she brought enough dango for all of them with her.

“So are you going back home or would you like to stay around for dinner?” Kyo asked when they began to pack up and leave.

“Kaa-chan's probably wondering where I am by now,” Maki muttered reluctantly, frowning down on the blanket he was folding. “And she asked me to pick up a few things,” he added, as if just remembering.

“That's okay,” Kyo assured him, “we're getting groceries, so you could buy what you need, come home and eat dinner with us and then go home?” She suggested hopefully.

Today had been a really nice day, and it wasn't very often she got the chance to just hang out with her teammates without there being any training involved.

She liked it, and next time, they'd have to bring Taku along as well.

“Are you sure it's not an inconvenience?” Maki asked, shooting a long look at Isshun, who seemed to be immersed in wrangling a tired, cranky baby Genma.

“Our home is always open to you, Maki-kun,” Isshun assured the boy with a quick, distracted smile. “Same as it's always been for Kou's teammates and whatever other friends I'm sure Kyo will eventually make.”

“I've told you, Maki,” Kyo said, grabbing hold of his hand again with a grin. “Teams are family.”

In the face of that, Maki quietly admitted defeat and came with them when they left for the convenience store the Shiranui family usually frequented, and then ate dinner with them, spending the meal exchanging light-hearted complaints about Katsurou-sensei with Kyo.

When he left for home, it was with a smile on his face and a promise to give Isshun's regards to his mother.

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Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

Life continues, there are missions and things are changing

Life was surprisingly monotonous for something as exciting as being a ninja.

Their missions kept being largely the same; courier mission after courier mission with the occasional escort thrown in for fun.

Though, those weren't actually fun.

Bandits were a real problem, and there was only one standard response in these times: instant execution.

If she stopped to think about it, it threatened to make her sick.

So! She tried not to think about it too much.

It was much nicer to focus on the smaller, happier things. Like Genma learning to call her 'nee-san'. He was such an adorable brother.

Or the birthday dinner her team took her on when she turned eight. It was very nice; Katsurou-sensei was even there and everything! He'd celebrated Taku's birthday with them, too.

The big softie.

"Kyo!"

Kyo was smiling before she turned around, "Hey, Taku. Kisaki. What are you up to?" She asked, taking in the pair of them.

Quite different from when they'd graduated.

Kisaki was huge for one. Bigger than even the dogs she'd had in her Before life; bigger than a calf.

Actually, she might just be a little bigger than Akamaru had been made to look in the Naruto manga, thinking about it, because Taku could've definitely ridden her into battle if he'd been so inclined.

Kisaki didn't have hanging ears, though, and looked more like a wolf. Almost.

Taku was a bit too fond and respectful of his ninken to do that, she was fairly sure.

"Sensei came by the compound; we've got a mission."

"Again? We just got back the other day!" Kyo sighed. "Genma's gonna cry again, because I promised I'd go with him to the park tomorrow."

"He'll get over it." Taku shrugged. "At least you were there for his birthday," he added after a second, probably realising Genma wasn't the only one who would be disappointed by the change of
“Yeah.” Kyo couldn't help but smile. “He's getting so big.”

It was weird to see him grow up like this, because her first little brother had been just two and a half years younger than her, and it'd felt -at the time- like they weren't all that different in age. They'd both been about equally small.

Not so much now, what with six years between them.

“When are we leaving?” She asked, snapping out of her thoughts.

“As soon as possible.” Taku shrugged again. “We have to go find Maki now, so see ya in a bit!” He tossed over his shoulder, already running down the street to hunt down their third member with Kisaki at his side.

“Better go pack, then,” Kyo muttered to herself and sighed.

At least the courier missions didn't take all that long. Two, three days unless there were complications.

Kyo absently rubbed at her right hip; she'd gotten hit with a kunai about five months ago. Grazed more than anything, really, but nevertheless, that had been an interesting experience.

Eh, she'd gotten away with a pretty cool scar, so that was... nice. Or something.

“Tou-san?” Kyo called into the apartment when she had stepped through the door. “Are you still here?”

“Yeah, in the kitchen,” tou-san replied a beat later. “Trying to get Genma-chan to eat his lunch,” he added wryly.

Kyo smiled and entered the room. “He doesn't like carrots,” she remarked after a look at what Kou was trying to feed the obstinate toddler.

“Nee-cha!” Genma exclaimed at the sight of her, waving his arms in her direction with a happy grin.

Kyo walked over to give him a quick kiss on a sticky cheek.

“I knew I forgot something,” tou-san sighed, giving her a dryly amused look. Kyo could understand; being a picky eater wasn’t exactly something shinobi could afford to be. “I didn't think you'd be back quite yet. What's up?”

“Apparently got a mission,” Kyo said, her smile fading. “I have to leave as soon as possible.”

“Then you should be packing, kitten.” Tou-san smiled sadly. “Come here; you're not too old for hugs yet, right?”

“I'll never be too old for hugs,” Kyo promised.

“Ah, you say that now,” Kou mused theatrically, pressing a kiss to her temple. “You be careful out there, okay? I don't know how I'll cope here alone with Genma when I have to worry about both you and Isshun,” he wondered, squeezing her tight before releasing her with a sigh.

“Don't worry; I'll hug you even when I'm an awkward teenager, tou-san,” she swore with slightly exaggerated care, even though it was perfectly true.
“Go. Pack,” Kou ordered her with a snort, going back to his attempts to feed the contrary two year old in the room. “Mission,” he reminded.

Kyo rolled her eyes and went to her room. Her and Genma's room. She rather liked it, though it meant she had to be careful with where she stored her weapons.

“Taku had to find Maki, so it's not like I'm in a hurry here!” She yelled in the direction of the kitchen. “We can't leave until all of us are there, anyway.”

“Pack your things, sweetheart!” Kou called back, sounding thoroughly amused. “Take extra needles!” He added after a brief pause.

“You worry too much,” Kyo commented lightly when she was done and walked back into the kitchen.

“I don't think I worry enough,” her tou-san countered distractedly, trying to make Genma accept the spoon with mashed carrots and beans. “Now, got everything? Nothing forgotten?”

“I've been a Genin for two years, tou-san,” Kyo replied exasperatedly. “You weren't like this in the beginning.”

“Yeah, well,” Kou huffed, taking a pause in the silent competition of stubbornness with the toddler to lean back and cross his arms over his chest, giving her an amused once-over. “Fatherhood does things to you, kitten. Ryota seems to be afraid it's contagious.”

“Ryota thinks emotions are contagious.”

“You've got a fair point.” Kou nodded sagely. “Just take care of yourself, okay? Look out for that team of yours, too.”

“I always try to, tou-san,” Kyo said, giving the man one last hug, pressing a quick kiss to his stubbly cheek. “You need to shave!” She told him cheerfully before she dashed off.

She could hear Kou snort and say something commiserating to Genma before she closed the door behind her.

With a small smile, she took off running towards the village gates.

Konoha was familiar now, like nowhere else had ever been. It felt like she knew every nook and cranny and she could navigate both the streets and the rooftops even when she was dead-tired and injured.

“Hey, sensei,” she greeted Katsurou when she jumped down to the ground in the open space in front of the gates.

“And here I was, hoping I wouldn't have to see your face quite yet,” Katsurou sighed dramatically, making Kyo grin.

“Aw, you know you've missed me since yesterday,” she piped back at him.

“Lies,” Katsurou deadpanned. “It's like an infection that's never cured. I've been ruined for life.”

“He's what now?” Maki asked, landing next to her.

At twelve, Maki was currently the tallest of him and Taku. Something which bugged the other - slightly older boy- to no end.
“Sensei’s just telling me how much he cares about us,” Kyo said cheerfully.

“Ah,” Maki blinked at Katsurou, who stared evenly back. “Still the best poker-face in the village,” the boy mused. “It's sad how no one will ever know how much he loves us,” he sighed morosely, giving Katsurou-sensei a long, miserable look that would make most people fold like wet paper.

Kyo, Kisaki and Taku had helped him develop it during one of their sleepovers. Too bad it never worked on sensei.

“Rats are easier to get rid of than you,” was all Katsurou said. “Cockroaches, even.”

“I'm here!” Taku shouted as he came skidding to a halt next to them, Kisaki joining him a second later with far more dignity and poise.

“How can you be the last one here when sensei told you first?” Maki immediately asked, crossing his arms and giving Taku a pointed look.

“Oi! Because I had to track your stupid ass down, idiot!” Taku shot back, instantly in Maki's face.

They really loved each other. Honestly.

“Why didn't you pack first, moron?” Maki asked, and that was actually a pretty good question.

“I could always sedate them,” Kyo offered.

“If I wouldn't have to carry them, I'd accept,” Katsurou mused idly, before he clapped his hands together. “Alright, my loveable little monsters; playtime's over!”

Taku and Maki both fell silent and turned to watch Katsurou-sensei expectantly.

“Beautiful. You've trained them so well, sensei,” Kyo praised with an amused smile.

“You, watch it.” Katsurou sent her a look. “Don't try and act like I don't know you three far better than I ever wanted or cared to,” he grumbled and made his way over to the guard desk.

“He loves us so much,” Kyo said to her teammates.

“Oh, he's completely gone. It's almost sad,” Maki agreed easily.

“Sucker's just too cut off from his own emotions. He needs therapy,” Taku declared firmly, a wicked grin playing around his mouth. “It's a real tragedy.”

“I'm gonna end up 'accidentally' murdering you three one day,” Katsurou threatened casually when he came back. “The Hokage won't even be able to hold it against me.”

“But you'd be so sad, sensei,” Kyo told him solemnly. “You'd be lonely.”

“And bored,” Taku added gleefully. “Who else would keep you on your toes?”

“You're the reason I suffer from insomnia.” Katsurou sighed. “Let's go.”

They all took off into the trees, and after a few minutes' running, stopped to talk and for Katsurou-sensei to hand the scrolls over to Kyo.

“Border to Yu this time,” he said as she was stuffing the scrolls into her poison pack.
“But Kumo ninja are so high-strung,” Kyo complained lightly. “And they never take me seriously.”


“I like to think of myself as punny,” she returned with an easy grin. “Do you think any of them will try to fry us this time?” Kuma being located in the Land of Lightning and all.

“There's always hope,” Katsurou muttered under his breath. “Come on, Taku, Kisaki, you take point. I'll bring up the rear.”

“Yes, sensei,” they all chorused and then set off in a north-east direction, arranged in their most well-used formation.

It was a pretty straightforward mission.

They came across a Kumo team close to their destination, but managed to shake them off and reach their goal. They reported the enemy activity, a Konoha team was sent off after the Kumo shinobi, and then early the next morning, they set back out for Konoha with a different set of scrolls.

Most people probably didn't realise it, but doing courier runs was hard work. Short but intense missions that just stacked up until it felt like you hardly got any time off at all.

It was stressful, because the odds of coming across enemy shinobi to or from the border stations were quite high, and for most of it, the opportunities for backup were slim.

If there was one thing Kyo definitely didn't enjoy, it was feeling like a hunted animal.

“I feel like we're doing this too often, sensei,” Taku muttered as they jumped down to walk through the Konoha main gates at a civilian pace.

Katsurou rubbed a hand at his chin, giving an acknowledging hum. “Our success rate it pretty high by now, so,” he shrugged, “we're popular.”

“We're so lucky,” Kyo mused, bumping her shoulder into Maki's arm, who snorted.

“The luckiest,” the boy agreed wryly.

“I love how we define 'success' the same as not dying,” Taku huffed, shaking his head.

“Don't forget not losing the messages,” Kyo added with a small grin. “Or getting lost in general.”

“That would just be pathetic,” Taku returned, appalled and positively scandalized.

“Let's go make our delivery before you manage to actually live up to those oh so ridiculous claims of potential mess-ups,” Katsurou said with a smirk at Kyo, who gave an offended squawk.

“As if I'd actually- Sensei!” She objected, pointing accusingly at the man. “You wound me!”

“He's just being realistic, Kyo,” Maki said sympathetically, aiming for a concerned and mournful look and Maki was definitely their best actor. The loveable ass.

“Betrayal!” Kyo gasped theatrically, staggering with only slightly exaggerated fatigue, aiming to make it look like emotional distress instead. “By my own teammate. Taku!” She turned to the Inuzuka, who snorted in advance. “You're with me, right? Don't join those idiots!”

“I'm on your side,” Kisaki said casually, sidling closer to Kyo and rubbing her head against her side.
Seriously, the dog was huge. Kyo loved it.

“Of course you are,” Kyo told her with a grin, raising her voice to talk over Taku's offended splutter. “Us females have to stick together, Kisaki.”

The ninken gave a solemn nod, though the glint of wicked amusement in her eyes was clear to all of them.

“Office faces on,” Katsurou-sensei ordered before they stepped into the Hokage tower, and all four of them instantly adopted serious, professional airs.

It was fun to make it into a game; see if anyone broke the mask.

Loser paid for dinner during their next outing.

They delivered their scrolls without issue and then left, all of them with their share of the paperwork.

“See you guys day after tomorrow!” Kyo said with a smile before she took off for home, feeling content and happy after a completed mission.

No one had been hurt, nothing had gone wrong and other than that brush with the Kumo team, things had gone without a hitch.

“I'm home!” Kyo called out softly when she stepped into the dark apartment.

Tou-san should be home, but he might be out with Genma, either at the park, his parents' or just the training grounds.

Well, Kyo could get started on dinner. Provided her dad had managed to grab groceries while she'd been gone.

But first; shower.

She'd just been gone two days, but wow did she smell!

Nothing like being back home to make you realise, she mused wryly, picking at her t-shirt and pulling it up to her face for a cautious sniff.

Yep, stale sweat, forest, a hint of wet dog and whatever else she'd managed to pick up. At least there wasn't any blood this time, she thought cheerfully, trudging into her room for a fresh change of clothes. Buck naked, because she'd forgotten to get some before hitting the bathroom.

Dressed and ready for food, Kyo grabbed her gathered weapons and stashed them on the top shelf of her wardrobe, where small, curious fingers couldn't reach them.

It wasn't until she was on her way to the kitchen that Kyo realised something might not be as it seemed.

She wasn't sure what made her notice, but she found her feet swerving from the short path to the kitchen to the door to kaa-san and tou-san’s room, instead.

Feeling foolish, Kyo still pushed the door open it a bit more and stuck her head into the room to take a look around.

As always, the light was muted in her parents' room, their window facing east. They got the morning sun but not much else.
Tou-san's side of the bed was closest to the door, kaa-san's closest to the window.

Kou was sitting on the side of the bed furthest from the door, elbows on his knees and head cradled in his hands. His back towards the door, so she couldn't see his face.

“Tou-san?” Kyo asked, instantly feeling her good mood evaporate. “I didn't think you were home; where's Genma?”

“...with kaa-chan,” he answered quietly after a beat of pressing silence.

Kyo felt like she should walk into the room, approach him to check on him and make sure he was okay. She couldn't make her feet move, though.

“Do you want me to get him?” She asked after a beat, forcing her voice out of a suddenly dry throat. “I mean, I was planning to cook something, but I don't mind getting him after-”

“Kyo,” tou-san said, interrupting her nervous chatter.

Kyo bit her tongue to keep herself silent.

Kou still hadn't looked at her, or raised his head from his hands at all and it was making her uneasy. Something was wrong.

“Tou-san, wha-”

“I was notified that Isshun's-” he cut himself off for a deep breath. “She's not-”

Kyo stared at her dad. Her face felt cold and her mind was blank.

Her eyes had fully adjusted to the gloom now, and Kyo noticed the unopened, official scroll lying on the bed next to where her dad was sitting.

Kyo turned on her heel and ran for the door.

Tou-san didn't so much as flinch when she slammed the door closed behind her.

Let's see, sensei was no doubt not home yet; having to take care of the post-mission stuff Kyo was glad she didn't have to deal with yet. Maki was out; she didn't want to spook his parents and she didn't want to deal with civilians right now anyway.

The Inuzuka compound it was.

Kyo ran as fast as she could across the village, ignoring the curious looks it attracted from the few other shinobi out and about. Her fatigue from an hour ago was gone, making it easy to run and jump as if she hadn't just returned from a run that had taken her halfway across Fire Country and back.

The guard at the gates to the Inuzuka compound didn't even try to stop her when she raced passed, far too used to her and Maki traipsing in and out of the place at all hours of the day by now. Pretty much all of them knew who she was, if only so far as that she was Taku's Genin teammate.

Kyo was distantly grateful.

She found him outside.

Kisaki spotted her first and she had no idea what the expression on her face looked like, but the
alarmed noise she made had Taku on his feet in a second, spinning around and getting an armful of Kyo instead of whatever threat he had imagined.

“Kyo?” He asked, bewildered, even as his arms came up around her back, pulling her protectively closer. “What’s going on? Shouldn’t you be resting?” He paused. “Where are your shoes?”

And yeah, that was no doubt why her feet sort of hurt.

She took a deep, unsteady breath, taking in Taku's earthy scent, not even mildly annoyed by the fact that he had clearly not showered yet and still smelled like old sweat.

She pressed her face more firmly into his chest, tightening her arms around his middle, refusing to let go.

“Kyo, seriously,” Taku tried again, and she could tell he was starting to get really worried. “What the hell happened? I saw you just an hour ago!”

Kyo opened her mouth, to explain, to tell him, but-the only thing that came out was a small, harsh breath.

“I'll go get Maki,” Kisaki declared next to them, and Kyo just knew she was looking between them with worried eyes, ears flicking indecisively.

“No, it's okay. I'm okay,” Kyo said before the ninen could take off. “I just- can I stay like this for a while?” She asked, voice small and strained.

“...yeah. Of course,” Taku muttered, squeezing her gently. “Let's sit down, 'cause your stamina still sorta sucks an ya need ta rest.”

Kyo couldn't help but huff out a small laugh, because trust Taku to be kind of insulting when trying to comfort someone.

She still followed when Taku shuffled off to the side of the small... training ground? And sat down in the shade of a solitary tree.

For once, they'd reached the village in the afternoon, rather than late evening. It might have had something to do with the fact that they'd left the border station hours before sunrise this morning, but... it was nice.

After just a few minutes, Taku sighed and let himself fall backwards so that he was lying on his back, Kyo propped up mostly on his stomach.

The sun and dappled shadows from the leaves of the tree felt nice on her back, and the sound of the gentle breeze was calming.

Kyo focused on taking deep, slow breaths.

Kisaki settled next to them, her head a heavy weight on the back of Kyo's legs.

She might have dozed off for a few minutes, but when she roused again, she felt marginally better.

“Sorry, Taku. Thank you,” she said as she slowly shifted herself into a sitting position, blinking at the boy, who peered back.

“No problem,” he said idly, looking quite comfortable where he lay. “Wanna tell me what's up now?”
Kyo mutely shook her head. “I'm fine,” she said again, hoping that if she repeated the lie often enough, it would eventually come true. “I need to go pick up Genma,” she muttered, rubbing a hand over her face.

It felt naked without her hitai-ate, but she'd forgotten to put it on and it wasn't like she had planned to leave the apartment today.

Her mind shied away from the reason behind her actions, and she bounced back to her feet with a forced smile.

“Thank you, Taku,” she told him again. “You're a good teammate and an awesome friend.”

“Oh-huh,” Taku grunted, watching her sceptically for a long second before he exchanged a quick look with Kisaki. “See you at training, then, I guess?”

“Yeah,” Kyo agreed, gave him a wave and then took off.

She didn't stop until she was outside her grandparents' house. Pausing, Kyo hesitated but then went through the hand-signs for a henge, using a small amount of chakra to make it look like she was actually wearing shoes.

She wasn't particularly fond of the idea of probing questions right now.

Kyo knocked on the door.

“Oh, Kyo-chan,” Haname-obaa-san greeted her with an affectionate smile. “Here to pick up Genma-chan? I take it Kou-kun is back from his mission?”

“Oh, yeah,” Kyo said easily, having no idea what sort of lie her dad had given. “It was just one of the inter-village ones.” She shrugged.

That was a likely excuse if tou-san needed a few hours to himself, right? Right.

“Well, Genma-chan's in the garden,” obaa-san said. “Would you like me to get him?”

“Yes, please.” Kyo smiled, hoping her grandmother wouldn't pick up on anything off about the expression.

She watched her grandmother retreat into the house, and a few seconds later, there was an excited squeal.

“Nee-san!” Gemna screamed, running as fast as his little legs could manage towards her, practically slamming into her knees.

“Oh,” Kyo huffed, but gladly wrapped her arms around Genma and picked him up. The little boy instantly wrapped both arms and legs around her in an octopus hug. “Nice to see you too,” she laughed faintly, hugging him tight.

“No,” Genma returned stubbornly.

“No?” Kyo echoed amusedly.
“No,” Genma confirmed, tightening his hold on her.

“Ready to go home?” She asked instead of pressing the issue.

Genma peered up at her, his large brown eyes all but shining with hopeful joy at the prospect. Kyo's heart hurt looking at him.

“Here’s his bag, sweetie,” obaa-san said, wandering over with Gemna's little backpack in her hands. “Tell your tou-san that he should pop by for a proper visit, soon. Have a nice evening, Kyo-chan.”

“You too, obaa-san,” Kyo returned, took Genma's bag and then turned and walked calmly down the path back to the street.

Part of her wanted to run back home as quickly as she could. The rest of her, though, wanted to take her time, and not just because she wasn't entirely sure it was safe for her to go roof hopping with Genma when he was so little.

For the first time in her life, this life, she didn't particularly want to see her dad.

“So what did you do with obaa-san today?” She asked Genma, who finally lifted his head from her shoulder to beam at her.

“Played, and 'baa-san made snacks!” He gushed, emotions doing a u-turn from his rather gloomy mood from a second ago.

“Did you have fun?” She asked, setting Genma down when he began to squirm.

“Yup!” Her little brother chirped, grabbing her hand and walking next to her. “Can we go to the park?”

“Tomorrow,” Kyo promised. “We can spend all day,” she told him. She could make a picnic out of it, too.

“Yay!” Genma threw his arms in the air, which included the hand in hers’.

Kyo smiled and brought Genma home.

She got up early the next day, got dressed properly, deciding to go for full shinobi gear. Partly because it made her more comfortable, and partly because it made the civilians respect her, rather than just treat her like an eight year old little girl who needed her mo- parents. Who needed her parents.

After making sure Genma was still sleeping comfortably, Kyo moved out into the kitchen to start cooking.

She made two lunch boxes, one for her, one for Genma, and then wrapped them up and got started on breakfast.

That done, it was eight in the morning, and she washed her hands and walked back into her and Genma's room to wake her little brother.

“Morning, Genma,” Kyo whispered, putting her hand on the toddler's shoulder. “Time to get up if you still want to go to the park,” she fairly sing-songed when her little brother tried to burrow deeper into his pillow.


“Really?” Genma asked, managing to push himself somewhat upright, squinting at her. “I wanna go,” he mumbled, voice bordering on a whine.

“Okay, then let's start by getting up,” Kyo said, carefully lifting the boy from his bed. She carried him into the bathroom and all but parked his little butt on the toilet. “Wait here while I get your clothes, okay?”

“Okay,” Genma muttered, rubbing tiredly at his eyes with one small fist, face scrunched up in defence against the bright lights in the bathroom.

“You done?” She asked when she came back, a pile of folded clothes in her arms.

Genma nodded.

Kyo helped him wash up and get dressed for the day, and then carried him into the kitchen, settling him—with some difficulty—into the high-seat she herself had used once.

She couldn't wait for that growth spurt that was bound to set in any time now.

She was certainly eating enough for it, so Kyo was hopeful.

“Let's eat, Genma-chan, so we can go afterwards, okay?” She smiled pushing the simple but perfectly acceptable meal closer to the toddler.

She'd liked to cook in her past life, but she hadn't had all that much time to practise here. Never mind that there hadn't been all that much need for it.

It took some time, but two years after Genma had been born, Kyo had anticipated it.

It was after nine by the time Kyo was helping Genma with his sandals and then finally left for the park.

She hadn't checked their parents' bedroom.

-x-x-x-
Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

Kyo is forced to face the truth

Kyo had brought enough reading material to last her, though she spent much of the day playing with her brother, pushing him on the swing and building a fantastic sand castle with him. Which Genma quite gleefully smashed to pieces afterwards.

They ate the lunch Kyo had made and packed, and she made sure her little brother drank plenty of water and wore his sun-hat, because it was warm and the sun was beating down on them from a clear, blue sky.

It wasn't anything she hadn't done before, but never completely on her own.

Either of their parents had always been with them, before.

“When's kaa-san coming home?” Genma asked drowsily when Kyo was carrying him home a few hours later.

Kyo's heart stuttered in her chest, but she still managed a small smile.

“Come on, Genma-chan. We're almost home now, and you're finally gonna get that nap,” she said, hoisting the boy a bit higher in her arms.

It was lucky she was a kunoichi, she figured, or she'd never have had the strength to carry Genma around like this.

Genma just made a discontent sound and put his head on her shoulder.

The next morning, Kyo repeated the process from the previous day, only she had to wake up Genma earlier, much to the boy's displeasure.

She dressed him, fed him and then dropped him off at their grandparents' house with the promise of picking him up once she was done with training, and then hurried off for their training ground to the sound of Genma's minor temper tantrum still ringing in her ears.

Well, he was tired and unhappy and he got like this sometimes.

“Morning, sensei,” Kyo greeted once she reached their training ground. “And Taku,” she added when she spotted the boy sitting a small distance away, looking to be working on a chakra exercise Katsurou had introduced them to a while back. “Hey, girl.” She smiled when Kisaki came trotting over to say hi.

“Are you okay?” The ninen asked, inspecting her carefully while Kyo buried her fingers in her thick, white fur.

“Yep,” Kyo smiled, ignoring the twist of guilt and something else in her gut at the outright lie. “How come you two are here so early?” Usually, Taku was the last one to arrive, because he liked to sleep
in, had trouble waking up and his family wasn't always home to wake him in the mornings.

“Had a few questions for sensei,” Kisaki said, accompanying her words with the dog-equivalent of a shrug.

Kyo ruffled the fur between her ears and then walked over to Taku, joining him in trying to make a leaf split/catch on fire with nothing more than their chakra.

She honestly didn't think more about it, and she was far too busy to dwell on much in the days that followed.

Three days after she'd come back from her mission, Kyo stood in front of the door to her parents' room. She had bathed Genma and tucked him into bed. She had washed up after dinner and cleaned up a bit after her brother's playtime in the living room earlier in the evening.

She'd done a load of laundry, hung it to dry and she was more than ready for bed herself, really.

Kyo stared at the closed door.

Closed. Like it had never really been before.

Taking a deep breath, Kyo pushed down the handle and got her first look of the room in three days.

It looked... exactly the same.

She didn't know what she had been expecting, but Kyo had had a tentative image in her head of an utter mess.

The only thing that had really changed -even the damn scroll was lying in the exact same spot, still unopened- was that tou-san was sitting on the bed, back against the headboard and his legs drawn up loosely towards his chest.

His elbows were propped on his knees and his hands were splayed over his face, covering his eyes.

From what she could see of his face, there was stubble on his cheeks and she wasn't sure if he was sleeping, or if he simply hadn't slept since she saw him last.

Regardless, he didn't look all that good.

Kyo opened her mouth, couldn't think of a single thing to say, closed it again and walked out. She carefully closed the door behind her again and went to bed.

The days felt far too long, but at the same time, she wasn't at all sure where they went.

Kyo kept herself busy, taking care of Genma, the apartment, picking up groceries on the way home from training and providing herself, her brother and -hopefully- tou-san with food.

She didn't know if the man was eating, but she'd started putting a plate of food on the bedside table closest to the door whenever she'd cooked a meal.

At least the plate ended up in the sink, but...

Genma had been increasingly weepy and clingy the last couple of days. Which meant leaving him with Haname-obaa-san in the mornings were getting more difficult, taking longer.
She'd taken to leaving home earlier in the mornings to make sure she wouldn't be late.

“Kyo, one moment,” Katsurou-sensei said before she could run off after he'd dismissed them after training, seven days after Taku had showed up before her to team training.

Kyo almost stumbled, because she'd just been about to run off to pick up groceries and then she had to swing by obaa-san's for Genma. Would she have time to visit the blacksmith first?

Taku and Maki exchanged a look, glanced at sensei and then reluctantly left.

“What?” Kyo asked impatiently. She had a lot to do.

Katsurou studied her intently for a long second, a small frown pulling on his blond brows.

When Kyo was on the brink of just outright asking what he wanted, her sensei started walking back towards Konoha, waving a hand for her to follow.

Kyo fell into step next to him.

“You need to use your words, sensei,” she muttered irritably. “You do this far too often.”

And it was a bit rude, perhaps, but Katsurou merely sent her a glance and didn't comment.

She frowned when she realised in what direction he was steering them.

“I had things to do before going home,” she huffed, though there was a tight pressure in her chest that felt a bit like fear.

Katsurou gave a non-committal hum and walked on, posture relaxed and almost leisurely.

It was frustrating just looking at him.

Frowning down at the ground, Kyo chewed on her lower lip and followed after him as he started up the stairs of her apartment building.

When he stopped in front of the correct apartment, Katsurou sent her a look and she reluctantly unlocked and opened the door.

As she had known it would be, the apartment was dark and looking to be completely deserted.

Katsurou-sensei walked in and, after a brief pause, continued inside without taking off his sandals.

Kyo quickly hurried after.

Her stomach dropped into her pelvis when her sensei immediately set his sights on the door to her parents' bedroom.

“Sensei-” she cut herself off at the look he gave her. Sharp, unamused and uncompromising.

When he opened the closed door, Kyo couldn't help but hold her breath.

She didn't move at all when Katsurou disappeared into the room, swallowed up by the gloom. Not that the apartment was particularly dark -it was the middle of the afternoon- but the atmosphere was enough to eclipse the light.

He'd left the door open behind him, so she didn't have any trouble hearing what was said.
“Get up,” Katsurou said.

“Go away,” Kou returned hoarsely after a beat of heavy silence.

“No. Get up,” the Yamanaka repeated sharply. “Get up, clean yourself up and get a grip.”

“Shut up,” she could hear Kou growl back. “This is none of your business; get the hell out.”

She wasn't sure what happened next, but sensei came back out, dragging Kou behind him by the front of his shirt.

Which... her dad didn't look particularly happy about. The way he forced Katsurou to let go was rather telling, jabbing a hand aggressively at the blond's face in a move Kyo had seen before, but only in the form of a far less lethal-looking kata.

Her heart jumped from her pelvis to her throat faster than she could blink, urging her to quickly draw back and get well out of the firing line.

Sensei was a Jounin, and dad was a Tokubetsu.

Far out of her league.

It was a short fight, fast and vicious, but Katsurou got Kou pinned up against a wall, much to the man's obvious fury.

“What are you even doing here?” Kou hissed, straining against her sensei's hold. “This is none of your damn business! Fuck off, man!”

“Your daughter is my business,” Katsurou returned and his voice was cold, tight, controlled. He was angry. “Look at her!” He said, jarring his hold on Kou in a manner that looked like it bordered on painful and jerked his chin in Kyo's direction.

Kou glared at Katsurou, but after a beat, grudgingly did as directed, shifting his gaze to look behind the Jounin.

He didn't spot her right away, which spoke enough about his physical and mental state on it's own, but when he did, he blinked and slowly paled.

“Kyo?” He rasped faintly, and Kyo finally became aware of herself enough to realise she was breathing hard.

Panting, as if she had been the one fighting rather than sensei and tou-san.

In one hand, she had a senbon clenched in a white-knuckled grip and she didn't know when she'd grabbed it. She'd somehow clamped down on her chakra without noticing, too. Completely.

Oh, and she was standing in a defensive stance.

When had that happened?

“Kyo?” Katsuoru-sensei's voice effortlessly tore her out of her own confused, disjointed thoughts.

“Yes, sensei?”

Katsurou sent her a quick, assessing glance over one shoulder before he turned back to Kou, who couldn't seem to look away from Kyo now that he'd been made aware of her.
“Your wife died,” Katsurou said harshly, shaking Kou again to get his attention. The senbon slipped from Kyo's fingers at the words, clattering to the floor. “Isshun died. That does not give you an excuse to shut down. You have responsibilities.” He took a deep breath. “And until you get yourself together, Kyo will be staying with me.”

“What?” That got a reaction out of Kou, who had been rather listless for the last few minutes. “The fuck are you on about? No. Absolutely not; she's my daughter!”

“Then you better act like it,” Katsurou growled in his face. “It's been eight days since we came back from our latest mission. Take some time to think about how you've spent them. And then ask yourself what your children have been doing in the same amount of time.”

And Katsurou-sensei stepped back from Kou with one last scathing look, rolling his shoulders to loosen them and then turned to Kyo.

“Go pack a bag, Kyo,” he said, slowly and carefully approaching her. “Your tou-san needs some time to himself.”

Kyo tore her gaze away from Kou, who was staring at the floor and looking miserable and rather pathetic.

“Go on.” Katsurou gently pushed her in the direction of her and Genma's room, and she went, packing clothes and essentials in one of her bags, throwing her mission kit in there, too, just to be safe.

“You done?” Sensei asked when she came back.

She felt cold and numb and a bit like she hadn't gotten out of bed this morning, but—She nodded. Katsurou gave her a small, tight but encouraging smile and proceeded to surprise her by picking her up.

Kyo wrapped her arms around his neck as he straightened upright again, put her on his hip and walked out of the apartment without so much as a parting look at Kou, who still stood slumped against the wall where he'd left him.

They walked by Ryota on the way out, and the Uchiha looked rather grim and unhappy, but he gave Katsurou a respectful nod, putting one hand on Kyo's head in a gentle pat, and then disappeared into the apartment.

Supposedly to deal with his teammate.

Kyo buried her face in sensei's shoulder, trying to take deep, even breaths.

“Why?” She asked, unable to stop herself.

“Because you're a child, Kyo,” Katsurou-sensei said firmly. “You're not an adult, but an eight year old child.”

And he made it sound so simple.

“Kaa-san's really gone,” Kyo whispered to herself and Katsurou sighed.

“Your mother was killed in action, in service of Konoha. She was doing her best to protect her family and every single person living inside of these walls.”
Kyo wrapped herself more tightly around Katsurou-sensei, pressing her face into his shoulder.

“I didn’t tell Genma,” she admitted into his vest. She doubted her words were even legible, but that hadn't stopped her from admitting to one of the things that had been pressing on her mind and conscience all week.

“Perfectly understandable,” Katsurou said evenly, and they were outside now, sensei carrying her through Konoha's streets without a care for what anyone might think. “That isn't your task, though you did an excellent job caring for your brother while your father was busy being an idiot.”

“He loves kaa-san,” Kyo protested weakly.

“So do you,” Katsurou returned, not missing a beat. Kyo liked that he hadn't pointed out it should be past tense. “That didn't stop you from taking care of your family.”

Kyo bit her lower lip.

She wanted to deny it, to tell him about how much this must've hurt tou-san and- she couldn't do it. It'd been hard, and she'd been so worried about tou-san as well. All the while acting like nothing was wrong and she was exhausted.

Kaa-san was dead.

No matter how well she looked after Genma and pretended everything was just perfect, that wasn't going to change.

And what if she was the reason her baby brother had to grow up without a mother from now on? What if Isshun hadn't been supposed to die?

Kyo wished she knew if Shiranui Genma's parents had still been alive in the manga her former self had once read. In the story the woman she'd been had amused herself with. Killing time.

Genma was just two... Kyo doubted he'd even remember Isshun.

The toddler didn't even know what he'd lost yet, because Kyo hadn't been brave enough to tell him, try and make him understand.

She could feel Katsurou-sensei take a deep breath and let it out as a heavy sigh. “What are you three doing here?” He asked, though he didn't sound particularly surprised.

Kyo turned her head just enough that she could peer ahead of them without having to lift her face from Katsurou's shoulder.

Taku, Kisaki and Maki were sitting outside the door to Katsurou's house.

“Yes Kyo with you?” Taku asked, completely ignoring their sensei's question. His eyes were sharp and keen as he took in Kyo, the way Katsurou was carrying her and the bag on her back. “I thought you'd just talk to her.”

“What's going on, sensei?” Maki asked, sounding calmer than Taku, but just as worried.

His poker-face was really getting good, Kyo mused uneasily. Closing her eyes, she pressed her eyes back against Katsurou's shoulder.

The man sighed again. “Let's head inside,” was all he said, stepping passed the boys and the ningen
littering his doorstep. “We'll brief on you the situation,” he promised when Taku gave him a mulish scowl.

“Alright,” the Inuzuka said, jumping to his feet and scrambling after sensei when he opened the door and walked inside.

Kyo wondered if she should point out that she was still wearing her sandals, but remained silent.

Katsurou went straight to the kitchen, pulled out a chair and sat himself and Kyo down, making no move to remove her from his person any time soon.

She loved her team.

“So what's going on?” Maki asked once they'd all settled down.

“Kyo's going to be staying with me for a while,” Katsurou began by telling them.

Kyo wondered what expressions they were wearing, but she wasn't brave enough to look. Because she was a coward.

“Uh, why?” Taku asked after a stretch of incredulous silence.

“Because,” Katsurou said, sounding like he had hoped Kyo would have come out of her shell enough to tell them herself by now. “Shiranui Isshun was killed in action twelve days ago, and Kyo's father isn't handling it very well.”

Kyo tensed.

The silence in the kitchen was heavy and oppressive and it felt like it was hard to breathe.

“What about Genma-chan?” Maki asked quietly, voice weak and a little hoarse.

Katsurou hummed, placing one hand on Kyo's back in a comforting manner. “With his civilian grandparents.”

“Kyo?” Taku asked after another pause, where the boys no doubt tried to assimilate the information.

“I don't want to talk about it,” she managed in a muffled, trembling voice.

“You need to talk about it,” Katsurou countered evenly, tapping a finger against her back. “You're not dealing with your grief very well either, brat.”

“Kaa-san's gone, tou-san hasn't been able to look at me in over a week and I couldn't even tell Genma. What's there to talk about?” Kyo hiccuped a little, despite her best efforts.

“Why didn't you tell us?” Taku demanded, the words all but exploding from his mouth, making Kyo jump. “I asked! Why wouldn't you- Don't you trust us!?”

And Taku was definitely upset.

“Taku,” Kisaki reprimanded him sharply, though there was a whine tinting her voice.

“Because if I told anyone that would make it real!” Kyo snapped, lifting her face from sensei's shoulder to glare at Taku, who all but flinched back. “’Cause I could just pretend she was out on mission like always if I didn't—” she couldn't continue for the angry sob that tore itself from her throat.
Kyo scrunched her face up in an attempt not to cry, but she was fighting a losing battle and she knew it. Didn't mean she'd just give up, though.

“I'm so sorry, Kyo,” Maki said quietly, and that just. Did it.

Kyo felt her eyes well up, the liquid spilling over and dripping down her cheeks no matter how much she fought it.

“I don't want her to be dead,” she sobbed.

Katsurou slowly wrapped an arm around her and gently guided her head back to his shoulder. “I know,” was all he said.

Taku, Maki and Kisaki ended up staying the night, too.

-x-x-x-
Living with Katsurou-sensei was weird.

Nice, but decidedly strange and a little bit awkward.

She'd been given her own room and everything. It felt a bit like she was constantly intruding on the man's privacy, all throughout the week she ended up staying with him, but it was nice at the same time.

Katsurou made for a pretty good room-mate.

Volunteering to do the dishes when she'd unexpectedly cooked dinner. Something that had earned her no more than a slightly raised eyebrow and a shrug.

Kyo was sitting on the floor in the living room working on making another batch of poison. She would be running low if she didn't make more all the time, and the latest set of incidents didn't change that.

It knocked on the door and sensei looked up from where he was sitting reclined on the couch, feet propped on the coffee table, reading through a pretty impressive stack of files Kyo pointedly hadn't asked about.

Kyo made to get up, but he waved a hand at her and tossed the file he'd been reading back onto the stack and got to his feet.

Kyo watched him go, shrugged to herself and then turned back to her own task.

She continued to thinly slice the root she had collected earlier, putting them into the pot Katsurou had generously sacrificed and donated to her. She'd extract the poison and then reduce it on low heat on the stove until there was barely any water left.

After that, she'd leave it to dry in one of the square bowls she'd been provided with to practice her craft. Once completely dry, she'd carefully scrape it out and voilà! A perfect powder of concentrated poison.

She looked up when Katsurou came padding back into the room.

Instead of returning to the couch, however, the man walked up to her and crouched down beside her. He looked over her work with some curious interest before focusing on her.

“Kou's here,” he said. “He'd like to talk with you, if that's alright with you.”

Katsurou looked like he wouldn't hesitate to send her dad on his way if that was what she wanted. It was almost enough to make her smile.
Almost.

She hadn’t felt like smiling lately, though, and now that her team knew, she didn’t put in the effort to keep up the charade.

“You don’t have to,” Katsurou said firmly when she’d been silent a second too long.

“No, that’s okay. I’ll talk to him.” Kyo sighed, ignoring the nervous lump in her stomach and put down her knife.

She didn’t particularly want to have a difficult, emotionally taxing conversation, but... she’d like to see her tou-san again.

“Very well,” Katsurou-sensei nodded, placed his hand on her head, didn’t ruffle her hair, and then straightened up and walked back to the door.

Kyo nervously waited where she sat, fingers twisting together in her lap.

Why was it taking so long?

She’d picked up her knife again to continue working, to give herself something to do, when Katsurou and Kou finally entered the living room.

“I’ll give the two of you some privacy,” sensei said after an assessing look at Kyo. “I’m in the next room over if you need me,” and that was definitely aimed at Kyo, who nodded.

It was nice to know she wouldn't be completely alone if this didn't go as well as she was hoping.

It was strange, because she’d never felt like this around tou-san before, but this situation, different as it was, reminded her of the divorce in the Before-life.

Her then-father had been very different after that. Not as... physically frightening, perhaps, but aiming more for psychological and emotional manipulation instead.

She didn't want Kou to turn out to be similar, but she couldn't help the apprehension filling her to the brim.

When the door to sensei’s bedroom closed, Kyo forced herself to turn to Kou, who was staring at her with an expression on his face she couldn't hope to label.

After a few seconds' awkward silence, Kou sighed and walked over, taking a seat beside her on the floor, absently looking over what she was doing.

“I owe you a serious apology, Kyo,” he began quietly, running a hand through his hair. “I’ve been... treating you and Genma, but you in particular, in a manner you neither deserve nor should have had to experience,” he admitted tiredly, rubbing a hand over his eyes before he turned to face her fully. “I love- loved your kaa-san very much, Kyo,” he said. “But that does not excuse my behaviour. I’m sorry, and I can only hope you'll forgive me.”

Kyo took a slow, deliberate breath.

That... hadn't been what she'd been expecting.

“It was scary,” she admitted quietly, frowning down at the root she was chopping, cutting another slice while she was at it. “It felt like you were disappearing, too.”
“I know.” Kou grimaced. “And for a while, I think I did, but,” he took a deep breath, “I may have loved Isshun, Kyo, but I love you and Genma more than anything else. For what it's worth, I apologize,” he said, and he looked it. He looked like he was hurting with how sorry he was.

Like he hadn't slept much in the last week, but at least he'd been taking better care of himself. Or, Ryota had ended up kicking him until he maintained basic personal hygiene, at least.

He was clean-shaven and he hadn't lost any weight, that she could see.

“Kami, I make for a lousy father,” Kou muttered to himself, rubbed a hand over his face again and got to his feet. He turned to leave, but paused. “Katsurou's offered you to stay for however long you'd like,” he admitted. “I'd like you to come back home, but-” he cut himself off and cleared his throat. “Think about it, Kyo?”

“Yeah,” she said faintly, feeling shell-shocked.

Tou-san thought she wouldn't come back home?

Kyo numbly watched her dad leave, shoulders slumped and looking defeated in a way she'd never seen before, weighed down by both grief and quiet shame.

It made her feel awful.

“Sensei?” She asked when a few minutes had passed since she heard the front door close.

Katsurou came wandering out of his bedroom, hands in his pockets and a thoughtful look on his face.

“Yeah?”

“Did you really tell tou-san I can stay here?”

“Yes.”

“Why?” She couldn't help but ask, feeling completely out of her depth. She couldn't see why the man would go out of his way to do that when she still had a parent. And even if she hadn't, there were other options.

Katsurou hummed, retaking his seat on the couch, but didn't move to touch his files. “Because you're my student, and I care about your well-being.”

“But tou-san...” her voice trailed off, unsure what she was trying to say. Was still alive?

“Knows you're legally an adult and don't technically have to do anything you don't want unless the Hokage steps in,” Katsurou said calmly. “And while you could get your own apartment -Konoha has good housing for her shinobi- you're still just eight.” He shrugged. “You make for a surprisingly good house-guest. Despite the poison.” He smiled amusedly, glancing over the project currently spread out in front of her.

Right.

Being a Genin meant she was legally an adult, and having been an active kunoichi for two years, Kyo had a perfectly acceptable capital saved up in the 'bank'.

Though it wasn't really a bank. More like a village-run account system, where a select division of shinobi kept track of how much you earned and made sure the numbers were as they should. It was
then just to withdraw however much you wanted from your personal account whenever you were in
the village.

It also helped the village save up on funds in difficult times, saving them from constantly handing out
massive amounts of hard cash when things were tight.

“I love my dad,” she said.

“I'm aware.”

“I just don't understand why he would think I don't want to come back home,” Kyo told him, pulling
her knees up to her chest and wrapping her arms around her legs.

Katsurou crossed his arms over his chest, head tilting a fraction in thought. “It's mostly conjecture on
my part, but I suppose he feels like he's failed you in a way that's unacceptable.”

“He's only human,” Kyo muttered, a frown pulling on her brows. “He's a good dad, but he's not
perfect.”

“And that is how you're different from your average child, Kyo,” Katsurou said, smiling
humourlessly. “Most children think their parents can do no wrong, and when they finally find out
that it isn't so, can't forgive them for it.”

Kyo grimaced but couldn't argue against his point.

She sighed. “I'll go home to talk with him again tomorrow, if that's alright with you,” she said,
shifting her seat and prepared herself to go back to work. She needed to finish this.

And it was better to get it over with quickly, rather than drag things out.

She knew from experience.

“Of course,” Katsurou agreed easily. “The offer stands, though.”

Kyo felt her lips curl into a small, heart-felt smile, which she pressed against one knee as she picked
up her knife.

She had the best sensei.

Kyo stared at her own front door, uncertainly contemplating if she should knock or not.

Knocking on the door to her own home just felt weird, though, so she took a deep breath and pressed
down the handle, stepping inside.

“I'm home,” was murmured quietly under her breath as she took off her sandals.

Then she walked out of the hallway into the living room, getting her first look at the place in over a
week.

Ryota was sprawled out on the couch, a very familiar, sleeping toddler draped over his chest.

Kyo smiled wanly and gave him a small wave, fully aware of Ryota's gaze on her, no matter how
much it may look at a glance like he was as deeply asleep as Genma was.
“Hey, kitten,” he rumbled sedately, lips curling ever so slightly in a tiny smile.

“Hi,” Kyo returned quietly, walking up to him to peer down at Genma. “Is tou-san home?” She asked, because she wanted that out of the way first.

Ryota hummed, gaze flicking over her shoulder to look into the kitchen.

Kyo turned around to see Kou standing stock still by the sink, staring unblinkingly at her. He'd been in the middle of making lunch, it looked like. He'd been so completely motionless she hadn't noticed him.

Was he even breathing?

“Can we talk, tou-san?” She asked, feeling awkward and slightly out of place. Which was just ridiculous, because she lived here. This was home.

Kou managed a stiff nod and mentioned to the kitchen table with a twitch of one hand.

Kyo took a seat, not at all minding Ryota's presence. He was family, too.

Her father cleared his throat once he'd sat down opposite of her. “I didn't think you'd come so soon,” he admitted, still staring at her as if he couldn't make himself look away. Or blink more than absolutely necessary.

“I need- want to talk to you,” Kyo said, taking a deep breath. “You're my dad; I love you.” She shrugged.

That had never been in question.

His actions had hurt her, frightened her and stressed her to the point of tears, but... she loved him. He was her tou-san. Her dad.

And none of it had been intentional. Which was an important distinction.

Kou let out a slow breath, carefully relaxing in his seat and finally starting to look more like himself.

The air between them got marginally lighter, less tense.

“You know,” tou-san said with a small, humourless smile. “I always figured that if anyone in this family was going to- Out of Isshun and me, I was the one with the biggest chance of not coming back alive.” And he sounded like he'd been pretty okay with that thought.

Kyo nodded before she could stop herself, feeling guilty and sheepish at the brief spark of genuine amusement it elicited from Kou.

It was true enough. There'd been two very close calls already, and the war wasn't looking like it would be over anytime soon.

“Why would you think I wouldn't come back home, tou-san?” She couldn't help but ask.

Kyo couldn't let that go.

It was just... this was her family. Yeah, they’d lost kaa-san, but that didn't mean she wanted to lose the rest of them, too.

“Because I scared you, Kyo. You looked like you thought I'd attack you,” Kou said quietly, gaze
dropping to the table-top with shame and regret. “Like you felt you had to defend yourself from me. And that's on top of everything else,” he ran a frustrated hand over his short hair. “I left you to deal with Genma, with everything, on your own.”

It sounded pretty bad when phrased like that.

“It's okay,” she muttered uncomfortably.

“No. It's not, Kyo,” Kou said firmly, giving her a stern frown. “Katsurou was right to do what he did.” He shook his head with a self-deprecating grimace. “I needed a kick in the ass.”

“If you'd given it another couple of days, I would've done it myself,” Ryota's voice came drifting in from the living room.

Kou snorted but didn't say anything about that.

“Tou-san,” Kyo spoke up again, fiddling with her hands, “when's the funeral?”

Kou's expression faded back to muted seriousness. “Soon. In a few days.”

“Oh,” Kyo blinked, not sure what she'd been expecting.

“I'm sorry, kitten.” Kou sighed. “I've been a shitty dad, but I'd like to give it another try,” he said. “It's not going to be the same, but, do you think you, me and Genma-chan can give a try at being a family even without- without your kaa-san?”

“Don't forget Ryota,” Kyo added with a wobbly smile.

“Don't worry; I'll kick him out first chance I get.”

“Hey,” Ryota protested idly from the living room, not sounding even close to bothered. “I can take you in a fight any time, Kou.”

“Just, please don't do it again?” Kyo asked shakily, biting the inside of her cheek to keep a somewhat straight face for a little bit longer.

“I promise that I'll do everything I can to make sure I never do anything like that ever again,” Kou swore firmly, not so much as pausing to think about what to say. It was obvious he'd given it a lot of thought.

“Okay,” Kyo answered, slipped off her chair, walked around the kitchen table and crawled into her tou-san's lap.

Kou's arms wrapped tightly around her and he pressed his cheek against her hair.

Kyo hugged him back just as tightly, barely noticing the trembling sob racking her chest, or the wetness dampening her hair.

She had already cried, but for once, that didn't feel like enough.

Kaa-san wasn't coming back, she was gone, and it would just be her, tou-san and Genma now.

And Ryota and her team, too, of course.

-x-x-x-
“So you’re going back home?” Maki asked, sitting down on the ground beside her.

“Yeah.” Kyo nodded, using a senbon to trace nonsensical patterns in the dirt. “Tou-san apologized. Several times. And I miss them, you know?”

“Hasn’t it been weird to stay with sensei, though?” Taku asked, a consternated frown on his face, arms crossed over his chest. “I mean, we spend most days with him, and now you’ve been going home with him, too.”

“Sensei’s nice.” Kyo shrugged. “Do you think Katsurou-sensei would agree to be room-mates again the day I want to move out?”

“As a teenager? Like hell I would,” the man in question replied calmly, strolling into their training ground ahead of a small group.

Which was unexpected.

“Aw, you wound me, sensei,” Kyo returned half-heartedly. She wasn't really in the mood for their usual banter. “Did he mention something about other people?” She asked Taku and Maki instead.

Kisaki was off in the forested area, no doubt watching the approaching team like a hawk.

“Nah.” Taku shrugged seemingly casually, though he was watching the approaching people with sharp eyes. “But you know sensei; likes to spring shit on us without warning.”

“That is one of his biggest flaws,” Maki agreed sagely, voice loud enough to reach the man in question.

Katsurou snorted, but didn't say anything to alleviate their idle curiosity.

“Hey, Kyo!” A familiar voice called.

Kyo felt her shoulders slump a fraction. Not because she didn't like Inoichi and she enjoyed spending time with him - he was a friend- but because she didn't want to play at being her normal self, or tell him about kaa-san.

Both options sounded like more than she could deal with right now, and she'd have to pick one of them.

Inoichi was too sharp when it came to reading people to avoid it.

“Hey! Fuck off, pretty-boy,” Taku all but snarled, jumping to his feet and taking an aggressive step towards the newcomers.

Kyo blinked and looked up at the unexpected, uncharacteristic reaction. That wasn't like Taku; she'd
never gotten the impression he'd disliked Inoichi before...

“What are you doing here?” Maki asked, climbing to his feet and joining their teammate, and even he sounded colder than he had any right, or reason, to be.

“Uh, joint training?” Inoichi replied after a beat of shocked silence, clearly not having expected this sort of reception. “Sensei, didn't you tell Katsurou?”

“I did,” Inoichi's sensei said evenly.

Kyo couldn't get a good look at him, because Taku and Maki stood in the way, but she was fairly sure he'd been supposed to be a Sarutobi. Shinzu, wasn't it?

“I figured I'd make it a surprise,” Katsurou-sensei drawled, giving the three of them a knowing look where he stood reclined against one of the closest trees. “I thought you'd appreciate it,” he added, and he made it sound like he meant all three of them, but he looked at Kyo.

Right.

Because Inoichi was her friend. The only friend she had outside of her team, almost, and Katsurou had been very insistent that she talk about this as much as possible.

The sneaky bastard.

Someone stepped a bit closer and Taku bristled. “I thought I told you to back off,” he growled and Kyo could tell just by the tone of his voice that he'd bared his teeth like only the Inuzuka seemed capable of.

“It's okay, Taku.” Kyo sighed, getting off her butt, too.

“But, Kyo,” the Inuzuka hissed, sending Inoichi a warning glare, before he all but pouted at her. “He's an ass, and his teammates are idiots,” he complained.

Kyo managed a tired smile, because that was actually funny. Especially since she was fairly sure Shikaku was supposed to be a certified genius or something.

The twelve year old boy in question merely gave them a deadpan stare, looking about as offended as one of the trees. Chouza just blinked, not looking particularly bothered, either.

“What's going on?” Inoichi asked, and Kyo couldn't help but notice how he wasn't defending his fellow Genin.

Kyo stepped out from behind the protective wall Taku and Maki had made of themselves, hiding her from sight.

“Hey, Inoichi,” Kyo gave him a wan smile, even as she ignored her stupid team grumbling unhappily beside her.

She absently reached out and smacked Taku on the arm when he started redirecting his frustrations onto Maki, no doubt in the hopes of picking a fight with a ready opponent.

The boy huffed, but grudgingly settled down.

“Wow, what happened?” Inoichi asked after a beat of silence, taking in the sight of her.

Kyo tilted her head, glanced at Chouza, Shikaku and Shinzu-sensei.
“Don't mind those idiots, tell me,” Inoichi carefully took hold of her arm and towed her a bit off to
the side. Mindful of her needles ever since that time he'd grabbed her with no warning and one had
stabbed him accidentally. It'd just been lucky it'd been a 'blank' one. “What's going on, Kyo?” He
asked, all seriousness once they'd gotten a measure of privacy.

Both of them ignored the way Taku and Maki were scowling at Inoichi.

“Kaa-san died.”

Inoichi blinked, mouth falling open in surprise. “But- Isshun's so... cool.”

Kyo snorted, rubbing absently at one eye. “Yeah. She's still... gone, though. And then I stayed with
sensei for about a week.” She sighed, gratefully slumping down to sit on the ground again, leaning
lightly against Inoichi's side.

“Katsurou let you stay with him?” Inoichi asked, as if that was another curve-ball. “I don't even
know where he lives,” he added in a mutter, mostly to himself.

Kyo shrugged.

“Okay, come on brats, gather up!” Katsurou called, stepping away from his tree when he had
finished talking to the Sarutobi.

She should probably ask Inoichi what his name was, to make sure she wasn't remembering it wrong
or something.

Kyo dutifully trotted over, snagging Taku's arm in passing, because, like always, he had ended up
trying to goad Shikaku into some sort of pissing contest.

Which... was about as ineffective as every other time they bumped into each other around the village.

“I don't get why you don't just give up,” Kyo said, giving him a long-suffering glance. “He's never
gonna step up to the challenge unless you actually try to kill him.”

“Lazy moron,” Taku muttered sourly.

Kyo patted him comfortingly on the arm. His inuzuka sensibilities made Shikaku's attitude especially
offensive, she gathered, but him trying to pick a fight all the time didn't help anyone.

“So,” Katsurou-sensei said once the three of them had gathered in front of him. “Mock-battle,” he
declared.

Taku started smiling.

Kyo sighed, but couldn't help but smile faintly at Taku's obvious glee. Even Maki looked pleased.

“Oh, no,” Inoichi groaned.

“It won't be that bad,” Chouza comforted him idly, pulling another snack from one of his pockets.
“It's just a mock-battle and you'll still have your friends when it's over.”

Inoichi just groaned again, louder.

Katsurou sent his fellow Clan-member an amused glance. “Kyo,” he said, drawing her attention.
“Nothing too mean, okay?”
“Okay,” Kyo returned, nowhere near as amusedly as she would have last month, but she felt... marginally cheered up.

“This is gonna be awesome,” Taku said with hushed enthusiasm Kyo felt she probably should have been a bit worried about.

“Kisaki! Stop stalking our guests and get out here!” Katsurou called, which was followed by Kisaki's quick appearance. “Great. All set.” Their sensei smiled.

The funeral was two days later and her team was there with her, all wearing black.

It was very nice with the extra support, Kyo mused faintly as she watched them approach.

She was decked out all in black herself, too. Standing between tou-san and Ryota, one hand slipped into each of theirs.

Kou held Genma with his other arm and he looked tense, pale and slightly dazed.

“You came,” Kyo couldn't help but say, breaking off from her family to approach her team.

“What are you talking about?” Taku scowled at her. “Of course we did. Idiot.”

“You're the idiot,” Maki sighed, slapping Taku on the back of the head. “Why can't you be more sensitive? Polite?”

“Shut up,” Taku grumbled, but mostly accepted the chastisement for what it was.

“How're you holding up?” Katsurou-sensei asked, ignoring the two boys with practised ease. He gave her an intent, assessing look, no doubt drawing his own conclusions before she could even open her mouth.

“I don't know,” she admitted. “It doesn't feel real.”

She'd just been on the one funeral before. In the Before.

Not that she'd only known the one person who died, but... she'd always been too far away to attend. When her grandfather on her then-father's side had passed away, she'd just started school on the other side of the country. Everyone had agreed it was too far to travel right when she'd gotten to a new school, a new place.

“That's okay,” sensei said, patting her on the head.

Kyo suspected he'd ended up just deciding to treat them all like puppies or something. Didn't help with Kisaki on the team.

Speaking of, the ninken trotted up to her and curled around her in a decidedly feline manner.

The one time she'd pointed it out to Taku, the boy had been so mortally offended he hadn't even been able to speak.

“Kyo?” Tou-san called her softly.

Kyo squared her shoulders, stole a hug each from each of her team-members -including Katsurou- and then walked back to Kou and Ryota.
She slipped her hand into tou-san's and felt as ready to face this as she would get.

It was fairly simple.

No grand ceremony like the one she could vaguely remember. No church, no priest. Her cousin had cried back then, saying goodbye to her grandmother.

The sun was shining here, making the black clothes almost uncomfortably warm, and there wasn't a cloud in the sky.

It was a beautiful day.

Isshun's urn was lowered into the pre-dug hole in the ground with gentle care, the headstone was put in place and- that was it, as far as the ceremonial stuff was concerned.

Kou handed over a clingy Genma to Kyo, who accepted her baby brother without hesitation. He didn't understand what was going on, but he'd been crying a lot the last few days. Missing kaa-san.

Katsurou-sensei's attention shifted slightly, making Kyo glance that way, too.

Blinking in silent surprise, Kyo took in the people standing in the shadow of the trees, crouching in the branches, watching solemnly without a sound.

The white, patterned masks were a dead give-away as to who they were but Kyo just didn't care right now.

ANBU attending her mother's funeral. Okay.

Tou-san jabbed three senbon into the ground in front of the grave, placed the wreath of flowers -all poisonous- and slowly lit the incense.

When he was done, he took a deep breath, pushed himself back to his feet and returned to Kyo and Ryota's side, wedging himself between them.

For a long minute, they just stared at the grave.

It felt... awfully simplistic. Incomplete. Kaa-san deserved more, somehow, but Kyo couldn't think of a single thing Isshun would have wanted more than her family and friends there.

“Okay,” Kou breathed quietly, more to himself than anyone else. His shoulders slumped and he almost folded in on himself, before he took a deep breath, consciously squared his shoulders and sent Kyo a small, sad smile. “How you holding up?”

Kyo shrugged, absently trying to disentangle Genma's fingers from her shirt, where he'd fisted the material and was pulling insistently on it.

“I'll take him,” Ryota offered, somehow managing to scoop Genma into his arms without getting Kyo's shirt at the same time.

With her arms free, Kyo turned to her tou-san and gladly melted into his sturdy frame when he picked her up and held her close, carrying her off homewards.

Leaning her cheek against her dad's shoulder, Kyo waved a tired goodbye at her team, unspeakably grateful for their support and presence.
Kyo walked onto their training ground, surprised to see the rest of them already present.

“Did I miss something? Am I late?” She couldn't help but ask, peering curiously at Taku and Maki.

“No,” Taku said with a shrug.

“Um, Kyo?” Maki spoke up, shifting his weight nervously. “We have something for you, but, uh, I hope you won't be upset or anything,” he rushed the words out, looking like he wanted to fidget with something but consciously refrained. “Sensei helped us get it,” and he pushed a sloppily wrapped present into her hands.

Kyo stared dumbly at it for a long moment.

“Well? Aren't ya gonna open it?” Taku demanded impatiently, leaning forward to better see her face.

“Sure,” Kyo replied after a beat of surprised silence. She threw a look at sensei, but the man just stared back, even and solid.

She found an edge and peeled the paper back, revealing the back of what looked like a picture frame.

Which explained the size, shape and weight of it in her hands.

Turning it around, Kyo stilled.

There, on the other side of the glass, kaa-san's dark brown eyes stared back at her, expression cool and professional but a definite spark of perpetual amusement in her eyes. She was wearing her hitai-ate, tied as a bandana to keep her long hair out of her face and from what little you could see of the rest of her, she was wearing the standard Chuunin uniform.

“It's the photo in her personal file,” Maki explained nervously. “Sensei helped us get it and we framed it for you, because-” his voice faltered a little, “because we weren't sure you had a picture of her.”

“Thank you,” Kyo said quietly, unable to tear her gaze away.

It felt like she hadn't seen her in forever, but it'd just been about a month. The funeral had been just yesterday, but Kyo had already been afraid she was forgetting what her own mother had looked like. She'd never been very good at remembering faces.

“Let's put it to the side for now, and then you can bring it back home afterwards,” Katsurou said after another minute had passed.

“I thought we would go to the hot-spring after?” Taku asked, shooting their sensei a perplexed look.

“We haven't been in forever, and Kyo needs to relax,” he stated firmly, arms crossing over his chest as he gave Katsurou a long, pointed look.

“Fine. We'll let Kyo swing by home before, and then head to the onzen,” Katsurou rolled his eyes, managing to sound completely done and long-suffering.

“Liar, sensei. You like us too much,” Kyo said with a small, painfully fond laugh. “You all know I love you, right?” She added, because she wanted them to know.

Taku and Maki both looked awkwardly embarrassed, Maki's cheeks tinting red.

“I know,” Kisaki said cheerfully, tail wagging calmly as she gave her an affectionate look. “Love
you, too,” the ninken returned.

Katsurou-sensei just shook his head with fond exasperation.

“We... *like* you, too, Kyo,” Maki managed to mutter with a rather constipated expression on his red face. This was no doubt pushing the limits of his civilian sensibilities. Or whatever remained of them from a very ordinary, civilian upbringing.

At least he didn't have a problem bathing together any more. She'd managed to corrupt him that much.

“Thank you, Maki,” she smiled a little wider, carefully put down the picture where it wouldn't accidentally get damaged and then trotted back to her team, more than ready to try and go back to her life.

Kaa-san would have wanted that, too. She knew it.

“Do you think it's the same for other people?” Kyo asked, stretching her arms up over her head where she lay on Katsurou's living room floor.

“Hm?” Katsurou hummed questioningly from the couch.

“I mean, after you die,” Kyo clarified after a short pause.

Katsurou didn't lower the report, document, whatever it was he was reading, but Kyo could still tell he was thinking it over.

“Reincarnation is widely accepted,” he eventually said, idly turning to the next page. “I can only imagine the idea must have come from somewhere.”

“But I'm still a bit weird,” Kyo summarized. She'd come from a very different reality before she'd been born here.

If Isshun had been reborn somewhere, she hoped it was in a more peaceful world than this one. Somewhere she wouldn't have to fight. Where she'd be happy.

“Let's not delude ourselves here, Kyo,” Katsurou said distractedly, reaching to pick up one of the other files, no doubt to double-check something. “You're *very* weird.”

“Thank you,” Kyo chirped.

“Oh, it's a good thing, in your case,” the man assured her with a frown, staring intently at the two files he was holding, one in each hand. “This isn't good,” he muttered to himself. “Sorry, I'm gonna have to cut this visit short; things to do.”

“Sure thing, sensei. Go save the village,” Kyo returned calmly, watching Katsurou gather up his files and get to his feet.

“Lock up after yourself,” he tossed over one shoulder and then he was gone.

Kyo remained on the floor a while longer, gazing contemplatively up at Katsurou's ceiling.

Would sensei appreciate it if she cooked him something he could eat cold whenever he came back from whatever emergency he'd no doubt discovered?
Well. It wasn't like Kyo had anything in particular to do right now; tou-san and Ryota were out on mission, the apartment was empty and she didn't really want to spend all afternoon at her grandparents'. Despite the fact that Genma was there and she adored her brother.

Cooking for her busy sensei it was!

Then she could go bother Taku and Maki; she had a few jutsu she wanted to experiment with.

Kyo had no idea why almost all ninja seemed to favour big and flashy over small, discreet and effective. At least it made adapting jutsu interesting, and her teammates were usually game.

With a small sigh, Kyo rolled to her feet and wandered into Katsurou's kitchen.

Time to see what sort of edibles he had in the fridge.
Chapter 27

Chapter Summary

The War comes a-calling

Kyo felt like she got over her mother's death far too fast, despite Katsurou-sensei's assurances that she had a very effective social network and that she was mentally dealing pretty well with her own grief, under the circumstances.

Something Kyo didn't know how to respond to other than to note it down due to practise.

The truth was, however, that she was just plain too busy to be able to dwell on it.

A week after the funeral, Team Six, more commonly referred to as Team Katsurou by now, were back on the active duty roster.

Which meant missions.

And boy, did it feel like they were making up for the weeks they'd gotten 'off' to clear up all the personal drama Kyo's family had inadvertently caused.

Konoha actually gave a shit about her shinobi and tried to make sure they were -somewhat- mentally sound before they sent them out on missions, to give them as big a chance to actually succeed and return as possible.

It wasn't just out of the goodness of the Hokage's heart, Katsurou had told them wryly; every shinobi was an investment, both monetary and in pure fighting-power.

Why throw that away like a careless toddler?

“When will this end?” Maki groaned as they made their way out of the Hokage tower, having picked up their latest mission. Surprise, surprise; another courier run. “Chisa-chan and Etsuko-chan are gonna forget what I look like,” he muttered sullenly.

They'd come back from the last one just two days ago. A pattern that had become something of a normal for them over the last few months.

They were spending just as much time running around Fire Country, frantically dodging enemy attention, as they were resting in the village.

“My guess? When the war ends,” Katsurou muttered unhappily, looking the four of them over with intent scrutiny.

They were all tired, coming awfully close to running on steadily depleting reserves and fumes.

Kyo sighed, scratching at a healing scab on her stomach. “Let me guess; we're leaving effective immediately.”

“Is there another option?” Taku wondered idly, walking beside her with one hand tangled in the fur
“Right,” Kyo muttered. The Inuzuka had a point.

“Meet at the gates in twenty minutes,” Katsurou ordered with a sigh. “You know what to do.”

“Yes, sensei,” Kyo answered for all of them.

They knew what to do; they'd been doing nothing else for months. Kyo was fairly sure she could prepare for a mission like this in her sleep by now.

“Let's get this over with,” Maki said, giving them a quick look before he took off for home to grab his gear. Say a hurried goodbye to his little sisters.

Kyo took a deep breath, bumped her shoulder into Taku's arm -why was he still so much taller than her?- and then left for her own home.

She didn't even bother to unpack her bag any more, just restocked it and changed out the extra clothes she kept in her bag when she returned to the village.

It was just easier.

Fifteen minutes later, she jumped down to the ground in front of the gates, automatically scanning for her team. She spotted Maki by the guard station, having already started on the due procedures of leaving the village on a mission like this.

Katsurou was no doubt chasing down some last minute details he thought were vital for the mission or something, so Kyo couldn't claim she was overly surprised not to see him yet.

“We good to go?” She asked, calmly approaching her scowling teammate.

“In a minute,” Maki returned distractedly. “Shit, I never remember this right, what was I supposed to write in this part?”

Kyo leaned closer to peer down at the document. “Sensei's registration number and then estimated return date,” she frowned at the paper, quickly reading through the parts Maki had already filled out.

“You need to add all of our names at the top, not just your own.”

“Right.” Maki sighed. “Can't you do it now that you're here? Please, Kyo?” In his defence, it was usually Katsurou-sensei taking care of this.

“Sure.” Kyo shrugged and picked the pencil out of her teammate's hand. “This is in case we die, you know,” she told him casually, quickly and efficiently filling out the rest of the document. “To know who hasn't come back and also give them somewhere to start looking.”

“Way to go on bringing down the mood,” Maki muttered, nonetheless grinning a little. “Your sense of humour sucks.”

“I love you, too,” Kyo tossed back as she finished the last line with a theatrical flourish. “And there's sensei and Taku.”

“Awesome. Let's go for a run, huh,” Maki said, wandering over to the other half of their team.

Kisaki was rather noticeable, actually, which made them easy to spot when the ninjen wasn't actively hiding.

“Yes, sensei,” they chorused dutifully and followed him through the open gates.

“Kawa,” sensei said when they stopped -as usual- to hand over the scrolls to Kyo, who carefully put them in her poison pack, arranging a few of her lethal needles just so while she was at it. Anyone who wasn't her reaching in with anything other than the utmost care would end up killing themselves.

Which was the entire point, because if it came to that, she was no doubt either already dead or dying. She was so used to it by now that the thought wasn't even enough to stir more than a vague emotional response.

“Any questions?” Sensei asked. “Then stay sharp; Suna's been more active than usual lately.”

And with that promising remark, they set out for the border station they'd been assigned this time.

Judging by the direction Katsurou set them on, they were heading for a border station closer to Konoha's shore line. Either that, or he was setting something of a false trail.

Kyo wasn't sure which option she preferred.

If it was the first, it would be longer to run than usual. If it was the second, then that indicated sensei was seriously worried about being ambushed on the way.

Turned out it was the former.

They reached the station with minimal fanfare, which was a relief, but all of them were still tense. They could see the marks of the regular scuffles and violence here, pock-marking the forest and landscape around them.

They'd stumbled upon an entire swath of forest that had been cut down by what looked like a truly massive wind attack. The remains of the trees had been smooth stumps that couldn't have been made by any other means.

Making their delivery, they got five scrolls in return. Which felt much more than the usual three and Kyo had to improvise to make room for all of them in her pack.

Nothing more than a minor inconvenience, but she made it work.

“Don't relax,” Katsurou told them sharply before they headed back out. In the dead of night after just five hours’ sleep. He evidently wanted to get back to the village before nightfall.

Taku took point, as was usual for them, with sensei bringing up the rear and Kyo and Maki in the middle.

Things went just like usual until Taku slowed to a stop three hours into their quick, quiet run.

The sun was just about rising over the horizon.

“I can smell people, sensei,” he said softly, voice barely audible, despite the fact he was standing so close.

Kyo's breathing was slightly elevated -already, which was annoying- but she knew how to make sure she was silent regardless, and she listened to and observed their surroundings carefully.
“How recent?” Katsurou asked, stone faced and not at all surprised.

“Recent.” Taku grimaced. “It feels like they came through not even half an hour ago.”

“An ambush, then,” their sensei muttered to himself. “Prepare yourselves for battle, kids.”

Kyo swallowed and began to check her weapons, mostly to calm herself and make sure she had appropriate needles where she remembered.

Which she did. She was just paranoid.

Maki checked his sword and kunai holster, too, so at least she wasn't alone.

“Go around wide,” Taku muttered to Kisaki, who nodded and dropped to the forest floor beneath them, slipping away through the undershrub like a pale ghost.

It was a tactical move they'd practised extensively. The idea was that Kisaki would get around behind their enemies and attack from the rear, taking their opponents by surprise.

They hadn't tried it in battle yet, but... it'd been very effective during training, scaring the crap out of Inoichi's team.

Kyo dearly hoped Kisaki would be okay.

“Stay close together and watch each others' backs,” Katsurou told them firmly, going through his own preparations. “Kyo, you know what to do if things go to shit.”

“Yes, sensei.” Kyo nodded grimly.

They all knew the teams hunting courier runners were comprised mainly out of Jounin.

“Look out for each other,” sensei said at last, giving them each an intent look, and then nodded. “Let's continue.”

Taku took a deep breath, turned back in the direction they'd been heading and leapt to the next tree-branch.

They could, theoretically, try and avoid the ambush, but shinobi tended to plan for such eventualities, and they'd no doubt end up being herded into the trap anyway. It was better to just forge on and act oblivious, hopefully taking their would-be surprise attackers by surprise.

It wasn't much of a hope but it was something.

Not to mention the fact the enemies were currently between them and Konoha, and letting them force them off track would be all kinds of bad. There was a border station full of people behind them, depending on and counting on them to deliver the scrolls as quickly as possible.

Kyo's every breath was loud in her ears, and she felt hyper aware of the forest around them; trying to pick up on anything out of place to hint at their enemies' presence.

She knew they were there, it was just a question of where exactly and when they would strike.

Five minutes later, Taku jumped to the next tree, Kyo and Maki right behind him, and the moment his sandalled feet touched the bark of the branch, a detonation went off all around them.
Kyo braced for heat, fire and violent winds whipped up by the sudden temperature shift, but...

She took a deep breath when they were all engulfed in a thick cloud of smoke, quick as a snake pulling a kunai and a senbon with each hand and prepared herself for a blitz attack while they were blinded.

“Fuck,” she heard Katsurou-sensei hiss behind her, but she didn't have time to react, because Maki stumbled next to her, a cough forcing its way out between his lips.

Alarmed, she pressed closer to the boy's side and frantically tried to locate their attackers.

Taking another deep breath, Kyo became aware of the bitter, familiar taste coating the back of her tongue at the same time as Maki stumbled again, distracting her.

“Maki?” She breathed his name, having to consciously stop herself from dropping her weapons to reach back and check him over with her hands.

The thick cloud was still hanging in the air around them, dissipating far too slowly and impairing her vision.

Maki didn't respond, and when he staggered into her, Kyo braced to take his weight.

What was wrong!?

“Think they're done for yet?” An unfamiliar voice drawled and Kyo stiffened.

She could feel Maki's strained, uneven breathing against her back and she knew without a doubt that their enemies were here now, waiting.

“Eh, give it another minute,” another voice answered, younger-sounding.

Kyo had just about a second to decide what to do.

Maki slipped off her back and fell to the forest floor beneath them with a thud, and the smoke was dissipating quickly now, as if to make up for the time it'd taken before, just clinging to the air around them.

She could stay upright and become an easy target, or... or, she could act along with whatever was affecting Maki.

Kyo let herself stumble and go limp.

The impact with the ground was painful and jarring, but she managed to keep herself from moving, having let her body drop just so to avoid hitting anything unfortunate.

Like her head.

She knew what the taste in her mouth was.

“There we go,” the younger voice spoke again, sounding horrifyingly satisfied. “Dropping like flies.”

“Good job,” the first voice returned coolly, and then there were several presences landing amongst them.

Her heart beat frantically in her chest, and Kyo's mind was screaming at her.
Where was Taku!? Katsurou-sensei?!

The toe of a sandal kicked her negligently in the side and it was just about all she could do not to twitch.

The foot continued to push her onto her back, no doubt to inspect her supposed corpse, but at least it gave her a chance to look around.

Kyo took a fraction of a second to make sure her facial muscles were slack and unresponsive, her eyes open just a little, giving a glimpse of her blue irises.

She fixed her gaze.

Maki was lying close to her, unmoving and within reaching distance, if she'd just stretch out her arm towards him.

She got a glimpse of a painfully familiar figure with brown hair a bit further off and Katsurou's blond hair was rather eye-catching.

"This was easy," yet another voice commented stiffly from Katsurou's direction, easily letting everyone know how on edge and suspicious he was.

Kyo tried to will her heart to calm down before it gave her away.

"Why do you think this one took longer?" The voice belonging to the person who had pushed her over asked curiously, peering down at her and giving Kyo a pretty good view of his face.

He was young, with sand-coloured, short hair and sharp features. There was a Suna hitai-ate on his forehead.

The boy, he had to be a teenager, no more than fifteen, began to crouch down to examine her more closely but froze when Katsurou-sensei's body dissolved into a puff of smoke, leaving a dead branch behind in its stead.

"Shit!" The Suna ninja who had stood closest to Katsurou said, before he crumpled to the ground with a kunai lodged at the base of the skull, cleanly severing the spinal chord where it joined with his head.

Kyo took the opportunity to reclaim her grip on the kunai she'd let fall from slack fingers and whipped the knife up to strike the distracted Suna shinobi's throat.

He didn't have time to react at all before her kunai bit deep into his skin.

There was a spray of warm, red liquid, but Kyo was already rolling to her feet, desperate to get away from the Suna shinobi.

The teenager she'd just killed, raised a hand to his cut throat at the same time as he toppled over, taking the spot Kyo had been lying in seconds before, but she didn't have time to more than take the information in before a hand clamped down around her throat.

"Why are you still alive?" A voice hissed furiously above her.

The kunai was torn from her fingers and she'd dropped the senbon somewhere, and she was going to die!

"Where's your sensei, brat?" The voice growled, the fingers around her wind-pipe tightening a
fraction.

She was slammed into a tree when she scrambled to pull another kunai from her holster.

The forest swimming before her, eyes watering from the lack of oxygen and the pain in her back and the back of her head, Kyo couldn't think.

Her mind was blank other than the wordless, desperate scream of DANGER!

*She knew she was in danger!* Kyo noted with a hysterical burst of amusement. She was going to die, either by being strangled by this Jounin, or he was going to gut her like a fish. Whatever he felt like.

“The kid killed my fucking apprentice,” another of the men hissed angrily. He took a step closer to where Kyo was pinned against a tree before he went down in a spray of blood.

“Fuck, find that damn tree-hugger!” The man holding her snarled at his teammates, and the remaining two Suna nin instantly turned to face the rest of the forest while the big, bulky man with his fingers wrapped around Kyo’s throat turned dark, chilling eyes on her.

With a truly monstrous snarl, Kisaki exploded from the undershrub, going for one of the Suna shinobi's throat, keeping that one busy.

The other one was met with a stony-faced Katsurou before he could do more than turn in his friend's direction and while the third one was semi-distracted by what was happening to his comrades, Kyo jabbed a needle into his arm, stabbing it right between the bones in the forearm until it went all the way through.

Leaving as much poison in his system as quickly as possible, and with no easy way to get the needle out.

The Suna nin swore and threw her away from him. Hard.

It had no doubt been an automatic reaction, and a sloppy one, but that didn't make Kyo's landing any softer.

Crashing into the unforgiving trunk of a tree four meters away, Kyo heard and felt something snap.

She was on her feet and dashing away before she could be caught again, though, clamping down on her chakra signature and going full stealth mode before her pursuer could do more than swear viciously.

Blood rushing in her ears, Kyo ran back towards Katsurou-sensei, straight into the chaos of a brutal fight way above her skill-level. The third Suna shinobi hot on her heels.

He was dead, she'd made sure of that. He just didn't know it yet.

Kisaki was slammed into the ground with a small but effective earth jutsu, not that it did much to discourage the enraged ninken for long.

Kyo threw a needle at the guy's foot while she rushed passed, hoping to help ensure Kisaki's victory.

The back of her shirt was snagged and Kyo was yanked violently from her forward trajectory and punted into the ground, back first.

Breath wheezing out of her mouth, a foot came down hard on her chest, pinning her in place.
“Give me the antidote,” the shinobi that had been chasing her spat, pulling the needle from his arm and throwing it with -what looked to Kyo- clumsy incompetence so that it lodged itself in her shoulder.

She twitched at the sharp sting, and a sense of overwhelming disgust welled up inside her at the thought of any of this guy's blood getting into her body, but she merely glared back.

“Give me the antidote,” the guy repeated aggressively, pressing down on her chest until she couldn't breathe and her ribs groaned in protest.

“Don't have one,” she managed with a wild, reckless grin there wasn't a lick of amusement in.

“Hand it over,” the Suna man growled, lifting his foot for a fraction of a second only to stomp it down again, knocking what little air remained out of her lungs.

Kyo felt like she was suffocating.

It was a miracle none of her ribs had broken.

The man Kisaki was fighting stumbled and the ninen took the opportunity to tear his throat out, making him go down with a spray of blood and a chilling gurgle.

That didn't mean she let him be, though.

Kisaki clamped her jaws around the mangled throat and violently shook her head until there was a loud, audible snap!

“Shit,” the Suna shinobi all but standing on her growled.

It was only him and the one fighting Katsurou-sensei, now.

“You're gonna die,” Kyo managed to wheeze at him, despite still being largely unable to breathe, effectively distracting him from sensei.

“So are you, you fucking brat,” the man snarled, but there was a very visible strain on him now.

His skin was clammy, his eyes beginning to look glazed and the only thing that prevented him from swaying on the spot was stubbornness.

He was also growing increasingly careless.

When he glanced over at Katsurou and his friend the next time, Kyo stabbed another needle into his foot.

This one with a poison that clashed horribly with the one she'd already dosed him with.

The man stumbled back with a curse, pulled a kunai from his holster only to drop the knife from clumsy, unresponsive fingers.

Kyo sucked down as large a gulp of air as she could manage and scrambled away from him.

She didn't have to do anything; he'd be dead within a minute.

Instead, she turned to the last remaining Suna shinobi, who didn't look particularly happy, though, Katsurou wasn't exactly in a position of overwhelming power, either.
There was no time to think.

Kyo jumped recklessly into the fray.

If nothing else, she was an excellent distraction.

Being as stealthy as she was capable, sensei still knew she was there, never mind what condition he was in; his poker-face was too good for her to make an accurate assessment. And that was at the best of times.

Right now, all Kyo really focused on was that he was still on his feet and capable of defending himself, keeping up with the sole remaining Suna shinobi.

The man in question, hair a burnt orange, snarled and launched himself at Katsurou with renewed vigour.

Kyo was alarmed to see sensei flagging a little in his response time, and he didn't move as smoothly as he should.

Keeping mostly behind Katsurou, Kyo rushed forward to parry a kunai aimed at her sensei's side and, more importantly, straight at his liver.

She caught it with one of her kunai and she tried to flick a needle at him while she was at it, but it didn't work. The needle fell from the fingers of her other hand and she was forced back by the force of the attack.

It took three tries before she finally managed to hit the Suna nin with a needle, and Katsurou took a kunai to the thigh for it.

At least it was relatively shallow and far from anything vital.

The Suna nin put up quite the fight, but the moment the poison was in his system, he was doomed.

Half a minute later, Katsurou-sensei killed him, stabbing a kunai through his eye and straight into the brain.

He died instantly.

For a long few seconds, Kyo remained standing, tense and ready for the next part of the fight. The next opponent.

Her breath was harsh, ribcage aching with how much it was expanding with every breath and she could feel her blood rush through her veins.

When she realised there were no other opponents, no one else trying to kill her, the muscles in Kyo's legs momentarily liquefied.

Staggering to the side, she hunched over in an attempt to catch her breath, thoughtlessly sheathing her kunai at the same time to avoid cutting herself.

Katsurou stumbling into the closest tree had her jumping straight back into full alertness.

“Sensei?” Kyo wasn't sure how she got to his side so quickly when it felt like her legs were threatening to fall off, but she did. “Are you okay?” She asked, voice breaking.

“Kisaki?” He asked, and he sounded winded, like every breath was a struggle.
She'd never heard him like that before.

“Alive,” Kyo answered immediately.

At least... the ninken had been alive last she saw.

Blinking, Kyo looked around and quickly found the large, white dog.

She'd crawled from her kill to Taku, and was lying huddled next to him on the ground. She was whining, deep in her throat in a constant, achingly mournful sound that hurt Kyo's heart.

Kisaki was crying.

“Taku's dead,” Kyo's voice broke on the second word. She couldn't imagine any other reason for Kisaki to sound like that.

“Maki?” Katsurou asked next, leaning heavily on the tree he was using as support.

After making sure Katsurou wouldn't fall over, Kyo stumbled over to the boy, intending to crouch down beside him but falling to her knees instead, leaving her sitting on her butt.

She pressed dirty, trembling fingers to Maki’s throat, desperately looking for a pulse.

She just wasn't finding one.

Kyo leaned down and pressed her ear to his chest. There would be a heartbeat. There would.

...there wasn't.

“Dead, too,” she managed in a strangled voice that sounded alien to her own ears. “Sensei.”

She wasn't sure what she wanted to say, only that Katsurou had to fix this. He had to do something. Somehow. Taku and Maki...

“Sensei?” Kyo's breathing was too quick, coming in short, sharp gasps that made her throat hurt.

Everything hurt.

“Come over here, Kyo,” Katsurou said, and he sounded faint.

Somehow managing to unclench her fingers long enough to let go of Maki's shirt, she laboriously pushed her head off his still, silent chest. She got to her feet and walked back to sensei.

“Here,” Katsurou said, holding out one hand.

Kyo numbly took the two scrolls he gave her.

Black and gold.

She stared at them for a long second, barely noting Katsurou sliding down the tree to sit at its' roots, before she turned around and walked back to her teammates.

She sealed Maki's body first.

Then, she approached Taku and Kisaki.

Kisaki was still whining, and it sounded like she was moaning 'No, no, no, no, NO.' over and over
again.

She let herself fall to the ground next to her friend, repeating the process all over again, trying to find a pulse she already knew wouldn't be there.

She listened after a heartbeat that had fallen silent.

Kyo barely managed to open the sealing scroll, her hands were shaking so badly.

When she did, she gently placed one of Taku's hands on the seal, pressed the fingers of both hands to the ink and pulsed her chakra.

The barely thirteen year old boy disappeared in a small wisp of smoke.

Leaving her and Kisaki on the ground, nothing more than empty dirt in the space between them.

“Kisaki?” She croaked.

“No. No, no, no,” the dog moaned. “No, Taku, no.” Pressing her snout into the dirt he'd been lying on, crawling closer to lie where he had lied.

Her heart was breaking a little more with every word out of Kisaki's mouth.

Instead of trying to talk to the ninken, Kyo got up and walked back to Katsurou, who looked pretty bad.

“Sensei? Sensei, you're bleeding!” Kyo said, quickening her step when she noticed the dark stain on Katsurou's side.

Everything hurt. It was hard to think but the thought of losing Katsurou too scared her down to her soul.

Katsurou was frighteningly unresponsive when she tried to get an answer from him, making her more frantic, more stressed.

Terrified.

“Sensei. Katsurou!” She went so far as to shake his shoulder, but the only reaction it got her was him opening his eyes a fraction to stare blankly at her.

Kyo managed to pull down the zipper on his Jounin vest on the second try, push the material aside to get a look at the damage and get an idea of what she was dealing with.

There was a gash in his side, deeper than the one on his right thigh and it was worrying how much blood he seemed to have lost.

She wasted no time in digging bandages out of her pack, and she had never been so grateful for Katsurou-sensei teaching her that jutsu to sterilize her hands after she accidentally gave Maki food-poisoning what felt like forever ago.

It was a neat chakra trick that ensured she wouldn't contaminate the wound with any poison residue she might have on her hands.

The memory threatened to release the shaky sob lodged somewhere in the back of her throat.

Kyo got him out of his vest, pushed up his shirt and mesh-shirt underneath to wash the wound;
gaping, clean cut that it was. She didn't know how to stitch skin and muscles and she didn't have any material for it, so she made do with the bandages.

She pulled them as tight as she dared, focused mostly on stopping the bleeding. She followed it by bandaging the wound on his leg.

That done, Kyo leaned back and tried to keep herself together.

If she relaxed for just a second, she'd shake apart.

Her fingers brushed against the Jounin vest she'd discarded beside her.

Kyo grasped the sturdy material and mechanically began to go through the pockets. Latching onto the next task with everything that she was.

Sensei wouldn't mind.

She found the scrolls relatively quickly; she'd watched sensei during missions for more than two years; she knew him.

Black and red for enemies.

Katsurou's words were clear in her head, from all those years ago. Kyo wasn't about to just... leave her teammates' killers here. Where they'd get a peaceful resting place, hidden away from the rest of the world.

“Kisaki!” She called as firmly as she could the moment she was done. “Kisaki, sensei is hurt and probably poisoned; I need your help to take him home. I can't do it on my own,” she begged the dog to pull herself together.

If Kisaki couldn't do it, couldn't help her, Kyo wouldn't know what to do.

She was only eight; she was too young, too small to help sensei home on her own.

The border station was closer, she knew, but she was also fairly sure Katsurou-sensei needed medical help the station wouldn't have. He needed a real hospital, so the best chance he had was for her to bring him to Konoha.

As fast as possible.

“I know Taku's dead, Kisaki,” Kyo said, standing to her feet, glaring at the dog and suddenly unreasonably angry. “But me and sensei are still alive! All three of us will die, too, if you don't help me!” She took a breath to try and calm down. “Listen to me!”

“Taku,” Kisaki groaned, eyes closed.

“Taku is weeping wherever he is, seeing you not doing everything in your power to protect the rest of his pack!” She shouted at the dog, positively incensed and not caring who might hear her.

If there were other people, other shinobi around, the battle before would have attracted them more surely than her voice could now.

“I'M STILL HERE!” Kyo screamed, before her anger snuffed itself out, as suddenly as it had appeared. “I'm still here, and I need your help. Please help me, Kisaki,” she whispered, collapsing back down in a heap.
Kisaki rubbed her cheek against the ground Taku had been lying on a few seconds longer, before she cracked her eyes open to glance miserably at her.

“Please help me,” Kyo repeated shakily, feeling halfway to defeated already. “Sensei's gonna die without you.”

“Okay,” Kisaki said quietly, voice hoarse and sounding nothing at all like her usual self.

Kyo pushed herself to her feet, followed by Kisaki, both of them worse for wear as they staggered over to where Katsurou was sitting slumped against the tree.

“Can you carry him?” She asked, glancing at the ninken, who gave a subdued but determined nod.

“I will,” Kisaki said.

“Sensei? Can you hear me? I need you to try and help me get you on Kisaki's back,” Kyo said, turning to the man, who looked more unconscious than awake.

Instead of waiting or trying to get a more lucid response, Kyo grabbed him with both hands, and had to bite her tongue to keep an agonized scream behind her teeth.

“Kyo? What's wrong?” Kisaki asked, anxious and pressing against her side in an instant.

“I think my arm's broken,” Kyo gritted through the nauseating wave of pain radiating from the limb in question.

Scratch that 'I think'. It was broken. She could feel the bones shift against each other when she moved, now that her attention had been brought to the issue.

How had she not noticed until now?

Looking at it, the skin of her forearm was already darkening to a mottled bruise and it looked a bit swollen. It felt very hot when she touched trembling fingers to it.

She tried with sensei again, using just her left hand, this time, wedging her shoulder into his side to get more leverage.

“You okay?” She asked, panting heavily when Katsurou was draped somewhat securely over Kisaki's back.

It looked like he'd slip off in just a few strides, but that was what chakra was for.

“Fine,” Kisaki returned after a minute, sounding just as tired as Kyo.

The dog was littered with shallow cuts, and no doubt an impressive collection of bruises, but there didn't seem to be anything serious. The sheer amount of drying blood soaking her fur made it hard to tell.

With the task at hand, Kisaki was getting more determined by the minute.

“Let's hurry back to Konoha,” Kyo told her shakily, taking deep, gulping breaths of air and trying to force the bile back down her throat. “Can you run?”

“We'll try,” Kisaki returned, taking an experimental step forward. “Full stealth?”

“Yeah,” Kyo said, shuddering at the thought of coming across anyone else wishing to kill them in
this situation. Just the potential prospect was enough to make her feel numb and mentally paralysed.

She didn't know what to do if that happened...

Exhausted, shaky and dazed, Kyo led them north-east, setting her sights on home and trying to keep herself focused on her task.

It was hard, though, when every jump jarred her arm and made her stomach twist, her eyes watering with pain.

She didn't dare stop to try and wrap her arm, either. Kyo had no idea if that could even make the injury worse, somehow, and the pain alone... she didn't think she'd be able to do it. Not with just one hand.

During the hours it took them, Kyo fell back regularly to check on Katsurou-sensei, every time praying to whatever powers there were that he would still be alive.

It was after midday sometime when she noticed Kisaki flagging.

“Walk for a while,” Kyo ordered the ninken, after she'd ensured the dog drank a few mouthfuls of water from her canteen, completely ignoring her own body's vehement protests.

She'd choked down a rations bar an hour ago, and her water canteen was still half-full.

She was fine.

Kisaki panted, sending her an acknowledging look before she leapt down to the ground.

Kyo debated what to do, stay in the trees where she had a better over-view? Or join Kisaki and sensei on the ground where she was closer at hand to help?

Dropping down next to Kisaki, Kyo uneasily scanned their surroundings.

“Come on,” she murmured, continuing on, ignoring the slight stumble when her foot caught on a stone.

They walked. And walked.

By nightfall, Katsurou had a fever and it was clear to Kyo he was in pain. The bandages she'd wrapped around his torso were stained a dark red.

“Let's run,” Kyo whispered quietly when it was nearly entirely dark out.

Both of them were exhausted, but she didn't dare stop to rest. If they stopped now, they wouldn't get back up again.

Kyo and Kisaki both knew without vocalising it.

If they hadn't- If they'd been in better condition, they would have reached their destination by now, but as it was... Kyo wasn't even certain where, exactly, they were any more. She knew they were heading in the right direction, but she didn't recognize anything.

Not that it was light enough to see much of anything when it came to familiar landmarks. Not in the darkness under the trees.

“Okay,” Kisaki managed, stumbling after her but dutifully falling into a relatively quick trot.
Kyo... wasn't at all sure how much time passed. The minutes, hours, seemed to tick by in spurts, and she didn't really know what happened in between the moments of startling clarity.

It was easier to just run, not think, let her mind be quiet and numb.

It felt like that time of night where it was late enough it was almost morning by the time they reached their destination.

Kyo didn't even realise where she'd taken them until she was staring blankly up at the grand main gates of Konoha, dark and forbidding under the meagre light of the stars.

The *closed* gates.

...of course they were closed. They closed at sun-down every day and didn't open again until sunrise the next morning.

Everyone knew that.

She should have aimed for one of the side-gates.

Before she could muster up the energy to get her mind to try and think up a solution, what to do next, they were surrounded by several dark figures wreathed in shadows.

The growl that curled out of Kisaki's chest was tired and uneven but absolutely chilling. It was the promise to spend her dying breath killing whichever idiot would dare to try and attack them.

“Declare yourselves,” a blank, monotone voice demanded and it took Kyo a few seconds to focus on his mask.

Ah. ANBU.

“Team Katsurou,” she managed after another second. “Back from- from the Kawa border.”

It didn’t sound like her voice. Life-less, thin, empty.

Silence met her words, and for a long second it seemed like no one would do anything.

“Injuries?” The ANBU captain -or so she assumed- stepped forward.

“Deep cut to the right side, and most likely poisoned. Don't know how much,” Kyo replied as promptly as she could manage. “Sensei needs the hospital.” If he was still alive.

How long had it been since she last checked?

The thought sent a spike of panic through her, and Kyo quickly fumbled to place her fingers on his throat to try and find that quick, shallow, but definitely *there*, pulse.

The flutter against her fingers made her let out a small, relieved breath, almost falling to the ground when her legs felt like they were threatening to give out.

“What about you, kid?” The ANBU captain asked, and why wasn't anyone doing anything?

Kyo blinked uncomprehendingly at him. “Sensei needs a medic,” she repeated blankly.

She was fairly sure the man behind the mask sighed. He turned around and signed something to his team.
“We'll escort you to the hospital,” and he leapt up on the wall.

Summoning up the energy and focus to follow him felt like too much, but she somehow managed, Kisaki right beside her.
Chapter 28

Chapter Summary

The hospital. And the report.

Arriving at the hospital felt surreal.
It was bright and noisy and there were people everywhere.

Kyo couldn’t summon up the energy to do more than follow orders and stick close to Kisaki and sensei.
The ANBU captain remained the whole time, though she was fairly sure he’d sent his team back to the gates as soon as they’d gotten the closest medic’s attention.

Someone grabbed Katsurou and made to lift him over onto a stretcher someone had rolled up to them.

Kisaki bared her teeth with a wild, uncontrolled roar of a growl, snapping after the nurse or medic or whatever they were.

“No,” Kyo said firmly, trying to place her hand on the ninken’s head but missing and ending up slapping her ear. “Stop it,” she added. “They’re helping.”

Kisaki huffed, gave the hospital staff a dark, warning glower with her teeth bared, before she whined sadly and pressed her face into Kyo’s stomach.

She could feel the dog stagger when Katsurou’s weight was lifted off her back.

In the electric light of the hospital room they’d somehow ended up in -Kyo couldn’t quite remember getting there- she noticed the dried blood staining Kisaki’s fur a rusty brown from her mouth down the front of her chest in stiff, sticky spikes. There was a lot of dirt, too.

It distantly made her wonder what she herself looked like.

She idly watched the frantic medics work on Katsurou, too tired to so much as find a place to sit.

“Genin,” a sharp, no-nonsense voice said, managing to pull Kyo’s gaze away from the bed-stretcher-thing sensei was laid out on. “Report.”

Kyo took in the sight of the stern-faced man with greying dark-blond hair entirely different from sensei’s before her, trying to make her mind kick back into gear.

The fingers of her left hand curled into Kisaki’s fur.

“Back from a courier run to the southern Kawa border,” she managed after a beat of stretching silence.

“And the scrolls?” The Jounin asked, his dark eyes assessing her, taking in every detail and it made her wonder what it was he saw.
“Got them,” Kyo returned lamely.

“Uncompromised?” The Jounin pressed impatiently, frowning at her.

Kyo rationally knew this was very important. The border stations were manned by and home base to dozens of people at all times, and it was vital for Konoha’s defences that their enemies didn't get the information moving back and forth between them and command.

“Yeah,” she managed, blinking blankly at the Jounin.

“Will you give them to me?” The Jounin asked.

“Should I?” Kyo wondered stupidly. Wasn't she supposed to leave them at the appropriate desk in the Hokage tower?

She glanced at the ANBU captain, who gave a short nod.

“Okay,” she mumbled dazedly.

It was pretty tricky to get them out of her poison pack with just her left hand, though it probably had more to do with how exhausted she was. When she withdrew the first one, a needle came along with it, having stabbed into her ring-finger and gotten stuck in her skin.

Kyo absently brought her hand up to her mouth, pulled the needle out with her teeth and then handed the first scroll over. Followed by the remaining four.

“Do you want these as well?” She asked numbly, needle dangling from her lips, pulling the first of the black and red sealing scrolls from one of her pockets.

Kyo was pretty out of it, but she did notice when the Jounin and the ANBU both focused the full scope of their attentions on her, at the same time.

It was enough to make her tense, prompting Kisaki to let out a soft, warning growl in response.

“...how many have you got?” The Jounin asked.

She wasn't clear-headed enough to actually count right now, so Kyo just held out the first one until the Jounin took it. She slowly pulled the rest of them from the various pockets she'd stored them in.

“Five,” she managed once she'd already handed all of them over. It was a bit belated, because the Jounin had no doubt already counted them himself, but Kyo still answered his question. “They're from Suna,” she added, because that felt like it might be important.

Maybe.

When the Jounin turned his gaze back on her, it was a heavy, assessing thing. “And the rest of your team?”

Kyo re-buried her fingers in Kisaki's fur and tightened her hold until her knuckles hurt from the strain. “I have them,” she whispered.

The Jounin's gaze softened. “I will take proper care of them,” he promised solemnly.

Hesitating, Kyo couldn't so much as blink, staring intently up at the unfamiliar Jounin. A stranger.

She wished Katsurou-sensei was awake to tell her what to do.
Her fingers trembled so much she fumbled twice before she managed to pull the first black and gold scroll from her clothes.

It took several seconds before she managed to unclench her fingers from around it.

The Jounin took it with obvious care, waiting patiently for her to withdraw the other one.

“I will make sure they're processed quickly before being returned to their families.”

“Okay,” Kyo whispered, swallowing dryly a few times.

She and Kisaki watched as the Jounin tucked away the two black and gold scrolls into his vest with gentle care, and then handed the black and red scrolls to the ANBU captain.

The masked black-ops shinobi disappeared in a shunshin at a brisk hand-sign from the Jounin.

“Now, I need to ask you for a report,” he said calmly, arranging his body language into something more soothing, relaxed and reassuring. “Start from when you left the village two days ago.”

Kyo gave a stiff nod and haltingly launched into the task.

It was pretty easy, until she reached the part where they'd left the border station.

“Three hours after that, we ran into an ambush,” she said, swallowing thickly and taking a trembling breath. “They'd rigged explosive tags with poison.” Or at least that was the closest she could get to describing it right now.

The Jounin sighed.

She summarized the fight and the following actions quickly and briefly, to the best of her abilities. There wasn't really much to say about the trek back to Konoha, not even the parts she could remember clearly.

“Excuse me, Senju-dono, but we need to check over the Genin now,” one of the medics said sharply, not even playing at politeness as he all but pushed the Jounin out of his away.

Kyo blinked.

“What's your name?” The medic continued by asking, voice far kinder.

“...Shiranui Kyo.” Kyo stared at the white-haired medic now crouched in front of her. After a brief hesitation, she added her registration number without prompting.

“And how old are you, Kyo?” The medic asked next.

“Eight.”

“Do you have any injuries that you know of?” He asked after he'd checked her pupils.

Kyo blinked a little. “My arm's broken,” she finally said. She'd made sure to keep the appendage motionless by her side for hours now, and hadn't really though about it since at least before the sun had set.

“I need to wash all this blood off to examine you properly,” he continued in a mutter. “I can't even see your skin.”
Kyo blinked.

Blood...?

For the first time since leaving on this mission, Kyo took a moment to look down on herself.

Her shirt was stiff with dried blood, splattered generously down her front and she could only assume the same could be said about her face. Her arms, too, were covered in blood, dirt and what looked like moss and bark residue.

“I'm gonna ask that you stand still while I cut your shirt off, okay?” The medic asked gently, pulling a pair of scissors from a pocket when Kyo nodded.

She watched tiredly as he proceeded to cut through the crusty material until he could peel it away to reveal blood smeared skin and the mesh-shirt underneath.

With a frown, he did something she'd never come across before that resulted in her mesh-shirt easily falling off her slight frame.

Had he pulled a pin out of it somewhere, or what?

“This will be a bit cold,” he warned, before he accepted a bowl with water and a sponge from a nurse and proceeded to quickly wipe her down. Starting at her face, moving down her throat and chest. Leaving tan skin and livid bruises in its wake.

Nudging her to step away from the wall, he then moved around to get at her back.

The sponge sliding over her spine was enough to make her hiss and flinch away.

The water made it feel like her back was on fire.

“Badly bruised,” the medic muttered under his breath, poking and prodding a bit, but now that she was prepared for it, she grit her teeth and managed to remain still. “Stand perfectly still,” he ordered and placed a hand flat against her back.

It hurt, but not as bad as the sponge had.

She felt the foreign chakra enter her system and it nearly made her twitch.

Not even close to as comforting as sensei's chakra, it slowly eased the pain until it was a more manageable pulsing ache.

“There. Now, let's take a look at that arm,” he said briskly, moving back around to her front and giving her an expectant look.

Kyo took a deep breath, buried her fingers in Kisaki's fur, braced herself and slowly held out her right arm.

It hurt enough she almost cried out, and her eyes welled up with liquid.

The medic wiped off the dirt and grime quickly and efficiently, making the swelling more noticeable and it looked like her forearm was just one big bruise.

It hurt so much, Kyo didn't know what to do with herself.

Taking slow, deep breaths, she stared fixedly at Katsurou-sensei's unconscious body while the medic
did his examination.

“The bones have ground against each other a bit too much for a quick fix,” the man finally said, leaning back and peering almost curiously at Kyo. “How long ago would you say this break happened?”

“This-” she had to pause to clear her throat, “this morning.”

“Make that yesterday morning.” The medic frowned. “This is going to hurt, I'm afraid. Ieda!”

One of the nurses came striding over and Kyo didn't fight them when they positioned her, the woman holding her shoulder and elbow in place, stabilising her arm as well as she could.

Then, before she could brace herself, the medic pulled.

Kyo almost threw up, and she swayed on her feet, but it was over with quickly.

She was so shaky afterwards she barely managed to remain on her feet, and she hardly noticed when the two medical professionals continued working on her arm.

She was so dazed she didn't even notice when they were done.

“Kid doin’ okay?” The Senju Jounin asked off to the side.

“I've had grown men cry during the setting of a broken bone not five hours old,” the medic said wryly. “Give him a moment.”

“Ah, Yakushi-sensei, Shiranui Kyo's medical file,” another nurse said, handing the medic a brown folder.

The medic, Yakushi, accepted it and flipped it open. He blinked and glanced at Kyo, who slowly blinked back. “Forgive me, her,” he corrected himself with a bemused expression.

“Sensei?” Kyo asked, speaking up for the first time in who knew how long, drawing the two men's attention.

“His condition is critical, but I never knew Katsurou to be a man who gives up without a fight,” Yakushi said, flicking her a glance before he returned to reading through her medical file. “Do we know what poison is in his system, yet?” He tossed at one of the other medics working on Katsurou.

Kyo dug a hand into her poison pack and withdrew one of her containers. “It was this one,” she said, holding it out towards the medic, her right arm cradled to her stomach. “it's got a very distinctive taste,” she added at the blank look, feeling defensive at the vague sense of disbelief she got from the medic.

“This is poison? You carry poison with you on missions?” He asked slowly, gingerly accepting the small jar.

“I'm a poison specialist,” Kyo returned flatly, feeling like she had finally run out of energy.

She was out. This was it.

Her reserves were empty.

Having handed over what might just give Katsurou that one, small thing that could give him an advantage, Kyo staggered back into a warm, solid wall of fur and muscle.
Kisaki caught her and made sure she didn't collapse to the floor.

“Bring another stretcher!” She heard someone call as if from a great distance, the noise and activity around her slowly fading as Kyo's body shut down for some sorely needed rest.

-x-x-x-
Chapter 29

Chapter Summary

Waking up to the aftermath

Waking up was hard. Like trying to pull herself free from a puddle of syrup.

It kept clinging to her skin.

Kyo finally managed to open her eyes a crack. The light in the room stung, burning her retinas, but the sensation faded after a few seconds, leaving her with the thrilling view of a bland, mostly white hospital room.

The window on the far wall let in what looked like early morning light, giving the other three beds she could see in the room a warm tint.

Her brain felt fuzzy and all of her hurt, aching like... like she'd fallen down the stairs or something. Not that that had ever happened to her, that she could remember.

But if Kyo had to imagine what it felt like falling down several flights of stairs, this was what she'd go for.

For a long moment, she just lay there, staring at the dust-particles swirling lazily through the air, illuminated by the sunlight streaming in through the window.

It was peaceful.

She knew she should try to figure out what was going on, why she was in the hospital, but Kyo's mind shied away from the subject every time her thoughts began to drift listlessly in that direction.

Exhaustion was pulling on her limbs even after who knew how many hours' sleep.

It was a depressingly familiar sensation, though not here. Not as Kyo. And it hadn't ever been this painful.

Finally having had enough of stalling, Kyo turned her gaze to her own body.

She had quite clearly been tucked down into the hospital bed by someone else, because the covers had been pulled up to her arm-pits and both her arms were resting on top.

Kyo never slept like this.

And... there was a cast on her right arm, from the knuckles of her hand up to her elbow.

Her eyes stung and she already knew why. She'd never really forgotten to begin with, it was just... easier to pretend like she couldn't remember. Like nothing had changed.

Kyo determinedly continued her inspection.

An IV was connected to her left arm, supplying her with a steady flow of fluids and taking a deep
breath sent a stab of acute discomfort through her chest.

Awesome.

Contemplating the pros and cons of trying to move, Kyo finally just decided to start small and go from there.

Twitching her fingers, she immediately decided not to try that again with her right hand until a medic told her it was alright.

_Shit_, that hurt.

Kyo slowly rolled over onto her side, a small, pained groan escaping her mouth.

Sitting up was surprisingly hard work, as all of her felt stiff and swollen.

Then again, she'd been tossed around and _stomped_ on, so... Was only logical, she supposed.

Once in a seated position, things got easier. Getting to her feet was hardly a challenge.

Okay, that was an outright lie, but Kyo didn't give a shit.

She had stuff to do that was more important than just lying around sleeping in a soft, comfortable bed. She'd done enough of that in her Before life to last her in this life, too.

Getting the IV out of her arm was tricky, because it was in her left one, her right hand wasn't exactly fully functional, but she made it work. By pulling the needle out of her forearm with her teeth.

She hardly noticed the brief sting.

Finding herself free of any constraints or watchers -the two other occupants of the room were both unconscious- Kyo shuffled off in the direction of the door.

She felt like an old lady with arthritis, she mused absently as she shuffled barefoot over the linoleum floors, every move slow and careful, lest she jar something.

Seriously, all she needed was a cane and the old-lady image would be complete.

It felt like a minor miracle that she didn't come across any nurses as she began her slow but determined search.

Thankfully, she didn't have to go very far.

Kyo found what she was looking for just a few doors down from where she'd started.

Slowly entering the private room, Kyo closed the door behind her, tiredly noted Kisaki sprawled out on the floor beside the bed and then dedicated her full attention and waning focus to crawling onto the bed without falling to the floor in a pained, undignified heap.

With a heavy sigh, Kyo carefully positioned herself on the bed beside Katsurou-sensei, head resting on his chest. She had managed to wedge herself between his torso and arm, placing her own injured arm on his stomach.

It was a miracle she had managed it without disturbing any of the tubes and wires connecting her sensei to the various machines placed around the bed.
She had managed it, though.

Letting out a relieved breath, Kyo felt her eye-lids grow heavy alarmingly quickly, sleep pulling insistently on her consciousness once more.

Katsurou-sensei's heartbeat was steady and consistent in her ear, and her arm rose and fell a fraction with his every breath.

Kyo relinquished her grip on awareness and returned to the land of blissful ignorance that was unconsciousness.

Next time she woke up, it was to a muttering nurse.

“-can't just wander off, leaving your bed empty and not tell anyone! Could've been anywhere!” The woman grumbled to herself, placing a hand on Kyo's forehead, followed by checking her pulse and then shaking her shoulder gently.

“Wha-?” Kyo mumbled, still just as exhausted. She couldn't have slept that long, but at least she was still with Katsurou and Kisaki.

Kisaki, who was still lying stretched out on her side, on the floor between the bed and the door, but watching the nurse with intent eyes, observing her every move.

“I need to re-insert your IV, Kyo-chan,” the woman told her briskly.

Kyo blinked incomprehensibly at her for a long second. “Right,” she finally muttered, shuffling around a little until she had freed her left arm. She'd been sleeping on it, so it was pretty numb.

“Would you like to return to your own bed, dear, or would you prefer me to get you a bed in here?” The nurse asked, taking in the awkward position she was now lying in, left arm barely exposed enough for an IV needle.

“Here,” she instantly returned, no hesitation.

“Alright, then,” the nurse smiled sadly and then went on to check on Katsurou, inspecting the machines he'd been hooked up to while she was at it. “I'll be back in a few minutes,” she said. “I'll let the medic know you're awake and where to find you,” she added kindly and then swept out of the door.

Kyo stared blankly at the closed door for a long, silent minute, before she took a deep breath and pressed her cheek against Katsurou-sensei's chest.

“Kisaki?” She asked quietly. She could hear the dog shift slightly on the floor. “Are you alright?”

“Yeah,” Kisaki replied, voice barely audible and somewhat hollow. “They took you away. Thought you wanted me to stay with sensei.”

“Thank you, Kisaki,” Kyo whispered back, closing her eyes and pressing closer to sensei.

Kisaki huffed against the floor. “My pack,” she sighed, and the grief in her voice went soul-deep.

Curling further into Katsurou-sensei's side, Kyo let herself drift off into something that was halfway between sleep and wakefulness.
She didn’t rouse back to full awareness until the door opened and someone stepped inside the room.

“Shiranui Kyo?” A male voice inquired with brisk aplomb.

“Here,” Kyo answered hoarsely, prying her eyes open to squint at who she assumed was the medic.

The dark-haired man hummed and flipped through the papers on the clipboard in his hand. “Broken ulna and radius on the right arm, deep-tissue bruising on the back and chest, a few fractured ribs as well as a mild concussion,” he read out loud. “Well. Time for a check-up,” he concluded briskly, putting the clip-board on top of one of the machines and then strode around the bed to get within easy reach of her. “Sit up, please,” he added.

Kyo slowly managed to do as asked, folding her legs so that her knees pressed gently against the outside of sensei’s right thigh.

The medic placed both hands on her back, running his chakra through her system, presumably to check her over and potentially speed up the healing process.

Kyo had no idea how iryou-ninjutsu worked.

“You’re healing nicely, there’s no infection, but I want you on bed-rest for at least another few days,” the medic said, before asking her to turn around. He continued by examining her broken arm, managing just fine through the plaster. “Everything looks to be doing fine,” he summarized, giving her a brief, friendly but weary and tired smile.

She wondered how many hours he’d been working at this point.

Every shinobi in the village was over-worked.

“How’s sensei doing?” She asked, and her voice was raspy.

The medic gave her an assessing look, and then moved down to the foot of the bed to grab the clip-board resting in the slot there.

He flipped through the pages, eyes scanning the words with fast efficiency.

“We’ve administered the antidote to the poison in his system, but in combination with the blood-loss, we can only wait and see,” he told her evenly, slowly putting the clip-board back, shifting his gaze to meet hers. “As it looks right now, he’s responding favourably to treatment.”

Which indicated that it could change at any time.

She turned her head to stare at sensei, whose pale face was partly obscured by the breathing mask held firmly in place over his nose and mouth.

“Are his lungs damaged?” She couldn’t help but ask.

The medic considered her a moment. “There is some tissue damage, yes. But we’re hopeful we’ll be able to reverse the degradation of the cells in time. We need to build his strength back up first, though.”

“Okay. Thank you,” Kyo returned thinly.

The medic watched her sadly a second. “His odds are looking better for every hour that passes without any incidents,” he informed her kindly. “A nurse will bring you a bed in a few minutes,” he added and then returned to his round, having more patients that needed attention.
After he'd left, Kyo didn't bother lying back down.

She'd get her own bed, soon, and the hospital staff had made it clear they'd like her in her own bed. Maybe that was best for Katsurou-sensei, too.

She woke up very early the next morning, still tired but no longer feeling like she'd collapse from exhaustion. Kyo slowly, carefully moved to the chair someone had moved into the room some time while she'd been sleeping.

Kisaki remained stretched out on Kyo's bed, deeply asleep.

Stiffly settling into the uncomfortable plastic chair, she pulled her legs up to her chest and placed her plaster encased forearm on her knees.

The room was dark and quiet, other than the sound of Kisaki and Katsurou's breathing, underlined by the steady, quiet beep of the heart-monitor.

Kyo found herself staring at sensei's rising and falling chest, every breath undeniable proof of continued life.

Taku and Maki...

She closed her eyes, the fingers of her left hand curling into the fabric of the hospital clothes she'd been dressed in.

They were gone. She'd handed them over to that Senju Jounin and- she couldn't help but be irrationally fixated on the fact that she wouldn't even have a scar to show for the disaster.

Sure, she'd gotten her arm broken but that was nothing. Nothing compared to what Kisaki was going through, nothing compared to Katsurou, who might still die, despite the fact that she'd gotten him to Konoha, to the hospital and medical help.

She should have tried to get here faster.

Kyo carefully leaned her forehead against the cast on her arm, closing her eyes and trying not to think.

It hadn't been her fault, but it still felt like she was somehow to blame for this.

Taku and Maki were dead and she was just... she was fine.

It felt like betrayal.

By her or her teammates, she couldn't say, but it hurt. It hurt so much it felt like even her heart was bruised.

By the time she raised her head, the sky outside the window was beginning to lighten, announcing the break of a new day.

A couple of hours later, a nurse backed into the room, turning around to reveal a tray with food occupying her hands.

“Oh, you're awake,” she said, blinking with obvious surprise at Kyo for a few seconds, before she plastered a smile on her face. “I come bearing breakfast.” she announced cheerfully, striding up to
the bedside table between the two beds and placing the tray on top of it. “This is for the ninken,” her smile faltered ever so slightly, before she powered on, “and the rest is for you, Kyo-chan.”

“Thank you,” Kyo said quietly, entirely unenthusiastic.

She wasn't hungry.

Rationally, she knew she probably was; her body should be craving food to make up for all the calories she had burned in the last few days, but... she couldn't feel it.

“Do your best to eat up, dearie,” the nurse told her kindly, and then bustled off again, saying something about the medic and another check-up before disappearing out the door.

Kyo could guess at her words, though she hadn't been listening.

“Are you hungry?” She asked Kisaki, who had rolled onto her stomach and raised her head the moment the door had opened. She nodded. “Okay,” Kyo said and stiffly managed to uncurl herself from the chair.

How many hours had she been sitting there?

She picked up the bowl of raw meat mixed with... something, and placed it on the bed in front of Kisaki, who dug in with gusto.

Kyo stared at the meal the nurse had brought her and then set to it with firm determination. Her body needed sustenance to recuperate properly.

A few days must have passed.

Days which Kyo mostly either slept away or spent in the plastic chair, staring at sensei and trying not to get lost in her own head.

Nurses and medics came and went, both for her and for Katsurou-sensei, and it wasn't until she heard a hissed conversation outside the door to her and sensei's room that she came back to herself enough to take note of the darkness outside the window, the slow and steady beep of the trusty heart-monitor.

“-an't just barge in there,” a voice she was fairly sure belonged to Inoichi hissed. “She lost her team.”

And yeah, she didn't need that pointed out to her.

“She's our friend, too,” Chouza said solemnly, not bothering to whisper.

“She's still not deaf,” she said clearly in the direction of the door and then placed her chin back on her crossed arms. The cast made it fairly uncomfortable, but she barely noticed.

The door opened and Inoichi and his teammates trudged inside.

It was obvious that the three of them had just returned from a mission; they were all dirty, slightly dishevelled and carried with them the smell of sweat.

“Sorry,” Inoichi apologized, looking regretful. “How's he doing?”

“He hasn't died yet,” Kyo replied absently, gazing contentedly at Katsurou, who remained
unconscious but alive.

The medics were hopeful they'd get the last of the poison out of his system entirely soon, so that was good. Then they'd just have to wait and see the damage it had done.

Her words left a heavy, awkward silence in their wake, because what could anyone possibly say in the face of that.

“I'm sorry,” Chouza said, wearing a sincere expression as he pulled a bag of his favourite snack from a pocket. “I would have wanted to stop by somewhere to get you something, but we came here as soon as we could when we heard,” he told her, holding the bag of chips out to her.

Kyo automatically reached out her left hand to accept it. “Thank you.”

“Who was it?” Shikaku asked, causing Inoichi to punch him in the arm. Hard.

Kyo put the bag of chips on the bedside table and then curled her arm close to her chest, wedging it in between her torso and her legs.

“Does it matter?” She couldn't help but ask. Taku and Maki would be just as dead if the enemy shinobi had been from Iwa or Ame.

“Not really,” Shikaku returned in something that came close to being a drawl. He looked somewhat pleased by her answer, though.

And that was why Inoichi lost his temper with his Nara teammate so often; Shikaku was largely insensitive and ignorant of the feelings of the people around him.

“If you're gonna start like that again you should leave,” Inoichi told the boy sharply, giving him an unamused look. There was a promise of violence in his eyes as he glared at Shikaku, before he finally relaxed and turned back to Kyo. “Has he woken up at all?” He asked, mentioning at Katsurou.

None of them had commented on Kisaki, yet, but... people who weren't very familiar with the Inuzuka and their ninken tended to be ignorant of just how close a relationship it was.

Inoichi and his friends were no more than twelve, thirteen, at most.

She could forgive them.

“No.” Kyo sighed. “I think they're keeping him in a medical coma to decrease the chance of lasting damage,” she admitted quietly, pressing her mouth against her cast. Not that anyone had phrased it like that, exactly.

“And how are you?” Inoichi asked carefully.

“I'm fine,” Kyo returned with little care. ‘Broken arm, but it's healing 'nicely'.” She smiled humourlessly against the hard, rough surface of the cast.

“You almost died,” Kisaki said where she lied on Kyo's hospital bed. “I saw.”

Kyo frowned at her. “We all almost died,” she returned softly, curling further into herself. “Or did die,” she added under her breath, closing her eyes.

“Does Kou know?” Inoichi asked next.
“Mission,” Kyo grunted.

“Gemma-chan?” Chouza continued the careful prodding.

Kyo's eyebrows pulled together. “Obaa-san and ojii-san's.”

“Do you plan to go there once you're cleared?” Inoichi asked tentatively.

“No.”

Genma was better off with their grandparents right now. Kyo wasn't any good for him as she was.

She couldn't even bring herself to go further than the small bathroom adjacent to the room Katsurou had been put in and Kyo had moved herself into, despite the nurses' constant attempts to cajole her into going to the mess hall for meals now that she was getting better.

Suffice to say, they'd so far been unsuccessful.

Inoichi tried to get her to talk to him several more times, and she knew he was trying to help, but she wasn't feeling very cooperative.

After a rather awkward, uncomfortable visit, the three boys left for home, for some well-deserved rest after their mission.

Kyo hadn't even asked about their mission, if it'd been successful or if there'd been any problems, she realised belatedly. She should have asked.

Once she was finally alone again, Kyo's shoulders slumped and she buried her face in her knees.

“Kyo?”

Kyo gave an acknowledging noise in the back of her throat.

“Are you okay?” Kisaki asked softly.

“No,” Kyo admitted miserably. “I'm not. I want tou-san to be here,” she whispered into her legs.

Kisaki whined, shuffling over and clearly making room for her on the bed.

Kyo gratefully abandoned the chair and cuddled with Kisaki on the bed until she fell asleep.

.

Staring blankly at the room in front of her, Kyo wondered how she had ended up here.

She blamed the nurse that had literally picked her up and carried her here, before dumping her on her own two feet only to march off again with stern orders not to come back to Katsurou's room until at least half an hour had passed.

The room was rather busy, relatively full of people. Mostly shinobi, in various states of convalescence, but also the occasional, nervous-looking civilian.

She felt distinctly out of place.

Partly because she was half the size of everyone else here, and partly because she was wearing no more than the hospital pyjamas she'd been given.
Thoroughly disgruntled and feeling practically naked -she hadn't even gotten her hitai-ate back- Kyo stalked into the room to eat her damn lunch.

At least she could trust Kisaki to keep a close eye on sensei and come get her if anything happened. Or just, bite out the throat of anyone who might want to harm him. Whichever.

“Are you lost, kid?” One of the tired-looking shinobi asked when she sat down by his table, briefly glancing up from his own meal.

“No,” Kyo said shortly, scowling at the excuse for food this hospital was serving.

The man hummed, eyeing her with more interest now. “Genin don't often end up in here,” he commented casually.

Kyo paused, chopsticks halfway between the plate and her mouth. Yeah, that was true; Genin were generally either so lightly hurt they didn't need to be kept in the hospital, or they were dead.

There was very rarely anything in between.

Without saying anything, Kyo placed her right arm, with the cast, on the table top next to the tray containing her food.

The shinobi gave it an amused look. “And where did you get such an impressive battle wound?” He asked lightly, no doubt expecting an answer along the lines of some training accident.

“Kawa border,” Kyo told him evenly, forcing herself to remain relaxed and eat the stupid food.

“Well,” the shinobi said idly, “that sucks.”

Kyo snorted. “So what are you in for?” She couldn't help but ask, mostly in an attempt to distract herself.

“A few Ame nin were quite determined to see me dead,” the man grinned, looking quite... uh, unhinged, to be honest. “It was something of a mild disagreement.”

“There seems to be a lot of those,” Kyo returned mildly. Seeing as they were in the middle of a war and all.

“You're funny, kid,” the shinobi said, leaning over the table to get a better look at her. “What's your name?”

“Kyo,” she answered simply, eyeing the man out of the corner of her eye. He had honey-coloured hair and grey eyes. Was probably a couple of years older than sensei, if she had to guess.

“So, you kill the guy who broke your arm?”

“I did, yeah.” Kyo shrugged. There wasn't an ounce of regret to be found within her over it, either. Not about that.

He'd almost killed her and she'd been fighting for survival.

Nothing wrong about that.

The shinobi chuckled, and Kyo was really beginning to suspect this guy had a few more issues than perhaps she had anticipated when she chose her seat.
“How would a squirt like you kill a grown sand lizard?” He asked with genuine interest, looking far too amused with this conversation.

“How?” Kyo said succinctly.

The shinobi blinked at her, and then burst out laughing. Loud enough it attracted the attention of several of the people around them.

“That's precious!” He chortled. “Damn near poetic.”

“Settle down, Hirata; you're scaring the brat,” another man said, black-haired with white eyes. A Hyuuga, then.

“Hey, shut your mouth. This boy's been out killing enemy shinobi for Konoha,” Hirata refuted with a grin.

Kyo didn't correct him about her gender. It was just easier to go along with it and it wasn't like she cared all that much. If people thought she was a boy just because she had short hair, that was their problem, not hers.

“He looks too small to even be a Genin,” the Hyuuga commented, eyeing Hirata carefully, as if he was an unstable explosive tag that could go off at any time.

Which... might not be all that far from the truth, actually, going by the man's slightly irrational behaviour.

“They took my hitai-ate and my gear,” Kyo muttered around her chopsticks, unable to keep from frowning.

She didn't like to be without her weapons; it made her feel naked, like she'd forgotten something.

“Ah, yes,” Hirata said, abruptly more serious. “They do that, I'm afraid. It's to discourage us from checking out early.”

Kyo scowled. As if she would do that. Sensei was here.

“Where's the rest of ya team? Shouldn't they be here wishing you good health and shit?” Hirata asked next, leaning an elbow on the table and supporting his chin in his hand as he scanned the room.

Kyo's fingers tightened around her chopsticks. “I was thrown out of sensei’s room,” she told him stiffly.


The Hyuuga gave him a sharp, slightly disapproving look.

Kyo described it as 'slightly' because Hyuuga in general showed about as much emotion through facial expressions as your average rock.

From what little experience she'd had with the Clan, at least, and Taku always said-

“They're all dead,” Kyo said curtly, putting her chopsticks down and pushing the tray away from herself.
“And you're alright with that?” Hirata asked next, seemingly fascinated with their conversation.

Kyo stared at him, not feeling like that question deserved a response.

Hirata appeared to find that funny, because he laughed again.

“Listen, kid, you should probably go back to your room,” the Hyuuga said calmly while Hirata was somewhat distracted.

“I have fifteen minutes left before I'm allowed to leave,” Kyo informed him flatly.

“It's true,” someone else butted into their conversation. “I saw one of the nurses carry him in here. Looked like someone'd pissed in her coffee.”

And Kyo watched incredulously as yet another shinobi joined them at the table. This one with black hair which looked dark green in the electric light.

“Don't you all have anything better to do than cross-examine me? I already gave my verbal report,” the irritable words were out of her mouth before she could censor herself.

“We're in the hospital, brat. The answer is no,” Hirata told her with a fierce grin.

She scowled at him, wishing for her poison pack.

“Boy's got spunk, that's for sure,” the most recent addition mused interestedly. “How old are you, kid?”

“Eight,” Kyo gritted out.

Was it really too much to ask to be left alone?

“And how long've you been a big, brave shinobi?”

Kyo actually laughed, grinning humourlessly at the three adults. “Nothing brave about killing people,” she crossed her arms on the table and leaned her chin on her undamaged forearm. “And since I was six.”

New-guy whistled quietly. “Didn't think we let them out of the Academy that young any more,” he mused idly.

“Must've had something going for 'im,” Hirata speculated.

Kyo silently wondered why the three grown men were so interested in this. Boredom could be the answer, of course.

Didn't mean she enjoyed the intense scrutiny.


“Yamanaka Katsurou,” Kyo said after a beat of silence.

“Shit, Katsurou's in here? How's he doing?” Hirata leaned forward abruptly. “No one tells me fuck any more,” he complained.

“After the last time you went berserk, you're surprised?” The Hyuuga asked archly, confirming
Kyo's earlier musings.

Hirata shrugged unapologetically. “Asshole should've kept his mouth shut.”

“Wait, you're the poison kid?” New-Guy asked abruptly.

Kyo blinked and gave him a curious look. “Poison specialist, yeah,” she muttered, not bothering to lift her head from her arms. “Nurses stole my pack, though.”

She could practically see the dots connect in the three men's heads as they assimilated the new information.

“Are they bothering you?” Kisaki asked as she came stalking up to the table, giving the three men an aggressive, threatening glower.

“No,” Kyo replied, having sat up straight the moment she spotted the ninken. “What happened?”

Kisaki bared her teeth. “Medic threw me out,” she growled darkly, deep in her throat.

Kyo frowned at the dog. “What did you do? I told you not to bite anyone.”

Kisaki snorted, ears flicking irritably before she pressed her head against Kyo's chest with a huff.

“They were taking him away,” she whined low in her throat. “For tests,” she added, no doubt in response to the way Kyo's heart started racing.

Kyo sighed, tugged on one of Kisaki's ears and got to her feet. “Think anyone will return my things to me if I ask nicely?” She wondered speculatively.

“I'd say stealth is the better option,” Hirata said idly, watching the ninken with intent focus.

Kyo shot him a contemplative look, and then shrugged.

She rolled her shoulders experimentally, grimacing at the painful pull on her still-bruised muscles.

“Come on, Kisaki,” Kyo muttered, pulling her chakra tightly under her skin and slipping out of the mess hall, leaving the three grown shinobi behind to amuse themselves however they wished.
Chapter 30

Chapter Summary

Kyo and the people in charge have a mild disagreement

She'd gotten her things back.

But other than that, not much had changed.

Kyo still spent her days in Katsurou's hospital room, sitting in the uncomfortable chair and watching sensei sleep while she tried not to dwell on anything.

She didn't know what else to do.

A full week after she had woken up, after her return to Konoha, someone knocked on the door to the room Kyo, Kisaki and sensei were occupying.

Staring stupidly at the door, it took her a moment before she thought to say anything. The nurses and medics never knocked.

“Yeah?”

“Shiranui Kyo?” The Chuunin on the other side asked, giving her a quick once-over once he'd opened the door.

“Yes.” She stared impatiently at the guy. She was the only conscious human in the room.

“I'm here to escort you to the Hokage tower,” the Chuunin said briskly.

“Any particular reason?” She asked warily as she unfurled herself from her seat in the chair. This had never happened before.

The Chuunin said nothing, but his impatience was conveyed well enough when Kyo didn't immediately jump to attention.

With a sigh, she turned to give Kisaki a look.

“I'll be here,” the ninken said calmly.

It was reassuring, in a way, but she sort of wished Kisaki could have come with her. The ninken hadn't been mentioned in the summon, though.

“Hopefully, I'll see you in a bit,” Kyo muttered and walked out to join the Chuunin.

They walked through the village in silence.

It felt like she was dreaming, seeing all the people going about their business without a care in the world, as if the war was nothing more than a distant inconvenience. Rather than the brutal bloodbath Konoha's shinobi were forced to face every time they left the village walls.
This place would never be the same, because Kyo knew she would never come across Taku on his way to the training grounds, would never join Maki on a trip to the grocery store ever again.

Would never see them again.

The Chuunin left her in the hallway outside the Hokage's office.

Kyo felt cold and a bit removed from the situation, like it wasn't real. Like it was happening to someone else. She could have just fallen asleep in the chair back at the hospital again, she mused distantly.

Before she'd gotten a chance to so much as digest this unexpected turn of events, Kyo was called into the looming office before her.

“Shiranui Kyo,” a deep, smooth voice said, sounding a bit absent even when she was the focus of most of the room. “Do you know why you've been brought here?”

“No, sir,” Kyo returned, her voice coming out entirely blank.

She'd never so much as seen the Hokage before, never mind spoken with him.

If she'd known she'd get to see the Sandaime Hokage under these circumstances...

“As I understand it, you have served me and your village with determination above and beyond both your rank and your age,” the Hokage said gravely. “You've more than earned the promotion to Chuunin,” he waved a hand and someone placed a scroll in her left hand, “I'm giving you. In that scroll, you will find the official promotion documents. Fill them out and hand them in at your earliest convenience, and a new photo for your file will be taken when you hand them in. It also contains a Chuunin vest, though I advice you to either get it fitted for you, or wait to wear it until you've gotten a chance to grow into it.”

Kyo barely registered the words, the information washing over her as she stared at the fancy-looking scroll clenched in her hand.

“May I speak frankly, Hokage-sama?” Kyo inquired in a voice entirely lacking inflection.

“When the situation allows for it, I encourage it in my subordinates,” Sarutobi Hiruzen returned, not unkindly.

“I don't deserve a promotion,” she blurted, feeling like the last hour caught up to her all at once when she looked up to meet the gaze of her highest ranking superior. The man who held all of their fates in the palm of his hand. “Surviving something that I've been trained for since I was old enough to walk,” she swallowed, “that's not something you get promoted for.”

The Hokage lowered the document he had been perusing, even during this... meeting? Promotion meeting? What the hell was she supposed to call it?

“You believe I'm promoting you because of your survival?” He asked mildly, putting the scroll he'd been reading down to fold his hands on the top of his desk, giving her his full attention.

He was bizarrely young to Kyo's eyes. Not the wrinkled, kind-looking old man she'd been envisioning in her head. From a story that was feeling more and more like nothing other than a rose-tinted bed-time fantasy the longer time passed.

His hair was a rich brown.
“If we promoted shinobi based on survival alone, there'd be no Genin or Chuunin left,” a somewhat familiar, gruff voice said from off to the side.

Glancing that way, Kyo saw the greying Senju Jounin she had talked to at the hospital a little over a week ago, standing by the wall, arms crossed over his chest.

“Thank you, Takeshi,” Hiruzen said with a thin smile. “Your survival, though impressive, is not the reason you're holding that scroll, my dear,” the Hokage told her kindly. “The situation you faced ten days ago; injured, three hours from the border with two dead teammates, a feral Inuzuka ninken and a greatly injured Jounin sensei. The way you handled it, the fact you got yourself, the ninken and your sensei back to Konoha alive, with the scrolls you'd been intended to deliver as well as the corpses of five Suna shinobi; that is the reason I'm promoting you.”

Phrased like that...

Kyo felt pale.

“I cannot- that was just- I had to,” she gave a frustrated huff, fingers clenching around the scroll until her knuckles shone white against the rest of her skin.

“There are many things we have to do,” the Hokage returned wryly. “That does not mean all my men -and women- keep a level head in a seemingly hopeless situation. That is to say nothing of my Genin.”

Kyo glanced at the Senju -Takeshi?- who nodded firmly. “You earned it, kid,” he told her simply.

She felt like she was gonna throw up.

So Taku and Maki died and she got a promotion?

She almost laughed.

“You have served your village admirably, and I can only ask that you strive to do so as a Chuunin as well,” the Hokage said.

It was a clear dismissal from a very busy man.

Kyo dipped her head in a deferential bow and followed Senju Takeshi when he led her out of the office.

He gave her a long look, nudged her in the direction of the closest seat and then returned back into the office, closing the door behind him.

Kyo took one step towards the closest chair only to sink to the floor, all strength leaving her.

Chuunin.

Okay.

She could... not really deal with that.

Raising a hand to her mouth, Kyo was fully aware that she was breathing too quickly, too shallowly. Wasn't much she was capable of doing about it, though.

“Hey, hey,” a soft voice said as someone crouched next to where she was sitting on the floor. The stack of papers that was put down next to her were an indication it was one of the shinobi aides.
“What's happened? Anyone see what happened to this kid?”

“Came from the Hokage's office,” someone else said. “Got a promotion, it looks like.”

“Kyo? What are you doing here? Inoichi told me you were in the hospital,” yet another voice said and it took a few seconds for her to place it.

It was Inoichi's sensei, Sarutobi Shinzu.

She stared at him with wide eyes, and oh, she was hyperventilating, wasn't she? She couldn't speak. The man frowned, glanced at the scroll in her hand and scooped her up into his arms with a sigh.

“Hiruzen's got shitty timing,” he muttered under his breath. “But he's not wrong, Kyo.”

Kyo sagged into his hold as he carried her off towards the hospital.

Kou came back to the village four days later.

She had no idea who told him, all she knew was that she blinked out of the trance-like state she found herself in most of the time to hear his voice.

“-lease just go home, take a shower, eat a meal and come back afterwards, shinobi-san,” a rather harried voice said outside the door, sounding like they'd repeated it several times to little avail.

“You get the hell out of my way right now or I punt you through a wall,” someone growled back and they sounded furious.

It must've worked, though, because the door opened in the next second and tou-san walked in, looking like he'd run through a battle-field to get here, carrying with him the smell of smoke, blood and death.

“Tou-san,” Kyo croaked, blinking tiredly at the man.

Kou glanced around the room, took in the sight of Katsurou and Kisaki and then walked the two strides it took to bring him up to the chair Kyo was curled up in.

Without a word, he swept her up into his arms.

“I got promoted to Chuunin,” Kyo told him weakly and then broke down sobbing.

Kou sank to the floor, cradling her to his chest like she was the most precious thing in existence, taking slow, deep breaths and running one hand over her hair, again and again in what was a bit too desperate a manner to be soothing.

“You're alright,” he finally breathed, pressing a kiss to her temple, smearing dirt and soot on her skin at the same time.

Kyo just cried; she wasn't alright. She wasn't fine.

“It hurts,” she sobbed, the words muffled by the torn fabric of Kou's Jounin vest, which she was clutching desperately in both hands. As well as she could.

One of the medics had told her she'd get rid of the cast in another three days, so that was nice.
“I know,” Kou sighed, holding her tighter. “I know, kitten.” He took a shaky breath. “When I heard you were in the hospital...” he whispered softly.

After a few minutes, an hour, who knew, Kou let out a heavy sigh and rose to his feet, still with Kyo in his arms.

“Let's get you home for some rest, Kyo. You've been incredibly brave, but you can relax now, okay?”

“Okay,” Kyo muttered reluctantly, tilting her head to glance over at sensei's sleeping form.

The medic had said he'd most likely wake soon. In just a few days.

“You can come back after you've slept,” tou-san promised. “Kisaki? Are you coming with us?”

The ninken looked tired when she met his gaze, but turned back to stare at Katsurou soon enough.

“Thank you, but I will stay,” she said quietly.

“Taku's proud of you, Kisaki,” Kyo told her shakily. “Thank you.”

The dog just laid down her head and kept her gaze on Katsurou when Kou turned around and walked out of the room, striding down the corridor towards the main exit, not so much as acknowledging the nurses they walked passed.

He was taking his daughter home and the higher powers that be help anyone who tried to stop him.

Kou scrounged up a quick meal for the two of them, and while Kyo mechanically ate, he stripped out of his clothes, threw them in the washing machine and then took a well-needed shower.

He was wearing nothing more than a clean pair of underwear when he came back into the kitchen to scarf down his own meal.

“Let's go sleep,” he declared once he'd put both their plates in the sink.

“What about Genma?” Kyo asked on an exhausted sigh.

“I'll go get him tomorrow.” Kou smiled wanly. “I know you never liked it there, but he's well off with my parents.”

“I know.” Kyo held her arms up at her dad, feeling like a toddler again, demanding to be picked up and held. “Can I sleep with you?” She asked, settling against Kou's warm and still slightly damp skin.

“I don't think I'd be able to sleep without easy access to you right now,” Kou admitted, leaning his cheek against her hair. “You don't realise how scared I got when I was told you've spent the last weeks in the hospital, Kyo.”

So soon after kaa-san, too... had he thought she'd died?

“Sorry.” Kyo slumped miserably.

“It's not your fault, kitten.” Kou sighed. “Being able to check your breathing and make sure your heart's still beating will help, though.”
Kyo knew what he meant. She'd been doing the same with Katsurou for almost two weeks, waking up from fitful sleep just to check sensei was still breathing, having to *make sure* before she could go back to just as restless sleep.

Instead of saying anything else, they simply went to bed, Kyo burrowing down beneath the covers on kaa-san's side of the mattress, pressing her face into the pillow and telling herself she could still smell Isshun's scent.

Kou settled down next to her, one of his hands coming to rest on her back, perfectly positioned to feel every breath, every heartbeat, and Kyo finally slept calmly.

Tou-san allowed her to spend eight hours with Katsurou the next day before he and Genma came to collect her.

They had dinner, and then Kyo resolved to sit down and make more poisons.

She needed to restock.

She had the time and she'd been doing absolutely *nothing* since she came back to the village. It was time to get off her sorry ass and do something productive.

Kyo carefully ignored the tears that occasionally dripped from her eyes as she prepared all her tools and materials.

“What're you doin’?” Genma asked, coming toddling into the kitchen to peer curiously at her where she sat on the kitchen floor. He was growing so fast; it was hardly more than half a year until he'd turn three.

“I'm working,” Kyo said, hurriedly wiping her cheeks dry and smiling at her adorable little brother. “Wanna help?” She asked next.

Genma blinked large brown eyes and gave an excited nod.

Kyo had been two when she started, and now that kaa-san wasn't here any more, poison lessons for Genma would fall onto her, wouldn't they?

“Okay, nee-san.” Genma smiled, carefully walked around her spread out work-station and seated himself somewhat clumsily close beside her, peering at the plant material with obvious interest.

Kyo quickly sorted through the piles of leaves she'd gathered this morning before going to the hospital.

“Here, see these leaves?” She asked, picking up the dark green, fuzzy leaves she herself had first started with. “I need you to tear them up like this and put them in the pot over there, okay?” And she gave her brother a demonstration with the leaf she'd picked up. “Don't touch anything else, alright?”

“Okay,” Genma chirped, eagerly reaching for the closest leaf that looked like the one Kyo had shown him.

Kyo watched him carefully a moment, pleased to see he was doing his best to mimic her demonstration. Satisfied that things were going alright, Kyo turned part of her attention back on the other batch of poison she'd planned to make.
When Genma was finished with his first leaf, Kyo didn't take much notice.

That changed when he started crying, though.

It began with a pained whimper, the boy holding his hands close to his stomach and trying to wipe them off on his t-shirt.

“Nee-san,” he sobbed, growing more and more distraught. “It hurts,” and tears were streaming down his steadily reddening face, scrunched up with pain and rising emotions and soon enough he was screaming.

Kyo snatched him up and rushed him to the bathroom, disinfecting her own hands with chakra before touching her baby brother.

Heart beating loudly in her chest, Kyo grabbed Genma's hands and stuck them into the sink, turning on the tap for cold water, and proceeded to scrub his swelling hands, trying to hold him still and not let his hysterical wailing get to her.

Which was the scene Kou walked in on a minute later.

“What is going on here?” He demanded to know, taking in the bathroom with slightly wide eyes.

She wasn't sure what he'd said he needed to do, but Kyo had a vague memory of tou-san telling her he needed to step outside for a few minutes and could she please keep an eye on Genma?

Genma screamed louder. “Tou-san!” The toddler cried at the top of his lungs, doing his best to wiggle out of Kyo's hold with little success.

She was still holding his small, angry red hands under the tap.

“I-I'm sorry!” Kyo stammered helplessly, already on the brink of tears herself. “I just- I thought- I'm sorry,” she sobbed once before she took a deep breath and firmed her hold on Genma.

“Kyo?” Kou asked, stepping into the room and picking Genma out of her arms, helping her keep his hands under the steady stream of cold water.

“I just- he asked what I was doing and I asked if he wanted to help, kaa-san isn't here any more and I figured I should do what she did, but then this happened and I'm sorry,” the words just rushed out of her mouth and Kyo felt like the worst sister in the world.

She couldn't stop the tears dripping down her face as she miserably tried to wash the toxin off Genma's tiny fingers.

“Do we need to take him to a medic?” Kou asked with far more calm than Kyo felt was fair.

“I don't think so, it's just, painful and I don't understand.” She hiccuped a little, picking up the bar of soap again to go another round.

It took an hour to get Genma to settle down somewhat, and by the time he stopped crying, the little boy was exhausted.

Kou had smeared his hands in a salve he'd dug out of one of his packs and then tucked him into bed.

“Kyo? A proper explanation, this time?” He asked, seating himself on the couch and mentioning for her to join him.
Guilt and shame churning in her stomach, Kyo didn't dare hesitate to comply.

“I had to make more poison,” she began in a small voice. “Genma was curious, and kaa-san started when I was two, so I thought he could help a little.”

Kou sighed, putting a hand on her head and gently ruffling her hair. “I realise that I should have talked about this with you,” he muttered, mostly to himself, “but children aren't generally like you, Kyo.”

“I'm sorry,” she said again, unsure how often she had repeated the two words in the last two hours. Her face screwed up and another wave of tears leaked from her eyes.

She hated being so weepy!

“It's not entirely your fault,” tou-san told her kindly after a brief pause. “You've always been so far ahead of the curve, Kyo. But you can't expect to hold Genma to the same standards; that would be unfair. He's his own person.”

“I know,” Kyo sobbed quietly.

“Let's wait with the poison lessons for another couple of years, okay? And please tell me in advance before you try again, please.”

“I will, I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking,” Kyo admitted miserably.

“It's okay. No harm done, kitten.” Kou sighed and pulled her into his lap for a hug.

“What if he won't trust me any more?” Kyo asked, unable to help herself, a fresh wave of tears accompanying the words. “I hurt him, tou-san.”

“Children are resilient,” Kou said, resting his chin on the crown of her head. “Genma will forgive you, if not right away then given time. Everyone makes mistakes.”

They sat like that for a long while, nothing but silence filling the walls of the apartment.

Then Kou sighed and squeezed her gently. “Go finish your little project while I make us a snack, okay?”

“Okay,” Kyo returned, feeling subdued and completely despicable.

How could she have thought this would be a good idea? Poison hurt people, and that was clearly the only thing Kyo was any good for, too.

Katsurou-sensei woke up the next day, nine thirty in the morning, two hours after she'd arrived for the day, when she had crawled onto the bed to lie next to him, listening to the steady beat of his heart and trying to hide her face in his chest.

Genma hadn't let her hold him today, and had looked so confused and hurt and-

Kyo took a deep breath and closed her eyes, entirely missing the way Katsurou's eyes had opened a crack.

She did notice when he took a deep breath and shifted the arm behind her back so that it curled ever so slightly around her.
Kyo raised her head to stare at sensei's face with wide, hopeful eyes. The slice of sea-foam green meeting her gaze was the most beautiful thing she'd ever seen.

“You're in Konoha, sensei. In the hospital,” she told him softly, hearing how Kisaki shifted on the other bed, which no one had bothered to remove yet. “We ran into an ambush on the way back on our latest mission and you got hurt.”

“Taku? Maki?” Katsurou's voice was faint, hoarse and barely coherent, but Kyo still understood what he was asking.

“They died,” Kyo whispered, curling closer to sensei's side.

Katsurou's hand, which had been resting on her side, curled and tensed, fisting the material of her shirt.

“Kisaki?” The man asked after a minute, still not having let go of her shirt.

“Here,” the ninken said, and she sounded wrecked.

Katsurou's eyes slowly migrated to the right, no doubt trying to catch sight of the dog, before he closed his eyes with another sigh.

“You've been unconscious for over two weeks,” Kyo told him quietly, and then reached over to press the button to call a nurse.

She could've asked Kisaki to go fetch someone, she supposed, but she didn't want to. The ninken deserved to be here just as much as Kyo did. If not more.

Two minutes later, a nurse opened the door to check on them. She ran off to get the medic when she realised Katsurou had finally woken.

A medic and what felt like half an army of nurses barged into the room a minute later, and Kyo and Kisaki were soon enough exiled to a waiting room when they rolled Katsurou's bed off for what would no doubt prove to be a plethora of tests and examinations, and-

Kyo settled in for a long wait, arms thrown around Kisaki's neck, the remaining two members of Team Katsurou drawing strength from each other.

-x-x-x-
Chapter 31

Chapter Summary

No matter how much she'd like it not to, things are changing and Kyo maybe panics a little bit.

Kyo got her cast removed, which revealed the sorry mess that was her arm. Pale, covered in dead skin and pathetically thin.

How could just a little over two weeks do so much damage to her hard-earned muscles?

Spending most of her time either cuddled up to tou-san, Katsurou or Kisaki -Genma was beginning to treat her like normal again- Kyo took turns between home, the hospital and the training grounds as she tried to get back into shape.

Thankfully, she could regain the strength and dexterity in her hand practically anywhere, and she'd taken to practising her hand-seals everywhere and any time she wasn't busy with anything else.

At least it kept her occupied.

Focused on something.

That, and helping Katsurou-sensei with his own physical therapy, which was pretty interesting. In a depressing, gritty sort of way.

Katsurou set about it all like he'd done it a hundred times before, grimly determined to get out of the hospital as quickly as possible, though according to the medic, that wasn't happening any time soon.

“You shouldn't blame yourself,” Katsurou said tiredly when they were finally alone, the last nurse having left them about five minutes ago after tucking the Yamanaka back into bed after the latest session.

“Easily said,” Kyo muttered back, frowning down at her hands as she flexed her fingers.

“Well,” Katsurou sighed, relaxing further into his pillow with irritable fatigue, “I for one am grateful.”

“For what?” Kyo all but spat, frown growing into a scowl.

Her sensei eyed her knowingly for a long moment and then hummed. “Then let's see what would have happened if I had been assigned an Academy graduate that wasn't you,” he began in a way that made it sound like he was just talking out loud to himself. “First of all, it would have taken so much longer to get the three of you into a cohesive, functional team, and that's even assuming I would have passed the lot to begin with,” he paused, glancing at her before he returned his gaze to the ceiling. “Taku and Maki would have clashed more often, more viciously, and our potential third member might even have joined in. Then, assuming we all made it to the main point of our discussion, the poison attack from the Suna shinobi would have killed all three, potentially Kisaki as well, because without you, there's no guarantee she would have learned stealth at all. And then, if the Suna team hadn't managed to kill me, I would have died of my injuries anyway. The main objective of our
mission wouldn't have been met, Konoha wouldn't have gotten their hands on five Suna shinobi, admittedly dead, but with all their equipment and personal affects intact.” He took a deep breath. “Did I forget something?”

Kyo didn't say anything, staring miserably at her limp, useless hands.

She rationally knew everything Katsurou was saying made sense, that he was right, but it still made her feel like the worst human in existence.

“So I am grateful, Kyo,” Katsurou-sensei concluded softly. “That you're alive, that you're my student. I'm very happy you've been conditioned to withstand poisons since you were two, and I am thankful the three of us are still alive,” he took a deep breath, and Kyo could tell he was exhausted and should probably be sleep. “It doesn't make you a bad person to be glad to be alive; it makes you human. It's instinct. And whoever said you can't feel more than one thing at a time should be granted a slow, painful death.”

Kyo gave a small, wet laugh. “You have an awful sense of humour,” she told him.

“At least I have one,” Katsurou murmured back, evidently falling asleep despite his best efforts to stay awake. “Now get over here so I can feel you breathe,” he ordered in a barely audible voice.

Which was an order Kyo was happy to follow.

Sensei did no more than huff a little when Kisaki joined them, draping her large, heavy body over the both of them until she was lying on their legs with her head cushioned on Katsurou's stomach, on the side that wasn't tender with a fresh scar, his fingers burying themselves firmly in the fur on the scruff of her neck.

He wrapped his other arm around Kyo's back and promptly dropped off.

Was that what had happened in the original story, Kyo wondered. Had Katsurou still gotten assigned the team, only they'd all been killed off in that ambush? Or had they died earlier?

Kyo tried to remember any situation where her team might have died had she not been there, but she couldn't recall anything specific, drawing a complete blank.

And was that even something to comfort herself with? They would have died anyway, didn't make her feel better. If anything, it made her feel worse.

Because if Kyo being here didn't make the slightest bit of a difference, then what was the point? Why had she woken up here?

Was it just one of those things? Something no one knew the answer to and just... were as they were? Katsurou's arm tightened around her, bringing her out of her spiralling thoughts.

Without Kyo, kaa-san's pregnancy might have turned out much worse, and she could've potentially not survived the labour that brought her beautiful baby brother into the world.

Tou-san would've been on his own with Genma and her teammates would never have known her. Sensei and Kisaki wouldn't be alive right now.

Despite everything, she was... grateful to be here.

With that realisation, Kyo closed her eyes and slept.
“I could’ve used a wind jutsu to clear the poison from the air,” Kyo pointed out bitterly.

“The poison was already in their systems by that point, Kyo. It wouldn’t have made any difference,” Katsurou returned gently, patting her shoulder comfortingly and being patient with her despite his own situation.

“But it didn’t even cross my mind,” she insisted stubbornly.

“So train harder,” sensei sighed tiredly.

It was another day, after another physical therapy session and he was exhausted after just ten minutes' worth of work. Mostly in an effort to make sure his muscles didn't atrophy further. The small amount of poison he'd breathed in had done a number on him, and the medics had told them Katsurou wouldn't be returning to active duty for months, maybe a year, if at all.

It was all up to sensei, at this point.

“You've always relied more on your needles and stealth than anything else,” Katsurou added, explaining what he'd meant. “Train yourself to use your jutsu without conscious thought. Practice until it feels like you'll drop from chakra exhaustion,” he yawned and then blinked his eyes open. “Though I'll be disappointed in you if you're careless and end up in here due to actually taking things too far.” He gave her a stern look.

“It would give me something to do,” Kyo mused quietly, smushing her cheek against Katsurou's shoulder.

The man hummed faintly.

Kyo remained awake while Katsurou slept.

None of the hospital staff had tried to stop the routine that had established itself; Kyo coming by everyday to spend time with Katsurou, lying in the hospital bed beside him for a few hours every visit. A medic had even taken her aside and told her that it was doing Katsurou good, that the Jounin was much calmer and far more cooperative than anyone had expected, considering the circumstances.

Hugs made everything feel better, and Kyo was rather pleased with herself for corrupting Katsurou-sensei to her side on the matter.

That didn't stop her from thinking -constantly worrying- about the future.

What would happen to her now? Sure, she'd been promoted to Chuunin, but she didn't have a team. No one had informed her of anything regarding work, and Kyo hadn't asked. Wasn't sure who to ask.

Sensei would have work once he was well enough for it; she wouldn't be surprised to learn Katsurou could help out practically anywhere in the village, whether that'd be T&I, the Academy or working in the Hokage tower as one of the Sandaime's aides.

Kyo didn't have the same options.

About one and a half months after the disaster, Kyo got an answer. A month after Katsurou-sensei
woke from his medical coma, Kyo was spending the afternoon at home with tou-san and Genma when it knocked on the door.

“I'll get it,” Kyo said, which left tou-san free to finish Genma's bath.

She padded to the door, pressed down the handle and opened it to reveal-

Kyo blinked at the silent ANBU standing on the other side of the threshold, white mask painted into something with teeth bared in a vicious snarl.

“Shiranui Kyo?” The ANBU asked, voice monotone but business-like.

“Yes,” she answered blankly. She couldn't think of a single reason for this.

Instead of saying anything further, the ANBU freed one of their hands from the cloak they were wearing, holding out a simple, deceptively plain scroll towards her.

Kyo automatically reached out to accept it.

The ANBU gave a short nod and disappeared in a shunshin.

Absently closing the door, Kyo eyed the innocuous scroll with mixed feelings. Part of her was curious. The rest of her felt rather paranoid.

“Who was it?” Tou-san asked from inside the bathroom.

Kyo walked up to the door, because she wasn't sure how to describe the confusing experience.

“Uh, an ANBU,” she said slowly, looking up from the scroll to peer at Kou. “He- I mean, it was most likely a him, gave me a scroll.”

“What sort of scr-” Kou began to ask, a frown on his face before he finally looked up from a happily splashing Genma.

The words died on his tongue when he laid eyes on the scroll, and Kyo had never seen that expression on his face before.

“Did the ANBU say who it was for?” He asked slowly after a beat of heavy silence, the atmosphere in the small room tense enough Genma had quieted and looked up from his playing.

“He just asked for me, gave me the scroll and then left.” Kyo shrugged warily, wondering what in the world was going on.

Kou took a deep breath, gave her a tight smile that wasn't at all reassuring and quickly finished up Genma's bath.

“What do you say about spending some time with uncle Ryota for a while, Genma-chan?” Kou asked the toddler in a light-hearted, almost cheerful voice that didn't fool Kyo for a moment.

Genma swallowed it hook, line and sinker, though, and gave a happy, excited cheer of, “Rota-oji!”

“We'll come and get you as soon as we're done with shinobi business, okay?” Tou-san promised, already in the process of getting Genma dressed.

“Promise?” Genma asked.
“Promise,” Kou returned evenly, ruffling the toddler's damp hair. “Okay, let's go,” he said the moment he was done, picking Genma up and mentioning for Kyo to follow.

Not having a clue what was going on, Kyo did the only logical thing and followed her father out the door and to the Uchiha Clan compound.

At tou-san's pointed look, she stuffed the scroll into one of her pockets before they stepped outside the apartment.

“What's going on?” Ryota asked, having gotten an excited Genma thrust into his arms the moment he'd opened the door. “Kou?”

“Some business popped up; it probably won't take more than a couple of hours at most,” Kou said with a pleasant smile that was seriously starting to worry Kyo.

Judging by the look on Ryota's face, he felt the same.

“What did something and why aren't you taking me with you?” He asked, absently shifting his hold on Genma, who was tugging insistently on a lock of Ryota's black hair, asking to be put down and 'Rota-oji' show him something cool, please?

“Sorry, not that kind of situation,” Kou returned without pause, gazing steadily at his teammate.

Ryota flicked a glance at Kyo, who shrugged, before reluctantly stepping down. “Alright. I'd like an explanation, though.”

“When we're done,” Kou agreed pleasantly, and picked Kyo up off her feet without warning.

Perfectly capable of keeping up with her dad on her own, Kyo bit her tongue to refrain from saying anything. Partly because she was rather unsettled by her dad's reaction, and partly because she loved the closeness, whatever the circumstances.

With one last nod at Ryota, Kou took to the roofs and left the Uchiha compound quickly.

It didn't take Kyo more than a handful of seconds to realise where they were headed. She didn't say anything, though, not even when they landed on the ground and Kou strode into the Hokage tower with clear purpose.

It felt strange to be carried through the familiar corridors, but she wasn't embarrassed. She loved her dad and she wasn't afraid to show it. Never mind how uptight some civilians were about public displays of affection, whether those were of a familial or romantic nature.

Fuck those people.

Kyo felt her stomach drop when Kou came to a stop outside the Hokage's office.

“Tou-san,” she whispered, tightening her hold on him, but Kou addressed the secretary sitting outside the closed doors, not showing any signs of having heard her.

“I need to talk to the Hokage,” Kou said firmly, giving the woman an uncompromising look. It was painfully obvious he wouldn't take no for an answer, and that he'd wait however long he had to if it came to that.

“I'll alert him to your request,” the woman returned evenly, giving him a cool look.

Kou didn't take a seat, instead remained standing where he was, watching her rise and walk over to
the office doors, knock, and then slip inside.

The following minutes were tense, to say the least.

“Tou-san, what are we doing?” Kyo couldn’t help but ask into the silence.

Kou just patted her on the knee and didn’t say a word.

It made her more worried, frankly.

It felt like it took hours before the door opened again and the woman said, “He will see you now.”

Kou gave her a short nod and strode passed. “Hokage-sama,” he greeted the Sandaime, tilting his head in a quick, shallow bow.

“Kou, I understand that you have some urgent business with me,” Sarutobi Hiruzen said mildly, looking relaxed and faintly curious where he was reclining in his chair.

Something about this whole thing made Kyo think he already knew what this was about.

“Damn well I do,” Kou growled, carefully setting Kyo down on her feet beside him and fishing the scroll out of her pocket in the same motion, tossing it onto the Hokage's desk. “What the hell is that?”

He asked sharply.

Kyo stared up at her tou-san with wide eyes.

The Hokage didn't so much as glance at the scroll. “You didn't even give her the chance to read it, Kou?” He inquired lightly, still managing to sound disapproving.

“I don't even know why you’d give it to her in the first place! She's eight!” The man hissed furiously.

“Your daughter is a very talented young kunoichi,” the Hokage said firmly, looking like he was done acting like he didn't know what this was really about. “And her talents are very well suited for ANBU.”

“She's eight!” Kou repeated harshly, taking a step closer to the Hokage's desk, but still very much in control of himself. Thankfully.

Kyo felt like the two men had forgotten she was there, and it took a moment before what the Hokage had just said registered in her head.

Her eyes widened.

She didn't have time to dwell on it further right now, though, because the conversation between the two men continued.

“Be mindful of what you say, Kou,” the Hokage cautioned calmly, eyeing the man with his dark, sharp eyes. It could have been made into a threat, but it sounded more like a mild reminder, even without the brief look he slanted in Kyo's direction.

Kou grit his teeth. “She lost her team not even two months ago! Do you want her to get killed?” He asked harshly. “I thought Konoha was supposed to care for her shinobi! That's what sets us apart from the other villages,” he spat.

“ANBU isn't the horrible place you make it out to be,” the Hokage said firmly, thankfully not looking like he was about to take exception to her tou-san's rising temper. “It's a close-knit
community within the village, within the shinobi forces, that gives a kind of support to its members that some people find is exactly what they need.”

“She's not broken,” Kou refuted vehemently, looking furious at the perceived insult.

She wasn't sure that was what the Hokage had implied, though.

“No,” Hiruzen agreed, sending Kyo another brief glance. “But she's suffered a great loss. Where would you want her to go from here, Kou? Should I place her on another team? Under a different sensei? To take the place of another fallen shinobi?”

Kyo felt the blood drain out of her face at the mere thought, her stomach turning to lead in her gut.

No. No, that's- she was good. No thank you.

“ANBU is dangerous; it kills people. Worse than that, it can twist them into something else,” Kou wasn't at all calming down, still just as incensed as when they'd arrived and he was starting to frighten Kyo.

Not that she was scared of him, but rather for him.

The Hokage was an undisputed dictator, and she was very much aware of it. If her dad overstepped an invisible line, she didn't want to know what would happen.

“She's too young!” Kou insisted sharply.

“She's eight years old and has already earned herself a field-promotion to Chuunin,” the Hokage snapped, patience wearing thin. “She's a prodigy in her field and I can already say without a shadow of a doubt she'll surpass her mother. Isshun was one of my best assassins, but she wasn't as capable in other fields.”

“No,” Kou snarled. “This has nothing to do with Isshun!”

“I feel it has very much to do with your late wife,” Hiruzen argued evenly.

“My daughter is eight, and I won't let you send her out to start on her assassin career before she's even reached an age with double digits!” Kou slammed a fist onto the Hokage's desk, rattling the heavy wooden piece of furniture, but thankfully not breaking anything.

Heart in her throat, Kyo stepped up to her father and pierced the skin on his left forearm with one of her needles, sinking it about a centimetre into his arm before withdrawing it again.

Kou twitched and glanced down at her, looked at his arm and then frowned.

“Kyo, what did you-” he began to ask, but had to support his weight against the desk he'd just struck when his balance got affected.

“It's just a sedative,” she told him quickly, voice small and unsteady. “You'll sleep for about an hour. Sorry, tou-san,” she bit her lip, staring at her dad with wide, guilty eyes as he struggled against the drug in his system.

It was a fight he was losing quickly, though, because Kyo had stabbed him very close to a larger blood-vessel, ensuring it'd be quick.

Kou slowly sank down in a crouch, head between his knees and putting one hand to his temple. With a quiet groan, he let himself sit down on the floor, leaning his back against the Hokage's desk,
and another few seconds later, he was out.

Kyo stared numbly at her dad, unable to move.

“I believe I can understand the reasoning behind your action, but let me assure you that it was entirely unnecessary, Kyo,” the Hokage told her kindly into the following silence.

“He’s gonna be so angry with me,” Kyo whispered under her breath, mostly to herself.

“Your family has been through quite a bit in the last few months. I'm not about to hold it against him,” Hiruzen assured her. “While a bit extreme, Kou's reaction isn't the worst I've ever endured.” He smiled thinly.

Kyo blinked a few times, taking that information in. “So you weren't going to punish him for insubordination?”

“For yelling at me out of concern for his eight year old daughter? No,” Hiruzen sighed. “I've always been of the opinion that it's important people should feel secure enough to speak up when they encounter something they believe is wrong. That doesn't always mean their words will be heeded, but I try to at least listen,” he said, picking up the scroll that had started this whole thing and held it out towards her. “Read it,” he advised her calmly.

Kyo took the scroll, sent the Hokage a questioning look, and then opened it and began to read.

It wasn't so much an offer, as orders to turn up in a specific location six o'clock in the morning two days from now, in full gear and prepared to be away from home for at least a week.

When she was done reading, she looked up at the Hokage, who was watching her curiously.

“It's not a promise, so much as the offer of a chance,” he said idly.

Kyo sighed quietly. “It's like graduating all over again,” she returned with a thin, bitter smile.

The Sandaime chuckled. “In a way, I suppose you're right.”

Kyo considered the situation, wishing she could just talk to sensei about it, ask for his advice.

“So I show up, go through some unknown test and potentially win a spot as an ANBU?” She asked, rolling up the scroll and putting it back in her pocket. It said to bring it with her to the designated spot in two days. “No offence, Hokage-sama, but I am only eight. Do I really have anything resembling a chance against shinobi that are bigger, stronger and with more experience than me?” She asked tiredly.

“And that is the reason you received that scroll,” Hiruzen smiled in a quietly pleased manner. “I have shinobi trice your age with not even half your self-awareness.”

“It's just stupid to pretend I'm more than I am,” Kyo muttered awkwardly, not sure how to respond. She was silent for a few seconds. “Can I talk about this with sensei?” She asked.

“I don't see any problems with that,” the Hokage replied after a brief, considering pause, giving her an intent look. “You're very fond of him.”

“Yes.” Kyo nodded. “He's my sensei, but,” she hesitated. The Hokage was supposed to know, but she wasn't sure if there were any ANBU in here. There probably was. “He's also my friend,” she finished quietly.
And the Hokage looked like he understood what she was talking about, because he smiled minutely, inclining his head.

“You are a remarkable young girl, Kyo. I'm looking forward to see where the next few years will take you.”

And it sounded like a clear dismissal, prompting Kyo to dip her head in a respectful bow, before she paused.

“Uh, Hokage-sama? What about tou-san?” She asked sheepishly, feeling her cheeks heat up at the amused look he sent her.

“Are you angry with me?” Kyo asked quietly a few hours later, sitting curled up on the couch at home.

One of the ANBU in the room, protecting the Hokage, had cleared the sedative from her dad's system in a matter of minutes at the Hokage's directions, before they'd left the office.

Kou sighed heavily. “No. I'm not angry. A bit chagrined, perhaps, but not angry. Not with you,” he said, coming over to sit beside her. “I'm angry at this war, the situation, the world around us that makes this an acceptable venture.” He pulled a hand through his hair, giving her an apologetic look. “I'm sorry if I scared you.”

“I'm not afraid of you,” Kyo replied instantly, because she knew what that felt like. “...but I was scared for you,” she admitted. “The Hokage has a lot of power.” She shrugged uncomfortably.

“He does,” Kou agreed kindly. “And I'm sorry I didn't take into account that you haven't yet gotten the chance to learn what kind of man he is.”

“I'm sorry for drugging you,” she said, leaning against his side, insides warming and relaxing when Kou automatically shifted his arm to pull her closer.

They sat in silence for a moment, just enjoying the calm. Genma was sleeping already, having been worn out by playing with Ryota.

Of course, if the prickly Uchiha had heard anyone refer to it as such, he would have insisted it was training, preparation for the Academy. And nothing else.

“He was right, you know,” Kou said abruptly, making Kyo blink and look at him questioningly. “When the Hokage said you're already showing signs of being better than Isshun was. He was right.”

Kyo stared at her dad, uncertain how to respond.

“It doesn't feel like it,” she settled on saying.

Tou-san hummed. “Age gives perspective.” He shrugged. “She started training later than you, and while she was very, very good with poisons, the rest of it wasn't something she was as skilled at.” He paused, staring at the far wall. “It's what killed her in the end. The constant stress and strain wore her down and she wasn't really trained for a battle-field.”

Kyo pressed closer to her dad's side, soaking up his warmth.
Chapter 32

Chapter Summary

Children need sleep. (Someone should tell ANBU)

The morning of the test, ANBU-try-outs, whatever you wanted to call it, Kyo got up especially early
and dressed with meticulous care. All without waking her sleeping brother.

After eating a large breakfast, tou-san keeping her company, Kyo wandered to the hallway to put on
her sandals.

Done and ready to leave, she stood still for a moment, nerves trying to eat her alive from the inside
out.

“Knowing you, you'll do better than anyone other than the Hokage and Katsurou was expecting,”
Kou said softly, voice still perfectly audible in the sleepy silence of early morning. “Go take them by
storm, kitten.”

“Thank you. Love you, tou-san,” Kyo returned, throwing her arms around Kou's middle for a fierce
hug. “See you in a week,” she added and then left with plenty of time to spare.

The village was quiet and almost deserted this time of day, caught somewhere in the awkward
transition between night and day.

Kyo made good time as she ran across the village, jumping from building to building with an ease
she would have found amazing in her past life, but now was nothing more than normal. Ordinary.

Reaching her destination, she landed in front of what looked like a simple storage unit. A large, plain
building that looked like it could house an impressive amount of food, weapons or whatever the
Hokage chose to use it for.

She knocked on the door.

A minute later, it was opened by a wrinkled, grey-haired, whipcord-thin man who gave her a
scrutinizing once-over before ushering her inside. He was missing two fingers on his left hand.

“Gear on this table, clothes on this one,” he ordered quickly and succinctly, skipping greetings and
small talk entirely.

Kyo couldn't really say she minded.

Instead of dwelling on her own nervousness, she began to unstrap her various weapons pouches, her
poison pack and all the gear she had tucked away on her person. It made a rather impressive pile, to
be honest. Far more than looked like it could fit comfortably on her small person.

Without much care of the old man -she assumed he was a professional- Kyo continued by stripping
out of her clothes until she was standing around in nothing more than her underwear, having
removed even her mesh-shirt.
“The small ones are always tricky,” the old man muttered to himself when he came back from his venture into the long aisles between the shelves taking up the enormous room, carrying a stack of black cloth in his hands. “Here, try these one,” he said gruffly, tossing the stack onto yet another table, this one previously empty.

Without a word, Kyo did as asked.

It was a perfect fit. Which she found mildly impressive, considering the old man had only given her a brief glance before wandering off to find clothes in her size.

When he returned the second time, she had finished dressing herself, fastening the legs of her trousers to her shins with one roll of bandages for each.

Having her shoulders bare felt weird, to be frank, but at least she'd been provided with gloves that ended above her elbows, which she secured in place with yet more bandages.

“Here,” the man said gruffly, thrusting a grey thing into her arms. “Let's see if it works.”

Kyo examined the heavy, matt grey thing she'd been handed, realising quickly what it was. Armour. ANBU armour to be exact.

Trying it on proved that it was slightly too large, and the old man snatched it back the moment she'd pulled it off.

“Put this on while I try and find a smaller one.” He scowled, and Kyo could sort of understand.

There couldn't have been many potential ANBU as small as she currently was. Finding something that fit her appropriately would be challenging.

While she waited, she fitted the grey arm-guards on her forearms, unused to the sensation and the extra weight, but she figured she'd adjust quickly.

That done, Kyo pulled on the black, knee-high sandal-boots she'd been provided with and then moved on to the meticulous task of transferring all her weapons into the new, black holsters that had been brought to her at the same time as the arm-guards.

At least her poison pack was already a nice, subtle dark grey, and would fit in very well with the rest of her new, potentially temporary, gear.

“This one's no doubt slightly big, but it's the closest I've got,” the old man muttered when he finally came trudging back. “If you end up measuring up to the challenge, I'll get you something custom made.”

He didn't look like he thought that'd be very likely, though, and Kyo couldn't help but silently agree with him.

“Here,” he said once she was done, throwing something at her face.

Kyo caught it reflexively, blinking a bit at the plain white mask in her hand.

“Put it on before you leave,” the old man said, placing a simple, standard issue tanto on the table and then wandered off, probably not intending to return this time.

Kyo stared after him a second. He could at least have told her how to put this thing on, she mused irritably.
With a small sigh, she turned her attention to the mask, taking in the smooth, blank porcelain. Featureless. She imagined it would’ve been cold against her fingers, but the gloves now on her hands ensured she didn’t know.

Turning it around, Kyo peered at the backside, which had been stuffed with a bundle of black cloth. Pulling on it, Kyo was curious to note it was quite firmly stuck to the mask.

It took her barely a second to figure out what it was for.

In this world, hair could be very distinctive, and Kyo had always thought it was pretty stupid to keep it uncovered when your identity was supposed to be a secret and all.

Then again, from an author's perspective, it was hard to convey a story when the reader couldn't make out who was who, so... And she’d already established that the manga she'd read, once upon a life, hadn't been accurate.

Glancing over the inside of the mask, now that it wasn't hidden by the cloth, revealed countless sprawling black marks inked into porcelain.

Deciding to just go for what felt the most logical route, Kyo slipped the cloth hood over her hair before pressing the mask to her face.

It was smooth and pleasantly cold against her skin.

Focusing, Kyo directed a thin layer of chakra to her face. Which was something she hadn't really ever tried before, but she managed.

The mask warmed slightly and stuck to her face. As if someone had applied glue when she wasn't looking.

Great.

Now she just had to do something about the cloth over her hair, because it was far too loose to be practical.

Kyo ended up tying a small knot on either side of her head, one behind each ear, and tucking them in under the hem to make them less obvious.

That done, she picked up the tanto, weighed it in her hand and then strapped that on as well.

As ready as she would ever be, Kyo walked out the door she had entered from, not really surprised to see someone waiting for her.

The ANBU took a second to inspect her before he nodded, mentioned for her to follow him with a subtle twitch of one hand and then turned on his heel and leapt away.

Kyo followed.

You'd think it'd be hard to breathe and see with your face covered by a solid porcelain mask, nothing more than two small eye-holes cut into the thing, but Kyo wasn't having any trouble at all.

Which made quite a lot of sense, even if she didn't have a clue about how that actually worked.
She suspected seals. Fuuinjutsu.

Aita always went on and on about the beauty of the art whenever they got a chance to meet up, rare that it was.

The ANBU led her to a part of the village she'd never been before. Up the face of the Hokage mountain and into the forests behind it, until they reached a series of training grounds she hadn't known existed.

They weren't the first ones to arrive.

“Line up,” the ANBU told her quietly, voice blank and giving away nothing.

Kyo did as directed without a word, feeling far too nervous for something she knew she probably wouldn't pass anyway.

She joined the line of other blank-faced ANBU prospects, feeling awkwardly out of place. Like she'd taken a wrong turn and ended up in the wrong place by mistake.

Kyo was half the size of everyone else, barely reaching up to the elbow of the very tall man standing at attention next to her.

It didn't help that her skin itched with the weight of the attention on her, either.

No one said a word while they waited, presumably for the rest of the potential new recruits to arrive.

Fully fledged ANBU were all around them, some coming and going, and some felt like they swung by just to take a look at the line of prospects.

It was all very awkward and nerve-wracking.

Two more arrived after Kyo and then, finally, something shifted when one man in a mask depicting what looked like a bear stepped forward.

“During this week, none of you will remove the mask on your faces. If you do, you're automatically disqualified for a spot on the ANBU forces,” he said in a quiet but firm monotone.

Which, Kyo mused, was an excellent way to intentionally drop out if you absolutely didn't want to become one.

“You will be given a number that will be the closest thing you'll have until we say otherwise,” Bear continued evenly, and then waved a hand at one of his colleagues, who stepped forward.

“Scroll?” The lizard masked ANBU said softly, beginning at the other end of the line from where Kyo stood.

She waited patiently for him to reach her spot.

“Scroll,” he asked, and Kyo readily placed it in his waiting hand, taking note of the way he'd cut the fingers off of the cloves he was wearing.

Kyo resolved to do the same at the first opportunity, because handling her needles like this wasn't something she was overly interested in trying; she'd drop them.

Lizard, or whatever his designated name was, proceeded to paint what she assumed was the number
thirteen on the forehead of her mask.

Kyo felt it was a rather solid assumption, because the tall man -teenager?- to her right was number twelve and slightly-shorter man on her left had just gotten fourteen.

Having to bite back an inappropriate giggle, Kyo focused back on Bear.

Lucky number thirteen. Hah!

Should she take this as a sign she was doomed to fail already? But then again, in these parts, four was more of an unlucky number than thirteen, so maybe not.

“The testing phase starts effective immediately,” Bear told them abruptly. “It's your job to evade capture,” he said, and several muted pops went off all around where the recruits were standing.

Kyo instantly knew the sound.

Exploding tags released whatever they'd been filled with, which, in this case, seemed to be some sort of invisible substance, either a gas, or a fine powder.

Kyo took a deep breath through her mouth, stubbornly shoving down the memories this had slammed to the forefront of her head.

She knew this taste, and her theory of it being essentially harmless was confirmed; potentially killing them would be a reckless waste of resources Konoha sorely needed.

A common sedative, fast acting and potent, with very little side-effects and short-lasting.

Kyo was immune.

Instead of scrambling to get away like the rest of her fellow Numbers, Kyo remained in her spot, absently taking note of the mixed reactions. Some had left using a shunshin, others had gone for the more basic technique of leaping out of the firing-line.

Kyo was the only one who hadn't moved at all. Other than for the fact that she'd begun to speed through a sequence of hand-seals she'd been working on the moment she realised just what had been released into the air around them.

Taking another deep breath, Kyo activated her jutsu, feeling it come into effect around her together with her exhalation.

Her range wasn't very good yet, but Kyo hoped to improve that with practice, and Katsurou-sensei had said to practise her proficiency until she dropped.

Three metres around her in all directions, in a decently sized circle, the air was Kyo's.

Chakra was very interesting. It was a constant presence in her body, flowing through her limbs like blood, only it could be manipulated in a manner blood couldn't, extended even outside your body. And like blood, it was a part of her.

That was true even after she'd moulded it into a jutsu and expelled it from her body.

Using it was like using a muscle; perfectly possible but required practice. The more practice, the better the mastery.

Someone scoffed derisively, and Kyo was very well aware of what this must look like.
The kid no one really understood the reason for being there, freezing up in the face of the very first challenge.

One ANBU shunshined to right in front of her, staggered and then collapsed to the ground, unconscious.

Kyo didn't give him -or her, but most likely a him- more than a brief glance, before she returned to focusing on her jutsu.

It was weird, and tricky, and it made her feel bloated in a way she knew wasn't real. But then again, her brain was trying to control something that was much larger than just her body, so.

In her little bubble, the air was hers.

And Kyo had made sure the sedative was still swirling all around her, rather than either dissipating or falling to the ground, where it wouldn't do any good.

The unconscious ANBU at her feet drew quite a bit of attention, but most of the watchers had taken off in pursuit of the recruits trying to evade capture.

Bear was staring intently at her, probably trying to figure out what sort of technique she'd used.

Every wind jutsu Kyo had ever heard of used the force of wind either to cut or hammer their target. Kyo had wondered if the opposite had been possible, which had resulted in this.

This jutsu didn't use cutting winds or gale-force gusts in an attempt to toss your opponents around, no. It was to hold the air still.

There were obvious drawbacks, of course. Like the fact that Kyo had to remain mostly motionless while using it, and unless she set the air inside her reach into motion, she'd run out of oxygen eventually, but... she thought it could be very useful.

Such as right now.

Another ANBU operative began to approach, visibly cautious in the face of this perplexing, unknown jutsu.

Which was another point in its favour, in Kyo's opinion; you couldn't see it. Didn't notice it until it was too late.

It greatly appealed to the part inside Kyo which had been carefully moulded into a silent assassin since she was old enough to walk.

She could feel the ANBU brush against her bubble of controlled air as they slowly circled her, trying to find any indication of what was going on. When they were right behind her, they stepped over the invisible line and Kyo only had to wait for them to breathe.

If they wised up and held their breath, she'd be screwed, but hopefully, they wouldn't figure that out quite yet.

The ANBU collapsed, falling victim to the sedative, just like their friend.

Bear crossed his arms over his chest, cocking his head as he considered her.

Ten minutes after the second ANBU had stepped into her bubble, Kyo was starting to get a headache. Not from lack of oxygen -not quite yet- but from the strain of having to concentrate so
intently without letting up. She'd never actually held this technique this long before, not when it was this large.

Number one, three, seven through eleven and fifteen had all been captured and collected at that point, and Kyo wondered absently if anyone would notice if she deactivated her jutsu.

It wasn't like you could see a difference, but then again, Uchiha could see chakra with those annoying eyes of theirs, so. Urgh, her head was pounding.

Taking a deep breath, Kyo had to release the jutsu or risk throwing up, and the air was getting a bit stuffy and stale around her anyway, so she relented to the inevitable and let go.

One ANBU appeared behind her and clamped a firm hand on her shoulder.

The sedative still lingering in the air made him sway slightly before he compensated for the unexpected reaction, but that was it.

The second ANBU, lying on the ground behind her, twitched minutely and shifted an arm as the sedative began to clear from their system.

By the time they had sat up, looking around in a rather dazed manner, though the mask made it hard to tell, the first one was stirring, too.

“...right,” Bear said, looking the lot of them over when the last few stragglers had been collected. “That was an interesting exercise. We're gonna have to run you lot through evasion drills,” he drawled. “Let's move on to the Hide and Seek survival training combo,” he continued, clapping his hands together and giving off a sense of foreboding glee.

And thus, Kyo got her first real look at the Forest of Death.

They were run through the metaphorical gauntlet, so to speak.

When they were gathered up the second day, having spent the night being hunted all over training ground 44, number fourteen was no longer amongst them, and when Two asked about it, Bear said quite blandly that they'd been disqualified and weren't coming back.

Kyo didn't really have time to wonder what they'd done to deserve that, since they were then promptly divided up into teams and assigned mock missions.

Kyo ended up with Three, Five and Nine. Their mission; to gather as much information as possible about the other teams' abilities and skills.

Hanging back while the others in her team discussed tactics, Kyo was content to just follow their lead. Partly because she was well aware no one would listen to her when they didn't even understand what she was doing there, and partly because she was content to remain in the background.

Unlike Three, who had been doing his best to attract the full-fledged ANBU's attention whenever she'd gotten a glimpse of him.

And she was pretty tired, too.

She'd been awake all night, having been constantly on the move to stay well ahead of the black ops shinobi looking for her, clamping down on her chakra all the while.
The Forest of Death had been fascinating, though, and Kyo hadn't been able to resist collecting a few poisonous plants while she'd been there. Mostly the really potent stuff you could usually only find outside the village walls.

If nothing else worked out, at least she had quite a few roots and flowers tucked away in her pack now.

“Then let's go,” Three said, his voice rather hollow, and Kyo was fairly sure the masks they were all wearing distorted their voices.

Not that Kyo had tried it out for herself; she'd had no reason to speak so far. Which was strangely nice.

She fell into the lose formation Three had all but decided for them. And who had assigned him as their team leader, Kyo wondered.

She also wondered if he realised the scrutiny he'd be under would increase exponentially with the voluntary assume of command, their failure or success weighing more heavily on him than the rest of them as a result.

Well. Better him than her.

Nine seemed to be a tracker of some kind, because he took them towards the closest team, which kicked off their spying gig.

Kyo wondered if she was supposed to take note of her own team's abilities as well, and with a mental shrug, turned her full attention to the task at hand, taking in as many details as she could while still keeping herself concealed.

The exercise lasted for a full day, and Kyo felt like she was ready to drop by the time they were recalled to 'base', which was the training ground they had all started in, on top of the Hokage Mountain.

They were told to line up, not necessarily in order, and were then handed a stack of papers each and told to fill out the forms. One for each number of the people remaining.

Oh, look at that; Six was gone.

Kyo sat down on the ground, fished a pen from one of her pockets and set to it, writing down as much information as she could recall, adding her own temporary teammates, as well.

After some consideration, she didn't write one for herself.

Katsurou-sensei had always said that it was stupid to make things easy for people, that even though it felt like a kind thing to do, in the long run, it wasn't necessarily the best option.

It was a philosophy Kyo had tried to take to heart. At least in her professional life.

Bear collected all the papers an hour later, handing them over to an ANBU with tusks on his mask. Kyo decided to call him Boar.

Boar and Bear. Heh.

And that was the sleep deprivation, she mused absently. Too little sleep had always given her a poor sense of humour.
Waiting for further instruction, Kyo grabbed her water canteen and drank two small mouthfuls, contemplating the merits of eating one of her rations bars. She hadn't eaten anything in a few hours now, and she was hungry.

Before Bear could say anything else, Kyo pulled one from her pockets, removed the wrapping and broke the bar in two, slipping half of it under the mask and cramming it into her mouth. Followed by the other half as soon as she'd chewed a few times and swallowed.

Urgh, that'd been uncomfortable, but at least there was something in her stomach now.

While they were taken to what Bear cheerfully described as an obstacle course, Kyo wondered what tou-san and Genma were doing.

She still had five days left.

Day four, Three was disqualified for doing something stupid and reckless that resulted in Four and Seven getting mildly injured.

Kyo had been glad to see him go, frankly, because the guy had been insufferably arrogant and had been the one of the recruits who had been the most openly derisive of Kyo's presence. Not that she'd done anything to actively slow the rest of them down, never mind how much she was aching and how exhausted she got.

She was doing her best.

When day six arrived and Kyo still found herself with the mask on her face, standing together with those who remained of the recruits, she was rather surprised.

About still standing, about not having been disqualified, and certainly surprised that no one had just taken her aside to tell her to go home and try again in a few years. Better luck next time, and all that.

“It seems you have all survived the preliminaries,” Bear told them, looking just as calm and unruffled as when Kyo had first laid eyes on him almost a week ago.

Kyo herself felt like she was dead on her feet, like she was floating a foot off the ground, she was so tired.

She'd gotten maybe one night's worth of rest combined in the course of this week, and she was at her limit.

Children needed sleep damn it!

“Wait in line for the medic to look you over and then you'll be given a tour of the facilities,” Bear concluded, waving a female ANBU over, the only marked difference the hint of curves under her body armour.

Kyo had come to the conclusion a long time ago that the male to female ratio was severely skewed when it came to the shinobi profession.

While she waited, Kyo ate another rations bar, having almost emptied her entire supply in the course of the week. She was so tired of the bland taste and texture of the things, but at least it made sure she'd been able to keep up somewhat to the older people.
Not that it was an acceptable substitute for sleep, but at least she wasn't starving herself.

Kyo knew better than most people just how important it was for your body to get the nutrients it needed to function properly. Being chronically ill in her past life had taught her a bunch of important life-lessons.

The ANBU medic finally reached her and Kyo remained perfectly still when a warm hand settled on the side of her neck, humming with chakra.

“’I'll tell Bear to let you rest properly before the next part begins,’’ she said once she'd finished her examination, patting her encouragingly on the shoulder before moving on to the next one in line.

Kyo blinked dazedly, too tired to react to much of anything right now.

It was actually a struggle not to fall asleep where she stood.

She still managed to keep up, somehow, when Bear brought them to what he called the Barracks.

The quick, brief tour passed in a blur that Kyo didn't really remember much -if any- of, honestly. She just knew that she had been assigned a room, that would be hers for the duration of her stay in ANBU -provided she didn't get kicked out in the next part of the selection process- and she didn't even think to remove the porcelain mask from her face before she collapsed onto the simple bed in her room.

She was asleep before she could so much as formulate a thought.

-x-x-x-
Waking up, Kyo felt like she'd been run over by a truck.

Her head hurt, her joints ached and her mouth was so dry it felt like it'd been filled with sand and then left like that for a few hours.

Blinking her eyes open, she stared unseeingly at an unfamiliar ceiling for the longest time, trying to make her exhausted mind dredge up the memories of what had happened.

Had she been injured? This didn't particularly look like the hospital.

“Hey, brat,” someone said, making her turn her head to the left.

A masked man was sitting reclined in a chair next to where she lay, feet propped up on the mattress of her bed and there was an IV needle stuck in her arm.

She blinked a few times.

“I appreciate the effort and all, but I'd appreciate it even more if you let me know you were about to collapse,” he said and Kyo finally managed to place him.

It was Bear. His mask almost looking like it was grinning at her in the muted lights of the small, personal room she had been assigned.

“I'll try to keep it in mind,” Kyo managed after a false start, almost wincing at how rough her voice was. And that was without taking the strange monotone it came out as into consideration.

She tiredly raised a hand to her face, cloth covered fingers coming into contact with something hard and smooth instead of skin.

Bear hummed. “That would be the mask you didn't take off,” he told her cheerfully.

Or as cheerful as anyone could sound while talking in a blank voice lacking much of anything resembling inflection.

Pushing herself into a seated position with a quiet groan, Kyo took stock of herself.

She wasn't hurting as much as she probably should, and thanks to the IV, she wasn't too dehydrated.

“How long have I been sleeping?” She wondered, annoyed when the words slurred ever so slightly.

“Almost two days,” Bear replied easily. “Had to bring in one of the medics, who looked you over and informed me it was merely exhaustion and to let you sleep it off.”

Kyo grunted, throwing the blanket off her legs to take a look at herself.
Someone had been kind enough to remove her armour and shoes, because Kyo was fairly sure she hadn't done that herself before falling onto the bed and all but losing consciousness. She was still wearing the same clothes, though.

“Did someone inform my family?” She asked after a beat of silence. If she'd been sleeping for two days, then tou-san would have been expecting her back yesterday.

“The Hokage was notified of the situation,” Bear said simply.

Which would be a yes, Kyo mused dazedly.

“What now?”

“I suggest a shower,” Bear drawled, looking wholly unconcerned and like he was perfectly happy to remain sitting in the chair.

Kyo blinked at the man a moment and then shuffled off the bed with a sigh.

She removed the IV from her arm and went through a few simple stretches, then walked over to the small bathroom adjacent to her room, taking in the fully stocked cupboard and the soap and shampoo available.

Without care for the man waiting on the other side of the door, Kyo stripped out of her clothes, and then removed the blank ANBU mask for the first time in over a week.

It felt weird.

She'd gotten so used to the thing she hadn't even remembered she was wearing it any more, which had no doubt contributed to the fact she'd slept with it on.

Kyo took a quick but thorough shower, scrubbing the accumulated dirt and grime off her skin and then wiped herself dry with one of the towels she'd taken out of the cupboard.

Blinking a bit at the discarded uniform on the floor, two thoughts were on the forefront of her mind.

One, God did the clothes stink. Second, did she even have anything clean to wear?

With a sigh, Kyo gave the bathroom a quick search for anything, and then wrapped the towel firmly around her waist. She put the mask back on, not caring one wit about her damp hair being covered by the black cloth, and then padded back out into the bedroom.

Luckily, there was a wardrobe. Kyo didn't think the chances of there being anything for her to actually wear inside it were very high, but she still checked.

Surprise, surprise, there was a stack of clothes in her size waiting for her, and Kyo marvelled at how well-prepared ANBU were.

It was bordering on creepy actually.

But then again, they'd had a week's worth of observations to go on, having no doubt been able to tell which ones would pass and move onto the next stage and had prepared accordingly.

Without further ado, Kyo pulled on the sleeveless shirt, a pair of simple black underwear -boxers, hah!- and then trousers.

She grabbed the gloves and sat down on the bed, slipped one of her kunai from the holster lying on
the bedside table and carefully cut the fingers off of the gloves, one after another.

Pleased with her work, she pulled them on and wiggled her fingers with content satisfaction.

*Much* better.

She spent another few minutes to put on the high, boot-like ANBU issue sandals, secured the gloves to her arms with bandages and then strapped all her assorted weapons and gear on her person, as well as putting the armour back on.

Bear didn't get off his ass until she was done.

“*Well, then,*” he said lightly. “*Let's go so I can show you the cafeteria and then we'll finally get started on the next phase.*”

Kyo merely followed him out the door.

The cafeteria had looked remarkably normal. If you ignored the armed, masked people moving around, talking to each other and eating.

Kyo could feel the gazes lingering on her, which made the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end.

*Why was everyone staring? Okay, she knew she was young, and sort of small for her age, but come on!*

There were several other ANBU that started out young that she could think of off the top of her head! Like... oh.

None of those were actually alive right now. At least she didn't think so.

There were others like her, right? She sent Bear an uncertain glance, biting her lower lip nervously.

Eating quickly, she then followed Bear into another part of the surprisingly large building, feeling a bit like a duckling following its mother.

Judging by the occasional snort from the people they walked passed, that was pretty much what it looked like, too.

Bear finally paused in front of a pair of large double doors, glancing at her over his shoulder before he pushed one of them open and stepped inside.

Kyo blinked at the large room she found herself walking into, and the first thing that popped into her head was 'gym-hall'.

There weren't any windows, but it was well lit and the ceiling was high enough above it wouldn't get in the way of even the wildest sparring.

*All Kyo could think of was that Taku and Maki would have loved it.*

The group of prospects were gathered on the other side of the room, sitting in scattered formation on the floor and looking rather worse for wear.

*It made Kyo feel even more self-conscious, because of course they had continued without her.*
“Thirteen, let's see what you've got when it comes to taijutsu,” Bear said, all but throwing her to the wolves. “Nine, look alive.”

Kyo slowly walked out onto the floor, which showed plenty of signs of frequent use.

While number nine got to his feet with a quiet groan, Kyo dropped down to sit on the floor, quickly going through a bastardized version of her stretching routine.

She wasn't looking forward to this.

Nine looked like he was about ten years older than her, with a a slender build and much longer reach. He walked with the grace of someone proficient in taijutsu, too, which didn't exactly increase her chances.

Oh, she knew she was going to lose. The question was just how long it would take and how much of a fight she'd be able to put up.

“Rules?” She asked softly, making several of her fellow Numbers look at her.

Kyo realised it was actually the first time she'd spoken in their presence, which made her feel a bit... weird.

Bear tilted his head, exchanged a look with Lizard -who had been here when they arrived- and then rolled his shoulders in a shrug.

“No weapons, no maiming and don't kill each other,” he said negligently.

Kyo sighed. She was screwed.

No weapons meant she couldn't even use her needles. Shit.

This was gonna hurt, she just knew it.

Nonetheless, at Lizard's signal, she fell into her favoured starting stance, watching Nine with avid attention even as she clamped down on her chakra.

She didn't have to make it even easier for the guy, who she'd already established was a sensor of some sort, by advertising her exact location.

“Begin,” Lizard said firmly.

Kyo remained where she was, warily studying Nine's stance, prepared to throw herself out of reach at the slightest hint of movement.

Nine waited a beat, but when it was apparent Kyo wasn't about to recklessly attack a stronger opponent, came after her with a half-assed, tentative attack. That Kyo easily slipped away from.

Nine did the same a couple more times before he realised she wasn't going to just stand still and let him hit her, and slowly upped the speed and force of his attempts.

Wow, was Kyo grateful for all that evasion training with sensei now!? She thought a bit hysterically as she ran around, jumping, rolling and slipping around Nine's attacks when she could and redirecting them to somewhere less sensitive when she couldn't.

“Will you,” Nine growled, “be still.”
Kyo gave a breathless laugh and then had to scramble away again. Throwing herself into a roll, immediately popping back onto her feet and falling into a run.

It was obvious Nine wasn't used to fighting someone who was so much smaller than him, but it was mostly the fact that he was tired and increasingly frustrated that ensured Kyo was doing as well as she was.

“Okay, that's enough,” Lizard snapped irritably when Kyo had to pull herself into a handstand to avoid first a jab with one hand and then a follow-up kick, before flipping herself upright and widening the distance between her and Nine again. “Thirteen, this is supposed to be a taijutsu match.”

“...I'm not a taijutsu kind of shinobi,” Kyo panted, and part of her loved how flat her voice came out. It added a certain something.

“Taijutsu,” Lizard said firmly, making Kyo sigh.

Bracing herself for some rather humiliating pain, she turned back to Nine, who was no doubt glowering at her behind his mask.

Yep, this was gonna hurt.

Mentally bracing herself, Kyo fell into a different stance and, figuring that there was no need to drag this out, surprised Nine by attacking first.

It was a sound beat down, exactly as Kyo had predicted.

Muttering soundlessly under her breath, Kyo peeled herself off the floor-boards and dragged her sorry ass over to the side to let another pair have the floor.

She was largely unaware of the way her fingers twitched towards her holsters every now and then.

The arm-guards that were part of the uniform made it a bit tricky to access her needle cuffs, so she'd have to think of some alternative to that... probably.

Or just get used to working around it.

“How can you still be alive with that sort of taijutsu skills?” Eleven asked her with a snort, making sure to keep his voice down.

Kyo gave him a disinterested glance. “I'm pretty good at my specialisation,” she returned evenly. She could tell Eleven was waiting for her to elaborate, but she wasn't feeling particularly generous.

Kyo was tired, in pain -Nine had given her so many new bruises, she just knew it- and it wasn't like the guy had asked nicely or anything.

Instead of responding to Eleven, Kyo began to stretch, going through the proper routine now, taking the time to go over every muscle with meticulous care.

By the time Lizard called her up to face One, she felt much better, though she was still tired.

Well, resting was for the dead and impaired, or however the saying went.

Kyo sighed and stood back to her feet for another round of painful defeat.
At the end of the day, Kyo felt like a badly bruised banana, but thankfully, Five was kind enough to show her where the infirmary of a sort was.

It looked more like an office, to Kyo, occupied by a single desk, two couches and several filing cabinets. It was also occupied by a single man with a bird mask.

He barely glanced at them when Five led Kyo inside, kindly letting her hold on to his arm for support.

She could hardly walk due to what she knew to be a truly massive bruise on her left thigh. The muscle threatened to spasm every time she tried to flex it. Which made for very awkward walking. Hobbling, really.

“Take a seat,” Bird-mask said, pointing absently at the couches while he finished reading the file he was holding.

Kyo sat down with a grateful sigh, leaving Five hovering uncertainly beside her before he slipped behind the couch to wait. Which she appreciated; she’d most likely need help getting back to her room afterwards.

“Status?”

“It’s just a bruise, but I figure it would be best if I was actually able to walk tomorrow,” Kyo said, pointing at the leg in question.

“And how did this happen?” Bird-mask asked, cocking his head.

Kyo peered at his mask. It looked a bit like an owl.

“Taijutsu sparring.” She grimaced, thankful for the mask hiding her expression.

The medic tutted disapprovingly, placing a hand on her pulsing thigh, the chakra almost immediately soothing the dull, bone-deep ache.

“Ain't gonna stay alive for long if you can't even keep up in a friendly spar, kid,” Owl told her bluntly.

Kyo scowled but didn't dispute his words; it was true enough.

She let go of her frustrated irritation with a sigh.

“Always focused more on evasion,” she said simply. Katsurou-sensei had thought that was more important, and Kyo couldn't help but agree.

“So use that to your advantage,” Owl grunted, sounding like a grumpy old man. “You don't always have to hit hard to be devastating.”

Kyo tilted her head. Now that was a thought...

She was quick, with nimble fingers, and she was very well familiar with the most vulnerable points of the human body. She could probably work with that, actually.

Kyo experimentally flexed her fingers, studying them with a considering air.

It would be a bit like stabbing a needle into the delicate spots, she supposed. Only instead of needles,
she could potentially jab with her fingers.

Which wouldn't be fatal, not even close, at her current level, but... it would be a step in the right direction.

So long as she didn't break her own fingers on anyone's armour. Or bones.

“There,” Owl grunted. “Anywhere else?”

“There's a pretty bad one here, too,” Kyo said, pointing at the right side of her chest. She could live with it, but lifting her arm tomorrow would be a pain -quite literally- unless something was done.

Owl snorted, but dutifully placed a hand on the indicated spot.

Five helped her back to her room when they were done.

Kyo was just glad she'd decided to eat first, because now she could wash quickly and then sleep.

“Thank you,” she said sincerely when Five stopped in front of the door to her room.

The guy shrugged. “I have younger siblings. You remind me of them,” he said, and then added, “vaguely,” with clear amusement.

Kyo smiled. “Yeah, I still appreciate it. I'll try and return the favour.”

Five laughed, which sounded seriously weird with the voice-altering thing on the masks, and it was obvious he didn't think there was much she could do in the way of favours.

And he might be right, but Kyo still put him on the list of people not to poison at the first opportunity.

After another week of gruelling training and drills, Kyo made her way homewards.

Finally.

She'd even ended up getting a mask.

Kyo was officially an ANBU now. She could hardly wrap her head around it, lest understand it herself.

Tou-san wasn't going to be happy.

“I'm home,” Kyo called tiredly when she stepped through the door, praying tou-san was still home and that he hadn't been sent out on another mission.

“Welcome back,” Kou returned, coming out of the kitchen, Genma on his hip and Ryota trailing after him with his hands in his pockets.

Kyo smiled at them, trudging up to tou-san to give him a hug, followed by Ryota, who gave her head an affectionate pat.

“So? How'd it go?” Ryota asked, giving her an expectant look.

“I, ah, got in?” She offered tentatively, sending tou-san an uncertain look.
Kou sighed. “I'd like to say I'm surprised, but. Congratulations, Kyo. I'm proud of you,” he said, smiling sadly and leaning down to press a kiss to the top of her head.

“What mask did you get?” Ryota immediately asked. “I've been trying to convince Kou it's the cat one, but he won't agree with me,” he smirked over at Kou, who grimaced.

“It's, uh, not the cat one,” Kyo told him distractedly, laughing a little.

She actually didn't know what she thought about her mask, and the name going with it.

“Which one is it, then?” Ryota demanded impatiently, his dark eyes warm and proud.

Kyo gave him an awkward smile. “Scorpion.”

Kou snorted at the look on Ryota's face. “Sounds very intimidating,” he grinned, “I like it.”

Ryota all but spluttered. “Who thought it a good idea to give that one to you of all people? I mean, look at you!”

Kyo blinked at Ryota before she glanced at Kou. “Is he drunk?”

“Maybe,” Kou answered idly, looking far too innocent and entertained to be anything but.

“The kitten's far too cute to be a scorpion,” Ryota grumbled, picking her up and hugging her to his chest, as if trying to protect her from something.

“I do sting, though,” she couldn't help but point out. And she was small and easily underestimated or over-looked, too, so that was also sort of accurate, she supposed.

“She does,” Kou confirmed with wry amusement, winking at Kyo when she gave him a sheepish look.

Ryota sighed mournfully. “They grow up so fast,” and he shifted his hold on Kyo until she was dangling in the air in front of him, blinking at his face as he peered speculatively at her. “Already a Chuunin and an ANBU. Isshun would be proud.”

Kyo swallowed passed the lump in her throat. “Thank you, Ryota-oji.”

Ryota grunted. “Do we get to see this Scorpion mask of yours? Or is that classified?”

“I can tell people my own code-name so long as I don't take it to extremes,” she said. Which applied to her ANBU status, too.

She hesitated. Kyo wasn't sure what she felt about her own mask, to be honest. She couldn't even decide if she thought it was creepy or beautiful, which... was a weird combination of emotions to waffle between.

“I'll show you,” she decided. “But you're not allowed to make fun!” She added, because she'd gotten quite enough of that from the rest of the Numbers already, thank you very much.

Nine had been rather snippy with her ever since their first spar, where he hadn't been able to land a solid hit on her. Though she should probably get used to calling him Weasel from now on.

“I would never,” Ryota instantly lied, with a perfectly straight face.

Kou shook his head and shifted Genma around so the toddler could see as well. “Go ahead, kitten,”
she said encouragingly.

Kyo sighed and withdrew the storage scroll she had been handed before she'd left ANBU headquarters.

She opened it, placed her fingers on the seal and focused on her mask as she pulsed her chakra.

A second later, she had her mask in her hand and held it up for the three males to see.


Kyo rolled her eyes but held the mask up to her face.

She didn't bother pulling the hood over her head, so she couldn't comfortably stick it to her face with chakra, but this was more than good enough for the purpose in mind.

Genma started crying.

Kyo twitched and instantly lowered the mask again, giving her little brother a dismayed look. “I made him cry,” she muttered.

Kou sighed. “Your mask made him cry,” he corrected as he tried to comfort the boy. “Your nee-san is still here, Genma-chan,” he told the toddler, lifting him up until they were eye to eye, smiling reassuringly at the boy.

“Nee-san,” Genma sobbed, bringing one fist up to rub at his eyes.

“Sorry, Genma,” Kyo said sadly. She couldn't seem to do anything other than make her brother cry lately.

Genma hiccuped pitifully and peeked over at her, seemingly pleased that the mask was no longer covering her face.

“Enough sad, more alcohol,” Ryota declared solemnly, picking Kyo back up to tuck her under one arm, like a sack of rice, and then marched back into the kitchen.

Genma giggled, still with wet tracks down his cheeks, and tugged insistently on Kou's shirt until he followed them.

“So why's Ryota drunk?” Kyo asked a couple of hours later, after they'd eaten and the man in question was lying on his back on the living room floor, holding Genma up in the air with his hands over him. Much to the little boy's delight.

“The Uchiha Elders want him to get married,” Kou said after a brief pause.

Kyo stilled. “Okay?”

“They've given me a deadline,” Ryota said blandly from the living room. “And if I don't have a name to present to them by then, they'll arrange something.” It was silent for a while. “Fucking busy-bodies,” he muttered sourly.

“So,” Kyo said slowly, frowning worriedly in Ryota's direction, “do you have anyone in mind?” She couldn't help but ask.
Ryota was silent, staring blankly up at Genma's happy grin. “No.”

She considered him intently. “Do you want to find someone?” She asked softly.

Ryota sighed. “I need to find more alcohol,” he declared.

“Coming right up,” Kou replied, getting up from the table to get a fresh sake bottle from one of the cupboards. He brought it out to Ryota and gave it to him in exchange for his son.

Ryota sat up to drink.

Kyo sighed sadly. This wasn't a situation she or tou-san could really help with other than to be there to comfort Ryota. Be his emotional support.

“I'm going to bed,” she said quietly, standing to her feet. “I'm exhausted, and I want to visit sensei tomorrow.”

“Okay.” Kou smiled, pulling her into a hug. “Sleep tight, kitten. We're proud of you.”

“Good night.”

And Kyo went to bed.

“Hey, brat,” Katsurou greeted her the moment she stepped through the door.

“Hi, sensei.” She smiled, looking around the new room he'd been moved to. It had three other beds - and shinobi- in it, but it was also bigger and brighter. Less cramped. “How are you?” She asked as she climbed up to sit on Katsurou's bed, down by his feet.

“Better.” Katsurou smiled a bit wryly, lifting the file he was holding. “Well enough to be put back to work.”

Kyo frowned. “You should really be resting, though, shouldn't you?”

“Nah. I was about to lose my mind.” He shrugged, clearly unconcerned, and tossed the file to the side, where it landed neatly on the pile waiting on his bedside table. “So how did it go?”

“Surprisingly well,” Kyo answered, still feeling rather bewildered. She was an ANBU. Okay. Alright.

“Then I believe congratulations are in order.” Katsurou smiled, tilting his head a tick, studying her. “Or should I offer my condolences?”

“No, I think- I mean, I don't really know how to feel.” Kyo struggled to put her thoughts into words. “It feels like they've made a mistake,” she admitted.

Katsurou raised a blond eyebrow at her. “They very rarely make mistakes.”

Kyo was just glad he hadn't said 'never'. She shrugged. “It still feels weird.”

“Well,” Katsurou sighed, leaning back further against his pillows, “tell me about how it went,” he requested lightly.

“I got to try my bubble jutsu, and it worked really well,” Kyo told him with smile. “I think they still
haven't figured out what happened, but no one's asked about it.”

“You don't ask about someone else's jutsu without damn good reason, Kyo,” sensei pointed out easily, folding his fingers together and resting them on his stomach in a relaxed, comfortable-looking way. “But I can see them all but itching with curiosity.” He smirked.

Kyo smiled, before she drooped despondently. “Taijutsu sucks, sensei.”

Katsurou actually laughed. It was brief and soft, but it was an actual laugh. “They pitted you against the others?”

“Yeah,” Kyo huffed, crossing her arms over her chest, coming close to sulking. “It went pretty well, until it was pointed out that I had to actually respond in kind.”

Katsurou snorted. “You always knew you'd have to work more on your taijutsu,” he said, zero sympathy for her plight.

Kyo stuck her tongue out at him.

Katsurou smiled and closed his eyes with a sigh.

Kyo settled down, looking him over worriedly. “How's physical therapy going?” She asked after a while to enjoy the comfortable silence.

Katsurou grunted. “They're all sadists, but it's going.”

She smiled and looked around, even though she'd noticed already that Kisaki wasn't there. “Where's Kisaki?” She couldn't help but ask.

Katsurou opened his eyes to gaze at her. “I managed to talk her into going back to the compound. She needs time to grieve properly, too.”

Kyo's gaze dropped to the covers. “I didn't let her do that,” she whispered softly, feeling shame rise like bile in her throat. She'd been too selfish, asking Kisaki to watch over sensei even when she herself didn't.

Katsurou nudged her with one of his legs to get her attention. “Stop it,” he ordered gently. “Kisaki needed a task to focus on, you know that as well as I do. Now that things have settled a bit, it's time she deal with her emotions.”

And he was right. Like always.

“I'm really, really glad you're alive, sensei,” Kyo told him with a tremulous smile. She didn't know what she would have done if she'd been left completely on her own.

Katsurou hummed, eyeing her knowingly, eyes warm.

“You're doing well, brat. Doing your best to turn yourself into an even worse little monster.”

“You just say that because you love me,” Kyo shot back, wiping at her eyes, though there was a small smile pulling on her lips.

“Okay, I was gonna just lie here and mind my own damn business,” an unfamiliar voice drawled. “But who are you, and what have you done to the Yamanaka?”

Kyo turned around to peer at the person lying in the bed on the opposite wall from sensei. He was
pale, with dark hair, but he didn't have the look of an Uchiha.

“Shut up, Daru,” Katsurou said without missing a beat, giving the man an unamused look. “This is my student.”

“I thought you were too old to be given a Genin team,” Daru mused.

Sure, he appeared to be a fair bit younger than Katsurou, but her sensei was far from old. “Sensei's not old,” Kyo said out loud, giving the stranger a perplexed look. He was just... thirty two? Thirty three? That wasn't old.

Then again, Daru looked like he might be twenty. At most.

Katsurou looked equal parts pleased and amused. “This is why I always put up with you, Kyo,” he told her lightly.

She gasped. “And here I thought it was my regular offers to poison people for you!” She placed a hand to her chest with over-done dramatics.

“It's part of your charm,” he acknowledged with what was -for him- almost a grin.

The only thing that was missing was Taku and Maki's amused snorts and occasional additions and it would be like nothing had changed.

The silence brought her back to the present, though, effectively wiping the smile off her face.

Katsurou sighed and pushed himself into a seated position with some trouble, placing a large hand on her head to gently ruffle her hair.

“They'd want us to be happy,” he told her quietly.

Kyo nodded. “I know. It's just hard.”

“So...” Daru butted in curiously. “You two seem awfully close for a student and sensei.”

Kyo scowled. She didn't like the way he'd said that; the inflection of his voice had made the hairs on her arms stand on end. “Would it be immoral to poison a hospital patient, sensei?” She asked loudly.

“I believe the staff wouldn't take it very well,” Katsurou mused, relaxing down onto the mattress again. “They might not let you visit any more, and then my life would be so much calmer and more peaceful.” He blinked, a small, rather vicious smile pulling on his lips. “On second thought, I'm not gonna stop you.”

Kyo squinted at him. “Are those built up frustrations speaking, or are you actually trying to get rid of me?”

“I don't play well with others, Kyo,” Katsurou told her sagely, staring straight at Daru, who had paled a little when Kyo glanced over her shoulder at him.

“You are an idiot, kid,” one of the other men grunted, sounding parts unimpressed and parts entertained. “Never try to play mind-games with a Yamanaka, moron.”

“Mind your own business and you might actually get out of here alive, fucking imbecile,” the last, bed-bound shinobi said calmly, not shifting his gaze from where he was staring at the ceiling.

“You've got mostly nice company in here,” Kyo told Katsurou with a slightly forced smile. She
perked up. “I could bake you something,” she offered.

Katsurou gave her a slightly wary look. “Not that I doubt your cooking skills, but, uh, I'd hate to be poisoned again, even by accident, Kyo.”

Kyo scowled at him. “You think I'd actually do that?” She slapped his knee and Katsurou snorted. That had been one time! “I cook for tou-san and Genma all the time and neither of them have died,” she sniffed, crossed her arms over her chest and stuck her nose in the air.

“You should look out, Katsurou; never piss off the poison specialist, or you might be poisoned on purpose,” the third man said idly.

He looked pretty peaceful where he lay, but Kyo had no idea what sort of injuries he might have. She wasn't about to ask, either.

“You're telling me,” Katsurou grunted, though the spark in his eyes was pure amusement, and Kyo was well aware that their bickering was nothing more than affectionate.

This was one of the ways she showed love and she was very happy that sensei was willing to play along.

“I could bring you flowers instead.” Kyo smiled innocently.

“Oh, Kami no,” Katsurou groaned. “Spare me.”

“Fruit basket?” Kyo mused. “I just realised that I haven't brought you anything; that's a serious breach in hospital etiquette.”

“Kyo, please stop it. You brought something to the hospital already.” Katsurou sighed. “Me,” he said when Kyo gave him a genuinely confused look. “Now go on; get out of here and do something appropriate for your age, for once. You've spent enough time in here on my account.”

Kyo blinked at him, trying to digest what he had just told her.

His eyes were warm, though, so it wasn't that he wanted to get rid of her.

“But I don't have anything else to do,” she said after a beat of silence. “I don't even know if Inoichi is still in the village and Aita's hardly ever here.”

“So try and find either of them. Take your brother to the park.” Katsurou shrugged. “Go buy dango and try to make a new friend.”

Kyo considered him carefully. “Are you hiding something from me?” She asked curiously. He really wanted her out of this room. It was most likely because he was pissed off about what Daru had implied, but- “Is it one of the nurses?” She asked, leaning forward and lowering her voice in a conspiratorial manner.

Katsurou placed a hand over his eyes. “I take it back. You're my least favourite person.”

“Try not to kill anyone, sensei. Remember that the medic said you're not supposed to use any chakra until they clear you,” she fairly sang as she jumped off the bed and walked towards the door. “Everyone other than Daru have a nice day!” She smiled and then left.

The smile slipped off her face, replaced by a frown the moment the door closed behind her.

Seriously, would she be court-martialled or something if she poisoned a hospital patient?
Chapter 34

A new team and also new experiences.

“Scorpion!” Bear said, drawing Kyo's attention, though it took a second longer than if he'd used her real name.

She was still getting used to this code-name thing.

Well, she'd gotten used to kitten so there was nothing that said she wouldn't get used to Scorpion, too.

“Sir?” She questioned, rising from her seat in the large training room they'd been using all through last week. Five, or rather Sparrow, had been helping her with her taijutsu, and a few of the others were around, too.

“Your team's here,” he said casually.

Kyo nervously wiped her hands on her trousers, waved a hasty goodbye to Sparrow and followed Bear when he led the way out and down the corridor.

She was still new to this place, and fairly unfamiliar with all of it, but wasn't this corridor leading down to some of the hidden exits?

She didn't ask if she was leaving on a mission, though tou-san would be worried if she left without a word.

“Hawk,” Bear spoke up abruptly, drawing the attention of one of the three ANBU huddled close together at what looked like the end of the corridor. “I come bearing gifts.”

“Our new teammate?” One of the others said, this one with a grinning mask that looked somewhat dog-like.

“Scorpion, ANBU team 23,” Bear said, waving a hand at the three men. Then, he gave a respectful nod at Hawk, turned on the spot and wandered away again, leaving without a sound.

“That's him?” The canine-masked guy slumped. “He's tiny.”

Kyo bowed politely. “Nice to meet you,” she greeted, for lack of anything better to do. “Please treat me well,” she added, because that might be something that needed to be stated out loud.

“Kami, it's a kid,” the third member said, sounding slightly shocked, even through the voice-distortion seals. He was tall, broad-shouldered and rather imposing. But that sentence alone gave Kyo an inclination of his personality.

“I'm Hawk-taichou,” Hawk finally said, seemingly finished with his close inspection of her. “Come with us.”
And he jumped out of the concealed opening, the rest of his team close at his heels.

There was nothing other than for Kyo to hastily follow.

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They settled down in one of the ANBU training grounds, the security seals carved into rocks in each corner all activated.

“Take a seat,” Hawk-taichou said.

Kyo slowly lowered herself to the ground, pulling her feet close to her hips, clasping her crossed ankles with her hands and giving Hawk an expectant look.

“I'm Hawk, taichou of this team. This is Hyena and Horse,” he introduced, pointing first at the canine-masked guy, and then the tall boulder of a man.

Hawk, Hyena and Horse? Kyo definitely felt like the odd one out. Was there supposed to be a theme?

“I'm Scorpion,” she said, perhaps redundantly, but it felt like the right thing to do after they'd introduced themselves.

“Specialisation?” Hawk asked promptly.

“Poison,” she hesitated slightly, before adding, “Stealth.”

“Sorry, taichou, I just have to ask,” Hyena interrupted, leaning forward to peer at Kyo. “How old are you, kid?”

Kyo stared at him a moment, before she flicked a glance at Hawk, who didn't seem upset or opposed to hearing the answer.

“Eight.”

Horse gave a soft whistle. “Damn,” he swore. “Have you even graduated from the Academy yet?”

“Yes,” Kyo returned flatly. Because, really?

“Right, back on track,” Hawk said. “If you're a poison specialist, I take it you're an assassin.”

“Wouldn't you have read my file?” Kyo wondered, fingers tightening slightly on her ankles.

She got the sense Hawk was grinning at her. “It's always interesting to hear what people will tell you themselves.”

“Yes, I've been trained with assassination in mind,” Kyo answered with a sigh.

“Which is excellent, because that means you'll actually fit into this team,” Hyena said cheerfully. “We're all capable of dabbling in the art, though none of us are true specialists in that particular branch.” He snickered quietly at his own... tree pun?

Kyo wasn't even sure.

“We're a bit more versatile, so I hope to brush up on your close-quarter combat skills before our first mission,” Hawk said, causing Kyo to slump.
“I was afraid you’d say that,” she muttered, before she firmed her shoulders and determinedly faced her new captain. “My stamina is rather poor, too.”

Hawk nodded. “We'll work around it.”

“It's a good thing we've got a Horse, then!” Hyena exclaimed delightedly, as if this was the best thing that had happened to him all year.

Horse snorted, but didn't seem to have taken offence.

Hawk gave a heavy, long-suffering sigh, as if mentally asking the higher powers that be what he'd ever done to deserve this.

Kyo couldn't help but smile faintly behind her mask.

“You look super creepy, by the way,” Hyena told her sincerely, sounding rather admiring, making her bite her lip to keep from laughing.

Her mask was... special, that was for sure.

There was hardly any white on it, making the little there actually was stand out all the more. The majority of the porcelain had been painted black and red in a rather insect-like manner, with black pincers in the region of her mouth.

Sparrow had said the red paint made her look poisonous, which was entirely fitting, she supposed.

“Then let's see what you can do,” Hawk declared, getting to his feet and giving her an expectant look.

Kyo followed with a small, indiscernible sigh. She supposed they wouldn't appreciate being poisoned, either, so her needles were out, too.

Again.

What followed was a gruelling few hours where Hawk had her running through hoops. Or at least that's what it felt like.

At the end of it, Kyo was still on her feet, but panting harshly.

Hawk-taichou gave a satisfied nod.

“Meet up here every day for four days, and then we have a mission,” he said, tilting his head to look at Hyena and Horse, too.

“Sure, taichou,” Hyena replied easily, firing off a lazy salute.

With that, they were all dismissed for the day, and Kyo returned home, trying not to worry about what sort of mission she’d end up going on.

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Apparently, whoever decided these things weren't a believer in starting slow, Kyo mused.

She and ANBU team 23 had left the village and were on their way to Taki, to assassinate an Iwa merchant that was supposed to be deep in the smaller country.
Kyo was being carried on Horse's back, to conserve her energy and to make sure she'd be at full
capacity if they had to fight unexpectedly.

At least it didn't seem like Horse minded. He hardly seemed to even notice the extra weight, to be
quite honest.

Being ANBU hadn't been all that different from what she'd already been used to, so far. This was the
first mission she was going on, but the training Hawk had put them through had been remarkably
similar to the things sensei had made her do since she was six. If only on a higher level.

The last week had been intense.

It took them two and a half, almost three days to reach their destination. Mostly because of the level of
cautions they had to resort to the closer they got to the Iwa border.

It was the first time Kyo was part of a team that were just as stealthy as she was, and while it wasn't
difficult to maintain the grip on her chakra, per se, it did feel strange to do so for such a long period of
time.

They reached a larger village, more of a proper city, and snuck inside with no one the wiser.

Which was where Kyo had to get to work.

Hawk had provided her with a picture of her target, as well as some basic information, and they
tracked him down fairly quickly. All four of them settling in to watch and observe him until night
fell.

Sneaking into the inn he was staying at, into his personal rooms, was disturbingly easy.

No one noticed a thing and Kyo settled in to wait for her target and his companions to fall asleep for
the night.

Part of the group was down in the inn's main room, drinking themselves into a stupor, so Kyo wasn't
feeling particularly worried on that front, and they didn't have any shinobi guards.

This close to their home country, they were evidently feeling secure enough not to bother.

Her target was a slim man, a bit on the tall side, with grey hair and plenty of lines on his stern face.
The glimpses she'd gotten of his eyes had showed a dark, intelligent gaze that made him look
altogether crafty.

Kyo patiently waited until the room was still and quiet, filled with nothing more than the soft,
peaceful breaths of the deeply sleeping.

Dropping down from her hiding place, still as fully concealed as she could make herself, with no
presence to speak of, Kyo walked on light, silent feet to where her target was sleeping on a futon on
the tatami floor.

Kyo crouched down next to him and slipped a needle from one of her wrist cuff holsters.

With a steady hand, she gently slid it through the skin on his upper arm, into the muscle underneath
and then withdrew it just as gently.

The man didn't so much as stir.

Kyo wiped the blood off the needle on her pants, tucked it away and then left to rejoin the rest of
team 23.

The merchant, her target, would be dead in a few minutes.

It felt like meagre comfort that she'd picked one of her kindest poisons, ensuring the civilian wouldn't feel a thing. He'd just... fade away in his sleep.

“We good?” Hawk asked in barely a whisper.

Kyo hadn't yet mastered the ANBU sign-language, but she was working on it. She knew the most vital signs by heart, at least, so they could make do in emergencies.

She gave a firm nod.

“You're terrifying, kid,” Hyena praised cheerfully, bumping her shoulder gently with one fist. “It's awesome.”

Kyo shrugged and didn't feel like responding.

It felt like she should be having some sort of reaction to this.

She'd had her first kill years ago, of course, but... it had always been in the heat of battle, life or death, people doing their best to kill her in turn.

This had been nothing like that.

That man she had just killed hadn't done a thing to her, personally. He was just living his life, doing his best to make a decent profit while he was at it.

And Kyo had killed him. Easy as anything.

Just because he came from the wrong country, was funneling money into the wrong country. Helping funding Iwa's side of the war, whether he wanted to or not.

There was probably something wrong with her, Kyo mused calmly as they slipped out of the village without a sound, leaving not a trace but a dead body behind them. Because what she'd just done? It felt like a kindness.

After all the violent, painful deaths she'd seen by now -after just two, almost three years on the job- people dying was normal. How you went, though... that was the question.

At least her target had gotten to die in his sleep, without knowing a thing.

It would have to be enough to comfort her until she got back home, where she could talk to sensei and tou-san about this new development. Her lack of a reaction.

Eyes dry, hands steady, Kyo leapt back onto Horse's back and settled in for the ride.

Shit, Hyena's sense of humour was already infecting her mind.

Slipping back over the border into Fire Country, Hawk started leading them along the border in a westward direction instead of continuing straight back to Konoha.

It made a certain amount of sense to Kyo.
Their mission had gone without a hitch, they'd made good time and they didn't have a mission waiting for them back in the village. So it was perfectly logical to do a silent sweep of a small stretch of the border, check in with one or two border stations and just offer a bit of assistance if needed.

Hawk-taichou hadn't taken them further than a few kilometres when there was a flare of chakra to the north-west of them, up ahead but closer to the border, in the direction of where Taki and Kusa met.

'Heads up,' Hawk signed and changed course, speeding in the direction of the chakra spike, Horse and Hyena hot on his heels.

Kyo took a deep breath and began to mentally go through the weapons she had on her person, what poisons she had available.

It was the first battle she was going to consciously, if you ignored that one shortly after she'd just become a Genin, and she hadn't fought in that one. Not really.

She knew this would be different.

When they were drawing near, Kyo patted Horse on the shoulder in warning and then dropped from his back, opting instead to take her spot in the formation they were supposed to be running in. Hawk had adjusted it to take Kyo's young age and corresponding stamina into account.

Then there wasn't any time to think.

Hawk paused at the edge of the battle-field to take in the situation, make sure there actually were Konoha shinobi present and find the most advantageous point to insert his team.

A second later, they were in the thick of it, appearing out of seemingly nowhere to go after the Iwa shinobi trying their best to crush their comrades to a bloody pulp with blunt force and frankly terrifying earth jutsu.

Kyo had a kunai in one hand, and used the other one to flick lethal needles at everyone within easy reach she could, without distracting herself enough to get killed.

Instead of trying to go toe to toe with the generally burly Iwa nin, Kyo flitted around her teammates, severing a tendon here, stabbing a needle into a thigh there, going in for the kill when the opportunity presented itself.

It worked beautifully. Until the Iwa shinobi realised four ANBU had arrived to the fight instead of just three.

At least Kyo's size made her difficult to spot.

Hyena was trying to fight two Iwa nin at the same time, to shield the injured shinobi behind him.

Kyo raced towards him, speeding through hand seals. She finished in time to spit a series of small, deadly wind sickles, about the width of a grown man's hand, at the Iwa shinobi from the side, managing to hit one of them.

The man swore as the razor sharp wind attack sliced into his side and he turned towards her with murder in his eyes.

Kyo belatedly realised she had gotten too close.
Managing to slip beneath the no doubt devastating punch aimed at her face, Kyo jumped away, flicking a needle at the guy's throat in retaliation.

Which was brushed aside with an armour-clad forearm.

Shit.

Kyo quickly jumped off the ground for the trees when her opponent flashed through hand seals of his own. She didn't want to stand around and wait to be swallowed up whole and ground to dust by the soil beneath her feet.

But she couldn't leave Hyena to take the attack in her stead, either.

Working as fast as she was capable, Kyo built up the chakra for her own attack, took a deep breath and raised her hand to her mouth.

With an explosive exhalation, she spat a near solid wall of air at the Iwa nin, who looked determined to weather the seemingly-harmless attack. It was usually used as a distraction, or to toss your opponent back.

Drawing a senbon quick as a snake, she coated the larger needle in wind chakra and threw it at the man's throat.

When he raised his arm to deflect it like he had the first one, it went cleanly through his forearm and lodged itself deep in his throat, all but disappearing from view beneath his skin.

Panting slightly -she'd used quite a bit of chakra in that jutsu- she remained motionless for a second too long.

She felt the impact, like a heavy punch, on her leg, but no pain.

Instead of inspecting the injury, Kyo threw herself back into the fray. She didn't have time to assess the damage right now; she'd end up with something worse if she stalled.

Helping her teammates, Kyo still tried to be careful with her leg, as much as she was able to without getting killed.

This was a battle fought on a higher level than she was used to, and it showed.

She did her best, though.

Running up the side of a tree, Kyo launched herself at an Iwa shinobi who'd been about to kill a man with a Konoha hitai-ate, and she practically landed crouched on his shoulders, stabbing a needle into the side of his neck, straight through the main blood vessel.

He'd die in a few seconds, which left Kyo free to flick to the next opponent, leaving the Konoha shinobi behind to hopefully catch his breath, focus and increase his chances of survival.

It was a free-for-all here, and Kyo couldn't think, was too busy reacting, taking in and sorting information to dwell on anything.

And all of a sudden, it was over.

Kyo found herself standing off to the side, having just killed a teenage-looking guy with black hair, his red and brown uniform stained with blood and stone dust, and there were abruptly no other enemies to focus on.
All of it had taken no more than a few minutes.

Breathing harshly and feeling twitchy like hell, Kyo glanced around, realising she should be looking for her team.

“Scorpion!” Hawk-taichou barked, making her jump and instantly shunshin across the remnants of the battle-field and next to her captain.

“Sir?” She asked, voice strained as her chest heaved to supply all her aching muscles with oxygen.

“You're still alive,” he commented. “Good.”

“Thanks for the assistance,” one of the regular Konoha shinobi said, giving Hawk a quick, shallow nod, before he turned to bark orders at his remaining men.

“Injuries?” Hawk asked once he'd made sure there weren't any other threats around.

“Nothing but bruises, taichou,” Hyena bounced on the balls of his feet.

“None,” Horse replied, much calmer than the shorter man beside him.

“Scorpion?” Hawk pressed, looking like he was giving her a once-over. Not that the black clothes made it easy to spot blood and stuff.

“Think so,” she managed, mentioning at her left thigh, which she couldn't really put any weight on any more.

It was pulsing in time with her heart, but she still couldn't feel any pain. She had a suspicion that that would change quickly now that the fighting was over with.

Hawk crouched down next to her and prodded her thigh experimentally. “You have a shuriken in there,” he commented flatly.

“Oh,” Kyo said, blinking. Yeah, that would be consistent with what she could remember; feeling something hit but there clearly hadn't been a kunai sticking out of her leg and she hadn't had time to dwell on it.

Hawk signed something to Horse, who positioned himself behind her, putting one hand on her shoulder, the other taking a steady hold of her left hip.

Without warning, Hawk pressed his fingers against her thigh, grasped the blood-slick shuriken barely sticking out of the muscle, and oh, yeah, she could definitely feel that! It was very much starting to hurt now.

Then, he pulled on the shuriken.

Kyo's entire body twitched harshly, without her consent, one hand lashing out at Hawk's face and her vision turned white.

“Don't do that again,” she managed in a strangled voice a second later, voice trembling so violently the words had been barely understandable.

Blinking tears from her eyes, she became aware that her arms were restrained and Horse was holding her back flat to his chest, which left her feet dangling in the air.

Hawk had a firm hold on her left hand, which was holding a needle just a few scant centimetres from
“Yeah,” he huffed. “We're leaving it in; it's stuck in your femur.”

At least he wasn't holding her reaction against her, Kyo supposed slightly hysterically, feeling like nothing more than a raw knot of pain and fading adrenaline.

After another moment, Hawk released her hand and Kyo slipped the needle back in her cuff with trembling fingers. She couldn't remember grabbing it.

“Horse,” Hawk said briskly, signing something Kyo didn't have the presence of mind to try and translate right now.

Horse nodded and Hyena pulled a roll of bandages from somewhere, while Hawk went to talk to whoever was in command here.

“Try and stay still, kid,” Horse said, the vibrations from his voice shaking her whole body, it felt like.

He shifted his hold on her and Kyo wrapped her hands around the arm he held around her chest like a steel band, watching Hyena lean down to wrap up her leg.

It hurt.

A lot.

Hyena tried to wrap the bandage around the shuriken, to prevent it from pressing on the very sharp object lodged in her bone, but it still hurt like a fucking bitch.

Kyo's hold on Horse's arm was white-knuckled and she was this close to just saying fuck it and scream by the time Hyena finally finished.

Breathing hard enough it was like she'd just ran as fast as she could across all of Fire Country, Kyo very much doubted she'd be able to do much of anything on her own, and that was just judging off of how much she was shaking.

It felt like she was gonna shake out of her own skin.

“We good?” Hawk asked when he came striding back to them, all lethal grace and fluid motions.

Kyo managed a stiff, jerky nod, unable to loosen her death-grip on Horse's arm.

“Then let's head back to Konoha,” Hawk said calmly.

Kyo's brain didn't have any input, feeling like it had shorted out due to the excruciating bundle of pain that was her leg.

Instead of swinging her onto his back -like she'd half expected- Horse slipped his free arm under the back of her knees and held her in front of his chest.

Like a princess, a distant part of Kyo's mind supplied helpfully.

Not that she gave a shit.

She'd never understood why people called it the princess-hold to begin with; she doubted a real princess of any repute would agree to be carried at all. But then again, carrying a woman with a long skirt or dress in any other way would be tricky, so wouldn't it be more logical to call it a... dress-hold
or something?

Feeling mildly nauseous from pain and exhaustion, Kyo let her head fall against Horse's shoulder and tried to settle in for a long run.

Since they were rushing, now, they might make it in about a day, she mused distantly.

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Chapter 35

Chapter Summary

Not all self-discoveries are all that great

By the time they reached Konoha, Kyo was fairly sure she had a fever.

She was shivering slightly, her breathing was laboured and it felt like her head might detach from her neck to float off on its own.

It was a fairly interesting sensation.

So much for an easy first mission after half her team had died, Kyo mused dazedly as they re-entered the village, not slowing down much even to identify themselves before heading for the hospital.

Cool, Kyo had never used this entrance before.

All of a sudden, she was lying on a flat surface.

Where had Horse gone?

Shivering worse than ever, Kyo tried to spot him anywhere, but the only one she could see was Hawk, who stood off to the side, watching the chaos.

Why did they need so many people, anyway? It was just a shuriken. Stuck in her femur, granted, but still! It was just a scratch.

Or something. Surely.

Kyo blinked tiredly, turning to watch one of the nurses, who approached with a syringe. She didn't do a thing to protest when the needle was stuck into the exposed skin of her upper arm, and the substance in the thing injected.

Maybe it would hurt less now? Kyo was hopeful.

She was fairly sure her trousers had just gotten cut off of her, because she felt even colder, and fingers were prodding the skin around the wound on her thigh.

Doing her best to lie still so that the medics could do their thing, Kyo bit her lip when her wound was examined more closely.

Did they have to be so... rough?

It still didn't prepare her for someone to grab the shuriken and begin to pry it from the bone it had lodged itself quite firmly in.

Kyo screamed.

She was pretty sure she may have kicked someone in the face before she was successfully restrained.
“Why is she still awake!?” Someone hissed as they struggled to hold her down on the gurney she was lying on.

“Because I'm immune, you idiots!” Kyo sobbed, the words gritted out between clenched teeth. Her voice broke on the last word.

She was breathing so hard it was painful, her hands shaking so badly from the icy agony splitting down her leg, up her hip and clawing at her spine.

Words were snapped back and forth above her, but they were nothing more than indistinguishable noise.

“Is there anything that will actually work?” A medic snapped the question at her.

Kyo laughed. “I work with a lot of sedatives,” she breathed roughly. Because she'd thought it could be really useful, and it appealed to the part of her that didn't like killing people.

And she absolutely had no clue how to deal with the fact that there were parts of her that didn't mind.

“Why isn't this in her file?” Someone hissed furiously, slapping something that sounded sort of like paper onto a hard, flat surface. “Anything else you're immune to?”

“Poisons,” Kyo forced out, the word strangled as she tried not to throw up.

“Morphine,” a voice right above her snapped.

Before Kyo could so much as open her eyes - they'd been clenched shut in response to the pain, tears streaming down her temples and into her hair - a syringe was jabbed carelessly into her arm and liquid warmth was injected.

With how fast her heart was pumping, it took what felt like no time at all before Kyo's muscles were beginning to relax, the pain fading to an uncomfortable, dull ache. It was loads better than the sharp, searing, icy agony that had been eating at her before.

Blinking dazedly up at the ceiling, Kyo took in the team of four working on her, their faces not registering at all.

She could feel them working on her leg, a sharp tug that almost lifted her leg off the gurney, and then a faint sense of foreign chakra entering her system.

Kyo was drifting in and out of it for a while, it felt like. She was still aware of the people flitting around, but it wasn't much of a concern of hers.

She felt pretty good, actually.

Kyo didn't realise she was still wearing her mask until Hawk walked up to her, placed his hand on her face and removed it with a pulse of his chakra.

She blinked dazedly at him. “Hi,” she managed.

“How much did you give her?” He asked the closest nurse.

The woman sent Kyo a speculative look and shrugged. “As much as was needed.”

Were they still working on her leg?
“Does this mean I disqualify?” Kyo wondered absently, gaze drifting a bit off course; she'd wanted to look at Hawk, but now she was staring at someone's crotch. Oops.

Consciously shifting her gaze back to Hawk's bird-like mask, Kyo peered curiously at him.

“No. You did pretty good,” Hawk sighed, patting her head, as if he couldn't quite help himself.

Did he have kids?

“Yeah,” Hawk answered, a reluctantly amused undercurrent to his voice, and oh.

Kyo had said that out loud, hadn't she? Oops, again.

Hawk shook his head, tucked her mask away beneath his body armour and talked to the medic for a while.

Kyo wondered if she could potentially share a room with sensei now that she was back in the hospital. Injured herself this time, but still.

Daru had been an asshole and she hoped sensei had thrown him out a window or something.

Before she could shape another disjointed thought, she drifted off into unconsciousness.

.

When Kyo woke up, she was pretty sure she was still drugged to the gills.

And she was lying in a real bed.

“You awake, brat?” A familiar voice asked.

“Sensei.” Kyo smiled.

“You know,” Katsurou mused idly. “When I told you to come see me when you came back, this wasn't what I had in mind.”

Kyo blinked a few times, feeling like she was on the brink of falling back asleep. “Did you know,” she said abruptly, managing to turn her head to peer at Katsurou-sensei, who raised an eyebrow at her. “I'm immune to sedatives, sensei,” and for some reason, she was whispering to him.

Weird. She hadn't intended to do that. Probably.

“I know.” Katsurou frowned.

“It really, really hurts when someone tries to pull out something that's stuck in your femur,” she told him solemnly. “And with someone, I mean the medics,” she added around a yawn.

Katsurou sighed. “Go back to sleep, brat.”

“Don' wanna,” Kyo mumbled, trying to lift a hand to rub at her face and failing quite pathetically. Her hand barely twitched, actually. “Tou-san?” She asked after a long pause.

“Came by to tell me he got a mission,” Katsurou replied easily, no doubt eyeing her closely to try and gauge her mental state.

“Oh.” Kyo blinked a little. “Did you know I murdered someone?”
The words just... slipped out of her mouth.

Kyo frowned, feeling perplexed. She hadn't intended to say that.

"Who hasn't?" A gravelly, sardonic voice she kind of recognized said. No doubt to point out she and Katsurou weren't alone.

"Oh, it's you." Kyo blinked at him. "Did you throw Daru out a window?"

The man stared at her for a long moment, and Kyo was pretty sure he looked amused, for some reason.

"They're having you on the good stuff, huh," was all he said. "Have fun with that, Katsurou."

Sensei just sighed.

Kyo frowned confusedly.

"We should be having this conversation privately, but I know both Seita and Watamaru are perfectly capable of secrecy," Katsurou said, shaking his head and sitting up a bit more properly. "You had your first kill years ago, Kyo."

"Oh, yeah," Kyo agreed easily, smiling a little. "Maki threw up," she informed sensei, who nodded shortly. "But this one was sleeping, you know?"


"Do you think I can move my leg?" She asked abruptly, attention drifting to her left leg. It was covered by the sheets, why was it covered?

"Kyo, focus," sensei said, snapping his fingers.

...she'd never been able to snap her fingers.

"Aren't you going to ask me how I feel about it?" She asked a bit belatedly.

"I have a feeling you're gonna tell me anyway," Katsurou said casually.

"It was pretty nice," Kyo said, ignoring sensei's words. "Which feels a bit wrong."

"Explain it to me," Katsurou asked thoughtfully, tilting his head.

Kyo hummed, trying to concentrate. Not the easiest task when she wasn't sure she could actually feel her own body.

"It was peaceful," she finally managed, blinking to focus her gaze on Katsurou. "I used my kindest needle and he died in his sleep."

"Nothing strange about that, especially compared to the last time you killed someone," Katsurou said with a small shrug.

Kyo stared off to the side.

The last time... had been during the ambush.
“Less blood,” she agreed absently. “It was very easy.”

“It's what you've been trained for,” Katsurou said. “Isshun taught you very well.”

“Mm,” Kyo mumbled and drifted off to sleep with little to no warning.

Kyo very much felt her body the next time she woke up.

Hands clenching in the blanket covering her, she groaned.

“Sensei?” She rasped, pretty sure that hadn't been a dream or a hallucination.

Kyo tried to shift to look for him, but gave up with a whimper.

“Sensei!” She almost sobbed.

“Already called for a nurse, Kyo,” Katsurou said, leaning heavily against the side of her bed, placing one hand on her forehead. She hadn't heard him move.

His hand felt blessedly cold against her skin.

“Hurts,” she breathed, managing to take a deep, trembling breath.

A second later, a nurse came barging into the room, leaving the door to the corridor open, which flooded the room with light.

Kyo hadn't even realised it'd been dark in here.

“You should be in bed, Yamanaka-san,” she said, before her eyes landed on Kyo. “What seems to be the problem?”

“Hurts,” Kyo gasped, a shudder going through her body.

“That can't be right,” the nurse muttered, grabbing the clipboard at the end of her bed. “You should still be under the influence of the morphine.”

“You're too good at what you do, Kyo,” Katsurou said evenly, leaning over the bed just enough to look her in the eyes. “You’re adapting to the painkillers.”

“It sucks.” She managed a choppy, unsteady laugh that turned into an agonized moan.

“I'm administering another dose,” the nurse said briskly, disappearing out the door for a moment. “I'll talk to the medic once I'm done here,” she told Katsurou when she came back in, a syringe in her hand.

A second later, the pain began to fade and breathing was slowly getting easier.

Kyo eventually managed to let go of the bed-sheets, fingers aching from the force of her hold, to fumble for Katsurou's hand, which he readily enough accepted.

Sucking down deep, slow breaths, Kyo tried to make her heart calm down from the frantic gallop it'd been performing in her chest, as if it had been trying to run away.

“Let's not do that again, please,” Kyo said unsteadily a minute later.
Katsurou patted her on her head with a sigh. “Your body's too used to handling toxic substances, Kyo,” he told her tiredly.

Kyo blinked, raising a shaking hand to wipe at her eyes when she realised they were wet.

“I'll let the medic know we need to give you doses more frequently than usual,” the nurse said, giving her a sympathetic look. “The medic on duty will come around for a check-up in the morning. Get back to bed, Yamanaka-san,” she added, giving Katsurou a stern, though understanding look and then left, closing the door behind her.

“Try to go back to sleep,” her sensei told her, squeezing her hand and then slowly letting it go, gently putting it back down on the covers.

Kyo blinked heavy eyes and did as ordered.

When she woke up next time, light was streaming in through the window and who was no doubt a medic was standing next to her, holding a hand over her injured leg.

“I heard there were some problems during the night,” he said calmly when he noticed Kyo's eyes were open.

“If you want to call it that,” she muttered drowsily. “How's it looking.”

“Your fever's broken and your leg seems to be healing nicely, despite the fact you made the injury worse by running around with it,” he told her briskly. “We're going to have to try and figure out how quickly you're adjusting to the morphine, so I want you to notify someone the moment your leg's starting to hurt again, understood?”

“Yes,” Kyo mumbled, blinking slowly a few times.

“If all goes according to plan, you should be out of here in a couple of days,” the medic gave her a small, thin smile. “Try to eat the meal a nurse will bring you shortly. Don't try to get out of bed,” and with that, he was done, leaving her to stare at the door after him.

Kyo sighed.

She dutifully ate the meal a nurse brought her and then considered trying to sleep some more. She felt rather jittery, though.

“Hey there, kitten,” Ryota's voice said from the direction of the door.

“Hi,” she returned after a brief delay. “What're you doing here?” She asked curiously.

“Do forgive her, Uchiha-san; she's drugged up to the eyeballs,” Katsurou said distractedly from his bed, reading files and important-looking documents again.

Ryota snorted and came into the room fully.

He picked up one of the chairs standing by the wall beside the door and carried it over, setting it down beside Kyo's bed.

“I heard you were in here, so since I'm in the village and Kou isn't,” Ryota shrugged, taking a seat. “Of course I'm here.”
“Why aren't you with tou-san?” Kyo asked once she had digested his words.

“Fucking Elders pulled some strings.” Ryota snorted derisively. “They're stubborn assholes with too much free time, the lot of them.”

“Do you want me to poison them for you?” Kyo asked with no hesitation what-so-ever and a heart-warming amount of sincerity. You know, for offering to murder someone.

“If they keep it up, I might just take you up on that.” Ryota smiled thinly, giving her an utterly fond look.

“So tou-san got sent out with another team?” Kyo mused, eyeing the man curiously. “Did you know I'm immune to sedatives?”

“Yeah,” Ryota said, shaking his head. “Isshun had something of a similar problem.”

“Remind me not to get injured again, please,” she requested idly. “It's not very fun.”

Every shinobi in the room snorted with amusement, making Kyo blink at the lot of them.

“You know, it's funny because you're handling this much better than many Chuunin I've worked with,” one of the other hospitalised shinobi chuckled.

Kyo peered at him, wondering if she should tell him she was a Chuunin or not.

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Chapter 36

Chapter Summary

Living the ANBU life. With ANBU fun and ANBU problems

Kyo was on a mission deep in Tetsu no Kuni when she turned nine, trying to find any information they could scrounge up on a potential alliance between Iwa and Kumo.

It was interesting to see Hawk, Hyena and Horse at work, doing something they were quite clearly very skilled at.

She learned a lot.

But ANBU team 23 weren't the only ones she ended up working with; Kyo felt like she got assigned to all sorts of teams, and quickly found that border patrol as an ANBU was both boring and far more interesting than she could have imagined.

So far, she'd experienced another battle like that first one and two occasions of enemy teams trying to sneak across the border. And that was just when Kyo had been there; she couldn't imagine how often that happened on average.

In between, there were hours upon hours of just running through Konoha's forests, of course. Which was both exhausting and somewhat mind-numbing after enough hours had passed.

Back in the village, Kyo was in serious need of replenishing her stocks, both for pure poisons -she'd made several batches that were stashed in Ryota's house while they dried- and coating needles in various substances.

With the new turn of her career, Kyo was going through a lot of them.

All of it made her realise just how shielded from the war she'd been before, how far sensei had gone to try and protect them.

Within the scope that he'd been able to, at least.

So Kyo settled down in one of the ANBU training grounds to coat several bundles of needles in various poisons and sedatives.

Home wasn't really an option, because tou-san was back in the village, so Genma spent a lot of time there, being the ever-curious almost-three year old.

Kou and Kyo had both agreed that it would be best to keep the sharp, lethal things away from Genma for a while now, since he'd taken up the habit of putting almost everything in his mouth if it looked interesting enough.

It hadn't helped that he'd seen Kyo hold a few of the needles between her lips and had wanted to try it for himself.

Ryota's house was out, because the man had grudgingly conceded to the Uchiha Elders' demands
and had begun to at least meet their potential bride candidates. Her dad's teammate would no doubt have embraced Kyo's request to work there had she asked, but she hadn't thought it would have been a good idea.

That would only draw out the inevitable. And it wasn't like she could change someone else's Clan; that sort of change had to happen from the inside.

So! She had settled down in one of the ANBU training grounds. She'd thought it was quite the clever solution, despite the fact that she'd had to change into her uniform and don her Scorpion mask for it.

Kyo had spent hours on her task, having gone through almost all of her new needles, the already laced ones laid out beside her to try in the sun.

Looking forward to be done with it and go home for some well-deserved lunch and then play with Genma for a few hours, maybe take him to the park? Kyo didn't think much of the pair of ANBU who had joined her on the training ground about half an hour ago.

She'd made sure to sit herself down off to the side where she wouldn't be in the way if someone else came along, so it wasn't like it was an issue.

Absorbed in her work, Kyo didn't think much of the build up of chakra behind and to the side of her; these people were comrades, she shouldn't have to watch her back.

That all changed when cold, unexpected water cascaded down over her head, and -more importantly- over her work station. Ruining hours of work and several batches of poison.

Kyo's fingers slowly curled into fists, even as the rest of her was still frozen in shock.

A pair of quiet sniggers behind her was all that was needed for her temper to snap. She could almost hear the sound of it echoing in her mind.

Dripping wet, Kyo slowly stood to her feet and turned around.

The two idiots didn't even try to act innocent, or hide themselves. They were just standing there, huddled together, laughing.

Oh, Kyo would give them something to laugh about!

Giving no warning at all -they didn't deserve one- Kyo calmly walked towards them, taking care to keep her body-language relaxed and amicable. Hyena had been giving her pointers.

When she was just a few paces away, she stopped, tilted her head and said, “You really shouldn't have done that,” in a mild voice.

One of the boys -and they very clearly were- snorted, but she didn't give them a chance to say or do anything.

She flicked the fingers of both her hands, at the same time, and three needles buried themselves in each of the boys' shoulders.

There was a beat of surprised silence, where the two boys looked down on themselves, blinked at her a bit, or so she assumed; they were wearing masks of their own. One of them took a step towards
her, stance beginning to lean towards the aggressive, while the other one growled.

That was about as far as they got before both of them stumbled, and the shorter, slighter one fell on his ass.

Kyo watched dispassionately as they succumbed to the pretty volatile mix of sedatives.

They'd feel like shit when they woke up. Utterly miserable.

Kyo relished the thought.

Not having the patience to deal with her ruined work right now, Kyo grabbed the two idiots by the shoulder straps on their body armour and began to drag them back to headquarters.

Taking pity on whatever person was responsible for the hapless morons, Kyo generously dragged them face up, heads clear off the ground.

It was hard work, and she had to strengthen her muscles with chakra to manage, but like hell was she going to let that stop her.

She hadn't removed the needles from their shoulders. They were going to have the worst hang-overs when they eventually woke up.

“Scorpion? What is the meaning of this?” Gecko asked sharply.

It was the same person who had handled part of Kyo’s selection, though she'd referred to him as 'Lizard' in her head at the time, before she'd been informed of his real code-name.

“They decided to ruin four hours worth of work for me,” Kyo told him calmly, absently wondering why everyone was staring at her. Sure, she was dripping water all over the floors, but at least she wasn't smearing blood everywhere.

It wasn't like something like this couldn't ever have happened before. There were idiots everywhere; shinobi and ANBU were no different.

“Are they dead?” Gecko asked curiously, poking at one of them with the toe of a sandal.

“No.” Kyo smiled. “But they'll wish they were when they wake up.” And she unceremoniously dropped the two of them to the floor. “Excuse me while I go salvage hours and hours of work now, and I might have to go visit training ground 44 to replenish my stocks after all the poison they just ruined,” she all but hissed, sending the two unconscious assholes a scathing glare. “Oh, and I would remove those needles from them, if I were you. And find a medic. Or you can just leave them as is, I don't care,” she said blandly to Gecko and then shunshined out of ANBU headquarters without further ado to go assess the damage back at the training ground.

Kyo was furious.

So much time and effort just carelessly destroyed because -what? They wanted to haze her? They thought they could do whatever they wanted because she was a kid?

What the hell!?

Giving a frustrated huff, Kyo took in the state of her previously carefully ordered needles, wanting to weep when she saw the current mess.

Her needles had been washed all over the area, the poison no doubt washed off, or at least mostly
and they might have mixed and- she was going to have to carefully clean every single needle and then do all of this all over again.

Kyo felt a few tears of pure frustration and pent up aggression leak from her eyes before she took a deep, trembling breath and shoved her useless emotions aside. That wouldn't help anything or anyone, least of all her.

With angry efficiency, Kyo set about gathering up her scattered needles, fully realising that she would have to go through everything, what she had on her person, too. Just to be sure that hadn't been ruined, as well.

Thank all the Gods her poison pack was water-proof.

But the needles in her cuff holsters were useless now.

The different poisons, never mind the sedatives would have all mixed together and seeped into the fabric, so she would have to wash those carefully as well.

And using needles she wasn't sure what they did would just be stupid. And reckless.

Feeling like she was going to cry, Kyo gathered everything and brought it back home. All of a sudden, she had so much more to do.

Genma would be disappointed.

.

Kyo was in a lousy mood.

The Incident the other day was still pissing her off, and she hadn't gotten to work it off any, since she didn't want to take her frustrations out on her friends and family.

Katsurou had taken one look at her and snorted amusedly, muttering about 'those poor fucking idiots' the moment she'd told him about what had happened.

She'd been helping him home, cleaning out his house for him since he'd finally been released from the hell that was the hospital.

She'd even cooked him several large meals, portioned them into plastic containers and thrown most of them into the freezer for him, to make sure he always had something to eat even if he didn't have the energy to cook.

Katsurou may be well enough to leave the hospital now, several months after being injured, but that didn't mean he was perfectly healthy.

Kyo hated the way his hands shook when he got tired, and how his breathing was still suffering from the inhaled poison. Even though he'd breathed in just a tiny amount, the long hours before he'd gotten help ensured it had left lasting damage.

At least the medics were hopeful they'd be able to fix it given time. Most of it.

They weren't sure.

“Konoha needs every man she can get,” Katsurou had told her, ruffling her hair. “So try not to kill them, okay?”
Kyo had given some light-hearted, cheery answer along the lines of 'No promises!' but that was actually pretty close to the truth.

She'd never been the kind of person who held on to her anger, to any grudges she might have. But Kyo was having a really bad year, and this had just... been the last drop.

It was too much.

Having most of her fellow ANBU keep a respectful distance to her when she walked into headquarters was both weird and somewhat pleasing, but Kyo mostly didn't care. It wasn't like she would take out her shitty mood on people who hadn't done anything.

“I heard you're having an interesting week,” Bear commented casually where he was lounging on the couch in what Kyo had taken to call the ANBU Common Room.

It was more of a large meeting room, actually, but it was also used by people who needed to wind down and couldn't do it alone.

Sometimes, it helped to just have people around you.

“I have absolutely no idea what you're talking about,” Kyo said back, entirely unamused. She wasn't having an interesting week; she was having an awful one.

Bear hummed. “Well, as long as you don't kill anyone. I'm not anyone's nanny.” He shrugged, got to his feet and strolled off.

Kyo felt a reluctant grin pull on her lips. That was all but permission, wasn't it?

Awesome.

Those two fucking assholes better pray they didn't come across Kyo anytime soon.

After running through team exercises with team 23, Kyo and Hyena went to the cafeteria for some much-needed sustenance before they'd continue with sparring -urgh- and Kyo studiously ignored the way some shinobi eyed her with twitchy unease.

It was even more obvious on the ones who were walking around without their masks on, having opted to wear them clipped to their belts inside the safety of ANBU headquarters.

“Man, you're one small package of terrifying whoop-ass,” Hyena cackled quietly.

He was the one she'd connected the most with so far, both in ANBU in general and on team 23. He had an awesome sense of humour.

“Thank you,” Kyo returned evenly, scanning the crowd and, of course, spotted one of her new least favourite people. “Let's eat before Hawk changes his mind,” she muttered, mood instantly plummeting again.

If he knew what was good for him... he better stay away from her.

Kyo had just sat down next to Hyena, fully prepared to focus on her food and nothing else, when Idiot nr 1 walked up to their table, looking generally disgruntled.

“Hey, I get you might be a sore looser and everything, but there's no reason to drag this out to unreasonable propor-”
Kyo stabbed him quite casually with one of her needles. Right into the back of his hand.

The guy swore, snatched his hand away from where he'd placed it on the table close to Kyo's food tray and backed away several steps.

It was far too late for that, though.

Ignoring him completely, Kyo ate another bite of her lunch.

Hyena was shaking with silent laughter next to her, watching Idiot 1 stagger once the sedative began to affect him.

It was another one of her less-than-kind ones, but at least she'd just dosed him with one sort this time. She was so kind and generous, she mused wryly.

Seriously, where had this vindictiveness come from? She couldn't remember being like this once upon a time in the Before.

The guy finally collapsed and Kyo, quite amusingly, had finished eating. “Let's go back?” She asked Hyena, stubbornly ignoring the silence and the excessive attention fixed on her.

She was not the one in the wrong here, damn it!

Did people seriously not realise how much time and effort went into her poisons? Did they think she just bought the stuff? Kyo felt like scoffing.

“Of course, little Scorpion,” Hyena agreed amicably, not bothered at all by the display. If anything, he seemed thrilled.

They put the trays with their dirty dishes away and then stalked off.

“You've got a mission, Scorpion,” Hawk said, tossing her a scroll.

Kyo looked up from the scroll she was already reading and caught the slow projectile easily. “Oh?”

“Not with us,” Hawk clarified, a bit redundantly.

Kyo had gathered as much when he said 'you' instead of 'we'.

Rolling up the scroll she had been reading with a small sigh, Kyo climbed to her feet, waved good bye to Horse and followed Hawk out of the room.

“Do you know with who?” She asked once they were in the corridor.

Hawk shrugged. “I doubt you've worked with them before.”

And there was just something about the way he said that that put her on edge. Not necessarily because she was scared, but Hawk sounded almost... amused? Vindictively smug? Entertained?

Regardless, it made her wonder what sort of situation she was about to walk into this time.

Hawk led her to one of the spaces teams frequently used to meet up in, only for her to come to an abrupt halt in the door.
“You have got to be fucking shitting me.”

It took a moment for Kyo to realise it was she who had just spoken.

But... it was true enough.

“I feel like I ought to tell you to mind your language, but,” Hawk tilted his head. “Feels a bit out of place.”

And there was definitely a smile in the bastard's voice.

“You,” Kyo said flatly, pointing accusingly at him. “Putting you on my shit-list as we speak, taichou.”

“I'm not the one assigning missions,” Hawk returned in a mildly offended manner.

“Shit-list. Hawk added,” Kyo grumbled. “I'm poisoning your water canteen the next time I see you.”

Hawk eyed her warily. “I'm going to assume that since you're saying this out loud, you're merely venting your emotions,” he said. “Hopefully,” he added in a quiet mutter and left with a quick, comforting pat on her shoulder.

Kyo eyed Idiot 2 for a second, and then approached the team of four. Which meant she was an add-on this time around.

“Nice to meet you,” she bowed politely to three out of four. “I'm Scorpion, I really don't like that guy,” she said by way of introduction, jabbing a finger at Idiot 2, who twitched minutely.

“So I've heard,” who was most likely the taichou drawled, making Idiot 2 shrink into himself a fraction. “I'm Wolf. The moron over there is Crow. These two are Stag and Sloth,” he introduced.

Kyo nodded at Stag and Sloth in turn, wondering if either of them was a Nara. Both names were remarkably fitting for that particular Clan.

“So what kind of mission is it? I just got this and haven't had time to read it yet,” Kyo said, wiggling her hand holding the scroll.

“Border support, we'll be gone a while, so pack accordingly,” Wolf answered promptly. “Meet back here in half an hour,” he added, dismissing them.

Kyo nodded and shunshined to her room.

It was a good thing she'd stashed enough gear here she didn't have to run home every time she got an unexpected mission.

Tou-san knew what it was like, but Genma was having trouble understanding why she just disappeared sometimes.

And now it looked like she'd miss his birthday, too. He was turning three in just four days and if Genma had gotten to decide, she and Kou would be home all the time. Always.

Grabbing the things she wanted to bring, Kyo checked over her uniform and the weapons and provisions she had tucked away on her person, and then hurried back to the meeting spot.

Wolf-taichou was already waiting.
“I'm gonna have to ask,” Kyo said, feeling mildly apologetic. “Have you read my file?”

“I have,” Wolf replied, thankfully not sounding like he had taken offence.

“Oh, good.” Kyo sighed. Not everyone read it all that carefully. Or so it seemed.

Instead of saying anything else, Kyo sat down on the floor, opened the mission scroll and began to speed read everything that had been written inside.

Great. They were going to patrol the border to Ame. Kyo was going to die.

Awesome.

The one stretch of border that was seeing the absolute most enemy action, and Kyo, all of nine, was being sent there.

Yup, she was definitely going to die.

Wolf crouched down in front of her when she tucked the scroll away. She'd leave it with someone before they left; less useless weight to carry around.

“I'll carry you most of the time, so don't worry about that,” the man said. “I expect you to be honest about your own energy and chakra levels, too.”

Kyo nodded, not feeling particularly happy, but she was honest enough she knew it was best for everyone, but most of all her, if she didn't push herself too far before even reaching any sort of destination.

It would put extra strain on Wolf, though.

As if reading her mind, the man chuckled softly. “You're pretty small, so it won't be a problem.”

Kyo tried not to scowl.

She had grown taller, damn it!

“Should I be looking out for any other acts of stupidity from Crow?” Kyo asked grudgingly into the following silence.

Wolf shook his head. “No. He and his friend have attracted quite a bit of unfavourable attention with that stunt of theirs,” he said, sounding vastly disapproving. “Kasai gave them a formal reprimand.”

Which was news to Kyo.

At her no doubt discernible surprise, Wolf snorted. “Disregarding the fact that pissing off a comrade to that point is incredibly stupid, never mind a poison specialist, sabotaging a fellow Konoha shinobi to such an extent... it's unacceptable.”

“Glad to hear it,” Kyo muttered, feeling a bit awkward now.

Wolf nodded and straightened out of his crouch, turning to the door a second before Sloth and Crow came walking in.

Stag arrived via shunshin a moment later.

“Let's go,” Wolf-taichou said, mentioning for them to follow him as he strode out of the room.
Wolf ended up carrying her all the way to the border, where she slipped off his back with a quiet 'thank you' and proceeded to run by her own power.

Sloth and Stag didn't seem to have any problems with this arrangement, but she could feel the glances Crow kept sending her, all throughout the first day and night.

When false-dawn lit the eastern horizon in a pale, greenish light, Wolf adjusted their course slightly and steered them towards what Kyo realised must be a border station.

Getting a few hours' rest sounded very nice.

As usual, it was easy to acknowledge that she never would have found the building without anyone to guide her there, which was entirely the point. Kyo followed Wolf as he entered, patiently waiting for someone to come meet them.

“Sloth, you show Scorpion to the closest bunk,” Wolf ordered when someone finally came to verify their identities and let them inside the station proper.

“Yes, sir,” Sloth returned calmly.

Crow gave a soft snort that Kyo was perfectly willing to ignore; wasn't her problem. And instead followed Sloth down the twisting corridors.

Sloth opened the door to a room and Kyo readily enough walked inside, finally taking off the ANBU cloak she had donned when they'd gotten close enough to the border, when it had started to rain.

As already established; water didn't agree very well with her needles.

Contemplating the question of if she wanted to bother with a shower, Kyo finally just let herself fall onto the closest bunk she came across, pleased to note that there were eight in this room. Which was plenty enough for all of them.

Throwing the blanket over herself, Kyo put her head on the pillow and closed her eyes to sleep.

It established something of a routine.

She could tell this was something Wolf's team had been doing relatively often, because all of them seemed familiar with the border stations they visited.

Kyo caught sight of Aita in one of them, and she perked up happily before she realised she couldn't approach him. Not as Kyo, and Scorpion had no reason to talk to the red-headed Uzumaki.

At least she got to see him; make sure he was alright. Note down how tall he'd gotten since they'd last met up. Then again, he was sixteen now? Practically an adult. Almost.

Definitely by shinobi standards.

Then they reached a border station that made the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end.

She couldn't say what, exactly was making her uneasy as hell because nothing looked out of place, this station just as hard to find as all the others had been.

Wolf came to a stop in a large tree, mentioning for the rest of them to be silent.
Despite it being second nature by now, Kyo checked to make sure her chakra was firmly under wraps.

'Crow, you see anything?' Wolf signed.

'Nothing,' the teenager replied in kind.

Kyo could tell that all of them were tense. Something about this place felt off.

There were no obvious signs of foul play, but then again; no one had come out to greet them, either, and there was always at least one team hidden outside a station at all times as sentries.

This was not looking good.

'Let's take a look,' Wolf signed, and he looked grim, the emotion conveyed through his body-language and the way his hands moved through the signs.

Wolf easily found the entrance, and cautiously creeping inside, they got their first confirmation that something was very wrong.

The second door, the one that actually led into the station proper, was stood ajar, and from what they could see, all the lights were off.

Hyper-alert, noticing every shadow, every hint of a noise, Kyo followed Wolf deeper into the seemingly deserted building.

Then they came across the first body.

He hadn't been dead long, judging by the state they found him in, and the Konoha hitai-ate on his forehead was very telling.

Kyo was pretty sure she already knew what had happened here.

Wolf mentioned for them to continue, leaving the Konoha Chuunin where he lay, for now.

They searched the whole building, finding more corpses, destroyed equipment and so much blood, but they couldn't possibly have found everyone that must have been stationed here. There should be more bodies.

By the looks of things, the attack must have taken place some time during the night, perhaps so far back as a day ago at most.

They couldn't find any sign of who had done it.

'Where's the rest of them?' Kyo signed when it felt like they'd looked everywhere. It was taking more time than it felt like it should, but they were being very careful, prepared for any traps that might have been left behind.

They'd found two already.

Sloth had meticulously disabled one, and Crow had warned them not to go into one of the back rooms, pointing out several things to Wolf that Kyo hadn't been able to make out.

She trusted their judgements, though.

Wolf tilted his head, as if considering something, and then mentioned for Kyo to come with him,
sending the rest of the team off to continue the search.

Kyo watched curiously, walking right behind the man, as he took them deeper into the eerie place, walking confidently through twisting and confusing corridors designed to make you lose your orientation.

“There should be a hidden level beneath this one,” Wolf said in a barely audible voice, pausing to consider a perfectly ordinary-looking stretch of wall with far more interest than Kyo felt was warranted.

She could deduce there was probably something more to it, though.

“You don't think that one looks the same?” Kyo asked, keeping her voice just as quiet.

“Only one way to find out,” Wolf muttered and pulled a kunai from a holster, stabbing it into a seemingly random spot on the wall.

Which, with a quiet groan and scrape of stone on stone, slid back to reveal a narrow opening, barely large enough to let Wolf-taichou through sideways.

Kyo had no problem walking through normally.

On the other side, it was even darker, and it took a moment for Kyo's eyes to adjust.

It just... looked like an empty, dusty storage room, a couple of wooden crates stacked against one of the walls.

Which was a hint enough that it wasn't. Things very rarely were only what they looked to be in the shinobi world.

Kyo subtly fluctuated her chakra to make sure she hadn't walked into a location-based genjutsu, and then walked further into the room when she couldn't detect anything.

Wolf sent her an amused glance, but didn't stop his own inspection of the room.

“Here,” he said softly, crouching down in the left-hand corner closest to the 'door'.

Kyo walked over to see what he'd found.

There were faint marks etched into the floor. Looking like nothing more than random scratches at a glance.

“These places are made to be a last resort, and are almost impossible to get into from the outside,” he told her.

“Almost?” Kyo tilted her head. That word made all the difference in that sentence.

“If you know what to look for, there's a loophole,” Wolf agreed. “A small one,” he added giving her a pointed glance.

Kyo blinked. “They could kill me, thinking I'm one of the enemy shinobi,” she pointed out, rather flatly.

“Which is why we will be doing this very carefully,” Wolf returned, not so much as missing a beat. “There are air-vents, but they'll be impossible to so much as find. What I'm banking on, however,” he trailed off, wiping the dust away from some of the marks on the floor.
Fuuinjutsu. Of course.

Wolf cut his thumb on a kunai and dragged the small injury over some of the seals, which made them glow with a soft, eerie light.

There was another sound of grinding stone, and then a small section of the wall next to Wolf slid open, barely large enough for Kyo to fit.

She stared at it.

Well. She supposed it was a good thing she'd never been claustrophobic.

“They’re intended for summons, if I remember correctly,” Wolf murmured quietly. He turned to give her an expectant look.

Kyo sighed. “Yes, sir.” She gave an absent salute as she considered how to do this.

With a mental shrug, Kyo kneeled in front of the square and went in, arms and head first.

If there were any people down there, still alive and conscious, she wanted to be able to defend herself at least somewhat if they decided to attack her before she got a chance to announce herself.

It was formed like a chute, going at a steep angle almost straight down.

It was nothing but rough stone, though, so there was no danger of her slipping uncontrollably, even without chakra.

It reminded her vaguely of that one time she’d gone spelunking in her past life, when she'd been in the United States. That had been an almost oppressively tight fit, too, feeling like she'd had the weight of the entire mountain pressing down on top of her.

Her hands finally brushed against a hard, smooth surface, which was quite neatly blocking her way. Her exit.

If there'd been room for her ribs to expand that much, Kyo would have sighed again.

Feeling along the surface, lid, whatever it was, she could feel faint patterns carved into it.

Going by what she'd witnessed Wolf do just a minute before, Kyo pulled a needle from a cuff holster and jabbed it into one of her index fingers.

Then proceeded to trace the pattern with her bleeding digit, hoping to hell and back she wasn't about to activate something that would kill her.

Instead of the increasingly morbid scenarios flashing through her mind, the edges of the square stone glowed softly, and then dropped away.

Smashing to pieces on the floor somewhere beneath, judging by the sound.

Taking as deep a breath as she could of the relatively fresh air, Kyo curled her fingers around the edge and pulled herself a bit further down.

“Anyone in here?” She asked calmly into the darkness.

God, she hoped so, or she had gone through all this nerve-wracking effort for no reason, and Wolf would have to try and talk her through how the hell she was supposed to get out of here again.
“Identify yourself,” a soft but even voice said from off to her right, closer to the floor.

“Scorpion, Konoha ANBU operative, part of team 17 under Wolf-taichou,” Kyo replied promptly.

There was a heavy sigh and a soft, flickering light was turned on. “About damn time,” the same voice muttered.

Kyo blinked rapidly as her pupils contracted, taking in the single room beneath her.

It was smaller than what she had imagined, with crates stacked in the back. There were also injured men stretched out on almost all of the floor, with just a few who seemed healthy enough to be ready for battle.

It seemed to be luck more than anything else that the stone lid hadn't hit any of them when it fell to the floor.

A stressed-looking medic was tending to the injured and the man who had spoken rose to his feet from where he'd been crouched, drawing Kyo's attention.

“May I enter?” Kyo asked evenly, not taking anything for granted.

“Yeah, just don't step on anyone,” the guy huffed amusedly, giving her an interested look.

It was a look she was fairly used to by now, and knew it was because of her small size in combination with the ANBU mask.

Kyo exhaled and wiggled herself further out the hole at the same time as she pulled herself down with her hands.

Sticking her palms flat to the ceiling with chakra, Kyo pulled her legs free and dangled from the ceiling by her hands for a moment, before she swung her feet up to stick them to the surface instead, walking over to the wall and down to the floor.

All without stepping on a single one of her comrades!

“So,” Kyo said once she was stood on the floor next to the exhausted-looking shinobi she'd been talking to. “How do we open up this place?”

“You are one tiny ANBU,” the man mused, blinking slowly at her, having to look down as the top of her head barely reached his chest.

Kyo could forgive him the reaction, because he frankly looked like shit.

“Other than a couple of traps, we haven't been able to find any trace of whoever attacked this station. If they'd been lying in wait, they would have attacked my team and I by now,” Kyo said evenly.

At least, that was what she'd been able to deduce from Wolf's actions. She seriously doubted he would have been willing to lead any potential enemies to this sort of knowledge.

“Over here,” the man muttered after a few second, having clearly needed a bit extra time to process her words.

Kyo could sympathize; she knew what it felt like to be so exhausted you were barely capable of coherent thought.

And with no further fuss, he slapped a hand on a palm-sized seal carved into the wall, pulsing his
chakra once.

Expecting it by now, Kyo didn’t even blink at the sound of grating stone. She was pretty grateful for the normal-ish sized door that appeared in the wall, though.

Seriously, just the thought of having to crawl back up that stone chute was enough to make her shudder. No thank you.

“Wait here and I’ll get taichou,” Kyo suggested before she slipped out and began to climb the narrow stairs.

Now that help had arrived, the shinobi who had assumed something resembling command had relaxed, and as such, would be deteriorating quickly, his exhaustion in the process of overwhelming him.

Kyo ran up the stairs and slapped a bloodied hand onto the seal in the wall leading into the dusty room Wolf was waiting in.

“Taichou,” she said to draw the man’s attention, despite the fact that it was rather unnecessary, since the opening of the door had been anything but discreet.

Wolf gave her a nod and followed her down the stairs to assess the situation.

All in all, there were five shinobi who were as close to uninjured as you could get. Two of whom were medics and looked like they were on the verge of collapse.

There were three shinobi who were injured but clear-headed and well off enough that they could probably fight if it came to it, and six shinobi who were unconscious.

Fourteen men in total.

That was a depressing number of survivors, and that was if all of them even made it back to the village. Which wasn’t anywhere near certain.

Once Wolf had gotten as much information from one of the alert shinobi as he’d been able to on short notice, Wolf left for the outer room again, Kyo at his heels.

She watched him flash through a series of hand-seals and then press a hand to the floor. A second later, a large wolf or dog stood before him, giving him an expectant look.

“Wolf,” it greeted idly.

“I need you to run a message to Konoha for me,” Wolf said without preamble, and proceeded to hand her the scroll he had been writing down the account and a few more things into while listening to the report of what had happened.

“Yes, sir,” the summons said, scroll clamped securely between impressive teeth and ran towards the exit.

Kyo crossed her arms over her chest and gave Wolf a long, unimpressed look.

He turned to eye her questioningly, head tilting a fraction before he understood.

“I don’t have any summons that small.” He shrugged, and she could feel the amusement coming off of him.
Kyo gave an unimpressed hum.

She was covered in stone dust. Her uniform wasn't actually black any more. All of her was grey.

The flicker of amusement faded quickly, though, and Wolf sighed. “Go fetch Stag for me, and notify the others of the situation. Tell Sloth to put up a parameter and go with Crow to patrol the area. Flare your chakra if you come across any problems,” he ordered.

Kyo executed a crisp salute, fist over her heart as she bowed shortly, and took off in the direction she'd last seen Stag.

If she'd understood things correctly, the man was proficient in iryou-ninjutsu, which would be a relief for the two medics down in the bunker.

'So some of them are still alive?' Crow signed as they jumped from tree to tree, checking for any sign of enemy presence.

'Fourteen,' Kyo confirmed, scanning the ground below them while Crow covered the trees.

'Shit.' Crow visibly sighed, though Kyo didn't hear it.

She silently agreed. And this also meant they had no idea what this stretch of the border had seen in the last day. Half a platoon of enemy shinobi could have slipped by without any of them being the wiser.

Which was a frightening thought.

Not to mention whatever information they'd been able to get from the bunker itself and the long-reaching impact it could have on the war.

They didn't talk more than that during their circuit around the border station. While Crow had been carefully professional towards her during the length of this mission, so far, that didn't mean they were automatically friends or something.

Like hell.

Kyo was still irritated about the whole Incident; how could anyone be that stupid? She'd thought ANBU were supposed to the best or something.

But she was willing to look passed it if Crow behaved, so long as there were no future repeats. Towards her or anyone else.

Fuck, what if she'd been slotted to leave on a mission later that day? The day after? It would have been a disaster and she might have died due to lacking equipment.

That wasn't something you just swept under the rug and forgot about. No.

She'd still give him a chance, though. Because at least Crow hadn't approached her to gloat/rub it in her face and indirectly call her a whiny baby. Like his friend had done.

-x-x-x-
Chapter 37

Chapter Summary

Getting a crash-course in poison is less fun than Kyo might have thought

They waited around at the border station they’d found all but wiped out, helping hold the fort down until reinforcements could arrive from Konoha.

Whom came a tense one and a half days later.

It was a special kind of nerve-racking to stay in one spot and know that if anyone attacked you right then, chances were, you’d be screwed.

Not to mention the enemy knew the location of this border station now, without any doubt.

So.

Once the border station was up and running again, fully manned, with the injured transported back to Konoha for further treatment, Wolf led them back out in the wilderness of Hi no Kuni's forests to continue their mission.

They continued south, before they turned around and headed back the way they'd come when they reached the Kawa stretch of the border.

Things were going rather well after that. Up until they reached the spot where the Ame and Kusa borders intersected with their own.

They ran into yet another spot of trouble.

Kyo suspected Wolf was preparing to turn them back around soon when something drew all of their attention to the north east, more towards the direction of Kusa than Ame.

“Emergency beacon,” Sloth murmured softly, clearly looking at Wolf to see what he'd decide to do about it.

“Prepare for action,” Wolf said firmly, turning them in the direction the beacon had gone off in, speeding up as he went.

They slipped through the forest like silent shadows, leaving nary a leaf out of place in the wake of their passing even when they were running at top speed.

Kyo had to struggle to keep up with the fully grown men, but she could do it for short distances like this.

They found a Konoha Team being chased by what looked like two Ame teams, slowly herding them away from the safety of Fire Country and towards Kusa, despite the Konoha shinobi's best efforts.

Wolf pulled his tanto and descended on the closest Ame nin like a vengeful God, killing the man before he could cut down the Konoha man he'd been lunging for.
“Look out,” the man Wolf had just saved shouted without pause, “Some of them use poison!”

Which sounded like a job for Kyo.

“Scorpion!” Wolf barked, engaging another Ame nin.

“On it!” She snapped back, already rushing towards one of the men with mouth-pieces and strangely shaped tanks on their backs, which suggested they preferred to use gases or just throw powders around. Considering where they were from, Kyo would bet on the former.

Gases did much better when it rained.

A very small part of Kyo's mind wondered, briefly, how they went about producing and preparing it.

Kyo flashed through a series of hand-seals almost too fast to follow with the naked eye and sent a strong gust of wind at the guy, dispersing whatever attack he had been attempting to use on the light-haired teenager in his path.

Without pause, Kyo proceeded to all but body check him out of the way so she could engage the enemy poison user and get him out of harm's way.

“Kids should go back home to mama,” the man laughed, his voice slightly distorted by the breathing aggregate over his mouth. And some kind of contraption on his body released a large cloud of semi-see-through gas, most likely from the container on his back.

Instead of backing off, Kyo went after his trachea with a kunai.

It was apparently such a recklessly unexpected move the man wasn't prepared for it in the least.

Kyo's kunai bit into his unprotected throat and sliced clean through it on her way passed to the other one. She was fairly sure there were two of them.

“You're going to die from that stunt,” the other one growled, taking a menacing step towards her.

She couldn't use the same surprise tactic twice, so when she attacked, this man countered her with a kunai of his own.

A minute later, he was trying with growing frustration to kill her.

“Why aren't you dead yet?” He hissed venomously. “You're not holding you breath,” he added with a growl, expelling another cloud of poison around them, practically in Kyo's face.

She smiled grimly behind her mask, knowing full well she'd feel the consequences of this later. Right now, though, she had this arrogant asshole to kill.

Katsurou-sensei had been very clear from the start that it was unacceptable for her to rely solely on her poisons. That doing so was a sure-fire way to get yourself killed the moment you met someone who knew how to deal with you.

This guy clearly never got that memo.

When she finally managed to get in a killing hit, Kyo turned to see that the rest of them had finished up with the last of the Ame shinobi that hadn't turned tail and fled.

They'd had the clear advantage of a surprise attack as well as not having to worry about the two poison users.
“You okay?” Kyo asked the teenager who was still sitting on the ground where he'd landed when Kyo had tackled him out of the way.

He was breathing hard and staring at her with what looked like stars in his eyes.

Kyo awkwardly ignored that and determinedly turned in Wolf-taichou's direction.

“Scorpion?” Wolf drew her attention, giving her an intent once-over. “You good?”

Kyo wondered what to tell him, because- ah, and she didn't have to say anything. Kyo stumbled and landed heavily on her front, barely catching herself.

“Fuck,” she muttered under her breath, starting to push herself up from the soggy ground.

“Hey, kid,” and that was Stag, putting his hand on her shoulder to help her up. “I thought poison wasn't an issue,” he said, though when Kyo glanced at him, he was looking at Wolf.

“I'm not immune to every poison in existence,” Kyo managed, feeling her breath grow more laboured, her heart was speeding up in her chest and she was starting to feel hot. “Yet,” she added with a short, breathy laugh.

Wolf sheathed his tanto and made sure the Konoha shinobi they had come to help were somewhat alright before he joined Stag next to Kyo.

“Oh, this is an interesting reaction,” Kyo muttered faintly, staring at her hands when they began to tremble uncontrollably.

She clenched them several times in an attempt to stop it, but it wasn't working.

“Holy shit, I'm so sorry!” The teenager she'd sort-of rescued gasped, running up to them to stare down at Kyo with horrified eyes.

“It's fine,” Kyo said dismissively. She was going to be fine. Probably.

This had, admittedly, never happened before.

“Tell us what to do, Scorpion,” Wolf asked firmly, holding a hand up in the boy's direction to silence him and keep him from crowding too close.

“Not sure,” Kyo admitted in a slightly strangled voice, a violent shudder moving through her body. “S' never happened before.”

Stag sighed, placing a hand humming with chakra on her chest. “And you're telling us now,” he muttered.

“I usually,” she had to pause when her hand spasmed, “get used to poisons in,” another pause, “small increments.” She shuddered again.

She was starting to feel too hot and too cold at the same time, her face felt flushed, then cold, then flushed again.

She couldn't control her muscles all that well.

“You're certainly not showing any of the typical signs of poisoning,” Stag muttered.

“Can you work on Scorpion and move at the same time?” Wolf asked.
“If we're not moving too fast,” Stag said absently.

“Very well,” Wolf said, picking Kyo out of Stag's hold when the man removed his hand from her chest and slung her onto his back.

Stag reapplied his hand to her back, no doubt focusing on her lungs to help with her breathing, possibly keeping a steady check on her heart, too.

“We're heading to the closest border station,” he ordered the mixed group.

The regular shinobi all nodded, sending Kyo blank glances every now and then, no doubt thinking she was dying.

If Kyo had anything to say on the matter, she wasn't.

This was just like getting used to a new poison, only instead of taking it slow, she was doing it all at once.

Right.

She closed her eyes and tried to take deep, calm breaths, even while muscles around her body tensed at random, all without any input form her.

If was weird, and frightening and... she felt far too hot, like her brain would fry.

Someone, most likely Stag, poured half a water canteen over her head, soaking the mask-hood and her hair underneath.

It felt nice.

Kyo sort of lost track of time for a while, far too busy to try and regain control of her own body, stop her limbs from twitching and spasming. Breathing was also very important.

She did notice when they reached the border station, though.

“Come on, Scorpion. Let's get you sorted out,” Wolf said firmly, clearly determined to see her healthy again. Which was reassuring.

“We need a private room, if not the infirmary,” Stag said sharply to someone the moment they stepped inside.

“This way,” someone replied just as briskly.

Wolf walked quickly through corridors that Kyo didn't really see, and she was only vaguely aware of someone having to hold the teenaged boy back from following them.

“But what if he dies, Hotaru? It would be my fault!” She heard as if from a long distance.

“Don't be ridiculous-”

And then they turned a corner and Kyo didn't catch the rest of what they were saying, their voices fading into indistinct background noise.

“In here,” the same voice from earlier said, accompanied by the sound of a door opening. “I'll be waiting here, so let me know if you need anything, ANBU-san.”
“Thank you,” Wolf said before she was gently lowered onto a cold slab of metal.

Was she lying on an operating table? She wondered absently, wanting to flinch away from the freezing surface.

“Strip her down,” Stag said hurriedly. “She's running a ridiculously high fever in response to the poison.”

And should Kyo be glad this was happening pre-puberty?

A small pulse of chakra close to her face removed her mask and the fresh air on her flushed skin felt amazing at the same time as it made her feel much colder.

Kyo shuddered.

“Get her out of the uniform, I'm gonna ask if they have any ice,” Stag muttered, hurrying back to the door.

Kyo didn't think the chances of that were very high; border stations weren't exactly known for their luxurious facilities or top-notch, modern equipment.

Wolf quickly began to undo the straps and fastenings on her armour, pulling things off as he went.

“Careful,” Kyo managed. “Nee-dles.”

“Understood,” Wolf murmured, proceeding with more caution.

Kyo was shivering so bad her teeth were chattering. She'd needed to tell him about the needles hidden around her person, occasionally just threaded into her clothes themselves, though, to make sure he didn't accidentally prick himself.

The moment her armour and obvious pouches and pack had been removed, Wolf took a pair of scissors to her uniform, cutting them away from her over-heated body with quick efficiency.

Leaving her lying in just her underwear on the cold, cold table.

Kyo gasped and flinched hard enough to almost bring her into a sitting position. She couldn't maintain it on her own, though, and slumped back down.

Wolf caught the back of her head with one hand to make sure she didn't hit it against the table.

Stag came hurrying back into the room. “No ice, but they've got pretty cold water,” he said, setting something heavy down on the table below her feet.

“Here, put this on her forehead,” Stag said briskly, voice tense and professional.

Kyo almost whimpered when something cold was pressed to her forehead and eyes, the shocking difference in temperature painful on her skin.

It was worse when another cloth was pressed to the back of her neck, armpits and even groin, every point where larger blood-vessels were close to the surface.

They were doing their best to bring down her temperature.

She rationally knew it, but that didn't change the fact that it hurt, damn it!
At least it was better than having a shuriken stuck in her femur, she mused with a small, breathless laugh, breath stuttering out of her chest.

“What's so funny, kid?” Wolf asked, steady hands not so much as pausing in their task to exchange the cloths for cooler ones from Stag.

“No-o ne-ed f-for seda-tives,” she stuttered with a faint grin, shuddering when a freaking cold cloth was pressed into her left armpit.


“It's an interesting ability you're got,” Wolf mused absently, “but with clear draw-backs.”

Kyo snorted by couldn't disagree. Her last hospital stay had really pronounced that. With a vengeance.

She closed her eyes and focused on her breathing, having no clue how much time passed.

Wolf and Stag didn't stop with the cold compresses until she was no longer shivering so hard she threatened to shake herself off the table and her heart-rate had returned to a more normal level.

“So. Am I gonna live?” Kyo asked with a wry, rather morbid sense of amusement as she slowly worked herself into a seat.

Her muscles were aching as if she'd just finished a ridiculous work-out routine worthy of the Gai person she could vaguely remember from the Story.

“Seems like it,” Stag said with a huff, tossing the last damp rag into the almost empty bowl of water by her feet. He continued by placing a hand on her bare chest, checking first her heart, then her lungs, moving down to other important internal organs, such as liver and kidneys.

“Well,” Wolf sighed, sitting down on a metal stool on wheels he pulled out from under the metal table she was sitting on. “If you hadn't been with us, someone would have died, so,” he said with rueful amusement. “Thank you for your sacrifice.”

“Any time.” Kyo shrugged, wincing at the pull on her exhausted, sore muscles.

It sucked to see your teammates die of poison while you were unaffected.

Kyo would much rather go through this a hundred times than live through that again.

She wasn't sure what expression she was wearing, but Stag ruffled her damp hair, followed by Wolf doing the same thing.

“Let's bring her on our next mission, too,” Stag suggested lightly.

Wolf snorted. “We only got her because we're running the Ame stretch,” he said, shaking his head, though he sounded amused. “We're not a team geared towards assassination.”

Kyo blinked. Because, what? That made it sound like people were fighting over her. What a ridiculous thought.

“Come on, you have to put in some effort, taichou,” Stag cajoled teasingly.

Kyo watched them bicker back and forth for a while, amused and relaxed, glad that her limbs no
longer twitched uncontrollably whenever they felt like it.

“Should I get dressed?” She asked into a slight pause in the amicable, inane argument.

Both men paused, looking like they had quite forgotten about her current lack of clothes.

“I hope you packed a spare set, because I doubt we’d be able to find something in your size around here.” Wolf said, getting up from his seat to move all her things from the counter by the wall to within easy reaching distance from Kyo.

“I always have spares,” Kyo said easily, pulling out a sealing scroll from her poison pack.

Stag gave an impressed whistle when she unrolled it, moving closer to get a better look. “That’s impressive work. Not one of the mass-produced ones,” he observed admiringly.

Kyo smiled. “It was a gift from a friend,” she said, touching her fingers to the first seal, pulsing her chakra.

A moment later, the scroll was weighed down against her lap by a fresh uniform.

Kyo eagerly pulled on the shirt; it was a bit chilly in here, even without a fever.

Sliding off the damp metal table to stand a bit unsteadily on the floor, Kyo shimmied out of her sopping wet underwear -from the compresses- and pulled on a dry pair and then trousers.

She didn't really care about the two men being in the room with her, both of whom had seen her basically naked already. She figured she would have been more embarrassed say, if she was four or five years older, because she figured she'd have more of a figure at fourteen.

Not that it was an issue at this time, so the whole thing was moot.

While she got dressed, Wolf and Stag began to clean up the room, gathering up the rags they'd used, put everything back where they'd found it and then waited for her to put all her weapons back where they belonged.

She had to go through her ruined uniform, too, to make sure there weren't any poisoned needles left in the fabric someone with poor luck could accidentally kill themselves on.

She found three, which she proceeded to tuck away into the cloth of her current uniform.

“Where do I put this?” She asked, holding up the shapeless piece of cloth that used to be a shirt.

Wolf considered it a moment. “We'll leave it with someone here; it could potentially find a use,” he shrugged.

Kyo nodded and began to head for the door, before Stag stopped her with a hand on her shoulder.

When she looked at him, he wordlessly held out her ANBU mask.

Grinning sheepishly, Kyo took it and quickly fitted it over her face, pulling the hood properly over her head to hide her hair.

Then, all ready and with nothing left behind, the three of them exited the emergency operating room to rejoin the rest of the team.

Hours had passed since they'd arrived at the station, and Kyo guessed it was late. Either way, she
was exhausted.

“Let's find where the rest of the team is bunking and join them,” Wolf sighed tiredly.

Kyo felt the absurd urge to take the two men's hands and walk between them like a little kid.

Wait. She was a little kid.

With no remorse what-so-ever, Kyo did what she wanted, slipping one hand into Wolf’s much larger one, and the other one into Stag's slightly smaller, but still much larger than hers’ hand.

Both men twitched minutely and glanced down at her, but neither pulled away.

Kyo smiled and bounced minutely on the balls of her feet as she walked.

Wolf chuckled softly and playfully squeezed her fingers.

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Chapter 38

Chapter Summary

Kyo did not sign up for this mission and she'd like a refund, please

Another few months passed, with Kyo running mission all over the place.

The war was getting dirty.

Or it was just that Kyo regularly kept getting exposed to a side of the fighting she hadn't experienced before.

Everyone was stressed, working over-time and missions were piling up, even for Kyo. It felt like she hardly ever saw her family any more, just about getting to say 'hi' to dad and Genma before either she or Kou had to leave again.

Genma threw a hissy-fit every time either of them stepped out the door without him at this point, thinking they were disappearing again.

It wasn't made any better by realising it was pretty much true.

Returning to the village, Kyo followed Hawk into ANBU headquarters feeling worn down and sleepy.

“Scorpion!” Bear called, having been in the process of walking passed only to pause when he spotted her. “Got a scroll for ya,” he said, tossing a small, thin scroll at her face.

Kyo caught it purely by reflex, blinking tiredly after the man when he continued on his way without another word.

“Anything exciting?” Hyena asked, sidling up beside her.

Kyo glanced down at the scroll, shrugged and opened it. “Not really,” she said, rolling it back up and slipping it into a pocket. “Just says to go to the mission room in the Hokage tower day after tomorrow.”

“Huh,” Hyena said, crossing his arms over his chest and tilting his head thoughtfully. “Well, let's get you to Owl so he can look at that head of yours.”

“Ha ha,” Kyo murmured but was grateful enough to let him lead her to the medic office anyway, one hand clasped loosely around her upper arm as he steered her along.

Her head hurt and she had a feeling her mask had been ruined; she'd need a new one.

Urgh.

Kyo slept most of the next day away, and spent the rest of it cuddling with Genma at their grandparents' house.
Tou-san was out of the village, together with Ryota, and sensei was busy with work. And besides, she had a distinct feeling Genma was the most neglected out of her precious people.

“Are you going again?” Genma murmured quietly against her shoulder.

“I have to.” Kyo sighed. “But hopefully not right away.” She smiled tiredly, pressing a kiss against Genma's soft hair.

“Want nee-san to stay,” Genma grumbled unhappily, tightening his arms around her neck until he was threatening to cut off her air ways.

Kyo huffed and rubbed a hand up and down his back in a soothing manner, relishing the hug even if it was a bit on the forceful side. Not that it was enough to really affect her.

“Want to show me what tou-san and Ryota-oji's been teaching you? Tou-san said you're very good at the katas,” she asked, aiming for distracting and redirecting the conversation.

Genma perked up, lifting his head from her shoulder to smile happily at her. “Yeah! Come on, come on!” He urged, hurrying to disentangle himself from her and running towards the hallway.

Kyo snorted and rolled to her feet, readily enough following the three year old.

She caught up easily, even after swinging by the kitchen to pick up a few snacks to bring along.

“Ready?” She asked after she'd helped Genma put on his shoes, having stepped into her own with absent ease.

She was getting to be pretty good at getting dressed quickly, she mused when Genma nodded.

“Can we go the roof way?” He asked eagerly, holding his arms up towards her, a hopeful look on his adorable face.

Kyo grinned and swept him up into her arms, swinging him around onto her back. “What a question; of course we can go the roof way!” She laughed, taking a hold of Genma's legs while adding another layer of security by sticking his small chest to her back with chakra.

When she leapt up onto the closest roof, Genma gave a delighted squeal of laughter that had Kyo grinning ear to ear.

The next day, Kyo got dressed in something that wasn't her ANBU uniform.

Her 'normal' outfit wasn't quite as comfortable, any more, so maybe it was time she buy herself a new one? A t-shirt and shorts just didn't feel right.

Something to think about.

Saying goodbye to Genma for the day, with a solemn promise to come say bye if she was 'going away', Kyo left their grandparents' house to run to the Hokage tower.

Wondering what this was about.

The scroll Bear had tossed at her hadn't mentioned anything about why she had to report to the mission room, just that she did.
With a mental shrug and a small sigh, Kyo landed outside the building and walked in.

Oh, maybe she could swing by Katsurou's new office while she was at it? See what it was like and check up on sensei. Make sure he wasn't losing his mind to boredom or something.

He was still adjusting to not going on mission outside the village while he was recuperating from his injuries.

Weaving around the shinobi moving about the busy mission room, Kyo approached one of the desks.

“Name and purpose?” The Chuunin behind the counter asked, not so much as looking up from the files he was sorting.

“Shiranui Kyo, I got a scroll to report to the mission room today,” Kyo replied easily, showing him the scroll in question when he glanced up at her words.

The Chuunin muttered her name under his breath as he got up to wander over to one of the large filing cabinets by the wall on his side of the room.

He came back quickly enough. “Here you go,” he said, handing her a substantially thicker scroll.

Kyo accepted it with a quiet thanks, face carefully blank as she considered what sort of scroll could be important enough for all this... effort.

With a sigh, Kyo walked over to an out of the way wall to open the scroll and see what all the fuss was about.

Kyo read the first few lines, blinked, read them again and then quickly read through the rest of it.

Taking a deep breath, she had to exert a surprising amount of effort not to crush the scroll in her hands.

With a small growl, Kyo stalked off to find Katsurou-sensei.

“I'm not doing it!” She spat by way of greeting when she swept into the office Katsurou shared with one other benched Jounin. Another Yamanaka, by the look of him.

Both of them glanced up from their paperwork.

“Do I dare ask?” Sensei wondered drily.

Kyo threw the scroll she'd just read at him, pleased to see he didn't have any trouble catching it.

Katsurou glanced it over and then gave her a Look, raised eyebrow and everything.

“These are orders, Kyo, not an idle suggestion,” he said reasonably.

Kyo scowled at him. “Why do you have to be so realistic all the time?” She wondered sourly, walking around his desk climb into his lap. “And no, I'm not too old to sit in people's laps,” she told him primly. And it wasn't like she was anywhere near old enough for any other kind of 'lap-sitting' yet either.

Katsurou sighed. Heavily. “I can't work like this,” he muttered, though he didn't do a thing to get rid of her.
“I don't understand why I can't just continue doing what I'm doing now,” Kyo continued obstinately. “It's fine like this.”

“Not really,” Katsurou, the traitor, disagreed. “You're over-worked and you've lost weight.”

“Not much,” Kyo returned without hesitation. “I make sure to pack double the amount of ration bars every time I'm in the village.” She frowned, turning so that she was sitting sideways over Katsurou-sensei's legs so she could look at his face without feeling like she was straining her neck. “I'm doing well enough.”

“Kyo, you're nine,” sensei said patiently. “You shouldn't have to work yourself to the bone every time you leave the village. That's when things like this happens,” he said, tapping a finger gently at the bruise taking up most of her right cheek-bone, centred around a nice, horizontal cut, about as long as her thumb.

“That's unfair,” she pointed out evenly, meeting Katsurou-sensei's unwavering gaze.

“Life's unfair. This isn't the end of the world.”

“I don't want it,” Kyo growled, curling in on herself despite her best efforts. “They can't just—” she bit her lip, feeling like she was about to cry, all of a sudden.

“No one can replace them,” Katsurou agreed quietly, raising a hand to tug gently on her hair. “But you shouldn't let that stop you from forming new connections.”

“But it's stupid,” Kyo mumbled, rubbing a hand against one eye. “And I'm a Chuunin.”

“Like that would stop you,” Katsurou returned with an easy shrug, leaning back in his chair, seemingly having given up on putting forth the pretence of wanting to get work done. “How long since you went to visit Kisaki?”

Kyo blinked at the abrupt change of topic. “We meet up whenever I have more than just a couple of days in the village.”

“That's not what I asked,” Katsurou said calmly.

Kyo scowled darkly at her irritating sensei.

She said nothing.

“You haven't,” the man concluded, sounding like he'd been well aware from the start. “Forget that order for a moment,” he said, nodding at the scroll lying on his desk. “And listen to the order I'm giving you right now. Go visit Kisaki. You and her both deserve that.”

Kyo stared down at her hands. “I don't want to go there,” she whispered.

“I know,” he took a deep breath. “Which is why you have to.”

She considered his words for a long minute, sensei perfectly happy to lean back and leave her to her thoughts.

Kyo hadn't been to the Inuzuka compound since before Taku died. Hadn't even gone near it, just like she hadn't been near Maki's house.

“I'll go,” Kyo eventually said, setting her jaw with stubborn determination. She had been a poor friend to Kisaki for a long time now, and it was long overdue she do something about it. “It's not
gonna change anything about *that*, though,” she said, jabbing a finger at the damn scroll.

“Perhaps not,” Katsurou conceded easily. “But it's a start,” he added, and pushed her off his lap. “Now scram; I've got work and so do you.” He gave her a pointed look.

Kyo stuck her tongue out at him, snatched up her scroll and not-quite-stomped to the door.

“Love you, sensei, see you tomorrow,” she said irritably over her shoulder.

“Please leave me alone,” Katsurou returned without missing a beat.

“You'd be bored and lonely. Stop being obstinate and admit you love me already,” Kyo tossed back negligently before stalking off.

Kyo wasn't sure how long she stood on the other side of the street just staring at the gates to the Inuzuka compound.

The gate guard had given her one look when she first turned up, understanding flickering through his eyes, and then acted like she wasn't there.

Kyo appreciated it, she really did.

That didn't change the fact that she'd been spending over an hour just staring at a not very interesting gate, face pale and chest feeling increasingly constricted.

This was ridiculous.

Taking a deep breath, Kyo scraped together whatever courage she had and took a firm step towards the gate.

And another. And another.

Before she knew it, she was standing right in front of it, feeling rather unsteady and why was it hard to breathe? But she was there.

She glanced at the guard, who gave her a long, assessing look, before negligently waving her through.

Not quite capable of scrounging up a smile, she gave him a grateful nod and stepped over the threshold.

Kisaki was waiting in the shade beneath a nearby tree, head resting on her paws and looking like she was dozing lightly.

Kyo managed to walk up to her, only to let herself fall down next to the enormous dog, one hand burying itself in the scruff of her neck, scratching that spot she loved.

“I'm proud of you,” Kisaki said softly.

“I'm not,” Kyo shot back, grimacing self-deprecatingly. “And I'm a terrible friend.”

Kisaki sighed, her breath stirring up a small cloud of dust in front of her nose. “Neither of us have been very good company lately,” the ninken mumbled.
“I do okay with tou-san and Genma, even Ryota and sensei. I don't see why I can't do the same for you,” Kyo wondered miserably, staring up at the leaves of the tree they were lying under.

Kisaki was silent for a long while. “Because sensei was unconscious and it was just you and me,” she whispered softly, shifting so that she could curl around Kyo and put her chin on Kyo's shoulder. Tucking her snout under her chin. “You saved all three of us.”

“As if I would have just left you,” Kyo breathed, closing her eyes. “And it's not like I could have brought sensei back to the village without you, Kisaki.”

They were still and silent for a long time, and Kyo felt like she could have fallen asleep if she'd let herself.

“I'm being assigned to a new Genin team.”

Kisaki stiffened, and then lifted a large paw, putting it across Kyo's chest and pulling her closer towards her side.

“Why?”

“I don't know,” Kyo admitted. “Sensei said it's because I'm too young to be able to just stay with ANBU full-time. That it'll wear me out until I'm killed.”

Kisaki growled, flexing her claws like a cat. “No,” she huffed firmly. The nin-ken raised her head to inspect Kyo's face, gaze lingering on the bruise on her cheek.

“Someone kicked me in the face,” Kyo told her glibly. Hard enough to shatter her mask, and it had been one of the shards that had been pressed into her skin to leave the cut. Owl had treated the concussion she'd gotten, so that was fine.

Kisaki pulled her tongue over the bruise and cut in a wet doggy kiss.

Kyo laughed weakly, grimaced at the feel and wiped the liquid off her face before she pressed a quick kiss to the dog's fuzzy snout back.

“I don't want a new team,” she confessed miserably. “I don't want another sensei; I've already got one!”

Kisaki eyed her for a long few seconds, gold eyes mirroring her grief. “Come on,” she said, climbing to her feet and shaking out her fur.

“Hey!” Kyo complained at all the sand and dust raining down at her.

“Then get up,” Kisaki said loftily, giving her a quick glance.

Kyo sighed, but obligingly rolled to her feet, dutifully following after the nin-ken when she walked through the familiar compound.

She buried her hands in her fur when she realised where they were going.

“There's no need to be afraid,” Kisaki told her gently and pushed to door open with her snout, giving a low bark into the house.

There was a beat of silence, and then Taku's mother came striding to the door.

She paused at the sight of Kyo, and Kyo just about had time to take a deep breath, wonder if she
should shunshin out of there, and then she was pressed against a soft-firm chest, strong arms wrapping around her in a tight embrace.

“Kyo,” Inuzuka Senpu murmured. “I've been hoping you'd come by.”

“Sorry,” Kyo croaked.

She wasn't sure what she was apologizing for. Taku dying? Not coming here sooner? She didn't know.

Both, probably.

Taku's mother took a deep breath, squeezed her even tighter before simply picking her off her feet and carrying her into the house.

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Chapter 39

Chapter Summary

Teamwork? Kyo thinks not. No thank you.

Her appointment came around far too soon for Kyo's tastes.

Before she knew it, it was time.

Kisaki had spent the last few days and nights at her place, sleeping in the bed beside her and Kyo appreciated it. Valued the comfort and support.

Staring up at the Academy, Kyo took a deep breath and stalked inside for the first time in three years.

The room number had been in the scroll she'd been provided, as well as the time.

She was dressed in her preferred uniform, her various holsters and her poison pack all strapped onto her form. Her hitai-ate, scratched and dented as it was at this point, was proudly displayed on her forehead.

Passing by the various shinobi and Academy sensei with hardly a glance, Kyo focused fully on her destination before she just turned around and left, consequences be damned.

She slid the correct door open, already a flat, unamused look on her face.

“Kyo-kun,” Nara Kouki said after a brief pause, standing at the front of the class.

“Kouki-sensei,” Kyo returned evenly, feeling the gazes of the entire class resting on her.

God they all looked so innocent.

She hadn't even noticed changing; had she been that wide-eyed when she graduated? She'd like to think she hadn't, but it wasn't like she was an objective judge.

“...please take a seat, Kyo-kun,” Kouki said slowly, giving her an intent once-over.

Taking a deep breath, Kyo stalked into the classroom, feeling so out of place it wasn't funny.

She was more comfortable in ANBU headquarters.

Instead of sitting down with the students like she'd been asked, Kyo walked into the classroom, up the stairs in the middle of the room and then settled herself against the back wall, focusing her attention of Kouki instead of the children craning their necks to stare at her.

“Right,” Kouki-sensei said, “Where were I? Ah, yes.” And he continued with the speech he'd been in the process of giving the kids when Kyo had barged in.

She barely listened to a word the man was saying. Not that she didn't have fond memories of Kouki-sensei, but she just wasn't feeling it right now.
Fuck, she didn't want to be here.

Kouki started reading off the teams, and Kyo forced herself to tune back in.

“-ina,” Kouki cleared his throat. “Team seven, Akimichi Naoki, Namikaze Minato and,” he paused, sighed softly, and then pressed on, “Shiranui Kyo. Your sensei is a Jounin named Jiraiya.”

Kyo stared blankly at the man. Really?

REALLY!?

Mental capacity temporarily turned off, Kyo couldn't think of a single thing. Not a word to describe her current mental-state, her situation.

“I wish you luck in your future endeavours,” Kouki finished with a proud, yet slightly worried smile when he had listed off all the teams. Not so strange, when he was sending this bunch of naïve children out into a war that got more vicious by the month. “Remain in the classroom and wait for your respective Jounin sensei to come and collect you.” He looked them over, gaze ultimately coming to rest on her. “Kyo, a moment?”

It was a request, not an order.

After a brief pause, Kyo pushed away from the wall to stride down the stairs and join Kouki, easily ignoring the graduates' attention. They had nothing on the trained killers in ANBU.

“I'd like a few words,” Kouki said when she stopped next to him.

Kyo nodded shortly and stepped out the door into the hallway outside. “It's good to see you again, sensei.”

“Though it would have been better under different circumstances,” Kouki finished for her, dark eyes sad and sympathetic on her behalf.

...she was starting to hate that look directed at herself.

“So what did you want?” She asked impatiently. She could practically feel the intrigue building on the other side of the door.

Kouki eyed her a moment longer before he turned in the direction of the staff room. “Never mind. I already got my answer,” and he left.

Kyo stared after him.

Annoying Nara.

With an irritated huff, Kyo returned to the classroom, prepared to spend however long it would take... Jiraiya, of all people, to come collect them.

When she stepped back into the room, however, there was what looked like a minor crowd of children waiting eagerly for her.

“Who are you?” A red-headed girl demanded, and Kyo very determinedly wasn't thinking about her name.

“You weren't in our class, why're you here?” Someone else asked, all but bouncing in place with pent-up excitement.
Kyo didn't pause her stride, merely continuing forward and fully expecting the barely-Genin to part before her.

Which they did.

Without a word, Kyo took a seat and leaned back, pulling a senbon from one of her holsters, just to give herself something to do, a safe outlet for her restless energy. She twirled it absently between her fingers, watching the metal catch the light from the window.

A boy with sparkling blue eyes and ridiculously blond hair took the seat beside her, giving her a small but sincere and friendly smile Kyo didn't feel the least inclined to return.

Faltering slightly, Minato turned to the front and settled in to wait.

When their last teammate shyly joined them a few minutes later, Minato struck up an easy conversation with him.

Then, the Jounin began to arrive.

Every single one of them studied Kyo with varying levels of interest, which she found perfectly understandable.

She felt so out of place it was ridiculous. It made her skin itch.

“Team Four?” A familiar voice snapped, sounding low-key pissed.

“Who thought it a good idea to give you a team?” Kyo asked with a small, amused twitch of the lips.

Ryota gave her a deadpan stare. “The hell are you doing among the kiddies?” He asked, seemingly without thinking.

Kyo smiled humourlessly, looking over the prospective Team Four. Oh, those poor children.

Ryota would fail them, she knew already.

Then again... did they select some Jounin for the sole purpose of failing a team if they wanted to give them another year to grow? If they managed to graduate without actually being ready... it made sense.

Like a fail-safe, to prevent kids from dying needlessly.

Something to ask sensei about the next time she saw him. Which, to be honest, would no doubt be today. Later.

“See you later, Kyo,” Ryota grunted, herding his terrified Genin hopefuls from the room.

She couldn't believe she'd missed Kouki mentioning Ryota's name.

She was really out of it.

She needed to get a grip

More and more kids trickled off with their potential Jounin, until the door opened again and it was just team Seven and another team left. Kyo couldn't recall which number they'd been given.

“Uh, seven?” Who could only be Jiraiya squinted into the room.
Kyo silently took in the mane of thick white hair, the iconic red lines on his face. Like he'd cried tears of blood.

Rising to her feet, Kyo sedately followed Minato and... shit, she'd already forgotten her second teammate's name.

Anyway, she'd no doubt hear it again shortly, she mused as she followed them across the room to Jiraiya, who looked like he honestly wasn't sure what he was doing there.

“Meet on the roof,” Jiraiya told them with an awkward laugh and disappeared in a shunshin.

Kyo considered following him in the same manner, but in the end, she wandered after the two Genin in the direction of the stairs.

She wasn't in any hurry, after all. She didn't even want to be here.

Wait. Would this mean she was no longer an ANBU? Crap, she should have asked someone about that before now...

She really needed to snap out of this trance-like state she'd fallen into.

Speaking of, Kyo blinked and realised she was already on the roof.

With a long-suffering sigh, she walked over and took a seat next to the shy Akimichi, turning her gaze on a smiling Jiraiya.

“Okay!” He clapped his hands together, rubbing them in a manner that looked almost gleeful. “Let's start with introductions! You, blond and cheerful! You go first.”

“My name in Namikaze Minato, I'm ten years old,” Minato said easily, peering a bit confusedly at Jiraiya. Clearly wondering what else he was supposed to say.

“Add likes, dislikes, hobbies, dreams?” Jiraiya suggested with a curious glint in his dark eyes.

Kyo genuinely considered jumping off the roof.

Not that it would harm her, of course, but it would get her away from here. Quickly and efficiently.

“Oh. Well, I like training, I dislike bullies. My hobby is training, I guess? And my dream is to become Hokage.” He smiled bashfully.

Jiraiya looked very amused, like this was all great.

Kyo wanted to put her head in her hands and weep. Or laugh hysterically until someone fetched Katsurou-sensei. This couldn't be happening.

Jiraiya continued by pointing a finger at the Akimichi boy, rather rudely. “You're up!”

“Ah,” the boy fumbled with what to say, for some reason caught flat-footed by the situation.

Kyo politely refrained from sighing.

“M-My name is Akimichi Naoki, I'm also ten. I like everything to do with food; growing, cooking, eating,” he looked a bit embarrassed, but soldiered on. “I dislike being teased about my weight. My hobby is helping my mother cook for our family and my dream... is to someday get to work in Cryptology.”
Okay... that last part had been unexpected.

Jiraiya turned his attention to her and Kyo leaned back on her hands, eyeing the man intently for a moment.

“Shiranui Kyo,” she said shortly. “I'm nine. I like poisons. I dislike a lot of things,” most of which she did not want to talk about, and were regardless not fit for current company, or the situation at hand. “My hobby is poisons.”

“You forgot one, kid,” Jiraiya said helpfully.

“No, I didn’t,” Kyo returned evenly.

“Right,” the man said slowly, before he blinked and got back on topic. “Well, nice to meet you three and all. My name's Jiraiya! I'm a Konohagakure Jounin,” he told them with a grin.

Kyo... wasn't particularly impressed. But then again, he hadn't given them any information that could potentially be used against him, either, so.

He made a very dramatic reveal about the test, making both Minato and Naoki perk up, with interest and silent worry respectively, and oh, they were doing it right away?

Okay.

Kyo got to her feet and followed Jiraiya without a word when he set off towards a training ground she'd never visited before.

“So! Gather up!” Jiraiya said, even though they were all already standing right in front of him. Not that he seemed to notice his own verbal error. “Your job, is to take these bells from me to pass the test,” he said, pulling two small silver bells from his pouch, striking a very dramatic pose.

God, you couldn't get farther from Katsurou-sensei if you tried, Kyo thought despairingly.

“Sensei, uh, there're only two bells,” Naoki pointed out rather timidly.

“Very good observation, kid.” Jiraiya nodded seriously. “That's because only two of you get to graduate and become my students! The last one get to go back to the Academy for another year.” He grinned, clearly pleased with himself.

Really.

If he'd gotten three Genin who were all newly graduated, that might actually have worked, but... really?

He didn't even seem to see any problem with this scenario.

“You get two hours to try and take these bells from me, and the one without a bell when the time runs out fails,” Jiraiya said, grin fading off his face for a serious, solemn look.

Now there was a thought.

Kyo didn't actually want a team.

“Keep in mind, though!” Jiraiya added abruptly. “If you want to have any chance at taking a bell, you need to come at me with the intent to kill.”
...she severely doubted it.

Had he even read their files? Because Kyo wasn't at all certain any Jounin would have said that to her if they'd read her file.

“Okay, whenever you boys are ready,” Jiraiya declared, tying the bells to his belt with an easy grin.

He hadn't read her file.

He most definitely hadn't read her file.

Kyo almost laughed.

“Go!” Jiraiya declared, and Kyo dutifully ran off to hide in the underbrush.

She could potentially just hide out here until the time went up, but... no. Sensei would be disappointed in her, and so would tou-san.

“Kyo,” Minato said quietly, drawing her gaze to where he was standing a polite distance away from her. “Meeting?” He offered with a tentative smile, pointing at Naoki, who was all but cowering behind him.

Kyo obligingly walked over to join them.

“You graduated last year, right? So is there anything you can tell us about this test that would be to our advantage?” Minato asked the moment she'd joined them.

Kyo stared bemusedly at him, didn't correct his misconception and shrugged. “I never did this test,” she said honestly.

“What kind of test did you do?” Minato asked curiously, tilting his head and studying her with his ridiculously blue, guileless eyes.

“Let's just say it spanned a week, and leave it at that,” Kyo smiled humourlessly.

“But if you've already been a Genin for a year, then you should know what to do, right?” Naoki asked nervously, glancing around them like he was afraid Jiraiya might attack them out of nowhere.

Kyo rolled her shoulders, wondering what to tell them. For all that she didn't want a new team, it wouldn't be fair to blatantly sabotage them, so-

“Teamwork,” she said curtly.

Both Minato and Naoki blinked.

“What do you mean?” The blond asked interestedly.

“Konoha prides herself on her teamwork. We generally send out our shinobi in teams of three or four. If you ask me, that's what this test is about.” She shrugged. “In theory, three Genin could beat a Jounin in a fight, if they cooperate.”

Even if she hadn't had a single clue about what all of this was about, Kyo thought it was all pretty logical and clear-cut.

From the look on his face, Minato seemed to agree.
“If we act as a distraction, do you think you could get the bells?” Minato asked after a lengthy, thoughtful pause.

Kyo stared at him. “What makes you think I'll give either of you a bell if I get them?” She asked evenly.

The boy shrugged pensively. “You just gave a minor speech on teamwork, but if that's the case, then someone graduating properly is better than no one doing it at all.”

Kyo had to fight back a sigh.

Damn it.

“Fine, what did you have in mind?” She asked flatly.

Minato smiled and crouched down to draw in the dirt. Kyo watched and listened, but part of her attention was elsewhere.

Jiraiya hadn't read her file, that much was clear to her, which meant that while she didn't delude herself into thinking she could take a Jounin in an honest fight, she could get the drop on him. Potentially. Mostly because he'd be expecting a freshly graduated Academy student, or something close to it.

Kyo was self-aware and honest enough to acknowledge that she was anything but.

And it wasn't like this was a real fight; Jiraiya wasn't going to fight at anything resembling full capacity.

She let the actual Genin decide their 'battle plan' and yeah, it was just fair to let them use whatever was at their disposal. One of the things which happened to be Kyo.

Ten minutes later, the two boys had settled on a course of action and Kyo readily enough followed along when Minato started to walk back towards the open field.

Jiraiya was sitting in what looked like a meditative pose where they'd left him, clearly waiting for them.

“Decided on a plan?” He asked idly, cracking one eye open to peer curiously at them.

Or rather, peer at Naoki and Minato, because Kyo was hanging back to wait for her signal.

Sensei better appreciate that she was doing this, she thought glumly as she pulled a kunai from her holster.

Half an hour later, Kyo was stood with the two bells dangling from one hand, Minato and Naoki both pretty much wiped out on the ground beside her, with Jiraiya standing in front of them, hands on his hips and a contemplative look in his eyes.

“I guess that means both of you two fail,” he mused, squinting at Minato and Naoki.

The boys both groaned.

Kyo snorted and proceeded to toss a bell to each of them, crossing her arms over her chest.

“They've both got a bell, though,” she said unenthusiastically, staring at Jiraiya with a deadpan expression.
Both Genin stared speechlessly at her.

Jiraiya peered up at the sky and scratched at his chin. “I guess that means all of you pass,” he mused casually.

“What?” Naoki blurted, still clutching the bell close to his chest as if it was something precious he was afraid would be taken away from him.

“Congratulations! From now on, all three of you are my Genin!” Jiraiya grinned, looking the three of them over with damn near sparkling eyes.

Oh joy.

“Awesome. What now?” Kyo didn't feel guilty for ruining the mood.

Not that Jiraiya let that stop him. “Now, we sit down and get to know each other better,” he said, unceremoniously plopping down to sit in front of them. “You can go first, grumpy.” He looked at Kyo.

Fine.

“Great. No offence to any of you, but I don't want to be on this team,” she said flatly. She still sat down, because her new superior officer hadn't dismissed her yet.

“Why not?” Minato asked, looking mildly baffled and perplexed. As if it were a foreign concept.

Kyo ignored the question and leaned back on her hands.

“What happened to your face?” Naoki asked tentatively in the following silence.

She smiled thinly, the expression bordering on brittle. “Someone kicked me.” She shrugged as well as she could at the boy, who looked horrified.

Jiraiya sighed. “Let's move on to you two, then,” he conceded and looked at Minato, since it was clear Kyo wouldn't cooperate.

She ended up staring off into the distance while she listened to the two boys, unable to stop herself from comparing to when she'd first met Taku and Maki properly all those years ago.

It took effort not to cry.

The moment she was dismissed, Kyo took off from the training ground and away from her new team.

Getting to the Hokage tower took hardly any time or effort, and she slipped into Katsurou-sensei’s office without attracting any attention.

That might have been because she’d accidentally gone full stealth mode, but details.

Sensei still noticed her when she arrived, sending a brief, absent-minded glance in her direction without pausing what he was doing.

Kyo dropped down from the ceiling to land on his back, wrapping both arms and legs around him and clinging like a baby monkey to its mother.
“Hello, Kyo,” Katsurou greeted distractedly, currently in the process of going through a drawer in one of the filing cabinets standing by the wall across from his fellow Yamanaka's desk.

Kyo buried her face in his shoulder, tightening her hold.

Instead of badgering her, Katsurou went about his business without a hitch, until he turned back to his desk.

“You realise that you're gonna get crushed when I sit down,” he said casually.

“'S fine,” Kyo mumbled into his Jounin vest. “I don't care. You won't be able to work if I sit in your lap, so this is fine.”

Katsurou hummed and took a seat in his chair.

Despite his words, he took care not to lean backwards.

For a full two hours, sensei didn't say anything as he worked, going through paperwork, taking notes on what he was reading, signing stuff. It was all probably rather important, if boring.

Katsurou finally put his pen down with a sigh. “So I take it your new team passed,” he said, opening the line of conversation.

“Unfortunately,” Kyo said, voice monotone.

She was well aware that the other Jounin, whatever his name was, had been sending them occasional glances ever since she'd arrived. Unlike Katsurou-sensei, he wore his hair long and had it pulled up in the traditional pony-tail.

“Tell me about them,” Katsurou ordered calmly.


Katsurou tilted his head and glanced down at her over his shoulder, but Kyo didn't turn her gaze away from the spot on the wall above the door she'd been staring at for the last hour.

“I've heard of Jiraiya,” was all sensei said.

Kyo was silent for a long minute. “Did you know Ryota came to collect a team?”

“I may have heard something to that affect, yes,” Katsurou mused, sounding vaguely entertained. “He failed them almost immediately. A few of the Chuunin were annoyed.”

Kyo snorted.

Yeah, that sounded about right for Ryota. She wondered when he'd found out he'd have to test a team? It couldn't have been very long ago, because he would have mentioned it, to complain if nothing else. And he hadn't been in the village for more than a couple of days, anyway.

“You should go home and let your father know how it went,” her sensei eventually said, absently patting her right knee.

“You're always gonna be my sensei, sensei,” Kyo told him solemnly, squeezed her arms around him in a brief hug and then shunshined out.
For all that she didn't want to think about it, Katsurou-sensei was right.

Tou-san would be waiting to hear how it'd gone, with Genma and probably Ryota, too.

Spending her evening with her family sounded like a fantastic idea after her day, and Kyo quickly ran home.

Kyo turned up at the training ground the next morning, blinking at the deserted place for a second before feeling like smacking herself.

Out of habit, she had left home to arrive here at the time Katsurou had always set, but this team wasn't set to meet up for another hour or so.

Stupid, stupid, she was so stupid.

Pressing the heels of both hands against her eyes for a moment, Kyo then walked over to one of the closest trees to sit down in its' shade.

She pulled out one of her sets of kunai and a whetstone, poured some water from her canteen on it and started sharpening her knives.

They'd gotten a bit dull after her last mission.

“What are you doing here?” Kyo asked without looking up from her work when a warm weight settled against her back.

“Taking a look at your new team,” Kisaki replied glibly.

“They're fresh graduates,” she pointed out, testing the sharpness of the kunai she was currently working on.

“So were we, once,” Kisaki did the the equivalence of a shrug, sounding unconcerned.

Kyo didn't argue; Kisaki could do what she damn well pleased. If she wanted to take a look at this team, then that was what she'd do.

The minutes trickled by and soon enough, Minato, Naoki and Jiraiya all arrived. Almost at the same time.

The Genin didn't notice her, but Jiraiya glanced over. Only to do a double-take at the monster of a dog lying casually behind her, acting as backrest.

“Well, enjoy the show,” Kyo said as she tucked away the last of her kunai and got to her feet.

“Have fun,” the ninken returned at a drawl.

Kyo barely resisted the urge to stick her tongue out at the dog, but Kisaki would just find that amusing, so she refrained.

“And we're all here,” Jiraiya said with a rather distracted smile, gaze continuously wandering back in Kisaki's direction. “To get started, I'd like to assess your taijutsu,” he said. “So you'll each have a turn against me, so I can see where we all stand.” He smiled. “We'll start with you,” he pointed at Kyo.
Of course, Kyo mentally sighed. *Taijutsu.*

Instead of complaining, she went through a few warm-up stretches and then rolled to her feet, wandering out into the middle of the field and took her stance.

She'd known Jiraiya had been supposed to be a good teacher, but it was nice to see some proof of it for herself.

The man carefully gauged her reflexes, response-time, strength, agility and probably a few other things, too.

But the close inspection didn't just go one way, and after months in ANBU, Kyo noticed the way Jiraiya favoured one side, how careful he was not to over-reach with his left arm.

She could only come to the conclusion that he'd suffered some sort of injury, and that that was one of the reasons why he was here, in the village, having been assigned a Genin team when Konoha was still at war, needing every able fighter she could get.

When they were done, Kyo's breathing was slightly elevated and there was a heavy, contemplative look in Jiraiya's dark eyes.

“You're up, blondie,” he called to Minato, who hurried to take his place, all but vibrating with eagerness.

Kyo sat down to watch.

After Jiraiya deemed them to be done, he took them to the Hokage tower, the mission assignment room to be precise, and got them their very first mission.

“D-ranks,” Kyo mused under her breath, ambling along next to Minato, who was shooting the scroll Jiraiya had gotten them excited, speculative looks.

Naoki was smiling cheerfully.

Well. They were ten and had never been on a mission before, so it was sort of understandable, she supposed.

It made her feel like a bitter old hag.

Which just made it absurd to think about the fact that she was physically one year younger than her new teammates.
A month passed very slowly, with the four of them training and doing the occasional D-rank around the village.

Part of her enjoyed it; it was like a vacation and she got to spend more time with Genma.

The rest of her was depressingly bored.

Jiraiya was teaching them tree-walking and water-walking and he still hadn't read her damn file.

Kyo was waiting for him to at least figure out she was a girl, if not on his own, then by opening to the first page of her personal file.

Not that all ANBU captains she had worked with had taken that information with them after skimming through her file, because gender wasn't the most important part and most ANBU recognized that, but still! Most of them tended to focus on her speciality, and she didn't have any complains about that.

The man was supposed to be legendary! And this was starting to border on pathetic. If nothing else, he was supposed to be a Jounin.

Okay, Kyo was probably not making things easier for him by having zero problems with taking her shirt off during water walking.

She had nothing in the way of boobs and hips; she was nine.

So when Jiraiya had advised them to take off a few clothes, Kyo had shrugged and thought 'what the hell' and gone along with it.

It had made it all the more amusing to see their reactions when she just strolled across the pond with no effort.

As if she had been doing it for years. Which she had.

At least there were always people around ANBU headquarters who were willing to spar with her when she felt like she was wasting away.

Which in turn had led to a rather unexpected... she wasn't quite ready to call it friendship, but at least something like it.

“Oh, Shiranui!” A remarkably disagreeable voice called, making Kyo look up from her reading with palpable relief.

“What?” She called back, carefully hiding her eagerness.

“You're coming with me for a while,” Uchiha Kaimaru declared grimly, a scowl permanently etched
onto his face and looking severely put out.

“I don’t remember agreeing to anything of the sort, asshole,” Kyo returned easily, fully aware of her teammates and Jiraiya's curious looks.

“Don’t be a dick, just come with me and defer to your superiors like you’re supposed to,” Kaimaru fairly sneered at her.

Kyo smiled sweetly up at him. “I don't know what world you live in, but I don't owe you shit, Uchiha,” she said casually.

Kaimaru, also known as ANBU Crow, crossed his arms over his chest to glare at her. “Trust me, if there was anyone else, I would go to them.”

“What's in it for me?” Kyo asked, tilting her head.

They both knew she was going to come with him, but that didn't mean she had to make it easy for him.

“I don’t kill Ryota, that's what's in it for you,” Kaimaru ground out testily.

Kyo tilted her head, genuinely curious now. “What did you do?”

“What did- Oi! You're supposed to ask what he did, you fucking brat,” Kaimaru scowled at her. He was a very surly teenager, all of fourteen and already looking like a mean old man.

Kyo hummed, acting like she was contemplating his words. “Nope. You're far more likely to do something offensive than Ryota, any day.”

Kaimaru snorted but didn't disagree. “I need you to talk to him before he murders me,” he grudgingly admitted, trudging over to slump down next to her, turning to watch Minato and Naoki's sparring match with idle interest. “This is your team?” He snorted, a faint sneer pulling on his mouth again.

“Why would Ryota want to murder you?” Kyo asked instead of commenting on her team. “Disregarding the obvious reasons, of course.”

“Fuck you,” Kaimaru shot back, sending her an annoyed glance. “Someone told him about how we met, and I need you to tell him that shit's behind us.”


Kaimaru fairly snarled at her. “You're trying to pick a fight with me, but that won't work this time, kitten,” he growled.

Kyo scowled at him. “You call me that again, I'll claw your eyes out.” Only tou-san and Ryota were allowed to call her kitten.

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“Then come with me and talk sense into that fucking lunatic,” Kaimaru huffed, leaning back on his hands, stretching his legs out in front of him to watch the rest of her team with an unimpressed, sceptical frown. “What the hell did you do to be benched with these losers?” He muttered out of the corner of his mouth.

Kyo appreciated that he at least was discrete.

“The 'fucking lunatic' is your uncle,” Kyo pointed out idly. “And I know it's hard, that it goes against
your nature, but try not to be an ass,” she shot back with a frown. “They graduated a month ago, give them some slack.”

“Still doesn’t explain what you’re doing here. Like a fucking wolf amongst the unsuspecting fawns.” Kaimaru smirked.

“What would your mother say about the words coming out of your mouth?” Kyo sighed, shaking her head with mock-concern.

“Shut up,” Kaimaru shot back with a half-hearted glare.

They sat in companionable silence for a moment, enjoying the cool breeze.

“Well,” Kyo finally said, jumping to her feet. “Let's go see if Ryota got the whole story of just what an idiotic moron you are,” she chirped.

“You wouldn’t dare,” Kaimaru growled, crowding into her personal space to scowl down at her, using his height to his advantage. “I’m asking you to make him back off, not make it worse.”

“Oh, I know. I'm just not sure if I feel like doing what you ask of me,” she smiled sweetly, making Kaimaru twitch. “I need to go on a quick errand, Jiraiya!” She called to the man. “I'll be back before lunch!” She added, grabbed Kaimaru's arm and began to drag him off before he could say something offensive.

She was pretty sure she could work him up enough to get a spar out of all of this before they had to part ways, judging from the way the prickly Uchiha was swearing at her.

If nothing else, Kaimaru was excellent to help her vent out her frustrations, at least.

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Another in-village mission.

Surprisingly, it wasn't one to run missives from various departments to their destinations, but Kyo was pretty sure she would have preferred that to this farce.

“Really?” She muttered to herself as she watched Naoki struggle with the black cat, too scared it would claw or bite him to get a good grip on it.

Sighing through her nose, Kyo walked up to the boy just as he lost his grip on the struggling feline, which looked like it wanted to claw his face off in retaliation to being caught.

Lucky for Naoki, Kyo clamped a hand down on the scruff of it's neck before it could reach its' goal, leaving it to swipe ineffectively at Naoki's chubby cheeks before the cat sent her a venomous glare, twisted in a rather impressive manner and latched onto her arm instead.

Kyo watched dispassionately as the cat had a go at freedom, clawing at her arm and leaving bleeding scratches behind.

When it noticed that its' efforts weren't doing anything, the cat adopted a mulish look... somehow. Kyo didn't know how a cat's face could be so expressive.

The point was, it hung placidly from her hand. Grudgingly.

“Th-Thank you, Kyo,” Naoki stuttered, giving the cat a wide-eyed look, making sure to stand well out of scratching-distance.
“You're welcome,” she returned calmly. “Seen Minato?”

“I'm here,” the boy in question jumped down from one of the trees. “I was waiting over there in case it got away,” he explained with a shrug, eyeing the cat and Kyo's arm. “You're bleeding.”

Kyo eyed her arm critically. Well, it wasn't like any of the scratches were more than skin-deep; they'd heal well enough on their own.

“Let's go find Jiraiya and hand him our target,” Kyo said instead of commenting.

The three of them walked in surprisingly comfortable silence for a while, and Kyo was actually enjoying it. For as long as it lasted.

“You never call him sensei,” Minato said, shooting her a cautiously curious look out of the corner of his eye.

It was more an observation than a question, which left it up to her whether she wanted to answer or not, how much she'd want to reveal.

Kyo turned her head fractionally to look at him, before she turned her gaze back to the street in front of them. “I already have a sensei,” she said simply.

“You never call him sensei,” Minato said, shooting her a cautiously curious look out of the corner of his eye.

It was more an observation than a question, which left it up to her whether she wanted to answer or not, how much she'd want to reveal.

Kyo turned her head fractionally to look at him, before she turned her gaze back to the street in front of them. “I already have a sensei,” she said simply.

“Is that why you don't want to be on our team?” Minato asked, tilting his head thoughtfully.

Instead of sounding offended, like most people would, he merely sounded interested to hear the answer.

And Kyo knew what he was doing; trying to figure her out.

When she shot him a look, he merely smiled.

Annoying.

“Something like that,” Kyo finally said, tightening her hold on the cat when it began to wiggle in a last ditch attempt at freedom. “You need to craft a better plan to get away,” she told the cat sharply. “Doesn't the woman have any nieces or something you could get yourself adopted by? Would make it easier to get the hell away permanently in a less obvious way unless that wouldn't be enough already.”

“Uh, Kyo. It's just a cat,” Naoki told her with a rather concerned look.

Kyo snorted, exchanging a look with the cat in question.

A cat it may be, but a normal one? No way in hell. Was it some sort of summon half-breed? It was 'just a cat' in the same way Kisaki was 'just a dog'.

True enough, but hardly the full truth.

“We got the cat, Jiraiya,” Kyo informed the man when they walked up to the guy, who was sitting down in the spot they'd left him in, scribbling something in a scroll.

He looked up at the sound of her voice, smile freezing on his face when he laid eyes on her.

“Oh, shit,” the guy said, and then he was standing in front of her. Or rather, where she had previously stood, because he'd lifted her up and was examining her arm with something that looked ridiculously close to panic. “You're bleeding,” he breathed, staring in horror at the blood slowly
dripping from her arm.


Seriously, this was nothing. She wouldn't even have thought it an issue in her first life. A quick wash with warm water and soap and she'd be fine.

“Minato, get the carrier over there,” Jiraiya instructed briskly, completely ignoring Kyo's words.

Oh my God, one and a half months in and she was seriously beginning to despair over this man.

Was it trauma? Was he like this because he could finally relax for the first time in who knew how many years? Was it his injuries? Worry?

What!?

The cat safely tucked away into the carrier the bemused Chuunin at the mission desk had handed them, Jiraiya tucked Kyo under one arm and why was Kyo putting up with this?

“We'll meet up same time tomorrow, so you guys get some free time. Bye!” And he took off in the direction of the hospital.

...seriously?

“It's barely a scratch, Jiraiya,” she huffed, but it was clear that the man wasn't listening to her. At all. Muttering under his breath about kids, Genin, blood and crushing responsibilities.

Which all sounded awfully dramatic.

She still wasn't prepared for what happened, though.

“Tsunade! One of my brats are bleeding out and I need you to fix him!” Jiraiya exclaimed loudly, slamming the door open to what looked like a private office that had partly been converted into a laboratory.

A blonde woman with a truly eye-catching pair of boobs turned around, already looking irritated and done with Jiraiya's theatrics, and he'd hardly stepped over the threshold yet.

“Like hell he is,” she returned flatly, barely taking a moment to glance at Kyo, who felt pretty done, herself. “What the hell do you think you're doing just barging in here, idiot? I have sensitive equipment in here!” Tsunade declared loudly, slapping the file she had been reading down on the cluttered surface of the desk she was standing next to.

“But there's blood, Hime,” Jiraiya whined, holding Kyo out in front of him like she was a wounded kitten he'd found on the street.

She instantly resented the mental picture.

Tsunade frowned, very briefly, down at her bleeding arm and then focused back on Jiraiya's face with a truly ticked off expression.

“Do you have any idea how busy I am!” She demanded angrily, and yeah, she looked pretty harried actually. “There's so much work piled up on my desk I don't even have time to go through it all! I don't have time for crap like this!”

Her vexed, frustrated rant continued, but Kyo had honestly stopped listening.
Taking the opportunity of Jiraiya's inattention for what it was, Kyo twisted from the man's hold and landed silently on her feet on the floor.

She'd spotted some cotton wipes and antiseptics on the counter to their right, so why not just finish this here? Would save her the trouble later, that was for sure.

Keeping part of her attention on the fluctuating tempers by the door, Kyo cleaned up the scratches on her arm, almost scoffing when they turned out to be just as shallow as Kyo had known they'd be.

*Dr.omics.*

“-and get the hell out!” Tsunade all but shouted, kicking Jiraiya out into the corridor and slamming the door shut hard enough it rattled in its frame.

Kyo blinked. Had the woman forgotten about her?

“Idiot, thinking no on else is doing anything important just because he's got a Genin team,” Tsunade muttered under her breath, scowling at the door before she blinked, straightened and turned around. To go back to work no doubt.

In that moment, she must have caught sight of Kyo, though, because she placed her hands on her hips and frowned at her.

“You're still here?” She asked gruffly, and then marched up to her.

Kyo warily prepared to shunshin the hell out of there, but the woman just took hold of her arm to inspect the scratches.

Tsunade scoffed. “That idiot. It's like he hasn't ever seen an injury before in his life,” she grumbled, placing her other hand on top of the scratches and healing them in a matter of seconds, despite her earlier words.

Kyo stared bemusedly at her.

Okay?

Actually... Now that she was here, Kyo couldn't help but think about what she knew of this woman. Whatever might happen in the future, there were some things that should be the same no matter what Kyo's presence might mean. Right?

Assuming the story she'd read in the Before had been accurate at all.

“You're a pretty good medic, right?” She heard herself ask before she'd come to a conscious decision on the matter.

Tsunade sent her a wry, amused look. “I'm the best in the village, brat,” she returned without missing a beat. She slapped Kyo's arm lightly and dropped the limb, the scratches looking several days old.

“Why?”

“Can you teach me how to treat poisoning?” Kyo asked evenly, studying the woman intently.

Tsunade blinked, frowning slightly at her. “You know, Jiraiya's told me more than I ever wanted to hear about his 'cute little team' and I know you're an aspiring poison specialist,” she said frankly, impatient and rather brash.

Kyo didn't see what her point was, so patiently waited for the woman to continue.
“I'm not gonna teach someone who's sloppy and careless enough to poison someone by accident. Own up to your own short-comings, kid, and suck it up. Genin aren't allowed to be just children any more, despite what Jiraiya keeps insisting,” she told her sternly, giving her an unimpressed, unsympathetic look. “You're gonna have to do what every competent shinobi does and hit the training grounds, brat.”

Kyo's insides felt cold, like they'd turned to ice.

After being on a team under a Yamanaka sensei for three years, Kyo's poker-face was excellent, even though she didn't bother to use it all that much outside of missions.

Staring blankly at the woman in front of her, Kyo felt nothing other than surging contempt.

How *self-righteous* did you have to be to-


Kyo turned and walked out the door without a word, silently closing it behind her and using a shunshin to transport herself out of the hospital.

-x-x-x-
Chapter 41

Chapter Summary

This wouldn't be a problem if Jiraiya had just done his job, and Tsunade wants a refund

Whenever she was in the village, Tsunade felt like she hardly had time to eat and sleep.

She would have liked to pretend she was strong enough she didn't have to care about such small, insignificant things the patients near-constantly around her all suffered from.

Alas, she could not.

Being a medic, Tsunade knew better than most people just how important it was to eat and rest properly.

Didn't change the fact she was swamped with work. Just because she wasn't out on the front-lines didn't meant the war went on hiatus.

Something Jiraiya knew, which was why it pissed her off beyond proportions when he brought one of his brats to her for something as inane as a bloody scratch that would heal on its own in a matter of days!

Her lack of sleep and the five cups of coffee she'd had since breakfast might have had something to do with it, but at the time, Tsunade hadn't cared.

And then the brat had to go and ask her such a stupid question!

It wasn't until Tsunade had gone home to the compound after a long shift, eaten and slept for a solid eight hours that she realised she might have been a tiny bit too harsh on the boy. According to Jiraiya, the brat was even a year younger than his teammates.

So, she was determined to set things right; Tsunade was dealing with enough poisoning cases courtesy of Suna and Ame, she didn't need to add more to her work-load. Teaching the brat a thing or two could only be to her advantage at this point. She'd manage to work it into her schedule somehow.

Anyway, Tsunade was determined to track the brat down to sit him down for a few lectures.

Nothing complicated about it.

Until she realised that no matter how she went about it, she couldn't find the damn brat!

She'd tried everything short of going to sensei to ask him to order the irritating boy to see her. It was vexing, frustrating and frankly pissing her off.

Sure, Tsunade wasn't a sensor in any capacity of the word, but she was a damn good kunoichi! Tracking down one little nine year old Genin shouldn't give her this much trouble!

“Where the hell's your brat!?” Tsunade demanded, stomping onto their old training grounds,
interrupting what looked like a sparring session between the blond brat and the Akimichi brat.

Jiraiya turned to blink at her, then looked around the area with a confused expression.

“He was here when we started. Why?”

“Because he's avoiding me,” Tsunade hissed furiously. Days, she had spent on this goose-chase now and it wasn't doing anything good for her blood pressure.

“Uh,” Jiraiya said eloquently, blinking at her and rolling back on his heels. “Why?”

“Fuck if I know,” Tsunade spat, starting to stalk back and forth like a caged, starving tiger.

She effortlessly ignored the wary look Jiraiya sent her in response.

“So what do you want me to do about it?”

“Tell me where the little shit is!” Tsunade clenched a fist, trying to control her temper.

Sensei would sigh at her and tell her she was too stubborn, like an Inuzuka ninken with a grudge. The longer it took to track this Genin down, the less she was willing to step back and let it go, no matter how much easier that would be at this point.

Jiraiya tilted his head. “Kyo's a tight-lipped kid.” He shrugged, as if it was just one of those things you couldn't do anything about. “Haven't been able to get him to share much of anything so far.” He sent his other two brats a questioning glance.

“Kyo doesn't talk much, sensei. He had a sensei before, though,” the blond one said, tilting his head a little with a small frown, gaze flicking from one of them to the other.

“Excellent,” Tsunade declared, latching onto that small step forward. “We're going to go see him right now,” she decided, grabbing the back of Jiraiya's shirt and starting to steer him in the direction of the Hokage tower.

Her teammate spluttered. “You don't even know who it is! Or where he is!”

“Why do you think I'm bringing you, moron?” Tsunade scowled at Jiraiya. Seriously, he never used that head of his unless it was for fuuinjutsu or a life and death situation!

Jiraiya stopped flailing, gaining a thoughtful look on his face. “Okay,” he said, giving up on struggling against Tsunade's hold and started walking for his own power.

He cheerfully waved his two other brats along for the trip, but Tsunade didn't give a shit at this point. Kami, why was she even doing this? It wasn't her job, she wasn't getting paid.

Thinking back to the dead face the kid had made, though, Tsunade firmed her shoulders and continued on her way.

“It was supposed to be a Yamanaka,” Jiraiya was musing, making Tsunade twitch.

“You're telling me you don't know his name either?” She asked with forced calm. She was careful to keep her voice down, though, because it was just basic damn courtesy. People were working on important things in here.
“I know enough to find him.” Jiraiya waved her concerns off with a negligent hand. “I asked around a bit and I’m fairly sure I know the general department he works right now.”

Tsunade frowned and sent him a sharp look.

“Someone said he was benched.” Jiraiya shrugged.

Which could mean a number of things, really. Anything from injury, failing certain mental requirements -though considering it was supposed to be a Yamanaka, then probably not that one- to his Genin being promoted or reassigned and anything in between.

“Hey, do you know if there’re any Yamanaka Jounin working around here?” Jiraiya asked a busy-looking Chuunin.

“There’s Toge and Katsurou, I suppose,” the Chuunin muttered with a distracted frown. “Down that corridor and to your left,” he directed and then continued on his way, probably to deliver the stack of papers he held in his arms.

“Thanks, man!” Jiraiya called after him and continued on his merry way, looking like this was some sort of happy excursion.

Tsunade huffed and hurried her step to catch up to teammate.

They strode through the open door of the indicated office, taking in the blond hair of the two occupants.

The two Genin trailed in behind them, looking like they were trying to attract as little attention as possible.

“Either one of you the sensei to a brat named Kyo?” Tsunade demanded impatiently, eager to finally get this over with.

“That would be me,” the one sitting behind the desk straight ahead said idly, barely glancing up from his paperwork.

“I need to find your brat,” Tsunade told him briskly.

“Kyo isn’t hard to find,” the man returned, finally putting down his pen to look at them.

He was older than her, by quite a few years, with cool sea-foam coloured eyes with indiscernible pupils as was common in his Clan. His blond hair was cropped short and there was something about him that made Tsunade straighten up.

“It is if he's avoiding you, apparently,” Tsunade huffed, crossing arms under her breasts, both impressed and a little annoyed when the man didn't so much as glance down at her rather impressive cleavage.

The Yamanaka -which one of them was he? Toge or Katsurou?- leaned back slightly, letting his eyes wander over the two of them, even flicking down to look at the Genin, before he turned back to Tsunade.

“Kyo isn't one to hold grudges,” he said evenly, and she could feel the way he was judging her. “Which begs the question of what you did to deserve it.”

Tsunade scowled, mouth thinning into an unhappy line.
“That's between me and the boy,” she ground out before taking a deep breath. Her words visibly hadn't impressed the brat's former sensei, and Tsunade figured that the fastest way to get this over with was to just give in.

She couldn't even tell the man it wasn't any of his business.

Quickly and succinctly recounting her and the brat's conversation from a few days ago, Tsunade watched the Jounin's every move for any sort of tell.

Yamanaka were damn tricky, though, and he didn't give anything away.

He sat perfectly motionless for a second after she'd finished, just watching her.

“That's what you said to Kyo, word for word?” He inquired calmly.

“Yes,” Tsunade ground out, narrowing her eyes at the man. He was being difficult on purpose, she just knew it.

The temperature in the room seemed to drop several degrees and there was something about the man's gaze shifting between Tsunade and Jiraiya that made her tense for an attack.

Benched or not, Jounin shouldn't ever be underestimated.

“You two,” the Yamanaka said quietly, “are fucking idiots. Get the hell out of my office.”

“You can't you just-”

The Yamanaka's cold, damn near hostile eyes flicked to Jiraiya, who had the good sense to shut up.

“I've heard about you and your team's feat in Ame,” he said in a chillingly calm voice. “But let me just tell you that if you don’t get a damn grip, I'm going to kill you before you can damage my brat.” One of his hands curled into a fist on the desk, the only visible sign of his fury. “Now get the hell out of my sight.”

Tsunade studied the man a second longer, gave a short nod, grabbed her teammate and marched out of there.

The two Genin hurriedly followed, shooting the Yamanaka Jounin wide-eyed, mildly terrified looks.

The moment the office was empty, Kyo dropped down from her hiding spot up in the ceiling to curl up in sensei's lap, accepting his wordless comfort without a sound, eyes dry and flat.

Katsurou sighed and wrapped her in a hug, realising that he wouldn't get any more work done today.

“Where are we going?” Jiraiya hissed quietly, trying to dislodge her hand from his shirt with little success. “I can walk on my own, you damn woman!” He added irritably.

“We've apparently fucked up, and I want to know in what way,” Tsunade snapped back, a scowl firmly painted on her features.

Yamanaka weren't generally ones for dramatics, not about these sorts of things. So if that Jounin was seriously pissed about this, Tsunade must have stepped on something either ugly, sensitive, or both.
Instead of letting go, she tightened her hold on Jiraiya and hauled him all the way up to sensei’s office.

“You two wait out here,” she ordered the two ducklings that had been trailing after them shortly. And then she barged into sensei’s office, not so much as bothering to knock.

Hiruzen, the Jounin Commander and the ANBU Commander all looked up at the interruption.

“Tsunade, Jiraiya,” sensei said evenly, looking over them calmly, as if they hadn't just barged in on an important meeting. “I wasn't expecting to see you here. Can this wait or is it urgent?”

“It's not gonna take long,” Tsunade said firmly, giving a nod to her fellow Clan member in greeting. “I want to know what the hell is up with Jiraiya's brat.”

Hiruzen gave a slow blink, leaning back minimally to stare at them. The two Commanders seemed to exchange a glance.

“I'm assuming you're talking about Kyo,” sensei said after a beat of silence. “What seems to be the problem?”

“Tsunade said something to him that was apparently bad enough to piss off his former sensei.” Jiraiya shrugged. Putting all the blame on her.

Before Tsunade could round on her teammate, she was brought up short by the actual frown on Hiruzen-sensei's face.

“Jiraiya-kun,” the Hokage began mildly, making Jiraiya drop the perplexed frown and straighten up instinctively. “Could you please tell me why you still haven't read through Shiranui Kyo's file, almost two months after you received it?”

Jiraiya frowned right back at their sensei, arms crossing over his chest. “I wanted to make my own opinion and assessment of the kids without outside influences,” he said seriously, jaw set stubbornly.

“When I told you to read Kyo's file, it wasn't a suggestion.” Hiruzen said sharply. “Which would have been all well and good, had they all been fresh Academy graduates,” he said seriously, jaw set stubbornly. The ANBU Commander shifted minutely, and then left the office in a near-invisible swirl of smoke.

Takeshi let out a sigh and shook his head, giving the two of them disapproving looks.

“Whatever mistakes have been made, you better do everything you can to fix them,” Hiruzen said firmly, voice brokering no argument. “Read the file. Dismissed.”

Tsunade automatically left the office, trying to digest what she'd just been told, Jiraiya right next to her. Back out in the waiting room, Tsunade slowly turned to stare at Jiraiya, who was beginning to look a bit guilty and shamefaced.

“You didn't read his file,” Tsunade said quietly.

She knew Jiraiya could be a bit... obstinate and moronic, at times, and that he played up his loud,
brawny personality whenever it suited him. But. She hadn't expected such a severe lapse in judgement.

“We are going to your place, you're going to find that file, and we're both reading it,” she hissed angrily, grabbing Jiraiya's wrist in a bruising grip and dragged him off in the direction of his apartment.

The two Genin boys were left sitting outside the Hokage's office, staring uncertainly after their sensei and the strange woman who had barged in on their training.

.

Tsunade had clout in Konoha.

Not just because she was the Senju princess and the Shodaime's granddaughter, but also because she was the most skilled medic in the country.

That opened up a lot of doors.

Tsunade resolved to get to the bottom of this, and it didn't even have all that much to do with the damn file any more.

The Hokage, uncle Takeshi, who was the Jounin Commander, _and_ the ANBU Commander had all known who Shiranui Kyo was without prompting.

The boy was _nine_. She had a feeling it would be in her best interests to inform herself as much as possible now the issue had been brought to her attention.

.

When Jiraiya found the file and they read through it, Tsunade ended up punting him through two walls, gave him a black eye and broke two of his ribs.

She might have patched him up afterwards, but that didn't mean Jiraiya would get back into her good graces any time soon.

_Shit_, she owed the brat a serious apology.

-x-x-x-
Chapter 42

Chapter Summary

Katsurou-sensei comes for a visit, and Kyo has a bonding moment with her new team. Reluctantly

“Don't you have training, Kyo?” Kou asked, standing in the door to her and Genma's room.

Kyo curled her arms tighter around her sleeping baby brother.

Now that she'd been in the village so much, he'd started sneaking into her bed at night, and Kyo was pretty sure he was of the firm belief she didn't notice anything.

She woke up every single time, but would never do a thing to stop him.

“I won't know what's going on unless you talk to me,” her tou-san sighed and entered the room to take a seat on the edge of her bed. “Kyo?”

He placed a hand on her shoulder.

Kyo took a deep breath and pressed her lips against Genma's hair, curling her legs up a bit further to cradle the boy with her whole body.

“I'm not feeling very good,” she whispered.

Kou frowned and put a hand on her forehead. “You don't seem to have a fever,” he said after a moment, sliding the hand up to push her hair out of her face. “Please talk to me, kitten.”

“Is it okay if I just stay at home today?” She asked quietly, feeling Genma's steady heartbeat under one of her hands.

When he spoke, she could hear tou-san was frowning. “That's not really up to me. You don't have anything planned?”

“I don't know,” Kyo admitted reluctantly.

Kou stilled. “Why don't you know, Kyo?” He asked quietly, voice gentle.

“Because I left training yesterday,” she admitted in a whisper. It felt better to say it out loud if she was whispering.

“Why?” Kou asked patiently. He knew his daughter, and she wouldn't just leave without good reason.

“Because Tsunade came looking for me.”

“Tsunade? Senju Tsunade?” Kou murmured confusedly. “Why would she be looking for you? I didn't even know you'd met.”

“Jiraiya introduced us.” After a fashion, at least. “I- I asked her something and she said no.”
Tou-san sighed. “You still have a few hours until you have to meet with your new team, yeah? I'm gonna go talk to Katsurou; you went to see him yesterday, right? He would know what this is about, hm?”

“Yeah. Okay,” Kyo said, relieved. Sensei would be able to explain it much better than her, and she didn't like talking about it.

It made her feel silly; like she was overreacting. It'd been more than half a year. Shouldn't it be getting easier?

“I'll be back in a while, okay?” Tou-san said and stood up, slipping out of their room and a second later, Kyo heard the front door click closed.

With a deep sigh, she closed her eyes again and listened to Genma breathe.

She guessed about an hour had passed by the time tou-san returned.

“Thank you for this,” she heard Kou say softly, his voice slightly muffled through the wall. “It's the first time I've had trouble getting her out of bed. Ever.”

The grunt that answered him was something she'd recognize anywhere.

Had tou-san really dragged Katsurou-sensei all the way over here? And sensei had agreed? He still had trouble moving around too much.

Kyo sighed against Genma's temple, her breath stirring up his hair, the soft locks tickling her nose. It was a good thing her brother wasn't a light sleeper, though she didn't doubt he'd eventually develop the habit, just like every other shinobi she knew.

“Kyo?” Katsurou asked as he walked into the bedroom.

“Hey, sensei,” she mumbled.

Katsurou sank down to sit on the foot-end of the bed, using the wall as a backrest. “I'm hearing you're not feeling all that well today,” he said on a sigh, gratefully relaxing into his seat.

“Are you okay?” Kyo couldn't help but ask. Partly out of genuine concern, and partly as a means to avoid answering. At least for a little while.

Katsurou huffed. “It is... frustrating, that it's taking so long,” he said, holding up a hand to show her how it was shaking. “Makes me feel lazy and useless even when I know I shouldn't strain myself, medic's order. Not to mention restless.” He smiled humourlessly. “Your turn.”

“Sneaky,” she muttered with reluctant amusement. “It feels like I should have gotten over it by now,” she huffed, immediately lowering her voice when Genma stirred. “It's been more than half a year and I'm still...” she made a vague motion with one hand. “Like this.”

“I'm going to be perfectly honest with you, Kyo. You're never going to be 'over it','” Katsurou said frankly, though not unkindly. “You, me, Kisaki, we're going to be feeling this loss for as long as we live.”

Kyo sighed. “I was afraid you were going to say that,” she mumbled. “But at least it gets easier,
right?” She wiped at her eyes with one hand, managing to manoeuvre around her brother without disturbing him.

“Most of the time,” sensei agreed. “And then some days, it's like it happened just yesterday,” he told her gently, patting her foot comfortingly.

Glancing at the window, Kyo stirred reluctantly. “I should probably get ready for training.”

“I heard something interesting before heading home last night,” Katsurou said, making her pause. “There was apparently an incident involving Jiraiya yesterday afternoon, so your team gets the day off.”

Kyo stared at Katsurou, who looked rather... pleased.

“You didn't do anything, did you?” She couldn't help but ask. She didn't want him to get into trouble, either with the Hokage or another Jounin. Not until he was perfectly healthy again.

“Not a thing,” Katsurou said easily, still looking too vindictively pleased for Kyo to fully believe him. He grew serious quickly, though. “It wasn't out of intentional neglect or malice, you know. The last two months.”

“I didn't correct him, either,” Kyo muttered.

She hadn't felt like she should have had to, never mind that it made it easier to remain distant to a team she didn't want to become a part of.

And what was even the use? From what she could remember, Naoki hadn't gotten a single mention in the story, so he'd probably die young. Minato died in his early twenties, which was no more than anything between ten to fifteen years from now. Even Jiraiya died! Admittedly pretty far in the future, but why couldn't anyone get to die of old age?

“You shouldn't have had to, Kyo. That doesn't change that Jiraiya had good intentions.” He shrugged. “Still doesn't excuse anything.”

“He's a good man,” Kyo agreed. “Very different from you,” she added with a teasing smile.

Katsurou tilted his head, a small smile playing around the corners of his mouth. “Yeah, sounds about right.”

Kyo kicked him in the thigh. “You're a good man, too, sensei,” she told him firmly.

“Not really,” Katsurou casually disagreed, slapping her foot lightly in retaliation. “It's gotten better in resent years, though.” He hummed a little. “There's a reason why there're so many people who think I've brainwashed you or something,” he grumbled.

“What? Really?” Kyo actually sat up to stare disbelievingly at him.

Genma mumbled in his sleep and rolled over onto his side, so Kyo absently tossed the blanket over him to keep him warm.

“I never did get around to telling you what it is I specialise in,” Katsurou mused, sliding down further in his seat and making himself comfortable. “You know my Clan's jutsu.”


“That's the basics of it, but it's not the only one. Ever heard of the Mind Body Switch? Well, I'm
really pretty good at it,” Katsurou said idly, looking relaxed and unconcerned. Kyo didn't buy it for a second. “With a small twist.”

She tilted her head to consider him carefully. “You know, I say it like I'm joking all the time, but I really do love you, sensei.”

“I know.” Katsurou sent her a glance, looking both amused and a little incredulous. Like it was baffling. “The way I use the Mind Body Switch is a bit,” he cocked his head as he chose his words, “unorthodox,” he finally settled on. “And it makes it hard for people to trust me.”

“Well they're stupid then,” Kyo said firmly. Katsurou was a good man, with honour and morals, as much as their profession allowed, and he had always done everything he could to protect her and her teammates.

Katsurou turned to look at her, meeting her gaze. “Part of it is that I get into other people's heads, but instead of taking over their bodies, I just,” he paused again, eyes going momentarily distant, “sit back and watch, unnoticed.”

Kyo tilted her head, considering the information with the weight it deserved. She was probably biased, but the thought of having sensei in her head wasn't at all something to be worried about. He'd taken a thorough look in there already and she was all the better off for it.

“It's hard to trust people you don't know,” Kyo finally said, shifting around so that she could lean against Katsurou's side. “Doesn't mean it's right for people to think you're rifling through their heads for fun. As if you don't have anything better to do,” she grumbled, offended on Katsurou's behalf.

Katsurou huffed out a low, hoarse laugh. “I don't even know why I'm surprised,” he muttered to himself, shifting his arm so that he could wrap it around her shoulders, pressing her more firmly into his side.

“You stealing my daughter, Katsurou?” Kou's voice came drifting in from the living room. “I might actually get away with it,” Katsurou said back, managing to sound thoughtfully contemplative.

“No,” came a sleepy protest from the head of the bed. “Nee-san's mine,” Genma grumbled sourly, crawling on his hands and knees over the mattress until he could sprawl over Kyo's lap, giving her sensei a fierce scowl.

“Oh, it seems I've been defeated before I even tried,” the man hummed, giving Genma an amused look. “Your sister is safe. This time.”

Genma made a protesting noise, glared at Katsurou and wrapped his arms protectively around Kyo's waist.

“You might actually get away with it,” Katsurou said back, managing to sound thoughtfully contemplative.

“No,” came a sleepy protest from the head of the bed. “Nee-san's mine,” Genma grumbled sourly, crawling on his hands and knees over the mattress until he could sprawl over Kyo's lap, giving her sensei a fierce scowl.

“Ah, it seems I've been defeated before I even tried,” the man hummed, giving Genma an amused look. “Your sister is safe. This time.”

Genma made a protesting noise, glared at Katsurou and wrapped his arms protectively around Kyo's waist.

“Seriously, sensei, stop messing with the three year old toddler.” Kyo smirked. “If you're so good at mind-games, then you should at least aim higher than that.”

“Oh, is that how it is?” Katsurou murmured. “Betrayal,” he mused, as if it was a foreign concept.

“Of the gravest order,” Kyo agreed solemnly and began to shuffle off the bed. “So while you're here, do you want breakfast?”

“Don't think we've finished talking about this, brat,” Katsurou said, but followed after her when she
wandered out of her room in the direction of the kitchen.

Judging by Genma's squirming, she might have to make a detour by the bathroom, first, though.

-x-x-x-

Settling down next to Naoki, Kyo did her best not to sigh.

Both of the boys were staring at her, as if wondering who exactly she was.

It didn't help that Jiraiya hadn't arrived yet.

“What's going on?” Minato finally scrounged up the nerve to ask, giving her a mildly uncertain look.

“Jiraiya didn't read my file and made a bunch of false assumptions about me,” Kyo answered honestly. It was time to stop avoiding the inevitable.

Sensei had insisted.

“Like what?” Naoki asked curiously. “That Tsuna-lady looked furious when they came out of the Hokage's office,” he added, watching her with guileless interest. Kyo was fairly sure he'd mentioned an interest in puzzles.

Which was her entire life.

She sighed. “I don't know the specific reason, but I think I can guess,” she muttered, frowning speculatively. “As far as sensei explained it, she was operating based on false intel, which was as a direct result of a simple misunderstanding blown out of proportions.”

When she turned to look at the boys, both of them were blinking at her. Naoki looking like he hadn't understood a word out of her mouth, while Minato merely looked startled. As if he hadn't expected something.

“Your old sensei is scary, by the way,” Naoki told her in a hushed voice.

Kyo managed a thin smile. “He's still my sensei; he'll always be.” She shrugged. That was clear enough. Katsurou had told her several times, the day before, that one did not exclude the other. He wasn't going anywhere. “And he just looks grumpy, most of the time.”

“If you say so,” Naoki muttered, looking like he didn't believe her for a second but wasn't about to argue about it.

“Will you tell us?” Minato asked into the following silence. He looked a bit bashful when Kyo glanced at him, his cheeks reddening at her reluctantly amused expression.

“Some of it,” she relented.

The two boys had been surprisingly patient with her, so far. Kind and welcoming even in the face of her curt disinclination. They deserved her to be honest about at least a few things.

“Okay,” Kyo huffed. “First of all, I'm not exactly what you think I am,” she told them seriously. “I actually happen to be a kunoichi.”
The boys stared at her in blank silence for a long few seconds.

“You're a girl?” Minato blurted, more out of surprise than anything else. It was followed by a rather horrified look on his face, most likely in response to the words he'd just uttered.

“Yep.” Kyo nodded.

Naoki looked more curious and mildly confused than Minato, but... shinobi Clan, compared to a sort of civilian upbringing.

“But you've taken your shirt off during training?” Minato continued confusedly a second later, when it became apparent Kyo wasn't about to hit him or something. He looked like she had just broken all the rules that applied to girls.

“Unless I take off my underwear, there's not really much of a difference between us, at this point.” She rolled her eyes.

She hadn't been very bothered by this to begin with, but after so many years of being a kunoichi, both on a team and her time spent in ANBU, Kyo just didn't care. It wasn't like you could afford each other much privacy on missions.

“So you're a girl,” Minato summarized slowly. “What else? You said that was the first thing.”

“I've been an active kunoichi for three years, not one, and I'm a Chuunin,” Kyo recounted quickly, wanting to get this out of the way.

“But you're a year younger than us,” Naoki said, looking shocked.


“So you're a girl,” Minato summarized slowly. “What else? You said that was the first thing.”

“I've been an active kunoichi for three years, not one, and I'm a Chuunin,” Kyo recounted quickly, wanting to get this out of the way.

“But you're a year younger than us,” Naoki said, looking shocked.


“Okay,” Minato said slowly, blinking a little as he assimilated the new information.

And it was that scene Jiraiya walked in on, one eye darkened by a bruise and almost swollen shut, his movements rather stiff.

He gingerly lowered himself down on the ground in front of them.

“Looks like I owe you a pretty big apology, kid,” he sighed, pulling a hand through his hair and giving her a sad, guilty look.

Kyo shrugged. “It is what it is, I suppose.”

“Well, I'm an idiot, but I'll try to do better,” he promised. “For what it's worth, I'm sorry, Kyo.” He met her gaze solemnly until she gave an acknowledging nod. “Now, what do you lot say about an easy mission?”

Kyo exchanged a look with Minato and Naoki. Hadn't all their missions been easy?

The biggest question in Kyo's mind as she walked into the house, was to wonder *where in the world* Jiraiya had found a baby-sitting D-rank.

And who had decided to spend money on one in these times?

Instead of saying anything out loud, Kyo simply followed Jiraiya as he led them to their destination.
Which looked to be a rather sizeable house.

The door opened before they had a chance to reach it to knock.

“Oh, good; you're here,” a woman, who was quite clearly a kunoichi, said, giving them all a careful once-over. “The kids are both in the living room, and you can use whatever you need in the kitchen for lunch.” She gave Jiraiya a sharp look and then was on her way.

“Someone's in a hurry,” Jiraiya muttered under his breath, walking into the hallway.

Kyo sighed and quickly followed him, taking off her shoes and entering the home properly to take a look at what they had to work with.

God knew Genma could get up to enough trouble on his lonesome with just a minute left to his own devices.

“Is it okay to just walk in like this?” She heard Naoki ask hesitantly back in the hallway, making Kyo pause.

Huh. She hadn't even thought of that.

“It's not like we broke in,” Minato returned reasonably, making Kyo's lips twitch.

“So, what would your names be?” She asked the oldest child curiously, crouching down in front of... him? About three years old, the boy was giving her a curious look from where he sat next to what looked like his little sister.

The girl, who Kyo guessed was probably around a year old, was dressed in a pale pink onesie. With a cute little bow in a matching colour clipped into the soft wisps of hair on her head.

She couldn't help but think that Genma was cuter, though.

“Ao,” the boy said simply, peering curiously at her. “Sacchan,” he added, patting his little sister clumsily but carefully on the head.

“What do the two of you say about something to eat, huh?” Kyo asked with a reassuring smile, picking Sacchan up with practised ease and settling the baby against her chest.

She helped Ao-chan to his feet and then led him by the hand into the kitchen, walking by the three staring males of her new team, sending them all an archly expectant look.

She may be the team kunoichi, but that didn't mean she was going to be the one doing all the work.

Minato and Naoki seemed to get the message, because they hurried to follow after her.

“How did you get so good at this?” Naoki asked tiredly when they were finally leaving.

Kyo smiled thinly and stretched her arms over her head. “I have a little brother.”

Minato made a small, interested noise, even though he looked like he was about to fall asleep on his feet.

Little Ao-chan had kept both boys on their toes all day, while Kyo had been content to sit back and watch them suffer, looking after Sacchan.
Girls had to stick together.

“Can you all come by my house for dinner tomorrow?” Naoki asked in a rushed manner before they could split up. “Kaa-chan's invited all of you,” he added embarrassedly.

“Sure,” Minato smiled, bumping shoulders with the boy in a friendly, encouraging manner.

Kyo didn't even try to muster a smile, but nodded after a brief pause. “I'd love to.” Which might have been a slight exaggeration, but... she didn't want to be rude, and she didn't doubt that Naoki's family was lovely.

It was just a bit... difficult.

“Ah, look at you.” Jiraiya grinned. “Bonding as a team and everything!” He looked like he thought it was adorable.

Kyo sent him a disgruntled look.

“We'll come, Naoki,” she assured the nervous boy, who smiled gratefully, and then stumbled off towards home.

Kyo shook her head and took to the roofs to do the same. If only with less stumbling involved.

Had her stamina been this abysmal after she graduated?

Making a mental note to ask Katsurou-sensei the next time she saw him, Kyo pushed all thoughts of work to the side.

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After training the next day, Naoki led them off towards the Akimichi compound with nervous anticipation and a clear bounce in his step.

Kyo walked next to Minato, half a step behind Naoki, with Jiraiya bringing up the rear.

She recognized it for the team formation it was.

Or at least a tentative one.

Thinking about it, Kyo considered their different skill-sets and mused that she would most likely end up taking point in this team. She had the most experience by far, out of her and the two Genin. Not to mention that she'd turned out to be pretty durable.

Dragging her mind away from that train of thought, she focused on the present. On the sun on her face, the people around her, the sound of the village. The smell of the restaurants they walked by.

Glancing around the Akimichi compound, taking in the familiar sights, Kyo slowly calmed herself and tried to keep at least part of her attention on what Naoki was saying, chattering away at Minato and Jiraiya.

“Kyo?”

“Oh, hey, Chouza.” Kyo blinked, turning to the boy with a small smile, feeling herself relax and ease
out of the tense posture she'd adapted without noticing at the approach of the older boy.

The Akimichi in question smiled at her, glanced over her team and walked up to her to place a hand on her shoulder in an easy, familiar greeting.

“What are you doing here?” He asked, giving the rest of her team a friendly smile, even while most of his attention remained on Kyo.

“Dinner,” she said, motioning towards Naoki. Who looked rather wide-eyed. “Been a while since we got a chance to meet up.”

Chouza hummed. “We've been busy.” He nodded. “Speaking of.” He smiled and glanced over his shoulder.

Kyo followed his gaze and grinned. “Hey, pretty boy.”

Inoichi snorted, gave her a disgruntled look at the horrible nickname but strode up to her to pull her into a hug, at the same time giving her new team a cool, assessing once-over.

Kyo rolled her eyes and patted Inoichi on the back. “Hi, Shikaku.” She smiled at the perpetually bored-looking Nara, who nodded back. “Are you off to meet Shinzu-sensei?”

“Nah,” he drawled, giving her an intent once-over. “Sensei's busy, so we were planning to hang out and relax.”

“Do you ever do anything else when your life's not in the balance?” She teased with a grin, shifting a bit to more easily talk with the Nara around Inoichi, who still hadn't let go of her.

“Kyo, are you going to introduce us to your team?” Inoichi finally asked, drawing her attention to the fact that Minato, Naoki and Jiraiya were all staring at her like they'd never seen her before.

“Oh, right,” she muttered. “This is Jiraiya, Namikaze Minato and Akimichi Naoki,” she introduced quickly, mentioning at each of them in turn, her smile slowly fading from her face. “My...”

“Team,” Chouza cheerfully finished for her, saving her from the awkward silence that would have descended on them otherwise.

Kyo unclenched her teeth from around her tongue enough to give a small, tight smile.

Inoichi tightened his arms around her for a brief second, giving her a quick glance. “Well, since it looks like you have a prior engagement to see to, we'll refrain from kidnapping you this time. But we're long overdue some quality time, Kyo,” Inoichi said in a light-hearted tone and with a friendly smile on his face.

“Yeah, sure.” Kyo blinked, absently patting his arm. “We should go bother Katsurou; he's been bored lately.”

“Will he agree with that assessment if we actually show up at his door?” Shikaku wondered wryly.

Kyo grinned unapologetically. “The restlessness makes him grumpy; he loves it when we bother him.”

“As long as you make sure he doesn't kill us and hide the bodies,” Chouza agreed with a cheerful, amused grin. “See you around! Say hello to your mother for me, Naoki-kun,” he added and then led his teammates away from them.
Inoichi reluctantly let go of her and stepped back. He gave her a quick, intent look and then wandered after Chouza.

“I can't believe you know the next Clan Head,” Naoki mumbled, staring after Chouza's retreating back.

“I thought you were too young to have a boyfriend?” Jiraiya muttered under his breath, giving her a mildly weirded-out look.

Kyo rolled her eyes. “Surprise, surprise; boys and girls can be friends without any romantic feelings involved,” she told the man succinctly. “And get your mind out of the gutter, Jiraiya. I'm nine.” She gave him an unimpressed frown. “Weren't we going somewhere?

It was unfair of her, but she couldn't help the way her face had closed off, how her voice had turned neutral and even and it was probably an even bigger change than it would have been, because seeing Inoichi, Chouza and Shikaku again had stripped her of her masks.

Giving her new team a glimpse of the real her.

Naoki startled. “Yeah, sure, this way,” he said dazedly, continuing down the road.

Kyo took a deep breath, ignored Jiraiya's pitying gaze, Minato's solemnly thoughtful one and followed Naoki towards his home.

There was a team dinner she had to survive, being introduced to a teammate's family and somehow be polite and friendly through it all.

She absently wondered if tou-san would agree to let her sleep next to him tonight.

For all that she didn't have them often, Kyo had a feeling she was going to have nightmares after this.

Naoki's mother turned out to be a very... motherly, rotund woman with a kind, welcoming smile named Tamiko, who immediately asked them to call her 'kaa-chan'.

Kyo wasn't sure how, but she somehow managed to press out a mostly-natural-looking smile in response, even while silently swearing to herself never to call her anything such.

Jiraiya sent her a quick, searching glance, but didn't call her out on her less-than-genuine reaction.

At least she managed to sit down by the table without incident, though she felt rather stiff and awkward. Out of place.

Jiraiya took the seat beside her.

Possibly in a subconscious show of shinobi solidarity in the face of the obscenely civilian mother hosting them.

Naoki looked happy throughout the whole thing, though, despite the fact his father was out on the front, or so Tamiko proudly told them. Minato seemed slightly hesitant but intrigued by the whole experience.

It made her feel bad on a whole other level, because the kid was an orphan. Had he ever known the love of a parent? Ever?
The warmth of home?

The thought was enough to make it easier to bite her tongue and smile through the evening.

"Thank you very much for the food, Tamiko-oba-san," Kyo said with a small, polite bow. "It was delicious."

It was a compromise.

Kyo would never call anyone... she only had one mother, but she could call the woman 'auntie' without making it feel like there was a needle lodged in her chest.

"Yes, thank you, Tamiko-san," Minato added, hastily copying her with the bow. "See you tomorrow, Naoki," he added with a cheerful smile at their teammate.

Who looked pleased, if slightly bashful as he waved them off.

Kyo stubbornly ignored the impulse to leap away and hurry home the moment they were done, when she had finally fulfilled her duty as a team-member, jumping from roof to roof until she reached the safety of the apartment. Of home.

Instead, she remained beside Minato and Jiraiya, walking in the direction of the middle of the village.

Jiraiya sent her a curious look, but didn't comment. Possibly because of the sharp, unamused half-glare she sent him when it looked like he was about to open his big mouth.

Minato sent both of them curious looks.

"You know I can go back by myself, right?" He asked them when they were drawing closer to one of the residential areas that housed a lot of shinobi and, more importantly, orphans.

Kyo only knew that because she'd been dragged around on a few village-wide patrols since she got her Scorpion mask. ANBU kept an extra close eye on the few Academy students and Genin living on their own, both to prevent potential accidents, but also to make sure there wasn't any outside interference taking advantage.

"Teammates takes care of each other." Kyo shrugged, frowning into the distance, not really seeing the street in front of them.

"Does that mean you want to be on this team now?" Minato asked, sounding part hopeful and part curious.

It made Kyo feel like all kinds of scum.

"Not quite yet," she replied evenly, honestly. "But I'm trying, okay?"

"That's okay," Jiraiya said firmly before Minato could do more than blink. "But I'll take it from here, kid. You go home, and I'll make sure nothing happens to Minato here." He smiled widely, placing a large hand on Minato's shoulder.

Kyo eyed the both of them for a moment, feeling distantly bemused.

"Fine. See you tomorrow," she relented.

Perhaps Jiraiya wanted to have a private conversation with Minato?
With a mental shrug, Kyo jumped up onto the closest building and set off towards home.

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Chapter 43

Chapter Summary

This is an intervention. It sucks pretty badly, wouldn't recommend, Kyo would like to file a complaint.

Kyo was eating breakfast with Genma when there was a knock on the door.

Blinking with surprise; the number of people who actually knocked before entering their home was near non-existent, and was usually reserved for shinobi coming by in a professional sense. Which could mean anything from new orders to bad news.

No one in Kyo's family was out of the village right now, though, so she assumed it was the former.

Kou, just fresh from the shower, went to answer before Kyo could so much as put down her chopsticks, still with a towel over his shoulders to catch any drops of water dripping from his damp hair.

She exchanged a curious look with Genma, who blinked back in a way that made her think he hadn't actually caught anything of what was happening.

A moment later, tou-san came into the kitchen and joined them for breakfast, a familiar blond at his heels.

Kyo stared at Inoichi, part of her wondering what he was doing here. The rest of her wasn't particularly surprised.

“Good morning,” Inoichi greeted with a cheerful smile, easily claiming the seat next to Kyo. As if he joined them for breakfast every other day.

Kou let out a small, somewhat amused snort, but readily enough got out an extra set of plates for the Yamanaka.

“...good morning,” Kyo returned bemusedly, waiting expectantly for some sort of explanation.

“Chouza told me your team had the day off today,” Inoichi said.

Which meant that Chouza must have asked either Naoki, or Naoki's mother about it. And then relayed the information to the meddling blond currently staring at her.

The question was whether or not Inoichi had prodded his teammate about it until the Akimichi had given in, or if Chouza had put his nose where it didn't belong of his own volition.

When Kyo said nothing in response to his words, Inoichi continued with light-hearted cheerfulness.

“I figured we could spend some time together; it's been a while, and I think the both of us could do with some casual fun,” he explained sincerely.

Kyo eyed her friend, feeling reluctantly amused. “How do you know I don't already have plans?”
She shot back, absently handing Genma a napkin to wipe his mouth with.

Inoichi tilted his head. “Well, I wouldn't mind spending some time with Katsurou-oji,” he mused.

Kyo sighed. “I do know people other than you,” she couldn't help but point out.

Inoichi blinked, eyed her a bit sceptically, which was just insulting, and then shrugged. “I'm always willing to expand my social circle,” he returned without a hitch. “You've told me about that Uzumaki you hang out with whenever it's possible. I wouldn't mind being introduced.”

Kyo gave him a flat look. “What says I wasn't planning on spending the day with Genma?” She asked, somewhat coolly.

She thought she knew what Inoichi was doing, but that didn't mean she had to be all that appreciative. Or cooperative.

Genma, the clueless little traitor, peered at her, before turning to tou-san. “I thought we were meeting with Ryota-oji?” He asked confusedly.

“We are,” Kou reassured the three year old with a dry grin. “Your nee-san is just being socially awkward.”

Genma blinked, looking like he didn't know what that meant, but took it as truth anyway, because tou-san was the one who'd said it, and why would tou-san ever be wrong?

Kyo narrowed her eyes at her father. Him calling her socially awkward. That was rich.

“Go spend time with your friend, Kyo,” Kou said, the amusement sliding off his face when he turned to look at her. “Do something fun together,” he added, and there was sad concern in his eyes.

It made all the irritation drain out of her more effectively than any cajoling words ever could have.

“Fine,” Kyo said shortly, focusing on finishing her breakfast, largely ignoring the rest of the occupants of the kitchen.

She hadn't actually had any plans for today. She'd been playing around with the idea of going with tou-san and Genma to see Ryota, or maybe go visit Kisaki to do something together.

And if not that, she could always go to ANBU headquarters for some additional training. Hyena was almost always there, or she might possibly go bother Crow.

Riling the guy up was surprisingly cathartic. And the spars it resulted in felt far more productive than training with Team Seven.

Kaimaru's vitriol was a far cry from the pitying looks she tended to get from seemingly everyone these days.

Half an hour later, Kyo and Inoichi were making their way to a forested training field at the edge of the village the two of them liked to train in.

“So what's this really about?” Kyo asked once they'd left tou-san and Genma behind.

Inoichi sent her an exasperated look. “Kyo, there's nothing strange with me wanting to spend time with a friend,” he said slowly.

Kyo frowned. “Yeah, but it's not like I've seen you all that much in the last year either.”
“Because half the time, I can't find you anywhere in the village, and the rest of the time, I've been out on missions!” Inoichi huffed, sending her a long, considering look out of the corner of his eye. “Heard a rumour you've been in and out of the hospital a few times, too.”

Kyo glared at him.

It was a serious breach in shinobi etiquette to ask those kinds of questions, even indirectly, and you just didn't do it. For several reasons. Something Inoichi should be well aware of, or she was going to talk to Katsurou about it at the earliest opportunity, so that he could chew out Shinzu about such a gross oversight in his teachings.

Instead of saying anything, Kyo sped up, taking to the roofs and forcing Inoichi to scramble to follow.

“Hey!” Inoichi protested when he caught up, landing in the middle of the training ground.

Kyo turned to scowl at him, feeling quite done.

She knew what Inoichi wanted, but she wasn't prepared to reciprocate.

“No, Inoichi, I'm not fine,” she said flatly, meeting his gaze head on, taking in his startled expression. “And no, I don't want to talk about it. So if that's the only reason you're here, you can just as well leave and do something else,” she told him firmly.


Kyo waited several seconds for him to leave, but the boy just stood there, staring at her. Waiting.

Kyo let out a heavy, tired sigh, running one hand down her face.

“Okay,” she breathed. “So what do you wanna do?” She asked, and the next time she glanced at Inoichi, he gave her a small, fond smile.

“Let's run some stealth exercises and then, after a couple of spars, we can go grab dango or something,” he suggested.

“Okay,” Kyo agreed.

That actually sounded like a nice day.

Arriving home for dinner that evening, Kyo felt marginally better, but she was exhausted.

Which wasn't entirely Inoichi’s fault.

She'd resolved to really, honestly try with her new team, after her talk with Katsurou-sensei, but... the more she tried, the harder it got.

The last week and two days had been terrible.

Kyo was trying, but it just didn't seem to be enough. She couldn't-

Taking a deep breath, Kyo focused on the food in front of her and listened with desperate intensity to Genma's recounting of his day, Ryota butting in every now and then with a correction or addition.
It was nice.

It was normal.

Her little brother was progressing nicely in his training, and maybe she should talk to tou-san about possibly starting Genma on poison lessons soon?

Absorbed as she was, Kyo entirely missed the loaded, pointed look Kou sent Ryota, and the acknowledging nod the Uchiha gave in return.

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Kou had known his and Isshun's daughter wasn't like other children since very early on in his stint as a parent.

Isshun hadn't been particularly daunted, though, and had seemed to have everything well in hand, so he hadn't ever found it particularly worrying.

Then she'd proven just how clever, insightful and mature she was and Kou knew why she'd been pushed up a couple of classes at the Academy, why she'd been slotted for early graduation.

That didn't mean he'd had to like the fact his adorable six year old daughter was going to join the Konoha forces at such a tender age.

He understood it, but that meant shit in the face of that new kind of terror.

And that had all been before shinobi life had had a chance to really leave it's mark.

Kou still stood by the words he'd snapped at the Hokage in the face of Kyo being drafted into ANBU at age eight; she wasn't broken.

She was just too bright, too mature, unable to connect to the children around her. Him and Isshun continuously being sent out on missions hadn't and didn't exactly help, but Kyo had always been understanding enough it made it feel like Kou was failing her. She was a child; she shouldn't be that understanding.

Even with only sporadic access and closeness to their child, they'd been able to see her struggles.

His daughter had been able to count her friends on one hand. Before half of them had been ripped away in the worst manner possible, leaving her with a gaping hole in her life.

Kami, having come back to the village to hear murmurs of a blood-drenched Genin arriving at the main gates in the dead of night, accompanied by a feral Inuzuka ninken and a half-dead Jounin sensei, only to realise it was Kyo they had been talking about...? Kou had been a hair away from tearing a gaping wound into Konoha's infrastructure in his haste to get to the hospital.

Would have done it, too, if anyone had been stupid enough to try and get in his way.

The memory of her sitting in that chair, small and tired, staring blankly at her sensei's mostly lifeless form still made Kou want to murder someone.

“I'm going to bed,” Kyo said quietly, rising from her seat on the couch, where she'd been attempting to read through a ninjutsu scroll for the last twenty minutes, with limited success.
“Sleep tight, kitten,” Kou returned, gladly accepting the quick hug she graced him with in passing on her way to the bathroom.

He spent the next ten minutes in silence, listening to her get ready for and then finally settling into bed.

Another five minutes, and Kyo's chakra settled into the calm of sleep.

For all that she was taking care of herself with near religious zeal, making sure to eat near constantly to counter the demands her active lifestyle put on her young body, he knew she hadn't been sleeping well the last week.

Even after sleeping through a full night, she was tired and drawn the next morning, but she hadn't made a peep about nightmares.

Kou was confident he would have woken up at any hint of such, as well, so that wasn't it.

Once he was sure his girl was truly asleep, he turned to Ryota, who was sprawled out on the couch, staring at the ceiling.

“Well?” He said expectantly, careful to keep his voice calm and casual; his little kitten had always been sensitive to any kind of disturbances and he didn't want her overhearing this particular conversation.

Ryota let out a small, unhappy sigh. “You're right,” he huffed, a frown pulling on his brows as he sent a long, speculative glance at the door to the kids' room. “I'll babysit for you,” he added, waving a negligent hand at Kou.

Giving his teammate a grateful nod, Kou got to his feet, stretched out his spine until there were a series of satisfying pops, and then headed for the hallway to put on his shoes.

He had a few errands to run, and since Ryota had offered to keep an eye on the kids without prompting...

“It shouldn't take more than an hour. Possibly two,” he said over his shoulder, meeting Ryota's gaze.

“Take all the time you need,” Ryota drawled back, looking insolently unconcerned to a casual observer.

Kou knew him better than his friend knew himself, though, and could see the acute concern hidden in his dark eyes.

Kou nodded and headed out.

First order of business; Kou ran with effortless ease through the village to Katsurou's house.

The man was still on med-leave, which meant he kept rather predictable hours, so he ought to be home at this time of day.

Granted, it wasn't particularly late -the sun was just starting to think about setting- but recovering from a poisoning like the one Katsurou had suffered from wasn't a walk in the park.

“Kou,” the man in question greeted idly once he'd opened the door, looking him over with careful eyes before stepping back to let him enter.

“The situation isn't going to resolve itself on its own,” he informed the older Jounin the moment the
door was closed.

Katsurou sighed, an unhappy grimace briefly twitching his facial muscles. “I was afraid of that,” he muttered, more to himself than to Kou. “Well, we’ve prepared for that outcome,” he added, though he looked tired. Worn. “Want me to talk to-”

“I’ve got it covered,” Kou interrupted.

He appreciated everything Katsurou had done for Kyo, for their family, was grateful even, about his presence in his daughter’s life, but there were some things he needed to do himself.

Katsurou gave an easy nod, as if he wasn't surprised in the least to hear that. Yamanaka that he was, he probably wasn't.

“So I can count on you?” He pressed, needing to hear the words out loud.

“We'll be there,” Katsurou assured him, but paused, a considering air to him that let Kou know he wasn't finished speaking quite yet. “She won't appreciate it,” he added idly.

Kou smiled thinly. “No. She won’t,” he agreed.

That couldn't be helped, though, because Kou had been forced to watch his daughter through every grief, every hurdle and injury that was tossed her way, all accepted without much fuss from his and Isshun's remarkable girl.

That didn't change the fact that he knew very well that Kyo wasn't as unaffected as she liked to pretend.

She still wasn't talking about or so much as mentioning Isshun in passing, had referenced her all of once that Kou had heard since the funeral, and that had been when she'd been upset to the point of tears herself.

And then there was the issue of this new team of hers.

His little girl was very good at pretending she was perfectly alright, like nothing wrong had ever happened and that she was just fine.

That didn't change the fact that the last week had seen her become increasingly twitchy, more harried, and Kou was becoming concerned she would end up doing something she'd regret dearly.

Like accidentally harm someone she hadn't intended.

Which was why he was going to do his damn best to make sure that didn't happen.

Kyo was dealing with enough misplaced guilt already, fuck if he let anyone heap more on her.

“Thank you,” Kou said, giving Katsurou a short nod and then departed for his next appointment.

Which would be a bit trickier.

He didn't know Jiraiya other than by reputation, and from what he'd been able to tell, the man kept a more irregular schedule than Katsurou, presently.

As shinobi tended to do, whether they were aware of it or not.

He'd been married to a top-notch assassin for about ten years of his life, though, so tracking down
Jiraiya shouldn't be too difficult.

He'd always been able to find Isshun, even if it had taken him hours when they first started dating, and he was much better at it now. He'd never be a tracker on Yuuta's level, but his friend had given him enough pointers for him to be decent.

Heading back out into Konoha, Kou eventually ferreted out where his target was currently spending his time.

Barely glancing up at the sign of the bar, Kou stalked inside, scanning the crowd.

A handful of adventurous civilians milling about, drinking and tangling with the darker side of their fellow citizens, Kou focused instead on the actual shinobi in the lively space.

Making his way to the other side of the room, Kou came to a stop in front of one of the occupied tables, taking in the three occupants with a neutral look.

The newly christened Legendary Sannin all turned to face him.

“What?” Senju Tsunade questioned gruffly, downing her cup of sake and giving him a mildly annoyed look, no doubt for interrupting their time off. A rare commodity these days.

Kou wasn't particular sympathetic; he'd heard about the woman scouring the village and could connect two and two, not to mention Katsurou briefing him on the situation. Kyo had been a wreck, and rumours abounded in the shinobi ranks, if you knew how to listen.

Focusing his gaze on Jiraiya, Kou disregarded the other two, ignoring how foolish that might be.

“Kyo isn't going to turn up for team practise tomorrow and the day after,” he informed the man easily, keeping his voice neutral and largely lacking any inflection.

Jiraiya blinked, slowly lowering his sake cup. “What?” He returned confusedly.

Kou eyed him a long second, ignoring the abrupt interest from the busty blonde. He knew he was supposed to be a monster on the front lines, but right now, it was hard to see why the Hokage had entrusted his and Isshun's daughter to this man.

“Kyo will be otherwise occupied tomorrow and the day after, so she's not going to be attending team practise,” Kou repeated patiently. “I suggest you focus on drilling the Genin while she's away, rather than take any missions,” he added dryly. “But that's entirely up to you.”

“And who the hell are you?” The Senju princess demanded with a dark scowl, eyeing him like she wanted to punt him through a wall.

Kou resisted the urge to smile tightly at her; he might not be a hot-shot like these people, but he'd like to think he'd be something of a challenge to beat, at least one on one.

“Her father,” he shot back flatly.

The woman blinked at that, most of her irritation bleeding away at the revelation.

“Want a drink?” She offered next, instead of saying anything else and dipping her empty sake cup at the bottle standing in the middle of the table in invitation.

“No,” Kou drawled, one eyebrow ticking up a fraction.
He eyed Jiraiya a moment, to see if he had anything to ask or add, flicked a glance at the pale snake summoner sitting beside him, and then turned to leave.

“Your kid...” Jiraiya said slowly, halting Kou's movements, and he slanted a look at the man over his shoulder. “She's hard to read,” he muttered, though it looked like that wasn't what he had wanted to say.

“She's been learning under a stone cold Yamanaka for three years,” Kou returned shortly, impatient to get this done with and return home to his family. “You'll only see what she's really feeling when she wants you to.”

Which said a lot, because he wasn't sure Kyo was fully aware of that. And the fact that she rarely bothered to censor herself didn't make it immediately obvious, either.

The silence turned somewhat awkward, loaded with unvoiced questions and whatever else these people thought they had a right to.

When anything else was failed to be said, Kou continued on his way back outside and home.

Kami, he missed Isshun like a limb. Like the lack of her in his life was a festering wound that was resisting every attempt to heal.

She would have been able to handle all this crap so much better. Kou just wanted to find someone to kill, to physically take out the problem, but the solution wasn't that simple.

Once again, he was forced to rely on Katsurou's assistance instead.

The next morning, Kou took over breakfast duty, leaving Kyo to help Genma get dressed and ready for the day.

Ryota, loveable ass that he was, was largely useless in a domestic setting, though he knew enough to keep his house clean and running, and make sure he didn't die of starvation.

That didn't mean Kou had any desire to inflict Ryota's cooking on his children when they absolutely didn't have to.

At the two approaching chakra signatures, he sent his teammate a look, which Ryota responded to by going to open the door without a word.

A minute later, Katsurou strolled into the kitchen with another blond by his side.

Kou nodded a greeting and then mentioned at the table. “Eaten yet?” He asked idly, as if the seriousness of the situation wasn't a constant, crushing weight on his mind.

“We have, thank you,” Yamanaka Inoki replied evenly, eyes scanning the apartment and the people in it in a casual manner that no doubt took in everything of note.

Kou shrugged and tipped his head at the table anyway, indicating for them to take a seat.

Judging by the sound of things, Kyo was finishing up with Genma in the bathroom and would no doubt join them in the kitchen in just a few minutes.

Kou wrapped up his cooking and served up the simple dishes on the table and then leaned back against the counter, arms crossing comfortably over his chest.
Ryota strolled over and claimed a chair for himself, looking expectantly in the direction of the bathroom.

Katsurou let out a small breath that might have been supposed to be a sigh, but didn't say anything. He merely leaned back in his seat and adopted a relaxed posture.

Kyo had always taken her cues from body-language before anything else.

The bathroom door opened and Genma's drowsy chatter became more audible, but Kou focused instead on the silent footsteps of his daughter's, bringing both his children closer.

A second later, Kyo walked into the doorway and froze when she saw the unexpected additions. Her blue eyes flicked from Ryota to Kou, to Katsurou and then landed on the stranger beside him.

Kou watched his daughter study the man for a long second, before she turned her attention back on him, looking like she was feeling betrayed.

"Take a seat, Kyo," he said softly, thanking his luck that Kyo had never showed any inclination to run away when faced with things she didn't like. That would have been a pain to deal with, because his daughter was still small enough she could wiggle into places even Isshun would have had problems with.

Face entirely blank, Kyo ignored his words and glanced at Katsurou instead.

Kou wondered if she was aware of the way she'd pushed Genma behind her, the three year old clutching at her trousers with wide eyes, falling mute at the tense atmosphere in the kitchen.

"I'm taking care of myself; I'm eating properly, I'm sleeping and going to training," Kyo said, fingers twitching and flexing at her sides in a way that, to those who knew her, was a major tip-off that she was anything but relaxed and at ease.

It certainly made Ryota watch her a bit more intently.

"You're trying to protect Genma from us, Kyo," Kou pointed out gently.

Kyo visibly startled and stared down at her little brother, who was standing uncertainly behind her, looking like he didn't know what was going on, or if it would be alright to cry.

Kyo took a deep breath, carefully disentangled Genma's fingers from her clothes, and then led the boy to the table, where she helped him into his seat.

After a tense pause, she took the seat beside him, posture stiff and reluctant.

Kou let out a silent breath of relief, and slowly moved to settle into the last available chair.

"You can eat while we talk," Kou said, though he doubted Kyo would actually do so.

Kyo nodded and then ignored that suggestion, though she dutifully helped serve Genma his breakfast, drawing a small smile from Kou, despite the situation.

"What's this about?" She asked flatly a moment later, when Genma was semi-busy eating, though he was still peering suspiciously at Katsuou and his fellow Yamanaka every now and then.

"You're getting a psych evaluation," Katsuou said with a casual shrug, at a brief glance looking relatively content.
Kyo frowned at him. “You can do it,” she said, not so much as glancing at the other blond.

Katsurou smiled humourlessly. “Sorry to say, I'm part of the problem this time,” he said, rolling his shoulders and looking like he had reconciled himself with that fact a long time ago.

Kyo's frown deepened, and she looked like she was about to object vehemently with that assessment when Yamanaka Inoki spoke up for the first time.

“It is always better to bring in an objective third party in instances like these,” he said calmly, not looking so much as ruffled at the positively arctic look that earned him from the girl. “Someone who wasn't there and can give an honest assessment of the situation that transpired, as well as help you work through it.”

“I already gave my report, the same night I came back to the village,” Kyo pressed out stiffly.

“And I've read it.” Inoki nodded calmly.

Kou glanced at Katsurou, who didn't look particularly happy where he sat, though it wasn't directed at either his Clan Head or his student. More the situation in general, then.

“Whenver I receive patients this young, I like to begin by viewing the incident via Mind-Walk,” Inoki continued evenly into the growing silence.

A brief but intense flash of panic flickered through Kyo's eyes and she turned abruptly to Katsurou.

“Why can't you do it?” She demanded, voice an octave higher than it usually was.

“I already have nightmares,” Katsurou countered without so much as a pause, and the easy admittance of weakness took both Kou and Ryota by surprise. “I have no desire what so ever to add another dimension to them,” he said firmly.

Kyo looked betrayed.

“We can talk about it,” she gritted out, turning back to Inoki, though it looked like that offer had only been put forth with great reluctance and something like acute desperation.

It was threatening to break Kou's heart.

“That hasn't worked so far,” Inoki returned with calmly composed poise.

“I'm functioning,” Kyo hissed abruptly. “I go on missions and I haven't endangered any of my teammates!”

“But the same cannot be said for yourself,” Inoki countered without missing a beat.

Kyo looked incensed. “That was a calculated risk! I figured I had about an 80% chance of escaping without issues, and anyone else would have died!” She took a deep breath to compose herself. “Even Wolf-taichou acknowledged that.”

Inoki tilted his head as he considered Kou's daughter, and the silence was thankfully enough for Kou to take a moment to calm himself.

What his daughter did with ANBU wasn't something he'd really wanted to contemplate, and the fact she'd landed herself in the hospital a few times already was enough nightmare-fuel to last him a lifetime.
“This isn't a negotiable situation, Kyo,” Katsurou said neutrally into the tense stand-off, breaking the silent staring contest between Kou's nine year old daughter and the Yamanaka Clan Head.

Kyo visibly struggled with that for a long moment, before she crossed her arms over her chest and turned her face away, staring mulishly at the wall.

“Fine,” she huffed unhappily.

Inoki nodded and rose to his feet. He grabbed his chair and moved it around the table until he could place it in front of Kyo, giving himself easy access to the girl.

“Do you know how the Mind-Walk technique works?” He asked professionally.

“Yes,” Kyo returned, still not looking at anyone, though she had paled at the question.

Inoki nodded, retaking his seat. “This will not hurt, but you might feel disoriented for a while, before things settle,” he warned.

“I don't suppose you can watch it without me?” Kyo muttered, sounding like she already knew the answer.

“That would be counter-productive, I'm afraid,” Inoki replied, a tad apologetic even as he sent Katsurou a look.

Something Katsurou didn't visibly react to in the slightest.

Kou reached over to pluck Genma from his chair and settled his son in his lap, watching as Kyo spent a moment attempting to calm herself down.

In the end, she seemed to acknowledge that that wasn't currently possible, and instead turned fully to the Yamanaka Clan Head, posture stiff and screaming out her reluctance for everyone present to see.

“Let's get this over with,” she declared tersely.

Inoki nodded sedately and slowly moved his hand to rest against her forehead. His other hand raised in a ram seal in front of his sternum to help focus his chakra.

The two ceased moving when the jutsu activated, with the exception of the steady rhythm of their breathing.

“What're they doing?” Genma asked in a hushed voice, staring avidly at his big sister, even as he tugged insistently at Kou's shirt.

“Your nee-san hasn't been feeling very well in a while, so they're trying to fix it,” Kou returned with a glance down at the boy.

“No, Nee-san doesn't like it,” Genma returned after a thoughtful pause.

“And sometimes we have to do things we don't like to get better again,” he said, squeezing his toddler gently in his arms.

Genma frowned at that and turned back to stare intently at his big sister.

Kou glanced at Katsurou, who was also staring intently at the duo, but for slightly different reasons than Kou's three year old son, if he wasn't mistaken.
"How much do you remember of that mission?"

The words were out of Kou's mouth before he could stop them, and he irritably bit down on the desire to swear.

Katsurou shot him a sharp glance, before focusing back on his student. “Enough to know exactly why she doesn't want to live it all again,” he answered curtly.

It reminded Kou that this man had also lost not only two team-members, but two students. Two children that had been supposed to be his responsibility.

Ryota cursed quietly under his breath, sliding down more firmly in his chair and looking supremely unhappy and agitated.

He'd been keeping entirely still and silent so far, keeping any attention or focus off himself.

Every second that ticked passed felt like it stretched out until it spanned the time of a minute.

Kou waited patiently for the Yamanaka to finish with the Mind-Walk, so that they could all deal with the fall-out.

It was a special kind of agony, he decided, watching your child suffer like this.

Kyo was strong, though; the best of him and Isshun combined into one tough little girl who loved quietly but fiercely and had never been shy about showing it.

Who had never cared about what anyone else might say about how tactile she was. Who had always insisted on hugs and physical contact, even with the paranoid killers that made up her family.

She'd worn Ryota down until the point he was now a toddler's favourite person, not so much as blinking when Genma clung to him like a well-loved teddy-bear.

“I should've asked Kisaki to come,” Kou muttered into the heavy silence, the thought occurring to him out of the blue.

Katsurou shook his head. “It's probably for the best she's not here when they come out of it,” he returned quietly, nodding at the still-frozen duo. “Ask her tomorrow,” he suggested instead.

Kou blinked but acknowledged the words with a sigh.

Half an hour passed before there was so much as an indication the Mind-Walk was coming to an end.

And then Kyo took a deep, tremulous breath, a shudder visibly moving through her body.

Inoki opened his eyes first and slowly removed his hand from Kyo's head, a thoughtful, intensely considering look on his face.

He glanced at Katsurou, before focusing back on the trembling girl in front of him, who's breath was coming in quick, short, panicked bursts.

Kyo's gaze was fixed on the air in front of her, seeing things that weren't there and her hands were shaking so hard Kou doubted she'd be able to hold so much as a kunai right now.

Her eyes were dry, but that didn't mean anything when she looked like she was a hair away from shaking apart and coming undone.
“That doesn't look good,” Ryota muttered quietly, evidently sharing Kou's thoughts.

Kyo gasped for breath like she was drowning, and her skin looked both pale and clammy.

“Should we have done this at the hospital?” Kou couldn't help but ask, gaze fixed on his daughter and tightening his hold on Genma, who was evidently distressed by his sister's current state.

And yeah, some might say he ought to have made sure Genma wasn't present for this, but the boy was part of this family and deserved to spend every second with them that was possible, even if those seconds were less than happy.

This was part of their life, too.

Part of who they were.

“Give her a moment,” Inoki said, still looking to be partly lost in thought, and there was a small part of Kou that wanted to know what he had seen.

The rest of him knew very well that he most likely wouldn't handle it well at all to have his daughter in lethal danger right in front of him, even if it was no more than a memory.

“What's the verdict, doc?” Ryota asked with sharp, sarcastic amusement in the depths of his voice.

Inoki slanted a brief look at Ryota, before he turned back to staring at Kyo. “Her promotion was well-deserved.”

“Don't say that to her,” Kou advised quietly, knowing full well what Kyo thought of it.

There had been no celebration of that promotion; no one had even suggested it.

Shaking his head, Kou focused back on Kyo, who looked slightly more aware now.

Kyo was still shaking like a leaf in a storm but her eyes focused on things that were actually present now, which was clear improvement.

Getting her limbs in something of a working order, she slid off her chair, stumbling slightly when her feet hit the floor, and then crept the small distance to Katsurou, like she thought if she made any hasty movements, someone would stop her.

Lifting a shaking hand to Katsurou's throat, Kyo pressed two fingers to his skin, clearly looking for a pulse point.

Kou watched his daughter's pale, tense face.

Katsurou didn't so much as twitch when Kyo touched his throat, but might have actually tilted his head a slight fraction instead, to make it easier for her to find the steady, calm beat of his pulse.

Without removing her fingers from just beneath his jaw, Kyo slowly seated herself in her sensei's lap, trying to deepen her breathing. With little success.

Kou watched Kyo slump against Katsuou's chest, looking utterly spent and on the edge of exhaustion.

The kind of session she'd just gone through wasn't exactly a walk in the park; everyone in the room - with the exception of Genma- knew it. Had been through it themselves, at various points of their lives.
Katsurou raised one hand to Kyo’s head, pressing it to his shoulder with gentle care and covering her eyes with his palm.

What was left visible of her face screwed up with unspeakable grief.

“Finally,” Kou breathed on an exhalation, feeling the first stirrings of relief when Kyo began to cry.

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Chapter 44

Chapter Summary

Doing Team missions again

Kyo never wanted to do that again.

Ever.

It hurt so much it felt like her chest had been torn open and she couldn't breathe. Like every beat of her heart pumped another fistful of blood out of the gaping wound threatening to bleed her dry.

Pressing her fingers more firmly against Katsurou-sensei's throat to make unequivocally sure of the fact he was alive and well, heart beating strongly in his chest.

Sensei's rough palm pressed firmly against her left temple and eye, holding her securely against his shoulder as she gasped out another shuddering sob.

Taku was gone.

Maki was gone.

They'd been taken away, leaving the rest of them behind.

Or was that supposed to be that Kyo had left them behind?

She didn't know, and she wasn't sure she wanted to find out, either. Because that might possibly hurt more than it was doing right now, and Kyo wasn't sure she could take it.

Feeling another shudder shake her slight frame, she tried to burrow closer to sensei's steady warmth, taking comfort from every breath expanding his ribcage, every beat of his heart.

“You are not at fault for their deaths,” sensei murmured quietly against her hair. “Rather, it's thanks to you they got to come home and be put to rest with their families.”

Kyo whined low in her throat, unable to vocalize her grief in any other way.

Sensei sighed softly and brought his other arm up around her back, hugging her closer to himself.

If she hadn't been so distraught, she might have smiled.

Having lost all sense of time around the moment Inoichi's dad had pulled her into the Mind-Walk, Kyo had absolutely no idea how long they sat like that. She just knew that by the time she finally began to get herself back under control, her head was pounding, her eyes were swollen and sore and he throat felt parched.

Like she'd lost so much fluids through crying she was mildly dehydrated.

Sensei slowly lowered his hand from her eyes, patting her absently on the arm but didn't make any move to get her off his lap.
Kyo was just trying to control her breathing, feeling almost faint now that she'd cried herself out.

Eyes still closed, she drifted on the edge of sleep for a few, blissful moments.

She must have fallen fully asleep, because the next she knew, she was waking up in her dad's bed. Peering around confusedly, Kyo slowly pushed herself into a seat, feeling a bit fuzzy.

Her head was pulsing uncomfortably.

When she staggered out into the living room, it was to the sight of Katsurou-sensei stretched out on the couch, conversing quietly with Inoichi's dad.

Urgh, he was still here.

Scanning the apartment quickly ascertained that tou-san, Ryota and Genma were all missing, which most likely meant the two men had taken her little brother somewhere to give the rest of them a measure of privacy.

For a brief moment, Kyo considered just turning around and going back to bed, because she did not want to continue the... therapy session, with Inoichi's dad.

She was rational enough to realise she had to, though.

It was very much needed, she knew it. But that didn't make it any easier, and she hadn't ever been very good at talking about her own emotions. Or emotions in general.

Definitely not in her last life, and it seemed like the trend was very much continued here.

Damn it.

With a quiet, resigned sigh, Kyo trudged passed the two men, ignoring them for now, and continued into the kitchen for a glass of water or ten. And something to eat, she mentally added when she spotted the still-made breakfast table.

She was starving.

Downing two glasses of water and then scarfing down the breakfast tou-san had made that same morning, Kyo took the time to do the dishes afterwards.

Mostly to drag out the inevitable, but she felt like she needed just a few minutes more.

To prepare.

After she'd dried everything and put it away, there wasn't really any excuse for her to avoid the two Yamanaka any longer.

Kyo took a deep breath, dried her hands and turned to the living room to face the music.

Spending two days in the company of two very insistent ninja therapists -one more than the other- was exhausting on so many levels Kyo didn't even know how to count them.

She felt wrung out and a little bit like someone had scooped the brain out from her head and filled her cranium with wet cotton instead.
Kyo could reluctantly admit that... she felt a bit better.

A little.

Going back to normal team training was almost a relief, though Inoki had been very firm with the orders that she was to check in for several more sessions whenever it was possible.

Trudging onto Jiraiya's preferred training ground, Kyo walked over to her favoured spot under one of the trees and let herself flop down on her back in the grass.

Staring idly up at the canopy of the tree, she waited for the rest of her new team, contemplating what she'd *feel* when she saw them.

Inoki had insisted.

Before that could happen, though, a large white pile of fur collapsed on top of her, knocking the breath from her lungs and dragging a small, breathless laugh from her abused chest.

“Kisaki,” Kyo groaned with what little air remained in her lungs. “You're crushing me!” She objected, trying to push the ninenk off of her. To no avail.

The dog was probably twice her weight, at the very *least*, so Kyo didn't have much of a chance without chakra, and she didn't particularly feel like exerting the effort.

“You smell sad,” Kisaki said by way of greeting, snuffling at her face with a wet, cold nose, giving it a few delicate licks for good measure.


Kisaki peered mournfully at her with her pale yellow eyes, looking pretty sad herself.

Kyo huffed another small laugh when Kisaki laid down her head on her shoulder and settled down for a nap, still lying mostly on top of her.

Were she even visible like this?

Kyo had no idea, and couldn't find it in herself to care all that much.

“Wanna be introduced to the team this time?” Kyo asked some time later, feeling warm and content and perfectly safe, trapped under her friend as she was.

Kisaki gave a small huff, but after a brief pause, added an affirmative noise.

“You're a good friend,” Kyo mumbled back, scratching absently at Kisaki's sides.

“Um,” a familiar voice said uncertainly a small distance away from them ten minutes later. “Kyo?”

“Hey, Minato,” Kyo greeted, wiggling one foot in lieu of a wave, which was the only part of her body that wasn't entirely trapped by the dog napping on her.

“Do you... need any help?” The blond asked, sounding both confused and hesitant.

“No.” Kyo smiled against Kisaki's fur, closing her eyes and turning her face more firmly into the side of Kisaki's throat and cheek. “Kisaki's just feeling a bit possessive right now,” she added, because the kid could probably do with a bit of an explanation.
“Mine,” Kisaki agreed on a sigh, shifting minutely to peer sleepily at Minato.

From the sound of things, Kyo could surmise Minato took a seat a respectful distance away, quite obviously leery of coming too close.

Kyo closed her eyes and contentedly waited for Jiraiya and Naoki to show up.

When they eventually did, about five minutes later, Kyo poked Kisaki in the ribs until she deigned to move with an unhappy huff and quiet grumbling.

The dog shifted off of her until she lay on the ground beside her, and Kyo finally sat up and looked around.

All three males in the clearing were staring at her.

Or, in Jiraiya's case, more at Kisaki than at Kyo.

“So, uh,” Minato began hesitantly, an intensely curious look in his blue eyes as he stared at first Kyo, then glanced at the monstrously large dog sprawled out beside her.

“This is Kisaki,” Kyo introduced, glancing down at the ninken. “Kisaki, this is Jiraiya, my new Jounin sensei, Akimichi Naoki and Namikaze Minato.”

Kisaki hummed, raising her head to look them all over with imperial dignity, crossing one front paw over the other, ears flicking indecisively.

“Kyo is mine,” Kisaki said firmly into the follow silence, ears folding back ever so slightly for a second, before she flopped over on her side again, as if she hadn't just sort-of threatened three Konoha shinobi.

Kyo sighed, though a small, helpless smile played around her lips.

“Um,” Naoki said, blinking a bit confusedly. “Isn't that... an Inuzuka ninken?” He asked slowly, as if he was trying to puzzle the entire situation out in his head.

“Yes,” Kyo said, climbing to her feet and grimacing at how stiff she was. Not so strange, she supposed, having spent the last half hour or so acting as a doggy bed. “She is.”

“Are you feeling better?” Minato asked next, carefully looking Kyo over. “Sensei said you were sick,” he explained at the questioning look Kyo slanted at him.

Kyo snorted. “I suppose you could say that,” she mused wryly, sending Jiraiya a look.

The man merely blinked back, as if he didn't feel the slightest stirring of guilt at the lie.

Though, perhaps he wasn't entirely wrong, Kyo mused silently to herself, considering the issue more objectively.

How else should he explain the situation to a pair of painfully green Genin.

“Well!” Jiraiya exclaimed loudly, making both Kyo and Kisaki twitch. “We're running some extensive drills today and tomorrow, and then we have our first mission out of the village,” he declared, not looking entirely happy about it. “I can't push it off any longer, and compared to the other teams, we're slightly behind,” he shrugged, as if he didn't particularly care about that.

Not that Kyo couldn't understand the sentiment.
Minato and Naoki both looked unashamedly excited by the prospect.

Kyo exchanged a heavy look with Kisaki, who had shifted around to watch them all with sharp, attentive eyes.

“What did you have in mind?” Kyo asked slowly, meandering over to the rest of her... team.

Jiraiya gave her a wide, welcoming grin and hunched down to lay out the battle plan to all three of them, ridiculously excited, despite what else lay ahead of them.

Kisaki kept close to Kyo for the next three days, going so far as to come home with her and sleeping in the bed next to her.

It got a bit cramped, especially when Genma added himself to the mix in the middle of the night, but she couldn't find it in herself to mind in the slightest.

At least none of them got cold.

Team Seven ran their first out-of-Village mission, with minimal fuss; thankfully.

Kyo was silently reeling throughout the whole thing, because it was at the same time far too similar to the missions she ran with Team Katsurou, and not at all the same.

Leaving Konoha, Kyo spent the first two hours continuously glancing back at Jiraiya, and it wasn't until the man slanted her with an obviously questioning look that she realised she was doing it, and why.

She was waiting for him to stop to brief them quickly and hand over the scrolls to her.

Like Katsurou had always done, since the very start.

Instead of saying as much, Kyo merely shook her head discreetly and focused on keeping her eyes and ears trained on their surroundings from there on.

Taking point felt both better and worse than she'd expected.

But it worked.

Another difference from Team Katsurou's short career was that they ran to the south-eastern border, almost right up to the sea that divided Konoha and Kiri; something she'd never done with her old team, which had focused far more on the western front.

Minato and Naoki's wide-eyed fascination both with the run there and the border station itself was part amusing and part... unsettling.

Kyo didn't know what to do with herself in the face of something like that.

She felt apart from the two Genin in a way she'd never experienced before. In either life.

To her, this was routine, normal.

It was more normal than the Academy, than running inter-Village D-ranks or baby-sitting missions.

“How can you not be tired?” Naoki huffed, exhausted and out of breath the moment they'd been let
into the border station, staring at her with something that was part admiration and part envy.

Kyo shrugged self-consciously. “I’m used to it at this point,” she muttered, trying not to think about how much more demanding ANBU was.

The pace was entirely different.

“You two need to work on your stamina.” Jiraiya concluded, eyeing Minato and Naoki with a considering air, arms crossed over his chest.

“Yes, sensei,” Minato sighed, sending Kyo one last glance, taking in her unruffled appearance.

Kyo shifted uncomfortably, not feeling particularly out of breath. Yeah, she was tired, but she wasn’t wiped out like Naoki looked.

Minato appeared to have fared slightly better, but he was clearly out of breath and quite exhausted as well.

Kyo looked questioningly at Jiraiya, who shrugged back.

“Let’s grab something to eat and then bunk down for the night,” he decided.

He could always talk to the one in charge of this station while the boys slept, and Kyo figured she could just as well catch up on some sleep herself.

Who knew how tomorrow would look.

-x-x-x-
Chapter 45

Chapter Summary

First kills for the boys, and Kyo takes up a few old habits again

The calm two and a half months they'd gotten at the start of their team life did not set the tone for the rest of their professional life.

Evidently, they'd been given some consideration, partly because of whatever injuries Jiraiya had suffered on the front lines, as well as for Kyo's... less than stellar mental state.

Probably.

The sessions with Inoki progressed nicely -according to the man himself- and Kyo was just looking forward to when she no longer had to seek the man out whenever she was in the village for yet another check-up.

Genma was severely unhappy with the turn of events, with her leaving more regularly again, and in an attempt to cheer him up, Kyo went through the effort of baking him a cake, doing her best to dredge up the memories of how.

Despite a lack of experience, in this body, it turned out alright. Definitely edible, and at the very least Genma had enjoyed it.

Team Seven were thrown head-first into the war-effort.

Minato and Naoki were forced to scramble to catch up, scrounging up whatever stamina-training they could manage during precious few days home.

It felt very much like a sink or swim situation, Kyo mused the few times she thought about it.

She wasn't sure if she should count herself lucky or unlucky to have gotten a head-start.

Kyo snorted bitterly at her own thoughts.

Better to have loved and lost than to not have loved at all, huh.

Well, she could certainly agree with those words, but that didn't mean it wasn't a shitty situation all around, and was bound to get worse before it got anywhere resembling better.

The war was still raging on, all around them.

Currently, they were quickly approaching the border to the Land of Hot Water, and Kyo was hoping they wouldn't run into any Kumo scouts sniffing around on the wrong side of the border.

Team Seven hadn't actually seen much in the way of real combat yet. The worst they'd encountered had been the aftermath of a skirmish up on the border to Taki.

It made Kyo uneasy.
It felt like she had to prepare herself for something even worse, and the two boys hadn't even had their first kills yet. Which was all kinds of fucked up.

Glancing around the forest, Kyo looked for any sign of the border station, even though she knew the bunkers were nigh on impossible to find if you didn't know exactly where they were, and she hadn't ever been to this particular one before.

About an hour later, they came close enough Kyo picked up on a familiar chakra signature and sped up, a happy grin pulling on her lips, ever so slightly.

“Kyo,” Jiraiya warned half-heartedly, evidently having sensed the same thing she had.

Instead of answering, she flared her chakra discretely, in a pattern she'd been taught in ANBU, to signal any Konoha sensor that she was a comrade, and jumped from the tree to land on her dad's sturdy, familiar back.

Kou huffed, but barely stumbled under her weight, having clearly anticipated the impact.

“Hey, kitten,” he greeted, as if this happened all the time.

Ryota snorted amusedly where he stood an arm away, and reached out to ruffle her hair.

“I didn't know you were out this way,” Kyo said, clinging even tighter to her dad, both arms and legs wrapped around him in a full-body hug.

Kou shrugged, turning to eye the rest of her team, who had landed on the ground a bit to the left of where he and Ryota were standing.

“I take it that limpet belongs to you, Shiranui?” One of Kou and Ryota's current team-members said dryly, eyeing Kyo with clear amusement.

Kou huffed a quiet laugh, but nodded. “This is Kyo. My daughter,” he added, because people still assumed she was a boy unless told otherwise.

The man blinked, adjusted his assessment, but didn't comment.

Jiraiya sighed, looking mildly long-suffering for a brief moment. Possibly because Kyo still wasn't really acting like he was truly her sensei, but... she was trying to adjust, and even he could acknowledge that.

“You're Kyo's father?” Minato inquired politely, looking over her tou-san interestedly.

Kou nodded. “And you'd be Minato, I assume,” he returned calmly.

The hair was a dead giveaway.

Jiraiya sighed, looking mildly long-suffering for a brief moment. Possibly because Kyo still wasn't really acting like he was truly her sensei, but... she was trying to adjust, and even he could acknowledge that.

“You're Kyo's father?” Minato inquired politely, looking over her tou-san interestedly.

Kou nodded. “And you'd be Minato, I assume,” he returned calmly.

The hair was a dead giveaway.

Minato blinked, glanced at Kyo and then nodded, a polite smile on his lips. He looked faintly pleased, if surprised to find she'd talked about him.

“You guys headed for the border station?” Jiraiya asked into the brief silence afterwards, looking the whole team over.

“Heading back in after a sweep,” Ryota confirmed with a grunt.

Kyo snickered into Kou's shoulder. “Why's Ryota in such a bad mood?” She asked tou-san, making sure to keep her voice down.
Kou rolled his shoulders, in a way she knew meant his scar was bothering him, and turned more towards the fourth guy on their team. “Takahara’s been a bit of a strain on his patience,” he said, not bothering to keep his voice down. “We're meeting up with another team before we're heading back to grounds. You coming with us, or splitting off?” He continued, turning to stare at Jiraiya.

He still hadn't made any attempt to remove Kyo from his person.

Jiraiya glanced over his two Genin with a considering look. “We might just as well stay in one group.” He shrugged.

Strength in numbers and all that, Kyo assumed.

Because Minato and Naoki were still green. Untested.

“So does that mean you're hitching a ride with your old man, or will you dazzle us with your speed, little kitten?” Ryota wondered, smirking at her when Kyo stuck her tongue out at the surly Uchiha.

“You shouldn't try to pick fights with children, Ryota,” Kyo told him loftily. “It makes you look like an even bigger arrogant prick than you are.”

The man who had asked about her earlier choked out a startled laugh. “Oh, I want to make a trade,” he snickered quietly. “You can take Takahara, Jiraiya, and we'll keep the pipsqueak.”

“Oi,” Takahara objected mildly, though he looked like he was teetering on the edge of exhaustion-induced collapse.

“Well, we should get going,” Kou said after another minute's rest, mostly for the Genin's benefit.

Kyo obligingly let go of her dad to land on her own two feet behind him. She couldn't help slipping her arms around his middle for a quick squeeze before she returned to her team formation. She may have given Ryota a quick hug, too.

Much to tou-san and Ryota's teammate's continued amusement.

Ryota took point, and led them on towards the border station, and it didn't take more than five minutes for them to meet up with the other team.

Which managed to look even more haggard than tou-san's.

Kyo looked them over and wondered if they'd seen action recently.

“Think they fought any Kumo shinobi?” Minato asked softly when they landed on the forest floor about fifteen minutes later.

Kyo shook her head. “There’d be more blood,” she pointed out, just as quietly. “But they might have chased an enemy scouting team out of our territory recently,” she mused, eyeing them speculatively.

Naoki paled, instinctively drawing closer as he looked around, clearly nervous. “But no one's going to be able to attack us here, right?” He asked.

Kyo glanced at him and then exchanged a look with Jiraiya, who grimaced unhappily.

“Nowhere is really safe, Naoki. Not even Konoha is entirely secure,” he said tiredly. “All we can do is stay on our guard.”

“Kyo,” tou-san called over, keeping his voice at a pitch that wouldn't carry, but just loud enough to
catch her attention. “You have any sedatives on you?”

“Of course.” Kyo blinked, and then processed his question properly. “Why?”

“We've got a fresh Chuunin that needs to sleep before he fries his brain,” Ryota grunted irritably, jerking his thumb at a pasty-looking teenager, who truly looked like he needed to sleep. Asap.

“Idiot's too keyed up to wind down, even off-shift.”

“Oh.” Kyo peered at the guy. “Sure, okay. We should wait until we get inside, or someone's gonna have to carry him.”

Ryota placed a hand on her head to gently ruffle her brown tresses again, gracing her with a small, quick smile of thanks.

And then proceeded to lead them all into the hidden bunker.

Once they were in the corridor inside, Kou corralled the teenager over to Kyo, who eyed him sceptically.

“So how long do you want him to sleep?” She asked, not bothering to ask the guy himself, because he frankly didn't look like he could be trusted with much of anything right now.

Not even himself.

“Let's go for a solid ten hours,” Ryota decided briskly. “He's more of a burden than a help right now,” he huffed, scowling.

Kyo rolled her eyes, but slipped a needle from one of her pouches, holding out her hand for the teenager's arm.

He blinked blankly at her a moment, before sluggishly complying.

“Never been stationed by the border before?” She asked him curiously.

“...no,” he replied after a beat of silence, blinking a couple of times.

Kyo patted his hand. “You'll just feel a slight prick, and then you'll sleep for a while,” she assured him.

Without waiting for a response, Kyo slipped her needle through the skin of his upper arm, sliding about half the needle into the muscle beneath, and then withdrew it again, tucking it away.

“You'll be feeling a bit dizzy, but that's nothing to worry about.”

“Already feelin' dizzy,” the young man grunted, though he swayed ever so slightly on his feet as he said it, a frown pulling on his dark brows.

“Didn't know your kid was an aspiring medic,” one of the other shinobi commented blandly, watching the swaying teenager dispassionately as he ran a hand over his ninken's head. “Need to add in the report for the Commander to send actually combat capable people out here rather than the wet-behind-the-ears pups,” the Inuzuka mused with a sigh.

“She's not,” Kou returned evenly, amusement lighting his brown eyes. It was nicer to focus on that, than point out that options other than 'wet-behind-the-ears pups' were starting to grow thin on the ground.
The man blinked and glanced down at Kyo, who grinned back. “Poison specialist,” she said lightly. Which attracted a bit of attention.

After that, Team Seven and Kou's team went their separate ways, both called away to take care of their separate duties.

Kyo saw one of the other shinobi haul the drugged Chuunin away to dump him in a bunk, where he’d be able to sleep off the sedative and hopefully be more alert once he woke up.

“So,” Minato said as they walked towards the command room, located deep in the centre of the bunker. “What other kinds of things do you have on those needles?” He asked interestingly.

Kyo smiled. “Oh, all kinds of things!” She chirped, eagerly launching into a quick, brief listing of the different poisons she carried on her person.

Naoki looked mildly nauseous at the end of it, while Jiraiya looked contemplative.

Minato simply looked fascinated, and Kyo mused that perhaps she'd be able to make friends with the two boys despite everything.

Jiraiya took a mission to get rid of a bandit problem in a village relatively close to Konoha next. Mostly to get the first kill for Minato and Naoki over with. Preferably in a situation not involving enemy shinobi.

Kyo wondered why he hadn't done so before now, but it could just as well be that it hadn't been possible.

The pressure on the shinobi forces was rather heavy at this point, and Kyo wondered if the war wouldn't end soon.

It felt like something had to happen, because this couldn't go on. It wasn't sustainable.

“Kyo,” Jiraiya said, drawing her attention before they could reach the bandits’ lair. “Try and keep an eye on the boys, yeah?” He asked, a small smile lighting his face, gaze flicking over to the nervous duo.

“Of course,” Kyo replied, blinking a bit, because why did Jiraiya think he'd have to ask? “Do you want me to keep back, or-?”

Jiraiya shook his head. “Not sure how many of them there are, just,” he glanced at Minato and Naoki again, “keep in mind why we took this mission.”

Kyo nodded.

Naoki looked like he might throw up, and they hadn't even gotten to the killing part yet.

Kyo felt strangely indifferent. Not that... not that killing was something she enjoyed, far from it! But, she could acknowledge that she’d been thoroughly desensitised by now.

It was... business like usual.

Well, Kyo mused wryly, she was an assassin; it was literally her job.
“You boys ready for this?” Jiraiya inquired kindly to the other two, and Kyo pulled herself back to the present.

Right. This was a team thing. She was part of this team.

“I don't know, sensei,” Naoki muttered, avoiding eye-contact but looking determined enough. He'd been trained for this since early childhood like all other clan kids.

Minato looked slightly pale, but relatively calm, blue eyes sharp and focused. “As ready as we'll ever be, I think,” the boy murmured quietly.

Jiraiya nodded, and rose out of the crouch he'd adopted to talk to them. “We're moving, and know that I'll keep an eye on you,” he assured them with a grin that bordered on cocky.

Then again, Kyo doubted bandits would be anything even resembling a challenge to Jiraiya. The same as it'd been for Katsurou, back then.

Kyo grabbed both boys' wrists for a moment, giving them each a squeeze and a brief smile. “We're both watching out for you,” she added her own piece, with exaggerated cheer.

Jiraiya gave her an approving nod, and that was it. Break-time was over.

The bandit camp they eventually found was rather more elaborated than the one Taku and Kisaki had tracked down when they'd been fresh Genin, with a decently sized hut making out the centre.

Most likely to house all the ill-begotten goods, if Kyo was forced to guess, because it certainly didn't look like it was stable enough anyone would want to sleep in it.

There were two fire places, one of which was currently being used to cook breakfast by a sleepy-looking, rather unwashed bandit.

A few were still stretched out in their blankets, but most were wandering around the camp, tending to chores or just stretching their legs.

Kyo wasn't really all that interested in what they were currently doing. All of them had chosen to take advantage of the unrest and difficulties by praying on people even weaker than themselves.

They should have prepared themselves for this end when they made that choice, even if they didn't know they were about to be put down like the criminals they were.

Kyo very briefly thought back on a world where they'd been able to afford to reform people like this. Where the community as a whole had expended the effort of taking care of the people who were unable to do it on their own.

Where issues like these hadn't been a problem to begin with, because everyone had been assured of at least food to eat and somewhere warm to stay, even if it wasn't anything even resembling luxury.

Exchanging a quick look with Jiraiya and receiving a firm nod, Kyo jumped from the branch she'd been perched on and darted into the camp, taking out the man crouched before the fire, cooking breakfast, by jamming a kunai into the side of his head and killing him instantly, before he could do something foolish. Like set the whole camp and the forest around them on fire in the coming panic.

Jiraiya took out another man with effortless, almost lazy ease a small distance away, having gone for the physically largest man amongst the bandits.
Which made a lot of sense, because despite whatever training they had, the rest of them were still children.

For a moment after that, there wasn’t much time for Kyo to think.

Their opponents might not be shinobi, but a lucky hit would kill you just as surely as lethal precision.

Kyo also tried to keep an eye on her two teammates, who were doing pretty well, from what she could see. Under the circumstances. As well as make sure none of the bandits tried to run away and hide.

Naoki fumbled and Kyo ran over to dispose of one of the men currently in the process of attempted homicide on the Akimichi Genin, before she went for the next one, not so much as blinking at the spray of blood she left in her wake.

And all of a sudden, it was over, just as abruptly as it always was.

With no one left to kill, Kyo wiped off her kunai, tucked it away and looked around.

No one looked to be hurt, so that was good, and Jiraiya was already approaching Naoki, who looked queasy and staggered on his feet until he collapsed on his butt. Only to scramble away from the puddle of still-warm blood he’d landed in.

Which in turn caused him to loose his fight with that queasiness, it seemed.

Kyo watched dispassionately as the boy threw up in the grass.

There was a distinct smell of burning flesh spreading throughout the clearing, which might have contributed to the situation. A glance told her that the first man she’d killed had fallen face-first into the fire he’d been tending.

Instead of continue watching -was a bit rude- Kyo turned to study her second teammate.

Minato looked even more pale than he had before they got started, and there was an arch of blood splatter across his face, over the bridge of his nose, as well as plenty of red on his clothes.

He was also shaking quite badly.

Frowning concernedly, Kyo drew closer, eyeing the blond intently.

“Minato?” She asked softly, drawing his attention onto herself, though he looked... distant.

He opened his mouth, seemingly couldn’t think of anything to say, and closed it again.

Kyo was familiar with the sensation.

Instead of saying anything, Kyo walked up to him, keeping her movements slow and steady, until she was right in front of him and could pull the older boy into a gentle embrace.

Sometimes, it was just nice to know you could still touch people without hurting them.

Hooking her chin over Minato’s shoulder, Kyo felt him tremble, but he remained otherwise motionless.

She squeezed him gently, listening to his quick, ragged breathing, coming in short, uneven gasps.
Five seconds passed and then she felt a tentative hand tangle in the back of her shirt, followed by a second one, until Minato was all but clinging to her, pressing her even closer.

His hands were shaking.

Kyo closed her eyes and wished she'd done this for Taku, back then.

Maybe he wouldn't have had to suffer quite so much from nightmares if she had.

It was useless to wonder, though, because she'd never know.

“You two okay over there?” Jiraiya's voice called calmly a while later, and when Kyo opened her eyes, he was staring curiously at them.

“Yeah,” she said, blinking a little.

Minato wasn't shaking quite so badly any more and his breathing had evened out, but the grip on her shirt was no doubt white-knuckled, if she was forced to guess.

As if he couldn't make himself let go.

“I'm always up for a hug,” she told him quietly, firming her own hold on him and settling in for however long this would take. “Hugs make everything better, even if it's just by a little bit.”

She smiled weakly, trying not to feel bitter.

Minato took a deep shuddering breath and huddled closer, as if her words had assured him that it was alright. That he had permission.

And it was; she didn't mind. At all.

“Kyo? Minato?” Naoki said some time later, probably just a few minutes, and he sounded slightly unsteady.

Kyo glanced at him. “Would you like a hug, too?” She asked curiously.

Naoki's face reddened and his gaze diverted to the side.

Kyo smiled at him. “Just a moment and I'll give you one, okay?” She almost laughed. “I think Minato needs a little bit longer.”

Minato gave a quiet snort, but he didn't let go. Or disagree.

Kyo wondered if she imagined the heat warming one of her ears, or if the boy really was blushing.

When Minato's death-grip on her shirt finally loosened, Kyo allowed him to step back. She noted with some amusement that his face indeed was red, and he couldn't quite meet her eyes, but.

Kyo shrugged.

Instead of commenting, she snuck over to Naoki and pulled him into a hug, too, ignoring the quiet squeak of surprise he couldn't quite suppress.

“Boys,” she sighed.

Kyo might not be very good at talking about the emotional crap, but this was something she was
quite good at.

Jiraiya stared at her with an utterly bemused expression on his face, until Kyo raised an eyebrow at him and flicked a pointed look over at Minato.

Who still looked quite lost.

Jiraiya huffed, as if he didn't know if he should be offended a kid was telling him what to do, but sure enough wandered over to hunker down by Minato to talk to him anyway.

Pleased that that was taken care of, Kyo snuggled into Naoki's slightly taller, more substantial form and tightened her hug.

“I'm really glad you're on our team, Kyo,” Naoki mumbled and awkwardly wrapped his arms around her back.

“It's not as bad as I was afraid it'd be,” she returned honestly.

She was starting to feel like she could actually do this again; do the team thing.

Naoki laughed unsteadily and patted her back. “That's good,” he sighed and slowly lost the tension that had made him stand ramrod straight.

There might have been a few tears, but Kyo wasn't about to bring it up.

The trip back to the village was subdued, but she didn't think either Minato or Naoki looked particularly traumatised, at least, which was something.

“How was yours?” Minato asked softly, shifting so that he was running a little closer to her, to make talking easier.

Kyo glanced away from the path of branches they were using to travel by for a moment to look at him.

She tilted her head, not having to ask him to clarify. “Also bandits, but more unexpected. Was supposed to be an escort mission, but our guy had been killed before reaching the meet-up point. I killed a guy by stabbing him in the groin,” she said blandly.

Of course, that had been the easiest point for her to reach at that age; she'd been pretty short.

Jiraiya twitched and side-eyed her with a mildly constipated look on his face.

He always made the most interesting expressions, Kyo mused.

It stood out even more than it might have, because she was used to Katsurou-sensei's poker-face from Hell.

“I ended up crying all over Katsurou-sensei's Jounin vest,” she added, because it was just as well these two boys knew she was just as susceptible to these things as they were. Or they might grow bashful about it like Taku and Maki had done.

“I... didn't think he'd be the sort of person to put up with that,” Naoki said carefully, looking like he wasn't sure if she'd take that as an insult.
Kyo smiled. “I love Katsurou,” she shrugged, “and he's not some unfeeling, frozen statue come to life, you know,” she added, because that should probably be put out there. “I've cried on him a lot since I graduated, actually,” she mused sadly.

She wasn't even embarrassed about it, because she'd had damn good reason for it. Every time.

“So,” Jiraiya began, a teasing lilt to his voice that had Kyo fixing him with a flat look before he could even get started.

“There are other kinds of love than romantic!” She snapped irritably.

“Sorry, sorry,” Jiraiya hastily apologized, waving a hand at her. “And I know that. I didn't mean any harm.”

Kyo huffed uncomfortably. She hadn't meant to almost-yell at him; she knew there wasn't really much in Jiraiya that was even close to malicious, but...

“Someone once insinuated that Katsurou-sensei and I were a bit too close,” she told him stiffly, forcing herself to look at him over her shoulder.

Jiraiya's eyes narrowed and the glint in them informed her that he'd understood what she meant perfectly fine.

“Really?” He drawled with casual interest. “Anyone I might know?”

“No idea,” Kyo returned breezily, aware that Minato and Naoki were largely confused by the unexpected turn of the conversation. “Sensei was in the hospital, and the ass probably came to regret it as soon as sensei got me to leave the room.” She shrugged.

“I'd like a name, kid,” Jiraiya pressed idly, and this side of him felt more familiar, for all that she'd never seen it before. From him.

Kyo hummed. “Daru,” she finally answered. “Though I don't know what other name went with that,” she added. It wasn't even sure he was still alive.

And it wasn't like she'd gone out of her way to learn more about the guy; she'd been focused on other things.

Like sensei's recovery. And ANBU.

The rest of the run was pretty much unremarkable, filled with the stunning wilds of Hi no Kuni and a thoughtful silence.

She was pretty sure Jiraiya was plotting something not-so-nice for Daru, but she couldn't claim -even to herself- that she cared.

Katsurou-sensei would never do something like that to anyone, and she hated that there was even one person out there who thought he was capable of it. In their own village, no less.

When they reached Konoha, Kyo kept a close eye on Naoki and Minato while Jiraiya took care of procedure.

Her gaze lingered on Minato, because... he was an orphan, living on his own.

Even when they went to report the completion of their mission, Kyo was lost in thought.
Maki hadn't been an orphan, but he'd been basically stranded alone after his first kill, for all that he'd still had loving people around him. His family wouldn't have understood what he'd just gone through even if he'd felt the slightest inclined to brief them on the situation.

He hadn't settled until...

Until Kyo had dragged him home to talk to tou-san; another civilian born shinobi.

Nodding firmly to herself, Kyo blinked and realised that they'd already excited the Hokage tower and were about to be dismissed by Jiraiya.

“You'll have tomorrow off, but if you want to talk, you'll be able to find me at our training ground anyway,” Jiraiya informed them lightly, as if he wasn't sacrificing a rare day off on making sure they wouldn't be alone with their thoughts if they didn't want to be.

Possibly mostly due to Minato not having any other adult in his life to turn to.

Kyo smiled at him, feeling her chest warm at the realisation.

No matter how they'd started off, Jiraiya was a good man. A good sensei.

“See you, Jiraiya-sensei,” Kyo bid farewell, for the first time verbally acknowledging the man as her teacher, and before he could do more than blink at her, Kyo had snatched up Minato's wrist and dragged him with her down the street.

“Hey!” Minato objected, sounding more confused than anything else.

“Well,” she could hear Jiraiya mutter behind her, and there might be a pleased note to his voice. “I'll walk you home, Naoki,” he said.

Which made sure both boys would be cared for.

“Kyo,” Minato pressed, tugging half-heartedly at the limb caught in her grip. “What are you doing? I should go home.” He sounded tired.

“You're sleeping at my place tonight,” Kyo told him lightly, throwing a quick smile over her shoulder at the befuddled, approaching stunned, blond.

“I don't even- I've only ever met your dad by accident on that one mission!” Minato objected, sounding rather harried, as if he didn't know how to react to this.

Kyo's smile dimmed. “Yeah. Sorry.” She sighed and slowed to a stop, turning to look more fully at the blond. “Tou-san won't mind,” she assured him. “He would have asked you all to dinner, but,” she shrugged uncomfortable, frowning down at the dusty ground.

“Why do you want me to stay over, Kyo?” Minato asked awkwardly into the tense silence.

“Because you just had your first kill, and that can do things to your head,” Kyo replied seriously. “You shouldn't be alone.”

Minato blinked at her, clearly surprised, before he gave her a small, tentative smile that nonetheless lit up his exhausted eyes.

Kyo smiled back and continued to drag the boy home with her.

And Minato let her.
“I’m home!” Kyo called when the door closed behind her, leaving both Minato and her in the dim light of the apartment hallway.

She didn’t actually know if tou-san was home or not, but that wouldn’t stop her.

Minato took in her home with weary curiosity as she led him into the kitchen, where she checked the fridge and then set out to cook dinner, making sure to make enough to last both her and Minato, as well as tou-san, Genma and possibly Ryota, who came over more often than not whenever he was in the village these days.

The Uchiha Elders were still trying to set him up to get married, and he -still- wasn't appreciating it one bit.

While Kyo worked, Minato sat by the kitchen table, watching her move about the kitchen.

“How did you learn to cook?” Minato asked later, after they’d eaten and were washing up. The boy had insisted on helping to do the dishes, no matter how much he probably would have preferred to go to bed.

Kyo paused in her drying of a plate. “My mum taught me,” she admitted. At least it was mostly true, if you disregarded the whole past-life thing.

Minato tilted his head, scrubbing away at one of the pots. “You've never mentioned her before.”

“She's dead,” Kyo returned, trying not to let her voice go entirely flat.

Inoki had said it was important to talk about it, even if you didn't want to, so this was her doing that.

“Oh.” Minato blinked, sending her a glance. “Sorry,” he apologized awkwardly.

Kyo shrugged. “Not your fault. It's not like I've been particularly forthcoming since we got assigned together.”

Minato huffed a small, incredulous laugh. “You know, I've never met anyone else our age that talks like that,” he said lightly, quietly leaving the previous subject behind them. “The other kids in class always looked at me like they couldn't understand a word I said whenever I did.”

Kyo snorted. “I don't know if you've noticed, but I'm not exactly like other kids,” she muttered, feeling mildly self-conscious.

It'd been painfully obvious at the Academy.

Not that Kyo didn't know why. It just... wasn't fun to get it slapped in your face on a daily basis.

There was a reason why all her friends were at least a few years older than her.

Minato hummed interestedly, looking relaxed and content, and then froze when the front door opened and then closed, followed by an enthusiastic, “We're home!”


“Kyo?” Tou-san called, sounding slightly distracted, and Kyo guessed he was struggling with taking off Genma's sandals; her baby brother could be so very impatient.
“In the kitchen!” She called back, quickly drying her hands and bouncing across the room to meet them. “I brought Minato home with me, and he'll spend the night,” she said brightly when Kou appeared in the doorway, Genma on his hip.


“Yeah, so just sit down,” Kyo replied, stealing Genma from their exhausted father and busied herself with getting the three year old situated and started on his food.

When that was done, she turned her attention back to Minato, who had slowly finished with the dishes and was now looking like he didn't have the first clue what to do with himself.

Kyo easily solved that by dragging him over to the table and unceremoniously pushing him into one of the chairs.

After she'd put everything away, Kyo took the seat beside him.

“So,” Kou said once he'd cleared his plate, turning his attention on her and Minato. “Anything happen I should know about?” He asked idly.

Kyo twitched a shoulder. “Jiraiya took a mission to clear a bandit problem in a village south-east of Tanzaku-gai. We just came back today.”

“Ah.” Kou blinked and looked Minato over a bit more closely. “And does it require a talk like the one I gave Maki?” He asked, turning his eyes on Kyo at the mention of her teammate.

“I don't know,” Kyo admitted, feeling a painful twinge in her chest at hearing Maki's name out loud. “Tou-san's a civilian born shinobi,” she explained at Minato's lost expression. “He can give a perspective on some things Clan people can't.”

“Oh.” Minato blinked, assimilating that. “Er,” he added, because he clearly didn't know what to say.

“You don't have to,” Kou told him, slight amusement colouring his voice. “But I don't mind answering a few questions if you ever think of any,” he added, because her dad was amazing.

“Oh,” Kyo blinked and looked Minato over a bit more closely. “And does it require a talk like the one I gave Maki?” He asked, turning his eyes on Kyo at the mention of her teammate.

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“Okay,” Minato said lamely, sending Kyo a mildly panicking look.

She peered confusedly at him. Why was he so... freaked out-looking?

“It's a,” she hesitated, trying to figure out just what Minato had an issue with here, “string-free offer?” She guessed uncertainly. “Tou-san isn't gonna hurt you?”

Kou actually gave a low, huffy laugh, giving the two of them an amused look. “Why don't you show Minato your room and set him up while I finish things here and get Genma-chan ready for bed,” he suggested.

When Kyo peered over at Genma, he looked like he was about to fall asleep into his food, barely capable of keeping his eyes open.

“Okay,” she sighed, and grabbed Minato's hand to pull him along out of the kitchen. “This is my room,” she declared after she'd pushed her door open. “I share it with Genma, so I hope that won't be a problem,” she added thoughtfully, walking inside, still with a hold on Minato's hand.

“It looks nice,” Minato mumbled.
“Thank you,” Kyo returned and proceeded to pull out an extra pillow and blanket, before she paused. “Would you be uncomfortable sharing the bed with me?” She asked curiously.

Taku, Maki and her had always ended up in a pile on the floor, since Kyo's bed hadn't been large enough for all three of them. Four, counting Kisaki.

But now that it was just Minato, that wouldn't be a problem.

“Uh,” Minato startled, cheeks turning a light pink and looking caught quite flat-footed by the question.

Which Kyo didn't understand at all.

With a small shrug, she rearranged the bed so that it would comfortable house the both of them. Minato hadn't said no, so he could probably deal.

She'd done this all the time her first childhood. And even in her teenage and adult years. She'd never minded sharing a bed, and it always gave excellent opportunities for late-night conversations, which could be interesting.

“Come on, let's clean up, get ready for bed, and then we can fill out our reports,” she said when she was done.

“Okay,” Minato said, sounding dazed as he followed her back out of her room.

While the blond went to fetch his backpack, which he'd placed by the front door upon arrival, Kyo slipped into the bathroom to use the toilet and then brush her teeth and wash up slightly.

Walking out, she left Minato to do the same, taking the opportunity to go change into her pyjamas.

Tou-san had just finished tucking Genma into bed when she walked back into her room, and he easily picked her up and enveloped her into a tight hug.

“You're a great kid, kitten,” he said, pressing a quick kiss to her temple. “Don't let the world change you, okay?”

“I'll do my best,” she promised, wrapping her arms around her dad's neck to hug him back.

There were no illusions in her mind that that would be hard, judging by how difficult this life had been already.

And there would be another war after this one...

Kyo felt like crying whenever she stopped to really think about it.

“You're tired, tou-san,” Kyo finally said. “You should get some rest, too.”

Kou chuckled. “Who's the adult in this relationship?” He demanded teasingly, but pressed another quick kiss to her temple and then set her back down on her feet.

He walked out the door, ruffling Minato's damp hair on the way passed when he encountered him lingering uncertainly in the doorway.

Minato glanced after him as he hurried into Kyo's room, wide-eyed.

“He's just tired,” she told him with a small, sad smile. “Come on.”
And she pulled out her pyjamas to quickly change out of her clothes and when she was done, sat down on the floor with her Chuunin mission report and a pen, where Minato quickly joined her with his own report, though the Genin version.

“Does it get easier?” Minato asked quietly when they'd finally lied down to sleep, staring up at the dark ceiling.

“Yes,” Kyo answered quietly. “But not in the way you're probably hoping.”

“...I was afraid of that,” he whispered back.

-x-x-x-
Five months after she was assigned her new team, they came back to the village, tired, sore and mildly bloodied after a run to the Kusa border.

They'd stumbled across a skirmish, which had left them bruised, but thankfully not seriously injured.

Trudging back into the village, Kyo was content to follow Jiraiya to the Hokage tower to give their report and hand in the messages from the border station they'd visited this time.

It wasn't until they were in the actual mission assignment room that she finally picked up on the talk.

"Jiraiya-sensei, can I be dismissed?" Kyo asked distractedly, eyeing the pair of Jounin who were talking quietly over to the side.

"Sure." Jiraiya blinked at her. "Just remember to fill out the paperwork." He smiled a bit wryly. "You don't want the paper-pushing ninjas to have any reason to hold a grudge, trust me."

"Yeah," Kyo agreed absent-mindedly, and then exited the building via shunshin.

Without further ado, Kyo ran to the hospital as fast as she was currently capable, because she'd heard a name dropped in the mission room she couldn't ignore.

And if Shikaku was in the hospital...

Kyo slipped into the hospital through the front doors and it took no more than a quick question to get the room number from the nurse at the front desk.

Dodging around medics, patients, the occasional visitor and sporadic shinobi, Kyo ran into Sarutobi Shinzu just before she could slip into the private room she'd been pointed in the direction of.

"Kyo," Shinzu said quietly, and the man looked exhausted.

"Shinzu-sensei," Kyo returned evenly, carefully eyeing the man. "How are they?"

Shinzu grunted, dragging a hand through his hair as he eyed her warily. "Alive," he said.

Kyo nodded, starting to feel mildly light-headed.

She wasn't as familiar with Shinzu as she was her own sensei, but Katsurou counted the man as a friend. And he was familiar enough for her to step up to him to give him a careful hug around the middle.

Shinzu remained unmoving and largely unresponsive throughout, but that didn't mean he didn't appreciate it.

She could almost see something in his shoulders loosen.
Stepping back from the Sarutobi, Kyo gave him a small, sympathetic smile, and then slipped into the hospital room without another word.

The light was muted inside, so it took a second for Kyo's eyes to adjust.

Two beds took up most of the floor-space, and two chairs had been crammed into what remained between the beds and the various machines crowded around them.

“Hi,” Kyo greeted quietly, barely stirring the solemn calm she'd walked into.

Shikaku didn't glance away from his teammates, but he twitched one hand at her in a limp, aborted wave.

Kyo took in the medical tape on his face and the bags under his eyes with painful understanding.

Slowly walking into the room, she turned most of her attention to the beds, watching the steady rise and fall of Inoichi and Chouza's chests.

Inoichi's hair was loose and splayed over the stark white pillow, and his eyes were closed.

She couldn't see any obvious injuries, but that didn't have to mean anything.

Inoichi was like her; more of a mid- to long-distance fighter. But his Clan techniques meant that his condition could be far more complicated than something merely physical in nature.

On the other side of the spectrum, Chouza looked to have been battered pretty badly, and was almost completely covered in bandages.

She didn't ask what had happened.

Kyo could guess well enough, and Shikaku honestly looked like a wrong word might be the last straw, the last thing that made him break.

Instead, she walked up to him and slowly, carefully tilted his head to get a better look at his face. And the injuries hidden by medical tape.

Tracing light, ghost-like fingers over the no doubt deep gouges, Kyo worriedly looked them over before focusing on Shikaku's brown eyes.

“Are they going to be okay?” She asked softly, staring into the older boy's flat, dull eyes.

“Yeah,” Shikaku grunted after a rather lengthy delay.

Kyo nodded, feeling some of the tension bleed out of her and she slowly sat down in the chair beside Shikaku's. No doubt Shinzu-sensei's seat, which he'd temporarily left just a minute before Kyo had arrived; she'd met him coming out the door.

“They almost didn't, though,” Shikaku whispered, barely loud enough to be audible. As if he said it too loud, he'd wake up and realise this was just a delusion. A dream.

That this -the hospital, their survival- was nothing more than wishful thinking and he'd be slammed back into harsh reality any second now.

Kyo reached out to take his hand in hers.

Then, after a brief hesitation, she gently tugged on his hand and brought it to Chouza's limp arm.
resting on top of the blanket pulled up to his chest.

“They're alive, and they're going to stay that way,” she said, finding Chouza's pulse and then pressed Shikaku's fingers to it.

Indisputable proof.

Shikaku took a shuddering breath and tentatively curled his fingers around his team-mate's wrist.

They probably sat like that for hours, and when Shinzu returned from wherever he'd disappeared off to, Kyo relinquished his chair and planted her small butt in Shikaku's lap.

She wasn't as small as she used to be, but at thirteen, Shikaku had started in on a growth-spurt that still made him so much bigger than her it wasn't as awkward as it could have been.

Carefully leaning her head against Shikaku's temple, Kyo sighed and watched her two friends, sleeping away in their beds.

“I don't know how you did it, Kyo,” Shikaku mumbled tiredly sometime later.

Hours had passed, but his fingers were still curled around Chouza's wrist, the pads of his fingers pressing against the pulse point there.

She sighed.

She wasn't sure herself, and some days, it felt like she was still...

“They wouldn't have wanted me to stop living,” she finally murmured back.

Shikaku's shoulders slumped, but he didn't say anything.

Kyo was in and out of the hospital a lot in the next few days, bringing with her easily consumed foods for Shikaku and Shinzu-sensei.

She also talked to Katsurou about maybe talking to Shinzu at some point, because she wasn't sure, but it felt like Shikaku wasn't the only one shaken deeply by the experience.

It meant she didn't get a lot of time to herself, in between team practice and the hospital, but whatever time she did get, she spent at her grandparents' with Genma.

Tou-san was away again.

Six days after Kyo had found out Inoichi and Chouza were hospitalized, the two teenagers woke up.

“It's very good to see the two of you conscious,” Kyo greeted them when she walked into their hospital room to see both boys peer blearily at the room around them.

Inoichi blinked slowly, while Chouza, who looked far more alert, gave a small wave.

“I actually woke up last night,” the latter admitted wearily, shifting a bit before he winced and stilled.

“Ah, yes. I'm not surprised Sleeping Beauty over here took his sweet time,” Kyo teased lightly, leaning down to press a quick, loud kiss to Inoichi's cheek, giving him an impish grin when the boy looked entirely disgruntled at her actions and words.
Shinzu gave a small snort, but Shikaku's lips didn't so much as twitch.

He'd gotten rid of the bandages now, and the two lines on his face, angry red and looking particularly brutal, would stay with him for the rest of his life.

At least they'd missed his eye.

Kyo glanced him over, absently wondering if it was some sort of animal that had caused them? But then again, it could just as well have been a blade of some kind.

“Shikaku,” she said firmly. “Your teammates are alive, and they're awake!” She snapped sharply, though she wasn't angry. Far from it. “They're going to return to full health! Whatever it is you're blaming yourself for, stop feeling sorry for yourself. Work to overcome whatever shit happened,” she grinned humourlessly. “That's basically what Katsurou-sensei told me,” she revealed. Except for the 'your teammates are alive' part. For obvious reasons. “I have a mission, so I can't stay, but make sure to kick those two out of bed as soon as the medic gives you the go-ahead, okay?”

Shikaku gave a mute nod, staring at her like he couldn't believe she'd just said that to him.

Chouza was gazing sadly at her, but at least he seemed to be on her side on the whole issue, while Inoichi just stared dazedly in her general direction, clearly not all the way there yet.

Was he medicated? Might explain his current state.

With a brief, quicksilver smile at Shinzu, Kyo left to run to the gates to meet up with her team.

They had another courier run. To the Kawa border.

Kyo just knew she was going to be on tenterhooks the entire way, followed by nightmares when they finally came back to the village.

She hadn't made a courier run in that direction since... yeah.

This was going to be fun.

-x-x-x-

Everyone lived.

Kyo still felt a little bit shaky when she thought back on the run, but everyone had lived.

They hadn't even encountered any enemy presence.

Didn't change the fact that Kyo had been tense enough she'd threatened to snap throughout the whole thing, much to Jiraiya's concern and growing apprehension.

But nothing had happened.

When they came back to the village, Kyo just about had time to rest up, check up on Team Shinzu and make sure her friends were alright -they were- and get in one day's training with Team Seven, before they were ordered out again.

“But we just came back!” Naoki objected half-heartedly, looking like he hadn't gotten a chance to
rest up at all.

“Yeah, and we're getting sent back out again,” Jiraiya returned with a grim frown.

Kyo... didn't really want to know what had happened to the Genin team that had no doubt been supposed to take this mission.

“Are we stand-ins?” Minato, the idiot genius, asked.

Jiraiya gave an affirmative grunt and Kyo elbowed Minato in the side when he opened his mouth to press for further answers.

“Trust me, you most likely don't want to know,” she said quietly when he frowned irritably at her.

Minato blinked, assimilated that, connected the dots, and gave a slow nod, irritation bleeding away.

“Where are we going?” Kyo asked instead.

“Kusa border,” Jiraiya answered unhappily.

Kyo sighed, adjusted her poison pack on the small of her back and wondered if it was the stretch of border at the thinnest part of the country, judging by how displeased Jiraiya was.

If so, that would bring them worryingly close to Iwa. And her shinobi.

“No use in delaying it, I suppose,” Kyo muttered with a sigh. The faster they headed out, the faster they'd -hopefully- get this over with.

Jiraiya looked them over with careful, heavy eyes and then they were on their way, leaving the safety of Konoha's walls behind.

-x-x-x-
They ran quickly and quietly north, and Kyo was happy she’d taken the time to introduce both Minato and Naoki to some basic stealth techniques a couple months back, so hopefully, they’d be able to slip through this territory without drawing any attention to themselves.

Kyo should have known better than to jinx herself.

They reached their destination with minimal fuss, though Jiraiya was even more cautious than usual at their approach. There had been a lot of action on the Iwa border lately, as far as she’d heard, and attracting any kind of attention here would be the height of stupid.

They’d delivered their scrolls, accepted the ones going back to Konoha and had just slipped out of the border station into the pouring rain outside when the muddy earth rippled a few metres to the right of them and spat out two teams of Iwa shinobi.

There was an explosion on the other side of the border station, and things descended into complete and utter chaos.

Kyo had to defend a strike that would have taken out not just her eye, but probably would have caused enough trauma to the head to kill her, and lost sight of the rest of her team for a crucial second.

The Iwa nin that had attacked her sent her a vicious grin, sharp as a kunai to the throat, and instead of trying to measure her strength to the fully grown, muscular man, Kyo focused on dodging.

The rain made everything harder, making it feel like Kyo was completely cut off from the rest of her team. As if she was alone.

Her breath loud in her ears, she stabbed a needle into the hand of the Iwa nin, but she only managed it at the cost of a strike to the face that made her eyes tear up and sent a shower of sparks across her vision.

She was fairly sure the man swore, before he pulled the needle from his palm, and then set out for her blood even more insistently.

It became a race against time.

Kyo just had to hold out until the poison had a chance to spread throughout his body, reach something vital, but the man might just kill her before that.

Kyo frantically scrambled out of the way of a kunai strike that would have gutted her, dodged under an earth jutsu from another Iwa nin, and then had to bite back a scream when her opponent growled and stomped down on her foot and made a slightly uncoordinated attempt to decapitate her.

Despite the searing pain radiating up her leg -something in her foot must have been damaged- Kyo
dodged under the swipe at her throat and jammed a kunai up the man's groin, aiming for the major blood-vessels there.

Hopefully, he'd bleed out before he could kill her.

When the Iwa Chuunin collapsed, succumbing to the poison and rapid blood loss, Kyo didn't have time to take a breather.

Another Iwa nin came swooping out of the rain like a herald of death and destruction.

Kyo fumbled for another needle, but her cuff-holders were wet and the needles slippery from the rain.

There wasn't any time to contemplate the fact that the poison was being washed off of her needles the longer they were exposed to the water.

Kyo honestly wasn't sure how she got away from the second one, but she was relatively certain she might have jammed a kunai into his head, up into the soft tissue under his chin.

Konoha shinobi from the border station had joined them, which somehow just added to the chaos.

One of them landed next to her, busy blocking his opponent's rock-covered fists from beating him to pulp.

Kyo snatched a container from her pack, unscrewed the lid at the same time as she ducked under her comrade's guard and threw the whole jar in the Iwa nin's face, not staying long enough to hear him hiss when he got a face-full of powdered poison.

She could just hope it would get in his eyes, mouth, airways, anything, before the rain washed it all away.

A terrified scream tearing through the rain felt like a punch to the gut.

Kyo knew that voice.

There wasn't a conscious decision, she just moved.

Barely taking the time to blink the rain out of her eyes, Kyo threw herself in the direction she'd heard Naoki's voice.

Flashing through the hand-seals faster than she could keep up herself, Kyo spat wind sickles at the large Iwa nin before he could even register she was there, ramming into the side of the man before she could think better of it.

The condensed wind cut through the ribs under his arm, up into his chest like it was butter.

He was dead before he hit the ground.

“Naoki!” Kyo shouted, risking a glance at the boy, who was half-submerged in the ground and face ashen grey and screwed up in mindless agony.

Minato was fighting near-by; she could see his blond hair, even through the downpour.

Kyo drew a kunai, coated it in wind-chakra and threw it as hard as she could at the head of his opponent.
“Minato!” She cried, attempting to make herself heard over the cacophony.

She didn't know any earth jutsu! She needed his help!

Instead of trying to do something that could potentially make everything worse, Kyo focused on guarding Naoki as best she could until help could arrive.

With people fighting, doing their best to kill each other all around, that wasn't easy.

When Minato finally came over, out of breath and with blood darkening his wet hair, she motioned at Naoki, not having time to more than notice the blood drain out of Minato's face at the sight before she had to move.

Protect the two boys, hopefully well enough to make sure Minato could get Naoki out of the muddy, crushing ground.

Hopefully, he wouldn't be too damaged...

Thought was elusive for a while, and Kyo hadn't the faintest clue how much time passed.

She couldn't think beyond parry, block, duck, dodge, misdirect and kill, when the opportunity presented itself.

Defend.

There wasn't even time to check how Minato was doing.

Was Naoki still alive?

Something cold squeezed her chest at the thought that maybe... maybe she'd seen it wrong. Maybe Naoki had already died? She might have been too late, hadn't saved him.

Been too slow to kill that Iwa Chuunin.

Breath coming in quick bursts, Kyo felt like she was breathing more water than air, it was raining so hard. There was mud everywhere.

It turned the world grey and blurry. Undefined.

Kyo was slinking around the spot Minato and Naoki were occupying like a washed out ghost, chakra suppressed and doing her best to remain unnoticed until she could help cut down any of the Iwa shinobi that got too close.

She wasn't bothering with her needles any more; she was fairly sure all the poison had been washed off by now. And if not, it was bound to be watered out enough to be less than reliable.

Severing a tendon at the back of the knee of what might have been an Iwa Jounin, Kyo darted away before she could be killed.

There might have been something grazing her back as she ducked and rolled away, but she wasn't sure and the mud made everything feel cold.

She was so keyed up she didn't immediately notice when it was over.

The sound of the rain was heavy in her ears, feeling like it was trying to pound her into the loose, water-saturated dirt beneath her feet, and she was still circling her two teammates warily.
A flash of white and red alerted her to the fact that Jiraiya had found them.

Kyo couldn't make herself relax yet.

There was a small flare of chakra, the earth shifted with a muted sucking sound and then Jiraiya was rushing back into the border station, Naoki in his arms and a deadly pale Minato at his heels.

Feeling like the air had frozen solid in her lungs, Kyo followed.

Jiraiya wouldn't be rushing like that if Naoki was dead, she told herself.

They were rushed inside to see one of the frantic, swampted medics.

“I don't know where Kyo went, sensei,” Minato said in a quiet, stressed voice that instantly made Kyo feel bad.

Before Jiraiya could do more than look briefly panicked and guilty, Kyo wrangled the hold of her chakra loose enough to let the man at least sense her without actively looking at her.

Several shinobi around her twitched and turned in her direction, hands jerking towards weapons.

Jiraiya snarled at them, taking a half-step in front of her and fixing the twitchy shinobi around the room with a dark, unamused glower.

“Deactivate the stealth jutsu, Kyo,” Jiraiya ordered flatly, not taking his eyes off the Jounin in the room who were still capable of dealing harm.

Kyo blinked tiredly, glanced down at herself and abruptly realised she'd, at some point, activated her chameleon jutsu. She hadn't noticed.

Forcing one hand up in a ram seal, she yanked at her chakra to dissipate the jutsu before anything else could happen.

“Injuries?” Jiraiya asked, still not taking his eyes off the rest of the room.

Kyo stared blankly at him, so tired talking felt like a chore.

“Kyo,” Jiraiya barked tersely.

“My foot might be messed up,” she finally managed. “I don't know, sensei.”

Jiraiya nodded shortly, finally sent her a glance, a grim frown twitching his mouth down in the corners at the sight of her, and then turned to the medic.

“What can you do?” He asked the moment he seemed to be done examining Naoki, who'd been laid out on an examination table and was clearly unconscious.

“Out here? Right now?” The medic muttered. “Not much,” he added with a focused frown, one hand on Naoki’s chest, the other resting on his left leg. “I'll stabilise him, but he needs the hospital.”

Jiraiya nodded.

“Minato, keep an eye on your teammates while the medic tries to stabilize Naoki. I need to talk to Otoki,” he huffed and stalked off once he was sure his orders would be followed and no one would try anything with his brats.
“Let me take a look at you,” the second medic, looking just as harried and drawn thin as the first one said, crouching in front of Kyo, who blinked at him.

The man muttered absently under his breath as he brought a hand to Kyo's forehead, but she couldn't pick up on the words.

When she glanced over at Minato, he seemed torn between drifting closer to her and sticking close to Naoki's side.

She waved a hand at him to make him stay where he was.

He looked like he may have gotten a few nasty-looking cuts on one leg, possibly from stone shrapnel, but seemed otherwise mostly fine.

The medic swore softly when he examined her foot.

Which couldn't really be good, she mused distantly, eyeing him blandly.

She was starting to recover from the post-battle adrenaline crash; her head was slowly clearing and she made an effort to take in the room they were actually in.

It felt like it was crowded to the point of bursting with injured shinobi, with the two medics and what looked like a couple of Chuunin aids? Running around to help.

Or were they supposed to be apprentices?

Kyo didn't know.

“Minato, are you okay?” She asked when the medic had done whatever quick fix he'd been able to manage, and had turned his attentions to the next patient.

“Fine,” Minato returned faintly, looking deeply shaken.

This was his first real battle, she reminded herself, and his teammate had suffered what looked more and more like a crippling injury.

Naoki hadn't stirred the slightest on the table he was lying on.

Before Kyo could consider the situation more closely, Jiraiya came striding back into the room, looking grim and short-tempered.

“Come on, brats; we need to high-tail it back to Konoha, preferably five minutes ago,” he said shortly.

His hands were steady and gentle when he gathered up Naoki to put him on his back, though, despite his words and posture.

“But, sensei-” Minato began hesitantly, sending Kyo a quick, worried look.

“We're coming,” Kyo said firmly, talking over her teammate's potential objections.

Minato looked unhappy, but didn't try to press the matter.

Small blessings.

She was well aware this was going to be difficult enough without anyone reminding her about it
every other minute.

Determinedly standing to her feet, Kyo clenched her teeth and tried to put weight on her left foot.

Pain shot through the limb, up her leg and robbing the breath from her lungs with the sharp intensity of it.

Gritting her teeth, she took a tentative step. Or, more of a hobble really.

She'd be limping like a one-legged chicken back to Konoha, clearly.

She saw Minato move out of the corner of her eye, but the glare she fixed him with halted him in his tracks, frozen with one arm stretched out towards her.

Taking in his posture, she was fairly sure she knew what he'd intended to do.

There could be any number of scratches on him, though and...

Still staring sternly at him, Kyo began to unclasp the cuff-holsters on her wrists. First the left one, then the right, and tucked the sopping wet, muddy fabric into one of her pouches.

They were without a doubt soaked through with an unholy combination of poisons and sedatives and she didn't want there to be any chance a single drop of it made it's way into Minato's blood stream.

No matter how naked it made her feel not to have the familiar weights hugging her wrists.

They didn't need more problems right now.

“Oh, okay,” she huffed when she was done, motioning to Minato that he could continue.

With a miniscule, quicksilver smile, Minato slipped his arm around her waist, pulled her arm on the same side over his shoulders and took part of her weight off of her.

Sparing her foot at least some.

She had no idea how well they'd manage this while running, but it was something.

“Come on,” Jiraiya said, sliding his gaze over them once and then moved to the door, carefully keeping Naoki as motionless on his back as he was capable.

It was telling that, despite everything, Naoki hadn't so much as twitched an eyelid.

Kyo lost herself to the rhythm of leaping from branch to branch, every jump moving them ever so slightly closer to home.

She was... grateful for Minato's help, because every move jarred her foot, and every time she touched it to the ground felt about as pleasant as sticking it into searing hot coals, but.

Kyo refused to put any more weight on Minato than absolutely necessary.

He was a Genin, ten years old, and he hadn't even been an active shinobi for a year.

It might be hypocritical of her, because Kyo was still younger, but at least she'd had three years to get used to this shit.
Jiraiya set a quick, near-brutal pace pushing what Kyo and Minato were capable of keeping up with, but neither of them complained.

They knew what was at stake here.

Kyo knew better than she was comfortable thinking about.

It felt like days later when they finally reached Konoha, and Kyo felt drained.

Jiraiya didn't stop to check in with the gate guards, so Kyo tugged on Minato to make him stop, despite the fact it felt like her head had been drained of all fluids.

It was a decidedly odd sensation, but somewhat familiar. Something she associated with extreme exhaustion, but in this case, was also due to near-constant, burning pain.

She filled out the necessary paperwork with noticeably trembling hands, accidentally smearing mud and blood onto the document under the careful observation of the gate guard, ignoring Minato's worried, disapproving looks and concerned hovering.

“Sensei could do this later,” he insisted quietly.

“Or I can do it now,” Kyo returned absently, blinking in an attempt to clear the blurry edges from her vision so that she could double-check that she was actually writing the correct information in the right spot.

The moment she put the pen down, she could feel a presence appear behind her, which was reinforced by Minato's quiet yelp.

Strong hands lifted her up and settled her into semi-familiar arms, despite the fact that she was still somewhat damp -and definitely filthy- from the earlier rain storm.

Kyo glanced up at the painted bird mask and gratefully relaxed against Crow's shoulder.

“Mind the leg, will you?” She mumbled tiredly.

Kaimaru's grip tightened ever so slightly on her, before he took off towards the hospital, leaving Minato to scramble after them.

-x-x-x-
Chapter 48

Chapter Summary

Seeing Tsunade again

Minato hurried after the ANBU that had picked up Kyo and run off with her, mind running a mile a minute.

Thankfully, the... man, was heading directly towards the hospital, so Minato was fairly sure he wouldn't have to track down a Chuunin or Jounin to intervene with some strange sort of abduction.

The ANBU all but flew down to the ground and walked briskly into the hospital via the front doors, something Minato was silently surprised by, even though he wasn't sure why.

Why wouldn't ANBU use the front doors?

When the nurse at the desk looked up and spotted the ANBU, she jumped to her feet and approached, looking Kyo over and making as if to take her from the special-ops' arms, but backed off faster than you could blink when the guy tightened his hold on her with a hostile air.

Minato wasn't sure if it was his body-language or something else that did it; he was frankly too tired to care all that much right now.

The important part was that, for some reason, this guy was... staking a claim on Kyo?

Did she have an older brother she hadn't told him about? A young uncle? Cousin?

Minato didn't know.

“T-This way, ANBU-san,” the nurse said nervously and waved a hand down one of the corridors.

The ANBU didn't wait for anything more to be added, and simply strode off with confident steps. As if he knew exactly where he was going, with or without directions.

Minato jogged off after him until he could walk beside him and get a look at Kyo.

She was rather pale, wasn't she?

Had there been anything else wrong than just her foot? Minato hadn't really seen much of Kyo's fighting after she'd thrown that kunai straight through the head of the Iwa shinobi he'd been facing off against.

He'd been a bit distracted with getting Naoki out of the ground after that, and he hadn't even gotten him entirely loose before Jiraiya-sensei arrived and took care of the rest.

Minato had been too scared of somehow making things worse by being careless; he wasn't that good with earth jutsu yet.

Which was definitely something he'd have to work more on. As well as learn how Kyo did that with the kunai.
The ANBU didn't so much as hesitate as he turned down corridors, walked down a flight of stairs and took further turns until they reached what looked like an operating theatre of some sort.

Instead of waiting for anyone to come meet them, or so much as knock, he pushed to door open with a shoulder and strolled inside like he owned the place.

Minato snuck into the room after him, though he didn't have any illusions about everyone not being aware of his presence.

He glanced over at what looked like an operating table, took in Naoki's unconscious form and the people working on him and then quickly looked away.

Jiraiya was talking to the blonde Tsuna-woman that had been looking for Kyo way back, and both of them looked pretty grim-faced.

“Tsunade-sama,” the ANBU spoke up for the first time, staring at the woman.

That was her name? Tsunade?

“What?” She snapped, and then glanced over, one eyebrow ticking up a fraction at the sight of the ANBU. And then she registered Kyo's pale form in his arms. “Put her over here. Status report?”

“Pretty sure something's broken in my foot,” Kyo gritted out faintly, not bothering to open her eyes. “There might be something else, too, but I frankly can't tell.”

“Well, let's get the mud and blood off of you to begin with,” the Tsunade-woman said briskly, setting to it.

Minato edged over to sensei and watched without blinking as Kyo was cleaned up, quickly and efficiently.

She had two black eyes, and there was a cut on the bridge of her nose. Broken?

“Jiraiya, toss me a pair of scissors, will you? Gonna have to cut the sandal off,” she muttered with a frown.

Sensei opened a drawer in the counter by the wall and threw a pair of strange scissors at the woman, who immediately set to do what she'd said.

Kyo made a sound like she wanted to scream but just about managed to refrain.

“Anaesthetic!” Tsunade barked next.

“What kind?” Kyo asked, voice faint and strained and she actually forced her eyes open to peer up at the woman.

“Not for you to worry about,” the woman returned gruffly, impatiently.

“I'm immune to a shit-load of stuff,” Kyo returned. “Crow,” she added, flopping one hand at the ANBU, who... was still there.

Minato hadn't noticed.

The ANBU obligingly came closer.

“What?” He asked, and Minato shivered at how inhuman his voice sounded, lacking anything
resembling inflection and emotion. It was eerie.

Kyo's lips twitched in a miniscule smile, though, despite everything. “Explain- for me,” she asked disjointedly, sounding like she was a hair away from losing consciousness anyway.

The ANBU -Crow?- rolled his shoulders and then turned a fraction to the Tsunade woman, who was watching him expectantly, unamused with the situation.

“Shiranui is immune to a number of poisons and sedatives, and her body adjusts to pain-killers unfortunately quickly,” he recounted quickly and succinctly, sounding vaguely unhappy. If that was with the situation itself or his role in it was unclear.

How did he know that? Minato couldn't help but wonder.

The Tsunade woman scowled, snapped her fingers and shouted for one of the nurses' attention. “Bring me the brat's medical file!”

Kyo sighed tiredly. “My back feels sort of numb,” she muttered, causing the blonde woman to pause and then give a short, irritable curse.

She rolled Kyo onto her side, making sure to do it onto the left side so it wouldn't jar her leg more than necessary, and brought a hand to the torn material of Kyo's mud-caked shirt.

Jiraiya gave a heavy sigh and pulled a hand through his thick mane of damp hair, staring guiltily at Kyo and Naoki and then glanced down at Minato.

“What about you? Any injuries I haven't asked about?”

“Just a few scratches,” Minato admitted quietly, touching the fingers of one hand to the tears in his trouser legs.

The cuts on his thigh stung whenever he moved, but it wasn't that bad.

He was more tired than anything else. Exhausted.

ANBU Crow bent down to get closer to Kyo's face. “Reckless,” he drawled, poked her in the arm and then left with a shunshin.

“How's Naoki?” Kyo asked the room at large, acting like the ANBU hadn't done anything strange or out of the ordinary at all.

“Worry about yourself, brat,” the Tsunade woman growled darkly, still working on whatever had been wrong with Kyo's back. “I'm gonna have to take care of the mess that is your foot, too. How's the pain-tolerance? It seems we're gonna have to wait for that medical file.”

“Decent,” Kyo returned idly, eyes closed and looking like she might be drifting off to sleep. If it weren't for the small furrow between her brows. “Either way, I bet I'll survive.”

“You better,” Jiraiya stated firmly, crossing his arms over his chest and hunkering down to wait.

If Minato stood a bit closer to him than was perhaps prudent, then he was just grateful Jiraiya didn't say anything.

-x-x-x-
Lying on a cold slab of metal would never be comfortable, and it wasn’t made better by the fact that her clothes were still damp with water, mud and blood.

Which was a lovely combination, all the way around.

Damn, she owed Kaimaru something nice for this, didn’t she? Hm. He probably wouldn’t touch anything she’d baked or cooked, not unless Genma was eating the same thing, and even then it was a toss-up.

Paranoid Uchiha.

Tsunade’s chakra withdrew out of her back -had it been bruised? Cut? She honestly couldn’t say- and carefully rolled her back over flat on her back.

Kyo took a deep breath and held the air in her lungs, trying to focus on not throwing up due to how... awesome it felt when her foot moved in response.

“Brace yourself, kid, because this isn’t going to be pleasant,” Tsunade said absently as she repositioned herself down by her feet.

Kyo determinedly relaxed her body, took deep, somewhat even breaths and curled both hands around the smooth edges of the table she was lying on.

“Go for it,” she said.

Tsunade gave an acknowledging grunt and placed a hand humming with chakra on the bridge of her foot.

It sent a jab of pain through the limb, but it wasn't so bad.

Kyo could take it.

The following thirty minutes weren’t as nice.

“There,” Tsunade finally said. “Don't move, and a nurse will come wrap you up in a minute,” and she moved over to the other table to work on Naoki, who seemed to have been prepped for whatever procedure they had to perform on him.

She was breathing hard, and sweat was clinging to her skin, making her hair stick to her forehead and neck, and her clothes to glue themself uncomfortably to her body.

“You okay?” Minato asked quietly, having edged closer to her now that Tsunade had moved on to her next patient.


At least the sharp, cutting pain of having her bones re-aligned had somewhat cleared her head.

She glanced over at the approaching nurse, watching the supplies she carried in her arms with unhappy resignation.

Oh, great. Another cast.

On her foot this time. Urgh.
...could you walk on a cast?

Kyo might end up finding out, regardless of medic's opinion on the matter, she mused drily, glancing at Tsunade, who looked very busy doing... something, with Naoki's legs she tried not to think too closely on.

The nurse chose that moment to carefully begin to wrap her foot in the plaster to make the cast, the warm, wet strips of cloth settling against her tender skin.

She bet that if she had bothered to glance down at her foot, it would be more blue than anything else.

One big splotchy bruise.

But then again, that was what happened when a grown man stomped on a child's foot with the intent to harm.

Sighing quietly to herself, she didn't fight or so much as twitch while the nurse lifted her foot to wrap the plaster all the way around, only leaving her toes bare.

When it was done, the cast reached up her shin to just beneath her knee and made sure she couldn't wiggle her foot even a little. Which was probably for the best.

"It needs to set for 45 minutes, so please keep off your feet at least that long, Shiranui-chan," the nurse said with a quick smile, and then hurried back to the other operating table, to assist the medics working on Naoki.

Kyo sighed and turned to stare up at the ceiling.

"Don't you have to go deliver some urgent scrolls, Jiraiya?" Kyo asked tiredly a minute later, trying not to listen to the sounds of whatever it was the medics were doing.

Jiraiya made an unhappy noise, but pushed away from the wall.

"Keep an eye on these two for me, will you, Minato?" He asked, moving towards the door with obvious reluctance, and he didn't leave until he got a verbal affirmative from the blond.

For a while, the only sound came from the medics busy operating on Naoki, and Kyo stared blankly up at the white ceiling.

She let out a small, quiet sigh and shuffled herself to one side of the slab of metal she was lying on and patted the probably not-so-clean-any-more table at the same time as she sent Minato an expectant look.

Minato blinked, eyed her uncertainly, before he gave in and carefully pulled himself up on the table and lied down next to her.

It was a bit of a tight fit, but Kyo didn't care.

Having Minato close right now was one less thing she had to worry about, her mind fretting and going all over the place as it analysed the consequences of the day's events.

And both of them were exhausted.

It didn't take long for them to fall asleep, and one of the nurses must have thrown a blanket over the both of them at some point, but Kyo didn't wake up until the door swished closed and a familiar voice roused her from her slumber.
It took a while before she could make out actual words, and spent those minutes peering at Jiraiya and Tsunade through the well-lit room.

“-s going to have some serious consequences,” Tsunade was saying quietly to a Jiraiya wearing... a rather interesting facial expression.

Kyo blinked and peered more carefully at him.

“Shit. I haven't even had them that long,” Jiraiya breathed, rubbing both hands over his face. He looked guilty. And angry. Sad, frustrated, pained. There was a lot going on there, but Kyo couldn't see anything good.

Heart speeding up in her chest, Kyo pushed herself upright, accidentally disrupting the blanket from around her and Minato, which jerked the boy awake.

“What- How's Naoki?” She asked, voice much sharper and louder than she had been intending.

Both of the Jounin turned towards her, neither looking like they had expected her to be awake.

“He's alive, brat,” Tsunade grunted with a frown, and she gave her a part disapproving and part sympathetic stare. Kyo's heart just about had time to slow down and calm before she continued. “I had to amputate one of his legs at the knee. It was too damaged to salvage,” she said with flat professionalism.

Kyo stared at her.

“What?” Minato murmured drowsily, accidentally pushing the blanket onto the floor as he sat up, too.

He turned to look at Jiraiya -as if that would magically change anything- but their sensei just shook his head with a pained look in his eyes.

Kyo couldn't think of a single thing to say.

She couldn't think of anything, other than the blank, empty void that the inside of her head had turned into at the news.

After a minute had passed without any further questions, Jiraiya turned back to Tsunade to continue the conversation Kyo had accidentally-on-purpose interrupted.

Minato was clearly in shock, staring at the far wall, pale faced and clearly not seeing anything of what was in front of his eyes.

Kyo felt... tired. And detached.

But mostly tired.

Like she hadn't slept in weeks, months... a year. Instead of having just woken up from a who knew how long nap.

She had quite forgotten about the cast on her foot, but she was reminded when she slowly and gingerly slipped off the metal operating table she'd been lying on and it touched the floor.

It felt weird.

Like she was wearing a strange, too-big-too-small shoe that didn't quite fit. And prevented her from
flexing her ankle.

At least she could walk without too much problems, even though it reduced her to limping, despite there not being more than a twinge of pain with every other step.

“Where are you going?” Minato asked quietly just before she reached the doors, bringing Jiraiya and Tsunade's conversation to -another- halt.

“Away from here,” Kyo said idly.

Where would be the best place to go? Home? Or Katsurou-sensei's house?

“Like hell you are,” came Tsunade's gruff reply, and she sounded unimpressed. “You're spending the night in a hospital bed, even if I have to tie you to it. And get the hell off that foot!” She added irritably.

“Kyo, you really shou-” Jiraiya began in a placating tone of voice, though she wasn't sure if it was directed more at herself or Tsunade.

She didn't really care.

“This,” she began, and her voice grew louder with every word, “was why I didn't want a GENIN TEAM!”

Before anyone could make any attempt at stopping her or try to force her to stay, Kyo yanked at her depleted chakra and exited the hospital with a shunshin, the echo of her own voice still ringing in her ears.

She staggered when she landed outside behind the hospital, and probably would have fallen if it hadn't been for the convenient wall close within reach, which she leaned heavily on.

Kyo really didn't have enough chakra left to have done that in her current condition, but... she'd had to get out of there.

Speaking of.

Kyo pushed herself upright and, using mostly her right foot -the good one- she jumped up onto the closest roof to get the hell away from the building she'd just escaped.

It didn't really matter where she went as long as it was away.

She needed to be alone for a while, and then... then she'd try and deal with this.

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Chapter 49

Chapter Summary

Running away rarely makes anything better but Kyo can damn well try

Kyo wasn't really sure where, exactly, she was, or how much time had passed since she'd made her quick escape from Tsunade's clutches, but she couldn't find it in herself to care.

She curled even more firmly down into herself, pressing her forehead against her raised knees.

At least no one was bothering her here.

Which might have had something to do with the fact she was sitting in a nook in an out-of-the-way alley, completely out of sight and chakra fully suppressed, what little of it she still had available, anyway.

Tou-san might have been able to find her, but she didn't even know if he was in the village right now or out on the border somewhere.

…her face hurt.

Tsunade hadn't gotten around to do anything about her probably-broken nose. Not that Kyo blamed her, because there'd definitely been more important issues to deal with.

Like Naoki. Like her stupid foot.

Kyo took a deep breath through her mouth, eyes still closed, and tried to think about this rationally.

Everyone was still alive -if not whole- and... again, that was as far as she got before her thoughts stuttered to a stop. Like every time before she'd tried the same.

It wasn't working.

The sounds and feel of Konoha around her eventually changed, the bustle of the afternoon slowly and steadily changing into the liveliness of evening; people returning home, going out to eat at any of the numerous restaurants, going drinking and what not.

Which slowly turned into the night crowd moving around.

There was the sound of distant, off-key singing making its way into her small spot of alley, and when she cracked her swollen eyes open, it was mostly dark out now.

She should probably go home.

Or go find Katsurou-sensei.

Kyo couldn't find the motivation to uncurl herself and get up.

Her foot hurt, her face hurt, her chest hurt...
She hadn't taken a hit to the chest, right? Right.

But then again; who knew what the hell had been wrong with her back, before Tsunade had fixed it, which might have left an impact.

Kyo stubbornly refused to acknowledge that her chest could hurt from reasons other than physical trauma.

She'd grown attached. Even when she'd tried not to.

What was even the use? If this was what would happen every time?

Kyo wanted to curl up in her bed, preferably with Genma hugged safely to her chest, and sleep for a week.

Another moment stretched out as it passed her by, her own quiet breathing the only sound in her ears.

...was she really this self-centred?

*Kyo wasn't the one* lying in a hospital bed right now, having lost- drugged up to the eye-balls and with a difficult recovery waiting ahead of her. No.

As always, she was just fine. Somehow beating all odds and getting out of scrape after scrape without much to show for it.

It wasn't fair.

She'd already gotten a shot at life, in a place that was so peaceful compared to this place it was almost laughable.

And she *would* laugh at it, if she didn't think it would make her cry.

None of the people around her now had ever experienced peace like she had. In a different body, different life, different world, but still.

The memories were *there*.

The air was getting chilled around her, and it reminded Kyo about the fact her clothes where still caked with slightly damp mud and probably dried or drying blood.

Shivering ever so slightly, she wrapped her arms more tightly around her legs, sucking in a lungful of night air and letting it go in a soft sigh.

Night had well and truly fallen when the sound of soft, hurried footsteps approached her hiding place.

“Very near, now,” a familiar voice muttered, as if to herself, and the footsteps quickly drew closer.

“Kyo?” Another voice asked, sounding worried and hopeful, at the same time as there was a sense of exhaustion pulling on the tone as well.

“Found her!” Kisaki stated, and next Kyo knew, a cold, wet nose pressed gently against her arm.

“Kyo,” she sighed.

“Are you okay? You've been gone for hours,” Minato said breathlessly, crouching down in front of
Kyo peered at her team-mate's concerned blue eyes. His blond hair looked more grey in the shadows and lack of light in the alleyway.

She stared from Minato to Kisaki and back repeatedly in confusion.

“Vous shouldn't have left the hospital,” Minato said quietly, looking worried. There was something about the cast to his face that made her think he looked lost.

Like he didn't know what to do other than what he was currently occupying himself with.

Kyo managed a low, rough laugh that died before it had had a chance to fully form.

“You smell hurt,” Kisaki said into the following silence, glancing between her and Minato. “Minato came to get me, because no one could find you,” she said next, wedging her snout in under Kyo's arm to give her a gentle nudge. “You're injured.”

“It's fine,” Kyo dismissed blandly. “Medic's already looked at it.”

The utterly unconvinced look Kisaki levelled her with was impressive.

“Come,” she said firmly, voice brokering no argument.

Kyo couldn't find it in herself to put up a fight.

Listlessly, she allowed Kisaki and Minato to pull her up from the ground and then up onto the ninken's strong back.

Cheek pressed against Kisaki's soft, warm fur, she watched the ally slowly slip passed them as the dog began to walk back to the hospital, pace slow and careful as to avoid jarring her.

She glanced over at Minato, who was walking close beside them, one hand fisted in Kyo's shirt and keeping his eyes peeled on their surroundings. Like they were still on mission.

He must have rushed to the Inuzuka compound when he hadn't been able to find her in the area around the hospital. And somehow talked his way inside.

Or convinced someone to fetch Kisaki for him.

How he'd made them listen to him, she didn't have the first clue.

Far too soon, Kisaki was stalking up the road to the hospital doors, the light from inside the building spilling out onto the ground beneath her paws.

Kyo stared at the shadows it cast, and if her face hadn't hurt too much for it, she would have frowned.

When Minato opened the door to let Kisaki in first, she was too tired to pay the hands picking her up off the dog more than cursory notice.

People were talking, but the words just washed over her, slipping off like water off of oiled canvas, leaving nothing behind in their wake.

Someone did something with her foot again, so she guessed she had done some sort of damage to the cast by walking around on it, but... she couldn't find it in herself to care.
Kyo slipped in and out of uneasy slumber until a large, warm hand landed on her head, accompanied by a heavy sigh from a familiar chest.

“You're going to make me go grey, child,” Katsuou-sensei's deep voice rumbled from next to her and Kyo had to bite her lip to keep from doing something stupid.

“Sensei,” she whimpered, voice high and thin and unsteady. “I was doing better,” she added wetly, because it just wasn't fair.

“You were,” sensei agreed firmly.

“I can't.” Kyo's throat closed up and she took a deep breath in an attempt to steady herself, shaking her head.

Katsuou was silent, and a small part of her was terrified he was going to leave. That he would realise that she was just too much trouble to keep around. All she did was give him more problems and grief.

There was only so much patience you could expect from one person.

Blinking her eyes open when the hand was removed from her head, Kyo just about had time to give the room a panicked sweep with her eyes, before sensei's arms slipped beneath her and picked her up from the hospital bed.

One of her arms automatically wrapped around sensei's broad, sturdy shoulders and she blinked in an attempt to clear her eyes, but that just made the tears spill over to drip down her cheeks. Which stung something fierce, because her face felt like one big bruise and her nose was still recently broken.

Katsuou settled back in his chair with a heavy sigh, settling her carefully in his lap.

Kyo went boneless against him, gingerly leaning her head against his shoulder. “I can't do this again, sensei,” she said thinly.

Sensei's hand came up to cradle her skull, air whooshing through his lungs in a deep breath. “Naoki is alive, Kyo,” he said quietly.

“Yeah,” she agreed tremulously, mouth twisting bitterly.

“He lost a leg, not his life,” Katsuou continued steadily, the timbre of his voice soothing and comforting and he was warm and alive.

“Sensei,” she said, voice small, trying to stop crying. “This is a horrible year.”

-x-x-x-

Katsuou slumped down in the uncomfortable chair and settled in for a long day.

He smoothed down Kyo's hair with one hand, while the other one made sure her left foot was placed safely and comfortably on the edge of the mattress right next to them, elevated and in no danger of falling off.

Humming neutrally under his breath, he glanced over at the door, where Jiraiya was standing by the wall and silently met his grim gaze.
The blond brat was passed out on his own bed, and the Akimichi boy had been tucked into yet another bed after he'd come out of surgery.

All of Team Seven had been gathered in one room, with the addition of Katsurou himself.

“Unless you plan to get something else done, I recommend grabbing a chair and taking a seat,” he said idly, not letting up on the steady petting of his brat's soft hair, smoothing it back from her battered face again and again in a steady rhythm he hoped would lull her fully back to sleep.

The younger man by the door looked conflicted, gaze flicking between his battered kids; from Naoki, to Minato, to Kyo.

“I should've protected them,” he muttered, sounding distracted and like he was talking more to himself.

“Maybe,” Katsurou returned evenly. “I wasn't there and it's too soon to have seen any of the reports, but you're talking to a man who lost two out of three students.” His hand stilled on Kyo's head, his hold on her tightening infinitesimally. “Your Genin are still alive, and Kyo will bounce back. Eventually,” he added into the grim silence.

She always did.

But that didn't mean Katsurou wasn't aware that there was a limit. For all that her circumstances were different, she was still just a child, and she could only take so much before something broke under the strain.

At the rate this war was going, they were about to start toeing the line.

“I feel like such a failure,” Jiraiya muttered, but did pick up a chair to bring further into the room. After a brief moment's indecision, he put it down between Naoki and Minato's beds, seeing as Kyo was already receiving most of Katsurou's attention.

“So learn from this and try to do better,” Katsurou huffed, knowing very well that it was easier said than done.

The room was silent for a long few minutes.

“How did you...” Jiraiya asked quietly, question trailing off uncertainly but it was clear enough what it was he was asking.

Katsurou slanted a long look over at the man, who was staring intently at Naoki's pale, drawn face. He felt his mouth flatten into a tight, tense line.

Katsurou turned back to gazing at Kyo's bruised but mostly peaceful face, slack with sleep and partially obscured with medical tape. “I take it you hunted down the mission report,” he began, and it wasn't really a question. Katsurou had done the same, as soon as he got out of the hospital, no matter how much it had felt like he was punishing himself. He didn't wait for Jiraiya to answer before continuing. “One of the last things I told them was to stick close together,” his lips stretched in a self-deprecating, humourless smile. It had made them an easier target for the trap. “It was just chance they happened upon the one team with Kyo on it. If not for her, they would've succeeded.” He paused and the silence stretched.

“I never know how to treat her,” Jiraiya admitted under his breath a while later.
“You'll figure it out,” Katsurou returned easily.

And even if Jiraiya couldn't figure it out, he was sure Kyo was up to the task. Once she'd gotten a chance to recover and heal and find a way to get used to the new person she was turning into. So very different from the adult she'd once been.

He sighed.

Katsurou was sure Kyo would recover from this with a little time and care. And lots of hugs, he mentally added with a small measure of amusement.

Brat had managed to corrupt absolutely everyone around her, too.

Her father, on the other hand, wouldn't be anywhere near as amicable and easily settled as Kyo was.

“They're alive,” he murmured quietly to himself, fingers finding the pulse on the side of Kyo's neck, as if of their own accord.

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Chapter 50

Chapter Summary

Kisaki, Katsurou-sensei and paperwork

Minato stayed in the hospital until Kyo was discharged the next morning. She was provided with a pair of very old fashioned crutches and then gently ordered to go home and rest.

Minato came with her, keeping a close eye on her the entire time, looking like he was prepared to run in and swoop her off her feet if she showed so much as a hint of stumbling.

It was a nice sentiment, but also, incredibly annoying.

“T’m not about to collapse, Minato,” Kyo told him tiredly after ten minutes of watching him twitch every time she moved.

The wooden crutches were the kind you fitted under the pits of your arms. It made Kyo miss the sort of crutches she had gotten used to in another life something fierce; they had seemed so much lighter and more practical.

“You look sort of unsteady,” Minato returned after a beat of silence, though there was an apologetic note to his voice.

“Which definitely has more to do with these annoying crutches than anything else,” Kyo muttered sourly.

Neither of them was in a very good mood, considering they'd just left Naoki behind in the hospital.

Thankfully, the boy's mother had turned up last night and hadn't left the room for anything other than the bathroom since, looking like she was prepared to camp out in there until the moment Naoki woke up from his induced sleep.

He had a few more surgeries and a lot of healing to get through.

“Do you- Do you think they'll assign another Genin to our team?” Minato asked a few minutes later, frowning down at the ground.

Kyo sent him a sharp look and he glanced up at her.

“That's what they did for you,” he added quietly, “right?”

“Jiraiya said he won't be fit for any kind of active duty for a really long time,” Kyo said darkly. “But maybe he can pull some strings to get him into cryptology once he's well enough.”

Minato nodded, but hadn't missed the fact that she hadn't answered his question.

She didn't know, and it wasn't like Kyo was fit for active duty right now, either. Not until the cast was removed from her foot and she was sure everything was working as it should.

Considering Tsunade had been the one who fixed her up, Kyo wasn't overly concerned, but it was
still a faint thought in the back of her head. Lying there, waiting.

“Come on, let's get home and fix something to eat,” Kyo muttered, motioning for Minato to come with her.

Neither of them felt up to spending time alone right now.

.

Kyo carefully settled down on the grass off to the side of their training ground, putting her crutches beside her. Within reach, but still out of the way.

“So what did you have in mind?” She asked, turning her attention to Jiraiya, who was watching her with an unreadable expression. “I can't really spar,” she pointed out dryly.

Which was obvious and something Jiraiya was already well aware of.

Minato snorted and sent her a wryly amused glance, before he focused back on their sensei.

“Which is why this is the perfect opportunity to hold a more theoretical lesson,” Jiraiya said, rolling his shoulders and sending them a thin smile, which was no more than a shadow of his usual grin. “What do you two know of fuuinjutsu?”

Kyo blinked a couple of times and considered him. “The art of sealing, ranging from anything between storage scrolls to explosion tags, to... more extensive works,” she said slowly.

“Barriers, too,” Minato added thoughtfully.

Jiraiya nodded. “Theoretically, there are very few limits to what you can not do with fuuinjutsu. The only thing that's setting the limit is your imagination and level of skill and competence.” He paused to eye them both seriously. “It's a field not many shinobi try their hand in, due to the high death toll,” he added seriously. “So? Interested?”

“After such a riveting introduction speech?” Kyo wondered dryly, sending him a sardonic look. She shrugged. “It's not like I have much else to do, and I might just lose my mind before this thing comes off if I don't keep busy.”

“It sounds interesting,” was Minato's response.

“Very well, then,” Jiraiya said, seriousness bleeding away for an eager, excited smile. “Let's get started on the basics!”

Which was how Kyo found herself in her first calligraphy lesson.

She had almost forgotten what it was like learning something new that didn't involve purely physical activities.

It was busy, engrossing and all-consuming, leaving no room to think about anything else.

The lessons also pointed out just how bright Minato was, and it was... humbling.

But no matter how much Kyo was enjoying learning something new and interesting, that didn't mean she could let her other responsibilities and tasks fall to the way-side. Which was why she found herself in the Uchiha district an early morning, overdue to check on the batches of poison she'd put to
dry in Ryota's house.

The man himself had let her in when she'd knocked, looking like he'd just rolled out of bed, and when Kyo had sat herself down on the floor in the living room, had let himself fall onto the soft couch to stare despondently up at the ceiling.

Kyo threw a glance at him in between motions as she carefully scraped the poison out of the bowl-tray, mindful not to let anything go to waste.

Ryota looked a bit... well, there was really only one word on her mind: Pathetic.

“Have you tried telling them you don't want to get married?” She asked into the sleepy morning quiet.

A throaty grunt was all the answer she got, which she took as an affirmative.

Kyo hummed thoughtfully. “You're making this more difficult than it has to be, you know,” she continued idly, narrowing her eyes as she carefully poured the fine powder into the jar she'd prepared.

There was rustling from the direction of the couch, and she was pretty sure Ryota had just sat up.

“So I've been told,” he drawled with clear disdain.

“I'm pretty sure your Clan Elders meant it differently from how I do, though,” she said evenly, still not taking her eyes off of her work.

Ryota didn't say anything to that, but she could feel his gaze on the back of her head, silently demanding some sort of explanation.

“You've made it very clear you don't want this, so why don't you just find a woman who feels similarly? You don't have to make a go at marriage in the same way as the Elders might want you to; so long as you're married and produce a kid or two, they'll be happy, right?” She continued before he could say anything. “So find a woman who are of the same mind as you and be upfront with her. Treat it like a mission and stake out parameters that will ensure that if you don't end up happy, then at least you won't be miserable.” She shrugged and finally sent him a glance over her shoulder.

Ryota looked like he had frozen in place where he sat, face entirely blank, but there was a clear, speculative glint in his eyes that let her know he'd heard and understood every word she'd said. And not said.

“I'll be very sad and disappointed with you if you don't take proper care of any future children you may or may not end up with, though,” she added calmly.

Ryota snorted.

The next time Kyo sent him a look, the man looked far less pathetic. Like he no longer dreaded the near future with overwhelming intensity.

Kyo couldn't help but smile faintly to herself, feeling relatively happy and content. Because she'd actually managed to do something to solve a problem, for once.

The feeling faded quickly, when her thoughts inadvertently turned back to Naoki and the fact that his life wouldn't ever be the same. Once he eventually woke up, anyway.
She and Minato had been to visit him a few times in the last few days, and the sight of the stump of his right leg under the blanket always made it feel like she was going to throw up.

It was wrong.

He wasn't supposed to look like that; he was only ten.

Kyo wasn't sure it would be okay even if he'd been twenty years older, because no one—no one deserved this.

Sighing quietly to herself, Kyo finished what she was doing, stacked up her equipment and pushed it into an out of the way spot where no one would accidentally step on it until she came around to wash them and start a new batch.

Curse it all to hell, she hated the damn crutches.

The day's fuuinjutsu lesson had gotten cancelled due to Jiraiya being called to an urgent meeting. Which would no doubt turn into an urgent mission.

Leaving Kyo with nothing to do.

After a few minutes' thought, Minato had decided to go off and train. Work to increase stamina and strength.

It made Kyo feel all kinds of useless, because she couldn't help him spar. Couldn't even see much use in spending the day with Genma, horrible as it might sound, because she was all but stationary, with her foot pretty much useless.

Tsunade had threatened dire consequences if she spent any time walking around on it again, and Kyo was inclined to believe she meant business.

She frowned down at her crutches, tempted to smash them against the nearest tree, but seeing as that wouldn't just accomplish absolutely nothing, but also leave her without means to get around, Kyo refrained.

 Barely.

"You're unhappy."

"You would be, too, if you suddenly couldn't move around without the use of two glorified sticks," Kyo shot back, sending Kisaki an irritable glance, even though it wasn't the ninken she was upset with.

It was a bit harder to frown at herself. Or life.

Kisaki gave an amused huff, did the dog equivalent of rolling her eyes, and then stalked over, every inch the apex predator.

Kyo watched the ninken take one of the crutches in her mouth, holding it between her teeth.

"The hospital will be put out if those break," she commented idly, making absolutely no move to save them.

Kisaki didn't dignify that with a verbal response, though she did give her a superior glance. And
proceeded to toss the crutch aside.

The other one joined it shortly.

“Nice. Thank you,” Kyo deadpanned. “Your plan better not be to leave me here,” she warned lightly.

Kisaki sighed at her and grabbed hold of Kyo’s arm, getting drool all over her forearm. Definitely on purpose.

“Ew.” Kyo snickered, but obliged happily enough when Kisaki pulled on her to stand up, careful not to put any weight on her bad leg.

Kisaki’s eyes were laughing at her, and before Kyo could do more than smile back, the ninken had let go of her, snuck around to behind her, slipped her head between her legs and lifted her off the ground.

Kyo slid to a stop on the dog's shoulder, peering curiously down at the top of her friend's head.

“I'm not sure I'm comfortable with this,” she admitted.

Kisaki slanted a questioning look at her as she began to amble back in the direction of the village.

Kyo sighed, tightening her hold on the white fur under her hands. “You're my friend, not some sort of... transportation, or beast of burden,” she muttered with a frown. Taku would have kicked her ass for even suggesting it.

“I know,” Kisaki replied loftily, and she sounded amused. “You're mine,” she added, as if it was all very simple. She must have picked up on Kyo's confusion, because after a brief pause, she continued with a huff. As if she thought she was being intentionally obtuse. “I like having you close, and pack helps when someone is hurt,” she sent Kyo a pointed look, “so this is fine. I decide it's fine,” Kisaki said easily.

Anyone else, though... Kyo could imagine that if anyone else tried to do this, the reaction would be both explosive and violent.

Deciding to relax and enjoy the sense of easy mobility, Kyo finally took an interest in where they were going.

“Kisaki?” She questioned a while later, when it became clear that they weren’t going home. To either of them.

“Sensei,” the ninken answered, calmly continuing towards the Hokage Tower.

Kyo smiled and amusedly watched one of the Chuunin absently hold the door open for them and then startle when he realised it wasn’t just another shinobi walking passed, but an enormous ninken, currently acting-pony.

Kyo gave him a slow wave in thanks.

Leaning down to get closer to Kisaki’s ears, she murmured to the dog, “You have an evil sense of humour.”

“You've rubbed off on me,” Kisaki shot back.

Because the long looks they were attracting were downright hilarious, if you were inclined to that
particular sense of humour.

Kisaki quickly made her way to sensei's office, knowing the way and slipping through the working shinobi with ease, even with her extra burden.

“Hey, sensei,” Kyo greeted when they slipped through the open doors.

Katsurou looked up from his work sharply, only to blink. “Kyo, Kisaki,” he greeted amusedly, eyeing them curiously. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“I don't have anything to do, and I'm currently crippled,” Kyo told him breezily, motioning down at Kisaki.

Katsurou-sensei's lips twitched. “Are you volunteering for paperwork duty? Because that's what it sounds like.”

“I am desperate,” Kyo told him solemnly, and even the other Yamanaka Jounin snorted at that.

“I suppose we can find something for you to do,” Katsurou huffed, shaking his head and getting to his feet. “Come on,” he said, motioning for them to follow.

He gave Kisaki's head a fond pat as he strode passed.

Katsurou brought them to what looked like a highly secure filing room not too far from his office, and he opened a drawer, grabbed a bunch of files, and handed them to Kyo.

“Do a preliminary screening of their mental states,” he said, nodding at the files. “There's plenty of space for you to make notations,” he added, which told her plenty of what he wanted from her.

“Am I really qualified for this?” Kyo wondered, peering down at the files with quiet apprehension.

“We'll find out, won't we?” Sensei mused lightly, taking a step closer to place a hand on her shoulder reassuringly. “It's mostly logic and good sense,” he added when Kyo continued to look uncertain. “You're my student,” he pointed out dryly, eyebrows climbing fractionally up under his hitai-ate.

“So that's a yes,” Kyo muttered to herself, frowning thoughtfully.

She cocked her head, considering what was on offer here, weighing her own abilities against the task at hand.

“You'll go over every one of these when I'm done, right? So if I botch something completely, it won't be a disaster,” she asked, lifting her gaze to stare intently at Katsurou.

Her sensei's dry look was assurance enough that anything else was unthinkable. These were Konoha shinobi they were talking about. Their mental health.

Kyo gave a small, firm nod. “I'll do my best,” she promised.

“I know you will,” Katsurou returned and walked back towards the door. “Go find somewhere to sit and get to it. Come find me when you're done and we'll see where we go from there.”

The break room in the Hokage Tower was surprisingly more peaceful than what you might have expected from the workplace of a bunch of stressed, professional murderers, but Kyo wasn't complaining.
“Over there, please,” she murmured, pointing at one of the corners.

Kisaki obligingly walked over and sat down, being a steady hand-hold for Kyo until she could lower herself to the floor and settle down.

Injured leg stretched out in front of her, the other folded in towards her hips, Kyo made herself comfortable, distractedly pulling a pen from one of her pouches and flipped the first file open.

She quickly read through the basic information on the shinobi it was concerning and carefully absorbed what she'd been provided with about the situation.

It didn't take long for her to get lost in the work.

Kisaki had settled down behind her, lying down to relax like a warm, breathing backrest with built in people repellent.

All the ninken had to do to make sure no one approached them was to crack one pale yellow eye open to stare unblinkingly at whichever shinobi had been studying Kyo a second too long with curious interest.

Not that Kyo was overly aware of that, absorbed by her task as she was.

Sliding yet another finished file underneath Kisaki's foreleg, Kyo turned her attention to the next one, ignoring the rest of the room.

Which worked perfectly well until a familiar hand reached her field of vision and she automatically snapped the file she was reading shut.

“Hello, Kyo. Kisaki,” Inoichi greeted, peering curiously at the diminished stack beside her. “What are you doing?”

“Working,” Kyo returned blankly, trying to focus back on the present situation and the break room they were sitting in.

When Inoichi's fingers twitched toward the files, Kyo pointed her pen at him. “Don't even think about it,” she said firmly, pressing her other hand down on the stack.

“I'm just curious,” Inoichi said, smiling pleasantly at her.

“Not for Genin eyes,” she huffed, sticking her tongue out at him.

Inoichi pouted.

“So if I go get Shikaku it's fine?” He wondered, doing his best to look wounded by her words.

Kyo narrowed her eyes at him. “No.”

Inoichi heaved a dramatic sigh, slumping down to sit on his butt on the floor. “How come you're here, anyway?” He asked, gaze sliding to the side to inspect the cast on her foot.

“Jiraiya was called in for a meeting,” Kyo said, eyeing the nosy Yamanaka boy suspiciously for a moment, before she tentatively turned part of her attention back on the file she'd been going through when he'd interrupted her. “I wouldn't be surprised if he's no longer in the village,” she added absently.

“And that blond teammate of yours?”
Kyo huffed a laugh at Inoichi calling anyone else blond. “Training.” She sent him an amused look. “I *would* join him, but Tsunade might actually follow through with her threats.” She shrugged, pointing her pen at her foot.

Kisaki rolled onto her stomach and yawned wide, displaying her impressive canines for a moment. She made a grumbling noise, deep in her chest and Kyo nodded, waving her off.

Absently pulling the files she’d already finished close, Kyo tucked them under her leg and turned her attention back to Inoichi, who was watching her with a peculiar look on his face.

“What?”

“...Is it okay to ask, or do you want me to back off?” He wondered, eyeing her intently.

Kyo frowned down at the pen in her hand, considering his words.

She wasn’t ignorant to the fact that it felt like Inoichi had received the brunt of her temper over the last few months, and that wasn’t fair. He was just trying to be a good friend. He *was* a good friend.

“Naoki lost his leg,” Kyo said evenly, scribbling down another few points in the mental eval report.

The words and the tone of voice she had said them in didn’t correspond, and as such, it took a second for the full meaning to sink in.

She knew the moment he realised what it meant, because Inoichi didn’t quite manage to bite back the wince.

“I am,” he took a deep breath, “so sorry, Kyo,” he said quietly.

She shrugged, lips twitching self-deprecatingly. “I’m not the one in a medical coma, crippled.”

“You know what I mean,” he returned seriously and Kyo finally raised her head to meet his gaze.

“Yes.”

Inoichi studied her for a long moment, and then took a mental step back and away. “So will you at least tell me what these are about?” He asked hopefully.

“No,” Kyo scoffed, rolling her eyes, relieved at the change of topic. “You can go ask Katsurou-sensei,” she suggested with a wicked grin, knowing full well Inoichi would do no such thing.

“No thank you,” the boy in question muttered quickly, predictably.

Eyeing her friend fondly a moment, she managed another few lines in the comfortable silence that settled between them.

“The fuck is this, some kind of daycare centre?” A gruff, disapproving voice grumbled loudly.

Kyo slanted her gaze to land on the Chuunin that had just walked into the break room, appearance both harried and ruffled, looking like he’d hardly slept in the last week, with bags beneath his eyes.

She guestimated him to be sixteen, seventeen years old and there was an ever so slight limp to his gait.

There didn’t seem to be anything wrong with his legs, though, and if she was forced to guess, Kyo would say there was some issue with his left hip. Possibly the pelvic bone?
She exchanged a quick look with Inoichi, and had to look down to hide a small smile.

“You think that's funny?” The Chuunin grumbled a moment later, after he'd gotten himself a cup of much-needed coffee and gingerly collapsed into a chair at a nearby table.

“I do, yeah,” Kyo returned idly, flipping through the papers in her current file, checking she hadn't missed anything, before she snapped it closed and tucked it in with the rest of the finished ones, under her leg.

Grabbing the next one waiting for her attention, Kyo flipped it open and absently stabbed her pen at the hand Inoichi had reached towards the same pile in an attempt to sneak a peek.

“You are no fun,” he huffed without a hint of anything other than cheerful amusement.

He did keep his hands to himself after that, though, so there was that.

“I didn't think there were Genin working here,” the teenager muttered sullenly, eyeing Kyo with something like disapproval.

“I'd say you're right,” Inoichi told him with a friendly smile the teenager looked offended by the mere existence of.

He sent Kyo a pointed look.

“Chuunin,” she said absently, frowning down at what she was reading. With a wordless grumble, she noted down a few pointed words and moved on.

The teenager scoffed, drained his coffee and pushed himself back to his feet to get back to work, shoulders tensing with pain before he got himself back under control and walked away.

Inoichi stared after him, a small, thoughtful frown on his face.

“Sometimes, I wonder how long this can go on,” he said, voice soft and quiet and instantly drawing Kyo's full focus and attention. “Tou-chan says it's starting to get bad, even for those who're still functional and capable of service.”

“There will be a breaking point,” she agreed, just as quietly.

The question was just when that breaking point would be reached, and what would tip the war over that precarious edge.

Her stomach churned uncomfortably at the thought.

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Chapter 51

Chapter Summary

Making friends, more paperwork and finally, tou-san

“The hell are you doing here? Useless fucking cripple,” Kaimaru scowled petulantly at her, like she'd somehow insulted him with her mere presence.

Kyo silently mused that it had been the right decision to leave Kisaki at home for this particular excursion.

No matter how much it grated to use the crutches, the ninken might just have killed him for the way he talked.

“Hello to you, too, asshole,” Kyo returned amicably, not waiting for Kaimaru to invite her inside before she made her way through the doorway.

If it had been up to the surly teenager, he would have slammed the door in her face and not lost any sleep over it.

“Fuck you think you're doing?” Kaimaru asked sharply, though he made absolutely no move to force her to leave.

Kyo turned around to face him, spending a moment to study Kaimaru's sullen frown, the way his eyes slid down to glare at her injured foot.

“Thank you.”

Kaimaru tensed. “What the fuck,” he hissed aggressively, bristling, gaze snapping up to her face, shining with prickly hostility, and for a brief second, the reaction took her aback.

Kyo studied him for a long moment, trying to figure out... oh.

“I'm not making fun of you,” she said, blinking incredulously at him. “I'm thanking you for carrying me to the hospital,” she clarified, feeling something small and sad settle in her chest at the way Kaimaru stared at her. Like her words weren't translating in his head.

Like they weren't making any sense.

Kaimaru scowled, looking immensely uncomfortable. “Don't do shit like that again,” he ordered scathingly. “And the moment that thing comes off, you owe me so much sparring, you'll wish you'd died.” He glared.

Kyo couldn't help but smile, unable to stop herself. Because Kaimaru's words were even harsher and more unpleasant than ever, but he looked... uncomfortable and awkward and somewhat lost where he stood.

Like he didn't know what to do.
“Okay,” she agreed simply. “I'll even buy you lunch,” she added.

Kaimaru twitched and narrowed his eyes at her, like he thought she was working an angle and was trying to figure out what she wanted.

“I'll be watching you like a fucking hawk the entire time, you damn pest,” he declared bluntly, eyeing her mistrustfully.

Kyo snickered under her breath.

That still wasn't a no, even if he'd just accused her of planning to poison him.

“I wouldn't expect anything less,” she shot back with a grin, feeling absurdly cheered up for someone who had basically been cursed out and cussed at for the last few minutes. “So have you seen anything of Hyena lately?” She asked curiously, because injured and -indeed- crippled like this, she couldn't exactly go visit ANBU headquarters, and unlike with Crow, she didn't know Hyena's real name and identity outside of the corps.

Kyo was pretty sure Hyena actually lived in headquarters, full-time, but she hadn't asked.

“You couldn't pay me to get within five feet of that headcase outside of missions, and if you think otherwise, you're just as crazy, Shiranui,” Kaimaru grunted, mouth a flat, unamused line across his face. At least he looked calmer and more at ease now that they were getting back on familiar ground.

“So he's fine, then,” Kyo surmised lightly. “Thanks, Kaimaru. You're a good friend,” she said, smiling brightly at him.

Kaimaru was too blind-sided and outright shocked to do anything as she awkwardly opened the door and went on her way, using her crutches to hop homewards.

“I'm not your-!” Kaimaru's voice snarled loudly behind her, but Kyo didn't so much as twitch. “We're not damn-” and he seemingly couldn't make himself say it, as if it was the vilest thing he'd ever heard and didn't want the taste of it on his tongue.

Kaimaru gave a frustrated growl and slammed the door shut with an echoing bang, and Kyo laughed quietly to herself all the way out of the Uchiha Compound.

Another few days of doing paperwork in the Hokage Tower with Katsurou-sensei, and Kyo was ready to do something drastic to get out of there.

“I don't know how you put up with it,” Kyo said, staring up at the ceiling, feeling like her soul was about to drift away from her body.

“Certainly not by sprawling dramatically on the floor,” Katsurou returned distractedly, not so much as glancing away from what he was doing.


Katsurou just snorted. “Come over here and tell my why you've flagged this shinobi here,” he said, not missing a beat.

Kyo rolled to her feet -though took care not to put any weight on her left one- and hopped on one leg over to sensei's desk to peer curiously at the file he was asking about.
Katsurou tapped one short sentence she'd written in the margin of the transcribed interview. “Explain,” he ordered evenly.

Kyo frowned and pulled the file out from under her sensei’s finger, to read some of it to get an idea of which one it was; she'd read a lot of them by now.

“Ah,” she murmured, frowning. Satou Takara. Reading his mental evaluation had given her the creeps, and she hadn't even been able to put a finger on why. “There's just something about his wording, here,” she said, tapping a particular section of text. “It's rubbing me the wrong way.”

Katsurou hummed neutrally, eyes continuing down the transcription.

“It's because he's wording his response like he's talking about a mission, giving an official report,” the man finally said. “Some newbies over at Psych misses it, takes it as a sign of professionalism, instead of dissociation.” He made a few notes of his own at the bottom of the page, before turning it over to take a look at the other side. “Which can be a dangerous thing in a professional killer if left unchecked,” he added idly.

A few thoughtful minutes passed while Katsurou went through another few of the reports Kyo had been assigned that day.

“What about this one?” He asked abruptly, jarring her from her wandering thoughts.

Kyo blinked and scanned the page Katsurou tilted in her direction. Maeda Hayate. Twenty two year old Chuunin, working in T&I.

“Well, he's not really answered any of the questions, has he?” Kyo asked sceptically. “He's talked a lot, but he hasn't said enough to so much as fill a spoon.” She sighed. “The guy doing this interview needs more training,” she muttered. “He's letting Maeda control everything and he doesn't even notice.”

Katsurou made an affirmative grunt, frowning at the file, made a few notations of his own, and then put it in one of his drawers, looking displeased.

“Gonna have to go through all of Psych at this rate,” he grumbled quietly to himself.

“I'm sure you'll leave them appropriately terrified,” Kyo consoled him with a small grin, pleased with the wryly amused look Katsurou shot her in response.

“You're done for the day, so scram,” he said instead of commenting. “Get the hell out of here, and take that lump of fur with you.”

“I resent that,” Kisaki huffed, getting to her feet with a playful growl.

“Yeah, sensei,” Kyo said seriously, levelling the man with a solemn stare. “Kisaki's the very definition of grace and beauty, and if you're not careful, she'll use your Jounin vest as a chew toy.”

“Those things are self-contradictory,” Katsurou shot back, smirking.

“Who says proper dental hygiene isn't graceful?” Kyo wondered idly, pulling herself onto Kisaki's back when the ninken came to a stop beside her, giving her an affectionate scratching behind the ears while she was at it.

“Get going,” Katsurou ordered flatly, but Kyo knew there was laughter in the depths of his eyes, even without looking.
Kyo was on her way into the kitchen when the door opened with a familiar call of “I'm home!” and she instantly had to drop her crutches to snatch up Genma before he could dash passed her and leap at their father in a flying tackle-hug.

For one second, everything was still.

Genma was too shocked to have been snagged off his feet to so much as wiggle, and tou-san merely stared tiredly at them.

“What was that? Kyo-chan? Are you alright, dear?” Obaa-san’s voice called from deeper inside the house.

“I'm fine!” Kyo called back, balancing on one leg. “Just dropped the crutches!” She added, because maybe that wouldn’t be obvious to their grandma.

“Why?” Genma demanded when he'd absorbed the fact she'd stopped him from running straight at tou-san.

“You need to be a bit careful with tou-san, okay?” She whispered in her brother's ear, studying the way Kou held himself and the wear and tear his uniform had seen since he'd left.

Genma craned his neck to peer at her, before he gave a small, solemn nod, even though he looked largely confused.

“If you take the sticks, I'll take the pup,” Kisaki drawled lazily from where she lay on the floor.

Kyo snorted and rolled her eyes, but nodded, because that actually sounded like a pretty good deal.

The ninken rolled to her feet, stretched, and strolled over.

They exchanged a brief look, and then Kyo carefully put Genma on the dog's back, where he excitedly fistfuls of fur as handholds.

“Don't pull,” she warned him and Genma gifted her with a brilliant grin.

“If you pull my fur, I'll chew up your favourite toy,” Kisaki warned glibly, but Genma didn't look particularly daunted.

“Oh, Kou-kun.” She smiled, walking up to her son to give him a look-over. “You should come in and stay for dinner; you look absolutely dreadful,” she said with clear concern colouring her voice.

Kyo shook her head.

As if tou-san wasn't already aware of that, and that was always a nice thing to get pointed out to you first thing back in the village.
Let the man get a shower first, at least!

“We already had dinner, though, baa-san,” Kyo reminded the woman, before Kou had to scramble for something to say in return. “Why don't we just bring some left-overs home for tou-san? That way, he can go to sleep sooner.”

Haname-obaa-san glanced at her, and Kyo managed a small smile at the woman.

“I'd really just like a shower and my bed, kaa-chan,” Kou admitted tiredly, and the weary quality to his voice seemingly won her over.

“Oh, alright.” She frowned worriedly at Kou for a moment. “I'll make you a box to bring with you, just one moment,” she said, sweeping off towards the kitchen. “I would like you to come by for a proper family dinner soon, though, Kou,” she added in a raised voice while she worked. “Kana and the kids haven't seen you in so long, I fear the little ones won't recognize you.”

Kyo exchanged a look with her dad and then hurried to go collect her and Genma's things while Kisaki brought the toddler over to the hallways, where Kou could outfit him with his shoes.

By the time they finally got home, it was close to Genma's bedtime.

Kyo handed tou-san the packed dinner, and then turned to her brother.

“Who do you think will get ready for bed first, us or tou-san?” She asked with a pensive, speculative look on her face, thoughtfully tapping a finger to her lower lip.

“Us!” Genma immediately declared.

“Really?” Kyo wondered with mild scepticism. “What will be the prize?”

“Tou-san's got to read us a story,” Genma decided after a brief moment's contemplation.

“Does tou-san accept those terms?” Kyo wondered idly, sending the man an amused look.

Kou just about managed to suppress an entertained snort, giving the three year old a solemn nod instead. “If I win, you have to read *me* a bedtime story,” he countered evenly, not missing a beat.

Kyo bit her lip to keep from laughing, and then had to brace for Genma's attempt to drag her off to their bedroom.

“I'm coming, I'm coming,” she assured the toddler. “It'll just take longer if you make me fall over,” she said.

Genma pouted up at her, but did calm himself somewhat, glancing at the cast on her foot with a sullen glower.

“Here you go,” Kyo said, handing the boy a fresh set of pyjamas, and then grabbed a clean t-shirt of her own to sleep in. “Wanna get a shower, too?” She asked Kisaki, who had settled down on Kyo's bed like a queen on her throne.

The ninken gave a dismissive sniff and laid her head down on Kyo's pillow.

Kyo huffed an amused laugh and followed Genma to the bathroom.

The crutches made *everything* trickier, and she couldn't wait to get rid of them, but until then, she'd have to manage as well as she could.
“Careful now,” Kyo reminded her brother as she watched him struggle out of his t-shirt, somehow making it look like a fierce battle of wills. Between Genma and the t-shirt.

Stripping out of her own clothes, Kyo gathered them all up and dumped them into the hamper stood off to the side, and then settled down to wash the both of them, all the while taking care to hold her left foot out of splashing distance.

Halfway through shampooing Genma's hair, Kou joined them in the bathroom.

It was a tight fit with all three of them, but it worked.

Kyo watched their dad quickly and efficiently shed his own clothes and step into the shower and had to bite back a wince at the plethora of vivid bruises blooming across his skin.

“Close your eyes,” she warned, “I'm rinsing out the suds now.”

“Okay, nee-san,” Genma replied, screwing up his whole face in a pre-emptive attempt to combat the evil shampoo's attempts to get in his eyes.

Kyo grabbed the bucket and poured small measures of water over her brother's hair until she'd gotten all of it.

It wasn't long after that that they were done and she had to tackle the next challenge.

Towelling the little beast of a boy dry.

Thankfully, the promise of story time ensured Kyo didn't have to chase Genma all over the apartment before they were done; something that usually wasn't much of a problem, but with her mobility as it was...

The moment Genma had wrangled on his pyjamas, and finished brushing his teeth, he dashed off to their room and she could hear him jump onto his bed, even without the victorious yell of success.

Kyo snorted and calmly pulled on her own sleep wear, sent tou-san an amused look, grabbed the crutches from their position leaning against the wall beside the door and hopped after him, much more sedately.

“We won, nee-san!” Genma gushed the moment he spotted her, bouncing on his knees on the mattress.

“It would seem so,” she agreed. “Come on, you need to pick a story before tou-san gets here,” she added, pointing at the bookcase.

Genma scrambled over and eagerly looked over the selection.

Meanwhile, Kyo made her way over to her brother's bed and gratefully sat down, dumping her crutches on the floor while she was at it.

Kisaki was snoring lightly on the other bed, and Kyo absently hoped she wasn't getting drool all over her pillow.

“We won, tou-san!” Genma declared, signalling Kou's entrance into the room.

The man gave a heavy, mournful sigh. “Unfortunately,” he agreed reluctantly. “Next time, though. I'm sure I'll win next time,” he mused, sending Genma into giggles when he effortlessly picked him up and carried him to bed.
After the story, when Genma had been tucked into bed and was deeply asleep, Kou smoothed the hair away from the boy's forehead, gazing steadily at his peaceful face for a moment, before he turned to Kyo and motioned towards the kitchen.

Kyo got up and hobbled after him, deciding to forego the crutches just this once.

She barely touched her left foot to the floor as she more jumped on one leg than walked and if Tsunade has issues with that, then Kyo honestly couldn't be bothered right now.

She'd deal with the consequences later.

“Are you okay, tou-san?” Was the first thing out of Kyo's mouth when she spotted Kou sitting by the kitchen table.

“Fine,” he grunted, rubbing both hands over his face before he craned his neck to watch her join him at the table. “They're just bruises; looks worse than it actually is,” he assured her absently, frowning at her. “Kyo...” he began lowly.

“An Iwa Chuunin stomped on my foot,” she told him quietly. “Tsunade fixed it, though, so hopefully, there won't be any problems by the time the cast comes off.”

Kou's frown didn't fade like she had hoped.

If anything, it grew more pronounced.

Kyo waited for him to say something, anything, but the silence grew as her dad stared at her, studying her face.

Thankfully, the worst of the bruising around her nose and eyes had faded by now, so that was something.

She bit her lip and silently acknowledged that she should... should tell him the other thing, too.

“Naoki wasn't as lucky,” she admitted in a barely audible voice, staring down at the table top, tracing the pattern of the well-worn wood with her fingers. “He lost a leg, and he hasn't woken up after the surgery yet.”

The kitchen was silent for a long moment, before Kou took a deep breath, held it for a second, and then released it in a heavy sigh.

When she glanced up at him, he'd raised one hand to rub at his face again, and what she could see of his expression was twisted up into something pained, exhausted and deeply concerned.

“What about the blond one? Minato?” He asked after a brief pause.

“He's fine,” Kyo returned, swallowing thickly.

Kou let his hand fall back to his lap and looked at her with something she wasn't keen on labelling in his eyes.

He looked almost afraid.

“Will you be alright sleeping in your own bed tonight?” He asked quietly.
“I think so,” Kyo said, frowning down at her hand. “I've got Kisaki,” she added, and then hesitated a moment. “But if I'm not,” she glanced up at tou-san, “can I come to you?”

“Of course you can, kitten,” Kou answered instantly, looking helplessly distressed and tired. Like he wanted to do more but couldn't think of anything that would actually help.

“I love you, tou-san,” Kyo said, getting out of her seat to shuffle around the table to give Kou a tight hug, “and I'm really glad you're home again.” She hoped the Uchiha Elders would stop pulling Ryota from missions soon, too. It felt better to know the man kept an eye on her dad's back.

“So am I, Kyo,” tou-san agreed wearily, wrapping her in his arms and pressing a quick kiss to her temple.

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Chapter 52

Chapter Summary

Kyo gets to meet a living legend and also get mildly abducted, but only in the friendliest of ways

Jiraiya came back from his impromptu mission a little over a week after he had left, and spent another week drilling them on calligraphy with uncharacteristic diligence. As if to make up for the time they’d lost.

He hummed thoughtfully as he studied their latest attempts at writing with a proper brush and liquid ink, eyes narrowed slightly.

“Either of you two artistically inclined?” He asked, seemingly out of the blue.

Kyo exchanged a quietly bewildered look with Minato, before she shrugged and scratched at a dry splotch of ink on her hand. “I like to draw when I'm at my grandparents house sometimes.”

“Not really,” Minato replied. “It's just writing?” He added uncertainly, as if he didn't quite understand the question.

Jiraiya huffed and eyed the boy with wry amusement for a moment, before he put the thin rice paper down and rolled his shoulders.

“Natural talent,” he muttered under his breath, as if trying to wrap his head around the concept.

From what Kyo could remember -which was admittedly not all that much any more- Jiraiya had never come over any of his skills easily, and had always struggled with things in a classroom-setting.

“Sensei?” Minato asked when Jiraiya had remained silent for a few seconds, just staring off into the distance with a contemplative look on his face.

“Right!” The man said, clapping his hands together and making both Kyo and Minato jump at the unexpected noise. “Thought we'd have to wait with this another few weeks, but,” he eyed them speculatively, “no time like the present, I guess.”

“Time for what?” Kyo questioned, trying to tell herself there wasn't any reason for her to feel the slightest bit of apprehension.

“Learning fuuinjutsu.” Jiraiya grinned widely at them and then got to his feet, only to crouch down in front of Kyo. “Come on, I'll give you a ride,” he offered.

Kyo huffed but willingly enough pulled herself onto Jiraiya's back.

Carefully arranging herself so that she wouldn't get a face-full of Jiraiya's mane of hair, she settled in for the ride.

“You never said why Kisaki didn't come with you today,” Minato said a few minutes into their walk through Konoha.
Kyo glanced down at him. “She went back to the compound to check in with a few people,” she said, shrugging as well as she could in her current position.

Kisaki's situation wasn't exactly *common*, so there weren't any clear rules for how people ought to deal with her. It made everyone calmer when the ninken checked in with the Inuzuka at least every few days, though, and that wasn't even taking into consideration how *strange* it was for one of their ninken to seek out outsiders rather than their own Clan.

Minato accepted her answer with a thoughtful nod.

They walked in silence until Kyo realised exactly where it was they were going.

“Uh, Jiraiya?” She questioned, trying not to tense with nerves. “Why are we going to the Senju compound?”

“I told you, didn’t I? To learn fuuinjutsu!” He grinned, broad shoulders shaking with a short laugh.

“Are we going to see the Tsunade woman?” Minato asked curiously.

God, Kyo hoped not.

Things were awkward enough without adding more, wasn't it?

“Not this time,” Jiraiya replied easily, “but I do believe Kyo’s got an appointment coming up with her soon.”

Kyo huffed and clenched her jaw, but didn't disagree.

Hopefully, she'd get rid of the cast on her foot at the end of it, so it wasn't all awful.

“Jiraiya-san,” the gate guard greeted in a friendly, unsurprised manner, which told her the man was a regular enough visitor it didn't raise any eyebrows. “Your team?”

“Sure is!” Jiraiya returned, a grin audible in his voice, even though Kyo wasn't in a position to see his face. “Are they in, or-?”

“Just go ahead,” the man waved them in with an amused twinkle in his eyes.

“Thanks, man,” their sensei shot back and continued into the compound as if he practically lived there, himself.

Kyo looked around with uncontrollable curiosity, despite herself.

The Senju compound looked very... traditional. Much like the Uchiha compound, but different at the same time. It felt more like one big home rather than the sense of a commercial district the Uchiha compound carried in certain places.

The Senju didn't seem to be wearing their Clan mark on every piece of clothing either, which made it feel different.

The three of them felt less like intruders and more like just another few shinobi moving about their business.

Jiraiya brought them passed what was clearly a blacksmith's understated shop, and Kyo vaguely recalled kaa-san telling her about the Senju blacksmiths once.
Very good at making high-quality needles, if she wasn't remembering it all entirely wrong.

Soon enough they approached what looked like one of the main buildings, and they were ushered inside with minimal fuss.

Without setting her down, Jiraiya merely pulled off her one sandal, kicked off his own and then continued inside.

His blasé attitude was making her feel mildly uncomfortable with the whole thing, because... were they really allowed here?

She exchanged a long look with Minato, which let her know her teammate was experiencing similar feelings on the matter.

“Um, sensei?” Minato eventually questioned, voice almost hushed.

“Almost there now, no worries,” Jiraiya countered in a voice that felt too loud.

And that wasn't the issue here, was it?

Kyo suppressed a sigh and resisted the urge to rub at her face. All the tension was giving her a headache.

Before the two of them could think of anything else to say or do, Jiraiya threw open a screen door with an enthusiastic greeting on his lips.

“Hey, old lady!”

Kyo took one look at the occupants of the room and felt like smashing her face against Jiraiya's shoulder.

“Hello, Jiraiya-chan,” a smooth, cultured and thoroughly amused voice greeted back. “I wasn't expecting you quite yet.”

“Yeah, change of plans,” Jiraiya said breezily, strolling into the room. “Brats are more gifted than I were.” And he flopped a hand in Minato's direction, as if that explained everything. “So, you got room for two more?”

Who Kyo was fairly sure was Uzumaki Mito raised a wrinkled hand to her mouth to hide a smile, gazing steadily at the three of them, before holding out her other hand in a welcoming gesture that looked far more elegant than Kyo felt it had any right to be.

Her hair might be grey, but the way she styled it was pretty iconic.

The woman's presence was so large and awe-inspiring, it took a moment for Kyo to realise she wasn't the only one she recognized.

Who could only be Uzumaki Kushina was staring at them, face screwed up in a squinty, sceptical expression that looked more comical than actually intimidating.

“What are you doing here!?” She finally demanded, the words seemingly bursting out of her mouth, and she was pointing rudely at Minato, cheeks reddening slightly with what could either be embarrassment at her outburst, or anger.

“Kushina, we're in the middle of a lesson,” Mito reminded the girl calmly, not so much as blinking at the interruption, though her words had an instantaneous effect.
Kushina settled down again with a mulish look, throwing Minato a sullen glare.

Kyo was pretty sure she'd stepped into the twilight zone.

Was she having an adverse reaction to one of the poisons she was getting acclimatized to? Was this a hallucination?

She was so shocked she didn't resist when Jiraiya swung her off his back and set her down on the floor, where Minato was quick to join her, making sure to keep Kyo between him and the disgruntled redhead.

The sheer implications of this were... staggering.

Uzumaki Mito was sitting in front of her like some sort of benevolent, amused queen... Or was that supposed to be Senju Mito?

Kyo didn't have the first clue.

“Do you know if the Hime is around here somewhere? I'd like to have a word with her,” Jiraiya asked next, as if absolutely nothing was wrong and everything was just perfect.

“I do believe she came home from her shift at the hospital about an hour ago,” Mito returned evenly, unruffled and looking like grace incarnate.

Kyo felt an intense, irrational desire to laugh.

“So it's fine with you that I leave my brats with you for a while?”

Before Mito had a chance to respond, they all paused at the sound of quickly approaching footsteps, heavy against the wooden floors.

Like someone was running full-tilt towards them with little care for who heard or noticed.

Kyo was a bit too dazed to more than register the noise.

Then, much like Jiraiya had done a few minutes ago, someone flung the screen door open and skidded to a stop in the room.

Kyo only had time to register the familiar shade of red hair and blue eyes before she was snatched off the floor and squeezed in a tight hug.

“I'll be borrowing this one for a few minutes, bye, see you later, Auntie!” And Aita had spun on his heel and was racing away again, leaving the rest of the room behind before anyone had gotten a chance to say a word.

...did the cast on her leg project the message that it was okay to just pick her up and lug her around like a piece of... something. Like some sort of pet?

Or was it Kyo's preference for hugging and piggyback rides shining through? Hm.

Aita didn't set her down until they'd reached a secluded garden, carrying with it a heavy sense of peace and tranquillity.

“At that it's not nice to see you,” Kyo began dryly, staring up at the sixteen year old who took a seat in front of her, “but this is going to be awkward to explain.”
Aita grinned, looking immensely pleased with himself. “I felt you enter the compound, and I just had to come see you!”

“I don't know about you, but basically abducting me isn't what I would call 'come and see me','” she couldn't help but point out, suppressed laughter making her voice shake.

Aita snickered, rubbing sheepishly at the back of his neck, while still managing to look completely unrepentant.

“I didn't even know you were in the village,” Kyo huffed and rolled her eyes, shuffling around until she was sitting next to the teenager, close enough to lean against his side.

“Yeah, things've been busy lately. Just got back the other day.” Aita shrugged, prodding at her cast with a toe. “I've wanted to talk to you for a while, actually,” he said, slanting a heavy look at her out of the corner of his eye.

Kyo closed her eyes with a sigh.

Contrary to what he'd just said, Aita remained silent and just wrapped an arm around her shoulders in a semi-hug.

“So Jiraiya?” Aita eventually said, a small, thin smile on his lips.

Kyo snorted. “Don't even start.”

“I bet Katsurou's having fun with that,” the teenager mused idly.

Kyo actually laughed, a short, humourless burst of sound. “Sensei might have made a few threats,” she admitted. “But he's not so bad, after you get used to him.”

“I see him around sometimes,” Aita returned. “Hangs out with the Senju princess.”

Kyo hummed.

Aita glanced down at her. “I would ask what you've been up to lately, but judging by the way you ditched me at one of the outposts a few months back spoke well enough on its own.”

Kyo half-heartedly punched him in the side. “That's classified,” she sniffed. She was silent a long second, before she gave in. “And it's not like I could just run up and hug you when I'm wearing the mask.”

“Which is why I didn't call you out on it,” Aita grinned, “but seriously, chibi. ANBU?”

“I think the Hokage wanted to see if I'd pass, and, well,” she mused wryly, ending with a shrug. “I passed.”

Aita frowned speculatively. “What's your mask?”

Kyo squinted at him and dug a finger into his side, causing him to twitch. “Scorpion, but not a word!” She pointed at his face and Aita dutifully mimed his mouth sealed shut.

Which lasted about a second, before a snort slipped out and he burst out laughing.

Kyo pouted exaggeratedly at him.

Aita took a deep breath and tried to compose himself, slowly settling down again. “I really wanted to
track you down and give you a hug when I heard,” he said quietly, the good mood evaporating like smoke in the wind.

The piece of garden they'd appropriated for themselves was silent for a long while, nothing but the breeze and the occasional bird disturbing the quiet.

“You should probably take me back before someone comes looking,” Kyo eventually sighed, prodding the Uzumaki into motion.

“Yeah, yeah,” he huffed, but dutifully got up and swung her onto his back with effortless ease. “So fuuinjutsu?” He questioned once they'd re-entered the house. “If you were interested, you should have let me know! I could have gotten you started years ago!”

“I never thought it was something I was gonna learn,” Kyo admitted wryly. Wasn't really one of Katsurou-sensei's talents or skills, so it wasn't like it had ever come up.

Aita hummed thoughtfully.

“Kyo!” Minato exclaimed the moment Aita slid open the screen door to the room where Mito was holding fuuinjutu lessons, looking unimaginably relieved. “Are you okay?”

“I'm fine,” Kyo assured her teammate, smiling thinly.

“Who are you?” Minato questioned next, staring unblinkingly at Aita, who grinned and waved.

“Uzumaki Aita! Nice to meet you,” he greeted amicably and ambled further into the room.

“Aita-kun,” Mito said calmly, causing the boy to freeze. “It is not proper behaviour towards guests, what you just did.”

“Aw, but Kyo's not a guest, Auntie,” Aita complained light-heartedly, though there was a mildly nervous undercurrent to his voice. “This tiny package of toxic waste is my honorary sister.”

Kyo pressed her face into the back of Aita's shoulder in an attempt to smother her helpless laughter.

Aita made an inordinately pleased noise.

“ Toxic waste?” Minato parroted confusedly, making her laugh harder.

Even Jiraiya, who seemed to have lingered in response to Kyo's sudden removal by unexpected Uzumaki, gave an amused snort.

“Oh, yeah.” Aita grinned widely. “The utter garbage this girl eats.”

Without looking up, Kyo reached around and slapped a hand over Aita’s face in an attempt to shut him up.

“Ow,” Aita said idly.

Which meant she'd most likely missed his mouth.

Kushina was openly staring at the two of them, eyes slightly narrowed as she looked from Kyo, to Aita, to Minato and back again.

“Well, you children should take a seat so we can have that fuuinjutsu lesson,” Mito finally said, definitely sounding amused.
Aita obligingly lowered Kyo gently to the floor and then made as if to wander off.

“You too, Aita-kun,” Mito added pleasantly.

Aita froze, glanced at the door, then at Mito, and then meekly took a seat next to Kyo.

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Chapter 53

Chapter Summary

Kyo gets rid of the cast, Naoki wakes up, and... memories

Things continued in a similar vein.

Kyo divided her time between tou-san and Genma, her team, and hanging out with Aita until he once again followed his shishou out to one of Konoha's borders, disappearing off for another stretch of who knew how long.

“So you're back.”

“Yes,” Kyo returned, hopping up to sit on the examination table, giving Tsunade an even look.

Considering this was a scheduled appointment, no one should be surprised.

“Have you stayed off the foot?” Tsunade asked, a small, suspicious frown pulling on her delicate brows. “Never mind, I'll find out soon enough,” she powered on before Kyo could so much as open her mouth.

Kyo sent Jiraiya -who was standing off to the side- an unhappy look, but obediently enough settled back to let Tsunade do her job.

Hopefully, she'd get rid of the cast and could -metaphorically- torch the damn crutches.

Tsunade removed her hands from Kyo's foot and reached for a pair of specialized scissors, making quick work of the plaster that had encased her foot for the last few weeks.

A tense ten minutes later, the woman stepped away from her and pulled the thin rubber gloves off her hands.

“Looks like you're well enough for me to send you on to physical therapy,” she declared with little fanfare.

Kyo let out a small, relieved breath. “So it's healed up nicely? I won't have any lasting problems?”

“Nothing that's immediately noticeable.” Tsunade shrugged. “But we'll see; if something pops up, I want you back here as soon as possible, understood?” She sent a sharp look at Jiraiya, too, while she was at it and the man gave a firm nod.

“Yeah,” Kyo muttered, frowning thoughtfully at her pale and slightly wrinkly foot.

Putting her feet together, it was obvious that her left one was thin and withered after the weeks it had remained static.

Tsunade launched into a lecture on stretches and exercises she were to be doing daily for the foreseeable future.

At the end of it, Kyo was ready to just seek out the closest physical therapist to get started.
She was tired of limping everywhere.

“He's woken up?” Kyo demanded, all but dropping the kunai she'd just collected from the other side of the training field, where it had ended up during her and Minato's spar a few minutes ago.

“Woke up after the latest surgery this morning, yeah,” Jiraiya confirmed with a smile that looked more like a pained grimace.

The instant flash of relief quickly turned into apprehension. “What's wrong?” She asked sharply.

Jiraiya eyed her shrewdly a moment, before he sighed. “As you know, he's gone through several more surgeries and Tsunade had to take part of his other leg as well,” he told them solemnly.

There were a lot of complications that could follow an injury like that.

Kyo could imagine that his legs had been all but so much ground meat, but...

She absently noted that her face felt cold and her mouth had gone dry. Kyo clenched her fingers and quietly wondered when she'd grabbed Minato's hand. Or had he grabbed her hand?

“Can we go see him?” Minato asked quietly, staring up at Jiraiya with a serious look on his young face.

“Of course,” Jiraiya shot back after a brief pause. “Tamiko-san said you were both more than welcome.”

Minato gave a firm nod and turned in the direction of the hospital, walking off and pulling Kyo with him without another word.

Walking was still awkward and sometimes sent a twinge of stabbing pain through her foot, but she hardly noticed any difficulties during the walk to the hospital.

In fact, before she knew it, they were standing outside Naoki's hospital room.

Kyo felt paralysed as she watched Minato raise a hand to knock, her grip on his hand no doubt painfully tight, and was there a pressure over her chest?

There was a slight pause, and then the sound of a chair scraping across the floor on the other side of the wood, then steps approaching.

The door opened and Tamiko-oba-san blinked tiredly at them a moment before a warm smile broke out across her round face.

“Kyo-chan, Minato-kun, how lovely it is to see you again,” she greeted softly, stepping aside.

“Please, come in. Naoki-kun is awake.”

Kyo swallowed thickly and wasn't sure how she managed to make her legs work, but into the room she went.

“Hey, Naoki,” Minato greeted with a small, relieved smile.

Kyo cleared her throat and forced herself into something that resembled normalcy. “Hey,” she said.

“Hi,” Naoki returned, and he sounded... tired. Sad.
“Sensei just told us you woke up,” Minato continued, undaunted by the heavy atmosphere. “We came right away.”

“Great,” Naoki said, voice bordering on flat.

Kyo didn't like this.

Minato continued to prattle on about how worried they'd been, how glad they were Naoki was finally awake, with a few comments about the training they'd been doing while he'd been unconscious thrown in there.

Kyo wanted to tell him to shut up, but she couldn't make her mouth work.

She couldn't tear her eyes away from Naoki's face, overly aware of the fact that he'd spent the entire time staring up at the ceiling, not once so much as glancing at either of them.

“Go away,”

The two words cut into Minato's determined dialogue like a knife through rice-paper, leaving a thick, uncomfortable silence in their wake.

“Naoki-” Tamiko began in a vaguely chastening voice, but cut herself off when Naoki turned his face away.

“Leave,” he said quietly. “Please.”

Minato opened his mouth to say something but Kyo tugged on his hand, drawing his attention.

She shook her head.

Kyo sent Naoki one last look, gave Tamiko a deep bow and then left, dragging Minato with her.

Minato remained silent all the way out of the hospital.

“What was that about?” He demanded to know the moment they were back outside, the sunlight beating down on them and making his hair look several shade brighter than it usually did.

“He's lost both legs, Minato,” Kyo managed to press out quietly, feeling cold and clammy and she really just wanted to go home. “His life is never going to be the same, and if-” she swallowed dryly, “if he blames us, ‘me’, ‘for that, then...’”

She didn't want to know.

Minato frowned. “But it's not like it was our fault,” he objected reasonably. “It was that Iwa Chuunin.”

“Doesn't matter,” Kyo muttered. “You should- you should talk to Jiraiya-sensei about it,” she added when it looked like Minato still wanted to argue.

She couldn't do this, not right now.

“What about you?” Minato asked, eyeing her intently, no doubt picking up on there being something off about her.

“I'm going home,” Kyo mumbled, sent Minato a brief glance, let go of his hand and shunshined off.
Kyo fiddled with her fingers, absently tracing the familiar scars and callouses with the fingers of her other hand.

The air was pretty stuffy, and she was slowly approaching what felt like too-warm, but she didn't feel like moving.

Sounds were muffled, but she'd heard when the front door opened and then closed a while back. She still hadn't made any move to get up and go out and say hi.

There was no warning before the mattress in front of her dipped sharply under the weight of an adult man, and then tou-san peeled back the comforter to expose her to the air in his bedroom.

“Bad day?” He asked evenly, peering down at her with sad eyes, taking her appearance in.

After spending so long under the comforter, the air felt cold on her face, but at least it was easier to breathe.

“Naoki's awake,” she said instead of answering him, still staring at her hands, resting limply against the sheets now.

“Okay,” tou-san answered slowly.

After a moment's contemplation, he moved the comforter further in towards the middle of the bed and lied down next to her, head on kaa-san's pillow.

“He didn't want to see us,” Kyo admitted, a traitorous tremble shaking her voice. “Didn't even look at us.”

Kou let out a heavy sigh, but didn't say anything.

“Tou-san?” She asked, reaching up to grab Kou's Jounin vest, using it to pull herself up so that she was lying beside him and could rest her head on his chest. “This is really hard.”

“Yeah. It really is,” her dad agreed bleakly, finally wrapping her up in a hug, holding her so tightly it almost hurt.

A minute later, Genma padded into the room and, the moment he spotted them on the bed, climbed up to join them.

“Nee-san,” he muttered and determinedly wedged himself between them, wrapping his arms around her as best he could. “Are you sad?”

“I'm very sad,” she agreed, face screwing up with tears, even as she fought against the need to cry.

“Why?” Genma asked against her diaphragm, innocently curious and concerned for her.

She took a deep, wet breath, nose clogging up with the tears she was desperately fighting off. On her exhalation, she lost the fight and with a wordless noise buried her face in tou-san's chest.

“There, there,” Genma muttered, one of his small hands patting her back clumsily. “Don't cry, it's okay,” he said, and it just made her cry harder.

-x-x-x-
“We've got a mission!” Jiraiya declared with forced cheer.

He'd been putting forth a facade of determined, dogged cheerfulness and happiness ever since their disastrous visit with Naoki.

Apparently, Tamiko had reluctantly asked Jiraiya that the two of them stay away for now, if only until Naoki could heal more.

“Really?” Minato asked, looking up from the seal he was slowly, painstakingly copying. It was a dud, harmlessly faulty explosive tag, existing for the sole purpose of them practising to use a brush to draw it out. “Even though we're not a full team?’”

Jiraiya plopped down in front of them, absently scanning their progress. “Some might say that you're more my apprentices than Genin at this point,” he mused, striking a generic 'thinking pose', hand cradling his chin.

“Because of the fuuinjutsu,” Kyo tiredly hazarded a guess.

“Exactly! So keep up the good work!” Jiraiya grinned, sending her a thumbs up while he was at it.

Kyo just blinked flatly at him. “When's the mission?” She asked instead of commenting.

“Tomorrow,” the man continued in a far more conversational tone of voice. “Another courier run, to the Yu border.” He scratched absently at one cheek. “Kumo's been pretty quiet lately, so it should be a breeze.”

“Way to go tempting fate,” Kyo muttered.

“It's probably a good thing we're running missions again, though, right?” Minato asked briskly, sending her a look before turning fully to Jiraiya. “Kyo got cleared for duty, didn't she?”

“I think it's probably good for all of us to keep busy right now,” Jiraiya said, clearly in an attempt at diplomacy Kyo couldn't help but feel he botched tragically.

“As if any of us have anything resembling a choice,” Kyo muttered darkly, and she knew she was bringing down the mood and being all around sullen and pessimistic, but she couldn't help it.

Life sucked pretty hard right now.

The pause that followed was awkward and approaching uncomfortable.

Jiraiya let out a heavy sigh, tugging absently at a stray lock of his hair and giving her a pained look, as if he didn't know what to do.

Well, he wasn't the only one.

“Do you want me to file for time off for you?” Jiraiya asked after a long pause. “With your circumstances, you might get it.”

Kyo closed her eyes and pressed the heels of her hands against her eyelids.

A quiet, bitter laugh escaped her.

“We both know, if that was an option, I would probably already have gotten it,” she said without looking up. “I'm functional, in good physical health, and my coping mechanisms are effective and better than most people's.”
When she finally looked up to meet Jiraiya's dark eyes, she couldn't help but notice the way Minato was staring between them as if he was trying to figure out what was really going on. As if he could read the unsaid parts of the conversation in the space between them.

Jiraiya's face twisted up in a brief, distasteful grimace.

As if he hated the fact he couldn't refute her words.

“I'm still here,” Minato said abruptly, out of the blue.

Kyo blinked and turned to stare at him, unsure if he was feeling ignored or...

The boy frowned at her with an intent look on his face, as if he was trying to look inside her head just with the force of his will.

“You're upset about Naoki, right? Well, he'll come around eventually, and I'm still here. I'm not going anywhere,” he declared firmly.

Or as firmly as a ten year old boy could, anyway.

Kyo cracked a small, reluctantly amused smile that seemed to please Minato to an absurd degree.

“Are you saying I'm stuck with you?” Kyo asked, wiping quickly at her eyes.

“Absolutely,” Minato said, gifting her with a grin that felt like the sun.

“Sensei, I think Minato's hit his head,” she huffed softly, gaze decidedly blurry. “He's saying crazy things. He must be concussed.”

Jiraiya laughed and reached out to ruffle the hair on both of them, looking genuinely happy for the first time since the botched reunion with Naoki had happened.

“Come on, pack up your things and I'll buy us all lunch,” he said with a warm grin.

The mission went as smoothly as was possible, as far as courier runs went.

They didn't so much as see a hint of enemy action, and there were no incidents.

It made Kyo feel all kinds of twitchy, and she wondered when she'd come to expect having to fight for her life whenever she left the village. When the simple progression of events where that didn't happen left her unsettled and generally rattled.

Nevertheless, the Konoha main gates were a sight for sore eyes.

Foot aching like a bitch and feeling tired and sore after the extensive cross-country run, Kyo shuffled into the Village with little care beside Minato, slightly behind and to the right of Jiraiya, who looked unruffled and like he'd merely gone for a pleasant stroll in the woods.

After they'd registered their re-entry with the guards, Kyo stilled the moment she noticed Katsurou-sensei standing calmly off to the side, watching her with an unhurried and relaxed air about him.

Kyo stared right back at him for a long moment, trying to figure out why...

Oh.
“Jiraiya, can I be excused?” Kyo muttered at her current sensei, not taking her eyes off of Katsurou.

Jiraiya swivelled around to look at her, followed her gaze to Katsurou-sensei and then gave a shallow nod, expression softening and tightening at once.

“Sure. Take your time,” he said, reaching out to pat her shoulder twice. “See you day after tomorrow,” he added.

“Yeah,” Kyo returned distractedly.


“Not this time, Minato,” Jiraiya said softly, interrupting the boy, but Kyo had already started moving away from them and was paying them less than even partial attention.

When she reached Katsurou, he held out his hand and Kyo slipped into a partial hug without hesitation, feeling her sensei's warm hand settle on her shoulder like a firm, grounding weight.

“No injuries?” Katsurou questioned quietly.

Kyo shook her head.

“Then let's go,” he said, giving her a brief squeeze. “We need to pick up something for Kisaki to eat on the way.”

“Okay,” Kyo returned mutedly.

They didn't speak after that.

Not until they reached the cemetery.

“Come, it's over here,” Katsurou told her quietly, tugging her along when Kyo's steps faltered. When she realised she didn't know where they were, which headstones belonged to them.

She hadn't attended the funerals, and she hadn't gone anywhere near this place in well over a year.

“This is Maki,” Katsurou muttered, crouching down in front of a stone that looked almost exactly the same as the ones around it. He carefully brushed off some imaginary dirt from the name carved into the surface.

There were fresh flowers by the grave, along with incense that had nearly burned out entirely, signifying Maki's family had been here earlier today.

Katsurou absently pulled a sealing scroll from a pocket and a moment later, held a very familiar, beat up wakizashi in one hand.

With utmost care, sensei placed the sword by the headstone, adjusting its resting place until it was perfect.

Kyo stared lamely at the grave.

She didn't have anything for him. Nothing to place by the resting place of this body. Not even flowers.

Barely noticing when Katsurou gently grasped her hand, she did notice when he tugged her down so that she was sitting in the grass beside him, planted firmly right in front of the stone.
Katsurou gazed at Maki's carved name for a long time, humming quietly under his breath, looking distant and pensive.

“He learned a lot during the years we got,” he mused eventually, a long while after they’d sat down.

Kyo slowly roused from her daze.

She was entirely propped up by Katsurou, having successively leaned more and more of her weight against his side without noticing.

With a small, soft sigh, she let herself slide down the last bit until she was lying down on her back with her head cushioned on Katsurou-sensei’s thigh. Close enough to the ground to smell the grass.

“This isn't where he is,” she found herself saying quietly.

“No,” sensei agreed, just as quietly. “But it’s where we go to remember him on days like today.”

“It doesn't feel like a year,” she muttered, gaze falling from the sky to the side, landing on the name. Maki's name.

Minami Maki.

He would have been thirteen now.

It felt like much more than a year had passed. So much had happened since then. But at the same time... it felt like it had happened just the other month.

As if she was still stuck alone in the hospital, staring at Katsurou-sensei hard enough he just couldn't die, not if she didn't look away. As if this was all a dream.

“Time is both a blessing and a curse,” Katsurou breathed, shifting one hand until it was on her face, covering her eyes a moment, before he pulled it up her forehead, bringing her hitai-ate with it until it fell into his lap.

They stayed a while longer, before Katsurou nudged her until she sat up.

Kyo stuffed her hitai-ate into a pocket, and they got to their feet and moved on.

She didn't need Katsurou telling her where to go this time, because she could already see Kisaki, stretched out on the grass a ways in front of them, looking like she hadn't moved all day. Possibly several days.

While sensei got out the food they'd bought for the ninken, Kyo sat down beside her without a word and got out her water canteen.

“Come on, Kisaki,” she murmured softly. “You need to drink and eat,” she cajoled sadly, running a hand along Kisaki's snout, up over one of her eyes and to her ear, smoothing down her pale fur.

Kisaki took a deep breath and let it out like a soul-rending whine.

Kyo closed her eyes, heart damn near jarred to a stop in her chest.

She still had nightmares about that sound, that desperate, agonized crying Kisaki had produced, conveying perfectly clearly how she was breaking to pieces inside.
“Come on,” she prodded thickly, managing to get the ninken to at least drink some water.

The moment Kisaki had lied back down again, Kyo scrambled over to settle herself in sensei’s lap, on the ground within the safety of the loose circle of his legs.

For a long moment, they just sat there, staring at Taku's name, the grave-marker depressingly similar to Maki’s. To everyone else’s resting here.

Kyo’s back pressed against Katsurou-sensei’s chest.

When Kisaki whined again, Kyo couldn’t help but twist around and face sensei.

Katsurou eyed her evenly, vaguely curious, but mostly thoughtfully pensive.

Kyo glanced at his face a second, before she slowly reached out to gingerly unzip his Jounin vest.

Every movement felt like an echo of that memory, like she was back there, even though all the details were wrong. But she couldn’t make herself stop.

One hand slipped in under his shirt to skim over the scar on his side, the other one carefully patted the outside of his thigh, and then she brought her hands back to in front of herself, staring at her palms and fingers.

Part of her mind couldn't process the fact that there wasn't any blood on them.

When Katsurou's large hands closed over hers, she startled so badly she nearly toppled over.

Her gaze jumped up to Katsurou-sensei's eyes, only to blink at the sharp, intent look in them.

“Where are you?” He asked. “Here?” He nodded shortly at the cemetery around them. “Or back there?” He tilted his head to the south west.

Kyo worked her jaw a moment, trying to remember how to speak.

“Here,” she croaked, the moment she found her voice.

“Good,” Katsurou said firmly, giving her an intent, narrow-eyed look. As if he was seeing everything and trying to sort it all out.

Kyo took a deep breath and tried to pull herself back to the present.

“He- He thought I was a baby,” Kyo managed to rasp, slowly turning back around so she could lean against sensei again.

“Only until he learned better,” Katsurou rumbled, the vibrations of his voice shaking her whole ribcage.

Eventually, Kisaki shuffled close enough to curl around Katsurou-sensei's back and end up with her head resting on his thigh, snout near enough wedged in between them.

They didn't leave until it was entirely dark out, at which point Katsurou picked her up without a word and carried her to his house, where he ultimately dumped her on the bed in 'her' room to get some sleep, before he retired to his own bedroom for the same.
Chapter 54

Chapter Summary

Kindly offering to poison people is a nice way to get to know someone

Time passed.

Days turned into weeks turned into months and before she knew it, Kyo was turning ten.

Despite assurances that it wasn't necessary, tou-san arranged a birthday dinner at a family-friendly restaurant. Katsurou-sensei would be there, as would Kisaki and Ryota, and tou-san told her she should invite her new team, too.

Having Katsurou and Jiraiya in the same room, by the same table, was more than a little awkward, but Minato and Genma made it work.

Somehow.

Genma was entirely oblivious to the subtle thread of tension between the two men, and Minato was too distracted by her little brother's glaring to notice anything off.

Kyo huffed a small sigh and sent tou-san a long glance.

Kou gave her a wry smile in return and shrugged.

"Can't believe the kitten's reached double digits," Ryota muttered, scratching at his jaw with a contemplative look on his face. "We're getting old."

"No you're not, you're just melodramatic," Kyo fired back without pause or a hint of regret. They were barely thirty; tou-san was twenty nine and Ryota was just a few months older.

Katsurou-sensei scoffed, though the look in his eyes was entertained.

"That applies to you, too, Katsurou-sensei," she informed him glibly, pulling one of the serving dishes closer to her plate.

"Brat," Katsurou grunted gruffly. "I've been accused of many things in my life," he mused drily, "don't think being dramatic has ever been one of them."

"There's a first for everything," Kyo informed him primly, before taking a bite of her fried fish.

Jiraiya coughed in a poor attempt to smother a laugh.

"Shouldn't there be more young people here?" Ryota asked next, probably in an attempt to derail whatever it was brewing between Jiraiya and Katsurou. "Don't you have any friends, kitten?"

"Inoichi and his team are on a mission," Kyo ticked off on her fingers, "haven't seen Aita since he left a few months ago, and your nephew slammed the door in my face when I tried to invite him," she told him, smiling cheerfully.
Ryota, who had been in the process of taking a drink of his sake, choked.

Kou automatically slapped him on the back a few times, eyeing his teammate with a curious, faintly sceptical look out of the corner of his eye, but refrained from commenting.

The moment his airways were clear enough for it, Ryota managed a strangled, incredulous laugh.

Kyo grinned at him. “But Minato's here,” she added, pointing at the blond, who was still staring curiously at Genma, who hadn't stopped glaring at him for a second since they'd arrived and the toddler had spotted him.

No one mentioned Naoki, and Kyo hadn't commented on the fact that this wasn't an Akimichi restaurant, either.

As if on cue, Minato spoke up.

“Kyo? Why is your little brother-?” His voice trailed off and he gestured vaguely at Genma, as if he didn't know how to describe what the little boy was doing.

“I don't know?” She returned lightly. “Why don't you ask him?” She smiled.

Genma's eyes narrowed further, no doubt in an attempt to intensify his glare, but all it really did was make it look like he could barely see.

“Nee-san's mine,” he declared as fiercely as a three year old -and a half!- could.

Minato blinked. “Okay?” He agreed confusedly.

There were several amused noises from the men around them, and Kisaki snorted.

“And mine,” the ninjukage declared, like a royal decree.

Genma made an unhappy, disgruntled huff and disappeared under the table.

A moment later, he reappeared in Kyo's lap, wrapping his arms firmly around her waist and sending Minato a highly suspicious glower.

Kyo snickered quietly under her breath for a moment.

“What 'bout girls?”

Kyo blinked and turned back to Ryota, absently patting Genma reassuringly on the back. “What about them?” She asked curiously.

Ryota gestured vaguely at her. “Shouldn't you have some as friends?” And he looked almost troubled.

Kyo tilted her head, studying the man. “I don't know if you've noticed, but there aren't really a lot of kunoichi around, Ryota.”

“It's slowly getting better,” Katsurou commented idly, looking relaxed where he sat, but Kyo couldn't help but notice he kept part of his attention on Jiraiya at all times. “There are more aspiring kunoichi joining the Academy every year.”

Kyo eyed him interestedly a moment, before she turned back to her uncle with a shrug. “Doesn't change the fact that most people in my graduating class thought I was a boy, and the rest were of the
firm opinion that I was a baby, so.” She shrugged again.

“Really?” Minato asked, looking up from his food to send her a curious look.

Kyo nodded.

“Huh.” Minato frowned in thought, the tips of his chopsticks resting against his lover lip. “Why?”

“I was four years younger than them,” Kyo snorted, “and pretty small.”

“Didn't look like much back then,” Katsurou-sensei agreed easily. “Though I can't say it's much better now, either.”

Kyo tossed a scrunched up napkin at him, which bounced harmlessly off his vest.

They ate in mostly comfortable silence for a while.

Tou-san managed to talk Genma into sitting on his own, if right next to Kyo, and they ended up shifting around the plates a bit, but the toddler soon enough went back to eating his food.

If with the occasional long look at Minato.

It wasn't until dinner was almost finished that Minato spoke up again.

“Why do you call her 'kitten'?” He asked curiously, looking alternately at tou-san and Ryota.

The two men exchanged a brief look.

Kyo paused what she was doing, because that was a very good question.

The one time she'd asked, just after they'd started, all she'd gotten had been some vague, entirely unhelpful answer she could barely remember.

“Well,” Kou said slowly, blinking a couple of times.

Ryota huffed and leaned his elbow on the table, a small smirk on his face. “First time I saw the kitten out of the infant-stage,” he began, but Kyo couldn't help but interrupt.

“I'm not some sort of insect!” She objected. “Why are you talking as if I was a larva at first?” She demanded to know, doing her best to suppress the grin threatening to split her face.

“-was at the hospital,” Ryota continued without pause or reaction. “Kou'd gotten hurt pretty badly and for a moment, it was pretty much touch and go,” he explained evenly, amusement dancing in his eyes. “Yuuta and I were waiting outside the operating theatre when Isshun breezed in like a damn storm. Yuuta, being the idiot he was, talked to her a full minute before he even noticed the kitten there, sitting quietly in Isshun's arms, staring at him like she was trying to figure out his deepest, darkest secrets.” He cracked a small grin. “Fastforward a while, Isshun was called away by the nurse and she up and left, but not before handing Kyo off to Yuuta, who accepted her before he could register what happened.”

“You know, as far as first impressions go, that wasn't the best,” Kyo mused idly, making tou-san snort out a laugh.

“So he just sat there, holding her like this,” Ryota continued, holding up his hands in front of him, as if holding something small just beneath the arms in front of his chest. “Looking like she was covered in explosive tags and could go off any second.” He smirked. “Idiot ended up asking if she shouldn't
be crying and the kitten asked if he wanted her to.”

Katsurou-sensei laughed quietly.

“That still doesn't explain anything as to the nickname,” Kyo pointed out.

“Yuuta couldn't get over the fact Kou and Isshun's not-even-three year old kid threatened him, and said you'd looked like a kitten, dangling from his hands. Cute and harmless-looking, but with sharp claws,” Ryota drawled, picking up his sake cup to salute her before taking a drink. “It stuck.”

“I didn't threaten him!” Kyo yelped. “I was two!”

“Sure sounded like it when you pointed out how much Isshun must have trusted him to hand you over,” Ryota fired back with a slow, amused, slightly wistful grin.

“It was the first thing he told me about when I finally woke up after surgery,” tou-san added with a healthy dose of wry amusement. “Couldn't get the picture out of my head after that.”

Both warmed and saddened by the story, Kyo busied herself with dessert for a moment.

“Who's Yuuta?” Minato asked quietly when the grown men turned to another topic.

“He was tou-san and Ryota's teammate,” Kyo explained just as quietly with a quick glance at the two. “He died a few years ago.”

Minato didn't say anything to that, but looked tou-san and Ryota over with new eyes.

All in all, it was a very nice evening, and Kyo walked home with tou-san and Genma, feeling warm and mostly happy.

It could have been better, if there hadn't been so many people missing, but turning ten felt so much better than turning nine had, it wasn't even comparable.

Not even a month later, Minato turned eleven, and they had another dinner, though quieter and with just the three of Team Jiraiya there to celebrate.

Team Jiraiya had just delivered the scrolls from a border station at the correct desk in the Hokage Tower and were on their way out when a disturbance further down the corridor drew their attention.

Someone was shouting, and there was the noise of what sounded to Kyo like a body striking something solid, along with the heavy thunk of kunai hitting wood.

All familiar sounds, though generally not inside the Hokage Tower.

Jiraiya frowned and walked closer, no doubt wanting to find out what was going on, while Minato merely looked curious.

They'd been to the border to Tetsu, so while not as tired as they could have been, neither of them were well rested, either.

Soon enough, they were close enough to get a clear picture of what was going on.

A tall shinobi, built like a brick wall, appeared to be off the handle pissed off, standing in the middle of the corridor with an absolutely enraged expression on his face.
Another shinobi lay crumpled on the floor by the wall, evidently the reason behind the earlier sound, and there was a group of tense men around him, all waiting to see what his next move would be.

The man was panting harshly, sharp, angry grey eyes scanning the people around him and there was an aggressive grimace on his face, as if caught mid-snarl.

The Konoha hitai-ate on his forehead seemed to glint mockingly at them in the light from the ceiling lamps.

“Sensei?” Minato questioned softly, clearly not sure of what was going on.

Jiraiya’s mouth flattened, and his gaze didn't leave the scene in front of them. “Stay close,” he said shortly.

“Calm yourself,” one shinobi said, taking a wary step closer to the enraged man in the centre of the altercation, pulling most of his attention to himself.

“Shut up!” He growled back, and it wasn't until she heard his voice that Kyo realised there was something... familiar about him.

The more she thought about it, the more she realised that she recognized him. Had met him before.

The question was from where...

Another shinobi tried to approach and was also punted into a wall for his efforts, seemingly with blatant ease.

People were talking and the shinobi in the middle roared something, throwing another kunai uncomfortably close to one of the spectators, but Kyo wasn't paying attention to the words; she was busy trying to place his face and voice.

She knew she'd come across him before!

The man huffed out a dark, bitter laugh and that's what finally did it.

Kyo knew where she'd met him.

Taking a second to truly study all the shinobi occupying the hallway, Kyo felt like she was slowly piecing together what was really going on here.

Sure, the man was angry and slightly out of control, but... not entirely without reason.

The shinobi around him watched him warily, with something like actual- not fear, but close, in their eyes, mistrust in their stances and- he was a comrade.

He was a Konoha shinobi, just as much as everyone else here.

That wasn't how you treated a fellow Konoha shinobi who needed help.

Slipping passed Jiraiya and Minato before either of them could try to stop her, Kyo approached the man at a calm but purposeful stride, but stopped a respectful distance away from him.

“Hello, Hirata,” she greeted calmly.

Hirata blinked and turned to fix her with an intent, weighty look.
She could tell it took a while for him to place her. “Kid,” he returned harshly when he finally did, gaze sliding to something behind her, and Kyo didn't doubt Jiraiya had taken several steps closer. Most likely in an attempt to snatch her away from the berserk Jounin.

“So they let you out?” She asked, even though it was more than obvious.

“Despite general concerns,” Hirata muttered, a sneer on his face as he scanned the rest of the people around them. “What about you, pipsqueak?”

“Still breathing,” Kyo told him breezily, taking the chance to study him more intently now that she was closer and Hirata had made it clear he wasn't about to attack her for now reason.

He was angry, sure, but Kyo couldn't help but notice how tired he looked beneath the show of temper.

Like he hadn't slept properly for months.

He was angry, tired, and there was something tense about his face that had nothing to do with either.

Kyo followed his gaze and studied the things his eyes were lingering on.

Hirata could tell these people didn't trust him, and he was very clearly hurt by the reception. Hurt that translated into indescribable fury, and it made sense, because Kyo hadn't met a shinobi yet who was good at showing any kind of weakness.

Hirata tensed in preparation when someone else edged closer.

“Hirata,” she spoke up into the tense silence, drawing attention to herself again.

“What?” He grunted, not taking his eyes off the man that had moved.

Part of Kyo wanted to ask where his Hyuuga friend was, but the options were either mission, dead, or 'not here', so she simply refrained.

“Can I come closer?” She asked curiously instead.

Hirata's full focus fixed itself on her and it was slightly unnerving, but... it wasn't worse than when Katsurou-sensei did the same thing.

The man gave a grunt Kyo took as permission.

She wasn't afraid when she walked up to right beside him, staring pensively up at the man, who glanced down at her with something like idle curiosity.

“Would you like me to give you something so you can sleep?” She asked quietly, deciding to go for the most obvious option first. The one that was most easily solved.

Hirata tilted his head and considered it, then glanced around at the people around them.

“Katsurou-sensei has an office in the building, and there's a couch,” she added in an equally quiet voice.

Hirata huffed, but the anger was slowly but steadily receding.

“Would you let me take your hand?” She asked.
Hirata blinked and looked down to stare blankly at her.

Kyo studied his expression a long second, looking for any sort of refusal or even mild discomfort. When she found none, she slowly reached out to slip her small hand into Hirata's large one.

He remained unresponsive, but that didn't stop her from grasping his calloused hand, turn on her heel and lead him through the surrounding shinobi.

Kyo didn't spare a moment for the staring idiots who had made everything worse with their mere presences and thoughtless actions.

It would have been better if they'd left, rather than try to 'contain' Hirata when whatever had set him off.

“Who the hell are you?” Hirata demanded sharply, making Kyo pause long enough to glance over her shoulder.

“That's my new sensei and teammate,” she told him, absently tightening her hold on his hand, reclaiming his attention.

“The fuck did Katsurou do to deserve that?” Hirata grunted in response, disgruntled but clearly letting it go enough not to be overly bothered by the two males following them.

“Takes a long while to recover from some kinds of poison,” Kyo said evenly.

“Shit,” Hirata muttered, and to Kyo, it sounded like an apology.

She sent the man a brief smile over her shoulder, turning down another corridor. “That's okay. I mean, it really, really sucked, but they're not so bad.” She shrugged. “It could definitely have been worse. I mean, Jiraiya was prepared to fight you if it looked like you'd hurt me, so,” she said, sending Hirata a quicksilver grin that held little actual humour.

For a moment, Hirata actually looked somewhat amused, though she didn't think most people would have noticed.

“Here we are,” she told him, before leading him straight into Katsuou-sensei's office. “Hello, sensei! We just need to borrow your couch for a while,” she announced cheerfully.

Katsurou looked up from his work, took in Kyo and Hirata, her hold on his lax hand and Jiraiya's hovering form behind them.

“I thought kids were supposed to bring stray animals home, not shinobi.”

“Don't be ridiculous, sensei; this isn't a home, and neither of us live here,” she told him reasonably, not so much as pausing on her way to the couch in the back corner. “Now,” she said once she'd motioned Hirata to take a seat, “how long would you like to sleep, Hirata?” She asked, looking expectantly at the man.

Hirata stared bemusedly at her for a long moment. “Is it possible to do a week?” He half-joked, and there was a tired note to his voice that went deep enough to lodge in his bones.

The corners of Kyo's lips turned down fractionally. “Not really. Let's start with a solid twelve hours,” she suggested, slowly pulling a needle from her cuffs, holding it up for Hirata to see.

Hirata eyed it with something Kyo was uncomfortable putting a name on.
“Go for it,” he said, looking more relaxed by the minute.

Kyo nodded and slowly inserted the needle into his upper arm, through the sleeve of his uniform shirt.

“You’ll start to feel drowsy in a few minutes, and your limbs will grow heavy, possibly feeling numb. That’s normal,” she informed him.

Hirata grunted an affirmative and shifted so that he could lie down on the couch, looking pretty content with this situation.

Kyo left him to it and wandered over to Katsurou-sensei to claim her spot in his lap. Something Katsurou didn't do a thing to object to or complain about.

“Do I even want to know what’s going on?” He asked idly, leaning back in his chair and absently tugging her hitai-ate straight.

“Something set off Hirata’s temper and then all the shinobi around him made it worse by treating him like a potential enemy,” Kyo told him glibly.

Katsurou hummed thoughtfully a moment, before he patted her on the head, glancing over at Hirata, who was staring contentedly at the ceiling while he waited for the sedative to kick in.

“I wasn’t aware you knew each other,” he said.

Kyo frowned off to the side. “We met in the hospital.”

Katsurou stilled, no doubt processing that and coming to the correct conclusion.

He let out a heavy sigh.

“So what the hell is going on here?” Jiraiya finally asked.

“You’ve ended up with a very interesting brat on your hands,” Hirata muttered sedately. “Other than that? Not much.”

“I’m confused,” Minato admitted readily, looking an interesting mix of curious and mildly troubled.

Kyo exchanged a look with Katsurou, and then faced her team with a sigh. She opened her mouth and-

Was interrupted.

“Not all shinobi have abilities that make them admired by their comrades,” Hirata grunted quietly. “Kid will grow up to be universally feared because of her blood-line.” He waved an uncoordinated hand in Kyo's direction, not looking away from the ceiling. “And people like me have a few too many cracks for other people's liking,” he added magnanimously, a faint smile pulling on his lips.


She was perhaps a bit too touchy about this on his behalf, but... she was feeling a strange sort of kinship with Hirata, even though this was only the second time they’d met.

At the disbelieving looks she got for her words, Kyo grudgingly amended, “It's not like you killed anyone, and people should be more aware of the consequences of their actions,” she muttered sourly, crossing her arms over her chest.
Katsurou patted her on the shoulder affectionately. “I'll make sure Hirata's looked after until he wakes up,” he promised. And after, was left unsaid, but Kyo still heard it.

“Thank you, sensei,” she said, pressing a quick kiss to Katsurou's cheek and shunshined to Jiraiya's side before he could do anything about it.

“Brat,” Katsurou's flat voice made her snicker. “go home.”

“Sorry for barging in,” she said with a smile.

Katsurou's dry and less than impressed look told her he knew very well she'd do it all over again in a heartbeat. With zero regrets.

“Get gone.”

Kyo fired off a lazy salute, grabbed Minato and towed him out the door.

Jiraiya-sensei lingered in the office a moment longer, gaze sliding between Katsurou and Hirata before he followed.

“What was that about?” Minato asked as soon as they were clear and well out of hearing distance.

“I just think people who have sacrificed a lot to the village deserve respect and understanding,” Kyo said.

“I agree with you, Kyo,” Jiraiya said on a heavy sigh. “I'd just like you to do it in a manner less likely to give me a heart-attack before I'm thirty. Or at least give me a heads up,” he muttered.

Kyo offered him a mildly apologetic smile, but didn't promise anything.

Tightening her hold on Minato's hand, Kyo mused that it were times like this that made her feel older than her physical age. That reminded her that in reality, she was older than Jiraiya, tou-san and even Katsurou-sensei.

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Chapter 55

Chapter Summary

The merits of the Village-system

Jiraiya had brought them by the Senju compound for another fuuinjutsu lesson with Uzumaki Mito; fuuinjutsu master and resident Jinchuuriki.

That reminder still threw her for a loop.

Kyo had spent the last few minutes just staring contemplatively at the woman, and she didn't become aware of it until Mito turned her purple eyes on her, sharp and vibrant no matter her age.

"Kyo-chan, was there something you wished to ask?" She wondered, not unkindly.

Kyo startled and blinked, trying to drag herself back fully to the present.

She tilted her head.

If she had permission to ask questions... even if they weren't fuuinjutsu related, Kyo saw no reason not to take advantage of the situation.

“Do you think the Village system is better than what was before?” She asked. Because who better to ask than someone who had seen both worlds?

The question left the room in silence, the weight of Mito's gaze a near-tangible thing, and even Jiraiya was staring at her.

Mito tilted her head, the paper charms dangling from her hair swinging back and forth with the motion.

She didn't ask what she meant or tried to treat it like less than what it was worth.

Mito instead gave the question the consideration it deserved.

“Shinobi villages gives us a unique chance at interacting with people outside of our families we didn't have before,” she eventually answered slowly, every word carefully weighed and measured before leaving her mouth, and her gaze never wavered from Kyo's face. “It makes sure family feuds like the one between the Senju and the Uchiha won't be as much of an issue, and it offers us a greater opportunity to protect our children, give them a proper childhood.”

Kyo couldn't help but feel something bitter and mildly resentful bubble up inside, because-

“The downside would be when the villages are drawn into full-blown wars like this instead of Clan feuds,” she muttered pensively, frowning off to the side.

She was pretty sure Minato was staring at her.

Part of her felt it was lucky Kushina wasn't present for the days lesson, because the girl might just have blown up at her for the perceived 'disrespect' towards her mentor.
“It wasn’t something my husband had anticipated,” Mito admitted without any hesitation or fuss. “But then again, he was always something of an idealist,” she mused wistfully.

Kyo eyed the old woman, sharply reminded that Mito had been married to the Shodaime, that she had been born and grown up in the Warring Clan Era and that she had seen the birth of Konohagakure no Sato. Had seen the world around them come together into what it was today. Had helped build it, from the very beginning.

Was Senju Tsunade’s grandmother.

Was the first ever keeper of a Biju.

It was so strange to stop and think about how young Konoha was. Her country back in the Before had been about a thousand years old, and the comparison just felt absurd.

“What was it worth it?”

The question had just slipped out, without any conscious input from her brain, but Kyo couldn’t find it in herself to regret it.

Mito’s gaze was heavy on her face, sharp despite her impressive age.

“I’d like to think so,” she answered after a lengthy pause. “Despite the wars, there has also been peace. Before, there was a constant state of free-for-all warfare, where everyone not from your Clan was a potential enemy.”

Kyo tilted her head and pensively turned her attention to what she had been supposed to be doing.

They wrapped up the lesson not long after that and Kyo and Minato went on their way, slowly ambling back into the village proper, leaving Jiraiya behind to track down his teammate. Or whatever he got up to in his free time.

Kyo wasn’t all that sure Tsunade would appreciate it, because from what she’d been able to pick up, the woman really did work too much whenever she was in the village.

“You ask interesting questions, Kyo,” Minato said after a long, thoughtful silence.

Kyo hummed and glanced at him. “Aren’t you curious?” She wondered. “Sometimes, this war doesn’t make it feel like the Senju and Uchiha heads realised what it was they were doing when they got together for this village,” she mused quietly. “And it’s not the first, but the second one.”

“There were almost twenty years between them, though,” Minato pointed out. “Like Mito-sama said, there’d never been such a long stretch of peace before Konoha’s founding.”

Kyo tilted her head, thinking it over. “I guess,” she relented, but it just made her feel sad. “It just makes me wonder...”

“Wonder what?”

“How to make it better,” Kyo said absently. “You want to become Hokage, right? Then shouldn’t that be something to think about, too?”

Minato started and turned to stare at her.

Kyo stopped walking as well, giving him a questioning look. “What?”
“I didn't think you listened back then,” Minato said with a small, budding smile.

“I listened,” Kyo huffed, feeling strangely defensive. “I just didn't feel like participating.”

“And you think I could really do it?” Minato pressed on, smile widening a fraction. “Even though I'm not from a Clan?”

“Why wouldn't you be able to do it?” Kyo muttered awkwardly, trying not to think of a story she'd read once upon a different life. About the leader who had been so powerful, so loved, he'd been remembered long after he'd sacrificed himself for his village, even in a world like this, where death was so common it barely counted as a footnote. “You're stubborn enough.”

Minato's face finally cracked up in a wide, happy grin and he grabbed her hand. “Come on, let's go spar!” He decided and began to drag her off before Kyo had a chance to so much as open her mouth.

“Tou-san?” Kyo asked absently, not pausing with the dinner preparations.

“Mm?” Kou hummed back, still with most of his attention on the report he was writing up.

“When do you think I should start teaching Genma about poisons?” She asked, finally voicing something that had been on her mind for a while now. “He's almost four.”

“Do you think he's mature enough?” Tou-san asked back, not looking up from his report, but sounding more invested in the conversation.

Kyo was silent as she considered it, carefully weighing her brother's maturity levels against the seriousness of the subject.

“No,” she finally sighed, dropping the last of the vegetables into the pot, put the lid on and then turned around to take a seat by the table. “Have you though about when to enrol him in the Academy?” She asked curiously, wondering if her dad had even thought of that yet.

Kou's face twisted ever so slightly with traces of grief for a moment, before he smoothed it over and focused on her.

“Your mother was much better at these things than I am,” he muttered tiredly, scratching at his jaw. “Genma's progressing well with taijutsu and the target practice I've started him on, but I think it might be better to wait a while longer,” he paused, eyeing her thoughtfully, “Genma's never been bored staying with my parents the same way you were.”

Kyo bit her lower lip, and she wasn't sure if it was to keep back laughter or something less amusing.

“Okay.”

“Any particular reason you're asking?” Kou asked, glancing down at his report for a second, before looking back at her, absently scribbling down another few words.

Kyo shrugged. “I was just thinking,” she hedged, frowning down at her hands. Her dad waited for her to continue, clearly aware that that wasn't everything. “Do you know how old- kaa-san was when she started learning?” She asked, having to force out the words.

Kyo cleared her throat and chanced a quick glance at tou-san.

Kou considered her a long moment, looking a perplexing mix of sad, relieved and proud.
“About six years old,” he said easily, as if nothing out of the ordinary had just been revealed.

Kyo looked up sharply. “What?”

Her dad blinked, clearly confused by her reaction.

“Tou-san, she started teaching me when I was two,” Kyo pointed out helplessly, not sure if she was feeling more distressed or apprehensive.

Kou put his pen down and considered her carefully, a small frown pulling on his brows for a moment, as if he was trying to figure out what the real problem was.

“You've never been what some people might label 'normal', Kyo,” he began slowly, clearly weighing his words. ‘Isshun and I both love you, and we've never loved you any less for being different.’ He stared at her until she nodded. “But that doesn't change the fact that you are different, and Isshun started teaching you when you were younger because you could handle it.”

Kou scratched at his jaw again, and Kyo wondered if the stubble was irritating him.

“I love Genma just as much as I love you, but he needs more time for some things,” he shrugged, “and that's okay. There's nothing wrong with either of you.”

Kyo didn't know what to say. Feeling mildly embarrassed at the way her throat had closed up, she got out of her seat, slipped around the table and plonked down in tou-san's lap, wrapping her arms around his neck for a tight hug.

“I miss her,” she confessed in a small, barely audible voice.

Kou sighed. “So do I,” he confessed heavily. “Every day.”

Her dad wrapped both arms around her and they spent a few minutes just sitting there.

“I love you, tou-san,” Kyo finally muttered into Kou's shoulder.

“I love you, too, Kyo,” tou-san said, pressing a quick kiss to her hair. “Go see what Genma's up to, will you? I'll finish dinner.”

“Okay,” Kyo agreed and reluctantly disentangled from her father.

Kou managed to give her a wan smile before she wandered off into the living room, where she found Genma sitting huddled behind the couch.

“What are you doing?” She asked curiously, determinedly stuffing all her depressing feelings aside for now.

Genma looked up with a scowl and gave a sullen huff.

Kyo blinked, and after a slight pause, sat down next to him on the floor.

“Genma?” She pressed.

“Don't tell tou-san,” Genma said, grudgingly giving in a second later, frowning down at the floor. “Promise!”

“I promise,” Kyo lied easily, giving her little bother a concerned once-over. She couldn't see anything wrong, but that didn't necessarily have to mean anything...
Genma mumbled something and Kyo blinked.

“What was that?” She asked, feeling the tension bleed out of her posture, but she had to make sure.

“My hands hurt,” Genma grudgingly repeated, sending her an unhappy look.

“Can I see?” She asked, holding out an expectant hand.

Genma hesitated a moment, before he held one of his hands out to her.

Kyo hummed and inspected it carefully, running her fingers gently over his palms. “You've been training a lot with the kunai, haven't you?” She asked, pressing at a blister experimentally.

Genma winced and nodded, scowl back on his face again.

“Why don't you want me to tell tou-san?” She asked curiously, interested to hear his reasoning.

“When I learned, my hands were a mess, and tou-san always helped me put on plasters and salve,” she added wryly.

Genma blinked and gave her a surprised, slightly dubious look. “Tou-san's hands doesn't hurt,” he said promptly.

“No, but they definitely did when he was learning,” Kyo told him confidently. “I bet his hands looked way worse than yours, too,” she added with a small grin. “Mine definitely did.”

Because Kyo hadn't known when to quit.

When Genma still looked sceptical, Kyo huffed and pulled a jar of salve from one of her pouches, and, like tou-san had done for her, rubbed some of the fatty substance into her brother's hands.

Tou-san was working far too much if he'd forgotten, she mused somewhat grimly, but kept a smile on her face regardless.

Genma watched her interestingly, slowly relaxing into something far less sullen and unhappy.

He let out a small sigh when Kyo rubbed her thumb over the heel of his small hand, and it mentally made her pause, a memory tugging on her.

She'd done this a lot in the Before; giving hand massages.

Her then-father had had joint pain, and it had been a rather common thing between her and her brother, too, and even her school friends and friends in general, so she had given a lot of people massages over the years she'd gotten back there.

She hadn't thought about it in years, but maybe it would help?

Kyo could remember how her hands had ached back when she'd been learning to throw kunai, then later with senbon, and being a proper child, it couldn't be easy on Genma.

With a mental nod, Kyo settled in for a while and carefully continued to press her fingers into the meaty parts of Genma's hand, dragging the tips of her fingers along the muscles and sinews until Genma leaned against her side, relaxed and nearing half-asleep.

He barely reacted even when she ended up pressing on the tender, healing blisters.

“So what were you really doing here behind the couch?” She asked after a while.
“...listening,” Genma muttered drowsily.

Kyo's lips twitched as she absently put down Genma's hand to pick up the other one and give it the same treatment.

“Eavesdropping?” She questioned lightly. “Did you pick up on anything interesting?”

Genma shook his head against her arm, somehow conveying his disappointment even without words.

“Better luck next time,” she told him, because he might be a three year old child, but he was also being raised as a future shinobi. “Maybe find a better spot?” She suggested. “Closer to the people talking.”

Genma made an agreeing grumble.

A while later, Kyo heard the whisper of feet moving across the floor, and then tou-san was leaning over the back of the couch, giving them a curious look.

“Anyone back here interested in some dinner?” He asked idly.

Genma gave an indiscernible grunt and Kyo smiled.

“Sure,” she answered for both of them. “But I think we might have to wake Genma up first,” she snickered, not feeling as guilty as she probably should.

“What are you doing?” Kou inquired, taking in her hold on Genma's hand.

“His hands hurt,” Kyo said lightly, carefully angling her brother's hand so their father could see the blisters and tender spots.

The skin around Kou's eyes tightened, and she could practically feel the weight of the suppressed sigh he wanted to release. Not at either of them, but at himself, she was sure.

“You promised not t'say anythin','” Genma mumbled against her arm.

“You know we can tell tou-san anything, Genma-chan,” Kyo told him cheerfully, scooping him up and getting to her feet in the same motion. “No one here will think any less of you for anything,” she said, squeezing him tightly a moment.

“You promised not t'say anythin','” Genma mumbled against her arm.

“You know we can tell tou-san anything, Genma-chan,” Kyo told him cheerfully, scooping him up and getting to her feet in the same motion. “No one here will think any less of you for anything,” she said, squeezing him tightly a moment.

“Of course not,” Kou said firmly, picking Genma out of Kyo's arms. He seemingly couldn't help but inspect the boy's hands for himself, and Kyo was certain the man was beating himself up for forgetting to do so earlier. “I love you, and I always will, no matter what.”

“Even if we go nukenin?” Kyo asked innocently.

Kou twitched and sent her a sharp look. “Don't even joke about that,” he huffed. He was silent a second and then eyed her wryly. “But yes, even then. Always.”

“Love you, too, tou-shan,” Genma muttered indistinctly against Kou's shoulder.

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Chapter 56

Chapter Summary

The War comes knocking on the door

"Are you really sure you should be doing this?" Minato asked, for the third time.

"Yes," Kyo sighed, barely resisting the urge to roll her eyes.

Instead, she hoisted the boy higher on her back and continued on her way to his apartment, steps not so much as faltering.

"Your foot still bothers you, sometimes," Minato remarked casually.

Kyo blinked and craned her neck to send him a long look. "Only when I've been exerting myself too much, and I'm not the one with a badly sprained ankle here, Minato," she huffed, raising her eyebrows at him. She actually hadn't thought he'd noticed.

Minato conceded the point with a huff of his own. "I was so close to pulling off that move, though," he mused, leaning his cheek against the side of her head, basically making himself comfortable.

"I don't know if I'd call it 'close' when you ended up injuring yourself, rather than your opponent," Kyo said amusedly.

"Shush, you," Minato returned, a smile in his voice.

Another few months had passed by. Naoki still didn't want to have anything to do with them, no matter how much Minato refused to let him get away with it.

The healing split lip he was currently sporting spoke well enough on its own about how well that was going for him.

Naoki had apparently nailed him in the face with a vase, throwing it at him when he'd refused to leave.

Coming up to Minato's apartment complex, Kyo headed for the stairs without a pause, climbing them with little effort, even with the extra burden.

"Key," she demanded, holding a hand up.

Minato dutifully placed it on her palm.

Kyo unlocked the door, kicked the door shut behind them as soon as she'd entered, toed out of her sandals and continued into the small living room/bed room combo that made up the main room of her teammate's home.

Leaving Minato sitting on the edge of his bed, she fixed him with a glare, told him, "Don't move," and continued into the kitchen.

Fortunately, Minato had a couple of ice packs in the freezer compartment of his fridge.
“Here,” she said, handing the two packs to her friend, who took them without a word. “Now, try to be still. This is going to hurt,” she warned with a quick look at his face, before she carefully took hold of his sandal.

Pulling the footwear off in a carefully controlled, smooth motion, hoping to make it as easy on the boy as possible, Kyo placed it aside the moment she'd gotten it off and inspected the swollen mess that had been hiding underneath.

“You're lucky our sandals offer extra stability,” she told him absently, experimentally probing the ankle a bit, “or this would have been much worse.”

“Just put on the ice, please,” Minato sighed, holding out the ice packs.

Kyo sent him a quick smile and did as asked, carefully wrapping them around the area, grabbing a roll of bandage from one pouch and used it to secure them to the ankle with.

“Now lie down and keep this thing elevated,” she ordered, getting to her feet.

Minato grimaced at her, but did so. Reluctantly.

Giving him an impish grin, Kyo bounced over to the closet and withdrew Minato's extra duvet and carried it over to the bed.

Folded up as it was, it'd make a nice pillow to rest his leg on.

“Now be a good boy and do as the medic has ordered,” she told him in a snooty, condescending tone of voice that made him snort out a short laugh.

“Where did you even learn to do that kick?” He asked, settling down and making himself comfortable, absently starting to remove the various pouches and holsters from his person, placing them on the bedside table.

“A friend,” Kyo told him, not looking away from her inspection of his fridge. Or, more precisely; what he had in his fridge. “Kaimaru, actually,” she added at Minato's curious vocalisation.

Minato was silent for a beat. “I still don't see how you can spend any time with him without ending up wanting to kill him,” he confessed, sounding mildly apologetic though sincere.

“You get used to him,” Kyo chirped with a smile, grabbing a handful of the vegetables Minato had on hand and quickly whipped up a meal for the boy.

Being the complete neat-freak that he was, Kyo had learned where everything was after her first visit to this place about a month ago; nothing was ever out of place or out of order.

“You could probably get used to anything,” Minato mused teasingly.

Kyo snickered. “He's actually not so bad, once you learn to translate what comes out of his mouth into what he actually means,” she reasoned.

“I'm pretty sure he meant it when he told me to 'fuck off and get lost','” Minato muttered, sounding embarrassed just to repeat Kaimaru's words.

Kyo hummed wordlessly, focusing most of her attention on the meal she was preparing.

She was pretty sure Kaimaru had been embarrassed in response to Minato's genuine compliment, because she'd learned over the course of the months since she'd decided they were friends that the
friendlier you acted towards him, the more vitriol it earned you from the teen.

“Here,” she finally said, handing Minato a plate of stir-fried vegetables, and then took a seat on the floor.

“Wanna work on sensei’s latest assignment?” Minato asked the moment he’d swallowed the last bite, giving her a hopeful look.

“Is it just me, or do you think it’s weird to be assigned homework again, too?” Kyo wondered dryly, but sure enough started digging through one of her pouches to get out the scroll.

Minato smiled amusedly, opened his mouth to respond, and froze on the spot.

Both of them turned as one to stare out the window at the village wide alarm that had just gone off.

Kyo stopped looking for the scroll and grabbed another roll of bandages instead.

She got rid of the ice-packs on Minato's foot, wrapped it tightly with the bandages, and then hurried to put on her shoes while the blond did the same.

“What do you think is going on?” Minato asked in a quiet voice when they ran across the village, jumping from building to building side by side, the only sign of his sprained ankle being the tightness to his face every time he put weight on his right foot.

“Nothing good,” Kyo muttered back, not breaking stride on her way towards the Hokage tower.

As far as she knew, this had never happened before.

Kyo's gaze was drawn to the ominous red glow to the seals inked into seemingly random surfaces along the way, which were clearly the source of the noise.

The streets were crowded with worried and frightened-looking civilians, trying to figure out what was going on.

ANBU teams were moving openly through the village, flicking around, either on their sweeps, or heading towards some specific part of the village.

They weren't the only ones out and about in numbers.

It seemed every shinobi in the village was either stopping to address the civilians, or, like Kyo and Minato, heading towards the Hokage tower for directions.

Landing outside the tower, the two of them had to pause a moment, if only because of the sheer amount of people moving around the area.

“What do we do?” Minato asked, looking around and trying to take in everything he could at once.

“I'm not sure,” Kyo said slowly, trying to spot anyone she actually knew... A familiar face caught her attention and she grabbed Minato's hand. “Come on.”

“Kyo?” He questioned, clearly wondering what she was doing, but following along willingly enough.

“Shinzu-sensei!” Kyo called, before he could hurry off and be lost in the crowd again.

The man paused, gaze swivelling around to land on her. “Kyo,” he greeted.
“Do you know what’s going on?” She asked, taking in everything she could about him.

He looked tense.

“We got word from one of the border stations,” he said quietly, gaze flicking briefly to Minato. “An Iwa regiment is moving towards Konoha.”

Kyo felt her eyes widen. “And the border station?” She couldn't help but ask. Tou-san and Ryota were out at one right now.

Shinzu's mouth flattened into a grim line. “We're lucky they got a messenger out before they were overrun,” he muttered darkly. “I need to go, but you should try and find your sensei,” he said, and then did as he'd said, quickly disappearing amongst the rest of the uniformed shinobi milling around.

“Come on, you heard him,” Kyo muttered tersely, “we need to find Jiraiya.”

“Where would he be, though?” Minato wondered, looking around at the chaos again.

They glanced at each other.

“Hokage's office?” Kyo suggested dryly.

“It's a place to start,” Minato agreed with a small smile and started in that direction, tugging her along by the hand he was still holding.

“We're looking for Jiraiya-sensei,” Kyo declared to the absolutely bogged down and harried-looking kunoichi sitting behind the desk outside the Hokage's office.

She barely had time to blink at them, caught in the middle of something that looked quite important, before a familiar voice called for them.

“Minato! Kyo!” Jiraiya called, striding towards them, grim-faced and determined, just like the rest of the people hurrying around. “I've been keeping an eye out for you two,” he said, looking them over.

“Minato's got a sprained ankle,” was the first thing out of Kyo's mouth, because she knew for a fact that Minato would never tell him that himself right now, in this situation.

True to form, Minato sent her a betrayed look.

“It's nothing serious, sensei. Just a sparring accident,” he said, turning back to Jiraiya, who gave him a reluctantly amused look.

Before anything else could be said, one of the ANBU who had been flitting about came to a stop next to Kyo.

She accepted the thin scroll he handed to her, and then he shunshined off to the next person.

“Kyo?” Minato questioned uncertainly.

Kyo looked up from the scroll -thin and no doubt empty, far more an informative token than a written message- to smile at him. “Looks like I've been given something to do.”

Jiraiya eyed the scroll, then Kyo, with something like dawning realisation and almost horror. “You're too young,” he muttered, as if to himself.
“It's okay, Jiraiya-sensei,” she smiled, “this is something I'm actually good at.” She wiggled the scroll at the two of them. She prepared to run off, only to pause. “Just,” she hesitated, “be careful, you two.”

“Going by the look of that scroll, I believe it's you who need to be careful,” Jiraiya said solemnly, placing a heavy hand on her shoulder. “I'm expecting you to come back here as soon as possible, Kyo.”

“Understood, sensei,” Kyo murmured back, leaning into his hold for a moment, before she stepped back.

Slipping one arm around Minato's waist for a quick, one-armed squeeze, she gave the two of them one last smile as she backed away a couple of steps, and then shunshined out of the building.

She had to get to ANBU headquarters, and quick.

Kyo felt a sense of familiar comfort settle inside her the moment she was wearing her uniform again, with her mask settled securely on her face.

This, she was used to, more than trying to fit into a new team.

Though that, too, was getting better.

“Scorpion!” Hyena said, bumping into her in friendly greeting. “You're here, too, huh.”

“Yeah.” She snorted, bumping him back. “Is the rest of the team around here somewhere?”

“Come,” Hyena snickered, taking a careful hold of her arm and guiding her deeper in amongst the waiting ANBU operatives.

They'd gathered a whole bunch of them in one of the sparring halls.

Kyo caught a glimpse of Sparrow in the back, but he was too far away to greet. She did manage a small wave, but doubted he'd seen her, and then Hyena stopped by Hawk and Horse.

“Hey, shorty,” Hawk greeted lightly.

“Taichou,” Kyo returned wryly, biting back the desire to tell him she'd grown quite a bit in the last few months.

She was getting taller!

“Okay, listen up!” Bear's familiar monotone drew all of their attention, instantly snuffing out the murmured, speculative conversations that had filled the room with a soft, constant background noise.

Kyo, along with everyone else, turned her full focus on the man.

“We've got a large force of Iwa nin headed this way, and not much time to prepare,” he began, voice firm and no-nonsense. “We're expecting Konoha to be under siege within a couple of hours, at most.” The statement sent a ripple of noise and subtle movement through the listening crowd, and Kyo felt a shiver of dread trickle down her spine. “What we haven't spread around the village, however,” Bear continued, raising his voice to re-capture their attention, “is that we received a distress signal from Uzushio about one hour after we got a hole torn into our border.”
The room was so quiet now, Kyo was sure she could have dropped one of her needles to the floor, and everyone would have heard it.

No one moved.

It seemed like no one so much as breathed.

“The people gathered here in this room,” Bear continued in a quiet voice that still reached every corner of the hall, “are the operatives still in the village with the best chance of getting by an invading force unnoticed. You're all here because of your stealth.” Bear eyed them all intently a long moment. “In the face of a coordinated attack of this degree, it is regretful we can't send more men,” he said quietly, “but you all will have to do. Do your best,” he ordered curtly. “Uzumaki Hinata will now brief you further on the coming operation.”

And he stepped back to give the floor, so to speak, to Aita's fuuinjutsu master, who looked exhausted and grim-faced, in addition to the fact he looked like he'd just run across half of Hi no Kuni in half the usual time.

Kyo immediately knew how Konoha had learned of the attack on her sister village.

There wasn't time to think after that.

Too absorbed in trying to memorize all the information about Uzushio Hinata-shishou was revealing to them, about the lay-out of the village, the nature around it, the topography, the ocean, with the whirlpools that had given the shinobi village its name, she didn't notice much else.

“I don't know what you can expect when you get there,” Hinata finished grimly, voice hoarse and rough after speaking for so long.

“You're not coming with?” Someone close to the front asked.

Hinata turned to stare at the speaker with a complicated expression, the faint lines around his mouth and eyes deepening fractionally. “My Clan isn't known for stealth,” was all he said.

And it was clear those words cost him dearly.

Kyo could tell he was all but itching with the need to go with them. To fight. But he'd be a beacon to any half-decent sensor within range.

“All right,” Bear stepped away from the wall he'd been leaning against, standing himself next to Hinata. “Get ready to leave in thirty.”

And with that, people started moving again.

“Meet back here five minutes before we move out,” Hawk murmured and shunshined out, no doubt for a few last-minute arrangements.

Kyo followed suit.

Back in her room, she quickly and efficiently packed everything she might need, all the while feeling numb, her head quiet and blank.

After she'd packed all the extra weapons and supplies around her body she could feasibly carry for an extended mission, Kyo took a few seconds just to breathe.

In the dim light and quiet of her room, the sound of the air moving through her lungs, her throat, was
She felt like she had an inkling about what was coming, but at the same time... she had no idea.

Shaking her head to herself, Kyo turned and walked to the door.

When she reached for the door-handle, a slight tremor went through her hand. She clenched it tightly and then flexed her fingers, and when she reached out again, she was steady. Fingers moving smoothly enough throwing senbon and needles wouldn't be anything resembling a challenge.

With ten minutes to spare, Kyo returned to the sparring hall to meet up with the rest of Team 23 and the other ANBU operatives that would leave shortly.

She'd barely stepped foot into the room when she was accosted.

“K-Scorpion!” A familiar voice called, stumbling ever so slightly on how to address her.

Kyo turned sharply to the left to see Aita hurrying towards her.

If possible, he looked even worse than Hinata-shishou; tired, worn... exhausted.

And that was just the physical aspect of it.

“Aita,” Kyo said quietly, reaching out to take hold of his arm.

He looked like he'd been crying.

“Please,” he asked, voice hoarse and quiet. Like there was so much he wished to say he couldn't get anything out. Like he was choking on all the words lodged in his throat.

He roughly grabbed her shoulder and pulled her into a quick, one-armed, desperate hug.

“Okay,” she said, getting the gist of it anyway, wrapping her arms around his middle to hug him back.

Aita used his free hand to wipe at his eyes, visibly firming up his resolve. “And come back, too,” he added unsteadily.

“I'll do my best, Aita,” Kyo swore, trying not to let the tremble in her voice escape the grip she had on it.

Despite how much he most of all should just go find a bed and sleep, Aita swept her up into a bone-crushing hug, pressing his face into her shoulder, for just a moment.

For all that he hadn't been back in years, Uzushio was his home.

It was where he had grown up, where his family lived. His parents, his siblings. Cousins, uncles, aunts. A four year old niece.

For them to have sent out a distress signal... it wasn't good, and he knew it.

“I have to go,” Kyo whispered, feeling horrible for taking away whatever comfort she had to offer her friend right now.

“I know,” Aita rasped, but didn't move to set her down yet. “Kill some people for me.”
“Stay safe,” she shot back, poking half-heartedly at his shoulder until he reluctantly put her down.

“Scorpion,” Horse said, motioning at her to come over.

Kyo took Aita's hand to give it a quick squeeze and then hurried over to her team, getting onto Horse's back with familiar ease when he crouched down in front of her.

It was time to leave.

-x-x-x-
Leaving Konoha had never before been so tense.

They'd been hoping to leave before the siege fell completely into place, but the damn Iwa army headed for them had moved faster than anticipated.

All of them still got into position, though.

'They're gonna launch an attack at the same time, as a distraction,' Hawk signed tersely.

They'd all already gone into full stealth mode, and they hadn't even left the 'safety' of the village walls yet.

'And remember, kids! Don't touch the ground!' Hyena signed enthusiastically, shoulders shaking with silent laughter.

'Is it lava?' Kyo signed back, unable to help herself. Though, she hadn't known the word for 'lava' in ANBU sign, so she'd picked 'molten' and 'rock' instead.

Hyena looked a little bit like he was having a small seizure, he was laughing so hard.

Still, not a sound escaped him.

'Focus, Hyena,' Hawk signed sharply, and his waning patience came across well enough.

Horse gave a quiet huff, but remained impassive where he was crouched.

Kyo made sure to keep her hands free, prepared to protect the both of them if things went to shit, though she hoped that wouldn't be the case.

All of them were tense.

When Hawk-taichou received the signal to move, they all slipped over the wall and moved quickly in amongst the trees, silent and discreet like shadows.

Kyo damn near held her breath.

Another heartbeat, and an air-rending explosion went off behind them, close to the front gates, if she was forced to guess.

She could only hope it had been caused by their side, and that all her loved ones would stay safe.

Shortly before they reached the shore-line, long after they'd crossed over into the Land of Hot Water, all of them stopped to take a break.
Drink some water, have a quick bite to eat, rest their legs.

Kyo felt an interesting combination of tense, restless and paralysingly afraid.

She'd hitched a ride with Horse every step of the way, so far, so it wasn't like she was particularly tired. Not physically.

Kyo had a feeling she'd never known much about Uzushio, in either life, but right now, she couldn't help but worry over all the details she had forgotten.

And the fact she had a vague recollection of the fact that the village had, supposedly, been razed to the ground...

And they were all running straight into that.

She wouldn't ever refuse -Uzushio were allies, they were where Hinata-shishou, Aita and Mito came from- because this was important. But... she couldn't help but feel like she was the wrong person for the job.

Kyo understood how they had reasoned while putting this operation together, but that didn't mean she had ever been sent to the front-lines before.

She'd been picked for her stealth, and little more.

While her team rested, Kyo wandered around to stretch her legs, taking the opportunity to scan the people they were travelling with.

She recognized most of them; had seen them around Headquarters, as well as been on missions with a few of them.

Some, she was sure, were completely unknown to her, though.

A dark shape moving in the corner of her vision abruptly drew her attention, and she jerked her head to the side to stare at the... ninken following her.

It was dark grey, but she'd recognize those eyes, the shape of the head, the ears, how she walked, anywhere.

“What are you doing here?” She demanded in a quiet whisper, automatically burying her fingers in Kisaki's dark grey fur.

“Stealth,” the ninken huffed, pressing her head against Kyo's body armour.

Fingers tensing in Kisaki's fur for a moment, Kyo digested that. Were they so desperate for one extra fighter that they'd asked an Inuzuka ninken without a human partner to go?

“I said yes,” the dog pressed, giving her a flat, unimpressed look, as if she knew exactly what she was thinking. “Because of you.”

“Kisaki,” Kyo sighed, crouching down in front of the dog's face, peering into her eyes. “I'm not Taku.” The words just slipped out of her, before she could stop them.

“I know.”

“You could get hurt,” Kyo whispered. She could die.
“So long as I keep you alive, I don't care,” the dog answered idly, as if it didn't much matter.

“I care,” Kyo hissed, closing her eyes for a second.

They were quiet for what felt like a long moment, before Kyo took a deep, calming breath and let it out as a sigh.

“We haven't fought together like this on our own before,” she muttered, silently admitting defeat.

“I know you. And you know me,” Kisaki countered evenly, curiously inspecting her mask, sniffing it and giving it an experimental lick. “We're still a team.”

“Oh,” Kyo breathed, feeling something settle inside. “Okay,” she repeated, a bit more firmly, and got back to her feet. “Have you been following me around since we left?”

“No,” Kisaki huffed, falling into step beside her when Kyo continued her careful walk around their very temporary camp. “You might have noticed me; I kept to the back.” She gave her a superior look.

Kyo huffed a small laugh and ran her fingers over Kisaki's head, tugging gently on one of her ears. “You'll be running with us now, though,” she said, and it wasn't a suggestion.

The look Kisaki fixed her with was dry and almost deadpan, as if that had been obvious since the start.

“Now what's this?” Hyena asked curiously in a muted voice when Kyo returned to their team's resting spot with Kisaki at her side.

“Reinforcements?” Kyo offered softly, feeling absurdly cheered now that she'd gotten a chance to digest everything.

Hawk and Horse glanced around, as if looking for the Inuzuka to go together with the ninken, but Kisaki's ears fell back a moment, and she pressed up against Kyo's side, giving an unhappy grumble.

'Scorpion?' Hawk signed questioningly.

'She's a friend,' Kyo signed back, one-handed. Her other hand had buried itself in Kisaki's thick fur again. 'She'll be sticking close to me,' she added, because that was something Hawk-taichou might want to know.

“I'll carry her,” Kisaki declared firmly, as if to prove her point.

Kyo glanced at Horse, who paused momentarily, and then shrugged.

“You should have said you'd brought your own transportation,” Hyena wheezed quietly, walking up to her to peer more closely at Kisaki, all but dripping with curiosity. “Horse might feel sad; you've replaced him.”

“Shorty's not as small as she used to be,” Horse rumbled softly, clearly amused.

“You're all horrible people,” Kyo told them sedately. “Water?” She asked Kisaki, because it wasn't certain anyone had thought to offer.

Kisaki made a noise of affirmation, and Kyo quickly got out her canteen before they had to leave again.
Once half an hour was up, everyone got ready to move on.

Instead of getting onto Horse's back, Kyo settled into the now-familiar position on Kisaki's back, feeling the dog's muscles move beneath her with every step and leap.

Hawk inspected her intently a moment, and then gave a satisfied nod and signed for them to go.

Running across open water was an experience.

Part of Kyo couldn't help but think about how beautiful it was.

The sun had set hours ago, but the stars were glittering above and the moon was out, its pale light reflected on the constant waves.

It took some getting used to, running on the ocean, because it wasn't smooth like rivers or ponds. Behaved differently.

Kisaki soon enough got in the rhythm to it, though; leaping from the peak of one wave to the next.

Kyo leaned down to get closer to Kisaki's ears. “Are you doing okay?” She asked, voice just loud enough to be heard over the wind.

All of them were running in complete silence, though she caught more than a couple of people signing back and forth between them, everything from idle conversations to light-hearted banter.

Anything to keep the coming battle from their minds.

“Fine,” Kisaki returned.

“I could run myself for a while,” Kyo offered.

“It's not a problem,” Kisaki insisted, sounding irritated.

She considered her friend a moment, and decided she must be sincere enough.

Kyo knew Kisaki was fully grown; an adult. But that didn't change the fact she wanted her to be in top condition when they reached their destination.

There would be no rest when they got there.

Best case scenario, there'd be a fight.

Worst case... there'd be nothing but ruins to search for survivors.

Kyo straightened up again and focused back on their surroundings, occasionally sending the deep, dark water rushing past beneath them a mildly uncomfortable glance.

She'd been used to the ocean in her past life. Before-her had grown up at the very tip of a small peninsula reaching out into the sea. It had been a constant in that life.

But that didn't change the fact that the closer they got to Uzushio, the closer they also got to Kiri, and the waters of the ocean was far more their domain than Konoha’s.

There was nothing to distract her from her thoughts.
It took them two and a half days of running at top speed, all in all from start to finish, to reach the island of Uzushio.

They got there, having managed to manoeuvrer past the treacherous whirlpools, only to get thrown head-first into a fight for their lives.

Kyo jumped off Kisaki’s back to launch herself at the man that had just leapt at a distracted Hawk from the dense vegetation at the shore-line.

She diverted his kunai with one of her own, simultaneously throwing a needle at him while the rest of the welcome-committee joined the party.

That was the downside to crossing open water; it was hard to hide.

Clearly, someone had spotted them, and prepared for their arrival.

Kyo caught a glimpse of a hitai-ate in the waning light and a small part of her breathed a relieved sigh at the fact it wasn't Kiri's symbol. The rest of her was far too busy staying alive to feel much of anything, other than to note down the Kumo clouds.

She'd have to look out for electric attacks.

Leaping back and away from her opponent, Kyo flashed through a series of hand-seals, landed in a crouch and spat a single wind-sickle at her opponent, staying low enough Kisaki could leap over her with ease and attack in the wind-attacks wake.

Falling back into familiar patterns, even though it lacked two people, they tag-teamed him.

With a chilling growl, Kisaki mowed him off his feet and crushed his throat between her teeth.

Kyo didn't stop moving for even a second, already headed for the next one, knowing Kisaki would be half a step behind her.

Katsurou-sensei had always focused on speed and mobility during training, emphasizing the fact that they never ought to be still if they could help it, and it had stuck.

Hawk cut down the Kumo shinobi he'd been fighting and gestured further inland, “Go!” He ordered sharply, and Kyo, Kisaki and Hyena didn't hesitate to follow orders.

Their whole group had spread out and approached from different points in smaller units for exactly this reason.

Kyo glanced briefly at the three unknown ANBU operatives who joined their run through the dense vegetation.

The trees weren't large enough to use for running like back home, and the ground was soggy, mildly swamp-like in texture, and would no doubt have slowed them down significantly if they hadn't had chakra. The smell of sea salt was heavy in the air.

The light under the trees was near-nonexistent, but Kyo's eyes adjusted soon enough.

“Kisaki,” Kyo said, and the dog got the point, slinking ahead of her to take the lead, nose lowered to the ground as she followed the Kumo-nin's scent trail back the way they'd come from.
No one protested the decision, and silently followed along.

It got rockier and rockier, large, smooth stones jutting out of the ground, until they reached a sheer cliff-face.

'This smells like a trap,' one of the ANBU signed tersely.

'Go around?' Another suggested.

Without another word, they quietly made their way along the cliff until they reached a less vulnerable and exposed place to scale it.

Kisaki was panting slightly, and Kyo sent her a worried glance, but didn't pause, jumping to the next stone, steadily getting higher.

The ninken made a soft noise she'd heard a hundred times before, and Kyo instantly signed the rest of her comrades 'Enemies!' a second before they came upon them, crouched in an out of the way spot where they had a pretty good view down the cliff-face.

Kyo had two senbon in her hand, threw them at the necks of the two furthest ones, mid-leap. She caught a third one's blade on her kunai and the calm was once again torn to shreds.

It was over with quickly; these men had clearly not been prepared for such a sudden attack.

They moved on, steadily making their way further and further toward the centre of the island, where Uzushiogakure was located.

By the time Hawk, Horse and another few shinobi re-joined them, they'd come across another two teams of enemies. All who seemed to be low-level Chuunin, posted as sentries, or meant to ferret out and kill any Uzu people trying to hide in the area.

'Injuries?' Hawk-taichou asked, taking a second to inspect them briefly. 'Then let's go.'

They'd just started, hadn't even reached the target proper yet, and Kyo was already feeling drained.

It would be a long night.

Kyo had lost count over how many people she'd fought by now. How many she'd injured, how many she'd managed to kill.

They'd reached the village itself, and it was... it was too horrifying to dwell on.

Kyo focused on the people they came across, the enemies and opponents, one after another.

It was better than the ruined village walls, the buildings reduced to rubble and the bodies. The smoke drifting through the air and the choking scent of burning flesh.

Kyo ducked under the crackling attack aiming to tear a hole in her side, rolling across the scorched, rock-strewn ground and leaping away the moment she had her feet back under her, palming another kunai and throwing a shuriken at the Kumo Jounin's knee at the same time as Horse charged him like a raging bull.

Barely touching the side of the building she'd leapt at, Kyo fairly bounced off and re-joined the fight.
She'd been separated from Kisaki in the last altercation they'd come across, and she didn't have time to so much as spare a though hoping the ninken was alright. That she was still alive.

The Jounin they were fighting flashed through the seals for another lightning jutsu, Kyo recognized the general formation of seals by now, and quickly went through the seal-sequence for a counter.

Lightning was weak to wind.

Taking a deep breath for a wind-sickle, Kyo fed it more chakra than she usually would and spat it at this guy's chest, following right behind it, kunai first.

Horse caught the nin's feet in an earth trap and jammed his tanto into his knee, at an angle that let the blade slide clean through the joint for good measure.

The Jounin just about had time to make a pained noise, lightning chakra crackling along his arms, before Kyo's wind attack hit, cutting clean through his hands, his ribcage and slicing through heart, lungs, the spine beneath.

Part of her feeling surprised it had actually landed, Kyo got a face-full of the resulting spray of blood, and dissolving electricity, but it was barely enough to make her blink; her mask protected her eyes.

They didn't wait for the body to hit the ground before they left.

Kyo figured, distantly, that they were looking for Hawk and Hyena, who had ended up on the same side of that massive, combined water and lightning jutsu that had separated them from Kisaki. But that didn't mean they could take a break from the fighting, or ignore the people they came across.

Kyo hadn't actually seen the Uzu swirl on a hitai-ate outside of on a corpse, yet.

Panting heavily, she stuck close to Horse's side, keeping stride and her eyes and senses peeled on their surroundings, trying to identify the most likely hiding places at a glance.

“Look'it here, look'it here,” a voice drawled gleefully. “Look what I found!” It fairly sang and a pair of Kiri shinobi dropped down on them from the top of the building they'd just been in the process of running past.

There wasn't time to do anything other than react.

Kyo diverged a katana from Horse's side, getting a shallow cut on the outside of her upper arm in the process, and jumped off Horse's large form to launch herself at the Kiri nin's face.

The man blinked and threw himself back, lips twisting into an unsettling grin.

Kyo was scrambling to stay alive and keep her opponent occupied enough to make sure Horse only had to deal with one of them at a time, and she was sure the shinobi she was fighting was toying with her, but she was afraid the two of them together would have little trouble killing her teammate.

“Little kids shouldn't get involved in grown-up fights,” the man cooed, giving her another thin slice, on the leg this time, and he wouldn't stop talking.

Was he used to riling people up to make them sloppy!?

Kyo found it both unnerving and a boon, really, because at least the sadist was foolish enough to drag things out.

She spat a small wind-sickle at Horse's opponent, and her own tutted disapprovingly.
“I’m feelin' neglected here,” he grinned, “no cheatin' with other people, darlin’.”

Kyo eyed him warily, desperately trying to suck down enough air to soothe her burning lungs, her protesting muscles.

“Enough restin’!” The Kiri shinobi declared with a delighted laugh, coming after her again, and she didn't have time to keep even part of her attention on Horse, to see if she might be able to take advantage and help him kill his opponent.

She was busy enough not getting killed.

There was a swell of building, familiar chakra behind her, and Kyo automatically dodged in the direction that would bring her further away from Horse the next time the creep she was fighting lunged after her with his katana.

She didn't think it was actually his sword, because there wasn't a scabbard on him, and the make of it was completely different from anything else he was either wearing or using.

Which meant it was most likely an Uzumaki blade.

The area around them was lit up by an enormous fireball, and Kyo took advantage of the bright light behind her, made a mock charge at her opponent and simultaneously flicked a needle at the inside of his thigh.

“What the fu-” the Kiri shinobi hissed, either in response to being blinded or struck by her needle, she didn't know, but Kyo took a chance and risked a quick glance at Horse, only to see- to see-

“NO!” She yelled, throwing herself at the other Kiri shinobi, not focusing on the fact Horse was on the ground.

He was still moving.

He was still alive!

The thought ran again and again through her head the second it took her to reach them, and she buried her shoulder in the man's stomach to force him away from Horse, who struggled through a series of hand-seals, slapped one hand to the ground and there was a wet crunch behind her, the distinct sound of something hard striking flesh and breaking bones.

She didn't tear her eyes away from her new opponent, but she knew the other Kiri nin was dead.

And if he wasn't dead, then he was at least incapable of doing any harm, because prior to whatever Horse had done, he'd been hit with a needle, and enough time had passed to let the poison take effect.

It quickly became apparent why Horse had gone for this man, rather than the other one.

He was better. More dangerous.

And Kyo wasn't at her best. She was tired and worried and fear was tearing at her insides with every panted breath, every attack she barely managed to dodge.

There was so much crushed rock and debris lying around it was a miracle it hadn't happened sooner, but when Kyo stumbled, left foot sliding on the rubble, she saw Death coming for her.

She scrambled to raise a kunai to block, shifting to protect her vitals from the knee that made its way
to her side at the same time, but she was in a bad stance, she wasn’t strong enough to block effectively.

The Kiri shinobi was smashed into with a brutal, sickening noise, hitting the ground a short distance away with a wet smack, his head bouncing on the rocky surface.

His knee still grazed Kyo’s side, hard enough it knocked her down and made her wheeze.

Not hard enough to break her ribs, though.

Mid-fall, throwing the kunai in her hand was reflexive, and so far from a conscious decision she didn’t notice she’d done it until a quiet laugh made her look up.

The ANBU that had saved her crouched down in front of her, spinning the kunai on one finger.

“Think this belongs to you, kid,” he said, and the grin in his voice was audible even through the voice-altering seals on his mask.

He casually tossed her the knife back, handle first.

Kyo caught it, sent him one last look, and then scrambled over to Horse.

“Horse,” she tried to get his attention, one hand pressing down on the stomach wound and the other trying to find a pulse at his throat.

“He looks bad off,” the unfamiliar ANBU commented idly. “You better patch him up quickly, kid, because we’re not done yet.”

Kyo gave a short nod, the worst of the panic threatening to suffocate her calming when she found a slow, ‘heavy’ pulse.

She knew that was bad, but at least he wasn’t dead.

*Head injury*, a small, distant part of her mind whispered at her when she rushed to at least dress the wound tearing up his abdominal muscles and leaking a steady flow of blood onto the stones beneath him.

She had no idea how deep it was, but there wasn’t any time.

Another enemy could come across them any second, and then he’d definitely be dead.

“Here we go,” the ANBU said evenly, stalking up to Horse, grabbed his arm and effortlessly used it to haul the unconscious man up off the ground and onto his back. “Come on, kid.”

Kyo didn’t need to be told twice.

-x-x-x-
While Kyo had been busy elsewhere, some of the ANBU with them had established something of a temporary safe-zone.

They left Horse there, and then headed back out into the chaos, both of them well enough to still fight, continue the mission.

Before they left the safe-zone completely, though, the ANBU paused and sent her an assessing look.

“Drink some water and eat a rations bar,” he ordered.

Kyo blinked at him, but obligingly grabbed her water canteen. She didn't notice how thirsty she was until the first drop of water made contact with her lips.

After almost draining her canteen, Kyo choked down a rations bar and a soldier pill for good measure, and then felt good to go.

Continuing the search of the ravaged village, Kyo couldn't help but send the ANBU with her continuous glances out of the corner of her eye.

She didn't recognise his mask, but it was some kind of bird, with a sharp, unforgiving cast to it that, combined with his height and built, made him look more than a little bit intimidating.

Kyo didn’t know why he was sticking with her.

Sure, he saved her life, and that was expected between comrades when it was possible, but there was nothing that said he couldn't just go on his way afterwards.

“That's gonna get annoying fast,” the man muttered, as if to himself, pausing on top of a mostly structurally sound building to look at her. “Ya don't recognize me, pipsqueak?”

And he proceeded to push his mask up until it rested on top of his head, a wide, wild grin on the face beneath.

Kyo blinked dumbly at him. “Hirata?” She asked.

“One an' only,” he drawled back, eyes continuously scanning their surroundings with a calm sharpness to them that spoke of familiarity and experience Kyo could barely fathom. “But you better call me Eagle, now that I'm temporarily out of retirement an' all,” he chuckled, and pulled the mask back down. “Kasai owes me a fucking drink for this shitfest.”

Kyo didn't have anything to say in the face of that, and with one last glance at her, Hirata continued out into the village.

A couple of hours later, Kyo had gotten another few cuts and bruises, though she couldn't say how
many, some scrapes, and the sun had risen.

The light and visibility did nothing to lessen the horror of this place. Instead, it made it more pronounced, showed off more details.

Kyo stared mutely at a small foot. Just a foot. About the size of Genma's, lying in a smear of dried blood near a pile of rubble that had at one point been a house.

“Stay focused,” Hirata said, seemingly unfazed by everything around him.

Thinking about it, Kyo had never seen him look so at ease. He moved like he was more comfortable here than back in Konoha.

Like this was more familiar.

Kyo made sure to stick close to Hirata, no matter what, knowing more than well that if anyone caught her on her own, she'd be dead meat in a matter of seconds.

She didn't know which was worse; moving through the destroyed village, or fighting for her life whenever they came across a Kiri or Kumo shinobi.

Each option was terrifying in its own, special way.

Breath forcibly leaving her when the latest enemy, a Kumo nin's foot struck her in the chest, kicking her away from him, Kyo arranged her body to soften the landing, to let her spring back to her feet as quickly as possible when she landed, only for something firm to snag hold of her ankle and abruptly change her trajectory without warning.

Before she knew it, she was launched straight back at their opponent, head first.

Not one to question anything mid-fight, Kyo went with it, drawing a kunai while she was at it and focusing on any openings the Kumo shinobi might give.

The moment Hirata had cut him down, Kyo turned to the man with a scowl. “Did you seriously throw me at him?” She demanded, breathing harshly and not sure if she should laugh or be indignant.

“Worked, didn't it?” Hirata drawled, unbothered by the sharp tone of her voice. “Fucker didn't expect that.”

Kyo huffed, but couldn't find the energy to argue, not when their opponent had died and the two of them were still alive.

Still.

Give a girl some warning?

“How're you doin' with supplies?” Hirata asked quietly next, derailing her thoughts.

Kyo grimaced. “Almost out of needles, and only got one holster worth of kunai left.” She didn't have much in the way of shuriken, either.

“Then take this guy's,” Hirata advised, kicking absently at the Kumo nin they'd just killed. “Can't do much about the needles.” He rolled his shoulders experimentally.

Kyo worked quickly; staying in one place around here wasn't wise.
Eventually, they had managed to work their way in towards the centre of the village, where most of the fighting could be found.

It was both terrifyingly overwhelming, *and* somewhat of a return to the more familiar for Kyo, because this was more like the battles she'd already participated in.

Here, she could focus more on her role as a support fighter without being mercilessly singled out. Didn't stop her from feeling twitchy and wide-eyed and the sheer *scale* of it.

“Eagle!” Kyo shouted, a second before she used the man as a springboard to avoid a stray, violent water jutsu cutting through everything in its path, and hopefully getting her the drop on the Kiri nin fighting a grim-faced Uzu shinobi close to their current position.

Hirata didn't so much as pause his fight with his own opponent, but braced himself for the impact and even gave her a small boost, shifting his weight in a way that gave her a fractional increase in speed without interrupting his own form.

Kyo went in low, aiming at the lower half of the unsuspecting Kiri Jounin, who was kept plenty busy by his Uzu opponent.

Firming her hold on the kunai, she severed a tendon in the knee, and then the Achilles tendon of the same leg in quick succession, tucking into a roll and darting away as the man cursed, left with only one working leg.

A glowing chain with a wickedly sharp point pierced his chest in his momentary distraction, by the sound of it right through a lung, only to bury itself in the ground next to Kyo's feet.

The Uzumaki grabbed his chakra chain, wrapped it twice around his arm in a quick, twisting motion and pulled himself forward to lob off his target's head before he could so much as twitch a finger.

He flicked a brief, steel grey glance at Kyo, barely long enough to register her affiliation, and then turned to the next opponent.

Kyo didn't linger, either, and scurried back to Hirata's side.

Right now, Hirata was the only safe spot amidst a world of chaos and violence.

Things narrowed down until she wasn't aware of anything other than the two of them, and the people in their immediate area, who was an enemy and who was not, parry, duck, throw a needle *only three left*, return to Hirata, don't stray.

“You still alive?” The question jarred her enough Kyo blinked and swivelled around to take a proper look around.

Things had calmed significantly since the last time she'd checked, and most of the people she could see where either standing around or sitting down, looking like the picture of spent exhaustion.

“Kid?” Hirata prompted.

“Yeah?” She asked, turning again to look at him.

Where did all the enemies go?

Some of her exhausted confusion must have come across, because Hirata gave a small huff, absently rubbing at his left shoulder -Kyo could vaguely remember him taking a hit there- and jutted his chin
to the North-East. “Scurried off to rest and regroup,” he grunted, making it clear she wasn't the only one feeling like shit.

“Oh.” Kyo blinked a couple of times.

She found herself eyeing the ground at her feet, considering it intently. Would it be okay if she just... lay down here and didn't move again for a while?

“Don't even think about it,” Hirata snorted, grabbing her and hoisting her up like a sack of rice before she could do more than twitch, tucking her under one arm, where Kyo was content to stay, not moving a muscle to so much as shift. “Where are you guys based?” He asked next, barking the sharp question at someone who was obviously not Kyo.

“This way,” an unfamiliar voice answered faintly.

Or that might just be Kyo, who was dropping off now that she was no longer moving and no one was actively trying to kill her.

“Hey, kid.”

Kyo was jarred back awake, from one second to the next, her body going from relaxed to tense so fast she was pretty sure she sprained something.

No... no, that was just a constant, non-related pain, she confirmed a second later, blinking blearily around an unfamiliar room. Unless it was possible to sprain your entire body all at once.

“What?” She asked belatedly, the word scratching through her throat, gaze finally focusing on Hirata, who was holding her rigid hand a few centimetres from the eyeholes on his mask.

...she was pretty sure he was laughing at her.

She was also slung over one of his shoulders, she realised after another second passed with little to no change.

Kyo slowly relaxed her fingers until it was clear she wouldn't try to poke the man's eyes out if he let her go. Which Hirata did, with an amused snort.

“Glad to have you back in the land of the living,” he drawled mockingly.

“Fuck you, I'm ten,” she huffed back. “I need sleep.”

Someone coughed.

Kyo blinked rapidly again and finally registered that there were more people in the room than just her and Hirata.

Quite a few people more.

She stared.

“What?” She demanded when people just stared at her, like she was some sort of circus freak.

Kyo was feeling far too tired and achy to try and be polite right now. The rude, abrupt awakening hadn't exactly helped.
“You never said why you brought the kid?” Someone asked with a sigh.

“Cause she’s useful as hell,” Hirata drawled back, and then turned his head to look at Kyo. “Got any poisons with ya?”

“I’m out of needles,” she grumbled unhappily, shifting slightly on Hirata’s shoulder until she got more comfortable.

“Not what I asked.”

Kyo eyed him with growing curiosity. “I always bring my poison pack,” she said with a shrug. It felt more natural to have it strapped to the small of her back now than not. Like it was an inherent part of her.

“What did you lot have in mind?” Hirata wondered idly.

“...depends on what you classify as interesting,” Kyo drawled back. “Because now that she was more awake, this definitely looked like some sort of serious war council she didn’t have much business being part of.

There was a large stone table in the middle of the room covered in maps, scrolls and various documents.

Another few of her fellow Konoha ANBU where spread out around the room in varying states of being more or less injured. Some where looking decidedly worse for wear, and the majority of them were people she didn’t recognize.

Most likely, they were men pulled out of ANBU retirement for this mission in particular. Old-timers, all of them. Veterans.

“Something large-scale that can even the odds,” a middle-aged, red-haired man said brusquely. He looked tired and determined, and there was a sense of grief clinging to his form, despite the mostly blank face.

Kyo cocked her head, quickly doing a mental check of her current inventory of poisons and various concoctions.

“I might have something,” she admitted slowly. “Depending on the circumstances you want to use it in.”

“Like what?”

“Will it be open space? Enclosed space? Will there be allies in the area that can be affected, the list goes on,” Kyo muttered, flopping a hand in a general, vague gesture. “Poison doesn’t differentiate between comrades and enemies,” she added, a thin thread of bitterness slipping through both her mental walls and her mask.

Kyo propped her elbow on Hirata's chest and rested her chin in her hand, watching the men around her confer quietly with each other.

“Would a barrier between us and the poison work?” Someone offered after a few minutes.

Kyo hummed sedately. “Maybe. Does it let through air? Because for something large-scale, I’d probably have to use either a very fine powder, or a gas, and they tend to get everywhere.” She considered it more closely a second. “We'd also have to direct it somehow without making it
dissipate too quickly for it to take effect.” She sighed. “Unless you're planning to send me on some kind of suicide mission, and I'd have to tell you I'm gonna have to protest that on principle.”

Hirata snorted. “Your sensei would kill me, kid,” he said dryly. “He made me your designated babysitter.”

A quiet, helpless laugh escaped her at that, despite the situation. Because Katsurou-sensei would do something like that.

“And he still tries to maintain he doesn't love me,” she mused, a smile pulling on her lips. The gravity of the situation returned quickly, though, her brief surge of amusement disappearing without a trace. “If you've got people with a Wind affinity and fine control, we could make it work,” she said. “Unfortunately, I can't keep up a jutsu like that and focus on the rest of it at the same time.” She hesitated a moment. “And I'm almost empty on chakra anyway.” She shrugged, the motion awkward where she was hanging.

Things were discussed further for a while, but Kyo was too tired to pay attention, and she was drifting on the edge of sleep by the time she was addressed again.

“What kinds of options do we have, poison wise?” Someone asked and Kyo jumped fully awake, chin sliding off her palm and she almost face-planted in Hirata's chest.

Someone gave an amused snort.

Kyo grumbled unhappy. “Put me down,” she requested, managing to give Hirata's chest an uncoordinated pat.

The man easily picked her off his shoulder, turned her the right way, and then put her down on her feet.

For all the good it did her.

The shock of suddenly having to carry her own full weight made her stagger and almost fall over, and she had to bite back a pained groan.

Instead of doing any of that, Kyo tensed all her protesting muscles and remained perfectly still a moment, just long enough to make sure she'd be steady and wouldn't make a fool of herself. Or just fall on her face.

That done, she carefully took a seat on the floor, unzipped her poison pack and began to put out her various jars and containers on the smooth stone, absently sorting them as she went.

Humming pensively to herself, Kyo eyed a jar with a clear, colourless liquid that looked more like water than anything else.

“Well?” The tired, grieving man prompted, when he'd clearly decided she'd taken long enough.

“I'm trying to decide between powder and gas,” she said, not taking her eyes off her supplies. “And I'm leaning towards gas, really,” she mused. “The air around here is a bit too damp to work well with the powders, and that's with the wind to take into consideration, too. I have one that might work, but I don't think it's what you're looking for.”

“How so?” He asked, seemingly satisfied that she actually knew what she was talking about, despite her clearly young age.
Kyo smiled humourlessly behind her mask. “It's a sedative, so it would knock them out, but we'd have to do the rest manually.” She shrugged. “And we'd have to wait for it to clear out of the air first, or all of you would get knocked out as well. Highly impractical.”

Hirata crouched down next to her, eyeing her collection of poisons and sedative with an appreciative air. “Not bad, kid. Not on the level of your grandfather quite yet, but perfectly respectable.”

Kyo’s head snapped up to stare at him. She wanted to ask, but this wasn't the time or the place.

Biting back the flood of questions his observation had brought to life, Kyo picked up two jars, one of which was the water-like substance she had been considering earlier.

“I believe this is our best bet,” she said, holding them up for the leader of the Uzu shinobi to see.

Or at least she assumed he was the leader.

“This looks ridiculously harmless,” Hirata mused, tapping a careful finger on the jar containing the clear liquid.

“It has a strong chemical reaction with the poison, turning it into gas and releasing it into the air. It's pretty much invisible, once it's gotten a chance to spread out,” she explained.

For obvious reason, kaa-san hadn't ever been able to demonstrate how it worked, but she'd drilled her religiously on how to make it properly, every step, and had quizzed her on how to use it until she'd been able to answer in her sleep.

It had been one of the last things kaa-san had gotten around to teach her before... before she'd died.

“That doesn't look like it's very much,” someone commented sceptically.

Kyo felt a tight, grim smile stretch her lips. “This here will be more than enough for what you have in mind.” She carefully put it down again, taking note of the nervous glances the containers were attracting now. “It's potent, but with a somewhat delayed effect.”

Meaning more people would walk into the cloud of noxious gas, breathing it in, before anyone realised something was wrong.

“It all hinges on if you can make a sufficient barrier, and whether or not you have those wind users,” she finished, looking up at the one in charge.

The man eyed her intently a long few seconds, before he turned back to his subordinates.

Kyo shrugged, put all her supplies away again and shuffled over to the wall, where she lied down and made herself comfortable, drank some water, ate a rations bar, and then almost immediately dropped off back to sleep, using her arm as a pillow.

-x-x-x-
Chapter 59

Chapter Summary

Showtime

Kyo had no idea how many hours sleep she'd gotten before Hirata woke her up again, somewhat kinder this time.

“Show-time, pipsqueak,” he muttered quietly.

Kyo mumbled something indistinct and managed to push herself somewhat upright with a soft groan. She was pretty sure she felt a couple of scabs cracking and breaking open with the motion.

“Yeah, you and everyone else,” Hirata agreed with an audible grin. “Probably should have had a medic take a look at you before your nap,” he muttered speculatively, poking interestingly at one of the many cuts on her arm.

Kyo hissed and slapped his fingers away, feeling impressively bad-tempered right now.

All of her was hurting, her head was pounding and she all around felt like absolute crap.

With a heavy sigh, she got started on the laborious task of getting vertical, because this wasn't the time to feel sorry for herself.

There was a deep ache pulsing in her right foot when she finally got around to putting any weight on it, and Kyo resolved to go visit Tsunade at the first opportunity when -if- she came back home.

This couldn't be healthy.

“Got any water?” Hirata asked casually, watching her slowly and painfully stretch out the worst of the kinks plaguing her body, both from the abuse it'd taken during the fight from hell, and sleeping on a cold, hard floor. “Here,” he said, offering his own canteen.

Kyo gratefully accepted it to down a quick few mouthfuls before handing it back.

“I'm taking it we're doing some sort of test?” She asked, slowly continuing her stretching.

It wasn't just to ease the pain of stiff and sore muscles, because Kyo rationally knew she'd most likely have to do some fighting soon enough. Unless her poison trick was enough to scare off the Kumo and Kiri force, which she severely doubted.

“They've whipped up some fancy special seal they're fairly confident will work,” Hirata told her easily, looking pretty relaxed where he stood. “Any idea how to test it?”

Kyo hummed. “Have to ask about how they intend for the barrier to work, first,” she said. And she was finally ready, having choked down another rations bar while Hirata had been talking.

“Then let's get to it.”

And Hirata led the way out of the room, for the first time giving Kyo a look at where they where.
It turned out they were in the Uzu equivalent of the Hokage Tower.

Hirata navigated the place with relative ease, which was a relief, because Kyo was a bit too distracted by watching the people they walked by to pay proper attention to memorize the way. Only part of her attention was dedicated to her surroundings in general.

There were mostly shinobi moving around, though far fewer than she thought there ought to be, but what was the most startling was the occasional civilian they walked by.

Kyo walked passed a dazed-looking child around her own age, which felt absolutely absurd. On so many levels.

Hurrying her step until she was level with Hirata, she turned her gaze straight ahead and tried not to look at anything other than where they were going.

It was easier like that. Kept her head more steady, quieter.

She couldn't afford to lose focus right now.

She could do that after she'd gotten out on the other side, and was back home again.

Provided she survived, of course.

There wasn't time to think of anything else after that, because they had reached their destination.

Hirata knocked firmly on a pair of impressive wooden doors, entirely covered in carved seals Kyo bet Jiraiya would have loved to study.

The doors opened and Kyo soon enough found herself in front of the same tired man, who, unlike Kyo, looked like he definitely hadn't been sleeping since she last saw him.

“We've constructed a barrier seal,” he announced, waving another man forward. “How would you propose we test it?”

“Can you explain how it works?” Kyo requested, far more polite now that she'd gotten some measure of proper rest, as far as the situation allowed.

The man -Kage?- nodded at the other, slightly younger man, who took a deep breath, rubbed at his jaw and launched into a brisk, technical explanation that made her incredibly grateful for the fact Jiraiya had started her on the basics when it came to fuuinjutsu.

She felt like she would have understood far less if he hadn't.

“So you're basically saying it's supposed to filter out any foreign substances from the air it lets through?” She muttered speculatively. That might actually work... if it worked as intended.

What she assumed was the resident seal-master blinked a couple of times, a vaguely wry look stole over his face, as if he had forgotten who it was he was talking to for a moment, and gave a nod.

“To summarize,” he confirmed. “I'm not sure how to test it, though,” he admitted regretfully.

“Do you have a small, windowless room that would be easy to contain in case it doesn't work?” Kyo asked after a brief pause.
She'd been contemplating the problem while she'd listened to the explanation.

“I believe we can arrange something.” the Kage agreed after a brief pause. “But who will test it?”

“Me,” Kyo said, a little bit blind-sided she had to clarify, because she'd thought that had been obvious from the start? “I didn't think- I mean, it's unnecessary to kill off one of your own men if something goes wrong?” She shifted her weight uncertainly, shooting Hirata a look.

Kyo felt like everyone was staring at her and she didn't like it.

“Kid's a Torikabuto,” Hirata finally huffed, crossing his arms impatiently over his chest.

And it looked like at least the Kage understood what that meant, because he blinked and then fixed her with a heavy, considering look.

“Very well then, we'll make arrangements.” And he motioned at one of his men to get to it.

“Will I be able to walk through the barrier after it's been activated?” Kyo asked the fuuinjutsu master. Because if she wouldn't be able to do that, then... she'd have to think of something.

Not that it'd be dangerous for her on the other side, but that would defeat the purpose of this whole thing.

“It shouldn't be a problem.”

Kyo gave a satisfied nod. “And how much time do we have before the Kiri/Kumo force comes back?”

“They'll probably want a couple hours more to rest up and regroup, take stock of their losses, try and estimate how many Konoha shinobi it was that made it here before they come charging back to finish the job,” Hirata drawled evenly, not looking overly bothered.

Kyo smacked him lightly on the arm. “Show some tact,” she told him firmly.

Hirata tilted his head, as if trying to figure out what she meant.

Kyo gestured around them with a hand and a small sigh.

She didn't press it, though, because she wasn't sure Hirata would get it even if she tried to explain properly. This seemed like it was normal to him, never mind that it was these people's home they were currently fighting- waging war in.

The Uzumaki closest to them sent her a side-long look, but remained silent.

Soon enough, they reached what looked like a small storage room that had very clearly been emptied in a fast hurry.

Kyo strode into the room to get a look and gave a satisfied nod.

“And the plan to contain the gas if things go wrong?” She asked the moment she stepped back out into the corridor, staring expectantly at the Uzumaki fuuinjutsu master.

“We'll add a secondary seal,” he said. He hesitated a brief moment, before he continued. “It will seal the room entirely.”

“Will I be able to shunshin out?” She asked, because slowly asphyxiating sucked and she’d rather not
do that to herself more than necessary.

“I'll make sure to only seal the door,” he promised, dipping his head in a small, respectful bow.

“Then let's get started,” Kyo chirped, bouncing ever so slightly on the balls of her feet, trying to project an optimistic cheerfulness she didn't feel in the slightest.

The Uzumaki got out brush and ink and quickly and expertly drew up seals around the door.

Kyo couldn't help but watch with fascination, automatically comparing it to the lessons she and Minato had been getting over the last few months.

After that, he continued inside the room, where he drew up another set of seals on the floor, stretching from one wall to the one across from it, dividing the room into two equal-sized halves. These seals were drawn up with significantly more care and effort, which wasn't very strange.

If they were completely new, then it just made sense.

They were given a few minutes to dry, and then everything was ready.

Kyo walked into the room, carefully stepped over the seals and turned to face the small group watching.

“Activate the seal, please?” She requested.

A faintly humming, transparent sheet of chakra came into existence between them the moment the fuuinjutsu master touched a foot to the marks on the floor. It wasn't visible, but when she focused, she felt the chakra in the air in front of her.

Kyo considered it pensively a moment and then tentatively reached out to touch it.

The tips of her fingers passed through without effort.

Taking a deep breath and not thinking about what could have happened if that hadn't worked, Kyo motioned for the man to retreat out into the hallway and activate that barrier as well.

It went pretty much exactly the same, only this barrier was faintly visible, the chakra glowing softly in the dim light.

With a small sigh at her thoughts, everything going on, Kyo focused on her current task.

They were on a deadline here. Quite literally.

Digging out her containers, Kyo started with the powder, pouring out a small, careful measure onto the dusty stone floor, eyeing the pathetically small pile with a sense of muted scepticism.

She knew it was more than enough for this, but that didn't change the fact that it looked like practically nothing.

Kyo told that part of her head to shut up, and dug up the reactive liquid.

Checking to make sure the barriers were still properly activated and the people on the right sides of them, Kyo carefully unscrewed the lid and gingerly tilted it so that she could drip exactly three drops onto the powder.

The first drop landed with a quiet hiss that told her that part was at least working as it should.
Another two drops later, Kyo watched as the powder bubbled slightly and a transparent steam began to rise up into the air above it, making it look like the floor was scorching hot.

Taking a deep breath, Kyo memorized the vaguely familiar scent; she'd worked extensively with both components of this gas in their separate forms.

Feeling like this was it, the moment of truth, Kyo straightened out of her crouch, stepped back over the barrier and sat down to wait.

The seconds ticked by at the pace of a snail, dragging on and on until it felt like time had stopped entirely.

Kyo ended up staring through the barrier, watching as more and more of the gas was released into the air until it looked like the other half of the room was full of a particularly vicious heat-wave.

“You alright in there?” Hirata asked after a few minutes, no doubt eyeing her intently where she sat, leaning against the wall.

“Fine,” Kyo returned distractedly. “It seems to be working,” she continued. “I can't smell anything.”

“Is it safe to bring this barrier down?” The fuuinjutsu master asked.

“I can't see why not,” Kyo returned, squashing down the paranoid urge to tell him absolutely not, because they didn't have much time and options were thin on the ground here.

There was a pause out in the corridor, and then the barrier flickered once, twice and then disappeared entirely.

It looked like the four Uzu shinobi and Hirata all held their breaths for a moment.

“None of you can smell something faintly nutty, right? No headaches?” Kyo questioned quickly, rolling to her feet and approaching them with muted concern.

“No,” Hirata grunted.

Kyo let out a slow, relieved breath. “Then it's perfectly safe to say your barrier is working exactly as intended, shishou.”

The Uzumaki man blinked and sent her a surprised look and Kyo very nearly bit her tongue.

She hadn't intended to call him that. It'd just slipped out.

He made her think of Hinata-shishou!

“Then we have a lot to do in the next hour,” Hirata declared briskly, pretty much picking her up and swinging her onto his back. “Come on, pipsqueak; you're not even close to done yet!”

Kyo scoffed. “As if I didn't know that,” she muttered, but easily enough settled against Hirata's back when he took off towards what she assumed would be the exit at a quick run, the Uzu shinobi hot on his heels.

Things had somehow come together while Kyo had been otherwise busy, because soon enough, it seemed like all the Uzu survivors still around had mobilised into what looked to be shaping up into one last, desperate battle.
Kyo could only hope more competent people than her had carefully planned out what needed to be done, because she was focused only on her part in this, as well as the small detail of survival.

While Itsuki-shishou, the fuinjutsu master, was busy drawing up his barrier seal on a scale large enough to be actually effective, Hirata brought Kyo by where most of their fellow Konoha ANBU were resting.

“Scorpion!” A familiar voice called, making something in Kyo's stomach twist and drop as all the worries she had completely ignored for the last... however many hours it'd been, resurfaced all at once.

Her team.

Kisaki.

Horse.

Was he even still alive, she wondered with a frantic sort of desperation, despite the fact that she rationally knew that even if she'd spent all this time beside him, there would have been nothing she could have done.

“Hyena,” she said blankly, feeling like that would be all she could manage for now.

“You look like crap, but you're okay,” the man said with a small huff that sounded relieved, carefully placing one hand on her shoulder, with a grateful nod at Hirata, who lingered behind her, looming.

“Horse?” She asked stiffly.

Hyena's shoulders slumped a fraction. “Still alive, but if he doesn't get to a hospital, things will look pretty bleak.”

Kyo didn't know whether to be relieved or devastated.

They were nowhere near a working hospital, they had fighting to get done yet, and it would take two and a half days to get back to Konoha after that, and that was if she was optimistic.

Never mind what state their home was in right now.

Feeling abruptly overwhelmed and on the brink of tears, Kyo closed her eyes and took a moment to just breathe. Calm down.

“Kisaki?”

“That dog is one hell of a creature,” Hyena said, sounding more cheerful now. “Absolutely terrifying and mostly okay.”

“Mostly?” Kyo repeated warily.

“Come on, I'll bring you over; she's been growly and snappy with everyone ever since we got separated.”

And he definitely meant that in a literal sense, Kyo knew without having to ask.

Hyena steered her effortlessly through the spread-out group of resting operatives until they reached what she identified as a makeshift field hospital.
Where the few amongst them who were knowledgeable in the art of iryou-ninjutsu were tending to those who needed it.

There were... so many. Yet, at the same time, not as many as she had expected.

She didn't have to ask where the majority of the rest of the ANBU operatives were.

Kyo spotted Horse first, laid out on a blanket, then Kisaki, who looked to be resting nearby, and then her eyes landed on Hawk, who was also stretched out on a blanket.

With his hand still on her shoulder, Hyena must have felt her tense, because he glanced at her and followed her gaze until he too was staring at Hawk.

“Ah,” he muttered, shoulder's slumping again. “Taichou's not gonna be fighting any battles for a while, but Dove said he'll be fine with time,” he admitted. He curled in on himself a fraction, like he was trying to make himself as small as possible.

Kyo slipped her hand into his. “I'm sure you did everything you could,” she managed in a half-strangled voice, and she meant it.

Hyena said nothing, and then they were there.

Kisaki's ears twitched, one of which looked to have been... trimmed down a little since she last saw her. Someone had cut off the tip of her left ear.

“Ky-”

“Scorpon!” Hyena said loudly, pointedly, speaking over the ninken, making more than one person glance their way.

Kisaki gave an aggravated huff, lips twitching ever so slightly, as if she wanted to bare her teeth just a little as she glared at the man, and then turned back to Kyo.

“Ky-”

“Scorpon!” Hyena said loudly, pointedly, speaking over the ninken, making more than one person glance their way.

Kisaki gave an aggravated huff, lips twitching ever so slightly, as if she wanted to bare her teeth just a little as she glared at the man, and then turned back to Kyo.

“Scorpiion,” she greeted, the relief in the voice palpable, tail thumping the ground a few times. “You're alright.” And she sniffed in her direction.

“I'm okay,” Kyo confirmed, striding up to the dog, taking in more of her with concerned attention.

Her temporarily dark fur made it harder to see, but Kyo hadn't been able to notice that she hadn't made to stand up.

“Just a few scratches,” the ninken sniffed disdainfully, crossing one front paw over the other. “I'll be fine after I rest.”

Kyo sat down by the dog to bury her fingers in her fur on either side of her head, angling it to look her properly in the eyes.

They were clear and alert and Kyo accepted that as truth with tremulous relief.

“Good,” she breathed.

“Kid, we don't have long,” Hirata reminded her shortly, still skulking nearby, but watching their surroundings instead of the shinobi in his immediate proximity.

“What's going on?” Kisaki asked, sending Hirata a sharp, speculative look. As if she was wondering if she would have to bite him.
“We're gonna try and even the odds,” Kyo said, repeating the Uzu Kage's words with a grim little smile behind her mask. “And then we're gonna try and make a break for it back to Konoha.”

“That's risky,” Hyena muttered, having drawn closer at her words. “There's still a few civilians around, including children.”

“And there aren't as many Uzu shinobi in good enough condition for anyone's peace of mind, but staying here, we're all sitting ducks,” Hirata finished glibly, as if he didn't much care what happened, so long as he got to fight.

Kyo barely resisted the urge to sigh. “And we'll have to bring our own injured, too,” she added, sending Hirata look.

The man shrugged, generally unconcerned. “Obviously,” was all he said.

“You should probably prepare yourselves as best you can,” Kyo told them quietly, feeling a heavy lump of nerves slowly settle in her gut. “As soon as my job's done, I'll try and find you, okay?”

“What are you doing?” Kisaki asked sharply, looking like she was prepared to get up and go with her.

“I'm responsible for the dirty trick that's going to give us an advantage,” she laughed humourlessly, before she had to swallow dryly or risk throwing up.

She was about to kill so many people.

“Come on, kid. Time's up,” Hirata said, motioning at her to get up.

When she glanced his way, one of the shinobi that had been with them in the corridor earlier was running towards them.

Things must be ready, then.

Kyo swallowed dryly again and got to her feet.

She turned around, hesitated, and shot Kisaki and Hyena one last glance. “See you in a bit,” she said, praying neither of them caught the slight tremble to her voice, and then she was running towards the Uzu shinobi, who twisted around and ran with them back the way he'd come.

Moment of truth.

Either this worked.

Or it didn't.

-x-x-x-
Chapter 60

Chapter Summary

Coming home

Kyo found herself alone on one side of the barrier.
It was a new, special kind of nerve-wracking experience.

Her hands were steady as she worked, pouring out her powder in four decent-sized piles along the length of the barrier, into small depressions in the ground to prevent the wind from taking it away before she was done.

The sun was setting, and the waning light was giving the ruins around them an added, eerie cast to it, and everyone was waiting.
Waiting for the sun to dip beneath the horizon and plunge them back into the dark. For the Kiri and Kumo alliance to attack.

Her preparations done, Kyo turned to look at the Uzu Kage, who was watching her intently.

Hirata was stood next to him, staring in the direction of the enemy camp.

The man swept his gaze over the area around them, glanced down the lines of grim, worn and waiting Uzushio shinobi, and then turned back to Kyo to give her a short, curt nod.

Determinedly not thinking about what it was she was really doing, Kyo grabbed the other container, and started pouring.

One fourth for every pile of waiting powder.

Slowly straightening upright, Kyo took a slow, deep breath, tasting the gas in the back of her throat.

It was much stronger now than during their little test run earlier.

Despite her immunity, the thickness of it threatened to make her eyes burn and she was starting to feel mildly light-headed due to lack of oxygen in the air she was breathing.

Kyo ran back to the point where she'd started, to give the Uzu Kage the signal that everything was ready.

Once she'd done her part, Kyo sank down into a crouch, resting, watching the Uzushio shinobi ready themselves for what was to come.

Part of her noted Hirata drawing back, slipping into the background.

A small handful -three men and one woman- stepped forward, taking up positions behind the safety of the barrier, one by each bubbling and hissing source of gas.

Itsuki-shishou was keeping close, studying his barrier seal with attentive eyes, prepared to fix any
problems that might pop up.

She couldn't say exactly what it was that alerted her to the change; a slight shift in the pattern of the wind, maybe?

Kyo's head snapped to the north-east a second before her brain had fully processed anything.

Turning more fully in that direction, Kyo contemplated the fact she probably ought to activate her chameleon jutsu, but... she was running so low on chakra, she didn't dare use any unless she absolutely had to.

She could see the approaching enemy nin now, and it made her feel like a rabbit frozen in the face of a pack of wolves.

For one heartbeat, Kyo felt incredibly alone.

She wished she was back home.

“Now,” the Uzu Kage said grimly.

His four chosen wind users all flashed through series of hand-seals and an abrupt breeze kicked up, far more controlled and focused than the natural wind.

Kyo worriedly glanced over her laid out poisons, wondering if they'd hold together, before the wind users got things under control and the air calmed to a steady, easy flow that effortlessly carried the gas towards their unsuspecting enemies.

Her heart pounded in her chest and Kyo didn't like this, but she watched as the first wave leapt closer.

By her estimation, they'd already entered the noxious cloud, and were about to get a taste of the first symptoms.

A headache would be first. A slow pressure behind the eyes that was easily ignored and blamed on something else.

Then there'd be a shortness of breath, followed by numbness to the extremities.

Their lungs would start to burn.

It would get hard to breathe and at that point, it would already be far too late.

Kyo took a deep breath and snapped herself out of it.

The first man stumbled and fell to the ground, his rapid forward momentum abruptly halted when his body shut down in response to the toxin in his system, still quite a ways away from the barrier.

A handful more followed.

The people further back began to slow down, suspicious and no doubt wondering what the hell was going on.

There were several sharp, abrupt fluctuations of chakra; attempts to dispel a genjutsu.

They had stopped moving forward, but they weren't safe. All of them were still directly in the path of the gas Kyo had arranged for the occasion.
Shinobi weren't ones to remain stationary for long, and when none of the Uzushio people moved to meet them, Kyo watched several enemy nin divert out to the sides, no doubt trying to circumvent whatever trap they believed had been put in place.

Every second felt like a minute.

Kyo was distantly aware that things were happening much faster than she was perceiving them.

There was a shout from further back the enemy's lines, and Kyo had to throw herself out of the way of a kunai thrown with alarming accuracy at her head.

Clearly, someone had spotted her and drawn a somewhat accurate conclusion.

A grim-faced shinobi, with a Kiri hitai-ate glinting dully on his forehead in the waning light, ran head-first towards her, and Kyo grabbed a kunai and readied herself.

Things happened very quickly.

Dodging increasingly uncoordinated attempts at ending her life, Kyo was distantly aware of the Uzu Kage barking orders, of rushed movements, a yell of warning and then the ground exploded.

One of the charging Kumo shinobi had slammed his hands into the ground, sending a massive surge of chakra towards the barrier seal.

Struggling to regain her feet and sense of balance, ears ringing and feeling a hair away from unbridled panic, Kyo swivelled around to look behind her.

The barrier seal had been broken, and stone shrapnel had been tossed around and done a great deal of damage, but that wasn't the worst part.

The barrier was gone.

No.

No, no, no, no, no.

The steady breeze that had fanned the gas towards their opponents had stopped, the wind users who had controlled it having been caught in the midst of the blast of high-velocity rocks and dirt.

Itsuki-shishou was lying not far from Kyo's current position, eyes glassy and staring blindly.

No, no.

The barrier was gone, the wind was gone, but the gas... the gas was still very much present.

With a gasp, Kyo snapped back into motion, scrabbling on all four to regain her feet and get to the hissing piles of bubbling toxins as soon as possible at the same time.

No!

Poison didn't differentiate between friend and foe!

Why weren't they running!?

They could still get away!
Kyo automatically dodged a Kiri nin's sloppy swipe at her head and all but dove at the first pile of the powder-liquid mix.

Fuelled by desperation and rising panic, and she didn't know if it'd work, Kyo used her fingers to dig into the dirt around it, rushing to *bury it and make it stop!*

By the time she started on the second pile, she'd grabbed a kunai somewhere and was using it as a pick, jabbing it into the dirt and rock, working with single-minded determination to try and minimize the damage.

People were dying all around her, from a combination of violence and inhaled gas, but Kyo didn't have the mental capacity to process that right now.

*She had to make it stop.*

Something thin, hard and strangely warm whipped into her side, sending her tumbling head over heels, only for a collection of deadly rock spikes to explode out of the ground where she'd been crouching a second before.

Winded and dizzy, Kyo tried to control her forward momentum until she could roll to her feet and press on towards the last pile, a cold-faced Uzu shinobi leaping past her, twin chakra chains sprouting from his back like a pair of extra appendages, targeting the enemies around them with chilling accuracy and deadly intent.

A roaring water dragon hit him from the side and cut him clean in half, spraying the area in blood and water.

A large-scale wind attack shrieked loud enough it made her want to cover her ears when it collided with some sort of crackling lightning beast trying to mow down a pair of Uzu fighters and Kyo couldn't keep track of everything that was happening.

Breath wheezing through her wind-pipe, Kyo tried to- tried to find *anything* to focus on, tried to figure out *what to do-* because she couldn't- she couldn't- 

Fingers closed around one of the shoulder straps to her body armour, yanking her harshly forward before she was fitted under a somewhat familiar arm and they were moving away from the thick of battle at dizzying speeds.

“They're still fighting!” Kyo managed a protest, voice rough and raspy and it was a miracle Hirata heard her over the sound of the wind in their ears.

“We've got other orders,” he bit out back, voice short and harsh and this wasn't a part of him she'd seen before.

“But they'll die!” Kyo's voice was high and thin and she tried to wiggle out of Hirata's hold until his other hand fisted a handful of her shirt, just above where the body armour ended.

“That's the fucking *point,*” he growled, and it was like a punch to the stomach. Hirata let go of her shirt to rap his knuckles painfully against the forehead of her mask. “Get it together, because we're not done.”

Kyo was sucking down large gulps of air by the time Hirata swung her up on his back, not so much as pausing his stride, still running just as fast, and it was all she could do to clutch at him and hold on for dear life.
She didn't even realise they weren't they only ones running at first, too caught up in everything they'd left behind.

Kyo would have gotten it sooner if she'd been more well-rested, been in better condition and been in a better mental state.

As it was, it still wasn't computing until she saw Kisaki and Hyena in the crowd.

Hyena had Hawk on his back, Kisaki was carrying Horse.

Every other person she managed to focus on was carrying someone.

They were running away.

And... the people they'd left behind weren't planning to join them.

The realisation was like getting submerged in ice.

Kyo's breath stuttered in her chest, every frantic thought flitting through her head snuffing out in a second.

It felt like everything went quiet, her panic gone like the flame of a candle dropped in a lake.

It was strange, because a second ago, she'd felt so overwhelmed she'd been unable to deal with anything, but now... now, Kyo felt so far removed from the situation it felt like it was happening to someone else.

They'd left the island behind by the time the faint thought crossed her mind, musing over how unhealthy this reaction must be, and surely sensei would be unhappy with her when they got back home.

.

There were things she couldn't remember.

Like getting off Hirata's back to run on her own.

It felt like all of a sudden, she was just there, leaping from one wave to the next along with the rest of them, gaze fixed on the horizon.

She remembered fighting off two separate attacks from pursuing Kiri shinobi, the very ocean beneath their feet rising up to swallow a few of their numbers whole like some sort of unspeakable monster.

The urge to get the hell away from the water was near-overwhelming, but there was nothing but open ocean around them.

There was nowhere to hide or escape to. Nothing to do other than defend, fight back and to keep running.

She'd never be able to look at the ocean the same.

It was a living nightmare, but she was too tired to be afraid. Too exhausted to waste energy on terror.

No one showed the slightest inclination to stopping when they reached land, no matter the state they were in, injuries, or how exhausted.
They didn't stop for even a second.

-x-x-x-

Minato had never before been so tense inside the village.

It clashed in his head; feeling like he was in the middle of a mission while still in such a familiar setting.

Seeing the village practically empty for any civilians was eerie on a whole other level, but it made it easier to get around. Meant less he had to worry about, too.

Not that Minato had seen much of the village since all of this had first started, since the village-wide alarm had gone off and Kyo had disappeared to somewhere.

Like almost all the Genin, Minato had been put to work evacuating the civilians into the extensive network of tunnels and rooms in the Hokage mountain -Minato hadn't known that was even there- and then keeping things running, made sure the people were calm, relatively content, and that nothing unexpected happened on that front. Distributing food rations, water, blankets.

Running messages.

Minato had carried so many missives seemingly everywhere by now he was sure he could do it in his sleep.

“Sensei!” He called, having caught a glimpse of Jiraiya on the other side of the room.

“Minato,” Jiraiya-sensei answered, pausing long enough for him to catch up, clasping a hand on his shoulder briefly and giving him a quick once-over. “How're you holding up?”

“I'm fine,” Minato assured him before he pressed on. “Have you heard anything about-”

“Nothing,” Jiraiya huffed, cutting him off, looking severely unhappy for a split-second. “Are you in the middle of something?” He asked next, blinking and focusing back on Minato.

“Delivered my last missive ten minutes ago. I have a couple of hours off,” he said, walking beside his sensei, observing the other shinobi moving around the Hokage tower. He'd planned to try and check up on Kyo's little brother -had been all week- but that could wait a bit longer.

Outside of the tunnels, the only areas that were still as active as usual -or even more so- were the shinobi buildings like this one.

And the wall circling the village, which was constantly manned.

“No one tells me anything, sensei,” Minato said after a pensive silence, glancing up at the man. “The civilians are frightened, but they're getting restless; it's been over a week.” You could only spend so much time terrified before it lost its edge.

“Hiruzen-sensei's fairly confident we'll chase them off soon,” Jiraiya rumbled back, reaching out to slap him on the back encouragingly. “They won't be able to keep this up much longer.”

“It just doesn't make sense,” Minato frowned thoughtfully, “Iwa doesn't achieve anything doing this other than making some obscure statement,” he said, glancing up at his sensei's tense face. “They're just killing themselves for no gain.”

Jiraiya stared at him a long moment, making Minato blink.
“Don't talk about that with other people, kid,” he said gruffly, shaking his head to himself. “There's more at stake here than you realise,” he muttered grimly.

A shout went up further down in the building and tensions sky-rocketed.

Had Iwa shinobi managed to get into the village?

Jiraiya-sensei turned smoothly in the direction the noise had come from, looking like he was prepared for anything, and Minato hurried to follow suit, just in time to catch sight of an ANBU running towards them.

He looked nothing like the ANBU that had been a very visible presence around the village in the last week. His clothes and armour were dirty and scuffed, smeared in dark, rusty colours that he belatedly realised were blood.

He was sooty and looking more than slightly singed, and there was another ANBU tucked under one of his arms, looking to be in even worse condition.

Minato blinked, taking in the smaller ANBU, a small part of him wondering why they hadn't headed for the hospital instead of the Hokage tower.

Before this had all started, he hadn't thought there were any ANBU quite that small.

Jiraiya-sensei made a distressed noise and when the ANBU rushed passed them, hurried to follow, falling into step behind them without so much as a hitch.

Minato hesitated for a split second, and then scrambled to follow, too.

Seeing as they weren't moving at top speed, Minato caught up with sensei relatively quickly and before he could think better of it, took a page out of Kyo's book and jumped onto his back.

Jiraiya-sensei twitched strangely, but adjusted to the added weight easily enough, one hand tugging on his leg to make sure he stayed on properly while he was at it, sending Minato a wry, reluctantly amused look.

He didn't put him down or reprimand him, though, which was all that really mattered.

-x-x-x-

He'd felt him the moment he entered the village.

Katsurou stopped what he was doing, rushed out of the T&I building to head in the same direction without a seconds' thought, and it didn't take a genius to figure out where he were going.

He didn't bother with the front door of the Hokage tower, and instead slipped inside through an upper level window and ran the last bit to catch up with them just outside the Hokage's office.

Katsurou slipped inside before the doors could close and that was the first opportunity he got to actually get a look at Hirata. And, more importantly, Kyo.

Both of them looked like absolute shit.

“Report,” the Hokage barked, seemingly not bothered by the people who had tagged along and
slipped inside to join them.

“Kid poisoned what looked like a group of Iwa fuckers in charge, by the main gates, so I'd launch an attack there,” Hirata grunted, simultaneously signing out a quick succession of coordinates with one hand. “We've got a group of roughly sixty people waiting on a chance to get to the safety of the village, and they're expecting a distraction and the signal to move. Time is of the essence, Hokage-sama.”

“You heard him, get to it,” Hiruzen snapped, and several ANBU shunshined out of the office to put things into motion. “Jiraiya, I want you and Orochimaru on the main gates, as well,” he added, slanting a quick look at his student.

Jiraiya glanced at Kyo, pulled the blond brat off his back and pushed him towards the wall, where he'd be out of the way, and then hurried off after the ANBU without a word.

“Hey, Katsurou,” Hirata spoke up next, and Katsurou automatically caught the girl he tossed at him with minimal warning.

“Will you stop throwing me at people!” Kyo hissed angrily and she sounded just as bad as she looked.

Katsurou carefully adjusted his hold on her, blankly taking in the tremble going through her frame and the way her ribcage was working rapidly to provide her with enough oxygen.

Despite that, she still managed to throw something at Hirata with unerring accuracy.

The man easily snatched the object out of the air in front of his face. And froze, the moment he saw what it was.

“Oi,” he objected flatly.

Before she could throw another jar of poison at the shinobi, Katsurou caught her wrist in his free hand.

“You shouldn't throw those around,” he told her firmly, quietly wondering what the fuck had happened for her to do something like that.

“I don't care, it doesn't matter,” Kyo panted, breathing elevating until it was too rapid, too quick to be healthy. “I. DON'T. CARE!” A half-formed sob tore its way out of her throat and it was an absolutely chilling noise through the voice-altering seals painted on the inside of every ANBU mask.

Without conscious input, the arm he had around the girl tightened, pressing her firmly against his side and front.

He fixed Hirata with a flat, unamused glare.

Kyo was hanging limply in his hold, not struggling to so much as free the hand he still held firmly.

Katsurou slid his hand up and plucked the jar of poison from her fingers, tucked it back into her poison pack, caught the jar Hirata tossed back his way to do the same to that one, and then shifted Kyo around so that she could rest more easily against him.

Her body went completely boneless near-immediately, her head thunking down on his shoulder and if Katsurou hadn’t had a secure hold on her already, she would have ended up on the floor. It was as if someone had cut off all energy to her limbs from one moment to the next, flipped a switch, lights
out.

“Takeshi, escort the Genin to the waiting room outside, if you please,” Hiruzen said grimly, waited for his orders to be followed, and then continued. “Hirata, I'd like a proper report now, thank you,” he said, fixing the man with a sharp, piercing look. It was abundantly clear that he wouldn't accept anything less than full compliance, no matter how politely worded.

“Uzushio's been razed to the ground,” Hirata said darkly, raising a hand to his face to push up his Eagle mask so it rested on top of his head. “We brought the majority of the survivors with us, but I was told several groups fled during the fighting prior to our arrival, though no one knows what fate they found.” He stiffly rolled his shoulders. “Kiri and Kumo were cooperating in large enough a force Uzu didn't have a chance. Broke through the barriers day before we arrived. They intended to destroy her.”

The silence was thick enough to cut in the wake of those news.

Katsurou carefully shifted his stance, fingers ending up on Kyo's throat without a conscious thought. Her pulse was quick as a rabbit's heartbeat against his fingers. Fast and frantic.

The Hokage fired off several probing questions, Takeshi adding his own sharp inquiries in between, and Katsurou listened to every word, all the while overly aware of the ten year old girl in his arms.

And that was when he heard something that made him focus the full scope of his attention on Hirata.

“-kid fought well. She's a good partner,” he huffed, rubbing absently at one of his shoulders.

“What?” He said evenly.

Hirata turned his head to blink at him, gaze flicking down to check on Kyo briefly, before he focused back on his face.

He scratched at his jaw, looking vaguely perplexed. “Kid's a good shinobi. Fought well.”

And he didn't seem like he understood what Katsurou wanted to know. The information he was indirectly digging for.

He knew you couldn't take everything into consideration during shitty situations, or even under the best of circumstances, but Kyo was ten.

“Pipsqueak did a good job of stayin' alive,” Hirata offered when Katsurou continued to stare flatly at him, clearly trying to figure out what he wanted to hear. “I only had to save her skin,” he paused, as if to try and recall, “three times?” He mused in a quiet mutter, giving a slow blink that gave away just how drained he really was. “Might be more,” he shrugged, “'s hard to commit shit like that to memory in the middle of a free-for-all genocide.”

Katsurou took a slow, deliberate breath, fingers twitching faintly against Kyo's clammy skin.

“And the reaction a while back?” Katsurou asked calmly, pressing on and leaving that issue for now.

Kyo was religiously careful with her poisons, mindful of them to the point of paranoia, and she'd thrown a jar full of the stuff at a comrade's face. A comrade she was inexplicably, confusingly fond of.

No matter how tired and battered, Katsurou hadn't expected her to do that.
Hirata shrugged idly, and it was clear he was slowly shutting down now he'd fulfilled his duties and was back home.

“Kid's very useful in a crappy situation,” he muttered, giving another slow blink.

“Katsurou,” Hiruzen spoke up, interrupting the unorthodox cross-examination. “Eagle and Scorpion could both benefit from a medic's attention, I'm quite sure,” he said firmly, glancing between Kyo's pretty much unconscious form, to Hirata, who was staring dazedly at the wall now, face drawn and blank, eyes distant and vague. “Alert the hospital that there will be a large influx of patients soon enough, if they haven't gotten there already.”

Katsurou eyed the man a long second, taking in the grim, tired cast to his face and inclined his head.

“Make him take a breather soon,” he told Takeshi on his way out.

“Don't worry about it,” the Senju drawled back, the skin around his eyes tight. “Got it covered.” And he, too, hurried off to fulfil his orders and make sure everything was running as smoothly as possible.

The blond brat was at his side the moment the door closed behind him and Hirata -who had jerkily pulled his mask back down before exiting- staring at Katsurou and Kyo alternately, clearly putting things together, one piece at a time.

There really weren't any other ANBU as small as Kyo was and the kid had most likely already figured out the truth, but rationally knowing and seeing for yourself were two different things.

Katsurou activated a subtle genjutsu to obscure Kyo's mask, as well as people's perception of him in general, to make it easier for them to disregard the small ANBU he was carrying, and then glanced down at Minato, who bit his lip uncertainly, and then fell into step beside him without saying a word.

Pleasantly surprised, Katsurou marched off to the hospital, regularly making sure he didn't lose Hirata along the way.

Kyo remained dead to the world, but she was breathing, her heart was still beating, no matter how faint her chakra was, and she was alive.

-x-x-x-
Chapter 61

Chapter Summary

Kyo would very much like to be invisible for a little while

The only thing worse than realising you couldn't immediately enter your own home, was the fact of the reason why.

Iwa shinobi were stationed along the entirety of the wall circling the village -keeping her safe- or so it seemed.

Kyo had been hitching a ride with Kisaki for the last who knew how long, with Hirata carrying Horse on his back, instead.

She had no idea how long they'd been running.

An out of place beeping noise, steady and consistent was in her ears for a moment, and Kyo glanced around confusedly, looking for any possible source.

The forest was utterly silent and still around them, though.

Focusing back on the problem at hand, Kyo faintly considered the people travelling with them, all the injured and the ones in desperate need of medical attention.

At least their pursuers had been forced away when they crossed back over Hi no Kuni's borders, so the terror of being constantly hunted had diminished for the last stretch.

“We need a distraction,” Hirata muttered speculatively, and she could feel the considering look he fixed her with.

Kyo was too tired to give any sort of reaction. She merely waited for the next set of orders.

Before she knew it, she and Hirata were off on their own, having crept unnoticed towards one of the Iwa encampments, keeping to the tops of the trees that remained in the area.

By the looks of things, they'd toppled several of the proud giants towards the wall, which looked far less pristine than the last time she'd seen it.

Someone touched her shoulder, jarring her, and Kyo looked down, perplexed, when she realised no one was there.

'Have anything to inconvenience these assholes?' Hirata signed, distracting her from her sluggish, confused thoughts.

Kyo reached one hand back to dig through her poison pack until her fingers closed around the container she wanted.

'Hold this,' she signed half-heartedly at Hirata, handing him the lid, which she'd poured a generous pile of powder on beforehand.
It was miracle her hands were steady enough.

While Hirata acted as a carefully motionless assistant, Kyo slowly and carefully went through familiar hand-seals, forcing all of her focus on corralling her hands to do the right things.

When she finished the last one, she took a deep, slow breath, reached out to grab the lid she'd prepared, brought it up to her mouth, and then blew out a steady, deliberate breath. Which easily carried off the fine powder with it.

Having scraped together the last of her chakra, Kyo felt the jutsu activate.

All she had to do was make sure the poison powder rained down in the correct area, reaching the intended targets.

That wasn't very hard.

She held her bubble jutsu for as long as she could. Until she swayed on the branch she was perching on.

Kyo barely registered it when Hirata picked her up, tucked her under one of his arms and left the scene, finding a small, hidden entrance she'd never known was there to slip back inside the village.

Things were fading in and out of focus and there was an echo of voices seemingly distorting the scene around her until it tore to pieces like so much wet paper.

Kyo woke with a gasp that turned into painful coughs.

Carefully rolling onto her side, she tried to suck down deep breaths and find a position that would make breathing easier.

Head still swimming with memories and the unsettling nightmare she'd just woken from, Kyo tried to figure out where she was.

“You'll be feeling quite under the weather until your chakra levels have had a chance to recover, I'm afraid,” a female voice told her evenly, and Kyo twitched hard when a hand was placed on her arm. “My apologies, dearie,” the woman said, sounding vaguely apologetic.

When she was assisted back onto her back, Kyo got her first look at what she tiredly identified as a nurse.

“You're in Konoha, Shiranui-chan, in the hospital,” she was told, which solved one mystery. “You're suffering from chakra exhaustion, amongst other things, and you've been asleep for the last five days.”

Shit.

“With plenty of rest and sustenance, you're going to make a full recovery,” the nurse finished perkily, undaunted by Kyo's dazed silence.

Kyo managed a blink.

She was feeling like absolute crap. Like someone had scrunched her up in a ball and twisted her around in an attempt to squeeze out every last drop of liquid from her body.

Only instead of liquid, it was chakra that had been drained.
Her body hurt, and she felt cold. Shaky.

Her head was pounding, her stomach roiled uncomfortably, as if she was on the cusp of having to throw up, and she doubted she could have stood on her own two feet even if her life depended on it.

With an exhausted sigh, she closed her eyes and returned to sleep.

Sleeping was better than feeling like this.

It was fine.

She was home. Safe.

Nothing to worry about.

.

Kyo slept through another couple of days, drifting in and out of consciousness and not feeling particularly hurried to reach a point where she could stay awake for more than a handful of minutes.

The nurses talked to her a lot, whenever they were around, but Kyo didn't feel particularly inclined to indulge them and respond in kind.

She did as told, she ate the food they brought her, she followed instructions.

That was plenty enough, in her opinion.

Apparently, things were very busy, the nurses told her, prattling on about everything and anything when they accepted the fact she wouldn't give any sort of verbal response.

Kyo was fairly sure they were keeping careful track of how alert she was and how much attention she was paying their 'conversations'.

The Iwa shinobi who had been besieging their village had been sent on their way, packing back home with their tails between their legs -according to one nurse- and the civilians were returning to their normal routines while repairs were taking place around the village.

Mostly concentrated on and around the wall, thankfully.

There were other things, too.

One nurse liked to remark on the weather while she wiped her down and tended to the virtual artwork of bruises littering her skin, keeping the plentiful cuts and scrapes clean with careful attention.

They'd gotten a lot of rain in the last two days, or so she'd been told.

Kyo hadn't noticed anything, and she didn't particularly care.

She was tired.

A week after she'd woken up, Kyo was well enough to sit up in bed and not feel like she was about to keel over while she was at it.

She could eat entirely by her own power, didn't have to have a nurse hovering concernedly by her side for the duration of the meal, and she'd even taken a couple of ginger, rather painful trips to the bathroom by herself.
Getting to use a toilet was a blessing, and Kyo relished the act.

“You mustn't be sad over your lack of visitors, dear,” the current nurse told her as she folded up the bedsheets she had stripped off of Kyo's hospital bed, more for easier transport than anything else, because they were going straight into the wash. “Everyone's been so awfully busy, but things are finally calming down and returning to normal.” She smiled. “Natsuki told me they've resumed the rolling schedule of border patrols. It'll be nice to see my boyfriend again, once he gets a chance to come back home, and Natsuki was so excited to see her husband she nearly cried. He'd been scheduled to come back two weeks ago, but his turn at the border was extended along with everyone else's when, well,” she trailed off, pursing her lips, because everyone knew what had happened with the whole siege-thing.

Kyo blinked, turning to stare blankly at the woman, who graced her with a warm grin.

She was young, probably around twenty, and traditionally pretty, she supposed.

Her smile dimmed fractionally when Kyo failed to say or do anything, but she didn't let that stop her.

“I heard the Hokage officially took in the Uzushio refugees and plan to give them their own compound,” she powered on. “Last I heard, they'll build it in the eastern section of the village, near the river, but who knows what changes they'll make before they start anything,” she said with a sigh. “Yesterday I heard someone say they'll move it to near the Uchiha compound, but that sounded like baseless gossip, if you ask me.”

Kyo tuned the rest of it out.

It was nice background noise, calming and relaxing to listen to, so long as she didn't pay too close attention to all the words.

Staring out the window at the blue sky and cheerful sunlight, Kyo considered the reason all the nurses made sure to stay longer than she was used to, all of them lingering in her room to talk to her for at least fifteen, twenty minutes whenever they came around.

Were they saving her room for last? They must be, to have the time for it.

So far, it had only happened once that a nurse had had to rush off to tend to some sort of emergency further down the corridor, and Kyo couldn't really remember much about it, because that had been when she'd still been sleeping more than anything else.

“Oh, please come in!” The nurse exclaimed, sounding delighted, and it was enough of a deviation from the usual routine by now that Kyo blinked and turned to stare at the woman, who was smiling brightly at the door. “Looks like you're finally getting visitors, Kyo-chan! Cute girl like you, I knew it was just a matter of time,” the nurse said teasingly, gifting her with a warm grin that Kyo just stared at.

She didn't feel the slightest inclination to return it.

There was an awkward pause, where the nurse's smile slowly faded to give way to a concerned frown, and Kyo belatedly realised she probably ought to check to see who was here to see her.

Slowly shifting on the bed, Kyo craned her head just enough to slant a long look at the door out of the corner of her eye. Only to freeze.

The room felt suddenly small and crowded, and yeah, it wasn't a big room, but it had felt like more than enough when it was just her and one or two nurses. The occasional medic.
Glancing over tou-san, Ryota, Katsurou-sensei and she could see Jiraiya-sensei's white hair behind them, too...

She couldn't explain the way she tensed, the blood draining out of her face and the way her breathing jumped into something far less calm than it'd been a minute ago.

“Kyo,” tou-san said, and there was palpable relief, concern and warm love in his voice, all wrapped up in a tight bundle, and it wasn't-

Kyo felt trapped.

“You're getting a bad track-record, kitten,” Ryota huffed, making as if to stride up to her bed. “You and hospitals. It feels like we can't even leave you in the village these days-”

Kyo was off the bed and out the window before she even realised she planned to do anything.

She just knew she needed to get away.

-x-x-x-

“This was why I told you to wait and let me brief you before we went to the hospital,” Katsurou growled irritably, reaching out to yank the Uchiha back from the hospital bed, even though it was already too late.

Shocked both mute and motionless, the man let him, without so much as a token protest.

“What just happened?” Kou asked blankly, staring at the open window as if he couldn't for the life of him process and digest the last two minutes.

“Oh, no,” the nurse muttered, hand raised to her face. “And she was starting to do better, too.” She worried her lower lip between her teeth. “She shouldn't be moving yet, and I need to inform the medic.” She frowned.

“I'll track her down and bring her back,” Katsurou told her firmly. “I'll drop a word at the nurse station when she's been returned.”

“That's much appreciated, Yamanaka-san,” the nurse replied with a shallow bow, looking relieved. “We've all been worried about the poor dear.”

Katsurou felt his mouth flatten into an unhappy line.

“The fuck?” The Uchiha muttered blankly when the nurse slipped out to notify the medic on call of the latest happenings. He was still staring at the window.

Katsurou dragged a hand down his face and glanced at Jiraiya. “You've not been here in the last two weeks?”

“I popped by the first few days, but the girl was dead to the world,” Jiraiya huffed, sounding troubled. “Sensei’s kept me too busy to do much of anything else after that.” And he looked guilty.

“Ah, this isn't good,” Katsurou couldn't help but mutter.

He hadn't been able to get away, either.
Between the influx of a handful of Uzushio survivors of various ages and the general lack of shinobi at hand to begin with, there hadn't been much time for anything other than work. It had diverted quite a bit of people from both Psych and T&I and everyone else had been working double shifts to cover for the loss. Not to mention the people sent out to repair the hole in their border defences, and everything that came with that.

“What,” Kou demanded blankly, still frozen in the door.

“They haven't let me see her any of the times I've come here,” Minato said quietly, glancing from his sensei to the bed, to the window and back again, before he turned his blue gaze on Katsurou. “I kept being told to bring an adult, Chuunin or above in rank, with me to be let in.”

“The fuck?” The Uchiha repeated, something sharp having slipped into his voice at the boy’s words.

“I'll be more than happy to discuss this with you after I've tracked Kyo down and had her looked over by a medic,” Katsurou said evenly, calm but unamused. “Excuse me,” he muttered making to walk over to the window to follow his brat out and ferret out wherever it was she had run off to.

“No,” Kou snapped, one of his hands grabbing hold of Katsurou's arm. “Absolutely not,” he hissed. “I'm coming with you.”

“Kou,” the Uchiha grunted, sending his teammate a speculative look, a small frown pulling on his brows.

“Kyo does not need a full team of Jounin hunting her down,” he said frankly. As he had been expecting, it didn't have much of an impact on either of them. “She's not a criminal,” he snapped, and just the suggestion sent a whisper of unease through his gut.

“No, it's probably best if we stay here,” the Uchiha huffed, giving Kou a pointed look, and at least Katsurou seemed to have something of an ally in the man on this matter.

“S probably best if we stay here,” the Uchiha huffed, giving Kou a pointed look, and at least Katsurou seemed to have something of an ally in the man on this matter.

“Neither of you are a tracker, Kyo's still suffering from chakra depletion and should be out of bed as little as possible,” Katsurou continued flatly, giving Kyo's father an unimpressed stare. “The best way you can help your daughter right now, Kou, is to stay here, wait for me to bring her back, and give her whatever support she'll need.”

And they didn't have time to stand around here and argue.

When it looked like Ryota would physically restrain Kou to keep him in the room regardless of the man in question's reaction, Katsurou turned back to the window without another word or so much as a glance.

He couldn't say he was overly surprised when Jiraiya followed when he leapt outside, but at least it
wasn't as bad as it could have been.

With her chakra as weak as it currently was, Kyo would be difficult to find enough even without the other man following him. It didn't help that he was practically blazing his chakra at maximum output for everyone to feel and take notice.

The man was, no matter what he thought of it, Kyo's sensei.

Katsurou ignored him to do what had to be done.

“Why would she come here?” Jiraiya wondered in a muttered tone of voice, worried and mildly unsettled as he scanned the large, towering trees around them. The ground far below.

Katsurou spared him a brief glance but didn't answer.

He wasn't in the mood for idle conversation right now, and he needed to track down Kyo as fast as possible before things spiralled even further out of control. Jiraiya had insisted on tagging along, but that didn't mean Katsurou had to indulge him.

When you stopped to think about it, the Forest of Death actually made sense for her to chose to hide in, considering the circumstances.

Kyo had seen a village razed to the ground, run over and destroyed. It's people ravaged and slaughtered.

Konoha's buildings and streets, no matter how peaceful, probably made her think back on Uzushio, and she would have run off to somewhere that didn't.

As far as Katsurou knew, there weren't trees this large on the island of Uzu.

“There she is,” Katsurou murmured, coming to a stop on a thick branch, crouching down to gesture at the small form that sat curled up in the branches of the next tree over, knees pulled up to her chest and arms wrapped around her own head, forehead pressing against her knees.

Katsurou felt old and tired just looking at her.

He glanced at Jiraiya.

“I still haven't gotten a chance to ask sensei what the hell he was thinking,” he muttered darkly, frowning at his student, eyes sad and looking like he didn't know what to do. Where to start.

Katsurou already knew what Hiruzen had been thinking, but that didn't do anything to soothe the mildly homicidal feelings he was carefully nursing.

Biting back a scathing snort, Katsurou jumped off from the branch he'd been crouched on to land a polite distance away from his brat, keeping a careful eye on her the whole time.

The way she tensed was disappointing, but not unexpected.

'Stay away!'

Katsurou stilled. The stiff, jerky signs enough to pull him up short.

She hadn't even raised her head to look at him.
“Is it alright if I stay over here?” He asked, voice even and calm, despite the rising urge to punch something. Someone.

Kyo's hand twitched in a half-formed affirmative Katsurou decided to take as answer enough.

“You're not yet in any condition to leave your hospital bed, Kyo,” he began sedately, “not to mention running around in here.” He scanned the area around them again, though he was fairly sure Jiraiya would rather eat a shuriken than let any of the wild beasts inhabiting this patch of forest get close to them right now. “There are several people here, and back at the hospital, worried about you, and I practically had to threaten your tou-san to keep him from running after you.”

Kyo curled up into an even tighter ball of hurt and misery.

There was the quiet tap of sandalled feet landing on the branch behind him, and Katsurou sent Jiraiya a sharp look over his shoulder, still keeping most of his attention on Kyo.

If he made her run off again...

“What's going on?” He asked seriously, looking from Katsurou to Kyo and back again.

“Kyo?” Katsurou questioned.

'No,' she signed back in shaky, unsteady movements.

“I'm sorry to say,” he took a deep, silent breath, “but this is not negotiable. After this little trip, you need to be looked at by a medic,” he said firmly.

He took a step towards her, only to freeze when she flinched back.

'Stay away,' she signed again, followed by a heartbreakingly desperate, ‘please.’

“...will you allow Jiraiya to pick you up and carry you back to the hospital?” He asked the moment he'd found his voice.

“Hey,” Jiraiya huffed, clearly wondering what the hell was going on here.

Kyo didn't disagree, which had to be good enough in this situation.

Taking a deep breath, Katsurou stepped back and turned to face the younger Jounin. “You are getting over there, picking her up and getting her back to her hospital bed, are we clear?”

Jiraiya eyed him sceptically, before he slanted a quick look at Kyo. “What the hell's going on, man?”

He asked quietly, for once perfectly serious. Solemn.

Katsurou eyed him with hard eyes for a long moment, jaw clenching momentarily, before he firmly shoved his personal feelings aside.

“What do you know about the mission?” He asked shortly, taking care to keep his voice down.

“Uzushio rescue mission that went all kind of ways to shit,” Jiraiya returned bluntly. “Half the ANBU sent out didn't make it back alive.”

Which was the core of it.

Katsurou eyed the man, actively having to keep a frown off his face, but there was nothing for it. This was something that would have to be stated out loud. “You know how my Genin died,” he said
shortly. Jiraiya looked thrown by the seeming random change of subject. “And you know what Kyo's specialization is. That alone should tell you a lot about the reasons why she had problems getting reassigned a new team.”

Jiraiya's gaze slid off his face and past him.

Following the line of his gaze, Katsurou's eyes settled on Kyo, who had shifted so that her hands were pressing down over her ears, clearly in an attempt not to hear what he was about to say.

Flexing his hands at his sides, Katsurou turned back to Jiraiya. “Kyo's biggest fear,” he continued quietly. “Her worst nightmare, is watching the people around her die of poison while she remains unaffected. It was no doubt several times worse when it was her own poison, rather than an enemy’s.”

For a couple of seconds, Jiraiya stared uncomprehendingly at him, as if what he'd just said didn't make any sense.

As if it didn't translate into anything comprehensible in his head.

Katsurou raised a hand to his face to rub at his eyes. He was beyond tired, his body was protesting the long few weeks he'd had and things didn't look like they were going to get better any time soon, but... part of him wanted to hunt down Hirata and murder him, consequences be damned.

Then he wanted to do the same to- that didn't matter.

The people who had made those decisions were already dead.

“What is it you're saying here, really?” Jiraiya finally asked, and the only thing that prevented Katsurou from wanting to smash his face in was the weight and gravity to his voice.

Seemed there was more than air between the younger man's ears, after all.

“I'm saying,” Katsurou huffed irritably, “that Kyo's gonna have issues with letting anyone she loves close right now.”

Jiraiya blinked, face twisting in a brief mask of bitter amusement. “You're saying I'm expendable.”

“I'm saying you're the most recent addition to a very small group of people important to her,” Katsurou snapped back impatiently, not in the mood to coddle anyone. “And unlike me, she's never seen you nearly dead by poisoning.”

Jiraiya scratched at his jaw, looking torn.

“So what do you want me to do?”

“Get her back to the hospital,” Katsurou ordered curtly, itching to do it himself. As it seemed like that wouldn't be possible right now, he was content to let Jiraiya do it for him.

“You okay with that, kid?” Jiraiya asked in a raised voice, turning his attention back to Kyo.

Katsurou didn't know if he should sigh exasperatedly or not, because, “Kyo isn't currently capable of making that decision for herself,” he sighed, resisting the urge to rub at his face again. “She's young enough the use of chakra today will have set her back days of recovery. She needs a medic.”

And he didn't even want to think about why he had to state these things out loud.
One of Jiraiya's teammates was the best damn medic in all of Fire Country.

“Alright,” Jiraiya finally said, and he sounded weary.

Well, he was far from the only one, and he could save his complaints until they'd gotten Kyo back to where she currently needed to be.

With one last look between them, Jiraiya walked over to Kyo to do as ordered.

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All the noises were muffled into something that was strangely calming and more safe.

The shock of finding herself in the middle of the village -her home- only to see the image of Uzushio superseded on top of everything around her had been enough to send her scrambling for a hiding spot before she was found and killed.

It wasn't even until she'd reached the calm of the forest that she realised she needn't have troubled herself.

No one in Konoha was going to try and kill her.

No one was hunting her down to hurt her.

There were no enemies here.

That realisation didn't change the fact her heart was racing in her chest, her breathing was shallow and rapid with mounting panic and she'd curled up in a small, protective ball by the time sensei found her.

The thought had just about gotten a chance to calm her mind before he tried to approach and her panic spiked again, entirely on it's own.

Kyo wanted Katsurou-sensei close, she did.

But...

A large hand landed on her shoulder, making her jump, fingers twitching against the sides of her head and she was pretty sure Jiraiya said something to her, but she was too busy trying to calm down to hear him.

Before she knew it, she'd been picked up and carefully arranged into strong arms, cradled against a wide chest like she was half her current age and then they were moving.

Nausea was threatening to turn her stomach, but it had nothing to do with how fast they were travelling, or with the man carrying her.

It had everything to do with what she had done.

Kyo's hands slid down from her ears to her mouth, content to leave the wind muffling her hearing to the sounds of the village, and with her eyes screwed shut, it was almost like they were out in the wilderness of Hi no Kuni.
It was almost enough to fool herself.

And then the moment was over, and everything came rushing back.

Jiraiya touched down in front of the hospital, and there were plenty of people moving about.

Kyo tore her hands away from her mouth to slap them back over her ears, and she didn't even try to open her eyes.

She tried to tell herself the sound of people wasn't dangerous, but the largest part of her currently in charge didn't want to hear it.

What felt like a Jounin, someone she didn't know, ambled passed them on their way into the hospital and Kyo shrank back, trying to melt into Jiraiya-sensei's chest.

She was being ridiculous, and she knew it.

There was no reason for her to be terrified!

But she was.

She was so, so scared, she didn't know what to do. She couldn't make herself stop hiding, even for a moment, even when she rationally knew the way she was going about it was ineffective and childish.

Keeping her eyes closed and her ears covered didn't hide her from other people.

If anything, it attracted more attention.

They paused for a brief moment, and then they continued down what she assumed was the corridor leading to her room.

Kyo didn't pay even half as much attention as she should, too absorbed in trying to regulate her breathing.

Jiraiya's steady heartbeat against her temple was grounding, but it wasn't enough on its own.

Katsurou-sensei kept close, too, but the destination -and the people waiting there- ahead of them felt like a kunai against her throat.

Jiraiya shifted his hold on her, to open a door, and not long after that, she was put down on a soft mattress.

Time was up.

Before anyone could try and make her do anything, Kyo pulled her legs up to her chest and pressed her face against her knees.

She didn't want to look at them. Didn't want to see-

She would like it even better if they didn't look at her, but she was realistic enough to pick her battles. None of the people in this room would agree to such a demand.

“Kyo,” Katsurou-sensei said firmly, her name muffled but audible, despite the hands over her ears. The next moment, sensei's hands were on her wrists, gently but determinedly pulling them away from her head. “You need to hear what the medic's got to say,” he said.
“Let's see the damage, then,” an unfamiliar voice said briskly into the following silence.

Kyo remained perfectly still when the man placed a hand on the back of her head, his chakra trickling into her body to assess the damage she'd no doubt done to her recovery by running off.

When that had been taken care of, the medic left to tend to his other patients, and then there was nothing distracting from the confrontation she hadn't wanted to experience.

“Kyo?” And that was tou-san's voice.

He sounded strained. As if he didn't know what to think.

'No,' Kyo signed back. She didn't think her voice would hold for conversation right now. 'No, no, no!'

She didn't want this, couldn't do this right now.

“What did he make her do?” Jiraiya asked quietly. “I've heard enough stories about- It was bad, but,” he sighed, “what was it you were talking about back in the Forest of Death?”

This was what she hadn't wanted, and Kyo's breathing sped up in response.

“What happened wasn't your fault,” Katsurou said on a heavy sigh. “Shinobi older and far more experienced than you made that decision and they used you, Kyo.” He sounded tired.

'I killed them,' Kyo signed jerkily, breath stuttering in her chest and she screwed her eyes shut even tighter.

“What is going on?” Tou-san demanded impatiently, aggravated and upset.

“I would like to know that, as well,” Ryota grumbled unhappily.

'Don't tell them!' Kyo signed with panicked desperation.

“And why not?” Katsurou fired back in a slow, even voice.

Kyo took a deep breath, fingers clenching in the sheets until she was sure her knuckles shone white.

'I-’ her fingers were too stiff for signing with anything even resembling her usual fluidity. 'I killed allies, sensei,’ she managed slowly, and she was sure the words were barely legible.

“Always knew I should've learned ANBU sign,” Ryota huffed, unhappy and sounding close to vexed, because the only one in the room that could understand her was Katsurou-sensei.

“And what do you think will happen when they find out?” Katsurou asked idly.

Kyo's breath was sharp and short through her windpipe, quick and erratic and she could barely feel her hands.

She couldn't answer.

She couldn't.

Sensei had said 'when' not 'if' and just that small kernel of truth was tearing at her.

Kyo didn't think she'd be able to deal with her family looking at her like she was- She'd had her first
kill so long ago it felt like a different life altogether -another one- and she'd long since lost count of the number of lives she'd ended.

But those had been Others.

Obstacles to get out of the way.

Enemies.

Targets.

Not allies. Comrades.

The few in this world that had been supposed to be safe. The ones she never would have to turn on and murder.

But she had done that anyway.

Kyo finally managed a somewhat proper though haggard breath, feeling like she was drowning. Drowning in this war, in this world, everything she had done.

“Kyo,” tou-san said quietly, and a hand came down on her hair.

She jumped at the unexpected contact, but didn't try to flinch away.

The weight on her head was grounding and far more comfort than she had expected. It made it easier to breathe.

'I want,' her fingers twitched to form the words before she could decide not to. 'I want kaa-san.'

“That's not something I, or anyone else here, can give you,” Katsurou returned wearily.

“What did she say?” Tou-san demanded sharply, shifting to no doubt stare at Katsurou-sensei.

“Kyo?” Sensei questioned quietly.

Kyo merely repeated herself. 'I want kaa-san.'

“Katsurou,” Kou pressed tersely.

“I want kaa-san,’ is what she said,” Katsurou recounted slowly, heavily.

There was a beat of silence, and tou-san's hand twitched and tensed minutely against her skull.

“I can't- Isshun's not been with us for a couple years now, Kyo,” he said faintly, voice stiff and awkward and there was grief and helplessness there. “Is there something I can-?” He cut himself off, as if he couldn't bring himself to finish that sentence.

'Why?' Kyo signed weakly.

‘Why, what?’ Katsurou asked after a brief pause, no doubt to see if she would sign something more without prompting.

'Why did she teach me that?' She demanded in increasingly jerky motions, feeling her body tense.

‘That?’ Katsurou questioned quietly, though she was sure he already knew what she meant.
'It doesn't do anything other than kill everything,' she signed tiredly, feeling like she ought to be angry. 'Why did she teach me?'

There was a strange noise and she finally shifted to raise her head from her knees, just enough to get her eyes free.

Katsurow was sitting in one of the chairs, slumped down, leaned back with both hands over his face. As she watched, he pulled them down and let them fall into his lap to level her with a flat look.

“You ask impossible questions, despite already knowing the answer,” he told her blandly.

She couldn't think of anything other than to ask 'Why' again. And again.

“Katsurow,” tou-san repeated curtly, voice dangerously close to falling into hard, flat and lacking inflection.


Kou flinched like struck, jerking his head around to stare down at her and Kyo could do nothing more than stare back.

There was something unnameable in his eyes that she couldn't even begin to identify.

Her dad remained frozen for a few seconds before he took a slow step back, away from her. He calmly removed his hand from her head, turned around, walked up to the wall and punched it so hard she was sure he split the skin on his knuckles.

Kyo stared.

'Sensei, what-?' She twitched a hand questioningly at her dad.

Kou punched the wall again, just as hard, leaving a smear of blood on the white paint, took a deep breath, and walked out the door without a word or a backwards glance.

“I'll go after him,” Ryota muttered. “We'll be back, kitten,” he added and then hurried after his teammate.

Kyo turned back to look at Katsurow-sensei, who was staring at the door with a tight, contemplative look on his face. “I think it's time I talked with your father, too, Kyo,” he finally said, weighing his words, slanting her a focused look. “I'm leaving to make sure your dad is alright, to make sure he'll be able to work through a great deal of helplessness and built up frustrations, and then I'm coming back here to you. You are far too troublesome to ever get rid of and if you think you have even a sliver of a hope to do so, then you don't know me at all.”

And with that, he got to his feet and ambled after Kou and Ryota, seemingly not in anything resembling a hurry to track them down. Leaving tou-san plenty of time to try and compose himself.

Sensei was amazing like that.

Kyo turned to look at Jiraiya, who scratched at his jaw like he didn't have the first clue about what was going on or how to react to it.

“Are you okay?” Minato asked quietly into the awkward silence.
Something bitter twisted her face a moment and she shook her head.

Not even close.

Jiraiya hesitated half a second longer, before he grabbed one of the chairs, placed it right next to Kyo's bed and parked himself in it, looking like nothing in the world could get him to move anytime soon.

After another brief silence, he leaned forward to snatch up her hand to hold it in his, a displeased frown on his face.

Kyo let out a small sigh, closing her eyes momentarily.

Letting her cheek fall against her knee she sent Minato a subtle look.

After a long few seconds' hesitation, she shuffled to the side, closer to Jiraiya, deliberately not looking at either of them.

Minato still seemed to understand, taking the hint and apparently not minding in the least, because he readily enough climbed up on the hospital bed to sit beside her.

“You two don't hate me, do you?” She asked, voice rough and gritty from disuse. It was the first thing she'd spoken out loud in a while. Minato turned to stare at her. “No.” He blinked. “Why would I do that? You're my teammate.”

He seemed genuinely confused.

Instead of starting on the list immediately popping up in her head, Kyo turned to Jiraiya.

“You're unbelievable, kid,” he sighed, tightening his hold on her hand. “I'll butt heads with that stuck-up, grumpy old Yamanaka of yours every day for the rest of my life, but you're not getting rid of me now. Too late for that, I'm afraid,” he grumbled gruffly, looking mildly uncomfortable but the stubborn set to his jaw spoke well enough for him.

“I already told you you're stuck with me,” Minato added sincerely, and if Kyo hadn't felt too tired and wrung out for it, she would have smiled. Or cried.

Instead, she settled for leaning back against the mattress to get some rest.

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Chapter 62

Chapter Summary

Kou wins award for Best Dad. (Kaimaru doesn't win any Best awards anything)

Kyo's dramatic episode had unfortunately set her back quite a few days, recovery-wise, which meant she had to stay hospitalized longer.

As far as she understood it, because of her young age, her chakra exhaustion was more severe and the medic had been very firm about keeping her under professional observation until she'd recovered enough to be 'safe' from whatever issues they were afraid of.

It might also have had something to do with how banged up she'd been, coming back from- that mission.

The lack of chakra in her system was apparently slowing down the healing process, despite outside efforts, which was no doubt another factor.

Kyo huffed out a small sigh as she wandered down the corridor towards one of the courtyards patients could visit without giving the nurses minor heart-attacks. And without making them notify the ANBU patrolling the hospital one of their wards had checked themselves out early and needed to be collected and returned to their beds.

Staying inside, confined to a bed in a small room for so long was threatening to make her lose her mind, because the only thing she had to distract herself with was her own thoughts, and Kyo was trying to avoid thinking too much about things for that very same reason.

Vicious cursing in a familiar voice made her slow to a stop before she reached her destination, though.

Kyo tilted her head, watching the nurse stomping out of one of the rooms further down the corridor with a ticked off expression on her face, eyebrows pulled together in a deep frown.

When she swept past her, most likely headed for the nurse station, Kyo heard her mutter darkly about impossible, rude patients under her breath and it was hardly a decision at all to walk the last distance and then slip in through the door.

“What!?” An unfriendly voice growled at her in greeting. “Oh. It's you,” Kaimaru huffed disdainfully when she gave a short wave of greeting. “In here again, are you? How fucking useless can you be?” He muttered harshly, turning his face away to scowl at the far wall.

Kyo walked over to the bed the teenager was laying on and, after a brief pause, climbed up to sit herself at the foot of it.

She was mindful not to jar him, because she still didn't know why Kaimaru was in here, and she doubted he'd stay around -no matter what the medic and nurses were saying- if he was actually capable of leaving.

'Chakra exhaustion,' she signed in explanation. Because that was still easier than talking and the
thought of making too much noise was making her deeply uncomfortable. 'And I'm bruised and have plenty of cuts, but other than that,' she trailed off with a shrug that only hurt a little.

Kaimaru snorted, studying her out of the corner of his eye. "Like I give a shit."

They were silent a long few minutes, and Kyo was content to sit there and stare out Kaimaru's window, watching the clouds drift by against the backdrop of a deep blue sky.

If it continued like this, there'd be rain by evening.

"Didn't see you around the village," Kaimaru grunted some time later, still sulking, but looking marginally more relaxed. Or, less tense, at least.

Kyo felt her mouth go dry, but ignored that easily enough. 'Had a mission,' she signed evasively.

"No shit," Kaimaru scoffed. "I'm not a damn idiot."

Kyo grimaced at him, because that wasn't what she'd meant and he knew it. 'Uzushio mission,' she clarified shortly. And that was as far as she was willing to go.

It was a clear improvement, but she recognized that she had some clear issues. Katsurou-sensei was slowly helping her through them, but he was still pretty busy with other things, most of the time.

Kaimaru frowned, dark eyes intent and speculative. "You missed out, Shiranui," he drawled. "The rest of us were on high alert for the entire siege, either running surveillance of the village and the Iwa encampments, or we were actively engaging the fuckers."

'Fun times,' Kyo signed, rolling her eyes. She was nonetheless grateful for the change of subject, slight that it may be. 'You okay?'

"Do I look okay to you?" Kaimaru demanded with an irritated, incredulous glare.

Kyo just stared at him, waiting for him to either change the subject or give her an actual answer.

Kaimaru huffed, arms crossing over his chest, and he looked away to glower at the wall. "Didn't dodge an earth jutsu completely, and it fucked up my thigh. Shredded part of the muscle," he grumbled shortly. "But at least I didn't break anything," he added snidely, sending her a pointed look.

Kyo felt a brief flash of faint amusement. 'Know when you're getting out?'

"No," Kaimaru growled aggressively. "Because none of these idiots tell me anything," he seethed. "You?" He shot her a dark look, as if daring her to comment.

'Don't know,' Kyo signed with a small shrug. 'As it looks right now, they're reluctant to let me out of their sights.'

Kaimaru considered her a moment, and then made himself comfortable against his pillows, frowning thoughtfully up at the ceiling.

"What's up with the signing?" He questioned sullenly a while later, fixing her with an expectant look.

Kyo hesitated. They were edging back in on uncomfortable ground.

'I'm traumatized,' she finally settled on sharing, feeling another fleeting flash of amusement, wry and
bitter, this time. 'It was bad.'

"Who's bright idea was it to send a fucking child like you, anyway?" Kaimaru grumbled, fingers tapping out an uneven rhythm against the covers in a restless, impatient manner she doubted he was fully conscious of. "Should just stick you with D-ranks and leave you at it," he added with a sneer.

'Fuck you,' Kyo replied sedately, though she felt strangely reassured. Not as keyed-up and anxious as she had half expected. 'Anything else interesting happened around here?'

"The hell are you talking about?" Kaimaru grumbled. "This is the hospital; nothing interesting ever happens here. People either suffer out their sentence until they're released or they die. Nothing exciting about it."

'The nurses have been talking at me a lot,' Kyo revealed once she'd digested that less-than optimistic response. 'I don't think I've ever been so caught up on the village gossip.'

"Good for you," Kaimaru scoffed with an unimpressed sneer, letting her know exactly what he thought about that.

'I try to tune it out,' Kyo agreed blandly, 'but I still find myself knowing who's interested in who and which nurse is having a romance with which shinobi.'

"Useless fucking waste of energy," Kaimaru muttered, contempt all but dripping from his voice.

Kyo eyed his thighs to determine which one was injured and then patted the foot on the other leg in a patronizing manner.

'At least you don't have to listen to the first-hand accounts,' she told him.

Kaimaru snorted and sent her a sharply amused look. "Suffer," he told her with a humourless grin. 'I am,' she assured him simply, patting his foot again. 'I'm just gonna have to make sure to share.'

"You wouldn't fucking dare," Kaimaru shot back so fast she blinked at him.

'I'll make sure to come visit every day until I'm discharged,' she swore solemnly.

Kaimaru let his head fall back against his pillow with a curse. "As if this shit wasn't bad enough already," he complained, but he hadn't made even the vaguest attempt to shove her off his bed, and he still had a good leg, from what she'd gathered.

And he hadn't outright told her to leave, either.

Kyo let out a relatively content sigh and settled herself more comfortably against the foot-end of the bed.

It wasn't like she had anything better to do right now, anyway.

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There was a knock on the door and Kyo looked up from the book Minato had brought her to see who it was.

Tou-san stood in the doorway, hands in his pockets and a complicated look on his face as he watched her.
“Hey, kitten,” he greeted when she gave him a tentative wave. “Can I come in?”

Kyo nodded, closing her book and putting it aside. Giving Kou her full attention.

“I'm sorry,” Kou began bluntly as soon as he'd taken a seat in the waiting chair beside her bed. “For how I reacted a couple days ago,” he clarified, pulling a hand over his face and looking both frustrated and conflicted. “I don't like seeing you hurting, Kyo,” he continued, stubbornly pressing on. “And I hate it even more when I can't do anything to make it better.”

“That's okay,” Kyo mumbled, feeling awkward and uncomfortable. “I don't expect you to be able to fix everything.”

“I know,” Kou returned, something sad in his eyes. “But sometimes, that just makes it worse, because I love you, and I wish I could-” he cut himself off with a heavy sigh.

After a brief moment's indecision, Kyo shuffled closer to the edge of her bed, nearest to her dad, and held out her hands expectantly.

Kou watched her a moment, figured out what she wanted, and then placed his hand in hers.

Kyo carefully inspected his bruised and scabbed-over knuckles, running quick fingers over the area, and then wrapped her digits around the warm hand in a comforting hold.

“Katsurou told me about your mission,” Kou eventually said, having spent the last few minutes watching her sadly. “What he could, anyway,” he corrected when Kyo tensed. He used his free hand to rub at his mouth, eyeing her pensively. “Isshun taught you everything she could because she knew she might die on the next mission, even if most people would claim it would be,” he hesitated a moment, before pressing on, “inappropriate to teach you certain things while you were still so young.” He was silent a second. “She was the last of her Clan, Kyo. She loved being a mother, and passing on her knowledge, sharing it with you, was something she loved doing, too.”

“I—killed allies,” she wanted to say, but the words wouldn't leave her mouth. Got stuck in her throat until it felt like she couldn't speak, couldn't breathe.

Kou closed his eyes with a quiet sigh, a pained expression flickering over his face for a second. “I can't tell you exactly what she was thinking,” he admitted. “I loved Isshun, she was my wife, but she didn't tell me everything.” Silence filled the room for one heartbeat, then two. “I can make an educated guess, though.”

Kyo raised her gaze from where she'd been staring at his knuckles, lost in thought.

“You are frightfully competent for your age, kitten,” tou-san said quietly, and he sounded both unimaginably proud and pained about it. “It's in a shinobi's nature to take advantage of everything around us, and if Isshun could give you that one thing, a small step up in any future situation by teaching you everything she could think of, as soon as she could, then she would have done it. If it would have given you the upper hand against any enemies you'd meet throughout your life, then she would have done anything.”

Kyo rubbed the fingers of one hand against first one eye, and then the other. “I wish she were here,” she admitted softly, feeling small.

“Me, too,” Kou agreed wholeheartedly.

“I love you, and I wouldn't trade you for anything or anyone, tou-san,” Kyo added, because for a moment there, she was sure Kou had been thinking something along those lines. That she'd rather
have kaa-san than him, and it wasn't true. “You're an amazing dad.”

She wished she could have had both of them.

Kou rubbed at his face and he looked tired. “Doesn't feel like it, kitten,” he disagreed wearily. “It sometimes makes me wonder how many more ways I could possibly mess up,” he mused self-deprecatingly.

They made for quite the pair, didn't they?

Kyo eyed Kou a long moment, comparing him to the father she remembered from her previous life.

They were nothing alike.

Kou admitted to his mistakes, owned up to them and tried to do better, and that was such an incredible, precious thing, she didn't think he realised.

Her Before-father had been perfectly willing to hurt her and manipulate her, then act like nothing had ever happened.

As a child, she'd been scared of him.

Kyo could still remember when she'd been short enough she'd had to reach up to the railing of the stairs, and it'd been after bed-time, but she'd been hungry, so she'd been unable to sleep. Dad had been home, though, so she couldn't go downstairs to ask for something, because he'd yell at her and send her straight back to bed.

She knew it. Had experienced it enough times to know for sure.

But she hadn't been able to sleep.

Gathering up her courage, she'd crept down the stairs, doing her best to be silent, and she'd peeked around the doorway into the living room to see mum and dad sitting on the couch, watching TV.

She had no idea how long she'd spent just standing there, doing her best to remain silent even while trying to work up the courage to step into view. Or resign herself to another couple of hours lying in bed, unable to sleep.

Barely keeping back tears, fear being the only thing keeping her cheeks dry.

She blinked and focused back on Kou, who was frowning down at the hand Kyo still had a firm hold on.

He was nothing like that man.

Always gentle, always careful. He'd never grabbed her hard enough it hurt, had never locked her in anywhere and he hadn't waged some twisted form of emotional warfare against her.

He hadn't dropped her like a hot coal the moment he'd gotten a son to fuss over instead. A son, because that had been what he'd always wanted.

Blinking rapidly, Kyo came to the abrupt realisation that she was crying.

“Kyo?” Tou-san questioned, concerned.

“I love you so much, tou-san,” she choked out. “You know that, right?”
Kou stared at her, looking uncertain and mildly worried. “Yes. And I love you, too. Always, no matter what.”

Kyo wiped some of the fluids off her face, and then slid off the bed to settle herself in her dad's lap, relaxing into the safety of his arms.

“I'm so relieved you're alive, Kyo,” her tou-san murmured against her forehead, before he pressed a quick kiss to her skin and then tucked her head in under his chin. “You'll be alright.”

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When she was finally discharged a few days later, tou-san came to get her and she held his hand in a tight hold with both of hers all the way home, until the door closed behind them, shutting the rest of the village out.

Letting out a small, relieved breath and trying to calm down, Kyo glanced around, taking in the familiar, safe space around her.

Everything looked just like it had the last time she was here. She wasn't sure why she'd thought it'd be different, but she had.

“Is nee-san home now?”

“She's still in the hallway,” tou-san answered calmly, which was followed by heavy, hurried footsteps stomping towards her and then Genma crashed into her legs, throwing his arms around her hips.

“Are you okay now?” He asked, peering up at her from the region of her stomach.

Kyo smiled weakly and managed a small nod. “Yeah,” she cleared her throat, “almost. How are you?” She asked and it was a feeble attempt at changing the subject, but either Genma indulged her, or the boy missed how awkward she was.

“Ryota an' me made dinner,” he said with a grin, all but glowing with pride.

Kyo hesitated a moment, before she picked her brother up and carried him into the kitchen to see what kind of situation they had on their hands.

Ryota was stood by the stove, frowning down at the pot he was stirring with intent focus, while Kou was watching his teammate with exasperated amusement.

“Maybe I should have just had dinner back in the hospital?” Kyo wondered mutely, with a sliver of her usual humour, because tou-san had told her enough stories about Ryota's cooking to leave her with a healthy dose of wary scepticism.

“Quiet, you,” Ryota grunted without heat, not looking away from what he was doing. “You're gonna eat it, and you'll be happy, got it?”

“Sure,” Kyo murmured with a measure of entertainment as she sat Genma back down on the floor, to watch him hurry over to Ryota, where he climbed onto the chair pushed up to the counter to peer into the pot with unbridled excitement.
Instead of joining them, she shuffled over to the table to take a seat.

After another couple of seconds, Kou joined her.

He sent her a wryly amused look, reaching out to put a hand on her head, smoothing her hair down and back until his hand rested on the nape of her neck, where it lingered, like a warm weight.

Kyo closed her eyes and enjoyed the physical contact, crossing her arms on the table and letting herself fall forward to pillow her head on her forearms.

Her dad let his hand remain where it was and by the time Ryota and Genma began to set the table, Kou gently squeezed the back of her neck to rouse her from the comfortable doze she'd fallen into.

Kyo blinked and slowly straightened up into a proper seat, trying to take in the room.

Genma was chattering eagerly at tou-san, while Ryota was serving up food for all of them with efficient aplomb.

Soon enough, she found herself with food in front of her, and Kyo cautiously took a tentative bite.

It was... **bland**, was the word that first came to mind.

She was pretty sure Ryota had used a little bit of salt and *nothing else* to season, which would explain that. And it even made a small measure of sense, because she doubted anyone had gone through the trouble of teaching the man how to cook food in a proper kitchen.

It was the same with a lot of shinobi, as far as she'd understood it; they learned in the field, and out there, you made do with what you could scrounge up and a bit of salt -which most people carried with them on extended missions- and then were happy you got warm food to eat at all.

After a while, *anything* was better than rations, Kyo knew it.

“At least you made your one decent dish,” Kou commented idly halfway through dinner.

Genma had wrinkled his nose after the first bite, sending his food a betrayed look, but after taking a look around the table, had returned to eat it with dogged determination.

More because he'd helped make it, Kyo guessed, than because he particularly *wanted* to.

Ryota gave an acknowledging grunt, seemingly not bothered.

“Thank you for the food, Ryota. Genma,” Kyo said once she was done.

“Yes, thank you,” Kou echoed with a small smirk at his teammate, “but please don't do it again for at least a year,” he requested lightly. “It's enough I have to eat this out in the field.”

“Oh, fuck you, Kou,” Ryota snorted easily, clearly not offended.

Genma contemplated his plate with a frown, and then turned to look at them.

“Tou-san?” He questioned, drawing the man's attention. “Can you teach me to make food?”

Ryota grinned. “I'm not good enough for ya any more? I'm *hurt*, kid.”

“We can play,” Genma decided magnanimously, before he turned back to tou-san, who was clearly biting back laughter. He gave their dad an expectant look.
“I can teach you a thing or two,” he agreed with a smile. “Kyo can teach you, too,” he added, volunteering her without pause.

Genma looked at her, brown eyes shining excitedly and Kyo nodded cautiously.

She wasn't sure she'd be up for it any time soon, but she'd teach him... eventually. If he still wanted to learn by then.

“Oh, come on, tiny. Time for the not-so-fun-part of cooking; clean-up,” Ryota declared, getting to his feet and picking up Genma in the same motion.

Kyo watched them blankly a moment, until tou-san gave her a light nudge. “Let's leave these two professionals to it and move out to the couch,” he suggested.

“I'm feeling taken advantage of,” Ryota mused, elbow deep in sudsy dishwater. He handed Genma a plate, watching carefully as the boy rinsed it and put it on the counter to dry, prepared to intervene in case of any mishaps.

“You did this on your own,” Kou reminded him without so much as blinking. “You're a grown, soon to be married man; suck it up.”

Ryota scoffed, exchanged a commiserating look with a clueless Genma, and sedately went back to doing the dishes.

Kyo followed her dad out into the living room, and sat herself in the man's lap the moment he'd taken a seat on the sofa.

Kou easily adjusted himself to make them both comfortable, and pulled a scroll from a pocket, unrolled it, and began to read.

Kyo leaned her head against tou-san's shoulder and let the sounds of the apartment wash over her.

It was very relaxing.

Ryota had left for home shortly after they'd tucked Genma into bed, having received the honour of reading the boy his bedtime story, and Kyo had already changed for bed and was brushing her teeth with meticulous care.

More because she was lost in thought, than for any hygienic reasons or concerns.

Or maybe 'lost in thought' was the wrong way to put it, because it was more like her head went blank and she stared unseeingly at the mirror. Not at her reflection, but at the surface of the mirror itself. Going through the motions.

Kyo blinked and realised she'd probably been at it for ten minutes.

With a quiet sigh at herself, she finished up and put her toothbrush back in its place.

She stared at it for a moment, before she gave herself a mental shake and turned and walked out, headed for her and Genma's bedroom.

Tou-san had retired into his bedroom as well, but she wasn't sure if he was going through his mission equipment or if he had planned on going to bed early, too.
The war didn’t exactly let you rest often, and never as well as when you were in the village, so when
the opportunity popped up, most people would go for it, unless there was a specific reason not to.

Trudging into the soft shadows in her bedroom, Kyo threw a glance over at Genma, who was
already deeply asleep, sprawled out on his mattress, limbs going every which way and looking
blissfully relaxed and content.

He’d kicked the duvet so that a corner of it was hanging off the bed onto the floor, one leg exposed
to the evening air.

Kyo froze, gaze drawn to the small, bare foot.

It was hard to breathe.

As if there wasn’t enough air and the shadows, just a minute ago so comforting, seemed ominous
now, sharp and too dark. Threatening.

Kyo turned on her heel and walked back out of the room, slipping into tou-san's bedroom without a
sound.

Kou was sitting up in bed, one foot on the floor and looking like he’d been about to get up and go
look for her, because he instantly relaxed when he spotted her, and oh, she’d pulled her chakra
signature under tight control again, hadn’t she.

Her face felt cold and a slight tremble went through her hands when she crawled across tou-san's
mattress on her hands and knees to burrow down beside him under his comforter, as close as she
could get and determinedly pressing herself into his side.

“Kyo?” Kou questioned softly, eyeing her worriedly.

“I'm just-” she choked out, the tremble moving from her hands up her arms until all of her was
shaking.

Tou-san sighed, eyed the door to the living room a moment and then slid down to get vertical.

Instead of saying anything, he wrapped an arm around her back and settled down.

Kyo shifted even closer, until she could put her head on his shoulder and could hear his heart beat.
Until she could feel his every breath.

Dad hummed quietly under his breath, his voice reverberating through her whole being, snatched up
one of her hands in his, held it firmly and resting on top of his stomach.

“You're in Konoha,” he said slowly, quietly. “You're at home, with me and Genma. You're safe. No
one is in any kind of danger here and we're all going to be fine,” he said in the same slow, sedate
tone of voice.

Kyo listened, clutching at her dad, trying to take the words to heart and slowly, in tiny increments,
she managed to relax and finally fell asleep to the sound of tou-san's voice as he repeated the same
things over and over again.

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Chapter 63

Chapter Summary

Kisaki, but also Hide and Seek

Kyo was feeling ridiculous.

She was being ridiculous, and part of her just wanted to move on and focus on other things.

That wasn't easy when leaving the apartment could send her into unbridled terror at a moment's notice for the smallest, most ridiculous things. Some of which she could barely connect to Uzushio, anyway, and she hated feeling like this!

Letting out an aggravated sigh, Kyo frowned down at Minato's hand with firm determination.

She was going to manage walking through Konoha without another incident this time. She was.

“Almost there, now,” Minato said easily, sounding almost cheerful, which made Kyo suspect there was a smile on his face, but she wasn't going to try and check. Because she wasn't stupid and this was hard enough to begin with right now. “Just another two streets.”

Kyo tightened her hold on his hand, scowling unhappily at herself.

This was absolutely ridiculous.

A few minutes later, a semi-familiar voice greeted her lazily.

“Hey, kid.”

“Hi,” Kyo bit out tersely, which had nothing to do with dislike or her trying to be impolite. A brown ninken entered her deliberately limited field of vision to peer interested up at her a moment.

“Kisaki?”

“Ah, yeah,” the Inuzuka guard mused solemnly, no doubt eyeing her intently. “At the veterinary clinic. I was told to direct you there, rather than Senpu's house when you dropped by.”

Kyo managed a stiff nod, tightened her hold on Minato, which prompted the boy to continue into the Inuzuka compound.

As soon as they'd left the busy street behind, Kyo felt part of her relax minutely and she chanced a quick look around.

The few Inuzuka out and about sent her a few cursory looks, but people around here tended to mind their own business, which was a relief.

It helped that Kyo was a familiar face, even if Minato wasn't.

“Um, Kyo?” Minato glanced at her, slowing to a stop. “I don't really know where to go from here,” he admitted apologetically.
“That way,” she directed, shuffling closer to her friend and nudging him in the right direction.

Soon enough, they’d entered the clinic and Kyo could finally relax.

Inside was good. Better. Felt more safe.

...absolutely ridiculous, she mentally scoffed at herself.

“Ah, Kyo,” a vaguely familiar voice greeted, drawing her attention. “Senpu's in the back office,” Inuzuka Ashi told her.

Kyo glanced at the teenager's face in passing with a grateful nod and padded deeper into the somewhat familiar building.

“I've never been here before,” Minato commented lightly, looking around with curiosity all but written on his face.

“Not many have,” Kyo muttered.

It was mostly visited by the Inuzuka themselves, as well as civilians who brought their injured or sick pets for treatment.

Other shinobi rarely had any reason to swing by.

Soon enough, Kyo found Senpu, who took one look at her and approached with a concerned frown.

“Kyo,” she said, striding up to her to place a calloused hand on her shoulder, giving her an intent once-over. “I've been expecting you,” she said, instead of commenting on anything else. “Come, let's talk, and then Kisaki's been wanting to see you.”

“Okay,” she agreed, letting herself be steered into one of the small offices that handled the dogs' medical files. Or at least the equivalence, because active ninken got hurt just as often as their human partners.

Senpu easily manoeuvred Kyo into a chair, motioning at Minato to take the one next to it.

“You're the teammate,” she established briskly, giving Minato a quick look, before she turned back to Kyo. Leaving it at that. “What have you heard about Kisaki's condition?” She asked.

“Nothing, really, “ Kyo muttered unhappily. “Sensei just said she was here, and to talk to you.”

Senpu's mouth flattened, ever so slightly, but she gave a curt nod. “She managed to snap a tendon in her left hind leg,” she told her bluntly, diving straight into it. “Just that would have been relatively easy to fix, but she also got two separate fractures in the same leg, which complicates things.” She sighed. “Kisaki's going to make a full recovery, but it's gonna take a while, and until I say otherwise, she's to stay off that leg and she's not to leave the compound.” And that was clearly not up for debate.

Kyo felt the blood slowly drain out of her face, because Kisaki had carried her. When her leg had been that injured, she'd carried Kyo.

“None of that,” Senpu huffed brusquely. “The dog's fully grown, she made a choice of her own volition.” She eyed her sharply until Kyo nodded. “Now she just have to face the consequences.” She smiled humourlessly, lifting a hand to rub at her jaw.

She looked tired.
Kyo eyed the woman a long few seconds.

She looked a lot like Taku had, with the same shade of brown hair, kept short, and her eyes were sharp and keen, missing nothing.

She had a very nice smile, though, and she gave excellent hugs.

“You can stay with Kisaki for about twenty minutes, Kyo, and then she's gonna need more rest, because I've got her on pain meds and they make her drowsy, okay?”

“Yeah,” Kyo agreed sadly, trying not to feel guilty. “I just need to see,” she mumbled.

“That she's alright,” Senpu nodded, finishing the sentence for her, as if it was obvious. “Then let's go.”

Minato looked like he wasn't sure if he ought to wait where he was, so Kyo tugged him with her when Senpu walked down the corridor, taking them to the kennel.

She maintained a firm hold on his wrist until she spotted Kisaki lying on a very soft-looking, dog-sized pillow.

Her fur was stained a light grey, making her look dirty, and clearly, someone had tried to get the dye-or whatever they'd used to stain her fur dark- out of her fur with only partial success.

Senpu lifted the hatch on the gate-like door and stepped back, letting Kyo walk inside the small room.

Kisaki made a soft, snuffling noise, turning her head in her direction and Kyo dropped down to sit on the floor by her head.

“Hey, girl,” she greeted softly, letting the ninken scent her hand a second, before she carefully ran her fingers along the bridge of her nose, up her forehead, between her ears and along her neck, smoothing down the fur along the way. “You need to let me know these things, Kisaki.”

“Kyo,” Kisaki sighed in response, her eyes falling completely shut. “Hurt?”

“I'm fine,” Kyo told her, continuing her gentle petting and inspecting her friend's bandaged leg. It looked like they'd shaved some of the fur away. “Had to stay in the hospital for a while, but that was because of chakra exhaustion,” she said. “I've been very worried about you.”

Kisaki gave a small huff, one eye slipping open a fraction to reveal a sliver of pale yellow.

“I know you worry about me, but I'm allowed to worry about you, too,” Kyo told the dog glibly. “And this time, I'm not the one with a messed up leg.” She was silent a moment. “And I'm sorry, but I'm not gonna try to return the favour, because you're too heavy for me to carry around the village,” she teased with a faint smile.

Kisaki produced a weak growl that was all tired playfulness. “You should carry me,” she mumbled drowsily. “'S fair.”

“You're more than twice my size,” Kyo pointed out reasonable. “Might be able to con sensei into doing it for me, though,” she mused lightly, having absolutely no plans on even trying.

Kisaki needed to stay here, and they both knew it.

The dog made an amused noise, one of her ears twitching slightly.
It drew her attention to the left one, and Kyo carefully ran her fingers up the shell of the ear, pulling gently on it so she could inspect the healed cut at the tip.

“I think Hyena likes you,” she said after a minute's comfortable silence, sadly letting the ear go again.

Kisaki hummed, deep in her chest.

“He's nice,” she countered easily. “He's fun and he's a good friend. He's a bit,” she paused, tilting her head, “cracked, but that doesn't mean he's not,” she gave a small, frustrated huff, because she felt like she couldn't articulate what she wanted to say. “He's treated me like an equal since the start,” she finally settled on.

Most other people in ANBU had seen her small stature and young age, and Hyena had seen those things too. But they'd always been a mere footnote to the man, and he'd focused far more on her abilities, her skills and talents. On her being his teammate.

She liked him.

Kisaki slanted her a brief look, before she dragged her head across the pillow so that it was closer to her, and Kyo obligingly went back to her careful petting, running her fingers through Kisaki's fur and scratching gently at her favourite spots.

“Okay, visiting time's up, kids,” Senpu finally declared, not unkindly.

Kisaki didn't move, not even to open her eyes, but a dark growl curled out of her anyway.

“Don't try that with me, pup,” Senpu returned, unimpressed. “You need to rest. The more you sleep, the sooner you can go back to running all over the village after this scrappy runt,” she said, nodding at Kyo, who sent her a half-hearted frown in return. “Come on, Kyo. You can come back tomorrow.” And it wasn't up for debate.

Kyo sighed, gave Kisaki one last pat between the ears and got to her feet.

Kisaki gave a small, pitiful whine, and Kyo paused, sending her a long glance.

“You're not in any condition to sleep here, kid, or I wouldn't have had any objections,” Senpu said kindly, interrupting her thoughts, grasping her shoulder and pulling her the last few steps out so she could close the gate.

“Where's Haru?” Kyo asked tiredly, realising she couldn't see Senpu's partner anywhere nearby on their walk back to the office, Senpu's hand still on her shoulder.

“He's out and about; just because I'm on office duty, doesn't mean he can't be outside enjoying the grass and the sunshine.” She was silent a moment. “He's been keeping the puppy company,” she added casually.

“That's good,” Kyo murmured, because the thought of Kisaki being all alone right now was physically painful.

Senpu made an agreeing noise and steered her back to the chair the moment they made it back to the office.

“I'll need a few minutes with Kyo in private, kid,” she said, and Kyo blinked, having almost forgotten Minato for a moment, because he'd been so still and silent. “She'll be back with you in fifteen minutes.”
“I'll wait by the front door?” Minato suggested, a tad uncertainly.

“Okay,” Kyo said. “Sorry, Minato. Thank you.”

“It's no problem,” he insisted, and then turned to walk back down the corridor they'd entered the building from.

Senpu closed the door, and instead of going to the chair behind the desk, she sat herself in the chair beside the one Kyo was sitting in, angling it so that they could more easily face each other.

“What did you want to talk about?” Kyo asked when the woman remained silent, just watching her. She tried not to feel nervous, but she wasn't sure it was working.

“You, and Kisaki,” Senpu said with a small huff, a sad little smile pulling on her mouth and she raised a hand to run over her eyes for a second. “She went into battle with you, Kyo.”

“I didn't ask her,” Kyo said hurriedly, because she didn't want Kisaki to get in trouble, but lying was a bad idea. “She said it was because of me, but I figured someone had asked her, given her the offer, because she said she was there during the briefing and-”

“You misunderstood me,” Senpu interrupted her calmly, cutting her anxious chatter off with another sad smile.

Kyo bit her tongue to keep silent, figuring it'd be better not to talk right now. Didn't do much to dispel the dread that was making her stomach feel like it'd been filled with lead, though.

“Kisaki isn't in trouble,” she clarified. “And neither are you, to my knowledge,” and there was a sharp glint of amusement in her eyes, for just a second, before she went serious again. Solemn. “But we need to talk abut what that meant.”

“Meant?” Kyo parroted weakly, confused.

She felt like she'd missed a large chunk of the conversation. Like she had tuned out and not heard the most vital part and was now expected to know what they were talking about.

“Kisaki's a feral ninken, Kyo. She's lost her human partner,” Senpu said, and Kyo didn't know how she could talk about Taku's death so easily, because Kyo still felt like crying just thinking about him, most days. “I don't know how much you know, but there's a reason we don't have a whole bunch of dogs like that around the compound,” Senpu said grimly, mouth a flat line across her face. In combination with the clan marks on her cheeks it made her look severe. “An Inuzuka ninken who loses their partner, well, they make it their singular task to take down the one who did it, and they often don't survive the experience. The ones who do survive generally aren't interested in anything other than taking out as many enemies as they can before they re-join their partner in death.”

Senpu blinked and met her gaze squarely.

“Not- not all of them,” Kyo objected weakly, feeling like this conversation was headed in a strange, somewhat scary direction.

“No,” Senpu agreed quietly. “Not all of them.” She eyed her intently a second longer before she continued. “But it makes Kisaki's situation rare, and unusual.”

“But it's never been a problem before,” Kyo couldn't help but interject, worried for her friend.

Senpu gave her a steady look and Kyo settled down again, trying to be patient and let the woman get
to the point in her own time.

“It's not a problem,” she said simply. “We're all grateful you brought her back to us. But her choosing to go into battle with you, making that decision of her own free will, it changes things.” Senpy sighed softly, closing her eyes for just a moment. “I know Taku wouldn't have minded in the least; he thought very highly of you.” She managed a thin, brittle smile. “What I'm trying to say here, I guess, is that Inuzuka ninken only go into battle with pack, Kyo. With family.”

Kyo blinked uncertainly, and she didn't know what to say other than, “I love Kisaki.”

“I know,” Senpu said softly, reaching out to take her hand and give it a reassuring squeeze. “Kyo. What do you know about our clan marks?”

Thrown by the unexpected question, she stared mutely at the woman a moment. “Nothing much, really. It marks you as an Inuzuka.”

“But you've noticed the different colours,” Senpu pressed on. When Kyo nodded, she gave her an encouraging look, eyes warm. “They all have different meanings,” she revealed. “The most common one is red. Red for blood; the blood of the Inuzuka. It means you're a born member of the clan.”

“Oh,” Kyo murmured. That made sense.

“You've probably seen a few with blue markings around the compound and village, yeah? That means they've married into the clan,” Senpu continued to explain. “It's not a requirement, but it is an option they're given after marriage and some decide to accept, to show their pride in their new pack, their willingness to live by our principles and ways. It's an honour to wear these marks, no matter the colour,” she said, touching her fingers to her own red fangs.

“This is very interesting, Senpu, but.” Kyo shrugged helplessly. She didn't know where this was headed.

“An Inuzuka who's lost his ninken can get his red marks darkened until they're the colour of rust, old blood. It's a way to honour their fallen partners and let the rest of the clan know of their grief without having to speak.” Senpu's eyes were distant for a moment. “There are colours for all sorts of things, Kyo. Purple marks mean an adopted child, born of other blood but brought in like one of our own.”

Kyo was silent.

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Kyo was silent.

“The marks signify family, child,” Senpu murmured softly and Kyo felt like she was slowly putting it together. “And there are marks for those who have been chosen by a feral ninken, someone deemed worthy to fight beside even after they've lost their partner. Our dogs are us and we are them, but we're still not the same.” She sighed heavily. “Losing a ninken is a terrible thing, but most of us can recover and move on. It's not often the same the other way around.” She fixed Kyo with a heavy look and if felt like she was pinned in place, unable to move. “That makes you very special.”

Kyo felt like she'd frozen solid. She was pretty sure part of her knew what Senpu was talking about now, what she was offering, but the rest of her felt like she didn't have a clue.

She was a bit too old to adopt 'like one of their own', right?

“If you wish to accept it, then you may receive the black fangs to signify your bond with Kisaki, Kyo,” Senpu said simply.

The office was perfectly silent for a long minute.
Kyo stared blankly at the woman in front of her while she tried to process everything she'd been told, all the information she had been given.

“What-” she cleared her throat, “what does that mean?” She asked hoarsely.

Senpu eyed her warmly, though she looked incredibly sad at the same time. “It doesn't have to change anything. A tattoo doesn't change your relationship with Kisaki, or with me. But it makes it official.” She was silent a heartbeat. “If you say no, then nothing will really change, either. But if you say yes,” she paused briefly, “no one, not the other clans, not even the Hokage, can say you don't have a right to be with Kisaki. To live with her, to work with her. And every single Inuzuka will know as soon as they see the marks, exactly what you mean to one of our own, what you have managed to do.”

Kyo took a deep, deliberate breath as she tried to assimilate that. “I'm- Kaa-san was- I mean, would it mean I'm- uh, adopted?” She asked disjointedly, trying to say and ask several things at once.

Senpu tilted her head. “I'm sure we could adopt you officially if that was something you wanted, but I'm aware of the situation with your mother's clan. Taku told me,” she explained at Kyo's puzzled look. “You'll still be pack. With the marks, without them, adopted or not.”

“I-” Kyo didn't know what to say.

Senpu reached out with both hands to cradle her face, ever so gently. “There's no need to decide right this moment. The offer stands, and you can say yes five or ten years from now and it'll still be true. You can say no, and then change your mind. It's alright, Kyo.”

Kyo blinked and something warm and wet spilled down her cheeks.

Senpu's face looked blurry.

“Getting the tattoo isn't the important part,” the woman murmured. “Regardless, you will always have the right to the black fangs. You don't need to get them on the face either.” She sighed. “You don't have to do anything if you don't want it.”

Kyo opened her mouth, most likely to say something, though she didn't have the first clue what. But the only thing that escaped her was a quiet sob.

“You're special, Kyo, and more than worthy of this honour,” Senpu whispered, pulling her into her lap and wrapping her up in a tight hug. “You brought my son home to me, and you gave us Kisaki back. Taku thought of you as pack and you did everything you could to protect him,” she said quietly, gently rocking her back and forth. “My home is open to you for as long as I draw breath, child.”

By the time she felt ready to leave, Minato had waited for her significantly longer than just fifteen minutes, but he didn't say a word of complaint.

The moment he spotted her, Minato's face twisted with worry and concern, but he didn't comment.

Kyo couldn't help but be unimaginably grateful.

If she had to talk right now, she'd probably break out in tears again, and her eyes were already sore and swollen.
“Home?” Minato questioned softly, tentatively reaching out to take her hand.

Kyo nodded tiredly and was content to leave the rest up to him.

She barely noticed the trek through Konoha, she was so absorbed in her own thoughts. Too tired and emotionally wrung out to spend energy on being afraid of ghosts and shadows.

“Will you be alright?” Minato asked outside her door.

He'd walked her up the stairs and would probably have walked her straight to her bed and tucked her in if he thought Kyo would let him.

She hesitated and then gave a small nod, leaning against the blond for a hug.

Hooking her chin over his shoulder, wrapping her arms around his middle, Kyo took a few seconds to just exist. Breathe.

Minato wrapped his own arms around her shoulders without hesitation, holding her silently, even though he must be confused and itching to ask.

She'd been relatively fine when he'd left her with Senpu, and had no doubt looked a complete wreck by the time he saw her again a little over an hour later.

“You're a good friend,” she sighed, finally loosening her hold on him and stepping back.

“So are you,” Minato shot back with a small, tentative smile, intently studying her face. “Do you want me to come by tomorrow?” He asked.

Kyo tried to remember if she had anything particular planned for tomorrow, couldn't think of anything, and then nodded.

“Thank you,” she mumbled.

Minato's smile widened a touch, and when she turned towards the door, he headed back towards the stairs.

When she got back inside, she nodded a greeting at tou-san, but didn't pause on her way to the bathroom.

Closing the door behind her, Kyo spent the next half hour just staring at her face, trying to picture herself with black tattoos down her cheeks and attempting to figure out what she was thinking, feeling, what was going on.

It felt like too much and she didn't even know where to start.

Was this something she wanted?

Going into battle with Kisaki again had been both comforting and absolutely terrifying, because having Kisaki there with her meant the dog was in just as much danger as Kyo herself was, and what if she were killed?

She didn't think she'd be able to cope if Kisaki died.

Kisaki wasn't allowed to die.

At least in Konoha, Kisaki was safe, even if Kyo was out on mission.
But Senpu had said nothing had to change, that her and Kisaki's relationship would stay the same - in that aspect- no matter what she chose...

And it wasn't like Kyo could use the Inuzuka clan techniques; they weren't compatible to her talents or style and it just-

But Kisaki knew that.

There was a soft knock on the bathroom door, making her start.

Before she could do more than blink at her own reflection, tou-san opened the door to get a look at her.

“Kyo? What are you doing?” He asked, taking in her stance before the mirror, her death-grip on the sink, with hardly a pause. “Was Kisaki alright?”

Kyo slowly turned to stare at her dad, wondering what to say.

How was she supposed to explain this?

Kou eyed her intently another second. “Want a hug?” He asked, and Kyo had thrown herself at him before he'd finished the question, burying her face in her dad's chest.

“Kisaki'll be fine,” she muttered into tou-san's shirt, because she knew she must be giving the wrong idea right now. “Senpu talked to me and I don't know what to do, tou-san.”

She wasn't even sure Kou could understand what she was saying, because she was talking into his chest, words muffled against his shirt, near-illegible.

Her dad took a deep breath, let it out as a soft sigh and picked her up.

“You're gonna have to explain it properly, kitten,” he said as he carried her over to the couch, warm and steady and he was the best dad. “Take it from the start,” he suggested.

-x-x-x-

Minato walked her back to the Inuzuka compound the day after, again, not commenting on the day before, but sending her continuous glances every now and then.

She should probably talk to him about this, but... she needed to sort it out herself, first.

After another short visit with Kisaki, they ended up in one of the training fields.

Kyo took a deep breath and relaxed, feeling far more at ease here, where there were no buildings and far less people.

“Everyone's going to be very busy for a while, aren't they?” Minato wondered out loud, staring up at the sky with a contemplative look. “Sensei's barely had time to stop by to say hi in the last few days.”

“Tou-san and Ryota are getting sent back out next week,” Kyo muttered tiredly. “Despite the fact they just got home.”

They were silent a moment. “It's because of Uzushio, isn't it?” Minato asked, making her tense and
shoot him a look. “They were our allies, but now that they're...” he trailed off with an uncomfortable frown.

“Konoha can't be silent and inactive in the face of an attack on this scale,” an unexpected voice said firmly. “Hello, brats.”

“Katsurou-sensei,” Kyo greeted with a small smile, turning to face the man. “Aren't you at the office?”

“Can't sit in a chair all the time, or I'll get fat,” Katsurou said glibly, strolling over until he could fold himself down into a seat in front of the two of them. “Senpu tracked me down for a chat, yesterday,” he said casually, resting his elbows on his knees.

Kyo's face twisted up in an unhappy grimace. “I'm still processing,” she informed him succinctly. “And I don't know what I think or feel yet.”

“Understandable,” was all he said, before he turned to the next topic on his mind. “I tracked you down with another purpose in mind this time, though,” he confessed with a small, easy smile that made his eyes look sharp.

“Oh?” Kyo questioned interestedly, leaning against Minato's shoulder as she watched the man, waiting for him to get to the point.

Katsurou snorted. “How do you feel about a few hours' worth of Hide and Seek?”

Kyo slowly lifted her head from Minato's shoulder again. “Really?” She asked interestedly. “You don't think I need,” she gestured vaguely with one hand, “more time to recuperate, or something?”

There was no denying how eager she was, either.

Running around and playing with two of her favourite people for a few hours sounded like a wonderful way to spend her time.

Kyo took a second to contemplate when, exactly, Minato had become one of her favourite people, but... he was here, she mused, sending the boy a fond glance.

The eleven year old looked interested, though mildly confused.

“Hide and Seek?” He asked slowly, as if the words were foreign and meant nothing specific to him.

Kyo blinked and turned to him. “You never played? What about at the Academy?”

“We usually played tag or variations of 'ninja' during recess,” he said with an easy shrug. “Or just sparred, but the sensei put a stop to that the moment they caught us at it.”

“Huh.” Kyo frowned a moment, before she pushed the matter aside. “Hide and Seek is like the civilian game, only there're are more variations. When I was little, kaa-san recruited tou-san and his team and they all tried to find me while I hid. It's a great way to get better at stealth.” She smiled. “Or tracking,” she added.

“Why am I not surprised,” Katsurou muttered amusedly.

“Yuuta was the most annoying,” Kyo told him solemnly. “Stupid sensors,” she grumbled theatrically.

Katsurou sent her an entertained look. “So what do you say? Feeling up to being chased around one
of the forested training grounds?"

“Sounds like fun!” Kyo smiled, feeling a spark of actual excitement at the prospect. “What about you, Minato?” She turned to the boy.

He tilted his head. “I haven't really tried it before, but it sounds like a good way to train.”

Kyo grinned at him. “You're such a dork,” she couldn't help but tell him.

Minato affected an offended air for all of one second, before he snorted and gave her a playful shove. “What does that make you?”

“A big nerd,” Kyo told him seriously, straightening back up. “We're game, sensei!” She turned back to Katsurou with a smile, to find the man watching them intently. “But we need to plan first, because Minato's new to this!”

“Go ahead,” Katsurou returned sedately.

Kyo squinted at him a moment, nodded to herself, and then pulled Minato with her when she got to her feet and hurried off a bit, to the side and behind her sneaky sensei.

“Okay, sensei's really good at this, so I'll give you a few tips,” she said quietly, leaning in close to Minato to minimize the chance of Katsurou overhearing. “Do you know how to suppress your chakra?” She asked first, because that was... important.

Minato blinked. “It's just to keep it all inside, right?”

Kyo grimaced. That was a very rudimentary way of phrasing it. “Basically,” she allowed reluctantly. “You need to pull it tightly into the core of your body and keep it under wraps,” she elaborated at Minato's curious look.

She'd given him and Naoki pointers about stealth before, but nothing in-depth. With so much else they'd had to learn quickly, there simply hadn't been time.

“Just do your best,” Kyo concluded, “and we'll work more on it later. Anyway, we'll go off in separate directions and do our best to stay under the radar, let sensei work to find us, okay?”

“You'd know better than me,” Minato said with a faint smile, eyes bright with interest.

“Anyway, when he finds you, he'll tap your shoulder and then be off after the other one, which will give you time to get away, possibly hide and get a head-start.” Kyo smiled. “Ready?”

“As good as,” Minato agreed.

Kyo nodded and jogged back to sensei, who hadn't moved. “We're ready! Which training ground did you have in mind?”

Ten minutes later, Kyo was jumping between trees like a shadow, slipping through the vegetation like a wraith.

It had been way too long since she'd done anything like this with Katsurou-sensei, she couldn't help the excited grin on her face, even after she'd activated her chameleon jutsu and had suppressed her chakra as well as she could.

Silently wishing Minato the best of luck, she focused fully on herself.
She'd show sensei just how much she'd learned in ANBU and he'd definitely have more trouble tracking her down this time!

Katsurou had lied down on a patch of sun-warmed grass after stretching out after his extended run chasing the two of them around for the last three hours.

He was breathing harder than Kyo thought he should, but his hands were steady and he looked better than he had last year after far less exertion.

“This is much harder than I thought it'd be,” Minato muttered, a distant expression on his face, most of his attention directed inwards. Katsurou had had no problems tracking him down again and again, which, evidently, Minato was taking seriously.

“It's all about practice,” Kyo chirped happily, because this had been a good day. The first one in so long she was more than determined to relish it to the fullest.

She plopped herself down beside Katsurou, close enough the small of her back was pressed up against his side, earning no more than a brief glance from the man, before he closed his eyes again. Kyo focused back on Minato with a smile when the boy sat down in front of her, a respectful distance from the resting Jounin.

“How am I supposed to practice?” The boy wondered curiously.

At least he was genuinely interested in learning. “Trying to suppress your chakra, and then learning to do it without thought. I did it in the Academy, and let me tell you, it was very interesting to accidentally sneak up on the sensei.” She grinned. “I never actually realised, before, how much they kept track of us by our chakra signatures.”

“That's easier than trying to keep a physical eye on a flock of energetic children every second of the day,” Katsurou drawled. “Three were bad enough.”

“You're just saying that,” Kyo teased lightly. “But you should probably start by meditating,” she said, turning back to Minato. “Get a proper feel for your chakra.” That was how she had done it.

Minato tilted his head, considering her words with a small frown. “How?” He wondered faintly.

Kyo frowned, too, a moment, wondering how to phrase this. “Sit still, control your breathing and look inwards to identify the feel of your chakra?” She suggested uncertainly.

Kyo had found that part very easy, personally, because there hadn't been any chakra anywhere in the Before, so it'd been easy to identify the new element to her body.

“It's a good place to start,” Katsurou agreed, still stretched out in the grass, relaxed. “You should try and do it, too, Kyo. Your head could benefit from some meditation right now.”

Kyo grimaced at him, because was that reminder really necessary right now? She was trying to enjoy the moment!

Not even opening his eyes, Katsurou poked her in the side.

“Fine!” Kyo huffed, shifting so that she was sitting more comfortably and maybe, accidentally, dug one of her elbows into the man's stomach while she was at it.
Accidentally.

Katsurou gave a quiet huff but didn't comment, and soon enough, Kyo's breathing evened out and calmed as she settled into the familiar warmth of her own chakra. Feeling her body.

Tracking the flow of chakra through her limbs.

Completely losing track of time and everything else around her, Kyo didn't come back to herself until there was a muffled rumble in her ear and she should probably be concerned, try to find what it was and where it'd come from, but... she was too comfortable.

Warm, content, feeling completely and utterly safe, Kyo couldn't even convince herself to open her eyes.

"-did I get it?"

The rumble sounded again. "You've not got a good enough grasp on the feel of your own chakra, kid. Start meditating every evening before bed, when you can, and it'll get better eventually."

"Does it usually take long?" She could hear Minato ask, and he sounded chagrined.

"You're the kind that usually takes to things easily, huh," Katsurou mused, and he sounded entertained. "Some prodigies find that the areas they're not particularly gifted in are galling and some just don't bother to learn at all." He hummed speculatively, no doubt studying her teammate intently.

"Plan to give up?"

"Kyo's good at this," Minato said quietly.

"She is," Katsurou agreed. "But she started early; she's got a big head-start on you." Sensei hummed a moment. "She's just gonna get better from here on, too," he added sedately.

The arm he had around her back tightened ever so slightly, letting her know Katsurou knew very well she was awake, but it didn't seem like he was about to call her out on it. At least not verbally.

Minato was silent a long moment. "I don't want to be left behind," he said softly.

"Kid," Katsurou sighed, the expansion of his ribcage lifting her head, "Kyo's not gonna leave you behind for anything in the world. I think she's physically incapable of it."

Kyo's insides felt warm, and she just about resisted shifting to press her face into sensei's chest.

"...tupid," she grumbled under her breath.

She was feeling marginally more awake after listening to the quiet conversation between the two males, but she still wasn't prepared to move.

Cracking her eyes open a slit to squint at Minato, she didn't see much more than a bright yellow blob and a lot of green.

She closed her eyes again and tightened her hold on Katsurou, and it was only then she realised one of her arms were draped over his stomach with a firm hold on his Jounin vest.

"Wht happned?" She mumbled drowsily, taking a deep breath and relaxing in time with her exhalation.

“S nice,” she muttered, wiggling closer.

Katsurou gave an amused snort, patted her side and seemingly turned back to Minato, who had looked to still be in roughly the same spot as he had been when they'd sat down, the brief moment she'd looked at him.

“We'll be having another session once you wake up. Try and get that head of yours back on straight,” Katsurou told her, just before she drifted off back asleep, and Kyo was fairly sure she managed a vague affirmation.

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Chapter Summary

The things they don’t tell you about in the recruitment pamphlets

Chapter Notes

Okay! We are now entirely caught up to everything I've posted on fanfiction.net and from here, I will be posting one chapter every Friday, unless I mention otherwise :)

Kyo had waffled between donning her uniform or not, but in the end, she'd chosen to go in her usual outfit, rather than her ANBU one.

She wasn't sure she'd- she wanted to wait a little longer.

Walking through the village was still nerve-wracking, and she'd rather not relapse. Again.

Seriously, being surprised by a baby's cry while on a walk down a perfectly normal, peaceful street into a minor meltdown was not something Kyo enjoyed. She'd rather not.

It hadn't even resembled the agonized scream she'd heard in its stead, in her head.

Sometimes, she really hated her brain.

“Name?” An even, bored voice asked, the shinobi it belonged to not even glancing up from his paperwork.

“Shiranui Kyo,” she replied easily enough.

“Purpose for your visit?” The man continued, pulling a clipboard from under a small pile of papers and snatching up a pen from somewhere to scribble down her name.

“Visiting a friend,” she said honestly, feeling mildly uncomfortable when the man finally looked up to fix her with a doubtful, assessing look.

“Genin are encouraged to visit in the company of their Jounin sensei,” he said.

“I'm a Chuunin,” Kyo huffed. “And my current Jounin sensei doesn't know the person I'm here to hopefully visit,” she added wryly.

Katsurou probably did, and that was without the asking around he'd done on her behalf, but that wasn't something this man had to know about.

“...and who would you like to see?” He finally asked, studying her intently.

He was good, but his gaze wasn't anywhere near the same level as Katsurou-sensei's.
“ANBU operative Hyena,” Kyo said quietly.

There was a faint flicker of chakra to the right of them, and Kyo signed a short return greeting back.

“Authorized,” a monotone voice declared, seemingly from nowhere, and the Jounin behind the desk gave a very slow, deliberate blink.

“Room number seventeen,” he finally said, eyes slightly narrowed in speculation, but face not betraying any of his thoughts as he waved her past.

Kyo bobbed her head in a quick, shallow bow of thanks and walked down the indicated corridor.

It looked like any other official building she’d been in around Konoha so far, if you disregarded the tight security and the signs with numbers over every door she walked by.

There hadn’t really been much in the way of windows, either, she mused.

Kyo walked past door number fifteen and focused back on the present, because the next door over was her destination.

Taking a quiet breath, Kyo knocked on the door, flaring her chakra just enough to alert Hyena as to her identity, but hopefully not enough to bother any potential sensors in the vicinity.

There was a pause, and then the door was yanked open, a hand reached out, snagged the front of her shirt and pulled her into the room and slammed the door shut again.

Kyo blinked and took in the young man in front of her.

“Hello, Scorpion,” Hyena greeted with a grin, letting go of her and stalking back into the room.

“Didn’t expect you,” he added distractedly, hesitating, and then taking a seat on the bed that was the centre-piece of the room.

Kyo took a moment to study the sparse furnishings, the lack of windows, the one door that no doubt led to a bathroom, before she turned her attention to the man himself.

It was the first time she saw him without his mask.

Hyena slanted a brief look at her, sharp, very green eyes glinting in the electric light and his hair was grey.

Kyo had always pictured him with brown hair, for some reason, but she quickly adjusted the image in her head to match the man in front of her and moved on.

“I wanted to see you,” she said, slowly walking further into the room until she was stood beside the bed.

Hyena twitched a hand at her to feel free to join him, and she carefully did, taking a seat at the foot end.

She watched him a moment, taking in the way his gaze wandered continuously around the room, the way his fingers danced across the covers, first here, then there, fiddled with this, then that, in a restless manner that made her tired just looking at it.

She glanced up at Hyena's face, only to see him watching her, following her gaze to his hands.

“Sorry,” he apologized glibly. “It’ll get better when I get my face back.”
“Okay,” Kyo said, accepting that, despite the slightly unsettling wording. “You know,” she said distractedly, looking around the mostly bare room again, “I’ve never been in here before.”

Hyena still for a brief moment, before he leaned forward to place both hands on her shoulders, staring intently into her eyes. “Never?” He questioned curiously.

“Never,” Kyo confirmed, feeling mildly confused by his reaction.

“How’s that work?” Hyena wondered, eyes widening a fraction. “Genin are normal; even these days it's gonna take a fair bit for a Jounin sensei to pass their students on to a professional, and you'd usually hear of fuck-ups like that,” he muttered, as if to himself, still staring intently at Kyo, as if he was trying to read something off her skin. “But you told me you were a Chuunin, little Scorpion.” His face lit up. “Did you lie?” He asked, sounding as if the prospect was an unexpected gift.

“No,” Kyo snorted, feeling a small smile pull on her lips, despite everything. “I really am a Chuunin.”

Hyena deflated. “Oh,” he frowned speculatively, fingers twitching slightly where they were still gripping her shoulders. “Yamanaka sensei?” He finally hazarded a guess.

“Yeah.” Kyo blinked. “How'd you know?”

Hyena grinned victoriously. “Tend to be very territorial of their little students, the Yamanaka,” he snickered. “All shinobi do it, in different ways, but the Yamanaka are the supposed experts of the mind, yeah.” He laughed. “Had a friend with a Yamanaka sensei, see. Never came here, either.”

A frown flickered over his face for a moment, before it was gone and the smile returned as he focused back on the present, on her.

“Did you really admit yourself, Hyena?” She couldn't help but ask, because Katsurou hadn’t been sure about that. He’d said it had been most likely, but...

“Yes,” he answered easily, popping the ‘p’.

“Why?”

Hyena stilled, going perfectly serious for a moment, eyeing her sadly. “No one told the little Scorpion,” he huffed, a faint frown pulling on his brows with something that looked like disapproval. He let go of her shoulders and carefully patted her head experimentally, looking inordinately pleased when she didn't make a move to stop him or showed any hint of being uncomfortable. “It's better for everyone that I stay in here for a while, seeing the shrinks twice a day,” he said firmly, and then he was off the bed, stalking around the room, dragging a hand along the wall.

When he reached the part where the headboard of the bed had been pushed up to the wall, he turned around and walked in the other direction, only to repeat the action again and again.

“No one told you about Horse, huh,” he mused, and his shoulders were tense, no matter how light and seemingly-merry his voice was.

Kyo's mood instantly dropped, and it felt like her stomach had been filled with ice. “No,” she confirmed quietly.

Hyena slowed to a stop, gaze dropping to the floor. “Got him to the hospital, medics did everything they could,” he shrugged, “but it was too late. He died,” he said flatly. “Hawk-taichou's retired from ANBU. Left his face behind for good.” He turned his head to fix her with a sharp, intent look.
“You?”

“No one’s told me anything about me not being ANBU any more,” she told him faintly, still trying to wrap her head around... around...

One of her hands fisted the material of her shirt over her stomach, and before she knew it, Hyena was crouched in front of her, staring intently up at her face.

“Scorpion told me,” he said quietly, “that she was sure I had done everything I could to protect taichou while we’d been separated. That I had done my best to help him and keep him alive. Hyena’s very sure Scorpion did her best to do the same with Horse,” he told her firmly.

“Sometimes, I hate being so small,” Kyo told him thickly.

“You got this much taller,” he used his hands to show her just how much, “since the first time I saw you,” Hyena said seriously.

Kyo smiled wetly at him, because it was a very sweet attempt to comfort her. “Can I hug you? Or would that make you uncomfortable?” She asked.

Hyena eyed her intently a moment. He poked experimentally at her side, where he’d no doubt seen her store needles in her clothes during missions. “Needles?” He asked interestedly, proving her right.

“Only in my cuffs, today, and I had to leave them behind at the door,” she told him quietly. Together with her kunai holsters and her poison pack.

Apparently, you were heavily discouraged from bringing weapons into this part of the Psych ward. A vaguely amused smile flickered across Hyena’s face, like quicksilver.

Moving very slowly, and looking like he was trying to figure out how to go about it as he went along, Hyena reached his arms around her in a tentative, uncertain hug that was doing its best to break Kyo's heart.

“I'll hug you back now,” she told him evenly, waited a heartbeat, and then slowly moved her arms to wrap them around his shoulders.

Hyena let out a very small sigh and leaned his chin against her shoulder for a moment.

When he began to get restless, Kyo let go.

Hyena returned to stalking around his room, like there’d been no interruption and Kyo tried to accept what she’d been told. Digest everything she’d learned in the last few minutes.

She felt very tired.

“Do you have something to do while you're here and aren't talking to the psych people?” She eventually asked.

Hyena sent her a questioning glance, managing to look quite puzzled.

“I'm asking if you'd like me to bring a couple of books, or something else,” Kyo clarified.

Hyena paused, tilting his head. “Maybe?” He frowned. “Don't know,” he decided and resumed his pacing.
Kyo frowned in thought, eyeing her friend as she tried to think of anything.

He seemed far too restless and twitchy for something as passive as reading, but maybe she could think of something else? It would have to be something the people running this place would approve of, too, so... nothing that could be used as a potential weapon.

Not that Kyo thought Hyena was about to do anything rash, either against someone else, or himself, but it was better to be safe than sorry.

She'd thought of at least one thing that might work, though she had no idea if Hyena would actually like it.

“I'll try to think of something until next time, okay?” She finally settled on saying.

“Next time?” Hyena parroted, sending her a part confused, part curious look.

“Next time I come to visit you,” she clarified firmly. “I'll come back in a few days.”

“Why?”

“Because you're my friend, and I don't like the thought of you being alone in here,” she said, and should she really be feeling so old? Ten year olds were supposed to have a lot of energy.

Hyena left his quest of wearing away the paint on the wall to walk up to the bed. He studied her interestedly a long second, before he reached out to pat her head again, more confidently than last time.

“I like you,” he told her with a smile. “Even when you're not wearing your face.”

“I like you, too.” Kyo smiled back, ignoring the liquid almost leaking from the corner of her eye. “Face or no face, you're still my friend.”

Hyena's smile widened into a pleased grin and he climbed back onto the bed to sit with her a few minutes.

When the Jounin currently in charge of this section of the ward knocked on the door to tell her it was time to leave, Kyo did so with another brief hug and a promise to come back.

“Scorpion,” Hyena called after her before she'd had a chance to leave the room fully. He was still sitting cross-legged on the bed, grinning at her. “You should wear your face next time,” he told her, gaze sliding off her to eye the Jounin speculatively. “You look much too soft like this. People might get the wrong idea.”

Kyo paused to eye him curiously a moment. “It's usually worked in my advantage when that's happened so far,” she told him honestly, because Kyo was well-aware she was still alive largely due to her enemies constantly underestimating her based on her looks.

Hyena leaned forward, as if he was about to impart a great secret, and his smile had turned sharp. “In here, you've been stripped of your poison stinger.”

Kyo blinked and sent him a fond smile.

He shouldn't really be worrying about her, but she appreciated it all the same.

“I'll keep it in mind, Hyena,” she promised. “See you soon.” And she left.
The Jounin closed the door between them and Hyena, gave her a long glance, and then wandered back in the direction of his desk without a word, Kyo following a step behind him.

The guards at the entrance to this building wouldn't be able to object to her bringing paper and crayons for Hyena to try his hand at drawing, right?

Having nothing to do, nothing to distract yourself with was sometimes the worst, at least for Kyo, and drawing was supposed to be good for you.

Kyo sent the Jounin a nod goodbye and went on her way, going through the slightly more complicated process of leaving Psych, but at least Hyena wasn't staying in one of the high-security sections, which was something.

Her friend may be a little bit broken, but not so badly he was a danger to everyone around him. Or to himself.

Jiraiya sighed heavily and motioned at them to put their brushes down.

“Brats,” he said, and he was already looking torn.

“You're leaving?” Kyo hazarded a guess, exchanging a look with Minato. They'd already realised this would happen, sooner or later.

Jiraiya gave an unhappy grunt. “Sensei's sending my team back out to the front, so I'll be gone a few months, at least.”

Minato nodded his acceptance. “Will you be leaving us homework?” He asked.

“Not really,” Jiraiya muttered, scratching at his jaw. “Is a bit of a bad idea when even the simplest seal done wrong can kill ya,” he explained. “But I've talked to Mito and she'll be expecting you for lessons twice a week. I expect you to keep up with the rest of your training outside of that, too.” He slanted Kyo with a look.

“Will do,” she agreed with a nod.

As a Chuunin, she was pretty much the next-highest ranking person in this team. Never mind the fact they were just three people. She was also pretty sure she and Minato could find plenty to do, left to themselves.

Katsurou-sensei had insinuated he'd be available for more Hide and Seek training, too, which was more than welcome, and she was sure Minato would jump on the challenge.

“Alright, let's wrap this up, pick up a few D-ranks and then grab something to eat,” Jiraiya said, getting to his feet. “We're leaving tomorrow, so this'll be it for a while.”

“Be careful out there, Jiraiya-sensei,” Kyo told him solemnly.

“We'll do our best.” Jiraiya grinned, placing a large hand on her head a moment, before he turned to Minato to clap him on the shoulder. “You two take care of each other, yeah.”

“Of course, sensei.” Minato smiled.

At the end of the day, when Jiraiya had said goodbye to finish up the last few preparations for his extended mission, Minato grabbed Kyo's hand and began to wander in the direction of her apartment.
building.

“Do you think he'll be okay?” He asked, not looking at her.

Kyo focused on Minato's grip on her hand, though she felt calm enough to scan the street around them.

“They're calling him and his team Legendary,” Kyo muttered with a twist of wry amusement. “If anyone's got a good chance.” She shrugged, not bothering to finish the sentence.

There were never any guaranties, though.

“Do you want to come with me to the hospital? I'm visiting Naoki,” Minato said after a few minutes' quiet walk.

Kyo hesitated, feeling guilt and unease turn her stomach. “I don't think that's a good idea,” she finally settled on saying. “Sorry.” She was pretty sure Kaimaru had been supposed to be discharged the other day, too, so she couldn't go visit him meanwhile. And he'd be even grumpier than usual with all the physical therapy he'd be doing, so she'd planned to give him some time to himself before she bothered him again. “Try and tell him not to injure you this time, please,” she muttered half-heartedly.

“He'll come around,” Minato said stubbornly. “He just needs to listen.”

“It's not always that simple,” Kyo told him, but didn't hold much hope that Minato would actually listen, because... well, he was still trying, despite Naoki's continuous attempts to chase him away. “Can we stop by here for a moment? There's something I need to buy,” she changed the subject abruptly, as they approached a small corner store.

“Sure,” Minato said, blinking curiously but changing direction readily enough. “Are those for your brother?” He asked curiously, eyeing the crayons Kyo placed on the counter.

“No.” Kyo added a thick packet of papers and readily handed over the cash. “They're for a friend.”

“Anyone I know?” Minato gave her a hopeful look.

“No, sorry.” And Kyo felt bad, because there were so many things she wasn't telling him and it felt... uneven. “Sorry,” she repeated quietly, frowning down at the bag she was provided.

It hadn't mattered much to her in the beginning, because she hadn't wanted to make friends. Had wanted to keep both him and Naoki at a distance. Never mind that it hadn't worked, but it wasn't the same now. They were already friends, but she was still doing it.

Minato sent her a look, but didn't say anything until they'd left the store. “You don't have to apologize to me all the time,” he said casually.

Kyo was silent, frowning down at the ground. “I feel like I'm not fair to you,” she admitted reluctantly. “Like I'm-” taking advantage. She gave a frustrated huff.

Minato tilted his head and looked at her. “You don't have to tell me everything just because we're teammates,” he said with a small frown.

“No,” Kyo agreed bluntly. “But you're supposed to talk to your friends, and I'm not being a very good one.” Hadn't been a particularly good one since they'd met, really.
Minato blinked at her. “So what's stopping you?” He asked, sounding far too curious about her motivations and far less upset with her. “Is it that you're not allowed? Or that you can't? Because I know that's a thing.”

Kyo grimaced at him, prompting a small, almost shy smile from the boy. “You need to stop making it your top priority to figure me out, Minato,” she told him dryly.

“But you're one of the most interesting people I've ever met,” he said, completely shamelessly. Not even trying to deny it. “And you've never talked to me like I'm just a kid.”

“You're older than me,” she felt the absurd need to point out.

Minato blinked, tilted his head and seemed to consider that, momentarily. As if he'd forgotten. “True, but you're older than me in shinobi years.”

“...you're not making much sense,” Kyo huffed, reluctantly amused.

“You understand what I mean anyway, though!” Minato grinned. “And I can be patient,” he added, a tad more seriously. “I'm not gonna pretend I'm not curious and don't want to know, but I'll survive.” He shrugged.

They walked in silence for almost five minutes before Kyo broke the companionable quiet.

“He's in Psych,” she said. “My friend.” She lifted the bag with paper and crayons to indicate who and what she was talking about.

Minato stopped to stare at her, clearly caught off guard.

“He admitted himself after our-” she cut herself off to take a deep, unsteady breath, “after our teammate died,” she finished quietly.

An expression of plain shock flickered over Minato's face for just a second, before it firmed up into something fierce and determined.

Kyo braced herself, though she wasn't quite sure for what, because Minato didn't look angry in the least, but part of her was convinced he'd yell at her any second now.

For keeping secrets. No matter how irrational the thought was. They were shinobi; they lived and breathed secrets.

There was a tug on her hand, and then she crashed into Minato, who threw his arms around her in a tight, firm hug.

“When did you find out?” He asked.

“Day before yesterday,” Kyo mumbled weakly, just standing there, leaning against the boy and gratefully accepting his comfort.

She hadn't told tou-san, because it'd been a lot all around for the last few weeks, and she didn't want to bog him down with even more worry right before he was sent back out.

Katsurou hadn't been happy with her decision, but he'd understood it, and other than remark that he didn't necessarily agree, hadn't brought it up again.

“I'm sorry,” Minato muttered against her shoulder. “Want me to come with you?” He offered.
Kyo gave a quiet laugh. “I don't think that's a good idea, but thank you.” She doubted Hyena would react well to some unknown person barging into his recuperation, and a relatively green Genin, at that.

She was getting very fond of Minato, but she'd rather wait to introduce him to Hyena a while longer.

“If he lets you, say hi to Naoki from me?” She requested, finally taking a step away from the boy.

“I'll do my best to get a word in edgewise,” he promised with a slightly wry smile, searching her face.

The next morning, Kyo slipped out of bed and got out one of her storage scrolls.

Eyeing it warily a moment, she acknowledged to herself how irrationally she was behaving, and then firmed up her resolve and opened it, unsealing her ANBU uniform.

The sight of her Scorpion mask was... not making her as uneasy as she had feared.

The cool porcelain was a secure weight in her hand.

Kyo traced the black and red pattern, the wicked-looking pincers formed out of the material in the area over the mouth and then continued up to absentely explore the eye-holes. Running her fingers along the shape of them.

With a small sigh, Kyo carefully put it down on her bed and quickly and efficiently dressed, pulling on uniform and armour, followed by her various pouches and weapons.

She didn't pick the mask back up again until she was done, fitting the familiar piece of porcelain to her face, arranging the black cloth over her hair in an automatic, well-practised motion. Kyo was ready so she quietly left her and Genma's room.

“Kyo?”

“Going to visit Hyena,” she said back, turning to approach tou-san, who was stood in the door to his room, looking to have just rolled out of bed, leaning against the door-frame.

“And that requires ANBU uniform?” He wondered, eyeing her with unreadable brown eyes.

“Not really,” she said with a small sigh, pushing her mask up to reveal her face and let her voice be entirely her own. “But Hyena told me he'd prefer it if I wore it next time. He's worried I look too harmless without it,” she admitted, a small, mildly amused smile pulling on her mouth.

Tou-san's lips twitched and he rubbed tiredly at his cheek. “Well, I can't say I object to that reasoning,” he muttered, smothering a yawn with his hand. “And the early hour?”

“I woke up.” Kyo shrugged. Did she need a better reason?

“Think your friend will be awake at this time, kitten?” Kou asked, making her pause.

She... hadn't actually thought of that.

Hyena had always seemed to be awake whenever she was hanging around ANBU headquarters, no matter the time, and he'd been so restless during her last visit, it hadn't even crossed her mind.
“I can check?” She offered blankly, starting to feel vaguely sheepish. “If not, I can just train for a few hours.”

Kou hummed, eyeing her with fond amusement. “Not everyone’s an early riser like you,” he said calmly.

“I know,” Kyo muttered, because she did, but she just... forgot, sometimes. Despite the fact she lived with two people who liked to sleep in, and that she knew what it was like, herself. Had lived on that side of the coin for almost thirty years.

She’d just gotten used to it.

Kou yawned again and stood away from the door jamb he’d been leaning against. “I’m expecting you back home in time for lunch,” he said, turning around and trudging back into his room, without a doubt so he could go back to sleep.

“Okay,” Kyo returned softly, watching her dad’s retreating back for a moment, before she pulled her mask back down and left the apartment.

It was different, slipping through the village as an ANBU, than when she walked the streets as Kyo. Like this, she could remain hidden and safe without feeling like she was hiding or running away. Without feeling like she was attracting more attention.

An ANBU staying out of sight was expected.

She only touched back down on the ground, in plain sight, outside the building housing Psych.

Things were calm in this part of the village this time of day, which meant the traffic of people coming and going was at a minimum.

Kyo walked inside to approach the closest equivalent of a welcome desk this building offered, eyeing the rather tired-looking Chuunin on duty. No doubt on his last hour of the night shift and waiting to be relieved of duty so he could go home and sleep.

“Yeah?” He asked, blinking at the sight of her. “Session?” He asked, already reaching for a list of available people who could accept her for a drop-in therapy session.


One of the ANBU stationed nearby got her attention and Kyo obligingly shared who she wanted to see and why.

’Hyena,’ she replied easily, signing her reply while the Chuunin pulled out another list. ’Personal reasons,’ she added, because it wasn't like she was here in a professional capacity.

It took a while to get through the procedure, and she had to relinquish her weapons, though she was allowed to bring in her gift with no more than what she was sure was an amused look from the ANBU who ended up seeing her through the process.

Half an hour after she'd walked in, she was allowed to continue up to the floor Hyena was currently staying on.

It was a bit of effort, but Kyo didn't mind overly much.
Every check and obstacle was to ensure the people in here were safe - to themselves and others - and also to make sure no one who shouldn't be in here just strolled inside.

Once she got to the correct ward, the same Jounin was there as last time, and he sent her an interested look when he waved her past to room seventeen.

Knocking on Hyena's door, Kyo hefted the paper and crayons more firmly in her arms, waiting to see if the man would answer.

A few seconds passed, and then the door opened to reveal Hyena's bright green eyes. A grin spread across his face at the sight of her.

“Scorpion,” he greeted easily, stepping aside to let her in, barely glancing at the Jounin that had trailed after her.

Kyo entered and looked around.

It looked exactly the same as last time, though the bed wasn't as neatly made, which must have meant Hyena had been occupying it recently.

The door closed behind her and Kyo paused.

“Did I wake you?” She asked, wondering if tou-san hadn't had the right of it. She probably should have waited a few hours.

“It's fine,” Hyena said easily, padding back to the bed on bare feet, taking a seat. “You came back.”

“Yes,” she agreed with a soft sigh, deciding to focus on Hyena, now that she was already here. “And I brought you something, though I don't know if you'll like it,” she confessed.

Instead of taking a seat next to Hyena on the bed, she sat down on the floor in front of him, putting down the two items in her arms beside her.

Hyena leaned forward to observe her with curious interest while Kyo opened both, pulling out a single piece of paper, which she placed on the floor, and then selected one of the crayons.

Slipping out the dark blue one, Kyo set it to the paper and absently began to draw.

“What are you doing?” She asked while she worked, not taking her eyes off of the dragon she was tentatively sketching out.

Hyena hummed neutrally. “The Barracks are better,” he eventually said, and he sounded distracted. “What are you doing?”

“Drawing,” Kyo said simply. “I thought you might like something to do; you seemed restless last time,” she shot him a quick look, though Hyena’s gaze was riveted on her hands, “and I know that I hate it when I haven't got anything to do.” She was silent a moment. “I thought you might want to try.”

There was a beat of silence, and then Hyena slid off the bed to sit on the floor.

Kyo paused her drawing to hand him a paper and push the box of crayons closer. And then she turned her attention back to her dragon.

It was lopsided, and her lines weren't as smooth as she'd once been able to do, in a different body, granted, but she remembered it. It was just as calming and therapeutic as she recalled it to be, though.
Kyo lost herself in the details of the scales, the mane down the spine and trying her best to make the face look right.

It ended up with sharp claws and too-short legs, but she didn't care.

The next time she looked up, Hyena had tentatively grabbed the black crayon and was dragging it over his paper with a focused look on his face, a small frown pulling on his brows.

Kyo exchanged her blue crayon for the green one.

She didn't know what the black smudge Hyena was drawing was supposed to be, but that wasn't even remotely important.

She'd brought him this to give him something to do and nothing else.

He could have broken the crayons down to crumbles with his fingers for all she cared if that was something that would help him relax.

All in all, it was a calm, pleasant morning.

Kyo and Hyena exchanged no more than a handful of words, but the silent companionship was peaceful and nice.

It made the rest of the world seem less... pressing. Less overbearing.

Right now, it was just the two of them, a box of crayons and a stack of papers waiting to be filled out with whatever they wanted and that was fine.

-x-x-x-
Kyo felt she'd been doing loads better in the last few days, which was why the realisation that she
would have to face two members of the Uzumaki clan in just a few minutes so much more jarring
and, frankly, upsetting.

She wasn't sure how she'd been able to avoid realising this problem until this very moment, walking
through the Senju compound with Minato, but she had.

That was the problem.

Or at least one of them.

Absently aware of the fact she must be hurting her teammate's hand, her grip on it was so tight, Kyo
still wasn't capable of doing anything about it.

Her face was cold and there was a pressure over her chest, making it hard to breathe.

"Kyo?" Minato asked, having slowed the moment her hold on his hand had gone from firm but
relaxed to white-knuckled and two-handed.

Focusing on taking deep breaths, Kyo forced herself to look up to meet Minato's gaze.

"Fine," she choked out. "We'll be late." And this was a really bad idea.

Mito was expecting them, though.

It wasn't the woman's fault Kyo was having issues with the most random things, and why was she
discovering new ones still?

She felt like every time she'd dealt with one of them, two new ones popped up to mock her.

It was infuriating.

But mostly, she mused distantly, it was exhausting and demoralizing, because she'd finally started to
feel like she was making real progress. That she was returning to a semblance of normal, yet
something always happened to set her back until it felt like she hadn't managed to do anything at all.

"Are you sure?" Minato asked quietly, reminding her that she wasn't alone and that they still had
someday to be.

Kyo gave as firm a nod as she was currently capable of, because her irrational brain could just suck it up and deal with this. She was having a fuuinjutsu lesson, like planned, like she wanted, and no one was going to stop her.

Not even herself.

Which was all well and good in theory, she mused shakily, feeling like a back-seat observer as Minato led them deeper into the Senju compound, walking along the familiar path to the main house and inside.

She could tell roughly where they were, but Kyo kept her gaze firmly fixed on the ground in front of her feet.

This might work if she didn't... look at them directly.

That was a weak plan and she knew it, but Kyo would prefer to try and fight rather than just give in to the mindless fear twisting her insides until it felt like they'd tangled up into one big knot that was trying to climb up her throat and out of her mouth.

Taking off with a shunshin was always an option, but that would be running away. Which would demand explanations Kyo wouldn't be willing to give. She was also trying not to run away. Very pointedly.

Though having a minor breakdown wouldn't be much better, she mused, pursing her lips.

Minato paused, twisting to look at her over his shoulder, and then slid the door to their classroom open with a sigh.

"Good morning, Mito-shishou," he greeted affably, strolling inside like nothing was wrong.

Shit, she was growing to love this boy.

Kyo was showing him nothing but the worst sides of her, but Minato was still here, putting up with her and making an effort to get to know her, never mind how many obstacles she'd thrown in his way, knowingly or not.


Still not raising her gaze, Kyo bobbed her head in a respectful bow in lieu of a greeting.

There was a beat of silence.

"Please take your seats and we shall begin," Mito said softly. "Kushina-chan, if you could-"

Kyo couldn't help the way her attention drifted off topic, the words Mito was speaking losing meaning as she listened intently to the woman's voice. Her tone and inflection.

At first, it had sounded like the aged woman had been just as always, but now that she listened closely, Kyo thought she sounded... tired. Worn thin and less...

There'd always been a sense of exuberant mischief to the woman before, no matter how dignified and understated it had been.
That was gone now.

And Kyo didn't have to guess as to the reason why.

Shallow breathing jerking unsteadily through her lungs, Kyo was making a conscious effort to calm down. She was so focused on her self-appointed task she hadn't even realised she was still holding Minato's hand in a death-grip.

Not until there was an agitated exclamation next to her.

"What is up with you!?!" Kushina demanded to know, despite the fact she usually behaved herself during these lessons, and the few times she'd slipped up it had always been to yell exclusively at Minato and his 'stupid smiles' and 'flaky personality'. "You're even weirder than usual!" The girl growled.

"Please don't do that," Minato said firmly, for once sounding completely like himself in the red-head's presence.

"Shut up," Kushina hissed, and Kyo was fairly sure she'd stood up, but she couldn't bring herself to lift her gaze and check. "Why are you even here if she's just gonna sit there and ignore everything that's going on, huh!?" And her voice was rising steadily.

"Kushina," Mito said, and she sounded tired.

"No! They're being rude!" The girl objected shrilly, stomping her foot. "They're butting into our lessons all the time and now they're not even paying attention! Fuuinjutsu is a serious art and it should-" what sounded like a small sob wrenched itself from Kushina's throat, but she didn't let that stop her. "They're not family! Why do they deserve to be here when they don't even appreciate it!?"

"Please stop talking, Kushina," another voice said, quiet and tight and sounding nothing like it usually did, which was why it took a moment for Kyo to place it. "That's not disrespect."

"Butt out, Aita! Then what would you call it? She hasn't even looked at us since she got here!"

Kushina fired back with venom.


And it was very true, a distant part of Kyo mused calmly, observing the rest of her wheeze with barely controlled terror.

Kyo wasn't holding Minato's hand any more, and she didn't know when that had changed, where it'd gone.

There was nothing grounding her to the present and she didn't know what to do with her hands. Where were her weapons? She needed at least a kunai...

Kushina's voice rose again, but Kyo couldn't make herself listen. Didn't want to hear another word, and it seemed her body was on entirely the same page, because her hands had moved up to cover her ears before the thought had more than begun to form in her head.

She was panting like she'd spent the last two hours running for her life and her eyes were too wide. Too dry. She needed to blink.

A fine tremor was moving through her form at uneven intervals and her field of vision narrowed down to a more manageable point.
A point that was soon enough invaded by a pair of familiar feet and legs.

Aita slowly bent down to sit on the floor in front of her, his hands slowly and carefully reaching towards her and Kyo couldn't move.

Frozen on the spot, she could do nothing more than watch and wait.

Aita's fingers closed around her wrists, gently pulling them away from her head, but she still couldn't make sense of what she was hearing.

"Kyo," his voice cut through her blind panic like a stray shuriken. Unexpected and sudden, but with sharp impact.

It made her jump.

"Look at me, please," he asked softly.

She still couldn't move, but somehow, with some help, she managed.

Aita's fingers were warm on her chin, and his grey eyes were dark with grief when she finally got a look at them.

The sight of his face, his eyes, his hair - red, red, red, red- was like a strike to the chest, knocking the air from her struggling lungs.

And all of a sudden, she was no longer in the Senju compound, but back in Uzushio. The room was replaced by ravaged stone buildings and ruins, the waning light doing nothing to hide the fact everyone around her was dying of deliberate violence and Kyo's unchecked gas, the toxic substance killing everyone in the area as surely as the knives and jutsu flung around with liberal ease, and there was so much to take in, to do, she didn't know where to start.

Itsuki-shishou was staring at her where he lay nearby, blank, dead eyes empty and accusing.

"Kyo."

And she was back in Konoha, gasping like she was drowning and Aita's grip on her face was painfully tight but it was grounding, real.

"I'm sorry," she choked out, voice rough with something that was halfway between a gasp and a dry sob. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry," she repeated again and again and it was nothing more than empty words, they didn't change anything, but she couldn't stop.

Again and again, she repeated them like her life depended on it, because she was staring at Aita's face, but all she could see for her mind's eye was Itsuki-shishou's eyes staring blindly in death when just a moment ago, he'd been alive and breathing.

Your fault.

The sound of bodies hitting the hard ground as they fell, giving in to Kyo's poison in their systems.

She was pressed up against something warm and solid and she should probably fight back, try to get away, but she was so tired, and everyone was dying. Was there really a point? If she moved, they'd notice her and they'd kill her.

She didn't want to die.
A hand was on the back of her head, pressing gently and she didn't see a reason to resist.

Her face met something soft and hard at the same time -shoulder-, a small voice whispered in the back of her head- and it muffled her voice, alerting her to the fact she was still talking.

She blinked, falling silent, mouth dry and she was clutching at something so tightly her hands hurt; finger joints aching dully.

Kyo closed her eyes and tried to take deep breaths, but the air caught in her throat every other inhalation, jarring her chest and making it feel like her lungs were on fire.

"It's alright," someone murmured close to her ear, but it wasn't.

"I'm sorry," she said in a thin voice, too tired to try and argue.

"It's alright, you're alright," Aita repeated shakily. "You're in Konoha, you're safe."

That was a lie.

It wasn't alright. Kyo wasn't alright. And Konoha... Konoha was safer. Safer than everywhere else, yes, but that didn't mean anything when people died all the time.

People like Horse.

Like the people of Uzushio.

Like their enemies.

Everyone died.

Kyo didn't even know what they were fighting for, and she didn't care.

She was so unimaginably tired, when she stopped to think about it and it just felt senseless.

They had long since passed the point where there would be any winners of this useless war, because so many people had died, on all sides, it just wouldn't be worth it.

Was the Village system worth the cost of human blood it was currently exacting?

...it was naïve of her to try and think otherwise. She was fairly sure it was.

All the blood being spilled here had been spilled back Before. All of this and more.

So much more.

The person she had been then had just been lucky enough to have been born in the right country, at the right time, the right century.

There was no such thing as the perfect world, but shit, it felt like they'd been closer than Konoha back there, than the Elemental Nations were.

"In here," she could hear Minato's voice, but it sounded fainter and strangely muffled than it should if he'd been in the room with them.

Breathing was slightly easier, but her chest still hurt, her head hurt, she couldn't bring herself to try and compose herself further.
"I can find her," Katsurou-sensei's voice answered shortly, and she could tell by the tone that he was no doubt wearing his blank, no-nonsense face.

The one that made people scramble to get out of his way.

Minato opened the door and Kyo carefully disentangled from Aita to throw herself at her sensei, hard enough he had to take half a step back to compensate for the sudden weight attaching itself to his torso.

Kyo clung to him, refusing to let go for anything in the world right now.

Katsurou gave a heavy sigh, wrapped an arm around her back and took the last few steps into the room, reaching back to slide the door shut behind him.

"Anyone willing to tell me what happened to prompt this reaction?" He asked evenly, walking over to take a seat next to Aita, no doubt checking the boy over while he was at it.

Kyo got her first look at his face in a while and he was deathly pale, with tear tracks down his cheeks.

"Um," Minato began uncertainly. "It started after we'd entered the compound, but she didn't want to leave, and it wasn't worse than it's been before."

Katsurou made an acknowledging noise, silently encouraging him to continue.

"It got a bit better for a while, I think, but then it got worse when we sat down for our lesson," Minato muttered uncomfortably.

"Kyo-chan came inside and sat down, keeping her gaze on the floor and seemed to manage her own emotions passably well, until Kushina-chan's temper flared up, Yamanaka-san," Mito spoke up. "I'm afraid part of the blame falls on us."

"Wha-!"

"Quiet, Kushina," Mito ordered firmly.

Katsurou hummed neutrally. "Kyo?"

"I'm sorry," she managed in a strangled voice, and she knew she should probably say something else, but her mind was blank.

"She's been apologizing a lot since the siege," Minato said quietly.

Katsurou heaved a small, quiet sigh, one hand coming to rest on the back of her head, warm and firm. The other one was still on her back.

"This needs to stop, brat. Enough's enough," he muttered firmly, but she didn't think it was aimed at her. Not really. "We're going to work through everything, from start to finish," he said curtly. "It won't be easy or pleasant, but you'll pull through."

Kyo was just glad someone else was taking charge right now.

And she knew it would suck, but it was bound to be better than this, in the long run.

She absolutely detested feeling like this, the way her own mind turned against her, again and again.
"When do we start?" She managed hoarsely, feeling like her throat had been scraped raw. As if she'd been screaming.

She hadn't, but it sure felt like it.

"You can start right now by telling me what set you off," Katsurou answered evenly, voice still cold and short.

His hold on her was warm and comforting, though.

Kyo closed her eyes with a sigh. "They've got red hair," she mumbled quietly. "I see their faces. They're dying and it's my fault."

Aita made a small, wounded noise but she refused to open her eyes.

"You were following orders," Katsurou said simply.

"Orders doesn't make it better," Kyo refuted tiredly, speaking softly into Katsurou-sensei's shoulder. "They asked for my professional opinion and counsel, and I offered something that, in the end, doomed them as surely as the enemies."

"What would have happened if you hadn't been there?" Katsurou asked, and this was a familiar question. One of her sensei's favourite to fling her way whenever something devastating happened.

"I don't know," she confessed weakly.

"Neither do I, Kyo," he said gravely. "You have to look at the ones that made it. The people who lived. You can't decide what those in charge do or don't do, and they made the choice."

"It was a horrible one."

"Sometimes, there are no good possible outcomes to a bad situation," he said flatly. "So you're forced to pick the one with the least objectionable results. That sometimes means people like you and me get used with careless abandon and left to cope as best they can." He took a deep, even breath. "Are you calm enough to move this conversation somewhere else?"

"Yeah," Kyo grunted, tightening her hold on Katsurou-sensei, with both her arms and legs.

"Then we'll take our leave," he declared firmly, getting to his feet with ease, not at all inhibited by Kyo clinging like a baby monkey to his front. "Mito-sama." Katsurou dipped his head in a bow. He paused at the door. "Go see Hinata, Aita. You need to talk about this, too," he ordered, and then left.

Kyo managed a weak wave goodbye at a pasty-looking Minato.

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"Is it going to be like this every time?" Kyo couldn't help but ask, stretched out on Katsurou's couch, absently staring up at the ceiling while the man himself went through a slow, thorough series of stretches on the floor a small distance away.

She could tell he was listening, even though he was mostly focused on what he was doing.

"Every time?"

"Every time everything goes to shit," Kyo clarified tiredly.
Katsurou-sensei had gone through the whole Uzushio mission with her during a Mind-Walk. Twice.

Revisiting the memory, in all it's uncensored glory.

It had been both worse and easier than she had feared, but regardless of that, it had left her absolutely exhausted and wrung out, feeling like someone had scooped her brains out of her head, scrambled them around, and then pushed them all back in.

Her head was pulsing uncomfortably, though she recognized an exhaustion headache when she got one.

They'd used to be a staple of her life in the Before, at the end.

"Some of the times," Katsurou said, drawing her attention. "But the older you get, the more well-equipped you'll be to deal with it. We're not just working to help you recover, but to give you tools to maintain your mental health indefinitely, despite whatever future dents you might take," he said easily, moving on to stretching out his arms when he was done with his legs. "Just like your physical strength, your mental one needs constant upkeep and careful tending," he mused wryly, sending her an amused glance.

Kyo graced him with a half-hearted glare, feeling sullen and generally grumpy.

Turning back to stare at the ceiling, Kyo contemplated something she'd been wondering about for a few days now.

"You know," she said into the comfortable silence, "Hyena said something interesting to me."

"Hm?" Katsurou hummed inquiringly.

"He was really surprised when I told him I'd never been to Psych before visiting him," she said casually.

Katsurou huffed. "All Chuunin are subjected to regular checks," he confirmed, not seeming bothered.

Kyo sat up to stare at him and Katsurou raised a surprised eyebrow at her.

"What do you think we've been doing all day, exactly?" He asked dryly.

Kyo blinked and tilted her head. "That's the same thing?" She wondered, feeling stupid.

Of course it was the same thing.

And Hyena had said it, too; Yamanaka were possessive of their students. Of their mental health.

She frowned. "When you were in the hospital, after," she gestured jerkily to indicate Taku and Maki dying, "I should have been summoned to a session, right?"

"Technically," Katsurou agreed slowly, taking a proper seat on the floor to eye her contemplatively. "If the situation had been different. If I had died, you would have, but as it looked like I would recover, they decided to wait it out and see before any decisions were made." A humourless smile pulled on his lips. "There's quite a bit of interesting information lurking in your head, Kyo, and I imagine the Hokage would like to keep that knowledge contained to as few people as necessary. Never mind that changing shrink can be upsetting."

Kyo frowned in thought, ignoring parts of that for now. "He said something about Genin, too," she
"Jounin are expected to look after their Genin students' mental health, along with their physical one. But it's understood that they'll alert the appropriate people to any situation needing more serious intervention."

"What about Jounin, then?" Kyo questioned curiously.

"The system is the same as for Chuunin, at it's base, but stricter," Katsurou snorted, stretching out his back until there was a faint pop as his spine realigned. "A Jounin going off their rocker can do a great deal more damage than a Chuunin." He paused. "Yamanaka are also checked by other Yamanaka, in addition, to make sure something vital doesn't spiral out of control." He gave a dark, humourless smirk. "No one wants an unstable Yamanaka anywhere near other people."

Kyo hummed absent-mindedly. It made sense, in a way. All the Yamanaka keeping an eye on their fellow clan members as a self-check system.

"What about people like Hirata?" She asked next, because while she was somewhat fond of the man, there was no denying he had more than a few screws loose.

"Shinobi standards for functional mental health are different than civilian ones," Katsurou snorted and finally got to his feet. "There's a whole classification system in place, making the management of the files easier. Also makes it easier to spot someone about to go off the rails, too." He paused. "Most of the time," he amended dryly. "Hirata's generally stable in his less-than-perfect sanity, and when his temper snaps, he tends to go for non-lethal violence while in the village, which is manageable." He collapsed into a seat next to Kyo on the couch, nudging her feet out of the way. "It helps that he's easy to direct at an enemy, even in his darker moments."

Kyo considered that with solemn sobriety.

It was sad and it made a small part of her cringe at how wrong it sounded, but... at the same time. It could have been worse.

"So Hirata's actually a best case worst case scenario?" She mused with a weak attempt at humour.

"If you want to look at it like that, then sure," Katsurou agreed with a smile, patting her foot. "It can get a whole lot worse than Hirata causing trouble every now and then," he assured her dryly.

Kyo said nothing to that and generally tried not to think about what that would mean, though she had a vague idea.

Psychopaths and sociopaths had existed in the Before, too. And she could only imagine a shinobi one would be objectively terrifying unless certain aspects of their personality were looked after properly on a regular basis.

"You staying for dinner?" Katsurou asked idly, slumping down further against the couch cushions, looking relaxed and content.

"I'd love to, but I should probably go home," Kyo sighed, pushing herself into a seat. "Tou-san's getting sent back out day after tomorrow, so I'd like to get in some more family time."

"Come by the office tomorrow morning," Katsurou-sensei ordered evenly, absently accepting the quick hug Kyo all but tackled him with before she got off the couch to go home. "Let me see how you're doing after some sleep."
"Okay. See you tomorrow, sensei."

And Kyo went home.
Kyo was well aware she was avoiding Minato, but that couldn't be helped.

It was just for a little while, she told herself. Until she'd gotten one more day to digest her own -rather embarrassing- meltdown the moment she'd seen Aita.

Not to mention that Kushina would no doubt be even less friendly than usual the next time she saw her.

That was bound to be fun.

Not that she'd done much more than given her the cold shoulder under Mito's watchful gaze so far, but all the same, Kyo could tell when someone didn't like her.

Tou-san and Ryota had both left the village two days ago, which meant Kyo and Genma were staying with Haname-obaa-san and Kentarou-ojii-san again.

Kyo was... dealing with it, and her grandma was easier to ignore than a lot of things, these days.

Not that she didn't love her grandmother, because she did, she just found a lot of the things Haname thoughtlessly said to be incredibly offensive and tiresome.

After two days of it, Kyo decided she needed a break.

Kaimaru was still recuperating and no doubt in a lousy mood, so she should probably wait a bit longer before she sought him out to see how he was doing.

Inoichi hadn't been back in the village since shortly after the siege, which hopefully meant he and his team were bound to come home soon, but that ruled out another possible distraction.

She'd honestly welcome cloud-watching with Shikaku at this point, just for a few hours' calm and quiet.

She was still avoiding Minato.

Which left only one option, really.

With a slightly long-suffering huff, Kyo donned her ANBU uniform and set out towards Psych, preparing herself for the mildly bothersome process of getting inside.

Hyena wouldn't mind a visit, she was fairly sure.

This time, Kyo's arrival didn't raise quite so many eyebrows, despite her small size, and things went relatively smoothly until she reached Hyena's ward.

“Ah, ANBU-san,” the Jounin behind the desk greeted her with far more interest than her previous

She signed in with her ANBU registration number on the list the man slid towards her and then turned to walk down the corridor to Hyena's room.

There was only mild surprise when the Jounin rose and ambled after her.

“Is there a problem?” She inquired politely when she reached door number seventeen, turning to face the man more properly, to find him studying her with blatant interest.

“Not really,” he drawled, but she could tell there was something he wanted to talk to her about. “What made you bring the crayons?” He finally asked.

Kyo cocked her head. “Hyena was restless, couldn't keep his hands still. Drawing calms me down, so I thought he might want to try.”

“Your sensei didn't put you up to it?” He pressed.

Kyo frowned minutely. “No one put me up to anything,” she told him firmly. “I'm sorry if the crayons have caused any problems, I was just trying to help.”

The Jounin merely hummed, if anything looking even more interested. “You're Katsurou's brat, yeah?”

Kyo nodded shortly, because he'd already seen her out of uniform and Hyena had called her Scorpion then, followed by her appearing in uniform her next visit.

As he was clearly not an idiot, he'd no doubt been able to connect the large, very visible dots.

Not that it was a problem, because this guy's clearance was high enough to deal with Hyena, so it was fine.

When he didn't say anything else, Kyo finally turned back to the reason she was there and knocked on Hyena's door.

“Come in,” came Hyena's muffled voice.

Kyo frowned; it was the first time he hadn't opened the door himself, and he sounded distracted.

Tentatively opening the door, Kyo stilled as she took in the room on the other side.

Hyena was stood up to the wall, which had been covered in paper, and he looked incredibly busy rubbing as much grey crayon onto the white wood pulp as he could manage.

Tentatively taking a step into the room, Kyo slowly looked around, taking in the sight.

The walls had been covered in paper all the way around. The bed had been moved into the middle of the room to give more wall-space and most of it had already been covered in colour. The door to the bathroom was all but impossible to see, with only the handle sticking out from the rest.

Turning back to her friend, she studied what he was currently working on. He seemed to be using primarily dark colours; grey, black, brown. Red.

Lot's of red, in places.
He was currently drawing what looked to Kyo like a charred, ash-filled remnant of a forest.

Hyena wasn't a great artist by any measure, but it was still abundantly clear what it was he was drawing.

There was a fresh corpse slumped in the corner, responsible for most of the red, and there were black kunai stuck in the burnt stumps of trees he had drawn on another wall.

“This is amazing,” she said, and it was. Never mind the dark, morbid theme he had going on, this was incredible.

Hyena hummed softly, expression focused and intent, but looking far more relaxed than he had her last visit, despite his smudged fingers and the fact it looked like he'd hardly slept in the last few days.

Without a word, Hyena handed her the black crayon, not taking his eyes off the ash he was filling into a blank space.

Kyo took it with a faint smile and turned to look around one last time.

It was all very dark and gritty. Gloomy and depressing.

She glanced down at the black crayon.

More black was the last thing this room needed.

She found the box with crayons halfway under Hyena's bed, withdrew the green crayons, and added the blue ones after a brief pause.

Then, she wandered back over to Hyena, gave him the black crayon back and began to draw.

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“Yamanaka-san?” A monotone voice droned from the door to the office.

Katsurou and Toge both glanced up, but seeing as the ANBU was facing the first, it was clear enough which one of them he wanted the attention of.

“Yes,” Katsurou answered, calmly finishing up the report he was going through and putting it away where it belonged.

If it had been urgent, the man’s conduct would've been entirely different.

“Your presence in Psych is requested,” the ANBU intoned calmly.

Katsurou paused to send the operative a curious look. “Requested?” He repeated bemusedly.

And from the way he'd said it he clearly meant it that way, too.

The ANBU nodded shortly.

'A non-urgent situation involving Scorpion,' he signed briskly.

Katsurou stared at him a moment, considered his options and then got to his feet. There wasn't
anything urgent in here for him to deal with right now and he was cutting down on the office-hours anyway.

And considering the kinds of situations Kyo had managed to wander into lately, he felt it might just be better to check this out now, rather than get surprised later on.

“I guess I can spare them a few minutes of my time,” he drawled and started for the door.

The ANBU signed an acknowledgement and shunshined off, no doubt to return to his post.

Katsurou wasn’t in the same hurry.

He nodded a quick goodbye to Toge and then left, trying to figure out what Kyo could be up to this time.

Non-urgent, the ANBU had said.

He couldn’t deny that he was curious, wondering what Kyo had gotten involved in.

Considering the location, he knew it had to involve Hyena in some form. Unless someone had managed to set off her near-non existent temper, which would have been impressive. And he was fairly sure that would have been classified as slightly more urgent and, depending on the girl's mood, varying levels of lethal.

The people working in Psych, at least in the long-term, higher ranking positions, all knew him on sight, and if not that, then definitely by name, so getting in wasn't overly complicated.

Learning what ward he needed to go to was solved with a simple question.

The desk was empty, which lured a faint frown onto his face, but it was easily solved when he focused a bit more firmly on his surroundings.

“You sent for me?” Katsurou drawled, approaching the open door further down the corridor to the left and the man stood calmly in it, staring into the room.

Kurama Naomi sent him a glance, before he turned back to watch whatever was going on inside room number seventeen.

“Are you the reason for this?” He asked, and he sounded both curious and faintly entertained.

Katsurou stopped beside him, glanced into the room, took in the liberal smears of colour on the walls and then turned back to Naomi.

“No.”

“That's what your student said, too,” he muttered, entertained.

“I'm no longer a Jounin sensei,” he reminded evenly, turning so he could see into the room more easily and getting a better look at what had actually been drawn on the walls.

Most of it were scenes you could see practically in all shinobi memories. Battle-fields, corpses, collapsed buildings.

Aftermaths of the fight.

There was what looked to be a dilapidated village in the background of one of the scenes.
What was also present, Katsurou noted with some interest, were splashes of cheerful colours.

The burnt down forest was sprouting what looked to be new shoots, tentative flowers growing from smudged grey.

The broken field, littered with bodies, also had flowers, and there were blue butterflies dotting that wall, and a few birds in the ‘sky’.

Katsurou realised Kyo must have climbed up the wall to reach that high, but she was clearly the one responsible for every single, small splash of bright cheerfulness in what looked like a desolate wasteland of death and destruction.

On the wall with the ruined buildings, a bright green snake looked to be sunbathing on a toppled wall, and weeds were growing in every crack Hyena hadn't already filled in.

As they watched, Hyena walked over to the wall with the burnt forest and efficiently began to tear down the papers stuck with a minimal amount of chakra to the wall, dropping the resulting mess on the floor.

Clearly not the first time that had happened, he noted with some interest.

Hyena grabbed a thick sheaf of papers, and quickly slapped new ones up on the wall in the old ones' wake.

And then it started all over again.

Hyena started drawing an island in the distance, with smoke rising ominously from its' centre.

A dark, stormy grey ocean followed, violent strokes of crayon signifying the choppy waves.

Soon enough, Kyo slipped up beside him, adding brighter spots of water, as if the sun was breaking through a heavy layer of clouds. Various sea-creatures followed.

Hyena drew a large shark.

Kyo added lots of fish around it, and what Katsurou was fairly sure was a whale flipped it's tail in the distance.

Rain-clouds appeared over the village, dumping their burden on the source of the smoke, before Kyo moved back to one of the other scenes, to continue adding life.

“How long've they been at it?” He finally asked, having long since leaned against the door jamb to watch.

“How long?” Naomi guessed, eyes riveted on the activity in front of them. “We got him new crayons last night; he'd used up about half of the ones the kid brought him,” he said casually.

Katsurou sent him a brief glance, more than aware he was itching to ask something.

“I wasn't the only one who thought it was a childish whim,” the man muttered, mouth pulling down in a displeased frown momentarily, before the expression smoothed over again. “But this is the most Hyena's worked through in such a short amount of time since he claimed his 'face'.” Naomi sent him an intent look. “You teach her that?”

Katsurou didn't react for a long few seconds.
“Give me the red one, it's not only good for blood,” Kyo mumbled, all but swiping the crayon from Hyena's hand to draw a group of wild-flowers.

In return, Hyena snatched away one of Kyo's green ones to tint the skin on one of the corpses, signifying decomposition.

He made a non-committal noise in the back of his throat. “Kid's always been good at reading people.”

“Parents?” Naomi asked idly.

“No,” he said, because Kou might have his faults, but he wouldn't ever raise a hand to either of his children. Isshun, had she lived and faced those kinds of issues, would have leaned more towards coldness and emotional neglect, if Katsurou had to hazard a guess.

The previous set of parents, though... the father.

The father, and the father's wife.

They were more likely the root of that particular set of skills. Not so much on the physical side, not after the mother took her children and left, but there were more ways than one to fuck people - children- up. And mental scars where harder to deal with.

It was serving Kyo fairly well, in this life, for all that she'd suffered for it at the time.

He blinked and snapped out of his thoughts. “Kid's generally observant,” he mused neutrally. “Have it on good authority she's got a strong pack-mentality, too,” he added casually.

He wondered if Kyo had ended up drawing primarily poisonous plants on purpose, or if she hadn't noticed.

Naomi scratched absently at the side of his throat, considering that a second.

Kyo chose that moment to bounce up to them, slipping her arms around Katsurou's waist for a quick hug, tilting her mask up to no doubt give him a bright grin. Not that anyone could tell.

“What do you think?” She asked, still not letting go of him.

“I think you've been busy,” he said evenly, placing a hand on her head to ruffle her hair gently through the cloth covering it.

Kyo gave a quick nod, let go of him and bounced back to Hyena's side, sidling up close for a half-hug there, as well.

Katsurou glanced at Naomi out of the corner of his eye, and resisted the urge to smirk at the look on his face.

Yes, the ten year old little girl had no fear of him. At all.

Naomi sent a long look at Kyo, only to glance back at Katsurou to notice him watching him, and quickly wiped the expression off his face.

For a moment, it looked like he'd take a step away from him, too, before he caught himself.

Kyo came wandering back, as if she'd forgotten something and had just realised.
“Would you like to try, sensei?” She asked seriously, holding out a bright yellow crayon at him, her fingers smudged in so many colours they’d turned a murky grey.

Katsurou eyed her fondly a second. “No,” he answered simply, voice in his regular curt, cold default, because Kyo seemed to go less and less by people's words and tone of voice for every year that passed.

Kyo nodded, reached out to pat his arm quick as a snake, and then continued on her quest to bring something bright to life into Hyena’s... art.

About a minute passed, before Hyena paused in his fervent doodling to cock his head. As if he’d heard something interesting and had only just processed it.

Abruptly, he turned around to fix Katsurou with a sharp look, giving him an intent once-over.

Katsurou stared back, not so much as blinking.

Green eyes slid back and forth between him and Kyo a few times, before a sharp, too-wide grin spread across his face and he gave a short, entertained laugh.

Katsurou watched calmly as the nineteen year old went back to his over-due venting and considered the merits of whether or not it would be worth it to find out how long the kid had served in ANBU by now.

There was activity further down the hall and Katsurou straightened up. “Looks like lunch is about to be served. Scorpion?” He questioned.

“Okay!” Kyo agreed near-instantly. She turned to Hyena. “Remember to eat and sleep, too, Hyena. And don’t get rid of all of my additions. Because there is never truly any one ending to anything, okay?” She told him solemnly, and then slipped out of the room and next Katsurou knew, he’d somehow gained an extra weight on his back.

Patting the girl's knee furthest away from Naomi, Katsurou briefly wondered what it would take for her to take her own advice, before he dismissed the thought out of his head.

She'd find a balance eventually.

-x-x-x-

The next day, Kyo got a different kind of surprise dropped in her lap.

Coming back to the house after morning practice -by herself- she found her grandmother in high spirits, trying to clean the entire house all at once.

“Obaa-san?” Kyo questioned confusedly.

She seemed to also be cooking up a feast for a minor army.

“Oh, Kyo-chan, excellent!” Haname smiled distractedly as she wiped down the coffee table. “Can you help me keep an eye on the kitchen? I don't want anything to burn.”

Kana-oba-san walked in, carrying an armful of cleaning supplies, so clearly, she’d been conscripted into this too.
“What's going on?” She asked, not making a move towards the kitchen yet.

“We're having the party this afternoon,” Haname told her briskly, sending her a confused glance. “Kou didn't tell you?” She looked concerned for half a second, before she smiled excitedly. “With all that dreadful business with the siege, Kentarou and I decided to host a small birthday party.”

Kyo blinked.

Birthday party?

As if on cue, Genma came charging into the room, looking excited enough to burst as he bounced up to their grandma to tug on her clothes.

“When're they coming? Can I have my presents!?”

“There's still a few hours left,” Haname told him fondly, absently disentangling his hands from her kimono. “Did you clean your room like I told you?"

“Yes!” Genma grinned, bouncing on the spot.

“Then go see if you can't help Kenji and Taichi in the garden,” Haname directed, which saw Genma zipping off again, footfalls heavy on the wooden floors.

Kyo felt like she'd temporarily frozen on the spot.

Genma's birthday... she silently tried to recall the day's date, and slowly came to the realisation that she'd completely forgotten about Genma's birthday.

Her brother had turned four.

Smack in the middle of the siege, she realised next, eyes widening.

She'd forgotten. Missed it completely!

“-also invited a few girls your age. You don't have enough friends, my dear, and I worry so,” Haname said, having continued to talk while Kyo had been busy thinking.

“What?” She interrupted blankly, causing her grandmother to frown faintly her way.

“I said I didn't want you to feel forgotten or neglected, so I invited a few girls your age, too. A few of Genma's friends have older sisters,” she said simply, as if that made perfect sense. “You need some cheering up, too, Kyo-chan, what with that whole debacle with the hospital visit and everything.”

Kyo stared incomprehensibly at the woman.

She had forgotten about her little brother's birthday, and now she was... attending a children's party? With 'girls her age'?

This couldn't possibly be a good idea, Kyo mused faintly, watching her grandmother and aunt go back to their cleaning spree.

“Can I invite my teammate?”

The question had left her mouth before she'd had a chance to process anything she'd just learned.

Haname hesitated, staring at her a moment. “I don't see why not,” she replied slowly, looking
vaguely troubled. “Of course, dear,” she added indulgently.

Kyo gave her a short, appreciative nod. “I'll be back in fifteen minutes!” She called, already hurrying back to the door.

She found him in their usual training grounds, where he was going through a set of cool-down katas.

Kyo didn't let him get a word in edgewise before she'd grabbed his arms, staring him straight in the face with something that felt like desperation.

“I know I've been avoiding you for the last few days, and I'm sorry. I just feel stupid and embarrassed and I will definitely apologize properly, but can you please do me a favour first?” She asked in one rushed breath, staring imploringly at the boy, who blinked, looking mildly overwhelmed.

“Sure,” he replied hesitantly. “What is it?”

“Can you please come to the birthday party my grandparents are hosting today? You don't have to bring a gift, I just need a sane person there.”

Minato blinked again, the tension bleeding out of his shoulders and he actually looked amused.

Kyo scowled at him.

“Sane?” He questioned with a budding grin.

“You haven't met my grandmother,” she grumbled, though relented her tight grip on Minato's arms. “And she's invited civilian children for me to 'make friends' with.” She grimaced.

That wasn't going to go over as well as her grandmother was no doubt hoping.

Minato looked offensively entertained at her expense. “What should I be wearing?” He asked.

“Not your shinobi gear,” she sighed, motioning at what he was currently wearing. “But you don't have to wear anything fancy, either.”

“And when should I get there?” He asked next, before he paused. “And where do they live?”

Kyo huffed, irritated with herself, rather than Minato, because she should have just gotten this out of the way earlier, but no. She had to be stubborn.

She gave him quick directions to her grandparents' house and then took off back there, herself, because Haname had made it clear she expected the whole family to help prepare.

She just hoped this wouldn't end in some kind of disaster, because for all that she dreaded all this herself, Genma definitely deserved to have some fun.

And the boy had clearly been excited about it, so Kyo could just suck it up and deal.

Now she just had to figure out if tou-san had neglected to mention anything about this because he'd forgotten, or if it had been an intentional lapse of judgement. She wasn't sure what either option would mean to her, she just knew she wanted to know what he'd been thinking.
Kyo had spent the last few hours helping in the kitchen, preparing food and keeping an eye on everything to make sure nothing burned and whatnot.

“You have to go change, my dear! The guests will start to arrive in just a few minutes,” Haname tutted, herding her towards her bedroom like she was a disobedient toddler.

Kyo heaved a mental sigh, but went along with it.

“I prepared this for you, Kyo-chan. Isn’t it beautiful?” Haname said excitedly the moment they reached her room, and she strode inside and gestured at the children's kimono laid out on Kyo’s bed. “It was Kana’s, when she was your age.”

Kyo eyed it warily. “It’s very pretty,” she agreed, because it was. A soft, clear blue with a white flower print down one side.

The obi was a pale pink, with white and red details.

She hadn't ever worn one, and in this life, she didn't think she'd ever so much as worn a dress, so far.

“I've never worn anything like this,” Kyo muttered, tentatively reaching out to run her fingers over the soft fabric.

“I'll help you,” Haname promised easily, motioning at her to undress.

With a soft sigh, she did, stripping out of her comfortable shorts and t-shirt combo. Absently pulling her mesh-shirt over her head and removing the various pouches and holsters while she was at it.

Her grandmother eyed all the weapons with clear distaste, but thankfully said nothing.

Soon enough, Kyo had been wrapped up in the kimono and tied in with careful attention.

“It's a pity your hair is so short, Kyo-chan,” Haname muttered, running her fingers through the brown strands. “But I'll make do,” she promised.

And before Kyo knew it, her bangs had been braided back from her face and fastened to the side of her head with a cute little accessory her grandma had magicked up from somewhere.

Fingers twitching ever so slightly, Kyo accepted the socks she was handed next, carefully bent down to put them on and was then deemed ready.

“Oh, you'll be the cutest girl in the house, I'm sure of it!” Haname beamed at her, going so far a to wipe some excess water from her eyes. Which felt a bit extreme.

“Thank you, Obaa-san,” Kyo murmured, trying to stop her fingers from twitching with the urge to add a few weapons to her new outfit in front of her grandmother. No matter how temporary it would be.

Haname gifted her with another wide, proud smile and then strode out of the room to get the last few things ready before the guests began to arrive.

Kyo eyed her weapons, and then settled for a few senbon, which she slipped into her obi, along with a single kunai.

No longer feeling quite so naked, she carefully walked out after her grandmother.

Walking in this thing felt weird. And constrictive.
She couldn't take her usual length strides, had to almost shuffle.

Kyo instantly disliked it.

Part of her couldn't help but wonder how she was supposed to fight in this if something happened.

She wiped the irritated expression off her face the second before she stepped into the living room, where Genma crashed into her the moment he saw her.

“Nee-san!” He grinned, still just as excited as he'd been this morning. “You look weird,” he told her sincerely, peering up at her with puzzled curiosity.

“Genma!” Haname chastised the boy, though there was a reluctantly amused sparkle in her eyes.

Kyo sent her a reassuring glance, before she awkwardly crouched down so she could speak face to face with her brother.

“I think so, too,” she confessed quietly. “But it makes Obaa-san happy, so don't tell anyone, okay?” She asked, smiling slightly.

“Ohayou!” Genma whispered back, nodding solemnly. His gaze dropped to study the kimono more closely. “It's pretty,” he decided a second later, reaching out to pat experimentally at it.

“Very pretty,” Kyo agreed, again, and feeling mildly long-suffering. Very impractical, too. “Excited about the cake and presents?” She asked next, turning attention away from herself.

Genma lit up with a brilliant grin. “Yes!” He exclaimed happily. “Come look!” And he dragged her over to the kitchen so she could look at the cake she had helped their aunt make.

Making appropriately awed and interested noises while she was at it.

Soon enough, there was a minor herd of children running around the house, which had Genma thoroughly distracted and occupied, meaning Kyo could melt into the background and observe. At least for a little while.

She perked up when she felt Minato approach, and quickly hurried to the hallway to greet him.

Finally!

“Thank you!” She told him fervently when she opened the door to let him in. “I'll owe you one, Minato.”

Minato blinked at her, taking in her appearance—and the sullen look that stole over her face in response—before he gave a ready nod, not commenting.

Kyo felt her insides warm with fond affection, before she dragged him into the house.

“There's food over there, you can grab whatever you like,” she said, waving a hand in the direction of the kitchen. “That over there is my grandfather,” she pointed subtly. “My cousin Kenji, he's one year older than you, his brother Taichi, who's nine. That's their mum, Kana, who's my aunt, and this is my grandmother,” she added quietly, approaching the woman, who was busy chatting with another woman around her own age, watching the children running around the garden through the living room window.

“Obaa-san,” Kyo said, getting Haname's attention. “This is Namikaze Minato, my teammate,” she introduced.
Haname started and gave Minato an intense once-over. She didn't have anything on a shinobi, though, and Minato's polite smile seemed to earn him a measure of approval.

“Very nice to meet you, young man,” she finally greeted. “Feel free to call me Obaa-san.” She smiled. “I take it you take care of Kyo on your missions, making sure nothing happens to her?”

Kyo's smile grew fixed on her face, and she felt a little bit like slapping a hand over her eyes.

Minato, bless him, looked confused. “Kyo's the more experienced shinobi out of the two of us, so she's the one who's been looking out for me, so far,” he said slowly.

“We look out for each other,” Kyo said firmly, trying to telepathically tell Haname not to make a scene.

“If you say so, dear,” Haname relented, though Kyo could tell she wasn't particularly happy about it. “Kyo-chan, come say hello to Yoshiko-san's granddaughter.”

“See you in a bit,” Kyo muttered at Minato, feeling increasingly disgruntled.

Which was how Kyo found herself shunted off with a group of three girls, all ten or eleven years old, squirreled away in one corner where they were busy talking while everyone else either played or mingled, depending on their ages.

“Hi,” Kyo greeted tiredly, trying to be polite but more focused on not being outright rude.

None of this was these girls' fault.

“Hi,” one of the girls greeted back, peering curiously at her with an open expression on her face. “I'm Miku. Souta's older sister,” she said, pointing off at one of the little boys Genma was playing with. Which would mean she was Yoshiko's grandchild.

“Akira,” another of the girls introduced herself.

“Natsuki!” The last one chirped cheerfully.

Kyo gave them a small wave, wondering what she was doing. “Nice to meet you,” she said, falling back on manners.

The three girls echoed the sentiment back at her, and then went back to the discussion Kyo had inadvertently interrupted.

It took a moment before Kyo realised what it was they were talking about, and when she did, felt like turning around and walking away in sheer exasperation.

“Do you have a crush on anyone?” Natsuki asked eagerly, dragging Kyo into the conversation.

“No,” Kyo replied, and it was true. That hadn't been anything she'd even thought about in the last... ever, really, in this life. She had more important things to concern herself with.

“Oh, come on!” Miku smiled at her. “Grandma said you're a kunoichi; you must hang around shinobi all the time!” And she looked excited.

The other two huddled closer, as if Kyo was about to impart some great secret.

“Oh, yeah,” Kyo replied slowly, feeling mildly puzzled. What was it they wanted from her, really?
This had never been her forte; girl talk had always confused her, even in the Before.

She could remember her older sister had thrived on it, though, falling in love right and left and it seemingly hadn't mattered if it'd been celebrities or someone she'd actually known, either.

Kyo had never been able to understand the appeal.

“Isn't it exciting to hang around shinobi, though?” Akira asked in a hushed voice. “Go on adventures with them and see them be all brave and heroic?” She may have sighed dreamily, too, but Kyo was too hung up on the 'exciting' part.

Well...

Exciting was one way to put it, she mused dryly.

Then the rest of what the girl had said caught up to her and she sent her a weird look.

There was a lot she could say in respond to that, but... most of it would go over the head of these children, she was fairly sure, and Kyo really couldn't scrounge up the energy for the effort to try.

“What about your teammates, then?” Miku asked curiously. “You have two, right?”

“One,” Kyo corrected absently, still trying to wrap her head around this whole thing. “He's over there, actually,” she said, pointing over at where Minato was listening to one of the grandmothers littered around the house, a polite smile plastered across his face, despite the fact it looked like he had no idea what he was supposed to do.

The three girls peered over and perked up.

“He's so cute!” Natsuki gushed, a wide grin on her face.

Kyo tilted her head and supposed they were right. She squinted over at Minato. He had a nice face and his blond hair was something she associated with persistent cheerfulness. And his eyes were admittedly very pretty, sparkling with intelligence, near-constant curiosity and ready affection.

“Is he your boyfriend?” Akira asked, looking a strange mix of shy and eager.

“No,” Kyo snorted. That would be all kinds of gross. Minato was eleven. “I don't have a boyfriend. There frankly isn't time for one, either,” she said firmly. “Why, either of you do?”

“Akira's got one!” Miku cried softly, stepping away from the other girl's attempt to elbow her in the side.

Akira's cheeks burned bright red with a blush, and she sent her friend a mildly irritated look, but she gave a cautious nod. “Daisuke asked me last week,” she revealed grandly.

Kyo stared curiously at her. “So what do you do?” She couldn't help but ask.

She'd had a 'boyfriend' in the Before when she'd been a child. In fifth grade, if she wasn't remembering it wrong, but... they hadn't so much as said a word to each other over the week it lasted before they'd 'broken up'. They'd become good friends after, though.

She was fairly sure there'd been a few more, when she'd been even younger, though it had just been a word. They'd all been her friends.

Akira's blush deepened, and she lifted her hands to press her palms against her cheeks. “Kissed,” she
mumbled embarrassedly.

“What!” Natsuki exclaimed loudly, causing Akira to hush her sharply, sending a wary look in their grandparents and parents' direction - Kyo was pretty sure Akira was here with her mother- before she sent her friend a scowl.

“Sorry,” Natsuki amended. “But you didn't tell us! When?”

Kyo wondered if she should just leave, because this was all kinds of weird, even by her current standards.

Had these girls even entered puberty yet?

“How old is this 'Daisuke'?” She couldn't help but ask idly.


The conversation continued from there, drifting over to other topics, such as what the girls wanted to do when they grew up, their favourite colours and their kimonos.

“So, Kyo-chan,” Miku asked with a small grin, “what's your future dream husband look like?”

Kyo stared blankly at her a moment, wondering if Haname had put the girl up to this, before she dismissed the thought out of mind.

She'd always hated questions like this.

They just didn't make any sense!

Who cared what people looked like?

“Oh,” was her eloquent reply, and she was feeling slightly cornered when all three girls stared expectantly at her. “I don't really care what people look like,” she muttered. “I'd rather be with someone ugly but nice than a pretty guy that's an ass.”

“But,” Natsuki said, looking confused. “Don't you prefer something? If you got to choose? Blond hair? Brown? Black? Your dream boy!” She prodded, as if it was incredibly important.

Kyo stared at her with long-suffering confusion. “If I have to marry, I'm not marrying someone because of their hair,” she said firmly, incredulous.

“But what if he's bald?” Akira asked in a hush. As if that was the worst possible match you could end up with.

“Then that's fine,” Kyo dismissed. “If I want to marry a guy, him having hair or not will be the least important factor.”

And who said she'd want to get married, anyway? She hadn't ever felt the desire in her past life.

The three girls whispered back and forth with each other a while, as if Kyo had brought up a completely foreign concept, but she didn't really listen.

Kyo was aware people had 'preferences' and stuff, back in the Before, and obviously here as well, but it had never made sense to her. What did it matter?

Personality was so much more important, and if you liked someone, then attraction on top of that
wasn't such a long stretch of the imagination, was it?

Shortly after that, Kyo excused herself to go grab something to eat and rescue Minato from a cooing mother.

They ended up in the garden, in one of Kyo's favourite hide-outs with a plate of food each, talking quietly, until Genma came running through the vegetation to collapse in her lap.

Which was when he finally noticed the blond beside her.

“What's he doing here?” He asked, a scowl instantly scrunching up his face.

“I invited him,” Kyo said with a pointed look. “Minato is my friend and teammate and I enjoy his company,” she told him dryly.

Genma gave a displeased grunt, still looking unhappy with the blond's presence.

Minato sent the boy a curious, slightly uncertain look. “I still don't know why you don't like me,” he confessed, peering at Genma.

“Nee-san is mine,” he huffed back, making himself comfortable in Kyo's lap like it was a throne and he its rightful king. “You're trying to steal her,” he accused mulishly.

Kyo choked on an abrupt burst of hilarity.

She laughed, despite the fact she was pretty sure she'd just almost suffocated on a piece of fried chicken.

“No one's stealing me, Genma,” she managed to force out in a strangled voice, simultaneously trying to muffle her laughter.

Genma gave her a thoroughly sceptical look that sent her right back to snickering helplessly until she was leaning heavily against Minato, stomach aching.

“When you go away, you're with him,” Genma said firmly, pointing at Minato, who blinked. “Ryota-oji told me,” he said importantly.

Kyo snorted and was pretty sure she might be crying with laughter.

“Does that mean Ryota is stealing tou-san every time they leave on mission?” She asked, voice muffled against Minato's shoulder as she futilely tried to ease her breathing.

Genma paused, as if he hadn't thought of that before. “No. Ryota's family. You said so,” he decided after a brief moment's thought.

“Well,” Kyo wheezed, finally managing to take a deep breath, still laughing a little every now and then, “Minato's my Ryota,” she told him with a grin. “He's family, too, you know.”

The look of budding horror on Genma face made her press a hand to her mouth to try and not laugh. Again.

“Nu-uh!” Her brother objected. “’S not the same!”

“Yes it is,” Kyo fired back with a helpless grin. “Ryota is tou-san's teammate and Minato's mine. Teams are family, so he is.”
Genma was silent for a long moment, a stubborn frown growing on his chubby little face. “Not calling him nii-san,” he declared firmly.

Or as firmly as a newly turned four year old could, anyway.

“You don't have to,” Minato assured him quickly, looking like he didn't have the first clue how to take this situation. Or how to deal with it.

Genma gave a regal nod, and that was that.

“What are you eating?” He asked, turning to peer at Kyo’s still half-full plate, which she’d managed to not upend over herself.

“Want some?” Kyo asked, offering him a skewer of teriyaki chicken.

-x-x-x-
Weeks passed and Kyo felt like she was slowly returning to normal.

There were setbacks, which Katsurou-sensei told her was normal, and she did relapse every so often, but the more time passed, the less it happened and the less severe her reactions to unexpected reminders were.

Her grandmother seemed to have gotten a lot of her usual grievances and concerns out of her system with the party she'd hosted, which meant she was slightly easier to live with.

Other than the war still going strong, life was turning pretty okay.

Which was why she was overdue another curveball, Kyo mused silently, staring up at Katsurou-sensei with wide eyes.

“No,” she said, as if it was actually that simple.

Katsurou heaved a small sigh, but didn't look even remotely surprised. “This isn't up for discussion,” was all he said, and it was true. It wasn't up to either of them.

“No,” Kyo repeated, desperately trying to figure out a solution that wouldn't make it feel like her heart was being crushed in her chest- “I can- I can go, too.”

It was a weak suggestion, and she knew it, but that didn't help. Didn't change how she felt in the slightest.

“That's not an option this time, Kyo,” Katsurou huffed, not unkindly.

“But you're not- You said I'm recovered; I can come!”

Katsurou eyed her sadly a moment, looking like he wasn't sure how to handle this situation.

It made her wonder if he'd ever experienced a similar scenario before, but she couldn't think of anyone else playing her current part.

Instead of saying anything, Katsurou grasped her arm and lifted at the same time as he bent down to swipe her off her feet and onto his back.

Kyo automatically wrapped her limbs around him and held on tight.

“I don't like this. I don't want this,” she muttered into her own arm, fingers grasping at Katsurou-sensei's Jounin vest with frantic strength.

“I know,” was all he said, calm and even. Like this was nothing new.

Katsurou walked through the village at a leisurely pace, unhurried and seemingly perfectly relaxed,
though she knew him well enough to know he had a specific destination in mind.

Kyo hated it.

Because it was wrong.

She wasn't even remotely surprised when they came across Minato, probably on his way to their training field for their planned spar. Kyo had just wanted to stop by sensei's house first, before heading on to meet him.

“Kyo?” Minato questioned, taking in the sight of her on Katsurou's back and the blank expression on the Yamanaka's face. “What's up?”

“Come on,” Katsurou ordered, motioning at Minato to fall into step.

After another quick look at Kyo, he did.

“Did something happen?” He asked, and she knew he was trying to gauge her reaction and figure out what it was.

She gave an affirmative grunt.

Katsurou paused a moment, standing still at the side of the street for a few seconds, cocking his head a fraction, as if he was listening for something, before he jumped up to the roof of the closest building, setting off in a deliberate direction.

Kyo didn't question it.

Minato looked like he wanted to, but despite the fact he'd joined in on a handful more games of Hide and Seek, he still wasn't very familiar -or comfortable- with Katsurou-sensei.

Part of her sat up at attention when Katsurou approached the Nara compound, though she didn't do more than blink and consider the implications.

She'd caught word that Inoichi and his team had returned to the village a few days ago, but she hadn't gotten around to seeking them out, yet.

Getting back after such a long stretch of time, it was only polite to let them rest up properly and spend some time with their families first.

“Inoichi,” Katsurou said by way of greeting, landing in a small training field in the middle of the Nara compound, in the middle of Team Shinzu, drawing all three of their attentions. “I need you to sit on her for a while,” he said evenly, gesturing at Kyo with one hand.

Minato touched down beside him at that point, glancing around like he was wondering if he was really allowed to be there.

“Um,” Inoichi said eloquently, blinking at his fellow Yamanaka like he was worried for his sanity.

Shikaku glanced between them a moment, before he huffed out a long-suffering sigh. “Will do,” he drawled, not really moving from where he was sprawled out on his back in the grass, fingers braided together beneath his head.

“Come on, Kyo,” Katsurou muttered, poking at her calf in a silent order for her to let go. “I'm on a deadline, here,” he reminded.
His words just made her tighten her hold on him. “No,” she whined, and she knew she was being a complete and utter child about this, but this was... no.

He wasn't allowed to leave on missions without her!

Not when he wasn't fully recovered.

Not when he could die!

“Kyo,” Katsurou repeated, voice firmer this time.

She reluctantly let go of him and dropped back down on her own two feet.

Throwing her arms around his waist for a proper hug, for just a moment, Kyo then miserably watched him leave with one last look at her.

He didn't say goodbye, didn't say they'd see each other soon, because there were no guarantees for anything.

When she could no longer see him, Kyo turned around, walked over to where Shikaku was lying and let herself fall down next to him. Possibly landing partially on the teen.

Shikaku grunted at the impact, but didn't otherwise react when she arranged herself beside him, feeling like nothing more than a big bundle of anxious misery.

“...nice to see you again, Kyo?” Inoichi offered in the following silence. “Katsurou seemed to be in a hurry?”

“He got a mission,” Kyo mumbled against Shikaku's shoulder.

“Oh,” Inoichi stared at her a moment, looking like he thought things were abruptly making far more sense, before he turned to Minato. “You know, I don't think we ever managed to properly introduce ourselves,” he said with a faint smile. “I'm Yamanaka Inoichi. These two are my teammates, Akimichi Chouza and Nara Shikaku.”

“Namikaze Minato,” her teammate returned after a brief pause.

“We graduated together,” Kyo told him absently, waving a hand at Inoichi and Chouza, because she really hadn't done a good job of this the first time they met. “And you can't really be friends with one of them without getting the other two included in the deal.”

Minato glanced at her and seemed to consider that, before he turned back to eye the three fourteen year olds.

“We're a three for one bargain,” Chouza agreed with a friendly grin. “So why are you really in a mood?” He asked next, wandering over to poke curiously at Kyo, before he offered her a piece of the snack he was currently eating.

“He didn't tell me he was going to get cleared for missions,” Kyo huffed, frowning and accidentally tightening her hold on Shikaku, who seemed content to pretend to be asleep.

“Is that why we've been training with him sometimes, lately?” Minato asked, evidently deciding that Team Shinzu wasn't so bad and wandering over to take a seat close to Kyo, not so much as blinking at the sight of her cuddling some stranger.

“Yes,” Kyo confirmed, eyes narrowing with irritation. “He should have just told me, but no, he's got
to be a stubborn idiot and spring it on me without warning an hour before he's leaving,” she grumbled quietly to herself.

Inoichi laughed. “You have no fear, Kyo,” he told her fondly. “Katsurou would have decked anyone else talking about him like that.”

“No he wouldn't.” Kyo disagreed with a sniff. “He would stare at them blankly until they backed off, deeply unsettled and fearing for their minds,” she corrected with a darkly amused grin.

“The question here, clearly, is if he'd follow through on that, though,” Chouza mused idly, not at all bothered by the topic they were discussing.

“Depends,” Kyo shrugged, finally sitting up properly, “on the idiot bothering him and what they did to piss him off.”

Inoichi shook his head with a smile and changed the subject. “So do you want me to literally sit on you, or do you want to spar or something?”

Kyo stuck her tongue out at him. “Sparring sounds nice,” was all she said to acknowledge his words.

“We could maybe do some team exercises, too?” She suggested curiously.

Sure, she and Minato were just two people, not a full team, but that wouldn't stop them.

Kyo was pretty sure they'd be able to present enough of a challenge to keep Inoichi, Chouza and Shikaku plenty occupied, despite their higher collective rank.

“So a mock-battle first and then sparring?” Chouza suggested.

“Pass,” Shikaku drawled, still without having opened his eyes. “It's a day off.”

Inoichi reached over and slapped a hand on his chest. “You can nap after, Lazy,” he huffed, unsurprised and not nearly as annoyed as he was pretending to be.

Kyo and Chouza exchanged an entertained look, while Minato watched their interactions with curious interest.

The two bickered back and forth a while longer, before Shikaku grudgingly pushed himself up with an aggravated huff.

“You're all far too high-maintenance,” he told them plainly.

“Shikaku, if you weren't surrounded by 'high-maintenance' people, you wouldn't have any friends,” Kyo told him sagely, reaching out to pat him condescendingly on the arm. “You'd just sleep all day, slowly wasting away.” She accompanied her words with an overly concerned expression.

Shikaku eyed her a long moment. “Sounds nice,” he mused, dark eyes shining with quiet amusement.

Inoichi slapped his shoulder, acting offended. “Oh, shut up. Let's do this, and then go eat together somewhere or something.”

“Sounds nice.” Kyo smiled impishly, echoing Shikaku. “Minato?” She sent the boy a questioning look.

The blond shrugged, though he looked intrigued. “I don't have anything else planned.” He was quiet a moment, before he sent Kyo a long look out of the corner of his eye. “These friends of yours are
far more pleasant that the other one I've met.”

Kyo choked on air and then tried to smother her laughter with a hand.

Inoichi blinked and looked momentarily stunned. “You made a new friend? I am shocked,” he gasped theatrically.

Kyo made a face at him. “I have a social life,” she said, sticking her nose in the air. The effect she was going for was slightly ruined by the fact she still couldn't stop laughing.

“Lies.” Inoichi grinned. “Who is it? Someone we know? Or did you mean the Uzumaki Aita I've heard so much about?”

Kyo shrugged. “No. And I doubt it.”

Kaimaru wasn't exactly a people-person, nor was he the kind of person Inoichi would try to befriend. ...or, maybe it would be more accurate to say Inoichi was the kind of person Kaimaru would do his best to avoid. By any and all means.

“Does this mean I've met all of your friends now?” Minato asked, sending her a faint grin. “Kaimaru, Aita, and these three?”

Kyo snorted, silently glad he hadn't mentioned Hyena, and heaved an exaggeratedly long-suffering sigh.

“Kaimaru? Do we know a Kaimaru?” Inoichi asked, looking at both of his teammates, curious and expectant. “I can't remember anyone with that name from the Academy,” he mused.

“I'm pretty sure he was an early graduate, and on top of that, he's a year older than you,” Kyo told him easily, well aware Inoichi wouldn't leave it alone until he learned more.

“Now I'm curious,” Inoichi said with an unabashed grin.

“Now?” She huffed, eyeing him drily. “When are you not curious?”

“She's got a point,” Shikaku drawled, sending a smirk at his friend.

“I don't know him at all, but I get the feeling Kaimaru wouldn't like them,” Minato said with an innocent little smile, eyes practically dancing with mirth when he sent her a look.

If anything, Kaimaru at least knew how to make an impression.

Kyo laughed. “He doesn't really like anyone,” she agreed. “It was hilarious when I told him we were friends. You'd think I'd just told him I was planning to poison him,” she mused. Not that Kaimaru didn't take that as an obvious underscore to all of their interactions, anyway.

“Okay, who is this person? I need to meet him now,” Inoichi said with an attempt at a serious face.

“Are we just gonna sit here and gossip, or are we training? Because if it's the former, then I'll go back to my nap,” Shikaku said plainly.

“Shikaku's reached his daily social interaction quota, so I guess we should get started,” Inoichi said with a nod, getting to his feet. “Want a few minutes to strategize?”

“Let's take five?” Kyo suggested, standing up, too. She twisted her back in an experimental stretch
while she waited for the rest of them to get up, as well.

The moment Minato joined her, she grabbed his hand and dragged him off to the side, well out of hearing range from the other team.

“Okay, here's the deal,” Kyo said softly, and quickly and efficiently gave Minato a rundown of the three teenagers' abilities and skills. “We definitely need to look out for Shikaku's shadows, and try and avoid close combat with Chouza,” she concluded.

“And Inoichi?” Minato questioned.

“He's more long-distance, like me, but I seriously doubt he'll use any clan techniques today, so.” She shrugged. “Much like I most likely won't use any needles.”

It was just better like that, because this was training and using their specialities made things easier, which was counter-productive. Training was supposed to be as hard as possible, so the real deal would hopefully be easier to handle later on.

“Are you done giving up all our secrets?” Inoichi called from the other side of the field.

“In a moment!” Kyo shouted back.

“So what do we do?” Minato asked, looking entertained at the situation at large.

“Make it as hard as possible for the three of them to corner us.” Kyo grinned. “Combined, they've got more experience than us.”

“I'll do my best not to be a burden,” Minato assured her, and Kyo couldn't help but roll her eyes.

“Minato, you beat me in spars half the time, these days. I know I'm not any kind of hot-shot when it comes to taijutsu, but that's still impressive,” she told him seriously. “You're smart and quick on your feet; let's go give them a surprise, yeah?” She grinned.

Minato stared at her, cheeks darkening with a faint blush.

Instead of saying anything more, Kyo bounced on the balls of her feet and turned towards Inoichi, Chouza and Shikaku, who were talking quietly amongst themselves.

When Shikaku noticed her looking, he nudged his teammates.

Kyo grinned, and that was the only signal she gave before she darted off, Minato half a second behind her.

DODGING under Chouza's arm, Kyo darted over to kick Inoichi's feet out from under him before he could get involved in Minato and Shikaku's fight, which seemed to be far more complicated than Kyo could wrap her mind around.

But then again, Shikaku had always had strange ways to get a measure of people.

There was a reason why Taku had never liked the Nara. Other than his projected laziness.

Taku had been too straightforward to have ever understood the way he acted, his way of thinking, when talking would have accomplished many of the same things.
Maki had just found it unnerving.

Shikaku preferred to judge people by their actions, though. Prodding them and manipulating the situation until he got a reaction. Preferably without having to expend much effort.

They'd all been promoted by now, Inoichi and Chouza having joined Shikaku and Kyo as Chuunin. Though they'd received their promotions in rather less... dramatic manners.

From that perspective, Minato was definitely at a clear disadvantage, being the only Genin.

Kyo threw herself under the attempted hold Chouza tried to grab her with, throwing a shuriken at Shikaku, forcing him half a step away from Minato, giving her teammate the second he needed to get out of the carefully laid trap the Nara had tried to catch him in, and then slipped away into the background.

“Damn it, Kyo! No cheating!” Inoichi snapped, though there was a small grin on his face as he threw himself in her general direction, no doubt aiming to keep her from interfering with Shikaku's plans.

...telling a shinobi not to cheat was like telling a fish not to swim.

Perfectly willing to let Inoichi and Chouza look for her where she'd been, Kyo ran up the trunk of a nearby tree, until she could use it as a spring board and launch herself into the open air above the boys.

Taking in every detail she could, Kyo angled her body, flipping so that she'd land feet first and straight at her target.

At the very last second, Shikaku must have sensed her somehow, because he shifted out of the way, making the impact awkward enough Kyo had to scramble to salvage her landing.

Kyo's shoulder struck the ground hard, but she distributed her momentum by curling into a roll and was back on her feet before she'd even managed to regain her breath, feet skidding slightly before she fell into a run.

Shikaku swore behind her, making her smirk, because Kyo's feet had still hit the teen's shoulder, even if it hadn't been as hard or at the angle she'd been aiming for. Instead for the dislocated shoulder he would have gotten, he'd probably get away with a beautiful bruise.

“Not so fast,” Chouza muttered and went after her like a battering-ram, now that he could see her again.

What followed was an interesting game of cat and mouse, where Kyo scrambled to dodge and avoid the physically much larger Akimichi, which wasn't anything she wasn't used to, but her opponents usually didn't know her as well as Chouza did.

Bending out of the way of another attempted grab, she couldn't dodge the elbow to the chest that sent her stumbling back, straight into a spot of dense shadow, and before she could leap away, the darkness had risen up, twisted around her ankle and yanked her up off her feet.

Leaving her dangling upside down in the air.

Kyo crossed her arms over her chest, sending Shikaku an unimpressed look.

“You're far too troublesome,” the Nara grumbled at her, but didn't show the slightest inclination to let her go any time soon.
With a small huff, Kyo rubbed at the tender spot on her chest and turned her attention to where Chouza and Inoichi were trying to corner and subdue Minato without hurting him.

“This is so much harder when I'm not allowed to either poison or kill my opponent,” Kyo mused thoughtfully.

Shikaku grunted, sending her a mildly wary look. “Remind me to thank Inoichi for befriending you.”

Kyo blinked. “Are you saying he had ulterior motives?” She asked idly.

“When does he not?” Shikaku wondered dryly.

Kyo grinned in silent agreement. “I thought he wanted to be my friend because I was interesting,” she snickered, well aware Inoichi had a tendency to get his nose into all kinds of situations that didn't really involve him.

“That's just another way to say you're a possible problem,” Shikaku huffed. “He likes to try and fix those.”

“Are you calling me his hobby?” Kyo couldn't help but ask, feeling entertained. “Do I need to tell him I already have a shrink? Katsurou-sensei is supposedly very territorial about his patients.”

Shikaku huffed out a quiet laugh, eyeing her amusedly. “I'll let him know the position's taken,” he drawled.

Kyo grinned at him a moment, before she turned back to watch Minato.

He was holding up well, even though she could tell his opponents were more interested in gauging his skills and reflexes than to actually defeat him.

Which was one of the reasons why they were her friends.

“Quite impressive for someone just a year out of the Academy, isn't it?” She smiled.

Shikaku hummed non-committally. “Then again, it's not every graduate that gets to spar with an ANBU Chuunin on a regular basis, in addition to being taught by a Jounin,” he murmured softly.

Kyo craned her neck to fix him with a flat glare.

What was with her friends being rude about this?

“It's because we know you, and can put two and two together,” Shikaku scoffed, sending her an unimpressed stare right back. “There weren't many other likely options, frankly, when you went back to active duty,” he grumbled.

Kyo heaved a heavy sigh, but supposed it was true enough. “It's not like I can serve in the same capacity as a fully grown shinobi,” she muttered quietly. “Or under the same conditions.”

“But being able to send you frees up someone else from doing the missions you can be sent on without issue,” Shikaku said in a muted murmur. “From that perspective, it's not a bad idea.”

Kyo tilted her head and considered both Shikaku, and his words.

“All three of you are meddlesome and far too irritating,” she said bluntly. “And you're all far better friends than what I deserve.”
The solid shadows around her ankle twitched fractionally.

“It’s been a difficult couple of years,” Shikaku muttered after a long, awkward pause.

Kyo wished she could tell herself that that excused anything and actually believe it.

“I’ve decided to try and do better,” she told him instead of sharing the thoughts on her mind. “I am tired of feeling like I’m constantly fighting.”

Fighting against everything, everyone. All the time.

Fighting against her friends and herself.

Fighting her own brain. Her memories and reflexes.

Discreetly palming the needle hidden in her shirt, Kyo considered their conversation, as well as the fact that no one had called this mock battle yet.

The question was, had Shikaku forgotten? Or did he have half a dozen contingency plans in place to counter any move she might try to free herself?

Only one way to find out.

Without shifting her own posture or position in the slightest, Kyo slid the needle from her clothes and it was easy to flick it at her captor from that point.

Shikaku twitched harshly when the needle struck his thigh, and his momentary inattention was more than enough of a chance for her to shunshin out of his hold and disappear into the background.

“Damn it, Kyo!” Shikaku snapped, voice all but dripping irritation and frustration.

Kyo snickered silently to herself, because there really wasn't any way for Shikaku to know that that particular needle was a blank.

He'd realise eventually of course, but until then, she had the opportunity to stage a counter-attack.

Flashing through hand-seals, Kyo snuck up on the three combatants and spat a solid wall of wind at Inoichi, pushing him straight into Chouza and derailing both of their attacks, which left her free to swoop in and rescue her teammate.

“Run!” Kyo cackled gleefully at her friend, dragging him with her in a desperate dash for freedom, Inoichi swearing up a storm behind them as he tried to quickly disentangle from where he'd ended up partially beneath Chouza.

“Oh, it's on,” Shikaku muttered behind her and Kyo felt a thrill of excitement and not-quite apprehension at the tone of his voice.

Ha! She'd managed to motivate a Nara!

She'd probably come to regret it before the day was up, but that was beside the point.

Feeling strangely accomplished and with a grin splitting her face, Kyo had quite forgotten about how she'd ended up in the Nara compound this morning, and there wasn't a thought in her head about Katsurou-sensei. There wasn't any time to feel upset or frightened on his behalf.

A breathless laugh escaped Minato and the two of them scrambled to get away and regroup before
Team Shinzu descended on them again.

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Chapter 68

Chapter Summary

Trying to do the friendship-thing

Kyo was fairly sure all five of them had gotten away from the mock-battle bruised and sore but feeling more than accomplished.

Except for Shikaku, who'd made it more than clear he was feeling vexed.

About the needle or the fact he'd let her rile him up she wasn't sure, but the point remained.

They'd ended the day by dragging their sorry asses to an Akimichi restaurant, where the owners wouldn't mind the fact they were all dirty and sweaty and looking like they hadn't showered in a week.

There'd been smiles on their faces, though, and Kyo had felt more at ease than she had in a long time.

She hadn't even minded going back to her grandparents' house afterwards, despite the fact part of her had wanted to ask Minato if he'd like to have a sleep-over.

Haname would have no doubt loved that.

Life moved on.

Things continued as usual, and... well, Kyo managed.

Fuuinjutsu lessons had been more than awkward lately, but at least no one had mentioned her breakdown, and Kyo had a distinct feeling Mito had told Kushina in no uncertain terms that she shouldn't bring it up.

Feeling both grateful and uncomfortable, Kyo tried her best to focus on the subject being taught and nothing else.

Having Minato beside her every step of the way helped. More than she thought the dork realised.

“Kyo-chan, if you could wait a few minutes,” Mito said at the end of the lesson, before she and Minato could leave.

Kyo looked up from where she was gathering up her supplies to give the woman a wary look. She still nodded and settled down again, though.

Kushina gave a quiet scoff, got to her feet and stomped towards the door, shoulder-checking Minato on her way passed.

The blond hesitated and Mito smiled.

“I need a moment in private with Kyo, Minato-kun,” she said softly, giving him an apologetic look. “You may wait in the corridor outside.”
Minato bobbed his head in a quick bow and did as directed.

Kyo swallowed nervously and tried not to fidget. “What did you want to speak to me about, Mito-sama?” She asked when she couldn't stand the silence any longer.

Glancing up at the woman revealed that Mito remained sitting in the same position, with the only difference since she’d last looked at her being that she’d closed her eyes and her face was drawn in a tired, pained expression that deepened the lines around her eyes and mouth.

“Mito-sama?” Kyo repeated, feeling more concerned than nervous now, because the woman was old, and what if something was wrong?

“I've talked to several of my clansmen, Kyo-chan,” she said, still without opening her eyes.

Kyo's shoulders curled in towards her centre slightly. “Okay?” She forced out, feeling the need to fill the lingering silence.

“I also spoke to Hiruzen-kun, to find out the extent of what happened on Uzu, the mission he sent his soldiers on, and as much of what happened in between the ANBU left and returned as possible.” The room was silent a long moment. “You have nothing to apologize for, child,” Mito said quietly, finally opening her eyes to look intently at her.

Kyo stared back, feeling like she couldn't move.

She was fairly sure most of the blood had drained out of her face.

“Your Yamanaka sensei was entirely correct when he told you that older, more experienced people made decisions that you had little opportunity to influence,” she sighed tiredly. “They asked for your help, knowing perfectly well it might end up killing them, Kyo. It was a trade-off they were more than willing to make.”

“I know,” she mumbled quietly, finally managing to tear her gaze away to stare down at her hands instead. “But I didn't realise it at the time, and I- I feel stupid, thinking back. I should have noticed.”

“It can be very difficult to see every angle when you're in the middle of a stressful situation,” Mito said sagely, and her voice was kind. “To say nothing of the specific situation you found yourself in Uzushio,” she continued softly. “I have been told you were exhausted and on the brink of chakra depletion already at the meeting where the plans were made. Not seeing beyond the most immediately obvious is perfectly understandable.”

Kyo bit the inside of her lip, letting those words rattle around in her head for a moment. “It doesn't feel like it helped,” she finally said, peering up at Mito through her lashes. “It feels like it made everything worse.”

Mito hummed. “We cannot know for sure what would have happened should we have chosen a different path. All we can do is look at what ultimately did happen and speculate.” Her gaze was heavy on Kyo. “It is my belief, that your presence in my childhood home in the time of her destruction was a boon, and not the curse you seem to think.”

Kyo sighed. “Thank you,” she said. It was the only thing she could think of to say in response.

“No, Kyo. Thank you,” Mito returned with a small, unimaginably sad smile that nonetheless lit up her eyes with warmth. “Being told how to feel has never helped anyone, but I want you to know that in my and my clansmens' eyes, there's no reason for you to feel shame or regret.” The room was silent for a heartbeat. “Now, go tell Minato that he needn't worry, and that neither of you are in
trouble,” she directed kindly.

Kyo managed a weak smile and got to her feet.

She paused by the door for a moment, to glance over her shoulder at Mito. “I'm very sorry about what happened to Uzushio, Mito-sama.”

“So am I, child,” Mito sighed, motioning at her to leave.

Kyo bent into a deep, respectful bow of thanks and then went to find Minato, only to almost stumble over him the moment she stepped out of the room.

“You okay?” Minato asked the second he saw her, having reached out to stabilise her when she'd all but stepped on him.

“Yeah,” she said, and it was true. She felt sad but, at the same time, somehow lighter than she had this morning.

It was nice to know that the majority of the Uzumaki in Konoha didn't hate her.

“How about you?” She asked, poking the boy in the shoulder Kushina had walked into experimentally. Depending on how the red-head had hit him, he might end up with a bruise.

Minato huffed, looking more embarrassed than annoyed. When they began to move towards the exit, he glanced at her out of the corner of his eye.

“You're not going to make fun of me?” He asked.

“Why?” Kyo blinked, sending him a confused look. For what?

Instead of answering, Minato smiled, looking relieved, and despite the fact Kyo was calm and didn't need it, he reached out to take her hand, braiding their fingers together firmly.

Kyo relished the contact.

“Wanna go eat lunch somewhere?” She asked instead of commenting.

“Sure,” Minato chirped. “Wanna spar a bit after?”

“Sounds nice,” Kyo agreed, feeling surprisingly content, though... the conversation she'd just had with Mito had reminded her of the fact that there were more unresolved issues in her life she eventually had to deal with.

One of which she felt she'd ignored and put off long enough.

Kyo decided then and there to do something about at least one of them.

She was checking in on Kisaki again tomorrow morning, but there was nothing that said she couldn't take the afternoon...

Walking into the hospital's long-time ward, Kyo firmly didn't allow herself to be discouraged by nerves or her darkening thoughts.

If she didn't do this now, then she'd never get around to it.
Pausing in front of the correct door, she took a deep breath, steeled herself, and then knocked.

There was a pause, before a familiar voice said, “Come in.”

Kyo opened the door, slipped inside and closed the door again behind her before she could change her mind.

“Hello, Naoki,” she greeted evenly, turning to look at the boy.

Naoki had changed a lot since she'd last seen him.

It wasn't that he had lost weight, she didn't think, though that was a possibility, too. No, Kyo was fairly sure it was the bitter, unhappy cast to his face that made him look so different.

When she'd met him, Naoki had been shy but generally cheerful and kind, if a bit on the meek side.

Right now, he eyed her like he wanted to throw her out. Or throw something at her, which, considering Minato's experiences, wasn't outside the realm of possibilities.

“What are you doing here?” Naoki asked shortly.

He was sitting up in bed, and Kyo couldn't help but notice that his hair was longer than the last time she'd seen him. That was nicer to focus on than the missing limbs.

“I came to see you,” Kyo told him honestly.

“To gawk at me?” Naoki pressed, eyes narrowing as he almost glared at her.

“No,” Kyo sighed, forcing herself to take a few steps further into the room, despite the less than stellar reception.

She'd been expecting it, but still...

“What could you possibly come here for?” Naoki asked, sending her an unfriendly glower, all but radiating hostility. “Finally wanna be a team?” He fairly sneered. “Well, too late.”

Kyo remained still, silently watching the boy, letting his angry words wash over her.

That hurt.

She acknowledged it to herself, and then pushed it aside. Naoki had every reason to be angry.

“I actually came to tell you about my first team. My Genin team,” she said evenly, and part of her was surprised at how steady she sounded. She knew she had his attention when he didn't say anything to that. “I graduated when I was six and they were ten. I don't think either of them liked me at first.”

This was really hard.

“I don't see how that's got anything to do with me,” Naoki said, and his words were hard. Like shards of shattered glass.

Hard and sharp enough to cut, but also fragile.

Liable to break under pressure.
“Because two years ago, during one of our missions, they died,” Kyo said, struggling to maintain a balance somewhere between keeping her voice from going entirely flat and it breaking.

She focused back on Naoki’s face and he looked... shocked? Surprised?

Kyo took a deep breath and pressed on, maintaining eye-contact. “Katsurou-sensei got hurt, too, and I came so close to loosing all of them~” she had to take a pause to clear her throat. “I didn't want a new team.” That was still true, partly. She admittedly loved Minato by now, but her feelings back then had been completely and utterly heartfelt. “But I tried, okay? I tried really hard. And I came to like you. Only then you got hurt. More badly than even Tsunade could fix and that's not fair.” She took another deep breath and forced herself to continue. “But you know, Naoki? Part of me can't help but think... if it had been either Maki or Taku in your position, I would have been so happy, just to have even just one of them alive.” Her voice was shaking ever so slightly now, and there was a pressure building behind her eyes.

Kyo ignored both. Pressed on.

She needed to finish.

She had to do this.

“You're still alive, and you've got your whole life ahead of you. You can still pursue your dreams.” She smiled thinly, the expression bleak and lacking anything resembling humour. “Sure, you're a little bit broken, but you're not the only one. And frankly, seeing the way you're treating Minato, who looks at you and only sees his friend, it's pissing me off.” She was still smiling bitterly. “It might be hard to understand, and it's a shitty situation all the way around. Nothing about this is fair, Naoki. But you need to know, that you're actually one of the lucky ones.” And it was probably horrible of her to say that to a boy who'd lost both his legs. Who no doubt felt like his life was ruined, but what she'd told him was true.

“You don't know what you're talking about.”

“No, I don't,” Kyo agreed. “I've never been in your situation, but I know you've given up, and that's just plain insulting.”

“Shut up,” Naoki said, and his voice was quiet.

He'd dipped his chin towards his chest so she couldn't see his eyes, but his hands had curled into fists, knuckles shining white.

“I've said what I came to say,” Kyo told him, a tremble still lingering in her voice.

Kyo began to turn towards the door, only to automatically shift her body out of the way of the projectile aimed at her head.

A glass vase smashed to pieces against the door behind her, spilling water and flowers across the floor.

“How stuck up and arrogant do you have to be?” Naoki hissed, raising his head to glare at her. “How dare you say all of that to me, when all of this is your fault to begin with!!?” He demanded to know.

Kyo stared blankly at him. “I'm sorry,” she said. “You won't be seeing me from now on, if that's any comfort.”
“You're a Chuunin,” Naoki continued, acting like he hadn't heard a word she'd said. “I was a Genin! I thought you'd have my back, but you always kept your distance and I was fine with that! I just didn't think you'd keep it up in battle, too!”

Kyo considered if there was anything she could say to that.

She could try and defend herself, perhaps, tell him about the heavy rain and the Iwa Chuunin trying to separate her head from her shoulders, but... she already knew Naoki wouldn't be interested in hearing it.

“Good bye, Naoki. I wish you a speedy recovery,” and she turned and left, ignoring Naoki's angry cry, telling her he wasn't done and for her to come back here!

She closed the door behind her and didn't visibly react to the heavy thunk as something hit the wood.

Kyo looked up and met the heavy, solemn look of the man in front of her.

Her face felt cold. Her fingers felt cold, but she also felt strangely calm.

The likeness between them was enough for her to guess this man was Naoki's father, and she supposed she ought to have wondered where his parents were.

“My apologies,” she murmured, forcing her throat to work.

“...they were all truths my son needed to hear eventually,” he said calmly, a thread of weary tiredness hidden in his voice. “But perhaps you weren't the correct person to provide them, Shiranui-san.”

“This was the one thing I could do,” she sighed, and she wanted to leave.

Kyo had done what she'd set out to do, and it had both gone better than expected and been far more of a disaster than she'd feared, at the same time.

Naoki's father -did she even know his name? If she'd ever been told, then she'd forgotten- hesitated a fraction of a second, before he placed a large, meaty hand on her shoulder. For just a moment.

And then he walked past her into his son's hospital room, leaving her behind without a word.

Kyo didn't look back or linger.

She left.

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There was a knock on his door and Minato paused what he was doing: rinsing the plate he'd used for dinner.

Finishing what he'd started, Minato carefully put the plate down, wiped his hands dry and turned towards the door.

There weren't many people who would come here, especially not this late.

Jiraiya-sensei was still away, out on the front, so... what reason could Kyo have to come here?
Genma would accuse him of attempted sister theft again.

Opening the door, Minato's curiosity melted away into acute concern and mild wariness.

Because he didn't know what could have put that kind of expression on Kyo's face.

She looked exhausted. And drawn in a way that had nothing to do with physical fatigue.

“Hi,” she greeted blandly. “Can I come in?”

Instead of saying anything, because the obvious answer was 'of course', Minato stepped aside and pulled the door open enough Kyo could walk past him and into his apartment with ease.

He was still trying to figure out what to say when Kyo stopped in the middle of his living room, staring blindly at the wall for a moment.

“Can I sleep here tonight?” She asked, and she still sounded... off.

Not like he'd gotten used to, when she was surprised by something and got so frightened she had to struggle not to try and disappear.

More like she was aching inside and didn't know what else to do.

“Sure. Of course,” Minato told her, almost stumbling over the words as he walked up to her to tentatively reach out to touch her arm. “Are you okay?”

“Not really,” Kyo said blandly, giving him an idle look, her blue eyes flat and somewhat dull. Distant.

Minato hesitated. “Would you like some tea?” He tentatively offered. Emi, the orphanage matron he'd liked best had always offered tea whenever any of the kids had been upset.

Kyo stared blankly at him, as if she couldn't process the question and Minato decided to just... take that as a yes.

A couple of minutes later, he'd guided Kyo into a seat on his floor, placed a steaming tea mug into her hands and settled down to wait.

“I may have done something stupid today,” Kyo said five minutes into the tense silence, though Minato figured he stood for most of the tension.

Kyo was making him nervous.

“Done what?” He asked.

“Visited Naoki,” Kyo told him blandly, seemingly unconcerned. “I needed to tell him some things, but the thing is, now that I did, I realised that I wouldn't be able to sleep on my own. Tou-san isn't here. Katsurou-sensei isn't here, either, and the same applies to Jiraiya-sensei.” She was silent a moment, and Minato didn't dare interrupt. “Sometimes, I don't like the person I'm turning into, Minato.”

“What do you mean?” He asked quietly, not having so much at sipped at his own tea. All he was doing was clutching at the mug. It kept his hands occupied.

Kyo frowned, head tilting a fraction in thought. “There's an image of who I should be in my head, yet I find myself falling short, time and time again.” She glanced down at her mug, before she
carefully put it aside and braided her fingers together, clutching them in her lap. “I want to be a good friend, but I can't seem to focus on anything other than myself. Me, me, me,” she muttered disapprovingly. “Too caught up in my own things to see anything else. I'm even doing right now.”

Minato wondered what he was supposed to do.

He was fairly good at reading people, he felt, but he didn't understand them.

Most people's motivations were a mystery to him, and it was always interesting to try and figure out what they were and why they urged people to act like they did.

People Minato had interacted with so far had always seemed to make it a point to be dishonest, to varying degrees.

He realised that lies were common, everyday things, and were mostly even harmless. Ensured that people's interactions remained smooth and uncomplicated.

Kyo had always been unexpectedly honest and blunt, though.

She'd never once tried to fool him into thinking her intentions were anything other than what she was showing him, other than the ANBU thing, and... well, they weren't supposed to talk about that.

“I don't think that's true,” he slowly, tentatively told her, watching more of Kyo's focus fix itself on him in response. “Everyone's focused mostly on themselves, to some degree. It's inevitable, because we're always seeing the world and the people in it through the perspective of our lives?” He offered hesitantly. Minato wasn't sure this was making sense, but he pressed on. “You've taught me loads of things since I met you. You spar with me almost every day, and you answer my questions, even when you don't particularly want to. You never had to do any of that, Kyo.”

Kyo frowned at him, as if what he was saying wasn't even understandable, but she was starting to look more alert. More like herself.

“It would be incredibly stupid not to help you improve when I'm on the same team as you, Minato,” she told him seriously.

“Yeah,” he agreed. “But people are stupid all the time.”

Kyo scoffed, glancing to the side but she wasn't disagreeing with him. She was still frowning, but it looked thoughtful rather than upset, so hopefully, that meant Minato wasn't completely failing at this.

“You're not like anyone I've ever met before, but that doesn't mean you're not a good friend,” he said.

“Even when I'm clinging to your hand like a terrified five year old for no reason?” She asked, a faint note of dry, self-deprecating amusement colouring her voice.

“I might not understand it, but it's never for no reason,” Minato objected with a faint smile of his own.

This was actually going better than he had hoped. He hadn't made her more upset.

“There are loads of things I should have told you, probably from the start,” Kyo challenged, and it felt like this was some sort of test. But not.

It was hard to describe, but Minato was fairly sure Kyo wouldn't try and get his measure like that, but
at the same time, it still felt like they'd reached some sort of threshold.

What laid on the other side, he could only guess.

He wasn't sure he wanted to know what would happen if he fell short, either.

Kyo was always so interesting.

“We're shinobi,” Minato pointed out sensibly. “There's always going to be things we can't talk about.” And he'd told her already; she didn't have to tell him anything. And that was disregarding the things she couldn't tell him.

Kyo's lips twitched in a miniscule smile, that nonetheless managed to be entirely genuine and Minato smiled back.

Without his notice, Kyo had slowly relaxed while they'd talked and now looked far more like she usually did. Less like a blank-faced kunoichi and more like his teammate.

“What can we go to bed?” She asked, and it reminded him that while she may have relaxed, she still looked just as tired.

“Yeah. I was planning on an early night, anyway,” he said, getting to his feet to hurry over to his closet to get out the extra duvet and pillow. “Are you visiting Kisaki again tomorrow?” He asked, even though Kyo had gone to the Inuzuka compound almost every day lately, even if it was just for a few minutes.

“Probably,” Kyo returned, having gotten to her feet when Minato did, but instead of trying to help and most likely end up getting in the way, she began to strip off her weapons pouches and holsters, placing them on Minato's small coffee table.

Soon enough, they were both tucked into bed, lying side by side, arms pressed together from shoulder to elbow.

“I think you're a good friend,” Minato told her quietly, glancing at her face through the dark, out of the corner of his eye.

Kyo was staring intently up at the ceiling. As if there was classified information written up there and he just hadn't ever noticed.

“Thank you,” Kyo said, and she sounded distracted. “I want to be, and I'll do my best in the future, okay? But first, I really need to tell you something. About myself, who I am and why I've been keeping everyone at arm's length.” She took a deep breath. “It's the same thing I told Naoki today.”

“Okay,” Minato said. If she wanted to talk, then he would listen.

Turning his full attention on his teammate, Minato listened to every word that left Kyo's mouth. When she told him about another team, two boys, older than her, same age as Inoichi, Shikaku and Chouza and the first friends she'd ever made.

About how close they'd gotten.

And that they'd died.

Minato listened, committing it all to memory.

Things were making a whole lot more sense, every soft word filling a hole in the picture he'd made
himself of Kyo over the year and months since he'd met her.

“Kisaki was Taku's partner. He was Senpu's son.” Kyo whispered tiredly, sounding like she was on the edge of sleep. “I miss them so much it hurts.”

“I'm sorry,” Minato said. It was the only thing he could think of to say that didn't sound horribly out of place or outright rude.

“Yeah. Me too,” Kyo smiled, sounding actually amused. “So now you know. This is me.”

Minato contemplated that for a long moment, frowning up at his ceiling, too.

“Is it horrible to say I like you, though?” He eventually asked. It wasn't something he would have asked anyone else, because people tended to get... angry, or upset, when he asked these kinds of questions.

Kyo laughed.

It was a quiet and hoarse sound, but still a genuine laugh.

“I have no idea,” she admitted. “I like you, too, Minato. I'm glad to be on a team with you.”

In light of what she'd just told him, that was the highest kind of praise, wasn't it?

Minato felt his cheeks warm ever so slightly in a pleased flush. “I couldn't picture me with anyone else.”

“Good, because I'm not letting you go now,” Kyo mumbled, rolling onto her side and slinging one arm across his stomach, hugging him loosely and seemingly drifting off to sleep.

“Good,” Minato whispered to himself, closing his eyes and letting himself relax fully.

-x-x-x-

Kyo woke up more slowly than she was used to.

For a long minute, she wasn't sure where she was, but there was bright yellow within her blurry line of vision and there was a breathing, sleeping body next to her.

Were they on a mission?

It was the first reason she could think of as to why Minato was sleeping beside her.

And then she remembered.

Kyo let out a quiet sigh, trying to label the feelings swirling inside her like slowly falling snow.

She was sad, no doubt about it, and there was hurt, guilt, a little bit of regret and slight offence in response to Naoki's words, no matter how much they'd been hurled at her in anger and grief, but she also felt... calm. More at peace with herself.

The guilt stemming from not having told was gone.
It'd been difficult, and she wasn't in any kind of hurry to do it again, but it felt good to have done it.

Part of Kyo was proud of herself. And sensei would probably be proud of her, too. When he came back.

When.

Glancing out the window, the sky was brightening steadily towards sunrise, and Kyo wondered idly what tou-san and Ryota were doing right now.

Where they alright?

Had they been able to sleep during the night? Or had they been on duty?

With a small huff at herself, Kyo slipped out from under the covers and got to her feet, quietly padding over to Minato's small bathroom.

When she was done and had washed her hands, she wandered over to the kitchen and poked around in her friend's fridge and cupboards a moment, before she got started on breakfast.

A few minutes later, Minato came trudging into the kitchen to peer blearily at her, hair sticking up every which way and looking generally sleep-rumpled.

“Morning,” he said around a yawn, rubbing at one eye.

“Morning,” Kyo murmured back. The sleepy silence was too peaceful for her to want to burst it with loud noises.

Instead of saying anything further, Minato began to set the table for two and when he was done, he helped her finish up the last of it.

Unceremoniously sitting down to eat, neither of them bothered with words.

Kyo was basking in the peaceful, comfortable silence, and Minato still looked too sleepy for conversation.

Almost finished eating, Kyo glanced at the blond, and then posed a question she'd been a bit curious about for a while now.

“Minato?” She began.

“Mm?” He grunted, turning his gaze to her, showing she had his attention.

“Why do you want to become Hokage?” She asked, putting down her chopsticks and tucking her hands into her lap, watching her friend intently.

Minato blinked, the sleepy expression on his face slowly clearing until he looked fully awake and alert.

He tilted his head as he considered his answer.

“Because I want to protect Konoha,” he finally said.

“You can do that as a Jounin, too. Or even a Chuunin or a Genin,” Kyo pointed out, unable to help herself. “All shinobi work to protect Konoha, not just the Hokage.”
Minato huffed, not in annoyance but with amusement colouring the noise. “You're right,” he said easily. “But the Hokage is the strongest one.”

“So you want the power?” Kyo pressed, feeling genuinely curious. “You want to be the strongest shinobi in Konoha?”

He frowned slightly. “Not necessarily,” he mused slowly, looking thoughtful. “The Hokage might be the strongest in one situation but not in another. I guess,” he hesitated a second, “I guess I just want to protect Konoha. Try and make her better. That's easiest to do from the top.” He blinked and focused back onto Kyo, an embarrassed flush creeping across his cheeks. “And also because it's cool,” he admitted with a bashful grin.

Kyo smiled. “You really are a dork,” she told him fondly.

“You know, Kyo,” Minato countered, still with a grin on his face, “you never did share what your dream was.”

Kyo snorted, but supposed he was right.

Humming quietly under her breath, she considered whether or not Minato would be able to relate to her dream. It wasn't anything as grand as wanting to become Hokage.

“You'll probably laugh at me,” she said, focusing back on the boy.

Most children no doubt would. Teenagers and young adults, too.

It was also, she had to admit... somewhat unrealistic for this life, and she knew more than well enough she most likely wouldn't see it come to pass.

“I'll do my best not to,” Minato swore, bringing her back to the present.

Sending him an absent smile, Kyo gave an appreciative nod. “The closest I've got to a dream is to get to grow old,” she told him. “Wrinkled with age, aching joints, getting to complain all the time,” she gave an amused grin, ”the whole deal.” She couldn't help but laugh softly at the look on Minato's face. “Grow old, and do it with as many of my loved ones beside me as is possible.”

Minato was silent for a long minute, watching her intently.

“That's a good dream,” he finally said, and he seemed to mean it, too.

“Thank you.” Kyo smiled. “I hope you realise that means I fully expect you to grow wrinkled and bent with time right beside me, too,” she added casually.

“Okay,” Minato agreed easily, making her laugh.

It was a very nice morning, and Kyo knew without a shadow of a doubt she'd remember this conversation for the rest of her life.

It was a very easy thing to say in a situation like this, but far more difficult to keep in the long run.

Kyo was only too aware of what challenges lay ahead of them, at least in a general sense.

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Chapter 69

Chapter Summary

So much happens, Kyo’s not sure where to start

Chapter Notes

I was stuck on this chapter for such a long time, it just sucked. But when the writing juices finally started flowing again, it grew and grew and wouldn't stop! :)

Happy reading!

Days trickled past, then weeks, and there was little else to do other than train.

Kyo and Minato were both fairly disciplined and industrious, not inclined to play hooky and slack off, even in the face of lacking supervision, but there was only so much training you could do before you hit a wall.

And considering their ages, they had to be careful about taking resting days, too, or they'd end up damaging themselves in the long run.

There was also the risk they might get sick of each other's company.

Not that Kyo was in any danger on that front just yet.

She'd take Minato over her grandmother any day.

She was honestly spreading her time somewhat equally -or at least she tried- between Minato, Genma and Kisaki.

Inoichi, part of a full team, all of whom were in perfect health, hadn't been allowed to stay in the village for long after their much-deserved time off.

One of the most noticeable things now in the aftermath of the siege was how empty of shinobi Konoha seemed.

As if every able man and woman had been sent out to make it abundantly clear to their enemies that Konoha would not take an attack like the one on Uzu, on Konoha, quietly. Or kindly.

After all of the difficult confrontations in her life lately, Kyo felt like things were growing more stable. Normal.

She felt like she'd actually managed to finally move past the whole... Uzushio mission.

It was still awful and horrible, and she still had occasional nightmares, but. It no longer felt like her entire life revolved around the experience.
“What are you doing?” She asked, taking in the sight before her with a healthy measure of incredulous concern.

“Go. Away,” Kaimaru bit out tensely, barely taking a moment to glance at her.

Kyo considered actually doing as he asked, because the teen looked to be in a truly lousy mood, but... he also looked upset.

A good friend would stay, and she'd decided already.

Kyo was going to be a better friend. To everyone.

And Kaimaru was her friend.

So!

“I thought you would still be under orders to take it easy,” she commented neutrally, slowly wandering closer, observing Kaimaru where he was stood up to a wooden post, steadily working on ruining his knuckles against the worn surface.

Kaimaru punched it again, evidently pouring his frustrations into the motion. “Leave me the hell alone, Shiranui,” he growled, glaring at the wood as if it had personally offended him.

“Give me a good reason,” Kyo fired back. “Because right now, you're just making me worried for you.”

Kaimaru made a wordless, frustrated noise and punched the post again. And again.

“This is none of your fucking business!” He finally snapped, turning clumsily to glare at her.

“Alright,” Kyo conceded, because Kaimaru had been considerate towards her before. “Wanna talk about something else?”

Kaimaru clearly took a moment to turn that suggestion over in his head, before he grudgingly eyed her with a fraction less hostility.

“Can you at least sit down?” She pressed, because he wasn't putting any weight on his right leg, so he must have strained himself more than he'd been supposed to. “My leg is hurting just looking at you.”

“Fuck you,” Kaimaru grumbled, but gingerly managed to lower himself to the ground. “The hell are you doing, comparing me to a loser like you?”

“Don't kid yourself,” Kyo fired back with a small, lazy grin, sitting down in front of him. “We're both losers.”

Kaimaru scoffed, trying not to looked amused. “So what're you doin' in the village? All the useful people have been sent out.”

“Aw, you're calling me useful, that's so sweet of you,” Kyo cooed condescendingly.

“Oh, stuff it,” Kaimaru muttered sourly, sending her a dirty look. “You're the one that wanted to talk and shit.”

“You're right, sorry,” Kyo apologized easily, earning herself a suspicious, narrow-eyed look from the surly Uchiha. “I know you haven't seen me around in a while, but I haven't exactly been doing all
that great,” she admitted, raising a hand to tap a nail noisily against her forehead protector with a shrug. “It feels like I'm past the worst of it, though, so cross your fingers.” She grinned.

Kaimaru crossed his arms over his chest instead, giving her a dubious once-over.

“Right,” he muttered, clearly not convinced. “You're gonna end up just as fucking loopy as Hyena,” he predicted pessimistically.

Kyo pursed her lips, tilted her head and seriously thought it over. “Probably,” she agreed. If this war didn't end soon, then change that 'probably' into a 'definitely'. “Good thing is I'm getting along much better with my teammate now,” she pressed on, projecting a stubborn image of persistent cheerfulness.

“The blond one or the fat one?” Kaimaru asked, managing to almost make it sound like something other than a disinterested grunt.

Kyo huffed, fixing him with a scowl. “You know that well enough already, asshole,” she reminded him sharply. “Naoki's still in hospital, officially retired, for now.” They'd see how the future played out, because there were still options for him. It all depended on Naoki, really.

How stubborn he was about wallowing in his own misery.

Kaimaru gave another grunt, and it almost sounded like a 'sorry'. If your ears were filled with water and you had a mild concussion.

Kyo snorted, scraped together a small handful of dust and pebbles from the ground beside her and threw it at him.

“Oi,” Kaimaru protested half-heartedly.

He looked tired.

Kyo frowned at him, before she unclipped her canteen from her belt, tossing it at him.

Kaimaru automatically caught it, gave it a distrustful look and then fixed her with a flat stare.

“You're out of your damn mind if you think I'm drinking from this,” he told her in a tone of voice utterly lacking anything resembling inflection.

“Please.” Kyo rolled her eyes. “If I wanted to poison you, we both know I'd be far more upfront about it.”

“That's what you want me to think,” Kaimaru muttered under his breath, but did unscrew the cap and took a wary sip of her water, eyeing the bottle like he thought it might leap up to try and bite his face off any moment.

He took an offensively long pause, evidently waiting for any adverse reactions, before he very nearly drained the canteen in one go.

Kyo watched him idly, feeling her eyebrows rise slightly.

Should she tell him that there were plenty of poisons that took far longer than that to take effect? ...probably not right now.

Kaimaru was having enough trust-issues regarding her already; there was no reason to add more.
When he was done, he threw her canteen back to her, aiming at her face with a smirk pulling on his mouth.

Kyo huffed and caught the now empty water bottle, but didn't comment.

Idiot had clearly been parched, not taking care of himself.

“Here,” she said, tossing a rations bar at him while she was at it, because who knew how long it'd been since he ate anything.

Kaimaru sent her an unimpressed look, but still opened the thing and bit into it.

He was more obstinate than Genma in a mood, seriously.

“So what the hell are you doing?” Kaimaru eventually asked, seeing as she was just sitting there. Not leaving.

“Training with Minato, mostly,” Kyo told him easily, taking his question to mean in general, leaning back on her hands and tilting her face towards the sun, soaking up its warmth. “We also have fuuinjutsu lessons at the Senju compound twice a week.”

Kaimaru eyed her shrewdly. “That sounds like a bad fucking idea.”

“One of the perks of being Jiraiya's student,” she agreed, sending him a smirk, knowing well enough her intentional misinterpretation of his words was irritating him to no end.

Kaimaru gave an unimpressed snort, turning his gaze to his right thigh, prodding it experimentally with one finger before stopping abruptly with a sullen expression on his face.

Kyo stared at him, glanced down at his leg and then met his gaze with an exasperated huff.

“You need to be looked at by a medic, don't you?” She asked, even though she was fairly sure she already knew the answer.

“No,” Kaimaru lied sourly.

Kyo squinted at him, glanced around for any kind of crutches and then heaved an exasperated sigh.

“I swear, did you walk here? Medic's going to be so damn unimpressed,” she muttered, shaking her head and getting to her feet. “Do you want to be re-admitted to the hospital?”

“Shut up,” Kaimaru mumbled sullenly, but didn't struggle when she carefully helped him back to his feet.

“Lucky for you I'm the perfect height to act as an emergency crutch, huh,” Kyo sniffed.

“You're just tiny,” Kaimaru sneered, pressing down on her shoulder with his elbow extra hard for a second, until Kyo made a protesting noise and poked him sharply in the side with one finger.

“Stop that!” She hissed at him. “You're heavy! I should just leave you here,” she grumbled, mostly just for show.

“Why don't you?”

Kyo paused, because that... hadn't been their usual bickering.
That had been a genuine question.

She sent him a sharp look. “Because we're friends, Kaimaru. And even if we weren't, you're my comrade.” She frowned at him. “I didn't leave you in that training field even when you were a nameless, moronic idiot who'd just sabotaged me. Why would I do so now, when I actually know you?” She groused, strangely offended by the question.

“You're fucking insane,” Kaimaru sneered, though... it lacked the usual bite.

He actually looked faintly rattled, and Kyo had no idea why.

“Come on, let's get you to the hospital before you collapse or something, because there's no way I'm gonna be able to carry you without help,” Kyo huffed, nudging at him to start walking.

Kaimaru growled irritably, but thankfully began to limp in the right direction. He made a point not to put any more weight than was absolutely necessary on her.

“You callin' me fat?” He grumbled in a tight voice that nearly had her sigh in sheer exasperation. Again. He was clearly in pain and only hurting himself more by being stubborn.

“No, idiot.” He was fifteen and she was ten; it was just natural that he was too heavy for her to lug around without damaging that leg of his further! He was tall, too! “Now stop your wining, or we're never gonna get there.”

Kaimaru produced a deeply insulted noise that had her grinning and trying to suppress a laugh.

-x-x-x-

Walking down the street towards one of the market places around Konoha with Genma on her back, Kyo listened to her brother chatter cheerfully about one of his friends, telling her all about what he and Souta had been doing the day before.

They'd apparently played ninja, saving Konoha and all of Fire Country from Evil Bad Guys, she was amused to note.

Haname had sent her out to pick up a few things from the vegetable stands up ahead, and Kyo had been more than happy to get out of the house. She'd been even more pleased when Genma had asked to come with her.

She was just about to ask Genma how the adventure had ended when she caught a small glimpse of familiar red out of the corner of her eye, and it was automatic to turn her head to chase it.

Get a better look.

Aita was on the far side of the market square.

He wasn't looking at her, but she knew he knew she was there; she could tell from the way he was very pointedly not even attempting to glance her way.

He was also not alone.

Kyo took half a second to wonder what to do.
She could always pretend she hadn't seen him. Pretend he wasn't there, buy the vegetables grandma had asked her to get and then leave for home like there hadn't been a hitch.

She could.

Not.

The last time she'd seen Aita, he'd been looking at her like he was breaking apart and he'd been crying. But he'd still tried to comfort her, reassure her and tell her it was *alright*.

It hadn't been, of course, because with his whole home village wiped out, erased from the maps of the Elemental Nations forever, how could anything be?

But that was just the material side of things.

*Things.*

And it wasn't even close to the true horror of the matter.

Aita had had several siblings he'd told her about. He'd had parents. Cousins. Aunts and Uncles.

So many people he hadn't seen in so long and... and he'd never see most of them again.

Kyo hummed a neutral acknowledgement to Genma, who'd continued to talk at her, despite the fact she'd been completely lost in thought and hadn't heard a word of what he'd said, and steered her feet towards the stalls on the other side of the square.

She could get her vegetables from any stall selling what she needed but, there was nothing saying she couldn't choose the one Aita was browsing.

Glance flicking down to the two children with him, she took in their red hair and the way the younger one -probably just a little older than Genma- clung to his hand with a tight grip.

The other one -her own age?- kept one hand either tangled in or lingering close to his clothes, never straying far and reaching out to take hold of him at the slightest thing.

They were out an about, though, and Kyo couldn't help but feel like that had to be a monumental step forward.

“Genna?” She said softly, when she'd strolled a little under halfway there, getting her brother's attention.

“Yeah?” He asked, cheerful and curious and bafflingly happy just to be with her.

Kyo felt she wasn't all that great, or much fun, most of the time, but who was she to tell Genma otherwise?

“See those three with red hair up ahead?” She asked, and she knew her brother turned to watch the ones she was talking about. He made an affirmative noise when he spotted them. “They've been very sad lately, okay? We need to be kind to them, even if they try to be mean.”

“Why?” Genna asked quietly in her ear, the beginnings of a pout tainting his voice.

“Sometimes, when you're *very* sad, it feels like something inside will break if you don't try to get the sadness *out,*” Kyo told him. “And to get it out, it's easy to try and make other people sad, too.”
“That's stupid,” Genma told her solemnly.

Kyo felt her lips twitch into a bleakly amused smile. “Isn't it just? But you know how when you get sad? When me and tou-san leave?” Genma made a soft, acknowledging sound. “Do you ever cry?”

“Only sometimes,” Genma told her with a sniff. “I'm a big boy, and grandma says big boys don't cry.”

Kyo needed to talk about that with him later, clearly, because that was one of the stupidest things she'd ever heard.

But, later.

“Do you decide to cry?” She asked, and she had no idea if she was doing a good job of this, or if she was just working to confuse the boy further.

Genma was silent a moment, long enough for Kyo to take another calm step closer to Aita, who still very pointedly wasn't looking her way.

“No.” And she could tell he was frowning.

“I don't decide to cry, either,” Kyo told him easily. “It just happens, when I'm sad and I can't keep the sadness inside any more.”

Genma thought that over a moment. “But you shouldn't be mean,” he finally said, with a seriousness and certainty that made it clear he was repeating something he'd been told by others. By their grandmother, no doubt.

And possibly some of his friends' mothers.

“Most of the time, that's true,” Kyo agreed. “But everyone does things they're not supposed to do,” she smiled faintly, sending Genma a quick glance, “and especially when we're sad and angry, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Genma agreed with a bashful little giggle, that he tried to smother into the back of her shoulder.

“Just try to be kind, okay? And remember that they've been sad, and that they might not mean it if they are mean.”

“Okay,” Genma agreed softly, clutching more tightly at her a second in something of a hug, warming her insides, and then they were there.

Kyo sidled up beside Aita like she hadn't noticed him.

“Ah, hello, young shinobi-san,” the stand owner greeted her. “What can I do to help you today?”

Kyo smiled and greeted him back, and then quickly rattled off the list of vegetables Haname had asked for.

While the man began to gather up what she needed, Kyo slanted a long look at Aita out of the corner of her eye, studying the wryly amused look on his face.

He met her gaze for a second, before it slid to the side to land on Genma, who was staring down at the Uzumaki children with barely contained curiosity.

“Nee-san, down?” He asked.
Kyo obligingly helped him down to the ground until he was stood beside her, still staring at the two kids with blatant curiosity.

“Your hair is strange,” he told the younger one with an open, honest expression.

Kyo was sure her own expression twitched minutely, because- that, that wasn't what she'd imagined his first words to be.

“You're strange,” the child, a girl, Kyo was fairly sure, fired back with hardly any pause and an offended frown.

Contrary to what the girl was no doubt expecting, Genma gave her a wide smile. “Nee-san says all the best people are strange! And weird!” He added, unashamedly cheerful. “Nee-san is very weird,” he told her with a grin.

Kyo... didn't know if she should sigh or laugh.

As it was, Aita snorted amusedly. “You're ridiculous, you know that, Kyo?”

“What?” She smiled sunnily. The smile faded quickly, though. “I've honestly been expecting you to track me down,” she admitted, somewhat neutrally.

Aita's reaction so far didn't indicate that he didn't want to be friends any more, but she couldn't be sure.

Kyo hadn't exactly been the most objective judge, lately.

“I kinda wanted to,” the teenager admitted, checking on his two wards a second, before sending her a look, “but shishou told me not to.”

Kyo reached down to snatch up Genma's hand before he could wander off, still busy staring at the Uzumaki girl, but he could get distracted by something in two seconds flat.

“Genma, if you want to try and make friends, then you should introduce yourself, first,” she told him. “Speaking of,” she muttered, her own words like an exasperating slap to the face. “Aita, this is my little brother, Genma. Genma? This is my friend, Uzumaki Aita,” she introduced the two.

Genma craned his neck to peer up at Aita, the seventeen year old towering over him. “You've also got strange hair,” he told him happily.

Aita snorted again. “I can definitely see the family resemblance.” He smirked at Kyo, who stuck her tongue out and blew him a raspberry.

“...your vegetables, shinobi-san,” the owner of the stand said hesitantly, and Kyo hastily slapped a smile back on her face, turning to the man.

Instead of bothering to haggle -most merchants and shop owners in Konoha gave shinobi fair prices-she just handed over the amount he asked for and hefted the bag in her free hand.

“Are you busy right now?” Aita asked her before she could do anything else.

Kyo blinked. “Obaa-san's expecting this to make dinner,” she said, lifting the bag a fraction higher.

“Why?” She paused, considering the fact that Aita had remained motionless here since she'd first laid eyes on him. “What are you even doing here?” She asked, because it was a bit strange and she could admit to being curious.
“Waiting for a large order,” Aita answered idly with a small shrug, scanning the area in front of them. “In fact, he should be getting back here, soon,” he muttered with a mildly irritable huff. “Anyway, wanna come see the compound?” He pressed on, turning to give Kyo a hopeful look.

Kyo felt some of the blood drain out of her face, but determinedly shoved those feelings aside with a vengeance.

Thinking rationally. She could do it.

Right.

“Okay,” she said.

Aita blinked, looking momentarily taken aback, before a soft, fond smile broke out across his face.

“Your order, Uzumaki-san!” A slightly flustered man called, struggling to pull a medium sized cart their way, loaded down with crates of various vegetables and wares. There was also what looked like a few bags of rice and flour each. “We do deliveries, too,” the man added, wiping his hands on the apron tied around his waist, looking over the cart before he turned to Aita with a polite, professional smile.

“No need, but thank you,” Aita returned calmly, walking towards him, bringing the two kids with him. “Everything looks to be in order,” he added, eyeing the large pile of food. “How much do I owe you?”

Kyo patiently watched them haggle a moment, more for the sake of it than to necessarily bring the price down.

Genma tugged on her hand.

“This is boring, nee-san,” he told her in a hushed whisper.

“I know, but just a second. Look at this,” she said, lifting him up to give him a better view, knowing what was coming without having to look.

When Genma gave her what she could only call a sceptical pout, she gave a small laugh and pointed over at Aita, directing his attention to where the teenager was pulling out a couple of scrolls from a pocket.

He handed one of them to the boy on his left, and unrolled the other one himself.

And together, they proceeded to methodically seal up all the food until the cart was entirely empty.

Aita slipped the two scrolls back into his pocket, offered the speechless merchant a cheery wave, and then wandered back over to Kyo and Genma.

“Ready to go?” Aita asked.

“Go where?” Genma asked, staring at him in awe.

Kyo was fairly sure her little brother would go wherever Aita wanted to bring him right now, which... she should probably be worried. A little.

“I’d like to show you where we live,” Aita told her brother with a friendly grin, motioning at himself and his two little shadows. “But first,” and he brought one hand up to make a few hand seals, one-handed, because the girl beside him looked entirely unwilling to let go of his hand for anything.
Soon enough, an exact replica of Aita was stood beside them, grinning with something like delighted mischief.

Both versions of the teen practically preened at the awed noise escaping her four year old brother.

“Come now, give them,” Aita's clone said, waving an impatient hand in the direction of Kyo's bag of groceries.

She felt her eyebrows rise a little, but handed him the bag readily enough.

“Grandparents haven't moved, right?” Aita confirmed.

Kyo snorted. “They'll die first,” she told him dryly.

What she was fairly sure was a Kage Bunshin, a Shadow Clone, saluted and then took off.

...she'd like to see the look on Haname's face when she opened the door to receive this unexpected delivery.

“Shall we then?” She asked, inexplicably cheered by the thought.

Aita led them through the village in a familiar direction.

Genma had demanded to be let down again and was walking beside her, staring with blatant interest at the Uzumaki girl he’d verbally poked earlier, trying to get her attention, despite the fact that she was full out ignoring him.

“Next to the Senju compound, huh,” Kyo mused, considering the road they were walking down.

Aita shrugged. “It's where us Uzumaki have been staying, so it was just natural to stick close, I guess,” he said, as if that part didn't matter much.

Kyo had sort of figured Kushina stayed in the Senju compound, with Mito, and Aita and Hinata-shishou spent the majority of their time there whenever they were in the village.

She was fairly sure there were another small handful of Uzumaki that had been staying in Konoha over the course of the war, helping them fight.

There were more of them now, though.

Soon enough, they walked through the newly erected gate to the Uzumaki compound.

Everything was brand new, the wood pale and fresh and there were still parts that were under construction. But it was clearly liveable.

Nothing was made of stone.

“Umimaru, can you take these to Ran for me?” Aita asked, holding the two scrolls out to the boy that had silently accompanied them, sticking close to Aita's side and keeping his eyes peeled on their surroundings without fail.

The boy, Umimaru, gave a grave nod, took the scrolls and ran off without a word.

“Come one, Ashika,” the teenager continued, sweeping the little girl up into his arms. “Lets go see if
we can't find a snack, huh.” He sent Genma a speculative glance, and then turned it on Ashika for a moment, before he focused on Kyo. “Wanna play a few games?”

“Sure,” Kyo agreed, because if Ashika was having troubles, then she and Genma were more than willing to try to help. “Hide and Seek?” She suggested lightly.

“I was thinking something more like tag,” Aita fired back with a smirk. “Everyone's supposed to have fun, Kyo, not just you.”

“I have no idea what you're talking about,” Kyo returned sweetly.

Aita snorted and led them deeper into the Uzumaki compound.

There were plenty of red-heads around, at various ages, but... Kyo focused on Aita and their general surroundings.

On Genma, still holding her hand and looking around with bubbly curiosity.

Before long, they found themselves in what looked like it was slowly turning into a garden, the two kids got sat down and handed their snack. One plate with fresh fruit, each, which had been collected from a large kitchen on the way.

Both of them busy, Aita took a seat next to Kyo, watching the little girl sadly.

“She's my niece,” he said softly. “Ashika,” he clarified, even though Kyo had been able to guess who he was talking about.

She wondered if anyone else in Aita's immediate family had survived, but didn't ask. He'd tell her himself if he wanted to.

“How old is she?” Kyo asked, instead.

“Five.”

One year older than Genma, if that.

Kyo made an acknowledging hum in the back of her throat, but was content with the comfortable silence.

A minute passed, and Kyo smiled when Genma extended a sticky hand and offered Ashika one of his apple slices.

Ashika peered suspiciously at him a moment, before she took it, and then dropped an orange wedge on the boy's plate in exchange without a word.

Genma sent her a grin and happily picked up the piece of orange and stuck it in his mouth.

“Is he a miniature garbage disposal yet?” Aita asked amusedly.

Kyo huffed. “No. I'm still waiting to start teaching him.” She sent Aita a look. “And it's not garbage. It's poison, thank you very much.”

“Same thing.” Aita grinned at her.

“It's not even remotely the same!” Kyo couldn't help but object, feeling mildly insulted. “I spend a lot of time and effort making my poisons!” She frowned playfully at him. “They're top quality!”
“You'd be the one to know,” Aita snorted.

“Exactly,” Kyo sniffed superiorly. “So don't go talking about things you know nothing about, amateur.”

“Oh, wow,” Aita mused lightly. “Going straight for the jugular today, huh. No mercy at all.” He grinned at her, eyes shining with good humour.

“I don't go calling your seals useless scribbles that could just as well have been made by a civilian two year old,” she told him, still with mock-offence colouring her voice.

Aita choked down a laugh and placed a hand to his chest. “I have been mortally wounded,” he lamented. “Struck down by the one I suspected least!” He flopped over dramatically until he was sprawled on his back in the grass. “Stabbed in the back!”


Aita squinted at her a moment, stuck out his tongue, slapped a hand on her arm with a cheery “You're it!” and then disappeared in a small puff of smoke.

He reappeared next to Ashika, who gave a startled peep when Aita scooped her up without a word of warning and then dashed off, cackling with laughter like a maniac.

“That's cheating!” Genma howled with outrage, jumping to his feet and pointing at Aita's retreating back like he was the worst kind of criminal.

Kyo snickered and slowly, deliberately got to her feet.

“Genma-chan?” She drew her brother's attention. “Since I'm it, you need to run, too.” She grinned playfully at him, stretching her arms over her head.

Genma jumped, blinked at her, and then took off after Aita. “Noo, nee-san!”

Aita led them to a nice field that would no doubt be turned into a training field at some point, but right now worked excellently as a playground.

There were a few trees spread out, offering shade, but most of it was nothing more than gently swaying grass.

Genma shrieked when she caught up to him, snagging him up for a quick hug and a kiss on the cheek.

“You're it, little brother,” she told him with a grin, set him back onto his feet and jogged off.

They were keeping this game child-friendly, for obvious reasons, so neither Kyo nor Aita would be anywhere near tired at the end of it, but that didn't mean they couldn't have fun.

“That's not fair, nee-san!” Genma protested, a slight pout in his voice, but he didn't let that discourage him.

Seeing as Kyo was the one who had tagged him, Genma set his sights on the two Uzumaki they were playing with, and went after Aita with admirable tenacity for a four year old.

Ashika was watching Genma's every move with careful attention, but her brother seemed to have decided on his target and was entirely unwilling to change his mind.
Aita kept just out of his reach, though, tantalisingly near, but never close enough to touch.

It was great fun, and Genma was smiling, until he stumbled over a hidden rock and landed hard on the ground, catching himself on his hands.

Kyo drew closer, because she could tell that had hurt, and sure enough, Genma sniffled.

“Hey, you okay, little guy?” Aita asked worriedly, peering down at her brother, who raised a bleeding hand to his face to wipe at his eyes.

He's scraped his palms, it looked like.

Kyo was debating whether or not she should go over there to comfort him when Genma gave another pitiful sniffle, and without looking, reached out his other hand to slap against Aita's leg.

“You're it,” he told him wetly, voice wobbling a bit, and it was very obvious Genma hadn't planned it, or faked it, but her brother clearly knew how to take advantage of the situation.

Kyo felt a little bit ridiculous at how proud that made her.

“That's so unfair,” Aita commented quietly, pursing his lips in an attempt to keep from smiling like an idiot. “Very sneaky of you, Genma-chan,” he praised, and then took off after Kyo without warning.

Kyo snorted out a laugh and shunshined out of his reach, because if this was how they were playing, then sure, she could keep up.

Halfway through his high-speed chase of her, Aita veered off and tagged Ashika, who gave the teenager an outraged glare, set her jaw, and committed to the game with a vengeance.

Kyo and Aita eventually found themselves sitting off to the side, watching the two kids playing in the field.

They'd finished their game of tag -with no clear winner- after a while, when the two kids needed a break to rest and catch their breaths.

“Think you can manage a few play-dates every now and then?” Aita asked her, not taking his eyes off the grin on Ashika's face when she threw a small handful of flowers at Genma's head.

“Of course,” Kyo said, sending him a look. “I'll tell Genma he can come over here to play even when I'm not in the village, shall I?” She suggested, because it wasn't like grandma had ever been good at saying no to Genma when it came to things like that.

And the Uzumaki were a respected Clan.

And apparently, it was perfectly alright for little boys to train to be shinobi, unlike girls, who should just-

Pushing the irritable line of thought aside, Kyo focused back on the situation with a quiet huff.

“How are you, Aita?” She asked softly.

Aita sighed and raised a hand to drag it down his face, rubbing at his cheek a moment. “Never thought I'd be a parent before I turned twenty,” he muttered, closing his eyes momentarily. “I don't
know how do to this. I have no idea what I'm doing.”

“I don't think anyone does, at first,” Kyo told him quietly. “Tou-san still struggles sometimes, but the important part is that he tries his best. I know he loves me, even when he make mistakes.” Kyo shuffled over so that she could lean up against Aita's side. “And I'll bet anything that Ashika's better off with you in her life than without.”

“What if I mess up?” Aita wondered, voice quiet enough it was barely audible.

Kyo shrugged. “Everyone does.” She was silent a moment. “I never told you about my first ever attempt at teaching Genma about poisons, did I?” She asked him bitterly, already knowing the answer.

“I thought you were waiting?” Aita sent her a confused glance.

“Yeah. But I wasn't thinking, and I forgot...” Kyo sighed heavily. She was still feeling guilty about that whole incident. It could have ended so much worse than it had. “Gemma didn't let me touch him for a week,” she told Aita bluntly. “But he forgave me and things are fine.” She sent him a pointed look.

Aita stared at her blankly for a moment, before he glanced over at the two children again.

“So you're saying I'm gonna mess up, but as long as I don't end up scarring her for life, she'll forgive me?”

“Something like that,” Kyo huffed and nudged him with her shoulder. “You seem to be doing more than fine already,” she told him. “Tell her you love her, though,” she added, because shinobi were weird about that. Kyo still hadn't gotten Katsurou-sensei to say it out loud, and even Ryota clammed up when she told him. Kou really was a fantastic father, because he'd indulged her almost from the start. “Even if actions say a lot, some things, people need to hear spoken, too.”

“You're such a weirdo,” Aita told her.

“See, this is what I'm talking about,” Kyo told him with a small smile. “What you meant to say there was 'I love you, Kyo’,” she told him lightly, leaning her head against his arm. “And I will respond by telling you that I love you, too, Aita.”

Aita produced a small noise she couldn't quite identify the emotion behind, but he didn't move, neither of them saying anything else for a couple of minutes.

“How can you say that to me?” Aita asked her tiredly, finally breaking the silence. “Before you went to Uzu, I—” Aita sighed, pulled off his hitai-ate and dragged his fingers through his hair in frustration. “I wasn't thinking, and I told you to go kill people for me, and the whole time you were gone, I couldn't stop thinking about it.” He scowled down at the ground. “What if you'd died and that was the last thing I told you?” He asked, but she didn't think it was really directed at her.

“You were upset,” which was a major understatement, “and I distinctly remember you telling me something else before we left,” she pointed out evenly. “You told me to come back, Aita.”

She stared at him until Aita tilted his head enough to slant a look at her, no matter how reluctantly. They were silent again, but it was less tense.

With a heavy sigh, Aita shifted his arm to squish her into his side in a semblance of a hug. “You think we're gonna have to plan their wedding one day?” He asked, nodding at where Genma and
Ashika now seemed to be... wrestling.

Kyo blinked and took a closer look.

It was either wrestling, or an attempt at some sort of sparring, though with what style, she could only guess.

She snorted when Aita's words finally registered. “I hope you realise I won't ever insist my brother marries anyone?”

“Even though you're technically the Clan Head?” Aita asked, a faint, vaguely teasing smile on his face.

Kyo stilled.

Shit, he was right, wasn't he?

“...I'm pretty sure it doesn't really count as a clan when it's only two people,” she told him with far more confidence than she actually felt. “Three, if you count tou-san.” Which she did, but he wasn't a Torikabuto, so... this was confusing.

Aita sent her a brittle smile, apologetic pain his eyes for a moment, before he flopped over on top of her, trapping her between his back and the grass, crushing her into the ground.

“Hey!” Kyo objected with a half-strangled laugh and a wheeze. “Get off of me, you big lump!”

“No,” Aita mused calmly, peering up at the sky. “I think I'll just stay here like this, not saying anything and putting my foot in my mouth again.”

“Oh, for the love of-” Kyo huffed and tried to wiggle out from under the seventeen year old, who couldn't be all that comfortable, either. “Do I look offended to you?” She demanded, doing her best not to laugh.

“No, but you're a sneaky assassin; you could be hiding your intentions to poison me later with ease,” Aita said with understated dramatics that sounded almost grand.

Kyo managed to free one arm and used it to pinch him in the side. “You're ridiculous,” she told him when Aita squawked like some kind of offended bird.

Aita pouted, widening his eyes and doing his best to look like a wounded puppy.

It had nothing on Maki's take on the same expression and the thought only sent a brief stab of pain and longing through her.

Kyo slapped Aita's cheek lightly. “I love you, Aita, but you're not a very good actor,” she told him sincerely, and promptly shunshined out from under him, leaving the teen to collapse onto the ground.

“Kyo!” Aita complained and then flailed an arm at her when she threw his hitai-ate at him with a laugh, nailing him in the face.

-x-x-x-

Since she couldn't just spend all her time in the village either training or doing nothing of particular
importance, Kyo had spent quite a bit of time in the Hokage tower for a while now, getting more acquainted with Toge.

The Yamanaka was familiar enough with her, had been around to see her traipse in and out of his office to see Katsurou over the last year and some months that he barely paused before giving her a stack of psych evaluations to go through when she popped by.

It wasn't the same as when she'd done this with Katsurou-sensei, but it was something to do. Something that made it feel like she was helping, making a difference. Contributing.

Toge was nice about it, and he'd told her -in a roundabout way- that he had a daughter about her age. And it wasn't like they could be overly picky these days; everyone still in the village was spread out far too thin.

Kyo wasn't technically supposed to be working in the tower, with the paperwork, but she was helping and no one was about to complain so long as she didn't screw up monumentally. Though, it was probably Katsurou-sensei and Toge who would get in trouble for any potential mess-ups, if she was honest...

Regardless, it was a good reason to hang around the Hokage tower from time to time.

Haname was starting to get on her nerves again and she hoped tou-san would come back home soon, because Kyo wasn't sure how much more of this she could take.

*One* more comment about them having to go dress shopping and Kyo would do something drastic. But that wasn't as bad as all the casual remarks about how much time she spent on training.

Urgh.

Kyo wandered in the general direction of the ground floor exit, though she wasn't in any kind of hurry to leave, when she caught a more than familiar chakra signature nearby.

It wasn't so much a *conscious decision* to move as it was entirely instinctive.

“Sensei!” Kyo exclaimed, throwing herself in a flying tackle hug at the man, who had been in the process of leaving one of the smaller offices close to the mission assignment room, and he just about had time to turn in her direction before she reached him.

Grinning down at the man, barely registering that she'd actually tackled him over and she was now sitting on his stomach, Kyo couldn't even begin to articulate her happiness.

“You're back!” She chirped.

“Ow,” Katsurou said back, entirely deadpan.

Kyo stilled, and looked him over again. “Shit, are you injured? Why didn't you stop me?” She asked, feeling mildly frantic for a moment, before her mind caught up with her and she realised Katsurou probably *wasn't* injured, but more banged up and definitely tired. “Sorry, sensei,” she told him sincerely, but didn't move off of his stomach.

Katsurou heaved a long-suffering sigh.

“You're just as much a little monster as usual,” he grunted, lifting a hand to try and slip out something from inside his Jounin vest, eyeing her intently a moment. “Still alive and in one piece,”
he added drably.

Kyo pursed her lips a slight fraction as she frowned at him. “I haven't been on any missions while you've been gone, so really, the one who's status as still alive and in one piece should be y-”

Katsurou pressed a hand over her mouth, cutting her off with minimal fanfare.

Kyo blinked at him. And then licked his palm.

“That's disgusting,” Katsurou told her in a completely deadpan tone of voice.

Kyo rolled her eyes, but before she could respond in any other way, something snagged the back of her shirt and she was physically hoisted off of her sensei and into the air.

Craning her neck to stare quizzically at the owner of the hand holding her aloft, Kyo blinked at a generally unimpressed face.

“Hey, Hirata,” she greeted, offering a slightly confused smile to the man.

The last time she'd seen Hirata... yeah, this was a much nicer setting. And the man didn't seem to have been injured.

He'd been on the same mission as sensei? That was actually pretty interesting.

Hirata eyed her with speculative focus for a moment, head tilting ever so slightly, as if he was contemplating something. Kyo had an inkling what he would do when he pulled back his hand a measured distance, but she didn't have time to do more than feel incredulous disbelief, before he'd tossed her away from him.

“Hirata!” Kyo protested, already twisting around so she could land feet-first on the wall he'd thrown her at, but she didn't get that far before someone caught her. “I've told you not to throw me at people!” She frowned at Hirata, pointing accusingly at him.

Hirata smirked right back, looking vastly entertained.

Katsurou heaved a sigh from the floor, before he pushed himself into a seat and finally pulled out whatever it'd been he'd been looking for from his vest.

Kyo narrowed her eyes at Hirata a moment, before she decided to drop the issue right now. She could chew him out later. Instead, she focused on the shinobi that had caught her, which... she probably should have done much sooner.

“Er, hello?” She offered awkwardly when she was confronted by an entirely unfamiliar face and neutral, assessing eyes. White eyes.

Kyo wasn't really familiar with the Hyuuga. Had never had much cause to interact with them.

Did she even know a Hyuuga?

“You can put her down, Isamu,” Katsurou told him absently, flipping through the pages of the small book he'd withdrawn from his person, and the moment he seemed to have found the page he'd been looking for, accepted Hirata's hand to help him back to his feet.

Kyo was put back on the floor without a word.

Katsurou fixed her with a firm look, serious enough she knew he meant business, and when he
turned the book over and handed it to her, she automatically accepted it.

Kyo turned her attention to the book with idle curiosity, wondering what was so important. There was a scratch down the front cover, and a large spot of dried blood staining the edge and some of the pages.

With a small huff, Katsurou shook his head. “Read it,” he told her shortly.

Kyo glanced at him, before she did as told.

The right page had a picture of a man she'd never seen before, listing name, age, abilities... Kyo frowned confusedly. That didn't feel like something relevant to her.

The left page-

Kyo's head jerked up and she stared mutely at Katsuou-sensei. “Wha-?”

“It's the latest Kiri bingo book,” Katsuou informed her shortly, looking an interesting mix of unhappy and smug, but Kyo couldn't really digest that right now.

Because.

Because on the left page, there was a rough sketch of Kyo's Scorpion mask, a list of information containing her estimated age, height, weight, what the fuck? As well as a semi-detailed description of the gas she'd used on Uzu and there were even mentions of her needles?

What.

Kyo finally reached the bottom of the page, and there was a price. On her head. As a Torikabuto.

Slowly raising said head to stare mutely at Katsuou-sensei, Kyo couldn't really say what she thought. She felt eerily blank.

“Congratulations, pipsqueak,” Hirata told her with a grin, slapping her on the back hard enough she almost smacked into the wall.

Kyo felt rather wide-eyed, and she was still clutching the small book tightly. “Um,” was all she managed to say.

“I thought most youngsters celebrated getting into the bingo book?” The Hyuuga -Isamu? mused idly, watching her with mild curiosity.

Katsuou snorted, plucked the book from her fingers and tucked it away again, before he placed a hand on Kyo's shoulder, steering her around and out of the room and Kyo went with him without protest.

Shock was always such an interesting thing, a small part of her mused faintly.

When Kyo became fully aware of her surroundings again, she was sitting on the sofa in Katsuou's sitting room, and she had no memory of how or when they got there.

Katsuou was crouching in front of her and it looked like he'd taken a shower while she'd been out of it.

“Back with me?” He asked, eyeing her intently.
Kyo blinked. “Why am I in the bingo book?” She asked blankly, because it still wasn't making much sense.

Rationally, she knew her abilities with poison made her very dangerous in certain settings, but she was ten! She wasn't-

“Because you set off a large-scale poison attack no one's seen the likeness off since the First Shinobi War,” Katsurou told her blandly, patting her on the knee before he straightened out of his crouch and walked over to his kitchen, where he inspected the inventory of the fridge a moment, and then got out a small handful of dry goods to make something to eat. “Let's just be happy they didn't get a good look at your mask, and they don't know your real face and name yet,” he added wryly.

“But I'm just ten,” Kyo felt the need to point out, still feeling like half her head refused to get in on this whole revelation.

“Just makes it more relevant to take you out of the game before you get to grow up and become more of a problem,” Katsurou grunted, and pushed a bowl of rice into her hand the moment he came back out of the kitchen.

He handed her a pair of chopsticks next and then sat down beside her.

Kyo eyed the rice a moment, taking in the baked beans on top, and then took a small bite.

They ate in silence and when Kyo was done, she took Katsurou's empty bowl and went to put them in the sink.

She'd wash them later. Right now, she was more interested in talking about... this.

“You're still confused,” Katsurou stated with exasperated amusement.

“Yes.” Kyo nodded, feeling like that was perfectly natural. She blinked and took in Katsurou's slumped position on the sofa, and how tired he looked. “Are you really okay, though, sensei?” She couldn't help but ask.

Katsurou heaved a heavy sigh and motioned at her to come sit. “Just tired. Still not back to full health, I guess,” he muttered, putting his arm over her shoulders when Kyo curled up against his side. “Sitting in an office for a year hasn't exactly left me in top condition.”

Kyo was silent a moment, turning that over in her head. “But this means the war is coming to a close, right?”

Katsurou slanted a glance at her. “Everyone's spread too thin,” he huffed. “Resources are starting to dry up, too.”

Kyo eyed Katsurou interestedly, because that hadn't sounded like speculation. “Hirata, you and a Hyuuga means you ran for Intel, didn't you?”

Katsurou huffed out a soft laugh, his arm tightening around her. “On what are you basing that theory?” He asked, relaxed, entertained and fond.

“You're not fully recovered,” Kyo reminded him easily, “so putting you out on the front-lines wouldn't be ideal. And with your particular skills, it would be better to do intelligence missions, anyway. Find out as much as possible, though I don't know in which direction or if there was anything particular for you to dig up,” she mused.
“And Hirata and Isamu play into that how?” He asked, eyes closed and a small, amused smile playing around his mouth.

“Hyuuga are generally good with discreet, delicate missions,” Kyo speculated, because their kekkei genkai suited those kinds of things very well. They were, of course, fearsome in close combat, too, but that didn't change how useful their eyes were. “And Hirata is good at stealth, but can also function as a battering-ram if things go to shit. Based on that, I'd say you were sent into a hostile situation, more than prepared to have to fight your way out.”

Katsurou snorted and ruffled her hair, all without opening his eyes.

A comfortable silence settled over them for a few seconds, and Kyo leaned her head against Katsurou's shoulder.

“I still think it's weird I'm in the bingo book,” she muttered. “I'm just trying to stay alive.” She was silent a second. “Does this mean I can't use my needles outside of ANBU now?” She added, because that was a real concern.

“We don't have any Toribakuto,” he drawled. “Even if Kiri sends their best infiltrators and spies, they're not gonna find much without a monumental amount of effort, and that usually means discovery. There are too many unknown variables,” he huffed, patting her absentely on the arm. “I bet not many know about the Torikabuto, these days, and the few that do.” He shrugged. “They have no idea how many we potentially have.” He smirked. “They pegged you as about three years older than you currently are, too.”

Kyo blinked and attempted to digest that. “So we're just gonna pretend I'm not in ANBU?” She asked confusedly.

“We already do that,” Katsurou corrected, sending her a look. “You haven't been on the Active ANBU roster for a while, which actually helps, and you'll no doubt go back to doing team missions with Jiraiya when he eventually comes back. If we're lucky, they'll think you died in Uzu.”

Kyo pursed her lips, unsure how she felt about this. “It feels a bit ridiculous,” she said.

Katsurou laughed and next she knew, his hand was on her face, pushing her away from him until she was sprawled flat on her back on the sofa, damn near falling off it.

“Hey!” She protested half-heartedly. “Can I sleep here tonight?” She asked instead of pressing the issue.

“Sure. Haname trying to convert you into a traditional housewife again?”

Kyo gave a sullen, affirmative grunt and rolled off the sofa to wander into the kitchen. She might as well do those dishes now.

She could probably run out and get some groceries, too, since sensei was tired and nice enough to let her stay here.

-x-x-x-

Katsurou got about a week in Konoha, before he was sent out again.
You'd think it was easier to see him leave the second time, but it was just as hard. Just as frightening. Because he could still die.

Distracting herself had worked last time, so that was what she did. Found things to do.

“Scorpion!”

Kyo paused on her way to the closest training hall, turning to face Gecko, who was striding towards her with clear purpose.

Resisting the urge to shunshin out of there to hide, which was entirely irrational, she knew, Kyo instead remained in place to let the man catch up.

“What is it?” She asked, wondering if someone else had noticed the latest addition to the Kiri bingo book.

She'd already gotten a couple of amused congratulatory wishes and a few respectful nods, and Kyo seriously didn't get it.

Congratulations! There's a price on your head!

“You're being reassigned to a new room,” Gecko informed her briskly. “So go collect your things and I'll show you to your new assigned housing.”

Kyo cocked her head. “Why?”

“Can't stay in the kiddie—” Gecko seemed to realise who he was talking to, cut himself off, corrected himself, “newbie barracks forever,” he finished, acting like there hadn't been a hitch. Kyo stared at him because that didn't seem like it was all. “...And Hyena requested it,” Gecko grudgingly added.

“Oh.” Kyo considered that a second and gave a nod.

Packing up her things was quick and efficient, considering she mainly had extra uniforms and equipment in her room. Other than that, there were only a few sets of her poison-making tools. Which... Kyo considered the two batches of poison she had drying in a corner.

With a shrug, she stuffed the last of her storage scrolls into a pocket and picked her two trays up and then walked out into the corridor to join the waiting Gecko. Who took a measured step away from her when he spotted the dark liquid in the tray-bowls occupying her hands.

“...what are those?” He asked warily. “No, wait. I don't want to know,” he sighed. “Don't kill anyone.”

Kyo bit her lip to keep back an inappropriate giggle.

Instead of wasting time talking, Gecko turned around and resolutely led the way to her new place of residence.

She'd been aware that there were other 'barracks' in ANBU headquarters, but she hadn't pried. For several reasons.

ANBU in general were pretty paranoid, and if a known poison specialist started asking questions about where people were sleeping... yeah, that was a bad idea.

Kyo wanted to have a good relationship with her colleges.
The few people they walked past paid them minimal attention, but everyone was very careful to keep a polite distance from Kyo, and one or two people may have ceased to move, momentarily, when they spotted the tray-bowls in her hands.

“Here we are,” Gecko muttered, stopping in a corridor almost identical to the one they'd left earlier, and every door was still unmarked and just the same as all the others.

He paused a moment, no doubt to eye her occupied hands, and then opened the door for her with a sigh.

“Do we need to decontaminate your previous room, Scorpion?” He asked, and he sounded long-suffering, even through his mask.

“No?” Kyo peered at him. What did he think she did in her room? Just because she'd stashed a few drying batches of poison there didn't mean she smeared the stuff on the walls.

Gecko seemed to contemplate the situation a second, and then stepped back, rolling his shoulders subtly. He took a step further down to knock on the next door over, which was almost immediately yanked open in a familiar manner.

“Hello, Hyena!” Kyo greeted with a smile. “You finally got your face back!”

“Scorpion!” Hyena greeted back, completely disregarding Gecko to sidle up to her and inspect what was in her hands. He cocked his head curiously.

“Let me just put these down,” she said, wandering into her new room, getting her first look at it while she was at it.

It was almost identical to her old room, she noted, if a tad bigger. And there was no bathroom.

Kyo put her poison batches on the floor in one of the corners, where they'd be out of the way, she then walked over to the built-in closet to place her storage scrolls on a shelf.

That done, she eyed the bed a moment, duvet and pillow folded and stacked in a neat pile on the middle of the mattress.

Should she do something about that?

Not right now, she decided half a second later, because she hadn't seen much of her brother in the last week, so she'd refrain from sleeping here for now.

No matter how tempting it was.

When she stepped back out of her room, Gecko was gone but Hyena was still there, staring curiously into her room.

“Doesn't yours look the same?” She asked.

“Mostly,” he agreed, and hearing his voice back in the standard monotone of ANBU wasn't as jarring as it probably should have been.

Hyena seemed far more relaxed and... *settled* like this, though.

“But?”

“It doesn't have your stuff in it,” Hyena snickered, reaching out to tentatively prod her shoulder in an
Kyo readily enough leaned into the touch, pleased when Hyena temporarily wrapped his fingers around her shoulder in a hold, only to let go again and abruptly start down the corridor.

“I'll show you what I'm drying later, if you want,” she offered, because talking about her poisons wasn't any kind of hardship.

“I'm allowed to spar again,” Hyena said instead of answering, but she took that as an automatic acceptance.

“I'd love to spar,” Kyo told him. “I was going to one of the training halls when Gecko distracted me,” she confessed.

“And now we're neighbours!” Hyena chirped eagerly, which sounded strange through the mask. “It was time for you to move out of the kiddie section anyway,” he added with an amused laugh.

“You know, Gecko said something like that, too,” Kyo told him, feeling entertained.

“Yeah.” Hyena's grin was audible in his voice. “You've stuck around for more than a year,” he said, as if that explained everything.

Kyo hummed, thinking it over.

It made a certain amount of sense, if her conclusions were correct. The whole idea of ANBU was to try and keep the members' identities secret from anyone who wasn't ANBU, which mostly included the rest of Konoha as well.

If you kept the new recruits together with the rest of the members, then that would be far harder to do, and it hadn't escaped her attention that at least one of her fellow Numbers had stopped showing up around headquarters quite a while back, and she hadn't heard anything about him getting killed.

So some people just weren't suited for ANBU, despite getting through the try-outs?

She'd have to remember to talk to sensei about it the next time he was around.

“Sparring, and then I'll show you around,” Hyena declared, just before they could enter the training hall he'd evidently set his sights on.

Kyo glanced at the door and very nearly groaned.

It was the pitch black one.

Fighting without the use of your eyes was a bitch and a half, and it also involved unfortunate amounts of taijutsu.

“You're lucky we're friends, because I don't like this room,” she said easily, sending Hyena into another bout if slightly manic hilarity.

“But, Scorpion! That just means it's more important,” Hyena cackled, putting both hands on her shoulders and all but pushing her into the room. “I need to get back into shape and we both need to get sneakier!” He announced cheerfully. “You could do to learn to use your tanto better, too.”

Kyo huffed a reluctantly amused laugh and didn't disagree.

Training was good, and the more difficult, the less time she had to think about what would happen if
Katsurou-sensei didn't come back to the village after this. What that would mean.

Nursing quite a few fresh bruises, Kyo trailed after Hyena into a completely foreign part of headquarters she'd never been near before.

It drove home just how huge this whole facility was.

There were *layers*.

Sparring with Hyena again had been nice, though part of her couldn't help but feel the acute loss of Hawk and Horse.

Neither of them had brought it up, but she could tell it had been bothering her friend, too.

Which was probably why the both of them were as banged up as they were; working harder meant less time to think on unrelated, useless what-ifs.

Hyena opened a door and all of a sudden, Kyo found herself blinking at what might as well have been the changing room of the public onzen.

Following Hyena's lead, she picked a shelf to put her things and began to strip, all the while looking around with measured interest.

Like everywhere else, the décor was simple and functional, and there still weren't any windows, but it was still... nice. It felt less formal than the 'official' part of the building. This felt more like it could have been part of a home, strangely enough.

Hyena hadn't said anything about there being separate showers, so Kyo sort of assumed it was a shared one.

Glancing at her friend out of the corner of her eyes, she watched him pull off his mask and place it on top of his folded clothes, give it a fond pat, and then turn expectant eyes on her.

Kyo blinked, stepped out of her underwear and considered herself ready.

Hyena grinned at her, said nothing, and walked to the open doorway into a large, well-lit, tiled shower room.

White tiles reflected the light well, and the fact there weren't any stalls would make it very hard for anyone to hide without the use of chakra, and it played straight into the part of her that assumed all shinobi were hopelessly paranoid. ANBU in particular.

Pausing when she noticed that they weren't the only ones currently there for a wash, Kyo glanced over at the young man leaning against the wall on the other side of the room.

As she watched, he turned on the shower he was standing under again, and Kyo very pointedly looked away, focusing on herself.

“Uh, Hyena?” She asked, halfway through the process of washing her hair.

“Mm?” Hyena sent her a glance, mostly focused on washing out a scrape on his forearm properly, but clearly enough paying attention.

“Should we leave and give him some privacy?” She asked, sending another brief look over at the
other operative, before she resolutely focused back on Hyena's face.

Kyo hadn't really ever been one to blush a lot, but she could feel her cheeks heat up again.

Hyena blinked, green eyes surprised, before he turned to look at the other man for a moment. He tilted his head, and then turned back to Kyo with a quizzical frown.

...which meant that was normal, then, she concluded embarrassedly.

“No?” Hyena offered tentatively, and it was very clear he didn't understand what she was talking about.

Kyo sighed.

“Okay, then,” was all she said, though, because... she could adapt. And she could also pretend to be blind and deaf for a little while.

Didn't change the fact it was making her rather uncomfortable and awkward to be in the same room, sans clothes, with someone who was very clearly... masturbating.

It would be better not to think about it, she told herself, and rinsed the scentless shampoo out of her hair.

The faster she was done, the sooner she could leave. Even though Hyena didn't seem to be in any kind of hurry.

“No alarm's gone off?” Minato offered tentatively, scanning the people in the street around them again.

The civilians were acting just like always, going about their business like they did every day, so they
clearly hadn't noticed anything yet.

But the shinobi, though.

Kyo's gaze lingered on one teenager, who was outright grinning as he talked enthusiastically with a couple of friends, gesturing with one hand to emphasize his words.

It felt almost absurd to think it but, “I don't think something bad has happened,” Kyo said slowly, as if tasting the words.

Minato looked about as dubiously confused as she felt.

“Hokage tower?” Minato suggested.

Because when in doubt, seek out superior officers.

“I think that's the best way to find out what's going on, yeah,” Kyo agreed, and they consequently abandoned their plans to go grab some dango.

It was a bit early for lunch, but a treat after morning practise would still have been appreciated.

Every shinobi they saw on the way was behaving... oddly. All eager and excited and there was a strange sort of feel to the air around them that made her nervous.

Pausing on the closest roof to the tower itself, they just about had time to notice Jiraiya-sensei on the roof of the tower, standing next to the Hokage with the other two members of his team, when a teenager, a boy just a few years older than her and Minato, paused beside them, barely long enough to grin at them and say, “The war's over! Hokage's gonna make an announcement!” And then was gone again, off to spread the news further.

Kyo blinked at the place he'd just stood, exchanged a look with Minato, and then focused on the one who would either prove or disprove that claim.

The seconds trickled by, turning into minutes, but eventually, the Hokage turned to the amassing shinobi milling about, and Kyo and Minato weren't the only ones lingering nearby, waiting.

“A cease-fire has been announced, and all the Kage will meet to discuss a potential peace,” Sarutobi Hiruzen, Sandaime Hokage, announced in a strong, firm voice, luring a celebratory cheer from the listening people.

All Kyo could do was stare numbly at the people celebrating around them, because...

There'd be peace?

It felt so sudden.

And... exchanging an uncertain look with Minato, she was at least reassured to find she wasn't the only one who seemed to wonder; What now?

-x-x-x-
Chapter 70

Chapter Summary

Whatever else happens, life carries on

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Even though they'd been at war, it had at least been... familiar. Predictable, to an extent.

Right now, Kyo didn't have the first clue what to expect.

For as long as she could remember in this life, or at least close to it, there'd been war. It had definitely spanned her whole kunoichi career. Had shaped it.

She'd started out as a fresh Genin, thrown head-first into this war, she'd trained, fought, bled, cried in this war, but... it had been her life.

It had been everyone's life. And now it wasn't?

Kyo didn't know how to even begin to digest that.

Minato was starting to get swept up in the general excitement and celebratory mood, and he eagerly dragged her over to Jiraiya-sensei the moment he and his team were no longer looking to be busy with the Hokage.

“Sensei!” Minato called, drawing the man's attention. “It's really true?” The blond asked, breathless and very nearly vibrating now.

Jiraiya blinked, and it was clear he was exhausted, but he mustered up the energy to smile at them, even if it was strained and he kept glancing at Tsunade, who... didn't look too good.

Like she was cracking at the edges but desperately trying to keep herself together.

“You heard the Hokage, Minato,” Kyo said firmly before Jiraiya could try to formulate a suitable response. “I doubt he'd fabricate a lie like that; people finding out something like this was false and it'd break morale.”

“You're right!” Minato grinned, and it drove home how... young he was. He was just eleven, and this was a fantastic change.

Kyo's inner pessimist mused that it seemed too good to be true.

“What does this mean, though? There'll still be missions, right? And now that you're back we'll be a proper team again! Can Naoki re-join us when he's out of the hospital? Can we-”

“Minato,” Kyo cut him off abruptly, even though she'd rarely heard her teammate talk so much all at once and be so excited about it before.

Jiraiya looked a little bit like he might cry if he didn't get a break, though.
“What?” Minato asked, blinking at her, eyes shining with unbridled joy.

“It’s a truce,” Kyo reminded him. “It might turn into peace, but we’re not quite there, yet. And despite that, things won’t change right away,” she said.

“Harsh, but true,” an unfamiliar voice said, and Kyo's gaze snapped to the only member of Jiraiya's team she hadn't yet met.

Orochimaru's skin was pale, almost alarmingly so, especially in contrast to his black hair, and his eyes were yellow, but not the same shade as Kisaki's.

He was tall, with a slim, sinuous build that contrasted greatly with Jiraiya's stockier frame.

She could guess he was a nightmare to face in battle, both from the scattered things she remembered and from the way he held himself. And he was looking at her with an idle sort of interest.

“But why is everyone celebrating, then?” Minato asked, mildly confused.

“Because this is the biggest change for the better that's happened since this war started,” yet another voice cut in, and Kyo glanced at Senju Takeshi, resident Jounin Commander. “You three should all go get checked over by a medic and then rest,” he continued, directing his words to the Sannin. “Look after yourselves,” he added, slanting a subtle look at Tsunade that nonetheless seemed to convey its point to both Jiraiya and Orochimaru, because the latter approached his kunoichi teammate and gingerly grasped her arm.

“Let's go, then, get this over with,” he said and steered the two of them in the direction of the hospital.

“Me and Minato train in our usual training ground in the mornings like always, Jiraiya-sensei,” Kyo informed the man in front of them before he could open his mouth.

Jiraiya blinked dark, tired eyes at her with something like gratitude.

Instead of saying anything, he placed a large, dirty hand on her head to ruffle her hair, and then did the same to Minato.

“I'll have to assess your progress,” he mumbled, and then went after his team.

Kyo was almost tempted to call it 'shuffling' but that would be wildly misleading. But he seemed to truly be that tired.

“Come on, Minato,” Kyo said, tugging the blond with her. She sent a respectful nod at Takeshi and then took off.

All the loud people around were making her uneasy and she didn't like it.

She rationally knew this was a good thing, that it was progress and that it was very much needed. But it felt wrong. Weird. Out of place.

It felt ridiculous to admit, but she didn't know how to deal with this.

“So why aren't you happy?” Minato asked the moment they found themselves somewhere less... celebratory. Less loud.

The civilians were catching on quickly now, and soon enough all of Konoha would be one big party, it felt like, so Kyo had all but fled to their training ground.
Kyo sat down with a huff, trying not to scowl like a sullen toddler.

“Because,” she began tersely, “I'm trying not to envision all the ways this could still fall through and failing miserably.” She crossed her arms over her chest uncomfortably. Minato deserved to be happy about this, damn it, and so did everyone else. “Everyone's still out at the border stations. People can still die.” The truce could dissolve.

Minato stared at her, the joy in his eyes slowly calming to something more moderate. “Sorry,” he said taking a seat in front of her. “Your dad's still out there, isn't he?”

Kyo sighed. “He is, but that wasn't quite what I meant.” She pressed out a thin but sincere smile at Minato, because she wasn't upset with him. “Nothing's gonna change right away, even if we do get peace, and- it feels a bit hollow,” she muttered, frowning down at her feet. “Sorry, but I can't explain it.” She didn't even know herself why she was reacting like this.

“That's fine,” Minato assured her after a contemplative pause. He eyed her a moment. “Want to have a sleepover at my place tonight? We can do our own celebratory dinner?” He offered tentatively.

That sounded loads better than to stay with her grandparents tonight, who would no doubt insist on some form of celebration, too. Far more extravagant and over-done than anything Minato could think up.

Pushing down the guilt of ditching Genma yet again, Kyo gratefully accepted.

“Thank you, Minato,” she told him softly.

Jiraiya didn't get around to meet up with them until three days later, when he ambled into their sparring session with a contemplative, distracted air about him that instantly drew Kyo's attention, resulting in Minato landing a rather painful kick on her thigh she only partially managed to block.

“Kyo?” Minato questioned, pausing to try and figure out why she wasn't focusing fully on him any more.

“Hello, sensei,” Kyo said instead, turning to face Jiraiya.

“Sensei!” Minato smiled, abandoning his stance to run up to the man like an eager puppy.

Jiraiya sent him a warm, fond smile, but he still looked preoccupied when he sat down, moving a tad more stiffly than Kyo remembered him doing.

Then again, she hadn't seen him in several months, and that was time he'd spent fighting.

“You okay?” Kyo asked, walking up to join them, trying to gauge his physical condition from the few cues she'd picked up on.

“Fine,” Jiraiya grunted, sending her a wryly amused look. “Just generally banged up.” He shrugged. “You look like you've been busy while I've been away,” he said, not so subtly changing the subject.

Minato obligingly launched into a recount of what they'd been up to in Jiraiya's absence, prattling on and looking almost painfully happy to have their sensei back, and-

Kyo suppressed a grimace, because she was just bringing down the mood, wasn't she? Like usual.

Biting back a sigh at herself, Kyo tried to pay attention.
Minato was talking about their fuuinjutsu lessons now, all but waxing poetics about the art, Kyo noted with growing amusement.

It was... nice.

With almost startling ease, Kyo and Minato fell back into familiar routines, as if Jiraiya hadn't ever left.

There were still differences, though.

Kisaki was still spending her days in the Inuzuka compound, Katsurou-sensei was nowhere in the village to be found and Jiraiya... seemed perpetually distracted.

Another three days, very nearly a week after he'd come back with news of the truce, Kyo frowned at the man and decided to ask about it.

“Is there some sort of problem, Jiraiya?” Kyo began, blunt and to the point, because she was starting to get a little bit tired of feeling like everything was so damn uncertain all the time.

Jiraiya blinked at her, surprised. “What do you mean?”

“You're behaving oddly. Like there's something bothering you,” Kyo said.

Jiraiya stared at her a moment longer, before a small, puzzling smile stretched his lips and he scratched awkwardly at his jaw, still eyeing her interestedly.

Why was he looking so pleased?

“I'm fine,” he finally said, and a small, anxious knot she hadn't been aware of untangled and relaxed in her chest. “I'm just worried.” And a deeply concerned and unhappy look stole over his face for a moment. “Tsunade's not,” he paused, as if wondering how to phrase it, “in a good place right now,” he admitted.

Kyo frowned.

She hadn't seen the woman since that day on top of the Hokage tower, but she'd been able to tell she'd barely kept herself together.

“So try and do something about it,” she suggested, voice a little bit flat, because Tsunade was Jiraiya's friend and why hadn't he figured this out on his own?

“I have,” Jiraiya muttered, pulling a hand over his mouth, frowning at nothing for a moment. “Tried to invite her drinking with me and Orochimaru and she looked like she was about to tear off my head.”

Kyo sighed, feeling exasperated. “Alcohol isn't a universal solution to problems,” she told him slowly. “Did you ask why she was so... upset?”

“Already know why,” Jiraiya grunted, something grim firming up his mouth a second. “Nothing I can do to help that, but she's acting-” Jiraiya sighed heavily, scratching at his jaw again, looking deeply contemplative.

“Have you tried asking her? I ask Kyo when I'm confused,” Minato suggested helpfully. “If she doesn't want to tell me, she says so,” he added.

Jiraiya eyed the both of them amusedly a moment, something dry and faintly bitter about the
expression, for just a heartbeat.

“I don't particularly want to be hospitalized for being a 'blundering fool','” Jiraiya drawled dryly. “I'm not good at this emotional crap.”

“You're not gonna get better at it just by ignoring it, either,” Kyo told him, voice just as dry.

“But, women,” Jiraiya complained, as if they were a mystifying, entirely separate species. “They don't make any sense!”

Kyo eyed him blandly.

“That's offensive,” she informed him flatly.

Jiraiya paused, blinked, and eyed her speculatively.

Kyo didn't appreciate it one bit.

“Wait, Kyo. You're a kunoichi,” he said slowly.

“Yes, we established this back when you became my sensei,” she told him drably. “With unfortunate consequences,” she added in a quiet mutter under her breath.

Minato was staring at Jiraiya like he was wondering if he might have hit his head.

“No, but you could talk to her and maybe it makes more sense to you!” Jiraiya said excitedly, as if he hadn't heard a word of what she'd said and this was the best idea ever.

Kyo stared blankly at him.

Had he forgotten how she and Tsunade had met?

They didn't really know each other, and Kyo was actually pretty okay with that. She didn't hate the woman, but she didn't particularly like her, either.

“That sounds like a bad idea,” she finally said, trying to be diplomatic.

“Why?”

“Because if she's not talking to you, what makes you think she'll talk to me?” Kyo couldn't help but ask, and this was far more exasperating than it should be. Why were they having this conversation? “I don't know Tsunade,” she reminded sharply.

“But you're both kunoichi, and you can,” Jiraiya waved a hand at her in a vague manner, “do the girl-talk thing!” He looked pleased with himself.

For a brief second, Kyo contemplated stabbing him.

He wouldn't expect it; she'd probably manage.

There were so many things wrong with this conversation she didn't even know where to start.

“Jiraiya,” Kyo said in a slow, measured tone, “you're an idiot.”

And then she shunshined out of there.

It felt like the best option, and they'd finished up training for the day, anyway. If Jiraiya had planned
for them to do any missions, then he could damn well track her down and tell her.

Another few days passed and Jiraiya thankfully didn't bring up his moronic idea again, despite the fact that he stared beseechingly at her every now and then.

Which Kyo did her best to ignore.

It was a bad idea and she knew it.

...did Tsunade even have any friends outside of her team?

Jiraiya was generally a good person, but he was also something of a disaster of a human being when emotions, feelings and delicate personal interactions were concerned.

Kyo had figured that out within the first week of their acquaintance.

She didn't know Orochimaru, had met him all of once, but... she couldn't really remember anything good about him from the Story in the Before, either.

He'd been bad news.

Not that any of the Sannin were even close to those people; all of them were much younger, less broken and they were real. Not characters in a book.

Kyo sighed and covered her face with her hands.

She couldn't believe she was doing this to herself; she didn't owe Tsunade anything.

Sure, the woman had fixed up her foot, had no doubt saved Naoki's life, but that was her job.

...damn it all to hell, Kyo didn't even know where to find the woman.

Leaving team practice without a word, resisting the urge to stomp away like an angry toddler, Kyo ran home to fetch Genma. Her little brother had a play date with Ashika today, anyway. She might as well ask a few, innocent questions while she was there.

“Have fun,” Kyo told Genma, who was in enough of a hurry he barely had time to wave her goodbye before he ran off with Ashika, disappearing into the house.

Apparently, Ashika had promised to show him around.

“Wow, I'm feeling popular,” Aita commented lightly, peering after the two children. “Ditched like a hot kunai,” he mused.

Kyo huffed amusedly, eyeing the teenager out of the corner of her eye. “Can I ask a question?” She began, because that was the only way she could think of to breach this subject.

“Sure,” Aita said, blinking a little as he turned to face her, eyeing her with expectant curiosity.

“Do you know what's up with Tsunade? Jiraiya's being an idiot about it, but he's worried.”

Aita stared at her a moment, before he sighed with a rueful smile. “Not quite what I was expecting.”
he muttered. “But yeah, I have heard something of that,” he admitted, throwing a glance in the
direction the kids had run off in again. “Her boyfriend died.”

Kyo blinked.

She hadn’t known Tsunade had a boyfriend, but if that was true... then she could see very well why
Tsunade might not be in the mood for Jiraiya's attempts at cheering her up.

Sighing heavily, Kyo still didn't know why Jiraiya would want her to talk to the woman.

It was more liable to do harm than good, if you asked her.

“And I don't suppose she's in the compound?” She continued, tilting her head in the direction of the
Senju compound.

Aita shrugged. “I don't really know her, and I haven't pried.” He frowned with concentration a
second, eyes unfocused. “But I can't sense her anywhere nearby,” he continued, sending her a
questioning look.

Kyo shrugged right back at him. “Jiraiya asked me to try and talk to her and I think it's a bad idea,
but at the same time...”

“You can't leave it alone,” Aita concluded, looking amused. “You're very nosy,” he told her.

She shrugged again, because it wasn't like she could argue the point right now. “Jiraiya's being a
pain, and he's genuinely worried. Apparently, his usual attempts at cheering her up failed
spectacularly.”

Aita snorted and shook his head, as if he had a good idea about what that entailed. “Good luck, I
guess,” he said, clapping a hand on her shoulder. “Don't get killed; I'll be very unhappy with you.”

“You're such a good friend,” Kyo told him dryly. “I'll pick up Genma before dinner, okay?”

“If you're still alive by then,” Aita fired back lazily and wandered off after the two children, no doubt
to keep an eye on them and prevent any disasters.

Kyo huffed but didn't press the matter.

Why was she doing this again?

.

Doing this kind of research in her own village felt weird, but it was simultaneously easier than on
missions.

Kyo was actually allowed in these places, once her status as a Chuunin had been confirmed. The few
ANBU lurking around made things smoother yet.

But still.

Kyo felt all kinds of creepy and stalkery.

That didn't change that she'd managed to ferret out Tsunade's boyfriend's name -Katou Dan- and
after that, his place of residence.

That last one had taken some creativity, but she'd managed.
Because if Tsunade was grieving, rebuffing her friends and not in the Senju compound? Kyo would bet on the late boyfriend's home.

Staring at the apartment door she'd tracked down - it didn't look all that different from the one at home, though this place was located much closer to the hospital - she contemplated the merits of knocking.

Already resigned to her fate, Kyo raised a hand and knocked firmly.

She waited a minute, determined to be as polite as possible. Which was something of a contradiction to this whole project, she mused self-deprecatingly.

When no one came to the door, Kyo slipped out the tools needed from one of her pouches and quickly and efficiently picked the lock.

It was *impolite* to do so here at home, but there were exceptions to every rule.

Kyo would take a look, see if Tsunade was there, and if not, she'd leave without touching a thing. Simple.

She gave a mental scoff, because that was hardly true, and she knew it. It was nice to pretend, though.

With a silent sigh, Kyo eased the door open and walked inside, making no attempt at being stealthy or quiet. Hopefully, that would make her intentions clear enough.

The hallway opened up into a neat if poorly lit sitting room.

The sitting room was also as far as she had to go, search-wise, because a very familiar woman was curled up on the sofa pushed up against the left-hand wall, knees pulled up to her chest and arms folded up on top of them, cushioning and hiding her face in equal measures.

There wasn't a chance in hell Tsunade didn't know she was there, but instead of saying anything, Kyo studied the tragic picture it made, for just a moment. And then walked into the kitchen instead.

She checked the cupboards, ignoring everything else for a minute, seeing what was available.

Tsunade didn't look like she had moved in hours, and that wasn't any good.

Rice, miso soup and some pickled vegetables wasn't anything fancy, but it would do for a simple, easy meal. She also found some canned tofu, and added that as well.

Finishing it all off with tea, Kyo gathered up everything on a simple tray she'd found in a drawer and carried it out into the sitting room. She set the meal down on the coffee table in front of Tsunade and then didn't know what else to do.

“You should try to eat something,” she said when the woman still hadn't moved a muscle.

Tsunade was physically sixteen years older than her, but she looked awfully young to Kyo where she sat.

Why did everyone around her seem so young, lately?

“What are you doing here?” Tsunade asked, not shifting in the slightest. Her voice was muffled and muted, thin and lacklustre.
Nowhere near her usual strong and brash demeanour.

“Jiraiya is fretting and being more of an idiot than usual,” Kyo told her evenly. “He's worried about you.”

Tsunade snorted softly, but she finally shifted enough to lift her head, just enough to look first at the food she'd prepared, and then at Kyo.

“Trying to poison me?” She asked half-heartedly.

Her eyes were red and it didn't look like she'd slept in... a while.

Kyo sighed. “No. I don't particularly like you, but I'm not nursing a grudge.” Despite what people seemed to think about her, anyway. “You were rash and unnecessarily harsh, unwittingly cruel, even,” she paused, meeting Tsunade's gaze, “but it wasn't just your fault.” Part of it lay very firmly at her own feet, too, she was more than aware.

“But?” Tsunade grunted, too tired to come across as suspicious.

“No buts.” Kyo shrugged. “I've never been in your situation, but I know enough to know it sucks.”

Tsunade huffed out a rough, bitter laugh that ended on something that sounded like a half-choked sob, but both of them pretended not to have noticed as she slowly shifted out of her position, until she was sitting up more properly, feet on the floor.

Reaching out a trembling hand to pick up the miso soup, Tsunade seemed to examine it closely before taking a small, tentative sip.

Kyo was too used to it to feel offended.

She dealt in poisons, and that was something other people would always be uncomfortable with. Especially shinobi, who knew what it actually meant.

Slowly sipping the soup, cradling it between her hands and not looking at anything in particular, Tsunade presented a rather defeated picture.

Her hair was loose, hanging freely around her face and shoulders and her shoulders slumped with the weight of the world.

Kyo remained where she was, still and silent and content to wait, no matter how awkwardly.

“I'm sorry.”

The words were soft and so unlike what Kyo associated the woman with, that for a brief second, she was convinced someone else had spoken.

“For what?” Because that felt entirely out of the blue. Unrelated to this situation.

“For what I said to you,” Tsunade sighed, pulled a hand through her hair to get it out of her face to look at her, something about her firming up momentarily. “For- You're right. It was cruel. And I apologize.” She met her gaze head on for a second, brown, almost amber eyes shining with steely determination. “If you still want them, I'll give you those lessons,” she said, for a brief moment looking like the woman Kyo had first met. But it faded quickly, and the grieving lover left behind was what remained. “Eventually.”
Tsunade's gaze dropped to stare at her hands.

“If you can't eat any more, at least drink the tea,” Kyo suggested softly.

She didn't know what to think about this, so she decided to save it for later.

“I don't think I can stomach any more right now,” Tsunade said with a wobbly smile, and Kyo was mildly alarmed to see tears dripping from her eyes.

One of her hands shifted to her stomach, while the other one reached for the chopsticks, and despite her words, she slowly and determinedly set out to eat the rest of the food.

Kyo couldn't help but stare at the hand pressed to Tsunade's stomach, though, because it wasn't pressed over the diaphragm, but lower.

That...

“When did you find out?” Kyo asked, deciding to test her theory and this just turned a whole lot more tragic, didn't it?

Tsunade stilled. “Last week. Medic caught it before I did.” She sounded blank, a shadow of the professional briskness Kyo had heard before. Detached.

“Until you decide what to do,” Kyo told her as gently as she could manage, and it was awkward, and uncomfortable, because she didn't know Tsunade, “do your best to take care of yourself, okay?”

Tsunade gave another wet laugh, brittle and fragile and sounding like she was steadily fraying at the edges, but she didn't object or scream at her, which was honestly better than Kyo had expected when she set out on this self-appointed mission.

With one last look at Tsunade, Kyo turned and left.

She found Jiraiya outside the Jounin command central, and she didn't give a shit about the people around.

“Sensei,” Kyo said, landing beside him and effectively getting his attention. “Bend down a little for me a moment,” she requested evenly.

Jiraiya eyed her intently a second, but did as she'd asked with a subtle shrug.

Kyo grabbed the front of his shirt and yanked him down until they were face to face, and it spoke in Jiraiya's favour that he let her.

“You're going to go to Tsunade, and you're going to be her friend. Understand? Give her every single hug she asks for and not. Let her cry on your shoulder, listen to whatever she wants to say, and I swear, if you make even the slightest attempt at flirting or some misguided attempt at cheering her up with jokes or idiotic acts,” Kyo all but growled softly, deep discomfort settled in her gut, but she ignored that, “I will drug you until you think you're a chicken.”

“...alright,” Jiraiya said, sounding somewhat stumped and too surprised to react in any other way.

“Where is she?”

“Dan's apartment,” Kyo informed him and finally let go of Jiraiya's shirt. “I suggest you pick up some groceries on the way. No alcohol.”
Jiraiya hadn't looked surprised to hear where Tsunade was currently hiding out, but he did send her an assessing look before he gave a solemn nod.

He placed a hand on her head to gently ruffle her hair briefly, and then disappeared to do as suggested.

Kyo huffed uncomfortably, felt her shoulders curl in on her a little, but she didn't care.

This was all awful and she hated it.

She felt...

Ignoring the few shinobi around who eyed her curiously, Kyo set off towards the Uzumaki compound, because it was time to pick up Genma. Then dinner with their grandparents.

Kyo tried not to think too much, but it was futile.

If Tsunade really was pregnant with her dead boyfriend's child... what did that mean?

Had the Tsunade in the Story been a mother? Had she had a kid running around somewhere? Kyo couldn't say for certain, but she'd been fairly sure she hadn't.

What had changed? And she knew nothing at all was certain, because the future wasn't set in stone in any world, but.

She just didn't know and it felt like it was eating her alive.

“Should you really be here?” Kisaki asked, cracking an eye open to peer interestedly at her.

“I don't care,” Kyo said, settling down on the soft pillow beside the ninke, making herself comfortable and snuggling close. “It's not like grandma's gonna notice anything, and I don't want to be alone.”

Haname would just think she'd woken up earlier than usual and taken off to 'waste her time' training.

“What's wrong?” Kisaki asked softly, nudging her gently with her nose until Kyo ran her fingers through the fur on her head, scratching absently behind one ear.

Relaxing and getting ready to sleep.

“Nothing much,” Kyo muttered drowsily. She was tired. “Just—” she sighed heavily, shuffling closer until she could press her face into the side of Kisaki's neck. “Tsunade might be pregnant,” she mumbled into her friend's fur.

“...and?” Kisaki asked back, voice soft and mildly puzzled.

The Inuzuka kennels were perhaps not the best place for this conversation, but seeing as Senpu and Haru were out of the village, this was where Kisaki slept.

She was very nearly fully healed, and Kyo knew without a doubt Kisaki was looking forward to a clean bill of health. And the freedom it would grant her.

Kyo sighed.
“The war might be over soon,” she whispered instead of trying to explain. “But I don't know what that means.” Not here, in this life, as this person. “It's always been war.”

“So we'll figure it out,” Kisaki huffed back, voice just as soft. “Maybe everyone will be home more often? That would be nice,” the dog mumbled, voice trailing off sleepily.

That would be nice, but it still felt too good to be true.

It was infuriatingly frustrating that Kyo couldn't just be happy about this one good thing that had happened! That almost everyone else was so relieved over she'd seen people shed actual tears.

It was a good thing. Fantastic, even, but it just felt-

With another sigh, Kyo determinedly pushed the thought away from her and decided to try and sleep.

Maybe things would make more sense tomorrow?

-x-x-x-

Chapter End Notes

With this chapter, I'm gonna take a hiatus from posting, and I don't know how long I need to rest up and get less stressed about everything, HtS being one of them. I still love this story, I still have a lot of chapters written up, waiting to be posted, but I need a break.

I want to widen the gap between the chapter I just posted and the one I'm currently writing, too, so that I can eventually continue to give all my readers one chapters per week without feeling like I'm in a persistence race.

Until next time, people!
Chapter 71

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Despite what Kyo had been fearing, nothing drastic happened.

Training went on like usual, Jiraiya taking up their fuuinjutsu lessons like they’d never stopped. There was sparring with Minato, swinging by ANBU headquarters to check up on Hyena and get some extra training there. She spent time with Genma and their grandparents, and life just continued like it always did.

It was weird.

But there was talk in the shinobi ranks if you knew to listen, and Kyo heard a thing or two from the other ANBU, and she knew there was a lot of things at work behind the scene. A lot of hidden currents churning up the waters of a seemingly peaceful pond.

The Hokage left the village for some sort of meeting that had the majority of the shinobi forces in a tizzy, and then, not long after that, it was announced that the Second Shinobi War had come to a close, half a year after the destruction of Uzushio.

-x-x-x-

“Where's nee-san?” Genma-kun asked, peering at her from his seat at the kitchen table.

“She left on one of those missions of hers again,” Haname told him, before she added, “and don't speak with your mouth full, Genma-kun.”

The little boy dutifully chewed and swallowed, before posing his next question.

“When's she coming back?”

“I don't know,” Haname replied, pursing her lips disapprovingly. The war was over; there was absolutely no need for her only granddaughter to risk her life like this now things had calmed down.

It wasn't like Konoha was so desperate one little girl was going to make a difference.

If only Kou had married a proper, sensible woman, none of this would have been an issue, but Haname still did her best with Kyo-chan, trying to instil some sense into that head of hers.

Kyo-chan had always been somewhat peculiar; always with her head in the clouds. Insisting on playing with knives and plants instead of the dolls and toys Haname had tried to supply her with. To no avail.

Haname honestly didn't know what would end up with that girl.

She worried so. How would Kyo-chan find herself a happy future when she refused to do what was best for her?

This kunoichi business wasn't something a girl, soon to be a young woman, should get involved
“Can I go play with Souta today?” Genma-kun asked the moment he'd finished his breakfast, and with a pointed look from her, put his chopsticks down tidily like she'd taught him.

“Of course, dear, but make sure to come back home in time for lunch,” Haname said with a warm smile.

Genma-kun was growing up to be quite a charming young man! Growing so quickly, too.

She was sure Kou would marvel at how tall his son had gotten since he'd last been in the village.

“Bye, baa-san!” Genma-kun called and ran off and Haname waited to hear the front door slam shut behind him.

Chuckling softly at the enthusiastic boy, Haname set out to clean up after breakfast. She should probably prepare for lunch now, too, which would give her plenty of time to see to other things in the meantime.

She'd planned to get some cleaning done today.

A couple of hours later, Haname was done with the first floor and had moved on to the upstairs.

Opening the door to Kyo-chan's room she sighed at the sparse décor. Maybe she should buy a few things for when her granddaughter came back? That might be nice.

Haname could only hope she wouldn't land herself in hospital again!

Shaking her head to herself, Haname set out to dust and then wipe down the floors.

Kana-chan hadn't been anywhere near this difficult to raise, and she'd turned into a fine woman; was a mother of her own now.

If Kentarou went to the Police station, would he learn something about when they might expect Kou back home? She would like to see her son sometime this year, even though Kou never bothered to come around to his poor old parents much these days.

With a sigh, Haname focused on her task, though part of her mind was already going over what groceries she'd need to pick up for dinner later.

-x-x-x-

“So this is the kind of missions we're gonna be doing from now on?” Minato asked, peering at the line of wagons and the oxen that pulled them ambling down the road beside them.

“For now, yes,” Jiraiya said, sending Minato a mildly puzzled look. As if he wasn't quite sure what he meant.

Kyo could have explained, but she wasn't feeling quite ready to breach the subject.

They were escorting a merchant caravan up to Tetsu no Kuni to trade various wares for metal, weapons and ores. She was fairly sure most of the wagons were currently full of medicine, medicinal herbs, as well as quite a bit of fabric.
“Shouldn’t a caravan this size have a full team guarding it?” Kyo asked instead of continuing the earlier line of questioning.

“Usually,” Jiraiya grunted, rubbing at his jaw and letting his eyes wander over their charges. “But we’re still stretched thin and it was decided our team is more than enough. People in charge are doing as best they can and it's not like we can turn jobs down right now.”

Right. Konoha needed the money.

“You have a summoning contract with the toads, too, right? You mentioned it once,” Minato contributed to the conversation. “That means we can have more fighters relatively easily if the situation calls for it.”

“Exactly!” Jiraiya exclaimed with a grin, ruffling Minato's hair.

Kyo snorted and couldn't help but smile a little, because her two male teammates looked so... relaxed wasn't quite the right word for it, because this was still a mission, and this shortly after declared peace, it was still dangerous out there. Bandits were plenty and enemies might still try to get in one last dirty shot at anyone else before things calmed enough it couldn't be blamed on confusion and chaos.

Eyeing the group of people and animals they had to protect during this trip, Kyo couldn't help but wonder... it wasn't like Konoha could just pull all the people out at the border home right away. Emptying the border stations and closing them, acting like all was good and well now.

It didn’t work like that.

This peace thing would take time, if it now would last at all, which she still wasn't entirely convinced of.

There'd be more war, she just didn't know when or how it would happen.

Turning back to the present, Kyo studied the nineteen men, seven wagons and fourteen mules they had to protect and couldn't help but wonder if it wasn't too much for the three of them to cover.

“So what are we gonna do during this trip?” Minato finally asked, taking in the slow progress of the animals and the carts.

The thrill of doing something new had faded about an hour into the trip and it was really sinking in now how slowly their company was moving.

It grated.

Kyo sighed and stretched her arms over her head, peering at the closest wagon.

“Guard the caravan,” Jiraiya drawled, looking entertained at the disbeliefing and dubious looks they sent him. “Training,” he added with a huff, rolling his eyes. “You can start by reading these,” he said, tossing a scroll each at Kyo and Minato.

Kyo caught hers and inspected it interestedly a second, before she focused back on Jiraiya.

“Water jutsu?” She questioned.

“It's your second affinity,” he said with a shrug. “And you said you'd like to learn some earth jutsu,” he continued, sending Minato a look.
Minato offered up a small smile and nodded, and then spent the rest of the day memorizing the contents of his scroll and practising the hand seals.

Kyo did much the same, but was splitting her attention between the scroll and their surroundings. It wouldn't do to completely lose her situational awareness and be taken completely by surprise by something.

She had learned a few small water jutsu in ANBU, but those were more focused on practicality than battle capacity, necessarily.

Fire jutsu small enough to light a camp fire discreetly. Water jutsu to draw water out of the air to fill a canteen, or use your own chakra, if the air was too dry.

Handy little things that made life easier in the field.

A good while before night-fall, their whole group slowed to a stop to make camp and it felt... absurd to stop moving, slow as it'd been, when there was still daylight to see by.

But she could adapt.

Kyo and Minato observed and assisted with a few small things here and there when it looked like someone needed it, but mostly tried to stay out of everyone's way.

“Let's make camp, kids,” Jiraiya said when the civilians were mostly done.

“We're not sharing with them?” Minato asked, even though he'd already started clearing the ground for a fire-pit.

“Shinobi tend to make civilians uneasy, Minato,” Jiraiya informed him evenly, glancing at the men milling around, tending to the animals and making sure the carts had been secured. “It's better in Konoha, where they're used to us, to the point you wouldn't really notice, but that doesn't mean they're comfortable enough to share their sleeping space with us.”

“Our hitai-ate make it hard to forget we're professional killers,” Kyo added drily, sending Minato a small, quick grin.

Minato tilted his head and thought it over, eventually giving a nod of acceptance. “Do we eat with them?”

“Yeah,” Jiraiya huffed, collapsing down to sit on the grass, leaning back on his hands and observing the camp slowly settling down in front of them. “But we should try and pitch in with that, so if you spot anything edible while we walk,” he trailed off meaningfully, sending them a look.

“Got it,” Kyo said. Maybe there would be opportunity for her to find some interesting plants, too. Some of her poison stores were running a bit low for comfort.

She couldn't find everything inside the village, though the access to the Forest of Death had helped a lot.

Maybe Minato would like to learn a few things, too, she mused, eyeing her teammate speculatively.

Could possibly be good practice for her teaching skills in preparation to teaching Genma...

The routine for the next few days was many things, but exciting was not one of them.
Up at dawn, eat, pack up camp, walk all day, brief break for lunch, walk some more, and then stop and make camp an hour before sunset.

Their clients slowly grew more comfortable around them, enough to ask a few questions or ask for a helping hand every now and then.

Or, at least they grew more comfortable with Kyo and Minato. They were still keeping a respectful distance to Jiraiya, which the man didn't seem to particularly mind.

“How even old are you kids?” Irie, the cook, asked curiously as he served up their portions one evening.

“I’m eleven and Kyo’s ten,” Minato responded with a smile, polite and cheerful to a fault.

Irie eyed them sadly a moment, before he turned to serve up the portion of rabbit stew to the next person waiting. “Seems awfully young to an old man like me,” he muttered.

“It is young.” Kyo shrugged, because it wasn’t like that had stopped anyone. “Hey, do you have any hot water ready, Irie-san?” She pressed, because something warm to drink sounded nice.

“Sure do,” Irie said and Kyo eagerly dug through her poison pack until she could find- ah-ha! Kyo accepted a cup of hot water with something like glee and dropped a few slices of dried bloodroot in it to soak.

Awesome!

Minato sent her an amused look. As he’d seen her drink this before, he wasn’t worried about her ingestion of the highly poisonous brew.

Instead, he steered them back to their own little camp at the outskirts of the larger camp, where Jiraiya was waiting for them, resting in preparation for the night watch.

They were taking turns, but it wasn’t like their days were particularly strenuous, so Kyo wasn’t overly bothered.

It was fine.

Kimura-san had even offered them to rest in one of his wagons during the day, if they wanted it. Which was very kind, but also self-serving, because the better rested they were, the better they’d be able to protect his wares and people.

This caravan was actually comprised of two different merchants, who’d come together to pay for Jiraiya and his team's presence.

It may be an old saying, but there was safety in numbers.

Just before they reached their camp, another of the caravan's people came striding towards them with a clear purpose, determination all but written across his face and Kyo watched him curiously.

Ryouichi was a man in his late forties and, as far as she'd understood it, had been a Konoha Genin once, before he'd retired as a teenager. These days, he was a herbalist, according to one of the cart drivers, and worked for Kimura-san.

Kyo paused to turn to the man, curious what he wanted, because he'd very clearly set his sights on her.
That didn't mean she was prepared for him to slap her tea mug out of her hand.

Kyo twitched with the need to pull a weapon and *retaliate* at the unexpected 'assault' but settled for fixing the man with a blank, somewhat flat look.

Because, what?

“Do you have *any* idea what it was you put in that water, young man?” Ryouichi snapped sharply, all but glaring at her.

Kyo glanced down at her poor, ruined tea and then turned back to the man lecturing her about the dangers of consuming plants you knew nothing about and the fact she was apparently ignorant enough she'd end up killing herself before an enemy got the chance.

Minato was valiantly trying to bite back laughter, from the look on his face, and Jiraiya had sat up to observe them a small distance away.

Kyo sighed. Heavily.

“Yes, I'm perfectly aware what it was I put in my water, Ryouichi-san,” she finally interrupted, tired of listening to him monologue. Though, she hadn't really been listening, to be completely honest. “And I appreciate that you're trying to look out for me, but now I'm gonna have to go get another cup of hot water from Irie.”

“Weren't you listening to a word I just said?” Ryouichi huffed irritably. “Bloodroot is highly poisonous and will *kill* you! Painfully!” He glared at her.

Kyo stared evenly back. “Other people, yeah. Not me.” She wasn't really in the mood to explain more than that and it wasn't really any of this man's business anyway. “Here, Minato,” she muttered, shoving her dinner at the boy, who took it without a word.

Then, she bent down to pick up her mug, inspected the slices of half-soaked root, deemed them good enough and went back to Irie for a refill.

*Then,* just because she felt like it, Kyo took a sip of too hot tea on her way back, keeping up steady eye-contact with Ryouichi while she was at it.

The man twitched strangely, threw his hands in the air and stomped off, muttering to himself about casualties and stupidity, and when she sat down by their fire, Kyo felt pretty accomplished and pleased with herself.

“Hey, Kyo?” Minato spoke up a few minutes later, when they'd all finished eating. “Why don't you correct people when they think you're a boy?”

Kyo glanced at him. “Because it's not like it matters much,” she said, and then grudgingly added, “and also because it's convenient. The civilians think we're too young, but it'll be much worse if they know I'm a girl.” Which was just ridiculous.

Girls were just as -if not *more,* in some cases- competent as boys!

Minato frowned. “Why?”

Kyo snorted and sent him a look. “How many people have asked you about marriage, Minato?” She asked dryly. “About how many children you want? Future wife? When you'll retire?”
“Um, what does that have to do with being a shinobi?” Minato asked, looking mildly overwhelmed and rather uncomfortable.

“Not much,” Kyo admitted. “But it's a pretty large part of being a kunoichi. Grandma would prefer if I never went to the Academy and keeps dropping 'hints' that I should just stop with this foolishness, leave it up to competent people, and completely focus on becoming the perfect house-wife.” The urge to roll her eyes and mock-gag was strong, but she resisted. Barely.

“That's stupid,” he said quietly, frowning down at the grass.

“It is,” Kyo agreed. “But women can pop out children, and that's apparently the only thing that's important to some people.” And she was maybe a little bit bitter.

She'd been lucky enough in the Before to never have felt like this. No one had ever put this kind of pressure on her back there, even as an adult. And Kyo wasn't even a teenager yet!

She hated it and it grated.

Jiraiya heaved a sigh and eyed the two of them with a strange look on his face. “Get some rest, you two,” he told them. “Kyo, you'll take the last shift tomorrow morning, Minato, you're on the first one today.”

“Okay, sensei,” Kyo murmured.

It was very nice of Jiraiya to take the worst shift almost every night; the one in the middle, which meant fewer hours of consecutive rest.

Having said his piece, Jiraiya settled down for some sleep, leaning back against the tree they'd chosen to camp beneath.

Kyo eyed the caravan camp off to the side. Animals and men alike had all been fed and watered and were settling down for the night.

Noise levels were falling and soon enough, the only sound was the popping of the fire kept alive in the centre of the camp, supplying light and warmth in the thickening darkness. Keeping some of the fear and unease at bay.

Not that a fire would actually help in case they were attacked, but whatever helped these people sleep.

“You okay? Want me to get you something?” Kyo asked, glancing at Minato.

“I'm good. You should sleep, too,” he returned with an easy smile.

Without any further fuss, Kyo unsealed her sleeping roll and, like Jiraiya, settled down for the night. She'd have an early start tomorrow and sleep sounded nice.

She wasn't physically exhausted, but there was something incredibly tiresome with the slow pace they were moving at.

She couldn't wait to be done with this escort mission so they could go back home.

Days crawled by at a snail's pace, but at least they got a lot of reading done.
They also took turns to scour the forest by the road they were travelling down, both for game and various plants, edible or otherwise. Scouting out their surroundings was also a good idea.

Kyo got a decent haul of poisonous plants to bring back home to work with, and just the chance to stretch her legs and run for a bit was a blessing. If she didn't have those moments, Kyo felt like she'd slowly lose her mind.

Jiraiya eventually seemed to suffer enough under the boredom to take to lecturing them on fuuinjutsu, or just quiz them randomly.

It could have been worse.

Two and a half weeks into their mission, two days after they'd left the latest village -in a string of tiny villages- behind, the monotonous boredom was interrupted.

“Kyo, to the front,” Jiraiya ordered softly. “Minato, guard the caravan.”

“Yes, sensei,” Kyo murmured, echoed by Minato, and they were both already moving. Kyo faded in with her surroundings as she ran ahead, slipping unnoticed between wagons and animals, skirting around the occasional man.

She got into position with minimal trouble, and once she was at the head of the caravan, she could see exactly why Jiraiya had reacted.

The terrain had gotten rockier and rockier the further north they travelled, and up ahead, there were clusters of stones fencing in the road.

Perfect for an ambush.

The caravan was travelling slowly enough it would be easy for word of their destination to make its way ahead of them, because none of the men had been shy about revealing they were headed up to the Land of Iron.

There were only so many roads they could take.

It would have been easy.

Hidden from view as she was, Kyo didn't have to worry about any potential attackers spotting her and doing something stupid, while still being in a prime position to react.

Eyeing the caravan for a moment, the line of wagons and animals stretched out like a slow-moving train, and then the rocks just up ahead... an ambush wouldn't attack the first cart. They wouldn't aim for the second one, either, most likely.

If Kyo was the one ambushing a caravan like this, she'd wait until she could strike it right in the middle, plunging the whole thing into chaos and separating the people in two manageable sections.

Leave them as little time to think as possible before tearing them apart.

Instead of lingering by the first cart, Kyo crept ahead until she could jump up on the rocks and investigate, still keeping part of her attention on the caravan. Her wards.

She could sense them before she saw them.

People. Bandits.
And... Kyo eyed what most certainly had to be a shinobi lurking in the back, looking bored and eyeing his companions with poorly disguised contempt.

Now, what to do, what to do.

Kyo wasn't used to having this much room to think ahead of a fight. She was usually thrown head-first into any confrontation, or all the thinking had been left up to other people. But she couldn't signal Jiraiya-sensei about this right now without blowing her cover.

If she waited and just bided her time, people could die, though.

There were people on the other side of the road, too, but she could deal with these ones before they could attack.

Choice made, Kyo pulled her weapons, a kunai in her left, three senbon with her right, and firmed up her resolve.

If Jiraiya ended up chewing her out for this, then so be it.

Taking a second to eye the bandits, Kyo could single out the more authoritative ones with a glance, and it was easy to throw her senbon at those three and leap at the shinobi in the same motion.

The shinobi swore and fell into a well-practised defensive stance, but Kyo didn't think other than to take in all the visual cues she could, let her body take in and react to everything around her unhindered by thought.

Kunai blocked with the side of a tanto, Kyo shifted to slip away from her opponent, throwing another senbon at the still confused bandits; they hadn't cottoned on to what was happening yet.

“SHINOBI GUARD!” The man she was trying to kill shouted at the top of his lungs, which was signal enough to Minato and sensei what was happening, too, and she wasted no time in doubling her efforts.

She didn't dare ignore the bandits, though, because even though they were untrained at best, one of them could still do enough damage from behind and if she was careless she'd end up dead.

Pale blue eyes, sharp and cold, scanned the area around him, but she didn't wait for him to try and find her before she attacked again.

She didn't know where he was from, couldn't see a hitai-ate anywhere, and she didn't know his rank.

He wasn't dressed like a shinobi, but that did nothing to hide the way he held himself, the callouses on his hands and the muscles under his clothes, shaped by hours and hours of training.

It made this all the more dangerous.

Kyo shifted her hold on her kunai, slipped another one from her holster, and went after the man again.

“Fuck,” he growled when she slipped under his guard.

She cut into his side, but it wasn't deep enough to be fatal, because he was wearing mesh underneath his civilian clothes and he'd shifted away from her.

“Kids shouldn't get involved,” he snarled, trying to grab her and retaliate, but Kyo rolled away from him.
He'd realised she was far too short for any kind of adult with that attack. Shit.

Throwing one of her kunai at the neck of a nearby bandit, Kyo slipped a senbon from a holster, flicked that at another, and then dove head-first back into her fight with the shinobi.

Was he a nuke-nin? Or an enemy nin *acting* like a nuke-nin?

No time to think on that right now, she mused with inappropriate hilarity as she ducked under a high kick aimed at her head, angled herself to avoid a knife to the chest and then jammed her kunai up into the soft tissue under her opponent's arm, into the pit.

He crumpled without a word, his breath leaving him in an eerie, wet rattle.

Yanking her kunai out with a twist, Kyo barely spared him a glance before she ran straight into the thick of the group of panicking bandits and picked them off one after one until there weren't any left.

It was very hard to counter someone you couldn't see, she mused blandly as she surveyed the group one last time, before she leapt up onto the rocks to see what the situation was with the caravan and the rest of the would-be-ambush attackers.

Jiraiya threw a kunai at the last of the men, hitting him in the centre of the back and felling him to the ground with finality, and he turned to survey the area and then the halted caravan behind him.

“Kyo?” He questioned.

“Here,” Kyo said, dropping her chameleon jutsu and giving him an easy wave. She took a second to take stock of herself. “No injuries and everything taken care of here.”

Jiraiya sent her a dry look and waved her over.

Kyo obligingly leapt down, landing next to the man.

“Explanation for the change of plans?” He requested blandly, ignoring everything else for now.

Kyo stretched out her arm, absently prodding her tender forearm -she was fairly sure she'd redirected a strike with it, but she barely noticed things like that in the middle of battle- as she eyed her sensei and superior officer.

“I went to take a look and see what we were dealing with, spotted a shinobi amongst the bandits and figured attacking was the best course of action. I couldn't alert you to the issue without revealing our presence or take my eyes off the target, and if I had let them wait until half the caravan had passed like they'd most likely planned, ninjutsu could have dealt enough damage several of our charges could have died and the wagons and animals been damaged. We would have been both delayed and in enough problems it wasn't worth the risk,” Kyo reported quickly and succinctly, meeting Jiraiya's gaze. “I knew you were prepared and ready to act, sensei,” she added.

Kyo wasn't feeling particularly apologetic, precisely, but it was still a bit of an uncomfortable situation.

Jiraiya stared at her a second longer, before he reached out to pat her on the shoulder with a snort.

“I'm putting this in the report when we get back home,” he warned dryly, “but you're right. Go collect our two shinobi, will you?” He muttered, handing her two body scrolls. Black and red.

Kyo accepted them with a brisk nod and set to it while Jiraiya went to talk to Kimura-san and
Yamada-san -the two men who had paid for their protection- to brief them on the situation.

While she was at it, Kyo located all of her weapons as soon as she'd stored the unknown shinobi, retrieved her kunai and senbon, wiped them off and then put them back where they belonged again.

That done, she headed over to the other side to find the man Jiraiya had mentioned. Her guy's friend or teammate.

Partner?

Eh, that wasn't important right now and it didn't really matter to Kyo either way. They were both dead and Kyo's wards were all fine, if unsettled and spooked.

When she was done with that, Kyo tucked away both the body scrolls in her poison pack and then set out to clear the road of bodies to make sure the carts could pass without any issues.

A wheel breaking on top of this would just suck, because any delay meant more time they had to stick with these people. Which meant more time spent away from home.

“You good?” Minato asked the moment she rejoined him.

“Fine.” She shrugged. She might get into some measure of trouble for insubordination, but she hadn't gotten hurt.

And they continued on as usual, slowly but steadily making their way north.

If most of the men they were travelling with eyed her with far more wariness and unease after the almost-ambush, then that was just to be expected.

She might look like an average ten year old, but she just plain wasn't.

-x-x-x-

A month.

It had taken them a month to travel up to Tetsu no Kuni's capital. A stretch that would have taken them a few days to run if they'd been free to set the pace.

Kyo was so glad to finally be done with this whole thing.

Saying goodbye to the merchant caravan inside the city walls, Jiraiya led them off to find an inn.

Kyo and Minato stuck close together, because there were a lot of people around and while Kyo had been to plenty of towns and even the occasional city before... she hadn't really been part of it.

Those had been stealth missions, usually at night, and no one had seen either her or the rest of the members of her team.

“This is very different from Konoha,” Minato murmured quietly, sending her a glance before he went back to observe the people and buildings around them.

Kyo made an affirmative noise in the back of her throat and concentrated on following Jiraiya through the crowds.
His broad back and white hair stood out, but it felt nice to have him there.

Soon enough, they were ensconced in a small room, tucked away in the back of a moderately sized inn in an out of the way location.

It was small but well-tended and the owner had been a woman in her forties who'd taken one look at Jiraiya and told him not to cause any trouble.

"Any particular reason we're still here and not on our way back home?" Kyo asked curiously, taking a seat on one of the futons laid out for them.

As far as she knew, Jiraiya hadn't taken any additional missions before they'd left. Seeing as the merchant caravan was staying here for two months, so they weren't exactly waiting around for that; another Konoha team would come retrieve them at the agreed upon time, and she could only hope it wouldn't be them.

He sent her an amused look. "We're just gonna spend the night, part of tomorrow, keeping an ear to the ground and our eyes open." Jiraiya shrugged easily.

"So we're spying?" Minato sounded intensely curious and it made Jiraiya huff out a low laugh.

"Nothing so complicated." He grinned. "Or stealthy," he added, sending Kyo a brief look, which she just blinked at in return.

She was sure she didn't know what he was alluding to.

"So you're basically gonna go drinking and see what the people of Tetsu are talking about," Kyo summarized dubiously.

"Pretty much," Jiraiya admitted without an ounce of shame or regret. "You'd be surprised at the kind of things you can hear in the seedier parts of any town."

"I doubt it," Kyo countered dryly. Not the fact you could hear interesting things, but the fact she'd be surprised about it, because she wasn't.

People talked. Gossiped. Whatever you wanted to call it, and the fresh peace was no doubt making many lips looser than they'd otherwise be.

"Kyo and I'll just be here, then?" Minato wondered.

Jiraiya paused, as if considering something. "You can go out and explore a bit, so long as you stay together and get yourselves back here before it gets dark," he eventually said, eyeing the two of them speculatively. "Don't pick any fights and if you see any foreign shinobi, try to get away. If that doesn't work, try and make as big a racket as you can and I'll come save ya." He grinned, though his gaze was sharp.

Kyo stared at him a moment. "I'd say that sounds highly irresponsible, but at the same time, sounds like actually sound advice." And she didn't know how she felt about it.

Jiraiya laughed and sent her a cheery smile, before he left, strolling back outside to do as he'd said.

"Should we really go out?" Minato asked after a beat of heavy silence. "We could stay here, too?" He offered tentatively, no doubt feeling about as dubious as Kyo felt.

"Well. I'm a Chuunin, and you're without a doubt not far away from a promotion either, so," she
paused, “it's probably fine,” she decided. “Let's see if we can't learn something Jiraiya-sensei won't hear about while bar-hopping.” She smirked.

Because drunks weren't the only ones who talked.

Minato's cheeks pinked ever so slightly, and he sent her a pleased grin before he grabbed her hand and dragged her off.

“So why do you think sensei really gave his permission for this?” Minato asked softly while they walked down a busy street, trying to see if they could find a market places.

“Probably because there's a larger chance we'll pick up on something interesting if more people are out and about,” Kyo returned casually, keeping her eyes peeled on her surroundings at all times. “And it's not exactly safe, but we're shinobi before we are children, and shouldn't be coddled,” she added dryly.

“And you're a Chuunin,” Minato added contemplatively with a nod.

“And there's that,” Kyo agreed.

It was afternoon, and they could probably spend at least a couple of hours getting a look around before they had to head back, and that was with a generous margin.

Their hitai-ate attracted a fair bit of attention, but that was expected this far north, and Kyo bet Kumo hitai-ate wouldn't garner even half as much scrutiny, if only by virtue of exposure.

Jiraiya was probably also betting on the fact that, with the peace as fresh and fragile as it was, no one wanted to be the one tipping the scales enough it shattered. That would make the particular village responsible rather unpopular with the rest of them.

Kyo frowned at that thought, feeling like something niggled in the back of her head, but before she could grasp onto it and try and figure out what it was, the street they'd been walking down opened up into a decently sized square.

“Wow,” Minato said, eyes large with fascination as he tried to take in everything all at once.

This market was bustling with people and there were all kinds of stands. Considering the fact they were in the Land of Iron, Kyo didn't feel it was particularly strange there were so many stands selling metal work, ranging between everything from kitchen knives to farming tools and shuriken.

“Come on, let's go look!” Minato urged enthusiastically, dragging her over to the closest one, all but vibrating with excitement.

Kyo couldn't help but laugh and go with him, eagerly surveying the various weapons on display.

She didn't know how many stands they'd taken a look at before Minato stopped by one to pick up a... rather strange kunai.

Kyo tilted her head and studied it a moment, before she took in Minato's sparkling eyes.

“You buying it?” She asked curiously, because Minato looked at that knife the same way Aita looked at his sword, sometimes.

“It's really cool,” Minato said, looking like he hadn't quite made up his mind. He weighed the kunai
in his hand speculatively. “Would it be usable in battle, though?” He asked, despite how much he seemed to want it.

Kyo eyed the strange-looking kunai speculatively, taking it from Minato's hands under the sharp gaze of the stand owner to get a feel for it a moment.

She handed it back with a small grin, watching Minato damn near clutch it to his chest.

“I can't say how accurate it would be for throwing, but close combat? Probably better than a normal kunai, with some practice. The prongs would be good for deflecting and catching someone else’s blade,” she pointed out, pointing a finger at the two shorter blades that grew out of the ‘main' knife, so to say.

“Hey, mister!” Minato immediately turned to the man hovering behind the stall, watching them like a hawk. “How much is it? And do you have any more?”

“I have a set of five,” he grunted, glancing at Minato's hitai-ate and then at Kyo, who met his gaze head on.

He quickly turned back to Minato, stating his price.

What followed was some rather impressing haggling, that Kyo only really listened to with half an ear while she surveyed the people around them.

When they were done, Minato tucked away his brand new kunai into one of his weapons holsters and turned back to Kyo, looking like a child on Christmas.

“Do you want to see if you can find something you want?” He asked, sending her a grin and taking an easy hold of her wrist. “They had a few holsters back that way,” he added, pointing down the direction they'd come from.

“That's fine,” Kyo assured him, feeling entertained. “I'd like to see if we can find something sweet to eat, though,” she suggested instead, because it had been a while.

Minato eagerly joined her in a quest to find a place that sold snacks.

Getting back to the inn well before dark, Kyo and Minato gathered up their things and went to the bathroom down the hall from their room, taking turns to wash and sticking together, because you felt pretty vulnerable in nothing but your birthday suit.

“Do you think sensei will take long?” Minato asked, already squeaky clean and dressed again, sitting just outside the tiled bathing area, keeping an eye on things.

“It wouldn't surprise me if he stays out all night,” Kyo returned absently, before she emptied the bucket of water over her hair to rinse out the shampoo she'd just finished with.

“This is pretty weird,” Minato remarked when he was certain she could hear clearly again.

Despite the rather vague statement, Kyo understood what it was he meant.

“Yeah,” she agreed quietly.

This didn't really feel like a mission.
Wrapping things up and getting dressed again, they soon enough settled down to rest and sleep respectively, because neither of them felt comfortable enough to just... go to bed without anyone awake and ready in case something happened.

Especially not without Jiraiya there with them.

“You sure you don’t want to sleep first?” Minato asked, even though his eyes were drooping and he looked half-asleep already.

“It’s fine,” Kyo snorted, throwing her pillow at him. “Sleep, and I’ll wake you when I get tired,” she promised.

Minato picked up her pillow from where it had fallen after hitting him in the face, hugged it to his chest and flopped down on his back, getting comfortable without another word.

He was asleep within a minute.

Kyo was feeling rather weary, too, but not to the point she’d have trouble staying awake.

Making herself comfortable, Kyo got out her whetstone and a couple kunai that could benefit from sharpening, settling down to wait a few hours, or however long it’d take Jiraiya to come back.

“You smell like you brought the bar back with you,” Kyo commented blandly, getting to her feet and approaching Jiraiya slowly.

He looked steady enough, so she doubted he’d been drinking enough to get affected to the point he’d be called drunk.

She wrinkled her nose, because up close, he smelled even worse. Like stale beer and smoke. “Did you bathe in the stuff?” She asked, tentatively poking at a section of the man’s clothes.

But no, they were dry.

Jiraiya snorted. “Your faith in me is astounding,” he said dryly, ruffling her hair with a bit more force than was comfortable as he trudged past her towards his futon.

Kyo scoffed. “Did you hear anything interesting?” She asked instead of commenting on that.

“Eh,” Jiraiya grunted, slumping down to sit and blink a bit blearily at her. “Maybe, maybe not. You never quite know with these things until you’ve got perspective,” he explained, lifting a hand and tipping it back and forth indecisively. “What about you two? Any trouble? Anything to report?”

“Everything went fine, no incidents,” Kyo told him with a shrug and went back to her bed. “People were mostly wary of our hitai-ate, but otherwise only seemed to talk about the peace.”

Jiraiya gave an acknowledging hum, rubbing tiredly at his face. “Wanna sleep?” He asked after a lengthy pause that made her wonder if he wasn’t a bit more under the influence than she’d initially assumed.

“That’s fine; I’ll keep watch a little while longer and then wake Minato,” Kyo told him. “Sleep, and then Minato can wake you for the last shift.”

Jiraiya fixed her with an assessing look, no doubt trying to gauge how tired she really was, before he relented with a sigh.
“If you get too tired tomorrow, I'll give you a ride, yeah?” He muttered and slumped down on his back, shifting to make himself comfortable.

“Thank you, sensei.” Kyo smiled softly and went back to her kunai; she had a couple left that needed sharpening, and then she'd find something else to do.

Maybe she should sort through all the plants and roots she'd gathered on the way here?

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Chapter End Notes

Hi! I felt like posting a chapter today, seeing as it's been over a month and I'm starting to feel a bit better. I won't be getting back to the weekly posting schedule just yet, but I figured I'd share a chapter every now and then to keep everyone interested? If that makes sense?
I hope you're all well!
Chapter 72

Chapter Notes

I got two pieces of absolutely stunning art yesterday and today, so I have to spread the happy around! Please go give them a look on tumblr! You can find them under the 'HtS art' tag on my profile (I have no idea how to link to specific tumblr posts, sorry)

Unlike the trip there, the run back home from Tetsu no Kuni took no more than three days, and that was without hurrying like they had Kumo nin nipping at their heels.

Being able to run and not think about keeping a civilian pace, or keep an eye on so many people and animals all at once was liberating, and Kyo relished every minute. Something she was fairly sure she wasn't alone in.

Minato sure looked happy to be done with their mission, too.

Neither of them cared about the amused looks Jiraiya kept sending them, because it really was that nice to be able to move at a speed that felt faster than a crawl, at best.

“Don't wait too long to fill out the paperwork,” Jiraiya reminded them before they split up after they'd reported in. “And you've both got a check-up at the hospital tomorrow,” he added.

Minato paused. “Why?”

“We've been away a month,” Jiraiya said with a small shrug. “I'm headed over right now, but you two can wait 'til tomorrow, just don't forget.”

“We won't,” Kyo assured him.

She just wanted to go home and see Genma. It felt like she'd been gone forever.

“See you tomorrow?” Minato asked before they split up, looking tired but accomplished and happy to be home again.

“Sure,” Kyo agreed with a smile, gently bumping her shoulder against Minato's. “Go home and rest,” she added, because it was more than nice to finally be able to relax fully.

Minato laughed. “Says you,” he muttered, sending her a look.

Before she had a chance to retort, he was gone, heading home to no doubt follow her advice.

Kyo peered after him a moment before she turned in the direction of her grandparents' house with a shrug.

Her feet took her there without any input from her brain, which was nice, and Kyo felt a little bit like she was walking through an indistinct haze.

It wasn't unpleasant, just strange and she probably needed to sleep, too.

“Kyo-chan?” Haname said when she spotted her walking into the kitchen, sounding surprised.
“What are you doing here? Kou-kun came home last week.”

“Tou-san’s home?” Kyo asked, immediately feeling far more awake.

“Of course, dear, that's what I just said,” Haname said, lifting a hand to cradle one of her cheeks, giving her a concerned once-over. “He's promised to come by one of these days for dinner, so be sure to remind him, Kyo-chan,” she added.

“Will do,” Kyo returned, even though she'd already spun on her heel and was striding back towards the door. “See you, Obaa-san! Thank you!” She called into the house and hurried off home before Haname could say anything else.

Dad was home!

Kyo grinned so wide her cheeks hurt, but she didn't care.

“I'm home!” She called, almost stumbling into the hallway, she was hurrying so much.

“Hello, kitten!” Tou-san greeted back, which was followed shortly by an energetic, “Nee-san!”

Kyo kicked off her shoes and next she knew, she'd thrown herself at Kou, who caught her without hesitation, wrapping her up in a tight hug that was the best thing in the world.

Going boneless against him, Kyo rested her head on her dad's shoulder and closed her eyes, just basking in the moment.

Kou gave a small, soft laugh, firmed up his hold on her and walked over to the couch.

“Me too!” Genma insisted from beside them, from the sound of things jumping up and down with impatient eagerness. “Me too, tou-san!”

“I only have two arms,” Kou drawled amusedly, finally taking a seat. And then Genma was trying to burrow himself into the non-existent space between Kyo and their father.

“Genma,” Kyo snorted, feeling a helpless smile stretch her lips, despite the fond exasperation colouring the expression.

“I missed you, too!” Genma insisted with a pout. “You were gone forever!”

“It was a month,” she muttered against Kou's shoulder, trying not to laugh. “Escorting merchants is painfully boring, tou-san,” she added, tilting her head to glance at his face.

Kou sent her an amused look, seemingly completely at ease and happy to be buried under his children.

“I haven't seen you in so long,” Kyo muttered, tightening her hold on tou-san and burying her face in his shoulder.

“Yeah,” Kou agreed with a sigh, a hand smoothing down her hair. “You've gotten so tall. If you keep it up, soon enough, I won't recognize you,” he joked half-heartedly.

“Genma will recognize me,” Kyo countered, moving one arm to snake around her little brother and pulling him into a partial hug. “Right?”

“Nee-san is nee-san,” Genma said importantly. “There's only one.”
Kyo snickered into Kou's shoulder. “I love you both so much, you know that, right?”

“Love you, too!” Genma chirped.

“Yeah. What he said,” Kou snorted and pressed a kiss to her hair. “No injuries?” Tou-san asked after a calm, peaceful moment, squeezing her gently to get her attention.

“No.” Kyo said and bit her lip uncertainly a moment, before breezily tacking on, “but I might get scolded for insubordination.”

Kou stilled, and then slowly drew back enough to look at her, fixing her with a rather blank look.

“Kyo,” Kou said, as if it pained him he had to say this out loud. “Please don't drop something like that on me and then not explain.”

“What does that mean?” Genma wondered curiously, peering from Kyo to tou-san and back again. “Insubination?”

“Insubordination,” Kyo corrected absently. “It means someone told you to do something and you did something else. It's not good.” She threw her little brother a look. “It can get you in trouble.”

Kou heaved a heavy sigh, letting his head fall back against the sofa backrest. “Explanation now, please, Kyo.”

“Jiraiya-sensei sent me up ahead of the caravan when we approached an ambush, to guard the wagons. I decided to check the bandits over to see what I had to work with, spotted a shinobi amongst them, and decided to attack before any jutsu could get involved,” Kyo recounted quickly and succinctly and she'd have to write all this down in the report tucked away in a pocket, waiting for her attention. “No one was hurt.” Other than the bandits, but that was a given.

It was startling, sometimes, how easy it was to dismiss anyone not of 'her people' as counting.

Her dad sighed again, blinking sedately up at the ceiling while he thought that through.

“Did you signal him?”

“How?” Kyo asked dryly. “I strongly doubt sensei know ANBU sign, and I was keeping a low profile. If I'd tried, I would most likely have given away our presence.” She leaned her chin on Kou's shoulder, not feeling inclined to move any time soon.

“And how did Jiraiya react?”

“Asked for my reasoning, conveyed he was mildly displeased and said he'd include it in his report.” Which was far from the worst that could have happened, but Kyo liked to think she knew Jiraiya well enough by now to gauge his possible reactions to most things.

Kou huffed, but didn't say anything else on the matter.

“Is nee-san in trouble?” Genma asked after it had become clear neither of them was about to continue the conversation without prompting.

“A little bit, maybe.” Kou admitted. “It always depends on the mission and situation, as well as what kind of changes you've made and the outcome they result in.”

Genma blinked, trying to digest that and no doubt try and translate it into something that made more sense.
“It means that sometimes, it's okay to bend the rules a little, so long as things turn out fine. If things get worse, you'll be in a lot more trouble than if you'd followed orders,” Kyo told her brother, who gave a grave nod.

Kou snorted and huffed out an amused laugh, but it was true enough.

Results spoke for themselves, and they were shinobi.

“You hungry, kitten?”

“Yeah.” Kyo was very rarely not hungry, and anything her dad made was bound to be better than food made on the road.

“Then go take a shower while I make something, and then we can all go visit Ryota in the hospital,” Kou said, patting her back. “He's fine, got hurt a while back and the medic wanted to keep him for observation a while once we got back to the village.”

Kyo let out a slow, relieved breath. “Okay,” she murmured, kissed tou-san's cheek and then got up to go take that shower.

“How're you feeling?”

“Kitten,” Ryota returned with a small, slow smile. “Haven't seen you in a while,” he continued, dark eyes giving her an intent once-over. “You look well,” he concluded, pleased.

“Unlike you,” Kyo huffed, approaching her honorary uncle with a worried frown.

“Nah, looks worse than it is, at this point,” he drawled, sending her a smirk when Kyo looked unimpressed.

Half-climbing up on the bed to give the man a careful hug, Kyo ignored the rest of the occupants in the room to properly greet Ryota.

“You look like you got beat up pretty bad,” Kyo told him solemnly, prodding gingerly at the bandages visible at the neck and arm of his hospital shirt.

“Gave as good as I got, though,” Ryota returned, which... wasn't a denial.

“It's so nice to see you again, Ryota, thanks for asking how I've been,” Kou said easily, setting down Genma on Ryota's lap with a wicked smile at his teammate's unimpressed glance. “We can tell who your favourite really is,” he accused teasingly.

Kyo snorted. “Did he suffer a concussion he's just not told me about?”

“Yes. He's unfortunately had it since childhood. Untreatable, I'm afraid,” Ryota muttered, gracing his friend with the stink eye. “Hey, if you offered to assassinate people for me, then maybe you'd stand a chance,” he added in a marginally louder voice, looking entertained.

Kyo grinned sheepishly, because oh, she'd forgotten about that.

“I thought I was your favourite?” Genma exclaimed, looking an entertaining mix of outraged, betrayed and playful.

Ryota blinked and turned to eye the four year old. “Between you and me, that's true,” he gave a
solemn nod, “but you should never agitate the poison specialist, and if she ever learns the truth, your sister might make me regret it.”

Genma pressed a hand to his mouth in an attempt to smother his giggles.

Kyo rolled her eyes.

“I'm feeling so attacked,” she mused, walking around the bed to take a seat in Kou's lap, where he'd settled into a convenient chair. “It's like you don't love me.”

“I love you,” Genma was quick to reassure her. “We can share him.”

“In half?” Kyo suggested dryly, sending Ryota an amused look.

“Okay!” Genma agreed, clearly missing half of her meaning.

Ryota snorted and then twitched with pain, expression tightening a second, before he smoothed it over to fix Genma with a neutral look.

“I feel like I've been outmanoeuvred,” he mused blandly, before turning to other matters. “So you're alright?” He asked, sending a look Kyo's way.

“Yep. Nothing of note to report.” She shrugged, swinging her feet at little, leaning back against tou-san's chest. “Things have been pretty calm on my front since the siege, and now that there's peace, things are apparently going to be even slower.”

Kou and Ryota both gave her a strange look, while another of the men in the room gave a hoarse laugh she didn't understand the reason for.

Peering inquisitively at the guy a moment, Kyo turned back to Ryota to find him watching her.

“Did she get sassy while we weren't looking?” He wondered, clearly posing the question to Kou.

“It's always been there, but I think most of it's actually unintentional,” Kou mused.

Kyo snorted. “So, what, outside of the obvious, is wrong with you?” She asked with a sweet smile, causing Ryota to fix her with a wry, mock-insulted look. For a second, he looked so much like Kaimaru the family resemblance was startling, and she almost laughed.

“Eh, caught a kunai in an unfortunate situation.” Ryota twitched a shoulder by way of shrugging, relaxing back against the mattress propping him up in an almost upright seat.

“Caught it with your gut, you mean?” Kou interjected, sounding unimpressed. “I'm pretty sure the medic said something about a few broken bones, too.”

“Giving away my weaknesses,” Ryota tutted disapprovingly, absently shifting an arm to allow Genma to carefully lie down next to him in a partial full-body hug. “Some teammate you are.”

“Tou-san is clearly the best teammate,” Kyo retorted easily. “Putting up with all your bullshit, Ryota.”

“True that,” Ryota agreed with a quick smile, there and gone again before you could blink.

Medical check-up passing without any trouble, things fell into a new kind of strange routine.
Kyo and Minato went on missions with Jiraiya-sensei, mostly escorts of various kinds, because the end of the war apparently meant a lot of people suddenly wanted to move around, and those that could afford it spent money on shinobi guards.

Money well-spent, if you asked Kyo, because the number of bandits roaming around the countryside was still high and murder and robbery seemed to be the theme for a lot of civilian interactions outside of the safety of a town or city.

The few handful of encounters with foreign shinobi were uncomfortable and fraught with so much underlying tension it was a miracle they were all still alive.

Violent confrontations had been mostly avoided, though, largely thanks to Jiraiya's reputation, if Kyo was forced to guess.

Being called Legendary in the shinobi world wasn't anything to sneeze at, and the man clearly had the skills and power to back it up.

“You're turning eleven soon,” Kisaki said evenly, peering at her from where she was lying on the floor, and Kyo looked up from the report she was filling out.

“Next week,” she confirmed, wondering what her friend was angling for, because both of them knew this already.

Getting to have Kisaki around at home again was a weight off of Kyo's shoulders she hadn't even noticed building up over the last half a year and some.

Kisaki hummed contemplatively under her breath, crossing one front paw over the other, ears flicking indecisively a moment.

“Senpu talked to you about the black fangs, a while back,” the ninken said, finally. “Haru told me.”

Kyo's fingers tightened on her pen and she frowned down at it before putting it down and sitting up properly.

They were apparently having this talk right now.

“Yeah,” she said, and she still didn't know what she felt about it, even after all these months. “What do you think about it?” She asked, because she had wondered, but there hadn't seemed to be a right time to ask...

“I could go on missions with you. Officially,” Kisaki said, her yellow eyes gleaming momentarily, lips twitching ever so slightly.

“There are both good and bad things about that,” Kyo felt the need to point out.

“Kisaki,” Kyo said firmly, because she didn't want this to turn into an argument, but some things needed to be said, no matter how much she would prefer not to talk about them. “You going on missions with me would mean- you could get hurt again, and I-”

“And you think the same doesn't apply for me?” The ninen asked, voice low and rasping with a suppressed growl. “You get hurt, Kyo, and I,” Kisaki's lips peeled away from her teeth with ire, “can do nothing to help. I hate it.”
“Exactly the same,” the dog snapped irritably. “We get hurt, it's part of who we are, but if I'm stuck in the village, then I can't do anything to help,” Kisaki huffed, before she took a moment to calm down. “Since Taku’s gone, you're my person, Kyo. Marks or no marks, that doesn't change. Other's perception of it would change, though,” she said firmly.

“It feels like,” Kyo paused, trying to put words to why this was making her so damn uncomfortable, “like I'm trying to take his place, and I could never do that.” She scowled miserably down at her half-finished report.

“Of course not,” Kisaki said, rearing back slightly to look at her, surprised. “Kyo,” she said, drawing her attention again, “it's not the same, but that doesn't change anything.” Kisaki gave a frustrated huff. “The marks wouldn't change anything between you and me, and we're the only ones that matter.”

Kyo sighed and pulled a hand down her face, fingers lingering on her cheek. “Senpu said they don't have to be on my face?”

“There's one Black Fang in the clan already,” Kisaki said casually. “He's old, and his partner died a while back, of old age, but I could take you to him to talk,” she offered, and it was very clear what Kisaki's motivations were.

It was painfully transparent, but Kyo couldn't find it in herself to mind even a little bit.

Kisaki clearly wanted this.

“I'm not making a decision before sensei comes back from wherever he is,” Kyo warned half-heartedly.

“I wasn't expecting you to,” Kisaki sniffed, sending her an insulted look at the mere suggestion.

“...you really want this, Kisaki?” She couldn't help but ask. Kyo may not know how she felt or what she wanted, but knowing what Kisaki wanted could only help.

“Yes. You're my person, Kyo. My partner. I don't like the thought of someone butting in to contest it,” she huffed, ears flattening at the possibility. “I'm not in any kind of shape to go back to active duty right away, either way, but yes. I'd like it very much if you wanted this.” And she finished it off by fixing Kyo with a sharp glare, as if daring her to say anything.

“And if I don't want it?” Kyo asked softly.

Kisaki blinked, tilting her head, looking like she hadn't actually considered that.

She looked rather stumped.

“Then I'll continue as I have, I guess,” the dog finally muttered, looking uncertain and a little bit lost.

Kyo couldn't stand it, and threw herself at Kisaki for a hug. “I will always want you, Kisaki,” she muttered into her fur. “I'm just not sure about-” she sighed.

Why was this so complicated? It didn't feel like it should be this complicated.

“We'll go talk to the Black Fang,” Kisaki decided firmly, leaning into her hug. “That will clear things up.”
And it sounded like she was fully expecting that, too.

Kyo couldn't help but smile faintly. “If you say so.”

Instead of continue to go in circles about the subject, Kyo sat up properly again and went back to her report. The thing wouldn't magically fill itself out on its own.

“Love you, Kisaki,” she said absently before she got fully absorbed in her writing.

Kisaki made a small, pleased and agreeing noise, settling down to doze.

-x-x-x-

Turning eleven was a quiet affair, and tou-san agreed not to make a big thing out of it this year when she asked.

Kyo felt like Genma's last birthday party had been enough for her for at least a couple of years, yet.

So they had a family dinner, and that was more than enough for Kyo.

Having tou-san home, alive and safe, was a better gift than any present she could think of, and it wasn't like there was anything else she particularly wanted.

Two weeks later, Kyo was sitting on the kitchen floor, keeping herself busy.

She was still going through all the materials she'd collected during that escort mission a while back, and she could only be grateful for storage scrolls. They kept the plants fresh and in excellent condition, even though it'd been a few weeks.

It was familiar work, repetitive and calming, grounding even, to be chopping up roots, tearing leaves, keeping an eye on the simmering pot on the stove, the needles drying off to the side.

She'd have to make sure to put everything away before Genma came home.

He'd asked to go to the Uzumaki compound to see if Ashika wanted to play, and Kyo -feeling a little bit weird- hadn't seen any reason to deny him.

She'd offered to go with him, but Genma had declined.

Also strange.

Being a Big Boy was apparently very important, and if it made him happy? Sure. She could deal, even though a lot of things had felt a bit... off, lately.

It wasn't the end of the world.

As it was, her poison-making was interrupted before she was done.

There was a knock on the door and Kyo looked up to stare in the direction of the hallway, even though she couldn't see it from her current position, sitting on the kitchen floor as she was.

People usually didn't knock.
With a small sigh, Kyo put down her knife, sterilized her hands with chakra, just in case, and then went to answer it.

Tou-san was stationed in the village, currently, Ryota would be convalescent a bit longer and she didn't think anything had happened to Genma...

Kyo opened the door and gave an embarrassing little squeal of joy and consequently threw herself at Katsurou-sensei, who was standing calmly on the other side.

This time -unlike last time- he was prepared for it and didn't end up tackled to the floor.

“Hello to you, too,” Katsurou muttered amusedly, peering down at the armful of Kyo he had somehow acquired.

Kyo grinned up at him, too happy for words just then.

“You're back,” were the first words she could think to say.

Katsurou's face gave an entertained twitch, before he raised his eyebrows at her, and she knew she was stating the obvious, but she didn't care!

“Still alive and in one piece,” Katsurou agreed blandly, putting her back down on her own two feet and giving her a once-over right back. “You look well, too,” he said.

“I'm fine,” Kyo said, taking his hand and tugging him into the hallway. They couldn't stand in the door forever.

Katsurou gave a somewhat sceptical grunt, but allowed her to pull him into the apartment.

“Do you have time to come in a little?” She asked, and abruptly realised she still had things on the stove and hurried into the kitchen. “Sorry, sensei, I just have to check something,” she called over her shoulder.

She was sure she heard Katsurou give a soft, amused noise of acknowledgement behind her.

Kyo quickly checked the poison bubbling sedately on the stove, then set about clearing the floor space so it was no longer hazardous to try and cross if your name wasn't Kyo.

“You've been keeping busy, I see,” Katsurou commented, having slowly ambled after her. He stopped in the kitchen doorway, leaning a shoulder against the jamb and observing the spread out selection of plants in various stages of being processed with interest.

“I need to restock some things,” she explained distractedly, crouching down to gather up her needles, which were all dry by now and ready to be stored.

Expertly gathering them up in a pile, every needle aligned with the ones next to them, Kyo grabbed the string she'd prepared beforehand and used it to tie all the needles together in a neat, but more importantly, easily manageable bundle.

Putting that aside, she continued to quickly and efficiently put away all the things she could wait to get to, and moving the rest of it around until the floor was mostly clear.

“There!” She scanned the floor one last time, to make sure she hadn't missed anything, and then turned to Katsurou with a smile. “Would you like some tea?”

“You sure this kitchen isn't a health hazard for anyone who isn't you right now?” He asked idly, gaze
lingering on the pot on the stove.

Kyo sniffed, partly in mock-offence and partly to check there weren't any fumes in the room. "It's perfectly safe," she declared confidently. "Me and kaa-san did this all the time back before," she died, "and it was never a problem for tou-san."

Katsurou hummed in a vaguely sceptical manner, before he slowly and carefully stood away from the door jamb and walked over to the kitchen table, where he sat down.

"Where's your brother?"

"He wanted to play with a friend, and he didn't want me to walk him there," Kyo said with a huff, and kept her hands busy preparing the tea. Before she touched anything, she'd sterilized her hands again.

Just in case.

Accidental poisonings weren't any fun.

"He's four now, right?" Katsurou continued, even though she was pretty sure he already knew that perfectly well. "I'm making small talk," he explained bluntly at the look she sent him.

"Okay, I guess? Why are we doing small talk?" She asked him, finally taking a seat at the table, one cup of tea for them each in her hands. One of which she passed over to Katsurou. "And if Genma was here he would tell you very sternly that he's four and a half," she added with a smirk.

Katsurou took a sip of his tea, eyes entertained. "Came back yesterday, and figured I'd better seek you out to prevent a public scene like the one last time," he said, instead of commenting.

Kyo hastily raised her mug to take a sip of tea, trying to hide the slight embarrassment that surged up at the reminder. And consequently burned her tongue.

"Erm," was her eloquent response, still with the rim of the mug in her mouth. "Sorry?" She offered.

Katsurou snorted, but didn't look displeased, so that was good. "The reason for the small talk," he mused, gazing up at the ceiling for a moment. "Trying to gauge your mental state, I suppose."

"You suppose? Why didn't you just ask?" Kyo was confused. She wasn't any good at small talk; it took too much conscious effort to remember to ask all the appropriate questions back and it was awfully tedious in general. "I'm doing pretty well, I think, but I'm feeling generally a bit out of sorts, and there's a lot of confusion clogging up my head."

"And why is that?" Katsurou asked, and he hadn't changed either his expression or his posture even a little bit, but Kyo still felt like something about him was more relaxed compared to just a few seconds ago.

"Because it's weird, sensei!" Kyo huffed, the words all but exploding from her mouth.

She'd been waiting to say them for a while now.

"Weird?" Katsurou echoed blankly.

"Yes! This peace thing! I feel like it's gonna break to pieces any day now, or some disaster will happen, and I never know what to expect! Missions are weird, all of a sudden!?" Kyo put down her mug to cover her eyes with her hands in an attempt to collect herself. "We're going on escorts! With
civilians! And they're so incredibly slow I feel like I'll lose my mind,” she complained, every single grievance she'd collected over the last two months spilling from her lips without any conscious decision on her part. “We saw a couple of Taki shinobi on the last one, and they didn't do anything!” She hissed, feeling like she was fraying at the seams. Taking a deep breath and lowering her hands, Kyo met Katsurou's gaze. “So it's weird,” she concluded awkwardly.

Katsurou calmly raised his mug to his mouth for another sip, looking thoughtful.

“Change is always difficult to adjust to, even when you rationally know they're changes for the better,” he said slowly, though his eyes were sharp. “You've never known anything other than war, in this life.”

“I remember when it was declared,” Kyo muttered, picking up her tea again.

“You were two,” Katsurou scoffed. “Even if you can remember it it doesn't mean it meant much of anything to you at that age.” And he fixed her with a pointed look.

Kyo made a face, but drank more too-hot tea instead of immediately answering.

Katsurou put down his mug, placing his hand flat on the table, eyeing her seriously. “Kyo, you can't expect to grow up to be the person you were before.” He paused momentarily, to make sure he had her full attention. “Experiences and actions shape us as much as everything else, and you are not that adult any more.”

“...I know.”

“Do you?” Katsurou challenged calmly. “It doesn't have much to do with your physical state,” he pressed on, “though being a child does have impact. You're different.” The kitchen was silent for a heartbeat. “You were that person once, that's true, but you've come a long way, done too much and changed, since that point in time. And that's okay.”

Was it?

Kyo had been a good person in that other life. Peaceful, kind, hadn't ever intentionally harmed anyone, really. Not beyond saying some thoughtless words here and there, and that didn't count.

She'd accidentally closed a car door on her then-brother's fingers once when they'd both been little but that... that was nothing compared to what Kyo had done.

It wasn't even in the same category.

Kyo was... Kyo was an assassin.

Murderer, she supposed her past self would have insisted. A killer.

It was frightening, how okay Kyo was with killing people. She didn't even think about it any more.

“So you know what the worst part is?” She asked, still distracted with her thoughts. “I have a point of reference.” She turned her gaze back to Katsurou, who was watching her solemnly. “I know what a normal person would- what regular people are supposed to be like,” she said blandly, and all of a sudden it felt like all feelings had faded away and disappeared. “What a good person is supposed to be like.” She was silent a second. “My life this time around is so incredibly fucked up I can't even describe it to you, sensei, because this is all normal to you. To everyone here, even the civilians, though they do their best to forget and ignore it.” Kyo smiled a tad bitterly. “I know I'm not the same person, and I know it so well it hurts, sometimes, when I stop to think about it.” She took a deep
breath and closed her eyes.

She hadn't expected a conversation like this today, or anytime soon if she was being honest.

“I can't tell you that what we do as shinobi is right, or anywhere close to it,” Katsurou said softly, still watching her with steady eyes. “But the fact you're,” he paused, tilting his head, “aware of all of this,” he seemed to settle on, “**does** make you a good person in my books. It's not the same and it's not anywhere near what you probably want to hear, but you need to know that. We kill people, and worse, as easy as anything, but there are people alive today because of you, who would have died if you weren't there.”

It was said with complete and utter certainty and how could it not? When Katsurou-sensei was one of those people.

Kyo couldn't help the small, weak smile that flickered across her face any more than she could stop the next words out of her mouth.

“I love you so much, sensei.”

“It would be too much of a bother to try and get rid of you now,” Katsurou muttered gruffly, which was as close to an 'I love you, too' she'd ever gotten so far.

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Chapter 73

Chapter Summary

When the day starts out normal, turns strange, then nose-dives into bizarre.

Chapter Notes

I am weak, with no self-control. We all know this already, but it needs to be said again. I have sort of accidentally tripped into NaNoWriMo and it's Doing Things to me. So have a chapter! :D

“Does this person know we're coming?” Kyo asked, feeling somewhat uncertain about this whole thing.

Kisaki huffed and sent her a look, but didn't comment, which... could mean several things, if she was honest.

Should they really be ambushing an old man with a conversation like this, though?

Instead of questioning the dog further, or fret about it, Kyo decided to just follow along and see what happened. Trust that Kisaki knew what she was doing.

The ninken led her into a part of the Inuzuka Compound she hadn't ever really visited before. Seeing as it was mainly filled with private homes, it wasn't so strange.

It was surprisingly peaceful and calm; the compound was far more bustling and active closer to the gates.

“This way,” Kisaki said, taking down an alley to the left and then walked up to the door of an unremarkable, normal house, small and quaint.

Kisaki watched her steadily until Kyo stopped beside her, sent her a glance and then raised a hand to knock.

Squashing down her nerves, she distractedly petted Kisaki while they waited, running her fingers over her fur again and again in an entirely self-soothing manner.

“There's no need to be nervous,” Kisaki told her quietly, nudging her hand with her nose.

Kyo sent her a thin smile, but didn't say anything.

There were approaching footsteps on the other side of the door, slow and shuffling, and then the door slid open to reveal an old, wrinkly man, mostly bald, wearing a traditional yukata.

His eyes were a murky green, bordering on brown, and they were sharp and fully alert, despite his age.
He glanced down at Kisaki, gave a strange little scoff-like sound and stepped aside without a word.

When Kisaki nudged her, Kyo entered the house and followed the man when he shuffled off towards... the kitchen.

“Here,” Kisaki said, leading the way to the back porch, where pillows had been put out. She easily lied down and eyed Kyo expectantly until she took a seat.

It seemed they had been expected, after all, which answered one of her questions.

She still wasn't sure what Kisaki wanted them to talk about, and she didn't know what questions to ask, if any.

With a silent sigh, Kyo resigned herself to wait. She could survive one awkward conversation.

Soon enough the man came shuffling towards them, steps slow and careful and he moved like he was in some kind of pain.

Arthritis?

“Here we go,” he muttered, setting the tray he'd been carrying down on the floor and carefully settled himself on the cushion waiting for him. “I understand there are some questions you'd like to ask,” he said, as soon as he'd finished pouring them tea.

There was a bowl of water for Kisaki, which he pushed towards the dog with gnarled and crooked fingers.

“I've been offered the black fangs,” Kyo said evenly, not sure of any other way she could start.

The man gave an acknowledging grunt, not seeming the least surprised.

Kyo busied herself with her tea, frowning down at the mug warming her hands.

“My partner was her teammate,” Kisaki supplied from beside her.

The old man grunted again, and she didn't even know what his name was. “Figured it was something like that,” he huffed, eyeing her critically. “And you're indecisive about what to do?” He hazarded a guess, demeanour gruff.

“You could say that,” Kyo agreed tiredly. She still wasn't entirely sure why they were here. “Kisaki wants us to accept, but I’m not-” she cut herself off with a frown. She wasn't comfortable talking about this with a complete stranger.

The old man scrutinized her intently a moment, before he gave a snort. “Don't wanna mark up your face?”

“I already belong to a clan,” Kyo told him evenly, and while that was part of the problem, it wasn't even close to all of it.

The old man produced a doubtful hum, giving her a once-over, no doubt in an attempt to figure out which clan.

“You don't need to get them on the face,” he finally grumbled, taking another sip of his tea. “Anywhere on your body is fine. It's symbolic.”

Kyo watched him interestingly a second, figured she was here for this specific reason and asked,
“Where did you put yours?”

The old man eyed her a second, before he raised a hand and tugged on his yukata, which parted to reveal a pair of Inuzuka fangs inked into the skin on his chest. Over the heart.

“Having the black fangs is nobody's business other than your own,” he said firmly. “Ya don't need to put them on display, though it's an option,” he snorted. “The people that matter will already know anyway.”

Kyo sent Kisaki a look and took another sip of her tea, considering his words.

Looking at it like that... Kyo was being a bit silly, wasn't she? She loved Kisaki, that had never been in question, and having her with her on missions again... She wasn't sure what that would be like, but it couldn't be bad.

Sure, the risk of injury got higher, but expecting anything less was naïve. And it wasn't like Konoha was entirely safe either.

Kisaki was right; it was part of who they were, at this point.

And if this was something her friend wanted, then was it really Kyo's place to tell her no? Wasn't that the same thing her grandmother did? Insisting Kyo wasn't fit for the shinobi life?

Suppressing a grimace, Kyo took another sip of tea, trying to figure this out.

More than anything, she wanted Kisaki to be happy. If that carried with it the risk of getting killed in the field...

Kyo sighed.

“How would it even work?” She asked, focusing back on the old man, who was eyeing her shrewdly.

“Meet with the clan head, confirm both of you want it and agree, then get the tattoo,” he said. “Not very complicated.”

“That's it?” Kyo couldn't help but ask, feeling mildly doubtful. She didn't know what she had envisioned, but it had definitely been more complex than that.

“You've already managed the hard part, kid,” the old man snorted, sending Kisaki a pointed look.

Oh. Right.

Kyo glanced down at Kisaki, who looked utterly relaxed and at ease with the situation, and she'd laid her head down in Kyo's lap at some point without her noticing.

Running her fingers over the dog's ear, absently tracing the cut off tip on the left one, Kyo got lost in thought again.

“You're gonna have to start training again,” she said, which probably came as if out of the blue. “And make sure that leg of yours isn't going to be a problem.”

“I know,” Kisaki said, peering up at her. “You decided?”

“You really want this, huh,” Kyo mused, smiling sadly down at her friend.
“Yes, but that's not the point,” Kisaki huffed, looking mildly annoyed. They'd talked about this already.

“Kisaki,” Kyo interrupted what she was fairly sure was to follow, “there's very little I wouldn't do to make sure you were happy. I'm not comfortable with the thought of somehow replacing Taku, but that doesn't mean you're not important to me.” She sighed softly. “I don't think I'd react well if you died,” she admitted quietly.

Kisaki snorted, though her eyes were soft. “I'll do my best not to, then.”

“You better,” Kyo scoffed, but buried her fingers in Kisaki’s fur, holding her tightly. As if to make sure she wouldn't slip away from her. “When do you think we can do this thing?”

She hadn't really contemplated the possibility of getting a tattoo in this life, definitely not before she was a teenager, but things changed.

Unexpected changes weren't always bad.

Kisaki lifted her head to drag her tongue over what felt like Kyo's entire face in a very wet doggy kiss.

“Eww!” Kyo laughed, pushing the dog away from her.

-x-x-x-

Kyo was trying to find Kaimaru.

You'd think it wouldn't be that hard, and she hadn't, at first. But he didn't seem to be anywhere she looked, and she was starting to get worried.

His leg should have long been healed by now, granted he hadn't done anything else to it while Kyo hadn't been looking, but... Wandering through ANBU headquarters yielded little of anything, though.

“Scorpion!” A familiar voice called, which was quickly followed by Hyena all but bouncing up to her, slipping his fingers around her upper arm in a quick squeeze in something she was starting to realise was his version of a hug, at least while they were both in uniform.

“Hey, Hyena.” She smiled. “Seen Crow?”

“Nope,” Hyena chirped, falling into step beside her. “I'm hanging around the village too much,” he commented, and it seemed off topic, but Kyo was pretty sure she understood what he meant.

“You haven't been assigned a new team?” She asked, surprised. She'd thought he would have been, by now.

But if he hadn't gotten a new team, then that most likely meant he spent most of his time on duty in the village, which meant he'd had little to no opportunity to spot Kaimaru. Or Crow, rather, because she wasn't sure Hyena was aware of Kaimaru's real name and face...

Not that it mattered much.
Kyo and Hyena split up again not soon after, because her friend told her he'd just come off shift and should try and get some sleep.

Kyo, figuring she could try the ANBU training grounds before she gave up and went home, did just that, after waving Hyena good bye.

Some of the fields were empty, though some were occupied by either teams or solitary individuals, and Kyo continued to check training grounds, until, at the next to last one, she finally found the person she'd been looking for.

Kaimaru was training in one of the heavily forested grounds, on his own, and it felt like he'd hidden himself away intentionally.

“Hey,” Kyo greeted, jumping down from the tree she'd paused in, to land next to Kaimaru, who got out of his kata, lowering his tanto.

“What are you doing here?” Kaimaru asked, voice short and curt, even under the seals on the mask.

Kyo paused. Had she done something to upset him?

“I wanted to see you,” she said, shrugging it off and pressing on. “I've been looking for you for a while.”

“Ever consider that I wanted to be left the fuck alone?” Kaimaru snapped.

Kyo felt her metaphorical hackles begin to rise, because what was this? This wasn't how their interactions usually went.

“I just wanted to check in and see how you were doing. Hang out for a while,” Kyo said evenly, pushing down her irritation.

“You should just leave me the hell alone, Shiranui,” Kaimaru sneered, turning to finally look at her and she wondered what expression was hiding underneath his Crow mask. “Who the fuck would want to hang out with a useless kid like you, anyway?” And he sheathed his tanto and turned away with a dismissive scoff.

Kyo pushed up her mask to frown at him. “What's wrong? You're not usually this-”

“I've always been like this, you've just been too stupid to understand I fucking hate your guts,” he snapped angrily, interrupting her. “So go away and waste someone else's damn time.”

She remained motionless for a moment, studying Kaimaru carefully.

She didn't understand what this was about.

“I'll go,” Kyo finally said, feeling more hurt than she'd like to admit, because she couldn't think of anything she'd done to Kaimaru to warrant this. Was he angry with her for taking too long before checking in with him? “You're clearly in a bad mood today, but,” she hesitated, “see you later, I guess.”

“Don't fucking bother,” Kaimaru growled darkly, making a short, aborted motion with his hand like he wanted to punch something.

Kyo took a slow step back, away from him, staring at him all the while.

“If you ever want to talk, I'll always listen, you know that, right?” She said before she could stop
herself, and Kyo had to bite back a wince at the way Kaimaru stiffened.

“I know you’re a moronic fucking child, but what part of ‘leave me alone’ don’t you get, Shiranui?” Kaimaru hissed, voice low and flat and this had clearly backfired. “I don’t want you anywhere near me! So get lost!”

Kyo stared blankly a second longer, and then left with a shunshin.

This had been a disaster.

Running back towards the village in a vaguely homeward direction, Kyo wondered how her good mood could have just evaporated so quickly.

Kaimaru was always abrasive and used harsh words, but this had been... that hadn't been the same. At all.

Kyo couldn't think of anything she had done to warrant... that. Had she? So then she had to assume that something else had happened for Kaimaru to be quite that hostile.

Absently changing out of her ANBU uniform, she pondered on if she should try and dig into this to find out what it could have been. Aita would call her nosy, again.

But she was feeling both hurt and worried, and it was an unpleasant combination all the way around.

Huffing quietly at herself, Kyo pushed her confused frustration to the back of her mind, because there wasn't much she could do about it right this instance, anyway.

Putting away the sealing scroll with her ANBU things in the back of the bed-side table drawer, amongst a number of other scrolls, dealing mainly with chakra exercises and basic jutsu, as well as a few extra sealing scrolls, she contemplated what to do next.

She didn't particularly feel like being around other people any more, and there were always things she could do on her own.

Maybe she should catch a couple of rabbits and practice her bubble jutsu? She was trying out a couple of new ideas with it, but-

There was a knock on the door.

Kyo blinked back to the present.

Going to open the door revealed a mildly annoyed-looking ANBU, who seemed to eye her irritably a second.

“Shiranui Kyo, your presence is required in the Hokage tower, room 342. You're late.” And with that, he was gone, using a shunshin to get out of the building in what seemed a rather passive aggressive fashion.

Rude.

Then the words actually registered and Kyo bit back a curse.

Great. She was apparently summoned to the tower, and she was already late.

Biting back an ill-tempered growl, Kyo locked up the apartment and hurried off, racing across the
village.

The numbering of the rooms in the tower was entirely illogical and intentionally misleading, and thus took some time to learn by heart, but Kyo was passably familiar with the place by now, which helped.

Slipping into the room, Kyo froze when she saw who was already in it.

The Hokage. Why was the Hokage here?

...had she accidentally entered the wrong room?

The ANBU had said room number 342, right? Right.

This was room 342. She was pretty sure.

Resisting the urge to go back out just to check, Kyo forced herself to examine the rest of the room as well, because there had to be some kind of explanation for this.

Jiraiya was here, frowning unhappily at the wall. Katsurou was lurking in the back corner. There were also a handful of people she wasn't familiar with.

Why was she here?

Feeling like she had walked into something she had no business interrupting, Kyo remained perfectly motionless and quiet.

Maybe they wouldn't notice her?

Which was just ridiculous, because Katsurou-sensei was looking at her, and the Hokage had glanced at her at her entrance.

“I didn't think any of the kids would be present for this,” one of the unfamiliar men muttered, sending her a dismissive look. “Who does that one belong to?” And he sent his colleagues an annoyed glance.

“Me,” Jiraiya said, sending the man an irritated look right back. “You're early, Kyo,” he added, finally turning to her.

“I was told I was late,” she said, feeling defensive as well as confused. It might have to do with the amount of attention she was currently under, because she didn't like it. And this wasn't making much sense. “Should I leave?”

“We're just about done,” Hiruzen said, gesturing at her to stay.

Instead of saying anything to that, she did as ordered and walked the last of the distance until she was stood next to Jiraiya-sensei, which felt better. Made it feel less like she didn't belong, no matter that she had apparently not been supposed to be here yet.

“Let's get back to the matter at hand,” the Hokage said briskly.

“Yeah, I wanna know which idiot thought up this idea,” another of the men present said, sounding generally unhappy. “And what village is gonna agree to host this thing?”

“I was coming to that, before our minor interruption,” the Hokage said mildly, effectively quelling the unsettled atmosphere in the room. He sent Kyo another brief look, gaze reassuring, which was
nice, because at least he didn't blame her for this. “The Daimyo sent me a message after he and the other countries' Daimyo had their meeting, to discuss the peace,” he began, and Kyo had a feeling he was explaining this in greater detail than he perhaps would have if she hadn't been present. “They all agreed that something must be done to prevent another war like this one, and proposed a solution after much discussion.”

“Of-fucking-course they did,” someone muttered quietly.

“Which brings us back to why I called all of you here for this meeting,” the Hokage continued evenly, and Kyo honestly couldn't tell what his thoughts on this subject were. “The Mizu Daimyo evidently volunteered Kiri to host a tournament for Genin, with the purpose of winning promotions to Chuunin in an effort to promote understanding and peaceful interactions between shinobi villages.” His voice was mild and calm and utterly unreadable.

A ringing silence filled the room, until someone gave a snort and someone else muttered out a string of curses she wasn't sure she wanted to actually hear more clearly.

“I bet the Mizukage's gonna be ecstatic about that,” the man that had spoken when she'd entered drawled dryly.

“There were several other reasons listed, all very optimistic and... inspired,” the Hokage continued, a faint thread of dry amusement underlining his voice, “and as I'm sure all the other villages bar Kiri will be doing as well, we will be preparing for this unexpected, unprecedented opportunity for our future Chuunin.”

Kyo blinked at the Hokage.

She hadn't known he had that particular sense of humour.

Instead of lingering on that thought, Kyo glanced up at Jiraiya, hoping for any sort of clue as to why she'd been called here. She was already a Chuunin, but that could potentially just be a boon... though she hadn't been supposed to be here for this part of the meeting.

“You want us to drill our kids, huh,” one of the Jounin in the room mused thoughtfully.

The Hokage inclined his head. “You were selected for this reason; all your Genin are more than ready for a promotion.”

Jiraiya rubbed his jaw, as he was wont to do when deep in thought. “This is gonna get ugly.”

“You've all received your orders,” the Hokage declared with finality. “Until further notice, you all know what needs to be done and what preparations to make. Dismissed. Jiraiya, Katsurou, you two stay.”

Kyo blinked.

What she could only assume to be a minor handful of Jounin sensei quickly and efficiently exited the room, looking grim and unamused with the situation.

When the door closed behind the last man, Katsurou stood away from the wall he'd been leaning against to walk up to the rest of them, seemingly at ease and relaxed.

“So what's this really about?” Kyo asked uncertainly. She still didn't understand what she was doing here.
“Jiraiya, among a few other Jounin sensei, will be going to Kiri to oversee a Genin team in an upcoming tournament, the purpose of which will superficially be to allow Genin the chance at promotions outside of the field,” the Hokage said quickly and efficiently.

“And other than that?” Kyo couldn't help but ask. This all sounded awfully familiar.

“A outlet for ill will and long-held grudges in a setting that won't spiral out of control into another war,” Hiruzen smiled thinly, sharp as ninja wire, “theoretically.”

“I see,” Kyo said slowly, still trying to figure out her role in this. “Does that mean you won't be sending any actual Genin, Hokage-sama?” She tentatively asked, because that might actually explain her presence.

“While that is tempting, this is also a real opportunity to promote the next generation,” the man sighed, leaning back in the chair he was occupying. “According to the rules drawn up, the participants have to be actual Genin.” He smiled dryly, because all of them knew perfectly well that was a rule begging to be broken.

“I'm temporarily getting assigned two other kids,” Jiraiya grunted, and he both looked and sounded less than thrilled at the prospect.

Kyo couldn't help but stare.

Either that meant her or Minato would be the third member, which begged the question of what the other one would do. And if Minato was going to sit this one out, why had Kyo been summoned here but none of the other children?

And that wasn't even broaching the subject of why Katsurou-sensei was here.

“Not just any Genin will be going,” Hiruzen said bluntly, eyeing her intently, “and there's a limit on how many Jounin I can send, as well. Kiri's not going be gracious about this.” He smiled thinly again, because that was a gross understatement. “The Jounin I've selected will prepare their chosen students during the next few months as much as is possible, familiarize the children placed on temporary teams with each other,” he glanced at Jiraiya, “while all the details are finalized.”

“Um,” Kyo said, because there were so many ways something like this could go wrong and it still didn't explain why she was here.

“As for why you're here, Kyo,” Hiruzen said, finally getting to the part she really wanted to know. “I'm assigning you a very important mission.”

“Okay?” She said slowly, feeling increasingly confused. This had been a strange day, and it seemed like it would get stranger yet. “I don't- Hokage-sama, are you sending me as one of Konoha's Genin?”

“Yes.” Hiruzen smiled grimly. “But that won't be your main mission,” he continued. “This event will grant us access to Kiri we've never had before. It's an opportunity I'm not sure we'll ever see again. Seeing as every single Jounin stepping onto that island will be under intense scrutiny and heavy guard, they won't be able to so much as twitch a finger without notice, but one of the Genin might be able to get away with something, if stealthy enough.” He fell silent, meeting her gaze patiently, waiting for her to connect the dots.

Kyo stared at him, feeling empty and blank for a heartbeat.

He surely wasn't implying what Kyo thought he was.
Surely.

Because Kyo didn't have any training for infiltration and that kind of work. She wasn't fit for something like that. She wasn't a good enough actor.

This was clearly a mistake and her mind was running away with her.

“I'm not an infiltrator,” slipped out of numb lips and Kyo still couldn't really feel anything at all, but there was something that felt suspiciously like panic brewing beneath the smooth surface her feelings had turned into. Like a thin sheet of ice covering a river.

“No, but you're excellent at stealth and you've been part of enough information gathering missions it's a base for us to build on, no matter how rushed and hasty,” the Hokage countered calmly. He nodded at Katsurou. “The next two months will be very busy for you, but I'm fully confident you'll do well.”

That sounded like a threat. Somehow.

She wasn't sure how, but it did.

“I don't.” Kyo's voice gave up and the rest of her sentence got stuck in her throat.

“Kyo,” Katsurou-sensei said, sounding faintly weary as he placed a hand on her shoulder, effectively grabbing her attention. “You have most of the information you need to complete a mission like this successfully already. It's not conventional, but neither is this situation,” he said, and the look in his eyes was grave. “One of the things you and I will work on is your chakra signature,” he began to explain, voice even and short and it was very soothing. “You tend to fluctuate it to reflect your mood, which is fine, but for this mission, you need to consciously control it at all times without forgetting yourself, at the same time as you take chakra usage into consideration.”

Kyo listened intently, focusing on sensei's voice, and for every word she felt a little bit more in control of herself, the situation not quite so overwhelming any more.

“We'll be sticking around Intel for most of the time between now and departure, to make sure you're as prepared as is possible, and any and all questions you will have will be addressed in due time,” he continued bluntly. “We will go over protocol and procedure, what to do in various scenarios, including the eventualty of discovery and or failure. You will be briefed on as much information on Kiri we are in possession of, and you will be prepared.”

Kyo slowly managed a blink, realising that her eyes felt dry.

Taking measured, even breaths, she turned everything she'd been told so far over in her head, examining it from every angle she could think of, trying to reconcile herself with it.

She was going to infiltrate Kiri.

Right.

Piece of cake.

Not.

“Am I going as myself?” She finally asked, and part of her was surprised at how steady she sounded.

“It would be better if you didn't,” the Hokage said idly, sounding like he didn't particularly mind
either way, but that wasn’t necessarily true. “Whatever identity is created for you, the correct paperwork will be supplied and slipped into the necessary places.”

Kyo gave a short nod.

Great.

“Take a seat and we’ll go over everything you’ll need to know at this point,” Hiruzen, the Hokage, told her, motioning at the rest of the seats around the table he’d been sitting by since she first entered. For the first time, she noticed the multitude of documents, files and scrolls occupying it.

Kyo sat down as indicated, and wondered what the hell kind of day this was, because it had started out like normal, turned strange, and then nose-dived into the bizarre.

-x-x-x-
Kyo walked home as if in a daze. This felt surreal.

Was there really no one better suited for a mission like this? Kyo felt woefully unprepared and under-equipped.

What if she failed?

_Dying_ had always been the worst-case scenario, but that wasn't true for this mission. Oh no, dying was several points down the list, beneath things like capture, and whatever followed _that_, getting the rest of the Konoha people in Kiri killed by association, implicating Konoha as a _whole_ and then cracking the fragile peace like a rotten egg.

Which was just what she could think of right now; there were no doubt so many other things that could go to hell in a hand-basket she hadn't realised, yet.

Yeah.

“You okay, kitten?” Tou-san asked when she walked into the kitchen, and Kyo blinked, wondering when she'd gotten home.

She hadn't noticed.

“I'll be staying with Katsuou-sensei for a while,” she informed her dad, still feeling spectacularly out of it, but there wasn't really anything she could do about that right now. “For training,” she clarified at the look Kou sent her in response.

“...alright,” he said after a pause, eyeing her intently. “Do you know for how long?”

Kyo shook her head. “I don't know.”

Her dad studied her a moment longer, looked like he wanted to ask, but visibly refrained with a sigh.

“Do you have time to have dinner with us before you leave?” He asked instead.

“Yeah.” Kyo nodded.

Another second passed and she realised she was just standing there, in the middle of the kitchen, and
forced herself to go sit by the table.

Dinner was a quiet affair that day, and when she repeated her words to Genma, he showed his displeasure by throwing the biggest temper tantrum in quite a while.

“Sorry,” she muttered to tou-san, speaking over Genma's loud crying.

“Don't worry about it, kitten,” Kou said with a small, sad smile. “This is somewhat overdue,” he explained, shifting his hold on Genma and hugging him to his chest despite the boy's struggles. “We've both been gone so much the last year, and now we've been home a while.” He shrugged, pulling a hand gently over Genma's sweaty hair.

“I'll come home and say hi every other day, okay, Genma? I love you,” she told her brother, who just screamed louder, making himself hoarse. “Love you, tou-san.”

“Love you, too, Kyo,” Kou sighed, bending down to press a kiss to her hair, seeing as both his arms were occupied.

Kyo managed a thin, quick smile at her dad and brother, and then went.

“Why is nee-san leaving!?” Genma wailed, fury and tears grating on her ears until the door closed behind her and the wood muffled it enough to no longer be quite so loud.

Feeling bad to leave tou-san with that particular mess all alone, she still couldn't find it in herself to linger.

She needed to train as much as was possible for this mission she was supposed to go on, no matter how much Genma protested, and she needed to stop by the Inuzuka compound to notify Kisaki of this whole thing, too.

“Put your things in your room,” Katsurou told her, “then we'll turn to any immediate questions.”

Which was only mildly reassuring.

The daze she'd been in over the last few hours was steadily fading now, and she wasn't sure what that left her with.

“What if I mess up and the war starts back up?” Kyo asked the moment she walked into the sitting room, frowning at Katsurou-sensei and feeling deeply unsettled.

Katsurou huffed and waved at her to come and sit. “None of us, no matter what village, can afford more warfare at this point,” he told her wryly. “Everyone goes into this thing, this tournament, expecting everyone else to play dirty and use every thick they can think of to get one up on the others.”

Kyo thought that over a long moment. “Why pick me?”

Katsurou sighed and eyed her with something she was fairly sure was exasperation. “Some villages might try and slip a few higher-ranked kids into this thing, and I doubt anyone will actually bring Genin that aren't skilled enough to be unofficially Chuunin already.” He crossed his arms over his chest, head tilting in thought. “But the real concern will be the Jounin sensei, because no one will allow a 'Genin' that's too old,” he sent her a wry look, “and it's generally assumed children are less of a threat, simply because of their lacking experience.” He was silent a moment, meeting her gaze.
“You're going to be dismissed, simply because of your age. Your gender will help further, and when we're done training, you'll be entirely unremarkable in every way that counts.” A wry, humourless smile twisted his lips. “There are two ways any Kage can play this,” he continued. “Either send over-qualified children to impress and promote their village's might and fighting power. To display the future potential of their forces. Or, send canon fodder no one will miss.”

That was terrible. “So I'm gonna present myself as canon fodder?” Kyo guessed tiredly.

Katsurou shrugged. “At first glance, but it's a fine balance to keep, because your main objective is to avoid attention. And a useless Genin surviving against the others will attract just that.”

Kyo sighed. Heavily. “I'm probably gonna die,” she muttered pessimistically, covering her face with her hands.

Katsurou huffed and reached out to gently grasp her wrists, pulling her hands away from her face again to solemnly meet her gaze.

“No matter how this mission ends, I fully expect you to come back here,” he said firmly, eyes sharp. “That's an order.”

“But, sensei-”

“We're going to do everything we can to prepare you and help you pull this off,” he continued, talking over her protest and cutting her off. “I fully believe you can do this, Kyo.”

“Really?” She asked weakly. “You do?”

“Yes,” Katsurou said confidently, and there was no doubt in his eyes. “It won't be easy,” he granted, “but it's doable.”

Kyo took a deep breath, tried to grab onto Katsurou-sensei's confidence in her, bundle it up in a small ball and tuck it away for safe-keeping.

“Okay, sensei,” she said on an exhalation. “What should we start with?”

Katsurou graced her with a proud smile. “Did you know your chakra signature is an excellent gauge on your current mood?” He asked her.

Kyo blinked and frowned. “What do you mean?”

“When you're upset, you dim it. You're the easiest to sense when you're happy and at ease,” he told her, looking vaguely amused. “So the first thing we need to work on is your grasp on it. You need to pick a level and keep it steady, but also lower it realistically at the pace you use it.”

Kyo tilted her head. “Hey, sensei, shouldn't we pick an identity for me first? Because chakra level is part of that,” she muttered speculatively.

“Did you have anything specific in mind?”

Staring at nothing, Kyo considered her options. She was supposed to slip under the radar... “Do you think I'll have time to observe the iryou-nin students some before we have to leave?”

Katsurou hummed thoughtfully. “That's a very good idea,” he acknowledged. “Would let you pass yourself off as weaker than otherwise, too, because it's always good to have a medic on your team. It would give you some leeway, while also play into Konoha's reputation.”
Kyo felt herself firm up and the panicky daze and crippling fear slowly turn into focus and determination.

Katsurou-sensei thought she could do this. He would help her and people would tell her what to do, what would happen, what to expect, would give her as many tools and as much information as she could possibly retain.

She could do this.

 Probably.

It was intense.

Katsurou kept a constant check on her chakra, reminding her every single time she slipped up or forgot to adjust her output to reflect how much chakra she used throughout the day.

It was a pain, but clearly necessary.

Kyo hadn't known she was so... inconsistent, when it came to her chakra signature. So that was interesting, she supposed.

Not that she had much time to dwell on it, in between training with Katsurou, going to Intel to be briefed on what felt like their entire archive on Kiri, general lay-out, major buildings, things to look for, how to go about basically breaking into highly secure buildings to get at information people generally wanted strangers to stay out of.

She felt a little bit like she was standing in the eye of a storm.

At least Katsurou stayed with her, which made it a little less frightening to be surrounded by nothing other than grown, grim-faced shinobi she didn't know all day long, and she could see the scepticism and doubt in their eyes as they took in her size and young age, but no one said anything about it and they treated her perfectly professionally.

There was so much information to memorize, protocol to read and familiarize herself with.

Kyo also ended up in the Uzumaki compound, when she had the time.

“Aita,” Kyo said, perching on the windowsill to her friend's room, feeling tired and stressed and nerves were eating her alive, but at least it was a manageable level now. “I need some help.”

“Sure,” Aita said, sitting up in bed to eye her worriedly, even though she'd woken him up. “Haven't seen you in almost a month, what's going on?”

Kyo made a dismissive gesture with one hand. “Can't talk about it. And I can't give any explanations,” she warned, eyeing her friend to see how her words were met. “Do you have the time?”

“It's important, right?” Aita asked, perfectly serious, blue eyes grave.

“Yeah,” she muttered. More important than she was comfortable contemplating, to be perfectly honest. When Aita nodded, she slipped in through the window and settled on the floor of Aita's room. “Can you teach me how to temporarily disable security seals in a short amount of time?” She asked softly.
Aita's eyes widened and he didn't take his gaze off of her. “Shit,” he said, slowly getting off his bed to join her on the floor, grabbing a t-shirt and absently pulling it on. He'd been asleep. “That's- I really need some info on that, Kyo. I can't just-” he sighed, pulling a hand through his hair, looking conflicted. “You're not doing something you're not supposed to do, right?”

“This is all sanctioned,” she assured him tiredly, rubbing at one of her eyes. “Sensei can confirm it for you or Hinata-shishou.”

“That's good,” he muttered absently, before he rolled back to his feet to go to his shelf and get a few scrolls, and then returned to his seat in front of her. “How rushed is this?”

“We've got a month,” she told him, “but I can't spend much time here, so let's try and be quick?” She requested with a weak laugh that sounded rather hollow.

It was lucky she dealt so well with sleep-deprivation, she mused inwardly.

“Got it,” Aita muttered, frowning down at his scrolls before he unsealed everything they'd need. “Start by reading that, if you can,” he added, tossing another of the scrolls at her, only to pause. Aita raised his head and studied her intently a moment. “How little sleep are you running on?”

“Six hours a night.” Kyo shrugged. “With naps every now and then throughout the day.”

Aita gave her an unimpressed look, but did as promised and refrained from asking. “We'll go through it verbally then, I think,” he muttered, as if to himself. “How familiar are you with privacy seals?”

“We've covered them in lessons, but not in depth,” Kyo replied promptly.

“And seal altering?”

“Not really,” she confessed.

Aita sighed, frowning at nothing for just a moment, before he gave a determined nod. “How important is this?”

“Pretty vital,” she sighed. She could probably work around it if she couldn't learn how to do this in time, but... that would be much harder. “Let's try and see how difficult I find it,” she suggested.

“We'll go over the basic theory of seal altering first, and then we're both sleeping until morning,” Aita decided, fixing her with a look.

Kyo glanced over at the bed by the wall. It looked very tempting, but... there was so much to do.

“Learning about seals while barely coherent with lack of sleep is stupid, Kyo,” he pressed solemnly, leaning forward to stare her in the eyes. “You'll blow up yourself or a building. We'll go over the basic theory, sleep, and then continue in the morning.”

“I can't do that,” Kyo gritted out. She had to go back to Intel in the morning, and then she was slotted to observe some of the hospital apprentices this week. “This is the time I've got, we've got to try and make it work anyway.”

She pulled the hitai-ate from her head and tossed it onto the floor next to her with mounting frustration.

Pushing the fingers of both hands through her hair, she fixed Aita with a beady-eyed glare.

“This is what I've got to work with, so humour me. Please.” Or she might just cry.
“Alright,” Aita huffed. “I'm not happy about it but fine!” He shook his head. “You're getting some sleep when I say so, though, even though you need to go in the morning.” His eyes narrowed as he all but glared at her, and he didn't stop until she gave a reluctant nod.

“Thank you, Aita,” Kyo whispered, feeling like she was on the brink of tears anyway, from sheer gratitude.

Gratitude and overwhelming tiredness and stress.

But this was fine.

Suffer a bit more now, higher chances to stay alive later. It was fine. She could do it. She'd worked with less energy before and done... okay.

Not great, but okay.

“Hey, can you make a seal that do the same things a henge does?” She asked before they could get started.

“You need to learn that, too?” Aita asked flatly, looking annoyed and displeased.

Kyo shook her head. “I'm asking if you can make one for me,” she clarified.

Aita stilled, and she could all but see his thought process work through every piece of information she'd given him and come to the most likely conclusion.

He slapped a hand over his eyes and groaned, but gave a short, firm nod. “I'll do it. We'll have to go through the characteristics you want to change, but yeah,” he muttered. “No more stalling, let's get started. Seal alteration,” he huffed, scowling at her.

Kyo smiled tiredly but nodded.

Kyo woke up feeling a bit too warm for comfort, but she blamed that on the fact her back was pressed up against something that was radiating heat.

Confused, Kyo opened her eyes and took in the room she was in, and for a brief second, she had no idea where she was.

Her heart just about had time to jump into her throat before the memories trickled back, and she realised she was in Aita's room, in his bed, and the warm thing against her back was Aita himself.

Biting back a sigh, Kyo sat up, glanced down at Aita, who was still sleeping heavily, slipped out from under the covers, picked up her hitai-ate and put it back on, strapped on her poison pack and her wrist holsters, all of which she'd taken off before bed, put on her shoes and then slipped out of the room the same way she'd entered it.

Part of her mused that she was a bit young to be sneaking out of windows in the early morning, but the rest of her told that part to shut up and get with the program.

Kyo needed to meet up with Katsurou-sensei, eat something for breakfast and then it was back to work.

-x-x-x-
Time eventually ran out and Kyo was forced to admit she’d learned everything she possibly could have in the time allotted.

Katsurou-sensei had told her she was doing well, had managed better than anticipated, even.

The last week, the frantic pace had calmed down significantly, because everyone involved in the rushed crash-course in infiltration and espionage all agreed that sending her out of the village like a sleep-deprived wreck was counterproductive on all fronts.

So the last week, Kyo had spent mostly on rehashing the vital points, recovering her energy, catching up on lost sleep and food, checking in with tou-san very briefly and she’d neither had the energy or the mental capacity to feel guilty about that just yet, taking care of a few last preparations, as well as having an extra few lessons with Aita.

“Okay, I think this is as good as it's gonna get with the time we've had to work with,” the redhead declared, eyeing the latest seal Kyo had just disabled. “You're scary when you're motivated, Kyo,” he told her with a grim little grin.

The only answer she felt that deserved was a grimace, before she snorted. “You finished the seal I asked for, right?”

“Yes, wanna put it on now?”

“Probably for the best,” Kyo muttered. “Have to be ready tomorrow,” she sighed. “Where's the best place to put it? And how durable is it? It's not gonna wear off unexpectedly, right?”

“So little faith,” Aita said, though it was mostly just for show. “It's gonna be fine; I'm using ink that's water-resistant, okay? It'll only come off with this very specific counter I've got, so come find me when you come back,” he informed her lightly.

Kyo smiled.

He'd said 'when'.

“Of course,” she murmured.

“As for the best place to put it...” he trailed off, giving her a thoughtful once-over, “back of the neck?” He suggested. “Or the forehead.”

“Is it gonna be visible? And if so, how big is it?” Kyo asked, almost without realising she'd spoken out loud.

“It will fade out of sight when activated,” Aita said and held up a small square of paper to show her the small but intricate seal drawn up on it, raising a pointed eye-brow at her, as if to ask if she really thought so little of him.

Kyo eyed it a second, and then turned around. “Neck,” she decided.

“Right,” Aita muttered quietly, and while he gathered up the equipment he'd need, Kyo pulled up her legs towards her chest and rested her forehead against her raised knees. “I'm starting now,” he warned her.
“Okay,” Kyo said, and didn't move a muscle when the wet brush made contact with her skin.

Was she ready for this mission?

She could only hope.

She felt more prepared, though. It didn't feel quite as much like a death-sentence as when the Hokage had first told her, so that had to count for something. Right?

Katsurou, and even the people at Intel she'd been learning from for the last two months, all seemed to think she had a decent chance, too.

Once the first cold shock of the ink had passed, the brush sliding over her skin felt rather pleasant, which meant that by the time Aita declared himself done, Kyo was dozing lightly, and he had to gently nudge her to rouse her back to full awareness.

“You okay?” He asked, studying her worriedly.


“I'll do it for you, I think,” Aita said slowly, frowning at her, before he shook his head and seemingly let it go. “Ready?”

Kyo nodded.

Aita placed two fingers on the back of her neck, pulsed his chakra and she could feel the seal activate.

It felt weird.

Like a henge, but stranger, because it wasn't her chakra being used, and this wasn't something she could dissolve just with a thought and a yank on her chakra. Couldn't dissolve it without deliberately touching the seal, and she didn't want that.

“Huh,” Aita said, lifting his fingers from her neck. “That looks weird,” he commented mildly.

Kyo huffed and turned around to send him an unimpressed look, grabbing a handful of suddenly long hair and tucking it behind an ear.

Aita blinked at her. “Seriously weird,” he added.

“I get it, I look weird,” she sighed, rolling her eyes. “But at least I take it that means it worked as intended?” She pressed. “I don't have rabbit ears or something, I hope,” she muttered under her breath.

“There's a mirror beside the door,” Aita told her instead of answering her question.

Sending him a sharp look, Kyo got to her feet and walked across the room.

When she caught sight of her reflection, she had to stop and stare.

Seeing herself, but not herself... was weird. More than weird.

Kyo stared at herself, taking in her now-brown eyes, black hair reaching down to her elbows. It was still her face, though.
It wasn't like Kyo's face was well-known, so it hadn't been necessary to go that far, but it was still strange to see herself like this.

Fiddling with a lock of her new hair for a moment, Kyo ran her fingers through it, pulling it back from her face.

Experimentally dividing it up in three parts, Kyo set out to braid it in a series of actions she'd done often, but not for a while. She'd had longer hair than this, once, she could do it, but that didn't mean she wasn't out of practice.

The hair felt real, and even though she knew it was a chakra construct, she couldn't tell any difference. Which was definitely good.

“Do you have- thank you,” Kyo said, accepting the bright purple elastic band Aita handed her, having fetched one for her before she'd been able to finish her question.

“Ashika demands I help her with her hair,” he said with a shrug, even though she hadn't commented.

“You're a good parental figure to her,” Kyo told him sincerely.

Aita snorted, but looked faintly pleased anyway.

While her friend went to clean up his fuuinjutsu things, Kyo got out one of her storage scrolls and unsealed the brand new outfit she'd gotten herself. One set of five, just to be sure.

Despite the mild distaste she felt about the whole thing, she changed clothes quickly and efficiently, because spending half a day getting used to it could only be a good thing.

Skin-tight but flexible shorts reaching down to her knees in a dark grey colour, which were partially covered by a simple, but absolutely girly, tunic-thing in a soft lilac that, while she didn't particularly like it, at least she hadn't felt like it'd be outright suicide to wear. It had half-sleeves ending at the elbow joint.

Sealing away her wrist holsters and her poison pack felt like a grave sin or criminal offence or something, but she still did it.

“You know, I don't think I'd recognize you if we walked past each other on the street with you looking like that,” Aita told her, a conflicted expression on his face.

Kyo stuck her tongue out at him, but didn't pause in the act of strapping on her kunai holsters and standard pouches.

She could still wear those, thankfully.

When she was done, she pulled out the brand new hitai-ate she'd been provided with and tied it on, the metal plate covering her forehead. She was hoping the band would help keep her now-long hair in check.

Her old one, the one she'd received upon graduation, was also sealed away.

“Well?” She asked, feeling like this was as good as it was gonna get. “What do you think?”

Aita stared at her, and there was an interesting expression on his face when he raised a hand to rub at his cheek.

“You look really-” he paused, seemingly to think over his choice of word, “young.”
Kyo peered at him. “I'm still eleven. We haven't changed anything that would influence how old I look,” she argued, frowning faintly.

“No, I know, but I mean,” Aita waved a hand at her in an encompassing gesture, “you look tiny,” he muttered. “Like you shouldn't have graduated yet?” And it sounded like a question.

Kyo smiled thinly. “Which was the idea, really,” she informed him blandly. It was also why she'd been given a shiny new hitai-ate to temporarily replace her old, scratched and banged up one.

The long hair and soft, feminine colour she was wearing helped, too, and in combination with new eye and hair colour, there'd been no need to change her face.

To mess with the Uzumaki further, Kyo cleared her expression until there was a small, sweet smile on her lips and her eyes were wide and curious. Shifting her posture at the same time, she clasped her hands and brought them up to her chest, peering up at Aita with polite interest.

“Hi!” She chirped cheerfully.

“That's fucking creepy,” was Aita's reaction. “Stop doing that. Right now.”

Kyo laughed.

“No, seriously, this is disturbing,” Aita insisted. “Can we please change you back? I've lost my friend Kyo, have you seen her?” He took a step closer, and he was only partially teasing. “Same height as you, short brown hair, blue eyes, creepy poison assassin.”

“But I am Kyo, silly!” Kyo giggled, even though she sort of wanted to drown herself. That time spent talking with three eleven year old girls last year ended up having been time well spent, apparently, despite her initial assumption.

Who would have thought.

Aita shuddered and covered his eyes. “I'm feeling traumatized. I can't unsee this,” he peered at her from between two fingers, “I'll never be able to look at you the same way ever again, Kyo.”

“It's not over the top?” She asked, reverting back to herself with a worried frown.

She felt like everyone would be able to tell it was her, like they'd wonder why in the world she was acting so weirdly and just tell her to get a grip.

“It's disturbing,” Aita huffed, with feeling, before he dropped his hands from his face to eye her more seriously. “But mostly because it's so scarily effective. With the change in behaviour and your general facial expressions, I doubt I'd recognize you without some sort of prompting.” He was silent a second. “Are you- will you be okay without your needles and poisons?” He asked worriedly, giving her another once-over.

“I'll be alright,” Kyo told him as confidently as she could manage, even though she felt upsettingly naked without them on her person. “I think it's time for me to go,” she said. “Thank you so much for everything, Aita.”

“Just be careful, and come back,” he told her, pulling her into a hug, tugging gently on her new braid while he was at it.

“I'll do my best,” she muttered into his shoulder, clinging tightly, just for a second. “Be nice to Genma when I'm away, okay?”
Aita snorted out a laugh. “Sure, so long as him and Ashika don't raid the kitchen again.” He grinned.

Kyo snickered, and stepped back, out of the hug. “See you around.”

“Yeah,” Aita agreed, slipping his hands into his pockets and watching as she slipped out his window and took off.

Instead of using the roofs and buildings to run, Kyo walked Konoha's streets at a civilian pace as she made her way to Katsurou-sensei's house.

She figured she could use every minute available to her to get used to this. As much as she could.

It just felt weird.

Kyo hadn't had long hair in this life, and the extra weight of it, the way the braid swung back and forth behind her as she walked... it would take some getting used to.

Hopefully, she wouldn't have to face off against any actual adults on this mission, which meant any mistakes she'd potentially make because of it would only enforce her image as a Genin. Without getting her killed in the process.

No one paid her much if any attention, the most she attracted were a few, brief glances before she was almost immediately dismissed.

It was... both rewarding and irritating.

This was the reaction she had been aiming for, but it was frankly upsetting how easy it had been to achieve.

Kyo hadn't changed much about herself, or so it felt, but she was already being treated entirely differently. And the mission hadn't officially started yet.

Huffing unhappily to herself, Kyo walked up to the front door of Katsurou-sensei's house and paused.

Instead of walking right on in, she stopped and knocked, waiting for sensei to let her in, because she was trying to adapt to her role already now.

When the door opened, there was a fraction of a second where Katsurou eyed her with clinical scrutiny, before he gave a nod of approval and stepped aside.

“I take it this means everything is ready for tomorrow,” he said after he'd closed the door behind her.

“As ready as I'll be,” Kyo agreed on a sigh. “I still feel like this is going to turn into a disaster.”

Katsurou hummed pensively. “Try to stay positive, while keeping those observant eyes of yours open to reality, and you'll be alright,” he said with a faint flicker of a smile.

Kyo stuck her tongue out at him. “Hirata will know what to expect, right?” She asked, still feeling a little bit sceptical about everything in general.

“Hirata will have been fully briefed on the situation,” Katsurou assured her amusedly. “He's essentially your backup.”
“Oh.”

Kyo considered that a moment. It made sense, and she'd worked with Hirata before, which could only be a benefit.

“You'll be working together, and there'll be time to hammer out the finer details on your way to Kiri.”

She frowned. “We'll be travelling together with the others, right?” Which meant she'd have to be creative, but that wasn't anything new. She already had an idea about a few ways she could go about it, depending on how Hirata reacted.

“Yeah,” Katsurou sighed, picking up a stack of files and parking himself on the sofa. “You should go to bed,” he suggested idly, sending her an assessing look. “You're still tired, and you'll have an early start tomorrow.”

It had been a hectic couple of months.

“Okay,” she said softly, but didn't go brush her teeth until she'd gotten a hug from Katsurou-sensei, who indulged her with fond exasperation. “Love you, sensei,” she told him, and then trudged over to the bathroom.

Would she be able to sleep with long hair again? Or would she manage to tangle herself up in the tresses and wake up in a panic, thinking someone was trying to strangle her?

Smiling with grim amusement at her own thoughts, Kyo closed the bathroom door behind her.

One week of semi-down-time wasn't anywhere near enough after almost two months of intense prepping for a high-stakes mission, but Kyo still got up with the sun the next morning.

Katsurou-sensei made her a hearty breakfast, keeping her company while she ate, seemingly perfectly relaxed and unconcerned.

“The Hokage wouldn't choose to send you if he, if we, didn't think you could actually pull this off, Kyo,” he said when she was done. “So you'd do well to remember that and keep it in mind in the following weeks.”

“Easy for you to say,” Kyo muttered, feeling generally ill-tempered and disgruntled and it wasn't only because she was tired. She was so nervous it felt like her stomach would rebel any moment now.

Katsurou laughed softly, patting her fondly on the head, tugging back a few stray black locks from her face and tilting back her head in the same motion, meeting her brown gaze.

“They're not expecting you, and they won't expect you. That's something you've always known to exploit, from the very beginning, whether you were aware of doing it or not,” he told her steadily.

Kyo stared at him, feeling oddly reassured, despite the less than cheerful words.

Katsurou gave her shoulder a few encouraging pats and then got to his feet.

It was time to go.

Instead of going to the door to pick up her backpack and put on her shoes, Kyo walked up to
Katsurou-sensei and threw her arms around his waist in a tight hug that felt a little bit desperate.

She closed her eyes and pressed her face into Katsurou's chest, for just a moment, trying to take all this faith in her he had and shove it into her own head.

"I love you, sensei, and please don't die before I come back," she told him, finally stepping back and blinking her eyes open.

Katsurou scoffed and sent her a glance. "Don't get full of yourself," he muttered, though he was smiling and Kyo could both see it on his face and hear it in his voice. "Go," he urged shortly, gently nudging her in the direction of the door.

"You're just trying to get rid of me!" She accused playfully, even while forcing herself to take step after step to the hallway.

"You're finally seeing it." Katsurou smirked. "It's not like I've been making a secret of my ambitions."

"The betrayal!" Kyo gasped theatrically, placing a hand to her chest, not pausing in the action of slinging her backpack on. "Sensei! How could you?"

"It's been a long and tedious mission, but my plans are finally coming to fruition," Katsurou drawled, voice dry enough to peel paint.

Kyo snickered quietly to herself a moment, ready to leave and there was no use in stalling any longer, but she still wasn't moving towards the door.

She took a deep breath. "I'll do my best not to die," she told him quietly, perfectly serious and feeling like her mostly-false confidence would shatter to pieces with one wrong word.

"I know you will," he said back, solemn and firm and not an ounce of doubt in his voice.

Kyo gave a sharp nod, firmed up her resolve -again- and walked out of Katsurou-sensei's house.

She would have liked to go by the apartment to say bye to tou-san and Genma, but she wasn't sure they'd be there, and it wasn't like she was being herself right now. Wouldn't be herself from this moment on until she came back.

...if she came back.

Suppressing a shudder, Kyo began to walk towards the Hokage tower.

She was early, but that suited her new name and personality just fine.

Nakahara Aiko liked to have plenty of time to spare before going on any mission, to calm her nerves if nothing else.

Kyo spent a brief second to mourn the fact she couldn't just use sealing scrolls instead of the backpack, but this played better into the image of the stereotypical Genin.

The time for self-doubt and nerves was over; she couldn't afford them the second this mission started.

Taking a deep breath of the early morning air, Kyo squashed down her conflicting feelings and settled into the role she'd made for herself and focused on the now.

She'd deal with the rest of it as it popped up. Take one day at a time.
She could do it.

-x-x-x-
Chapter 75

Chapter Summary

And so it begins

No one gave her a second look on her way through the Hokage tower, on her way to the designated meeting room, where everyone going to the Kiri Chuunin Exam would meet up, to at least get a good look at who they'd head into the heart of enemy territory with and get their official send-off.

Kyo was feeling somewhat bleary-eyed, but seeing as that only added on to her new identity, she did nothing to play it down, even while she kept an eye out for Hirata.

No, Hirata-sensei, because she needed to get used to that fast or risk slipping up at an inopportune moment.

Couldn't have that.

So when she walked into the correct room and saw the man already present and waiting, Kyo skipped up to him with a happy, excited smile and said, “Hirata-sensei!” in an appropriately moderated voice.

Damn, her grandmother would have been ecstatic if Kyo behaved like this all the time, wouldn't she?

“Kid,” Hirata grunted back, giving her a critical once-over, officially to make sure she was ready for the trip, and not to get a good look at her new appearance. “Got everything?”

“Yes, sensei.” Kyo nodded, gripping the straps of her backpack and trying to look politely excited, though she wasn't sure how well she managed.

Anything off with her acting could be blamed on nerves, anyway, so she wasn't overly worried about that part. Not when they were still in the village.

Not when there were so many other things vying for her to fret about.

“Are we going to leave soon?” She asked, partly because she wanted to know how long they'd have to wait and partly because that would convey an extra sense of eager excitement.

I'm a naïve Genin, Kyo told herself dryly and abruptly had to bite back a snort.

“Everyone has to meet up first,” Hirata muttered dispassionately, sending her an unreadable look, and she wondered if he found her behaviour as annoying as she did. “Stay close,” he added shortly.

Kyo parked herself next to Hirata and relaxed her face until she knew she looked half-asleep, which was a very good excuse not to interact with anyone, even when others began to trickle into the room.

“Oi, Senju,” an unfamiliar man called, striding towards Hirata with deliberate purpose and a severely unhappy shine to his eyes. Two children were trailing after him like ducklings, and they looked older than her.
Kyo guessed thirteen. Possibly. Definitely teenagers, at least.

“Kurama,” Hirata said back, giving the man a disinterested look before he focused on the two kids. “Those the ones?”

The Kurama Jounin gave him an unamused frown, before he sent his students a look. He looked like there was plenty he wanted to say to Hirata, but clearly refrained. This was neither the time nor the place for any kind of confrontation.

In the end he sent Hirata one last, narrow-eyed look and then turned to address his Genin, imparting a few last-minute words of wisdom.

One boy and one girl, both with serious expressions on their faces, but they also looked... not excited, she decided, but there was anticipation there, and it wasn't negative.

Kyo tilted her head.

The Kurama Jounin placed one gloved hand on each of his students' shoulders, gave them both a firm nod, and then stalked off.

Kyo drifted closer with an almost timid, polite smile. “Hello,” she greeted them hesitantly. “Are you going to be on my team under Hirata-sensei?” She asked, even though she was stating obvious things.

The two Genin exchanged a look before the boy nodded. “We are,” he said, passably confident and polite enough for the situation.

Kyo let her smile loose a bit of the nervous quality she'd been trying to convey. “Oh! Nice to meet you,” she greeted, executing a quick bow, her braid falling over her shoulder. “I'm Nakahara Aiko, but please call me Aiko-chan. Let's work well together!”

“Rikuto,” the boy said shortly.

“Shimizu Honoka,” the girl offered her own greeting, even giving her a polite bow back. Her eyes were purple, which was an interesting colour, with soft-looking, shoulder-length brown hair that curled gently around her face. “It's nice to meet you,” she echoed back.

Rikuto had short hair in a strange bluish colour that looked almost grey in this light, his eyes were brown and he was rather tall for his age.

Both wore something that was very similar to the standard uniform, dark colours, with added arm-guards and gloves.

Kyo couldn't claim to have seen them before, not to mention met, but they seemed competent enough.

They held themselves in a manner that was reassuring and pointedly more experienced that what she had been expecting, which was nice. They were also acting perfectly professionally.

Pity Kyo couldn't really respond in kind.

Smiling cheerfully at the two of them, she very much did not react in any way when the door opened and Jiraiya walked in, followed by Minato and two more kids, another duo she was unfamiliar with.

Shortly after that, the Hokage joined them, shadowed by Senju Takeshi and several unseen ANBU
guards, she was sure.

Hopefully, none of them would be as over-worked and exhausted as Beaver had been, which had resulted in the slight mix-up when this whole mission had started for her.

Looking around, Kyo took in the three teams present, gaze lingering briefly on the third Jounin.

She hadn't really worked with any Aburame before, but he looked competent, and Katsurou-sensei had already informed her the Jounin sensei going to Kiri had been chosen very carefully.

“If I can have your attention for a few minutes,” the Hokage said, even though no one had been talking. “You're all aware why you're here, the mission lying before you and what will be required of you.” He swept his gaze over them, not lingering on anyone specific. “I wish you the best of luck and I have every faith that every single one of you will make me and Konoha proud.” And he smiled at all the children gathered in the room.

They were equal parts sacrificial lambs and the race-horse Konoha had bet on.

It all depended on how they did in the Exams. On which side they fell.

“As you face the challenges waiting for you, I ask that you keep in mind you are all Konoha shinobi, before anything else, and the Will of Fire burns in all of you,” the Hokage finished, and the look in his eyes was firm, resolute and absolutely chilling in its sheer intensity.

Right then, Kyo could tell exactly why this man was Hokage, why he'd held the position for as long as he had and why, in a story once upon a time, he'd lived through three wars, personally kept his village alive and strong through two of them.

Having to resist the urge to perform a formal salute, Kyo waited to be dismissed with everyone else.

The Hokage gave them one last nod, and watched as the three Jounin going with them herded them from the room.

.

Going to the Land of Water as they were, they'd travel down in a south-eastward direction, sticking to within their own borders for as long as was possible, before crossing over into the Land of Tea, located on the peninsula stretching out into the sea between the Land of Fire and the archipelago constituting the Land of Water.

Going that way meant they wouldn't need to cross as big a stretch of open water, and Kyo could only be grateful.

She had no idea what her reaction to seeing the ocean again would be.

The distance they had to cover before that was impressive, though, and they weren't exactly rushing.

No one wanted to arrive in Kiri exhausted; that was a bad idea no matter how you looked at it. So they would stop to camp every evening at dusk, which meant they'd spend almost a week just travelling.

As Katsurou-sensei had promised, it left her with plenty of opportunities to talk with Hirata privately.

Seeing as she was pretending to have low chakra reserves, feigning exhaustion from time to time while they were running was enough to have Hirata carry her occasionally without sparking
suspicion in any of the Genin.

The one Jounin she didn't know, Aburame Takara, sent her a few thoughtful glances every now and then, but didn't seem to speak much.

Kyo actually couldn't make out much of anything about... them, because they wore rather bulky clothes and much of their face was covered.

“Is he always like this?” Honoka asked quietly, frowning up at Hirata, who had sat down on a branch up in one of the surrounding trees and didn't look like he planned to move anytime soon.

Kyo peered up at him a second before she turned back to Honoka with a bright smile. “Sensei is a bit anti-social,” she told her easily.

“There's anti-social,” Honoka muttered, “and then there's anti-social.”

Kyo giggled softly, because wasn't that the truth. Hirata hadn't exchanged more than a handful of words with the other Jounin sensei throughout the day, outright ignored the kids, and was only really giving Kyo the time of day.

Since this morning, Kyo had learned that Honoka was fourteen, as was her teammate, rather than the thirteen she'd first assumed, and was far more mature than the rest of the kids.

Kyo liked her, and could only mourn the fact she couldn't get to know her as herself.

But there was nothing that said she couldn't do that later, when this mission was done, she told herself in an attempt to be optimistic.

-x-x-x-

The last two months had been weird. In more than one way.

First off, sensei had been unhappy about something, but had brushed him off when Minato had tried to ask.

Second, he hadn't seen Kyo in almost exactly two months, too, and Jiraiya-sensei just kept telling him she was busy, that since she already was one, the Chuunin Thing in Kiri didn't involve her.

Minato couldn't help but wonder if she was doing ANBU stuff instead.

And then, lastly, there was Setsuko and Akiyama Gorou, who had been training with them, sparring, running drills, getting familiar...

Minato found himself constantly comparing them to Kyo, and found them a bit... lacking.

Not that there was anything wrong with Gorou and Setsuko! Quite the opposite. But they were older than him and Gorou talked a lot, and it got a little tiring after a while.

Kyo could talk, especially if you got her started on poisons and plants, but she could also be silent for hours without making it feel awkward, and Minato liked that about her. He liked the fact there were no expectations to constantly keep up with a conversation when he had nothing important to say.

Minato had never realised how much Kyo wasn't lording her rank over him, either. But it wasn't just
that, because technically, Minato and Gorou were both Genin, but with two more years of service and experience, Gorou was higher in the pecking order, and he seemed intent to always remind the rest of them. Never mind that Setsuko was older than him by a few months and had graduated earlier.

It was tiresome. And it got old fast.

Minato had decided, two weeks into this new kind of team training that he was hugging Kyo the next time he saw her.

He'd win this tournament-thing, become a Chuunin and focus on catching up to her.

He liked Kyo, and he refused to be left behind.

“Are we settling down for the night?” Minato asked Jiraiya-sensei, who sent him a look and sighed.

“Make camp and get some sleep, Minato,” was all he said, before he stomped over to talk to that Jounin Kyo had brought to Katsurou-san once, a while back. He looked less... mentally unstable now, though.

Or maybe not, he amended, when he realised sensei had to jump up into a tree to get close enough to speak quietly with him.

“Okay, let's make camp over here,” Gorou decided, walking over to claim a spot of ground that looked passably comfortable to sleep on.

Seeing no reason to protest, Minato just exchanged a glance with Setsuko and got started.

She was a quiet girl, didn't speak much, but she seemed to like him better than Gorou.

It felt strange to be on mission with so many other kids his age, Minato mused to himself as he rolled out his blankets. The closest he could think to compare it to was the Academy classes, but it wasn't even nearly the same thing.

Felt entirely different, and there was a tense, unpredictable undercurrent scoring every interaction.

Minato sighed and wished Kyo was here.

It would have been fun to discuss everything with her and hear her take on things.

Not feeling tired enough to lie down and try to sleep just yet, he settled down to observe the rest of the people travelling with them.

The Aburame Jounin kept close to... -his? Minato would go with that for now. Until proven otherwise- his Genin, silent but alert and there was something very calm about his whole presence.

Hirata-san was up in the tree, still, and his Genin had gathered underneath, the two girls chatting softly with each other.

One of them was older, a teenager, and the first impression Minato had gotten of her was... solemn. Serious. Something that was partly reflected in her teammate. He was pretty sure Gorou had called him Rikuto? Hm.

It was exacerbated by the cheerful, chatty girl Minato's age they'd been paired with.

She looked to be bouncing everywhere, and she was smiling at everyone, even when she looked like
she'd rather go and hide.

They'd only travelled together for one day, so far, and there hadn't been much time to socialize with the other teams.

Gorou seemed to be trying to present himself as team leader, too, which was annoying.

Not that Minato absolutely wanted the position—he'd actually prefer Setsuko; she seemed sensible—but having the other boy constantly send him pointed looks was getting ever more irritating.

Actually. The Hokage had told them to stick together, if not in quite so many words, which meant they should definitely try and get to know the other Genin better, and this was the best opportunity so far.

Decided, Minato got up and wandered over to the Aburame Jounin's team and introduced himself, talking a little bit, getting their names, if nothing else.

When he moved over to do the same with Hirata-san's team, he finally got a clear view of the black-haired girl's face and slowed his approach until he was just standing there, staring at her and studying her features.

Minato tilted his head, trying to figure out...

Why would she—? Sensei had said...

“Hi!” The girl chirped, having noticed him staring at her and had walked up to him on her own. “Saw you looking,” she explained with a small, modest smile that bordered on shy, but that wasn't right, because she had approached him. “I'm Nakahara Aiko, but you can call me Aiko-chan, okay?” She told him, all in one breath and finished it off by waiting breathlessly for a response.

Her eyes were brown. They were wrong. They should be blue.

Why was her hair black? And it was long.

Minato glanced at the braid, but it could only hold his attention for a second, before he focused back on the very familiar face.

“Wha—”

“I'm super nervous about this,” she said, speaking over him and cutting him off, seemingly accidentally, “going to Kiri, it's a bit scary, you know? But it's also a bit exciting,” she giggled, raising a hand to cover her mouth, as if embarrassed by the sound. “Oh, I'm so sorry, I didn't give you the chance to introduce yourself!” She smiled, watching him interestedly.

And then, for just a second, her gaze shifted into something more familiar, and, more importantly, into a sharp, pointed look that finally kicked him back into gear.

“Oh, uh, I'm Namikaze Minato?” He offered, even though it came out more as a question, because why was he introducing himself to Kyo? She already knew him.

“It's nice to meet you! Let's work well together,” Kyo chirped at him.

No, wait.

She had introduced herself first, for some reason, but she hadn't used her name.
She was looking differently, was acting differently, and... sensei had said Kyo wouldn't be coming.

Was this what he had meant?

Minato frowned at nothing for a moment, lost in thought, even though Kyo kept up a steady stream of quiet conversation while she steered them to the last two Genin of their group.

What kind of reason would Kyo have to pretend to be someone else? Why would she even be here? She was already a Chuunin and they were going to... Kiri. They were going to Kiri.

Minato's eyes widened a fraction in realisation and he turned to send Jiraiya-sensei a look. Then spent a second studying the Aburame Jounin, then Hirata-san.

If he was forced to guess, all three of them looked like front-line fighters, didn't they? He knew for a fact Jiraiya-sensei was one.

And Kyo... he glanced at the girl beside him out of the corner of his eye. Kyo did not. Look like one, that was. But considering some of the things he'd learned about her...

Wrapping up his conversation with the last two Genin, barely remembering their names -had it been Rikuto and Hana-something?- he turned back to Kyo.

“It was nice meeting you, Aiko-san. Thanks for introducing me to your team.” He smiled.

“Please, call me Aiko-chan!” Kyo chirped back, looking pleased. “And it was nice to meet you, too,” she added sincerely.

Minato gave her a nod and then wandered back to his temporary team to try and get some sleep.

He wasn't entirely sure why Kyo was here, acting like someone else, but he understood enough not to make any waves. He'd play along.

“What, got a crush on that girl?” Gorou asked when he came back, peering over at Kyo for a moment before he grinned at him.

Minato blinked blankly back, which didn't appear to be the reaction Gorou had been looking for.

They all settled down to sleep shortly after, all nine of them.

-x-x-x-

It took them six days to travel to Kiri at a reasonable pace.

In that time, Kyo felt she had gotten plenty of opportunity to talk to Hirata about the finer details of her mission, and she'd even gotten around to sort of talk to Minato about feigning ignorance.

Had Jiraiya forgotten to do that already, or something?

It felt like time passed far too quickly, though.

She'd had a week and all of a sudden, it was gone.

They'd crossed two larger islands to get to Kirigakure, which was located on the west side of the
main island in the archipelago that made up the Land of Water.

The stretches of ocean they'd crossed to get there were shorter than the one between the Land of Hot Water and Uzu, but it had still left Kyo on high alert, part of her convinced there were enemy nin lurking around, waiting to drag them down into the dark waters.

Hirata had picked her up and carried her for most of the stretches without a word, and she could only be grateful he'd been there.

“Don't wander now,” Hirata ordered brusquely, eyes sharp and keen on their surroundings, despite the heavy mists that had come up more and more since they'd stepped foot on the second island.

Now that they were on the main island, the largest one, they were particularly dense, obscuring the view and making it feel like there could be people lurking practically anywhere.

The air was warm and moist and Kyo's clothes clung to her.

The temperature alone wasn't particularly higher than in Konoha, but the level of humidity in the air, even where the mist kept away, made it feel so much worse.

Insects buzzed insistently around them and the vegetation was lush and almost tropical, if you asked Kyo.

The ground, where it wasn't rocky, was muddy and almost swampy, in places, even far from the coast, which was excellent breeding grounds for mosquitoes.

Waving a hand irritably in front of her face in a futile attempt to get rid of the pests, Kyo eyed a plant off to the side of the road they were walking down, sent Hirata a brief look and then jogged off to collect it, cutting the whole plant off a little bit over the ground, and then returned to her team.

Hirata glanced at the plant, gave a huff and said nothing.

She'd barely gone a couple of metres off course, and she was also putting on a bit of a performance for their watchers.

“What are you doing?” Honoka asked curiously when Kyo picked off a leaf, crushed it up in her hand and then began to rub it on her skin, beginning at her arm.

“It wards off the bugs.” Kyo smiled, offering the plant to Honoka, who hesitantly took a leaf to copy her. “Do you want one, sensei?” She asked eagerly, holding the plant out to Hirata.

The man gave a snort, but didn't otherwise react.

Kyo bit back a snort of her own, because come on, she knew some plants that weren't poisonous, too!

“Thank you, Aiko-chan,” Honoka said when Kyo offered her another leaf, for her face this time. “We don't have this many mosquitoes back home,” she muttered sourly, giving their surroundings a disapproving frown.

“It's all the stagnant water.” Kyo informed her sagely, and then passed the plant over to Rikuto when he eyed it interestedly. “They lay their eggs in it.”

Honoka shuddered and eyed their surroundings again. “That's why Hirata-sensei told us not to drink it?” She muttered, only hesitating over the honorific a little by now.
“Partly!” Kyo chirped. “It can also host parasites and bacteria, which can make you sick,” she divulged happily.

“Duly noted,” Honoka huffed.

“So how long do we have to walk like this before we get there?” Kyo asked curiously, staring up at Hirata and well aware of the number of her ‘fellow’ Genin listening attentively.

“Almost there now, so shut up,” Hirata grunted back, not so much as glancing at her.

“Okay, sensei!” Kyo chirped back, and she imagined herself giving a small, crisp salute in addition, but that would probably be to lay it on a bit thick.

There were mist-shrouded mountains rising up like pillars ahead of them, like tall, silent spectators in the distance, and the sky looked more grey than blue, despite the fact the sun was still beating down on them.

It took them roughly an hour to reach the gates; towering, intimidating pillars hewn from stone, looking to have been carved straight from the mountains.

The doors themselves were also made of rock, and while they were smaller than Konoha's they looked about just as heavy.

“You all wait here,” Hirata grunted at them, exchanged a look with jiraiya, and together, the two of them approached the gates and the Kiri shinobi standing there, watching them.

Jiraiya produced several scrolls from somewhere, which he presented to the gate guards, and a few tense minutes passed while the documents were inspected and verified as authentic.

Kyo shifted from foot to foot, trying to ignore the frankly intimidating number of chakra signatures surrounding them.

The back of her neck was itching from all the stares, but she focused on Honoka, stood beside her, and Minato off to the side.

“Let's go,” Takara-sensei murmured softly, herding them all towards Jiraiya and Hirata the moment Jiraiya signalled them to do so.

“Sign your names here,” a Kiri shinobi said with a humourless grin, eyeing their group of Genin like they were meat on display at the butcher's. “Remember not to wander, or you might find yourselves... lost,” he added, grin stretching further until he looked mildly deranged.

Kyo took the pen offered her and neatly wrote 'Nakahara Aiko' beneath Shimizu Honoka, before she handed the pen to Rikuto.

When they had all signed themselves in, the Kiri shinobi half-turned to shout, “Oi! Ameyuri!”

“What!?” A supremely unimpressed and ill-tempered voice answered.

“You're up!” The man said with something that sounded like glee, and turned back to grin at them some more.

Kyo didn't like the look in his eyes at all.

“I swear I'll kill half the fucking administrative people the next time they try and pull this shit,” the owner of the voice grumbled irritably. Stepping into view was a frankly tiny woman with red, very
interestingly-styled hair, the colour a touch closer to purple than the Uzumaki shade, and sharp, pointed teeth. “What the hell are you waiting on, get moving!” She snapped, frowning at them.

Taking one look at Jiraiya and Hirata, her frown deepened and she stalked off with lethal grace and looking about as menacing as a starved tiger.

“Remember the fucking diplomacy, Ameyuri!” The gate guard called after them, voice shaking with laughter.

“Someone get someone sane to meet the fucking 'guests'!” ’Ameyuri’ snapped back, seemingly carrying enough weight around here to send at least a couple of men scurrying to do as she’d said.

“So... you're not quite what I was expecting.”

Kyo felt like slapping a hand over her face, because of course Jiraiya had to open his big mouth.

“Yeah? And what were you expecting?” The woman asked, and her black eyes didn’t get any more friendly with the way they narrowed on Kyo's idiot of a sensei.

“You know, someone tall, ugly, intimidating. Far from someone as pretty as you,” Jiraiya replied with a grin, sending the woman an apprecciative glance. At least he kept most of his attention on their surroundings.

Ameyuri didn’t so much as blink.

In fact, she completely ignored Jiraiya's attempt at flirting with the enemy, and led them down the road further into Kirigakure.

“Now, make sure not to wander, especially not somewhere you're not supposed to be, or you will be assumed to be trying to get into shit you're not supposed to and end up very dead,” Ameyuri told them dispassionately, sounding like she was reading off of a script she'd been provided with.

If only using her own words to convey the message.

All the buildings were made of stone, and even here, in what seemed like the middle of their village, the vegetation was denser than what Kyo would have assumed.

The street they were walking down was paved with stone, too.

There were people out and about, but Kirigakure wasn't as lively as Konoha, not at a glance. Not so far, at least.

Kyo glanced at the two swords strapped to their guide's back, taking in the strange shape to them.

There were claw-like blades sticking out from the main blade, two on each sword. One near the tip, one near the handle, on either side.

“The first part of the Exam starts tomorrow. You will be taken to your residence for your stay, you will be fetched tomorrow morning by yours truly, and not step so much as a foot outside in between, got it?” Ameyuri sent them all a chilling smile over her shoulder.

There were more people moving about now, despite the drifting mist.

Navigating this place would be a nightmare, Kyo mused distractedly, and that wasn't taking the Kiri shinobi constantly moving about into consideration.
No one said or did anything unexpected until they walked by a civilian with a rather terrible cough.

“Oh, yeah,” their guide spoke up, turning to eye them all, displaying her sharp teeth in a disconcerting smile. “Try and stay out of the mist, yeah?”

“Why?” The boy on Minato’s temporary team asked, sending the woman leading them a part defiant and part unnerved look.

“There might be something waiting for ya in it,” she grinned, “or ya might catch something unfortunate,” she said, flopping a hand negligently at the civilian who was making his way slowly away from them, sounding like he was about to hack up a lung. “Just be good little Genin and keep to where you're supposed to be,” she finished, turning back to leading them to their destination.

Kyo glanced at Hirata, who had very clearly not taken his attention off of the woman since the moment she’d appeared.

He flexed one of his hands, at his side, casually into what looked like a very brief sign and Kyo had to suppress a groan.

Of course their guide was a sensor.

That just made sense, didn't it?

It also made Kyo's job so much harder.

Clamping down ruthlessly on the urge to dim her chakra down to nothing, Kyo continued like she hadn't learned anything new at all.

All the buildings in this village seemed to be cylindrical in shape, some towering up above them like the mountains walling them in like a natural barrier against the rest of the world, and Kyo wondered if the style had anything to do with the mists and weather patterns around here, or if it was purely aesthetic.

Maybe they'd carved the tallest buildings out of the mountains themselves?

Shops and civilian residences seemed to follow the same theme, and it made for trailing, ambling, very confusing roads.

Again, the fact part of your vision constantly seemed to be obscured by mist of various thickness didn't exactly help.

Then there were trees and bushes...

Kyo sighed softly and sidled closer to Honoka, who sent her a glance and then slung an arm over her shoulders.

Kyo blinked, realised the older girl had taken her shift as an expression of fear, and settled into the hold and kept her pace even with Honoka's. It merely enforced the image she wanted to convey, so this was more than fine.

Without any other incident of note, they entered a building that looked largely the same as every other building they'd seen so far and were all but shunted into their allotted rooms, one for each team.

“Well, that could have gone worse,” Kyo said with deliberately forced cheer, because going for the fearful vibe was still a goal.
Just because they could no longer see their babysitter, didn’t mean there weren’t others.

Hirata gave a neutral grunt that could have really meant a number of things, before he went to work checking the room, the beds, the walls, the bathroom, every little inch.

If nothing else, it would force any watchers to do it from outside, which was no doubt entirely the point.

That, and make sure there weren’t any seals in hidden places. Or traps.

“You brats should get ready for bed,” he finally declared, evidently deeming it safe.

Kyo smiled, bounced over to claim one of the beds, putting her backpack on it to dig out her sleep wear and toothbrush, before she hurried into the bathroom.

“Don’t take too long, Aiko-chan; I need to pee!” Honoka called after her.

“Okay!” Kyo chirped back, grinning a little at the amused snort it drew from Rikuto.

Hirata had settled down on one of the two chairs in the room, back to a corner, eyeing them steadily and patiently, and Kyo knew he would get about as much sleep tonight as she would.

Probably less.

“Do you think it would actually be worth it to take a shower?” Rikuto asked no one in particular when Kyo came back out again after a couple of minutes, feeling far more refreshed than she had going in. “It feels like I’ll still be damp tomorrow morning,” he complained softly.

The boy had been very quiet during their travels so far, but there was an easy camaraderie between him and Honoka that made Kyo want to smile wistfully.

“You better take the opportunity now, because who knows what’ll happen tomorrow,” Honoka advised with a shrug, grabbing her pile of clothes and necessities and slipped into the bathroom now it was unoccupied.

Kyo sent Rikuto an amused smile, which he actually returned! Progress! Then she shared a glance with Hirata, before she settled down in one of the four beds and got comfortable.

The ideal thing would be to get a few hours’ sleep before it got dark.

Staring up at the ceiling, nerves like a rabid beast in her chest, clawing at her ribs to get out, she acknowledged that that would be very difficult.

With a soft sigh, Kyo determinedly closed her eyes, relaxed her body and decided to, if nothing else, relish the fact she was lying in a real bed.

Trying to empty her mind of the same thoughts chasing themselves in circles, she listened to Honoka and Rikuto converse quietly with each other, the sounds of them moving about as they got ready for bed, and Hirata’s unwavering presence in the far corner was reassuring.


Kyo was wide awake the moment Hirata shifted his posture, which had remained the same for several hours at this point.

She hadn’t slept, but she’d managed to fall into a somewhat pleasant doze about an hour ago, so Kyo
considered it a partial success.

Rubbing at one of her eyes with only partially exaggerated tiredness, Kyo glanced briefly at Hirata when he got up from his seat to stretch out first his arms, then his legs, one after the other.

Casually making sure she still had the sealing scroll tucked into her clothes, Kyo got out of bed with a yawn, shuffling towards the bathroom.

'Always assume someone is watching', whispered through her mind, echoing one of the many lessons she'd gotten crammed into her head over the last two months.

She left the bathroom door open, lifted the lid on the toilet, but instead of doing anything with that, she turned on the tap so only a thin stream of water trickled into the sink, more to mask the sound of her changing than anything else, and then quickly and efficiently unsealed her outfit and changed into it, whatever traces of tiredness had lingered completely gone.

Hirata kept an eye on her while she was at it, even while going through his slow, calm stretches, because-

Kyo sent him a nod when she was done and tersely waited for him to do his part.

She'd practised this with Katsurou-sensei and several different people in Intel, just to be sure she'd be able to pull it off without a hitch, no matter the circumstances and partner.

Hadn't done it with Hirata yet, though, but-

Hirata sent her another look, curled one hand into a seal, close to his body and out of view from the window. In the same motion, he slowly approach the bathroom and when the shadow clone popped into existence, it wasn't visible for even a second before it had used a henge to turn into an exact replica of Aiko, still dressed in her pyjamas.

Simultaneously, Kyo pulled every single hint of her chakra signature deeper into herself than she'd ever tried, attempting to erase herself completely from any sensors' radar.

Hirata leaned against the door jamb, watching her tuck her braid up into the dark grey cloth she used to cover her face and hair.

“You should go back to bed,” he said evenly. “Try and get as much sleep as possible for tomorrow.”

“I'm nervous, sensei,” Kyo said back tremulously, securing her holsters and double-checking she'd made sure there wasn't anything that could make any noise.

Hirata gave a disapproving grunt. “None of that,” he told her gruffly, giving her an intent once-over to try and spot anything she might have missed.

In turn, Kyo glanced at her copy, standing silently beside her, watching and waiting, and it was impressive Hirata had managed to hit the chakra level she'd been maintaining spot on.

It was almost eerie.

“Good night, sensei,” Kyo said softly, signing a quick, 'Going now.'

“Sleep,” Hirata ordered shortly, at the same time as he signed, 'Acknowledged,' back.

Kyo took a deep breath, steadied her nerves, activated her stealth jutsus and shunshined out of the building.
Landing on the side of the building they were currently staying in, Kyo took a moment to gather her bearings, breathe, and memorize the exact building, floor and window she'd need to return to.

'Always have an exit strategy,' was another lesson.

Tonight would be spent on scouting the village, locate the places she'd break into if everything went according to plan during their stay, try and get a feel for the lattice-work of guard sweeps and what else.

Familiarize herself with Kirigakure.

Taking one last breath, Kyo slowly made her way down the side of the building, essentially crawling on all four. Like a spider.

She'd rather move with excessive care than get caught, thank you very much, but she felt she had to be extra careful this close to where all the foreign teams were hosted.

Or at least Kyo assumed they were keeping all the teams in the same building. It would make it easier, security-wise, and if any of the shinobi from different villages killed each other due to sheer proximity, then all the better for Kiri.

Nervousness still running like a live-wire of electricity through her entire body, Kyo slowly felt part of her settle, focus fully on the task at hand.

There was no room for anything other than full dedication to her mission right now.

She wanted to survive, and that meant she had to use every single scrap of knowledge and experience in both body and mind, every single little bit of stealth and sneakiness she had amassed over the last eleven years and put them to good use.

They'd only gotten a brief, highly limited glimpse of Kirigakure on their arrival, taken through a nondescript part of the village to reach their lodgings.

 Entirely on purpose, but that didn't change the fact that Kyo was now getting a greater appreciation for the seemingly simple move.

The village had been built in a surprisingly mountainous part of the island, occupying a narrow valley, the topography all but easy for anyone to traverse, not to mention civilians.

They had solved this problem by building ramps, elevated walk-ways on structures that doubled as walls, as well as grand, arching bridges, sometimes moving over another elevated road.

It must have taken a lot of effort to build, and it didn't escape her how this all worked as just another layer of defence in case of invading forces.

Then there were the winding, snaking roads down on the ground, too, all working to make the place confusing, disorienting and hard to navigate.

Slipping through the village like a whisper of a ghost, on constant high alert, Kyo still tried to build up a mental picture of the place, and it was surprisingly easy to locate and mark out the various shinobi buildings on her mental map, even though she kept her distance for now.
The dark and the mist made it hard to see, but when she finally laid eyes on what she knew was the equivalent of the Hokage tower, Kyo had to take a moment just to stare.

Built out of stone like every other structure she'd encountered, it was massive, rising up above most of the nearby buildings, and there were several wall-like walk-ways and ramps leading out of it, making it look like a sprawling beast watching over the whole of Kiri.

Kyo concentrated on her breathing a moment, waiting for another patrol to make its' way past her, and she absently contemplated how cold it was.

Well. Cold was a relative term, but it'd been very warm in the day. Warm and humid, and while she estimated the temperature was about the same as in Konoha at this time of night, it was still just as humid as it'd been during the day.

Which made it strange.

It would have been pleasant, if not for the damp, she suspected, but the persistent mists seeped into her clothes until it felt like they'd chill her to the bones.

The patrol long gone and no one else coming her way, Kyo continued on, swallowing down her apprehension and drew nearer to the Kage tower.

She wouldn't enter today, but she'd take note of every door, every window; every possible exit.

When that was done, she'd continue to the next one.

Every single piece of information she could gather, no matter how inconsequential-seeming, Kyo would hoard them close and clutch them to her chest, because you never knew which detail might end up saving your life in a tight spot.

Kyo kept perfectly still, waiting for yet another guard to make his way past, having to suppress a shiver.

It was about an hour and a half until sunrise, and Kyo had to get back to where she was supposed to be well in time before anyone would miss her and get suspicious.

If only people wouldn't be constantly moving about!

Finally seeing her chance, Kyo concentrated, forced her cold, stiff fingers to shape the familiar seals and with a twist of her chakra, she was once again inside.

Glancing over the beds, Kyo confirmed she was indeed in the right room -thankfully- and soundlessly made her way across the ceiling until she could drop down beside 'her' bed, still in full stealth mode and all but undetectable.

Landing in a crouch, Kyo touched one cold finger to Hirata's henge'd hand and then drew back, slipping into the bathroom while the kage bunshin made a show of waking up and stumbling to the toilet.

When Hirata's clone fumbled through the door, Kyo was already in the process of hurriedly changing out of her dark grey, nondescript outfit, finally able to allow herself to let out the shiver she had been suppressing for at least an hour.
Her clothes were so damp they bordered on wet.

'Hang them to dry,' the clone signed, watching her with Kyo's eyes, admittedly in their current brown colour, but it was still unnerving. 'I'll take care of it before the kids wake,' he added.

Kyo managed a jerky nod and tossed the sealing scroll at him, before she pulled on her blessedly dry pyjama pants with a bit more force than she'd intended.

Hypothermia *sucked* but it was familiar.

Kyo had been more than acquainted with this once, in the Before, where snow, ice and sub-zero temperatures had been a staple of every winter.

She'd bathed in ice-water once, in a lake, in the middle of winter, as part of a lesson in school when she'd been seventeen, and that was the coldest she'd *ever* been.

Her fingers, her limbs in general, had been so stiff and numb when she'd changed into dry clothes afterwards, still out in the open on the ice, she hadn't been able to pull on her socks by herself. Or her shoes.

It'd taken hours to warm up, but it had been a good experience.

When she was once more appropriately dressed for bed, had hung up her clothes to hopefully dry, Kyo threw a glance at herself in the mirror and then turned to the clone.

Once again timing the shift down to a fraction of a second, Kyo released the grip on her chakra until it was back at the steady, sleepy level she'd had it before she'd left on her scouting trip, at the same time as the clone silently dissolved, the small cloud of smoke dissipating within the span of a breath.

The scroll she'd tossed it earlier had been placed on the sink, and Kyo was confident enough Hirata would do as he'd promised it barely registered as a blip on the radar at this point.

There was a soft knock on the door.

"You fallen asleep in there?" Hirata asked gruffly, but kept his voice soft enough it wouldn't disturb either of the actual Genin.

Kyo waited a second, flushed the toile, washed her hands -the warm water made her skin prickle uncomfortably- and then opened the door with one hand, the other rubbing at her eyes as if half-asleep and trying to make herself keep her eyes open.

Producing a sleepy, incoherent noise that could possibly be considered an affirmative, Kyo shuffled back to bed and climbed in under the covers.

She would lie here, get warm, *maybe* get a little bit of sleep, and then they'd finally get to see what Kiri had planned for all the Chuunin hopefuls.

Pressing her face into the pillow, trying to keep her teeth from chattering, Kyo curled up into a tight ball, legs pulled towards her chest as she regulated her breathing.

This would be a *fun* mission, she could already tell.

-x-x-x-
Chapter 76

Chapter Summary

And so the Exams begin

When Honoka and Rikuto began to move around and effectively woke her up, Kyo felt like just rolling over and going back to sleep.

“Come on, Aiko-chan,” Honoka said on her way back from the bathroom, sending her a look. “It's time to get up.”

Suppressing a groan and rubbing at her eyes to get rid of the grit crusting them, Kyo sat up and took stock of herself.

“I didn't sleep very well, either,” Rikuto offered sympathetically, sending her a glance, before he focused back on getting dressed and as ready for the day as they could get.

At least he had slept, she grumbled mentally, but did get out of bed.

Kyo had to stifle a grimace at how stiff she felt. Not necessarily because she had strained herself particularly during the night, but spending any length of time cold left its' impact.

Rubbing absently at her right thigh, Kyo gathered up the things she'd need and then trudged into the bathroom, not giving a rat's ass that she was currently sharing it with Rikuto, who just sent her a glance and then focused back on brushing his teeth.

Not caring one bit, Kyo used the toilet, emptied her bladder, flushed, got dressed and then joined the boy at the sink to wash her hands and brush her teeth.

Rikuto sent her an amused look Kyo merely blinked at.

What? She was tired!

Honoka was pulling on her gloves when they came back out into the main room, which no doubt meant she was ready to go.

“Breakfast,” Hirata said, tossing each of them a rations bar. “Be quick,” he ordered shortly, not looking any less sharp and focused than he had yesterday, sleep or no sleep.

Had his clone been sleeping? And if so, did that translate into proper sleep for the person once they dissolved the clone? Hm.

Kyo blinked and realised she'd finished her food, but instead of wonder how and when, she automatically grabbed her canteen for a sip of water.

She didn't bother filling it before they left, because considering their location, water would not be a hard-to-come-by commodity for a while, and it was still mostly full.

A few minutes later there was what sounded like an impatient kick on the door, and the three of them...
turned to stare at it.

Hirata had already been looking, and he didn't seem surprised in the least.

When the man opened the door, the same woman from the day before was stood on the other side, looking irritated and ticked off and she scowled up at Hirata like she wanted to lob his head off.

“Time to go,” she bit out, even less friendly than she'd been the last time they'd seen her.

Kyo wedged herself between Honoka and Rikuto and didn't say anything while they exited.

The woman, Ameyuri, studied them all with narrowed eyes a long second, but what Kyo couldn't help but wonder was how long it took her to style her hair like that. Seriously. It looked amazingly like bunny ears.

She blinked slowly and resolved to talk as little as possible for a while. Just to be sure she wouldn't say anything too blunt.

It would get better after she'd gotten a chance to wake up more properly, she knew from experience.

They were led out of the building, back out into Kirigakure and the mist and it wasn't until they'd walked for quite a while that Kyo realised Jiraiya, Takara and their respective teams weren't with them.

Jarred enough to kick her back into full focus, Kyo sent Hirata a glance, but seeing as he didn't seem particularly perturbed, she had to assume that just meant they'd meet up with them later.

Hopefully.

“And here we are!” Their guide said, a ridiculously long walk later, pivoting around on her heel to flash her sharp teeth at them in a grin. “Time to say bye to sensei, now,” she informed them with far too much amusement for the situation.

“See you later, Hirata-sensei,” Kyo chirped obligingly, arranging her mouth into what she hoped was a passably tremulous and forced smile.

Ameyuri gave a derisive snort and then turned her full attention on Hirata with a truly chilling smile.

“Let's go join the other Jounin, shall we?” She suggested in a way that made it abundantly clear there were no other options available.

“Brats,” Hirata said shortly, glancing them all over once, and then walked away with the Kiri kunoichi they still hadn't gotten the full name of.

...was Ameyuri her first or last name?

Small part of her wondering if she could borrow one of Katsurou-sensei's bingo books when she came back home to check, Kyo turned to Honoka and Rikuto, eyeing them questioningly.

“Let's go inside and see what's up,” Honoka decided, placing a comforting hand on Kyo's shoulder, steering her around and walking towards the entrance a small distance away from them.

Having to bite back a genuine smile, she wondered if Honoka was the kind of person who found it easier to be brave on someone else's behalf, or if she just naturally took care of the people around her.
Either way, Kyo liked her more and more.

Before they could enter, another Kiri shinobi came striding out of the mist, leading another team.

Taking in their Suna hitai-ate, Kyo glanced over the children before she focused on the Jounin sensei.

He wasn't particularly tall, with a sinuous build that suggested speed and agility. In combination with the young, inexperienced and nervous Genin with him, she couldn't help but conclude Suna had gone for a different tactic than Konoha.

Grimly pushing those thoughts aside, Kyo turned her gaze to the front and paid attention to the building they were entering when Rikuto opened the door and stepped inside in front of them.

Inside was just one large room, already mostly filled with children, but also more fully grown Kiri shinobi than she was frankly comfortable with.

Kyo scanned the crowds, spotting their fellow Konoha Genin one after one until all eight were accounted for.

Minato's hair made him easy to pick out in any crowd, no matter what village, evidently.

The majority of the room was taken up by rows of what looked like school benches, in Kyo's humble opinion, and she could only guess there'd be some kind of theoretical aspect to this whole thing, before she turned to observe the rest of the children more intently.

The vast majority were, naturally, wearing Kiri hitai-ate.

Suna seemed to have only sent the one team, go figure. Those poor children.

Iwa appeared to have sent two teams, Kumo four, while Ame had sent three, like Konoha.

There were none from any of the smaller shinobi villages present. Not that Kyo had particularly anticipated their attendance, but it still drove home how precarious this whole situation was.

They were all balancing on a knife's edge; any careless move was bound to cut deep and draw blood.

Trusting her two teammates to watch out for any immediate issues, Kyo was content to wait in the last few Genin, watching the people around her, categorizing which ones would no doubt end up being the biggest threat.

Trying to figure out which ones she needed to keep an extra eye on. Which definitely included the grown shinobi in the room, as well.

Kyo's inner musings were brought up short when her gaze landed on a rather spectacularly eye-catching individual.

First of all, his skin was pale blue.

Second, there was something about that that was dauntingly familiar.

Kyo stared, taking in childish features she was pretty sure belonged to a future enemy. Or at least he had been, in the story, which didn't have to mean much of anything, to be honest.

What had his name been again?
It was really strange to see a person with so many aquatic features seemingly naturally incorporated in their physique, but the shinobi world was *strange*, no question about it.

The boy had dark blue hair, there were marks like gills on his face below his eyes. Eyes which were rather less human than what was entirely conventional, even in this world.

There didn't seem to be much of a sclerae, and they were pale grey in colour. Like the eyes of a shark.

“What?”

Kyo abruptly realised she'd been staring long enough, intently enough, she'd drawn the boy's full attention and now there were more people staring at her, because he hadn't kept his voice down. At all.

“Um,” Kyo spluttered, trying to wrestle down the unchecked panic this situation sparked because *she couldn't attract attention!* “You're very pretty,” she blurted, before she even knew what she wanted to say, mind scrambling for anything to say to salvage this situation. “Blue's my favourite colour,” her mouth seemingly decided to add, and she could feel her cheeks burning.

Why.

Why would her brain do this to her!?

Would it be acceptable to go over to the wall and try to smash her head in against it? Would anyone try and stop her?

While one part of her mind was still busy with the blind panic, the rest of her quickly gathered her wits and considered the situation.

This... wasn't actually as bad as it could have been.

Might even have been a stroke of accidental genius.

“What?” The boy repeated after a long, awkward pause, tone entirely different from last time and looking at her like she were defective.

Perfect.

“Ah, I mean,” Kyo quickly stammered, doing absolutely nothing to try and hide her embarrassment and discomfort at the attention she was under. “I'm, uh, I'm Nakahara Aiko, please call me Aiko-chan,” and this was definitely humiliating, “what's your name?” She asked, all in one breath.

People were staring at her.

But not all attention was bad attention, so long as she could control the light they saw her in.

...how did love-sick girls act, again!?

It was a miracle Honoka and Rikuto hadn't said something by now, but they were probably as shocked as part of Kyo herself was, because she had *not* seen this coming. Didn't mean she couldn't take advantage, though.

She was fairly sure Minato was staring at her with blatant disbelief off to the side.

“...Hoshigaki Kisame,” the boy finally muttered, cheeks darkening a fraction as he scowled at
nothing in particular and looking quite sullen with all the attention.

Holy crap.

She knew that name.

Biting back a hysterical giggle that would have been entirely inappropriate, Kyo instead offered what she hoped to all gods and deities was something that could pass for a pleased, shy smile.

She was never doing this again.

Ever.

Could you actually die from embarrassment? Because Kyo might find out.

Her face felt uncomfortably hot, but hopefully, that would help sell this near-disaster into something that would firmly cement her role as a silly little girl to every single person in this room. And those outside it.

Keeping that goal in mind, Kyo gathered up her 'courage' to shuffle a few steps closer, thanking her luck that people were starting to lose interest by now.

“How-” she cleared the throat, “how old are you? I'm eleven,” she said softly, because demure was a good thing, right? This wasn't the situation she'd through she'd need to remember all the things Haname always lectured her about, but she still tried to scrounge up the information.

Kisame stared at her, and it was hard to gauge his expression, though she felt like she was slowly getting over the differences in facial structure.

“Same,” he eventually muttered, looking about as clueless about how something like this was supposed to go as Kyo felt.

Why was she doing this again?

Ah, yes. Mission. Trying not to be found out and killed. Important reasons.

“It was nice meeting you,” Kyo told him shyly. ”Good luck.” And then she turned around and rushed back to Honoka's side, most of all wishing to go full stealth and pretend to be one with the walls for a few hours.

Wait, had she just wished the enemy good luck?

Having to suppress the urge to slap a hand over her face on top of everything else, Kyo resigned herself to feeling like one big pile of an embarrassed and humiliated mess for a while.

Sleep-deprivation sucked.

This mission sucked.

If Minato didn't stop looking at her like that soon, she was going to put laxatives on all of his spoons the moment they were back home.

For fuck's sake, she was too old for this.
Neither Rikuto nor Honoka had, thankfully, said anything to comment, and the older girl had helpfully steered her over to the seats once they were called to ‘sit down and shut up’ and she was now bracketed in by her two temporary teammates, leaving her free to slump down and try to become one with the furniture.

At least she hadn’t blown her cover?

That had to count for something, right?

Granted, everyone else in the room with her either looked at her with obvious disdain or had blatantly dismissed her like foolish and unimportant, but that had actually been the goal, so... success?

Kyo bit back a frustrated sigh.

At the very least, she was now fully awake and alert and the adrenalin kick and lingering traces of panic and humiliation ensured she wouldn’t lose focus again for a while.

The shinobi that slapped down a thin sheaf of papers in front of her didn’t so much as spare her a glance before he went on to the next one.

Kyo looked over her papers curiously.

They were seriously doing a written test?

Eyes narrowing suspiciously, she read through the questions of the first page and had to stop and start again, because... what?

They were asking about poetry? Etiquette? Why the hell would they do that?

Instantly distracted by trying to figure out every possible angle and reason Kiri could be asking questions like this, she absently grabbed a pen out of the wooden box another Kiri nin was walking around the room with.

He wasn’t the only one, joined by one other, presumably to speed things up.

“You’ve got an hour,” the man that had distributed the papers said from the front, giving them all a sharp once-over.

Waiting half a heartbeat for him to add anything else, Kyo then began to write down her answers.

She didn’t know the correct answer to every question, but that didn’t really matter; they were asking for Konoha customs and traditions? How could they expect anyone not to bullshit that?

It was rather amusing to think up untrue but believable enough answers, while still maintaining a naïve enough thread anyone reading through her papers would dismiss any obvious mistakes as the ignorance of a child.

When she was done with that, she passed the time by scribbling in the margin, starting with a few generic flowers, which turned into stars, and then she got an idea.

They already thought she was a silly little girl from her earlier performance...

Having to suppress a gleeful grin, Kyo started adding hearts. Lots of hearts. Some of which she added Kisame’s name to.
Biting back a snicker, she carefully wrote out 'Hoshigaki Aiko' in one place, before she crossed it over, as if embarrassed, but that didn't mean you couldn't see what it said.

This was hilarious.

It was surprisingly hard not to get so engrossed in her work that she lost track of the rest of the room, but at least it made it easier to fake the real thing. She jumped when Rikuto subtly elbowed her in the side, and when she jerked her head up, it was to the sight of the unamused visage of their examiner.

Kyo handed him her test with a nervous smile that was entirely faked.

It was almost disturbingly easy to play ditzy and inattentive.

When he had all the tests in hand, the man seemingly in charge of this event returned to the front of the room, eyed them a moment, before he smiled.

It wasn't a nice expression.

"The first event in the Chuunin Exam will commence now," he said, and his voice was cold and smooth like river stones. "Your mission? Survive." His smile stretched into a grin. "You've passed either if you reach the mark, or if you're still alive this evening," he added, and then shunshined out, together with all the other grown shinobi in the room.

Well.

That hadn't sounded ominous at all.

The next to follow were the Kiri Genin, who hurried to exit the building, and that just set off all kinds of alarm bells in Kyo's head.

"We should leave and meet up with the other two teams," Kyo whispered to Honoka, who sent her an assessing look, before she nodded shortly.

"We could just stay here until evening, though?" Rikuto offered uncertainly, looking unnerved and on edge. "That would be fully within the rules stated."

"There's something off about all of this," Kyo muttered, following after Honoka and determinedly keeping a thoughtful frown off her face. "We assumed the written test was the first event, but it wasn't, so why go through the trouble? There weren't really any useful questions, either, so it's not like they'd get any viable intel on anything other than how our minds work," she continued to mutter speculatively, and she should probably try and think quietly.

"What do you mean?" Honoka asked, turning her head to keep half an eye on her while she kept the rest of her attention on their surroundings.

There was a genjutsu hiding the exit.

How nice.

It was relatively easy to slip through, though, and none of this was making much sense.

"Aiko-chan!" Minato called softly, jogging up to them, his two teammates in tow. The Aburame's team came striding over just behind them. He gave her a concerned once-over, before he turned to nod at Rikuto and Honoka as well. "Does anyone else feel like there's something really wrong with all of this?"
“Yes,” Kyo said instantly.

Those alarm bells were still going off in her head, and she knew something was going on, even though she hadn't figured it out yet.

Looking around the area around the isolated building they'd been in didn't yield much information, either, because the mist had thickened even more since they'd gone in, and this couldn't be normal.

“What did you mean, Aiko-chan?” Honoka asked again.

“Not here,” she said quietly, continuously glancing around. “Let's leave.”

“Why, though?” Rikuto pressed, even though he looked tense and almost scared with the series of events that had landed them here.

“Because we're sitting ducks,” Minato said firmly, sharing a look with Kyo.

It was a relief that he'd said it, because she wasn't supposed to be that insightful and she was already pushing it.

But then again, she'd bought herself some leeway with the Kisame-incident.

“Let's go,” Honoka decided, looking all nine of them over with a frown. “You sense anyone around, Rikuto?” She asked the moment they'd found a place that felt marginally more secure than the building they'd started in. “Then please tell me what you meant, Aiko-chan,” she continued when Rikuto shook his head in a negative.

“If not for intel, then what reason did they have for the test? And it's not like anyone would answer their questions honestly, anyway; they're the enemy,” Kyo mused, eyes tracking over the swirling mist, far too thick to be natural.

This was part of the event, then, she could only surmise.

“What?” And that was the boy on Minato's team, Gorou.

“Why would we answer honestly? He didn't say we could fail.” Kyo shrugged and eyed him curiously a moment, before she glanced over the last three Genin. “And it's not like winning is the objective here,” she continued in a contemplative tone of voice.

“Back on track, please,” Honoka cut in, and she looked far more tense than Kyo had expected.

She blinked curiously at her a moment.

“Back to what?”

“The reason for the written test?” Rikuto prompted, exchanging a look with his teammate Kyo couldn't decipher.

“Since it doesn't have any obvious reason, there must be something else.” Kyo shrugged again, peering up at the just as white sky. The mist obscured everything, it seemed. “We're about two hours away from noon, I think. That's an awful lot of time to 'survive' or reach 'the mark', whatever he meant by that, unless they've got something other going on we haven't figured out yet.”

“I think there was something in the questions about a 'mark',” Minato muttered speculatively.

“There was?” Kyo tilted her head. She hadn't noticed.
“Several of the poetry questions referred to similar things,” the blond revealed, sending her a worried look.

Kyo frowned back. Why was he worried about her? It wasn't like she was injured or anything.

To be absolutely sure, Kyo looked down on herself, but... no. No blood or anything. She was fine!

Someone snapped their fingers in front of her face and Kyo scowled at the owner of the hand.

“Try to focus,” Honoka said, and she was definitely looking worried.

“On what?” Kyo asked, puzzled.

“Anything?” The older girl muttered, biting her lower lip a moment, as if desperately trying to keep rising panic in check.

Kyo frowned and sent Minato a questioning look.

“You are acting pretty weird, Aiko-chan,” he confirmed, but why was he calling her 'Aiko-chan'?

Kyo blinked very slowly, trying to sort through her alarmingly muddled thoughts.

What had they been talking about again? What was the objective? There was something wrong here, but why wasn't Kyo...

Her drifting thought-process was abruptly interrupted when Gorou threw himself to the side without warning, rolling back to his feet with a wild look in his eyes.

“Uh, Gorou-?” Minato asked hesitantly, only for Gorou to duck his head sharply, as if dodging something.

“Why are you just standing there!?” He demanded loudly, sounding both angry and scared.

Rikuto jumped over to the boy and put a hand on his shoulder, externally disrupting his chakra flow, only to very nearly get stabbed in the chest for his efforts.

“Whoa!” Honoka leapt to her teammate's defence, kicking the kunai out of Gorou's hand with swift ease. “What's your problem?” She demanded next.

“No, wait,” Kyo mumbled under her breath, trying to wrench her focus back under control to look over the rest of the Genin around her. “Minato, look at me a moment,” she requested, but there was a slight delay before he actually did as she asked.

Minato peered questioningly at her, and-

Shit.

This wasn't good.

This was very, very bad, actually, and Kyo felt a little bit like smacking herself in the head with something heavy.

That would just make this shitty situation worse, though, so she sensibly refrained.

There was a very big difference between being drugged and knowing you were drugged.
Instead of trying to reason with an increasingly more out-of-control Gorou, Kyo shunshined to right behind him and stabbed him with a senbon at the point on his neck that would knock him out instantly.

“Aiko-chan!” Honoka exclaimed, horrified.

Which wasn’t an unreasonable reaction, she told herself sternly, because it must have looked like she'd just killed a teammate after acting increasingly less like herself in the past few hours.

F*ck this whole mission, really.

“He’s just unconscious,” Kyo bit out tersely, and even though she knew she was drugged, that didn't make it any easier to concentrate on anything. Especially when there were so many pretty patterns in the mist. “Everyone needs to listen up, quickly, because this is just going to get worse.”

“What do you mean?” Honoka asked, still wary and looking like she was contemplating ‘rescuing’ Gorou’s unconscious form from the hold Kyo had on him.

“We've been drugged,” Kyo revealed succinctly, and her expression was pinched with effort to stay on track. “It's kicking in at different times, but I guess I started feeling it first due to smaller body mass,” she explained, and it certainly couldn't have helped that she hadn't slept much last night. “Does anyone have any idea as to how they drugged us?” She asked, trying to figure it out herself, but she didn't exactly trust her mind right now.

Eyeing Honoka and Rikuto a moment, Kyo felt fairly sure the two of them hadn't been affected by whatever this was, which was a blessing, honestly.

“Hey, Namikaze,” Rikuto spoke up, “what did you say about the mark? And the poetry questions?”

Minato tilted his head, a bit far to look comfortable, before he gave a slow blink. “Some of them mentioned an undisturbed lake, smooth like a mirror, with a large rock in the middle,” he said softly, sounding somewhat fuzzy.

“That's very specific,” Kyo muttered suspiciously.

“Well, that wasn't all from one question, but if you put it all together, then that's what you got,” Minato told her vaguely.

He'd pulled a kunai in the next second and brought it up to his face, frowning intently at the metal.

“Minato,” Kyo said firmly, or, as firmly as she could currently manage. “Put that down.”

Minato peered at her, and then dropped the knife to the ground without a second look.

“Great,” Kyo sighed, slapping a hand over her eyes, for just a moment, because what a cluster-fuck.

They were stuck in hostile territory with six drugged children, excluding herself, with the goal to 'stay alive' which indicated Kiri had something more planned on top of this.

When could they have slipped them something? But then again, Kyo knew better than most people you didn't necessarily need to ingest a substance for it to come into effect.

Was it the mist itself?

No, no, she'd started acting off since before they came outside, thinking back, and that would mean all of them would be drugged, too. Which Honoka and Rikuto were not.
She groaned.

Nothing ingested, nothing inhaled, that left... something they had all touched.

Kyo lifted her head sharply and turned to stare at Honoka and Rikuto, who were watching the rest of their group suspiciously.

“What?” Honoka asked, eyeing Kyo like she was afraid she'd attack them next.

“You two are wearing gloves,” she said, which explained everything, but clearly didn't make much sense to Honoka.

“So?” She asked, exchanging a look with Rikuto.

“So, that means everyone's touched something that the two of you haven't,” Kyo huffed irritably, finally realising she could actually just put Gorou down on the ground, rather than hold him up. Which she did.

Her arms were getting tired.

“But why did Gorou go nuts like that?” Rikuto asked softly, looking half-way resigned, but also a little bit sceptical.

“That's probably what we have to look forward to in a while,” Kyo muttered grimly. “Hey, Minato,” she said next, getting the boy's attention, “did Gorou do anything different from everyone else during the test?”

Minato stared a little to the left of Kyo's face, and his pupils were still bigger than they should be.

He pursed his lips. “No?” He offered, but it sounded like a question. He blinked. “He didn't answer all of his questions, though,” he eventually muttered, frowning slightly. “It was disappointing.”

Kyo had to bite back an inappropriate giggle, though part of her felt tired, because that didn't answer anything. “What did he do when he wasn't writing?” Kyo pressed, because there had to be something.

Minato peered at her, before his nose scrunched up in disgust. “Chewed on his pen,” he said with clear distaste. “That's highly unhygienic,” he added gravely, staring imploringly at the space to the left of her.

“And very foolish in enemy territory,” Kyo added dryly, still feeling strangely entertained by the whole thing. “Anyone else put their pen in their mouths?” She asked the rest of the kids.

Not that it did much good, because they all looked to be varying levels of high.

Judging by Gorou's reaction, they had so much more fun to look forward to, though.

It would be a miracle if they all survived this day, and that wasn't even taking the other Genin lurking around into consideration.

Was Kiri trying to get them to kill each other?

...yes, Kyo mused darkly. Yes, they were.

That would be all kinds of poetic, wouldn't it?
She snorted at the turn her own thoughts had taken and then focused back on her surroundings, again. Urgh. She hated this.

“You're training to be a medic, right, Aiko-chan?” Honoka spoke up. “Isn't there anything you can do about this?”

She wished she could.

“I haven't learned that much yet,” Kyo said, and it was much harder than it should be to remember to be Aiko-chan right now, rather than herself. “I don't know what- I can't think of anything,” she confessed, voice wavering, as if on the brink of tears.

Which wasn't all that far from the truth, to be honest.

She hated this.

Taking a deep breath, Kyo steadied herself, pushed all other thoughts and memories to the back of her head and turned her full attention to the problem at hand.

She didn't have time for self-pity and misery right now.

Rikuto sighed. “Should we try and move to a more secure location?”

“Which would be where, exactly?” Honoka muttered at him. “The mist is so thick, we can't even see where we are currently, and these guys aren't exactly all here any more,” she pointed out wryly, gesturing at the rest of them.

Kyo wondered if she should feel offended, but decided Honoka was probably right. Mostly.

Right this moment, the rest of the Genin seemed to be acting like they were experiencing a general high, unlike whatever reaction Gorou had had.

Seeing as she didn't know what sort of drug or poison was in effect here, Kyo didn't know how much time they'd have before things worsened, either.

Eyeing her hands speculatively a moment, she had to sternly press down the urge to lick her own fingers in what would absolutely be a foolish attempt to figure out what plant and or substance they'd based it on.

That would be a bad idea no matter how you looked at it.

Kyo very obviously wasn't immune, even if she wasn't getting the full effect.

She frowned.

That must mean this toxin was related to another toxin she was immune to, didn't it? Or she'd experience the same thing as Minato right now. Or closer to it, because the few hospital visits she'd had had made it more than clear she metabolized drugs faster than your average person.

Unfortunate, in those particular cases. Right now, it could only be a good thing.

Time floated aimlessly for a while, without her notice, because when there wasn't anything specific to focus on, Kyo's attention drifted, no matter how much she tried to prevent it.

“Aiko-chan,” Honoka said, but it wasn't until the third repeat that Kyo realised that name currently belonged to her.
“Yes, Honoka?” Kyo finally answered, blinking a few times, trying to clear her head and also figure out how long she'd spent just staring out into the mist.

“Are you okay?” Rikuto asked, giving her a concerned and mildly wary once-over.

Kyo looked at him, taking in the fact he was currently steering Setsuko back to their group and then made her sit down with the other kids.

“It's difficult to concentrate on anything!” She chirped with a too-wide grin, but she was supposed to be Aiko-chan right now, wasn't she? That meant cheerful and airheaded was what was on the menu.

“Are you sure there isn't anything you can do about this?” Honoka asked with a heavy sigh, looking their group over with deeply troubled eyes.

“Yep!” Kyo said, popping the 'p'. “I'm drugged, and I don't think that makes it any safer.” She giggled, only to strangle the noise, because *wow*. Why.

The only thing Kyo could do to help this situation was to sedate all the Genin until they were unconscious, but... no, she couldn't actually do that either, because she didn't have her poison pack with her.

Kyo mournfully patted the small of her back and the large pouch taking up most of the space there, missing the familiar weight and shape of her pack something fierce.

“How long do you think it'll take before someone comes and tries to kill us?” Kyo asked curiously next, blinking at Honoka and Rikuto.

The two teenagers momentarily froze, as if that thought hadn't occurred to them yet, which was just silly, because why else would they get collectively drugged? Unless to make it easier for Kiri's own Genin to make short work of them?

Kyo peered confusedly at the two.

Beating down the urge to hum the tune drifting through her head, Kyo looked over the other Genin, because she abruptly realised she had no idea what they'd been doing in the last... however much time Kyo had been spaced out in.

Gorou was still unconscious, thanks to Kyo. Though she doubted he'd *actually* thank her later. She hadn't talked to him a lot, but she'd gotten the impression he was pretty full of himself. So yeah.

Most of the kids were sitting down, looking vacantly at nothing, though one of the Aburame's kids was lying down, looking asleep.

Minato was still standing, though.

But he wasn't standing still.

“What are you doing, Minato?” Kyo asked curiously, having to bite back another inappropriate giggle at the sight of the boy turning on the spot, again and again, staring up at the sky.

“The sky is spinning,” he told her, and he sounded off. Like he was half-asleep at home.

“No, *you're* spinning,” Kyo corrected with a smile. “You should stop it before you-” Ah. Too late.

Minato came to an abrupt stop, staggering on the spot for a second, before he bent over at the waist to throw up at the muddy ground at his feet.
That wasn't a great sign, was it?

“Drink some water,” Kyo ordered. “Medic's order!” She added, because she had to remember to play Aiko-chan, too. And Aiko-chan was studying to be a medic.

Minato raised his head to peer blearily at her, eyes unfocused.

Kyo huffed a sigh and walked over until she could grab the boy's canteen off his belt, unscrew the lid and shove the whole thing into his hands.

“Drink,” she repeated firmly.

“Where's the medic?” Minato asked dazedly when he'd dutifully downed a mouthful of water.

“I'm right here,” Kyo huffed, but sent him a grin. “Or, I'm gonna be a medic. One day.”

“You are?” Minato looked very confused.

Kyo guided his canteen back to his mouth so he could drink some more. Which would also stop him from talking, at least for a little bit.

As hard as it was to stay focused and serious, Kyo knew without a doubt she couldn't let Minato say anything to plant seeds of doubt as to her identity and character in any potential watchers.

It was perfectly possible to twist anything he said into him just being drugged and confused, but she honestly couldn't afford it. She wasn't sure she could currently manage, either.

Her thought-process was effectively derailed by a blood-curdling scream echoing through the mist, and Kyo all but felt her mind sharpen and lose some of the fuzziness.

“What was that?” Honoka said quietly, slipping into a partial stance, defensive, while Rikuto palmed a kunai.

“Looks like it's starting,” Kyo murmured softly to herself, eyeing the mist around them with a frown. “I'll scout a perimeter!” She volunteered with a cheerful smile a second later, raising a hand in the air and bouncing on the balls of her feet.

“Aiko-chan, I don't think that's a good ide-” Rikuto began to say, and he sounded anxious, but Kyo was already making her way away from the group.

They were all sitting ducks; it would be foolish not to at least get a better idea of where they were, the lay of the land around them and what sort of reception they might encounter from the other Genin.

Kyo hoped it was only the other Genin they had to worry about.

If the Chuunin -or higher- got involved, this would suck even more.

With a distinct job to do, Kyo found it easier to focus. The mists in her head, matching the ones around her, seemed to lighten fractionally, and it was honestly a relief.

She hated feeling this fuzzy and random, but at the same time... it wasn't entirely unpleasant, which made it all so much more dangerous.

Biting the inside of her cheek to jar her mind back on track, Kyo concentrated on her surroundings, taking care not to stray too far from her group while she was at it.
There was a slightly larger tree in front of her, emerging from the mist quite abruptly, but she could tell it would bear her weight at a glance, never mind how pathetically small it was compared to the trees back home, and Kyo jumped up to perch on one of the branches.

Which gave her an excellent vantage point to observe the carnage down below.

She counted... two bodies, but the amount of blood suggested at least one more person had been hurt.

Tilting her head, she caught sight of the Iwa hitai-ate.

Hm...

The fighting seemed to have passed a while ago. Not enough time for the blood to even start to clot, but she didn't have to worry about getting pulled into it, she was pretty sure.

“Ah, it's you,” a semi-familiar voice huffed, drawing her gaze.

Kyo blinked at the person stepping out of the mist, eyeing her with what she was fairly sure was curiosity, though it was still a bit difficult for her to make out.

“Hello!” Kyo grinned, before she could stop herself, and then felt like smacking herself in the face.

“You're still alive, too!” She chirped, trying to arrange her face into something pleased. “Did you kill them?” She asked curiously, pointing at the two dead Iwa Genin.

“And if I did?” Kisame asked, eyeing her with interest, making no move to get any closer. The mist continued to drift along, making it look like it was trying to drag him back into its folds, from time to time.

Kyo shrugged easily. “Just wonderin',” she said, scanning their surroundings again, before she turned back to the boy. “Don't you have a team?”

“What's it to you?” He shot back, not so much as pausing. “And don't you Konoha nin need two crutches beside you at all times to get anything done?” He added with some consideration.

Kyo smiled. “Just thinking if I have to prepare for a knife coming at me from behind,” she informed him primly, having to bite back yet another giggle, and this was starting to get old. “And I'm scouting!” She added enthusiastically.

Kisame looked at her like he thought she was well and truly crazy.

“That's a funny reaction,” he commented blandly. “Not like the others.”

“You mean the drug?” Kyo clarified curiously, peering down at him. “I'm studying to be a medic!” She informed him happily. “I accidentally got poisoned during a lesson once, and after that, shishou instructed me in how to clear it from my system faster!”

Was she laying it on a bit thick? She honestly couldn't judge that, right now. But the way she figured, this was an opportunity to lay down some additional background work, because someone might have questions when Kyo inevitably recovered from this drugging faster than everyone else.

There was another chilling scream, this one closer than the last one, and a Genin-sized shadow rushed through the mist towards them, towards Kisame's back, and Kyo had thrown a senbon before she'd even processed the information.
“Oops,” she giggled awkwardly, raising a hand to cover her mouth in a vague attempt to be 'dainty' or something. Fuck if she knew how to do this properly.

Kisame had drawn a sword at her perceived attack, looking like he'd been ready to leap at her in a heartbeat, only to register she hadn't been aiming at him.

“...I could have done that,” he said flatly, after he’d taken a quick look over his shoulder at the other Genin, eyeing her like she was suddenly even more strange.

“You use senbon, too?” Kyo gasped eagerly, leaning forward in her crouch until she would have risked falling off her branch if she hadn't had chakra to cling to it with.

Kisame glanced very pointedly at the sword in his hand, lifted in a solid hold and ready position between them. “No,” he said simply.

Kyo didn’t let that discourage her. “Okay!” She chirped, undaunted by the heavily speculative look Kisame fixed her with.

“You’re not gonna attack me like these guys?” He asked next, dipping the tip of his gleaming sword towards the corpses, for just a second.

“I have no reason to try to kill you,” Kyo informed him, entirely honest.

“That’s never stopped anyone before,” Kisame said, pensive and almost confused.

“But killing you isn’t in the parameters of this mission,” she mused, raising a hand to tap a finger to her lower lip thoughtfully.

“You killed that guy,” the boy on the ground beneath and in front of her pressed, jerking his head at the fresh corpse behind him, as if he couldn't let it go.

Kyo smiled. “Because he attacked first!” It was very simple, really. And it had sort of been an accident. “I will defend myself, because the goal is survival.” It was always survival, ultimately. “But since you and I are just talking, unless you attack me, too, I won't do anything.” And her smile stretched into a grin.

“You're completely nuts,” was Kisame deadpan conclusion.

“Thanks!”

“It wasn’t a compliment,” he said, but if Kyo wasn't mistaken, he looked like he was on the brink of laughter, and a second later, his lips stretched in a grin to match her own, showing off sharp, shiny shark teeth.

“Oh! Pretty!” Slipped out of Kyo, and she just had to take a second to really contemplate her life choices, because what the actual fuck did she just say?

This time, it seemed Kisame was more prepared, because he looked amused, in addition to embarrassed, and said, “Thanks,” in a very dry voice Kyo would have appreciated more if she wasn't the butt of this whole joke.

The urge to slap a hand over her face was strong.

Another scream echoed through the mist, from far away, but this time it wasn't a solitary thing, because several other yells and cries followed, as if in answer, until it made the hairs on the back of
her neck stand on end.

Kyo flicked Kisame one last look, taking note of the unsurprised cast to his face, and then fired off a much sharper grin.

“Bye,” she said, because she abruptly realised several things.

Kyo had been standing still for far too long, when she'd initially intended to do a scouting sweep. Which she'd managed to forget about halfway through. She'd left her team behind.

She'd left a bunch of Genin on their own, because she'd forgotten this wasn't her ANBU team.

Her ANBU team would have been perfectly capable of protecting themselves while Kyo performed a vital task, because scouting was important.... but not under these circumstances.

And it didn't really matter that she was drugged and concentrating on important things was difficult, because she'd still left them.

She had run off like an idiot.

Kyo leapt into the midst of her group just in time to knock out Setsuko, who was so far gone with terror she'd been about to murder the possibly sleeping Genin belonging to the Aburame Jounin she couldn't remember the name of right now.

It was chaos.

What the hell had happened!?

At least Minato was still just standing still, rooted to the spot and staring blankly at nothing.

“What's going on?” Kyo asked the moment she was sure no one else was going to try and kill anyone else.

“A Kiri nin came by,” Honoka shot back tersely. “He didn't do anything, but he was wearing some weird get-up, and all the others lost their shit.” Honoka was holding a hand to the side of her stomach, and when she shifted her grip, Kyo caught a glimpse of blood and a short slice in her shirt. Didn't look overly serious.

Rikuto was guarding his teammate's back, eyeing the mist like he was waiting for it to grow teeth and claws, which... wasn't that far from what they could expect right now, probably.

And then there wasn't any time to talk, or even think, because a Kiri Genin appeared out of the mist without a sound and went after the nearest Genin with a grim, determined glint in his eyes.

Three more followed.

Kyo parried a tanto aimed at her throat, and her head was clearer, but thinking was still hard, and how should she play this? She couldn't go full out, obviously, because....

Shit, Kyo jumped out of the way of a stray shuriken from one of the others, and then had to go on the defensive again, making sure not to step on Gorou, who was still out cold, and she had to make sure no one killed him in passing.

She couldn't go full out, had to be Aiko-chan, but she couldn't just stand by and let any of her comrades die in front of her when she could do something to stop it.
Absolutely not.

But she needed to figure out a way to do it without raising suspicions.

A streak of bright yellow rushed past her, all but mowing down the Genin Kyo had been fending off, and she blinked.

That solved it.

“Minato, you up to defending us?” Kyo asked evenly, bending down to get Gorou's pulse. Her teammate didn't say anything, didn't even glance at her, but he went after the next Kiri nin. “I take that as a yes,” she muttered, hurrying over to check Setsuko's pulse, and then the sleeping kid, who might actually be unconscious.

Unfortunate reaction to the drug in his system?

Another heartbeat and the remaining three Kiri Genin slipped back into the mist, disappearing from view.

A tense few minutes passed where no one moved.

Kyo glanced down at the boy who's pulse she’d found. It was weak, and he looked pale, but there was nothing she could do.

Head still feeling somewhat fuzzy around the edges, Kyo finally removed her hand from his throat and took a more thorough look around, cataloguing their collective state.

“Well, me take a look at that,” she said softly, standing up straight and approaching Honoka.

The girl sent her a brief glance, before she went back to vigilantly scanning their surroundings -even though you couldn't see anything other than mist- and obligingly pulled up her shirt to reveal the cut in her side.

Kyo inspected it and thankfully concluded it was as shallow as she had guessed earlier.

Pulling out bandages and a compress from the standard medic pouch on the small of her back, Kyo's hands were steady when she quickly and efficiently wrapped up the cut, and she distantly mused -hoped- that meant she was steadily getting less and less affected by the drug.

Enough time passed for Honoka and Rikuto to start to slowly relax and let down their guards.

Kyo wanted to snap at them, remind them how foolish that was, but she managed to keep the words behind her teeth as she tried to figure out another way.

She wasn't good enough at this.

Weighing the importance of her mission against the lives of the Genin with her wasn't something she wanted to do, but the thought was there. In the back of her head. Constantly.

She had her orders. They had theirs.

It wasn't her fault that they weren't as vigilant as they should be. Even though they were only children.

Something that didn't feel like a Genin appeared in range of her senses and one of Kyo's hands twitched with the need to sign a warning, but she stomped it out and readied herself.
To hell with this whole thing!

She'd try to do the best she could, even with her hands tied!

A second later, a grown Kiri shinobi came sweeping out of the mist. Kyo expected to see weapons in his hands, but instead, she took in the very weird get-up he was wearing in the second she got.

He ran straight through their group, darting in and out between them, brushing up against a few of the kids, who were clearly loosing it, and then he was gone, but Kyo was too focused on the foreign chakra in her system to dwell on it and she was deeply unamused.

Cool and slippery like oily water.

Disrupting the genjutsu before it had a chance to do much of anything, she ignored the terrified screams around her, the hysterical sobs from one of the boys, who had covered his face with his hands and was rocking back and forth where he sat, and the distant screaming from other parts of the... examination grounds, made a whole lot more sense.

Kyo jumped to Rikuto's side, placed a hand on his arm and jarred him out of the genjutsu as well, before she did the same to Honoka, who's face looked slightly pale.

At least the two of them were in better shape than the others.

Kyo landed next to Minato, placing a hand on his shoulder and almost got gutted.

“Minato,” she hissed, tightening her hold on him, taking the opportunity to externally disrupt the genjutsu.

The kunai pressed up against her stomach didn't move.

Minato gave a very slow blink, gaze focusing, for just a moment, on her Konoha hitai-ate, and then seemingly dismissed her as a non-threat.

...Kyo was clearly not entirely recovered yet, and she'd have to remember that.

Watching Minato with grim eyes, for just a moment, Kyo knew he wouldn't forgive himself if he actually injured her.

Instead of dwelling on it, she turned to the rest of the kids.

She didn't know how much of a difference dispelling the genjutsu on the drugged kids would help, but at least it would ensure they wouldn't see things that weren't there.

Hopefully.

.

It repeated, a while later, the grown shinobi, or another one like him, came back, doing the same thing again.

The only difference was what happened after.

Kyo disrupted her chakra, followed by Rikuto's, then Honoka's, Minato, the rest of the Genin, only she didn't have time to finish, this time.

Kiri Genin came slipping out of the mist like ghosts just after she'd finished with Minato.
“Anyone without a Konoha hitai-ate is fair game,” she muttered to her friend, and then hurried to defend.

She didn't see what happened, she just knew that one moment, they were holding up fine against the attack, the next, Honoka screamed like she was dying.

Kyo cut down the Genin she'd been fighting in pure startlement.

Shit, she really wanted the drug in her system to just burn up and die, but she didn't have time to dwell on it.

Rushing over to Honoka, prepared to help in any way she could, Kyo didn't blink at the sight that greeted her.

Honoka was fine.

Well, physically, at least. She wasn't injured.

Rikuto wasn't as lucky.

Kyo crouched next to the boy with grim determination, and she knew it was dangerous, the way the rest of the world became secondary, less important, but she was incapable of splitting her attention right now.

And Rikuto was injured.

He was sitting on the ground, clutching one hand to his stomach while a slowly growing pool of blood soaked into the ground he was sitting on, face twisted up with agony.

If she had to guess, he'd taken a serrated blade to the gut, because it looked to be messy and she couldn't fix this.

“Lie down,” Kyo directed quietly, tersely, as she hurriedly helped him lie down flat.

Rikuto's eyes were open and he was looking at her. His breathing was shallow and uneven and he was clearly in pain, terrified, had they nicked one of his lungs?

Kyo took in everything with sharp eyes, and her head was slowly and steadily clearing but she was still affected.

Feeling every single ounce of focus in her body sharpening into a fine point on the boy in front of her, on his stomach, Kyo quickly and efficiently set to it.

He was bleeding slowly but steadily and if she couldn't find and stop the main source, then he'd bleed out sooner rather than later.

“Rikuto?” Honoka asked, and the question, the name, sounded like a sob.

“Don't lose focus,” Kyo fired back, distracted, not taking her eyes off of her hands.

At least she'd thought to sterilize them before she reached for the torn shreds of Rikuto's shirt, cutting them away with a kunai to reveal the torn flesh beneath.

It looked like the blade had stabbed him, and then sliced out to the right, cutting through whatever was in its way before slipping clear of his body, and Kyo pressed a hand to it while the other one rifled through her pouch.
Standard for any Genin medic, and she'd familiarized herself with the contents, knew enough to at least be able to use most of them for basic things, but... Kyo was very much aware of the fact she wasn't a medic. Not even an aspiring one.

Withdrawing what she was looking for, she slipped out a pill and coaxed it into Rikuto's mouth.

“Bite down on it, then swallow,” she ordered tightly.

“Aiko-chan, you have to fix him,” Honoka said, and she sounded feverish now, hovering beside her.

Did that mean the Kiri Genin had left? Were they circling, waiting for the best opportunity to strike next?

“I'll do my best, but you need to stay focused, Honoka,” Kyo bit out, and she wasn't acting like Aiko-chan right now, but she didn't care. Honoka and Rikuto deserved the best she could do, lacking as her efforts would be.

She already knew it, but maybe...

Kyo turned her whole focus back onto the wound.

Lifting the hand pressing down on it saw another wave of blood seeping out, but she had to see...

Throwing a quick look at Rikuto's face, she noted the slack quality to it and was reassured with the fact the painkillers had kicked it.

Kyo slipped a couple of careful fingers into the stab wound, trying to gauge how deep it was, what she was dealing with, how to- how to try and do something that would actually work.

“Heal him!” Honoka said, falling to her knees beside them, crying and breathing far too quickly, one gloved hand raised to cover her mouth as if to keep herself from throwing up. “You're a medic, you need to- you need to fix him,” she all but begged, and Kyo clenched her teeth.

Taking her eyes off her patient for a brief second, she looked around them to note they'd been left to themselves, for now, most of their fellow Konoha Genin had been either knocked out or where curled up in a tight ball of terrified misery, and Minato was slowly circling them all with a coldly blank face and unfocused eyes.

Right.

Better than nothing then, because Honoka was clearly not in any state of mind to protect anyone right now.

Gently feeling out the wound, trying to find what she was pretty sure must be a severed vein of some sort. It wasn't ideal, but it was what she could do.

“Honoka,” she bit out, bringing her other hand to the boy's stomach, trying to staunch the bleeding even while she tried to stop it with her other, somehow.

She wasn't equipped to deal with this, didn't have the skills and knowledge necessary.

“Save him, Aiko-chan,” Honoka cried, sounding like she was breaking to pieces. “Rikuto.” She reached out a trembling hand to tangle in Rikuto's grey-blue hair.

“Honoka, I can't save him,” Kyo said curtly.

“You have to,” Honoka instantly objected, desperate. “You're a medic, you can fix him, you can do
“I can’t,” Kyo refuted flatly, trying to tell the part of her that was more ANBU than anything else to try and be kind, despite the situation. Rikuto's blood had somehow smeared up her arms to her elbows, and she was still trying to stop the damn bleeding. “Honoka, it's not that I don't want to chance a technique I haven't mastered yet,” she said shortly, frowning with concentration. Considering the location of the injury, it was possible his left kidney had been hit, maybe even his spleen, depending on the angle and depth, and that wasn't even mentioning the intestines. “I don't know how, how to go about it, where to start. I don't know what to do, or how to do it,” she continued, sending the girl a look.

Honoka raised her hands to her head, cradling it and staring with wide unseeing eyes at her dying teammate. “You can't do this, Rikuto,” she whimpered. “You have to stay alive, you have to come back home with me. You're not supposed to die. You have to save him.” And she was outright sobbing now, eyes closing with a fresh wave of tears.

“Honoka, Rikuto is dying,” she said firmly, but making sure her voice wasn't sharp. “I've made sure he's not in pain, but there's nothing else I can do.” Not out here, with the tools she had on hand.

Sure, there were things even Kyo could have tried to do, to try and delay things at least until the Konoha Jounin could help, but in this situation? Right now? She couldn't think of anything that would actually work.

Searing wounds closed was a way to stop the bleeding, keep infection at bay, maybe, and prevent something from getting into the wound, but she didn't have access to a fire, and even if they could start one right now, it'd take too long and would also signal their location to every single shinobi within range and then some.

Throwing another quick look at Rikuto's face, he seemed to have lost consciousness, which was more a blessing than not, and he was pale.

Kyo put a couple of blood covered fingers against his throat, feeling for a pulse. A second later, she'd found it and felt her mouth flatten at what she found.

It was thin and quick, like a sparrow's heartbeat against her fingers. Too weak, too fast.

He'd lost a significant amount of blood by now, no matter that it wasn't gushing.

“Honoka,” Kyo said again, eyeing the crying girl in front of her solemnly. She deserved for Kyo to be serious and fully herself right now, if only for a few minutes. “Rikuto is going to die, there's nothing I can do,” she told her again. “You need to say goodbye.” Before it's too late.

“Rikuto,” Honoka sobbed thickly. “He's not dying,” she denied, even while one of her hands blindly reached for his limp, bloodied hand. “You need to- you need to save him, Aiko-chan.” She took a deep, wet and tremulous breath. “Y-You can do it, you can fix him, you're a medic,” she continued, desperate hope in her voice and she was praying for a miracle Kyo couldn't give her.

Kyo stared at her. “I'm sorry I can't save him,” she said quietly.

Honoka's shoulders curled in on her and she leaned forward with a keening sob, her unoccupied hand covering her face.

Realising she was still pressing down on Rikuto's stomach, no matter how futile it was, Kyo slowly
lifted her hands.

The stomach wound wasn't bleeding much any more, and she knew just how bad that was.

There was nothing she could do. Rikuto was a few breaths from death's door, but at least he wasn't in pain, wasn't scared.

He'd pass as peacefully as Kyo had been able to make it. She didn't know if a real medic student would have been able to do more in her stead, but there was no use in 'what if's'.

Instead of trying to argue with the girl, Kyo took a look around at their sad little group and then carefully got to her feet to check over the rest of them.

Kyo wasn't a medic.

Suppressing a sigh, she began to look over the rest of the Genin. Minato had a bleeding cut on his cheek. Most of them had gotten nicks and cuts, bruises, a dislocated finger... so she did what she could, even with the ones who tried to stab her and scramble away from her as if she were the enemy.

Knocking the boy out with absent ease, Kyo eyed his finger, and with a vague idea of how to fix it, she carefully grasped it and set to it.

Rikuto's drying blood still coated her hands and arms.

-x-x-x-

By the time the sun set, Kyo was entirely clear-headed again, she'd long since sealed up Rikuto's cooling corpse and pocketed the scroll after Honoka had refused to take it, or so much as look at it.

They'd fended off several more attacks from the Kiri Genin, but no one else had died.

Kyo had made sure she got similar cuts and scrapes as the Genin around her, and she'd tended to all of them to the best of her ability, but when the mist finally began to lighten, supporting the theory that it was entirely artificial and controlled by a person, rather than the weather, she was tempted to huff a relieved sigh.

Honoka hadn't said a word since Rikuto had stopped breathing, and the rest of the kids were still drugged, even though the paranoia, terror and probably hallucinogen aspects of it had worn off a while back.

They didn't have to wait long before Jiraiya-sensei, Hirata and Takara appeared, shadowed by their local babysitter.

Ameyuri looked their group over with a sharp smile, flashing a glimpse of her pointy teeth, but didn't comment while the Konoha Jounin grimly collected their kids.

Kyo stumbled over to Hirata, an unsettled, uncomfortable and unsteady smile on her face. “Sensei,” she greeted, doing nothing to hide how tired she was, though she made sure to tint it with something like lingering terror.

Hirata eyed her briefly, before he turned to Honoka, who'd followed Kyo without a word, face ashen
and tight, eyes bloodshot.

Kyo peered up at Hirata, reached out to grasp his hand, slow enough he could see and avoid it if he wanted to, and lifted it until she could put it on Honoka's shoulder.

The girl's face tightened further, and she slumped minutely into the hold, never mind that Hirata wasn't her own sensei, but he was a Konoha Jounin, her temporary sensei, and he was safe.

As safe as any of them could be here, right now.

“Let's go back,” Hirata grunted blandly, eyeing Honoka a second longer, didn't remove his hand from her shoulder, and scanned the rest of the kids. “You've all earned some rest.”

Jiraiya-sensei picked up Minato and put him on his back and then grabbed his two other children, carrying one under each arm.

He looked grim.

“Looks like most of you passed, huh,” Ameyuri mused, suppressed laughter weaving a faint, trembling thread through her voice. “It'll be interesting to see how you hold up in the next part.” She grinned.

Kyo drew closer to Hirata's side, as if afraid.

She most of all felt tired and worn and she knew the day's events would catch up to her eventually, but she couldn't afford it yet.

Kyo still had things to do, even after all this.

Thankfully, she'd get a few hours' sleep first, hopefully a shower, though she'd rather take the sleep if she had to choose, no matter the blood still smeared up her arms.

It had been a long day and it was far from over.

Without a word of complaint, Kyo followed Hirata back to their rooms. His hand was still on Honoka's shoulder, steering her along and making sure she kept up and didn't stumble.

Takara had one of their kids on their back, like Jiraiya, while another one was under their left arm, and the last one was conscious enough to walk for his own power, even though the Aburame Jounin had to make sure he didn't wander off.

Kyo couldn't wait for this mission to be done.

She missed home. Missed Kisaki and sensei, Genma and Aita and dad.

Kyo was an assassin, not a medic, and she was tired of pretending to be someone else. This mission was a pile of crap.

-x-x-x-
Controlling her breathing and maintaining the ruthless grip on her chakra, Kyo carefully copied the latest document she'd gotten her hands on.

The 'regular' kind, she wrote down in a short-hand Katsurou-sensei had taught her, Taku and Maki years ago, keeping things short and concise and close enough to code no one without knowledge of how to read it would understand a word without a lot of effort.

The already encrypted files had to be painstakingly copied, though. Not a single stroke out of place or different from the original, and it didn't matter that she didn't understand them, because decrypting them wasn't her job. Thankfully.

Kyo blinked a couple of times, took another breath, and copied down another few lines, stubbornly keeping her hands steady.

She was running on little sleep, and she kept as much of her attention as she could afford on her dark surroundings with a level of paranoia that was entirely warranted.

If someone caught her at this, there would be no chance of trying to play it off as anything other than what it was.

She wasn't supposed to even be outside of their allotted room and everyone knew it.

When she was done, Kyo put everything back exactly as she found it, carefully erased all signs of tampering on the security seals, and she was definitely getting Aita something nice when she came back home, and then crept over to the next filing cabinet.

Searching for anything on the damn list she'd gotten.

As if it was a shopping list, and not a collection of subjects and information the Intel people wanted her to steal.

Troupe movements, financial documents, mission logs, certain individuals' personal files, if she could manage, anything she could find about alliances and contacts outside of Mizu no Kuni.

Whatever she could find on Uzushio, whether that dealt with the attack or stolen documents and or things.

The Intel people had also been insistent on any documents pertaining to the Mizu Daimyo's court and the Nobles around him.

Kyo wasn't stupid, sleep-deprived or not, and she could connect the dots.

No one was particularly happy with the Mizu Daimyo right now, and if he hadn't been assassinated already, then it was just a matter of time. And Kiri would want to change out whichever person or people they had close to him as 'advisors' or whatnot.

Kyo wasn't particularly fond of this mission, and she couldn't say she felt an overwhelming desire to continue on to do more of them for Intel -granted she actually pulled this whole thing off and avoided getting killed- but she guessed there were worse things you could do for your village.

The minutes trickled by while Kyo continued on her painstakingly slow and careful way through the
Kiri Kage tower, steadily making her way to what she was fairly sure was the archive connected to their version of the mission assignment room.

There were still people out and about, if in less numbers than there usually were, if Kyo was forced to guess.

Partly because it was the dead of night, but also because of the decent group of foreign shinobi present in the village.

Couldn't leave those on their own. Who knew what they'd get up to?

Kyo had to bite back a wave of amusement at the thought, because she was way too tired and she couldn't afford to mess up even a little right now.

She was in the midst of the dragon's den, here.

*One* slip and she'd be dead meat. Or worse.

Waiting paid off when a Kiri Chuunin walked into the archives, most likely to retrieve a file, and Kyo took the chance to slip inside with him, unnoticed and invisible and then she just had to wait for him to leave again.

Using chakra like this, in complete stealth mode, with her chakra signature suppressed far enough it was non-existent was... tricky to pull off, and it felt strange, but she could do it. Had been learning over the course of years, ever since she got into ANBU, but probably before that too.

Kaa-san had had her build the foundation for these skills since the very start, and Kyo hadn't even realised.

When the Chuunin was gone, Kyo could finally get started on what she was there for.

Mission logs.

It took her no time at all to notice and Kyo felt temporarily tempted to put herself out of her misery, because... Kiri didn't have any shinobi registration numbers. Why.

*Why* would they do this?

Sure, Konoha's filing system was intentionally a chaotic mess if you weren't in on the secret behind it, but this was just... Kyo couldn't even describe it.

How did they keep track of who did what? Who had *earned* what? When someone was due at Psych, medical check-ups?

In combination with the damn *caste-system* Kiri apparently had, it painted a rather bleak picture, if you asked her.

Kyo abruptly cut off that particular train of thought before it could give her a headache. She couldn't afford to be distracted.

Though, to be fair, there was already a dull pulsing in her head, behind the thick bone of her forehead.

It was easy enough to ignore, but it was still *there*.

Focus.
Not producing so much as a sigh, Kyo set to it.

This part would clearly take more time than anticipated.

.

Getting back into the building that held the room they were staying in had been more of a challenge this time, compared to the previous night.

Or was that supposed to be ‘morning’?

Not that it mattered, she decided sluggishly, slowly stirring in response to Hirata’s abrupt and one-word wake up call.

She’d gotten an hour's sleep this morning, which didn't feel like enough to even properly warm up her stiff and chilled limbs.

At least she hadn’t gotten as cold as the night before, due to the fact she’d spent much of this night inside various buildings.

Kyo slowly managed to untangle her legs from the blanket of her bed and stumbled to her feet, rubbing a hand at her bleary eyes, before she glanced over at Honoka.

The girl hadn't spoken at all last night, but she'd fallen asleep from sheer exhaustion not long after going to bed.

Kyo exchanged a look with Hirata, who shrugged and leaned further back in his seat, clearly not about to get involved in this situation right now.

How nice. Leaving it up to her.

“Honoka? It's time to wake up,” Kyo said, reaching out to place a hand on Honoka's arm. A clean hand. No blood anywhere in sight. “It's morning,” she added softly. “Come on, let's get ready for the day.”

Honoka stirred and sent her a lacklustre look that Kyo was intimately familiar with.

He pretty eyes were dull with grief and almost lifeless, especially compared to when they’d first met.

Kyo suppressed a sigh and took the older girl's hand, pulling her with her into the bathroom as soon as Honoka was on her feet.

Sharing one last look with Hirata, Kyo closed the door between them, because... well, there was no need to keep it open and the illusion of privacy would probably help.

“Honoka,” Kyo said softly, hesitantly, keeping her Aiko-chan persona, but dialling it down as much as she could allow herself. “I'm really sorry about Rikuto, I'm sorry I haven't learned enough yet to have been able to—” Kyo sighed, frowning down at the floor. She hated the lie. “I'm sorry there wasn't anything I could do to save him,” she said instead, because that was the truth. No lies. “I'm sorry,” she added quietly, peering up at Honoka's face, taking in the tears dripping from her eyes and the pained grimace twisting her features. “Can I give you a hug?” Kyo asked.

“Not—” Honoka cleared her throat, “not right now, Aiko-chan,” she managed hoarsely. “I know it wasn't—” she closed her eyes, “wasn't your fault, but I’m—”

“Okay,” Kyo said, not holding it against her. She wondered if she should ask again if Honoka didn't
want to hold on to Rikuto's body-scroll, but... she studied the girl intently a moment, trying to gauge if that would help her, or just shatter her completely.

She'd leave it alone for now.

Kyo turned to get through with her morning routine, leaving Honoka alone to compose herself as well as she could.

When she was done, she slipped back out, leaving Honoka in the bathroom, and walked over to sit on her bed.

“What are we doing today, sensei?” She asked, eyeing Hirata with tired curiosity.

The man eyed her right back a second, before he gave a negligent shrug, tossing her a rations bar. “Eat up, then take a nap or whatever. You look like shit.”

Kyo had to bite back an amused snort, but did as ordered.

Stomach full, as comfortable as she could currently be, Kyo lied down and curled up and fell back into a light doze before Honoka came out of the bathroom.

They'd been left to their own devices all day, and Kyo felt both grateful for the break as well as increasingly paranoid.

Why would Kiri give them any breathing-room? A chance to rest?

But then again... this meant their own Genin also got a chance to rest up and recover what chakra they'd spent, and none of them had been drugged, which meant they'd be in excellent condition while the rest of them would have needed another couple of days to be the same.

So they didn't really lose any advantage.

Kyo sighed silently, going through with the same routine that had quickly established itself since they got here.

Time for round three.

Honoka had buried herself under the covers of her bed, once she eventually came out of the bathroom this morning, and hadn't emerged for anything other than bathroom breaks, but she was now deeply asleep, for better or worse.

Grieving could make you awfully tired.

Kyo glanced at her body double, checking to make sure Hirata was ready for the switch.

Receiving a shallow nod, Kyo reigned in her chakra and 'disappeared', while Hirata's clone took her place in one smooth breath.

'Going,' she signed with one hand, using the other one to make sure the cloth mask covered her face properly.

'Acknowledged,' Hirata returned blandly, and it was still beyond weird to have her own face stare at her with neutral disinterest.
Kyo took a deep breath, nodded to herself, and then raised a hand in a ram seal to focus her chakra to help her exit the building with minimal fanfare.

She had much to do and only a limited number of hours to do them in.

'It's fine if you leave a few signs behind so long as they aren't discovered until after you've left,' he'd said, Kyo mused with far less panic than she felt was currently warranted.

Sure, she'd gotten a decent amount of sleep during the day, today, never mind that she couldn't relax enough for deep, proper sleep. But that didn't mean she was fully recovered or even acceptably well-rested.

Dodging another swipe of a sword, Kyo twisted out of the way and jumped further up the building she was using as something of an attempted escape route.

She'd shortly find out if it'd end up working or not.

Ameyuri lunged after her again, her swords gleaming wickedly, even in the dark and the mist, but that was probably due to the electricity the woman was using like it was going out of style and Kyo launched herself out and away from the wall of the building, into the open air.

Ameyuri turned to follow, leading with her weapons, and Kyo was absolutely fortunate that the woman seemed intent on keeping this on the down-low and was more interested in capturing her than outright murder, or she'd be in even deeper shit.

She was also lucky the henge she'd wrapped herself in made Ameyuri's aim ever so slightly off.

It was just about an hour before dawn, and Kyo had been trying to ditch the woman for about twenty minutes now.

She wasn't even sure what she'd done to expose herself, but here they were.

Wind and air rushing about her as gravity pulled her towards the ground, one of the swords came towards her side, trying to catch her on one of those wickedly sharp hooks. Kyo twisted out of the way, raised her hands, gathered the chakra she'd need and pulled off a kawarimi with a fist-sized stone far beneath on the ground, which she immediately followed with a shunshin into the building she'd been running up the length of a few seconds before.

Holding her breath and trying to force down the acute nausea the sequence of moves had left her with, not to mention the dismal drain on her chakra, Kyo hunkered down to wait.

Pressed a hand to her side.

She didn't have much time to get back to Hirata and switch back with his clone.

If anyone noticed she wasn't there...

Taking a moment to inspect the room she was currently in, Kyo observed the very obviously civilian home she'd slipped into. Sparsely decorated, she noted distractedly.

It was dark, and she could just about sense a couple of muted, civilian-strength chakra signatures in the other room over. Clearly sleeping.

She'd headed away from the ninja-populated areas of the village on purpose the moment she'd been
discovered, and she hoped this would be enough to let her get away, at least for now. It didn't really matter that she was headed away from where she'd need to be shortly, either.

Lurking in the dark like she was, and since no one was barging in to corner her, Kyo took a moment to take stock of herself, shifting minutely and having to bite back a grimace. She was still high on adrenaline and fear, but she didn't have to feel the pain to know she hadn't gotten away scot free.

Shit.

No time to dwell on it, though, because if she stayed here much longer, then they'd inevitably find her, no matter how well she hid.

Heart thumping loudly in her chest, breath trembling through her windpipe, Kyo prepared to return out into the mist.

She didn't have time for fear. There was too much else to focus on than her own emotions or feelings and Kyo did not want to find out what the inside of Kiri's T&I looked like.

The seconds were trickling by and she needed to get back to Hirata and Honoka.

Taking a deep breath, Kyo pulled her chakra even deeper into herself, and then shunshined back out, to a different location than the one she'd entered from.

She didn't stand around to see if anyone was there waiting for her, before she slipped off, continuing her trek back to where she needed to be.

She was taking the long way around, even though every Kiri shinobi with half a brain knew where she was headed, but there was no need to be predictable about it.

One more run-in with Ameyuri delayed her further.

Flashing her sharp teeth in a grin, the Kiri kunoichi emerged from the mist like a shark surfacing from deep waters, attempting to swallow her whole like an unaware seal. Swinging her swords came at her from either side.

Kyo jumped, throwing herself out of the way of the scissor-attack. Followed it up by shunshining further away. Getting out of immediate range.

“You're mine,” the woman hissed with a menacing smile, eyes gleaming with another building lightning attack, tendrils of electricity sparking along the blades of her swords.

Kyo didn't waste her breath on a retort. Speaking at all would have been beyond stupid, and she was trying to survive. See this mission through.

Instead, she leapt back and tried spot any chance to get the hell away.

It wouldn't be wise to use the same tactic twice in a row.

Ameyuri didn't give her time to think, kept pressing her.

Those swords came at her again, and Kyo... did something foolish.

She would have loved the chance to take a deep breath, but there wasn't time, so she just moved, coated her hand in wind-chakra, hoping with everything she had this would work and not see her lose her fingers.
Dodging the sword aiming for her hip, she rushed Ameyuri, grabbed the tip of the blade, ignored the burning hum of electricity, and used it to launch herself over the woman and out into the mist at the same time as she spat two wind sickles at her in quick succession.

She didn't want to be gutted.

Didn't want to be caught.

In the back of her head, she prayed that this would be enough to keep Ameyuri busy enough, make sure to keep her swords occupied long enough for her to pull this stupid move off. Keeping the woman busy enough to let her escape, hopefully with all limbs intact.

Ameyuri dodged the wind sickles aimed at her torso with an aggressive grimace on her face, eyes flashing angrily, and she retaliated by trying to hook her other sword into Kyo's leg, twisting the blade in Kyo's hand sharply to make her let it go.

Kyo clenched her teeth, twisted her body out of the way, let go of the sword and took off, not pausing to so much as breathe.

Letting the mist swallow her up and desperately throwing herself back into full stealth.

Her arm tingled with traces of electricity, despite her attempts to cancel it out and her hand felt numb, which couldn't be good, but she got away.

Air wheezing through her throat, Kyo forced it down until it felt like she was suffocating, but she was used to that and she needed to be silent, because sure, she got away from Ameyuri with a combination of luck, nerve and doing something unexpected the woman probably hadn't encountered before, but the area she was now entering was crawling with Kiri shinobi just waiting to corner her and drag her off for questioning.

Ameyuri wasn't the only one hunting for her.

Suppressing a mental shudder, Kyo made sure every single drop and whisper of chakra she had left was deep under wraps, in her core, and crept on through the shinobi infested mist.

-x-x-x-

The kid was taking too long.

Hirata glanced over at the Genin girl sleeping fitfully in her bed, then over at the clone occupying the pipsqueak's and contemplated several contingency plans.

Katsurou would be fucking pissed if he failed to bring his brat back home with him, and Hirata didn't really wanna deal with that. No matter how you looked at it, it'd be messy.

Not to mention the kid was fairly interesting on her own merit.

Hirata was actually looking forward to see what she'd get up to in the next few years, but that was all hinging on her not getting killed on this mission.

Not shifting his seat or posture in the least, he carefully tracked the increased activity outside the building.
Either the kid came back, or she didn't, and that meant Hirata would have to decide on a course of action...

The faintest sound of feet tapping against the bathroom floor was the only thing alerting him to the fact the pipsqueak was finally back.

Pushing his previous line of thought to the back of his head for later contemplation, Hirata threw a glance at the window.

The damn mist was slowly starting to get illuminated in time with the lightening sky. Dawn was fucking close.

Kid no doubt had a good explanation, he figured, and instead of remaining where he was, watching his clone go through with the same farce as yesterday morning, he got up himself, movements unhurried and carefully measured.

He took a moment to stretch briefly and thoroughly scan the small space they'd been assigned for their less-than-welcome stay, and then ambled over towards the bathroom door with bland disinterest in every inch of his body.

Hirata nudged the door open and walked inside without a hitch, not so much as blinking or pausing on his way to the toilet.

Throwing another glance out into the room, to check on their guards as well as the Genin, Hirata calmly opened the toilet lid and sat down.

'Come here, be quick,' he signed evenly, taking in the pained grimace on the kid's face at a glance, before he focused on the rest of her.

She followed orders, despite the tremble going through her limbs, and this time, it wasn't from the wet and the cold.

Though, her uniform was still wet, and not exclusively with water.

Hirata quickly and efficiently set about helping her get out of her clothes, taking in the damage underneath.

Flicking a dry look at her face, he quickly turned back to inspect the wound scoring her side, on her left side, cutting into her abdomen and going up her ribs, raking across the bones in what was absolutely a painful manner.

Ah, fuck.

'Hold still,' he instructed her shortly, one handed, while the other one pulled out what he'd need from one of his pouches.

Couldn't risk attempting iryou jutsu right now for several reasons. Only one of which was that Hirata wasn't particularly good at them.

Any unexpected surge of chakra from their room would blow their cover, though, so that was out regardless.

'Not a sound,' he warned with a grim look, before he started with disinfecting.

The liquid he put on the compress stung like a bitch and a half, he knew from experience, but it was
better than the alternative.

The kid took a deep, silent breath and gave a short nod, reaching out to grab his uniform sleeve with her right hand.

Hirata briskly set about cleaning out the long but shallow cut.

It would scar, he noted blandly, even if an expert medic got their hands on it right away, because the edges looked somewhat singed.

Not too badly, but enough to hamper healing.

'Lightning chakra,' the pipsqueak let go of him long enough to sign, one handed, and Hirata narrowed his eyes on her other hand, for just a second, before he temporarily dismissed it to finish up the wound he was currently dealing with.

One thing at a time.

Now clean, the kid shaking pretty badly from a combination of pain and adrenaline, he slapped a few compresses on it and then wrapped the whole business up with bandages.

At least the mild lightning burn ensured it wouldn't bleed excessively.

'Next,' he continued with grim efficiency. They didn't have much time to wrap this shit up, or their cover would get blown despite the kid's effort to get away and back here without further notice.

Pipsqueak hesitated a fraction of a second, before she gingerly held out her left hand for him.

Hirata eyed it dispassionately and felt an eyebrow rise with dry amusement.

Flashing a grin at the kid, who gave him a completely deadpan expression in return, he set about cleaning out the cuts.

Ah, shit, they were pretty deep, and with the same burned quality as the other one.

'What'd you do, grab the blade?' He signed, entertained and tempted to laugh when all it got him was a sullen look and a curt nod.

Fuck, he was sharing this with Katsurou when they got back home. This kid was hilarious.

A light kick to one of his sandalled feet got him fully back on track and Hirata went back to cleaning the cuts out with rough but quick motions.

The deepest one was on the heel of her hand, slicing deep into the muscle and possibly even scraping bone, starting in the middle of her palm and going out to the side, and yeah, kid wasn't gonna be having fun with this.

He was more worried about the cuts on her fingers, though, 'cause that shit was irritantly fragile, and if the tendons were damaged...

Hirata finished up, pressed another compress to the heel of her hand, and then began to wrap it up, until it was all covered. Every finger wrapped individually and this was as good as it was gonna get right now, what with the limited time they had to work with.

'How dicey is the situation?' He asked when he was done, starting to put everything away while he waited for her response.
How big was the chance they'd have some pissed off Kiri nin after them the moment they left this room?

‘I henged to the body size and shape of the Suna Jounin,’ kid informed him blandly, inspecting her left hand a moment, and then quickly set out to dress in her official outfit, face twisting with pain, but she evidently didn't let that stop her, though she moved more gingerly than she would have had she not been injured.

Hirata smirked. ‘Nice,’ he signed back. ‘Put a genjutsu on that hand,’ he added distractedly, getting to his feet, flushing the toilet, turned on the tap, and then quickly began to wipe down the surfaces they'd been using to get rid of any possible blood.

The pipsqueak paused and eyed him blankly.

‘Same one as you use for the tattoo,’ he elaborated wryly, gaze flicking to her arm, where he was well aware the ANBU tattoo was hidden from view.

Kid blinked a couple of times, and then frowned with concentration.

The next second, the bandages shimmered out of view until unblemished skin was the only thing left visible.

Giving a satisfied nod, Hirata turned off the tap and left.

Time to stage his clone waking up for it to switch place with the kid, and then he should probably wake the Genin, too.

If nothing else, this was sure shaping up to be an interesting day.

Wiping the grin off his face, Hirata adopted his mission-face again and set to it.

-x-x-x-

Kyo was having a bad day.

At least she'd gotten back into their room without any additional disasters, but that didn't change the fact she'd gotten injured and every breath sent a stab of red-hot fire through her side, and she'd rather not even think about how her hand was feeling right now.

This sucked so bad.

Despite the fact she had absolutely no appetite, Kyo forced down the rations bar Hirata had tossed at her, like every morning, while Honoka sluggishly went through her morning routine, looking absolutely awful.

Kyo was sympathetic, but she couldn't quite find it in herself to expend more effort and energy than she absolutely had to, because the day had only just started, and she severely doubted they'd get another rest day.

It hadn't escaped her attention that this was pretty bad, and she was fully aware she couldn't let on that she was more injured than she'd gotten two days ago. And she had to be Aiko-chan, too, on top of that and she already knew this would suck so badly.
Shifting into a position she hoped would be slightly less painful, Kyo suppressed a grimace and instead forced a smile on her face, hoping it didn't look as stiff as it felt.

“Do you think we'll actually do anything today, sensei?” She asked, pleased she at least managed to make her voice sound like usual.

Every small success was important.

“Probably,” Hirata grunted, managing to sound both sullen and disinterested at the same time as he maintained his attentive watchfulness.

Kyo resisted the urge to scowl at him. She turned to Honoka instead. “How're you feeling today?” She asked softly, and she was concerned for the older girl, but she wasn't in any mortal danger right now, no matter how severe the mental and emotional blow of losing a teammate was.

“I'll be fine, Aiko-chan,” Honoka assured her mutedly, and she did seem slightly more composed than she'd been the day before, even though it was very clearly just a mask.

Which was perfectly understandable.

They were in enemy territory, and they couldn't leave yet.

Shortly after that, there was a firm knock on the door and Hirata got up to answer, an anticipatory gleam to his eyes, but that was the only sign Kyo could spot that he was ready for possible violence.

“Good morning,” Ameyuri purred the moment she laid eyes on Hirata, gaze sharp as she scanned him from head to toe, a smirk on her lips like razor wire and fingers caressing the handle of one of her swords.

Kyo very firmly refused to react in any way, other than to bounce to her feet, before she hurried over to Honoka to take her hand and pull her with her to the door.

It was a good thing Kiri didn't have any Yamanaka, because the inside of her head didn't reflect her expression and behaviour in the least right now, and there was a continuous string of curses, complaints and mental screaming going on.

Moving hurt, and why did it have to be Ameyuri? If she slipped just a little, then the kunoichi would zero in on her like a shark on fresh blood.

Honoka squeezed her hand reassuringly, which would have been fine, nice even, if Kyo hadn't deliberately taken the older girl's hand with her left one, and the burning pain threatened to bring tears to her eyes.

Her smile no doubt turned somewhat fixed, but Kyo was fairly sure that could be blamed on nerves and the fact Ameyuri was exuding a subtle pressure of blood lust into the air around her, deliberately or not.

“Ready to go?” The woman asked politely, still looking like she was a hair away from pulling a sword on Hirata, though she threw a brief glance at Kyo and Honoka, too. “Then let's go see if you measure up to become Chuunin.” She grinned, the expression darkly amused.

Kyo didn't look forward to find out what the second task or test would be, but there wasn't any choice involved.

Sliding up as close to Hirata as was practical, Kyo turned her head to look up at Honoka and offering
her a tight smile.

Honoka offered a faint, tremulous smile back, and that was better than nothing.

At least she'd have Honoka at her back, no matter what they'd be made to do.

Kyo tried not to stare at the Sandaime Mizukage standing a respectable distance in front of the group of gathered Genin, garbed in the official Mizukage robes, though he'd forgone the hat.

There was so much to focus on she honestly didn't know where to start.

The amount of Kiri shinobi around was unsettling, too.

Ameyuri was, somehow, looming threateningly in the background and Kyo had seen her stalk the Suna Jounin for a while, eyeing him like she was considering how to cut him up to pieces and fry him, before she'd drifted back to do the same with Hirata. Her hand throbbed painfully at the thought.

It was very creepy, and she didn't know how anyone that short managed to loom over anyone, not to mention someone as tall as Hirata.

Then there was the rest of the Konoha Genin, and other than Kyo herself and Honoka, all of them looked like they'd had a rough time of it since she'd last seen them.

Minato was rather pale, and if she was forced to guess, he hadn't been sleeping well. If at all.

He didn't look as bad as the Aburame Jounin's Genin, the boy who had spent the first part of this exam all but unconscious. He looked almost green and very unsteady.

Bad reaction to the drug, she confirmed grimly.

But back to the Mizukage, Kyo contemplated the information she had been given on the man, however brief the Intel people had been, because if she ended up facing him in any capacity, she would have failed her mission rather spectacularly.

Mizushima Enmu, a respectable 57 years old. His hair was more grey than the dark it had once been, and his eyes were entirely black, which was all kinds of unsettling.

He'd decorated his hair with some sort of beads or pearls in a near-crown fashion?

He was supposedly an excellent sensor, as well as more than dangerous with a sword, and while his age was impressive for a shinobi, he shouldn't be underestimated because of it.

Kyo wasn't a natural sensor, though she'd gotten decent at it from necessity, but the man's chakra was... almost oppressive.

"Alright, listen up!" A large, heavy-set man said, flashing sharp teeth at the lot of them momentarily, and what was up with Kiri shinobi and sharp teeth?

Was it some sort of genetic mutation?

It was very well possible, she supposed, because chakra could do weird things to people.

"We are currently standing in the Academy arena," the man continued, and there was a truly massive
sword on his back.

Kyo stared subtly a moment. Was that one of the Seven Swordsmen of the Bloody Mist?

Then his words registered and Kyo stilled.

She had a really bad feeling about this.

“We will be having one-on-one matches, and the winners will be given the promotion to Chuunin.”

He grinned, and he looked a little bit like a bear. An unfortunate mix between a bear and a fish. He was tall and wide, with long, orange-red hair that he'd styled in an interesting fashion, reinforcing his bearishness. Though not as interesting as Ameyuri did hers. “The first match,” he continued into the expectant silence, eyeing them all with cold, calculating eyes, “will be between Namikaze Minato and Nakahara Aiko.” His lips stretched into a thin, lethal-looking smile.

Kyo blinked. Wait, that-

“In Kirigakure tradition, it's to the death,” he finished with obvious glee.

Kyo frowned minutely, before she sent Minato a look, making sure to make it look nervous, rather than speculative.

She couldn't win this match, that was clear.

Kiri might think they were being cleverly cruel and sadistic, but this was actually good. Really good.

Or, well, good for Kyo's adopted persona.

Aiko-chan would not win this match, and she trusted Minato to not kill her, no matter what these people said.

Glancing around at the rest of the Konoha Genin, she could see similar emotions in all of their eyes. None of them would be killing any comrades today.

Not because of this tournament and certainly not for a promotion.

The question was, though, if someone else would enforce the rules if they refused to deal the killing blow... there'd be some sort of judge, she assumed.

Maybe.

Or they'd just expect the kids to go after each other with intent to kill and the one left standing at the end of it would be the winner.

This was giving her a headache, on top of everything else.

“Step up to the ring and we'll get started,” the same Kiri man said with a toothy smile, eyeing first Kyo and then Minato with dark, fish-like eyes.

Kyo didn't have to fake how reluctant she was as she made herself step away from a very pale Honoka, because this would be all kinds of awful, she already knew it, and Minato would probably be upset with her before they were done.

Because Kyo was injured, and there were a lot of highly observant spectators. She was pretty sure she'd be able to hide the fact her side was hurting like a bitch, but her hand... her left hand was all but useless and she couldn't let it show.
Which meant she had to do something reckless again.

Suppressing a grimace at the turn her thoughts had taken, she just knew everyone back home was going to be unimpressed with her.

Not to mention Jiraiya-sensei.

Resisting the urge to send the man in question a look, she instead turned to stare at Hirata, projecting a muted sense of panic, even while she hurriedly went through Minato's fighting style and how she could use it to her advantage.

Shit, this was going to be utterly miserable, wasn't it?

Kyo finally turned to face her opponent, sending Minato a weak, unsteady smile that tried to hide false unease and fear.

The constant pain was actually helping her act out all these negative emotions. Go figure.

Minato frowned minutely, looking like he was trying to figure out her plan, because she'd be willing to bet she wasn't acting like he'd expected.

He knew very well she wouldn't think he'd be willing to actually kill her.

Or, if he did, Kyo would kick him in the shin the moment they got back home, because where was the faith?

“Ready?” The bear-fish-man said blandly, looking like he couldn't care less if they were ready or not. “Then, begin!”

Kyo pulled two kunai, one in each hand, even though holding the left one was agony, and made both of her hands tremble, but she somehow managed. The threat of discovery was a powerful motivator and the tremble looked like nerves.

It was fine.

Minato hesitated, sent a look at their sensei, and then charged.

Kyo almost smiled, because he opened this fight like he opened about half of their sparring matches back home and it was so familiar and routine she very nearly laughed.

God, she loved this boy.

Firming up her face into something that could be read as determination, Kyo countered.

Far more concerned with her own body, her reactions and the fact that moving her torso sent liquid fire across her ribs and left side, Kyo had to regulate her breathing to prevent herself from giving up the game.

As it was, she barely kept tears from her eyes.

Minato executed a quick, sharp kick and Kyo intentionally lagged minutely, letting it connect with her hip, and sure, it stung, but compared to her other issues, it barely counted.

Her friend looked momentarily throwed, and there was a noticeable pause, before his gaze sharpened and he continued, speeding up and going at it with more sincerity.
Kyo approved.

They continued to spar, though she focused more on dodging and redirecting blows than anything else, and it wasn't particularly easy to fumble her steps or strikes every now and then, but it wasn't difficult either.

She knew Minato's style so well she could do it, even while focusing more on making it look natural.

That was the key point here.

Kyo visibly geared up to go on the offensive, because this wouldn't go anywhere at this pace, and she needed Minato to draw a weapon.

With clumsy determination, Kyo went after Minato's throat, sure enough he'd be able to dodge she wasn't overly worried, and she needed to play this just right to make it believable.

Minato quite visibly startled, but it took another two tries for him to draw a kunai of his own, to counter and deflect, and Kyo knew it was now or never.

He'd never do this intentionally.

Firming up her resolve, biting back an apprehensive hiss, Kyo fell into the stance to execute a kick-stab sequence they'd practised a while back and she was betting on him falling into the response with little to no thought.

Kyo aimed a kick at his stomach and when he jumped back, followed it up with a half-spin which immediately transitioned into strike with her right hand, kunai first, which was followed with her left one.

It was down to the second, and when Minato did fall into the anticipated counter, Kyo made sure to react, if only a moment too late.

Minato's kunai bit into her shoulder, slid off her collarbone and continued through the muscle connecting her shoulder to her neck, slightly deeper than anticipated.

Kyo leapt back with a pained noise that wasn't faked, the kunai slipping from her left hand on it's own, though it played into her plan.

Minato remained frozen in place, face entirely blank.

Kyo blinked rapidly, feeling tears fall from her eyes, though it wasn't from the cut in her shoulder. Attacking with her left hand had hurt, fuck, she might throw up.

Dropping her other kunai, Kyo raised her right hand to her left shoulder, and it was shaking with how much she was hurting, but she barely acknowledged it other than to confirm it played into the picture she was deliberately presenting.

She was bleeding a bit more than she would have preferred, but that was fine.

Warm blood slowly seeped down from her shoulder, staining her shirt almost black. Soaking the bandages underneath, and shit, she hadn't thought of that.

Ah, well. No plan was perfect, she mused as she bit her lower lip, trying to keep back a genuine sob, watching Minato with guarded eyes, and tears were still trickling down her cheeks.

She no doubt looked utterly pathetic.
Score.

Someone made an impatient noise. “Finish her and end the match,” a Kiri Jounin snapped, giving Minato and Kyo a disdainful look, making it perfectly clear how pathetic he found them.

*Good.*

Minato finally snapped out of his shock, if only to give the Kiri man a disbelieving look.

Kyo made sure to shrink into herself, all but cowering.

“If you refuse to fulfil the parameters to win, both of you will be killed,” the Bear-Fish-guy said dispassionately, and Kyo just about had a second to feel unchecked panic, because *shit*, that would be *bad*. She didn't have any directives about what to do in this situation!

The possible member of the Seven Swordsmen of the Mist lifted a hand towards the handle on his massive sword, a rather unhinged grin on his face, at the same time as he took a very deliberate step closer to Kyo and Minato when it became clear her teammate wouldn't kill her. But before anything else could happen, a far too large *thing* appeared between them and the Kiri man in a cloud of smoke.

Kyo just about had time to blink before she'd been picked up and they were moving far too fast for her to react in any way other than to realise she *couldn't breathe*.

It only took a couple of seconds for them to relocate, and she knew it was Hirata who had grabbed her, but she couldn't think because Hirata was *pressing on her ribs with his forearm*.

Kyo couldn't breathe, but a choked sob still tore its way from her throat and she was shaking so badly she doubted she’d be able to stand on her own two damn feet right now.

Her side was on fire, the cut up her ribs pulsing in time with her frantic heartbeat.

Tears were streaming down her face, but she barely noticed, too busy trying to *not make more of a scene* because fuck this wasn't in line with her act so far.

“H-He was gonna—” she pressed out, before she had to pause for a large gulp of air or she might actually faint, “g-gonna kill us, sensei,” she managed weakly, voice rasping through her throat.

Hirata gave a quiet huff, but did shift his hold on her minutely until it no longer felt like his arm was a red-hot brand against her skin.

The question now was if he'd done that on purpose, or if it was just unlucky happenstance.

Another few seconds passed before she could clear her head enough to focus back on the large arena-like business they were all currently occupying.

There was a very tense stand-off going on down on the floor and Kyo finally realised what that big thing was.

Staring incomprehensibly a moment, Kyo slowly made the connection.

A toad. A huge toad, holding an equally big sword.

But no, wait... there were supposed to be even bigger toads in existence here, wasn't there? Toads the size of small mountains, with just as enormous weapons, shields... large enough to take on the Kyuubi.
Hirata had grabbed her and brought her back to the rest of the Konoha Genin, where Takara had also joined them, an angry buzzing emanating from beneath their bulky clothes and it was entirely ominous and all the children looked varying levels of scared and or tense.

Kyo herself was in too much pain to be scared, and she was all too aware she might have to move quickly soon.

“Stay,” Hirata ordered her gruffly, putting her down and pushing her in Honoka’s direction, and Kyo didn't have breath for words right now.

Asshole.

“Aiko-chan, are you okay?” Honoka asked, and there was a badly hidden thread of panic in her voice as one of her hands hovered uncertainly over her bleeding shoulder, the other holding her right upper arm in a white-knuckled grip.

Kyo blinked dazedly at her a second, before she remembered: Rikuto had died the last time Honoka had seen blood.

“Fine,” she rasped back tremulously, huddling closer.

Takara shifted towards her, until they could place one hand on her shoulder and their chakra was surprisingly mild and soothing. Kyo took slow breaths while the Jounin healed her, trying to regain her equilibrium.

“Try not to strain it, or it'll open up again,” Takara told her softly, voice just as androgynous as their appearance.

Kyo nodded tersely back, more focused on Jiraiya and Minato than on her stupid shoulder.

The tense stand-off was still happening, and Jiraiya had shunshined to next to his toad, who sent him a brief look, before focusing back on the Kiri nin in front of... him? She'd go with that for now. He hadn't broken his ready-stance for so much as a second, and that sword looked wickedly sharp.

A deep, burnt orange colour, the toad also had blue markings that made her think of stylized fire, and he was wearing armour, in addition to the sword.

He looked to be more than ready for a battle-field.

Jiraiya-sensei looked entirely unamused with this whole situation, and while it looked like every Kiri shinobi in the room was more than ready to turn it into a free-for-all fight, so did the foreign Jounin.

Nothing like the threat to murder all of their kids to bring people together, she thought with a level of amusement that was entirely inappropriate for the situation.

Had there ever before been a temporary alliance between all the major villages bar one? Against that one village in question?

As it looked right now, Kyo might actually witness one.

Throwing a glance at Hirata, Kyo could tell he was more than ready to move at a fraction of a seconds notice, hands conveniently close to his weapons holsters, and there was a gleam to his eyes she was vaguely familiar with by now.

“Aiko-chan,” Honoka said quietly, drawing her attention.
Kyo finally looked at the girl, and noted she was alarmingly pale. “I’m fine,” she said, and didn’t react when Honoka slowly raised a hand to wipe Kyo's cheeks dry, as if to point out the lie with actions alone.

Kyo bit back a scoff. She was fine. She had to be fine.

The truth was, there were no real options here, right now, and she couldn't afford to be anything other than ready for whatever would happen.

She didn't yet know if that would be a fight for their lives, in an attempt to break their way out of Kiri by force - there was procedure for that situation, though - or if this whole thing would get resolved in some other way and they'd go back to the death matches.

Neither of those options felt particularly appealing.

Focusing on taking slow, steady breaths, waiting for the pain to fade to more manageable levels, Kyo silently observed the stand-off Jiraiya-sensei was currently busy with.

The toad had shifted minutely so that Minato was closer and - more importantly - within easy reach, in case things turned to the worse.

Jiraiya and the Kiri fish-bear Jounin were having a very tense, sharp conversation down there, too quiet for her to hear, and it looked like both of them were more than ready to turn it into something else at a moment’s notice, before the Mizukage signed one of his men and the atmosphere shifted ever so slightly.

A fight like the one all the foreign Jounin here could whip up would leave Kiri with a great deal of property damage and smashed infrastructure. Which probably helped, as a deterrent.

Kyo watched the Mizukage issue a few orders to his chosen proctor, who had only very reluctantly stepped away from Jiraiya-sensei.

Things were discussed a few minutes longer, before Fish-Bear-guy stepped back up to announce the outcome, looking vaguely irritated, but not particularly surprised.

So... they'd been aware this might have been an option.

Kyo had to bite back a huff.

Opportunistic assholes, the lot of them. But then again; shinobi.

“Right,” the man finally said, sending Jiraiya a look that made it more than clear he was itching to pull his sword, but instead turned to scan the Genin. “The first match will be accepted as a draw, but both contestants will have to finish another match.” Here, he grinned again, looking darkly amused. “Nakahara Aiko will face against Momochi Benkei, same rules as stated earlier will apply, or the contestants will both face the proctor's sword.” Then, he sent Jiraiya a sharp look, as if saying 'happy?' and Kyo knew without a doubt they couldn't complain about this.

Kiri had given a concession to the truth that they couldn't make two children from another village, the same village, kill each other, no matter the circumstances, but the same did not apply for two children from different nations. Who were enemies regardless.

“Aiko-chan...” Honoka said quietly, sending her a look, and Kyo knew why.

She'd all but metaphorically shot herself in the foot, what with her injured shoulder, and this person
wasn't someone she knew well enough she could focus more on herself.

How was she supposed to pull this off as Aiko-chan, not get killed, and still maintain her cover?

Kyo felt rather pale, but she did slowly make her way back to the ring she and Minato had occupied just a few minutes ago.

She walked by both Minato and Jiraiya-sensei on the way, but she didn't acknowledge them in the least, no matter how much it grated to ignore them.

Minato looked so pale she was afraid he might faint, and she'd never seen him look scared before. Not like that.

Not on her behalf.

Kyo took her place without a word, and instead of dwelling on anything else, she studied her new opponent.

Momochi Benkei was a tall teenager, broad and well-muscled, wearing the typical Kiri uniform, and he was watching her with a smile she could only describe as mean.

He had brown hair, dark eyes, and she would have to somehow kill him without revealing she was anything other than a slightly below-average Genin.

Right.

She would... have to improvise that.

Her shoulder may be messed up, but at least she had a viable excuse not to use her left arm now, which was actually a large plus no matter how she looked at it.

She'd have to remember to thank Minato later, when they were no longer at risk of dying.

Swallowing dryly, head feeling uncomfortable blank and empty, Kyo pulled a kunai with her right hand, angled herself so that she could more easily protect her vulnerable side, and got into a ready stance.

Her opponent eyed her with cruel amusement and eager anticipation.

He was one of those, was he?

She might actually be able to use that to her advantage. If she turned out to be right.

-x-x-x-
Chapter 78

Chapter Summary

Aiko-chan is put to the test

Chapter Notes

Merry Christmas, Happy Holidays, or Seasonal Greetings, people! Whatever you're celebrating, or even if you're not celebrating at all, I hope you all have a wonderful week. Lots of love!

“Begin,” Fish-Bear-guy said dispassionately, and her opponent immediately fell into a charge.

Kyo had been anticipating it, which helped, but she still made a point of scrambling out of his way. Aiming a clumsy slash at one of the tendons in his arms.

Momochi Benkei hadn't pulled a weapon yet, but from the way he was moving, Kyo suspected he probably wouldn't.

Of course she had to be pitted against a taijutsu specialist.

This mission was the worst.

Half-formed and shapeless thoughts swirled through her head while she focused on dodging, letting a few punches and jabs just about graze her when she could afford it and the opportunity presented itself. There wasn't much time to think, but Kyo still had to try.

She had to kill this boy somehow, without making it look like either an accident or competent.

How was she supposed to find that balance when she couldn't move or breathe without it feeling like her side was on fire? Without the use of her left arm?

Sure, it was all but useless to her right now anyway, but it sure would have been handy to have use of both hands.

Hah! Pun!

Smacking that thought down with ruthless irritation, Kyo eyed her opponent intently.

He was big and physically intimidating, especially for his age, but he was an actual Genin, Kyo was relatively sure.

As much as anyone here was a Genin, anyway.

Which meant more along the lines of not-yet-promoted-Chuunin, but she was used to facing Chuunin in battle. And more than that, it was something she could do.
She'd also gotten a fairly decent sample of Kiri shinobi fighting styles on that mission to Uzu, so she could do this.

She could.

Firming up her resolve, Kyo got to it, keeping all her senses open for *any* kind of opening, taking note of every single little crack in this guy's defence and how she could use that.

It got harder to remember to be Aiko-chan, but that would have to be fine. So long as she didn't drop the act entirely, she should still be in the clear.

“You need to start doin' more than just dodging if you want to get anywhere,” Momochi Benkei told her, smirking at her with self-confidence and superiority, and Kyo forced a miniscule, stiff and entirely faked and insincere smile onto her face in response.

The fact her face felt cold and pale wasn't at all an act, but a real response to pain and stress, blood-loss, was less important, but she could still use it to her advantage.

Shit, her shoulder was bleeding again, wasn't it? She hadn't noticed.

“At this rate, you're gonna drag things out until they're slow and painful,” the boy continued to taunt, but at least it afforded her a slight breather.

He was ever so slightly slow to move one of his legs whenever he came out of a kick, and he didn't bother to compensate for it with his arm on the same side.

She could use that.

A non-lethal injury to start with.

Trying to see if her plan had any obvious holes, Kyo had to quickly pretend to scramble out of the way of another strike aimed at her face.

Her opponent seemed to have a thing for aiming at her eyes, which was incredibly annoying.

The next time Kyo dodged a kick, ducking under the sandalled foot approaching her throat, she lashed out with her kunai as she all but fell past her opponent, and she hoped this looked accidental and not as carefully calculated as it was.

Her kunai bit into his thigh, far more shallow than if she'd gone for this with *intent*, but it was a start.

Kyo hadn't expected this to be either quick or easy, but she was doing it.

Her opponent cursed and widened the distance between them, eyeing her with narrowed eyes a moment, assessed his leg, and then went after her with doubled enthusiasm.

Which she could possibly angle to make it look like recklessness?

Kyo had to bite back a laugh, and turned her full attention back to this guy's stance, his guard and any cracks and holes she could use.

Momochi grew increasingly sloppy and desperate to finish her, and this fight was dragging out.

She couldn't spare so much as a fraction of her focus on the rest of the room right now, she had to trust Hirata and Jiraiya-sensei to have her back, and it was all worth it the moment she felt her kunai slide into her opponent's stomach, and she let herself stumble and fall, using the motion to all but gut
He made a small, pained noise, and Kyo scrambled back to her feet, getting away from him. She whirled back around and widened her eyes when she laid eyes on him.

One hand pressed to his stomach, panting harshly and glaring at her with something that was starting to look like real desperation, Momochi Benkei didn't stop. Instead, he charged her with a yell and tried to jab his fingers into her eyes.

Kyo ducked his clumsy lunge and stabbed her kunai up into his throat, through the windpipe and into the spine.

The boy produced a quiet, gurgling noise, and for half a second, they remained frozen in place, his eyes large and staring incomprehensibly at her.

Then the moment was over and he fell to the floor, yanking the kunai out of her hand on the way down, and Kyo was left standing, panting and pale, trying to make her eyes look wide and wild.

“...winner, Nakahara Aiko,” was announced a second later, and Kyo jumped, as if she had forgotten there were in fact other people in the room with her.

She most of all wanted to lie down and not move again.

Instead, Kyo sent the Fish-Bear-guy a fearful look, and then hurried back to Hirata's side, doing nothing to hide the fine tremble moving through her limbs as she raised a hand to cradle her injured shoulder.

Shit, she was far too tired for this. Was hurting too much.

She had to be done now, though. Didn't she? Kiri couldn't make her do anything else?

Exchanging a wide-eyed look with her supposed sensei, Kyo huddled in close beside Honoka while a Kiri shinobi collected Momochi Benkei's body.

No one bothered to clean up the blood and fluids from the stone floor.

Then the next contestants were called up.

One of the Kiri Genin, this time facing off against one of the Kumo ones.

Kyo wasn't sure how much time passed while they waited.

Most of the matches were quick and brutal, but there were a few that dragged out, like Kyo's had done.

Honoka was called to fight, and Kyo worriedly watched her go.

“Don't die,” she told her softly, before she could get too far.

Honoka sent her a half-hearted smile that didn't reach her eyes, said nothing, and then turned back to the task at hand.

With her temporary teammate elsewhere, Kyo felt rather alone, even though she was still standing next to Hirata, as well as the rest of the Konoha people present. But she no longer had someone in
her personal space, and the comfort had been nice.

Sure, she could sidle closer to Hirata, but he might still have to move abruptly, and she'd rather not get in the way.

Minato still looked pale, and the few times he'd glanced at her, the look in his eyes... Kyo didn't have the energy to deal with that just yet. This wasn't the time or place for it, either.

Honoka's match began, and the girl got out a coil of ninja wire her male Kiri opponent outright laughed at, before he charged head-first.

Honoka was prepared for it, though, and when she looped her wire around one of his arms in a quick, skilful move and yanked it sharply enough to lop the appendage clean off, Kyo blinked when the boy's entire body liquefied.

Kyo stared mutely at the puddle on the floor, and she wasn't the only one.

Water clone...? But then the puddle began to move and she was fairly sure clones weren't supposed to do that.

Instead, it reformed into the boy, who grinned at a clearly shocked Honoka, and charged again, angling his tanto to slide it between her ribs straight into her heart.

Kyo was pleased to see the girl recover quickly, though, and that her current teammate wouldn't let it phase her.

Honoka's expression firmed up, her purple eyes darkened with something ugly and determined, and Kyo felt entirely and genuinely impressed by what followed.

Honoka didn't draw another weapon. She kept her wire, wrapped it twice around her left hand, grabbed the rest in her right and went to town on her opponent.

The exchange of blows let her wrap him up loosely in the ninja wire, and when he made as if to leap back, she let him.

At the last second, she yanked on her hold on the wire, which tightened it on him all at once, but instead of cutting into his skin and possibly making him turn back into water, Honoka let go of the wire with one hand, which she raised in a ram seal.

Faster than Kyo could blink, the entire length of wire lit up with crackling electricity until the noise of it filled the room and the Kiri Genin screamed.

Still with lightning chakra surging through the wire and her opponent both, Honoka pulled a kunai with her other hand and leapt in close enough to jam the knife into his eye-socket all the way to the hilt with a wet, squelching noise.

Leaping back, away from her opponent, Honoka kept the lightning chakra going another few seconds, until the smell of burnt flesh began to permeate the room, and only then did she stop it.

Honoka's opponent was very, very dead, Kyo observed. And probably half-cooked.

“Winner, Shimizu Honoka,” Bear-Fish-guy announced blandly, sparing the smoking corpse a brief glance, before he announced the next two to fight.

Kyo took deep, slow breaths, focusing on Honoka's progress back to her side.
The girl sent a short nod at Hirata and then parked herself next to Kyo, a fair bit closer than Kyo had anticipated and she had to clench her teeth and lock her muscles to prevent herself from shifting away from her. Thankfully, a second later, Honoka shifted her arm so it no longer pressed Kyo's arm into her injured side.

Offering a small, tight smile to Honoka, they both turned their attention back to the floor to watch.

Setsuko was cut down by her opponent's sword, and it grated that none of them could step in and stop it.

Such senseless killing.

Takara's Genin, the one with a poor reaction to the drug, was killed near-immediately, as well, which wasn't much of a surprised but it was-

Kyo was feeling like shit, but having to stand on the side and watch was worse. So much worse.

Gorou just about managed a win against his opponent, and when it was Minato's turn, he stepped into the ring with an utterly blank expression on his face and such cold eyes Kyo knew without a doubt he'd win.

His Kiri opponent didn't really stand a chance.

-x-x-x-

"Is tou-san home yet?" Genma asked, again, but time was going so slowly!

Aita-nii sent him a look Genma was used to getting from grandma, auntie Kana and other various adults in his life. He was pretty sure nee-san had called it 'exaspebated'.

"You said Kou was working until five, right?" he asked, and Genma nodded. "Then yeah, he should just about be done by now."

"Yay!" Genma and Ashika cheered together. "Can Ashika eat dinner at my house today?" he asked next, peering up at Aita-nii beseechingly.

Ashika was quick to follow suit.

"...what are you two planning?" Aita-nii wondered dryly, eyeing them with blatant amusement, crossing his arms over his chest and leaning against the wooden pillar holding up the ceiling over the otherwise open walk-way that went around the large building.

"Nothing!" Ashika immediately refuted, scowling up at her big brother. "Stupid Aita!"

Aita snorted. "You only ever call me stupid when I interrupt any of your 'schemes', Ashika," he pointed out, and his face was unreadable, but it sounded like he was close to laughing. "So what is it this time? Ren might actually kill me if you mess up the kitchen again."

"Ashika was gonna teach me to cook, 'cause Ryota wasn't any good," Genma told him truthfully, just like the last time it had been brought up. It hadn't been Ashika's fault!

Aita huffed, stepped away from the wooden pillar and crouched down in front of them, eyeing first Ashika and then Genma, and he couldn't tell what his expression meant.
Aita-nii was nice, though. He was friends with nee-san, and she'd told him he should go to Aita-nii if he couldn't find her, tou-san or Ryota if he ever needed an adult.

“Ashika can't eat dinner at your house today,” Aita finally said and Genma drooped. “Not until I hear your reason why,” he sent Ashika a stern look before she could open her mouth, “because you usually ask earlier than right before and I'm not actually stupid, Ashika.”

Ashika sulked, but exchanged a look with Genma.

“I wanna ask him something and Ashika could help him say yes!” Genma burst out, the words refusing to stay in his mouth even a second longer.

“Okay,” Aita said slowly, looking between them again, and then sat down on the floor in front of them with a heavy sigh. “Ask what, and how would Ashika be able to change Kou's mind?”

Genma sent Ashika an uncertain look. It had been supposed to be a secret, but...

Ashika pursed her lips, crossed her arms in front of her chest but did plop down to sit, too, so Genma did, as well.

“I'm six,” she said bluntly. “I'm starting the Academy, but Genma is five.” She glared at Aita-nii, though Genma wasn't sure why.

Ashika glared a lot at other people sometimes, though, so it was fine, even when he didn't get it. She glared at him, too, from time to time, but nee-san had said that people who were sad didn't always mean to be mean.

And she always said sorry after.

“I think I get it,” Aita muttered, rubbing at the side of his head for a moment, mouth twisting strangely before he shook his head. “If you want to ask your dad about starting the Academy sooner, that's perfectly alright, Genma,” he began, and both Genma and Ashika perked up, “but that's not something Ashika should be present for.” He shook his head again. “You're both too young to go for emotional blackmail,” he muttered under his breath, though Genma wasn't sure what that meant.

“But I want to go!” Ashika instantly objected. “I've been before and it was fine! You said it was fine!”

“And it was, because Kou knew you were coming over and knew what to expect,” Aita returned calmly.

Genma discreetly edged away from Ashika a little, because her face was getting red and she was loud when she was angry.

“Why can't she come this time, though?” he asked, before Ashika could get started.

“Did you ask your dad if she could come for dinner?” Aita-nii turned to eye him knowingly and Genma felt his shoulders slump. “That's why. Do you want me to walk you home, Genma?”

“I'll go by myself,” he sniffed, exchanging another look with Ashika, who's face was still flushed and her eyes were dark when she turned back to glower at her big brother. Genma hesitated a brief second. “I can still come play tomorrow, right?”

“Yeah, sure,” Aita muttered, eyeing Ashika like he knew exactly what was going to happen when Genma was no longer there. “You asked about the park?”

“Okay,” Aita said slowly, looking between them again, and then sat down on the floor in front of them with a heavy sigh. “Ask what, and how would Ashika be able to change Kou's mind?”

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“We're gonna go play with Genma's other friends,” Ashika said, very firmly.

Aita-nii sighed. “See you tomorrow, Genma-kun.”

“Okay. Bye, Ashika,” he said and got to his feet to run to the hallway and get his shoes.

Genma had barely rounded the first corner before Ashika's voice rose in a furious shriek and he had to wince, glad she wasn't screaming at him. It always made his ears hurt if he was too close.

“I'm home,” Genma called into the apartment, feeling a little disgruntled at not having Ashika with him, but mostly nervous. “Tou-san?”

“In the kitchen,” tou-san called back, and he could hear something clatter against the stove top.

Genma hurried to kick off his sandals and had taken several steps before he remembered he should put them together properly, and hurried back to do that, because if he maybe was a super good boy, then tou-san would say yes even if Ashika wasn't here.

“Did you have fun today?” tou-san asked when he came bounding into the kitchen, sending him a look and a smile over his shoulder.

“Yup! Loads of fun,” Genma grinned, “Ashika showed me her new brush and we made lots and lots of drawings!”

Oh, no, he'd forgotten to bring his drawings home with him.

Staring in horror up at tou-san for a second, Genma wondered if they'd still be there tomorrow. He'd wanted to show tou-san! And Ryota! And nee-san, when she came back, even though he was still angry with her.

She hadn't been home in forever.

She'd said she'd be back soon, but she'd lied. And it wasn't nice to lie! Grandma said so!

“Dinner's ready soon, so go wash your hands,” tou-san said, making him jump.

“Oh, yeah? And why's that?” tou-san asked, sounding entertained.

“Because you're a Jounin, and that means you're the best,” he returned without hesitation.

Tou-san gave a soft snort and then laughed, serving up portions and putting them on the table, before he sat down in the seat across from Genma's. “Is that so? Then what about the Hokage?”

“He's the boss, and that means he sends you on missions, but you're still the best,” Genma said
seriously, picking up his chopsticks and carefully placing his fingers just so. “Tou-san,” he continued, halfway through dinner.

“Mm?” tou-san hummed, throwing him a glance.

“Can I go to the Academy?”

Tou-san put down his chopsticks to look at him properly, head tilting a little in thought. “Any particular reason?” he asked. “You've never made any indication you've wanted to start earlier, before.”

Genma pursed his lips and scrunched up his face, trying to make sense of that. “None of my friends were going, before,” he settled on, leaning against the table to peer up at tou-san. “Ashika’s starting and we wanna go together.”

Tou-san hummed again. “It would mean more training, classes, getting homework, reading a lot and you can't play whenever you want,” he said.

“I know that!” Genma and Ashika had talked loads about the Academy!

Tou-san huffed. “It would be a lot more responsibility than what you have right now,” he pressed. “Some of it will be boring.” He raised an eyebrow at him.

Genma scowled. “I'm five,” he reminded loftily, “I'm not a baby.”

Tou-san smiled lop-sidedly. “Starting the Academy would also mean we'd have to talk about other things,” he continued to muse.

Genma blinked. “Like what?” This was a pretty simple thing, if you asked him. He wanted to be in the same class as Ashika, so that meant he'd start the Academy. Easy. If some of it really did turn out to be boring, then that was alright, because he'd at least have Ashika there.

“You know what your sister specialises in, right, Genma?”

“Poisons,” he returned right away, because he knew that! He sent tou-san a weird look.

Tou-san nodded once. “Starting the Academy might mean you should start learning from Kyo as well,” worry flickered across his face for a second, but Genma missed that, “and that adds up to a lot of work for you.”

Genma frowned. “Nee-san's gonna teach me?”

“That's always been the plan,” tou-san sighed. “It's because of the clan you come from; it's almost like a kekkei genkai.”

“I have a kekkei genkai!” Genma abruptly sat up straight, eyes wide. Why hadn't anyone ever told him?

“Not quite,” tou-san huffed out a wry laugh, “but it's a special ability unique to you and Kyo, and you'd have to convince her to teach you.” He sent him a smile.

Genma frowned. “But nee-san never lets me close when she does the plant thing,” he complained, crossing his arms in front of his chest. It was unfair; nee-san always put everything away when he came home and she'd been doing the thing! Even when it looked really cool.

Tou-san hummed. “She tried to start teaching you once, when you were little,” he said. “It didn't go
so well, and she's scared the same thing will happen again.”

“She did?” Genma blinked. “When?” he demanded to know. He didn't remember anything like that! It was silent for a second. “Does that mean I can start the Academy with Ashika or not, tou-san?” Genma asked irritably, because none of this was going as he had been imagining.

“If you're certain you want to, then alright, I'll sign you up,” tou-san said evenly. “But, Genma, if it turns out you can't keep up with the other children, or you think it's boring and don't want to do the work, then the Academy sensei can keep you back a year and they have last say.”

Genma frowned, trying to make sense of that.

He heaved a heavy sigh. “I know that, tou-san,” he huffed. “I'll work hard and I'll become an awesome ninja like you and nee-san!”

Tou-san smiled at him, but he looked distracted. “Now finish your dinner, Genma.”

“Oh kay!”

Ashika was gonna be so happy when he told her it worked! Even though Aita-nii had ruined their plan, it had worked anyway! Tou-san was the best.

-x-x-x-
Chapter 79

Chapter Summary

Kyo wants to be done

Chapter Notes

The second part of my Christmas gift! Enjoy! ^^

Almost there.

Kyo could see the gates out of Kiri and she had to resist the strong urge to just make a run for it.

She wanted to leave and go home. Finish this awful mission and be done. She wanted to go home and just... not have to constantly worry about being found out, cover blown, captured and the horrible things her mind conjured up after that point.

The fights were done with, she'd won her Chuunin promotion, and could they just leave now? Please?

Ameyuri kept dragging things out, though, eyeing Hirata with progressively more thinly veiled hostility, and Kyo was sure they were trying to find any proof of guilt, because she and the Kiri shinobi knew someone had been poking around where they didn't belong, but she could only feel grateful that the woman wasn't turning that kind of attention on her.

Kyo wasn't sure she'd be able to deal with that on top of everything else.

Every breath burned and that was when she stood still. Walking was a whole other experience, but at least that would mean they were making their way home, so she'd take that over this.

Her hand... Kyo would rather not think about it.

The dull throbbing from her shoulder paled in comparison and she barely registered it in between the two other points of pain on her body and Hirata finally stepped away from the desk, and that would hopefully mean they'd finished sorting out the paperwork.

Kyo sent a glance at Jiraiya, who'd looked grim and unamused for a good long while, now. And he had very pointedly not stepped away from their group.

“Are you okay, Aiko-chan?” Honoka asked mutely, sending her a look.

“Fine,” Kyo returned, managing a faint smile. “Just wanna go home,” she added, because that was true and she was allowed to share that much.

Just a little longer.
“Alright, let's go,” Hirata grunted, very clearly keeping part of his attention on Ameyuri, even though he'd turned to face them. “We're done.”

“Until next time,” Ameyuri all but sang, trailing after them when they walked out the gates, and she sent them all a wide grin that looked to be full of dark promise.

Kyo could honestly say she'd be perfectly content to never so much as see Ameyuri from a distance again. That would be nice, actually.

They followed the same road they'd taken on the way there, and it was a tense walk. Kyo was more than certain they were followed and watched closely every step of the progress they made.

It made her all the more aware of the fact she couldn't do anything to give up the game now. Not when they were so close to actually getting away.

Kyo wasn't feeling well, but she stubbornly struggled with every scrap of energy and focus she had to project a picture of a discouraged, frightened girl in some measure of pain. Nothing more, nothing less.

She could do this. Just a little bit longer.

They made it off the main island without incident, and Kyo very determinedly kept her gaze on Honoka's back for the entire run across the ocean to the next island. If she focused all of her attention on Honoka's back, keeping the exact same distance, and keeping pace, then there was less energy to think of other things.

Like the water beneath her feet, the hidden Kiri escort she was sure was still there, or the fact breathing was more painful than it should be.

Her hand was just one big knot of burning agony and she tried to move it as little as possible, assured that anything off about her posture could be blamed on her shoulder. She really should get Minato something nice as thanks when they got back home.

He'd done her a bigger favour than she thought he realised.

This would suck even more if she couldn't blame some of her actions on a messed up shoulder. If she'd been forced to pretend to be perfectly fine, she might just have sat down and cried a while back.

Seeing as their destination this time wasn't an enemy village, they kept a much higher tempo and didn't stop for any breaks.

Kyo was fairly sure the plan was not to stop until they crossed the border to the Land of Fire and they were finally back on their own home turf.

Time blurred for a while, because it was easier to focus on taking the next step, leaping from one wave to the next, and then back to more familiar terrain of trees. Hours blended together.

At least she didn't have to act when she was running.

They didn't stop until they reached the Land of Tea and Kyo didn't know if she was grateful or not when she stopped moving.

On one hand, no more running. On the other... there was now less to concentrate on and distract herself with.
“Sit,” Hirata ordered her irritably, still on high alert, and yeah, Kyo hadn't been keeping any kind of attention on their surroundings for a while. She wasn't even trying to keep up the pretence.

Instead of arguing, Kyo sat down in the patch of grass she had previously been standing on, too tired to do much of anything else.

She hadn't been sleeping much in the last few days.

Or the last few weeks.

Hm. And all of her was far too painful to do more than absolutely necessary.

Kyo blinked dazedly when Hirata sat down next to her, but didn't dwell on it other than to let herself tip to the side until she was leaning against Hirata's arm and promptly fell asleep.

Hirata woke her up by pressing a rations bar into her good hand and proceeded to stare flatly at her until she sluggishly ate it.

She didn't feel like she had slept at all, even though she rationally knew she had.

Kyo was stiff and cold when she gingerly sat up and she'd genuinely focus on anything other than her own self right now.

So she ate the rations bar, drained her canteen. Hirata plucked it from her fingers and tossed it at Honoka to fill when she was done, and Kyo stared at her hand for a long moment, wondering where the hell her canteen went.

“Oi, Takara, take a look at the kid's shoulder,” Hirata said, directing his words at the Aburame Jounin and by the time Kyo had digested his words, the Jounin in question was already crouching in front of her.

They placed one hand on Kyo's injured shoulder, and then there was blessedly numbing chakra flooding her system.

Giving a small, relieved sigh, Kyo blinked and focused more properly on the person in front of her, taking in more of Takara's face.

There was a small frown pulling their eyebrows together, growing more pronounced the longer they kept at it, and Kyo stubbornly refrained from shifting her seat uncertainly. She didn't glance questioningly at Hirata, either.

Were they still being watched? She didn't know.

“Okay, wrap it up, we gotta go,” Hirata declared a minute later.

Takara dutifully finished and straightened up to their full height. They did send Hirata a brief look, but didn't comment.

“Aiko-chan?” Honoka spoke softly and crouched down next to her, holding Kyo's water canteen in one hand. “You okay?”

“Fine,” Kyo muttered, gratefully accepting her filled canteen back. Attaching it to her belt with one hand proved to be a bit tricky, but she managed on her third try.
Honoka eyed her dubiously, but refrained from commenting. Instead, she offered her hand to help her up.

Kyo gave her a grateful nod and for the first time looked around.

The other Genin didn't look to be in excellent condition, either, but Kyo was probably the worst off. Whether they realised it or not.

Though... one of Takara's remaining two kids looked like he might have her beat, on a second look.

Not that it was any sort of competition, but Kyo was feeling pretty sorry for herself.

“Let's go, then,” Jiraiya said, and that was that.

More running.

They'd crossed over into Fire Country and Kyo had been contemplating the issue for a while. The Kiri shinobi had to have stopped following them now, right?

Would they really stalk them all the way back to Konoha's doorstep?

Her musings were brought up short when her foot slipped, and instead of landing on the next branch over like intended, Kyo was too out of it to be quick enough to save the situation with chakra, and thus dropped like a stone.

Ow.

Ow.

She didn't actually need to breathe, right? Breathing must be optional, Kyo mused, cheek pressed against grass and dead leaves, and as soon as her lungs started working again, she was sure she'd be able to smell the moist earth beneath. Close enough to taste it on her tongue.

The pain wasn't really fading, she contemplated faintly a long second later.

Kyo gathered herself enough to push herself onto her side, and off of her left hand, which, paradoxically, hurt even more for a second, before the shrieking agony radiating up her arm slowly calmed to a dull, hot throb.

Ow.

“Kyo!”

Oh, no, that was the wrong name.

“Don't touch her, brat,” Hirata grunted and from the sound of things, picked Minato up and set him down further away from her. “You still alive, pipsqueak?”

“Owwww,” Kyo groaned. This was utterly pathetic, but she didn't care. She didn't feel very good, and this wasn't helping.

“Stop being so dramatic,” someone, Minato's teammate, what had his name been again? scoffed impatiently. “It's a cut in the shoulder, come one, get up, I wanna go home. You're not the only one hurting.”
“Genin need to shut the fuck up,” Hirata said evenly and crouched down beside her, carefully rolling her over onto her back. “Anything got worse?” he asked curiously, poking absently at her shoulder, though she didn't know if that was just for show or because it had opened up again.

“Can’t tell,” Kyo pressed out, and she’d closed her eyes at some point.

Hirata slapped her cheek semi-gently. “Come on, let’s get you somewhat upright so we can get a look.” And he looked grim when Kyo finally cracked her eyes open to look at him.

She flicked a glance at the others, who were standing around and waiting with varying levels of impatience and or worry.

“Cover's kinda blown already, kid, and we lost our escort a while back,” Hirata informed her blandly with a shrug. “Takara, get your ass over here,” he continued in a louder voice, not pausing in the act of divesting Kyo of her lilac shirt-tunic-thing.

Getting her hand through the sleeve made her grimace.

Contemplating if she really wanted to take a look, Kyo ended up glancing down on herself anyway and yep, her bandages really needed to be changed, even disregarding the blood that had soaked into them.

And Hirata was still prodding her experimentally.

“If you don't stop that right now, Hirata, the moment we're back home, I will find a way to kill you,” she informed the man tightly.

Hirata barked out a laugh. “Sounds interesting!” He grinned. And he poked her again.

“Oh, fuck you,” Kyo hissed, batting half-heartedly after his hand with her good one.

Hirata snorted and gave her a dry once-over. “You're a bit young for me, no matter how you look at it.”

“Shut up before sensei kills you for me,” Kyo muttered sourly back.

“Which one?” Hirata sounded curious.

“Both of them.” Because Jiraiya was standing a short distance away, staring at Hirata like he was currently contemplating cold-blooded murder, and she'd like to think Katsurou-sensei would have been feeling similar feelings if he’d been here.

“Hirata, just move,” Takara sighed, and Kyo didn't know them well enough to tell if they were exasperated in general or just tired of the delay.

One of Takara's kids very clearly needed a hospital. Soon. And all of the kids were exhausted and had scrapes and cuts of various kinds.

“Sorry for the bother,” Kyo offered blandly, blinking dazedly.

Takara hummed and placed a hand first on her shoulder, before they went on to her side, and Kyo had to bite back a wince. “I need to change your bandages,” they declared a moment later, and Kyo sighed.

Yeah, she'd already gathered, but that didn't mean she particularly looked forward to the experience.
“Go for it,” she said evenly.

Takara eyed her a moment, from behind their sunglasses, and then gave a brisk nod and set to work.

Kyo closed her eyes and focused on her breathing. Keeping it deep and steady when Takara unwound the bandages Hirata had wrapped her up in the day before. Pulling away the compresses, which were half-stuck.

Someone hissed.

“What did you do, Kyo?”

Kyo peered blearily at Minato, and while he offered a nice distraction, she couldn’t actually answer his question.

“Oh, you know. Nothing.”

“As if we’re supposed to believe that,” the other boy, hadn’t his name been Gorou? muttered darkly, scowling suspiciously at her.

“Okay, that’s enough,” Hirata drawled, sending the two boys a look that was more than quelling. “Brats should mind their own fucking business.” He turned back to Kyo and Takara. “Rush it, and we’ll leg it back to Konoha.”

Takara sent Hirata a sharp look, but it made sense. Kyo probably needed a proper medic, anyway, and she wasn’t the only one.

“Very well,” Takara said shortly and quickly and efficiently got on with business.

Which hurt more, but they got done faster.

Kyo focused on her breathing.

“A shirt, kid. This one’s pretty much ruined,” Hirata huffed the moment Takara was done, and the both of them knew nothing had been done with her hand, but they really needed to keep moving.

“Here,” she muttered, tossing him one of her sealing scrolls.

Hirata snorted, but unsealed it for her and helped her get fully dressed again. “Enough of a break, we need to move,” he said, unceremoniously picking Kyo up and putting her on his back.

Kyo gratefully relaxed against Hirata’s shoulders.

“Kyo,” Minato said again, and he really needed to stop that. She fixed him with an unamused look, and his expression twisted with guilt. “I’m so sorry.”

Kyo stared incomprehensibly; she didn’t get the feeling he was talking about using her real name, because he’d done it several times by now.

His gaze flicked to her shoulder.

Oh.

Kyo managed a weak, distracted smile. “Don’t apologize for that,” she mumbled, feeling her eyes droop. “I meant for you to do that, so thanks, really.”
Kyo was too tired, and on the brink of falling asleep, not to mention she was pretty sure she had a fever, so she missed the expression that flickered across Minato's face in response.

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The rest of the journey back was more an indistinct blur to Kyo than anything else. She spent most of it dozing on Hirata's back, and she was so grateful she didn't have to run she would have given him a proper hug if she thought he would at all appreciate it.

Hirata nudged one of her legs when the gates were in sight and Kyo stirred sluggishly.

He'd given her enough time to wake up somewhat properly by the time they were once more within the safety of Konoha's walls.

“Honoka!” someone called, which was followed by a teenaged boy leaping down to the ground to meet them.

Honoka took one look at what must be her teammate and burst into tears, which was probably answer enough as to what must have happened to Rikuto. Which reminded her.

“Put me down a moment, Hirata,” Kyo muttered, because this was something she had to do.

Hirata slanted a wryly amused look at her over his shoulder and by the time he had complied and Kyo was on her feet, the Kurama Jounin had joined his two students, looking grim.

“Kurama-san,” Kyo said, drawing attention to herself. She didn't bother with playing Aiko-chan, because she couldn't see a point. Minato had already revealed her real name and the rest would come out soon enough to anyone who looked hard enough. Her left hand felt sort of numb now, which was probably not very good, but yeah. Soon. “Here,” she said, holding out the body-scroll holding Rikuto's corpse.

Honoka produced a small, wounded noise and covered her face with her gloved hands.

Kyo sighed sadly.

The Kurama Jounin glanced at his student, before he reached out to accept the scroll with a silent sigh. He gave Kyo a short nod, and then turned away, far more focused on his kids, and it was time for Kyo to go, anyway.

“Hospital now, right?” Minato asked, approaching uncertainly.

Kyo sent him a thin smile. “I'll see you later, Minato,” she said, and turned to Hirata, helping him put her back on his back and then they were off.

.

Intel wasn't really a hospitable place, but it served its purpose more than adequately.

Hirata got the two of them in with minimal fuss, and Kyo was just glad for everything she didn't have to do, absently reaching up to de-activate the seal on the back of her neck.

She definitely had a fever.

But eventually, she was put down on her own two feet and faced the man who had held in part of her pre-mission briefings.
“Report,” Nara Tatsuno ordered briskly, and she didn't particularly like him, but that was of little consequence.

“Mostly successful,” Kyo informed him blandly, and with a grimace, unclipped her iryou-nin pouch from around her hips and put it on the table, and proceeded to flip it open and place all the sealing scrolls containing her ill-begotten goods on the table top next to it.

She carefully put them in a neat row, one after another, and she wondered if she ought to feel accomplished right now.

All she could feel was encroaching exhaustion and pain.

What followed was dry, monotone procedure. Oral reports. Superficial mental checks.

At the end of it, Kyo's face was tight with pain and it was difficult to remain still.

“Can we wrap this up so I can finally get to a medic?” Kyo finally asked, feeling like she was reaching the end of her rope.

The Chuunin that had been taking notes and assisting Tatsuno scoffed and sent her a dismissive look. “These protocols are important and a few scrapes and bruises can wait,” he said blandly, turning back to whatever it was he was scribbling on the clipboard in his hand.

Kyo stared blankly at him, trying to process that.

Hirata, meanwhile, had remained in the background, silent and still and Kyo had honestly forgotten he was still there. Now, however, he shifted, taking a subtle step towards the Chuunin. Then another.

“Oi,” he said flatly, “considering you know nothing about the kid's injuries, you need to keep your mouth very fucking shut about it,” Hirata said, and there was a rather disturbing grin on his face.

“Please don't pick a fight,” Kyo told him on a tired breath, more exasperated than she probably had any right to be, because this wasn't the time, but a small part of her felt rather warm and fuzzy at his ready defence of her anyway.

“Why? Asshole needs to lose a few teeth,” Hirata huffed back, not taking his eyes off of the suddenly very nervous-looking Chuunin. Kyo was apparently not the only one who had forgotten about Hirata.

“It's just gonna take longer for me to actually get to the hospital at this rate. You can kick his ass later,” Kyo muttered. She wasn't in the right state of mind to deal with this right now. Her face felt weirdly hot, while the rest of her felt cold.

Why did she have to be the responsible one, anyway? She was only eleven, and she was a Chuunin, while Hirata was a Jounin.

He clearly out-ranked her; didn't that mean it should be the other way around?

Hirata scoffed, his grin stretched another notch and the Chuunin honestly looked like a deer in headlights.

Nara Tatsuno sighed. “We've cleared everything that's most important right now. Take her to the hospital,” he directed blandly, gesturing vaguely at Hirata, because he had most of his attention on the scrolls with information Kyo had painstakingly copied down for them already. “You can fill out the written report once the medics clear your for it.”
Oh thank god, *finally*.

Kyo turned to stare beseeingly at Hirata, who huffed a laugh that sounded far from mentally stable, but she didn't care one bit.

Instead, she gratefully wrapped her arms loosely around Hirata's neck when he picked her up and relaxed.

She was done. Mission complete.

It was finally over.

Ignoring the Intel people, Hirata left, taking her with him, and Kyo was asleep before they'd left the building, too tired and too achy to struggle against the need for sleep a second longer than she had to.

By the time she woke up, her wounds had been tended to and she'd been tucked into a hospital bed.

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Chapter 80

Chapter Summary

Kyo isn't sure she's actually woken up

Chapter Notes

Today is my birthday! So this chapter is a birthday present to myself and all of you! Whether it's your birthday or not! :D Also, to every single one of you, HAPPY NEW YEAR!! May 2019 treat you well and bring you happiness~!

Kyo stared uncomprehendingly at the person in front of her for a few seconds, the picture just not making any sense in her head.

“What?” Tsunade snapped, sounding more ill-tempered than any other time she'd seen her.

Which wasn't out of the realm of possibilities, part of Kyo's mind admitted quietly, but the rest of her was sort of hung up on the fact Tsunade was.... well.

Very pregnant.

Kyo stared at that stomach, feeling mildly fearful.

For who, she wasn't sure, she just knew the feeling was there.

She could probably blame most of it on being pretty out of it, barely awake and still in more or less constant pain, if not as sharp, and she didn't feel as feverish as she had on the way home from Kiri, so it was still a clear improvement.

“Oi,” Tsunade said with an unconvincing attempt at a calm voice. “My face is up here.” She pressed out a forced smile and Kyo blinked. “What kind of stupid shit have you been up to now, brat,” she demanded to know the moment she was satisfied she had the majority of Kyo's attention where she wanted it.

“Nothing,” she'd replied before she could fully process the question, and Tsunade scoffed, flipping through what Kyo quickly realised must be her medical chart.

“Nothing,” Tsunade repeated in a dark mutter, scowling down at the clipboard in her hand as if it had offended her gravely. Kyo absently wondered if it would be worth it to try and get out of bed and escape. “That's why you came in with mildly infected burns?” she demanded sharply, tapping a finger ominously against the paper she was reading off of. “Centred around shallow lacerations, both on the left side of the torso and in the palm of your left hand, hm.” Tsunade fixed her with a glare.

Kyo blinked back. “Um.” She felt like she'd missed most of what was going on here.

She'd just woken up, and she was in no state to deal with this.
Whatever this was.

“Do you have any idea what lightning chakra can do to your internal organs?” Tsunade demanded, acting like Kyo had either said nothing, or answered in some other -more acceptable- way. “You’re lucky you’re in as good condition as you are, and you still look like shit,” the woman continued to grumble, shifting her stance until she irritably waddled around Kyo's bed to awkwardly sit down in the chair there.

Kyo watched, feeling like she'd entered another realm.

She'd died and been reborn here, it was surely possible.

“Uh, Tsunade?” Kyo asked, drawing the woman's gaze. She cleared her throat, to try and get rid of some of the raspy quality to it. “What are you- I mean, should you really be... uh, working?” she asked hesitantly, feeling confused and unsettled and glanced at Tsunade's frankly enormous stomach again.

Tsunade's frown deepened. “I'm pregnant, not dying!” she snapped, far more aggressively than Kyo felt was warranted.

“Yeah, I get that,” she said weakly. “But I was there when kaa-san was pregnant with Genma and her stomach never, um, got that big.”

Because Tsunade's stomach was... was she okay? Should she be walking around? Should Kyo call for a nurse?

“Don't you dare even think about pressing that button,” Tsunade huffed irritably, face twitching strangely before she pressed a hand to her stomach with a huff. “I've already made three nurses burst into tears today and I can't stand to live through another one.” She glared at Kyo as if to dare her to comment.

The room descended into a pregnant pause.

Part of Kyo's mind perked up at the pun, but she smacked that impulse down again.

“How, er, far along are you?” she finally asked, for lack of anything better to talk about. This was a far better subject than her mission, or how she got her injuries.

Tsunade pursed her lip, studying her almost suspiciously a second, before she put down Kyo's medical chart on the mattress down by her feet. “Thirty two weeks pregnant with twins,” the woman all but grunted, leaning back in her seat and soothingly rubbing her stomach like kaa-san had done when Genma had kicked a lot. “Which is not the same as to say I'm suddenly invalid and useless and should just lie in a bed all day and stare at the wall until I loose my mind,” she hissed, and there was clearly a lot of pent up aggression and frustration there.

Kyo gave a slow blink.

That... sounded like a terrible idea. Who came up with it? It clearly wasn't working.

“And it's not like I'm the most skilled fucking medic in this entire building,” Tsunade continued with venom. “I know my limits and I scan my babies often enough I know exactly how healthy they are and how careful I have to be and if one more person tells me to go lie down, I will.” Tsunade's voice devolved into a wordless hiss and Kyo felt kinda relieved she wouldn't have to hear exactly what she'd do, because she'd probably have to report that to someone, and that sounded like far more work than she could stomach right now.
“Why aren't you doing research or something?” Kyo asked confusedly, waving her good hand in a weak, vague gesture.

“I was banned from my lab!” Tsunade growled. “And then I tried to settle for paperwork, but that, too, is apparently too strenuous for my fragile state and sensibilities!”

Kyo was starting to fear for the chair Tsunade was sitting in, because the woman had grabbed one of the arm-rests and it was creaking worryingly under the strain of her grip.

They sat in silence for a moment, because Kyo had no idea what to say, or do, or react in general, to this.

Kyo and Tsunade still didn't really know each other.

“At least you,” she hesitated, before pressing on, “don't have very long left?” she offered, hoping it wouldn't backfire.

“A month,” Tsunade huffed, clearly disgruntled. “I already love them, but they sure are taking their sweet time.” And she glared down at her stomach, for just a second.

Kyo blinked again, wondering if maybe she hadn't really woken up, because this felt far too surreal to be actually happening. Some kind of fever-dream sounded more likely.

Tsunade heaved a heavy sigh, drawing her attention again, and Kyo witnessed as seemingly all the air -and fight- drained out of the woman as she slumped in her seat.

Kyo wasn't sure she liked this any better than the righteous fury.

The woman raised a hand to her face to cover her eyes. “I can't believe I'm unloading all my complaints on an injured child,” she muttered, more to herself than Kyo, she was fairly sure. Tsunade sighed again, before she took a deep breath and straightened back up, fixing Kyo with an attempt at a professional mien. “Whoever fixed up your hand seems to have done a decent job of it,” she continued, as if she hadn't just had a minor breakdown, but Kyo was perfectly happy to play along.

“That's good,” Kyo sighed, watching Tsunade reach out to place her hand over her left one, her chakra somewhat familiar by now as it washed over the limb.

Soothing the ache.

Kyo closed her eyes with an appreciative hum, and before Tsunade was done, she'd fallen back asleep.

Tsunade seemed to have made Kyo her project, but that was fine. Kyo slept through most of her check-ups, anyway, and it wasn't like there was anything to complain about with the best medic in the country devoting her full attention to her recovery, pregnant and hormonal or not.

Kyo had a lot of sleep to catch up on.

Her next visitors were less confusing, though, which was something of a relief.

“Nee-san!” was all but screamed happily from the door and Kyo was roused from her current doze.

Doing nothing and just relaxing was wonderful.
“Hi, Genma.” She smiled, turning her head and spotting not just her brother, but Aita and Ashika, too. “Hey.”

Aita eyed her concernedly a second, before he offered up a friendly grin and continued into the room, carrying one child under each arm, like they were logs or sacks of rice or something.

“It's getting way too complicated to visit you, Kyo,” Aita told her amicably, walking around her bed to sit in the chair Tsunade had tended to use over the course of the last couple of days.

“Might have to do with the hormonal medic that's adopted my case,” Kyo muttered, and covered a yawn with her hand.

Was it weird to think of herself as one-handed right now? Because she didn't even want to try moving her left hand until Tsunade told her she could.

“You should stop going to the hospital, nee-san,” Genma told her seriously, frowning at the bandages on her hand for a moment.

Kyo snorted out a laugh that was far too painful to keep up for more than a couple of seconds and sent her little brother a fond look. “Yeah, I probably should,” she agreed. She shifted gingerly. “So what have you been up to while I was gone?”

“Oh no,” Aita said amusedly, which was as much as he had time to get out before both Genma and Ashika opened their mouths.

“We're gonna start the Academy!” they chorused triumphantly, exchanging a smug look across Aita's lap.

Aita sighed. “Yeah, that.” He rolled his eyes. “Let's see if you're as smug when you actually start. I don't wanna hear any complaining about boredom or homework.”

Kyo stared neutrally at Genma as she tried to wrap her head around that.

Her first impulse was to state the obvious: Genma was five. He shouldn't start until next year. When he was six.

But that would be utterly hypocritical of her, wouldn't it? Even though Kyo hadn't actually ever asked to start the Academy... it had been a decision made for her, and she just hadn't seen any reason to object.

“Nee-san, can you teach me about poisons?” Genma fired off next, staring at her with all but sparkling eyes. “Tou-san said you would, but that I had to ask, and I didn't know you would teach me! We have a kekkei genkai!?” He looked like he might be about to start shining with excitement.

Ashika pouted. “I have a kekkei genkai, too,” she insisted.

Kyo and Aita exchanged a look. “Technically, none of us have kekkei genkai,” Kyo pointed out with a weary smile.

Genma and Ashika looked equally unhappy with her contradiction.

“Yeah, nothing as fancy as that, I'm afraid,” Aita joined in, sending the two kids a smirk. “And I don't know how much of a skill eating things really is,” he added teasingly, sending Genma a faux-superior look.
Genma gave an outraged gasp, and Kyo couldn't help but laugh, no matter how much the action hurt.

“Stop bullying my brother, Aita,” she told him, gingerly placing her hand over the healing cut on her side. “And yeah, I can teach you,” she continued, turning back to her brother. “But you have to decide if you want to try now, or wait a while longer, because not all of it's fun.” She eyed him seriously. “It's gonna hurt, and you'll feel sick and awful for parts of it, and you have to listen to my words very carefully, because people die if you handle this wrong, Genma.”

Aita grimaced and sighed, put Ashika more properly on his lap and then lifted over Genma so he could sit at the foot of Kyo's bed.

“Okay, nee-san,” Genma said with an eager grin.

“And I don't just mean when you feel like it,” she pressed, because this was important. “You have to listen to and follow my orders. About all of it, all the time.”

If he couldn't do that, then it wouldn't matter how much Genma asked.

“I will!” Genma chirped, but she'd see for herself once they got started.

Kyo should talk to tou-san about this, too. Hear his thoughts about it. She eyed her brother another second and then shifted subject with a sigh. “Anything else interesting happen?”

“Genma and Ashika aren't allowed to go to the park without adult supervision,” Aita informed her blandly. “Because it's not alright to beat up civilian children,” he added pointedly, fixing Ashika with a look.

Ashika crossed her arms over her chest and sulked.

“But he was mean, Aita-nii!” Genma immediately fired back, coming to his friend's defence and frowning at the older Uzumaki.

“Doesn't matter,” Aita sighed, and it was clear they'd talked about this several times already.

“It's all about moderation,” Kyo said, drawing both of the kids' attention, even though they looked confused at her choice of word. “It's not okay for me to stab someone just because they're not polite to me, especially if I'm a shinobi and they're a civilian,” she tried again.

“They should be nice,” Ashika sniffed.

“Maybe,” Kyo agreed wryly. “But you can't kill people every time they disagree with you, and with shinobi training, against an untrained civilian child, that might be what eventually happens if you keep it up, Ashika.”

Ashika looked largely unimpressed with her words, but Kyo could see the uncertainty and guilt in her eyes, which was enough for now.

They turned to other matters, and Kyo let the eager chatter wash over her for a while, listening instead of engaging.

“Tou-san said he was coming as soon as he's done with work!” Genma eventually said, and Kyo roused herself enough to send him a look.

“He's home?” she asked. She'd thought maybe he wasn't, since no one had visited her in the last two
days, but that might have more to do with Intel being obnoxious assholes, than anything else, now that she thought about it.

“He was gone for a little bit, but then he came back,” Genma informed her, somewhat distracted with the faces he and Ashika were making at each other. “Not like you, who were gone forever,” he added with a sniff, sending Kyo an unhappy look.

“Right,” Kyo sighed. “I was more busy than anticipated,” she muttered, more to herself.

“Speaking of which,” Aita spoke up. “Kyo, let me help you sit up properly for a little while,” he said, and got out a small bottle from one of his pockets, which he placed on the bedside table and then proceeded to help her upright.

Her side stung at the motion, but it was manageable.

It felt like she was healing quickly, and that might not be so strange, considering how often Tsunade came around.

“There we go,” Aita muttered, once Kyo was sitting up on her own, hands placed very carefully in her lap. Next she knew, there was something cold and wet on the back of her neck.

“Ah, right,” she muttered, blinking a little. She'd forgotten all about the seal. She'd deactivated it after arriving at Intel with Hirata, but hadn't given it any thought after that.

“There. All gone without a trace,” Aita declared when he was done, showing her a folded paper towel, with a smear of wet ink on it and smelling vaguely like alcohol, but not quite the same.

Kyo absently wondered what more had been added, but only briefly.

“What was that?” Ashika demanded forcefully, but she looked exclusively curious.

Ashika still wasn't showing much of her emotions other than various forms of anger, huh. Well, everything in due time.

“Aita drew on me and then forgot to remove it, so I've had to go around with his scribbles on me for a while,” Kyo told her solemnly.

Ashika blinked, thought that over, and then sent Aita an offended look. “That's mean, nii-san,” she hissed, one hand curling into a fist and looking like she was contemplating hitting him.

“Yeah, that is mean, Aita,” Kyo agreed with smirk at the teenager, who sent her an exasperated look.

“You should work on that; be a better friend.”

“Oh, shut it, Kyo,” he huffed, lacking heat. “Just lie back down before you faint or something.”

Kyo produced an amused noise, but let herself fall backwards until she was once again leaning against her soft, nice pillow.

Genma came crawling up the bed, presumably for a hug.

“Not on that side, Genma,” she told him, resisting the urge to move her hand out of the way.

Genma paused. “Is that side okay?” he asked, eyeing her right side instead.

Kyo nodded and lifted her right arm to accommodate her brother.
Part of her relished the close contact, but the other part... felt uncomfortable. Which was just silly, she told herself sternly. Genma knew to be careful with her hand and he'd been around enough injured people he knew the drill already.

An hour into their visit, tou-san arrived, and Genma and Ashika had retreated to the floor by then, where they were jumping around from square to square on the patterned linoleum.

“Hey, kitten,” he greeted, paused in the door, and then brought a chair in with him from the hallway.

“Hi,” she returned and it was so good to see him it felt like her voice was threatening to catch in her throat.

She waited for Kou to put down the chair and sit, before she did anything. “Can you help me sit up?” she asked, holding out her good hand.

Tou-san grasped it and helped her get vertical without a word.

That was enough for her to shuffle to the side of the mattress and relocate to her dad's lap.

When Kou easily wrapped her up in a tight hug, Kyo leaned her head against his shoulder and her eyes burned with tears, and it didn't even have anything to do with the pressure on her ribs.

She didn't care about that.

“You okay, kitten?” Kou asked softly, leaning his cheek against her head.

“I was really, really scared, tou-san,” she admitted wetly, and that was as far as she managed to keep back the tears.

Kou sighed sadly, breath ruffling her hair. “Some missions are like that,” he said quietly.

“It was awful,” Kyo sobbed helplessly, clinging to her dad, because he was safe. He was home, he was-

“Uh, maybe I should grab the kids and go?” Aita offered awkwardly.

Kyo took a deep breath and shook her head, still with her face pressed against tou-san's throat.

She hated crying, and she liked it even less when there were people watching, but Haname kept telling Genma boys didn't cry, and she'd be damned if she didn't set an acceptable example.

If everyone insisted on telling him stupid lies, then she'd show him what it was like and that it was alright to cry.

Because it was.

“It's okay, Aita-nii,” Genma said solemnly. “Nee-san is sad sometimes, but you just have to hug her and it gets better.”

Kyo's next sob came out together with a wet laugh.

The small arms that wrapped around her waist didn't belong to Genma, though. She glanced down and caught blurry red and she was pretty sure Ashika was scowling sullenly.

But she was still hugging her stubbornly, awkwardly. Determinedly.
“Get better,” she ordered her, too, and Kyo couldn't help but laugh.

All the accumulated stress and fear she'd been feeling over the last few months didn't magically disappear together with her tears, but the pressure in her chest lightened and eased. The lingering traces of terror and cold, clinging mists were chased away, at least for now.

The stark colour of the blood on her hands a mere shadow, rather than glistening wet, sticky and stubborn and refusing to dry.

The helplessness of watching children get killed without doing anything.

“It's good to have you back home again, Kyo,” tou-san said.

“Mm,” Kyo agreed, pressing closer to her dad. She agreed fully, and she didn't feel in any hurry to go back to active duty for at least a little while.

She'd earned herself some down-time now, right?

“I wanna hug nee-san, too,” Genma whispered at Ashika, and they switched places.

Kyo took a deep breath and relaxed.

She was home, tou-san was fine, Genma was fine, everyone was okay.

-x-x-x-

“Okay, I'm here, like you asked,” Kyo said, blinking blearily at Minato, outside the hospital, against her better knowing, and Tsunade might flip, but Minato had asked.

Kyo had been in the hospital for a week, and Tsunade had told her, irritably, that she'd get sent home soon, if things kept up.

At least the woman was professional enough she wouldn't ever sabotage her patients recovery, bored to tears or not.

Which was something.

“Great,” Minato smiled, “then let's go,” he said, turning in the direction of the closest training field, if she wasn't mistaken.

Kyo eyed him a moment, before she fell into step beside him.

A minute later, a large, white shape sidled up to her and Kyo let her right hand come to rest on Kisaki's back.

“Are you guarding the hospital?” she asked amusedly.

Kisaki gave an unimpressed sniff. “The staff gets nervous if I walk inside without a person,” she grumbled. “You're getting out soon,” she said next, and it wasn't a question.

Kyo slanted her with a curious look. “Probably,” she agreed, and turned back to Minato, who was walking silently on her other side. She still felt like there was something... off with him.

Not anything particularly ominous, just- the smile not quite reaching his eyes, and the way he kept silent. It was perhaps not entirely out of character, but the silences between them weren't usually this tense.
Kyo and Kisaki exchanged a look, but the dog knew even less than her what was up.

When they finally reached their destination, Kyo felt tired, and there was a surge of discomfort at the fact the training field was far more occupied than expected.

She wanted to ask, but Minato looked like this was exactly according to plan, and jogged ahead to greet the children hanging around.

There was a splotch of bright red, and it took no more than a glance to ascertain that Kushina was present, which... was great.

Kyo took in each of the children, but she didn't really recognize anyone else, with one glaring exception, but Minato was chatting happily with a group of them, while Kushina was interacting with a few kunoichi in something Kyo couldn't decide if it was a friendly or semi-hostile manner.

...was this Minato's graduating class?

It had been much bigger the last time she saw it.

And... Kyo wasn't actually part of it. She hadn't spent any more time with these children than the time it had taken to wait for Jiraiya to come and pick them up. That was it.

What was she doing here?

There was an Inuzuka girl standing on the outskirts of Minato's group, ninken beside her, and she eyed Kisaki a moment, then Kyo, and offered a respectful nod Kyo readily returned.

She petted Kisaki absently as she took in all the faces and contemplated the situation. Ignoring the metaphorical elephant, for now.

Had she snuck out of the hospital for a reunion she wasn't actually part of?

She slanted Minato with a look.

“Come on, Kyo,” the boy in question said, waving her over. “Introductions!” he said, with a wide smile she found to look rather insincere.

What was going on?

“Hi,” Kyo said dutifully, walking over to the group centred around not just Minato, but also Naoki, who was standing up and looking... better than the last time she'd seen him. Must have finally gotten used to his prosthetics, then.

Kisaki, lucky dog that she was, opted out of the human pleasantries and walked over to the shade to lie down in the grass.

“You weren't in our class,” someone said, eyeing her curiously, which drew her attention away from Naoki's dark eyes, scanning her and dismissing her in the same motion.

Hopefully, they could get away with ignoring each other. Kyo didn't have the energy for more drama.

“No,” she confirmed blandly. “But you saw me briefly when you graduated,” she added.

Kyo wasn't sure what was going on, but she was willing to play along if it would make Minato happy. She owed him that much.
She owed her team that much, she corrected silently.

“Oh! Right! You're that really grumpy kid!” someone exclaimed and Kyo eyed the boy briefly. “So what are you doin' here? You weren't actually part of our class.”

Kyo shrugged her good shoulder. “Minato invited me,” which sounded nicer than 'dragged me along', “since I'm his teammate, I guess.”

“Huh.” The boy sounded stumped. “I didn't actually think they did that? Mix the teams with kids from different classes.”

“My first team died, so I was reassigned,” Kyo informed him absently, still taking in and categorizing the kids, taking note of most likely abilities and skills, specializations, sorting through their chakra levels and signatures.

All until she realised what exactly it was she was doing.

Kyo froze, blinked, and looked around at the awkward silence in the group in her immediate vicinity.

“What?” she asked tiredly.

She was back home, surrounded by what was most likely a bunch of Genin and she was categorizing them as potential targets and or enemies.

Kyo wasn't very keen on looking closer at what that actually meant, not without Katsurou-sensei's help, so she focused on the most obvious distraction, instead.

The awkward silence held another second, before Minato broke it. “Was the plan to spar or something? Or just hanging out?”

Someone snorted, but grasped onto the distraction with both hands. Figuratively.

They talked for a bit, and Kyo was happy to just stand there, keeping to herself.

“Kyo?” Minato drew her attention. “You wanna join the list of people who wanna spar?” he asked with a perfectly polite smile and Kyo gave him a bland look.

“No.” Which should be obvious to him if he was thinking at all, but then again, she still hadn't figured out what his issue was, yet.

“I'm sure you could do it,” he pressed.

“Just because I can doesn't mean I want to if I have any options,” Kyo refuted dismissively. She wasn't stupid, and sparring right now had absolutely no meaning. It would serve no purpose other than to prolong her recovery and set her back days.

Tsunade might be pleased, but she might also just tear her head off. Verbally.

“Come on! We're here to celebrate Minato's promotion! He's the first of us, ya know!” someone cajoled. “You can spar a little.”

She hadn't actually known Minato had kept in contact with his class. She certainly hadn't, after graduating.

“Hey, Kyo,” Minato asked, looking thoughtful and eyeing her intently and she didn't know what he was really playing at right now. “How did you celebrate your promotion?”
“I didn't,” she said flatly and walked away. “Have fun, Minato,” she added over her shoulder, waving a hand in wordless encouragement.

Instead of interacting with the Genin, Kyo settled down with Kisaki, stretching out in the grass, on her back, head and shoulders propped up against her friend's warm, furry side.

“You should rest,” Kisaki told her softly. “I'll keep an eye on the others.”

Kyo gave a grateful hum and closed her eyes to doze lightly.

She was tired, and the walk hadn't exactly helped. Nor had the forced human interaction.

Her side was throbbing, and so was her hand.

She was roused back to full wakefulness when Kisaki gave a warning grumble.

Kushina had sat down nearby a while ago, looking irritated and giving her a look as if daring her to comment, but Kyo had done nothing more than gone back to her nap.

Kushina could take refuge from the other children near her and Kisaki all she wanted.

The Inuzuka girl had followed shortly, and the two girls had been talking quietly ever since, their voices making for a rather peaceful backdrop.

Cracking her eyes open now, revealed a slightly different interruption. It also brought her attention to the fact the kids had all fallen silent.

“Shiranui Kyo, you have a medical check-up in fifteen minutes,” Hyena said in his most professional tone of voice and she just knew he was laughing his head off inside.

“Sure,” she returned, blinking a few times. “I haven't done anything to strain myself,” she shared.

Hyena crouched in front of her, one of his hands twitching, as if he wanted to poke at Kisaki, before he controlled himself. “Can you walk?”

Kyo considered it a moment. She'd done little more than nap, but she felt pretty wrung out. “Not if we have a time to keep,” she informed him blandly.

Hyena nodded and smoothly scooped her up in his arms.

Kyo let herself be manoeuvred around without even a token protest, relaxing into Hyena's hold with a content sigh.

“See you later, Minato, Kisaki.” She flopped a hand at the both of them, and then Hyena left, leaving the kids behind to their fun to take her back to the hospital. “It can't possibly have taken them this long to have noticed I was gone,” she muttered at Hyena, who cackled out a soft laugh.

“Sneaky, sneaky Scorpion,” he giggled. “Nah, I've been keeping an eye on you for a while.”

That was really nice of him, actually. “Thank you.” Kyo yawned. “Won't get in trouble, right?”

“No worries,” Hyena gave another soft cackle, “Senju princess has the whole hospital in a tizzy. No one will even mention it,” he promised cheerfully.
Kyo smirked.

Served the idiots right when they refused to let the woman actually *do something* to relieve the encroaching boredom, and the whole situation was just ridiculous and entirely self-made.

If Tsunade got a say in her own damn situation, then it wouldn't be an issue at all, probably. Or at least far less tense.

Shaking her head to herself, Kyo pushed the thoughts out of her mind and peacefully let Hyena return her to where she was supposed to be.

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Chapter 81

Chapter Summary

Lots of things happen and Kyo's not sure about any of them.

Kyo recovered pretty quickly, her side healing up well, leaving nothing more than an angry red scar behind. As a souvenir.

She was instructed to keep her hand bandaged for extra support and protection a while longer and then life went back to normal.

Sort of.

Minato was still being a passive aggressive little shit, and she honestly couldn't figure out why.

Had she done something to him?

She'd been so busy in the last few months, she honestly didn't know when she would have had the time to mess their relationship up, but clearly, she'd done something.

Fuck if she could figure it out, though.

So instead of giving herself more of a headache, she decided to just ask.

After their first day of team training, before Minato or Jiraiya could take off, Kyo caught her teammate's arm with her right hand, fixing him with an unamused look.

“Okay, Minato,” she said, “what did I do, and why won't you just talk to me about it?” The passive aggressive act was getting irritating already, and it had barely been a week since the class reunion-thing.

There'd been several snippy remarks during the light sparring session today and Kyo was more than done with it.

“You haven't done anything,” Minato refuted unconvincingly, still smiling that fake smile at her and it made her want to punch it off his face.

That wouldn't actually help their relationship any, so she refrained.

For some reason, Jiraiya groaned and covered his face with his hands.

Kyo sent him a frown.

“Oh, brats. Time to resolve this, I guess,” he declared, grabbing the backs of both of their shirts and sat them all down in a circle for Team Meeting or something.

You know, as much as three people could form a circle, anyway.

Or did that make it a triangle?
“Alright!” Jiraiya exclaimed loudly, crossing his arms over his chest and giving them both a would-be-stern look. “Talk it out,” he ordered.

And then gestured at them to get started.

Kyo had to suppress a sigh, but did turn to Minato. “Fine. You've been acting off for a while now and I can't figure out why, so I'm asking you. What did I do, and why are you just being petty about it instead of talking to me? We're friends.”

“Are we, Kyo?” Minato asked back mildly, and it made her frown at him.

“Of course we are.” And she might have ended up saying that in an 'are you stupid?' fashion, but she couldn't help it. They'd been teammates for two years now, they'd covered this already!

“Really?” Minato fired back sceptically, but at least he wasn't aiming that empty smile at her any more. “Because last I checked, friends don't make friends stab them with no warning.”

Kyo stared blankly at him a long second, making sense of the words, because that wasn't at all what she had been expecting.

“Wait, what?” she had to ask, because this was what he was upset about? WHY!?

And she might actually have said that last part out loud, judging by the looks on both Minato and Jiraiya's faces.

This wasn't making any sense.

“You're unbelievable, kid,” Jiraiya muttered, shaking his head at her and she scowled back.

“Seriously, why?” she snapped, because she wasn't getting it.

“Uh, because it's wrong, horrible, going against everything we've ever been taught and or told,” Minato ticked off on his fingers, staring at her judgingly, “not to mention the fact that you cried, almost got killed, and I thought I had actually—” Minato cut himself off with a huff and a frown, crossing his arms over his chest defensively. Turning his head away and staring off to the side.

Kyo blinked and studied him. “Okay,” she said slowly, still catching up to this entire conversation. “I may not have considered this from your perspective, but you haven't considered it from mine, either,” she told him frankly. “Kiri pitting us against each other was honestly a blessing at that point, Minato. I know your fighting style almost as well as my own and I could use that to my advantage without risking anything more serious or, you know, miscalculating and ending up dead.” Which had been a real possibility.

“What do you mean?” Minato asked, turning to frown at her.

Kyo sighed, pulling a hand through her hair, and it felt surprisingly strange after her stint with long hair again, brief as it may have been. “I'd gotten injured,” how wasn't relevant to this conversation, “and I had to either hide it or find any other plausible explanation for my actions and body language that the Kiri shinobi wouldn't question. So I made you cut up my shoulder a little.” She frowned right back at Minato. “It was the best option I had available, at the time. And I wasn't crying because of the shoulder,” she told him.

Instead of explaining further, Kyo quickly and efficiently unwrapped the bandages on her left hand until she could hold it up in front of the two males, showing off her brand new scars.
Kyo had examined them intently already, and had slowly started to get used to the angry pink, raised
lines, one across half her palm, out from the middle to the side opposite her thumb, and the other
ones cutting across three of her four fingers, discounting the thumb.

Minato's eyes widened as he took them in.

Jiraiya, on the other hand, dropped his face into his hand with another groan, as if he was in physical
pain.

"ANBU," he complained, sounding like he had a headache.

Kyo and Minato both turned to him.

"You've told me we aren't supposed to talk about that," Minato said, eyeing their sensei.

"We aren't," Kyo huffed, setting about wrapping up her hand again and giving Jiraiya an unamused
look. "So does that clear up this misunderstanding or not?" she continued, turning back to the matter
at hand and leaving Jiraiya to his dramatics.

"You made me stab you in the shoulder, I'd hardly call it a misunderstanding," Minato said, but
actually looked mildly amused, now.

Kyo rolled her eyes, feeling relieved. "So we're good? Friends again?"

"Fine," Minato sighed. "But I'd appreciate it if you didn't do that again," he added, an expression of
depth, unsettled guilt flashing across his face, for just a moment.

Kyo felt bad for him, but she didn't regret it in the least. "I didn't do it for fun," she reminded quietly.
"I really never want to find out what a Kiri interrogation cell looks like," she muttered under her
breath with a shudder.

"Yeah," Jiraiya agreed firmly. "Let's never do that." And he was eyeing her like he wanted to wrap
her up in a blanket and tuck her away somewhere.

"Would you feel better if you got a hug?" Kyo offered, and she was only partially teasing.

"Brat," Jiraiya huffed, but didn't deny it.

Kyo grabbed Minato's hand and got to her feet, pulling him with her, and all but flopped herself at
Jiraiya, pushing him over and dragging the Minato with her, leaving both of them sprawled on top of
their sensei.

"This," Jiraiya mused dryly, "is not a hug."

Kyo couldn't do anything other than snicker into his shoulder, with Minato joining her a second later,
and Jiraiya wrapped an arm around them each with a put upon sigh.

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When they went to the Hokage tower the day after, after training, to collect their next mission, Kyo
honestly thought nothing of it.

She was enjoying the fact she and Minato were back on good terms, she'd gotten a full night's sleep
at home, in her own bed. Tou-san was home and things were pretty okay.

Instead of going to the mission assignment room like she had expected, Jiraiya turned them in
another direction.

Kyo followed him into the Hokage's office with a measure of unease, but maybe he just needed to talk to the Sandaime or something? Jiraiya was his student, for all that it was easy to forget.

She couldn't help but think of the last time she'd talked to the Hokage, though, and she really didn't want a repeat so soon after coming back home. She hadn't even been back a month!

But Jiraiya-sensei and Minato were with her this time, so it was fine.

Probably.

She was getting far too paranoid, clearly, if she couldn't even walk into a room without making contingency plans. Not to mention she was in Konoha, surrounded by allies and she probably shouldn't feel this cornered when thinking about her highest superior officer...

"Ah, you're here, excellent," the Hokage said with a smile, waving them in.

...he'd been waiting for them. Oh no. That couldn't be good.

Unconsciously drawing closer to Minato, Kyo didn't notice right away just which people were currently in the room with them.

And then Jiraiya-sensei, the utter traitor, put a hand on her shoulder and pushed her in front of him until she found herself stood on her own in front of the Hokage, staring up at the man, who eyed her with intelligent brown eyes, a small, entertained smile on his lips.

Which was just awfully suspicious.

"Shiranui Kyo," he said evenly, and despite her feelings, she straightened to attention.

"Congratulations."

And she was handed a scroll, which she automatically accepted.

…what?

Kyo might have been staring at the Hokage like she was questioning his sanity, but what was going on!?  

Instead of doing something stupid, like ask just that, she decided to look at the scroll. That might explain everything for her.

Simple.

Kyo looked at the scroll and took it back. The scroll didn't explain anything. Instead, it made her more confused.

"Why am I holding a promotion scroll?" she asked, which was probably a dumb question, judging by the amused snort someone made. She raised her head to eye the Hokage again.

Maybe she should just try to give it back?

He raised a pointed eyebrow at her.

Kyo blinked and thought over what he'd told her before handing it to her and promptly paled.
Oh no. No, no, no, this had to be a joke.

A *bad* joke!

“Uh, you can't promote me,” was what actually came out of her mouth, and she was freaking out a bit much to be embarrassed.

“Oh?” Hiruzen sounded vastly amused. “And why not?”

Kyo stared blankly at him, because there *had* to be a reason- “Isn't there supposed to be some sort of written test?” she demanded, feeling mildly frantic.

“You did pretty well,” Takeshi, resident Jounin Commander and Kyo's currently *least* favourite person said, sounding entertained.

Wait, what?

He held up a scroll and she *recognized that*.

Katsurou-sensei was a damn liar and a *traitor*, she was never giving him another hug again. New Psych evaluation test he wanted her to test for him her ass!

But no, that wasn't actually the only reason why this was a horrible idea. “I don't have enough chakra to be a Jounin,” she told the Hokage seriously, because honestly, someone other than her *had* to see what an awful idea this was. “I'm solidly average.”

“Kyo.” Katsurou-sensei, the traitor, was actually in the room and she hadn't noticed, and for once she wasn't even sure if she was happy to see him or not. “For your age and gender, your chakra reserves are actually quite generous, and definitely above average.” He fixed her with a pointed look.

That was a horrible thing to spring on her right now.

Why hadn't anyone ever told her?

Kyo turned back to stare almost beseechingly at the Hokage, who eyed her amusedly right back. “But I'm happy as a Chuunin,” she objected weakly.

She was running out of good reasons, damn it. Other than that she just didn't *want* it, and she didn't think they'd accept that either.

The Hokage leaned forward ever so slightly, meeting her gaze. “You're wasted as a Chuunin, Kyo. Congratulations on your promotion.”

She stared at him a moment, and then silently admitted defeat.

“Thank you, Hokage-sama,” she sighed, offering the Hokage a deferential bow, and then sullenly retreated to Jiraiya-sensei's side.

Someone snickered softly.

“Well, that was the most interesting Jounin promotion I've ever witnessed,” Takeshi, the ass, said, sounding almost damn cheerful. “Let's try for something similar next time, Hiruzen.”

“Ah, I'd be careful if I were you,” Katsuro said with a smirk aimed at the man. “She's your problem now.”
“Congratulations, kitten,” Ryota said, and shit, she'd missed his presence, too.

Him and tou-san both, it turned out.

Kyo stared blankly at them and then turned to exchange a look with Minato, because none of this was making any sense.

Minato stared back, looking vaguely entertained, but he also shrugged at her, as if he had no more clue about anything than she did.

“Congratulations, Kyo,” he told her, for lack of anything better to say.

“Urgh,” Kyo grunted back, before she was picked off her feet and wrapped up in a tight embrace by her dad. “Why didn't you warn me? You all are horrible people,” she added at the room at large, but gladly hugged her dad back.

“If anyone had warned you, we might have had to track you down first,” Katsurou drawled.

Ryota laughed and reached out to ruffle her hair, far less gently than he could have done.

Kou hummed softly and then sighed. “I'm very proud of you, Kyo,” he told her and Kyo tightened her arms around him in response, for just a moment, before he lowered her back to the floor. “Come on, let's go. I'm sure the Hokage has plenty he has to do,” he said, sending a respectful nod at their resident benevolent dictator.

Hiruzen inclined his head right back, watching them warmly.

Kyo ended up in a cosy restaurant that offered a decent amount of privacy.

The moment they were left somewhat to themselves, Ryota pulled her into a one-armed hug that left her feet dangling over the floor.

She pursed her lips and twisted around to look at her smirking honorary uncle. “This isn't a very good hug,” she told him blandly.

“It's only partially a hug,” he drawled back and then pointed at the table in front of them.

Kyo frowned and turned to look. And resisted the irrational urge to slump in defeat.

Because at the table tou-san was very clearly aiming for, sat not only Aita with Ashika and Genma, who were shoving each other in something that looked like it would soon devolve into a wrestling match, but also Inoichi, Chouza and Shikaku.

“It's also to make sure you don't run away,” Ryota added, sounding self-satisfied enough Kyo contemplated kicking him. “You've been a bit flighty, lately.”

Kyo stuck her tongue out at him, blowing him a raspberry while she was at it, feeling supremely unimpressed.

Instead of fighting the inevitable -because Katsurou-sensei had tagged along, and he'd find her for sure- Kyo let the man carry her over.

“Arriving in style, I see,” Aita commented and Kyo sent him a sullen glower.
“This is a conspiracy,” Kyo retorted flatly.

Jiraiya-sensei snorted and took a seat at the table, eyeing the additions with curious interest.

“I thought you got promoted?” Inoichi asked, blinking at her, and shit, it'd been way too long since she so much as saw them. She just wished it had been under happier circumstances.

Katsurou huffed and flicked her forehead protector in passing, and considering who he was, he might have just read her mind.

“This is a positive thing, Kyo. Not something to sulk over,” he told her idly, taking the seat next to Inoichi, giving her a considering look.

“No one asked me if I wanted to become a Jounin,” Kyo huffed right back, scowling at him. “Which, you know, someone should have done.” Katsurou smirked at her. “I'm poisoning all of your spoons,” she threatened, pointing at his stupid, smug face.

“No picking fights at the dinner table,” Kou sighed amusedly. “We're here to eat and have a nice time.”

“And celebrate nee-san!” Genma added, throwing his arms in the air, though it was slightly less visible than it would have been if Ashika hadn't been sitting on his stomach, pinning him to the floor.

“It's not always a choice,” Shikaku said, leaning back and eyeing her intently. “If the village sees traits they want in a Jounin, you're gonna end up promoted to one.”

“But I liked being a Chuunin,” Kyo complained. For all that she hadn't wanted to be promoted last time, either. “I liked being a Genin, too,” she added in a quiet mutter.

Ryota finally put her down and ruffled her hair again, far more gently and fondly than before. “We know, kitten,” he told her and nudged her to go take a seat.

“So how are you three? I haven't seen you in forever,” she asked, turning to Inoichi, Chouza and Shikaku, figuring that if she couldn't avoid it, then a distraction was in order.

“We've kept missing each other,” Chouza sighed. “It's been very busy.”

“Yeah, and Shikaku's more philosophical than usual lately, since he got promoted, too, you know,” Inoichi added, sending her an encouraging smile.

“Great, Shikaku and I can suffer together,” Kyo grumbled unenthusiastically.

“I don't really understand,” Minato told her, slipping into the seat next to her with a subtle glance at Genma, though her brother was still too busy with Ashika to have noticed much else. “Becoming a Jounin is a great accomplishment. Most people don't manage, not to mention that you're, uh, you know, not even a teenager yet.” Minato grinned teasingly at her. “You're shorter than me.”

“By two centimetres,” Kyo rolled her eyes, “and stop bragging, I'm sure I'll overtake you soon enough, cause your latest growth-spurt is slowing down,” she sniffed at him, not really caring, but teasing Minato was fun. “And yeah, it's a great honour,” whatever the hell that meant, “and the pay is better, but it also means far more scrutiny, responsibilities and harder and more dangerous missions,” she said, ticking them off on her fingers.

“Please don't remind me,” her tou-san requested mildly.
They were approached by a waiter, their orders were taken and it was... nice.

Halfway through dinner, Kyo remembered something and fixed Katsurou with a considering look.

“What?” he asked, slanting her with a glance.

“Lend me your Bingo book for a moment,” she all but ordered, holding out her hand expectantly, because he owed her at least that much after this whole farce, and she'd meant to ask. This was the first time she'd seen him since coming back.

“You okay, Kyo?” Inoichi asked, eyeing the bandages on her hand.

“Yeah, it just needs the extra support for a while longer,” she told him absently, still waiting for Katsurou's Bingo book. “Thank you,” she said when he placed it in her waiting hand.

Sure, using her left hand hurt a bit, but the Physical Therapy people had told her to use it as normal, so that was what she was doing.

Now that she'd finally gotten her hands on a Bingo book she trusted, Kyo began to flip through it until she found the Kiri section and curiously started paging through it, one page at a time, keeping it up until she found what she was looking for.

Kyo stared at Ameyuri's picture, glanced at her name; Ringo Ameyuri. Which meant Ameyuri was a first name, not a family name.

She continued to read, until-

Kyo snapped the book closed abruptly, feeling pale.

“What is it?” her tou-san asked, giving her a sharp, concerned once-over and Kyo looked up to find pretty much the entire table staring at her.

“Nothing?” she offered awkwardly, feeling mildly panicky again.

“That was the woman leading us around Kiri, right?” Minato asked, because the idiot was sitting right beside her, had looked in the book over her shoulder and she had thought Minato was smart.

Kyo sent him a glare and then let herself fall backwards until she was lying on the tatami floor, slapping a hand over her face.

“Minato,” Jiraiya sighed heavily in the following silence, “use that big brain of yours.”

“That information is classified,” Katsurou informed her teammate blandly, eyeing him in a detached sort of way that she knew unnerved most people.

“What,” Ryota asked flatly, and she didn't want to know what expression he was wearing.

Or tou-san, for that matter.

“But-” Minato began to say, sounding defensive and slightly confused.

“I was not in Kiri, Minato,” Kyo hissed, “and this is the second time!” And she punched him in the arm. Not as hard as she could have, but hard enough to hurt.

Minato leaned away from her, sent her a wary look and rubbed at his arm, before he turned to Jiraiya, who looked mildly constipated.
Chouza sighed softly. “We didn't hear anything,” he said smoothly, continuing to eat his dinner as if
he'd heard nothing out of the ordinary.

“Hear what?” Inoichi asked easily, not so much as blinking.

Kyo huffed, sitting up again if only so she could send them an appreciative look.

“It's not like it was a deep cover, but this is somewhat disappointing,” Katsurou said blandly, flicking
a reassuring look at her. “It wasn't constructed to be air-tight, but being outed by your own teammate
is a bit of a surprise.” He took another bite of his dinner, as if nothing at all was wrong. “And you
shouldn't read things like that in company like this if you can't control your reaction, Kyo,” he added
blandly.

Kyo felt tempted to throw the book at his face. “I was shocked, okay? I just had a retroactive near-
death experience,” she mumbled under her breath.

Kou produced a quiet noise, before he spasmodically unclenched his hand, letting the remains of his
chopsticks fall to the table, only to raise that same hand to his face to cover his eyes.

“I need a moment,” he muttered.

“Uh-” Minato began to say something, shooting Jiraiya a questioning look, and he had clearly not
connected the dots yet.

“I know your promotion was very resent, Minato,” Katsurou-sensei said evenly, “but you need to
learn to think like a Chuunin, rather than a Genin. Quickly.”

“But Kyo was-” Minato broke himself off, looking like he was contemplating shuffling further away
from her, sending her another wary look while he was at it. “Hirata-san acted like it was fine, once
we were back in Hi no Kuni,” he said.

“It's not like he could erase my name out of the others' heads,” Kyo sighed. It was so very easy to
forget that Minato was only twelve, because he acted far more mature than the rest of their age-
mates, most of the time. “And we couldn't play it off as anything else, since you repeated it several
times.” She fixed him with an unimpressed look.

Minato had the grace to look embarrassed. “I was worried for you, okay? And I also thought-” He
grimaced. “Just remember you promised to never make me do that again.”

Kyo snorted, but couldn't help but send him a fond look, before she glanced suspiciously at the
Bingo book she still held clutched in one hand.

Maybe she'd read it wrong?

Knowing her luck, she probably hadn't, she decided, and grudgingly handed it back to Katsurou-
sensei, who took it with a nod.

“What are they talking about?” Ashika asked shortly, pulling at Aita's arm insistently.

Aita hummed, looking her and Genma over. “Well,” he said slowly, “Minato needs to learn to be
sneaker,” he offered sagely.

“Nee-san should give him lessons,” Genma said seriously. “She's very sneaky.”

Kyo snorted, unable to help herself.
“Let's not encourage her,” Kou said wearily. “If your nee-san becomes any sneakier, I might just go grey.”

“I need something stronger than this,” Ryota muttered, eyeing his glass speculatively.

“Don't get drunk; save it for later,” Kou muttered back at him and then returned to the celebration with a thin, though mostly sincere smile, sending Kyo a look, his brown eyes warm but concerned.

That night, after everyone had gone home and Genma had long since been put to bed, Kyo got out of bed without a sound, got dressed and then quietly left the apartment.

Making her way across Konoha was easy, and she'd used this path a hundred times before.

“I thought you were angry with me,” Katsurou-sensei said idly, not looking up from the report he was currently reading.

“I was,” Kyo huffed, dropping down to the floor from the ceiling, ending up standing awkwardly in front of Katsurou's couch, unsure.

“What, no hug this time?” His voice was mild, and when he finally glanced at her, his sea-foam green eyes were calm and familiar and so damn steady she didn't know what to do.

“I'm still unhappy with you,” she told him stubbornly, frowning.

It was all just a mask, of course, because Kyo was not calm, she wasn't- she wasn't alright.

She was back home, but she was sorting children into classification levels based on who to kill first if the situation arose and that wasn't- that wasn't okay.

She was back home, but it didn't feel like she was herself, like she'd spent so much time and effort to desperately try and be Aiko-chan she'd somehow forgotten how to... how to turn it off.

Then there was Tsunade's pregnancy and she didn't know what that meant, and then the promotion she hadn't wanted and why was everything changing? She couldn't keep up and it felt like she didn't know what was happening half the time and-

“Kyo,” sensei said evenly, from right in front of her, and she jumped, because she hadn't noticed him moving and her eyes were too wide, was it hot in here? “It's alright, you're safe, deep breaths.”

Oh.

Kyo took another harsh breath, sucking down air that wasn't enough. She was all but wheezing and she hadn't noticed.

She did notice her heart racing in her chest and it was- scary.

It was working so furiously it almost hurt, and Kyo didn't know how to slow it down. Didn't know how to breathe.

“I'm going to touch you, Kyo,” sensei warned, and then there were hands on her, on her arms, manoeuvring her numb body until she was sitting down, leaning against something firm and warm and sensei's voice vibrated through her chest. “Try to match your breaths to mine,” he directed steadily, “take a deep breath, use your stomach, as best you can, then breathe out. Let's do it again. You're doing well, Kyo.”
And he continued to talk, not so much as pausing when Kyo's breath stuttered and failed to do what she wanted.

Kyo gasped for breath until it felt like she was going to faint.

She'd felt something similar before, but it hadn't been quite like this. Aita had been there, then, and just breathing hadn't felt like the most strenuous workout. Like sparring with Hyena in the Dark Room in ANBU headquarters when she was already bruised and exhausted and he was fresh.

Like a fight to the death, only there wasn't an enemy to focus on, no mission to complete, no directives.

Nothing to focus on but herself.

And sensei's voice.

Sensei's steadily expanding chest with every breath he took and the way he slowly coaxed her to emulate him, until every breath entered and left her lungs a little bit easier. A little more smoothly.

“That's it, doing great, Kyo,” sensei said, and even though she was still panting, it was a little less frantic than it had been before. “I know it's hard, but you can do this. A little more, let's try again,” he coaxed, and his hand was on her chest, keeping a close check on her heart-rate, if she wasn't mistaken.

Kyo let her head fall back to lean against Katsurou's shoulder.

She was exhausted.

Sweat made her hair stick to her forehead and where had her hitai-ate gone? Had sensei pulled it off of her? She hadn't noticed.

“There we go,” Katsurou breathed, inhaling deeply again. “Try to use your stomach,” he guided her patiently and she thought he might have told her to do that before, but she wasn't sure.

They sat there, just breathing.

“What was that?” Kyo eventually managed to ask, and her voice was rough. Her body felt a little bit like it had turned to jelly, but she could think again and her breathing was still elevated, but she could- she wasn't suffocating and she knew where she was.

Sensei hummed. “Panic attack,” he told her simply. “It's been a lot lately,” he continued with a soft sigh she felt more than heard, reminding her of their current position.

Kyo and Katsurou were both sitting on the floor, Katsurou with his back to the couch, with Kyo sitting between his legs, her back against his chest, and he was all but hugging her.

She let her head tip to the side so she could peer up at him and sensei glanced down to meet her gaze. His jaw was tense, but his eyes were still steady.

Always steady.

“Why didn't you tell me?” Kyo asked instead of dwelling on that information. She could do that later. Probably.

“Because,” Kasturou sighed, slowly relaxing his posture and it made her realise just how tense he'd been, “you were liable to take off,” he huffed wryly. “I informed Kou, who informed his Uchiha
teammate and your friends. I talked to Jiraiya about it."

He paused. "Because if not, then you would have accepted the scroll, filed the necessary paperwork and not told anyone. Pretending nothing had happened or changed."

Kyo took another breath, slow and tired and hated that she couldn't find it in herself to refute his words.

Because it was probably true.

"I don't want more responsibilities," she muttered.

"Kyo, you've assumed many of the responsibilities expected of a Jounin already, whether you've realised it or not." He heaved yet another sigh, leaning his chin against the top of her head. "This was a strategic decision, but that doesn't mean you haven't worked yourself up to this point on your own merit." He patted her lightly on the sternum a couple of times, and then shifted to lean back against the couch in something more relaxed, more comfortable.

Kyo didn't know what to think, not to mention say, so she said nothing.

They sat in silence, she didn't know for how long, just breathing together.

She'd come here to talk to Katsurou-sensei, but she couldn't really remember what she'd wanted to talk about any more.

Kyo shifted one of her hands until it was resting on the spot Katsurou's hand had been occupying, on her chest, over her heart, and it was beating beneath the skin and bone, still elevated, but calming down. Then she lifted her hand in the air in front of her face to stare at the bandages covering it.

"I've lost most of the sensation in some of my fingers," she told him.

"Not entirely unexpected," Katsurou hummed softly. "What did the medic say?"

"That it'll most likely come back in time, once the scars have gotten a chance to heal fully," she recounted blankly, still staring at her bandaged fingers. The medic that had talked to her had been fairly positive about it, which was nice, but it didn't change the facts. "What if it doesn't?"

"Then you'll adapt," sensei said simply. "You can learn to work around it."

"Sensei," she said bleakly, "my needles need fine precision."

"Yeah," he agreed. "Try not to worry about it until you know for sure. It might be a non-issue," he suggested wearily. "What about this one?" he asked, tapping a finger against her side.

The scar-tissue itself was numb, lacking any particular sensation, but the skin around it was sore and sensitive.

"Fine." They were silent a moment again and Kyo remembered what she'd wanted to talk to him about now. "She was one of the Seven Swordsmen of the Bloody Mist," she breathed, pressing closer to Katsurou-sensei at the words. At speaking it out loud. "I didn't know, and she nearly--" she bit herself off with a shudder, and for a brief second, it felt like the cold, cloying mist in Kiri was surrounding her again, about to swallow her whole.

Like she was back to being utterly alone.

"You succeeded," Katsurou said firmly, reaching out to carefully grasp her still-raised hand. "You
accomplished your mission, and you came back home.” He took a deep breath. “I'm proud of you, Kyo, and you should be, too.”

Kyo blinked suddenly burning eyes.

First tou-san and now Katsurou-sensei... did they want her to cry?

She wiped irritably at her eyes with her other hand, and watched when Katsurou pressed his thumb to each of the tips of her fingers.

The index finger was mostly fine; just the right-most edge felt a little bit numb, but it was barely noticeable.

The other three, though...

It was an interesting feeling. She could see what he was doing, and she could feel the pressure, but it was... dulled, and she knew she could only feel it due to the deep-tissue pressure. The skin itself wasn't registering the touch at all, bandages or no bandages.

It didn't make any difference; she'd checked.

“I was scared the entire time,” she told him. Though terrified would be closer to the truth.

“Anyone with half a brain would be,” Katsurou-sensei said. “But you didn't let it control you, and that's what really matters.” His grip on her hand tightened until it hurt, the deep scar on her palm stinging. “You did everything that was expected of you, Kyo.”

She watched him shift his hold on her hand until he could press his thumb to her palm, tracing the scar there, too, and she didn't care that it hurt.

“Do you think I would have been able to save him if I'd been a real medic student?” she asked tiredly, changing the subject slightly.

“Probably not,” Katsurou hummed after a second to pin down what it was she was talking about, putting her hand down on her stomach, since he was done with his inspection and assessment of it. “If you really were a medic student, then you'd most likely also have been a genuine Genin, and from what I've heard of the autopsy, he was too injured for that level of skill to make any difference.” And that was without taking the situation itself into consideration, too.

Ah, yeah. Rikuto had died pretty quickly, all things considered.

“I didn't like having to lie to my teammates,” she mumbled, distantly recognizing that she probably ought to sleep.

Katsurou said nothing to that, because it was just how it was. They both knew the reason, why it had been necessary. “You should go to bed, Kyo,” he told her instead. “Kisaki's been waiting for you to come back, and she'll most likely want to see you in the morning.”

“She wasn't at the dinner.” Kyo blinked blearily.

She was pretty sure Katsurou-sensei shrugged. “She declined the invitation. I think she wants to see you in private.”

Kyo stared at the far wall. “Do you think Taku would be upset with me for taking the black fangs?” she asked abruptly. “For making Kisaki my partner?”
“No,” Katsurou-sensei said.

She waited for him to continue, say anything at all, any 'because' or 'but' that would be following, but there was nothing. Only silence.

Kyo sighed. “Why is it so hard?” she couldn't help but wonder. “Everything. There's always something.”

“I think that's what they call life,” Katsurou-sensei told her and she could hear the smirk in his voice.

Kyo elbowed him weakly in the side, but it was a half-hearted token gesture at most. “Idiot,” she huffed. Here she was, opening up to him, and he was making awful jokes. “You're not funny. Stop trying to be funny.” He was her damn therapist, not a comedian.

Katsurou snorted, lifting his right arm to rest his wrist on his raised knee on the same side. “It's not pretty, but this is us, Kyo. This is part of who we are. Like this, right here,” he twitched his fingers at the room in front of them, “panic attacks in the middle of the night, tears no one else will ever see or mention, keeping religious check on your neighbour's chakra signatures. Doing perimeter sweeps of your own home. Reading files and doing paperwork when you can't sleep. Others haunt the graveyard to appease the ghosts keeping them up. Drowning sorrows in alcohol or women.” He sighed. “But it's not just bad things,” he continued into the pressing silence. “It's also trust in people you know better than yourself, watching someone's back and knowing they'll watch yours. Adrenaline and exhilaration of a successful fight, the accomplishment of a cleared mission, the security in knowing your own body, the confidence of knowing you'll do what's right for yours in a tight situation.”

Kyo listened, feeling every word in the very marrow of her bones.

“The question is,” she muttered softly, “is it enough?”

Katsurou shrugged again. “I don't know that, and neither do you. I doubt anyone does. But it's a way of life, a job, a profession that, for people like you and me, were chosen for us, by people who had just as little choice themselves, and we'll just have to do the best of it.”

“I hate you just a little bit when you say things like that,” Kyo told him blandly. “But only because it's true, and I don't have any better suggestion to offer instead.”

Katsurou huffed out a genuine though rusty laugh. “Come on, I'm too old to be sitting on the floor all night if I've got options, and we're leaning against the couch,” he said, nudging her gently.

Kyo snorted, but did sit up properly, suppressing a grimace at how wrung out she felt.

Katsurou got his feet under him first, and then helped her up fully.

He eyed her speculatively a moment, and then sat down on the couch with a huff, making himself comfortable and leaving her to decide what to do on her own.

...she hadn't told tou-san where she was going, or even that she was going to leave. But.

Katsurou-sensei picked up the file he'd been going through when she'd arrived, as if barely any time at all had passed between then and now, and Kyo lied down on the couch beside him, head cushioned on his thigh.

“You sure? There's a perfectly good bed waiting for you in the other room,” he said absently, already scanning the words on the page he'd opened to.
“Shut up,” Kyo muttered. “I'm still angry with you.”

“Got it.”

She was pretty sure Katsurou was smiling, but she didn't check.

-x-x-x-
“So we're actually getting a mission this time?” Kyo questioned suspiciously. She'd probably been scarred for life by this whole promotion incident and she wasn't in any kind of hurry to forget about it.

Jiraiya sighed. Heavily. “Yes,” he huffed. “When will you stop bringing it up?” And he had the gall to send her a long-suffering look.

She gave him a look that indicated the answer was threatening to stretch into infinity. “Well, seeing as it hasn't even been a week,” she reminded him snootily, she was fully aware. Minato was watching both of them with far more amusement than should be allowed. “I'll remind you as long as I feel is needed.”

Jiraiya sighed again.

“Which is forever,” Minato helpfully supplied, grinning up at Jiraiya.

She wasn't as angry about his part in her promotion as she was pretending, but that didn't mean it wasn't fun to annoy the man.

“Let's grab the damn scroll,” Jiraiya muttered, and he was definitely distracted. By something.

Kyo eyed him intently a moment, trying to glean anything else while they followed along with procedure, taking care of the official paperwork.

Another escort, though thankfully not for a full caravan, this time.

Meeting their client, Kyo subtly took in his appearance.

A nondescript man in his early twenties, working for one of the wealthier merchants living in Konoha, and they were escorting him to a larger town to the west of their current location, which would take them a few days at a civilian pace.

Not that it was their only task; Kyo'd seen the scroll Jiraiya had accepted, and it reeked of Intel.

She'd gotten a good taste of them now, and after her last mission, Kyo would admit she was a bit paranoid. Intel had their fingers in a lot of pots around Konoha, and any mission could come with additions.

She frowned. Now that she was a Jounin, she'd have to pay more attention to those sorts of things, wouldn't she?

Information gathering.

“Okay, you both know what preparations you need to do before tomorrow, so take care of that,”
Jiraiya told them briskly once the civilian was no longer around.

Kyo blinked and peered speculatively up at their sensei. “What's up?” she asked, because there was clearly something, and in her experience, it was better to try and stay on top of these things. Before they were sprung on her later on.

Jiraiya sent her a quick, distracted smile, including Minato as well. “Tsunade popped, so I gotta go check on them.”

Kyo stared.

Popped...

“Wait, she gave birth?” she blurted, feeling a little bit like her stomach had dropped out of her. “Isn't it too soon?” She'd thought there were at least a few weeks left?

Jiraiya nodded, which was almost immediately followed by a shrug. “Yeah, last night. So I gotta go. See you two tomorrow.”

And he was gone.

Kyo and Minato exchanged a look, because Jiraiya just sucked at the emotional things, didn't he? Absolutely awful.

“Should we go give our congratulations? Well wishes?” Minato asked tentatively, speaking as if tasting the words as they rolled off his tongue. “Send flowers?” he suggested next.

“No idea,” Kyo sighed. She wasn't sure Tsunade would appreciate it either, because this wasn't the happy occasion it might have been, because the father wasn't there to join the celebration. “I say we wait.”

“You'd know better than me,” Minato acknowledged, only to laugh when she grimaced at him. “Hey, Kyo?” They'd left the Hokage tower behind by now, and the sun was shining off of her teammate’s hair.

“Yeah?” Kyo asked, sending him a look before she went back to scan their surroundings. “What is it?”

“...could you show me where Psych is?” Minato asked quietly, clearly uncomfortable.

Kyo didn't miss a step, but she did pause what else she was doing. “Yeah, of course.”

Right, Minato was a Chuunin now. Which meant regular checks.

And that Kiri mission hadn't exactly been a walk in the park for any of the kids sent on it, not just Kyo. Mental check-ups would definitely be a good idea.

“Shouldn't you have done this before now?” she couldn't help but ask, because this was a bit in the last minute.

Minato shrugged, letting his eyes track the roof tops above with intent focus. “I've never been, and-”

There'd been their minor disagreement, Kyo finished mentally.

“I'll show you,” she promised firmly. “Want me to go with you?” she offered next, because... it did sound a bit scary, actually.
Going by yourself into unknown territory.

Minato avoided eye-contact a little while longer, before he gave a short, shallow nod.

Kyo reached out to take his hand without another word, steering them in the right direction, because they might just as well get this over with.

“You don’t have anything else to do?” Minato eventually asked, having composed himself somewhat. Enough to actually look at her without overwhelming discomfort.

Kyo shrugged. “Tou-san is working, Genma was supposed to play with one of his friends today, and the longer I’m busy, the longer it’ll take before I have to go home and spend time with Obaa-san,” she informed him easily.

It was a win-win situation, really.

“Can you tell me what it's like?” Minato asked softly next, and his grip on her hand tightened a fraction.

Kyo thought about it. “Not sure how accurate it'd be, because I've never been to Psych for a mental eval or session,” she confessed. “Katsurou-sensei's my shrink,” she added when Minato looked confused.

The boy contemplated that a moment, blue eyes grave and nervous. “Isn't that,” he hesitated a fraction of a second, “weird?”

“No really. I love him, I trust him, and he's always been there to help me when I've needed it. I like talking to him.” Even when she didn't want to talk, she knew Katsurou-sensei would be there for her.

He'd helped her so much, she didn't know how she'd ever be able to... not 'repay' but, give something back?

She loved Katsurou, and she knew he loved her back. Love was all about balance.

If nothing else, Kyo was very determined to show him how much he meant to her, and she thought she was managing that pretty well.

“What do you talk about?” Minato asked, bringing her back to the matter at hand.

She blinked and thought it over. “Feelings.” She wrinkled her nose. “Things I worry about,” she added thoughtfully, “things that go wrong, either on missions or here in the village. Off duty or on duty.” She shrugged. “Also the different traumas I've collected by now.”

Reminding her of her age and limitations, too.

“Okay?” Minato said, but he sounded confused, not to mention apprehensive and uncertain.

“Sensei put it like this,” Kyo said, turning to eye him a second, before she focused back on the road in front of them, taking them steadily closer to their goal, “he's teaching me how to take care of my own mental health, even when things get bad. He helps me sort myself out, and give me exercises to do to train up my mind the same way the physical therapy people help me build my body back up after an injury.”

They walked in silence for the rest of the way, but the next time she glanced at him, Minato at least no longer looked like he was dreading his imminent meeting quite so much.
“Here it is,” Kyo murmured, walking up to the Psych building and the front doors.

Minato's steps faltered, ever so slightly, and yeah, it looked a bit intimidating, now that she thought about it.

He mumbled something, and when Kyo sent him a look, he repeated himself, avoiding eye-contact. “Can you wait for me?”

“I'll wait,” Kyo confirmed, squeezing his fingers. “Try to think of it like just another medical check-up, only this time for your mind.”

Minato managed a brief, half-hearted smile, let go of her hand, and then motioned at her to lead the way.

Kyo smiled back and did.

The mature Yamanaka woman that ended up collecting Minato from the waiting room looked both competent and nice, and she wasn't worried for her teammate.

If she ended up asking Katsurou-sensei about Yamanaka Chie the next time she met up with him in private, then that was between them.

As escort missions were largely the same.

Slow, hopefully uneventful and definitely drawn-out.

It was more difficult to be yourself around civilians, around clients, because shinobi like Kyo and Minato tended to freak them out and be unnerving.

A slow mission right now wasn't something Kyo was complaining about, though, no matter how boring parts of it was. Not after their last mission so fresh in all of their minds.

They escorted their client, saw him safely to their destination, and then settled into the decently sized town they'd taken him to.

Kyo wasn't sure what it was called, but it was a good amount of people gathered together, and finding an inn wasn't a problem.

“Is this going to be like our mission to Tetsu?” Minato asked curiously, when they'd settled in for their first night.

Jiraiya hummed thoughtfully a moment. “Something like that,” he finally said.

They all settled down for some sleep, even though Jiraiya would only get a few hours of it before he got up to go take a look at the town's night life.

“Try not to get too drunk,” Kyo told him dryly, settling down in her futon and making herself comfortable.

Jiraiya sent her a dry look. “Remember not to stray after dark, and same rules as last time applies,” he reminded them instead of remarking on that. “I've made this room a safe base, so keep that in mind.”

“Yeah, sure,” Kyo sighed, relaxing and more than ready to sleep.
She may be a Jounin now, but this was far more Jiraiya's mission than hers’. Kyo would stick with Minato and she was more than happy with that arrangement.

“G'night,” Minato muttered, half-way asleep already, and Kyo was half a step behind him.

Three days into their stay, playing at being some weird shinobi-version of tourists or something, Kyo woke up early. Early enough it was more 'late' than 'early' actually, and for a moment, she just lay there, wondering why she was awake.

She hadn't had a nightmare, she didn't have to pee, she couldn't hear or see anything that might have woken her up.

It was dark, Minato was sleeping peacefully on the futon beside her own, and Jiraiya was snoring softly in his own bedding.

Why was she awake?

It wasn't until she shifted her position that she got her first... inclination.

Kyo slowly sat up, automatically taking care to be quiet and discreet, because her two male teammates didn't have to be awake just because she was.

Shifting again, Kyo grimaced because, yeah... this was vaguely familiar.

Taking a deep, slow breath, she silently got out of bed and had made her way to the bathroom before she could think too much.

Closing the door softly behind her and turning on the light, she got her first look at herself in the bathroom mirror.

Kyo stared at her pale face for a second, before she turned her attention **lower down**.

Yep.

There was blood.

Her thighs had been sliding together with the liquid and she'd recognized the feeling, for all that it had been quite a while.

Kyo remained motionless for a few minutes, unsure of what to do and her mind was pretty blank.

She'd gotten her period.

...it was far too soon? She was only eleven! She'd thought- Kyo had thought she'd have several more years before she'd have to worry about this!

She'd been a late bloomer in the Before and she'd just sort of assumed that would stay the same, here.

Kyo hadn't expected this.

At all.
Eventually, she took a deep breath and took off the trousers she'd slept in, mostly because she could feel the blood slowly seep further down her thighs.

It was sticky and wet, and it felt very uncomfortable for several reasons.

How to deal with this?

Kyo silently contemplated the issue while she washed out the worst of the blood from her sleeping trousers with cold water in the sink.

When that was done, she repeated the process with her underwear, ignoring the blood seeping down her inner thigh at a snail's pace.

Kyo knew very well it wouldn't go away just because she ignored it, but a girl could wish.

When that was done, she glanced down at herself with wry determination. And then set out to clean herself up too, even though she rationally knew that wouldn't actually solve her problem.

How... how did kunoichi deal with this?

If she'd been back in the village, there would have been people to ask. Because Kyo hadn't thought to ask about this before.

She'd assumed she'd have at least two years more! Maybe even three!

Grabbing a generous wad of toilet paper, which she folded together neatly before she pressed that up between her legs, Kyo wondered what kaa-san would have taught her.

She hadn't ever thought to ask. It hadn't been relevant. It hadn't- it hadn't even occurred to her this would eventually be an issue she'd have to deal with.

Kyo had known, of course. Had lived with this for the majority of her life in the before. Bleeding once a month.

Menstruation wasn't particularly fun, but it just was. You didn't get a choice, no one asked you and you then said yes or no. That wasn't how it worked.

Carefully prodding her lower stomach, Kyo pursed her lips. She hadn't felt anything like cramps, yet, which was probably a good thing.

Why did this have to happen during a mission?

But then she changed that line of thought, because this would have been so much worse if it had happened during the last mission she'd been on.

Kyo felt pale and shaky just thinking about it.

Stuck in Kiri running an under-cover mission and getting reacquainted with menstruation? No thank you.

Suppressing a shudder, Kyo still felt like it wouldn't have been an unreasonable demand to want to do this back home.

...did they have pads here? Tampons? Why had she never thought to ask about this? Or just, look around in the grocery store every now and then?
Or did they sell them at the apothecary?

Kyo just didn't know, and this was assuming they existed to begin with!

She took another deep breath, and contemplated her lack of pants. And trousers. She couldn't just stay like this indefinitely; half-naked and locked in a generic inn bathroom.

Her first instinct was to just hide this, pretend it hadn't happened, that nothing was wrong or out of the ordinary and just... keep doing what she always did.

That was what she'd done the first time this had happened to her.

...and that was just an absurd thought. People usually experienced this once and called it a day.

You know, as much as a monthly experience could be described as such.

Kyo pressed the heels of her hands to her eyelids with a heavy sigh.

She was on a mission, things could go to shit at any time; you just never knew what would happen. It might be nothing, or some unexpected disaster would strike.

Kyo had experienced both enough times in her career not to want to take any unnecessary risks.

Which meant. Which meant she couldn't try to ignore this.

Oh sweet mercy, she'd have to talk about it. With Jiraiya of all people.

Why was this her life? Why couldn't anything be simple for once? That would have been so nice, Kyo mused mildly hysterically, ignoring the sense of deep unease settled firmly in her gut.

And it had nothing to do with what else was happening with her insides right now.

Kyo pulled off her hitai-ate, put it to the side and washed her face in the sink with cold water, hoping that would make her feel a bit better.

She knew there was nothing wrong or weird about menstruating. That it was perfectly normal. But she'd just prefer not to talk about it right now. Or in general.

And she didn't know why she was like that, because her sister in the Before sure had been more open about a lot of things than most people were comfortable with.

She'd grown up hearing things regularly discussed at the breakfast table that she'd later learned most families didn't talk about at all.

She'd known how and when her then-mother had lost her virginity, how she'd met her then-father, they'd discussed bullying, school and problems. And she was pretty sure periods and menstruation had been part of it.

She'd learned about it in school, too. On several different occasions.

So it wasn't like it was an unfamiliar subject, but it still made her uncomfortable.

Kyo would just have to suck it up, like usual, and deal with whatever needed to be done. Being uncomfortable was nothing compared to what could potentially happen down the line if things went poorly.
This would be one *awkward* conversation, she just knew it.

But first; pants.

Kyo slipped out of the bathroom, leaving her clothes to dry in the very small shower that had been squeezed into the bathroom, and crept over to her things.

Getting a clean pair of pants, Kyo pulled them on with a grimace, because she'd probably bleed on those, too, before this was over, and then considered if she wanted the same fate for another pair of her trousers.

No, she decided. It was too much hassle and just not worth it.

She dithered another few seconds, before she realised what it was she was doing and felt like smacking herself.

She was a grown woman. Sort of. She'd gotten used to talking about this at one point, in the Before, with close friends and family, at least, and Jiraiya was... neither of those things, but the next best thing.

He was her sensei, her teammate.

She could do it.

Taking another deep breath, Kyo straightened up and forced her hands to stop neatening up her small stack of gear, waiting for morning beside her futon, and instead moved to sit in seiza beside Jiraiya's still-sleeping form.

“Jiraiya-sensei?” she forced herself to say, speaking softly but firmly, and her voice came out far more steady than she had thought it would.

It was at least reassuring to know she could fake confidence.

“Mm, wha?” Jiraiya grunted and twitched at the sound of her voice, only to lift one hand to rub at his eyes. When he was done, he peered blearily first at her and then at the room around them. “What?” he repeated roughly a second later, once he'd established there wasn't an imminent disaster waiting for him.

Jiraiya yawned, scratched at the stubble on his jaw and pushed himself into a seat.

Kyo watched him and wondered how to breach the subject.

“Um,” she said when Jiraiya sent her an expectant look, looking far more awake now than he had two seconds ago.

Shinobi tended to be like that, she'd found. Once you were awake, you were *awake*. Getting stuck somewhere in between tended to be bad for your health.

“What is it?” Jiraiya pressed, eyeing her with idle curiosity. “It's way too early for either of us to be awake,” he muttered, pushing some of his thick hair out of his face.

“Ah, there's- this *thing*, I need to speak to you about,” Kyo muttered, and she felt so uncomfortable it was like her stomach had twisted itself into a heavy knot.

Or that might just be the cramps kicking in, she couldn't tell.
It'd been long enough she honestly couldn't tell them apart right now.

“Okay,” Jiraiya said slowly, drawing out the word and eyeing her with a measure of more focus.

“I have a—” how was she supposed to phrase this? “a problem,” she finally settled on. “And I'm not sure what to do about it,” she added, because it was the truth, no matter how much she wished it wasn't.

“Okay,” Jiraiya said again, clearly waiting for her to continue.

Kyo bit her lower lip, feeling her face burn, and she could only be glad for the lack of proper lighting. Running off or melting into the wall sounded very appealing right now.

Her stomach couldn't seem to decide between feeling heavy as lead and fluttering nervously and she wondered if she wouldn't be throwing up before this was over.

Kyo clutched her hands together and pressed them in between her knees, rather than let them fidget.

“You're gonna have to provide me with something more than that, Kyo,” Jiraiya huffed after several long seconds.

“I know,” she muttered, and this was so uncomfortable and awkward and she could do this. It didn't have to be as difficult as she was making it. “I'm bleeding,” she told him tersely, scowling at herself, taking care to keep her voice down, because Minato was still sleeping and she'd rather not- Jiraiya was enough right now.

Jiraiya blinked and then scanned her intently for-

“Not that kind of bleeding, I'm not hurt,” she amended in an awkward mutter, frowning off to the side, because she wasn't injured. “I'm bleeding,” she told him tersely, scowling at herself, taking care to keep her voice down, because Minato was still sleeping and she'd rather not- Jiraiya was enough right now.

It wasn't making her feel better that Jiraiya was just staring blankly at her.

Why hadn't she ever talked to kaa-san about this before she'd died? That would have been so much easier!

The longer it took Jiraiya to react in any way, the more Kyo felt like she might actually cry, she was that miserable.

Having been awake a while now, she could recognize the vaguely familiar symptoms; her lower abdomen was aching dully, and she felt a bit... off, in a way she'd never been able to put a name to, but that had always explained itself when her period had finally made itself known, every month.

She could feel the paper pressed up between her legs slowly getting soaked and it worked as a temporary solution, but it was also uncomfortable.

Like- like having a pebble in your shoe you were constantly aware of, only she couldn't remove this one, or she'd drip blood all over the floor.

“Say something,” Kyo ordered with a thread of desperation.

She wasn't sure what she'd been expecting, and she'd known this probably wouldn't work out flawlessly, but for him not to say anything at all?

Kyo felt far more out of her depth than she should be, but she couldn't help it.
She knew how to deal with this in theory, but that had been back in the Before. Life had been very different then, she'd had ready supplies, and she didn't- what was she supposed to do?

Jiraiya finally moved, and she refocused on him.

Slowly raising one hand, as if she was a frightened animal he was worried about spooking, Jiraiya very slowly moved his hand, and she thought he'd meant to ruffle her hair, like he tended to do to offer comfort and or encouragement, but instead, he placed his hand on her shoulder.

Next she knew, Jiraiya had whisked the both of them away via shunshin and she was too stunned and shocked to so much as give a peep of protest.

Surely this hadn't just happened.

It felt like she barely had time to blink before she found herself stumbling to her feet in a new, unfamiliar location and she was instantly on high alert.

This wasn't their inn.

This wasn't-

Kyo took in the frozen woman staring at her, the man that had just walked in the door and the fact Jiraiya was nowhere to be seen.

The man had apparently dumped her and then made a run for it.

Kyo distantly wondered if she should laugh or cry.

“Oi, this one looks interesting,” the man that had just walked in slurred, and he was very obviously drunk off his ass. “How much?” he asked, turning to give the beautiful woman's general direction a look.

He'd already started reaching for her though, and Kyo's fingers went through the natural motion of slotting needles between them.

Only to freeze for a very brief second.

Because she didn't have her needles.

That was as far as that line of thought had time to register in her numb head before a large, rough hand closed around her upper arm, and Kyo automatically grabbed it, twisted it harshly enough the man let go with a pained howl, falling to his knees and bringing his head close enough for her to jab at the pressure point at his neck that would solidly knock him out, with or without needles.

Which was one problem taken care of, she mused blandly, letting the man slump to an alcohol marinated pile on the hallway floor.

She turned to take in the rest of the room again.

This was... surely this wasn't the kind of place Kyo had come to the conclusion it was.

Surely.

Jiraiya wasn't this stupid.

...right?
Someone please tell her this wasn't a brothel.

The very pretty, artfully painted lady who was no doubt intended to greet customers raised a dainty hand towards her mouth, drawing her attention.

“Young... miss?” she tentatively asked, looking startled and confused, but not as much as someone else of a civilian disposition might. “Are you sure you ought to be here?” she continued slowly, seemingly encouraged when Kyo didn't show any further violent inclinations, and she was actually younger than Kyo had at first assumed.

Kyo blinked. “Please don't tell me my sensei just dumped me in a brothel,” she heard herself ask blankly.

“Alright,” she said, and then *didn't say anything more, WHY!*

Kyo just stared blankly at her, because there was absolutely *nothing* coming to mind she could say.

The slide of liquid down her inner thigh jarred her out of it, and Kyo tore her gaze away to grimace down at the *stupid blood*, and it really explained things for her, didn't it?

“Oh,” the woman said softly. “I see,” she continued in an even quieter voice.

Kyo frowned and sent the front doors a wary look when she felt a pair of civilian-strength chakra signatures move towards them, and she drew deeper into the building.

She couldn't believe he'd *actually*- she wasn't wearing any clothes! Or her *weapons!*

“Young miss, kunoichi-san,” the beautiful young woman spoke up, sending her a surprisingly friendly smile, considering she'd knocked out one of their customers, “do you require some assistance?”

“Yes,” Kyo bit out, because while this wasn't the worst situation she'd ever been in, it was definitely up there on the list. “Please.”

She withstood the considering look she was given in return. “I'm sure Okaa-sama can come to an agreement with you,” she said. “Come, quickly now, kunoichi-san.”

And Kyo was ushered into the back, out of sight, through a few hidden doors and eventually found herself in a perfectly respectable office, in front of a middle-aged woman.

She, too, was very beautiful, her long black hair styled up in an elaborate do Kyo had no idea how it worked, and face carefully enhanced with a tasteful amount of cosmetics.

Her nails were painted a deep, eye-catching red.

“How very unusual,” she mused, eyeing Kyo intently from head to toe. “I must confess you're not our usual clientele.”

“I didn't have much choice in the matter,” Kyo told her firmly, not having any patience for this. “Let's get to the point, if you please.” She had a feeling this woman was sharper than most men gave her credit for. She could see it in the way she studied her; all speculation and consideration. “I'm in need of some assistance. What do you want in return for providing it?”

This seemed to be a well-off establishment, she could tell already after a very brief tour, and from the women's appearances, they took good care of their workers and weren't tight on money.
The woman hummed, looking part entertained and part approving. “Very well, then, what do you have to offer?”

Which was the question, wasn't it?

“Easy to learn self-defence for your employees,” Kyo suggested after a pause, taking the woman in and considering her options.

“My dear girl, what makes you think that's not already something I teach my girls?” the woman asked, smiling pleasantly.

Which might be a bluff.

Kyo shrugged, ignoring the blood very slowly making its way down to her ankle. “I'm fairly sure I can make whatever defences 'your girls' already have better,” and it wasn't empty bragging, “but if that's not enough,” she mused, eyeing the woman right back, gauging how much she was willing to give. “I can teach you how to produce and properly use a safe sedative.”

Jackpot.

She could all but see the woman in front of her sit up at attention.

She hummed. “That's a bold claim,” she said sedately, which was nothing more than an act.

Kyo smiled thinly. “Take it or leave it. I'm sure I can manage my situation without help if it comes to it.” Though it wouldn't be fun and she would hate every second of it.

The brothel madam's artfully painted mouth finally stretched into a genuine smile and she rose with fluid grace -though it lacked the lethal undertones of a kunoichi- and held a hand out towards a side door. “Let's start by getting you cleaned up, kunoichi-san.”

-x-x-x-
Chapter 83

Chapter Summary

The consequences

Chapter Notes

All this anger at Jiraiya is giving me life ^^

Minato hurried past another shop being opened by a sleepy-looking civilian, scanning the streets and buildings around him as best he could.

He couldn't find them. Either of them.

And even if something had happened to Kyo, he should be able to find sensei!

Minato severely doubted anyone could take down Jiraiya without making enough of a racket to at least wake him up.

Jogging down an alley to get to another street, Minato did his best to be quick without looking like anything was wrong, because panic and fear attracted attention and he wasn't sure that'd be safe.

And it was better to be safe than sorry.

Feeling like he would soon come close to having checked the whole town, Minato bypassed a bar that looked to still be open, only to come to an abrupt halt when he registered a glimpse of familiar white after he'd already passed it.

Pivoting around on his heel, he walked inside, because all it would take was a look.

Jiraiya-sensei was easy to spot and Minato was beside him so quickly he absently wondered if he might have unknowingly shunshined across the room.

“Sensei,” Minato said, relieved, worried and confused all at the same time, because sensei was here, but where was- “Kyo's missing! I can't find her!”

“S not missin',” Jiraiya-sensei muttered, struggling to fix him with a look, before he gave up and turned back to staring intently at the sake bottle stood a small distance in front of his face, where he was leaning his chin on his arms on the bar.

Minato blinked, trying to make sense of that.

So Kyo was not missing? That must mean sensei knew where she was.

He frowned. “You're very drunk,” he said, stating the obvious.
Sensei hadn't ever done that before. Not on a mission, and not at home, either, at least not where him and Kyo had been around to see.

Jiraiya-sensei snorted. “Yep,” he agreed easily, sounding vaguely pleased about it.

Minato's frown deepened. Something was going on. “Sensei,” he pressed with some urgency. “There was blood in Kyo's bed,” he told him grimly.

Not a lot, but enough for him to wonder-

Sensei made a pained noise and reached out to grab the sake bottle, only to accidentally knock it over instead. “Don't remind me,” he groaned, his chin sliding off his arm to leave his face smushed into the wooden bar top, muffling his voice. “'M not paid for this.”

Minato stared, trying to make sense of this. “So Kyo's alright?” he eventually asked, when it became clear Jiraiya-sensei wouldn't say or do anything else without prompting.

Sensei made a vaguely uncoordinated gesture with one hand that he took to be an affirmative.

“Where is she?” he demanded next, because all of this was making him uneasy and worried. There'd been blood, and then he hadn't been able to find them. All of Kyo's weapons and gear had been left in their room, and he'd even found her hitai-ate on the bathroom sink, and Kyo never went anywhere without her things while on mission. Barely did so back home!

Jiraiya-sensei murmured something inaudible, waving a hand in a generally east-ward direction.

Minato considered that for half a second, and then took off again.

Clearly, he'd have to get the story from Kyo to make sense of it.

Ducking into the fifth building, Minato felt like his face might be on fire, because there'd been a very lightly dressed lady two buildings back and he still didn't know what to do with the information.

Why would sensei point in this direction!?

Minato took a deep breath and focused on the thankfully dressed- woman seated on the slightly raised floor in front of him.

“You're a bit younger than our usual customers, young shinobi-san,” she told him amusedly, voice pleasant and almost playful.

Minato bit back a grimace. “I'm looking for my teammate,” he said, instead of acknowledging that. “This tall, short brown hair, blue eyes, close to my age,” he rattled off quickly, wanting to get this over with and find Kyo already.

“And what is this information worth to you?” the woman asked, voice falling into something he'd tentatively call a purr.

Minato stared confusedly at her.

Worth? Was she asking for money in return for telling him? Did that mean they'd seen Kyo, or just that they wanted to trick him for some quick, easy profit?

“Be nice, Ito, I told you'd he'd come around to look for me eventually,” a familiar voice said dryly
and Minato was so relieved he felt like staggering.

Instead, he turned to carefully look over Kyo, who came walking out from a discreet sliding door he hadn't really noticed off to the side.

“Kyo,” he said, feeling most of the tension seep out of him. “You're okay?”

“Yeah, fine,” she said, though there was something about the look on her face that made him pause. “I expected you sooner than this; it's been half a day.”

“I've been looking all over,” Minato huffed, exasperated more than anything else now that he knew Kyo was okay. “I found sensei first, but he didn't tell me anything.”

He walked up to Kyo, taking in her appearance, looking her over for injuries even though she'd said she was alright. Her hand was still bandaged, and she was wearing a simple yukata he knew wasn't hers.

Minato frowned.

What was going on here? Really?

“You failed to mention your teammate was so cute, Kyo,” the woman, Ito? said easily, sounding vaguely amused.

Minato's cheeks, which had started to go back to normal, heated up again and he sent Kyo a mildly panicked look.

“He's twelve,” Kyo informed the woman blandly. “And only has eyes for one person, and she's not you, Ito,” she continued, and Minato considered sinking into the floor.

He was sure he could make it happen with an earth jutsu.

“Kyo,” Minato said in a strangled voice, not sure if he wanted to tell her to shut up or beg for some sort of explanation.

“So if you had to track down Jiraiya, then what's he been doing?” Kyo asked instead of acknowledge Minato's distress.

Eyeing his teammate warily, he shrugged. “Found him in a bar,” he said. “He was drunk.”

Kyo's eyes narrowed. “Oh, was he?” she asked, sounding perfectly pleasant, but Minato had to fight the urge to edge away from her. “Interesting,” she added, in the same way you might find a trap laid by your enemies in the way of your mission to be 'interesting' information.

“Are you sure you're okay, Kyo?” Minato asked softly, shifting closer to his friend and lowering his voice. “There was blood in your bed.”

Kyo's face twisted into a very brief grimace, before she relaxed with a huff. “I'm really okay,” she promised, meeting his gaze fondly. “I'll tell you everything, okay? But can you first go and get my gear for me? Please?”

And yeah, she didn't even have her hitai-ate.

Minato nodded seriously, reached out to take her hand, for just a moment, and then ran off to get Kyo's things for her. She'd said she would explain.
He'd finally learn what this was all about and maybe sensei's behaviour would make more sense after?

-x-x-x-

Kyo had had a pretty interesting day, even discounting the whole... period thing. And yeah, she was definitely putting that whole issue aside for now.

Madam Teruyo was an interesting woman, and Kyo approved of the way she looked after her employees.

Not that Kyo was very knowledgeable about the prostitution business, even in general, but she knew it was very easy for things to get ugly quickly.

Ito and the other workers lived here, at the brothel, and they had their own rooms, were provided with three meals a day, as well as clothes, and once they aged out, Teruyo either helped them settle down elsewhere, or provided them with different jobs in the brothel or with one of her apparently numerous contacts.

'The girls', ranging between a handful of years older than her and well into their twenties, worked three weeks out of the month, and got a week off when they were 'in the red'.

Kyo could think of several worse situations to be in, and she didn't mind in the least to provide some of her knowledge as payment for the assistance she'd received.

While she hadn't been provided something as simple as pads or tampons, this was more practical and secure than her temporary solution.

A carefully made cloth pad, which had been tied around her waist with a belt-like contraption, with absorbent paper placed on the part which would press up between her legs. Which she'd have to exchange as she bled.

And she guessed it worked but it was not just uncomfortable, but also highly impractical for someone with as active a life-style as a kunoichi.

Perfectly serviceable for a woman who could take it easy in her home, Kyo didn't doubt, but running, jumping, fighting for your life?

She'd rather have a handful of tampons at hand, really.

Not that she had much choice right now, but this was definitely something she'd investigate thoroughly once she got back home.

“You done with the second batch of girls?” Ito asked idly, sending her a brief look, before she went back to studying the midday crowds passing in front of the building.

Customers were few and far between in the daylight hours, she'd been told, but it did happen that one wandered in, and thus, Ito was ready to greet them and direct them to their lady of choice. If they had one.

In the course of the day since Jiraiya had dumped her here, Teruyo had gone from a woman seeing an easy business opportunity to very subtly trying to recruit her, if Kyo wasn't mistaken. Probably
not as one of her working girls, because despite her age, Kyo was a bit scarred for that already, but she doubted the madam would say no to some extra security and protection.

There were a small handful of male members of staff, and Hana -one of the girls Kyo had been teaching basic self-defence- had told her they sometimes stepped in to remove certain customers from the premise.

Kyo also suspected two of 'the girls' were in fact teenaged boys, but she wasn't anyone to judge.

They'd all been attentive students, for all that they were all older than her. Their line of business wasn't safe, and they all knew it, for all that Teruyo did her best to take care of them.

“Yeah, most of them went to go sleep,” Kyo answered Ito's question, blinking back to the present. “Shouldn't you be relieved of duty soon, too?” she continued, eyeing the young woman, because Ito had been here since before Kyo arrived.

Ito smiled. “Nene should be getting ready,” she said.

Kyo nodded absently and turned to her other problems while she waited for Minato to come back. With her things.

Clothes. Weapons. Everything, basically.

Jiraiya had dumped her here. Only to then go and get himself drunk. While on a mission.

Inside Fire Country, granted, but that was still-

Kyo frowned. If she had been anyone else... this would have been such an enormous disaster, she didn't even want to contemplate it.

Since she'd finished with the second batch of 'girls', she had fulfilled her end of the deal with Teruyo, considering she'd talked her through the process of making a basic sedative already, early this morning.

Kyo had made a rough sketch of what the plant looked like, written down detailed instructions and everything, until the woman had been satisfied.

Which meant that as soon as Minato returned and she'd gotten dressed, they could leave.

“Will we be seeing you any more before you leave?” Ito asked mildly, pulling her out of her thoughts again, as if she'd been thinking along similar lines.

Kyo hummed. “Depends. I'm not sure how long we're staying, and even if I did, things can change quickly,” she said honestly.

Because you never knew. One moment, everything was fine, the next, someone was trying to kill you.

Ito glanced at her again, more specifically down at her legs, this time, and Kyo didn't have to follow her gaze to know where she was looking.

Kyo's legs hadn't been covered upon arrival, and she had a pretty impressive scar on her right thigh. That shuriken she'd gotten hit with on her first ANBU mission had left its mark.

“I haven't seen many shinobi,” Ito mused casually, seemingly changing the subject, “but they were always fully grown.”
Kyo snorted. “Only the lucky ones get to that point,” she drawled, feeling morbidly amused.

The lucky ones and the skilled ones. The ones with something going for them, but even the best needed luck on their side to survive, sometimes.

They ended up staying two more days, which left Kyo with plenty of time to brief Minato on everything that had happened.

He listened to her explanation with rapt attention and a tilted head, taking things much better than Kyo had expected.

Much better than Jiraiya had.

Sure, he'd been a bit awkward and uncertain, and he had apparently never heard anything in-depth about this before, but her teammate was considerate and took to the information with minimal fuss, once she'd assured him it was normal and something all girls went through.

In those two days, they'd seen Jiraiya only very briefly, and he'd made himself scarce as soon as he'd made sure both of them were still alive and had everything they needed. Barely glancing at Kyo, which was just offensive.

She couldn't wait to leave and get back home, even if it would be uncomfortable as all hell to run with the belt-pad combination thing, and yeah, she just wanted to be done with this whole thing.

Kyo covered her face with her hands. “I'm not over-reacting, right?” she asked, without looking at Minato.

“No,” he told her softly.

“Thank you,” Kyo returned, just as softly. “I love you, Minato. You're a great friend.”

When Minato failed to say anything back, Kyo tilted her head to glance at him through the gaps between her fingers, to see the boy smiling down at his lap, a slight flush on his cheeks but looking pleased.

Had anyone ever told him they loved him before? Kyo couldn't help but wonder, abruptly.

“Can we share your futon tonight? Or would that make you uncomfortable?” she asked next, before she could stop herself.

“It's just a bit of blood; we've seen plenty of that before,” Minato said, shuffling over. “Is your stomach hurting?” he asked after a pause, eyeing her speculatively. “You said that was common.”

“It's fine,” Kyo smiled, “and the worst of it's over now, anyway, I think.” She would clearly have to see on that front, because she'd already been firmly reminded of the fact that nothing was the same in this life.

It seemed like an unnecessary statement, but Kyo had needed the reminder.

She couldn't assume things would play out the same in this life, just because they'd been a certain way in her previous one.

Shuffling over to Minato's futon, the both of them settled down to sleep, Jiraiya still out and about, but they'd be going back home first thing tomorrow morning.
Kyo decided she would put her current issues with Jiraiya aside until they got home and then... she'd deal with that when it was time.

-x-x-x-

The run back to Konoha was fast, supremely uncomfortable, but uneventful, which was a great relief.

Kyo wasn't sure she'd be able to deal with a fight on top of everything else that had happened this week.

Kyo and Minato stuck close together, and Jiraiya seemed perfectly happy to pretend everything was perfectly fine and just like always.

Even when it wasn't.

They reached the village, signed themselves in and then went to the Hokage tower to report a successful mission and most likely notify Intel about whatever it was they'd wanted Jiraiya to do for them.

While Jiraiya was talking to the ninja manning the desk he'd approached, Kyo contemplated her options, considered what she wanted to do.

She'd had several days to think it over.

While Jiraiya was distracted, Kyo wandered over to the next desk over and met the gaze of the Chuunin manning it.

"Yeah, hi, excuse me," she began politely, "I'd like to file an official report on inappropriate conduct by my direct superior."

The Chuunin gave a very slow blink, taking that in and she could all but see him process her words.

He eyed her intently a second, before his gaze slid over to Jiraiya and narrowed on the man, who had stilled, clearly in response to hearing those same words.

Jiraiya squawked. "It wasn't that bad!" And he looked flabbergasted, for some reason.

"I disagree," Kyo told him blandly.

"Oh, come on, it's not like you're a Genin," Jiraiya almost whined, which attracted a measure of attention from the other Jounin in the room.

"No, but I'm an eleven year old girl," Kyo reminded flatly.

Jiraiya spluttered. "Yeah, but- that's still- this is completely unnecessary!" And he waved a preoccupied hand at the Chuunin Kyo had approached.

"I do believe other people than you will be the judge of that," he said flatly, eyeing Jiraiya a second longer, before he turned back to Kyo. "You understand that you'll be temporarily pulled from your current team if you go through with this?"

The Chuunin gave a short nod and got up to retrieve the papers she’d asked for without another 
word.

Jiraiya stared at her with a dismayed look, before he turned back to his own task with a huff.

“Kyo?” Minato questioned quietly.

“It’s procedure,” she told him with a shrug. “Don’t worry about it.”

When the Chuunin returned, Kyo accepted the papers he handed to her and then immediately began 
to fill them out, writing down the *incident* that had sparked this whole thing, in detail, because 
frankly? It had been completely unacceptable.

If Jiraiya had actually *talked to her*, like a normal person, and *then* taken her to the brothel for some 
assistance, then it would have been a completely different matter.

But he hadn't.

So that was that.

“Would your teammate be willing and or able to confirm your report?” the Chuunin asked when she 
was done writing, after she'd read through everything she'd quickly and efficiently jotted down to 
make sure she hadn't forgotten anything.

Kyo blinked and glanced at Minato.

“Yes,” he said, stepping forward. “Do I sign something?” he asked solemnly.

Kyo considered him a second, before she shrugged and put down the report and pointed for him, 
handing him the pen.

Minato quickly read through what she'd written and added his signature at the indicated dotted line.

“Very well, you'll be contacted as soon as your report has been processed by the appropriate 
people,” the Chuunin informed her briskly, swept the papers up and marched out of the room.

No doubt to get started on that right away.

Kyo tilted her head. That had been both quicker and easier than she had anticipated, actually.

With a mental shrug, she turned back to Jiraiya-sensei with a perfectly polite smile. “May I be 
dismissed now, *sensei*? I have a medical check-up to get to.”

“Yeah, fine,” Jiraiya grunted, unhappy but not in any position to blame anyone other than himself.

Minato sent her a mildly alarmed look.

“Don't worry,” Kyo told him softly. “It's standard procedure, and I just have to be checked over and 
update my medical files, okay?”

Sufficiently calmed, Minato nodded and reached out to take her hand for a second, squeezing her 
fingers.

“See you tomorrow?” he asked hopefully.

“Absolutely,” Kyo confirmed with a smile, and then left. She had places to be.
Her hospital visit was quick and painless, and before long, she could leave.

She was finally done and considered which place to check out first.

Home? Or her grandparents' house? Should she see if Katsurou-sensei was home?

Pursing her lips for a second, Kyo paused outside the hospital, before she decided to just go home first.

She'd like a thorough shower and a fresh change of clothes if nothing else, and at least a nurse had been very helpful and provided her with some standard supplies to deal with her current 'monthly cycle' or whatever the hell you wanted to call it.

In her past life, Kyo had been fond of referring to her period as 'shark week'.

She'd always found the physical similarity between a uterus and a shark brain to be hilarious, and sharks made you think of blood, too, so it was perfectly appropriate.

Shaking her head to herself, Kyo headed home.

The apartment was empty when she got there, but a quick look in the fridge let her know tou-san had been home very recently, if he wasn't still, which was enough to cheer her up significantly.

With a small smile, Kyo headed for her room, got a change of clothes and then went to the bathroom.

She was taking a shower.

Kyo took her time, enjoying the fact she was home and could fully relax. Didn't have to worry so much about what to do in case of attack.

She still didn't know how to deal with the fact this would most likely happen once a month from now on.

The medic had mentioned the different drugs she could be provided with, but... Kyo was well aware of her problem with drugs.

How had kaa-san done this?

Kyo was getting dressed again when she heard the front door open and then close.

“Kyo?” tou-san called into the apartment.

“In the bathroom!” she shouted back. Then paused. Was tou-san gonna come in here?

Kyo eyed the door warily a second, before she pushed it from her mind and went back to dressing.

When she was done and wandered out into the apartment, she found tou-san sitting by the kitchen table, frowning at the far wall.

“Hi, tou-san,” Kyo greeted, walking up to her dad to give him a kiss on the cheek and a quick hug.

“Hey, kitten,” Kou said, clearing the frown off his face and turning to eye her intently. “Take a seat, will you?”
Kyo blinked at her dad, but did as asked, taking the seat opposite of him. “Did you want to talk about something?” she asked, because he looked preoccupied.

Kou’s jaw clenched for a second, before he determinedly relaxed again. “Yes. I do.” He took a deep breath and let it out as a sigh. “I heard- Kyo, did you file an inappropriate conduct report today?” he asked, blunt and direct.

Kyo blinked. Wow, the rumour mill in Konoha worked fast. “Yeah, I did,” she said, because there was no need to try and deny.

Kou’s expression pinched, ever so slightly. “...can you tell me why?” he asked quietly and he looked a bit-off.

Kyo tilted her head and studied her dad. “Because Jiraiya did something I can't just-” she huffed, wondering how to explain this. Did she just-tell him everything from the start?

Peering at her dad, she realised she probably didn't have much of a choice, going by how tense he looked.

So she told him, starting with waking up because her thighs were wet with blood, no matter how uncomfortable this conversation made her.

Tou-san listened intently to every word, face inscrutable.

It was probably better he knew about all of this, anyway, she mused in the back of her head as she talked.

“And he just dumped me in a brothel,” she muttered sullenly. “Which isn't really the part I'm upset about, because I can see the sense in it, but I wasn't dressed. I didn't have my weapons. Minato had to bring me my hitai-ate after he'd tracked me down!” Kyo rubbed at her eyes, feeling exasperated all over again. “And to top it all off, he disappeared to go get drunk. On a mission. Leaving Minato with absolutely no information about what was going on.” She took a deep breath. “So yeah, I filed an inappropriate conduct report,” she concluded tersely.

The kitchen was silent for a long few seconds.

Kyo watched tou-san tiredly, taking note of the blank expression on his face and the utter lack of motion. He was sitting perfectly still, not moving a muscle.

Then, from one second to the next, he fluidly rose to his feet and took a step towards her, leaning down to place a hand to her cheek at the same time as he dropped a kiss on her hair.

“Thank you for telling me, Kyo,” he said, and that, at least, sounded sincere. “I have to get back to work,” he added casually. “I'll be back later, okay?”

“Okay?” Kyo agreed dubiously, watching the man as he straightened up, turned around and stalked off.

There was a brief pause, and then the door opened and closed, and Kyo was once again alone.

She had a very bad feeling about this.

-x-x-x-
Kyo had decided not to follow her dad when he'd left, because there'd been a lot going on lately, and she was frankly getting a little bit tired of it.

She wanted to relax!

And not think about serious things for a little bit. She was eleven; she was still a child. That should be allowed, right? When she was off-duty, at the very least.

And she wouldn't be doing missions with team Jiraiya until they'd looked into things, either, so there was that, too.

Meeting up with Minato the following morning like planned wasn't something she'd had to think twice about, but their walk through Konoha afterwards...

“Am I imagining things or is every other shinobi we walk past staring at me?” Kyo asked quietly, trying not to let the attention get to her.

She didn't know these people, why were they looking at her?

“You're... probably not imagining it,” Minato offered a minute later, having taken a moment to pay attention to the shinobi moving around them.

Kyo felt her mood plummet.

Great.

“Your place?” she asked, because she didn't enjoy being gawked at.

“Sure,” Minato said with an easy shrug. They'd finished their morning work-out already. “What are you gonna do while they look into...” he began to ask, when they were safely ensconced in Minato's small apartment. “Uh, sensei's behaviour?”

Kyo tilted her head. “Probably ANBU,” she mused.

She hadn't thought that far, to be honest. Had mostly assumed that was what would happen.

Minato blinked at her. “Does that mean you can talk about that to me now?” he wondered.

“You already know about it,” Kyo said dryly. With a sigh, she went to flop down on Minato's bed. “And it's not like I have anyone else to talk about it with right now.”

Not when people were looking at her like that.

There was a slight pause, and then Minato sat down beside her, folding his legs up on the mattress.

“What's it like?” he asked, sounding to be on the verge of bursting with curiosity.


“Huh.” Minato seemed to think that over. “ANBU's always seemed a bit,” he hesitated, “scary, you know? I never really thought about the fact they were actual people.” He frowned.

“That's the point, though,” she said, reaching out to pat his knee reassuringly. “We're the scary bogeymen.” She grinned. Thinking about it a little more, Kyo came to a decision. “I'm Scorpion,”
she told him quietly, the sleepy apartment safe enough. “My mask,” she clarified, when Minato gave her a puzzled look.

“Oh.” Minato was silent a second. “Is it really okay for you to tell me?”

“I can tell those closest to me, so long as it’s not taken too far. But you can’t tell anyone.” That would actually put both of them in a bad situation. “Inoichi, Shikaku and Chouza know I’m ANBU, but they don’t know my name or mask, so keep that in mind,” she added, sending Minato a dry look.

“I’ve said I’m sorry, okay?” Minato muttered back, looking embarrassed and avoiding eye-contact. “You’re never gonna let me forget that, will you?”

“Nope,” Kyo said cheerfully. “Not a chance. Not even when you’re Hokage.”

Minato snorted and shifted to kick her shoulder playfully. “If I ever become Hokage, I could order you to forget it,” he pointed out logically.

Kyo hummed, pretending to think it over. “Nope, still impossible.” She rolled out of the way of the next kick with a laugh, grabbed Minato’s pillow and hit him in the face with it.

“That’s cheating!” Minato objected, words barely legible due to the laugh lodged in his throat. “Be nice to your lower-ranking teammate!”

“Oh, that’s just low,” Kyo growled with mock-offence and tackled him off the bed.

The two of them impacted the floor with a loud thud and helpless snickers.

That evening, there was a knock on the apartment door, and Kyo, who was still not used to that happening, approached it with some measure of trepidation.

She’d opted out of going to her grandparents’ house, even though she hadn’t seen much of tou-san since two days ago.

Someone would have notified her if he wasn’t alright, and he’d been working long in-village shifts lately.

Kyo doubted anyone had told Genma and their grandparents that she was back home, so she didn’t really feel all that guilty about staying away.

It had been pretty nice to have some time entirely to herself.

On her way to the door, it knocked again, and Kyo frowned minutely.

“I’m coming,” she muttered under her breath, and then opened the door, staring blankly at one of the least likely people she could have ever expected. “Er.”

“Brat,” Tsunade greeted gruffly, walking inside without an invitation to do so, scowling unhappily at nothing in particular.

“Brat,” Tsunade greeted gruffly, walking inside without an invitation to do so, scowling unhappily at nothing in particular.

“Shouldn’t you be at the hospital?” Kyo asked slowly. “Or at home? You know, with your babies?”

“I snagged myself a babysitter, so I’ve got at least two hours before anyone tries to chase me down in hysterical frenzy,” Tsunade muttered darkly, scowl deepening for a brief second. “Let’s go sit down for some tea,” she continued, grabbing the back of Kyo’s shirt to steer her in the direction of the
kitchen, even though this was the first time Tsunade had been here.

Rude.

“Sure, take a seat, want me to make the tea or did you bring your own?” Kyo asked, tugging her t-shirt back into place the moment the older kunoichi had let it go, all but glaring at her.

Tsunade blinked and huffed. Thought about it a second, and then heaved a sigh, rubbing at her face.

“I'll... appreciate it, if you indulge me for a few minutes,” she said after moment's contemplation. “I'm stressed, running on little sleep and my temper is probably permanently compromised these days,” she tacked on breezily. “There are far too many idiots in this village.”

Kyo snorted, but accepted the unspoken apology for what it was and went to put on the kettle.

This was already bizarre enough.

Soon enough, she settled at the kitchen table, with tea for both of them and gave Tsunade an expectant look.

She'd clearly come here to talk about something that couldn't wait.

“Right,” the woman said, for a second looking vaguely unsure how to start, before she powered on. “I'd ask the idiot himself, but I'm too furious with him to get the words out without putting him through a few walls while I'm at it, so I've come to talk to you instead,” she began briskly. “Did Jiraiya pressure you into a sexual situation with him, using his rank and superiority to coerce you?”

Kyo choked on her tea.

She had to take a moment to cough up the hot liquid trying very insistently to get into her lungs, all the while trying to accept the words that had just come out of Tsunade's mouth.

“You-” she coughed again, “you think he'd do that?” she couldn't help but ask, her voice still half-strangled, because while Jiraiya hadn't made his... appreciation of women in general a secret, he hadn't ever showed the slightest interest in children.

Tsunade's frown deepened and one of her hands pushed her hair out of her face. “If you'd asked me last month I'd have punched you in the face,” she said frankly. “But when you hear some of the details, it just sounds really fucking bad.” And she didn't look happy about it. “Look, I know Jiraiya, and he's an unashamed man-whore, but he's—” Tsunade cut herself off to cover her eyes for just a moment. “He's a big man. He's strong. I was told he was drunk, and there was a brothel involved, then the report, and you're freakishly mature but you're only eleven. A child, no matter your rank.”

Tsunade looked up to fix Kyo with amber eyes shining with something like desperation. Desperately clinging on to the belief she actually knew her teammate.

The belief he'd never do that.

Kyo took a deep breath and put her tea mug aside. “Jiraiya did not pressure me to do anything even remotely sexual with him. I swear.” She grimaced, because was that what people thought? Ew.

It may explain a few things, though, but... ew.

Tsunade slumped in her chair, most of the tension bleeding out of her and Kyo was pretty sure she heard her whisper something that sounded suspiciously like “Thank Kami,” before she straightened
up again, rubbing at her face with both hands.

“Okay, that's- Good,” she said firmly with a nod. “That leaves the question of what he actually did do.”

Kyo eyed her pensively a moment.

Well, she'd known she'd have to repeat this story several more times when she filed that report, so she couldn't really complain, but... yeah, this wasn't quite the reaction she'd expected.

“I got my period,” Kyo sighed, and some measure of discomfort paled in comparison to what Tsunade had no doubt been through in the last few days, if she truly had believed, if only for a second, that Jiraiya might have-

Yeah, let's not think about that, Kyo mused wearily.

Tsunade blinked, looking genuinely confused, so Kyo put aside her feelings about the matter and went through everything that had happened. Again.

And shit, was that what tou-san had thought, too?

Kyo felt mildly ill when she realised he probably had.

“-when Minato finally found him, he was drunk as a skunk.” Kyo shrugged, finishing up her story.

Tsunade had placed both elbows on the table in front of her at some point while she talked, resting her face in her hands, and Kyo had no idea what her expression looked like, though her body language was telling her a number of things.

None of which were particularly positive.

“Jiraiya, you idiot,” Tsunade whispered, and she sounded tired.

Kyo sighed silently, and then went to refill Tsunade's tea.

Escaping into ANBU headquarters had seemed like a good idea.

It really had.

Before she realised she'd forgotten to take into consideration that ANBU gossiped just as much as everyone else apparently did, and Kyo patiently waited out Hyena's pretty awkward hug with fond exasperation.

At least her Scorpion mask made sure she could breathe, even with her face pressed firmly into Hyena's shoulder.

“Do you want me to kill him?” he asked, the moment he let go of her enough to look at her.

Kyo huffed a helplessly amused sigh. “No, but thank you for the offer.” She smiled wryly. “Not all rumours are actually true, Hyena,” she told him, rather than dwell on the fact Hyena apparently was perfectly willing to murder a fellow Konoha shinobi without orders from up top if he felt like it.

...should she inform someone about that? Probably.
She'd mention it the next time she saw Katsurou-sensei, which... she had no idea when would happen, actually.

There'd been so much going on, she'd forgotten to see if he was home.

Hyena took a long few seconds to think over her words, and then reached out to take hold of her arm. “Let's go spar. Dark Room. Then tanto practice.”

Kyo snorted. “It's really fine, Hyena, but sure. Let's do that,” she agreed placidly, letting him drag her off for some sparring.

Taijutsu again, but at least that meant less time for thinking. Which would be nice.

On their way to the Dark Room, they walked past the people moving about, and Kyo could only be relieved not many knew her actual name around here, for all that some of them had seen her face.

The Dark Room wasn't a very popular training room, so it was usually free, whenever Hyena dragged her off to it, so she didn't think they'd have to worry about it being occupied right now.

Kyo's line of thought was sufficiently derailed when Crow came walking in the opposite direction.

Well. More stomping stealthily, really.

She raised a hand and signed a greeting, because she hadn't seen Kaimaru in forever!

Only for Kaimaru to sweep past her without a word, without so much as acknowledging the greeting with a glance.

Kyo would have paused, if Hyena hadn't still had a firm hold of her arm and was towing her quite determinedly to the location of their impending spar.

What-?

Oh.

Oh yeah.

Kyo had forgotten all about that strange conversation she'd had with Kaimaru some months back. Just before she got assigned the Kiri mission and she'd just completely forgotten about it.

Shit.

Resolving to track him down for a serious conversation as soon as she could, Kyo blinked back to the present when Hyena opened the door to the Dark Room and marched them both into the pitch blackness.

“No needles, and you can only do evasion for the last part,” Hyena's voice told her cheerfully. “Taijutsu, Scorpion.”

“Urgh, taijutsu,” Kyo repeated with only slightly overdone dislike.

Hyena snickered, patting her arm. “You're getting better,” he told her with an audible grin, and then disappeared.

She could feel the displaced air and there was no time to focus on anything other than her sparring partner after that, because Hyena was definitely better at this than her and she'd rather not be covered.
in bruises by the time they were done.

Kyo took a deep breath and pulled her chakra into her core and concentrated on her surroundings.

The air stirred and Kyo leapt away and tucked into a roll, popping back to her feet as quickly as possible and turned on the spot to face her opponent, only for an open-handed strike to hit her shoulder from the other direction.

Kyo bit back a hiss, but at least she knew where Hyena was now.

Still stretching out her right shoulder carefully, Kyo trudged along beside Hyena towards the mess hall for something to eat, because they'd ended up sparring for two hours and she was starving.

“You are evil,” she muttered at her friend, who snickered amusedly.

“You've gotten some strange habits since last time,” he said, reaching out to poke at her left hand. Only to grab it and examine it more closely when he spotted the bandages peeking out from under her glove. “Need to work on that,” was his conclusion.

“You didn't have to almost dislocate my arm,” Kyo grumbled at him. And she was already aware she was far too protective of her left side since Kiri and was working on fixing it. She was making progress, too.

“We'll swing by Owl after eating,” Hyena decided perkily. “He'll fix it.”

“So long as you deal with the lecture,” Kyo told him, feeling reluctantly amused. Because Owl wasn't exactly gracious about being used as the resident emergency first aid medic when it came to training accidents and or whatever other injuries the operatives contracted around headquarters.

When they got there, the mess or the cafeteria, or whatever you wanted to call it, was moderately busy, both with people who looked to have just returned to the village, gotten off their shift or just gotten out of bed. It was an interesting mix and people were coming and going at random times.

Kyo followed along after Hyena, grabbed herself a meal and then sat down at the otherwise empty table Hyena chose.

She would have been content to just eat in silence and enjoy the comfortable companionship with her friend, but that didn't mean she could just ignore the conversation going on behind her.

“-who would have fucking thought?”

“Not like anyone can be all that surprised,” the other one answered blandly, “with how Jiraiya sleeps around with anything that's got tits.”

“Yeah, but his own damn apprentice? Kid's supposedly ten or something.”

“Disgusting. Hope they put him through the wringer over at Psych.”

Kyo took a deep breath and contemplated what to do.

Sure, Jiraiya was an idiot, and she didn't regret filing that official complaint, but for people to immediately think he was a paedophile?

Jiraiya was an idiot, but he was her idiot sensei, and she was actually fond of him. He didn't deserve
people turning on him like this over something he hadn't actually done.

“Scorpion?” Hyena asked, head tilted and watching her interestingly.

Kyo blinked and focused back on him, which made her realised she was rolling a pair of her needles between her fingers.

Hmm... should she really?

If they'd stopped talking about it, Kyo would probably have been able to let it go and pretend she hadn't heard anything, even though she would have been unhappy about it.

But they didn't.

It wasn't really a conscious decision to flick a needle each at the two gossips, but she did. One struck home, in the shoulder of the man with his back to her, but the other missed and she silently resolved to work on that at the next opportunity, but she didn't have time to think much after that, 'cause the guy she'd aimed at had reacted to the sneak-attack and things devolved from there.

The guy with his back to her had grabbed the needle in his shoulder, pulled it out and thrown it back in the span of a second, though Hyena caught it and threw it at the wall.

Kyo was crouching on the surface of the table she'd been seated by a breath before, had flicked another needle and Hyena threw himself into the scuffle with over-abundant enthusiasm when the two guys moved to retaliate and someone threw a food tray and it was chaos.

Kyo smiled grimly and went after her target.

“Well?” Bear asked shortly, and he was eyeing both of them like they were misbehaving children.

Kyo had never -in either life- been called into the principals' office, but she was pretty sure it would have felt something like this.

She stubbornly didn't shift her stance or fidget, and Hyena's stance was utterly relaxed and unapologetic beside her.

Bear sighed. “Starting fights in the mess hall isn't something we condone. We have training halls for this very reason,” he said firmly, unamused.

“I'll keep it in mind for next time, sir,” Kyo said evenly, because she still wasn't feeling particularly apologetic.

Hyena snickered quietly.

Bear gave a very short nod and turned to eye Hyena. “And you? What's your excuse?” He didn't sound like he particularly wanted to know, but they were both his problem anyway.

“Protecting my teammate's back,” Hyena said seriously in his 'professional voice' which fooled none of them. Especially since he went back to snickering right after.

Bear looked like he had a headache.

“One last thing before you two go to clean up your mess,” he said, all but oozing long-suffering exasperation. “Scorpion?”
“Yes?” Kyo said, and she had a feeling she knew what he was gonna ask.

“Did you kill two of my operatives?”

“No,” she said flatly, because that was just offensive. She'd poisoned them a little, sure, but she wouldn't actually kill them. “Nothing other than a couple of nasty sedatives,” she informed him blandly. “For spreading baseless misinformation about a Konoha comrade,” she added, because she was still feeling spiteful.

Bear looked like he was actually contemplating taking off his mask, if only so he could pinch the bridge of his nose.

“I'll forward a request to Psych to speed things up so this whole situation can be resolved faster,” he said shortly. “In return, I expect you to not pick any more fights. Either of you.” And he eyed Hyena shrewdly, too.

“Sure thing, Bear boss!” Hyena chirped easily, executing a crisp salute while he was at it.

“Go clean up the mess you made,” Bear ordered them flatly, washing his hands of both of them.

Hyena saluted again, grabbed Kyo's arm and shunshined them both out of Bear's office.

“That went better than anticipated,” he said cheerfully, steering them back towards the Mess.

“You think?” Kyo couldn't help but ask.

“Yep! No punishment other than clean up? Worth it,” Hyena snickered.

She couldn't help but to snicker along with him.

There was a lot to clean, though, because food had ended up everywhere, but at least the company was good and hopefully, no one would bother her about Jiraiya again, or, you know, spread false rumours about him in her presence.

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Chapter 84

Chapter Summary

The perks and drawbacks to having the sensei you do

It didn’t take many days after the ANBU mess hall incident for Kyo to be called to the Hokage’s office, and she knew what it was most likely about, why and stuff, but she was still nervous when she walked into the room.

Sarutobi Hiruzen seemed like a pretty good person, all in all, but her interactions with him had been both limited and not all that nice.

She associated him with change, and it hadn't always been for the better. Change, and indisputable authority.

Taking in the people present, Kyo's nerves solidified into a dense ball in her gut, but she also felt her determination firm up.

She still felt she'd done the right thing, even under the scrutiny of the Hokage, the Jounin Commander, Katsuou-sensei and another man, stood beside him, clearly from Psych. There were also two other people she was pretty sure she hadn't ever met before. One woman and one man, flanking the Sandaime.

“You know why you're here, Kyo?” Hiruzen began the conversation.

She nodded. “Yes, sir,” Kyo responded briskly, because she wanted to get this over with already. She could honestly say she hadn't anticipated all the fuss her report had kicked up.

Hiruzen inclined his head and picked up what she quickly realised was the report in question, eyeing it briefly before he put it back down and turned back to her. “Would you like to be taken off Jiraiya's team? You have options other than to be his apprentice,” the Sandaime said gravely, looking generally tired.

Kyo frowned at him. “I'd rather stay on my team. I like my team.” If he'd asked her two years ago? She would have leapt at the opportunity, no question about it, but things had changed pretty significantly for her since then.

“Then why file the complaint at all?” the woman beside Hiruzen asked, and she was looking at her like she was judging everything from her hair, the clothes she was wearing to the dented hitai-ate on her forehead.

Kyo frowned at her, too. “Because it was unacceptable, and I don't want anything like it to happen again. And also because Jiraiya shouldn't be put in charge of any other young girls who might rely on him for assistance.” She took a deep, calming breath and eyed the two unknown people by the Hokage. “For most girls my age, that could have ended badly.” If this had happened to her the first time around? Kyo was fully aware she would have been scarred for life.

Hiruzen sighed and motioned for Takeshi to... do something.
Kyo watched the man go to a side door to let in Jiraiya.

She studied her sensei for a moment, before she turned back to Hiruzen, wondering what else he wanted to discuss.

“Jiraiya,” the man said the moment Jiraiya had wandered up to stand in front of his desk, coming to a stop beside Kyo. “Psych have finished their evaluation. Any issues the two of you would like to discuss before we put this whole situation behind us?”

Kyo pursed her lips and considered it. “I’d like to say something,” she said, because she needed to make a few things clear, even in present company, and she didn’t think Jiraiya would like to talk about this later. When the Hokage inclined his head at her to go ahead, she turned to eye Jiraiya intently. “You’re my sensei and I’m very fond of you, but you’re an idiot, Jiraiya. Did it even occur to you that if you’d talked to me, none of this would have been a problem? You could have just said, ‘You know what, Kyo? I’m not comfortable with this, and I don’t know how to help you, get dressed and I’ll take you to someone who can’?” She was pretty sure her face was entirely deadpan. “Instead, you dumped me in an unknown location, without my weapons or so much as my hitai-ate,” she continued, ignoring the rest of the people in the room, “and did it even occur to you that there aren’t only women in a brothel? The man who was there when you ditched me asked how much I cost.”

Jiraiya sighed heavily. “Yeah, not my proudest moment,” he muttered, at least having the sense to look contrite.

“And then you went and made it worse,” she muttered at him, but left it at that, because Jiraiya had clearly heard enough about this in the last few days. “If nothing else, you should apologize to Minato,” she huffed, and turned back to eye Hiruzen attentively.

The Hokage was observing her closely back, and she couldn't quite pin down the emotions in his eyes.

Was he amused? Not quite.

But he didn't look disapproving of her, at least, which was something.

“My dear girl,” the woman said, speaking up again, and it was abundantly clear she thought Kyo was anything but dear, “if you go and file a complaint for every little thing, the system will lose its value altogether.”

Kyo gave a very slow blink. “So you mean I shouldn't have let anyone know my sensei ditched me in a possibly hostile environment without weapons or clothes, only to go and get drunk? There might have been foreign shinobi around and what was I supposed to do then?” Seriously, was this woman for real?

Jiraiya made a protesting noise. “Oh, come on, Kyo, give me some credit,” he complained, though he sent the woman beside Hiruzen a narrow-eyed look. “I'd scoped out the town by then; I knew there weren't any people around you couldn't deal with easily.”

Kyo shrugged. “Yeah, but I didn't know that. And neither did Minato.”

Jiraiya grumbled unhappily under his breath but clearly conceded the point.

The Hokage sighed softly, eyed Jiraiya wryly a moment, before he slanted a look at Katsurou and the Psych ninja standing at his side. “Anything else we ought to cover right this moment?” he asked, voice dry. When no one said anything, he turned back to Kyo and her stupid sensei. “Very well, seeing as outside of this incident, there are no further complaints and you have declined to be taken
off the team, Kyo, you will be officially reinstated and your whole team will return to the active roster.” He paused. “I agree that this situation was unnecessary and not something any of my kunoichi should have been put through,” he fixed Jiraiya with a look, “and that the official complaint was valid.” The kunoichi beside him got a glance, too. “That said, you're all dismissed. I have other matters to deal with.”

Kyo bent into a quick, respectful bow and then turned to peer up speculatively at Jiraiya.

“What?” he huffed, eyeing her wearily back.

Kyo pursed her lips a moment, contemplating the situation and the fact that shinobi gossiped. And she didn't like it. The things they'd been saying about this idiot man. And some people had been watching her for clues or something and if she was gonna be the centre of attention anyway...

“Indulge me a moment, sensei,” she muttered and easily climbed up on Jiraiya's back. “Okay, now we can leave,” she declared, settling down and making herself comfortable, hanging her arms over his shoulders and leaning her chin on her own arm, intentionally making herself look as at ease as she could.

Jiraiya snorted, but didn't complain. Instead, he wandered out of the Hokage's office at a sedate pace.

She could feel Katsurou-sensei's gaze on her back, but she ignored that, for now.

“Are you angry?” she asked quietly, because Jiraiya couldn't have had a fun week. Not that it was her fault, really... but still.


Kyo got the point, because there were a lot of subtle looks directed their way.

A Chuunin was staring blatantly and Kyo bared her teeth at him in a pointed grin. “Are you gonna take me and Minato to visit Tsunade soon or not?” she asked, changing the subject and not keeping her voice down, because this was making her uncomfortable, but she'd be damned if she let these rumourmongering people ruin her relationship with her Jounin-sensei.

Wait... did he still classify as her Jounin-sensei if she was a Jounin, too?

Kyo still didn't really know what to do with her new promotion. Wasn't even sure what it actually meant.

All she knew was that it was scary. Jounin were supposed to be really strong and powerful, and Kyo... well, she felt like she fell pitifully short of that standard.

Actually, this made her wonder something else.

“Hey, Jiraiya-sensei,” she began slowly, continuing when he made an acknowledging noise, “does the Hokage get involved with all officially filed complaints?” she couldn't help but ask.

Jiraiya gave an amused snort. “Not even close, no. But I'm his student, you know,” he drawled. He sounded pretty self-deprecating about it. “It's a perk.”

Yeah... that made sense. “Mm, well. I feel like I'm developing strange reactions to talking to the Hokage,” she muttered under her breath, causing Jiraiya to snort out a laugh. “But Tsunade, she gave birth, right?” she pressed, even though she'd technically already seen Tsunade. That didn't count,
“Are you trying to cheer me up?” Jiraiya asked, sounding part amused and part dubious.

“Maybe,” Kyo smiled, “but I know Minato's been sulking a bit and he could definitely use some cheering up.”

“Doubt babies will do the trick, kid,” Jiraiya said, but he did sound a bit more like himself.

“We won't know until we try,” she countered. The babies weren't what would actually cheer him up, either. A minute passed in silence, and they were steadily making their way through the tower. “So, Katsurou-sensei was there?” Kyo prodded somewhat awkwardly, because she wasn't at all sure how to broach this subject. Not really.

Jiraiya made a noise somewhere between an amused laugh and a strangled cough. “...I pity your future boyfriends, Kyo,” he said dryly, and left it at that.

Kyo blinked and wondered what that had to do with anything of what they'd just discussed. Seriously.

Minato eyed Kyo on Jiraiya's back and pursed his lips, looking reserved and still resting one hand on the handle to his door.

“So everything's fine now?” he asked, voice measured.

“Pretty much,” Kyo said with a shrug. Or, as much as her current position allowed her to shrug, anyway. “Wanna come with us to visit Tsunade and see the babies?” she continued easily.

Minato blinked slowly, studied Jiraiya's face for a long second, before he nodded. “Okay.”

Kyo smiled at him and nudged Jiraiya. “Sensei's just gotta tell you something first,” she said cheerfully, possibly enjoying this a little bit too much.

Jiraiya huffed, but didn't contradict her. Or, you know, drop her off his back in protest.

Minato eyed him expectantly.

“I'm very sorry about my behaviour on our latest mission and I will do my best not to repeat it,” he said gravely, sincerely. “Same applies to you, Kyo,” he added. “I'm sorry.”

Kyo hummed. “Good.”

Minato seemed to think it over a second longer before he nodded. “Alright, sensei,” and he finally smiled, “do we go now or did you mean tomorrow?”

“Might just as well go now,” Jiraiya said, and they watched Minato pull on his sandals and lock his door when he was done.

Half an hour later, they were in the Senju compound, being let in into what Kyo realised must be Tsunade's personal rooms? Apartment? She wasn't sure what these things were actually called.
“Oi! Tsunade!” Jiraiya called into the rather humble home, and a second after the name left his lips, the woman in question came stomping towards them. Quietly.

“Shut up!” she hissed softly. “I swear, if you wake them up-!” She left the threat hanging in the air between them, one hand raised in a fist threateningly.

Kyo snickered into Jiraiya's shoulder before she dropped to the floor. “Hello, Tsunade,” she greeted. “Babies napping?” she asked, even though it was more than obvious.

“Yes,” the woman huffed, slowly relaxing her stance and giving first Jiraiya and then Kyo a quick once-over. “Well, come in, then, don't just stand there.”

“Excuse the intrusion,” Minato murmured politely.

Tsunade grunted something that could be a reply and she looked like many new parents did; mildly sleep-deprived.

“Here they are,” she said, which felt a bit... anticlimactic, in Kyo's opinion, but she eagerly enough walked up to the crib to peek inside at the two little people. “Shinrin and Kiko,” Tsunade announced, collapsing into a seat in the armchair beside the crib, rubbing at her face.

They were still very small, and sort of reddish, but they were sleeping peacefully and were pretty cute.

Their hands were tiny.

She smiled involuntarily. Genma had been that small a while ago.

“So when are you planning to go back to active duty?” she asked absently, not taking her eyes off of Tsunade's children -and that thought was still weird- and she wasn't expecting it at all when she was yanked off her feet and pressed into a very soft chest.

Kyo embarrassingly enough flailed a little. “Uh- Tsunade!?” she asked and her voice was a bit higher than normal.

She did not squeak.

“Shut up and just let me hug you,” Tsunade muttered, squeezing her more tightly and Kyo flailed an arm at Jiraiya in a silent request for assistance as well she could.

Jiraiya blinked at her and shrugged, remaining where he was.

The traitor.

Kyo huffed out a sigh and slowly relaxed into the hug, even going so far as to tentatively wrap her arms around Tsunade's waist to hug her back.

The seconds were dragging on, but now that she was prepared and, you know, had gotten over the surprise of basically being ambushed, it was pretty nice.

Kyo leaned her chin against Tsunade's shoulder and was content to wait it out.

If the woman needed a good long hug, then Kyo wasn't all that opposed to assisting.

She still wasn't sure why she'd been nabbed, but she could ask later.
“Uh, hime?” Jiraiya tentatively said, after a few minutes with no change. “Are you okay? Want me to go get someone for you? Kyo and Minato can babysit for you for a few hours if you need time to yourself,” he said, generously offering the two of them up.

“Shut up, Jiraiya,” Tsunade huffed, shifting her head, no doubt so she could glare at her teammate. “I’m fine!” she snapped.

But she still didn’t show any indication of letting go of Kyo.

“Um, you know, I don’t actually mind, but I am a bit confused,” Kyo admitted after a beat of awkward silence. “Did something happen?”

Tsunade produced a quiet, amused noise. “No,” she huffed, but she was clearly entertained. “Just-thank you,” she said in a soft voice.

And she finally let her go.

Kyo blinked confusedly at the woman. “For what?” She hadn’t done anything? At all?

Instead of explaining anything, Tsunade smiled at her and then turned to her babies. “Want to hold them?” she offered, sounding almost cheerful now.

Still feeling confused but not sensing anything negative, Kyo tentatively agreed. “Sure.”

“You, too, blondie,” Tsunade continued. “Sit down and you can hold one each,” she decided.

Instead of pressing, Kyo shrugged and yanked Minato down with her so both of them sat on the floor.

The next moment, Kyo was handed a tiny little sleeping bundle. “Kiko,” Tsunade said, smiling softly, “my daughter, born first.” She picked up her other one and carefully positioned Minato’s arms in the correct hold. “And Shinrin, my son.” She sounded unimaginably proud.

Their hair was very lightly coloured, what little there was of it, and they didn’t yet have any defined features that Kyo could make out, but they were cute.

“You have two adorable babies, Tsunade,” Kyo told her sincerely, leaning over to peer at the boy in Minato’s arms.

Her teammate looked rather frozen in his seat, as if he was terrified of so much as breathing wrong, not to mention move.

“Thank you,” Tsunade answered, looking pleased, proud and sad at the same time. “Hear that, Jiraiya? My babies are adorable, not ‘weird and red’.” And she smirked at the man, who huffed in mock-offence.

“Hey, babies aren’t my thing, you know that.”

“Which is why I didn’t make you godfather,” Tsunade snorted right back, not missing a beat.

“And besides! They’re a far prettier sight now than they were last time,” Jiraiya added, gesturing at Minato and Kyo with one hand, as well as the babies they both held.

“Just shut up while you’re ahead.”

Kyo exchanged an amused look with Minato, who still looked more like a statue than a living,
breathing human being, but at least he was ever so slowly relaxing when he realised nothing
dramatic had happened yet.

“Stop rubbing it in my face, woman,” Jiraiya grumbled at Tsunade, but it was mostly for show and to
keep the banter going, because Tsunade looked much happier now than when they'd arrived. “It's
not like your pick is any better with kids than me, anyway.”

“Orochimaru can at least take things seriously,” Tsunade sniffed, crossing her arms under her breasts.

Kyo stared down at Kiko, absently listening to the two adults in the room bicker back and forth like
children, and tried to think.

Orochimaru was godfather? That... probably wasn't very good.

Kiko was sleeping peacefully in her arms, her face relaxed and breathing steady, but Kyo still didn't
know if her very existence was something she had forgotten or... or if it was something that had
changed.

What could have changed?

Shinrin-chan started moving a bit in Minato's arms and her teammate instantly looked close to panic.
When the infant started making displeased noises on top of that, he looked to be on the brink of tears.

“It's fine, Minato,” she told him, nudging his shoulder gently with her own. “He's probably just
hungry or something.”

“Okay,” Minato said, swallowing nervously, eyeing the baby in his arms with growing trepidation.

“I'll take 'im,” Tsunade sighed, sweeping up her son and pushing down one of the shoulders on her
shirt-thing to free up her breast, almost in the same motion.

Jiraiya politely studied the ceiling, while Minato went red and jerkily averted his gaze to the floor.

Kyo stared exasperatedly at them. “You two do realise that breasts are made for feeding babies,
right?” she couldn't help but ask. “That's why women have them.”

Tsunade snorted out a laugh and eyed the two males in the room with them, before she turned to
Kyo. “If you manage to convince them of that, I'll be impressed.” She smirked.

“Kaa-san breast-fed Genma all the time without clearing a room,” she pointed out with a frown.
Katsurou-sensei hadn't so much as blinked at it, and neither had tou-san or Ryota, actually, and her
honorary uncle tended to be weird with a lot of normal things. “And I mean, I'm pretty sure men can
produce milk, as well,” she muttered. “I think.”

Hadn't she heard or read that somewhere in her past life? It had been a long time ago, but she was
pretty sure...

Jiraiya made an undignified squawk. “Lies!” he all but gasped, looking mildly green for some
reason.

“It's true,” Tsunade countered with a deliberate smirk. “It's pretty rare, though, usually due to medical
conditions.”

Minato took a deep breath and raised his gaze to stare at Kyo for a moment. He chanced a very brief
glance at Tsunade, before he frowned at a spot on the wall.
Kyo shrugged.

“We need to talk,” Kyo said by way of announcing herself.

It didn't count as breaking in when she had a standing invitation into Katsurou-sensei's house.

“Good morning to you, too,” Katsurou muttered, blinking rather blearily at her a second, and then continued on his way to the kitchen. Probably to get some coffee, if she wasn't mistaken.

“Worked late?” she asked, eyeing the man worriedly a moment, before she hurried to follow him.

“You want breakfast? I can make you something,” she offered, because she had barged in on his morning routine without warning.

Katsurou made a non-committal grunt she took as a yes, and went to raid the fridge.

Eyeing what she had to work with, Kyo decided on pancakes and grabbed the things she'd need and didn't bother Katsurou-sensei while she was at it, leaving him to wake up a bit more first.

“Slept poorly?” she eventually asked, flipping a pancake and waiting for it to cook on the other side, too, slanting a quick look at sensei over her shoulder.

“I struggle with insomnia, Kyo,” Katsurou grunted, leaning mostly over the kitchen table and almost speaking into the wooden surface. He was clutching a coffee cup loosely in one hand, using the connecting arm as a pillow. “Sleeping poorly implies sleeping at all and would have been pretty good.”

Kyo frowned concernedly at him, and then went back to her cooking.

By the time she placed a plate stacked with neatly folded pancakes in front of him, Katsurou looked marginally more awake and alert and he actually went through with the effort of sitting up properly.

He dragged a hand down his face and drained his coffee.

Kyo held out her hand for the mug and went to refill it for him the moment he handed it over.

That done, she bounced back to the table, handed the man back his mug and then took a seat.

Katsurou-sensei took a sip of coffee and eyed the pancakes with idle interest. “How am I supposed to eat these?” he finally asked.

Kyo blinked. “I like to eat them with sugar,” she shrugged, “and use my fingers.”

“Barbaric,” Katsurou drawled, but easily enough unfolded one of them on the plate, on top of the other pancakes.

Kyo got up again and fetched him some sugar, because she'd forgotten to do that. Then she proceeded to show him how she always did it; pouring sugar on top, folding it in the middle and then rolling it up into an easily handled package that was also easy to consume.

Katsurou shrugged and ate.

While her sensei was busy, Kyo contemplated everything she wanted and or needed to talk to him about.
There was the Hyena thing, which she hadn't forgotten about. She should also talk to him about the whole... uh, Jiraiya Situation and everything that had come with that. Probably.

And then there was Crow.

Kyo still didn't know what was up with him. She'd managed to upset Minato without realising, so she might have done the same with Kaimaru, but she honestly couldn't figure it out on her own, and it wasn't like the guy had been forthcoming the last time they’d spoken.

Even though it'd been months ago.

But that wasn't actually the most pressing, even though the worry was there, in the back of her head. Along with Tsunade's motherhood-thing, but that was a different kind of worry.

Kyo rubbed the bridge of her nose with her fingers, frowning in thought.

“That looks serious,” Katsurou-sensei sighed, pushing the empty plate away from him and crossing his arms over his chest, finally looking more like his usual self again.

Not that that magically fixed his lack of sleep.

Kyo blinked at him. “Are you sure you shouldn't try to rest? When I can't sleep I try to find someone to sleep next to,” she said, eyeing her sensei worriedly. Sleeping was very important and not sleeping was... pretty bad.

It sucked to be tired all the time.

Katsurou stared at her, and she was pretty sure he was amused. “Kyo, you said you needed to talk to me,” he reminded her, not commenting on her suggestion. “So talk.”

He picked up his coffee mug for another sip, eyeing her steadily over the rim.

Kyo crossed her arms on top of the table and leaned her chin on them. “Hyena offered to kill Jiraiya for me. I feel I should mention that, to start with.”

Katsurou-sensei paused in the act of putting his mug down, giving a thoughtful nod. “Thank you for notifying me,” he said dryly. “Anything else?”

“Senpu's back home,” Kyo said casually.

Katsurou and Kyo stared at each other for a long second, before Katsurou blinked and frowned with a sigh, for just a moment.

“Hm. You and Kisaki are finally going to do it?” he asked mildly. “You're certain?”

Kyo frowned at him. “I thought you thought it was a good idea,” she muttered.

“I do,” Katsurou-sensei said. “But I'm asking if you think it's a good idea. You have to be sure.”

And she knew this wasn't really something you could take back afterwards, but she doubted she'd ever want to.

Kyo had been thinking over this issue for months. For a year, almost, and... well, Kisaki was her friend, her teammate, and when she got the Black Fangs, that would make it official.

“I'm sure,” she said slowly. “Or as sure as I'll ever be,” she amended. “And Kisaki wants this, and
that's important, too.”

Katsuou-sensei nodded and gestured for her to continue.

Kyo smiled at him, so unimaginably grateful to have him in her life, and continued to discuss whatever else was going on in her life right now.

Why were there so many issues? They finally had peace! Weren't things supposed to be easier to deal with?

Instead, Kyo felt like she'd gotten even busier.

Ah, well. This was a different kind of busy, and she supposed she could get used to it.

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Kyo looked over her preparations with close attention, feeling mildly paranoid, because this was the fifth time in as many minutes she'd done that, but she couldn't help it.

“Stop worrying, you're making me stressed,” Kisaki muttered with a huff from where she was lying on the floor a small distance behind her. Close, but far enough away she'd stay safe even in the eventuality of accidents.

Kyo wasn't sure what accidents could happen for something this basic, but it was better to be safe than sorry.

“Last time I tried this, I could have gotten him killed,” Kyo huffed back, fussing with the materials in front of her some more. “Did Senpu say when we'd be able to do the ceremony-thing?” she fired back rather than dwell on her own short-comings as a teacher.

...kaa-san would have done this so much better.

She knew it with every fibre of her being.

Kyo wasn't very good at teaching people things. She was pretty good at learning, but passing that knowledge on? Not something she had as much experience at.

What if Genma ended up hating her again?

Kyo bit her lower lip nervously.

“Soon,” Kisaki said, jolting her out of her thoughts and Kyo had to think a moment before she remembered what question the ninken was answering. “They just need to wait in the necessary people, and we're good to go.”

“Oh.” Kyo blinked down at her hands and took a deep breath. “You're staying here for this, right?” she couldn't help but ask, because Kisaki was good moral support, and they'd be official partners, soon, so this was technically something Kisaki ought to know, too.

Wasn't it?

Kyo was pretty sure Kisaki already knew more about poisons than most ninken, just from what she'd picked up over the years, but this would be more structured.

Or it was supposed to be.
What if she forgot to teach him something important? It felt like such a long time since she'd done this with kaa-san.

The memories of those first few lessons felt far less sharp and pristine than they should be, and Kyo couldn't help but worry.

Genma was still so little...

The front door opened and Kyo straightened up, pushed her thoughts to the side and tried to focus on the here and now. On the lesson she'd planned in meticulous detail.

She could do this.

Had to trust in both her brother and in kaa-san's teaching style, because that's what she would use as guide-lines, obviously, and kaa-san had known what she was doing.

Unlike Kyo. Just because she could make and use them didn't make her an expert!

“We're home!” Genma called into the apartment and Kyo swallowed dryly.

Was it too late to pack up everything and pretend like nothing?

“Welcome back,” she called back, trying to tell herself to get a grip, because this was entirely irrational. Mostly. “I'm in the kitchen,” she added, because... well, she did want Genma to come here.

“Good luck, Kyo,” Kisaki said softly.

Tou-san came wandering after Genma when he bounced in, only for her brother to pause in the door to take in the room, Kyo sitting on the floor with several whole plants lying on the wooden boards in front of her. There was her knife, the pot, and everything they'd need for this lesson, already put out and ready for use.

“What are you doing?” Genma asked curiously, not coming closer, but looking like he wanted to.

“We're having our first poison lesson,” Kyo told him steadily, exchanging a look with tou-san, who smiled encouragingly at her.

“I'll be in the sitting room if you need me,” he said casually, turning around and wandering away again.

Leaving Kyo alone with her brother.

Biting back the irrational urge to call him back, Kyo took a deep breath and smiled determinedly at Genma. “Come sit down,” she told him, trying not to feel grim as she patted the piece of floor beside her.

Genma carefully skirted the laid out materials and took the seat beside her, sitting close enough he was very nearly sitting in her lap.

“Nee-san,” he whispered, and she doubted he had even noticed Kisaki behind them, he was so enthralled by everything she'd prepared. “Are you gonna teach me poisons?” he asked, sounding quietly anticipatory and eager.

“Yeah,” Kyo cleared her throat, “that's what I just said. Remember what I told you when you asked about this in the hospital?”
Genma looked up to meet her gaze, a blinding grin on his face. “I have to listen to you!” he chirped.

“Yep,” Kyo nodded, “and what else?”

“Um,” Genma seemed to think hard, “I have to listen even when you're not here?” he offered, somewhat uncertain.

Kyo sighed quietly, but nodded, because he'd gotten it right in essence. “You need to follow the rules I set, even if you don't want to, even when I'm away.” She fixed him with a firm, unamused look. “It's important, for you and for your future classmates, okay?”

“Oh okay,” Genma said seriously.

“This is the first lesson,” Kyo continued, gesturing at the plants on the floor in front of her with a hand, “and it's going to hurt, okay?”

“Why?” Genma asked, and he sounded curious more than anything else.

“These plants? They're poisonous. They'll sting your hands and give you a rash when you touch them,” she explained, somewhat weary. “Don't put anything in your mouth unless I've told you to, Genma, okay?”

“Oh okay, nee-san. I promise I'll listen!” Genma said, back to enthusiastic and eager, all but vibrating beside her, waiting to start.

Alright, then,” she muttered to herself, took a deep breath and reached for one of the plants. “Your job today will be to pluck all the leaves from the stalk. Like this, and when you've done that, you'll tear them up like this and put everything in the pot beside you,” she instructed evenly, showing Genma how to do it as she spoke.

Her little brother watched her every move with eager anticipation.

When she was done with the first leaf, she handed the whole stalk over to Genma, who took it without hesitation.

Kyo watched attentively as he got started, picking the first leaf off the stalk exactly like she'd showed him and then did his best to tear it up in equal-sized strips.

When she was satisfied things were going well so far, Kyo took another deep breath, exchanged a quick glance with Kisaki over her shoulder and then began to tell him about the poison.

Symptoms, attributes, how to determine strength and dosage, but also the various steps involved with production they'd eventually get to.

All the while hoping to hell and back she wasn't forgetting something. Or messing up.

“Okay, let's take a look at those hands,” Kyo finally declared when Genma was done with the first plant.

Genma took a deep breath and held out his hands with a brave face.

Kyo eyed him with a shred of amusement, despite herself. “You're allowed to show that it hurts, Genma,” she told him honestly, taking one of his hands to inspect it intently, all of a sudden feeling like kaa-san doing the same for her had been just yesterday, even though pretty much everything had changed for her since then.
Genma sniffled softly and bit his lower lip, peering up at her and shuffling closer.

“Why aren't your hands doing the thing?” he asked quietly, leaning all his weight against Kyo's side.

“I did this when I was little, and I eventually got immune. Like you will, too,” she told him, feeling entirely nostalgic.

Genma's hands were an angry red, and they felt hot to the touch and were mildly swollen.

“It stings,” her brother whined, pressing his face against her upper arm.

“I know,” Kyo said, because she did and this was part of it; she'd warned him. “Do you want to stop, or should we continue with the other one, too?” she asked, inspecting Genma's other hand and nodding at the other plant she'd prepared.

She'd have to bring him with her out next time to show him the kind of environments it grew in, too.

Genma thought about it for a few seconds, before he took a deep breath and straightened up. “Keep going,” he said, sounding utterly bullheaded.

“Okay,” Kyo smiled, “don't touch your face with your hands or fingers,” she warned.

Genma gave a firm nod, frowning determinedly, and they continued.

All in all, Genma's first poison lesson had been a success, she felt. It was a big load of nerves off her back, because while Genma had been whiny and rather pitiful towards the end, there hadn't been any tears or hysterics like the last time...

Tou-san had given her a tight, tight hug later that night, telling her Isshun would have been proud.

It added a new aspect to their normal, everyday routine, but Kyo didn't mind.

Making poisons was fun and now she got to share it with her little brother.

But she didn't really have time to relish the minor personal success, and Senpu was still arranging things with the Inuzuka, when all of Konoha went into mourning.

Uzumaki Mito had passed away.

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Chapter 85

Chapter Summary

The passing of a Legend

There was a massive funeral for the wife of the late Shodaime, and civilian and shinobi alike dressed in black to honour the woman's memory. Celebrate her life and acknowledge her passing. Mourn her.

During the funeral, Kyo couldn't help but watch the Uzumaki gathered in the front.

More specifically, Kyo found her gaze resting on Kushina. And Tsunade.

Mito had been Tsunade's grandmother, even if it was easy to forget.

The medic was brash and unapologetic, most of the time, but she wasn't all that old. She was still trying to figure life out, and there had been many changes for her lately, what with the death of her boyfriend and becoming a single mother.

Kyo sighed softly and threaded her fingers through Kisaki's fur.

She'd tuned out of the speeches a while ago, because for all that she'd been very fond of the woman, she could only take so much of the same things being said over and over again about her life and legacy.

Mito had supposedly died a natural death, in her sleep, going peacefully. Something highly unusual for someone in their kind of life.

And, well... she didn't doubt parts of that were true. But no one had really made any clear mention of Mito's status as a Jinchuuriki or who the heavy mantel had been handed to.

Kyo glanced at Kushina again.

Wondering.

Things were either changing, or the Story hadn't been anywhere close to accurate to start with and Kyo didn't know which option was more frightening.

It wasn't really the not knowing that was getting to her, because Kyo felt like she didn't really know what was going on most of the time, and everything was uncertain, even at the best of times, but... if things were changing.

What would that mean?

She knew there were a lot of very important things supposedly happening in the future -if that part was true- and if things changed, what if it wasn't for the better?

When she took a moment to actually think about it, she felt so unimaginably scared, it was just easier not to think about it at all.
Until the next time something popped up that made sure she couldn't help it.

With a sigh, Kyo glanced at Minato to her right.

He was taking it harder than her, but then the boy hadn't ever really lost anyone. Not like this. He was an orphan, but he'd told her he couldn't remember anything other than the orphanage and the carers there.

He'd been very young when he'd been placed in their care.

Parents were a concept Minato hadn't experienced for himself, loving or otherwise.

Without a word, Kyo reached out to take his hand, because he wasn't alone and she didn't want him to forget.

The sun was beating down on them, and the black funeral garb wasn't making it any easier to bear, but no one moved before the ceremony was over.

“What now?” Minato asked softly, voice quiet even amidst the muted atmosphere.

Jiraiya heaved a heavy sigh, placing a hand on the boy's shoulder. “Nothing much. You get the rest of the day off,” he glanced between Minato and Kyo, “so take it easy, and we'll meet up again tomorrow.”

“Give Tsunade our condolences, okay?” Kyo requested tiredly, still holding her teammate's hand.

“Yeah,” Jiraiya agreed with a brief, bleak smile and then wandered off.

“Come on, Minato. Sleepover at my place,” Kyo said, carefully pulling the boy with her.

Not that it was particularly difficult, seeing as Minato easily fell into step beside her, keeping close.

She glanced at Kisaki, but the ninken gave no indication of going anywhere without Kyo right now. Which most likely meant she would sleep with her tonight.

Well. Her and Minato.

“Kou won't mind?” Minato muttered at her, about half-way to home.

“No?” Kyo blinked at him, feeling thrown. “Why would he?” Tou-san hadn't ever had a problem with Minato and she didn't understand why he would start now.

Minato mumbled something indistinguishable and Kyo shrugged.

She didn't press.

When they got home, Kyo steered them to the couch and soon enough, both of them were sprawled out, next to each other, cuddling.

It was very nice, and she figured Minato could use some comfort right now.

Kisaki stretched out on the floor in front of the couch, like a big, furry, lumpy carpet that breathed. And would protest if you tried to step on her.

“Aren't you sad?” Minato eventually asked, staring up at the ceiling with a small frown.
Kyo craned her neck to give him a look, before she re-settled her cheek against his chest. “I am,” she said, because she was, she was just— “I was fond of her, but Mito wasn't someone I knew all that well, and she was old. She lived a long life.” She was silent for a second, trying to put her feelings into the right words. “I'm sad I didn't get to say goodbye, but other than that, I'm fine. I think she was mostly happy, as much as was possible, anyway.”

Kyo wasn't doing a good job of this.

She sighed.

Minato said nothing, but there was a thoughtful air to him now.

Kyo had been fond of Mito. Had liked her a lot. But this wasn't like when kaa-san died. Or Maki and Taku.

Not even close.

“Kushina's probably devastated,” Kyo mused softly a while later. “Are you gonna try and talk to her?” She couldn't help but wonder, because... well.

“She doesn't like me, though,” Minato muttered back. “She thinks I'm—” he cleared his throat, “she'd probably just yell at me.”

“Yelling might make her feel better,” Kyo offered. “But you don't have to do anything if you don't want to, you know.”

They were silent again. The quiet of the apartment accentuated by the sound of their soft breathing.

“Did you really forgive sensei?”

Kyo hummed, taking the sudden shift of subject in stride. “Forgiven, yes. Forgotten? No.” She thought about it a second. “I probably won't ever be comfortable bringing up anything personal and sensitive to him again.”

She knew herself. And even if she didn't want to be like that, Kyo was very much a 'one chance' kind of person when it came to her emotional vulnerability. At least when it came to people in a position of power over her. Jiraiya had ruined that kind of relationship between them, probably for good.

“Does that,” Minato hesitated, “does that extend to me?” he asked uncertainly.

“Nope,” Kyo replied easily. “You always listen to me, and you weren't the one who freaked out.”

Minato gave a snort. “Do you think Kushina will ever like me back?” he asked, very quietly.

“I don't know, Minato,” Kyo sighed. “Maybe? Just, be yourself and try to get to know her if she'll let you? If she doesn't like you for you, then there isn't really any point.” She tightened her hold on him in something of a hug. “But then again, I've never been in love, so maybe I'm the wrong person to ask,” she added thoughtfully.

Minato snorted again. “You always give good answers, though. Very logical. Always makes sense.”

“Logic, I can do. Romance?” Kyo wrinkled her nose. “Not my thing.”

Minato snickered and agreed. “It doesn't make much sense.” He grew serious again quickly, though. “What do you think will happen with our fuuinjutsu lessons from now on?”
“Maybe Jiraiya will teach us exclusively? Or maybe we'll have additional lessons with Hinata-shishou?” Kyo suggested. There were a few Uzumaki to choose from, actually, but it all depended on Jiraiya-sensei, she was fairly sure.

Minato sighed softly. “Do you mind if I take a nap? Didn't sleep much last night,” he admitted quietly.

“Not at all,” Kyo said, settling down to rest a bit, too. She'd been spending a lot of time at ANBU headquarters lately and Hyena had mentioned something about the coming recruit period?

She hadn't ever been around for that, so she was curiously looking forward to it.

By the time tou-san came home, Kyo was fully awake again, and had spent the last while going over the list of things to cover in Genma's next few lessons, as well as other things she needed to do.

Kou closed the door behind him with a sigh and pulled a hand through his hair and looked around.

He probably spotted Kisaki first.

“Hey, kitten,” he greeted quietly, walking up to the couch to peer down at her and Minato. He, too, was wearing black funeral clothes, and it made him look grim.

It took some effort not to think about the last time she'd seen him wear them.

Kyo smiled faintly in greeting, twitching one hand in a semblance of a wave, but didn't say anything.

“Tired?” tou-san asked fondly, resting his elbows on the back of the couch. “I take it there'll be another sleepover,” he continued softly. “Any requests for dinner?”

Kyo shrugged and shook her head.

Tou-san huffed a quietly amused laugh and straightened back up to wander into the kitchen, leaving the two of them to their relaxed lounging and, in Minato's case, continued napping.

-x-x-x-

Kyo waited patiently where she sat, on the wooden porch of Senpu's house.

Kisaki was lying beside her, mostly relaxed, but head raised and there was clear anticipation in every line of her body. Ears straight up with alert attention.

“Relax,” Katsurou-sensei said, from where he was sitting nearby, sending her an amused look. “You already know what to expect.”

“Yeah, but that doesn't change the fact I'm nervous,” Kyo huffed back, gripping her ankles determinedly to keep herself from fidgeting.

“Nothing to be nervous about,” Kisaki muttered at her, though her ears flicked indecisively.

Kyo took a deep breath, trying to relax.

Time wouldn't pass faster just because she was counting the seconds.

“They're here,” Kisaki said, almost exactly at the same time as a large, dark brown dog slunk around
the corner of the building, heading straight for them.

“Hi, Tenshi,” Kyo greeted softly, automatically giving the dog a once-over, looking for any new scars or injuries.

He had a rather massive scar on his neck, down his shoulder before it trailed off on the front of his chest, almost making it look like he had a large bald spot.

Tenshi huffed at her in greeting and went to inspect Kisaki, scenting at her and giving her ear a few affectionate licks.

“Is Arashi coming, too?” Kyo couldn't help but ask, feeling awkward and a bit out of place.

She wasn't overly familiar with Taku's brothers, or their respective dogs, because they'd been away as much as everyone else during the war, and then it had just been a painful reminder.

Tenshi flicked her a glance and gave a snort.

Ah, so not far behind, then, Kyo mused.

Teki and Motoki came wandering around the same corner not a minute later, with Arashi right behind them.

Arashi's right arm was about as scarred up as his ninjen was, and Kyo vaguely remembered when Taku had told her and Maki about the incident, though he hadn't gone into detail. It had nearly cost him his arm as well as his partner's life, though, she was fairly sure.

“Hey, tiny!” Arashi greeted her with a toothy grin.

“Not so tiny any more,” Teki argued absently, giving her a wave and shoving at his older brother with his other hand.

“Stop your fighting, you're too old to act like pups,” Senpu said, striding out of the house to look them all over. “Bring your little sister inside and we'll get started now that the two of you are finally here,” she huffed brusquely.

Kyo peered at the two young men a second, before she exchanged a look with Katsurou, because she wasn't sure what to think or feel.

If Taku had been alive, he would have been fifteen now, she realised.

Teki was two years older than that, with Arashi being the oldest one at twenty two... it felt weird to think about it.

It had been three years.

Kisaki gently nudged her arm, pulling her out of her thoughts.

Kyo took a deep breath and got to her feet.

“No regrets?” she asked the ninjen beside her.

The look Kisaki graced her with was deadpan, at best. “No. Now come on,” she said, and nudged her again.

Kyo began to walk, grateful when Katsurou-sensei fell into step beside and slightly behind her.
“You're not replacing him,” he told her quietly, “merely accepting your place in the family.”

Kyo breathed out sharply.

Right.

Senpu's house was at least a familiar setting. She'd spent a lot of time here, both with her Genin team, and... after. With Kisaki, and Senpu.

Granted, not as much, but it still counted.

Kyo followed Kisaki into the sitting room, where two unfamiliar people were waiting together with Senpu, their ninken sitting beside their respective partners.

“Right,” one of the men said unceremoniously, looking Kyo over from head to toe, followed it up by giving Kisaki the same treatment, and then shot Senpu a look. “Everyone here?”

“Yeah,” Senpu huffed, arms crossed over her chest and giving her sons a sharp look when Teki looked like he'd try and shove Arashi again.

“Kisaki, you've chosen to partner with Shiranui Kyo?” the man asked briskly, looking like he couldn't have been in the village for more than a day. Probably less.

“I have,” Kisaki answered firmly.

The man nodded, and Kyo was pretty sure he was the clan head, even though she'd never seen him before.

“Shiranui Kyo, you want to accept the black fangs to make your bond official?” he asked next, his dark eyes coming to rest on her face, meeting her gaze in a challenging manner. As if gauging her worth.

Kyo inclined her head. “Yes,” she said simply, because this was a decision that had been long in the making. She'd had a lot of time to think about it, and she couldn't see any other option.

The Inuzuka clan head stared at her a second longer, before he gave a curt nod. That done, his mouth finally stretched into a sharp smile that showed off his canines.

“Tadashi, you're up,” he said, slapping the other man with him on the back hard enough it looked painful.

“Have you decided where you want them?” Tadashi asked her, rather than acknowledge his clan head in any other way.

Kyo eyed him, taking in the lines on his weathered face and the faded scars on his hands.

She nodded. “Back of the neck,” she said succinctly.

She'd given that, too, a lot of thought.

Rather than comment in any way or fashion, Tadashi gestured at her to take a seat while he got out his tools.

Time to get that tattoo, huh.
Kyo turned her back to the man, took a seat on the floor and drew up her legs towards her chest and rested her forehead against her knees.

Kisaki pressed close to her side and settled down to wait.

This would take a few hours.

-x-x-x-

The skin on the back of her neck was sore after the repeated stabbing-by-needle it had been subjected to, but it hadn't been too bad.

Hadn't been particularly nice, either, but Kyo had had a tattoo in her previous life, so she'd had at least an idea of what to expect. And it wasn't like she hadn't had worse.

Shuriken stuck in her femur would always hold a special place in her memory.

Getting the ANBU tattoo had been much quicker and had involved quite a few other things, in addition, so that didn't feel like quite the same thing.

Walking into ANBU headquarters, looking to find Bear, seeing as he supposedly wanted to talk to her about something, Kyo was trying not to reach up and adjust the high collar of her sleeveless shirt every other second, because it was pressing against her very new tattoos and it made her overly aware of them.

Which was weird. And distracting.

Which was why she very nearly walked right past Sparrow and Crow, who seemed to be involved in a quiet, heated argument that looked like it was inching closer to outright violence by the second.

Kyo stopped to just stare at them a moment, because she hadn't known the two of them knew each other. Or was on speaking terms.

Though that last one was debatable; they were more hissing aggressively at each other than talking, hands creeping progressively closer to their weapons.

The few other people moving about the corridor were acting like they'd seen nothing wrong and just went about their business, like there wasn't a brewing fight right in front of them.

Kyo was perhaps not one to throw stones, but yeah. She should... probably try and do something? Both of them were her friends.

“What are you doing?” she asked, blunt and to the point, because she honestly couldn't think of another approach short of sedating both of them, and people generally didn't appreciate that.

“Scorpion,” Sparrow huffed aggressively, though she was well aware it wasn't her he was angry and frustrated with.

“...Bear told me to take any fights to a training hall,” Kyo informed both of them after a tense pause, gaze alternating between them.

Sparrow scoffed irritably. “Why bother? I'm heading to bed,” he muttered and shunshined off.

Leaving Kyo with Kaimaru, who looked supremely unhappy with Sparrow's sudden departure, if his
body-language was anything to go by.

“Are you gonna tell me what's been up with you lately?” Kyo asked Kaimaru warily, wondering if this would end like the last time they'd talked.

“Back off, Scorpion,” Kaimaru growled. “Shut the fuck up and mind your own damn business. Who the hell would want to hang around someone like you?” he hissed, shoved her harshly out of the way and stalked off, not sending her so much as a glance.

Kyo rubbed gingerly at her shoulder, feeling a strange mix of blank, upset, hurt and angry. But she was also confused.

What was his problem?

She honestly couldn't think of a single thing she'd done to Kaimaru for him to treat her this way, and she'd been mulling it over for weeks.

This wasn't like the misunderstanding with Minato.

Kyo scowled at nothing, her fingers ending up wrapped tightly around the shoulder-strap of her body armour.

What the fuck.

The more she thought about it, the less sense it made.

She didn't get the time to follow the tentative, unpleasant trail of thought to its conclusion, because Hyena appeared beside her in a small puff of smoke, reaching out to curl his fingers around her arm in greeting and carrying a far too grave an air for her to remain distracted.

“What happened?” she asked before she'd fully registered her friend's appearance.

“Come, we're being briefed. Village defences were breached three hours ago,” Hyena told her briskly, and she could hear the sharp grin in his voice.

-x-x-x-

Minato hadn't really planned to do anything with Kyo's suggestion, and he still wasn't sure if she'd been sincere about it or meant it more like a joke.

He couldn't get the idea out of his head, though.

And... Kyo had been right; yelling at him might actually help make Kushina feel better. She seemed to like yelling at him normally, anyway.

His musings were rather redundant, Minato decided, peering up at the Uzumaki compound gates.

He was already here. Might as well make himself useful.

And he was worried.

He hadn't seen Kushina since the funeral a little over a week ago, and she'd been so quiet and withdrawn then, she hadn't seemed much like her usual self.

Minato sighed and approached the gate guard.
Turned out, he didn't even have to convince anyone to let him inside. As one of Mito's students - former or otherwise- he was more than welcome.

“Do you know where Kushina is?” he asked instead of comment on that, because he wasn't sure what to say.

“Princess was in one of the back gardens this morning,” the guard told him, seeming more focused on the scroll he was writing in than on his current job. He hadn't even glanced up to look at him.

“Thank you,” Minato murmured and walked into the compound.

He hadn't ever been here before, because lessons had always been in the Senju compound and he hadn't really had any reason to come here.

Everything looked very new.

It was a rather unsettling reminder of what had happened to their previous home. A quiet reminder of why this whole compound had sprung into existence.

Minato came across a few more red-heads on his ambling trek through the grounds, but most of them seemed to be busy with whatever tasks they had in their everyday lives, and he already knew all the fully grown shinobi were working long hours either on missions or on administrative jobs while in the village.

Even sensei sometimes grumbled about paperwork and having to spend hours at the Jounin Station to do his part.

Kyo had been busy with ANBU lately, too, whatever that meant, and Minato couldn't help but wonder if this was what peace was like.

Paperwork. In-village work shifts.

The first garden he found was deserted of any human life, as was the second one.

The third one was a small, private-looking affair he felt reluctant to intrude on, so Minato continued on after a glance to make sure Kushina wasn't there.

The fourth garden, in the very back of the compound, nestled against the circumventing wall, looked more promising and he found Kushina's fuuinjutsu kit carefully laid out on a patch of smooth, dry ground.

No sign of the girl in question, though.

Minato frowned worriedly down at the ink and brushes, the half-finished storage seal sketched out on a square of paper.

Kushina took her fuuinjutsu very seriously, and he hadn't ever seen her walk away from her equipment like this.

Not to mention leaving a seal midway, unfinished.

Grief wasn't supposed to change someone that drastically, was it?

Minato wasn't exactly an expert, but that didn't sound like Kushina at all, and he'd known her since they'd been six.
He tapped his fingers against his weapons holster while he thought, trying to consider this from every angle, but that didn't stop his imagination from running away from him.

She could have just gotten distracted by something. He was probably over-reacting.

Nodding shortly to himself, Minato decided to look around and see if he couldn't find her.

It wasn't until he found Kushina's kunai holster lying abandoned in the grass and some rather obvious, pretty deep scuff marks on the ground that his growing worry spiked into alarm.

Kushina wouldn't leave her fuuinjutsu things, her weapons, like this.

And then he found the single red hair, caught on the very wall supposed to protect the Uzumaki compound.

Minato's thoughts were racing, and he could feel his blood rushing like it did before a fight.

Someone had forced Kushina to leave without her weapons, which meant they'd used force, and that most likely meant enemy shinobi.

He couldn't see any other explanation.

Where there any Jounin close enough he could alert?

But he didn't know how long ago this had happened, and it was clear no one had found out yet.

The more time passed, the more difficult it would be to track them down and find their trail.

Shinobi skilled enough to infiltrate Konoha without notice... could he do it?

Minato crouched down to pluck the single hair from the wood it had snagged on.

His fist clenched around it and determination firming up, Minato jumped down to the ground on the other side and quickly began to look for any hint he could find.

Sensei might kill him for this, but he couldn't just leave. Who knew how far they'd gotten by now and Minato was sure someone else would discover what he had done soon enough.

They'd follow, and hopefully, by then, Minato had picked up on the trail.

That had to be worth something.

He'd make it count.

.

They'd left the village.

Minato had found the Chuunin guarding one of the side-gates dead, but he hadn't paused to so much as take in the sight of the corpses.

That had been a while ago, and he was steadily heading further and further away from Konoha.

He'd collected more than a dozen bright red strands of hair now, and he knew he was on the right track.

Minato didn't stop to think about how foolish what he was doing was, because yeah, he'd been
promoted to Chuunin, but he was *alone* and these enemies had a hostage. He didn't know how many they were.

He should have alerted someone before he left.

Minato pushed the thought aside, because there hadn't been anyone around close enough, and whatever he should have done, it was too late now.

When he landed on the next branch, he slashed the bark of the tree in passing, like he'd done countless times already, leaving a clear mark behind.

It would make a more obvious trail than strands of Kushina's hair.

Keeping his eyes peeled and trying to go as fast as he could, Minato found another one a few minutes later.

Trying to track these people didn't leave him much room or time to think, anyway, and he didn't have a *plan*, he was well aware.

Minato had no idea what he'd do if he actually caught up to them.

He was pretty sure he was sort of betting on more capable people having caught up to him by then, but he was also very determinedly *not* thinking about what would happen if they *hadn't*.

Hours trickled by and he had a feeling he was catching up.

Minato wasn't sure if that was wishful thinking or dread, but he was tense enough he felt ready to snap.

For how long had he been running?

Surely, backup should have caught up to him by now?

Thinking wasn't really productive in this situation, so Minato tried not to. And it was easier than it normally was, because he was *tired* and- when had it gotten dark!?

Pausing for half a second, Minato wasted a moment to blink at his surroundings, before he went back to scouring the area around him, because it didn't really matter, in the large scheme of things, straining his eyes to find the slightest hint of *red*...

There.

He was still on track.

Kushina was dropping strands of hair often enough he hadn't lost the trail even once, even in the dark, and he'd be sure to tell her what a brilliant idea that was once he found her, but right now, all Minato focused on was to score another mark into the closest tree.

Pressing on.

The moon was high in the sky and it was very late when he all but stumbled over them.

Minato froze, for a fraction of a second, because this was the part he *hadn't planned for*, but it didn't last for long, because several shadows separated from the darkness around him and fell on the Kumo shinobi down below like demons out of a nightmare. They'd barely had time to turn to face Minato before they had to defend themselves from something far more frightening than a lone, newly
promoted Chuunin.

Minato blinked, shook his head, and focused on what he could do to help.

Get the hostage away from the enemy nin.

That was a good start.

Especially since two of the Kumo nin seemed to be about to race off, leaving their remaining three comrades behind to face the fury of ANBU.

Minato had launched himself after them before he could think twice, and he'd get into so much trouble for this, wouldn't he?

Not quite sure how it happened, the next he knew, Minato ducked beneath a masked man's attack and was crouched high up in one of the trees in the next second, Kushina in his arms and she was crying and struggling to get free, but he just tightened his hold on her, ignoring the cut on his forearm.

“It's alright,” he told her tiredly, even though the fighting wasn't done yet.

“No! They still have her!” Kushina sobbed and Minato didn't understand.

Had who?

A shrill scream that couldn't belong to anything other than a small child rent the air and Minato felt his blood run cold.

He'd miscalculated.

If these Kumo shinobi had been able to abduct Kushina without notice, then what was it that said she was the only one they'd taken?

-x-x-x-

Kyo was gonna smack Minato over the head as soon as they were safely back in the village.

What was he thinking? Haring off on his own without alerting anyone?!

She wanted to smack him right now, actually, for more than one reason, but she couldn't do that. And one of the reasons for that was that, despite her feelings on the matter, Minato made for an excellent distraction the shinobi they were pursuing wouldn't expect.

The two teams of ANBU, yes, but a lone twelve year old Chuunin? Absolutely not.

And she hated it.

This was dangerous and she wished it was playing out differently, but it wasn't.

And part of that was Minato's own fault.

These people had been in Konoha long enough to not only execute their mission, but also plan for a clean getaway. And they'd pulled it off.
The sight of those two Chuunin at the side-gate had chilled her to her core, because it really, truly drove home the fact that Konoha... wasn't safe. And she should have already known that, because she'd been told again and again. The siege had been undeniable.

But it hadn't made it real in quite the same way, because she hadn't been home. Hadn't lived it.

Kyo had infiltrated a shinobi village, though. She knew it was possible, but she hadn't connected the dots.

Stupid of her, really.

If Kyo could infiltrate Kiri at the age of eleven, then fully grown shinobi, Jounin, could absolutely do the same, but better.

Kyo barely glanced at the next slash in the bark of the tree she briefly touched down in, and at least Minato was still thinking. Keeping his wits about him.

Now, if only she could let him know he wasn't alone on this quest.

'Stay sharp,' Hyena signed her in passing, and he was entirely focused, running and jumping beside her. Like she should be, too.

Kyo took a deep breath and pushed all unnecessary thoughts to the side. She would have plenty of time to mentally go through all of this with a fine-toothed comb later.

As always, the tension broke without warning when Minato all but jumped into the Kumo shinobi midst and they finally dropped the stealth to engage.

Kyo stayed in Hyena's shadow to look for any advantage, assisting anyone when she could without getting in the way, but shifted more of her attention to Minato when her idiot teammate joined the fray to grab Kushina at the earliest opportunity.

Rushing to get on his heel and do her best to keep anyone from killing him.

Diverting kunai and interrupting an attempted grab.

At least he had the sense to get the hell out of the way after that, but that wasn't the only thing they had to worry about.

Kyo ducked a stray kunai, sprung back to her feet and jumped in to try and injure the Jounin Hyena was fighting, before her friend very abruptly shifted his focus and left the guy they'd been fighting for another.

Fraction of a second later, Kyo saw why and clenched her teeth, firming up her grip on her kunai while she was at it and followed Hyena without a second thought.

Hyena went after the Kumo nin's throat with exuberant glee that was coloured with more bloodlust than was perhaps conventional, but Kyo couldn't help but approve.

At the first crack in his defence, minimal though it might be, Kyo was there, threw her kunai at his head and tore Ashika out of his arms and got the hell away from all of them, Hyena getting in his face before he could even think to try and take the girl back.

Precious cargo got precedence.

“You're safe,” Kyo told the frozen stiff girl, cradling her to her chest, though not taking her eyes off
the fight, even when she crouched on a branch close to where Minato was standing. “We’ll bring you back to your nii-san before you know it,” she murmured absently, part of her wishing there was some way to temporarily disable the voice-altering seals on her mask, because Ashika deserved something familiar right now. At the very least.

She tensed when Gecko turned on Dove with no warning, coming so close to taking the man's head clean off his shoulders, Kyo jerked with an aborted need to move and help.

Ashika took precedence, but that didn't mean she couldn't use her hands.

It took absolutely no conscious input and it took a second for her to realise she had already flicked a needle at Gecko when the thought drifted through her head.

Another few seconds, and Dove apprehended their drugged, somehow compromised comrade and made sure he wouldn't do any further damage before the sedative knocked him out fully.

'Shit,' Cat signed harshly, and yeah, this was bad, because three of their Kumo shinobi had taken off in the confusion.

One was dead, and the fifth injured and unconscious.

'Cat, Hyena, pursue, but only to make sure they won't circle back and surprise us,' Viper took charge, and the two men took off without a sound. 'Scorpion, get your ass down here,' he signed next.

Kyo gently shifted her hold on Ashika, and jumped down to rejoin the remaining operatives.

'What did you dose him with?' Dove asked, having one hand on the back of Gecko's head, while the other one was staunching the bleeding on the side of his own neck, because he hadn't managed to dodge all of Gecko's unexpected attack.

'Sedative, strong enough to keep him under until we get back home and then some,' Kyo signed back succinctly, one-handed. 'It's a nice one,' she added, a thrum of amusement fleetingly tinting her emotions.

It died quickly when Ashika gave a very quiet whimper.

With a soft sigh, Kyo pulled a kunai to cut the ropes tying the girl's arms together behind her back.

“Stop,” Viper said shortly, making her freeze. “Turn her around fully,” he instructed.

Kyo put her knife back and carefully turned so that Ashika's back was facing Viper, exposing the little girl's arms, and the way her forearms had been tied securely together, pressed together, leaving her hands all but cradling the elbow on the other arm.

She was only six. She didn't deserve this.

“We're gonna free up your arms, Ashika,” Kyo told her softly, and she didn't doubt her voice was unnerving to her, like this, but it must be better than the alternative of complete silence.

Viper signed agitatedly at Shrew and they conversed hurriedly for a tense minute.

Kyo followed the silent conversation with growing apprehension.

When Viper finally turned back to her and Ashika, Kyo took a deep breath and said, “Try not to move, okay?” And only signed the go-ahead when Ashika jerked her head in a small nod against her
shoulder.

Viper pulled a kunai and cut through the rope with infinite care, Shrew standing at the ready right behind him.

The moment it was free, Shrew had already flashed through a series of seals too quick to follow, and the bundle of rope was replaced with a twig and-

There was a minor explosion twenty metres off into the shrubbery and Kyo had to take a second to breathe.

The explosion tags hadn't been strong enough to kill her, or even maim her.

But Ashika's arms would have ended up hurt enough she'd have needed hasty medical attention.

The moment her arms were free, Ashika wrapped them around Kyo's neck and held on so tightly she was half-convinced she'd never let go.

“You! Chuunin!” Viper called sharply up at Minato. “Bring her down here,” he added, projecting a grim sense of no-nonsense urgency.

Minato landed lightly next to Kyo, Kushina slumped in his arms.

The girl looked exhausted and more than a little worse for wear. There was quite an impressive bruise on her cheek.

Viper and Shrew repeated the process, which resulted in a similar explosion, but slightly larger, this time.

These guys were absolute assholes, Kyo decided, sending the dead Kumo Jounin a cold look, tightening her hold on Ashika in something of a hug.

Aita must be so worried.

“Let me go, I can stand on my own,” Kushina said and her voice was weaker than she was probably trying to project.

Minato obligingly lowered her to her feet, only to latch on to her arm when the girl staggered and nearly fell.

Kushina's face twisted up with threatening tears, only for her to angrily wipe at her eyes. “Ashika?” she asked tremulously.

Ashika whimpered.

“It's alright, Ashika,” Kyo spoke very softly next to the little girl's ear. “It's alright to cry, and hugs make it better.”

Ashika went stiff for a long second, only to finally melt into her hold with a quiet, terrified sob.

Kyo rubbed one hand up and down her back, sending Kushina a brief glance.

Minato looked both pale and exhausted, but he was focused on Kushina, which was probably good. Kept him from dwelling on anything else right now.

She doubted he'd have a fun time with the onset of realisation later on, when all the what-ifs got a
chance to really make themselves known, because it wasn't fun to be all alone in the face of enemies, no matter if that was true or not.

They'd been there for the later part of the run, but Minato hadn't known that. He'd still pressed on, though.

...she didn't know if she ought to be angry with him or proud.

She didn't know many people who would have taken off after them on their own. Recklessness, according to some, she was sure.

Ashika's crying had subsided somewhat, and Kyo didn't doubt she'd soon be asleep. She hadn't stopped clinging to her, despite her obvious exhaustion.

“Shrew, you carry the Uzumaki princess,” Viper ordered shortly, speaking out loud for the non-ANBU present's benefit, she was sure. “Get ready to move the moment Cat and Hyena comes back.” And then turned to Kyo. 'Can you carry her and run without slowing us down?' he asked her.

Kyo fixed him with an unamused look. She wasn't eight any more.

She stopped rubbing Ashika's back only long enough to sign 'Affirmative,' and she would make sure of it.

Viper inclined his head and turned to eye Minato critically.

Ashika had gone boneless with sleep by the time Hyena and Cat melted out of the shadows, panting hard and visibly strained but unhurt.

'Bastards high-tailed it back to Kumo,' Cat reported jerkily, chest expanding rapidly to provide him with oxygen.

Hyena sidled closer to Kyo, discreetly brushing his fingers against her arm.

'I'm fine,' she signed him in answer to the unspoken question. 'You?'

'It was quite the run!' Hyena signed back and she just knew he was grinning at her, the loveable maniac, and he was just as winded as Cat was.

“We're leaving,” Viper declared once he'd made sure everyone was ready to move. “First sign you can't keep up, Hyena will carry you,” he added, directed at Minato. He didn't wait for any kind of response before he directed Dove to pick up Gecko, Cat grabbed the unconscious Kumo nin the moment Falcon had secured him properly, which left Falcon and Viper without anything weighing them down in case there'd be further fighting.

The two of them could be considered their currently freshest soldiers.

“Go,” Viper ordered shortly and Kyo fell into formation without a hitch, herself, Shrew and Minato in the most protected spot in the middle of their group.

Ashika remained asleep the whole run back to Konoha.

Konoha was buzzing with activity when they re-entered the village and every shinobi she saw was tense and all but twitching.
The minor eastern gate had been cleaned up while they’d been gone and two new grim-faced
Chuunin had taken the fallen comrades' places, in addition to a pair of ANBU that kept to the
shadows.

Viper steered them directly to the hospital, because they had several patients for the medics to see to,
including a hostile one that needed to be looked over before he was passed on to T&I.

Kyo cared more about Ashika and Kushina, though. And Gecko. She wondered what had happened
to make him attack Dove like that...

The moment they touched down in front of the hospital, Hinata-shishou was there, Aita not even half
a step behind him and Kyo very nearly ended up stabbing him when Aita swept up not only Ashika,
but her as well, into a tight hug that screamed frantic desperation.

“She's physically unharmed,” Kyo informed him quietly, the moment she’d managed to unwind
enough she no longer felt like she was a hair away from gutting her friend. “Now unhand me,” she
added. “You can hug the stuffing out of me later if you want.”

“I will,” Aita muttered into Ashika's hair, but did let go. Reluctantly.

Hinata-shishou had instead gone to Kushina, and while he projected a similar level of stress and
worry, he was far more dignified in his approach than his apprentice had been.

“Uzumaki-san, if you could accompany us into the hospital,” Viper said, sidling up to Hinata and
twitching a hand at the building right in front of them. “The abductors used seals and there are chakra
suppression seals we didn't want to touch.”

“Lead the way.” Hinata-shishou said firmly, keeping one hand on Kushina's back, even though she'd
hid her bruised face against the back of Shrew’s shoulder the moment the man had approached her.

Viper inclined his head in a shallow nod and set to it.

By the time Kyo had been relieved of the small child in her arms and things were settled enough for
her to get a minute with Aita in relative privacy, the teen looked exhausted.

“She didn't deserve this,” he said tiredly, rubbing a hand over his face. “She didn't need this. Neither
of them did.”

“No, they didn't,” Kyo agreed softly. “We'll help her move past it, though,” she reminded him,
fooling at Ashika and reaching out to squeeze Aita's hand for a second, before she left.

She had an errant Chuunin to track down and make sure no one was about to metaphorically murder
him for being a reckless moron.

Had someone alerted Jiraiya to what had been going on, yet?

-x-x-x-

Minato was merely following orders at this point, and he wasn't actually sure what was going on.

He’d been looked over by both a medic and a man in a uniform he couldn't claim to have seen
before, but he had a feeling he knew where that man primarily worked, anyway.

Minato had seen the unconscious Kumo shinobi get handed over to another man dressed very
similarly to that one, which... left him feeling rather uncomfortable.
His arm had been bandaged and treated, and he'd been informed he was very lucky not to be hurt more badly.

It was a struggle to stay alert by the time he was approached again.

Minato blinked at the much shorter ANBU, taking in the mask and... “Scorpion?” he asked uncertainly, because while he’d seen Kyo in her ANBU uniform before, it had been a while ago and he hadn't gotten a good look at her mask. And this person held themselves differently.

The ANBU- Kyo inclined her head and stepped up to him, slowly reaching out with a gloved hand to touch his arm gently.

Minato closed his eyes and let himself tip towards Kyo, because he was tired and he wanted this day to be over with already.

Kyo caught him effortlessly and let him rest his head on her shoulder.

“Were you there the whole time?” he asked in a quiet mutter, ignoring the quiver in his voice, not lifting his head from her shoulder and he didn't care that they weren't alone.

“No,” she said, and her voice sounded weird.

Minato wasn't sure he liked it, but there wasn't anything he could do about it anyway. He sighed. “I was so scared,” he breathed, lifting a hand to grip her forearm, wondering if this made him too clingy. “I didn't know what to do.”

Rather than shrug him off, Kyo mirrored him, gripping his arm right back with her other hand, pulling him closer.

“Me too, idiot. Running off on your own,” she muttered, and he could feel her crane her neck to look at something, but still didn't shift.

It was kinda nice to stand like this, not having to worry about anyone other than himself. Knowing Kyo was keeping an eye out for him.

“Namikaze,” someone said, and they sounded the same way all the ANBU did, voice life-less, impersonal and monotone. Same as Kyo's, right now.

When Kyo nudged him, Minato raised his head to blink blearily at the tall man that had approached them.

His mask was snarling, showing off teeth and looking entirely unfriendly.

He seemed to inspect Kyo a moment, before his mask turned to Minato with unnerving intensity.

“Your verbal report will be dealt with now,” he said and gestured shortly with one hand at him to get started.

Minato cleared his throat and did.

Briefly covering his motives behind his visit to the Uzumaki compound -worry- and all the details he could remember.

Thinking back, there had been far less people moving about than there should have been, hadn’t there? And wasn't it just plain weird for the guard not to have even looked at him?
Fuuinjutsu student or not, the guard should have looked up from his scroll to at least give him a once-over.

The Senju guard always did, no matter when or how often he showed up. Same with the Inuzuka guard, the few times he'd gone with Kyo.

Minato frowned. “It was weird. No one really looked at me, and I didn't really think of going to find someone when I realised what had happened.” He paused, frown deepening. “Or, maybe it's better to say there wasn't time?” he mused, but that wasn't actually true... It wouldn't have taken that long?

Minato blinked when the tall ANBU in front of him sighed silently. “Continue,” he ordered.

Which he did, recounting everything to the best of his abilities, telling him about the hairs that had led him in the right direction.

Which made him aware of the fact he was still holding them in his hand, which was clenched in an almost painfully tight fist.

He hadn't noticed.

Minato grimaced, but couldn't work up the energy to try and relax his fingers right then.

Kyo nudged him lightly, pulling him back on track, and Minato tiredly finished his oral report, ending it all with the ANBU charging the Kumo shinobi and how he'd grabbed Kushina to get her out of the way.

“I didn't even consider the possibility of them having grabbed anyone else,” he admitted in a mutter, frowning at the far wall.

What part of the hospital were they even in?

The ANBU inclined his head shortly, which Minato took as a dismissal, and he wasted no time in leaning part of his weight on Kyo, who had remained beside him throughout.

“I need to give my report, too,” she said softly. “I'll come back after, though, okay?”

Minato gave a reluctant nod and watched her walk away with the tall ANBU, looking perfectly at ease at his side. Like she belonged there.

He couldn't help but wonder how used to these things she was to be so unaffected.

Minato felt like he could barely keep himself together, and he wasn't actually the one who'd been abducted by enemy nin.

With a deep sigh, Minato folded himself down to sit on the floor, leaning his back against the wall to wait this whole thing out.

He'd have to go to Psych again after this, wouldn't he?

Surely sensei would be informed soon and... he didn't even know. He hoped Kushina was alright. And the little girl.

-x-x-x-
Chapter 86

Chapter Summary

What are the facts?

“This is why genjutsu masters are so damn dangerous,” Jiraiya huffed, pulling his hands through his hair. “And a fucking pain to deal with,” he added darkly, frowning at nothing.

“I'm just glad to know why everyone acted so strangely,” Minato admitted uncomfortably. And he looked rather awkward, because they all knew he had been one of those people.

“Hinata-shishou and a few of the others are putting up anti-genjutsu seals all over the Uzumaki compound as we speak,” Kyo added her own nugget of information to the conversation. Though Aita's explanation had been much more complicated. “Something like that will never happen again, not within those walls.” Not that it would undo the damage.

Ashika had been doing better lately, too.

Aita had cried tears of helpless frustration when she'd finally gotten a chance to go visit him out of uniform earlier this morning. He'd also made good on his promise to 'hug the stuffing out of her' too, but she hadn't minded in the least.

None of them had gotten any sleep, and it was almost noon now.

Jiraiya-sensei had come to collect the both of them from the hospital, looking grim and unamused, eyeing the two of them like he was wondering what the hell he'd ever done to get saddled with such troublesome students.

Right now, Kyo couldn't really find it in herself to blame him.

No regrets, though.

Jiraiya had taken them to a nearby training field and sat them down to talk and make sure they were alright.

He sighed heavily. “And sensei's kept me and Orochimaru in the village to try and discourage something like this from happening,” he muttered. “For all the good it did us.”

Kyo hummed. Changing host for a Biju must be a tense affair so she supposed it made sense.

Minato's head came down on her shoulder, jarring her back to the present.

She sent him a concerned glance and then met Jiraiya's gaze.

“You two should go home. Sleep. You've more than earned it,” he said, getting back to his feet.

Kyo nudged Minato gently, rousing him from the doze he'd fallen into. “Yeah, sure, sensei,” he said, blinking blearily at their surroundings, before he focused on Jiraiya. “Just wanna check up on Kushina first.”
“I’ll make sure he doesn’t fall asleep on the side of the road,” Kyo promised, feeling somewhat amused.

“Great,” Jiraiya huffed, eyeing her intently, too. “Both of you need sleep. I have to go.” And he reluctantly turned to leave. “Don’t get into any more trouble,” he ordered them before he took off.

“I feel like I want to comment on his lacking faith in us, but we don’t really have much of a leg to stand on right now,” Kyo mused philosophically, blearily peering up at the cheerfully blue sky.

Minato hummed a sleepy agreement, before he snorted. “I was always the good student,” he said with a crooked, half-hearted grin. “Never caused any trouble.”

“Well, welcome to the dark side,” Kyo snickered. “At least you didn't accidentally poison your classmates.”

Minato choked on a laugh. “You didn’t.” And he was definitely laughing at her.

“Give me some slack, I was five and they stole my lunch. Sure, I shouldn't have left it unattended, but they technically poisoned themselves. Now come on, didn't you want to check up on Kushina before you fall asleep on your feet?”

And she stood up, offering him a hand up.

Minato took it with a tired smile. “I'm really glad you're my friend, Kyo.”

“Not as glad as I am that you're mine,” she shot back, feeling ridiculously happy. Despite everything that had happened yesterday and during the night, no one she knew and cared about had died.

Yes, Ashika would no doubt have even more issues to deal with, but she wouldn't be alone. Would have support and love and she would be fine with time and healing.

“Here it is,” Kyo said, peering at the scribbles beside the otherwise unmarked door.

She couldn't actually understand them, because medics had their own codes and ways of doing things, but being friends with Aita had its perks.

“Are you sure we shouldn't have asked one of the nurses if this was alright?” Minato asked, unable to stop himself from worrying.

Kyo smirked at him. “They would have told us to come back tomorrow, I bet,” she shared. “Better to just get it over with. If they catch us in the act, we'll apologise.” And maybe act like a pair of clueless children, if they could. Could she still pass herself off as a Genin?

She blinked and sent Minato a glance only to find him staring at the door with a funny look on his face.

Kyo tilted her head. Nerves?

“Want to go home?” she asked him, because people were allowed to change their minds.

Minato shook his head. “No,” he said, and he sounded firm. But he still didn't move.

Clearly projecting her movements, Kyo reached for the door handle, sending Minato another look, but he made no move to stop her. So she opened the door and pushed him inside.
She hadn't really planned for him to snag her hand and pull her in with him, though.

There was an awkward pause.

“What are you two doing here?” Kushina asked. She was curled up in the single hospital bed, her deep red hair a stark contrast to the primarily pale colours in the room. The girl was lying on her side, legs pulled up to her chest and staring out the single window.

There was a very discreet fluctuation of chakra to the left and Kyo automatically signed a greeting.

Yeah, Kushina would very definitely have an ANBU guard for a while.

She frowned minutely. Shouldn't she already have had an ANBU guard?

Oh, shit, what if it wasn't only those two Chuunin who had died? She'd need to check in at headquarters later to make sure...

Kyo snapped back to the present.

There was a very awkward silence currently smothering the room.

Kyo elbowed Minato in the side pointedly and then pushed him further towards the bed with a look.

“Uh, I wanted to check- er, I mean, see you were alright,” the boy said, and this wasn't doing anything about decreasing the awkwardness.

Kushina frowned, but didn't say anything. She looked pretty miserable, but at least someone had done something about the bruise on her cheek. It now looked several days old.

Kyo looked between the two of them and decided it was a very good thing she was good at blending in with her surroundings. She was not getting involved any further in this mess.

“Why? Haven't you done enough?” Kushina asked sullenly.

“Um, no?” Minato sounded confused.

Kyo very discreetly positioned herself by the wall, pulled her chakra into her core and... pretended to be one with the wall.

Yep, it was a solid plan.

“You shouldn't have gotten involved, it had nothing to do with you,” Kushina said, still not really looking at Minato. “Why did you?” she added abruptly, sitting up with a scowl, looking like she was more than prepared to set off her temper. “You've never involved yourself before.” And she eyed Minato suspiciously.

There was... more history here than Kyo was really aware of, clearly, because that didn't sound like it made any sense.

Minato blinked at the girl. “That wasn't the same at all,” he said slowly, as if he had no idea how the conversation had taken this turn. “Everyone should get help when faced with enemy shinobi,” he said firmly. “And all those other times were with bullies, and I always knew you could take care of yourself. You're strong.”

There was a beat of silence, and Kushina was blinking owlishly at Minato now.
Kyo wondered if she shouldn't just make a run for it while she still could.

“What?”

“I mean- you're really smart, and that thing you did with your hair-” Minato was rambling, and there was a flush creeping up his cheeks, “to make a trail, it was really clever. I've always thought your hair is very pretty.”

Minato might actually combust, because his face was bright red now.

Not that he was the only one.

Kushina was staring at him like she thought he was daft, but her face was also starting to take on the same colour as her hair.

...this was painful to watch.

Kyo would actually like to be somewhere else.

Minato might actually combust, because his face was bright red now.

Kushina was staring at him like she thought he was daft, but her face was also starting to take on the same colour as her hair.

...this was painful to watch.

Kyo would actually like to be somewhere else.

“Wha- It wasn't- You can't just-” Kushina took a deep breath and tried again, pointing a finger at Minato's flushed face. “Are you stupid!?” Only to clap both hands over her mouth, evidently not having intended to say that.

“I thought your hair was beautiful already the first time I saw you. It was easy to spot the strands you dropped. That was a really clever thing to do in an otherwise hopeless situation,” Minato said solemnly, though it was ruined somewhat by the way his blush deepened further.

Kushina seemed to have gone mute, and she was staring at Minato with wide, unblinking eyes.

Neither of them would notice if she just shunshined out of here. Would they?

Kyo was experiencing intense regret right now.

Why had she let Minato drag her in here, again?

The two twelve year olds were just staring awkwardly at each other now. She had places to be, right? But she'd promised Jiraiya-sensei she'd make sure Minato got some actual sleep, in an actual bed.

...and the bed in here wouldn't be a viable option. The two ducklings might spontaneously combust.

Or Kushina might accidentally kill her teammate due to acute embarrassment and she didn't want that.

Kyo had grown much too fond of Minato to let that happen.

Dragging both hands down her face, Kyo took deep breaths. She could do this.

“Sensei told us to go home and get some sleep, and I think Kushina needs to rest, too, Minato,” Kyo said softly into the silence, not looking up or even removing her hands from her face.

She'd seen more than enough of this tragically uncomfortable scene.

From the sound of it, both of them jumped.

Great, they'd forgotten about her.
“Oh, right.” Minato cleared his throat, sounding a mix of relieved and mildly panicked. “Right, we should- do that.”

“Yes, we should,” Kyo agreed dryly. “I'm really glad you're alright, Kushina,” she said, finally looking up and meeting the girl's gaze head on, sending her a small, friendly smile.

“Yeah,” Kushina agreed faintly, looking mildly dazed and blushing so hard she may be on the verge of fainting.

Kyo wouldn't have been surprised to see steam come out of her ears.

She waited a heartbeat for Minato to do something, but he just stood there. Like the idiot he secretly was, so Kyo stood away from the wall to collect him.

“I hope we'll keep having fuuinjutsu lessons together,” Kyo told Kushina while she dragged Minato with her to the door, because she wanted to leave. “You should also be proud of yourself for keeping it together and staying sharp,” she added, because Minato was definitely right about one thing. “And thank you for looking out for Ashika, even in a situation like that. As much as was possible.” She paused, wondering if she wanted to add anything else now that she had the chance without risking the girl's quick temper. “Bye,” she said when she couldn't think of anything.

“Bye,” Minato echoed lamely, and that was all Kyo needed.

They were out of here.

She very firmly closed the door behind them and didn't say anything until she'd successfully dragged Minato all the way to his apartment, gotten him inside and put both of them to bed.

She was far too tired to deal with this and she honestly couldn't be bothered to go any further when there was a perfectly good bed here and she could have the option of keeping Minato close.

Because this whole thing could have very easily turned into a disaster.

Kyo was ever so grateful that it hadn't, but that didn't mean she wasn't aware of what might have been the fallout.

“I just made a fool of myself, didn't I?” Minato asked miserably into the silence of his apartment.

The sun was streaming into the room, because it was still the middle of the day, but neither of them cared about that.

“I don't think so at all,” Kyo refuted honestly. “You told her something she probably needed to hear, and you spoke the truth. That's worth something, Minato.” She eyed him blearily a second, before she snuggled close. “Now sleep,” she ordered, settling down.

Minato huffed in a manner that might have been amused, or possibly exasperated, though it sounded a little bit like a sob, too, but he did relax. Closed his eyes.

Both of them were exhausted.

It didn't take more than a minute for both of them to be out.

The next morning, Kyo opened the door to leave Minato’s apartment, only to freeze at the sight that greeted her.
Flat, yellow eyes stared at her from a thoroughly unimpressed and unamused, though admittedly canine, face.

“Just going to talk to a few people, huh,” Kisaki said in a deadpan voice.

“Hi, Kisaki!” Minato called from the floor in front of his bed, where he'd sat down to go through his kunai. Whetstone at the ready beside him. More to give himself something to do and distract himself than because he'd used any of them last night.

Yesterday night?

He'd told her his arm didn't hurt, either, so that was good, even though he was due another check-up today, if she wasn't mistaken.

“Don't you 'hi, Kisaki' me,” the ninken grumbled. “You're just as bad!” she huffed, and Kisaki was officially judging both of them.

Kyo sent her a tentative, apologetic smile. “In my defence, I didn't know anything other than what I'd planned would happen.”

Kisaki growled half-heartedly at her, but she was definitely more frustrated than anything else. “This isn't supposed to happen any more,” she declared firmly. “If you keep this up, I will never leave your side ever again,” she declared darkly.

Kyo blinked and tilted her head. “Okay?” she said, because that didn't actually sound so bad.

Kisaki's ears were still turned back and down with displeasure, eyeing her intently. “Where are we going?” she asked when Kyo said nothing else.

“I want to go back to the hospital. I'm pretty sure Aita hasn't left and—” she hesitated a fraction of a second, “can you come with me to get Genma before we go?”

Kisaki huffed again, but dropped the unfriendly body-language. “Fine. Come on.”

“Bye, Kisaki,” Minato called after the dog with a forced grin.

If he wanted to pretend everything was fine, then she'd let him, for now.

Kyo had to bite back a fond sigh. “See you later, Minato,” she tossed over her shoulder and got going.

“Remember what I told you?” Kyo asked, pausing outside the door to Ashika's hospital room.

“Something bad happened to Ashika and she needs lots of hugs,” Genma said solemnly.

Well. Not exactly what she'd told him, but good enough. “She needs us to be very kind and patient,” Kyo said softly. “And if she wants them, then yes, also hugs.”

Genma nodded against her shoulder, looking very serious.

Kyo took a deep breath, exchanged a look with Kisaki, and let it out as a sigh and then knocked.

Kisaki pressed against her leg, for just a moment, in silent encouragement.

“Come in, Kyo,” Aita called, voice just loud enough to be audible through the door.
Slipping inside, she wandered up to the bed at an unhurried pace, taking in the occupants.

Aita was reclined on the mattress, Ashika curled up party in his lap and partly lying on his chest.

“Hey,” Kyo greeted with a small smile. “How are you?”

“Tired,” Aita answered for both of them, rubbing a hand against his cheek. He didn't look like he'd slept since she'd last seen him. “Hi, Genma,” he continued, rather than dwell on it. “How nice of you to come visit us.” He smiled wearily.

“Nee-san told me Ashika's sad,” her little brother told him seriously, before he eyed his friend. “Hi, Ahiska. I'm here to hug you better,” he announced.

Kyo couldn't help but huff with amusement, for just a second. “Unfortunately, hugs aren't a cure-all, Genma. But they make us feel less alone and less scared.” And she helped her brother off her back and onto the bed, where he wasted no time to climb over Aita's legs to wrap around the very quiet and still little girl.

Kyo, on the other hand, took the chair Aita had been sitting in at one point, while Kisaki sat down next to her, watching the two Uzamaki intently.

“Hello, Kisaki,” Aita said once he was sure Ashika wouldn't react negatively to being insistently cuddled. “Haven't seen you in a while. You look well.”

The ninken snorted softly, ears flicking. “You'll see me more now that I have an official partner again,” she said haughtily. “Congratulations on the pup,” she added, sounding almost snooty.

Kyo blinked and turned to eye her canine friend. “What's with the attitude?” she couldn't help but ask.

Kisaki shot her a condescending look, as well. “I'm joining team training from now on,” she declared.

“Sure,” Kyo said slowly. “That was sort of the plan?” She couldn't help but feel confused. “We both know it's gonna take a while for you to get back into peak condition, but you don't have to prove yourself to anyone, Kisaki.”

“Staking claim,” Kisaki half-growled. “People have forgotten, but I'll remind them,” she muttered, sounding remarkably ill-tempered.

Kyo considered her a moment, before she decided not to press. Not right now. “You know,” she said, turning back to Aita. “I feel like it wasn't so long ago we were here, only our positions were reversed, then.”

Aita managed a bleak smile. “We need to stop meeting like this,” he agreed.

They sat in silence for a minute, because neither Kyo nor Aita were sure what to talk about.

Ashika was at least responding to Genma's hug by pressing as close as she could manage, which had to be better than rejection of any physical contact, surely.

“What did the Psych people say?” she asked softly.

Aita shook his head and mouthed 'later'.

Kyo nodded her acceptance and cast her mind about for another subject. “Genma? Why don't you
tell Ashika about your first few poison lessons?” she suggested, feeling pleased when her brother perked up and eagerly launched into the subject.

Even better, Ashika actually showed interest.

-x-x-x-

Kyo woke up abruptly, only to find herself glancing around the darkness in her and Genma's room, wondering what had woken her up and feeling wide awake now that she was no longer asleep.

“Kyo,” Kisaki said softly, nudging her arm again, which made her realise who the culprit was.

“What is it?” she whispered, wondering if she should be feeling irritated or not. Not that Kisaki would wake her for no reason, but she’d been asleep. Sleeping was nice.

“You smell like blood,” Kisaki informed her solemnly, and Kyo blinked.

Blood? What?

She pushed herself into a seat and- oh. Yeah. Right.

It was time for that already?

Had it really been a month?

Kyo was pretty sure it had been longer. Or at least it had felt longer, what with everything that had happened.

Not that her period necessarily had to be regular, and that was without acknowledging the fact that Kyo had quite forgotten all about it.

Rubbing at her eyes for just a second, Kyo got up and tried to remember where she'd put that... belt-diaper-like thing she'd gotten from the brothel. And the supplies from the hospital.

Since she'd forgotten to look into it, she'd have to make do with it for now.

At least that was better than bleeding all over her bed.

Kyo had probably managed to smear blood on the sheets anyway. Great.

Gathering up everything she'd need, she headed for the bathroom, flicking on the light to see what she was dealing with here.

Peering down at her thighs, Kyo pursed her lips and mused that at least she hadn't been wearing trousers, this time.

Less clean-up.

Heaving a weary sigh, Kyo set to it.

Cleaning herself up and doing what needed to be done, and she was all about done when there was a soft knock on the door.

“Kyo? Everything alright?” tou-san's voice asked and Kyo froze.
Squashing down the irrational urge to hurriedly hide all evidence, she reminded herself that she’d already told her dad about this, and... this was probably a good opportunity to ask, actually.

“Yeah. Fine,” she said back after a slightly too-long pause. “Um, one second.”

When Kou didn’t open the door, she went back to what she’d been doing; washing out the worst of the blood from her underwear in the sink, the cold water draining all the warmth from her fingers.

That done, she hung them to dry and then washed her hands.

She may or may not be dragging things out, but she was willing to disregard that right now.

This would almost definitely be a very awkward conversation.

Before she left the illusory safety of the bathroom, Kyo took a moment to just. Breathe. Deep, calm breaths, trying to tell herself there wasn't any need to feel as uncomfortable as she was.

Absolutely no need.
...easier said than done.

With a grimace at herself, Kyo tentatively exited the bathroom and looked around for Kou.

There was a light on in the kitchen, so that was where she went.

Tou-san had taken a seat by the kitchen table, a mug of steaming tea in front of him that he was loosely cradling with one hand as he frowned at the wall.

There was a mug for her, too.

Lips twitching minutely, because she really did have the best dad, Kyo crept into the room and took the seat opposite from her father.

Kou blinked and focused on her but didn't say anything. Instead, he raised his mug to his mouth to take a sip of tea.

Kyo fiddled with her fingers for a moment, before she blurted, “I probably bled on the bed.” And consequently felt like smacking her face into the table. Preferably hard enough to render herself unconscious.

Her dad gave a huff that sounded almost amused. “I've done that, too, a few times, I must confess,” he said, voice mild.

“Yeah, but the difference is I'm not injured,” she muttered. Kou said nothing, so she tentatively continued. “How did... how did kaa-san deal with this? When I went to the hospital, they told me there were-” she gestured vaguely with one hand, “drugs, a shot I could take. Or pills.” Kyo was silent a second. “But that won't really work for long for me, will it?”

“Not really, no,” Kou confirmed quietly.

“So what did kaa-san do when she had to go on missions?” Kyo pressed, because this was something she needed to know.

Kou sighed and raised a hand to his face to drag it over his mouth, sending her a vaguely pained look. “You know, when you were born, I never thought I'd have to have this conversation with you,” he said wistfully. “I always assumed Isshun would be here to help you, even with things like
“Especially with things like this.”

“Instead, we get to be awkward and uncomfortable together,” Kyo joked half-heartedly.

Her dad just hummed softly. “Isshun used a—” he trailed off uncertainly, before he pushed on with a grimace, “I don't actually know what she called it, or much about it. Wasn't something we ever talked about. I'm afraid I won't be of much use to you, kitten.” And he looked truly apologetic about it.

As well as troubled.

Kyo reached for her tea, pursing her lips in thought. “What am I supposed to do, then?” she couldn't help but ask.

Kou sighed and leaned back, scrubbing a hand through his hair, looking tired and frustrated. “You could talk to Senpu about it,” he suggested, making it obvious he'd thought about this, “or inquire with the women at the hospital. Whichever you'd be more comfortable with.”

“Senpu,” she said, not having to even think about it. She blinked. “You think she can help me?”

“Many of the Inuzuka aren't very fond of the drugs,” Kou shrugged, “so I think she'd know more about it than I do, at least.”

And if she didn't, then she probably knew who to ask, at the very least, Kyo realised.

She drank some more of her tea.

Tou-san didn't show any inclination to getting up any time soon, either, so Kyo cast about for something to say.

“Are you happy, tou-san?” slipped out of her mouth before she could come to any sort of decision.

Kou blinked at her, face entirely blank. “What?”

“I mean, ever since kaa-san died,” her voice trailed off awkwardly, before she cleared her throat and pressed on, “I don't want you to feel lonely,” she said quietly.

Kou blinked a few times, but no longer looked quite so blank. “Kyo—” he began to say, but she interrupted him.

“I wouldn't judge you if you wanted to find someone, you know. I want you to be happy,” she told him seriously. “I'm not saying you have to get married, unless that's something you want, but you don't have to be alone, tou-san.”

Kou stared at her, looking as close to speechless as she'd ever seen him and Kyo shifted in her seat self-consciously.

It wasn't wrong of her to bring this up, was it? She knew he missed kaa-san -she did, too- but that didn't mean he had to be miserable.

“I mean, you're not that old, you could fall in love again,” she continued, meeting her dad's gaze head on, and he looked- quietly bewildered, and a bit overwhelmed, perhaps. “I know you still miss kaa-san, and I do, too, but—”

“Kyo. Kitten,” tou-san cut into her sentence with a sigh, rubbing one hand over his eyes for a second. “I love you and Genma dearly. It's harder since Isshun died, I won't deny that, but,” he
paused, frowning at the table for a second, getting his mind in order, “your mother, she was special. There isn't anyone else quite like her, and I'm afraid I'd compare any woman to her.”

Which wasn't fair to anyone, and they both knew it.

“But that doesn't mean you have to cut yourself off from everyone else,” Kyo insisted. “I know you have Ryota, and I love him, he's a good friend, but he's been busy a lot lately, with the wedding and his clan.” She wasn't blind; she knew how much her dad had buried himself in his work for a while now. No matter how busy she got with everything else, she liked to think she'd always notice when her family was struggling. “I'm not saying this isn't okay, but I just wanted to know if you're happy.”

Kou sighed again, rubbing at his cheek and looking at her with undefinable eyes. “I'm pretty sure a man isn't supposed to have conversations like this with his children,” he murmured softly.

“We established that I wasn't like other children a long time ago, tou-san,” Kyo reminded him in a weak attempt at humour. “So if you want to have a night to yourself sometimes, I'll distract Genma,” she promised him with a small smile. “And if you do find someone you like, then I will be nothing but happy for you.”

Kou huffed, and he looked like he wasn't sure if he should be feeling amused or befuddled.

The room was silent, her dad clearly needing a moment to absorb this whole subject, and yeah, it had probably come out of the blue, from his perspective, but Kyo thought it was important.

She knew people in the Before who had hated the idea of their parents meeting a new partner, and she had never understood it. Why begrudge a person you loved happiness?

Her then-mother had had one serious boyfriend after the divorce and his children had been horrible to her, and they'd been fully grown. Adults. As if what their father did was in any way her fault.

Kyo didn't understand it, but she'd wanted to make it clear to tou-san that she wasn't like that, if he truly did want to find someone. If he was lonely.

“I'm... not sure how I feel about this,” Kou eventually said, face pensive. “But, Kyo? Being your and Genma's parent isn't a chore. I am happy, being your father,” he said firmly. “And I don't want you thinking otherwise.”

“Okay,” she agreed, feeling warm and fuzzy. “I love you, tou-san.”

“I love you, too. Now, you should get back to bed,” he sighed tiredly, draining the last of his tea, which was no doubt cold by now.

Kyo glanced down at her mug, and it was still half-full, but she didn't really feel like finishing it. Instead, she got up, poured out the contents of her mug in the sink, which was also where she put down the mug, and then went to give her dad a hug.

“I love you,” she muttered into his shoulder.

“You told me just a little while ago,” he said fondly, squeezing her gently.

“I know, but I do.” Kyo took a deep breath, and tou-san smelled like kunai oil and metal, but also like home. “Good night,” she added quietly.

“Night, kitten.”
When she slipped back into bed, Kisaki shifted her head to peer at her through the dark.

“You okay?” she asked mutedly, conscious of Genma, who was sleeping in his bed on the other side of the room.

“Fine,” Kyo said as she slid back into place beside the ninke, because Kisaki took up more than half the bed, but she didn't mind. It just meant she had someone to shamelessly cuddle throughout the night. “Need to talk to Senpu in the morning,” she added. “Are you okay, Kisaki?” Kyo asked once she had finally settled and gotten comfortable.

Kisaki sighed and shifted to put her head on Kyo's chest, her warm breath ghosting over her face.

“It's not the same,” she whispered. “You're not Taku.”

Kyo spent a minute just breathing, letting those words wash over her and accepting the metaphorical kick to the chest.

“No, I'm not,” she agreed on a breath. “But I'm your friend and I love you. We'll be alright together, don't you think?”

Kisaki hummed a note deep in her chest, before she pressed her snout against the side of Kyo's throat, all but pressing her head up under her jaw.

It was answer enough.

-x-x-x-

Kyo's talk with Senpu went better than anticipated, and she was so glad she didn't have to go to the hospital to talk to a complete stranger about this.

The early morning conversation somehow grew into a whole day lesson, not just to tell her about... well, the cup? Kyo wasn't sure what to call it, but it was a small cup-like thing you put up your vagina that collected the blood and could be left in there for much longer than was safe with tampons.

A tampon could make you sick if you left it in for too long, but this cup-thing was fine.

And you could even put it in if you thought you'd get your period but wasn't sure! And Kyo was fairly sure she was in love.

But back to her day with Senpu; the woman not only told her everything she wanted to know, she also showed her how to make them, which meant Kyo would be able to make a new one in the field if she ever lost hers.

It was fantastic.

A huge load off her shoulders, frankly, and getting her period once a month again no longer felt like a death sentence.

This was fine, actually. She could handle this, now.
This was so easy, why wasn't everyone using these things? Why didn't everyone know about them?
You just had to take it out, rinse it thoroughly with clean water and then you could put it back in for another whole day, if you didn't bleed too much.

Fantastic.

Made from a certain kind of tree resin, which Senpu had informed her had antiseptic abilities, you made the small cup, which was still somewhat flexible and felt a bit like rubber and yeah, you had to make a new one when you'd used it a while, but they could last for over a year, if you took proper care of them.

It was all very interesting.

Not to mention it was such a huge relief, her mood practically soared.
All of her issues weren't magically fixed, but this sure made it feel like her immediate future was much brighter.

Maybe puberty wouldn't be as awful as she had feared it would be? She'd done it once before, she knew what to expect, she could deal.

When she and Kisaki eventually came back home, she was humming softly under her breath and the ninjen looked happier, too, which was wonderful.

It would take time for them to settle into this new kind of relationship, and that was okay. So long as they could talk about things they'd be fine.

“How'd it go?” tou-san asked, coming out of the kitchen to give her a look.

“Great!” Kyo grinned. “I'm all set now,” she said. “Where's Genma?”

“In your room,” Kou said. “Go see what he's up to, please, while I finish dinner.” And he returned to his cooking.

“Sure,” she agreed, because she never minded helping their dad with Genma. “What are you up to?” Kyo asked when she walked into their room to find Genma had dragged both of their comforters off their beds, and also brought in a couple of chairs from the kitchen to build a pillow fort.

When she crouched down, she also spotted one of the cushions from the sofa.

“I made a house!” Genma exclaimed excitedly, crawling out of his pillow fort to give her a hug. “Do you think Ashika will like it? She can come sleep over when she's better,” he gushed excitedly, tugging on her arm until she followed him 'inside'.

Kisaki stuck her head in under the comforter to get a look, made a pleased, softly amused noise and lied down with her head pillowed on the sofa cushion Kyo and Genma were sitting on.

“How do you like it?” her brother asked.

“I love it,” Kyo said, looking around with a grin. “It's amazing.” It was very cosy, and he'd also moved several of his toys and favourite books into the space.

“Thank you!” Genma chirped, looking immensely pleased.

Kyo reached for one of the books, thinking about maybe reading it with her brother when Genma
tugged on her arm.

“Mm?” Kyo hummed, sending him a glance, only to blink at the serious look on Genma's face. "What is it?"

“Nee-san, are you hurt?” he asked, peering up at her with large eyes, shifting closer until he just crawled into her lap. “Are you going to the hospital?”

“No?” Kyo tilted her head.

Genma leaned closer until his nose was almost touching her own. “There is blood in your bed,” he whispered seriously, as if he wasn't sure if it was supposed to be a secret or not.

“Oh.” Kyo blinked and felt her cheeks heat up a bit with embarrassment, because she'd forgotten all about that, and again with this conversation! "No, I'm not injured, Genma. I'm not going to the hospital, I'm just- I got my period,” she admitted uncomfortably, though she determinedly didn't let any of her feelings show on her face.

Other than the slight blush, because there wasn't anything she could do about that short of a henge.

Genma's face screwed up in confusion. “What's that?” he asked.

Kyo took a deep breath, tried to organize her thoughts. “You know how during bath time,” she began neutrally, “you've noticed you and I don't look the same?”

Genma frowned, but nodded slowly. “You don't have a pee-pee,” he said, whispering the last word, sending Kisaki a look. “Don't tattle to grandma I said that,” he told the dog.

Kisaki gave an amused snort. “Puppy,” she huffed fondly. “Your secrets are safe with me.” And then exchanged a look with Kyo.

“Yeah, well. Grandma isn't here, so it's fine,” Kyo said dryly. “Anyway, it's not just on the outside that girls and boys look different, okay?” Genma nodded dutifully, listening attentively, like the good student he was. “We're different on the inside, too.”

“Like what?” he asked curiously, settling down in her lap, making himself comfortable for a lecture.

Not about poisons, this time, but still.

“Well, girls have parts that can make babies,” Kyo told him, abruptly wondering if anyone had told him how babies were made. Would she have to have that talk, too? “And once a month, once you enter puberty, those parts prepare for a baby, but if there isn't the right,” uh, how to phrase this so a five year old understood it? “parts, then they bleed for about a week, and then it starts all over again. Any questions?”

Genma's face scrunched up cutely as he thought. “What's pu-ber-ty?” he asked first.

Kyo hummed, frowning minutely. “It's because of hormones,” she mused, feeling mildly uncertain, before she reminded herself Genma wouldn't know what that was, anyway. “Stuff your brain makes to make your body function,” and she poked him playfully on the forehead, drawing a giggle from the boy, “and they tell the body it needs to grow into an adult. Changing things.”

“What things?” Genma immediately asked, leaning forward with interest.

“Well, tou-san gets a beard unless he shaves every now and then,” Kyo pointed out easily. “You will
be the same, eventually, but you don't grown hair on your chin now, do you?”

Genma pursed his lips and shook his head. “Girls don't grow beards, nee-san.”

“Nope. They don't. But women grow hair in new places, too, and they get wider hips, instead. And breasts. It's because of babies, too.”

Genma looked a little bit like one big question-mark and Kyo sighed softly. “Okay, let's go about it like this, instead,” she muttered to herself. “Do you know where babies come from?”

“Grandma said the Gods give babies to parents that pray for them after they're married,” Genma reported quickly, not so much as blinking.

Kyo felt her face twitch. “That,” she took a deep breath, “isn't even close to the truth,” she said evenly, very determinedly not shifting her expression or body language. “Okay. All you need to make a baby is a uterus,” she placed a hand flat on her lower abdomen, “and a pee-pee,” she pointed at Genma, “on two grown people, children can't, and you can make a baby.”

“How?” Genma demanded breathlessly, eyes so wide they looked like they would pop out of his skull if he wasn't careful.

Kyo wondered if she wouldn't be starting to regret this conversation, soon.

“If two people like each other, they might agree to have sex. If one of them doesn't agree, it's not sex. That's very mean, and one should never do it.” She gave her brother a serious look. “It's very, very bad, okay.” Genma nodded, still with something like stars in his eyes. “During sex, a pee-pee goes inside a vagina, which is what girls have instead of a pee-pee, and that's how a special seed is put inside a kaa-san by a tou-san and it slowly lets the kaa-san grow a baby.”

Genma was silent for a second, turning that over in his head. “Why would anyone ever do that, nee-san?” he asked, sounding mildly horrified.

“Because it feels nice, and they like each other. Or because they think it's fun. Or they want a baby. There are many reasons.” She shrugged. “Anyway, nine months later, and the baby comes out from the woman's stomach, which is why we need wider hips, so there's room.”

“How does it get out?” Genma asked, still looking like this information was blowing his mind away.

And they were back to mildly uncomfortable ground.

Kyo sighed. “The same way it got in,” she pointed down at her own crotch, “through the vagina.”

Genma's eyes boggled. “Are they okay!?”

“They're okay,” Kyo assured her brother. “Puberty makes it so girls are built for making babies, remember? Mothers' bodies have prepared for it, so don't worry.” They could go into this in more detail in a few years if he was still interested, because she was trying to keep this basic and still understandable. Genma was only five. “Breasts are made for making milk, which is what babies eat. They're too little to eat the kind of food you and I eat.”

She was silent, watching her brother assimilate that information.

“Are you gonna make a baby?” he eventually asked and Kyo choked back a giggle.

“No. That's why there's blood in my bed. I'm still too little to make a baby. It would be really
dangerous if I tried.”

Genma looked appropriately horrified. “Don't try to make a baby, nee-san,” he immediately told her seriously and Kyo couldn't keep back a small snort.

“I won't,” she promised solemnly. “Any more questions?”

Genma tilted his head and thought about it for a minute, and Kyo was glad to leave him to it. Surprisingly, this had actually been easier to do than that talk with Jiraiya when this issue first popped up.

Go figure.

“Does this mean tou-san made us?” Genma eventually asked.

“Yes.” Kyo grinned.

The awe was back on Genma's face. “Come on, nee-san! We have to tell him!” he gushed, jumping to his feet and scrambling to get out of the pillow fort.

Kyo hurried after him because part of her definitely wanted to see the look on tou-san's face and the rest of her felt like she probably had to explain a few things to their poor father.

“Tou-san!” Genma said eagerly right when Kyo stepped into the room, her brother having run into the man's legs and was tugging excitedly on his trousers. “Tou-san, you made us! That's amazing!” And he was definitely staring up at tou-san's very blank face with adoring awe.

There was a choked noise from the direction of the kitchen table and Kyo glanced at Ryota. Huh, she hadn't realised he was here, but... it was very nice to see him again. It had been a while.

“Kyo?” their dad said evenly, voice bland and neutral and Kyo bit her lower lip for a second.

“I may have accidentally told Genma about the facts of life,” she confessed with a shrug. “He's very impressed with your baby-making skills?” she offered tentatively.

Ryota made another choked-off noise, before he let himself fall forward over the table, shoulders shaking and he was absolutely laughing at them.

A few seconds passed, and Genma was prattling excitedly at their frozen dad, pretty much repeating back a jumbled mess of what Kyo had just told him, and Ryota sounded like he might actually be crying with laughter.

Kisaki came to a stop beside her, having followed at a sedate pace, looking over the scene in front of them.

“We have a nice pack,” she said softly.

“Yeah,” Kyo agreed, feeling warm all over. “We really, really do.”

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Chapter 87

Chapter Summary

Different kinds of confrontations

Things went back to normal. Ish.

Was there really such a thing as 'normal' when you were a shinobi? Kyo wasn't sure and she'd been doing this for a pretty long time, now.

Their kind of normal, anyway.

Some things were different, though. Ashika was still under observation at the hospital, though she’d be released any day now, and Aita just wanted to bring her home and... help her settle into a routine again.

Genma was very excited for that, too. He'd made loads of plans for how to cheer his friend up, and it was very sweet, but she didn't know how much it would actually help.

Ashika had been attacked twice in her 'safe place' now and that left a mark.

Then there was Minato, she mused, glancing at the boy beside her.

This had been an experience for him as well.

At least Minato didn't seem to be suffering from debilitating trauma, but there was still a noticeable change.

Which was why she'd suggested a team spar with Inoichi's team. Partly because it was a good way to improve and find new things to work on, but also because it had been a while since she spent time with her friends and Minato could use some fun right now, too.

So!

“Hey, Kyo,” Chouza greeted her with a smile. “Minato, it's nice to see you again.”

“Good morning,” Minato greeted back with a serious nod.

Kyo glanced from Chouza to Shikaku and back again, tilting her head with a small frown. “Where's Inoichi?” she couldn't help but ask, because... they'd agreed to meet here at this time. Had he forgotten?

That hadn't ever happened before.

Shikaku smirked at her. “You clearly don't keep up to date with the latest gossip.”

“Not really, no,” Kyo admitted freely. Gossip hadn't ever interested her, in this life, or her last one. And even so, she had a tendency to miss things, even when she tried to pay attention to the drama. “So what's happened?” she asked, trying not to immediately assume the worst.
He hadn't gotten injured or something, right?

Chouza heaved an exasperated sigh. “Inoichi has discovered the opposite sex,” he said sagely, and Kyo couldn't help but pause and stare blankly at him.

Glancing at Minato revealed he was wearing a similar expression.

Shikaku snorted and looked vastly entertained. “Girls,” he clarified.

“I know what you meant,” Kyo huffed, exasperated, and it was true, she just... couldn't quite wrap her head around it. “So you're saying Inoichi's got a girlfriend? Or that he's just discovered sex?”

Chouza and Shikaku both sent her a strange look and Kyo sighed tiredly, exchanging another look with a mildly perplexed Minato.

“You got the same lessons on sex that I did in the Academy, right?” she couldn't help but ask.

“I'd like to think so, yes?” Minato answered, slowly starting to look amused, because yeah, neither of them had been present for the other one's lesson, but come on! What were the odds the Academy had changed that much in just three years?

Slim, that was what.

“I don't understand this obsession with mating some humans have,” Kisaki commented blandly, stalking over to a shaded spot and flopping down in the grass, stretching out with a content sigh. “Why bother unless it's to make puppies?”

Kyo made an amused noise in the back of the throat. “It's because humans and dogs are different,” she said, following after her friend. “And not all humans are like that, either,” she added thoughtfully.

Some people didn't like sex.

Then there were people with an addiction problem. What had it been called again? Hm. Nymphomaniac!

“The joys of puberty, huh,” Kisaki drawled, sending her an amused look and Kyo couldn't help but grin back.

“So Inoichi is, what? Sleeping around?” Kyo joked as she took a seat next to Kisaki, turning to look expectantly at Shikaku and Chouza, waiting for some kind of response. The dry looks hadn't really been expected. “Wait, really?” she couldn't help but ask, starting to feel entertained. “Can't actually say I'm surprised,” she mused after another pause to think it over.

“I can't believe you haven't heard about it by now,” Shikaku huffed drily, looking entertained. “At least try to listen to the gossip about people you actually know, Kyo.”

Kyo sent him a mock-offended look. “Why can't I just hear things from my friends? That's way more reliable than trusting the words of complete strangers,” she sniffed. And that would also require her talking to complete strangers, which she wasn't all that interested in.

“...so is Inoichi not coming?” Minato asked slowly, still looking equal amounts of perplexed and amused.

“He's coming,” Shikaku snickered and Kyo sent him a look.
“That's a terrible joke,” she informed him wryly. “And he's most likely just late, and we can make fun of him for it when he arrives,” she added to Minato. “So what about you two, then? Discovered the delights of dating?”

“Way too troublesome,” Shikaku drawled, sitting down with her and Minato, sending Kisaki a respectful nod when the ninken glanced at him. “Chouza might be interested, though.”

Chouza rolled his eyes, but wandered over. “A girlfriend might be nice, but I'm not gonna try and follow Inoichi's lead. Sounds exhausting, if you ask me.”

Kyo snickered softly.

By the time Inoichi finally showed up, Shikaku had pulled a deck of playing cards from one of his pouches and they'd been spending a good twenty minutes playing poker.

Kyo hadn't played cards since before she'd died, and it was surprisingly fun when no one had pressured her into it and wanted to play non-stop until it felt like she wanted to barf all over the cards.

“Oh, so you finally deign to show up?” Kyo asked the mildly sheepish Yamanaka when he came strolling up to them. “Overslept?” she added blandly.

“Oh, or was there sleep involved at all?” Shikaku questioned with a smirk.

“You two can just shut up,” Inoichi snorted with a crooked, unrepentant grin, plopping himself down in their little circle.

Kisaki gave a harsh snort and a second later, Kyo felt why.

Abruptly leaning away from the teenager, Kyo sent him an incredulous look. “Okay, I know everyone's entitled to their own likes and dislikes, but you smell like you've bathed in perfume. What the hell, Inoichi?”

She felt tempted to raise a hand to her face to pinch her nose shut.

Kyo hadn't ever liked strong perfume and had always held her breath walking past people like that on the street, because it felt like the strong smell would bring tears to her eyes.

Kisaki gave an irritable growl and got up to wander away from him, sneezing three times in a row and shaking out her fur, ears flicking with annoyance.

“You stink.” Kyo grimaced, in complete agreement with the ninken.

“It does smell very strongly,” Minato offered neutrally, absentmindedly rearranging the cards in his hand. “Chouza, it's your turn,” he added, sending the Akimichi an expectant look.

The teenager in question placed his card of choice on the ground in the middle, peering at Inoichi. “Not chased by an angry father today?”

Inoichi huffed. “One time,” he muttered sourly, eyeing their small group. “I thought we were gonna train?”

“We were, but then not all of us were here,” Kyo said, still leaning away and contemplating if the smell would get better if she doused Inoichi with a water jutsu.

It just might and she was seriously considering it.
“Wait until we're sparring,” Shikaku muttered at her out of the corner of his mouth, narrowing his eyes on his hand of cards. “Sensei did that last time he showed up smelling like half a whore house.”

“Good to know,” Kyo muttered back. “Your turn.”

Shikaku hummed and placed his card.

Inoichi sighed at all of them, scratching absently at his throat where Kyo got a glimpse of a hickey. Smothering another snicker, she turned back to the game.

They'd finish this and then get started on warm-ups.

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Minato had told her he'd hunt down Jiraiya to talk to him about their fuuinjutsu lessons, and maybe accelerating the theoretical lessons, because both of them would be happy to work more on it while they were stuck in the village.

Kyo didn't know how long the Hokage would want to keep Jiraiya and his teammates close, but they could take advantage of the situation to get as much training in as was possible.

She had a few ideas she wanted to discuss with him, too, but she was still working through some of the details of what she would want to do. Or try to do, anyway.

While her teammate did that, Kyo had slipped off to ANBU headquarters, because there was still that conversation with Bear she'd been planning to get to. Hopefully, there wouldn't be any unexpected interruptions, this time.

Knocking on the door to the man's office, Kyo tried not to feel nervous. The last time she'd been here, the man hadn't been all that impressed with her.

Ah well. Nothing she could do about that now.

“Come in,” a standard monotone voice said, and Kyo eased to door open enough to slip inside.

Only to still for half a second when she spotted not only Bear, but also Kasai.

Resident ANBU Commander.

The man was sitting behind the second desk that had been unoccupied, last time, and she hadn't actually paid much thought to it, at the time.

Swallowing dryly, Kyo walked up to stand at attention in front of Bear's desk.

“I was told you wanted to speak to me, sir;” she said softly.

“Was a while ago,” Bear grunted, not really looking up from the paperwork he was going through.

“Things popped up,” Kyo muttered, “and no one said it was urgent.”

“True enough,” he said, putting his reports aside and finally looking up to study her, though she wasn't sure that was better. “Barring any further emergencies, I have a job for you this recruiting run,” he said briskly, getting straight to the point.

“Okay?” Kyo said slowly, cocking her head and trying to figure out what in the world that could be.
“The new recruits we've kept our eyes on show promise, but they're also,” he paused a moment, “somewhat disappointing, in certain aspects. Many of them are the kind of people who will see the invite and let it go to their heads,” Bear said dryly, all but oozing unimpressed exasperation.

Kyo waited for him to get to the point.

Before he could say another word, Kyo caught the scroll Kasai threw at her, peering at it curiously, before she sent the man a cautiously questioning look.

“An extra uniform set,” Kasai told her shortly.

Uniform set? Did that mean it included everything? Even another mask? Why?

Some of her bafflement must have come through, because Bear snorted.

“You don't look like much, Scorpion,” he said frankly, and Kyo spent a brief second to wonder if she should feel insulted. “Take that uniform, make it as noticeable as you can possibly make it. And then we'll see how well our recruits' pride can take a game of Hide and Seek in the Forest of Death.”

She was pretty sure he was smirking behind his mask.

“Um,” was all she said, turning the scroll in her hands over absently, thinking it over. “Can I ask for help with this?” she asked slowly, lifting the scroll.

Bear and Kasai exchanged a look. “Your Uzumaki friend?” Bear hazarded a guess and Kyo nodded. “Very well, but I don't need to tell you to use discretion.”

Kyo inclined her head in a deferential bow. “Was there anything else?”

“You've got two weeks to get ready, so get to it,” Bear said and it sounded like a dismissal.

“Is it certain I'll still be here, at that point?” she couldn't help but ask before she left.

“It's not an issue,” Kasai said, and that was that.

Kyo would have to let Minato know they had at least two weeks, most likely three, in the village before they had to leave again.

Now, she had to seek out Aita to talk about this... project, she'd been given.

“How are you settling in?” Kyo asked, crouching on the windowsill to Aita's room, taking in the sight of her friend and his niece.

Ashika jumped, and turned to eye her with a scowl. “Don't do that, nee-san!” she snapped, and it didn't escape anyone's attention that she had pressed herself up against Aita's side. All but clinging to him.

Kyo blinked and tilted her head. “Nee-san?” she parroted interestedly, entering the room properly to wander over to the two of them. “Having a little sister sound wonderful, especially if her name is Ashika.” She smiled at the girl.

Ashika managed a very small, tentative smile back, before she pressed her face against Aita's ribs.

“You know you're actually allowed to come in here through the front door, right?” Aita asked her,
wrapping an arm around Ashika's back and sending her an exasperated look. “No one will try to stop you.”

Kyo shrugged, unrepentant. “The window is quicker.”

“And you should be grateful I've keyed you into the seals,” the teenager sniffed with mock-superiority.

“Or I could temporarily disable them,” Kyo chirped with a grin, because Aita was the one who had taught her, which meant he'd started to teach her how to disable his seals first.

Aita paused and sent her a look. “Curses,” he said conversationally. “I guess we'll never get rid of her now,” he mused, exchanging a look with Ashika, who had shifted enough to peer up at them.

The girl didn't laugh, but she didn't withdraw further, which was more than good enough.

“Why are you here, nee-san?” Ashika asked gruffly, seemingly deciding it was safe enough.

Kyo had apparently gotten a new little sibling.

She had no complaints.

Arranging her expression into a serious mien, Kyo sat down on the floor in front of the two Uzumaki. “I desperately need the two of your help,” she told them solemnly.

“The two of us?” Aita repeated curiously, sending Ashika a quick look.

“The two of you.” Kyo nodded. “I desperately need Ashika to help, too, or I'll fail my mission.”

Ashika drifted slightly closer, not leaving Aita's side, but drawing nearer to Kyo with helpless curiosity.

“What mission?” she asked, one hand still tangled in Aita's shirt.

Kyo withdrew her scroll, made a show of looking around to make sure the coast was clear, and then unsealed her uniform.

Ashika shied away momentarily, before she visibly gathered her courage, set her jaw and reached for the Scorpion mask.

Kyo handed it to her without hesitation.

“Kyo?” Aita asked, watching Ashika with tender eyes while she explored the ANBU mask, but was clearly concerned about how sanctioned -or unsanctioned, as it may be- this was.

“It's fine, I have permission, but Ashika?” She turned to eye the the girl. “This is a secret, even from Genma, okay?”

“...he doesn't know?” she asked quietly, fingers dancing over her mask, tracing the pattern, and then lifted it to her face, peering first at Kyo and then at Aita through the eye-holes.

“He's seen it, but this is our project, and he doesn't need to know anything about it.” Actually, she wasn't sure Genma remembered what her mask looked like; he'd been pretty small when she'd first gotten it and she hadn't thought about it since. “It's a secret,” she stressed. “Just between the three of us, or I'll get into loads of trouble. Can I count on you?”
Ashika lowered the mask to her lap and stared blankly at her for a long second, before she gave a very grave nod. “I'll keep the secret, nee-san,” she promised.

Kyo smiled softly, and slowly reached out to smooth down Ashika's red hair, letting her hand slide down to cup her cheek, for a brief moment.

“I know you will. You're brave and strong and very kind.”

“So what do we need to do?” Aita asked, looking a little bit like he was tempted to grab her and pull her into a bone-crushing hug.

“Okay! Listen up; here are the mission parameters,” Kyo said with a mischievous grin, holding up a finger and starting on the explanation for what she needed.

She knew she and Aita would do their best to make this as fun as possible for Ashika, and Kyo would let the girl make most of the decisions, so long as they were within the directives Bear had given her.

-x-x-x-

Things were very busy, but it wasn't a bad-kind of busy.

Kyo was happier than she'd been in a long time.

There was training with Minato and Kisaki, fuuinjutsu with Jiraiya-sensei. Her project with Ashika and Aita, meeting up with Inoichi whenever he could tear himself away from chasing skirts, or whatever he wanted to call it.

Who knew the nosy boy would be so popular with girls?

Well, no, she could have guessed that, she was pretty sure, if she'd ever stopped to actually think about it.

Inoichi was far from bad-looking and he was good at reading people, not to mention sociable and easy to talk to. He was nice. Friendly.

It made sense.

Anyway, Kyo was happy to leave him to it. Chouza and Shikaku were just as nice to spend time with, and she made sure to drag Minato along, half the time, when he was willing.

Kisaki took to any training with a vengeance.

Then there were lessons with Genma, which she very carefully continued, spaced out appropriately to let her brother recover in between.

Tou-san was still working a lot, but he seemed slightly calmer. Somehow? Kyo couldn't quite explain it, but that was the feeling she got.

She hadn't seen Katsurou-sensei in a while, and she was vaguely aware he'd been sent out on mission a lot lately, and while she grabbed some time with him in between, she still missed him. Missed having him around.

Regardless. Wasn't anything either of them could do about that.

Just about two weeks after starting her arts and crafts project with her two favourite Uzumaki, she
just needed to get away for a bit.

Take a breather, because Kyo had surrounded herself with people lately, and it was nice; part of her loved it. But it was also exhausting.

She needed peace and quiet.

All the activity had been hard on Kisaki, too, and she knew the ninken was currently spending some time in the Inuzuka kennels, just taking it easy and not being surrounded by people.

Kyo felt both mildly guilty and apologetic, because Kisaki's life had been very different, and the abrupt change was hard on her, not to mention being someone's official partner again had brought up old grief, even when it might seem unexpected.

Wandering out towards the more remote training grounds, Kyo took her time. Enjoyed the quiet.

She was in no rush, and she was busy enough trying to think out a few details to a small handful of tentative plans she had for training in the near future, Kyo was happy to let her feet take her where they wanted, trusting herself not to wander into an already taken training field.

Which was how she eventually found herself in a seclusive spot of a training field, shielded from easy view by trees and shrubbery and it was also already taken.

Kyo stared with mild disbelief, because come on, how could this be possible?

What were the odds?

Resisting the urge to slap a hand over her face in sheer exasperation with herself, Kyo considered turning around and leaving, because her attempts to talk to Kaimaru lately hadn't exactly ended well, and she was pretty sure tempers would spark if she tried now, but...

Frowning, she silently acknowledged to herself she would very much want an explanation for why she was no longer good enough to so much as even acknowledge.

She and Kaimaru were supposed to be friends.

Or so she'd thought, anyway.

And besides, her mood had already soured, so she might just as well get this over with. Right?

Kyo wasn't sure what was better; walk away and pretend she hadn't seen him, or stay to try and talk.

With a heavy sigh, Kyo shifted her weight, trying to decide.

Maybe it would go better out of uniform? This wasn't ANBU headquarters, and neither of them were currently wearing their mask.

In the end, she got too frustrated with herself and just marched out on the field to approach her maybe-friend.

Kaimaru looked up when she came within easy speaking distance, fixing her with a hostile look.

So things were starting off great.

“Go away,” Kaimaru ordered her shortly.
“No,” Kyo snapped back, because she was tired of this same song-and-dance they’d been doing for the who knew how many last few months. A year? She couldn't even remember when it had started. “I'm not going away this time until you tell me what the hell I ever did to you!”

“Just because you decided we're friends,” he sneered the word, “doesn't magically make it true, you fucking pest.”

“Oh, yeah, because stating the obvious is such a crime.” Kyo rolled her eyes with something that was approaching scorn. “For some reason, don't ask me why, I actually like you, you fucking asshole, and forgive me if I thought it was mutual.”

“You're nothing more than a delusional child who's used to get her way. Not everything is about you,” Kaimaru spat. “Got your whole life served up on a silver platter, others smoothing the way for every step, yeah? Who the fuck would want someone like that in their life? Others have to actually work for shit.”

There was something wrong with her ears, because Kyo was pretty sure she heard a strange rushing sound that didn't belong here. Like the rushing of water, but they were far from the river.

“How nice of you to share your honest thoughts and opinions of me,” she said frigidly, feeling like her joints had locked up.

“This is your fucking problem, Shiranui,” Kaimaru sneered, “I've been telling you since the start, but you're too damn thick to get the message. Read my lips; I hate your spoiled fucking guts.”

“You are lying to me,” Kyo gritted out, trying to take deep breaths, because this still didn't feel like it was actually true. Kaimaru was foul-mouthed and ill-tempered but he didn't go out of his way to be cruel.

Did he?

Kyo had been pretty sure she'd had his character pinned, but what if she hadn't. She could have been wrong.

“Go the fuck away!” Kaimaru snarled, Sharingan activated and there was a kunai in his hand and it was nothing other than reflexes and instincts that had Kyo dodging the strike at her face.

Kaimaru didn't pause, didn't let up the attack, and this wasn't sparring.

Kyo's rising anger snuffed out in an instance, replaced by cool, clinical logic and the familiar attempts to figure out an enemy's next move before they did it.

Reacting.

Dodging.

Surviving a fight with lethal force and this was wrong.

This wasn't sparring; Kaimaru was genuinely, determinedly trying to hurt her.

Kyo leapt away as soon as she could manage, landing in a crouch a generous distance away, pressing her hand to her side and not taking her eyes off the enemy. Off of Kaimaru, she corrected herself.

It felt like a switch had been flipped in her head, going from relaxed off-duty, to mission mode. No in
between and no transition.

She wasn't watching a friend.

Kyo removed her hand from her side and glanced dispassionately at the blood coating her palm.

Her side felt numb, which wasn't really good, in her experience.

Kaimaru stood frozen in a ready-stance, staring blankly at her and not so much as blinking, the tomoe in his Sharingan spinning slowly.

Kyo turned her gaze back to Kaimaru, looking him over from head to toe, taking in the sight of him and... nothing. She was done.

Straightening out of her crouch without a word, Kyo pressed her hand back to her side to staunch the bleeding and walked away without so much as a second glance.

She told the medic that treated the stab wound in her side it had been a training accident.

She'd dodged the worst of it, anyway, and she was done with Kaimaru. She'd tried, several times, but she'd clearly thought she'd seen something in him that just wasn't there.

-x-x-x-

"Kyo, do you want to eat anything special tomorrow?" tou-san asked at breakfast. "Kaa-chan's wondering."

"No?" she answered distractedly, mostly lost in thought and occupied with her food. "Why?"

The pause made her look up, only to find tou-san staring at her with a bemused expression on his face.

"What?" she asked, feeling defensive, all of a sudden.

"You know what day it is tomorrow?" he asked her mildly.

"Monday," Kyo replied flatly, feeling frazzled and not really appreciating the weird breakfast quiz.

"Sure, that's true," tou-san agreed, peering at her, "but it's also your birthday."

Kyo froze, staring blankly at her dad.

Genma's snickering at her was what finally unfroze her enough to blink at the man, her head worryingly empty.

Kou put down his chopsticks with a sigh, crossed his arms over his chest, leaned back in his chair and gave her a concerned look.

"Are you gonna tell me what happened yesterday that has you so upset?" he asked evenly.

"No," Kyo huffed, turning her gaze down to her plate, picking at her food. "A person I thought was a friend clearly wasn't, and he made his feelings abundantly clear on the matter," she said a moment later, contradicting her first response, but she just couldn't find it in herself to care.

"This wouldn't have anything to do with the bandages I spotted when you changed into your pyjamas last night, would it?" her dad pressed gently.
Kyo gave an affirmative grunt. “I'd rather not talk about it,” she muttered.

Tou-san considered her a second longer, before he let out a sigh and returned to his food.

“Nee-san, can you play with me today?” Genma asked, sounding mostly cheerful, despite her very obvious bad mood.

“Sorry, Genma, not today,” Kyo muttered. “I'm busy with work.” She needed to go pick up her scroll from Aita, and then she had places to be.

Genma drooped, but Kyo wasn't in any kind of mood to try and comfort him or cheer him up. Not without accidentally making things worse, anyway, and she didn't want that.

It would just be better to keep her mouth shut and keep to herself, today.

When she was done eating, Kyo thanked for the food, placed her plate in the sink and then walked to the hallway to leave. Before she walked out the door, she could hear Genma say;

“Nee-san is very grumpy today.”

“We're just gonna have to cheer her up later,” tou-san said back, but Kyo didn't linger to hear what her brother's response was.

She knew she was being grumpy.

Kyo managed to speak the absolute minimal necessary amount while she picked up the scroll, but she did manage to press out a rather forced smile in thanks to Ashika, who was so excited about her work and Kyo had no right to bring the girl's mood down.

Aita gave her a look, but didn't comment, and she was grateful.

She really was.

She just couldn't express it right now in any way that would mean anything.

“You're here, good,” Bear said briskly the moment he spotted her. “Go get changed and then join us on the field outside training ground forty four,” he ordered briskly, clearly preoccupied and on the way there, himself.

Kyo nodded curtly and shunshined off to get to her room.

She got accosted by Hyena outside her door, and she wasn't sure she could- ‘deal with him right now’ sounded awful, even in her head and just wasn't true. People. It was people in general she couldn't deal with right now. Today.

Hyena slid up to her, like he usually did, only to pause and cease to move very briefly.

A low snicker escaped him, and he lowered his hand again without touching her.

Instead of saying anything, he handed her a kunai and signed at her to hurry up and get changed. Implying he'd wait for her.

Kyo glanced down at the kunai now in her hand and then walked into her room to get changed without comment.

Setting to it with quick efficiency, Kyo barely glanced at the... very eye-catching ANBU uniform,
and then walked back out. At least Bear couldn't complain she hadn't taken her task seriously.

Hyena took one look at her and made a noise like he was suffocating and for a moment, it looked like he'd actually fall over from laughing too much. As it was, he caught himself on the wall, and he was cackling.

“I'm so happy you're enjoying this,” Kyo told him lifelessly, feeling entirely deadpan.

There was glitter. Far more glitter than any one person should ever wear, not to mention an ANBU. In combination with the neon pink, Kyo was feeling all kinds of disgruntled.

Ashika had had a lot of fun, and she wouldn't have changed anything if she got another chance, but still.

Why pink?

Couldn't Ashika have chosen neon yellow? Or orange? That would have been nice.

Not that there was anything wrong with pink, exactly, but after spending a whole childhood getting the colour shoved down her throat at every turn, she'd been more than sick of it long before she'd died, back in the Before.

Kyo walked up to Hyena and smacked him lightly on the stomach. “Let's go,” she growled, watching her friend slowly manage to straighten up. Making sure he was ready, Kyo activated her chameleon jutsu and tugged her chakra into herself, going full stealth, because like hell was she walking through headquarters like this right now.

People were already treating her a certain way due to her size and young age.

“Yeah! Let's go!” Hyena agreed enthusiastically, voice shaking so hard with laughter he was barely understandable.

Kyo huffed, but followed when he turned in the direction of the closest exit with a definite spring in his step.

“We're here!” Hyena cackled loudly, landing in front of Bear and the recruits, damn near vibrating with eager anticipation.

The Numbers shifted uncertainly, glancing around at the numerous spectators, clearly unsettled.

“Right, now that everyone needed is present, let's get started.” Bear said blandly, turning the full scope of his attention onto the nervous Numbers, who, by the looks of things, didn't appreciate it. “Your job right now, will be to track and capture Scorpion through training ground forty four,” he gestured at the Forest of Death behind him at that, and a few of the Numbers all but cowered at the feel of the place. “You'll be judged on how well or poorly you do.”

Kyo blinked and studied them.

All boys, huh. Disappointing.

“Scorpion, if you could let the Numbers get a good, long look at you before we begin,” Bear requested evenly, and expertly pretended like Hyena wasn't slowly asphyxiating himself by laughter a small distance away.
Kyo huffed to herself, squared her shoulders, tried to push her bad mood aside and let her stealth jutsu drop.

Leaving her fully visible where she was standing next to Bear, sparkling in the sun.

Hyena practically howled.

Kyo crossed her arms over her chest and glowered at Bear, who was staring down at her.

“I blame you for this. Suckiest assignment ever,” she muttered dully.

Kyo looked like an enthusiastic six year old girl had barfed paint and glitter all over her, and yeah, that was pretty much exactly what had happened.

Her Scorpion mask was in shades of eye-searing pink. To match the rest of her outfit.

“Is everyone ready?” Bear asked mildly, turning back to the Numbers, who had all relaxed and seemed to be getting comfortable with the idea of this task, and oh, Kyo would make them all regret that mind-set very quickly.

Ashika had declared she was the glitter fairy, and yeah, Kyo would make them all eat glitter.

There were bags of the stuff stored in her weapons pouches, as per Ashika's orders.

Feeling deadpan, Kyo grabbed a handful of glitter, threw it in the air -making sure to cover Bear while she was at it- and disappeared before the first few sparkles could hit the ground.

A couple of the Numbers snorted dismissively.

Kyo took off into the forest, deliberately leaving a very clear trail of glitter behind. With a tight, determined smile, she upped her speed and decided to try and run as many places as she could in as short a time-span as was possible, which would leave the Numbers well occupied for a while.

This shit was on.

Laughing at her because she was small, female and currently pink? These assholes would not be so smug before this thing was done.

Kyo observed the three Numbers that had decided to work together to track her down.

They'd been following one of her glitter trails for a good long while now and were growing irritated and frustrated with their lack of progress, which, newbie mistake, that.

Contemplating how she wanted to go about it, Kyo tilted her head and watched her three targets, before she selected a needle from her cuff holster with slow deliberation.

Soundlessly slipping down from the branch she'd been sticking to, Kyo crept down the tree trunk and warily approached the ANBU hopefuls.

Who remained fully engaged in their hushed discussion on how best to track her down and capture her.

Excuse her while she rolled her eyes.
Sneaking up on them wasn't even remotely challenging, and Kyo listened to their quiet arguing for a while, standing right beside her target, feeling unimpressed.

Rolling her needle between her fingers, she eyed the closest Number.

He was the biggest, out of the three, and the one she'd take out first, she'd decided.

Crouching down, she smoothly inserted the needle into his calf, just enough for maybe two hours' unconsciousness, and then withdrew it again.

If he felt anything at all, he'd most likely think it was some sort of insect bite, but she doubted it; they were all three of them very distracted with being the one in charge and talking over their temporary teammates, and Kyo was good with her needles.

Shaking her head to herself, she retreated a small distance.

Getting one of the small rocks she'd collected before she went on the offence, she hefted it in her hand at the same time as she got a handful of glitter with her other one.

There were several ways she could do this, but...

Yeah. She was already here, dressed to the nines; she'd already decided she might as well have a bit of fun while she was at it.

Kyo threw the stone off to the side, making sure it wouldn't hit anything on the way to the ground and when the noise finally reached them -a dull thud as the stone hit the dirt far beneath- the three Numbers fell quiet, tensing and turning to look in the direction the noise had come from.

There were all kinds of beasts in here.

Kyo climbed back up to the branch above, but only long enough to sprinkle the glitter, and then, while her targets were busy freaking out and looking for her, snagged her drugged victim.

He was woozy and close enough to unconsciousness he didn't make a sound when she snagged him and covered him with her chameleon jutsu, and she didn't stick around to watch the reactions.

Kyo reinforced her muscles with chakra, hefted her mostly-unconscious target, and ran back to the starting point, prepared to dump off another one on the growing pile of Numbers she'd been collecting over the last few hours.

“Having fun, Scorpion?” Hyena asked the moment she dropped her burden next to the other ones, eagerly getting in her face.

“You're lucky I'm fond of you, Hyena,” she muttered, throwing a handful of glitter in his face, too, before she headed back to the last few, no-doubt freaking out, Numbers.

She wondered if she could try out that genjutsu she'd been practising? Might be interesting.

Jiraiya-sensei claimed she ought to be good at them, but she still wasn't sure.

Pursing her lips thoughtfully, Kyo went through a few tentative plans, but she'd have to see what situation she came back to before she chose.

“Right,” Bear, still with traces of glitter on his person, announced when all of his recruits had woken
up again, more or less miserable. “You lot have plenty to work on before this week is over, because that was a pathetic display. You should all thank Scorpion for being nice enough not to actually poison anyone,” he said.

“I didn't think you'd appreciate dealing with the fallout,” she said blandly.

As it was, all the Numbers -and a few additions, such as Bear and Hyena- were sparkling nicely in the sun.

“Your assignment is done, Scorpion,” Bear informed her, not commenting.

“So I can change back to my normal uniform? Finally,” Kyo huffed.

“Hey, Scorpion, do you have any more glitter?” Hyena asked, at her side immediately and somehow managing to look like an eager puppy.

Kyo could feel Bear's glare on her when she wordlessly handed her friend a whole bag of the cursed stuff.

Hyena giggled and swiped the bag, having tucked it away before anyone could try and take it from him.

And then he was gone with a small puff of smoke. Off to have fun, probably.

Kyo didn't really care.

“Right. Don't kill off the Numbers, Bear,” Kyo said by way of good bye, waving a hand at him over her shoulder as she wandered off.

The few other operatives that had stuck around to watch and observe looked to have enjoyed the show, and a few of them even signed her a few appreciative words, so she guessed it could have gone worse.

It'd been pretty cathartic, actually, which was nice.

But she should probably go get changed, before she made someone blind.

The various shades of pink Aita had managed to turn her uniform into were all equally eye-searing, and she was starting to get sick of seeing it every time she moved and her side was hurting like a bitch after lugging all the teenagers around.

-x-x-x-

The next day, after morning training with Minato, Kisaki and Jiraiya, Kyo went home and prepared to spend the next few hours at her grandparents' house for a family dinner.

Supposedly to celebrate her birthday.

Kyo hadn't even remembered, before her dad pointed it out the day before, and she couldn't claim to care all that much.

Gifts had never been a huge thing, here, and was mostly something given to small children.

Tou-san and kaa-san had given her mostly shinobi related things, and she honestly wasn't expecting anything. There was nothing Kyo wanted, anyway, that she could think of.
Spending time with tou-san and Genma was always appreciated, though.

She probably could have done without Haname, but still. They were family, and she was pretty sure tou-san had implied Kana would be there, with Kenji and Taichi, which would be a nice distraction.

At least Kisaki was coming with her, so she'd have good company.

“You don't have to, you know,” Kyo told the ninken quietly while tou-san and Genma were in the bathroom, getting ready.

“I know, but I'm coming,” Kisaki huffed at her, leaning her head on Kyo's lap and Kyo scratched her around the ears. “Know you don't like it.”

“Thank you,” Kyo smiled, “you're a good friend.”

Kisaki made an indecisive noise and pushed against her hands.

“Are you two ready to leave?” Kou asked when he came out of the bathroom, Genma in tow.

“Yeah, I guess,” Kyo sighed.

“It's just a few hours,” her dad tried to reassure her, but both of them knew it didn't really help.

The house was already full of people when they got there, and Genma wasted no time in running off with Taichi, racing out into the garden to play, while Kisaki followed at a sedate pace, most likely to keep an eye on her brother.

“Hello, Kou,” Kana greeted her little brother with an absent smile. “Kyo-chan, happy birthday.”

“Thank you,” Kyo muttered, trying to muster up a smile but falling a bit short, she suspected.

“Kyo-chan! Oh, it's nice to see you again,” Haname came striding over, placing a hand on her shoulder, “already twelve. Time is passing so quickly.” She pressed her other hand to her chest and peered down at her tearfully.

Kyo stared back blankly.

What?

“Kaa-chan,” Kou said firmly, sending his mother a look. “You look well, everything alright lately?” he asked, drawing attention away from Kyo, which was fully appreciated.

Kyo ducked away from Haname and wandered into the living room.

Kana's husband was talking quietly with grandfather, keeping the two of them busy, and Kenji was lingering nearby, listening in.

Kyo walked over to him.

“Hey, Kenji,” she greeted, looking the two grown men over absently for a second, before she focused on her cousin.

“Hi, Kyo. Happy Birthday,” he said, clearing his throat and shuffling a bit awkwardly, looking like he thought she would call him out on eavesdropping.

Kyo felt her lips twitch.
At fourteen, Kenji was rather gangly, more elbows and knees than anything else and he didn't seem to really enjoy the awkwardness of puberty.

“Thank you,” she said, feeling content to just stand there, waiting out as much time before dinner as she could possibly get away with. “So what's new with you?” she asked, more to ease her awkward cousin than because she necessarily wanted to talk right now.

Kenji gratefully told her about his studies with his dad, learning more about the family business and tentatively telling her about the girl he was thinking about asking out.

What was with people asking her for romantic advice?

Kyo honestly didn't know what she was talking about, but that didn't mean she wasn't trying her best, of course. She still felt like she was spouting nothing but bullshit.

When they all took their seats at the table, Kyo found herself steered to sit next to Kana and Haname, which she didn't mind, per se, but it still made her pause, ever so slightly.

Kyo tended to sit next to her brother or Kenji at these things.

Exchanging a look with tou-san, who shrugged, Kyo was ready to just eat, make minimal amounts of conversation, and then sneak off with Kisaki and leave when they were done.

She wasn't really in the mood to celebrate, and her side was hurting.

“Kyo-chan,” Haname said about halfway through the main dish. There'd be dessert afterwards, she knew. “I've been wanting to speak with you,” her grandmother said with a strange little smile and a concerned look in her eyes.

“Okay?” Kyo said, sending Kana a glance, because she got the feeling this was something her aunt already knew about.

Haname nodded. “If you've been experiencing womanly troubles, why didn't you come to me? I would have told you all you needed to know, my dear.”

Kyo stared at her, trying to digest those words.

That wasn't what she'd been expecting.

“Or at least Kana, if you didn't feel comfortable with me.” Haname sighed sadly, putting down her chopsticks to place a hand to her cheek. “I worry for you so, Kyo-chan, but at least now all this nonsense will be left behind us.”

“What?” Kyo's voice was flat. For several reasons.

Who the hell called getting your period 'womanly troubles' in a serious manner? Her grandmother, evidently, but Kyo was still unimpressed.

“I know Kou has been very lenient with you on this matter, sweetheart, but it's time to focus on what's really important now that you're a proper woman.”

First of all, Kyo was turning twelve. Today. And she was very clearly not a woman in any capacity of the word as far as Haname knew.

Second, “Excuse me?”
“This kunoichi business was fine when you were a child, Kyo-chan, but we must look to the future now,” Haname said in a voice that tried its best to be sensible.

Kyo stared at her in disbelief. She couldn't believe she was hearing this. How divorced from reality was this woman?

What the actual fuck?

And her grandmother wasn't done talking yet.

“We need to salvage this situation before it's too late, but not to worry, my dear; things will turn out just fine. Kana and I can put out a good word for you and I'm sure Kentarou can give you plenty to do at the shop to get you used to things,” and there were words coming out of her mouth that just didn't make any sense.

“I'm sorry, but I have no idea what you're talking about,” Kyo interrupted shortly, and this better not be what she thought it was.

“I'm talking about stopping with this kunoichi nonsense, Kyo-chan,” Haname said kindly, as if she was sharing a great piece of news. “It's high time. And it's good timing, too, because you've fulfilled the Academy five year contract,” she added, sounding more cheerful. As if this was all great; working out perfectly.

And yeah, Kyo had a vague memory of that contract she'd signed when she'd entered the Academy, but she honestly hadn't paid it much thought. There'd been so many other things on her mind at the time, and it had seemed pretty logical to her; get an education in exchange for five years of service, in whatever capacity you were able to provide.

What it had to do with this conversation, she didn't know.

“What the actual fuck,” slipped out of Kyo's mouth before she could censor herself, and her voice was maybe louder than she had intended, drawing the attention of the rest of the table.

“Kyo!” Haname gasped. “I will not have that kind of language at my table,” she chastised and Kyo laughed. Because all of this was just surreal.

“I'm going home,” she announced, feeling too incredulous to take this seriously, getting to her feet.

Only for Haname to grab her left wrist, making her twitch.

“We need to talk about this, young lady,” Haname said in a would-be stern voice.

Kyo sent her a glare her grandmother clearly hadn't anticipated. “Let go of me,” she said evenly. “And as for talking? You have no right to try and tell me what to do with my life,” she snapped.

Kisaki had stood up where she'd been dozing lightly a moment before, watching alternately Kyo and Haname with a vaguely uncertain air.

She was definitely on Kyo's side, but she clearly wasn't sure what to do.

“But, Kyo-chan,” and Haname had the nerve to look confused, “this is just how it must be,” she said, gaining momentum. “We've been lucky so far that you haven't gotten grievously injured, but there are no certainties for the future.”

Kyo scoffed in her face.
Haname had no idea what she was talking about. “I'm gonna tell you right now, Obaa-san. I'm never getting married. Ever. And even so, what in the world made you think I'd retire to settle down with some civilian man you choose for me?” She took a deep breath, trying to stay calm. “Now, let go of me.”

It would be so easy to force it, but she didn't actually want to hurt the woman.

“Kyo, we've been patient,” Haname said, sounding like she was talking to a disobedient child and she'd finally lost her patience. “It's high time this childish fantasy of shinobi adventure,” she gestured vaguely to accompany her words, “are put to rest and you focus on a realistic future. I want you to be happy,” she had the gall to claim.

“You have never wanted for me to be happy,” Kyo hissed angrily, feeling sick to her stomach and she genuinely couldn't believe the words coming out of her grandmother's mouth. “You've always wanted me to be what you want, never me! You've wanted to change who I am since I was old enough to talk and you have no say in what I do with my life. Now let go of me, woman,” Kyo growled.

“See?” Haname sighed, and Kyo felt very acutely she had no sense of self-preservation, because Kyo's self-control was starting to fray at the edges, and this person was restraining her. “This is part of what I've been talking about. You have no sense of what's appropriate for a young woman, Kyo-chan.”

“Kaa-chan,” Kou finally said, rising to his feet and placing a hand on the table, giving his mother an unamused look. “We've talked about this.”

“But you won't see sense, Kou!” Haname huffed exasperatedly. “Kyo-chan is a young woman now, and you clearly don't understand what is needed to give her a secure future.”

“I am never getting married,” Kyo spat again, clenching her hand into a fist and feeling like she might vibrate out of her skin if she didn't get to move soon.

“You say that now, but there's time. In a few years, you'll feel differently, and what about children, Kyo? Don't you want to become a mother one day? Have a family?” And Haname looked genuinely concerned.

Not that it made much to soften the impact of her words.

Kyo sneered at her. “I don't need to be married to have children.” Her grandmother gasped. “All I need is temporary access to a healthy male, but it's not like that's any of your business. I'm my own person, I make my own decisions, and I am worth more than my fucking uterus or how happy some helpless man thinks I can make him. I'm not gonna spend my days cooking and cleaning for a man who can't be bothered to do so for himself!”

Haname looked like she was prepared to launch into several lectures in response to that.

“You need to let go of my arm now, unless you want to lose your fingers,” Kyo gritted out through clenched teeth, because every fibre of her being was screaming at her to move and the suggestions as to how she should make that happen flitting through her head were getting progressively more violent.

“Don't be ridiculous, Kyo-chan,” Haname sighed, all but rolling her eyes and sending Kou a look, as if she expected him to tell her off and this was proving her point, somehow.

Kyo didn't have the presence of mind to look at her dad, most of her focus on the hand on her wrist,
her left wrist, which made her skin crawl, and she did. Not. Want. It. There.

“This is what happens,” Haname said, “when you let little girls run around and play with knives. Sit down properly and finish your meal, Kyo.”

There was a kunai in her hand and she couldn't remember drawing it, wasn't sure when she'd done so or what she'd planned to do with it, but she slammed it down into the table before she did something stupid.

The sound of the knife sinking into the wood left an eerie silence in the room, where nobody moved.

Tou-san looked grim, but not particularly surprised.

“I'm a Jounin,” Kyo said in a chillingly cold voice. “I'm an assassin, Obaa-san.” Her face was without a doubt blank, because it was the only way she knew to get back in control of herself, but it left her hyper-aware of the people in the room. Their positions, their chakra. Weaknesses. The sense of fear starting to clog up the atmosphere. “You've never listened to a word I've ever said to you, but I was fine with that, because you didn't try to interfere. But where the hell do you get off trying to force your way into my life, treating me like I'm not even a person. Was this how you treated kaa-san? No wonder she couldn't stand being here.”

Kyo pulled her hand out of Haname's lax grip with a scornful look at the woman.

Without another word, Kyo slid away from the table and walked to the door, Kisaki joining her soundlessly.

Throwing a look at tou-san over her shoulder, Kyo slipped outside and was gone.

Well.

She wasn't going back there in a while.

Now... where was a good place to hide? She didn't want to interact with any people in a while and she needed to calm down and ease out of the head-space she'd fallen into.

-x-x-x-
Kyo hadn't actually known where Jiraiya-sensei lived, but that had been a nice challenge to distract herself with.

Tracking down the information.

Kisaki was a silent ghost beside her throughout and Kyo was glad she hadn't said anything yet.

She'd probably snap something rude at her if she did, and Kisaki didn't deserve that.

None of this was the dog's fault.

Breaking into the apartment, Kyo's head was still quiet and calm and utterly focused on her task, and it wasn't until she scanned the small, cluttered living room and sat down on Jiraiya's couch that she wondered what in the world it was she was doing.

Kyo felt Kisaki get up on the couch beside her, but she'd covered her face with her hands and pretended she didn't notice the tremble shaking her limbs.

What did she-

She'd almost put that kunai-

Kyo took a deep breath, though it felt more like a gasp for air.

“She was in the wrong,” Kisaki muttered, wedging her head into her lap, pressing up Kyo's arms to give herself room to do so.

“Doesn't make it okay for me to nearly *kill* her,” Kyo muttered back.

She'd almost killed her own grandmother.
It would have been so easy.

Kyo huffed out a quiet, near-hysterical laugh, because hadn't she told Ashika something about this not so long ago? About how it wasn't okay to attack and potentially kill civilians? Just because you didn't agree with them?

Made her the worst kind of hypocrite.

“Why are we here?” Kisaki asked after a stretching silence.

Kyo sighed and let her hands drop to her lap. “No one's likely to look for me here, and I need to be alone.”

Kisaki peered at her until Kyo shifted and shuffled around so she could lie down, head pillowed on the sofa arm.

Kisaki moved with her, until she was sprawled half on top of her, head resting on Kyo's chest.

“...I don't want to go back to that house again,” Kyo muttered quietly. It didn't even have all that much to do with what Haname had said, either.

On some level, she'd known exactly what her grandmother had thought and felt about her being a kunoichi from the start, but that didn't mean she'd expected that conversation.

She'd showed them a part of her she'd been very carefully keeping separate from her off-duty life. And there was no taking it back.

She'd left her kunai buried in the dinner table, and it'd been stuck down to the hilt.

“I don't care about them,” Kisaki told her conversationally. “You were right; 's never cared about you for you.”

“I know I was right,” Kyo huffed bleakly. “I just shouldn't have had to-” she cut herself off with a sigh.

She wished tou-san had cut in before things had deteriorated to that point, but it was possible he hadn't been sure how to react without making things worse. And then he probably hadn't wanted to set her off.

Kyo couldn't even find it in herself to blame him.

She'd made a mess of things and she felt awful about it.

Kisaki sighed, and then carefully snuffled at her side. “Should I move?”

“No. I love to cuddle with you.” What was a bit of pain and discomfort compared to cuddles?

Kisaki sent her a fond look and settled back down, and they lay there, in silence, in the muted light in Jiraiya's small apartment for hours, just breathing and dozing lightly.

Kyo wasn't keeping track of the time, but it was dark out by the time someone approached the door. Jiraiya stepped into his small hallway and paused, no doubt sensing her, because she wasn't trying to hide, and neither was Kisaki.

He looked mildly wary when he came into view, taking in the sight of the two of them sprawled out
on his couch.

Jiraiya frowned and put his hands on his hips.

“It's rude to break into people's places, kid,” he said with a huff, before he wandered into the tiny kitchen to grab something to drink. “Okay. What disaster happened?” he asked, taking a seat on the floor with his sake in one hand, giving her a look as if to say 'hit me, I'm ready'.

Kyo smiled wanly up at the ceiling. “I almost killed my grandmother earlier today,” she told him conversationally.

Jiraiya paused with his bottle halfway to his lips. “Well, fuck,” he commented blandly. “She okay?”

“Yep. Didn't hurt her at all.” Which was very good. She wasn't sure how she would have dealt with the murder of a family member on her hands. Didn't know how that would have made her feel. Or impact her relationship with everyone else.

Right now, she wasn't sure she felt anything in particular about it, other than to feel... weird, about her loss of control.

“I came very close to killing her, sensei, and I was okay with that,” she admitted softly.

Jiraiya took a thoughtful swig of his alcohol, before he shrugged. “We kill people all the damn time.”

“Yeah, but not our people,” Kyo argued. “Or, we're not supposed to,” she whispered, tightening the hold she had on Kisaki, her fingers buried in her thick fur. “I've had a bad week, Jiraiya. Sorry for stealing your couch, but you're not getting it back until tomorrow.”

Jiraiya shrugged again, eyeing her seriously for a moment. “S fine,” he grunted, taking another mouthful of sake. “Feel like home.” He rolled his shoulders, unconcerned.

-x-x-x-

Tou-san, at least, didn't seem to hold anything against her, and while her little brother asked her about why she was fighting with baa-san, he didn't seem to have been particularly traumatized, either.

And that was as far as Kyo investigated that matter.

She didn't care about Haname or anyone else of those people right now.

“So Ryota finally got married?” Kyo couldn't help but ask again, because things sure had dragged out, hadn't they?

“Yes, kitten,” Kou said, sounding mildly exasperated and amused on his teammate's expense. “Which is why we're going to go and congratulate him and his brand new wife.”

Kyo blinked and exchanged a look with Genma, who was bouncing along beside her, holding her hand.

Getting into the Uchiha compound was easier than normal, and she didn't doubt they'd been expecting their arrival, seeing at tou-san had been Ryota's teammate for some twenty years now.

Kyo had been in and out of the place somewhat regularly over the last few years, too.

“Congratulations,” Kyo told her uncle when she finally saw him.
He was dressed up for the occasion, wearing a traditional wedding kimono, and there was an interesting expression on his face that looked to be caught somewhere between annoyance and smugness.

“Kitten,” Ryota greeted with a sharp grin. “Kou, Genma,” he added, looking them all over. “Come, let me introduce you to my wife.” And the smugness became more pronounced.

Ryota wandered through his house until he reached the back porch, where a congregation of Uchiha Elders and various other clan members had gathered for the occasion.

“Meet Uchiha Fukami,” Ryota said grandly, “my wife.”

Kyo found herself staring at what had to be a teenager. Not a is-Ryota-a-paedophile teenager, but still.

Ryota was over thirty, and this young woman was... uh, quite a bit younger than him.

She didn't look particularly unhappy though, other than the sense of annoyance she carried with the incessant fussing of the people around her, and she was probably more dolled up than she'd like, too, going by the way she was holding herself.

“Hello, nice to meet you,” Kyo greeted politely, bending into a shallow, polite bow. “Welcome to the family.” She smiled, because she didn't care what anyone said; Ryota was her family.

“Thank you,” Uchiha Fukami said, and her voice was cool and smooth and rather pleasant, in a polite and distant kind of way.

Genma peered curiously up at the woman, still holding Kyo's hand. “You're very pretty,” he said admiringly. “Will you be Ryota-oji's special friend now?”

The Uchiha woman peered back at her brother, looking quietly bewildered.

“Yes, she will, so be nice to her,” Kyo said with a sigh and a look at her brother, who grinned unrepentantly up at her. “You already know what marriage is,” she said conversationally.

Genma nodded. “It's what grandma said you need to do before you make babies but that's a lie,” he recounted dutifully, looking pleased with himself.

Some of the polite chatter in their immediate vicinity died and Kyo had to bite back a snort.

When she glanced at him, tou-san was peering up at the ceiling with an exasperated cast to his face, while Ryota looked like he just about managed to keep back laughter.

“Nee-san, can I go play?” Genma asked, tugging on her hand.

Kyo glanced out into the garden and at the small handful of children, before she exchanged a glance with Ryota's wife.


Kisaki had opted out of joining her today, when she'd heard about the formal occasion, and had instead told Kyo she'd find a nice patch of grass to nap on, giving her an amused look all the while.

Lucky dog.

She turned back to the newly wed bride. “So, if you don't mind me asking, how old are you?” Kyo
asked, because if she had to poison Ryota, then so be it.

“Eighteen,” Fukami replied evenly, not shifting out of her seat, in impeccable seiza, hands folded together neatly in her lap.

It didn't change the callouses on her hands, though, or the way she held herself; she was very much an active kunoichi.

Kyo tilted her head, sent Ryota a look and then turned back to observe the young woman, who was weathering the treatment with more grace than could be found in all of Kyo's body.

The awkward silence probably would have stretched out much longer if not a passing Uchiha had signed a quick 'congratulations' at Fukami, who automatically signed a small, subtle acknowledgement back.

In ANBU sign.

Kyo blinked and found herself leaning forward with interest.

'I didn't know you were ANBU,' she signed when Fukami's attention was once more on her.

Fukami gave a very slow blink, fingers twitching in a half-formed sign.

“In what department do you usually work?” Kyo asked casually, settling down and making herself comfortable, because this suddenly got a whole lot more interesting compared to just a few minutes ago.

“I do my fair share of paperwork and civilian interactions for the Military Police,” Fukami said evenly, at the same time signing a deliberately casual 'Intel and Archives,' which was interesting.

'Assassin,' Kyo signed back while she scanned the rest of the guests.

Kaimaru was standing next to who she was fairly sure was his mother some distance away, and part of her wanted to tense up, but she resolutely ignored him.

Like hell Kyo would let him ruin this. This day was for Ryota, and she loved her uncle, no matter what Kaimaru did.

You couldn't help who you were related to, after all, and so she turned back to Fukami without a hitch.

So long as Kaimaru stayed away from her and left her alone, she'd pretend he wasn't here and that she hadn't seen him.

“What are your plans now that's you're married?” she asked curiously.

Tou-san was still talking to Ryota quietly, and Genma had introduced himself to the other children and was now very busy playing tag.

Fukami gave a small, smooth shrug. “Nothing much will change. My honourable husband and I have come to several agreements regarding our personal life.”

Kyo smiled. “I'm glad he found someone who felt similarly to himself,” she told her truthfully.

This marriage was starting to make more sense, and Ryota's smugness could also be explained if Fukami was a match the Elders hadn't anticipated. Had perhaps even disliked the match, for
whatever reason, but if it worked out between the two of them, then that was more than fine.

Kyo didn't care even a little bit about the Uchiha Elders.

Fukami seemed like a nice person, though, and their conversation stuck to work and training and it was very nice, all things considered.

When one of the aged Uchiha ladies approached them for the bride's attention, Kyo retreated with a polite nod and a genuine smile.

She could definitely see herself getting along with Fukami, and she wondered if the woman would mind if she approached her in uniform... hm. Something to think about, she supposed.

Jiraiya-sensei announced they had a mission two days after Ryota's wedding and Kyo felt a surge of relief.

She couldn't quite pin down why it was an immense relief to go back to missions, but it was.

Thankfully, Minato seemed to agree with her.

"It was starting to feel weird," he told her quietly while Jiraiya sorted out the paperwork of leaving the village.

"Yeah," Kyo agreed, taking a step closer to Minato to avoid an oxen-pulled cart loaded with wares. She frowned absently.

They were running up to the north of Taki no Kuni with several missives and letters, some intended to be dropped off on the way, while others were intended for their destination.

Thankfully, they wouldn't be gone long -if things kept according to plan- as they wouldn't have to stick to a civilian pace.

Kyo suspected they'd make regular stops, though, seeing as Jiraiya seemed to have a constant mission going with Intel, these days.

Ah, well. It wasn't so bad, and it let her and Minato see more of the Elemental Nations than they would have, otherwise. Kisaki wasn't particularly happy, though, but that had more to do with the ninken's decision to stay home for more training.

She didn't want to be a liability, and she'd been off duty for almost four years.

So she'd be training with Arashi, Teki and their respective ninken while Kyo was gone. Most likely with single-minded determination and focus.

They stopped in a medium sized town to deliver a letter, but also taking the time to celebrate Minato's birthday half way through the mission, spending some money in a teahouse for a decent meal prepared by someone else, in an actual kitchen.

"Thirteen," Kyo commented amusedly. "How does it feel to be an official teenager?"

"Much the same as being twelve did," Minato said with a shrug, sending her an entertained look.

"Do you think we've reached the point in fuuinjutsu where sensei will help us with personal projects?" he asked next, because he was a dork obsessed with seals.
“Maybe? I've been thinking about storage seals, lately,” Kyo confessed.

Minato peered at her, before he sent their sensei a glance, gauging how much time he'd spend on flirting with the waitress before he got around to actually placing their order. “Storage seals? We've covered that already?”

“Yeah, but I was thinking about something a bit more complicated.” It would hopefully solve her water problem, too, when it came to her needles.

Minato made an interested noise but didn't press.

There were more people than them in the teahouse and while they were exclusively civilians, they were also all too curious for their own good.

Kyo could spot at least five people eavesdropping in their close vicinity, and she was barely trying.

“We should bring it up when we get back home,” he suggested, looking anticipatory and eager at the prospect.

Kyo smiled at him and nodded, bumping her shoulder into his. “Let's,” she agreed.

They returned back home without a hitch, which was another relief.

No injuries, no hostile interactions with foreign shinobi, and all their letters and missives had found the correct recipients without much problem.

Sure, they'd had to track down one man to some tiny village in Taki close to the Tetsu border, and Kyo and Minato had helped a widowed woman repair the roof of her house while Jiraiya-sensei took care of the details, but that had been kinda nice.

Hiwa-san had been very appreciative and had shared plenty of the local gossip, not to mention Konoha-friendly attitudes were always a plus.

Getting within sight of the main gates, Kyo couldn't help but pause, Minato mirroring her right beside her.

They exchanged a look and then followed after Jiraiya, but the eerie sense still clung to her.

“Uh, sensei?” Minato asked while they waited to get the attention of the slightly frazzled gate guards. “Is something happening?”

“What do you mean?” Jiraiya grunted, going through his pockets to look for their mission scroll, most likely, and only paying their surroundings cursory attention.

“This place is packed,” Kyo stated bluntly, taking in all the people, wagons, there were donkeys braying and seriously, people were everywhere. “Are we hosting a festival or special event or something?” she added, because what was going on?

“No?” Jiraiya sent the two of them a confused look, before he surveyed the bustling chaos around them quizzically. “We've been waiting for trade to pick back up and this has been anticipated. That's why they doubled the shinobi presence,” he said, gesturing distractedly at the additional Chuunin amongst the civilians, taking statements and inspecting wares and what not.

Kyo stared blankly at them, before she exchanged another look with her teammate, who looked
about as confused as she felt.

“Uh, what?” Minato said, tilting his head and looking around again with a bewildered expression.

“So you're saying this is normal for peace time?” Kyo asked slowly, hesitantly, almost tasting the words as they came out her mouth and why in the world was this so weird?

It shouldn't be weird, she was fairly sure.

She was feeling slightly overwhelmed, and yeah, there had been more activity at the gates when they'd left than normal, but she'd just figured they'd caught the... morning traffic, or something. But it was much worse now.

Kyo reached for Minato's hand, trying to anchor herself.

Jiraiya paused to send the two of them an intent look, before he glanced around again, an almost pained expression twisting his features for a moment.

“Trade all but stopped during the war,” he informed them gently. “Anything that's not funded by the village, at least. Civilian trade has finally gotten back on its feet, so yeah, this is actually pretty normal,” he said, watching the two of them like he was contemplating wrapping them up in a blanket and hiding them away somewhere.

Which... Kyo was feeling torn about.

On one hand, yeah, it was a bit ridiculous.

But on the other, part of her couldn't help but silently appreciate the sentiment.

How had she not realised this already? It felt like something that ought to be obvious, really, if you stopped to think about it, but she couldn't help but stare around at the bustle with wide eyes.

Because she hadn't thought about it.

...it would be relatively easy for foreign shinobi to slip into the village amidst this chaos.

Eyeing the people around her with increased suspicion for a brief moment before she caught herself, Kyo felt like slapping a hand over her eyes.

What was she doing?

“Do you think it'll be long before the guards get to us?” she asked instead of commenting, feeling tired and exasperated. She wanted to get this over with so she could go home.

Jiraiya eyed her a moment longer, slapped her gently on the back in wordless sympathy and then went back to attempting to locate their mission scroll amongst his multitude of pockets, pouches and gear.

Kyo calmly ate her breakfast, sitting in the chair opposite of tou-san, who looked perpetually amused, as both of them listened to what sounded like a whole flock of children running amok in her and Genma's room.

It was, in fact, just one child running amok.
Her brother.

“Did you feed him sugar for breakfast?” Kyo couldn’t help but ask Kou, who shot her a look.

“No.”

Kyo took another bite of rice, trying not to wince when it sounded like half the contents of their closet fell out and crashed onto the floor.

“I'm okay!” came Genma's voice a second later. “How much longer?” he called next.

“Half an hour!” tou-san called back, calmly drinking his tea and sending her another amused look. “I'm fairly sure Isshun told me you were much calmer,” he mused.

Kyo shrugged. She'd been more worried about kaa-san than anything else, but she'd been excited, too.

“I was just glad someone was coming with me,” she said, feeling a bit wistful. “Kaa-san got sent out and nearly missed it, and then I was a bit worried about how tired she was.” But it had been fun. “She started teaching me to throw the needles after.”

Tou-san smiled sadly at her.

“I'm dressed!” Genma announced loudly, skidding into the kitchen and looking a hair away from bouncing off the walls with excitement. “I can go like this, right? Do I need to bring my kunai? Do you think the other kids know more than me because they're older? Can you teach me cool jutsu so I won't lose in the spars?”

“You'll be fine,” Kyo told him amusedly, unable to quite stop the soft snigger from slipping out when Genma skipped up to them.

“Come on, come on, come on,” Genma chanted, all but vibrating beside tou-san and tugging on his shirt. “What if we're late!?”

Oh, the horror.

“So little faith,” tou-san tutted teasingly. “Afraid your old tou-san can't keep the time, huh,” he mused.

“Tou-san!” Genma whined, tugging on his shirt again.” “Come on! I wanna go start becoming a ninja!”

Technically, he'd started to become one quite a while ago, Kyo mentally mused, getting to her feet and bringing the dirty dishes to the sink to wash them quickly.

“Here, nee-san,” Genma said, rushing to bring her the rest, taking the tea mug right out of tou-san's hand to hurry things along.

Tou-san snorted, but didn't protest.

By the time she and Kou made their way to the hallway, Genma had been standing by the door for five minutes, loudly lamenting their slowness.

“You are taking forever,” he declared with a huff.

“We're going about things at a perfectly normal pace,” tou-san replied easily, putting on his sandals
and sending Kyo a look, but she was ready. “Alright, nothing forgotten? Did you grab your lunch?”

“Yes!” Genma lifted his bento to show them.

“Very well. Then let's go,” tou-san said and opened the door.

Genma bounced down the stairs ahead of them with a wide grin.

He calmed slightly when they reached the street, where he came to walk between the two of them, slipping a hand into Kyo's and smiling sunnily up at her.

Now that they were actually moving towards the Academy, Genma eased down from his boundless energy significantly and the closer they got, he got progressively more quiet and serious.

Kyo glanced down at him but didn't comment.

He might just be nervous.

“Are you sure Ashika won't be there?” he asked before they walked into the Academy yard.

Kyo exchanged a look with tou-san, who sighed softly and bent down to scoop the boy up and place him on his hip, giving him an intent look.

“She'll have to wait until she feels better,” Kou said evenly.

“You'll still be friends even if you're in different classes, Genma,” Kyo added her own piece.

Genma leaned his cheek on tou-san's shoulder and peered sadly at her. “Yeah.”

“And you can tell her all about it, what you're learning, what your classmates are like, and you can still practise with her and maybe even do your homework together, if Aita says it's okay,” she continued conversationally.

Genma thought it over for a few seconds, before he slowly brightened a little. “Okay. Thanks, nee-san.”

Kyo smiled wryly at him, because she hadn't really done anything, but all the same. “You're welcome.”

She lingered while tou-san approached the Chuunin noting down the arrivals and let them know which classroom they'd have to head to.

“Have a nice day, Genma,” Kyo bid him softly, reaching up to place a quick kiss on her brother's cheek. “Good luck, and I'm sure you'll make loads of friends before you know it.”

“See you later, nee-san,” Gemma said back, wearing a small, nervous smile and burrowed closer to tou-san, who squeezed him gently.

“I'm sure you'll have fun. Listen to your sensei and things will be fine,” he said.

Kyo nodded and watched them walk away.

Time for team training, and she was meeting up with Kisaki before she got there, so she'd take the way by the Inuzuka compound.
“I just don't know how to feel about it,” Kyo confessed with a huff.

“You were *four*, so I really don't think you've got any room to talk,” Minato pointed out with a wry look at her.

“I know!” Kyo threw her hands in the air. “It doesn't make sense, and I know it.”

“He'll be a pup for a while longer,” Kisaki said, seemingly unconcerned with the subject. “And it's peace.”

“Which makes it *better*, yeah, but still.” Kyo pursed her lips, frowning into the distance. In the end, she heaved an exasperated sigh. “I'm just worried for my little brother, you know?”

“We know,” Minato confirmed with a smile. “But it's not like anyone will let him graduate before he's ready. And Kisaki's right; it's peace now.”

Oh, if only it was that simple.

Kyo sent the boy a dry look. “You realise people can and will die even though it's peace, right?”

Minato tilted his head and thought it over. “Yeah, but it's still not the same.” He was silent for a second. “You know?”

“I know,” Kyo sighed, feeling tired all of a sudden. “Want to bring up the fuuinjutsu thing with Jiraiya today?” she asked, shamelessly changing the subject.

Minato brightened. “That would be great,” he said with a smile.

Kisaki gave a snort and sent Kyo a look, but didn't press. She'd find out soon enough.

When the physical workout was over with and all of them had sat down for the theoretical part, Minato cleared his throat and fixed their sensei with a bright-eyed look.

“Sensei?”

“Mm?” Jiraiya grunted, still unrolling the scroll he'd evidently prepared for their lesson. “What is it?” he continued when Minato didn't immediately say anything more.

Minato turned to exchange a look with Kyo, who nodded encouragingly at him. “We were wondering if it would be possible to try for a personal project,” he said, leaning forward with eager anticipation.

Jiraiya blinked at him for a second, before he considered the words and looked between them with shrewd amusement.

“Discussed this ahead of time, have you?”

“Of course we have,” Kyo said easily. “It's a team effort.”

Jiraiya barked out a laugh, lips stretching into an amused grin. “Sounds interesting. What did you have in mind?”

“I'm not sure, I just know I'd like to try and personalize something,” Minato mused, all thoughtfulness, now. “Try and see if I could make it my own.”

Jiraiya hummed, eyeing the blond before he turned to Kyo, studying her expectantly.
“I have a more specific question,” she confessed. “Is it possible to get storage seal tattoos?”

She very much wanted to know, because it sounded like the perfect solution for her. If she could get one on each wrist, then she wouldn't have to worry about rain or water jutsu ever again, and it would also free up space in her pouches for other things.

Win-win.

Jiraiya stared at her for a long second.

Long enough she was starting to wonder what in the world she'd said to get the reaction.

Before she could say anything, he huffed out an incredulous laugh. “You couldn't just ask about something simple,” he muttered, pulling his fingers through his hair and eyeing both of them amusedly. “You know what, let's move this conversation to the Uzumaki compound. It's more their line of business, anyway, and someone could explain the intricacies of what you'd want to do while I bring Minato to the Hokage library. Get both of you started, that way.”

Kyo tilted her head.

Was it really that complicated?

Didn't you just have to tattoo a storage seal on yourself and be done?

Kyo wouldn't mind getting more tattoos, not when they'd be *that* useful and she'd thought about this a lot.

Maybe it could also help ensure she wouldn't ever run out of needles again.

That hadn't been fun, and she'd rather not do a repeat.

...she'd rather never experience something like Uzushio ever again, but if she ended up there anyway? Yeah. Kyo would like to have her needles.

There was another war coming and she'd make sure to be prepared.

Make sure *all of them* were prepared, she amended, looking her team over while they packed up.

“Okay, come on, let's get going,” Jiraiya said when they were done, looking the training field over to make sure they hadn't forgotten anything.

It was a familiar route to the Uzumaki compound by now and just a few minutes after they'd entered, there was a shout of, “Nee-san!” and then Ashika came pelting around the corner.

Kyo easily bent down to catch the girl when she launched herself at her, lifting her up and wrapping her up in a tight hug.

“Where's Aita?” she asked, looking around, because she doubted he'd be far behind.

“Nii-san's too slow,” Ashika huffed sullenly, firming up her hold on her and proceeded to inspect Jiraiya intently with a scowl. “Who're you?” she demanded to know.

“This is Jiraiya. My Jounin sensei,” Kyo introduced with a soft, exasperated sigh. “That's Minato, my teammate,” she pointed at the boy, who was staring at Ashika with a rather stricken look on his face, “and you've met Kisaki already,” she finished without a hitch.
“Puppy,” Kisaki acknowledged with a casual sniff at Ashika's leg.

“'M not a puppy,” Ashika countered immediately, scowling at the ninken, and Kisaki was absolutely amused and would now never call her anything else, if Kyo wasn't mistaking that look in her eyes.

“She calls Genma the same thing,” Kyo informed the girl, only to give a mental pause when Ashika drooped and buried her face in Kyo's shoulder.

She mumbled something indistinct into Kyo's shirt that wasn't audible and Kyo shrugged at the two males, who were staring confusedly at her.

It was the start of the Academy today, and Ashika had been held back, so it wasn't exactly shocking behaviour.

“Ashika!” Aita huffed when he came stalking around the closest corner. “Just because I told you Kyo's come to visit, you can't just take off without a word,” he groused, but his expression was pinched with concern and no doubt remembered fear.

“Hello, Aita,” Kyo greeted casually, making no move to put Ashika down. “Do you happen to know where Hinata-shishou is? I'd like to talk to him, if at all possible.”

Aita paused, properly taking in the company she was currently in, before he let a more professional expression slide into place on his face.

“Official business?” he asked, posing the question partially to Jiraiya, as much as it was for Kyo.

“Semi-official,” Jiraiya said, tipping a hand back and forth in a show of indecision. “Would be nice if someone could explain all the complicated details in the project Kyo would like to try her hand at, while I get Minato started on his. It's more your area of expertise than mine,” he said with a shrug, evidently not bothered by the admittance.

Aita send her a look, before he turned back to Jiraiya. “That won't be a problem,” he said, not even pausing to think. “I can take her to shishou and let him know you and Minato will be arriving eventually?” he offered.

“That would be much appreciated,” Jiraiya said, inclining his head, giving Aita a once-over while he was at it, looking thoughtful. “We shouldn't take more than an hour or two, depending on how quickly Minato finds anything he likes.”

Aita nodded his understanding.

“Have fun,” Kyo told her teammate with a grin, “and see you in a while. Don't cause any trouble, sensei,” she added, more for the heck of it than anything else.

Jiraiya scoffed. “I'm the one supposed to say that, you damn brat,” he muttered and turned to leave at a sedate pace. “Don't get into any situations while I'm gone,” he tossed over his shoulder and Kyo couldn't help but snicker into Ashika's hair.

Minato sighed, gave her a wave and then ran after Jiraiya until he caught up enough to walk beside him.

Kyo turned back to Aita with a cheerful smile. “So,” she said.

Kisaki gave an amused snort.
“So, indeed,” Aita drawled dryly, glancing briefly at the ninken at her side. “Ashika, you’ve got anything to say?”

“You sensei is weird, nee-san,” the girl said bluntly.

Aita sighed heavily, while Kyo bit back a snort. “Yeah, he is, but he's a mostly nice weird. Hinata-shishou?” she reminded Aita, who waved at her to follow.

“What project was he talking about?”

Kyo explained her and Minato's musings while she fell into step, Kisaki easily keeping up with them, even though she drifted off to sniff at things occasionally. She told him about Jiraiya's reaction to them bringing it up and something like this really would be a learning experience that'd be more challenging than just the lectures, the theory and painstakingly copying already finished seals.

They were getting pretty good at that already.

“So I asked about possibly getting storage seal tattoos and Jiraiya suggested going here,” she wrapped it up succinctly, eyeing her friend intently while they walked.

Ashika was still attached to her front like a particularly stubborn burr, legs wrapped around her waist and arms around her neck.

Aita laughed softly, shaking his head. “You're unbelievable, Kyo.”

“What? I just asked! And it's not like it can be such a huge leap of logic, anyway,” she muttered, feeling exasperated. “I can't possibly have been the first person to have ever thought about it.”

“You're not,” Aita assured her amusedly.

“Good,” she huffed back, narrowing her eyes on him.

Aita produced an entertained noise, but didn't say anything else.

Kyo exchanged a somewhat dubious look with Kisaki, but the ninken didn't know what was up any more than she did.

Soon enough, they'd reached their destination and Aita knocked on the frame of the sliding door in front of them.

“Shishou?” he questioned, sliding the door open enough to stick his head into the room. “Jiraiya came by with Kyo, she's got an interesting fuuinjutsu question that requires quite the thorough lecture.”

Kyo bit back a sigh, because of course it couldn't just be as simple as she had been hoping.

A simple fix would have been very appreciated.

“Bring her in,” Hinata-shishou's voice answered, and he sounded weary.

“Hello, shishou,” Kyo greeted softly, dipping her head in as much of a respectful bow she could currently manage, arms full like they were.

“Hello, Kyo,” Hinata said back, taking a seat on a cushion on the floor. “Now, what question did you have?” he prompted, eyeing Ashika, who, rather than let go when Kyo sat down in front of him, made herself comfortable in her lap while Kisaki settled beside them.
“I asked about storage seal tattoos,” she repeated herself for the third time, absently carding her fingers through Ashika's thick hair.

Hinata smiled at her, the skin in the corners of his eyes crinkling. “Did you, now?”

“Yes!” Kyo sighed sharply. “So will someone tell me why this is such a big deal anytime soon, or what?” she huffed, eyeing the two amused males. Because of course Aita had joined them, taking a seat beside his fuuinjutsu master.

“Kyo, do you know why not all shinobi have seals inked into their skin?” Hinata asked, rather than comment on what she'd just said.

“No, but I have a feeling you're about to tell me,” she muttered.

“Our bodies are riddled with chakra pathways, which makes the whole matter far more complicated than, say, drawing a seal on a piece of paper, or in a scroll,” Hinata began warmly. “There are of course plenty of advantages such a seal would bring a shinobi, but not many pursue it due to a number of reasons. One, such a storage seal would have to be entirely personalized, made from scratch,” he smiled at her, “and not many shinobi get proficient enough in fuuinjutsu to begin with to bother. It also requires a deep understanding of chakra in general, and your own in particular.” He paused, meeting her gaze. “Then there’s the matter of finding someone skilled enough to take that seal and put it on your skin without mistakes. Learning how to use such a seal.”

He fell silent, just watching her, and Kyo frowned in thought.

Okay, that sounded like a lot, but the benefits...

“Still interested?” Aita asked curiously.

“Yes. How would I go about designing a brand new storage seal?” Kyo asked, focusing back on Hinata and absently shifting her seat when Ashika began to move, turning around so that she could sit with her back to Kyo's front, to watch the two men and listen properly. “And how does one take the chakra pathways into consideration? In what way?” she couldn't help but press, because while it sounded complicated as hell, it also sounded fascinating.

“Depends on where you'd want to put it,” Hinata said mildly.


Hinata hummed thoughtfully. “May I see?” And he held out a hand towards her expectantly.

Kyo blinked at him but shrugged and quickly and efficiently removed her wrist holsters and placed them neatly beside her.

Kisaki had stretched out on her side and was dozing lightly, now, not very interested in their fuuinjutsu conversation.

As always, her wrists felt ridiculously naked and light without the holsters, the weight and pressure of them against her wrists more than familiar.

That done, she held out her arms for Hinata-shishou to inspect.

His hands, as rough and calloused like every shinobi's, were warm and careful when he grasped her offered limbs, and he spent a moment to thoroughly inspect her left hand, and the bandages that still covered it.
He ran his thumbs over the pale skin on the inside of her wrists and then let her go with a thoughtful look on his face.

“Shouldn't be impossible,” was all he said.

Kyo had no idea what it was he'd just checked, but decided not to question it right now, since he hadn't said it couldn't be done.

“And to start making a seal?” she repeated.

“You'd have to take a lot of things into consideration,” Hinata said smoothly, frowning with speculation. “Chakra nature, chakra type, the... texture, if you will, of your chakra, as well as adapt it to the limitations of your chosen area and the chakra pathways in it.” He gestured at her wrists with a hand. “Then there's the details of how complex you'd like it. How large a storage space you'd want, how easily accessible.” He smirked at her and Kyo felt tempted to stick out her tongue. “Still interested, Kyo?”

She spent a minute to think about it with focused care.

That was a lot of fiddly work and she'd have to learn so much before she could so much as get started.

Eyeing Hinata and Aita for a moment, before she went back to frowning at the wall, Kyo knew she wouldn't be alone, though. There'd be people to ask for help along the way, and she doubted they'd let her fumble around in the dark and potentially kill herself with some monumental mistake.

She glanced down at her needle holsters.

Kaa-san had given her those, and she'd worn them for very nearly half of this life. She loved them, and nothing would ever be able to replace the memories they signified.

They'd been with her through everything, but... they had their weaknesses. And if she wanted to be as ready as she could be for whatever the future would hold?

“Can we start right away?” she asked, turning back to the two Uzumaki fuuinjutsu experts.

“It'll take a lot of self-examination,” Hinata told her evenly.

That was fine.

Kyo was pretty used to that, already, actually.

She nodded. “I understand, shishou. I still want to try.”

“Very well,” Hinata said simply and asked Aita to go get the things they'd need to get started.

By the time Minato and Jiraiya joined them, Kyo was already half-buried in a pile of different storage seal designs, if only to get started to see some of the vast variations available and take notes on what she might be able to use.

The Uzumaki in Konoha had managed to bring some of their things from Uzushio, and that involved a big part of their fuuinjutsu library, which on its own was an invaluable treasure.

Not worth as much as the people, though. Not even close.
“What did you pick?” she asked, looking up and blinking rapidly to clear her eyes, taking in the pleased look on Minato's face.

“Barrier disruptor,” her teammate announced, sitting down beside her and giving the pile of scrolls around her a curious look. “I'm gonna try and change it into a more general chakra disruptor.”

Kyo eyed him seriously. “To work on people?” she asked softly.

Minato nodded shortly, fingers clenching on the scroll in his hand. “Okay, sensei, can we get started?” he asked, rather than comment on her unasked question.

Jiraiya gave an amused huff and eyed both of them, scratching at his cheek and looking positively bemused.

“You know, I thought most kids tried to get out of doing theoretical work, rather than ask for more,” he drawled.

Both Kyo and Minato sent him the look that sentence deserved and went back to their respective task.

Aita snorted out an amused laugh where he sat with Ashika, drawing with crayons, though it was far more fuuinjutsu practice than unstructured fun.

Kisaki was still stretched out, dozing, within reaching distance from Kyo, but far enough away she wouldn't get buried beneath the scrolls or get ink on her fur, if they reached that point.

“So, you decided to take on the challenge, did you?” Jiraiya said, walking up to Kyo to take a look at what she was doing. “Best of luck,” he told her, sincere, but also somewhat wryly.

Kyo sent him a look. “Thank you,” she answered evenly, getting more determined by the minute.

She would do this.

The fact Kushina came around to join them before the day was over, taking a seat with Aita and Ashika to draw, was something she noted absently, but didn't particularly pay attention to.

-x-x-x-
Genma took to school like a fish to water.

He loved the lessons, and he also loved the other children. Mostly.

Or at least that was the impression Kyo had gotten in between missions, fuuinjutsu and training with Hyena in ANBU headquarters.

The place wasn't quite the same with the Numbers there, but at least the provisional period was coming to a close soon, and people could start to relax more around the place again.

While the recruiting period was in full swing, no one was allowed to walk around outside the barracks without their mask on, and while most of the operatives did that normally anyway, it was nice to be able to take it off in the cafeteria for a few minutes, for example.

Not possible with Kiddie ANBU around.

And Kyo was very amused to use that term, to herself, and to the other ANBU.

Hyena found it hilarious, too, which was nice.

Gecko had taken her aside and told her a quiet thank you, the first time she'd seen him since the Abduction Incident, laughing bitterly about the whole thing.

“Never thought I'd ever thank anyone for poisoning me,” he muttered. “But thanks.”

“You're welcome,” Kyo had answered, just as quietly. “I'm pretty sure Dove's not holding a grudge,” she'd added, because that might be something he was worried about.

Gecko had sighed tiredly, rubbed a hand over the cloth on his head, given her a nod and stalked away.

Everyone was busy.

Coming back to the village after another mission, civilian escort, this time -though not a caravan, thankfully- Kyo checked the position of the sun and wandered in the direction of the Academy.
Seeing as she'd just come out of the Hokage tower, it was a very short walk.

Classes ought to end soon, so Kyo found a nice place to perch and waited.

One of the older classes were having a taijutsu lesson in the training field linked to the Academy yard and they provided something to look at while she waited. Some entertainment.

Such as it was.

When the first children came running out from the building, Kyo jumped down from the tree-branch she'd been sitting on and walked sedately towards the door, keeping her eyes peeled for her brother.

“Nee-san!” the boy exclaimed when he saw her and Kyo smiled.

“Hey, Genma,” she greeted, pulling him into a firm hug, pressing her face against his shoulder, for just a second. “Everything good?”

She was tired. They'd been running all night and morning to get back home in minimal time, and she felt the lack of sleep.

Kyo had been generally more tired lately, her body craving more sleep, she assumed, and she was still getting used to it.

“Yeah,” Genma muttered, hugging her back, just as hard. “Nee-san?” he asked once she'd put him down again, taking her hand and peering up at her. “Can you come pick me up from school again tomorrow?” he asked hopefully, brown eyes large and beseeching.

“Sure?” Kyo blinked, feeling mildly puzzled. “Of course,” she added. “I just got back, so I won't be sent back out that quickly,” she muttered under her breath, smothering a yawn with her hand. “Did you learn anything interesting while I was gone?”

“Yep!” Genma chirped, more cheerful now, and he eagerly prattled at her, telling her everything from the lessons Shuzo-sensei were giving them, to the friends he'd made.

And boy was her little brother a sociable creature.

It was like he'd gotten all the genes that had skipped over Kyo, in that department.

“Oh, tou-san went away, nee-san,” Genma told her when she took the turn to bring them home.

Kyo paused, but then continued on anyway, giving a languid shrug. “I'll bring you to grandma's after we've spent some time together.”

“Are you still angry with baa-san?” her brother asked.

“Yes.” Well. Maybe not angry, necessarily, but she still didn't have any desire to spend any amount of time under the same roof as Haname.

Hurt, was more the right word, Kyo was fairly sure. Hurt and disappointed. And offended, probably.

And alright, a little bit angry, too, but she'd rather not think about it. Because it led to her thinking about her losing control like that and- yeah. She rather wouldn't.

Kyo didn't like the implications.

Walking into their apartment, it was indeed as abandoned as Genma's words had implied it would be,
and she'd have to ask him how long tou-san had been away and if he'd said anything about how long he'd be gone. But first, shower.

“Bathroom,” she announced.

“Okay!” Genma said and eagerly raced ahead of her, and Kyo felt like a snail next to her exuberant brother.

She'd have to go check in with Kisaki, too, let her know she was back home, but Kyo would take the time to sleep properly, first. She was too tired to do otherwise and the ninken wouldn't begrudge her the rest.

Trudging into the bathroom after Genma, Kyo absently kicked the boy's shirt to the side so it wouldn't get wet and began to take off her gear, placing it to the side to be cleaned and checked over tomorrow.

She usually did this before going into the bathroom, but she'd decided to just... skip that. Merge the two things. Hopefully, it would let her go sleep sooner.

Sitting on the wooden stool to wash, next to her brother, Kyo blinked when she realised Genma was staring at her.

“What is it?” She didn't have any new scars to attract his attention, and there wasn't so much as a significant bruise on her to draw his gaze.

Instead of saying anything, Genma tentatively reached out to carefully poke her chest.

Ah.

*Those.*

Kyo hadn't decided what she felt about developing breasts again, yet. It was... It was. Nothing she could do about it, really, and it wasn't like they were big enough you could see so much as a hint of them through her clothes yet.

“ Weird,” Genma announced, though he sounded curious. And he was still poking her left breast tentatively. “Why's it so soft?”

Kyo snorted. “Because it's fat,” she told him dryly. “Now stop that, it's uncomfortable, and I'd rather you wouldn't.”

Genma froze for a second, before he raised his head to stare at her face, looking partly sheepish and partly guilty. “Sorry, nee-san.”

“It's okay,” Kyo sighed, reaching out to ruffle his not-yet wet hair. “They're just tender, and I'm feeling a bit self-conscious about them.”

“All okay?” the boy asked, tilting his head and scrutinizing her chest, as if trying to see what the problem was.

Kyo felt her cheeks warm up slightly in response, but she sent him a fond look. “Because they're new, and I haven't gotten used to them yet.” Never mind that she'd had a pair before, once. This was still weird.

Again.
Genma looked mostly confused, but nodded his acceptance and went back to his wash.

Kyo was quietly grateful.

Damn, growing up was hard.

They finished their wash, and Kyo kept to one-word responses when she could. It was wonderful to wash the dust and grime of travelling off her skin, but her bed was calling her name.

“Okay, dressed? Got everything?” Kyo asked, rubbing at her eyes before she fixed Genma with a look.

“Yep,” her brother confirmed, giving a solemn nod. “Why can't I stay here with you?”

“Because I will be sleeping for a pretty long while, I think, and you need dinner, breakfast tomorrow, and I'm just too tired this time, Genma.”

Genma grimaced sullenly, but didn't throw a fit, and she could only be grateful. “Baa-san says you should stop being a ninja,” he informed her on the way there. “Tou-san argued with her again.”

“Oh?” Kyo huffed. “And what do you think?”

“You're the best, after tou-san,” Genma declared firmly, lips pursed and jumping over a pot hole in the road at the same time. “I'm gonna be just like you. Baa-san is being silly.”

“Yep,” Kyo agreed dryly. Silly. “See you tomorrow after school, Genma,” she bid her brother when they got there. Deciding not to touch upon his aspirations for himself just now.

“Good night, nee-san,” Genma said back, throwing his arms around her waist for another hug. And then he ran to the door, throwing it open and charging inside, and Kyo snorted amusedly, but didn't linger.

She had a date with her bed and she wasn't missing it for anything.

.

The following day was calm, and she slept through half of it, which was just wonderful and entirely according to plan.

At least she woke up feeling revitalized and mostly recovered.

After restocking the fridge and taking care of her gear, Kyo threw a glance at the window and prepared to head back out.

She'd slept late, so it was already time to meet up with Genma, like promised.

“You look tired,” Kisaki commented, slinking up to her about half-way to the Academy, looking unruffled and like she'd been there the whole time.

Kyo sent the dog a look. “I am tired,” she huffed. “Got to sleep out, though, which is nice. How've you been?”

“My legs hurt,” Kisaki grumbled.

Kyo rubbed at the dog's head in wordless sympathy, because getting back into shape kind of sucked a lot, but at least Kisaki was perfectly healthy. No lingering health issues from Uzu.
Genma was wearing a fierce scowl when she spotted him and Kyo exchanged a confused look with Kisaki, who shook out her fur with a pensive huff.

“Puppy,” the dog greeted. “Learn anything today?”

“Yeah,” Genma muttered, before he turned to wrap his arms around Kyo’s waist. “Please come pick me up tomorrow, too, nee-san,” he said, speaking into her stomach.

“...okay?” There was definitely something going on here, but fuck if she knew what it was. “Wanna go train with me and Kisaki for a bit?” she suggested, because that was bound to cheer him up, right?

As she’d hoped, Genma brightened. “Yes!” he agreed, all eagerness.

They could probably go and get some dango after, too, she mused, turning their steps towards a suitable training ground.

Before long, Genma was bouncing along next to her, talking eagerly about everything he’d show her and begging to be taught 'all the awesome jutsu, nee-san'.

Kyo met up with her team the following morning, for training and fuuinjutsu and the day passed so quickly she was running to the Academy before she knew it, feeling like she’d forgotten something.

Kisaki was absolutely laughing at her, but kept pace beside her without issue, so the ninen was clearly making progress with her own training.

Soon enough, she’d be ready to leave the village with them on missions, and Kyo found herself looking forward to it with eager anticipation.

Landing in the Academy yard, Kyo scanned the children already milling around, looking for Genma.

“There he is,” Kisaki said, nodding over towards the back.

“Uh-oh,” Kyo sighed, starting over there, because her brother's body-language was far from calm and happy. “What now?”

“He was angry yesterday, too,” Kisaki commented idly, watching with sharp eyes as they approached the boy.

“How was your day?” Kyo asked, raising her voice and getting Genma's attention.

Her brother whirled around, face red and hands curled into fists at his sides. “Nee-san!” he exclaimed, nonetheless looking pleased to see her, so... at least he wasn't angry about her being late?

“This is the girl?” an unfamiliar voice drawled and Kyo blinked.

Turning to look at the two people standing a small distance away, she took in what looked to be one of Genma's classmates, she was pretty sure, and his... brother?

She tilted her head with a faint frown.

“Nee-san,” Genma huffed, stomping up to her, pointing at the duo, “beat him in a fight,” he all but ordered.

Kyo blinked slowly.
Kisaki snorted, looking from the boy to the two strangers and back again, ears flicking indecisively and looking generally unimpressed.

“Uh, why?” Kyo couldn't help but ask. She was pretty tired; it had been a long day, and she had some interesting reading she wanted to get to.

Not to mention... she eyed the older of the boys again. He couldn't possibly be anything other than a Genin, and she'd get nothing out of that.

“I knew it!” the little boy exclaimed, sounding victorious. “Girls are stupid and weak! Right nii-san?”

He turned to eye his brother.

“Yep,” the older boy said with a smirk. “Little girls should stay out of shinobi business; it takes a real man.”

“...rules you out, then, doesn’t it?” Kyo couldn't help but mutter, eyeing the boy sceptically. He might actually be her age, if she wasn't mistaken.

He puffed up with insult and Kyo felt... unimpressed.

“Shut up! You’re just a kunoichi, and you’re not even a pretty one,” he said, giving her a derisive once-over, gaze lingering on her chest, which told her more than she needed to know about what he meant with that.

Kyo stared blandly at him.

Really?

“What’s the name of your Jounin sensei?” Kyo asked, rather than... touch that. This wasn't her problem.

“None of your business,” he sniffed, taking an assertive step forward.

Kisaki scoffed, just as derisive, and wandered away in the direction of home, clearly having no interest in whatever this was supposed to be.

“You shut up!” her little brother growled. “Nee-san is stronger and better than your stupid brother!” And he glared at the other kid.

Well. That was flattering, she supposed dryly, sending her little brother a wry look.

“Little kids should learn to keep their mouths shut, or they might find themselves in trouble,” the Genin huffed, eyeing Genma in a way that made Kyo stare at him right back.

“You'll get written up for this, you understand that, right?” Kyo asked blandly. A Genin prepared to abuse his power and status like this wasn't someone that should be promoted to Chuunin anytime soon.

She'd make sure to drop a word to his sensei, too. Out of professional courtesy.

The Genin scoffed. “Right,” he rolled his eyes, “just stand still and let me beat you up a little so we can go home.”

Kyo stared at him.

Really.
This guy's self-preservation instincts didn't seem to have woken up yet, or something.

“Show them, Gin-nii!” the little boy exclaimed excitedly, and the Academy yard was all but deserted by now.

'Gin' smirked superiorly at her and made a show of attacking, throwing himself at her in some kind of superfluous kick.

Kyo had plenty of time to push Genma behind her, grab the guy's foot and push it up at the same time as she jabbed her fingers into a cluster of nerves on the inside of his thigh and then push his leg away from her without resistance. Disrupting his already poor balance.

She blinked.

...ah, that had maybe been a bit overkill? she mused, watching the Genin swear and jump on one foot as his other leg had definitely gone numb and it was very uncomfortable to get your pressure points jabbed like that. Maybe even painful, depending on how hard you hit, but she hadn't gone that far.

Kyo eyed him blandly for another second, before she shook her head to herself. “Come on, Genma. We're going home,” she said, firmly steering her brother towards the street.

She wasn't spending any more time on this idiocy.

“But, nee-san!” Genma complained, dragging his feet. “Why didn't you-”

“We're leaving,” she told him shortly, starting to feel unamused.

Genma huffed and sulked until they were well and truly out in the village. “You're stronger than he is, nee-san,” he grumbled, scowling down at the ground.

“Yes,” she agreed. “But that doesn't make it alright to, what? Beat up a Genin just because my little brother told me?” She raised her eyebrows at the boy.

Genma continued to scowl angrily at the ground. “They keep saying girls are stupid and weak,” he finally exploded. “And they're not!” He went so far as to stomp a foot. “You're a girl and Ashika's a girl. Ren's a girl, too, and you're all the best,” he muttered, clearly unwilling to let it go.

Kyo felt somewhat helpless, looking at him, because how was she supposed to deal with this?

Genma wasn't in the wrong, exactly, but that didn't make his reaction to it right, either.

She looked around and steered them to a corner store down the street.

It was quick to go in to buy an ice cream for them each and then find the closest bench in a somewhat out-of-the-way spot for a talk.

Genma swung his feet back and forth where he sat beside her, and while he was still frowning, he no longer looked quite so worked up.

It was difficult to be angry when you were five years old and had ice cream.

Kyo sighed softly, trying to think of a good way to talk about this while she ate her own treat.

“You weren't wrong when you said girls aren't weak, Genma,” she finally said, feeling... she wasn't even sure what she was feeling at this point. “We're not. We maybe won't get as physically strong as boys, but you can be strong in different ways.”
“So why didn't you show them?” Genma huffed, frown deepening, clearly unhappy with the whole situation.

Kyo suppressed a grimace. “You weren't wrong, but it was wrong to try and set up a fight between me and that Genin, little brother,” she huffed right back, nudging him gently. “I'm a Jounin, Genma,” no matter how she felt about that, “and that means I can hurt people very easily.”

Genma peered up at her, looking confused and still frowning minutely. “That was what I was telling Takeo, but then he said I was lying and that his nii-san could beat you up easy.” He muttered, thoroughly offended. “I told him he was wrong, but then Shohei said I had to prove it!” He looked scandalized.

“Your ice cream is melting,” Kyo reminded him distractedly.

Genma ate his melting ice cream while Kyo tried to... think.

Uh.

She wasn't feeling equipped to deal with this. Seriously.

“Why is it wrong to show them?” Genma eventually demanded, turning to stare at her, clearly wanting a good answer.

Kyo sighed. “Genma, I don't want to hurt a Konoha Genin. I could accidentally-” she cut herself off and cleared her throat. “If you feel like they're wrong, then you should try to find a way to prove them wrong in a way they'll actually listen,” she tried. “What are the girls in your class saying?” she asked, because that might get them somewhere.

Had the kids been like this when she was in the Academy? If so, then she hadn't noticed, too busy studying and advancing to new classes often enough to have missed it.

She couldn't find it in herself to mind.

“They don't like it, and they think the boys are mean,” Genma huffed, crossing his arms over his chest. “They're really nice, though! And Ayaka showed me how to fix my shirt when I got mud on it the other day!” He sent Kyo a look, and she nodded. “Suzu's really good at taijutsu, too, but when I tried to tell Shohei, he didn't listen.” And he was back to scowling.

“This isn't something that can be fixed just by punching someone in the face,” she told her brother tiredly.

“It should,” he sniffed back, sticking his nose in the air. “They're being stupid.”

“Yeah, they are. But it's something they've been taught, probably by their parents,” Kyo said quietly. “You know how baa-san says I shouldn't be a ninja?” Genma gave her a cautious look and nodded. “It's sort of like that.”

Genma thought that over thoroughly for a moment. “So they're being silly,” he finally decided.

“Yeah,” Kyo agreed weakly and got to her feet. “Now come on; I'll walk you to the house.” Because it would be time for dinner soon, and Genma was probably hungry.

-x-x-x-

Her first ANBU mission in a good long while was an assassination and Kyo had almost forgotten
what it felt like.

Jiraiya-sensei hadn't looked happy when she'd informed him she'd be unavailable for about a week, but hadn't said anything.

Kyo had been grateful.

She'd been pretty glad she wouldn't have had to try and explain to Minato either, because while he knew she was in ANBU, assassinations... well.

She hadn't really minded, last time, but Minato looked at her like she was someone who- someone like him.

Her victim this time had been a young woman, and Kyo had no idea why she was killing her, but she had. Quick and painless.

At least she'd gotten to work with Hyena, again.

Walking into ANBU headquarters after they'd gotten back felt nice. It meant Kyo could start to fully relax again, and she could get back to her regular, normal life.

Where she didn't have to kill young, civilian women in their sleep.

She'd spotted Crow heading in, but hadn't showed any indication of having so much as seen him, because she didn't want to fight any more. Kaimaru had made his choice and she was content to leave him to it.

Not happy, but... content.

“Come on, let's go shower,” Hyena said cheerfully, looking alert and happy. As if the out of village mission had left him refreshed.

“I think I'll pass,” Kyo muttered back. The last time she'd walked into the ANBU shower, there'd been two people having sex in there.

At least she now knew Hyena hadn't forgotten to mention a women's section, though.

She'd been so tired and banged up when she'd walked in and noticed, and she'd already been undressed, so Kyo had decided to ignore everything, wash quickly and then leave like nothing had been wrong.

The two lovebirds hadn't so much as paused, but at least they'd been quiet.

But still.

Kyo didn't feel like venturing back into the ANBU showers for a while. She'd report back in with Bear and get everything in order and then just go home.

They had a perfectly working shower in the apartment.

Hyena snickered at her, but didn't argue.

For some reason, he'd found her reaction to the incident funny.

Official duties finally taken care of, Kyo slowly made her way back out towards one of the exits again, Hyena tagging along, for some reason. The other half of their temporary team had split off to
Kyo blinked when she caught a glimpse of blond hair further down the corridor, but didn't pause, didn't really react in any way, even though she kept a curious eye on Tsunade as she approached.

What was the woman doing in ANBU headquarters?

Well, never mind; Kyo doubted anyone would tell her if she asked, and she was more interested in going home and take that shower anyway.

Her body was sore in a way that had nothing to do with physical exertion, and more to do with impending period, if she wasn't mistaken.

This part of growing up was just... damn inconvenient, really. But, she was sure she'd get used to it eventually. All over again.

One second walking down the corridor beside Hyena, the next, she had ducked around her friend to get away from the hand reaching for her.

Kyo blinked mutely at Tsunade's intent face.

What?

"I need you to come with me for a while," the woman said firmly, and no? Kyo wasn't interested in that?

She'd just come home from a mission and she really didn't see the point for this. Tsunade didn't know Scorpion.

As far as Kyo was aware, Tsunade hadn't ever so much as met Scorpion.

Kyo exchanged a look with Owl, who was escorting the woman, and abruptly felt somewhat betrayed, because the old man clearly didn't give a shit what Tsunade did so long as she didn't kill her.

Traitor.

Tsunade reached for her again and Kyo ducked out of reach, only for Hyena, who had been eyeing them curiously all the while, to place a hand on her back and push her right towards the other woman.

Kyo stared at her friend in muted shock.

What.

'The hell?' she demanded shortly when Tsunade clamped down a hand on her shoulder with an iron grip.

'Looks serious. Don't dodge the medic,' Hyena signed her back, snickering.

'I'm not injured!' she couldn't help but return incredulously. 'Asshole,' she added, still more shocked than anything else.

'Tell me if anything interesting happens!' Hyena returned, but Kyo was rather distracted, seeing as Tsunade had just gotten a firm grip on one of her shoulder straps and picked her up off her feet, tucking her under one arm.
What the actual fuck?

Actually, Kyo was too tired and achy to deal with this.

'I'm putting you two on my shit list,’ she informed both Owl and Hyena.

“Right. I'll get back to you. Something came up I have to deal with,” Tsunade declared briskly.

Owl shrugged, evidently not giving a shit one way or another, probably to both of their statements, and he consequently wandered away.

Hyena was watching her avidly, giggling softly every now and then, but let Tsunade march away with Kyo like she was some sort of spoils of war or something.

You know what, Kyo really was too tired for this.

Tsunade had too tight a grip on her for her to be able to shunshin away and she didn't feel like wasting energy on struggling. The woman was a new mother, and if this was her first project coming back to work, then she was pretty sure it was important enough for it.

Kyo could probably slip away at some point, though... but damn it, she was getting curious.

Once Tsunade had gotten out of ANBU headquarters, Kyo decided to activate her chameleon jutsu, because this wasn't exactly dignified.

ANBU lugged around by an irate medic across half the village, looking like a dead body.

All in a day's fun, she mused, feeling deadpan and increasingly annoyed.

Tsunade sent her a narrow-eyed glance, as if wondering if she'd try to get away, but didn't pause her run across the village.

And of course she was taking her to the Senju compound.

What the hell? Kyo was starting to get really interested in hearing an explanation for this, but that didn't mean she was any less irritated.

Before she knew it, Tsunade had entered one of the buildings, brusquely dumped Kyo on the floor and Kyo was on her feet in a second, tearing off her mask to demand an explanation because she wasn't in the mood for this.

“You're far more like Jiraiya than either of you will ever admit,” she bit out irritably, glaring at the woman, who blinked back. “What do you want?” she all but growled.

Tsunade's face was unexpectedly blank, and it made her pause.

...Kyo had assumed the woman had clearance, due to her being inside ANBU headquarters, but shit, what if she didn't? What if she'd just made a mistake?

That was as far as Kyo had time to follow that line of thought, seeing as she was physically attacked.

A heavy weight hit her side, knocking her clean off her feet and Kyo's reflexes kicked in with a vengeance.

It felt a little bit like her head went blank, and next second, she found herself staring up at a grinning face.
...why was a boy straddling her?

Another second passed and Kyo's gaze flicked down to the senbon being held a scant millimetre from the side of his neck, the wickedly sharp point all but pressing against his skin.

Shit, she'd almost killed him.

Luckily, Tsunade had grabbed her hand before she could, keeping the needle well away from soft, vulnerable flesh and tissue. From piercing clean through the boy's neck.

Kyo's fingers were pressed together in a way that was bordering on painful by the woman's grip.

Actually. This was Tsunade's fault to begin with, she mused absently, feeling blank and her face was utterly expressionless; she could feel it.

The boy was pretty heavy and this was getting increasingly awkward... he had a hand planted on her chest.

Though, to be fair, he probably couldn't feel a hint of the chest she'd started to develop through the heavy body armour she was wearing, and there still wasn't much to suggest she was female. Especially not when she was wearing the ANBU uniform.

He was still grinning like a moron at her, and she still didn't know who the hell he was.

His hair was a darkish blond, and his eyes were a warm brown.

"You're still alive!" he finally exclaimed. "I thought you died," he added, still grinning radiantly down at her, blinking rapidly and Kyo was mildly alarmed to see tears adding a shine to his eyes. "I felt awful and guilty, and I just couldn't forget, but you're alive," he all but sobbed at the end, raising a forearm to rub it over his eyes.

It just so happened that he placed more weight on his other hand at the same time. Which was still pressing down on her right breast.

Which was tender, damn it, ow.

Kyo's expression tightened and she flicked a glance at Tsunade.

They exchanged a look and Kyo slowly moved her senbon away from the boy's neck when the woman released her grip on her hand.

Tucking it away again was slightly awkward, with the way she was pinned to the floor, but it took barely a thought.

"Can you please stop molesting me?" she asked flatly, watching -and feeling- the boy jump.

He raised his head to peer wetly at her for a second, and Kyo pointedly looked down at the hand on her chest. It took another second, and then he snatched his hand back like burned.

"Sorry!" He flailed a little, a flush creeping up his cheeks. "Dear Kami, you're a girl!? I had no idea!" He looked mildly panicked for a second, and Kyo huffed irritably. "So sorry!"

"It's fine," Kyo bit out tersely, because it wasn't like she didn't know it had been an accident. She turned to Tsunade. "What's this about?"

She'd just gotten back from a frankly sucky mission and she wanted to go home and get a shower.
And then sleep in her own bed. And plan her revenge on Hyena and Owl.

You know. Nice things.

Both Tsunade and the boy stared at her, and why was he still sitting on her?

Straddling her hips, even, and she had most definitely not signed up for this.

“You don’t,” the boy hesitated, looking strangely upset, not that she had any idea why, “recognize me?”

“Evidently not,” Kyo drawled impatiently. To her alarm she witnessed the boy's lower lip tremble slightly.

“I'm so glad you're alive!” he sobbed, rather than comment on her inability to remember him.

Kyo stared, starting to feel more confused than anything else.

Tsunade sighed. “Will you stop it with the blubbering?” she asked, but she looked resigned, like this was a regular occurrence.

“But, nee-san, he's still alive. I didn't get him killed,” the boy cried, sobbing into his arm again.

“Her,” Tsunade corrected with a mutter. She sighed. “Nawaki, I thought there was something you wanted to say to your ANBU if you ever saw them again,” she reminded, finally walking over to take a seat on the floor a small distance away, clearly deciding Kyo wasn't about to murder anyone.

The boy nodded, still with his eyes pressed to his arm, though he did take a deep breath.

“Thank you so much for saving my life, and I'm really sorry you d- almost died,” he said, sobbing a little, but doing his best not to. “I've been training to be much, much stronger so no one else has to- has to do something like that for me ever again.”

And he tipped forward until he could sob against her shoulder.

Kyo twitched and stared up at the ceiling with growing incredulity.

There was... so much, about this whole situation, she had issue with.

Kyo heaved a heavy sigh and awkwardly raised a hand to pat the guy's back a few times. It seemed she wasn't getting out of this anytime soon, so she might as well try to make it easier on everyone.

Didn't change the fact some stranger was currently all but sprawled on top of her, pinning her to the floor.

How old was this guy? Fifteen? Sixteen?

And then there was the things he'd been talking about... Kyo couldn't remember him at all. Couldn't recall ever having seen him, even.

And then there was the fact he'd called Tsunade nee-san.

The woman had a younger sibling?

Kyo frowned, trying to remember if she'd ever known about that or not. She couldn't... couldn't quite wrangle her head enough for it right now.
When she was finally let up and the boy -Nawaki?- got off of her, it was to sit on the floor beside his sister, wiping at his face and looking thoroughly embarrassed by his emotional outburst.

Tsunade sighed. “You're still a crybaby,” she told him, face stern but unimaginably fond.

Kyo grimaced as she pushed herself into a seat and took a second to rub a hand over her hair. Her dirty hair, in need of a shower.

“What the hell?” she demanded wearily, frowning at the two Senju.

Tsunade frowned back at her, but she didn't look irritated. If anything, she was looking somewhat concerned, or maybe... guilty?

Kyo didn't get it, and she wasn't in the mood to try and figure it out either.

“I know- I mean, I realise from your reaction that you don't remember me,” Nawaki muttered, still embarrassed, and mostly avoiding eye-contact. “And it was three years ago, on a mission, and there were these Ame nin, and they were chasing us away from the Fire Country border, but then an ANBU team arrived and,” he took a deep breath, “and you shoved me out of the way of the poison user.”

Kyo stared mutely at him.

She remembered that mission.

How could she not? Especially since she'd ended up almost cooking alive with fever due to her body fighting the unknown toxin in her system and-

Fuck.

This was that boy.

This was the boy who she'd-

She had a vague memory of him being worried about her, but she hadn't thought about it since then, and so much had happened, and-

“I remember,” she murmured.

Kyo stared from Nawaki to Tsunade and back again repeatedly, trying to take this in, but it just felt surreal.

She covered her eyes with a hand and a sigh.

“He's been talking non-stop about it for almost three years now,” Tsunade said gruffly into the silence, but Kyo didn't look up. “And then I spotted you and- shit, kid, I might just need to scream at sensei, won't I?” the woman muttered, and when Kyo glanced up at her she was scowling fiercely at the wall. “I'm teaching you iryou-ninjutsu,” she declared hotly and Kyo looked up feeling something like alarm.

“What?”

“You heard me,” Tsunade huffed, fixing her with an assessing look. “You're my student now.” And her mouth stretched into a rather disconcerting smile.

“I'm already very busy!” Kyo found herself objecting, because what time wasn't taken up by
missions and training was eaten up by fuuinjutsu! Teaching Genma!

“So am I, that's no excuse,” Tsunade said dismissively.

“I am- No, Tsunade, you're gonna listen to me this time, damn it,” Kyo growled, feeling so done already. “I'm very glad for the offer and I gladly accept, but not right now. Do you have any idea how much I'm doing already? This uniform isn't just something you put on for fun!” She took a deep breath, trying to calm down. “And then there's my team, and training, and my brother, and all the other crap I have to deal with, and do you even know-” Kyo clenched her teeth shut before she blurted something she either didn't mean or would regret. Not that one of those automatically excluded the other. “Thank you very much for offering to teach me, and I respectfully accept. At a later date, when things have calmed down a bit. You need to spend time on your children, and whatever project you interrupted today.”

“Damn,” Tsunade said, eyeing her interestedly. “You sure you don't want to become a medic?”

Kyo huffed out an incredulous laugh and grinned at her. “No shinobi in their right mind would agree to have me treat them.”

Tsunade shrugged, seemingly not caring overly much about that. “It's not like they'll be able to run away,” she reasoned with a small, almost mean grin right back.

Kyo snorted and couldn't help but laugh briefly, because this was just ridiculous.

She raised her knees and leaned her elbows on them, covering her face with her hands. “This is such a disaster,” she couldn't help but say. “It's your fault I unmasked myself in front of a stranger, too. I'm telling Bear.”

Tsunade scoffed, but it sounded amused. “Fine,” she huffed. “But even if you forget, I'm still giving you those lessons.” And she was dead serious about it, too.

Kyo could tell when she looked up and met her gaze.

She glanced at the boy sitting beside Tsunade, staring at Kyo with something like stars in his eyes and yeah, she didn't want to deal with that right now, but he was Tsunade's little brother.

“Yeah,” she agreed softly.

“Hey!” the boy in question exclaimed into the following silence. “What's your name?” He leaned forward eagerly.

Kyo eyed him wryly and then sighed. Might as well go all the way, huh.

“Shiranui Kyo,” she said, feeling reluctantly amused.

“I'm Senju Nawaki! Now that I've finally found you, you and I are definitely friends, just so you know, Kyo-chan!” he declared with a grin.

Kyo stared blandly at him and wondered if she shouldn't have tried to dodge this trap anyway.

The fact that Tsunade was laughing at her wasn't helping.

-x-x-x-
Kyo went back to her life, pretending nothing at all was different, thank you.

“Wanna tell me why you're so tense?” Kisaki asked, stretched out beside her on the otherwise deserted training ground, watching Kyo work on her bubble jutsu.

She'd very generously hunted down and caught a rabbit for her.

The poor little thing was all but shivering in the temporary cage Kyo had built it, because it was definitely still alive, and she couldn't have it run away from her.

Some people would probably call this animal cruelty, Kyo mused absently, taking a deep breath and focusing on her chakra. She couldn't get distracted if she wanted this to work.

“Tsunade sort of kidnapped me,” Kyo murmured, not bothering to open her eyes. “Only she didn't know it,” she added, because that was true. “Apparently, ANBU Scorpion saved her little brother's life a few years ago.”

Kisaki was silent a moment. “Doesn't sound so bad.”

“Except he pounced on me without warning, I almost killed him, and then he cried on me for almost an hour.” Which just sounded absurd. “And to top it all off, he decided we're friends now,” she muttered awkwardly.

Kisaki gave an amused snort, which was just unfair.

Kyo sighed and focused back on the terrified rabbit in front of her.

She activated her bubble jutsu with a calm exhalation and her awareness expanded in a circle in front of her.

Doing this while sitting outside the circle was tricky, and still felt pretty weird, but she was getting the hang of it.

Focusing on the movement of the air in her grasp, Kyo tried to lock on to it, keep it from moving.

Seeing as she'd created this jutsu by moving the air, no matter how minimally and in a limited space, to keep something like a powder from settling on the ground, holding air completely still was a
whole new challenge.

It was interesting, though.

Kisaki shifted beside her, distracting her and Kyo lost her focus. She let the jutsu disperse.

Not Kisaki's fault, but still somewhat disappointing.

“What?” she asked, sending the dog a look.

Kisaki was staring at the rabbit, though. “Something happened with it,” she said, not tearing her eyes away.

Kyo turned to look and felt a wave of pleased accomplishment wash through her.

She got up and went to examine the small animal, prodding it and shifting it over onto its side.

“It's only fainted, I think,” she commented, pressing her fingers to the rabbit's side, its' heart beating rapidly beneath its ribs, confirming her theory. “Wanna eat it?” she asked her friend next, because she had a bit of a headache and should probably leave it at this for today.

Kisaki perked up and Kyo smiled.

Throwing the rabbit at her, Kisaki easily caught the limp animal, which was followed by a wet crunch, and Kyo was happy to leave her at it.

She'd managed to take a small step closer to the goal, though, so over all, she was feeling pretty accomplished.

Two months into Genma's Academy career, he came close to exploding with happiness when Aita informed him Ashika would be allowed to join him.

The two children were so happy and excited it was like watching a minor storm tear through the garden. Though, thankfully, leaving less destruction in their wake.

Admittedly not by much, bit still.

“Genma's been coming over every other day, so she's been keeping up with the coursework,” Aita told her amusedly. “Shrink says it'll be good for her to socialize more with other kids at this point, get in a routine and feel like she's working on getting stronger.”

“That's good,” Kyo answered with a small smile. “And they're definitely happy about it.”

“They've been doing the homework together, you know. All she's missed are the actual lessons,” Aita huffed.

“So they'll let her into Genma's class?” Kyo confirmed. No wonder Genma was over the moon. And Ashika, too.

“Yep,” Aita grinned, “though the Chuunin sensei might regret signing off on that before the term is up.” It was freely admitted and there wasn't an ounce of shame to find in the Uzumaki.

Kyo snickered. “Speaking of changes,” she continued in a faux-casual tone of voice that had Aita glancing suspiciously at her. “A little bird told me you've got a girlfriend.”
Aita stared at her, before he sent the two kids a wry look. “Loose-lipped little menaces,” he complained fondly.

Kyo smirked at him. “Really, your sensing is slipping if you can't even detect two Academy students spying on you,” she drawled teasingly. “Or maybe you were just too distracted?” she added.

Aita pushed her off the edge of the veranda they'd been sitting on. “What were you saying? Sorry, I couldn't hear you over all the noise,” he said casually, flapping a hand at Ashika and Genma, both of whom were shrieking loudly with joy where they chased each other.

There was a loud splash and both Kyo and Aita looked up.

Genma seemed to have tripped into the pond, and was currently spluttering, shaking water from his hair.

Ashika was laughing so much it looked like she was on the brink of wetting herself.

Kyo's brother pouted at the girl, before he threw himself at her and pulled her into the pond with him.

There was more shrieking, though outraged, this time.

It all devolved into a water fight.

The poor, poor koi fish, Kyo mused with a grin.

“Anyway, you were saying?” Kyo turned back to Aita, who snorted and sent her a look. “You were about to tell me about your girlfriend,” she said helpfully, getting to her feet and retaking her seat beside her friend.

Aita grimaced at her. “I thought Genma had already told you everything of note?” he asked haughtily.

He couldn't keep it up for more than a second, though, before a soft smile swept over his face.

“Ren's great,” he offered. “She's been helping me with Ashika and we just,” he shrugged, rubbing at his cheek self-consciously.

“I'm happy for you,” Kyo told him sincerely, bumping her shoulder into his arm. “She's clearly making you happy.” She paused. “I guess this means you'd like it if I kept the window visits to a minimum, huh,” she mused thoughtfully. She wouldn't want to interrupt anything... That would be awkward.

Aita froze and looked a little bit like he was dying, and he sent her such a pitiful look Kyo couldn't help but topple over laughing until she was lying on her back, holding her stomach.

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“We haven't been together that long yet!” he muttered, face so bright red it was visible even from beneath the hand he'd slapped over his eyes. “You're a horrible, horrible person. I'll never be able to look Ren in the eyes ever again,” he muttered under his breath. “When she asks me what's wrong, I won't be able to tell her why, either, because you're just awful.”

“Oh, come on, you're almost twenty.” Kyo poked him in the arm, still laughing. She paused, thinking of something. “Wait, don't tell me you're a virgin or something?” she asked, feeling abruptly concerned.

Aita produced a pained groan, adding his other hand to his burning face. “Go away, Kyo. I'm not
talking about this with you.”

“Does that mean there’s someone else you’d rather talk about it with?” she gasped theatrically. “And hey, when am I gonna officially meet her, anyway?” she pressed.

“You’ve met,” Aita huffed at her, glaring half-heartedly at her between his fingers. “Briefly,” he amended at the look she shot him. “She does a lot to help take care of the compound,” Aita explained.

“Huh.” So Aita was dating another Uzumaki? “Aren’t you, uh, you know,” she gestured awkwardly with one hand, “related?”

“Only in the vaguest terms of the word.” Aita shrugged, calming down now that they were on safer ground again. “There’s enough branches of the family tree between us not to matter.”

Well. It wasn’t like it wasn’t common in other clans, too, Kyo mused.

Ryota and Fukami had both been part of the Uchiha clan even before they got married, so she guessed the same principle applied to them.

“Hey, before I forget,” Aita spoke up, jarring her out of her thoughts. “Ashika wanted to ask Genma to stay over for a sleep-over sometime soon. That okay with you?”

“Sure, but you should probably bring it up with Haname,” Kyo said, sitting back up to watch her brother and honorary little sister playfully try to drown each other.

Aita grimaced. “Still not talking?”

“Nope,” Kyo replied. “Haven't seen her since my birthday, actually, and I intend to keep it like that.”

Aita sighed and pulled her into a one-armed hug. “Sorry about your grandmother, Kyo.”

“Not like it's your fault, but thanks.”

-x-x-x-

She ran a few missions with her team, and there was something really nice about spending time with just Minato and Jiraiya, even if it was outside of the village and in the middle of a mission.

Jiraiya's work with Intel was definitely a permanent thing, now, so they stopped regularly when the mission allowed for it, and it made for plenty of time to just talk or relax in each other's company.

It was nice.

You know, with the added threat of enemy action, but that felt like a constant given, always.

In between everything else, there were some things Kyo just couldn't ignore.

Like the fact her clothes were getting tight in new, additional ways.

Of course, she'd been forced to get new clothes regularly since she'd woken up in this life, but she wasn't just gaining height now.

Kyo was stubbornly ignoring that, though.

No matter how insistent her hips were on expanding.
It was a serious bother, honestly, but it hadn't yet reached the point where it was obvious to the casual observer.

Back in the village again, she'd somehow missed tou-san, again, but at least Katsurou-sensei was home!

“I haven't seen you in ages,” Kyo muttered, tightening her hold on the man, who was entirely resigned to his fate.

“It's been very busy,” he acknowledged blandly, peering down at her face, but Kyo wasn't ready to end the hug yet. “We have quite a bit to catch up on all over the board now it's calm again.”

Kyo huffed.

_Calm._

Well, that was one way to put it, she supposed.

“I have so much to tell you I don't even know where to start,” Kyo said, pressing her face back against Katsurou-sensei's shoulder.

“No disasters, I hope,” he sighed, finally raising an arm to give her a bit of a hug back.


She honestly didn't know where to start.

“Come on, we can make dinner and then you can just talk at me until you've gotten it all out,” Katsurou suggested, patting her back a few times. “If Kou's not home, you could always bunk in your room,” he added blandly.

Kyo smiled up at him and stood on her toes to press a kiss to his cheek.

Hah! She was tall enough to do that now!

With an impish grin at the man's utterly blank expression, Kyo hurried into the kitchen to see what he had as options for dinner.

“You're just getting worse with age,” Katsurou-sensei muttered behind her, before he came trudging after her, rubbing at his eyes with the fingers of one hand before he fixed her with a half-hearted glare. “Aren't you supposed to out-grow these things?”

Kyo snickered and tossed him a broccoli.

They settled into a comfortable routine for a few minutes, Kyo telling him about things that had happened, as they occurred to her.

Katsurou-sensei hummed an acknowledgement every now and then, more listening than participating, and it wasn't until they sat down to eat that Kyo caught herself.

“Um, sensei?”

“What?” Katsurou looked up at her, blinking a little and taking in the no doubt concerned expression on her face.
“You just came back from a mission, and all I'm doing is talking about myself,” she muttered, feeling self-conscious and inconsiderate. “I know you're my shrink, but you're also allowed to tell me ‘no’ or 'later’, you know?”

Katsurou's lips twitched. “I'm well aware,” he drawled, turning his gaze back to his food. “I've been out on mission most of the time since we last saw each other,” he continued casually. “Hearing you talk about these everyday things, relatively simple and uncomplicated, is rather nice.”

Kyo eyed him dubiously. “My complaining is soothing to you?” Excuse her for being sceptical.

The man shrugged. “Is it complaining or voicing genuine concerns?” he questioned with a glance at her face. “This thing with your grandmother is a real issue, could even develop into a problem down the line, unless addressed.” He paused to meet her gaze. “It's not complaining.”

Kyo stared at him a moment longer, before she nodded and went back to eating. And talking.

She'd like to believe it wasn't just wishful thinking that made Katsurou-sensei look more relaxed by the time she went to bed.

-x-x-x-

Team training was feeling more and more productive, and Minato was getting steadily better at the taijutsu all the time, so Kyo really had to work for it now.

Blocking a punch, she aimed a jab at a pressure point on the inside of Minato's upper arm, only for her teammate to widen the distance between them before it could land.

Downside to fighting someone who was familiar with your style, Kyo mused absently, focused mostly on the present, and the spar.

By the time they were done, Jiraiya approached with a thoughtful look on his face.

“Your style's getting more specific, Kyo,” he said, eyeing her interestedly.

“Brute force hasn't ever been my thing.” She shrugged, not pausing in the act of stretching out her protesting muscles. Minato had gotten in a few painful hits, and she'd rather deal with it now than tomorrow. “Been studying pressure points pretty intensively for a while now, you know? I like it; feels like it suits me.” Strengthening her fingers with chakra, she could use them almost like needles, too.

Jiraiya hummed. “We'll work on that more,” he said. “There're plenty of ways to make that more devastating.”

Kyo nodded her acceptance and exchanged a look with Kisaki, who was lying off to the side, observing.

They were still trying to figure out a way to incorporate their ways of fighting in a way that would work. That would let them come together seamlessly into something more effective and would hopefully work with Minato, too.

“Minato, you're developing your taijutsu nicely. Try to incorporate weapons a bit more so you won't have to think about it,” he advised. “We're gonna start doing intensive ninjutsu training from this point, now that you're both, uh,” he glanced at Kyo, “teenagers, or something more like it. So make sure to eat more at every meal. Don't want to have you fainting on me. Tsunade would kick my ass.”
“Any specific reason why?” Minato asked curiously.

“Try to expand your chakra reserves as much as we can,” Jiraiya grunted, scratching at his jaw. “We’ll talk about jutsu to work on later, but you’ll also try to make your current ones as large and chakra extensive as you can, just to get a feel for it.”

Kyo frowned. “And that will help?” That wasn't even close to how she'd done things up until now, but... it made a small measure of sense, she supposed.

“Yep,” Jiraiya said simply. “Stretching your reserves to the point of exhaustion often enough, we'll start to see results relatively quickly.”

Kyo grimaced. Chakra exhaustion wasn't exactly fun, and she'd rather not experience it again, honestly, because she'd felt like crap to a degree that was actually impressive.

“And we'll be doing this while running missions?” she asked dryly, sending their sensei a look.

Jiraiya grinned at her. “We'll try to squeeze it in in between, while we're home,” he assured her with a snort.

“Is it really so awful?” Minato asked.

“Yes,” Kyo and Jiraiya chorused, neither of them so much as pausing to think about it.

Minato blinked at them.

Kyo huffed, feeling reluctantly amused. “It's not just that you don't have any chakra, though that in itself feels... awful. It's also that you feel so wrung out you're in pain and I felt like I would throw up the entire time,” she shared wryly. “Everything hurt, I could barely walk, and it wasn't because of injury.”

Kisaki leisurely got to her feet now that it looked like they wouldn't continue sparring, for now, stretching unhurriedly.

“That does sound pretty terrible,” Minato muttered, frowning in thought. He sighed heavily. “Good to know what we have to look forward to,” he summarised blandly.

“The goal is to not get you two checked into the hospital,” Jiraiya objected, clapping a hand on either of their shoulders, steering them out of the training field and towards the village. “Hime would have my balls,” he added in a mutter under his breath.

A laugh escaped Kyo before she could catch herself. “Are we done for the day, or did you have anything else planned?” she asked, sending their sensei a small grin and absently running her fingers over Kisaki's head when the dog came up beside her, falling into step.

“We'll go eat, and then sit down somewhere calm to go over both of your progress with your fuuinjutsu projects,” Jiraiya said, and that was that.

It was a very nice way to spend a day, if you asked Kyo.

Jiraiya steered them to a nice little bar-restaurant deal that looked a bit dingy, but served excellent food and by the time all four of them had finished eating, Kyo was well aware of their... stalker.

She exchanged a reluctantly amused look with Jiraiya, who looked somewhat entertained, if also puzzled.
Jiraiya turned to eye Minato curiously and opened his mouth.

Kyo elbowed him in the side before he could say a word, though, because her teammate had been very uncomfortable about this whole thing back at the hospital, some months back, and he hadn't brought it up again, but she severely doubted Minato's feelings had changed.

Why in the world Kushina was following them, she had no idea, but that wasn't the point.

...following them *badly*, too, Kyo mused with far more exasperation than she really felt this situation ought to need.

That girl evidently hadn't received a single lesson on stealth in her life.

She exchanged a look with Kisaki, who's mouth opened in a doggie grin, tongue lolling amusedly.

“Shush,” Kyo told her. “Show some tact.”

“She could at least have covered her hair,” Kisaki said back conversationally, ears flicking cheerfully.

That was very true, because Kushina's hair stood out like a sore thumb from the rest of the people moving about.

The most common hair colour in Konoha was brown. Followed by black.

Bright, blood-red hair was rather more exotic.

When the opportunity presented itself, Kyo slanted a subtle look over at Kushina, who was... dear lord, no, *why* was she trying to hide behind that post like that?

It just made her *more* noticeable, and Kyo barely resisted the urge to slap a hand over her eyes.

“That's painful,” she muttered, turning back to the front.

Jiraiya snorted softly and sent her an amused look.

Kisaki was absolutely laughing at all of them.

“You okay, Kyo?” Minato, the oblivious dork, asked, eyeing her concernedly and reaching out to take a loose hold of her arm.

“Yes. Just fine,” she drawled, sending him a smile. “Read some really interesting scrolls last night, and I think I can actually manage to do this thing,” she revealed, turning the conversation back to their fuuinjutsu projects, feeling tentatively positive, for once.

“You have to share some of those scrolls,” Minato told her with an excited grin, his hand sliding down to grip her hand with familiar ease, fingers braiding together. “Fuuinjutsu is just *so* exciting, don't you think?” he positively gushed.

“You're adorable, Minato,” Kyo snickered, squeezing his fingers encouragingly.

Minato startled and sent her a surprised look, cheeks tinting a light pink.

Jiraiya barked a laugh, ruffling the boy's hair. “Kyo, remind me to help Minato with his sensing, will you?”
“Don’t forget his situational awareness,” she chirped back.

“...I feel like you’re making fun of me,” Minato huffed, eyeing both her and Jiraiya suspiciously.

“We are,” Kyo assured him with a grin.

Later that week, while they were making their way back into the village after a long day of training, she was listening to Minato grill Jiraiya about ninjutsu, feeling content to remain on the side-lines.

Kisaki was walking beside her, staring further down the street, so Kyo didn’t feel particularly bad about not paying too much attention to her surroundings.

Konoha was a busy place, even more so now, these days, so someone coming running down the street in their direction wasn’t anything she paid particular attention to.

She regretted it when a rather solid weight collided with her, would have knocked her over if arms hadn’t wrapped around her almost at exactly the same time, pressing her back against a flat, firm chest.

Kyo spent a brief moment to feel betrayed that Kisaki hadn’t warned her, but it wasn’t like she didn’t recognize this chakra signature.

“I am going to poison you the next time you do this,” she growled irritably, aiming a half-hearted kick at the boy's shin with her heel, because he had picked her up and she was currently hanging from his arms. Like a teddybear.

“Kyo-chan!” Nawaki said cheerfully. “I saw you from further down the street and I just had to say hi!”

“Saying hi does not involve running me over and picking me up,” Kyo drawled, kicking him again. But at least he wasn’t groping her this time. “Kisaki, why did you let him do this?” she complained, staring blandly at the ninken, who had taken a seat in front of her and was watching them with far more amusement than should be allowed.

“He smells like Tsunade,” she said simply.

“That’s because he’s her brother,” Kyo muttered. “Will you just put me down?” she snapped at the teenager in question.

“Uh, hello, Nawaki,” Jiraiya said, and oh, yeah. Shit. Her team was here.

Her sensei was staring at her, hanging from Nawaki’s arms.

There was a rather interesting expression on his face.

“I,” he paused, gaze alternating between the two of them, “didn’t know you two knew each other,” he drawled, a slow smirk growing on his face.

“We don’t,” Kyo answered flatly.

Jiraiya stared at her.

Where she was being all but cuddled.
Kyo heaved a heavy sigh. “Nawaki, if you don't put me down right now, I will stab you in the face, and you better hope Tsunade can save you.”

“I don't think I've ever seen you angry,” Minato said.

“I'm not angry,” Kyo said mildly. “I'm starting to feel annoyed, though.” And she kicked Nawaki on the shin hard enough he released her with a pained noise. “And you,” she turned to eye the teenager. “You need to stop trying to tackle me every time you see me,” she muttered.

Nawaki grinned and rubbed the back of his head semi-sheepishly. “But you're kinda huggable, Kyo-chan.”

Kyo sighed. “You're lucky your chakra signature is memorable,” was all she said, though.

“I thought you were busy this time of day, Nawaki,” Jiraiya said next, drawing a small measure of attention away from her, which she was grateful for.

“On my way to the hospital!” the boy reported eagerly. “Want me to say hi to nee-san from you?”

“You do that,” Jiraiya drawled. “Have a nice day.”

“You, too! See you around, Kyo-chan!” Nawaki said with a sunny grin and then ran off.

Kyo rubbed a hand over her face and reluctantly turned to fix Jiraiya with a look. “Don't even start,” she told him blandly.

Jiraiya grinned. “Unexpected choice of boyfriend, Kyo, I must say.”

Kyo huffed and threw her hands in the air.

Why was he like this?

“We're done for the day, aren't we? Great. See you tomorrow,” she muttered and stalked off, Kisaki trotting after her.

“He didn't seem so bad?” she offered, nudging her gently. “He smelled genuinely happy to see you.”

“He's a bit too... grabby, considering the fact we barely know each other,” Kyo returned softly. “I don't know, it just feels weird.” She sighed.

“You can always go through with your threat and poison him, next time,” Kisaki offered.

Kyo snorted and sent her a fond look. “I know, but I probably won't. Nawaki is...” she didn't even know.

He'd been so happy to learn she was still alive he'd spent the better part of an hour crying on her, and he didn't seem to have any kind of hidden agenda.

She just didn't know him very well, and the manhandling was getting tiresome quickly.

“Going home?” Kisaki asked, rather than press.

“I miss tou-san,” Kyo breathed, because home was dreadfully empty.

It felt like she hadn't seen him in forever, and she was feeling strangely lonely without him, even though she had Kisaki, her team, her friends, and a village full of people.
“Senpu’s home,” the ninken beside her said casually. “She wouldn’t mind some company.”

Kyo slowed to a stop, thinking it over. “Okay,” she said quietly, reaching out to caress one of Kisaki’s ears affectionately. “I love you, Kisaki, you know that, right?”

“I know,” she answered easily, like it was as obvious as breathing.

-x-x-x-

Kushina’s stalking got progressively worse, until she just stomped onto their training field one day, grabbing the front of Minato’s shirt and loudly challenging him to a fight.

“Why not?” Jiraiya said, eyeing the two of them interestedly. “Might be good to change up sparring partners occasionally,” he added, trying not to smirk.

Minato sent their sensei a mildly panicked glance, before he turned his focus back onto the scowling Uzumaki in front of him.

Kushina’s cheeks were flushed, and she looked severely annoyed. And impatient. Possibly embarrassed.

Kyo shrugged and wandered over to take a seat off to the side, beside Kisaki.

A moment later, Jiraiya joined her.

“He was probably hoping you’d save him, you know,” she told the man, observing Minato’s flustered face.

“Save him? From what?”

Kyo took a deep breath, pointedly didn’t laugh and concentrated on petting Kisaki.

“If you two are ready, then get started!” Jiraiya called at the two thirteen year olds still out on the training field.

Kyo watched Kushina let go of Minato’s shirt with a sniff, only to unseal a sword.

Well.

That was bound to help him get better at using kunai. Probably.

While the two teenagers went at it, Kyo flopped over until she was all but sprawled on top of Kisaki, who sent her no more than an amused glance, before she went back to observing the increasingly violent sparring match.

Minato might need a visit to the hospital after this, she mused blandly.

Because the idiot was floundering, and only got into gear ten minutes into the fight, and Kushina had already scored a shallow cut into one of his thighs by then, hampering his movements.

“Senpu and Haru agree I’m fit for fieldwork,” Kisaki said softly, voice calm and casual and it actually took a moment for Kyo to register the words and their meaning.

She blinked, turning her head to meet the dog’s gaze. “Really? Even though we haven’t found a good way to fully integrate our styles?”
“Really,” Kisaki confirmed with a huff. “And we did fine on that mission,” she continued easily. “We’ll figure this out.” And she sounded very firm about it.

Not that Kyo disagreed, because she didn’t.

She thought about it for a moment, ignoring Kushina’s raised voice in the background, saying something about Minato disrespecting her or something.

Which was just absurd.

“Guess we’ll get to go on missions together again,” Kyo said, finding herself smiling softly. “Hear that, Jiraiya?”

“Yes, heard ya just fine,” their sensei drawled, not taking his eyes off the sparring match still going on. “Won’t get one until next week, though, so you have some time to prepare” he added with a brief glance at the two of them.

“Thanks,” Kyo said, leaning her cheek against Kisaki’s head and hugged her close. “We’ll be fine, right?”

“I think so,” Kisaki answered, turning to give her cheek a delicate lick.

“It’s a great honour to have you meet up on time,” Kyo drawled, feeling amused.

“Oh, shut up,” Inoichi huffed back, reaching out to sling an arm over her shoulders. “It’s not like I never spend time with my friends.”

“That’s true,” Kyo agreed easily. “You just tend to be late.” And she sniffed him pointedly. “You also don’t stink, this time,” she added with a grin.

Inoichi sighed, sending her a long-suffering look. “I’m a young, healthy teenager,” he announced. “There’s nothing wrong with having a bit of fun in my time off.”

“Nope,” Kyo agreed, “but that won’t stop me from making fun of you.” She smiled. “What have you been up to lately? Other than sleeping around?”

Inoichi sighed again, but sent her an amused look. “Missions, training, the usual. It’s different from the war, but I can’t help but feel like we’re still just as busy,” he said.


“You’re so articulate,” Inoichi praised, staring at her with the most insincere admiring expression on his face she’d ever seen.

Kyo snorted and elbowed him lightly in the side. “Words are hard, shut up.”

Inoichi laughed, but nodded. “I get what you mean, though.” And a frown briefly flickered over his face, before he shook his head and dispelled whatever thoughts had gotten his attention. “Everything people were putting off during the war are suddenly dealt with. I think there’s been, like, five weddings in the clan during the last three months.”

“Ryota got married.”
Inoichi paused. “And how's that agreeing with him?” he asked, voice dry.

“Surprisingly well, last I saw him, anyway. I think he's more smug about irritating the Elders than anything else, though,” she confessed. “His wife seemed nice.”

Not that Kyo had seen Fukami since then, and she hadn't gotten around to try and track her down in ANBU, either, because... she wasn't actually sure how to go about that.

You didn't ask anyone about their identity behind the mask. You just didn't.

If someone shared, that was different, but. Yeah.

Kyo guessed she’d just have to wait and see if she spotted her, and hope she'd actually recognize the young woman.

Kyo and Inoichi calmly wandered through Konoha, stopping to buy dango at a food stall, and then continued in a vague direction towards the training grounds close to the Nara compound.

They hadn't talked about training, but it had been quite a while since just the two of them had done anything, and training could be fun.

Before they got that far, though, Kyo felt a familiar chakra signature move towards her, but she was prepared this time and twisted around to plant a hand in Nawaki's face before he could glomp her.

Seeing as his arms were longer than hers, he still managed to wrap them around her waist and lift her up, though, but at least she made it uncomfortable for him.

“Will you just stop it!” she hissed at him, shoving at his stupid face and twisting to try and get out of his grip.

“But, Kyo-chan,” Nawaki whined, sending her a wounded look and tightening his arms on her, clearly not prepared to let her go yet. For whatever reason.

“Stop calling me that!” Kyo exclaimed. This was why Jiraiya was now convinced Nawaki was her boyfriend. “Why can't you greet me like a normal person?”

“But seeing you just makes me so happy,” Nawaki told her, eyes going shiny and tearful, and-

“Oh, for fuck's sake, you better not start crying,” she huffed incredulously.

Nawaki sniffled, clearly making a valiant effort to pull himself together. “I won't,” he promised, and she would have taken him more seriously if his voice hadn't been wobbling unsteadily.

Kyo heaved an exasperated sigh.

“Uh, hello, Nawaki?” Inoichi said slowly, looking between them like he wasn't sure what to make of this. Made two of them, really. “I didn't think you knew each other,” he mused.

“And you two do?” Kyo asked back, not really surprised, because Inoichi was social, but still.

She shoved at Nawaki's face again.

“We went to the Academy at the same time, Kyo,” Inoichi informed her amusedly. “Sure, Nawaki was in the other class, but still.” He shrugged. “You would have known that if you'd talked to people back then, and not just,” he gestured vaguely at her, “you know.”
Kyo stared blandly at him. “You and Shikaku were the only ones remotely interested in me back then, and Shikaku was too lazy to do anything. Shut up, not everyone's a social butterfly like you.”

Nawaki had been in the same year as her graduating class?

*How* had she not noticed that!?

...actually, she hadn't recognized him on sight even after having met him once, she couldn't claim to be terribly surprised, and it wasn't like he'd been the only Senju in the Academy back then, either.

But still.

Inoichi was laughing at her. “So what prompted this,” he paused momentarily, "friendship?"

Kyo scowled at him, before she gave up with a sigh and stopped trying to shove Nawaki's head away from her.

Might as well let him hug her at this point.

“Kyo-chan is *amazing,*” Nawaki declared strongly, and Kyo let her face fall into her hand.

Why.

Actually, she didn't have to deal with this, she realised, and quickly shunshined out of Nawaki's arms. She planted herself firmly behind Inoichi, ignoring Nawaki's surprised squawk as her weight disappeared abruptly.

“Don't you dare move,” Kyo huffed irritably when Inoichi snickered. “Be a good friend and be my shield.”

“Alright,” Inoichi agreed magnanimously. “But seriously, how did you meet?”

“On a mission, a while back, and then we met up again by chance and Nawaki recognized me. He's declared we're friends now,” Kyo recounted quickly, before the teenager in question said anything else to make matters worse.

Nawaki produced a soft sound. “But, Kyo-chan, that doesn't make it justice,” he complained pitifully.

How old even was this guy? Seriously.

Kyo made very sure to keep Inoichi between her and Nawaki, because there was only so much of this she could take without losing her patience.

It had been just about a week since the last time he'd done this, and she was already tired of Jiraiya's ribbing.

It was all fond teasing, from the man's side, but that didn't mean it wasn't also annoying.

Kyo didn't *want* a boyfriend, and she very clearly didn't have one.

“Last time we spoke, you said you were very busy, Nawaki,” Inoichi said casually, and it was very much a point in his favour that he hadn't so much as shifted where he stood. “That's changed?”

Nawaki startled. “Crap,” he muttered and glanced up at the sky. “I'm gonna be late.” He drooped. “Nee-san's gonna yell at me again,” he complained plainly, not looking overly bothered by that
prediction.

“Have a nice day and good luck,” Inoichi wished him easily, sounding rather cheerful.

Kyo was about to chime in, but changed her mind.

“Actually, Inoichi, can I have a few minutes with Nawaki?” she asked.

Both boys glanced at her, but the Yamanaka merely shrugged and began to wander in the direction they’d been heading in before they'd been interrupted.

“What is it, Kyo-chan?” Nawaki asked curiously.

Kyo took a deep breath. “Look, Nawaki, this maybe isn't the place, but,” she cut herself off with a frown and started again. How the hell was she supposed to do this? “You realise that I didn't know your name, didn't recognize you in the least, back then, right?” she asked and Nawaki nodded hesitantly, looking confused. “I would have done the same thing for anyone wearing that hitai-ate, because that's what you do, you know?” She was probably not doing a good job of this, but that would just have to be fine. “I'm still alive today because people have saved me when I've been about to mess up, or too tired to react properly. That's the same for everyone.”

“Sure,” Nawaki agreed, still looking confused and somewhat befuddled.

“You deciding we're friends out of some sense of misplaced guilt or gratefulness isn't necessary, and it's frankly making me feel uncomfortable. You don't owe me anything, not to mention your friendship,” she told him bluntly. “I'm glad you're alive, and I would do it again, but you don't have to do,” she gestured vaguely between the two of them, trying not to grimace awkwardly, “this. We're fine, so please stop it.”

Nawaki's face scrunched up in a confused frown, and it looked almost painfully thoughtful.

“Anyway, that was what I wanted to say. Sorry for delaying you further,” Kyo finished, still feeling incredibly awkward, and she watched Nawaki startle with relief.

“Gah! I'm even more late!” he exclaimed, throwing the sky another nervous look. “Um, guess I'll see you around, Kyo-chan?” he offered, still clearly confused, and then took off with a wave.

Kyo let out a slow, relieved sigh.

Hopefully, this meant she could go back to normal and not... uh, not worry about being run over every time Nawaki caught sight of her in public.

Shaking her head to herself, Kyo pushed her thoughts away from herself, because she'd been doing something she'd been looking forward to before they got interrupted, and with a small huff at herself, she ran to catch up to Inoichi.

“You okay?” he asked, giving her an idle once-over and checking she was alright.

“Yep. Just fine,” she said. Hopefully, that was true, too.

“Great,” Inoichi grinned, “let's go bother Shikaku once we're done sparring, and then drag all of us over to Chouza's place for dinner,” he said.

“Disturb Shikaku on his day off?” Kyo mused, biting back a grin. “He'll be bitching about the hours of missed napping and cloud watching for days.” She paused and exchanged a look with Inoichi,
who was smirking outright now. “Let's do it.”

-x-x-x-

Jiraiya got them a short, simple mission for Kisaki's first outing with team seven.

Part of Kyo was unimaginably grateful, and she may have slipped the man a brief hug before she'd hurried back over to Minato and Kisaki.

She felt far more excited and nervous than a routine mission warranted, but she couldn't help it.

This would be the first time she went on a mission with Kisaki since Uzu, and their first official mission since she'd been eight!

Part of her couldn't believe it'd been four years, while the rest of her was quietly fretting.

The civilian woman they were escorting to a nearby village didn't talk much, kept to herself as much as the situation allowed, and seemed fully intent on reaching their destination as quickly as possible, with as little interaction with them as she could manage.

Kyo didn't mind, and it was actually a far more business-like attitude than most of the civilians they'd escorted so far had adopted.

Jiraiya even managed to be professional for the full two days they spent in their client's presence.

“I'm impressed,” Kyo said blandly once they'd dropped the woman off at her destination.

“With what?” Jiraiya asked distractedly, busy scanning their surroundings and she was pretty sure he was contemplating whether or not it would be worth it to dig into the local gossip this close to Konoha or not.

“You didn't try to flirt with her even once,” Kyo told him easily, not changing her pace in the slightest.

Jiraiya huffed, sending her an insulted look. “Your faith in me is abysmal,” he muttered.

“She's got a point, though,” Minato chimed in, looking thoughtful. “I was actually waiting for you to do something,” he paused, considering his words, “insensitive,” he finally settled on.

Jiraiya sent both of them a deeply unimpressed look. “I know how to be professional!” he objected, looking almost sullen for a second.

Kyo and Minato exchanged a look.

“If you say so, sensei,” Kyo said flippantly.

Payback was a bitch.

Jiraiya's eyes narrowed on her. “This is because of the boyfriend jokes, isn't it?”

“Got it in one.” She smiled. “But it's also because your behaviour tends to be predictable around women.”

“This team is strange,” Kisaki remarked idly.

“We probably are,” Minato agreed. “A bit. But I like us.”
“So are we going home now, or...?” Kyo asked, petting Kisaki's head fondly.

“Home,” Jiraiya grunted, still scrutinizing her and Minato like he was trying to decide what their angle was. “We're too close to Konoha to get anything useful.”

Kisaki sent her a questioning look.

“Intel,” she told the dog, who made an acknowledging noise. “You feeling okay?” she asked next, because she was not-so-secretly fretting.

Kisaki snorted and sent her a look. “Fine,” she huffed, shaking out her fur.

“Let's run, and we'll be home in a few hours,” Jiraiya decided with a shrug, reaching out to ruffle Kyo's hair with a bit more force than necessary.

Kyo sighed.

Her hair was all over the place now, she just knew it.

Minato took one look at her and tried to hold back an amused snort.

“Thank you so much, Jiraiya,” Kyo told the man blandly.

Jiraiya smirked at her and then they were off.

Two days later, Kyo and Minato were trying out a new few sets of stances Jiraiya had taught them, which was pretty interesting, when Minato landed a solid kick on her chest.

Sandal hitting a very tender breast.

Kyo automatically tucked into a roll and was back on her feet in a second, crouched close to the ground, at the ready.

Ow.

Kyo blinked rapidly and felt tears threaten to fall because, ouch.

Minato was staring at her, and so was Jiraiya, but she just needed a moment to breathe, really.

“Are you okay?” her teammate asked, sounding concerned.

“Minato,” Kyo said, and was embarrassed to hear her voice waver, “if you ever do that again, I'll kick you in the nuts, yeah?” She smiled blandly, and left with a shunshin, because she genuinely felt like she'd cry, and it was embarrassing, because it wasn't like Minato had intended to do that, and how would he know?

It wasn't like Kyo had told him she was developing and how much it could hurt, and-

Puberty sucked, and she was probably getting her period soon, wasn't she?

Kyo took a deep breath, determinedly not crying, and she silently acknowledged Kisaki joining her with a glance.

She didn't say anything until after she'd reached the destination she had in mind, though.
“Are you okay, Kyo?” Kisaki asked, sounding concerned and giving her a once over.

Kyo grimaced and gingerly pulled off her shirt, tossing it onto the couch. “Fine.” And she pretended like she hadn't just sniffled pitifully. “Ow,” she muttered, pulling off her mesh shirt, too.

“Hello, Kyo,” Katsurou-sensei said with an exasperated sigh, walking out from his bedroom, rubbing a hand over his face. He took one look at where she stood by his coffee table, prodding gingerly at her very naked chest, and sighed again. “I need coffee to deal with this,” he muttered, and walked to the kitchen.

“I think I'm gonna get a bruise,” Kyo mumbled, peering sadly down at her chest. They'd gotten a bit bigger since she'd last looked at them.

Which wasn't so weird, seeing as Kyo had very stubbornly ignored their very existence for quite a while now, but she already knew she couldn't keep it up indefinitely.

Had known that from the start.

“Okay, what happened?” Katsurou asked when he came wandering out of the kitchen again, coffee cup held in one hand. After a brief moment's contemplation, he took a seat on the sofa, tossing Kyo's mesh shirt aside.

“Minato kicked me,” Kyo told him sadly, still prodding her right breast, “and I maybe threatened to kick him somewhere painful back, if he ever did it again.” Her chest was tender damn it, and she still felt on the brink of tears.

Katsurou met her gaze and slowly took a sip of his coffee, face inscrutable.

“And then I left, before they could say anything, because I didn't want to start crying,” she added reluctantly, blinking rapidly because that last part was still very much in effect.

She wiped at her eyes with one hand.

“What am I even supposed to do with these things?” she demanded irritably a moment later, covering her right breast with her palm.

She may have been ignoring them, but that didn't mean she hadn't become more and more aware of them during practice, anyway.

Jumping around was getting progressively more awkward and painful.

She probably needed a bra.

“You've been through this once before,” Katsurou pointed out blandly, gesturing vaguely at her with his mug.

“That wasn't even remotely the same!” Kyo objected indignantly. “I spent the majority of my days sitting in a school bench back then, and I wasn't exactly considered sporty,” she scoffed. “And now, I jump and run around even on a calm day off.” She fixed him with a frown, stubbornly ignoring the liquid threatening to leak from her eyes. “It's not the same, and I don't even know where to get a bra around here. Do we have sports bras?” She turned an almost pleading look on Katsurou, who took another sip of his coffee.

No one said anything for a moment, though Kisaki whined sympathetically and leaned her head
tentatively against Kyo's side.

…she'd have to explain the reborn-thing to Kisaki after this, wouldn't she? Damn it.

“All my clothes are getting too small, and I need to get new ones, but I also don't want to,” Kyo said, wiping at her eyes again. “My hips are getting wider. I wish I could have just—” she shrugged, “skipped right over puberty, because it sucks, sensei, and I hate that I'm crying for no reason right now,” she sobbed, but just a little.

Without looking up, Kyo trudged over to Katsurou, because she really needed a hug right now.

“Please put on a shirt first,” the man said, voice flat.

Kyo peered up at him and Katsurou was eyeing her intently, before he picked up her t-shirt and threw it at her face.

Kyo was still crying, but she couldn't keep back the tearful laugh, either. She quickly pulled on her shirt and then collapsed into the seat beside Katsurou-sensei, leaning firmly into his side.

“Can I just sleep for a couple of years until this is done?” she asked tiredly, leaning her head against Katsurou's shoulder, only to snort out a breathless laugh when Kisaki jumped up and wiggled into both of their laps, making her choke when a paw found its way straight into Kyo's stomach.

“Kisaki!” she wheezed.

“You're lucky I already finished my coffee, mutt,” Katsurou drawled, honestly not sounding all that put out.

Kisaki huffed and rolled over onto her back.

“Scratch my tummy,” the ninen ordered loftily, and Kyo snickered half-heartedly and did as directed. “Stop being sad,” she added, twisting to somehow peer at Kyo upside down. “I'll chew on Minato and Jiraiya for you.”

Kyo laughed reluctantly, running her fingers through the fur on Kisaki's stomach.

“Right,” Katsurou drawled, shifting to tentatively sling his arm around Kyo's shoulders. “This wasn't how I imagined my day would go,” he mused blandly.

Kyo sniffled and wiped her cheeks dry again. “Did I wake you up? Were you sleeping? Sorry, sensei.” She couldn't help the way she drooped.

Katsurou sighed. “It's fine, Kyo,” he told her, patting her shoulder reassuringly while he was at it. “I'm not sure how I can help you, though,” he added dryly. “Why not go ask Senpu?”

“She's not in the village,” Kyo muttered back, and besides. She felt more comfortable bringing this to Katsurou than anyone else.

At least he hadn't asked why she hadn't brought it up with Jiraiya.

Hah.

“Ah,” Katsurou muttered, and when she glanced at him, he was frowning speculatively at nothing. “Well.” He was silent a moment. “Stick around for a while, and we'll see,” he huffed, and got to his feet, almost dumping Kisaki on the floor in the process.

The ninen growled half-heartedly at him and Katsurou smirked back.
“I’ll be here, hiding,” Kyo told him, flopping down so she could lie beside Kisaki, wrapping her arms around her.

Katsurou sent her a look, and then wandered off.

Kyo was pretty sure he left the house, but she didn’t feel like getting up to check.

Would she really have to scour Konoha for a store that sold sports bras? Did they even have them? How did other kunoichi deal with this, and where did they shop?

There were plenty of businesses that sold shinobi gear of all different kinds, but she hadn’t... once again, she’d failed to check if they had anything like this.

“I need to get more observant,” Kyo muttered into Kisaki’s fur. “And learn to plan ahead better,” she added. Because it wasn’t like she hadn’t known this was coming.

Kisaki made a questioning noise.

Kyo huffed back, because she wasn’t feeling up to explain it right now, other than to say, “Growing up is kind of awful.”

Katsurou didn’t come back until after about an hour, and he was frowning minutely and scratching at the side of his throat.

“Alright, come on. Both of you,” he said.

Kyo blinked at him, but obligingly pushed herself into a seat. Exchanged a confused look with Kisaki, and then shuffled off the couch.

“Where are we going?” she asked, when Katsurou steered them towards the front door.

The man merely grunted vaguely and gestured at her to hurry up, so Kyo did.

It was only after they’d left that she realised she’d forgotten to put her mesh shirt back on and wow... this was even more uncomfortable than usual.

She felt like she was still half-naked, and her breasts were much more noticeable and she felt far too self-conscious about it.

Kisaki was a steadying presence beside her, though, and Katsurou-sensei was here.

It was fine.

Her head was just being a hormonal teenager, and she’d... find a way to deal. Somehow.

Eventually.

Probably.

Yeah, she wasn’t really making much progress on that front, she mused wryly to herself.

“Okay, here we are,” Katsurou muttered and entered a small, out-of-the-way shop without any kind of sign outside.

It honestly didn’t look much like a shop at all, but when they walked in, the place was stuffed with all kinds of shinobi gear.
“Come on,” he said, leading her into the back, and soon enough, Kyo found herself gently pushed towards a set of shelves housing...

Sports bras!

Or. Something like it, at least!

Kyo curiously picked one up and inspected it.

Made from thick, dark grey fabric, is seemed durable, if not overly comfortable, and this particular one was clearly too big for her.

Kyo put it down and tried to figure out what kind of sizing system they had going here, because there weren't really any labels, and were these all hand made? Probably.

In the end, she grabbed a few that looked to be close enough to her current size, and then turned to look around for some kind of changing room.

Katsurou was standing a small distance behind her, Kisaki beside him, and both of them were observing her idly.

Kyo blinked at them, feeling abruptly self-conscious again.

“Um,” she said eloquently. “I need to try them on?” she offered, holding one of the bras up, to make it clear what she was talking about, even though she belatedly realised it was more than obvious already.

Katsurou sighed and pointed off to the side.

Kyo managed an awkward smile, and hurried off.

There was a small, simple changing room, sectioned off by a plain piece of cloth.

She shrugged and ducked inside, wasting no time to pull her t-shirt off and picking one of the bras to try it on.

First one was too big around the ribs, which rendered it pretty much useless.

Second one was pretty good, though.

Kyo stared down at it, tugging tentatively at the wide shoulder straps, and then the elastic section going around the ribs.

It fit rather well, actually.

Well, there was only one real way to test a sports bra.

With a nod to herself, Kyo turned her gaze to the ceiling, and jumped, using the wall to turn so she could land feet-first on the ceiling, upside down.

“What are you doing?” Katsurou asked, staring up at her with a blank face.

“Need to know how well it'll hold,” Kyo told him distractedly, far more occupied with assessing how well the bra was doing its job.
It felt... *weird*.

With a grimace, Kyo planted her palms to the ceiling, cut the chakra to her feet and swung down and landed on her feet on the floor.

It could do better in the support department, but it was definitely an improvement to what she'd had before.

Which had been nothing.

Rather than dwell on it, she went to try out the two other ones she'd brought with her from the shelf.

In the end, she settled for three of them, another one of the one she was wearing, and one slightly larger than that one, too. Because she very pointedly hadn't taken it off once she'd decided.

She could still pay for all three of them just fine, thanks.

“*You done?*” Katsurou-sensei asked.

“I think so,” Kyo replied with a tired sigh. Why did this have to be so much trouble? “Does anyone even work here?” she asked, rather than dwell, because she hadn't seen anyone when they walked in.

Katsurou huffed amusedly and nudged her off to the side, where she finally noticed a small, partially hidden counter.

A man was lounging there, with some of the most impressive scarring Kyo had ever seen.

He was also missing an arm.

Kyo merely blinked and walked up to place her new best friends on the counter. “I'm buying three of these,” she told him blandly.

The man met her gaze and offered a thoughtful nod.

Paying was a quick affair and as soon as she was done, she walked back to Katsurou and wrapped her arms around his middle for a tight hug of wordless thanks.

She was so, so glad she had him.

“Enough,” he finally said, sounding gruff. “You forgot something at my place, I'm pretty sure, and you need to go and talk to your team,” he told her, though she knew he wasn't *really* unhappy with her.

“Okay,” she mumbled.

She supposed she had to face Minato and Jiraiya soon enough, even though she couldn't pretend to be eager about it.

Fetching her mesh shirt, putting it on over her brand new bra and pulling the t-shirt on on top, Kyo was ready to go.

“*Kyo*?” Katsurou-sensei spoke up before she could leave the house, and he was eyeing her thoughtfully. “Do you still care about Kaimaru?” he asked.

Kyo paused, turned to blink at him.
Her immediate reaction was to say no. But. That wouldn't be quite true.

“Yeah, but he made it more than clear what he feels,” she told him, feeling sullen, now. This was a weird day. “Why?”

“If you want to, try to reach out to him again,” Katsurou said, eyeing her seriously.

“Okay, but,” Kyo tilted her head, “why?” she couldn't help but ask.

“The direction he's going, he’ll end up suiciding on a mission before the year is up,” he informed her evenly, and Kyo was brought up short.

She stared blankly at the solemn Yamanaka for a long second, before she managed a short, shallow nod.

She had intended to look into what the hell had been up with Kaimaru, way back, but then she just... hadn't. Something had happened every time she'd had a spare moment, and she'd forgotten, and then he'd-

After the fight, she'd taken a deliberate step back and away.

Kaimaru had made it more than clear he didn't want her to get involved, and she'd finally relented, because... well. He'd stabbed her, no matter how much he probably hadn't intended to do so.

That sent a pretty sharp message.

“Okay, sensei,” she said again. “Are you gonna get sent out again?” Because it felt like he probably would have waited to drop that on her if he hadn't.

“Down-time's over,” he huffed, inclining his head in an affirmative. “You two look out for each other, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Kyo agreed and Kisaki snorted.

“Of course,” she said. “Come back safe,” the ninken added, walking up to press her head against Katsurou's stomach. “We love you.”

“Yeah, we love you very much, sensei,” Kyo agreed, joining her partner in giving the man a hug. “I love you. Thank you,” she muttered, and pressed a kiss to his cheek, just because she could.

Katsurou made a sound halfway between a sigh and a huff. “You two need to get going,” was all he said.

“Yeah.” And that was that.

“Are you feeling better now?” Kisaki asked, a few minutes after they'd left Katsurou's house.

“A bit, yeah,” Kyo sighed. “But it still feels awkward.” She was overly aware of the added restriction the bra added. The added pressure.

Her chest was more noticeable now, too, which... was something of a downside.

“You're an adolescent now,” Kisaki mused. “Nothing strange about that,” she reasoned.
Kyo's lips twitched with wry amusement. “Let's get this over with,” she muttered, squared her shoulders, and took off to return to her team.

She'd been gone a little over two hours, and she hadn't exactly left under ideal circumstances.

Biting back a grimace, Kyo jumped down from a nearby tree to land on the training field, instantly drawing Jiraiya's attention.

Minato, immersed in working on his seal, took a few seconds longer.

“Hi,” she greeted awkwardly.

“Hello, Kyo,” Jiraiya greeted, reluctantly amused and eyeing her intently. “I wasn't sure you'd be rejoining us today,” he commented casually.

Was she really that flighty?

Never mind that, right now.

“Sorry for kicking you, Kyo,” Minato said the moment he caught sight of her.

Kyo sighed and wandered over to take a seat next to him. “No need to apologise,” she muttered awkwardly. “It was a spar; you kicking me was sort of the point.”

“But still,” Minato paused, eyeing her uncertainly, “you were upset.”

And he might not know why she'd been upset, but that didn't matter.

Kyo shrugged. “Puberty is weird, okay?” she muttered at the two males, and Kisaki snorted and settled down next to her, stretching out on the firm, sun-warm ground. “I'm, uh, developing,” Kyo said firmly, ignoring her flushing face and sending Jiraiya a pre-emptive glare, “so please don't kick my chest again. It hurts.”

“Oh,” Minato said quietly, gaze involuntarily dropping to her chest, and consequently blushing bright red. “Right,” he muttered, turning to stare up at the sky.

“Now that you're back, why don't you bring out your research and join us?” Jiraiya finally suggested, glancing between them like he was wondering what to say. “You were stuck on how to adapt your seal to your chakra texture, right?”

“Yeah,” Kyo said and gladly took the distraction. “I know chakra nature plays a part, but that it isn't everything, and I can't quite wrap my head around the concept.”

Kyo got out the storage scroll with all her fuuijutsu things, at least the ones regarding this particular project.

“You talked about types of chakra, though,” Kisaki yawned, sending her a look. “Way back, when Maki asked,” she clarified at the look it got her. “About stealth.”

Kyo stared at her, lost in thought.

It felt so long ago, she could barely remember, but... there was a vague memory, she was pretty sure.

And it was true that not all people had chakra suited to stealth.

Hadn't kaa-san mentioned something once that the two of them had a similar type of chakra?
Was *that* what this alluded to?

She supposed it was worth a shot, and either Jiraiya or Hinata-shishou would inform her if she was way off the mark.

With a nod and renewed determination, she set to it, hunkering down to work.

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Chapter 91

Chapter Summary

Growing up comes with growing pains

Chapter Notes

With this chapter, I'm upping the rating on HtS as a whole, and I have also added a few tags, which is something you should all keep in mind and give a look before you continue on to read. Thank you!

There was absolutely no denying either the fact that Kyo was fully in the throes of puberty now, or the fact that she was very clearly female.

No one would be mistaking her for a boy at a glance from now on, she was rather sure.

Having to start using a bra again was apparently some kind of milestone.

She still wasn't sure how she felt about it, but the few teenaged boys that had looked to be mildly interested in approaching her about it had been effectively chased away by a casual showing of teeth from Kisaki.

Kyo obviously had the best partner.

Minato needed some time to get used to the fact she was turning more visibly female, but he was sticking close and made it more than clear he was on her side.

No matter how awkward he was about it.

“It's not like you're a different person,” he muttered at her while they waited for Jiraiya to finish up the last few details before their latest mission, conversing quietly with one of the mission assignment ninjas.

“Nope,” Kyo agreed blandly, frowning at nothing.

It would be nice to get out of the village for a while, get a bit of distance from this new kind of attention she found herself under from a few of her fellow shinobi.

It was weird, okay?

She hadn't been very observant to this kind of attention in her past life, but she'd been raised to notice when people paid any kind of attention to her this time around, because it usually didn't mean anything even remotely positive.

Being an assassin, that was doubly true for Kyo.
Attention made her feel unsettled, and that was when teenaged boys weren't giving her speculative once-overs.

Urgh.

Why.

The widening of her hips made something as simple as walking feel awkward by now, too, and Kyo wasn't enjoying the experience.

Katsurou-sensei had been right, two weeks ago, pointing out she'd experienced this once before, but that didn't change the fact she'd been a child for the last twelve years, and it was easy to forget.

She also hadn't experienced those things in this body before now, and that made a difference.

The last week's taijutsu practise had been more than awkward, and she had more bruises than usual to show for it.

The only ones who weren't treating her the slightest bit different were Kisaki, Genma and Ashika. Though, to be fair, she'd been a bit too busy to be very social lately, and it wasn't like she'd felt up to seeking people out.

Kyo just felt awkward.

The new swing to her hips when she walked was awkward, being overly conscious of her chest was awkward, and the sudden urge to cry, at times, was awkward, but there wasn't anything she could do about any of those things.

Life utterly sucked, sometimes.

"Right, we're ready to leave," Jiraiya said, striding back towards them. "Come on, you two."

Kyo, Kisaki and Minato all fell into step easily.

"You're still okay with this?" Kyo couldn't help but ask quietly, glancing down at her partner.

Kisaki sighed. "When will you stop asking that, Kyo?" She threw her a look, ears folding ever so slightly to show her displeasure.

Kyo shrugged. "This is just our second mission together," technically, "and I just, you know, want to make sure." It was better to ask one time too many than to not ask at all, in Kyo's opinion. "I'm still not an Inuzuka by blood." Even though she had the tattoos, for all that they were easy to forget about, ever since they'd healed up.

It wasn't like she could actually see them herself, even in a mirror.

Kisaki huffed and used her weight to almost push her over, all but shoulder-checking her hip.

"Hey!" Kyo complained easily, struggling not to laugh.

Minato watched them curiously and absently steadied her with a hand on her shoulder. "So what kind of mission do we have this time, sensei?" he asked, rather than comment on Kyo and Kisaki's minor disagreement.

Jiraiya pursed his lips and motioned at them to follow.
“So?” Kyo pressed when they'd finally left the village.

“Recon,” the man huffed, not looking entirely pleased with the situation. “We're headed up to Ishi, which takes us through Ame while where at it.”

Which explained why he looked unhappy.

Ame had been a hotspot during the war, and she hadn't been close to it for years, but she could still remember what little she'd seen clearly.

And the Land of Stone? What kind of business could they have way up there?

“What kind of recon would take us to Ishi?” Minato asked, watching their sensei closely and attentively and clearly thinking along similar lines.

“The troublesome kind,” Jiraiya said plainly.

“I though all recon was troublesome,” Kyo muttered distractedly.

At least that was what people tended to say, because due to its very nature, you could never be quite sure what kind of situation you were heading into.

That was why it was reconnaissance. Finding out more for the people who'd be coming after.

Oh, this would just be an unpleasant mission, she was sure of it.

“Good thing I packed so much poison,” Kyo drawled. “How likely are we for enemy contact?”

The look Jiraiya slanted her spoke plenty on its own and Kyo bit back a sigh.

Right.

This would be fun.

She just knew it.

“Come on, let's get going; we'll run at top speed until we reach the border and make camp. We'll go through Kusa for part of the way, and only cross over into Ame when necessary,” Jiraiya informed them seriously. “Stay sharp, you two. Try to keep close and make sure to have each other's backs.”

“Yes, sensei,” Kyo and Minato chorused quietly, the gravity of the situation settling in.

Kisaki gave an affirmative huff, too, even though Jiraiya had failed to address her by name.

All of them would do their best.

Things were calm all the way through Kusa, though things got far more tense the moment they left the relative safety of Fire Country.

Jiraiya wasn't really one for stealth, but he was evidently able to be discreet when the situation called for it. And this certainly did.

Ame hadn't recovered much in the last year and a half.

Much of the landscape was still scarred with old battle fields, the nature ravaged and torn. The
villages they came across were either abandoned, ruined, or in poor repair, and the civilians they caught sight of were thin, ragged and more than terrified at the smallest unexpected noise.

It was... grim.

Kyo had kept to the border on the few missions she'd had, but this made it more than clear how some of the fighting had gone down.

And it'd been almost two years, which meant part of the damage had gotten time to heal, too.

It was more than discouraging.

“This place smells of sickness and death,” Kisaki said, eyeing the small village up ahead with wary suspicion.

“Starving people tend to get sick,” Jiraiya murmured quietly, staring steadily at the poorly kept buildings a fair distance away. “Let's move on.”

“Why not stop and help?” Minato asked, looking displeased, but not hesitating in complying.

Kyo wasn't sure what they could possibly do to help, because they'd been part of the problem.

Konoha wasn't free of guilt, here.

And the moment they caught sight of their hitai-ate, these people would fear for their lives, or worse.

“You can't help someone who doesn't want to be helped, Minato,” Jiraiya told him wearily. “And you don't know if some of this damage wasn't done by Konoha shinobi. If people killed here died by our hands. The kindest thing we can do here right now is move on and leave,” he said, sending the boy a brief look, before he went back to scanning the landscape.

Ruined fields, only some of them in partial use, where the upturned soil allowed for it.

Kyo wondered if they couldn't just use a basic earth jutsu to flatten out the ground, but dismissed it just as quickly, because that would not just signal their presence here, it would also leave a calling card.

A way to track them down.

Suppressing a shudder, Kyo kept pace with her team and while they weren't exactly rushing, they weren't stopping, either.

Slow and steady wins the race? she mused blandly.

They were almost exactly on the border to Ishi when Jiraiya growled out a soft curse and turned to the left.

Kyo exchanged a look with Kisaki, who wasted no time in blending in with the background and seemingly disappeared.

There was no need to advertise the presence of a ninken none of these people would be expecting.

Kyo drew nearer to Minato and tersely observed the team of three Ame shinobi that had come to a stop a small distance away from them, watching their team with sharp eyes.

Maybe it wouldn't turn violent?
It might just be an uncomfortably tense stand-off and then they'd go their separate ways? Finish this mission and be done?

Yeah right. Kyo felt like scoffing, because she was maybe trying to do better now, but she wasn't that optimistic.

“A team of Konoha shinobi,” one of the Ame nin said in a gravelly voice that sounded like it wanted to laugh. “What could you possibly have wandered so far from your side of the border for?”

“We're just passing through,” Jiraiya said, voice calm and easy and carrying a sense of levity that was utterly false.

“We know who you are,” the same man responded with a slow smile, eyeing Jiraiya intently. “Funny two parts of you aren't with you.” And his gaze slid to Kyo and Minato, and Kyo felt a cold shiver run down her spine.

Right.

Jiraiya-sensei couldn't exactly be popular with Ame nin, and Orochimaru and Tsunade weren't with him right now.

Crap.

The three Ame shinobi were just standing there, though. One of them was crouched in a ready position, one hand on the ground, but no one was moving.

The level of tension in the air was thick enough to choke on.

Kyo could feel Minato breathe next to her, they were standing so close, and then there was a minor shift, Jiraiya growled out a quiet curse, and then a fourth Ame nin melted out of the air in front of them.

Fuck, Kyo hadn't noticed him at all!

And that was as far as she had time to react, or think, really, before there was a brief shine of thin, fine metal in the air in front of her.

Kyo tried to jump back, but a sharp, painful tug on her arm brought her the other direction. Something hard and unforgiving impacted her face.

Pain sparked like electricity behind her right eye and things went dark.

-x-x-x-

One moment, Kisaki was standing next to Kyo, and the next, she'd vanished, and Minato could only hope she hadn't run off.

Or, if she had, that there was some sort of plan involved, because he had a feeling they'd need all the help they could get with these guys.

They looked really strong, and sensei didn't have his team with him.

He just had Minato and Kyo. And Kisaki, but she only ever listened to Kyo, but she still counted, he supposed.

Anyway, Minato really had to focus.
Kyo tensed beside him, and then there was a fourth Ame shinobi, appearing out of nowhere, right in front of them!

Minato jumped back and more behind sensei, fully expecting Kyo to be right beside him, only she got yanked forward instead, and he hadn't noticed the ninja wire.

The Ame nin grinned, elbowed Kyo in the face hard enough to knock her out before she could do a thing, and picked her up before she could hit the ground.

Retreating behind the rest of his team.

He didn't break eye-contact with Jiraiya-sensei for so much as a second.

“Stay behind me,” sensei snapped and next Minato knew, there were two minor explosions of smoke on either side of sensei and two huge toads had joined the fray.

Shit, shit, shit, Minato didn't know what to do!

They'd taken Kyo!

He was breathing too fast and itching to try and take her back, but sensei had all but told him to stay put and he didn't- what should he do!?

Part of Minato blankly mused that this was usually where he looked to Kyo for guidance, because she always knew what to do.

“Give her back!” slipped out of him before he could stop himself, and consequently had to throw himself out of the way of a water jutsu.

“No,” one of the Ame shinobi laughed. “I think we'll take her back to the village with us,” he drawled baring his teeth in a wide, cruel grin. “I'm sure she'll be able to tell us all kinds of things.”

“Not to mention the entertainment value,” the one next to him added, face serious and eyes fixed on sensei.

Minato felt pale.

He couldn't get a clear view of Kyo, but he could see the guy who'd grabbed her was crouched over her, and she was still out cold.

Crap, this was really bad, wasn't it.

“You put a finger on her, I'll crush all four of you, starting with your feet,” Jiraiya-sensei said, and his voice was hard in a way Minato hadn't ever heard before. “Gama, with me. Gamatatsu, make sure none of them try anything else,” he ordered in a voice that was more like a growl, and it sent a shiver down Minato's spine.

One of the Ame nin laughed. “You really gonna try your luck when we've got a knife to the girl's pretty little neck?”

“You kill her and there's nothing stopping me from tearing you to pieces,” sensei drawled.

And then he moved.

There was nothing Minato could do other than watch, and he hated every second of it.
He hated it even more when the Ame shinobi moved to meet sensei and he got a better view of Kyo.

-x-x-x-

It wasn't quite 'waking up' when one moment, everything had been dark and quiet, and the very next Kyo was well aware of several things that made all the alarm bells in her head go off at once.

It felt more like she'd been standing in a pitch black room, only for someone to tear off the drapes from a window facing directly at the sun, rather than her waking up.

Waking up implied something calm and uncomplicated.

Returning to consciousness stretched out on hard, uneven ground with a weight on her thighs, pinning her legs down and a pounding ache in her head was neither calm nor uncomplicated.

It took a while before she could make sense of what she was looking at.

Kyo couldn't move her arms.

Couldn't really feel her hands, actually, but that wasn't as important as the sharp blade pressed up against the side of her throat.

The man having her pretty much strung up and pinned to the ground wore an Ame hitai-ate and for a long second, it was all Kyo was capable of focusing on. Staring at the metal plate.

“Ah-ah-ah,” he said lightly, but he wasn't looking at her. “Now that's just a shame, anyone surprise me and I make one wrong move, she'll lose a lot of fluids very quickly, and you don't have your medic whore with you right now.” Which was just all kinds of horrifying, but then he turned to look at her and it got worse. “Well, you and I will have all kinds of fun, darling,” he positively crooned, smiling down at her at the same time as the hand not holding a kunai to her throat gripped her upper thigh, thumb pressing very blatantly against her groin.

And Kyo... couldn't think of a single thing.

She was utterly and completely blank.

There was absolutely no question about what he meant, but Kyo couldn't even work up the motivation to try and tug on her hands.

Not that she had a lot of room to do so, because her arms were stretched up as far above her head as they could go, until it felt like she couldn't breathe, and there was still a kunai alarmingly close to one of her major blood vessels.

This man would kill her, she realised.

But he wouldn't be quick about it.

“Oh, you're one of those,” the Ame nin said, sounding pleased. “You're gonna be so much fun, and Konoha kunoichi always scream so prettily.” He smiled.

Kyo was pretty sure she should be doing... something, but she couldn't think of a single thing.

She couldn't move her hands, couldn't reach her needles, not to mention use them, and her legs were restrained.

If she tried to move, he'd slit her throat, possibly accidentally, because that was how close the knife
was pressing against her skin.

Then he was shifting, derailing whatever faint thoughts she'd been managing as he pressed a knee up between her legs. Forcing them apart.

People were talking, but she couldn't make sense of the words.

They might as well speak a foreign language for all the sense it made.

“If you move even a little, I might accidentally cut you, sweetie,” the Ame nin told her, sending her a look, before he reached for another kunai.

Move?

Kyo couldn't currently think, how was she supposed to move when he was in the process of-

There was a loud noise, and the Ame nin restraining her huffed, sending the commotion in front of him a look. “Just gonna have you scream nice and loud for me to remind them of the situation, don't you agree?” And he turned his head to meet her gaze and Kyo had never been this frightened in all her life.

Had never been paralysed with it.

Not like this.

He looked calm and composed, like this wasn't anything strange. Like this was just another part of life, and the kunai that slipped in under the hem of her trousers -to cut her belt, she belatedly realised- was cold and jarring and it felt like there was a pressure over her chest.

Kyo couldn't breathe.

There wasn't enough air.

The Ame nin made a pleased noise, and then tensed at the same time as he twisted to avoid the massive, white weight slamming into him from his right.

Kisaki wasn't growling, wasn't making a noise, but she was all teeth, claws and compact muscles, and she was aiming for his throat with single-minded determination.

Ame nin swore and was moving.

Kyo's body shifted on its own the moment the weight was off of her, and she twisted with the enemy shinobi's momentum, pulling her legs up and rolling over her right shoulder in the same move.

The second she got her feet under her, Kyo yanked out the kunai that had secured the ninja wire around her hands and forearms to the ground at a sharp angle.

Channelling wind chakra to the knife in her hands, she cut off the wire still connecting to the Ame nin.

She shunshined back to next to Minato, gaze seeking out-

“Kisaki!” she snapped, voice cutting through the sounds of combat, because Jiraiya was currently doing his utmost to squash the Ame squad like ants. Keeping them occupied enough they couldn't try to target her and Minato again.
She could see two toads.

The ninken didn't take long to return to her side and Kyo gave her a quick once-over to make sure she wasn't hurt.

She'd hoped she wouldn't have to use Senpu's canine oriented first aid lessons quite yet, but there was some blood staining Kisaki's fur.

Nothing serious, though, she was fairly sure.

“Kyo,” Minato's voice was trembling, and it was close, drawing her attention, “your hands.”

Kyo stared at him for a heartbeat, before she thought to glance down at the limbs in question.

She was clutching the kunai tightly enough her knuckles shone white and- ah.

She held her hands out towards Minato, bracing herself against Kisaki, who had pressed up behind her, not taking her eyes off the fight still going on in the background.

Kyo probably needed to pay closer attention.

The thought was there, but she couldn't do anything more about it than register its existence and let it sit there. No matter how important she knew it was.

Minato's hands weren't as steady as they probably needed to be, as he carefully began to pick at the wire wrapped tightly around her arms.

Kyo watched him work dispassionately, taking in the blood slowly beading in places, where the wire had cut into her skin, but she couldn't feel it yet.

“Sorry, this is probably gonna hurt,” Minato said quietly, not taking his eyes off of what he was doing, and finally began to unwind the wire from her arms.

She could feel him peel it away from her skin, but it didn't hurt.

It would in a few seconds, though, she knew that much.

Kyo kept watching his progress dispassionately, feeling the tug as he pulled the wire out of the places where it had dug in particularly deep, but she still felt numb. Her needle holsters had protected her wrists, at least, which was something.

“Get ready to run,” an unfamiliar voice said, and when Kyo turned her head to look, the same toad Jiraiya had summoned in Kiri was standing in front of them, facing the Ame nin, one sword in each hand at the ready and his bright colour stood out starkly against the bleak landscape around them.

They'd been lucky with the weather so far, she mused.

Hadn't come across anything more than a light drizzle a couple of times, but the sky was overcast and looked to be constantly on the verge of heavy rains.

All typical for this region.

“Done,” Minato said, untangling the last of the steel wire from her hands, and Kyo wasted no time in dropping the kunai and attached wire unceremoniously on the ground.

She wanted to say thanks, but the word got stuck in her throat, so she just sent her teammate a nod,
hoping it looked grateful enough.

“Thanks for the help, Gamatatsu,” Jiraiya said, landing beside his summon, who nodded gravely, and then disappeared in a cloud of smoke. “Come on, you two. We need to leave, quickly, before they come back with reinforcements.”

Kyo nodded and took her position in the team formation they'd been using.

She tensed when Jiraiya reached to pull her belt, and the accompanying gear attached to it, from her person.

“I'll carry this for you, Kyo,” he muttered, eyeing her pensively for a second. “I'll give it back the moment we're somewhere safe.”

She managed a stiff nod.

That was better than losing her things mid-run.

“Let's go,” he said, the moment he was done and they high tailed it out of Ame, across the border into Ishi and didn't so much as slow down until they reached a substantial village.

Ishi was all rocky mountains and surprisingly dry for a place bordering to Ame, but the high altitude was no doubt responsible for that.

Most of the run had been firmly up-hill.

Jiraiya led them to what looked like the largest inn in town and got them all a room to share.

“Now what?” Minato asked, looking tired and tense and he was still glued to Kyo's side.

She was sure she would have appreciated it more if she hadn't felt cold and numb and distant to everything going on around her.

“Now, you help Kyo wrap up her arms,” Jiraiya directed grimly, “while I go see if I can't find our contact. I won't take long.” And he didn't look particularly happy about leaving them by themselves, but it was what it was.

Missions were like that.

Before he left, he pressed the sealing scroll with her gear into one of Kyo's hands.

She stared dispassionately at it a second, before she slipped it into a pocket and turned to eye Minato.

“Right,” the boy said, staring right back at her. “Let's sit down and get started,” he suggested.

She went and took a seat on the floor, Kisaki lying down behind her, pressing close, curling around her back.

Minato took the seat in front of her, got out his basic healing supplies, and got started.

Kyo took off her needle holster and then held out her right arm for him first, and she found herself staring blankly at the red lines on her skin.

They sat in silence for a long few minutes.

“Why didn't you do anything?”
The question was soft and halting, but it made part of her jolt.

Lifting her gaze to Minato's face revealed the unhappy frown pulling on his features and he looked... disappointed in her.

“Why were you just lying there?” he pressed, and it felt like Kyo's stomach was trying to turn inside out.

“That's enough, Minato,” Jiraiya said, striding into the room with purpose, only pausing long enough to close the door behind him. “Contact will set things up for us tomorrow,” he added for everyone's benefit. “Kyo, we need to do something about your neck and arm,” he continued, sending her an assessing and somewhat apologetic look.

Kyo stared blankly at him.

Her neck and arm?

“You're bleeding,” Kisaki said softly, nudging her elbow gently with her snout.

Kyo blinked and turned that over in her head.

Bleeding, huh.

When she turned her attention back to Jiraiya-sensei, he was observing her solemnly before he heaved a sigh, full of feelings she didn't have the mind to interpret right now.

He folded down in a seat in front of her, waving Minato aside as he did so, and then fixed her with a look.

“You'll have to remove your shirt, Kyo,” he said.

Kyo stared back, reached to grab the cloth in question and then paused.

She should probably change trousers, too, shouldn't she? Because when he'd- that Ame shinobi had cut her belt, he'd most likely cut through her trousers, too, but she didn't- did she have an extra belt?

“Kyo,” sensei said again, voice as gentle as she'd ever heard it, but she still startled. “Your shirt. I can't see it, but from the amount of blood soaking your sleeve, the cut on your arm is pretty deep. I need to look at it.”

That made a lot of sense.

That was why her sleeve and right arm felt wet.

Kyo took a few slow, even breaths and then pulled her shirt up over her head, ignoring the stabbing pain it sent through her arm.

She dropped it on the floor beside her, and then turned back to eye Jiraiya.

There. She'd done it.

Sensei's gaze was fixed on her right upper arm and he was frowning with displeasure, which probably wasn't positive.

He scratched at his jaw, eyeing her arm contemplatively. “That either needs stitches, or proper healing,” he mused, looking thoughtful. He eyed her intently for a long second, and Kyo stared back.
Jiraiya dragged a hand over his hair with a sigh. “Right,” he muttered, and bit his thumb without further commentary.

Kyo watched him speed through a complicated-looking series of hand seals, press his hand to the floor, and then, in a cloud of smoke, a toad had joined them in the room.

“Jiraiya-chan, are you alright? You summoned Tatsu-chan and Gama-kun earlier today, but they both said you did rather well against your opponent,” the toad said, sounding distinctly feminine, and... she was also significantly smaller than any of the other toads she'd seen Jiraiya summon so far.

Which hadn't been many, granted.

Just the two, she was pretty sure.

“I'm alright,” Jiraiya assured his summon, and then cut to the chase. “Can you heal my student, Shima?”

The toad blinked her large eyes, and finally turned to look Minato and Kyo over, head tilting curiously.

She was a pale green colour, with vibrantly purple markings. She was also wearing some sort of cape-thing. And her head looked weird.

“Oh dear,” she muttered, sounding concerned. “Now this won't do. Sit perfectly still, sweetie,” she told her and Kyo couldn't suppress the violent shudder that went through her at the sound of the endearment.

Kisaki growled and bared her teeth. “Her name is Kyo,” she bit out aggressively.

The toad didn't so much as blink. “Of course, Kyo-chan,” she said.

Kyo made sure not to move a muscle when the toad reached up to place her... hand? on her upper arm, over the deep cut into the muscle.

It took a couple of minutes to heal up, and the toad's chakra felt... different. A bit strange, but not unpleasant, she was fairly sure.

As sure as Kyo was of anything right now, anyway.

“There, that should hold at least until you get back to Konoha, Kyo-chan,” the toad told her, slowly removing her hand and wiping the blood off on her cape. “You should still wrap it, just to be safe. Now, let's take a look at that cut on your neck,” she murmured, sounding concerned again.

It was harder to stay still when the toad's cold and somewhat moist digits made contact with the side of her neck, but she managed.

It was something tangible to focus on.

“Is there anything else that needs to be looked at?” the toad asked when she was done, giving Kyo a
careful once-over.

Kyo hesitated, because she wasn't actually sure.

There had been another kunai close to her skin during that- earlier, but rather than say anything, she turned her gaze on herself to check.

There was a shallow cut down on her left hip, but that would heal on its own. It barely counted as more than a scratch, really.

Kyo turned back to the toad and shook her head.

“Very well, then,” she muttered. “Despite the circumstances, it was very nice meeting you two, Kyo-chan, and...?” She sent Minato an expectant look.

“Namikaze Minato,” her teammate introduced himself.

“Minato-chan,” the toad said, smiling kindly at him. “I'll be returning home now, Jiraiya-chan, unless there was anything else you needed my assistance with?”

“No, that's fine. Thank you, Shima,” Jiraiya-sensei said, adding a grateful nod while he was at it.

The toad -Shima- unceremoniously disappeared in a puff of smoke, leaving the four of them alone again.

“Lets finish patching you up, Kyo,” Jiraiya said on a sigh, and slowly set about bringing out everything he'd need.

Kyo remained perfectly still throughout.

When he was finally done and went to place out seals around the room to make it more secure for the night, Kyo pulled on a fresh shirt, and then turned around and buried her face in Kisaki's fur.

If she gripped it hard enough, maybe her hands would stop shaking.

Kisaki whined softly and shuffled closer, snuffling sadly at whatever part of her she could reach without disturbing Kyo's hold on her.

“You should try to sleep,” Jiraiya said when he was done. He eyed the two of them carefully as he took a seat, absently putting away his sealing things while he was at it.

Kyo took a deep breath, hugged Kisaki more tightly for a second, and then sat up.

Had to take a look at Kisaki first, find out if there was anything that needed to be bandaged.

She found a short but relatively deep cut on her jaw, and it looked like the Ame nin had tried to cut her throat. Or ram his kunai up into her head. He'd obviously failed, but still. It made Kyo's insides turn cold and heavy, just thinking about it.

Kyo carefully cleaned the cut out and was then done.

That had been the only thing. Only thing she could do anything about, at least.

She got up, got ready without a word, and then settled down in her sleep roll with Kisaki, hugging the ninken as close as she could.
She was only glad Kisaki indulged her and didn't protest, even though she was pretty sure it'd get too warm for the dog very quickly.

Kyo did not sleep well.

She woke repeatedly throughout the night, either because she was sure she heard someone move, only to look around and see nothing out of place, meet Jiraiya-sensei's gaze, and then try to go back to sleep. Or she woke because of nightmares.

This was the second mission Kisaki had joined them on.

If she hadn't been there...

Kyo shuddered at the thought and banished it to the farthest reaches of her mind, but that didn't mean it wasn't there. Waiting.

And her sleeping brain clearly felt she needed to deal with it. Examine it more closely.

Kyo huffed and pushed herself into a seat.

She pushed her hair out of her face with trembling fingers and took solace in the warm, furry weight pressed against her side.

Kisaki snuffled softly and shifted closer.

Kyo turned her gaze on the dog and wondered if she should be crying.

Right.

Tears didn't feel like something she could currently afford; they were still on mission and Kyo still felt uncomfortably empty and blank.

Anyway, she should probably get up and get dressed for the day.

Jiraiya had mentioned something about a meeting they were supposed to do today? Which was probably important.

So. Get dressed. Then deal with the day.

She could do that.

Kyo got as far as taking out the sealing scroll Jiraiya had put her stuff in, unsealing her things, pulling her gear off the ruined belt and then got out another sealing scroll, to get the extra clothes and things she always carried with her on missions.

She unsealed her extra belt and... ah, yes. There were the threatening tears.

“Kyo? You okay?” Jiraiya asked, after she'd just sat there for several minutes staring at the belt she'd unsealed.

“Fine,” she said blandly, and turned to stare up at the ceiling, because yeah, still didn't want to cry and that made it easier to control the prickling in her eyes. “I've never had to exchange my belt on a mission before.”
“...I know,” Jiraiya said softly, and there was rustling from Minato's blankets now.

Jiraiya was missing the point, though.

Kyo hadn't ever had to exchange her belt on a mission, and she hadn't thought about...

“It's too small,” she said, hating the fact her sentence devolved into a sob on the last word.

Fuck it all, she'd been so close to keeping the tears back!

She'd grown a lot lately, in all the ways puberty dictated, which meant the damn belt was too small, short, whatever you wanted to call it, just because Kyo's body had decided it wanted to develop hips.

And now she was crying about it.

Kisaki whined softly, snuffled gently at her hair, and then leaned her chin on her shoulder. “It's okay,” she said.

Jiraiya sighed. “Minato, you've got an extra belt, right? Lend it to Kyo,” he directed.

Kyo wiped irritably at her wet cheeks and eyes and tried to get her breathing back under control.

Part of her couldn't believe she'd neglected to change out her belt since... when was the last time she'd even thought of her extra belt? It had definitely been years, but.

She couldn't remember.

“Here, Kyo,” Minato said softly, plopping down to sit next to her and placing the simple leather belt on the floor next to the one she'd unsealed.

“Thanks,” she muttered, feeling awkward and embarrassed now, in addition to everything else, even though she rationally knew she didn't really have anything to be embarrassed about.

Minato tentatively leaned his shoulder against hers.

Kyo sighed and felt some of the tension ease out of her, but only a little.

She took a deep breath. She could do this.

She had to do this, really.

Reaching one hand up to pat Kisaki gratefully on the snout, rubbing the soft, short, velvety fur for a moment, Kyo pressed her cheek against the dog's head and then reached for Minato's belt.

Began to transfer her things over from the ruined one.

When she was done, she put it on and was ready to go, as soon as she'd put the last few things away again.

They packed up, went to eat a quick breakfast in the inn restaurant, or whatever you wanted to call it, and then were on their way.

She'd known, in the back of her head, that Ishi had it's own shinobi village, but she hadn't ever thought much about it, because it wasn't like she'd ever travelled out this way, and they hadn't seemed much like a threat compared to the likes of Suna, Kiri and Kumo. All the other major villages.
Meeting up with a delegation of Ishi shinobi outside of the town they'd spent the night in, though, felt not only strange but... tense.

Not because the team meeting up with them acted particularly threatening, but because it carried weight.

This was official business, and all of them were aware it was important.

The scroll Jiraiya handed over to the man who looked to be in charge carried the personal seal of the Sandaime Hokage, and this was... was this the first, tentative step to a possible alliance?

Kyo couldn't help but wonder.

Thinking more about that was better than to dwell on how uncomfortable she was with the assessing looks the Ishi shinobi kept sending her and Minato, the speculative glances Kisaki received.

So she'd rather think about the underlying reasons to this mission.

Ever since Uzushio had been destroyed, it had left Konoha without any allies.

Sure, the Uzumaki that remained had been integrated into the village, but the survivors weren't a whole village.

The war had drained a lot of Konoha's resources.

Thankfully, neither Kyo nor Minato were expected to get involved in the talking, which left them free to hover in the background, observing the Ishi shinobi's every move.

Watching the way they interacted with Jiraiya.

Kisaki was pacing impatiently behind the two of them, not taking her eyes off of the foreign team for more than a second here and there, yellow eyes intent and speculative.

Things were eventually wrapped up and they went their separate ways.

“So? Did they seem positive to a possible alliance or not?” Kyo asked, a respectable distance from the meeting point.

Jiraiya sent her a dry look.

“It's really the only logical conclusion, sensei,” Minato piped up, taking her side.

“You two are far too much trouble,” the man mused. “And we'll see. This was nothing more than the first contact. More a testing of the waters than anything else,” he said. “Let's make camp,” he added a few minutes later, landing on a patch of flat ground in a relatively protected spot.

Kyo landed next to him, sent him a questioning glance.

“We'll be heading back through Ame first thing tomorrow,” Jiraiya said seriously, looking specifically at Kyo.

And yeah, she'd been trying not to think about that, thanks.

Rather than comment, Kyo set about to make this patch of ground habitable for the duration of the night. As safe as she could make it.
Minato joined in her efforts a heartbeat later.

They didn't start a fire.

Dinner was a sparse affair, and none of them talked much, but it was still comparatively comfortable.

It was calm, the sky was clear and there were so many starts visible up there.

It was beautiful, and the air was almost crisp.

“Um, Kyo?” Minato spoke up, voice soft and pitched not to carry. “Why didn't you do anything, though?” he asked, and she knew right away what it was he was talking about.

She could pretend she didn't understand, though.

If only the question hadn't sparked anger in her chest, because why did he-

“Because,” she bit out quietly, “I don't know about you, but nothing like that has ever happened to me before, Minato,” she told him, anger audible in her voice. “I've been singled out before, but not like that. It's been because of my size, not because-” she cut herself off to take a deep breath. “I'd like to see how well you'd do with an enemy nin trying to-” and she couldn't finish that sentence, because it was just-

She didn't want to think about it.

Minato didn't move a muscle, and he didn't say anything, which was both pleasing and a bit disappointing, even though she wasn't sure what reaction she'd been hoping for.

Kyo focused on petting Kisaki.

That was easier than talking.

It was easier than a lot of things, honestly.

“Will they?” Minato eventually asked, voice small and thin.

Jiraiya sighed. “They might, but kunoichi are statistically far more likely to be victims of various forms of sexual assault,” he told them wearily.

Which was just great, Kyo thought cynically.

“But,” Minato said and Kyo took a deep breath, pretty sure she wouldn't like what would come next, “there were still things you could have done,” he said quietly.

“Feelings aren't rational,” she snapped at him, got up and walked over to sit beside Jiraiya. “I don't want to talk about this right now,” she added.

They were going back through Ame tomorrow.

Minato was possibly trying to understand, but he was just making her angry.

She ignored the part of her that whispered that anger was just easier than confronting the real issue. That part of her head could just go stuff it.

“Okay,” Minato said, sounding sad, and maybe a little bit hurt, and she briefly wondered what expression he was wearing right now. It was too dark to see anything other than outlines. “Sorry.”
“I'm not really angry with you,” she informed him tersely. Reluctantly.

She wasn't actually certain she was angry at all, but that would bring her back to territory she didn't want to think about, let alone speak about.

Being angry really was easier.

“Rest up.” Jiraiya ordered them plainly, reaching out to slowly place a tentative hand on Kyo's shoulder, for a moment, and she leaned into the touch. “We'll run through Ame at top speed tomorrow,” he said, sounding grim.

“Thank you, sensei,” Kyo said quietly, and then settled down to sleep.

When Kisaki padded over to lie down next to her, she didn't waste any time in rolling over to press her face against her fur, wrapping her arms around her in a hug.

“I love you, Kisaki,” Kyo told her, voice barely loud enough to be heard. “I'm glad you're here.”

“I love you, too,” the dog sighed back. “And so am I.”

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Chapter 92

Chapter Summary

Home again

Kyo hadn't been so tense on a run for a good long while, now, and she couldn't really say she'd missed it.

Thankfully, she seemed to have been sufficiently traumatized by Ame nin for a while, and the one squad they came across was chased away easily enough.

Kyo was very resolute not to be taken by surprise by something like that again. Ever, if she could help it.

Which might be an unrealistic goal, she silently admitted to herself, no matter how much it made her stomach feel like a lump of ice lodged in her gut.

The run back to Konoha took about two and a half days, all in all, disregarding the night they camped out in Ishi, resting up before the gauntlet run across Ame and into Kusa.

When they walked through the gates back into Konoha, they'd been gone for about a week.

Kyo felt like it had been much longer, but that might have more to do with... the new experiences.

“Alright!” Jiraiya said, once he’d gotten them all signed in and the initial paperwork taken care of. “Let’s go report and take care of the rest.”

Kyo fell into step, one hand resting on Kisaki’s back the entire way to the Hokage tower.

Konoha was bustling with people as usual and the press of people wasn't exactly pleasant.

Kisaki made for an excellent people repellent, though.

Not that anyone shied away from her excessively, but a dog Kisaki’s size invoked a natural amount of respect in civilians, and shinobi were polite enough to give her her space.

It was pretty nice.

“And remember,” Jiraiya began to say before they split up.

“Hand in the paperwork on time, we know,” Minato said, smiling faintly at the man. “See you day after tomorrow, sensei.”

Jiraiya nodded, surveyed the two of them one last time, and then turned away with a small sigh.

Kyo exchanged a look with Kisaki and then turned to wander in the direction of home.

“Kyo, wait,” Minato said, hurrying to follow.

She sent him a tiredly curious look, because she was weary and she just wanted to go home. “What
is it, Minato?"

The boy frowned ahead, and it looked like he was trying to put words on something complicated, so she left him to it without pressing further.

“Usually, when something happens,” he began slowly, “you drag me off for a sleepover. Do you,” he hesitated, “do you want me to do that?”

Kyo slowed to a stop and turned to face her teammate.

No matter what she was feeling right now, Minato really was a great friend.

“I just want to go home, Minato,” she admitted quietly, and Minato just about had time to slump, despite his best efforts not to, before she added, “you can come with me if you want, though?”

Minato blinked. “And you'd be okay with that?” he prodded carefully.


Not the oldest one, but she didn't see Inoichi often enough these days, her friendship with Aita felt different, and Minato had somehow managed to sneak into that spot largely without her notice anyway.

They continued down the street, and Minato looked happier than he had a minute ago.

Kisaki snorted amusedly and pressed close to her side for a second, giving both of them a fond look.

“Pack is pack,” she said, as if everything should be obvious to anyone with half a brain.

“I guess you're right,” Kyo agreed softly.

After another minute, Minato tentatively reached out to take her hand. Squeezed her fingers gently and sent her a questioning look.

Kyo sighed and felt a little bit of the tension that had been a permanent fixture for a while now ease up a notch.

They were back home.

Konoha was refreshingly mundane and familiar, and she had Minato, Kisaki, even Jiraiya-sensei.

She'd be fine, even with this... added thing to consider, while on missions. Didn't really have a choice, she figured.

Jiraiya hadn't been surprised in the least, so this was apparently something she'd have to try and prepare for.

Kyo felt her mouth flatten at the thought.

Kisaki huffed and nudged her with her shoulder, sending her a look, ears flicking.

Kyo blinked, took a deep breath and straightened her back. Right. She could. Think about this later. When she wasn't in public and should be paying at least superficial attention to her surroundings, even if they were in Konoha.

She tightened her hold on Minato's hand, and the boy sent her a look in response.
She just shook her head subtly, because she didn't want anything, and focused on the street in front of them.

Halfway home, they spotted an approaching police patrol moving in the opposite direction, which wasn't really anything out of the ordinary, or particularly eye-catching, if only she hadn't spotted one particular face among the four Uchiha.

Kyo perked up, and was hurrying towards Ryota before she could think twice.

Walked right up to the man until she could lean her forehead to his chest in an almost-hug.

“Please tell me tou-san is home? I haven't seen him in months,” she said by way of greeting.

“Hello to you, too,” Ryota grunted, though he sounded vaguely amused. “Kou should be finishing up work in a while, yeah. Go home, kitten,” he told her, placing a hand on her shoulder to push her away enough to give her a critical look. “Get some sleep,” he added, and then sent a look at Kisaki and Minato, who'd trailed after her. His gaze lingered on Minato a moment, and then turned back to Kyo with a huff.

“Okay,” Kyo agreed, managing a thin, half-hearted smile. “See you, Ryota.”

He produced an agreeing grunt, eyed her speculatively a second, and then walked over to his squad, who'd been waiting impatiently for him.

Kyo watched him leave, but just for a second, and then returned to Minato's side, gratefully taking his hand.

“Tou-san is home,” she told them, feeling almost on the brink of tears, suddenly. Which was just ridiculous.

Yeah, she hadn't seen him in what felt like way too long, but that didn't mean she had to cry about it! Stupid hormones. Stupid puberty.

Minato smiled at her, though he also looked a bit...

Kyo peered at him. “Tou-san likes you, Minato. There's no need to worry,” she pointed out, because it wasn't like he hadn't ever met him before and Kou was well aware of their sleep-overs and stuff.

They made it to the apartment not long after that, and Kyo felt the tension fall off of her like stepping out of a wet, mud caked cloak the moment she stepped over the threshold and into the familiar hallway.

“Food?” Kyo asked, turning to eye Minato and Kisaki when she'd put away her shoes.

“Yes, please,” the ninen said with a heartfelt huff, wandering over to the couch, flopping over until she was sprawled out over the entire thing.

Kyo eyed her amusedly a moment, and then turned to meet Minato's gaze.

The boy shrugged and turned to wander into the kitchen, familiar enough with this routine by now to not so much as falter.

Kyo smiled and followed him.

They cooked in silence, made enough for all three of them, and tou-san and Genma, too, and then sat
down to eat.

“You should take a shower,” Kyo said when they were done, gathering up the dishes and carrying them over to the sink.

“What about you?”

“I'll shower when you're done,” she assured him with a snort, when Minato fixed her with a stubborn look. “You can go back to your worried hovering when you're finished,” she muttered under her breath.

Minato huffed. “Fine, but I'll help you with the dishes first,” he declared, clearly not willing to budge on the matter.

Kyo laughed helplessly, just a little, and didn't argue.

Minato had been in the bathroom for all of three minutes when the front door opened and Genma's voice happily chattered at who could only be tou-san.

Kyo paused, and then walked out of her and Genma's room about at the same time there was a happy squeal of “NEE-SAN!”

“Hi, Genma!” she greeted with a grin, bending down to accept her brother's hug, picking him up and holding him close with maybe a bit more desperation than was normal, but she couldn't help it. “Hello, tou-san,” she added, sending their dad a look, still clinging to her little brother.

“Kitten,” Kou smiled, eyeing her warmly, “been a while. How are you?” He took off his sandals at an unhurried pace. “You got a hug for your old man, as well?”

Kyo pressed a kiss to Genma's cheek, put him down on his own two feet and all but threw herself at her dad.

She'd missed him.

Kou exhaled heavily and held her tightly, tucking her head under his chin. “You're growing up much too fast, kitten,” he told her softly.

Kyo closed her eyes and hugged him even tighter. “Missed you,” she said, rather than anything else. “Minato's here. We're having a sleep-over.”

“Oh. You made dinner?”

“Yes. It's in on the counter. Are you staying home for a while now? We kept missing each other,” Kyo couldn't help but inquire, and she still didn't want to let go.

Her dad sighed softly, raised a hand to smooth down her hair. “I'll be stationed in the village for a few months at least, unless something drastic happens.”

Kyo let out a slow, relieved breath.

While she and tou-san had been busy, Genma had wandered over to the couch, and was having some sort of staring-match with Kisaki.

“You can sleep in my bed if you let me sleep with nee-san,” Genma said, serious and business-like, still staring intently at the ninken, who’d raised her head to watch him.
Kisaki hummed. “Deal,” she agreed. Even going so far as to extend a paw to 'shake on it', which Genma readily reciprocated.

Kyo snorted and finally stepped back from tou-san. “Kisaki,” she sighed, sending the dog a look.

Kisaki opened her mouth in an unrepentant doggy grin, tongue lolling. “What? I can still sleep in his bed.”

Kyo shrugged, because she supposed that was true enough. “Take a look in our room, Genma,” Kyo advised the boy, who blinked curiously at her a second, and then rushed to do as asked.

He came running back out in a second, a wide grin on his face. “We'll sleep on the floor!” he gushed, colliding harshly with Kyo's legs, throwing his arms around her waist. “Can I sleep next to you, nee-san?”

“Sure, since you already hashed it out with Kisaki,” she drawled.

“Can Ashika come?” Genma asked next, barely waiting for her to finish talking. “She can bring Aita-nii.”

“Not tonight, Genma,” tou-san said, picking the boy up and tucking him under one arm. “And I'm pretty sure your room can't fit any more people in it,” he mused, eyeing first Kyo, then Genma speculatively. He let his gaze wander around the apartment next, eyes deeply contemplative.

He shook his head before Kyo could ask what was the matter, though.

“You can have a sleep-over with Ashika another day,” Kyo consoled her pouting brother, feeling amused.

“Go take a shower, Kyo, and I'll make sure this one gets fed,” Kou said, turning Genma upside down -much to the boy's delight, judging by the giggles- and sedately wandered into the kitchen.

Kyo shrugged and turned towards the bathroom door.

Shower had turned off, so she might as well see if Minato was done.

She exchanged a look with Kisaki and then knocked. “You done?”

“Yeah, just getting dressed,” Minato returned. “You can come in,” he added, sounding distracted.

Which was what Kyo did, threw a disinterested eye on where Minato was pulling on a soft-looking t-shirt and instead focused on removing her gear and put it on the toilet.

“I pulled the mattresses off the beds, so I hope you don't mind sleeping on the floor,” Kyo told him, when Minato got out his toothbrush.

The boy paused, thought it over, and then shrugged. “Just keep Genma from trying to smother me with a pillow while I sleep,” he requested lightly, sending her a teasing grin in the mirror.

“Oh, ha-ha,” Kyo muttered, though she couldn't help but smile. “You're so funny.”

“Thank you!” Minato chirped, looking very pleased with himself.

It was a perfectly acceptable hour to go to sleep by the time all of them were ready for bed, both
Minato and Kyo showered and clean, teeth brushed and wearing their sleep clothes.

Minato had helped her redress her arms, checking over the cuts and cleaning them out before they'd left the bathroom.

Tou-san eyed them all amusedly while they settled down on the mattresses Kyo had arranged in the middle of the floor, arms crossed comfortably over his chest, leaning against the door post into the room.

“Want a bed time story?” he asked them.

“Nee-san can tell it today, tou-san,” Genma said, wiggled out from under his comforter, hurried over to the bookshelf, grabbed a book, and then hurried back again.

All but thrusting the book into her face in his eagerness.

“Alright,” Kyo agreed. She sat up, made herself comfortable, and then opened the book. “Lie down and get ready for sleep,” she directed her brother, who was still standing in front of her, watching her avidly.

Genma wasted no time in burrowing down again, shuffling closer until he was almost in her lap.

Kyo couldn't help but snort, eyed the book he'd chosen, and then began to read.

It didn't take too long, and it was nice. Calming, to go through with things that were routine.

Genma was listening, but was visibly getting more and more sleepy, and Minato was relaxing beside her, stretched out on his back, eyes closed and face serene while he listened, too.

Kisaki had placed herself at the foot-end of the mattresses and was snoring softly.

Tou-san was still standing in the doorway, watching the four of them with a fond expression on his features.

Genma was asleep before she reached the end of the story.

“Good night, kids,” Kou bid them quietly when Kyo closed the book and placed it aside, on the floor. “Sleep well.”

“Good night, tou-san,” Kyo returned.

“Night,” Minato said.

Kisaki produced a noise that was half whine, half huff-growl, and then went back to her peaceful snoring.

Her dad's lips twitched amusedly, and he stood away from the door post, turned off the light, and then wandered back out into the rest of the apartment, leaving the door slightly ajar behind him.

Kyo carefully shifted Genma so he was lying less glued to her side and more on his own, so she could lie down without risking lying on top of him, and carefully made herself comfortable.

Genma slept through the manhandling without so much as a hitch to his breath.

Minutes slowly trickled passed, and everything was quiet and still, only the sound of their breaths to be heard.
Eventually, tou-san got ready for bed, too, turned off the lights in the apartment and went to go sleep. Kyo was still wide awake.

Don't get her wrong; she was really tired, but... she also felt far too alert to be able to sleep.

It was nice to just lie there, though.

Taking in the sounds of the apartment, the building around them. The smell and feel of home.

“You still awake?” Minato asked softly an undetermined time later, not moving other than to speak.

“Yeah,” Kyo answered, voice just as soft.

“I'm really sorry for what happened, Kyo. I'm sorry I didn't help you, and I'm sorry I didn't tell you that instead of—” he cleared his throat quietly, “instead of asking you insensitive questions.”

Kyo stared up at the dark ceiling, absently noting the hot liquid seeping from her eyes, down her temples and into her hair.

“That's okay,” she said, even though she wasn't sure which part she meant it for. Maybe both?

“It's not.”

Yeah. It wasn't.

Kyo reached out her hand to find where Minato was lying beside her, and then rolled over on her side, shuffling closer until she could press her face against his shoulder.

“I don't want to think about it,” she told him, voice faint. “Thank you for being here,” she added, because she was so happy he was here, right now, with her. “Love you, Minato.”

“Wouldn't wanna be anywhere else,” he said back, sounding like he was finally on the edge of sleep.

Kyo slept poorly, despite her best efforts, but at least there weren't any outright nightmares, this time.

When they woke up in the morning, it was to Genma producing an outraged noise when he spotted how close Kyo and Minato had been sleeping, and then tried to push the older boy off the mattress and onto the floor.

“Nee-san is mine! You can sleep with Kisaki!” he declared grumpily, throwing himself over Kyo when he found his attempts to shift Minato unsuccessful.

“I don't belong to anyone other than myself, and you really need to think about how you treat my friends, little brother,” Kyo drawled, rubbing at her face to try and get rid of the gritty feeling clinging to her eyes. “I like Minato, and I like hugging him. I like hugging you, too. Lucky I have two arms, isn't it?” She sent him a dry look.

Genma glowered at her, and then pressed his face into her chest, clinging even tighter.

Kyo heaved a sigh and sent Minato an apologetic look.

The blond merely shrugged and got to his feet.
Time to start the day, she supposed.

-x-x-x-

By the time they met up with Jiraiya-sensei for team training day after their day off, Kyo almost felt entirely back to normal.

Okay, that was a lie, but she was trying.

Still, returning to familiar things was very nice.

“Okay, finish up your cool-down exercises,” Jiraiya instructed them at the end of practise. “We've got a mission,” he declared.

“Already?” Kyo couldn't help but feel dismayed. Just one day in the village? Wasn't that a bit much? It hadn't even gotten that bad during the war. Close, but not quite.

“Yeah, we got back day before yesterday, sensei,” Minato agreed, and even Kisaki was sending the man an unimpressed look.

Jiraiya huffed at all three of them. “Come on, give me some faith here. It's in village!” He threw his hands in the air, exasperated.

“Right.” Kyo snorted, shaking her head to herself, but dutifully fell into step when their sensei began to lead them into the village.

“Are you sure this is a mission?” Minato asked when Jiraiya ended up taking them to the Senju compound.

“Yep.”

And he unceremoniously entered and led the way to a familiar building. A familiar home.

“Alright! I brought you some babysitters!” Jiraiya announced upon entry, which was followed by the cries of first one baby, then two.

“Why the hell do you have to be so damn loud all the time?” Tsunade demanded irritably, striding over to the crib hosting her babies and sending Jiraiya a dirty look while she was at it. She picked up one of her children, and then the other, somehow managing.

Kyo suspected she might be cheating with chakra to make sure the first one stayed attached to her chest while she picked up the second, but she wasn't judging.

Babies were a lot of work, and Tsunade was alone.

As much as you could be alone with a whole clan backing you, but the point remained. She was a single mother.

“Hi, Kyo-chan!” a familiar voice greeted, and then there was a rushing of footsteps heading towards her.

Kyo froze, because she rationally knew what that meant, only she couldn't deal with it right now.

She'd talked to Nawaki about this!

Caught somewhere between alarm and dread, Kyo's limbs locked up, because she didn't want to end
up accidentally hurting anyone, only she needn't have worried.

Before Nawaki could get within reaching-distance, Minato landed a solid kick to the older boy's chest, sending him crashing right into the closest wall.

“Ow,” Nawaki groaned, sending Minato a teary, hurt look. “What was that for?”

Minato offered nothing more than a small, perfectly polite smile back, and Kyo would give him a tight hug, later.

Kisaki eyed Tsunade's brother with narrowed eyes, grumbling out a huffy growl and reluctantly shook out her fur, and then wandered over to a spot of unoccupied floor to lie down.

She kept part of her attention on Nawaki, though.

“We talked about this,” Kyo told him, still feeling somewhat stiff.

“I know, and I thought about what you said,” Nawaki agreed, gingerly picking himself up, straightening out and rubbing a hand over the spot Minato had kicked him with a grimace. “I decided I disagree,” he concluded, cheerful smile back on his face, looking like he hadn't at all just been kicked into a wall.

Kyo stared blankly at him.

What.

She couldn't even remember exactly what it was she had told the boy, but she was pretty sure she hadn't expected this to be his response.

“You disagree,” she echoed blankly, still trying to think of something to say to that.

“Yes. I think you're a really cool person, and that's why I want to be friends. Not because I feel guilty, or whatever,” Nawaki said with a smile, rubbing a hand to the back of his head, looking almost offensively carefree.

Kyo was pretty sure she would have ended up staring mutely at him for much longer, if Jiraiya hadn't intervened.

“Right, I'm gonna have to interrupt you two lovebirds for a bit, because we are actually here for a reason,” he said, placing a hand on Kyo's shoulder and steering her deeper into the room, towards where Tsunade was tending to her kids. “This is a mission,” he reminded them with determined cheer.

Jiraiya was full of crap.

“Come on, Minato,” the man said. “Let me take one of those, Hime.” Jiraiya turned to Tsunade, holding out his hands expectantly towards her.

Tsunade eyed him dubiously a moment, and then carefully passed him who Kyo was pretty sure was her daughter, watching her teammate like a hawk until she was sure he was holding her properly.

At Jiraiya's insistence, Minato hesitantly accepted Shinrin from his mother's secure hands, holding the boy like he was afraid he might fall apart any second.

Kyo was distracted from watching him, though, when Jiraiya all but shoved her at Tsunade.
She sent him an irritated look, because had that really been necessary?

And she was fairly sure she knew what he was doing, but she didn't have to appreciate it.

“Alright, brat. Jiraiya said you had an injury that needed to be looked at,” Tsunade said gruffly, gesturing at her to follow her into one of the back rooms. “Nawaki, keep an eye on Jiraiya and make sure he doesn't drop Kiko or something.”

“Will do!”

“Oi.”

They walked into what looked like Tsunade's bedroom, and should Kyo really be here?

Bedrooms were something of a sensitive matter for shinobi, because no matter how strong you were, everyone was vulnerable when they slept, and it became a problem for a lot of people.

Or so Katsurou-sensei had told her, once.

Bringing people you weren't overly familiar with into the space you slept in wouldn't exactly make that better.

“So,” Tsunade said when she'd closed the door and turned to fix her with an assessing look. “What'd you do to mess yourself up this time?”

Which was just unfair.

“Excuse you, but it's other people that mess me up,” Kyo muttered sourly, but obligingly pulled her shirt off, tossing it aside on the floor with little care.

She wasn't in the best of moods.

Turning to expose her right shoulder, Kyo wordlessly gestured at the bandages still covering the cut the toad -Shima- had healed for her.

Tsunade approached and unceremoniously began to undo the bandages, clearly to get a good look at what she was dealing with.

When she'd laid the healing cut bare, she observed the placement of it shrewdly, eyed the medical tape covering the corresponding cut on the side of her neck, and then got to work.

Not saying a word.

Part of Kyo felt so unimaginably grateful she came close to tears, but she was very sure she didn't want to cry -again- and there were really plenty of other things to focus on.

Like Nawaki and Jiraiya's muffled voices from the other room, squabbling back and forth, Tsunade's chakra in her system, or going over the poison lesson she'd held for Genma yesterday.

He was progressing nicely.

“It's been treated properly,” Tsunade finally said. “You can forego the bandages from here; I healed up the last of it. Let's take a look at that hand of yours while we're already at it,” she decided, and proceeded to do just that, not waiting for Kyo to say anything.

Not that Kyo put up any kind of struggle while the woman removed the bandages covering her left
hand. Which had become something of a regular feature and something she automatically put on when she was getting dressed in the morning.

Tsunade took longer, this time.

Kyo waited patiently, going over a tentative plan for Genma's next lesson. She'd have to bring him with her to get the roots they'd need, so she should probably discuss it with tou-san first.

“Right,” Tsunade said when she finally withdrew her chakra from Kyo's hand. “You should stop using the bandages at this point, build up strength and dexterity without the added support. You still doing the stretching exercises?” she quizzed, fixing Kyo with a look.

“Every morning, when possible,” she answered dutifully.

Tsunade nodded, stepped back from her and crossed her arms over her chest. Giving Kyo an intent look.

“Wanna tell me why Jiraiya was so insistent on this whole meet-up?” she asked, when Kyo bent down to pick up her shirt, pulling it back on.

“No.”

Tsunade huffed, though she sounded more amused than annoyed. “Figures. It's probably stupidly convoluted and idiotic, anyway,” she muttered, fondly exasperated. “I'll swing by the hospital, seeing as you're all babysitting for me anyway, and file the paperwork for this.” And she nodded at Kyo's shoulder. “I could probably do with a few hours to myself,” she added under her breath.

“I'll keep an eye on them,” Kyo said, tugging her shirt down more firmly.

“My kids or your team?” Tsunade smirked at her.

Kyo smiled back and turned to the door.

They left Tsunade's bedroom and rejoined the males, who were still largely where they'd left them.

Jiraiya had relinquished Kiko to her uncle, while Minato had taken a seat on the floor, looking more comfortable that way, and Kyo wondered how often she'd have to tell him the likelihood of him dropping the kid was astronomically small.

“Right,” Tsunade drawled, eyeing them all dubiously. “I'll get going, then. Nawaki, enjoy your day off while it lasts.” Which sounded like a threat.

Without further ado, the woman swept out of her rooms and left them, like she'd said, not so much as looking back.

“Did you do something to upset her?” Minato asked, turning to eye Nawaki curiously.

The boy in question laughed uncomfortably. “Um. Maybe?” And he muttered something about being late and then dropping something she couldn't hear what it was.

Kyo snorted and sat down beside Minato, wordlessly offering to take the baby boy off his hands for him.

Her teammate handed him over with grateful relief.

“Hello, Shinrin,” Kyo greeted with a small smile. The boy stared up at her and brought a hand to his
face, shoving it in his mouth. “You've gotten much bigger since the last time I saw you,” she told the child, taking in his features with idle curiosity.

“Yeah, they're growing like weeds,” Nawaki agreed, plopping himself down, too, rocking Kiko gently in his arms.

Jiraiya surveyed them a second, and then turned towards the door with a shrug. “Have fun, brats,” he told them, and then followed Tsunade's example.

“I thought he said this was a mission,” Minato muttered under his breath, though he didn't sound surprised.

“Jiraiya's full of crap, Minato. Don't take anything non-training related he tells you without a grain of salt,” Kyo drawled.

“Wow, that's harsh,” Nawaki snickered, though he sounded like he agreed.

Kyo shrugged. “Nothing less than what he deserves.”

“It's kinda true,” Minato agreed, face doing something interesting as he stared at the door after Jiraiya, looking long-suffering and mildly embarrassed about the whole thing.

-x-x-x-

Other than training and spending time with her family, Kyo had a personal task to see to, in addition. She'd put it off long enough, and Katsurou-sensei had asked her to do this.

Not directly, perhaps, but Kyo didn't want Kaimaru to get himself killed, either intentionally or not. No matter how stupid and mean he was being.

Kisaki agreed with her, once she'd explained the situation.

But first, she needed to make a quick stop before she could scamper off to ANBU headquarters, while her ninken friend went to spend some time with Senpu and Haru in the Inuzuka compound for a few days.

Kyo eyed the large storage facility she'd visited a few times over the years, hoped old man Kaede was there, or she’d have to postpone this to another day.

She knocked, and waited.

“So you're back again,” the old man grunted when he opened the door, fixing her with a heavy look full of scrutiny before he ushered her inside.

Kyo glanced very briefly at his missing fingers, unable to help herself.

Her left hand tightened into a fist, the lack of bandages somehow making her feel more aware of the scars, and it made the numbness more exacerbated, somehow.

“Gear on this table,” Kaede ordered shortly before he shuffled off in between the towering shelves, having already given her an intent once-over, and this was so far following the script to a T.

It was the same every single time.

Kyo quickly and efficiently put her ANBU uniform and some of her gear on the indicated table,
looking them over carefully.

They'd gotten too tight again.

“Here you go,” the old man said when he came back, putting the new gear on the other table, and then turned to watch her try the body armour on, because that one was still the trickiest.

Clothes were relatively easy.

Kyo carefully tugged the heavy piece of gear in place, and then tried to stretch her arms over her head.

Kaede stood away from the table he’d been leaning against to shuffle up to her.

He reached out to tug experimentally where the armour ended in her back below her neck, and hummed thoughtfully under his breath for a second.

“If it gets too tight over the chest, you come back here right away, even if it's just a month from now. Don't let any of the idiots tell you to just lengthen the shoulder straps.” He eyed her intently. “Leaves plenty of vital spots vulnerable, that way.” And he pressed a finger just below her left armpit, under her arm, meeting her gaze with a pointed look in his eyes.

“Got it,” Kyo said quietly.

Kaede grunted neutrally and went back over to the other table to collect the gear she'd been using and was handing back in. It was still in good condition, but she knew he'd go over it and check nothing needed to either be repaired or otherwise improved.

Kyo pulled off the body armour, stripped out of her clothes and changed into the ANBU uniform the old man had provided her with instead, and then put the armour back on.

It settled much more naturally over the sleeker uniform, compared to her usual mesh-shirt, t-shirt combo.

She should probably look into getting herself some new outfits, probably.

Whatever, that was a problem to contemplate another day.

Kyo got ready quickly after that, sealed away the extra uniforms, put on her Scorpion mask and sent the old man a respectful nod before she turned back towards the door.

“Thanks for the help, Kaede.”

The man grunted again and waved her off, so Kyo left.

ANBU headquarters next; she had someone she needed to track down.

Thankfully, the person she'd been hoping to catch wasn't out of the village, and was relatively easy to find, even. Perks of people having an actual office.

“Gecko,” Kyo said by way of greeting, walking up to the man.

Gecko looked up from the paperwork he was currently looking to be trying to get a handle on, and she was pretty sure he gave her an almost wary once-over.
Yeah, she had boobs, she hoped people would get over it quickly.

She was betting on having a bit of goodwill with the guy after the Kumo kidnapping incident, which might make this whole conversation go smoother.

Or so she hoped.

“What is it?” Gecko asked, and he was still studying her semi-suspiciously.

Kyo tilted her head, studying him right back. What was his deal? “I wanted to ask you something. Have a few minutes?” Because it wasn't like this was incredibly important and couldn't wait, no matter how much she might want to get it over with.

Gecko turned his head to glance down at his paperwork, and then put it down with a sigh.

“What do you want?”

“Do you know what's up with Crow?” Kyo asked, blunt and to the point, because that was effective. Would waste as little time as possible for both of them. “He's apparently getting more and more self-destructive.”

Gecko leaned back in his chair, crossed his arms over his chest and cocked his head thoughtfully.

“Why you wanna know?”

“Cause I may currently be unhappy with him, but that doesn't mean I want him to end up dead. If I have to kick him in the face to make him see sense, then so be it,” Kyo huffed, having to resist the urge to mirror the man and cross her arms over her chest, too. “My shrink asked me not to end our friendship.”

And it was making her mildly uncomfortable being so frank and straightforward, but Gecko was pretty high-ranking, worked closely with Bear a lot, and it was the truth.

Didn't change the fact it felt like she was laying part of herself bare, and they didn't know each other that well.

Gecko stared at her a few seconds longer, and then visibly gave in with a sigh. “Fine, sit down,” he muttered, and then reached down to pull out a drawer in his desk, which looked more complicated than it would have been with a normal desk-drawer.

Kyo suspected seals.

She sat in the chair in front of Gecko’s desk, watching him rummage around for a moment, before he withdrew a single file, folder brown and unremarkable.

He flipped it open and began to skim through the pages quickly and efficiently, one after one.

Kyo waited patiently and didn't speak.

All until Gecko closed it with a quiet 'whuff' noise, too soft to be a proper snap.

“Right,” he said, and put the folder back where he found it, closed the drawer again, and re-activated whatever protections there were. “His team got disbanded last year. All three of his teammates retired from ANBU, for various reasons. He's been provisionally placed on a number of teams after that, but nothing’s worked out so far.”

Kyo took a second to digest that. “Anything else?” she asked, though she hoped not. That sounded
like quite a hefty issue already, and she had no idea what to do with this information.

Gecko eyed her. “Crow's got issues with social interactions.”

“Tell me something I didn't already know,” Kyo muttered under her breath, and got to her feet with a sigh. “Thanks, Gecko, I appreciate it.” She turned to leave.

“Try to leave him in one piece when he comes back from his mission,” Gecko told her, and she was pretty sure that was dry amusement beneath the voice altering seals on his mask.

Kyo snorted and didn't deign that with a verbal response.

“See you around, Gecko,” she said dryly, and left.

She ended up hanging around headquarters for a few hours, trying to find any more information she could on Kaimaru's -or Crow's, really- social life, only to come to the conclusion he pretty much didn't have one.

It was... Kyo didn't know what to think.

“What are you doing?” Hyena asked, finding her sitting on the sofa in one of the communal living rooms close to their rooms.

Kyo's arms were crossed over her chest, and she was frowning at nothing, trying to think. Not that anyone could tell, but she was also pretty sure her body language was enough to keep most people at a distance.

She was irritated.

“Thinking,” she told him shortly.

Hyena slowly tilted his head, and then sank down in the seat beside her, close enough their sides were pressed together.

He mimicked her, crossing his arms over his chest, and then turned to stare at the wall.

Kyo had to suppress an amused snort.

“What about?”

“Crow.”

“Ah.” Hyena hummed a second. “Birdie's not been making friends around here,” he said mildly.

“So I hear,” Kyo drawled, still supremely irritated.

How the hell was she supposed to be able to do anything about this situation? Last time she’d spoken to Kaimaru... yeah, that had been a disaster.

With a heavy sigh, Kyo let her head fall down on Hyena's shoulder.

She knew one thing for sure, though. This time, she was planning this thing; no more stumbling across Kaimaru by accident. No more unexpected confrontations.
There'd be a planned confrontation, next time.

“How’ve you been?” she asked Hyena softly.

“Fine.”

“Really?”

Hyena hesitated, and then snickered softly. “Do you have any more glitter?” he asked her hopefully.

Kyo's lips twitched. “I don't want anyone to actually try to kill you, Hyena,” she told him honestly. “And besides, I used up a lot of it when I decorated Owl's office,” she tacked on breezily.

Hyena snickered again. “He's been in a mood since then, just so you know,” he told her cheerfully.

“Yeah, well,” Kyo muttered, entirely unrepentant. He'd just handed her over to Tsunade without hesitation, and Kyo hadn't appreciated it. And it wasn't like Owl had the advantage of being her friend. Like Hyena. “I'm still a bit annoyed with you, actually, you realise that, right?”

“Yep.”

Kyo huffed. “I could poison you really easily right now,” she informed him blandly. She had needles in her clothes, conveniently close to her hands, and it wasn't like she'd have to even move particularly much to reach him.

Hyena wheezed out a giggle and didn't move away from her even a little. “You'd be nice, right?”

“Yeah,” she agreed softly. “I'd be nice.”

Because if she ever used her needles on Hyena, she'd pick a sedative. One of her nice ones.

Hyena made a pleased sound in the back of his throat and tentatively reached out to pat her knee experimentally.

“I like you, Scorpion.”

“I like you, too, Hyena.”

Two days later, she still hadn't decided on what to do, though she spent most of her waking moments thinking about it, provided she wasn't occupied by other, more important matters.

Kisaki had taken one look at her when she came back from the compound and hadn't left her side since, looking all exasperated with her, which was just rude.

“Okay, Kyo, sit down,” Jiraiya sighed heavily, frowning at her and Kyo blinked back to the present to frown right back at him.

“What is it?”

“You've been particularly distracted since we came back to the village,” her sensei informed her bluntly.

“And you're not sleeping,” Minato chimed in, eyeing her worriedly.
Kyo frowned at him, too. “I sleep,” she argued irritably. And then grudgingly added, “Poorly, but I still sleep!”

Kisaki snorted and sat down beside her.

Tou-san was giving her looks in the mornings now, too, and she really didn't appreciate it. She didn't want to discuss this with him.

“Right,” Jiraiya drawled, looking tired and exasperated. “Have you talked to your grumpy old Yamanaka yet?”

Kyo clenched her teeth and didn't say anything, which was answer enough.

Kisaki slanted her an unreadable look.

“Yeah, thought so,” Jiraiya muttered under his breath. “Change that before you show up for training tomorrow,” he ordered firmly, perfectly serious about it. Kyo opened her mouth to argue, but he interrupted her before she could get out so much as a word. “You almost accidentally poisoned Minato today, Kyo.”

Kyo closed her mouth and scowled down at the ground.

She knew that, damn it. And it hadn't been on purpose, she just- he'd startled her.

There were things on her mind, and she wasn't sleeping well, and she didn't want to talk about it.

“Sorry, Minato,” she said.

“Yeah,” the boy said, and he wasn't angry. Just worried. “Just. I don't really want to end up in the hospital.”


Jiraiya snorted. “That sure is one way to look at it,” he drawled. “You've got until tomorrow, Kyo,” he reminded her. “And then I'll carry you to Psych myself, yeah?”

“Fine,” she huffed.

So she apparently needed to find Katsurou-sensei, now.

Kyo's frown turned more thoughtful, as she considered the issue. She'd check his house first, she decided.

“See you two tomorrow,” she told her two teammates, got to her feet and then wandered off to get started, Kisaki a steady presence beside her.

“I should have waited with the visit,” Kisaki huffed quietly, jogging along beside her.

“Senpu and Haru are also pack,” Kyo told the dog. “That doesn't change. And besides, you wanted Senpu to give you a check-up, right? That's important.”

“You're important, too,” Kisaki countered.

Kyo sighed, because she knew she wasn't exactly great company as she was right now, but she also
knew Kisaki wouldn't want to hear any argument relating to that fact. So she remained silent.

They checked Katsurou's house, which was dark, empty, and didn't look like he'd been back in a while.

Kyo frowned and exchanged a look with the dog tailing her.

“Do you think he could be back anyway? It was a while since he got his mission,” she couldn't help but muse.

“Ask Inoichi?” Kisaki suggested, though she didn't look sure about it.

Kyo hesitated.

Inoichi was really good at spotting when she wasn't... doing so well, so she'd rather avoid him, really. And besides. She didn't know if he was in the village, either.

She racked her brain for a second.

“Do you think they'd tell me if we went to Intel?” she asked dubiously.

Kyo didn't particularly want to go back there, either, to be perfectly honest. Didn't have particularly good memories from the time she'd spent prepping for the Kiri mission.

“You said they weren't very nice at Intel,” Kisaki pointed out, ears folding ever so slightly with displeasure.

Wait, Katsurou-sensei wasn't just a Yamanaka, but he was a Yamanaka Jounin, that meant the Jounin Commander should keep some kind of track of his whereabouts, right?

And unlike the Intel people, Kyo actually liked Takeshi.

She nodded to herself.

Besides, she was a Jounin, too, so he couldn't really complain about her wanting to talk to him, right?

...that meant she had to go to the Jounin Station, didn't it? Or should she try the Hokage tower, first? Hm.

Kyo sighed and ran a hand over Kisaki's head. “Come on, I think I have an idea,” she said, and walked back to the door.

She'd lock up sensei's house again and then get going. All in all, it shouldn't take that long.

Fifteen minutes later, Kyo and Kisaki walked into the Jounin Station, for the first time in their careers, having decided to go there first.

They attracted quite a few looks, but Kyo ignored that, and Kisaki didn't care, so long as people left them alone.

The question was just whether or not Takeshi was actually here, and who could she ask about it?

Some tentative exploration later, they walked into what looked like a break room, with several sofas placed around the room, a kitchenette in one corner, hosting several coffee machines. It also hosted a familiar face.
“Hirata,” Kyo said, getting the man's attention with a sense of intense relief.

The man looked up from the scroll he was reading to look her over, glance at Kisaki, and then crack a wry smirk.

“You lost, pipsqueak?” he asked, leaning back in the sofa he was sitting on, watching her approach.

Kyo shook her head. “Do you know if sensei's in the village?” she asked him, because if Hirata knew, then that'd be great.

“Katsurou? No idea,” he drawled, still eyeing her interestingly. “Heard you got promoted. 'Bout time you showed your face in this place. Want a tour?”

“Maybe another time? Is Takeshi here? He'd know if sensei's in the village, right?” Kyo pressed, determined not to get side-tracked or distracted.

The look in Hirata's eyes didn't change, but a slow, almost worryingly amused smile stretched his lips until he was wearing a rather unhinged grin.

“Come on, I'll show you the way, pipsqueak,” he said, getting to his feet in one smooth motion and gestured at her to follow.

Kyo fell into step without pause, just feeling relieved to know she was on the right track. Kisaki was still right beside her, and she was already familiar with Hirata.

Sort of.

They two of them had met before, at least. In a way.

Did it count when it happened during the Uzushio mission?

Kyo didn't know, so she resolved to ask Kisaki later if she wanted a proper introduction to the man. When they weren't worrying about this.

Kyo conveniently avoided thinking about what this really was about, too, but that was less important than finding Katsurou-sensei.

He'd help her deal with everything else.


“Hirata,” Takeshi returned distractedly, and he wasn't alone.

The other man looked like an Aburame, though Kyo couldn't claim to have ever seen him before and wasn't familiar with him.

“Hello, Kyo,” Takeshi greeted mildly when he turned to look at her. “Unusual to see you here, though you're more than entitled to make use of the facilities we have here.”

Kyo mentally paused.

Was that his way of telling her he'd been expecting her to come around the Jounin Station sooner?

“Do you know if Katsurou-sensei is in the village?” she asked him, rather than try to figure out anything else.
She just wanted to be done.

Takeshi paused, and then exchanged a look with the Aburame, who walked over to one of the filing cabinets standing along the back wall.

He came back a moment later with a paper in hand.

From the glimpse she got of it, it looked like some sort of list, with plenty of scribbles on it.

Takeshi took it, looked the list over, and then turned back to Kyo.

“Unfortunately not. Anything specific you needed?”

“Not really. Thanks for telling me,” Kyo muttered, distantly realising she'd buried her fingers in Kisaki's fur and was holding on far too tightly.

Shit.

Sensei wasn't here, and Jiraiya had said... Crap. She'd have to go to Psych.

Hirata slapped her on the back and then grabbed a fistful of her shirt in the same place -and her bra, what the hell- and picked her up off her feet.

“Hirata, will you stop it!” she hissed at him, effectively snapped out of her thoughts.

Hirata just laughed, carrying back out the way they'd come until he could toss her onto the sofa he'd evidently claimed for himself.

He took a seat, and Kyo huffed irritably as she tugged her clothes back into order.

At least he hadn't thrown her at anyone.

“You look like shit, kid,” Hirata told her, and he'd picked up his scroll again. “Your mutt looks tense, too.”

“When will you get it into your head that I don't appreciate being manhandled?” Kyo huffed at him, rather than acknowledge his observations, but she didn't get up to leave.

Sensei wasn't here, so there wasn't anything for her to do right now.

Could go home, she supposed, but she was tired and going home meant she'd have to talk to people. To tou-san.

“You owe me for all the times you've thrown me at people,” Kyo said, scowling pre-emptively at Hirata, who smirked back. “So just sit there and be my pillow,” she muttered, sat up and moved until she could lean her shoulder against his arm, made herself comfortable, and then went boneless.

Sitting like this, it was almost like she was out on a mission, and Hirata was strong. He'd warn her if there'd be any problems, and he'd keep them all safe.

Kisaki climbed up on the sofa next to her and lied down with her head in her lap, growling a half-hearted warning at Hirata while she was at it.

Kyo was asleep before the dog had fully settled.

-x-x-x-
Kyo went to meet up with her team the next morning with a lump of dread in her gut, but at least she felt more well-rested than she had the day before.

Hirata had been kind enough to remain in his seat for a few hours, until Kyo had woken up with a start when a small group of people had walked into the room, talking between themselves.

So she'd muttered a thanks at Hirata and left for home, Kisaki like a large, white shadow beside her.

It still felt weird, sometimes, when she stopped to think about it, to have Kisaki follow her around unconditionally all the time, but. It was also mostly nice.

“It's not so bad,” Kisaki said, nudging her to go the last bit and finally wander onto their training field.

Kyo sighed, but didn't try to argue.

“Morning,” she greeted blandly, seeing as both Minato and Jiraiya were already there.

“Well? Did you talk to your shrink?” Jiraiya asked, rather than offer a greeting back, which, rude.

“...no. He's not in the village, so it was a bit hard to arrange,” Kyo drawled, and why was she acting like this?

Jiraiya eyed her seriously a moment, and then nodded. “Let's go to Psych, then,” he said, and made as if to march off with her right away.

Kyo dodged around him. “Training first. Please.” She wasn't sure what to do with herself if she wouldn't get to work off some of this anxious energy first, and she really didn't want to sit down with some unfamiliar ninja therapist for a deeply unsettling conversation already; there was no need to make this even harder on herself.

Jiraiya eyed her pensively a moment, before he gave in with a sigh. “Fine, but if you disappear on us, I'll notify the shrinks, we clear?”

Kyo was not going to pout at the man, though she came close.

She didn't even know if she felt insulted or disappointed, because it wasn't like she had planned to do that! But... the possibility to potentially run off and hide somewhere was a nice thought.

The look on Jiraiya's face told her he wasn't overly impressed, but he also looked like he could sort of understand. Which was nice.

He'd actually been much more sensible about this whole thing than she might have expected.

She wondered if something similar had ever happened with Tsunade.
Which might be why he'd tried to force the two together for a talk. Again.

The hours spent training passed far too quickly, and by the time Jiraiya wrapped things up, Kyo bit back the urge to ask about a fuuinjutsu lecture, because she was just stalling now, and all four of them knew it.

“Kyo?” Jiraiya fixed her with a look.

“Fine, I'll go,” she sighed, slumping in defeat.

Jiraiya nodded. “Need me to walk you there?”

“No.”

“Just know that I will find out if you put it off,” the man said, dropping a hand on her shoulder for a second, patting it comfortingly. “It's for your own good.”

She knew that. Didn't make it any more appealing, though.

Jiraiya eyed her thoughtfully another second, turned to toss Minato a look and then turned away to leave with a sigh.

Minato dithered nearby, not looking at her, but not leaving either and Kyo exchanged a look with Kisaki and then turned to the boy, feeling reluctantly amused.

“Would you mind walking with me to Psych, Minato?” she asked.

Minato perked up and turned to her with a relieved smile. “You wouldn't mind?”

Kyo thought it over a moment, and then shook her head. “Do you like your shrink? What was her name, again?”

“Yamanaka Chie,” Minato said, falling into step beside her when Kyo slowly began to walk in the direction of the village. “She's good, at least I think so. Why?”

“Because I only ever talk to sensei,” Kyo muttered. She didn't want to talk to some stranger, but she could ask if Yamanaka Chie was there, which might make it a bit less painful.

Again, time ran away from her and they reached their destination much quicker than Kyo would have preferred.

Better just get it over with.

They walked inside and Kyo approached the reception desk.

“I'm here for a drop-in session,” she told the man working it bluntly.

This part of Psych was different from the smaller ward she'd visited Hyena in, and there were several people sitting at the ready, similar to the mission assignment room, actually, but for different purposes.

There were always people available for drop-in sessions, on top of the planned sessions, and then there was always plenty of paperwork to go around.

“Right. Name?” the man she'd approached asked, looking her over with professional interest, writing her name and registration number down when she told him. “Akio's free, so you can go off with
him," he said, pointing at a teenager, possibly eighteen? Sitting further down the room. Kyo took one look at him and said, “No.”

She may look like a Genin, but she wasn't one, and if he really had made that assumption, then she severely doubted 'Akio' had the clearance to talk about most of her issues with her. Or maybe he'd pegged her as a Chuunin? Kyo didn't know.

“No?” the guy questioned, watching her dryly.

“I'd like to request Yamanaka Chie,” Kyo told him firmly. “If she's not here, then I'll come back another time.”

The Psych ninja eyed her a second longer, and then went to check one of the filing cabinets with a shrug.

“She's here, but you'll have to wait a while. She's busy.”

“That's fine,” Kyo said, and then turned and walked over to the small but cosy waiting area. Taking a seat.

Minato sat down next to her and slanted her a look out of the corner of his eye. “Are you sure it's okay to do that?”

Kyo huffed. “I'm not gonna talk to a Psych apprentice used to dealing with unproblematic Chuunin,” she told him firmly. She'd also much rather speak to a woman, but that was beside the point.

They had to wait a little over half an hour, before Minato nudged her and nodded at the Yamanaka woman that came walking into the room.

Kyo paused her steady petting of Kisaki's head -she'd been scratching behind her ears for a while, and the dog had all but placed her head in her lap- to send the woman a look.

Yamanaka Chie spoke with one of the shinobi manning the desk, accepted a clipboard and then wandered over to them.

“Shiranui Kyo?” she asked, gazing landing on Kyo with a small, professional smile.

Standing to her feet, Kyo ran her fingers through Kisaki's fur one last time, and then followed the woman when she led them away.

Minato remained sitting in the chair he'd been occupying for the better part of the last hour, watching them leave.

Yamanaka Chie took them to a very simple, modestly sized room, where the only furniture was a table and two chairs.

The walls were bare and there weren't any windows.

Kyo buried her fingers in Kisaki's fur and eyed the table with distaste.

This already felt incredibly awkward, and the professional setting was making her feel worse.
“Any problem?” Chie asked her evenly, eyeing Kyo's face with close attention.

“...can we sit on the floor?” Kyo asked in an uncomfortable mutter.

Chie paused, and then inclined her head.

Kyo waited for Kisaki to lie down, and then sat down close to the dog, using her as a physical barrier between herself and the unfamiliar Yamanaka.

Which was definitely something the woman noticed.

Chie sat down cross legged in front of them, held the clipboard in front of her and slipped a pencil from one of her pockets.

“Let's go over a few questions to start with, if that's alright with you,” she began, and Kyo nodded. “Please repeat your name and registration number for me, as well as your age.”

The woman wrote it down in her papers as Kyo spoke.

“Your rank?”

“Jounin.”

She wrote that down as well.

“And who is your regular Psych contact? Seeing as you came in for a drop-in session, I'm assuming they were unavailable.”

“Yamanaka Katsurou,” Kyo said, watching the woman closely, and caught it when she paused for a fraction of a second, before writing that down, too.

“Very well,” Chie said when she was done. “Is there a specific topic you'd like to discuss today, Shiranui-san?”

Kyo's gaze dropped to stare down at where she was carding her fingers through Kisaki's fur with a frown.

“Yes,” Kisaki said, answering for her.

Kyo huffed and tugged half-heartedly on a small handful of the white hairs between her fingers.

Chie eyed the both of them for a second, and then gave a slow nod to herself. “How many years have you been a shinobi, Shiranui-san?” she asked, not commenting on the previous subject matter.

Kyo stared blankly at her for a second, and then dropped her gaze back to Kisaki. “Six years.”

Half her life. Damn.

“You graduated when you were six. That's very young,” Chie said evenly, the scratching of her pencil against paper a steady background sound. “Tell me about your team.”

“The first one or the one I have now?” Kyo couldn't help but ask wryly. Chie just stared expectantly at her, waiting patiently. “My first teammates died when I was eight.” She was silent a second. “They were as old then as I am now,” she mused sadly.

She'd finally caught up, and from here on out, she'd pass them by and leave them behind. They'd
forever be younger than her, the gap steadily widening.

Chie waited patiently, neither pressing her nor changing the subject.

“Maki was civilianborn. Taku an Inuzuka.” Which should be obvious, really. “They fought a lot, but they were the first friends I ever made and I loved them.” Kyo took a deep breath. This wasn't what she was here to talk about. “What sort of clearance do you have?” she asked.

“Enough to access your file; I checked the moment I was notified you wished to speak with me.”

There was a question in there, and Kyo contemplated whether or not she wanted to answer it, but... better than talking about other things.

“You're Minato's shrink. I asked sensei about you back when he got promoted, and sensei said you were competent and good at your job,” Kyo said matter of factly. “If I have to talk to anyone other than sensei.” She shrugged.

Chie blinked, digesting that, but didn't otherwise react.

She did write down a few lines in her notes, though.

“And the reason for today's topic? Unless there's something else you'd like to add first?”

Kyo scowled, and turned her head to meet Kisaki's gaze, which was easier than looking at Chie. “People have been mistaking me for a boy pretty much my entire life,” she said, which sounded like a random subject change. “There was an incident during the last mission we went on.”

She probably wasn't making much sense.

Kisaki sighed quietly and there was a question in her eyes.

Kyo considered it briefly, and then inclined her head.

“One of the enemies grabbed Kyo,” the dog said, turning to stare at Chie, who outwardly wasn't fazed by their double act. “He tried to force a mating.”

“I see,” Chie said calmly. “Tell me about the mission.”

Kyo took a deep breath. She could do that.

“We were running up to Ishi for reconnaissance, and it brought us through Ame,” Kyo began curtly, voice tight.

It was easier if she treated it like a mission report.

She recounted the mission quickly and succinctly, sticking to the bare facts.

Chie hummed neutrally, still writing calmly in her papers. “And the reason you're here, despite an obvious reluctance?”

“I can't sleep,” Kyo admitted sourly. “Katsurou-sensei isn't in the village and Jiraiya-sensei made it clear I didn't have a choice but to talk to someone.”

Chie nodded thoughtfully. “So let's talk about the reason you can't sleep, to start with,” she continued evenly. “The Ame nin that attacked you and the attempted rape is very clearly the root of a lot of your current feelings.”
Kisaki made a low noise deep in her chest and sent Kyo a look.

Kyo placed her hands to Kisaki’s cheeks, cradling her face and staring into her eyes. “I’m really angry,” she said, pronouncing her words carefully.

“Why?”

“Because I couldn’t do anything.” Only that wasn’t true. Minato had been right; there were things she could have done. Tried to do. Whatever. It had also been jarring to have stealth used against her like that.

Kyo was good at stealth, knew a lot about what you could do with it, how to use it to get the drop on people that were stronger than you, yet she hadn’t expected for those same techniques to be used on her.

Which was all kinds of stupid.

She was supposed to be a Jounin, right? What a joke.

“Couldn’t do anything or was unable to do anything?” Chie asked, when it became clear Kyo wasn’t adding anything further without prompting.

“Is there a difference?”

“There is,” the woman said firmly. “You think you’re the first shinobi that’s frozen in the field? There are certain things no amount of training can ever prepare you for, and from what you’ve told me, you dealt with this better than you could have done.” Chie paused, eyeing her intently and making sure she was listening. “An attack like that is different from an attempt on your life, and you need to give yourself the chance to learn to deal with it, the same as with first kill and first real battle.” Chie glanced down on her clipboard, before she fixed her with another look. “The likelihood that it will happen again is sadly high, but there’s a steep learning curve involved and you will have support.”

Kyo didn’t move for a long minute, thinking nothing in particular.

Trying to digest.

It wasn’t really working.

“One of the hardest lessons we as shinobi ever have to learn, Shiranui-san, is that no matter how strong we get, there will always be moments when we need help,” Chie told her, putting her clipboard aside on the floor beside her, leaning forward slightly to fix her with a look. “I think we'll wrap things up here for today. I'll give you a few breathing techniques to try to help you fall asleep more easily. Take two days to think about what we've talked about, and then come back. Make an appointment with the front desk for a time that suits you on your way out and I'll arrange my schedule to fit you in. Does that sound acceptable?”

Kyo managed a stiff nod.

They were done? Already?

Chie's lips stretched in a small, approving smile. “Excellent,” she said and walked her through a small handful of breathing exercises to do while she was lying in bed at night. “Will you find your way back to the waiting room on your own, or would you like me to accompany you?”

“We're fine,” Kisaki huffed, getting to her feet first, shaking out her fur and sending Kyo a look.
“Come on, Minato’s probably waiting. Let’s go home.”

“Okay,” Kyo said softly, standing up and wandering off, Kisaki a steady, comforting presence beside her.

She had a lot to think about, but right now, Minato was waiting and then she and Kisaki could go home, just like the ninjen had said.

-x-x-x-

Kyo would be having therapy sessions with Chie for a while, but at least the woman was agreeable.

Their second session hadn’t been much different from their first one, and it had been more Chie talking, with Kyo just adding a sentence or two every now and then, answering the occasional question, but it sure gave her a lot to think about.

She missed Katsurou-sensei.

Which prompted Kyo to swing by the Hokage tower one afternoon to ask Toge if he had any idea when Katsurou was slated to come back to the village, and she’d been well aware it was a long shot, but she was still disappointed when the man told her he didn’t know.

“Guess we’ll just have to wait,” Kisaki huffed on the way back down to the entrance again.

“I guess,” Kyo agreed blandly.

Didn't mean it changed how she felt about it.

They walked in silence for a few minutes, before Kisaki paused.

Kyo sent her a questioning look, only to see Kisaki staring fixedly at something off to the side. Kyo turned to follow her gaze and paused, as well.

“What is he doing?” the ninjen finally asked.

“Being an idiot,” Kyo told her, unable to look away from where Inoichi was very clearly flirting blatantly with one of the paper-pushing ninjas. Yeah, the kunoichi looked like she was enjoying the attention, possibly even reciprocated whatever feelings were prompting that behaviour, but that didn't mean she had any desire whatsoever to bear witness to it.

Kyo was prepared to pretend she'd seen nothing and walk away when she spotted Chouza sitting in the break room, within sight, parked at a table and eating what looked like lunch.

Was a bit early for lunch, but that had never stopped an Akimichi that she knew of.

Changing her mind, Kyo walked over to the boy and took a seat beside him at the table.

“Hi, Chouza. Are you aware Inoichi is making a complete fool of himself in the corridor outside?”

“Talking to Tsubame, yeah. He's been coming by almost every day,” Chouza returned cheerfully, offering her one of his sandwiches.

“Thanks,” Kyo said accepting the gift, broke off half of it to give to Kisaki, who'd sat down beside her, and then bit into the other half herself.

“He claims he's in love, you know,” Chouza revealed with an amused look in his eyes. “But he said
“Yeah, I get the point,” Kyo interrupted him with a snort. “At least it looks like they're having fun?”

Chouza laughed softly. “If you ask me, Tsubame's superior will give Inoichi a stern talking to about waylaying his subordinate, soon.”

Yeah, Kyo was pretty sure Tsubame had been holding a stack of files in her arms.

She leaned back in her chair with a soft sigh. “How're you doing?” she asked.

“Busy. Tou-chan's been handing off part of the clan head duties to me lately, but it's interesting.” Chouza shrugged. “You?”

“Fine,” Kyo lied easily, absently reaching out to smooth down the fur on Kisaki's head. “We should try to fit in some joint training soon again, if you think you can manage?”

“Can't see why not,” Chouza agreed, slanting her with a look. “Inoichi told me you've been making new friends.”

And he was absolutely teasing her, which gave an inkling as to what subject he was referring to.

Kyo stuck out her tongue and blew him a half-hearted raspberry. “Don't even start. I'm sure Jiraiya's already pulled every joke and 'congratulatory wish' you'll be able to think of.” She rolled her eyes. “It's not like I know why Nawaki is so insistent to be friends, anyway.”

“He's very friendly.” Chouza grinned.

“Too friendly,” Kyo muttered, but couldn't help but smile back, no matter how wry and lopsided the expression was. “Thanks for the sandwich, Chouza. Tell Shikaku hi from me, yeah?”

“Not Inoichi?”

“The opportunity passed him by. Tell him he needs to work on his situational awareness. I need to go.”

“Nice seeing you again, Kyo,” Chouza told her with a fond smile.

“Yeah, you, too.”

Kyo had an irritating Uchiha to track down, though, so she got up and left, silently wondering how to start this conversation with Kisaki, because she wasn't sure it would be a good idea to bring the ninken with her.

She'd checked in with Gecko again and Kaimaru was finally back in the village, so she could have that damn conversation with him.

Kyo still wasn't sure this was a good idea, but at least she felt far more prepared, this time.

“I'm not sure I like this,” Kisaki told her, and if her face had been capable of it, Kyo was certain she would have been scowling heavily.

“Yeah, well,” Kyo muttered. “I'm not sure I like it, either, but I don't want him to end up dead. I still like him.”
"He hurt you."
Kisaki's ears flattened.

"Yeah," Kyo agreed, sending the dog a look.

Kaimaru had hurt her, both physically and emotionally, but she cared more about the latter, if she was honest, and she was frankly angry and disappointed in him, but... she still thought of him as a friend.

For better or worse.

She was giving him one last chance with this, and she guessed they'd just have to see where it got them.

If they ended up trying to beat the shit out of each other for a while, then that was something she was fully prepared for.

"Next time you go see him, I will come," Kisaki decided.

"I'm not sure this will actually work, Kisaki," Kyo pointed out with a sigh. There might not be a next time, for all she knew.

"I know," the dog growled, baring her teeth a glimpse, eyes sharp.

Right. Kyo made a note to herself to make sure Kisaki wouldn't maul the Uchiha no matter how this conversation went, because despite everything else, he was still Ryota's nephew and she didn't want the man to be sad.

"Just. Let me do this on my own? Please?"

"Fine," Kisaki bit out, displeased and rather growly, fixing her with an unhappy glower while she was at it.

When Kyo was ready, Kisaki stalked over to flop down on the floor in the living room, demonstratively facing away from her and radiating silent disapproval.

"See you later, Kisaki. Thank you, I love you," she said, pausing in front of the door.

Kisaki grumbled wordlessly under her breath, ears flicking irritably. “Love you, too,” she bit out sullenly.

Nodding to herself, Kyo left.

Time to hunt down one spectacularly ill-tempered Uchiha, she supposed.

Which meant the Uchiha compound was the obvious place to start looking.

Kyo was allowed entrance with minimal fuss, and she made her way to Kaimaru's house. Kaimaru's parents' house, really.

It didn't yield any results, though, seeing as no one seemed to be home.

Kyo frowned at nothing for a moment, trying to think.

Would she really have to scour the village for Kaimaru? She doubted he'd be in ANBU headquarters so soon after he'd gotten back home.
Did Kaimaru do any work for the Military Police?

It took Kyo close to two hours to finally track the guy down and while she'd known this wouldn't exactly be easy, she'd sort of counted on the difficult part starting after she'd met up with him.

When she finally laid eyes on Kaimaru, he was slowly wandering down a street with what looked like two of his relatives.

She didn't know what they were doing, if they'd made any plans or something, but she stalked up to Kaimaru with a thin, impatient smile nonetheless.

“Hello, Kaimaru,” she bit out a short, irritable greeting, even though she rationally knew it wasn't his fault he'd been so difficult to find. Kyo hadn't exactly let him know she wanted to talk.

Kaimaru slanted her with a disinterested glance, and for a second, there wasn't a trace of recognition in his eyes.

She could see the moment he made the connection, though, and he froze for a fraction of a second.

“What the fuck?” he asked blankly, underwhelmingly eloquent.

“You and I are overdue a talk.”

“Fuck no,” Kaimaru told her, not even pausing to think about it and made as if to turn away.

Kyo reached out to grab the front of his shirt, pulling him towards her a little, just enough to make her point. “I know where you live, Kaimaru. If you won't talk to me, I'll be forced to get your attention through other means,” she informed him mildly, and her lips were still stretched in an insincere smile.

Kaimaru's eyes narrowed on her, and his scowl deepened.

“Hey, you don't want to talk to him, he's an ass,” one of Kaimaru's companions said, interrupting her staring contest with Kaimaru long enough for her to throw him a glance.

He had lighter hair than most Uchiha, but the classical facial features and dark eyes.

Kyo had no idea who he was and hadn't so much as seen him before, as far as she was aware. Why was he talking to her?

“Yeah, if you want a good time, you're far more likely to find it with us,” the other one agreed, smiling charmingly at her.

Kyo stared blankly at them.

What.

“Fuck off, both of you,” Kaimaru growled aggressively, sending the two teenagers an irritable glare, looking like he wanted to punch them in the face.

Kyo decided to... pretend she hadn't heard anything.

“Seriously, this guy is very unpleasant; you don't want to talk to him,” the first one pressed, aiming a smile at Kyo she frankly found unsettling.

Right. Ignoring the two idiots.

Kaimaru grabbed her hand and yanked it away from his shirt. “You need to learn to take a fucking hint,” he hissed at her.

“So do you,” Kyo hissed right back. “You come with me, or I poison you. Your choice.”

“Fine,” he bit out and then watched her with hostile eyes. “Where the fuck do you want to go?”

Kyo gestured at him to follow and led the way to the training ground she'd picked out for the occasion. Suitably out of the way and secluded.

Part of her was surprised he actually went along and followed.

“Well?” Kaimaru demanded darkly when Kyo stopped and then just stood there.

She suppressed a grimace, because even though she'd planned for this confrontation, now that she was actually here... she had no idea where to start.

“You said you wanted to talk, so talk.” Kaimaru scowled at her. “Or I'll leave. This is just like you; used to have people pandering to your every fucking whim like-”

“Will you shut up!” Kyo snapped at him, angry with herself, because why couldn't she just- She took a deep breath, and then fixed him with a frown. “Can you just stop it with the hostile act?”

Which was clearly the wrong things to say.

“You think this is an act?” Kaimaru sneered, staring at her with disdain.

No, not entirely, but whatever.

It hurt, but she'd been prepared for that.

“Whatever it is, it's self-destructive and dangerous,” Kyo told him firmly. “Have you ever had to bury your friends, Kaimaru?”

“Fuck you, we're not friends.” Kaimaru retorted, not so much as blinking, or pausing to consider her words. “Just because you use that word like it's magical, doesn't mean it means anything other than the fact you're a delusional child who should stay out of my fucking business!”

“You should tell that to your shrink,” slipped out of her before she could stop herself, because keeping hold of her composure was getting progressively more difficult.

Kaimaru stared at her, eyes darkening further with what looked like fury. “What?” he asked flatly.

“You heard me,” Kyo told him plainly, sounding far more blasé than she was feeling. “You're apparently doing enough damage to yourself your shrink reached out to my shrink. I am really unhappy with you, but I don’t want to see you dead.”

Kaimaru stared at her, not moving other than to visibly clench his teeth.

Seeing as he wasn't about to say anything, and Kyo was on a roll, she continued.

“I spent the longest time trying to figure out what the hell I did to you, what I- Why you were angry with me, why you were pushing me away, and I couldn't figure it out.” She paused, taking another
deep breath. “Then my shrink asked if I was willing to stand back and watch you kill yourself and the answer is no, Kaimaru. For some mysterious reason, I like you! Even though you make it difficult, and you hurt me in ways you probably don’t even understand, and I am so angry with you!”

Shit, she was almost crying, and she didn't want to.

“You have no idea what you're talking about,” Kaimaru told her blankly.

“I talked to Gecko,” Kyo snapped. “Your team was disbanded over a year ago. Why the hell didn't you tell me? I asked!” She remembered that conversation!

“'Cause I didn't want to tell you! Not everything is about you, Shiranui!” Kaimaru snapped and jerked minutely, as if part of him wanted to fall into attack. “What the hell is wrong with you?” he demanded, and there was a mean look in his eyes, like he wanted to tear her apart. “Why won't you just-!”

And he finally gave into the urge to turn things physical, but Kyo had been expecting it this time.

Kyo felt like they were right back to their last interaction. It wasn't a spar, but a fight, and Kaimaru was aiming for all of the soft, tender, painful spots, but at least he hadn't grabbed a kunai this time, which must be some sort of improvement.

Kyo was busy enough dodging to think much, but it felt almost like a relief.

Time spent dodging Kaimaru's increasingly violent attacks was time she didn't have to talk about her feelings.

“Why do you keep butting into this shit? It's got nothing to do with you!” he forced out through gritted teeth, aiming a strike with the heel of his hand at her face that would break her nose if it struck home.

Kyo twisted aside and jabbed her elbow into Kaimaru's upper arm and leapt away from him before his follow-up kick could land.

“Because I care about you, you idiot!” Kyo growled back, angling her body to make the knee to her stomach less of a problem, and redirected the elbow headed for her face with a forearm.

Why the hell did he keep aiming at her face!?

Kaimaru tried to kick her in the head and Kyo leapt over the limb, tucking into a roll before she sprang back to her feet.

“Like hell you do,” Kaimaru hissed angrily.

“Don't try to tell me how I feel!” Kyo all but screamed at him, going on the offensive before she could consider if that was really a good idea.

Things... got out of hand, for a little while.

Eventually, they had to take a break, though, to catch their breaths if nothing else.

“You're a fucking pest,” Kaimaru wheezed at her, glaring like he wanted to strangle her. “What do I have to do to make you go away?”

“Talk about your feelings,” Kyo sneered at him. It was a challenge and a dare, and both of them knew she wasn't expecting him to do it.
Kaimaru growled wordlessly, gritted his teeth and reached back to pull his tanto.

Fuck.

They were doing this, huh.

Rather than waste her breath on words, Kyo pulled two kunai and met him head on.

The sound of metal on metal was sharp and painful, grating on her ears.

“Why can’t you just talk to me?” Kyo huffed at him, and tried to kick him in the stomach, more to widen the distance between them than to cause him any substantial pain.

“You don’t listen,” Kaimaru snapped back.

“I’d listen if you only spoke the fucking truth!” Kyo spat back, throwing one of her kunai at his leg, not so much as blinking when he shifted out of the way. “But you keep lying to me,” she gritted out, drawing another kunai.

Kaimaru bared his teeth at her, and it sure wasn’t in a smile, and then went after her again with a vengeance.

She was gonna be in so much pain tomorrow.

Eventually, they had to stop, though, because neither of them wanted to actually injure the other, and Kaimaru was very carefully in full control of himself the entire time.

No Sharingan, this time.

Kyo lay sprawled on her back, staring up at the sky. Feeling her chest expand as much as it could in an attempt to supply her with oxygen, even though it didn’t feel like enough. Her throat felt raw.

Kaimaru was in a similar position a small distance away.

“Why won’t you go away?” he asked quietly, the moment he had the breath for it.

“Because I’m your friend, stupid.”

“Fucking ridiculous,” Kaimaru muttered, though it didn’t hide the way his voice shook. “I don’t have any fucking friends.”

“Yeah, you do.”

“Shut up.”

“I won’t,” Kyo said plainly.

“Seriously. Shut up. Please.”

Kyo pushed herself into a seat, grimacing at the feel of the numerous new bruises she had, as well as the occasional shallow cut, but she wanted to get a look at Kaimaru’s face.

There were no ANBU masks, this time.

“I’m not gonna shut up, Kaimaru,” she told him seriously.

Kaimaru’s eyes were closed, and at her words, a grimace twisted his features. “Why?” he asked,
“Because I like you,” she repeated again.

“No one fucking likes me,” he snapped back, clumsily throwing his tanto at her without opening his eyes.

Kyo shifted a foot to stop the weapon's progress, though it skidded across the ground the last short bit and wasn't any kind of threat.

It was a miracle they could both still move at all.

“Well, I do,” Kyo huffed at him. “Why is that so hard to believe? Have I ever acted like I don't?” Because that strangely hurt. Why did he think she'd spent so much time with him if not because she enjoyed his company?

Kaimaru did nothing but breathe for a few heartbeats. “I told you. No one likes me. I'm not stupid.”

“I know you're not stupid,” Kyo muttered, frowning at him.

“Yeah, well, you clearly are,” Kaimaru huffed, though she could tell it was half-hearted at best.

“Why wouldn't people like you?” Kyo asked.

Kaimaru opened his eyes to fix her with an incredulous look, and... yeah, well. “People just fucking don't, okay,” he snapped. “You gonna force me to make a damn list?”

Kyo grimaced at him. “You're doing it again. Stop trying to fight with me.”

“You're the one picking fights all the damn time. Shit. Why the hell are you so fucking abnormal,” Kaimaru muttered under his breath, and then used his hands to push himself into a seat, much like Kyo had done. “What the fuck is there even to like? This is what you get.” And he fixed her with dark eyes, glaring at her and daring her to find even one thing.

“It's really fun to bicker with you. You're intelligent and resourceful. Teasing you is great, and you let me needle you into spars whenever I want, which is also something I love doing with you. You're a fantastic sparring partner. You're surprisingly insightful into a lot of things, so long as you parse through your potty mouth, and you treat me like we're equals. Have done so almost since the start.”

Kaimaru stared at her, face wiped blank.

There wasn't even a frown pulling on his eyebrows. No expression at all, and it was almost eerie.

A long moment passed, where they did nothing but stare at each other, until Kaimaru's face twitched oddly.

He raised a hand to cover his eyes, mouth twisting with a soft, bitter laugh that sounded more like-

“Why-” Kaimaru cleared his throat. “Why the fuck are you- Out of all the people, you're the only one. What's wrong with you? No one wants me around. I've been kicked off so many teams now I don't bother counting. I know I'm a fucking failure, okay. People drop me as soon as they can, that's just how it is, and it's not like I don't know why.”

“That's not true,” Kyo argued quietly.

“Shut the fuck up, you don't know anything,” Kaimaru huffed without heat. He sounded tired. “I bet
you're one of the idiots who think Genin teams are the best thing ever, right? Best friends forever or whatever crap you want to call it. Yeah, well, good for you,” he muttered listlessly, not pausing for a response he clearly wasn't expecting. “What a load of crap. Those assholes couldn't get rid of me fast enough, and the fucker of a Jounin they stuck us with fucked off the moment we made Chuunin. First team that ditched me, but I guess it was just as well.” He fell silent.

“I don't know what that would be like,” Kyo said quietly when she was sure he was done. “My Genin team died.”

“Fuck,” Kaimaru said. He laughed again, dark and self-deprecating, before he pushed the hand covering his eyes up to drag his hair out of his face. His eyes were red, though there weren't any tears. “Good for you, huh. That's nice.”

“It's not your fault people don't look deep enough to really get to know you, Kaimaru,” she said.

“Do you ever stop talking?” Kaimaru asked her, voice rough.

“Yeah. But I like talking to you.”

“That's just pathetic,” he told her, and she might have labelled it as a cutting remark if only it hadn't looked like Kaimaru was about to cry. “I don't want to wait for you to fucking cut your losses.”

“What makes you think I will?” She hated losing people and when had she ever implied she'd just-

Kaimaru's face screwed up, no matter how much he was fighting it. The soles of his sandals dragged noisily against the ground when he drew his knees up and folded his arms against them, which let him hide his face in his arms.

Kyo watched him sadly.

“Go away,” he told her, words muffled, but it didn't hide the way his voice hitched.

“I don't want to.”

Kaimaru took a deep, unsteady breath, and didn't make a sound.

Kyo wasn't sure how long they sat like that.

“We should probably go to the hospital,” she eventually said, because she could practically feel her body go stiffer for every minute that passed, and she was in enough pain she didn't particularly want to try to stand up. She'd probably sprained a few things, at the very least.

Kaimaru hadn't moved a muscle in a long while, still hiding his face in his arms, and she wondered if he was still crying.

Made it impossible to forget he wasn't older than seventeen.

He wouldn't have been a legal adult back in the Before.

“Kaimaru, are you okay?” Kyo asked, and forced herself to her feet, and she couldn't help the pained grimace on her face, her body screaming in protest.

She bent down to pick up the boy's tanto, no matter how painful it was to move, and then shuffled over to him. All but collapsing down to sit beside him.
“Hey,” she said softly. “If you don't look at me soon, I might start to cry.”

“Fuck you, Shiranui.”

“Kyo,” she corrected. “You're calling me Kyo from now on. Because we're friends, and that's what friends do.” She was silent a moment, staring at his hair, which was the only part of his head she could see. “Can I give you a hug?”

“No.”

Kyo contemplated that a second, put down the tanto on the ground beside her. “Alright. Then I'll just lean against you for a while instead.”

She proceeded to do just that, because she was hurting, she was exhausted, and she still wasn't sleeping well.

It was getting better -a little- but she still woke up every now and then, convinced someone was gonna-

Kyo let out a slow breath, closed her eyes and relaxed against Kaimaru's side, leaning her cheek against his hair.

“There is something seriously wrong with you,” Kaimaru said, not moving and his voice was still muffled.

“Yeah,” Kyo agreed blandly.

“Shut up, you're not supposed to agree with me,” he muttered sullenly.

“Haven't really been able to sleep lately,” Kyo mumbled, eyes growing heavier with every breath. Kaimaru was really warm. “Life's a bit sucky right now, and been worried 'bout you, too.”

Kaimaru snorted, and Kyo wasn't awake enough to tell if it sounded amused or wet with tears.

It was dark out by the time they managed to drag themselves to the hospital, and they endured the unimpressed lecture the medic gave the two of them in silence.

-x-x-x-

“Nee-san, wake up!” was the only warning she got before Genma jumped on her bed and Kyo couldn't help the pained groan that slipped out of her.

Ow.

She hadn't gotten home until late last night, and while the medics had healed up the worst of the damage Kaimaru had doled out, there were still plenty of bruises and sore muscles to remind her of what had happened.

“Don't do that, Genma,” Kyo whined, far too tired to care. She'd actually been able to sleep, though, which was nice.

She wasn't sure she'd be willing to do a repeat any time soon, though, but that was another issue entirely.

“What's wrong?” Genma asked, leaning over her to peer at her face.
“She was in a fight,” Kisaki drawled, sounding unimpressed, but she was still stretched out on the bed beside her, letting Kyo use her as a teddybear.

Kyo loved Kisaki, she really did.

“I'm gonna sleep a bit longer, Genma,” Kyo muttered drowsily, burrowing down deeper into her comforter and pillow, pressing a bit closer to Kisaki while she was at it. “See you later.”

“Why?”

“I'm tired.”

Genma seemed to think that over for a long few seconds, and then huffed out an unhappy “Fine,” and crawled off the bed to run out into the rest of the apartment.

Kyo got a few blissful minutes of more sleep, before she was woken up again.

“Kyo, you're gonna miss breakfast!” tou-san called from the kitchen.

Kyo groaned again, pulling the comforter over her head.

She'd finally been able to sleep, why couldn't they just leave her alone.

“I can always carry you in here, kitten,” tou-san offered magnanimously.

Kyo huffed and pushed herself into a seat with a scowl.

Ow.

Kisaki snorted and eyed her with far more amusement than this situation called for, if you asked Kyo.

“You're enjoying this, aren't you?” she accused the dog.

“Yeah,” Kisaki admitted shamelessly. “Serves you right,” she sniffed, got up and wandered out of the room with a swish of her tail.

Kyo stared after her.

Right.

Dragging herself out of bed, Kyo considered her closet for a second, and then dismissed that thought, because getting dressed sounded both painful and like far too much effort for something like breakfast. She could go back to bed again after she'd eaten, too.

So she just trudged out of her and Genma's room, wandering in the direction of the kitchen, rubbing at her eyes sleepily.

“Oh, wow, I hope you gave back as good as you got, kitten.”

“Hi, Ryota,” Kyo returned, not so much as pausing, and then collapsed into her preferred chair. And consequently slumped over the kitchen table to continue her doze.

“Kyo,” tou-san sighed, walking over from the stove. “Sit up properly, or I'll put your rice bowl down on your head.”
“‘S fine,” she muttered.

Kisaki snorted again, and then there was a warm, wet mouth on her leg, practically wrapping around her thigh and a wide tongue pressed to her skin.

Kyo jumped upright with a yelp. “Don't do that!” And she batted a hand at Kisaki’s head, only to have the dog grin at her. “Ew, there's drool all over my thigh,” Kyo complained, using her sleep-shirt to try and wipe it off. With limited success.

Kisaki had also scratched her with her teeth, but not enough to leave anything other than faint pink lines, but still.

“Okay, wasn’t gonna bring it up, but, seriously. Who the hell gave you permission for that?” Ryota grunted, and when she looked up, he was frowning at her, arms crossed uncomfortably over his chest.

“Permission for what?” Kyo asked, confused and still distracted with trying to wipe her thigh dry from slimy dog drool.

“That,” Ryota huffed, waving a hand at... her?

Kyo blinked at him, and then turned to look at tou-san, only Kou was suddenly very busy serving up breakfast for all of them.

What?

Why did it look like tou-san was barely holding back laughter?

Kyo narrowed her eyes on both grown men, feeling like she was missing something, here.

Exchanging a look with Kisaki yielded nothing, either.

“What?” she finally asked, because she wasn't getting it.

“Who the hell gave you permission, to-” Ryota grimaced ever so slightly, “develop and shit?” And he glared at her chest as if it had personally offended him. “You're a damn kid. You don't get to grow up yet,” he muttered sourly.

Kyo stared blankly at him.

“Ryota?” Kou said plainly. “Shut up.”

“Thank you, tou-san,” Kyo said, because while it was a little bit amusing, it also made her feel entirely too self-conscious, and she didn't appreciate it.

She couldn't quite stop herself from hunching her shoulders in an attempt to make her chest less noticeable.

Ryota muttered something indistinct under his breath, but didn't argue, and they settled down to eat a moment later.

Kisaki received her own breakfast -solid Inuzuka feed, which Kisaki told her was delicious- but that didn't stop Gemma from 'sneaking' the dog bits and pieces of his own breakfast when he thought no one was looking.

“Tou-san?” her brother eventually spoke up, looking up from his meal to peer curiously at the man.
“How come we don't have a kaa-san? All the other kids in my class have one.”

The calm, comfortable atmosphere froze solid, and Kyo ceased to move, chopsticks caught halfway between her plate and her mouth.

...they talked about kaa-san, right?

Kyo was sure they did.

Only... she couldn't actually remember if they talked about her with Genma and. Kyo felt like her stomach had dropped out of her.

“You-” Kou said, voice bland and a bit tight, before he had to stop. Took a deep breath, thought about it a second, and then tried again. “You did have a kaa-san, Genma,” he said quietly, staring at the boy like he wasn't sure what to do. “She died when you were little.”

“Oh.” Genma frowned and thought that over for a moment.

Kyo stood abruptly, dropped her chopsticks to her plate, not caring that one of them bounced off and rolled to the floor with a clatter. She was already stalking back to her room, ignoring the concerned question her dad called after her.

She went straight for her closet, because she knew it'd be in there somewhere...

Kyo tore out old clothes and extra gear with little concern, and she couldn't remember exactly where she'd put it, and it had been years, but she eventually found it, in the very back of the closet.

Clutching the framed photograph to her chest, Kyo strode back into the kitchen, leaving the mess behind in their room to be dealt with later, because this was far more important.

She sent tou-san a quick look when she walked back into the room, but focused her full attention on Genma soon enough.

Her little brother stared up at her like he wasn't sure what was going on.

Taking a deep breath, Kyo held out the photograph towards him.

She couldn't believe she hadn't done this before.


Genma took the picture with wide eyes, holding it carefully and then tentatively peered down at Isshun's dark, intent eyes, taking in her cool, professional expression, the long, brown hair and the bandana keeping it out of her face.

Kyo stared down at the picture, too, because she hadn't looked at it since- in a really long time and she'd- forgotten what kaa-san looked like.

“...I didn't know you had a picture,” Ryota said softly, sounding a little like he'd just lost his breath. Because kaa-san had been his friend and he'd just lost her, too.

“Taku and Maki gave it to me,” Kyo told him, still not looking away from kaa-san's face. “After the funeral.”

“Kitten,” tou-san sighed, getting to his feet to wrap her in a brief hug, pressing a kiss to her hair, and then went to pick Genma up, who was still clutching the picture. “Let's talk about your kaa-san for a
while,” he said, and walked out into the sitting room, to park the both of them on the couch.

Kyo blinked and exchanged a look with Ryota, before the two of them followed.

She couldn't believe they'd all completely neglected to tell Genma about kaa-san. Why hadn't they-

Kyo sighed, and sat down on the couch next to her dad and brother, and resolved to tell Genma as much as she could remember.

It was important.

-x-x-x-
The look Jiraiya graced her with when she showed up for training the day after her and Kaimaru's... conversation, had been unimpressed at best, but she couldn't claim she had any regrets.

Not when the two of them had finally managed to work through some of the issues between them.

Everything wasn't magically fine, but at least she didn't think Kaimaru would keep insisting on trying to push her away any more, which was a good starting point.

Life moved on, though.

They went on another mission, Kyo kept up with her therapy sessions with Chie, which were slowly and steadily improving, and she made sure to pay her little brother every bit of attention he wanted.

Which was what led to the current situation.

Kyo held Genma's hand tightly and smiled up at Kaimaru's unimpressed face.

"Here," she said, picking her brother up and all but thrusting him at Kaimaru, who twitched and shifted his gaze to stare mutely at Genma's inquisitive eyes.

"You look a lot like Ryota-oji," her brother said by way of greeting.

"Okay, what the fuck, Shiranui?" Kaimaru demanded, seemingly when he couldn't make sense of this on his own.

"Take him, quick. I'm trying to keep you from getting bitten, here," Kyo informed him plainly.

"Bitten?" Kaimaru echoed blankly, looking like he was getting a headache.

"Yeah. And you're supposed to be calling me 'Kyo', remember?" she said, all but tossing Genma at the teenager, who stiffly caught him.

Genma snickered.

Which was just in time, because Kisaki landed behind her with an irritable huff. "Kyo," she growled accusingly, and then paused when she registered exactly where they were and the frozen Uchiha next to her. "You."

"Hello, Kisaki!" Kyo greeted with a grin. "I was waiting for you to catch up! You've never been properly introduced to Kaimaru, have you? Kaimaru, this is my ninken partner Kisaki. Kisaki, meet Ryota's nephew, Uchiha Kaimaru."

"I know who he is," Kisaki grumbled, eyes narrowing on the guy.

"Good, then you know that he's my friend and I'm fond of him," Kyo said pointedly. "So will you please stop it with the temper tantrum?"

Kisaki growled. "Don't think the puppy makes a difference."

Kyo placed her hands on her hips, frowning at the dog. "What did Genma ever do to you?"

"Yeah! I love you, Kisaki! Be nice to me!" Genma, the little brat, agreed cheerfully, giggling
helplessly where Kaimaru was still holding him, looking to have turned to stone.

“What,” Kaimaru said.

“I wanted to ask if you'd like to come with us to get some dango,” Kyo said, determined to drag the older boy with her, unless he had a really good excuse. She didn't want things to get awkward between them.

Okay, more awkward, because Kaimaru very clearly didn't know how to behave around her now, or what to make of anything, it seemed.

“Why?” he asked, voice flat, and he still hadn't moved. He kept a wary eye on Kisaki, though, which was probably wise.

“Why not?” Kyo smiled at him. “Dango is delicious.”

Kaimaru glared at her a second, before he slanted a look into the house. “Fine,” he huffed, put on his sandals and came out to join her.

He sent Kisaki a speculative look.

“I'll be watching you,” the dog informed him curtly, pressing close to Kyo and fixing him with a warning glower.

“What the fuck am I supposed to do with this?” Kaimaru asked next, frowning down at Genma, who looked pretty content to be hanging from his hands.

Kyo peered at them. “Well, that depends on you. Genma loves piggyback rides. Or you can hand him here, so long as someone,” she sent Kisaki a look, “promises to behave herself. We talked about this, Kisaki.”

The dog snorted and avoided eye-contact.

Right.

“I don't know what the hell to do with kids,” Kaimaru muttered, looking uncomfortable.

Kyo nodded and plucked her brother from his hold, and then stepped between Kaimaru and Kisaki when the dog half-heartedly snapped after the Uchiha.

“Right,” Kyo said cheerfully, swinging Genma around until he was clinging to her back. “Let's go eat some dango!”

“You're so incredibly weird, you know that, right?” Kaimaru huffed at her, but fell into step easily enough, throwing a curious eye at Genma now that he was no longer holding him.

Kyo shrugged. “There's nothing wrong with being a bit weird. I'm gonna do what I feel is right, though, even if that makes people side-eye me, you know?”

Kaimaru was silent for a long few minutes, and Kyo let him be, content enough to wander through Konoha in the direction of her and Genma's favourite dango shop. Even Kisaki seemed a bit less ill-tempered now that she'd gotten some of her aggressions towards Kaimaru out.

“You're a pain in my fucking neck, Kyo,” Kaimaru eventually muttered, scowling at nothing and looking like he was daring her to say anything.
“Yep, and I'm gonna keep it up,” she assured him firmly.

There were plenty of things in her life she couldn't control, or do anything about, but she'd rather not lose her friends when she didn't have to.

And Kaimaru using her name, that was him verbally acknowledging their friendship, wasn't it?

Kyo smiled, and was very determined to make this into a good day.

“Can we train after, nee-san?” Genma asked, leaning to the side to try and see her face. “And I finished the last of your homework, too, so can we have another lesson?”

Calling the small doses of poison she was preparing for him 'homework' was very amusing, but it also made it easier to discuss in public where there were plenty of civilians around.

Kyo hummed. “We got started on meditating, right? How're you doing with that?”

Genma's face scrunched up. “It's boring,” he told her bluntly.

She snorted. “You need to get to know your chakra before I can teach you all the stealth things kaasan taught me,” she informed him casually.

Genma was silent a heartbeat, and then slumped with a sigh. “Fine, let's do the boring meditating. Can you show me again?”

“Oh of course. Kaimaru, are you busy later, or would you like to join us?” She turned back to her friend, who eyed her sceptically. “We can spar while Genma tries to meditate,” she explained.

“Fine,” he grunted, turning to scowl at the road ahead, not saying another word until they reached the dango shop, and then only to tell her what a ridiculous moron she was when she bought enough of the treats for all of them.

Kyo didn't mind, though, because there was no heat behind his words and his uncertain awkwardness got progressively better throughout the day.

-x-x-x-

Kyo came home from team practice to flop down face-first on the couch. They'd get a mission soon, Jiraiya had told them, but right now, she was just glad they weren't going anywhere.

“You okay?” Kisaki asked, nudging her gently.

“Cramps,” she grunted back.

She'd gotten her period the day before and this time around seemed like it was accompanied with rather insistent cramping.

Great.

Kisaki snuffled at her hair for a second, and then wandered off to drink from her water bowl in the kitchen.

When she was done, she went to lie down on the floor by the sitting room window, in a patch of sunlight, and settled down for a nap.

Which sounded like a wonderful idea.
Kyo sighed, closed her eyes, and shifted so that she was lying more comfortably, cheek pressed against the sofa seat.

She woke up again when the front door opened.

“Tou-san, I'm home,” Tou-san's voice announced evenly.

“Welcome back,” Kyo muttered fuzzily, shifting a hand to rub at her face, but didn't otherwise move. “Where's Genma?”

“Off in the village somewhere, playing with friends,” Kou told her easily, walked past her and put down a bag of groceries on the kitchen table. “You okay, kitten?”

“I'm pretty sure my uterus has defected and has plans to join the enemy side as soon as its dug its way out of me with the kunai it somehow gotten its' hands on,” Kyo mumbled sullenly, determinedly not moving.

Kou hummed thoughtfully, but didn't say anything, and she could hear him move around in the kitchen, putting things away and preparing for dinner.

They were pretty soothing sounds to listen to, and when the man eventually came wandering over, Kyo had almost managed to fall back asleep.

Her dad paused beside her, next to the couch, and then there was something wonderfully warm on the small of her back and Kyo let out a small, relieved breath, feeling like all of her melted into the couch.

“I love you,” she muttered drowsily.

Tou-san laughed softly, gently ruffled her hair and then walked back to the kitchen without a word.

Clearly, Kaa-san had chosen the best possible guy around to marry.

By the time Tou-san came to wake her up, he was mostly done with dinner and as soon as she'd sat up, hugging the still lukewarm hot water bottle to her lower stomach, he took a seat beside her, reaching out with a hand to smooth down her hair with an amused snort.

“You okay, kitten?”

“Yeah. Feel much better now,” she mumbled, and smothered a yawn with her hand. “This growing up stuff is pretty overrated,” she grumbled.

Kou smiled at her, before he cleared his expression, fixing her with a look. “There's something I've wanted to talk to you about, and now that Genma's out playing, I figure it's as good a time as any.”

“Oh?” Kyo peered confusedly at him, rubbing at the creases in the skin on her cheek, from where she'd pressed it into the sofa. “What is it?” And she couldn't help but feel a spark of worry in her chest.

She hoped nothing serious had happened.

“It's about Isshun,” Kou said, eyeing her carefully. “About the clan you come from.”

“Oh,” Kyo thought that over. “Okay?”

Her dad sighed, and rubbed a hand over his hair. “You're growing up so quickly, Kyo,” he said,
smiling at her with what was both pride and wistfulness. “I know you don't mind sharing a room with Genma, but both of you are just getting older and bigger, and before long you'll be living on top of each other.” He paused, gaze going distant for a second. “What it all boils down to is that we don't have enough space.”

Kyo blinked slowly, digesting that.

Tou-san wanted to move? But-

“What does that have to do with kaa-san?” she couldn't help but ask, and she wasn't sure what she felt about what Kou was implying with the moving thing, but she also felt she hadn't heard everything yet.

She hugged the hot water bottle more firmly to herself.

“It’s easy to forget, but your mother was a clan kunoichi, Kyo,” tou-san said seriously. “She was alone, before you were born, but that doesn't mean she didn't come from somewhere.” He was silent for a minute, and Kyo didn't interrupt. “There is- Isshun and I discussed it, when she was pregnant with Genma, about how we'd move when the two of you got older and we needed more space. Of course, we'd always thought there might be more-” he cut himself off, looking pained, shaking his head. “We talked about moving, already back then, to give us enough room to grow as a family, and Isshun said she'd always wanted to move her potential future family back into the Torikabuto clan compound, at some point.”

Kyo stared at Kou with wide eyes, not sure where to even begin to digest everything he'd just said.

First of all being... tou-san and kaa-san had wanted more kids? She wasn't sure why that thought was so jarring, and it even made sense but that didn't mean she'd ever actually thought about it.

For a brief second, she wondered what it would have been like to have more siblings other than Genma, before she pushed the thought aside.

Torikabuto compound. Right.

...there was one?

“I didn't know there was a Torikabuto compound,” she admitted blankly, figuring that that was a good place to start.

“It's a small one,” Kou shrugged, “nowhere near the size of, say, the Uchiha or Senju clan compounds. There were never very many Torikabuto, but yeah. They had a compound.” He met Kyo's gaze for a moment. “And ever since Isshun died, it's technically been yours.”

Kyo mentally reared back.

What.

She had a- why!?

“You mean it belongs to me and Genma, right?” she asked, voice blank, and she wasn't sure what kind of expression she was wearing, but tou-san eyed her concernedly.

“You're the oldest, Kyo, and you're a fully fledged shinobi on top of that. The Torikabuto would have recognized you as Clan Head, had there been any still alive. Isshun was always proud of that.”
Kyo wasn't sure what to do with this information.

"The point is, Kyo," tou-san said, when it became clear she wasn't about to say anything. "I want you to think about it, or at least keep it in mind, because sooner or later, we'll need to move. This apartment has been our home for a long time, and I know we all like it, but it's just too small for us."

He paused, eyeing her solemnly. "If you want, you can open up the Torikabuto compound for us, or I could look into something else."

"Right," Kyo said faintly.

Tou-san reached out to place a hand on her shoulder, squeezing it gently. "Think about it, yeah?"

"Yeah," she agreed, and watched tou-san get up to walk back to the kitchen. Check on dinner.

Kyo turned to exchange a wide-eyed look with Kisaki, who stared back, having clearly heard every word.

Walking through the Hokage tower with Kisaki once more, feeling discouraged, felt like it was turning into something of a regular occurrence.

She'd gone to talk to Toge again, but he still hadn't heard so much as a whisper about Katsurou-sensei.

Kyo wasn't sure whether she was supposed to be worrying about him or not, but she was.

She couldn't help it.

She also missed him. Hadn't seen him in far too long. Would really like his help with figuring some things out. And she just wanted him back here. Safe.

"I'm sure he's fine," Kisaki told her, though she, too, looked worried and restless, like she wanted to try and track the man down, no matter where that would lead them.

Kyo reached out to pet her head, rubbing at one of her ears in the way she knew Kisaki liked.

There wasn't anything they needed to do, didn't have any plans for the rest of the day, and she was a bit too discouraged to think of anything specific.

Maybe they should just go home? But then again, tou-san was working and Genma was out playing with friends. Something about him and Ashika playing ninja with their friends from class.

Kyo watched the people moving about the tower as they slowly made their way through it. Most of them were clearly busy, working, moving from point A to point B, teams coming in from a mission, others who had collected their mission scrolls, or they were here to do some other kind of business.

Most of the various branches around the village had at least an office in the tower, which made cooperation easier, and it was also something of a hub for all kinds of paperwork and other activities.

There were also several break rooms and lounges where anyone that needed it could get a few quiet minutes or a cup of coffee, if it was needed.

Kyo and Kisaki strolled passed one of them, catching a glimpse of the interior and Kyo couldn't help but pause and take a second look.
There was a kunoichi sitting by one of the tables, chin resting in one hand and staring down at the wooden table top, looking tired and sad.

More importantly, though, was the fact Kyo recognized her.

Had wanted to speak with her for quite a while now, but hadn't felt right about tracking her down.

“What is it?” Kisaki asked, peering up at her.

“I think I'll go have an awkward conversation. Please don't get angry if she's rude, okay?” she requested in a quiet voice.

Kisaki didn't look entirely convinced, but nodded nonetheless and followed Kyo when she turned and walked into the break room.

She wordlessly sat down at the table with the girl and wondered what she was supposed to say.

“Hello, Honoka,” she greeted softly.

Honoka started and looked up, her purple eyes landing on Kyo's face with polite incomprehension, clearly not recognizing her.

“My name's Shiranui Kyo, but the last time you saw me, I went by Nakahara Aiko,” Kyo introduced herself, and part of her couldn't help but brace for some kind of negative reaction.

Honoka stared blankly at her another second, took in her face, her hair, what she was wearing and then let out a small breath in something that wasn't quite a sigh.

“What do you want?” she asked.

Kyo considered it a second, because what did she want?

“You know, for all that our jobs on that mission were different, I really did like you back then, and while I couldn't act like myself, the best lies are based on truth. I was still me, even if I grossly exaggerated certain parts of my personality.” She paused, lost in thought. “I told myself, back when we met, that I'd like it very much if I could get to know you as me, too.”

Honoka stared at her, eyes unreadable, but at least she hadn't told her to get lost, which was something.

“You know, for a while after,” the girl slowly began to say, gaze dropping back to the table, “when I realised just what- I hated you. Just a little. I wanted to- but sensei refused to tell me anything, or help me look into who you were, and I just.” Honoka sighed, shifting to cover her eyes with both her hands, for just a second, before she dragged them up her forehead and over her hair.

Kyo couldn't really claim to be surprised, because... well, if she'd been in Honoka's situation, she wasn't sure how she would have reacted, or felt.

“And how do you feel now?” she asked idly, feeling distantly curious.

“Tired,” Honoka laughed humourlessly. “I don't even know,” she admitted. “I don't really know anything about you.”

Well, that was true.

Kyo tilted her head in thought, reaching out to pet Kisaki, which she was vaguely aware was
becoming a habit.

“Honoka, meet Kisaki,” she said, introducing the two, nodding at the ninken which had been sitting quietly beside her the entire time. For the first time, Honoka turned to look at her. “She's my partner, but only because her first partner died. Taku was my Genin teammate,” she revealed evenly. “Him and Maki were killed on a mission two years after we graduated.” She was silent a second. “I know how much it hurts to lose a teammate, and I tried my best to save Rikuto, even though I'm not actually a medic.”

Honoka stared at Kisaki for a long few seconds, before she closed her eyes with a familiar grimace twisting her features.

Grief, but somewhat dulled by time.

It had been almost a year.

Kyo absently wondered where the time had gone. It didn't feel like it'd been that long ago, but...

“Well.

“If you tell me to leave you alone, I will, you know,” Kyo told the girl, because she wanted to make that clear.

“What was your name again?” Honoka asked her.

“Shiranui Kyo.”

She nodded. “What did you have in mind by approaching me, then, Kyo-chan?”

Kyo couldn't help the grimace at the suffix to her name, because, “Sorry, it's just, not many people call me 'chan' but the few that do aren't really...” her voice trailed off as she tried to find a good way to phrase it. “I've had dubious experiences with people who call me that,” she settled on. “Please, just Kyo is more than fine.”

Honoka blinked at her, but nodded. “Kyo, then.”

Kyo turned her attention to the actual question she'd been asked and wondered...

“Are you working right now?” she asked, because it occurred to her she had no idea. Honoka shook her head, and Kyo continued. “Would you like to go to the onsen together?”

Honoka stared at her, because that clearly wasn't what she'd been expecting. “Sure?” she finally said, looking vaguely confused. “But, why?”

“It would be nice, and I don't have any female friends, so that's not something I can do with anyone other than my little brother.” Kyo shrugged, casually dropping another few personal details about herself, because as it was right now, their relationship was uneven.

Kyo knew more about Honoka than Honoka knew about her.

Honoka stared intently at her, and then gave a firm nod. “I wouldn't mind getting to know you,” she decided. “Let's go.”

“Great.” Kyo smiled and got up to leave.

The walk to the public onsen wasn't as awkward as she had half-expected, as Honoka fired the occasional question at her.
“Wait, that Jiraiya guy is your actual sensei?” Honoka asked, pausing in the act of washing off.

Kyo, sitting on the stool beside her, couldn't help but snort. “Yep.”

“Oh, he seemed a bit…” Honoka’s voice trailed off, as if she didn't know what to say without coming across as rude.

“He's an idiot, but he's usually got his heart in the right place.” Kyo shrugged. “Just, he's a complete moron about women in general,” she huffed, shaking her head, and then dumped a bucket of warm water over her head to wet her hair.

“He flirted with that Kiri kunoichi,” Honoka said, sounding offended.

“I know, don't remind me,” Kyo groaned. “I wanted to kick him so badly.”

Honoka laughed at her, the sound quiet and incredulous. “That's gotta be tough. Nobu-sensei can go completely stone-faced when he's feeling awkward, and he basically shoved me at his wife when I started menstruating, but he's always professional.”

“Lucky you,” Kyo muttered at the girl, and then began to work shampoo into her hair, sending Honoka a mock-sullen look when she laughed, still incredulous. “Jiraiya-sensei dumped me in a brothel.”

Honoka paused, thinking that over. “Well, if you were on a mission, that's not entirely unreasonable,” she mused.

“No, you misunderstand,” Kyo huffed, feeling exasperated. “He literally picked me up, in the middle of the night, I wasn't even dressed, shunshined off, dumped me and then fucked off to get drunk.”

Honoka stared at her with slowly growing horror. “And he's still your sensei?” she asked quietly.

“I filed a complaint and was given the choice to be taken off the team, but I declined. I like Minato a lot, and Jiraiya's not so bad. Most of the time.”

Honoka stared at her a second longer, and then shook her head. “I can't believe anyone would think that was a good idea.”

“Like I said, he's an idiot,” Kyo laughed. “But a mostly loveable one.”

Honoka snorted and eyed her sceptically.

“Are you two done soon?” Kisaki asked dryly, though she sounded amused.

“Almost. Are you sure you don't want me to wash you off too so you can bathe with us?” Kyo asked, sending the ninken a look.

“I don't like baths,” Kisaki reminded her idly.

Kyo shrugged and finally rinsed out her hair.

A moment later, the three of them relocated to the outdoor pool, where Kyo and Honoka settled into the water with relaxed contentedness.

It was almost shocking, how easily they'd fallen back into the friendship they'd built the tentative
basis for during the Kiri mission, even though Kyo had been forced to act like Aiko-chan during it.

Kisaki lied down on the tiles leading out from the main building, settling down in a spot of shadow.

Honoka absently reached up to secure the towel she'd wrapped around her hair and it drew Kyo's
gaze to the girl's arms.

She'd noticed earlier, but had been busy with other things, but Honoka's forearms were criss-crossed
with hair-fine scars, riddling the skin between the tips of her fingers to her elbows.

Honoka noticed her looking and smiled wryly. “Learning to use razor wire,” she explained. “Even
with gloves and arm-guards, I've lost count of the number of cuts it's left me with. I've probably
spilled enough blood to supply a grown person by now, just on my wires.”

“You're good with them, though,” Kyo said, and she was pretty sure she'd never forget that Genin
Honoka had electrocuted. It had left an impression, even in the state she'd been in at the time.

Honoka stared at her hand with a small frown. “I've worked on it almost every day for five years.
But thanks. If you're not a medic, what's your specialization?” she shot back, leaning back against
the pool side and giving Kyo an expectant look.

“Well,” Kyo said. “I'm a poison specialist.” Which was a statement that tended to earn a variety of
reactions, really.

“Huh.” Honoka thought that over, crossing one leg over the other in front of her, under the water. “Is
that why you didn't react the same as the other Genin to the drug?” she asked, clearly referring to the
Chuunin Exam.

Kyo nodded. “I was still drugged, but not as much, and it wore off quicker. It's a perk.” She smiled
humourlessly.

“We're probably really lucky you were with us,” Honoka mused softly, staring up at the sky for a
while.

Kyo said nothing, feeling somewhat uncomfortable.

Looking after the Genin hadn't been her job. She'd been supposed to blend in with them and make
herself forgettable, which had limited her a lot, even though she'd tried to do her best with the
situation.

But still.

They sat in silence for a few minutes, just relaxing.

“This was pretty nice,” Honoka said, after they were done, when they'd gotten dressed and left,
turning to smile tentatively at her. “Wouldn't mind doing it again.”

“Me too,” Kyo said, smiling back. “Like I said, I don't really have any friends that are girls. It was
refreshing to talk to someone who just understands certain things.”

Honoka laughed. “Yeah. See you around the village, Kyo?”

“Absolutely,” she agreed, and that was that. They went their separate ways.

“You look happy,” Kisaki commented on the way home.
“I feel pretty happy right now. Approaching Honoka went much better than I thought it would.” At the look Kisaki sent her, Kyo elaborated. “I mean, she didn't scream at me, and she was willing to talk.” She didn't hate her!

The dog snorted, bumped her head into Kyo's side affectionately and left it at that.

They went home.

-x-x-x-

Their team ran two short missions in the span of a week, out to two separate villages not too far from Konoha for Jiraiya-sensei to help stabilize the village well in one of them, and to help repair a road on the other one.

Fuuinjutsu made the first issue quick and easy to fix, and Kyo was pretty sure the villagers got their money's worth, because Jiraiya added quite a few things, such as water filtering seals. The well would be fully functional and healthy for the average human life-span, unless it was deliberately destroyed.

Making a solid dirt road with earth jutsu was chakra extensive, but quick and relatively simple.

It was just exhausting work, and even Jiraiya looked somewhat drained after he was done.

At least Minato had gotten a chance to try his hand at the earth jutsu first, which had been useful, and while Kyo and Kisaki hadn't really done much of anything, it'd been nice to get out of the village for a while.

There hadn't been any enemies, they hadn't even been near the Fire Country borders, and no one had been forced to so much as hurt anyone, not to mention kill.

It'd been nice.

Coming back home again was still pretty great.

Kyo, Kisaki and Minato were making their way through the village after they'd reported back for a completed mission, heading back to the Shiranui apartment for a shared meal.

Kyo and Minato hadn't spent much time together outside of missions and training lately, and sometimes, it was just nice to exist in each other's presence. Relaxing, doing nothing, but together. Sharing the same space.

Which was the plan for the rest of the afternoon, really.

They'd almost reached their apartment building when a small projectile with very distinct red hair rushed them, colliding with Kyo's legs.

“Ashika?” Kyo questioned, peering down at the girl with a thread of worry.

“Nee-san,” Ashika said, staring up at her with wide eyes. “Come, quick,” she said, and she looked rather pale.

Kyo had one second to try and rationalize the fear gripping her gut, before she'd picked the girl up, swung her around to her back and asked, “Where to?”

Ashika pointed, and Kyo took off, fairly confident Kisaki and Minato would follow.
It was perhaps not rational, the way Kyo's heart had jumped into her throat, but her mind was running away with her, going through half a dozen scenarios and explanations as for why Ashika could have approached her like this, but most of them involved Genma.

Ashika and her brother were best friends, and they both played together and trained together, to see Ashika frightened and alone...

They ended up in one of the child-friendly training fields set aside for Academy students and fresh Genin, and Kyo breathed a silent breath of relief when she laid eyes on her brother.

“Genma,” she said, but didn't relax, and she may have scanned the area for everything from enemies to any other kind of disaster her brain had been able to think up.

Minato and Kisaki came to a stop beside her, scanning the near-deserted training field much like she had done.

Kyo helped Ashika down from her back, and then walked up to Genma, who was sitting off to the side, staring down at his lap, and it hadn't escaped her attention that he hadn't looked up or greeted her back.

She was still worried.

Kyo crouched down in front of Genma, eyeing him carefully. “Genma, are you okay? What happened?” she asked, sending Ashika a look, because her brother didn't look like he was willing to say anything just yet.

Ashika bit her lip, glanced at Genma and then turned back to Kyo, and she definitely looked scared, but also... guilty?

Kyo took that in with a faint frown.

“Genma hurt his hand,” Ashika told her bluntly.

Turning back to her brother, she finally noted that Genma wasn't actually staring down at his lap. He was staring down at his hands, which he'd wrapped loosely in the hem of his t-shirt, hiding them from view.

At least there wasn't any blood.

“Genma?” she tried again, because if he'd hurt himself, then she needed to get a look at it, see how serious and-

Genma slowly looked up, and his eyes were red, there were tears clinging to his eye-lashes and he'd very obviously been crying, but there was also something stubborn about the expression he was wearing.

And he also looked frightened.

“Genma, you know you can talk to me about anything, right?” she told him softly.

“You'll get angry,” Genma said, which turned into a sob at the end.

“When have I ever been angry with you?”

Her brother cried, and she was itching to pick him up and hug him tightly, but she didn't dare do so before she knew how he'd hurt himself. So she instead settled for very gently rubbing his back with
one hand.

It took a bit more coaxing before she managed to get Genma to show her his hand.

“Nee-san, I'm sorry,” he sniffled, looking like he was about to start sobbing uncontrollably again, but he did, slowly, carefully, remove the fabric from around his hand to expose it and finally let her see.

Kyo took one look and felt her stomach drop down into her pelvis, because that was-

“That's one of my needles,” she said blankly, staring at the needle pierced through Genma's hand with something she was fairly sure was horror.

Okay.

She took a deep breath.

“Genma, this is very important,” she said slowly, putting effort into keeping her voice calm and even, reaching out to gently cup his face, tilting it up towards her. “Where did you take it?”

“In your things,” her brother sobbed, looking utterly heartbroken. “I'm sorry!”

“I'm not angry with you,” she told him and she wasn't. Kyo was just silently terrified, because-

“Genma, please focus. Is this one of my poisoned needles?”

Genma sobbed, and raised his uninjured hand to rub at his eyes. “I washed it.” He hiccuped miserably. “Very carefully, nee-san,” he told her wetly and she wiped the tear tracks from his cheeks with her thumbs.

Kyo took another deep breath, held it for a second, and then let it out in a relieved sigh.

Right.

That was- good. That was good.

“I need to look at it, okay?” she said, and waited until Genma nodded before she let go of his face and reached down to gently grasp his hand, turning it over to get a better look at where the needle was going clean through his hand.

Into his palm, and out again of the back of his hand.

All things considered, it was a small thing, from a shinobi standpoint, but Genma hadn't yet turned six, and he'd never been truly injured before, beyond scrubbed knees, blisters and the nicks and bruises that came with training.

And hands were tricky; Kyo ought to know.

“Oh, okay, I'll pick you up now, Genma, and we're going to the hospital. You're going to be perfectly fine, don't worry, yeah? I just want a medic to look at your hand, just in case,” she said evenly, and then slowly reached out to pick up her little brother.

Genma clung to her and buried his face in her shoulder the moment he could, and proceeded to dampen her shirt with tears and snot, but she didn't care even a little bit about that.

“Ashika, would you like to come with us to the hospital?” she asked the girl, who'd been watching them like a hawk.
She nodded mutely and reached out to fist a hand in the hem of Kyo's shirt.

Kyo took a moment to collect herself, try to calm down from the scare, and then sent Minato a questioning look.

“‘I'll come with,” he said, frowning worriedly at Genma.

Kyo managed a quick, appreciative smile, before she turned her steps to the hospital. She wanted a medic to remove that needle, screen for any possible poison contamination and then check the needle hadn't managed to hit anything important.

Wait with Kisaki and Minato a moment, I'll be right back,” Kyo told Genma and Ashika, gesturing at Minato to take a seat.

Which he did, sending her a questioning look while he was at it.

Kyo proceeded to place her brother in her teammate's lap, took a second to smooth down his hair and kiss his cheek, and then turned to hunt down a competent person to talk to.

Genma curled up in Minato's lap and buried his face in his shoulder with a minimal amount of protest, even though he cried harder, which made her feel guilty.

Didn't change that she had to do this.

“Excuse me,” Kyo said, approaching the woman working the reception counter in the waiting room. "I need a medic to screen my little brother for poison, and to take a look at his hand to make sure he hasn't nicked a tendon or something.”

The nurse considered her a second, and then nodded, got up and strode off.

Kyo went back to her brother, rescued Minato from being cried on by a clingy, distraught child, and sat down in the chair beside him.

Kisaki carefully wedged her head into Genma's lap to sniff his hand.

“Smells too much of other things to pick out any traces,” the dog told her.

“Thanks for trying,” she muttered, and placed a hand to her brother's forehead. Was he warmer than usual because he'd been crying and pressing his face against first her and then Minato, or because he was running a fever?

Kyo's insides felt tight and heavy with worry.

It didn't take long for the nurse to come striding back into the room, an unfamiliar medic in tow.

She gestured at Kyo, who had already stood up at the sight of them.

“The possible poisoning?” the man asked, looking Kyo and Genma over intently.

“He washed the needle after he took it, but I want to make sure he got everything off before this happened,” Kyo told him succinctly, taking hold of Genma's hand and holding it up for the medic to see.

He made a wordless noise of affirmation and led them off down one of the corridors.
Kyo gestured at Minato to tag along, because she couldn't see any reason for him to stay in the waiting room.

And besides, that meant he could keep an eye on Ashika and make sure both of them knew what was happening.

Would probably help calm the children, too.

The medic took them to a private room, where he directed Kyo to place her brother on the waiting examination table-bed-thing with a firm mattress.

Genma sniffled and reached for Kyo's hand with his uninjured one, and Kyo gripped it firmly, though she kept her eyes on the medic.

He started by examining where the needle was stuck in Genma's hand, running his chakra through the area, and then unceremoniously pulled it out.

Her brother started crying again, and Kyo squeezed his hand reassuringly, gently wiping the tears away from his cheeks with her other one.

“His hand will be fine,” the medic announced shortly, turning to Kyo with what she was fairly sure was an unimpressed look. “Young lady, I must ask, how did he get access to a poisoned needle in the first place?”

“He took it from my gear.”

“Then it sounds to me like you need to keep better track of your things and your brother,” he huffed, giving her a judging look she wasn't appreciating in the least.

Kyo eyed him humourlessly. “Have you checked to make sure my little brother isn't poisoned yet?” she asked him flatly.

The medic harrumphed. “This is a serious matter, my dear.”

“Kisaki, go find someone competent, please,” Kyo asked, not taking her eyes off of the medic that refused to do his job.

The dog stood up, bared her teeth at the medic and left, working the handle on the door with her teeth before slinking out.

“Excuse me, I expect a certain measure of respect,” the medic said sharply, looking at her like she was a disobedient Academy student.

That was a funny thing to say when he showed absolutely zero respect either to her or to his patient, who happened to be an almost six year old little boy.

“Hit him, nee-san,” Ashika said darkly from where she was half-hiding behind Minato, scowling at the medic, who sent the girl a look, took in her vibrantly red hair and offered her a tightly professional smile.

“You needn't worry about this, sweetie,” he told her, which was so condescending Kyo found herself contemplating drawing a needle that would definitely be poisoned.

Even Minato was frowning at the medic now.

Maybe this guy wasn't actually able to screen anyone for poison? If she stabbed him, she'd find out
for sure. See if he could treat himself.

That wasn't a bad plan, was it?

Thankfully, before she could come to any kind of decision, the door slammed open and interrupted whatever the hell this guy was trying to tell her now.

Lecturing her about the importance of gear safety and how to handle poisons?

Kyo might have been tempted to laugh if it wasn't so damn insulting.

“Okay, I'm here, Kyo-chan!” a familiar voice declared, but for once, she was actually entirely pleased to see him. “What did you...” Nawaki's voice slowly trailed off when he took in the scene he'd arrived to.

Kyo's stance was possibly a bit aggressive, her face entirely blank.

“Wow, the last time I saw you wear that expression, you almost stabbed me in the throat, Kyo-chan,” Nawaki said, and he sounded troubled. “Why are you provoking a Jounin, Moriyama?” And he was suddenly all professional, straightening up, not a trace of a smile on his face. “What's going on here?”

“This idiot apparently thinks it's more important to lecture me on how to handle my gear than it is to make sure my brother hasn't been poisoned,” Kyo bit out, and she was distantly aware her voice was chillingly cold.

She'd never felt like this before.

Or, well, that wasn't quite true, but she wasn't used to feeling like this at home, in the village, when there were no enemies or targets around.

Though, a small voice in the back of her head whispered, there was one target. Right in front of her.

Kyo ignored that part of her with firm determination.

The medic, whatever his name had been, was staring at her with something like slowly dawning realisation, and he looked a bit pale.

Good.

“Okay, I'm quite good at screening for poisons,” Nawaki told her briskly. “I'll be taking over this patient, Moriyama.” He paused, eyeing the man. “I'll be sure to let nee-san know about your unprofessional conduct,” he added pleasantly, a thin, professional smile stretching his lips, and the family resemblance to Tsunade was more than obvious, in that moment.

“You don't have the authority-” Moriyama began to object, puffing up importantly.

“Let's put it this way,” Kyo said evenly, cutting him off. “If you don't leave, I'll turn you into another patient.”

Moriyama sent her an irritated look, though he couldn't meet her gaze and he busied himself with other things quickly, and then stalked out with an offended huff.

“Kyo-chan, are you alright?” Nawaki asked, features relaxing into something more normal the moment the other medic was gone.
Kyo sent him a look. “Don't touch me right now,” she bit out.

She needed a moment.

And besides, she'd really love it if someone made sure Genma wasn't poisoned any time soon. She turned to give her brother a once-over and Nawaki seemed to take the hint.

He walked more properly into the room, closed the door behind him, and pulled out a metal stool from beneath the bed-thing Genma was lying on.

“Hey, there, little guy,” Nawaki greeted him with a friendly smile. “Sorry to hear you hurt yourself, but we'll fix you up before you know it, and then your nee-chan will bring you home and take good care of you, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Genma agreed wetly, rubbing at his eyes with his good hand, even though there was no longer a needle in the other one.

Kisaki noiselessly stalked up beside her, and Kyo placed a hand on her head.

“Thank you,” she said, voice still far too flat, but at least Kisaki didn't care about that.

The dog pressed against her hip, producing a breathy, irritated huff in silent agreement.

Nawaki was still talking with Genma, explaining what he was doing and asking him questions about what he'd done today, how he'd ended up hurt.

“I wanted to throw it like nee-san does,” Genma confessed in a small voice, peering miserably down at his hand. “But I couldn't do it, and then I tripped.” A few more tears dripped from his eyes at the admittance.

Kyo wanted to ask- but, no.

Anything she wanted to say would come out far too harsh right now, and she truly wasn't angry with Genma. Disappointed, yes. Worried, definitely. But not angry.

He'd just given her a huge scare, and then the idiot medic had gone and made it worse.

For every second that passed and nothing further happened, Kyo felt herself slowly ease out of... whatever you wanted to call it. The mental state that made it seem like a good idea to just eliminate whatever it was that was in front of her.

Which was honestly frightening in itself, and she didn't know what to do about it. She'd have to talk to Katsurou-sensei about it again.

Whenever he deigned to show up.

Taking a deep breath, Kyo deemed it safe enough to move, walking back over to sit on the bed-thing beside Genma, looking him over worriedly.

Nawaki had one hand on her brother's chest, though, and he was wearing an expression of intense concentration, so she didn't want to interrupt or distract him by speaking.

Genma turned to look at her, and Kyo forced a small smile she hoped was at least somewhat reassuring.

“Allright,” Nawaki said, blinking and ending the iroyu jutsu he'd been using on the little boy in front
of her. “No poison in his system that I can detect,” he announced.


Nawaki grinned at her, looking inordinately pleased. “Hey, it's not often I get to actually practise these things on patients, which is just a shame, if you ask me, seeing how ruthlessly nee-san is teaching me. This was a great opportunity, so thanks, little guy,” he said cheerfully, turning to look at Genma for the last part, reaching out to ruffle his hair playfully. “But, try not to do it again, yeah? Nee-san will be unhappy with all of us if your nee-san ends up putting someone in the hospital.”

Kyo couldn't help but snort.

She had a feeling Tsunade was going to be more upset with that medic than with her, but she agreed that there was no need to tell Genma that. Not that she thought he'd be taking her needles without permission again any time soon.

“So everything's done? We can leave?” Kyo asked, reaching out to lift up her brother and fold him into a tight hug. Something he didn't seem opposed to in the least, if you judged by how firmly he held on to her.

“Yes,” Nawaki said, getting to his feet and pushing the stool back in under the bed-thing with a foot. “All better again!”

Kyo nodded and prepared to walk out of there, though she paused beside Nawaki. Reached out to grasp his hand, for a moment. “Really, Nawaki. Thank you.”

He smiled, looking a little bashful. “You're welcome. I really like being a medic, you know, and I'm being taught by the best! So feel free to come to me if you ever need it, to be sure!”

Kyo managed another small smile, and then walked out.

She hadn't taken more than a step out of the examination room before a small hand slipped into hers and Ashika frowned worriedly up at her a second, glancing at Genma, before she turned to glare ahead.

Kyo waited for Minato catch up, pressed her shoulder against his for a second.

“Ready to go?” her teammate asked with a small smile.

She was really glad he'd come along.

-x-x-x-

Tou-san had been unimpressed, both with Genma's plan to learn to throw needles on his own, and with the condescending medic, when they'd told him about it, and had consequently sat Genma down for a long conversation.

Kyo had listened in on it enough to know tou-san wasn't angry with Genma, either, but worried for him.

“Why didn't you ask your sister to teach you?” tou-san had asked, at one point.

“I did, and she said no,” Genma had mumbled back, and. Kyo had a vague memory of that.

She hadn't paid it much attention, because they'd been in the middle of a lesson, and there was so
But she'd told Genma she'd teach him eventually, so she hadn't expected him to just. Try to learn on
his own.

Regardless, their dad had talked it over at length with the boy, discussed why it was wrong, gone
over how dangerous it might have gotten and whatnot, so she was perfectly willing to leave it behind
them.

Provided something like it never happened again.

Two days after the needle incident, when Jiraiya was wrapping up the fuuinjutsu session they'd
focused much of the day on, Kyo got something else to think about.

Jiraiya turned to stare at the edge of the training grounds about at the same time Kyo became aware
of someone approaching, and she looked up to see Yamanaka Inoki walking towards them.

Kyo stared.

She exchanged a look with Jiriaya, but the man shrugged.

“Doubt he's here for me,” he said, and yeah. Inoki was staring at her.

She didn't know why he'd seek her out, though, but...

He was the Yamanaka clan head.

Kyo quickly packed up the last of her things, slipped her notebook away and then jogged over to
Inoki, trying to tell herself she was being ridiculous. There was no need for dread to weigh down her
guts.

“Inoki,” she greeted.

“Kyo,” he returned evenly, face grave. “I need to speak to you about Katsurou.”

Kyo stared up at him, feeling like the ground was crumbling away from beneath her feet until there
was nothing keeping her out of the gaping abyss underneath.

Only reason she remained standing was because she'd all but frozen solid at those words.

No.

Please tell her that didn't mean what she thought it did.

-x-x-x-
“He's not dead,” Inoki said firmly, no doubt able to see the raw panic on her face.

Kyo took a shuddering breath and shifted one of her feet to keep from staggering.

She repeated those words in her head, over and over again for a little while, which helped.

He wasn't dead. He wasn't.

Taking another unsteady breath, Kyo finally felt able to concentrate on Inoki again, and fixed him with a deeply unamused look.

Had it really been necessary to scare her like that?

Kyo felt a little wild-eyed, to be honest, like she was high on adrenaline or something, and buried her fingers in Kisaki's fur when the ninken came trotting over.

Inoki glanced at the dog, and then turned back to Kyo. “Katsurou is not dead,” he repeated, “but he's not in perfect condition, either.” And on a closer look, Inoki looked pretty worn and tired. “I came to ask if you'd be willing to extend a bit of assistance.”

Kyo stared at the man, trying to for the life of her figure out what that meant.

So, sensei wasn't dead, but probably injured? What in the world could Kyo possibly be able to do to help? She wasn't a medic.

Wait, she was very clearly missing something.

Inoki wasn't a medic, either, why was he approaching her?

Right now, Kyo felt more confused than anything else. Almost.

The absolutely defining emotion clouding her head was worry.

“I'll help,” she said, even though she had no idea how, yet.

Inoki's lips twitched minutely, looking like they wanted to stretch in an uneven, wry smile, before he smoothed out his expression again.

“Don't agree before I've told you everything.”

Kyo scowled at him. This was about helping Katsurou-sensei, of course she was going to agree!

Rather than say anything more, Inoki gestured at her to come with him, and Kyo fell into step with a distracted wave goodbye at Minato and Jiraiya, too preoccupied to manage anything more right now.
Kisaki stuck close to her side all the way through the village.

“Where are we going?” Kyo asked, when it became clear they weren't going to the hospital.

“Psych.”

Oh.

“So what kind of help could I possibly provide, anyway?” she couldn't help but ask, because she couldn't think of anything.

“Katsurou had a rather unpleasant encounter with a genjutsu specialist during his mission,” Inoki told her quietly, once they'd finally entered the Psych building and were out of the public eye. “He returned a week ago, and he's in poorer condition than I'd like. He took down three people before we could incapacitate him,” Inoki informed her frankly.

Kyo stared at nothing.

'Took down' could mean a number of things, really.

“Okay?” That was... interesting, she supposed, but still didn't tell her much of anything about why she was here.

Inoki paused, coming to a stop in an otherwise deserted hallway, and getting into Psych had never been so easy and uncomplicated as with the Yamanaka clan head beside her.

Other than having to give up every single weapon on her person, no one had given her so much as a second glance, and she hadn't had to sign anything.

The man turned to meet her gaze.

“We're keeping him sedated, for his protection. And ours,” Inoki told her blandly, and she couldn't read his face at all. “You and Katsurou are close, know each other better than most people realise,” he continued. “I know this for a fact if only due to my status as Katsurou's shrink.” He paused for a second, the weight of his gaze enough to freeze her in place. “Getting to see someone familiar might help him, but you need to know that it also might not. If things go badly, your and Katsurou's relationship could change because of it.”

Kyo managed a slow blink, for a moment just letting that swirl around in her head while she focused on the warm weight that was Kisaki pressing against her side.

She still wasn't sure exactly what that actually meant, though she was starting to get a vague picture.

But she wasn't turning around and going home.

“I want to try,” Kyo said quietly, focusing back on Inoki, who didn't look surprised in the least.

He nodded, and turned to continue down the corridor, leading them deeper into the bowels of Psych.

Kyo had never been in this part of the building before, and she soon enough figured out why.

*High security wing,* was written on the door Inoki was leading them towards, and it looked like a warning, rather than a simple description.

She couldn't help the feeling of dread that settled deep in her gut when they were let inside and the door clicked shut behind them. Locking.
Wow, okay, this was unsettling.

Kyo exchanged a look with Kisaki, who's ears were folded back until they lay flat against her head, clearly on edge.

She hadn't made a sound, though, and Kyo could tell from the look in her eyes she wasn't going anywhere without her.

“This way,” Inoki said, slanting her an assessing look and gesturing to his right as soon as he was done talking to the two men that clearly worked on this ward.

...or was it better to say they guarded it?

The first option sounded better, though, and Kyo didn't know enough about how this part of Psych operated to really be able to say. But she was sticking with the first option until proven otherwise.

Inoki eventually opened a door, unmarked and metal, like all other doors here, and motioned at her to enter ahead of him.

Which she did.

Kyo blinked and took in a surprisingly cosy room, with a pair of couches, a coffee table, behind which there seemed to be something of a kitchen area.

It looked a little bit like a home, if too bare, impersonal and plain to be a real one.

There were a few doors along the walls.

There were also people in here, and none of them were Katsurou-sensei.

Kyo eyed them all intently, and felt somewhat surprised to see Chie among the ones present.

Huh.

“Take a seat, Kyo,” Inoki said, walking past her and moving towards the couches.

The rest of the people were standing around what served as the kitchen table, and they were discussing something rather intensely in quiet voices.

Kyo went to take a seat on the couch, facing Inoki, and she clasped her hands together and pressed them in between her knees.

Kisaki sat down on the floor beside her feet, staring at the Yamanaka.

“If you still want to do this once we're done talking, there are a few things we need to make clear,” Inoki said, jumping straight into it, which Kyo appreciated. “First, know that we'll be observing every second, and will intervene as quickly as we can the moment things go bad. Second, for that same reason, your ninken partner needs to stay in here.” He held up a hand to stall any protests, though it didn't stop the low growl that escaped from Kisaki's throat. “Extracting one person is quick and efficient. Adding a ninken complicates matters. There's no use arguing; this is non-negotiable.”

Kisaki turned to look at her, and she looked annoyed, but-

“Fine,” the dog said, even though it was perfectly clear she was far from happy.

Inoki nodded. “You will not be talking about anything that might upset him, even if you get him to
verbally respond and ask questions,” he continued. “I know he's your shrink, but this is for his benefit, not yours, and you need to remember it.”

Kyo nodded shortly.

Yeah, she’d sort of figured that already.

“Anything else?” she couldn't help but ask.

“Wait, who the hell brought a kid in here?” one of the three people by the kitchen table asked abruptly, voice loud and grating, finally noticing her.

Kyo sent the teenager an irritated look.

“I did,” Inoki said blandly. “She's here to spend some time with Katsurou.”

“What,” the grown man standing next to Chie said flatly, turning to give Kyo a pensive once-over.

“Yeah, that's insane. He shredded three people's minds!” the teenager agreed, sounding horrified and incredulous at the same time.

“Listen, kid, you don't want this guy inside your head,” the man told her firmly, and Kyo was starting to feel offended.

Rather than try to argue, she turned back to Inoki, pretending the two strangers hadn't said anything.

“You think this might work, right?”

“Yes.”

Kyo nodded to herself. “Okay. Let's try.” And she really wanted to see Katsurou-sensei. Make sure he was alive and... maybe not alright, but as close to it as was possible.

“I was planning to give you a bit of background information, first,” the man said evenly, though he didn't look particularly surprised.

Kyo frowned at him. “Is that something I really need to know?”

“Yes!” the teenager interrupted. Again.

Kyo turned to fix him with a narrow-eyed look, because who even was he, and why the hell did he have such a poor opinion of Katsurou-sensei?

“Inoki-sama, you can't let a Genin go in there right now,” he argued, making as if to sound sensible and reasonable.

“Make your apprentice shut his mouth, Masaru,” Chie said absently, still mostly busy reading through the papers on the table in front of her, looking largely unconcerned. “You need to teach him better if he can't read people better than that.”

'Masaru' sighed and sent his apprentice a quelling look.

Kyo turned to stare impatiently at Inoki. She was worried about sensei and would really like to see him now, please.

Everything else came secondary right now.
“I suppose,” he mused thoughtfully, eyeing Kyo almost curiously for a second, before he shrugged. “It won't make much of a difference,” he decided, and got to his feet. “Through here.”

Kyo leaned down to press a quick kiss to Kisaki's snout, and then followed him.

Inoki opened one of the doors, which led into a small, darkened room that contained nothing other than another door and a decently-sized window.

Kyo walked in and looked through the window, taking in the room on the other side.

It looked normal enough, if you ignored the fact the furniture was bolted to the floor. Other than that, it looked similar to the room Hyena had stayed in, back when he'd checked himself into Psych.

Katsurou-sensei was sitting on the bed, though, legs stretched out on the mattress in front of him, crossed at the ankles, with his back propped up against the headboard.

He was staring vacantly at nothing in particular, and he looked a bit... she wasn't sure how to describe it.

Kyo didn't like it.

For as long as she'd known him, sensei's eyes had been sharp, alert, missing nothing.

“Changed your mind?”

The question jarred her back to the present and Kyo sent Inoki an irritated scowl, lifting her chin a fraction.

“No,” she informed him coldly.

Inoki eyed her with something that looked almost like a smile. “Know that I will be here watching, and if things go south, will get you out.”

“Yeah, thanks,” Kyo huffed, still not feeling particularly charitable, even though she rationally knew sensei must have done enough things to warrant this kind of behaviour. She still didn't like it, and she felt offended on his behalf.

Inoki studied her a second longer, and then moved to open the door for her.

Kyo walked past him without hesitation and entered the room on the other side, and she already knew what it looked like, but it still felt different, now that she was actually in it.

Katsurou-sensei's gaze had come to rest on her face the moment she stepped into view, but he hadn't otherwise reacted in the slightest.

“Hi, sensei,” Kyo greeted him softly, abruptly wondering what the hell she was supposed to say. Or do.

Katsurou didn't react at all, and Kyo watched him carefully in silence for a long few seconds.

She knew he was supposedly unstable enough to be sedated, and Inoki had implied a whole host of other things, too, but... she couldn't for the life of her help but feel anything other than relieved at the sight of him.

Katsurou was alive and breathing, and for a little while today, she'd thought he was dead.
Releasing a small sigh, Kyo slowly wandered over to where he was sitting, keeping a close eye on his body-language while she was at it, but this just felt like normal, to her.

If she ignored the somewhat vacant look to his eyes and minute slackness to his face.

Kyo decided that, unless Katsurou-sensei gave some kind of indication to the otherwise, she'd treat this as close to normal as she could.

So she slowly took a seat at the end of the bed, folding up her legs in front of her and making herself comfortable, still watching him.

“I've missed you,” she said. “A lot's been going on while you were away, and I've been wanting to tell you everything about it. Did you know I met Honoka again?” she said, because Katsurou-sensei had told her he liked listening to her talk about her life. Found it calming. “We talked and I invited her to the hot-spring with me. It was really nice, and I was just really relieved to hear she doesn't hate me, you know? It was a mission, but it was still shitty.”

Inoki had told her not to talk about anything upsetting, so she wouldn't.

She smiled. “You won't believe this, but I finally managed to kick some sense into Kaimaru,” she continued. “We both got yelled at by the medic after, but it was absolutely worth it, because he's not being all stupid any more and I got my friend back. Kisaki's probably still planning to bite him at the first opportunity she gets, but I'm sure she'll come around eventually; you know what she's like.”

Kyo shrugged, and tried to sort through all the topics she'd been planning to bring up with sensei, and picking the harmless ones as she went. “What else? Inoichi is being an utter idiot, and if I have to witness him flirting with anyone ever again, I might just do something drastic.” She rolled her eyes, and only belatedly remembered Inoichi's dad was watching and listening in, but... ah, whatever. If he wasn't aware of Inoichi's skirt-chasing already, she'd eat a shuriken. “And then he has the nerve to try and tease me about Nawaki, which is just absurd, because I've been trying to get him to stop with the,” she gestured vaguely with one hand, “whatever the hell he thinks it is he's doing,” she huffed.

Kyo continued to talk, sticking to light-hearted, relatively uncomplicated topics, all the while watching Katsurou-sensei watch her.

“-I feel like I'm getting closer to finalizing my seal design, which is really nice. Jiraiya's been supplying me with more scrolls to read, though, so I guess I still have a ways to go, but it's still a relief to know I'm improving.”

Minato had all but finished his seal, which was honestly amazing, and she couldn't wait to see what he'd try and tackle next.

Kyo leaned her elbow on her knee and rested her chin in her hand, watching sensei idly.

He wasn't responding at all, and she'd been talking continuously for what felt like an hour.

He wasn't freaking out and reacting badly either, despite what Inoki and everyone else seemed to have feared, which was at least good.

Kyo didn't feel like talking any more, though, and she was pretty sure she'd exhausted all the topics she'd wanted to address that she'd deemed appropriate for this situation, so she just sat there.

Watching sensei, studying him and relaxing.

She knew she was probably supposed to be on her guard or something, but she couldn't make herself. Not when sensei wasn't showing even the slightest hint to do anything at all, either good or
bad.

Kyo wasn't sure how much time passed in silence, but it was peaceful, and almost soothing, to just sit there.

Sharing Katsurou-sensei's space.

She didn't know at what point her eyes had slid shut, but she opened them again when a hand closed around her arm.

“Kyo.”

“Hi, sensei.” She smiled, opening her eyes and meeting Katsurou's gaze, which was still distant and somewhat cloudy, but he was actually looking at her. Seeing her.

“You're real,” he observed, almost blandly.

“Yeah,” she agreed, still smiling at him, because she was just so relieved.

Katsurou seemed to painstakingly think something through for a moment, an ever so slight frown pulling on his features. “I might slip into your head,” he admitted, mouth flattening with displeasure.

“That's fine. You've been in there already, sensei,” she assured him.

Kyo was worried about a lot of things, but having Katsurou in her head was not one of them. She trusted him.

Katsurou's fingers tightened around her arm, and there was something in his eyes, before he let out a slow breath.

When he pulled on her, Kyo went easily and melted into the tight hug Katsurou wrapped her in, a couple of his fingers ending up on the side of her neck, checking her pulse.

When Katsurou-sensei leaned his forehead to her shoulder, she slowly moved to hug him back and she wouldn't move a muscle until he either let go or someone told her to.

Kyo was perfectly happy to stay where she was, even though Katsurou's hold on her was nearing Restrictive and probably close to white-knuckled.

This was fine.

Kyo was pretty sure they'd been sitting like this for hours now, and part of her wanted to shift and make herself more comfortable. Ease her complaining muscles and stretch a little.

She wouldn't, though.

Katsurou-sensei was still holding on too tight to be comfortable, but she didn't mind.

She leaned her cheek against his hair and wondered if she'd wake him up if she moved a bit, anyway.

One of her legs had fallen asleep a while ago.

Thinking about it a while longer, Kyo finally gave in to her body's insistent complaining and slowly,
carefully shifted from her awkward sprawl until she was sitting between sensei's legs, her own legs stretched out over his right thigh, leaving her feet hanging off the edge of the bed.

Feeling much better, Kyo settled back down and let Katsurou continue to hug her tightly.

Ignoring the circumstances, it was pretty nice.

Her moving seemed to have stirred Katsurou-sensei from whatever state he'd fallen into, though, and he slanted her with a look she blinked questioningly back at.

He looked a bit more alert now, which might have something to do with it.

“It's fine,” she told him, even though he hadn't said anything. “You know I like hugs.”

Something wry flickered through his eyes, for just a second and Kyo smiled impishly back.

“Hey, you're one of my favourite people.”

Katsurou exhaled slowly, closed his eyes for a second, and then turned to stare at the wall with the... one-way-mirror, huh. And the door.

Kyo peered over, not feeling surprised, exactly, but she hadn't paid the window so much as cursory attention after she'd walked in here.

“Inoki said he'd observe in case you lost control,” Kyo told him softly.

Katsurou's jaw clenched, but he didn't look surprised. “I hate the fucking sedatives,” he muttered under his breath.

“Well, they help, right?”

Katsurou frowned minutely and briefly met her gaze.

His comment made more sense when, a few minutes later, the door opened and Inoki walked inside with a food tray in his hands.

“Dinner,” he announced evenly, and approached until he could put it down on the bed beside the two of them.

Kyo looked over the food and mused that it looked pretty good.

“Kyo,” Inoki said, drawing her attention. “How are you feeling?”

“Fine?” Kyo blinked confusedly at him.

“Fine?” Kyo blinked confusedly at him.

He eyed her pensively for a long second, flicked a glance at Katsurou, who was frowning at the food, and then turned back to her. “Would you be willing to come with me for a few minutes while Katsurou eats?”

Kyo tilted her head. Turning that over in her head.

“Oh, alright,” she decided. Katsurou wasn't keeping her here against her will, but they probably wouldn't believe just words. Not when things like mind-control could be involved. “I could probably use a bathroom break,” she admitted.

Inoki nodded and helped her get up without disturbing the food tray in the process.
When she was back on her feet, Kyo turned to look at Katsurou-sensei, who was watching her and Inoki blandly. “I'll be right back, sensei.”

Katsurou made a vague grunt of acknowledgement, but didn't otherwise react.

Kyo followed Inoki out of the room.

She blinked and wordlessly took in the small room outside the door, eyeing Chie and the two others, who had all apparently been observing? Okay?

Kisaki was also waiting for her, which was nice, the ninken approaching her the moment the door closed behind Inoki, wagging her tail and snuffling at her hands.

“How is he?”


The man eyed her with an understated sense of wry amusement and gestured at her to follow.

Which she did.

They went to sit on the couches again, Inoki facing her and eyeing her speculatively. “Will you oppose a superficial screening of your mind?” he asked.

Kyo blinked at him and thought it over.

Well. They had mentioned Katsurou messing up three people's minds, and sensei had told her himself he might accidentally slip into her head.

“No. Go ahead.” The quicker they got this over with, the quicker she could go back to Katsurou-sensei.

Inoki nodded and slowly reached out to touch the tips of his fingers to her forehead, which was bare -she absently wondered who the hell had ever used a hitai-ate as a weapon- and then removed them a small handful of seconds later with a satisfied nod.

Which probably meant sensei wasn’t lurking about in there, right?

Kyo found that thought far more amusing than it ought to be, she was pretty sure.

“So? He's not sleeping, is he.”

“Not willingly,” Inoki admitted evenly.

Kyo sighed. “He doesn't really appreciate the drugs.”

Inoki twitched a shoulder in a shrug. “We'll take him off them the moment we can be sure he won't spiral back into a state of constant high-alert. We'd seal up access to his chakra instead, but the one time we tried, he panicked rather badly,” Inoki said, voice bland and matter-of-fact.

Kyo stared at him a moment, and then sighed again. “But he's improving, right?”

“Yes. The fact he recognized you as substantial and real on his own is encouraging.”

Right.
“Did you have a bathroom around here or what?” Katsurou'd had one in his room, but if she was already out here...

Inoki got to his feet. “Over here.”

Kyo quickly used the toilet, washed her hands, and then walked back out to where Inoki was waiting, looking pensively thoughtful.

They walked back into the small hallway-like room after that, where Chie, Masaru and his apprentice were waiting.

The moment the apprentice spotted Kisaki, he subtly shifted away from her. Which was interesting.

Kyo turned to fix the dog with a look. “Kisaki.”

“What?” Kisaki gazed innocently up at her, like she'd never done anything wrong ever.

Kyo had to bite back a smile, but only said, “Try to behave yourself,” before she wandered back into Katsurou's room the moment Inoki opened the door for her.

Sensei hadn't really moved while she'd been gone, and the tray still stood undisturbed on the bed beside him.

Kyo eyed him for a moment, and then slowly walked over to sit down next to him, close enough her side was pressed to his.

“Food looks good here,” she commented.

“It's drugged.”

Kyo blinked and eyed the food curiously. “Which part of it?” she couldn't help but ask, feeling far more interested than most people probably would be.


“Huh. Well, that sort of makes sense,” she mused faintly, still studying the meal Inoki had brought. “Apparently, you did cause a lot of trouble.”

Katsurou fixed her with a wry look. “I thought Inoki would have briefed you.”

“He did. Sort of. But I don't have to know everything about you, sensei. You're still the same person, you know? And I love you.”

Katsurou-sensei's face closed off, which was disappointing.

“You should leave.”

Kyo started, for a second sure she'd misheard. “Why?”

Katsurou fixed her with a look, and he definitely looked more alert now compared to when she'd first arrived. “I'd rather you left,” he said blandly, which didn't answer her question at all.

She had a moment to feel off-balance and hurt, before she narrowed her eyes on him. “Bullshit,” she snapped.

“Kyo, you don't even realise what kind of person I am, what I've done, how many people I've
injured in ways you can't even imagine,” Katsurou began, voice cold and even, like it always was, but she didn't care.

“Oh, you mean I don't know you?” she demanded tightly, feeling increasingly angry, which felt strange, because she'd been almost abnormally calm so far, thinking about it. “Just because I haven’t been briefed on your file, on whatever trauma’s sparked this situation, the last six years of my life don't matter?”

“It's not the same,” Katsurou said flatly, frowning darkly at her.

“How is it not the same?” she demanded curtly, all but glaring at him now. “I know enough about you to know you. I don't need some other person to tell me every detail about all the shit you've been through. If you want me to know something, you can damn well tell me yourself.”

“That's not how this works.”

“Says who?” Kyo challenged impatiently. “And after everything we've been through, if you think I'll leave just because it turns out you're not some flawless pinnacle of the human race, then I have no idea what's wrong with you.”

“Shut up, Kyo.”

“Make me,” she bit out angrily.

Something mean flitted through Katsurou's eyes, which was all she had time to register before everything went dark.

Kyo was pretty sure she heard the door slam open behind her, but she was sort of busy.

By the time she came to again, Kyo was rather certain she was in a completely different part of the Psych building.

Kyo stared around herself in confusion for a moment, before she realised what must have happened. Irritation replaced her confusion almost immediately.

“Oh, this is just great,” she muttered under her breath. “If you're still in there, then I hope you can feel exactly how unimpressed I am with you.”

Looking around didn't yield so much as a hint as to where she was, and she couldn't remember actually getting here, so... Kyo picked a direction and started walking.

“What is wrong with the people in my life, lately? First Kaimaru, and now you?” she muttered. And it wasn't like Katsurou-sensei could blame anything on being a stupid teenager.

Sure, he was hurting right now, and far from at his best, but still!

Didn't stop her from being angry with him.

“Why can't you just accept that I love you and want to be there for you?” she demanded huffily, and it was probably not a great idea to talk to herself while walking through Psych, but she couldn't bring herself to care.

Where the hell had Katsurou-sensei taken her, anyway?
She still didn't recognize anything, and she'd been walking for a few minutes now. Hadn't come across any people, either.

“I hope you realise you made me leave Kisaki behind, and I will absolutely tell her exactly who's fault that is,” Kyo sniffed, taking another turn. “She'll be very unimpressed with you.”

“Who the hell are you?” a Psych ninja demanded two minutes later when she took another turn and finally spotted another human being.

“Shiranui Kyo. I'm looking for Yamanaka Inoki. I'm a bit lost,” she admitted blandly, staring expectantly at the man.

Who was eyeing her a bit dubiously. “This is the high security wing,” he said slowly.

“Oh, that's good. Looks like he didn't make me run too far, then,” Kyo mused with a frown. “Seriously, if you're still in my head, I just want you to know I'm so annoyed with you, sensei,” she muttered.

Which. Made the Psych ninja look wary. “What did you say your name was again?”

“Shiranui Kyo.”

“Shit. People have been looking for you for hours,” he muttered, giving her a careful once-over.

Kyo stared, and then raised a hand to rub at her eyes with a sigh. “Hours,” she repeated flatly.

Actually, thinking about it, her chakra reserves were smaller than they ought to be, and she felt a little bit like she'd been moving about a lot.

This was so weird.

“Can you take me to Inoki or what?” she finally asked.

“...sure. This way,” the man in front of her said, gesturing at her to move, and it didn't escape her notice that he made her walk ever so slightly ahead of him.

By the time she was back in the right corridor, Kyo was feeling highly unamused, and she crossed her arms in front of her chest while she waited for anyone to open the door.

It opened to reveal the apprentice guy, who yelped and slammed the door shut in her face.

“Okay, that's just rude,” Kyo huffed. The Psych ninja standing beside and slightly behind her snorted softly. “Don't laugh, that guy is supposed to be one of you. Which makes him indirectly your problem,” she muttered sourly.

It took a minute and then the door opened again, revealing Chie, who fixed Kyo with an intent look.

“Hello, Kyo.”

“Hi. So I hear you've been looking for me for a while.”

“Indeed,” Chie agreed. “And how are you feeling?”

“Very annoyed and irritated,” Kyo returned. “But other than that, just fine. Can't really remember anything between talking with sensei and when I woke up standing in some random corridor.”

Chie nodded slowly, exchanged a look with the unfamiliar Psych shinobi that had escorted her back
here and then gestured at her to come in.

Kyo stalked inside with a huff. And was immediately almost run over by Kisaki.

“You okay?” the dog asked, looking her over intently and sniffing concernedly at her. “No one
would let me help look for you.”

“I'm fine,” Kyo bit out and then sent Chie a look. “So when can I go talk to sensei again?” The other
Psych man didn't look to be here, for all that his apprentice clearly was. Out looking for her?

“We won't be doing that,” the woman informed her calmly. “Please take a seat.”

Kyo frowned unhappily, but walked over to the couch to sit as instructed.

“Before anything else, we need to make sure you haven't suffered any damage,” Chie said. “Is
Katsurou still present, or do you think he's left?”

Kyo stared at her. “No idea.”

Chie blinked very slowly. “You don't seem very concerned,” she observed neutrally.

“Should I be?” Kyo couldn't help but ask, feeling perplexed.

Chie studied her with an unreadable expression for a long moment.

Katsurou-sensei had already seen all of her worst memories, and she'd talked to him about pretty
much everything else. It was sort of a point not to keep secrets from your shrink, or it might defeat
the whole purpose of having one.

Kyo talked even about the things that made her deeply uncomfortable with Katsurou, and he was
always supporting her. No matter what.

“You are very lucky, Kyo,” Chie eventually informed her. “I hope you realise this could have ended
very badly.”

“Sensei doesn't want to hurt me.”

“It's not about what he wants to do right now,” Chie sighed quietly. “The problem is he's not fully in
control of himself, and that makes it harder to differentiate between who's an enemy and who's not.
Makes it harder to react with anything other than hostility when under even the slightest amount of
stress.”

Kyo thought that over carefully, and she supposed it made sense, in a way. “He'd have no reason to
hurt me, though,” she couldn't help but press.

She just couldn't see any situation where she was a big enough threat to sensei he'd feel the need to
go on the offence.

Chie took a deep breath. “Perhaps it was a bad idea to bring you here,” she mused, still eyeing Kyo
intently. “Inoki assured me you were mature enough despite your age, but perhaps not.”

Kyo blinked.

That was a first.

“It's not childish to believe in and trust the people you love,” she said tartly. “Sensei isn't at his best,
but that doesn't mean he's no longer the same person. You think I don't know there's something dark in him? That doesn't go away, ever, even when he's fine.” She frowned at the woman. “I may not know all the details, or anything specific, but I'm not blind or deaf, and I can connect the dots to come to certain conclusions. That doesn't change anything.”

Chie tilted her head, pensive and curious. “Oh?”

“I can know someone has been broken too many times to fully heal, but that doesn't mean I have to treat them like anything other than what they are.”

“And what's that?”

“A person.”

Inoki looked rather exhausted by the time he re-joined them, and Kyo had long since flopped over and stretched out on the couch, Kisaki sprawled partly on top of her.

Waiting easily got boring, and she'd had a long day, so Kyo figured she might as well try to nap.

“Kyo,” he breathed, giving her what she was pretty sure was a relieved once-over. “I need to screen you again.”

“Go ahead.”

She was too comfortable to move, so she just watched him walk up to her to crouch down beside the sofa.

He placed his fingers to her forehead.

It didn't take long, and a couple of second later, he hummed thoughtfully.

“He's still in there, isn't he?” Kyo asked, eyes narrowing. “I knew it! Sensei, you're an idiot,” she huffed, but didn't actually move.

“You're not opposed to it? I can force him out,” Inoki said slowly, meeting her gaze and it felt like he saw more than just her.

“Eh.” Kyo wiggled a bit, made herself more comfortable. “If he wants to hang around, let him.”

Inoki hummed again. “You won't be allowed to leave so long as he's there,” he told her. “You'll be under intense observation.”

“So? This couch is quite comfortable.” Kyo blinked at him. “Will I get to see him again?”

“We'll see.”

-x-x-x-

Over the weeks that followed, Kyo visited Psych often, whenever she was in the village, and even spent the night, a few times. Sitting with Katsurou-sensei like they were on mission, to try and help him sleep, when he was well enough.

There were a few more ‘incidents' as Inoki called them, but nothing that was bad enough she had to go to the hospital, which was fine.
Kyo was just glad Katsurou-sensei was steadily getting better.

Not that there weren't plenty of other things to keep her busy. There were still missions, training, fuuinjutsu, her family... Jiraiya finally got them started on expanding their chakra capacity, which. Sucked.

So badly.

Kyo and Minato were miserable, but at least they were miserable together.

Most days spent in the village, the both of them felt so bad after training they just limped off to whichever place was closest, whether that was Minato's apartment, or the Shiranui one.

Kisaki was perpetually laughing at them, but at least she made sure they didn't wander off course when they felt bad enough they could barely see straight.

Last night, they'd hobbled over to Minato's apartment and collapsed onto his bed, too tired to even undress other than to drop their gear on the floor in a trail on the way over from the door.

Seeing as Jiraiya was trying to kill them, he'd told them to meet up early the next morning to keep it up, so while Minato was in the kitchen throwing together something for them to eat, Kyo tried to change into a fresh set of clothes and sort out which kunai holsters belonged to who at the same time. With limited success, seeing as she felt far too bleary-eyed.

Wait, had that pouch been hers or Minato's?

With a sigh at herself, Kyo reached out to grab it to check again, because she'd already forgotten.

Kisaki, lucky dog that she was, was still sleeping, stretched out on the floor off to the side, snoring softly.

It knocked on the door.

"Kyo, can you get that?" Minato asked, and when she glanced at him, he was leaning heavily against the fridge, looking like he was about to fall asleep.

"Sure," she agreed, staggered to her feet and wandered over to the door.

She pulled it open to a sight of bright, vibrant red hair and a familiar face.

Kyo blinked blearily at Kushina, who's face was steadily reddening.

The girl opened her mouth, said nothing, and then ran away without a word.

Kyo peered after her, feeling confused and perplexed. Why the hell had she blushed?

With a shrug to herself, Kyo closed the door and shuffled into the kitchen to see if Minato needed any help.

It was weird to feel like you were starving with hunger at the same time as nausea made your stomach churn.

Chakra exhaustion was the worst.

"Who was it?" Minato asked, looking up from the frying pan to give her a look, only to pause.

"Please tell me you didn't open the door like that."
“Like what?” Kyo blinked at him, rubbing at her eyes, because she’d been awake a while by now, but it still felt like they were crusted in sand.

“Kyo, you're not wearing any clothes,” Minato pointed out, sounding pained.


Minato squinted at her, letting her know he firmly disagreed, but she didn't care. He was definitely in the wrong.

“So who was it?”

“Kushina, but I have no idea what she wanted, because she just ran off without saying anything,” Kyo muttered, slumping down at the kitchen table, leaning forward to press her forehead to the wood. “You two spending more time together or what?”

Minato groaned. “Kyo,” he complained. “And no. She comes around sometimes to challenge me to weird competitions, and I'm pretty sure she hates me.”

Kyo tilted her head to peer sceptically at him. “Minato, she wouldn't seek you out if she hated you.”

“She's trying to make me as miserable as possible,” Minato informed her, looking sad.

Kyo snorted, but didn't try to argue. “Are you done? Let's just eat and hope we don't throw up. Then you can help me sort through our things, because I didn't get to finish.”

“Yeah,” Minato agreed, and they proceeded to rather painfully get ready for yet another day.

“Hi.”

Kyo turned to stare at the unfamiliar teenager that had just approached her. “Hi,” she returned slowly, trying to figure out if she'd ever seen him before.

“I've seen you around the tower a few times,” he said, smiling faintly.

“Okay?” Kyo still didn't get what this entire conversation was about, short as it had been so far. He would have approached her differently if this was about business.

“You work around here, or what?” he asked, not looking away from her eyes.

Kyo wondered if her face was as blank as it felt. “Not really, no.”

“Oh. I'm in Mission Assignment, myself,” he told her, giving her a look like he was expecting some kind of reaction.

“...congratulations?”

“It's pretty nice. I get to see a lot of really interesting things, hear stuff, you know? It's pretty cool.” He was leaning against the wall beside her now, making himself comfortable, so the hope that he'd leave soon was probably not realistic. He was still turned towards her and very clearly invading her personal space.

Kyo subtly shifted to lean away from him.
Would it be socially acceptable to ask why the hell he was talking to her?

“Are you busy right now?” he asked next.

“Yes.” She was. She was very busy waiting for Jiraiya and Minato to get done in the Hokage's library, so they could then go and have a fuuinjutsu lesson at the Uzumaki compound.

Minato had finished his first seal and was currently picking a second one to work on. He was very proud, and they were all going out to celebrate his success tonight.

In comparison, Kyo felt hopeful she was getting close to tentatively finishing her preliminary seal design, and she wanted to hear Hinata-shishou's opinion on it.

She was very, very busy.

“Oh,” he looked disappointed, for some reason, but he recovered quickly, “what about tonight? Would you like to go grab a drink with me?”

What.

Why?

Wait... was he flirting with her?

WHY!? She was twelve, and this guy was at least seventeen! Possibly even older, and Kyo had no idea who he was or knew anything about him, other than what he, himself, had just told her and he hadn't even introduced himself.

Not that it would have helped if he'd done so, but still.

Kyo stared at him with flabbergasted disbelief, she was pretty sure, trying to figure out what kind of bet this guy had lost when Jiraiya-sensei and Minato finally reappeared, saving her from the headache she was sure she’d end up with if she tried to think about this for a second longer.

Also saved her from trying to think up an appropriate response.

“Kyo,” Jiraiya-sensei said, pausing ever so slightly, gaze flitting between her and the guy trying to flirt with her.

Kyo stood away from the wall she'd been leaning against with a sense of overwhelming relief washing through her.

Oh, thank god.

“Coming, sensei,” she said, quickly walking over to join the rest of her team, sending Kisaki a frown. “Why the hell didn't you do anything?” she hissed at the dog.

Kisaki sent her a steady look, having the nerve to look amused.

“I think I need a drink,” Jiraiya mused, still standing in the same spot, frowning at nothing and looking faintly constipated.

“You're not the one who just got randomly hit on by some weird stranger,” Kyo muttered at him, giving him a nudge. “Now, can we please go?”

“Yeah, sure,” Jiraiya muttered and got going.
“Next time, I'm going with you guys, even if I'm not getting anything,” she mumbled at Minato, who was frowning after the guy who was slowly wandering away from them, hands in his pockets, not looking particularly heart-broken over being rejected, but whatever.

“Yeah,” Minato agreed.

Kyo had noticed, over the last few months, ever since she'd started looking obviously female, that people treated her differently.

Not just like the other day, with that guy who'd flirted with her, but in almost every single aspect of her life.

People looked at her differently, and she didn't like it.

It wasn't only shinobi, either, but the change in the civilians around her was even more marked.

Kisaki had snarled angrily after the first woman who'd tossed a disapproving 'whore' after her, while visiting the market place, but Kyo hadn't been able to think of anything in particular.

She just.

She'd known about this. Had experienced it before, though it hadn't been directed at her, then.

Kaa-san had had to deal with this all the time, back when she'd still been alive, and Kyo had taken notice.

She just hadn't connected the dots, hadn't realised she'd be forced to endure it, too.

Which was something she probably should have done.

Maybe she'd been hoping it would have gotten better by the time she hit puberty? Kyo couldn't help but wonder. But then again, she hadn't exactly been expecting puberty to drop-kick her in the face, out of the blue.

Definitely not as early as it had.

Wasn't anything she could do about it, though.

“Kyo,” Kisaki said, nudging her with her shoulder and drawing her attention from where she was putting groceries in a basket, slowly wandering down the isle in a corner store close to home.

Kyo looked away from the flour she was contemplating to look at Kisaki, and then followed her gaze to the young woman who was walking towards them, a partly determined, partly exasperated expression on her face.

She didn't look familiar, other than to note she was an Uchiha, with black hair and eyes and wearing pretty standard clothes for her clan.

“Can I help you?” Kyo asked mildly, because she was very obviously staring at her, walking right at her, and maybe she was here in an official capacity?

“I'm sorry to bother you, Shiranui-san,” she began, sounding apologetic. “I was wondering if you might be willing to answer a question.”
Kyo peered at her, feeling her eyes narrow ever so slightly.

People had been weird around her lately, but it had mostly been men. And civilian woman. Would the kunoichi start, too, now?

“What kind of question?” she couldn't help but ask slowly.

“Are you in a romantic relationship with Namikaze Minato?” the older girl asked, with a perfectly straight face.

Kyo stared blandly at her for a long moment, and then went back to perusing the flour she'd been looking at before she got interrupted. “What's it to you?” she asked, finally choosing one of the bags and placing it in her basket.

Slowly wandered further down the isle until she spotted the next thing they needed.

“I am,” the girl began, voice dry, “asking on behalf of a friend.”

Which didn't really have anything to do with Kyo, did it? “Why not ask Minato?”

The Uchiha sighed through her nose, and she looked more exasperated by the second when Kyo slanted a subtle glance at her.

“Are you willing to answer the question or not?”

Kyo snorted. “We're not,” she drawled, turning to look more properly at the girl. “Why ask at all?” She felt it was pretty obvious she and Minato held absolutely no romantic interest in each other. Besides, Minato was in love with— “Wait.” She paused. “Your friend wouldn't happen to be Kushina, would it?” she asked, pretty sure she knew the answer already.

The chagrined look on the Uchiha girl's face was answer enough. “It is,” she admitted dryly, and then sighed heavily. “Now that we've gotten that out of the way, would you mind answering a few more questions?” she asked, giving her an apologetic look. “I was provided with a list.” And she proceeded to actually pull a haphazardly folded piece of paper from a pocket as proof.

Kyo sent it an incredulous look and couldn't help but laugh, just a little. “Go for it, though I reserve the right not to answer.”

“Fair enough,” the girl said with an elegant shrug. “If you're not a couple, why do you regularly hold hands?”

“Because it's nice?” Kyo supplied amusedly, grabbed a few things off the shelves she wanted and slowly wandered on. “Because it's grounding? Because he's my best friend?”

The Uchiha looked bemused, but didn't question her. She glanced down at the still folded up list, before tucking it back into her pocket again.

“If you're not a couple, what about friends with benefits?” Her face was utterly bland as she said it, and it was clear she was repeating something word for word.

Kyo sent her what she was pretty sure was a weird look.

“No,” she said simply.

“Do I really have to bring up the incident that sparked that question?” the Uchiha kunoichi asked, looking almost pained, and she was far more expressive than Ryota and Kaimaru were.
“Not really,” Kyo said, but that was it. She wasn't making this any easier on her than she had to.

“Then why the nakedness?”

“First of all, I wasn't naked,” Kyo pointed out, feeling long-suffering. “Minato and I just have sleepovers every now and then, and I was tired, okay? I was trying to do several things at once and sort of forgot I wasn't properly dressed before I opened the door.” It was perfectly logical, really. “I still have no idea why Kushina just took off like that,” she grumbled under her breath.

People were weird.

Uchiha girl looked vaguely amused now. “I think that'll be all, as for the questions,” she decided. “Thank you for indulging me.”

Kyo shrugged. “Hey, what's your name?” she asked, before the Uchiha could turn and walk away.

“Ah, my apologies. I'm Uchiha Mikoto,” she said, inclining her head in a small nod. And then left.

“Well,” Kyo said, once she was gone. “That was interesting.” And she exchanged a look with Kisaki, who tilted her head.

“Humans are weird,” the dog mused dryly.

“Agreed.”

-x-x-x-
Chapter 96

Genma had turned six a while back, and now that Kyo was far less busy and distracted with other things, finally took him aside and showed him how to throw the small needles properly, like kaa-san had showed her when she was still in the Academy. That was the most meaningful birthday gift she'd been able to think of, even if it was quite a bit belated.

At least there hadn't been a big party for her to attend, this time.

“They're too big, I can't make them fit like you do,” Genma muttered, mulishly trying to hold one of the needles she'd provided him to practice with between his fingers, like she'd demonstrated.

He'd been a bit wary of them to start with, but had gotten over any lingering fear and remembered pain relatively quickly.

“I know, but you'll grow into it,” Kyo assured him, feeling... she didn't even know.

Her little brother looked so small, and yet. When she'd been that age, she'd become a Genin.

It felt absurd.

Who the hell had signed off on that?

And when had he gotten this big, anyway? It didn't feel like it'd been so long ago that he'd been absolutely tiny.

They spent a few hours on target practice, and Genma showed her how well he could throw kunai and senbon, too.

After, she carried him home on her back, listening to him talk quietly about his friends, about what he and Ashika had been up to lately, and the training he was doing with tou-san and Ryota, whenever they were in the village.

“Hey, tou-san?” Kyo asked when they'd gotten back home again, drawing the man's attention. “Was I that small when I was six?” she couldn't help but inquire, still stuck on it.

Kou blinked at her, and then turned to peer over at where Genma was petting Kisaki, rubbing her stomach and chatting cheerfully with her at the same time.

“Yeah,” he said, head tilting ever so slightly. “Possibly a bit shorter.”

Kyo felt her face twitch. “Absurd,” she breathed.

Kou smiled wryly at her. “Watching you leave on missions was incredibly hard,” he said mildly, clearly deducing in which direction her thoughts had turned.

Kyo froze, sent Genma a calculating look, and then turned to stare at her dad with a pained one. “I have no idea how you did it.”

“You had a good team. Katsurou was a good sensei for you.” Kou took a deep breath. “It was very difficult, but we'd all prepared you as well as we could, at the time.”

Kyo shook her head to herself, indescribably relieved she wouldn't have to watch Genma leave on missions for a few years, yet.
He had to finish the Academy first, and Genma wasn't skipping grades like she'd done.

Thankfully.

There was only so much stress she could take, and Kyo'd had to go buy a new set of bras the other day, seeing as she'd outgrown the last ones. Already.

It sucked.

Dealing with puberty left her with enough stress to go around, and she couldn't wait to be done with it.

She'd managed to meet up with Honoka again, too, but only briefly. Exchanging words for a few minutes in the Hokage tower while Jiraiya picked up their last mission scroll, but it had still been nice.

Walking into her and Genma's room, Kyo absently wondered when her life had gotten so incredibly busy, intending to grab her fuuinjutsu notebook. She wanted to look over her storage seal design again.

She was so close to finishing it, she was starting to feel impatient.

But still. At least that was something to occupy herself with and take her mind off of other things.

Such as the fact she didn't know how to... further her poison skills.

Hadn't known that for quite a while actually, but by now, she had long since finished everything kaasan had taught her and gotten her started on and she just didn't know where to go from here.

As far as Kyo knew, there wasn't anyone to ask, either.

With a sigh, she focused on her fuuinjustu. She had plenty of people to ask about that, at least.

Kyo and Minato were both trying to catch their breaths during team training when a familiar redhead came stomping onto their training field, looking about as cheerful as a thundercloud.

She'd actually been wondering when Kushina would end up swinging by again, after that very weird conversation she'd had with the Uchiha friend a while ago.

“Hello, Kushina,” Jiraiya greeted the girl drily, which spoke enough about how often this had happened in the last few months.

No one was surprised.

“Jiraiya,” Kushina returned the greeting, though it was huffy and distracted at best, and Minato had already slumped with poorly concealed resignation.

Why did he always have to look like a kicked puppy whenever Kushina was concerned?

“Oi, Shiranui! I challenge you to a fight!” Kushina declared hotly in the next breath, pointing dramatically at her, feet planted firmly at shoulder-width and looking like she was bracing for a full-body tackle.

Kyo paused.
Wait, what?

She thought it over for a second, came to the conclusion it probably wasn't entirely unexpected and tried to think of any way to de-escalate this whole... situation.

Kyo had absolutely no interest in competing with Kushina for, what? Minato's affection?

No thank you.

That sounded messy. And unnecessarily complicated.

She didn't particularly want to fight with the girl, either, but...

“Okay,” she said, thinking of something that might work. Might even be fun, at least for Kyo. “But since you issued the challenge, that means I get to choose in what way we fight,” she decided with a slow, amused smile.

“Um, Kyo, I'm not sure that's a good-”

“Fine!” Kushina declared loudly, talking over Minato's nervously concerned words. “How you wanna do this?!” And she proceeded to crack her knuckles with a fierce scowl on her face.

Kyo peered curiously at the girl, exchanged a look with Kisaki, and then turned back to Kushina with what was possibly a teasing smile. “Tag.”

Kushina paused, an expression of utter incomprehension overtaking her features. “What.”

“No weapons, no ninjutsu. You're it, and if you manage to tag me within twenty minutes, you win,” Kyo said quickly and succinctly, taking advantage of Kushina's silent attention while she had it. “Minato can time us, and Jiraiya-sensei’s the judge.”

Kushina thought it over another few seconds, looking far more speculative now. “Taijutsu's okay, right?” she asked.

“Of course.”

“Deal!”

Fantastic.

“Come on, Minato, let's get out of the way,” Kisaki said cheerfully, taking hold of the boy's arm with her mouth and effortlessly dragged him with her off the field.

Jiraiya scratched at his hair, peering up at the sky for a moment, and then just went with it. “Alright then,” he said. “Both of you ready?”

“Ready!” Kushina confirmed, looking fired up.

“Yep,” Kyo said.

“Minato, you ready to take the time?” Jiraiya asked next, sending the bewildered boy a look.

“Yes, sensei.”

“Great, then let's get started on three, two, one!”
Kushina came at her like a charging bull and Kyo took off as well, having to bite back a laugh.

-x-x-x-

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” Minato asked, unable to help but feel somewhat anxious.

Kushina usually challenged him whenever she came around, why was she going after Kyo, all of a sudden? Was she just- was she gonna go after all of his friends?

Did she really hate him that much?

“It's fine,” Kisaki huffed, sounding amused. “We play this with sensei all the time,” the dog informed him, and it took a second before Minato realised what it was she was talking about, because when had they ever done this with Jiraiya-sensei?

But Kisaki wasn't talking about sensei, she was talking about Katsurou-san.

...he hadn't seen Katsurou-san in quite a while, actually. Kyo had said something about him getting injured a while back.

Minato hoped the man got better quickly, because he knew Kyo loved him a lot, even though he was sort of intimidating.

Blinking back to the present, Minato guiltily realised he hadn't been paying attention to his teammate and Kushina and quickly focused on them.

Only to have to take a moment, just to absorb what it was he was watching.

Kushina was trying with all her might to hit Kyo in any way possible, only for Kyo to slip away from her at the last second, keeping just out of reach, jumping and leaping all over the place to dodge.

Kyo's eyes were shining with the thrill of it, and she was clearly having fun.

Kushina, on the other hand... Minato bit back a wince. Kushina looked more and more frustrated for every second that passed without her coming even a little closer to touching the younger girl.

Minato, still keeping part of his attention on his inner clock, was sort of dreading the last five minutes, which were approaching far too quickly.

Kushina lunged after Kyo, who slid under the hand reaching for her, flipped back to her feet and didn't take her eyes off her opponent for so much as a second.

The redhead pushed herself upright, panted for breath for a moment, and then slowly turned to glare at Kyo with murder in her eyes.

If he'd blinked, he would have missed the sight of four glowing chains exploding from Kushina's back, aiming at Kyo with frightening speed and accuracy.

“Oi,” Jiraiya said, unamused.

“It's not ninjutsu!” Kushina yelled and went after Kyo with renewed enthusiasm.

Not that Kyo looked like she minded overly much. She just looked like she actually had to work for it, this time, dodging and using a kunai she'd pulled when he wasn't looking to redirect the occasional chain, which was topped with a wickedly sharp tip, like a knife.
She still looked like she was enjoying herself, but Minato had a bad feeling about this whole thing.

Two minutes later, he cleared his throat, took a deep breath and said, “Time!”

One of the chains tried to wrap around Kyo one last time, only for the girl to leap away with what looked like ease, and Kushina slowly stopped moving, heaving for breath and still scowling heavily.

Kyo landed without a sound, straightened up and finally let the wide smile she'd been holding back the entire time show on her face.

Kushina's expression crumpled. “SHUT UP!” she shouted angrily and ran off with a sob.

For a long moment, no one moved a muscle, other than Jiraiya-sensei, who huffed an exasperated sigh.

-x-x-x-

Kyo was still frozen, going over what had just happened, because she must have missed something.

Kushina had been good; had made her really work for the win, especially after she brought her chakra chains out.

Glancing over at Minato revealed the boy looked about as dumbfounded as Kyo felt, staring at nothing, as if the world didn't make sense any more.

Jiraiya looked long-suffering and exasperated, though, and Kyo had definitely missed something.

Taking a deep breath, she went over what had happened, but also everything that had lead up to this moment, as far as Kushina was concerned and... consequently felt like smacking herself in the face.

Kushina very clearly thought Kyo and Minato were a couple. For whatever reason. And yeah, Kyo had told her Uchiha friend they weren't, but that didn't mean the redhead actually believed it.

Which lead to the confrontation today.

It had clearly been about more than just challenging Kyo to a fight, and then she'd gone and made it look like she was... making fun of Kushina?

Kyo didn't even know, but she was very sure that wasn't how she'd meant it.

She'd honestly had a good time.

Lifting a hand to rub at her face with a sigh, Kyo sent Jiraiya a look. “I'll go after her, that's okay with you, Jiraiya?”

“Yeah, sure. Don't make it worse,” the man grunted, shaking his head and sending her a disappointed look, which was just rich, coming from him. “Teenagers,” he added in a mutter under his breath.

Kyo resisted the urge to roll her eyes and instead sent Kisaki a look. “You coming?”

“Are you sure you shouldn't just leave her alone, Kyo?” Minato asked, looking deeply troubled. “I've never seen Kushina cry like that before.”

“Yes, I'm sure,” Kyo said firmly. “See you tomorrow, Minato.”
She waited for Kisaki to trot over to her, and then calmly wandered off in the direction of the Uzumaki compound.

Leaving Kushina to her misery? Over a misunderstanding? No, that sounded like a bad idea.

Kyo might not be able to understand the way Kushina thought, but that didn't mean she'd wanted to actually hurt her feelings.

"Why are we going to talk to her?" Kisaki asked, bringing her out of her thoughts and sending her a perplexed look. "She was the one who wanted to fight."

"Yeah, but I didn't mean to actually make her cry."

"That wasn't your fault," Kisaki huffed, looking like she didn't get this at all.

Kyo frowned, trying to think of a way to explain it. "Kushina thinks I'm her, or something. I think. For Minato." Probably.

Kisaki blinked, ears flicking uncertainly. "You want to mate with Minato?" She sounded highly sceptical.

"No," Kyo snorted, and had to laugh a little, because that just sounded- "I don't. But I think I ended up hurting Kushina's feelings."

"I don't see why that matters. She's not our friend."

"No, but Minato likes her. He cares about Kushina," Kyo told her patiently, for some reason finding this conversation endlessly amusing.

Kisaki was silent for a long few minutes, clearly pondering that while they steadily made their way towards their destination.

"So you're taking steps to ensure the peace and happiness of our pack in the future," the dog finally theorized. "Minato wants Kushina for a mate, once fully grown, and that would make her pack. Making sure Kushina isn't upset with you now will make it easier for us when that day comes."

Kyo choked on air. She couldn't help it.

She slapped a hand over her mouth to keep from laughing.

Kisaki sent her an unimpressed look. "I don't understand why you're laughing," she told her flatly. "It's a sound strategy. You make a good Alpha."

That made her pause, though. "Um, I'm not anyone's Alpha, Kisaki," she couldn't help but point out. The look Kisaki fixed her with told her exactly what the dog thought about that claim. "Kushina is trying to show Minato she's a good match and win his approval. Are they putting off the mating because of their ages?"

Kyo sighed. "No, they're just being idiots. Minato doesn't realise Kushina likes him, and Kushina thinks Minato is in love with me, probably."

Kisaki snorted derisively. "Humans are weird. It doesn't have to be this complicated."

"Remember the talk we had with Genma? About puberty?" Kyo muttered at the dog, trying not to grin. "Hormones make everything more complicated than it has to be."
Kisaki scoffed, but seemed to consider it. “I don't get it,” she finally admitted.

“That's okay. You don't have to. Just,” Kyo took a deep breath, “please don't mention any of this to either Kushina or Minato, please?” She was pretty sure both of them would combust, and it'd just make everything more complicated in the long run.

“Fine,” Kisaki snorted and shook out her fur. Only to fix Kyo with a look next. “Are you going to do something like this, too?”

“Probably not,” Kyo drawled wryly, sending the dog a glance. “I've never been in love, and probably never will be.” If she'd never once been in love over the twenty six, probably twenty seven years she'd gotten in the Before, then she couldn't see herself doing it in this life, either.

Which wasn't really something Kyo would cry over.

Crushes and romantic love seemed to make a lot of things far more complicated than they needed to be, she agreed with Kisaki on that, that was for sure. And she just didn't get it.

She knew it was difficult to be upfront about things that made you feel exposed and vulnerable, but if Minato and Kushina just took an hour to talk to each other, then she felt everyone would be far better off.

Would spare them all a lot of drama.

Kyo absently greeted the gate guard and wandered into the Uzumaki compound. She hadn't been by in a while and wondered if Aita was around somewhere, or if he was away on mission.

“Think you can find Kushina?” Kyo asked, glancing down at Kisaki.

“No problem,” the dog said and determinedly stalked off in a different direction, keeping her snout somewhat lowered.

Kyo could tell the moment she picked up on Kushina's scent trail, and it took them straight to one of the main buildings.

She took off her shoes in the hallway and continued to follow Kisaki as she led her through the familiar corridors, all until-

“Kyo,” a somewhat familiar voice said, sounding surprised to see her.

Kyo blinked at the young woman standing outside one of the doors lining this corridor, tilted her head and tried to place her...

“Ren,” Kyo returned, finally remembering where exactly she'd seen her before. This was Aita's girlfriend! “Have you seen Kushina anywhere?”

Ren glanced briefly at the door behind her over her shoulder, and then turned back to eye Kyo with wry amusement. “Unfortunately not,” she lied. “What business do you have with her?”

“We had a bit of a misunderstanding just now, and I'd like to clear it up.”

“It wasn't a misunderstanding!” Kushina shouted, slamming the door open to glare at her, and her eyes were red and a bit puffy from crying.

“Yes, it was,” Kyo countered calmly.
Ren sighed. “Why don't we all go to the kitchen and have some tea? I'm sure I can find a few snacks to go with it.”

“Sounds wonderful,” Kyo agreed, because she'd just come from training, and she was hungry. Hadn't eaten since breakfast, so any kind of food sounded great.

“Why are you walking around so familiarly in here, anyway?” Kushina demanded, narrowing her eyes on her and looking like she was deliberately trying to pick a fight now.

Kyo shrugged. “Aita's assured me I'm welcome.”

“Which she is,” Ren said firmly, sending Kushina a quelling look. “Come now, Kushina. Tea and snacks, in the kitchen,” she said, taking hold of the girls arm and practically dragging her with her. Didn't let go until she could gently push her towards one of the chairs around the large kitchen table.

Kyo slid into the seat opposite Kushina's and easily ignored the girl's disdainful sniff and the way she turned her face away, crossing her arms over her chest. Body-language speaking loudly and clearly about her current feelings.

Kisaki lied down next to her, content to wait this out.

“Thank you,” Kyo said when Ren put down a mug of steaming tea in front of her, then one in front of Kushina and lastly one for herself. She also placed a tray with snacks on the table between them.

When she was done, she took the seat beside Kushina and graced Kyo with an expectant look. “You mentioned something about a misunderstanding.”

“Yes. I'm pretty sure Kushina thinks I'm in love with Minato, which, I can assure you, isn't true.”

“Liar!” Kushina huffed, still refusing to look at her.

Kyo sighed, feeling exasperated. “I really don't know what I can say to convince you, Kushina. You already sent your friend to ask, and I answered. What else do you want?”

“You were naked! In his apartment!” the girl shrieked, face reddening alarmingly fast.

“Okay, I don't know how many times I have to say this, but I wasn't naked!” Kyo huffed, rolling her eyes. “I was wearing underwear!”

Kushina muttered something inaudible under her breath.

Kyo rubbed at her eyes with the fingers of one hand. “Kushina, have you ever had chakra exhaustion?” she asked, not looking up.

“No.”

“Lucky you,” Kyo muttered. “It makes you feel very, very crappy, okay? And Jiraiya's having us press as close to it as is possible without getting us hospitalized on a regular basis, which isn't fun, so excuse me for forgetting I wasn't properly dressed before going to answer the door.” She took a deep breath. “If I'd known it'd bring this much trouble, I would've double-checked,” she muttered under her breath. “And besides, Minato and I are teammates, we've seen each other naked plenty of times on missions, but that doesn't mean I'm in love with him.”

Kushina's face was still bright red, and she was scowling at her, which meant she was at least looking at her now. “Then why would you make fun of me?” she demanded, looking oddly
Kyo took a moment to wrap her patience around herself, like a blanket. “I wasn't making fun of you. I don't want to fight with you, so I suggested tag, because it's something I play with sensei all the time and I think it's great fun. You were really making me work for it, too, you know?”

Kushina stared suspiciously at her, looking like she was trying to figure out which parts she'd lied about and which parts were just plain bullshit.

Kyo finally picked up her tea, blew on it and took a careful sip.

She turned to eye Ren.

“Is Aita away on mission?”

“He is,” the young woman confirmed.

“So you're happy being Aita's girlfriend?” she asked, and then belatedly wondered if that wasn't a rude thing to ask. Wait, crap, why was she so bad at this?

“I am, yes,” Ren said, smiling faintly and there was an ever so slight pink tint to her cheeks, though she didn't look unhappy. “I like him a lot, and Ashika is like another little sister. Genma-kun is a very good friend for her.”

Kyo smiled. “So long as they're not wrecking the kitchen?” she asked dryly, glancing around the room they were sitting in.

Ren laughed. “It's difficult to be angry with them for long, no matter how much extra job they give me,” she said, shaking her head.

“Just make them clean up any messes they make.” Kyo shrugged. “Are you solely responsible for the household?”

“I never participated in kunoichi lessons,” Ren admitted easily, inclining her head. “My parents believed it wasn't a woman's place, so I always focused on fuuinjutsu and iryou-jutsu, back before Uzushio fell, and there's been plenty for me to do around here. It's not so bad, and I get to take care of my family.”

Kyo nodded thoughtfully. “So long as it's something you enjoy doing.” Which was really the important part.

Ren smiled at her, eyes shining playfully. “Aita's told me quite a bit about you.”

“That's funny, because he's told me almost nothing about you. It's almost like he doesn't want us to get to know each other,” Kyo drawled amusedly. “Maybe I should ask him if he's ashamed of me?” she mused.

“If you're not in love with Minato, then who are you in love with?” Kushina demanded, interrupting with a fierce scowl, looking like she wasn't sure what to do with the turn the conversation had taken while she'd been quiet.

Kyo bit back an exasperated sigh. “I'm not in love with anyone. Why do I have to be?”

Kushina eyed her dubiously. Evidently not convinced.

“Look, I've never been in love with anyone, don't really understand how that entire thing works, or
how it feels,” she gestured vaguely, “and I don't think I ever want to fall in love, either.” And she'd just had this conversation with Kisaki, why was this such a big deal? “It's just incredibly illogical and messy, and the idea frankly makes me uncomfortable.”

The anger seemed to have bled out of Kushina, leaving her looking more perplexed and confused than anything else.

“I don't get you at all,” she told her bluntly.

“I don't really understand you, either.”

“You're really weird,” Kushina said firmly.

“Kushina, now you're just being rude,” Ren sighed, sending the girl an exasperated look.

Kyo laughed. “You know, you're not the first one to tell me that,” she informed them both cheerfully. “I don't really mind being weird.” It was better than a lot of other things. “So can we just agree on the fact that I'm not in love with Minato? Have absolutely no interest in him to be anything other than my best friend? Please?”

Kushina eyed her intently another few seconds, before she huffed. “Fine. But I'm keeping my eyes on you, Shiranui.”

“Wouldn't it be better to keep your eyes on Minato?” she teased gently.

Kushina's blush returned with a vengeance. “On that flaky idiot!?” she exclaimed, froze, and then slapped both hands over her face and slumped over the kitchen table, muttering inaudibly under her breath.

Kyo exchanged an amused look with Ren, who sighed indulgently and reached out to pat Kushina's shoulder sympathetically.

Kyo took two of the onigiri Ren had provided, offered one to Kisaki, and then ate the other one herself.

-x-x-x-

She would have to take old man Kaede up on that advice he'd given her a while ago, to go change out her body armour again, because it was already getting too tight in the chest, she mused sourly while she donned her ANBU gear.

If her boobs insisted on keeping this up, she might just end up nursing a grudge.

Kyo wanted to check in with Hyena, though, get in some sparring and just. Hang out as a semi-anonymous operative for a while.

Hopefully, that would let her escape from weird people, because she'd had another guy try to flirt with her yesterday, and Kyo just. Didn't know what to do with that.

It made her uncomfortable, and it wasn't like she could avoid going out into the village, which seemed to be enough for these guys to assume she was just waiting for them to try their moves. Or something.

Either way, she wasn't interested.

Kyo hadn't yet figured out how to convey that in an appropriate manner, though, other than to
disappear on that last guy, but she felt like it maybe wasn't the way to go about it, long term.

She was sort of stumbling around in the dark, here, because she hadn't had to deal with this a lot in the Before, either, but at least those times, people hadn't approached her randomly out of the blue.

That hadn't been the norm where she'd lived, in that world. Hadn't been socially acceptable.

It hadn't spared her entirely, and she could remember several incredibly awkward conversations and interactions, but it didn't exactly help her right now.

Kyo stalked out of her room and swung by her dad's bedroom, because the man had worked the night-shift and was catching up on some sleep.

“Tou-san, I'm heading out,” she said, keeping her voice soft and unobtrusive. “Going to ANBU for a while.”

“Yeah, okay.” Kou took a deep breath, rubbed at his face and sent her a fuzzy look. “You're joining us for dinner?”

“That's the plan,” she confirmed. “Sorry to wake you, just wanted to let you know.”

“I appreciate it, kitten.”

“Sleep well.”

Kou grunted an acknowledgement and rolled over, so Kyo took that as her cue to leave.

She fitted her mask to her face and shunshined out of the apartment and was running across the village before she knew it.

Seeing as Kyo was spending the day doing ANBU things, Kisaki had decided to take the opportunity to spend some time in the Inuzuka compound. Doing dog things. Relaxing.

Slipping into ANBU headquarters, Kyo felt some of the tension bleed out of her, because this was familiar territory. Here, she could just be herself and not worry about stupid things.

It took some poking around to learn that Hyena was working, but that he'd come off his shift soon, so Kyo figured she could just stick around and grab something to eat or something. Maybe get some reading done, because she'd automatically slipped a few of her fuuinjutsu scrolls into one of her pouches.

Which had become something of a habit since she'd started her personal project.

Still considering it, Kyo wandered off in the general direction of the Mess Hall, mostly lost in thoughts of fuuinjutsu theory and storage seal designs and Hinata-shishou had told her it had to feel right, whatever the hell he meant with that, and then there was the fact she'd have to make the whole thing small enough to fit on the inside of her wrist when she eventually settled on something and-

“Are you new here?”

Kyo blinked at the arm cutting off her path forward.

It hadn't been there a second ago, she was sure, because she'd swerved to walk around the people moving in the opposite direction, which had brought her closer to the wall.

The wall which a hand was now pressed against, keeping her from easily continuing her forward
momentum.

Kyo eyed the limb incredulously for a long second, and then finally thought to turn her head to study the mask of the guy it belonged to.

“Excuse me?” she asked mildly, because there might still be a logical reason for this.

“I mean, I haven't seen you around, and I'm sure I'd remember you,” Rat, also known as Idiot Number 1 -or had it been Idiot Number 2? She couldn't remember- said, angling his mask in a way that implied he'd just given her a very pointed once-over.

...oh, for fuck's sake!

The last time she'd seen this idiot had been after he and Kaimaru had sabotaged her and he'd decided to be even dumber and 'confront' her about it after.

Kyo had very pointedly gone out of her way to keep away from him after that, and she'd been under the impression he'd done the same.

Why the hell was he suddenly hitting on her!? Very, very badly, on top of that.

Kyo really didn't want to deal with this, wasn't sure how to deal with this, and she just-

Rat looked like he was about to continue with his misguided attempt to... she didn't even know, but Kyo got out a needle and very casually stabbed him in the arm with it.

Coincidentally the arm blocking her path.

“Fuck!” Rat swore, flinching and suddenly far less friendly, aiming a kick at her leg. “It's you!? I thought someone had finally done us all a favour and killed you off, you fucking brat.”

“Have a nice nap,” Kyo told him blandly, ducking under the kunai he threw at her in retaliation and casually continued her way to the Mess Hall, shifting to avoid the follow-up kick and ignoring the way Rat swore and staggered.

Someone else could deal with that.

Kyo was so done. Why couldn't people just leave her alone? What had she done to deserve this kind of attention?

Did her breasts give off some kind of hidden signal she hadn't been told about?

The things were clearly more trouble than they were worth.

Kyo was sprawled out on her back on the sofa in the communal room closest to her room, not doing anything.

Her latest fuuinjutsu scroll was lying on her face, partially unrolled, and she just couldn't be bothered to move.

If she read another word of it right now, she might just throw up.

The scroll also made sure she wouldn't have to look at anyone, and if she was lucky, it'd make people think she was asleep.
You didn't disturb anyone who was asleep, if you could help it, that was just common sense, and you definitely didn't disturb anyone sleeping for something as inane and useless as flirting with them.

If Hyena didn't show up soon, she'd leave. Call it a day.

...might go do something destructive.

Jiraiya was still shoving new jutsu down their throats at every opportunity, and had them expend ridiculous amounts of chakra whenever he knew they wouldn't leave the village for a few days, so it wasn't like she didn't have plenty of ways to do it.

Water jutsu were turning out to be a lot of fun.

And besides, having it be one of her affinities meant it was very easy to draw the stuff out of her clothes if she ever got wet, and Kyo had been playing around with the idea of maybe using a water whip with poison in it. That could be potentially devastating, because Kyo had turned out to be very good at making the water high-powered enough to cut.

Besides, any open cuts, scratches and injuries would mean any enemies were dead.

Jiraiya had given her a strange look when she'd brought it up, and then reminded her the potential use for that was limited at best on missions, now that they had peace.

And yeah. That was true.

But it wasn't like the peace would last for long and she was more than aware of it.

Thinking of the next war made her feel cold and clammy, though, so she tried not to, when she had a choice.

Just that the knowledge was there, waiting and looming in the future was enough to make it feel like Kyo was racing against the clock.

She needed to get as strong as she could, which was also why she wasn't objecting to Jiraiya's gruelling chakra training regime.

More chakra meant more stamina and more stamina meant less risk of making stupid mistakes. Less risk of dying.

Kyo frowned.

“Hi, Scorpion,” Hyena's voice greeted cheerfully, jarring her out of her thoughts.

Kyo flopped a hand in the direction his voice had come from in a half-hearted greeting. “Hi,” she returned blandly.

The scroll lifted off of her face and she got her first good look at her friend, who looked tired.

“Reading?”

“I'm avoiding my problems,” Kyo told him seriously.

Hyena snickered, curiously looking the scroll over, before he rolled it up, tugged on Kyo until he could slip it into one of the pouches on the back of her hip, took a moment to push her back into the position she had been lying in before that, and then crouched down beside her to poke her curiously on the chest.
"You should get a new one, this one's too tight," he told her earnestly.

"I know, but I didn't feel like doing it today." Hyena kept up the curious poking, like he was trying to figure out what the hell it was. "What are you doing?"

"Trying to figure out where these came from," Hyena said, sounding far too serious to be anything but. "I'm sure you didn't have them last time I saw you."

"They're new," she deadpanned and then heaved an exasperated sigh.

It wasn't like she could feel much of it through the body armour, and besides, Hyena didn't have any ulterior motives.

This was fine.

For a little while.

"Are you going to stop any time soon?" she drawled, causing Hyena to pause, tilting his head.

"Oops," he snickered. "I should go sleep," he told her, snatching his hand away from where he'd been experimentally poking at her chest to see how much give it had. He paused. "You still have muscles underneath, right?"

"Of course," Kyo snorted and finally sat up, preparing herself to stand up and leave. "Sleep well, Hyena. I'll drop by sometime soon again so we can spar."

"Nice," Hyena said, reaching out to pat her shoulder twice, and then wandered off in the direction of his room.

Kyo got to her feet, stretched, made sure Hyena had closed her pouch properly again after putting her scroll back for her, and then turned in the direction of the closest exit.

-x-x-x-

"I think you've done everything, now," Kisaki told her, peering around the room before sending her a look. "Can I get down from the couch?"

"Please let the floor dry first," Kyo said apologetically, wiping her hands off on her trousers. "But yeah, I think that was everything." She'd stocked up Katsuou-sensei's kitchen, wiped down the obvious places for dust, changed the sheets on his bed, and wiped the floors. Everything was clean and ready for Katsuou-sensei to come home.

"Are you sure he wanted you to do this?" Kisaki asked.

Kyo paused. "Well. I did it, and I won't apologise," she decided.

Sensei had been a bit distant with her lately and she didn't know what to do about it other than to try and keep treating him like normal.

"...do you think he'll be hungry when he gets here?" she asked, feeling almost nervous. This would be the first time she saw Katsuou-sensei outside of Psych in months.

Unsure what to do with herself now that she was done cleaning, Kyo dithered a moment before she walked over to sit on the couch with Kisaki.

The dog shifted around until she could push her snout against her hands, wordlessly demanding
scratches, and Kyo was only too happy to oblige.

It gave her something to do. Something to focus on.

It took about an hour before the front door opened, and Kyo and Kisaki both paused, listening intently.

Katsurou walked into the sitting room, eyed the two of them briefly, and then walked past them without a word, continuing on to his bedroom.

Kyo felt her shoulders slump.

Kisaki whined softly, nudging her and giving her a comforting look. “I will always want you close, no matter what,” she said.

“Thank you,” Kyo whispered, even though she wasn't sure Kisaki had intended that to sound like it had.

Katsurou was just...

“There's no need for you to look like that.”

Kyo quickly wiped at her face, somewhat embarrassed to find her cheeks wet and looked up to meet Katsurou-sensei's sharp gaze.

He still looked somewhat reserved, and his stance made him look mildly uncomfortable.

He'd changed clothes, was wearing what she knew was what he preferred at home. Loose, comfortable, well-worn trousers and a simple t-shirt.

They stared at each other for a moment, until Katsurou-sensei turned away to walk into the kitchen, and Kyo didn't know what to say.

She wiped at her eyes again, scrubbing the lingering tears away at the same time as she tried to tell herself she was being silly.

This was sensei. She loved him and he loved her, even though he seemed to be unable to vocalize it.

But people could fall out and drift apart even when they loved each other, though, a small, sharp voice reminded her in the back of her head.

And Inoki had warned her.

Going to see Katsurou-sensei in Psych might mean their relationship would change, and not necessarily for the better.

Kyo took a deep breath, told herself there was no need to cry, and made a conscious effort to straighten up properly. She got up, with one last pat for Kisaki, and then walked into the kitchen.

“Are you upset with me?”

Katsurou sighed and stopped what he was doing.

He stood with his back to her, staring down at the stove and whatever he was frying up, and didn't say anything for a long minute.
Kyo's eyes burned.

“Yeah,” he finally said softly, “but it's not your fault.” He was silent for a few seconds again. “I am,” he took a deep breath, “unhappy, you saw me like that.”

“Like what?” Kyo asked, unable to keep the wetness from her voice.

Katsurou sighed again and leaned his forehead against the cupboards over the counter, something tired and almost defeated in the line of his shoulders. “Kyo,” he said, and it sounded like a plea. “Can we not talk about this right now?”

Kyo bit her lip, doing her best to keep the thick feeling in her throat back, and the burning in her eyes had gotten worse and no matter what she did, she couldn't help it. “Okay,” she said, only to sob helplessly.

She raised a hand to rub irritably at her leaking eyes, angry with herself, because there was absolutely no need for her to be crying right now.

Only.

That wasn't true, and she knew it.

Fingers wrapped tentatively around her upper arm, slowly guiding her forward and Kyo let herself lean against Katsurou-sensei's chest, crying into his shoulder as he awkwardly wrapped her up in a loose hug.

“I'm not supposed to be making you cry,” the man muttered roughly, as if to himself.

It took a while, but she managed to calm down until she was just breathing against Katsurou's shoulder, eyes closed and still pressed to the soft material of his shirt. Which was now damp.

She didn't want to move.

Katsurou-sensei hesitated again, and she hated it. As if he wasn't sure if he was allowed to steer her.

He did eventually guide her over to take a seat at the table, and Kyo sat, feeling exhausted and she had a headache. Her eyes felt puffy.

Katsurou took the seat opposite her, though he kept his gaze on the table. He ran a hand through his hair, rubbing slowly at his head, looking quietly at a loss.

“People know who I am, Kyo,” he said quietly, still not looking at her, “because I-” he cut himself off, clenched his teeth for a second and then tried again. “No one wants an out of control Yamanaka close to other people.” His voice was low and rough and he sounded like he was in pain.

“You're not out of control.”

“But I was. And I might be again,” he argued wearily, leaning his elbows on the table, clasped his hands together and pressed them lightly over his eyes. “I don't want you associated with that part of me.”

“I don't understand,” Kyo admitted, and damn it, was she really gonna cry again? She wiped away the few tears that had spilled over without her permission, sniffing softly.

“Kyo, do you understand that I could have turned your mind into so many scattered puzzle pieces every single time you came to visit me?”
“You wouldn't do that.”

Katsurou tensed, though he still wasn't looking at her. “I would do that. I have done that. Many times. To comrades. To people trying to help. To-” His voice was hard and flat all the way up until it sounded like it broke. A spring wound too tight folding under the pressure. He was silent for a long time, and when he eventually resumed talking, his voice sounded raw. “When I'm functional, I'm very valuable to the village. Efficient, strong. Effective. I still can't believe someone signed off on me getting a Genin team.” He laughed roughly, without much humour, and what she could see of his mouth was stretched in a too-wide smile. “You four were one of the best fucking things to ever happen to me,” he gritted out tightly.

And then Taku and Maki had been killed.

Katsurou had been stuck in an office for a year, with Kyo off in ANBU, only to be slotted into another team, under a new sensei, and-

“I don't care that you have flaws, sensei.”

“Calling them flaws is an unspeakable understatement, Kyo,” he countered, sounding bone weary.

“You told me that we are what other people turned us into,” she told him as firmly as she could, even though there was a hair-fine tremble in her voice. “That we can only do the best with our situation, and that was true.”

“Yeah.” He was silent a moment, still wound tight. Not looking at her. “It was nice, though. Having one person who wasn't-”

“Wasn't what?” Kyo demanded, feeling so many things she wasn't sure any more.

Katsurou took a deep breath, held it, and then let it go slowly. “It's not rational, Kyo,” he told her. “I know you're not afraid of me, even when you should be, even when it's the logical conclusion. It was still nice to have one person who didn't know.”

Kyo slowly slumped forward on the table, resting her head on her folded up arms and peering tiredly up at Katsurou-sensei.

“You were there when I talked to Chie; you were in my head. You heard what I told her,” she said. “I've known for a long time you're not perfect, that you have bad sides and flaws, like everyone else. I also know you're one of the most professional people I've ever met, that you're competent, strong. You've done much more for me than most other people in your situation probably would have, and I know that no matter what,” shit, she was crying again, “no matter what situation or problem I face, I will always be able to go to you for help. That you'll look out for me, listen to me and even if you don't know the answer, you'll try to find it, or help me find it.” She sniffled, because crying always left her with a runny nose. “I trust you, and love you, and I feel safe with you no matter how bad it gets, and please don't push me away, sensei.” She took a deep, unsteady breath. “I don't know what to do if you push me away.”

Katsurou finally shifted, if only to unclasp his hands and press the heels of his hands to his eyes.

They -his hands- were trembling.

“I don't know what to do with you, Kyo,” he said, voice gravelly and thick.

“I just need you to love me back,” she sobbed, feeling pathetic, pressing her face into her arm. The fabric of her shirt sleeve slowly seeping through with tears and snot.
Sensei’s voice was so quiet when he spoke next, she almost didn’t hear him.

“I already do.”

-x-x-x-
Chapter 97

Chapter Notes

Because I'm so happy, having Silenceia here with me, I'm spreading the joy! ^^ (Also, tomorrow is the 1 year anniversary of when I started putting HtS up on Ao3, so)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Kyo was pretty sure she only found her way home after that conversation thanks to Kisaki being there to steer her and keep her from walking into things.

She'd felt so drained from all the crying and talking, she'd been all but dead on her feet.

Katsurou-sensei had shakily told her he needed some time to himself, though. Regain a sense of balance.

Find a normal.

So she'd left, somehow feeling lighter after their talk, no matter how heavy and painful it'd been.

When she'd gotten home, tou-san had taken one look at her and pulled her into a hug, prompting Kyo to burst into tears all over again, and she'd ended up crying herself to sleep.

She'd woken up in tou-san's bed the next morning, for a moment feeling like she was five again.

Life relentlessly moved on, though, filling up with ever more training, missions and her family. Her friends.

ANBU.

Kyo was sent on another assassination. An old man in the Land of River, this time, which was so much better than the last one she'd had, killing the bald old man in his sleep was almost a relief.

Before she knew it, a month had passed and she hadn't seen sensei since their talk, and while she missed him, she was fine with giving him space.

Kyo had spent a few hours sparring with Hyena and was on her way home when an unfamiliar operative got her attention.

“Scorpion?” they asked, and when Kyo turned towards them with a nod, passed her a scroll and was on their way.

Kyo peered after... him?

They had been a bit too slender for her to tell, and she'd been distracted.

Whatever, that wasn't important.

Kyo opened the scroll she'd been given, took note it was a mission scroll and curiously began to read.
The further she got, the further down towards her pelvis her stomach was sinking.

...this couldn't be right.

Could it?

It must be some kind of mistake, surely? Because Kyo could name several reasons why she shouldn't be handed a seduction mission like this, and the most pressing one wasn't even the fact she hadn't- She hadn't had sex in this body yet!

Haven't even so much as kissed anyone yet!

But that wasn't as important as the minor detail that she was twelve. And... she hadn't received any training for this kind of mission.

Kyo mechanically rolled up the scroll, feeling like she'd rooted to the spot, and she was very glad she was wearing a mask, because she had no idea what kind of expression she was wearing.

She'd known about seduction missions since the start, had been fairly sure they wouldn't be a problem, even, but. She was twelve years old, wasn't even a proper teenager yet, and she didn't know who she could ask about this.

Had there been some sort of mix-up?

Was she expected to just. Take this mission, not make any fuss?

Was that how these things went?

Kyo had expected another couple of years, at the very least, some training, definitely, but what if she'd been wrong?

The pit of her stomach felt cold with something that was suspiciously close to panic, but the rest of her felt utterly numb.

Empty.

Kyo absently realised she couldn't just stand there forever, so she took a deep breath, pulled her chakra tightly into herself and activated her chameleon jutsu at the same time.

She slipped through the village like a ghost, the scroll still clutched in one hand, tight enough her knuckles would have shone white if they'd been visible, she was sure.

Kyo entered Katsurou-sensei's house without announcing herself first, even though he hadn't approached her to say it was okay, yet, but she just.

She had to talk to someone about this, and she didn't know what to do.

Kyo stood in sensei's hallway, unsure how to proceed, because she hadn't been supposed to come here without him giving her the go-ahead, and she didn't even know if he was home or not, and she really didn't want to upset him, but-

“Kyo?” Katsurou-sensei asked, sounding mildly exasperated as he came wandering out of his bedroom -had she woken him up?- and he turned to scan the hallway she was lurking in. “You know, I was wondering how long you'd manage to...” His voice trailed off, eyebrows pulling
together ever so slightly in a small frown.

Ah, she'd forgotten to release her chameleon jutsu, she belatedly realised.

Kyo tugged on her chakra, releasing the technique, making her actually visible.

Katsurou-sensei blinked slowly, observing her. “Kyo?”

Kyo opened her mouth, wasn't sure what to say, and closed it again.

She fidgeted a little.

“I'm sorry. I know you said- but I was given this just now, and I don't know what to do,” she said lamely, holding out the scroll towards him.

Katsurou-sensei frowned a little more deeply, strode up to her to take the scroll from her fingers.

He eyed her intently a second, even though she realised she was still wearing her mask, and then turned to the scroll.

Opened it.

Read it.

Closed it again.

“Wait here,” he told her evenly, turned on his heel and strode back to his room, disappearing inside and out of sight.

Kyo did as told, remaining where she stood.

A few minutes passed, and when her gaze was drawn to movement in the door to Katsurou's room, part of her startled.

Because sensei was wearing a very familiar uniform, standard gear and- Sensei was ANBU.

Of course he was ANBU, a small part of her whispered. It made sense.

Katsurou-sensei was decked out in full ANBU regalia, with a bone-white mask on his face, dark blue and red markings enhancing the features. It looked canine and it was snarling viciously.

Together with the sight of him stalking towards her, determination all but oozing off of him, Kyo almost shivered.

'Get on,' Katsurou-sensei signed, motioning pointedly at his back.

Kyo obliged without a word of protest, and very quickly after that, they were headed back to ANBU headquarters.

Sensei was still holding her mission scroll in one hand.

.

It felt very weird to be riding on Katsurou-sensei's back through ANBU headquarters.

Actually, it felt weird in general, because she hadn't done this in years, not to mention while wearing her ANBU uniform. Her mask.
While both of them were wearing ANBU uniform.

Kyo faintly mused that today was a very strange day, and was probably not getting better anytime soon, judging by how people were reacting to the sight of Katsurou stalking down the corridors towards them.

Some clearly didn't give a shit, but others very obviously went out of their way to give him a respectfully wide berth.

What was even sensei's designated name? As far as she knew, there weren't that many options to choose from, canine-wise, and Wolf and Hyena were both taken.

No, wait, Wolf-taichou had retired last year, she reminded herself.

Kyo shook her head minutely to try and focus back on the present, on the situation still happening around her.

She could lose herself in thought later.

It still took a second for Kyo to think to wonder where the hell they were going, because Katsurou-sensei very clearly had a specific destination in mind, and he kept going deeper and deeper into headquarters, but she didn't recognize this area at all.

Four years, she'd been an ANBU now, but she was still learning new things about this place.

Sometimes, the ingrained paranoia in this profession was exasperating.

Knew it was there for a reason, but still.

Kyo was pretty sure they were moving down, now, and she had some sort of vague inclination of where they were going, because they'd passed by a few operatives lugging stacks of files around and- were they going to the archives?

She knew ANBU had their own, but she hadn't ever had any cause to visit them.

Before now.

Kyo was feeling mildly apprehensive when Katsurou-sensei finally opened a door and strode inside like he did it regularly, scanned the large room on the other side of the door he'd just stepped through, chose a target, and then threw the mission scroll at the guy's face hard enough the crack of impact resounded throughout the room.

Kyo was pretty sure she hadn't expected him to do that. Along with everyone else in the room, it looked like.

The guy sensei had aimed at slowly gathered himself, and the force of the impact had actually thrown his head back, but seeing as he was wearing a mask, it couldn't have actually hurt all that much.

The sound of it that close to his ears, though, that was a different matter.

Kyo almost winced.

“What the hell-” he began to demand loudly, raising a hand to his head, but Katsurou hadn't actually stopping his forward momentum after he'd thrown the scroll that had started all of this.
By the time the ANBU Katsurou-sensei had decided to... approach, realised exactly what was happening, they were already close enough for Katsurou to reach out and grab one of his shoulder straps, yanking him up and close enough their masks were very nearly touching.

“Explanation. Now.”

Kyo was very glad sensei hadn't ever addressed her like that, and she wasn't at all surprised at the small, panicked noise the guy produced in reaction.

“For what!” he yelped, sounding more than frazzled.

Kyo tried not to feel guilty, even though she rationally knew this wasn't really her fault.

They were attracting a lot of attention.

“The scroll,” Katsurou bit out darkly, tightening his hold on the operative, and Kyo didn't even realise he'd kept walking until he had him pressed up against the row of filing cabinets lining the wall. Which had to be very uncomfortable. “Why the fuck was it given to Scorpion?”

Sensei's tone reminded her of a a naked blade, pressed up against an exposed throat.

This was probably not very good; he'd just gotten out of Psych a month ago!

Inoki would be so disappointed in both of them, she just knew it.

“What scroll!” the guy sensei had at his mercy all but shrieked. “I don't know!”

“Why all the fuss? It's just a low-level seduction?” someone else drawled.

Katsurou didn't so much as twitch, just turned and threw the operative he'd been terrorising into the person who had spoken, hard enough it definitely hurt for both of them.

“The fuck, man?” the second guy that had spoken hissed.

Kyo had no idea what to do, other than to keep up what she'd been doing. Which was pretty much nothing.

She wasn't even sure what was going on.

“Oi, Dog, you just got released from Psych, don't you think you should try to-” the voice of reason cut off when Katsuuro slowly turned to face the operative off to the side that had spoken.

There wasn't any time to think, contemplate if this wasn't a ridiculously stupid idea, but Kyo still reached around and placed her hands over Katsurou's eyes, keeping her movements smooth and unhurried.

“Don't take things too far,” she told him with a huff, feeling uncomfortable. With this whole situation. With the minor crowd that had gathered to watch.

“Why the hell are you even throwing a temper tantrum, you old fuck?” the unpleasant idiot from a moment ago demanded.

Still blinded, Katsurou turned and very casually stepped on his forearm, pinning it to the floor. With his other foot, he broke his humerus with a single kick, quick and brutally efficient.

The operative produced a choked-off grunt of pain and clear distress.
“Because some idiot decided to try and send a twelve year old without any seduction training on a fucking seduction mission,” Katsurou-sensei growled. “I'm taking issue.”

“I can tell,” an unimpressed voice drawled, and Kyo turned her head to look at the door. “Stop injuring my people, Dog.”

“Kasai,” Kyo breathed, still not taking her hands away from over Katsurou's eyes.


“I didn't know who to ask, or if this was just how it normally goes,” she muttered, feeling uncomfortable and defensive.

Kasai sighed. “A gross oversight from our side, indeed. I'll set Gecko on finding out exactly how this situation was allowed to progress as far as to reach you, Scorpion. Dog, will you step off of Stout's broken arm? If you keep it up, Owl will get on your case.”

Katsurou-sensei scoffed, but obligingly stepped off the arm he'd been standing on -and had broken in the first place- to slowly wander over to Kasai.

“With me,” the ANBU Commander ordered and turned to leave, signing something at Bear in passing, who swept into the room they'd just left, presumably to deal with the mess.

Kyo was a bit distracted, though, trying to absorb everything that had just happened, the fact Kasai had gotten involved, and she still didn't dare take her hands off of Katsurou-sensei's eyes.

Not that it seemed to inhibit him or even so much as mildly inconvenience him, as he kept walking and moving just like normal.

She felt pretty blank. Wasn't sure what to think about anything right now.

Thankfully, Katsurou seemed to know how to deal with this, and she was pretty sure he was in control of himself, even though he hadn't indicated he wanted her to stop essentially blindfolding him yet.

Walking next to Kasai as they were, their small group attracted even more attention walking through headquarters than they had on the way down.

They finally ended up in Kasai's office, which she didn't know how to feel about, either.

“Sit down,” the man said blandly, and sensei obligingly found a chair and sat down. Trapping Kyo between his back and the backrest, but she didn't mind. “Do you need me to send for Inoki?”

“I'm fine, just give me a moment,” Katsurou grunted.

“Scorpion, I apologise for this situation, but in the future, please approach Gecko, Bear, or myself if you have any serious concerns about the missions you are assigned. There will be less of a mess for me to clean up, that way.”

Kyo blinked at Kasai, taking that in. “Sensei, he makes it sound like you're an irresponsible person,” slipped out of her and oops, she probably shouldn't be teasing him right now.
“I thought we'd already had this conversation,” Katsurou muttered, but he sounded reluctantly amused under the seals on his mask, she was pretty sure.

Kyo wasn't used to hearing his voice like this.

“Scorpion,” Kasai said, effectively drawing her attention again. “Disregarding your age and lack of training, what are your feelings regarding possible seduction missions in the future?” he asked, voice bland and professional.

Kyo paused, tried to think it over. “Don't know,” she muttered slowly. “I mean, I haven't really considered it properly. Thought I'd have a couple more years, honestly.”

Kasai nodded thoughtfully, and she could feel his gaze on her.

“Just give her a kunoichi mentor,” Katsurou suggested gruffly. “Might spare me a few headaches,” he muttered.

Kyo made an offended sound in the back of her throat. “Are you trying to get rid of me?”

Katsurou-sensei leaned back, which made her wheeze a little, because he wasn't exactly light.

“Wouldn't do that,” he murmured softly, diverging from the script, as far as their usual banter went, and it made her pause.

“I know, sensei,” Kyo assured him quietly, leaning her chin on his shoulder. It was a jarring reminder of everything that had changed. Both between the two of them and in general.

“I'll take it under consideration,” Kasai sighed. “If you're both feeling calm enough, then get the hell out of my office.”

“Yes, sir,” Katsurou drawled and patted her knee, silently letting her know to drop her hands from his mask.

Which she did.

She walked out of ANBU headquarters on her own two feet, and Katsurou-sensei was right beside her, so she felt like the day hadn't been a complete disaster, after all.

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“What's with that look on your face?”

“What look?” Kyo squinted dubiously at Jiraiya, who was watching her speculatively right back.

“That look,” Jiriaya said, pointing rudely at her face, eyes narrowing further. “What are you planning?”

Kyo huffed, wondering if she ought to be feeling offended. “I'm not planning anything,” she informed him dryly. Which. Was maybe a little bit of a lie.

Kind of.

Well, actually, it wasn't, because she didn't have a plan yet, she was just thinking very seriously about a lot of things, because she had to acknowledge some of her problems just weren't going to go away.

But it wasn't like that was any of Jiraiya's business, or had much to do with him. So she was sticking
to her answer.

Jiraiya huffed and grumbled to himself, but stopped verbally prodding her. Went back to his writing.

A minute passed, and Kyo read another paragraph on the latest scroll Hinata-shishou had given her, on chakra, this time.

Sensing. Which. Was interesting, though she wished the person who'd written it could have been less dry and boring.

She was sure there were ways to write about this subject that didn't make her feel like her eyes were about to melt out of her skull it was so unenthusiastic and awkward.

Which was why she felt a guilty surge of relief when Minato gently poked her leg, getting her attention and giving her a reason to take yet another break.

She sent him a questioning look.

“You sure you're not planning anything?” he asked her softly, still sitting as if he was busy reading, though she was pretty sure Jiraiya was well aware they weren't paying as close attention to their studying as they ought to be. “You look oddly determined.”

“I'm not planning anything,” Kyo huffed, exasperated. And she wasn't. Really. “I guess I just have a lot on my mind.”

“Oh, so you answer him but not me,” Jiraiya muttered, sending her a sullen look, and wasn't he supposed to be the oldest one here?

“Minato is nicer to me, and I like him better,” she shot back at him, not so much as blinking. She turned to eye her scroll with distaste. “Okay, I need a break from this thing, before I give in to the urge to set it on fire. Kisaki, would you be willing to catch me a rabbit?”

Kisaki lifted her head to give her a look. “Will I get to eat it after?”

“Oh, so you answer him but not me,” Jiraiya muttered, sending her a sullen look, and wasn't he supposed to be the oldest one here?

“Minato is nicer to me, and I like him better,” she shot back at him, not so much as blinking. She turned to eye her scroll with distaste. “Okay, I need a break from this thing, before I give in to the urge to set it on fire. Kisaki, would you be willing to catch me a rabbit?”

Kisaki snorted and got to her feet, shaking the dust from her fur and not looking at all apologetic. “I'll get you your rabbit.”

“Thank you,” Kyo said, watching the dog stalk off.

“What is it you're trying to do with that jutsu, anyway?” Minato asked, peering curiously at her and putting his own reading away, shamelessly taking advantage of the situation to take a break, too. “You haven't told us.”

“You haven't told us anything about that jutsu, actually,” Jiraiya drawled, eyeing her interestedly. “I don't recognize it. Where'd you find it?”

Kyo blinked at them. Thought it over for a second and came to the conclusion that, yeah... she might actually have forgotten to share about the Bubble jutsu.

Huh.

“Well. I didn't really find it anywhere, seeing as I thought it up,” she told them distractedly, frowning at nothing in particular as she tried to scour her memories for any instance they'd showed interest in
it, but was coming up short. “Katsurou-sensei looked really amused when I kept asking him questions about wind jutsu and my mounting frustration with all the shortcomings I felt they had.” She'd been seven, and it had just seemed incredibly wasteful to pour as much chakra into a jutsu as all the scrolls she’d read had wanted her to.

Granted, they'd been intended for older children, with larger chakra reserves and far better stamina, but still.

There was also the point it had felt counterproductive to blast off a wind attack large enough to level a forest when you were trying to go for stealth.

By now, she knew it was because once you reached a certain level, you needed large-scale attacks -if you could manage them- to make it harder for the enemies to dodge and get out of the way, but she hadn’t quite made the connection back then.

“You invented it,” Jiraiya said blankly, staring intently at her. “When?” he asked, eyes narrowing.

Kyo blinked at him. “I guess? I mean, I couldn't find any jutsu that focused on keeping the air still, so I tried a few things until I found a way that worked for me and continued from there?” She eyed him confusedly. “It's pretty useful, and I'm very fond of it, so I'm trying to get better at using it.”

Jiraiya looked a little bit like he was half-way between a headache and laughing incredulously.

“What's it called?” Minato was eyeing her with intense curiosity.

“Bubble jutsu.” Kyo shrugged.

Jiraiya snorted. “That is the most ridiculous name I've ever heard.”

“I know,” Kyo grinned at him, “it's hilarious, but it's also weirdly accurate!” She gestured eagerly with one hand. “I make a bubble of air that is mine.”

“And all the rabbits?” Minato asked, still curious.

“Trying to suffocate them, but it's not going so well,” Kyo admitted, idly watching Jiraiya choke on air.

Minato stared at her. “Um. Why?”

“Because it would be really useful?” Kyo couldn't help but ask back, eyeing the two males dubiously. They remembered she was an assassin, right? “And I'd like to make it more versatile, because it's possible to run out of poisons in a bad situation, but at least my body produces more chakra, so as long as I'm alive, that's usable.”

There was a bit of an awkward silence.

“That's unexpectedly grim. You sure you're feeling alright?” Jiraiya muttered, eyeing her speculatively again. “We've got peace, Kyo.”

Yeah, but for how long?

Not that that was what she said.

“What's wrong with wanting to prepare for the worst possible scenario? You're my sensei, you should be encouraging this behaviour,” she told the man, voice dry.
Minato peered between them for a moment, and then fixed Kyo with a bright-eyed look. “Can I try it?” Looking all hopeful.

Kyo blinked at him. “Sure?”

Minato perked up and practically beamed. “How do I do it?”

“Um, well. Right.” Kyo tried to corral her thoughts. She’d never tried to teach this to anyone else before. “In the beginning, it was easier to activate it with an exhalation, sort of like a fireball, but slower and far less dramatic,” she began thoughtfully. “And I definitely suggest you sit down and close your eyes the first time.”

“Yeah, but,” Minato tilted his head, “how do I do it?”

“I’ll show you the hand seals in a moment, but that’s the easy part. It’s just to get it started, and it practically takes no chakra.” Kyo flapped a hand dismissively at him. “The hard part is actually doing anything with it.”

It'd taken her a lot of practice.

“Can I just try? I'm pretty good at jutsu, and wind is my chakra affinity.”

“Alright,” Kyo agreed, and quickly showed him the hand seals.

When she was done, she shuffled away from him until she was sitting next to Jiraiya.

“So I just try?” Minato asked, giving her a questioning look. “Why did you move away?”

“Yeah, you try. And I moved away because when I started, I was always the centre of the bubble. It took a lot of practice to place the bubble in front of me. And you're about to experience a bit of sensory overload.” She smirked at him.

Minato looked mildly confused but merely shrugged and carefully went through the seals, evidently shaping his chakra as he went.

“Okay, how much of a headache will this give me?” Jiraiya muttered at her, not taking his eyes off of Minato.

“Nothing much. Minato will get a pretty impressive headache, though.”

“You're pretty evil,” Jiraiya mused, looking amused.

Kyo sniffed in mock offence. “He's the one that asked. I'm merely being accommodating to my teammate.”


Minato finished with the seals, exhaled sharply, froze, and then slumped with a pained groan, dropping his head in his hands.

“Kyo,” he moaned pitifully.

Kyo snickered. “You okay? You lasted almost a full second.” And she was possibly getting far more amusement out of this than was necessarily fair, but yeah, she wasn't gonna try and change it.

“Why would you do this to me?” Minato groaned. “I can feel my brain.”
“Yeah, it sucks pretty badly before you get used to it,” she agreed cheerfully. “Now-a-days, I just feel,” she paused contemplating it, “‘bloated’ is the wrong word. It's more like I'm larger than my body.”

Jiraiya stilled beside her, as if something she'd said had caught his attention. “How did you think to start doing your thing with the rabbits?”

Kyo frowned at him. “I told you. In the Bubble, the air is mine. I can feel it when people -and animals- breathe. Made me wonder if I couldn't work up the control to stop them from breathing altogether, but I haven't managed yet.”

Jiraiya turned to stare at her, eyes slowly widening. “Holy shit. And how old were you when you invented this jutsu, again? You didn't say.” He looked quietly shocked, if Kyo was forced to guess, and she wasn't sure why.

“Uh, seven?” she answered tentatively, not at all sure where this was heading.

“You've got to be shitting me,” he said bluntly.

“...no?”

Jiraiya covered his face with his hands, for a moment, and then pushed his hands up over his hair with a huff, sending her an incredulous look. “Everyone has to breathe, Kyo. Everyone.”

“Yes, I know.”

“Do you?” And he was sounding a bit strange now. “Shit, nothing in your file said anything about you being a sensor.”

“Because I'm not?” Kyo felt like she was missing something vital, here, and she didn't like it.

“How the hell did I get saddled with two geniuses?” Jiraiya muttered to himself, dragging a hand over his face, looking like he wished he was drunk. “Who thought that was a good idea?”

Okay, yeah, fair enough, only, “I'm not any kind of genius, Jiriaya,” she told him, feeling long-suffering.

Jiraiya barked out a laugh that made her frown at him. “Right. And the sky's green.” He grinned at her, genuinely amused.

Kyo wasn't seeing what about this was funny. “I'm not,” she insisted firmly.

“Uh, Kyo?” Minato said, still sounding pretty pitiful, with a hand pressed to his temple, squinting vaguely in her direction and she'd temporarily forgotten about him. “You're already a Jounin,” he pointed out. “When will this headache go away?”

“Give it some time. Drink water,” she told him distractedly. “What does me being a Jounin have to do with anything?”

Jiraiya sighed. Heavily. “Are you for real, kid?” he asked, though it didn't sound like he was talking to anyone in particular. “You know the average age for making Jounin is closer to twenty than anything else, right?”

Kyo stared blandly at him.

She still wasn't seeing his point. It wasn't like her promotion had been... she blinked slowly, turning
that thought over in her head. Had been what, exactly? Kyo frowned.

She'd only been promoted because of the Kiri mission, which she'd only been sent on because of her 'adult' mindset and the experience she'd gotten in ANBU, which could be attributed to the same reason.

Her frown deepened.

“I agree that I'm not exactly normal, but that doesn't mean I'm a genius or prodigy or something, because I'm not,” she huffed. This topic was making her uncomfortable.

Why wouldn't Jiraiya stop laughing, and he was staring at her with incredulous disbelief now. “Kyo, you're one of the stealthiest people I've ever met.”

“Can't have met very many, then,” she retorted bluntly, eyeing him sceptically. What the hell kind of agenda was he having here?

Jiraiya produced a small, strange noise and took a deep breath. “Kyo. Listen. You're twelve. You already have several years as an ANBU under your belt. That's not- how many people your age do you think can claim that? If kids are good, this is the age they're possibly recruited. And even then, you're stealthy even for an ANBU. You think the Uzu mission was just, what?” He eyed her with something like fascination. Like he could hardly believe what he was seeing.

Kyo hated it. She wanted to tell him to knock it off right now. “I never said I wasn't stealthy,” she huffed at him, feeling on edge. “But it's not like other people aren't better, and I'm not exactly impossible to find. Sensei always knows where I am, can always find me. So can Aita. Many people can find me.” Ameyuri had managed it without much trouble, too.

Jiraiya's face did something interesting she couldn't label. “You know, I looked into your Yamanaka a while back,” he drawled slowly, looking fairly bemused. “Turns out, he's very well known in certain circles around here, for several things. But one of the first things I heard about him was that he's one of the village's absolute best sensors.” He fixed her with a dry, pointed look.

Kyo stared back blankly.

“As for your Uzumaki friend,” he continued to drawl sedately, and there was something offensive about the amusement she could see on his features. “The Uzumaki clan is known for more than just fuuinjutsu, Kyo, and producing the occasional exceptional sensor is definitely one of them.”

Kyo's head felt strangely quiet.

There was absolutely nothing she could think to say in response to that.

Thankfully, she didn't have to, seeing as Kisaki had impeccable timing and came trotting back onto the training field at that precise moment, a frightened-stiff rabbit in her mouth.

She took in the scene greeting her and paused. “What'd I miss?” the dog asked, looking exasperated and mildly suspicious.

Kyo got to her feet and approached the dog. “Sorry, won't be able to concentrate right now, so what do you say about saving the rabbit for later? I can seal it up for you so it stays fresh.”

Kisaki eyed her pensively a moment, and then bit down on the rabbit with a crunch, killing it instantly. “Fine.” She didn't look like she cared either way, and she still got the rabbit out of the deal.
Kyo quickly and efficiently sealed up the animal and tucked the scroll into a pocket. “See you guys tomorrow, there's something I have to do,” she muttered at Jiraiya and Minato.

“And what's that?” he asked, still sounding amused.

“Need to track down 'my Yamanaka' and have a conversation with him,” Kyo muttered under her breath.

She and Kisaki left, and she did her best to ignore Jiraiya's amused snickers as he helped Minato get to his feet.

“Let's get you home,” their sensei muttered at the boy, who only groaned in response.

Kisaki was eyeing her amusedly, which wasn't appreciated right now, but it wasn't like Kyo was gonna stop what she was doing to have a conversation about it with her, either.

She was busy.

Looking for Katsurou-sensei.

They needed to talk.

“Can you smell him?”

“No. There're too many people moving about in here,” Kisaki replied evenly, not bothered.

Kyo huffed and stalked on, didn't so much as pause before she walked into the tower Jounin lounge, even though she technically hadn't ever visited it before.

“Kyo?”

“Hi, tou-san,” Kyo bit out, distantly surprised to see him, but still not pausing. She was busy. “Have you seen Katsurou-sensei?” she asked, even as she scanned the room and the people around them.

“No,” Kou said, eyeing her interestedly. “Are you alright?”

“Yep. Just peachy.”

“I don't know, either,” Kisaki informed her dad, still looking amused. “She and Jiraiya were talking about something, and Kyo didn't find it as funny as he did.”

“Shush, you,” Kyo muttered and gently pulled on one of Kisaki's ears. “Come on, we still have to find that lying idiot.”

“...Katsurou?” Kou was looking positively bamboozled, but she didn't care. “What did he do?”

“It's more what he didn't do,” Kyo scoffed, turned on her heel and stalked out again. “See you later, tou-san.”

“Yeah,” Kou agreed slowly, evidently still confused. “Good luck?”

“Thanks.” The Jounin Station it was, then. She didn't think Katsurou had been hanging around the tower a lot since he was released from desk duty, but it had still been worth a shot. And she'd already checked his house, so.
Kyo determinedly continued.

It didn't take long to reach the Jounin Station, and this time, she didn't hesitate before stalking inside. Takeshi had told her she had every right to 'make use' of the facilities, whatever the hell that meant, so at least she'd gotten clear permission.

She and Kisaki still attracted quite a bit of attention on their way through the building, but she guessed that was unavoidable. Partly because despite the boobs and hips, she still looked young, and seeing as she didn't have red fangs on her face, wasn't an Inuzuka by blood, yet still had one of their ninken following in her heels.

It took a bit of searching, and she was starting to think that he might not be here at all -should she check ANBU next?- when she walked into a section in the very back of the building and caught a glimpse of a familiar face, sitting together with a few other men.

“Shinzu-sensei, have you seen- Katsurou!”

“Kyo,” Katsurou-sensei returned idly, sending her a vaguely questioning look.

The two of them were seated around a table with two other men she wasn't familiar with, a large stack of files between them and coffee cups in their hands or close enough to reach.

It looked like they'd been there a while.

“Hi, sensei,” Kisaki greeted, wandering up to the man to wedge her head in under his arm, tail wagging lazily. “Kyo's acting weird.”

“I am not,” Kyo huffed and stalked after her, and then crossed her arms over her chest and squinted at Katsurou.

Katsurou blinked slowly and took a sip of his coffee, watching her curiously.

“You okay, Kyo?” Shinzu asked, looking amused, despite the fact she hadn't even mentioned what it was about yet.

“Fine,” she bit out irritably, and then focused fully on Katsurou. “Why haven't you told me you're a sensor?”

There was a beat of silence.

Shinzu snorted and raised a hand to scratch at his cheek, looking offensively amused. “Yeah, Katsurou, why the hell haven't you told us?”

“Shut up, Shinzu, your input is not appreciated right now,” Kyo muttered at the man, who grinned, unrepentant.

Shinzu chuckled, looking far too entertained.

Not that Katsurou-sensei was much better, giving her a dryly amused look. “You never asked,” he said plainly.

Which was just offensive! “Why should I have to ask! You could have just, I don't know, dropped a few words? In the last six years?” she demanded irritably, frowning at him. “Hey, Kyo, know how you're learning stealth? Yeah, just felt you should know I'm a sensor.”

Katsurou's lips were twitching suspiciously. “I felt actions speak louder than words.”
“Oh, that's rich,” Kyo muttered, eyes narrowing.

“Who finally told you?” he asked, clearly curious.

“Jiraiya,” Kyo bit out, feeling almost betrayed. “I still can't believe you never told me; my whole life has been a lie.”

“That's a bit dramatic.”

“No, it's not!” Kyo threw her hands up exasperatedly. “Is it true you're one of the village's best sensors?” she asked pointedly, because this was very important.

“Well-” Katsurou drawled.

“Yes, he is,” Shinzu cut in, still amused.

At least he was making himself useful, even if he was annoying about it.

“I can't believe you wouldn't tell me that!” And yeah, she just couldn't get over this, because-

“You thought everyone could sense like this asshole?” one of the unfamiliar men asked, looking entertained.

“Yes!” Kyo exploded exasperatedly. “Of course I did! He's my Jounin sensei, he's the reference point I use on everything shinobi-related!” She planted her hands on her hips, staring irritably at Katsurou. “I can't believe you.”

“Ah, well. It was nice while it lasted,” the insufferable man mused, putting his mug down to lean back in his chair and cross his arms over his chest, watching her steadily.

“You did this on purpose,” she deducted blandly, not exactly surprised.

“You're calling me arrogant?” she shot back.

“No,” Katsurou snorted, all but rolling his eyes. “But it's an easy trap to fall into.” He shook his head slightly. “Your age, it would've been easy for it to go to your head.”

Kyo felt vaguely offended. “As if all the smack-downs my career has given me would have been signs of my obvious superiority,” she deadpanned. “Evidently, all the times I've landed myself in the hospital so far are just proof I'm indescribably awesome.”

Shinzu snickered. “To be fair, the fact you've stayed alive long enough to reach the hospital is pretty impressive, Kyo.”

She sent him the look that statement clearly deserved. “Why are you even talking right now? Go try to talk some sense into Inoichi instead. He could clearly use a good talking to,” she muttered sourly, sending him a frown while she was at it.

Shinzu grinned at her. “He tried to hit on you, yet?”

“No. Thankfully.” Kyo was having quite enough of people flirting with her.

Katsurou stilled and Kyo blinked curiously at him.
“You're twelve,” Katsurou said flatly, eyeing her intently. “Who the hell's been flirting with you?”

...had she said that out loud? Oops.

She shrugged. “Random idiots? I don't know, it's just incredibly weird.” Anyway, apparently, Kyo needed to re-evaluate a lot of things in her life, and what else had Katsurou-sensei failed to mention to her?

She narrowed her eyes on him. Turned around with a sniff.

“What’re you going?” he asked, because he knew her, and yeah, she was maybe acting a bit over the top, but she was a teenager. Kinda. She was allowed act out and she was still miffed.

“To find Aita. I'm gonna make him help me get better at hiding from sensors.”

“Why?” And Katsurou definitely sounded amused now.

“Spite, mostly. The goal is to scare the crap out of you,” she muttered huffily.

“That sounds like a bad idea,” one of the other men mused.

“Hey, Kyo, a request? Can you make sure I’m there when you do it? That's something I need to see,” Shinzu said cheerfully. “Best of luck.”

“Thanks,” Kyo drawled and stalked off again.

She had to go find Aita now, because she was definitely doing this thing. And who cared she was already plenty busy? She could squeeze in one more thing.

Kisaki hurried to catch up with her. “Do you really have time for this?”

“I'll make time,” Kyo muttered. “We can go pick up Genma while we're at it. Academy should be done by now, right? Let's make a lesson out of it.”

“Because we don't have enough to do already,” Kisaki drawled, but didn't try to stop her.

When she found him, Kyo explained the situation and then endured the minutes the redhead wasted on laughing himself silly.

“Fine, let's do it,” Aita finally agreed, wiping tears from his eyes and exchanging a wide grin with Genma and Ashika, who'd been watching the conversation play out with confused incomprehension.

“Why are they so weird?” Ashika demanded with a huff, eyeing the two of them sceptically.

“Dunno,” Genma answered with a shrug and then turned to Kyo. “Teach me stealth, nee-san! I wanna scare people, too!”

Later that night, Kyo and Kisaki were lying in bed.

Genma was already sleeping deeply on the other side of the room, tired after a long day of school and training, and his quiet, steady breaths were a calming backdrop.
She wasn't sleeping, didn't feel even close to falling asleep, despite how tired she was.

Kyo had too many things on her mind, though.

“Are you thinking about the stealth thing? You're not actually as upset about that as you made it seem when we talked to sensei,” Kisaki muttered quietly at her, cracking an eye open to peer at Kyo through the dark.

“I'm not really upset about it,” she agreed softly. “Just. I feel a bit stupid, I guess,” she muttered with a sigh.

In hindsight, now that she knew about it, it seemed like something obvious.

She'd been picking up hints and signs of this for years without putting it together to reach the obvious conclusion.

And what that meant when applied to herself, too.

But that wasn't actually what was keeping her awake.

This puberty thing was far more annoying than she could have possibly anticipated, and she'd already...

Kyo sighed. There'd been the Ame mission, with the- almost getting... yeah. Then all the attention from males, in various capacities, which was uncomfortable and awkward and she still didn't know how to deal with it.

The cherry on top had been the seduction mission, though.

All of that made her think more on the growing up thing, and she couldn't help but wonder... wouldn't it be better to just. Get it over with?

Not that she could hurry puberty along, but there were things she could do.

Like find some guy to sleep with, lose her virginity, before it happened in a way she had no control over. Before it happened in a way that would give her nightmares for the rest of her life.

It wasn't like she was particularly attached to her virginity, for all that she hadn't thought much about it yet, in this life.

There were people who treated it like it was magical or something, waiting for That One Person, and that was fine. Sounded lovely. She just wasn't one of them.

It hadn't been particularly romantic to lose it in the Before. More business-like and matter-of-fact, and she hadn't minded it overly much.

It'd been awkward, and a bit weird, but she'd still take that over some target. Or worse, an enemy.

Kyo let out a deep sigh and shuffled closer to Kisaki, wrapping her arms around the dog in a hug.

“I think I'm gonna do something many people will find weird, again,” she admitted.

“What?” Kisaki asked sleepily.

Kyo hummed vaguely. “Find someone to have sex with.”
“Okay,” Kisaki agreed, clearly not giving a shit, which was reassuring.

Kyo smiled and hugged her partner tightly for a second, before she settled down to try to sleep properly.

-x-x-x-

Chapter End Notes

If anyone's missed it and is interested, here's another link to the HtS discord server: https://discord.gg/y7YmP4W
Chapter 98

Chapter Summary

Damn it, Kyo

Chapter Notes

I'd just like to point out that no one *has* to read this story, and if something makes you uncomfortable, then by all means, take care of yourselves and put your mental health first and *don't* read.

First thing first, she needed to have at least a vague plan of attack.

Kyo wasn't actually sure where to even start, because she didn't necessarily feel like having sex yet, but she'd much rather make that decision herself, on her own, than anything else, so this was what she'd do.

And it wasn't like she was entirely opposed, either, but...

Kyo frowned, thinking it over.

“So is there anyone you like?” Kisaki asked, watching her curiously.

“Not really.”

“Then what would you look for in a mate?” Kisaki continued, looking amused, crossing one front leg over the other.

That was actually a good question.

Older than her, that was for sure, because she didn't want to feel like a creep. But he also couldn't be too old, or that would feel creepy, too.

Actually, before she did anything else.

“Come on, let’s go,” Kyo said, getting to her feet and starting towards the village. Leaving the secluded spot they'd been relaxing in, pretty much hiding away from everything for a while.

Kisaki obliged, trotting after her, looking curious.

It didn't take too long to track down the person she was looking for, and Kyo landed on the training field the team was currently occupying, Kisaki half a second behind her.

“Hi, Kyo,” Chouza greeted. “Want to talk about that joint team training?”

“Not right now, I'm a bit busy,” Kyo replied distractedly, gaze finding Inoichi. “Hey, Inoichi, would
you be willing to have sex with me?"

Inoichi, who had just turned to greet her, froze.

There was a beat of silence where no one moved.

"...I think you broke him," Shikaku observed mildly, studying his teammate interestedly.

Kyo frowned at the blond, propping a hand on her hip.

The three of them were sixteen; that was neither too old nor too young, and they were her friends, which would have made it even better.

She liked them, and having sex with one of them would have been better than some stranger.

She sent Chouza and Shikaku a questioning look each, seeing as Inoichi was still frozen solid and not so much as blinking, looking like he'd turned to stone.

Chouza's eyes widened for a second, before he shook his head in a clear negative, even going so far as to take a small step away from her.

Kyo huffed and turned to eye Shikaku.

Who eyed her speculatively right back.

"No," he finally said, still looking pensive. "Sounds like far too much trouble," he decided.

Kyo grimaced at him and heaved a sigh. "Great," she muttered to herself, crossed her arms over her chest and tried to think of anyone else she could ask.

Minato...? But no, he was just thirteen; she'd feel like a paedophile, and besides, he wasn't at all interested in either her or sex, so that would just be weird, even if he happened to say yes.

Aita was a no, too. He'd made it clear he viewed her as a sister, and he had Ren now.

Kaimaru... no. Their friendship was still sort of rocky, and he might just try to kill her if she asked.

Did she have any other friends she could ask for something like this?

...Nawaki?

Kyo's frown deepened. No, she wouldn't feel comfortable with that. Partly because she couldn't be sure he wouldn't say yes out of some subconscious form of guilt or something, and she still didn't know him well enough to know for sure.

He was out, too.

Damn it, those were everyone. This meant she'd have to find someone else, didn't it?

How the hell was she supposed to go about doing something like that?

Kyo tapped her fingers absently against her arm, trying to think.

...she'd just have to keep being rational about this, she decided.

"Kyo, are you okay?" Chouza asked, bringing her out of her thoughts.
She blinked at him. “Yeah, fine. Okay, bye, gotta go.”

Seeing as none of them were willing to help her, she needed to find someone else.

Inoichi still hadn't moved a muscle by the time she left, and Kyo absently wondered if he was even breathing.

“What about that one?” Kisaki asked, staring down at one of the people down below.

Kyo followed her gaze. “...Don't find him even remotely attractive, and he looks a bit young,” she responded dubiously. He couldn't be older than fourteen.

The two of them were sitting on the edge of a roof along one of Konoha's busiest roads, people-watching.

“What about a civilian? That one's got appealing body-language.”

“I think I'll be more comfortable with another shinobi,” Kyo mused. Civilians were prone to get the wrong idea, as far as she'd understood it.

Kyo wasn't at all interested in getting a boyfriend or something. This was strictly a one-time deal they were talking about here.

“So what age?” Kisaki asked, peering curiously at her a second, seemingly enjoying herself.

“Fifteen, sixteen I think,” Kyo muttered speculatively. That was neither too old nor too young. But that wasn't the only thing they had to keep in mind.

Couldn't be a Genin either. That would just feel wrong.

Couldn't be a complete asshole, and she'd rather he not be a virgin, too.

One virgin present during sex was more than enough, even though she technically knew how this went and had some measure of experience, as far as previous lives went.

It took all afternoon, but she did walk away from there with a short list of prospective candidates.

She managed to get their names and everything, and it really was a good thing she was good at stealth, and ANBU had sort of trained her for this.

Kyo had had to dig up information on people in Konoha several times before, so she sort of knew how it went.

This was absolutely doable!

Feeling somewhat cheered up, Kyo went home, already planning out how to do this over the next few days, and she felt relatively confident she'd finish her research pretty quickly.

Shouldn't take more than two weeks, provided no one was sent away on mission.

“Are you sure you're not up to something?” Jiraiya asked, eyeing her suspiciously, and hadn't they had this conversation already?
Sure, this time he was technically right, but.

“Nothing that concerns you, Jiraiya.”

“Ouch, that's harsh,” the man muttered. “Shouldn't you be showing some respect for your sensei?”

Kyo blinked at him, tilted her head. “Sure?”

Jiraiya heaved a long-suffering sigh. “Teenagers,” he complained under his breath.

Kyo exchanged a look with Minato and shrugged.

Kisaki was silently laughing at all of them, she was sure, but that seemed to be a near-constant mood for her lately.

The day's lessons were wrapped up shortly after that, and Kyo and Kisaki took off before anyone could say anything, or try to interrogate her.

She didn't have the time, energy or motivation to spend on fielding questions she wasn't interested in answering to begin with.

“Okay, you check out the Aburame we spotted yesterday, try to find out as much as possible. Their compound is right next to the Inuzuka one, so it won't be particularly suspicious if anyone notices you,” Kyo said, pausing to give Kisaki a look.

“Alright. When are we meeting up again?”

“Three hours?” she suggested. “But you can always come find me before that if you feel like we can cross him off the list, or you find something interesting to share.”

Kisaki nodded. “Got it.” She jumped up with her front legs enough so that she could give Kyo a quick lick on the chin, and then took off.

Kyo snickered softly to herself, and hurried off to do her own research.

Which was basically stalking.

...should she be feeling weird about this?

Well. She wasn't digging up any information that wasn't widely accessible if you knew where to look, or listen to the right people, so... it wasn't too bad?

And besides. It wasn't like she had anything horrible in mind!

At worst, these teenagers would never be bothered by her, and at best, one of them might get laid. If he agreed, that was.

That wasn't so bad.

As predicted, it took her about two weeks to narrow the candidates down to just one, and Kyo felt fairly happy with him.

Seeing as her friends had turned her down or just wouldn't agree if she asked, this was the next best thing.
A boy named Ryouichi, who's parents were both civilianborn shinobi. Father being a career Chuunin and his mother working at the hospital.

He was sixteen, a Chuunin, she found him reasonably attractive, he seemed to be a good person. His friends and the people in the neighbourhood he lived in seemed to think highly of him.

He'd had a few girlfriends, which was good, and what had made her actually choose him in the end: he had a female Nara Jounin sensei.

She severely doubted she'd find anyone else even close to that level on such short notice.

So, decision made, that just left her with the small conundrum of how to approach him.

Kyo spent two full days pondering the question, but she couldn't seem to think of a good way no matter how she went about it.

It was exasperating.

Then there was always the possibility of him saying no, too... Kyo wasn't sure what she'd do in that eventuality, but she supposed she could always go with number two on her list. Though that would take some more research... double-checking things.

“What are you doing?”

Kyo turned to find two familiar kunoichi peering at her with suspicion and curiosity, respectively.

“Hello, Kushina, Uchiha-san. I'm thinking.”

“About what?” Kushina pressed, still eyeing her suspiciously.

“Flirting,” Kyo responded honestly, because she might as well see what they had to say. “What do people even say to each other when they're trying to get laid?”

Kushina's face took on colour alarmingly quickly, and she really was an unfortunate blusher, wasn't she?

Her Uchiha friend looked entertained, though. “Asking for some specific reason, or just hypothetically?” she asked, eyeing Kyo interestingly.

Kyo smiled back and didn't actually say anything.

“This isn't about Minato, is it?” Kushina asked slowly, all but dripping distrust.

Kyo sighed and rolled her eyes. “No. How many times do I have to tell you?”

Kushina stared at her a moment longer, crossed her arms over her chest and nodded. “Okay. In that case, guys definitely have to do something romantic. Something to show how much they love you!” she declared firmly.

Kyo tilted her head. When did she say anything about love being involved?

“It is very nice when boys show you they care and are invested in the relationship,” the Uchiha girl agreed thoughtfully.

“And when you don't have a relationship?” Kyo asked, curious despite herself and wanting to hear their answers.
“Well,” the Uchiha said thoughtfully, raising a hand to cradle her cheek, “you’d have to start by introducing yourselves and get acquainted.”

“Do stuff together!” Kushina supplied eagerly, which... explained quite a bit about her behaviour the last few months, actually. "Make him acknowledge you're a kick-ass kunoichi!"

“That, too,” the Uchiha agreed calmly, and what had her name been again? Kyo couldn’t for the life of her remember right now. “But it's important to have calm, intimate moments, too.”

Kyo sighed. “You haven't actually answered my question,” she told the two girls, who blinked at her. “You're talking about boyfriends,” she waved a hand at them, “and I never said anything about love.”

“Oh.” The Uchiha blinked. “I'm not sure how anything else would work,” she admitted apologetically.

“No, it's pretty much the same thing, isn't it?” Kushina argued, turning to frown at her friend, placing her hands on her hips.

Which turned into some sort of lecture Kyo wasn’t paying much attention to, because her targ- uh, the guy she was trying to figure out a way to approach seemed to be done with his team now, and they were slowly moving in their direction.

Kushina and the Uchiha girl were still discussing love, or whatever, but Kyo figured she probably wouldn't be able to think up anything sophisticated, so she'd just stick with what she was used to.

She walked up to the boy. “Hi,” she greeted, ignoring everyone else. “You don't know me, and I don't really know you either, but would you like to have sex?”

Ryouichi froze, the polite expression calcifying on his face.

She was pretty sure Kushina sounded like she was dying behind her, but she didn't turn to look at what the girl was up to.

“You look pretty nice, sure,” one of the other two boys said with a smirk.

Kyo sent him a puzzled look. “I wasn't talking to you, I was asking him.” And she pointed at her guy. Why the hell would he interrupt like that?

The Nara Jounin was eyeing her curiously, giving Kyo an intent once-over, tilted her head, clearly considered the situation. “Well, Ryouichi? The girl asked you a question. Either decline or accept,” she drawled, dark eyes intent on Kyo's face.

Kyo blinked. Right, this was a bit sudden. “Do you want to think about it?” she asked, because that would be fair.

“Uh, w-why?” Ryouichi finally stammered, his cheeks were kinda pink and he was glancing around, anywhere but at any of them.

“Because I don't want it to happen on a mission,” Kyo informed him bluntly.

“Oh.” He paused, clearly thought that over. “Okay, fine.” There was a beat of silence, and then he seemed to realise what he'd just said and his blush intensified.

“Great!” Kyo smiled. “Are you busy now? I kind of want to get it over with.”
He opened his mouth, didn't seem to know what to say, and then sent his sensei a panicked look.

“You may go, Ryouichi,” the Nara said easily, corralling the two other boys with ease. “Have fun.” And she walked away, marching her two other students with her.

Kyo turned back to Ryouichi, who sighed and awkwardly shifted his stance. “You still don't have to, you know,” she told him firmly.

“I- Yeah, I know,” he muttered, slanting her with a look and then diverted his eyes once more. “Should we go?” he asked next, looking embarrassed again, and yeah, they were still just standing in some random corridor in the Hokage tower.

“Let's,” Kyo agreed and waved an absent goodbye at Kushina and the Uchiha girl, who were still staring at her like they couldn't believe their eyes.

Kyo gave a mental shrug.

People were weird, and it wasn't like the time in the Before had been too different from this.

Sure, her question then had been non-verbal, more implied, and the setting had been different, but the situations overall also weren't the same. The lives weren't the same. She felt it was important to make everything as clear as possible here.

Soon enough the two of them were wandering through Konoha, and it wasn't as awkward as Kyo had been fearing.

Sure, it was a bit tense, but not too badly.

“Um, what's your name?” Ryouichi finally asked, still not really looking at her, but he was slowly losing the blush.

“Kyo,” she informed him with a wry smile.

“And, uh, you're not a Genin, right?”

“Nope.” She very much approved of him asking, too, which was another point in his favour. Kyo felt she'd chosen well.

“Where...?” his voice trailed off uncomfortably, and he raised a hand to rub at his face, looking like he didn't know what he was doing.

Well. There were a few options, there.

Kyo doubted her and Genma's shared bedroom would cut the deal, but it wasn't like there weren't any inns in Konoha.

She suggested it and Ryouichi grimaced minutely.

“Er, would you mind my place?” he asked.

Kyo blinked. “I didn't think you'd be comfortable with that,” she admitted.

The boy shrugged. “Tou-chan and kaa-chan both work late and my siblings are busy. It would make me less uncomfortable,” he muttered. “This is already pretty weird.”

“I don't mind.” Kyo shrugged, and then waited for him to 'show the way', because she doubted he'd
appreciate it if she told him she'd been looking into him and his life.

Some things were just better left unsaid.

Soon enough Ryouichi showed her into his family's house, and Kyo curiously looked around. She hadn't been inside, because there were lines and she hadn't crossed them.

“Through here,” he muttered to her, walking through the house with sure, easy steps and Kyo followed. “So, um, this is my room,” he declared, looking around like it was the first time for him in here as well. “I don't really know how to do this,” he admitted into the awkward silence that followed.

Kyo turned to look at him. “Please tell me you've had sex before.” Because if not, then she'd seriously miscalculated.

“No, I have,” he hurriedly assured her, slapping a hand over his eyes before he dragged it down his face and sent her an embarrassed look. “Just. Not like this.”

“Oh.” Kyo blinked and considered that. “Does it have to be complicated?” She met his confused gaze for a second and then pulled off her shirt with a shrug.

“Wow, uh, okay, that's- one way to do it,” Ryouichi muttered, blinking and watching her pull her mesh-shirt off as well.

Kyo paused, eyed him carefully, trying to see if he was still okay with this. “You can still change your mind.”

“Well. Yes. But I haven't.” He was silent a second, carded the fingers of one hand through his hair. “You sure you haven't?”

Kyo raised her eyebrows at him and grabbed the hem of her bra.

Ryouichi reached out to take hold of one of her hands, stopping her. “Wait, please don't do- that feels wrong.”

Kyo frowned confusedly. It was all about getting naked, right? And men around here seemed to have a collective fixation on breasts, so.

Ryouichi sighed and eyed her a second, and he was still holding her hand loosely. “You'll tell me if you're uncomfortable, right?”

“Yes.” She doubted he'd make her uncomfortable, though. She was the one who had asked for this and she was fully prepared for everything that would follow.

She already knew largely how this would go, and hey, it might even be a better first time than in the Before.

Not that that would be difficult. It was already less awkward.

Ryouichi eyed her a second longer and then tentatively placed a hand on her waist, running his fingers over the scar across her ribs, eyeing it contemplatively a second.

The light press of lips to her mouth was a bit of a surprise, but it was nice.

She was pretty glad she'd chosen Ryouichi; he was clearly a good guy, and reacted to this as she'd hoped he would.
Kisaki sniffed her curiously. “So how was it?”

“Alright.” Kyo shrugged.

Hadin’t exactly been mind-blowing or life-changing or anything, but it’d been... nice. Had hurt a little bit, but it’d been negligible in the large scheme of things and it wasn’t like it hadn't been expected.

She just felt relieved to have put it behind her. Now she could finally go back to normal and not give it any thought as she focused on training and missions and just living her life.

She’d said her goodbye to Ryouichi and they’d gone their separate ways, both fully aware they wouldn’t have any further contact, and it was fine.

Kyo felt rather pleased.

When she went to meet up with her team the next morning, she felt far less stressed, and there was a tension in her, a deep-seated fear, that was gone. Had been put to rest. And she hadn't been fully aware of it until it was no longer there.

It made her realise she’d been carrying it around for weeks. For months. Ever since that mission to Ame, she was pretty sure.

But it was finally gone, and it was such a relief, she felt lighter. Like there was a heavy weight off her shoulders.

“You're in a good mood today?” Jiraiya asked, sounding somewhat sceptical.

“Yep.”

“Did something nice happen?” Minato asked, eyeing her curiously.

Kyo shrugged. “More like I don't have to worry about something any more.” And yeah, enemies might still try to target her like that again, but she still felt like she'd taken back a measure of control of the situation.

Her good mood lasted all day, all until she came home that afternoon.

“Kyo, can you please come sit down for a moment.”

“Tou-san? I didn't think you'd be home yet,” Kyo said, exchanged a look with Kisaki and obligingly wandered over to the kitchen. She eyed her dad, and the tea he’d set out and took a seat at the table. “What is it?”

Kou was silent for a long moment, face serious. “I'm trying to figure out how to start this conversation, but I can't think of anything,” he muttered, raising a hand to rub at one of his eyes.

Kyo frowned. “Nothing’s happened to Genma, has it?”

“No.”

Which was a relief, to be sure.

Kyo waited patiently for her dad to gather his thoughts and try to figure out whatever he needed to say.
“Right,” he finally said, and Kyo looked up from where she'd been petting Kisaki. “I guess there's nothing for it other than to ask,” Kou muttered, dragged a hand down his face, and then fixed her with a look. “Kyo, I was told by one of the people I work with that you approached a boy to ask—” he cut himself off, looking vaguely pained, before he tried again. He clasped his hands together on the table between them. “Is it true you propositioned a boy in the tower, yesterday?”

Propositioned?

Kyo tilted her head. That had been fast.

And yeah, she hadn't particularly wanted to have this conversation with tou-san, and maybe she should have picked a different spot to approach Ryouichi than the tower, but she honestly hadn't thought people would care.

Why the hell would they gossip about her? They didn't know who she was. Might have a vague concept of her at best, because of her poison skills, but not enough to know her on sight.

“Kyo, I need you to say something now,” tou-san informed her tightly, and it made her realise she'd been silent for several long seconds.

“What about it?” she asked, feeling vaguely defensive. More because of the look on Kou's face than any other reason.

“Please tell me nothing came of it.”

Kyo stared at her dad, and she could lie, but she didn't really want to.

“Kyo,” Kou prompted tersely.

“I don't want to lie to you, tou-san,” she told him quietly.

Kou closed his eyes with a sharp sigh and covered his face with his hands, for just a moment. Then, he dropped his hands, opened his eyes and fixed her with a look she couldn't quite label just yet.

“You are twelve years old, Kyo,” he told her flatly.

“I know that.”

“No, Kyo. You. Are. Twelve.” Kou frowned at her. “Why the hell- You are far too young for sex! And why would you even think to do this?”

Kyo frowned right back at him, feeling uncomfortable with the conversational topic and his slightly raised voice. “Tou-san, if you just—”

“You know, I was sure you'd tell me this was wrong, that someone had mistaken themselves, and that my twelve year old daughter hadn't just—” he cut himself off with a frustrated sound and a sharp gesture.

“You know, I was sure you'd tell me this was wrong, that someone had mistaken themselves, and that my twelve year old daughter hadn't just—” he cut himself off with a frustrated sound and a sharp gesture.

“Just what, tou-san?” Kyo asked evenly, distantly registering that her face felt cold. She was pretty sure all the blood had drained out of it.

“You can't do this. You're too young,” Kou said firmly, insistenty. “I frankly didn't think this was something I had to worry about! I expected better from you!”

Kyo stared at him, something bitter on the back of her tongue.
Better.

That implied a whole host of things, and she wasn't very enthusiastic about any of them.

“What, exactly, are you saying here, tou-san?” Kyo asked slowly, and when had she stood up?

Kisaki was pressed into her side, tense and uncertain, ear folded back. She wasn't liking this, either.

“Kyo, you're a child, you don't have any business having sex with anyone! Did someone- did anyone pressure you into this?” Kou asked, standing as well, frowning heavily.

“No. I asked him, remember?” And she turned to stalk towards the door.

“Where are you going? We're not done talking about this.”

“Away from here. I'm done. You can continue the conversation on your own.”

“Kyo, you need to listen to me,” Kou said firmly, striding after her.

“So... this is a bad time to come back, isn't it?” Ryota asked, eyeing the two of them speculatively, standing in the door, one hand still on the handle and with Genma on his back.

“No, you have great timing,” Kyo told him flatly, walking over to step into her sandals. “He's all yours.”

“You're twelve, Kyo, I can't believe we have to have this conversation. I'm disappointed in you, and I honestly thought you knew better,” Kou said, and it was-

Kyo paused. “I know I'm twelve,” she informed him rigidly, her volume steadily rising with every word, "but it's not like anyone else cares!”

She was panting harshly when she was done, just meeting her dad's gaze.

He looked pale, all of a sudden, and shit, she hadn't meant to say that.

“Come on, Kisaki,” Kyo muttered and stalked out.

“Wait, nee-san, where are you going? Don't be angry!” And that was Genma, but she just couldn't-

Not right now.

Kyo shunshined out of the building, Kisaki half a step behind her.

She knocked on the door, hoping he was home.

She wasn't sure where else to go.

The door opened and Minato blinked at her, clearly surprised.

“Hi,” she greeted weakly. “Can we come in?”

Minato wordlessly stepped back, opening the door for her. “I'll get you a towel. Or two,” he said, sending Kisaki a look, because it was just typical for the clouds that had been gathering in the sky above all day to finally dump their load on Konoha.
Kyo shivered a little. It was late evening and she'd stayed outside much longer than she probably should have, and it'd been raining for hours now.

She just hadn't been able to bring herself to go anywhere, and she'd taken off her wrist holsters and put them in her poison pack at the first drop, to make sure they stayed dry. It'd been fine.

Kisaki nudged her, and Kyo slowly stepped into Minato's hallway.

Getting her shoes off was a bit of a struggle, but she managed, even though she was so cold it was difficult to make her limbs do what she wanted them to.

Sitting still in the rain really hadn't been a great idea.

“What's wrong?” Minato asked when he came back with an armful of towels. He tossed one over Kyo's head and then used another one to begin to rub Kisaki dry.

She slowly rubbed the towel against her hair, trying to think of anything to say.

“Can we sleep here tonight?” she asked, rather than answer.

“We had a fight,” Kisaki added morosely, leaning her chin on Minato's shoulder. “We're sad.”

Kyo sighed. “Yeah,” she agreed quietly.

Minato paused. “You two had a fight?” He sounded confused, looking between them.

“No. With tou-san.”

“Oh.” Minato resumed the drying of Kisaki's wet fur. “What about?”

Kyo sighed, finally closed the door behind her, and then peeled her drenched shirt off, pulling it over her head.

She placed her gear off to the side and then took off her trousers, too.

Getting out a scroll and unsealing another set of clothes took little effort and minimal energy. It also let her focus on something else for a moment, as she pulled on the pair of dry trousers.

“I did something, and tou-san heard about it, and he think I was stupid to do it,” Kyo said quietly.

“He didn't even ask me why I did it.” Not properly. And he hadn't tried to listen to her at all.

There was a fresh towel in front of her face, and Kyo blinked at it. Turned to stare blankly at Minato, who had crouched down in front of her, eyeing her concernedly.

“That doesn't sound like Kou. The thing you did, what was it?”

Kyo bit her lower lip and took the towel. Pressed it to her face for a moment, before she peered up at the blond, wondering what his reaction might be.

Minato eyed her right back and sat down on the floor in front of her. Waiting.

“I,” Kyo began, ignoring the way her voice shook, “slept with someone.” She took a deep breath and continued when the boy clearly didn't get it. “I had sex with someone.”
Minato startled, rearing back -just a little- and his cheeks reddened. “Why?” he asked, though it sounded more like he asked for the sake of filling the silence, rather than because he absolutely wanted to know.

Kyo said nothing, just pressed her face back to the towel.

“Oh,” Minato said softly a minute later, and there was heavy understanding in his voice.

Why couldn’t- Minato was thirteen and he could understand something Kou had been unable to grasp, as an adult.

But then again, Kyo hadn’t exactly told tou-san about... everything.

“Do you want a hug?” Minato asked hesitantly into the quiet. It was still raining heavily outside, but it just gave the silence depth.

Kyo nodded wordlessly and collapsed against her teammate when he tentatively wrapped his arms around her, and he didn’t care that she wasn’t wearing a shirt, that she was still damp and cold from the rain.

“He didn’t even ask me to explain,” Kyo whispered as she cried into Minato’s shoulder, unable to help herself.

...!

“These mood-swings are killing me, kid,” Jiraiya groaned, rubbing at the back of his head and eyeing her concernedly, looking like he didn’t know what to do.

At least that hopefully meant he hadn’t picked up on the same gossip tou-san had yesterday yet.

Kyo said nothing, just folded herself down in a seat, pressing her mouth to her arms, which she folded on top of her knees.

Kisaki came to a rest behind her, like a big, warm, safe backrest.

“Can we focus on fuuinjutsu today, sensei?” Minato asked, having sat down right beside her, and he was eyeing Jiraiya expectantly. “We really want to finish up our personal projects soon.” Even though he’d already started on his second seal, that was still true.

“Fine,” Jiraiya grunted, still eyeing the two of them pensively.

It was a slow, calm day, which was fully appreciated.

She couldn’t even claim to be the slightest bit surprised when it ended with Katsurou-sensei wandering onto the field, eyeing her solemnly.

“Hello, Kyo.” He sighed. “You already know why I’m here.” It wasn’t a question.

“Tou-san talked to you?” she guessed unenthusiastically.

“He did, yeah,” Katsurou confirmed, crouching down in front of her and ignoring everyone else present, for now. “Told me about what happened. Which prompted me to go have a talk with Chie.”

Kyo couldn’t imagine the woman being happy about that.

She sent him a look.
“I may have been temporarily benched, but I’m still your shrink,” Katsurou drawled with a small, mean smirk, and Chie probably hadn’t had a great day today, either. “If they think they can keep me from reading your file, they’ll have another thing coming.” The smirk slid off his face, leaving no trace of having been there at all. He eyed her seriously. “Want to talk?”

“Are you gonna yell at me, too?” she asked blandly.

“No.”

Kyo considered that for a moment, and then got to her feet. Let herself fall forward until Katsurou-sensei caught her with a huff.

“You're getting too old for me to carry around,” he said, but still held her close and straightened back up to his full height. Lifting her off the ground.

“I'll never be too old for that,” she protested bleakly.

Katsurou sighed. “Until next time, Jiraiya.”

“Yeah. See you tomorrow, Kyo,” her stupid sensei told her, giving her a crooked, encouraging smile and Kyo waved half-heartedly back.

Katsurou-sensei only carried her to the edge of the field before he put her down on her feet again, eyed her a second, and then continued walking in the direction of his house.

Kyo and Kisaki followed without a word.

Didn't say anything until they'd entered his house and Kyo had curled up on Katsurou's couch.

A couple of minutes later, she was cradling a steaming mug of tea in her hands, which also gave her something to look at that wouldn't look back.

“Aren't you gonna ask?” Kyo asked into the silence, feeling tense and apprehensive.

“No.”

Kyo blew on her tea, ignoring the lump in her throat. “It's so stupid.”

“I disagree.”

“You're stupid,” she muttered under her breath, taking a tentative sip of her tea, even though she knew it was still too hot and would burn her tongue.

Kyo didn't care.

“I am pretty stupid,” Katsurou agreed idly, surprising her. “Letting a genjutsu trip me up, which put a lot of pressure and stress on you, on top of all the other shit you've been through lately, and part of this whole situation is my fault to begin with, Kyo.”

“Right,” she muttered disbelievingly. “And how exactly would it be your fault? You weren't there.”

“No,” he agreed quietly. “I wasn't. But I've known you your whole career. I know people have mistaken you for a boy, enemies and comrades alike, and I also knew what might happen once puberty hit. I should have sat you down and talked to you about it, but I didn’t.”

“It's not like you can think of everything,” Kyo mumbled, uncomfortable, frowning at her tea. “And
you're not my official sensei any more.”

“So?” Katsurou challenged darkly. “Like that's gonna fucking stop me,” he huffed, before he let out a weary sigh. “The point is, Kyo. There isn't a neat, tidy solution to this problem.” She could feel his gaze on her, but didn't look up. “Some people will agree with Kou. That you're too young and that sex isn't something you should even think about, let alone participate in. Others will think it was the right thing to do. A sensible decision for a kunoichi in your position.” He was silent for a beat, and from the sound of things, had dropped his head back against the backrest. “The truth is, both of those options are right. As a child, you're too young. But as a kunoichi, it was sensible. Maybe even necessary.”

“I just wanted to have a choice,” Kyo said wetly, and this just sucked.

Why was she so damn weepy all the time?

“Yeah,” sensei agreed quietly.

“A say in who and why and when.” She wiped irritably at her face. “I asked Inoichi first,” she revealed with a small, abrupt laugh.

Katsurou shifted, possibly to send her a look. “And what did he say?”

“Nothing. All but turned to stone. I don't think he was even breathing.” Kyo sniffl ed and took a deep breath. “Chouza and Shikaku also said no.”

Katsurou grunted and she was curious enough about his expression she turned to look at him.

He was frowning darkly at nothing in particular. “I can't even tell if I want to praise that idiot or smack him on the head,” he eventually said.

“You could do both,” Kyo offered tiredly.

“It's a definite possibility,” Katsurou muttered, before he turned back to the matter at hand with a huff. “Well?”

“Well, what?”

“You found someone else,” he said blandly. “Please reassure me he behaved himself, or will I have to track this hormonal teenager down for a few choice words?”

“He behaved himself,” Kyo assured him, voice just as bland. “It's not like I just grabbed some random person. He was the most promising candidate on the list I compiled.”

Katsurou laughed, low and rough and reached over to gently ruffle her hair. “Good girl,” he praised. “And? Do you regret it?”

Kyo thought it over, but she didn't need long. “No,” she said, and it was the truth. “I'm just feeling really relieved.”

Katsurou sighed, and his hand was still on her head. He very gently pulled her towards him and Kyo let herself tip over, only remembering to keep her tea from spilling at the last second.

“I'm sorry my shortcomings impacted you in this way, Kyo.”

Carefully stretching to put her mug down on the coffee table, she wondered what she ought to say to that.
“I was a child for a really long time, the last time around. I didn't get a lot of the drama everyone else was so busy with when we became teenagers, and I never fit in. My friends and classmates thought I was childish.” She paused. “But, you know, I never mourned it: not fitting in. I was happy just being myself.”

She'd felt left out a lot, though. Her friends at the time hadn't been very good ones, and they'd kept her on the fringes of the group.

They'd been temporary, and she'd gotten better friends as soon as she could, but it had still left an impact.

Being the odd one out, not understanding the excitement about boys. About love and romance.

“Doesn't really weigh up for the lack of childhood here,” Katsurou grunted, tugging gently on a lock of her hair. “And you're still a child, even if you make for a lousy one.”

“Thanks,” Kyo drawled, deadpan.

“We both know you've never really known how to be a kid, Kyo.” Katsurou shrugged. “It shouldn't come as any kind of surprise to the adults in your life that you're keeping it up now as well. Though I will admit there are different kinds of troubles involved.”

Kyo snorted and pressed more firmly into Katsurou-sensei's side. “I'm really angry with tou-san,” she said quietly. “And hurt.”

Katsurou sighed and hummed neutrally under his breath. “To be fair, you're his child, Kyo, and he doesn't know you're anything other than a twelve year old girl with too much responsibility on your shoulders already, with too much grief and pain carved into your skin.” He was silent for a beat. “Let me ask you something.” He sent her a look. “If you'd heard about some other twelve year old girl who'd done what you did, what would your reaction be? Ignore the reincarnation thing for a moment, and try to imagine it.”

Kyo closed her eyes and did.

A twelve year old kid approaching an older, unfamiliar teen to have sex and... yeah. She knew it. She knew it wasn't alright, in most situations.

“It doesn't change the fact he didn't hear me out,” Kyo said sadly. “That he told me I'd disappointed him.”

Because Kyo would like to think she'd at least stop to think why, ask some questions and not just jump to conclusions. Give that kid the benefit of the doubt, especially a fellow kunoichi, who's life looked different from a civilian's. But even then, she'd at least ask.

“Yeah, he fucked up,” Katsurou agreed. “But it's not the first time, and it comes from a place of love and concern. You know that.”

“Yeah, but why can't he just-” Kyo cut herself off with a sigh, let her head fall back against Katsurou's shoulder to stare up at the ceiling. “Everyone keeps insisting I'm,” she gestured vaguely, “I don't even know, but the moment they think they know better than me, I'm just a child again.”

“Growing up sucks,” Katsurou drawled. “And it sucks even more if you're a shinobi. You're a child, but you're also a soldier, and it's a strange line to walk. Not many people manage to keep it up and remember both of those things at all times.”
Kyo suppressed a disgruntled grunt, and tried to look objectively at it.

...she already had trouble with that herself, didn't she? She'd thought about it not too long ago, about Genma.

Admittedly, he wasn't a Genin yet, but he was getting older, and she still couldn't see anything other than her little brother when she looked at him.

He still looked and felt far too young to be a shinobi, and she doubted that would change in time for his graduation.

“Is this where you tell me I'm a hypocrite?” she wondered tiredly.

“We're all hypocrites, Kyo. More or less.”

She sighed. “I bet you'll tell me to go talk to tou-san next,” she mumbled.


“Why?” Kyo asked, sending him a narrow-eyed look.

“Him and his Uchiha friend dropped off Genma with his parents and went out to drink,” Katsurou revealed, sounding vaguely amused.

“He's getting drunk,” Kyo stated, feeling vaguely disbelieving. “Like a responsible adult,” she deadpanned.

Katsurou smirked at her. “We just established everyone's a hypocrite.”

“Yeah, but he doesn't have to be so- urgh,” she huffed, disgruntled. “It's not like I got drunk and threw myself at first, best random man I found, even though he's acting like I did.” She thought about it, eyes narrowing further. It made her incredibly annoyed. “I'm gonna go talk to him now and then come back here. That's okay with you, right?”

Katsurou fixed her with a look. “You know, if anyone bothers you, you can bother them right back. With something small and pointy,” he told her idly.

Kyo blinked at him. “But,” she hesitated, “what if they have a mission after or something?”

“Then that's their problem. Not yours.”

Kyo huffed, not sure if she was feeling amused or not, but she got to her feet and sent Kisaki a look.

Who was watching her intently, several questions in the depths of her eyes.

Kyo paused, thought back to everything that had been said, and gave a mental shrug. She was pretty sure she would have ended up telling Kisaki about the Before sooner or later anyway, so this was as good an opportunity as any. She'd actually intended to talk to her about it before now, but hadn't gotten around to it. Had forgotten.

“I'll tell you all about it tonight,” she promised the dog. “See you in a bit, sensei,” she added for Katsurou's benefit, who was still seated on the couch.

He watched her evenly a moment, and then shrugged. “I'll get started on dinner. Try not to start any fights.”
Kyo paused. “But you just said- I don't even know what anyone means any more,” she muttered to herself, metaphorically washing her hands of everything.

“Poisoning someone for bothering you and starting a fight is not the same thing, Kyo,” Katsurou said amusedly, though he was already on his way into the kitchen and wasn't looking at her.

Kyo sent him an annoyed look and stepped into her sandals.

“I'm leaving now!”

With Kisaki's help, it didn't take too long to track down tou-san and Ryota to the bar they'd chosen. The dog took one look at the place and said, “I'll wait out here, if that's alright with you.”

“Sure,” Kyo agreed. “I'll be right back.”

“Too many people, and it smells,” Kisaki grumbled unhappily, sending the bar an offended look. It wasn't terribly late -not even evening yet- but the bar was already busy and it wasn't exactly a classy place.

Looked to be fairly popular with shinobi, though.

Kyo dithered a moment, before she scowled at herself and walked inside. It wasn't like she had any real reason to dread this conversation.

And they were in Konoha, so she doubted anyone would try anything, even with dubious amounts of alcohol involved.

Kyo paused inside the door and scanned the people inside. It wasn't particularly difficult to spot tou-san and Ryota, sitting in one of the booths, tou-san with his head in his hands. At least her honorary uncle noticed her almost immediately.

He raised an eyebrow at her and nudged his teammate, who raised his head.

Kyo sent them both a dry look and headed over.

It wasn't that far, and it really shouldn't be any kind of achievement to be able to walk across a room. She only wished it hadn't been well-populated with drunk people.

Drunk teenagers.

Kyo stared up at the obviously drunk teenager that had stopped in front of her with long-suffering exasperation. He'd been walking from the bar, a fresh bottle of something in one hand, supposedly heading back to his table, when he'd spotted her and veered off course.

“Hey, you're really pretty,” he said, and he had trouble focusing his gaze.

“Thanks,” Kyo said flatly, stubbornly pushing down her growing discomfort. “Leave me alone.”

“No need to be like that, I just wanna talk.”

“And I don't,” Kyo said. She hated that this had to happen right now. “I'm busy.”
“With what? Let me buy you a drink. You can tell me all about it.” And he reached out to take hold of her arm.

Kyo pushed his hand away from her. “No. You need to get better situational awareness,” she informed him shortly, trying to step around him, only for him to shift with her, blocking her path.

“Come on, I'm just trying to get to know you here,” he said, cajolingly, smiling encouragingly at her. “Making friends.”

He definitely needed better situational awareness, because both tou-san and Ryota were well within view, and neither of them looked particularly happy with what they were seeing.

Tou-san looked a little bit like he was a hair away from getting up and stalking over, which probably wouldn't result in anything good.

Maybe she should just take Katsurou-sensei's advice into consideration?

Kyo couldn't help but hesitate, though, and before she knew it, there was an arm around her shoulders, trying to steer her towards one of the tables.

She felt her expression twist minutely, and her fingers twitched towards her cuff holsters, but she didn't have time to reach a decision before drunk guy was stopped in his tracks by getting picked up off his feet, a large hand fisted in the front of his uniform shirt.

Thankfully, that also meant his arm disappeared from around her shoulders.

“Girl said no,” a familiar man growled. “Go waste your breath on something else.” And drunk guy was pushed away harshly.

He stumbled but caught himself, huffed something in their general direction, sent her and her unexpected saviour one last look, and then wandered away, looking disgruntled.

“Thanks, Hirata,” Kyo said, turning to the man that had intervened.

Hirata grunted, still eyeing the teenager speculatively a second longer, before he turned to Kyo with a grin. “Here to get a drink, pipsqueak?”

“I'm twelve,” Kyo deadpanned, before she could catch herself.

“So?”

She peered at him and then shrugged. “I'm not. Thanks for the help.”

Hirata stared at her, one of his hands reaching towards the back of her shirt, which Kyo quickly dodged. “See you around, kid,” he said with a laugh, and wandered off.

“I already feel like I've seen you around more than usual, lately,” she shot back, sending him a frown while she was at it, because why did he have to try and pick her up every single time?

“It's 'cause you're starting to hang around my haunts,” Hirata drawled, raised his sake bottle in her general direction and wandered off.

Kyo snorted and turned back to the reason she was actually here. Only to find tou-san and Ryota staring avidly at her. And Hirata.

Mostly Hirata, actually.
“Hello, tou-san,” Kyo greeted and slid onto the bench next to her dad, who shifted minutely to give her room to do so. “Ryota,” she added, glancing at the man.

“Who the hell was that?” Ryota asked, looking away from Hirata if only so he could frown at her.

“Hirata?” Kyo tilted her head. “We’ve run a few missions together.” She shrugged. “But that wasn't really what I wanted to talk about.”

“This really isn't the setting, Kyo,” tou-san sighed tiredly. “We can do this tomorrow.”

Kyo pursed her lips, considering it.

Talking tomorrow would probably be the better option. But, she was already here.

“I just wanted to address the fact you seem to think I'm some irresponsible idiot,” she huffed, seeing as that was the part that really hurt. “Because I'm not.”

“Oh, kitten, I'm gonna have to disagree on that,” Ryota muttered, eyeing her with a disapproving frown.

“Why? I didn't just walk up to some random person! I did research, okay?”

“Research,” Ryota echoed blankly.

“Yes. I mean, what if he'd been an asshole? Or a Genin?” Kyo scoffed. “I'm not stupid.” She had standards.

Tou-san had placed his elbows back on the table and covered his face with his hands. “I know you're not stupid,” he muttered. “Kami, I need to drink several of something stronger.”

“Oh, just so we're clear,” Kyo said, eyeing her dad somewhat wryly. “I'm still not really interested in boys, or dating or whatever, so you don't have to worry about that.”

“So you just, what?” Ryota asked, peering almost curiously at her now. “Decided to-”

“No!” Kou interrupted, jerking upright and sending his teammate an almost desperate look. “I refuse to have this conversation. Please go talk to Katsurou some more, Kyo.”

“Okay. See you tomorrow, tou-san. Don't get too drunk.” Kyo shrugged and got back to her feet.

She took two steps before she ducked a kunai thrown half-heartedly at her and Kyo turned in the direction the knife had come from to fix Hirata with an incredulous look.

“That is not how you get anyone's attention,” she informed the man, but nonetheless walked over to see what he wanted. “What?”

“You off to see Katsurou?” Hirata asked, idly curious, and he looked pretty relaxed, which made her wonder how much he’d had to drink already.

“That was the plan, yes,” she said slowly, narrowing her eyes at him and trying to gauge his mental state. “Want me to send him over?”

“Nah,” Hirata laughed. “Tell him he owes me one.”

“Why?”
“I'm apparently still on babysitting duty,” he drawled, and took a swig from his sake bottle.

Kyo heaved a sigh, rolled her eyes and turned to leave. “Have fun, Hirata. Don't start any fights,” she told him over her shoulder.

“Those two contradict each other,” Hirata informed her with a slow, lazy grin.

Kyo shook her head, despite herself, and left.

Kisaki was waiting outside like indicated and walked up to her the moment she spotted her. They didn't need to exchange any words, just started off back towards Katsurou's house together.

She'd help Katsurou-sensei finish up dinner and not think of any of this for a while, she decided.

-x-x-x-

“Sometimes, I feel like I have no idea what's going on in her life,” Kou groaned, scrubbing at his face and accepting the bottle Ryota pressed into his hand with wordless gratitude. “She's too young for this.”

“Kitten's been too young for a lot of things,” Ryota drawled back, still eyeing the man a bit further down the room, who seemed to be doing his best to drink his way through half the bar's inventory.

Kou grunted an acknowledgement. “For fuck's sake, though.”

“Yeah. Makes you feel old,” Ryota huffed.

“No, it makes me feel homicidal,” Kou muttered with a scowl and drained his sake. “Hand me the next one.”

Ryota snorted, but complied without complaint.

-x-x-x-
Hello readers!
In light of some commentary on recent chapters, I’d like to make a few things clear:
Hear the Silence isn’t a children’s story. The world is built around conflict between
militaries made up of super-powered individuals, all of which are or started off as child
soldiers. The main character is also a part of, basically, black ops, and a trained assassin.
What I’m saying is, Hear the Silence will cover/address some very sensitive subjects and
conflicts. Morality is dubious at best when the characters have been conditioned to use
every weapon at their disposal, including taking advantage of other people’s mental and
emotional weaknesses. The society is sexist and female soldiers face additional threats
and prejudice.
I understand that recent plot points made some readers uncomfortable, which is
completely understandable. I’d just like to remind you that you’re in charge of the
content you consume and responsible for your own choices. The story is rated mature
and appropriately tagged and I won’t be changing it according to comments/complaints.
Please watch out for your mental wellbeing.

If you think I should add a tag, please let me know. I can be found on tumblr, username
emptysurface, and HtS also has a discord server, you can DM me anytime.
[https://discord.gg/y7YmP4W]

This got long, but I think it needed to be said.
And now, onto the chapter!

Kyo stayed with Katsurou for a few days, ignoring the rest of the village.

She only really left to meet up with her team.

Minato clearly didn't care much what she did, so long as she was happy and at ease, and she was so
glad he was her friend.

She could tell exactly when Jiraiya picked up on what was probably the latest rumours, but he
surprised her by not breathing a word about it, no matter how weirded out he looked about the whole
thing.

“So he's not a completely lost cause,” Minato said with a shrug when she mentioned it to him.

“I guess even Jiraiya can surprise,” Kyo muttered a quiet agreement.

But she couldn't keep up with the avoidance forever, and did go back home when Katsurou-sensei
gave her a nudge to do so.

“Go home, Kyo. He loves you, he just worries.”

“I know,” she muttered back. “You'll still be here, right?” she couldn't help but ask, though.

Katsurou smiled somewhat bitterly. “After the episode I had? No one's gonna let me out of the
village for at least a while longer.”

Kyo sighed and sent him a look. “It's to make sure you're healthy, right? Not as some kind of punishment.”

Katsurou eyed her evenly for a second, and then shrugged. “Go talk to your father.”

“Fine,” she huffed and with a nudge from Kisaki, started moving towards the door. “See you around, sensei.”

Walking through the village made her feel mildly uncomfortable, but it was mostly just in her head, she was fairly sure.

People didn't have any reason to give her any more attention that usual.

And if they did anyway, then... well, that was their problem. Not Kyo's.

She sighed tiredly and reached out to run her fingers over Kisaki's fur.

Regardless, they reached home without incident -thankfully- and Kyo was greeted by two very exuberant children, Genma and Ashika all but throwing themselves at her before she'd had a chance to take off her shoes.

“Nee-san!” they chorused excitedly. “Come look, come look!” Genma said, tugging on her hand and dragging her in the direction of their room.

Kyo, feeling amused and unimaginably fond, obligingly let herself be steered where they wanted to go.

“We made it!” Ashika informed her proudly, eyes all but shining when Kyo glanced down at her, staring at the pillow fort the two children had built.

By the look of things, they'd taken all the kitchen chairs, this time, and every duvet in the apartment. And all the pillows.

“Did you ask tou-san before you went into his room?” she couldn't help but ask, amused.

“Yes,” Genma said, placed both hands on her butt and tried to push her further into the room, putting every scrap of strength he had into it. “Look inside!” he huffed, still trying to make her move faster. “Ashika, help me, nee-san is too slow.”

A second pair of hands joined Genma's and Kyo sedately walked towards the pillow fort.

“Nee-san,” Genma whined impatiently.

“I'm going,” she said, and finally bent down to crawl inside. “This is very nice,” she praised, looking around in the muted light and stuffy air. “Must have taken you a long time to build.”

“Yep!” Genma agreed cheerfully, with Ashika nodding her wholehearted agreement.

“So why was it so important I come inside here right this instance?” she asked curiously.

“Where were you?” Ashika asked bluntly, peering questioningly at her.

Kyo paused. “Ah, well, I-”
“Did you have a mission?” her brother asked, and it would have been such an easy lie.

Kyo sighed. “No. I wasn't feeling very well, so I went to stay with Katsurou-sensei. But I'm feeling better now, so I came back home,” she told them.

“Were you sick?” Ashika asked, worry clouding her features.

“No,” she hesitated, eyed Ashika carefully, and then explained, “he’s my shrink.”

Ashika took that in with a small, uncertain frown. “Why do you have one?”

Kyo sighed again and reached out to pull Genma into a hug, absently wondering if Ashika would want one, too. She held an arm out in silent invitation and after a brief pause, the girl crawled over.

“Because sometimes,” she said quietly, “things happen to me, or I do things, that make me very upset, and I need help to feel better after. It’s the same for all shinobi.”

“What about tou-san?” Genma asked, curious.

“He's got one, too, but I don't know who. Ryota's got one, as does Minato. I'm pretty sure even the Hokage has a shrink.” Though she wasn't sure of that last one, but... he surely must have one, right? Seemed very unhealthy to exclude the strongest shinobi in the village, anyway.

“You only have to go talk to one if something bad happens to you,” Ashika informed her seriously.

“I know. It's to make us healthier. It's a medic, but for your head, rather than your body. You have health check-ups at the Academy, right?”

“Yeah,” Genma confirmed.

“It's the same thing, if only to make sure you don't get too sad, or too angry, or maybe someone just don't know how they feel, so they need some help to figure it out,” she tried to explain. “Just like I go to the hospital when I've injured myself, whether that is for a sprained ankle or a broken bone.”

Both children thought that over for a moment, and Kyo enjoyed the calm silence.

“So what else have you done in here?” Kyo asked after a while, moving away from the heavier conversational topic, glancing around and taking in all the stuff the two kids had dragged into their hideout.

“We did our homework,” Genma informed her, flapping a hand at the small pile of papers off to the side.

“And we read,” Ashika added with a shrug. “And talked.”

“Sounds like you've had fun, though, and since you're done with your homework already,” Kyo said, pressing a quick kiss first to Genma’s cheek and then one on Ashika’s, and grinned at the baffled look on the girl's face it earned her. “You can continue to play. I need to talk to tou-san for a bit.”

“Okay,” her brother agreed, only sounding mildly disappointed about it, before he wiggled out of her lap and crawled over to one of the back corners. “Go talk to tou-san,” he directed.

Kyo couldn't help but snort, gave Ashika one last squeeze, and then carefully left the small pillow fort.
“Are you aware Genma and Ashika have raided pretty much the entire apartment for anything soft and fluffy?” she couldn't help but ask when she walked into the sitting room, spotting her dad on the sofa, legs stretched out over the seat and back leaning against the armrest, reading through what looked like some sort of report.

“Was a bit hard to miss,” he drawled, put the report down on the coffee table and then fixed her with a neutral look. “We should talk.”

“Probably,” she agreed. No matter the fact she felt reluctant about it.

Looking around told her Kisaki had wandered into the kitchen and was currently stretched out on the floor, soundly asleep. Which was fine, but... no, she really shouldn't get accustomed to using Kisaki as an emotional crutch. Or some sort of shield.

There were things she needed to do on her own, too.

Kyo walked over to take a seat on the other end of the sofa, and Kou pulled his feet towards himself to give her more room to do so.

He rested his arms on his now-raised knees and watched her intently for a long moment.

Kyo had no idea where to start, and was content to leave it up to the man to take the first step.

“There are,” Kou began, hesitating a second, before pressing on, voice quiet, “certain aspects to being a kunoichi that I don’t know about. That I won't ever fully understand,” he said. There was a beat of silence. “I can't describe how upsetting it is to think about that I can't really help you, or offer the proper support in the moments you really need it,” he said tiredly.

His hands, which had been relaxed when he began to talk, were tight fists by the end of it, and Kyo carefully reached out to touch his knuckles.

“Did you hit someone?”

“Possibly,” Kou said dismissively, clearly not caring one bit about his bruised hands. “The point is, I'm really sorry I didn't try to talk to you properly. But, Kyo,” he met her gaze, eyes solemn and serious, “you're only a child. You shouldn't rush through everything it means to become an adult; it's not a race.”

“I'm not trying to rush,” Kyo defended herself, voice small.

“Then why, Kyo?” tou-san asked and he looked tired, but also like he was doing his best to try and understand. “It wouldn't have hurt anyone to wait a couple of years.”

Only that wasn't true.

She still didn't want to talk about this with her dad, because as much as just thinking about that- that incident made her skin crawl and made it feel like... She still knew it would probably hurt and upset Kou just as much. And it wasn't like he could do anything to change any of it.

Kyo's stomach was churning uncomfortably, but she took a deep breath and decided she'd probably avoided this for long enough.

She forced herself to meet his gaze, cleared her throat and opened her mouth. “It's important to have a choice, tou-san,” she said, voice strained.
Kou blinked and stared at her, and she could tell he didn't understand. “I know that, kitten.”

She shook her head, because he didn't get it. “I look like a girl now,” she muttered. “Tou-san, everyone can tell I'm a—” she gestured shortly at herself, feeling shaky and unnerved and she'd really rather not talk about this, but her feelings could just go and drown themselves in a bucket, because she was tired of miscommunication and misunderstandings.

Kyo loved her dad, and if she didn't talk to him, he wouldn't be able to understand what she was going through and he had always done his best to care for her in every way he could.

And when he made mistakes, he tried to fix them.

This was him trying to fix a mistake.

Kyo clasped her hands together tightly in her lap and took a deep breath. “I'm a kunoichi, and enemies can tell.”

The man in front of her hadn't moved a muscle since she'd started talking, hadn't produced the slightest noise and when she scraped together whatever courage she had to look at him, his face was utterly blank.

She could hear Genma and Ashika talk to each other in the other room, but she couldn't make out the individual words.

Kisaki shifted in her sleep on the kitchen floor, stretching out and snoring softly, relaxed and content.

“Tou-san?” she asked quietly, starting to feel a bit worried for him, because two minutes had passed now and he still hadn't reacted at all.

Kou flinched minutely, and one of his hands jerked towards her, just a little, before he brought it to his face to press over his mouth instead. All without taking his eyes off of her.

He looked... very quietly horrified, a distant part of Kyo's mind mused.

The silence stretched out again, and Kyo didn't know how to make this better, how to-

“He didn't,” she said shortly, and her voice sounded strained, even to her own ears. “But it was—” she cut herself off to take a deep, unsteady breath, feeling like her insides had turned to lead.

Close. It had been far too close.

“Who?”

Tou-san's voice was rough and so soft she almost missed it.

“An Ame nin,” Kyo revealed with a shaky breath.

Kou produced a soft sound she couldn't label, but it made her look at him.

He'd dropped his hand from his mouth and was instead gripping his thigh holster hard enough his knuckles shone white.

His face was still utterly blank.
She glanced down at his hands again, and he blinked. Relaxed his death-grip and jerkily shifted his hands, before he froze once more.

Kyo took another deep breath. “I wanted it to be on my terms,” she said as firmly as she could manage.

Which finally broke the eerily blank mask on tou-san's face, though she wasn't sure it was an improvement when his features twisted with pain and something ugly.

Kou inhaled sharply, and slowly, ever so slowly, reached for her.

Kyo just sat there, watching him, wondering if she couldn't just go to bed after this, because she felt exhausted.

Then her dad's fingers gently closed around her arm and she willingly let herself be pulled -slowly- into a careful, very gentle embrace.

Kou tucked her head in under his chin, and this close, she could feel the fine tremble going through him with every breath he took.

He didn't say anything, but that was fine, because he kept holding her and Kyo hugged him back as tightly as she could.

Kyo buried her face in tou-san's shoulder and breathed. Felt safe.

-x-x-x-

Tou-san didn't seem to know how to treat her, after, but that was... fine.

He probably just needed some time to adjust, but she did drop a word to Katsuou about how their talk had gone. Mostly, she just tried to go on as normal.

Which worked for about two days, before someone else insisted on reminding her of what a mess of a person she supposedly was.

Kyo was walking Genma and Ashika to the Uzumaki compound, carrying a small bag thrown over one shoulder, because her little brother would be staying the night, and he was so excited he was bouncing along in front of her, talking a mile a minute with his friend while he was at it.

It was nice, and Kyo couldn't help but smile at how happy they both looked.

They'd spent an hour after the Academy let out to train a little, and Kyo had gotten a look at how they were doing with the various things they were learning, but they'd been taking it easy.

A slow, mostly relaxed day and Kyo had relished it.

Entering the Uzumaki compound without a hitch, they soon enough reached the main house and Kyo had just taken off her sandals and stepped up onto the polished wooden floor when she was physically attacked by the two very energetic children she was accompanying.

“Really?” she couldn't help but ask drily, throwing a glance at Ashika over her shoulder, who was clinging to her back, only to be met with an unrepentant grin, and then looked down at Genma, who had wrapped himself around her leg, sitting on her foot.

“Come on, nee-san,” Genma said, tugging on her trousers, eyes shining. “It's fun!”
Kyo heaved a long-suffering sigh that wasn't at all representative of her real emotions and continued into the house in search of Aita.

Who ought to be around here somewhere.

For every second step she took, a giggle slipped out of her brother, who got dragged along the floor.

She could have lifted her foot more, but why bother? She didn't really mind.

Taking the way by the kitchen, because the kids could do with a snack after school, Kyo was fully prepared to go in there and hopefully exchange a few words with Ren, if she was present. Ask about Aita's whereabouts.

What she hadn't anticipated was someone grabbing her and pulling her into the room before she'd gotten a chance to fully enter on her own and Kyo had a senbon in one hand before she'd realised what, exactly, had happened.

More than ready to use it, too.

Kyo fixed Kushina with a deadpan look, pointedly putting her senbon back into its holster. Not that the girl seemed to notice.

“Did you really do it!?” she asked, all but vibrating with nervous energy Kyo couldn't quite understand.

She squinted dubiously at her for a second, and then sent the Uchiha friend and the other two redheads in the room a look at the same time as she helped Genma to his feet and then Ashika down from her back.

What was this?

“Kushina, you realise that one of the reflexes I have is to stab people who grab me unexpectedly with poisoned needles. Right?” she couldn't help but ask, because if people kept this up, then one of these days, she'd end up accidentally putting someone in the hospital. At best.

Kushina waved that aside as if it didn't matter in the least, and then grimaced at Ashika, who produced an indignant sound.

“Ren made a snack for you two,” she informed the kids. “It's over there.” And she waved at the counter, and the second Kyo was no longer connected to the two children, Kushina began to half-drag, half-push her over to the table. “Okay, seriously, do you have any idea how- Tell us everything!”

Kyo blinked very slowly and obligingly sat down in the chair Kushina had so enthusiastically steered her to.

Ren offered her an apologetic smile and pushed a mug of tea towards her. But she wasn't doing anything to actually stop this.

Whatever this, was.

Kyo took the tea and tried to figure out what in the world this was about. Seriously.

“Everything?” she questioned blandly.
“You can't just go up to some random guy and ask him-!” Kushina all but flailed for a second. “And then expect us not to ask about it after!”

“Ah,” Kyo said mildly, peering at the girl, who's cheeks were already pink, then glanced at the Uchiha girl, who looked about equally as interested.

“You didn't actually,” Kushina lowered her voice dramatically, “sleep with him, right?”

“Well.” Kyo blinked again and took a sip of her tea. “I did.”

Kushina produced a high-pitched noise and her blush deepened. She looked equal parts horrified and fascinated.

Kyo didn't understand why this was such a huge deal, at least not for Kushina and her friends.

She slanted a look at Ren, who was watching her with an unreadable expression on her face, holding a cup of tea of her own cradled in both hands, making it look unfairly sophisticated while she was at it.

“What, though?” she asked, when she noticed Kyo looking at her.

Kyo sighed and felt her shoulders slump, because how many times would she be forced to have this conversation?

Why couldn't people just let it go? It had nothing to do with them.

Rubbing one hand at her face, for just a second, Kyo contemplated if she really wanted to talk about this with these girls -she didn't even know the Uzumaki seated next to Ren!- but then again... people were clearly gonna talk anyway, weren't they?

Her eyes narrowed slightly in consideration.

She scanned the other girls again, and Kyo was abruptly overcome with the realisation of how different she was from them.

And she wasn't just talking about her early graduation, and the promotions that had been forced on her.

“All of you have ever really considered what it would be like to be sent on a seduction mission, have you?” Kyo asked, even though she was fairly sure of the answer already.

Ren blinked, looking somewhat startled, and the Uchiha -damn, what had her name been again?- looked taken aback.

Kyo took another sip of her tea, trying to figure out what she was thinking. Feeling. What she wanted to say.

“All of you come from a valuable clan; no one's going to send you on missions like that,” she pointed out, somewhat redundantly. “It's not really the same for me.” She shrugged. “And, you know, I'd much rather the first time I have sex be with someone of my choice, than with some target.”

“Surely you'll have more time before you reach that point in your career,” Ren said softly, though it sounded like a question.

Kyo smiled humourlessly. You'd think that, yeah.
“Nee-san,” Genma said, suddenly beside her and peering up at her with an intent expression on his face.

There was an apple slice clutched in one of his hands, but he wasn't giving it any attention right now.

“What is it?” she asked, ignoring the mildly uncomfortable expressions and body-languages of the other girls at the reminder of the kids’ presence.

“Are you gonna have a baby?” he asked her seriously, looking worried.

Kyo blinked and snorted, feeling amused. “Nope. I made sure he didn't give me the parts needed to make a baby,” she informed him solemnly.

Genma considered that for a second, before he nodded and the worry cleared from his face.

He took a bite of his apple and then wandered back to Ashika.

Kyo eyed him fondly for a second, before she turned back to the girls, who all looked... sweet mercy, what now!?

She was pretty sure her expression conveyed her exasperation perfectly well on its own, but she still felt she had to say something.

“What?” Even though Kyo sort of dreaded what else they'd come up with.

“Uh, isn't he a bit young to know about sex?” the Uchiha asked politely, face mostly blank.

“Why?” Kyo couldn't help but ask. “It's better to just give him the facts now, rather than ambush him with it later. Saves everyone from ridiculous misconceptions and stupid lies,” she huffed. She still felt irritated about the things Haname had tried to pass off as truth.

There was a thoughtful silence, which let Kyo drink some more of her tea in peace.

“So,” Kushina said slowly, drawing out the word, and her face was still more red than normal with a persistent blush. “What was it like?” she asked, staring at Kyo with poorly disguised curiosity.

Kyo suppressed a sigh and eyed the girl dubiously.

In the end, she just shrugged and said, “Alright. Hurt a bit, but I was sort of expecting that. Wasn't too bad.”

Kushina blinked at her, opened her mouth and looked like she was preparing to fire off a barrage of questions Kyo was pretty sure she wouldn't be willing to answer, but they were interrupted before she got a chance to get started.

“...I have no idea what kind of conversation I just walked in on, but I'm also pretty sure I don't want to know,” Aita's voice said warily, and he was standing frozen in the door into the kitchen when Kyo looked over that way. “Hello, Kyo,” he greeted evenly, still looking like he was contemplating turning around and walking away.

“Hey, Aita,” Kyo smiled at him, because she hadn't seen him in a while, “we're just having tea. I'm just about done and then I have to go. Kisaki's over at Senpu's and we're having dinner with them today.”

“Right,” Aita said, eyeing her suspiciously, before he turned to give the others a similar look. “You okay?” he asked next.
Kyo shrugged. “Fine,” she said, put down her empty tea mug and got to her feet. “See you tomorrow, Genma. Have fun, and listen to what Aita says, yeah?”

“Okay!” her brother agreed cheerfully without a hitch. “Love you, nee-san!”

“Love you, too.” Kyo smiled at him and then walked towards the door.

Aita stopped her with a hand on her shoulder when she tried to walk past him, and he eyed her intently for a second.

“Bring your fuuinjutsu things by soon, okay?”

“It would be nice to finally be done with the seals,” Kyo mused, leaning into the touch, thinking about it.

“Shishou said you were close, last time,” Aita reminded her, finally smiling faintly, looking encouraging. “You sure you're gonna go through with it?”

“Absolutely,” Kyo returned without missing a beat. “Why?”

“You won't be able to remove them once they're done, you know?”

“Which is kinda the point,” Kyo sighed. “I really need to go now, Aita,” she reminded him and glanced pointedly at the hand he still had on her shoulder.

Aita met her gaze for a long second, before he let go of her with a huff. “See you soon, you troublesome garbage disposal.” And he grinned teasingly at her.

“If you're not careful, I'll share some of my 'garbage' with you,” she drawled and slowly began to wander back the way she'd arrived, waving a lazy goodbye over her shoulder.

“You're not supposed to threaten your friends!” Aita called after her.

“Then stop disparaging my skills!” Kyo tossed back, biting back a grin.

“Dropped the puppy off safely?” Kisaki asked, sending her an inquisitive look from where she was cuddling with Motoki, the moment she walked into the house, and it still felt somewhat weird to just let herself in, no matter how well she knew Senpu approved and encouraged her to do so.

Haru was sitting a small distance away, observing everything that was happening in the kitchen with stoic attention.


“About what?” Senpu frowned at her, looking up from her cooking and smacking Teki's hand away from the frying pan at the same time, without taking her eyes off of Kyo.

“Um.” Kyo blinked at the woman, feeling awkward.

Teki pouted at his mother for a second, before he sent Kyo a look and a casual wave of greeting. “That was true? I thought for sure Matsuo was just being a dick. Trying to pick a fight with me or something.” He blinked. “Good on you, though.” And he wandered over to finish setting the table.

Kyo had no idea how to react to that.
“Kyo?” Senpu pressed.

“I’d rather not discuss it right now,” she muttered, feeling awkward and somewhat uncomfortable. Why the hell were people talking so much about this, anyway. She couldn't possibly have been the first kunoichi to have done something similar!

Urgh.

People were clearly stupid.

Senpu eyed her a second longer, before she let it go with a huff. “Go tell Arashi and Tenshi dinner's all but ready, and if they track mud through my house again, they won't be getting any of my cooking for the rest of the week.”

“I'll relay your message word for word,” Kyo assured her dryly. “They're out back?”

“Yeah.”

Kyo nodded and turned to do as she'd been asked.

“Hey, tiny,” Arashi greeted her with a grin, sitting on the ground in the garden behind the house and looking pretty beat.

Tenshi was stretched out beside him, resting.

“You mother wanted me to tell you it's time to eat,” Kyo informed him, and then repeated what Senpu had said about the tracking of mud on her floors.

“Got it,” Arashi snorted, all but rolling his eyes. “Are you ever gonna ask to learn to put that pretty little nose of yours to good use?” he asked, when he'd gotten to his feet and made sure both him and his ninken were presentable enough for Senpu's dinner table.

Kyo blinked at him, turning that over in her head. “I thought it was an Inuzuka trait?”

“Yeah, but that doesn't mean others can't learn a little, if we like them well enough.” And he winked playfully at her, reaching out to ruffle her hair.

Kyo let him with a long-suffering sigh, but was mostly absorbed in her thoughts.

Getting a keener sense of smell might be a good advantage, and would be helpful with her poison-work, too, actually.

...she was never going to be less busy, was she?

Kyo smiled wryly and ducked away from Arashi when he attempted to ruffle her hair again, giving a mental shrug. “How difficult is it to learn and get somewhat proficient?”

“Eh. No idea. Depends on the person, I guess?” Arashi shrugged and absently scratched at Tenshi's neck, the dog leaning against his side affectionately. “Can't have an Inuzuka without a good nose on them, though, so you'll learn sooner or later, tiny.” He grinned at her, showing off sharp canines.

Kyo snorted. She couldn't ignore the way it made her feel warm inside, though, being included. Openly and readily welcomed.

This was Taku's family, and she was well aware they could have reacted differently. Could have blamed her for- but they didn't. They wanted her here, and went out of their way to show her they
meant it.

“Why the hell are you dragging your feet? Come on, dinners getting cold!” Senpu called from the kitchen.

“Let's go, before Teki eats everything,” Arashi drawled and jogged the last of the way.

Kyo smiled and followed.

Senpu eyed her intently when she walked back into the room, pulled her into a tight hug for a moment, and then released her with a sigh. “Sit down,” she directed brusquely.

“Yeah,” Kyo agreed, stubbornly ignoring the small lump in her throat and sat down to eat. She was starving.

Kisaki sent her a look, licked her chops and then went back to her own dinner, growling half-heartedly at Motoki when he came too close to her food bowl in his enthusiastic consumption of his own food.

“You really need to teach your dog better manners, Teki,” Arashi huffed, shaking his head and giving his brother an exaggeratedly disappointed look.

“Oh, fuck you, Arashi,” Teki said back without heat. “We're both fine as we are.” And he rolled his eyes and stuffed his mouth with food.

Arashi eyed him amusedly. “If you say so.”

“You're both acting far more like clueless brutes than I raised you to be,” Senpu muttered with an unimpressed look at both of them.

“Kaa-san, that's just unfair,” Arashi protested. “Don't lump me together with the idiot!” He pointed at Teki, who glowered back.

Kyo snickered softly and ate the meal Senpu had made, enjoying the lively atmosphere and listening to the near-continuous banter.

-x-x-x-

Kyo sighed and leaned her chin in her hand, frowning down at her seal design.

There was something missing, she just didn't know what.

“You're gonna sear a hole in your notebook if you keep that up,” Minato muttered at her, frowning at his own fuuinjutsu project with concentrated focus.

Kyo scoffed, but leaned back in her chair to stare at the ceiling for a moment instead. “I just know I'm ridiculously close.”

“Mm,” Minato agreed.

The two of them were sitting in one of the break rooms in the Hokage tower. Jiraiya was around somewhere, busy with work, and they'd just ended up at the closest table to try and make some progress with their respective seal.

With limited success.
Kyo was pretty sure she was developing a headache, and no matter how much she stared at it, she couldn't figure out what she was missing in her seal design!

It was frustrating.

She rubbed tiredly at her face, only to glance down at Kisaki when the dog leaned her chin against her thigh, peering up at her from where she lay on the floor beside her.

“You're pushing yourself too hard,” Kisaki said.

“I'm pushing myself the perfect amount,” Kyo countered under her breath, but mentally conceded the point. Kisaki was probably right.

She couldn't really bring herself to try and stop, no matter how much Chie insisted she was only delaying things and avoiding the real issues.

Kyo was... aware of that, in the back of her head.

With a heavy sigh, she snapped her notebook shut if only so she could slump forward and use it as a pillow.

She needed a break.

“I'm sure you'll figure it out,” Minato told her, full of support and confidence.

Kyo appreciated it, she did, but, “I don't have your aptitude for this,” she admitted freely, no matter how frustrated with herself she was. “Looking at you, it's like you're just learning another code, but it doesn't make sense to me like that,” she huffed and tilted her head so her chin was pressing into the cover of her notebook.

Fuuinjutsu felt like a foreign language, to her.

Or... a foreign language wrapped up in symbolism and hidden meanings and she couldn't remember everything the different markings stood for half the time. Didn't help that they changed meaning in certain combinations, or if you 'stacked' them differently.

How to build up a basic seal was pretty easy, once you got used to it, but the moment you tried to do anything more complicated, there were an infinite number of things to keep in mind.

The more she worked on it, the more she realised why so few people ventured into this particular field of fuuinjutsu. The storage seal she was trying to make basically had to be an honest representation of part of herself. Reflect her chakra, at the same time as everything else was incorporated in the mix.

To those who knew how to read it, it would give away some highly personal details of who Kyo was, but she still felt like it would definitely be worth it even with that potential handicap.

Part of her absently wondered what that meant when applied to Jinchuuriki. There was no use thinking about it, though, because Kyo wasn't in any kind of position to influence anything on that scale anyway.

Hinata-shishou had told her the seal had to resonate with her, whatever that actually meant, and he insisted she'd know the moment she found the final version.

Kyo silently went over all the variables she'd already gone through and covered, ticking them off the
mental list that had been all but seared into her head by now.

She was pretty sure she hadn't missed anything.

Maybe she was just incapable of accomplishing this?

That would be sort of poetic, she mused bitterly.

The one time she was trying to create something that wouldn't be directly deadly, it refused to work.

Making poisons and jutsu to murder people in their sleep was both easy and fun, but this?

Kyo sat back up and rubbed a hand over her eyes.

The scratching sound of Minato's pencil stopped and she shifted her hand to send him a look, but Minato wasn't focusing on her. Or on his work.

Instead, he was frowning off to the side and it brought Kyo's attention to the fact there was a chakra signature approaching their table.

And judging by the look on Minato's face, she wasn't sure it was anyone she'd be happy to see.

Despite her misgivings, Kyo turned to throw a glance that way, too, only to feel confused.

That wasn't anyone she knew.

“Hi,” the unfamiliar teenager said. “Do you mind if I sit here for a moment?” he asked, only he didn't actually wait for a response before he pulled out the chair and sat down.

Kyo resisted the steadily growing urge to frown.

She dearly hoped this wouldn't be about what she suspected it might be.

She couldn't deal with any more teenagers trying to flirt with her right now.

Seriously.

There was an awkward silence.

“Can we help you?” Minato finally asked, and for once, he wasn't smiling.

Minato was politely friendly with most people, but right now, he was frowning faintly, staring at the teenager, who barely took his eyes off of Kyo long enough to send him a quick, dismissive glance.

Rude.

“Hm? Oh, don't worry about it, kid, I just want a word with your friend, here.” He smiled at Kyo.

Who did not smile back.

Did he think he was being cute or something? Because he wasn't. He was being rude. And creepy.

“What do you want?” Kyo asked bluntly, feeling too on edge to try for politeness.

The teenager smiled amusedly and tilted his head. “You really are very straight-forward,” he mused. “But alright, I can do this your way.”
She wasn't sure why, but she didn't like the way that sounded.

“Do what?” she questioned again, and she was honestly contemplating just getting up and walking away.

“Wanna have sex?” he asked, still amused and there was a self-confident smile on his face Kyo felt tempted to stab.

“No,” she'd bit out before she'd fully digested... this.

“Aw, come on,” he cajoled, not looking discouraged. “You made it more than clear this is how to go about it.”

Kyo tried to take a deep breath, but that wasn't helping the tight, burning sensation in the pit of her stomach and she was fairly sure her cheeks were reddening. “I said no,” she forced out.

The guy trying to... talk her into bed with him leaned forward to lean an elbow on the table, peering curiously at her and not taking the hint. Only this wasn't a hint, this was a blaring neon sign; she's said no. Twice.

“I hear you were eager enough. You want me to try and encourage you or something?”

“No,” Kyo hissed and the flush on her face grew more pronounced because this was humiliating. Why wasn't he listening to her? Why was he-

“Come on, this was what you did.”

“Yeah, but I was prepared for him to say no,” Kyo forced out, feeling so uncomfortable she felt jittery with it. Rather than stay were she was to endure more of this disaster, Kyo abruptly stood to her feet, her chair making a loud, screeching noise as the legs dragged against the floor. Effectively attracting the attention of everyone in the room.

Great.

Like she'd actually needed this situation to get worse.

Rather than stop to dwell on it, or focus on any one person, Kyo quickly and efficiently gathered up her fuuinjutsu things.

“See you tomorrow, Minato,” she muttered at her friend, but she refused to look at anyone. She just didn't want to see the expressions on their faces.

“Look, there's no need to act all offended,” the teenager that had approached her said, standing as well, and at least he no longer sounded amused. Which was something.

Kyo tensed, but thankfully, she didn't have to say anything, because Kisaki chose that moment to stand up, making herself visible from behind the table.

She slowly bared her teeth and snarled at the guy, fur standing on end and surging forward aggressively, forcing the guy to hurriedly back away from them or risk a serious bite somewhere it would hurt.

“Whoa! What the fuck!?” teenage guy exclaimed, not having expected that and he was swearing up a storm.
Someone in the background laughed uproariously and Kyo just wanted to sink into the floor.

Kyo closed her eyes for a brief second, didn't try to stop Kisaki from going after the guy again, and instead stalked off towards the door.

Two steps in, she pulled her chakra into herself and went full stealth, fully focused on getting the hell away from here, and it sounded really tempting to never show herself in public ever again.

Maybe she could ask someone about becoming a full-time ANBU like Hyena was?

That sounded nice.

-x-x-x-

“Do you think Shuzo-sensei's gonna give us back the tests tomorrow?” Genma asked curiously, jumping over a puddle before he turned to look at Ashika.

“Don't know. The test was stupid anyway,” she huffed sullenly.

“You know all the stuff, even if you're bad at writing it down,” Genma tried to comfort her. “Nee-san says some people aren't good at learning stuff by reading and writing.” He balanced on one leg for a second, wondering how to cheer her up. “Wanna play tag?”

Ashika brightened considerably. “Yes! You're it!” she exclaimed, slapping a hand on Genma's arm before darting away, disappearing into the crowds before Genma could even try to protest.

“Hey! That's cheating!” he hollerred, setting off after her as quickly as he could. At least Ashika's hair made her easy to spot and Genma couldn't help but grin, throwing himself into the game with twice the enthusiasm.

They'd tagged each other back and forth five times before they had to stop and catch their breaths.

“I won,” Ashika panted at him.

“I tagged you five times! I win!” Genma argued, panting just as hard, and he'd sat down on the ground, because his legs were tired. They'd had taijutsu class today and everything.

“Tagged you six times,” Ashika countered smugly.

“First time doesn't count! You cheated,” he grumbled back. Ashika just grimaced back at him, though, and with a heavy sigh, Genma looked around. “Where are we?”


Genma scowled at her. “I know that!” he huffed. “I meant-” he cut himself off when Ashika giggled helplessly. Genma pouted, though thinking about it, it'd been a little funny.

But just a little.

Before he knew it, he was giggling, too.

“I'm hungry,” he complained with a heavy sigh when they'd calmed down again and breathing was easier now. His legs didn't really hurt any more, either.

Ashika perked up. “Aita-nii gave me money!” she said, as if just remembering. “So we could buy a snack after training!” She smiled so wide her eyes almost squinted shut and bounced on her feet with
eagerness. “Come on, Genma.”

“Yeah,” he agreed, getting back on his feet and took Ashika's hand before she could run off without him again.

He wasn't sure where they were yet, but there were still plenty of people around, and he didn't want to lose her in the crowd.

When Ashika spotted a taiyaki stand off on an out-of-the-way corner, she wasted no time in dragging him over and buying them one each.

“So what are you gonna tell Shohei tomorrow?” Genma asked curiously while they waited.

Ashika sniffed. “No. He's stupid and you told me he said mean things about girls.”

“Yeah. But now he says he likes you,” Genma pointed out curiously, even though he wasn't sure why that made a difference. To be fair, Ashika's hair was very pretty and her eyes were cool. The same shade of grey like rain-clouds! Ashika was also really good at taijutsu. She was strong! “He's kinda nice when he's not being mean.”

Ashika pursed her lips, thinking about it. “He can play with us,” she decided. “If you want to,” she added, sending him a brief look.

Genma smiled. Ashika was the best.

“Has Aita-nii taught you any more cool fuuinjutsu?” he asked next, though he paused when Ashika reached up to accept the two taiyaki from the man working the stall, and then eagerly accepted the one she handed him.

Genma bit into it and waited for Ashika to answer, savouring the delicious treat.

Nee-san had given Genma another batch of homework the other week, which reminded him.

Genma paused to dig the small parcel out of one of his pockets, though it took some looking, because he couldn't remember which pocket he'd put it in this morning... Ah-hah!

He grinned when he found it.

“Weren't you supposed to eat that at lunch?” Ashika asked, eyeing it suspiciously.

“I forgot.” Because Takeo had been mean to Suzu again, so Genma had invited her to eat with them and then they'd played all throughout the break and he'd forgotten all about it.

But it was fine if he ate it now.

Nee-san wouldn't know the difference!

“And nii-san isn't teaching me any seals,” Ashika huffed when she was sure Genma was done pouring the fine powder into his mouth and was busy chewing another bite of his taiyaki. “He's just teaching me boring stuff.”

“Drawing’s fun,” Genma objected, even though he still had food in his mouth and you weren't supposed to talk with your mouth full.

“Sometimes,” Ashika relented. “It's fun when we draw, but nii-san just wants me to draw boring stuff.” She brightened a little. “But he's also started giving me fun lessons!”
“On what?” Genma asked, pausing in the act of taking another bite. He only had the tail of his taiyaki left by now.

“Remember I told you about the chains?” Ashika asked, bouncing a little with excitement. “Nii-san and shishou are teaching me to use them!”

Genma thought about it, feeling a little bit uncertain. “Um, Ashika?” he asked hesitantly, because Ashika had told him about the chains, more than once, but not all of those times had been good. “Is that... okay?”

“Yes,” Ashika bit out and sent him a stubborn frown, daring him to contradict her.

“But you were sad and you told me you were scared—”

“Everyone's said I don't need to be scared,” Ashika huffed determinedly, though she looked a bit tense.

Genma frowned worriedly at her. “Okay,” he agreed. He thought about it a moment, because Ashika looked upset now, and he didn't like that. He liked it best when Ashika was smiling. “Wanna show me tomorrow?” he asked.

Ashika sent him another look. “Sure,” she said, relaxing again.

They finished their taiyaki, and then decided to look around. Figure out where they'd ended up.

“Let's just go towards the Hokage mountain and we'll end up back by the Academy,” Ashika suggested, pointing up at the three faces carved in the rock in the distance.

“Okay,” Genma agreed easily, because he liked being with Ashika and they still had loads of time before he had to go home. “Wanna play something?” he asked hopefully.

They could play and stuff at the same time.

“Play what?” Ashika asked curiously.

“Ninja?”

“But there's just two of us,” she countered, though she didn't sound like she didn't want to play.

“So? We can pretend!” Genma grinned. “We're on a mission!” He skipped forward a step. “Have to stop the enemies from catching us before we reach the village,” he continued, feeling more excited about it by the second.

Ashika thought it over, but he knew he'd already convinced her. “Fine. Come on, let's go!”

They exchanged a grave look and a nod, and then took off down the street again, running as fast as their legs could carry them. Dodging around people and stalls, turning down any street that would bring them closer to the target while evading the enemies!

They dashed around a corner, having to dodge the shuriken one of the enemies threw to try and trip them up when Ashika ran smack into someone and bounced off, falling on her butt.

Genma tried to stop right away and ended up tripping.

“Ow,” he muttered and inspected his palms, wincing and having to blink back a few tears at the stinging pain.
He'd scrubbed his palms, and possibly a knee, and there were tiny little grains of rock stuck in his skin. There was also a bit of blood.

Then he remembered Ashika and turned to look at her.

She, too, was inspecting her hands, before she craned her neck to look up at whatever it was she'd run into.

A tall man stared down at them with a small frown and Ashika scowled back.

“Sorry!” Genma apologised quickly, bouncing to his feet and hurrying to help Ashika up, too.

“Didn't mean to do that, we didn't see you.”

“Be more careful next time,” he told them shortly, and then turned back to the woman he had maybe been talking to before they'd interrupted.

“Come on, Ashika,” Genma whispered, tugging on his friend's hand and dragging her with him away from the grown-ups. “Are you okay?” he asked, the moment they were clear.

“Yeah.” Ashika showed him her hands, and they looked about the same as his. “You?”

Genma nodded and took in their surroundings. They'd run pretty far already.

Looking around, he spotted a familiar face, though.

“Look!” he said, pointing.

“At what?” Ashika asked, but had already turned to try and see whatever he was pointing at.

“I know him!” Genma grinned. “He's friends with nee-san. Do you think he knows where she is? Maybe she'll agree to play with us?” He couldn't help but feel excited, because nee-san didn't have a lot of time to play, but it was always fun when she did!

“He looks mean,” was Ashika's verdict, and she frowned at... what had his name been again?

“Come on,” Genma said, snatching up his friend's hand again and bouncing over. “Hi!” he greeted eagerly, stopping right in front of the guy. “What was your name again? I've forgotten.” And he watched him expectantly.

Nee-san always said to ask if he forgot something, or wasn't sure.

“...Kaimaru,” the guy -Kaimaru- eventually answered, having turned to look at them and he was frowning heavily. He was also very tall, which was sort of cool. “What the hell are you doing here?”

“We got lost,” Genma admitted readily. “Do you know where nee-san is?”

“...no,” Kaimaru said, still talking in that weird, slow manner.

Maybe he was shy?

Ayaka was shy.

“Oi, Kaimaru! The fuck are you doi- What the hell is that?” someone else said and Genma turned to look at the new person.

“You're Military Police!” burst out of him before he could stop himself.
“Isao, these two brats are lost,” Kaimaru told the other guy, sounding sort of grumpy. “I'm bringing them out of the district before things go to shit.”

“Rather you than me,” the other one answered idly, sounding like he wasn't listening properly. “I'll let the others know.”

“Yeah,” Kaimaru huffed and then Genma was lifted off his feet by the back of his shirt. And by the sound of the offended squeak she produced, so was Ashika. “The f- hell are you doing in here?” he demanded, fixing Genma with a glower.

Genma blinked back, because... he'd just told him, hadn't he? “We got lost?” he offered confusedly.

Kaimaru scoffed, but didn't say anything else about it.

“Are you sure you know nee-san?” Ashika asked shortly, squinting suspicious up at Kaimaru.

“Yeah!” Genma confirmed. “He went training with me and nee-san this one time, and it was really great! I had to meditate for a bit of it, but then I got to practice with the needles, instead. It was awesome.” He grinned.

Ashika pouted at him. “Next time, I wanna come, too. I can also throw needles,” she muttered, crossing her arms over her chest.

Kaimaru heaved a heavy sigh and next Genma knew, he'd been tucked in under his arm.

He peered over to see Ashika had been, too.

“Where the fuck's your moron of a sister, brat?”

“Don't know. She's working,” Genma replied dutifully. “She was gonna be in the tower today!” he added, perking up, because he remembered her complaining about it this morning!

“Of-fucking-course,” Kaimaru muttered under his breath.

“That's a bad word,” Ashika told him with a scowl. “No one's allowed to use that word.” And she pointed up at his face.

“Like hell. I talk however the fuck I want, and no brats are gonna change that,” Kaimaru growled.

Genma couldn't help but giggle, because he sounded like Kisaki when she was grumpy!

“No!” Ashika objected fiercely. “It's a bad word!” she insisted and tried to punch Kaimaru in the stomach, though it was a bad angle.

“That was pathetic,” Kaimaru snorted. Genma blinked and then Ashika was hanging upside-down in front of them, held up by the ankle. “From that position, it would have made more fucking sense to use your elbow. Hasn't anyone taught you shit? Aim for the ribs, brat. That might actually sting,” he drawled. “Even from someone as tiny as you.” He scoffed. “I'm not getting paid enough for this. It's a damn headache.”

Ashika frowned, but she didn't look as angry as Genma had been expecting.

They exchanged a look.

“How did you and nee-san become friends?” Genma asked, trying to peer up at Kaimaru's face curiously, even though it didn't work very well.
“Ask your damn sister.”

“We will,” Ashika told him firmly. “Nii-san told us how he met nee-san,” she added stubbornly, glaring now.

“Do I look like we're fucking related?”

“You look a lot like Ryota,” Genma mused. “And he's my uncle.”

“You can keep the shitty asshole,” Kaimaru scoffed with a dark scowl. He sent Ashika another look, and then somehow shifted his hold on her so he could fold her back under his arm. “Now shut the fuck up.”

Genma exchanged another look with Ashika and couldn't help but giggle again.

No matter how they prodded, Kaimaru refused to tell them anything else other than that they should stop talking, all the way to the tower, so when he finally put them down, they'd been talking about the likelihood of Aita-nii agreeing to let them have another sleep-over.

“Stay. Put,” Kaimaru ordered them shortly, snapped something at a shinobi that sat behind some kind of desk nearby, and then stalked off.

He was barely gone long enough for Ashika and Genma to look at each other and take a curious look around before he was back.

Dragging a very familiar blond behind him by the front of his shirt.

“This is your fucking problem now, I'm busy with work,” Kaimaru snapped, and he looked sort of really angry.

Genma tilted his head and peered up at him. “Bye, Kaimaru!” he called after him when he stalked away.

“Yeah! Bye!” Ashika added, and then turned to Minato.

“Where's nee-san?” Genma demanded with a frown.

Minato stared blankly at the two of them for a moment, and then sighed. “She had to go. Let's just get the both of you home?”

Genma squinted suspiciously at him, but he looked sort of tired. And worried. And nee-san liked him for some reason, even though he couldn't figure out why.


“Do you think your dad will let us have a sleep-over at your place next time?” Ashika asked, taking his hand and shooting Minato curious looks every now and then while he walked them home.

-x-x-x-
Hinata-shishou sent her another look but didn't comment, and he didn't stop studying her seal, either.

He was holding her notebook in one hand, using his other to turn the pages, studying her various designs, the scribbles she'd added in the margins and the plenty of doodles that had absolutely nothing to do with fuuinjutsu, all with a pensive, professional look on his face.

Kyo waited patiently for him to finish, focusing more on the warm weight that was Kisaki curled up behind her, pressed against her back.

Rather than try to deal with any of her problems, or her emotions for that matter, like a responsible person might have tried to do, Kyo had instead run to the Uzumaki compound to see if Hinata-shishou wouldn't be willing to give her some advice on her seal.

It was working rather well so far, never mind that her face still felt somewhat warm.

He hummed softly and Kyo blinked back to the present.

“And you say it doesn't feel complete yet?” he asked idly.

“Yeah. I mean, you said I'd be able to feel it, and at this point, I'm just feeling frustrated,” she muttered.

Hinata-shishou hummed again. “I can't see anything that's necessarily missing,” he finally told her, closing the notebook and handing it back to her.

Kyo took it and laid it in her lap, frowning down at the worn cover. “Maybe I just won't be able to do it, then,” she muttered pessimistically.

“That is a remarkable first attempt at a personal storage seal, Kyo,” he said firmly. “Considering the fact you've only learned for a few years, you've made an incredible amount of progress in a short amount of time.” He eyed her with a faint frown. “Don't sell yourself short.”

Kyo sighed. “But I'm not getting anywhere!” she snapped and then closed her eyes and had to bite her tongue. “I'm sorry,” she apologised quietly, bowing her head in shame, because she hadn't meant to yell at him.

None of this was Hinata-shishou's fault.

He didn't have to help her, but he was. Had done so from the start, without question.

The man sighed heavily. “What's this really about, Kyo? You're not usually this impatient.”

Kyo's stupid eyes stung. “Nothing, shishou. I'm sorry for yelling at you. I'm just frustrated.”
She couldn't continue her poison studies and now she wasn't getting anywhere in her fuuinjutsu studies, either.

And she'd hit a wall with her Bubble jutsu, too.

Was this really how far she'd be able to get? Kyo wasn't sure what she'd been expecting out of her career, but it sure hadn't been to reach any kind of peak at age twelve.

Kisaki nudged her thigh with her nose in silent question.

Kyo didn't take her eyes off her book, but moved one hand to rub it over her friend's head.

She was fine. She just needed a moment.

She took a deep breath, straightened her back, and then focused back on Hinata-shishou.

“Are you sure there isn't anything you can tell me to do? Any advice?” she pressed, and she wasn't sure why she was so hung up on this.

It wasn't like she hadn't known this would be difficult, and there had never been any guarantees for her to succeed, either.

Why was she surprised?

Hinata-shishou exhaled through his nose, still watching her with that faint frown. “You've decided to tackle a complicated and difficult field, Kyo. Everyone's chakra is different, and the one with the best chance to figure out what's missing is you. I can guide you and answer questions, but I can't offer you any kind of shortcut.”

Kyo grimaced. “I know.”

Hinata-shishou inclined his head. “Merely reminding you,” he said mildly. “You need to try and figure out what part of you is missing in that seal. I can tell you've been a diligent student and I agree that you are very close to finishing it.” He visibly thought about it for a second. “If you'd been my apprentice, I would have been proud to be your master,” he announced with a small, genuine smile.

Kyo stared at him. And then abruptly looked down to flip through her notebook, face feeling hot for entirely different reasons and she had no idea what to say in response to that.

“Do you think the capacity of it will be enough for what I want to do with it?”

“For your needles, yes?” Kyo nodded. “Yes, I believe it will be plenty enough.” He sounded amused. “You'll no doubt have enough space for quite a bit of your poison stock, as well.”

Which was good; she'd been trying to make sure of that, but she still hadn't pinned down how exactly that worked.

“And you'll be able to help me make it smaller when I'm done?”

“Yes, Kyo.”

She thought about it a bit more, still feeling discouraged and sad, because she still didn't know what to do about the main problem with her seal. “Do you have any advice? Any idea at all what I'm missing?” slipped out of her before she could stop the impulse.

She'd already asked and repeating the same thing over and over again just made her feel like a whiny
Hinata-shishou leaned forward and reached out to take the notebook from her fingers, closed it and placed it aside on the floor, and then grasped her hands in his. Prompting her to raise her head and look at him.

He smiled. “Give yourself a chance to rest and I’m sure it’ll come to you sooner or later, Kyo.” He squeezed her hands. “You look tired and upset, and that’s never a good mindset to try and do anything productive in. That said, would you like to talk about whatever is bothering you?”

Kyo opened her mouth, not sure what to say. She closed her mouth again.

“I’ve been—” she cut herself off, because she didn't particularly want to talk about this, and the few other people she’d tried with hadn't really... been able to offer any kind of solution, but- “I've been getting attention from boys, lately,” she muttered awkwardly, turning her head to stare off to the side, because that was easier.

Hinata-shishou was still maintaining a gentle hold on her hands.

“And this is bothering you,” he surmised calmly. It wasn't a question.

Kyo still nodded. “I want them to stop,” she informed him tersely, and she wasn't even aware of the way she'd gripped his hands back, hold tight. “And today, someone asked me if I wanted to—” she cut herself off.

She couldn't bring herself to finish that sentence, and did it make her as hypocritical as it made her feel? Because she had approached a complete stranger and asked him- asked that, too, like that teenager earlier had said.

Hinata-shishou exhaled through his nose. “That is indeed a difficult thing to try and deal with,” he said steadily. “What has Katsurou told you on this topic?”

Kyo smiled humourlessly. “That if anyone bothers me, I can bother them back, stab them with a needle, but, shishou—”

“It would mean poisoning a comrade, no matter how harmless the substance on that needle,” Hinata-shishou said solemnly, and Kyo was so relieved someone got it she nearly sobbed.

“Yeah,” she agreed hoarsely.

Hinata-shishou didn't say anything for a long few minutes, and Kyo was grateful for the respite.

“It's been a long two years,” he finally murmured wearily. “But that doesn't mean it's been very long a time at all, Kyo. Other people can tell you as often as they can that what happened in Uzushio wasn't your fault, but that won't make a difference unless you actually believe it.”

“It wasn’t my decision, but I was the means to an end,” Kyo said blankly. “I was the one thing that made it possible.”

“Yes, and by doing that one thing, you made further more things possible,” Hinata-shishou said firmly. “Do you think I would have as many of my kin around me at this very moment if you hadn't occupied those shinobi so effectively?” He paused. “Uzushio soldiers died, but they did so willingly and knowing full well what they were getting into, Kyo.”

“But I didn't,” Kyo whispered. “And I was there, shishou.” She turned to meet his gaze. “I was in
the middle of it, sitting there, when the barrier went down, and I was the one who—" she blinked rapidly. “I could see them dying.”

Hinata-shishou met her gaze, not blinking and not flinching away. “Then you must have also seen the determination on their faces. The willingness with which they fought.”

Kyo blinked again, feeling something hot drip from her eyes. “But I sabotaged them,” she breathed.

“You helped them,” the man countered sharply. “You created a wall to protect the retreat. You created a trap to lure in the enemies and diminish their numbers.”

“But it wasn’t enough,” Kyo argued wetly, taking a deep, unsteady breath. “Even with all that, they still came after us and we still lost people on the way.”

“How different do you think it would have been without your poison? Without the impenetrable noxious cloud between the majority of their forces and you?”

She couldn’t look away from his eyes.

Kyo took a deep breath and felt like she hadn’t been breathing. “I know, shishou. I know. I can tell myself, again and again, and I know you’re right, I just—”

“Nothing anyone does can change what happened on Uzu,” Hinata-shishou said firmly, voice hard and almost unforgiving. “And I would not change it, even if that weren’t so.”

Kyo startled and stared at him with shocked disbelief.

The man smiled, the expression thin and largely humourless. “It could have been worse, Kyo.” He squeezed her fingers. “We’re a sad remnant of what we once were, but we still are. We are here, right now, in Konoha. We’re still a clan.” He was silent for what felt like a long moment. “And it saddens me greatly that your assistance to ensure that that could be possible is preventing you from using one of your most effective weapons.”

Kyo opened her mouth to protest, but Hinata-shishou interrupted her.

“Tell me, Kyo. When was the last time you used your poisoned needles in the field?”

She closed her mouth without so much as a peep.

It hadn’t been that long ago... surely?

Kyo racked her brain.

The last few missions hadn’t seen much in the way of action, the Ame mission... she’d frozen, so she hadn’t used any weapons right then.

In Kiri, it hadn’t been an option and she hadn’t even brought any of her poison gear. At all.

Before that...

Surely she’d used her needles. Right?

But then she thought about her poison stash, the needles she was storing at home, waiting to be used and... how long since she’d re-stocked her wrist holsters? Her poison pack?

It felt a little bit like losing her breath to realise he was right.
How was it possible for her not to have so much as noticed this? For two years?

Kyo was staring blindly at nothing, eyes wide, as one realisation after another hit home like a gong in her head. Every strike of the club shaking her to her core.

She'd used that one needle on Rat.

And the one on Gecko when they were retrieving Kushina and Ashika, but that was two needles. Over the course of two years.

Two needles used on comrades.

No, wait, she'd also used her needles during the ANBU recruitment thing Bear had asked her to do, but that too had been on comrades.

Why was she- shouldn't it be the other way around!?

A short, quiet, incredulous laugh escaped her, because none of this was making a lick of sense and she just had no idea how to deal with it, or what to do with this information at all.

“I think I need Katsurou-sensei,” Kyo managed to say faintly.

Hinata-shishou squeezed her fingers again. “Kisaki?” he asked quietly.

“Yeah, I'll get him,” the dog agreed, already in the process of getting to her feet. “Won't be long,” she added and raced off.

Hinata-shishou had remained with her until Katsurou-sensei arrived, at which point he'd gotten up and left with a few quiet words for the man.

Katsurou-sensei sighed softly and then walked over to sink down in a seat beside her. Not saying anything.

Kyo kept her gaze on the floor, frowning at nothing at all.

“It doesn't make any sense,” she finally said.

“It makes a lot of sense,” he countered.

“It doesn't!” Kyo snapped, jerking her head up to glare at him. “I'm not using my needles! Other than on-” She cut herself off and pressed her hands over her face.


Kyo made an acknowledging noise in the back of her throat, not so much as shifting her hands. Taking deep breaths, trying to calm down.

Kisaki slowly retook her place behind her, curling around her back.

“Are you willing to hear what I have to say?” Katsurou finally asked.

Kyo took a deep breath, though about it, and nodded. “I always want to hear what you have to say, sensei,” she told him honestly. She might not always like what he had to say, but she wanted to hear it anyway.
“The Uzu mission took a lot out of you, Kyo. It took so much that by the time you reached the hospital, you’d nearly killed yourself with chakra exhaustion,” he began calmly, still just sitting beside her on the tatami floor. “Then there’s the mental repercussions,” he sighed.

“We've worked on those.”

“Very diligently,” sensei agreed softly. “And you've made a lot of progress.”

Then why was she still-

“I'm tired of this, sensei,” Kyo admitted softly. “No matter how hard I work, or how much I do, it's never enough.” Not in anything.

“What would have been enough?”

She sent him an irritated look. “At this point, I feel like I'm a tower, built up one block at a time.” She mimed placing a wooden block in front of her. “Kaa-san dying,” she placed another imaginary block, “Taku and Maki.” Another one. “Uzushio.” Yet another one. “Kiri. The Ame nin-” she cut herself off, hand hovering in the air in front of her, staring at the staggering, swaying tower she could see for her mind's eye.

“...you are more than your traumas, Kyo.”

“Yeah. But sometimes, it doesn't feel like it.” She let her hand drop to her lap. “And then Hinata-shishou made me realise-” she took a deep breath, “the only people I've used my needles on, sensei, are comrades.” She stared at the wall. “For two years. And I didn't realise.”

“I told you it made sense, and I meant it,” Katsurou-sensei said firmly. “And I'm going to tell you why.” He turned to face her and waited for Kyo to follow suit.

Which she reluctantly did.

“So are you going to tell me some great wisdom now?” she asked, possibly a bit snidely.

“Yes.” Katsurou eyed her seriously. “What's the difference between comrades and enemies, Kyo?” He didn't wait for her to try and answer, before he answered himself. “Comrades are safe.”

She scowled with how deeply unsettled those words made her. “So you're saying I'm only going for targets who won't actually try to kill me for it?” That wasn't comforting. Not even close.

“You have poisoned people again and again, since you were six years old, and near enough every single time, someone has tried to kill you for it.” He watched her steadily. “Keeping that in mind, reminding yourself that you are a child, can you honestly tell me your reaction to it for these past two years has been strange?”

Kyo pulled her legs up to her chest and buried her face in her knees. “I hate it when you do this, sensei.”

“I know.” He took a deep breath. “But that doesn't make it any less true. Or mean that you need to hear it any less.”

“How do you do it?” she asked abruptly, tilting her head to peer at him, almost suspiciously.

Katsurou-sensei smiled wryly. “You're asking me that after the things you've learned about me?”

“Yes.”
“I’m the reason for many of Inoki’s headaches, I’m afraid.” He grinned sharply. Humourlessly. “I bury myself in my work and cut myself off from the people around me to protect them and myself.” He paused. “Which was why giving me a Genin team was so effective, because doing those things became either impossible or cancelled each other out.”

Kyo narrowed her eyes on him. “So you really would have tried to push me away if I hadn’t cried all over your kitchen table?” she half-demanded, and she didn't even know how she was feeling about this.

“Not by conscious choice and Inoki would possibly have tried to strangle me.”

Kyo snorted, feeling reluctantly amused, despite herself, before she pressed her face back against her knees. She sighed. “I’m tired, sensei.”

“Working yourself into the ground isn’t a solution to your problems,” he told her sagely and without looking, Kyo kicked at his knee.

“You're a damn hypocrite,” she informed him huffily.

“I distinctly remember the conversation we had where we established everyone's a hypocrite.”

Kyo laughed tiredly and brought her hands up to braid her fingers together over her head. “So this is a problem that clearly needs to be fixed,” she said, returning to the main issue. “Even though I have no idea how to do that, or where to even start.”

Katsurou-sensei hummed an acknowledgement. “It'll take time, but we'll get there.”

“And in the meantime?” she couldn't help but ask.

“You've managed well enough so far. The end of the war has afforded you some leeway, as well.” Katsurou paused. “You’re not helpless without your poisons, Kyo, even though this is concerning.” He took a deep, weary breath. “Now that you’re finally in a place where you’re aware of this, acknowledging this and capable of talking about it, you can move forward.”

Moving forward.

She'd thought that was what it was she'd been doing all along, but part of her clearly hadn't kept up. Hadn't gotten the memo.

“It's so incredibly frustrating to feel so old and so young at the same time,” she muttered.

“There's a lot of knowledge and experiences trapped in that head of yours, and not only because of 'the Before'.” He tapped a finger against her hands, still resting over her head. “You've seen and done more than most other kids your age in Konoha.”

Kyo sighed irritably. “Why do people keep bringing that up?” she muttered. “Yeah, fine, I'm more messed up than most other kids, but that doesn't help me.”

“It might help if you actually acknowledge it, rather than take your own experience for granted. Like it's the norm and like it's normal.”

She raised her head to glare at him, dropping her hands to the floor, and Katsurou graced her with an unimpressed look right back.

“So you're saying I should think of myself as abnormal?” she bit out.
“Now you’re just trying to pick a fight,” he informed her idly. He tilted his head. “Which might be a first for the two of us.”

...damn it. He was right, too.

Of course he was.

The silence in the room grew heavy, but Kyo focused on her breathing. On trying to calm down and centre herself.

It didn't have to be this complicated.

“Is it easier to just disappear into ANBU?” she asked quietly.

“Yeah,” Katsurou said blandly. “Short term.” He took a deep breath. “But long term it's more likely to make it worse, and it cuts you off from your friends, your family. You love your family, Kyo.”

“Yeah, I do.” Which had never been in question. “Someone asked me if I wanted to have sex with him today.”

“Oh?”

She glanced at Katsurou to find him frowning at her.

“I said no three times, but he wouldn't take the hint, and he made it sound like he was just doing the same thing I did.” She took another deep breath. “I hate how he made me feel.”

“And who was this?”

Kyo shrugged. “Some guy. Don't think I've ever seen him before.”

“I bit him,” Kisaki commented, sounding pleased with herself.

“Good girl,” Katsurou praised, not missing a beat. “What's the worst thing that can happen if you poison anyone?”

“They die.”

“And the next worst thing?”

Kyo stared at him, wondering what the hell kind of angle he was playing here, because she wasn't seeing it. “They end up in the hospital.”

“And that is bad, why?”

She frowned. “Because they have work. Might have missions. They could have responsibilities I don't know about waiting for them.”

“How are their responsibilities your problem?” Katsurou asked evenly.

Kyo opened her mouth to retort, only to pause.

She narrowed her eyes on him. “Doesn't change the fact it'd be a bother for a lot of people.”

Katsurou leaned forward. “Don't mess with the poison specialist' is a saying for a reason, Kyo. People shouldn't be approaching you, bothering you, without taking it into consideration. And if they
don't know you're a poison expert, then that's entirely on them.”

She was maybe scowling at him, but that was beside the point. “It's not that easy. What if they actually die?”

Katsurou held out a hand towards her and Kyo eyed it dubiously.

“Your hand,” he ordered blandly. Which was an order she followed. He turned her hand over and pointed a finger at one of the needles in her wrist holster. “What does this one do?”

“Quick-acting sedative,” Kyo told him confusedly.

“And this one?” He moved his finger to point at the fifth needle on the left of the first one.

“Nerve toxin that attacks and shuts down the lungs.”

“This one?”

“...kills quickly, with little side-effect.”

“This one?”

“It's a sedative that'll leave you feeling like you have the worst hangover, what's the point of this, sensei?” Kyo couldn't help but demand, because she still wasn't getting it.

He tugged on her hand and fixed her with a firm, meaningful look. “You know your needles inside out. You check them obsessively. You could switch places on every single one of these and you'd still know exactly which was what and where to find it.” He stared at her. “So the idea of you accidentally killing anyone you decide to poison is close to laughable, Kyo.”

She stared mutely at him, trying to think of a good counter.

“...so long as I'm in control of myself.”

Katsurou's mouth pressed together with displeasure. “We're working on your temper, and Chie is helping you, too. Everyone can be pushed too far.”

“Yeah, but-”

“Your grandmother stomped on several tender spots all at once,” Katsurou interrupted firmly. “What did you do?”

“Pulled a kunai,” Kyo muttered.

“And what did you do with it?”

Kyo glowered at him, because he already knew the answer. She'd told him about this already, why was he even asking?

“You already know.”

“Why didn't you pull a needle?”

“Will you stop it?” she hissed at him.

“No. Give me an answer, Kyo.”
“Because no matter how upset and hurt she makes me feel, she's still my grandmother and I love her!” she spat, feeling close to bursting with irritation and pent up frustration. “I don't want to kill anyone I don't have to kill!”

“I know,” Katsurou smiled thinly at her, “which is why I wonder why you're so afraid you're going to. Why do you trust yourself so little?”

Kyo stared blankly at him for a long moment. “Can you just shut up and give me a hug?”

Katsurou hummed. “I suppose you could do with a break,” he mused and then pulled on the arm still in his grasp and obliged her without a word of complaint.

-x-x-x-

Seeing as Katsurou-sensei had all but ordered her to put all of her various projects on hold, the next few days should have been very slow for Kyo.

If she hadn't spent the majority of them asleep.

Which. Was indisputable proof that Katsurou had been entirely right in his actions and Kyo really had been pushing herself far too hard for a while now.

No matter how loathe she was to admit it.

“Are you really saying boys have been saying things like that to you before?” Minato asked with a thoroughly displeased frown.

“Not exactly,” Kyo muttered, keeping herself somewhat busy sorting through the ridiculously large poison stash she'd been accumulating for the past two years without realising.

How she had failed to realise, she still hadn't figured out, but she supposed self-delusion was a powerful thing.

“Kyo, seriously.”

She looked up to send Minato a look. “What do you want me to tell you, exactly, Minato? That people have tried to get in my pants? Not as blatantly as that, but yeah. Pretty much?” She shrugged sullenly. “I don't like thinking about it, and I don't want to talk about it, either.”

“Chie says it's important to talk about the things we don't want to talk about,” her friend and teammate told her solemnly.

“I know,” Kyo drawled. “She says that to me, too. Every other time I see her. It's incredibly annoying.”

Minato snorted. “I still don't understand why you asked me to help you with this,” he said, changing the subject.

Kyo sent him a dry glance. “I didn't. You invited yourself along, claiming we've spent far too little time with each other lately.”

Minato smiled placidly at her, not denying and not looking the slightest bit guilty. “It's the truth.”

“I see you practically every day,” Kyo argued, more for the sake of it than because she disagreed.

“Yeah, but that's for training and that's not the same.” He shrugged, lifting a jar to peer at the liquid
inside. “What's this for?”

Kyo threw it a distracted look. “Does nasty things to open wounds. Sort of like an infection, but far more fast acting.” She considered it for a second. “Don't try to open it. It's not healthy to ingest either.”

Right this moment, it felt like she didn't know what to do with all these poisons.

Which was why she'd made half a dozen storage scrolls under Jiraiya's careful attention today, and she was currently trying to decide which things could be sealed away for long-term storage, and which things should be kept where they were.

There were also *so many* needles she'd prepared, bundled up and stored away, seemingly purely per automatics. And without looking at the already waiting stack of needles.

Which was *exasperating.*

But she was taking the whole afternoon to deal with it, which was definitely something.

Kisaki had decided to go to the Inuzuka compound in response.

“I wonder if people realise how much poisons you're keeping in here,” Minato mused interestedly, eyeing the floor around where they were sitting. “You're practically a health hazard to all of Konoha.” He grinned at her. “What if there's a fire, Kyo?”

She sent him a mock frown. “Then I'd suggest you hold your breath and run out of the wind direction, keeping well clear of the smoke.”

Minato laughed, just a little. “But seriously, this is a lot. Even for you, right?”

“Yes,” she sighed, looking around at everything again, even though she still had trouble digesting it. It was just a little bit ridiculous, no matter how she looked at it. “The joys of having issues you don't know about.” She raised one of her poison jars toward him as if making a toast.

Minato snickered, grabbed a jar and copied her, clinking them together.

Kyo snorted and then put the jar she was holding in the to-be-sealed pile. She'd already found *three* jars of that particular poison, and she wasn't done sorting through everything yet.

“So what's this?” Minato asked next, holding up a jar with a grey-green powder for her inspection, doing his best to help.

Kyo eyed it intently for a second. “Over there,” she directed at the keep-pile.

“How long have you been banned from any extra work?”

“Oh, you know,” Kyo muttered. “Until I'm less of a mess, though that part was more implied than-” She cut herself off, tilting her head to listen. “Did it just knock?” she asked.

Minato turned to eye the door leading out into the sitting room in time for there to be another knock.

“Kyo, I know you're in there! Let me in, we need to talk!” Aita's familiar voice called faintly, muffled through the front door but still recognisable.

Kyo blinked. “I'm pretty sure I haven't done anything to upset Aita,” she muttered to herself.
“Are you gonna let him in?” Minato asked, looking curious.

“Yeah,” she sighed and got to her feet, carefully walked through the clutter spread out on her bedroom floor and made her way to the door. “Hey, Aita,” she greeted, letting him into the apartment.

“Don't you 'hey, Aita' me,” he muttered back, stalking inside and barely pausing to take off his sandals before continuing into the sitting room. “This is all your fault to begin with! I've tried everything to make her drop it, but she won't!” He looked pretty frantic as he pulled both hands through his hair.

“Okay,” Kyo said slowly, drawing the word out as she tried to figure out what the hell this was even about. “I hope you realise I don't have a clue what you're talking about.”

Aita groaned, covered his face with his hands and then walked over to collapse on the sofa.

“I never signed up for this,” he whined pitifully, though it didn't sound like he was talking to anyone specific.

“Hello, Aita,” Minato greeted, wandering out of Kyo and Genma's room.

“Hey,” Aita greeted back, entirely lacklustre. “Come to watch me suffer?”

“Um.” Minato blinked at him and then exchanged a confused look with Kyo.

Who could do nothing other than shrug back, because she still didn't know what this was about.

“Are you going to explain what's going on anytime soon, or should we just leave you to your suffering?” she asked mildly.

Aita groaned and flapped a hand at her. “Kyo,” he whined.

“Yeah, that's my name,” she drawled dryly. “What is it?”

“How could you do this to me?” Aita all but wailed softly.

“That would be a much easier question to answer if you got to the point and told me anything to explain... well, anything,” she huffed and rolled her eyes. “So what's going on?” she pressed, walking over to kick Aita's leg lightly until he shifted enough for her to be able to sit down beside him on the sofa. “And why are you being all dramatic about it?”

Aita took a deep breath, visibly steeled himself and then sat up straight. Turned to meet her gaze, looking pained. “Ashika's asking questions, Kyo. And I can't make her stop. Ren's refusing to help me!”

Right. Because that explained everything.

Kyo was pretty sure her expression had gone completely deadpan. “Because questions are such a bad thing.”

“These kinds of questions, yes!” Aita was quick to return. “And it's your fault so I'm here to make you take responsibility!”

Kyo sighed and rubbed the fingers of one hand over her eyes. “You're not making any sense.”

Aita took a deep breath and reached out to place both his hands on her shoulders, looking grave.
“Kyo. Ashika, my seven year old niece, is asking me questions about where babies come from. Questions about sex. Because Gemma's told her about the things you've told him, and she is being unreasonably stubborn and relentless.”

Kyo stared blankly at him for a long second, before a small snicker slipped out of her.

And then she just. Cracked.

Laughing until her stomach hurt and she was close to toppling off the sofa. Probably would have done so if it hadn't been for Aita's hands still on her shoulders.

The teenager in question produced an offended noise. “It's no laughing matter!” He sounded horrified. “I'm nineteen! I should not be talking about sex with a seven year old girl!” And he was shaking her back and forth a little to try and convey the severity of the situation.

Kyo took a deep breath, tried to stop laughing, only to take one look at his face and fail spectacularly.

Oh, sweet mercy, she was pretty sure her eyes were leaking.

Kyo gasped for breath.

Minato had taken a seat on the floor a small distance away and was watching them like they were prime entertainment.

Wheezing in an attempt to control herself, Kyo cleared her throat and tried to fix Aita with a serious expression.

It didn't really help that she was giggling helplessly every now and then.

“Has it occurred to you to just,” she gestured vaguely with one hand, “answer her questions honestly?”

Aita's face drained of colour and he looked faint. “No. Absolutely not. First of all, she's way, way too young for that!” he insisted, the horrified expression back with a vengeance. “Second! I'm the last person who should- She's a girl! A girl should talk to her about these- I mean, what if I- I can't do this, Kyo.” He looked honestly frantic and Kyo's hilarity calmed a few notches.

“Okay, take a deep breath,” she directed first of all, reaching up to grasp his hands. Removing them from her shoulders. “Please try to calm down. This isn't the end of the world.”

Aita nodded tersely and took a moment to try and do just that.

“Right,” Kyo said, eyeing him pensively. “Ashika's just curious,” she informed him. “And it might seem like it's far too soon, but it really is better to prepare her for certain things. Let her know how stuff works now, rather than let her fumble through it on her own later.”

“But-” Aita began, looking like he was about to protest.

Kyo frowned at him. “No, no interrupting,” she huffed. “I'm not saying you should go into all the sordid details. She's too young for that. But telling her about the basics, keeping it age-appropriate. Informing her what sex is, how it happens, why people do it and how it can be abused isn't unreasonable,” she bit out, stomping down her own unease with the subject.

Aita was her friend, and so was Minato.
“Why would you tell Genma about these things?” Aita pretty much lamented.

“Because he found blood in my bed and wondered if I had to go to the hospital,” Kyo informed him stiffly. “I wasn't gonna lie to him. Especially not when I then discovered the ridiculous things our grandmother had told him, so yeah. I told him where babies come from and how they happen, and do you know what his reaction was?”

Aita mutely shook his head, looking rather wide-eyed.

“He asked if that meant tou-san had made us, and when I told him yes, he got all amazed and excited and ran off to tell him just that,” Kyo said. “He was curious. And Ashika probably is, too. That doesn't mean they're gonna start thinking about sex like adults and teenagers do,” she told him shortly.

Aita produced a pained sound. “But, Kyo,” he all but begged. “I can't do this. I'm not equipped to deal with something like this!” He looked distraught. “I asked Ren, but she said no, and I'm not desperate enough to ask shishou, but—” he covered his face with his hands.

Kyo crossed her arms over her chest. “So what do you want me to do about it?”

Aita twitched and froze. “I don't know!” he exploded miserably, dropping his hands from his face to fix her with a desperate look. “But this is clearly your fault, so you need to take responsibility for it.”

Kyo sent him the unimpressed look that definitely deserved.

“Let's say, hypothetically, that I talk to her,” she drawled slowly. “I'm not going to lie to her.”

Aita's face twisted into a grimace as he thought that through. Considered everything it might mean.

“But you would do it?” he eventually asked, looking like he'd swallowed a whole rations bar in one piece. Without water.

Kyo thought about it.

Well, Ashika was calling her 'nee-san' and she'd already given her little brother the talk, so she supposed it wasn't unreasonable.

“Fine, I'll do it,” she decided, and Aita just about had time to slump with abject relief. “On one condition,” she added casually.

Aita froze, and then fixed her with a suspicious look. “What condition?” he asked warily.

“You being there for the conversation,” Kyo said firmly.

Aita stared at her with mute horror, before he thought about it, and then jerkily inclined his head in a nod he seemed to regret deeply. But he nodded all the same.

“You're absolutely horrible. Just the worst,” he mumbled, covered his face with his hands again and let himself flop over on the sofa until he more resembled a pile of misery and regret than a person.

Kyo snorted at him.

Yeah, adding Aita to that conversation would make herself feel far more uncomfortable, but seriously. He couldn't just run to her—or anyone else, for that matter—every time Ashika asked him about something he found uncomfortable.
So she'd just have to teach him how to do it.

If he made Ashika uncomfortable during their talk, then she'd make sure to make him uncomfortable right back.

Actually. She should probably warn him about that beforehand.

Kyo blinked and sent Aita a considering look.

But probably not right now, because he honestly looked like his brain had fried and he'd given up on using it productively for the rest of the day.

Turning to exchange a look with Minato, Kyo shrugged and then got up to go back to sorting through her poisons.

The following day, Kyo and Kisaki arrived at the Uzumaki compound after they were done with their team, and after the Academy had let out.

She still wasn't sure how she was feeling about this thing, but there was definitely a lot of exasperation involved.

Aita was quick to meet up with them, grabbing her arm as soon as he was close enough, as if he was afraid she'd try to back out last minute.

“Okay, before we do this, Aita,” Kyo said firmly, fixing him with a warning look. “Let's go over the rules.”

“Rules?” Aita parroted blankly, blinking at her like he wasn’t sure what was going on.

Kyo nodded. “Rules,” she confirmed. “No matter what we talk about, no matter what Ashika asks, you're not allowed to be anything other than calm. Composed. Don't freak out,” she hissed at him. “You can freak out as much as you want later, but if you mess this up, she's probably never going to bring you any troubles she comes across later.”

Aita swallowed dryly. “So no pressure?”

Kyo snorted. “Sit still, be patient, understanding and be calm and you'll be fine.”

Aita all but whined.

“See it like this; talking about this now, you might be spared a conversation when she's a teenager to tell you she's pregnant.”

“That- that's not even close to reassuring,” Aita muttered faintly, his grip on her arm white-knuckled and cutting off her circulation.

Kyo shrugged. “I'm just telling you how we're doing this, and if you can't, then the deal's off.”

Which didn't mean she wouldn't talk to Ashika anyway, but there was nothing stopping her from making Aita far more miserable in the process for being an idiot.

Groaning, Aita slumped, staring up at the ceiling for a second, before he sighed heavily. “Yeah. Fine. I can do that.”

“Good,” Kyo smiled and exchanged an amused look with Kisaki, “then let's go.” She started
walking further into the building. “You've told her we're going to talk today at least, right?”

“Yeah,” he muttered, not sounding enthusiastic.

Which was something, to be sure.

Soon enough, Aita ushered them into his room, where Ashika was waiting impatiently, though he himself paused in the door. Threw an eye back out as if he was considering making a run for it before it was too late and Kyo watched him interestingly while she bent down to give Ashika a hug.

“Aita?” she asked when he seemingly couldn't make up his mind on his own.

He jumped, turned his head to look at her, and then cleared his throat and walked inside. “Right.”

Kyo turned to focus fully on Ashika with a smile. “Let's sit down and talk. Aita told me you wanted to ask some questions.”

“What's the blood-thing, nee-san?” Ashika wasted no time in asking. “Genma said it happened to girls. I'm a girl.”

Kyo sighed softly, but couldn't claim to be particularly surprised.

Kisaki snorted and lied down off to the side, making herself comfortable and seemingly falling asleep the moment she laid her head on the floor.

“Let's sit first. Aita, come sit. Right beside me.” Kyo sent him a pointed look.

Which he did, even though he made it look a little bit like he was walking to his own execution. Which was just ridiculous.

“Okay, Ashika, here's the thing,” Kyo began, turning to look at the girl who's full attention she was the focus of.

-x-x-x-

Kyo's forced vacation kept up, even with the one added mission sprinkled in, and she was now talking about her problems with not one but two shrinks on a somewhat regular basis, seeing as Katsurou-sensei had decided to ignore his own orders to rest.

Or something.

She supposed the two of them could be hypocrites together.

It was nice enough, to give herself a break and just... take a step back from the hectic pace she'd set for herself for a while and two weeks since her minor breakdown, Kyo and Minato were headed to the Akimichi compound.

Kyo tightened her hold on Minato's hand, frowning a bit at nothing.

“You okay?” Minato asked, sending her a glance. “You're not usually this reluctant to meet up with Inoichi, Shikaku and Chouza,” he remarked.

“I know,” Kyo huffed, but that didn't change that she felt a bit uncomfortable. “Just. The last time I saw them,” she cut herself off and didn't finish that sentence.

She just knew this would be awkward. Especially if she considered how the majority of everyone
else had reacted.

“I don't know if I'll manage, but if Inoichi is an idiot, I can kick him for you,” Minato offered.

Kyo laughed. “Thanks, Minato. I appreciate it.”

“I could bite him, too,” Kisaki chimed in with an unimpressed snort. “These adolescent males are proving to be both tenacious and annoying,” she said firmly.

Kyo sighed softly. “Yeah.”

They didn't really talk much after that, just walked the rest of the distance to their destination.

The Akimichi guard waved them in with a friendly grin and then went back to scanning the people moving about.

There was a steady stream of people walking in and out of their compound today, but that was par for the course with the situation.

“Hey, Kyo!” Chouza called, the moment he spotted them. “Minato! Welcome!”


“Of course.” Chouza grinned back. “Food's over there, just grab whatever you'd like. Shikaku and Inoichi are around here somewhere. Sorry, we'll have to catch up more later, but I have to go,” he excused himself and walked over to a man that looked like he wanted to speak to him.

“So, food?” Minato asked.

Kyo nodded and let him lead the way over to the groaning buffet table that had been set up on the other side of the courtyard.

The majority of the Akimichi, Nara and Yamanaka clans were milling around with people leaving, new people arriving and a few additional shinobi popping in for a word and a bite to eat.

It was a rather festive occasion.

“What would you like, Kisaki?” Kyo asked, balancing two plates in one hand, shamelessly cheating with chakra. Because why wouldn't she?

“There's something that smells really good over there,” Kisaki told her, leaning her chin on the table and peering over at the other side of the surface. “What is it?”

“Looks like some kind of meat dish,” Kyo told her, readily serving up a portion on Kisaki's plate. “Anything else?” she asked, at the same time as she grabbed a few things for herself. “You like fish.”

Kisaki's tail was wagging as she inspected the selection.

Kyo found her a few grilled fish, in addition to a few other morsels, and soon enough, the three of them settled down to eat in an out of the way spot.

Providing her partner with her plate, Kisaki wasted no time to dig in, happily crunching on one of her fish before she turned to the other things Kyo had gotten for her.

“Have you made any progress with your fuuinjutsu project?” Kyo asked Minato after a while.
Minato sent her a dubious look, and she felt like rolling her eyes.

“I'm not doing anything! I'm just talking to my friend!” she huffed, slapping his shoulder lightly. “I'm allowed to do that much, at least.” She pouted at him.

Minato snorted, clearly amused on her expense, and graciously told her about what he had figured out while working on his seal.

It was pretty nice and the food was excellent.

Inoichi didn't find them until almost an hour in, when he came jogging over with a grin on his face, greeting all three of them with warm enthusiasm.

“Have you eaten yet?”

“Yep. It was delicious.” Which was the same for every Akimichi family barbecue, as far as she’d understood it.

Inoichi took a seat in front of them, eyes bright as he looked between Minato and Kyo. “So. What's new with you?” he asked.

Kyo narrowed her eyes at him, because what kind of question was that?

“Kyo over-worked herself,” Minato said, prompting her to send him a disbelieving look.

Had it really been necessary to rat her out like that!?

She scoffed. “Minato,” she warned.

“What? It's the truth, and Inoichi is your friend,” her teammate said with an unconcerned shrug. “He asked, I answered and we're just conversing.”

“You're full of shit,” she muttered under her breath. “And you're enjoying yourself,” she accused sullenly.

Minato smiled sunnily at her, looking like the picture of innocence.

Kyo was unimpressed.

Inoichi looked amused. “Have you replaced Nawaki with Minato, Kyo?” he asked teasingly, and it was all in good fun.

Kyo could tell he didn't mean any harm with it, but she could feel her mood do a complete switch. Could feel her face go blank and her eyes cold.

Without a word, she got to her feet and walked away.

Hiding in a shadowy corner, listening in on the conversations in her immediate vicinity, it was maybe not so strange that Shikaku was the one that found her.

It was definitely in his favour that he did nothing more than take a seat beside her, not saying a word.

Kyo slanted him a look out of the corner of her eye, but Shikaku wasn't looking at her.
“He's a Yamanaka, but that doesn't mean he isn't also an idiot,” he said a minute later.

“I don't know what's more frustrating, him acting like the last time we met didn't happen or him asking that.” She clenched her teeth, because right now, she was just plain angry.

Was this never going to end?

“To be fair, I think you shocked a few years off his life with that stunt,” Shikaku drawled, darkly amused.

Kyo turned to glare at him. “It wasn't a stunt. This is my life, my career, and I don't want to let other people decide—” she bit herself off with a growl.

Shikaku grimaced. “You know, I figured it was something like that,” he muttered. “But that doesn't mean it's nice to think about.”

“Try living with it,” Kyo snapped, before she took a deep breath.

Shikaku sighed and was silent a moment. “Remember when I told you you really should pay the rumours a bit more attention?”

Kyo grunted an affirmation, because yeah, she remembered.

“There's been some pretty interesting ones about you lately,” he informed her blandly. “Inoichi's been waging an aggressive war on them, in his own way.”

Kyo thought that over and sighed heavily. “I know you guys don't— You're my friends and I love you, but—”

“Just letting you know.” Shikaki shrugged, seemingly unconcerned. “Do we need to worry about you?”

Kyo snorted. “Depends on who you ask,” she muttered with a half-hearted attempt at humour. “Working through some issues, on top of everything else, but I'm getting better.”

Shikaku hummed. “You do tend to get into serious things.”

She huffed a soft, tired laugh and tipped to the side until she could lean against his shoulder. “It's not like I do it on purpose,” she defended herself. It wasn't like she could refuse orders, either, when it came to missions. And then there were the unexpected things that happened while on mission, and you couldn't just politely inform an enemy that you really were too young for a fight to the death. Or that you didn't want to get into a tough situation again, and couldn't you all just pass? This once?

She scoffed at her own thoughts and then sighed.

“So what's up with you?” she asked.

“Smooth,” Shikaku drawled. “Barely caught that graceful change of subject.”

“Shut up,” Kyo muttered at him, but couldn't help but grin. Just a little.

Shikaku shrugged -Kyo's head shifting with the motion- and huffed. “Not much. Life just continues as it always does.”

“Inspiring,” Kyo told him. “And you clank down on my conversational skills.”
“Yeah, well. If I can point at you, then maybe Inoichi will get off my case at least thirty percent of the time.”

“You wish.”

“Oh, I do,” Shikaku agreed plainly. “You wanna go back to the others before Minato murders Inoichi? You'll get to savour his sincere apology.”

“Tempting,” Kyo scoffed. “But I suppose our friendship means I have to save him from my teammate,” she mused.

“Don’t forget Kisaki. She’s making a reputation for herself, biting people.”

“She’s such a good dog,” Kyo agreed and sat up straight. “Thank you for talking with me and for not being an ass, Shikaku.”

“Figure someone on our team has to be the voice of reason,” he drawled.

“I thought that was Chouza.”

“Fair enough.”

-x-x-x-

A couple of days after the Akimichi family barbecue, Kyo and Kisaki walked out of the hospital together after Kyo had finished a routine medical check-up.

Boring, but supposedly necessary.

It was far more waiting around on stressed, busy medics than anything else, but at least she wouldn't have to go back for another one in quite a while.

“What?” Kisaki asked, before she yawned wide, showing off her teeth, causing a passing civilian to quicken his step slightly.

It was boring to wait for these things for her partner, too.

Kyo rolled her shoulders and then stretched her arms over her head as she thought about everything she had to do today.

Had to pick up Genma from the Uzumaki compound, pick up some groceries, and then she'd planned to give Genma another lesson tonight.

She was pretty sure she hadn't forgotten anything.

The curious noise Kisaki produced brought her out of her thoughts and focusing back on her surroundings.

“What?” she asked, even as she followed Kisaki's gaze to- “Nawaki? You okay?” She blinked at the boy standing up ahead, who jumped.

He turned to stare at her and... that was a kid in his arms.

Was he babysitting Kiko? If so, then where was Shinrin? And they were still outside of the hospital, so maybe the babies had gotten some sort of check-up, but that didn't explain why Nawaki was so pale. Or why he looked shocked to his core.
“Kyo-chan,” he said weakly, still looking like he wasn't all there.

Kyo felt concerned. She couldn't help it.

“You okay?” she asked slowly, repeating herself.

Nawaki turned to stare off in the other direction for a second, before something in him seemed to firm up. He turned back to Kyo and Kisaki and walked up to them.

“Can you hold this for me for a second?” he asked, taking the bag off his shoulder and all but hanging it on Kyo's, and she was still confused enough by this that she was hesitant to react in any particular way. “Can you do me a favour?” Nawaki asked next, and the look in his eyes was intent and desperate enough Kyo just stared mutely.

What the hell was going on?

“What kind of-”

“Thanks, I'll definitely owe you one,” Nawaki said hurriedly, and then Kyo found herself with a whiny baby thrust into her arms. Which the kid definitely didn't appreciate.

Seeing as her options were to either hold her or let her drop to the ground, Kyo did the only reasonable thing.

“Oi, Nawaki, you can't just- Nawaki!” Kyo had not been prepared for the guy to spin on his heal and take off without another word. “Nawaki!”

He didn't even pause.

If possible, he sped up instead, and Kyo stared after him with incredulous disbelief.

She felt tempted to chase him down and shake him, demand answers, but she was holding a baby, and this little girl was definitely too young to go roof hopping.

She exchanged a look with Kisaki, who didn't have any more answers than she did.

“Right, so... uh,” Kyo muttered and peered at the screaming little girl in her arms. “You're definitely not Kiko.” She stared at the kid. “Did I just become an accomplice in a kidnapping or something?”

-x-x-x-
“I feel like I should be worried,” Kyo mused, carefully shifting her hold on the distraught child she was holding, bouncing her gently to try and make her stop crying. “Seriously. Did Nawaki kidnap her?”

“Stupid to do it in the open like this, if so,” Kisaki snorted and stretched up to sniff at the little girl's foot.

Kyo eyed the kid again. She looked to be around a year old, and she wasn't looking too happy right now, even though she was slowly calming down from the shock of being shoved at a complete stranger. Which was a relief; the noise wasn't pleasant.

Kyo looked around, but Nawaki was long gone, and it wasn’t like she could just drop the kid off somewhere when she had no clue what was going on.

“Right. I guess I'm babysitting?” she mused sceptically.

Kisaki hummed pensively, sniffed the baby's foot a bit more only to sneeze.

Kyo sighed and looked around again, but no one was really paying her any particular attention. So she walked a few steps to the side, to make sure she wouldn’t be in anyone's way, and then crouched down to look through the bag Nawaki had so generously dumped on her, holding the baby girl to her chest while she was at it.

Maybe the contents would tell her something.

...it didn't tell her shit, seeing as she found mainly baby clothes, but at least she dug out a sun hat for the baby, which she was quick to put on her.

It was light pink.

Kyo eyed the colour with some measure of distaste, but that was far from the most important issue right now, so.

“Kyo? Picking up Genma?” Kisaki reminded her and Kyo grimaced.

Right.

She still had things to do today, so... she guessed she'd just have to bring the baby.

“This is so weird. I don't even know your name,” she told the little girl, who was clinging to her shirt now and this was so incredibly weird. “Okay,” Kyo muttered, closed the bag, slung it over one of her shoulders, shifted her hold on the baby and then resumed walking.

Holding a very young child propped on her hip.

To go pick up her brother, and this was definitely going to be an interesting situation to try and explain to people.

Nawaki hadn't looked like he'd planned to come pick her up anytime soon.
He hadn't looked like he had a plan at all, actually, and Kyo couldn't help the heavy lump of worry in her gut.

Despite everything else, Nawaki was actually becoming a friend, and when he acted so out of character, that was absolutely concerning.

Right.

Now she *definitely* needed to pick up groceries, because there hadn't been any food in the bag and they didn't exactly have anything suitable for a baby at home, she didn't think.

It had been a while since Genma were this small.

Walking through Konoha with a baby on her hip was. Strange. But no one paid her any mind. Didn't send her so much as a second glance.

Reaching the Uzumaki compound *did* earn her a rather interesting look from the gate guard.

He didn't say anything, though, so Kyo gratefully relished the additional minutes of peace and quiet.

They'd end soon enough.

Entering the main building, Kyo quickly and efficiently navigated the familiar corridors until she reached Aita's room.

She could easily hear Genma and Ashika from the next room over, but she felt like she maybe needed some help here, so Aita first.

There was no way Kyo could juggle two kids *and* a baby on her own at the same time.

“Hey, Kyo, the little monsters are in Ashika's r-” Aita opened the door and was already talking, looking at her and it took him a second to take in what he was seeing properly, and consequently cut himself off.

He stared at her.

Kyo gently bounced the baby, who had started whining softly again, pressing her face against Kyo's already damp shoulder, and she didn't know what the problem was. Was she hungry? Tired? “Hi,” she said lamely.

“...Hi,” Aita repeated. “Why are you holding a baby? Who's kid is that?”

“Um.”

Aita took a deep breath. “Kyo. Who's kid is that?” he repeated.

Rather than answer right away, Kyo marched past him to enter his room, dropped the bag with baby clothes on the floor and then sat down on his bed. Relocating the little girl to her lap.

“It's a bit complicated,” she told him when Aita had closed his door.

Kisaki wandered over to flop down and stretch out on the floor, even though she very clearly kept an ear and eye on their conversation.

“A bit?” Aita questioned wryly.
“Or a lot,” Kyo granted with a mutter, frowning at nothing for a second. “I'm not sure who this kid belongs to,” she admitted steadily. “A friend sort of asked me to babysit and then ran off before I could ask any questions.”

“Right.” Aita looked highly sceptical, and it wasn't like she couldn't understand. “Which friend was this?”

Kyo pursed her lips. She wasn't sure she wanted to tell him that just yet, because she still didn't know what the hell was going on.

“That's not important right now.”

“Uh-huh. You didn't just kidnap a kid, right?” Aita was staring at her with a complicated look on his face.

Kyo felt offended. “You honestly think I would?” she couldn't help but demand.

He shrugged. “Wouldn't have crossed my mind an hour ago, but, uh, Kyo? This is weird, even for you.”

She scowled at him. “That's just rude. What the hell do you mean 'even for you'?”

“You heard me, you pile of toxic waste.”

Kyo snorted and then couldn't help but laugh a little, because what else could she do? “I just have no idea what's going on, so I'm gonna babysit for a while. Until he comes back and takes responsibility for this.” Whatever this was. “Anyway, I wanted to ask if you can help me with the kids, because I can't juggle three of them on my own at the same time.”

Aita stared at her. “Fine. Come on,” he muttered and stalked back to the door.

It took no time at all to make the very short walk to Ashika's room and then Kyo was sitting on the floor with two spellbound kids peering down at the baby girl sitting in her lap.

“So small,” Ashika mumbled, sitting glued to Genma's side and staring at the baby girl with an intent expression on her face.

Genma, beside her, was studying the little girl's face with blatant fascination and curiosity.

“All babies are small. You two were this small once, too. As was I.”

“Aita-nii, too?” Ashika asked, not taking her eyes off of the little girl.

“Yes,” Kyo said. “I'm babysitting this little one, so Genma, we can't have a lesson today unless someone comes by to pick her up before it's your bedtime.”

Her little brother pouted up at her. “Why?” he asked.

“Because poison isn't good for babies, and it might hurt her, even if we're careful.”

Genma thought that over for a second, glanced down at the baby girl again and then nodded solemnly. “Okay, nee-san. We can do the lesson tomorrow instead.”

“That's very generous of you,” Kyo praised him, and leaned forward to press a kiss to his cheek. “Thank you.”
And to keep things fair, she pressed a quick kiss to Ashika's cheek, too, while she was at it. And was rewarded with a small, happy smile.

Kyo grinned. “Okay, Genma. Let's go, we need to get groceries on the way.”

“Okay,” he brother agreed, still transfixed with the baby she was carrying, but he readily enough took her hand and followed her out of the Uzumaki compound, Kisaki a quiet, steady presence at their backs.

The moment they got home, Kyo parked Genma on the couch, showed him how to hold a one year old and then placed the little girl in his lap with firm instructions not to move too much.

Just to be safe, Kisaki was keeping an eye on them.

The little girl had been crying part of the way home and Kyo was pretty sure the poor little thing was hungry.

So, now at ease to move more freely, Kyo quickly and efficiently packed away the groceries, put some basic vegetables to boil until soft. That done, she went through the bag of mainly baby clothes more thoroughly, was relieved to find a decent stash of cloth nappies and then determinedly stalked into tou-san's room to try and find the soft yellow baby blanket they'd used both for her and Genma.

She didn't like going through tou-san's closet, but this was a bit of a desperate situation.

Thankfully, it wasn't difficult to find, having been neatly folded up and placed on one of the top shelves, Kyo pulled it down and returned to the sitting room.

“Right,” she huffed, spreading out the blanket on the floor and then went to relocate the baby. Because as happy as Genma was to 'babysit' he also looked like he wanted to stretch his legs. “You can sit here with the baby if you want, Genma. Just remember to be careful with her; she's very small and fragile.”

“Ohkay, nee-san. I'll be careful,” he promised and reached out to very gently run his fingers over the brown fuzz on the little girl's head.

Kyo sent him a distracted smile and then went back into the kitchen. She still had to make that baby food, and it was so incredibly lucky she still remembered how kaa-san had done this for Genma.

She was gonna punch Nawaki in the arm for this the next time she saw him. When he wasn't holding a baby.

Kyo had been busy enough she hadn't spared so much as a thought for tou-san.

Which meant that when he walked into their home with a tired “I'm home,” Kyo was caught almost entirely flat-footed. With a baby sleeping on her shoulder.

“Oh, welcome back?” she offered blankly, watching tou-san, who had frozen near enough solid at the sight.

She'd tried to put the kid down, earlier, but she hadn't liked that. Had woken up again the moment she wasn't being held.
Genma had been in the middle of doing his homework on the sitting room floor, but had looked up when the door opened.

Kisaki was stretched out sleeping on the floor an arm away from him, though her eyes cracked open for a second at the new addition.

“Kyo?” tou-san asked in a calm voice, even though he still hadn't moved a muscle other than to speak.

“I'm babysitting,” she returned awkwardly. “It's a bit complicated.” Really, Nawaki could come pick this kid up any second now, please.

He owed her so much for this.

“Complicated how,” her dad asked slowly, visibly taking a deep breath and then finally walking into the apartment properly. He eyed the baby she was holding like she'd been covered in primed explosive tags.

Kyo stared at him, unsure where to begin, and how to explain why she'd agreed to this without much complaint, because the look on Nawaki's face...

She sighed. “I had my medical check-up today,” she began, because that part was easy, and would let her build up to it. Tou-san already knew about that part, too.

Kou nodded, paused for a second, and then walked over to take a seat on the sofa.

Kyo sent him a glance and then resumed the slow pacing she'd been keeping up for a while, ignoring the drool slowly seeping into the shoulder of her shirt.

“You had your check-up,” tou-san prompted when she failed to continue.

Kyo grimaced a little, but figured it would probably be better to just. Get it over with. “When I walked outside, I spotted Nawaki,” she began, and very quickly went over everything that had transpired between them after that, leading to the current situation.

When she was done, she sent her dad a look. “So I'm babysitting.”

Kou rubbed a hand over his eyes. “Kyo, you have no idea who's baby that is.”

“No, but I know Nawaki enough to know he wouldn't kidnap anyone.” At least she desperately hoped so. “And he was- tou-san, if you'd seen the look in his eyes, you would have helped, too.”

“And when is he coming by to pick her up, Kyo?” tou-san pressed, looking even more tired than he had when he'd walked in.

Kyo bit her tongue and didn't say anything, because she didn't know and both of them were well aware.

“Do we have to have another conversation about how you're still no more than twelve years old, Kyo?”

“No.”

“Are you sure?” her dad pressed, looking a bit helplessly bewildered. “Ah, damn it, I'm pretty sure kids aren't supposed to do these things at your age.”
“Sorry.”

Kou rubbed a hand through his hair, scratching at his scalp as he digested everything. “Alright,” he breathed and looked up again. “Come here, let me take a look at her,” he directed wearily. “You’ve fed her?”

“Yes, I made baby food,” Kyo answered, wasting no time in taking a seat beside her dad and passing over the sleeping baby into his far more experienced hands.

Looking after a child this young was exhausting and Kyo would love to go to bed, actually.

“Changed her nappy, too. Nawaki gave me a bag of stuff.”

“Gave’,” Kisaki repeated with a scoff, before she yawned, stretched and went back to her nap. Lucky dog that she was.

“Fine, he all but threw it at me,” Kyo corrected herself. “Point is, at least there are baby clothes for her.”

Tou-san hummed speculatively and carefully looked the little girl over. “Okay,” he said simply, passing her back over to Kyo. “I’ll go unseal the crib we used for you two. That way, if your Senju friend fails to show up tonight, we’re at least prepared to deal with it.”

Kyo was just relieved tou-san was helping, because she wasn’t sure what else to do right now.

Nawaki better give her a good explanation for this, or so help him, she’d be forced to take it up with Tsunade, and she was pretty sure none of them would like that.

Nawaki did not, in fact, show up that evening, and Kyo was woken up by a baby's scream at an unholy hour.

It was still dark out.

Genma slept through it without so much as a twitching eyelid, Kisaki ignored it once she'd recognized what the noise was, and Kyo dragged herself out of bed and into tou-san's room, even though she was pretty sure her dad was already dealing with it.

It was her fault they had a baby on their hands, so she should at least help.

“Go back to sleep, kitten,” Kou directed her softly, sending her a look over the baby girl's head as he rocked her gently.

“But-”

“It's fine, I've got it.”


Her dad murmured something about changing nappies in response, but Kyo was already trudging back to her soft, wonderfully warm bed.

She was way too young for this.
Waking up that morning, Kyo felt more bleary-eyed than usual, but she easily enough went to check on the baby before anything else. Making sure not to wake tou-san.

That done, Kyo got dressed, made breakfast and it felt pretty close to the regular morning routine.

All up until the baby started crying, that was.

Tou-san showed up shortly after, bringing the little girl with him, carrying her on his hip with absent ease.

Kyo went to wake up Genma, and then everyone sat down to eat.

“Have you thought about how to do this today, Kyo?” tou-san asked calmly when they were done, though he was still patiently feeding the little girl, one spoonful of vegetable mush at a time.

Kyo stared at him, flicked a glance at the baby in her dad’s lap, and then felt like smacking her face into the table.

Damn it, why did this have to be so-

Nawaki seriously owed her such a good explanation for this.

“I'll bring her with me to practice. I'll focus on fuuinjutsu today,” she said evenly. Because tou-san had work and could definitely not bring a baby with him.

And Kyo was the one who had gotten into this situation; Kou was just generous enough to help.

“I wanna come, too!”

“You have the Academy today, Genma,” tou-san said. “You can spend time with your nee-san and the baby after that, unless she's been picked up by then.”

...God, Kyo hoped the baby had been picked up by then.

What the hell was she supposed to do with a baby?

Jiraiya was going to have a heart-attack.

There was nothing for it other than to deal and hope for the best, she supposed, getting up to do the dishes and get the last few things in order.

In a quiet voice, tou-san directed Genma to help, so Kyo passed the first washed plate to her brother to be dried.

Crap, she needed to pack a bag with all the stuff they’d need if she was going to carry a very young child with her all day.

Rather than complain, Kyo set to it.

Before she left, Kou held out what looked like nothing more than a neatly folded up piece of cloth towards her.

“What's that?” she asked curiously.

“I'll show you.” And Kou shook it out and quickly and efficiently tied the thing around Kyo's torso, over one of her shoulders and then under the arm on the other side. “Isshun used it when you were
“...thanks,” Kyo muttered, and she had no idea how to feel about this. It just felt plain weird.

Her dad sighed, placed a hand on her head to gently ruffle her hair and then sent her on her way. “Have a nice day, kitten. See you tonight.”


Pausing for a moment once she’d reached the street, Kyo adjusted the sling and exchanged a look with Kisaki.

“Good practice for future puppies?” the dog supplied.

Kyo snorted, but didn't disagree.

Eventually wandering onto their training field saw Kyo very patiently waiting out Jiraiya's freak-out, and she clinically mused that he looked like he was going to faint, for a minute there.

“You done?” she finally asked.

“What're you- You can't just show up with a damn baby and then look at me like I'm an idiot for being shocked!” Jiraiya exclaimed, tugging on a lock of his hair with anxious energy. “What the hell, Kyo!?”

“I'm babysitting.”

Jiraiya produced a strangled noise and covered his face with his hands and a nervous laugh. “I hope to Kami you're babysitting,” he muttered under his breath. “Question is why you're babysitting right now.”

“Person who was supposed to pick her up didn't show,” Kyo explained shortly, adding a casual, one-sided shrug while she was at it.

Jiraiya laughed a bit more, sounding pretty frantic. “Kyo,” he all but groaned.

“Look, it won't impact you much; I'll just focus on fuuinjutsu today,” she reasoned.

Jiraiya took a deep breath, dropped his hands from his face and fixed her with a look. “Fine. Alright. Yeah, that sounds like a good idea.”

Kyo nodded and walked over to sit down on the side of the field, in the shade from one of the surrounding trees.

“Uh, Kyo?” Minato asked, trailing after her, looking like he had several pressing question on the tip of his tongue.

“Yes, Minato?”

“A baby?”

Kyo pursed her lips, shrugged, spread out the baby blanket and then sat down. “I was pretty
surprised, too, but it's not like I can just dump her somewhere.” She peered down into the sling, found the girl sleeping peacefully, so she decided to just leave her where she was right now.

Kyo brought out her fuuijutsu notebook and a pencil. Also a few scrolls for reference.

She hadn’t touched this project for over two weeks now, maybe she’d manage to make some actual progress?

Sometimes, getting distance whenever you hit a wall was the best thing you could do. Even if she had forgotten that for a while.

Kyo put her notebook on the blanket in front of her, still closed, and then grabbed one of the scrolls at the same time as Jiraiya called for Minato to stop 'lazing around'.

“Have fun,” Kyo sing-sang at him.

Minato scoffed, sent her a dry look, stuck out his tongue at her for good measure, and then got up to jog over to Jiraiya.

Aww, she'd been rubbing off on him!

Kyo grinned and then turned her focus onto her scroll, rather than the sparring match about to happen in the middle of the field.

Done with walking a turn around the training field, Kisaki wandered over to flop down beside her.

Kyo ran an absent hand over the dog's head, tugging gently on her ear, but she was already reading. Scanning the words and taking in the already familiar information.

In the presence of her team, everything else fell away and became unimportant.

She remained utterly engrossed in her reading all until something on her chest shifted and produced noise and Kyo blinked down on herself, trying to drag her mind out of the fuuinjutsu haze she'd fallen into.

“Right,” she muttered under her breath, feeling entirely long-suffering with herself. Putting her scroll aside, Kyo lifted the little girl out of the sling and held her to her chest instead. “What's the matter?”

She bounced the girl lightly.

Throwing a glance up at the sky revealed it'd been a few hours, so... hungry?

Just to be sure, Kyo lifted her up and cautiously sniffed at her hips.

Yeah. Nappy change, too.

Rather than sigh, because that really wouldn't help, she pushed away her fuuinjutsu things with her leg and then carefully put the girl down on her back in front of her.

The little girl was still crying, face screwed up with unhappy displeasure, small arms waving around angry little fists.

“One moment,” Kyo muttered, trying to dig out everything she'd need from the bag she'd packed this morning.

She hadn't actually changed a nappy in... a few years, before this had started, and she'd never been
entirely responsible for Genma when he'd been this small. Kaa-san or tou-san had always been around, even though she'd helped.

Didn't mean she didn't remember how to do it.

“Need any help over there?” Jiraiya called.

“Nope!”

“Good, 'cause you're not getting any from me!” he returned, sounding insufferably pleased with himself.

“I suppose I could just throw the dirty nappy at you when I'm done changing it,” she breathed distractedly.

She probably wouldn't, though.

When the little girl had been cleaned and provided with a fresh nappy, Kyo unsealed one of the bottles of baby formula tou-san had prepared while she'd packed the bag this morning, and soon enough had the girl eating happily. Holding the bottle herself and peering up at Kyo with wide eyes from where she was sitting beside her.

Getting nutrients and fluids.

Important stuff.

After that, the little girl was wide awake, so Kyo got out the plushy Genma had very generously donated to the baby, which was grabbed and almost immediately shoved into said baby's mouth. Where she chewed on it with the few teeth she had to work with.

At least she was happy and content, sitting on the blanket beside Kyo, peering around at everything with bright, brown eyes.

Excellent.

Kyo went back to her fuuinjutsu, though she couldn't help but throw an eye at the kid every now and then.

“I swear, you're nowhere near old enough for shit like this, Kyo,” Jiraiya sighed, crouching down in front of her to peer at the baby.

Baby girl giggled and lobbed the drooled on plushy at Jiraiya's face.

Kyo snorted and sent the kid an approving look. “She's clearly already an excellent judge of character,” she drawled. “Don't you think, sensei?”

“Oh, shut up,” Jiraiya huffed without heat and handed the plushy back to the girl, who giggled some more and clapped her hands.

Sitting down on the ground in front of them, Jiraiya amused both himself and the baby by making faces at her and playing peek-a-boo. To both of their obvious delight.

Kyo had to bite back a laugh, but part of her mind had gotten hung up on one particular word Jiraiya had said.

That she wasn't _old_ enough.
Not in body, perhaps, but...

“Holy crap,” she muttered blankly, feeling like a complete moron.

She snatched up one of her scrolls and all but tore it open in her eagerness to find the section she wanted. Soon enough, she groaned exasperatedly and used the still-rolled up part of the scroll to repeatedly smack herself on the forehead, because-

“Finally figured it out, didn't ya?” Jiraiya asked, sending her a proud grin.

“Yes,” Kyo laughed incredulously. “I can't believe I didn't think of this before,” she muttered, dropped the scroll to her lap and covered her eyes with her palms. “It's so stupid.” And she was grinning like an idiot.

The storage seal had to be an honest representation of herself and Kyo wasn't just Kyo. She'd been someone else before that, in the Before, and she couldn't believe she hadn't realised this when Katsurou-sensei had talked to her two weeks ago.

He'd all but stated it outright!

Kyo was older than her years, and she couldn't just ignore that. Not in her everyday life, and clearly not with her fuuinjutsu either and she'd just. Forgotten. Like a moron.

There was a delighted exclamation of baby babbling beside her and a scroll hit her thigh.

“Yes, thank you,” Kyo laughed, still feeling near enough high with the breakthrough.

Baby girl babbled back at her with a wide, gummy smile and then pulled herself over on her hands and knees, crawling energetically over to the closest scroll to toss that one as well.

...she was far more lively today than she had been yesterday, but Kyo still didn't have a clue what was going on with this child or how her day had played out the day before, so. It might not actually be so strange.

She just didn't know.

“You're far more active today than you were yesterday,” she told the kid, who babbled something back and continued crawling forward until she was sitting beside Kisaki.

She fell silent and eyed the dog intently, and Kisaki watched her back.

“So what's really going on, Kyo?” Jiraiya asked, turning to stare at her and looking like he was prepared to keep it up until she folded, no matter how long it would take him.

Kyo sighed.

Baby girl had reached out to grab a fistful of Kisaki's fur now and was tugging experimentally on it.

“I'm not actually sure.” She shrugged. “What I told you was true, but other than that, I'm pretty clueless myself.”

Jiraiya blinked and took that in. “Which sounds very worrying,” he commented.

“It does sound pretty weird,” Minato chimed in, trudging over now that he was done stretching. He was limping ever so slightly and he looked both tired and winded.
Jiraiya clearly hadn't gone easy on him, but Kyo knew their sensei well enough to know he wouldn't leave more than bruises. Which could be painful enough.

“Kyo?” Jiraiya prompted, far more seriously.

“One of my friends asked me for a favour and ran off before I could either decline or accept.” She gestured at the child. “So I'm babysitting.”

There was a strange look on Jiraiya's face. “Which friend?”

Kyo stared at him, trying to figure out what kind of reaction he was having and what it meant. “That's not really relevant for you,” she decided.

Jiraiya snorted and crossed his arms over his chest. “Oh yeah?” He eyed her speculatively. “Was it that Uchiha friend of yours?”

Kyo raised her eyebrows and fixed him with an unimpressed look.

Really.

If he thought it'd be that easy, then he had another thing coming.

Also, did he know her at all?

“Oh no, sensei. She brought out the pokerface,” Minato said lightly, smiling amusedly.

Jiraiya snorted and eyed both of them dryly. “Kids today have no respect,” he complained theatrically. “When I was your age-”

“Oh?” Kyo interrupted with overdone curiosity. “Does your white hair mean you're actually an old man, sensei? Do you need me and Minato to walk you home? Maybe you should cut back on all this physical activity; we don't want you hurting yourself. I hear a broken hip is terrible for someone your age.”

Jiraiya choked on air and he looked so thoroughly offended Kyo broke down laughing after a single look at his face, and Minato was barely half a step behind her.

“Kyo, can you stop laughing and save me from the puppy?” Kisaki asked wearily a while later and when she looked over, baby girl had managed to pull herself to her feet and was all but sprawled on top of Kisaki, seemingly trying her best to get the dog's ear into her mouth.

Kyo pressed her face to Minato's shoulder and tried to smother her helpless snickers.

-x-x-x-

Nawaki had failed to show up all throughout the day, so Kyo had done the only thing she'd figured was acceptable and had brought the baby girl back home with her. Again.

Tou-san hadn't exactly looked impressed, but he hadn't looked terribly surprised, either, when he'd gotten home.

Genma, on the other hand, had been ecstatic, and had been doing his best to try and help the little girl stand upright, trying to teach her how to walk, had read her several stories, and brought out half of all his toys from their room into the sitting room to share with her.

Kyo's little brother was adorable and she loved him so much.
It had kept him well occupied all afternoon.

Tou-san was giving both the baby girl and Genma a bath by the time there was a soft, very tentative knock on the door and Kyo sent the hallway a pensive look.

That better be Nawaki.

He had some serious explaining to do, and she wanted answers.

Before she went to answer the door, though, Kyo walked over to the bathroom to check on the rest of her family.

Tou-san sent her a speculative look, but didn't say anything.

When she opened the front door, it was indeed Nawaki on the other side, but the firm words on the tip of her tongue died a swift death when she took in his appearance.

Nawaki did not look great.

Judging from the bags under his eyes, he hadn't slept since she'd last seen him, and from the state of his clothes, she guessed they were the same ones he'd worn when she'd last seen him, too.

His posture also failed to tell her anything good.

Nawaki honestly looked like he was a hair away from making another run for it; he looked skittish.

All in all, he clearly wasn't in a good place right now, so Kyo didn't say a word, just took a step back and opened the door wider for him to come in.

She honestly wasn't sure he'd take the offer, but she could tell that if she pushed even the slightest bit, he would run.

Kyo eyed him evenly a second longer, and then turned around and walked back inside, leaving the door open behind her. Leaving Nawaki to make the choice on his own.

Meanwhile, she'd make some tea.

There were things she wanted to know, yeah, but not that desperately.

For all that she hadn't known Nawaki for very long, she was... growing fond of him. It was hard not to when he was so enthusiastic about their friendship, and he'd done an excellent job giving Genma that check-up a while back.

Kisaki produced a quiet huff-noise that let her know Nawaki had walked inside, but she didn't outwardly react in any way.

Just finished pouring tea, setting out the mugs on the table and then got the leftovers from dinner from the fridge, because Nawaki didn't exactly look like he'd had the presence of mind to get himself something to eat in the last few hours.

By the time she was done preparing everything, Nawaki had silently taken a seat at the kitchen table and was staring down at his tea.

Kyo put the plate with food down in front of him and took her own seat.

“...sorry,” he muttered.
Kyo shrugged. “I'm not really angry. Just confused and wondering if I've been assisting in a kidnapping for the last two days.”

Nawaki grimaced, grabbed his mug and drained the still-steaming tea in one gulp.

Kyo blinked slowly, tilted her head and refilled his mug.

Being a medic, did that mean he could heal the burn to his mouth as he was drinking the too-hot tea? It didn't sound impossible.

Besides. Better he drink tea than alcohol.

“She's mine,” Nawaki said hoarsely, voice breaking halfway through, before he covered his face with his hands. “Supposedly.”

Well.

That was... interesting.

Did that mean what she thought it did?

“Who's the mother?” she asked evenly, not sure what she was feeling other than calm and blank. Was there something specific you were supposed to feel in a situation like this?

Nawaki pushed the plate aside, placed his elbows on the table and pushed his hands up until he was gripping his hair. “I don't- I mean, I didn't know, and she broke up with me.”

Kyo eyed him steadily, wondering what the hell she was supposed to do.

She took a sip of her tea.

Waited for him to gather his thoughts.

Nawaki took a deep, unsteady breath. “Misa-chan said she didn't want to be involved with shinobi, that she didn't want- she broke up with me, and then I haven't seen her,” he whispered to the table.

Before yesterday, at least, Kyo deducted blandly.

“Did you use protection?” she asked, because at least there was cause for Nawaki to consider the possibility baby girl might be his. Not that it absolutely had to be true.

“Yes. Or- Yes. I don't know,” Nawaki slumped forward until he could press his forehead to the table. “I can't remember.” He was all but cradling his head now, as if trying to ward off a blow. “Nee-san is going to kill me.”

Kyo had to bite back a wince, because... yeah. No matter what, she couldn't see Tsunade taking this well.

“And yesterday?”

Nawaki almost whined. “Misa-chan walked up to me, and she was carrying- and she handed me the bag, and the b-baby, and said she couldn't do it any more. That she was tired. And that I had to deal with it.” He breathed for a moment. “I can't be a dad.”

“You clearly can,” Kyo muttered under her breath, and she still didn't really have any idea how to deal with this, or why she'd been involved.
Other than the fact she was possibly the first familiar person Nawaki had spotted.

“No, I can't, Kyo-chan,” Nawaki insisted desperately, raising his head to stare at her while he all but begged. “I don't know how to- what to do. I can't even take care of myself half the time, and oh, sweet Kami, my parents;” he moaned, sounding like he was in pain. “My clan. They're all going to kill me.”

Kyo sighed and drank some more of her tea. “You can't have been the first person to have had a—uh, ‘an accident.”

Nawaki made a sound like a kicked dog. “Kyo-chan, I can't—”

Kyo eyed him with a small frown, put down her mug, placed her elbow on the table and leaned her chin in her hand. “I bet a lot of people are going to be very unimpressed with you no matter what you do,” she told him frankly. “But as far as I've understood it, clan’s are generally happy for any additions and are you really telling me the Senju would reject the little one just because she was an accident?”

“...no.”

“So let's say she really is your daughter,” Nawaki flinched as if she'd struck him and Kyo couldn't help but feel mildly exasperated, “then you clearly need to do something to deal with it.” She paused, eyeing Nawaki blandly. “I get that this is a shock, that it sucks for you. But that little girl? She doesn't know anything about that, and by the sound of it, she just got abandoned by her mother.” She was silent for a second. “So what are you gonna do about it?”

Nawaki whined and buried his face in his hands. “I don't know,” he admitted, voice muffled. Kyo sighed. “Drink some more tea. Eat. I need to see if tou-san needs any help.”

She got up and wandered out of the kitchen, only to find Kou seated on the sofa, a thoughtful look on his face, arms crossed over his chest.

He had clearly listened in.

“Kids are both in bed,” he told her evenly.

“Thank you.” She walked up to him and pressed a kiss to his cheek, before she let herself collapse into a seat beside him.

Her dad shifted to sling an arm around her shoulders. He hummed. “Interesting development,” he mused, sending her a dry look.

Kyo snorted softly, because that was one way to look at it, to be sure.

They sat in silence for a minute, listening to Nawaki pull himself together and do as Kyo had said, slowly eating the meal she'd provided him with and drinking more tea.

The quiet sound of the teapot being put down on the table again gave him away.

Kou sighed and squeezed her gently. “You're a good friend, kitten,” he told her quietly and pressed a kiss to her hair. “You should go back in there.”

“Yeah,” she agreed. This wasn't something that would just go away on it's own. Definitely not for Nawaki, and he clearly needed some help right now.
And Kyo had apparently volunteered for the job.

Oh well.

She leaned her head against her dad's shoulder for just a second, and then stood up again, walked into the kitchen. Gave Nawaki a critical once-over.

“Feeling a bit better?” she asked, retaking her seat.

Nawaki nodded and scrubbed a hand over his eyes. “Sorry,” he sniffled, “it's just-”

“Yeah,” Kyo agreed. “You look like shit, by the way,” she informed him. “And I seriously think you need to be fully alert and coherent for whatever decisions you have to make, so let's go to bed.”

Nawaki raised his head to stare blankly at her.

Kyo stared back.

...and then went over what she'd just said and felt like putting herself out of her misery.

She was pretty sure she'd heard tou-san produce an incredulous noise, but she'd ignore that.

Kyo sighed and scowled. “You can take my bed and I'll sleep with Genma.” She narrowed her eyes on Nawaki, daring him to comment or make any kind of joke. “Then we can talk more tomorrow if you want.”

Nawaki blinked slowly, parsed through that and managed a small nod.

He honestly looked like he was ready to just lie down on the floor and sleep right there.

Instead, she steered the boy past tou-san, who was still seated on the sofa, eyeing them with an unreadable face, arms crossed over his chest once more, and all but shoved Nawaki into the bathroom.

Closing the door behind him, Kyo paused, pursed her lips, and with a glance at her dad, wandered into his bedroom.

To raid his closet for the second time in as many days.

“It's okay, right?” she asked when she came back out again, clutching a set of Kou's down-time clothes. They were old and worn and very comfortable. Definitely good for sleeping in.

They'd be a bit big on Nawaki, but it would be better than the alternative.

“Yeah, sure, kitten,” tou-san huffed and shook his head, sending her a fondly exasperated look. “You're one of a kind, you know that?”

Kyo blinked at him for a second, before she shrugged.

The whole reincarnated thing made her a bit unique, she supposed, but other than that? She didn't think so. Not really.

Nawaki was a friend, and friends helped each other. It was simple.

“Anyway, I'll go get changed while Nawaki's getting done, and then bed. I'm tired.”
“And you'll have another long day tomorrow, I'm sure,” Kou returned mildly.

Kyo grimaced.

Wasn't that the truth.

“Night, tou-san. Love you.”

“And I love you, Kyo.”

She smiled and went to get ready for bed.

When Nawaki tentatively walked into the room to join her, a few minutes later, he looked about as skittish as a fawn walking into a wolf den, and he looked around like he expected to be kicked any second.

“Here,” Kyo said, handing him tou-san's clothes. “That's my bed. Genma's sleeping over there, so try to be quiet, but he generally sleeps like the dead, so don't worry too much.” She smiled faintly. Nawaki looked very overwhelmed. “I'll go brush my teeth. Sleep well, Nawaki.”

“Yeah,” he whispered quietly. “You, too.”

-x-x-x-

The next morning, Kyo woke up shortly before Genma did, roused from sleep by the slight shift in her brother's breathing pattern.

Rather than get up, she remained where she was, peering drowsily at Genma's relaxed face, feeling pretty content.

She hadn't been woken up by unhappy baby screams during the night, which was nice.

She could hear Nawaki breathe deeply on the other side of the room, and she knew Kisaki had settled for the floor beside Genma's bed, what with the extra addition.

...tou-san had probably been right; this apartment was starting to feel too small for them.

Genma shifted, sighed, and soon after raised a hand to rub at his eyes.

“Morning, Genma,” Kyo greeted softly.

“Morn, nee-san,” her brother mumbled back, clearly still half-asleep.

He rolled over on his side and wrapped himself around her torso in an octopus hug and Kyo had to bite back an amused snort.

Another minute passed, and then Genma shifted to squint up at her. “I'm in your bed?”

“No.”

“...you're in my bed? Why?” He blinked owlishly at her, looking like he couldn't comprehend a reason for that to ever happen.

Kyo grinned. “I loaned my bed to a friend. He was really tired and he's feeling sad. Wanna get up? Let's try to be quiet so we don't wake him up, okay?”
“Okay, nee-san,” Genma agreed, voice instantly dropping to a whisper.

She wrapped him up in a hug and rolled to her feet, bringing Genma with her. Taking care not to step on Kisaki, who snuffled sleepily, Kyo walked out of their room until she could take a seat on the sofa.

Smothering a yawn with one hand, she turned her attention back to Genma when he tugged on her shirt.

“What?”

“Can we go check on the baby?” her brother asked, eyes wide and pleading.

Kyo stared back. “You know she's going to go home eventually, right? She won't be living with us from now on, Genma.”

He pursed his lips. “Why not? Why can't I be a big brother?”

Well. It was definitely too early to have this conversation, Kyo decided with a sigh. “Because she's got parents and a clan that are waiting to take care of her. We're only babysitting.” Standing up, she walked over into their dad's room.

Kou woke up the second she stepped over the threshold, but that was probably for the best.

He sent her a questioning look, but Kyo just walked up to the bed and crawled in, sliding both her and her brother in under the covers.

“I'd be a great big brother!” Genma insisted stubbornly, frowning at her.

“Yeah, you've been amazing,” Kyo said and pressed a kiss to Genma's cheek, and then turned to tou-san. “Please help me explain why we're not adopting the baby.”

Kou stared back, looking like he most of all wanted to go back to sleep.

“Tou-san!” Genma insisted. “She likes me. Why can't I be her nii-san? I'll teach her stuff!”

Kou sighed heavily and pressed his face into his pillow. Without looking up, he reached out to snag Genma with one arm and pulled him into a hug.

“It's too early for this, Kyo,” the man grumbled, voice muffled by his pillow.

“I know,” she agreed idly.

Kou snorted and raised his head if only to fix her with a dry, reluctantly amused look. “Okay,” he sighed, rolled over onto his back and pulled Genma with him until the boy was sitting on his stomach, frowning down on him. “Listen, Genma. That little girl has a family and everyone should get a chance to be with their family, don't you think? If you ask your nee-san really nicely, there's nothing that says it should be impossible for her to take you to visit her sometimes, though.”

Genma didn't look convinced. “That wouldn't make me a nii-san,” he huffed, crossing his arms over his chest. “Why can't you make another baby, then, tou-san?” he demanded irritably. “That wouldn't be so hard.”

Kyo pressed a hand to her mouth to try and smother a snicker, while Kou stared up at Genma with a blank face.
“Kyo,” their dad sighed. “I blame you for this,” he informed her blandly.

The laughter building in her chest got harder to try and bite back, so Kyo grabbed kaa-san's pillow and pressed it to her face when she couldn't hold it back any longer.

Ah, her stomach was hurting from laughing, and she couldn't really breathe, but she couldn't stop.

“Why's nee-san laughing?” she heard Genma ask, which didn't help.

The rest of them had long since eaten breakfast by the time Nawaki woke up and dragged himself out of bed.

Tou-san and Genma had both already left and Kyo had even gone on a quick errand earlier this morning to tell Minato she wouldn't show for team training today.

Her teammate was easier to track down than Jiraiya, and he was also liable to ask less awkward questions. Which was always a plus.

Not that Minato wasn't expecting a proper explanation once this was all over, but that was fine. She didn't mind.

“There's food for you in the kitchen,” Kyo informed him distractedly, busy drawing up a tentative new seal with the final piece incorporated in it.

She was just trying out different designs at this point, until she found the right one, but it was still something to do.

“Thanks,” Nawaki mumbled and shuffled off into the kitchen, only sending the almost-toddler on the floor a part wary, part panicky look.

Kyo had to suppress a sigh, but didn't comment.

Not yet, anyway.

Baby girl was perfectly content with the pile of toys Genma had loaned her, as well as Kisaki, who very graciously tolerated the drool and grabby hands whenever baby girl crawled over to 'pet' her.

By the time Nawaki was done eating, Kyo had packed away her fuuinjutsu things and was waiting for him, sitting cross-legged on the couch, holding her ankles comfortably.

“Feel better today?” she asked, watching Nawaki walk up to her to collapse into a seat beside her.

“No,” he replied miserably, staring at the child that might be his daughter. “It feels like a nightmare, but no matter what I do, I just won't wake up,” he mumbled.

Kyo eyed him, feeling deeply unimpressed.

She wordlessly punched him in the arm.

“Ow!” Nawaki jumped and flinched away from her, rubbing the spot she'd hit him and there were tears in his eyes.

Because yeah, she'd hit hard, and had aimed at a cluster of nerves, too, but it was nothing less than he deserved.
“What was that for?” he asked, blinking shining eyes and all but sniffling.

“Seriously, Nawaki. Stop feeling sorry for yourself,” she scoffed, feeling her patience stretching thin. “You've known about this for two full days now and what have you done? Yeah, I get that it was a great shock and it's not what you'd had in mind for yourself, but this is the situation.” She frowned at him. “And you need to deal with it.”

“But I can't, Kyo-chan,” he whined, wiping at his eyes. “I don't-"

“Stop it with the 'can't's' and 'don't's',” she ordered him shortly. “First of all, you need to find out if that child really is your daughter or not.” She pointed at baby girl. “But even then, you need to figure out what you want to do, Nawaki. This is a person's whole life and future you're calling a 'nightmare'. She hasn't done anything to anyone, and she didn't ask for this, either.” Kyo felt entirely unamused, but at least she had Nawaki's full attention. “So what are you going to do, Nawaki?”

The boy stared at her, and then turned to stare at the child instead. “I don't know,” he whispered miserable.

Kyo had to take a deep breath, because they weren't getting anywhere. “Nawaki,” she said slowly, trying to keep hold of the last scraps of her patience. “There are a few options, here. Lucky for you, you get to pick and choose.” She smiled humourlessly. “One, you dump her in the orphanage,” she began harshly, and was pleased to see Nawaki at least looked horrified at that prospect. “Two, you bring her to your clan to be raised by another Senju. Or three, you take responsibility for your mistake and do it yourself.”

“I have no idea how to raise a child, Kyo-chan,” Nawaki admitted weakly.

No shit. “I figured that out when you all but threw her at me and made a run for it,” she informed him tartly. “Doesn't change the fact that you can learn. It's not like you won't have help, or will be entirely on your own, either, so you really need to get a grip and do something. You can't just mope around and feel sorry for yourself forever.”

“But-"

“That kid doesn't have anyone right now. If you want to feel sorry for anyone, feel sorry for her,” Kyo snapped, feeling close to furious, all of a sudden, jabbing a finger at the little girl, who had fallen quiet and turned to stare at her with wide eyes at the tone of her voice.

Shit.

Instantly wiping the scowl from her face, Kyo sent the girl an apologetic smile and went to pick her up. Neatly saving her canine friend from more fur-pulling in the process.

“I'm so sorry, little one,” Kyo said softly. “Didn't mean to scare you. You tou-chan's just being an utter moron. Making a complete ass of himself, actually,” she crooned soothingly, pressed a kiss to the child's cheek and then went back to the sofa, re-taking her seat.

She glared warningly at Nawaki over the kid's head, because he honestly looked like he was about to throw himself away from them.

“You move from that spot, I'll turn you into a pincushion,” she told him evenly.

“Kyo-chan,” Nawaki whined, looking panicked, but at least he stayed put. “I can't-"

He cut himself off when Kyo unceremoniously handed him his potential child, setting her quite
neatly in his lap.

Which baby girl didn't appreciate, judging by the whining noise that quickly developed into full-blown crying.

Nawaki looked like he was about to have a panic attack.

“It's okay,” she told him firmly. “She doesn't understand what's happening, you just need to comfort her.” Nawaki stared desperately at her and Kyo had to resist rolling her eyes. “Give her a hug,” she directed.

“But she's so small, what if I hurt her?” Nawaki hissed in a half-strangled voice.

“You manage just fine with Kiko and Shinrin,” Kyo was unimpressed, “and you're a medic, Nawaki. Please use your brain.”

Very slowly and stiffly, Nawaki eventually did as directed and wrapped the child up in an awkward hug.

Rather than 'rescue' him, Kyo got up, went into the kitchen to prepare a bottle of baby formula, and then came back to see Nawaki doing a bit better.

He was just being stupid.

“Here,” she said, holding out the bottle towards him. “She's probably hungry by now,” she added, because it'd been a few hours since breakfast. “If you give it to her, she can hold it by herself.”

Nawaki, looking a bit pale and shaky, did as directed and the insistent crying stopped the second baby girl took the bottle.

Kyo sat back down beside them with a heavy sigh, feeling tired. “It doesn't have to be as complicated as you're making it, Nawaki. Either she's your kid, or she's not. Either you raise her, or you don't. You just need to make the choice and deal with the outcome.” She sent him a weary look, and for the first time, Nawaki looked like he was actually thinking about what she'd told him.

Staring down at the baby he was holding with a pensive, deeply thoughtful look on his face. 

Finally.

“...what's her name, anyway? You realise we've been looking after her for two days without knowing what to call her other than 'baby girl', right?”

Nawaki sighed softly. “I'm so, so sorry, Kyo-chan.”

“Don't apologise,” she told him blandly. “Just get a grip and try doing something sensible.” She flopped over and stretched out. “So? Name for baby girl? Your ex-girlfriend told you that much before she took off, at least, right?”

“Yeah.” Nawaki cleared his throat. “Her name's Aiko-chan.”

Oh, for fuck's sake.

Why did it have to be that name?

Kyo stared at the baby, still sucking contentedly on her bottle, and figured this had to be some sort of ironic twist of fate.
The universe was mocking her.

“Well,” she drawled. “Nice to officially meet you, Ai-chan.”

Nawaki produced a curious noise, but he was more focused on little Aiko, and maybe this wouldn't turn into a complete disaster after all.

Well.

She could always hope, because Nawaki still had to share the news with his sister, their parents and the rest of their clan.

Which was bound to be fun for everyone but the people involved.

Thankfully, Kyo had more than done her job as a good friend now, right? Right.

-x-x-x-
Chapter 102

The good thing about the whole mess Nawaki had managed to land himself in was the fact that no one gossiped about Kyo any more.

They were all far too busy gossiping about the Senju bastard and Tsunade's fantastically bad temper.

The woman was clearly less than impressed with her brother, but Kyo had anticipated that.

Less anticipated was Jiraiya's reaction.

“That was Nawaki's kid,” her sensei had told her, wearing a truly strange look on his face as he'd stared at her.

“Yep. Turns out he really is Ai-chan's biological father,” Kyo mused, because you'd have to be both deaf and dumb to fail to pick up on that, the way people talked.

The next Senju clan head siring a daughter out of wedlock? The horror. The scandal.

People were idiots.

“No, Kyo, seriously. That was Nawaki's kid.”

“Yeah, we already established that, Jiraiya.”

“He's sixteen!”

Which meant he'd become a dad at fifteen, didn't it? Ai-chan was about a year old.

Regardless, Kyo wasn't all that interested in all the drama anyway, and she was more than happy to stay out of it.

She was even feeling tentatively hopeful about her life maybe calming down a bit, in the boys-flirting-with-her department, at least, now that she was no longer the talk of the town, among certain kinds of people, but she'd have to wait and see on that front.

Kyo still had plenty of things to occupy herself with.

Surveying the room in front of her, Kyo walked up to the counter when the shinobi in front of her was done and eyed the Chuunin manning it.

“Yeah?” he asked, looking mostly bored.

“Uniforms,” Kyo told him shortly. Seeing as this was the Hokage tower supply room, it ought to convey perfectly well what she wanted.

She'd been putting this off for weeks -or maybe longer, she wasn't keeping track- and she was finally big and tall enough to fit into the standard uniforms, so she'd figured she should give them a try.

The Chuunin blinked and let his eyes trail down her body in a less than professional manner.

Kyo had to suppress the urge to scowl at him.

“I'm pretty sure we have your size,” he said with a small smile, but rather than go and get her the
damn uniforms, he leaned his elbows on the counter and met her gaze. “Gonna have to get your name and registration number for that first.”

...she took everything back. Men were morons and this was never going to stop, clearly.


It wasn't like- no wait, she had another option she could try here.

Feeling her determination firm up, Kyo shunshined out of the building and ran across the village. It only took a few minutes for her to reach her destination.

Kyo landed outside the warehouse, and -hoping Kaede was here- Kyo walked up to the door to knock.

A minute later, old man Kaede opened the door and gave her a quick, clinical once-over before he turned around to shuffle off in between the shelves.

“Wait a moment, Kaede,” Kyo said, stopping him before he could disappear out of view. “I'm not here for- actually, that, too, probably,” because she was still growing and it was ridiculous, but that wasn't her main objective, this time, “do you have regular uniforms here, too?” she asked, feeling tentatively hopeful.

Kaede stared at her, expression inscrutable. “Regular uniforms should be acquired through the tower supply room,” he informed her blandly.

“I know,” Kyo hurriedly assured him, “and I tried that, but the Chuunin,” she grimaced, “I just- you're professional, Kaede.” And this really shouldn't be close to making her cry, damn it. “Please?”

Why was her life so stupid?

Kaede didn't look particularly impressed, but he hadn't told her outright no either. “What about your ANBU uniform?”

“I probably need new ones of those, too,” Kyo huffed, metaphorically waving that aside. “Can you help me or not?” She probably wasn't above begging at this point.

Was it really too much to ask to want to go through your life without having people flirt with you at random moments?

Whatever happened to being professional?

Kaede scoffed derisively and turned and walked away.

Kyo slumped disappointedly, but well... she wasn't overly surprised.

Rubbing a hand over her face, she waited for the old man to return with her ANBU uniforms, at least, because she did need them.

Puberty was such a bother. She couldn't remember it being quite like this the first time around, but... then again, she wasn't sure it hadn't been like this in the Before, either.

She definitely knew people hadn't flirted with her like this as a teenager in the Before, to be sure, though.
It was just baffling and strange.

Kyo couldn’t wrap her head around it, even when she knew she probably just had to get used to it. Learn to ignore it.

She was brought out of her thoughts when Kaede returned, tossing not one but two stacks of folded clothes on the metal table beside her, fixing her with a stern look.

“Just so we’re clear; you didn’t get those uniforms from me, kid,” he told her casually.

Kyo turned to eye the standard Konoha uniforms stacked neatly in front of her and felt tempted to hug the old man.

“Thank you,” she breathed, feeling so grateful she might just cry anyway.

“Oi. You heard me?” Kaede pressed, eyeing her dubiously.

“Yeah, of course. What uniforms?” Kyo asked with a wide, relieved grin, swiping up the uniforms and sealing them up in one of her storage scrolls. She picked up her ANBU uniforms at a far more normal pace. “Thank you so much, Kaede,” she repeated, because honestly, she appreciated it.

Kaede grunted sceptically. “What about your body armour?” he asked, rather than comment, eyeing her like he was trying to figure out her angle.

“Still fits decently, but I’ll probably be back in a month or two,” Kyo informed him with a sigh. “So until then, Kaede.” She nodded at him and left when the old man waved her off, looking like he was glad to be rid of her.

It didn’t dampen her mood in the least.

Her new uniforms sealed up and tucked away, Kyo headed for the destination she’d had in mind this morning when she set out from home, Kisaki joining up with her halfway there.

“I thought you were just going into the tower,” the ninken bit out irritably, sending her an unhappy glower. “Stop doing this.”

“Sorry.” Kyo grimaced, because... yeah. “It was sort of impulsive, but at least I got the uniforms.”

Kisaki scoffed, but left it at that.

Kyo silently resolved to try and do better.

Reaching the Uzumaki compound, Hinata-shishou was waiting for them, and they soon enough settled down without preamble and Kyo got out her notebook.

Staring down at it for a moment, she took a deep breath and handed it over, trying her best not to feel like she was holding her breath.

The man in front of her sent her a steady look and opened the worn cover, quickly and efficiently flipping through the book until he reached her most resent scribbles.

Finding what would hopefully be her final design.

Hinata-shishou studied the seal with careful attention for a long minute and Kyo couldn’t help but
fidget while she waited.

She turned to exchange a look with Kisaki, who huffed neutrally. And then snapped playfully after Kyo's fingers.

Kyo smiled and went with it, trying to touch Kisaki's snout without being caught, while the ninken did her best to pinch her fingers with her teeth.

It was a good distraction.

All until Hinata-shishou cleared his throat. Reminding her where they were and what they were doing.

Kyo snapped back to attention, suddenly feeling like an Academy student caught doing something she wasn't supposed to do. She smiled innocently and Hinata-shishou smiled wryly back.

“You're certain this version is correct?” he asked, voice carefully neutral, eyeing her interestedly.

“You said it has to resonate, right?” Kyo retorted with a quizzical frown.

Hinata-shishou nodded. “With your chakra,” he added mildly.

“Yeah,” she agreed quietly. “And it does.” It was a very weird feeling, but not unpleasant. Sort of like an added buzz to her chakra? Like... she couldn't put it into words. As if the seal was part of her chakra to begin with?

Hinata-shishou eyed her thoughtfully and then glanced down at the seal again. Gently touching one finger to the centre part of it. The piece that acted like the foundation for the whole thing, and the part she had been missing before her breakthrough.

“Wisdom,” he mused pensively.

Kyo blinked. “No,” she objected, before she could stop herself, because that wasn't it. She cleared her throat. “It's not wisdom, shishou. It's age,” she told him quietly.

Hinata raised his head to meet her gaze, watching her solemnly. He looked unimaginably sad, for just a moment.

He didn't comment, though.

“Now we need to make it the correct size, and then, if you're still sure about this, we can go through with applying it to your skin,” he said evenly.

Kyo straightened up. “How long would that take?” Because she'd been working on this for months.

“Not longer than a week, but it depends on how much time you're willing to spend on it at a time,” Hinata-shishou said idly, having turned back to study her seal.

“Can we start right now?” she couldn't help but ask.

Hinata smiled amusedly and didn't look the least bit surprised. “Of course.”

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Kyo was so busy working on her seal she was pretty sure she lost a few days. Somewhere.
“Woah, okay, kitten. Slow down for two minutes, will you?” tou-san said, physically stopping her from leaving the kitchen table.

Kyo blinked at him. Glanced down at the hand on her arm, and then took in the exasperated expression on his face.

“What is it?”

Kou snorted at her and exchanged a long-suffering look with Genma.

Who was... scowling at her.

“You're being boring and mean, nee-san,” her brother informed her sullenly.

Right.

“It would be nice if you could spare us a few minutes of your time,” tou-san agreed idly. “Especially today,” he added, looking amused. “And then there's the fact I leave on an extended mission tomorrow, which is another reason I'd like to spend some time with both my children.”

Kyo stared at him. Tried to remember when she'd last spent time at home with her family, not doing anything specific, and was drawing a blank.

She sent Kisaki a look. Not that the dog felt like being the slightest bit helpful, seeing as she'd lied down again now that it looked like Kyo wasn't about to run off.

“So,” Kyo said slowly, turning back to Kou. “What did you mean with 'especially today'?” she couldn't help but ask. Because she couldn't think of anything else to say.

Her dad snorted, pulled her into a one-armed hug and said, “Happy birthday, kitten.”

Kyo froze.

What.

“Are we doing this again this year, Kyo?” Kou asked, still amused. “It's the same date every year.”

Kyo had to bite back a snort. “I've been busy,” she defended herself half-heartedly.

“We noticed,” her little brother sniffed, looking insulted.

“I just need to finish this thing, and then I'll have more time for you again, Genma,” she promised. Not that the boy looked all that appeased.

Kou sighed, patted her back and then let go of her. “I understand this is important, Kyo, but try to be home with time to spare before dinner today?” he requested wearily.

“Yeah. Of course. I'm sorry.” She tried not to feel guilty. “Do you know how long you'll be gone? You said you have a mission.” She really had been far too busy with everything else for a while now, seeing as she had completely neglected her family.

Her dad shrugged languidly. “We'll see,” was all he said, so... he didn't know.

She turned to eye Genma. “I'm sorry I haven't given you any attention lately, Genma. I'll try to make it up to you,” she promised.
Genma frowned at her for a second longer, before he nodded and held out his arms.


Kyo sighed and squeezed him firmly. “Thank you,” she returned. “I love you, too. Want to bake a cake with me tonight?”

Genma peered up and looked so damn hopeful it was threatening to break her heart.

Fuck, she'd been a crappy sister lately, clearly.

Having to suppress a grimace, Kyo instead smiled at her brother and pressed a kiss to his cheek. Then moved to press a kiss to tou-san's cheek, too.

“I love you both so much, I hope you know that, right?” she told them. “And I'm sorry for forgetting- I'll come home earlier today. I really have to go now, though.” She glanced guiltily in the direction of the Uzumaki compound.

“We know. Go learn something, kitten,” Kou urged her gently, smiling lopsidedly at her.

Kyo smiled back and got going.

Fifteen minutes later, she joined Hinata-shishou, Jiraiya, Minato and Aita. Blinking a bit at Kushina, but she was more focused on the two adults.

“Sorry I'm late!” she said by way of greeting. “And I'm also going to have to leave earlier today.”

She sent Hinata-shishou an apologetic look, because this was his time he was spending on her when he didn't have to.

“That's alright,” the man said placidly. “We're pretty much finished and you have a decision to make.”

Kyo had to bite back a snort.

Decision. Right.

She made this decision before she'd even started, so that would be easy.

“I haven't changed my mind,” she informed him evenly, and then almost got pushed over when Minato wrapped her up in a hug.

“Happy birthday,” he told her.

Kyo laughed, wrapped her arms around his torso and lifted him up as she hugged him enthusiastically back. “Thank you.” She grinned wryly. “Even though I forgot and tou-san had to remind me,” she admitted with a self-deprecating snort.

Minato snickered. “Didn't you say you forgot last year, too?”

“But it's just a day like any other,” Kyo complained and put him down again. Only to blink a bit at Minato.

...when the hell had she gotten this much taller than him?

He was almost half a head shorter than her! And she'd failed to notice.
“Congratulations on living long enough to become an official teenager, Kyo,” Jiraiya said with a grin, reaching out to ruffle her hair enthusiastically. “It's an accomplishment. Try to keep it up until you hit at least twenty.”

“I'll do my best,” Kyo informed him and tried to jab her fingers into one of the pressure points on his forearm to make him stop messing up her hair.

Only for him to dodge with ease.

Kyo pouted at him.

She'd need to work more on her speed, clearly, but she supposed that was a project to keep in mind for the future.

“Happy birthday, Kyo!” Aita chimed in, grinning at her and walking up to pick her off her feet and swing her around in an exuberant hug that made her laugh. “Happy eating of garbage for another year.”


Aita squeezed her gently, put her back on her feet and patted her head in a mock-condescending manner. “Of course.” And then he pushed her over towards Hinata-shishou, who had been watching them with a fond, patient smile.

“Happy birthday, Shiranui!” Kushina called from where she was sitting, adding a grin and a wave, before she went back to her fuuinjutsu studies.

“Thanks,” Kyo returned and then settled down in front of Hinata. “Anyway, you were saying?”

Jiraiya snorted and ruffled her hair again, walking past where she was sitting to go take a seat off to the side.

She frowned after him, tried to smooth down her static hair and then turned back to Hinata-shishou with a huff.

Kisaki took the opportunity to lie down behind her, now that things had calmed down and no one looked like they were about to hug her or pick her up again.

“You've thought about this carefully,” Hinata said, as if there hadn't been any kind of interruption.

Kyo nodded. “I have. I haven't changed my mind.”

Hinata-shishou eyed her intently for a long second, before he inclined his head. “Then let's get started.”

Kyo perked up. “We'll do it today?”

“We'll have time for one of them, yes, even with your earlier departure.” He smiled. “Aita will observe, and hopefully perform the second one.”

Kyo sent her friend a look.

“Hey, shishou's been drilling me ruthlessly on how to do this since you first asked about the tattoos,” Aita said. “Don't look at me like that, that's just insulting, Kyo.”
“So long as you don't mess it up,” she sniffed, only to grin at him a second later. “Okay!”

Aita attempted an offended expression, with limited success, and he abandoned it quickly. “Let's settle down and get started, I wanna learn how to do this thing,” he said, rather than comment.

“Which arm would you like to begin with, Kyo?” Hinata-shishou asked steadily.

Kyo shrugged and then took off the wrist holster on her right arm.

That done, she held it out towards Hinata, who grasped it gently. “Aita, the tools,” he directed.

Which Aita was quick to produce.

Everyone settled down quickly, Minato shuffling closer to get a good view when Hinata accepted ink and needles from his apprentice.

Kyo eyed the thin skin on the inside of her wrist, then the needles, and resigned herself to a long few hours.

She already knew this would hurt, but it would be worth it.

“Ready?” Hinata asked calmly, voice soft and collected.

“Yes, shishou.”

“I'll draw up your seal to begin with, and then get started. Try to hold still.”

Which was the only warning they needed.

Months of hard work had led up to this and it felt like a massive accomplishment to have reached the end.

Kyo smiled and watched Hinata-shishou work.

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“You okay?” Kisaki asked, sniffing at the bandages on her right wrist.

Kyo grimaced. “Yeah, fine. Just sore.”

Tou-san had left yesterday, Genma was safely with their grandparents and Kyo had spent the day getting her second tattoo. By Aita.

Which had taken longer, if only because he didn't have the years of experience Hinata-shishou had, but he'd done a very good job.

Hinata-shishou had thought so, too, and had hinted that Aita would be ready to complete his apprenticeship soon.

Kyo would have to think of a good gift to give him, when the day came.

“It's pretty cool,” Minato piped up, walking along beside them. “And it is pretty practical, too,” he mused, peering up at the evening sky.

Kyo smiled. “Yeah. Now I just have to wait for them to heal properly and then learn to use them.”

“Do you really think it'll be hard? They're storage seals.”
“Yeah, but it would be really nice if I could learn to direct a pulse of chakra to the seal without using my fingers, unsealing a needle that way.” Kyo had been thinking about this a lot.

Minato hummed, thinking about it. “Now what? You finished your project.” He sent her a look.

“I probably won't start another one right away; I have so many other things I need to work on,” she admitted. “But we'll see.” She smiled and reached out to take Minato's hand. “I'm not as gifted with fuuinjutsu as you are, genius.”

Minato huffed, trying to hide his embarrassment. “You're a prodigy, too, remember?”

“Urgh. Slander.” Kyo grimaced at him. “Come on, let's get going. Jiraiya threatened to continue with his brutal torture of us, so we better eat and get some sleep.”

Minato half-groaned, half-laughed. “First, he didn't threaten us, he told us we'd continue expanding our chakra reserves. Second, you probably shouldn't call it torture.”

“Just calling it like it is,” Kyo drawled. “Or are you saying you're enjoying yourself?”

Minato grimaced and sent her a look that looked almost resentful. “That's a stupid question, and I'm not sure I feel comfortable with you staying over after saying that to me.” He blinked his large blue eyes at her. “I thought you were supposed to be my friend, Kyo.”

Kyo huffed. “Guess I can stay with sensei, then,” she sniffed. “I can tell when I'm not wanted.” And she turned as if to walk away, only for Minato to tug her back with a laugh.

“Kisaki, help me out here, Kyo's being all unreasonable,” he teased with a grin. “Do you think it's the hormones? Sensei keeps complaining about teenagers.”

The dog snorted and eyed both of them amusedly. “Watch it,” she said.

Kyo snickered and enjoyed the time she was spending with two of her favourite people.

Now that she had more time on her hands again, Kyo made sure to train with Genma a lot, dragging Minato with her half the time.

Playing Hide and Seek with her brother like kaa-san had done with her was great fun for both of them, and Minato enjoyed it, too.

It even seemed to help with the stubborn dislike Genma was still maintaining towards her teammate.

The days Ashika joined them were just as fun, but perhaps a bit less productive. Regardless, Kyo didn't mind.

It was also an opportunity for Kisaki to teach her a thing or two about tracking, not to mention helping them work on their teamwork.

It was all around a good training exercise.

The kids still had the Academy, though, and Kyo and Minato had training, missions, and everything else going on in their lives.

Two weeks after tou-san had left, Kyo swung by ANBU headquarters to try and catch up with Hyena, hopefully get in some training, only to get a bit of an unexpected surprise.
“Scorpion!” Gecko called the moment he spotted her. “Bear wants to see you!”

“Okay?” she asked, pausing uncertainly. “Right now?” she couldn't help but ask, even though it was pretty obvious.

“Yeah,” Gecko huffed, most likely amused, though it was hard to tell. “He's in his office,” he directed, and then went back to what he'd been doing.

Which looked to be... hanging out with friends?

Giving a mental shrug, Kyo re-directed her steps and made for Bear and Kasai's shared office, instead.

She supposed Hyena would have to wait a bit.

When she knocked on the office door, Bear called her in almost immediately.

“I was told you wished to speak with me?” Kyo said by way of announcing herself, silently wondering if this would be another case like the recruitment-thing.

“Ah, Scorpion, I was wondering when you'd show up,” Bear said, and if she wasn't mistaken, he gave her a quick once-over. “Your seduction mentor is finally back in the village. Come with me, and I'll introduce you,” he said briskly and got to his feet.

Kyo blankly waited for him to put his paperwork away and then fell into step behind and slightly beside the man.

Her what?

Spending the walk to the Barracks trying to figure out what the hell she'd missed, Kyo didn't voice any of her many questions out loud, because... well, she didn't know where to even start.

Before she could reach any kind of conclusion, Bear stopped in front of a door, looking just the same as all the others, and Kyo was pretty sure she hadn't ever been in this section of the Barracks before.

He knocked.

Kyo didn't have time to feel anything other than blank before a mostly naked woman wearing her ANBU mask opened the door and leaned against the jamb.

“Hello, Bear,” she practically purred, looking like she was considering reaching out to snag the front of his uniform with her fingers.

“Spider,” Bear returned flatly. “I brought you your next student.” And he all but pushed Kyo at the woman.

Who cooed.

...what was going on?

Before she knew it, she'd been pulled into Spider's room and urged into a seat on the floor and handed a mug with... tea?

Yeah. Tea.

Kyo eyed it blandly for a second, and then focused back on Spider, who was putting away a few
things with quick efficiency, and then came to sit down in front of her.

There was a large, full-body sized mirror standing on the floor and leaning against the wall off to the side, which seemed pretty out-of-place in ANBU headquarters.

“It's always so exciting when a new little one finds their way to my clutches!” the woman said, sounding thrilled.

Kyo stared at her. And then took a sip of her tea, because she still didn't know what to say. Or do.

“Okay, here's how I usually like to do things,” Spider continued, undaunted by the awkward silence from Kyo's side of the room. “Masks off for lessons,” she said first, holding up a slender finger, “we're gonna have to ditch the clothes so I can see what I'm working with at some point, and you need to tell me very quickly if you have issues with anything.” She tilted her head, thinking. “We have a lot to cover, so prepare yourself for that. I'm not opposed if you want to take notes.” She cradled her chin with one hand, elbow resting in her other palm. “How are you feeling so far?”

“Surprised?” Kyo offered tentatively. “I didn't even know I was getting seduction lessons?” Though it probably shouldn't have come as anything like a surprise.

Spider laughed softly. “Ah, Bear dropping the surprise on you. How very like him.” And she was back to purring. “I'll make sure to convey your appreciation next time I see him,” she all but chirped, back to being oddly enthusiastic again.

Kyo blinked. “So, uh. Masks off?” she asked.

She honestly had no idea what to expect, here.

Spider nodded. “It's a good place to start. Seduction training is very *personal* and some level of trust is to be preferred.” She reached up to pull off her own mask and placed it aside without a hitch, and then turned to smile at Kyo. “Honesty is also important, here.”

She was *very beautiful*, was the first part that registered in Kyo's head.

Large brown eyes set in a symmetrical face, with long, shiny black hair that looked like it reached her waist.

Smooth, flawless skin and full lips.

Seeing as she was also wearing very little, Kyo could tell she had a body most women might be willing to kill for. Curvy, but still slim and lithe.

Removing her own mask, Kyo felt almost self-conscious.

She couldn't really live up to this standard, but, uh... this was clearly something Bear and or Kasai had decided, so she'd still do her best.

Spider's smile widened. “Look at that!” She reached out to cradle Kyo's face with both hands. “Fantastic,” she decided.

Um. “Thank you?” Kyo offered dubiously.

Spider grinned and shuffled closer, until their knees were touching. “Right, let's get started right away,” she said. “What are your thoughts on sex?”

Kyo blinked, and then honestly thought about it. “It's nice? Or it *can* be nice? Uh, I mean, it's just,”
She gestured vaguely with one hand and why was Spider still holding her face? “something you do with people? You like? Or are fond of?” Friends were to be preferred if you asked her.

Spider hummed. “Interesting,” she said. “So you’ve had sex then, I presume.” It wasn’t really a question.

“Once?” Kyo offered back, still feeling... mainly confused about this whole thing. “Wanted to get it over with,” she tacked on, because that was true.

A very slight wrinkle appeared between Spider's eyebrows. She pulled Kyo's face a bit closer to her own. “Rape?” she asked seriously, meeting her gaze straight on.

“No, But it came close?” Kyo answered quietly, unable to stop herself from phrasing it as a question. “So I figured I wanted to do it my way.”

Spider stared into her eyes a second longer and then relaxed with a nod. “Sensible,” she praised, smiling again. “I have a feeling you'll be very easy to work with. What's your name?”

“Scorpion.”

“I caught that part.” Spider grinned, the expression sharp, and Kyo hadn't caught a hint of this side of her before this moment. Like a lovely kimono that didn't show a hint of the blade hidden within its folds. “Your name, cutie.”

“...Kyo.” She hesitated a second. “Shiranui Kyo.”

Spider hummed neutrally, but didn't comment. “Let's talk for a while longer, before we do anything else,” she said, and picked up her own tea mug from the floor beside her.

Which reminded Kyo she also had tea.

“Okay,” she agreed softly.

“Do you know what seduction missions are?” Spider asked her pleasantly.

Kyo blinked and stared at her. “It's,” she hesitated, because was this some sort of trick question? “a mission where you sleep with someone?”

Spider smiled cheerfully. “Wrong!” she chirped. “It's a mission where you might have to try to seduce someone. Which means the spectrum a 'seduction mission' can fall on is very wide and varying wildly in difficulty and level of intimacy.” She took a sip of her tea. “Depending on the objective of the mission, there are many options you can choose between. And seducing someone might not even involve physical intimacy at all, especially if there are only civilian targets involved.” She paused. “But using genjutsu is something I advice my students to be very careful about, because that leaves a trace for other shinobi to pick up on. And if you try it on a shinobi, that can backfire very badly.”

Kyo tilted her head and considered the information she was being given.

This was all... very different from what she'd imagined.

You know, if you ignored the fact she hadn't really considered getting seduction lessons to begin with.

Had known it was a likely scenario in her future, but she hadn't actively considered what it would be
“What would be the different kinds of objectives one should expect on a seduction mission?” Kyo asked curiously.

Spider smiled at her, looking pleased. “Oh, I'm going to enjoy this! First lesson and you're already asking the good questions.” She shifted and made herself more comfortable. “Intelligence is the obvious answer,” she began frankly. “But there's also recon, assassination, infiltration, not to mention the rare mission to try and steal a bloodline.” The woman grinned sharply, showing off white, even teeth. “But those are in a whole different class of mission, and not just anyone will be sent on one, if one such mission ever does pop up. It's rare.”

“Right.” Kyo was trying her best to assimilate and digest all of this, never mind how interesting it all was.

“Then there's always the chance seduction elements might pop up on a mission that originally didn't have anything of the sort included, and being the team kunoichi, whatever needs to be done will in most cases be laid at your feet, simply by virtue of your gender.” Spider's smile was thin, this time, and there was something rather unsettling about it. “Seduction can be very effectively used to redirect attention, in many different ways.”

Right. That sounded like it all made sense.

“A lot of it is acting, emotional manipulation, figuring out how to affect the people you're targeting, without letting them know what it is you're doing, and knowing your own boundaries. You might not always be in a position to respect them, but knowing where they are is still imperative,” Spider lectured seriously. “Crossing a line you know about is a world away from stumbling across one you didn't even know existed.” She took a deep breath. “Right. Seduction work can be a lot of fun, and most of the ones who specialise in it enjoy it, but it's also got a rather dangerous side to it.” She eyed Kyo solemnly. “When things go wrong, it has repercussions. The mental scars a botched seduction mission can leave you with is nothing to scoff at, but there are Psych people in the village that specialise in helping you work through them.”

...right.

Kyo blinked. Picked up her lukewarm tea and took a sip, letting that rattle around in her head for a moment, and was grateful Spider gave her a minute to do so.

“So,” she said hesitantly when she felt she'd stalled long enough. “What are you going to actually teach me?”

Spider smiled at her. “A lot of things, and only part of it will deal with actual intimacy.” She held up a hand and counted on her fingers. “There's cosmetics, acting, learning how to move, how to read people, how to manipulate situations to your advantage, how to dress. This is a complicated field,” she grinned, “but the rewards are definitely worth it. And if you do it right, there's plenty of pleasure involved,” she purred, eyes going half-lidded.

Kyo stared at her, not sure what she was feeling, but okay. All of that sounded like it made sense. “I'm already pretty okay at reading people,” she informed her new... sensei?

“Excellent! It'll give us something to build on!” Spider clapped her hands together gently. “It's more than just reading people, though. It's also knowing how to use that, how to make them think approaching you was their idea. Knowing what a man or woman likes in a potential partner without talking to them.”
Which sounded complicated.

“I'm... very blunt?” Kyo offered awkwardly. She didn't think she was very good at manipulating people?

Spider nodded to show she understood, but didn't comment one way or another.

“Let's take today to get to know each other,” she said instead. “My name is Sarutobi Utako, I'm twenty eight years old. It's very nice to meet you, Kyo-chan!”

“Nice to meet you, too. I'm Kyo, I'm thirteen.”

Spider blinked at her a second. “Early bloomer, huh. My sympathies.” She reached out to pat her shoulder. “Now, let's start make all the men in this village regret it more than you.” And she grinned sharply.

Kyo was pretty sure she'd grow to like Spider very quickly.

She'd ended up spending all day with Spider, who'd mostly been asking her questions about her life, her feelings on certain matters and explaining any questions Kyo had been able to think of.

It had been pretty nice, and Spider had made the two of them more tea.

Didn't change the fact that Kyo was now starving.

So first stop after Spider dismissed her was the Mess Hall.

Kyo ate quickly, mind still buzzing with everything she'd learned and the prospective potential of future lessons, and she felt so wound up she didn't even know what to do with herself.

She was playing around with the idea of trying to find a sparring partner when she walked out of the Mess Hall, only to be all but handed one when she spotted Crow walking towards her further down the corridor.

With a wide grin, Kyo got a running start and leaped at him in a tackle-hug he very much didn't appreciate, judging by the metaphorical hissing and spitting.

“Oi! Let go of me, you stupid-”

“Let's spar!” Kyo interrupted energetically. “Sparring!”

“What- you can't just- *Let go of me, Scorpion!”* Kaimaru growled, doing his best to shove her away.

With a badly suppressed snicker, Kyo did let go of him, as asked, but only so she could duck around him and jump on his back instead.

“Oh, *FUCK YOU*!” Kaimaru snarled, pulled his tanto and tried to stab her in the leg.

Kyo shunshined off with a wild laugh and threw a senbon at her friend before she headed towards the closest training hall, knowing full well Kaimaru was right behind her, all but frothing at the mouth.

It had been a while since they sparred and hung out, anyway, so this would be fun!
“Let’s take a look at your tattoos, then,” Hinata-shishou said.

Kyo dutifully held out her arms for inspection, letting the man unwind the bandages from her wrists with gentle fingers.

The tattoos should have healed properly by now and it was now time for the moment of truth.

...what if they didn't work?

Kyo wasn't sure what she'd do, but she was pretty sure it would involve tears.

“Can I see?” Genma asked eagerly, crowding one of Hinata-shishou's sides, while Ashika occupied the other one.

“In a moment,” Hinata-shishou said, the picture of patience.

He removed the last of the bandages and studied the tattoos with intent focus, though he did make sure to tilt her arms in such a way it was easy for the two children to look their fill while he was at it.


Aita laughed. “Sure, the moment you're good enough at fuuinjutsu to design them yourself,” he told her, looking amused. “I'll even help you,” he promised, well aware it would be quite a few years until that would be even tentatively possible.

Ashika still looked suitably pleased and placated.

“I say they're ready to be put to the test,” Hinata-shishou said, bringing her back to the matter at hand. Quite literally.

“Right,” Kyo muttered, eyeing her new tattoos nervously, and pulled a needle from one of her pouches.

She placed it to the skin on the inside of her left wrist, directed a small pulse of chakra to the fingers pressing against the seal at the same time and watched and felt the needle disappear.

Kyo stared at the spot for a long moment.

“Well?” Aita prodded when she'd failed to say anything -or even move- for longer than he had patience to wait.

She blinked and turned to look at him, not sure what expression she was wearing. “It worked,” she said blankly.

Hinata-shishou produced an amused sound. “After all the hard work you put into it, I should hope so,” he said warmly. “Congratulations, Kyo.”

“Thank you,” she returned, still feeling somewhat caught up on... everything. Kyo turned back to stare at the black tattoos on her wrists. “Are you supposed to be able to feel it when you seal something?” she couldn't help but ask.

Hinata-shishou hummed. “They're part of you. That doesn't sounds so strange to me.”
“What does it feel like?” Minato asked, all but brimming with understated curiosity and eagerness, even though he'd managed to remain still and silent so far.

Kyo shrugged. “Weird,” she muttered, for lack of any better words to describe it. She rubbed a finger against her left seal. Would it be as easy to unseal the needle again?

Not taking her finger away from the black ink, another pulse of chakra and a thought saw the needle falling to the floor in front of her.

“Shit,” Kyo muttered, and quickly snatched up the needle before anything could happen. No matter how much of a long-shot it was, in this situation. “Didn't quite think that through.”

“It will take time to get used to them and to become adept at utilising them in the manner I believe you have in mind,” Hinata-shishou said, smiling proudly at her and Kyo couldn't help but smile back. “All you need now is plenty of practise.”

“Yeah,” she agreed.

“So everything worked?” Genma asked, looking between her and Hinata-shishou, who nodded. “Yay!” he exclaimed, throwing his arms in the air in celebration, Ashika following suit. “Nee-san did it!”

Kyo grinned at her brother and honorary little sister for a second, before she turned back to her seals. Testing the other one gave the exact same result, and she -once again- fumbled the needle when she unsealed it again.

Minato shuffled closer to her. Close enough he could reach out to wordlessly seal away his pencil using the seal on her right wrist.

Kyo snorted out a laugh. “I'm not a storage scroll,” she huffed with mock-offence.

“That's a weak defence at this point, I'm afraid,” Jiraiya drawled.

“You're much more practical and useful than a storage scroll, Kyo,” Minato piped in, the utter ass, smiling sunnily at her like he didn't have a care in the world.

Kyo laughed, unsealed his pencil and threw it at his face, making sure it hit in an utterly harmless manner. “Just you wait until I'm used to these things,” she warned with a small, involuntary grin.

Hinata-shishou chuckled. “You should be able to use them without touching your fingers to the seal every time, too,” he informed her fondly.

Kyo pursed her lips and glanced down at her left wrist.

Frowning with concentration, she directed a trickle of chakra to the seal... only for nothing to happen.

Kyo's frown grew, until she realised a pretty crucial detail.

There was nothing in the seal for her to unseal.

With an exasperated groan, she flopped over and buried her face in Kisaki's fur. “I'm hopeless,” she grumbled, squeezed her arms around Kisaki in a quick hug, and then sat up properly again and grabbed one of the storage scrolls from her poison pack. Got started on transferring things over.
She was gonna work on this until she got it, or so help her.

During team training the next day, Jiraiya first of all made sure both her and Minato all but expended their chakra reserves, and then decided to put her through quite the additional workout; sparring with him while Minato worked on his personal seal.

Her teammate was more determined than ever to finish it now that Kyo was done with hers, never mind that this was his second project.

“You've been slacking off a bit lately,” was Jiraiya's explanation for near enough killing her with taijutsu.

“What,” Kyo hissed at him, because they both knew well enough she'd been put on forced rest by her damn shrink!

That her shrink also happened to be Katsurou-sensei was irrelevant in this situation.

By the end of the day, Kyo was sprawled out on the packed dirt of the training ground, panting harshly and aching something fierce, and just the act of dragging herself into a seat to stretch felt like some kind of torture.

She felt like it had been a very good decision to break in her new uniforms this morning, because at least they covered all of her legs. She'd had to roll up the sleeves to her elbows, but that was fine.

“I hate you,” she groaned pitifully, eliciting a chuckle out of her idiot sensei.

“You'll thank me in a few years. You're getting better, but your taijutsu really needs more work. Can't have you lose to a pesky Chuunin every other match.”

“Will you let him talk about you like this, Minato?” Kyo grumbled half-heartedly. “And that's just unfair, because Minato's good at taijutsu. I don't specialise in it, and you know it.”


“Let's go a round of mock-combat and I'd like to see you look so smug after,” Kyo huffed. “Kisaki, bite him for me,” she added, flopping over with a pained noise.

Ow.

Her body hurt, and she was pretty sure she might have sprained something?

She didn't even know right now.

“Oi,” Jiraiya protested, while Kisaki sounded like she contemplated her options.

“This is good for you, though,” the dog finally decided.

Kyo whined petulantly. “Betrayed!” She flopped a hand at Kisaki, who was silently laughing at her. “Stabbed in the back!”

Minato snorted. “You didn't use any weapons,” he reminded her idly.

“It's a damn metaphor,” Kyo grumbled and finally sat up with a grimace. To stretch some more.

“Ow,” she complained.
Jiraiya snickered at her expense and walked over to take a look at how Minato was doing, which was more than fine.

Kyo would be busy stretching out her protesting muscles for quite a while.

When she was finally done, half an hour later, she'd just dragged herself upright, standing on her own two feet, when a familiar person appeared by shunshin right in front of her.

“Oh, for- What now?” she demanded crankily, but she didn't care to try and censor herself.

Hyena snickered, clearly finding it hilarious. “Hi!” he chirped, tempering his amusement enough to speak. “You have plans for the afternoon!”

“No, I don't,” Kyo returned, frowning suspiciously at him.

“Yes you do!” Hyena insisted. “Hello, dog!” he added cheerfully to Kisaki, who had jogged over.

Kisaki rumbled a greeting back and looked between the two of them. “More ANBU business,” she concluded wryly.

“Yes!” Hyena confirmed, reaching out to pick Kyo off her feet and throw her over one of his shoulders.

“Why,” Kyo deadpanned, but still felt too tired to try and do anything to protest the treatment. “I'm gonna end up nursing a grudge,” she muttered, more to herself than either Hyena or her team. “See you tomorrow, sensei! Minato!” she added in a louder voice, flopping a hand at both of them. Took a moment to elbow Hyena in the back. “I can go on my own!” she hissed at him.

Hyena dutifully put her down, only to move so she ended up on his back instead.

Kyo leaned her cheek against his head with a long-suffering sigh.

“Have fun, Kyo,” Kisaki told her, eyeing her solemnly. “Stay safe.”

“Yes,” she agreed, waved one last time, and then let Hyena run them both across the village without another word of protest.

Hyena snickered, even as he went stealth. “Not leaving the village this time, Scorpion,” he informed her quietly.

“That's good,” Kyo sighed.

Hyena brought her straight to one of the training halls, though, admittedly one she'd never visited before, and Kyo just about had time to feel severely annoyed, because did she look like she was in the mood for training right now?

Not to mention the minor detail that she wasn't wearing her ANBU gear, uniform, or even her mask.

Kyo slipped off Hyena's back the moment he stopped moving, and she was frowning at him.

Would have questioned him quite pointedly about what it was he thought he was doing when the door opened.

“Ah, you're finally here,” a voice said, familiar-but-not.

Turning sharply to eye the newcomers, Kyo felt her ire quickly be replaced by confusion.
“S- uh, Dog?” she asked, just about catching herself, because she couldn't call him 'sensei' right now, for obvious reasons.

It still felt very strange to see Katsuou-sensei in ANBU gear, though.

Kyo tilted her head, and then spent a second studying the other two people that had arrived with Dog. She was relatively sure she wasn't familiar with either of them.

She sent Hyena a pointed look. “You suck at explaining stuff,” she told him flatly.

Hyena snickered and reached out to pat her head. “You're not dressed properly, but that's alright.”

Kyo resisted the urge to sigh.

That wasn't the point.

“Why am I here? And what's going on?”

“Training,” Katsuou-sensei, or Dog, whichever worked, really, informed her, much to her displeasure.

She'd already trained quite a bit today, and she was tired. Felt wrung out and sore, and she was going to have plenty of bruises tomorrow, not to mention Jiraiya had made her expend most of her chakra already.

But rather than complain, because Katsuou-sensei never did these things without very good cause, Kyo unclipped her canteen from her belt, downed half the liquid inside, ate a rations bar, and then drank the rest of the water.

“Right,” she muttered when she was done. She eyed the empty canteen in her hand for a moment, then Katsuou, Hyena and the two additions, and sealed it up in one of her new seals.

Then she took a moment to actually look at the training hall Hyena had brought her to, grateful no one interrupted her or tried to start things before she'd had a chance to at least centre herself.

She had no idea what was going on, but that was irrelevant right this moment.

There was... sand. Everywhere.

Actual dunes of the stuff, and now that she wasn't busy with everything else, she properly registered how warm it was in here.

Right.

Kyo sighed, rubbed a hand over her face and finally turned back to her sensei.

“What did you have in mind?”

“Hide and Seek,” Dog said, voice lifeless, but still managing to convey a sense of amusement.

Kyo narrowed her eyes on him, took in the rest of the full ANBU team and- fuck.

This was gonna suck even more, wasn't it?

“You two can prepare yourselves for my eventual revenge, just so we're clear,” Kyo informed Katsuou and Hyena irritably, and then went full stealth without a word of warning, bolting the fuck
away, because shit, this would have been a challenge even fully rested, and she wasn't.

Urgh.

This day was the worst.

-x-x-x-

It'd been near enough a day now, she was pretty sure, and they kept chasing her around this damn training hall and Kyo was honestly tempted to just make a break for it.

Ignore whatever underlying reasons they might have, because she was tired. Her body hurt, her chakra reserves were starting to get alarmingly low, and the only water she could get her hands on was by converting her chakra into the liquid.

Which usually wasn't much of a problem, but she was starting to run low.

And this training hall was warm.

It was becoming increasingly tempting to try and poison her 'playmates' for every hour that passed.

Getting cornered in another ambush, Kyo bit back an ill-tempered curse and focused on nothing other than trying to escape them and get away once again, dodging and slipping out of reach of every single attempt to grab her, catch her, or otherwise make her day worse.

A faint shine of metal was the only warning she got before there was ninja wire around her left foot and leg. Before it could tighten beyond escape, Kyo relocated with a shunshin, gritting her teeth at the abysmal drain on her chakra.

What was the point here!?

Hyena came swooping in, tanto first, and Kyo twisted her body out of his way and then used his shoulder like a springboard to throw herself off and disappear into the sand dunes again.

It worked.

For about five minutes, before Katsuou-sensei bore down on her like an enraged demon.

Kyo did her best, but it had been a full day. Maybe more, and she hadn't been rested when they started and her stamina and reaction-time was suffering for it.

And the damn sand had gotten everywhere by now -she'd possibly be willing to kill for a shower- and her foot slipped, and that was everything Katsuou-sensei needed to knock her out.

Kyo woke with a quiet groan, feeling intensely disinclined to move anytime soon.

“Come on,” someone said, prodding her in the side.

Kyo tried her best to ignore him.

Her muscles were burning, and her skin felt gritty. She was probably covered in sweat and filth and all of her was hurting.

Ow.
Someone prodded her in the side again, and Kyo surged to her feet with an aggressive hiss, senbon in hand and aiming for the side of a neck before she could consider if that was really a good idea.

“Yeah, okay, she’s up,” someone said dryly, and Kyo found herself scowling blearily at an unfamiliar ANBU mask, and for a moment, she had no idea what the hell was going on, where she was, or what team she was with.

What mission was this?

Blinking slowly, Kyo tried to force her brain to cooperate enough to figure out what was what.

...Right.

Training, not a mission. There were sensei and Hyena.

Kyo eyed the hand wrapped tightly around her own hand, keeping the senbon well away from the neck she'd tried to stab.

Not feeling inclined to apologise, Kyo just slowly tried to pull her hand away, which the man let her, with an intent, assessing look.

Kyo collapsed back to the sand with a pained whine, until she'd flopped down on her back.

“I hate you. So much.” she mumbled, when Katsurou came into view, still wearing his Dog mask, peering down on her. “Both of you,” she added, barely legibly, to include Hyena, as well.

“You did pretty well,” Katsu-rou-sensei said, crouching down next to her to ruffle her hair.

It wasn't her imagination when it felt like she had half a bucket of sand in it.

Kyo grumbled wordlessly. “Hate you, sensei.”

“Yeah, you said,” he rumbled, amused. The asshole. “Come on, you need to be looked at by a medic and then take a long shower.”

And who's fault was that? Not Kyo's!

But still.

It was pretty nice that she didn't have to actually move by herself, seeing as Katsu-rou-sensei grabbed her arm and hauled her up until she was slung on his back.

She wouldn't have been able to keep herself up, and was perfectly content to leave it up to him.

Kyo was done.

She needed a long nap. And maybe proper food.

Hyena snickered nearby, though he at least sounded tired.

Hah, served him right.

He reached out to pat her shoulder, but said nothing, and Kyo was too tired to try and sign so much as a word.

Closing her eyes for a moment, she sort of missed what sensei was saying, but at least he wasn't
talking to her. Instead, Katsurou was addressing the two unknown men, and then they were walking.

Kyo drifted on the edge of sleep, and was only jarred back to full wakefulness when she was lowered down onto something semi-soft.

Blinking blearily at her new surroundings, Kyo took in what looked like a hospital room?

Ah, right. Tsunade had been helping establish something of a medic division in ANBU headquarters; she'd heard about it, but hadn't had cause to visit yet.

Until now, clearly.

Owl had apparently tired of having people run in and out of his office for him to heal them and had brought it up with Bear, who had taken it up with Kasai, so now they had this.

An infirmary, of a sort.

There was talking going on above her, but she couldn't be bothered to try and decipher it. That was someone else's problem.

Instead, Kyo went back to her well-deserved nap.

.

The next time she woke, she was sitting on Katsurou's couch, in his house, with the man himself crouched in front of her.

Wearing his usual down-time clothes.

Kyo blinked confusedly at him.

“'M gonna ask stuff later,” she informed him fuzzily. Raised a hand to rub at her eyes, only for Katsurou-sensei to stop her with a wry twist of the lips.

“You need a shower, Kyo,” he told her mildly. “I don't think you want to rub sand into your eyes. Will you be able to take one without falling asleep?”

Kyo frowned at him, needing a moment to process the question.

“'M fine,” she muttered and laboriously struggled to her feet.

If Katsurou hadn't steadied her, she might have fallen back down on the couch again, and he helpfully steered her over to the bathroom without a word.

“Let me know if she falls over or something,” sensei said, and Kyo frowned confusedly, before a familiar voice answered.

“Will do.”

“Hey, Kisaki,” Kyo greeted with a slow smile. “When did you get here?”

The ninken huffed and gave her a gentle nudge. “Undress. Wash. You stink, and you're filthy. Is that sand?”

Kyo contemplated that a second. “Yep,” she answered after a beat. And then pulled her shirt over her head, dropping it on the floor.
She was tired, this was sensei’s fault. He could pick up her clothes after her when she was done. And clean up whatever sand ended up on the floor.

That sounded like a great plan, so Kyo got to it.

Shower, and then she could sleep in an actual bed.

-x-x-x-

Kyo slept near enough for two days straight before she felt to be in any condition to tackle anything more strenuous than going to the bathroom, or making the trip to the kitchen for a meal.

Thankfully, Katsurou had been very helpful and supplied her with all the food she could possibly eat, and then sent her straight back to bed.

It was kinda nice.

Almost a week passed before she felt somewhat back to normal.

“You're just the worst,” she informed Katsurou, who smiled amusedly at her.

“So you keep insisting,” he drawled. “Now go,” he gave her a gentle shove in the direction of the door, “you have team training.”

“The nerve,” Kyo muttered, but easily enough got going, and she exchanged a dry look with Kisaki while she stepped into her sandals. “Has he told you anything?”

“No.”

Kyo sighed and supposed she'd have to wait until the moment sensei decided he was in a sharing mood.

She really wasn't appreciating the chakra exhaustion, though.

Meeting up with her team again was nice, but she made sure to squint suspiciously at Jiraiya, because he hadn't been entirely innocent in this whole thing, either.

“What?” He blinked at her.

“Just wondering if you'll try to give me chakra exhaustion again,” Kyo returned blandly, turning to Minato when he snorted.

“That wasn't really sensei, Kyo,” the boy said.

“Yeah, well, he didn't exactly help, either,” Kyo muttered under her breath before she sighed, deciding to just. Let it go. “What are we doing today?”

Jiraiya grinned and waved her over and showed her a big box of small balls. Almost like golf balls, but made of wood. And possibly a bit smaller?

Kyo leaned down to pick one up, eyeing it curiously.

“Um, what?” she asked, sending Jiraiya an expectant look.

“We need to get you proficient with those seals of yours!” Jiraiya declared. “Seal these up, and then the four of us are playing a game.” He grinned.
“What game?” Minato asked, having picked up one of the wooden balls, too.

“Kyo’s gonna do her best throwing these at us while we try to catch her,” Jiraiya said, looking pleased with himself, crossing his arms over his chest with a sense of smug satisfaction.

Kyo tilted her head, thought it over, and then started sealing up the balls with a shrug.

It sounded interesting, and might even be fun. So long as she didn't mess up too badly, that was.

“Let's get to it!” Jiraiya exclaimed eagerly, clapping his hands and rubbing them together, like this was the best thing he'd thought of all week.

“Sounds like fun,” Minato smiled, “try to actually catch a few of the balls, Kyo.”

“Oh, wow. You should think about what you say, Minato,” Kyo growled playfully and chucked one of the balls at his head, hearing it ping off his hitai-ate.

The boy snickered and stood up straight to stretch.

Kisaki huffed amusedly, licked Kyo's cheek quickly and shook out her fur, then stretched, too. Preparing.

Time to put herself to the test, she supposed.

“Come on, it wasn't that bad,” Minato told her, even though both of them were well aware he was trying to comfort her.

Kyo grunted. “Just dropped about half of them,” she muttered. Which would be more than disastrous in the field, with her needles.

A second could make the difference between life and death on missions, and fumbling her needles in a fight would definitely get her killed.

“You just need to practice more,” Kisaki said simply, as if it wasn't more complicated than that.

Kyo sent her a wry, reluctantly amused look. “Yeah,” she agreed. “Thanks for helping me,” she added, to both of them.

“Oi, what about me? Your dear old sensei?” Jiraiya huffed, reaching out to poke the back of her shoulder from where he was strolling along behind them.

Kyo hummed, pretending to think about it. “I suppose you have your good moments, too, sensei.”

Jiraiya produced an offended noise, but was cut off before he could say anything else.

“Kyo!” a familiar voice called, and Kyo turned to see Honoka jog towards her.

Smiling, Kyo raised a hand in greeting, because it wasn't often the two of them caught sight of each other around the village and actually had time to hang out.

The first time at the onsen had been really nice, but other than that, it had mostly been words exchanged here and there.

“Hey, Honoka,” she greeted her tentative friend. “You okay?” Because she looked a bit tense.
“Yeah, fine, are you busy right now?” Honoka said, dismissing her concerns without pause. “Wanna go to the onsen?”

Kyo blinked and tilted her head. “Sure?” This was... a bit more forward than she'd expected from Honoka, but it wasn't like she was complaining. “I'm done with training today, so,” she turned to Minato and Jiraiya, “see you guys tomorrow?”

“Yeah, sure. Have fun!” Minato told her with a smile, and then waved a friendly greeting at the other kunoichi. “Hi, Honoka.”

“Yeah, hi,” Honoka returned, adding a polite nod, but she was clearly impatient and distracted.

So with one last shrug, Kyo and Kisaki joined Honoka on the way to the onsen. A good, long soak actually sounded wonderful.

Honoka didn't really start talking until they'd arrived, washed and had finally settled in the hot pool, leaning back against the edge and enjoying a measure of privacy.

“So what's up?” Kyo asked, making herself comfortable and feeling pleasantly relaxed.

Kisaki was lying a small distance away, resting in the shade and keeping an ear turned in their direction.

Honoka smiled apologetically. “I'm sorry, I just- needed to talk to someone,” she muttered, rubbing one hand over her face.

“Hey, no worries.” Kyo shrugged, running her hands through the water. “I don't mind if you want to talk.”

“Thank you,” Honoka sighed softly, and then took a deep breath. “It's just- urgh, do people ever try to force you to be something you're not?”

“Oh yeah,” Kyo huffed. “More often than I'd like.” She shook her head and sent Honoka a look. “You?”

“You know how you told me you didn't really have any friends who are girls?” Honoka asked, sounding wry. “Yeah, well, I do. My best friend works at the hospital,” she muttered. “Known her my whole life, we started the Academy together. Graduated together.”

“Yeah? Sounds nice,” Kyo said, not sure where this was going or why she was being told about it.

“It is,” Honoka said, not exactly sounding enthused. “Lately, though,” she sighed, letting her head fall back to lean against the edge of the pool, cushioned by the towel wrapped around her hair. “It's all about boys this, boys that, talking about clothes and make-up, the gossip her friends at the hospital's tells her, and when I try to talk about training or missions, she looks all-” Honoka gestured vaguely with one hand. “I don't know.” She was silent for a long moment. “Like I betrayed her or something, just because I'm not the same.”

“That sounds difficult,” Kyo murmured softly.

Honoka sighed. “Sorry, Kyo. This doesn't really have anything to do with you, I was just, I don't even know. Hoping to talk to someone like me, I guess?”

Kyo smiled faintly and sent the girl a look. “I don't mind, I just feel like I can't really offer any input.” She shrugged. “I suck at talking about boys.”
Honoka snorted out a laugh. “Me too. And I get enough of that already. Do you want to talk training?” She sounded hopeful.

“Sure,” Kyo agreed, grinning just a little. “I recovered from chakra exhaustion just the other day, so I'm glad to do anything other than sleep.”


“Yeah,” Kyo agreed with a snicker. “But I wouldn't mind talking more about your friend either, if you want? Sounds like you need to vent a bit.” And since she clearly hadn't wanted to go to her shrink about it... Besides, this was what friends did for each other.

Honoka snorted, but visibly thought about it. “Nariko and her team failed their Jounin-sensei's test,” she revealed. “It didn't take long at all before she was snapped up by the hospital, seeing as her chakra control's always been good, but she was,” she hesitated, “upset. For a long time, after. Then she decided she wanted to become a medic, but lately, she says she's happy as a nurse and gets angry with me whenever I ask about her plans to become a medic.” Honoka frowned at nothing. “I don't really understand.”

“People change, sometimes,” Kyo said quietly. “Being on the active roster isn't for everyone.”

“Yeah,” Honoka huffed. “But she doesn't have to act like-” She frowned up at the sky. “It's not my fault,” Honoka muttered under her breath. “It feels like she resents me, sometimes.”

Kyo sent her a sympathetic look. “I'm sorry,” she said, because it was the only thing she could think to say that meant anything. “That's not your fault, though. Being sent out on missions is hard. It's not exactly like civilians paint it up to be, and it's difficult to explain to other people.” Not that she'd ever tried, but she'd thought about it, sometimes.

“Yeah,” Honoka agreed.

Kyo thought about it a moment, sending Honoka another look. “Hey, can I ask you a question?”

“After I dragged you here just to complain at you? Sure,” Honoka drawled, looking wryly amused.

“Do teenagers ever flirt with you?” Kyo blurted, because she would seriously like to know if that was normal.

Honoka snorted out a startled laugh. “Oh, wow, wasn't expecting that. Yeah, sometimes, why?” She grinned, just a little.

Kyo slumped. “Damn it, I was hoping that was just- a weird fluke or something,” she muttered. “The moment I got my boobs, guys have been trying to get in my pants,” she confessed huffily. “It's incredibly annoying and whatever happened to treating me like a damn person?”

“I know,” Honoka groaned, slinging one arm over the edge of the pool to lean on it, turning more towards Kyo. “Have any of them tried to tell you how to use your weapons yet?”

Kyo stared at her with incredulous horror. “What? No! Why would they-?”

“I had this one guy try to show me how to use a razor wire properly only to end up almost cutting off his own finger.” She smiled sharply. “It was definitely an unfortunate accident,” she added unconvincingly.

Kyo snickered, unable to help herself. “Holy crap, I think I'm in love with you,” she laughed.
Honoka snorted and used a hand to splash her with water. “Not interested.”

“Aw, are you sure?” Kyo teased.

Honoka tried to keep a straight face, but it lasted for no more than a moment before she cracked a grin. “Training?” she requested, looking far more relaxed.

“I’m trying to learn how to use these,” Kyo shared, showing her her new seals, and it was a very nice way to spend her afternoon, and they finished it all off by deciding to make it a regular occurrence.

-x-x-x-

Two weeks exactly after that weird training session from hell -which she still hadn't gotten any good explanation for, by the way- Kyo got a scroll practically dropped on her head before she could leave team practice.

Kyo frowned at the scroll, and then threw a glance in the direction the ANBU operative had taken off in.

Rude.

He'd barely stayed long enough to confirm he had the right person.

“Kyo?” Minato asked, watching her worriedly.

Kyo blinked and turned to him with a shrug. “Just a summon to some kind of meeting? Tomorrow morning.” She sent Jiraiya a look, but he was frowning like he wasn't sure what was up, either.

So... uh. ANBU related?

But the scroll listed a meeting room in the Hokage tower as the designated spot.

Kyo didn't know.

She was supposed to meet up with Spider again this afternoon, so she didn't really have time to dwell on it, either.

Spider was teaching her the art of make-up. In all it's various shapes and forms.

It was interesting, and Kyo definitely needed the lessons; make-up had never been anything she'd known much about, even in the Before.

She'd barely even used mascara, so this was all new, interesting information, and there was so much Spider could do with the stuff, too!

It was pretty cool.

With a sigh, Kyo rolled up the scroll and moved to put it in a pocket, was reminded of her new seals, and put it in one of them instead, still feeling something like glee at the action.

“You're grinning,” Jiraiya informed her. “You're still dropping your needles more often than not.”

“Shut up, Jiraiya, I'm working on it,” she snapped irritably back, because he was already well aware she was doing her best. Was helping her with it, even.

Jiraiya lifted his hands disarmingly in front of him. “Just stating the facts here,” he drawled, definitely
Kyo narrowed her eyes on him. “You're lucky I have somewhere to be,” she huffed, feeling annoyed.

With a nod goodbye at Minato, Kyo left, taking off to ANBU headquarters yet again.

She felt she'd been hanging around the place more in the last month than in quite a while, but it wasn't a bad change.

She'd actually sort of missed it. Spending time around other ANBU operatives like this.

Kyo loved her team, but it was just different. She wouldn't trade, for anything, but it was still nice to have both.

Now that she was in and out of headquarters so often, Kisaki had decided to take some time and spend it in the Inuzuka compound, but she'd have to swing by and inform her of the meeting tomorrow; her partner would want to know.

The following morning, Kyo and Kisaki wandered into the Hokage tower, making steady progress towards where they were apparently needed.

“You know anything about what it's about?” Kisaki asked, even though she'd already asked once, last night.

“No,” Kyo sighed. “You don't think I'm in some sort of trouble?” she mused. She was fairly sure she hadn't done anything to get in trouble for, though, but she still couldn't help but wonder.

Well, she'd just have to wait a few more minutes, and then she'd be told for sure.

Walking into the room, Kyo momentarily paused, taking in the people already present.

“Hey, Hirata,” she greeted the only one she actually knew and recognized. She walked up to him, sending the other two a furtive look.

Both men, quite a bit older than her, looking fairly experienced, and this was only giving her more questions.


Kisaki huffed and growled half-heartedly until Kyo reached out to absently pet her, running her fingers through her fur.

“Know what's going on?” she asked, because she was curious, damn it! It wasn't everyday she got summoned to a mission meeting in the Hokage tower.

Hirata slanted her with a look, and then his mouth stretched in a wide, amused grin. “It'll be a pleasure working with you again, kid,” was all he said, voice a deep rumble in his chest.

Kyo felt reluctantly amused.

A minute later, the door opened again and the Hokage walked in, followed closely by the Jounin Commander.
damn it, this was giving her all kinds of flashbacks. Unpleasant ones.

At least Katsurou-sensei wasn't lurking in one of the corners, this time.

Kyo was well aware it was pretty ridiculous of her to feel the level of alarm and paranoia she was currently experiencing, but it wasn't like she could control her emotions, or what she was feeling.

She could be professional about it, though.

“Wonderful, everyone is present,” Hiruzen said by way of greeting, touched a seal on the wall and effectively sealed the room.

Kyo blinked very slowly.

“You've all been carefully selected to accompany Takeshi on a diplomatic mission to Suna in a few days' time, and we will dedicate today to make sure everyone present is fully aware of what is expected of you, and work out any questions and or concerns you may have.”

Which all sounded nice and dandy, Kyo just had one small question right this moment.

If she had been feeling any less baffled, she might have felt self-conscious and embarrassed about raising her hand like an Academy student trying to get the sensei's attention.

“Yes, Kyo?” Hiruzen asked readily.

“Uh, Hokage-sama,” Kyo returned. “That sounds... great. But, um, what am I doing here?”

Hirata snorted out an amused laugh and reached out to slap her on the back.

Kyo scowled at him.

Seriously, though. What the hell was she doing here?

Hiruzen smiled easily, took a seat at the table in the room, leaned his elbows on the wooden surface and braided his fingers together in front of his mouth. “Suna has so far made it seem as if they are perfectly willing to agree to an alliance, which is the ultimate goal of this mission,” he nodded at them all, “and while I am feeling optimistic about it, it doesn't change the fact things can go badly. Suna's known for using poisons, so I felt it prudent to send one of my best poison experts along for the trip.”

Kyo stared at him, not sure what the hell she was feeling, or what expression she was wearing.

“Does that answer your question?” he added mildly, looking quietly entertained, and would it be possible to smack the Hokage? Just on the shoulder or something, or would his guard try to stop her?

Right, focusing back on the mission.

Kyo blinked. “Right,” she muttered, for lack of anything better to say.

“Also, before we get any further,” Takeshi spoke up, getting her attention. “Will this mission be a problem for you, Kyo?” he asked, eyeing her seriously, including Kisaki in that, as well.

Kyo frowned, not sure what he meant.

“We're going to Suna,” he added bluntly. He glanced down at Kisaki again, and-
Shit.

Kyo turned to focus on Kisaki, as well, to find the ninfen all but frozen on the spot.

With a tight, concerned feeling in her chest, she crouched down in front of the dog, raising her hands to bury in the fur on either side of her face. “Kisaki?”

The dog blinked and focused on her, and Kyo wasn't certain what emotion she was seeing in those yellow eyes, but it wasn't particularly positive.

Her ears were slowly but steadily folding back.

Rather than say anything, Kisaki's lips peeled back to give Kyo a very good look at her teeth, and she sent the dog an unimpressed look back.

“Seriously, we're gonna try to make friends, here, and if you can't do that...” she let the sentence trail off, because that would mean- damn it.

Kisaki growled.

“I'm just stating the obvious,” Kyo countered flatly, not discouraged. “You and I both know what would happen if you came with and tried to go after anyone, and I don't actually want you to end up dead.” Not to mention Konoha clearly needed this alliance to work. “It's up to you. Can you do this?” Kyo asked quietly.

Kisaki met her gaze for a long moment, a quiet growl still rumbling in her chest and looking more or less pissed off.

In the end, she turned her head away to basically glare at the wall, body-language screaming her refusal.

Kyo sighed and straightened up. “Then I suppose you'll be staying here for this mission,” she summarised unhappily.

Kisaki sent her a searing glare, lunged at her and then stalked over to the door, which Takeshi readily opened for her.

“Did you just bite me?” Kyo questioned incredulously after the dog, before she could disappear entirely out of the room, but Kisaki ignored her without a backwards glance.

Kyo turned to eye her thigh dubiously.

Ow. And also, these trousers had holes in them now. She'd have to mend them later.

She might actually be bleeding, Kyo mused blandly, experimentally flexing her leg.

Yep, that hurt.

“Well, that could have gone better,” she muttered to herself, and then turned back to the rest of the people present, to find pretty much all of them observing her.

Kyo stilled, and tried very hard not to let on how self-conscious she abruptly felt.

Takeshi sighed softly. “Leg okay?” he asked idly, gesturing at her to take a seat by the table.

“Yep, just bleeding a little. I'm lucky she loves me,” she returned, stomping down on her unease with
ruthless determination.

She could be professional.

“I’ll patch it up for you,” he offered with a small shrug when Kyo took a seat on one of the chairs, as indicated.

Kyo awkwardly sat still when the Jounin Commander placed his hand on her thigh and his chakra healed up the damage Kisaki's teeth had made.

So she was off to a great start on this mission.

Hirata looked extremely entertained, while the other two looked... unimpressed.

Not that she particularly blamed them, because this hadn't exactly been the best first impression she could have given.

Kyo bit back a sigh.

“How about you? This mission gonna work for you?” Takeshi asked softly while he worked on her leg.

Kyo blinked and focused on him, only to shrug. “Won't be a problem. They're already dead.”

Because the people who had killed Taku and Maki had died shortly after, and that was what it was. She didn't blame Suna as a whole for the war, for the way this world worked.

It had been a long few years since Taku and Maki had died, and nothing anyone did at this point would change a thing regarding it.

Takeshi patted her leg exactly once and stood back up without another word when he was done.

While the two of them had been busy, Hiruzen had been discussing what sounded like a few mission details with the other men.

Kyo stood up and wandered over to Hirata.

“What did I miss?” she asked quietly.

“Not much,” Hirata grunted, arms crossed over his chest. “This mission goes how most of them goes. Head in, protect the Commander while we're there, hope for the best and fight our way out if things go to shit.”

Which... didn't exactly sound optimistic.

“Kyo,” Hiruzen spoke up again. “I also picked you for your stealth,” he informed her.

She frowned minutely. “Will this be like the last mission?” she couldn't help but ask, not sure how she'd feel about that, because, well, weren't they aiming for an alliance?

“No,” Hiruzen said, putting those worries to rest before they could fully form.

“If negotiations fall through and things turn dicey, we expect you to try your best to get out and run back here to report the damage,” Takeshi said without a hitch, looking completely unbothered, even though it was his potential death they were discussing here.

Kyo stared at him and felt a cold shiver run down her spine.
She wasn't... very good at leaving comrades behind.

There were strangers in the room, but she couldn't keep the words back. “Last time I got those orders, I broke them,” she informed them quietly, sending the Hokage a look. She didn't regret it in the least and she wouldn't change it even if she could. But.

“We're aware,” the Hokage informed her dryly.

And what the hell did that even mean? That they knew but expected differently from her now that she was older? Or that they acknowledged it and expected her to act similarly again, just with their blessing? Unofficially, at least?

If it worked, then great; they got more of their people back.

If it *didn't* work, then they could blame it all on her and cite insubordination.

So... win-win for Konoha as a whole, in the worst-case scenario she was envisioning.

Kyo wasn't sure she liked it, but that didn't change things in the least.

Why couldn't people just *say* what they meant, and tell her what they wanted? What they expected from her?

Hiruzen and Takeshi continued the briefing and Kyo listened closely to every word. Memorized as many details as she could possibly retain, all the while trying to tell herself the tension running through her body was *normal* for this situation.

This kind of mission... it was natural to feel nervous, but at least Kyo wouldn't have to do anything other than stick close to Takeshi and pay attention to her surroundings.

Takeshi would stand for all the talking and negotiating and stuff. Kyo would just be a glorified secretary.

And if things went badly, then she had to somehow escape an enemy shinobi village, run across half of Kaze no Kuni and get back to Konoha as quickly as was possible without anyone finding her, capturing her or, you know, outright killing her.

Easy.

Excuse her while she had a minor mental breakdown in the corner.

“Any further questions?” the Hokage finally asked, she didn't know how many hours later, but it sure wasn't morning any longer. “Then you're dismissed. Prepare yourselves for departure at dawn day after tomorrow,” he directed, and then slanted Kyo with a look. “One moment, Kyo.”

Waving a distracted goodbye at Hirata, Kyo remained where she stood, eyeing both the Hokage and Takeshi with something that felt tragically close to suspicion.

They waited until the door closed behind the other three before they said anything, though.

“I realise that you have some reservations about this mission,” Hiruzen began, and Kyo was physically incapable of keeping back the incredulous snort.

“I'm sorry, Hokage-sama, but I'm-” she cut herself off with a huff and pulled a hand through her hair, trying to order her thoughts, “I'm thirteen. I'm a teenager. Barely. I feel like bursting into tears at random moments in my everyday life,” she told him frankly, too stressed to feel embarrassed or
whatever else she was supposed to be feeling right now. “This mission is incredibly important. Don't you think you should actually assign someone more, I don't know, more competent to it?”

“You're perfectly capable of seeing a mission like this through,” Hiruzen countered evenly, not looking particularly disturbed or surprised by her minor outburst.

Kyo dragged a hand down her face. “Just. So I won’t be infiltrating Suna?” she couldn't help but ask again, now that she had the chance. Just to be entirely sure.

“No. Konoha is genuinely interested in this alliance, though Suna's intentions are yet to be confirmed for certain.” Hiruzen smiled wryly, the expression holding little in the way of genuine humour.

“You'll go to try and prevent any kind of poisonings, carry any and all paperwork in those very nifty seals of yours,” he gestured at her hands, “and to use your stealth to Konoha’s advantage if negotiations fail.”

Kyo took a deep breath and thought that over carefully.

It didn’t sound too bad. If you ignored the 'going into the heart of enemy territory' part.

She sighed, already knowing she would go regardless of her feelings on the matter. “Alright,” she said.

“And you’re sure your feelings toward Suna won’t be a problem?” Takeshi pressed, eyeing her with careful attention. “They killed your team,” he reminded her frankly.

Kyo sent him an irritated look. “The war killed my team,” she huffed back. “The people that killed them are already dead, and yeah, they happened to wear Suna hitai-ate, but that doesn't mean much. Taku and Maki would be just as dead if they'd been from Iwa or Kumo. Ame or Kiri.” She shrugged, uncomfortable, because both the Commander and the Hokage were studying her closely. “I'm not nursing any kind of grudge against Suna.”

The Hokage sighed softly, eyeing her in a way she had trouble identifying, and she didn't have the first clue what was going on in his head.

“You keep surprising me, Kyo,” he told her absently, exchanging a look with Takeshi. “Any other objections you have to this mission?”

Kyo felt tempted to scowl like an unhappy toddler, but managed to refrain. “No, Hokage-sama. Will I be allowed to discuss it with Katsurou-sensei?”

“By all means, so long as you take care to be discrete. This is a highly classified mission,” he reminded her dryly, “and your time of departure isn't something we've shared with anyone who wasn't present in this room for the briefing.”

Great. Not that she was particularly surprised, but still.

The Hokage produced several sealing scroll, placing them on the table in front of him. “The paperwork I’m entrusting into your care,” he said by way of explanation. “I'd like you to seal it up right now.”

Kyo eyed the scrolls, mouth dry. “Yes, sir,” she murmured back and got to it.

It drove home just how serious this mission was, what was at stake and the pressure put on her.

Kyo methodically unrolled the scrolls, emptied them, placed the files and documents in neat stacks
on the table in front of her, and then began to seal them up, memorising what went where and what it was, making sure she'd be able to unseal it again without hesitation or issue, all under the careful observation of the Hokage and Jounin Commander.

It was a lot.

She wasn't sure if she was imagining it or not, but her tattoos felt almost strained when she was done, and experimentally pressing her fingers to one of them revealed it was hot to the touch.

Something to eventually ask Hinata-shishou about, she decided.

“Hokage-sama?” Kyo asked when she was done, looking up at the man, then threw a glance at Takeshi.

“I believe I don't have to point out how important your discretion about all of this is, Kyo?” Hiruzen gestured at the now empty scrolls.

“No, sir,” she said firmly and reflexively saluted.

“Until next time, Shiranui,” the Jounin Commander said, observing her calmly. “Make sure you'll be well rested.”

Kyo sent him a look, bobbed her head in a polite bow and then made for the door. She'd need a few hours to digest this, then talk to sensei and maybe try to track down Kisaki for a conversation, if the ninken would even let her.

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Chapter 104

Chapter Notes

October 22nd is the anniversary of when I started posting this story, but I -true to form- don't have the patience to wait another two days to post XD

Kyo made sure to show up in the designated meeting-spot early on the day they were to leave, with plenty of time to spare.

The sun hadn't risen yet, and it was very early.

She hadn't slept very well, but still felt wide awake. Knowing they were heading into an enemy village like they were, she couldn't claim to feel particularly surprised.

Kisaki had refused to speak a word to her since the meeting two days ago, but at least Kyo had asked sensei to try and talk to her while they were gone.

Or at least comfort her, because she knew Kisaki was just-

Kyo sighed and signed a quick, discrete greeting at Hirata, who watched her walk over, looking pretty relaxed where he stood.

“Pipsqueak,” he greeted, and he was never going to stop calling her that, was he? She'd grown to be decently tall by now, but he was still at it.

“Hirata,” she returned dryly. “Good morning.”

“Is it?” He grinned at her.

“I guess we'll see,” she muttered back. Jiraiya and Minato were of the belief she'd be away on an ANBU mission for the foreseeable future, Gemma knew even less than that, and tou-san still hadn't come back from his latest mission. “So,” she began slowly, “you know those two?” She nodded subtly at the other two on their team for the duration of this mission.

“Mm,” Hirata grunted. “Hyuuga Satoshi, Nara Ikki. Competent enough.” He shrugged, clearly not caring overly much. “Oi, Satoshi, Ikki!” Hirata called in the next second. “This is Shiranui Kyo. She'll be working with us.”

Kyo wasn't at all sure she preferred this introduction to just not getting introduced at all, actually, but she nonetheless nodded politely at the two men, and then sent Hirata an irritated look.

Which he clearly found amusing, judging by the smile.

“You are so annoying,” she informed him blandly.

Hirata barked a laugh. “I've been called worse things, pipsqueak.”

Kyo rolled her eyes, because that wasn't what she'd meant and he knew it. “Who needs to make a good impression on people, anyway,” she muttered under her breath, because she seriously doubted
anyone here had forgotten about the meeting two days ago.

Hirata slapped her back encouragingly. “Vastly overrated,” he declared. “Oi, Takeshi, old man! Let’s get going before the sun beats us to it, yeah?”

Takeshi, who’d just walked up to them, sighed exasperatedly. “Everyone ready?” he asked, rather than acknowledge Hirata's words. “Then let's go.”

Kyo, who had been eyeing the man curiously, wasn't prepared for Hirata to grab the back of her shirt and toss her over one of his shoulders.

“Hirata!” Kyo hissed as soon as she'd caught her breath. “Cut it out with the manhandling! What is wrong with you!? I can walk on my own!” And she shunshined away from him, because for fuck's sake!

What was with everyone and throwing her over their shoulders, lately? First Hyena, now Hirata? Hirata just laughed amusedly, sending her a wide, toothy grin.

“Hey, Commander, are you gonna be able to keep up? How long has it been since you left the village?”

Takeshi sent Hirata a dry look. “Are you going to give me problems on this trip, Hirata?” he asked mildly.

“Well,” Hirata drawled, drawing out the word, “that depends on-”

Kyo slapped him lightly on the arm. “We talked about this years ago; show some tact.”

Hirata glanced at her and shrugged, but thankfully left the subject at that.

“Let's go,” Takeshi said, which meant no one had the time to focus on anything else.

Kyo was well aware what this mission would entail, both for them all as a group and for her specifically.

She might not look forward to it, but she knew roughly what to expect.

They were a respectable distance from the border to Kawa by the time they stopped for the night, all five of them settling down and getting ready to rest and sleep.

No one had talked during the run, and Kyo had tried not to think about anything specific. She'd ended up thinking about the mission in front of her regardless of that, though, despite her efforts. Also trying to ignore the occasional glance from the Hyuuga and Nara on their temporary team.

She wasn't sure what to do about that whole thing, yet, and was hoping it would just resolve itself on its own.

She could at least hope, right?

After they’d made camp, eaten a rations bar each and downed some water, Kyo sank down beside Hirata, who was leaning against the trunk of the tree they were all perched in, high off the ground.

The man was both warm and safe and Kyo could do with a few hours' sleep, seeing as she hadn't
gotten much proper rest the night leading up to today.

“You good?” she asked the man, sending him a look, because she was basically huddled up to his side and she was well aware some shinobi had issues with that.

Hirata snorted and sent her a dismissive look back. “I'll wake you when my watch is over,” he said, rather than comment, which was a confirmation, really.

All but outright permission.

Kyo hummed an affirmative back, made herself comfortable.

Takeshi had taken a seat nearby, looking mostly occupied by his own thoughts.

The Hyuuga had his Byakugan activated and was clearly taking a thorough look around, while the Nara had already made himself comfortable and looked asleep.

Kyo doubted that was true, but he looked fully relaxed and unaware of his surroundings.

She had a feeling it was a dangerously deceptive impression and entirely intentional.

Sitting as close to Hirata as she was, she could feel his every breath, and the warmth he was radiating was nice in the evening chill.

It would have been nice to have Kisaki on her other side.

Things were silent and still, disregarding the animal life around them. Birds and insects, possibly a rabbit or some other small animal moving through the shrubbery down below.

Kyo felt uncomfortably aware of the fact she was the only kunoichi present, which wasn't much different from usual, and it hadn't been a problem before, but... she didn't really know any of these men. Was more familiar with Hirata than anyone else, and she didn't know him all that well, either.

Not really.

And they were all so much older than her.

The Nara looked to be the youngest one, disregarding her, and he still looked to be closer to his thirties than anything else.

The Hyuuga blinked and looked a little bit like he was coming out of a trance, for just a second, before he went to find somewhere to settle down, too, and soon enough, no one was moving or talking, and it was... Kyo didn't even know.

It felt tense, and awkward, in a way she wasn't used to.

ANBU missions never felt like this; she'd always felt included and safe in a way she suddenly didn't.

Her own team was different, too, for obvious reasons, because that was her team.

Still. She wasn't sure how to deal with this.

Kyo felt a brief, intensely strong desire to talk to Katsurou-sensei. Ask for his advice and just. It would have been so nice to have him here.

Have anyone here she actually knew and- But at least she had Hirata, she told herself firmly.
It could definitely have been worse, and she had more important things to worry about than the comrades at her back for this mission. Why the hell would any of them do anything to her? And besides; Takeshi was the Jounin Commander, and he'd always been professional. Since the first time she'd met him.

This would be fine.

She just had to focus on her job and push her feelings aside to be examined at a later date. When she was back in Konoha and preferably had some help from her shrink. Either of her shrinks.

Hirata shifted beside her and Kyo almost jumped.

He sent her an unreadable look that Kyo blinked back at, trying not to feel strangely guilty.

'Relax. Try to breathe,' he signed her blandly, and she couldn't read his face right now, and she wasn't sure it had all that much to do with the dark.

Right. She was supposed to rest. Sleep.

'Yeah,' she signed back lamely.

Kyo took a deep, deliberate breath and once more tried to settle down and make herself comfortable. Shifting so she was leaning more firmly against Hirata's side, leaning her head against his upper arm.

Determinedly closed her eyes and concentrated on Hirata's breathing. Every silent inhalation and exhalation.

She managed to count to eight before sleep claimed her.

They were still in Hi no Kuni, and the chances of someone attacking them right now were relatively small. Things would be fine.

It was getting progressively warmer and dryer the closer to Kaze no Kuni they got, and the large trees of Hi no Kuni slowly gave way for a different kind of landscape.

It got flatter, and outside of the immediate area around the plenty of rivers that had given this land its name, the vegetation grew sparser and coarser until it looked more like a savannah than anything else.

Kyo hadn't ever spent a lot of time in Kawa, had only ever visited briefly for an assassination a while back, so she was taking in the landscape with a small measure of curious fascination.

It was such a marked difference from the vast forests of home.

Takeshi signalled all of them to stop and make camp the moment they'd reached a point he apparently deemed appropriate for it. “We'll spend the night,” he said, still busy scanning the area, though he did send the Hyuuga a meaningful look.

Which meant he would no doubt scan the landscape all around for any potential threats. Which was nice.

Kyo looked around, herself.

It was far more open and exposed than she would have liked, but she wasn't about to question
anything. And it wasn't like they had a lot of options out here, either, and she was pretty sure this was a safer camp site than closer to one of the rivers.

Hirata clearly didn't have any compunctions about their location, though he did turn to fix Takeshi with an impatient look. “We’re not Genin, why the fuck are we dragging our feet?” he asked irritably.

“We want to arrive in Suna well-rested, Hirata,” the Jounin Commander said patiently. “And we’re meeting up with our Suna escort tomorrow, once we cross into Wind.”

Hirata scoffed, but said nothing else to voice his displeasure, which was probably for the best.

Right.

They were being escorted the last bit of the way.

Kyo couldn't help but wonder how that would go. There were so many ways something like that could be turned into an ambush, but then again... she had to assume Suna either wanted or needed an alliance, as well, or something like this whole mission would be a strange risk to take.

Allowing five enemy shinobi access to their village.

If they killed all of them before reaching Suna, that would be both strangely irrational and definitely spark a reaction from Konoha as a whole, to boot. And Suna wouldn't gain anything other than more conflict and fighting. For what gain?

Something like that wouldn't make a lick of sense.

With a sigh, Kyo joined the efforts of making a basic camp without a word, busy thinking about her job once they'd meet up with the Suna people.

Hopefully, it would be less tense than the whole Kiri mission had been, but she wasn't about to hold her breath.

When Hirata reached out to grab the front of her shirt and lift her off her feet, she wasn't taken off her guard or particular surprised, but she also didn't do anything to actually stop him. Despite how unimpressed she felt.

She'd been sticking close to his side since they'd left Konoha, so she wasn't sure if this was a reaction to that or not.

Maybe he wanted her to cut it out?

“You can't do this every time you're bored,” she informed him with a huff, frowning at him, stomping down on whatever else she was feeling right now.

Hirata shrugged, unconcerned. “Who says I'm bored?” he drawled.

“Your actions? The look on your face?” Kyo drawled right back. “Put me down.”

“Nah, I don't think I will.” Hirata eyed her speculatively and tilted his head.

“Hirata,” Kyo warned him when he flicked a look at the Hyuuga, “don't even think about it.”

Hirata grinned, but before he could actually throw her, Kyo swung up a leg to hook over his arm and used her other to try and introduce her sandal to his face.
If only Hirata hadn't used his free hand to catch it in a merciless grip, keeping her foot away from his head.

Kyo narrowed her eyes at him. “Just let me kick your face, asshole,” she hissed.

“No fighting, if you please,” Takeshi drawled, not so much as looking up from the scroll he was looking over. “Try to behave yourselves.”

Kyo was absolutely not spluttering. “He was gonna throw me at someone again!” slipped out before she could stop herself.

“Not with you clinging like this, pipsqueak,” Hirata said easily, and then shook her a little in a half-hearted attempt to dislodge her hold on his arm.

Kyo all but growled at him and doubled her efforts to force her foot at his face in something that would hopefully at least sting.

“I thought we were supposed to be professional,” the Nara mused, sounding like he was talking to no one in particular, but his dark eyes were cold and distant in a way she automatically disliked.

Also, was he saying that to her or Hirata?

Kyo's eyes narrowed speculatively, but she was distracted from her thoughts when Hirata abruptly let go of her shirt, letting his arm drop at the same time.

She twisted and prepared to tuck into a roll, but she’d quite forgotten the fact Hirata still had an iron grip on her foot, which meant she ended up dangling upside down rather than hit the ground. Like she'd been expecting.

Held up by the foot.

“...this is so incredibly undignified,” she mused with a heavy sigh, crossing her arms uncomfortably over her chest.

Hirata grinned and swung her back and forth a little, eyeing her interestedly. “You still have dignity? You really are a kid.”

“Oh, fuck you,” Kyo muttered, not actually feeling all that upset, even if this whole thing Hirata insisted on was mildly irritating.

Hirata barked out a laugh. “Katsurou would scramble my brain so thoroughly it'd drip out my ears.” He grinned with sharp amusement.

Kyo turned her head to blink up at him, distantly aware her face had gone blank. “I'm thirteen,” she felt the need to point out. The threat of what Katsurou would do to him was not supposed to be the only thing stopping him from being willing to-

No, you know what, Kyo wasn't even going to think about that.

“Are you going to put me down anytime soon?” she asked instead, ignoring everyone else present, because that was easier than dwell on whatever they were thinking about... uh, this.


Kyo just about had time to wonder what the hell he was planning next, when he swung her up, grabbed her and next she knew, she'd been thrown over Hirata's shoulder.
Trying not to wheeze - getting a shoulder roughly shoved into your stomach wasn't pleasant - Kyo's entire body locked up, because Hirata had a hand on the back of her thigh.

She rationally knew there wasn't anything inappropriate about it, because he was just steadying her, not even close to gripping high enough to be-

“I'm going to lodge a needle in your spine,” Kyo bit out rigidly, she couldn't stop herself. It was either that or go full stealth and hide and she couldn't do that.

This was a mission.

Hirata hummed, not so much as a hitch in his step but his hand shifted so he was holding on to the back of her knee instead of her thigh.

As if he had intended to do that all along, but she knew he understood why she'd reacted like that.

And that mean Hirata knew, too, didn't it?

Fuck, Kyo wasn't sure how she felt about that, and what with what he'd said about Katsurou and, uh... her age not being much of a deterrent about... Kyo didn't have the first clue what to think or feel.

Thankfully, she didn't have to mentally flounder for long before Hirata grabbed her again and dumped her on the sandy ground next to where Takeshi was sitting.

“Stay put,” he told her with a sharp grin and then wandered off to metaphorically poke the Hyuuga, who'd been eyeing them with a blank expression on his face.

Great.

Kyo huffed and shifted uncomfortably, tugging on her shirt and not looking at Takeshi.

“Here,” the Jounin Commander said a minute later, holding out the scroll he had been reading earlier towards her.

Kyo took it without a word and re-sealed it into her left wrist tattoo.

“Any questions for tomorrow?” Takeshi asked when she failed to say anything, or, you know. Look at him.

Kyo grimaced and sent him a brief glance. “Stick to your side, not talk unless addressed and be your human storage scroll,” she muttered. Also try to make sure no one poisoned the Jounin Commander without letting on that that was what she was doing.

Somehow.

Takeshi's lips twitched minutely. “That's one way to describe it,” he murmured and then sighed, letting himself fall back and stretch out on the sun-baked ground beside her, hands braided together behind his head. “Make them underestimate you.”

Kyo had to bite back a scoff, because people underestimating her seemed to be a standard experience, these days.

Not that it hadn't been like that before, but now it was for new, stupid reasons.

“I'll do my best,” was what she said, though, and Kyo remained in her seat beside Takeshi, watching
Hirata amuse himself by attempting to provoke the stoic Hyuuga on their team.

-A-X-X-

Ashika slammed the door behind them shut and turned to stomp over to the bed.

“This is stupid!” she declared hotly, face flushed and an impressive scowl on her features.

Genma bit his lower lip. “I'm sorry.”

Ashika whirled around to send him a furious look. “It's not your fault!” she snapped, and Genma flinched just a little bit, he couldn't help it. The next time he looked at her, Ashika's expression was stricken. “I'm- sorry, Genma, I-”

“It's fine,” he muttered and shuffled further into the room to crawl onto Ashika's bed. “I don't know how to make them stop,” he admitted and tried not to sniffle.

They’d just gotten home from the Academy and a few of the girls in their class had been pestering him about playing, and then Ayaka and Hitomi had gotten into a fight, and he just didn't know what to do.

Genma wasn't sure why all of them couldn't just be friends.

It hadn't been a problem at the start, but now some of his classmates just acted strange.

And not just them, but girls from the other class, too, and he didn't even know them!

Ashika shuffled awkwardly a moment, and then came to join him, flopping on top of him for a hug. “We'll try to make them stop,” she told him and wrapped her arms around him tightly. “I'll even ask Shuzo-sensei to help if it doesn't work,” she swore.

Genma sniffled and hugged her back. “Takeo won't stop teasing me about it,” he mumbled, feeling sad and miserable, and he didn't know what to do.

Neither nee-san nor tou-san were home for him to ask, either, and baa-san had just smiled at him and praised him for being popular.

Genma hadn't minded having lots of friends, but it was weird now, and he felt-

“I'll punch Takeo in the face,” Ashika huffed angrily. “We'll figure it out.”

“Okay.”

“Let's do the homework, and then we can go see if Kushina-nee won't play with us and teach us any interesting traps,” Ashika decided.

“Mm,” Genma agreed, rubbing at his eyes and taking a deep breath. “Love you, Ashika,” he told her.

Ashika's face went bright red. “...you, too,” she muttered back, not looking at him, and then grabbed his hand to drag him off her bed to grab their homework.

They'd go to the kitchen later, too, because both of them were hungry and Ren was nice. She always gave them a snack when they asked.

-A-X-X-
Kyo eyed the two teams of Suna shinobi and wasn't at all sure what to think. Or feel.

She just knew it was tense and there was an invisible divide between their groups that felt insurmountable. Like there was no way to cross it without sparking hostilities.

But even so, Kyo knew what she was supposed to do, so she remained at Takeshi's side, following him along like a silent shadow and tried not to feel self-conscious at the way she was examined and assessed, again and again.

She was the only kunoichi present.

The Suna shinobi wore uniforms that blended in with their surroundings, and had clearly been adapted to the desert they called home and their Konoha uniforms stood out like sore thumbs in comparison. Dark blue and green meant to blend in among trees, rather than sand and open dunes.

The sun beating down on them was also something of a concern.

The bright light and exposed nature was making part of Kyo feel all kinds of twitchy, and the constant attention wasn't making it any better.

She still did her best to remain outwardly calm, though.

“This way,” the man who was clearly in charge of their escort said, no-nonsense and down to business. “We'll travel until sundown and then make camp, and without any unforeseen incidents, we should reach the village tomorrow afternoon.”

“Very well,” Takeshi agreed pleasantly.

The Suna man nodded shortly and they took off, the five of them boxed in by their escort.

Kyo had to continuously remind herself of the fact it probably wasn't a threat.

At least not exclusively.

Biting back a sigh, she silently bemoaned this whole mission, because all of it was just painfully complicated and there were so many ways this could go wrong and turn into a disaster and she didn't know how to actually deal with it.

She was never going to complain about escort missions ever again. No matter how boring they got.

Poison specialist or not, Kyo was still wondering if there hadn't been anyone other than her available to go instead, because she felt woefully young and unprepared for this.

She also felt... incredibly alone.

By the time the sun was setting and they reached the cluster of rocks that was clearly their intended camp site for the night, Kyo was tired and had sand in several places she'd never wanted to have sand.

She was also pretty sure this mission was going to leave her with a noticeable sunburn, but that was close to the least pressing of her current concerns.

It paled in comparison to such inconvenient details as the fact she needed to pee, and she wouldn't be able to ignore it for much longer.

What would be worse? Wetting herself, or going off with Hirata to try and take a leak? With all these
Suna nin around?

She was still debating the issue when Hirata walked by, grabbed the back of her shirt and dragged her off without a word, casual as you may be.

“What?” she asked quietly when he let her go, and they were out of sight of the rest of their companions, but that didn't mean there wasn't at least one Suna nin keeping an eye on them.

Hirata sent her a brief, uninterested look. “Watch my back,” he said, already in the process of undoing his belt.

Right.

Kyo automatically turned to keep her eyes and attention on their surroundings, rather than on the man emptying his bladder a small distance away, and damn it, men just had it unfairly easy, sometimes.

Silently wishing she, too, could pee without near enough getting half-way undressed, Kyo shifted her stance and waited for Hirata to be done so they could switch places.

She could hear Hirata do up his belt again and had to bite back an uncomfortable sigh.

Time to do this, she supposed.

Hirata didn't look at her when she undid her own trousers, pulled them down and crouched down in the same motion and she'd done this too many times to count on missions, but that hadn't ever been with foreign shinobi just a few metres away and the Konoha/Suna alliance was barely out of the womb yet, so to speak.

Technically, they were all still enemies.

Which was just a great thing to think about while you weren't fully dressed and taking a piss.

Kyo tried to get done as quickly as possible, but there was just no rushing certain things, no matter how much she might wish it was differently, and would it be possible to invent some sort of jutsu for this?

Not that she thought that sounded particularly realistic, but a girl could dream.

Standing up and pulling her pants and trousers back on quickly the moment she was done, Kyo sent Hirata a look, to find the man staring at the—ah, wonderful. At the Suna shinobi perched on top of one of the rocks jutting out of the sandy ground, observing them, and Kyo was too tired to feel embarrassed.

“Done,” she muttered, and that was that. Kyo and Hirata wandered back to the rest of their team.

The less she thought about things at this point, the better, probably, and that was the theory she was sticking with. At least until she was back home in Konoha.

Kyo walked right back to Takeshi's side, but that didn't mean she wasn't aware of the looks and the occasional mutter following her every step.

“Fucking tree-huggers, can't leave home without bringing a woman,” one of the men huffed, before he was effectively shut down by his friend.

“Bed warmer,” another Suna nin grunted in an agreeable fashion, sounding like he was merely
stating a well-known fact of life.

Wind country was mostly desert. Fire country was mostly forest. Konoha kunoichi were only useful for one thing.

Ignoring the way her face felt hot, Kyo sank down in a seat beside Takeshi, feeling grateful for the quickly falling dark, because at least that made it easier to hide the humiliation.

“You should rest,” Takeshi told her and patted her on the thigh a few times, hand lingering unnecessarily. “We have a long day ahead of us tomorrow.”

Kyo couldn't help but send him a brief look out of the corner of her eye, because this was... new.

Then again, Kyo wasn't the only one aware of the Suna shinobi's general assumptions about her, so he might be playing into that.

She hoped he was playing into that.

Rather than say anything, Kyo tucked her head and nodded shortly, settling down beside him and doing her best to rest. Not sleep -she didn't think she'd be able to sleep even if she tried- but rest.

Attempt to relax.

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Reaching Suna felt like both a blessing and a curse, because while it meant she no longer had to be the only kunoichi in a group exclusively made up of shinobi much older than her -most of which weren't comrades- it also meant they were now in the heart of enemy territory.

They were so pathetically outnumbered it wasn't funny.

Kyo felt all kinds of twitchy and also like she desperately wanted to lock herself in a bathroom for a few hours to take a long shower and maybe cry for a bit.

Instead, she remained by Takeshi's side while they were escorted through the imposing stone corridor cut out of plain rock that served as the gates to the village.

Acting like all the unseen watchers weren't making her skin crawl.

Just a useless kunoichi here, nothing to see, don't mind me.

Kyo was clearly just decorative.

When they finally stepped out of the death trap waiting to happen, Suna visibly stretched out in a dry valley in front of them, surrounded on all sides by the same kind of rock they'd just passed through.

It looked like it'd been dug out, but perhaps not necessarily by human hands.

Nature could do amazing things.

All the buildings she could see were oddly round and made out of clay, and there were more shinobi than civilians out and about within easy view, but it wasn't like their arrival was any kind of surprise.

Oh, look, Kyo wasn't the only kunoichi around any more!

The few women she caught sight of looked far from friendly, though, which wasn't anything
resembling a surprise but that was better to focus on than the fact she felt like a fish in a barrel.

“The Kazekage's waiting,” their guide -of a sort- announced and took them down what looked like a main road.

They may be shielded from the open desert in here, but there was sand everywhere and people were dressed to protect themselves both from the sand and the sun.

The small glimpses she got of the alleys and diverting streets, there were wide pieces of cloth hung up between the buildings to provide more shade in places, and there were stalls practically everywhere.

Kyo could definitely imagine it as a lively place, full of life, but right now... everything was just tense.

As if the whole village was holding its breath.

It was difficult not to let it get to her, but Takeshi was right beside her and he was exuding a deep sense of steady calm.

Kyo focused on him, and knew that Hirata, the Hyuuga and the Nara, whatever they thought of each other, at least all had each other's backs.

They were led to the very centre of the village, where what could only be the Kazekage... building, was waiting for them, and it was oddly spherical. It all made Kyo think of a fat spider sitting in the middle of a web.

Waiting for unaware flies to get stuck in its trap.

She felt like there was a weight hanging over her head when they all stepped inside the building, no matter how irrational it may have been. Nothing happened, though, and their guide quickly and efficiently took them through the corridors higher up into the building.

No one stopped them or got in their way, but that didn't change that every single person in view -and out of view- kept their full focus on them and it was... unnerving.

To say the least.

By the time they finally reached the Kazekage's office, it was almost a relief to step into the room with the man they were all here to see.

No matter how terrifying he was, both because of his position and as a shinobi in his own right.

Takeshi calmly came to a stop before the Sandaime Kazekage's desk and tipped his head in a polite, cordial greeting. “Shui-sama,” he began. “Hiruzen sends his regards.”

“I'm sure,” the man behind the desk said, voice cool and even and he was an imposing, handsome man, Kyo supposed distantly, taking in the wild mane of dark hair and the sharp, narrow eyes. It was sort of overshadowed by the massive amount of chakra he was doing absolutely nothing to mute radiating off of him, though. “I believe you've brought me a scroll from the Hokage,” he added calmly.

It wasn't a question.

Takeshi held out a hand towards her and Kyo almost jumped and hurried to unseal the scroll in
question.

Only to fumble it and almost drop it to the floor.

Catching it last second, she handed it to Takeshi, well aware you could probably fry an egg on her face.

Hirata made a sound like he wanted to snort behind them and Kyo quietly resolved to kick him later.

You know, if she hadn't expired from acute embarrassment before that.

What a moment to be clumsy.

Kyo had to determinedly resist the urge to cover her burning face with her hands, though thankfully, no one was paying her an unreasonable amount of attention, focusing instead on Takeshi and the Kazekage.

The latter of which had been provided with the promised scroll and was reading it without further ado.

At least he seemed relatively straight-forward. For now.

“Kyo, the documents,” Takeshi said impatiently, and for a brief second, she panicked, because had she missed something? Had she tuned out of the conversation at the worst moment possible!?

“Which ones?” she forced herself to ask as calmly as she could, because she was pretty sure she hadn't missed anything. At least nothing that had been said, and she couldn't help but wonder if she was being punished for something.

“On the treaty,” Takeshi sighed heavily, as if she was being difficult, and it wasn't exactly something she could control when her body decided it wanted to intensify the blush on her face.

Great.

She hated this mission with a passion.

Kyo silently unsealed the documents in quested -didn't fumble them this time- and handed them over without a word. Or without looking at anything other than the spot of wall right in front of her.

It was too interesting to look away.

Part of her definitely got why it was a good idea to make her look incompetent and largely useless in front of these people, but that didn't mean she appreciated this. Any of it.

Would have been nice to have been told about it beforehand.

...maybe she should discuss a way to get over her poisoning hold-up with Katsurou-sensei when she got back to Konoha? Kyo was pretty sure she'd just found several volunteers to help her with it.

Kyo pushed those thoughts away from her to focus fully on the situation around her, because the Kazekage was rolling up the scroll now, putting it aside and focusing back on Takeshi.

“Very well,” he said. “Zan will bring you to your lodgings and negotiations will begin tomorrow morning as scheduled.” He gestured sedately with one hand at their guide, who stepped forward with a respectful nod aimed at his Kage. “Welcome to Suna.” He smiled thinly at them, and Kyo couldn't help but feel like that was a threat.
This was all off to a wonderful start, she couldn't help but feel as she obediently trailed after Takeshi back out of the Kazekage's office.

At least no one had attacked them yet? That had to count for something.

-x-x-x-

Kyo looked around at their temporary place of residence and wondered what, exactly, she was supposed to do now.

Nara Ikki had flopped down on the couch and looked to have fallen asleep, while Hyuuga Satoshi had taken a seat by the table, seemingly turning into a statue or something.

That posture was very correct.

Takeshi and Hirata were discussing something in quiet voices and Kyo... wandered over to the kitchen.

She opened the first cupboard she came across and took in the fully stocked shelves.

That was a lot of food.

Not to mention that this house seemed to be some fancy diplomat residence, or meant to host visiting nobility or something, so she supposed it made sense.

It was also a silent statement of how well Suna was doing, she supposed. Showing off their prosperity; look how much food we have, we can just throw the stuff at you!

Now, if it was actually safe for consumption or not was a completely different question.

Kyo tilted her head and eyed the tea on the lowest shelf.

“Kyo!” Takeshi called for her before she could reach a decision, making her jump.

“Yeah?” she asked, walking back out into the main room to eye him questioningly.

“Come on, we need to speak about tomorrow,” the Jounin Commander said, gesturing at her to follow as he turned away from Hirata to wander further into the apartment.

Flicking a brief look at Hirata, who was busy approaching the Hyuuga, Kyo was quick to follow Takeshi as instructed, even though she didn't know what there was to talk about.

She'd thought they'd covered everything essential before they'd left Konoha.

But then again, there seemed to be some impulse improvisation going on, so maybe he wanted to talk about that? Kyo had sort of figured they were all under observation, though, and were supposed to not draw attention to her being anything other than a Chuunin secretary?

“Commander?” Kyo questioned quietly when Takeshi led her into what was very clearly a bedroom, and part of her mind abruptly pointed out to her that this situation could turn weird and creepy very quickly.

...she wasn't expected to actually 'warm' any beds, right?

Someone would have told her if that was the case. Right?
“Wash up,” Takeshi gestured at a door she assumed led to a bathroom and then unclipped one of the pouches off of his belt, putting it on the fancy wooden desk off to the side. He sat down and took out several scrolls. “It’s been a long few days in the desert,” he added, not looking at her.

Kyo remained frozen on the spot a heartbeat longer, before she very slowly took a step in the direction of the assumed bathroom.

Slanting a long look at Takeshi, who looked like absolutely nothing was wrong here and this was all perfectly normal, she forced herself to walk across the room in a calm fashion even while her mind was running away from her a mile a minute.

So. This was an... interesting development?

Was it actually possible for her to reject the Jounin Commander right now if that was what was going on?

It probably wasn’t. This was most likely just a performance for their watchers, but a small part of her couldn’t help but point out that Takeshi wasn’t just her next highest superior, he was also in charge of this mission and his word was law.

If she fucked up this mission, she could be the reason Konoha lost a valuable ally and that... well. That would be all kinds of bad, and she doubted anyone would care even a little bit about her motivations.

Hah.

So, this was fun.

Sending Takeshi one more subtle look, Kyo walked into the bathroom and wondered if she was supposed to actually take a shower, or just. Pretend.

And there was also the question of if she was willing to make herself that vulnerable here, in Suna. Surrounded by not-so-friendly shinobi watching their every move.

Then again. She was supposed to be a Chuunin who was perhaps not so smart, and keeping someone's bed warm at night didn't require a lot of things.

Damn it, Kyo hated this whole everything.

Turning to send herself a distracted look in the mirror, Kyo took in her own blank face and her dust-covered skin.

Shit, she probably had to wash up, actually.

The 'stereotypical girl' cared about her appearance, and the kunoichi lessons at the Academy had always tried to sell the importance of looking nice even on mission. Making it sound like it was imperative to a Kunoichi's identity to remain soft and feminine.

As if some dirt and sweat could impact that in any way.

Kyo felt tempted to scoff just thinking back on it.

But yeah, back to the matter at hand.

Inspecting the bathroom she found herself in, Kyo concluded that there was a shower, though there was also a small wash basin? That looked far more sensible and actually useful than the shower.
Which made sense seeing as they were in the middle of the desert and water had to be a precious commodity out here.

Showers being common sounded like an outrageously wasteful thing, if you asked her.

Craning her neck to throw a glance at Takeshi over her shoulder -because she deliberately hadn't closed the door- Kyo clenched her teeth and crouched down to put her gear on the floor in a nice, tidy pile.

That done, she pulled off her shirt, mesh shirt underneath and then her bra and quickly and efficiently went over to the wash basin to wash herself off using one of the soft wash cloths that had been provided.

Wiping off dust, grime and old sweat felt incredibly nice, granted, but the rest of it she could have done without.

Kyo got done with her upper body, went on to wash her face and hair, and when that was done, dried herself off and pulled on a fresh bra and shirt.

Alright, halfway done.

Glancing at Takeshi again, who looked very busy at the desk, Kyo suppressed a sigh and undid her belt.

Pulled off her trousers, her pants, and quickly washed the rest of herself. Trying to look like she wasn't rushing.

Just going about her business, because this was absolutely not out of the ordinary for her.

Nope. Not at all.

Just another day on the job.

Pulling on clean pants and trousers, Kyo quickly sealed away her dirty clothes, put all her gear back in their appropriate places, and then walked out of the bathroom again, trying not to think about what was coming next, because... uh.

“You can use the bed while I look over everything in preparation for tomorrow,” Takeshi said dismissively, not so much as glancing at her. “I'll come join you in a bit.”

Right.

Because that wasn't terrifying at all.

Acting. This was all an act; a performance.

Holy fuck, was this how other villages treated their kunoichi? Was this something other Konoha kunoichi experienced?

Without a word, Kyo walked over to the bed, sat down on the edge and then saw no reason to not just get it over with, so she lay down and spent the next few hours staring up at the ceiling.

Kyo was pretty sure she’d been expecting missions to get at least a little bit easier to deal with with age, but her missions just seemed to get suckier and suckier.

Now, if she had to rank them, would this mission be better or worse than the Kiri mission?
Hm.

-x-x-x-
Chapter 105

Kyo had to very pointedly resist the urge to scowl at everything and everyone when she finally got to leave the bedroom she was supposedly sharing with Takeshi during their stay.

He hadn't put a finger on her, which was a relief, but that didn't mean it hadn't been awkward to share a bed with the Jounin Commander without warning.

Who was old enough to probably be her grandfather.

Tightening her hand in the fist it'd been in for a while, crumpling up the note Takeshi had supplied her with last night even further, she had to take a deep breath before rejoining the rest of their team.

So she was apparently Takeshi's bit on the side for this mission, and they'd play the angle to their full advantage.

She probably should have realised what was going to happen before they left home, but it hadn't even occurred to her.

One look at her gender, and most people were apparently going to assume she was sleeping with someone in power, clearly.

“Morning,” Hirata drawled at her. “Slept well?” And the insufferable ass was smirking at her like he knew full well she was seriously considering attempted murder.

Rather than show any of that, though, Kyo refused to so much as twitch, and sent him a small, tight smile instead.

“Adequately,” she informed him softly, and continued on her way to the kitchen without a hitch in her stride.

It felt like it was nothing other than stubbornness that kept her hands from shaking when she opened the cupboard from yesterday, grabbed the tea, put it on the counter and then went to put a kettle on.

She didn't care if this shit had been poisoned; she was just a dumb chick, what did she know about poisons?

Absolutely nothing, so there.

It was child's-play to seal up the crumpled note in one of her wrist tattoos while she prepared her tea, and Kyo was rather confident no one had caught her at it.

Note? What note?

Waiting on the tea leaves to steep, she scarfed down a rations bar, leaning one hip against the kitchen counter and listened to Takeshi and the men on her team exchange a few casual words.

It was very early morning, the sun just about above the horizon, but it wasn't like any of them would be getting any decent sleep during their stay and everyone and their grandma knew it.

Rations bar eaten, tea done, Kyo grabbed her mug and wandered back out into the sitting room and took a seat on the sofa.

“You okay there?” Hirata asked, collapsing in the seat beside her and slinging an arm over the back
of the sofa behind her, casual as you may be.

Kyo blew on her tea and slanted him with a clinically distant look.

So this was a game to play, huh.

“Perfectly alright,” she said easily, and then ignored the four men while she savoured her tea.

Which hadn't been laced with anything, as far as she could tell, which was a very nice bonus and said good things about their hosts.

Not that it would mean anything if any of the other food-items in the kitchen had been poisoned.

Hmm, would it be worth it to go through everything just to find out?

Depended on how the rest of their stay went, she decided.

Today would be spent on meetings with the Kazekage and his people, and Kyo would be busy all day taking notes and looking occupied. Which would be all kinds of fun, she could already tell.

Draining her tea, Kyo got to her feet, went to the kitchen to wash her mug and then she was using the bathroom, because it would just be typical if there wouldn't be much in the way of breaks throughout the day.

“But don't take too long,” Takeshi told her in passing, but Kyo didn't dignify that with a response.

Zan, the same man that had stood for most of the interactions with them since their arrival in Kaze no Kuni, picked them up and escorted them to the Kazekage building and it was straight to the Kazekage's office after that.

Hirata, Satoshi and Ikki were all provided with suitably comfortable seats in the waiting room outside the office, while Kyo and Takeshi were led inside.

Takeshi was provided a chair, while Kyo took up position beside and slightly behind him.

This, she'd been prepared for, so Kyo unsealed the wooden clipboard she'd been provided with back home, the generous wad of papers clipped to it and a pencil from her right tattoo, and was thus ready.

The Kazekage eyed her neutrally a moment -which was a little bit terrifying- but soon enough turned to Takeshi.

“My advisors and I have all studied the documents you provided yesterday afternoon,” the Sandaime Kazekage began neutrally, gesturing with one hand at the four elders sitting silently by the wall off to the side behind him.

The conversation built off on that, and Kyo focused intently on every word that was being said, as well as everything else that was going on in the room.

If things turned to shit, it would be her job to signal the rest of the team.

But that was only in the worst case scenario, and other than that, she truly was here as a secretary.

Which, Kyo wasn't sure how to feel about, mostly because she was physically incapable of taking notes.
It was a persistent problem that had followed her from the Before, clearly.

Luckily, she was very good at listening -so long as she didn’t try to take notes at the same time- so Kyo kept her pencil busy doodling on her papers while she committed every single thing to memory to be carefully written down later tonight.

Takeshi got a half-decent portrait, though you didn’t see much of his face.

And four hours in, the Kazekage had gotten one, too. As well as the advisors.

It was all interspersed with plenty of cartoonish flowers, plants, several dogs as well as a few trees. A sun over a few desert dunes, and when she began to get hungry, food began to join in.

Kyo honestly wasn’t paying too close attention to what her pencil was doing, far more occupied with the meeting itself.

This was all incredibly important, and they were discussing everything from border patrols, mission protocol for all kinds of situations, as well as terms for the alliance overall.

Trade deals.

Kyo had thought highly of Takeshi already before this mission, but now she also felt he was incredibly competent and his job must be really hard.

It was more than obvious he was acting as Hiruzen’s envoy, here, and she wasn’t jealous of him in the slightest.

“Very well, I think that’s enough for one day,” the Kazekage concluded in a manner that felt somewhat abrupt. “We will continue tomorrow morning where we’ve left off, and rehash a few things once we’ve gotten a chance to discuss matters between ourselves.”

Which wouldn’t work for Takeshi, but sure.

“Sounds more than reasonable, Shui-sama,” Takeshi agreed with a nod, getting to his feet. “A Kage’s schedule is very busy. Thank you for setting aside enough time to give this the attention it deserves.”

“Just so,” the Kazekage said neutrally, offering a minimal nod back.

“Come along, Kyo,” Takeshi said with one last nod and then walked across the office towards the doors, Kyo keeping close at his heels.

She’d sealed away her clipboard before they’d left the room, and Hirata, Satoshi and Ikki all surged to their feet the moment they caught sight of them.

Zan was also present.

“I’ve been instructed to offer all of you a chance to enjoy traditional Wind Country cooking in one of our excellent restaurants, if it would please you,” the man said, directing his words at Takeshi.

“That’s very hospitable of you and we gladly accept.”

Zan inclined his head and led them off.

Kyo had to bite back a sigh, because this was all just awfully stiff and almost tedious in how cautious everyone was.
It had only been a day, but she was already sick and tired of it, and she was fairly sure she wouldn't be able to keep up the levels of stressed paranoia for the entirety of their stay.

She had honestly already started to become numb to it. The stress.

All the crap flung her way.

She'd just do her job to the best of her ability and deal with whatever happened. That usually worked for her.

The restaurant they'd been taken to looked like it usually was a rather popular place, all things considered.

Right this moment, it was mostly deserted, though.

The waiting staff looked nervous and talked as little as possible and was quick and efficient about their job.

It was. Tense.

Kyo eyed all the men around the table and took a sip of whatever drink they'd all been provided with.

Zan and her were the only ones to have touched it.

It was good, though. Pleasantly cold, it tasted rather sweet, almost fruity, and it worked very well to quench her thirst.

Kyo also couldn't feel so much as a hint of the telltale signs of poison, known to her or not, so after three sips and several minute's wait, she switched out her cup with Hirata's, not so much as blinking or looking away from the paintings she was examining.

The clay walls of the restaurant had been decorated very nicely. Rough brush strokes that conveyed a lot of movement.

She had a feeling Hyena would have appreciated the art a lot.

She could feel Hirata staring at her, but she paid him no mind, and after a moment longer, she could see him slowly trying his drink out of the corner of her eye.

Wonderful! Now she just had to hope she'd gotten this right and there weren't any slow-acting poisons involved.

Kyo was fairly confident she'd manage to pick out if not the taste, then the feel of a poison, though.

Was that arrogant of her?

She considered the question while she drank another few mouthfuls of what had originally been Hirata's drink, and then switched it out with Takeshi's when she'd deemed it safe.

Did she want to go through the effort of doing the same for Satoshi and Ikki? Well, they hadn't really talked to her yet, she didn't know them, and Ikki in particular didn't seem to like her at all.

So no.
She'd save her taste testing for Takeshi and Hirata, at least for now.

By the time the food arrived, Kyo was almost enjoying herself, because there were so many great things to try!

Wind's cooking seemed to favour more spices than was generally used in Fire country, and Kyo just went ahead and served herself a bit of everything after a look at Takeshi to make sure she had permission.

There was a *really* spicy soup she wished she could get the recipe for, and a few meat dishes. Was that a grilled lizard?

It tasted great, and there even was a satisfying crunch to it, and the look on Zan's face was probably far more amusing than it ought to be, because he was very good, but he still couldn't quite hide the incredulous disbelief he was experiencing watching her sample all the excellent cooking.

Kyo didn't even pause in between grabbing a bit of yet another dish for herself and supplying Takeshi with a few things she'd ascertained were safe.

“Do you enjoy spicy food, Commander?” she asked, eyeing the soup for a second before she turned back to Takeshi, dumping some fried vegetable things on Hirata's plate without looking, and then added a leg from the lizard-thing, just to be sure he got some protein, too.

“Not particularly,” Takeshi drawled back.

Kyo tilted her head but nodded and continued on her quest.

Satoshi was looking very quietly amused, so he got a few delicious parcels to nibble on, too.

She was possibly ignoring Ikki, but she didn't like him.

Kyo tried the small bread things arranged artfully on a large plate next, and found they were filled with something sweet. “It this fruit?” she asked, eyeing the jelly-like goo for a second, before she turned to their guide.


Kyo offered him a tentative smile. “It's delicious.” She ate the rest of it, and resolved not to give any of those to her team, because being individual packages, that was dicey.

Hm. Unless she ate half of one and then gave them the other?

That might work, because it really tasted awesome.

Giving a mental shrug, she did just that and added the other half of the pastry-thing to Takeshi's plate a while later.

Oh, was that some kind of *rat*?

Curious, Kyo leaned forward to eye the dish, and then tried some with a shrug.

This was a lot of fun, and it made her wonder what sort of food they had in the other major countries.

By the time they eventually left, Kyo felt almost uncomfortably full, but she regretted nothing.
Takeshi sighed heavily and all but collapsed onto the bed beside her and Kyo shot him a distracted look.

“You okay?”

The man grunted a vaguely affirmative response and rubbed both hands over his face.

Kyo glanced down at the transcript she was writing, and then unclipped her canteen from her belt with one hand and put it down beside the Jounin Commander.

“The night is long and it wouldn't do to let yourself become dehydrated, Commander,” she told him lightly, grinning just a little when he had to abruptly force down a snort.

Takeshi sent her a dry look, but did accept the water.

Kyo went back to painstakingly writing down today's meeting in one of the Intel short-hands Katsurou-sensei had taught her at some point. She couldn't remember exactly when she'd learned it right now, but it served its purpose more than well.

“Are these your notes?” Takeshi asked a moment later, picking up her clipboard.

“Yep,” she agreed, suppressing a smile. “They're very detailed and comprehensive.”

“You're pretty good,” Takeshi snorted, eyeing the portrait of the Kazekage. Then he sighed and rubbed at his face again and he looked tired.

Tired in a way that had nothing at all to do with physical exertion.

Damn it, Kyo was pretty sure she wasn't supposed to be feeling worried about the Jounin Commander.

But... the amount of stress and pressure he had to be under right now. She didn't want to even imagine. And he wasn't exactly young.

And in addition to that, Takeshi would be the first member of their team to be targeted in any potential assassination attempt.

Kyo bit her lip and determinedly completed her transcript, and then read through it three times to make sure she hadn't forgotten anything or made any mistakes.

That done, she carefully rolled up the scroll and sealed it away into her left tattoo.

Flicking Takeshi another look, and he still looked subtly exhausted, Kyo debated what to do.

The shock of her role on this mission had subsided by now, and it really wasn't that much of a stretch of the imagination, she'd just... forgotten. Which was stupid of her.

Kyo bit back a self-deprecating grimace.

She really had to make sure she remembered all this bias shit and sexism in the future, or it would seriously fuck her over one of these days.

Putting away her things and contemplating what to do, Kyo flicked Takeshi another look and then slowly shuffled around until she was facing him.
Frowning thoughtfully at the man.

“What?” Takeshi asked softly, not opening his eyes and not moving a muscle other than to speak.

Kyo pursed her lips and then very gently touched the tips of her fingers to the back of Takeshi's hand.

The Jounin Commander's eyes slid open and focused on her, but he didn't move away or verbally question her about her actions.

So Kyo gathered up her courage and picked up his hand, placed it easily in her lap and pressed her thumbs into the meaty parts of his palm, dragging them out towards the edges of his hand.

Takeshi eyed her blankly a long second, flicked a brief glance down at his hand, and then frowned minutely.

“Stress isn't good for someone your age,” Kyo informed him with a huff and didn't return his hand to him. Kept up the simple massage.

Takeshi snorted, something wryly amused flickering across his face, and it looked like there were several things he'd like to say to that, but he ultimately settled down without a word.

It was very quiet and still, and there wasn't much activity around this apartment.

There were still watchers, but at least they were good at keeping a low profile, which was something.

Though that could also be a big disadvantage, too.

Either way, when Kyo deemed Takeshi relaxed enough, she gently put his hand down and flopped down beside him, because she was tired and there'd be another just as long day to look forward to tomorrow.

Another tense meeting to memorize and what not.

“Kyo,” Takeshi said neutrally.

“Takeshi,” Kyo returned in exactly the same tone of voice, and they were speaking quietly enough the chances of someone eavesdropping successfully on them was minimal.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“We're sleeping together,” Kyo returned calmly, and yeah, she'd lied down right beside him, practically with her head pillowed on his shoulder.

Should she be worried about how little she cared, at this point?

Takeshi snorted. “Children should abide to their bedtimes,” he muttered under his breath, but didn't push her away, and instead settled down to rest with a long-suffering sigh.

Takeshi was a good man, Kyo decided.

Kyo woke up and was sitting upright before her vision had cleared.

She stared mutely down at a clearly very amused Takeshi for a heartbeat, and then got to her feet and
marched into the bathroom, stubbornly ignoring the embarrassed flush on her cheeks.

If her stupid face could stop blushing on this stupid mission anytime soon, that'd be great.

Because Kyo had settled down to rest last night, and had even managed a light dose. She must have fallen properly asleep at some point, though, all without meaning to.

And Takeshi had let her.

He could have woken her up!

But no. Instead she'd ended up cuddling the Jounin Commander in her sleep on a mission where she was assumed to be having sex with him on the regular and all of them could end up dead at any moment.

Which was just fantastic.

When she was done in the bathroom, Kyo stalked back out and continued out of the bedroom, continued on to the kitchen, and she definitely ignored the curious looks from Hirata, Satoshi and Ikki, who were seated around the sitting room table. Playing cards.

Fantastic.

It was still dark out it was so early and Kyo was still blushing, but she needed to do something to occupy herself.

So going through the kitchen cupboards and all the food in there it was.

Kyo got to it with single-minded determination.

Scowling into the cupboard, she arranged all the things in it on the counter and then began to examine the goods starting from the left.

Stupid hormones. Stupid puberty.

Stupid people making stupid assumptions, too.

“You, uh, alright there, kid?” Hirata called after her, sounding like he was possibly questioning his sanity.

“Absolutely wonderful,” Kyo returned, impressed with the way she managed to keep any of her feelings out of her voice.

Now, would all this food be thrown away later if she actually opened all the packages and checked the edible things over?

Did she actually care?

With a mental shrug, Kyo opened a package of crackers, picked one and nibbled on it while she worked on systematically checking everything over for any kind of tampering she could think of.

At least it was an excellent distraction.

-x-x-x-

Another three days of meetings and being very deliberately showed around certain parts of Suna, and
Kyo was more than ready to be done and leave.

Wrapping up the meeting on the fourth and last day, Takeshi was exchanging a last few platitudes with the Kazekage and his advisors while Kyo sealed away her clipboard and pencil and grabbed the documents they had been provided with to bring back to the Hokage for further negotiations and whatever else was involved in establishing an alliance.

Kyo focused mostly on her job and carefully sealed them away, counting them and making sure she hadn't missed one, or something had been displaced, and she very much wasn't expecting it when her hand was grabbed too quickly for her to react.

She froze.

Didn't shift even a little while the Kazekage turned her hand over and inspected the inside of her wrist with intent focus, and wow, she'd really like to be anywhere else right now.

“Shui-sama?” Takeshi asked, sounding calm and content, but Kyo was still frozen, so she had no idea what kind of expression he was wearing.

The Kazekage hummed neutrally, dropped her hand, and she just about had time to feel relieved before he grabbed her other one.

...damn it.

Kyo didn't resist in the least when her other tattoo got inspected just as intently, and then the Kazekage placed one finger to her seal and unsealed the pencil she'd been using just a few minutes ago.

He hummed again and then sealed the pencil back in her tattoo.

“Very practical,” he said evenly and let her go, finally turning away from her. “Your village has always been adept at fuuinjutsu,” he added, clearly directed at Takeshi.

Kyo distantly mused that she felt like she was about to faint, and then recognized that she definitely should get back to actually breathing.

Another heartbeat passed without anything happening, and she managed a silent, shaky exhalation.

Followed by an intake of air.

Which was definitely good; her head already felt clearer. Oxygen was definitely important.

Another heartbeat passed where no one paid her any attention, or talked to her, or touched her, and Kyo finally blinked and forced herself to go back to her job.

Making sure she had everything they needed to bring back to Konoha. Right.

That wasn't too hard.

She could do it.

A few minutes later, when Takeshi gestured at her that it was time to leave, Kyo had made sure she had everything and was more than ready for it.

She fell into step with the Jounin commander without a word, doing her best not to show how shaky she felt and it didn't really help that they were exposing their backs to the Kazekage.
Rejoining their team, both Hirata and Satoshi shot her subtle looks, so she supposed she wasn't managing to look unaffected as well as she'd been hoping.

But fuck, getting unexpectedly grabbed by a Kage wasn't her idea of fun. Not to mention it hadn't even been *her own* Kage.

Never mind that it had been in a mostly harmless manner, the threat had been very clearly conveyed to her nonetheless.

Because she hadn't noticed what he'd been about to do until he'd already had a hold on her hand.

“Senju-sama,” Zan said, having been their faithful guide for their whole stay. “If you'll come with me, I'll escort you out of the village and see you safely on your way back to Konoha.”

“Excellent,” Takeshi murmured, sent Kyo a brief look, and then fell into step with the man, who led them off through the Kazekage building without hesitation.

Home.

The run across the desert was quick, far too hot, it left her with sand in uncomfortable places yet again, but they were heading in the right direction this time, which made it all so much easier to stomach.

They didn't stop to spend the night anywhere this time, which helped.

They said goodbye to their escort after a full day and some spent running through the desert, without any drastic issues or incidents, and then they were *finally* on their own.

Takeshi took a moment to look them all over thoughtfully.

“Let's go,” he said, and no one had to state out loud that they wouldn't rest, that they would run at top speed back to Konoha, because this was the most vulnerable part of the mission.

People who might be interested in stopping a Konoha/Suna alliance could have gotten word of the mission by now, and knew their general route, so... fun times.

Potential ambushes were always lovely, Kyo thought grimly, clenching her teeth.

In this part of the country, too. It brought up such *nice* memories.

“Satoshi,” Takeshi said at one point, and the Hyuuga nodded shortly and shifted places with Hirata, taking point.

Ikki remained in the back, sharp-eyed and attentive.

It was tense, all of them high-strung and on edge.

An hour and a half away from the Fire Country border, Satoshi signalled them all about hostile activity with one hand and said, “Iwa!”

Kyo had to bite back a curse.

Fuck.
This was just typical.

“Alright, you all know what to do,” Takeshi barked, calm and not so much as ruffled. “Split up.” He sent Hirata, Ikki and Satoshi a firm look. “See you three later. Kyo, with me.”

'Don't die,' she signed at Hirata and then stuck even closer to Takeshi's side when the others split off to go head off their surprise guests.

And yeah, she supposed Iwa wouldn't be thrilled by a Konoha/Suna alliance, but damn it.

Takeshi slanted her with a quick look before he turned back to the front. “Don't fall behind,” he ordered shortly, and then put on another burst of speed.

Kyo grit her teeth and followed suit, even though it was near-enough physically painful to leave Hirata and the others behind.

She was the one carrying all the documents, though, and Takeshi was the Jounin Commander.

The speed they were currently running at, there was no room for errors, and she had to stay fully focused on the path forward, or she might accidentally kill herself.

Her legs were already burning and tomorrow would suck so much.

Jumping off yet another tree branch, Kyo directed more chakra to her legs and determinedly didn’t think of anything.

Her head went blank.

Nothing existed other than the goal ahead and everything else was irrelevant.

Hours passed.

Kyo barely registered their arrival at the Konoha gates, because they barely stopped long enough for Takeshi to verify their identities before they took off again.

She did distantly register the fact an ANBU team was dispatched to rush out and assist Hirata, Satoshi and Ikki, but that was an irrelevant detail.

Next she knew, they were striding through the Hokage tower with clear purpose and Kyo was Takeshi's shadow, not veering from her post for so much as a second.

“Welcome back,” Hiruzen greeted them calmly with a small, pleased smile, and for a second, Kyo was pretty sure her brain disconnected, because... that wasn't right? “I take it everything went well?”

“Better than expected,” Takeshi returned and, had Kyo missed something? “The rest of the team diverted an Iwa squad on the return, but it's being taken care of.”

“Excellent.” Hiruzen stood up and walked around his desk, gesturing at both of them to follow.

He led them to a smaller meeting room off of the Hokage's office.

There were comfortable couches and she was pretty sure an ANBU had just prepared them all tea, but Kyo felt a little bit like she might have hit her head.

...she didn't have a concussion, right?
Takeshi gratefully sank down on one of the couches with a bone-weary sigh and Kyo hovered uneasily beside him, still feeling far too keyed up.

“I'm getting too old for things like this,” he muttered and rubbed at the side of his neck. “You're gonna need to find yourself a replacement soon enough, Hiruzen. Retirement sounds better for every year.”

“You'd be bored to tears within a week,” the Hokage returned without missing a beat, which earned him a wry grunt that sounded vaguely amused.

...Kyo still wasn't sure what was going on.

Hiruzen placed one of the steaming tea mugs in front of his Jounin Commander, and then added one more beside it, and grabbed the last one for himself.

“Now,” he said, far more serious and down to business and Kyo straightened her spine. “Your report.” He flicked a glance at her, but it was clear the words had been directed at Takeshi, who heaved another sigh.

And started talking. Quickly and easily going through everything that had happened in the last week and some days in an effortlessly efficient manner.

“Kyo,” he said, voice oddly sharp.

Kyo blinked and turned to meet his gaze. Belatedly realised he'd said her name twice, the first time without garnering any reaction.

“The files,” Takeshi prompted.

Without a word, Kyo began unsealing everything of importance, one thing at a time, handing them off to the Jounin Commander, who in turn either passed them to the Hokage or placed them on the table between them.

“I'll need the transcript of the last meeting, too,” Hiruzen said distractedly a while later.

Kyo tilted her head, thought about it, and unsealed an empty scroll and a pen. She walked around the table until she found an unoccupied spot, where she crouched down and got started.

It took a moment to shift her focus to the right information, but once she'd found it, the memory slotted into place and it was easy to transfer the text down onto paper.

Taking the time to read through it once when she was done, Kyo rolled up the scroll and neatly placed it together with the other ones and then returned to her spot beside Takeshi.

She hadn't been dismissed, so clearly, they still needed her for something.

It took over an hour before Hiruzen ordered her to give her own report, and Kyo dutifully recounted everything of value or importance in a cool, even voice that seemed distant and detached to her, but that wasn't important.

What was wrong with her?

“And you didn't detect any substances in any of the edibles you examined?” Hiruzen pressed interestedly while he sorted through the stack of files the Kazekage and his advisors had supplied them with.
“Nothing,” Kyo confirmed shortly.

Hiruzen hummed neutrally. “You performed excellently on this mission, Kyo,” he said.

Kyo stared at him for a heartbeat. “Thank you, Hokage-sama,” she returned blankly, for lack of anything better to say.

He nodded distractedly. “Anything else?” He shot Takeshi a look.

Discussions continued, Hiruzen quizzing Takeshi about the Kazekage, mentioning advisors by name and asking probing questions about specific wording -calling on Kyo to answer a few of them- and it felt like it dragged on and on.

There were no windows in this room.

“Hokage-sama,” an ANBU said, standing a respectful distance away, at attention. “You wished to be notified; the remaining team members have arrived.”

“Thank you, Badger,” Hiruzen sighed and looked over the cluttered table in front of him for a second longer, shot his right hand man a gauging look, and then turned to Kyo.

Gaze probing, assessing.

She didn't like it.

Hand involuntarily twitching in a prompting gesture, she watched Hiruzen's lips twitch with something wryly amused.

“Anything else you feel a need to bring to my attention?” he asked her, not scolding her for her impertinence.

Kyo blinked very slowly.

“No, sir.” She wasn't sure what else there'd be to talk about; she'd already given a comprehensive oral report, and she'd hand in the written one the moment she got a chance to write it down.

Takeshi hummed. “Go check on Hirata for me, will you, Kyo?” He eyed her neutrally. “They ought to be on their way here to report, so you'll meet them on the way out.”

What was his angle?

Kyo cocked her head minutely, before she inclined it in a respectful nod.

She turned on her heel, stalked past Badger, who was lingering, with an absently signed greeting and left the room.

Walking through the Hokage's office without the man in question being present felt weird.

She didn't get further than the area immediately outside of the office before she spotted Hirata walking towards her.

There was blood on him, but he didn't hold himself as if seriously injured, but Satoshi looked like he'd need to go to the hospital as soon as he'd checked in with Hiruzen.

He had one arm slung over Ikki's shoulders, the Nara taking part of his weight.
That leg didn't look like it would be fun to deal with.

“Oi, pipsqueak,” Hirata greeted, giving her a quick once-over and then a sharp grin. “You take good care of the Commander, yeah?”

The Nara scoffed out what sounded like a derisive laugh and Kyo felt, for a brief second, as if everything froze.

She had an overwhelming urge to move, to make him hurt, to-

The stillness shattered to pieces when Hirata grabbed her out of the air and punted her at the closest wall.

Kyo couldn't remember moving, but she also felt like a switch had been flipped in her head and this was what she'd been waiting for.

Impacting the wall, she could feel her body protest, but it took no thought at all for her to roll with the impact and contort so her feet met the closest flat surface and she'd launched herself back at Hirata with single-minded focus.

Hirata gave a sharp, delighted laugh, elbowed her in the face and kicked her into the other wall, grabbed the senbon she'd jabbed into his shoulder and threw it at her.

Breath cleanly knocked out of her lungs, Kyo caught the senbon with ease, because throwing senbon and throwing kunai were wildly different things, and you could tell when someone hadn't ever learned to do the former.

She threw it back at the man and leapt up to the ceiling, touching down only long enough to reposition herself and drop forcefully down feet first on the man that was her target.

It didn't at all surprise her when she was caught, and she ignored the painful hold on her throat to hook her leg over his arm, twisted her body and swung her other leg to aim a hard kick at the side of Hirata's head with her shin, and that kept him occupied enough he didn't notice-

“Kyo!” an authoritative voice barked and it was instinct to freeze. “Hirata!” was added in the exact same tone of voice not even a second later and Hirata threw Takeshi a lazy glance.

“Hey, Commander, no ruinin' the fun.” He was still grinning too-widely.

He'd also caught the leg she'd tried to kick him in the head with in an unforgiving grip at her knee, his thumb digging in so harshly into the soft backside of the joint her whole leg had gone numb.

Takeshi eyed them both with an unamused look on his face, taking in everything else with a quick glance.

“Enough. This isn't the time.” He looked like he had no patience for any of them right now. “Ikki, escort Satoshi and Hirata to the hospital,” he eyed the two senbon she'd jammed into the man's forearm, slotting clean between the bones, “make sure he doesn't collapse somewhere. I'll come to get your reports the moment I'm done here.”

Ikki sighed and sent both Kyo and Hirata a deeply annoyed look, dark eyes cold and disdainful, though she had a feeling that last part was directed far more at her than at Hirata.

“Hirata, let go of Kyo before she loses consciousness,” Takeshi directed shortly next.
Hirata dropped her like a hot coal and Kyo hit the floor harshly, but that didn't stop her from rolling to her feet and-

Almost ending up on her ass, because she couldn't feel her right leg and it threatened to fold beneath her weight.

Hirata laughed at her and Kyo suddenly had two needles slotted between her fingers.

“Enough,” Takeshi repeated, and she could tell he meant business. “Kyo, you're dismissed. Go-”

She didn't wait to hear what he wanted her to go do, instead went full stealth and shunshined out of the building.

Her leg hampered her quite a bit, but she didn't care.

Kyo had no idea where to go, didn't know who was home or not and she seriously didn't feel inclined to check more places than absolutely necessary.

She did start by ghosting through her grandparents' house, because if tou-san was home, then Genma wouldn't be living there.

Though she was pretty sure the Academy was still in session, the point still remained.

Genma's room looked well lived-in and there were plenty of signs he'd been here this morning, so Kyo abandoned the tentative plan to go home, because as much as part of her wanted to be alone, the rest of her recoiled from the idea.

She could go see if Minato was around, but she didn't feel enthusiastic about it.

Katsurou-sensei might be a very good idea, but at the same time... not this time. Or at least not yet.

She didn't want a shrink, even if it was sensei, she wanted a friend.

She wanted to go hug Kisaki, but she couldn't do that, because Kisaki was angry with her.

There was one place she could go that might be nice.

Kyo didn't dwell on it any longer than that and instead turned in the direction of the Uzumaki compound.

Slipping in through Aita's bedroom window required minimal effort, but that was as far as her body was willing to go.

Taking deep, slow breaths, Kyo slid off the windowsill and eased herself into a seat on the floor below the window.

Her body hurt, her leg hurt.

No, actually, both of her legs hurt, but in different ways, and her face hurt, why-

Kyo touched her fingers to her mouth and they came away wet with blood.

Great.
That would explain why her lip was throbbing and damn it all to hell, she was done.

She'd just. Sit here a while and rest. Maybe sleep a little.

The floor was nice and she was leaning against the wall. It was comfortable, and it was safe.

-x-x-x-

The sound of the door sliding open prompted Kyo to crack her eyes open.

Aita's gaze found her right away and he all but froze, eyes widening as he took in what was probably far from the pretty sight that was Kyo right now.

“Wha- Kyo!?” And Aita was at her side in the blink of an eye, and it took a second before she managed to refocus on him.

“Hi,” she greeted fuzzily. “Sorry for inviting myself in. Just needed to rest for a bit.”

“You needed to- You look like you need the hospital!” Aita hissed at her, hands hovering in front of her, but not touching. “Who the hell let you wander off like this? What kind of mission did you- How badly are you injured?”

Kyo tried to sit up more properly, ignoring the pained grunt that slipped out of her. “Didn't happen on the mission,” she muttered and tried not to grimace. Her probably split lip wouldn't thank her. “Happened after.”

“After,” Aita repeated quietly, then looked her over again. “Who did this?” There was a hard glint in his eyes.

The pained grimace finally won out over her self-control and Kyo felt the scab on her lip crack. With a resulting trickle of blood down her chin.

“Not right now. Please. Can't you just,” she muttered, attempting to sit up without the help of the wall, though her body protested quite insistently, “hug me?” she finished weakly.

“Kyo, I'm afraid to even touch you right now, because you frankly look like shit,” Aita told her solemnly.

“I feel like shit,” she muttered, not contradicting him. “But I need a hug.”

“Can you even stand?”

“Don't think so. Aita, please?” She wasn't above begging. She just needed a really good, long hug right now. “Please,” she repeated again, feeling blankly helpless, because what else was she supposed to do?

She stared at Aita, who looked so worried it was almost painful.

“Alright,” he said and very gently took hold of her arms. “But we're getting you off the floor first.”

Kyo didn't argue, and she didn't try to fight him. “Your bed will get filthy,” she mumbled at him when she figured out where he was steering her the second he'd gotten her upright.

“I don't care even a little and I'm insulted you'd even bring it up,” Aita huffed back at her and carefully lowered her down to sit on the edge of his mattress. “We need to take a look at how bad this is,” he muttered, more to himself than to her.
Kyo made a protesting noise. “Hug. I'm off the floor. Please.”

Aita frowned worriedly at her and sat down beside her with a heavy sigh, though he did sling an arm carefully around her shoulders.

Kyo wasted no time in leaning into the touch and turned to hug him back.

She was distantly aware she was clinging, burying her face in Aita's shoulder and her chest was feeling tight.

Dragging her feet up on the bed and practically climbing into Aita's lap, she wanted to just hide.

“Kyo?” he asked quietly, and the way he wrapped his arms around her, it felt like he was afraid she was going to fall apart.

Kyo took a deep breath to answer, tell him something, anything, but all that came out was a half-strangled sob.

“Kyo,” Aita repeated again, and she knew he was worried, but she couldn't make herself do anything other than cry right now.

His arms tightened around her.

She had no idea how many minutes passed while her body wasted a lot of fluids in a useless, stupid way.

“I don't want to do this any more,” she hiccuped in a high, thin voice, pressing her face more firmly against Aita's shoulder, ignoring the sticky blood, tears and snot she was getting onto the fabric. “I don't want to look like this. I don't want people to look at me like that any more, I don't want to be the- the bed warmer,” she sobbed helplessly, the words just spilling from her lips before she could stop them.

Aita had gone rigid, but it barely registered.

“I've fought so, so hard, I'm getting better all the time, and I don't want all that to be waved aside just because I've got-” Kyo had to cut herself off to actually breathe, sucking in a trembling breath. “It's not fair!”

Why couldn't she stop crying?

Kyo's hands were aching with how tightly she was holding on to Aita's shirt and she was just so tired, hurting and she had dust and sand in all kinds of places.

She stunk with old sweat.

Eventually crying herself out, Kyo's head felt heavy and stuffy and her eyes were all sore.

“I'm sorry,” she rasped, because she'd just cried all over Aita with no warning and complained at him like a little kid. Gotten blood on his clothes.

Aita hadn't made a sound in a really long time and she wasn't feeling brave enough to lift her head from his shoulder to look at his face.

He felt really tense, too.

“You can tell me if you want me to go,” she whispered, feeling so pathetically miserable it threatened
to make her cry again.

“What,” Aita hissed and spasmodically tightened his arms around her. “Are you out of your god damn mind?” he demanded in a low, angry voice that made her flinch. “You can't- you can't tell me something like that and then expect me to let you slink off without a word of protest!” he snapped, and his hold on her was bringing tears to her eyes, because it hurt, but it was also a great relief.

He didn't want her to leave.

“Sorry.”

“Don't apologise,” Aita all but growled, and she could feel him fist the material in the back of her shirt.

There was something she needed to clarify here, she was fairly sure, but thinking was hard, and her head felt far too sluggish.

“...no one made me sleep with them,” she murmured, finally pinpointing the issue. “But everyone thought I was.” Acting like she was nothing more than-

Aita seemed to think that over for a long moment, and then released a heavy, shaky sigh.

“I didn't want the stupid promotion, but I didn't sleep my way to it, either,” she hiccuped, just a little. “I work hard, Aita. All the time. I always try my best, but ever since- it's like it doesn't matter. Like I'm not a person any more.” She sniffled. “I hate it, and I don't want to feel like this.”

“I'm so sorry, Kyo,” Aita whispered, and all the anger had drained out of him.

That just made her cry again, because why was he apologising?

She was exhausted, though, and after everything that had happened, it just snuck up on her when she wasn't paying attention, eventually leaving her in a pleasantly quiet and dreamless sleep before anything further could be said.

Aita hadn't stopped hugging her even for a second.

This was fine.
Chapter 106

Kyo knew where she was when she woke up.

She was in Aita's bed, still crusted in dust and sand and all of her hurt.

The skin on her chin felt itchy and stiff and she vaguely remembered there was dried blood on it, most likely, and yeah, she needed a wash. For several reasons.

With a soft groan, Kyo pushed herself into a seat to look around, because her senses were telling her she was alone, and-

Something in her hand crinkled.

Turning to stare incomprehensibly at her hand, it took her a second to realise what it was she was looking at, and then another second to actually read the crumpled note she was holding.

For some reason.

*Gone to get you some food. DON'T LEAVE!!!*

The last two words had been underlined several times and Kyo stared at them with drowsy bemusement.

Okay.

Looking around Aita's room a moment, Kyo slowly managed to shuffle off of the bed. Got to her feet with what felt like monumental effort and far too much pain and she very tentatively tried to stretch out one of her arms. Which was something she gave up quickly.

Ow.

Limping over to the door, Kyo felt a little bit like an old, arthritic woman, but it wasn't like it was the first time.

Probably wouldn't be the last, either, she mused blandly.

Sliding the door open, Kyo looked down first the right side of the corridor, then the left side, contemplating her options.

She picked left.

It felt pretty nice to move a little, no matter how slow her progress was, because being still for however many hours she'd been asleep had left her stiff.

She didn't come across any people on the way to her destination and Kyo finally slowed to a stop in front of the door she wanted, raised a hand and knocked.

A moment later, it opened and Kushina fixed her with a perplexed frown, only to blink when she took in the state she was in.

“What?”

“Can I lie on your floor for a while?” Kyo asked calmly, feeling tranquil.
Kushina's expression did interesting things while she digested that. “...why?”

“Because you're a kunoichi,” Kyo returned truthfully.

“Yeah?” Kushina eyed her like she was fairly sure she'd lost her mind. “Did you escape from the hospital or something?”

“No.”

If she'd escaped from the hospital, then she wouldn't be wearing a filthy uniform and she was also fairly sure she would have been cleaner.

“You stink,” Kushina informed her bluntly.

“Mm,” Kyo hummed a vague agreement. “So?”

Kushina blinked at her a second longer and then stepped back with a shrug. “Fine, whatever. I don't get you, Shiranui. You're just really weird.”

Kyo didn't say anything, simply followed the girl into her room and then slowly folded down to the floor and stretched out on her back with a content sigh.

Ah, perfect.

Closing her eyes, she simply breathed and tried to relax.

She got a few wonderful minutes of quiet calm, before Kushina decided to address her again.

“You're seriously just gonna lie on my floor?”

“Yep.”

If you asked her, it was a very good plan.

Kushina huffed out an annoyed sigh, and then she plopped down to sit beside her. “You're not gonna die, right?” she asked, and then there was a finger poking Kyo's cheek tentatively.

“I highly doubt it,” Kyo returned serenely.

“Do you know you have tear tracks in the dirt on your face?”

“Mm, I cried earlier.” So it made sense.

There was an awkward silence Kyo pretended not to notice. She was busy relaxing. Breathing.

“There's also blood,” Kushina continued, powering on with stubborn determination, and she poked experimentally at Kyo's lower lip.

“Ow,” she said plainly, but didn't move.

“So,” Kushina said slowly, drawing out the word. “What does my being a kunoichi have to do with you being here? I'm pretty sure we don't like each other.”

“I don't dislike you, we just don't know each other,” Kyo said. “I think you're a bit rash and prone to jump to conclusions, but that's not the same as not liking you.”

Kushina scoffed, and Kyo could feel her insulted scowl.
“Yeah, well, you're just- stupidly cold and unfeeling and weird!” the girl returned with a sniff.

Hmm, well, she supposed she might seem that way to people who didn't know her. Maybe.

Though to be fair, Kyo had felt anything other than 'unfeeling' lately, and she was also far too weepy to be able to claim anything of the sort.

“...you're sometimes incredibly unobservant,” Kyo returned.

“Your boobs are stupid!” Kushina exclaimed.

“Oh, yeah, for sure,” Kyo agreed wholeheartedly.

“What,” Kushina said blankly and Kyo cracked her eyes open to squint at her. The girl looked utterly dumbfounded.

For some reason.

“I'd trade with you in a heartbeat,” Kyo added plainly and closed her eyes again with a sigh. “You can be incredibly obnoxious,” she continued whatever exchange they had going on here.

“Yeah, well,” Kushina spluttered, “you're an annoying know-it-all!” she hissed.

Really?

Huh, well-

“And you're all smug and condescending and you think you're better than everyone else!” Kushina added heatedly, sounding flustered.

“...I've been told that before,” Kyo admitted quietly.

“See?” Kushina huffed, clearly vindicated.

Kyo didn't want to play this game any more.

Luckily, a good distraction was headed their way at a decent pace, and a moment later, Aita skidded into the still open door to Kushina's room, audibly thumping into the door frame.

“What,” he forced out in a terse, aggravated voice, “part of don't leave do you fail to understand!?”

“Hey, Aita,” Kyo murmured, flopping a hand at him. “I haven't left.” She was still in the Uzumaki compound.

“You're gonna give me a heart-attack!” Was her friend's response as he stomped into the room. “I was afraid you'd wandered off and collapsed somewhere else!”

“Didn't collapse,” Kyo argued half-heartedly. “Just tactically decided to rest.”

“Right,” Aita huffed and crouched down beside her. “I really need to see how badly off you are now, Kyo. Depending on what I find, I'll either get Ren, or we'll send for a medic.”

Kyo grimaced. “Urgh, no.”

“Kyo,” Aita said and he sounded- she didn't even know. Genuinely upset with her. “Do you know that you haven't got internal injuries? Fractures? Fuck, with that lip you might even have a
She huffed out a soft, amused laugh. “You're cursing now?”

“Not exactly doing a good job of reassuring me I'm wrong there, Kyo.”

“Oh, no, I get what you're saying,” she told him, eyes still closed. “You wanna see me *naked,*” she teased, and she definitely would have been grinning if it wouldn't have threatened to make her lip bleed again.

“Stop it,” Aita said, and he didn't sound amused, like she'd hoped. “Don't even- Kyo.” And he sounded a little bit like he'd cry.

She grimaced and sat up, finally looking at him. “I'm sorry, I didn't mean-” She didn't even know what she'd meant, because it wasn't funny and she didn't feel like this was anything to joke about. But she was still doing it, apparently.

“I know,” Aita sighed, rubbed at his face a second, and then fixed her with a firm look. “Now please let me reassure myself you aren't secretly bleeding out or something?”

“I'm pretty sure you would have noticed that,” Kyo muttered, but dutifully began to remove her weapon holsters and pouches. “I think I need a bit of help, here, I can't really lift my arms,” she sighed.

Aita wordlessly reached out to assist her in the removal of her shirt, and then the mesh shirt underneath.

There was no misunderstanding the upset hiss he produced the second he got a good look at her torso.

“I'm pretty sure I'm just bruised,” Kyo mused, and gingerly prodded at her side.

“What did you do?” Kushina asked, and Kyo had sort of forgotten about her. A little. Which was stupid because they were still in her room and Kyo was the one that had walked here.

“Got thrown into a few walls,” Kyo muttered.

“Damn it, Kyo, this looks like it could be serious,” Aita sighed. “Are you sure your ribs aren't fractured?”

Kyo shrugged, because she didn't *know* that, obviously, but, “I'm pretty sure they're not. It doesn't hurt *that* much.”

“I'd be far more reassured if I didn't know your standards are super skewed,” Aita muttered irritably. “Alright, Kushina, can you run over to the Senju compound and grab one of their medics?”

“No,” Kyo said firmly, looking up from her side to all but glare at him. “No Senju.”

Aita frowned right back at her. “Oh, so they have something to do with this?”

“Let it go, Aita.” This made her feel tired. “There's nothing you can do about it, anyway.” She took a deep breath. “Now help me stand up so we can look at my leg, ’cause that's the worst,” she muttered, already in the process of unbuckling her belt.

“Wha- you can't just- undress like that, Aita's a guy!” Kushina squeaked, flailing a little bit.
Kyo scoffed. “Aita isn't the least bit interested in me as anything other than a friend and the feeling's one hundred percent mutual,” she muttered sullenly, sending the girl a brief, unhappy look.

Aita sighed and helped her up off the floor. Again. “Just. Stand still and try not to fall over,” he said, lightly slapping aside her hands and helping her with the buttons.

He did a much better, quicker job of it than Kyo had been able to pull off in her current state, and he soon enough helped her step out of her trousers.

He sighed again. “Damn it, Kyo,” he said, his hold on her arm tightening minutely.

She eyed her knee as best she could and felt her mouth twist with displeasure.

Fuck, she might actually need a medic after all.

“He didn't have to be this much of a dick,” she huffed under her breath, because Hirata had clearly done something to her knee. It was swollen and the bruising was impressive and she just. Didn't feel up to dealing with it at all.

“I'm going to get that name, Kyo,” Aita informed her steadily and then wrapped one arm behind her back, hooking the other one under her thighs, mindful of her knee. “Come on, let's get you washed up and then to the hospital, have a medic look at you.”

Kyo leaned her head against his shoulder. “Oh? You gonna help me?”

“Nope,” Aita drawled dryly and turned in the direction of the door. “And shut up, Kyo. I just need to make sure you don't fall over and crack your head open on the tiles.”

“Such confidence,” she mused tiredly.

“When I find you all but unconscious on the floor in my room? You bet your ass.”

“I guess that's fair.”

“It's more than fair, you human disaster, don't worry me like this. I'm too young to get grey hair,” he muttered at her and carried her out of Kushina's room, leaving the girl behind to whatever she'd been doing before Kyo had showed up.

“Love you, Aita,” she sighed and relaxed into his hold.

“Yeah, I know, you keep telling me,” the man muttered, but carried her with infinite care to the closest bathroom, and he didn't leave.

He didn't leave her alone in the hospital after, either, and if that wasn't love she didn't know what was.

-x-x-x-

She was possibly not dealing with things in the most ideal manner, but at least she was trying to deal with it.

In her own way.

Or so Kyo told herself as she stalked through ANBU headquarters with a very specific destination in mind.
She had to pause a bit when passing by the Mess Hall, though because several of the tables had been turned over and there were kunai and shuriken marks all over the place.

“What happened?” she asked one of the passing operatives, who threw a distracted look at the mess.

He shrugged. “Fight. Someone said something stupid; the usual.”

Right.

Kyo wasn't sure if it was reassuring or not to know she wasn't the only one who... did these things? Had moments of dubious judgement?

She didn't know.

With a muttered thanks at the operative, she walked on, because she wasn't really all that interested in the latest drama around this place.

Kyo would have preferred if there was less drama in her life, too, but some things were clearly beyond her at this point.

Arriving in the Barracks without issue, Kyo very quickly found the right door and knocked, hoping Spider would be there, because... well. She needed to talk to her.

She waited one heartbeat, then two, and slowly felt her shoulders slump with disappointment.

Of course she wasn't here. Because that was just typical.

Kyo leaned the forehead of her mask against Spider's door and wondered where to even start looking.

The Sarutobi compound? She'd rather not.

“Scorpion,” a familiar voice said, pleasantly surprised and Kyo jerked her head up and turned to blink at Spider, who came walking towards her, a steaming tea mug held in one hand.

Which made sense, because the communal kitchen for this section of the Barracks was located in the direction Spider had come from.

“I need to talk to you,” Kyo blurted before anything else could be said, and she mentally winced.

It would have been better to go with a greeting and some small talk first, probably, because Spider had emphasized the need for her to practise the skill.

Whatever, that would be a problem to think about later.

“Certainly,” Spider said and gestured at her to go inside her room ahead of her.

Which Kyo wasted absolutely no time doing, striding over to her usual spot and taking a seat, staring down at the floor as she wondered how to explain this. Where to start. Waiting for Spider to come and join her at her own pace.

“Alright, then, what did you want to talk to me about?” Spider asked, calm and collected and looking like the picture of grace.

Kyo hunched her shoulders and took off her mask.
“Oh, honey,” Spider sighed and shifted forward to cradle her face. “You need to look after this cute face of yours.”

Kyo grimaced. “Not helping right now,” she muttered.

“I wasn't aware I was supposed to help,” Spider returned, definitely sounding amused. She did let go of Kyo's face, though, and removed her own mask and placed it aside. “What seems to be the problem? You look upset.” She eyed her patiently and picked up her tea.

“I had a mission, recently,” Kyo mumbled, doing her best not to fidget and she occupied herself by playing with her mask. “Anyway, there were,” she hesitated, “stuff, and people made assumptions, and I just hated all of it and how it made me feel, but people are gonna do that all the time, aren't they? So I figure I should just, uh, learn to deal with it and use it against them? Somehow?” She frowned imploringly at Spider, who eyed her steadily back. “Even though I don't know how that will make me feel, either, or if I'll be any good at it, and then there's-

“Kyo, breathe,” Spider cut into her rambling, putting her tea back down with a soft sigh. She reached out to take her hands. “I don't know what you're talking about. Start at the beginning, please, or I won't be able to help you.”

Kyo grimaced again, ignoring how it made her lip hurt. “I just- They thought I was only there for sex,” she said quietly, feeling small.

“Ah.” Spider eyed her soberly. “And that's the first time that's happened to you,” she said, and it wasn't a question.

Kyo managed a jerky nod. She took a deep breath and then, in very general terms, described the situation she'd been in. Without mentioning enemy shinobi, potential allies or not. Just. People.

“And then there was a moment when I didn't know if he would, because he was my superior and if he wanted to it wouldn't really have been possible for me to say no,” she finished quietly, face feeling hot and she was scowling down at the floor.

Spider sighed and reached out to take her hand again. “I'd like to say Konoha doesn't have shinobi like that, who would exploit you and take advantage, but that would be a lie,” she told her softly. “Chances are, those situations are going to come up again in the future, and it's entirely up to you how you deal with it.” She paused. “But you're going to have to deal with it, Kyo.”

“I know, but I don't know how,” she exclaimed quietly, hating the way her eyes were prickling.

“That's why you're here, right?” Spider was smiling sharply at her when she chanced a look at the woman's face. “So that I can teach you in the ways of making men fear for their manhoods.” Her smile grew into a rather intimidating grin, and it wasn't even aimed at Kyo. Not really.

“Yeah,” Kyo agreed and quickly wiped at her eyes.

Spider hummed cheerfully, looking contemplative for a moment. “You're doing very well with the cosmetics,” she finally said. “How much time are you willing to commit to this right now? And how determined and willing are you to do what's needed?”

Kyo took a deep breath and straightened her spine. Squared her shoulders.

She'd come here because she wanted to put in the effort. She didn't have anything else pressing to
deal with right this moment, either, so.

“Barring any missions or other obligations, I'm yours,” Kyo told the woman in front of her seriously.

Spider smiled at her. “Excellent, then I say we can advance the syllabus a little and get started on some of the interesting bits!” She rolled to her feet with a pleased stretch and then gestured at Kyo to follow suit. “Remember; if you feel uncomfortable or just want to stop, tell me.”

“I will,” Kyo promised.


Kyo took a second to digest that, and then slowly began to shed her uniform.

Standing buck naked in front of a full-body mirror in Spider's ANBU room was all kinds of awkward, but she didn't really mind, either.

“Oh, Kyo, we need to talk about not letting anyone bruise you like this,” Spider tutted disapprovingly and it made her crack a small, amused smile. “So!” the woman continued. “How familiar are you with your own body?”

Kyo blinked. “It's... my body?” she said hesitantly, though she felt a little bit like she was missing the point.

Spider smiled indulgently at her. “It is indeed,” she agreed easily. “But have you ever taken the time to properly look at yourself? Touch yourself?” She winked teasingly at her through the mirror and Kyo had to bite back an exasperated sigh. “So take a moment and properly examine yourself and then we'll discuss whatever flaws or assets you may wish to discuss, either real or imagined.”

That sounded pretty healthy, actually.

A good attitude to take to your body changing and whatever else.

Kyo tilted her head, blinked a little, and then did as directed.

Well. She didn't look like a small child any more, that was for sure.

There were the breasts, for one, having reached a point where they were a decent handful, no matter how much she'd rather they weren't. But at the same time, somewhat regularly meeting up with Tsunade, she couldn't help but be very aware it could have been worse.

Much worse.

There were the hips, she supposed, and now that she'd gotten a chance to adjust to them, Kyo tentatively decided she liked them.

Then there were the natural consequences of having developed as quickly as she had.

Stretch-marks.

Both on her boobs, her hips and the inside of her thighs, but unlike the first time she'd experienced this, she didn't mind in the least.

Yeah, they were kind of noticeable, but that would fade with time. Just like scars.
Kyo could remember all the anxiety she'd experienced in the Before about the stretch-marks, and while she still understood why, she'd also reached the point in that life where she hadn't cared even a little bit.

Those teenage fears and worries had faded and become non-issues, and it had been a great relief.

To not worry so much about what people thought of her body. About things that were perfectly normal and she was incapable of influencing anyway.

Besides, Kyo had much more noticeable marks on her body this time around, and she didn't particularly care about those, either.

“People will definitely be able to tell I'm a kunoichi the moment I'm naked,” she mused blandly, studying herself in the mirror.

She'd started to grow hair in new places, she noted with detached interest.

“Well, we have a few tricks for things such as scars,” Spider shared lightly. “I know for a fact Mito-sama helped develop several seals for the seduction division specifically, back when it was first founded.”

That was pretty cool.

Kyo hummed an acknowledgement.

“But you can also do quite amazing things with make-up, if you have the skills,” her seduction teacher continued. “Of course, that comes with its disadvantages, but in a dicey situation, it's good to have a back-up plan.”

“Yeah.” Kyo could definitely see the sense in that. “So am I just supposed to stare at myself?” she couldn't help but ask, because there wasn't really all that much to look at, after a while.

It was a body, with arms and legs and a torso. There wasn't anything particularly spectacular about her looks, but she didn't look bad, either.

Spider laughed lightly. “Well, you could tell me what it is you're thinking about when you look into the mirror,” she said, positioning herself behind her, meeting her gaze in the mirror over her shoulder.

Kyo tilted her head and tried to think about it. “I just don't know what I'm supposed to be thinking, because this is just. Me.” She shrugged. “I can't really change how I look, and I'm not sure how to make people,” she gestured vaguely with one hand, “I don't know!”

Spider smiled. “Everyone looks different, and every body-type can be made irresistible if you know a few basic facts,” she informed her quietly, fingers touching very lightly on Kyo's right hip. “You just need to figure out which parts of yourself you're confident enough about to turn into your weapon of choice.”

“I kind of like my hips,” Kyo confessed. “And I suppose my face is attractive?” Though she couldn't help but turn that last part into a question.

“You suppose?”

“Well, yeah,” Kyo muttered. “I take after both my parents, and I guess they're both attractive enough.”
“But you don't know for certain?”

Kyo frowned. “I don't know, I just don't really think about my own looks a lot,” she huffed. “I've always had more important things to think about!” Like not dying.

Spider tilted her head. “This part of your career needs a different mindset. What works for me might not work for you and vice versa. You need to find a way to approach it, though.” Spider's hand, which had lingered on her hip, slid up her side until she could tap a finger on the ribs beneath her right breast. “Some would say your chest is a great asset, but you don't seem to think so.”

“They're mostly just annoying, in the way, and I don't like the way men stare at them when they think I won't notice.”

“But think of the great distraction they can be,” Spider said, voice light. “Holding yourself, moving in a way to subtly pronounce them, and certain people won't be able to resist, and being distracted can be a dangerous thing.”

“I suppose,” Kyo mused quietly, still frowning and trying to wrap her head around everything.

“So you've got the hips and the boobs,” Spider said perkily, “and you're learning to enhance your face with cosmetics. Anything else?”

Kyo shrugged. “Legs?” she suggested dubiously. Some men liked legs, right?

Spider hummed approvingly. “I think we've got a good start, here,” she decided, stepping back from her and clapping her hands together. “Right! Show me how you'd walk if you actively tried to get men's attention. Put those hips to good use.”

“...naked?” Kyo couldn't help but question.

“If you can do it naked in here, then it won't feel half as awkward the first time you try it in public while dressed.”

Which made some small measure of sense, she supposed, but Spider's room was small. Just the same size as all other private rooms in the Barracks, but if she backed up against the wall, then that might just give her a few strides to work with?

With a mental shrug, Kyo did just that and then tried her best not to feel self-conscious as she walked across the room.

“No, no,” Spider interrupted almost right away. “You're not off to murder a target, dear. Relax more, take it easy. Try to look like you've got all the time in the world.”

This was so weird.

Kyo sighed and tried again. Doing her best to be relaxed.

“Let those hips swing the way they want to; don't try to force it,” Spider continued to instruct her and they kept at it. Again and again.

Any awkwardness about being naked was soon forgotten as Spider instructed her to try and walk in different manners. Adopting the role of anything between the seductress to shy civilian girl.

It was almost fun.

-x-x-x-
“So? You gonna mope around here forever?”

“Probably,” Kyo returned with a huff. “No,” she immediately added, contradicting herself.

“Good, because we've got incoming,” Aita informed her dryly, sounding vaguely amused.

Kyo raised her head and shot him a questioning look, but she could already hear the two sets of footsteps thundering towards them and a heartbeat later, Aita's door had been thrown open.

“Aita-nii!” Ashika exclaimed. “We're home!”

“We're here!” Genma added his own piece and the two children were tumbling into the room. There was a brief pause, then, “NEE-SAN!”

“Hello, Genma.” Kyo smiled and sat up just in time for her little brother to throw himself at her. “I've missed you a lot,” she mumbled into his hair.

“I missed you more,” Genma muttered, tightening his hold on her. “Can I stay with you tonight?” he asked next, peering up at her imploringly and there was something stubborn about the look in his eyes.

Kyo stared back at him. “I'd planned to stay with Katsurou-sensei tonight,” she admitted.

Genma drooped, for just a second, before his determination firmed up again. “I can come too! I don't have school tomorrow!”

Well. She wasn't sure Katsurou-sensei would agree to that, but...

She looked at her brother. “I'll sleep a lot and it'll be boring.”

“I don't care, I wanna be with you!” Genma insisted, clinging to her with what felt like every scrap of strength her had available. “Please, nee-san?”

How the hell was she supposed to say no in the face of that?

Kyo gave in with a small sigh and pressed a kiss to her brother's cheek. “Alright. I love you a lot, Genma.”

“I love you, too,” Genma mumbled and buried his face in her chest.

Yeah, she knew that.

Kyo rolled off of Aita's bed and was on her feet, still with her little brother gathered up in her arms.

Her knee only gave a slight twinge of protest to the motion, which was testament to how effective the medic had been. And also the fact the injury hadn't been that serious, so she guessed she and Hirata were still good.

She was really tired; it'd only been two days since she got back from the Suna mission and she'd spent most of the time either here at the Uzumaki compound or with Spider at ANBU headquarters.

There'd also been the trip to the hospital, she supposed.

“Are we going now?” Genma asked.

“Mm. We need to go liberate your things from grandma's house first,” she said. “How do you feel
about sneaking around a bit?”

Genma grinned up at her, so she took that to mean he found the prospect exciting.

“Really, Kyo?” Aita asked, sounding tired. “You should be resting, and it's not like you couldn't just go there and ask for the midget's things.”

“Yeah,” she agreed easily. “But I don't want to.”

“Haname-baa-san is weird,” Ashika harrumphed and wrapped a hug around Kyo's hips. “Come visit soon, nee-san,” she added with a bit of a pout.

“We're due some serious training, soon,” Kyo said with a smile down at the girl. “Hide and Seek might be fun.”

Ashika shone up. “Deal!”

Kyo laughed a little, reached out to smooth down Ashika's hair and then turned to look at Aita, feeling the smile slide off her face. “Thank you, Aita,” she said seriously, feeling something tighten in her chest, because she was so damn grateful she didn't know how to convey just how-

“You don't need to do that,” Aita told her simply. “Just take care of yourself and come give me a hug every now and then.”

Kyo managed a lopsided smile. “I love you,” she told him, because she couldn't think of anything else to say to convey how she felt.

Aita sighed heavily.

“We love you, too!” Ashika huffed, face going bright red and refusing to look at anyone.

Kyo grinned and squeezed her brother tightly as she leaned down to press a kiss to Ashika's flushed cheek. “I love you, Ashika,” she said, added a second kiss and then straightened up with a sigh. “Come on, Genma, let's go break into a house.”

“Yes!” her brother exclaimed excitedly.

With Genma clinging to her back like a baby monkey, Kyo having wrapped them both up in a chameleon jutsu, it was child's-play to slip into Genma's bedroom, collect his things and leave a note for Haname to potentially find.

Kyo didn't really care all that much what Haname thought, but she also figured she should do something.

Genma was snickering softly against the back of her shoulder throughout the whole 'mission' and pointed at the things he wanted her to collect.

It didn't take long, and soon enough, Kyo was slipping back out again, clutching their spoils in one hand as she ran across the village towards Katsurou's house.

Genma was still giggling like he was having the time of his life.

It made her smile. That something so simple could bring him so much joy.
“Okay, remember not to touch anything you're not supposed to,” Kyo reminded her brother when she landed outside Katsurou's house, helping Genma down from her back and meeting his gaze.

“I know, nee-san!” he huffed, all but rolling his eyes. “I'm not a baby.” He was clearly offended by her fussing. “I'm six and a half, almost seven!”

“I know you know, but it's important,” Kyo sighed. “This isn't our house, and I haven't asked permission to bring you. Which means you have to be on your best behaviour.”

“Okay,” Genma agreed quietly, reaching out to take her hand.

With a mental shrug, Kyo unlocked the door and walked inside, taking in the familiar hallway and sitting room it opened up into.

“Come, are you hungry?” She turned to Genma the moment she'd taken off her sandals and put down her brother's bag.

“Is that okay?”

“Yeah, it's okay. Just no touching personal things or anything shinobi related.”

Genma agreed easily enough and followed at her heels into the kitchen.

It was quick and easy to whip up some food for both of them, and an added portion for Katsurou-sensei, too, obviously, since she was sort of intruding in his house.

Meanwhile, Genma did his homework at the kitchen table, and when he was done, he bounced up to her to help cook with eager enthusiasm, chattering at her about the Academy all the while.

Talking about his lessons and the fact Ashika and him were becoming really good friends with a 'Shohei' and all the fun they'd been getting up to while she'd been gone.

He kept it up while they ate, too, and Kyo listened with something that felt like relish.

...wait, was this how Katsurou-sensei felt when she was talking to him about her problems?

Having to very briefly resist the urge to slap a hand over her face, Kyo instead focused back on the present and smiled at her little brother, who grinned back.

“Where's the bathroom?” he asked when they were done with the dishes. “I need to pee, and we need to wash up.” He blinked at her. “Right?”

“Yeah,” she agreed amusedly. “I'll show you.”

Kyo opened the door to the bathroom and walked inside, Genma being quick to approach the toilet.

“Sit down to pee,” she ordered absently. “You can stand up and pee as much as you want out in the field, but in a bathroom, you sit down.”

“Nee-san,” Genma whined, but did do as directed. “All the boys at school say only girls sit down to pee,” he huffed, pouting at her.

“And what's wrong with being a girl?” Kyo challenged, eyebrows raised as she shot him a look before she went back to taking off her gear and placing it aside. “Besides, it's very unhygienic to stand up, so until you're the one cleaning the bathroom every week, you’ll sit. It's also much healthier to sit down,” she continued.
“Why?” Genma asked curiously.

Kyo frowned as she tried to remember... “You don't empty your bladder properly when standing up, so if you're unlucky, it can eventually make you sick,” she shared, fairly certain that was at least close enough to the truth.

The Before felt like an age ago, but a lot of things still stuck.

Like random facts and snippets of information.

“Oh.” Genma stared at the wall while he contemplated that. “I guess it's sort of nice?” he added, though he sounded dubious at best.

Kyo snorted. “You don't have to find it nice, just know that I'll be very upset with you if I have to clean pee off the floor and the toilet, and I will definitely make you help,” she warned easily. “Tou-san sits to pee when he's at home,” she added.

Genma tilted his head, having probably never really thought about that.

By the time he hopped off the toilet and flushed, Kyo had begun to undress and her brother eventually migrated to just beside her, touching one of the more impressive bruises on her side.

“Are you okay, nee-san?”

“Yeah. I'm okay.” She sent him a quick smile. “Now come on, I'm really tired and would like to go to bed.”

Even though it was very early and way before Genma's bedtime, he didn't complain or look the least bit reluctant.

Twenty minutes later, Kyo led the way into the bedroom that had been hers since she'd been eight and walked straight up to the bed and flopped down on it.

She struggled with the duvet for a second, before she managed to pull it out from under her and instead drape it over herself, then relaxed with a heavy, content sigh.

Genma crawled onto the bed beside her and burrowed down under the duvet to latch onto her side, wrapping his arms around her in a careful hug.

“Are you sure you're okay, nee-san?”

Kyo hummed and wrapped her arms around her brother, pulling him closer. “It was a difficult mission, and it made me feel very,” she hesitated briefly, “sad.”

“Oh. Did you lose a fight?”

It was an innocent question, but Kyo couldn't help but laugh softly, even though it wasn't really funny.

Losing a fight usually meant you were dead. Or at the very least badly off enough you had to be hospitalized.

“No, there weren't any fights during the mission,” she shared quietly, and Genma raised his head to stare owlishly at her. “I got into a fight with a friend when I got back.”

“Why?”
“Because he said something that really upset me and I wanted to hit someone. I know he doesn’t mind and he thought it was fun.”

“You have weird friends, nee-san,” Genma informed her seriously and Kyo couldn't help but snort out a laugh.

“Yeah, I do, don’t I? But I like them,” she sighed and squeezed her brother gently. “Sorry I'm so boring, but I need to sleep. Will you be okay?”

“Yep.”

“Mm, good. Love you, Genma,” Kyo breathed and was already falling asleep.

-x-x-x-

Genma had been resting with nee-san for quite a while, and it was nice. He'd missed her, but she looked a bit... sad, he supposed.

And all the bruises looked like they hurt; he knew from taijutsu practice.

Sometimes, bruises hurt a lot.

After a while, he couldn't help but squirm a little, though, because he needed to pee again, and he always had a snack before bed...

This wasn't home, though, and nee-san had told him not to touch anything.

But he really needed to pee.

“Nee-san,” Genma whispered, even though nee-san was sleeping and looked like she definitely shouldn't wake up yet. “Nee-san.”

“Mm?” nee-san hummed back, not really moving.

“I need to use the bathroom,” he told her, poking her arm a little.

Nee-san sighed and shifted, lifting her arm from around his middle and rolled over on her back.

Now free to move, Genma shuffled off the bed and quickly padded across the floor and made his way to the bathroom.

The rest of the house was dark and it was a bit scary, but at least he knew nee-san was just in the other room.

It was fine.

Genma peed, -sitting down!- flushed and then went to wash his hands, even though it was a bit difficult to reach properly. At least he wasn't little enough he couldn't wash his hands without a step stool.

He couldn't wait until he was as tall as nee-san, or even tou-san.

He couldn't wait to go on missions with them and make sure they never got hurt ever again. Neither nee-san nor tou-san would be coming home with bruises and stuff if Genma was there to help them.

Done washing up, Genma exited the bathroom and wondered if it would be okay to go to the kitchen
on his own to get something to eat. Maybe a fruit? That wasn't either personal or shinobi stuff!
That meant it'd be fine, right?
Genma didn't really have time to make a decision before he walked into something firm he hadn't expected to be there.
With a small yelp, he lost his balance and ended up on his butt on the floor, blinking up at...
Uh-oh.
Genma didn't move, and he felt very cold and alone all of a sudden as he stared up at the scary-looking man that was eyeing him.
He wanted to call for nee-san, but he couldn't move.
The man raised a hand to scratch at his cheek, and Genma couldn't tell what he was thinking at all.
“Well,” he said, sounding stern. “This is a first.” He eyed Genma even more. “Kyo bring you with her, huh.”
Genma was pretty sure it hadn't been a question, but he still nodded. “She's sleeping,” he managed to say, even though his voice was shaking.
“Bet that's a bit early for you, isn't it?” the man asked, and he still looked really stern and scary and almost mean, but... he hadn't yelled at him yet. Or said anything not-nice.
Genma managed another jerky nod.
The man sighed, or at least he thought he did, because it didn't make a lot of noise.
He crouched down in front of him. “Are you going to sit there all evening?”
Genma jumped and scrambled to his feet. “No!” And he almost winced, because he hadn't mean to yell. “Sorry,” he added in a far more indoor-appropriate voice.
The man hummed vaguely. “So is there anything you need?” he asked after a bit of a pause, straightening out of his crouch again.
Would it be okay to tell him? He still looked scary, but... well, he was friends with nee-san, right?
“'m hungry,” Genma mumbled uncertainly, because he still didn't know if this was okay.
He could always scream for nee-san, though, if something happened.
“I'm sure there's something appropriate in the kitchen,” was all the man said and slowly turned and walked that way.
Was Genma supposed to follow, or...?
“You coming?”
Genma jumped again and hurried after him, not sure what was going on any more, but at least it didn't seem bad.
Which was probably good?
Genma watched the man open the fridge, finding the food nee-san had cooked earlier. He'd even helped!

Instead of taking out any of that, the man instead grabbed a few vegetables and put them on the counter.

Genma couldn't help but wonder what he was supposed to do, but he eventually decided to creep over to take a seat at the table, because that was safe, right?

Grandma wanted him to do that when she thought he was in the way, sometimes. Or go out and play. But Genma wasn't really dressed to go outside and he didn't want to, either.

He wanted to stay with nee-san.

Blinking at the mug that was put down in front of him, Genma then raised his head to blink at the man, who added a bowl of miso soup and a bit of fruit on a plate, then went to take the seat on the other side of the table, where he'd already given himself a similar snack.

“Th-Thanks,” Genma stuttered and blew on his soup.

He couldn't help but peer curiously at the man, though, because this was actually much nicer than he'd been expecting.

When he'd eaten his soup and had started on his fruit, he felt much better and almost brave! So he turned back to the man and asked, “What's your name?”

“Katsurou,” the man -Katsurou- answered without pause.

Wait, he'd known that!

“How do you know nee-san?” Genma had always sort of wondered that.

“I'm her shrink,” Katsurou said, took a sip of his tea and then tilted his head fractionally. “How come Kyo brought you over?”

“I asked. I haven't seen nee-san in forever, and she keeps being busy,” Genma huffed irritably. “With important stuff. So I asked if I could sleep with her tonight and she said yes. Then we came here.” He blinked at Katsurou. “She told me not to touch any of your things, and I haven't,” he added, because he didn't want nee-san to get in trouble.

“That's very considerate,” Katsurou said, and he still sounded stern, but Genma was starting to suspect that was just how his voice sounded. Maybe. “Do you know why Kyo decided to come here?”

“That's very considerate,” Katsurou said, and he still sounded stern, but Genma was starting to suspect that was just how his voice sounded. Maybe. “Do you know why Kyo decided to come here?”

“She's sad. She fought with her friend, and now there are lots of bruises. It looks like it hurts, and Aita-nii was worried.” Genma thought about it a bit more, and then added, “And she said it was a difficult mission.” He pursed his lips. “Do you know what kind of mission it was?” he asked hopefully, because nee-san hardly ever told him anything about her missions!

And he bet it was really interesting.

What if she'd saved a princess or something?

“That's classified,” Katsurou said, not even stopping to think about it. “You don't like tea?”

Genma tilted his head at the question, and then glanced down at the mug he'd been provided with.
“It's okay, but it's still too hot.” He shrugged and kicked his legs a little under the table. “Have you been a ninja for long?”

“Yes.”

“Have you ever been on any cool missions?” Genma stared interestedly at Katsurou.

“A few,” he drawled blandly. “Temperatures can get far below freezing in the Land of Frost.”

Genma made a protesting noise. “That wasn't what I meant!” He gaped at Katsurou a little. “Do you know what cool means?” he asked seriously, because if he didn't know, then Genma would have to try and explain.

“I know what cool means.”

“Are you sure?” Genma squinted at him, because it didn't seem like he knew what it meant.

“Positive,” Katsurou said blandly. “So Kyo's sad. Is that why you're worried?”

Genma startled and blinked at him. Then reached for his tea to see if it was cool enough to drink now, while he thought about it.

“No?” he finally said, still not sure what Katsurou meant.

“So you're not worried about Kyo?”

“Why would I worry about nee-san?” Genma tilted his head curiously. Nee-san was awesome.

Katsurou made a small sound that sounded a bit... amused?

He didn't know and this guy was just weird, really.

“So what are you worried about?” Katsurou asked calmly, sipping some more of his tea.

Genma scowled off to the side and crossed his arms over his chest. “Nothing.”

“Uh-huh.”

“It is!”

“Of course.”

Genma glared at Katsurou, and then heaved a heavy, long-suffering sigh. Was he always this annoying? How did nee-san stand spending time with him?

Then again, nee-san liked to spend time with Minato, so her taste in friends didn't always make sense.

Stupid, smiley blond, trying to weasel his way into nee-san's life!

“I'm gonna go to bed now,” Genma declared firmly, sending Katsurou a look, because there! That would make him stop asking annoying questions. “I'm tired.” At least a little, and he wanted to cuddle more with nee-san.

“Sleep well, Genma-kun,” Katsurou said, watching him grab his dishes and very carefully carry them over to the counter beside the sink.
Genma sniffed, but then paused. “Thank you for the food,” he said dutifully, and then ran out of the room. Before Katsurou could start asking him questions again.

He'd have to ask nee-san about this tomorrow.

-x-x-x-
Kyo woke up slowly, and it took a long time for her to realise she was actually awake. And remember where she was and why she was so tired.

For a brief second, she thought she was still in Suna, because there was a warm body beside her. It took no effort at all to determine it wasn't the Jounin Commander, though, because he was much bigger.

Had far more chakra.

With a small sigh at herself, Kyo shifted to rub at her eyes and then peered over at Genma, who was sleeping like the dead beside her, breathing deep and steady.

She needed the bathroom, and she could feel sensei's chakra out in the sitting room.

Kyo needed to talk to him, about a number of things, but she should probably start with her little brother's presence in his home. Her reasons for bringing him along without asking first, or so much as a word of warning.

She also didn't really want to leave Genma on his own, because waking up in an unfamiliar room on your own could be frightening.

Eyeing her brother, Kyo decided he was probably sleeping deeply enough she could leave without feeling guilty.

And she'd be just in the other room over. So it was fine.

Probably.

Dragging herself from the bed, Kyo forewent getting dressed to instead stagger her way to the bathroom.

That done, feeling marginally more human, Kyo shuffled over to the couch and collapsed into the seat beside Katsurou.

“Sleep well?” he asked.

“Mm.”

“You brought your brother.”

“Couldn't say no,” Kyo muttered. “He asked, and,” she hesitated, trying to put words to her thoughts, “I haven't spent much time with him lately.” She was silent for a moment. “Sorry.”

Katsurou-sensei hummed and didn't comment. “So?” He sent her a pointed look. “I take it you came here to talk?”
Kyo grimaced a little and shifted her seat. Drew up her knees and wrapped her arms around her legs. “You know about the mission, right?”

“Not in detail, but yeah, I know the gist of it.”

She stared down at the sofa cushion she was sitting on. Took a deep breath, and then told him about the mission, from start to finish. About everything.

It felt like another verbal report.

Katsurou listened silently, not interrupting, just letting her talk.

Which she did, until she felt like she had nothing left to say.

The house was utterly silent for a long moment, and Kyo didn't know what she was feeling. Or thinking. Or much of anything in general, really.

She just felt tired.

With a deep sigh, she slowly let go of the tension in her shoulders and did her best to relax.

“You have a fair bit of down-time now. What are you planning to do?” Katsurou asked, rather than immediately turn to everything she’d just dumped on him.

Kyo shrugged.

“Kyo, a conversation requires two participants,” he said. “The report you just gave me wasn't anything other than that; a report.”

“I know,” Kyo muttered uncomfortably. “But I don't know how to-” How to talk about this without feeling like...

“What's the main issue?” Katsurou asked sedately.

“Everyone assuming I'm only good for one thing, which is sex,” she huffed bluntly. “That that's the only reason I'd be put on a team, sent on a mission.” Her face twisted with bitterness and it pulled on the scab on her lower lip.

“It's a way people are going to underestimate you,” Katsurou murmured with a tired sigh.

“I know!” she snapped irritably, before she took a deep breath and tried to calm down. “I know,” she repeated, more collected. “But it's not supposed to be like **this**.”

“In what way?”

Kyo sent him a dark look, before she went back to scowling at the couch. “I didn't- I thought I'd be a secretary. Not a-” she cut herself off with a huff.

“It's a common strategy, Kyo. And a sound one. It ensures shinobi from other villages will barely give you a second glance,” Katsurou said evenly.

Kyo stood up abruptly, because she couldn't sit still, couldn't **do nothing**, right now.

She paced in front of the coffee table, not so much as looking at Katsurou-sensei. “And no one thought to **tell me that**? Before we left the village? Or just made sure I was aware that that was something I'd be required to do?” She stomped a foot angrily, but didn't stop pacing for so much as a
second. She just needed to get some of these feelings out. “Instead I had to-” she cut herself off again, growling irritably.

She was pretty sure Katsurou was frowning faintly at her, as if he was ever so slightly confused. “You had to what?”

“Be told to follow the Jounin Commander to his bedroom, told to wash and then get on the bed,” Kyo spat.

Katsurou was silent for a long heartbeat. “Senju Takeshi is a good man, Kyo.”

“So what!” she hissed back, whirling around to glare at him. “I know that! But that doesn't change that if he'd really wanted to have sex, there would have been nothing I could have done to stop him!” She was panting harshly by the time she was done, just meeting Katsurou's gaze.

She resumed her pacing.

“It wasn't anything other than pretend,” Katsurou said quietly.

“No, it wasn't,” Kyo hissed and kicked the coffee table noisily. “It wasn't just-” She hated the way she couldn't properly articulate her feelings, get out what she wanted to say. Couldn't dislodge the words in her throat. “I'm thirteen! All of those men were-” she pointed aggressively in the direction of the Hokage tower, all without looking away from Katsurou-sensei, “at least fifteen years older than me! And let's not even talk about the Suna nin, and the fucking Kazekage!”

“You'll wake your brother.”

Kyo kicked the coffee table again, making it skid across the floor, not giving a shit about the way her foot smarted.

She grit her teeth and took a deep breath, fruitlessly trying to calm down.

“Kyo, missions like these are difficult,” Katsurou sighed and rubbed at his face.

Kyo scoffed derisively. “Look me in the eyes and tell me a thirteen year old boy would have been treated the same. Tell me a shinobi in my position would have been expected to play the part of- without a word of complaint, or so much as a warning!”

Katsurou stared at her, and she couldn't read him. “Kunoichi are-”

“WHY!?” Kyo almost shouted at him, feeling so frustrated she didn't know what to do with herself. “Why does that make a difference? I'm a shinobi! I fight just as much as-! It shouldn't matter!”

Katsurou-sensei sighed softly and rubbed at his jaw. “Kyo, I know you don't want to hear this, but don't you think puberty is making you-”

She didn't let him finish.

Kyo wasn't fully aware of what she'd just unsealed to throw at him, but it wasn't a weapon.

Katsurou tilted his head aside and a second later, something wooden clattered noisily to the floor behind the sofa, on the other side of the room.

“Don't,” Kyo said in a strangled voice. “Don't you dare. Say that to me.” She felt like she couldn't breathe. “One moment, I'm an adult and everything's supposed to be fine. The next, I'm nothing but a child and I should do as I'm told. And people switch it up on me however they please and expect me
to smile and be happy! Don't you *dare* try and tell me I'm nothing more than a hormonal little *girl* who just hasn't adjusted to her place in the world!"

'Your brother's awake,' Katsurou signed at her, face utterly blank and jaw clenched shut.

Kyo bared her teeth aggressively and stalked off without another word.

It felt incredibly satisfying to slam the door shut behind her, though it was ruined by the instant guilt she felt at the sight of Genma's wide eyes.

Kyo panted harshly and for a second, she had no idea what to say.

"'m sorry," she managed after a moment. "Are you okay? Did you sleep well?"

Genma blinked at her, looking fearful and worried. "Nee-san?"

"It's okay, I'm just- I'm a bit angry," she admitted. "Not at you." She exhaled sharply and then did her best to shove her negative feelings aside.

"Okay," Genma said quietly.

Kyo got onto the bed with a small smile, holding her arms out for a hug, hoping her brother would comply.

The boy instantly got on his hands and knees to crawl over and flop against her for a hug.

"It's your day off," Kyo said, pressing her cheek against his soft hair. "What do you want to do today?"

"I get to decide?"

"Yeah. Today, I'm all yours."

The blinding grin that that earned her probably shouldn't make her feel as guilty as it did, but it did. Kyo seriously needed to spend more time with her brother.

"Can we go visit the baby?" Genma instantly asked, looking so hopeful she knew she'd do anything to keep him happy.

"Yeah," she agreed quietly, and then hugged him even tighter.

Slipping out of Katsurou-sensei's house was easy and something she'd done a hundred times before, and she determinedly didn't think about the man.

He could just-

No, not thinking about it. She was spending today with Genma and that was that.

Squinting slightly at the Senju compound up ahead, Kyo took a moment to glance down at her brother, who was holding her hand and skipping along beside her.

They'd stopped for breakfast, and then swung by home to get the stuffed animal Genma had given to little Aiko-chan that she'd forgotten to send with Nawaki.
...urgh, she still couldn't think that name without also thinking about the Kiri mission. And she'd rather just not.

“Remember, Genma,” she said, well before they reached the gate guard. “I don't know if we'll be allowed in, and I don't know if Nawaki is there or at work.”

“I know, nee-san, but we're still gonna try, right?” her brother returned with another wide grin.

Kyo couldn't help but smile back. “Of course.” She'd promised, and today, there wouldn't be anything preventing her from fulfilling that promise.

She was on leave.

Walking up to the Senju guard, Kyo nodded a polite greeting and met his gaze. “We're here to visit Nawaki. Is he home?”

The man hummed a little and looked the two of them over. “Yeah, know where to go?”

Kyo hesitated for a fraction of a second. “He lives near Tsunade, doesn't he?” At least that was what she'd assumed.

The guard nodded simply. “Just ask someone if you get confused.” And he waved them inside without any fuss.

Well, that had been remarkably easy.

...she should probably not question it right now.

“Come on, nee-san!” Genma urged, tugging impatiently on her hand and doing his best to drag her across the compound.

“Genma, you don't know where we're going,” she pointed out mildly, but did pick up her pace a bit. And adjusted the direction they were going.

Rather than let her words discourage him, Genma just bounced along and chattered at her about little Ai-chan.

“Do you think they'll let me be her nii-san like you're Ashika's nee-san?” he asked her, all but vibrating with barely contained excitement.

“Well, we can certainly ask,” Kyo said, having to bite back a laugh. “Anyone would be lucky to have you as their nii-san.”

Genma beamed up at her.

Kyo walked confidently through the compound and entered the main building, easily making their way towards Tsunade’s apartment, still betting on Nawaki living nearby.

They were siblings, both children of the clan head, right? It made sense.

“Is this it?” Genma asked when she stopped in front of a door.

“No, but I'll ask for directions.”

“Oh. Okay.”
With one last glance at her impatient brother, Kyo knocked and waited. She could feel Tsunade was home; the woman's chakra was quite distinct.

A moment later, the door slid open and Tsunade fixed her with a look, one eyebrow already raised. She had one of her children on her hip.

“What?”

“Hello, Tsunade,” Kyo returned. “Would you be willing to tell us where we can find Nawaki? We're here to visit him.”

Tsunade flicked a look at Genma, who offered a tentative smile back, and then shrugged. “Three doors over that way,” she directed. “Pop in for a word before you leave, will ya?”

“Alright,” Kyo agreed, though she wasn't sure she'd like it.

She had Genma with her, but there was nothing saying she couldn't just grab him and go full stealth to make a break for it anyway.

Genma thought that was fun. It'd be fine.

Her brother tugged impatiently on her hand. “Come on, nee-san! We know the way now! I wanna visit the baby!”

“Yeah, yeah, I'm coming,” she huffed amusedly, sent Tsunade an appreciative nod and wandered off. “Hello, Nawaki,” she greeted once she'd knocked on the right door and the teenager in question had opened.

He, too, had a child on his hips, only this one was crying.

Nawaki took one look at her, pleadingly held out his daughter towards her at the same time as his eyes filled with tears.

Kyo sighed, but accepted the girl and walked inside, Genma right beside her and staring intently up at Ai-chan.

“Have you changed her diaper?” she asked idly, watching Nawaki nod. “Fed her? Checked that it's not her gums hurting because she's teething?”

Nawaki nodded again only to freeze at her last question.

He stared wetly at her a second, and then mutely walked up to place his hand gently on Ai-chan's cheek.

“Didn't think of that,” he mumbled while he worked.

“And yet you're a medic,” Kyo teased lightly, trying not to feel tired. Little Aiko was still crying, though it was calming quickly now the problem was being seen to and she was clinging very tightly to Kyo's shirt, pulling on the material.

“I don't work with babies!” Nawaki exclaimed, sounding and looking frayed around the edges. “Nee-san is teaching me about poisonings! Severe physical trauma! At this point, I can repair ruptured organs and broken bones! I can-!”

“I'm sorry, I didn't mean it like that,” Kyo hurriedly assured him before his slightly raised voice set Ai-chan off again. She took a deep breath. “How are you holding up, Nawaki?” she couldn't help
but ask, because he didn't look too great.

There were dark bags under his eyes and he was still on the brink of crying.

He blinked mutely at her, hand falling away from Ai-chan's mouth when he was done, and the little girl was clearly appeased.

Kyo sighed and looked around, then walked over to set the baby down in the play area very obviously set up for her benefit and sent a smile at her brother.

"Why don't you give Ai-chan the toy you brought her and then play with her a little? Be gentle," she reminded.

"Okay!" Genma agreed and eagerly flopped down beside Ai-chan, who blinked curiously at him and then launched an enthusiastic stream of incomprehensible baby babble.

That taken care of, Kyo turned back to Nawaki, who was watching them, shoulders slumped and looking rather defeated, in her humble opinion.

And also like he very much wanted to cry.

Suppressing a heavy sigh, Kyo walked up to him and pulled him into a lose hug, making it more than clear he could step out of it at any moment.

Instead, Nawaki latched onto her and sobbed into her shoulder, as if this was what he'd been waiting for for days.

A good cry could do a lot to make you feel better when you felt like shit; she ought to know.

Kyo absently rubbed Nawaki's back while he soaked her shoulder with tears, every breath racking his body as he cried.

It took a few minutes but he eventually calmed down.

She patted his back and leaned back to try and look at him. "Feel better?"

"Yeah," Nawaki rasped back, taking half a step back to rub at his eyes, sniffling a little. "Sorry. I just- there's been a lot, and she's crying half the time and I don't think she likes me, and everyone's made it clear she's my responsibility," he mumbled, breath hitching a little, as if he was about to start crying again. "I'm not working as much, but can't really sleep."

Well, that sounded like it generally sucked for him.

"If it's any consolation, it'll get better. It's only been a few months, and she's getting older."

"I know," Nawaki sniffled and took a deep breath. "It's really good to see you again, Kyo-chan," he looked up to meet her gaze and then leaned forward as if to-

Kyo shoved a hand at his mouth at the same time as she tried to control the spike of acute panic cutting through her core.

She was suddenly very aware of the fact they were still half-hugging, and this could possibly be considered far more intimate than she'd honestly intended.

"...what are you doing?" she couldn't help but ask, the words tumbling from her mouth. He surely hadn't just tried to kiss her, right!? And dear god, that better not mean- "You're not in love with me,
“Right?” she blurted, voice several octaves higher than normal.

Nawaki blinked confusedly at her, eyes still red-rimmed and shining. “I thought you liked me?” he asked, voice muffled against her palm.

“Why!?” Kyo yelped, and yeah, she wasn't doing a good job of controlling that panic.

“You,” Nawaki blinked at her some more, “hugged me and let me cry on you?”

What did that have to do with anything!? And she still had her hand pressed over his mouth, because she hadn't thought to remove it. It actually felt safer to keep it there, for now, though.

“By that logic I was in love with you before I'd even met you!” Kyo hissed in a half-strangled voice, feeling twitchy. “I hugged you because you're my friend and you looked miserable!” She took a deep breath. “I don't do romantic love!”

Yep, that was definitely panic.

“Are you okay, Kyo-chan?”

“No!” Kyo took a few deep breaths, trying to calm down. “Just to- make sure, you're not in love with me?” She eyed Nawaki warily.

“I think I have a bit of a crush,” Nawaki mumbled against her palm, avoiding eye-contact and cheeks pinking slightly.

Kyo twitched and dearly wanted to go full stealth and disappear, damn it, but there was Genma, and she couldn't just-

“I'll go see what Tsunade wanted to talk to me about,” she announced abruptly, jerking away from Nawaki, who looked hurt, but she couldn't deal with that right now. “I'll be back in a while. Genma, behave yourself and listen to Nawaki.” Kyo shot her brother a look, and she was doing her best to act like she wasn't a hair away from running for her life. “We'll,” she turned back to Nawaki, feeling like her stomach was tying itself in painful knots, “talk about this later,” she muttered, and left.

She couldn't deal with this right now.

Urgh, she might as well actually go and see what Tsunade had wanted.

If nothing else, Kyo could definitely do with a good distraction right now.

.

After hiding in the rafters for about half an hour, doing her best to calm down and not feel like there were ants crawling around under her skin, Kyo silently admitted defeat and dropped down to knock on Tsunade's door.

Again.

It took a bit longer for her to open this time, and Kyo was once more fixed with a dry, somewhat unimpressed look by the woman.

“You wanted to talk,” Kyo said by way of greeting.

Tsunade huffed, but stepped aside to let her in without a word and closed the door behind her again.
“Wanna tell me why Jiraiya's under the impression you're still out of the village?”

Not really. “I just came back,” was what she said, though, “and I have some stuff to deal with.” She sent Tsunade a brief look, before she focused on the man sitting on the floor further into the room, holding one of Tsunade's children on his knee. “I'm going to meet up with him tomorrow.”

Tsunade hummed and walked over to her teammate, and Kyo absolutely didn't know how to deal with being in the same room as Orochimaru right now.

This day *sucked* and could just go and jump off a cliff or something.

The thing with Katsurou, then Nawaki, and now *Orochimaru*.

What the hell had she done to deserve this?

Would it be awfully rude to just take off and leave?

...probably.

“So was that it? That was the only thing you wanted to talk to me about?” Kyo asked, deciding to ignore the man for now, seeing as he was content to do the same to her. Busy studying Shinrin with clinical interest while the boy babbled happily at him.

Wait, Tsunade's children and Nawaki's daughter were roughly the same age, weren't they? That was... she didn't even know.

In any other situation, she'd probably find it amusing.

“No,” Tsunad said. “Takeshi asked me to take a look at you, seeing as you apparently took off before he could tell you to go see a medic.” She fixed her with another unimpressed frown.

There were several unspoken questions in there Kyo didn't have the slightest interest in answering.

“I already went to the hospital,” Kyo informed her curtly. “It's fine.”

She didn't want to talk about the Jounin Commander, the mission, or her injuries. *Definitely* not with Orochimaru in the room.

“Was that all? I've promised to spend the day with my brother,” Kyo tacked on a tad stiffly, but she didn't care.

“Fine,” Tsunade muttered, still frowning at her, and she hesitated slightly, as if she wanted to ask something, but sent her teammate and her children a look and then shook her head shortly. “Guess you can go, then.”

Kyo nodded and excused herself, and it was only when she was back out in the corridor she realised this meant she'd have to go talk to Nawaki, probably.

With a heavy sigh, Kyo walked up to lean against the wall, gently thumping her forehead protector against the solid wood a few times. Trying to think.

She *didn't want* to have this conversation. At all.

But she rationally realised she'd probably have to, no matter how much just the thought made it feel like her stomach was threatening to crawl out of her with sheer discomfort.
Why did everything have to be so damn complicated?

Couldn't people just... keep their feelings and stuff to themselves?

But there was nothing for it, really; she'd just have to suck it up, bite her cheek and deal. She couldn't leave Genma with Nawaki for the rest of the day and she wanted to spend time with her little brother, damn it.

So she had to do this first. Fine. She could do that.

Genma had already gotten a fair amount of time with Ai-chan, and she was fairly sure she could entice him with training if things got too uncomfortable to bear.

It'd be fine.

With one last soft thump against the wall, Kyo raised her head, took a deep breath and then walked back towards Nawaki's door.

Knocked, and then walked inside without waiting for a response.

Nawaki glanced up from the scroll he was reading, sent the two kids a glance and then turned to gaze expectantly at her.

Looking like a kicked puppy.

Fuck everything.

Kyo took another deep breath -she could do this- and forced herself to walk over. Sit down in front of the boy.

“I'm sorry if I hurt your feelings,” she pressed out to start, and she meant it, she just felt a bit like she'd rather be anywhere else than here, right now. Having this conversation. About feelings.

Nawaki nodded sadly, accepting the apology, at least, which was a start. “I just don't understand,” he mumbled. “I thought you liked me. You've helped me so much, and you haven't yelled at me like everyone else and I thought-” he cut himself off, cleared his throat. “I don't understand, Kyo-chan.” He peered pitifully at her.

Kyo stubbornly resisted the urge to shuffle away from him and widen the distance between them, because that would just be rude and childish. “I told you; I don't do romantic love. I can't- I've never been in love, I don't understand it, I don't want it. It makes me feel like I'm trapped,” she admitted awkwardly, feeling stiff.

Not that she knew why she felt like that, she just did.

“But, why?” Nawaki asked, looking genuinely confused.

Kyo shrugged. “I just do. And all those things you mentioned, I did them because you're my friend. You're my friend, and you needed help, so why wouldn't I help?” She frowned at him, crossing her arms over her chest and then fixed her gaze at the wall off to the side. “And yelling at you when all of this has already happened is just stupid and doesn't really accomplish anything. So long as you're dealing to the best of your ability, that's fine,” she huffed.

Nawaki sniffled again and Kyo shot him an alarmed look. “See?” he hiccuped a little. “This is why- Are you sure you don't like me?” And he sounded weirdly hopeful.
“I like you,” Kyo huffed warily. “As a friend,” she hurriedly tacked on when Nawaki perked up minutely. “What's wrong with being friends??”

“Nothing,” Nawaki muttered, and he was definitely moping.

“Listen, Nawaki,” Kyo said, still eyeing the boy dubiously. “You getting a girlfriend won't miraculously solve all your problems.”

Nawaki sighed and stared at the floor. “I know that.”

“Okay. Just so that's clear.” Kyo pursed her lips. “And even if you still want a girlfriend, it won't be me.”

He contemplated that for a long moment, and the only sound was Genma's voice, quietly talking to Ai-chan in the background as he played with her. Something about the stuffed animals being ninjas?

“And you won't ever change your mind?” he asked quietly, peering up at her through his lashes.

...Nawaki had ridiculous puppy-eyes, but Kyo just felt unimpressed.

“Did you even hear what I said?” she couldn't help but bite out, and she'd curled her shoulders towards herself at some point. “I don't- I can't handle this love thing, okay? I don't know if you can tell, but it's making me uncomfortable.”

She liked Nawaki as a friend. He was nice and enthusiastic and kind, even if he also was a bit of an idiot, but right now, she just wanted to not see him in a while.

Until this whole thing just faded away into nothing.

Give them both some distance.

“Okay,” Nawaki agreed softly and that was that.

They didn't talk about it any more and Kyo was so relieved she felt like she might just melt through the floor.

.

The rest of the day was spent playing and training with Ashika and Aita, and Kyo even got in some training herself.

It was nice, and she got a chance to not think about anything else for a while.

Was busy enough focusing on bettering her stealth while both her little siblings sparred in the background.

“Can still sense you,” Aita said.

“You already said,” Kyo returned, not opening her eyes. “Trying to get a handle on it over here.”

“I'm just letting you know you haven't gotten it yet,” Aita quipped.

Still without opening her eyes, Kyo shifted to kick at Aita's knee and didn't dignify that with a verbal response.
“Ow,” Aita said, clearly being a dork and not meaning it all that much. “You’re the one that asked for my help.”

Kyo hummed, because yeah, that was true. He just didn't have to be so annoying about it.

A minute later, she decided it was time for a pause and opened her eyes with a frustrated sigh. “How the hell am I supposed to blend in more with the environment?”

Aita shrugged. “You just have to? There are different ways to go about it, obviously, but there's chakra everywhere, and everyone's got their own flavour.”

Kyo smirked at the man. “Sounds like you walk around licking everything and everyone around you,” she teased.

Aita scoffed. “I think you're confusing me with you, Kyo.” He grinned. “And I suppose you're just gonna have to find some way to blend in with the environment. Somehow.”

“Gee, I wish there was a good sensor somewhere who could tell me how to do that,” she drawled, leaning her chin in her hand, elbow resting on her thigh. “Preferably someone I know and like and maybe even a friend,” she continued dryly.

Aita was laughing at her. “I don't know, Kyo. You could maybe ask Katsurou?”

Kyo stuck her tongue out at him and ignored that statement. “How's it going for you two?” she asked, glancing at the two kids over her shoulder.

“Fine!” two voices chorused, which wasn't at all suspicious.

There was a bit of a pause and Kyo met Aita's gaze, pretending she didn't notice the two children 'sneaking' up on her.

Next second, two small bodies impacted her back and Kyo huffed. “You caught me.”

Genma flopped into her lap and pouted up at her. “Nee-san,” he whined. “You're supposed to be scared!”

“Oh! Don't do that! You scared me!” she exclaimed and pressed a hand to her chest.

Genma and Ashika both giggled.

“That doesn't count!” Ashika snickered, all but draping herself over her shoulder.

“Oh? That's too bad; it's the best I can do.” Kyo grinned. “So I take it you're done with your spar?”

“Yeah,” Genma sighed. “Ashika won again.”

Kyo carded her fingers through his hair. “Don't worry. I lose all the time with most of my friends; you still learn loads.” Most of the time, you learned more from losing than from winning, even.

“Yeah, but with your pointy little needles, you don't need to hit anyone more than once to win,” Aita reasoned. “Hey, Kyo? You guys sleeping at our place tonight?”

Kyo abruptly found herself the focus of three intent stares, if for different reasons. She hummed pensively and eyed her brother. “I think Genma should go back to grandma's house, at least for tonight. Don't want anyone to accuse me of kidnapping.” She smiled humourlessly. “There's the
Academy tomorrow,” she added, before either of the kids could try to protest. “And I'm meeting up with my team tomorrow morning.”

“Back to work,” Genma huffed disappointedly, crossing his arms over his chest.

“Yeah,” Kyo agreed. “But I'll do my best to spend more time with you, okay?”

“Okay,” Genma agreed, and he didn't look entirely convinced, which... was somewhat upsetting, but there wasn't anything she could do about it.

“And you?”

Kyo turned back to Aita. “I have somewhere to be tonight.” She shrugged.

She had another lesson with Spider, and she figured she could just sleep in the Barracks after.

Did that mean she was avoiding Katsurou? Maybe. But she didn't care enough to do anything about it.

That would be a problem for another day, she decided firmly.

-x-x-x-

Thanks to the Suna mission, Kyo had missed Minato's birthday, so the first thing she did when she saw him was all but bowl him over with a hug.

She was still taller than him.

“Happy belated birthday,” she murmured, hugging him tightly.

Minato flailed a little bit, but did hug her back. “Thanks,” he squeaked, and then cleared his throat. “You okay?”

“Mostly,” Kyo sighed and closed her eyes. “Physically,” she amended very softly, but didn't expound on it any more right then. “So what have you been up to while I was otherwise occupied?” She smiled and stepped away from Minato, who huffed and frowned half-heartedly at her.

His face was all pink.

“You're just gonna ignore me, huh,” Jiraiya huffed off to the side.

Kyo rolled her eyes and wandered over to wrap her arms around her stupid sensei's middle in a fond hug. “Hello, sensei. Still as patient and dignified as a small child, I see,” she teased with a small grin.

Jiraiya produced an offended noise, but merely patted her shoulder a few times and left it at that.

He could act however he wanted; it didn't change the fact he looked rather pleased.

Suppressing the urge to shake her head at both of them, Kyo turned back to Minato to send him an expectant look. “Well?”

“Mostly fuuinjutsu,” the boy admitted. “And we did a few missions around the village. Mostly for R&D, because they wanted sensei to advice on a few things?” He sent Jiraiya a questioning look. “It was pretty interesting.”

Huh. Kyo hadn't ever visited Research and Development. Hadn't had any reason to.
“And what's the plan for today?” she asked, rather than dwell on it.

“Sparring, then getting the two of you to waste a lot of chakra,” Jiraiya said cheerfully, rubbing his hands together and easily ignoring the twin groans from both her and Minato. “We have to get back to expanding those reserves of yours, and Kyo's got a fair bit of time off ahead of her, which means we'll take full advantage of the minor vacation.”

Kyo and Minato exchanged a look and then stared at Jiraiya with blatant disbelief.

Vacation. Yeah, right.

Three days later, a little over a week since she got back from that stupid mission, Kyo was on the way home when she spotted a very welcome sight.

Genma and tou-san were walking together a fair distance further down the street, and Kyo ran to catch up with them and impacted her dad's back in a hug.

“Hello, kitten,” Kou greeted with a cough and patted one of her arms. Then coughed again and Kyo frowned up at the back of his head.

“You okay?”

“Just a bit of a cold, it's fine.” She could hear the smile in his voice. “Are you going to let me get a look at you, or are you planning to stick to my back like a burr all the way home?”

Kyo laughed, unable to help herself and let go of the man so she could sidle up beside him. Slipping her hand into his, because he was her dad and she didn't care if some people thought she was too old for it.

“I missed you a lot and it's so nice to see you again!” she told him with feeling, smiling up at him.

“Everyone's home!” Genma agreed with a cheer, throwing his arms in the air. Only to pause. “No, wait, where's Kisaki?” He looked around, as if expecting her to come slinking up to them any second.

When she didn't, he turned to stare expectantly at her.

Kyo grimaced and glanced up at tou-san. “She's angry with me,” she admitted.

Kou sighed and slung his arm around her shoulders, pulling her close. “You can tell us more about it over dinner,” he said, and for now, that was that. “Come on, you little monsters,” he said and bent down to scoop up Genma, all without letting go of her, turning him upside down -to Genma's delight- before slinging him over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. “I don't know about you, but I want a shower and to not leave home for at least a day.”

That sounded like a wonderful plan for the rest of today if you asked Kyo.

The next morning, Kyo woke up and wandered out into the apartment to discover tou-san was still asleep.

With a mental shrug, she got started on breakfast and then went to wake up Genma, because he had school and shouldn't be late.
It was routine.

What wasn't routine was the fact their dad failed to show up in the kitchen by the time breakfast was done.

Kyo frowned in the direction of his bedroom. “Eat your food, I'll go check on tou-san,” she muttered and sent Genma a stern look when he looked like he was about to protest. “You have to leave in twenty minutes,” she reminded him.

Genma sulked and sullenly took another bite of his rice.

Satisfied he was eating, Kyo got up and walked across the apartment.

“Tou-san?” She knocked gently on the door and pushed it open, peering into the room. “You okay?”

He had told them he had a cold, so it wasn't like this was entirely unexpected.

“'m fine,” Kou rasped from the bed, and Kyo almost winced at the sound of his voice. “Went by the hospital before picking up Genma yesterday; told me to rest for a few days. Sleep it off.”

“Okay,” Kyo said, thinking about it. “I'll bring in breakfast for you when Genma's left, okay?”

“Thanks, kitten,” Kou sighed, coughed wetly a few times and then went back to sleep.

Once back in the kitchen, she shared a look with Genma, who peered curiously up at her, despite the lingering traces of unhappiness.

“Tou-san's not feeling so good, so he'll rest. He's sick,” she explained.

Genma blinked at her. “Why?”

Kyo stared back, feeling a bit stumped. “Uh, he must have picked up some bug on his mission?”

“You get sick from bugs?”

“No, no,” Kyo snorted, laughing a little. “It's just what you call viruses and bacteria. Which are what makes you sick. Tou-san's body just have to fight them off and then he'll be back to normal again.”

Genma thought that over with an intent expression for a moment. “It's like a fight?”

“Pretty much, but all the fighters are very, very small. You can't even see them, they're so small.”

Her brother wrinkled his nose. “Weird,” was his verdict and then jumped off his chair. “I'm done! Do I have to help with the dishes?” he asked.

“Put your dishes in the sink, at least,” Kyo sighed. She needed to talk to tou-san about possibly making Genma help more around the apartment, because Haname was predictably spoiling him rotten.

It would be nice with some extra help with the cleaning, if nothing else.

Before she knew it, Genma was off and Kyo was left on her own.

Well. In a way, at least, because tou-san was still present, if asleep.

Rather than dwell on it, Kyo prepared breakfast for the man, wondered if they didn't have a tray stashed away somewhere, and then carried everything off to place on the bedside table next to where
he was sleeping.

Tou-san looked a bit flushed, Kyo noted worriedly. He probably had a fever.

She went to get a large glass of water for him, too. Then cleaned up the kitchen and hurried off to meet up with her team.

For more chakra training stuff, and if he didn't give them a break soon, Kyo was relatively certain she'd be able to convince Minato Jiraiya deserved to get a little bit poisoned in revenge.

Just a tad.

Like, make him get the runs for a day, to give the two of them a break if nothing else.

Dragging herself home as soon as training was done, absently making sure Minato was okay enough to at least find his way back to his apartment, Kyo was still more worried about tou-san.

He'd been alone for several hours by now, and she hoped he'd gotten better, but that didn't mean her mind wasn't also pointing out all the ways things could have gone wrong.

What if he'd fallen over and hit his head?

What if his fever had gotten worse?

What if, what if, what if.

It was making her head spin, so she figured she'd just have to go home and make sure.

The apartment was quiet when she walked in, and she wasted no time in taking off her shoes and went straight to tou-san's bedroom.

“Tou-san?” Kyo asked, nudging the door open to peer inside.

Her dad was sprawled out on the bed, much like he'd been when she'd left this morning, and when she walked inside, she saw he'd barely eaten anything of the food she'd prepared him.

Frowning worriedly, Kyo gathered everything up and brought it out into the kitchen.

Maybe she should try to make some sort of soup?

Her dad could surely at least get down a bit of miso soup, right?

Nodding to herself, Kyo set to it.

Carrying the bowl of miso soup the moment she was done, she walked back to her father's bedroom.

“Tou-san?” she asked, taking a seat on the mattress beside him.

“Mm?” He sounded more asleep than awake and his voice was barely recognisable it was so rough and raspy.

“I made you soup, tou-san,” Kyo informed him, put the bowl down and then slowly reached out to touch the inside of her wrist to his forehead.

He was very warm. Definitely had a fever.
Kou mumbled something under his breath and blinked blearily at her, trying to turn over onto his back. Didn't quite manage it until Kyo reached out to help him.

His clothes were damp with sweat and she frowned.

“Here,” she said, helping him sit up and carefully handing him the soup bowl and eyed him a moment to make sure he'd be able to hold it on his own.

This seemed to be a bit more serious than a simple cold?

Her dad drinking his soup, Kyo got up to raid his closet for a fresh change of clothes, and she didn't care how awkward this might get because she was worried. And it wasn't like she hadn't ever seen the man naked before.

Placing the fresh clothes at the foot-end of the bed, Kyo hesitated a second, and then went to fetch some clean, cold water and a wash cloth.

If she was going to help him change clothes, then she could definitely wipe him down while she was at it and hopefully bring down the fever a bit at the same time.

Which was the scene Genma stumbled in on, out of breath and a bit wide-eyed when Kyo sent him a distracted look.

“You okay, Genma?” she asked.

“Yep!” the boy was quick to reply, and then shuffled into the room. “Is tou-san okay?”

“He's got a pretty high fever,” she replied, which didn't really answer the question, she was well aware. “Can you give me the shirt over there?”

Genma dutifully grabbed it and gave it to her.

“Kitten,” tou-san slurred, reaching out an uncoordinated hand to ruffle Genma's hair.

Kyo froze. “Tou-san?” she asked, but didn't get any kind of response. “Kou?” she tried, and met her dad's dazed, glazed eyes.

The man mumbled something at her that made her go rigid, but she wasn't sure she'd heard him right.

Until he said it again, that was.

“Isshun,” Kou sighed. “Shouldn't leave,” he mumbled, fumbling for her hand to try and squeeze her fingers. “Stay here.”

“Nee-san?” Genma asked, and he sounded uncertain, and a little bit scared.

“Help me a little here, Genma,” Kyo said softly and quickly and efficiently finished wiping down their father and then pulled on a fresh pair of trousers on the all but boneless man.

He was really far too warm.

Could she carry him to the hospital?

...even if she hadn't been flirting with chakra exhaustion -thanks, Jiraiya- Kyo wasn't sure she could have done that and still keep him comfortable, so.

Kyo sighed and rubbed at her face for a second.
“Alright,” she breathed and then turned to Genma, who was alternately staring at her and tou-san. “Genma, I'm gonna need you to help me for a bit. I'm gonna go get Ryota, but we can't leave tou-san on his own when his fever is this high. I'll show you what to do while I'm gone.”

Genma nodded mutely, looking pale.

Kyo showed him how to keep a cold, wet cloth on Kou's forehead at all times, wetting it regularly, and when she was sure he knew what to do, she walked calmly to the hallway, put on her shoes and walked out of the apartment.

She closed the door softly behind her, and then took off.

Trying her damn best not to get flashbacks to when she'd done something similar for kaa-san, Kyo sped across the village and, instead of rushing to the hospital, Kyo arrived in the Uchiha compound in record time.

The gate guard barely asked what business she had there before just waving her inside.

Fantastic.

Next she knew, she was knocking on the door to Ryota's house.

He'd be home right?

It was in the middle of the afternoon and the sun was shining, but she hadn't thought that far actually, and was Ryota working?

When the door opened Kyo almost startled, and found herself blinking at Fukami.

Oh. Right.

“Hello, Shiranui-san?” the young woman greeted her, looking her over with a very slight wrinkle between her brows.


“Of course, come inside. I'll fetch my husband for you.”

Kyo did and then impatiently waited in the hallway, shifting her weight from foot to foot, telling herself it probably wasn't actually that urgent.

Tou-san wasn't actively dying. He wasn't bleeding, and a few minutes probably wouldn't make any kind of difference.

“Hey, kitten, what's up?” Ryota asked, the moment he came into sight, Fukami trailing after him.

Kyo couldn't blame her for being curious. “Tou-san's got a fever,” she blurted.

“Yeah, he got a cold,” Ryota grunted, frowning at her.

“He thought I was kaa-san. He called Genma 'kitten'. Can you come take a look at him, at least? And potentially bring him to a medic, because I think he maybe needs one.”

Ryota stared at her a moment longer, and then walked up to her and stepped into his sandals. “Come on, kitten,” he said, taking her arm and giving her a gentle nudge. “Let's go.”
Kyo surged forward to give him a quick hug and then they were off back home. She didn't even mind the fact Fukami seemed to be tagging along.

“Genma?” Kyo called out before she'd stepped into the apartment properly.

“Nee-san!” Genma answered and his footsteps came thundering towards her.

Kyo swept him up in a tight hug. “Very well done,” she murmured in his ear. “Thank you. I'm very proud of you. Is he okay?”

“Same as when you left. He called me kitten again,” Genma whispered back.

“Shiranui-san, would you mind me making use of your kitchen?” Fukami asked politely.

“No, sure. Go ahead,” Kyo said distractedly, already following Ryota into tou-san's bedroom.

“Ah, fuck,” Ryota sighed when he spotted Kou. “Well, you sure know how to make an impression,” he muttered and sat down on the edge of the mattress, reaching out to poke Kou on his sweaty forehead. “This is almost as bad as that mission to Tsuchi, remember? Yuuta just about lost his fucking mind.” He huffed a little and then sighed again.

“Where's 'e?” Kou slurred back.

“...yeah, this fever's really fucking you over bad, Kou,” Ryota huffed flatly, and then turned to give Kyo and Genma a look. “Go drink some tea or something, I'll take him to the bathroom. A cold shower can't hurt.”

“Okay, thank you, Ryota,” Kyo sighed and just felt so incredibly relieved she didn't have to be the one calling the shots here.

While Ryota hauled Kou up to do as he'd said, Kyo carried Genma into the kitchen to find Fukami setting out mugs for all three of them, tea already steeping.

“Thank you,” she murmured and sank down into a chair. Genma in her lap, clinging to her.

“Is tou-san gonna be okay?”

“Yeah, he is,” Kyo said, not missing a beat. “We'll try to bring the fever down and if it doesn't work, then we'll take him to the hospital.” It was a bit of an unspoken rule, she supposed, that you didn't bother the medics for anything that wasn't actually serious.

If they'd already taken a look at their dad and prescribed rest and sleep, then that was what they'd try first.

Kyo leaned her cheek against the crown of Genma's head. “He'll be fine,” she breathed tiredly.

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