Katsumi is a normal girl from Konoha. Except for her features, which scream 'foreigner'. And her family history is basically nonexistent. And the Hokage looks at her like he sees something else. Something dangerous. She's admittedly an odd kid but ninja business suits her just fine. As long as she doesn't get killed too early on and makes a couple friends along the way, she'll be plenty happy. But shinobi life is never that simple. She had been told throughout her that she was just a nameless orphan but something in her refuses to believe that. Follow Katsumi on her journey to becoming a worthwhile shinobi while she uncovers her past and writes her future as she realizes that home is only twenty percent location and eighty percent something else entirely.
Igarashi Sachiko knew she was going to die today. It was not something that she feared as she had lived the life of a shinobi since before she was in double digits. However, she did fear for the life of her daughter.

She thought of her family. She thought of her friends. Mostly, she thought along the lines of *This shouldn’t be happening.*

The entire village was celebrating the birth of the Lighting Daimyo’s daughter. Little Igarashi Katsumi-hime came into the world screaming loud enough for everyone in the hospital to hear on a stormy late September afternoon and her parents couldn’t have been more proud.

The child was the result of a perfect political union between the new Daimyo of the Land of Lightning and the only daughter of the Third Raikage. For such an important birth to be so soon on the heels of the end of the Third Shinobi World War was good for morale the advisors kept saying to the young daimyo, but he did not care. Hikaru was just happy that he was able to start a family with a woman that he had loved since they were teenagers.

They had met originally when she had been assigned to guard him on a standard escort mission him on a journey to Kirigakure. Ever since then, he had been immediately smitten with her especially after he witnessed her dispatch four armed bandits twice her size. He had begun courting her the summer after that and they were married three years later at twenty-two and twenty respectively. They had lived happily together for only about six months before all hell broke loose in the world.

That was when the Third Shinobi World War had started. Since his wife was first and foremost a shinobi, she was called back into Kumogakure to help her family strategize and, ultimately, fight. Hikaru did not see a lot of Sachi during the war but he did hear from her frequently in the form of letters. The letters were full of her special brand of humor and wit and he found himself needing them like he needed air to breathe or water to drink. He yearned to be by her side but he had his job to do and she had hers, especially after his father was assassinated and Hikaru himself had to take over as the daimyo.

Three years later, the war was over and Sachi was with child.

Their story was a story of luck; Most political unions did not end up the way theirs did and Hikaru was thankful every day for it. She was his equal in every way and he absolutely adored her. He had been over the moon when he heard Sachi was pregnant and had been eagerly awaiting his child’s birth.

In preparation for their child’s arrival, they had hired Takanashi Akiko, the senior-most medic-nin in the city, to oversee the little princess’ birth. A wizened woman she might have been but her canny blue eyes showed her sharp intelligence and skill. She had shunshined in the morning Sachi went into labor with her young assistant Emiko right behind her. They began to unpack their materials and Hikaru was so stunned at their efficiency that he almost forgot his wife was giving birth to his child in the same room. He remembered when she accidentally used chakra-enhanced strength and nearly
broke his hand during a particularly powerful contraction.

His wife stayed in this state long enough for Hikaru to panic slightly. He turned his silver eyes to the midwife worriedly. He paced and fretted everytime Sachi so much as flinched. She almost laughed at his nervous face as he asked her if she needed anything.

“What I need right now is for your baby to stop shredding my insides,” she hissed, grimacing at the latest bout of contractions. She threw her head back against the pillow and swore a blue streak to fight against the pain. Hikaru’s tan face paled at the sight. He mopped at her brow with a cool towel while she bit back the wild discomfort.

This went on for another five hours before what sounded like a battle cry came from Sachi. She began breathing heavily as she felt a large mass of something making a mass exodus out of her body and a piercing wail rang out into the spacious hospital room.

Igarashi Katsumi had arrived into the world and she wanted everyone to know it apparently.

The midwife and her assistant quickly measured the infant before passing her back to her mother to inspect. Sachi’s hair was plastered to her face as she looked into her daughter’s face lovingly. She looks like me, she thought as she examined her features. Sachi was not one for excessive emotions but after a ten-hour labor, seeing her perfect daughter, she promptly burst into tears. She was in the midst of tearfully counting fingers and toes when the door opened abruptly.

At the sound of Katsumi’s wail, Hikaru burst into the room, pale grey eyes shining. He had been sent out about an hour before because though he was the leader of the entire Land of Lightning, he was in a state of near panic at the sight of his wife in pain and though Akiko-sensei was a very patient woman, she only had so much tolerance. When he saw his wife, happily crying with a small bundle in her arms, and the midwife’s exhausted but proud expression, his shoulders sagged in relief. He seemed to remember himself soon after and walked slowly over to the bed. He placed a kiss on his wife’s sweaty forehead as he peeled back the blanket that had been obscuring his child’s face from him.

“Took you long enough,” Sachi teased, watching his face as he looked at their daughter for the first time. Hikaru might as well have been a million miles away for he did not hear his wife’s jab. He was focused entirely on his child.

He was greeted with the prettiest baby he had ever seen in his life (and he definitely wasn’t biased or anything). She was a beautiful mix of them both, having his strong chin and nose juxtaposed beautifully with her mother’s aristocratic bone structure, mouth, long lashes, and chestnut brown skin.

He let out a surprised laugh as he pulled away the blanket completely to reveal a shock of moon-white curly hair that mirrored his own. He planted a kiss on her forehead as well, feeling his eyes prickling with tears. The loud noise seemed to have startled the baby into opening her eyes to investigate. Staring back at him were the most exquisite gold eyes, eyes he’d only ever seen once. He heard Sachi gasp as she recognized the color as her own. She shifted her gaze to his as some of the happiness in her face was replaced by anxiety.

The midwife walked over to investigate and looked stunned. The woman nodded and walked out, ushering her assistant out with her.

“She inherited my eyes, Hikaru,” she murmured in the empty room, furrowing her brow. “We can protect her right?” Sachi asked her husband, helping the baby (their baby, they had a baby) latch on to her right breast. Her husband grinned at her in that boyish way of his and gave her a kiss that sent
her worries hurtling out the window unmissed.

“With our lives,” he replied, placing a kiss on Katsumi’s head. Sachiko bit her lip worriedly. He noticed her anxiety and placed a hand scarred from mandatory weapons training gently on her face. “If they want Katsumi-chan, they will have to go through an entire village of shinobi,” he reassured her. “Also your family in Kumo,” he snorted, thinking about how excited their extended family was going to be.

* A daughter, I have a daughter! *

“That’s what I am afraid of,” she whispered. She frowned but did not bring it up again. For now, they could just be a normal happy family, enjoying having a baby for the first time.

Two weeks later, the village was in a state of celebration. Every time a new heir is born, the capital city of the Land of Lightning had week-long celebrations to commemorate the momentous occasion. Free food and drink flowed from every restaurant in the city as the citizens honored Katsumi-hime’s birthday.

Hikaru and Sachiko were sent gifts from all of the noble families in the capital and were showered with well wishes from the citizens. Sachiko was sent congratulations from her oldest brother A in the form of the largest stuffed rabbit in the world. B had sent a harried-looking messenger chunin who had read off a rap in the most dispassionate voice she had ever heard that sent her into a fit of giggles. She stifled her laughter and sent back her thanks. They had promised to come to see her and the baby within the next month or so.

They never got the chance to.

On the final night of the festival, the compound was attacked.

It was an efficient invasion of their home that was made even easier by the surplus of civilians and the lack of shinobi due to the festivities. The best Hikaru could do was lead them towards a series of tunnels dug under the estate to aid in their escape. Sachiko had argued with him the entire way that he should come with them. He kissed her and told her that his civilian speed would slow them down too much.

Sachi felt her heart threaten to shatter into a million pieces.

His brown face was pulled into a scowl as the dying yells of their shinobi echoed down the passage, causing the small child in her arms to scrunch up her round face and cry. His expression melted into one of exasperated affection despite the grave situation. He kissed her and their beautiful child quickly before ordering one of the shinobi sent to guard her to barricade the exit of the passage under the estate with a quick doton jutsu.

As Sachiko sprinted forward into the dense forest ahead of her, she tried not to think about how her
village was being razed. She tried not to think about how her husband was probably going to die. She tried not to think about how the shinobi tasked with guarding the daimyo’s wife were being picked off one by one as they sacrificed their lives for her and her daughter. She tried not to think about how when reinforcements came, it would probably be too late. She kept her roiling emotions at bay by thinking about her precious child who had long since stopped crying and just stared up at her with pale gold eyes. It seemed that even her infant knew how dire the situation was.

“Sachiko-sama, we are a quarter of an hour out from the nearest guard post,” her lone shinobi protector, Yu, said to her. They had started with half a dozen. She nodded and kept running, making sure to keep her chakra masked. If they could make it into Kumo proper, they would be safe. A and B would know what to do. If she just kept running, everything would be fine. She had never been particularly religious, but she found herself praying to every deity that she knew of for her daughter’s life.

The night had made the temperature drop dramatically. Autumn in the Land of Lightning was always rainy and cold, especially with only about a month and a half until the blizzards set in late November. Her silken nightgown was already soaked through with rainwater and torn, rendering it thoroughly ruined.

She had hardly had time to grab her weapons pack and throw on some standard-issue shinobi sandals before she was rushed out the door. She took a moment to curse her lack of time to prepare.

The nearest guardpost was only about thirty kilometers northeast, but those fifteen minutes could prove deadly to her baby if she got too cold. She gritted her teeth and picked up the pace, holding her baby tighter to her chest. She had to conserve chakra so she couldn’t keep them warm manually. They just had to hope for the best.

Their luck had run out it seemed when Yu cried out in pain a few moments later. She yanked out several senbon from her shoulder and snarled at their attackers, jumping in front of Sachi, tanto out. Yu opened her mouth as if to say something but never got the chance because of the kunai sticking out of her throat. Sachi was sprayed with hot sticky blood as she held back her cry of alarm. Yu was a good woman. She hadn’t deserved to die like that. None of the shinobi under her employ had deserved to die like they did. She clutched her child tightly and bared her teeth at the half-dozen masked shinobi that had dropped from the trees to surround her.

“I don’t suppose you lot will leave me alone if I ask nicely,” she drawled, trying valiantly to keep her voice from shaking with cold and adrenaline. Sachi knew she must’ve been a sight in her torn pajamas and wet hair. She held out her kunai defensively, feeling a fierce protectiveness well up in her chest. If I have to die now, this is a pretty badass way to go out. She smirked and held her ground.

“Igarashi Sachiko-sama. Hand over the child and come with us,” an operative in what looked to be a feline mask intoned as he stepped towards her. She backed up in response, keeping her eyes on the androgynous figure. She fought back a shiver and looked them in the face seemingly unafraid.

“Fat chance, Kitty,” she said as she launched her kunai at the operative’s face. They sidestepped and darted forward, slashing at her with a katana that would have killed a lesser ninja. She jumped back and met their sword with senbon. While they were distracted by their crossed blades, she aimed a punch at the ninja’s face and frustratingly enough, they dodged that as well. At this point, a wet strand of dark curly hair had come out of its haphazard updo but she paid it no mind. She feigned left and gave them a kick that sent them flying back into a nearby tree.

Another burlier operative made an attempt to flank her. She whirled around and slammed her palm into their neck, causing them to stumble. She then was engaged in a quick series of taijutsu moves
that made her wish she wasn’t still holding her child. **Dodge, feign right, kick, slash, duck**, she kept fighting through instinct, knowing that if she slowed down for a moment, Hikaru’s sacrifice would be in vain.

Her baby whimpered in her arms and she knew she couldn’t beat them head-on. She threw a bone-crushing punch and danced out of the way of her opponent’s kunai. She cried out as another operative came from below and nearly broke her right ankle before she did a quick kawarimi.

*Time to switch tactics.*

She grimaced, ignoring the pain. She jumped back and made four kage bunshin of herself and substituted herself with one of them before the smoke cleared. She surreptitiously made an extra clone and retreated into the trees. She began throwing poisoned senbon needles at the different operatives while they were engaged with her clones. With three of her assailants down for the count, she began feeling hopeful again. *Heart, subclavian vein, internal jugular vein, kidneys, carotid artery, brachial artery, lungs, brain stem...* She ran through different vital points in her head as her kage bunshin began to dwindle. She felt a prickling sensation on her neck and jumped off the tree limb she was perched on, swearing.

Sachi narrowly dodged a mass of flames that scorched the earth almost twenty meters below it. She ducked behind a towering oak for cover and listened for the originator of the flames. ‘Damn,’ she thought, closing her eyes and altering the flow of her chakra and directing it into her eyes. *Asshole-san might actually kill me with that.* When she opened her eyes once more, they had an odd glimmer to them, the previously plain irises now glowing with chakra.

It was at this point her baby started wailing in earnest. She groaned in her head, mourning her blown cover. One of the enemy shinobi took out the tree she was hidden behind with a powerful wind scythe jutsu. She darted left to avoid getting crushed by the traitorous foliage. She rolled quickly to avoid the rain of shuriken heading her way before one of the remaining shinobi darted in to attack her once more. While she danced around their attacks, she noticed a shinobi in the trees making hand signs. With her eyes, she could see trails of red chakra coming from his fingertips. She smirked and forced her chakra into his system through her eyes, disrupting the flow of his chakra, and stopping him in his tracks from creating those pesky fireballs.

However, her distraction costed her. Sachi forgot about the third shinobi who blindsided her with a brutal kick to the chest, knocking her backward, nearly making her lose her grip on her child. She recovered quickly, rolling to her knees in the icy mud and standing back up, but her one-handed tajutsu was significantly slowed down. She grimaced, feeling a few broken ribs and possible internal bleeding.

Her assailants seemed to have finally figured out why she was such a formidable fighter and kept their distance, sending jutsu flying at her while staying frustratingly out of her sight. She was going to lose this battle. However, so close to a guardpost would have the nearest ninja running to check out the commotion. If she could hang on for the next few minutes, she might receive reinforcements.

She scowled and flipped through a series of one-handed hand signs and whirled to face the ninja attacking her. She saw the trails of chakra with her eyes and quickly assessed the situation. She felt her chakra roil in her gut as she thought of the right jutsu.

Sachiko went through over a dozen hand-signs quicker than lightning as she manipulated the rain around them to sharpen and fly at the enemy shinobi in an attempt to stop them. She heard the impact and grinned victoriously as she saw one chakra signature flutter and fade. Four down, two more to go. One of the remaining two shinobi came forward at her out of nowhere with a katana and slashed upwards at her and she moved flipped backward to dodge. *Woah, that was an attempt to kill, she
thought moving quickly from tree to tree, dodging their increasingly vicious swords strokes.

She admittedly got sloppy. Having spent so much time dodging them that she didn’t notice the paper bomb that was placed in her path until the last minute. Sachi turned her back to take the brunt of the explosion as she was blown off of the tree. She’d lost her grip of Katsumi in the chaos and cried out as she felt a searing pain engulf her back. As Sachi flew backward, she looked up at the night sky and at the raindrops falling.

She stopped falling suddenly, feeling the queer sensation of steel sliding through her gut. She screamed at the feeling before the blade slid out of her body. She crumpled to the ground, knowing that she couldn’t staunch the bleeding in time. She was no medic. Sachi looked up at the operative in a bird mask who was sliding his sword back into its sheath. She then looked at the shinobi in the wolf mask who was holding her baby in their cold grip.

Katsumi looked at her and gold met gold.

Bird crouched down to her and brought out a medic’s kit and cleaning a set of wicked blades. She then understood in her hazy pain-filled state what he was going to do. My eyes, she thought fuzzily. Canary-san is going to take my peepers.

Sachi knew then what she had to do.

She looked at her baby, her beautiful baby girl, one more time before taking out a kunai. Bird jumped back ready to defend but didn’t anticipate her next move. She deftly slashed the blade across her eyes, ruining them.

Black black black filled her vision (or lack thereof) as she bellowed loud enough for those bastards in Iwa to hear her. She dug the kunai into her eye sockets to further ruin their ability to steal her eyes and study them. She heard one of the operatives curse and she heard her baby start crying harder than she’d ever heard her. Part of her felt bad for it. Sachi dropped the knife with shaking hands, feeling too queasy to hold it any longer.

She rolled over and vomited into the grass. Her thoughts became progressively fuzzier. Oh shit, I’m dying, she thought as the sounds of them trying shush her wailing child faded. She turned her head to the noise and forced her lips to form words.

“F-Fuck you,” she stammered, spitting vile bodily fluids in their direction.

Igarashi Sachiko thought about a lot of things while she lay there in the forest in cold mud, feeling cold raindrops hit her face and her bodily organs shut down.

She thought about her family in Kumo and how devastated and angry they were going to be. She thought about her beloved husband who was probably dead right now. She thought about those bastards who had killed her and how she had expected to keep flipping the bird to the shinigami until the tender age of ninety, but would never get the chance. She thought about how dying at twenty-four was a lot younger than she had hoped for. She thought about Katsumi and how she would never get to see her beautiful baby girl grow up into the amazing young woman she was born to be.

She had never been a particularly religious woman, but she sent up one more prayer to protect her baby. Give ‘em hell, baby girl, she thought, grinning victoriously at nothing.

Igarashi Sachiko thought about lots of things until she thought of nothing at all.
Root Operative Sora did not like rain. As he flew through the trees, he tried to keep the sleeping bundle in his arms as dry as possible. The child refused to stop crying so he had put her under a genjutsu. He knew it was dangerous for children that young, but he could not risk getting found by Kumo’s border patrol who had heard the noise and come to investigate accordingly.

*Danzo-sama is not going to be pleased when he finds out the woman died,* he thought as he and his partner Akari closed in on the Fire Country border. The Kumo nin that would begin attempting to track them would not be able to follow them into a foreign country especially so soon after the war. He shrugged as he kept moving.

*He’ll have to be satisfied with one set of eyes.*

Sora had not liked killing that woman and taking her child. Something about that seemed inherently wrong despite his teachings in ROOT. However, it did not matter what Sora liked or didn’t like. Danzo-sama wanted this particular kekkei genkai and this child was one of the last to manifest it. Danzo-sama probably wanted to indoctrinate this child into the system as well and harvest the fruits of her bloodline.

The infant stirred in his arms as he felt a twinge of something in him. Indigestion maybe? He kept that feeling away as he rocketed over the border. Within a few hours, the child will have been safely delivered to Konoha. It was not Sora’s problem to think about. Sora was not really supposed to think at all. But that twinge would not go away. Nevertheless, Sora kept moving, ignoring that nagging feeling in his chest. Maybe it was because he was cold. Sora did not like rain.
Sarutobi Hiruzen was having quite the month. For one, his successor, Namikaze Minato and his wife, Uzumaki Kushina, had just been killed in an attack that had almost destroyed the entire village, had subsequently wiped out approximately a quarter of all of the active duty shinobi in his employ, and had killed his own wife, Biwako, to whom he had been married for well over forty years. He had no time to grieve her, however, since the resulting power vacuum threatened to swallow Konohagakure whole. Konoha was currently, for all intents and purposes, a damn mess. He had to do the only reasonable thing: come out of retirement and pick up the hat once more.

Hiruzen scowled just thinking about it. He was far too old to lead. He should be doting on his family and fishing and doing whatever the hell it is retired shinobi his age do. He had paid his dues to Konoha several times over. He deserved to have his peace. Instead, he was doing a job fit for a much younger person and losing what little sanity he had left in his old age. He huffed and flipped through piles of scrolls that had been laid out on his desk.

Quickly skimming through S-rank missions and the possible shinobi who could take them on was difficult work. He had to think of a lot when doling out possible assignments; he had to think about skill level, jutsu arsenal, and general competency as well as circumvent clan politics. He also had to think along the lines of ‘Who is the least likely to die completing the mission?’ and ‘Who can we afford to lose?’ This kind of work was not conducive to having a clean conscience.

His left hand twitched slightly as he read through the details of a mission. His body clearly was craving his pipe. He was just about to give his vice some thought when he felt chakra flare right outside the large rectangular window that gave his office a spectacular view of what he sold his soul to protect.

A winded genin fell into the room with a missive clutched tightly in his gloved hand. Hiruzen smiled and thanked the sandy-haired Yamanaka boy, lightly scolding him for not using the door. The boy grinned and claimed that real shinobi didn’t use doors. Hiruzen nodded indulgently and sent the kid on his way, reading the message quickly and frowning slightly. It seemed Danzo wanted an audience with him at noon. Hiruzen’s good mood faded quickly at the request. He glanced at the clock and saw that it was already a quarter to noon. An early lunch it is then.

He placed the mission scrolls in a desk drawer as he told his civilian secretary to hold his meetings for the next hour or so. It would be better to get the meeting over with and see what Danzo wanted.

Whenever Shimura Danzo invites him to play shogi under the guise of enjoying his company, Hiruzen knows to keep his guard up. It is an old tactic; whenever Hiruzen is focused on the game, he is consequently less focused on keeping his emotions and thoughts hidden from his friend which makes him much easier to read. To an outsider, however, it just looks like two old men playing a game and drinking tea. The Hokage knew better.

Sitting in one of the many parks in Konoha, the Sandaime knew something was amiss. Maybe it was the way Danzo’s lips were quirked up in a half smile even though he was, by all accounts, losing terribly. Maybe it was because they had only exchanged false pleasantries for the entire hour they had been playing even though, knowing Danzo, they should’ve been past this point half an hour ago. Maybe it was just pure instinct. Whatever it was, it prompted him to lose his patience. If Danzo was intent on playing games, then he could play too.
“What is it that you are really here to talk about, old friend?” Hiruzen inquired, keeping his eyes on the game board. He felt Danzo look at him. He gingerly placed a piece on the board in response and folded his hands in his lap.

“I am not sure I know what you mean, Hiruzen,” The Hokage inwardly groaned, keeping his irritation from showing on his face. “Can I not just request your presence? Am I not allowed to appreciate your company? Why, if I didn’t know any better, I’d think you didn’t like me,” he chuckled. Hiruzen looked upwards at the blue late-October sky and prayed for patience. He met Danzo’s gaze head-on and placed another piece on the game board.

“Is it about the mysterious assassination of the Lightning Daimyo’s family?” he asked, getting straight to the point. Danzo stilled for a moment, clearly surprised at Hiruzen’s knowledge. “I do not suppose you have anything to do with that, do you, old friend?” the Sandaime kept his voice light, letting the thinly wrapped accusation speak for itself. Danzo smiled, moving another piece.

“The Third Raikage’s line has some very interesting kekkei genkai,” he replied instead of an answer, keeping his focus on the game and not on Hiruzen’s question. Hiruzen quirked an eyebrow and decided to humor his friend. “Very few people know about it, but there is a dojutsu similar to Konoha’s Byakugan in one of the noble clans of Kumo shinobi. Rumor has it that these shinobi can not only see chakra, but they can also disrupt chakra flow visually along with a couple other nifty tricks.” Hiruzen’s eyebrows rose at that, not having heard about the bloodline trait in that much detail before. That sounded formidable. “Of course these shinobi are in high demand in Kumo’s military forces but like our Hyuga and Uchiha, they are hunted for their eyes. They are kept close to the Raikage and are constantly under guard. Or at least, most of them are,” Danzo said, smiling. Hiruzen looked up at his friend and glared already knowing where this was going.

“Danzo, what did you do?” he asked, forgetting the game altogether. Danzo turned to his right and poured himself a cup of tea. He took a long sip and gave Hiruzen a smile that made him look like the cat that hadn’t just caught the canary, but who had caught an entire flock. It was a look that made the Hokage incredibly wary.

“Silence rang out as Danzo offered him the cup with an infuriating smile on his lips. Hiruzen smacked it out of his hand in anger, tea and shogi forgotten.

“That is an act of war!” he hissed at his friend, losing his composure completely. “If Kumo finds out that we are responsible for their lack of a daimyo and if A finds out that we are to blame for the death of his sister and her child, there will be hell to pay!” Hiruzen felt like shaking his friend. Danzo just calmly picked back up the teacup and set it back on the table like it hadn’t just been slapped out of his hand. Somehow, that made the Hokage even angrier.

“Hiruzen, you aren’t seeing the bigger picture,” he replied, rolling his eyes and waving his hand dismissively. “One, the child is very much so alive. Two, we have a copy of one of Kumo’s most powerful bloodline traits at our disposal to examine and cultivate into a weapon against her own country should we go to war with them again. Little Katsumi-hime’s eyes come from the mainline meaning that her eyes have the potential to be just as if not more powerful than her mother’s, who, in case you forgot, was called ‘Kumo no Arashi’ for a reason. Thirdly, we have a fantastic bargaining chip should we need it,” he continued, a confident glint in his eye. “If Kumo decides to cause us trouble, we have a trump card. They’ll do anything to get their little princess back. Lastly, I made sure that the kidnapping couldn’t be traced back to Konoha. As of right now, Kumo’s ANBU should be following a false lead that’ll send them looking in Iwagakure’s direction. It’s perfect.” Danzo
crossed his arms across his robed chest and met Hiruzen’s eyes with his singular one.

Hiruzen shook his head. He could not allow Danzo to use this child in the way he obviously wanted to. Too many children had been used and thrown away in the midst of a war that had nothing to do with them. Maybe protecting this one child like he had failed to do with so many others would help ease his dirty conscience. Was it selfish? Probably. But he had the power to save this child from a worse fate than she deserved. His mind was made up. He refused. “Absolutely not. Not so soon after the end of the last war. That child is a citizen of Konoha now whether you like it or not, therefore she is under my jurisdiction. If you so much as touch a hair on that child’s head, you will pay for it dearly,” Hiruzen threatened. Danzo frowned and opened his mouth to plant more somehow perfectly crafted arguments in his head to convince him but Hiruzen kept going. “Igarashi Katsumi will be a nameless orphan with no idea of her bloodline ability that she may or may not have,” he decided. Danzo opened his mouth to object but Hiruzen quickly shut him down. “Just because her eyes have the right color does not mean that she will have the altered chakra paths to back it up. You should be happy I do not throw you to Kumogakure for what you did, Danzo. You will speak of this to no one.” Danzo rose and gave him a mocking bow.

“As you wish, Sandaime-sama,” he drawled. He placed his hands behind his back and walked away. As Danzo disappeared in a flurry of leaves, Hiruzen couldn’t help but feel like his win was hollow. Danzo always had multiple schemes lined up so he knew that this was far from over. Hiruzen rubbed at this temples to ward off an oncoming migraine. He glanced tiredly over to the abandoned game board and paused, his scowl deepening. Danzo had been only two moves from capturing his king. A bad omen. The furrow in his brow deepened.

Hiruzen was getting too old for this shit.

ROOT Operative Wolf just wanted to go home.

Of course, it was her job to follow Danzo-sama’s orders but still, after running an assassination/retrieval mission and barely making it out alive, she was exhausted. Nevertheless, she still had a job to do. She was hopping from rooftop to rooftop when she found the entrance to the ROOT Compound in an alleyway between two private residences in the market district. She shimmied down a drain-pipe and dropped down to the ground silently, not even disturbing a woman walking with her two children ten meters away. Setting up a standard genjutsu, she disappeared down the hidden metal hatch and hurried down the stone steps into the confusing underground building. According to Danzo-sama, the target was to be turned over to the custody of the Konoha Orphanage at once, though how the Hokage knew that Danzo-sama had the baby she’ll never know.

After about five minutes of walking through the massive underground building, she came to a large metal door. She lifted her right hand and pulsed a bit of chakra into the locked door and pushed it open with ease.

Rooms like this one were standard in ROOT and were used for many different purposes like interrogation, punishment for wayward operatives, and holding someone in a secure location. The
stone walls were imbued with chakra dampening mechanisms to limit more powerful shinobi who had come into the room for obvious reasons. The sloped floor had a drain to make clean up easy for when things got messy.

This time, however, the room was not harboring dangerous shinobi, and thusly, all of the proper materials had been relocated. Instead, there was a singular table and a small metal crib. Wolf stalked silently over the sleeping child, making sure not to wake her. The small child huffed in her sleep and turned over as if to find a more comfortable position. Wolf could see the dried tears on her small face as well as a fleck of dirt lodged in her moon-white hair. The black ops operative frowned slightly and brushed the offending debris off of the baby.

Surprisingly, this caused the baby to wake up. She opened her heirloom eyes and focused their gilded irises on Wolf’s porcelain mask, causing her to shift uncomfortably. Something about that child’s stare made Wolf feel naked somehow. Like the infant could see into her mind. Of course, this line of thinking was ridiculous considering the child wasn’t even a month old yet. She hefted the child into her arms and made her way out of the room and out of the compound.

As she went back the way she came, she thought about how wrong it seemed to house something as innocent as a baby in a place full of death and carnage so Wolf did not feel particularly bad making her way towards the orphanage. She looked down at the baby in her arms and felt a trace of a smile adorn her lips. The baby had fallen back asleep in her arms. For someone who was told regularly that she didn’t have a heart, she couldn’t help but feel what she thought was a watered down version of it warming. She shook off that terrifying notion and continued moving forward, roof hopping her way eastward towards her destination.

She made it to the orphanage, a well cared for building, in record time. Before she had time to examine the location, a brunette child of about five shot out of the front door, followed closely by what looked to be a brother, maybe two years her senior. Laughter was bubbling up from the lips of the girl while the boy’s tan cheeks were flushed, with anger or exertion, Wolf didn’t know. That was when the girl noticed the ROOT member in their front lawn. She skidded to a stop as the laughter died on her lips and was replaced by a quiet reverence.

“Are you a shinobi?” the little girl asked, her head cocked to the side in awe. Wolf nodded, feeling uncomfortable. The boy walked up to her with a matching expression but considerably less tact.

“How have you ever killed anyone?” he questioned. Wolf’s eyebrows shot up under her mask. Before she could answer, a dark-haired civilian woman in her early thirties came out of the house wearing a well-worn yukata. The children immediately went to her side as she walked up to Wolf who was intensely grateful for the interruption. She introduced herself as the orphanage’s head caretaker, Akiyama Kagome. Wolf nodded in respect and handed her the small bundle and she immediately cooed at how cute she was.

“I hope my children weren’t bothering you, Shinobi-san,” Akiyama-san said, smiling with just a little too much teeth, cutting her narrowed brown eyes to the sheepish children who had moved behind her. The girl had found something interesting in the grass to look at while the boy looked towards the street. Wolf fought the urge to roll her eyes at their obvious guilt. When Wolf answered in the negative, the woman shrugged, dismissing the hidden threat. The children nearly sagged in relief. If running an orphanage doesn’t work, this woman could definitely work in training ANBU recruits, Wolf chuckled inwardly.

The woman turned her attention back to the infant in her arms that had seemingly woken up. “What is the child’s name?” she questioned, a soft smile taking years off of her prematurely aging face.

“Katsumi. No known family name,” the shinobi replied. The older woman nodded as her gaze
turned a little sad.

“Poor thing,” she said, rocking the baby like a pro. “Too many children have been made orphans in this world. No matter. She will receive good care under this roof. Tell Hokage-sama that she will be cared for here.”

Wolf left the orphanage soon after feeling like a large weight was being lifted off of her chest. Something in her made her believe Akiyama-san. The baby was going to be cared for in the orphanage. She again felt the odd sensation of warmth bubbling up in her chest but dismissed it as exhaustion. She then remembered the grime that had been begging to be cleaned from her skin since she came into the village earlier that morning. She grimaced and started in the direction of her apartment. She had a date with a hot shower and she did not want to be late. Only later did she realize that that odd feeling was contentment.

ROOT Operative Wolf was happy to be home.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: What’s up, y’all? Thanks for tuning in for another mediocre chapter of my painfully mediocre fanfiction! A couple announcements, I think I’m going to try to update every Monday so in case you were hoping for an upload schedule, you’re welcome. It may not stay consistent as school starts back (senior year means HELLA stuff to prepare for ;-;) so sorry in advance if I stop uploading for a few weeks. I’m currently writing several chapters at a time to stock up on content to release so we should be fine for the next couple weeks. Secondly, anyone have any ideas for what I can name the dojutsu? I have a couple in mind but I’d really appreciate some more ideas. Anyways that’s Chapter 2. Let me know what you thought in the comments or feel free to pm me. As always, this is unbeta’d so tell me if there is revision needed anywhere. Thanks again to everyone who’s clicked on this so far! I appreciate every single one of you. Now onto the next!
F is for Friends Who Do Stuff Together

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Living in an orphanage wasn’t nearly as bad as some people would have you believe. For Katsumi at least, she assumed that it wasn’t much different than living in a normal household. Except for the used clothes. And the lack of personal space and belongings. And the obvious lack of parents. But you know, that kind of stuff was material.

Katsumi was an odd kid. For as long as she could remember, most of the adults in her life regarded her with wary tolerance. At four years old, she was already odd enough to have drawn the attention of several adults. This hardly was a new occurrence. She was what they called ‘an early bloomer’. She began speaking and walking much earlier than the other children her age at 7 months old. This caused a few raised eyebrows around the orphanage especially around the grownups that took care of her. Of course, when any probing questions were thrown Kagome’s way, she laughed them off and used shinobi-level misdirection techniques. It was around this time that Katsumi realized that maybe it would be better to keep certain things secret if other kids weren’t doing them too. Those kinds of things drew attention.

So when Katsumi learned to read at three, she read at night by the streetlamp near her window. Those were the best nights when she was able to pilfer books from the older kids and read surreptitiously while everyone else was asleep. It made her feel like the shinobi protagonists she favored in her books and she lived for the rush of adrenaline that accompanied stashing her stolen contraband quickly when she heard Kagome coming down the hall.

Though she was canny enough to have kept that secret for about a year, one night she eventually got caught. She had just gotten to the climatic ending fight scene at the end of her book that she didn’t hear Kagome open the door to the room that she shared with her agemates until she saw her, arms crossed over her robe with an irritated glint in her eye. Kagome gestured for her to come out of the room and Katsumi felt her stomach drop.

She tossed back the blankets that were covering her small form and shuffled her way across the carpet and out into the hall. Her primary caregiver led her into the kitchen and Katsumi instinctively took a seat and swung her legs underneath her nervously. Kagome walked over to a long-abandoned kettle and began making herself a much-needed cup of tea. When she turned back around, Katsumi was looking at her clasped hands, loose white curls covering her face. The small child did this on purpose so that it might be harder to read her facial expressions and obvious guilt. It didn’t work.

"Would you mind telling me what you were doing so late at night, Katsumi-chan?" Kagome questioned, leaning against the counter. Katsumi seemed to have found something incredibly interesting on her hands and declined to answer. Kagome sighed, pulling her long dark hair out of her face and into a loose low ponytail. "Let me ask you a different question then. When did you learn how to read?" she asked. Katsumi stilled in her chair. The telltale whistling of finished tea rang out in the quiet kitchen causing Katsumi to jump slightly. Kagome wordlessly grabbed the steaming teapot, making sure to avoid the hot glass, and poured herself a mug. Kagome placed the steaming mug to her right on the counter and figured she’d give it another go.

"Would you mind telling me what you were doing so late at night, Katsumi-chan?" Kagome questioned, leaning against the counter. Katsumi seemed to have found something incredibly interesting on her hands and declined to answer. Kagome sighed, pulling her long dark hair out of her face and into a loose low ponytail. "Let me ask you a different question then. When did you learn how to read?" she asked. Katsumi stilled in her chair. The telltale whistling of finished tea rang out in the quiet kitchen causing Katsumi to jump slightly. Kagome wordlessly grabbed the steaming teapot, making sure to avoid the hot glass, and poured herself a mug. Kagome placed the steaming mug to her right on the counter and figured she’d give it another go.

"You aren’t in trouble, Katsumi-chan," the child visibly relaxed, her legs swinging again in the chair. "But I am curious. I know the curriculum at your school is barely into teaching your class the basics of literacy but here you are reading full books.” Kagome folded her arms across her pale blue dressing robe and smiled at the girl. Katsumi, seeing that she wasn’t going to get punished returned
her grin brightly.

“I saw Masahiro and Hideki reading and I asked them ‘How do you do that thing with your eyes?’ and then they showed me how!” she exclaimed excitedly, speaking with her hands. Kagome smiled at her enthusiasm but wished it wasn’t so late at night. “They showed me how to sound out words and I figured it out from there. It wasn’t that hard Kagome, honest.” Kagome looked at the child who was clearly happy to finally be able to spill the beans after what had likely been at least a few months. Kagome frowned slightly, wondering what had prompted her to keep it a secret in the first place.

“Does your teacher at school know about you being able to read?” she questioned, placing a hand on her hip. Katsumi shook her head and scrunched up her nose.

“No, I didn’t tell her. We’re learning sight-words right now. I told Hideki that and he said that sight-words were for babies and I’m no baby.” she replied, fidgeting slightly. Kagome nodded.

“Why didn’t you tell Yoshiro-sensei that you could read?” Kagome pressed lightly.

“Well because when I do things before everyone else does, the adults treat me different.” Katsumi answered, shrugging her small shoulders. “Manami-sensei called me a progi.. prodog…” Katsumi trailed off, stumbling over the word.

“A prodigy?” Kagome asked, feeling sick to her stomach. Katsumi’s face brightened again.

“Yes, that thing! And prodigies,” she slowed down on the word in order to say it correctly. “They get moved to different classes and I wanted to stay in my class.” Katsumi finished, turning her golden eyes imploringly to her. “Do you think that Yoshiro-sensei will have me moved?” Kagome plastered a smile on her face, praying for guidance.

“I’m not sure, little one.” she lied, hoping the girl didn’t notice the guilt on her caretaker’s face. It wasn’t her fault. Orders are orders and if a civilian child shows excessive promise as a shinobi, they are required to be reported to the Office of the Hokage for the child to be analyzed. Then, the primary caretaker has to bring up the prospect of being a shinobi to the child. If they say yes then they will begin the process of transferring them to the Academy instead of normal civilian school.

Kagome hated doing that. Though Kagome was a civilian herself, her brother had been a first generation shinobi. That lifestyle hadn’t been particularly kind to him. After a mission gone wrong, he was too reckless in his job and got himself killed as a way to escape the inner demons that had been hounding him since he donned his hitai-ate. According to his teammates, he had been smiling as he died. After his loss, the glamour of shinobi life had been lost on her. She knew now that shinobi life was not a happy one. How could she willingly subject children that she cared for to it and keep a clean conscience?

Kagome bit her lip as the child in front of her babbled on about what she had been learning in school. Kagome had known that this was coming. She had been getting questions about that child since she started walking, it was bound to happen. Kagome just couldn’t believe how soon it seemed. She wasn’t even half a decade old for Kami’s sake, entirely too young to begin training to be a weapon. How could Kagome sentence that sweet child to such a life? Kagome sighed. She had no choice. Orders were orders after all and she had tried for as long as she could. She ushered Katsumi back to bed and took her book for good measure.

“You can read this tomorrow morning. You’ll ruin your pretty eyes if you keep reading in such poor lighting.” Kagome said to quell her whispered protests. Katsumi crawled under the covers and was quickly asleep. Kagome walked back into the room she shared with her husband. She sat back down
on the bed and prayed for forgiveness. Kagome looked over at the nightstand and examined the
cover of the book she’d caught Katsumi reading. ‘The Tale of the Utterly Gutsy Shinobi’. She was at
Hokage Tower early the next morning. Two weeks later, it was decided that next school year,
Katsumi was to be entered into Konoha’s Shinobi Academy.

“Who can tell me where the best place would be to strike to stop a target from getting away?” the
young instructor asked. Katsumi raised her eyebrows at the lack of hands in the air. The other kids
around her looked at their feet, out the window, their desks, anywhere that wasn’t the expectant face
of their sensei. She figured that someone statistically had to have some inkling of knowledge about
the concept. A pale boy with dark hair and eyes raised his hand suddenly. The instructor —what was
his name, Iruka or something?— looked in the boy’s direction and called on him.

“Yes, Sasuke?” The entire class breathed a collective sigh of relief that they were saved from being
called upon randomly as Iruka-sensei was apt to do in the event that no one volunteered.

“A quick slash to the hamstrings should do the trick,” he answered. Katsuki shuddered, feeling the
backs of her thighs, sympathizing with the imaginary bandit. That sounded like it would hurt really
bad. Iruka-sensei nodded and he continued on with the lesson. Katsumi zoned out completely,
drawing stick figure drawings where her notes should have been. A boy with triangular markings on
his face and a dog on his head —how had he snuck that thing into the building?— looked over at her
paper and snickered.

“You’re really bad at drawing, you know,” he whispered. Katsumi scowled at the boy, pulling her
paper away from his stupid prying eyes.

“You’re really bad at brushing your teeth, you know,” she whispered back, relishing in his offended
expression. He frowned at her and then barked out a laugh. It was at that moment Iruka-sensei
stopped with his lecture and glared at the both of them. Katsumi looked down at her paper, happy
that her face was brown enough that the blush that would be surely marring her cheeks right now
was hidden. The boy who had disrespected her budding art skills gave a quick apology to Iruka-
sensei. Luckily for them, he seemed satisfied with the boy’s sheepish look continued talking about
how velocity and trajectory of kunai can alter the radius of blood spray.

She kept doodling on her paper ‘Maybe this guy would look better with a hat and sandals.’ she
thought, scribbling them on. The uncultured reprobate leaned back over towards her and narrowed
his eyes at her drawing.

“Put a hitai-ate on him instead of whatever kind of hat that is. Also maybe make him taller.” he
whispered, offering her critiques. She narrowed her eyes at him, searching for a hidden barb in his
words. When she found none, she shrugged and gave the drawing a forehead protector. The slightly
more cultured boy squinted at the drawing and gave her a thumbs up.

“You’re pretty cool. My name is Kiba. This is Akamaru,” he said, gesturing to the white puppy
sitting on his head. Katsumi fought the urge to rub the pooch behind the ears as Kiba continued.
“Are you new to Konoha? I’ve never seen you around town before. I think I would remember your
hair.” She let out an indignant squawk and grabbed a white braid defensively. She knew her hair was
different but she didn’t think it was that noticeable considering there were people walking around
with pink hair for crying out loud. Especially now that she wore it in two long plaits, she figured
she’d get less attention than if she wore it out. He noticed her reaction and backtracked. “Not that it’s
bad or anything. It’s just… noticeable.” he reassured. Satisfied by his save, she decided to give this
Kiba a chance.
“I didn’t leave the civilian area of town very much until recently.” His eyes widened.

“What, are you civilian-born?” he asked, dropping the whisper altogether. Katumi looked at Iruka-sensei to make sure he hadn’t heard Kiba’s volume. ‘Still talking about velocity.’ She looked back at her new acquaintance and nodded.

“I live in the Konoha Orphanage.” she answered flippantly. Kiba’s face sobered immediately.

“So did your parents, like, die or something?” he asked. ‘No tact on this one,’ she noticed. She shrugged again.

“Never knew my parents. All I know is that I was at one of the civilian schools near the market district and now I’m here.” she looked pointedly at one of her pencils on the desk instead of at Kiba.

Sensing that the conversation had gotten a little too personal, Kiba changed the subject. “Well do you want to play with me and my friends during lunch?” he suggested. “We’re going to play ninja.” Katumi scrunched up her nose and looked back at Kiba.

“How do you play ninja?” she queried, tilting her head to the side. Kiba grinned in response, which distorted the look of his purple face-paint.

“I guess you’ll have to find out,” he answered cryptically. She opened her mouth to say that she didn’t much care for surprises when Iruka-sensei dismissed them for break time. As everyone rose from their desks and grabbed their lunches, Kiba was suddenly surrounded by a couple of boys from their class. Katumi analyzed each of them, wishing she had paid more attention to them so she knew what she was getting into.

“Don’t tell me you made friends with this girl, Kiba.” a dark-haired boy drawled, saying the word “girl” like it was an insult. Katumi glared at him, getting ready to shove her foot where the sun didn’t shine. Another boy intervened, however, noticing her ire.

“Shikamaru, that wasn’t nice. Girls can be cool too. Just not Ino.” he said, as they both shuddered together. She put that tidbit of knowledge away in her head for later. The boy who had defended her had extended his hand. “My name’s Choji. That boy who just insulted you? His name is Shikamaru.” Katumi took his proffered hand and shook it. “Now come on guys, we have an hour of break time. I’m super hungry.” Kiba, who had finished packing up by that time, snorted and shouldered his bag.

“You’re always hungry, Choji.” he replied exasperated. The boy in question shrugged and took out a bag of chips. He offered one to Katumi but she declined. ‘An odd group,’ she thought as she walked with them down the Academy steps and into the yard. She squinted her eyes against the sun and she heard the sound of children playing. Kiba led them over to a hilly area near the fence where another boy was sitting on a swing already. Katumi felt like she knew this boy but couldn’t place him.

“Naruto! This is my new friend...” he trailed off looking at her expectantly “I actually never got her name. What’s your name?”

“Katumi.” she answered, feeling awkward being put on the spot. Kiba grinned and continued.

“Right, this is Katumi. She’s going to be playing ninja with us today.” Kiba called out to the blonde boy. He looked up at her warily, his blue eyes full of suspicion. Katumi held his stare until he dropped eye contact. ‘Yeah, I definitely know him.’ Never one for beating around the bush, she decided to just ask.
“I know you from somewhere,” she said, tapping her chin with her pointer finger thoughtfully. Naruto’s tan cheeks paled slightly and he stayed quiet. “We lived together in the orphanage at some point, didn’t we?” she asked, finally able to pin down where she knew him from. He relaxed slightly as he nodded.

“Why did you move out?” she questioned, looking at the clearly uncomfortable Naruto.

“I was responsible enough to live on my own,” he answered mechanically like he had been asked that a ton, shrugging his shoulders, only the shirt he was wearing was a few sizes too large and slid off his left shoulder. Katsumi frowned at the offending article of clothing. He clearly wasn’t.

“Well that was dumb,” she said, flipping a white braid over her shoulder. Naruto’s face reddened in embarrassment at her words. “You’re five just like me. No five year old should live on their own,” she stated matter-of-factly. She then noticed that it seemed like Kiba, Shikamaru, and Choji had all disappeared in favor of playing ninja. She walked over to the swing Naruto was sitting on and sat down next to it, pulling up blades of grass and watching them get blown away in the autumn breeze.

“I’m sorry if I hurt your feelings,” she mumbled, looking at the grass. Naruto’s expression faded into one of wary acceptance.

“That’s alright. I like living on my own,” he said, smiling a little. “No grownups to tell me what to eat, when to go to bed, or when to do my homework. I’m my own man, believe it.” Katsumi smiled a little at him.

She reached behind her and took out her bento. “You wanna share? Kagome always gives me too much.” Naruto’s eyes grew to the size of dinner plates (A/N: haha pun) at the proffered food. He took out a spare set chopsticks he had gotten from the lunchroom and they began chowing down, talking about everything and nothing (“The next time I spar with Sasuke-teme, I’m going to beat him, believe it!”). When they came to the topic of schoolwork, the tips of Naruto’s ears went red.

“I hate homework and when I’m here, I don’t get how to do the work-work.” Katsumi paused, thinking.

“Well if you want, I could tutor you. I’m pretty okay at the theory stuff.” Naruto’s face brightened exponentially and Katsumi couldn’t help but smile with him.

“You’d do that?” Katsumi nodded. “That’s what friends do right? They help each other out.”

“Okay. We can study at my apartment today after class,” he said, practically bouncing off the walls with his excitement. “We can walk together.”

“Okay.” Katsumi returned his excitement, happy to have found so many friends today.

They kept talking about random topics as they packed up their things to return back into the building for afternoon classes. By the time lunch was over and the boys came back over to the hill, sweaty and laughing, they were surprised at how well Katsumi and Naruto were getting along.

“Sorry for leaving you two behind. You talk too much, Katsumi.” Kiba said, wiping his brow. Katsumi glared at him and wanted to try something that she’d seen the boys do with one another. She reached over and slugg ed him in the arm. Kiba looked at her, surprise evident in his gaze as he rubbed at his sore limb. It was at that moment when Shikamaru busted out laughing, Choji following closely behind. Naruto grinned as well.
“You’re alright, Katsumi-san,” Shikamaru said through laughs at Kiba’s expense. “I’m sorry I insulted you before. You’re a-okay.” Kiba just shoved his hands in his pockets and stalked back towards the Academy’s main building muttering about traitorous friends. Her new friends began talking about what they did during recess and Katsumi was content just to listen. She grinned as she got back to her seat in the classroom. ‘Friends,’ she thought giddily, ‘I think I’ve made friends.’

———

“To calculate the velocity, you first have to— Naruto, are you even listening to me?” Katsumi placed a hand on her hip and scrunched up her face like she’d seen Kagome do a bunch. It seemed to get the general point ‘I want you to do what I say right now’ across clearly for all the other kids she lived with.

Naruto scratched the back of his head sheepishly. “Sorry, Katsumi-chan. I got distracted. What’s the formula for the velocity of a projectile again?” Katsumi huffed and repeated it.

They had been sitting on Naruto’s ratty couch for the better part of an hour. After classes were over, they headed back to Naruto’s apartment after picking up junk food from the convenience store. Well, Katsumi picked up junk food from the convenience store. For whatever reason, Naruto refused to go into the store, mumbling something about how he didn’t like the smell of it or something. Katsumi narrowed her eyes at him scrutinizingly but went inside anyway. After picking up as much junk food as her meager orphan stipend could handle, they ran to his residence to study.

Naruto and Katsumi had agreed to split up their study sessions into two halves: general theory work and training which was easy enough to handle without an adult present. Naruto it seemed was waiting for the first half to be over so they could do something that he enjoyed.

Katsumi fiddled with the end of her braid, working out the problem in her head. “Alright, Naruto. If Ninja A throws a kunai traveling north at fifteen meters per second at Ninja B who is hiding in a tree fifty meters away, how long does it take for the kunai to hit its target?” Naruto looked up at the ceiling in thought for a moment before writing out some rudimentary calculations in his notebook. After a few moments, he circled an answer.

“The kunai would hit Ninja B in a little over three seconds,” he stated proudly, looking at Katsumi for approval.

“That’s right!” Katsumi high fived him. Naruto grinned and laid back on the couch.

“This math stuff is easy. I don’t know why I was struggling so hard with it,” he said, tossing a potato chip in his mouth. Katsumi rolled her eyes and grabbed a handful herself, being mindful of not spilling any on the floor.

“It’s because you had to think of it a different way,” she replied, mouth full of chips. “You’re smart, Naruto. You just need a little extra help and to apply yourself. I bet you could beat Sasuke-san if you tried.” she stated matter-of-factly. She looked over at Naruto who had visibly stilled. She set down her chips on a nearby plate, looking over at her new friend. He had tears in his eyes. Katsumi immediately worked on stuttering out an apology for saying something wrong because she had never really had friends before and she really didn’t want to mess this up, fearful of losing her new friend before he scooted forward on the couch and wrapped his skinny arms tightly around her middle. She looked at his blonde head, stunned at his display before carefully hugging him back. When he finally let her go, he looked away, cheeks red with embarrassment. He wiped away his tears and looked back towards their forgotten work.

She punched him in the shoulder reassuringly, not knowing how to deal with his mortification.
“C’mon. It’s time for physical training.” she said, dispelling the awkwardness. He looked at her, relief evident in his eyes as they peeled themselves off the couch and strapping on their sandals in the genkan.

Walking through the Hidden Leaf Village was an experience, especially in the afternoon. As they made their way to the training grounds, Katsumi was overwhelmed by the smells wafting in on this side of town. Near Naruto’s apartment were a plethora of food places, a few clothing stores, and a cute flower shop. Ignoring the tempting aroma of barbecue, they made it to training ground six which was one of the few that had been reserved for Academy students only. Seeing that it was vacated, they checked it out for the next couple hours and walked into the area.

Katsumi immediately dropped to the grass and began stretching, falling back on the Academy training regimen. Naruto looked at her like she was crazy.

“Aren’t we going to spar?” he asked, tilting his head to the right in question. Katsumi looked up from touching her toes long enough to snort.

“We have to stretch first unless you want to be dragged back to your apartment because you got a muscle cramp.” she went back over, touching the ground past her pointed toes, showing off her flexibility.

Naruto scowled, not liking to be outdone. He plopped down gracelessly onto the ground next to her and started stretching as well. After they were all limbered up, they ran through a couple of the basic kata that they were taught at the Academy.

“You go too fast,” Katsumi pointed out a few minutes later, hand on her hip. Naruto opened his mouth to retort how maybe she was just going too slow. She rolled her eyes. “You start out going the right speed. But when you mess up a move, you end up speeding up to compensate which speeds up the entire thing. Then what you gain in speed, you lose in technique and accuracy.” she surmised succinctly. Naruto huffed but took her advice into consideration.

“Alright, now that we’ve warmed up, now can we spar?” Naruto whined. Katsumi turned to look at him and shrugged.

“Fine. Taijutsu only though.” she said, dropping back into the standard Academy defensive stance. Naruto rushed at her, giving off an odd sort of battle cry. ‘Jeez, he’s fast,’ she thought as she dodged his first attack, ducking under his right fist. He placed his hands on the ground and swung his left foot back towards her in an attempt to catch her off guard. Katsumi sidestepped instinctively and kept letting him advance, keeping her moves to blocks and dodges. When he threw a particularly hard kick with his right foot, she decided to kick things up a notch.

She grabbed his right leg, wincing at the force behind his kick and threw it back the way it came, throwing him off balance. She then dashed inward and punched him in the stomach. He dropped down low to sweep her feet out from under her as she jumped back out of the way. He grinned at her again and charged, throwing all semblance of battle strategy out of the window.

She grabbed his right leg, wincing at the force behind his kick and threw it back the way it came, throwing him off balance. She then dashed inward and punched him in the stomach. He dropped down low to sweep her feet out from under her as she jumped back out of the way. He grinned at her again and charged, throwing all semblance of battle strategy out of the window.

He threw punch after punch her way and it was all she could do to keep out of their destructive path. She saw an opening finally. He made a move to get behind her and she let him before slamming her elbow back where his stomach was going to be. Feeling it connect, she whipped around and took his feet out from under him in a perfectly executed sweeper kick. She sat on his bony chest as he struggled to throw her off. She pushed his arm between his shoulder blades in an effort to make him yield. When he did, (quite loudly), she got up off him and held out a hand to help him up. He gave her a sweaty grin as he got back to his feet.
“I’ll beat you next time, Katsumi-chan, believe it!” Katsumi laughed and led him over to the targets for aerial weapons practice.

“You wish.” she retorted, picking up some practice kunai that had been left out for student use. She threw one at a target to gauge her skill. When it barely hit the target, she scowled, picking up another one. ‘What am I doing wrong?’ she thought as Naruto threw one that made it in the second ring. He whooped and began bragging. Katsumi waved him off and told him to keep practicing. She bit at her thumbnail thoughtfully. The calculations were correct. It must have been something that she wasn’t thinking about.

“You’re flicking your wrist too much.” called out a dry voice behind them. Both children whirled around to see a dark-haired boy who looked a good few years older than them standing near the entrance. Katsumi scowled, thinking about the stranger’s advice.

“How would you know?” she asked, more irritation coloring her tone than she would’ve liked. The boy walked over to them on silent feet. ‘Oh he’s an actual shinobi,’ Katsumi thought as she analyzed the newcomer. He wore a weapons pouch slung around his hips and standard shinobi gear. He had an odd symbol on the back of his high-collared blue shirt which caused Katsumi to know who he was. Naruto got to say it before she did though.

“You’re Sasuke-teme’s brother!” he exclaimed, stars in his eyes as he looked at this example of what a real ninja should be. Before Naruto could start rattling off how he was going to beat up Itachi’s younger brother, Katsumi tugged on his shoulder.

“Teach me how to throw kunai,” she said, forgoing manners. “Please.” she tacked on belatedly, feeling her face heat up. The older boy turned his inscrutable gaze on her and seemingly agreed. He grabbed one of the dull kunai from the pile and masterfully threw one that sunk into the dead center of the target. He made a face at the blade.

“These aren’t the best to practice with but I guess you’ll have to make do.” she grabbed one and eagerly scampered beside him to watch his technical perfection up close. He gestured for her to get in her throwing stance. He scrutinized her, offering her short critiques (“Relax your shoulders and your wrist. All the tension should be in your core.”) and altering her stance by nudging her in different directions until she was how he wanted her. He nodded at her to throw, reminding her to keep her wrist relaxed. She took a deep breath and threw the kunai at the target, feeling satisfaction swell in her chest as it hit the center. She turned her wide eyes to Sasuke’s brother in awe and he shrugged.

“You’re a natural. Just keep practicing.” he placed a gloved hand on her head in what she thought was affection. He then disappeared in a swirl of leaves. Naruto immediately started babbling about how cool Sasuke’s brother was and asking her to teach him how to throw like that.

Katsumi was about to reply when she noticed the sun going down. They had been out for a while. “Aw man, Kagome is going to be so mad at me for staying out late,” she whined, rushing to clean up the training ground. Naruto helped her pick up stray weapons until the place was exactly how they found it. She shouldered her bag and hugged Naruto. She didn’t know why, but she felt like the kid didn’t get enough hugs. “I’ll see you tomorrow in class!” she said as she dashed out of the practice area and into the street in the direction of the market district. Naruto yelled his goodbyes before she got out of earshot and Katsumi smiled. As she ran between civilians, she hoped that she would feel like this all the time. Friends were nice she decided. That was why even though she had to listen to a twenty-minute lecture from Kagome about getting home before sunset and telling her where she was going, her mood was still good. As she sat in her bed, listening to her roommates sleep around her, she felt excited to go back to the Academy the next day. She had friends.
A/N: Hey y’all, that’s chapter three for you! Comment what you want to happen next in our story. This chapter was a lot of self-indulgence on my end because Naruto deserved to have good friends who cared about him and that boy deserved more hugs than he was given ;-;. Sorry for the maybe confusing time-skips. Katsumi starts off the story at four (when she gets caught reading) and ends up at five when we end the chapter in case that wasn’t clear. I also hope you guys enjoyed the cameos this chapter, specifically Itachi’s. His character is hard to write but that scene was fun. I might end up skipping through the Academy years a bit before we slow down in the genin years. VERY IMPORTANT QUESTION: How would you guys feel about Katsumi taking Sakura’s place on Team 7?? I’ve been playing with the idea and I genuinely want to know what you guys think. Please please please drop a comment below so I know how you feel about it. If not, I’m just going to go through with what I want and y’all can’t complain lol. Again, please please please let me know what you think. As usual, this is un-beta’d so if there’s anything that made your eyes bleed, pm me and let me know. Thanks to everyone who has given this bad-boy a read! I appreciate it a lot! Onto the next!
“Psst. Katsumi.” The girl in question kept her golden gaze fully on her notes as she tried to drown out the distraction. Four distractions. She tapped her pencil lightly against her thumb in mock concentration. Iruka-sensei said they were going to be working on aerial weapons and she was looking forward to showing off. At nine years old, she was already one of the best in her class at it and she was excited for the next half hour to be over. That’s why she ignored the whispers being thrown her way by her wayward friends who obviously wanted to include her in their shenanigans. She felt a light tug on her braid.

Fighting the urge to snap her writing utensil in half and shove it into someone’s eyes, she turned around, brow furrowed in irritation. “What is it, Kiba?” she whispered. He grinned and leaned over the desk to whisper in her ear.

“Just wanted to let you know that a successful prank is about to occur. But, if you don’t want to hear about it, I suppose I’ll let you get back to—”

“What’d you do?” Katsumi interrupted, mischief in her eyes. Though she tried to hide it, she loved the pranks just as much as they did. She just didn’t like the trouble it attracted. The last time she was embroiled in one of their schemes and had gotten caught, Kagome had threatened to make her clean the orphanage from top to bottom with nothing but a toothbrush. Shuddering at the memory, Katsumi focused on Kiba.

“Nothing major. Just a standard water balloon rig. When he opens his top left desk drawer where he keeps his chalk, he gets drenched.” Kiba snickered. She chuckled, looking at their poor unsuspecting teacher. He continued to talk about the importance of tracking skills up front. She looked a couple seats to her left and Naruto gave her a thumbs up. She returned his gesture with a smile of her own, pretending to take notes again.

Not fifteen seconds later, Iruka-sensei opened the desk drawer and was surprised to find his clothes soaked in water immediately after. The entire class, which had been half asleep, erupted into laughter at their teacher’s misfortune, Katsumi laughing behind her hand. Iruka’s eyes zeroed in on Naruto and his friends with a quickness only a ninja could have. Katsumi looked away, praying that he didn’t think she had anything to do with it.

As the gears were turning in his head, Katsumi was quicker. “Iruka-sensei, would you like me to fetch you a towel?” she asked, making sure her pretty eyes were wide and innocent enough to make her look faultless. Iruka-sensei turned his head in her direction, thought for a moment, judging her relative innocence, and nodded, thanking her on her way out the door. As Iruka-sensei stalked over to her friends with murder in his gaze, she looked back and smirked at Shikamaru who mouthed the word ‘traitor’. She stuck her tongue out at the lot of them and walked out the door.

‘Suckers.’ she thought, smirking as she headed for one of the supply closets in the building. She took her time returning with a towel, making sure that Iruka-sensei’s anger had cooled off before she reentered. Naruto always complained about how she always helped plan their pranks but never got in trouble when they happened. She was just clever enough to keep herself from getting caught too often. She snorted, throwing a white braid over her shoulder as she walked back to class. They could learn a couple things from her. How could they expect to be a decent ninja if they couldn’t think their way around detention?
Katsumi walked back into class, surprised to see a grumbling Shikamaru, a laughing Kiba and Naruto, and a snacking Choji cleaning up the wet floor with napkins, the room otherwise empty. ‘That can’t be right, Iruka’s not stupid enough to leave them all in here alone.’ Katsumi thought, searching the room again before her eyes caught on a familiar mop of pale blue hair. Mizuki-sensei waved at her and went back to grading papers at one of the vacant desks.

Choji saw her first and smiled at her, offering her a barbecue-flavored potato chip. She declined and walked over to sit on Iruka’s desk. “Where is everyone?” she asked, swinging her legs, nearly kicking Naruto in the neck.

“Iruka-sensei told us to clean up the mess while he took the class out for aerial weapons practice early,” Shikamaru supplied from her left. Katsumi nodded. She fiddled with something on her teacher’s desk, waiting for her friends to be done cleaning. Though she definitely wanted to leave them behind to get some practice in, she stayed with them, providing encouragement in the form of jokes to speed the process along. When they finally finished, they all walked into the school lawn to meet up with the rest of the class.

Katsumi walked ahead of them to a still wet Iruka and handed him the towel she promised. She smiled and thanked her before going back to critique one of her classmates on their form. She walked across the grass to her usual spot in front of a dummy and some dulled kunai. She bent her hand back to stretch her wrist a little and picked up one of the kunai. Katsumi got into the proper stance, the stance that Sasuke’s brother had shown her a few years ago and threw two kunai, one at the dummy’s heart and one at the head, both of them hit with perfect accuracy. She then moved to shuriken, picking up a couple and weighing them in her hands. This practice (picking up a weapon, throwing it, and hitting the targets she wanted to) continued for a few minutes before she realized she had an audience.

A skinny blonde girl frowned at her before smiling. “It looks like you’re going to be my competition for best kunoichi of our year, huh?” she asked, walking over the Katsumi. She raised an eyebrow in question, not really getting what she was inquiring. “My name is Yamanaka Ino,” she said, sticking out her hand for her to shake. Katsumi took it warily, before giving her own name.

“I know who you are,” Ino replied, crossing her arms. “You’re that girl who’s always hanging around with those troublemaking boys.” Katsumi chuckled awkwardly, not knowing how to respond.

“Yep, that’s me,” she said, shoving her hands in her pockets, unsure. Ino rolled her eyes at her obvious discomfort.

“Relax, I’m not going to kill you. I just wanted to talk to you,” she said, waving a hand dismissively. “Can you teach me how to throw better? You’re the second best at it.” Katsumi placed a hand on her hip and raised an eyebrow.

“Who’s the best?” she asked, feeling slightly offended. Ino’s eyes cut over to a dark-haired boy a few meters away from them who was throwing weapons at the targets with a vigor she’d never seen before. His brow was furrowed as every single one of his weapons hit their intended marks without fail. Katsumi, feeling a little concerned, looked away. “Sasuke-san?”

Ino nodded, a blush coloring her cheeks. “I’ve already asked him but he said no,” she said, pouting. “So would you teach me?” she questioned, grabbing Katsumi’s hand. She fought the urge to jerk away from her. She sighed inwardly.

“I guess I could give you a couple pointers or someth—” Ino smiled and walked in front of her to start practicing.
“That was easier than I thought it would be,” she said, grabbing a kunai. She got ready to throw before Katumi stopped her.

“You legs are too close together. Also, your shoulders are too tense. Relax them.” Katumi rambled off critiques, thinking about the person that had helped her all those years ago. Once she had fixed Ino’s stance, she folded her arms across her chest and nodded at her. “Now just inhale and throw.”

Ino threw the kunai and though it wasn’t a bullseye, it was a significant improvement from her last try. Ino whirled around and let out a squeal that hurt Katumi’s ears. She winced as the girl hugged her, awkwardly patting her back. Ino pulled away and thanked her. “I’m going to go practice. Thanks, Katumi!” she said, and ran off. Katumi made a face, not knowing how that social interaction went. ‘That was weird,’ she thought.

Naruto still had better stamina. No matter how hard she trained or ran, Katumi still got tired way before him. She frowned, silently cursing the bead of sweat that was making its way down her face as she punched at a striking post. Naruto was next to her, doing push-ups while regaling his day at school like she wasn’t there for most of it.

“And then Sasuke-teme said I was dumb, which I’m not. He makes me so mad! One day I’m going to wipe his stupid smirk right off his face, believe it!” he said, pushing through the workout. It seemed like no matter how hard he worked out, he never got too tired to threaten to beat up Sasuke. Katumi made a noncommittal noise and kept punching at the post. ‘Left, left, right hook, duck…’ she went through the motions until her arms ached. Naruto finished his set and got up. They wordlessly switched places, her on the ground and him at the striking post, wrapping his knuckles quickly. They were used to the routine. They did it everyday.

Over the years, Naruto’s concentration and memory and Katumi’s fighting prowess had gotten much better as they collaborated after school. Katumi felt proud when she saw her muscle definition in the mirror and Naruto beamed when he saw he was no longer at the bottom of the class ranks. He could be one of the top performers if he paid more attention in class and quit pranking and vandalizing but Katumi supposed his improvement had satisfied her enough as is.

Nowadays, they spent the academic part of their study sessions doing homework and spending the rest of their study sessions training physically. There really wasn’t any need for intensive catching up since Naruto wasn’t so behind everyone else anymore. Some days, other people joined them but for the most part, it was just the pair of them, bonding over books and sweat and achy muscles. That suited Naruto and Katumi just fine.

Katumi’s arms shook as she continued with her pushups. ‘Sixty, sixty-one, sixty-two…’ she pushed herself harder. Fridays were strength days, which she hated the most. She groaned, arms trembling in earnest now.

“You can do it, Katumi-chan!” Naruto cheered from above her. He sped through his taijutsu conditioning as usual. Katumi gave him a strained smile and continued. ‘I just have to make it to eighty.’ she reasoned while her triceps burned. ‘Seventy-five, seventy-six, seventy-seven…’

Katumi would never admit it, but when she finished the eightieth push up, she collapsed gracelessly into the grass and let out a noise that would have sounded like a dying animal had it not been muffled by the grass. Naruto shouted congratulations at her from above. When she finally rolled over, Naruto was over her, holding out a calloused hand to help her up. Grinning, she took it, ignoring the ache in her arms.
After doing lunges up and down the field, sparring for a little bit, and doing some stretches, they both decided to call it a day. “Hey, Katsumi-chan, it’s six! Ramen?” Naruto asked as they picked up their canteens from under a towering oak tree. Katsumi stretched her arms above her head, looking up to check the time. They always got victory food at the end of the week. The first time they went, it was to get to know each other better and strengthen their friendship. Now, it was something they did weekly. They traded off the opportunity to choose where they ate but Katsumi already knew what they were going to end up getting. When it was Naruto’s turn to pick, he always, without fail, chose ramen. Every single time.

“Gladly,” she replied, happy to be done with their training. Naruto let out a loud whoop and they shouldered their bags to head to Ichiraku’s. They were well used to this route seeing as though they made the trek often. At this point, they could probably make it to Ichiraku’s blindfolded with both hands behind their backs on one leg. They walked down the sidewalk, laughing and talking when it happened. Naruto was walking on her right, talking a mile a minute when a villager pushed him out of the way and muttered something that sounded suspiciously like the word ‘monster’. Naruto stumbled, almost dropping his bag trying to keep himself upright. Katsumi stuck out an arm and steadied him quickly.

At this, Katsumi whirled around and glared at the offending civilian. “Excuse you, sir,” she said, glaring at the balding merchant like he was something she’d found inside of a broken down toilet. She had practiced this look several times. She’d seen a purple haired kunoichi use it on someone and it almost made them pee their pants. Katsumi, the ever diligent student, memorized the expression and got it down pat. He scoffed at her. Katsumi fought the urge to use him as a striking post. “You have a problem with him, you have a problem with me,” she snarled, her voice surprisingly menacing for a nine-year-old girl. “And believe me, sir, you do not want a problem with me. Don’t start fights you can’t win,” she said, clenching her bandaged fists angrily. The man paled before crossing his arms.

“You would defend this abomination?” he asked, his voice rising in indignation. She put her hands on her hips, cursing her small stature. She then gave him an overly saccharine smile that would send most people running for the hills with prayers on their lips.

“I defend my friends, villager-san. I’m not at fault. I’m not sure if the Hokage would approve of this kind of behavior towards two children, now would he? Naruto,” she asked, his blonde head snapped up and blue eyes met hers nervously. “Want to go see Hokage-jiichan instead of getting ramen?” she questioned, dropping the familiar honorific to show their favor with the sitting ruler. At this point, they had gathered an audience of people looking in disapprovingly. That, coupled with the obvious threat made the man stalk off, grumbling.

Katsumi, still furious, grabbed Naruto’s trembling hand and dragged him towards Ichiraku, her eyes promising a slow death to anyone who stopped them. She sat down on the stool and ordered two bowls of ramen. She was wound up so tightly, she looked like she was going to snap. Naruto placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder and offered her a small smile.

“They don’t get to treat you like that. Not while I’m around. I swear, the next time someone does that, I’m shoving my foot up their a—” Naruto hugged her fiercely, nearly knocking her off her chair and effectively cutting her off.

“Thank you, Katsumi-chan.” She relaxed into his embrace, feeling her anger leech away slowly. When he released her, she shoved him lightly.

“Don’t thank me for being a decent human being.” she retorted. Ayame came to them with two steaming bowls of ramen and all of the excess tension and emotion disappeared as Naruto slurped
down hot soup.

Katsumi couldn’t get the street encounter out of her head. That was not the first time she had had to threaten people who were blatantly rude to Naruto and she was fairly certain that it would not be the last. She frowned inwardly, halfway listening to Naruto talk about how good the ramen was. She couldn’t figure out why adults hated her friend so much. Sure, he vandalized stuff sometimes and he was generally loud and disrespectful, but that was no cause to be treated like trash. She’d seen Kiba act worse than Naruto and all he got from strangers was a couple half-hearted glares and scolding. They ostracized Naruto and Katsumi couldn’t figure out why.

She ran through every similar encounter she had seen, everything she heard about Naruto from those occurrences and from people in general, and from what little she could glean from him over the years. ‘Monster, they called him a monster,’ she thought, chewing the tip of her chopstick. That seemed to be a common theme amongst the hissed insults thrown his way. The word was grossly inaccurate. Sure, he was annoying and loud, but a monster? That was a stretch if she’d ever heard one.

Maybe it was something his family did. It wasn’t unheard of for people to take their hatred or fear out on the only remaining memento of what caused the emotions and Naruto was an orphan like her. This probably was not something she could ask adults about considering the obvious fear they had over getting found out by the Hokage. ‘The information might be classified,’ she thought, feeling an odd discomfort at getting caught figuring out state secrets that were well above her rank. She just hoped that that wasn’t the case.

It wasn’t like she could ask his clan either since he seemed to be the only Uzumaki in Konoha. Any time she asked Naruto about it, he just asked her to drop it and to respect her friend’s wishes, she did. Asking Naruto himself was out too. But, the library might have something on his clan’s history other than the usual ‘They were great allies to Konoha and they got wiped out,’ that they got fed in school. No, this was something she’d have to figure out herself. She decided to check the library to see if they had anything useful. If she was lucky, she might even get birth and death records of the Uzumaki that had lived in Konoha before and get a better understanding of Naruto’s history.

She checked her watch and figured she had just enough time to swing by the library before she had to be back at the orphanage. She finished her ramen quickly, stood up, and stretched.

“Naruto, I’m pretty tired. I think I’m going to head back home,” she said, faking a yawn, hoping that he wouldn’t see through it. Naruto grinned at her the way he always did. Katsumi couldn’t help but feel a twinge of guilt for lying to her friend.

“Ne, Katsumi-chan, you’re always tired.” he joked, laughing. After a few moments of comparing her to the elderly in terms of energy, he bade her goodbye and he finished his own food. Katsumi ducked out of the restaurant and ran in the direction of the library. She had an hour and a half before she was needed back home. She’d have to hurry if she wanted to make it home by dinner.

After getting inspected by the chunin on desk duty and threatened with bodily harm if she went up past the third floor, a vaguely disturbed Katsumi made her way into the library’s depths. She walked right past the fictional works that she usually favored and went to look through clan records, thinking that that was a good a place to start as any.

She had visited the library before but she forgot how much she loved it. The library was one of the largest buildings in Konoha. She had always found comfort in the tower bookshelves and the smell of paper that permeated the air. She set her bag down at her usual table near the windows, noticing
the usual lack of traffic in the room. Satisfied, she began her search.

She pulled out tome after tome and brought them back to her table, scanning through the history of Konoha’s most prominent clans with eager eyes. ‘Warring States period, yadda yadda yadda, Senju Hashirama and Uchiha Madara…’ she kept skimming until she finally made it to a small paragraph dedicated to the Uzumaki.

“Hailing from Uzushiogakure, this prominent clan has been allied with Konohagakure since its founding. They are known for their large chakra reserves, chakra chains, longevity, and fuinjutsu prowess. The once distinguished clan has been disbanded due to the invasion and destruction of their homeland. Though scattered, most of them reside in Konohagakure, the land of their historical allies. Notable members include Uzumaki Mito (see pgs. 15-22, 54, 73, & 108), Uzumaki Ashina (see pg 13-17), and [REDACTED].”

Bewildered, Katsumi reread the paragraph. ‘Of course the information would be redacted. Just my luck.’ she thought, flipping through the book for any more information. ‘The Uzumaki look pretty clean to me,’ she decided, frowning. ‘Nothing worth a descendant getting called a monster in the streets.’ When she found no additional information, she pulled out another book and started reading.

She read through the next book, stumbling across supposed birth records by clan as recent as around fifteen years ago. Assuming Naruto’s parents were older than five when he was born, she should find something of value. She flipped to the back, past about fifty pages of unfairly pretty dark-eyed Uchiha, and read through the disappointingly small record of Uzumaki living in Konoha. ‘No one young enough to have had Naruto nine years ago,’ she thought, ready to chuck the book across the room. She grabbed scroll detailing the history of the village after the Warring States Period and skimmed it. When that book yielded no new information, she pulled out another one. And then another one.

By the time she had finished skimming through about a dozen books, she felt like throwing herself out of the window. She tugged at a pale braid, thinking about a way around this roadblock. ‘Newspapers,’ she thought, standing up abruptly. ‘This place has to have records of what’s happened around the village within the past decade.’

Katsumi looked through the first floor before climbing the staircase to the second. Here, she noticed, instead of just books on the shelves, there were boxes of newspapers. ‘Bingo.’ She made her way through three shelves before finding the years she was looking for. Katsumi took out the yellowed pages, sat down cross-legged on the carpet, and began reading. After reading newspapers from earlier that year, she skipped to October, around the day of Naruto’s birth. She was stunned to see a paper reading ‘DEMON FOX ATTACKS KONOHA’ that had been released the day after Naruto’s birth. She shivered reading some of the first and accounts of how the corrosive chakra felt both from a distance and up close, it apparently being powerful enough to vaporize people standing upwards of ten meters away from it.

She paused when she got to the bottom of the page. Looks like whoever was supposed to be going through and redacting classified information missed something.

“What’s up with that? I’m just trying to figure out what went wrong!”, said the second desk chunin as Katsumi made her way through the staircase. She was met with the irritated voice of the desk chunin from earlier. Katsumi barely heard him as she was too busy staring at the picture in the newspaper.

It featured a young blonde man with achingly familiar blue eyes next to a willowy red-haired woman
with bone structure she knew entirely too well. Under the picture were their names. ‘Namikaze Minato and Uzumaki Kushina’ had apparently been key figures in stopping the Nine-Tails from leveling the village.

Realizing that she was probably down to around two minutes before the testy adult downstairs came at her with knives in his hands and about ten minutes before her caretaker would come at her with murder in her eyes for Katsumi staying out curfew for the third time that week, she grabbed the newspaper and hurried down the stairs onto the first floor. Katsumi put the information surreptitiously in her bag, eager to read more about what happened on October 10th. She made it out the door as the prickly chunin looked on, closing and locking it behind her.

She ran home, dodging civilians and merchants hauling their wares home after a long day on the market. ‘Late, late, late, I am so late,’ she thought, wishing she could chakra walk like she had seen other shinobi do so she could take to the rooftops and get back much quicker. ‘The next thing I work on is chakra walking.’ Katsumi poured on the speed, making it to the market district within ten minutes. She made it to the orphanage and snuck around the side of the house that had her window.

She strained her eyes in the dark, thinking about a way in. She grinned and dug around in her bag for some kunai and rope. Making quick work looping the rope through the kunai ring, she threw the kunai full force at the groove between the stone in the wall a meter above her window ledge. She tugged forcefully at the lodged kunai, and satisfied that she wasn’t going to fall to her death, climbed the roped quickly, praying that the noise of her blade hitting the wall wasn’t loud enough to alert Kagome.

When Katsumi finally reached her window ledge, she hauled herself up on the narrow platform and checked to see if anyone was in the room before she came in. Realizing that everyone was probably eating downstairs, she stood up on her tiptoes and yanked the kunai out of the wall. Blowing a wayward curl out of her face, she jimmied the old window open and slid inside, crouched low to the floor to listen for footsteps. When she heard none, she closed the window and sighed in relief, a huge grin on her slightly sweaty face. She had snuck into her own house successfully. Like a ninja. The childish part of her squealed in delight.

Katsumi walked a few meters on the wood floors to her bed and sank down on it, kicking off her sandals and shoving them under her bed to be snuck into the genkan later. She hauled her grey duffle bag onto her worn yellow comforter and pulled out her stolen information. Instead of skimming, this time she read through it thoroughly.

She stopped at the picture, feeling an odd sort of sadness well up in her chest. ‘So these were Naruto’s parents,’ she frowned. They looked really happy in the photo, the woman laughing and the man —the Yondaime Hokage for Kami’s sake— gave a more subtle smile, looking like there was nowhere he’d rather be than with her. ‘That would explain why the information was redacted. Holy crap, this really was a state secret.’ she thought, eyes widening. Naruto definitely didn’t know. If he knew that his father was the Fourth Hokage, he would make sure everyone else did too which might bring unwanted attention in the form of people wanting a score settled against their dead enemy’s son. No way a person who was Kage-material left the world with no enemies.

Katsumi shuddered, thinking about the trouble this secret could bring. Then Katsumi frowned again. By all accounts, Naruto’s parents were the exact opposite of what she suspected they were. They were heroes in the eyes of the village. So why did the general populace treat Naruto with such contempt?

She skimmed the four-page newspaper article for any more information before stumbling on a question; the paper said that Naruto’s parents stopped the Nine-Tails but it never specified how.
Furthermore, it seemed like the Nine-Tailed Fox just rampaged out of absolutely nowhere. Where was it before that day? She shook her head, thinking about everything she had ever been taught about Tailed Beasts in school. ‘Sealing. To control the beasts, they have to be sealed inside of something or someone,’ she thought, tapping her pen on her chin. His mother probably did the sealing considering that her clan had pumped out more fuinjutsu masters per capita than anybody else in the world before they got wiped out. That answered one question but left several more unanswered. ‘Why did they both die?’ ‘What caused the beast to get let out in the first place?’ and most importantly ‘Where is the beast now?’

Katsumi bit her thumbnail, thoughts swirling around her head rapidly. ‘Library,’ she decided. ‘I need to figure out more information on Tailed Beasts and their containers and hopefully more information about Naruto’s parents.’ She rolled off of her bed and walked over to her dresser, crouched down, and put the newspaper under some socks in her drawer for safe keeping. As she stood back up, her muscles groaning in protest, she grimaced. ‘And chakra walking. I gotta research chakra walking tomorrow too.’ She rubbed at her sore muscles and sat back down. Since everyone was still at dinner, the shower should be clear for her to get first dibs on. Katsumi gathered up her shower stuff and got ready for the long day of researching she had ahead of her.

‘I’m going to figure this out even if it kills me.’ she thought, resolutely, turning on the hot water. ‘But I really hope it doesn’t.’

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Well that’s chapter four. Hope you guys liked the Ino cameo. Personally, I think she’s a cool character that deserved more development than Kishimoto gave her but that’s neither here nor there. I have no idea where this story is going to go after they graduate from the academy. I’ve been toying with the idea of putting Katsumi in Sakura’s place on Team Seven but I’m still undecided for plot reasons. Let me know what you think! For anyone wondering how Katsumi could figure out who Naruto’s parents were so quickly, Naruto literally has his dad’s everything. You’d have to be blind not to see the family resemblance. Also, one of Katsumi’s main traits is that she’s wicked smart and able to deduce things quicker than most kids her age (save Shikamaru). The kid’s a veritable genius. She’d be similar to Shikamaru if he weren’t so lazy. She’s invested in figuring out this supposed mystery because it involves one of her closest friends and because she hates not knowing things more than she hates arm day. Let’s see how far she goes to figure this out before she gets bored or caught. Feel free to pitch some ideas in the comments. I’ll give them all a read-through. Thanks for reading. We’ve gotten over 100 hits!!! Anyways onto Chapter 5.
Katsumi woke up early, excited for a full day of research. Most nine-year-olds would abhor the thought of doing work on a weekend but for Katsumi, this was something she loved. She’d never met a mystery she couldn’t solve or a problem she couldn’t crack and she was incredibly invested in her most recent conundrum. ‘What really happened nine years ago on October 10th?’

She rolled out of bed, making sure to get dressed quietly as to not wake her roommates. She quietly put on some white shorts and a loose tee shirt. She took her hair down and braided it tight to her scalp in one long plait down her back. After that, she toed on a spare pair of standard-issue shinobi sandals, grabbed her bag, opened the window by her bed and stepped out onto the ledge. Before she left, she made sure to grab a notebook so she didn’t have to take things from the library too often. She quickly shut the door behind her and jumped down onto the lawn. Satisfied with her escape, she made her way towards the library, enjoying the quiet morning.

Not many people were up at seven am. Just a few merchants setting up shop in the market district, a few people running early morning errands, and a couple shinobi. Katsumi savored the lack of traffic and took her time walking to the library so she could enjoy the stroll before it inevitably got too hot to. Though it was only mid-April, the midday heat was already oppressive so Katsumi made it a point to avoid being outside if at all possible around noon.

Katsumi ambled up to the library’s front doors and peeked her head in. This time at the desk was a kunoichi with dark hair. She waved at her and told her (much nicer than the last guy) that she wasn’t allowed to go up past the third floor. Katsumi nodded and walked right into the main atrium where she was the day before. She sat back down at her usual table and began her quest.

She looked for any books on Tailed Beasts to start with, not knowing anything more specific. Katsumi ended up picking up half a dozen books on it. When she sat back down, she picked the one with the most interesting cover and began reading through it.

“Tailed Beasts are a set of nine chakra monsters derived from the energy of the Ten Tails by the Sage of Six Paths (more on pg. 56-63). The more tails the best has, the stronger they are, the most powerful being the Nine-Tailed Fox. When left alone, these powerful beast tend to wreak havoc on human life, decimating it where it is found. However, their immense power can be harnessed by being sealed within a human who then becomes a jinchuuriki. Jinchuuriki can work in tandem with their Tailed Beast and become immensely powerful.”

‘That would explain why the Nine-Tails could almost destroy the village within an hour and a half.’ she thought, writing notes down. The book then broke down the different beasts, their names, their known abilities, and where each of the Tailed Beasts were sent after the Warring States period. Interestingly enough, all the major villages got two while Konoha saved the most powerful one for themselves. It was all pretty standard stuff so Katsumi moved on and picked up the next book. Unfortunately, the book was virtually useless because she didn’t understand the apparently foreign language of sealing. She placed it back on the table after several minutes of attempting to decipher it. She grabbed another book and prayed for patience. It went into depth about the fuinjutsu behind making a jinchuuriki, stating that if the seal is good enough, the Tailed Beast is unlikely to escape the jinchuuriki and kill them in the process. It did say something else that she made sure to write down.
“Jinchuuriki are usually made while the host is young in order to help the body acclimate to the influx of foreign chakra. The way that different villages seal the beasts into the jinchuuriki varies by location (see pg. 143). For a successful jinchuuriki sealing process, it is imperative to find a compatible host so they don’t reject the beast’s chakra which results in death. If the seal is strong, it is unlikely for the Tailed Beasts to be released except under certain circumstances. If the jinchuuriki loses control or the seal is weakened, the beast will be released. For female jinchuuriki, this is especially difficult because the act of childbirth weakens the seal significantly (pg. 27 for more). Extraction of the Tailed Beast is always fatal for the jinchuuriki.”

‘Well, that sounds like bad news for any jinchuuriki hoping to start a family…’ she thought, skimming the rest of the book. Finding nothing else of use, she picked up another book. It didn’t say much beyond fuinjutsu jargon that she had no hope of understanding.

She thought about what she had just read. The Nine-Tails had been sealed away in someone before the attack, someone powerful enough to think they could handle the stress. Then, somehow, the beast gets out which begs the question “Who was the Nine-Tails jinchuuriki nine years ago?” she thought aloud. She wrote that down as well, underlining it for further investigation. She thought about it, biting her lip.

The jinchuuriki had to be someone compatible with the Nine-Tails chakra which narrowed down the pool of possible hosts considerably. However, since she knew virtually nothing about chakra compatibility, she knew she couldn’t figure it out from that angle which left age, skill level, and gender as possible leads.

The jinchuuriki couldn’t have been a novice or else they would’ve had someone with them to keep them from releasing their beast. The village would have put together a plan in case it happened. Konoha had trusted whoever this was. No, this was a surprise. ‘Sabotage? An inside job?’ she thought, writing it down as a possible lead. It was clear that whatever happened on October 10th wasn’t supposed to happen, which meant the jinchuuriki was older and more skilled than the average ninja. Childbirth supposedly weakens the seal, but she didn’t see any ways to combat that in the book so she ruled that out as well. ‘No one would be dumb enough to voluntarily weaken the seal and put themselves and everyone else at risk unless they had a serious backup plan.’ she thought, biting her lip.

That meant that the profile of the possible Nine-Tails jinchuuriki was a skilled male shinobi, likely over the age of fifteen, that was probably well respected and highly regarded. That narrowed down the suspects enough for her to start looking for prospective hosts. It couldn’t be anyone currently alive considering the extraction of a bijuu is lethal. She played with the profile in her head and then it hit her like a ton of bricks. She was an idiot.

“Namikaze Minato!” she exclaimed, feeling like kicking herself. Thankfully, her section of the library was empty save for some old guy in the corner who looked up like he’d been electrically shocked. She whispered a sheepish sorry in his direction and thought about her discovery. Of course, it was him. He fit the profile and it would explain why he and his wife, both extremely powerful shinobi, died that night. They would’ve felt like it was their responsibility to clean up the mess so they would’ve been in the thick of things. If his wife was a sealing master, she probably tried to fix his busted seal and, when things went sideways, got caught in the crossfire. It made perfect sense. The next question is who has the Nine-Tails now?

Katsumi wrote down her findings, grinning like a madman the entire time. For Katsumi, nothing felt better than figuring something out, especially something this big. To her, she had just outsmarted the entire government by figuring out something they probably didn’t want her to know just by using
basic resources and her own ingenuity and deductive reasoning skills. She felt like she had achieved something great and it wasn’t even noon.

The small girl grabbed all of her books and slid them to the edge of the table to be dealt with later. ‘Now it’s time to read up on chakra theory,’ she thought as she looked for the appropriate books. After finding a good book on the concepts behind chakra, she sat down and began reading, feeling very pleased with herself. An hour later, she was confident enough to go test it out herself, excited to learn something new.

“Just picture where I want the chakra to flow and walk up the tree,” she stated, trying to make it feel less impossible. Of course, she knew it was perfectly within the realm of possibility since she had seen people do it for as long as she could remember but it was such a faraway concept that she hadn’t expected to be learning so soon. It wasn’t in the Academy curriculum and she definitely didn’t have anyone else to teach her so she was basically on her own. That suited her just fine though. She always did her best work alone.

Currently, Katsumi was in Training Ground 14, a heavily wooded area that provided plenty of flora to practice on and plenty of shade to relax under when she was done. Though she hadn’t rented it out, she figured since it was supposed to get really hot that day, not many people would be training so close to noon. She had placed her bag a few meters away from her a few minutes ago and began practicing climbing a tree with no hands. It wasn’t that big of a deal, was it?

Katsumi decided to start small and channel chakra into her hands first. She closed her eyes and focused on feeling the energy in her body and coaxed it to flow into her fingertips. The achievement was accompanied with a warmth in her palms that made her smile. She then placed her hand on the tree in front of her. When the bark under her hand crunched, she pulled up on the chakra. It took a little bit of experimenting, but after about five minutes, she got the right amount of chakra into her hands and felt comfortable enough with the concept to try it with her feet.

She went through the same steps and once she felt the telltale warmth in her feet, she carefully placed a foot on the bark of the tree. She tried pulling her foot away and was amazed by how tightly she was latched onto the tree. She let out a startled laugh and gingerly lifted her other leg next to it, trying not to get disoriented at the change in gravity. Then, she walked up the tree. Her heart was in her throat the entire way up, but she walked up the touch the highest branch, laughter bubbling out of her and walked right back down, exhilarated by the experience. Katsumi flopped down onto the grass and laughed in relief. Today was full of accomplishments it seemed. She heard a clapping to her left.

Katsumi shot to her feet shakily, looking for the source of the noise. ‘Stupid limited chakra reserves,’ she thought, cursing her fatigue. A group of young adults was standing fifteen meters away from her. The first one, a pretty woman, was staring at her with red eyes like she had grown another head. There was a tall lanky one with eighty percent of his face covered in a way that was totally not sketchy at all slouched over examining her with his one visible eye while Katsumi fought the urge to squirm under his gaze. Standing next to him was a dark haired man lighting with a cigarette in his mouth, and another man with what looked like a senbon in his mouth —unsanitary— who was the source of the clapping.

“That’s some chakra control you got there, kid.” the clapping one stated, his hands deep in his pockets. Katsumi eyed him warily. “I didn’t know they were teaching that stuff in the Academy now.” he finished, laughing a little.

“They don’t.” she said, looking at his companions and judging their facial expressions. That was
when the woman spoke up.

“You taught that to yourself? How old are you?” she asked, placing a hand on her hip. Katsumi wanted to stick out her tongue and repeat the same question back to her, see how she liked getting interrogated by a stranger. She just answered ‘nine’ and saw their surprise on their faces.

“That’s awfully young for a squirt like you to be tree climbing.” the sketchy masked man said, not even looking up from a book he had gotten seemingly out of nowhere. Katsumi almost huffed in irritation because she was not a squirt, but refrained. She shrugged. A breeze ruffled her hair and she felt a stab of annoyance at her hair’s inability to cooperate in the best of times. The one with the senbon in his mouth whistled low, impressed.

“Looks like Iruka’s got a prodigy on his hands,” he chuckled to the man with the cigarette. He shrugged.

“Kid’s got talent.” Katsumi felt her face flush at the attention, unused to it. That was when the weird one ruined the moment.

“Is anyone going to tell her that she shouldn’t be here?” he drawled. His companions cringed and Katsumi felt her face get warm. “We reserved the Training Ground and she’s practicing shinobi basic techniques during our allotted time,” he stated matter of factly, turning a page in his book. She didn’t think he liked her very much which was fine because she didn’t think she liked him very much either.

She shrugged, feigning nonchalance. “I’ll leave gladly. If you want, I can bring back a hairbrush and help you practice basic hair care techniques. You look like you need them.” she said, making her voice icy and narrowing her eyes in a way that, combined with her oddly colored irises, made people wildly uncomfortable. The woman let out a choked laugh while the two men guffawed at her barb. She turned and walked to her bag, preparing to leave to go get something to eat. She had forgotten to eat breakfast and was quickly regretting that decision. She scooped up her bag and was preparing to leave the way she came when the man with the needle in his mouth called out to her.

“I like you, kid. What’s your name?” he asked, laughter coloring his tone.

“Katsumi,” she answered, keeping her voice cool. It seemed like the weird man had left to go somewhere else. Good. The man laughed again.

“Well Katsumi-chan, I hope I’ll be seeing more of you,” he said, moving to hand her something she had forgotten in her haste to leave. A book on jinchuuriki she had pilfered from the library. She swallowed down her unease, hoping he didn’t think that a nine-year-old learning about chakra monsters was anything to investigate. The man with the cigarette let out a laugh.

“I do too. Not many people can put Hatake in check that quickly, least of all, little girls,” he said. She nodded and placed her book in her backpack, ready to go get some food.

“Try not to practice anything like that without someone else. If you get hurt, you’ll need someone to take you to the hospital.” the woman supplied, a smile on her face like she had to say this often. Katsumi nodded, wanting to leave before this Hatake man came back. She waved goodbye to the strangers and made her way into town. She was tired, sweaty, and irritated by her encounter with the strangest bunch of adults she’d ever met, but none of that could dampen her mood. She had made two large accomplishments and it wasn’t even one in the afternoon. She was on a roll.
The rest of Katsumi’s day was supposed to be spent where she spent the first half, researching. Now that she knew who the Nine-Tails’ jinchuuriki was, she was trying to figure out who the new one was. She knew the basic requirements for a prospective host so she could narrow it down. She thought about everything she knew about the Kyuubi attack. The attack happened suddenly which means that they wouldn’t have time to find a suitable host in such short notice. She tapped her foot on the aged carpet. Either they had to quickly get a possible jinchuuriki or they already had them on deck as soon as the fighting started.

Katsumi thought about all of the criteria required for a possible host and tried to reason her way to an answer. ‘The new jinchuuriki was likely young, or at least young enough to not have fully developed chakra coils so that knocks out anyone over the age of six during the attack.’ she deduced, writing that down. She thought some more when she thought of something else. ‘Compatibility. The person would have to have chakra compatibility,’ she thought, biting her thumbnail. ‘But, again, I don’t know enough about chakra to think about it from that angle.’ It also had to have been someone accessible who already was an option since there was no time to ask for parental permission. She was stumped. Absolutely stumped. ‘Chakra. I need to know more about chakra and chakra compatibility.’ she decided, getting up to add to her extensive stack of research materials on her desk that had almost obscured her from view.

She found a few books as well as an interesting looking scroll and sat back down at her table to read. Chakra was a fascinating subject to her so she sped through the books, finding what she needed quickly. Apparently, she needed to figure out what her chakra nature was. She also found out that chakra compatibility is based on a lot of different factors so the line of jinchuuriki is usually hereditary. ‘The Tailed Beasts get passed around like an old necklace’ she snorted. She facepalmed and groaned.

‘I didn’t think of the possibility of the jinchuuriki dying and the Tailed Beast having to be reformed!’ she thought, feeling like ripping her hair out. ‘I’m definitely missing something.’

“Have you been here all day?” a familiar voice called out. Katsumi’s head snapped up from her research and see Kiba and Akamaru standing in the doorway.

“I didn’t know you knew where the library was, Kiba.” she snorted, grateful for the break. He laughed and walked over to her table. Katsumi reached down and pet the small dog.

“Who comes to the library on a Saturday?” he asked, wrinkling his nose in distaste. “Jeez, Katsumi, that’s a lot of books. What’re you even reading about?” The girl in question cringed inwardly, trying to think up some convincing lie to keep her friend out of her quest for classified knowledge.

“I wanted to find out my chakra nature but I didn’t feel like I knew enough about chakra to go about it,” she answered, keeping her voice steady. Kiba got up off the table and grabbed her arm.

“Well come on, we’re all going to go hang out. My sister’s taking us to a lake just outside of Konoha. I’m saving you from yourself.” he replied, tugging her towards the doorway. She whined, trying to stay in her seat but failing when she felt a small body tugging at her pant leg. Grumbling about rude boys and their traitorous puppies, she gave in and put up most of her books before shoving the rest of them in her bag and following Kiba out of the door. She waved goodbye to the desk chuunin and stepped out into the heat.

“Before we go, I need to put up my work and grab my swim stuff.” Kiba shrugged and followed her towards the orphanage, complaining about the oppressive heat the entire way. By the time they had made it into the house, Katsumi felt like choking her friend just to stop his griping and moaning. She tossed her bag onto her bed and rounded up the appropriate materials for an afternoon of swimming. When she finished packing her stuff, they left for the gates, excited.
Playing with her friends was always a good time especially during the summer. They had a really fun time. They swam around, enjoying the respite from the heat, and played a few games. Kiba’s sister pushed him into the lake a few times and that turned into an all battle royale in the water. Naruto ended up winning in the end because no one could predict what he would do next. By the time the sun was setting, they were tanner and hungrier than when they started out. They made the trek back into the village around a quarter to seven and made it back right before the hour.

Drenched, but satisfied, Katsumi waved to her friends and separated from them once they reached the gates to head home. They had been at the lake for hours and she had worked up a decent appetite. When she made it home, she shucked off her shoes in the genkan and made her way into the kitchen.

“Hey Katsumi-chan,” Kagome said from the stove. Looked like they were having miso soup tonight. Katsumi greeted her guardian. Kagome turned around and smiled at her young charge. “Looks like you had fun today.” she chuckled, placing a hand on her hip.

“Kiba’s sister took us all to the lake,” she said, plopping down at the table tiredly. “We had a really good time.” Kagome made a noise of approval and kept cooking. Five minutes later, the second round of dinner was underway. The other kids came from different parts of the house to eat and it was raucous as usual. The younger ones always ate first since Kagome and the other grownups had to help them and they couldn’t do it while trying to keep the peace amongst the older children. Katsumi sat in her usual spot and wished she had something to do with her hands.

It wasn’t that she didn’t like the other kids, it was just that she couldn’t really relate to them very well. They were all nice to her but they were distant. The kids her age were all civilians. Sure, some kids older than her were shinobi but they had all moved out as soon as they started making a steady wage, grateful to leave behind all memories of them not being wanted. She didn’t blame them. Her peers couldn’t understand her lifestyle and she didn’t understand theirs. It made coming back to the orphanage pretty lonely.

Katsumi ate by herself most nights, usually coming downstairs right before Kagome put away all the food. Tonight though, she came home just in time for dinner so she figured she’d go ahead and eat so she could turn in early. She had done a lot today and she was absolutely exhausted. So while all the other kids were talking and laughing, Katsumi ate quickly so she could get some much needed quality time with her pillow. As soon as she finished, she stood up and brought her plate to the sink before thanking Kagome and heading upstairs. She could practically feel the stares on her back from her housemates but she didn’t care. They could think she was weird all they wanted to. As soon as she became a genin and taking on missions, she wouldn’t have to deal with them anymore.

That was one of the perks of being a shinobi; as soon as you get the hitai-ate, you’re an adult in the eyes of the law. That meant that she could move out and nobody could stop her whereas her civilian counterparts had to wait several more years before they got that right. She smiled at the thought of autonomy as she walked into the main bathroom. Yawning, she took a quick shower before they got full in the post-dinner bathroom rush. Under the hot spray, she mulled over what she had learned today and contemplated slamming her own head into the wall in her frustration. There was something she was missing and it was driving her insane.

She eventually got out and toweled off before heading to bed, hell-bent on figuring it out in the morning. It took her no time at all to fall asleep. Until she woke up in the dead of night, a name on her tongue.

‘Of course, Naruto’s the jinchuuriki!’ she thought, nearly waking up her roommates. She looked over at the clock by her bed and noticed the time. Nearly three in the morning. She felt like kicking
herself because of her inability to see the obvious until the wee hours of the morning. It all made sense. The prospective jinchuuriki would’ve had to have been a small child that his parents knew would be compatible and since Tailed Beasts are usually passed down family lines, he would automatically inherit his chakra compatibility from his dad. They wouldn’t have had to ask for permission seeing as though it was their own son and his mother probably did the sealing herself before she died. That would also explain why the villagers all hated Naruto. She had finally found the missing puzzle piece and she was proud that she had done it in minimal time. ‘Two days to figure out classified government information? That has to be a new record.’ she thought, grinning in the dark. She flipped a fuzzy braid over her shoulder and smirked, feeling entirely too proud of herself.

She felt giddy having figured out what had been bothering her for years. Katsumi leaped up out of bed and rummaged through her bag for her notebook to write down her discoveries. She frowned when she didn’t find it where she usually placed it. She opened up all of the other compartments and felt her heart seize. It wasn’t there. She frantically ran through where it could be before she remembered her interruption and quick departure from the library courtesy of a certain Inuzuka. ‘Of course, I leave all of my research in the library,’ she groaned. Her good mood had taken a turn for the worst.

‘Oh no, what if someone finds my notebook? It’s really incriminating,’ she wrung her hands and felt like pacing. She took a deep breath. ‘It’s unlikely someone found it. It’s not like the library is the place to be on Saturdays. I’ll just swing by super early and pick it up, problem solved.’ she reasoned with herself, feeling her heartbeat slow down. She relaxed back into her bed and tried to fall asleep and eventually did.

She awoke to a tapping on the window by her bed. She drowsily opened her eyes, ready to chew out whichever one of her favorite group of boneheads decided to wake her up at five in the morning. She was not met by a friend. When she looked at her window, she saw the unfamiliar face of an adult shinobi gesturing for her to open the window.

Katsumi, shaking off her shock, jumped up and opened it. The shinobi who had woken her up was apparently a jounin based on their flak jacket. Katsumi fought the urge to run as the unfamiliar adult told her why he was here.

“You’ve been summoned by Lord Hokage.”

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Dun dun DUN! Yeah… she’s been found out. RIP Katsumi. Also, the kid’s smart but she has difficulty seeing what’s right in front of her. She tends to go for the most difficult option, not believing that it really could be that simple. At least she was half-right. Whatever, she’ll find out in a bit. Thanks for supporting my writing! It means the absolute world to me. There’s not much to talk about in this A/N lol. Also, guess who finally figured out how to operate this site? Me! Onto the next!
“You’ve been summoned by Lord Hokage.” By this time, some of her roommates had woken up to inspect the racket and were utterly dumbstruck to see this random shinobi in their room. Katsumi waved them off absentmindedly, not wanting them to wake up their caretakers. It didn’t concern them.

“D-Do I have time to change?” she asked in a small voice. She didn’t want to be executed in a tee shirt and duckling pajama shorts. Somehow, it didn’t seem like a dignified last outfit. The jounin shook his head and went back out the window. Katsumi numbly strapped on her shoes and followed him, grateful for the steadiness in her movements.

‘That’s what I get for figuring out classified secrets,’ she thought, trying to keep up with the older shinobi as they walked through the market district in the direction of the Hokage Tower. ‘And now I’m going to die because I was careless.’ she fought back tears as they closed in on the large building. She straightened, willing her tears to disappear. If she was going to die, she wasn’t going down in tears. She refused. The jounin knocked on the door and Katsumi gulped and placed steel in her spine. She heard a muffled ‘come in’ and as she walked into the intimidating office, she held her head high.

The Sandaime Hokage wasn’t the most intimidating man, she decided. He looked like the standard grandfather that she had seen in films. This didn’t make her let down her guard though. In the shinobi world, appearance meant next to nothing and she knew that no ordinary person could earn the title ‘Hokage’. No, the man in front of her was not one to be trifled with. The Hokage gestured for her to take a seat and waved the jounin out the door and into the hallway. Katsumi did as she was told and did her level best to keep her body language neutral.

The Hokage took out a folder, opened it up, and began reading it. “Katsumi, nine years old, parentage,” he paused for a minute before continuing. “Parentage unknown. Civilian-raised but excelling in the Academy. Abnormally high intelligence, a good student and quick learner, above average strength and speed, all around a prodigious student.” he finished looked at her, his eyes catching on her eyes for a tad bit too long. She held his gaze, feeling wildly uncomfortable. Why was he reading off her achievements? Wasn’t she in serious trouble? She had effectively a serious law. Isn’t that grounds for execution? She really really really didn’t want to be killed in fleece duckling shorts. “Would you mind telling me why you’ve been frequenting the library lately?” he asked, clasping his hands in front of him and looking at her again.

Katsumi stayed quiet, not sure how to play this. Usually, she could figure out how to circumvent trouble with ease when it came to Academy teachers and her caretakers at the orphanage but she
couldn’t help but feel entirely outmatched. She was out of her depth by an incredibly large margin and she knew it. It wouldn’t be smart to deny anything considering that the fact that she’s in the office means that he knows exactly what she’s done. But would it be better to out herself and throw herself to the mercy of the Hokage? At least if she stayed steadfast in her resolve, he may respect her while he gives the order to kill her whereas if she gave in and went belly-up immediately, he would at best pity her. Strength was the best way to go. If she was going to die, she’d die unbreakable. She forced the tension out of her shoulders and stared at the most powerful man in their village head on.

Hokage-sama looked amused and shrugged, reaching under his desk and pulled out a familiar notebook. Katsumi inwardly deflated. Of course he had found her notebook. She honestly had the worst luck in the world. She kept silent and the Hokage started to read off her observations and her notes. She kept perfectly still as he finished.

“I’m impressed, Katsumi-chan. Your observational skills are extraordinary for someone your age. But I must ask, what prompted this investigation?” Katsumi shrugged, knowing that any hope of lying was out of the window. ‘Honesty it is.’

“I saw how adults treated Naruto. I wanted to know why,” she answered succinctly. The Hokage made an interested noise before folding his arms across his chest.

“Well, did you find out why?” he asked.

“It’s because he’s the Nine-Tails jinchuuriki, isn’t it?” the old man in front of her nodded. She didn’t know how she felt about her suspicions being confirmed. Didn’t that mean her friend was dangerous? Did he even know? She was shaken out of her thoughts by chuckling.

“Your notebook is very accurate. Except for one detail.” she looked up, offended. She thought that she was right. “Minato wasn’t the previous jinchuuriki. It was Kushina.”

Katsumi must’ve made a face because the Hokage let out a laugh. “Other than that, your observations and hypotheses were spot on, don’t worry.”

“Are you gonna kill me?” she asked, cutting straight to the chase and trying not to panic. She braced herself for the beginning of the end. How would it be, quick slash to the throat? Katsumi remembered the ornate carpet below her chair. No, that’d surely ruin the fabric. Maybe they’d force her to swallow poison? She wracked her brain trying to think of possible execution method, wishing she had paid more attention in school. School. Would her friends even know what was going to happen to her or would they think she disappeared? Who would take care of Naruto while she was gone? She had finally had something worthwhile in her life and she had gone and mucked it up by
being too damn curious. She inadvertently started to hyperventilate.

“Katsumi-chan, please don’t faint in my office.” came the level voice of the Hokage. “No, Katsumi-chan. I was not planning on killing you.” She slumped in her chair in what was pure relief and felt the oppressive fog of panic lift from her brain before she lifted a hand to her face to inspect a telltale wetness dripping onto her tightly clasped hands. She had started crying. In front of the Hokage, Kami, that was so embarrassing. She furiously wiped at her eyes, trying to get rid of any trace of the traitorous tears from her face and cleared her throat to try to salvage what was left of her dignity.

“Naruto doesn’t know I’m assuming.” He shook his head and stayed silent, mulling over the details. He picked up her notebook and flipped through it. Katsumi couldn’t help but feel immensely thankful that the Hokage wasn’t mentioning her crying. It was already mortifying enough.

“You are very organized. Pity you don’t apply this single-minded focus to your schoolwork.” she shrugged, feeling slightly insulted. “In case you were wondering, we knew about your endeavors before you left your notebook.” she looked up at him, confusing. ‘Didn’t I cover my tracks?’ The Hokage chortled. “I’m not sure if you are aware of this, Katsumi-chan, but you have a habit of shouting out your revelations when they hit you suddenly. When that happened, one of my jounin just so happened to be in the room and thought it was increasingly odd that an academy student was shouting out the name of the long dead Yondaime Hokage.”

Katsumi wracked her brain trying to think about who was in the room with her when she had her false epiphany. ‘I knew that Hatake guy looked familiar.’ She had seen him earlier that day, only then, she thought he was some random old guy. She swore inwardly. It was official, she definitely had the worst luck in the world. ‘Not only was he rude, he’s a snitch too.’ She glared at her hands.

The Hokage slid her notebook in her direction across the desk. “Now that you know, you aren’t allowed to speak of it to anyone. Least of all Naruto himself. The consequences will be unpleasant.” Katsumi caught his drift and snorted unintentionally.

“Of course not. Knowing him, he’d shout it from the rooftops loud enough for people in Kiri to hear.” She frowned, thinking about her lonely friend. All he wanted was to feel important and seen. He deserved to know that he wasn’t just some nobody. “When are you planning on telling him, Hokage-sama?”

The man in question was quiet for a moment before answering. “When he’s ready to handle the knowledge.” Katsumi nodded sagely, playing with the information in her mind. ‘I understand that you are civilian-raised. How are you liking Konoha’s Shinobi Academy?’ he asked, changing the subject abruptly.
Katsumi thought for a minute. “It’s okay. We just move really slowly through concepts in class. It gets kinda boring.” The old man put the files back from where he got them and smiled at her.

“Is it now?” Katsumi fidgetted and elaborated.

“Yeah. I wish we didn’t spend so much time on basic stuff that we already know.” The Hokage seemed to take her answer into consideration before nodding.

“Well Katsumi-chan, that’s all I wanted to talk to you about. You’re free to go.” Katsumi stood up a little quicker than intended, ready to leave the office, her nerves feeling raw. She bowed and made to walk out of the door before the Hokage called out to her. “Oh, and please return the library materials when you get the chance. Apparently, I need someone to go through the collection once more.” She winced, having been thoroughly caught.

“Hai, Hokage-sama.”

“Oh and one more thing, try not to make it a habit to leave out sensitive information where anyone with a library card can see. That habit may hurt you later on in your career.”

A pause.

“Hai, Hokage-sama.”

_____________________

“You can come out now, Kakashi-kun.”

An ANBU member with a dog mask stepped out of an alcove that had been previously hidden by a genjutsu and lift his mask. “What did you think about Katsumi-chan?” the Sandaime asked.

“Too smart for her own good. Mature for her age. Sharp.” Kakashi said, moving to the front of the room.
“I understand it that you and some other jounin saw her attempting tree climbing yesterday.” the Hokage sipped on a cup of tea that had materialized out of nowhere.

“She wasn’t attempting. After less than half an hour, she was able to do it with no problem.” The old man’s eyebrows raised considerably.

“I wasn’t aware Iruka-kun was teaching tree-walking so early,” he chuckled.

“He’s not. She spent about an hour reading a book about it in the library and figured it out herself.” the Sandaime frowned and took another drink from his cup.

“Interesting. Very developed chakra control at such a young age. Who else saw her do this?” he asked.

“Just Asuma, Kurenai, Genma, and myself. We were going to use the training ground when we found her and observed for a minute. She left approximately five minutes after seeing us. The kid seemed near chakra exhaustion. Apparently, the tree climbing took a lot out of her reserves.”

The Hokage nodded. Kakashi made a face under his mask. “What I don’t get is how a civilian-born kid had such developed chakra paths to begin with. Most civilian kids have to get theirs turned on manually in the hospital before they can even hope to achieve ninjutsu techniques. Not only that, but hers were abnormally developed. Most clan kids don’t even have developed systems before the age of eleven or so.”

“Why do you think that is, Kakashi-kun?”

“Well, obviously Katumi’s parents weren’t civilians. She has an active chakra system which means at least her mother was a shinobi if not both parents. Does she know?” The old man shook his head.

“Katumi’s past is a dangerous one. If I have it my way, she’ll never know. But alas, things are never that simple.”

“What’s her story, Hokage-sama?” he asked, placing his hands behind his back.
“That, Kakashi-kun, is classified. If you need to know, you will be told. Until that time arises, please know that it is being handled. Also, let Iruka-kun know that he is to keep an eye on her.”

“Why not graduate her early? The kid is clearly genin material, why not give her an early promotion? It happens all the time.” The old man frowned.

“One, early promotions usually are because of wartime necessity and seeing as though we are in a time of peace, I do not deem it necessary. Second, Katsumi is no ordinary Academy student. Because of the,” he paused, searching for the right word, “Circumstances surrounding her parentage, it would be unwise to send her out into the field early. It could cause problems. No, she will graduate with everyone else in her year and when she does, the topic of her past and how it affects her well being will be revisited.”

“Hai, Hokage-sama.”

“Now, see to it that she returns her stolen books to the library. The chunin who are in charge it would be very displeased if the materials aren’t returned promptly.” Kakashi shuddered, thinking about the people who run the building. They were some of the scariest shinobi in existence if you asked him. No, he did not want to cross them. Not in a million years. But he also saw the hidden order in the Hokage’s words; Watch the kid. Clearly something of this caliber wasn’t information that should be shared willy-nilly. Damn. He hardly knew this kid and she was becoming such a fucking headache. “Also, Kakashi-kun I have a question. What were you doing in the library on that day? It’s to my understanding that your preferred literature has no place there.”

Kakashi shrugged. “Hiding from Gai.”

“Ah, of course you were. Dismissed.”

The jounin disappeared.

Katsumi shuffled back down the road that she came down feeling understandably relieved. To be fair, she thought she was walking towards her own execution which, in hindsight, seems a little drastic. Her conversation with the reigning military dictator only lasted for an hour from her trip from the orphanage to leaving the office proper so it was still pretty early in the morning.
After dodging several caffeine-deficient adults, she figured she’d make the most of her last day of the weekend and train before school tomorrow. She could definitely use more practice tree-climbing. But first, she had some stolen contraband to return to its rightful destination.

She opened the door to the orphanage slowly, trying not to wake up Kagome. Her guardian would have a fit if she knew that Katsumi had done something to have caught the attention of the Hokage. Katsumi had noticed that Kagome didn’t much approve of her profession. She always had a certain look on her face when she mentioned aspects of her life involving shinobi, especially when she mentioned some of her friends and their families. Katsumi assumed that it was the same general wary indifference that most civilians felt towards shinobi, but based on how vehement she was, Katsumi knew that it was something personal. But that was a mystery for another day. She'd solved her fair share of mysteries for the next decade.

Katsumi slipped into the quiet house undetected and went into her bedroom to turn in her library books. When she walked in, she noticed a that day’s theme: strange shinobi showing up in her room and scaring her and her roommates half to death.

“Hatake-san. Why are you in my room?” Katsumi warily asked the masked man in her room. The bedroom had been vacated, probably at his arrival. ‘Smart kids,’ she thought, envying their state of uninvolvment. How she wished she didn’t have to have what was sure to be an extremely uncomfortable conversation.

The man in question was sitting on her bed and lazily reading through the same orange book she had seen him with the day before piquing her interest slightly. She shook off her burgeoning curiosity in favor of getting him out of her hair.

----------

Though she was a little girl with frizzy white braids in what looked like duck pajamas standing in her bedroom with a shinobi who was leagues ahead of her skill-wise, she still had the nerve to look annoyed. If Kakashi wasn’t trying to get something done, he might’ve smiled at the kid. She had guts. But overconfidence got shinobi killed every day so he shouldn’t encourage her behavior. At least he could have some fun messing with her.

“One could ask you the same question,” he replied cryptically. The girl frowned and folded her arms across her chest. Oh, he was going to have some fun with this kid.

“What do you mean?”
“Well, why are you in my room?” Katsumi’s face flitted between confusion and irritation at his answer.

“This is my room. What are you even talking about?”

“Here you are, barging into my room uninvited and yelling at me. You’re hurting my feelings.”

“This isn’t your room. Leave.” Katsumi bit out, narrowing her eyes at the jounin. He finally looked up from his novel, wanting to giggle. Pissing people off was Kakashi’s favorite pastime.

“Mah, Katsumi-chan. You’re so mean for such a little squirt.” The child in front of him let out an angry squawk, looking ready to rip him a new asshole. She took a furious step forward before stopping herself, keeping herself and her fury in check. Kakashi internally approved.

“What do you need?” she asked, erasing the anger from her features surprisingly well for someone who wasn’t formally trained to do that on a daily basis. ‘Just who is this kid?’ Kakashi thought. He set his book down and decided that he was done bothering the youth for the next hour or so.

“Hokage-sama says to make sure you turn in your library books.” With that, he disappeared, leaving a pile of leaves on her bedspread.

---------------------

Katsumi looked at where the masked guy had been moments before, bewildered and irked. ‘That’s all he had to tell me?’ she stalked over to her bed, ripped the comforter off her bed and shook the offending foliage to the ground. “A memo would’ve worked just fine,” she grumbled. Now she had a mess to clean up.

She muttered angrily about ‘stupid ninja and their tricks’ as her roommates filed back into the room with a puzzled-looking Kagome behind them. Katsumi inwardly groaned at her earlier stealth being rendered useless by one stupid, masked weirdo.

“As happy as I am with you taking the initiative to tidy up your living space I do have to ask you
why Hana-chan and Itsume-chan were motivated enough to vacate their rooms before ten am.” Katsumi fought the urge to scratch her head sheepishly, having been thoroughly caught. She turned over her left shoulder to prop the broom against her bedframe and shrugged casually, trying to salvage what was left of her morning. Kagome seemed to sense her approaching deceit and gave her ‘The Look’. Katsumi knew that there was no hope for her avoiding a lecture.

“I had an early morning visitor,” she said, looking at her feet. She heard Kagome shift her weight onto her other side.

“Two shinobi visitors?” Kagome pressed. Katsumi cringed inwardly. This stupid village was full of snitches it would seem.

“The Hokage wanted to talk to me about my work in the Academy,” she lied quickly. “He wanted to know how I wanted to proceed in the future, whether or not I wanted to be promoted in a couple years.” Kagome seemed to relax at that.

“And the second shinobi?’

“Just one of the library chunin reprimanding me about overdue library books.”

“Hn. Alright Katsumi-chan. Make sure you turn in those books today.”

“Yes ma’am.” She turned toward the two girls that had drifted to their respective beds with suspicion in their eyes. Clearly they didn’t buy it. Well, it didn’t matter if they did or not as long as Kagome did so Katsumi didn’t much care for their cynicism at the moment. “I’m sorry for waking and frightening you. It won’t happen again.”

Kagome nodded, satisfied with the resolution and walked back out of the small bedroom. Katsumi made quick work of gathering her books and throwing them into her bag before jumping out the window to go turn them in. That was entirely too close for her liking.

As she walked down the street, she looked at the sun to gauge the time. Roughly a quarter until nine. Katsumi made her way to the library before the turn of the hour and walked into the familiar building.

Thankfully, the cheerful chunin was there at the front desk. She placed her books on the counter for
them to be checked back in, apologizing the entire time. Luckily, she got off with light scolding from the brown-haired woman for which she was intensely thankful. The day had been eventful enough without being threatened with bodily harm for the second time within the past couple hours.

The day had already been long and it wasn’t even noon. Katsumi shouldered her bag and waved goodbye to the library chunin. That was all she had to do today so she was nonplussed as to what she would do for the rest of her waking hours. Somehow, she didn’t much feel like researching and she didn’t think she had the stomach to handle being around any of her friends for an extended period of time today. So she turned and started walking in the direction of the training grounds, determined to practice tree-walking.

So the child checked out Training Ground 7 for the next few hours and ran herself ragged on her quest to perfect her fledgling chakra control. After nearly plummeting to her death no less than three times, panting and thoroughly spent but still satisfied with her progress, she headed home an hour after noon, ready to take a long nap. Kami knows she needed it after the morning she had. But first, she absolutely had to take a shower. Yeah, shower first, nap later. Katsumi grabbed her things from their spot under a tree and headed home. She didn’t notice the spectator who had been watching her progress though. The masked man kept his observations to himself and left shortly after she did.

‘That kid is going to have an interesting future,’ Kakashi thought and he shunshined into his apartment. It takes a special kind of child to figure out government secrets so young. It was clear that the girl was exceptional.

He frowned and walked into his kitchen, thinking about that impressive academy student. Those kinds of shinobi didn’t come around very often, even rarer still did they have happy endings. Kakashi knew that better than anyone. Kakashi felt bad for the poor girl. She had no idea what was in store for her and it was entirely too late for her to reconsider her career now that she had the attention of the Hokage himself. He sighed and opened his fridge to find it predictably empty and forcibly pushed all thoughts of prodigious but doomed little girls out of his head. It wasn’t his problem. What was his problem was the glaring lack of food in his house.

He wasn’t home enough to keep his refrigerator fully stocked and even when he did go grocery shopping, it was for a couple things that usually ended up going bad during his frequent extended missions out of the village. ‘Time to freeload,’ he smirked, thinking of an unwitting target. Maybe Asuma or Kurenai today seeing as though he already got Genma two days earlier. He left through the window of his residence with a smirk on his lips, laughing inwardly at his unsuspecting victim. He was feeling barbecue today.
A/N: Hey y’all. That’s Chapter 6. Expect a time skip fairly soon because I’m tired of writing about Konoha 12 in the Academy. There’s only so much I can write lmao. Thanks to everyone who’s been reading and commenting and leaving kudos and bookmarking. You guys really make my day every time I see another notification. On to the next!
“Tomorrow you’ll be taking your graduation exams so make sure you’re ready to perform like the shinobi you’ve trained to become,” Iruka-sensei encouraged from his place at the front of the class. He beamed at all of the children in his class. “See you tomorrow class and good luck!”

The class erupted into excited chatter as they packed up their things to go home. They were going to become genin tomorrow which was no small feat. “I wonder what our team assignments are going to be,” Kiba said. Katsumi snorted and slung her bag onto her back. Shikamaru rolled his eyes and opened his mouth to say something before Katsumi jumped in.

“I don’t care who I’m going to be with as long as it isn’t you yahoos.” the lone girl said, waving her hand dismissively. The aforementioned yahoos all began protesting more or less. Choji laughed, Kiba looked affronted, Naruto whined, and Shikamaru muttered something about ‘troublesome girls’.

“Katsu-chan that was mean!” Naruto proclaimed the loudest, moving to punch her in the arm. She twisted out of the way, laughing at his expression. They all walked out of the school and southwards towards the residential district.

“I’m kidding. Honestly, you lot are too sensitive to be shinobi,” she smirked. “But in all honesty, I don’t really care that much about who my teammates are so much as who the teacher is going to be.” She frowned and looked at Shikamaru and Choji wistfully. “You’re lucky. You already know who your teammates are gonna be,” she pouted. Shikamaru groaned.

“Don’t remind me. Yeah, I’m going to be on Choji’s team but Ino comes along to complete the Ino-Shika-Cho set. This is all going to be so troublesome.” Shikamaru complained. Choji got noticeably more pale at the mention of their female teammate. Katsumi rolled her eyes.

“Ino’s bossy, not a demon,” Shikamaru looked at her doubtfully at that. “No, really. She’s not that bad. Just…” she stopped to think of the right word. “Loud. And demanding.”

“I hope I’m on the same team as Sakura-chan,” Naruto interjected. Katsumi sighed, expecting this answer.

“Wow really? We had no idea,” Kiba said sarcastically. Naruto shot him an irritated look.

“If we’re put on the same team, then I can impress her and make her fall in love with me and not Sasuke-teme,” he explained for the ninety-seventh time that week. But who was counting?

It was no secret that Naruto had a thing for their pink haired classmate. He basically followed her around like a puppy and irritated her seventy-five percent of the time they were in school. Naruto had been in love with Sakura since he was eight. The only problem was that Sakura didn't like Naruto and instead had a crush on Sasuke, who was in love with training and seemingly detested the blond almost as much, if not more than Sakura herself. It was the worst love triangle of the century if you asked Katsumi but no one ever asked her perfectly valid opinions.

It also didn’t help that Katsumi didn’t particularly like Sakura to begin with. Anytime Iruka-sensei had the class spar, he always paired Sasuke and Katsumi together, since they were on similar taijutsu levels. Every single time, Sakura would first look at her enviously and whisper something that
Katsumi doubted was very pleasant into another girl’s ear and then stare longingly at Katsumi’s sparring partner. Every single time, Sasuke paled and scowled defensively, hating the attention. Katsumi’s heart went out to Sasuke, it really did. That girl had crazy in her green eyes and Katsumi wanted none of it, thank you very much. Naruto did though. He wanted her crazy so much that it was annoying.

Sakura also hated Naruto, which made Katsumi really dislike the pink-haired girl. Sure, Naruto was a bit too forward with the girl, but her rebuffs were often needlessly cruel which Katsumi had a hard time not ripping her a new one for. It wasn’t like she could physically beat her up for it since she would get into major trouble for it (Sakura looked like the type to snitch) and it wasn’t like she was fit to be her sparring partner anytime soon (Ino, maybe. Sakura? Absolutely not.).

Katsumi frankly had no idea what Naruto saw in Sakura. The girl was pretty enough and highly intelligent, but other than that, she lacked all of the necessary traits to become a capable kunoichi. It was pathetic, really, the amount of effort she put into trying to impress Sasuke and the minuscule bit of attention she put into becoming a decent shinobi. Honestly, if Sasuke decided out of the blue to quit being a ninja, Sakura and half of the girls at the Academy might jump ship right along with him. It was dumb and Katsumi didn’t get it at all. Crushes were weird and stupid, and right along with Sakura’s special brand of insanity, Katsumi wanted absolutely none of it. Sure, Sasuke was kinda cute if you got past his unbelievably abrasive personality, but Katsumi didn’t get the hype. Maybe it wasn’t hers to get. She shrugged in response to her friend’s words.

“You know what would be terrible?” she asked, starting to giggle at the possible disaster. Her friends turned towards her expectantly. “You, Sakura, and Sasuke all on the same team.” Everyone collectively cringed at the prospective team assignment. “Your team wouldn’t get anything done because you would be too busy being at each other’s throats all the time.”

“Don’t jinx it, Katsumi,” Choji warned.

“I don’t have to,” Katsumi replied, shrugging off Choji’s superstitions. “I don’t think fate is cruel enough to create that kind of chaos. Naruto nodded vigorously.

“I can’t wait to beat Sasuke-teme. He thinks he’s so cool. He won’t be when I beat him and become the Hokage, believe it!” Before Naruto could launch into another tirade about exactly how he was going to become the next military dictator at the age of twelve, the group found themselves at the front of Katsumi’s residence.

“When do you plan on moving out?” Kiba asked. Katsumi grinned and looked up at the peeling white paint on the orphanage’s outer walls.

“The end of next week,” she answered, feeling relief seep into her posture. Kagome had been a great caretaker but there was something about the general aura of dejection that permeated the air in and around the building that made her thankful that she was almost considered an adult in the eyes of the law and could move out fairly soon, of course barring unforeseen circumstances during tomorrow’s exam.

“You need any help moving?” Choji asked. She sent him a grateful smile.

“I’m alright. I don’t have that much stuff to move. Besides, Naruto’s letting me move into his apartment until I have enough money to get my own place so he’s helping me. Thanks though.”

“Naruto grinned at that.

“It’s going to be so cool having a roommate!” Naruto exclaimed, drawing a few aggravated stares from the adults walking around them. Katsumi secretly shot a particularly mean looking man a glare
that could strip the paint off a wall, telling him silently to keep moving while her friends kept talking. He looked away quickly after that.

“Try not to kill him, Katsumi.” Shikamaru deadpanned. Naruto scoffed at his accusation.

“She would never. She loves me too much,” he said cheekily, elbowing her lightly. That was her cue to leave her four favorite morons and go inside.

“Whatever helps you sleep at night. Speaking of sleep, I gotta get some so I don’t pass out during the graduation exams.” Katsumi felt excitement bubble up inside of her at the prospect of finally becoming a real shinobi after all this time. She turned around and made her way to the front porch.

“See you guys tomorrow. Try not to fail so we can all become shinobi together, alright?” They shouted their affirmations and Katsumi disappeared behind the front door of the orphanage.

She was finally getting out of here as long as she passed the next day. Sure, twelve years old was a little too young to be living without adult supervision but that was the beauty of being a ninja, she got all kinds of privileges that she probably shouldn’t have with the hitai-ate. Hell, if she wanted to, after tomorrow, she could go to a bar. She was legally an adult after all. Of course, the bartender probably wouldn’t serve her and she would probably get kicked out by any halfway decent adult, but it was still a really cool prospect.

Katsumi went straight to her shared room and tossed her school bag onto her bed. Once she got her forehead protector, a whole world of possibilities opened up for her. She looked down at her loose civilian clothing with distaste. First order of business it seemed was to go shopping for proper shinobi attire.

Though she tried to fall asleep early, there was one thing that was weighing heavily on her mind: Naruto. No matter how hard they tried to prep for the exams, he just couldn’t do a standard bunshin. Katsumi knew that it was something about his absolutely massive amounts of chakra, but they couldn’t figure out how to alter the input to get a decent output. Hopefully, his scores would be high enough everywhere else to compensate, but Katsumi was anxious for her friend.

She had to let it go. She had done all she could do for her friend. It was up to him now. She just had to have faith.

She fell asleep dreaming about being a newly minted genin and awoke ready to ace her exams.

Katsumi predictably did well on the test, both the written and the practical. Naruto did fine on the written but bombed the practical. Apparently, his massive improvements hadn’t been enough for their instructors. Katsumi almost wanted to go up to the school and give their teachers a piece of her mind but it wasn’t their fault. Making a standard clone is a basic ninja skill. As much as it hurt her, Naruto would just have to try again next graduation season.

She had found Naruto after the headband ceremony and tried to console him but he waved her off. Told her to go enjoy being a shinobi and that he was fine.

“You’ll be with us before you know it,” she reassured, hugging his narrow shoulders tightly. “Don’t let this get you down. Just try harder next time and you’ll blow everyone out the water, I promise.”

“I’m fine, Katsu-chan, really. I just need some time alone.” He flashed her a half-hearted smile that broke her heart.

“Okay,” she conceded finally. “But you know where to find me if you wanna talk.” With that, she
left him alone. Did she want to push? Absolutely. But he needed his space and would come to her when he was ready, not when she was. Katsumi had to accept that. Besides, she had to prepare for the next day.

She spent the hours after getting her results back eating victory barbecue with her friends (minus Naruto), shopping for new clothes, and polishing her forehead protector in her room.

She had enjoyed the shopping the most if she was being honest. Katsumi had been saving up every penny she got from her government stipend for the past year and a half (man, being an orphan really had its perks) and bought brand new gear for her new life as a shinobi of the Hidden Leaf.

She bought several new items including a couple pairs of standard-issue shinobi sandals in both blue and black, numerous pairs of loose-fitting pants, leggings, fingerless gloves, several pairs of shorts, mesh armor, sleeveless kimono-style tops, and a few sleeveless hoodies. She bought most of the clothing in standard greys, blacks, and blues so she could wear them on missions as well as around the village, but also snuck in a couple in more interesting hues, like violet, yellow, green, and crimson. She may or may not have gone a little bit overboard but it was worth it. She finally was a shinobi. That was definitely something to celebrate. Kagome lightly chided her when she got home about blowing her savings all at once but Katsumi could tell that her heart wasn’t completely in it when Katsumi told her that she was a genin now.

Kagome had given her a strained smiled and hugged her tightly when she told her that she was moving out within the next week. Her caretaker made her promise to take care of herself and to come by for dinner once a week which Katsumi agreed to promptly. She could’ve sworn Kagome’s voice broke on the last word but she didn’t say anything. Katsumi felt a little sad about leaving the only home she had ever known for twelve years, but it was time for her to grow up. Kagome and the others had been good to her but she was a shinobi now. Katsumi waited until Kagome let her go before going upstairs to plan the next day.

Tomorrow she was going to get her team assignment and though she had acted nonchalant around her friends, she really was fretting about who she was going to get paired up with. She hoped that she was going to be on the same team as two of her boys but she knew that that probably wouldn’t happen given their individual skills. Shika and Choji were likely already accounted for and Kiba, being an Inuzuka, was likely going to be put on a team that specialized in tracking which Katsumi had zero experience with. ‘Relax,’ she forced the tension out of her body. ‘Everything’s going to be fine. There’s absolutely no reason for me to freak out.’

“Wait, Naruto did WHAT last night?”

There was absolutely reason for her to freak out. Of course, she was going to be on a team with both Naruto and the angriest Uchiha in recent history because her luck was apparently just that goddamned awful. When Iruka-sensei called out their names and team number, she fought back a groan and they were told to go to another classroom to meet their sensei. Frankly, she was thankful to leave seeing as though every girl in their class that wasn’t Hinata immediately zeroed in on her with jealousy in their gazes, looking ready to kill her for being “lucky” enough to be placed on the same team as their stupid crush. Honestly, it was like everyone had lost their damn minds. Sasuke at least looked at her with what she thought was relief. It was probably because she was one of the only girls in their class that didn’t have a thing for him so he didn’t have to worry about being harassed daily by his teammate. Well, Sasuke didn’t have to worry about Katsumi harassing him at least.
As they dutifully walked down the halls to wait on their jounin instructor, Naruto and Sasuke went at it. Or more like Naruto yelled at Sasuke and Sasuke let out a couple carefully aimed barbs in retaliation. Really it was just driving her up the wall.

“How come of all the people in our year I had to get paired up with you?” Naruto whined. Sasuke scoffed.

“You think I wanted to be paired with the Dead Last? Just try not to slow me down, loser.” Naruto’s face reddened and he stalked closer to the dark haired boy, looking ready to get physical before Katsumi grabbed his wrist.

“Can the both of you shut up for a minute?” she snapped. “If you didn’t like each other before, tough. We’re all on the same team so you’ll just have to get along,” she said, angrily throwing open the door to the classroom. Everyone who had already gotten their team assignments was sitting down, chatting as they waited for their sensei to arrive. She felt Sasuke train his angry black eyes on her back as she walked in and sat down at a desk. She stared him down with the same intensity, refusing to back down. No way was she going to let herself be bulldozed because he thought he was better than her.

Surprisingly, he ended up looking away first and crossed his arms. “Whatever,” he dismissed, plopping down in a chair near the window, far, far away from his new teammates. Naruto sat down next to her with an embarrassed look on his face.

“Sorry, Katsu-chan.” he apologized, scratching the back of his neck sheepishly. Katsumi rolled her eyes and sighed.

“Just try not to get into it with him too often,” she said quietly. “Just like I’m on your team, he is too. We need him so at least try to make nice.” Naruto cut his eyes towards the angry brunet in the corner, quietly fuming, and nodded.

“I’ll try.” he acquiesced. Satisfied, Katsumi smiled at him and settled into her chair to wait for their teacher. It had been about ten minutes since they had been sent to this room to wait so surely they wouldn’t be waiting too much longer.

———

Katsumi was horrifically wrong. *Again*. Five hours had passed and their sensei still hadn’t shown up. “I swear, they’d better be dead or dying right now,” Katsumi seethed, having gotten bored of reading her book by now. Sasuke grunted in agreement in by the window. Katsumi looked towards an abnormally quiet Naruto and frowned.

“What are you doing?” she asked her friend who was standing on a chair by the door with what looked like an eraser in his hand. Naruto flashed her a grin.

“Pranking our sensei,” he replied like that wasn’t something incredibly stupid.

“Do you honestly think something as simple as a falling eraser could catch a jounin?” Katsumi asked incredulously.

“A jounin isn’t going to fall for a plain old trap like that,” Sasuke said from his seat.

“Whatever. It’s his fault for being so late.” Naruto said, getting down from the chair and moving it back to its desk to watch the door. Not even fifteen seconds later, the door opened to reveal a familiar masked face. Surprisingly, the eraser fell down onto the man’s silver hair and scattered chalk dust into the air before falling to the ground at his feet.
The three genin looked in shock before Naruto broke the silence with loud laughter. That was when Katsumi recognized the guy. She inwardly groaned at her absolutely horrendous luck. Of course, the snitch is her sensei because who else would it possibly be at this point? Naruto gloated loudly.

“He fell for it! He actually fell for it!” he exclaimed through his amusement. Katsumi placed her hands on her hips and looked at the jounin with a grin tugging at her lips. One glance at Sasuke told her that he was staring down their new teacher immensely unimpressed.

The messy haired man leaned down to pick up the eraser and looked up thoughtfully. “How should I say this? My first impression of you guys are…” They unintentionally leaned in expectantly. “I hate you.” he finished cheerfully.

To say that Katsumi was unenthusiastic would be the biggest understatement in existence. She kept her face blank and stared at her sensei with interest while she cursed every god she knew of for her misfortune.

“Meet me on the roof in two minutes.” their new sensei said and promptly disappeared with a puff of air and leaves.

“Two minutes?” Naruto exclaimed to the spot Kakashi-sensei used to be. Sasuke stood up abruptly from his chair and made for the door. Katsumi and Naruto followed suit, not wanting to find out what would happen if they were late, however ironic that might be.

When they got to the roof panting with less than a minute to spare, their sensei was leaning against the railing with a book in his hand not even looking up at them. “Took you lot long enough.” Naruto opened his mouth to angrily yell back his response when Katsumi elbowed him not as lightly as she should have to quiet him down. Kakashi, of course, saw none of this and gestured for them to come forward. The three children settled onto the steps in front of their instructor and waited for him to speak. They didn’t have to wait very long.

“Let’s start with introducing yourselves,” Naruto leaned forward in interest. “Start with your name, things you like and hate, hobbies, and a goal for the future.”

“Why don’t you start off just to show us how it’s supposed to go?” Katsumi asked, not trusting this guy one bit, knowing from experience that he was entirely too shady for her liking.

“Oh me? I’m Hatake Kakashi. Things I like and things I hate…” he trailed off, his singular dark eye looking up in thought. “Yeah, I don’t feel like telling you that.” Katsumi’s face scrunches up in confusion. “My dreams for the future? I haven’t thought about that. As for my hobbies, I have lots of hobbies.” Katsumi looked at him like he had begun hopping on one foot while singing in another language. ‘Just who the hell is this guy?’

“That was the most useless introduction I’ve ever heard!” Naruto exclaimed. Katsumi agreed. As far as they knew, he could be a serial killer. They wouldn’t be the wiser considering how remarkably ambiguous his introduction was. Sasuke made a noise that sounded equal parts agreeing with Naruto’s sentiment and irritated.

“Well, then how about you give a better one?” Kakashi-sensei prompted, raising an eyebrow in her friend’s direction. Naruto didn’t need to be told twice. He loved talking about himself.

“My name’s Uzumaki Naruto. I like instant cup ramen and the ramen I got with Iruka-sensei at Ichiraku. I hate the three minutes you have to wait after pouring the water into the ramen cup,” Katsumi rolled her eyes in amusement at Naruto’s obsession with noodles. Honestly, it was becoming a problem seeing as though they accounted for about eighty percent of his daily nutrition
but that was a problem for another time. “My hobby is eating different types of ramen and comparing them and my future dream is…” he paused for dramatic effect. “To be the greatest Hokage! Then the whole village will stop disrespecting me and start treating me like I’m somebody!” he finished, adjusting his hitai-ate. He put on a victorious grin and Katumi stifled a laugh. It wasn’t that she didn’t believe in Naruto, she did. It was just that he had been saying that since he knew what that word meant and his enthusiasm was infectious.

Kakashi’s face was inscrutable and he turned to Katumi. “Our lone kunoichi. You go next.” The girl in question sighed inwardly. Personally, she thought the only person that needed to introduce themselves was their teacher but, again, nobody ever asked her opinion so she just did as she was told.

“I’m Katumi. I like training and learning new skills. I don’t like not knowing things or being held back. My hobbies include reading and hanging out with my friends.” Naruto grinned at that. “As for my hopes for the future,” she looked skyward, thinking about what she wanted to do. “To be a decent shinobi and to keep my precious people safe.” she finished. Kakashi said nothing again and turned to Sasuke.

“Last one, go on ahead.” Katumi quirked her head slightly to the right, her interest piqued. Though she knew Sasuke (well, knew him as well as anyone could), she was curious as to how he would answer Kakashi-sensei’s questions given how closed off he usually is.

“My name is Uchiha Sasuke. I dislike a lot of things and don’t like many things in particular,” ‘Jeez,’ Katumi thought, ‘This one’s a veritable ray of sunshine.’. But after that depressing start, the only way it could go was up. “And I don’t really have a dream so much as an ambition. I will restore my clan and kill a certain man.” Katumi was floored. It actually got worse. Basket cases. She was on a team chock-full of absolute basketcases. One was the sketchiest jounin in Konoha, the other was a ramen-crazed orange ball of sunshine and highly concentrated determination, and the last one was an angry kid who’s one aspiration in life was vengeance with a side of murder.

Shikamaru had no right to be complaining about his team assignment anymore. She’d take Choji and Ino over this motley crew any day. But that ship had long since sailed. She fought back the urge to cry and decided to just deal with it. Older shinobi always said that your team becomes a second (or first in Naruto and Katumi’s case) family so it was definitely in her best interest to at least try to make this work.

“On that cheerful note, I think we understand each other well enough.” their teacher said, crinkling his eyes in what looked like a smile. “Formal training begins tomorrow.”

“Aw yeah!” Naruto exclaimed energetically, pumping his fist into the air. “What’re we gonna do for our first real day as shinobi?” He was practically bouncing on his heels in excitement which was almost enough to pull a smile from Katumi.

“A survival exercise.” Katumi thought she had reached her surprise quota for the next couple weeks but she was obviously wrong. She opened her mouth to protest the plan but Kakashi-sensei cut her off. “Be at Training Ground 15 at dawn tomorrow. Oh and don’t eat breakfast tomorrow unless you plan on throwing up.”

Naruto gulped.

Katumi frowned, thinking about his instructions. If it was a survival exercise then wouldn’t it make sense for them to eat so they had the strength to, you know, survive? She met her teacher’s gaze and saw a hint of amusement and something else (looking back, it was probably sadism) in his eye and he shrugged. He was enjoying this.
“Oh, and by the way, this exercise has a sixty-six percent failure rate which means two of you are likely to be sent back to the Academy if you fail so don’t screw up.” Naruto let out an indignant squawk, Sasuke’s face, if possible, went into a deeper scowl and Katsumi couldn’t keep the shock from marring her features.

Getting sent back to the Academy was very low on the list of things that she wanted to do. Extremely low. If she failed tomorrow, she would be sent back to the orphanage and treated like an incompetent child. No, she was going to pass. She wasn’t going to let herself fail. She refused. So, she steeled her resolve and looked their sensei in the eyes defiantly. Katsumi wasn’t going to fail tomorrow. Kakashi looked at her blankly but ignored it.

“Dismissed.”

Katsumi sat on her bed and began sharpening her weapons. It wouldn’t do for her kunai to be anything less than perfect for tomorrow. Her civilian roommates had long-since vacated the room, unnerved at her focus on honing her blades. It was inconsequential to her. She was moving out the day after tomorrow so she didn’t have to worry about their judgment for much longer. As she sharpened her weapons, she thought about what could be in store for her tomorrow.

He had told them it was a survival exercise which they had done plenty in the Academy which meant that there was probably some kind of twist. She thought about how prepared she should be for the test. She could be super prepared and bring a whole wilderness survival bag that would guarantee her wellbeing for at least two weeks, but it would inevitably slow her down with the bulk. She could also prioritize different survival materials and pack lightly, but risk leaving something important out in favor of maneuverability.

Katsumi decided on the latter and chose to bring the essentials (canteen, fire-starters, a couple meters of rope, a basic first aid kit, a mirror, and a compass) and placed them carefully in a bag. She also put her ninja gear in there as well (an ungodly amount of paper-bombs, a couple dozen shuriken, several razor-sharp kunai, and ninja-wire). She felt less uneasy at the prospect of jumping headfirst into the unknown tomorrow and decided to turn it in to get some decent rest.

It didn’t work. When she woke after what she felt like fifteen minutes of sleep seven hours later, she threw on black shorts with a dark blue sleeveless hoodie with mesh armor under it down to her elbows and knees as an extra layer of protection. She spent time braiding her hair back tightly to her scalp and slipped on her fingerless gloves before gearing up completely, kunai holster, survival pack, the whole nine. She finished her ensemble by tying her hitai-ate in its rightful place, strapping on her sandals, and leaving her room.

Katsumi passed the kitchen and thought for a moment about whether or not she should chance eating breakfast. ‘There’s no guarantee I’ll eat again today given that I don’t know how long this survival exercise is gonna last but I reeeeeally don’t want to blow chunks on the first day,’ she folded her arms across her chest and checked the time. She had about half an hour to get to the assigned training ground. She shrugged before grabbing an orange and some strips of left-over pork from last night. ‘Protein and carbohydrates. That oughta do it.’. It was light and would lend her some energy. With her nutrition squared away, she headed out the front door, ready to take on the world if need be. She tightened her gloves as she walked and grinned viciously in the early morning light. Failure was not an option.

‘Hit me with your best shot, Hatake.’
A/N: Hey y’all. Das Chapter 7. We’ve finally reached the genin years! Expect the story to slow down a lot more now that we’re in the juicy bits. I have no idea how far I want to take this story, it’s just been really fun to write. I also realized while editing that Katumi’s outfit is exactly like Wasabi’s from Boruto which was entirely unintentional. Whatever. Still cute. Team 7 is ready to fuck shit up! Thanks to everyone who has been reading and giving me hella love. I appreciate every single one of you! Sorry if any of the characters are OOC. I’m still trying to figure out what I like as a writer. Anyways, onto the next.
When Katsumi woke up that morning, she was expecting to be pushed to her limits physically. What she got instead was a lesson in patience since even though she woke up at stupid o’clock, their sensei had seemingly taken a surprise trip to Sunagakure and was just now making his way back. They had been waiting for three and a half hours.

Katsumi had arrived about ten minutes before their scheduled meeting time to find Sasuke and surprisingly Naruto there as well. Sasuke stood under a tree, deciding to look off in the distance melodramatically while Naruto looked like he had passed out unceremoniously on the grass. She wasn’t the only one affected by the early hour. Well, at least they weren’t bickering. Katsumi plopped down on the ground next to her friend and waited for their sensei to show up. And waited. And waited. And waited.

After around thirty minutes of waiting, Katsumi decided to begin preparing the best way she knew how: warming up. She fell back on the old Academy warm up routine, complete with light calisthenics and stretching, as well as meditation. Sasuke sent her a couple unreadable looks while she did this but otherwise didn’t even acknowledge her existence which was fine by her.

An hour later, she began checking and rechecking her supplies to stave off the lethargy. Naruto went back to sleep. Katsumi envied him.

At three and a half hours in, she was getting unacceptably antsy. This was when Naruto had woken up and started complaining. Loudly.

“Where the hell is our sensei? It’s been forever!” Katsumi couldn’t help but agree, having taken to doing target practice with falling leaves in order to fight through her nerves.

“Maybe he got lost,” Katsumi offered, boredom coloring her tone. Naruto looked at her like she had
grown a second head and Sasuke scoffed a few feet away. “No really. Maybe he got kidnapped by foreign shinobi and is being held for ransom. That would be a change in pace,” she shrugged. Naruto busted out into laughter, imagining their odd teacher at the mercy of foreign powers. Katsumi saw something that looked like a small smile on Sasuke’s face, but it disappeared as soon as he saw her looking.

“Katsu-chan, that’s awful!” Naruto snickered. She grinned too, despite her impatience.

“It’d serve him right for being so late yesterday,” she said coolly. This made Sasuke grunt in approval from his perch a few meters to her left.

“Now, that’s no way to talk about your poor sensei when he’s not here.” called out a voice in the general direction of the entrance. Naruto and Katumi jumped while Sasuke looked up, startled, at the words. “Maa if I didn’t know any better, Katumi-chan, I’d say you didn’t like me.” Once the shock faded, Katumi placed a hand on her hip and scowled at the man.

“I don’t much care for people who are over three hours late,” she replied primly. Kakashi-sensei looked unfazed. Naruto started yelling which took the attention off of Katumi for which she was grateful.

“You’re late! Again!” Their teacher shrugged, shoving his hands in his pockets.

“I was late because I had to help an old lady cross the street.”

“For three hours?” Katumi asked immensely unimpressed.

“Let’s move on shall we?” Kakashi-sensei plowed on, ignoring her. Her frown deepened but she was happy to finally get on with the exercise so she let it go.

He walked over to a tree stump and hit the timer on an alarm clock. “The timer is set for noon. Your goal is to get one of these bells from me.” Their teacher grabbed bells out of his pocket and jingled them in front of their faces for emphasis. Katumi frowned.

“There are only two bells though.” Kakashi-sensei sent her an eye-crinkle that was what she assumed was equal parts amusement and sadism. It was hard to tell with three-fourths of his face covered.
“Oh yeah. That means that whoever doesn’t get a bell is the loser that gets sent back to the Academy.” All three genin stiffened. That was… odd to say the least. Isn’t the point of being a Leaf Shinobi working with your team? What was Kakashi-sensei trying to accomplish by splitting up the fledgling squads? It made no sense logically.

Kakashi-sensei finished explaining the rules of the test, including a colorful one: they were allowed to use lethal force. At this, the genin had differing reactions. Katsumi looked at him dubiously, wondering if he had just recently escaped from a mental hospital or if he actually wanted three shinobi to come at him with the intent to kill. Sasuke looked at him with grim determination. Naruto bragged loudly about how Kakashi-sensei clearly wanted to get killed.

“Ignore the loser. They usually speak loudly to hide their own inadequacies and end up the first to get eliminated.” Katsumi felt her face scrunch up in fury, ready to let their sensei have it. First, he was obscenely late, then he gives them insane instructions, and ends with insulting one of her best friends? She stopped herself from launching herself at him prematurely through remembering that she was going to have the opportunity to attack him later. Realistically, she knew that she couldn’t hold a candle to the jonin in terms of skill so she was probably going to have a difficult time getting one of those bells but she shoved all thoughts of failure out of her head. It was unlikely, but possible. She just had to find the right way.

Naruto, it seemed, had considerably less self-control than she did. He threw himself at the jonin, kunai out with a battle cry on his lips. It was at that moment Katsumi realized just how large the chasm was between their relative skill-sets. When Naruto got close enough to their sensei, he somehow got behind him quick enough to grab his hand and disarm him. Katsumi’s pale eyebrows disappeared into her hairline at her sensei’s speed. She hadn’t even seen him move. This guy was much more skilled than he had been letting on. A head-on approach like that would only get her embarrassed like Naruto which was something she would like to avoid if at all possible.

“Not so fast. I didn’t say begin.” Kakashi-sensei said. Oh yeah, he was definitely enjoying this. Katsumi tightened her gloves in anticipation. “Go.” They scattered.

Katsumi hid in the underbrush, close enough to still sense her teacher but far enough away to where he couldn’t see her. Though, in all likelihood, he could probably sense her anyways. It didn’t matter if he could sense her if he didn’t come after her. She crouched low in the bushes, thinking about a strategy when her attention was drawn to a commotion about fifty meters to her left. She almost facepalmed when she saw what it was.
“Alright Old Man, let’s fight, fair and square!” came the voice of her impulsive best friend. Katsumi wanted to bash his head in. He clearly wasn’t thinking at all. Their teacher just raised an eyebrow at his declaration. Naruto dashed forward but stopped, clearly having learned his lesson about going at such a high-level shinobi head-on.

Katsumi was far enough away to see Kakashi-sensei speak but unfortunately was just out of earshot. He reached into his hip-pouch and Katsumi tensed, feeling like she knew what was going to come next. Instead of him pulling out a weapon of some kind, he pulled out that familiar orange book.

He gestured Naruto to come forward, but not taking his eyes off of his reading material. Katsumi rolled her eyes at the blatant disrespect but saw what Kakashi-sensei was going for. His insults, dismissiveness, everything was to rile up Naruto into making stupid mistakes that could’ve been avoided had he kept a cool head. He wanted to teach Naruto a lesson, probably in humility if she were to wager a guess.

She frowned, thinking about the possible repercussions. This could potentially ruin Naruto’s confidence in himself as a ninja. But, she had to remember that this could be the catalyst that pushes Naruto to focus on improving. Though she wanted to jump in to save her friend the impending humiliation, she knew that it would be better for him in the long run to have this lesson taught to him by an ally than someone who wished him ill-will.

‘This could be a possible opening.’ Katsumi rose up to stand low in the foliage before creeping to a nearby tree. ‘If I’m lucky, he doesn’t know much about our skill-sets so he won’t be expecting me to get the literal drop on him,’ The girl looked around to gauge Kakashi-sensei’s relative level of awareness before deciding to go for it. She stayed low to the ground and crept over to a nearby oak tree to walk up it. When she had successfully made her way up high in the towering tree, she made a series of well-timed, controlled leaps from one tree to the next to get in the right position above her sensei. When she was satisfied with her location, she looked down to watch Naruto’s progress. It wasn’t pretty.

He went through a painfully short series of taijutsu moves, not because Naruto was bad, but because Kakashi-sensei was just that good. He hardly moved while dodging Naruto’s admittedly sloppy moves. ‘He knows he can’t fight this guy the old fashioned way so why is he doing this?’ Katsumi bit her lip, thinking about just what the hell Naruto was doing. ‘Maybe he’s planning something?’ she thought. That optimism faded when Kakashi-sensei made a tiger sign with his nimble fingers, one that was notoriously dangerous. This, she couldn’t abide.

‘Damnit, I wanted to wait,’ she scowled before whipping out kunai and jumping down from the branch directly onto her masked weirdo’s back. He looked up when she was falling and Katsumi relished the surprise evident in his one eye. He turned his attention away from Naruto and onto the falling twelve year old. She was well within range by that time. The man moved out of the way but Katsumi was ready.
She quickly dropped into a roll, getting out of the way of the defensive onslaught she felt coming.

With the hilarity of the situation, she couldn’t help but quip: “Sorry to drop in,” which Naruto groaned at.

“I knew you were going to say that,” he said somewhere behind her. If she didn’t have her eyes warily on the shinobi in front of her, she would’ve grinned at her friend.

“Two on one? That’s hardly fair.” Katsumi snorted.

“Neither is you toying with a twelve-year-old boy.” She could’ve sworn Kakashi-sensei was smiling at her behind his mask. He raised an eyebrow and she raised her blades in response which he shrugged at as if to say ‘It’s your funeral, kid.’ Then, he rushed at her.

‘Sweet Kami, this man is fast!’ It was all she could do to keep up with what was surely less than ten percent of his true power. He threw punch after punch at her and she could only barely dodge while trying to get a couple of her own hits in. She darted back, panting and considerably less confident. Katsumi caught Naruto’s eye over Kakashi-sensei’s shoulder and he nodded at her. He was with her, which means they needed a plan. Katsumi knew she needed to stall to think of something usable.

“Is that all you got, Old Man?” she taunted, trying to keep the exertion out of her voice.

“That overconfidence will get you killed one day.” Katsumi forced her body to relax and roll her eyes at his very accurate statement. She still needed time that she didn’t have. Looked like she was going to have to re-engage.

“Bring it on.” He came right back at her and she couldn’t tell if he was faster or if she was getting slower. This time, she didn’t get away unscathed, getting a couple blows to her ribs for her faux-arrogance. Katsumi darted backward to think about her next move. ‘This man isn’t one for pulling punches…’ she thought, rubbing absentmindedly at her ribs.

The ninjutsu she knew were all too standard for combat situations like that this. When she was ten, she decided to figure out what her chakra affinity was so she got a note from the Hokage himself to get her hands on some chakra induction paper and found out that she had dual affinities, leaning more towards water than lightning about 60-40. The small raiton jutsu she knew wouldn’t do anything to stop a monster like Kakashi-sensei. But, if she could find a way to amplify her current
arsenal, she might be able to snatch a bell.

Then it hit her. There was a small river about a third of a kilometer from where she was. While she and Naruto had been scouting, they had stumbled across it so he should know about it too. If she could somehow herd their sensei in that direction and got him in the water, her basic knowledge of lightning style jutsu could disorient him long enough for her and Naruto to snatch the bells.

So she looked at Naruto, who grinned at her, and pulled her face into one of barely concealed fear. She then did the one thing Kakashi-sensei didn’t expect her to do (other than surrender of course). She bolted. She made sure to make her steps look panicked so she threw stealth and precision out the window. It was kinda fun, running full speed through the forest without caring about being a shinobi. She figured that if she seemingly got scared and bailed, Kakashi-sensei would be more apt to follow her in order to teach her a lesson. He would find her before noon. The dude was vindictive and sadistic it seemed. Kakashi-sensei would be coming for her. She just had to be willing to wait. Again.

Katsumi just prayed that Naruto knew where she was going. After almost a decade of training together, he knew how she thought and vice versa. They knew each other’s arsenals fairly well so if he was thinking, he could figure out what she was trying to do.

This was her only viable option. Her only advantage was that Kakashi-sensei likely didn’t know her personal progress as a shinobi and only was informed of what she did in school. He knew how smart she had been in the Academy, but he likely had no idea about her extracurricular activities. He was also underestimating her. This, she could use. She smirked as she closed in on her chosen location. It was all about timing.

She threw herself into the most subpar hiding spot to make it seem like she wasn’t in her right mind and was running off of instinct. Katsumi hid behind a tree a couple meters away from the stream and panted loudly. ‘Man, if being a shinobi doesn’t work out, I could definitely become an actress,’ she thought, smugly. Unlike earlier that morning, she didn’t have to wait nearly as long.

“You should quit being a shinobi if you run away so easy. Where’s that overconfidence now?” called a voice several meters to her right a little more than a half hour later. He was trying to bait her. Fat chance. She knew the only reason she could hear him move was because he wanted her to, but she still used that to her advantage. That is, until he stopped moving. ‘Oh crap.’

“Did you think you could hide?” Katsumi instinctively whipped around and threw a kunai where his heart was. He caught it. ‘Double crap.’ “Nice try.” She then threw herself at him wholeheartedly, ignoring her aching torso. This was the third time she’d been engaged in taijutsu with this man and though she could appreciate how skilled he was, she never wanted to fight him again. He altered his fighting just above her skill-level so it was a challenge but not impossible. She needed time to think.
She needed a distraction.

An orange distraction barreled between the both of them. “Don’t forget about me, Kakashi-sensei!” Naruto yelled, getting into a defensive stance. Katsumi was able to get away from their teacher and tried to pretend that she wasn’t close to her limits. Naruto caught Katsumi’s eye and flitted quickly to the left about seven meters at the stream. He nodded. ‘Oh thank Kami he’s smart.’

Kakashi-sensei sighed before pulling out his book again. Naruto, as usual, puffed up angrily. “I told you before, Naruto, I don’t even have to look at you to beat you.” Naruto launched himself at their teacher, this time with a little more finesse. Katsumi thought, crouched down low, what they needed to do. Naruto kept trying to herd Kakashi-sensei those scant few meters towards the water, but as if seeing what they were trying to do, he never got close enough to fall in.

Naruto only lasted about thirty seconds before getting a brutal kick to the chest into the water, landing with a large splash close to the banks, effectively spraying Kakashi-sensei. Her eyes darted to the puddle he was standing in. That was her opening. If she could only get in close enough, she could electrocute him. She wasn’t skilled enough yet to do an actual jutsu, but she had a decent handle on channeling her element in small amounts into her extremities. It wouldn’t do much and it drained chakra like nobody’s business, but it would definitely be enough to catch him off guard long enough to snatch the bells.

‘Wait, where’s Naruto?’ she thought, looking surreptitiously at the river behind her teacher. His blond head chose that moment to pop up out of the water to give her a determined smile and a thumbs up. Then another one. And another one. Until seven bunshin —wait were they flesh and blood too, where had he learned THAT?— were bobbing in the water, their eyes dead-set on Kakashi-sensei’s back. Oh yeah, this could definitely work.

Kakashi-sensei turned his lone grey eye at her once more. “Well, are you going to come at me? You don’t have much time.” Katsumi shook off her nerves and ran forward, and began channeling her element in small doses into her palm. It was pretty hard to see seeing as though it was relatively weak all things considered, but she still darted in to re-engage, pushing herself harder than she ever had. Kakashi-sensei was prepared to fend her off, though this time, she wasn’t going for him. Then, several Naruto clones burst out of the water and latched onto Kakashi-sensei’s back, surprising him. Not for the first time today, he looked vaguely stunned. That was all she needed.

Once she got within range, she dropped into a roll at his feet, reaching for the large puddle at his feet. She forced her chakra into her fingertips and believed with every inch of her being that this could work. ‘Almost.. there…!’

That is until she felt heat at her back and had to change direction at the last minute, throwing herself gracelessly to the right and out of the way of a massive fireball. Coincidentally, she flung herself a
little too much and fell directly into the stream, hitting the cold water and getting thoroughly drenched. When she resurfaced, she was livid to see what had happened.

Sasuke had decided to join the party.

“Dammit, Sasuke, I almost had him!” she nearly shrieked, angrily.

“Like I’d let you and dobe take the bells.” he snapped, flying through hand-signs quickly. Katsumi could only watch as her plan got torn to shreds because of Sasuke’s inability to stay out of the goddamned way. The Narutos hadn’t been as lucky as her to move out of the way. At first, Katsumi was horrified, until she saw them all poof out of existence along with their teacher.

She felt her eyes prick with angry tears but she shoved them away. Her careful maneuvering had been thrown unceremoniously out of the window, never to be seen again and she wasn’t exactly happy about that. She had to adjust. ‘If I can find Kakashi-sensei, I could—’ She had just started retreating into the trees when a loud sound rang out into the air in the direction of the alarm clock. It was noon.

Katsumi turned her head to look at her teammate’s expression. As Sasuke glared a hole through a log that was in the place of Kakashi-sensei, a loud yell came from the origin of the ringing. Naruto. They trudged back to their original meeting place, frustrated.

“Naruto, you ran at me head-on and ignored any semblance of planning. Not only that, but you left your teammate for selfish reasons. Fail.” Naruto’s face reddened, but he said nothing.

Apparently, Naruto had made clones to come after Kakashi-sensei which left himself free to steal the lunches. Kakashi-sensei caught him and had tied him to one of the three stumps before she and Sasuke could make it back. The petty, vindictive side of her reveled in his discomfort for effectively leaving her for food.

“Katsumi, you were made a plan, yes, but you left Sasuke in your own machinations and you were reckless and overconfident. Fail.” Katsumi found something interesting to stare at by her foot, thankful that he didn’t mention her dripping everywhere.

“Sasuke, you acted alone and underestimated your teammates. Fail.” Sasuke made an angry “tch”
noise and scowled like he could burn a hole into Kakashi-sensei’s back if he glared hard enough.

“You don’t think like shinobi, you think like brats. All of you should quit being ninja,” he said simply, turning his back to them. Suddenly, Sasuke threw himself at Kakashi-sensei furiously, an ugly expression on his otherwise pretty face.

“Sasuke, the hell are you doing?” Katsumi cried out. Naruto opened his mouth to yell but was cut off. Kakashi-sensei immobilized their wayward teammate quicker than Katsumi could follow. When the dust cleared, their teacher was sitting on Sasuke’s back with his arm pulled up brutally between his shoulder-blades, stopping him from moving.

Sasuke struggled admirably, but he was no match for the jonin.

“You think everything’s about you.” Kakashi-sensei turned to look at the other two. “You don’t know what it means to be ninja, you think it’s a game?” Sasuke attempted to throw Kakashi-sensei off of him but was only met with his arm being pulled a little bit higher up his back. “Did you ever stop to consider why we put you on three-man teams?”

Oh. Duh. Katsumi wanted to kick herself. Why hadn’t she seen through this earlier? Why was she so bad at seeing the obvious. “This exercise was a lesson in teamwork, huh?” she offered. “The point in having only two bells was to force us apart. If we had disregarded the consequences and worked together, we would’ve passed, right?” Their teacher looked slightly irritated at her taking his grand reveal away from him but it was a small comfort for her. She had failed anyway.

“Exactly right, Katsumi-chan. If all three of you came at me, you might’ve been able to take the bells. But since you put yourselves ahead of the squad you all failed. Ninja missions are carried out in squads. Of course, individual skills are necessary, but teamwork is the most important element to a successful mission. Every shinobi should understand this. When individuals put themselves above the squad, it leads to failure and death.” he finished, squishing Sasuke down a little more with his foot to emphasize the point. “For example,” he pulled a kunai out of nowhere and held it to Sasuke’s neck. Naruto yelled out in surprise. “Katsumi, kill Naruto now or Sasuke dies.”

Katsumi was frozen at the order. Of course, in this situation, she could do what the captors say, but risk them lying and be down two teammates instead of one. Then again, she could refuse and might as well have slit her other teammate’s throat herself. Before she could finish working out the moral dilemma in her head, their teacher pulled the weapon away and spoke again.

“That’s something that can happen on a mission.” All three of them breathed a sigh of relief. “The enemy takes a hostage and you’ve got an impossible choice. And someone ends up dead.” Kakashi-
sensei got up off of Sasuke and walked towards a huge marble stone behind him. “On every mission, your life is on the line.”

Katsumi and Sasuke wordlessly followed him, stopping slightly behind their teacher at the front of the monument. “Have you looked at this stone? The names engraved on it? Those are the names of heroes who honored our village.” ‘Oh jeez,’ she thought, understanding exactly what they were looking at. Naruto clearly did not.

“That’s it! Now I know! I’ve decided I’m going to have my name on that stone!” Naruto called from behind them. Katsumi fought the urge to hit him.

“No Naruto, those are a different kind of hero. They died in action.” Naruto’s expression fell at Katsumi’s soft words.

“This is a memorial stone. The names of my closest friends are engraved here.” Katsumi looked at the stone. ‘Could this be where my family is?’ she thought to herself.

It wasn’t the first time that thought had occurred to her. Most orphans are a result of war so it wouldn’t be far-fetched for her parents’ names to be on that stone. The only problem is it was reported that she was found in a small civilian village outside of Konoha and brought here to be cared for after the Nine-Tails’ attack leveled the surrounding area and killed her parents. A lot of kids at the orphanage had similar stories. She dismissed the fleeting thought quickly.

The somber mood had lifted slightly by the time Kakashi-sensei spoke again. “Alright, I’ll give you one more chance.” Katsumi perked up immediately. “But, I’m going to make it much harder on you. You’ll have three hours to get a bell. Eat lunch now to gather up your strength but you aren’t allowed to give Naruto any.” Kakashi-sensei instructed, walking up to a grumbling Naruto. “It’s your punishment for trying to eat before everyone. And, if anyone tries to feed him, that person will immediately fail.”

Lunch was an interesting affair. Naruto’s stomach was growling horribly. Katsumi felt bad for her friend, but she didn’t want to jeopardize the test. Plus Naruto was a jerk for ditching her back there. Was it petty? Absolutely. But it was only fair. Around the third time his stomach growled, she could feel her resolve wearing down. The entire time, Naruto tried to reassure them that he was fine and could not eat for large periods at a time. Katsumi frowned and was about to crack and share when something shocking happened.
“Here.” Sasuke offered up his bento. Naruto looked floored and tried to protest. Sasuke cut him off. “We need to get those bells as a team. If you’re hungry, you’re gonna be weak which threatens the mission and hurts the team. Just eat before Kakashi-sensei comes back, dobe.”

Katsumi offered hers too, not one to be shown up by Mr. Angry-Fireball-Pants over there. “Here, take some of mine too. If we divvy it all up, we each get a decent amount of fuel.” Naruto wriggled his hands futilely at his sides.

“Uh, Katsu-chan? I can’t exactly move my hands. You’ve gotta feed me!” Katsumi groaned, wondering why she was put on this particular team with all these impossible boys.

“Just hurry up and feed him before Kakashi-sensei gets back,” Sasuke snapped, keeping watch for them. Katsumi made quick work of shoveling rice into his mouth while grabbing quick bites herself. Then, an explosion sounded out before them. Kakashi-sensei stepped out of it, rage lining his visible features. ‘Aw crap,’ Katsumi thought. ‘That’s what I get for being weak.’

“YOU,” Kakashi-sensei yelled menacingly, wind tearing at their clothes. “You broke the rules. I hope you’re ready for the consequences.” Sasuke had moved between her and Kakashi-sensei quickly, a kunai out in his right hand. Kakashi-sensei made a couple hand-signs and the sky darkened. Thunder clapped in the distance. ‘This guy can control the weather?!’ Katsumi thought frantically, trying to think of a way out of this. “Any last words?”

“You said—” Naruto faltered, fighting through fear. “You said there were three of us! So that’s why Katsu-chan and Sasuke-teme…”

“We’re all on this squad so we’re all in this together!” (A/N: ONCE WE KNOW THAT WE ARE WE’RE ALL STARS AND WE SEE THAT, sorry, not sorry, High School Musical is full of bops, fight me.)

Katsumi moved to stand by Sasuke, her own blade out and put a determined look on her face. “He’s right. We’re a team. You fight one of us, you fight all of us.” she said, shoving down her fear. Her team needed her, there was no room for fear. Kakashi-sensei’s face screwed up even more. ‘Well, I’ve had a nice run,’ she thought, clenching her hands around the hilt of her kunai tighter than necessary.

“That’s your excuse? You…” he raged. She and Sasuke only responded by standing closer together, ready to defend Naruto. “Pass!” he chirped. Katsumi almost fell on her butt in shock.
“What do you mean ‘pass’?” she queried, still on edge. The storm clouds rolled away, revealing the blue sky once more.

“You’re the first squad that ever succeeded. Every other squad did exactly as I said and fell into every trap. They couldn’t think for themselves. A ninja must see through deception. In the ninja world, those who break the rules are scum. But those who abandon their comrades are worse than scum.” Kakashi-sensei explained.

At this, Katsumi did fall onto her butt in relief. She looked up at Sasuke and saw a small smile on his pale face. She turned around to see what Naruto was doing.

“You know,” Naruto blubbered behind her, “He’s kinda cool.”

“Everyone passes,” Kakashi-sensei said, giving them all a thumbs up. “Team 7 begins its first mission tomorrow.” Naruto whooped and Katsumi felt her entire body relax finally. “Now everyone, let’s go home.”

Sasuke wordlessly walked with Kakashi-sensei and Katsumi followed suit, eager to go home and clean herself up.

“Hey wait! What about me! I’m still tied up here, you know!” Naruto bellowed, but Katsumi kept walking. ‘Serves him right for leaving me with clones and not telling me.’ she snickered. Oh, she’ll come back for him. In a couple hours. After a nice long shower and a decent meal. She’d earned it. She was finally a shinobi and boy, did it feel good.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Hey y’all. Sorry not sorry about the HSM reference. You deserved it. I wanted to write it. Anyways, this was a fun chapter to write. I loved writing Katsumi’s strategy and cackled when I threw a monkey wrench named Sasuke into her plans. Poor baby. Oh well. Onto the notorious Wave Arc! I hope she doesn’t seem super over-powered. Her lightning affinity paired with natural curiosity, rockin genetics, and a really good brain = her making a very crude version of a chidori. NOW BEFORE YOU GUYS JUMP DOWN MY THROAT FOR THAT it’s not anything like Kakashi’s. It’s literally just extending her chakra out of her hands in tiny amounts. About two thirds the strength of your average taser, not enough to completely debilitate someone like Kakashi’s, but damn, it packs one hell of a sting. Again, thanks for reading, commenting, reviewing, the whole nine yards. I can’t believe I’ve gotten this far and
people are actually reading this. It’s insane and I keep waiting to wake up from this absolute dream. Thanks so much, guys! Alright, onto the next!
Katsumi woke up obscenely early that morning and for good reason. She was finally moving out of the orphanage. She hopped up out of bed, using her unnaturally good night-vision to maneuver around the dark bedroom to gather the remainder of her belongings.

For the most part, she packed up all of her things the night before. But she had left certain objects out because she had to, you know, use them the next day. She threw her hair into a messy braid for the day. She looked at a clock by her bed. 6:30 am. Naruto was coming by at 7 to help her move everything before the streets got super crowded and the day got exponentially hotter.

Katsumi flitted around the room like a hummingbird on Adderall; brushing her teeth as she systematically packed up the rest of her things into a large bag near the door. None of her roommates woke up to wish her farewell which she was fine with. Most of them were jealous of her expedited freedom anyways so she didn’t take their cold-shoulders personally. She finished packing with five minutes to spare before hauling her stuff to the front door to be moved across town. Kagome was waiting for her with a peculiar look on her face.

“Did you pack your toothbrush?”

“Yes, ma’am.

“Your favorite sandals?”

“Yes, Kagome.”

“Did you——” Katsumi closed the distance between them with wrapping her skinny arms around her caretaker’s waist tightly.

“I’m fine, Kagome.” The woman in question crushed the child to her in one of the tightest hugs Katsumi had ever been in. Not that she was complaining.

“I know,” she sighed. “Come by to visit once a week so I know you’re alive, alright?” Her voice
was tightening with what Katsumi thought was restrained tears. She nodded against her, still hugging the only parent she’d ever known.

A knocking sounded out making them jump. Kagome laughed at Katsumi’s startled expression and hugged her one more time before letting the girl go. “That must be Naruto,” Katsumi said, awkwardly, not really knowing how to deal with the influx of strong emotion.

If she was being honest, she was quite conflicted at her decision to fly the nest, mostly because of Kagome. The woman had taken care of her since she was a baby and did one hell of a job. She never went to bed hungry, she always had a decent place to sleep, and usually had hot showers. It wasn’t a bad set-up to say the least. She loved Kagome like she thought most kids loved their moms. But, it was time for her to leave her childhood behind in favor of the life of a shinobi. It was hard work, but it would most definitely be worth it to be strong enough to protect her and everyone else she cared about. It was time for her to go. Katsumi knew it and so did Kagome.

Kagome reached behind Katsumi to open the door in order to welcome her friend in, which was surprising considering her general dislike of Katsumi’s friends. Katumi figured since she was moving out, that Kagome would let it slide. Naruto tumbled in, entirely too bright and loud for such an early hour but that was to be expected. He greeted Kagome somewhat politely to which she gave him a strained smile in return. He turned to Katsumi.

“Is that everything, Katsu-chan?” He gestured to her three overstuffed bags. She nodded and hauled one over her shoulder. The weight making her arms hurt already. Thank Kami she didn’t have any furniture to bring since all of it was property of the orphanage, but still, the bag was heavy as hell. Naruto had made a clone to carry the third bag, of which Katsumi was intensely thankful for.

She gave her caretaker one last glance and bid her farewell. “I’ll come by on Sunday if that’s alright with you.” Kagome nodded and ushered them out the door.

“Now you both hurry up and get her things moved before the streets get too busy, okay?” Katsumi and Naruto both agreed then headed down the front porch steps, ignoring the beginnings of an ache in their arms. Katsumi was free.

Katsumi moved into the second tiny bedroom Naruto had in his small apartment. She didn’t have much in the way of physical objects but Naruto claimed the house had enough for the both of them. He was right. He had all the standard furniture and had plastered movie and ramen posters haphazardly along the walls, as well as random trinkets lying around without any order on different flat surfaces. She thought it was messy. He called it ‘character’. They agreed to disagree.
The living room looked hastily cleaned like he only tidied it up the morning of. He probably did. His tiny two bedroom apartment had one bathroom, a kitchenette, and a small living space. Which, all things considered, was way more space than she was used to. She had her own room and only had to fight one person for dibs on the bathroom, which was a huge plus if you asked her.

The kitchen and pantry were depressing though. It was full of junk food and instant ramen which wasn’t surprising in the least. Of course, now that the both of them were living there, they had to buy more food. Katsumi refused to subsist solely on junk no matter how good it tasted.

Once she made more money, she could get her own place. But until then, she was just gonna have to bunk with Naruto which she was fine with for the most part. After they finished organizing her room, a task that took less than an hour, they sat on his old couch and talked about interesting topics, mainly their new team.

“What do you think of Kakashi-sensei?” Katsumi asked Naruto. He sat cross-legged and he screwed up face up in thought.

“He’s really strong. I wanna be as strong as him one day,” he answered, tapping his chin. “Whaddabout you?”

“He’s irritating. But strong like you said. Did you see how he stopped Sasuke after you got tied to the stump?” she recounted. “It was like he was toying with us the entire time. If he wanted to, he could absolutely destroy us in, like, one hit.” Naruto frowned.

“He’s weird though. What was he reading?”

“No idea. Maybe we could ask him?” Naruto made a noise of agreement. Katsumi checked the clock on the wall and was happy to see that they could go into town to get some breakfast.

“Alright, Naruto. We have a couple things, including, but not limited to, grocery shopping and maybe training. I dunno. If there’s anything else we need to do today, feel free to stop me at any point.” She stood up from the couch and moved towards the genkan to her shoes. Naruto followed suit. “But first, let’s grab some breakfast.”
“No.”

“Please, Katsu-chan?”

“Absolutely not.”

“Why not?”

“You already have over seventy-two packs of ramen at home! And yes, I counted.” Katsumi argued, placing her hand on her hip and leveling him a look. Naruto took one look at her and scoffed. She strode forward to the stall with the tomatoes and picked out a half dozen ripe ones.

“There’s no such thing as too much ramen.”

“Yes there is,” she said, turning to narrow her eyes at him. She should’ve gone grocery shopping alone if this was what she was gonna get every time they visited a market. She turned back around to hand the merchant the money to pay for their vegetables. So far, she’d picked up a couple heads of lettuce and red onions, a couple pounds of protein in the form of fish and chicken, as well as a couple fruits to hold them over for the next couple weeks so that they didn’t get scurvy or something. Scurvy was bad, right?

For the most part, Katsumi had never really been grocery shopping on her own. Usually, she would accompany Kagome a few times a month, so this was a learning experience. Katsumi looked down into her wallet for the remains of the grocery budget. They had done well and still had enough to grab lunch afterward. Satisfied, she placed the tomatoes in the bag and thought about what they could eat for lunch.

“Hey look over there,” Naruto nudged her in the ribs. She looked up and over to where Naruto was pointing and stopped. “Sasuke-teme’s over there.”

‘He’s alone…’ she felt her heart twinge in sympathy for her second teammate. He apparently had the same idea she did and was grocery shopping. His pale face was pulled in a scowl as he tried to barter with the merchant in charge of the stall selling fish.

“Naruto, could you make a couple clones to take the groceries back to the apartment? I wouldn’t want anything to go bad.” Happy to show off his new skill Naruto puffed out his chest. He promptly
did as she asked him without any resistance.

After the two clones took off with their bags, Naruto paused. “Why aren’t we taking them back ourselves?”

“But we’re going to go get lunch as a team,” she strode over to Sasuke and Naruto hurried behind her though grumbling about Sasuke being a ‘stuck up Uchiha’.

“Hey, Sasuke.” The boy turned around and looked at the two of them, his eyes narrowing slightly.

“What do you want?” He was dismissive and readjusted his bag on his arm. Katsumi almost rolled her eyes at his attitude.

“Naruto and I were just about to go to lunch. You wanna come with us?” His eyebrows raised slightly but then furrowed.

“No.”

“Let me rephrase that,” she said, giving the brunette an overly saccharine smile which Naruto grimaced at. “You’re coming to lunch with us. I was only asking to be polite. You don’t really have a choice. Call it team bonding.” With that, she experimentally grabbed his wrist and dragged him towards Ichiraku. To her immense surprise, he let himself get tugged to the ramen shop with an odd expression on his face. Counting it as a victory, all three genin plopped down on stools and waited for someone to take their order.

“So Sasuke, I was just asking Naruto his opinion on Kakashi-sensei. What do you think about him?” Looking at the menu even though she could have recited it from memory. Naruto looked at her in confusion because of it, but didn’t say anything. As confident as she acted with Sasuke, she didn’t know him very well and felt awkward in his presence. She honestly needed something to do with her hands to stave off her social awkwardness until she felt comfortable (or as comfortable as one could get around the prickliest Uchiha ever) around him.

The dark haired boy shrugged, staring intensely at the table. Seems like she wasn’t the only awkward one. “He’s strong. Really strong. Infuriating though.” Katsumi snorted at his keen but brief observations. Sasuke cut his eyes at her and turned to look at his own menu.
At this point, a slender brunette teenager came over to them with a smile on her face. “Hi, Naruto-kun! Hey Katsumi-chan. Ooh, is this the third member of your team?” the civilian girl asked, eyes widening in interest. “Uchiha Sasuke-kun right?”

Sasuke opened his mouth to say something presumably rude but Katsumi cut him off. “Yeah, that’s him. We’re Team 7 as of yesterday,” she gave her a look that said ‘what can you do’. Sasuke scoffed and stared pointedly at this laminated menu.

“Ayame-nee, look at this!” Naruto exclaimed, pointing eagerly at his hitai-ate.

“So you’re finally a shinobi, Naruto-kun? Tell you what, ramen’s on the house in honor of the formation of Team 7,” she said, ruffling his hair affectionately. Naruto whooped and started rambling off food orders. Katsumi winced at her friend’s volume but said nothing. It wasn’t every day that adults were kind to Naruto because of their aversion to his furry little problem. ‘Are chakra foxes furry?’ she thought before throwing the question out. Katsumi was glad he had good people in his life so when he got like this, she just grinned and bore it. She wouldn’t be the one to burst his bubble.

Once Naruto stopped talking a mile a minute, Katsumi and, surprisingly, Sasuke placed their orders as well. By the time lunch had finished, Sasuke had genuinely laughed once which Katsumi was secretly proud of. Although it was at Naruto’s expense for spilling hot broth all over his pants in an unfortunate area, Katsumi wasn’t one to look a gift horse in the mouth. The boy was entirely too serious. He needed to have fun more. Plus, he wasn’t all that bad once you got past his abrasive, perfectionistic exterior. When they parted ways, Sasuke’s posture was markedly more relaxed than it had started out. His parting words were slightly sharp, but significantly more dulled than they could have been. He had a good time.

Team 7 had survived their first meal as a team which hopefully wouldn’t be their last.

The rest of the day was spent training and finally painting Katsumi’s new room.

“I liked the orange,” Naruto called from the kitchen. Katsumi was in her room (‘my room,’ she thought giddily not for the first time today) painting the wall a pretty yellow color. She snorted at his comment while dragging the brush along the drywall.
“Yeah, you would. Personally, I don’t want to hurt my eyes everytime I enter my room,” Naruto turned on the kitchen sink and shouted something that got lost in the sound of running water. Katsumi assumed it was some quip about the color yellow but said nothing.

Until the paint dried, she was going to be sleeping on the living room couch which was fine by her. She’d been accidentally falling asleep on that couch since she was five years old so purposefully falling asleep wouldn’t be much different.

They had been doing this for the past couple hours since getting back from training ground nine. The sun was beginning to set so they called it a day and dragged their sweaty, aching bodies home. Since she was the only person with some knowledge of making non-ramen foods, she was going to be making dinner that night so she wanted to finish up before then.

Naruto was being a grade-A prep chef while she worked by cutting and washing the vegetables she was going to cook. Honestly, once you got past his lax definition of clean, he was a pretty good roommate. Katsumi was happy to be living with her friend and she could tell he felt the same. Though the apartment was new to her and the freezer would leak if she didn’t press it shut all the way... and the window in her room didn’t close completely... she felt like, for the first time in her young life, that she was home.

“How do you feel about tempura?”

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Heyyyyy this one was pretty short, not gonna lie. But I thought about these scenes in the shower and I couldn’t let it go. Baby dai-nana-han is my life and I’ll be damned if they don’t bond. Also yes, I know that Naruto’s apartment doesn’t have a spare bedroom but if we were going by what Kishimoto created, Katsumi wouldn’t exist so… ¯\_(ツ)_/¯ Thanks to everyone who’s been reading and reviewing and giving me ideas. Back when I was a passive member of this site, whenever I’d read A/Ns where the authors would write something along the lines of “Every notification makes my day” I would think they were exaggerating and that it was corny. Nah, it’s pretty true. I literally yell when I get a notification. I lose my mind and I love every single one of you who’s given this story a read. So yeah, now that that gross bit of emotional vulnerability is done, onto the next! And Happy October!
“Team Nine?” a young short woman with shoulder-length red hair called out into the nearly empty classroom. Sakura’s chest puffed out at the recognition, excited to meet her new sensei. “I’m Kisaragi Hiro and I’m your sensei. Follow me.” Sure, she wasn’t on Sasuke-kun’s team, but at the very least, neither was Ino-pig. She wasn’t sure she could trust that white-haired bitch on his team not to snatch him up so she would try to keep an eye on her. Sakura rose quickly with her other teammates and went after their quickly disappearing teacher.

Sakura was ready to finally start taking her career seriously, become a great shinobi, and to beat the hell out of that girl Katsumi the next time she saw her. Sakura steeled her spine and followed her sensei out of the door, not feeling someone’s golden gaze on her back.

“The first thought that came to mind was ‘Who?’” Iruka-sensei called out. The first thought that came to mind was ‘Who?’

It was odd, not knowing who she was going to be trusting her life with. The other two girls were another class in their year at the Academy so Sakura had only seen them in passing.

The first girl was a tan brunette named Ryuujin Suki. Suki seemed simultaneously like the exact opposite and a replica of Ino in some ways. When they found out they were on the same squad, the girl trained her slate-grey eyes on her and immediately strode up to Sakura and introduced herself promptly. “So you’re Haruno Sakura? I’m Ryuujin Suki. Let’s kick some ass together.” Suki said, sticking out her hand for Sakura to shake. Sakura was shocked at her boorish manner of speaking but shook her hand because it would be impolite not to. When she did, Suki smirked and Sakura noticed her slightly sharpened canines. “Let’s go find our third teammate, shall we?”

The other girl was an unfairly pretty bespectacled Hyuuga girl named Hanako. She was fairly quiet so far, with a similar vibe to Sasuke oddly enough. They had the same “I’m skilled and you’re not” energy and it wasn’t nearly as attractive on her than it was on Sasuke-kun. According to Suki-san, Hanako-san was a serious little kunoichi, apparently being the undisputed top of her class, her
Taijutsu being so vicious that her only sparring partners were the chunin instructors, and even they didn’t always get away unscathed.

“Hello Haruno-san, Ryuujin-san. I look forward to working with you both.” Hanako-san introduced herself in a way that seemed painfully formal to Sakura but she gave the girl a small smile and said nothing about it. Suki, on the other hand, did.


“Don’t you think you were being a little mean?” Sakura asked, staring at the retreating form of their teammate. Suki rolled her eyes.

“Not my fault she can’t take a joke,” Suki replied, taking out a kunai and cleaning under her nails. Sakura’s nose wrinkled in distaste. ‘Suki thinks she’s so cool,’ she thought, judging her teammate’s poor manners.

“I’m going to go see if she’s alright,” Sakura decided, going in the same direction as Hanako had previously. ‘She’s probably headed to go wait for our sensei in classroom 23A.’ Sakura thought, as she headed that way. When she pushed open the door to the classroom to apologize on Suki’s behalf, she realized that she wasn’t alone. All of the other genin teams had gathered here to wait for their sensei. Near the window sat… She almost squealed. Sasuke-kun was here too!

Sakura straightened out her red dress and flipped her hair over her shoulder in a way she was told was alluring to the opposite sex. She strutted over to her crush confidently before getting stopped by a yellow and orange blur.

“Hi Sakura-chan. You look pretty today,” a certain blond annoyance said to her, cutting off her path to true love. “Now that I’m a ninja, do you wanna go on a date with me?” he basically shouted. She narrowed her eyes in unadulterated loathing for the boy. It wasn’t that she disliked Naruto himself, no, she would have no problem with him if it weren’t for his stupid crush on her. And that he was loud and smelled like ramen. And that he didn’t take ‘no’ for an answer. Plus Sasuke-kun didn’t like him either and if he was always hovering around Sakura, she’d never catch his eye like she wanted to and would likely always associate her with Naruto which was the absolute last thing she wanted.

“Naruto, move out of the way. I’m trying to talk to Sasuke-kun!” she said, miffed. Naruto frowned and folded his arms across his chest.
“That bastard? What do you even see in that guy? He’s a jerk.” Sakura wanted to hit him. Nobody insulted her Sasuke.

“You’re just jealous because he’s much cooler than you’ll ever be.” Naruto let out a noise of indignation before his attention was drawn elsewhere. It was a light cough from the girl with the weird eyes and white hair who was in their class. For whatever reason, Sakura couldn’t remember her name at the moment. She was sitting a few seats away from Sasuke near one of the large open windows, her eyes trained on the pair of them in disinterest.

“Naruto, stop bothering her. She’s irrelevant,” the girl called over lazily. Sakura’s face pinkened. “Leave her little obsession be. Come back over here so we can wait for our sensei.”

“And who are you?” Sakura asked, feeling her temper rising. Who did this girl think she was?

“Wow, you’re an observant one, aren’t you? S’not like I’ve been in your class for the past seven years or anything.” The girl’s tone was aloof, bored even. However, her eyes told a different story. Her gilded stare bore a hole into Sakura’s green one, subtly telling her to back off. ‘This is not a fight you’ll win,’ they told her. Sakura didn’t care. Nobody talked to her like that and she wasn’t about to let stupid, curly-haired, she-demons start.

“What, you think just because you’re on a team with Sasuke-kun that you’re better than me?” The girl let out a sharp laugh. Sakura glared even harder at the girl. Naruto at this point was looking at the two of them like they had declared themselves next in line to be Daimyo of a foreign country and had their birthright stolen from them by a secret faction of the government. He looked absolutely nonplussed and what was worse, looked at Sakura with, what looked like, pity.

“Oh wait, you were serious?” she raised a pale eyebrow and smirked. She had victory written all over her brown face and Sakura didn’t like it. “I don’t think I’m better than anyone, Haruno. But I know that I’m the better shinobi out of the two of us by far,” she concluded. Sakura’s face scrunched up in anger.

“That’s not true. I’m one of the top kunoichi in our class, Iruka-sensei said so.” Someone over by the window snorted. Sakura looked over at Sasuke to find him focused on the view from the window and not on the altercation his future wife was getting into. Sakura inwardly frowned at his apathy and looked back to find the girl had risen from her seat and walked silently over to the pair of them.

“Katsu-chan, it’s fine,” Naruto was grinning nervously, scratching the back of his head. He was
trying to protect Sakura from this girl, like Sakura couldn’t handle it herself. ‘Katumi, her name is Katumi,’ she remembered belatedly.

“Shut it, Naruto. Nobody likes you anyway,” Sakura said a little more shrill than she would’ve liked. That’s when Sakura noticed that conversation in the room had died and the entire classroom of genin were now staring at them in blatant interest. Of course, she felt bad saying something so mean to the boy but it was Naruto. Besides, it kinda just slipped out and it wasn’t like she was going to recant her words and show this girl any sort of weakness. Later on, she would realize that that little statement would be both her undoing and her salvation. But currently, she plowed on like nothing was wrong.

The dog boy from their class in particular looked absolutely giddy, muttering something that sounded like “Oh, Pinky’s gonna get it now.”

If Sakura were more observant, she would’ve noticed the slight twitch in the other girl’s left brow. She might’ve noticed how she tensed her left hand at her friend’s rude dismissal. But she wasn’t so she didn’t.

Sakura did notice how much more, well, professional Katumi looked. The other girl looked like a young girl, sure, but she looked like a young shinobi in her dark red kimono top with billowy sleeves, mesh armor, and shorts. She looked like a real kunoichi in her standard issue sandals and her hitai-ate tied around her forehead, her long hair tied back professionally into one long braid down her back.

Sakura felt like a child playing ninja in comparison. If she was to be honest, Sakura felt a little insecure in this girl’s presence. But, Sasuke was watching (well, more like Sasuke just happened to be there and might be listening) so she wouldn’t back down. She’d show Sasuke that she was better than whatever dumb girl got lucky enough to be put on his team.

She opened her mouth to say something but was rudely cut off.

“I’m gonna stop you right there, Haruno. You say you’re one of the best kunoichi in the class which very well might be true. You have the mental aptitude for it, that’s for certain,” Katumi starts as she ambles up to the pair of them, hands in her pockets. Somehow her kind words don’t make her relax. They only make her feel like a huge storm was about to roll in and that if she knew what was good for her, she would brace for impact.

“But here’s where we’re different,” she continued. Sakura put her hands on her skinny hips and narrowed her eyes. “If you spent less time staring at Sasuke’s ass and spent more time actually trying to become a decent shinobi, maybe your stamina wouldn’t be so piss-poor. Maybe your endurance
wouldn’t be so god-awful. Maybe you would be able to win a spar that wasn’t with Hinata seriously holding back.” As Katumi counted all of Sakura’s faults on her fingers, Hinata ducked her head when Sakura’s green eyes sought her out to see if the other girl’s words were true. That was all the answer she needed.

Oh, but Katumi didn’t stop there. “Maybe, *maybe* then you could have the skills to back up your surprisingly bold words. But you don’t,” she stopped in front of them, her gold eyes absolutely molten in her anger. Sakura fought the urge to cry and held her chin up defiantly. “So watch what you say next time to Naruto. If you don’t, maybe I won’t be so nice as to let you off with a warning like I’m oh-so-very-kindly doing right now,” Katumi looked at Sakura coldly before seemingly deciding that the other girl was not worth her time and turning back over her shoulder to get back to her seat. “When you’ve stopped thinking that you’re one of the best and want to actually *be* the best, come fight me for it. Until then, stay outta my way.” she finished, waving her hand dismissively as sat down and pulled out a book.

Silence. The classroom was so quiet, if someone dropped a pin, it would’ve sounded out louder than a foghorn. Nobody had ever put Sakura so thoroughly in check before, especially when in came to Naruto. Most people thought he was annoying and let her mean words slide. Not Katumi. She had verbally *eviscerated* Sakura with a few well-placed words and hardly any effort on her part.

Naruto looked at her apologetically like ‘what can you do?’ and walked back to his seat by his friend. Everyone was staring right at Sakura either with pity or amusement. Though Katumi had spoken in low tones, her words had carried well enough for everyone to have heard them. Her cheeks turned a violent shade of red before she all but threw herself at the nearest desk and prayed her jounin instructor would arrive quickly. At least Ino-pig hadn’t been there to hear her. That would’ve made the situation even worse than it already was.

She rested her chin in the palm of her hand and thought about the other girl’s harsh words and found that none of them were false. She was really bad at the physical aspect of shinobi training. She was actually one of the worst in their class at it. She made up for it with her intelligence and test scores but would that be enough in the ninja world? Would it do her any good to be able to calculate the trajectory of a kunai instantaneously if she wasn’t fast enough to move out of the way?

The chatter in the room had finally started back up with nervous glances being thrown Sakura’s way. She was weak and they all knew it. She turned around to look at Katumi and sighed. She had muscle definition that Sakura couldn’t even dream of because Sakura was too busy wondering whether or not Sasuke would like girls with too much muscle. Katumi was the top kunoichi, ahead of even the untouchable Ino by a sizable margin because she worked at it. It was important to her so she perfected her craft. Sakura pressed the heels of her palms into her eyes, trying to stop the tears from leaking out. Sakura was weak.

“Hey, why’re you crying?” a familiar voice asked from her left. She looked up to find Suki sitting on
the desk next to her. Hanako had materialized in the chair to her right somehow. She was so caught up in her own sorrows that she didn’t even sense her teammates get close to her. Sakura wanted to kick herself. “Wait, does it have something to do with all of the people trying to secretly look at you? Aw man, you were gone for like, five minutes! How did I miss the action?” she asked, throwing her hands up in the air in faux exasperation, concern evident in her eyes.

“I’m weak and everyone knows it,” she sniffled, bringing her hands down from her face to fall helplessly into her lap. She had a fleeting thought about Sasuke not liking girls with red, puffy eyes, but dismissed it just as quickly as it came. Sasuke probably didn’t like weak girls either. She held back her tears and focused her watery green eyes on her teammates’ confused expressions.

“Then get better,” Hanako said.

Sakura looked at her like she was crazy. “What do you mean ‘get better’?”

“It means exactly what she said,” Suki shifted to fully face Sakura. “If you’re weak, train until you’re not. Get better,” she elaborated. “I mean, it’s not exactly fuinjutsu, Haruno.” Suki leaned back in her chair and kicked her feet up onto the desk carelessly but Sakura wasn’t even paying enough attention to reprimand her. Suki’s words bounced around in her head. ‘Get better,’ she thought.

“Team Nine? I’m Kisaragi Hiro and I’m your sensei. Follow me.”

After leaving classroom 23A, they had made their way to Training Ground 13 to have their first formal meeting as a team. Hiro-sensei had ushered them onto a hill overlooking a small lake in the area, pulled out dango that she had gotten from seemingly nowhere, and Sakura felt herself liking her sensei more and more. Hiro-sensei sat down and trained her brown eyes on the girls with a grin pulling at her mouth. They munched on their treats with varying levels of enthusiasm and suspicion, but equal levels of curiosity.

“Alright ladies!” Hiro-sensei said, clapping her hands together, a bright smile on her face. “Let’s get to know each other, shall we? How about we do a standard introduction. Let’s do name and age, Zodiac sign, strengths and weaknesses, and a goal.”

Hanako raised her hand, a gesture that reminded Sakura of her Academy days, with a confused expression on her face. “If I may ask, Hiro-sensei, is there any kind of goal in particular you would
like us to divulge?” Their sensei shook her head, her red locks bouncing.

“It can be any kind of goal you want it to be, Hana-chan.” The girl nodded solemnly like she had just been told she was going to run a suicide mission. “How about you go first to get the ball rolling?” The dark haired girl nodded, pushing her glasses up her face and clearing her throat primly.

“My name is Hyuuga Hanako, I’m twelve years old, and I’m an Aquarius. I’m smart, good at taijutsu, and I’m fast but I lack brute strength and ninjutsu prowess. My goal…” the girl trailed off. “My goal is to join ANBU Black Ops and specialize in Tracking.” Sakura’s jaw almost dropped. ‘Black Ops?’ That sounded like it needed a lot of talent and hard work. She looked at the slight girl and wasn’t entirely sure that she could do that. But she looked into her eyes and saw such a visceral determination and honestly had to change her mind. It would be a lot of work, but Sakura genuinely believed Hanako could achieve her goal.

“Ah, aiming high, are we? Hm, alright. Suki-chan, your turn,” Hiro-sensei said, looking at the brunette like her words held the answer to all of the world’s secrets. Suki grinned at the attention and leaned back on one palm in the grass and stretched her legs out in front of her.

“I’m Ryuujin Suki, I’m twelve, and I’m a Capricorn. I’m great with blades and thinking ahead, but my chakra control could use a little work. My goal is actually pretty similar to Hanako’s in that I want to join the ANBU retrieval and assassination branch.” Sakura’s head spun at that. Suki, the fun-loving, blunt girl wanted to specialize in assassination? She had said it so flippantly. But, if you think about it, every shinobi specialized in assassination so it wasn’t that big a deal, but still, it was hard to believe.

“Oh, I got two ANBU hopefuls on one team? I don’t suppose you also want to become a Black Ops operative as well, do you, Sakura-chan?” Hiro-sensei commented, laughing. Sakura cracked a smile.

“I’m Haruno Sakura, I’m twelve, and I’m an Aries. My strengths include my intelligence and ability to learn quickly. I’m bad at taijutsu and most things involving endurance or stamina.” she said, blushing at her lack of technical skill like the other girls. Hiro-sensei nodded at her encouragingly, urging her to continue. “My goal is to be a great kunoichi, and to beat a rival of mine.” Suki looked at her approvingly and Hanako nodded at her.

“Well, you girls are each promising in your own ways. I’m excited to be teaching you and I hope I can help you girls grow into the amazing kunoichi I know you can be.” Hiro-sensei beamed.

“But Hiro-sensei, you never told us about yourself!” Sakura interjected. The small woman looked at her slightly embarrassed.
“I didn’t? Sorry!” she exclaimed, scratching the back of her head in a way that reminded Sakura oddly of Naruto. “I’m Kisaragi Hiro, I’m twenty-three, and I’m a Scorpio. I’m good at solving puzzles and I’m bad at being patient. My goal is to whip you girls into tip-top shape before the Chunin Exams.”

“The Chunin Exams are coming up?” Suki asked. Hiro-sensei nodded, dropping her grin quickly.

“I’m not going to sit here and lie to you girls like some of your peers’ sensei, but the higher-ups want your class to be either Chuunin-ready or at least ready to take the exams within the next three months.” Their teacher said seriously. “Don’t ask me why because I’m not quite sure myself. I don’t make the rules I just follow them, ladies.” she finished, laughing in a way that wasn’t entirely sincere. ‘Hiro-sensei knows why but doesn’t want to tell us,’ Sakura realized. Hiro-sensei paused. “Well, the higher-ups want the ones who pass to be chunin ready.”

Hanako’s hand shot into the air. “What do you mean ‘pass’?”

“Yeah, we just passed the Graduation Exams, like, yesterday,” Suki said in a ‘duh’ kind of voice. Hiro-sensei snickered.

“Oh, that little thing? That was just to weed out potential genin candidates from the rest. Yeah, that wasn’t the test. I’m going to be the one administering your test.” Sakura’s jaw really did drop at that. Hiro-sensei stood up and walked over to their bags by a tree, the girls scrambling to follow her.

“Now wait a minute, Hiro-sensei. You’re meaning to tell us that we might not stay genin?” Sakura asked. She couldn't stop here, not when she had something to prove!

“Bingo, Sakura-chan. I like you girls, really, I do. But, if you fail my test, I’m sending the whole lot of you back to the Academy to start over.” Suki looked ready to start swinging at that. “Maa, maa, girls calm down. If you pass, I’m your teacher and we can get this show on the road. Just make sure you, you know, pass.”

“What’s the test?”

“Oh, it’s nothing really. Just meet me on the second floor of the tallest building in Konoha within the next hour.” Suki visibly relaxed. “Only, there’s a catch.” Their teacher pulled out several pieces of rope, a blindfold, a set of ear and nose plugs, and what looked like a gag. “You’ll have certain senses...
removed based on your skills. Hanako, you’ll be blindfolded since you have the Byakugan. Suki, you get the ear and nose plugs since you have heightened senses. Lastly, Sakura, you’ll get your mouth covered and your hands tied behind your back since you’re the most likely to figure this out the quickest. That way it’ll harder for you to communicate your findings.” Hiro-sensei tossed the girls their restraints and they put them on dutifully.

“Also before you try to activate your Byakugan to see through my blindfold, Hanako, I got that one made with chakra-dense material. To make an incredibly long bit of technical jargon short, it’s gonna scramble your eyes by flooding them with too much chakra. I wouldn’t advise trying to see through that unless you want a debilitating headache, violent nausea, and the inability to use your Byakugan for the next three or so days.” Hiro-sensei chirped happily. Sakura looked at her teammate’s horrified expression and almost wanted to laugh if her future wasn’t on the line. She couldn’t lose, especially when Ino-pig was likely taking a similar test miles away from her. She couldn’t lose now without beating Katsumi. She strengthened her resolve and swore not to waver in this. She would not lose.

Hiro sensei finished making sure their handicaps were on well before looking at them proudly. “Remember, girls, you have to all make it there together and tap me to pass. If you make it inside and don’t touch me, you lose. If only two of you make it, you lose. You catch my drift?”

Hanako said that she understood. Sakura nodded. Suki, who couldn’t hear anything shouted “What?”

“Right,” their teacher said, taking out a watch from absolutely nowhere, pressing a button, and tossing it to Suki who snatched it out of the air immediately. “Your time started about three seconds ago. Good luck, kiddies.” With that, Hiro-sensei vanished.

“Alright guys, we don’t have much time.” Suki borderline shouted. Hanako winced but nodded.

“The tallest building in Konoha would have to be Hokage tower if I remember correctly.”

Sakura shrugged and nudged Suki forward. “Where are we going?” Suki asked, looking at both teammates. Sakura looked towards Hanako and tried to gesture for her to say it again.

“Hokage Tower,” Hanako said, being careful to pronounce each syllable slowly.

“Would now be a bad time to tell you guys I can’t read lips?” Suki questioned as sheepishly as one could while basically yelling. Sakura wanted to throw her head through a wall.
“Day drinking again, Hatake?” called a lilting voice from a few feet away.

“Kisaragi,” he greeted, his eye crinkling in genuine amusement. “What else would you have me do at a bar?” he asked the ginger woman who had sat on the stool to this right. Kakashi had been at the dingy bar for the past couple hours, trying to avoid meeting the minions he was supposed to teach. He knew he couldn’t avoid them forever, but damnit if he couldn’t at least try.

“Wait until a decent hour, I suppose.” He chuckled at that.

“I haven’t seen you in Konoha for longer than fifteen minutes in a while. What gives?” She shrugged.

“I was forcibly retired last month by the Hokage. Apparently, a six-year non-stop ANBU stint is ‘unhealthy’.” she said, placing air-quotes around the word ‘unhealthy’. Kakashi snorted and took another swig of his drink through his mask. “Now I teach genin.”

“You enjoying it at all?” She laughed openly at that.

“I enjoy messing with them,” she answered, waving over the bartender. “They’re a good group of girls, don’t get me wrong, but it’s much more fun to get under their skin just a little, you know?” Hatake nodded, knowing exactly what she meant. “Aren’t you supposed to have a team this year?” she asked, turning her brown eyes on him.

“I have one every year. Why is this one any different?”

“Because this batch of genin is full of clan heirs and prodigies. I wonder what was in the water twelve years ago.” she joked. “What’re you doing for your genin test?” It was his turn to shrug.

“Standard Bell Test.” She grimaced.

“Brutal, Hatake. You are one sadistic man, you know that?” she asked him, a grin pulling at her lips.
“Maa, I’m not a sadist. I’m just a bitter old shinobi.”

“Same difference.” she quipped. He turned his lazy gaze to her brown one, feeling a vague sense of interest.

“Well what are you doing to test your genin?” he queried, taking a measured sip of his drink.

“I gave them slightly inaccurate instructions to find me while getting rid of their best attributes and gave them a short time-limit.” Kakashi looked at her with what she thought was admiration.

“You’re bringing three genin into a bar?” he asked incredulously. She rolled her eyes at his attempt to play dumb.

“There’s a kage-bunshin of me in the library right now, waiting for them if they make it. Honestly, I’d figure there’s a seventy-thirty chance against them making it.” The bartender had finally arrived with her drink which she happily took a long drink of.

“I’m curious. What kind of misleading information did you give them, Kisaragi?” The kunoichi in question smirked.

“The main bit of fibbing I did was on my location. I told them to meet me in the tallest building in Konoha. That in itself is a riddle. The library is the tallest because it has the most stories.” Kakashi snickered at that. “Oh, and I told my little Hyuga kid not to look through her blindfold or else she’d get violently ill and she wouldn’t be able to use her Byakugan for three days if she did.”

“How’d you get Hyuga clan approval for that?” Kakashi found himself asking. The woman started laughing in earnest.

“I didn’t. It was total bullshit. That shit doesn’t exist as far as I know. The kid follows the rules to a tee. She needs to learn how to literally see through deception.” Kakashi looked at the red-haired young woman in front of him, really looked at her.

“You’re evil.”
“S’not like you’re much better. Say, how long have you kids been waiting to get picked up?” she taunted. Kakashi let out a sharp laugh at that.

“Touché.”

About forty-five minutes later, with less than minutes to spare, the three girls tumbled into the library, panting and looking more than a little exhausted, like they had figured it out in the nick of time. They sprinted over and tapped their sensei on the hand and promptly collapsed, breathing heavily.

“You…” Suki panted, glaring angrily at the bemused adult. “are an evil bitch.” she finished, flopping onto her back to relax. Hiro grinned wickedly.

“Alright Team Nine. Official training starts tomorrow. Go home, you girls reek.”

Chapter End Notes

A/N: This was supposed to be an omake but my hand slipped and well… The rest is history. Sakura needed a wake-up call and I feel like being on a team with strong women would be good for her self esteem and her borderline obsessive crush on our favorite angry little uchiha boi. Plus she needed to get a reality check. Her surplus of pride back in the day was atrocious. This was mainly told from Sakura’s POV so I hope I did her justice. I realized that Suki is kinda similar to Anko in some ways and that Hanako is kinda like a slightly more laid-back Neji but you know what, lets roll with it. I also hope you guys liked the bar scene ft. Kakashi being an irresponsible asshat like normal. Is it a ship? Is it a friendship? Tell me what you think about Hiro! I hope nothing was too OOC. That’s Chapter 10, hope you enjoyed it. Next chapter is going to be the beginning of the Wave Arc so buckle up, kiddos, this shit’s about to get wild. As always, thanks to everyone who’s been reading and showing this fanfiction love. I appreciate the hell outta y’all. Onto the next!
Since Katsumi had entered the Academy, she had looked forward to finally becoming a genin, specifically taking missions. To all prospective-shinobi, all of the glamour of their chosen career is in what jobs they take. There were ninja like the library chuunin who had fairly safe and cushy but mind-numbingly lackluster jobs and there were ninja like Katsumi’s sensei who were both admired and feared for their abilities and, in turn, the jobs they were able to take, like assassinations, high-profile body-guarding, and dangerous infiltration. Katsumi knew going in that she would have to work her way up to those kinds of missions and that the beginning would be slow, but she didn’t think that they’d be quite this…

“Boring? Dull? Stupid?” Naruto called out from his section of the garden. Apparently, she’d been thinking aloud. Katsumi made a small noise of agreement and wiped the back of her hand across her brow to keep sweat from getting into her eyes.

Team 7 had been assigned their millionth D-rank mission of the week, this time it was gardening for one of the village elders. They had done every tedious activity one could think of, from babysitting spoiled kids to painting fences to running errands for people. Katsumi was about six seconds from tearing her hair out at the sheer, well, boredom. It didn’t help that Kakashi-sensei was only there when they received a mission and not while they were actually doing it. Frankly, Katsumi didn’t blame him. If this is what all genin had to go through, once she had finished this phase, she wasn’t going to look back either. But still, it would’ve been nice to have some help.

For the past three hours, they had been weeding and watering the garden and harvesting the various produce in the area which was a lot. Sitting pretty on close to three acres of land, they still had plenty to do and it was hot outside. Katsumi had chosen the wrong day to wear a long-sleeved hoodie, but in her defense, it was supposed to rain today and she thought it would keep her from getting overly wet. The only problem was that she wasn’t wearing a shirt under her jacket so she couldn’t exactly, you know, take it off. Plus the temperature was nearing triple digits which definitely wasn’t ideal. Katsumi just figured she’d power through it and burn her grey hoodie and take an ice bath as soon as she got back to the apartment. She’d just need to stay properly hydrated which she thought was doing a pretty good job of. Her teammates thought otherwise. Naruto kept sending her worried glances every so often, even offering to work blindfolded so she didn’t have to work in such a hot garment. Sasuke had looked at her choice of apparel dubiously and shrugged before getting to work himself, which Katsumi was thankful for.

Sasuke had long-since gone off to whatever corner of the yard to do his work independently which Naruto was happy about. Though they were making some headway on the whole ‘team bonding’ front, the boys still argued fairly often about the dumbest things, though some of the insults have lost a bit of their previous vehemence. Katsumi learned to let some of the arguments go. You can’t win ’em all.
A tinny beeping noise sounded out from Katumi’s watch and she almost dropped her basket in relief. It was time for lunch. Naruto ran over to her, apparently having heard her alarm with his freaky bat-ears (seriously, his senses were scary good). “Can we finally take a lunch-break, Katsu-chan?” he asked, sweating profusely under the early afternoon sun. Thankfully, he had taken off his godforsaken, traffic-cone orange jacket and was down to a sweaty black t-shirt. Katumi wasn’t faring much better, feeling ready to drop dead from what she thought was an early onset heat stroke. Katumi looked at him enviously and wished she didn’t have to adhere to the rules of polite society.

“Yeah. Come on, let’s grab Sasuke from his little hidey-hole and eat. I feel like I’m about to keel over from heat stroke” she joked. Naruto laughed and they set their baskets down to look for Sasuke.

The two genin sluggishly walked through the garden, in search of their wayward teammate, careful not to step in any puddles and drench their shoes. Katumi had made the mistake earlier that week and wasn’t hoping to repeat it any time soon.

The past week had been full of torrential rains, signaling the beginning of spring in Konoha. Anybody in their right minds had stayed inside to wait the week-long downpour out. Not Team 7. Kakashi-sensei had them doing drills from dawn to dusk, working on their personal abilities and their teamwork skills, and having them take D-rank after D-rank. The frustrating part was that after Kakashi-sensei gave them their instructions, he left them to their own devices, seeking refuge from the rain and leaving Team Seven to suffer. Every single day, Katumi and Naruto returned to their apartment muddy, sopping wet, and exhausted.

The good news was that they had over a dozen D-ranks under their collective belt which made them look really good on paper. The bad news was that they were bored out of their minds doing glorified chores. Katumi’s head pounded just thinking about it.

They came upon Sasuke in a fruit tree a little ways into the property. He stood perched on one of the thick branches about fifteen feet above the ground, placing apples into a basket. Katumi was impressed at the amount of fruit he’d collected thus far. The base of the tree was surrounded by dozens of similar fruit-filled baskets and Katumi felt lazy in comparison. He noticed them before they got too close and paused his fruit-gathering.

“We’re taking a break for lu-” Katumi started before he jumped down and strode past them in the direction of the main house without a word. Katumi stared at his retreating form, and placed her hands on her hips, scowling at his rudeness but ultimately deciding to let it go. She knew when to pick her battles and trying to beat some manners into the prickly Uchiha was not one she wanted to choose. She didn’t have the time, patience, or kunai to do it and it wasn’t like it was personal. He was like that to everyone.
“That bastard! I’ll teach him some manners, Katsu-chan, believe it!” Katsumi smiled tiredly at Naruto and followed Sasuke towards the house. Naruto kept ranting about what he was going to do to Sasuke and exactly how he was going to best him at everything under the sun and Katsumi just nodded. She was too hot to worry about Naruto’s promises of retribution. Her head was killing her anyways. ‘When was the last time I’ve had water?’ she thought, rubbing at her temples. Katsumi wasn’t stupid, she could tell she had overworked herself and now she was paying for it. Naruto’s voice suddenly stopped and he turned his baby-blue eyes onto her, worried.

“Hey Katsu-chan, are you okay?” he asked, stopping their trip to the house. Katsumi waved him off, determined to get to a private room to take off her hoodie and cool off.

“I’m fine, Naruto. Let’s just get inside,” she answered, grinning at him to reassure him. It didn’t work. He tried again and she felt frustration rise in her. “I just need to drink some water and I’ll be fine,” she said, with a bit of her usual sharpness. Naruto stared at her for a moment before reluctantly continuing their trek. Katsumi raised the sleeve of her hoodie to her forehead to wipe some sweat that had surely gathered from her brow and noticed something odd. She wasn’t sweating. That definitely wasn’t good, but it probably wasn’t anything life-threatening so she wouldn’t panic.

Katsumi apparently had stopped walking which had caused Naruto to look at her, alarmed. “Katsu-chan, are you sure you’re okay?” he asked, walking back to her. She scowled at his worry. She was fine, damnit! She moved to stride forward towards her friend.

“Naruto I told you, I’m fine. Just a little hot,” she stumbled slightly. Naruto steadied her.

“We’re only about five minutes from the house so let’s hurry, alright?” he asked. Katsumi nodded, happy that he was finally listening to her.

“Yeah, don’t sweat it, Naruto,” she joked. Naruto had already started moving forward. Why was he so far ahead of her? He sounded like he was a million miles away.

“Aw man, Katsu-chan, that joke wasn’t funny and you know it!” Naruto laughed. He kept walking before he noticed that there were no footsteps behind him. “Don’t tell me your feelings are hurt.” he joked, turning around to his friend. She was staring at him and was hyperventilating, her ruddy face screwed up in fear. Something was wrong.

Naruto rushed to her side immediately, shouting. Or at least Katsumi was pretty sure he was shouting. He sounded like she was submerged in water to her. Suddenly, her legs couldn’t support her body weight and she collapsed, only to be caught in an awkward position, crushed to Naruto’s skinny chest.
"My last words would be a pun... she thought, laughing inwardly as black spots invaded her vision.

"Katsumi!" That was the last thing she heard before she passed out.

She regained consciousness to the sound of a foreign beeping to her left and an angry feminine voice.

"Next time you take your team on a D-rank, try not to bring one of them back half dead, Kakashi. Sweet Kami, the girl could’ve died!"

Katsumi fuzzily connected the dots in her head, feigning sleep for a couple of moments. She was probably in Konoha General by the sound of the conversation. The second thing she noticed was that the fabric she felt on her skin was foreign enough to make her realize that she wasn’t wearing her own clothing. The bed she was laying on was noticeably softer than she was used to and the faint scent of antiseptic hit her nose. *Yep, I’m most definitely in a hospital.*

"We know you’re awake, Katsumi-chan," came the dry voice of her instructor. She opened her eyes and was unsurprised at her correct assumption. “Welcome back to the land of the living, kid.” Katsumi’s gaze landed on the single eye of her teacher and noticed the young blonde medic-nin at a desk near the door of her room.

"What happened?" she asked, groaning at the entire situation. The medic breezed past Kakashi and was by her side in an instant, green chakra lighting up her palms. Katsumi looked at her work, mesmerized. The doctor had her brown eyes trained on her with laser-like focus. Katsumi jumped at the decidedly minty feeling when her cool palms touched her body, assessing any possible damage.

"Hi, I’m Oshiro Mei, your doctor. You had a heat stroke, Katsumi-chan. Your friends brought you here a few hours ago and scared the hell out of all the medics in the emergency unit with their shouting,” the medic laughed lightly as she explained what had happened. Katsumi was floored. She had a what-now? “You were unconscious when they brought you in. You gave us all quite the scare, little girl.” The medic pulled out a small flashlight from her lab coat and placed it in front of Katsumi’s face. “Follow this with your eyes for me.”

The medic waved the pen-light slowly and Katsumi did as she was told. Satisfied, the medic shut off the light and wrote some things on her clipboard.
“You’ve got some pretty eyes,” Oshiro-sensei remarked offhandedly as she scrawled something down in her messy print. “I’ve been a doctor for almost a decade and I’ve yet to see eyes like yours.”

“Do you get any other patients with interesting eyes?” She scratched the back of her neck in a move that was decidedly Naruto, slightly embarrassed by all of the attention. The blonde doctor snorted and glanced up from her writing to level Katsumi a mildly amused look.

“I work in Konoha: the Land of the Freaky Eyes,” she joked, grinning slightly. “From dealing with cagey Hyuuga clansmen to those arrogant Uchiha, I’m more than used to interesting peepers, trust me. Of course, after the incident four years ago, I haven’t seen much of the Sharingan save for your absolutely charming sensei over there.” Katsumi’s eyes flicked to Kakashi from his spot near the door and was just quick enough to catch an exaggerated eye-roll from the man at the deadpan tone of the doctor and stifled a giggle. “But, I can’t say that I’ve ever dealt with eyes that looked like yours before.” Oshiro-sensei finished, clearly fascinated. Katsumi held her hands still to quiet the need to fidget under the undivided attention of the doctor. Oshiro-sensei looked nice, but there was something unplaceable in her gaze that made Katsumi feel like she was something to be dissected for the sake of science. Needless to say, Katsumi was unnerved, but she dismissed it to be thought about later, preferably once she got into her own clothes.

“So where’d they go? My friends, I mean,” she asked awkwardly, clumsily changing the subject. Katsumi shifted her weight and sat up properly, wanting to kick herself. Jeez, wasn’t she supposed to be smart? What kind of smart person almost died from getting too hot? She was never going to be able to live this down.

“Oh, they were sent out of the room during the healing. We needed to cool down your internal temperature the old fashioned way and I assumed you didn’t want them in here for that.” Katsumi wracked her brain for what ‘the old fashioned way’ could mean before remembering. Ice baths. Good choice on the older woman’s part. The medic-nin finished her diagnosis and stood up straight. “Looks like you’re going to make a full recovery, missy!” she said cheerfully, clapping her hands together in a way that seemed over the top. “You’re just going to be on the mend for a couple days which means no strenuous activity for the rest of the week.” Katsumi gapped at the woman. ‘The rest of the week? It’s only Thursday!’ she thought, ready to protest. She didn’t want to waste three whole days doing nothing because of her own stupid mistake.

Katsumi must’ve looked crestfallen because the medic laughed. “Nothing too strenuous for you for about five days,” Oshiro-sensei chirped before whipping around to her teacher. “You hear that, Kakashi? No. Strenuous. Activity.” she repeated slowly as if to a two-year-old. Kakashi rolled his eye. “If she’s in here for heat stroke because of something you had her do again, you won’t like the consequences. Though the medic had a smile on her face, it made the threat seem all the more, well, threatening.”
Katsumi fought the urge to bury her face in her blankets from embarrassment. She’d almost died from being an idiot. How was she ever going to live this down? “Yes, ma’am,” Kakashi mocked. “I’m going to get her teammates from terrorizing the other doctors. They’ll be happy to come see her,” Kakashi said, before swiftly leaving the room. The medic-nin glared at his back before turning back to her clipboard.

“When am I cleared to go?” Katsumi questioned, fidgeting the weaving in her blanket. The doctor shrugged, placing the cap on her pen and walking back over to her desk.

“What is it with non-med-nin and hating hospitals? I swear, that’ll be the collective downfall of all of you; can take a kunai to the chest and keep moving but you’re all scared of getting blood-tests. Amazing,” she mocked, huffing lightly under her breath. “But after I finish writing down the results of your diagnostic test, you can leave.” Katsumi breathed a sigh of relief, ready to leave as soon as possible. “But I was serious about no strenuous activity, Katsumi-chan,” Oshiro-sensei warned, wagging her finger in the girl’s direction. She turned around and dropped some of her previous levity to adopt a more serious tone. “Your body lost a dangerous amount of water quicker than it could get replenished. Though I’ve fixed most of the internal damage caused by your heat stroke manually, your body still is seriously dehydrated, which is something that has to be fixed the normal way. If you don’t heed my words, there’s a high possibility of you ending up right back here in even worse shape than you were in today. No intense training for at least three days.”

“Yes ma’am,” Katsumi conceded, knowing when she was beaten. She was a shinobi, she couldn’t afford to ruin her body no matter how much she wants to do what she pleases. Oshiro-sensei was a medic-nin for a reason; she was plenty qualified. Katsumi certainly was not so it was in her best interest to obey the doctor. The woman smiled at her which made Katsumi realize just how young Oshiro-sensei was. She couldn’t be much older than nineteen or twenty which was fairly odd considering the average age of the civilian doctors she’d been to in the past. Then again, age meant next to nothing in the shinobi world so she really shouldn’t be that surprised.

“I’ll be in my office to get you some discharge forms. Stay here.” The doctor left the room and shut the door behind her. Katsumi fiddled with the hospital bracelet on her wrist, twisting it aimlessly, lost in thought.

She’d almost died because of a heat stroke. To a shinobi, that’s like almost getting killed by a paper-cut. Shame and embarrassment filled her as she fought back frustrated tears. If she hadn’t been so stupid, this wouldn't have happened. Now her friends were worried about her and Kakashi-sensei probably thought that she was incompetent. The tell-tale prickling of tears signified the beginning of a mini-pity party, but before it could get started, the door was thrown open and she was assaulted by a loud yellow and orange blur.

“Katsu-chan! You’re finally awake! Jeez, you slept for forever.” Naruto had already bounded across the room and had attached himself to Katsumi’s side, hugging her tightly. “I knew you weren’t
okay!” he mumbled into her blanket. Katsumi pat him on his hair in a way that was both awkward and seemingly reassuring, not knowing how to deal with Naruto’s justified worry. Apart from Kagome, she’d never really had anyone to worry about her well-being like this before. Sure, she’d gotten scrapped up in spars sometimes, but she was always healed on the spot at school so Kagome never even had the chance to fret unless she somehow mentioned it on accident. This was a different thing entirely.

She looked up and saw Sasuke leaning against the wall near the door, looking out the window, trying to seem nonchalant but failing. Katsumi saw the relief in the relaxation of his usually stiff spine. He seemed to notice her analyzing him and scoffed, frowning a little bit. Something about his forced indifference made her want to laugh.

“What special breed of idiot wears a hoodie in this kind of weather?” Sasuke gestured to the window, looking directly at Katsumi with irritation evident on his face. “Next time you want to do something this stupid, at least try to give us some notice.” Katsumi’s first instinct was to bristle at his tone, but she stopped herself as she read between the lines. Sasuke was actually worried about her. Huh. The world must be ending.

Naruto rose abruptly from where he was glued to her side, looking angry enough to fight Sasuke in the middle of her hospital room, but Katsumi yanked him back down. “Duly noted,” she accepted, giving him a wry grin. Sasuke’s scowl deepened slightly before disappearing altogether, fading back to its usual cool standoffishness. Naruto looked confused at the way she took his biting words but Katsumi waved them off. That was the only way Sasuke knew how to show any kind of affection was nonchalant and guarded which was understandable considering his past. She’d let it slide.

“When can you leave?” Naruto asked, finally really understanding where they were and lowering his voice accordingly.

“The doctor is coming back with release forms so I can leave after I sign them.” Katsumi shifted in the bed to sit up a little straighter.

“This isn’t going to stop team training, is it?” Of course, Sasuke would ask that because who else would? Katsumi shook her head.

“Well, I just can’t do any intense training for the next three-ish days.”

“So it’s going to stop team training?” Sasuke deadpanned. Katsumi snorted.
“Yeah.”

Sasuke rolled his eyes at the inconvenience and crossed his arms, clearly aggravated by their doctor-induced stagnation.

“Speaking of training, where’s Kakashi-sensei?” Katsumi asked, finally noticing his absence.

“The weirdo said something about needing to vacuum his dishes and bolted. Guess he doesn’t like hospitals or something?” Naruto scratched the back of his head and smiled apologetically. The girl nodded and sent Naruto a look that read mild irritation to hide her actual feelings. Katsumi would never admit it, but she was kinda hoping Kakashi-sensei would still be there. Something about his presence relaxed her and soothed her raw nerves. Maybe it was because of his rank and how she knew that he would make sure she didn’t get seriously hurt. Or at least, he was supposed to. It could be his dry sense of humor would’ve helped her relax and not think too much about her own mistakes.

So though she knew that Kakashi-sensei was likely a busy man, she couldn’t help but feel a little disappointed at the news.

The door opened once more to reveal Oshiro-sensei holding a stack of papers. She came over to Katsumi’s bed and handed the stack to her along with a pen.

“Alright Katsumi-chan, just sign here, here, and initial here and you’re ready to go home.” The girl quickly did what she said before handing her the documents. “Remember what I said about intense activity. Don’t take this the wrong way, but I hope I don’t have to see you in here anytime soon,” the woman chided, handing her a bag that she’d procured from nowhere. Her things.

“We’ll meet you outside, Katsu-chan.” Naruto grinned and he and Sasuke left the room, probably to give her privacy to change.

Katsumi rose with a quickness and rushed to the bathroom to change out of her hospital gown. She put on her shorts with no problem but when she looked into the bag again, she paused. The offending article of clothing. The red hoodie. Katsumi was reluctant to put it back on. Clearly, it had been washed since Katsumi could faintly pick up the smell of generic hospital detergent but that didn’t mean that she wanted the wear it right after it almost killed her especially since, though it was the late afternoon, the temperature was still pretty damn hot. She fingered the sleeves of the jacket thoughtfully before getting an idea.
Katsumi poked her head out of the bathroom, hoping that Oshiro-sensei was still in there. The woman was grabbing her files from a desk and was right about to leave. “Oshiro-sensei, would you mind handing me a pair of scissors?” If the doctor thought the question was odd, she didn’t show it and quickly procured a pair of sharp silver scissors which Katsumi took gratefully. She set to work, fixing her apparel.

When Katsumi emerged, the heavy sleeves of her red hoodie were cut off at the seam and cropped near her navel, feeling a hundred percent better. That, paired with her usual mesh armor and shorts made her feel like herself again. Katsumi made sure to thank her doctor before leaving the hospital, hopefully never to return again (though she knew that that was impossible with the life she lived). Naruto waiting for her by the elevators and with that, they began their trek back to the apartment.

Walking home from the hospital with a hyperactive worrying knucklehead is not something that she’d recommend. Every time she stumbled slightly or looked the least bit shaky, Naruto started fretting like a mother hen, offering to show off his ninja skills and carry her, fireman-style back to the apartment. Every single time she declined. Sasuke had disappeared after finding out that she wasn’t dead or in immediate danger of death which she was okay with. The two genin trudged along the sidewalk to their apartment, laughing and talking like kids do.

Katsumi would eventually reminisce on moments like these and feel like crying at the memories. While they were still genin, everything was relatively simple. The worst thing in her day was having to run fifteen laps around Konoha instead of ten and her worst injury was heat-stroke. Worse things would come to pass. Awful things. But for right now, they were talking about a tree they saw that reminded them of Shikamaru and giggling about it. They could enjoy the easiness of it all. Looking back, Katsumi decided that around that time was the beginning of the end.

As punishment, as soon as Katsumi’s three days grace were up, Kakashi was in her apartment at four am to ‘make up for lost time’. It really just meant working her until dehydration was the last of her worries. To be honest, she deserved it. She had made a dumb mistake and she had to pay for it. But holy Hashirama, was it necessary to up her laps from fifteen to thirty, utterly thrash her in all three ninja arts three times a day, and train harder than she ever had before? That was debatable.

But by the end of the week, she was able to manage twenty-seven laps without vomiting and made progress in strategizing while fighting so it really wasn’t that bad. Naruto and Sasuke had been included in some of the remedial training, but not all of it, which she was secretly grateful for. They had the option of leaving. She did not. It seemed like for the most part, Kakashi-sensei sometimes only paid attention to the boys and for the most part just left her to her own devices. She revelled in the one on one attention and tried to make it known that she appreciated it. Every day, she dragged her sore butt home, collapsed on the nearest flat surface (usually the couch), and had to be peeled off to take a shower. Everything ached. But she felt her muscle building and could feel her reflexes speeding up. Though training one-on-one with the famed Copy Ninja was painful, she was seeing
results.

That’s why when Kakashi-sensei mentioned that he had signed Team 7 up for a C-rank mission about a month later, Katsumi’s face lit up in barely contained excitement. Naruto whooped loudly and Sasuke gave one of those little half-smile, half smirk things. It was a standard escort mission to the Land of Waves and they were to start in the morning.

Katsumi slept well the night before leaving for the mission, having been exhausted from her training the day before and woke up bright and early, ready to meet their client. What gender were they going to be? Were they famous? Would they be nice and easy to deal with or spoiled and high maintenance? What was even in the Land of Waves besides, well, waves?

Katsumi didn’t quite know what she was expecting when the door to the Hokage’s Office opened to reveal a stout old man with grey hair and what looked like sake in his hand at six in the morning but it certainly wasn’t that.

He took a swig and Katsumi fought the distaste from showing on her face, trying to stay professional. This was their client. She had to be nice to get the job done. It was just supposed to be an easy escort mission that would last two, three weeks tops. She was sure that she could handle this.

“What’s this? It’s just a bunch of brats!”

Katsumi swore violently in her head at her misfortune. She wasn’t sure that she could handle this. But she would have to try.

Yeah, this was definitely the beginning of the end.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: this was another chapter that was supposed to be omake. WELP. We’re in the wave arc, kiddies. BUCKLE UP. And I mean seriously. IMPORTANT ANNOUNCEMENT: I’m going to have to change my upload schedule *cue the booing* yeah, I know. But I have so much to do and uploading every week is getting to be a lot. I’m just scooching the uploads back to every two weeks so hopefully, you don’t abandon my fic to find an author with a better upload schedule ;_;. I’m sorry, y’all, it’s just that life gets in the way and it’s either I spread out my uploads or I get burnt out and possibly stop writing entirely. I hope you guys understand! Thanks so much for everyone who’s been reading! I appreciate the heck outta ya. Onto the next!
The night before her first trip ever out of the village, Katsumi had had the same dilemma from the night before her first day as a genin: packing. Kakashi-sensei had said to pack enough supplies to last them at least two weeks and while that left Katsumi a lot of figurative wiggle room, literal wiggle room was in short supply. She had to prioritize what to pack based on importance. That meant the map, compass, canteen, a box of matches, and iodine stayed. Katsumi sat on her bed, biting her thumbnail in thought, trying to remember if she missed anything when a shout came from the other room.

“Katsu-chan, do you think I should pack ramen?” She stopped and rolled her eyes, chuckling a bit, and decided not to even give a response, letting her silence speak for itself. After a beat, Naruto called back, sheepishly, “Right. No ramen.” She continued with packing and tried to remember what the weather was like in Wave around this time of year. Hot, humid, and apt to rain at odd times which made sense considering its relative location to Konoha: southward and surrounded on all sides by miles and miles of ocean.

Katsumi was excited to see the ocean. She’d only ever seen it in books before and never in person since Konoha was too far northwest for any beach-trips. There were only certain people with clearance to leave the village for extended periods of time: shinobi and civilian merchants. Everyone else needed to make an official request with the Office of the Hokage which was a lengthy and tedious process and was much more trouble than it was worth. Because of this, most of Konoha’s citizens had never been out of the village before. But now, since she was a genin, she had clearance to leave the village, which was definitely exciting.

This go round, Katsumi packed everything, from firestarters to two spare sets of clothing. It wouldn’t do to be unprepared. Katsumi went to bed excited and dreaming of crashing waves and sandy beaches.

Her idealistic outlook on this mission came to a screeching halt though, when she saw the man they were to be escorting. Tazuna-san was an older man with completely grey hair, not the cool, silver colored mop of Kakashi-sensei, but a color showing his old age. He had dark eyes and glasses, was stout and unpleasant-looking with a bottle of what looked like rice wine in his grip. He reeked of cheap liquor and salt-water; an all-around unsavory looking man. Her opinion of the man only got worse when he opened his mouth and called them all brats. But, she swallowed her distaste because she could not, would not mess up her first real mission out of the village. So after that cheerful introduction, the five of them headed out of Konoha.

By the time they had reached the front gates, Naruto had forgotten all about the previous insulting
comments and basically bolted as soon as he passed the gate chūnin and the towering gates like a
dog that hadn’t been outside in months. He ran about, yelling about this and that, irritating the pants
off of Sasuke and Tazuna. Kakashi just reprimanded him lightly, not even looking up from his
orange book and Katsumi laughed. Where he stored all of that enthusiasm, she’d never know.

“I still can’t believe that these are the ninja that are supposed to escort me,” Tazuna gripped, his thick
Water country accent and obvious inebriation making him slur his words. He took a swig of
whatever foul drink he had in that bottle and scowled. “I paid good money for this?”

“Maa, Tazuna-san, you’re in good hands. I’m a jounin, one of the most high-ranking shinobi in the
Hidden Leaf and though they are young, those kids are still shinobi. Do not underestimate them.”
Kakashi-sensei was still reading, looking as bored and nonchalant as all get out, but Katsumi still
appreciated the sentiment. Her other teammates did as well, Naruto puffing out his chest like a bird
and Sasuke looking as smug as he would allow himself to be. The group had fallen into a decent
formation with Katsumi and Naruto up front, Tazuna and Sasuke in the middle, and Kakashi-sensei
bringing up the rear. Naruto turned around and grinned at their client, walking backward with no
difficulty.

“He’s right, old man! As long as you’re being protected by the great Uzumaki Naruto, no one would
dare try to hurt you!” Katsumi rolled her eyes at his bravado and ignored Tazuna’s likely biting
response in favor of asking her teacher a question. Katsumi fell back into step with Kakashi-sensei
who was still reading that book he always carried with him everywhere. Figuring that he probably
knew she was there from the moment she got within a few paces of him, she asked her question
immediately.

“Kakashi-sensei, about how long is it going to take to make it to Wave?” Katsumi adjusted her bag
on her back, balancing the weight evenly on her shoulder blades. According to her map, running
continuously at top speed, Team 7 could likely make it to Wave by nightfall, if not a little bit after
sunset. But since they were traveling with an old civilian man, they had to slow down, which
Katsumi was not exactly thrilled with.

Though Naruto had considerably less self-control than she did, she still felt the exhilaration that
accompanied the newfound freedom and didn’t blame him for bolting out the gates as he did. She felt
the urge to as well but kept herself under control, not wanting to embarrass herself in front of their
client. Professionalism is the name of the game.

“No more than three days of travel if we don’t run into any hitches.”

“And if we do?” Kakashi-sensei quirked an eyebrow at her question. “Run into any hitches, I mean.”
Katsumi finished awkwardly.
"It'll depend." Kakashi turned his gaze back to his book and, knowing a dismissal when she saw one, Katsumi disengaged, instead focusing on the landscape around her. She would never admit it, but seeing several different types of plant-life she'd only read about at the Academy, her excitement was palpable. She was checking out her surroundings taking note of the flora and fauna when her gaze caught on something odd a few meters ahead of their group.

Puddles? But it hasn’t rained for weeks! Katsumi frowned, looking around for anything that could cause the water pool that they were passing. Seeing nothing, she felt unease seep into her posture and she placed her hand near her kunai holster.

Something’s not right.

Katsumi shot a worried glance at her teacher who was staring directly at the offending puddle with something like irritation. She opened her mouth to ask what was with the puddle when two masked men burst out of the water. Shinobi! Almost quicker than she could follow, they pulled out some sort of spiked chain and wrapped them around Kakashi-sensei before yanking viciously and ripping their sensei apart before their eyes.

“Kakashi-sensei!” Naruto yelled, dashing forward to what looked like his remains. Katsumi went to grab the back of his jacket to stop him, wanting to vomit because Ohmygoddohmygoddohmygod they killed Kakashi-sensei we’re going to die. She felt terror lock up her limbs and she vaguely felt her legs tremble. She was frozen in fear.

That is until the two shinobi materialized behind Naruto and told him that he was next. Not Naruto. Never Naruto. The icy fog that had cloaked her brain in fear quickly dissipated and was replaced with a different emotion entirely: unadulterated rage. They had they back toward her to focus on Naruto.

Big mistake.

Without doing much thinking, Katsumi jammed a kunai that she didn’t remember having in her hand up and into the right kidney of the left one’s back and twisted with just as much ferocity as they had when they killed Kakashi-sensei.

He let out a blood-curdling scream and Katsumi sunk the kunai to the hilt, feeling his hot blood coat her hands. When he dropped, she yanked the blade out and saw the second one rushing towards her, blades in hand with a very angry expression on his face.
“You little bitch!” He swung his chains towards her and she threw herself out of the way. “You’re gonna pay for that one.” He threw his chain at her again and Katsumi darted to the right to get out of its destructive path but the shinobi had learned. She looked and saw the chain hurtling towards her faster than she could dodge. Before Katsumi could even exhale, a shuriken came out of nowhere and pinned the chain to a nearby tree and away from her before being locked in place by a well-placed kunai. Sasuke.

Katsumi nodded to him and ran toward their client to protect him, closing the distance between them in seconds. She held her kunai out, ready to defend. She was scanning the battlefield for any other hazards when her gaze caught on Naruto who looked absolutely petrified. Sasuke had apparently ripped the chain out of the remaining man’s gauntlet and destroyed his main weapon.

I knew he was fast, but this is ridiculous.

Suddenly, the shinobi had changed directions and started barrelling towards her and Tazuna with a malicious glint in his eye. Katsumi held her kunai out and kept Tazuna behind her, scowling at the incoming shinobi. She wasn’t scared anymore. Though she was civilian-raised, something about this sort of combat made her blood sing. It sharpened her reflexes and filled her with a sense of brutal efficiency and purpose. She could swear that something warrior-like ran through her veins and roared in approval everytime she raised her blades. That same feeling told her that, despite her civilian blood, she was born for this. She was made for this. So this time, when danger came at her full-force, she was ready to meet it head-on. Fear was not an option.

“Stay behind me, Tazuna-san!” Katsumi roared, keeping her eyes on the incoming shinobi.

Suddenly, Sasuke had somehow gotten between her and the enemy ninja for which Katsumi was grateful. They would take him out together, as teammates. She felt something fiery bloom in her chest and almost grinned. Even if Kakashi-sensei was gone, they would be okay. Hopefully.

She steadied herself, gritted her teeth, and waited for impact. Out of nowhere, a tall figure had appeared in front of them and held the shinobi in a tight grip. Relief ran through her body when she recognized her sensei as very much so not dead.

“Yo.” Katsumi felt like crying, never feeling so thankful for another person’s presence in her life. Naruto clearly shared her sentiment judging by the huge grin on his still-pale face. Sasuke looked mildly annoyed at their sensei, presumably for stealing his thunder.
Her eyes darted towards where he had ‘died’ before and saw several logs in the place where his dead body was. A substitution paired with a genjutsu. *I gotta get him to teach me how to do that so perfectly.*

“Naruto,” their teacher called out to her blonde teammate. “Sorry I didn’t help you right away. I didn’t mean for you to get hurt. I just didn’t think you’d freeze up like that.” Kakashi-sensei closed the distance between the rest of their group in a leisurely pace, like they weren’t all just about to die. “Katsumi. Sasuke. Good job, very smooth.”

Katsumi tried not to preen under his compliment. It wasn’t often that their teacher gave out any praise so when it was given out, that meant that they did well. *Really* well. Kakashi-sensei nodded to them to continue on their journey like none of that happened which Katsumi was grateful for.

“Hey,” came Sasuke’s voice. Katsumi turned around to look at her teammates, wondering why they weren’t hurrying up. Naruto looked equal parts embarrassed and shell-shocked and Katsumi felt bad for her friend. He looked up at Sasuke, confusion evident on his face.

“Huh?”

Sasuke smirked. “You’re not hurt are you? *Scaredy cat?* ”

Katsumi groaned as Naruto’s face scrunched up in anger as he made to attack the other boy. “Sasuke!” he started.

“Naruto!” Kakashi-sensei barked. The boy stopped immediately, looking sheepish. “These ninja have poison in their claws. We need to take it out of you quickly.” Katsumi automatically gave Naruto a once-over. *When did he get injured?* Fear started to well up in the pit of her stomach, but she pushed it down, knowing that panicking would do no one any good. Naruto was staring at his hand fearfully, holding it far away from him like that would do something. “You have to open the wound and remove it. It’s in your blood so don’t move around. That spreads the poison.”

Katsumi was by Naruto’s side in an instant to help him with it. She grabbed his shaking hand and took out a clean kunai. “Don’t look,” she warned, keeping her tone even. She was just about to break skin when he pulled his hand away.

“I can do it, Katsu-chan,” he declared, pulling his hand away from her. She looked at him dubiously, but back off nonetheless.
“By the way, Tazuna-san, we need to talk,” Kakashi-sensei stated simply. The old man looked nervous but nodded. They all followed their teacher to the tree where their previous assailants had been tied up. *When did he do that?* Katsumi had a hard time looking at the one who she’d dispatched. His head was loll’d to the side, his dilated eyes focusing on nothing as he sat in a pool of his own blood. He looked as white as a sheet and from what she could see, he was sweating a lot. He was clearly in hypovolemic shock from losing too much blood. *She* had done that to him and if he didn’t get medical attention soon, he would die. Something about that didn’t sit well with her. It was one thing to kill quick and painlessly, but it was another to let your opponent suffer needlessly. His partner murderously bored his dark eyes into her but kept quiet as they approached.

“They’re chuunin from Kirigakure. Their specialty seems to be relentless attack.”

“How did you know about our ambush?” The enemy shinobi’s voice was gruff when he spoke.

“A puddle on a clear day when it hasn’t rained in weeks?” The other ninja looked down, embarrassed. *I knew something was off.* Clearly, these guys weren’t the cream of the crop in Kirigakure. But they wanted something. This wasn’t a coincidence. They wouldn’t put nearly this much effort into attacking them if there wasn’t something important on the line, whether that be a huge payday, a threat hanging over their heads, or just following someone else’s orders.

“Then why did you leave the fighting to the genin?” Tazuna asked, adjusting his hat to ward off the sun.

“I could’ve taken them out quickly, but then I would’ve learned nothing. I had to know who their target was and what they were after.” Katsumi felt a surge of admiration for her teacher. He trusted them to handle it all so he could gather information in less than a minute. *Now this what a shinobi should be.* Katsumi paused and thought about his words.

“What are you getting at?” Katsumi noted the defensiveness in Tazuna’s voice.

“They were after Tazuna-san, weren’t they?” Katsumi spoke up, glancing at her teacher for confirmation. He looked mildly irritated about having his thunder stolen right out from under him, but nodded.

“That’s right, Katsumi-chan. I wanted to know if they were after us, ninja attacking ninja, or if they were after you, Tazuna.” The man in question paled. “When you put in your mission request, you asked for standard protection. You never said that you were being hunted by shinobi. Had we
known this, this mission would’ve been listed as at least a B rank. If we knew that we would be fielding attacks from enemy ninja, we would’ve staffed differently and charged for the price of a B mission. Lying to us is unacceptable.” Kakashi’s posture was relaxed, but something in his tone spoke volumes about just how angry he was about this. He was pissed.

Tazuna opened his mouth to say something but was cut off by their sensei again. “This is beyond our skill level. We’re going back to the village.” The bridge-builder’s face reddened in what Katsumi thought was anger.

“Now wait just a minute…”

“No you wait a minute,” Katsumi found herself saying. “Are you forgetting that because of your inability to tell the truth, our teammate has been poisoned? We need to get him to a hospital! We’re going back.” Katsumi finished, trying not to punch the old man in the gut for withholding crucial information.

Everyone turned to look at Naruto, still preoccupied with his hand, to ask his own thoughts on the matter. Suddenly, he whipped out a kunai, swung it up dramatically in the air, and jammed it a few centimeters into his hand, getting blood on the grass.

“Naruto, what the hell?!!”

“What’s he doing?”

“Dobe, what do you think you’re doing?”

The blond boy was holding his hand to his chest tightly while everyone was trying to figure out why the hell he just did that. “I’ll never back down again and have someone else rescue me. I’ll never run away,” he declared, clenching the hilt of the kunai tightly. “I won’t lose to Sasuke or you, Katsu-chan. Upon this wound, I make this pledge, believe it.” He turned around to face them and gave them all a fierce grin. “We’re not quitting this mission! I’m going to be fine.”

“Naruto, it’s all well and good that you got rid of all that poisoned blood, but any more than that and you’ll bleed out,” came Kakashi’s dry voice. Naruto stopped and looked at his hand, horrified. His previous bravado drained out of him quickly. To say that he panicked would be an understatement.
Katsumi shook her head, exasperated. “What is it with you and showing off all the time? Honestly, Naruto you’re such a drama queen sometimes.” She closed the distance between them, already pulling out her first aid kit. She only knew pretty rudimentary stuff so she could really only stop the bleeding and dress the wound, but it would have to do. She grabbed his hand but stopped abruptly. *Wait, is the wound healing already?* Sure enough, the gash was sealing from the inside and it looked like within the next fifteen minutes, there’d be nothing left on his hand. She wiped away some of the blood and doused the area in some disinfectant and left his hand alone for the most part. Katsumi’s mind raced, thinking about all of the possible uses for his quick regeneration, calculating how long it would take for him to heal based on the severity of the wound before Kakashi-sensei placed a gloved hand on her head.

“Katsumi-chan, take the group onward. You know the right direction. I need to take care of our guests.” She turned back to look at their previous attackers, feeling slightly sick. *He’s gonna kill them*, she realized. Kakashi gave her one of those eye-crinkles that she liked to think was a reassuring smile. “Go ahead. I can clean up back here.” He patted her on the head and nudged her and Naruto forward, the latter being none the wiser about why their teacher was staying behind.

With that, the group moved on, minus Kakashi-sensei with Katsumi at the helm. Within fifteen minutes, Kakashi had caught up with them, appearing with a quiet ‘yo’ and smelling vaguely of smoke. Team 7 would continue on their mission to the Land of Waves, for better or for worse.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Aaand we’re firmly in the Wave Arc. A shorter chapter than usual, but my life’s become a veritable shitstorm as of late. But hey, let’s keep it moving. Onto the next!
“You girls have ten minutes to limber up.”

Immediately, Sakura dropped forward to touch her toes, feeling the stretch along her hamstrings and pushing herself a little farther until her knuckles touched the grass. Team Nine had been training together for a little under four months now so the girls were used to Hiro-sensei’s brutal training regimen. Every day had a different focus, from chakra control to brute strength to speed and agility to kenjutsu, they never stagnated, working on different aspects of shinobi life and perfecting them to their slave-driver sensei’s standards.

*Sometimes I forget that she was an ANBU captain for five years* …

Hiro-sensei’s goal was to have each of them passable in a weapon, at least three jutsu, and able to run a non-chakra-enhance kilometer in less than 4 minutes all before the Chuunin Exams which was something she claimed was doable. Meanwhile, every day after practice, each girl could hardly make it to their respective homes before collapsing in exhaustion.

Hiro said it built character. Suki said it built resentment. Suki then had to run an extra kilometer for
“Time’s up, ladies. Suit up,” Hiro called from her spot on a low-hanging tree branch as she gestured to the bag below her. The genin did as they were told and started strapping weights to their legs and arms with a quickness only learned by repetition.

‘An idea that I got from a colleague!’ Hiro told them as she basked in their dismayed expressions. ‘Oh, quit your whining. Trust me, these things, while old-fashioned, work. Just strap them on. I have them set to weigh a third of your body weight to start off. As you progress, I’ll gradually add more and more weight.’

That was three months ago.

While Hiro-sensei was really strict on their training, Sakura was beginning to see results. Her arms, once slight and breakable, were now corded with lean muscle and pockmarked with a couple scars that she wore with pride. The girl had stopped wearing her red silk dress after having it ruined one too many times by weapons training (something she knew Hiro was doing on purpose to make her start wearing more suitable clothing) and began wearing charcoal gray pants and a sturdy blood-red sleeveless tunic with the Haruno crest on the back. In addition to the more appropriate clothing, Sakura had taken to wearing her long pink hair in a high braided bun instead of down her back all of the time after Hiro-sensei had grabbed her by her hair during one of their spars and mentioned how much of a safety hazard it was.

The day after Sakura had changed her look, Hiro’s brown eyes had sparkled with pride at her alterations as she tugged lightly at the tightly coiled braid on the top of her head to test its strength.

“Practical. I like it.”

Now, Sakura could honestly say that she looked less like a little girl playing dress up and more like a young kunoichi, something she was secretly ecstatic about.

Hiro-sensei may have been brutal, but she was a genius when it came to teaching.

Sakura finished wrapping the weights around her wrists when Hiro-sensei jumped down from her spot in the tree and landed in front of the girls, a playful smile on her lips. “Five laps, no chakra. You have fifteen minutes. Go.”
The genin darted forward to complete their warm-up.

Sakura made sure to pace herself, pushing her speed to about sixty percent. She kept this pace until the last half kilometer when Suki pulled up next to her, a grin on her sweaty and flushed face.

“First one to finish gets to pick the activity we do on Friday!”

Sakura bristled at the challenge, feeling the familiar fire of competition roar to life in her. She glanced at the Hyuga beside her whose brow was furrowed as she thought about it. Hiro-sensei had them train six days a week for eight hours a day. On their off-days, the girls got together to train without Hiro cracking the whip at them every six seconds and what they did depended on what they wanted to do that day. Sometimes it was decided by voting. Other times it was decided by a competition.

Like this one.

“You’re on.” Sakura challenged, picking up the pace a bit more. Hanako sent her a slight smile, which on anyone else would’ve been a grin of Naruto-proportions. Then, Hanako threw out a leg and tripped Suki. The brunette went down with a yelp, Sakura’s green eyes wide in surprise before she realized that Hanako was gone. Sakura bolted, leaving Suki in the dust.

“You assholes!” Suki’s laugh hardly reached Sakura’s ears as her heartbeat was drowning out any and all other sounds as she zeroed in on the grey back of Hanako’s vest with laser focus. By the time she’d caught up to Hanako, she was already at their starting point, laying on her back. Sakura slowed her dead sprint to a jog until she was close enough to the other girl to hear her winded laughter.

“You should’ve seen the look on Suki’s face, Sakura!” the usually quiet girl almost howled, her voice perforated by her harsh breathing as Sakura finally crossed the finish line.

“That doesn’t sound like push-ups,” Hiro-sensei called, mirth evident in her voice. Clearly, she’d seen what happened to Suki and had enjoyed it.

Sakura dropped down to the ground and began the aforementioned exercise while listening in for Suki’s belated arrival.

“You guys are all assholes and I hate you.” Sakura looked up at the other girl and noted the dirt on her face from her fall and couldn’t take it anymore, giggles bubbling from her lips. The genin’s
deadpan tone paired with her disheveled appearance only made Hanako laugh harder as she collapsed into giggles on the floor, giving up on push-ups entirely. Sakura joined in, laughing until her stomach hurt. Suki pouted, her scowl deep set onto her face as went through her own set of push-ups.

When all three girls had finished, Hiro ambled up to the sweaty genin, hands deep in her pockets as she gave them all a once over, stopping at Suki for a moment.

“Did you do something different with your hair?” she asked, clearly referencing the plethora of foliage in Suki’s brown locks.

“Sensei!” Suki whined.

Hiro rolled her eyes fondly. “Ready to go?”

All three genin nodded and Hiro went through about a half dozen handsigns and slammed her palms on the ground and suddenly they were falling.

Instinct kicked in as Sakura silently landed in a deep crouch about fifteen meters from their previous location, automatically cushioning her landing with chakra, knowing that the other girls had already done the same.

They’d landed in a hollowed out cavern created by Hiro-sensei below their usual training ground, full of different structures she’d built with her impressive repertoire of doton jutsu, from mudwalls that were at least five meters tall to rungs in the smooth ceiling to elevated pillars in the middle of a pit. Their sensei had made them an entire gymnasium to use. Hiro had built the place so they could practice at anytime without having to worry about being seen by prying eyes.

Hiro was also incredibly paranoid.

“And when did you say you got permission from the Hokage to build all of this?” Suki had teased when the red headed jonin had shown them their real training ground a week after they’d been instated as Team Nine.

The other two girls were looking at the high domed ceiling and the smooth floor below them in awe, wondering how the hell anybody but the Sage of Six Paths could’ve built something like this.
“That’s another kilometer Suki!” Hiro chirped happily, grinning with entirely too much teeth for it to be genuine. The brunette had snickered and took off to start her punishment not nearly as cowed as Hiro probably would’ve liked. “Officially, Training Ground 48 is our designated team practice area, but off the books,” The redhead smirked, looking proud of her handiwork. She waved a slender hand at the cave they were standing in and looked back at the remaining girls. “This is where we train.”

Hiro beckoned them to the center of the room to the designated sparring mat, the three genin following closely behind. When she stopped, she turned around and grinned in a way that would make most genin run for the hills. Not Team Nine. “We’re going to be sparring, three on one. I need to see where you’re at in combat. Only rule is stay within the bounds of the mat. Your goal: land a hit on me.” The woman backed up and each genin readied themselves.

Hanako unstrapped a wicked looking bladed bo staff from across her back, slicing the air in front of her and Suki unsheathed a katana, a smirk directed at Sakura and Hanako. Sakura sent one of her own back before taking out dual tanto, feeling the familiar weight of the blades in her hands. Hiro took this all in, wiping away a fake tear.

“Sage, I’ve created monsters,” Hiro stage-whispered, looking fiercely proud of them for a moment. The redhead then shrugged, taking out her own karambit knives, twirling them with expert precision. “Kenjutsu it is then.” Then, Hiro was speeding towards them and the fight had begun.

Hanako blocked another swing of Hiro’s blade with her staff, grunting at the raw power the woman had while Suki came in, slicing quickly with her katana at Hiro’s blindspot. The woman disengaged, dancing out of Suki’s way before having to dodge a swipe of Sakura’s tanto to avoid being disemboweled. Shit, they’re learning quickly. Of course, that was to be expected. Hiro hadn’t been relentlessly pushing them for nothing as they had the Chuunin Exams looming over their heads that she had to make them more than ready for. She’d been training them in a similar way she’d trained ANBU recruits: without mercy and with the same laser focus she used with everything else she did in her life. Needless to say, the girls, who already had a healthy amount of natural talent, were flourishing. In terms of bladework, they could use a lot more practice, but they were certainly not bad for green little genin. She’d definitely have to watch Suki and her katana. That girl was a natural.

She ducked Hanako’s bo staff while blindly deflecting a fast swipe from Sakura and pushing her back. Suki reengaged, trying with Hanako to flank her. Hiro jumped back to avoid it and sheathed her knives. “I’ve had enough of blades, haven’t you?” The girls followed her directions with varying amounts of enthusiasm. Hiro then went through hand seals at half her usual speed so the girls could keep up and disappeared beneath the ground.
“Headhunter jutsu,” she heard Sakura murmur to the other girls. Hiro inwardly grinned at her astute observation and decided to test her reflexes. Hiro positioned herself under the pink haired genin and grabbed her ankle from below her in her bruising grip before the girl disappeared and a pebble hit Hiro’s clenched palm. _Kawarimi? Nice job, Sakura._ The jonin came back up from the ground to be met with a _blisteringly hot_ fireball courtesy of Suki.

_By the Sage, is that girl part Uchiha?_ Hiro thought as she took a page out of Sakura’s book and substituted herself with a rock. She crouched low, waiting for the girls to come back at her and wasn’t disappointed. An impressive mud-wall from Sakura came flying at her, pushing Hiro back to the ends of the mat. She snorted, pride swelling in her chest because her girls were getting so good so quickly when Hanako darted in, open palms flying. _Juuken? How typically Hyuuga._ Hiro dodged her hits, getting around her strikes with practiced ease before, deciding that Gentle Fist wasn’t going to work on someone of Hiro’s skill-level, Hanako dissolved her stance into a standard taijutsu stance and tried again, this time with Suki, who'd decided to join the party.

When _both_ girls came at her, Hiro had to watch out. She ducked under a fist and blocked a high kick aimed for her face, the girls working in tandem to take Hiro down. _Wait where’s Sakura?_ Right as Hiro was about to look for her, both genin she was caught up in high genin to low chuunin-level taijutsu with disengaged as something was lobbed in her direction before it exploded on impact and smoke got rid of any semblance of visibility. Coughing, the listened for a scuffling of feet or an intake of breath that would indicate where her pesky genin had disappeared to before instinctively dodging to the left. A tagged kunai whizzed by and Hiro hardly had time to disappear underground before an explosive tag detonated.

Tremors rocked the ground, sending shockwaves she was pretty sure were noticeable to anybody nearby. Hiro resurfaced and was immediately forced to block what she _knew_ was a chakra enhanced kick from Sakura, a vicious grin on her face. _Someone has a thing for taijutsu._ Suki came from behind with a wicked punch to the kidneys that would’ve done her in is she hadn’t substituted with _another_ rock. The girls were clearly giving her no room to breathe as Hanako came back in with her bo-staff and slashed downwards and Hiro took a step back to dodge.

Or so she thought.

When a slight pain came from her sternum, she looked down to see a slash in her black shirt and crimson blood welling up from the wound.

The genin noticed around the same time she did, Suki letting out a whoop and slapping Sakura’s hand in a high-five.

“How?” Hiro’s question was directed at Hanako, the grinning brunette looked back at Sakura who had a sly grin on her face. Sakura shrugged.
“I used Kokoni Arazu no Jutsu to make Hanako’s staff seem a little bit shorter than it actually is knowing that you have a tendency to only dodge just enough and hoped that that observation would hold up. It did.” Hiro stared at the pinkette for a moment before laughing out loud.

“Brilliant. You girls are all brilliant. Holy Hashirama, you’re going to wipe the godsdamned floor with the other genin at the Chuunin Exams. Shit, I’m so proud right now!”

“Does that mean we can go home early today?” Suki’s tentative voice rang out, interrupting their sensei.

“Fuck no! You guys are going to be working on your individual strengths until lunch though. Suki, run through your kata then spar with my clone until you can’t move or you pop it,” Hiro said, quickly making a shadow clone and sending the girl off to practice. “Hanako, you’re going to be working on agility so work on dodge training.” Another clone and Hanako was gone. “Now Sakura. I want to work with you on genjutsu. That was very clever what you did back there.”

The girl flushed as pink as her hair before nodding. “Thanks, sensei.”

Hiro shrugged. “You’re welcome, kid. Honestly, you have some real talent. Here’s what you’re going to work on.” Hiro walked over to their discard belongings and took out a book from her bag and handed it to Sakura. The girl quickly scanned the cover and found it to be an adventure novel of some sort. She looked up at Hiro with confusion and the woman smiled. “You’re going to use your chakra to replicate this book until the only way you can tell which one is the fake is with your memory.” Sakura peered up at the woman with wide green eyes, digesting her instructions. “A big part of casting genjutsu is precision. If you can’t feel the texture of the cover or smell the scent of the paper, it’s not realistic enough. Make me believe what it is you’re casting.”

Sakura nodded, determination in her green eyes and Hiro patted her on the head. “Go at it, kid.”

“Hai.”

Hiro waltzed back to sit down to watch their progress with content. Oh yeah, her girls were going to be absolute monsters. She was just excited to be there for the ride. Hiro smirked, feeling satisfaction well up in her chest at the sight of her girls working their asses off and making progress. They were going to dominate the Exams.

Chapter End Notes
Okay, I freaking love Hiro and Team Nine so goddamned much, I had to write something about them. Sorry if it's a little short, but that should tide you guys over until the big upload next week (shit gets Wild with a capital w). Honestly, I just posted this because I didn't know how else to get the word out about the blog and I didn't want to be an asshole and post just the announcement so here we are with a whole extra chapter written for the sole purpose of talking about a tumblr. Y'all better follow that shit lmao. Follow it on Tumblr @hosffblog mkay that was chapter 13, enjoy. Onto the next!
This [Ninja] Is On Fire

Chapter Summary

Katsumi has a bad day.

Chapter Notes

Hey y'all. Long time, no post. This one's a long one. Strap in. You're in for a wild ride. Also, follow my tumblr for extra content @hosffblog you punk bitches. 'Kay, enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The day had started well.

Katsumi woke up on a forest floor, about fifteen kilometers from the coast of Hi no Kuni, surrounded on all sides by her teammates. Sasuke, who had been up because he had the last watch shift, had nudged her awake with the toe of his shoe, telling her that Kakashi-sensei wanted them to be ready to move out within the next half hour.

This early in the morning had a certain beauty. Katsumi took a moment to admire the dappled sunlight streaming through the trees, making the bright greens on the summer forest seem all the more vibrant and, well, alive. Though she had no artistic expertise, she liked to think that this would be a nice scene to paint.

Team 7 sleepily broke camp, getting rid of any sign of them being there in case any more enemy shinobi were following them, though this was more for practice than out of necessity. Tazuna just watched their efficiency, seeming impressed. They had done this a million times in the Academy so to the genin, this was child’s play. Naruto was gathering up their gear and checking inventory, Sasuke was skinning and cleaning breakfast, and Katsumi was getting rid of any and all traces of their camp, leaving the campfire alone for Sasuke to cook with. Kakashi-sensei was checking the area for any serious hazards and making sure that their path was clear to proceed to the docks and find someone willing to take us into the country.

The smell of the roasting rabbit made Katsumi’s stomach rumble, so she picked up the pace. She covered their tracks leading into their camp, overturning the dirt to anybody tracking them couldn’t figure out where they went. She got rid of any indentations from their bedrolls and did little maintenance things to minimize their footprint. Though if she were to be honest, anybody trailing them would know where they were headed since they were with Tazuna so her job was useless, but
it was still good practice.

Twenty-minutes and a decently full belly later, they were off to the coast. They were markedly quieter this morning as the genin were still fairly tired from the previous day. The team trudged through the densely packed forest and made it to the docks in a little less than four hours of walking.

“Finally!” Naruto pumped his fist in the air at the sound of seagulls squawking up ahead and Katsumi almost bolted. She was so close to the ocean, she could taste the salt in the air. Her face lit up in undisguised glee.

“I take it you’ve never seen the ocean before, eh missy?” Tazuna smirked. Katsumi glanced up at the old man and shook her head. “It’s beautiful, the open water. Miles and miles of clear blue and nothing else. Makes you want to get lost in it.” The girl nodded, a grin tugging at her lips at the unfolding scene ahead of them.

Team 7 had finally broken the tree line and made their way to catch their boat into the Land of Waves. Not many people had been clamoring to transport their team into the island country so they were grateful for the fisherman who was on his way to the island anyway and felt kind enough to take them with him.

Katsumi and her teammates plus Tazuna got ready to board the small fishing boat in the late morning sun. Naruto was talking the bridge builder’s ear off, asking a million questions about his life on the island while Sasuke and Kakashi stayed quiet. Katsumi was preoccupied with staring at the glittering surface of the water. There was just… so much. Of course, she knew how large the ocean was, but it had never really occurred to her just how much water there was. As the fisherman prepared the depart, Katsumi crouched down to put her hand in the warm water and a grin stretched along her features. She was in paradise.

Then she got on the boat.

She had read about seasickness, but it was another thing entirely to feel it. Nausea crashed into her like, well, a wave. The rocking motion was not agreeing with her. She tried to swallow her motion-sickness, closing her eyes to ward off the urge to vomit her guts up.

“Sea-sickness?” came the slightly amused voice of Tazuna. Katsumi groaned in response, not wanting to open her eyes for fear of throwing up all over the boat. She heard a rustling ahead of her and someone’s gloved hand grabbed her smaller one and placed something light in it.
“Here.” Katsumi dared to peek open her eyes to see a few crackers in her hand. The fisherman was looking back at her with a small smirk on his face. “This should help take some of the edge off. It happens to the best of us, kid.” She popped one in her mouth gratefully.

“Thank you,” she mumbled through a mouthful of saltines.

“Try looking at the horizon. Since it’s a fixed point, it’ll help with the nausea. Also if you find yourself needing to throw up, do it over the side of the boat, please.” The girl closed her eyes and nodded, downing another cracker and focussing on breathing and not of the unbelievable churning in her gut. She heard Sasuke snort. Katsumi’s eyes shot open to rip into Sasuke when Kakashi thumped him on the head with his fist. Sasuke’s face morphed from being smug to an indignant one that made Katsumi stifle a giggle.

As they neared their destination, a fog rolled in that got thicker the closer they got to the island proper. After throwing up only twice that hour and a half, Katsumi was thankful when the fisherman suddenly turned off the boat’s engine and took out a set of oars instead. Immediately, the mood on the boat changed. Visibility was low and everyone was on high alert.

“Boy, do you have any family in Wave?” Tazuna’s voice came in a low whisper.

“Nope,” Naruto answered, puzzled.

“Any family from the islands at all?” The older man pressed, curiosity and something like recognition lining his face. Katsumi’s eyes flitted to Kakashi’s dark one, panic rising as she realized what had happened.

Because of Uzushiogakure’s close proximity to the Land of Waves, it wouldn’t be unreasonable to assume that Tazuna has seen a lot of Naruto’s clansmen in his day, so it’d make sense for him to recognize Uzumaki traits in Naruto’s features. Though his coloring, from his tanned skin to his blond hair and blue eyes, are all courtesy of his dad, everything else is his mother’s: the high cheekbones on his round face, the shape of his eyes, the slope of his nose, even in the curve of his smile. From the very few pictures Katsumi could remember seeing of both Naruto’s parents and his clan, she could see how Tazuna could make the connection, but that didn’t stop her alarm.

He’s not supposed to know yet!

Kakashi-sensei looked prepared to say something to offset the taboo subject when he was interrupted
by the fisherman.

“The bridge isn’t far now and our destination is just up ahead.” As if on cue, they passed under an unfinished bridge. From what they could see, the construction site was full of all types of materials from a huge crane to dozens and dozens of loose metal beams strewn about.

“Woah! It’s huge!” Naruto shouted, the weird questions forgotten as he was unable to keep his excitement at bay for more than twelve seconds.

Katsumi sighed in relief, slouching in her seat.

*Crisis averted.*

“Quiet!” the fisherman hissed, his gaze darting about to check to make sure no one was around to hear Naruto. “I told you no noise! Why do you think we’re traveling like this, huh?”

“To sneak in,” Naruto answered guiltily. “But why?” Katsumi was about to give her guess as to why they were having to go incognito when Kakashi spoke in a low tone.

“Tazuna-san. Before we go any further, I have to ask you something.” The entire morning, Kakashi-sensei had been indifferent towards Tazuna. Well, more indifferent than he usually was. Katsumi could tell that Kakashi wanted to take them all back to Konoha and honestly, he’d be right to. So far, this mission was squarely in the B rank category and it was no secret that the three-fourths of her team were not B rank shinobi. Though Kakashi was good enough to compensate, they’d only slow him down and they could get seriously hurt if things went sideways.

“Well out with it, boy.”

“The men that are after you, I need to know why. If you don’t tell us, I’ll end the mission when we drop you ashore.”

Everyone turned to look at the old man. He was looking down at his hands, guilt evident in his body language. With that, Tazuna told them his story, about how the greedy business tycoon was seeking to control the Land of Waves and how Tazuna and his construction team were the only ones brave enough to oppose him by building the country’s only hope: a bridge to the mainland.
“So those guys who attacked us, they worked for Gato?” Sasuke asked. Tazuna nodded, a scowl on his face. He then proceeded to guilt the hell out of them into completing the mission, bringing up his family and how by leaving him on the pier and not helping him further, they’d condemn an entire people.

Twenty minutes after that cheerful conversation, they had been dropped off and were in the midst of escorting Tazuna to his home. Katsumi thought she had seen poverty before. She was wrong. In Konoha, even the people at the “bottom of the barrel” like her had some sort of help. So maybe she didn’t have brand new things growing up, but she wasn’t destitute. Seeing the merchant stalls full of food that should’ve been thrown out, the dingy buildings and streets, and the suspicion in the tired eyes of the impoverished people, Katsumi felt uncomfortable. She wanted to help, she really did, but they had a job to do. Hopefully, that would be enough but until then, she had to focus.

The good news was that it didn’t take them long to get through the city and into the countryside where Tazuna lived. After a mishap involving Naruto throwing a knife at a suspiciously white rabbit (a detail which Katsumi stashed in her brain for later) in a clearing, the group breathed a collective sigh of relief.

Then a six-foot-long meat cleaver came out of nowhere and nearly took off their heads.

“GET DOWN!” came Kakashi-sensei’s voice. Katsumi practically threw herself onto Tazuna, bringing them both to the ground. She looked around wildly to find the source of the blade. By the sage, could that even still qualify as a sword? That thing is unnecessarily big. What kind of giant is gonna wield that thing without throwing their back out every two seconds?

She got her answer in the form of a horribly dressed six-foot man standing on the blade that had been conveniently lodged in a tree ahead of them. What is it with ninja and making grand entrances? If Katsumi weren’t so freaked out, she’d laugh at his flair for the dramatics. Honestly, if shinobi work didn’t pan out, this man could definitely become an actor.

“Well, well, well. If it isn’t Momochi Zabuza, the famous Kiri nuke-nin.” Katsumi’s hackles raised immediately. For a rogue ninja to have survived for this long, especially having been from the aptly named Blood Mist Village, this man was not one to play with. Everyone stayed perfectly still, even Naruto which was surprising considering his inability to hold his horses most of the time. Kakashi reached for his hitai-ate but stopped when the missing-nin spoke.

“Kakashi of the Sharingan. Hand over the old man and no one gets hurt.” The circus-giant had a low, gruff voice, reminding Katsumi oddly of a villain she’d seen on television as a kid. Though his voice was unnerving, his words threw her and her teammates for a loop.
Sasuke stiffened and stared at Kakashi in equal parts confusion and anger which was odd since he rarely ever let his emotions show on his face. *Sharingan? Wasn’t that an Uchiha thing?*

“Manji formation. Protect the bridge-builder and most importantly stay out of this fight.” Kakashi-sensei spoke in low tones that made the hair on the back of Katsumi’s neck stand up. This fight was not going to be like the last one. No, this Zabuza man was the real deal. “Use the teamwork I’ve taught you. You’re going to need it.”

“Enough chit-chat,” Though the words caused her adrenaline to spike, Katsumi was grateful that they were finally going to start the fight. All the talking was making her antsy. “I’ve got an old man to kill and I guess that means I have to go through you and your brats, Kakashi.” The brats in question flashed into defense formation Manji around Tazuna that had Katsumi and Naruto on the right and left respectively with Sasuke defending the front.

Before they knew it, Zabuza had flash-stepped to stand on the surface of a small lake in the direction Katsumi was facing and she made a mental note to try to learn how to walk on water if she survived this encounter.

“Ninja Art: Hidden Mist Jutsu.”

Everything faded into eerie white and Zabuza vanished.

“Sensei…” Katsumi murmured, trying to keep the terror from creeping into her body. The fact that she could hardly see two feet in front of her made her previous unease turn into fear and she tried to keep it out of her voice.

“He’s probably going to come to try and take me out first.”

“Who is he? *What is he?*” came Naruto’s familiar voice, lacking its usual enthusiasm to adopt a more serious tone, his eyes darting around in the mist, cataloging as much as possible in the murky white air.

“Momochi Zabuza. He’s an ANBU Black Ops member from Kirigakure who specializes in the Silent Killing technique. Don’t lower your guard, you guys.” Everyone readied themselves for impact, thankful for the precious seconds they had before shit *really* hit the fan. Katsumi’s grip on her kunai tightened. The suspense was driving her up the wall. Sweat dripped down her spine and
she scowled into the mist, trying to see through it and failing miserably. She didn’t dare take her eyes off her section to see how Naruto and Sasuke were faring. “Well, if we fail, we’ll only die,” Kakashi said flippantly.

“What the hell, Kakashi-sensei? How can you be so relaxed?” Katsumi found her fear being replaced by anger. Dammit, this wouldn’t have happened if everyone had just listened to her when she said that they should go back. She silently cursed the old man they were protecting. If only he’d been honest with them, they wouldn’t be in this situation in the first place, the mission would’ve been better stocked, and she would be at home training or something. But no, he had to lie to them in order to save some money. If we get out of this, Tazuna and I are going to have a conversation about honesty. Hell, if we get out of this, Naruto and I are going to have a conversation about knowing your limits.

“The mist keeps getting thicker by the minute…” Naruto had a note of awe in his voice and Katsumi couldn’t blame him. What kind of absolute monster was Zabuza if he could cast such a large-scale jutsu like this? His chakra reserves must be absolutely massive.

“Eight spots,” called a disembodied voice from somewhere in the mist. Katsumi’s grip on her kunai tightened exponentially. “The larynx, the spine, the lungs, the liver, the jugular, and the subclavian veins, the kidneys, the heart… Now then, which vulnerable spot would be the best to kill you with?” Katsumi gritted her teeth, feeling the fear eat away at her resolve. The fact that Zabuza’s tone was calm and matter-of-fact only furthered the effect of what Katsumi suspected was a healthy dose of Killer Intent.

Though just because she knew what it was, didn’t mean that it affected her any less. It felt like she was suffocating, every neuron was firing in all the wrong ways, making her think she heard a noise or saw a shadow where there was none. If Zabuza himself didn’t kill her, the KI would. Katsumi wouldn’t be surprised if the obscene amount of cortisol pumping through her veins right now was enough to kill a horse. It wasn’t a good idea to put this much stress on her brain and heart. She may actually go insane. Katsumi felt the tell-tale prickling of tears behind her eyes and forced them away. She needed to get a damn grip.

“Aw, is the little girl crying?” mocked Zabuza’s voice. “Don’t worry, girlie. I’ll make it quick.” She heard the sound of metal scraping on something and felt her heart jump into her throat. She’d never admit it later, but a fearful whimper escaped her throat.

“Katsumi-chan, breathe. You’re going to be fine.” Kakashi-sensei sounded far away.

Now would be a really, really good time to ditch the bridge builder. I mean, he’s not even after us so we co— Stop it. That’s the coward’s way out. We have a mission to fulfill. Running away is not an option. Fear is not an option. The girl tried to keep the tremble out of her arms and glared in what she
thought was a fearsome manner into the mist. She really didn’t want to die here.

She didn’t dare take her attention off of what was in front of her to see how her teammates were faring for fear that Zabuza would use that exact moment to strike. Of course, if he wanted to kill her, she would stand no chance whether she saw him or not, but it she still wanted to be able to at least see him when he was coming.

Then, Kakashi-sensei made it clear that he had had enough. He placed his hands together in a tiger seal and mass amounts of chakra surrounded him and dispelled most of the mist. She breathed a small sigh of relief at having her vision mostly restored when she noticed Sasuke’s ragged breathing to her left. He wasn’t doing well with the suspense either.

“Sasuke-kun,” Kakashi-sensei’s voice was unnervingly even like he did this kind of stuff every day. Katsumi found herself relaxing at his tone. “Don’t worry. I’ll protect you with my life. I will not allow my comrades to die.” The finality of his statement brought some much-needed comfort to both the genin and Tazuna. Katsumi’s deathgrip on her blade lessened slightly as the effects of the killer intent decreased. She could breathe again.

That is until Zabuza maneuvered his huge body in the tiny space between the genin and Tazuna so quickly that no one had even realized what had happened. “It’s over.” Naruto let out a startled cry from her left and all Katsumi could do was watch in horror.

Quicker than Katsumi’s untrained eyes could follow, Kakashi-sensei was there with a kunai embedded in Zabuza’s gut. *That’s not blood.* Water was leaking through the wound which was the telltale sign of a water-clone. The real Zabuza was directly behind Kakashi.

“Sensei, behind you!” Naruto called out, pointing needlessly at the dangerous and poorly dressed nuke-nin. He wasn’t quick enough. Again. Kakashi-sensei was sliced by the huge sword right in front of them. But, before the reality could sink in, water splashed where blood should’ve been.

“Don’t move.” Kakashi appeared behind Zabuza with a knife to his neck and Katsumi didn’t know if her heart could take all this excitement. *So basically anytime I think Kakashi-sensei is dead, I should just know that he’s faking…?* “It’s over.”

There was absolute silence for a moment while everything sunk in.

“Wow!” Naruto’s eyes lit up in admiration. Sasuke even let loose one of his small smiles at the sight,
clearly just as relieved as the rest of them.

“You’ve got to teach me how to be that fast when we get home, Kaka-sensei,” Katsumi declared, a grin of Naruto-proportions on her face.

Zabuza began chuckling, a sound that was comparable to steel being dragged against concrete and it sent shivers up her spine accordingly, melting her grin.

It was very much so not over.

*Note to self: Assume everything is a clone and act accordingly.* Kakashi was kicked into a tree lake in a way that probably was conducive to having unbroken ribs. The next thing Katsumi knew, Kakashi-sensei was trapped in a water-prison, they were facing down Zabuza clone that was just as deadly as the original, and they were squarely up Shit’s Creek without a paddle.

A lot of things happened within three seconds of each other. First, the mist came back in, limiting their visibility. Second, Naruto was kicked in the face and his hitai-ate flew off. Zabuza ground it into the dirt with his shoe, smirking from behind his weird mask. Third, Kakashi told them to take Tazuna and run.

*Shit.* Katsumi’s brain whirred, analyzing the situation while she essentially stared death in the form of a knife-wielding psycho giant in the face. *Our Team is mostly separated which is not good™. Plus we’re down another person in guarding Tazuna which is really not good. Then again, if Zabuza wanted to end this quickly, there wasn’t much stopping him, whether all three of us were here or not. I guess we should be thankful that Zabuza is the sadist that he is. On the up side, Zabuza has his hands tied with Kakashi so he can’t do much right now. But that’s not even accounting for the clone...*

“You won’t win this fight! Leave me and run!” Hearing her seemingly invincible sensei’s voice sound so panicked and angry made a small part of Katsumi crumble.

Katsumi thought about all of their options at light speed. Running was out of the question. Zabuza would find them sooner or later and if they left Kakashi-sensei for dead, they’d definitely be dead then. That option had a one hundred percent failure rate so it was out. Giving up Tazuna wasn’t an option either, so saving their own skins, though it had a high chance of working, was out as well because then they would abandon the mission and that was unacceptable. That left staying. But with things as they were, there was no way for them to make it out of this scenario alive with Kakashi-sensei trapped. No matter how good their teamwork was, there would be no way for them to beat an ANBU level shinobi without Kakashi-sensei, so they had to get him out. C’mon, Katsumi. Think
about this. She bit her thumb-nail in, lost in trying to find a way out of this predicament.

While she wasn’t paying attention, Sasuke had charged at Zabuza and got thrown like a rag-doll and Naruto had gotten the bright idea to rush the nuke-nin head on. Before she could even yell at him to have an ounce of self-preservation for once in his gods-damn life, he got the shit kicked out of him again and rolled back in her direction. Katsumi fought the urge to rush to his side to see if he was alright in order to stay on her guard. It wouldn’t do anybody any good if she fell to pieces now. Tazuna was trembling behind her and Katsumi almost felt bad for him. Almost.

“Naruto, are you alright?” she murmured, keeping her eyes on Zabuza. When she got no response, she couldn’t take it anymore and tore her eyes away to see him struggling to his feet with his forehead protector in his bandaged left hand. That’s what he was after? He spouted some inspirational speech about becoming the Hokage and never giving up after insulting Zabuza’s lack of eyebrows and retying his hitai-ate. Honestly, it helped to ground Katsumi. Naruto’s determination and the familiarity made her feel like she wasn’t facing imminent death in the form of a giant, terribly-dressed, psycho butcher.

“Are you going to come at me too, girl?” the clone sneered. Katsumi fought a shudder, glaring in what she thought was a fierce manner. “What, don’t want to talk to me?” Katsumi kept her mouth shut, not trusting herself to speak without her voice shaking. “Fine.”

Quicker than an asp, Zabuza was there, swinging his sword at her torso. Katsumi choked on a shriek and threw herself back, barely getting out of the way in time. Katsumi knew that she shouldn’t have been able to evade a full-powered swing from Zabuza which meant either she got jonin level speed when she was scared enough or Zabuza wasn’t moving as fast as he could. She was going to bet on the latter. The question was why would he do that? Wasn’t he trying to kill her? Or worse, was he just playing with her?

Katsumi jumped back and landed in a crouch, her gold eyes darting around to catalog her surroundings while she breathed heavily. The fear was making her heart race more than the exertion, something that she struggled to get back in check.

Sasuke was still groaning on the ground, nursing what looked like a cracked rib or two and Naruto was guarding Tazuna. His blue eyes bored into her fearfully, looking ready to race to her rescue. Kakashi looked feral, nearly foaming at the mouth in his anger. He was shouting something from inside his prison but her blood was rushing through her ears too hard to hear. The real Zabuza noticed this and his eyes lit up which made her stomach drop into her shoes. He looked positively unhinged. Her eyes fell back on the predator in front of her and was terrified to find that both Zabuzas seemed impressed. The entire situation rubbed her nerves raw.

“You don’t want to play? How rude. Guess I’ll have to teach you some manners, little girl.” The
clone grinned behind his weird mask and suddenly she was caught in his grip by her braid. He yanked before she even realized what he was doing and she was pulled off of her feet and dragged several meters. Loose rocks cut at her bare arms and back as she was hauled roughly along the ground. Her struggling made it worse, but she didn’t care. She kicked and screamed but to no avail.

Zabuza trucked on, her white braid wrapped around his hand and hauling her like someone might drag a particularly heavy bag of fertilizer. Needle-like pain shot up her scalp as she was tugged violently to the lake near Kakashi-sensei. At that point, she abandoned all composure and started panicking, lashing out at any spare bit of skin she saw.

She didn’t want to die.

“Shit, let me GO! Stop!” Katsumi slashed the kunai at the arm holding her hair wildly before feeling her heart sink as it was knocked out of her hand.

“Little girls like you shouldn’t play at being shinobi.”

She felt the water on her butt first. Fear, wild and untamable, ran rampant through her mind, fogging it and making everything seem more clear as it dawned on her. He’s going to drown me. She was crying in earnest at this point, her neck aching from the rough treatment, trying to dig her nails into something, anything that would make him drop her. She frantically looked for her teammates, Sasuke looking horrified and Naruto with anger evident on his face. He was pissed. Through the fear, Katsumi duly noted how his normally blue irises turned blood red.

“YOU BASTARD, LET HER GO!” Naruto did the one thing she did not want him to: he charged again, this time abandoning all shinobi skill and screaming bloody murder the entire way.

“Shit, Naruto! Stop!” He was met with the same action he got the last time he felt bold enough to run at Zabuza, a kick to the chest that would’ve made Katsumi cringe if she wasn’t absolutely petrified. The water was up to her waist as Zabuza pulled her through the water and closer to Kakashi-sensei. She vaguely noticed that Naruto landed near Sasuke but couldn’t focus after the grip on her hair tightened.

“Nononononono pleeease!” She didn’t recognize the keening wail she heard as her voice, her chest heaving while she hyperventilated. She did not want to die. She was sobbing at this point, straining away from Zabuza frantically, feeling like her scalp was going to rip off of her head.
Katsumi must’ve looked awful because Kakashi started *raging* at the prison, slamming his fists against the water like a maniac so hard that blood running down the walls of the prison.

“Brats like you shouldn’t be shinobi.” Zabuza looked simultaneously smug and insane which made Katsumi start clawing at the cold water, struggling to get away. He gripped tighter to her scalp and leaned down from where he was standing where Katsumi could get a good look at his face, probably the last thing she’d see.

Every second of this encounter seemed crystal clear and slower than molasses in Yugakure. She tore her eyes away from Zabuza to look at Kakashi-sensei who’s eyes looked surprisingly glassy before her sight was engulfed in murky blue.

Zabuza’s iron grip on her neck held her head down even as she bucked. Panic, visceral and unadulterated, rose up in her chest and ballooned until she truly realized that she was going to die. Color looked so much more vibrant underwater, her crimson shirt billowing in the flow of the water while her shoes dug into the silt at the bottom of the lake, the dark blue disrupting the medley of browns and tans. It was almost peaceful.

Then she ran out of air.

Burning. Her chest was on *fire* as her brain begged her to inhale. She started thrashing, desperation and carbon dioxide buildup clouding her vision and her mind. All she could feel was the agony in her lungs, vaguely recalling the day in the Academy that they learned about what happened to the body when someone drowned and decided that the descriptions didn’t do the experience justice. Her chest felt like it was going to implode on itself. The pain was so bad that she contemplated inhaling just to end her suffering, but she kept fighting, though her struggles were getting weaker and weaker the longer she went without oxygen.

Before long, her limbs felt like lead and her head was fuzzy, hardly registering anything but the magma in her chest until her body betrayed her and she inhaled. Needless to say, her body was confused when murky lake water was what entered her lungs and not oxygen. As the water passed into her body, she decided that *that* was worse than holding her breath. She choked, her body trying to reject the foreign material but it was too late.

Black began eating away at her vision as the underwater world was gradually fading in and out of focus. *I’m dying now*, she realized drowsily as she stopped moving entirely. All she felt was exhaustion, death beckoning to her disguised as sleep. All she had to do was follow.

But, something stopped her. Suddenly, the pain eased slightly and the girl was brought a bit of
clarity. A voice, feminine and strong, called out to her while she was in that purgatory, hanging between awareness and unconsciousness, life and death. The lilting voice filled her mind, caressing her brain while providing steely words.

‘Katsumi, hold on,’ the woman called out. The warmth in her voice reminded Katsumi oddly of the rainy season, of the afternoons she’d spent since she was a child watching the yearly rainfall come down in sheets from her window in the orphanage.

When Katsumi was younger, she’d sit, curled up on the window-seat near the largest window in the room for hours, sometimes watching the rain, other times reading a book and listening to it hit her window. Her favorite nights were when thunderstorms would light up the sky, turning the deep black sky into bright hues that lit up her room. Oddly enough, the elements had provided her with immense comfort, like she wasn’t alone.

One night when she was about seven, on a particularly rough day, she’d skipped dinner with the other kids and came upstairs just to cry, frustration and anguish and sadness finally catching up to her. As Katsumi threw herself onto her yellow bedspread, tears coming down her face, not unlike the rain outside, she felt a tug in her brain. The girl looked up from her folded arms and immediately directed her gaze at the night sky outside. She rose from her bed and padded to the window-seat on quiet feet, sniffing as she went. The girl climbed up onto the worn wooden seat and sat on the red cushions, folding her legs under her and just stared out the window at her old friend, the thunderstorm, a tentative grin on her face.

Lightning bolts painted the heavens all kinds of colors, everything from the palest of lilacs to deep blue and Katsumi watched as the sky danced for her, her spirits lifting exponentially at the once in a lifetime thunderstorm. Finally, when she was right about to crawl back into bed, drowsiness overtaking her, she saw it. White arced across the sky, the brightest one yet, seeming to bleach the entire world. She absentmindedly touched her pale curls, the color matching the flash, feeling something warm flare in her chest.

When the girl got in bed, she fell asleep quickly, a smile on her lips.

Katsumi basked in the sound of the mystery woman’s voice, not knowing if she was imagining it or if it was real but not really caring. ‘Katsumi, do not yield.’ The tone changed quickly, turning as sharp and cold as the rain in a place she’s never been, as the woman outright ordered her, her tone making her seem more like a captain than a benevolent spirit.

‘Katsumi, you do not yield.’
Something in her tightened, reminding her of that night with the white lightning, feeling something like a thread pull taut. Strength surged through her veins, a new fire roaring to life in her belly. Katsumi resumed her fighting, trying to throw Zabuza off her, her thrashing renewed.

*I’ll stop fighting when I’m dead!*

Out of nowhere, the pressure on her neck disappeared and was replaced by large gloved hands on her shoulders that yanked her above water so hard that her joints ached. She stopped fighting due to the shock.

Suddenly, everything was far too bright and far too loud. She kept her eyes closed as she noticed the shouting around her. Katsumi inhaled like it was her job, taking in deep lungfuls of air, gobbling it up greedily. She let out a wounded groan as she began to tremble, realizing that she was very much so *alive* and being crushed to Kakashi-sensei’s chest before getting tossed unceremoniously like a sack of flour into the air.

“This Sasuke!” Kakashi-sensei’s voice barked. Thinner arms wrapped around her frame tightly, quickly securing her and grunting as they received her weight.

“This Katsumi, are you alright?” He set her down further away from the bank and closer to Tazuna and hovered around her like a hummingbird, clearly frightened. All of the jostling was *not* agreeing with her stomach. Nausea hit her like a brick over the head suddenly. She’d been quick enough to turn her head to the side as to not throw up all over Sasuke, but she did get some on his shoes. She retched and made horrible sounds, getting up all of the remaining water while her eyes watered something fierce. She stayed there, trembling on her hands and knees until all of the water was coughed up for markedly longer than she would care to admit later on.

When she was done, she gave herself ten seconds to recollect herself. They were still in a life or death situation so she couldn’t afford to fall to pieces now. She shakily counted back from ten and gathered her wits, shoving down this bit of trauma to be dealt with at a later date. She didn’t have time. It could wait. Katsumi sat on her butt and wrapped her arms around her legs ready to ask Sasuke for a briefing. Then she noticed Naruto.

Katsumi was horrified to see her friend covered in malevolent red chakra, the whisker marks on his face looked deeper, and claws protruded from his fingertips. He was on the shore, looking at Zabuza like a predator who’d just found wounded prey. He looked ferocious. *This is what the village was scared of.*

“What happened?” asked voice so rough from screaming that Katsumi almost didn’t recognize it as
her own.

Apparently, Naruto had lost it after Zabuza kicked him into next week. *Shit, so this is what the books were talking about when they said untrained jinchuuriki can lose control if they feel strong emotion,* she made the connection fuzzily. He had charged Zabuza again, this time covered in Kyuubi chakra which had burned Zabuza enough that he dropped the jutsu he held on their teacher and released the clone that’d been drowning her. As soon as Kakashi-sensei was free, he grabbed her and tossed her to Sasuke to get her away from the situation. Now, their teacher was looking at Naruto with something akin to worry in his one-eyed gaze. He was inching closer to the boy, shuffling along the grass.

“Something in him snapped when you stopped struggling,” Sasuke gruffly recounted.

Zabuza looked considerably less confident than he did before, his hand on his blade as he stood several meters out on the water.

“YOU BASTARD!” Naruto roared, flexing his hands to brandish his claws. Sasuke looked at a loss as to what to do. The usually cocky genin stared at her in a way that read ‘Any ideas?’.

Katsumi wracked her brain, trying to remember every detail she’d ever read in her life about jinchuuriki, mainly how to snap Naruto out of it. She quickly broke the situation down in her head. Naruto was angry and scared because of her getting taken by Zabuza, which caused the seal to loosen and a bit of the Nine-Tails to take over. *Then by extension, if he knows I’m okay, then maybe it’ll stop his rampage. Right?* She had no time to doubt herself. It wasn’t like anyone else had any other plans. If they did, they’d have put them into action already.

*You do not yield.*

“Help me up.” Sasuke immediately did as she asked until she was standing, albeit leaned against Sasuke, but that didn’t matter much. *Hopefully, Naruto won’t notice that.*

The girl inhaled deeply and bellowed: “NARUTO!” Katsumi wasn’t a yeller. For the most part, she was fairly quiet, unlike Naruto, who’s inside voice was ear-splittingly loud. So it isn’t every day that Katsumi screamed at the top of her lungs for any reason. But the rare, rare times that she did, Naruto always listened, knowing that she must be dead serious if she raised her voice. This time was no exception.
His red gaze found her gold one and a lot of the fury died then and there. His posture relaxed and the crimson in his eyes began to fade back into their familiar baby blues. Katsumi inwardly breathed a sigh of relief as he recognized that she was mostly fine.

“KATSU-CHAN!” He was at her side in an instant, all residual demon fox chakra forgotten. He crushed her into a hug, nearly knocking her over with its force.

“Oi, dobe! Be careful with her!”

Katsumi patted Naruto on the back as he sniffled into her wet shirt.

“Katsu-chan I thought you were gone,” his voice broke at the last word as he pulled her into a tight hug. “I was just so angry. I’m sorry. I’m so so sorry I couldn—” Katsumi flicked him lightly in the back of the head.

“Naruto, it’s not your fault,” she returned his hug with every bit of force, his close proximity making her realize how cold she was. Something to be dealt with later. “I’m fine. Just stop crushing me. We have a job to do, remember?” Katsumi gave him what she thought was a reassuring grin and was proud when he gave her a firm nod and let her go.

“Are you sure it’s a good idea for you to be moving around so soon after you almost drowned?” Sasuke’s hands were shoved deep in his pockets but that didn’t stop Katsumi to remember how badly they were trembling when she was emptying her stomach onto the grass.

She shrugged, forcing nonchalance into her posture. “Do we have a choice?” She moved to begin guarding Tazuna and cursed her stupid legs as she stumbled a bit. Sasuke scowled, thrusting his hand to steady her. She shot him a grateful grin and they remade their protective formation around an incredibly pale Tazuna. He was staring at her in awe but she ignored it in favor of distracting herself with the most astounding fight she’d ever seen in her young life. From water-dragons to hand-signs quicker than their eye could follow, Katsumi realized that this was what a real shinobi looked and fought like and that she had a hell of a long way to go before she got that skilled.

Something about the vicious way Kakashi was fighting sent chills down her spine. Her almost dying was to send a message to Kakashi-sensei and he clearly got it. His usually relaxed demeanor was almost manic in the vigor with which he now fought. Now that he was free and the genin and Tazuna were firmly out of the way, he could fight unimpeded. The vehemence he made the hand signs with reminded her oddly of Sasuke in a way she didn’t like. He was like this because she had been slow enough to get caught.
Shame made her heart crumble in on itself, which she pushed away and focussed on the fight. Katsumi would ignore this like she was ignoring the chill in her bones that was either from her near-death experience or the cold water. She ignored that feeling just like she was going to ignore the fact that she was still soaking wet and dripping onto the grass. She ignored the shame like she pretended not to notice the lingering tremble in her limbs. Katsumi couldn’t afford to be weak. She felt her eyes burn but she ignored it.

*You do not yield.*

Kakashi-sensei had finally gotten Zabuza’s back against the wall when it happened: two senbon needles piercing Zabuza in the neck and his head lolling forward. Something ugly and vindictive in her rejoiced at his death, roaring in approval in her chest. Uncomfortable with her visceral reaction, Katsumi busied herself with looking around for the interloper and found an androgynous figure standing ominously in a tree with a Kiri headband.

The shinobi claimed to be a hunter-nin from Kiri who’d been tracking Zabuza for a while, but Katsumi didn’t buy it. She’d read enough about the shinobi world in order to catch up with her clan-kid peers to know that there were a couple key things off about this supposed hunter-nin.

“Don’t Hunter-nin travel in groups? Where’s your team?” Katsumi asked, placing a hand on her hip.

“We separated when we came into town as to not arouse suspicion. I was the first person on the scene.”

“Bullshit,” Katsumi shot, scowling. “Any shinobi within a hundred kilometers would’ve been drawn immediately to this fight what with all the chakra being used. It’s damn near a beacon. You have no team.”

“Katsumi-chan, what are you getting at?” Kakashi-sensei’s tone was deceptively light.

“This ‘hunter-nin’ isn’t legit. My guess? They’re with Zabuza. I bet Zabuza’s not even dead.”

It was absolutely silent for a moment, the only sound the wind through the trees.
“Very astute of you, Katsumi-chan. If you’re wrong, I’m sure shinobi-san won’t mind if I make sure Zabuza-san is dead, ne?” Kakashi ambled up to Zabuza’s body, kunai in hand, ready to verify when the shinobi appeared right behind him to stop Kakashi, confirming her suspicions. The scream that was on the tip of Katsumi’s tongue died when the fake hunter-nin did.

The kunai Kakashi had meant for Zabuza was used to slice clean across the other shinobi’s throat from ear to ear in a grotesque imitation of a smile. Blood. So much blood came from the accompanying spray that the grass below the hunter-nin was drenched in it but that was nothing compared to the actual ninja. The shinobi clutched at their throat, trying futilely to stop the blood gushing from their neck but it was far too late for that. The shinobi dropped to their knees, choking on their own blood.

Bile. Hot bile rose in Katsumi’s throat at the scene as she tried not to throw up for the fourth time that day. Vaguely, she heard Naruto make a wounded sound from her right and Sasuke retch into the grass. Katsumi staggered over to Naruto who looked absolutely horrified, moving his head to the side and away from the scene that had been embedded in her mind. “Don’t look. Don’t look,” she murmured, fighting the shaking in her limbs.

The ninja was dead because of her. She hadn’t slit their throat, but she might as well have. She had killed someone by proxy. Her fingers became damp with Naruto’s tears but Katsumi hardly noticed. She had basically killed someone. Someone who was going to kill me and my team. That small fact gave her some bit of comfort. This was the life that shinobi lived. Maybe next time, she will have actually killed someone. That’s what she signed up for when she put on that headband. She knew that this was going to happen eventually, but Kami, if it still didn’t hurt like a bitch.

You do not yield.

“Don’t look, kids.” Kakashi’s calm voice came from far away. Katsumi looked up to see him at Zabuza’s side, his gloved hands placed on his face. She looked down, but that didn’t stop her from hearing the sickening crack of Zabuza’s neck snapping. “Sasuke. Make a fireball around here,” Kakashi-sensei gestured to an area in the clearing a comfortable distance away from them. “I can’t. I’ve used too much chakra.”

Sasuke looked even more pale than usual but did as he instructed. His unusually clumsy fingers went through the hand-signs and a large fireball came into existence, hurting Katsumi’s eyes which was exceedingly odd. Normally, her eyes weren’t that sensitive to light, but she’d deal with that later.

“Now Katsumi-chan, you and Sa—” Their sensei staggered forward and collapsed unceremoniously to the ground.
“Shit.” Katsumi groaned. There was literally no way that their day could’ve gone worse. Sasuke darted to their sensei’s side, checking his pulse.

“He’s alive, just unconscious. It’s probably chakra exhaustion.”

“Wow, a fine time for that, sensei.” Katsumi glared at Kakashi-sensei’s unmoving body, never hating him more. More than that time he had them run twenty laps around Konoha. More than that time he was eight hours late to practice. More than that time he offered to buy them lunch and then disappeared as soon as the bill hit the table. No, she felt an ugly emotion well up from the bottom of her chest that she hadn’t felt in a really long time: abandonment.

Katsumi knew she was being petty and childish because he was there twenty minutes ago to save her from a watery grave, but this was a different kind of abandonment. This crushed her view of Kakashi-sensei. Before, he was this untouchable, indomitable person who would never let anything bad happen to them. Now, he was out cold and if anything else happened, they’d be shit out of luck. They were alone. Katsumi understood that he was only human and that he wasn’t invincible but it still hurt. She felt desperately lost with two distraught teammates, a scared old man to protect, two dead bodies to dispose of, a roaring fire, and the worst godsdamned migraine she’s ever had in her life. She was lost and still fucking shaking and soaking wet and it seemed like no one was going to lead them out of this. They couldn’t exactly wait for Kakashi-sensei to wake up since with chakra exhaustion, that could take hours or it could take weeks so someone had to step up and lead.

Sasuke couldn’t do it. He looked five seconds from falling to pieces. Though his facade was stony, he was shaking like a leaf and he was still entirely too upset for her liking. Naruto was most definitely out. He was as white as a sheet with tears streaming down his face. He was panicking. Tazuna wasn’t a shinobi so he likely didn’t know how to make the hard decisions common in the shinobi world plus he was their client. Which left her. Fuck, fuck, she wasn’t ready for this kind of shit! I-it’s too much, I can’t! Katsumi was entirely too scared and overwhelmed. She desperately wanted to just mindlessly follow orders but that wasn’t an option right now. Someone had to be strong and though she didn’t want it to, it had to be her. They had a protocol to follow.

You do not yield.

“Tazuna-san, how far is it to your house?” a voice that sounded much too authoritative and strong to be her own asked.

“L-Less than a ten-minute walk due west from here. Can’t miss it.”

Katsumi forced the fear and doubt out of her body in one fell swoop. “Sasuke, get me two large
branches, strong enough to hold up Kakashi-sensei.” The boy made a face that was both irritated and relieved to be given orders which Katsumi ignored. He did as she asked quickly, hauling them over to her. She had already taken out a couple meters of rope and she began winding it along the wood to make a makeshift stretcher. It certainly wouldn’t be comfortable, but it would have to work. It wasn’t like Kakashi-sensei would feel it anyway.

She walked over to Kakashi with the stretcher and set it down beside him. Sasuke, already knowing what she was about to do, helped her roll their teacher onto it with very little trouble. Naruto was still shell-shocked, thus was absolutely useless. She moved in front of her friend and snapped her fingers in front of his face. “Hey, Naruto. *Naruto! C’mon, get it together. You can’t do this right now. I need you. The team needs you.*” This seemed to get his attention and his watery blue eyes focussed on her.

“Katsu-chan, I’m so sor—”

“Don’t worry about it,” she dismissed. “Tazuna-san, do you think you and Naruto could transport Kakashi-sensei to your house?” The bridge-builder nodded, already moving towards their fallen sensei. Katsumi turned her gaze to Sasuke, silently asking him if he could handle this. Katsumi knew that she should just send him with Tazuna, but she just couldn’t do this alone. She knew she was being awful and selfish, but she didn’t care; this was something that she wouldn’t do by herself. This was the one selfish act she’d allow herself even though she’d probably hate herself later for dragging Sasuke into this, tarnishing him with this deed. He looked surprisingly solid and nodded at her. Grateful for his steadiness, she sent him a weak smile.

“But Katsu-chan, what’re you and Sasuke gonna do?”

She tried to channel her inner Kakashi. “Clean up the mess.”

Naruto opened his mouth to argue with her but was cut off by Sasuke. “Don’t try to fight her on this, dobe. Just get Kakashi-sensei and Tazuna-san out of here.” Naruto frowned, still resisting.

“Naruto, that’s an order. Go.” Katsumi found herself saying. Even though she wasn’t his superior by a long shot and he could easily challenge her authority, he listened to her, picking up the other side of Kakashi-sensei’s stretcher and walking with Tazuna out of sight.

“What do you need me to do?” Sasuke asked when they were far enough away.
“Get the fire burning as hot as possible,” was all she said as she walked over to the smaller body of the fake hunter-nin. A small part of her wanted to take off their mask to see who they were, but she knew better than to do that. It would only make the next steps harder. She hauled the false hunter-nin over her shoulder, knees buckling slightly at the weight. She really should’ve eaten something after throwing up over that boat so many times. Suddenly, Sasuke was there helping her move the body, silently shouldering the burden with her. Katsumi tried not to notice the shinobi’s blood leaking onto her skin and seeping into her clothing.

It didn’t work.

The pair (or trio depending on how you look at it) stopped in front of the roaring fire, staring at it for a moment.

“Three, two, one.” Katsumi and Sasuke tossed the first body into the fire quickly, not wanting to watch it get eaten by the abnormally hot flames. With considerably more difficulty, they dragged Zabuza and tossed him into the fire as well, the acrid stench of burning flesh mixed with the smoke causing Katsumi to throw up again into some nearby bushes. Her eyes teared up as the bile burned her throat, gagging for a longer time than she would’ve liked.

*You do not yield.*

Sasuke kept the fire unbelievably hot until there was nothing but ash and they got rid of the evidence together, dousing the area in water from the river and scattering the ashes elsewhere. The little bits of bone were crushed using rocks and tossed into the lake. Katsumi didn’t notice the tears on her face until she saw the matching ones on Sasuke’s. They covered the remaining blood by overturning the dirt and Sasuke got rid of any traces of genetic material. Within thirty minutes, all evidence of their battle and the enemy shinobi’s bodies had been erased. They had done their job.

When Katsumi and Sasuke arrived at Tazuna’s house hauling an unnecessarily large sword, looking like they’d escaped a slasher-flick and smelling like a slaughterhouse that had caught fire and vomit, no one asked any questions. The only thing Katsumi asked was where the bathroom was. Tazuna’s daughter gladly gave her the information along with the whereabouts of their sleeping quarters. That was all Katsumi needed to hear before rudely walking away from the woman mid-sentence in search of the washroom.

Everyone pretended not to hear her empty her stomach for the fifth time that day. Nobody mentioned the awful sound of her heaving sobs either. After staring at the shower and shaking in fear for five minutes, when she got in she’d scoured desperately at her skin and washed her hair seven times with
the cheap soap to get rid of the awful stench of burning bodies because *dead* it smells awful get it off get it OFF. Katumi ignored the redness and accompanying welts on her skin from her brutal scrubbing.

She redressed into a different outfit and rebraided her sopping wet hair before leaving the bathroom. She passed an equally dead-eyed Sasuke on her way to the bedroom but said nothing. She made quick work of laying out her bedroll and promptly passed out at the late hour of five thirty in the afternoon. Throughout her slumber, she was accosted by nightmares featuring the smell of roasting flesh, her lungs burning from lack of oxygen, and her own hands drenched in someone else’s blood. She was woken up screaming by a worried Naruto first and then a red-eyed Sasuke. Her skin was uncomfortably slick. After that, she just stayed up the rest of the night under the guise of ‘not needing much sleep’.

Sasuke had just stared at her with dark eyes when she said that she would take over his watch shift. She almost dared him to question her. He didn’t. Katumi spent the rest of the night in the quiet house, the only person awake. The silence was comforting and horribly lonely at the same time.

The day had **started** well.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Yiiiikes. Also, Sasuke’s eyes were red because he was crying, not because of his Sharingan. That’s gonna happen later. Yeah, this chapter was a goddamn mess. I got some inspiration for two scenes from both another fanfiction and a book that I love (brownie points if you get the reference to the latter). This fanfiction is amazing, and it’s called ‘Face Like Thunder’ by HopeYouAlwaysStay on this site. It’s so well written and I highly recommend it. That fic has my favorite version of Naruto and it’s a great read so shout out to that author. Anyways, we’re gonna see what happens next and boy, it’s a doozy. Do I love to make Katumi and the boys suffer? Absolutely. It makes for great character development! Thanks for making it this far in my mediocre fanfic! I love each and every one of you guys and I can’t thank you guys enough. Anyways, onto the next!
Now that they were in Wave, the job was surprisingly lackluster, especially considering the colorful start.

The day after Tazuna had come home, he decided to head to the construction site to work on the bridge with his team and Katsumi decided to escort him. It wasn't that she was excited to see the bridge or meet the men or anything, it was that Katsumi needed to leave the house and the people in it. Tsunami and her worried glances every time she rushed to the bathroom when she couldn't keep her food down because the smell of cooking meat was familiar in the worst way. Naruto with his switches between painfully false cheer that made her head hurt and asking Katsumi non-stop questions about her wellbeing that she did not want to answer. Sasuke and his alarming silence that made her feel like all of her hard work in warming him up was meaningless. Kakashi-sensei who looked like a broken doll on a bed and the seemingly endless waiting for him to wake up. So when Tazuna left that morning, Katsumi jumped at the chance to go with him even though was operating on less than two hours of sleep. Anywhere was better than here.

The trip back into town was better than the first one which wasn't saying much. This time, Katsumi got a good look at the absolutely filthy streets and the people that lived on them. Beggars were on every corner, holding out things to collect money from the tired looking citizens who, by the looks of their attire and gaunt features, weren't that much better off to begin with. The smell of unwashed bodies, rotten food, and salt-water created a hellish mixture that permeated the air, making Katsumi want to gag with every breath she took. Most of the grimy buildings were empty and boarded up, the misery evident on the faces of every man, woman, and child she was unfortunate enough to come across. When the pair finally made it to the docks, she was immensely relieved.

Two dozen or so men greeted Tazuna warmly, excited to see their boss back from his journey in one piece and began thanking her profusely for her role. She just nodded, smiling slightly at their praises as they demanded a recap.

"What happened on your trip, boss?" a burly looking older man with dark hair asked. The rest of the men nodded along, leaning in clearly interested in the story.

While Tazuna ruffled her hair and bragged on her brave deeds and sharp mind, Katsumi truly felt the disconnect between shinobi and civilians in a way that she never had before. To most civilians, shinobi were no more than fiction, the assassins the bad guys call to clean up their messes, the mysterious and dangerous bodyguards accompanying the rich and powerful, the hired hands of the Daimyo who are heard of but rarely ever seen, the boogeymen recounted in bedtime stories to warn naughty children into behaving lest they get 'taken by shinobi'.
To be fair, unless one lived in close proximity to a shinobi village, it was highly unlikely to see ninja at all so it was understandable why public opinion on shinobi was so negative away from hidden villages. Usually, their opinions stayed that way unless they saw shinobi doing good in the community like they were doing now.

It was odd, Katsumi thought, that if she had told the story in its entirety to another shinobi, they would probably look at her with something like pity in their eyes, knowing the exact kind of heartbreak and pain these missions caused, especially when they were undertaken while she was still so young.

But civilians? They saw no difference in the hard decisions and life or death situations she was thrust into and theatrics portrayed in films or books. To normal people, this kind of stuff was cool. The fact that the fake hunter-nin wasn't large enough to be an adult and likely died a teenager was cool. Katsumi seeing through their ruse was cool. Her and Sasuke single-handedly getting rid of the evidence was cool. Their sensei almost dying was cool. They didn't see Katsumi's new-found aversion to meat and dislike of open flames and water. They didn't see Sasuke wake up with a keening whine caught in the back of his throat, eyes wild from images that the rest of the world never see. They didn't see the shadows in Naruto's eyes when he looked at a kunai. They didn't see that side and they never would.

Anger, bright and scorching, bubbled in her stomach. She felt like she was catching on fire as the men spoke, sending her impressed looks and low whistles at her skill. Tazuna had stopped ruffling her hair and left his palm affectionately on her head, in a way that reminded her of Kakashi-sensei, who was unconscious and unresponsive on a cot because of him. If he had just told the fucking truth, none of this would've happened. If everyone had just listened to her, none of this would've happened. Then Naruto and Sasuke would be back to their easy bickering and Kakashi-sensei would be perpetually late and ignoring them for that dumb orange book of his. She wouldn't be a damned mess and they would all be fine. They should all be fine.

The fury ballooned in her gut, making her see red. How dare they? How dare they look at her and not see a monster? They looked at her palms and marveled at the callouses and the strength but all she could see was the blood that stained them. All she felt was the slickness of the hunter-nin's blood and how it soaked her gloves so badly that she had to take them off. They looked at her like she was something amazing but all she was was a murderer. She'd spent hours getting the crimson color out of her moon-white hair, scrubbing it off of her skin, but it was still there, in an invisible layer that wouldn't come off no matter how hard she tried. Marking her. Branding her. They would never smell the stench of the bodies as they were eaten by the fire. But they dared to applaud her? They would never feel their clothes dry stiff with someone else's blood. But they dared to praise her? She was ruined because of them. Her team was ruined because of them. Because of Tazuna. Because of her.

If she had been strong enough, Kakashi-sensei wouldn't have needed to expend so much chakra on
Zabuza. If she had stronger, she wouldn't have been caught by Zabuza and caused Naruto to lose it and jeopardize the lives of everyone in Wave. If she was stronger, she could've spared Sasuke the trauma. If she had been stronger, she would've convinced them all to go back to Konoha and this all would've stopped with the two chuunin in the woods and she would be able to stand the smell of meat cooking without fleeing to the bathroom to empty her stomach. Maybe then, Naruto wouldn't be just a little bit cracked and Sasuke wouldn't be shut down. Kakashi-sensei wouldn't be six inches away from the after-life and maybe she could sleep through the night without waking up screaming from nightmares about being burned alive, feeling the phantom flames licking at her skin.

Suddenly, the once comforting weight of Tazuna's hand on her head was too much for her to handle. The childish part of her wanted to break his hand in three places to see if he liked being injured because of someone else but she pushed that urge down. Down, down, down into the recesses of her mind to be thought about and dealt with later because she still had a job to do whether she liked it or not. She had a mission to fulfill and it would be highly counterproductive to hurt her client. What would Kakashi-sensei do? Grin and bear it. Deal with it for the sake of the mission. So while she felt something ugly clawing at her insides, begging to be let out, she held it in. She let Tazuna keep his palm on her, swallowing her anger. She had a job to do. Someone had to keep Team 7 together.

When the men were done recounting her crimes, she padded over to a wooden pallet and sat down cross-legged to begin keeping guard. Guarding a construction site was considerably less interesting than one would hope. Any shouts had her rushing over but they were usually from fallen equipment on unprotected fingers or toes. She took in her surroundings for a moment, looking at everything from the sprawling docks she was located on to the glittering blue ocean below them and flinched violently as a particularly strong wave crashed against the shore.

Katsumi hated the ocean.

Sitting like this with little to do for several hours left her a lot of time to think, namely about Zabuza and his friend and whether or not their employers knew that they had failed. If they kept constant communication, we're screwed. Her brow furrowed in thought as she stared out at the stupidly azure ocean. It would be highly likely that whoever sent them would send someone stronger to assassinate Tazuna so they had to be ready. Best case scenario: Gato holds off on retaliating and we have time to prepare. But since when does Team 7 ever get the best case scenario? She scowled thinking about their collectively shitty luck. It would be better if they started planning for their unwanted guests sooner rather than later so that they didn't get caught off guard when they inevitably showed up.

The afternoon was spent planning watch shifts and different strategies to meet their attackers based on their relative skill levels. It wasn't much, but Katsumi felt markedly better planning for the unexpected. It made her feel normal for a minute like she was in the middle of a thinking problem for the Academy that she had loved so much.
By the time it was time to wrap up work for the day, Katsumi had what she thought was a few workable defensive strategies to implement with or without Kakashi-sensei's help. Tazuna nodded to her from her spot where the bridge met the road and they headed back to his house. He didn't try to make small-talk which she was grateful for so the walk back was quiet except for the scuffing of their shoes against the uneven pavement.

"Mind where you step, girlie," Tazuna warned as they crossed the lawn to near his house. "Damn rodents keep burrowing in the yard and some sections aren't completely stable."

Katsumi paused, inspecting the seemingly innocuous grass below her before shrugging and falling back into step with Tazuna.

When they entered Tazuna's residence, Tsunami was in the midst of making dinner. Katsumi had learned to hold her breath lest she embarrasses herself by throwing up.

"Father! Katsumi-chan! Welcome home. Did you have a good day at the site?" her lilting voice made the house seem a little bit more lively. Tazuna smiled softly at his daughter and toed his shoes off in the small genkan in a way that showed his old age. "Let me help you with that!" Tsunami rushed over to help but Tazuna waved her off.

"I might be old, but I'm not ancient yet Tsunami." Tsunami frowned prettily, looking close to reprimanding and helping him anyway when her dark gaze fell on Katsumi and softened.

"Katsumi-chan, I made miso soup tonight. Hopefully, that won't upset your stomach." Was she really that obvious when it came to her own dumb responses to arbitrary things? Kami, she was weak. Feeling herself starting to spiral, she cut herself off from that self-destructive way of thinking. It wouldn't do anyone any good for her to lose it over soup. Even though the thought of swallowing liquid made her want to start crying hysterically, she still needed to get a grip.

"Tsunami-san I'm alright, really. You don't have to change up the way you do things because of my own weak stomach," she sent her a weak smile that probably looked more like a grimace.

Tsunami's brows furrowed. "I really don't mind, it's just that you should regain your strength. I understand that you've been through a lot and I—"

"Tsunami-san, I appreciate the sentiment, but I'm fine."
Tazuna was staring at his daughter and the girl with something like unease. Apparently, Tsunami was a stubborn one and wouldn't let this go.

"You don't have to lie to me, Katsumi-chan. I'm just trying to help." The girl bristled.

"I get that you're trying to help, but you're not my mother or my superior so lay off." The silence was louder than any words they could've traded. Katsumi looked away, mad at herself for lashing out at Tsunami. Just another one of her stupid mistakes that she's made within the past seventy-two hours. She needed to get it together. "Look, I'm fine, really. I lived, didn't I?" Katsumi forced a little bit of false cheer into her voice, channeling the hell out of Naruto. She turned back around and went back into the small kitchen, looking incredibly doubtful but ultimately not commenting on it. A weak part of Katsumi rejoiced.

"Dinner'll be ready in twenty minutes."

Katsumi finished taking off her sandals and padded into the quiet house, careful to stay away from Tsunami and her probing questions. From what she'd seen so far, theirs was one of the nicer houses in Wave by a long-shot. Though the wood floors creaked horribly in spots and it was a little drafty in the room she shared with Kakashi-sensei, this was probably damn near a four-star hotel as far for Wave standards since everyone was so dirt-poor.

This far out in the country Katsumi couldn't smell the god-awful stench of the city instead the breeze smelt faintly of salt-water and oak. She had twenty minutes to kill before dinner which meant she had a little less than half an hour to avoid her team before she was forced by societal standards and manners to meet them in the kitchen for what was sure to be strained conversation paired with flavorless food. Of course, it wasn't Tsunami's fault since it was impressive that she could get food that wasn't rotten, but she did miss the variety of flavor back home.

Katsumi made it into her bedroom and silently opened the door. Why she bothered to stay quiet as to not disturb Kakashi-sensei, she'll never know, but every time she entered the room, she was silent. *It's not like he'll hear me or anything.* Her temporary living space was nice when she remembered not to look at her sensei and consequently feel her heart twist in violent guilt. It was a small sparsely decorated room, fitted with a twin sized bed pushed up against the back wall, an old desk and chair set near the large window, and a rickety dresser adjacent to the door. Katsumi had taken it upon herself to move the desk away from the window and closer to the door Kakashi-sensei took the small bed with the threadbare blue bedspread since he needed it more than she did.

Katsumi had taken to sleeping on the floor under the table. She couldn't explain it, but sleeping there made her feel safer than sleeping out in the open. Did it make her look absolutely insane? Most definitely. But when she passed out from exhaustion, she tended to sleep for a little longer under there and in case someone came in the house, she wouldn't sleep through it.
The genin shuffled across the terribly creaky wood floor to her sensei to check on him. He'd been
dead to the world for a little over a day now and she was beginning to get worried. Well, more
worried than she already was. He looked peaceful, at least. Katsumi padded over to her little nest
under the table and crawled under. She sat cross-legged and began taking inventory of her supplies
like she did when she had downtime.

Katsumi still had a dozen kunai, a couple meters of rope, all of her ninja wire and paper-bombs, as
well as her survival equipment which she was pretty happy about. One of her emergency plans
involved rigging up the house with several lethal traps so the fact that she still had most of her
equipment was comforting.

That's what she did for the next twenty minutes, repeatedly. Katsumi knew that this obsessive
counting of her weapons probably wasn't healthy, but it helped to calm her mind. The repetitive
nature of the action relaxed her. Well, as relaxed as she could be nowadays.

A knock sounded on the old wooden door.

"Dinner."

Katsumi sighed as she crawled out of her space to hopefully eat and keep down some food in what
was likely to be up there with one of the worst dinners she'd ever been too (which included the ones
she'd had at the orphanage).

___

Katsumi swung her legs under the table, nervously reverting back to her old habit. The food on the
table wasn't meat, which she was happy about, but she could feel Naruto's eyes on her, waiting for
her to take a spoonful of soup. It smelled pretty good all things considered, but every time she
touched her spoon and it sloshed the liquid around in the bowl, her stomach bubbled mutinously.

Naruto conversated with Tsunami, asking her about all kinds of things from the weather to her
favorite childhood memory all while keeping an eye on Katsumi in a way that made her both
appreciative and irritated. She sat across from Sasuke at Tazuna's rickety dining table and she tried to
gauge his reactions to certain things and was disheartened to find that there were none. It looked like
he'd retreated into himself as he mechanically ate his soup, not even noticing anyone around him.
Katsumi's heart twinged in regret at the sight, feeling the guilt rise up and threaten to eat her alive.
To distract herself, she dipped her spoon in the soup, preparing to eat. *Nope.* As soon as the liquid hit her tongue, her empty stomach revolted, lurching violently as saliva filled her mouth rapidly.

"Shit," she mumbled. Katsumi threw her chair backward in her haste to make it to the bathroom before she threw up on Tsunami's wood floors. She stumbled her way to the toilet and threw up nothing but bile. Her throat and eyes burned and she cringed as the toilet water splashed back up near her face. Once she was finished heaving, she slumped against the toilet, feeling her brain cloud with hopelessness. What kind of ninja was she if the first time she experienced something bad, she was this affected by it? *Kami, I'm pathetic.* Tears stung her eyes as she sat on the cold tile floor and flushed the foul-smelling evidence down the toilet.

It wasn't like she could feasibly keep this up if she wanted to continue down her preferred career path. Katsumi knew enough from her phase a couple years ago when she devoured medical texts like it was her job that her body could stand this for maybe two days before her performance would suffer. Any more time after that and she would risk fainting which was something she would like to avoid while standing guard over a civilian with thugs out to kill him. Then, if she still hadn't figured out a way to eat, she'd have about a week's worth of fat stores to run through before her body would begin breaking down her *muscle* and she would really be in trouble. It wasn't like she had much fat or muscle to go through in the first place. Sure, she was fairly well-built for a genin with pretty good musculature, but coming in at a solid one hundred-fifty centimeters tall, she didn't have much meat on her bones to waste. That meant she had two days maximum to figure out a way to get past her eating problem or else…

Katsumi scowled, looking at herself in the water's reflection and not wanting to think about the consequences of not thinking up a way around her issue. She sat like that for a while, lost in thought before hauling herself up, brushing her teeth, and going back into her bedroom for the rest of the night.

As the sun well and truly set, Katsumi sat on her bedroll under the table and thought about everything and nothing. She wrapped her arms around her legs and pressed her back to the wall, resting her head on her knees, comforted by Kakashi-sensei's steady breathing.

As the night went on, a few knocks sounded at her door, first Naruto, then Tsunami, but neither of them pushed when the door remained closed. *Looks like it's going to be another one of those sleepless nights.* She sighed, resigned.

___

After about a week of the same thing, Katsumi was becoming antsy.
Gato had yet to send anyone after them and Katsumi was almost wishing that he'd hurry up already. Kakashi-sensei was still asleep and Katsumi was honestly beginning to wonder if he was ever going to wake up. The rest of their team began to trade off who went with Tazuna and who stayed home to guard the house and they had a pretty decent schedule going. So far, they had been doing a pretty okay job, having zero hiccups which Katsumi was proud of. Everything was going fairly well, but Katsumi couldn't help but feel like the other shoe was going to drop any second. But while Team 7 was going well, Katsumi was... well, she was doing the best she could.

She still wasn't really eating. Tsunami had stopped pestering her about eating days ago and had just sent her worried glances during meal times. Naruto had tried one time to talk to her about it but was swiftly shut out and he stopped as well. She just couldn't do it. Every time she tried to eat something, her stomach revolted and she threw up which was hardly a good experience. But, after three days of starving, she'd found Kakashi-sensei's emergency stash of soldier pills while she was taking inventory of his things after she'd grown bored of her own. So, every couple of days, she popped one in her mouth and downed it, figuring he wouldn't mind much. Sure, it wasn't the healthiest method of gaining nutrition, but until she could get a handle on her... problem, it would have to do.

Showering was an experience as well, though once she got past the potent terror accompanying the sight and sound of running water, she was fine. The first time she bathed after the incident, her fear was mostly overrun by the need to get the blood and gore off of her, but the day after that, it was all she could do not to collapse onto the floor she was shaking so hard. As the days have gone on, she's cut down the time it takes to force herself under the lukewarm spray significantly, instead of taking thirty minutes, it now takes her under ten on a good night. It wasn't much, but it was progress.

The one thing she hadn't quite found a solution for was her sleep (or lack thereof). Logistically, she knew she was going to crash at some point, only having averaged about eleven hours of sleep in the past seven days, but she couldn't help it. As much as she tried to exhaust herself with training, escort duties, and strategizing for Gato's inevitable arrival, when her head hit her bed-roll, sleep escaped her. More often than not, she was caught in the middle of that hellish purgatory-like state at the very edge of unconsciousness for most of the night and when she did cross into dreamland, she was unceremoniously thrown out by her own mind via vivid nightmares.

They were mostly the same images recycled over and over again; burning alive, drowning in water and blood, her comrades dying because of her own inadequacies as a shinobi, but just because she's seen those movies before didn't mean that they affected her any less. After waking up from the feeling of flames licking her skin or her lungs ready to burst one too many times, she just stopped trying to sleep altogether. Of course, bone-deep exhaustion hit her every once in a while, but every single time, without fail, that she fell asleep, she experienced horrific nightmares, resulting in around three hours of sleep on a good night. For now, she was just trying her hardest to keep her reflexes sharp even though she knew she was terribly sleep deprived, but it was the best she could do. At least the team was doing better.
Sasuke had finally decided to come back to them around four days ago, commemorating his mental return with a snide comment about Naruto’s lack of manners at dinner. Naruto was so surprised, he forgot to yell at Sasuke for his remark, and Katumi couldn't blame him. He'd been silent for days, hardly even acknowledging their collective existence except to wake one of his teammates for their shift in the watch schedule. Her bewilderment must've shown on her face because Sasuke looked directly at her and gave her a short nod that seemed suspiciously like reassurance. Something in her heart swelled and she almost grinned at the boy, relief flooding into her brain. *Maybe I didn't ruin him after all.*

Katumi was back on the bridge for her seventh full day on the island after writing, scrapping, and rewriting several defense strategies and laying traps around the property, knowing full well that they were more for surveillance and to alert her than to seriously injure the intruders. After a long and boring day doing nothing, when Katumi and Tazuna returned back to his house, since Kakashi-sensei had yet to return to the land of the living, Katumi had taken it upon herself to brief the team on her ideas after dinner and was delighted to notice both boys engaging in a civil and helpful manner, each providing their own input and critiques allowing her to fine-tune her plans to fit the most likely scenario into something that everyone agreed and was happy with. They sat in a circle in the middle of Katumi's room poring over different notes in Katumi's small and neat writing as well as several maps (both hand-written by them and borrowed from Tazuna) trying to perfect their plan for when Gato finally came for Tazuna.

In case Gato sent people in while Kakashi-sensei was still down and they got through the traps they'd laid out, Naruto was to make as many clones as possible and split them into two different teams, one to run interference with the enemy and the other to get Tazuna and his family and Kakashi as far away from the house as he can, to an abandoned bank in town that Naruto had spotted on their way into the village.

"You sure are resting a lot of this plan on Naruto's shoulders…" Sasuke murmured, frowning at her. Naruto let out a squawk of indignation and looked ready to pummel Sasuke.

"Any disadvantage with numbers can be overcome by spamming the shit out of shadow-clone jutsu, which seems to be Naruto's specialty." she reasoned, trying to keep the peace while nursing a migraine. "His part is integral in the rescue, yes, but during the actual fighting, he'll be doing mostly support for us." Meanwhile, Sasuke and Katumi would be the front-line fighters, she explained, taking down any intruders while they were hopefully distracted by the clones. Hopefully, the traps will have at least wounded their assailants enough to slow them down, allowing them time to enact their plan.

"Aw, I'm going to be missing out on all the action!" Naruto whined. Katumi flicked his ear and he yelped, trying belatedly to swat her hand away. Sasuke smirked at the display. "What do I do when I've gotten them to the safe house?"
"Stay there and guard them. If it looks like the clones are dwindling and your reserves aren't bone-dry, pop out a couple more, but *stay with Tazuna,*" she emphasized. "He's our client. It doesn't matter if we defeat Gato if Tazuna dies in the process because we weren't careful."

As a last minute stroke of genius, Sasuke suggested they stuff the gopher-holes with explosives to make a makeshift minefield. At Katsumi's aghast and impressed expression, he snorted.

"It's not like you don't have plenty," he snarked, placing his hands on his knees as they sat around a map Naruto had drawn of the property and surrounding areas. Katsumi rolled her eyes and pointed at a spot near a stream less than ten kilometers away from the house.

"Are they even big enough to work with?" Naruto questioned, looking out the window at the aforementioned holes dubiously, his brilliant trap-making mind whirring with possibilities and calculations.

"If they're not, the two people that stay at the house can expand and prep the minefield," Sasuke explained, gesturing to their packs that they'd taken inventory of minutes prior.

"But what happens if we forget exactly where we've placed the bombs? Tazuna, Inari, and Tsunami could also set them off without thinking too, y'know."

Sasuke scowled, looking up to think about Naruto's very valid point.

"We could just use chakra-triggered ones instead of pressure-triggered bombs. We could also mix our tags in each separate mine so in case one person is too busy to set off a particular explosion, someone else can do it." Katsumi decided, already beginning to mentally divvy up their bomb supplies. "Plus if one goes off in a close enough vicinity to another, it'll trigger all of the bombs near it to go off. We literally get more bang for our buck."

Both boys nodded, approving of her idea. "You're really good at this, Katsu-chan," Naruto cheered, giving her a thumbs up paired with a kilowatt smile. She shrugged and scratched her neck, not knowing how to take a compliment without being *weird* about it.

"Thanks, Naruto." She looked back at the map and placed stars in strategic areas around the house in a kilometer radius, before her brain caught on another idea.
"We should also set up a perimeter. Naruto, how long can you hold a kage-bunshin?"

Naruto tapped his face with a finger, thinking about her question. "If it's not disturbed? Probably maybe a week straight until my reserves are empty." Katumi's eyebrows shot up at his generous estimation. Seven whole days? That's insane. Thank Kami for freaky Uzumaki chakra reserves.

"How about six with a simultaneous henge thrown onto them? Factor in leaving at least a third of your reserves too."

"As long as the henge isn't anything major, a day or two maybe? But that'll drain like a bitch. I could push it to at most maybe four, but then I'd probably get chakra exhaustion." Katumi calculated the risk and the benefits, deciding that it was worth it and nodded.

"Hold on, you can't be seriously suggesting that dob—" Katumi leveled him a sharp glare which he returned with equal fervor before correcting himself. "That Naruto can hold up half a dozen shadow clones plus a transformation on top of them for forty-eight hours straight, are you?"

Katumi shrugged, sensing more than seeing Naruto's chest puffing out with pride.

"His chakra reserves are ginormous. He can do it," she stated, smiling at her blond teammate. "But, if you don't think you can do it, speak now or forev—"

"I can do it!" Naruto interrupted, looking almost offended at the slightest notion that he couldn't. "Trust me, Katsu-chan, this is something I can handle, y'know. Leave it to me," Katumi nodded, thoroughly convinced due to his certainty.

"Alright. Set up those clones in these spots," she used a pen to circle the areas she listed on the map. "Then turn them into something normal, like a leaf or a rabbit or something. Nothing out of the ordinary."

"No white bunny-rabbits?" he joked, referencing the clearly self-named 'Demon' Brothers they'd encountered days earlier. She snorted at the idea.

"No."
"Is this all going to be enough?" Sasuke asked, and Katsumi paused to think about how she should answer this. The plan was solid, but as with most things in shinobi life, it was easy (almost likely) for things to go sideways even if the strategy was seemingly bullet-proof. But, did she believe in her plan and, more importantly, her team? Absolutely.

"I guess we'll know when they get here. But just know that I trust you guys to handle your part and I hope that the feeling is mutual." She made sure to look them both in the eyes to show her sincerity which made Naruto grin from ear to ear and Sasuke's posture relax slightly.

"We do, Katsu-chan! Let's give those bastards a taste of the Hidden Leaf Village!" Naruto pumped his fist into the air, like he could already taste victory and Katsumi sighed in a way that was half exasperated and half fond. She looked at Sasuke and shrugged and could've sworn that she saw a hint of a smile on his face. Her heart squeezed painfully at the sight. Finally, Team 7 was beginning to feel like an actual team. She trusted Naruto and Sasuke and it was nice to know that they felt the same. She trusted her boys.

"Dinner!" Tsunami-san knocked on the door to announce it and both bots rose to go scarf down as much food as humanly possible. Can't relate, Katsumi thought, laughing inwardly at her own slightly twisted humor. She made herself busy by reorganizing their notes and placing them back in her bag to be reviewed again later when she needs something to do to calm herself down after a nightmare later on.

She felt someone linger but didn't say anything as she busied her hands to keep them from fidgeting. A talk about her eating habits was not something she wanted to have for the thirtieth time in the past week. She huffed, blowing a wayward curl out of her face before looking up at the person. To her surprise, Sasuke stood in front of her with his hands thrust deep into his pockets.

At least I'm not the only nervous one.

She met his gaze and inclined her head, willing him to spit out whatever he had to say.

"You need to eat." he blurted out, his words lacking their usual coating of indifference to don a more sincere tone. She just looked up at him like he'd started screaming in a different language. Katsumi knew that to some degree Sasuke cared about her, but it never dawned on her just how much until the Wave mission. She was flattered and appreciative, but that didn't stop the twinge of annoyance from making its way across her features.

"You're the twentieth person to tell me that within the past hour. Take a number." she joked, hoping to deflect.
"I'm serious, Katsumi. You not eating and sleeping is going to make you off your game when Gato sends his cronies our way which could jeopardize both the lives of our team and the mission itself." Half of her was amazed that he had the capability of saying so many words to another person at once while the other was both wildly uncomfortable and increasingly more defensive.

"Sasuke, I'm fine." Her hands had stilled from neatly folding the papers and she stared him dead in the face with a little bit more vehemence than she intended.

"No, you're not. You know, if you're going to try to bullshit everyone, at least try to make it half-way believable," Sasuke snapped, anger flaring in his dark gaze. "I thought you were supposed to be smart."

"Are you seriously lecturing me on opening up to people? This is a little hypocritical even for you, Sasuke," she shot back, crossing her arms over her chest.

"Why is it so hard for you to admit that you need help?" Katsumi had completely abandoned keeping her expression neutral and it morphed into one of outrage. "Don't forget that I'm usually the one to shake you awake from your nightmares because dobe sleeps like the dead. I see how you look immediately after them, before you try to wipe your expression clean. You're not fine." Katsumi's anger flared dangerously, but she quickly swallowed it. Katsumi rose off her knees and moved to push past Sasuke. I've had enough of this shit.

"I don't have time for this," She brushed past him to get to the door but he grabbed her wrist. The thin leash she kept on her anger tightened dangerously as she kept breathing. "Let go now."

"You would try to run away from confronting this. How fitting." His tone was disgustingly condescending as he all but called her a coward.

The leash broke.

"So what if I'm not fine?" Katsumi hissed, anger finally catching up to her and breaking her resolve to stay carefully indifferent and evade. "Are you?" she accused, thrusting a finger in his direction. His cheeks darkened and his scowl deepened. "None of us are fine. But we don't have a choice but to carry on because we have a job to do!"

"You can't do your job with you half dead all the time. Holy Hashirama, how are you so dense?" A
small part of Katsumi was fascinated by the intensity of Sasuke's emotional outburst. She couldn't remember a time when he got this heated about anything. But the majority of her brain wanted to rip him a new one for questioning her competence.

"And what do you want me to do? I'm trying, Sasuke, I really am. But I can't focus on me right now! With Kakashi-sensei out of commission, a mobster on our asses, three civilians to guard, and two knuckle-headed teammates to keep alive, it's all I can do not to collapse under the pressure! I don't have time to worry about every little thing that's happened to me!" Sasuke snorted derisively.

"You almost died. We almost died. And then you and I had to dispose of two bodies for the first time in the middle of a foreign country with no supervision in the middle of enemy territory. That's not a 'little thing'," he replied, throwing her words back in her face. Suddenly, Katsumi wasn't angry anymore. She just felt a bone-deep weariness take over.

"I know. Don't look at me like that," she snapped, a bit of her fire flaring up again. "But until this mission ends and we're all back in Konoha safe and sound, I can't afford to think about that. I-I'm not sure if I'll be able to close that door once I open it," she admitted, picking at nonexistent lint on her shorts. Sasuke glared at her, still not mollified but deciding to let it go for now.

"Whatever. Just don't slow down the team." Katsumi's face was twisted in her anger as the boy turned and strode towards the door. Before she could stop herself words flew out of her mouth on their own. "Why do you even care so much, Sasuke?"

The boy stopped in his tracks, his hand pausing their descent on the door handle. Katsumi thought he was going to answer her when he, acting like the words weren't even spoken, wrenched open the door and left her confused in the room with their sleeping sensei.

The hell was that all about?

She felt a storm brewing in her head, complete with regret, guilt, bubbling anger, and a whole host of other unpleasant emotions and Katsumi just wanted it to stop. She hadn't lied when she said that the pressure was making her go insane, she'd just never said it aloud before. Am I leading everyone right to their deaths? whispered an ugly corner of her brain.

She dropped to her knees, barely registering her breath quickening until she was hyperventilating. She absentmindedly glanced at her hands and saw them trembling before she confirmed it. Damn it, I need to calm down.
The tenuous control she had on her emotions was threatening to break as her thoughts roiled in her mind. She clenched her hands tightly, vaguely feeling her nails cut into her palms as she tried to get a grip, the sharp sting grounding her but not by much. The metaphorical door was splintering under the force of the emotions bearing down on it.

You do not yield.

Katsumi crawled into her nest under the table and clenched her blankets, trying to gain some semblance of control while her head spun. The only sounds in the room were Katsumi's harsh panting and Kakashi-sensei's steady breathing. Suddenly, it wasn't as comforting as it once was. I did that, her traitorous brain told her. She shuddered, feeling colder than she had any right to be and wrapping herself in one of her blankets to focus on the earthy smell to calm down.

You do not yield!

After what felt like six hours, her breathing evened out and she stopped shaking so violently. Crisis averted. Katsumi pulled the thin blanket tighter around herself as if to ward off both the chill in her bones and the unpleasant emotions that almost drowned her.

Katsumi sat there with her back against the wall for a while until she drifted off for a few hours of blissful sleep…

…Only to be woken up with her heart pounding in her chest and the kunai she kept under her pillow flying in the direction of the stranger in her room, before it was plucked out of the air like it was nothing.

"Maa, Katsumi-chan, is that any way to be treating your frail old teacher?" Maybe because of the late hour, Katsumi's brain was extra sluggish since she reacted so violently, but she recognized the voice immediately.

"Kakashi-sensei?" she called into the dark facing what she hoped was Kakashi-sensei's face. "Welcome back to the land of the living," she joked, remembering what he'd said to her after she'd woken up after her heat-stroke incident. Even after being unconscious for a week, his reactions are still leagues ahead of mine.

The jounin shifted his weight onto his left foot and snorted before coming over to her to ruffled her hair, the weight of his hand entirely more comforting than it had any right to be.
"So what'd I miss?"

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Kakashi Hatake or Thomas Jefferson? Naruto or Hamilton? You decide. Wassup guys. Senioritis hit me harder than a mofo. Follow my tumblr, I've already posted extra content there @hosffblog. It's v cute. S/O to the people that have already followed. The realest mvps. Question of the Post: Why do you think Sasuke lost it on Katsumi? Drop your answer in the comments if you feel like it. I'd be intrigued as to what you guys think it may be. Onto the next!
“What’d I miss?”

That sentence bounced around in Katsumi’s head as she focused on Kakashi-sensei’s figure in the dark room. Something in her broke, snapped so violently she felt it in every cell of her body. Laughter, hysterical and worrying laughter came from her lips and before she knew it, she was taking loud gasping breaths, unable to breathe. Her stomach burned as she kept laughing but the question was so damn ridiculous, she couldn’t stop.

“What’d I miss?”

“N-Nothing much, sensei,” she chortled, tears filling her eyes as she laughed. The hand on her head tensed slightly but Katsumi kept laughing, fearing that if she stopped laughing, she’d start crying. Relief, anger, disbelief, and fear were swirling around in her head, threatening to drag her under but all she could do was laugh because What kind of question is that? You were out for a week with only your genin team to protect you in the middle of enemy territory whilst waiting like sitting ducks facing certain death in the form of unknown thugs/shinobi sent by a mobster that we had probably royally pissed off by killing off two of his best men and you ask me ‘What’d I miss?’?! The irony didn’t escape her.

“Sit,” Kakashi-sensei commanded, pressing lightly on the top of her head. She did as she was told, neatly folding her legs under her and waiting for instructions. Kakashi-sensei sat across from her and focused his grey eye on her seriously which made her antsy and the laughter died in her throat. The hell is this all about? She kept her hands still in her lap and she stared at her sensei’s face, her eyes having adjusted finally to the dim light provided by the moon shining through the window. “Report.”

Katsumi inwardly sighed in relief, thankful for some semblance of normalcy. This she could do. “After you lost consciousness seven days ago, Naruto and Tazuna carried you back to this house while Sasuke and I followed protocol and disposed of the bodies, taking less than thirty minutes total. I can relocate the area if necessary.” The way in which she spoke was almost mechanical as she was able to completely remove herself from the situation while recounting the details in a succinct manner for her commanding officer. “We rendezvoused here and have stayed ever since, alternating watch shifts, guarding both the house and Tazuna at the construction site, and preparing for Gato’s inevitable retaliation. Civilians in the house include Tazuna, his daughter Tsunami, and her young son Inari. Nothing out of the ordinary has occurred so far,” she finished, leaning back on her hands and stretching out her legs. He nodded in approval.
“Naruto and Sasuke?”

“Both resting in the room adjacent to this one. Naruto seemed…” she paused, trying to think of the best word to describe her friend’s mental state. “Affected by the events in the clearing, though he’s been getting better. Sasuke,” the name tasted bitter in her mouth, not having forgotten about their conversation from early. “He spoke to no one for three days but seems like he’s in better spirits lately.”

“And you?” Kakashi-sensei’s voice was quiet and even, no longer a commanding officer needing a report, but a sensei asking about his student. The change jarred her, making her feel more than a little panicked. Feelings were something that she did not want to talk about and for good reason. Every time she even thought about what happened on the lake, she felt unadulterated dread fill her heart in a way that made her feel a hair’s breadth away from shattering. No, it was better to shove the memory and the emotions into a box and unpack it later.

Much later.

“I’m fine,” she shrugged, forcing nonchalance, leaning back a little further onto her hands. Even in the dark, she could tell Kakashi’s face looked doubtful, but she held her ground feeling a familiar flare of anger in her belly. “Really, I’m just ready to go home.” she half-lied, meeting his stare and not backing down.

“It’s not like you weren’t just drowned or anything.” Kakashi-sensei’s voice morphed from one that was soft and steady to deliberately cutting, the words making her flinch. Bastard’s trying to make me react. Though the motion was small, the jonin in front of her noticed it and sighed, clearly having all of the answers he needed. “Katsumi, it’s okay to not be fine.” The wary indifference flared into annoyance.

“But I am fine. I’ll be better once we get back home.” Kakashi-sensei inhaled, ready to argue her statement, but Katsumi was quicker. “I’m not a child, Kakashi-sensei. I’m a shinobi,” she snapped, frowning at the prodding. Her teacher stared at her and assessed her mental state, a slight frown seeming to tug at his covered mouth. It was gone suddenly and replaced with one of his eye-smiles which made Katsumi relax, but not much.

“Get some rest, Katsumi-chan. You’ll need it for tomorrow.” The jonin stood up and shuffled back to the bed before laying out on it, not unlike a particularly lazy cat. The mental image was almost enough to make her smile. Almost.

“Hai.” Katsumi followed suit, crawling back under the table to her bedroll, ignoring Kakashi-sensei’s
eyes on her, assessing her odd sleeping arrangement to close her eyes and, for the first time that week, try to go to sleep instead of letting it drag her into unconsciousness when she physically couldn’t take being awake anymore. She turned onto her side to face the wall and pulled her blanket up past her shoulders to get comfortable.

It didn’t work very well.

---

Sometime between three and four am, Kakashi awoke to pained whimpers. He cut his eyes to the origin and was not at all surprised to see Katsumi curled in on herself with the blanket thrown off of her with the force of her restlessness, face scrunched up in what Kakashi could only call fear as she hyperventilated in her sleep. He dimly noticed that her hair was down from its usual tight braid and was everywhere on her pillow and stuck to her forehead with sweat. Kid must be having a nightmare, he sighed. Kakashi turned on a lamp to lighten up the room (not that he needed it to navigate through the dark) and Kakashi crossed the distance between them, placed his hand on her shoulder, and began gently shaking her awake.

“Wake up, kiddo. It’s me, Kakashi-sensei,” he murmured, making sure to identify himself soon after she returned to consciousness so she didn’t panic and attack him in her confusion with the kunai she’d taken to storing under her pillow. Her golden eyes flew open, cloudy with terror before they widened in recognition.

“Whaa?” her voice was heavy with sleep, the fear on her face being replaced quickly by confusion, then comprehension, and finally uncertainty. She frowned lightly and hauled herself up against the wall to her left and hugged her knees while she calmed her breathing. Something in Kakashi’s heart broke at how she was clearly hurting but still trying valiantly to conceal it.

Reminds me of myself.

“You wanna talk about it?” Trauma was something that he was all to familiar with and it pained him to see his genin have to deal with these things so damn young. Naruto with his bright blue eyes and pale blonde hair paired with his tanned skin, round face, and fiery spirit that reminded Kakashi of every person he’d ever failed. Naruto seemed completely immune to any kind of bad emotion, what with his overall sunny demeanor and indomitable optimism, but that didn’t mean Kakashi didn’t see the way his face changed when they walked through the civilian sector to get to the mission office, changing from its usual bright transparency to being more guarded and closed-off or that he didn’t immediately notice how many ribs he could see on the boy’s torso and all Kakashi could feel was guilt guilt guilt twisting his insides because dammit, he should’ve been there for sensei’s kid.
Sasuke with his sharp stare and Uchiha heirloom brooding glares was another matter entirely. Nobody would’ve been able to predict his brother flying off the handle so completely and by the time Kakashi had gotten to him, Sasuke was so far down the rabbit-hole of revenge that it was all Kakashi could do to help him not succumb to his inner darkness completely. Of course, he was getting better, likely attributed to having a team he can count on and care about, but the Uchiha boy had a long way to go before he could be even close to being considered ‘okay’.

But Katsumi? The little golden-eyed honest-to-Hagoromo prodigy who grew up knowing what love was in a decent household? The girl that laughed easily and loved hard, but could make her gaze hard enough to cut diamonds in the face of anyone who mistreated her precious people? The genin who’s heart was still soft enough that she had a habit of tossing earthworms back into the grass so that they didn’t die on the hot sidewalks of Konoha? Kakashi knew that in his heart, he could have, should have saved her. She wasn’t too far gone or had nothing left to lose like the boys, like him. She had a chance. But, as Kakashi looked at her deceptively small form hugging her knees, white long white curls loose around her shoulders hiding her face from him, trembling with too many shadows in her metallic eyes, he knew that she was nearing It. The point of no return that every good shinobi had to cross, that has made some ninja into absolute monsters, others into pencil-pushers, and some into civilians.

“No.” Her voice was softer than it should’ve been and Kakashi’s eye narrowed at her, willing her to give in and tell him something.

“You might feel better if you talk about it,” he prodded, poking her in the side to lighten the mood. A bit of her usual fire came back as her head snapped up to reveal a face tightened in irritation for which Kakashi was glad. She shook her head again, denying entry into her thoughts.

“S’not like I’m going to be able to get back sleep even if I do.” A note in her voice was odd. Bitter and decidedly darker than Kakashi was comfortable with. But, it wasn’t like Kakashi was new at leading subordinates. He knew when to push and when to hold back to stop a comrade from breaking and it wouldn’t do her any good for Kakashi to force open the floodgates in the middle of a mission, in fact, it would do the exact opposite. Katsumi seemed to have a good grasp on how to keep her emotions separate from her actions (Almost too good…) so he would have to trust that she could keep it together until they got back. Then, I’m sending that kid to the nearest Yamanaka to get a psych eval, he decided. But holy Hashirama, this kid needs sleep, he thought, noticing the pronounced bags under her eyes in the warm yellow light of the lamp.

While the kid was busy looking at her feet, Kakashi took his headband from over Obito’s his Sharingan. “Look at me, Katsumi.” She frowned, but did as he said. Her eyes widened as she stared in wonder at his red iris and swirling tomoe, looking absolutely fascinated by the movement.

“How’d you get that?” Her question caught Kakashi slightly off-guard, wondering just how much this girl knows as he began weaving a simple, but effective genjutsu to give her dreamless sleep. The
jutsu did its work quickly as she slumped against the wall, unconsciousness overcoming her without much of a fight on her end. Kakashi smirked before repositioning her sleeping form back under her blanket, feeling the familiar twinge of protectiveness he always felt around his kids.

He silently padded back over to the bed, resolving to make her take it the next night, and evaluated just what the hell his life had become within the past six months. It seemed like he had been living life as an eternal bachelor until three little monsters threw his life in a tailspin and he suddenly became what Genma had called him after one too many drinks two months ago a Mother Hen.

"Don’t you have genin to babysit, kaa-san?" Aoba asked mockingly, nursing his fifth drink within the past two hours, looking well on his way to being absolutely sloshed. Kakashi looked up, bristling at the nickname as Aoba and Genma cackled.

"Wow, you guys really are drunk," Kakashi snorted, resisting the urge to beat the shit out of them both. Genma chuckled, for once the signature senbon was out of his mouth as he smirked.

"Oh get real, Hatake. Everyone and their mothers know that you basically tuck those kids in at night." At Kakashi’s indignant look, Aoba howled in laughter and Genma looked victorious. “It’s okay to be a Mother Hen,” he joked.

The next time the three of them sparred, Kakashi made sure that he utterly thrashed them, making sure that they knew not to tease him next time. Of course, that didn’t stop the rumors from flying around Jonin Headquarters about Kakashi’s devotion to his team and the shit-eating grins he got from his two asshole friends even months after the incident.

Though he’d never admit it, it was true. The little demons had wormed their way into his heart and Kakashi was six seconds from panicking because of it. He had a reputation of getting the people closest to him killed and he wasn’t sure if he would be able to keep going if his kids received the same fate.

At first, he’d tried being emotionally (and physically) distant, hoping that they’d get bored with talking to a person with the personality of a freshly painted wall. Nope, they just kept trying until they wore him down enough to get a response. Then he tried to be the most irritating prick on the face of the planet, screwing with them at every turn, making their training damn near impossible, all while being the world’s worst hypocrite when it came to punctuality, knowing that his ability to baffle even the most senior of politicians with complete and utter bullshit would be likely to drive them away. Nope. They’d just yell at him for being late and threaten him with bodily harm, but they never left. It seemed like the little monsters were here to stay. They just kept burrowing deeper and deeper into his heart and mind and Kakashi hadn’t realized just how deep until Zabuza.
When the nuke-nin had trapped him in that water prison, dread tore through him as he tried desperately to convince the kids to just leave him behind and run. At the time, he didn’t even give a damn about Tazuna even though he was their client, he only truly cared about the fate of his students. But their stupid loyalty and devotion to their team made them stay and while Kakashi was proud of them taking his lessons to heart, he was furious. Things only got worse from there when Katsumi was attacked. He hadn’t felt that terrified since Obito and something snapped in him seeing his student dragged by her hair and almost drowned in front of him. But before he could even comprehend what he was feeling, Naruto had lost control of the Kyuubi and then he was free and all he could think about was how Katsumi was still underwater and his team was still in danger and he just acted and now, his team was safe but, if Katsumi’s behavior was any indication, fractured and he was left with the realization that his kids meant everything to him and that terrified him.

Too many of his precious people have died and Kakashi wasn’t ready to lose any more. Panic threatened to overtake him at the thought before one thought came through with complete clarity, startling him with their promise: I won’t let them die. Doubt swam around in his head, making him second-guess his promise when a small sound shook him out of his thoughts. Katsumi had turned over, her face looking more peaceful than it’s probably been in weeks and his resolve strengthened exponentially. He would fight to protect that. Protect them. His team. He would fight with everything he had. Hell, even if he had to punch the shinigami in the fucking face, he’d do it for his kids. Anything for those three.

Kakashi fell asleep to the idea, ready to prepare those kids to face the damn Sage of Six Paths if necessary.

“‘We’re going to be doing what?’” Naruto’s too blue eyes widened in disbelief as their teacher led them through the forest, as agile on crutches as he was on his own two feet. Katsumi gingerly stepped over a felled log, a grin pulling at her lips. She almost cackled, thinking back to when she had first learned how to chakra-walk and just who she had met in that training ground.

They hadn’t talked about it officially, but every now and then, one of them would reference the ordeal while the other pretended not to remember. It had confused both of their other teammates but that didn’t make it any less fun, probably more so.

“This tree climbing without hands,” he chirped, sending an eye-smile over his shoulder at them. Katsumi snorted at the fake gesture.

Sasuke grunted next to her, looking equal parts confused and aggravated as he glared at Kakashi’s back almost with enough intensity to set him aflame. “What, with chakra?” Naruto’s brow was furrowed in thought while he kept pace with the group, dodging a particularly large rock with
practiced agility.

“Exactly right, Naruto.” Kakashi nodded, his voice sounding both vaguely surprised and impressed. The group stopped at a clearing with several towering trees, their tops hidden in the perpetual mist. “I’ll demonstrate, then it’s all up to you.” The genin backed up to give the man space and with that, the jonin ambled up to a large tree and walked up it like was nothing, both boys staring at him with utter disbelief. When he was standing upside-down on a branch that shouldn’t have been able to hold his weight, calculations making her head spin, he stopped, focusing one barely-visible eye on them. “Concentrate your chakra to the soles of your feet and use chakra to stick to the trunk of the tree.” Quicker than Katsumi could follow, Kakashi-sensei had thrown two kunai into the ground at the boys’ feet and Katsumi inwardly smirked at the confusion on Sasuke’s face when he noticed she didn’t get one. “Use the kunai to mark how high you can go until you reach the top. While you’re first starting out, you’re going to want to run at the tree and use your momentum until you get used to the feeling. Go at it.”

Both Naruto and Sasuke sped to their own tree, excited to begin. Naruto ran full-force at the tree, a grin of monstrous proportions on his face. Katsumi watched as his chakra answered the call, his sandals glowing a vibrant blue, as he placed his foot on the wood and it promptly exploded, throwing the blond a couple meters backward. Katsumi winced, stifling her giggles at Naruto’s surprised face while he picked wood chips out of his hair.

Too much chakra.

“Don’t you want to learn how to tree-walk with the boys.” Somehow Kakashi-sensei had materialized to her left and she prided herself on not jumping. She rolled her eyes at his question.

“Not interested,” she replied evenly, playing his game as she watched Sasuke give his best shot at the task. She snorted as he fell back down after going about two meters up. This is going to take a while.

“Follow me.” Her sensei was already moving towards the tree-line on the opposite end of the clearing and Katsumi followed.

Somehow, Kakashi-sensei was still faster than her, even on crutches, something that wounded her pride more than she would care to admit. They picked their way away from the clearing, not too far from the boys, but far away that Katsumi could no longer hear their harsh breaths and hard landings. Katsumi noticed the sound of running water coming from up ahead and inwardly groaned, having the feeling she knew exactly what fresh hell her teacher had in store for her.
The pair stopped at the banks of a rushing river. From the looks of it, the river didn’t look particularly deep, probably only coming up to her waist in the deepest part, and the current wasn’t very strong, but that didn’t stop the bile from rising in Katsumi’s throat preemptively.

“Water-walking?” Her voice was shakier than she would’ve liked and she resisted wrapping her arms around herself to calm down, not wanting to look childish. She stared at Kakashi’s back, fear and anger making her stomach turn. The man hummed in agreement noise and walked over the rushing water with practiced ease.

“The concept is virtually identical to tree-walking, so I don’t doubt you’ll figure it out quick enough.” Kakashi shrugged and Katsumi felt like crying. When he didn’t hear her footsteps moving towards the water, he asked, “Well, are you coming to try or not?”

The girl took a couple shaky steps towards the water before her even, carefully measured breathing became erratic. “I-I can’t.” She looked away at a stray bit of foliage to her left, willing her mortifying tears away.

“You can and you will,” he replied simply. If she wasn’t sure what he was trying to do, Katsumi would almost say his demeanor was bordering on cruel. She bit her lip, staring at the water and trying to keep it together. It looks just like where Zabuza… Katsumi hardly noticed the coppery tang on her tongue. “I thought you were a shinobi?” Kakashi’s tone was both teasing and demanding, somehow making her both relaxed and indignant at the same time. “Also isn’t your primary affinity water?”

Katsumi snorted, feeling a bit of the fear leaking out of her at his words. How pathetic would it be for a water-user like her to be scared of her own element?

“The fear you feel right now? I can’t make it go away completely. But, I can help you learn to manage it better.” She looked up from the water and met her sensei’s uncharacteristically sober gaze, feeling comfort at his unwavering sincerity. “I’m right here, you’re going to be fine.” Katsumi heaved a large sigh before gathering up all of her nerve like it was chakra. C’mon Katsumi, you can do this. It’s just a little bit of water. Katsumi toed off her shoes as to not get them drenched in the exercise, laying them carefully near the tree-line and unbandaged her loose grey capri pants to roll them up past her knees to keep them somewhat dry. Satisfied, she forced herself to move forward, one trembling step at a time until she was at the water’s edge.

She looked up nervously at Kakashi to find that he’d relocated under the shade of one of the towering oak trees that neared the river’s edge and taken out one of his books. He glanced up at her like he’d forgotten she was there as she felt a twinge of annoyance (and gratitude) at how he wasn’t making this a huge deal for her. He wasn’t babying her or trying to hold her hand. He just gave instructions that he trusted her to follow, something she appreciated greatly.
Katsumi understood what he was trying to do. The point wasn’t solely to teach her water-walking, no it was more than that. This was a lesson in bravery that she desperately needed after the incident with Zabuza. Katsumi needed to get over her fear of water and her teacher knew it, though how he did, she’d never know.

*You do not yield.*

She inhaled once more, closed her eyes, and, before she lost her courage, practically threw her right foot into the shallow part of the water, not even caring about the ‘exercise’ at this point. Cold water engulfed her toes, making her flinch violently at the feeling. She placed the left one in the water and marveled at how she wasn’t *panicking*. She heard the turn of a page and she took another careful step deeper into the water until it came up to her ankles. Another couple steps and the unseasonably cold water was brushing against her mid calves, then to her knees. Until finally, she was in the deepest part of the water, feeling the current up to her waist with a triumphant grin on her face. Was she still trembling? Absolutely. But, she was in a decently sized body of water which was more than sufficient for her. An idea occurred to her as she abandoned all hope of staying dry today and, before she thought better of it, buckled her knees to completely submerge herself.

Panic made her muscles lock up, not having felt water on her face since the incident with Zabuza, but she forced the tension out of her body, relearning the feeling of being underwater while sitting cross-legged at the bottom of the river. She opened her tightly closed eyes to take in the aquatic world around her, marveling at the little blue fish swimming around her slightly raised hands and felt a tentative grin tug at her face. Once Katsumi felt a familiar burning in her chest, she came up for air, unable to stop the surprised laughter from bubbling out her throat. She went back under, relearning how to swim, enjoying the challenge of going against the current for a few minutes before she dragged herself back to the shore to find Kakashi leaning against a nearby tree, orange book in hand.

The exhilarated girl plopped down next to her teacher, resisting the urge to shake like a dog and ruin his book. Her forest green kimono top was a lost cause and her meticulously braided hair was all over her head at this point, but she hardly cared. She’d finally beat her fear of water. “Done playing in the water, chīsana ahiro?” he asked, she rolled her eyes, internally cringing at the nickname (knowing that if she showed how much it bothered her he’d never stop calling her that until she was practically old and *gray like him*) before getting up from her spot on the ground.

“Show me how you did it one more time,” she pleaded, grabbing his hand to tug him up. The jonin went purposefully limp, making it damn near impossible for Katsumi to move him without his help even with her own considerable musculature. Katsumi contemplated taking his book and chucking it into the river for her efforts just to be petty.

“You don’t need me to show you again. Knowing you, you’ll have it perfected in half a dozen tries,”
he drawled from his place on the grass. She walked back over to the river, running through calculations in her head at light speed, figuring out how much chakra this activity was going to require. She bit her thumbnail in thought, staring at the water for longer than necessary before coming to a decision.

She cautiously placed her left foot onto the surface of the water, mindful of the chakra she was expelling. Her foot stuck and she let out a startled laugh at the accomplishment. Katsumi lifted her right foot to meet its twin before falling into the river to her mid-calves, splashing water everywhere. She scowled at the water in retaliation, failure tasting bitter in her mouth.

Katsumi got back out and tried again, this time adding a bit more chakra to her feet and getting the same result. *What am I missing?* The girl sat down on the edge of the water, placing her hand into its cool depths experimentally. Katsumi pulled the wayward limb out of the water and focused chakra into her palm, attempting to test the right amount of chakra needed to both attract into and repel water away from her palm. Her brow furrowed as she then practiced altering amount of chakra she used to try to feel for the perfect amount for a few minutes before she seemed to have gotten it, water sticking to her palm in a half inch thick coating before flaring her chakra again and forcing it away from her hand like it was magnetized. She then kept practicing, this time on speed until she could draw the water to her palm quicker than she could blink and repel it just as fast, noting it worked better the closer her hand was to the water.

*Interesting.*

Katsumi released the water and stood back up, eager to try again. She repeated the action, willing herself to stick to the surface and falling through, feeling frustration rip through her. A snort came from behind her and she whirled around ready to punch her sitting instructor in the throat when he opened his mouth to ask a question: “Are you taking every property of both chakra and the water itself into account?” She thought about it, running through every attribute she could think of, wracking her brain to figure it out. Less than thirty seconds later, she wanted to throw herself, gut-first, onto a katana.

“Oh Kami, I’m dumb.” She was treating the water like it was *solid*, like a tree. She wasn’t taking into account the state of matter it was in or the movement and she wanted to brain herself with a blunt object. She marched back up to the river’s edge with purpose, redoing the process only instead of laying out her chakra in a thin, even layer over the sole of her bare foot, she spread it out until the pale blue glow came out almost an inch away from her skin, lessening in intensity the further away from her it went to better mesh with the moving water. “Instead of making my chakra like a strip of tape, I need to make it more like…” she paused, trying to think of a good analogy. “Gum stuck to the bottom of my foot. More flexible like the water itself. I just need to keep emitting a steady stream of chakra from my feet…” she mumbled, staring at the water thoughtfully.

Kakashi-sensei hummed in a way that almost made Katsumi wonder if he was even listening to her,
but she didn’t care too much about him listening to her rambling. *Now to test my theory.* She gingerly placed her foot onto the water’s surface for the fourth time in the past hour, making sure to focus on making her chakra less rigid. Satisfied that she wasn’t going to fall into the river again, she put her second leg up quickly, hoping that her chakra would do its thing, her eyes closed as she braced for impact. When none came, she opened her eyes again and looked down. It stuck.

*It stuck.*

“It stuck!” Katsumi let out a triumphant whoop, pumping her fist in the air in a Naruto-like fashion. She focused on maintaining the chakra, feeling the steady but inconsequential drain on her chakra as she chanced walking along the surface of the river. Katsumi took a couple tentative steps into along the surface until she tried running and she was running as fast as she could on water as she could on land. She could officially walk on water! Though learning this on the river made it considerably more difficult given the attributes, it was worth it. *Wait.*

She skidded to a stop and whirled around to look at her sitting sensei. Feeling her gaze, he looked up from the book lazily.

“Kaka-sensei, wouldn’t this have been much easier to learn on still water?” she asked, narrowing her eyes at the silver-haired jonin. He sent her one of those infuriating eye-smiles and she really reconsidered not ruining his book.

“Yeah, but where’s the fun in that, eh, Katsumi-chan?” She almost screamed in irritation, but refrained as to not give him the satisfaction. “Well, now that you’ve finally done that,” he dragged out the word like it hadn’t taken her what she was almost certain an unnervingly little amount of time to figure out how to walk on running water. “I can finally teach you what I was planning on earlier.”

With that, Katsumi perked up, always willing to learn new things. Her sensei flipped through three hand-signs in rapid succession— Ox, snake, and ram— slow enough for her to keep up with and take note of before a thick mist rolled in. “What jutsu is this?” he asked, regulating the fog clouding her vision.

“Kirigakure no jutsu. Aptly named I would say,” she answered quickly, appreciating the usefulness of the low visibility from an offensive standpoint. Especially now that it wasn’t being used on *her.*

“No kidding. Now that I showed you the hand-signs, I hardly think I need to explain more than that.” Katsumi was caught between annoyance at his laziness and pride at his trust in her abilities. “I want you to have this down by tomorrow. Hop to it, chīsana ahiru.” Katsumi’s surprised expression from the *very* ambitious deadline was stopped in its tracks by the resurgence of the nickname. Before
she could even roll her eyes at the man, he disappeared in a flurry of leaves, leaving her alone.

_Hn. I’ll have it done by noon,_ she thought pettily, getting to work on the new jutsu, and not even realizing how much her temperament had changed in the past hour and a half.

Katsumi didn’t have it done by noon. To be fair, she had it down by half past noon. Embarrassing, but it was what it was. Katsumi found that the issue was all a matter of finding the right amount of chakra to weave into the water to make the mist, which took her slightly longer than she was hoping for, but when she made her way back towards the sound of sloppy landings and harsh grunting drenched, but proud, she couldn’t find it in herself to really complain.

Sasuke had been the first person to notice her breaking the tree-line, spotting her from out of the corner of his eye as he flipped down gracefully from ten meters up the trunk of a tree, landing in a crouch while he breathed heavily. “Where’ve you been?” He stared at her, noticing that she was noticeably wetter than usual once she stopped in front of him.

“Hey, Katsu-chan. Did you have a nice swim?” Naruto called out from his perch on a branch, shooting her a smirk of Sasuke-proportions. Katsumi rolled her eyes, feeling her cheeks heat slightly.

“Shut up, Naruto. I was learning how to walk on water,” she replied, forcing some Kakashi-brand nonchalance into her tone, shoving her hands into the pockets of her grey pants. Naruto snickered at her response and she wanted to throw something at him. Ignoring the impressed if not slightly envious looks from both boys, she noted their progress. “How’s tree-climbing going?”

Sasuke grunted, irritation flashing in the depths of his dark eyes. “I will get this before dinner,” he swore, scowling at the tree like it had personally done something to him. With that, he ran back at the tree to try once more. Fighting back some snickers at his canny resemblance to an angry house-cat, she turned her gaze to Naruto.

“What about you, Naruto?” He hopped down from his spot on a high up branch and Katumi appreciated the number of slashes Naruto had managed to gouge in his tree. _He’s learning this quicker than I anticipated._ Katumi’s eyes trailed back to Sasuke’s tree and her eyes almost widened in disbelief. _He’s keeping pace with Sasuke!_ she realized, feeling a familiar bit of pride well up in her chest. _That’s probably why Sasuke’s crabbier than usual,_ she snorted.
Naruto pouted, staring balefully at his tree in mock-misery. “This is taking forever. You got any tips to learn this faster?” he asked, skipping right to the point. Katsumi let out a laugh at his impatience.

“Sick of throwing yourself up trees?” she teased, poking him in the arm with a finger. He snorted, swatting at her prodding hand half-heartedly.

“Hardly. I just want to speed this whole thing up, y’know” his gaze flitting briefly to Sasuke, a third of the way up a tree and gaining, and then away and Katsumi smirked, understanding his game. He leaned in conspiratorially and dropped his voice low to whisper: “How’d you learn so quick? You were able to do it in an afternoon when we were, like, nine,” he pointed out, grinning at the memory.

Katsumi folded her arms across her body and sniffed haughtily, putting her nose in the air like she’d seen some of her old roommates do back at the orphanage a thousand times. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Naruto threw an elbow into her side which she moved out of the way of, laughing the entire time. “Alright, alright, stop assaulting me, you big baby,” she got out through giggles, collapsing her legs like a foldable chair and sitting relaxed into the grass. Naruto followed suit and waiting for her answer, pulling at the grass with excitement. “When I learned it, I didn’t really bother using my momentum by running up the tree. I never really thought about that, I guess,” she shrugged. “But, I did spend a while holding my foot to the tree and using trial and error to find the right amount of chakra to use. Then, once I found it, I committed the feeling to memory and tried walking up the tree.”

“So this is more an exercise in control than speed or power?” Naruto asked, finally getting the point as he stared at his tree and studied it. Katsumi nodded, leaning back further on her hands in the grass, relishing the feeling of the sun drying her body.

“Exactly. If you can find and maintain the precise amount, you’re golden.”

Naruto grinned, scrambling to get up to try again. “Thanks, Katsu-chan! Oh, and don’t tell Sasuke-tem—” His voice faltered at the steely look she gave him at the insult. You two are going to get along even if I have to force you to! “Don’t tell Sasuke ,” he amended, looking at the crouching raven-haired boy staring at them with suspicion in his dark eyes from twenty meters away. Naruto looked back and flashed her one of those megawatt grins. “I’m gonna beat him, believe it!”

Katsumi returned his smile and vocalized her support before hauling herself off the grass and in the direction of Tazuna’s house to eat lunch. The genin picked her way across the two kilometers separating the team from the civilian residence, enjoying the sounds of the forest, feeling more at
peace than she had in a long time and enjoying it.

Chapter End Notes

Did Kakashi just call Katsumi ‘little duck’? Yes. Was it cute as FUCK? Also yes. Merry Christmas/Happy Hanukkah/Happy Kwanzaa/Happy Holidays to everyone celebrating!! I may or may not post an extra upload on Christmas because I might be busy but check in on the tumblr to see later on. Question of the Post: So we know that in classic Team 7, Kakashi sees himself in Sasuke, Rin in Sakura, and Obito in Naruto. How do you think that’s changed with Katsumi in the mix? Gimme an answer in the comments if you feel so inclined. Alright, that’s it for this week’s upload. Catch y’all homies later, most definitely on the 31st of December, maybe even sooner on Christmas Eve/Day (the 24th and 25th respectively). Onto the next!
The next few days were a blur of activity. From team and individual training to body-guarding duties to working and reworking their defense strategies, Katsumi hardly had time to even think. On the eve of the first day of their second week at Tazuna’s residence, Kakashi was going over the logistics of their plans to deal with Gato and his minions.

“Wait, you called for backup?” Naruto exclaimed, a slight frown pulling at his lips. Team 7 was back at Tazuna’s house, sitting in Kakashi and Katsumi’s shared room, poring over a map of the area. Katsumi sat, her legs splayed out under her as she listened to the change of plans with relief. The man in question nodded at the blond boy’s question.

“I sent a letter to Konoha requesting reinforcements last night. The team of shinobi should be here within the next couple days, even sooner if they’re running at full speed.” Kakashi-sensei explained, hands in his pockets where he stood leaned against the wood-paneled wall.

“How does this change our mission?” came Sasuke’s gruff voice. Katsumi popped her knuckles, looking at the map and going back over their defensive strategy, which didn’t change nearly as much as she thought it would.

‘It’s a good plan.’ Kakashi-sensei had said, shrugging, Katsumi’s heart swelled with pride at the acknowledgment. ‘You may have a real future in Tactics if you keep up this kind of thinking.’

The girl sat up a little straighter at the memory, chancing a glance at Sasuke’s slight scowl and noting it. Someone’s not happy about the help, she thought, almost rolling her eyes. “Our job is the same as it has been: provide security detail for Tazuna and his family. Once the other team gets here, they’re going to be taking care of eliminating Gato and his thugs. Until then, we just have to stay alert.” Kakashi finished. Naruto’s face sunk at the news. “Now stay here, I’m going to go see if dinner is ready.” With that, their sensei disappeared with a poof, a few leaves from his shunshin falling to the floor, leaving the three genin alone.
Naruto immediately looked at Katsumi. “I can’t believe Kakashi-sensei doesn’t think we can do this!” he exclaimed, his voice simultaneous indignant and crestfallen. Katsumi snorted.

“You’re aware that we’re well out of our depth here, correct?” she asked pointedly, making it a point to stare both boys directly in the eyes. Naruto’s baby-blue eyes looked sheepish after a moment and Sasuke just looked defiantly forward, not meeting her gaze. “This is ideal. We don’t know what we’re going to be up against with a guy of Gato’s caliber. It’s best to leave this up to the pros. Tazuna gets his protection, Wave gets their bridge, Gato gets what’s coming to him, and we get to live to fight another day. Everybody wins.”

“As much as I hate to agree with the do—” Sasuke stopped at the glare Katsumi sent his way and scowled before correcting himself to her standards, leaving the girl incredibly smug. “With Naruto, he’s right. We could’ve handled it. That compound could be full of civilian thugs an—” Sasuke started.

“Or it could be full of high-level shinobi that are ready to hand our asses to us,” the girl interrupted, taking Sasuke’s scalding glare and giving him back no reaction. She didn’t need to. Her logic would speak for itself. “The point is, Sasuke, we don’t know. And while I get your need to prove yourself, I would prefer not to make dumb decisions chasing that and needlessly risk the lives of the team.” Katsumi’s tone was body language and tone were both flippant to offset the sharpening of her eyes.

“What would you know? You can’t even use chakra to climb a tree.” Sasuke shot back, and Katsumi was taken aback at the venom in his words being aimed solely at her. She let out a humorless laugh at his assertion, relishing in how his face went from viciously smug and sliding backward into uncertainty at both her confidence and her refusal to submit.

Katsumi stilled, fighting the grin that was about to appear on her face, noting Naruto’s nervous expression from his spot on the floor. “That’s what you think, is it?”

Sasuke, who had begun looking slightly unsure at her reaction, regained a bit of his nerve plowed on. “I mean, you weren’t practicing with us so yeah.”

Katsumi felt a lazy grin stretch across her features as she looked at Sasuke and replied, “That’s because I learned how to do that when I was nine.”

“Bullshit,” Sasuke swore, looking at Naruto for confirmation, the boy keeping a carefully blank expression on his face as to not allude to anything or show favoritism to either party lest he set Sasuke off even more, something Katsumi was impressed by. He’s been learning. “As if someone civilian-born could learn something so advanced that young.” The brunet spat the word ‘civilian-
born’ like it was a curse and Katsumi had a hard time keeping calm in the face of his *unbelievable* arrogance.

*Okay, first of all, screw you.*

Katsumi sat up, anger simmering low in her belly as she tried to keep calm so she didn’t end up beating the shit out of her teammate, something that would be very counterproductive, as much fun as it might’ve been at the moment. “As much as I would love to watch your bitch-fit truly unfold, *Sasuke-kun*, you should remember that you’re not the only talented member of this team,” she said, her tone light and vaguely amused to contrast with the fire that was surely in her gaze.

*Don’t test me, bitch.*

Since they’d become teammates, they’d dropped all semblance of the careful courtesy in favor of immediate familiarity, which, though traditionally disrespectful, suited both children just fine. He’d first used it as a way to get under her skin and push her away and she’d adopted the habit with feigned indifference, never having cared much about manners that much anyway. That, paired with having to rely on each other for extended periods of time made Sasuke look at her differently, almost like she was an equal which was something she’d been immensely pleased with since he’d never really did that for anyone but *Naruto*, and even then it was rare.

In truth, his remarks pissed her off more than she was willing to let on because of that grudging respect he’d begun to show her and she almost tore him a new one for not believing in her talents. It also didn’t help that with the conversation they had had the day before, Katsumi was a little less kind than she should’ve been regarding her prickly teammate and his outbursts. She drew out the unusual honorific and pitched her voice a smidgen higher to mock the girls who used to fawn over him in the Academy, knowing how to throw him off his rhythm and succeeding, his dark eyes widened slightly at the unfamiliar address and Katsumi smirked inwardly.

*Katsumi: 1, Sasuke: 0.*

Sasuke huffed, ready to say something else when a pointed cough came from the bed. All three genin whirled around to find their sneaky sensei lounging with his trademark orange book in his right hand. “Sasuke, it would do you well to stop underestimating your teammates,” Kakashi called lazily from his spot on the bed, his deft fingers moving to turn a page in his book. “That arrogance will be the death of you.” The man had stopped reading and looked Sasuke dead in the eye, all semblance of lackadaisical reading forgotten.

Sasuke, looking equal parts indignant and cowed by Kakashi-sensei’s words, narrowed his eyes and
crossed his arms across his chest. “I’m serious, Sasuke. You need to trust each other as teammates. Not everything is about you.”

Ah, so here’s Kakashi-taichou I’ve been hearing so much about, Katumi thought, watching the tips of Sasuke’s ears turn pink. The boy scowled and looked down at the ground.

“I wasn’t kidding when I said that teamwork would be your most valuable asset on this squad, but with that, you all need to be able to trust one another to get tasks done and respect them. Katumi,” he barked and the genin prided herself on not flinching at the sharp address. “Stop picking up after Naruto all the time. He’s not a child, he’s a shinobi and you coddling him will get him or you killed.” The masked jonin turned to look at the team, making sure to make eye contact with each kid. “Naruto. Use your head more. Sometimes it’s better to hang back and assess a situation than to run headfirst into it, kunai in hand.” Katumi hadn’t dared to look at her teammates to see how they’d taken their joint-reprimand so she just stared forward. “You guys are the most capable genin team I’ve ever seen. Don’t let all of that potential go to waste because of your own overconfidence.”

Seeing that his students were sufficiently reprimanded, the man clasped his perpetually gloved hands together, a bright smile on his masked face. “Well, c’mon. Dinner’s on the table.” Both boys rose quickly, clearly hungry after a day of sharpening their chakra control. Katumi almost winced at the prospect. “Make sure you eat up. Tomorrow, I’m kicking your training up a couple notches.”

Great.

———

Kakashi had woken Team 7 up in the wee hours of the morning so early that even the birds weren’t up yet. He’d shaken her awake first and gave her brief instructions before leaving to go wake up the boys.

“We’re leaving the house in five minutes. Dress for intense training.”

Well, now I’m awake.

She threw her hair up into a high ponytail, forgoing the usual tight braid as she was apparently pretty damn short on time and she didn’t feel like wrangling all of her thick white curls into a neat braid without it being wet. Katumi was about to leave her hair like that, her hair falling near her mid-back even pulled so high at the top of her head before thinking better of it and wrapping her curly mane
into a large, but fairly secure, topknot. She was tired, not insane. Having her hair out like that would be just like asking someone to grab her by it as Zabuza had. No, she wasn’t doing that anymore.

Never again.

The young kunoichi threw on a loose forest green sleeveless kimono-top over mesh armor, hopped into a pair of grey hakama pants and her well-worn sandals before wrapping bandages around her ankles to secure the hem of her pants and around her wrists and palms to provide extra support. That ought to provide me with extra mobility for whatever the hell Kakashi-sensei’s going to have us doing today. She’d just finished tying her hitai-ate around her head and sliding her gloves over her hands when a knock sounded at the door.

“C’mon, beauty-queen. Kakashi-sensei says to meet us outside when you’re done primping,” Sasuke’s dry voice called from the other side of the door. Katsumi snorted derisively at his description and the note of humor in his voice. Seems like he wasn’t mad at her anymore. Thank the Sage. She wasn’t sure if she could keep from shoving a kunai up his ass if he kept being petty like he was yesterday. With that, Katsumi grabbed her equipment pouch (always full for obvious reasons) and ran out of the room, ready to go despite being woken up at stupid o’clock.

When she opened the door to step out onto the porch, she realized that she was the last one to get there and almost groaned. She fell in line with Naruto and Sasuke and the trio began to follow Kakashi into the woods, enjoying the chill of the early morning before the heat turned the humidity against them.

“Glad you could join us, Katsu-hime,” their asshole sensei said from ahead of them.

She scowled at the nickname, praying that it wouldn’t stick. “I was late by, like, thirty seconds!” she grumbled, embarrassed. Both boys snickered and Katsumi, already irritated, was able to nail Sasuke, who happened to be closer to her, right in the side with a particularly pointy elbow. He grunted, glaring at her while rubbing at his rib and Katsumi pretended not to have done it on purpose.

“My arm slipped,” she explained sweetly, giving him an overly saccharine smile and relishing in his irritated mien before turning back to the front to focus on the trip. Katsumi rubbed sleepily at her eyes, trying to track their progress through the forest as they navigated through the darkness, stepping over fallen trees as they went. When the group stopped at the same clearing they’d been practicing at for the past couple of days, their teacher signaled for them to stop.

“Today, I’m going to be changing your previous training regimen,” he announced, a gleam in his eye that made Katsumi wary. “Warm up. You have ten minutes before we begin.”
Katsumi immediately started doing jumping jacks to heat up her muscles. *Whatever it is he has planned, I’m going to want to be as ready as possible.* After about seventy-five, she dropped down to touch her toes, placing her hands flat on the ground first, then working on hugging her face to her knees. She went through a modified version of her usual warm-up, stretching deeper and longer in her back, legs, and arms especially before Kakashi-sensei told them that their time to prepare was over. All three kids gathered around their sensei who procured a map of the island out of nowhere, unfurled it, and gestured to a large red star he’d drawn at a spot northeast of their location.

“You have ten seconds to memorize the location before the map goes up in flames.”

Needing no further prompting, Katsumi took a mental picture of the area, storing the starred location in her brain. *The waterfall?* Katsumi thanked the Sage that she’d had enough sense to become decently familiar with the surrounding area when they were planning for Gato so it was less about memorization and more about recall. A couple moments later, the scroll burst into flames as promised and their teacher continued.

“You’re task is to run from here to there as fast as you can, retrieving an object for me that I left, and come back. It’s about twenty-two kilometers there, so you lot can do the math as to how far you’re going to be running.” *Wait, is this like a scavenger hunt or something?* Sasuke, the fastest one of their group, grinned at the test of speed and Katsumi was glad she downed her rations pill the night before as she rallied her chakra into her calves in preparation for the run.

“What are we looking for?” Katsumi asked, a furrow in her brow that was probably hard to see in the dim lighting.

“You’ll know when you see it,” he winked, and Katsumi considered giving up prematurely for a moment.

“Wait, how long do we have?” Naruto asked, an excited grin on his face at the prospect. Their teacher tapped his chin with a gloved finger and looked up as if he was thinking about it. *Like he didn’t already plan how much time he was going to give us,* Katsumi thought, sourly.

“As much as you need. But be warned, you don’t want to come in last place. Be glad that I didn’t make you start this in the midday heat.” Katsumi looked up at the still-dark sky and thought about how long it would be until the pinks and oranges of sunrise bled into the skyline. “Oh, and for a little extra incentive…” Kakashi flipped through a series of unfamiliar hand-signs before slamming his palm on the ground, and with a surge of chakra and a *poof*, over a half-dozen dogs were in front of them, ranging from a huge bulldog with jaws big enough to rip a man in half, to a small, droopy-eyed pug sitting on the bulldog’s head.
Katsumi rubbed at her tired eyes again and noted the hitai-ate on various places on each dog’s bodies as well as the henohenomoheji adorning their backs.

*Ninjen*?

“So these are your pups?” the surprisingly gruff voice of the miniature pug called out, nearly causing Katsumi to fall on her ass in surprise. *I didn’t know summons could speak in human tongues...*

“These are them,” Kakashi answered, looking amused at their wide-eyed reactions. He turned back to address them and all three genin stood up a little straighter. “Monsters, these are my ninjen, a group of animals I signed a summoning contract with which is something I can go more into depth about at a later date since you guys are on a time limit. The pack is here to provide you with a bit more motivation,” the masked jonin grinned, a bit of sadism making Katsumi even more nervous. Kakashi let out a low chuckle and spoke in low tones to the pug. “Nothing they can’t run with and nothing too serious.”

Katsumi had never seen a dog smile before but after watching the exchange and the accompanying grin on the talking dog’s face, she was crossing the threshold into acceptance that her clothes were most likely going to be ruined.

“Because I’m so nice, I’ll give you guys a ten-minute head start before I send them after you. Once you get to the location, I’ll be kind and give you a reprieve, but as soon as you’re en route back here? They’ll be right back on you. I’d run quickly,” Kakashi-sensei lowered his voice to a stage whisper and widened his eyes, “They bite.”

Sasuke paled considerably.

“Oh, one last thing, first one back gets to use chakra for the entirety of the next exercise.” Naruto’s head shot up as he sized up his competition while the other two did the same. “Go.”

Katsumi was gone before he even finished saying the word.
By the eighth straight kilometer of running, Katsumi could feel a slight burning in her calves. She gracefully leaped over a fallen tree, feeling more or less in her element as she passed a clearing that meant she was going in the right direction. Knowing the boys, they’d be taking the most direct route to the waterfall, but she knew better. If they did go that way, they would run the risk of going through swampland, full of nasty creatures which, though it would provide them with the shortest trip, they would definitely run into trouble with the flora and fauna. Katsumi was banking on the assumption that they either didn’t know or didn’t care about that and were blinded by their own competitive natures to slow down and think for once. Hopefully, they’d attack each other in order to slow the other down and make it even easier for her to snatch the win.

Katsumi decided to skirt around the edges of the swamp, cut through the middle of the river that the waterfall fed into, doubling back to throw the ninken off her tail if she had time, and finally, booking it to the finish line.

Of course, that didn’t mean she wasn’t going to do a little bit of sabotage on her end either, she’d just do it with more finesse. Speed, along with stealth and cunning were going to be what wins this for her. First, she’d begun carefully leaving traps for anyone tailing her, either boy or dog, to run into. Nothing lethal of course, but an explosive tag here and a wire-trap there were quick enough that she could do them on the run and effective on most. Growing up with Naruto and the boys meant she knew plenty about both setting traps and pranks. That, paired with a few genjutsu she knew, made her a formidable opponent indeed.

She slapped a tag on a tree branch with a rudimentary Kokoni Arazu no Jutsu over it to blend it’s stark white and red colors with the browns and greens of the forest to disguise it, remembering how long it’d taken her to get that one genjutsu down pat when she was curious about her jutsu affinity when she was a year from graduating and spent a half month in the library because of it. She probably still would be in that library if one of the deceptively sweet-faced library ‘chunin’ hadn’t decided to help her out with it.

_Not a genjutsu-type, but this will work just fine_, she thought, feeling the small drain on her chakra as she went. She kept going for a few more minutes, passing a glen that signified that she was about halfway to the waterfall when she heard it: a set of piercing howls from where she’d shot like a bat out of hell from.

_Shit_.

Pouring on the speed, she made the executive decision to detour about a hundred meters east. Katsumi tore through the trees, her chakra-enhanced speed making her almost _fly_ as branches and bushes tore at her pants and made her thankful that she’d forgone wearing shorts today. She made it in seconds to a clearing with one of the smaller rivers on the island and dashed through it, praying that it would throw some of the ninken off her scent for a minute or two when they caught up to her. As a last minute stroke of genius, she tore off the black obi around her waist and cast it into the river.
to send a bit of her scent floating downstream. *Hopefully, I didn’t just waste a perfectly good sash…*
Katsumi sped up even more but not yet in an all-out sprint as to conserve a bit more energy and took to the trees.

Katsumi had just hit the approximate eighteenth-kilometer mark when she heard an explosion sound off from roughly three kilometers behind her and she swore so vehemently, her sandaled foot almost missed the next branch and sent her tumbling down from fifty meters above the ground.

*They’re getting closer.*

Every few minutes, Katsumi noticed that one of her traps were getting set off closer and closer to her most recent location which meant whoever it was tailing her was gaining on her and *fast*. *At this rate, they’ll overtake me before I can get to the waterfall.* She swore low and threw any semblance of pacing herself out of the window as she settled into a full on sprint. She forced more chakra into her legs as she willed herself to outrun those dogs, sweat pouring down her face. *Maybe that trick with the obi really did buy me some time…*

But she’d underestimated how good Kakashi-sensei’s ninken were. If she kept going with her plan, they’d catch up with her within the next ten minutes easily. The girl had slowed to a jog when she came upon the river that signified the home-stretch. *Could I…* Katsumi stepped onto the surface of the water and thought for a moment about her idea.

*There’s no time!*

With that, the genin ran *up* the river, completely discarding the original plan of crossing and doubling back in favor of stealth. *S’not like they don’t already know where I am,* she thought as she sprinted on the river, focussing intently on not falling into it, throwing away every bit of stealth and careful maneuvering in favor of good old-fashioned *speed*.

Katsumi had just begun hearing the roaring of the waterfall when she saw a small body dart under one of the bushes beside her. At this point, she was running at breakneck speed, just trying to make it to the treeline that signified the safe-zone in one piece. She threw herself forward, ignoring the barking a few meters behind her, knowing that they’d finally caught up to her, ignoring the *screaming* of the muscles in her legs as she ran.

Forty meters.
Thirty meters.

Twenty.

Ten!

Five...

With one final leap, she was in range of the safe-zone near the base of the waterfall, without a moment to spare apparently as she’d begun to smell the scent of wet fur. When she stopped, she trudged to shore noticing dimly that the barking had disappeared. When her feet were on solid ground, she threw any semblance of dignity out the window and collapsed onto the grass, finally stopping for a minute (or seven) to catch her breath, her chest heaving and her legs and lungs burning from the sheer amount of effort that run took.

Checking her reserves and noting that she had burned through about a fifth of her chakra on the run here, she peeled her aching body off the ground to take in her surroundings. In the morning sun, Katsumi could admit that aesthetically, this place was gorgeous. She was at the base of the waterfall, near the mouth of the roaring river the waterfall bled into. Katsumi crouched down low to the banks of the river and took deep gulps of cold water, praying that she wouldn’t catch something from their dubious depths. Running water is safer, right? She splashed some of it onto her face to cool off, not caring much about the state of her clothing as they’d been torn by branches and thorn-bushes and drenched by the river-water and her own sweat, clinging to her like a second skin. After her heart-rate stopped beating hard enough to tattoo her chest from the inside, she began her search for… whatever it was Kakashi-sensei had left for her.

If I were Kakashi-sensei, where would I hide something for genin to find? Katsumi took silent steps around the area, trying her luck at looking under rocks, in the boughs of trees, even peering into the river itself and finding nothing out of the ordinary.

In plain sight.

In order to get a better vantage point of the area, Katsumi began to climb up the cliff face adjacent to the waterfall. Channeling chakra to the soles of her feet, she ascended the cliff a couple hundred meters off the ground, trying valiantly to avoid the misty spray of the water and failing miserably until she reached the top.
Hauling herself over the edge of the cliff, Katsumi finally was able to see the entire area. The safe-zone was less than half a kilometer in radius, but that didn’t mean it was any easier to look for an unknown object. She bit her lip, before focusing on the blue sky in front of her to gauge the time. *It’s probably a little after seven right now,* meaning she’d spent almost an hour running fast and far and she’d still only made it by the skin of her teeth.

The girl stood up and scanned the entire area, quickly cataloging spots of interest, before her eyes were drawn to an explosion roughly eight kilometers south of her location, causing a warm rush of wind to blow over her face. *Aaand that would be the boys meaning that I have very little time...*

She finished taking in the area when something caught her eye. A flash of light nearly blinded her, leaving her rubbing at her sore eyes, while also trying to locate where it’d come from. Her gaze caught on a patch of foliage southeast, below her. *There, in the trees.* She’d spotted the origin a couple hundred meters away from her and she’d crouched down low, flattened herself to the densely packed earth, to investigate. The light found her again, blinding her in odd intervals.

*Code?*

Thirty seconds later, she’d jumped down, located the tree and stopped dead in her tracks at the scene before her.

“About time you got here.” Sitting in a tree, lounging like a particularly large cat was…

“Kaka-sensei?”

The silver-haired man looked up from his book, an amused expression on his masked face. He tilted his head to the right and gave her a lazy salute in welcome.

“Wait, you’re the object I have to bring back?”

“Maa, Katsumi-chan, don’t objectify me,” Katsumi rolled her eyes and placed her hands on her hips. “But yes, I’m the precious cargo that you’re going to be escorting back through the woods. Think of it as a lesson for any future rescue missions like this one.”

“When’d you have time to make and relocate what I’m assuming are three shadow clones?” Katsumi glanced behind her as another explosion rocked the forest. *I’m running out of time...*
“Last night,” he chirped, jumping down from the tree branch he was lounging on and landing in a crouch. “Astute observation as always. Now this clone isn’t particularly durable so keep me safe on the way back. Consider me a civilian. If I were you I’d hurry up; you don’t have much ti—”

Katsumi had already moved, hauling him up onto her back, aided by her chakra to help manage his weight. “Hang on, Kaka-sensei.”

She ran back the way she came, feeling a steady drain on her chakra and made her way back to the starting point right as the yelling reached the safe-zone.

———

Everything was fine until the halfway point.

Kakashi-sensei had been a wonderful passenger, only shifting the flip the page in his book and holding on tight enough that she didn’t have to worry about him slipping off. The morning humidity became more oppressive the farther she went, the steamy air settling on her arms like a second skin and she grimaced, thinking of the cold shower she was going to take after this to cool off. She kept moving, one foot after the other, ignoring the slow-growing ache in her arms at holding up Kakashi and the rekindled fire in her calves at the increase in speed from her previous pace, from moderate to booking it in the direction she came.

The trip had been relatively quiet until a sharp bark came from her left as she ran suspended above the ground in the trees. She swore low in her breath, ignoring the quiet chiding about her language from her sensei, and sped up.

“You nearly gave us the slip, pup,” called a low voice behind her. “You’re more clever than those boys, that’s for sure.” Katsumi chanced a peek behind her and saw three of the eight dogs trailing her: the pug, the ginormous bulldog he was riding on, and an auburn greyhound. Quickly, Katsumi analyzed their probable skill-set and tried to think of a way out of this predicament.

The pug is probably the leader judging by how Kaka-sensei spoke to him first. He’s likely the brains. Her gold eyes flitted to the scary bulldog. Definitely more for strength than speed, but that doesn’t mean he’s not fast. Her gaze then rested on the sleek greyhound. Fast, probably used for wearing down prey.
Her thoughts scattered, however, when the bulldog appeared at her left and *body-checked her off of the tree*. Swallowing a yelp at the sudden change in movement, she righted herself mid-air, landing in a crouch against a tree trunk, breathing hard. She leaped away when the greyhound darted towards her, jaws snapping near her back.

*The clone.*

Katsumi dropped to the forest floor, a scowl on her lips as she kept her back to a tree trunk. “I’m curious. How’d you find me so quickly?” she called out, readjusting the weight along her back. “Was it chakra or scent?” Her hand inched toward her weapons pouch as her eyes darted back and forth to locate her assailants.

“Easy.” Katsumi’s head whipped to a spot directly in front of her where the pug was sitting on the grass. *Must not be a combat-type which means he’s probably really good in something else. Probably intelligence. Tracking maybe?* “A combination of both. Why, trying to get rid of us again?”

Katsumi snorted, not trusting her assumptions on the little dog’s skill enough to take her eyes off of him and instead, listening for the other two dogs. “Hardly. You’ve found me twice now. Once more wouldn’t be difficult for ninken of your caliber.” *There.* A rustle of leaves came from her right about ten meters away. *They’re likely trying to pop Kakashi-sensei so I fail.* She kept her face carefully blank in the face of the realization.

*Can’t outrun them, not with how fast I am now,* she frowned inwardly, promising to work on her speed when she finished this exercise. *But, with some trickery and quick thinking, I can get them off my tail enough to gain enough distance to get back, hopefully before the boys.*

Katsumi quickly thought about where she was, recalling the approximate locations of her traps and her proximity to a useful one while keeping careful watch for any dogs, strategizing her ass off. The good news, Katsumi realized, was that she’d rigged the *hell* out of her route to the waterfall up until the river when she gave up on trapping, everything from wire traps to flash-bangs to smoke bombs or explosive tags left in strategic areas no more than two hundred meters away from each other.

The greyhound burst out of the bushes, aiming for her ankles to trip her. Katsumi jumped up several feet in the air to avoid it and was met by the large body of the bulldog barreling towards her. Slamming her hands together, she substituted her body with a leaf she’d seen couple meters away. She landed awkwardly and feigned catching her breath, staring daggers at the bored looking pug lounging on the grass.
To win this, I’m going to have to be very, very careful...

“Can I at least get the names of the ninken that are thoroughly going to hand my ass to me within the next few minutes?” Katsumi focused her chakra, feeling around for the leftover chakra from the genjutsu she’d placed on the traps she’d laid earlier, finding one conveniently a couple meters to her right. She prayed that they’d let her stall for a few more seconds.

Ignoring a quiet ‘Language, Katsumi-chan,’ from her mellow passenger, the pug answered easily. “My name’s Pakkun. The big guy’s name is Bull and the greyhound’s name is Ūhei.”

“My name’s Katsumi. Pleased to make your acquaintance, Pakkun-san,” she replied plainly, in a tone that wouldn’t be out of place in a tea-room that was offset by her darting eyes and fidgeting limbs.

“Clever and polite. A surprise,” Pakkun complimented easily. Katsumi kept listening for the other dogs, wishing she knew how to augment her hearing with chakra. She adjusted Kakashi on her back, purposefully leaving an opening, banking on the assumption that one of the dogs was going to take it.

Bingo.

A large grey body darted out of the bushes once more, aiming his open mouth for Kakashi-sensei when Katsumi twisted out of the way, right next to the trap she’d laid a little over an hour ago. Bull followed her with expert precision, stepping directly on the trigger for the trap.

The hulking dog went down with a surprised yelp, ninja wire wrapping tightly around his body from mouth to tail, before he realized what’d happened, effectively rendering him useless. Katsumi sent an apologetic glance at the dog, feeling a little bad for the uncomfortable position the bulldog was in before jumping away, closer to the pug.

“When’d you set that up, pup?” Katsumi noticed an impressed note in his voice as she listened for the greyhound. A rustling in the bushes to her left. She slowly started storing chakra in her legs, her hand clenching tightly.

Steady ...
Her hand tightened around a metal ball in her bag. “On the way here. Didn’t you think it was a little odd that I’d take the exact same route back even though it wasn’t a direct path to the finish line?” The dog chuckled, amusement on his cute face when Katsumi noticed that the rustling had stopped.

A reddish-brown blur came at her at the speed of light and it was all Katsumi could do to take the little ball in her hand, chuck it at the ground and leap away simultaneously, safely out of range. She threw her shirt over her nose and wasted no time taking to the trees and retreating as smoke and chili powder filled the air from her bomb. She then, for good measure, proceeded to flare her chakra and ignited every explosive tag within a half kilometer radius at the same time, the evidence of her destruction nearly deafening her with the earth-shaking boom.

She’d left the clearing that the dogs were in alone, not wanting to seriously injure them in the exercise, but damn, if her ears were ringing, she knew the ninken were much worse off than her. She felt Kakashi-sensei cringe on her back as she ran in the other direction, trying not to inhale the remnants of her chili-powder scented surprise.

It was a little thing she’d taken the time to make when she couldn’t sleep and her mind wanted to wander to unsavory places. Sometimes, late at night, she’d test them deep in the woods on Tazuna’s property until she came back smelling like a spice-cabinet with red eyes, a runny nose, and a tired, but satisfied smile.

In turn, she’d taken to carrying at least three of her modified smoke-bombs on her at all times because she’d never know when she’d need one. Now, the dogs were temporarily robbed of three of their senses: hearing from the explosion, scent from the chili powder, and sight from the smoke, which would buy Katsumi hopefully enough time to get back to the starting point.

Forcing chakra into her legs, she ran, ditching her familiar route and opting to go directly to the finish line. Her own harsh breathing filled her ears as she bolted, flying through the forest as the competitive spirit pushed her harder than she thought she could go, maintaining her speed as the kilometers counted down.

Untying Bull will take a while with no thumbs. She grinned viciously.

When Katsumi finally reached the clearing, sprinting like the shinigami themselves were on her heels, the real Kakashi-sensei was reading his book leisurely. Too tired to even scowl, she dropped the clone onto the ground, her hands on her knees as she sucked down air, ignoring the stitch that had wormed its way into her side and the aching in her arms as she had to give up using chakra to hold up Kakashi-sensei on the last kilometer to use that chakra to aid in her speed, not trusting her distractions to work for much longer.
“Took you long enough,” Kakashi drawled, suddenly in front of her with a canteen extended. Katsumi took it without complaint, gratefully downing water quickly to stave off her dehydration. When she finally looked up, he dispelled the clone, his eyes fluttering as he received all of its memories.

Katsumi fell onto the grass, moving sluggishly to stretch out her aching legs in front of her.

“Clever. Very clever strategy, Katsumi-chan. How’d you think of it?”

“Which part?” she asked, her voice perforated by her harsh breathing.

“All of it.” Katsumi stopped and thought for a moment.

“I knew I probably couldn’t finish the task with Naruto, Sasuke, and the dogs all on me at the same time so I made sure to minimize the possibility of that happening by altering my route. It was longer, pretty efficient. That, paired with rigging my path with traps and a couple other tricks, helped to keep the ninken away for the way there.”

“And on the way back?”

“Well I’d barely stayed away from them the first time so I figured that they’d find me again. Knowing that, I took the same route so I’d be close to any traps I may need. After confronting Pakkun, Ūhei, and Bull, I figured out that they track using a mixture of chakra-sensing and good old-fashioned scent tracking so I took out Bull first since he seemed like the most immediate threat, and got rid of their senses to buy myself time.”

“Did you have to destroy half of the forest while you were at it?” Kakashi looked both proud and a little bit exasperated at her display and her eyes widened for a moment.

“Wait, no civilians live out this far, right?”

The jonin shook his head, a little amused by her sudden realization. “Nope, it’s only Tazuna. Still, you probably displaced some wildlife.”
“I didn’t do anything worse than Naruto and Sasuke did in their brawl,” she said defensively. “It was for disorientation more than anything. I figured that it’d be hard to track me with chakra if bits of my chakra were going off at random intervals all throughout the forest. It was a smokescreen technique so I’d be harder to pinpoint. Then, I ran and here we are.” Katsumi finished, finally catching her breath.

“Here we are indeed.” The jonin looked at her, an unreadable expression on his face before it disappeared entirely.

He’s studying me.

“What now, Kaka-sensei?” She plucked at nonexistent lint on her pants, trying to ignore the unease that crept into her mind when she saw Kakashi-sensei’s analyzation. He sent a fake smile her way.

“We wait for the boys to catch up, Katsumi-chan. Feel free to cool off while we wait.” Katsumi, needing no further prompting, resumed her stretches on the ground. This went on for about thirty minutes before Katsumi got bored and asked Kakashi-sensei how to mask her chakra signature and he agreed.

Katsumi was in the middle of meditating when her wayward teammates burst through the treeline, running neck and neck towards them. When they both got to the pair at the exact same time, Katsumi snorted at their simultaneous declarations of who was there first.

“C’mon, I got here first, y’know!”

“No way, dobe! I totally got here before you did! And I would’ve gotten here sooner if you hadn’t interfered with—”

“You interfered with me first, you bastard!”

“Get real, Naruto! Kakashi-sensei, I got—”

“NO HE DIDN’T!”
“Stop interrupting me!”

“Both of you be quiet,” Kakashi-sensei said, an unimpressed look in his eye. He crossed his arms over his chest and appraised the filthy boys.

“Did you guys fall into a ditch or something?” Katsumi asked, seeing all of the dirt on their skin and clothes and wrinkling her nose up playfully. “Looks like you guys got buried alive.”

Sasuke scowled at her observation and turned to the jonin. “Kaka-sensei, I got here first. Now if you could please tell Naruto over here that—”

“Where’s the object?” Kakashi asked evenly.

Both boys’ gazes dropped down, Sasuke looking aggravated and Naruto’s blue eyes sheepish. Naruto mumbled out something unintelligible and Katumi cracked a grin.

“What was that, Naruto-kun?” Kaka-sensei asked and Sasuke’s scowl deepened.

“We, uh… we accidentally popped the clones on the way back.”

There was a beat of silence before it was shattered by Katumi cackling.

A lone bead of sweat made its way down Katumi’s forehead as she focused intensely on her own body. They’d been working at chakra suppression for the past day since she’d asked to learn so Katumi was more than accustomed to the steps Kaka-sensei made her go through.

Still didn’t make it any less irritating to have to meditate for a half hour in the heat to get a better sense of her own chakra system. Naruto and Sasuke were working on water-walking a half kilometer away with a shadow-clone so she had zero distractions.

It was slow, slow work.
“Look inwards. Feel your chakra coils, the flow of the chakra, everything.” Kakashi’s unusually attentive voice called out from behind her. “When you’ve pinpointed it, let me know.” Katumi closed her eyes and did as she was told, sensing the flow of her energy throughout her limbs quickly. They’d spent the past two days after she asked just meditating for this exact purpose so the act of feeling her chakra was almost automatic at this point.

“Got it.”

“Alright. Think of your chakra like a flame, as long as you’re living, it’ll keep burning uninhibited. Chakra suppression is like dampening the flame,” he explained. “You have to intentionally snuff out the flame yourself. How can shinobi do this without dying?”

“By making their chakra signatures comparable to that of a small animal or a civilian,” Katumi answered promptly.

“Good. Is it possible to completely suppress your chakra?” Kakashi-sensei quizzed. Katumi’s eyebrows furrowed as she thought about his question.

“Yes, it just takes a lot of chakra control.”

“Correct. Should you ever completely suppress your chakra? Why or why not?”

This one took a bit more thought before she found what she thought to be the correct answer.

“No,” she said slowly, “because to any halfway decent sensor, you’d just be a black hole in their vision since chakra is all around us. The absence would draw their attention fast as hell.”

“Good. Come here,” he beckoned lazily. Katumi rose from her spot on the grass and walked over to the seated jonin. “You have decent sensing capabilities which you can definitely work with. But, for now, try to memorize my chakra signature.” Kakashi held out his forearm to her and Katumi gingerly grabbed it, closing her eyes to sense his chakra via direct contact. “What does it feel like?”

Katumi branched a tentative tendril of her own chakra out into his system to sense the flow. “Almost…” she paused, thinking about the right word. “Sharp? Like both cold and hot at the same
time, you know?” She frowned, trying to compare his chakra to something tangible.

“Like lightning?” he offered. She nodded vigorously.

“Exactly like lightning. There’s also less than I thought there was and—” she sucked in a sharp breath, her eyes snapping open. “Your chakra is being drained like crazy right now even though you’re not doing anything...” Katsumi trailed off, before thinking of what the drain could be from. She moved her hand to his face, a question in her eyes. “Do you mind if I—”

“It’s fine,” he sounded almost bored with her ministrations. She placed her hand on his forehead protector before lifting it up to meet a blood-red eye marked by three tomoe. The vibrant color would’ve caught her off-guard had she not seen the Sharingan in action already with Zabuza. Katsumi closed her eyes as she felt for the tiny chakra pathways in his face, pinpointing the ones that fed into his eyes and frowning.

_They’ve been altered._

Katsumi felt the chakra imprint left behind from a quick, but not shoddily done bit of healing. The echoes of minty healing chakra pinged on her radar as her chakra flitted through his paths, judging the damage. The tiny pathways had been fused with the foreign ones connected to the Sharingan, his chakra system almost forced open to accept the eye. The veins had been cauterized and the damage had been healed in a way that spoke volumes about the situation Kaka-sensei must’ve been in at the time and about what had been done. Katsumi’s chakra felt the deadened nerves and she almost cringed.

_This wasn’t originally his eye_, she noted, feeling around for any signs of the previous owner’s chakra and finding faint traces of smoky chakra. _The transplant must’ve been done by one hell of a medic._

“She was.” Katsumi’s eyes shot open at his level words, finding his gaze on his book. _I’ve gotta stop thinking out loud_. She felt the tips of her ears burn. Before she could settle into her mortification, he quickly batted her hand away and slid his hitai-ate back over his eye. Katsumi stuck out her tongue and he rolled his eye. “What could you tell from sweeping your chakra through my system?”

Katsumi quickly recounted all of her findings, touching on the ghosts of old chakra and her ideas on what happened based on the evidence. “It was probably done while the donor was still alive, most likely done on the battlefield judging by how hasty the pathway merging was. Your chakra paths weren’t made to host the Sharingan, thus they suck up a huge amount of chakra,” she finished. “How come you can’t turn them off?”
Kakashi shrugged, turning a page in his book. Katumi tried to surreptitiously get a peek of what he was reading before he angled the novel away from her intruding eyes. She pouted, her curiosity being foiled. “Dunno. They’ve just always been like this: on and sucking up chakra.” Katumi nodded, pondering the logistics behind a surgery of this caliber. “What, are you hoping to become a med-nin?” Kakashi asked, noticing her interest. She shook her head.

“No, my chakra control is good. Not that good.” Kasumi snorted at the idea. “Plus I don’t think I’m cut out for that kind of work. Always working support while my friends are in the thick of things?”

“It’s noble work,” Kakashi pointed out. “The strongest woman on this side of the world Senju Tsunade-sama is a med-nin and that woman has leveled mountain ranges with the flick of a finger.” He looked up at her disbelieving expression. “Not mountains, mountain ranges. All with her perfect chakra control.” Her eyebrows shot up, thoroughly impressed.

“As fun as that sounds, I still don’t think I could be a medic. Medics are usually the first target. Nope, no iryo-nin duties for me. Though it does seem useful to know how to heal…” she trailed off coming close to rethinking her choice.

“Maybe you should take a couple first aid classes,” Kaka-sensei offered. “Not enough to become a full-fledged med-nin, but enough to keep people alive until someone better comes.”

“That’s a good idea, Kaka-sensei. I’ll look into that when we get back to Konoha,” she conceded, smiling a bit. She took that moment to walk back to her meditation spot a few feet away.

“About going home,” Kakashi started, putting his book in his lap and looking at her head-on. “When we get back, I want you to see a therapist to work through your trauma.” She halted at his words. Katumi turned to look at the jonin, a frown tugging at her mouth.

“I’m not even scared of water anymore,” she protested. “Kakashi-sensei, I’m fine now.” Katumi placed a hand on her hip and stared at her sensei intently. She opened her mouth to refute his idea further when he cut her off, his tone surprisingly sharp.

“Then why are you still taking my soldier pills?” Any argument died in her throat and she looked away, shoving her hands in the pockets of her black pants. “They’re heavily monitored for a reason, Katumi-chan. What, did you think I wasn’t going to notice?”
“I wasn’t being irresponsible with them,” she mumbled. “I was taking one every two to three days just like the bottle said.”

“And you thought that was healthy?” Katsumi scowled, channeling her inner Sasuke at the ground. “These specialty pills were made with my weight and height, age, and chakra levels in mind.” Katsumi settled in for a long-overdue scolding. “You taking pills meant for me isn’t doing you any favors. You could overload your chakra system or worse.”

“It was just supposed to be a stop-gap,” Katsumi bit out. “Just until I could—”

“Until you could what? Magically keep down food?”

“I’m working on it, alright?” she bit out, angry tears stinging her eyes.

Kakashi sighed, suddenly looking more tired than anything. “I know it’s hard to talk about what happened but you’re going to have to. If you want to be the best shinobi you can be, working through these things is necessary.” The genin’s indignation faded into a heavy weariness, the fight draining out of her.

“Fine. I’ll try it when we get home,” she conceded, crossing her arms contrarily. She’d go but she never said she’d like it. The jonin gave her a crinkled eye-smile and flash-stepped towards her, ruffling her hair abruptly. She moved to bat his hand away, hissing like a particularly angry cat. He darted out of the way, chuckling lightly under his breath. He clapped his gloved hands and settled back into a more professional posture.

“Now, back to chakra suppression.”

“How’d you clap without making a sound?”

He ignored her question. She huffed and sat back down to angrily meditate.

She muttered something that sounded suspiciously like the word ‘asshole’ under her breath when she closed her eyes.
“That doesn’t sound like meditation to me…”

The next day, Katsumi had just gotten the hang of a new jutsu in the late afternoon when she felt a group containing shinobi touch down near their location. Her hands dropped to her sides, the water she’d been manipulating splashing to the hardened ground, useless without her chakra running through it. She immediately began suppressing her chakra to make herself virtually invisible to any sensors. Her brow furrowed as she felt them zeroing in on Tazuna’s house quickly. Deciding quickly, she started off in the direction she knew a Kakashi clone would be stationed in the house.

She ran until she got to the house where she was half a kilometer from Tazuna’s, chakra used sparingly to augment her speed. Naruto was on body-guard duty while Sasuke was working with the real Kakashi-sensei on a new fire jutsu so she was basically on her own for a minute. She burst through the door of the small house and looked around for the clone.

A familiar mop of grey hair was on the couch in the sitting room. Kakashi looked up from his spot, orange book in hand. Katsumi wasted no time. “There’s a group of shinobi headed this way. I can’t pinpoint how many are coming or their general skill-level,” she admitted. “But they're coming in fast. ETA: maybe about ten minutes at their current speed.” She then unsheathed a kunai and chucked it between the clone’s eyebrows, dispelling it before it could realize what had happened. Inwardly snickering at the clone’s surprised expression, she started preparing the house for an invasion.

“Is something wrong, Katsumi-chan?” Tsunami had entered the room having heard all of the commotion. She wiped her wet hands on her skirt, smelling faintly of dishwashing soap. Katsumi, never being one for beating around the bush nodded.

“There’s a group of unknown shinobi headed this way.” Tsunami’s eyes widened at her words.

“Could they be the reinforcements you ordered from Konoha?” she asked hopefully. Katsumi shrugged.

“No, I’m sensing genin-levels of chakra. Konoha wouldn’t send more genin reinforcements for something like this. Where’s Inari?”

The woman placed her hands on her hips and thought for a moment. “He was in the backyard last I
saw him, playing some game. Should I—"

“Go get him?” Katsumi interrupted. “Yes.” Tsunami went back through the doors to find her son, admirably keeping her obvious terror on lock. Katsumi bit her lip, plans running through her head. The woman came back into the room, Inari hanging off of her hand. “Alright. Both of you get into the cellar. You’ll be safer there until my team gets back.”

Tsunami nodded gravely, pulling her son in the direction the aforementioned room. The boy sighed loudly. “See, I told you! Gato always wins. He’s going to kill all of us and th—”

“Inari!” Tsunami barked, mortified.

“You’ll definitely die if you keep that attitude. Now shut up and get in the cellar with your mother.” Katsumi dismissed, too distracted to be annoyed. Both civilians did as she said and she checked on the inbound group of ninja. They’ll be here within the next eight or so minutes, she estimated. The door burst open suddenly and Katsumi almost jumped a foot in the air.

Naruto and Sasuke came in through the front door with a panicked Tazuna in tow. Katsumi noted the dirt and blood that had stained their hands, faces, and clothes and decided that the worse had come. So when Naruto exclaimed “One of my sentry clones spotted a group of enemy-nin coming to the house and fast! Gato’s here!”, all Katsumi could think was:

Fuck.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: and here’s where things get sticky, y’all.

Merry Christmas to all those celebrating and cheers to a new year starting tomorrow (holy shit, I graduate in 5 months whaaaaaa). I honestly didn’t think I’d make it this far in writing this fanfiction. I had always been a passive member of this site, reading and
giving basic feedback on my favorite works but never ever writing any of my own. But now, I’m like, kinda an author and that shit is wild to me! Thanks to everyone who has kept reading and has made it this far! I really appreciate it! After the Chuunin Exam arc, the plot kinda deviates and after that is where I will end this fic in the dead space in between Naruto and Naruto Shippuden, so expect about ten-ish more chapters until we end this fic. Of course, I’m going to keep going with this fic (I already know how I want it to end, who I’m pairing Katsumi up with eventually, the whole nine ;) but I do want to know if I should make the blank space a fic of its own in the HoS universe, like a series of drabbles of Katsumi’s time in that dead space and then go immediately onto the Shippuden era, which will be a much longer story, or if I should just skip immediately to Shippuden. Lemme know what you think. I’ll make sure update y’all on my decision the tumblr so keep your eyes peeled Happy Holidays and here’s to a prosperous (and writer’s block free ;_;) new year, y’all. :)

QoTP: What jutsu do you think Katsumi had just gotten the hang of when Gato’s goons showed up? Follow-up question: What quote or saying did you guys like the most? Mine was “Don’t test me, bitch.” Made me cackle when I wrote it. Mkay bye y’all. Onto the next!

BUT WAIT, THERE'S MORE

I’m going to start thanking my commenters because y'all are the greatest and I was going to start with the ones on the most recent chapters but that wouldn't be fair to the ones who commented before Chapter 16 so here we go (and P.S.: I'm doing this every chapter so it'll never be this long again but I figured, hey, why not)

Shoutout to users: Kurochach, Chriisss, Faedra, and jdjd I love y'all more than words can say. You guys commenting and interacting really helps motivate me when I start to lose my motivation to write so thank so you much!

SPECIAL SHOUT OUT: The tumblr homies including: dreamtogether2000 (the og), nagel-1, simulationtext, and fiendish-fiend (my actual friend in real, actual like wtf leave me alone ;_;) you guys make my heart go uwu <3

OKAY I KNOW THIS WAS LONG BUT I LOVE EVERYONE WHO HAS READ THIS STORY AND ENCOURAGED ME TO KEEP GOING OKAY THANKS BYE FR Y'ALL
Blood, Blood, Gallons of the Stuff

Chapter Notes

TW: blood and gore, other implied stuff. read at your own risk. shit gets wild.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Gato’s here!”

The roaring in Katsumi’s head stopped at his words. *Time’s up*. She took a deep, steadying breath before springing into action.

“Where’s Kakashi-sensei?” she asked, already moving to her room to grab the rest of her gear, throwing her sandals on, slinging her equipment pouch onto her hips, and finally, adjusting and tightening her hitai-ate.

“At the bridge,” Sasuke supplied, going into his own shared room to do the same, gearing up for combat rather than guard-duty. “He told us to grab Tazuna and get back to the house to evacuate him and his family and to take care of the team of enemies coming to the house.”

“Well, we know what to do. Naruto?” Katsumi called.

The blond was already going through the seals. “On it.” Soon enough, the room was full of Naruto clones. Sasuke slid his gloves on, looking moderately excited by the action and Katsumi finished strapping her holsters to her legs.

“The civilians are in the cellar, Naruto,” Sasuke offered. Half of the Narutos nodded and disappeared to go retrieve their new charges while the other half moved to run interference with the enemy shinobi that were approaching until the only Naruto left was the real one.

“Alright team,” Katsumi started, looking both boys squarely in the eye. “This is where things get a little sticky.” Naruto let out a strained laugh and Sasuke cracked a wry smile. “Sasuke, you’re with me. Naruto—”

“I knooooow,” he whined, “Keep the civvies safe and keep making clones to run distract for you
guys.” Katsumi nodded, happy that he remembered his role and wasn’t going to complain heavily like he did when he’d first been assigned it.

“Watch your—”

“Watch my reserves, I know .”

He’s learning .

“Stay safe and be smart ,” she added, looking both boys in the eye with her command. Naruto bounded towards her and wrapped her in a crushing bear-hug before wrapping an arm around Sasuke and dragging him into what had just become a group hug. Oddly enough, the raven-haired boy didn’t struggle too much, just looking a little constipated.

“We’ll be fine, y’know! Now let’s teach these jerks a lesson!” he exclaimed after he released them, punching his hand and looking determined. Sasuke snorted and Katsumi laughed. “Bye guys!”

The blond vanished. Sasuke’s gaze found hers and she noticed a fire glowing in their onyx depths. Good. He’s motivated.

“How far out are they?”

“Four minutes, maybe?” she answered, straining her budding sensory capabilities to get more information now that they were well within her range. “There’s half a dozen of them, three of them are no more than civilian thugs but the other three…” she trailed off, pinpointing their approximate chakra levels. “There’s two high genin-level shinobi and one squarely chunin level.”

Sasuke cracked his knuckles. “I like those odds. That’s doable.” Katsumi smirked at his confidence. “Are the civilians out?”

Katsumi nodded, feeling Naruto’s chakra heading in all different directions, as per their modified escape plan. If they had any sensory ninja, they’d be hard-pressed to find the right Naruto if they saw through their ruse and decided to go after the civilians instead. The other Naruto clones were lying in wait all around the property, ready to attack when given the signal.
“Let’s move out.”

The two genin ran to meet the confrontation head-on.

Katsumi ducked under a fast kick aimed at her head and pressed a hand to her bleeding side, breathing heavily. She flipped the kunai in her hand and slashed at her opponent, aiming to hamstring him before he pulled his leg away from her reach, smirking.

She’d been fighting for about an hour now and needless to say, she was getting a little tired as the sun was beginning to set and the temperature began dropping. Katsumi blocked a punch to the gut, her forearm groaning in protest, and tried to sweep her opponent’s feet out from under him, becoming more than slightly frustrated at his timely jump.

Katsumi and Sasuke had worked together to take down the three civilian thugs as well as one of the other genin but they were having a bit of trouble. After meeting the group and leading them inward towards the house and detonating the minefield, causing an impressive set of explosions taking out the genin, they were left only with the last two shinobi. High-level genin my ass. This dude is chunin level at least.

They’d split up, each taking a ninja to fight and they’d been like this since, deadlocked in a battle of wits and skill. Sasuke had long since taken his fight somewhere else in order to keep from catching his teammate in any large-scale attacks. Naruto’s clones had begun dwindling until she could hardly sense any near her so Katsumi was effectively on her own until further notice.

Katsumi had been engaged in tight combat for the better part of twenty minutes with the hulking brute, trying to find openings to end the fight as soon as possible. The man was at least a decade her senior and had probably about eighty or so pounds on her with the skills to match his size. So far, the damage inflicted had been about even, but the stalemate was growing old quickly.

“Getting tired, Little Leaf?” the enemy shinobi asked with a smirk on his lips, using the dumb nickname he’d taken to using as soon as he saw her headband. “Don’t worry, I’ll make it quick.” Something about his words reminded her painfully of Zabuza and that made her blood boil. With a newly renewed fighting spirit, she darted inward to engage with a bit more ferocity than before.

Katsumi aimed an open palm strike at the chunin’s solar plexus, feeling it connect lightly before the man shunshined a few feet away, rubbing his chest and swearing under his breath. The last Naruto clone came from behind and jumped on the back of the shinobi, surprising him enough to create an
opening. Katsumi dashed towards her cursing opponent and wasted no time slashing her kunai deftly across his throat, expecting to feel the accompanying blood spray on her face.

At the last second, however, the man destroyed the clone and threw his head back an inch, barely missing her killing blow, but not being able to stop the damage completely. Katsumi jumped back to disengage and quickly assessed the damage she’d caused. There was a flap of flesh right above his collar-bones that was gushing blood onto his dark grey vest as well as a few miscellaneous cuts and bruises from their earlier fights. He breathed heavily, pressing a hand to his wound, looking furious.

“You little bitch,” he hissed, raising his hands to make half a dozen seals. “I’ll get you back for that one.” Katsumi threw a kunai in his direction but the damage was already done when he ducked under them to slam his palms on the ground. “Doton: Āsuburēdo!”

Had she been at one hundred percent, dodging that attack would have been at least somewhat possible. But since she had a gash in between her ribs bleeding profusely, a sprained wrist, a couple burns from the explosive tags, and several other assorted cuts, she wasn’t as fast as she needed to be. She took a step back unconsciously, moving her left leg out of the way.

Time slowed down for a moment and she felt the impact of his jutsu. Oh, she thought a millisecond before the pain really set in. This is going to hurt like a bitch.

It did.

Pain, pain, pain like nothing she’d ever felt before erupted in her right leg as what felt like several spikes rambled their way into her appendage from her mid-thigh to her lower calf, shredding muscle and pulverizing bone as they went in. A scream tore its way out of her throat, loud and keening, as she fell forward onto her hands, her vision tunneling and darkening. Through the pained fog, she vaguely heard her opponent laughing. She looked up at the man to see him ambling towards her as he lazily spun a kunai around his finger by the ring.

She, against her better judgment, chanced a look at her injury and almost threw up. To say that the once smooth bronze skin was mangled would be an understatement. She forced herself to assess the damage, noting that four spears about as thick as her upper arm had forced their way into her, passing cleanly through. I’m no medic, but I know that an injury like this could very easily kill me and quickly.

Katsumi’s harsh breaths sounded out as she realized that the full pain hadn’t yet set in fully. Thank the Sage for adrenaline. That meant she had time, but not a lot. Black began to eat at her vision, but Katsumi stubbornly kept a tight grip on consciousness, knowing intuitively that if she passed out
now, even if the chunin were to suddenly drop dead, she wouldn’t wake back up. Plans began forming sluggishly in her pain-addled brain, weighing her options as the chunin took his sweet time. *If I can just get that sadist close enough…*

The genin wracked her pain-addled brain, grasping at strategies as they fled her mind in her borderline panic as she bled out. *C’mom, think of something!* she thought, her carefully managed panic surging, making it harder and harder to strategize. That’s when it hit her. Katsumi took a deep breath, steadying herself for what she was about to do next.

Then, she forced her eyes to widen in fear and began tugging at her pinned leg, desperation coloring her jerky movements, like a cornered animal. The tears that began streaming down her dirty face and the shaking in her body weren’t faked as the pain was arcing through her like lightning, making it almost impossible to think clearly. She knew she was only making the damage *worse* in her sharp movements, but she knew this was the only viable option. She let out fearful shrieks started to beg, meaningless frantic consonants and vowel sounds bubbling from her lips like water and Katsumi saw the cruel glint in his eye grow as he smiled, a slash of bright white teeth that promised something worse than death. He stalked towards her slowly, dragging out the confrontation and Katsumi hammed it up accordingly. She preyed upon his sadistic streak, pressing all of the necessary buttons to make his perverse interest in causing pain overrule his desire to finish the mission completely.

And by the looks of it, it was working.

As he got closer, she gathered chakra into her palms in a light layer, not enough to be detectable unless he was looking for it, which through his bloodlust, he probably wasn’t even aware of. She knew, as drained as she was, she’d only have one shot with this. *And it might not even work, it’s all theoretical*— No, she decided, cutting off her panicked thoughts. *It will be enough. It has to be.*

*You do not yield.*

“You’re a fierce little thing, aren’t you?” He finally stopped in front of her, chuckling at her disheveled appearance. “Now that I think about it,” he started, taking in her tearstained and bloodied appearance with a bloodthirsty sort of glee. “I don’t think I’ll make it quick after all, Little Leaf. My apologies.” He placed his hands together and released the crimson-stained spears back into the earth, delighting in her pained gasps. “Now that my job is done, you’re going to be coming with me.”

Katsumi groaned as he scooped her up into his arms, making sure to jostle her lightly. She forced herself to thrash a little, just to keep up the charade. “I would knock you out, but it wouldn’t be near as fun that way.” Her heart almost stopped beating in her chest, the panic on her face very much so *real*.
You do not yield! The closer he was, the better this would work. Steady, she thought, keeping the fight or flight response tamped down as low as possible as to not ruin her own plans through her fear. He assumed that she was too wracked by pain and chakra-drained to do anything more.

Big mistake.

The only notice he had was the sharp rise in her chakra-levels as she slammed a chakra-coated hand over his chest and pulled with all of her might using her chakra.

For a moment nothing happened.

Then, the screaming started. Ugly, gut-wrenching howls came from the chunin as he became the one thrashing. He dropped her abruptly as she planned, and she let out a scream at the impact, harsh breaths tearing through her as the black spots reemerged once again. Katsumi then looked at her handiwork.

The chunin was stumbling backward, clutching his head in his hands as he made high, wounded sounds low in his throat. His skin had taken on a greyish-blue pallor and he started shaking violently. Then, he dropped to his knees and as his heart stopped beating in his chest, and fell flat on his face, dead.

It worked.

Katsumi dropped the chakra sheathing her hand and with it, assorted liquids splashed onto the ground near her. For a moment, all she could hear was her own labored breaths. All was quiet around her. Oh shit. Slowly, but surely the adrenaline in her blood was lessening and the pain was beginning to sharpen once more, increasing its intensity and fast. I need immediate medical attention, she decided fuzzily, taking deep breaths to slow down her heart-rate. Her blood was everywhere, staining her clothes, the ground, even getting on her hands and face.

She looked around the desolate area for something, anything, she could use to staunch the dangerous flow of blood stemming from her leg and finding nothing. She was dying and she knew it.

Naruto was at the bank, hopefully sending out more clones, but there was no guarantee that he could send some more in time. Sasuke was Tobirama-knows-where, hopefully not dead in a ditch. Kakasensei was likely still tied up at the bridge and wouldn’t be able to assist her for an indefinite amount of time.
She was alone.

“Hello? Sasuke? Is anyone out there?” she called out weakly, feeling her strength wane. “I’m really injured and I need help.” She started coughing violently, before trying again, but louder. “Kakashi-sensei? Naruto? Sasuke? Anybody? I need help,” she tried again, her voice cracking on the last syllable. Her breathing quickened, as she realized that there was a high probability that she would die from this injury, alone and scared in the middle of bum-fuck-nowhere Wave country and with that, she began to cry.

Great sobs wracked her small frame, both from the pain and the fear, tears making their way down her dirty cheeks. *There’s so much I wanted to do …*

She slumped, laying on her back when the adrenaline finally gave out, staring up at the grey sky as black began eating away at her vision once more. Katsumi fought valiantly against it like she did before, this time unaided by a battle-high, feeling death disguised as drowsiness pull her down, feeling the dizziness of severe blood-loss take over and cloud her mind.

*Wait.*

She felt three chakra signatures coming toward her quickly from the east, though in this state, she was unable to tell anything else about them other than that they were coming fast. *From the bridge,* she realized, her hope renewing. Katsumi felt a small surge in strength as she held on by the skin of her teeth to consciousness. Voices muffled by the sound of her blood rushing in her ears sounded off entirely too close to her as she rallied her strength one more time.

“Over here,” she called weakly. Shouts rang out and her fading vision was suddenly filled with a shock of silver hair and a swirling, red eye. “Hi, Kaka-sensei,” she offered faintly.

“What happened?” he demanded, not searching her body for injury for long before pausing on the monstrosity in place of her right leg. Something in his face tightened at the sight and he paled slightly. “Oshiro—”

“Already on it,” said a feminine voice to her right. Though she had traded her lab-coat for a jonin vest, if the sandy blonde hair wasn’t a dead giveaway, the smile she offered was. “Hi, Katsumi-chan. Hold still for me.” Her palms lit up with green medical chakra as she assessed the damage dealt to her leg. Katsumi sat up a little to see that the injury looked markedly worse in the almost ghastly green light than it did earlier before Kakashi-sensei eased her back down to lie supine.
“Lay back down,” he urged. Katumi shrugged and did as he asked.

“Kakashi, keep her talking and keep her warm,” the medic ordered absentmindedly.

“Hai,” her sensei murmured, an odd look in his eye. Scared, she realized, placing the emotion. He’s scared. He took off his jonin vest and rested it across her like a blanket, his brow pinched with worry. “Report,” he demanded, his voice unusually gruff.

“I got in a fight. You should see the other guy,” she joked, jerking her chin in the direction of the enemy chunin a few meters away from her in the fading light of the evening. A low whistle came from her left.

“Damn, kid,” came a familiar jonin in a bandana. He flicked the senbon in his mouth absentmindedly and he made a quick circle around the body. “The hell happened?”

“Hi Genma-san,” she greeted, surprisingly lucid. Wait, I can’t feel my leg, she realized. “Oishisensei, my leg—,” she murmured, feeling dizzy.

“I deadened the nerves from your hip down in order to stabilize you,” she explained quietly as she worked. “You would be thrashing around too much for me to work otherwise.”

“How’d you get hurt this badly?” Genma inquired as he began stuffing the body into a storage scroll. That’s weird, Katumi thought hazily. S’not like the guy was anyone important or anything. Why waste a storage scroll on that?

Katumi then became aware of the gloved fingers snapping in front of her face, blinking rapidly in response. She had zoned out for a moment and didn’t even realize it. “Hey, keep focused,” Kaka-sensei urged, not chancing jostling her while Mei was working. “How did this happen?” he asked, gesturing to her injury.

“My leg got shattered when he used a doton jutsu. Something about spears?” Her memory was fuzzy and at this point, everything was too difficult. Then she almost bolted upright. “Naruto and Sasuke, where—”
“They’re fine. Back at Tazuna’s house with another med-nin getting patched up,” he said, easing her concerns. “Everyone is fine, Katsumi.”

“Oh,” she replied, relieved. “Alright.” Her face scrunched up in thought and she asked: “Will I be?”

There was a pregnant pause as her question rang out.

“Oh, course, kid,” Genma assured, crouching down low and squeezing her shoulder to comfort her.

“Oh, alright,” she repeated, a small smile on her lips.

And then she promptly passed out, the alarmed yelling fading into nothing at all.

The first thing she noticed when she woke up was the glaring lack of noise. Am I dead? Then, she felt the dull throbbing behind her eyes, the dryness in her mouth, and a blank space where her right leg should be.

Alarmed, her eyes shot open and she threw the blanket covering her lower body off of her and breathed a sigh of relief when she saw her leg intact and firmly connected to her body with a white plaster cast from her hip to her toes. After that healthy dose of adrenaline at the wee hours of— she looked out the window, and gauged the time based on the amount of daylight since her internal clock was shot — between one and four in the afternoon it seemed, she took in her surroundings.

Konoha General?

She took in the low, steady beeping of the machines at her bedside and looked down at her right arm at the IV drip and at the bandages wrapping her arm at various places over wounds she’d sustained at Wave.

Wave!

Then all the memories came back in a rush, fuzzy with a few pieces missing, but still there. Her heart
raced at the memory and her wide eyes darted to the slowly opening door. A sandy-blond head poked in, smiling in greeting.

“Hi Katsumi-chan,” Oshiro-sensei greeted, moving around the room, writing something down on a chart, likely entering some data. “How’re you feeling?”

“Like shit.” The med-nin laughed at that, sending her an amused glance and sitting down at the armchair by the window to face Katsumi.

“I was expecting you’d say something like that.”

“Where’s my team? What happened while I was out?” she interrogated, cutting to the chase quickly.

“Relax, they’re fine,” she reassured. Katsumi felt some of the tension draining out of her muscles at her words, breathing a sigh of relief at the good news. “You’ve been out for about five-ish days. After you got injured, we brought you back to the bridge-builder’s house and got ready to head out now that the threat had been neutralized.”

“Naruto and Sasuke?”

“I healed the boys enough to make them well enough to travel and we came back to the village, where I could heal you better. You were in rough shape when we brought you in, despite my frequent healing sessions on the road. It’s a wonder you didn’t die before we made it back.”

Katsumi felt her brow furrow at the news, rolling the information around in her head. I almost died. Again? Before she could feel anymore furious at herself, she was shaken out of her thoughts by laughter. She looked up from her lap to see Oshiro snickering like a prepubescent boy at her likely sour expression. “You’re going to make a full recovery, don’t worry.”

She shifted in the bed, careful not to jostle her injured limb too much lest she messes up the impressive anesthetic effect the doctor had put on it and the pain comes back full force. “How long until I’m out of the hospital?”

“No less than two weeks. Maybe three.”
“What?” Katsumi exclaimed, already anticipating how that would affect her training regimen. “Why so long?” she asked, a frown pulling at her lips.

“Um, because we had to completely regenerate about sixty percent of your femur and piece back together your tibia as well as regrow your vastus lateralis, fix the gaping holes in your adductor magnus and gastrocnemius, and —”

The doctor stopped her rambling, seeing the confused expression on Katsumi’s face at all of the medical jargon. “Your leg was fucked up,” she summarized. “So fucked up that I couldn’t heal it all in one go and it’s not completely healed yet either.”

“Wait, I thought you said you pieced back together all the muscles and bones and whatnot.”

“There’s only so much medical chakra can do. With high-trauma injuries like yours, sometimes too much chakra can do more harm than good. No, it’s better for you in the long-run for you to heal the rest of the way the good old fashioned way.”

“When can I begin training again?” Oshiro-sensei glared at her and Katsumi sighed. “When will it be safe for me to start lightly working out again?” she amended, rolling her eyes at the med-nin’s answering smile.

“Well, with the physical therapy you’re going to be going through, you should be back to normal in about two months, just in time for the Chuunin Exams.”

Katsumi paused her fidgeting to look up at the doctor who looked slightly guilty. “Wait, are we expected to enter?”

Oshiro rose from her seat, slapping her knees as she got up, flashing Katsumi a bright smile. “Well, it’s nice to know you’re in good spirits, Katsumi-chan. I’ll be back tomorrow to run some diagnostics on your leg before I assign you a physical therapist to work with.”

“But, Mei-sensei—”

“Your team should be coming to visit you within the hour,” she plowed on, ignoring Katsumi’s question and gathering her things to leave. “Make sure you don’t move around too much. Bye kid.”
And she was alone again.

She didn’t even spend an entire hour on her own before the door was thrown open and a familiar shock of blond hair invaded her room and her vision. “Katsu-chaaaaaaaan!” Naruto, using speed she didn’t even remember him having, was at her side immediately, looking like he wanted to give her the biggest bear-hug he could muster but thought better of it given her condition. He settled for grabbing her hand and squeezing it, a huge grin on his face. “You’re finally awake!”

“Hey, Naruto,” she greeted with a little less enthusiasm but just as much warmth. She shifted her gaze to their other teammate who had filed in after Naruto had made his grand entrance, giving him a smile as well. “Hey, Sasuke.” Katsumi noticed the slight tremble in his fingers and the dark shadows around his eyes likely due to stress, inwardly frowning at the observation. What all did I miss? He gave her a small, sincere smile of his own which Katsumi took as a sign to save her questioning about their health for a later date.

“How are you feeling?” Naruto asked, searching her face for any sign of discomfort. “Are you hungry? Thirsty? I can call the nurse, y’know and they ca—”

“Naruto, slow down,” she chuckled at her friend’s excitement and because she didn’t want him to pass out from lack of air, she gave him a brighter smile to calm him down. “I’m fine. I saw the nurse, like, an hour ago.”

“Oh, alright.” Naruto scratched behind the back of his head sheepishly, breathing a little deeper.

“Why don’t you guys sit down and tell me what I missed while I was out, ne?” Both boys took the invitation to relax, Naruto sitting at the foot of her bed immediately and Sasuke taking the armchair by the window as Naruto began regaling the rest of their trip to Wave, Sasuke interjecting periodically when their blond teammate embellished.

“So Gato’s really gone?”

Sasuke nodded. “Cut down by Kakashi-sensei himself at the end of the battle. After all of his thugs had got taken out, he was a goner.”
“And the bridge?”

Naruto jumped back in. “There’s a team of chuunin guarding the rest of the building process to make sure Tazuna-san doesn’t get killed by any leftover thugs. We were relieved by Hokage-jiji and you should see how much money they deposited into our accounts, Katsu-chan! Get this, they paid us like it was an A-rank!”

“That’s because it was, Naruto.” Sasuke rolled his eyes at his cluelessness.

“That’s not all though,” Naruto added slyly, looking at Sasuke who puffed up a little with what Katsumi believed to be pride covered in his typical forced indifference. She arched an eyebrow and indicated for them to proceed.

Naruto opened his mouth but Sasuke beat him to it. “I awakened my Sharingan.”

Katsumi sat up in her bed, eyes widened at his announcement, a smile on her face. “Lemme see!” she demanded, slapping the mattress unconsciously in her excitement. He sighed, long-sufferingly — like he didn’t want a chance to show off to his team — and the signature red of his clan’s dojutsu bled into his eyes, complete with, curiously enough, two tomoe in his right eye and one in the left.

Katsumi whistled low, obviously impressed and Sasuke preened under the attention — as much as Sasuke could preen at least — and she asked when it happened. “During my fight with that chunin in Wave,” he explained, switching it off. “Apparently almost dying awakens the Sharingan,” he said dryly. Katsumi snorted and was about to respond when the door opened again and Kakashi-sensei stepped into the room with a lazy salute and a ‘yo’.

“I hate to interrupt my cute baby genin’s team-bonding, but I have to talk to Katsumi about some stuff now that she’s awake so Naruto-kun and Sasuke-kun get out.” He pointed his thumb in the direction of the door and proceeded to shoo the grumbling boys out of the room. When he finally shut the door, he ambled up to her hospital bed. “Good to see you awake again, Katsu-chan.”

Since when has he ever called me ‘Katsu-chan’? Katsumi wondered, her brain catching on that small detail and making her slightly uneasy. ‘Chișana ahiru’, ‘Katsu-hime’, and ‘kiddo’ are popular ones, but never ‘Katsu-chan’. That’s always been Naruto’s thing. She dismissed it, brightly smiled at him despite the change, just happy to see him again.
“Glad to be back, Kakashi-sensei.” He sent her an eye-smile at her words before lowering himself into the newly-vacant armchair. “What did you need to talk to me about?”

“Maa, Katsu-chan. So impatient.” _There it is again_. Katsumi glared. “Alright, fine. The enemy ninja back in Wave, the one that messed up your leg,” Katsumi winced at the memory. “How did you kill him?”

Katsumi’s eyebrows shot up at his odd question before answering him as evenly as possible. “I dehydrated him.”

“You _what_?”

“Well, people are, like, two-thirds water, right?” He nodded and she continued with her explanation. “So, I channeled chakra into my hands and just kinda-sorta pulled it out of him.”

He was quiet for a moment, seeming to roll the information around in his mind. “You dehydrated him. Huh.” For the first time ever, Katsumi saw her sensei look completely nonplussed by something, but again, her brain snagged on something else she found in his gaze. _Interest? No, that’s not it…_ She inwardly frowned, feeling her suspicion rise but keeping her expression clear. “How did you come across that idea?”

Call her paranoid, but something just seemed _off_. She had spent most of her time in her sensei’s presence trying to learn how to read him accurately. Because of that, she started looking for something to explain the weirdness.

First, it was the name-change, something she thought might’ve just been coincidental at first. Maybe not. His body language was all out of whack too: a little too straight and tight, contrasting greatly with his constant, easy-going slouch. The last, and most damning thing of all was his face, namely: _Why the hell could I see something like interest in sensei’s face at all?_

Usually, unless he was feeling an emotion that was particularly strong, all hope of being able to read him with accuracy was thrown out of the window preemptively. But now, Katsumi was _positive_ she could see the interest in the lines of his brow and the shades of his eyes, making her very, very uneasy.

She had an idea just to be _sure_ her bad feelings were just that: feelings and not something to be actively worried about, so, she lied. “From when we were practicing the water-bullet jutsu in Wave
when Naruto and Sasuke were practicing water-walking, remember?” The lies were subtle and believable, not enough for just anyone to know immediately, but enough to where, if that were the real Kakashi-sensei, he would correct her. “It was all theoretical of course. I just needed to neutralize the most immediate threat so I did,” she added, watching his expression carefully.

‘Kakashi-sensei’ just nodded, like he had forgotten all about what she was talking about, even going so far as to slap himself lightly on the forehead like he was surprised he had missed it. “Maa, you know me. My memory gets worse with age I suppose, an old man like me.” His false smile sobered up a little when he asked another question. “All of this without jutsu?”

“No jutsu.”

A beat of silence.

“An interesting use of chakra theory lessons I’ll tell you that much.”

‘Kakashi-sensei’ stood up to leave, sending her another perfectly practiced eye-smile before turning around and heading to the door.

Whoever the fake was certainly did his research.

By this time, Katsumi had been inching her hand towards the call-button, her suspicions confirmed that the person in her hospital room, while she was vulnerable, injured, and most importantly unarmed, was very much so not Kakashi-sensei. She had just been about to lunge for it before he got too far when suddenly a hand had her sore wrist in a bone-breaking grip. She swallowed her gasp of pain and gritted her teeth.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you.”

The unfamiliar voice sent chills down her spine as the hand squeezed her wrist harder to emphasize what position she was in. She kept her breathing as steady as possible while her heart threatened to beat right out of her chest, ignoring the pain. She had been right about to scream when she felt the ice cold kiss of steel against her delicate throat, threatening her more than words ever could. “You won’t have the chance, Katsu-chan.”

Katsumi was dimly aware of the heart rate monitor near her bedside picking up in speed as her heart beat frantically. “What do you want from me?” she bit out, trying not to let fear cloud her brain as she realized just how fucked she was. Unless someone busted into the room right now, there was no
way for her to get out of this, not the way she was now. She was truly at this person’s mercy. Her blood ran cold.

“Nothing but information,” the imposter answered their voice low and smooth.

“Are you going to kill me?”

The person wearing Kakashi-sensei’s face let out a laugh, so foreign with his voice. “Hardly. You interest me, Katsumi. You will interest my lord as well.”

Well she wasn’t going to die of a slit throat today and that was a relief, but she wasn’t out of the woods quite yet. She looked around the room, looking for something to get her out of this. “Who’re you working for, mystery patient-assailant?” she asked, keeping the fear out of her voice and forcing nonchalance to color her words. She just had to buy herself more time and keep him talking.

*If my heart-rate gets too fast, a nurse will come in,* she remembered, loosening her rigid hold on herself and letting the fear run rampant, listening to the telltale beeps to her right steadily pick up on purpose.

The imposter chuckled. “Well I suppose you’ll find that out soon enough, now won’t you?”

And before Katsumi could even do anything, she felt the prick of a needle at the base of her neck and she was washed in the tide of unconsciousness, the last five minutes wiped clean from her memory due to whatever was in that syringe.

When her breathing slowed and evened out, indicative of a deep sleep, the person wearing Kakashi’s face, wasting no time in getting seen by anyone else, quickly opened the window and jumped out, dropping the henge they had used to disguise their features and blending in with the bustling crowd in the middle of the hospital district, their job complete.

They smirked as they were waved at by a couple of random civilians and they raised their hand in greeting.

*Things just got interesting.*
A/N: OH SHIT. Things just got interesting indeed! There’s a lot to unpack in this chapter, especially Katsumi’s new kill-move (HOW FUCKING COOL IS THAT??) and the bad injury, plus Dr. Mei spillin the Chunin Beans. Oops. Question of the Post: Who do y’all think that was and why were they askin all those questions? Answer down below!! It’s not super hard to guess it lol but I’m curious as to why you guys think the imposter did all of that. Poor Katsumi. It’s just one thing after the other with her. ;-;

Optional QotP: What would be something you'd like to see Katumi (or really any of the characters tbh, I'm not picky) do skill/relationship-wise in the story? I'm open to anything.

Shout Outs: Cupcake (milkywayheartcupcake) and fudde who commented on the last chapter and Foodmoon, who left me three lovely comments on chapters 2, 3, and 4. Y’all are real ones!

Follow the HoS:ASE tumblr https://www.tumblr.com/blog/hosffblog.

Onto the next!
Katsumi had just woken up from her nap when a familiar voice filled her room.

“Oh thank Kami, you’re finally awake.”

For the second time that day, Katsumi’s hospital room’s door was thrown open to reveal a genin with blonde hair and blue eyes and Katsumi sighed as she readied herself for Hurricane Ino, haulng herself up in the hospital bed to sit upright against the headboard. The blonde girl, followed by an exasperated Shikamaru, a waving Choji, and, surprisingly enough, Sakura, all piled into her room. Katsumi’s eyes flicked to the nurse outside of her room who was overseeing her treatment, knowing that she most likely would have a problem with this many people at once in her room to find the nurse’s desk empty. *Huh, they must be doing rounds or something.*

The mattress dipped as Ino sat down on the foot of her bed and the rest of her guests took up space in various areas, most noticeably of which being Sakura standing by the door, looking ready to run if necessary. *Interesting.* She sent the girl a slight smile in greeting and the other kunoichi gave her one as well, looking a little bit pale and decidedly nervous.

“I heard from Naruto that you’re gonna be in the hospital for, like, the next *month.* What in the name of the Sage *happened*?” Ino questioned, her sharp gaze catching on the floral arrangement that had been sent in earlier from a group of volunteers determined to ‘cheer her up’. Katsumi sighed, already knowing what was coming before Ino could even angrily hiss “Who brought in this second-rate flower-arrangement?”

“Oh, here we go…” Shika muttered, settling into the armchair, placing his hands behind his head and relaxing like he was getting ready for the long-haul.

Ino ignored him and continued. “I mean, *violets*? Those aren’t even in season for one and everyone knows that the *right* flower for the occasion would’ve been—”

Choji coughed lightly and Ino sent him a glare at his interruption in her lecture about flowers and their meanings. She sighed deeply, as if not teaching them was paining her.

“You know what, we can talk about flowers later. What happened on you guys’ mission?”
Katsumi shrugged, not entirely sure what was supposed to be classified and what wasn’t seeing as though she wasn’t there for the mission briefing. She settled for a purposefully vague description, telling her friends the gist while also hoping she wasn’t breaching protocol too much. “It went sideways. We ran into a couple missing-nin that had been hired by some gang-leader and had to deal with the fall-out.”

“What happened to your leg?” Choji asked, catching a glimpse of white from her leg cast from where it wasn’t entirely covered by the blanket.

“I ran into trouble with an enemy shinobi.”

Their eyes widened at that and Katsumi could understand why; rarely did genin as inexperienced as they were go into combat with enemy shinobi and even rarer still did they come out alive. All of them, including the perpetually uninterested Shikamaru, had a plethora of questions to ask, but after a shared look between them while Katsumi looked away had them all keeping their mouths shut. Whether it was her tone or the way her eyes darkened a little towards the end of her sentence, the genin let up on their interrogations, as well-meaning as they might have been, sensing that this wasn’t something she wanted to talk about any time soon.

“Well, it’s good to see you back in one piece,” Sakura finally spoke up. When everyone turned to look at her because of her choice in wording, the tips of her ears pinkened. “What? I saw her when they brought her in,” she explained, shifting a little from foot to foot under the scrutiny. “My team and I were waiting to get our physicals done when we saw her.” She looked directly at Katsumi. “You looked pretty bad.”

“Forehead!” Ino shouted, looking shocked at her lack of manners. Katsumi’s eyebrows shot up at her candor, knowing that months ago, the Sakura she had been wouldn’t have been so straightforward and would have definitely minced words in the name of being polite; it was as much her trademark as her hair color.

“Thanks, Haruno,” she drawled, sending her a smirk, amused at her change in mien. “Believe it or not, I felt pretty bad too,” she huffed, a bit of laughter coloring her tone calming Ino down at Sakura’s almost intentional lack of tact. She’s testing us to see how we handle her new demeanor, Katsumi realized, sending a more full-bodied smile the pink-haired genin’s way before she really looked at the other girl.

Her previously ridiculously impractical loose hair was put up in a braided bun at the base of her head and it seemed that she’d traded in her silk dresses for a study red sleeveless shirt and a pair of black leggings with an equipment belt worn around her waist. Her well-muscled arms were covered in little
scars, likely received from training, and she now wore fingerless gloves to complete her look. Sakura looked a kunoichi for the first time and Katsumi was oddly proud of her. She looked like she was finally taking both shinobi life and herself seriously. *Looks like Sakura’s changed a lot in the past few months*. She both wanted to hug her and spar with her. The contrast was startling. “But I’m still standing.”

A snort that came from Shika’s direction was met with a pillow thrown with terrifying accuracy at his face. “Metaphorically, of course,” Katsumi added sweetly while her friend sputtered at the impact of the sudden projectile.

“Yeah guys, she’s back to normal,” Shika muttered, rubbing his nose where the pillow had made contact. The remaining kids in the room laughed at his reaction, including Sakura who sent a curt nod in her direction. *I’m glad you’re alright*, it said. Katsumi cracked another grin her way and turned her attention back to the group at large.

“So what’s happened around the village while we were gone?”

———

Three painfully uneventful weeks later, Katsumi was let out of the hospital as long as she promised to come to her physical therapy appointments the recommended three times a week which she did promptly. At this point, she’d do anything if that meant she could get her life back in order.

Naruto had shown up around half past noon to help her get her things from the hospital back to the apartment, rambling on a mile a minute about how training had been going without her there while holding a duffle bag full of her belongings. He was catching her up to speed when her brain caught on a sentence he said and she stopped in the middle of a busy sidewalk, crutches and all, and stared at him with her eyes narrowed in confusion.

“Wait, Kakashi-sensei’s teaching you fuinjutsu?”

He beamed at her, puffing his chest out with pride. “Yep! Apparently, I’m a natural, y’know? I recreated a sealing scroll I’d seen him use and modified it to work kinda like a time-bomb to use during pranks. But before I could actually use it, Kaka-sensei caught me and made me tell him how I did it so I did and now he’s teaching me sealing!”

It made sense, given both Naruto’s skillset and his lineage. He would have a natural affinity for
sealing given his clan, but he also has always had a special way of being able to think laterally, his tricky brain being able to think of the most off the wall, creative approaches to solving most problems. He was clever in a way most people could only dream of being and smart enough to keep that side, his more calculating and observant side, hidden from most of the world so that they underestimated him.

For years, Naruto played up being the dead-last, even though he was in the upper half of their graduating class by the end of their Academy days despite his inability to produce a standard clone. He played the role of the village idiot so people would look the other way when he pulled off stunts like learning a forbidden, A-ranked jutsu within an hour and beating a seasoned chunin before he was even a genin. So when he did things that, by all accounts should make him considered a genuine prodigy, everyone dismissed it as a fluke or luck and that’s exactly what he wanted.

In short, Naruto was a lot more intelligent than most people gave him credit for. Of course, he was genuinely still as bright, bubbly, and kind as he put out to the world; that much wasn’t an act. But Katsumi knew for a fact that a part of him enjoyed getting one over on everyone who thought him to be slow or unintelligent like it was all some huge prank that would be revealed the second he made Hokage, something which Katsumi had no doubt he’d be able to do.

But still, all those things considered, it didn’t change the fact that fuinjutsu was notoriously difficult. Not that she doubted her friend at all, it was just that... well... it was fuinjutsu.

The two genin by now had continued their trek through the market district to get to their apartment, their pace slowed considerably while Katsumi was on crutches.

“Naruto, that’s actually really cool. You do know that fuinjutsu is supposed to be one of the most, if not the most difficult discipline in the ninja arts, right?”

Naruto raised an eyebrow. “Wait, really? So far, it’s been pretty easy. It’s almost like—”

“Instinct?” Katsumi supplied, already knowing where he was going with this. He nodded, grinning at her again.

“Exactly like that. I’m working on the basics right now, but I want to get up to environmental manipulation by the time you’re well enough to spar with us.”

They stopped at the entrance to their building and Naruto opened the door and they both stepped out
of the mid-May heat and into the air-conditioned foyer, nodding to the people at the desk before heading up, albeit slowly due to Katsumi’s crutches.

“‘Environmental manipulation’? Sounds complicated, especially if you’re going to try to learn it in a month,” Katsumi noted.

“Well I’m pretty sure that the only thing I’ll have to do is open the matrix up from an internal circuit to become external so that it can affect the area around it, but depending on how much chakra I use I can tweak just how much area it spreads over, hopefully without overloading the matrix and—”

He stopped, noting Katsumi’s slightly confused and impressed expression and just smiled. “It’s not going to be impossible,” he summarized. “Not for me, at least.”

“Just don’t burn down the apartment.”

He chuckled as he took out the key and unlocked the door to their living space. “No promises.”

She hobbled in, tired from the exertion of the trek home after almost a month of zero activity outside of physical therapy, and threw herself onto the ratty teal couch, sighing deeply.

“Can we order in tonight?”

“Can we get ramen if we do?”

She sighed again, this time a little less due to relaxation and a little more with exasperation.

“Fine.”

It was good to be home.
Katsumi shifted from foot to foot nervously while Kakashi-sensei knocked on the heavy wooden door to the Hokage’s office to see why she’d been summoned.

When he’d dragged her from the library and her research on the human body at around two in the afternoon, instead of pouting like she claimed she never did, Katsumi had been unnervingly quiet the entire way, deep in her own head trying to figure out what it was that the Hokage wanted to talk to her about.

_It’s probably something about the mission now that I’ve been out of the hospital for a week and can move around a little better._

She’d decided to ditch the crutches a couple days ago. Her leg was a little stiff still and the new skin covering the old wounds was still a bit tender, but walking wasn’t impossible as long as she didn’t stand for too long. Physical therapy was helping a lot with not letting her muscles atrophy, but it would still be another couple weeks before she would be cleared by Oshiro-sensei to train again, something that Katsumi was less than thrilled about especially considering the Chunin Exams were starting at the beginning of July, which was a little more than a month away. She would have to hit the ground _running_ if she wanted to be ready to compete in the exams like Mei-sensei had said. That is, of course, if Kakashi-sensei and, more importantly, the Hokage thought Team Seven was ready to have the chance to advance to becoming chunin.

So, as she waited for the doors to open, she decided that she would leave her nerves at the door and be as strong as possible to show that she was ready to take the exam, straightening out her back and slowing her breathing as a muffled ‘come in’ prompted Kakashi-sensei to push the door open to reveal the Sandaime sitting at his desk in reading glasses, looking over a stack of papers with a stamp with his seal on it in his hand.

When they got far enough in the room, he placed the stamp back onto a tray, likely where the ink was being kept, and looked up at them with a small smile. Both shinobi bowed low and respectfully, murmured greetings on their lips. The Sandaime nodded in greeting. “Please, have a seat, both of you.”

Katsumi sat down in one of the chairs in front of his desk while Kakashi took the second one and they both waited for instructions. “It is good to see you out and about, Katsumi-chan. How has your recovery been?”

Katsumi sat up a little straighter and answered promptly. “A bit rocky at first, but I’m managing, Hokage-sama. Thank you for your concern.”
“Well, that is certainly good to hear.” He moved around some papers on his desk before grabbing a
manilla folder under a stack and opening it. “This is the mission file from your C-rank turned A-rank
from about a month ago.” She nodded. “As you know, it is protocol to have every person involved
in a mission fill out a report form, but since yours is a special case, I am content with you verbalizing
it instead of writing one out. So tell me, Katsumi-chan,” he paused, clasping his hands in front of him
and looking dead at Katsumi. “What happened when you went to Wave?”

So Katsumi took a deep breath to steady herself and she recounted, for the first time since it
happened, exactly what went down from the moment they left the village full of excitement and a
healthy thirst to prove themselves until the minute she woke up in Konoha with a numb leg, a hole in
her heart, and a plethora of nightmare fuel.

“Well, you see, what had happened was…”

And then she launched into a succinct retelling, making sure not to skim over the important bits and
to keep her breathing and facial expressions even during the parts that had stuck with her for better or
for worse. The Hokage just sat and listened until she got to the part where she got hit with the earth-
spear jutsu that had shattered her leg and almost ended both her career and her life.

“How did you take care of that nuke-nin? There was no other information other since Kakashi-kun
and the other jonin arrived after it had happened.”

Katsumi rallied her strength and did her best to be as removed from the situation as possible as to
give a more unbiased account, ignoring the cold sweat that had been accumulating on her palms.
“After I got caught by the jutsu, I knew I couldn’t move with my leg like that and that my only
chance of ending the fight in my favor would be to get him close.”

“And how did you do that?” The Hokage went from looking like a military dictator to adopt a role
more similar to a doting, but slightly estranged grandfather, his eyes warm as he encouraged her to
give detail. “I understand that this was a traumatizing experience for you and I truly am sorry that
you had to go through something this troubling this young.”

Katsumi had a little bit of trouble drawing the line between the old man and the Hokage for a
moment before she realized that he probably didn’t really care about her as a person as much as he
did about her as a shinobi. After all, a blunted weapon loses a lot of its use. He was probably only
adopting that role to make her comfortable enough to give the information despite her perceived
misgivings about the entire ordeal. It was emotional manipulation plain and simple and Katsumi
didn’t like it.

Of course, she wasn’t going to say that because just as easy as he had played the part of a kind old
man, he could become the Hokage once more and punish her for insubordination but a small part of
her wanted to call him out on it just to see what he’d say. *Self-preservation is the name of the game*, she reminded herself, quelling that urge before it got out of hand. So, she kept her expression clear and unbothered while she made sure her voice was steady and strong as it should be.

They don’t let weaklings take the Chunin Exams.

“I noted he had sadistic qualities during my fight with him so I preyed on them until his bloodlust clouded his judgment. He likes screamers,” she offered flippantly, shrugging her shoulders, unaware of Kakashi’s disgusted expression under his mask. “The shinobi made a move to grab me and take me to a secondary location while he believed I was too injured and scared to fight back. I am not certain what he planned on doing, but I had a couple ideas and I didn’t like them so I stopped that from happening.”

“How did you stop him?”

“Well, when I was practicing water-walking with Kakashi-sensei about three days prior, I messed around with the laws of attraction and repellency with chakra and different objects while I tried to figure it out.”

“And so since the human body is two-thirds water…” Kakashi-sensei muttered, finally seeming to understand what she had done. She nodded, a little bit uneasy at their attention on her for the first time since the beginning of the meeting.

“I pulled the water out of his body and killed him.”

“No jutsu?” Kakashi-sensei asked, giving Katumi the weirdest case of deja vu when she shook her head, slightly perturbed but not knowing why.

*Weird.*

“No jutsu,” she confirmed, shaking her head.

The office was silent for a minute as both of the seasoned shinobi in the room took in the green genin that had killed someone with a technique akin to most kinjutsu only considerably less complicated. Katumi kept her back straight under their scrutiny, daring them to say what she did was wrong. *He was going to torture and kill me. I did the right thing.*
The Sandaime cleared his throat, an unreadable expression on his face. “How did you get the idea to use that on people?”

Katsumi shrugged again. “I had been tweaking the technique in my free-time as a sort of last-resort method.”

“An assassination jutsu,” Kakashi supplied, looking at his own gloved hands for a moment. Katsumi nodded, not exactly liking the phrasing he’d used, but not really knowing any other way to describe such a technique.

“Well, yeah,” she conceded. “After that, Kakashi-sensei, Oshiro-sensei, and Genma-san found me and I lost consciousness soon after that. When I woke up, I was in Konoha General Hospital with a wicked headache, cottonmouth, and a dead-leg.”

The Hokage stared at her for a moment as the room was dead silent after she finished telling the tale and Katsumi had the oddest impression that he wasn’t really seeing her. Unnerved, she waited until he was done, a lot more uncomfortable than she was before.

She didn’t have to wait very long.

“Alright, Katsumi-chan, that’s all that I needed from you today. You’re free to go enjoy the rest of your day as you wish.” Taking the dismissal for what it was, Katsumi rose from her chair and bowed low, before exiting the room to go back to the library to finish her research with a slight frown on her face. Something about the end of that conversation felt oddly familiar and she just couldn’t place her finger on how.

“---

“I am worried, Kakashi-kun,” the Hokage stated slowly, moving to stand a few moments after the genin left the room. Kakashi followed suit, rising from his seat to stand at attention as the Sandaime walked over to the window overlooking the village. “She is brilliant and inquisitive, both of which are good traits if nurtured correctly but if the wrong ideas are placed in her head…” Sarutobi suddenly looked decades older as the harsh light from the midday sun shined on his face through the blinds. Mostly, Kakashi just noticed that he looked tired.

“She could go dark,” Kakashi offered, shoving his hands into his pockets, using the colloquialism
used by most shinobi to describe people who snapped under the immense pressure of shinobi life. Kakashi sighed, not really wanting to even entertain the idea that one of his baby genin could do such a thing but it wasn’t unheard of. Everyone, active-duty or not, has known someone who went dark before. The risk of going dark, like dying, comes with the territory of being a shinobi. Usually, it happens after a life-changing injury or the death of a close friend or comrade — though, sometimes in ANBU it can happen with no warning at all, causing the others to have to put them down like a rabid animal before they become a danger to the public — though as long as the ‘shadow’ is caught and brought into counseling or therapy fast enough, it usually doesn’t end horribly like with suicide like his father, homicide like Uchiha Itachi, or worse in Orochimaru’s case.

But there were instances where there was already something a little off about the shadow to begin with, a chemical imbalance, unresolved childhood trauma, or anything that made it so when they see the edge, the boundary that separates them from the million shades of grey that shinobi are forced to make a home in every day and the overtly inhumane acts that mark the other side, instead of being pushed over it, they willingly step over it themselves and, for the most part, see nothing morally wrong with the heinous crimes that tend to be committed afterward.

Kakashi shuddered, trying to get the idea that clever little Katsumi could go dark but not quite succeeding. She matched the profile of prospective shadows almost perfectly. Genius intellect, an almost obsessive curiosity when it has been piqued, high skill level, and an unnerving ability to compartmentalize emotions. Katsumi checked every single box except for one: she was unbelievably selfless. When it came to her loved ones, there was no denying a strong tie to each and every one of them, something that those who are almost born to go dark do not possess. Though she was good at concealing her inner thoughts, it was obvious how somewhat soft that girl was.

Whether it was the group of ankle-biters that had taken to following Naruto around or the merchants who she was a regular customer of in the market district, there was no way to hide her altruistic and considerate nature. Everyone from the Hokage down to the worms she picked up off the hot sidewalks felt it as sure as they felt a calm breeze. Just like Naruto was determined, Katsumi was unwaveringly noble. Kakashi could see it in the way she pushed herself daily, in the way that she strived for excellence in everything she did that she would lay down her life for that, for her village, and for her people. She would willingly ruin herself for her precious people and that bone-deep loyalty, that fierce protectiveness both reassured and scared the shit out of Kakashi because it begged a new question:

How far would she go to protect her loved ones?

“Kakashi-kun, keep an eye on her,” the Sandaime sighed. “Make sure you instill in your team the importance of bonds and the necessity of anchors in this life. Make sure they know the difference between duty and cruelty and that they know not to cross that line.”

Kakashi nodded as the Hokage turned around and met his gaze. “And for Kami’s sake, send that girl
to a therapist. I want a psych-eval by the end of the month on each of your students.”

“Does that mean they are expected to enter in the Exams?” Kakashi asked, noting the oddly specific timing and choosing his words carefully, deciding that the old man’s silence was answer enough. Panic flared in Kakashi’s chest at the prospect. *My kids in the Chunin Exams this early?*

*Absolutely not.*

“They’re not ready.”

The Hokage leveled him an unamused stare. “Judging by this,” he held up their mission file, “they are more than ready to take the test.”

“That was a *fluke*,” he pointed out, gesturing to the folder and trying hard to keep his tone respectful. “It was a miracle that they didn’t die on that mission, you and I both know that.”

“All three of them showed exceptional promise as shinobi and since they received their hitai-ate.”

“Yes, and ‘exceptional promise’ isn’t going to keep them from getting their throats slit by a foreign Suna-nin,” Kakashi bit out, a bit of temper poking through his usually calm demeanor. “And don’t tell me that they haven’t been planning something, because you *know* they’ve been entirely too quiet these past few years, that with their closed borders and refusal to engage in *any* joint-Chunin Exams for the past decade until *now* where it’s being *conveniently held in Konoha* —”

“I have already taken precautions against something like that happening. It is perfectly safe.” The Hokage was clearly close to losing his patience but Kakashi plowed on.

“*Safe?*” Kakashi repeated incredulously. “One, since *when* in the entire history of the Shinobi Nations has the Chunin Exams *ever* been close to being considered ‘safe’, and two, what comes after that? Say they pass and they receive the death-sentence disguised as a rank-advancement. As chunin, they’d be expected to go on riskier missions, namely *front-line combat*, which, given the state of affairs internationally, doesn’t seem to be too far-fetched of an idea!”

“I told you security was being handled—”
“They’re hardly even twelve, Hokage-sama. They’re too young for something like this and I—”

“And weren’t you six when you became a chunin?” A bit of heat coloring the Sandaime’s tone at Kakashi’s insubordination.

Kakashi let out a bitter laugh, coated in self-loathing. “Yeah, and look at how well I turned out.”

The Hokage sighed, finally understanding what all this hysteria was all about. He was frightened, deathly so, for his genin. It was understandable, his fierce overprotection, given his background. He really couldn’t blame the younger man. He sighed again. Damnit, he was going soft.

“How about this, if you stop having a fit, I will promise not to promote them to chunin in the end. You can decide when they are ready for a promotion” Kakashi’s stare went from the floor back up to the Hokage’s kind eyes. An olive branch was extended. The clench in his jaw loosened imperceptibly. “At least not until they turn of age and can decide for themselves what they want to do. Is that fair?”

“No,” Kakashi said simply, looking considerably less heated but markedly more wounded, betrayal evident in his stance. “It’s not.” The Hokage knew that his offering wasn’t what Kakashi had wanted to hear, but it wasn’t really up to what he wanted. He had a village to run and people to keep safe, he didn’t have time to be worrying about what the jonin was and was not okay with in regards to his genin, his soldiers.

“If something happens to them, I will never forgive you,” Kakashi promised, his voice filled with such ice-cold venom now that his fear had been leached away. “If they get hurt or worse…” he paused, seeming to be unable to continue with even the idea of any harm befalling the kids.

“Yes, yes, I know, Kakashi. Now sit back down. There is something else we must discuss.” Curiously enough, the Hokage gestured for the ANBU agent in the hidden alcove right off the door to leave. Kakashi immediately felt the incredibly slight smell of the generic body-wash supplied in the ANBU Barracks disappear as well as the faint rustling of fabric and the customary raising of misdirection and muffling genjutsu being placed over the room, signifying the black ops agent’s absence. Warily, he sat back down in the chair, feeling his previous anger disappear and be replaced with a twinge of nervousness.

The Hokage seemed to steady himself for a moment, sitting back down in his own chair and reaching down into a drawer in his desk to pull out, oddly enough, a large bottle of brown liquor and two crystalline glasses, placing one in front of the jonin and pouring them both a glass before taking a deep drink of his own.
“Hokage-sama…?” Kakashi started, clearly unnerved, taking a polite sip.

The Hokage sighed, setting his cup down on the desk once more and staring dead into Kakashi’s dark eye. “Now that the prospect of rank-advancement is being brought up, I believe that it is about time that I talk to you about Katsumi’s past.”

Kakashi’s visible brow shot up in surprise, not having expected this particular conversation today. “What about it?”

“Twelve years ago, right after the Kyuubi disaster, there was an attack on the Lightning Daimyo’s family. His wife was a high-ranking jonin from Kumogakure who had been known as ‘Arashi no Kumo’, a formidable kunoichi rumored to have been next in line to become the Raikage because of her ruthless control over a dojutsu that had almost been Konoha’s undoing in both the Second and Third Shinobi World Wars,” Kakashi’s eye widened, recognizing the name immediately as a sudden coldness formed in his core. That couldn’t be … “The young family had just celebrated the birth of their daughter, who was said to share a kekkei-genkai with her mother, when their compound was attacked and the family was slaughtered, the father in the house and the mother was found in the forests separating their estate from the nearest guard tower, her eyes gouged out, seemingly on purpose.”

Kakashi stayed silent throughout the entire ordeal, the dread burrowing a hole in his stomach and making him feel sick as the Hokage continued. “The body of the daughter was never recovered but Kumo had reason to believe the baby had died, of exposure, from a wild animal attack, and they had officially stopped looking about a decade ago.”

The Hokage stared at Kakashi, letting him draw his own conclusions from the information given as each waited for the other to break the silence. Everything, the remarkable natural talent, the scary intellect, kami, the chakra natures, it all made sense now. Eventually, Kakashi caved first, letting out a strangled “Who?”

Sarutobi let out a derisive snort at the question. “Who else? The same man who has been plotting to take this blasted hat from me since I got it.”

Kakashi paused for a moment, thinking about who said person might be before groaning. “Are you fucking kidding me? That bitch is back at it again?”

“Yes, he is and has been for quite some time now.”
“Then why in the name of the Rikudo do you want Katumi to compete in a, get this, international competition, where literally anyone could see and recognize her?”

“For two reasons. One, the Raikage already said he was not allowing any teams from Kumogakure to compete, treaty or no. Secondly, because the alternative is worse,” the Hokage confessed. “Danzo has been planning on doing something with her since he ordered her brought to Konoha and I have reason to believe he is almost done with his machinations,” he explained, almost pleading with Kakashi to see it the way he did. “If she is in the exams, it buys her an extra month, a solid thirty days for us to come up with something to counter whatever it is that he is planning.”

Kakashi had had quite enough of this bullshit. “Why not throw him to Kumo? I’m sure they will be happy to have the man responsible for the foul shit he pulled.”

“Do you honestly think the Raikage will see it that way? He will see a cover-up, years in the making, endorsed by the Hokage, therefore endorsed by Konoha as a whole.”

“But isn’t that exactly what it is?”

“Kakashi,” he growled low in warning, his eyes narrowed and his patience impossibly thin. “They have been looking for a reason to raze this village and this is more than enough. If you care about Konoha, hell, if you care about Katumi, you will keep this secret as if your life depends on it. I am only telling you this so that you can better command your squad in its entirety, nothing more, nothing less.”

“And what if she manifests the kekkei genkai?” Kakashi pressed, not quite done. “Is there any information about how it works?”

“There is not much, but I was planning on having one of my senior-most medics examine her eyes during a physical to see if there is anything we can glean from a cursory analysis. That will have to be enough for now.”

“And when is Danzo going to get what’s coming to him, huh? How long until he pays for the lives he’s ruined? Is Katumi ever going to know about what was taken from her?”

“I am working on it.”
Kakashi looked at the Hokage with an expression almost akin to disgust for the first time in a really long time and the old man almost felt a bit of shame at it. “If it makes you feel any better, know that I am doing these things to preserve the village as it’s reigning military dictator.”

The jonin rolled his eye. “Yeah, that helps a lot, Hokage-sama.”

The Sandaime sent him another warning glare, nearing the end of his rope.

“I am serious, Hatake.”

“Yeah, I know. But my earlier sentiments still stand. If this backfires, I will never forgive you,” he repeated.

“Yes, yes, I am well aware. Now please get the hell out of my office,” he ordered, feeling entirely too old to be doing this job. Don’t worry, I will never forgive myself either, he thought bitterly. “Believe it or not, this is a place of work where people have jobs to do.”

“Hai Hokage-sama.” The jonin took the dismissal for what it was and strode out of the room, his eyes narrowed and jaw clenched. He left, the office door wide open and Hiruzen alone and nursing a migraine.

He sighed deeply before draining the remaining liquor in his glass.

I am too fucking old for this shit.

Chapter End Notes

Aaaaaand now we’re in the Chuunin Exam arc! Yeah, things are going to get a lot more fast paced after this so if you thought the Wave arc was a lot, fasten your seats, kiddies. The next time I post, I will officially be EIGHTEEN so I’m super stoked about that omg I’m going to be a whole adult wtf?? Anyways, thanks for reading this far, again, I love you guys a flippin’ lot. I posted a skills eval for Katsumi on the HOS tumblr so y’all should go check that out because it basically goes over her stats and how powerful she is, something pretty valuable to have right before the chunin exams so go give that baby
a look. It’s pretty cool, I think.

QOtP: Why do y’all think Sakura was in Katsumi’s hospital room?

Shout-outs:

Cupcake (milkywayheartcupcake): ily bb thanks for the comment! Any short phrases with expletives in them are my favorite to write tbh.

Fly_by_night: ilysm tysm dude, both are great guesses (one of them may or may not be right, shhhhh ;)...)

Kurochach: SHIT REALLY DID GET REAL That was honestly the whole point of this chapter. I hate whenever I read fics that make the shinobi world seem kinda trivial, like they can’t die at any point. This brush with death was to help Team 7 reevaluate their priorities and skills to get better. It was a wakeup call. Thanks for the comment bb!

WHO knows: Thanks for the comment dude! I appreciate the support, and I genuinely really do enjoy writing Katumi. I hope she’s not like a Mary Sue or something. That would suck.

Alright y’all, thanks for reading. Onto the next!
Katsumi sat pin-straight in the lightly cushioned chair, her body wound as tight as a rubber ball as she waited next to Kakashi-sensei in the lobby smelling faintly of lemon verbena.

The dreaded day had come: therapy.

To be fair, this trip should’ve happened about two weeks ago, as soon as she was released from the hospital, but after she was released from the Hokage’s office, she’d taken to hiding out in the apartment as to not run into Kakashi-sensei, who claimed when he visited her in the hospital the day after she woke up that he would drag her to the appointment if necessary. Naruto sent her amused glances every time he left their flat to go train on his own while she was out of commission during the days after she was released from Konoha General.

“He knows where you are, y’know. It’s not even that bad. Inoka-sensei is super cool,” he said, sending her a reassuring smile as he put on his shoes at the genkan. Kakashi-sensei had taken both boys to see a therapist already since they had more mobility and they weren’t avoiding him as fervently. Both Naruto and Sasuke had apparently been seen by a therapist over six times each since they’ve been back in the village.

From what she’d seen from Sasuke’s visits to their apartment to either annoy Katsumi during her recuperation period or crash on the couch when he didn’t feel like making the trek to the Uchiha compound on the outskirts of town after a particularly rough day training, he was looking a lot better than he did before: a little less anemic-looking and it was a smidgen easier to make him laugh than it was before which his teammates were immensely grateful for. Katsumi remembered the Sasuke she knew at the Academy and how his brow was always furrowed and his eyes always narrowed as if he believed the world was out to get him. The poor boy obviously had so much unresolved trauma that the second some of the pressure got released, to those who knew him well, the change, though admittedly was fairly small, was astonishing. The perpetual bags that had been under his eyes had been lessening as he began sleeping better and his cheeks gained a bit of healthy color to them as he started eating a bit more and with increased regularly.

Of course a little of that could be attributed to Katsumi and Naruto. Since Team Seven had been back in the village they had taken to spending more time together as a team, namely in the form of inviting Sasuke over to their apartment for dinner a couple times a week and fattening him up with the easiest to prepare meals that two — sometimes three if Sasuke wasn’t being a little bitch — preteens with limited bank accounts could produce.
At first, he had protested like he always did, rejecting their offers vehemently until Katumi just got irritated and dragged him over where they shared a slightly awkward, but overall pleasant meal as a team. After that, in the past few weeks, it wasn’t uncommon for Sasuke to be over at their flat every other day at various times, sometimes eating, but other times sleeping on their couch or watching television or, on rare occasions, just hanging out and talking with them.

Therapy was doing a lot of good for Sasuke and as infuriating as the boy could be, Katumi could admit that she was happy to see one of her boys doing better.

Katumi could also see a change in Naruto as well, though not as drastic as with their brunet teammate. For one, Naruto had been considerably less restless and impatient. He also was less visibly anxious whenever they were passing through parts of the village with civilian-dense populations, something Katumi noticed when he walked her home from the hospital. He didn’t seem to fold in on himself so much whenever an asshole villager said something cruel to him so it seemed that the mysterious ‘Inoka-sensei’ was working with him on dealing with that as well.

The most noticeable change, however, was that he was a little quieter than he was before. It was nothing major, but Katumi knew that a side-effect of his loneliness was an almost insatiable need for attention, thus making him more likely to act out or do certain things that were designed to make people pay attention to him, like speaking at an insane volume ninety percent of the time. He seemed less thirsty for acknowledgment of any kind, good or bad, which had mellowed him out a little. Naruto was still Naruto, of course, so he still spoke loudly and frequently, but it didn’t seem like it was due to any insecurity anymore.

Clearly, therapy was working for both of them and it would likely work for her if she just gave it a try, but something in her balked at the prospect. She knew that she should just bite the bullet and go so she didn’t have to keep using the steadily declining soldier-pills she had pilfered off of Kakashi-sensei while they were in Wave now that she wasn’t on an IV drip at the hospital anymore. She knew she should just go so she could work on having a normal sleep schedule, but if she had to be honest, she was terrified of what she’d have to rehash if she went and what that would force her to acknowledge. So unless Kaka-sensei wanted to drag her to the therapist, she wasn’t going.

Period.

Besides, she had better things to do. Like her hair. Katumi sprayed the bright pink plastic spray-bottle she held in her right hand, wetting the section of her hair she was detangling. Wash-day was a big deal indeed. Taking a generous about of leave in conditioner and spreading it throughout her hair, from root to the ends as she worked her curls with a wide-tooth comb, she looked at him dubiously from the little mirror she’d propped up on the table long enough from her blanket fort on the couch, not believing him for a moment. Through her teeth, the sound slightly muffled by the hair clip she had in her mouth, she said: “Naruto, I’m fine, I told you, like, a million times already.”
He rolled his eyes, standing up and walking to the door. “Sasuke’s going to stop by later today so let him in. I’ll see you at around—”

“Five, I know, kaa-san,” she drawled. He stuck his tongue out at her before letting himself out. “Bye.”

“See you later!”

And she was alone again with old cartoons, a blanket fort, a half ton of hair products, and prescription medications she had to take every six hours to help speed up the healing process.

She braided the section quickly with deft fingers slick with product, twirling the ends and throwing the finished plait in with the others. This pattern continued until she was finished, around twelve white braids all over her head, cleaned and styled, a welcome change from her dirty hair from the day earlier.

Sure, it was a lot harder to manage keeping up with her haircare when she was injured as she had been, but with enough effort and the reluctant help of her two teammates at times, she kept her hair looking nice throughout the ordeal. Katsumi didn’t care too much about how she looked, but what she did care about immensely was the state of her hair. It was her pride. She loved how different it was in both color and texture from anyone she’d ever met so she took care of it. So if that meant that every week she had to take time to wash, detangle, condition, and braid — or twist if she had something fancy to do that week —, she’d do it with little to no complaining. It was worth the compliments and the sometimes envious looks she got from everyone around her. Her hair was fucking cool.

For the next two hours after she finished styling her hair, she sat and watched television on the ratty, kill-me-orange sofa eating snacks that Sasuke had brought over the week before and was bored out of her godsdamned mind because since she was confined to the flat for bed-rest as per Oshiro-sensei’s orders for the next week or so, she couldn’t do much else other than watch television while she waited for her hair to dry completely.

Katsumi was in the middle of an old movie she had seen a million times when she heard the whoosh of the window in their kitchen swing open on its greased hinges and she was greeted with the slight scent of kunai oil and dog fur.

Shit.
Katsumi cringed, swearing low as she knew that there was no chance for her to try to escape seeing as though he already knew she was there just like Naruto had said. She sank low into the cushions, willing the blanket fort to camouflage her to no avail as the jonin ambled into the apartment like he owned it.

“Yo,” he greeted, throwing himself onto the cushion next to her. She nodded her head in greeting, keeping her gaze firmly on the television set and the brightly colored cartoon characters traipsing around the screen. After about forty seconds of each person waiting for the other to break the silence, Kakashi sighed dramatically. “Get dressed,” he ordered, finally cutting to the chase. “We have an appointment to get to within the next half hour.”

“Do we though?” she asked, stalling. She turned to look at him, meeting his lazy stare and laughing lightly. “Or is this another one of your little mind-games for training where you’ll eventually reveal that—”

The words that would have come next died in her throat after he gave her an unamused look, his visible eyebrow raised. Katsumi sighed, cutting the television off and rising from her seat to go throw on some actual pants instead of her kunai-emblazoned pajama shorts. “Gimme a minute to change.”

“Take your time, hime.”

———

Twenty minutes and a pair of standard-issue pants later, they were sitting in the waiting room of a pristine building after being seen by the chunin secretary, a Yamanaka by the looks of him. He had directed them into the spacious room and told them the wait would be around five minutes before leaving to go sit back at his desk. Kakashi-sensei had sat down and pulled out his book, making sure to angle the pages away from her, a detail she stored in the back of her brain to be examined at a later date.

Katsumi fidgeted with her hands, surreptitiously practicing her hand seals to work up speed while she waited, stretching her wrists and working on her manual dexterity as she finally found something worthwhile to do with her hands when she was nervous.

“Relax,” Kakashi murmured from behind his book. “She’s good at what she does. I’d say half of the active duty shinobi today have been in her office at least twice in their careers. She’s the best.”
Katsumi nodded, reassured but not by much.

Five unbelievably quick minutes later and a sandy-haired woman in her late twenties reminding her vaguely of Ino came into the waiting area with a manilla folder in hand. She smiled brightly with perfectly straight white teeth at the two of them and Katsumi fought the urge to run. *This* was the woman who dealt with some of the most troubled minds Konoha had to offer? This prim, put-together woman? Katsumi swallowed her doubts, refusing to give them any thought.

*No use in doubting someone who clearly knows their shit.*

“Ah, so this is the elusive fourth team member of Team Seven?” Bright blue eyes flitted to Kakashi, an easy sort of grace in her words. “Well, better late than never I suppose.” The woman crossed the distance between them in quick, measured steps, her heels clicking along the tile. “I’m Yamanaka Inoka-sensei.” She held her hand for Katsumi to shake. “It’s a pleasure to finally meet you, Katsumi-chan. I’ve heard a lot about you from your teammates.” Katsumi frowned at the last bit, her head quirking to the side and Yamanaka-sensei laughed. “All good things, of course. All good.”

“Oh, alright,” the genin replied, shaking her hand gingerly. “Nice to meet you too.” Yamanaka-sensei handed her the folder and a pen.

“Fill these out for me,” she ordered, gesturing for her to sit back down and write at the coffee table. “It’s just a mixture of legal documents and a self-evaluation form. If you have any questions about the material, feel free to ask me.” Katsumi nodded, opening up the folder and following her instructions, writing her name and the date at the top in black ink. “Hatake-san, would you mind stepping into my office for a moment?”

The genin looked up from her task, confusion evident in the furrowing of her brow but ultimately saying nothing as her jounin sensei disappeared behind a heavy wooden door and she was left alone.

Flipping through the papers quickly, she signed her name in the indicated spaces, pausing her quick and neat pen strokes when she got to the question ‘*Why do you think you should be here today?*’ To be frank, there were several reasons why she thought she should be there, none of which she was particularly comfortable with jotting down for anyone with access to the patient ledgers to peruse at their leisure, but it wasn’t like she had much of a choice in the matter seeing as though she was likely to be the subject of conversation in the office at the moment judging by the oddly coincidental timing and it was probable that the shrink already knew what was up with her.
Katsumi sighed as she wrote the phrase ‘Mission-related trauma’ in the slot, comfortable with the level of ambiguity such a response allowed; just enough to provide the necessary information but not enough to where anybody with a key could get a peek into her head. That was just for herself and apparently Yamanaka-sensei. She kept filling out the necessary paperwork, chewing on her lip in thought.

She knew she was being entirely too paranoid, but ever since she was released from the hospital, an almost smothering sense of foreboding had taken up residence in her mind and hadn’t let up. Something was coming. She didn’t know how she knew or what it was, but she was absolutely certain that something was brewing, a storm was approaching and it was not one she could hope to weather with complacency. Something in her knew for a fact that this quiescence, the lull in activity, was just the calm before a devastating hurricane shook her world to its foundation and she didn’t much care for the anxiety that had taken root in the pit of her stomach.

Katsumi was shaken out of her thoughts, however, when the door opened once more and Kakashi stepped out, followed by Yamanaka-sensei. Immediately, she noticed the slight tension in Kakashi’s shoulders and the set of his jaw, not quite concealed by his ever-present mask. Though they weren’t much, Katsumi had learned how to read people, particularly her emotionally stunted teammates. Everyone had a tell, of course, some more obvious than others, but after spending so much time with a person, it isn’t exactly impossible to learn how to read them, at least to some degree.

Naruto was a fairly open book unless you knew where to look. He had a tendency to cover up any negative emotion with overwhelming positivity and volume, which usually was enough to keep people that didn’t know him very well from seeing the loneliness folded away in the many shades of blue in his eyes or the anxiety in the way he smiled with just a little too much teeth. However, no matter how hard he may try to hide what he felt, it was impossible to keep it from Katsumi for very long since she had known him since they were basically in diapers.

Sasuke was a little harder to read. Maybe it was the lack of history between them or maybe it was because he was so unbelievably traumatized from the events of his childhood that he forgot how to show emotion like a normal human being. Whatever the case was, Sasuke was only readable when he felt especially strong emotions. Then, and only then, did fissures appear in his armor and Katsumi could get a decent peek inside his head, something that didn’t happen very often.

Every time she got a glimpse of his true feelings, she didn’t like the raw, unresolved grief she saw festering in his heart, taking up root and poisoning him from the inside out. That was part of the reason she had been excited to see him finally seeing a therapist because Sage knew he needed one yesterday because who in the hell would let an eight-year-old deal with such massive emotional upheaval without seeing a professional and then let him stay in the house where he saw his entire family’s dead bodies?
Whoever made that call needs to have their head examined.

But Kaka-sensei was the toughest read of them all, least of all because of his physical mask. No, Katsumi could tell that the mask he wore on his face was only the most visible one he donned. He was a man of many faces. Though time had passed, hushed stories of ‘Friend-Killer Kakashi’ still reached her ears long before she’d worked up the nerve to ask one of the library ‘chunin’ about him when she received her team assignment and in the vaguest way possible, she was told about his past and though she was spared most of the details, all she knew for certain was that one doesn’t come out of a childhood after being made a chunin at six and fighting in a war before puberty unscathed. Not by a long-shot.

It was easy to see when you knew where to look and it was more than obvious that his previous lackadaisical attitude and tendency to baffle them with his bullshit was just a way to distance himself emotionally from them because there was no way in hell that the Sandaime would allow someone who was genuinely as unstable as Kakashi made himself out to be lead a team of young, impressionable genin. That or the Hokage had a disquietingly low standard of what made a jonin ‘emotionally and mentally sound’, in which case Katsumi should be very, very worried. So, using his own words against him, Katsumi practiced learning to see underneath the underneath with him until she was almost, almost able to reliably read him about twenty percent of the time, which was a lot better than most people could say.

So, when both adults came back through the door, it wasn’t impossible to tell that whatever they talked about in the confines of Yamanaka-sensei’s office, they were in disagreement about something. Katsumi said nothing, not wanting to let them know that she figured that something was up and merely stood and handed the folder into Yamanaka-sensei’s manicured hand. The woman smiled brightly and thanked her.

“Now that that’s taken care of, it’ll just be you and me, Katsumi-chan.” The genin nodded, bracing herself for the experience. “Hatake-san, you can either wait here for an hour during her session or you can leave and come back. It’s your choice.”

He looked at Katsumi for a moment, probably gauging which one she would’ve preferred and shrugged. “See you in an hour, kiddo.” Suddenly, the place Kakashi was replaced by swirling leaves and Katsumi was alone with the shrink.

“Follow me.”

The Yamanaka turned on her heel and marched to her office, throwing open the door to reveal a room that could only be described as comfortable. Katsumi took in the mellow lighting cast on the pale blue painted walls provided by the large window covered by cream-colored curtains and a couple floor lamps, glowing a warm yellow. In the middle of the room was a long table, fit for a
professional meeting lined with cushy-looking chairs. Nearer to the window was a section that looked much more like a mini-library than an office, a couple cream-colored sofas surrounding a coffee table, adorned with throw-pillows and blankets in multiple different colors ranging from a light seafoam green to a pretty coral color. Behind the second couch was a bookshelf lined with scrolls and thick tomes, closing the room off a bit, making the room look comfy instead of claustrophobic. At her desk in the corner of the room, calming music drifted from somewhere, really making the room feel calm and mellow.

*Almost like a beach.*

“Sit wherever you’d like.”

So naturally, Katsumi immediately directed herself to sit in one of the office chairs as Yamanaka-sensei moved to do the same, sitting in the one across from her. Something about spilling her deepest, darkest secrets while sinking into one of the impossibly soft-looking sofas by the window seemed a little too cliche, like something out of a film, even for her. She felt like she should be sitting upright for this, as dignified as humanly possible.

They both sat down and Yamanaka-sensei’s keen eyes zeroed in on Katsumi. Somehow the older woman picked up on her unease and her professional mask dropped a little as she grinned tentatively.

“Let’s start with the basics and break the ice, alright? Tell me about yourself.” At Katsumi’s quirked eyebrow at the vague suggestion, Yamanaka-sensei laughed a little, before picking up the folder and flipping through it, her eyes roving over the pages a mile a minute. “Anything you want to tell me about you and your life, feel free to spill it now. Go ahead, I’m listening.”

“Uh, okay,” she started, scrambling to find something interesting to talk about. Wasn’t therapy supposed to be all about how screwed up she is? Talking about herself wasn’t something she did very often, especially with people she’d hardly known for ten minutes. Picking at nonexistent lint on her pants, she spoke, her voice a little gruffer than she would’ve liked, cracking in the first word. “I like to read, my team is really annoying sometimes, I love thunderstorms, my birthday is in September, and my favorite color is yellow,” she offered, not quite knowing what else to say other than whatever popped into her mind at that moment.

“Good.” Yamanaka-sensei looked pleased with her shoddy introduction, offering her a kind smile. “I’m not one for excessive formalities so you can call me Inoka-sensei or just Inoka is fine too. Let’s see, something about me…” she trailed off, tapping her red-painted lips with her pointer finger, her clear blue eyes directed up at the ceiling. “I’m thirty-one, I’ve been a therapist for eight years next spring, I like yakitori, I’m a Cancer, I’m a tokubetsu jonin, and I’m married with two kids, a boy and a girl.”
Katsumi nodded, taking in all of the information quickly, swinging her legs back and forth in the seat. Inoka-sensei continued, placing the folder on the table and looking at her. “Now that our introductions are out of the way, I have to make sure that you’re aware of a couple things before we start. Number one,” she held up her pointer finger for emphasis, “everything that is said in this room stays between you and me. No one, not even the Hokage,” she paused, thinking about that, “well, okay, maybe if he asked nicely…” Katsumi snorted, thinking about Inoka-sensei telling the most powerful man in the country to ‘say pretty please’ even though they both knew that if the Hokage wanted to see her files, he would see her files whether she wanted him to or not. “But I’m serious, nothing, good or bad, leaves this room unless you give me written permission to do so or unless it’s something like a psych-eval, which you will be asked to do at some point in your career, alright?”

“Alright.”

“Good. Number two, feel free to discuss anything you want to in here, whether it’s a rant about your annoying teammates or a disturbing nightmare, my ears are open to all of it. I’m here to help you so take advantage of that.”

Katsumi frowned, a question coming to mind. “What about suicidal thoughts?”

“I’m not going to report you unless it seems like you are going to be a danger to yourself or others. This is a safe space for conversation and healing. Nothing else. Clear?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Number three, you don’t have to talk every single session if you don’t want to.” Katsumi’s eyebrow raised at that. “If you want to read a book or take a nap on the couch, go ahead. The sofas are incredibly comfy. Trust me.” Inoka winked dramatically which forced a surprised laugh out of Katsumi. “Even if you just want to cry and let it all out, feel free to use up the tissues conveniently here on the table. I understand that everyone has bad days and sometimes, silence is necessary.”

Katsumi nodded, feeling a bit of the tension leave her body at how casual she was being about something that, at first, was such a big deal to her. It now just seemed like a glorified conversation. She felt a little silly at not coming beforehand, but she couldn’t help but feel comforted by Inoka-sensei’s candor and easy demeanor, knowing intuitively that this was a woman who had seen, heard, and done a lot of bad things who didn’t come out the other end of it ruined. It was inspiring, honestly.
“Number four, communication is key,” she added. “None of this is going to work if we can’t communicate properly. You won’t get your help, I won’t be able to do my job properly, and we’ll both be frustrated, so do yourself a favor and be open and be honest. If you’re nervous, say you’re nervous. If you’re scared or angry, say you’re scared or angry. Make sense?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“And lastly, number five,” she held up all five fingers, “everything you feel is okay. Your feelings are valid and they are human. Don’t be afraid to show emotion or vulnerability. That’s why I’m here. I want none of that shinobi ‘must-hide-all-emotions-under-pain-of-death’ nonsense. Cry if you need to. Yell, scream, hell, rage if you need to. Allowing yourself to feel those emotions make it possible for you to heal. You’ll feel like shit for a minute, but that means it’s working. After you get through dealing with all of those emotions, you can start on the road to getting better. In this office, at least, I want you to practice experiencing and, most importantly, acknowledging the full range of human emotions, the good ones to the not-so-good ones so you can heal.”

Katsumi nodded, a little caught off-guard by the last rule. No hiding emotions? That was, like, shinobi rule number one; most ninja lived life emotionally constipated at best, living by Konoha’s unofficial nindo: ‘I’ll keep my emotions right here, and then one day, I’ll die.’ and they were happy about it. Emotions gummed everything up, making their line of work markedly more difficult. If you can’t hide your emotions, you’re as good as dead. Seeming to sense her thoughts, Inoka quickly added, “Take that stiff, emotionless shinobi bullshit somewhere else, just drop the mask when you’re in here. Yes?"

After lowering her eyebrows at Inoka’s language and grinning for the first time in an hour, feeling the knots in her stomach unravel, she nodded. It seems that I’ve misjudged you, Inoka-sensei.

“Alright.”

“Glad we’re on the same page. Now, what do you know about therapists?”

Odd question. “Uh, that they help people deal with their problems.”

“Correct. I help people, specifically shinobi, disturb a disturbed way of thinking. For you, judging by your paperwork, it seems my job is going to be helping you sift through and deal with all of the trauma you have already sustained and then, putting in place habits and teaching you techniques to help you be better equipped to handle them healthily in the future. Make sense?”

“Yes.”
“Great,” she smiled at her again, “now it’s your turn to talk now that we have the nitty-gritty stuff out of the way. Now, what’s been troubling you?”

And here we go. She laughed inwardly. There were a couple of ways she could go about this. Obviously, lying was out of the question seeing as though the woman probably already knew at least part of why she was here from either the boys or Kakashi-sensei so it was really a matter of how much she was willing to divulge. Her cagey, emotionally-stunted self wondered whether she should go balls to the walls and spill everything but run the risk of being deemed too emotionally unstable to be a shinobi or she could tell just enough to keep her off her ass and not receive the help she likely needed.

It wasn’t a particularly hard decision to make, all things considered, seeing as though everything stayed in the room unless it was a mandated psych-eval. It’s not like everybody in this profession isn’t at least somewhat emotionally unstable to begin with so I’d hardly stand out. It would also be considerably unwise for any of the higher-ups to bar Katsumi from maintaining her genin status if what Kakashi-sensei told her held any truth.

For one, to revoke her shinobi-status, they would have to completely redo team assignments which would throw the entirety of Team 7 severely out of whack, a team that, by all means, is likely up there as one of the most promising of their generation since they had the village jinchuuriki and son of the Yondaime and the last of the legendary Uchiha clan on her team. They were a team designed to be heavy-hitters, both on the battlefield and politically, not unlike Team 10. It would take a lot for her status to be taken away, especially after the unexpected success of their last mission.

It was pretty obvious that they could have — they should have — died in Wave. It was a combination of stupid, brilliant luck and unadulterated skill that kept the genin of Team 7 alive throughout the duration of a mission that would’ve killed some chunin. They knew it and so did the Hokage. Their team was an investment, though who else had something riding on their success was yet to be uncovered. It was imperative that Team Seven matured and became more powerful, that much was obvious based on just who was assigned to teach them. She was a lot of things: insensitive, one-track minded, brusque, but she wasn’t stupid. International legends aren’t often sidelined as teachers if the students weren’t important to at least some degree. Konoha had a lot riding on them with one of their most notorious jonin unable to take frequent high-level missions and that choice was deliberate, meaning that it was highly, highly unlikely that anything Katsumi said to the shrink, barring suicidal or homicidal actions, would warrant a rank revocation.

With that decided, she took a deep breath, gathering up all of her courage and steadying herself, throwing any kind of emotional masking out of the window. S’not like she’s not trained to sense it immediately.
“I went on a mission that didn’t go the best.”

“What happened on that mission?”

“The same thing that happens on every other mission shinobi go on: shit hit the fan,” she answered dryly without really meaning to.

“Would you mind elaborating on that?” The therapist’s voice was just as dry, matching Katsumi’s unintentional challenge with equal intensity. She quirked an eyebrow as if to say ‘I can play this game all day.’

“Well, what all do you know? How much about my trauma is in that folder?” she asked, hating the way this conversation was going already.

“Humor me, Katsumi-chan. Pretend I know nothing at all.” Katsumi crossed her arms across her chest, feeling a little bit more than uncomfortable.

_Honesty is the best policy after all so screw it._

“I was almost drowned by an S-ranked ex-Mist-nin, I watched the man I look up to most collapse and was left alone to deal with the repercussions in the middle of enemy territory, I disposed of two dead bodies, one of which might not have actually been dead when we threw him in the fire, then I was seriously injured and almost killed by another missing-nin and left to die in a foreign country.”

To Inoka-sensei’s credit, she’d be _great_ at a casino. If the woman was perturbed at all, she didn’t show it at all, letting out a thoughtful ‘Hm’ and jotting something down in the aforementioned folder. The therapist looked back up from the paper and asked, “Is that all?”

Katsumi shifted in her seat, oddly unnerved by her poker face. “Yep,” Katsumi replied, popping the end of the word.

“Have you noticed any alarming behaviors come up after those events?”

Katsumi cringed in her head, not expecting the canny woman to hit the nail on the head so quickly or
quite as accurately as she did. “Some.”

“Like?” she prompted.

“I’ve been having nightmares about everything for starters.”

Yamanaka-sensei nodded, jotting that down. “How often?”

“Every night for the most part.”

“Any recurring themes or are they all random?”

“They, uh, all come from the Wave mission, drowning, burning alive, bleeding out, you know… the usual.” Katsumi was out of her element here. Other than Kakashi-sensei — and even in his case, in very vague terms — she’d never spoken in depth about any of this stuff. It was making her nervous. More than nervous.

“Anything else?”

“It’s harder for me to eat now.” That caught Inoka’s attention, judging by the slight frown tugging at her red lips. “Meat is a no-go for me and the idea of me swallowing liquids makes me want to gag,” she admitted honestly, feeling a little bit better at her dirty little secret being out in the open. “I’ve, um, I’ve just been using soldier pills to keep from starving or getting too dehydrated.”

Katsumi couldn’t stand to look Inoka in the eyes and settle on staring at a spot right above her head, focusing on a motivational poster with a cartoon kitty-cat with paws that were too big for his body hanging off a tree. She heard the pen scratching the paper, another thing being written down. “Because of, and correct me if I’m wrong, the body disposal and the near-drowning experience respectively, correct?”

She nodded, not trusting her voice at the moment. Shame tasted bitter in the back of her throat and, even more mortifying, she felt tears prick her eyes as she willed them away stubbornly, thinking it much too cliche to cry at your first therapy session.
“Alright, here’s how we’re going to go through this: we’re going to work through the mission in pieces, starting with the drowning bit and moving forward from their chronologically. Once you’ve dealt with that, we can move on to the next event that might have affected you in unpleasant ways and keep going from there. Is that okay?”

Something about Inoka-sensei calling her first near-death experience — well, her first real near-death experience, but who was splitting hairs? — ‘the drowning bit’ made some of her anxiety lessen. It made her realize that while it was a big deal, but it wasn’t the end of the world and she would work through it with Inoka-sensei.

“That’s fine.”

“Alright. So tell me everything and please, do start from the beginning.”

Katsumi nodded and, with a shaky breath, retold the story in its entirety for the second time.

———

“So, how’d it go?” Kakashi-sensei asked on their way out of the comfort of the nice-smelling, air-conditioned office, his hands in his pockets as they walked back to her apartment in the mid-afternoon Konohan heat. The childish part of Katsumi’s heart soared at the prospect of having an adult come pick her up from something, but she tamped that unsettling part of her down, not quite enjoying what that implicated.

_Inoka-sensei would tell me to let it out_, she mused, thinking back on the emotionally draining session with her new therapist. Emotional exhaustion was on a whole different level from physical exhaustion and Katsumi was ready to go to bed and sleep until noon the next day even though it probably wasn’t even half-past four yet. It was just that talking about everything they’d spoke on was so damn tiring that it was hard for her brain to keep up. Her mind was overworked and her emotions had been stretched impossibly thin in that office. She still mustered up a small smile at Kakashi’s question though.

“I like her. She’s… more normal than I thought she’d be. Not pushy or stiff or anything,” she said, walking down the road with Kakashi-sensei at a leisurely pace through the colorful market district, dodging slow-moving civilians with ease. She turned her head to her sensei and grinned wickedly, a bit of her exhaustion forgotten for a moment. “She lets me swear and put my feet on the table. Plus, she makes pretty decent lemonade and gave me some interesting things to think about. Thanks for making me go.”
Kakashi smiled at her genuinely from behind his mask, reaching a hand out to ruffle her hair. “I’m glad you found value in your session. When’s the next one?”

“On Thursday. When we made the schedule, we decided I would go Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays from six to eight pm.”

“Hm. That’s good. I’m proud of you for going and making the best of it.”

“Thank you for paying for it,” she replied, feeling a little embarrassed at her lack of funds. She already was thinking about ways to pay him back for what was sure to be a good chunk taken out of his bank account when he snorted derisively. He waved a hand dismissively, almost offended she would even bring it up.

“Don’t worry about it. It was nothing.”

When they stopped outside of her apartment building, the witty comeback she’d been thinking about died in her throat. Before she lost her nerve, she whipped around and threw her arms quickly around his torso, feeling that it would be appropriate to hug him in this situation. After all, he was kind of like the weird, slightly distant older-brother that she never had and he deserved her gratitude for something so simple as being there.

“Thank you, Kaka-sensei.”

She felt him stiffen and it was almost enough to make her disengage and run up to the apartment, ‘taking it easy’ be damned. Was that inappropriate or too soon? Or does Kakashi-sensei had a weird thing about people touching him and invading his personal space? Oh gods, did I fuck it up? Before she could get too deep in her own head, she felt a hand pat her tentatively on her back in an almost robotic fashion and Kakashi relaxed a little, placing a hand in her hair and ruffling the braids affectionately.

“No problem, kiddo.”

When she let him go, he nodded to her, looking just as awkward with the physical affection as she felt, but he didn’t seem like he didn’t like it somewhat, judging by the lingering softness on his visible features. She saluted lazily, stepping onto the front step of the complex, hoping her nonchalance would diffuse some of the gross *feelings* flying around.
“Catch you later, sensei.”

He waved and after pulling out his trademark orange book with his free hand, he disappeared with a puff of leaves.

Katsumi turned around and opened the door to the building, welcoming the cool blow of the air-conditioning and nodded to the young man at the front desk before heading upstairs to her apartment to take a well-deserved nap before Sasuke came over to make sure she didn’t die.

She threw open the door to the apartment, finding everything exactly the way she had left it a little over than hour and a half ago with Kakashi-sensei before trudging into her room, flopping onto her bed, and falling asleep almost immediately.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I hope I did the therapy scene right. I’ve been a couple times and I based Inoka off of my therapist (she does let me swear and put my feet on the table :)). Can y’all believe I’ve written twenty whole chapters of my brain-baby and it hasn’t been utterly terrible (at least I don’t think so)? Like wow. Go me. Also wow, go you for making it this far lmao. Next chapter is when we get into the Chunin Exam Arc y’all. Are you shook? Because I certainly am. Just an FYI, I’ll be taking a break between the end of this fic and writing the second bit just to blow off steam and get my creative juices flowing (and to get acclimated to college because holy shit what?) so don’t be mad if I drop off the face of the earth for a month or two after I’ve finished writing the ending for this badboy. I’ll be back, pinky promise! Anyways, onto the next!

Shout Outs

Octoskies: Thanks for the comment. The feeling is very much so mutual! I was super excited and terrified to write the chunin exam arc and I’m sorry in advance lmao.

heh: I KNOW!! He literally could and if Sarutobi wanted to avoid all-out war, he would just give her up and piss off Naruto, Kakashi, the entirety of the Rookies, it’d just be a mess all around. And Katsumi, bless her smart, angry little heart, she couldn’t do a goddamn thing about it. Ooh, they’d have their hands FULL with her. They’d probably send her back because she’d cause too much trouble. Good thing he opted out of sending genin to the chunin exams, therefore, keeping the Sandaime’s dirty little secret a secret for a little bit longer. (It doesn’t get kept for much longer though btw lmao)

QoTP: How do you think having a Team 7 with better mental health will change the storyline?
“Keep your sword-arm up, Sasuke. Knees,” Kakashi kicked the back of his knees with the side of his foot with enough force to bend them as he appraised his form while Sasuke stood as taut as a bow-string, poised to spar with one of Kakashi’s shadow clones with a blunted daito, “bent and keep them that way. Remember the footwork we practiced and for the Sage’s sake, loosen up. I won’t tell you again.”

If the genin was bothered by the instruction, he didn’t show it, regaining his balance and going back at the clone, slashing and dodging as he sparred with it, his mouth set in a determined line with renewed fervor.

Their instructor rounded on their blonde teammate. The boy was panting a couple meters away. “Naruto, stop taking shortcuts,” Kakashi barked when his sharp gaze fell on Naruto’s who was in the middle of sparring a clone using only sealing.

“Stop using the same seal over and over again. This exercise is supposed to make the basic seals I’ve taught come to you automatically. If you want to fight using only fuinjutsu, you can’t do that. This has to be automatic, almost like breathing.

"Again."

Naruto looked up sheepishly from his scroll, ink and sweat dripping onto his whiskered cheeks, his face red with exertion.

Kakashi’s clone had taken to making Naruto get rid of dangerous and benign objects using only his sealing notebook and chakra-ink. Those objects included but were not limited to: live explosive tags, thrown kunai, ink-bombs, and, curiously enough, various plant-life.

Judging by his relatively unmarred clothes, Naruto had been successful so far. However, Katsumi knew he was likely getting worn out by the exercise fairly quickly. It was a lot: he had to run fuinjutsu calculations in his head based on the characteristics of each item — whether it was living or not, the size, contents, and whatnot — and picking out the best seal to store each one safely, and draw it on the paper within no more than five seconds.
Needless to say, Kakashi was not fucking around.

Three weeks and nine therapy sessions had passed since Katumi’s first and with that, she had finally been given clearance to train again about a week and a half ago. Oshiro-sensei had admonished her to come to the hospital immediately if there was any lingering discomfort. After that, it was done: she was an active-duty kunoichi again. Kakashi-sensei, of course, took the clearance and ran with it.

Well, more like he took the clearance and she ran with it.

His sharp attention flitted to her and his eye narrowed slightly. “Pick up the pace, hime!” he called to her as she ran sprint drills unaided with chakra.

Thankfully, due to physical therapy sessions and Oshiro-sensei’s miracle hands, Katumi’s muscles hadn’t atrophied so she was more or less in the same physical condition as she was before the injury. But according to Kakashi, she needed to be even faster so he had her running suicides like she was back at the Academy. Only she had to sprint, no chakra with twenty-five-kilogram leg weights on.

For an hour.

“I know you can do better than that!”

He’d been running them ragged for weeks, Katumi apparently only catching the tail end of his insanity. Every day like clockwork, he expected them to be at the designated training ground at dawn for them to go through his insane version of genin training. Said insane training included weighted conditioning exercises, sparring with clones using any and all of the known ninja arts — and sometimes none of them but taijutsu if Kakashi was feeling particularly vindictive that day —, and their own specialized training to build up their individual skills.

Katumi liked the last bit the best and was surprised to learn that Kakashi-sensei had started Sasuke on kenjutsu to compliment his fighting style and he taught him a few new katon jutsu. He now practiced with a blunted daito every day during training and he was getting better at a rapid pace and Katumi knew he’d be formidable once he got better.

Naruto’s specialization was, predictably, fuinjutsu, the most difficult of the ninja arts, relying on an acute knowledge of chakra, damn-near perfect penmanship, close to a thousand different seals, and a creative mind. He practiced all the time in the apartment, experimenting with the seals he’d learned with Kakashi-sensei — who was surprisingly well-versed in fuinjutsu — on different objects and
slapping his own tweaked seals on them to see how they altered them.

For example, when a quarrel between Naruto and Sasuke ended up with the refrigerator getting busted about two weeks ago, before Katsumi could shove a kunai up both of their stupid asses, Naruto had held up his hands placatingly and took out his sealing scroll. He hastily drew out symbols with chakra-laden ink, his brow furrowed in concentration. Katsumi tapped her foot angrily and Sasuke, for once in his life, had looked nervous, glancing from her to Naruto for about forty-five seconds when finally, Naruto made the last brush-strokes and grinned as he made his hand glow brightly with chakra.

“Don’t worry, this should work.”

The blond walked over to the smoking fridge and opened it, placing the seal towards the back and activating it with his chakra with a light touch. Immediately, it lit up, the familiar yellow light casting a glow on their various groceries before they could even think about spoiling. Satisfied, Naruto closed the door with a flourish, grinning at each of his teammates.

He reappeared next to Sasuke with his arms akimbo and a large smile on his face.

"Done!"

Still angry, she flicked both of them in the nose as she left the room with a decent amount of force: enough to smart but not enough to seriously hurt. Sasuke hissed, trying and failing to bat her hand away and Naruto looked at her with faux-betrayal in his big blue eyes.

“Don’t break anything else chasing after your stupid rivalry or I’ll kick you both out.” Katsumi glared to make her ire known even though she wasn’t particularly angry anymore, but still annoyed. Sasuke scoffed and looked away, a light flush on his cheeks. Naruto’s eyes narrowed.

“I live here!” he argued, hands on his hips defiantly.

“My threat still stands. So unless you enjoy sleeping outside, don’t break anything else.”

Naruto sighed dramatically. “Fine, we won’t.”
Katsumi smiled, throwing both boys off-kilter with her abrupt change in demeanor, before leaving the room completely to practice her experimental suiton technique some more.

She sat down on cross-legged on her yellow bedspread, more or less satisfied with the scene in the kitchen. Then, it dawned on her that one day, likely pretty soon, Naruto was going to become very, very good at fuinjutsu if the display in the living room was any indication of his skill after a little under a month of tutelage.

Her prediction was very quickly being proved accurate.

Now that she was well enough to train with her team again, she only saw more and more progress from both boys, enough to make her competitive spirit roar to life because I’ll be damned if those boneheads surpass me because I was sidelined.

She’d taken to practicing her new technique when the boys weren’t there to ruin her concentration, testing her control of her favorite element on her bed.

After the conversation with the Hokage, she had realized how dangerous her new skill was on its own and how desperately she needed to hone it. It could be something that saves her life (again) one day so now, while she had so much downtime, it would be wise for Katsumi to perfect it.

As much as an original technique can be perfected, of course.

So every single day, without fail, she practiced. She had taken to messing with the laws of chakra attraction and distance in her spare time. Katsumi was getting good at it: drawing water from various objects like plants and the air using chakra and redispersing it around the room. She was diligent, drawing water into her chakra-covered palm first from the plethora of plants she’d bought from the Yamanaka Flower Shop.

Daily she watched their green leaves shrivel up and brown rapidly as she took the water from their cells repeatedly and played with it, making shapes in the air with the cloudy water, some harmless, some lethal enough to destroy a couple of water bottles she’d left in her room. Slowly she worked on weaponizing the water, first in quick slices that could gouge wood when she was particularly focused then, her more shaky experiment, turning it into sharp needles capable of breaking skin. If Katsumi had it her way, they’d be able to pierce muscle and bone soon.

The latter fell apart more often than not, but hey, she was working on it.
Eventually, she tried to do the same with the air, sucking the moisture out of it, but after one too many times bursting a blood vessel in her nose from the suddenly bone-dry air and almost bleeding all over her comforter, she’d bought a humidifier and went from there. It was noticeably a lot easier to practice with a readily available water source nearby, even if it had be taken out of the poor, unsuspecting foliage.

Then again, she couldn't count on always having water to use nearby in the field so she'd have to get comfortable with using what she had.

It had been an uneventful two months.

She felt bad for Naruto and Sasuke who had had Kakashi-sensei on a hundred percent crazy for five weeks while she’d only had to deal with it for going on two weeks now. Of course, she heard stories about it whenever all three of the genin were in the apartment — those were usually the nights Sasuke crashed on their sofa, too exhausted to try to make it back to the Uchiha compound without running the risk of passing out on the way there — and both Naruto and Sasuke were too tired to even try to make any sort of dinner that wasn’t takeout and she took it upon herself to do it.

Through full mouths, they told her the utter nightmare that was a focused Kakashi-sensei and how jealous they were that she had yet to experience it since she was still on the mend. At first, she thought they were just exaggerating, as Naruto was apt to do, but a week and a half ago, she found that she had to agree.

*He's a fucking monster.*

Sweat poured down her face as she ran the back to her starting line, the stitch in her side aching like a bitch. She did one more set, trying to find her groove to get through the exhaustion, breathing in through her nose and out through her mouth. Twenty more seconds and a full suicide later, Kakashi tossed her a water bottle that she gulped down gratefully, trying not to let it go down the wrong pipe in her haste.

Kakashi leveled her an admonishing look, causing her to slow down, sipping her water in slow, measured motions. “You have five minutes to recover before you work with me. I have a new jutsu for you. *Stretch,*” he commanded and Katsumi did just that, feeling some of the tension that had been building in her calves relax as she pulled at the muscles in a pike, her breathing and erratic heart-rate slowing down.
Apparently, she had the makings of a ninjutsu specialist according to Kakashi-sensei.

It made sense why he kicked their training up so many notches from the slow and relaxed sessions, usually with mild surprises and easy team-building exercises, to an actual, literal, genuine hell. They had all almost died on what was supposed to be a standard C-rank escort mission and Kakashi was understandably worried, especially since Katsumi almost came back to the village in a body-bag.

Yeah.

“Sasuke!” the genin’s head turned from where he was trying to decapitate the clone. “Get ready for conditioning. Get your weights and warm up. You’re running long-distance to build up endurance.” Sasuke dropped his blades and walked over to his bag to strap on the weights.

“Naruto, you can stop now. Practice chakra suppression and tumbling and flexibility all at the same time. I want you to be able to do the round-off back handspring combo with the full layout by the end of the day.”

Naruto groaned, looking more than a little bit drained from his specialty practice, but began stretching his wrists and arms, drawing his left across his body and tugging as he walked over to the blue mats that sat in the sun a few dozen meters away the Kakashi had purchased for this exact purpose.

Apparently, acrobatics was an important skill set for any shinobi, allowing for agility and ease of mobility in most situations, combat or otherwise. So, of course, Kakashi had taken it upon himself to drill them in tumbling every other day, even bringing in a civilian gymnast a few times to teach them basic acrobatic maneuvers.

Naruto, surprisingly, had taken to it like a fish in water when he’d shown it to them, doing flips and tricks like he had been trained to since birth, laughing the entire way while his two genin teammates stared in awe because when the hell had he learned to do all of that?

Then, Kakashi had sped up his training to an advanced level. While Katsumi and Sasuke worked on the basics like cartwheels, round-offs, and the occasional walkover, Naruto was perfecting handsprings, layouts, and aerials. Katsumi was surprised he didn’t break his damn neck with some of the stuff Kakashi-sensei had him doing, throwing himself into the air without fear or chakra. Katsumi was not nearly as fearless, requiring a spotter at least fifty percent of the time when she was tumbling for fear she’d kill herself on accident. She had a minor fear to work through in learning how to tumble.
Baby-steps.

Of course, that didn’t mean she wasn’t at least *passable* in the specialty — or better than Sasuke by a *long* shot, something she mercilessly teased him for — it just took her a minute to warm up is all. Plus half the time, she was nearly dead on her feet from all the catch-up work Kakashi-sensei had her doing to make up for her two months out of commission. It seemed like from sunup to sundown, she was running speed and agility drills if she wasn’t perfecting her chakra control to Kakashi’s ANBU-level standards through continued learning and practice of different water-style jutsu including his favorite one to torment her with: the hiding in the water technique.

When she was a puddle he enjoyed dropping various leaves and twigs onto her glassy surface. The first time he did it, she promised dark and low that she would gut him in his sleep one of these days which had done nothing but prompt the *boys* to start tormenting her in the same way. It had taken her *two hours* to get all that stupid shit out of her hair and she’d nearly skinned her teammates alive for it. It nearly made her miss the week after she’d just woke up in the hospital with an injured leg and they treated her like she was a princess. But it was much better this way, even if her team was being a *massive* pain in the ass six out of seven days a week. All the activity was almost enough to get rid of the foreboding feeling that had been roiling in the pit of her stomach ever since she got back from Wave.

*Almost.*

She rolled to her feet, feeling like her five minutes of reprieve was up and sought out Kakashi-sensei who had his back towards her, studying the boys’ progress with a narrowed eye. Katsumi walked on habitually silent feet and he turned around, his focus on her for the moment.

“You have an unusually strong affinity for water, you know that?”

Caught a little off-guard, she nodded slowly. “I kinda figured, what with the whole Wave thing,” she offered, pantomiming her dehydration technique with her hands.

His gaze turned contemplative, like there was something he was holding back from telling her. Swallowing her discomfort, she held his gaze, waiting for him to break the silence.

“Mizu-bunshin. How do they differ from a standard bunshin?”
“They require water-natured chakra, usually best paired used by someone with the elemental affinity. To use them, it can help for beginners to have a water source nearby, but experts can do it with only their own chakra.”

“Thank you, Encyclopedia-san,” Kakashi snorted. “I’m assuming all I have to do is give a demonstration and you won’t need me anymore?” he asked, tossing her a scroll with the aforementioned jutsu in it.

Katsumi smirked, a confident little thing with more teeth than necessary. If there was one thing Katsumi was proud of, it was her ability to soak up knowledge (and skills) like a goddamned sponge. It seemed like her chakra system just agreed with her. It didn’t allow much resistance when she tried to learn jutsu, especially if they were water-based.

Though while it was impressive and the cause for a lot of her pride, it wasn’t like she didn’t know what some of the older shinobi said about her when they had learned that a tiny little first-year genin had taken down a mid-chuunin-level nukenin with an original technique. It wasn’t every day that something like that happened.

Katsumi was well aware of how impressive she seemed and how it, while it was currently a good thing, could turn into something very bad in the blink of an eye. So, she kept her head down and practiced, dead set on making sure that her assassination technique wasn’t her only skill. She couldn’t afford to be a one-trick pony in the shinobi world.

That spelled disaster in more ways than one.

“You know it, sensei,” she chirped, shifting her canny smirk into a bright smile. She caught the scroll in her left hand, her eyes devouring the characters the second she unraveled it.

He sighed heavily before making the tiger sign and, just like that, there was a copy of Kaka-sensei standing to his right.

“Thanks! I’ll take it from here,” she decided, already prepping her chakra for the work. She felt him disappear from her enhanced senses, likely to go instruct the boys.

Katsumi sat down in the grass and meditated, preparing her chakra for a ninjutsu use, digging down deep into her well of power slowly. She found it much easier on her body to ease into techniques instead of diving down sharp and fast into her reserves and calling on as much chakra as possible.
Theoretically, due to chakra’s almost acidic nature, doing that too much could cause premature chakra-exhaustion in the short term and early-onset chakra-path degeneration in the long term.

Hm.

She would have to research that when she finished up here to verify her theory.

Katsumi quickly cleared her mind and began learning a new jutsu, drowning out the sounds of harsh breathing, shaky landings, and sharp reprimands.

It was a long day of training.

———

This certainly was…


Unexpected.

Naruto’s eyes widened to a comical amount as a grin of demonic proportions lit up his face. “This early?” Kakashi held out the white forms for them to read and Katsumi did, skimming the text lining the top, feeling the familiar anxiety come back full force as she read through it.

When practice had concluded at around five in the afternoon, the genin gathered around their sensei for their daily debrief. Kakashi had integrated that into their training as a way to cement certain critiques into their heads before they went their separate ways for the evening. Katsumi had been expecting to hear about Naruto’s inability to tuck his chin into his chest when doing a layout of Sasuke’s rigid posture while sword-fighting, not… this.

“Haven’t you stopped to wonder why I’ve been so much harder on you these past few weeks?” Kakashi questioned easily, his tone light.
“I thought it was because we almost died in Wave,” Sasuke deadpanned.

Katumi was dumbfounded as she tried to wrap her head around this.

*The Chunin Exams? Now?*

“Well, that was part of it, but not quite. It’s because you, my cute little genin, have to be ready to take the exams,” Kakashi answered. He folded his arms his chest as he leaned against a striking post leisurely.

“You don’t look excited, Katumi-chan,” he pointed out.

“It’s not necessarily a matter of excitement,” she defended, a bit of petulance on her face. “I am, don’t get me wrong, this is…” she trailed off, unable to find the right words to describe a potential rank advancement, the unease rising and falling with the tide of her breathing. “It’s just that isn’t it a little early? We’ve only been genin since January. Could we really be chunin-ready in six months?”

“If you don’t want to compete, just tell me. But, do understand that Konoha requires genin to participate in teams, so if you opt out—”

“I hold back Naruto and Sasuke,” she finished, the furrow in her brow deepening. She felt two sets of stares on her and she refused to look up, knowing that their intensity would make her decision for her.

Katumi bit her lip. She wanted to advance, honestly, she did. It was just that something felt *off*. She’d felt off about something since she’d woken up in the hospital and she couldn’t place exactly what it was until just then. Something in her was digging its heels into the ground, incredibly leery at the prospect of taking the Chunin Exams and she didn’t know *why*.

To be completely honest, Katumi didn’t want to compete. But it didn’t seem like it was really up to her judging by the fact that there were what looked to be liability waivers in Kakashi’s hands at the moment.

Signed by the Sandaime Hokage himself.
It looked like it was already decided for her. Kakashi was just asking them to give some semblance of free-will to them so that if something bad happened — which, judging by how in depth the legal form was, that scenario was most likely — they would only have themselves to blame since they had agreed. This entire situation left a sour taste in her mouth, the smoke and mirrors surrounding the damn thing making her unbelievably antsy.

“Couldn’t we just find a replacement if she chickens out?” Sasuke drawled from her left, a touch of amusement in his otherwise dry tone.

Naruto’s head whipped towards him, a reprimand on his tongue. Katsumi beat him to it, fire in her gaze, because she was many things: arrogant at times, single-minded, blunt, and sensitive, but she was not a punk.

“I’m taking the damn exams, you rude bitch,” she ground out and as quick as an asp, she snatched one of the papers from Kakashi’s outstretched hand. She snarled, sending a fierce glare in Sasuke’s direction and was met with a slight smirk.

Bastard baited me, she realized and she kicked herself for falling right into his stupid ass trap.

He’s learning.

“Glad to know you’re motivated,” he said, ignoring her cursing. Kakashi sounded almost like he was about to roll his eyes but there was something lingering in his tone that Katsumi couldn’t quite place. Dismissing it immediately, Naruto let out a whoop and grabbed one of the papers himself, Sasuke following suit a moment later with the last form.

“We’ll make you proud and all advance to chunin, Kaka-sensei! Believe it!” He pumped his fist in the air as his hungry eyes devoured the page. Kakashi nodded, letting out a long-suffering sigh.

“Bring those back tomorrow. But for now, go home,” he ordered, providing a shooing motion with his hands. “Get yourselves some rest. We’re going to formally start training for the exams and you’ll need all the energy you can get.” He flashed them a wolfish grin from behind his mask and the genin scampered off to their respective homes. Sasuke mumbled something about needing to do something at the Uchiha Compound and disappearing into the fading light of the evening.

The remaining two genin ambled down the road in no hurry, speaking in hushed tones about the upcoming exams. Naruto seemed determined — which was hardly anything noteworthy — but
Katsumi couldn’t shake her bad feelings.

“You were hesitant back there,” Naruto pointed out as they neared the market district, his tone neutral. “Why? I thought you were tired of the baby-genin work.”

“I am, I am,” she agreed, a frown pulling at her lips. “It’s just— I don’t know Naruto, something about this just seems... off,” she mumbled, shoving her hands in her pockets, scowling at the ground. Her intuition was telling her to stay on her guard but for the life of her, she couldn’t figure out why.

Naruto nodded, his expression pensive. “I did notice something kinda weird in Kaka-sensei’s delivery,” Naruto admitted. Katsumi’s head whipped to look at him. “When you mentioned Wave, he said we had to be ready to take the exams, not pass the exams.”

Katsumi nodded, having picked up on that oddity as well, biting her lip.

“Though, maybe this is just for practice, y’know,” Naruto added, stepping around a civilian merchant’s cart.

“You could be right. It could be just, like, for experience or something. So we can get used to the feeling of being treated like chunin before we actually are.”

“Yeah,” Naruto smiled at her as they stepped up onto the front steps of their building. He threw open the door, welcoming the air-conditioning in the early June heat. “Besides, if things get sticky, we can always bail, y’know.”

Katsumi paused on their ascent up the stairs, the one she stopped on creaking in protest. “You mean disqualify ourselves?”

“Well yeah,” Naruto answered in a ‘duh’ kind of voice, turning around to look at her before she took the hint and caught up. “If shit hits the fan like you feel it will, we can always find a way to disqualify ourselves and live to fight another day.”

“You wouldn’t be upset?” Katsumi questioned, a little floored by Naruto’s foresight on this. It would be much more like him to disregard any sort of danger and go in, kunai blazing. Maybe she was rubbing off on him after all this time.
“Well a little,” he admitted sheepishly, unlocking the door to their apartment with a brass key. “But isn’t that what being a chunin is all about? Knowing when to fight and when to cut your losses?” Katsumi nodded, not expecting Naruto to see it like this when it had always been his instinct to go, go, go even when it was probably best to stop and analyze. But, she supposed he was just maturing and growing up just like she was so she shouldn’t have been so surprised.

“Besides, these things are offered, what, like every six months or something? We can always take ‘em again, y’know,” he finished. Naruto promptly threw himself onto the couch in front of the television and took out his sealing notes and a brush and inkpot. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to figure out how to make a timed ink-bomb seal.” He sent her a foxy grin. “There’s a civilian merchant who called me a demon the other day and I think he would look really good in red from head to toe.”

Katsumi sighed and shook her head. “If you get arrested one of these days, just know that I’ll deny that I’ve ever met you before in my life,” she said, disappearing into her room to put her bag down, ignoring the sound of Naruto’s laughter from the couch.

“They’ll have to catch me first!”

Since the Wave Mission, it wasn’t uncommon for Katsumi to have migraines fairly often. Sometimes they occurred twice a week, other times, usually when she is particularly stressed out, they can happen multiple times a day. Katsumi had become used to the emergence of pulsing, intense pain throbbing behind her eyes for a while now so it wasn’t uncommon for Katsumi to carry around aspirin when she needed to lessen the pain momentarily as is the case during practice or missions. It had become her new normal after Wave, just like going to therapy or insane training from Kakashi-sensei.

She had not, however, woken up with a migraine before.

Katsumi was thrown unceremoniously out of unconsciousness to the worst migraine she’d ever had in her life, letting out a whimper and rubbing at her eyes from behind her eyelids futilely to dispel some of the pain. It felt like someone was laying a hot poker under her eyeballs and prying them up, the hot pressure unbearable.

After trying in vain to open up her eyes and hissing in pain every time, she gave up on that front and
rolled out of bed, padding along the cold floor on shaky legs, feeling along the wall as to not bump into anything while she was temporarily blinded. When she finally grabbed the door handle separating her from the rest of the apartment, she turned it and moved shakily to the bathroom to find some aspirin, trying not to cry because this one hurt really bad. Moving her eyeballs behind her closed lids caused needles of pain to reverberate through her entire head and Katsumi wondered which particular gods she pissed off that morning to warrant this.

Judging by the lack of movement in the apartment and her internal clock, it was probably fairly early in the morning. Somewhere between half past four and a quarter to six, if she had to guess, an hour or so before she and Naruto got up to head to team training.

Her fingers caught on the door-frame signifying the bathroom and she practically threw open the door and ignored the cold tiles beneath her toes, walking instinctively to the vanity. She opened up the medicine cabinet and felt around for the bottle of extra-strength aspirin blindly, deciding she was going to sneak a quick peek at the label and deal with the pain because she’d be damned if she used the weaker medicine.

When she found what she believed to be the right bottle, Katsumi opened one eye to verify, swallowing the pain to check. Her nimble fingers had the bottle open in seconds, dropping two of the little white pills into her hands and downsing them dry, desperate for relief. She felt her way to the bathtub, sitting on the cold ceramic and waiting for the medicine to take effect for a few minutes, recalling everything she had done that day that could’ve caused a headache of this caliber as she rubbed at her temples.

Really, all she did yesterday was team-training like they had been doing for the week since they were told they’d be competing in the Chunin Exams, a lot of taijutsu and the sharpening of their basic skills so that they could suppress their chakra, walk on water, and tree-walk half-dead with their hands tied. So, nothing that they did yesterday could’ve aggravated her head into a migraine this bad. Really, the only thing that had ever really given her bad headaches was whenever she overused her fledgling sensory capabilities. That, or when she was near chakra-exhaustion, but neither of that happened often as she was careful with the former, only using it when she needed to and wasn’t really in a position to achieve or get near the latter. Not since Wave.

She was stumped.

Slowly but surely, the pain lessened after about fifteen minutes, enough to where it felt less like hot-coals were being pressed under her eye-sockets and more like a normal migraine. Katsumi breathed a sigh of relief, standing up gingerly from her seat on the rim of the bathtub and moving to stand in front of the mirror. Cautiously, she opened her eyes, her hands clenching the sink tightly in preparation for the pain that had accompanied the action earlier. When her eyes focused and the brightness from the bathroom lights had stopped making her eyes hurt a little, her heart almost stopped.
A couple seconds later, clumsy footsteps sounded down the hall and the door was thrown open, hitting the wall with a sharp *bang*. Naruto stepped inside, kunai in hand, with a bewildered expression on his face.

“What happened?” he shouted, looking around the bathroom for intruders and finding none. “Katsu-chan wha—” he stopped, his eyes widening as they caught her gaze in the mirror.

“What’s going on with your eyes?”

Katsumi shrugged helplessly, wondering the exact same thing still caught in a stupor.

Her irises were *glowing*.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Yeah. That happened. This chapter was a little bit short until I added in the dojutsu part instead of pushing it back, but that’s alright because the chunin exams are going to be a fucking mess. Also, thanks to my friend, I’ve finally figured out where I want this story to go and let’s just say it’s going to be wild. Naruto, our resident gymnast/fuinjutsu extraordinaire is in for a lot. Also MentallySound!Sasuke is a hoot to write. Less of an asshole, more of a sassy bitch. Makes me like him a lot more tbh. I do hope that I’m writing an interesting and dynamic character and not some bum-ass Mary Sue type. That would break my heart. Anyways, onto the next!

Shout Outs: me because I mf deserve it ;-;

QoTP: What do you think Danzo’s plan for Katsumi is? I had someone mention before that it seemed like in the beginning that Danzo wanted his scheme with Katsumi’s family to be found out by the Hokage and that the whole thing was on purpose. What do y’all think?
Expect the Unexpected

Chapter Summary

In which Katsumi does not expect the unexpected.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

About an hour later, both genin were sitting in the waiting room of Konoha General. Katsumi was still in shock, rubbing at her temples as she sat in the hard plastic chair. She had kept her eyes closed the entire way as they were still unbelievably sensitive to light through the migraine had lessened in intensity. So Naruto had escorted her, making sure she didn’t run into anything or anybody since she outright refused to be carrier hime-style by rooftop.

The trip felt like it took forever and a day on foot.

Naruto was rambling quietly to her, throwing out ideas on what he thought happened to bring up her spirits. “Wait, what if you got bit by a radioactive spider, y’know? Have you seen any spiders around the apartment?”

Katsumi snorted, thankful for his good humor. “No, not that I know of.”

She heard him chuckle. “Totally a radioactive spider-bite,” he mumbled to himself. “Well, the good news is that you probably have superpowers now.”

“Naruto, what time is it?” she asked, changing the subject abruptly when she remembered something.

“Uh, like half past si— oh shit we’re late for practice, y’know!”

Katsumi swore under her breath, her anxiety climbing. “Okay, you go and tell Kaka-sensei what happened. I’ll wait for Mei-sensei here.”

Naruto probably furrowed his brow judging by the tone in which he said: “Are you sure you can
“I’ll be fine. Plus if anything goes wrong, I am in a hospital. Go.”

He patted her on the shoulder and she heard him rise from his chair. “I’ll be back within the hour, pinky-promise.” The other genin took off down the hall they came in from and left Katsumi alone. She sighed deeply wondering if the day could get better at all.

Not long after Naruto’s departure, she heard a familiar voice call out: “Are you absolutely incapable of staying out of the hospital for longer than two months at a time?”

Katsumi turned her head in the direction of Mei-sensei’s voice, a bit of petulance coming out. “S’not my fault. Blame Rikudou-sama. It seems he hates me.”

Katsumi felt her sharp gaze assessing her, picking up on her closed eyes. “Well let’s get you checked out, ne?” Katsumi nodded, happy that she didn’t have to wait very long for assistance. The med-nin walked over to her, her steps deliberately audible as to not startle Katsumi since she couldn’t watch her approach. Katsumi felt Mei-sensei’s hand grasp her upper arm and lightly pull, signaling her to get up from her seat as she led her into Mei-sensei’s office.

———

Healing Katsumi had always been a bit of a hassle.

Since the heat stroke incident, Mei had noticed that to heal the girl completely, she needed a lot more chakra and the strain that accompanied treating her was unreal.

The doctor had dismissed it for the most part, as some people were harder to heal than others as their bodies were more receptive to different treatments. It wasn’t a big deal then.

Until her brush with death in Wave, that is.

Katsumi didn’t know it, but she had been a lot closer to death than she thought she was. It was the main reason why her squad and Mei had to pack up in the little island country so quickly and haul
ass back to Konoha; without more medics and better facilities, Katsumi would’ve died in hours. Mei had gone with them to keep her as close to stable as possible before she had immediately gone into surgery the second they touched down in the village and even then, her chances of survival were dangerously slim.

The genin was lucky that it had been Mei who had arrived for if it had been any other medic — other than Senju Tsunade-sama herself — she would’ve died before they’d reached the border of Wave.

The severity of her injury wasn’t the only thing that lowered her chances.

To Mei and all of the other medics on the team that helped with the surgery on her leg a couple months prior, it was noted that it was like her body was rejected the influx of foreign chakra courtesy of the original two medics in charge of her surgery. Amazingly enough, upon further examination by one of Mei’s interns, her chakra was slowly breaking down their healing chakra and rendering it useless, making it a lot harder for them to heal her and requiring a large group of medics to keep the girl alive long enough for no less than four iryo-nin focusing on repairing the damage to her femur alone, which they eventually did, but not without extreme difficulty. It had taken a grand total of nine medics to keep that girl alive and even then, it almost hadn’t been enough.

Mei had told Katsumi when she woke up in recovery that the reason why she had to let her leg heal partially through the good old fashioned way was that it would be better for her body in the long run to finish the process unaided, but that was not the case.

Something about Katsumi’s chakra made it alarmingly aggressive to foreign chakra and due to its almost jinchūriki-levels of acidity, made her own chakra able to dissolve it into her system and, even worse, attack any of her own, perfectly healthy cells that had been imbued with the unfamiliar chakra, damaging her cells and tissues in an effort to burn it out.

The team was forced to stop or else her chakra would end up killing her if they added more fuel to the molecular fire and some of the medics were even nearing chakra exhaustion due to how intense the healing was. It was like nothing any of the medics on the team had ever seen before, the more experienced ones staring warily at the unconscious girl while a couple of the younger ones wanted to take samples for further analysis. Mei had quickly shut that idea down, going so far as to make the other medics swear not to tell another living soul about what they had observed, which they had agreed to with wide eyes.

By the skin of their collective teeth, they kept the girl alive even though her chakra was fighting them back every step of the way, reacting similarly to the cells of someone with an autoimmune disease. Mei tried her best to keep it hush-hush for the time being, but she knew for a fact that what had happened in that operating room was not normal and it likely had something to do with her mysteriously absent family because any medic worth their certifications knew that there was no way
that girl was from the Land of Fire.

Of course, Mei had her own suspicions, none of which she’d vocalize unless asked, but it was clear
to her that something was wrong.

She just had to figure out what.

“And you just woke up like this?” Mei asked, her fingers around Katsumi’s head, minty chakra
assessing the damage apparently located primarily in her eyes and not in her head as Katsumi had
initially assumed. Her brows were furrowed as sweat began to bead at her hairline in exertion.

Katsumi had her eyes opened now, as Mei-sensei’s healing making it possible for her to be able to
see without being in excruciating pain. Mei kept pushing carefully regulated amounts of chakra
around her optical nerve, fighting against the girl’s chakra to bring down the swelling in her face
behind her eyes.

It seemed like depending on the severity of the injury Katsumi’s chakra reacted differently as Mei
wasn’t running into nearly as much difficulty as she had when she was trying to keep the girl out of
the embrace of the shinigami, going from ‘nearly impossible’ to ‘challenging’.

Just one more thing for her to bring up to the Hokage when she meets him later in the day.

Katsumi shrugged helplessly. “Yep, took a couple aspirin, opened my eyes, and they were glowing
and stuff.”

Mei frowned, feeling around the inflamed chakra-pathways that were much, much more complex
than the average person’s, making a note to jot that down later. “You’re an orphan, right?”

“Yes ma’am,” she answered slowly, her brows knitting together a little in the process.

“You have no idea of your lineage or anything?” Mei pressed.

“No, I don’t. Why?”
Mei took a deep breath and sighed. She didn’t get paid enough for the shit she did.

It looks like she’d be having quite the conversation with both the Sandaime and Hatake as her jonin sensei would need to be informed of her findings as well. When she spoke to the silver-haired jonin, maybe she’d grill him for information if he had any. Mei needed answers if the lack of information kept impacted her ability to do her fucking job and heal this girl like it was already and if they wanted to keep Katsumi alive — and Mei from attempting a double homicide — they would give her the answers she wanted and immediately.

Mei inwardly winced before delivering a bit of news that would likely make her life a thousand times more difficult than it already was. “Looks to me like you have a kekkei-genkai of some sort that I’ve never seen before.”

Katsumi’s mind went blank for a moment.

A what?

“Wait, wait, wait, aren’t those exclusive to shinobi?” Katsumi asked, rolling the information around in her head. Last she checked, she was civilian-born and nothing else. This kind of stuff didn’t happen to civilian-born orphans like her, this kind of stuff only happened in the novels she’d read or the movies her and Naruto liked.

Holy Hashirama, she had a kekkei-genkai?

“Well, normally yes which means that you have at least one shinobi parent. Eyes closed again for me.”

Katsumi did as she was asked, feeling the healing chakra shift around her face.

Katsumi’s mind was racing as she wrapped her head around the idea that she, a supposed civilian nobody, had at least one shinobi parent. Part of her rejoiced at finally having some part of her past to hold on to after all this time of knowing absolutely nothing. It was refreshing and exhilarating, and
so, so utterly **terrifying** because it also meant that the false story she had been told, that her parents were civilian farmers who died in the Kyuubi attack in a little farming village a couple of kilometers west of Konoha, was either an innocent mistake that someone happened to get wrong or, even more likely, someone was **lying** and had been covering up the truth for almost thirteen years.

But why would they lie? Even if one of her parents was a shinobi — or, gods forbid, **both** of her parents, holy Hashirama —, it was unlikely they were particularly important anyways seeing as though she was just thrown into an orphanage and forgotten about rather than given to friends or family. She was likely the result of a one-off fling between a random shinobi and a civilian, an idea that made her cringe in distaste. Not that there was anything wrong with being a bastard, honestly, in this day and age, lineage didn’t matter unless you had the skill to back it up. But still, if that was the case, it was a miracle she was alive still. Katsumi wondered if her blood relatives lived in Konoha **right now** and had no idea that she even existed.

*Then again,* she frowned, **nobody in Konoha is as brown as I am,** she remembered, comparing her bronze skin-tone to the fair ones of her countrymen. *It’s highly unlikely that something like melanin is that recessive.* Which meant she had to have at least one parent with a fairly dark complexion for someone from Konoha or Hi no Kuni in general to have sired her. But in her travels throughout the Land of Fire with Team Seven, she had never seen anyone as dark as she was; not any of the civilian villagers they helped, not other shinobi, the darkest anyone else was obviously a result of sun exposure, not from good old-fashioned genetics.

Not only that, but her hair was her most memorable feature, not in the moon-white color, which was shared with a few people in the village — she shuddered, when the possibility of the famed Jiraiya-sama being her father reached her mind and dismissed it as quickly as it came. Though she’d never met him she still knew he was a world-class **creep** — but the texture. Her hair didn’t know what order was. It was unbelievably curly, thick, and coarse, falling down her back in sheets of riotous coils that she had never seen anywhere else but her own head. They contrasted greatly with the dark, silky, **straight** hair that frequented the people of Hi no Kuni, making her stand out horribly if she didn’t braid her hair like she usually did. In short, she didn’t look at all like a typical Land of Fire citizen which left a scenario that left an interesting taste in her mouth.

*I could be from another land and not Hi no Kuni …*

She rolled that idea around in her head and bit her lip. It would make sense. Mei-sensei said that she had never even seen a kekkei-genkai like hers before and she’d been a medic-nin for over a decade at this point. If **anyone** would know anything about her weird eyes, it would be the experienced medical ninja, but even she was stumped judging by the slight furrow in her brow. Either her eyes were a mutated version of the Sharingan or the Byakugan or they were something else entirely.

*Did other hidden villages have dojutsu or was it just Konoha?*
Her gaze flicked to Mei-sensei’s face and was unnerved to see her face carefully blank as she kept bringing down the swelling in her face, her warm hands cupping her face as green lit up Katsumi’s peripherals.

*But if I have a kekkei-genkai, that doesn’t just mean that I’m the child of a ninja, but it most likely means that…*

“Does that mean that I come from a shinobi clan?” she blurted out, her ideas filling her mind to bursting. Someone had lied to her about her family, she was almost positive. The backstory hardly even made any sense now that she thought about it. She scowled as more ideas began forming in her head, each one more uncomfortable than the last.

*Who or what are they protecting with the lie?*

Mei pursed her lips and was about to answer when a single knock sounded at the door. She called out a distracted “Come in.” and the door swung open and two sets of deliberately audible footsteps sounded across the linoleum.

“Oh you I’d be back soon!” Naruto’s cheery voice called out. Her eyes flicked open at the entrance. Katsumi smiled a little, bolstered by her best friend’s mood and feeling a little better now that he was here. She glanced at Kaka-sensei who nodded at her in greeting and she returned with one of her own, thankful for their presences. She quickly noticed the empty spot where her other teammate should’ve been and sent a questioning look to Kakashi.

“Sasuke’s in the waiting room in case you were wondering,” he answered. “I wanted to leave both of the boys in there but Naruto was about to throw a temper tantrum, so…” Kakashi trailed off, rolling his eye a little while Naruto scowled a little bit.

“I told her I would be back and I never break a promise to a friend, y’know,” he said pointedly at Kakashi-sensei who looked unaffected by his words and smiled at Katsumi again, his sunny disposition back quickly.

Mei’s chakra died out and Katsumi was oddly relieved not to have her chakra in her system for any longer, the experience a little bit more uncomfortable than normal. She gave the two shinobi a strained smile.
“It’s good to see you Naruto-kun,” she greeted. “Hatake,” she nodded respectfully.

“S’good to see you again as well. I heard the likely exaggerated version from my excitable baby genin here, but what’s going on with her?” Kakashi asked, moving to lean against the wall leisurely, his lazy gaze trained on Mei.

Mei told them quickly that she suspected that Katsumi had a kekkei-genkai and that this morning was the time that she awakened it for the first time judging by the dilation of her chakra pathways in her eye and the spike in her chakra reserves. Katsumi’s mouth almost fell open at the last bit because she hadn’t even felt the slight increase in chakra.

“No, I was right about to test it when you two came in,” she answered a little irritated at the interruption.

Kakashi then looked dead at her. “Switch it on,” Kakashi demanded, looking a little less bored than he usually did. After taking a moment to understand what the hell he wanted her to switch on, Katsumi obliged, closing her eyes and shunting chakra into her face turning on what she had to call her ‘sensory mode’ and feeling a twinge of pressure behind her eyes as a rush of chakra came into contact with the paths near her optic nerves. She peeked one eye open carefully and gasped, both eyes wide.

“By the sage...”

She could see everything. It was like when she had examined Kakashi’s Sharingan for the first time and she could sense his chakra and feel its nature only a lot more in depth. She could see the bright blue aura of what she instinctively recognized as his chakra surrounding him in a surprisingly thin layer for someone who was known as a ninjutsu-heavy fighter. It swirled around him like water, weaving between his left leg and around his hip before transforming into a much more solid form around the bottom of his torso. Around his body were different types of chakra, all the same color, but each one behaving differently.

Like their elemental releases.

Jumping between his finger-tips of his right hand were what Katsumi recognized as lightning chakra,
flitting between his digits so quickly, she figured that she wouldn’t be able to see it unless she was looking for it. Fire-natured chakra wove around his left leg, dancing and flickering around in a way that was reminiscent of a campfire.

Near his heart, floating around his upper torso were wisps of wind-natured chakra, thin and quick, almost blowing away some of the encroaching water and earth natured chakra below them.

*Does the location of the different elements mean anything?*

Her hungry eyes then took in the chakra in his face, concentrating understandably in the spot covered by his hitai-ate, a swirling vortex of red where his Sharingan was, drawing the rest of the chakra around his body near it like a tornado even though he wasn’t even *using* it.

*I didn’t know you could use all five chakra natures, sensei …*

Next, she looked at Naruto before looking away quickly. She winced, tearing her aching retinas away from her friend as her suspicions were confirmed. With her augmented sensory-mode activated, looking at his chakra was like looking at a bright scarlet sun, something she expected due to his furry little problem. She could sense some lingering vestiges of the chakra, namely the fact that where the sensei’s chakra no matter the form smelled like ozone, the vast majority of Naruto’s was chaotic and felt very, *very* angry.

Before she could judge anything else, her thoughts were interrupted and she was reminded that she was not the only person in the room. “What can you see?” Kakashi asked.

“Chakra,” she answered with palpable awe in the voice. “Natures, characteristics, amounts, I can *see* your Sharingan eating up your chakra and that you can use all five natures,” she offered, too distracted to notice Kakashi’s raised eyebrow. “Mei-sensei, would you mind activating your Shōsen Jutsu?” she requested, taking note of her wind and earth natured chakras centered around her torso and arms respectively. “I want to see what that looks like with my dojutsu.”

When Mei’s hands lit up a pale green according to Katsumi’s wishes, a large grin spread on her face. “What does it look like?” Mei questioned, taking out a clipboard.

“Chakra looks different depending on what it’s being used for I think. The healing chakra looks almost *liquid,*” she said, squinting a little to see it better. “It’s definitely fluid and it…” she trailed off, trying to feel it even though it wasn’t concentrated on her. “It feels… fresh? Like clean. And kinda
Cold maybe? A little sharp too. Which would explain your signature feeling the way it does. Does iryo-ninjutsu alter your chakra signature permanently? Like, does it leave an imprint or lasting effect on it or does it only change when your chakra is being used for medical jutsu?’’

Oshiro-sensei inhaled sharply, her eyes widening, and she quickly wrote something on a paper on her clipboard. She flitted her eyes to Kakashi, watching him twitch imperceptibly when her gaze landed on him, his one visible eyebrow raised.

“What about me?” Naruto whined, bouncing on the balls of his feet with excitement. “What does my chakra look like?”

Katsumi pulled a face. “Overwhelming. Scarlet and wispy, so you probably have wind natured chakra. Angry too… There’s a lot of it. Like, a lot-a lot.”

Before she could go on or Naruto could respond, Kakashi interrupted. “Naruto, would you mind going to the waiting room to let Sasuke know that team practice will be pushed back to noon and waiting for us to finish up in here?”

Naruto pulled a face. “Yes.”

Kakashi smiled but not kindly. “That wasn’t a request. We need to talk to Katsumi alone. Beat it, kiddo.”

Naruto huffed, and with a scowl, he left the room. “See you later.” And with that, the heavy wooden door closed and Katsumi felt a little more exposed than she had been before as she watched his insanely bright signature go farther and farther down the hall and to the elevators before shutting the chakra flow off from her eyes.

She then noticed how pale Mei-sensei had gotten and the tense lines of Kaka-sensei’s face for the first time and she wanted to go with Naruto.

Mei spoke first. “First things first, you don’t use this dojutsu freely until we know more about it, meaning no messing with it at home,” she orders, her expression sobering up. Katsumi almost didn’t wince. “You are to come in to see me and only me, unless you are told otherwise by me in person, every day after training so I can monitor your eyes to make sure there aren’t any…” she trailed off, looking up at the ceiling, “unsavory side effects to using your eyes. Your health is mine and Hatake’s main priority in this situation, right, Kakashi?”
He looked up like he hadn’t been paying attention and nodded. “Of course it is.”

Mei continued. “No one outside of Team 7 and I are to know about your dojutsu unless you are given explicit permission from myself, Hatake, or the Sandaime Hokage *himself* to do otherwise or you are given no other alternatives, are we clear?”

“Hai,” she answered, her eyes wide at the amount of severity this apparently warranted.

The medic turned to Kakashi with a hint of uncertainty. “Should I call in the boys to brief them on the situation?”

Kakashi shook his head. “They know better than to go running their mouths about this for now. I’ll let them know later.”

She nodded before grabbing her clipboard and furiously scribbling something on the paper. “This is a happy occasion, don’t get me wrong, but we need to be careful when it comes to things like this,” Mei said with a touch of apology in her tone. “There are people that should not know about your eyes until you can use them correctly and I’m here to help you do that so you have to work with me, alright?”

Mei pinned Katsumi with a hard stare that brokered no room for arguments and Katsumi nodded quickly. “Good,” the woman replied with a smile. “We’re going to have fun learning about this, you and I.”

Katsumi sent back a more tentative smile of her own and Kakashi sighed.

“I’m in for a lot of headaches because of you two, aren’t I?”

Mei’s smile turned into a sharper smirk. “You and me both, Hatake.”

Katsumi’s answering smile was tentative but genuine.
Kakashi interrupted. “Well since all of that is out of the way, go tell your teammates that you’re not going to die and,” he paused, glancing quickly at the analog clock on the wall behind Mei-sensei’s head, “go get lunch.”

Katsumi frowned. “It’s only ten-fifteen,” she protested, disliking how she was being dismissed from an appointment that was for her.

Kakashi sighed. “Then go get late breakfast,” he amended. “Go get ‘brunch’ or whatever it is you young people are calling it nowadays.”

Katsumi raised an unimpressed eyebrow, crossing her arms across her chest. “You’re only twenty-six, sensei.”

“What? I can’t hear you, my hearing is failing me in my old age.”

Rolling her eyes, Katsumi pushed off the examination table to land silently on her feet on the linoleum floor. “Whatever you say,” she replied, taking the obvious hint that the adults wanted to talk about her alone.

“Thanks for everything, Mei-sensei,” she said, inclining her head towards the woman who shook her head.

“It was nothing, Katsumi. Just doing my job,” she said, smiling a little. “Now go enjoy your morning before Hatake comes to destroy your peace,” she joked.

Ignoring the queasy feeling in the pit of her stomach, she walked out of the room, shutting the heavy mahogany door behind her. The nausea only worsened, however, when she felt the slight tingle of a minor jutsu being thrown over the room, the emitting signature coming from inside the room. A privacy genjutsu, she recognized, along with the clean feeling of Mei’s chakra pushing it along until it enveloped close to half of the entire floor.

_Clever. I’m going to have to ask Mei-sensei to teach me how to do that one of these days._

Katsumi kept walking, making her way down the narrow hallway back around to the front desk. She waved politely to the dark-haired nurse manning the desk as she left the ward and went down the next set of hallways, past rushing doctors and frazzled med-nin towards the waiting room where her
team was.

She was lost in thought as she walked, trying to figure out what it was that Mei and Kaka-sensei were talking about in there as it pertained to her when someone bumped into her, sending her sprawling onto the hard tiles with a quiet grunt on her part.

Blinking rapidly in surprise, she looked up, ready to chew out whoever it was that knocked her over and stopped when she met the one-eyed stare of a familiar old man.

“My apologies, child. I did not see you there,” he said, his voice slightly raspy. The old man held out a bandaged hand to pull her up which she took gladly, picking herself back up. Once she was on her feet again though, she was on her guard again.

He continued. “You are Katsumi-chan of Hatake-kun’s genin squad, correct?” he asked, a bit of interest evident in his visible dark eye.

“That’s me,” she offered awkwardly, wondering why the hell this conversation was going on for so damn long. Then, she recognized him from around Hokage Tower and almost cursed herself for not placing him sooner.

*Councilman Shimura.*

“I am very sorry for running into you so carelessly,” she quickly apologizes, bowing respectfully. She wasn’t dumb enough to piss off one of the village elders and if there was any way possible she could amend it, she would do it.

Even if that meant a bit of kissing ass.

The old man smiled, probably noting that she didn’t recognize him for a moment, the crisscrossing scar on his chin stretching as he did. “It is no issue, Katsumi-chan,” he said, making her relax slightly. “I have heard about your achievements as a genin. You are very impressive.”

She bowed again. “Thank you so much, Shimura-sama. It is an honor to serve Konohagakure and all of her people,” she said a bit robotically, keeping her eyes averted as was customary.
Konoha wasn’t painfully old-fashioned, but every day she was reminded of her place in society: a nameless, penniless orphan with no clan-backing or noble lineage and here she was, speaking to one of the most powerful people in the country. That fact grated on her with every passing day, something that helped push her forward in her training. One day she would bow to no one, she’d swear. Today was not that day. She knew where the power was in this situation and knew for a fact that Shimura Danzo-sama was not one to mess with. So she played along, apologizing when it wasn’t her fault and deferring to him, as much as it stung to brown-nose like this.

“Well, I am happy to hear that. Konoha cherishes all of her soldiers,” he responded. “What brings you to the hospital so early in the morning?”

Katsumi was on high alert at this point. He wants something from me, she thought, there’s no way in hell that he’d be talking to someone like me for so long otherwise. The realization left a sour taste in her mouth, but Katsumi kept her expression blank and respectful as she answered truthfully, heeding Mei-sensei’s words.

“I woke up with a bad migraine so I came here to make sure that it wasn’t something major, sir.”

He nodded, smiling again at her, his gaze unreadable. Katsumi almost began to squirm under his gaze, feeling oddly exposed in front of him but otherwise saying nothing. It felt like he wasn’t really seeing her, but he broke his eerie silence before she had the chance to examine it. “Do feel better soon, child. You cannot afford to fall behind on your training. You have great potential.”

Katsumi nods, forcing a slight smile on her face as she bowed low. “Thank you so much for the compliment, Shimura-sama. I appreciate the concern.”

He smiled and with that, the old man hobbled down the hallway in the same direction he had been going when they ran into each other and Katsumi watched him until he disappeared down another corridor, feeling like the conversation that was had didn’t involve any of the words that were exchanged.

Ignoring the goosebumps that erupted on her arms, she walked towards the waiting room with purpose, eager to be around her teammates again, hoping that their presence would get rid of the burgeoning anxiety that conversation caused.
It didn’t work.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Danzo makes a reappearance. Wonder what that means…

Anyways, Mei is being left out of the loop and she is NOT happy about it. She’s likely going to chew Kakashi out in that office RIP. ALSO someone pointed out to me that Mei has the same coloring as Tsunade and I completely missed that somehow??! Like how did that completely go over my head? Well, Mei has ash blonde hair and super dark brown eyes so hopefully, that could help with the distinction, I guess.

You guys should for real be checking the hosffblog tumblr for between-post updates and extra content because I’ve posted both, one of which being super important and the other revealing one of the endgame ships so go take a look at that. If you aren’t following/keeping up with the posts there, I won’t be repeating them on here because I shouldn’t have to do us both a favor and (if you care at all) just stay updated via tumblr. There’s an important announcement on there that you guys should be aware of. Is this me forcing you guys to follow the tumblr? Maybe. But it’s not for a bad reason so please do it I post drabbles on there. :)

SPEAKING OF TUMBLR, shoutout to the tumblr fam that I haven’t shouted out yet including users mirukosbitch, llemoncakes, 1997mulberry, and asticality. Y’all rock!

Shoutouts:

The homie Octoskies: Thanks for the encouragement and ilysm! I also like my versions of Naruto and Sasuke better than the ones from the anime too. They’re more believable and less hokey if that makes any sense. Less “I’M ORANGE AND LOUD AND I’M GOING TO BE HOKAGE”/”I am an AVENGER whose only purpose in life is to be an emo piece of SHIT” and more like normal people with different aspects to their personalities that aren’t built on one singular trait because that’s dumb.

Czat: Thanks for the compliment! I actually struggle with trying to get the characterization right as I’ve tweaked some things and made different changes from the canon material. That makes it SUPER FLIPPING HARD to know if when I’m writing dialogue or body language if its accurate and appropriate for the character! But I’m doing my best and I appreciate the encouragement so thanks and ilysm.
Ronnieangell: AHHH THIS IS ONE OF THE BEST COMPLIMENTS I COULD RECEIVE THANKS ILYSM

QOTP: What do y'all think Danzo was really doing in the hospital?

Anyways, onto the next!
They were on their way to Ichiraku for lunch when they heard it.

Ambling down the paved sidewalks, joking about Sasuke’s inability to do something as simple as a roundoff, Naruto noticed it first: a familiar, high-pitched voice yelling.

“Is that-”

“Konohamaru?”

Both genin made eye-contact before immediately taking off in that direction, following the sound of Konohamaru’s voice. They rounded a corner and the scene that unfolded before them caused Katsumi to pause, throwing her hand in front of Naruto’s chest to force him to as well, her sore arm muscles pulling with the strain.

A teenager — probably not much older than them under his garish violet face-paint — in a black hood held Konohamaru by his shirt, dwarfing the Academy student with his size. His face was pulled into a snarl as the boy kicked at him, fighting valiantly to no avail. Konohamaru’s friends, Moegi and Udon, were standing around him, pleading with the nin to put their friend down with tears in their eyes. Another one, a slightly older blonde girl stood behind him looking more annoyed at the situation than anything, scowling with her arms across her chest. Katsumi’s eyes flicked to her scarf, taking note of the hitai-ate adorning it.

“Sand genin. Be smart about this,” she murmured to Naruto who nodded before stalking over to the group. Katsumi sighed and trailed after him, using careful, measured steps.

“Hey!” Naruto shouted, wasting no time as he marched up to the boy. “Put him down!”
“Naruto-nii!” the remaining Academy students shouted, running to the blond’s side. He nodded reassuringly in their direction, his gaze never leaving the two foreigners for a moment. Katsumi sent a small smile and told them to back up.

“This might get ugly,” she said apologetically, ushering Moegi and Udon behind her, as they wiped away their tears.

The hooded genin looked up with a smirk, taking in the newcomers quickly and his grip on Konohamaru’s scarf tightening. “And just who the hell are you?” he asked, his smooth accent marking him as someone from Sunagakure more than his headband did.

“Kankuro…” the blonde warned, looking at the people that had gathered to watch this happen with something akin to anxiety. Even through the face-paint, it was easy to see the family resemblance between the two in their shared features. Siblings. Katsumi’s eyes caught on the rectangular weapon strapped to her back, interest rising in her.

Too bulky to be a blade… unless it’s something like a bastardized version of a fūma shuriken...

“Stay here,” she whispered to the kids and she went to meet Naruto, making herself look as unassuming as possible while the teenage girl eyed her suspiciously, seeming to see right through her harmless facade before Katsumi could even really use it.

“I’m not going to ask again, put him down,” Naruto bit out, his hand at his kunai holster threateningly.

“Oh,” the genin, Kankuro, laughed mockingly. “And exactly what are you going to do about it, punk?” he asked in accented Yange. It wasn’t uncommon for people of other nations to speak the common language of Konoha, but the fact that this boy spoke it as well as he did indicated his relative status in his country: Kankuro and his relative were likely Sunagakure nobles.

Well, that’s going to make my life more difficult, she sighed inwardly.

Naruto took a step forward, his eyes promising violence when a couple of things happened at once: Kankuro grinned, a vicious thing, no more than a flash of teeth, almost welcoming the conflict. His left hand shifted, palm-up, and he moved his fingers in a way that looked practiced. Then, Naruto fell over, like he had been tripped, falling flat onto his back.
Interesting. Katumi stored that exchange for further analyzation later.

Very interesting.

Before Naruto could get even more incensed than he already was and actually try fighting this guy, Katumi cut in. “I’d advise you unhand that Academy student, shinobi-san,” Katumi cut in, her voice dripping in saccharine sweetness. “As skilled as the Hokage’s own grandson might be, he is just an Academy student after all.”

She sent him a politician’s smile, bland and with just a bit too many teeth showing to be entirely genuine while she waited for him to heed her warning. Hopefully, the name-drop would get through his thick skull enough for him to realize what a shit choice he was making.

Out of all of Konoha’s Academy students, Konohamaru is the last one he would want to mess with for a lot of reasons.

Kankuro’s eyes widened slightly, but Katumi knew her thinly veiled threat had hit home when his grip loosened and Konohamaru dropped, but not before kicking him in the chest on his way down. Kankuro exhaled when the kick landed, not looking injured so much as irritated. The kid scurried away, behind Katumi and reuniting with his friends.

A little less than satisfied, Katumi pursed her lips and leveled an unimpressed look at the Suna nin, holding her ground and not seeming the least bit unnerved or intimidated.

“I suggest you go wherever the gate-chunin told you to go before you get into any trouble, Kankuro-san. Why, you wouldn’t want to get disqualified from the Chunin Exams before they’ve even started for gross misconduct.” Naruto’s breathing slowed as he felt the situation deescalating, his gaze shifting rapidly from her to Kankuro to Konohamaru as he picked himself up off the ground.

“Oh yeah?” he asked, getting angry. “And what the hell do you know?” His hand drifted to the wrapped package on his back and Katumi eyed him warily, the smile still plastered to her face.

She held up her hands palms up nonthreateningly. “Not much,” she admitted. “But I do know that it is against the rules to attack participants before, during, and after the Chunin Exams without express permission to do so and that kid isn’t even a genin,” she folded her arms across her chest. “For all intents and purposes, you’re committing a crime, Kankuro-san, on Leaf Village soil, no less. That’s
grounds for at least disqualification from the Exams. That is if you’re not arrested first.”

“You know what? I am so sick of you Leaf Village punks…” His hand grasped the end of the bandage concealing what Katsumi assumed was a weapon from prying eyes and Katsumi almost sighed. Wow, they must not make them very bright in Suna.

“Kankuro, you’re going to bring Crow out now?” the girl asked in her almost undetectable accent, her eyes widening. ‘Crow’? What is that, a summon? Katsumi analyzed the weapon he was carelessly about to use in a crowded street in the middle of Konoha. Katsumi raised a singular eyebrow and was about to say just how dumb she thought his decision was when a pebble came out of nowhere, aimed with laser-focus, and hit his offending hand.

Kankuro hissed and everyone’s eyes looked up to where the rock came from to find Sasuke sitting leisurely in a tree, a scowl on his face, tossing another rock leisurely in his dominant hand. Katsumi fought the urge to laugh at his antics.

Drama-queen.

“What do you think you’re doing causing all this trouble in someone else’s village?” he drawled, his eyes narrowed in disdain in the dim light from the shade of the tree.

A bit of envy surged in Katsumi when she watched Sasuke’s entrance, though she was not one for excessive theatrics, she could definitely appreciate it at the moment, admitting to herself that sometimes, her cranky, socially awkward, acrobatically-inept teammate was pretty damn cool.

Still an ass though.

Grasping his aching hand, Kankuro glared right back at Sasuke. “Where do you punks keep coming from?” he muttered darkly.

“I mean, you are in the middle of Konoha so where do you think?” Konohamaru sneered, his trademark brattiness rearing its ugly head once he had reinforcements.

Katsumi snorted, unable to stop herself when Kankuro’s pissed face whipped towards Konohamaru. The Suna genin took a threatening step forward, pain promised in the crease of his brow.
“Beat it, bitch,” Sasuke called drily from his perch, crushing the rock he was tossing into dust and letting it rain to the ground. Katsumi was surprised at his blatant showing of strength, wondering if he had used chakra for a feat like that.

“You sure talk big for a little punk. Why don’t you come down here?” Kankuro suddenly started unwrapping his mystery weapon some more, apparently losing brain-cells the angrier he got and Katsumi backed up, ushering the kids and Naruto away from the lunatic as well as things were, as she had predicted, getting uglier by the second.

Sasuke scowled and his leg muscles tensed, ready to spring into action at any moment when a quiet voice called down from the same tree softly, but not weakly:

“Stop it, Kankuro.”

Sasuke’s eyes widened to what would’ve been a comical amount had Katsumi not been surprised as well because when the hell had he got here and why didn’t I notice? Kankuro and the blonde girl blanched simultaneously, their body language shifting to become more guarded and wary.

Noticing this, Katsumi studied the upside-down interloper, from everything from the blood-red hair to the intense dark circles — Kami, did this guy even know what sleep was? — all the way to the gourd on his back and the Suna hitai-ate. His dead-looking teal eyes were on Kankuro, which seemed to be enough to make the other genin want to piss his pants judging by the complete 180 he made, from bold and antagonistic to meek and fearful because of the presence of one small genin that didn’t look much older than Katsumi did. Of course, looks aren’t everything and size didn’t matter at all in the shinobi world, but it had Katsumi wondering what made this dude so special if Kankuro was willing to fight everyone present in the vicinity but not this Sand nin.

His raspy voice sent chills down Katsumi’s spine as he switched from Yange to Koya, the common tongue in Kaze no Kuni, effectively shutting everyone else out of their conversation. Suddenly, Katsumi wished that she had picked Koya to learn in the Academy so she could understand what was going on. Even with the gap in understanding, Katsumi could instinctively sense that something was fundamentally off about this boy. She could feel it in her bones and she was equal parts interested and wary.

But not wary enough to leave him be.

Intrigued, Katsumi tried to branch her chakra out into the area, feeling for his own to get a better feel
for his skill level. Thankfully this wasn’t banned by Mei-sensei and Kaka-sensei since it had no real impact on her eyes, per se, just her chakra system. Carefully, she sent out a tendril of her own chakra towards the red-head, her curiosity undeniably piqued.

When the spiritual contact was made, it was like her blood began running in reverse. Every cell in her body came to a screeching halt as everything in her screamed at her to get awaygetawayGETAWAY from his chakra. Katsumi almost threw up onto her shoes with the intensity of just how wrong he felt. Her brain burned and she hissed, rubbing at her temples and wrenching her senses out of sensory mode because by the Sage, what the everloving fuck was wrong with this dude?

Nauseous and dizzy in a way that only came from being in sensory-mode for entirely too long set in and Katsumi had to fight not to sway in place, her head pounding like a drum. The only way to describe the shinobi’s chakra was demonic, roiling around in his gut like a typhoon and likely five times as deadly, different from every signature she’d ever felt but achingly familiar at the same time.

If Sensei’s chakra felt electric and Naruto’s was billowy, this newcomer’s felt like glass, jagged and cutting and infinitesimally fragile with a hint of copper tinged with what Katsumi could only place was complete madness around the edges. And gods, there was so much of it in such a small boy, what the hell was this kid?

She swallowed the phantom tang of oddly gritty copper, trying not to gag and was brought back into reality by Naruto’s warm hand on her arm jostling her out of her sensory-overload-induced stupor. Katsumi then became dimly aware of herself breathing heavily and judging by the way she felt, her indifferent mask shattered. She shook her head imperceptibly at her blond friend. Later.

The other shinobi’s sharp eyes zeroed in on her, his face eerily blank before turning to Kankuro.

Kankuro stuttered a greeting, trying to force his tone to be casual, a strained smile on his garishly painted face. One gloved hand rose from its place at his side to rest behind his head, scratching sheepishly.

The red-headed genin said nothing for a moment, causing both foreign genin to squirm. All three genin struggled to understand his next statement, only catching the name of their village in his emotionless tirade.

Through the language barrier, Katsumi could see Kankuro frantically trying to cover his ass with a rapid series of stuttered words when he was cut off rudely by a short statement from the redhead that
had the boy’s tan face devoid of any color as he stared at the other in muted terror.

Sasuke’s eyes were narrowed in suspicion, leaning away from the redhead ever so slightly.

Soon, he snapped out of it and stuttered out what sounded like a half-hearted apology, his hands trembling slightly from where they were loose at his sides.

Apparently satisfied, the smallest Suna genin turned his blank stare to Team Seven, settling first on Sasuke, then Naruto, and settling on Katsumi, seeming to identify her as the one who needed to be addressed. “I’m sorry for any trouble Kankuro might have caused,” he said with no inflection in his voice. A little shocked at the apology, she nodded tersely, stating that it was no problem at all. Saying nothing in response, he looked at the other two Suna-nin. “Let’s go, we didn’t come here to play games.”

He appeared on the ground next to them and stalked off, the other two scrambling to catch up. All three of them began walking down the sidewalk and Team Seven watched them like hawks until they vanished from sight, the tension not leaving their limbs until they were long gone.

Sasuke took that moment to jump down from the tree next to them. He landed silently in a crouch, straightened up, and raised an eyebrow. “What the hell was that?”

Katsumi shrugged, a little shaky and still fighting down the nausea that threatened to make her lose her lunch on the sidewalk.

“Our competition,” Naruto answered, not sounding very happy about it.

———

After the run-in with the Suna genin a week ago, things had been fairly quiet around Konoha which was surprising considering the surge in foreigners arriving in the village. For Team Seven, however, not much had changed; all three of them kept seeing Yamanaka-sensei once a week, training went on as usual, and the team dinners continued, this time with various discussions on how to better tackle the exams.

And their competition.
“I’m telling you, the noble with the face-paint was totally a puppet-master,” Katsumi stated, frowning lightly from where she was combining the ingredients for the seasonings for dinner.

Sasuke made a noncommittal noise from the cutting board. “How could you tell?”

“His fingers moved oddly when Naruto ‘mysteriously’ tripped plus the weird human-sized package on his back that he had named ‘Crow’ apparently. All signs point to puppet-master.”

Naruto gave her a blank look from where the beef slices were cooking in the pan and Katsumi glanced at him, a little exasperated. “He probably used chakra strings to trip you,” she explained again. “It was quick and I probably would’ve missed it if I wasn’t looking dead at him.”

Sasuke scoffed. “Dumbass gave himself away too readily.”

“Well, what does that mean for us, y’know?” Naruto asked.

Katsumi pursed her lips, the pungent smell of the chili bean paste and oyster sauce she was mixing sticking inside her nose. “It means he’s probably lacking in taijutsu and ninjutsu like most puppet-masters are. But, he might be well-versed in how to use poisons as that’s his village’s specialty.”

Sasuke ‘hn’ed, furrowing his brow, mincing the cloves and garlic finely. “Do we risk getting close to destroying his puppet in combat?”

“It depends on the situation. If you see an opening, take it of course, but we need to know what we’re up against first. Final verdict: wait until he reveals the puppets abilities and proceed with caution.”

“What about the redheaded one that showed up at the last minute? What did you gather from his chakra?” Naruto asked over the sound of the beef sizzling in the pan.

Katsumi frowned, discomfort on her face speaking as loud as any words she could have come up with.
Naruto grimaced. “That bad, huh?”

“We stay the hell away from him,” Katsumi declared vehemently. She walked over to Naruto and dumped the seasonings in with the meat before placing the bowl in the sink to be washed later.

Naruto’s eyebrows shot up in surprise and Sasuke paused in his chopping of the vegetables to stare at her. Katsumi shook her head again, shuddering, her hands holding the edges of the sink tightly as she recalled. “His chakra was,” she paused, trying to find the right word for it, “malevolent. I’ve never felt anything like it. There’s something about him, something that we, under no circumstances want to fuck with.”

“Could we take him as a team, y’know?”

Katsumi bit her lip. “Not unless we had a major trump card.”

“What about Naruto’s fuinjutsu?” Sasuke offered.

“I guess a chakra suppression seal could work if we could get close enough, but he had a metric shit ton of chakra. That might take out at least a fourth of Naruto’s reserves to maintain, if not more.” The rice cooker dinged and Katsumi walked over to turn it off, pressing the button absentmindedly.

“I could modify the matrix to accommodate more chakra input and output, but that might alter the combination of the seals making it more unstable, y’know,” Naruto muttered, trying to find a solution. “But if I change the input to—” he cut himself off, a victorious grin on his face. “I can have one done by tomorrow.”

Katsumi’s eyes widened at his intuitive knowledge of fuinjutsu and that he was so good that he could solve a problem like that in his head within less than fifteen seconds.

How he was dead last for so long, I’ll never understand.

Even Sasuke looked a little dumbstruck for a moment as he put the garlic and ginger into the pan.

“Speaking of, I have the tags you wanted,” Naruto announced, stirring the contents of the pan.
Katsumi nodded, putting the top onto the rice-cooker and turning around to lean on the counter, listening to the clicking of the stove being turned off by Naruto and the clinking of porcelain as Sasuke got out three bowls from the cabinets.

“Any idea what we’re up against?”

“Based on the careful non-hints Kaka-sensei may or may not have been slipping us and from what I’ve gathered from the library, Konoha-hosted Chunin Exams have historically always had a written or intelligence portion, a team-oriented stage, and an individual combat round, usually towards the end.”

Two large spoons had materialized out of nowhere in Sasuke’s hand as he grabbed himself a healthy serving of food and piled it into his bowl. Naruto did the same right after he was done and Katsumi followed suit.

“They’re probably going to give us the intelligence test first just to weed out the idiots,” Sasuke mused, sitting down at the kitchen table and digging in.

Katsumi shrugged as she and Naruto took their seats around the table. “Maybe.”

“So if that part goes first, would it make sense for the proctors to grade by team instead of individually?” Naruto asked, his mouth already full of food. “I mean, ef tha’ se’ond par’ is tha’ ‘eam-stage,” he got out through his food before Sasuke and Katsumi glared sharply at him for his lack of manners. Naruto swallowed quickly, smiling sheepishly and continuing, “you can’t exactly have two-thirds of a squad participating y’know.”

“Well, yeah,” Katsumi replied. “Which means we all have to do well. No slip-ups.”

Sasuke rolled his eyes. “Hai taichou,” he drawled mockingly.

Katsumi took that moment to throw the crumpled napkin on the table at his face. Of course, the
raven-haired boy dodged, but it was the thought that counted. He snorted before asking, “Got a game plan for how to beat everyone else?”

Katsumi scoffed, offended that he would even entertain the idea that she didn’t. “Of course,” she said, before recounting exactly how they were going to beat everyone — or at least the other Rookie teams that they knew in their graduating class. “Team Ten is entirely too specialized: you take out one part, the rest of them crumble. If we’re ever in a combat situation against them, I’ll take out Choji first since, according to Ino, he apparently refuses to go all out on girls whenever they spar with another team.” Both boys nodded, shoveling food into their mouths as she spoke. “After that, it’s divide and conquer: Naruto on Shika and Sasuke can take down Ino.”

“Wait, how come you get to fight Choji and I have to fight Shikamaru?” Naruto pouted, the expression losing a bit of its usual effect due to the food on his chin.

“Because Choji won’t be afraid to go all out on you two whereas, if Ino’s bitching is to be believed, with me, he’ll hold back at least a little bit. Plus you’re unpredictable enough to give Shika a hard time, at least until me or Sasuke finish up with Choji and Ino. If you get caught, you could outlast him in terms of chakra so you’re the best option.”

“What about Kurenai-sensei’s team?”

“Sasuke, you take Kiba. With your Sharingan, you can take him and Akamaru down, no sweat. Naruto, you fight Shino.”

The aforementioned blond genin made a face. “Why him?”

“Because if he does get you with his bugs, it’ll take a while until you get sucked dry of chakra. I think you can figure it out before then. Hinata is too much of a wallflower to ever take me on seriously so I’m, like, eighty-six percent sure I can take her out without much difficulty.” She took a bite of dinner and frowned.

“Team Nine though, is where we might run into trouble.”

Sasuke looked up at her questioningly, the spoon in his hand pausing on its trip to his mouth. “Isn’t that Sakura’s team?”
Katsumi nodded gravely. “They’re good.”

“Another bit of gossip from Ino?”

“Well, their jounin instructor is Kisaragi Hiro-sensei, a retired ANBU Captain. I heard she doesn’t fuck around,” Naruto added.

“She doesn’t, not if what I’ve seen from Sakura holds any weight.”

“Wait, when’d you see Sakura-chan?” Naruto asked, perking up at the mention of his crush.

“She visited me in the hospital with Ino and her boys. She’s bulked up a bit. Looked different.” Sasuke raised a dubious eyebrow and Katsumi nodded. “She looks more serious about being a kunoichi and if that’s the case, she’s a major threat.”

“Okay, well what’s the plan then?”

“Here’s what we do: I’ll take Suki. Her katon won’t match up well with my suiton which will force her to get in close to me where I can take her out.” She then pointed to Naruto. “If the situation calls for it, you gotta fight Hanako. Hyuga tend to be entirely too reliant on the Byakugan so use that. Find a blind-spot whether it’s above or below her and use shadow-clones to keep her attention away from them. If all else fails, just bum rush her. Sasuke’ll take Sakura.”

Sasuke groaned. “Why?”

A little peeved at the seemingly endless series of questions about her planning skills from the boys, Katsumi huffed impatiently before answering. “For a lot of reasons. For one, according to Iruka-sensei, she’s a genjutsu type and with your Sharingan, you nullify one of her greatest assets immediately. Plus you’re likely still faster than her so as long as you can get in close, you can end it. It’ll be tough though.” He leveled her an unimpressed look, one that she returned, finishing her last bite of dinner. “Sakura is smart. Don’t count her out.”

“Who died and made you the leader?” Sasuke asked sourly.
Katsumi sighed, her irritation rising. He always did this when he was unhappy with a piece of her plans. Nevermind the fact that everything else was more than fine; if there was a single bit that he disliked, he caught an attitude and challenged her debatable authority.

“Last I checked Kaka-sensei made me the team strategist and not you,” she bit out, narrowing her eyes at him. “So, unless you suddenly mass produced more brain cells and want to take that assignment up with sensei, I suggest you shut it and go with the damn plan.”

He glared at her for a moment before dropping his gaze to his empty bowl, effectively cowed.

Katsumi rolled her eyes at his drama, content to move on. “Any more questions about what we do tomorrow?”

Both boys shook their heads and Naruto got up to collect the dishes and put them in the sink.

“Thanks,” Katsumi and Sasuke chorused to their blond teammate.

“If that’s the case, then let’s get some rest for tomorrow. We have to be at our best,” she finished, rising from her chair and going to her bedroom to retire for the evening, before pausing in the doorway. “Oh, and one more thing: we don’t reveal anything about ourselves until we absolutely need to. That means no fighting, no drawing attention to ourselves. No stupid rivalries and no shit-talking. We’re already Rookies. We don’t need the make the target on our backs bigger. We stay quiet, keep our heads down, and we might just come out of this in one piece”

“Blend in and take the win,” Naruto rhymed over the sound of running water as he washed the dishes. “We got it, Katsu-chan. We’re going to come out of this chunin, believe it!” He pumped his fist in the air, splashing water on Sasuke, who was drying as Naruto washed. He hissed in displeasure and Naruto snickered.

“Try not to kill each other before tomorrow please,” she pleaded. Naruto saluted, Sasuke sulked, and she took that as an agreement before closing the door to her room and promptly throwing herself onto the bed, bouncing slightly before settling down.

We’re going to kick ass tomorrow.

She laid in bed, her mind whirring and much too active to sleep for a couple of hours before,
eventually, sleep took her and she was out like a light.

———

When they walked into the waiting room for all Chunin Exam participants after seeing through that embarrassingly basic genjutsu from the two gate-chunin, Team Seven did exactly as planned, with a small tweak.

“I still can’t believe you made me change out my signature tracksuit,” Naruto mumbled mutinously, picking at his dark-colored standard issue gear as they walked to a vacant seating area. “I really like orange, y’know.”

The blond genin had indeed traded out his kill-me orange jumpsuit for basic shinobi gear, fit with a long-sleeved grey shirt with reinforced mesh and steel inserts in strategic places, plain black pants with a metric shit-load of concealed pockets to inconspicuously carry his sealing equipment, and sturdy shinobi sandals covering his feet and fingerless gloves on his hands. Naruto looked average and, most importantly forgettable in that get-up and that was exactly what Katsumi wanted when she bought the clothing a week ago without the boys knowing.

Kaka-sensei had given her the idea, in fact, when he mentioned a store right off the market-district that sold clothing specifically for shinobi and how first impressions mattered a lot when it came to competitions like there. He’d been doing that a lot lately: giving the lot of them careful non-hints and nudges in the right direction to avoid any risk of outright cheating on his part. Sensei claimed he didn’t know what she was talking about and Katsumi might’ve believed him if someone hadn’t left her the number to his personal account at that store ‘accidentally’ written on a napkin stored in her bag with a henohenomoheji scrawled on the corner.

“Thank the Sage she did. Your tracksuit was a godsdamned eyesore ,” Sasuke teased in low tones from Katsumi’s right.

Naruto let out an indignant squawk and glared at Sasuke.

She sighed. “It’s about blending in and, I’m not sure if you’ve picked up on this yet, but orange isn’t exactly inconspicuous,” Katsumi murmured, stepping around a group of Ame-genin who gave them an evil glare. Katsumi looked away first, hoping that it wasn’t anything personal.

“Or pleasant to look at all ,” Sasuke said, a smirk on his face.
“Let’s not forget your unfortunate fashion choices, High-Collar-san,” Naruto quipped quietly, causing some color to rise to Sasuke’s pale cheeks.

Katsumi had outfitted him as well in a similar outfit, most noticeably devoid of any clan crests. When questioned about it, Katsumi replied simply that it would be dumb to let the enemy immediately have some idea of his skill set before he even steps onto the battlefield if they have some inkling of knowledge about Konoha’s clans.

Sasuke had stared at the package for a moment that morning and thanked her, overall a much nicer encounter than the one from Naruto, before going into the bathroom to put it on while Katsumi was wrapping the loose sleeves of her matching shirt with bandages to keep them from being a safety hazard.

Katsumi, of course, missed the elegance, and, well… the cuteness of her usual outfits — so she liked her kimono tops, sue her— but favored the practicality of their temporary uniforms. They made them blend in with the crowd and, a bonus, it made them look a little bit older. It said enough about them without giving too much away as their old outfits would have. They were perfect.

In their new getups, they looked painfully average; just three young-ish looking genin, not a threat to anyone. They were perfect.

The latter genin opened his mouth to say something back to Naruto about his preferred clothing but Katsumi beat him to it.

“Can you both behave for once?” she pleaded, sitting down at the empty table near the back. Her boys followed suit, their bickering stopping as they did. She folded her hands in front of her and observed the eighty or so chunin hopefuls in the room with heavy-lidded eyes, feigning laziness to offset the sharpness of her assessing eyes.


“I got, get this, ten Suna teams including the puppet-master’s squad,” Sasuke whispered, looking excited. Katsumi sent him a look.

---

*Suna hasn’t participated in any joint Chunin Exams in the last half decade at least,* Katsumi
thought, recalling what Kakashi had hinted at a few days prior.

What's changed?

“Remember what we agreed on about how we’re not going to get in the middle of that clusterfuck unless absolutely necessary?” she asked forcing a bit on nonchalance into her tone.

“Yeah, I know, it’s just... they look strong,” he mumbled. Katsumi’s brow furrowed but otherwise, her expression remained the same and Sasuke huffed. “But yeah, we don’t jump into that shitstorm, got it.”

Katsumi nodded, smiling a bit at her teammate.

“Well, while you both were arguing, our last three Konoha teams came in,” Naruto said, nodding his head towards the door where the other Rookies were doing a horrible job at being inconspicuous.

Chouji looked obviously nervous, looking around the room in a way that screamed ‘easy pickings’. Shikamaru was bored like he’d rather be literally anywhere else but there, where Ino was looking six seconds from dragging them both bodily to their seats. The blonde girl hissed something in the two boys’ ears that had them moving a little quicker and out of the center of the room and they disappeared into the crowd of genin.

Team Eight was right behind them, with a shouting Kiba — Katsumi winced at his inability to keep a low profile —, silent Shino, and quivering Hinata, followed by Team Nine, who at least looked somewhat capable, walking in silently, observing the competition, and sitting down immediately near the door to speak in hushed tones, their keen eyes darting around the room quickly.

Sakura’s eyes caught Katsumi’s gaze and the gold-eyed girl nodded in acknowledgment and was pleased when the pink-haired genin did the same before bringing her attention back to her team.

Team Nine would likely be good allies to have in the years to come and it would be smart to start working on bonds with them as soon as possible. Under Hiro-sensei’s tutelage, they’d become formidable kunoichi indeed.

“I think we should team up with the other Rookies,” Naruto whispered suddenly as if reading her mind. Katsumi raised an eyebrow, telling him to elaborate, and he did with a shrug. “There’s safety
in numbers plus we already have a target on our backs since we’re obviously the youngest ones here. It just makes sense to stick together, y’know.”

Katsumi eyed the other Rookies, assessing them, from sharp-tongued Ino to loudmouthed Kiba down to eagle-eyed Hanako and nodded. “That’s a good idea, Naruto,” Katsumi agreed, looking at Sasuke to gauge his reaction.

“It’s not an awful idea, I guess,” he said, rolling his eyes, but still seeming vaguely impressed by Naruto.

The blond genin puffed his chest out with pride at the praise. “I’m full of good ideas, y’know.”

Katsumi was about to respond, likely a quip disputing Naruto’s previous statement when a set of muffled footsteps sounded around them and Team Seven shut up on instinct. Three heads swiveled with scary accuracy towards the source of the sound, a tall teenager with gray hair and an easy smile on his face sporting a Konoha hitai-ate. Already on their guard, the genin visibly relaxed one by one at his friendly demeanor, playing up their rookie status immediately in the face of a potential foe.

Just because they were rookies didn’t mean they had to act like them.

They planned this: look average and unsuspecting so that they would be overlooked by other competitors until the third round. So if that meant covertly watching this stranger’s every move but pretending like they weren’t and running the risk of looking incompetent, then that’s what they would do.

Even though it grated horribly on Katsumi’s ego.

“Hey, you guys!” he called, his hands deep in his pockets as he pulled up to their table. None of the genin greeted him and he laughed a little. “Tough crowd,” he joked. They weren’t amused. “You guys are the part of the Rookie Twelve, right? You know, the ones fresh out of the Academy?”

This statement caught the attention of eavesdroppers around them as the genin could feel several sets of probing eyes on them for the first time since they came in. Katsumi wanted to throw him out of the window because that asswipe just blew our fucking cover! Katsumi lounged back in her chair, staring lazily at the newcomer with vaguely bored eyes, hopefully not giving anything away through her expression but mild apathy.
He tutted condescendingly. “This isn’t a class field trip,” he snarked, his hands on his hips.

To Katsumi’s right, a muscle feathered in Sasuke’s jaw, hardly noticeable to someone who didn’t know him but he was having a difficult time with keeping his cool in the face of someone who clearly underestimated them and their skills. Katsumi released a bit of the tension in her upper body, not wanting to show this creep that she was irritated by his remarks, instead, responding coolly: “And you are?”

“Yakushi Kabuto,” he answered easily, flashing a half genuine smile. “You’ve done a decent job in keeping yourselves under the radar so far,” he took a couple of steps closer. “But, that alone isn’t going to help you survive the exams. I mean, I should know.”

“How many times have you taken the exams?” Naruto asked, ‘foolishly’ taking the painfully conspicuous bait with his blue eyes narrowed imperceptibly.

“Ah, this is my, uh, seventh time,” Kabuto answered, scratching himself behind his head sheepishly. Katsumi’s eyebrows rose slightly, not quite expecting that particular answer. He’s failed seven times?

And he as the audacity to tell us that it’s not a class field trip?

“Why are you talking to us?” Leave it to Sasuke to cut right to the chase, Katsumi laughed inwardly at her teammate’s impatience. He stared the older boy down, his arms crossed petulantly over his chest.

Kabuto laughed a little. “Now hold on, a minute,” he countered, holding his hands up in mock-surrender before they went back to his pockets, this time to retrieve something. “I just wanted to be nice and share some information with you guys, since we’re all Leaf-nin as a show of good-will.” He pulled out a set of orange cards with green trim with a flourish, holding them out so Team 7 could see. “These are my Ninja Info Cards.”

Naruto’s head quirked to the side as his blond brows came together. “What do they do?”

Kabuto smiled and crouched down onto the floor. “I’m going to let you guys in on a little secret,” he said, dropping his volume and smirking a little bit. “There are almost two hundred of these babies. As I’ve taken the exams, I’ve been gathering information about them, so I haven’t been totally wasting my time.”
“What kind of information?”

Kabuto’s eyes flicked to Sasuke’s face and back down again. “All kinds. For example, this one,” he pulled out a seemingly blank card and placed it face-up onto the ground. “I know it looks blank right now, but if I just do this…” Team Seven watched as the teen pushed his chakra into the card as it began spinning, and, eventually began revealing the information on the card. “I can reveal the information on the card. Can’t have just anybody with eyes have access to my cards.”

Naruto’s eyes widened slightly. At Katsumi’s quick look of concern, he shook his head imperceptibly.

Later.

“For example, this one shows the geographical distribution of all the candidates that came to take the exams, what villages they come from and how many from each village.”

“That’s really cool, Kabuto-san!” Naruto exclaimed, his exuberance startling both teammates. Something was wrong. “What else do you have?”

“Well, they might have individual information on specific candidates.”

Holy Hashirama, how the hell did he get that kind of information?

Kabuto must have registered her thoughts to some degree because he held his hands up again. “I can’t promise that the information is complete or perfect, but I’ve got something on pretty much everyone.

“Including you three, of course.”

Sasuke’s eyes narrowed at the almost-threat and Katsumi almost followed suit. She folded her arms across her chest and schooled her features into one of vague interest. Kabuto’s canny eyes found her face.
“Got anyone in particular in mind?”

“Maybe,” she answered flippantly. He then told them that he didn’t need much to identify them, a first name or a basic description would do just fine. “A redheaded noble boy from Suna with a gourd on his back,” she offered sweetly.

Kabuto pulled out a singular card and grinned, the expression oddly reminding Katsumi of a snake. Ignoring the weird feeling in the back of her mind, she waved her hand for him to continue.

“Gaara of the Desert,” he said, placing the card onto the ground and activating it until the information appeared on its blank surface. “Mission experience: eight C-ranks and, get this, one B-rank as a genin! There’s not a lot more information on this guy, but there is this: he’s gotten through every single mission without a single scratch on him.”

Naruto gasped theatrically. “How’d he manage that?” Laying it on a little thick, aren’t you Naruto? She thought, knowing when that he was trying to make this Kabuto dude count him out as an idiot, and by the looks of Kabuto’s smirk, it was working.

“I’m not sure. Like I said, there isn’t much information on him. This is going to be a hard exam.”

“Well, we look forward to the challenge,” Katsumi replied, a confident little smile on her face. “Thanks for the information Kabuto-san, but if you wouldn’t mind, we’d like to talk strategy before the exams finish,” she said, dismissing him politely.

He smiled a little sheepishly. “Oh, of course. I’ll get back to my squad as well.” He stood up to go. “Good luck with the exams, guys!” The unsaid ‘You’ll need it.’ rang out as loudly as his farewell and the teenager disappeared into the crowd of candidates.

“Oh, alright! Nice meeting you, Kabuto-san!” Naruto said cheerfully, waving with enthusiasm.

As soon as he was gone, Naruto’s grin dropped from his face, replaced with a scowl. “Those were some high-level privacy seals on those cards,” he hissed. “No genin would have access to stuff like that. There’s no way in hell that that dude is still a genin after seven tries if he knows how to do that.”

Katsumi nodded, frowning. “Gaara’s a foreign genin. Kabuto shouldn’t have that kind of
information on anyone, let alone mission records from a Sand-nin. That’s so obviously stolen information, it’s not even funny.”

What, did he think we were dumb or something?

“Do we report him to one of the proctors?” Sasuke murmured, looking between his two teammates.

“Absolutely. That Kabuto dude is obviously up to no good, y’know.” Naruto answered, making a fist with one hand and slamming it into his other. “But do you think he knows we know he’s a fake?”

“We can’t know for sure,” Katsumi replied. “But it would be in our best interest to tell someone.”

“Oh, I forgot to ask you,” Sasuke said, his voice getting even quieter. “Are you going to use your dojutsu at all during the exams?”

“Mei-sensei said not to unless absolutely necessary, so if the situation calls for it, yes.”

Suddenly, shouting came from the front of the room. Immediately, all three genin were on their guard and their heads swiveled to the source of the disturbance.

A dark-haired genin was up in the air with two kunai poised to be thrown at Kabuto. They left his fingers in a flash of metal and embedded themselves in the ground where Kabuto was standing half a second ago.

“The hell is going on here?” Sasuke murmured, looking ready to jump in.

Katsumi shook her head, folding her arms across her chest.

Naruto’s pale brows knitted together. “I dunno, but those guys are the only team from Otogakure,” he explained as Katsumi caught sight of their hitai-ate and nodded grimly.

“That doesn’t explain why they’re attacking him,” Sasuke said.
The bespectacled genin had leaped back, his eyes wide with alarm when another genin with bandages wrapping his face darted in front of him and threw a punch at Kabuto’s face that he quickly dodged, throwing his head back a few centimeters.

“He’s good,” Sasuke admitted under his breath, not looking happy about it.

Kabuto’s smirk was easy to see from this far across the room and the genin were about to sit back down to talk about what just happened when the lens of his glasses cracked and shattered, littering sharp debris on the floor below him.

“Oh, so it was that kind of attack,” Kabuto noted, taking off his glasses and observing them in one hand.

Sasuke shifted next to her. “Wait, I saw that, he dodged it. What gives?”

Katsumi was just as confused as her teammates as she tried to figure out how that had happened.

Some kind of invisible attack maybe? Chakra-based most likely. Genjutsu’s out because they don’t alter the physical world— unless we’re all caught in a genjutsu … But no, I would notice if there was foreign chakra in my system.

She wasn’t sure how she’d notice, but she knew that she would.

Her gaze flitted to the gauntlet on the bandaged genin’s arm, assessing the gear carefully.

Metal, likely steel with… she quickly counted, seven holes, but for what? Pressurized air? No, we would’ve seen his hair or something move with it.

“The power’s in the gauntlet,” Katsumi whispered, still trying to figure out what was powering it. “There are holes on the outside, see? Something is produced in it which caused the invisible disturbance that we saw earlier.”
“Pressurized air?” Sasuke asked.

Naruto shook his head. “We would’ve seen something get disturbed by the air.”

Then, out of nowhere, Kabuto’s confident smirk vanished and he dropped to his knees and promptly threw up all over the floor.

*Delayed nausea? What kind of attack can cause something like that?*

“I got it.”

Both Katsumi and Naruto turned to look at their teammate.

Sasuke’s eyes narrowed. “They’re soundwaves.”

“How can you tell?” Naruto asked

Sasuke opened his mouth to answer when he was interrupted — again — by the door being thrown open, hitting the wall with a sharp *bang* and a tall man, decked out in what Katsumi recognized as the standard uniform in the Torture and Interrogation Unit, stormed into the room with a deep scowl etched onto his face.

The chatter in the room from a few moments prior died abruptly as half of the genin jumped at the entrance, obviously nervous eyes darting this way and that. Once the man arrived at the podium, he aimed his glower at the genin, making more than a few genin shrink away from his ire.

Not Team Seven.

“Alright, you baby-faced degenerates! Shut up and listen.” As he spoke, poofs of chakra, indicative of a shunshin sounded off all around him, revealing more T&I chunin. “I’m Morino Ibiki, the proctor for the first test of the Chunin Exam and from this moment, your worst enemy.”

*Are all senior Konoha-nin such drama-queens?*
And with that, the exams had finally begun.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: So this is the official beginning of the Chunin Exam arc! Yes, people depending on the geographical location speak different languages and dialects in my version of Naruto-verse. Why? Because I said so. I made up a lot of them, but a couple were based off of actual words so feel free to guess which ones I guess. Koya is Wind’s main language and depending on the accent can indicate which part a person is from. Yange is the language common in the Land of Fire. Naruto speaks a sort of bastardized version with his interesting verbal tics courtesy of his mother who spoke it even worse than he did — or was it even better because she mixed in different slang and words from Uzu’s language lol — where Katsumi’s is oddly proper due to her inability to stay out of libraries. Sasuke’s is perfect since he’s the Konoha equivalent of a nobleman and he was taught by his clan before they died. Kakashi is much the same way but he adds in weird and informal words in with his speech to offset it and make it his own. Depending on the area of each country, the dialect changes and in some places (like Mist), entire dialects have disappeared and been lost. Yeah. I just didn’t think it was realistic — you know, as realistic as Naruto could be — for this huge ass world with different cultures and races could possibly have the same universal language all around. So yeah, this’ll help spice it up.

Shoutouts:

The TUMBLR FAM: users solar-is-the-future (sorry about the whole Sakura/Katsumi thing lmao), narutoluvr9, and cryingchipotle. Y’all are the bomb-diggity!

Justcallmehero: HE’S SUCH A PUNK I STG. Kakashi mf HATES him so no doubt he’s gonna get to punch him at some point. Honestly, there’s a line a mile long of people who deserve to punch the shit out of Danzo with the entirety of ROOT and Sasuke and Itachi at the front. Kakashi is at a close fourth tho. UwU

CYUNME: Ahhhh thanks so much!!! I’m literally crying ilysm.

czat: YES. IT. IS.
Octoskies: Are we talking about Tsunade? I hope so because we ALL know that the Slug Princess plays NO (zero, 0) GAMES, especially when it comes to the elders lmao.

Ilyasm, you guys make my day :))

QoTP: What kind of fuinjutsu goodies do you think Naruto has in store for the other Chunin Exam competitors? Are they ready? (no lol)

Mkay, onto the next!
Chapter Summary

The beginning of the Chunin Exams.

This oughta be good.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

As per the orders of one Morino Ibiki, the group of twenty or so chunin quickly separated the various teams of genin, seating them as far away from their squadmates as physically possible given the confines of the room likely to prevent cheating.

With short nods, Team 7 went where they were supposed to with varying levels of excitement. Katsumi kept the growing anxiety off of her face at being taken away from her team, sitting down in the second seat in the fourth row as instructed by the shouty, bald chunin with the wicked facial scars.

Katsumi noticed her seat directly next to Sakura's brunette teammate Suki, who sat with a pensive look on her usually more expressive face. She remembered the girl from the Academy from their shared kunoichi classes and as such knew that she was a bit brash and rough around the edges at times, but a good shinobi and a good person.

Katsumi inclined her head politely to the girl to her right and she answered with a sharp grin, with absolutely more teeth than necessary, more a flash of teeth than a smile. A tad bit unnerved, she turned her attention back to the task at hand, staring at the exam on the desk with interest.

She fought the urge to turn the flipped over packet in front of her over to see what they were up against but dismissed that immediately, knowing that her starting before Morino had given his permission would get her kicked out.

The girl sighed deeply, already sensing the beginnings of a stress-headache in her near future.

"Alright, I'm only going to say this once so listen up, brats." He glared sharply as he stared at each
and every genin. "No fighting without the permission of the proctor and even then, the use of fatal force is explicitly prohibited. Anyone who even _thinks_ about disobeying me will be disqualified immediately. Got it?"

Dead silence.

A brunette chunin spoke up from the front with the same level of authority, her lips curling around the foreign syllables easily in what Katsumi understood as a rough translation for the nin from Suna, followed by another woman with dark hair doing the same for Ame judging by the complicated verb tenses.

_Everyone else is shit outta luck I guess._

Once all of the genin were relatively on the same page, Morino nodded and continued.

"Good. There are a few rules you need to be aware of before we begin," Morino said from the front of the room. He grabbed a piece of chalk and got ready to write. "And I won't be answering any questions so you'd better listen up the first time."

Katsumi's brow furrowed. _No questions? What kind of test is this?_

"Rule number one: the written part of the exam is conducted on a point-reduction system. You all begin the test with a score of ten points. For every question you get wrong, we take away one point. So, if you miss three questions, your final score is a seven."

_That's fair._

"Rule number two: teams will pass or fail based on the total score of all three members."

Katsumi grimaced at the desk, swearing in her head. That might make things a little bit harder but she believed that they were solid as a team. As each translator did their jobs in the spaces between Ibiki's explanations, Katsumi reassured herself. They were going to be perfectly fine.

Right?
"Rule number three: the chunin around the room are there to watch you carefully for any signs of cheating. For every incident they spot, they'll subtract two points from the culprit's score. Be warned, their eyes are sharp and if they catch you five times, they'll dismiss you immediately. Anyone fool enough to be caught cheating by the sentinels doesn't deserve to be here. If you want to be chunin, then show us what exceptional shinobi you can be."

Wait, wait, wait, what?

This all made zero sense to Katumi. At the Academy, if a student got caught cheating then their test would be nullified immediately and they were given a zero in the grade book, so why was it that here, where the stakes were infinitesimally higher would they only subtract two points for each infraction?

She rolled the Morino-san's words around in her head. 'Anyone fool enough to be caught cheating by the sentinels doesn't deserve to be here.' he had said.

Being stupid enough to cheat and stupid enough to be caught cheating have two completely different meanings so why is it that—

Oh.

Oh.

The anxiety that had been making her chest tight drained immediately as she understood what the chunin proctors had done. She narrowed her eyes, an annoyed pout on her face but still nodding in time with the other genin around her.

Clever bastards.

"One final thing: if any candidate should get a zero and fail the test, the entire team fails."

Which would line up perfectly with our predictions from last night about how the second stage will likely be team-oriented.
"The final question won't be given out until fifteen minutes before the end of the testing period. You'll have one hour total." His hard stare went from the group of genin to the clock above him as the second hand on the clock ticked back up to the very top.

"Begin!"

The test in itself wasn't impossible.

'Q1: If MASTER is coded as 411259, then 765459 is what?'

A cipher?

It was just insanely difficult.

She scratched the back of her head, racking her brain for the right answer. She wrote out a couple of sketches, starting first with replacing certain characters with numbers and tweaking the array as she went. Soon enough, she had what she believed to be the right answer, jotting down the word with a smidgen of doubt, but ignoring it.

Katsumi moved onto the next question, worrying her lip between her teeth as she thought. The test was even worse than she had anticipated. She looked up from her paper, her eyes zeroing in on Sasuke's back a few rows ahead of her and she cringed. Hopefully, the boys were doing alright, but she didn't have much faith to begin with. If she had to wager, only a handful of genin could at least attempt to find the right answer meaning it was only a matter of time before the first person started cheating.

Speaking of...

Katsumi looked at Suki out of the corner of her eye, noting her frustrated expression along with the tight grip she had on the pencil. Suki absentmindedly tucked a piece of stray hair behind her ear and glared at the paper with almost enough intensity to set it aflame. One thing was certain: Suki was stumped and had yet to begin cheating which put Katsumi in the perfect position.
She glanced at the chunin proctor to her left, a man with spiky black hair and bandages wrapped around his face with a mean look in his eye…

Exactly what she had been hoping for.

Carefully, she shifted her position in the chair, focusing her gaze on the test while she jotted down the answer to the second question. Her offending limb grazed Suki's leg as Katsumi crossed her legs at the knee, a gesture that, to the casual observer, was nothing more than it seemed to be: an accidental bit of contact made for the sake of comfort.

Suki paused, glancing quickly at Katsumi. Now that she had her attention, Katsumi could offer her assistance. With her free hand, she tapped her finger silently on the desk, still reading the next question. The inaudible tapping to some might be meaningless, possibly the rhythm of a song but Suki knew better.

If she didn't, she would never have become a kunoichi in the first place.

In the Academy, the one part of the day that Katsumi used to hate the absolute most were kunoichi classes: the hour she'd spend daily separated from her boys and thrown into a room where they learned about paltry practices like performing tea ceremonies or *ikebana*.

Historically, they were a way to help encourage more girls to become shinobi to keep Konoha's numbers strong as skilled kunoichi are able to do things that male shinobi couldn't do even if their lives depended on it. When the Nidaime Hokage took to office, he had asked his brother's wife, Uzumaki Mito-sama, to help him revolutionize the shinobi schooling system as there was a severe decline in women joining the military in the wake of the decades-long peace and subsequent international unease when the Second Shinobi World War was on the horizon.

Under her sharp guidance, kunoichi classes were integrated into the Konoha's Shinobi Academy, bringing in seasoned kunoichi and paying them to teach the female shinobi of tomorrow in various different subjects, supposedly to make them stronger in the long run.

To Katsumi, for years it had seemed like a tragic, misogynistic waste of time since there was no male equivalent for her friends and they got to learn valuable things while she was stuck learning useless social niceties like how to properly address feudal lords or how to write different types of poetry.
That is, until Katsumi turned eight.

It is fairly common knowledge that most children with no real potential or drive tend to drop out of the Academy around their second or third year in, having decided that the courses are too rigorous, the teachers were too brutal, or the life of a shinobi just wasn't for them. Until then, kunoichi classes seemed like they were just a way to keep the girls occupied while making sure they learned all of the feminine traditions that were customary in their society. But their fourth year in, kunoichi classes changed.

Apparently, all of the things they had been learning beforehand were in preparation for their later years where they used those soft skills in their repertoire as kunoichi.

So, instead of learning what flowers went best with another, they learned how to send coded messages through ikebana from fair-haired Kohara-sensei.

They learned how to become completely different girls under dark-eyed Reina-sensei through acting, pitching their voices higher or lower, changing their demeanors from timid to regal to completely forgettable until they could all don different faces with the ease that a performer could. They practiced learning how to read people, to feel when the air shifted and danger was near. They learned how to tell what a person's thoughts based on the smallest of facial expressions. Under her tutelage, they learned how to replicate accents down to the slightest inflection until the girls could become completely different people in a matter of seconds.

They learned from red-haired Akane-sensei how to hide weapons on their person through concealed daggers slid in the sleeves of kimono or carefully placed on the insides of their thighs, even in senbon needles woven painstakingly through their hair, only detectable through the slight glinting of metal through the strands.

Satsuki-sensei taught them in their eighth and final year how to manipulate the opposite gender: what words to say to garner the right responses, how to tell if they were interested, and how to protect themselves when honey-pot missions went south as they so often did. They could tell that the woman didn't particularly enjoy teaching them about those things, things that Satsuki-sensei said they were much too young to know about, but she did and she taught them well because to coddle them would be the same as signing their death warrants herself.

They learned about politicking, history, art, and culture until the young kunoichi were all formidable in their own rights until they were plenty dangerous before they even received their hitai-ate. Interestingly enough, while they had to pass the standard Academy graduation requirements, they also had to meet different ones for their kunoichi classes, the same ones that the kunoichi before them had to meet.
They first had to develop a code only known to those in their class and go an entire day of only using that to test its viability in the field. This had confused the boys in their classes greatly when an entire third of their classmates had only communicated in blinks and taps for a day under the watchful eye of their kindly old Momo-sensei who had her sharp gaze zeroed in on each one of them to watch for any slip-ups.

She found none.

The other graduation requirement was to learn another language fluently, enough to hold a conversation in that language for two hours either with a group of their peers who also spoke it or, in rare cases, with an adult. Monitored with microphones on their person and the occasional staff-member tailing them during the duration of the exam, this task was always the hardest to accomplish. They had time to meet the second requirement as they had been notified about what they would have to do to graduate at the end of their fourth year and most of them had been practicing and learning since then, but that didn't change the fact that it was still difficult as hell. Of course, they were allowed to work together as most of the girls had chosen widely-known ones like the one full of choppy vowels spoken in Kirigakure or the harsh consonants common in the plains of Iwa.

Katsumi, curiously enough, felt drawn to the decidedly sharp tongue in the language spoken in Kumo, Kotsunora. She liked to think that the words sounded like a thunderstorm, full of short consonants and long vowels, rolling off her tongue like water. It was quick and concise, rarely using multiple words to say a phrase that could be communicated in one. Kotsunora wasn't a common language this far south as most immigrants from the Land of Lightning settle in more neutral areas like the Land of Hot Water or Yugakure, never straying too far from the military might of Kumo so Katsumi didn't have anyone to practice with other than, curiously enough, Hinata, the timid Hyuga heiress, who could hardly get any sentences out through her constant stuttering and hasty apologies, much to Katsumi's contained annoyance. Despite that, she persisted, unable to stop until she was fluent enough to pass the test with little difficulty around the middle of her seventh year.

Sakura, she remembered, wouldn't shut up about how quickly she was picking up on Koya, the language common amongst those living in the deserts southwest of Konoha, when they were ten, bragging about how easy it was to Ino when they were still friends.

The blonde Yamanaka girl struggled through the impossible spelling rules of Ishita stubbornly, staying up late for weeks on end when the end of their final year in the Academy approached until her pronunciation was flawless enough to fool an Iwa native, preening under Momo-sensei's praise despite the bags under her eyes.

For years Katsumi had believed the lessons to be a way to waste their time and help them remember their place in society as girls when really, it was to prepare them to be dangerous in a different way
than their male counterparts. Later, they realized that other than the Hokage, no one really knew for certain what went on during their classes, only that they were learning how to play the *shamisen* and write sonnets. It was a secret only known to the kunoichi of Konoha and they would prefer to keep it that way.

So it was not a surprise when Suki understood Katumi's offer to help her on the test, her grey eyes narrowed, likely searching for a catch. Katumi was glad that she remembered Suki had heightened senses from the Academy, praying that she could hear the inaudible taps without the use of chakra, a gamble that didn't want to lose. Thankfully, she did and reciprocated quickly.

A few more taps later and Katumi almost snorted at how easy she was to predict. 'Payment' Suki had tapped slowly with her fingertip, wanting to know what was in it for Katumi, an understandable question.

Katumi shook her head imperceptibly, circling an answer on her test, tapping the eraser of her pencil on the desk to fit a particularly lengthy message, hoping that the chunin proctor only meters away wouldn't catch her.

Even if he did, though, it wasn't like he'd know what she was saying anyway.

'Succeed together'.

At that, Suki sent her a wolfish grin and nodded once. Katumi then proceeded to painstakingly tap out the answers so Suki could begin copying the answers down surreptitiously with a steady hand, her pencil dancing furiously along her paper. She didn't bother giving out the lengthier short-answer responses, knowing that to attempt to communicate that would pushing the chunin proctors' leniency entirely too much for her to be confident that they all wouldn't be sent out of the exam room as cheaters. Suki didn't seem to care much seeing as though she just needed to get at least one question right in order to not fail her teammates.

Both girls made quick work of sharing the information, Katumi in her inaudible communication and Suki in her writing, finishing the task in a little less than ten minutes total.

Some might've called what Katumi was doing selfish and in a way, it was. She was helping the other girl out so that she could be used as an ally later on, not out of the genuine kindness of her heart. But Suki and her team were a good investment Katumi figured, and if there was anything Konoha lacked, it was a surplus of skilled kunoichi. They were going to be important one day and if Katumi was smart, she'd make sure she was on their good side when it happened. So, if that meant playing the long game and taking a couple of chances on them, so be it. It'd be worth it in the end if
Suki's trusting smile she gave when she was finished copying her answers down.

Every five or so minutes, a genin would get escorted out of the room along with their screaming teammates for cheating, a detail that seemed to make the others panic a little judging by the rigidity in their postures with each instance.

Katsumi winced when she heard the familiar voices of fellow Konoha genin, but it couldn't be helped. If they couldn't handle intelligence-gathering in a controlled and safe environment, what made them think that they could do it when the stakes were astronomically higher on a mission? It would be downright *negligent* not to kick them out until they were ready.

But it still would've been nice if fewer Konoha teams got disqualified.

Thirty-two minutes later, Morino-san stopped them in order to give out the tenth question, a frankly *bogus* test of guts that an embarrassing number of genin failed miserably in. The entire test was a clever thing; Morino, Konoha's best interrogator, intimidating the genin, providing a seemingly impossible test, and telling them that he would halt their careers as shinobi if they failed at answering it, a bluff that Katsumi almost laughed out loud at.

*No way the head of T&I in Konoha could bar foreign genin from a rank advancement,* she thought, taking in the terrified faces of the others and almost scoffing. *Not even the Hokage himself has that kind of power.*

Sasuke turned around then, meeting her steady gaze and nodding, likely noting how relaxed she was. Sasuke was many things, but he wasn't *stupid.* He knew that if the team strategist wasn't panicking, there was no reason for him to either. He faced forward at her easy expression, some tension leaking out of his posture as he did. He'd be fine.

Unfortunately, Naruto was behind Katsumi and she wasn't about to draw attention to herself as Sasuke had in order to make sure he was okay. She'd just had to trust that he'd be able to see through the painfully obvious ruse and keep his head on straight. Katsumi wasn't the only one who had figured out the proctor's game, judging by Sakura's tight expression in the front row and the look on Shikamaru's face in the row in front of her. It seemed both of them had picked up on what was going on and were *not* happy about it.

Smirking, she leaned back in her chair, waiting for the last of the weenies to forfeit as the man kept goading them. Really, Morino-san was *scary* good at what he did judging by how many squads cracked under the pressure. Genin teams trickled out one by one, usually due to a singular cowardly teammate until soon enough, less than half of the teams that had started out remained.
"Well if you're all sure, there's only one thing left to do: for me to tell you that you've all passed the first exam!"

Though Katsumi had known what was going to happen before it did, that didn't stop the relief from flooding her system at his words. Suki whooped loudly next to her, practically vibrating in her seat with the excitement of being one step closer to a rank advancement. She pumped her fist in the air in a fashion that was very reminiscent of Naruto before she turned to Katsumi with a wide grin on her face.

Then, the window shattered, kunai flew to strategic spots, and a purple-haired woman burst through the room shouting about how she'd be their next proctor.

Morino-san sighed and they exchanged words that Katsumi couldn't hear from where she was, but she understood enough to know that not enough of them dropped out to this Mitarashi Anko-san's liking.

After she threatened them, they were dismissed until the morning and the genin raced to the doors, ready to be done with the exams for the day.

Katsumi rose slowly, knowing that the boys would want to talk strategy after this — likely over a bowl (or six) of ramen — and taking her time.

Suki did the same, leaning against the desk, facing Katsumi. "I owe you one, dude," she said. "Really."

Katsumi let a small smile of her own onto her face. She turned to face her. "Well, I can think of a way to repay me," she replied, loving the feeling of a well-thought-out plan falling into place. Suki's eyebrows raised and Katsumi plowed on before the pandemonium that had erupted in the room due to the good news faded and they were overheard. "The next round. Team up with my squad?" she asked, sensing their teams' eyes on them.

"Why?" Suki questioned with a bit of suspicion, crossing her arms over her chest.

Katsumi shrugged. "Because six heads are better than three," she answered simply. "Plus you know that I'm useful as proven by the exam. My team's the same way, even though they're kinda a couple of boneheads sometimes," she snorted, the touch of humor in her words causing Suki to
grin knowingly. Boys were stupid whether you were on a team with them or not it seemed. "There's no rule against it and we all want the same thing, right? Why not work towards it together?"

Suki frowned, thinking the proposition over, likely searching for any lies in Katumi's statement. Katumi waited with bated breath, her fingers metaphorically crossed that Suki would agree. Finding her offer full of sincerity, she nodded, holding her hand out for Katumi to shake.

"Deal. Don't make me regret this, Katumi," she warned.

"You won't."

"I'll have to run this by Haruno and Hyuga, but I doubt they'll be too opposed."

Katumi chuckled, feeling Sasuke and Naruto get closer seats as they fought through the throng of genin. "I should certainly hope not. My boys'll be fine with it."

Suki flashed her a grin. "What all do you know about the next stage?" she asked conversationally.

The other girl gave a sharp smirk. "Officially, it's all just theory and conjecture."

"And unofficially?"

Suki was proving herself to be a good ally already. "You'll just have to wait and see."

They were interrupted by a brunette with a sharply suspicious glare trained on Katumi. Fighting through her discomfort, she nodded in her direction. "Hyuga-san. It's good seeing you again."

The girl narrowed her eyes, turning to her teammate and effectively ignore Katumi completely. *Okay, first of all, ouch,* Katumi inwardly winced at her icy treatment, wondering what she'd done to earn it. "What did you do, Suki?"

Suki shrugged. "I've just bagged us an ally for the next round," she answered easily as if all of that had been Suki's grand plan. "You know Team Seven, right?"
Sakura, who had just sidled up next to them, raised her eyebrows at Katumi warily. "Are you sure we can trust them?" she asked, contrasting greatly with the aggression coming off in waves from Hanako.

"This is a terrible idea," Hanako muttered darkly, glaring at Katumi before looking away.

Tough room...

"Nope!" Suki chirped happily, ignoring her other teammate's statement entirely with a hand on her hip. "But, she may or may not have intel on what to expect for the second stage of the exams, so I think she's worth hearing out, don'tcha think?"

Hanako looked from Suki to Katumi to Sakura before throwing her hands up in the air before disappearing into the crowd of genin leaving the room.

Suki snorted as she watched her go. "Drama queen," she chuckled, staring after their teammate with fondness. "Anyways, how about we go over to yours to talk strategy tonight with your team to iron everything out?"

"Iron what out?" Sasuke asked from where he had materialized to Katumi’s left.

"Took you long enough," she joked, ignoring the way Sakura imperceptibly stiffened in front of her at his arrival. "You know Sakura." She gestured to the pink-haired girl who was staring pointedly at her shoes. "This is Ryuujin Suki, her teammate and for now, our ally."

"Oh, you listened to my idea!" Naruto smiled. "It's good seeing you again, Sakura-chan." To Katumi’s immense displeasure, she could see a faint blush across his cheekbones rise when he spoke to her. It seemed his little crush hadn't died like she hoped it did.

_Hopefully, this won't be a problem._

Sasuke scowled but said nothing. Katumi was likely going to get an earful when Team Nine was out of earshot though.
"We're all hanging out at the apartment tonight to talk strategy," she informed the boys. "Before we take on whatever happens tomorrow, we need to have a solid plan." She turned back to the remaining members of their team once more. "Does seven work for you guys? We can order takeout."

Sakura nodded mutely as Suki answered the affirmative.

"We'll see you guys then," Suki said before grabbing Sakura's wrist and pulling her away under the pretense of finding their lost Hyuga before they too disappeared out of the doorway.

Sasuke rounded on her the second they were gone, irritation in the lines of his frown. "We don't need their help to win," he spat.

Katsumi rolled her eyes, not feeling up to diffusing another one of his world-class bitchfits so soon after taking such a difficult exam, but it seemed like she didn't have much of a choice in the matter. She sighed deeply. "We don't need it, but it'll help. Think of it as…" she paused, searching for the right word, "think of it as insurance that we have the best shot of acing tomorrow's task."

Sasuke scoffed. "What's so special about that team anyway?"

"Would you prefer another team?" Katsumi asked with a raised eyebrow, placing a hand on her hip.

"Absolutely," he answered, the furrow in his brow deepening.

Naruto snorted. "I think Sasuke's just too much of a chicken to be around Sakura-chan now that she's all different," he said, smirking in Sasuke's direction.

If possible, the raven-haired boy's scowl deepened while Naruto burst into giggles.

"Careful, Sasuke-kun," Naruto chided, pitching his voice a little high. "Or else your pretty face might stay like that," he got out through guffaws.
"Oh, and what do you know, Dead Last?"

Katsumi sighed, feeling a migraine come on that had nothing to do with her eyes when Naruto's laughter stopped abruptly.

"Last I checked, Sakura hated you anyways," Sasuke sneered, knowing how to hit the blond where it hurt on two levels.

Naruto growled, anger and embarrassment making his whiskered cheeks turn pink as he took a step towards a smirking Sasuke. Before the Fourth Shinobi World War could break out in the classroom, Katsumi placed herself in between her two troublesome boys, her irritation rising.

"Not now," she hissed, placing an arm on one of their shoulders, her grip tightening to the point of pain to cut through their angry testosterone-induced haze. Her fingers digging into the tender flesh of their shoulders got their attention of the other and they both looked at her.

"We don't fight in public, especially right before a huge turning point in our lives."

At least Naruto had the decency to look slightly cowed by her sharp reprimands. Sasuke just looked annoyed at her interference. She tightened her grip on him, causing him to hiss in discomfort.

She felt bad for hurting them intentionally, but when they got into moods like this, where they were at each other's throats when their stupid rivalry got the better of their common sense, the only thing that could bring them back down from the heights of idiocy was pain. She'd tried everything: waiting it out, pleading, straight up screaming at them, but nothing worked before Katsumi had started getting their attention through pain; whether that be nicking them with a kunai or punching them in the arms. Nothing worked quite like good old fashioned pain to bring them back to their normal levels of idiocy.

That, and their seemingly mild fear of her.

"We're a team. For one, with so many foreign parties around us, we can't afford to look weak or divided. We need each other right now, we don't need pointless arguments and bickering. You two will get your shit together this instant or else I'll kick both of your skinny asses from here to Kirigakure, got it?"

Naruto nodded quickly, the beginnings of discomfort showing up on his face. Sasuke said nothing, glaring at her in defiance.
Oh, so he wants to play like this, does he?

Katsumi shunted chakra into her optical chakra paths, making her eyes glow in a way that was most definitely not allowed by Mei or Kakashi, staring Sasuke down and asserting her dominance to make him listen to her.

"Got it?" she repeated, letting off a bit of latent killing intent and noting the way his eyes widened at the picture she likely made.

It might've been overkill, but the Chunin Exams have been known to kill off entire teams of genin, in fact, it was almost expected. Plus, judging by the reaction of the second proctor, she planned on doing her level best to make tomorrow more difficult to weed out more contenders in preparation for the final round so they had to be incredibly careful. The time for bickering or egos or rivalry had long-since passed. It was sink-or-swim time and Team Seven needed to be together. So if securing her boys a shot at becoming Chunin and staying alive meant she had to scare the shit out of them so they would comply, she'd do it as much as she didn't like it.

Her eyes were aflame in her anger, boring a hole into his before he caved and looked away, a faint blush lining his cheekbones. "Yeah, uh, okay whatever, Katsumi."

Katsumi narrowed her eyes at him, wondering what the hell his weird reaction was all about, but he wrenched his arm out of her grip and turned away, stalking towards the exit, his pale face in flames.

"Let's just go get food or something," he said before he disappeared out of the room.

Utterly baffled by the sudden change in demeanor, Katsumi followed with Naruto close behind grinning like an idiot.

"What?" she asked as they jogged through the hallway to catch up with their wayward teammate.

Naruto snickered, trying to straighten out his features and failing miserably. "It's nothing. Just Sasuke being stupid, y'know."

Katsumi threw her hands up in the air in frustration. It seemed the boys were determined to be
difficult and drive her insane today. "You guys are impossible," she declared, storming out after Sasuke.

Naruto just laughed again, a knowing look on his face.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Hmm, I wonder what Sasuke’s deal is….

Shout outs:

The tumblr fam as always, y’all are the GOATs

Octoskies: I’m glad you’re digging the characterization! I’ve had a couple of people tell me that they like my version of Team 7, specifically Naruto and Sasuke more than the canon version because Naruto is smarter and Sasuke is more tolerable. Here’s a breakdown of that as well as a bit of insight into Katsumi’s character because why not?

With my version of Naruto, I don't think he's much smarter than he was in canon, I just think he needed a reason to apply himself mentally just as much as he does physically. He's a clever boy already as evidenced by his many feats that have been glossed over by the fandom like stealing a top-secret, heavily guarded scroll and evading capture from skilled shinobi for hours before taking out a seasoned chunin whilst using said A-ranked jutsu that he picked up within a few hours of having it. Also, I just don't like writing dumb characters. Naruto needed to apply himself and fuinjutsu is something that he'd have a natural aptitude for and something he'd find interesting (though, whether he'd use it more for pranking than its actual, intended use, we'll have to wait and see lol) so it was a good fit.

Sasuke is a different story in that this is who I think he could’ve been if he had been supported after the Massacre through therapy and close relationships and slow healing. He was denied that or he rejected it and honestly, I think he just needed someone to force him to have a good time and take care of himself like Katsumi does. As much as they get on each other’s nerves, they love each other and they love their team (though they’d never admit it). Sasuke knows that he’d risk his life for Katsumi and vice-versa. It’s a very underrated relationship in my opinion. It just sucks that Sasuke didn’t get this kind of treatment in canon. As much as I usually shit-talk Sasuke, he is a victim that never got help and honestly, that was the fault of both Danzo and the Sandaime. Sasuke is more likable because he’s more human here. He’s more relatable and relaxed than he ever was in canon.

About Katsumi, after the disaster that the Wave mission was, she's kinda come into her own as a leader instead of a more or less reluctant follower. She's more confident in her abilities and takes up the reins with Kakashi isn't there. Since she's proved herself to both of the boys multiple times to be a capable leader, they fall in line for the most part.
Another reason why she is so skilled both physically and mentally is that she has to be. She's a civilian-born girl on a team with the last heirs of royal and legendary clans with an internationally famous teacher. That places her at a disadvantage because she's worse than Sakura in terms of standing in a shinobi village: a nameless civilian child with no connections on a team where everyone's eyes are on them. Through this, she grinds and practices and works really hard to get better in order to keep up in a world that would gladly walk all over and has walked all over people like her. She refuses to be forgotten or left in the shadows of her team so she tries to find any way to stay sharp. A fun side-effect of spending your childhood with your nose in books is that your vocabulary gets much better. Plus with her kunoichi classes, she's well aware of politics and would be the best person to be a diplomat out of at least the genin on their team. Katsumi is a different kind of character in that though she has some natural aptitude, she works for every bit of success she gets and refuses to lose to anybody. Kakashi sees this and encourages it instead of ignoring her in favor of the boys like he does in canon, praying that it'll be enough to keep them together and alive.

We'll see how that goes.

I know you didn't ask for all of that, but I kinda just started writing and didn’t stop, so sorry! Thanks for the comment though!

czat: I’m glad you like the dialects and languages! I refuse to believe that in that big ass world of theirs, not a single village as ethnically, geographically, and culturally diverse as theirs has at least a different dialect of some sort. So I went a little nuts and threw in whole separate languages because why not? I'm glad you agree with my slight outrage. It makes writing a bit more difficult, but it's still fun as hell.

QoTP: Who out of the Rookies do you think is going to get promoted to chunin by the end of this?

Mkay, onto the next!
“For a place called ‘The Forest of Death’, this place sure is mild,” Sasuke murmured as Team Seven walked along the forest floor, careful not to get too far away from the path they’d planned out.

The other two laughed quietly, keeping their eyes peeled for danger and their footfalls silent as they waited for the signal.

So far, their trek through the forest had been pretty tame, aside from the occasional giant insect or poisonous plant. All three shinobi kept their location seals within easy reach and their chakra tightly suppressed, their heads on a metaphorical swivel.

“Position?” Naruto whispered, his brow furrowed.

Katsumi swallowed, her eyes narrowing unconsciously. “No more than two kilometers away,” she answered, feeling the faint trio of familiar chakra signatures almost due west of their location.

“They need to hurry up and find a team…” Naruto muttered impatiently, his mouth in a grim line.

Sasuke rolled his eyes. “We have a plan. Don’t lose your head, Naruto.”

“And pay attention to your seal,” Katsumi added. “We’re just moving around to keep any would-be attackers away from us.”

The plan was simple but brilliant: Teams Seven and Nine were all outfitted with seals courtesy of Naruto that had two main functions: when one person saturated their seal with a small amount of chakra, it transmitted the signature to the seals of the other team as well as the location. When Naruto made these, the original intent was for Team Seven to be able to find each other no matter the distance once he perfected them, but he figured the unfinished versions were workable for the next day as long as he made some ‘small tweaks’. When both teams were strategizing, he introduced them
to the group, they’d jumped at the idea as a way to signal each other during the Exams as their temporary alliance only worked if they could communicate.

Though Katsumi probably could find them without the seals, her accuracy depended on how close they were whereas the seals had a fifty-kilometer range with no drop in accuracy according to Naruto. When a signal was transmitted, the seal would heat up enough to catch the attention of the carrier of the sister seal. The way in which the seals operated was brilliant. Naruto had the idea of mixing chakra-induced magnetic ink in with the regular ink he used to make his seals so that when they were activated, the seal itself would shift on the paper in the direction of its twin in order to lead the squads to each other when they needed reinforcements.

Team Nine would hunt for teams other teams since they were more fit to track since they had both Suki’s senses and Hanako’s eyes. When they signaled Team Seven, they’d come in and help take down the other genin and the two squads would split the spoils.

The idea of just traveling in a group was tossed around until Sakura brought up the fact that them staying together in such a large group would make it borderline impossible for any decent sensor to miss them and it would draw attention to them. It was a gamble, hoping that the other team wouldn’t double-cross them, but it was a worthwhile risk. Katsumi more or less trusted the other team and she had faith that they wouldn’t turn on them.

If they did, she’d just have to eliminate them from the competition in retaliation.

But hopefully, it wouldn’t come to that.

Naruto pulled a face, puffing out his cheeks in irritation. “I wasn’t lo—”

Sasuke held up a hand, halting their conversation in its tracks suddenly.

“So, Suki’s seal went off,” he said, pulling the seal out from one of the pockets of his pants and examining the ink. “Let’s move out!”

Team Seven sprang into action wordlessly. Sasuke took point as he circulated minute amounts of chakra through his legs, jumped onto a decently high branch of the nearest tree and started leaping from tree to tree, Naruto and Katsumi close behind him in a spearhead formation with Naruto on his left and Katsumi on Sasuke’s right.
She felt a spike in chakra and jumped a little farther than necessary, landing on the branch next to Sasuke, shaking her head at his newly red eyes. “Not yet,” she admonished. “You might not even need it. Just wait until you have to.”

He scowled, but said nothing, nodding curtly and deactivating the Sharingan as Katsumi fell back into her position in the formation.

It wasn’t long before they came to Team Nine’s position on the edge of a clearing by a decently wide river, their chakra signatures buzzing low as they suppressed them tightly.

Team Seven landed a few meters away on silent feet, their eyes on the seemingly unsuspecting team of Ame genin barely out of earshot filling up their canteens, hurrying over to the crouched girls.

Suki flashed a sharp-edged smile. “Took you lot long enough.”

Sasuke rolled his eyes. “Traffic was awful.”

Katsumi shifted her weight to her knees. “What’s the situation?” she asked, cutting their banter off in favor of focusing on the topic at hand.

The girls had picked a smart place to meet as the sound of the rushing water would mask the sound of their voices.

They still took no chances, speaking hardly louder than a whisper. “Three males, all from Ame, likely between fifteen to eighteen years of age” Sakura answered. “From what we’ve gathered, the skinny one there,” she pointed to a genin with a shock of black hair and a rebreather strapped on over his mouth, “he’s the leader. The one with the glasses is a sensory type so keep your chakra leashed tight,” she warned.

“What about the little one?” Naruto queried, jutting his chin in the direction of a smaller genin with brown hair and a mean look in his eye.

Sakura shrugged. “No idea. He hasn’t really done anything or said much. The other two don’t really talk to him. But watch out for that scythe. Judging by the way he moves, he knows how to use it.”
Katsumi winced, examining the aforementioned weapon on his back. It was wicked, the silver blade glinting dangerously in the dappled light of the forest.

“He has the scroll,” Hanako mentioned. “I saw the glow of the chakra in his pack with my Byakugan.”

“Are you sure?” Sasuke pressed.

Hanako glared at him, clearly offended that he would doubt her. The boy scoffed and turned away.

“Can you tell which type it is?” Naruto chimed in, his bright blue eyes curious.

Hanako shook her head. “Just that he has the scroll.”

“Alright, what’s the plan?” Suki asked, not taking her eyes off the unsuspecting trio of boys near them.

“How much time do we have?” Sakura asked, her brow furrowed.

“Not much. Looks like they’re going to be moving out within the next couple minutes,” Suki offered.

“We ambush them,” Sasuke said, punching his palm. “We rush them two on one and take their scroll. Done.”

Suki sent him a smile. “I like the way you think, Uchiha. Who fights with who?”

For a moment, no one said anything before all five genin turned to look at Katsumi expectantly.

She sighed.
Katsumi had been hoping that she wouldn’t be the one to do all of the strategizing, but if someone had to do it, she was a little glad that she was leading. From her admittedly short track record, she was pretty good at it as long as she didn’t get too overwhelmed. Plus, it was flattering that they all wanted her to formulate their plan of attack.

And it wasn’t like she hadn’t already thought about it while Sakura was briefing them on the situation anyway.

“Naruto, you’re with Hanako-san. Use your clones to cover her blind-spots. While she’s rushing the leader, feel free to use seals to supplement her taijutsu to take him down,” Katsumi said easily. “Sasuke and Suki, you guys take out the little one with the scythe. I’m assuming you can use that katana on your back, right Suki?”

At the brunette’s aghast expression, Katsumi figured she was right and continued. “Right. You and Sasuke are the best ones to get around his scythe. Your footwork is bound to be better than ours since you’re both swordsmen. Take him down but watch it with fire,” she warned. “We don’t want to accidentally destroy the scroll.” She paused, locking eyes with the other team’s strategist. “You’re with me on the sensor. Try to get him with genjutsu while I distract him up close.”

“Are we killing?” Hanako asked, her dark brows knitted together in determination.

Katsumi shook her head. “Try not to. But if it’s between you and them, end it. Any questions?”

At the chorus of answers in the negative, Katsumi nodded. “Alright, let’s get this scroll.”

With that, they sprang out of their hiding spots and descended on the team of genin.

———

“Left!” Sakura called, prompting the other girl to throw herself out of the way of her onslaught in order to not get caught in it herself. She did, but only by the skin of her teeth, narrowly missing getting slashed by her dual tanto.

Katsumi frowned. “Whatever happened to genjutsu?” she called out, observing the girl’s skill with her knives and the bloody slashes in the shinobi’s clothing from where he hadn’t been fast enough.
“Didn’t want to waste the chakra,” she got out between harsh breaths, slashing at the boy with vigor.

The boy tried his hand at dodging before he sent her flying through the air with a wicked kick to her chest. Not wasting any time to see Sakura right herself mid-air and roll, Katsumi immediately filled in the gap, forcing the older boy back with a series of ruthless taijutsu moves to wear him out, making the gash in her upper arm stretch painfully.

He blocked her kick, baring his teeth and swearing at her in a language she didn’t understand when Katsumi substituted herself with a fallen branch, landing away from him allowing Sakura in a flash of pink to come in while he was still confused. Sakura slammed the flat of her blade into his nose, the loud crunching making Katsumi cringe.

The accompanying spray of blood was impressive, dousing the forest floor below him. He bellowed in pain, moving to attack Sakura before Katsumi knocked him out with a swift hit in the back of the head with the hilt of her kunai. The Ame-nin dropped like a rock, his eyelids fluttering shut as he fell, landing face down on the forest floor.

“Nice assist,” Sakura complimented, catching her breath with a half smile.

“Tie up this guy. I’ll finish Naruto and Hanako’s work over there,” she instructed, jutting her chin in the direction of the fallen Ame-nin whose bonds were a little too loose for Katsumi to be comfortable with.

It looked like the boy had been trained in getting out of restraints and with a few more minutes, he’d soon become a problem again.

Katsumi walked across the clearing, her hands digging in her hip pouches for spare wire when Sasuke swore several meters away.

“Tch. We already have a Heaven scroll,” Sasuke scowled, breathing hard from where he and Suki finished their fight and had been rifling through his bag.

Suki let out a whoop. “We don’t,” she sang.
When she tried to grab it from him, Sasuke darted away.

“Like we’d let you have this until we got our Earth scroll,” he sneered, his grip on it tight.

Suki pouted and crossed her arms over her chest, opening her mouth to begin to protest.

“You’ll get this,” Sasuke said, waving the scroll, “when you help us get an Earth scroll.”

Suki scowled. “Like hell we will!” she exclaimed, making a grab for it.

A spike of chakra and Sasuke’s nondominant hand was on fire. “Or I could always burn it and we could start over,” he said, moving the flames threateningly near the scroll. Suki’s mouth closed abruptly and it was her turn to scowl while Sasuke smirked triumphantly.

Katsumi grinned at her teammate before turning her attention back on the task at hand, yanking at the wire reinforcing the ropes around his ankles before moving to the wrists. Sasuke was a lot more clever than she gave him credit for it seemed.

With nimble fingers, she finished tying the wire closely around the leader’s wrists, tightening the ninja wire to the point of pain and ignoring the older boy’s swearing and struggling. He kept insulting her, cursing at her in his native language, and pulling roughly against his bonds and generally giving Katsumi a hard time as she fought to keep him still enough to incapacitate him.

*They should’ve knocked him out when they had the chance.*

She gritted her teeth as the gash on her arm was torn open a little more in her efforts, causing a sharp pain to slow her down. The injury was from a kunai she hadn’t been able to dodge completely during the fight. To be fair, it was originally aimed at her heart but she moved instinctively to the right and ended up getting sliced in her upper arm instead.

The blood was beginning to stain the sleeve of her shirt. The cut itself wasn’t particularly deep she didn’t think, but by the Sage, did it hurt like a bitch to deal with. She’d need to bandage that at some point.
A hand landed on her shoulder. “I got it,” Sakura said, pushing in her good arm lightly away from the enemy nin.

“That’s going to need stitches,” she commented offhandedly, her sharp eyes taking in the injury.

“No shit,” she replied with a frown. After their battle together, Sakura looked different to Katsumi somehow.

Fighting with Sakura was… an experience. The other girl was the textbook definition of calculated, helping Katsumi keep the sensor on his toes and not giving him a single centimeter of space. At first, Katsumi was miffed that Sakura seemed to completely disregard her instructions of staying out of the fight for the most part until she could pin him with a genjutsu but she’d even had an annoyingly good point when it came to the conservation of chakra. To be honest, the fight was over before it started anyways so it didn’t really matter she supposed. Sakura had been ruthless with her dual blades, slicing with expert precision while giving Katsumi plenty of openings to finish it. Sage, Sakura was impressive and Katsumi respected the other girl a lot more after fighting alongside her. Sakura was skilled and dependable now, much different from the girl she was before they were made genin.

Katsumi got up off her knees, handing control of the restraints to her and pulled out her first aid kit from her bag. After getting her fingers on a roll of bandages and rolling her sleeve up to wrap them carefully around her upper arm, she watched as the pink-haired kunoichi went through a half dozen hand signs, finishing in a tiger seal. The air around them shifted slightly, wavering like it does when the weather gets blisteringly hot. The boy slipped quickly into unconsciousness with the other two as Sakura cast a genjutsu over the three of them.

“That’ll keep them knocked out for the next day or so.”

The rush of air next to Katsumi signaled their teammates coming over to inspect their handiwork.

“There’s no one around for, like, the next two kilometers,” Naruto reported slightly out of breath from his trek through the woods with Hanako. They finished their fights first and were sent to scout the area and look out for any unwanted visitors.

Hanako nodded. “We should head northwest parallel to the river. I saw a team from Kusa heading to the tower six kilometers from here,” Hanako offered, shifting her weight to her other side. “We are halfway there at this point. We should finish this promptly so we can return to civilization.”
“Sounds fine to me,” Suki chirped, darting around to collect stray kunai littering the clearing where they’d fought.

“Do we leave them like that?” Naruto asked, gesturing to the sleeping boys they’d taken down earlier.

“They could die out here, y’know.”

Sakura bit her lip, looking torn. “Well—”

Hanako scoffed, cutting Sakura’s response off. “They were well aware of the risks of competing in the Exams,” she replied, wiping a bit of blood away from her brow a result from a cheap shot her opponent got on her. Her glare darkened when she focused on the sleeping figures of the boys.

“They’d do the same to us,” Sasuke added, his eyes hard.

They were all quiet for a moment, as they realized the situation, all collectively feeling a lot older than twelve and thirteen. Katsumi paused in dressing her wound. She was conflicted. She had no real allegiance to these boys or Amegakure as a whole. Gods, if she remembered correctly, the village hated Konoha and would’ve gladly slit their throats in retribution for what transpired during the Second and Third Shinobi World Wars. It was just… as they were, sleeping and quiet, they weren’t a threat. Every time she had every attacked someone with the intent to kill — other than with the bell test — it was because they posed an immediate threat to her or her team. But right now? Those boys were as harmless as the day was long. She couldn’t justify leaving them completely helpless in the middle of the Forest of Death.

It was cruel.

“Sakura, how far away can you be to release an illusion on someone?” she asked with the end of her bandage in between her teeth, tying it off carefully with a measured tug.

Her green eyes widened at the question before looking upwards as she thought. “Uh, like a kilometer and a half away, maybe?

Suki jogged up to them again, her pack bulging with the other supplies she’d pilfered from their opponents. “So what’s the plan? Are we separating to go track the other team?”
“We’ll go track the Kusa team while you guys finish up here,” Katsumi instructed, rolling her sleeve back down and adjusting the weight of the bag across her shoulders. “Wait for our signal and we’ll do this all over again. Hopefully, they have an Earth scroll this time. We get our scroll, we give you yours, we book it to the Tower, and we finish before nightfall. Everyone’s happy.”

“And what if you lot run off with our scroll?” Hanako asked with narrowed eyes, her hand on her hip.

Katsumi smiled blandly. “We still need you guys and while we have what you need, you still need us; the status quo remains unchanged. Now I’m trusting that you won’t double-cross us because we certainly have no plans of betraying you guys so let’s just make this easy and be honorable, ne?”

If Katsumi were paying attention to anyone other than Hanako, she would’ve seen the begrudgingly impressed expression on Sakura’s face, the respect on Suki, and the satisfaction lining the faces of both of her boys. Hanako’s face twisted like she’d tasted something sour and she grunted, turning away from Katsumi and stalking over to the river, taking out a canteen and filling it up, all the while still fuming.

Suki whistled low. “Well, if Hanako didn’t hate you already, she definitely does now.”

Katsumi shrugged. “I’m not worried. She can hate me all she wants after we finish the Exams.”

“Just go ahead and get on those Kusa-nin. We’ll be waiting for your signal,” Sakura said, nodding at the members of Team Seven individually. “Don’t die.”

Naruto laughed, a light blush on his cheeks, his hands akimbo as the other two genin got ready to move out quickly and quietly. “Ma, ma, Sakura-chan, we’ll be fine! I mean, what could go wrong?”

And they were off.

———

They were closing in on the trio of faint signatures when they disappeared from Katsumi’s senses completely.
She lost her balance on her next jump to a tree branch, her misstep sending her falling five meters downward before she changed direction mid-air and landed on another branch, slightly out of breath as she tried to wrap her head around three genin-level chakra signatures disappearing entirely.

Both Naruto and Sasuke jumped down next to her, concern and alarm evident in their stances as Sasuke looked around for an invisible assailant on the branch where Katsumi was crouched.

“What happened?” he asked in a low voice, his daito out and Sharingan swirling to life.

Katsumi shook her head, straining her senses and finding nothing. “The signatures of the Kusa team completely disappeared,” she said. “I can’t— they’re just gone.”

“Well, what does that mean?” Naruto’s brows were furrowed, his hand drifting towards the pocket where he kept the location seal.

“It means you’ve fallen right into my trap, children,” a smooth, disembodied voice said from above them before an unbelievably strong gust of wind blew the three of them off a tree and the world went to hell around them.

———

Chapter End Notes

A/N: We love a good cliffy.

Shoutout to Katsumi for keeping the status quo unchanged. I got a little inspiration on that bit from a really good movie. Kudos to anyone who can guess which one. Does anyone else feel like Katsumi lowkey would make a really good pirate? The next chapter is a mf MESS so good luck. Entering: The Snake Sannin!

Shoutouts: The tumblr fam as always including the newest members of the fam: huohuaduvessa, jaehynniespeach, and blogthreehundredandninetyfour !! I love you guys! Welcome to our merry band of crackheads.

Leaddusthands: I'm glad you loved the last chapter! Katsumi's specialty is glaring rowdy boys in line. It's her forte. Ilysm and thanks for the comment!

CYUNME: AHHH YES! I found it hilarious!! Sasuke has a thing for girls that could
beat him up idk why but it fits him so much. Poor baby lol. He has it bad and I'm not even sure if he fully realizes it. Even worse, Katsumi sees him as another brother and she's brilliant but is so dumb when it comes to relationships and dating and crushes, he literally couldn't have picked a worse girl to develop a crush on, it's great and tragic at the same time jfc. Also the tumblr is just https://hosffblog.tumblr.com/ or, hosffblog :). Thanks for the comment and the support! Ily!

Natty19: Ikr! They're adorable. Too bad it's probably never going to happen. I find prepubescent love affairs to be deeply amusing and entertaining. Thanks so much for the support and the comment! Ilysm beech!

czat: Thanks so much! I actually got the idea of what kunoichi classes could've (or should've, fuck you, Kishimoto) been from a really weird conversation in my Economics class that featured a future female Marine, magic, and the Girl Scouts of America. Yeah. That conversation went exactly how it sounds like it did lol. I just hated how Kishi never expounded on kunoichi classes and just left it on flower arrangements. I feel like any self-respecting kunoichi would've snuck some different stuff into the classes to make them more useful, but that's just me. Also, in this version, the Academy teachers get a LOT more respect so they care a lot more about the kids. Thanks for the motivation and the comment! Ilysm, dude!

QoTP: I know the story has, like, zero romance in it (right now), but who out of the characters, if any of them, would you like to see together as endgame?

Mkay, onto the next!
Katsumi plummeted to the ground from several meters up, weaker branches breaking under her in her descent and scratching at her skin, the wind whipping her hair into her face and whistled past her ears. Panic, sharp and strong, flooded her veins before pure instinct kicked in.

She blindly caught a stronger branch on the way down without thinking, grasping its rough surface with her thankfully gloved hands, halting her descent immediately as the thick branch bent under her weight, but thankfully, didn't snap. Her shoulders screamed in protest, the harsh grab almost popping both of her arms out of their sockets. Katsumi hissed in pain and dropped in a much more controlled fashion to the ground silently on the balls of her feet and finding cover in the underbrush.

Katsumi laid flat on her stomach, rolling one shoulder at a time to relieve some of the ache and tightly leashed her chakra signature until it was comparable to that of a woodland creature to try to search for her boys. I need to find them, she thought, urgency making her heart race.

We’re being separated on purpose.

She focused, slowing her breathing and extending her senses, her chakra branching out to search for something familiar near her and promptly scowled.

Fuck.
There was nothing.

No Naruto or Sasuke, no birds, squirrels, giant centipedes, or even plants according to her senses. It was like something or someone was melding all of the chakra signatures in about three kilometers in one direction and seven in the other, so much so that Katsumi couldn’t make heads or tails of anything. Under the cloying blanket of unfamiliar chakra, her normal sensory capabilities were decommissioned to the point that she doubted any decent sensor wouldn’t be able to see inside, let alone throughout it.

She swore a blue-streak in her head in frustration. Whoever had done something like this was no genin. Sage, they probably aren’t even a chunin, she thought incredulously. Whatever it was, she knew enough about chakra blocking that this was likely the work of a seal or set of seals and that the user was likely very skilled so she’d have to be extremely careful. Even worse, the person who did this jammed her senses, nullifying one of her most powerful skills.

Katsumi was effectively going into this blind.

It was probably that Kabuto bitch, she thought, anger flaring up in her at the accusation. Damnit, she knew they should’ve told someone earlier instead of waiting for later.

There was no time for that, however, for one thing was certain: whoever had separated them wanted at least Katsumi alive since she hadn’t been killed outright. The winds had been destructive, not necessarily deadly. The shinobi in charge of the jam was plenty skilled enough to use something immediately lethal but they hadn’t, meaning that they wanted something from her or the boys. It probably wasn’t the scroll since she didn’t have it, so that left the options open. They wouldn’t be after information because three orphans with questionable ties to Konoha high society wouldn’t exactly be her first pick for informants when there were literal clan heirs running around like in Team Eight and Ten.

So what are they after?

Before she could do anything, she had to plan. Any time she was in a stressful situation, Yamanaka-sensei always told her to FOF: “Focus on facts”. That way, she wouldn’t get overwhelmed and killed. For the most part, it helped a lot.

So, what did she know?
To maintain a seal this large, it would need either multiple seals placed in strategic places or multiple people who have to focus on holding the seal. That meant that she’d either be dealing with a group of distracted people or slips of likely volatile paper hidden within the five-kilometer radius. She frowned, worrying her lip. The seals or people will be placed near or at the edges of the affected area and if my hypothesis is correct, this weird ass dampering technique is covering a five-kilometer radius so I have… Katsumi ran the calculations in her head and almost started to cry. I have thirty-one square kilometers to search to find one if I go about it that way. It’d be akin to a wild-goose chase that may or may not yield anything fruitful.

She looked up at the sun from the forest floor. It was early in the afternoon according to the position of the sun so she didn’t have much time before nightfall. She couldn’t afford to search that much ground to maybe find nothing while a dangerous shinobi was loose in the Forest of Death. For someone to have infiltrated Konoha Chunin Exams, they would’ve had to have been extraordinarily powerful, even more so to have that much control over wind-natured chakra to have blown all three members of Team Seven so far away from each other.

But since it’s—

A prickling feeling at the edge of her senses made the hair on the back of her neck raise and she investigated, focusing more on that feeling to find the source of the oddity. Katsumi inhaled sharply, her eyes flying open a slight, knowing smirk on her face.

The jutsu was moving. Not quickly, but enough that its activity was coming up on her radar that she noticed that several small signatures began popping up westward where there’d been nothing before. That meant that the caster of the jutsu and likely the person who had blown them away were one and the same and most importantly, at the center of the jutsu with a limit of a five-kilometer jutsu radius. And for whatever reason, they were moving.

To maintain something this complex and large must drain heavily on chakra so whatever they set out to do had to be done quickly and might not be able to be maintained through heavy combat. It was a gamble, the large-scale smoke-screen jutsu; by cloaking chakra signatures in this section of the forest with their own chakra, that meant that they wouldn’t be able to sense her since her signature was hidden. But that meant that whatever they had to do the person had to do it quickly before it was noticed by any one of the chunin proctors monitoring the exam.

So, Katsumi would go to the center of the jutsu and see what she could find using small amounts of chakra. She was fairly certain that her signature would be cloaked, but there was no harm in conserving it just in case. After finding her boys, they’d take on this person all at once, weaken the jutsu, and call for reinforcements, either through Team Nine or, worst case scenario, opening the scroll, which would likely disqualify them from the exam and bring the proctor’s attention to their locations quickly.
Where we’ll hopefully be escorted out by more experienced ninja.

Katsumi steeled herself, preparing mentally for what she felt would be one of the most difficult things she’d ever done. This would be her test, not the scroll-collecting and arriving at the tower in time, but staying alive. It wasn’t an exam anymore: it was sink-or-swim time.

Katsumi had spent more than enough time drowning to know what she’d have to do.

Katsumi pushed herself up off the ground and got out of the bushes. If there was one thing Katsumi knew how to do, it was winning. Even though she had come from nothing basically, she’d fought and bled and sweat to get to where she was. Yes, she had raw, natural talent, but every bit of improvement, every jutsu she’d learned, every muscle she’d strengthened was all because of her downright refusal to lose; lose to Naruto, to Sasuke, to the other Rookies, and to herself.

Now, when everything was on the line was no different. Fear wasn’t an option. Neither was failure. She’d win like she always had and protect those that protect her with everything she had in her.

By any means necessary.

Her boys needed her. That would have to be enough to spur her forward. It always had been before.

You do not yield.

She was gone before the thought could even finish forming in her head.

———

Katsumi finds Sasuke first.

When she spots him standing at the base of a large tree, she lets out a breath she didn’t even remember holding. She jumps down from the tree she was on, landing a few meters away from him and walks over.
Katsumi throws herself out of the way of a set of razor-sharp shuriken being thrown at her face, a disgruntled noise escaping her.

Sasuke’s face is set in a fearsome scowl when she looks back, with more shuriken poised in his hand. “Don’t come any closer.”

“How do I know you’re actually Katsumi?” she demands, her heart racing.

“How do I know you’re actually Sasuke?” he retorts. “You could be someone in a henge.”

Katsumi narrows her eyes at him, approximately two seconds from bashing his stupid face in. “How do I know that you’re actually Sasuke?” she retorts, crossing her arms across her chest. “You could be a fake too.”

“Just tell me something only the real Katsumi would know.”

“I take it back, you’re definitely the real Sasuke,” she mutters.

Katsumi levels him an unimpressed stare, prompting him to raise his hand again in preparation to throw. “You have three seconds. And I won’t miss next time.”

The girl rolled her eyes. “Well, I know that you’re a total fucking drama-queen, but that’s something anyone in Konoha would know.” At the boy’s deepening snarl, Katsumi remedied her answer. “You light incense in the Uchiha clan shrine for every festival or holiday without fail and have since you were eight as a way to remind the spirits that you’re still there and so they know that you haven’t forgotten them.”

Something in Sasuke’s hard obsidian eyes softened and his hand lowers. He nods to her tersely, his
posture relaxing. “You could’ve just said that I like tomatoes,” he mumbles, shifting his weight from side to side, shoving a hand in his pockets.

Katsumi shrugs, more at ease now that Sasuke isn’t throwing sharp objects at her face anymore. “Figured you’d need definitive proof.”

“Any idea what happened?”

“ Powerful ninja, likely a fuuton user separated us because they want something. There’s a chakra-dampening jutsu surrounding us in about a five-kilometer radius with the user likely at the center of it. The jutsu blocks every chakra signature in the area, covering it with the chakra of the caster, making us effectively invisible to anyone outside and for anyone inside too. Sasuke, this person isn’t genin level or even chunin level,” she says, his eyebrows raising. “We need to find Naruto as soon as possible, weaken the caster enough for their control over the jutsu to slip, and get help.”

Sasuke scoffs. “I’m not stupid. I figured something was up when my Sharingan couldn’t see anything through all this excess chakra,” he says, pulling out their Heaven scroll from his pack. “And I doubt using this would work right now to get help from our seniors.”

“It won’t,” she confirmed.

“Then, what do we do?”

“We—”

A rustling from the bushes made Katsumi and Sasuke stop talking and immediately draw their respective weapons, standing nearly back to back with Katsumi nearest to the foliage.

“KATSU-CHAN!” a familiar voice called out as a blond boy rushed towards the both of them with a bright grin on his face. “I’ve been looking for you guys everywhere and—”

Katsumi wordlessly chucked a kunai at his face with deadly accuracy, the blade only stopping when he caught it with a confused expression on his face and dodged the next one smoothly. “Hey, what the hell are you do— HEY!” he exclaimed, jumping out of the way of a blistering fireball courtesy of Sasuke and landing on his feet a safe way away from them.
“How about you stop pretending to be our teammate and come out, you coward,” Katumi spat, her eyes narrowed.

“I don’t know what yo—”

“The real Naruto would understand the gravity of the situation immediately. He’d never be as reckless as that,” Sasuke added, snarling. “Whoever you think you’re trying to fool, it isn’t us.”

“Where is the real Naruto?” Katumi ground out, her temper flaring dangerously and her hand on her weapons pouch. Oh, she didn’t care how she did it, she just knew that if this person hurt Naruto, she’d take pleasure in gouging out their eyes and cutting out their tongue.

No one fucked with her boys.

“We’re not stupid. I know that you’re the jutsu caster so just come out.”

The imposter gave a decidedly serpentine smile that stretched Naruto’s face in all the wrong ways, their almost reptilian tongue coming out of their mouth to lick their lips.

“A sensor, are you?”

Katumi’s fury drained and she took a step back and said nothing, more cautious than anything.

“Aren’t we the clever one?” a voice asked that was very much so not Naruto’s. Suddenly, smoke filled the immediate area as a henge dispelled and in the place of the imposter was a dark-haired Kusa nin with the worst fashion sense Katumi had ever seen in her life. Ino would have a field day … she thought, her nose curling up in mild distaste.

The woman let out a laugh that reminded Katumi oddly of a blade scraping stone. “What, am I not pretty enough for you, child?”

“No comment.” Katumi’s hold on her kunai tightening ever so slightly.
Sasuke scoffed impatiently, his eyes narrowed. “What do you want from us?”

Freaky Bitch-san chuckled again. “I’m impressed, you certainly haven’t dropped your guard, have you?” she noted. “This promises to be very interesting…”

Both genin jumped back several meters when her hand went to her hip, expecting a weapon but being met with…

*An Earth scroll!* Katsumi placed, frowning suspiciously.

“I bet you’d *loove* to get your hands on my Earth scroll, wouldn’t you?” she crooned, bring it up to her face. “It would go so nicely with your Heaven scroll…”

Before either genin could wonder how in the Nidaime’s name she knew definitively that they had a Heaven scroll, her ungodly long tongue wrapped around the scroll and pushed it down into her mouth, swallowing it whole like a snake. Katsumi’s face scrunched up in disgust and Sasuke looked ready to gag at the display.

“On second thought,” Katsumi said without thinking, “you can keep that shit.”

Sasuke nodded at her and they both leaped at her, the plan of attack already drilled into them; Sasuke rushes the opponent from the front and Katsumi tries to pin them from the back.

They were less than a meter away from where they started when they stopped in their tracks.

*Bloodbloodbloodblood* filled Katsumi’s vision, blood from her own throat being slit to kunai being embedded into her chest to decapitation and brutal body mutilation. Agony and pure, unadulterated *fear* swamped her senses, making it impossible to think as she was shown her own death over and over and over again, an endless film reel of the worst ways to die, the only common thread being the amount of bloodshed.

*Blooddeathgutsfiregoresorrowdeathpain*
Outside of her head, her legs buckled and she fell helplessly to her knees, her unseeing eyes staring ahead of her in abject terror. From a million miles away, she hears what she believes to be Sasuke retching in the grass next to her, but nothing can shake her from this stupor.

“You’re paralyzed with fear, aren’t you?”

Is— Is this some… some sort of g-genjutsu…? She wonders, desperately trying to gather her thoughts in the face of what she realized to be the most powerful Killing Intent she’d ever experienced by far.

“Don’t worry,” the woman says, the clinking of metal marking her movements. “I’ll make it quick.”

In her head, Katsumi was throwing herself against the KI, slamming her will into it relentlessly, trying to force herself to move. If I don’t move, we are going to die! Move, godsdamnit! She pleaded, hardly getting more than a twitch from her fingers while the woman came towards them.

She tutted disappointedly. “I thought you’d be more of a challenge,” she complained before Katsumi heard the sound of kunai whistling through the air. She closed her eyes, waiting for the inevitable impact when a shoulder slammed into her stomach and suddenly, they were weightless.

Through her clouded brain, she recognized the scent of Sasuke’s sword oil and relaxed a little bit. As she focused on the trees whipping past her and they got farther away from that woman, her mind began to clear bit by bit.

Before long, Sasuke stopped running and dropped her behind a tree while he panted. He set her down with a modicum of care before collapsing himself. Katsumi then noticed the blood staining his pants and sighed, understanding what he did.

“I get that the pain helped get your mind off the fear, but did you have to stab yourself that deeply?” she asked.

He glared at her tiredly. “We can’t fight her. She’s too strong.”

“You’re right. Our best bet is finding Naruto and fleeing as quickly as possible,” she sighed, finally feeling like herself again.
Sasuke leaned against the tree and slid down until he was in a seated position, wincing at the way it tugged at the gash in his thigh.

“That’s going to need stitches,” she said, observing the wound warily.

The raven-haired boy huffed. “I know. Do you still have your med-kit with you? I lost my pack in the explosion,” he said with a scowl.

Katsumi nodded and took her damaged pack off, bringing it around to rifle through it until she brought out a leather pouch which she carried her medical supplies in. She pursed her lips, causing Sasuke’s frown to deepen. “What?”

“It got busted in the blast.”

Sasuke groaned, throwing his hands up into the air and Katsumi huffed, crossing her arms over her chest. “Hey, when you’re plummeting to your death, you don’t really worry about your supplies so much as you do your life. It must’ve fallen out then.”

“Well, do you have anything to suture with?”

Katsumi winced. “The needle survived the fall but the only thread-like thing I have is some fishing line.”

“Why do you have fishing line in your pack?” Sasuke asked.

“Does it matter? It’s something to stitch you up with so shut up and roll up your fucking pant leg,” she hissed, already irritated despite his injured state. Should she be treating him with a little more care since he got injured saving her life? Probably. But he was pissing her off and she wasn’t one to pull punches.

The boy did as she said, slowly lifting his extended leg off the ground to roll up his pants but failing.

“The fabric won’t stretch enough to make it over your thigh. Just…” she sighed, feeling the slightest stirrings of discomfort. Forcing professionality, she continued in a very matter-of-fact tone. “Just take
them off,” she said in a rush.

Sasuke let out an indignant squawk, his brows knitting together as his face reddened. “Wha- Katsumi I can’t just—”

“You can and you will. C’mon Sasuke, we don’t have much time so just take the fucking pants off so we can find Naruto.”

“Fine. But I’m doing the sutures.”

“Fine by me. Just hurry up will you, Drama Queen?”

Sasuke glared at her, placing his thumbs in his belt loops and lifting his hips before Katsumi looked away, watching the unnaturally still forest for any activity. She crossed her arms over her chest again, listening to Sasuke’s pained hisses with mild annoyance. He was having trouble with the stitches.

“Do you want me to—”

“*No!*” he exclaimed in a voice much higher than his usual gruff tenor, his voice cracking slightly. His pride was making him stupid apparently. Katsumi snickered silently. “I got it! Just... Just keep looking that way!”

Katsumi rolled her eyes and kept watching the forest until he was done.

“I’m decent.”

Katsumi turned back around and saw him standing with what looked like forced nonchalance and walked over to hand her the suture kit.

“Good. Now how do we find Naruto?” she asked, placing her supplies in her bag and getting ready to move out. “We should keep moving to keep that Kusa-nin off of us.”

Sasuke was silent, long enough that Katsumi paused and looked at him and noted that he didn’t meet
her eyes. “Sasuke?”

“Katsumi…” he started and she already knew what he was going to say.

She shook her head. “Fuck no, absolutely not. Whatever possessed you to think that that was even an option, get that shit out of your head.”

Sasuke scowled, looking more pained than angry. “Godsdamnit, you know I don’t want to, but we might not have a choice!”

Katsumi got in his face, her voice low. “We are not leaving Naruto behind and that’s final.”

Sasuke crossed his arms across his chest. “How far away are we from the edge of the jutsu.” At Katsumi’s answering furious silence, his gaze hardened. “How fucking far?” he demanded.

“Less than two kilometers!” she admitted, her temper getting the best of her. “There, you happy?” she muttered, moving away from him to begin getting rid of any vestiges of their stay in that part of the forest, overturning the soil to give herself something to do.

Sasuke followed her, annoyed with her attempts to ignore him. “Katsumi, we could get to help and come back with reinforcements within the next half hour!”

“No.”

“We don’t even know where he could be!”

“No.”

“We have almost eighty square kilometers to search and if he’s conscious, he’s going to be moving and—”

“NO!” she exclaimed, angry tears prickling at her eyes. “We are not leaving Naruto behind and that’s final!”
Suddenly, a calloused hand was on her wrist wrenching her to him so that she could face him. “Listen to me! Gods, Katsumi, do you think I want to abandon Naruto? Newsflash: I don’t!” he shouted, his free hand clenched in a fist. “But all I know…” he paused to gather himself, closing his eyes before continuing. “All I know is that I have one teammate that I know is alive for sure and I see a way out that would lower the risk of something jeopardizing that. Naruto is important, but he isn’t here right now and we can’t afford going on a wild-goose chase to go find him. This isn’t some kind of fucked up training simulation from Kaka-sensei—”

“Damnit I know tha—”

Both hands were on her shoulders as he shook her. “Listen. To. Me.” Each word was punctuated by a rough shake, not enough to hurt, but enough to gain her attention. Katsumi surprisingly didn’t break his arms for that and just listened. “Stop thinking with your bleeding fucking heart for once in your life and look at the bigger picture. What would Kakashi-sensei do?”

That paused the incoming of Katsumi’s angry tirade, forcing her to think about how she should answer. What would sensei want them to do? The odds were certainly not in their favor: a powerful shinobi was tracking them through the forest and their only means of escape would require them to leave one of their teammates behind to deal with the horrors of the forest alone, which could mean his certain death. They could try to track him down but risk wasting time and energy that could’ve been spent escaping and getting help, but if they found him, they would be a complete cell. If they left, whatever happened to Naruto would be on their conscience forever.

“Kakashi-sensei would march in there and hang that bitch by her fucking intestines for attacking us because Kakashi-sensei has the skills to beat her. We don’t.”

“Exactly, which is why we should—”

“I wasn’t finished. What does Kaka-sensei always say?”

Sasuke glared at the ground, not willing to meet her eyes.

“Say it.”

“Those who break the rules are scum, but those who abandon their friends are worse than scum’, yeah, I know.”
“Sasuke, you’re scared. If you weren’t I’d say you were out of your fucking mind,” she started, her glare softening a bit as she looked at him and saw the concealed fear in the lines of his face and in his posture. “You’re scared of losing all of us and being alone again and I get that, but we can’t abandon Naruto. We couldn’t take her down because we were fighting with a piece of our team missing. We have a much better chance of making it out of this alive if we’re together. We just have to trust that if we can’t find him, he’ll come find us. Sasuke, help me make Team Seven whole again.”

Sasuke’s prickly exterior melted away, his mouth forming a thin line and his eyes softening. He sighed, but before he could say anything, they were interrupted by something catching Katsumi’s attention in her peripheral vision.

Her eyes widened as terror gripped her heart. “ABOVE!” she called, causing Sasuke to wordlessly leap out of the way of a truly gigantic snake, one that made the anacondas that had frequented the forest look like garden snakes in comparison.

She landed on a thick branch in an awkward, off-balanced crouch, her heart hammering in her chest. Katsumi hated, hated, hated snakes. They were strange-looking and they had fangs, Katsumi tried to shake off her childish phobia with difficulty, knowing that any distraction could spell her death out here with an opponent like her and only Sasuke as backup.

The snake wound its way around one of the trunks of a tree several meters away from her, its tongue flitting out every so often to taste the air.

_C’mon, Katsumi, think!_ She urged herself trying to calm the panic that was coursing through her. A plan. She needed a plan of action.

_So, what do I know?_

The snake lashed out at Sasuke, forcing him back. The boy threw a panicked spray of shurikens, shouting his head off and the snake darted out of the way. Despite wanting to jump in to help him, she knew that she would be much more useful coming up with a strategy to win this battle. She would just have to trust that Sasuke could manage.

The snake was obviously a large problem, but the larger problem was the shinobi who was nowhere to be found. *How had that snake even gotten here?* she wondered, her mind running through possibilities. The snake obviously wasn’t from the forest itself since it was entirely too large even for the standards of the Forest of Death.
What is it, a summon?

That meant they had to go through it to get to the Kusa kunoichi. Katsumi was just getting around to formulating a workable plan when the snake turned its eyes on her, lunging towards her, its jaws open to reveal a row of glistening fangs. Shoving down the initial fear, Katsumi substituted her body with a leaf, watching the beast close its fangs around the area where she had been a moment before. It stuck out its tongue before its head turned back towards her.

She reached into her hip-pouch, her fingers closing around a small circular object as the snake curled around a nearby tree, its slitted eyes on her. Timing, this would be all about timing.

Katsumi folded into a crouch, resting her elbows on her knees to make herself a smaller target as they both watched each other, waiting for the other to strike first. The genin refused to look away, keeping her eyes on the snake instead, tension in the lines of her body. She knew she’d have to get this right the first time or else she’d risk failure.

And failure wasn’t an option.

Finally, the snake broke their little stalemate, lunging at her with blood-lust that matched its master, its lithe body barreling towards her at the speed of light. Fighting against every instinct in her that told her to leap away, she held steadfast, gritting her teeth and holding the ball in her hand tightly. She had to wait for its mouth to open and not a second too early.

When she could scent the acrid smell of scales and blood and it was close enough for Katsumi to see each individual scale, it opened its mouth and Katsumi struck, her right hand raising from her side and with a practiced accuracy, she chucked the object right into the snake’s waiting mouth before throwing herself back off the branch and down towards the forest floor, the wind whistling past her ears.

The snake closed its jaws around the ball before it hit its tongue and detonated, blowing its head clean off its body. The grenade activated with a deafening boom that shook the forest and decimated the flora in the surrounding area, leaving the ginormous tree nearest to the blast site nothing more than a smoking hunk of wood and set the rest of them promptly aflame.

That could become a problem if left unchecked…
Not quite out of the radius of the blast, a slightly singed and partially deaf Katsumi covered in snake guts grimaced at the feeling of the scalding air from the explosion evaporate the moisture from her skin.

A shoulder slammed into her thigh in a clumsy catch, a familiar pair of wiry arms breaking her fall and catching her before she could become a stain on the forest floor. They landed on another branch, the both of them breathing heavily, watching her handiwork as the remains of the snake’s body were sent careening downwards by the explosion before it hit the ground with a thud.

The snake’s body twitched on the ground blood darkening the grass several meters below them.

“Gross,” he muttered once he set her down again, his hands covered in snake goo. Katsumi scowled as his Sharingan-red eyes searching her for injury. “You’re alright?”

She nodded, her fingers nimbly running through a trio of hand signs before a milky white vapor lowered the visibility, hiding the two of them from prying eyes. This way, if there was any movement or disturbance her mist, she’d know exactly when she was. They couldn’t get snuck up on.

“Have you seen that kunoichi anywhere?” she asked, her voice low, scanning the mist instinctively.

Sasuke shook his head. “Not since be—” His red eyes widened then as he pointed to where the twitching mass of the smoking snake carcass was lying hidden in the mist.

Alarmed, Katsumi shook him. “What, what is it?” and through a series of truly horrific noises that lead Katsumi to believe that the animal was a little bit more than a run-of-the-mill summon, a familiar voice laughed from below them.

“Godsdamnit.”

“Clever,” the disembodied voice of the Kusa-nin said with an audible smirk on her face. “The two of you make a good team. You both must have nerves of steel to have been able to act so surely under so much pressure...” she trailed off, a clear note of interest in her tone. She walked leisurely up the nearest tree until she was just barely in their line of sight.

The woman analyzed Sasuke slowly, completely ignoring her. Katsumi scowled. “The prey must
learn to never let their guard down…” Sasuke reached an arm out cautiously and to Katsumi’s surprise, grabbed her arm and tugged her back behind him and out of her line of sight, a sharp kunai in his other hand like she was something that had to be protected or something.

Katsumi tried not to let the sentiment grate on her too badly.

In a way that Katsumi was sure would haunt her nightmares if she got out of this alive, the woman’s torso elongated in a way that screamed extreme body modifications and she came speeding at the two of them with hunger in her eyes faster than they could blink, winding her body around trees in her fervor to get to them, her mouth curled into a smile.

Fearful, Sasuke threw a handful of shuriken at her that she dodged in a move that reminded Katsumi of the snake, laughing the entire way, her body shooting through the trees like an arrow finding its mark.

Amidst the chaos, all Katsumi could feel was the panicked grip Sasuke had on her wrist. She felt each frantic beat like she could feel her own, his blood thrumming powerfully through his veins, proof of his vitality. Time slowed down, and Katsumi paused to think about how screwed they were.

Things were bad. They were severely outgunned. Naruto was MIA. They were trapped with an easily A-ranked fighter with no way out. They were surrounded by hostiles on all sides with no options but to fight to their deaths against an opponent that was leagues ahead of them. They were tired, injured, and frightened and Sasuke was squeezing her wrist so hard she was certain he was going to break it.

“Looks like I got here just in time!” an angry voice called from above them. Three sets of eyes all looked up to find a familiar blond boy standing on a branch about ten meters away, his arms akimbo.

“I got your message, Katsu-chan, but did you have to set half the forest on fire to do it?” Pure, unadulterated relief made Katsumi’s knees weak enough that she didn’t bother to feel annoyed at his little jab. His ability to remain normal despite the shitstorm they were in almost made her burst into tears. Gods, she’d been so damned worried.

“Glad you could join us,” she called shakily, a slight grin on her tired face. His blue eyes studied the state that his teammates were in and he frowned. “Stop picking on my friends!” he shouted at the strange woman, anger stretching the whisker marks on his face.
“Naruto!” Sasuke called. “Get out of here! You don’t know what you’re up against! Run while you still can.”

The kunoichi smiled. “Hm… it seems you managed to escape my friend. Well done, Naruto-kun.”

“Listen, demon-snake lady, I don’t care about you or your choice of company. Just slither back to whatever hole you came out of before I turn you into a pair of shoes!”

If Katsumi wasn’t so terrified, she might’ve laughed at Sasuke’s exasperated expression.

He sighed as his eyes faded back to their normal color. “You can have it.”

“Sasuke—!”

“Shut up for once in your fucking life, Naruto!” he shouted, taking a cylindrical package and holding it aloft for them to see. “You can have the scroll. It’s what you want, right? Take it.”

Katsumi bit a lip, not wanting to give up the scroll, but definitely not willing to die over it.

The snake woman smiled wider. “Oh, is that what you think I’m after? You silly, silly children aren’t seeing the bigger picture.”

She then summoned an even larger snake and proceeded to nearly level half the clearing in her efforts to torment them. It was all Katsumi could do to stay out of the range of the summon and she could feel herself starting to slow down a bit from fatigue.

Before Katsumi even had the chance to begin starting to think about a plan, in her haste to stay away from the falling debris from the snake’s destruction, by the time Naruto’s chakra changed from benign and normal to chaotic and overwhelming, he had already punched the snake and in a feat of monstrous strength, stopped it altogether a mere meter away from a shell shocked Sasuke.

“Hey kid, you’re not hurt are ya?” Naruto asked. Katsumi groaned inwardly, knowing what he was going to say next. “You’re not hurt are ya, scaredy-cat?”
Sasuke was about to respond angrily judging by the redness on his cheeks that had nothing to do with the battle when the tongue of the snake darted out to wrap around Naruto’s torso, bringing him up to its summoner upside down.

“The last Uchiha and the Kyūbi jinchūriki on the same team? Old man Sarutobi must’ve gone senile.”

Naruto struggled in his half-lucid state, cursing and kicking at the air, trying to keep his shirt from obscuring his vision.

“Let me go!” he shouted, his furious red gaze on the smirking Kusa-nin. Wisps of angry, red chakra began to roll off of him in waves and the woman tutted.

“Oh, there’ll be no more of that.”

Katsumi threw herself into action, a spray of kunai hit the air where the woman once was as her hands flipped furiously through dozens of hand signs. Water-bullets shot towards the woman, glinting in the dappled sunlight and cutting clean through the tree where they landed and the older kunoichi pouted.

Katsumi shot like a rocket to the kunoichi, a snarl on her lips, ready to rip her tongue out herself. Springing from tree to tree, she closed in, a seemingly endless supply of kunai coming from her hands. The other girl put her hands on her nonexistent hips and tilted her head.

“Angry are you?” she taunted, likely feeling the latent killing intent coming off of her. “Well I apologize,” she said, her hands forming seals so fast that Katsumi couldn’t even begin to follow them, “but this isn’t your fight.” With a wave of both of her pale hands, a gust of wind sent her and her weapons flying backward before she even had the chance to be offended by her rude dismissal. “Stay out of it. The big kids are talking.”

She tumbled through the air, her body twisting to try to gain some semblance of order. A sharp pain hit her thigh as one of her kunai hit her as she fell. Her breaths came out in harsh, panicked pants as the wind tore at her as the ground rose up to meet her. In a stroke of genius, she substituted her body with that of a boulder she spotted on near the base of the tree on which Sasuke was perched on her way to save Naruto.
Katsumi landed roughly on her side on the forest floor with a groan in the place where the rock was. Her head was spinning as she tried to regain equilibrium after the instant change in direction and gravity. It seemed her body still needed to catch up. She rolled over onto her stomach and popped herself into a somewhat stable crouch. The genin looked up dizzily and stared in horror at the scene that she had been forcibly removed from.

She gained her bearings just in time to watch the Kusa nin touch the tattoo on her friend’s stomach with smoking fingers and twist. Naruto screamed in pain, writhing around in the grip like he was being branded and Katsumi was too far away to stop it when he lost consciousness and was thrown carelessly off the branch. Only when Katsumi threw a kunai to pin his shirt to a tree trunk hard enough for it to sink to the hilt did he stop falling.

Sasuke dropped down into a crouch next to her, his fear almost palpable as he trembled next to her.

“Now, Sasuke, whatever will you do?”

At that moment, Sasuke’s heartbeat was like a life-line she didn’t know that she needed keeping her tethered to sanity when the situation she was in threatened to make her lose her mind. She couldn’t go check on Naruto to see if he was alright, the smoke from the mini forest-fire she’d made was beginning to make her eyes water, and over and over and over again she was being disregarded by their opponent. In the raging black ocean of doubt and fear and chaos as Sasuke shook next to her, through her adrenaline-addled haze, Katsumi knew only two things as certain as she knew herself: Sasuke was alive and she would do anything in her power to keep it that way.

The kunoichi darted forward to close the distance between them, her eyes on Sasuke and Sasuke alone.

Big mistake.

Fire coursed through her veins as red-hot fury painted her vision as red as blood. Her hands moved of their own accord, not into any hands signs. No, for this, she’d need none. Katsumi closed her eyes, feeling for the kunoichi’s core of power and finding it easily before reaching out with her energy and grabbing hold of hers, a scream almost making its way out of her lips from the sheer effort her actions took, her hands clawing the air in front of her in a mockery of a hand sign.

Suddenly, the laughter stopped and a choked noise came from right in front of the two of them. Katsumi opened her eyes again to find the kunoichi centimeters away from them, her body paused mid-air in her pursuit, her eyes wide with surprise.
“What is this, genjutsu?” the woman was now alarmed at her lack of mobility, her eyes darting between the two of them, first settling on an ashen Sasuke and then on red-faced and trembling Katumi. The girl focused on her breathing, take deep, measured breaths to fight against the strain that was resonating in every cell in her body. She grunted, feeling wetness drip down her face and ignoring it.

It didn’t matter quite what the other woman did.

Katumi had seized control of her blood in a new act that would scare her a bit if she wasn’t already terrified.

It started when she’d created the mist, weaving her own chakra into the vapor like a tapestry as a trap, for though the woman seemed to barely be human, she was still human. Meaning that she needed to breathe at some point. Then, all she had to do was wait until it was in her bloodstream.

“What did you do to me?” the kunoichi hissed, all amusement gone from her face. “Release me now!” The woman’s will began slamming into Katumi’s as each blow shook the foundations of her self control with the force of a hurricane. She grunted, taking a step back and snarling right back.

Her fingers squeezed the empty space, not quite closing, adding pressure in her circulatory system, making the kunoichi scream like Naruto did. The woman writhed in her hold and Katumi did not budge. She wanted to do more, Katumi wanted to kill her with her own blood: make it flood her lungs, collapsing her heart, halting its flow altogether. The roaring in her own blood screamed for retribution. But, a move like this sapped her strength quickly and she was already borderline running on fumes from the fight to begin with. Maybe when she was at her full-strength or near it she’d be able to pull something off like this. Katumi had sizable chakra stores, but not enough to accommodate something like this at near the dregs of her reserves.

“Sasuke… kill her!” she ground out, fighting back with her own power, forcing her body and her chakra into a shaky submission and trying to keep the dark spots in her vision at bay for a while longer. Oblivious to Sasuke’s astonished look, rallying the last of her strength, with a pained battle cry, Katumi pushed with her chakra as the branch rose up to meet her when her power finally waned and her control slipped.

Shit, I did too much, she thought as her knees buckled.

Intense heat shot past her, lighting the forest in front of her on fire as the other kunoichi was set on
fire by a well-aimed fireball courtesy of Sasuke who seemed to have shaken off his fear. Katsumi winced, falling onto her backside and pulling herself away from the woman’s smoldering remains, relief feeling like a balm to her wounds. A hand went to her face to wipe away some of the foreign wetness that had dripped down it while she had the woman under her control.

Her hand came away bloody.

*Well, that’s not good*. The girl frowned, her brows coming together in the middle of her forehead.

*The bitch should’ve suffered more*, she thought with a huff, wiping away the evidence of her nose bleed onto her sleeve.

Sasuke ran over to her a bit of concern showing on his grimy face. “Are you—”

*Blooddeathgutsfiregoresorrowdeathpain*

Katsumi cried out at the latest bout of Killer Intent, tasting copper in her mouth with its intensity. Sasuke stumbled, his face in a grimace.

Katsumi forced her head up to see the Kusa nin who by all account should’ve been *ashes* staring at the two of them with a face like melted candle wax revealing what looked like grey skin and striking yellow eyes.

*Bloodsomuchbloodwatercoldsocoldicedeathpainsuffocating*

She — *he, they, it?* — clapped slowly. “Such masterful use of the Sharingan. Why, I think yours might be more powerful than *his*,” they said.

Katsumi’s heart dropped into her shoes as recognition arced through her like lightning.

*The snakes, the skill, Sage, the fuinjutsu on Naruto?*

“Why are you still breathing?” Sasuke shouted, the frustration evident in his voice. “What do you
want from me?"

“He’s Orochimaru of the Sannin,” she said, awestruck and fearful, her heart beating double-time.

Orochimaru smiled at her and nodded. “I have underestimated you, kunoichi-chan. That will not happen again,” he said with something akin to respect. His attention turned back to Sasuke. “As to your question, well, you’ll find that out when I see you again.”

Katsumi was too caught up in the Killer Intent to stop what happened next as Orochimaru’s next elongated after a single seal and bit him on the neck like a vampire before retracting quickly.

Sasuke’s legs buckled under him as he screamed like he was being flayed alive next to Katsumi. He dropped like a sack of rocks, clutching his neck like it was burning him within an inch of his life.

“What did you do?” Katsumi snarled, panic and anger making her see red. “What the fuck did you do?”

Orochimaru smiled. “Just a parting gift. Soon enough, he will come to me to seek power. I wonder, how far will you go to seek power, Katsumi-chan?”

Katsumi’s blood ran cold. “What do… How do you know my name?”

She dimly noticed Sasuke’s cries dying down until he lost consciousness altogether and slumped onto the ground.

The Sannin laughed before appearing a couple of meters away from Katsumi. “I daresay I know a lot more about you than just your name.” She tried her best to back up, but in her weakened state, all she managed to do was shuffle backward on her hands. He grabbed her face in his cold hand and looked at her for the first time in their entire encounter, something like delight lining his face. “You know, I have been wondering who Sarutobi-sensei put on a team with the last vestiges of three noble clans and why he would place some random civilian orphan with them.
“Tell me, child, where are you from?”

Katsumi kept her mouth shut, refusing to answer any of his questions. He shrugged and dug his fingernails into her face hard enough to draw blood as he repeated the question in an even tone. She held still, toughing it out through the pain when he kept adding more and more pressure until she caved.

“Konoha! I’m from Konoha.”

His laugh sounded like a blade on metal, causing goosebumps to erupt along her skin. “No you’re not,” he replied simply, his grip relaxing.

“What? Yes I—”

“No, you are not.” His eyes took in her appearance leisurely, spending an unusual amount of time at both her hair and eyes. “No, no, no, my dear, you most certainly are not from Konoha. Not even the Land of Fire… I wonder how they—” he stopped, a smirk on his face. “Oh Danzo, you clever bastard.”

Da— what does Councilman Shimura have to do with any of this? Katsumi had had enough. “What the fuck are you talking about?” she demanded.

“You aren’t from Konoha and I think you’ve suspected something like this for a while now, haven’t you?”

She purposefully didn’t meet his gaze and he chuckled at Katsumi’s refusal to answer. “Oh, this is rich. Sarutobi-sensei doesn’t know what he’s done… I knew you looked familiar when I saw you…”

“What are you talking about?” she hissed, more curious than scared at this point.

“Konoha is lying to you.” He spat the name like it was a curse with sympathy. “Sarutobi-sensei is lying to you. Everyone has been lying to you for your entire godsdammed life and you didn’t even know it.” A devilish smile found its way onto his face. “Or, maybe you did know but you just didn’t want to believe it. Oh, they hit the jackpot with you…”
He released her face and took a step back to appraise her. “Yes, there’s no mistaking it.”

“Mistaking what?”

“You know, I see a bit of myself in you, child. You are clever and skilled with an unhealthy thirst to prove yourself and, most importantly, you are bloodthirsty,” Orochimaru said, not answering her question.

“What? I don—”

“Oh, don’t try to deny it. When you had me in your jutsu, I could feel it: you wanted me dead.”

“So did Sasuke,” she countered petulantly, lifting her chin in defiance. If she’d had control of her body, she would likely have her arms folded across her chest.

Orochimaru chortled quietly at her display. “No, Sasuke-kun wanted to survive. You, my dear, wanted me dead more than you wanted to live and didn’t care what you had to do to make it happen and you almost succeeded. I could do something with a girl like you. This body… it will not hold out much longer thanks to your little paralysis trick, but it is no matter.”

“What do you want from me?”

He chuckled. “So pushy… Tell you what, hime, I’ll give you a hint: if you leave this place, go to the library and research something called ‘The Hyuga Affair’ and follow that lead. If you’re as smart as I think you are, you’ll find out your answers. When you’ve finished, come with Sasuke when he seeks me out,” he offered.

Her eyes widened to the size of dinner plates in shock. “You may not bear my mark, but you may have more potential than Sasuke-kun… I could make you infinitely more powerful all the same.”

His words spoke to a dark part of her heart and she fought the urge to shake her head to get rid of the thoughts in her mind. “What makes you think we’d want to commit treason and join you?” she said with such vitriol that the Sannin laughed.
“Oh, you’re adorable. Research the Hyuga Affair and all that it entails and come let me know, child,” he replied, and with one hand-sign, began disappearing into the earth below him. “That is if you can defeat my team from Otogakure. Think of it as your first test. They’re on their way as we speak and you do not have much time, Katsumi-hime.”

“Stop calling me that!”

Once his chin started disappearing, he smiled. “Come find me after that.”

There was a beat of silence before the words “How would I find you?” fly out of Katsumi’s mouth before she can stop them.

“You’ll figure it out. I’d hop to it,” he got out before his dark head disappeared beneath the earth and Katsumi breathed a sigh of relief she hadn’t realized she’d been holding.

And then Katsumi was alone, chakra-depleted, and injured with two unconscious boys in the middle of the Forest of Death with a team of hostiles coming to kill her. She patted down her pants for her location seal and found nothing.

When she popped in two soldier-pills and checked Sasuke’s pockets and climbed up a tree to retrieve Naruto to check his and found nothing, she stared at the two of them: Naruto sleeping soundly and Sasuke sweating bullets with his collar revealing an odd sigil on his shoulder as he slept fitfully.

Shit.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Yeah, things are heating up! I don’t have much to say except that I’m graduating in 3 days (on Thursday the ninth) and I’m suuuper stoked about it! Yeah, Katsumi is in some hot water. Let’s see how she does in the next part.

Shoutouts: the tumblr fam, specifically users blogthreehundredandninetyfour (who is hilarious and a real one btw) as well as whosaysthevilecantplaydead-blog and anacbm (thanks for not having the longest tumblr username ever btw lol). Welcome, welcome, welcome!!

Leaddusthands: I was actually going to put Katsumi and Sakura together as the endgame ship, not gonna lie. But for reasons that have already been revealed on the
HoS tumblr blog, I decided not to, but they were about this close to being the endgame ship lmao. Also, bring all the spray bottles! Orochimaru needs to stay away! Too bad he doesn’t.

Tsuchikage: (great username btw) ooh, I love Shikamaru. I agree, they’d be a great fit for each other. But we’ve got a long way to go before Katumi gets any kind of substantial romance in her life and we can see who she ends up with. The world may never know.

czat: if you liked chapter 25, I hope you enjoyed chapter 26. It was pretty action-packed if I do say so myself. I also love Team 7’s dynamic. It evolves and morphs and changes throughout the years, but it will (probably) stay mostly the same. Thanks for the comment, homie!

treewhisker: I usually don’t like OC fics either! But I’m glad you like this one!! The gorls have my whole heart and I love them. Suki is honestly such a role model and she’s too pure for this world. My stronk babies make my heart go uwu. Also, thanks for calling the girls developed! I try really hard to develop them well! Thanks for the support and the comment and ilysm.

QoTP: What do you think the limitations of Katumi’s dojutsu are?

Anyways, thanks so much for reading. Stay tuned for the next couple chapters. This is going to be a long arc so strap in. It gets wild within the next few chapters. Well, more wild than it’s already been. Bye y’all! Onto the next!
Chapter Notes

A/N: Hi my lovely readers! This is the downtime chapter before shit gets even crazier than before so enjoy the reprieve. This is also one of those chapters that I released last week on tumblr so you should really get on following that. I mean, if you want early/extra content, that is.

Enjoy.

(Also sorry this was posted late. I got caught up watching Game of Thrones and lost track of the time. In my defense, it was only a few hours late...

NO SPOILERS I just finished season 4)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The first thing Katsumi did after Orochimaru of the Sannin left her alone in the middle of the Forest of Death was take two soldier-pills and down them hastily.

They slid down her dry throat with enough difficulty to make her grimace, but there was no time for discomfort. Judging by the Snake Sannin’s warning, she probably had less than a couple hours before his team of genin would be on her like orange on Naruto so she had to hurry.

Taking about five minutes to wait for the effects of the pills to start taking effect and getting rid of her dizziness and the beginning of chakra exhaustion, the second thing she did was examine the two sleeping boys. According to her admittedly rudimentary first aid classes, their condition greatly impacted how and if she could move them. She’d have to be careful.

Well, as careful as time would allow.

Naruto was paler than normal, the color leached out of his tan cheeks as he slept like the dead. Katsumi pursed her lips as she checked his vitals manually like she’d been taught by Kaka-sensei, placing a gloved hand on his neck. His skin was unnaturally cold, his heartbeat was slow under her fingertips, and his breathing was more shallow than Katsumi would’ve liked. More than that, she lifted his shirt remembering where Orochimaru had touched — struck? Stabbed? She wasn’t able to tell from so far away — him, fearing the worst. She gritted her teeth to keep calm; from what she could tell with the naked eye, the tattoo on his stomach had been altered in some way, making it the most worrying observation of the ones she could see.
Katsumi let his shirt fall onto his stomach and shifted her weight until she was hovering over Sasuke, her unsure hands shaking more than she would care to admit. Sasuke was more frightening than Naruto. His usually pale face was ruddy with exertion as he turned fitfully in his sleep which was a step down from his previous thrashing. His heart was beating so fast that Katsumi was worried it might fail, beating out of time with his quick, harsh breathing.

He muttered incomprehensible words and phrases every so often, scaring Katsumi half to death with the sudden noises while she was so on edge. When she checked his temperature and he was unbearably hot, she almost dragged him to the river they had been following earlier to try to cool him off and would have if not for the time-crunch they were on.

The genin huffed, her brows coming together. There wasn’t really anything outwardly wrong with the boys. No life-threatening injuries, no evidence of any poisons in their systems, hardly any visible afflictions. By all accounts, they both should be fine.

So why were they both unconscious?

*Whatever it is keeping them asleep must not be physical then.*

After thinking a quick apology for breaking Kaka-sensei and Mei-sensei’s rules for what seemed to be the hundredth time that day, Katsumi flipped her eyes into their sensory mode to check their chakra signatures to test her theory. She shifted her gaze to lie on Naruto and was more confused than anything. She squinted, trying to focus her eyes on what she was seeing. His chakra was acting abnormally, swirling around the tattoo on his stomach and—

*Holy shit.*

There seemed to be cracks where the five swirls of the altered tattoo lie in, like Orochimaru had effectively punched a hole in the tattoo.

*Tattoo or seal?*

As his normal chakra swirled, near the site of Orochimaru’s tampering, wisps of bright, scarlet chakra seeped through the cracks and mingled in his system even though it was obviously not supposed to be there. Though there were minute amounts, it was still alarming where it curled around what looked like foreign, but decidedly old and benign chakra imbued in the seal itself.
It looked like the seal was… *breached?*

*That can’t be*, she backpedaled, squinting to try to make sense of what she was seeing to no avail. *You can’t just do that to a seal…*

*Can you?*

Katsumi blanched, having an inkling of where it was coming from, but seeing as though she had next to no knowledge on fuinjutsu on *any* level — let alone a level *this* high — there wasn’t anything she could do for him.

She bit the inside of her cheek and grimaced, hating being unable to help her friend but not knowing anything else to do.

Her gaze shifted to Sasuke and her stomach lurched when she comprehended what she was seeing.

Sasuke’s chakra was usually a clear blue color, vast and almost palpable in her eyes, usually swirling around his face when his Sharingan was activated and rushing through his hands when he was practicing ninjutsu during training.

Not anymore.

Around his neck where the strange sigil lie, a deep purple began spreading through his system like ink on a paper and *quickly*. It tainted his own chakra and from what Katsumi could see, it even *fried* some of the neighboring chakra vessels and causing irreparable damage to his system. It had spread from the crook of his neck to his collarbone and it showed no signs of slowing down.

It was like a parasite.

She reached a hand out unconsciously to touch it and Sasuke screamed in pain, rearing back and away from her unconsciously and Katsumi saw the spike in his reserves, the pain making the foreign bodies — *is that chakra?* — spread quicker, shutting down and dilating pathways in a dangerous manner as it went. Katsumi deduced that the source of the pain was the odd sigil that Orochimaru had placed on him when he bit him.
From what Katsumi could tell, she had a couple of options.

The first was to leave him alone and pray to every god she knew of that he would be alright for as long as it would take for her to find somebody to help him.

The second was riskier: she could cut the sigil out of him and hope that he doesn’t die from the blood loss. Katsumi gnawed on her lip as she thought about it.

In theory, it would work much in the same way that amputation did; it would get rid of the infected or dead areas to save the healthy tissues. But with next to no medical experience and with questionably sanitary tools at best, she would be lucky if he didn’t get an infection. That was if he survived the operation at all seeing as though the affected site was dangerously close to the subclavian artery. One nick and he’d bleed out or she’d cause permanent damage to his body.

So that was out.

*Chakra, the thing looks like it feeds on chakra …*

If Sasuke had no chakra, the seal would have nothing to feed on. But how could she induce chakra exhaustion on an unconscious person? *Or, better yet, how can I shut off the flow to someone’s chakra system entirely?*

She sighed deeply. If only she had a Hyuuga on deck, then this would be simple.

“And we all seemed to have lost our damn seals too so calling Team Nine here is out too…” she muttered blackly. Using her sensory skills was out too since Orochimaru had driven them so far west that any recognizable chakra signatures were long gone.

Something needed to be done now about Sasuke. Her eyes flitted to Naruto’s abandoned pack and she wondered if Naruto might’ve had something to help.

*He always talked about how he experimented with different seals, it would be just like him to have been manipulating chakra suppression seals…*
Her hand eventually caught on his sealing notebook which she threw open with gusto. It was a thick leather-bound book that Kaka-sensei had gotten him on a whim soon after he’d started learning fuinjutsu. She’d seen Naruto scribbling in it fairly often around the apartment and during practice, unable to focus on anything else when he had an idea for a seal.

Katsumi flipped through the pages, trying her best to read through his horrible handwriting and fuinjutsu jargon to understand the purpose of each individual seal. For someone so messy, the organization of each page was consistent and his drawings of the seals were impeccable with carefully thought-out details in each one.

It was honestly impressive how serious Naruto was about fuinjutsu.

Eventually, she happened upon a complicated sketch of a seal in the middle of the book that, by the hastily written description, looked like it could be used to temporarily block a person’s chakra paths.

‘For subdued retrieval’, Naruto had hastily written, ‘lasts for periods of 5-ish hours if maintained, painful!! :( (possibly chakra-path degenerative??? Ask Sensei or Katsu-chan later ) WIP , tested twice, ’. Then, in what Katsumi recognized as Kakashi-sensei’s lazy scrawl: ‘needs to be tweaked a bit more before cleared for field use’ with a henohenomoheji in the place of a signature.

Katsumi bit her lip. It was an experimental seal that wasn’t field-approved by Kaka-sensei, but it wasn’t like Katsumi had any options; She was alone in the forest with a chakra-poisoned teammate and a the most powerful jinchuuriki in the Great Nations with a damaged seal and it was seeming like this was the only choice that didn’t involve an invasive, hack-job surgical procedure that would probably do more harm than good.

She knew she couldn’t just leave him like this…

Katsumi flipped the notebook fully open and laid it out next to her. Next, she pulled out a brush and ink from Naruto’s pack and studied the drawing like her life depended on it. She took in the whorls and odd symbols, she memorized the formation of the thick lines wrapping the center character, and the swirling lines that were drawn outward away from the center of the matrix.

Katsumi then, wasting no time at all, dipped the brush into the ink and with a steady hand, began replicating the seal on Sasuke’s neck in the spot adjacent to the site of the infection. Through careful brush strokes, she recreated the seal in its entirety on his shoulder. She had just finished drawing the center character when Sasuke began groaning, his face scrunched up in discomfort.
“Shit, shit, shit, no, hang on, I’m almost done, just a little longer…” she pleaded quietly, picking up the pace as she drew the last line of the seal. Katumi placed her hands over the seal, careful not to smudge it and pushed a bit of her own chakra into it to activate it as she had seen Naruto do several times and Sasuke started thrashing, his yells echoing in the stillness of the forest.

“I’m done, Sasuke, I’m done, just— agh!” She rummaged through her own bag for a spare bit of cloth and shoved it into his mouth, muffling his pained cries. “Ahhh sorry, sorry, sorry,” she mumbled, her hands flapping around her face unconsciously as they did when she was particularly overwhelmed. The girl took a couple deep breaths to calm her racing heart. It was done. The hard part was over.

*You do not yield. Keep it pushing!*

Katumi shunted chakra into her eyes again to monitor the seal’s progress. She sighed in relief when she saw his chakra slowing down like it was supposed to even though he was writhing in agony on the forest floor. Thankfully, it looked like because of the seal, the spreading of the foreign chakra was halting as well. She’d have around five hours before it would need to be reapplied. It wasn’t a solution so much as an overly convenient stop-gap, but it would have to be enough.

*C’mon, Katumi get it together, get moving*, she prompted, slapping her cheeks a little with her grimy hands. The glow in her irises died down and she pursed her lips, looking at her boys. They couldn’t stay here. She needed to find a place easily defendable from their rapidly approaching enemies. The good news was that they would have to find her first, a difficult feat in such a thick and hazardous forest. The best thing she could do was get moving quickly, find a safer place, and prepare for Orochimaru’s team the best she could.

There was nothing else left but to do it.

She tilted her neck to the side and rolled her shoulders to relieve some tension and set to work securing a groaning Sasuke on her back and securely fastening him to her, first using fishing-line on his wrists over her neck, tying his torso to her back, and his ankles around her waist, hoping that that would be enough. After that, she carefully hefted Naruto up in her arms, carrying him hime-style. She took a couple experimental steps forward, wincing under the extra weight and knowing that it was going to tire her out quickly.

*That just means I’m going to have to move fast.*

She looked up at the sky, noting the sun’s proximity to the horizon. Nightfall. She’d give herself until nightfall to find someplace to set up camp. Then, she’d have to make camp and wait. That was all
she could do.

Katsumi set her shoulders and took to the trees, her mouth in a grim but determined line.

———

Her knees almost buckled when Katsumi found a small area several kilometers downstream where she could set up camp right before the sun went down, coloring the area in the dusky pinks and golden yellows of sunset.

Katsumi touched down at the clearing more than exhausted, her breath coming out in harsh pants. When her feet hit the grass, the ground seemed to sway under her feet. She grimaced and more or less dropped Naruto on the grass, almost falling over with the drastic change her balance.

“Sage, lay off the ramen…” she grumbled, shaking the soreness out of her arms. It would’ve been much easier to use chakra to lug both of her teammate’s asses halfway across the fucking world, but she needed to conserve her chakra for the attack and she was already fairly low to begin with so she used it sparingly, only cycling through her muscles to help augment her speed and strength slightly. She wouldn’t have made it as far as she did otherwise.

With a couple strategic cuts from her kunai, Sasuke fell off of her back with a thud next to Naruto, rolling a bit before he stopped on his side. Katsumi sighed, bringing a hand up to massage her overworked shoulders and back, knowing she was going to be entirely too sore the next day.

The boys were heavy as hell.

She looked up at the setting sun, measuring the length of the shadows of the trees, and estimated that a little over five hours had passed since she last applied the blocking seal near Sasuke’s neck. A quick peek at his chakra system showed the effects of the seal wearing off as his chakra circulated slowly.

Wasting no time, she set to work redrawing the seal on his shoulder again, following the faded lines of the older one to make for a much quicker application and stuffing the same rag into his mouth to stifle his pained screams once more. She pushed a bit more of her chakra into the seal, hoping that that would make it last for a bit longer without destabilizing it, murmuring apologies the entire time.
The chakra-drain of maintaining the seal was noticeable and a tad bit concerning with her so close to scraping the bottom of the barrel, but it was nothing that a little food, water, rest, and soldier pills couldn’t fix fairly easily.

Afterward, the genin surveyed the area, everything from the bubbling creek to the towering trees surrounded them, already planning how she could utilize her surroundings for the hours to come. Katsumi wiped her sweaty forehead with one hand as her mind whirred.

*First, I need to get these two out of the open like this.*

After a bit of searching, she found a small group of tall trees and next to it, a large hollow log, seemingly abandoned by any animals if the three-ish-month-old animal droppings were any indication. It was close enough that she could get to them in less than five seconds but far enough away that they wouldn’t be in immediate danger during the fight.

Katsumi made quick work of hauling each boy individually and stuffing them into the log next to each other, hoping that they wouldn’t wake up and panic, thinking that they had been kidnapped or buried alive. After placing a rudimentary false surroundings illusion, making the log appear abandoned. It wasn’t much — any halfway decent genjutsu type would be able to see through it fairly quickly — but the team would likely be too focused on zeroing in on her campsite than looking around for any small genjutsu anyway with it so close to the clearing that she was occupying. Rolling her shoulders again, she walked back to her fledgling campsite to start taking care of herself for once.

Katsumi took out a kunai when she made it back to the clearing and began digging down into the earth, a little over half a meter down into the ground in preparation for the fire she was about to make. *Thank you Kakashi-sensei,* she thought as she gouged out another hole in the ground to serve as an airway.

*Looks like your annoying paranoia is paying off.*

Katsumi gathered wood and stripping the bark off of it, she assembled an immaculate campfire inside the hole before taking out her pack of water-proof matches and lighting the smokeless blaze.

With the fire crackling comfortably, all she had to do was find sustenance. Finding a rabbit to kill and skin wasn’t as difficult as she had feared since she was *this* far out in the woods and humans rarely came out this way. She skinned and gutted it robotically, trying not to scrunch up her nose in distaste but failing. Usually, it was Sasuke who did this part. She didn’t like killing such a cute animal — who did? — but since the raven-haired boy was out of commission for the moment, the
As the sun went down and the ambient sounds of the forest grated on her nerves with every owl hoot, she busied herself with eating the unseasoned rabbit leg. The juices ran down her face and dribbled onto her chin in a showing of horrible manners, but who was going to judge her? She was in the middle of the forest where there was no Kagome-obasan to scold her on etiquette or team to tease her.

Instead of relieving her, the thought just dampened her spirits.

*No, stop it, none of that*, she admonished herself, shaking her head as if to clear her mind of such thoughts. *You’ll see them all when you make it out of this forest alive.*

Katsumi sighed, forcing herself to take deep, steadying breaths. She would see them all again. Repeating that thought over and over again could only help so much as the chill of the night set into her bones, causing her to scoot closer to the hidden fire, basking in its warmth to stave off the fear that had started to creep in from the corner of her mind.

When that stopped working less than ten minutes later, she did the one thing she could think of to take her mind off the growing dread taking root in her stomach: Strategize.

Focus on the facts.

*Okay, if I were a team of Sound-nin, what would I do?*

For starters, they likely knew somewhat of what they were up against, an advantage that they had over her as well as numbers. The only problem with that was the questionable accuracy of their information and how up to date it was. Pilfered mission ledgers could only tell so much and it seemed like Orochimaru was surprised at Naruto’s jinchuriki status and Katsumi’s own skills.

*So their intel must only be on Sasuke and his Uchiha blood.*

Meaning that they probably completely disregarded his team’s abilities.
Katsumi felt a half smile pull up the corners of her lips. This she could work with.

So, what were they likely to do?

To find her they would need a decent sensor in their midst so it would take them a couple hours to get to her position since she’d fled the scene of the battle so soon after it had ended. They would probably want to be as fresh as possible for their fight meaning that they wouldn’t push themselves very hard to find her. After all, they had five whole days in the forest; time was on their side.

They couldn’t have been very close to where they fought the Snake Sannin either; if they were, they would’ve been able to easily overtake her on her way here unless they were tailing her, but that wasn’t possible because she couldn’t see any traces of humanoid chakra nearby when her dojutsu was activated every ten minutes to monitor her surroundings.

If she were to wager a guess, the best case scenario, if the Sound nin were stopping for breaks and sleep as well as moving at an average pace, they would be on her tomorrow at around noon.

Worst case scenario: they’d be there within the next four or so hours.

Katsumi looked around the dark clearing, peering into the trees with wide, calculating eyes.

*So what do I have that they don’t?*

*Information.*

She could recall seeing them before the test had started in the classroom when they had attacked Kabuto. Sasuke had said that the big one with the gauntlet utilized soundwaves to attack his opponents and as evidenced by Kabuto spilling his guts on the floor, they could cause debilitating nausea. That was easy enough to work around in itself now that she knew how it worked.

From what she could gather, the team as a whole was arrogant and hotheaded, keen on dealing as much damage as possible with their power and sheer bloodthirstiness. They seemed to have more malice than common sense and believed themselves to be better than the other genin so they would likely be more apt to toy with her during their fight than actually try to finish her off cleanly.
Katsumi had picked her spot specifically for the purpose of fighting dirty. She was already outnumbered, but there was no reason that she should be outplanned. Everything from the proximity to the river to the clearing itself was chosen to help aid her. Katsumi bit her lip, her canny eyes surveying the terrain through the dark, letting the sound of rushing river water calm her nerves. She turned back to watching the fire, finding solace in the heat.

They would be so focused on finding her that they probably wouldn’t be looking around much for any traps that she might lay. The Sound genin probably weren’t even expecting her to be in the picture or they might even be under the impression that she was frightened and more likely to run away than stand her ground and fight.

Her mouth twisted into an ugly frown.

No, sticking around and fighting was for the Kyuubi jinchuuriki and the last Uchiha according to everyone else, not the little girl with more hair than muscles who was too smart for her own good.

Before the Wave incident, she’d had older shinobi ruffle her hair and patronize her when she was in and out of the Mission’s Office on her own to drop off reports.

They had called her ‘darling’, ‘adorable’, and ‘awfully ambitious’ which would’ve been fine if not a bit grating if the exact same people didn’t praise Sasuke and call him ‘powerful’, ‘skilled’, and ‘prodigious’ for doing the same things that Katsumi did whenever they all walked around as a team. According to half of the damn adult shinobi in the village, she was lucky to have put on the same team as the boys, but probably not going to last very long. People didn’t think that the little civilian girl would be able to keep up with monsters and legends.

Funny how quickly the opinions changed when she came back half-dead with a shattered leg after carrying an A-ranked mission as a genin, survived Momochi Zabuza of the Seven Swordsmen, and returned with the blood of a B-ranked chunin nuke-nin on her hands after killing him with an original assassination technique.

Suddenly, they didn’t know what to make of her, the girl that shouldn’t have survived but did with a kill-count on her first mission out of the village. Rumors circulated, people stared and whispered
about her when they thought she wasn’t paying attention, wondering what the hell she was to have survived all of that without a demon in her belly, Uchiha blood, or twenty-years of field experience under her belt.

They didn’t know how to categorize the girl who left the village a housecat and came back a leopard.

Anger and resentment warmed her blood as she scowled into the flames. She clenched her fists from where her hands rested on her knees.

If her treatment by seasoned Konoha shinobi was any indication, she could tell that the Sound nin would underestimate her too, thinking her just an obstacle to get to the main event. Nothing more than a placeholder and an extra.

Katsumi would bring them to their knees for their arrogance, for daring to think that she was anything less than powerful, skilled, and prodigious; anything less than the best.

She was the best kunoichi in their year for a fucking reason and she’d be damned if they didn’t know it soon enough.

Her entire life, people have tried to bury her. Most of the Academy staff with the exception of her kunoichi class teachers expected her to fail or drop out. They’d even tried to pass over her for Kunoichi of the Year in favor of clan heiress Yamanaka Ino, but due to Katsumi’s perfect scoring on the exit exam, they had been forced to award the clanless nobody with the coveted title. Momochi Zabuza had tried to drown her in her own element and had almost succeeded in breaking her and she’d burnt him alive. The nameless chunin she had killed almost took her with him, but she fought tooth and nail for her life, never giving up or giving in.

Katsumi had been forgotten, patronized, and underestimated for almost thirteen years. Nevertheless, she persisted.

People have tried to bury her time and time again, but they forgot one crucial detail: she was a seed.

With fury warming her bones, Katsumi rose up from the ground and got ready for the fight.

Let them miscalculate. Let them underestimate her. Let them believe her to be a weak, clanless little girl. Let them think she was simple and frail, something to be ignored or bowled over.
They wouldn’t live to regret it.

By the time the sun rose over the Forest of Death, the outcome of the fight had been prematurely decided.

________________________________________

hey, I learned how to insert links!!

https://www.tumblr.com/blog/hosffblog

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Yeah, Katumi is vvvvv angry. And it doesn’t help that Orochimaru did kinda get into her head a bit. Oh well, we’ll see how this goes.

Horribly.

QoTP: I’m gonna recycle a question because no one has ever given me the right answer, but why did Danzo tell Hiruzen that he kidnapped Katumi? (I’ll answer that on my tumblr one of these days if y’all really want to know the answer. It’s a mf doozy.)

Free drabble for the first person who answers correctly.

Shoutouts: as always, the tumblr fam, specifically users anacbm, blogthreehundredandnintyfour, and huohuaduvessa because they’re epic as fuck and I love them. Send me a prompt for an omake/scene and I’ll write it for you and either include it in the story or just post it a la carte on the tumblr. Anything y’all want (within reason, of course) because y’all are dope and ilysm. Thanks for all the love.

Octoskies: dude, believe me, I get it. Finals suck MAJOR ass, just finished mine so I feel for you. Also here's how I know I'm reading a good fanfic: I yell/talk when something happens. The fact that the last chapter had you yelling made my heart sing. Hopefully, the one that I upload after this one has you screaming too lmao. Oh my god, Katumi is going to be LIVID when she finds out that Kakashi knew and didn't tell her because yeah, she doesn't really care much about the Hokage lying to her, but Kakashi is like the person she trusts more than anyone in the world. If there's a big reveal and subsequent betrayal, it will be really hard on the both of them. Plus Sasuke being overprotective gives me life. He cares so much about his team and Katumi is such a soft spot for him. It's too bad that she has no idea that he likes her. Oof. I love a good prepubescent love subplot. They're cringey and embarrassing but adorable all the same.
I'm glad that that makes you like him a bit more because him having something as paltry and normal as a crush was kinda an attempt to humanize him.

And embarrass him, but hey, we got the best of both worlds here.

How many times do I have to say that I love a good long comment? Because I do love a good long comment. Send me a prompt for an omake/scene and I gotchu since you're a loyal commenter and ilysm. Kthnxbai

Treewhisker: Shit IS happening and I'm glad you got the bloodbending reference!!! Literally no one has mentioned it so far and that's where I got my inspiration for that scene from, the Puppetmaster episode of ATLA in the third season! I always wondered what Katara could do with a skill like that if she just had less uptight morals. This is my wish-fulfillment lmao. Thanks for the comment, homie!! I hella appreciate it!

czat: No. I was not kidding. And I am not kidding when I say the next chapter is hella intense as well, if not more so. GOOD FUCKING LUCK LMAO *laughs evilly* Send me a prompt for an omake/scene because ily and you always leave the most pleasant and hilarious comments. Ily homie. Thanks for the comment!!

blackfox730: a new commenter! Welcome to the fold!! I snickered like a prepubescent boy when I read your comment because that's exactly what I would think if I read this. IT’S TOTALLY GONNA BITE THEM IN THE ASS AND I LOVE IT. Thanks for the comment and ilysm!!

Mkay guys, gals, and non-binary pals, we’ve reached the end of my notoriously long author’s notes. Sorry lol. Shameless self-plug: follow the House of Storms tumblr for any and all extra content, early chapters, and mini spoilers/hints. I promise you won’t regret it. (it’s just hosffblog on tumblr). And I included it this time because I just now figured out how to put a link in here. Oof. Never said I was smart lmao. Better late than never. 乄( ७ )乄

Onto the next!
On this side of the forest, all was eerily quiet in the still of the morning. Hardly any bird calls could be heard, most small animals were hidden in trees and burrows as if sensing what was to come. This far out in the Forest of Death, three teens were on the hunt.

“C’mon, I sense some chakra over this way!” Zaku whispered excitedly, vaulting over a fallen tree in his haste. He struggled to keep his impatience in check whilst being this close to Uchiha Sasuke, the boy they were assigned by Orochimaru-sama to kill to prove their worth.

He’d almost scoffed in the his Kage’s face when they were given their orders. If he knew before that all he had to do was kill one measly Uchiha whelp to get promoted, he would’ve been a chunin months ago.

The dark-haired girl to his right made a face. “The Uchiha’s?” Kin asked, her keen eyes staring ahead.

Zaku shrugged. “Could be,” he replied, a smirk twisting his features. “Only one way to find out…” His hands clenched and relaxed, his bloodlust almost palpable.

“Both of you, shut up,” the other boy hissed, his expression hidden by the bandages wrapping his head. “We have to be serious about this. Orochimaru-sama demands absolute perfection and I, for one, intend on delivering.”

Both genin rolled their eyes at Dosu’s reprimands but stayed quiet other than a few muttered curses. Team Dosu wasn’t much of a team by Konoha standards; they didn’t trust each other very much, rarely did they hang out after practice, and they didn’t much like each other.

The good news was that they weren’t a Konoha team. Team Dosu was much stronger than any of the weak ass flower-children that Konoha had to offer. They didn’t need teamwork or friendship or whatever other hoity-toity bullshit Konoha preached about. Sage, Zaku was strong enough to take on
all three of the Leaf Village punks on his own with one hand and no feet.

He frowned. Too bad he had to be saddled with the two others because of Konoha’s stupid ass rules. Whatever. He’d kill whoever Orochimaru told him to if that meant he could ditch the two losers at his side after all of this was said and done.

Or maybe they could die tragically in the forest while on the way back.

Either worked for him.

This is going to be a piece of cake.

———

Dosu noticed it first.

“You guys feel that? He asked, his eyes shifting around suspiciously as a white mist began to roll in slowly seconds after he felt the shift in the air, clouding their vision little by little.

“Is this the Uc—”

An earth-shattering boom shook the forest as Zaku tripped a concealed wire-trap, the explosion bending trees as well as sending debris and the Sound genin flying through the air at varying velocities.

Kin landed shakily several meters away, breathing harshly where she was crouched against a tree-trunk near Dosu, the only evidence of his surprise in the rigid lines of his posture.

Zaku hadn’t been as lucky.

“Fuck! Shit, this fucking hurts!” he yelled. Dosu huffed with annoyance, dropping down to assess Zaku’s injuries. His left arm was covered in angry, scarlet burns from his knuckles to the middle of his upper arm from where he didn’t move quick enough out of the blast radius. “Who the fuck did
that? I’ll fucking kill that Uchiha prick!”

“Zaku shut up for once in your damn life,” Kin dismissed, rolling her eyes and landing back on the ground. “Stop being such a wimp.”

“Fuck you, Kin,” Zaku hissed, his temper flaring dangerously. This would impact his offensive capabilities.

Shit.

“Come on, you two,” Dosu ordered. “If they made traps, we must be zeroing in. Stay close and alert,” he instructed, ignoring Zaku’s indignant look. “The mist is getting thicker by the minute.”

And the mist did thicken.

And thicken.

And thicken until they couldn’t see a meter in front of them. This put the understandably on edge as they trudged through the forest, their footfalls silent and their nerves raw.

“By the fucking Sage, are you sure weren’t fighting some Kiri losers?” Kin asked lowly, her knuckles preemptively lined with her signature senbon. “Where even are they? We’ve been walking through the mist for close to an hour. Zaku do your fucking job and sense something.”

Zaku scowled. “Don’t you think I’m trying? With all this chakra floating around in the mist, I can’t get a decent read. The punks are confusing my senses.”

“So we could be anywhere?” Kin asked, a bit of frustration coloring her deceptively neutral tone.

“Nah, you’re in the right place,” a disembodied female voice called from the mist. “You have been for a while, actually,” she continued a note of amusement in her Konoha accent.

This must be Sasuke’s kunoichi teammate!
“You kept walking around in circles, but it looked like you were having so much fun, I didn’t want to be the one to burst your bubble.”

All three Sound genin were immediately on their guard, looking around in the opaque mist to try to locate where her voice was coming from. It sounded like the source of the voice was simultaneously in every direction and none at all, making it hard for them to pin her down.

*She knows what she’s dealing with.*

“This is the female teammate,” Dosu reminded quietly. “Sasuke can’t be far. Find her.”

“Well aren’t you clever,” Kin shouted, her muscles tensed. “If you’re so smart, why don’t you come out of your little hiding place and take us on for real, huh?”

A harsh snort came from their left. Zaku’s eyes remained closed as he focused on locating her, but everytime she spoke, her voice came from a completely different place. His annoyance rose sharply.

“I think I’ll stay here, thank you.”

*A diversion maybe?*

“Where’s Sasuke?” Dosu asked, jutting his chin in front of them with a ghost of a smile showing under his bandages. “Is he so scared of us that he has to send a little girl to fight for him?” he taunted, his footsteps silent as he closed in on a deceptively small figure in the mist.

The girl said nothing at first, content to leave them in silence in their twisted game of Marco-Polo before answering. “Sasuke isn’t here right now, but I can take a message,” she said with saccharine sweetness.

Then, Dosu pounced. “Enough games, girl,” he growled, his gauntlet whirring with power as he swung at a brown-skinned girl with stark white hair.
The girl turned around with sluggish reflexes, dodging his attack, albeit just barely, sharp eyes narrowed.

“Oh, you’re fresh out of the Academy, aren’t you?” Zaku taunted, laughter on his lips.

She swayed on her feet, the vertigo seeming to catch her by surprise. She stumbled and Dosu dashed in with a kunai, determined to end her foolishness. “Little, talentless girls like you shouldn’t be ninja,” he snarked, cutting her throat with a quick slash.

The girl’s body fell to the ground, her blood staining the dirt as she choked, and eventually died, nothing more than a memory now.

Dosu snorted, kicking her corpse over and out of the way, staring out into the white air. “Come on out now, Sasuke!” he called out into the mist. “We killed your little teammate here. It’s a real pity you couldn’t come out and fight us yourself.”

“Pathetic,” Kin sneered, spitting on the ground. “If she’s any indication of what a Konoha genin is, you all should quit while you’re ahead.”

Suddenly, the mist cleared supernaturally fast, causing all three Sound genin to whirl around, trying in vain to find the source of the abnormality when someone cleared their throat behind them.

To their immense, collective annoyance, sitting there leisurely checking her nails on a rock that the genin had yet to see due to the thick mist, the girl whose throat Dosu had just slit sat looking almost bored.

She looked up, her gaze finding them and smirking lightly. “Oh hey,” she lilted, an easy smile on her face. “Didn’t see you there.”

Kin snarled, taking several steps forward. “Stop playing games, bitch. Where’s Sasuke?” she demanded, getting more and more impatient.

The girl laughed imperiously, crossing and uncrossing her legs from where she was sitting delicately on the rocky outcropping, her posture like something straight out of a Daimyo’s court. “My, my, so impatient, kunoichi-chan,” she taunted, examining her short nails in the sunlight with all of the grace of a courtier. She lowered her gaze onto the three of them, her casual demeanor looking odd when
paired with the preternatural focus in her stare.

Zaku felt oddly like she was visually taking them apart and had been for the entirety of their confrontation. Her eyes reminded him oddly of Orochimaru-sama.

“Like I said earlier, he isn’t here right now, but I can take a message.”

“Can we just kill the little bitch already?” Zaku asked, his hands clenching and unclenching at his sides, hating the similarities between the two. “She’s really pissing me off.”

“Hold your horses, shinobi-kun. I wouldn’t do that if I were you…” she warned cryptically.

“What are you even talking about?” Kin challenged, taking another step forward. “Do you think that some weak little Leaf girl like you could take any of us on? We just saw what you could do when we killed your clone. Plus it’s three on one.”

She laughed again, this time with genuine mirth dancing around in her eyes. “Oh, I don’t think I could take you lot on. I know I could,” she replied as casually as one would report the weather but with an unmistakable edge of something biting. “But that’s beside the point,” she continued, ignoring the growing Killer Intent coming off of two of the three Sound nin. “Since I’m so very nice, I will give you guys a choice.”

The girl on the rock went unnaturally still, all signs of amusement wiped clean from her face, her expression blank. “You walk away now and I’ll let you keep your lives,” she offered soberly. “You stay and fight and I promise you that you will die here. You choose.”

Kin had had enough. “Yeah right!” she scoffed, launching herself at her in a flurry of movement. “I’ll kill you where you stand! Then, I’ll skin your little teammates alive in front of you, you worthless bitch!”

Then, something odd happened.
Kin stopped abruptly mid-step less than half a meter where she had started, much to her team’s confusion. Her once fearsome expression was replaced with one that betrayed her bewilderment at her body’s inability to move. “What did you do to me?”

The girl’s hands had risen, clenching the air level with her chest, her previously relaxed expression tight. “I’ll warn you *one* more time; go peacefully,” she admonished, giving control back to Kin and crossing her arms over her chest. “I won’t be so kind next time.”

Their kunoichi teammate dropped to the ground like a puppet with cut strings and the girl shrugged.

Kin got back up quickly, fury evident in lines of her face. “I’ll make you regret that!” she promised, taking out senbon quicker than Zaku could follow and chucking them at her head.

The girl dodged cleanly, tilting her head to one side, the senbon flying past her ear harmlessly to embed themselves into a tree behind her.

“Cute little parlor trick,” Dosu sneered, violence promised in his posture. “Too bad it won’t be good enough to save your friends when we kill you all.”

The girl tensed imperceptibly, a hardness taking up residence in her eyes, her previous flippancy fading. Something changed in her stance and Zaku could tell that Dosu had struck a nerve. She was off-balance.

*Time to strike!*

Zaku, deciding to pick up where Dosu had left off then substituted his body with a rock next to her, his bloodlust almost tangible as he punched her in the side, catching her off guard. He relished the feeling of a rib snapping under his fist.

The girl might’ve been clever, but he was bigger and stronger than her. He knew that he could win this fight.

She grunted, eating the punch, but not recovering quick enough for Zaku’s rough grab at her hair.
“Don’t…” she started, a wildness in her eyes that hadn’t been there before.

He pulled roughly, a frizzy braid in his hands, the pale strands catching in the light and showing off the silvery highlights mixing in with the snowy white majority. He had her in a corner now.

She winced, seeming to be torn between damaging her hair to get free and preserving it.

Pathetic.

“Look at all this ugly hair,” he taunted, yanking her this way and that. “You’d be better off bald.”

Kin laughed from where she stood several meters away and Dosu relaxed. They had her. It was over. All Zaku had to do was drag a blade across her throat and it would be over for her.

The girl stilled when he went to drag her from off her knees and onto her backside. Zaku snickered, mistaking it for complacency. He didn’t notice the subtle change in her facial expressions, content with terrorizing this girl before they killed her. Then it would be off to find the little Uchiha boy since he didn’t seem to care about the fate of his female teammate, off him, and become a chunin of Otogakure.

She shuddered and sat rigidly as if regaining control over herself. “Aw, are you going to cry?” Zaku asked incredulously. “What happened to the girl who could take us all on? Fucking pathetic.” He tugged roughly at her hair to emphasize his point and scowled when she didn’t move where he wanted her to be. “Dosu was right! Little girls like you shouldn’t play at being ninja!”

Then, she snapped.

Zaku’s body lit up in excruciating pain, pain like nothing he’d ever felt before. The boy dropped to the ground, releasing her hair and oblivious to the similar states of his teammates as he laid gasping for air through the profuse amount of what he vaguely recognized as Killer Intent forced its way into his system, combating with the pain for the most overwhelming sensation.

Blooddeathkillstrangensapbreakcutbloodbloodblood.
Dimly he heard Kin’s screams, but he had his attention on the deadly calm face of the white-haired girl who hadn’t even gotten up. “Don’t touch my fucking hair,” she said, the gold tones in her eyes catching in the light of the sun making the girl look supernatural. With one last cold look, she turned her head sharply to the side and with a moment of intense pain in his neck, Zaku’s vision went black and he saw no more.

———

Dosu’s eyes widened through the pain of what felt like his blood setting itself aflame inside of his body when he heard the unmistakable crack of a snapped neck. The girl had hardly moved from where she was kneeled, her eyes focused on the too-still body of Zaku.

Dead.

Dosu swore violently in his head, searching for some way out of the predicament he found himself in. He’d never even heard of a jutsu that could control someone’s body remotely like she was doing. How had she done it?!

Blooddeathredburstcutstrangleseversnapslitbloodbloodblood.

“How...? How... did you d-do this to us?!” he got out, the pain addling his brain and impairing his speech. Maybe if he could just keep her talking, he could find out a way to counter whatever trick she had placed on him. It had to work.

Something in her gaze was vacant and she got up off her knees, dusting off her pants delicately. “What, you think you’re going to get me to monologue?” she asked with deceptive innocence. “Who do you take me for? Orochimaru?”

She ambled up to him, lethality in her gait and Dosu wished that he hadn’t underestimated this small Leaf kunoichi and ordered Zaku to kill her when he had the damned chance. He tried his hardest to get away from her, trying to force his limbs to move and do something, but her inexplicable hold on him refused to let up.

The girl crouched down in front of him, a humorless smile on her face that spoke nothing of the overwhelming Killer Intent that came off her in oppressive, nausea-inducing waves.

Dosu grunted, feeling fear for the first time in a long while that had nothing to do with Orochimaru-
sama.

He snarled, spitting in her direction. “Go to hell, witch!” he hissed, a bit too much terror in his tone for it to be realistic.

She just smiled placidly. “I’ll see you there.”

He watched with abject horror as her hands clenched tightly and a horrible pressure welled up in his chest before something ruptured in his chest. A strangled scream made its way out of his throat as his dark eyes bulged out of their sockets. A bit of blood trickled out of his mouth and his vision blackened, his eyes now unseeing as he slipped silently into the afterlife.

———

When Kin was tasked with finding and eliminating Uchiha Sasuke, she hadn’t expected to be taken down by a demon-girl who could take control of her body without hardly lifting a finger.

“When I was tipped with finding and eliminating Uchiha Sasuke, she hadn’t expected to be taken down by a demon-girl who could take control of her body without hardly lifting a finger.

“Please, please, please,” she begged, the words bubbling over her lips as fear gripped her heart tightly, the only feeling she could discern away from the pain and Killer Intent. This wasn’t how it was supposed to go. She was supposed to go back to Otogakure with honor after killing the Uchiha and getting the title of chunin, not this! “I-I’ll go! I’ll leave Konoha the Chunin Exams and never return!” her volume rising to screams. “Please!”

Even in Kin’s pain and fear-addled state, she could tell that whatever mercy the girl might’ve had earlier was long-gone and she cursed Zaku’s stupid fucking soul to the deepest depths of Jigoku for provoking her by grabbing her hair as he had. That seemed to set her off. She was different, like a switch had been flipped. There was no trace of the graceful, imperious girl from earlier.

Now she was death incarnate.

The girl shook her head, cruelty lining her cool gaze. “Whatever happened to killing me where I stand and skinning me in front of my teammates?” she asked.

Kin tried to shake her head and failed, the grip on her still holding strong. “I-I was, uh, I was kidding! It was a joke!” she cried, hysteria making her voice tremble.
She seemed to contemplate her words carefully, tilting her calm face up to the sky like she was lost in thought. “A joke, huh?” she asked slowly.

Seeing her opportunity, Kin jumped on it. “Yes! It was all a big joke!”

The white haired demon-girl hummed noncommittally and shrugged.

“Too bad I didn’t think it was funny.”

Kin didn’t even have the chance to scream at the painful pulling and squeezing sensations when the girl placed a delicate hand on her torso and most of her blood was sucked out of her body through her pores, splattering carelessly onto the grass next to her.

One dry heartbeat and painful, shuddering gasp later, Kin was gone from this world just like the rest of her team.

From several meters away, completely hidden, a man stood in a tree with a wide smile on his serpentine face at the display.

*Amazing.*

———

When the last of the Sound nin died finally, Katsumi felt the grass sway dangerously under her feet when she released her blood.

*Chakra exhaustion*, she placed distantly, feeling like part of her consciousness was floating in the aftermath of the battle. Part of her was *screaming*, raging frantically inside of her mind, but Katsumi couldn’t quite grasp that bit as well as she should’ve. It was very hard to focus.

*Anchor yourself*, she internally instructed in a voice that sounded too authoritative to be her own. *Find something to focus on*.
Her lethargic gaze fell onto the corpses of the three teens — *murderer, I am a murderer* — and thinks for a very long time on what to do. It felt like she was floating.

*Scroll*, she remembers suddenly, *find an Earth scroll*. After riffling clumsily through the packs of the three genin — *they’re dead dead dead dead because of me* — her shaking fingers closed around the cool metal surrounding an Earth scroll and with subdued relief, put it in a concealed pocket on her torn pants.

Unable to stop herself, she collapsed to the ground, her tailbone groaning in discomfort on impact. She swayed but remained seated upright, her eyes focusing and unfocusing on everything around her: the river, the blades of grass touching the exposed burns on her calves, the steady drip of blood hitting the grass from above her, coloring the blades scarlet.

In her floating state, it took her a moment to register the sound of three sets of feet land on the edge of the clearing until she felt a gloved hand touch her shoulder and a figure blasted from behind by sunlight stood crouched in front of her.

“Katsumi— Oh *shit*, Katsumi, what happened? Where are Sasuke and Naruto?” a girl with concerned eyes the color of soot asked. It sounded like she was speaking to her underwater and Katsumi had a hard time understanding her.

*Who?*

She blinked slowly, her mouth trying to form words, but failing. Panic rose sharply in her as she tried to get a hold on herself. What was wrong with her? Why couldn’t she function? Why were the last few minutes — or was it an hour? Two? Five? Time was melding together — so hard for her to recall? Who was this girl and why was she in her face asking about people she’s never met?

Katsumi’s mouth opened and closed rapidly as she ransacked her brain for words, for some sort of *explanation*, but found none. The girl with the ash eyes shook her lightly, repeating the same strange-sounding syllables, “Katsumi. Oi! Katsumi snap out of it, what happened?”

“Sheki-chan, stop shaking her, something’s wrong,” another girl snapped, walking up to the pair of them. When she noticed Katsumi’s panicked gaze and dishevelled appearance, her green eyes hardened under candy-floss eyebrows. “Hanako-chan, find Uzumaki-kun and Uchiha-kun. They can’t be far,” she ordered, turning back to Katsumi, raising her hands slowly, showing her palms to Katsumi in the universal shinobi sign of good intentions.
“We’re not going to hurt you,” she soothed, taking slow, measured steps towards her. “Your name is Katsumi and you’re on Team Seven with Uzumaki Naruto and Uchiha Sasuke. Your sensei is a masked man named Hatake Kakashi and he has a lot of dogs. It’s 8:36 in the morning on the second of July,” the green-eyed girl kept rattling off facts one after another as she kneeled in the grass in front of her.

“My name is Sakura of Team Nine. I’m…” she paused, biting her lip and continuing. “I’m your friend. So is Suki. We’re in Training Ground 44 during the second phase of the Chunin Exams. Katsumi, I think you’re dissociating right now and we need you to come back to us.”

“I found them!” another voice called from several meters away. “Uchiha-san does not look too good.” A girl with long black hair and pale eyes came from across the clearing hauling two painfully familiar boys over her shoulder. “He has a weird seal on his neck and what looks like a chakra blocking seal next to it, but his chakra burnt through it about an hour ago and whatever was in the seal is spreading.”

Maybe it was Sakura’s facts that did it or Suki’s tactlessness that began shaking her out of her stupor, but after Hanako finished speaking, clarity came back to Katsumi like a bolt of lightning.

The girl jerked in Sakura’s hold, still considerably exhausted, but much more lucid than she had been before. Sakura jumped, startled and stared for a moment at the struggling girl with wide eyes in her arms. “Katsumi you probably shouldn’t be moving around so—”

“I’m fine. Go into my pack and look for the sealing set in the biggest pocket to the front. When you find it, give it to me. I would, but I think I have a couple broken ribs,” she instructed, trying to keep her wheezing to a minimum. “Hyuga, bring Sasuke over here to me. I need to redraw that seal before he gets any worse.”

Hanako surprisingly did what she asked and placed Sasuke on the ground in front of her on his back.

“Gets any worse?” Suki repeated, a bit of relief bringing some of the color back to her tan face. Her brows knitted together with concern. “What happened to him? What’s up with the dead Sound team?”

Sakura placed the kit into Katsumi’s outstretched hand and she crouched down quicker than she should’ve to Sasuke’s side. Swallowing a gasp of pain when she felt something sharp too close to her lungs to be comfortable, Katsumi uncapped the ink and dipped the brush in. “We were attacked
by Orochimaru.”

Suki swore low under her breath while Hanako activated her Byakugan to look around the area.

“Why didn’t you call us?” Suki exclaimed. “We could’ve—”

“We were blasted off a tree with hurricane-level winds, separated, and fought two different battles with Orochimaru himself,” Katsumi interjected, annoyed that they thought that she didn’t think about that already. “Somehow the seals got lost along the way,” she deadpanned.

Hyuuga scowled, still scanning the trees. “I take it were his people?” Her scowl deepened when Katsumi nodded mechanically. “Good thing you dispatched them. Any idea where that snake went?”

“He’s probably long gone, Hanako-chan. He wouldn’t stick around after something like this,” Sakura pointed out, her arms crossed over her chest as she studied Katsumi’s trembling hand motions. “If that’s the case, we need to get to the Tower and fast. Did you at least get an Earth scroll?”

Katsumi nodded, trying to keep the room from spinning too much. Her shaking hand hovered over Sasuke’s shoulder, ready to draw the seal again. Her hand trembled with bone-deep exhaustion and she tried her hardest to force it to steady but to no avail. “Fuck. Sakura, before we leave, Sasuke needs this seal redrawn on him so that whatever Orochimaru placed on him won’t spread. It’s infecting his chakra system. And I wo—”

“Move over, I got it,” she answered, nudging her out of the way, minding her injuries. “You’re about to pass out from chakra exhaustion. I’m surprised you lasted this long.”

Katsumi made a face, her lips pursed. “I’m fi—”

“Shut the fuck up and give me the brush. I just follow the old lines, right?”

Rather than curse Sakura out for that, Katsumi nodded again tiredly. “Then when you’re done, push a bit of your chakra into it. It’s going to hurt him.”
Sakura waved a hand dismissively, her flippancy almost enough to cover up some discomfort in her rigid stance. “He’ll be fine.” She turned her attention back to her ashen squad who were pointedly ignoring the corpses of the Sound nin. “Once I finish this, we book it to the Tower and tell somebody. Hiro-sensei will know what to do.”

Black spots swam in Katumi’s vision, her body finally using up all of her energy. Her eyes focused and unfocused as she swayed on her knees, unconsciousness overtaking her like a wave.

“Suki, she’s passing out!” Sakura barked.

“On it!”

Right before Katumi could face plant, she was caught and steadied by gloved hands.

“C’mon, Katumi, stay with us, ple—”

Everything went black.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: *nicki minaj voice* DID I LIE?

RIP to those Sound Nin lmao those were not good ways to go out.

Shout out to Team 9 for the assist. They’re darlings and I love them. Yes, Katumi had a dissociative episode after Zaku pulled her hair. Ten points to who can guess why that in particular triggered her to go off. Nobody was not controlling her in any way, shape, or form, all that raw power and deadly efficiency was all Katumi. Oof, she’s gonna have a hard time dealing with that if she wakes up. Hopefully I didn’t botch the whole dissociation bit, I only researched for an afternoon on it so if there’s a glaring error, I’m sorry ;-;

Writer’s block is a bitch so if the chapter after next comes out late, don’t say I didn’t warn you.

QoTP: What do you think Orochimaru’s plans are for Katsumi?

Shoutouts: the newest members of the tumblr fam users azthena, arcticfox24, kazekageclan, joyfulnarutoanimegoth, and leaddusthands!! I hope you guys liked the boys reactions to realizing Katumi’s a cute girl. It was hysterical to write lmao.
We hit 20+ follows so I released the hime!drabbles to celebrate, a tumblr exclusive drabble series. Enjoy, tumblr fam. Ily.

blackfox730: I’m glad you’re waiting for karma to hit. Me too lmao. Only I know when it hits (and boy does it HIT)...

dng: I’m so happy to hear you’re eager for updates! It warms my heart ;_; Oh yeah, that reveal is going to be a LOT. Let’s just say a lot of suspicions are going to be proved right. The Hyuga already don’t really like her very much just because the only place where people look like her is Kumo and they haven’t had the best history with Kumo nin. But Katumi also faces an interesting situation if she ever meets her own people. She has the pedigree on both civilian and shinobi sides of her family and she looks the part of one of their countrymen. Hell, she even speaks the language. But, it’s the subtle things. She uses Fire Country slang and her Kotsunora, as flawless as it is, has an slight accent. She dresses like a Konohan, she fights like a Konohan, she speaks, thinks, and acts like a Fire Country native. In all ways except genetically, she is a Konohan. So the question becomes who is she; Katumi, the orphan kunoichi of Team 7 or Igarashi Katumi-hime, the lost princess hailing from an ancient and regal bloodline from Kumo? Who is she with? The people that raised her or her family? Katumi is coming up on a crossroads where she’ll have to pick a side and it’s not going to be fun. (And I just realized it, but Katumi has a lot of similarities with Theon Greyjoy from Game of Thrones holy shit but I just started watching and I’m only on season five so NO SPOILERS lmao) What runs through her blood? Lightning or fire?

I guess we’ll see.

czat: Yeah, Sasuke is really going through it, but hopefully the seal will work. Check my tumblr for the drabbles. That’s where I post stuff like that. I pinky-promise that I’ll have that done before the end of the month (but probably a lot sooner lol). Thanks for being a consistent commenter and ilysm!! <3

Octoskies: Ughhh I’m SAYING. Danzo is so fuckin MESSY. Him and orochimaru both. I KNOW that Orochimaru loved spilling the tea on Katumi’s birth family. Poor girl, caught between two petty, evil, messy ass bitches. Also, believe me, Katumi wants to run around like a chicken with her head cut off, but the only thing keeping her from insanity and completely LOSING it is the fact that there are people relying on her to get it right. That’s her anchor: the people she loves. She’s also really good at compartmentalizing under pressure, but oh god, when she takes those emotions out to deal with them, sweet jesus, it’s a MESS. She’s in therapy for a reason lol. I hope the “sound-nin showdown” lived up to your expectations lmao and I’ll be right on take dainana-han fluff (it’s a guilty pleasure of mine too lol). Also welcome to the tumblr fam!! Thanks for the support and the comment and for always being so consistent jfc I could NEVER anyways ilysm and I hope you liked the chapter!

treewhisker: Thanks! And I agree, fuck sexism and the people that tried to count Katumi out.

Fanfiction13: Oh my god no but I think I’d burst into tears if it happened. I think that’s every writer’s dream: to have someone draw their characters. I think I’d die of happiness then lmao.

Mkay, I’m gonna go to bed, guys, gals, and nonbinary pals. Follow me on tumblr @hosffblog for extra content and drabbles and whatnot. Send me some asks. I’d be
happy to answer them!

Lastly, HAPPY PRIDE TO ALL MY LGBTQIIA+ FOLLOWERS ILYSM

Onto the next!
Let Your Words Release The Pain

Chapter Notes

A/N: I know, I’m so, so, so, so sorry that this chapter was a day late! I was busy all day yesterday and slept over at my friend’s house and by the time I realized I was supposed to update, it was like 3 am and my laptop was at home. Plus my wifi at home hasn’t been working for like 4 days so there’s that too. But hey, here’s a long, hurt/comfort chapter to make up for it.

Sorry, sorry, sorry!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The bark bit into her palm as she held on with tightly clenched fingers. Katsumi could feel blood welling up at the site of the abrasions but couldn’t find it in herself to let go.

Her eyes were glued to the scene in front of her.

A taller boy was crowding the smaller figure of a girl in the middle of the clearing, a swift punch to the ribs sending her crashing to the ground with a grunt. She rolled to recover, but not fast enough before he grabbed onto her hair roughly with a gloved hand, a cruel smile on his face.

“Look at all this ugly hair,” he spat, tugging her this way and that. Pain needled at her scalp even from where Katsumi was sitting on a tree several meters away, watching the attack unfold. “You’d be better off bald.”

Katsumi felt like her soul was split in two, one half was sitting on the tree branch and the other was with the horrid boy about to get killed. It was a startling and unnerving dichotomy, the Katsumi that was out of harm’s way was panicked while the one in danger was oddly serene.

No one but Katsumi knew what was going to happen next.

She wanted to run. She wanted to run both towards herself to stop what was about to occur and away from it all.
She felt like a coward because of it.

When it happened the first time, her heart squeezed and it felt like her consciousness floated away from her and let a smaller, baser part of her mind take control. It felt like she was just a spectator in her own life as she watched her own hands murder that team with their own blood. Katsumi then had had no control over her actions

Just like now.

“Aw, are you going to cry? Fitting for a little crybaby bitch like you.” He yanked harshly at her hair to emphasize his point causing the other Katsumi to almost lose her balance. “Dosu was right! Little girls like you shouldn’t play at being ninja!”

Katsumi on the tree opened her mouth to scream at them to run, at her to stop, or just to scream in general but no sound came out. Whatever phantom that had split her mind and stolen control of her body seemed to cut off access to her vocal cords as well.

She couldn’t even look away when something changed in her eyes and they went vacant.

Three sets of strangled screams echoed off the trees when she grabbed control of their blood and squeezed.

She snapped the first boy’s neck with a jerk of her own. The accompanying crack made her shudder in the trees.

The second boy died choking on his blood when she imploded his heart. Katsumi felt wetness trail down her cheeks then.

No, no, no, no, NO!

As if someone had unshackled her, Katsumi regained control of her body and burst from her perch on the tree, moving quickly to get between her body and the last Sound nin, sobs catching in her throat. Her steps hit the ground in time with her thundering heartbeat and within seconds, she was at the foreign kunoichi’s side.
Katsumi turned to herself, taking in her stalking, assured gait as her other body came to a stop less than a meter away from herself and the other girl. “Please,” Katsumi begged hoarsely, raising her empty hands, palms up in surrender. “You don’t have to do this.”

The demon wearing her face smiled easily, the relaxation foreign on her features. “You’re right, I don’t.” She chuckled, her eyes closing for a moment before reopening. Her irises were glowing a burnt gold when they refocused on Katsumi.

“But you do.”

The control was wrested from her grip once more and her body moved of its own accord, a kunai materializing in her previously empty hands. Katsumi took one step forward then another, a whimper on her lips. She kept walking until she was standing over the screaming girl.

Up this close, she could tell that the girl wasn’t much older than she was, no more than sixteen years in age. Katsumi closed her eyes when she felt her hand move upward.

When it slashed down, the screaming stopped and the iron-like grip over her body slackened.

Overtaken by sudden nausea, she ran to the river’s edge and emptied her stomach into its glittering depths, the bile burning the back of her throat and tears welling up in her eyes. At some point she fell to her knees, her legs sinking slightly into the banks of the river, dampening the fabric.

The laughter from the other her had changed, from a slightly off version of her own to a deep, rasping chuckle that she’d only ever heard in one other place. When she turned around to confirm, the wrinkled face of the Sandaime Hokage stared back at her, a canny smile on his aged face. His white robes swished when he walked towards her.

“Look,” he said after he reached her, gesturing towards the river. “Look and tell me what you see.”

Unable to stop herself, her head turned and she peered at her own reflection on the surface of the water.

The face of Orochimaru of the Sannin stared back at her, his face showing the shock and horror that
was surely mirroring her own.

She couldn’t stop the scream that tore its way out of her throat.

———

“Katsumi.”

The girl bolted upright, her eyes flying open in panic. Her eyes searching the dark room for some kind of threat. Warm hands found her shoulders, grounding her before she could attack the figure in front of her with extreme prejudice with the memories of her nightmare fresh on her mind.

“It’s fine, It’s Kaka-sensei. You’re safe.”

When the fear began to inch back to the corners of her mind, she recognized the voice as her eyes adjusted, the aggression turning into a frankly embarrassing amount of relief. A grey eye found hers in the darkness and she released a breath she didn’t know she had been holding. She slumped against the headboard, heaving a great sigh.

“How long was I out for?”

Kakashi shrugged, his eye crinkling in what she’d begun to recognize as a smile despite the dim lighting. He slid back into the armchair at her bedside.

“A day and a half.”

Then, she recognized her surroundings; the slightly scratchy linens, thin blankets, stiff hospital gown, and sterile smell of the hospital hitting her all at once.

*Konoha General.*

Katsumi pouted inwardly. It was like she was always in the hospital in the aftermath of a major event. Her brows knitted together in a frown, the latent exhaustion and heaviness in her limbs
stopping her from doing much else. The chakra exhaustion was still dogging her it seemed.

“What time is it?”

“Probably around one in the morning. Maybe later.”

Katsumi let her head fall back onto the wooden headboard with a soft thud, focussing on slowing down her frantic heartbeats. “What happened while I was out?”

“Team Nine along with Naruto carried you and Sasuke out of the Forest of Death a little after ten in the morning on the second day of the competition. Your old Academy sensei, Imura—”

“Iruka,” Katsumi quietly corrected, a little indignant on Iruka-sensei’s behalf. “His name is Iruka-sensei.”

He raised an eyebrow at her, questioning the importance of her interjection, but continued with a huff. “Right. Iruka-sensei brought you lot out of the forest and straight to the hospital since both you and Sasuke were unconscious. Naruto and Team Nine had quite a lot to say when they got to him.”

Katsumi opened her mouth, questions about Naruto and Sasuke on the tip of her tongue when Kakashi interrupted, his demeanor sobering. “Katsumi,” he said, forcing Katsumi to steel her nerves in preparation for what she knew he was going to say, “I need you to tell me everything that happened in the Forest of Death. Naruto and Team Nine told us as much as they could, but there were several holes, holes that we need you to fill.”

Katsumi snorted, a faked effort in nonchalance. Everything in her was screaming, begging her not to relive those horrible hours, but orders were orders. She shrugged and began to recount the story.

“Well, first we got yelled at a lot by that weird chunin with the purple hair. Then we waited around a bit at our assigned entrance for our Heaven scroll and—” The words died in her throat at Kakashi’s lack of amusement and Katsumi sighed, looking at her still dirty fingernails instead of her sensei.

Her bravado was gone. She just felt small and very, very tired.
“We… Team Nine and us, we had a plan. It was supposed to work but it didn’t, gods, it really didn’t fucking work at all…”

“What was the plan?” Kakashi prompted.

Katsumi gnawed on the inside of her cheek before speaking. “Naruto made these location seals for all of us to work together and gang up on singular teams to speed up the process. It was working fine at first, we took down some random team from Rain easy-peasy, but we got another Heaven scroll. To keep Team Nine from ditching us since they had what they wanted, we took the scroll with us and picked the closest team, one from Grass, to attack a couple kilometers downstream. If we ran into any trouble, we’d just call them in for back-up.”

The girl gave a shudder that had nothing to do with the temperature of the room.

“Then we were attacked by Orochimaru of the fucking Sannin because apparently the universe hates us,” she continued evenly, her fists clenching tightly, her short nails digging into the meat of her palms enough to keep her grounded. “He… He separated us first, some winds blew us away from each other. He placed some weird chakra smoke-screen type justu around the area in a five kilometer radius so I couldn’t use my senses at all. I was walking in absolutely blind, but I needed to find them, sensei.” Katsumi looked up into his one eye earnestly. “I just knew I needed to find Naruto and Sasuke quickly.”

“Did you?”

Katsumi winced. “I found Sasuke first within about half an hour. Then,” she scowled, “Orochimaru wearing the face of a Kusa girl in a henge of Naruto — I know, confusing — showed up and tried to fool us. When it didn’t work, she— he,” she corrected with a bit of uncertainty, “them, I don’t know, just put off a metric fuck-ton of KI, enough to stun a godsdamned horse. He was going to kill us, but Sasuke broke out of it and got us out of there.

“But he came back.”

Katsumi fell silent for a moment, the images of the confrontation flashing in her head, her brown face painfully ashen even in the poor lighting. It was… hard to talk about this. But, she had to push through it.

You do not yield.
Kakashi was being a saint, not rushing or pressing for more answers for which Katumi was unbelievably thankful, but she couldn’t expect the Hokage — who would likely want to hear the story as well as soon as possible — to coddle her like this.

She shuddered in remembrance of her dream.

Her voice became more business-like as she straightened her spine and looked Kakashi dead in the eye unflinchingly. “He attacked mainly Sasuke, kinda just throwing me out of the way or ignoring me entirely. Then Naruto jumped into the fray. I believe he might have accidentally accessed Kyuubi chakra since he was so mad, but Orochimaru touched his stomach over the seal and knocked him out within ten minutes of his arrival so he was out. After that, Sasuke and I did our best to kill who, at the time, we thought was some random kunoichi from Kusagakure who kept spouting off the wall shit about Sasuke’s eyes and prey. I caught her in my blood possession jutsu and Sasuke threw a fireball into her face. When she didn’t die and her face melted, she bit Sasuke on the neck and put some kind of seal into his system and Sasuke was down for the count. Instead of leaving right after or killing me, he… he just started talking.”

She stalled again, shifting her weight onto her other hip on the bed to give herself something to do. Kakashi, sensing her discomfort, nodded encouragingly.

“Keep going.”

The genin bit her lip absentmindedly. “He said that I was like him,” she blurted out in a rush, shame making her face grow hot. “He, um, he said that Sasuke would come to him eventually to seek power and that he was… he was impressed by me and how tricky I was and, gods, sensei, I was so scared; I had no chakra, I was injured and alone and outclassed and so, so fucking scared and, Kami, he had my face in his hands and he was just talking and I thought I was going to die —”

“You’re hyperventilating,” Kakashi interrupted, his warm, gloved hand a comforting weight on her shoulder. “Get a hold of yourself, kiddo. You’re going to give yourself an anxiety attack.” He gave a comforting squeeze, forcing her to look at him. “Breathe.”

“Right, right, I just… I just have to… to breathe,” she repeated through shuddering breaths, clenching her hands so tightly that she felt her nails cut crescent-shaped gashes into her palms. Somehow, the pain calmed her, gave her something else to think about, to worry about. Now, instead of worrying about how easily Orochimaru could’ve killed her or worse, she worried about if she was going to leave blood on the sheets.
After several minutes of silence broken only by Katsumi’s labored breathing, her heart stopped threatening to break her ribs and she felt a bit more in control.

“So, Orochimaru spoke to you,” Kaka-sensei prompted, reminding her where she’d left off. “What all did he say? Try to be as accurate as possible, verbatim phrases if you can.”

“I’ll try. He said… he said that Sasuke would come to him for more power soon, I think because of the seal he put on his neck. He complimented my… my skill,” she tried, having a hard time recounting this particular part. “He said that I was cunning and ruthless like him and that he could ‘do something with a girl like me’. He told me to come with Sasuke when he deserts the village because I have ‘potential’. After that, he said other things…”

“Like?”

Katsumi held her breath, trying to find the right words to phrase the other conversation they’d had about how apparently the entirety of Konoha was lying to her, but she just couldn’t. It was just… damnit, she was curious. She needed to know what he was talking about. Could he have been lying? Absolutely. But, she couldn’t not at least look into ‘the Hyuga Affair’ to see where it would take her. Katsumi knew that she had to follow this lead no matter what and telling Kakashi, as much as she wanted to, would just make it harder.

He would no doubt tell her to stay away from researching it like she wanted to, which he had every right to do. Sage, he’d might even forbid her from doing it. He’d be right to. It was a tip given to her by Orochimaru of all people. But, there was something in the Snake Sannin’s eyes that told her that he wasn’t lying to her. It was genuine surprise and recognition on his face when he first really looked at her, she could feel it. He knew something about her past that she didn’t know, something important. After almost thirteen years of not knowing, she couldn’t pass up the opportunity to finally know.

So, Katsumi closed her mouth and shrugged. “Just a bunch of melodramatic monologuing,” she answered quietly, the lie tasting of ash in her mouth.

It’s not lying, she amended, reasoning with herself, just omitting bits of the truth…

“He warned me about his own team coming for us though. Said that they were coming to kill me and if I was as clever as he thought I was, I’d hop to it. He left after that. They, uh, they came in the morning after I had downed some soldier pills and hauled Naruto and Sasuke halfway across the forest.” At Kakashi’s raised eyebrow, she hastily tacked on a belated explanation, “his team came, I mean. They came maybe around half past seven? I dunno. The loud one tripped one of my traps and
I woke up from my nap and before you go and scold me about sleeping and not keeping watch, I trapped the entire forest around us in a two-kilometer radius. I needed sleep more than anything and I was almost dead on my feet after hiding the boys and preparing for the fight.”

Kakashi raised up his hands in surrender. “Maa, so rude, I wasn’t going to say anything.”

“Whatever,” Katsumi replied, rolling her eyes and not believing him for a second. Her spirit dimmed a bit as she continued with the recap. “They came to the clearing arrogant and loud. I faked my death, played with them a bit with some mist and I…” her voice faltered. She closed her eyes against the burning of tears behind her eyelids. “I tried to tell them to go… I didn’t want to— to kill them, I didn’t, but they just wouldn’t listen to me when I told them to leave. They didn’t want to believe that I was powerful enough to kill them.”

Kakashi was quiet for a moment and Katsumi tried her best to keep her breathing under control again but it was hard when all she saw when she closed her eyes was the brutal deaths that she’d inflicted on the three Oto youths who were just following orders.

Just like she had been.

“Katsumi…”

The genin shook her head, fighting against the trembling in her limbs, something like grief making her feel raw and tired. “Right, right, sorry I can continue. He… the loud one got the jump on me… he pulled my hair and I just— Zabuza, and I-I couldn’t breathe and I just — sensei, I snapped,” she said, her voice cracking on the last word. She was barely speaking coherent sentences at this point and she was surprised that Kakashi seemed to be following along well enough. “I snapped so badly and all I wanted to do was kill him and make it as painful as possible so I…”

“Katsumi,” Kakashi started, his voice as gentle as he’d ever heard it.

It broke her. “I pulled at their blood plasma with my chakra until they were on the ground, screaming,” she whispered, horrified by her own actions. “I wasn’t myself, sensei, it felt like I was floating while someone else was controlling my body but it was still me, but darker and I snapped the loud one’s neck without even touching him.” She hardly noticed her voice rising in pitch with her hysteria, “The second boy called me a witch and I smiled in his face as I busted his heart open and, oh gods, the girl, sensei, the girl, I drained her body of her blood through her pores it was so, so much blood, I killed them all, sensei and they weren’t that much older than me and I—”
Intense nausea overtook her and she grabbed the wastebin by her bed and retched violently into it as she shook. It felt like a punch in the gut as she gagged, a large hand rubbing at her back as she heaved until there was nothing left and she was just dispelling bile.

“Let it all out, kiddo.”

When she was done, Katsumi wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, refusing to meet Kakashi’s concerned gaze. “I was hovering after that,” she continued, her voice hoarse. “I still felt like my consciousness was floating, like I was there and not, both me and not. Plus, I was scraping the bottom of the barrel chakra-wise so I was about to pass out from exhaustion. Then, Team Nine found me. Brought me back here.” Her trembling arms hugged her knees close to her chest, a breeze cooling her overheating skin through the opening in her gown at her back. “It’s just…” she looked up at Kakashi for the first time in several long minutes and her resolve shattered. Her face crumpled as tears fell down her face and she asked in a tiny, broken voice: “Am I really like him?”

Before she knew it, strong arms wrapped tightly around her small, shaking frame and she really broke down then, the flood gates slamming open and she sobbed openly into her sensei’s shirt, all of the fear and anguish and disgust coming out of her. He smoothed her frizzy hair back with gloved fingers and Katsumi was so distraught that she didn’t even notice his lingering discomfort at the physical contact or the quiet fury that had taken up residence in his face.

“I w-was so, so f-fucking scared, sensei,” she whimpered, her cries muffled by Kakashi’s chest as he crushed her to him. “I was so a-alone and ex-exhausted,” she hiccuped, “Am I a m-monster too?”

“No, absolutely not. You’re nothing like that snake, I promise,” he reassured her vehemently. “You are kind and genuine and want to protect people. He’s an evil bastard who hurts innocents for his own personal gain; you two couldn’t be more different if you tried.”

Katsumi shook her head. “Then why did he—”

“Because he’s a fucking liar who likes to do this kind of shit to people. Sometimes… Sometimes, Katsumi, our enemies say things to haunt us after we face them,” his hand rubbed soothing circles on her back in a way that he remembered Kushina-nee-san doing for him decades ago. “You can’t let that—”

“But I KILLED THEM!” she roared, not caring about her volume anymore. “I murdered that team and part of me enjoyed it! Part of me thought ‘That will teach them to underestimate me’! I killed them in terrible, horrible ways and I liked it. I liked the power and for the first time in weeks, I wasn’t scared! I’ve been terrified for so fucking long and I don’t know what to do!
“I’m just so, so tired, sensei.”

—-

Those words physically hurt Kakashi to hear.

His lone kunoichi, his arguably favorite student sounded undeniably, unmistakably broken. Once he got over the all-encompassing need to track down the serpentine son of a bitch responsible and rip his spine out through his ass and floss his fucking teeth with his intestines, he couldn’t standby anymore.

Kakashi disengaged from the hug, holding her at an arm’s length. He looked at her snotty, puffy face, searching for some bit of Katsumi still in there. “Look at me.”

She shifted her miserable eyes up to his and flinched, looking quickly away before he shook her shoulders lightly. “I know that you’re scared. Sage, every time I let you kids out of my sight, I’m terrified,” he admitted. “The fear is normal. Honestly, I’d be more worried if you weren’t afraid. But, the worst is over now. Orochimaru is gone and now I’m here and I’m not going to let him or anything else hurt you or the boys. Not while I’m still breathing. And about that team, you were backed into a corner and you were forced to choose between your life and your morals and your body chose for you. You snapped. You dissociated. Happens to the best of us.”

Katsumi looked down at her hands and he shook her shoulders again. Damn, he forgets how young she is sometimes. How young they all are. He was going to fucking murder everyone involved with this shitshow of a Chunin Exam, starting with Orochimaru and ending with the Sandaime and damn the consequences.

‘They’ll be perfectly safe’ my fucking ass.

“Hey, look at me. You made the best decision you could at the time, conscious or not. You protected yourself and the boys and I am so, so very proud of you for doing that. You are the reason Naruto and Sasuke made it out of that forest alive. You are the reason the village knows about Orochimaru and is on high alert. Not many genin would’ve been able to do what you did. You were terrified but you pushed through it and kept pushing through it no matter what. It’s shitty, the things you had to do so young, but you took it all and ran with it unflinchingly. Sage, you fought a member of the Legendary Sannin twice and lived. Not many people can say that.
“But, you’re safe now. I’m here, Mei-sensei is here, Hiro-sensei is here, Inoka-sensei is here, the Hokage is here,” he catalogued the slight flinch the last name caused, but didn’t say anything. “We’re all going to protect you. You’re out of the woods now, Katsumi.”

“Now look at me,” he commanded quietly. The girl obeyed, her knitted brows conveying her confusion. A hand reached up to his hitai-ate to reveal his active Sharingan. “If you want, I can give you dreamless sleep because it looks like you need it,” he chuckled drily. “Just say the word an—”

“Fucking do it, sensei,” she replied tiredly.

He shrugged and his Sharingan began swirling as she stared, some of the tension leaking out of her posture. Gods above, she looked exhausted.

“Now go to sleep,” Kakashi ordered, letting go of her and getting up from the bed. “You need your rest. The day after tomorrow marks the end of the second round so you’ll need to be prepared for whatever that may entail,” he said through clenched teeth.

Katsumi hardly noticed as she was nodding off into a genjutsu-induced sleep. She scooted back down to lay under the covers, exhaustion making her feel heavy.

Kakashi hated that even though the Hokage knew bits and pieces of what had transpired in the woods, he still refused to let his team drop out for the third part of the Exams when Kakashi had stormed in there after Naruto had shown up at the Tower with half of Team Seven unconscious with a malfunctioning seal and outlandish tales of the Snake Sannin on his tongue. He still had half a mind to go back into his office and demand for their disqualification from the competition now that he had the whole story from Katsumi but the Hokage had made it clear that his genin were to stay in the Exams until they either lost in the preliminaries if they had them or the final stage.

Kami, the girl hadn’t even lost her baby fat yet and she had a kill count nearing double digits. Of course, when he was her age he’d had one in the hundreds, but that was wartime and much different. His baby genin had seen and done things that most grown adults wouldn’t in three lifetimes and when it would be the best thing for them to drop out to give them some modicum of peace, the Hokage refuses in the name of saving face.

Needless to say, Kakashi was seriously contemplating high treason right about now.
He was silently moving towards the door when Katsumi’s half-asleep voice stopped him in his tracks.

“Does it ever get any easier? The guilt?”

Fuck.

He thought about it for a moment and sighed. “It hurts less with time.”

Katsumi turned over, shifting on the bed. “Oh. G’night sensei. Thank you,” she said drowsily, sleep overtaking her quickly.

Kakashi snorted quietly. His cute little genin had tuckered herself out. He sighed inwardly, leaving her hospital room and closing the door behind him as he stepped out into the hall.

She’d had a series of long days lately.

He nodded to the woman on the night-shift at the front desk in the pediatric unit of Konoha General and she smiled tiredly at him before turning back to writing on her clipboard. Kakashi had rounded the corner to leave the unit, pressing the button for the automatic doors to swing open and he walked into the waiting room, more than a little lost in thought.

The jonin wordlessly sat down on the tan couches, closing his eyes to ease the throbbing headache that had started up in the base of his skull. The television rambling on in the background of the empty waiting room was the only sound until it was broken by a familiar feminine voice.

“How is she?”

The tension left his shoulders when he heard her, sighing deeply as his eyes opened. A young red-haired woman leaned against the wall, apparently having just come back from the bathroom judging by the scent of cheap antibacterial soap on her hands. She walked forward and sat on the couch with him.

Kakashi sighed. “She’ll be alright.” He carded a hand through his already messy hair, focusing his
gaze on the brown eyes of his companion. “Your girls really helped her out back there. I know it wasn’t your idea, but thank you.”

Hiro snorted dismissively. “It’s nothing. I know how important your team is to you. Besides, it was good practice for them.”

Kakashi sighed, relaxing deeper into the cushions and saying nothing for a moment, hoping that waiting would take some of the bitterness out of the words he was going to say next. “It was true, Hiro. Orochimaru attacked them.”

It didn’t.

The redhead frowned, biting her lip in thought. Both jonin were silent for a minute as their minds went through all of the information of what was bound to be a very, very big problem come morning.

“A problem for another day,” she replied cheekily, despite the late hour.

Kakashi raised an unimpressed eyebrow and she laughed quietly. His faux annoyance melted in the face of her easy cheer and he let his head fall back onto the back of the couch.

“You coming home tonight?” Hiro asked.

Kakashi shook his head. “I’m on call. Sasuke’s got what looks like an upgraded version of Mitarashi’s curse mark and until Jiraiya-sama gets here tomorrow around noon, I’m needed to help keep Sasuke stable,” he explained. “His chakra system has effectively gone into shock and it’s all I can do to maintain it. It’s like nothing I’ve ever seen before.”

Hiro made a face, something in between sympathy, irritation, and fury. “Why can’t that snake bastard stay gone? I swear, he keeps coming back like a bad fucking penny.”

The other shinobi snorted. “I could think of a couple more not-so-nice ways of putting it, but yeah.”

Hiro frowned, acknowledging his obvious worry. “Hey, we’ll track him down together, alright? There isn’t a place on this planet that Orochimaru can hide now that the two of us are lookin’ for
Kakashi nodded and Hiro elbowed him in the side with enough force to almost make him jump. He sighed longsufferingly. “Alright,” he acquiesced. “Stop manhandling me. My constitution is delicate, you brute.”

Hiro rolled her eyes and rose from the couches. “Yeah, whatever.” She stood over the other jonin and, in the empty waiting room, rolled his mask down over his face and pressing a kiss on his mouth which he returned tiredly. She squished his face between her palms playfully, bringing his baleful gaze to her. “We’re going to shatter every bone in that snake’s body and staple his tongue to his eyelids for what he did and we’ll do it together,” she promised, planting a peck on his squished lips.

He seemed to genuinely relax then and she pulled away quickly, adjusting his mask back to its rightful place quickly and pinching his chin. “And about Sasuke’s seal, you’ll figure it out,” she reassured, patting his cheek affectionately.

She straightened herself back up, giving a dramatic stretch before adding, “You always do.”

“What would I do without you?” Kakashi asked, feeling a bit better after her violent pep-talk.

Hiro let out a rough laugh. “Not function, that’s for sure. Hey, my mom might have something on more complex sealing her library so I’ll check before I go home and feed the dogs. Also I can bring you breakfast in the morning so that you don’t have to eat the shitty hospital cafeteria food.”

Kakashi groaned in drained appreciation. “Ugh, have I ever told you how much I love you?” Kakashi mumbled, his exhaustion almost palpable.

Hiro snickered, sauntering to the center of the room. “A couple times, but I could stand to hear it more. I love you too.”

An honest chuckle made its way out of Kakashi’s throat, the first one in what seemed like years. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

A couple seconds and a puff of air later, she was gone.
A/N: Again, sorry this was late!! My wifi has been out for like four days. But yeah, Hiro and Kakashi are together and they’re everyone’s chaotic mom and dog dad. But, like, no one but them know so the reveal is gonna be funny as hell.

Kakashi was originally supposed to be a deadbeat dad, not Team Seven’s emotional support dad! But hey, things change.

Katsumi is traumatized as HELL from the forest and she just needed to let it all out. Shout out to Kakashi for dealing with it accordingly. Don’t worry, it gets less sad next chapter plus, there’s gonna be more Ino!! :D

QoTP: How do you guys think that Katsumi’s actions in the forest change the chuunin exams?

Shoutouts: the tumblr fam and our two newest friends, awildtrazerhasappeared and doubtedbus409. Welcome aboard!!

Kurochach: Good guess! Her dissociative episode was caused by Zabuza himself when he grabbed her hair and tried to drown her from I think like chapter 13 (they’re all kinda blending together tbh lol). She’s getting really, really good but pretty slowly which is something that I hated when reading Naruto fanfics: characters would power up so damn QUICK and there would be no room for slow improvement, which is MUCH more realistic. Thank you for the compliment! I appreciate the feedback!!

Octoskies: I’m glad we can agree that the sound min had to GO lol. Also, that’s a pretty good guess on what Orochimaru wants and honestly, you’re pretty spot on. He wants to cause as much discord for Konoha and Katsumi is perfect for that. Her situation would cause a war between at least two of the main five shinobi villages with Konoha on the wrong side since it’s their fault. The Sandaime is most DEFINITELY going to pay for it. The thing I was trying to convey was that Konoha is cool or whatever, but they’re corrupt as FUCK and Naruto’s can-do attitude doesn’t change the fact that there’s over a hundred years of damage that needs to be undone for any progress. ROOT and the Sandaime’s unwillingness to act is just the beginning. The people in charge make decisions and people get hurt. Constantly. It’s not fair and we’ve barely gotten started with unfairness.
And yeah, I agree, RIP to the poor sap that has to tell the Raikage that his niece is alive. They’re getting thrown out the window lol.

I’m happy that you like Sasuks!! He was a fun character to write and honestly, I usually don’t like Sasuke but I hope that this was written so you see him less as the Uchiha heir and prodigy Sasuke and more like the emotionally constipated, embarrassingly smitten, tween boy Sasuke. Makes him much more likeable in my opinion. But yeah, the whole Itachi thing is going to make him LIVID. I feel bad for whoever is around when he hears that lol.

Thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you, THANK YOU for leaving comments! You have no idea how much they encourage me and I appreciate you so so much!! Also I lowkey have been feeling like my story has become predictable so to hear that you never know what to expect makes me feel a hell of a lot better!! I hope this was enough Papakashi for you. Thanks again!!

Delaney: It’s perfectly unhealthy how much you love this fic! I love it an unhealthy amount too. French fries are unhealthy and I love those too. We’re here for a good time, not a long time, Delaney. Kidding (not really) and thanks for the comment!! Ilysm!!

AkitaWF: That was one of the best compliments I’ve ever gotten jfc thanks so much, I’m so honored wow ahhhhhhhh *dies from happiness*

czat: Yeah, team seven is kinda sorta a trouble magnet so you never really know what you’re gonna get with putting three main character-types on the same squad lol. Hope you liked this fluffy chapter!!

CinnamonBunProtectionAgency: Great name btw, wow iconic. Thanks!!

Theacup: Have you followed the tumblr yet? Because if you want more content, that’s where you should go.

Again, sorry, sorry, sorry this was late!!!
Mkay, thanks y’all!

Onto the next!!
Chapter Notes

Sorry for this being, like, a day late!! Enjoy a nice, easy, fluffy chapter as a sorry.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Katsumi was getting used to the whole ‘beridden’ thing quite nicely.

_Getting out of bed is for suckers_.

The moon-haired genin had been dozing off and on throughout the morning, enjoying a nice lie-in. When Katsumi wasn’t injured or otherwise occupied, she had a very strict schedule which started when she left the house at half past seven to train with Team Seven. But, since she was currently an invalid and a half of their team was unable to train do to legitimate medical reasons, she had all the time in the world to selfishly enjoy sleeping in until noon if she wanted to.

Katsumi drifted in and out of consciousness for the better part of four hours, loving the quiet _nothing_ that came with being bedridden. Of course she liked to train and improve, but damn, if laying in bed wasn’t a close second in terms of fun activities. She had nowhere to be, no one to see, and nothing to do for once and she _loved_ it.

Now because of her fine-tuned situational awareness, she’d technically been awake since she heard footsteps outside her door, the background noise a low buzz in the background of her mind. When the door opened a quarter to noon, she assumed that it was one of the orderlies coming in to check her vitals or whatever it was that medics did to patients that didn’t really need treatment so much as rest. The genin didn’t get up of course, it was easier to just feign sleep until they left, so she left her eyes closed and her breathing even. Being awake meant conversation and medicine and other not-pleasant things. Sleep meant blissful relaxation and quiet and _not_ talking to strangers, a _huge_ plus. Besides, the longer she faked being asleep, the easier it was to convince her hyperactive brain to shut down.

It was annoying, her inability to soundly sleep when she wasn’t somewhere her stupid prehistoric lizard-brain deemed safe. Usually when she slept in hospitals, the rare moments she could briefly slip into unconsciousness were very regularly interrupted by any movement in or around her room. Good situational awareness bred god shinobi but terrible, paranoid sleepers with Katsumi being no exception to the rule.

Katsumi’d been content to fall right back as she always did when she slept in the hospitals when this person broke the silence.

“You’d think it wouldn’t take you getting sent to the hospital for me to see you, but here we are.”

The girl bolted upright, a smile already on her chapped lips when she saw the figure standing by the windows, fussing with the curtains. “I swear, one day you’ll be the death of me.” Kagome glanced over her shoulder, a tired smile lighting up her lovely face bathed in the light of the late morning.

“Kagome!” Katsumi tried to get up out of bed to greet her properly but the woman waved her off.
“Ah ah ah,” she chastised, giving her The Look to stop her movements which was still surprisingly effective. “Don’t you dare pull your stitches trying to get up.”

Katsumi scoffed, a little annoyed but comforted by Kagome’s hovering nature. It had been a while since she’d gone to go see her to Katsumi’s shame. She wanted to visit, she did, it was just that with training and missions and almost dying every other day, she rarely had the time. That didn’t stop Kagome from treating her like she was still a child every time she saw her.

This was one of those times.

“I’m fine, Ka—”

“Don’t make me have to tell you again,” the woman threatened, a familiar sort of steel in her voice causing Katsumi to laugh.

“Remember that time I became a legal adult and you stopped having any authority over me?”

Kagome snorted, sitting down in the chair next to her bed, looking to all the world like things like the law and sovereignty were just words. “Semantics.” Her old caretaker folded her arms across her chest, a dark eyebrow arched in question as she waited with her lips pursed.

An explanation.

Katsumi winced, feeling like a naughty child who had been caught with their hand in the cookie jar. It seemed Kagome still had that effect on her. She laughed awkwardly. “Oh yeah, about the whole,” she stopped and gestured around the room, “it was the—”

“Chunin Exams?” the woman finished. “Yes, I figured as much. Your team qualified so quickly, why you’ve only been shinobi for, what, six months now?” She pursed her lips. “Was it wise for Hatake-san to have entered you all while you are so young and inexperienced?”

Katsumi shrugged, feeling oddly guilty. “Kaka-sensei didn’t seem too thrilled about us being entered,” she said, jumping to her sensei’s defense in the face of Kagome’s disapproving attitude. “I think his hand was forced by someone higher up,” she admitted honestly.

Of course, Katsumi knew that her old guardian didn’t much care for her occupation and as much as she wished it wasn’t true, Kagome didn’t really like Kakashi, not because of who he was, but for what he was: the person teaching her the ways of the wetworks.

Now Katsumi had never been one of those people that was obsessed about her social status. She didn’t really care if she was the most liked or the most popular or the prettiest. That kind of stuff never mattered to her so much as her skill level. That kind of stuff was immaterial when on the battlefield; your family name wouldn’t save you from an ambush of enemy shinobi. But, it didn’t change the fact that civilians were virtually powerless.
As a civilian, she would’ve never gained any power or influence in the upper echelons of Konoha’s society unless she married a shinobi clan head. Plus, not just any clan head would do either since the balance of power between Konoha’s clans was not equal. As a clan head’s civilian wife, her power would be severely handicapped — not because of her gender since around a third of the clan heads were female and in general, shinobi were a lot less discriminatory as long as you can hold a kunai — because of her status.

As accepting and liberal as Konoha liked to pretend it was, old money and older names held power in the village, in a shinobi village. Her being a civilian orphan who hypothetically got lucky enough to marry above her station would give her a tenuous amount of influence because in villages like theirs, civilians held next to no power. The highest levels of government were all run by exclusively shinobi simply because of the power imbalance between ninjas and their non-military counterparts. That was just the way it was for them; if they want the protection that comes with living essentially on a military base, they have to deal with the fact that to some of the more conservative members of their government, they’re seen as little more than children, children who don’t know better and need to be placated and, above all else, ignored.

The simple fact: if you’re a civilian and want power, move to the capital.

Being nameless was already a major disadvantage, but to be a civilian orphan? Oh, she was signing up for her life to amount to nothing more than a housewife, teacher, or at best, a merchant.

Kagome’s lips thinned in distaste, but she stayed quiet for a beat, her disdain palpable. “It was still unwise no matter who made the call. You got hurt.”

“I always get hurt,” Katsumi countered. “It’s in the job description. The point is that I survived.”

“And what happens if next time you don’t?”

“Well, it’s not like whatever kills me is going to kill me more times than I was already going to die anyway,” the genin replied flippantly, her nihilism jumping out.

It was when Kagome blanched that Katsumi realized what she’d said.

“Oh crap, I—”

“Never speak like that,” Kagome hissed, fear making her dark eyes wide. “Don’t say things like that, your life is precious! Never say something like that ever again,” she snapped, a surprising amount of anger in the furrow of her brow.

Katsumi eyes widened in alarm. She had never seen the woman so furious in her life and Katsumi had done a lot to warrant Kagome’s anger in the past — including that time when she tried to practice wall-walking inside the house, got startled by a stray cat, and busted a hole the size of her head in the drywall — but never had she gone off like this.

Too shocked to even begin to reply, Katsumi felt Kagome grasp her face with one hand as she brought them face to face. “Promise me, Katsumi!” she beseeched, an edge of hysteria to her voice.

“Alright, alright, I promise!”

Kagome’s anger faded, replaced by horror. She released her face quickly, blinking quickly when she realized what she’d done. “Oh gods— Katsumi, I am so, so sorry for lashing out at you like that.”

The woman frowned, clasping her hands in her lap and looking remorseful. “I didn’t mean— I should have never done that. I’m sorry,” she said, wringing her hands in her lap. “Forgive me? I know it is no excuse, but… I worry about you.”
Katsumi opened her mouth to dismiss the infraction and she stopped.

It was then that Katsumi noticed just how weary Kagome looked, dark smudges coloring her under-eyes and silver peeking out in her dark ponytail. Kagome wasn’t much younger than the Sannin but running the Orphanage had aged her prematurely. But now, she just looked tired.

*She hasn’t been sleeping.*

Katsumi instantly felt ashamed. This woman who was responsible for dozens of children was up late at night, worrying and fretting about a girl who wasn’t even in her care anymore all because she couldn’t stay out of trouble.

Guilt made her stomach roil.

“It’s okay, I understand. I didn’t mean to make you worry so often.”

“Tsumi, hon, you’re always going to make me worry. It’s in the job description,” she added, making Katsumi chuckle quietly. “When I took you in as a baby, I made that choice to worry about you until I die and long after that I’m sure with how you like to live your life. Knowing you, you’ll have me rolling in my grave post-mortem for decades.

Katsumi let out a genuine laugh at that, the previous tension dissipating.

Kagome’s warm brown eyes found hers. “Listen, you might not be my daughter biologically, but you’ll always be my girl, alright? My strong, beautiful little kunoichi,” Kagome complimented, some warmth seeping back into her words and, dare Katsumi say it, pride. “And as much as it terrifies me…” Kagome paused, a wobbly smile making its way onto her face, “from what I’ve seen and heard, you are very, very good.”

Katsumi had to fight to keep herself from bursting into tears then.

“I’m proud to have had a part in your growth and I’m ready to support whatever it is you want to do next. Show them all how it’s done, eh?”

For what it must’ve taken Kagome to swallow her distaste and compliment her like she was, Katsumi felt a lump begin to form in her throat, emotion almost overwhelming her. Katsumi reached a hand out and grasped Kagome’s warm one in hers, squeezing against the tears that had started to fog her vision.

“Thank you, Kagome. That means... you don’t even know how much that means to me to hear you say that. And I’m sorry for not visiting this month. I know that I—”

Kagome shook her head, patting her hand lightly. “Now, now, there’ll be none of that. There’s nothing to apologize for. I know you’ve been busy trying to send me to an early grave in the name of protecting the village and whatnot.”

Katsumi’s brows rose. “You’re not mad?” The girl shifted uncomfortably on the bed, fully prepared to be lectured about making time to see her more often which she more than deserved.

Kagome cracked a wry smile, crossing her legs at the knee and looking up at the ceiling as if to think about it. “Well, I am a little annoyed, but that is to be expected what with your line of work. Besides, I can’t very well scold you while you’re on the mend. Though I imagine with your level of frequency in hospital visits you’ll be missing out on quite a few well-deserved lectures... so maybe I should lay into you just this once to make up for it...”
And just like that, everything was okay again.

“I would really prefer you didn’t, but I suppose if you just can’t help yourself…”

The woman let out a genuine laugh, her face lighting up and making her look decades younger. “Don’t you sass me, young lady,” the mirth in her eyes sabotaging the faux-stern tone she’d taken to combat her laughter.

“Or what?” Katsumi asked teasingly, crossing her arms across her chest and tilting her head to the side, a challenge in her posture.

Kagome raised her eyebrows. “My, my, how bold you’ve gotten since receiving your hitai-ate.”

Katsumi snickered, her heart feeling light for the first time in a while. Being around Kagome was like being home and Katsumi never wanted that feeling to end.

“And what about it?”

“Keep sassing me and no okonomiyaki for dinner next time you come by.”

“Okay, wait, no need to get so hasty, Kagome!”

Her next visitor barged in a couple hours after midday unannounced and loud enough to disturb the entire floor.

“Question: can you sneeze without ending up in the hospital?” Ino breezed in, carrying bags of take-out that smelled faintly of Yakiniku-Q and threw herself into the armchair by the window.

Her attitude was flippant and insulting even, but that didn’t stop Katsumi from catching the tightness around her blue eyes when they gave her a once-over or the tension in her shoulders when she faux-carelessly sat down.

Ino was favoring her right shoulder.

Bitch.

Katsumi scoffed. “Okay, first of all, asshole, this is only the third time I’ve ever been to the hospital in my life so I don’t want to hear it. Second, I know your punk ass hurt your shoulder so don’t even try,” she shot back, her eyes narrowed, pointing out her observation and relishing the faint surprise and annoyance that lit up Ino’s eyes. “What happened? Dislocated it when you fell from a tree because a bug got too close to you?”

“Fuck you, at least I’m not hospitalized because of chakra exhaustion. You’re in here like once a month!”

“It wasn’t ju—”

“Follow-up question: what dumb breed of bitch takes on three older shinobi on their own with no backup?”

“On what planet is sharpening kunai with a nail file a good idea?”

“Who told you that green was your color? Because bitch, they lied.”
“How’s the lice?”

“How’s your ringworm?”

Katsumi held up her wrist and flashed her a garish facsimile smile that was more a baring of teeth. “Nonexistent like your ninjutsu ability. Tell me, Ino-chan, have you learned anything else other than your mind-transfer jutsu, or are you still just a one-trick pony?”

“Bitch.”

“Ass.”

The two girls stared each other down, low-level killing intent starting to come off of them, both daring the other to say something else. If Katsumi were a hundred percent, she might’ve even dared her to hit her just to taunt Ino, but she just settled for sneering at her.

Then, they both promptly busted out laughing, falling back against their respective pieces of furniture, all of the tension gone. Through their gasping breaths, Ino maneuvered her way onto the foot of Katsumi’s bed. “We’re so dumb,” she got out through her giggles.

“ *You’re* so dumb,” Katsumi corrected, her heart feeling light with the arrival of her best female friend. “I’m a genius last I checked.” She scowled at her when Ino sat purposefully on her feet in response and had half a mind to shove her off the bed entirely, but gods, she was just so damned happy to see her.

“Whoever told you that lied.”

“Like you do to yourself whenever you say you look good?”

Ever since Ino wormed her way into Katsumi’s life, she hasn’t known peace. Well, she never really had peace to begin with, what with living with the village jinchuuriki and hanging out with her merry band of hooligan boys, but there was a different kind of camaraderie between her and Ino.

She loved Kiba, Shika, and Choji, but nothing could quite measure up to giving Ino a blindfolded makeover with her makeup or arguing over petty things they noticed in the movies that they went to go watch on Fridays at the cinema — Katsumi didn’t care, she would think that Haru and Sora belonged together until the day she died, godsdamnit. Ino would have to rip that pairing out of her cold, dead hands — or even trying to eat cheese puffs whilst having drying face masks on and trying to ruin them by laughing too hard at the other.

Ino was indecisive, aggressive as hell, blunt to a fault, and picky enough to make Katsumi want to throw her out of a window most days, but she was fiercely loyal, witty, hilarious and much more intelligent than most people gave her credit for. The clan heiress was always one of the first people to make sure that Katsumi was alright, whether she was in or out of the hospital and for whatever godforsaken reason could tell whenever something was up with her and knew exactly how to make it better.

So, Katsumi hasn’t pushed her off of Hokage Mountain to save her sanity quite yet.

But by the Sage, she was getting close.

Ino pursed her lips and stuck her nose up in the air imperiously. “I’ll let that one slide since you’re currently an invalid,” she replied airily.

Katsumi slapped her halfheartedly in the arm, incredulity making her eyes widen. “Am not!”
“You’re in the hospital, therefore you’re an invalid. Case closed,” Ino said cheekily, her grin too big for her to be serious. “When can you leave this godsforsaken place? This shit is downright depressing.”

“Tomorrow morning if nothing catastrophic happens.”

Ino snorted. “Knowing you, the second I leave, something worse than catastrophic is going to happen. I’m thinking meteor shower.”

“You’re so dumb,” Katsumi replied, shifting her weight in the bed. “It would totally be a freak fire-tornado and you know it.”

Ino lets out a laugh and holds out the large brown paper bag smelling faintly of meat towards her. “Well then, you’d better eat this before it touches down.”

The bag disappeared from Ino’s outstretched hands and she laughed at the sound of ripping paper and satisfied chewing. “Kami, you eat like a fucking horse.”

“Just because you’re on another stupid ass diet doesn’t mean everyone has to be,” she shot back through a mouth of noodles while she scowled, though its effects fell flat due to the sauce on her chin.

Ino snorted and tossed her a napkin which she caught in her left hand. “Plus, I hardly ate in that godforsaken forest, so cut me some slack.”

Ino’s teasing smile dimmed a bit and she stilled, sitting cross-legged on the scratchy comforter. “Katsumi, what happened with your team? I haven’t heard much because I don’t have the clearance, but I heard it was something bad.”

Katsumi didn’t say anything, content to enjoy the small miracle of Yakiniku-Q’s grilled beef after days of ration bars, unseasoned and overcooked rabbit, and hospital food. Ino elbowed her in the shoulder when she got annoyed with Katsumi’s avoidance.

“Alright, alright, stop fucking bullying me. I’m not sure how much I’m allowed to tell you, but I haven’t been officially debriefed so I’m technically not breaching any protocol, so you’re welcome.”

Ino rolled her eyes. “Even if you were, I could just lie and say I eavesdropped on my dad and boom, problem solved.”

“Whatever. If we get in trouble, I’m denying everything. We got attacked by Orochimaru in the forest.”

“Orochimaru?!” Ino whisper-shouted, her pale brows nearing her hairline in shock. “Like, the Sannin Orochimaru? You know, the one with the big snakes? And you’re still alive how?”

Katsumi rolled her eyes and finished chewing before loftily offering: “Maybe not all of us as mediocre as you.”

Ino’s insulted gasp made Katsumi snicker as she put more noodles in her mouth.

The blonde punched her in the shoulder, causing her to laugh even harder. “Hey, fuck you, I’m a brilliant kunoichi, thank you very much.” Her expression sobered again. “Is that why Sasuke-kun is down for the count?”

Katsumi nodded, feeling the atmosphere become heavy. “The snake bastard bit him and messed up
his chakra system. How is he?” she finished, searching Ino’s eyes earnestly for an answer. “Have you been to see him? What’s happened?”

Ino bit her lip, a little habit that she picked up from Katsumi. “No one’s allowed in without high clearance and direct permission from the Hokage, but,” she said, lowering her voice conspiratorially, “I heard that apparently Jiraiya-sama is coming to the village to see what he can do within the next couple days.”

“Holy Hashirama, where did you hear information like that?” Katsumi whispered, her eyes wide. “That probably isn’t supposed to get out until he gets here.” She’d never understand how Ino got information on everything at the tender age of twelve and three quarters.

Ino shrugged, a self-satisfied smirk on her face. “You know how it goes; someone owes me a favor, I cash in on it, I’m well-informed.”

Katsumi blinked slowly, still equal parts unnerved and impressed. For her to have gotten information of that calibre, she would’ve called in a favor from someone very high up in the chain of command. There was no way in hell that the Hokage wanted people to know about their resident spy-master’s movements until he was long gone, especially when it came to the Sandaime’s biggest disgrace, Orochimaru. The fact that they had to call in one of the last remaining seal masters in the world to undo something that happened when the Chunin Exams were infiltrated by one of Konoha’s own nuke-nin would cause a hell of a lot of problems if it was found out. It was weakness that they could not afford to show.

And Ino knew about the decision hours after it was made because she called in a favor?

“Sometimes you scare me with how well-connected you are.”

It amazed Katsumi how some people took one look at Ino with her pretty Yamanaka features and slight bone-structure and put her into the box of mediocre or lackluster as far as clan heirs go. That was one thing she and Ino shared: they were constantly underestimated.

While it drove Katsumi up the goddamned walls, Ino genuinely loved it, saying that that gave her more room to operate without prying eyes. Ino would always tell her that when people underestimate her, they give her a lot more than they would give someone they took seriously because they don’t see her as a threat.

“Good. You should be,” she said, tossing her ponytail over her shoulder haughtily and laughing. ‘They don’t see me until it’s too late,’ she had said, somehow looking both menacing and goofy with a sheet mask on her face.

As much as it astounded her, the existence of Ino’s fledgling information network made sense; her father was the leader of the Torture and Interrogation branch of Konoha’s military, her uncle was the head of the Intelligence branch, and her mother was a “retired” — because everyone knew Yamanaka Reika was anything but retired as the alleged oldest and longest-sitting ANBU Captain the Corps had ever seen. Though no one could really prove it as the identities of ANBU operatives were classified, but it didn’t stop it from being somewhat of an open secret — kunoichi of high standing with loose lips when plied with enough whiskey.

Not only was she well-connected through her familial ties, she was likely the most popular twelve year old in the history of Konohagakure. Katsumi had seen it when she hung out with the girl, Ino literally knew everyone; she knew shopkeepers and merchants, jonin, genin, and everything in between. If that wasn’t weird enough, it seemed like everyone liked her to some degree. It was easy
for Katsumi to see why; Ino was charismatic to a terrifying degree. She was like the sun and everyone wanted to be around her to bask in her glow. That was what drew Katsumi in in the first place, not the charm, but the promise of what lies underneath.

Because for a girl who seemed to have everything, Katsumi could tell that she wanted more. They had that in common, the hungry fire that burned hot in them, only visible in their eyes and Katsumi had seen it in her. So, when Ino demanded help with her throwing under the guise of impressing her beloved Sasuke-kun, Katsumi knew that that was just a front to cover up why she really wanted it: if everyone believed that she was too busy chasing after boys than training her taijutsu, no one would suspect the kind of threat she was until she had her kunai to their throat.

Ino was strong in a way that Katsumi envied.

It was clever, really, the way that Ino used her reputation and her image to her advantage: people like her so they are much more likely to do things for her if she asks but they underestimate her so they don’t count her as a threat. Ino knew exactly what she was doing when she tried to find an ally in Katsumi and vice-versa — one could never have too many allies and a major clan’s heiress was a powerful friend to have — but they didn’t expect to find genuine friendship in the other. Their kinship as the only two decent kunoichi in their homeroom class would blossom into a weirdly aggressive friendship, full of witty comebacks, half-hearted insults, and a lot of inside jokes.

Katsumi taught Ino how to think, how to observe and plan ahead, while Ino taught Katsumi how to see people, their tells, their ticks, their weaknesses, and how to exploit them quietly.

Needless to say that Katsumi still had a lot to learn from Ino.

Fortunately, she’s always been a great student.

The annoying blonde thorn in her side continued to needle her for another two hours about various subjects before she jolted like she’d been struck by lightning.

“Oh yeah, I forgot to tell you, word on the street is that the Hokage is going to postpone the prelims for the last stage of the Exams,” she told her once the takeout had been thrown in the bin and they were just talking about a book they had both read. Ino leaned in and lowered her voice more. “I haven’t heard anything as to why per se, but—”

“A smart woman would put her money on Sasuke’s availability to compete,” Katsumi finished, a furrow in her brow.

Ino nodded. “I mean, I get why the Uchiha are so important to show off, but does it outweigh the risk of dozens of foreign dignitaries staying Konoha for even longer? For what?”

“To prove a point,” Katsumi answered, leaning back onto the headboard, worrying her lip and staring out the window at the village bathed in the bright light of a summer afternoon. “Think about it, Sasuke’s the last Uchiha, a super powerful clan. After they all got wiped out that took out, what, like a fifth of Konoha’s active duty shinobi?” Katsumi estimated. “That’s a major blow to personnel especially because of how infamous the clan was. The Hokage would be smart to show off how skilled Sasuke is at an event like the Exams so that other nations would know three things: One,” she held up a finger, “that the Uchiha aren’t nearly as extinct as they would like to believe, two, that Sasuke, the last heir, is just as skilled if not more skilled than his clansmen were, and three that even though the Uchiha are an endangered species, the other genin more than make up for the Uchiha skill-deficit.”

Ino groaned, rubbing her face with her hands tiredly. “Ugh, so that means that our sensei are going to
be pushing us harder than ever to be able to put up a strong front to everyone else, huh?"

“Bingo. This exam crop is full of clan heirs with your entire team, most of Team 8, and Naruto and Sasuke, you know, the last heirs of two legendary clans,” she deadpanned. “This is the Hokage showing off his most promising group of genin in the most recent decade.”

“Mama said that there hasn’t been a cohort like ours since the Nidaime’s time, like, seventy years ago.”

“Exactly. But that raises the question—”

“Why now?” Ino offered, her smile brightening when Katsumi nodded and gestured for her to elaborate, letting her take over the theorizing. “Why would the Hokage wait until right now to show us o— Wait, is this why we were all made to take the Exams on our first year instead of waiting like literally everyone else?”

Katsumi grinned. “You’re on a roll today,” she complimented, rubbing her eyes. “But back on track since this is becoming one of those conversations. You’re on the right track; why would the Hokage want us to all compete right now and not later?”

Ino tapped her chin thoughtfully. “Well, it’s probably a matter of timing, but are we late or right on time?” Ino took one look at Katsumi questioning expression and continued. “Since it’s peacetime, the Hokage can’t exactly put an official rush-order on an entire class to push us all through the Academy at an expedited pace so whatever it is that’s worrying him enough to put us on display in the exams must be a pretty recent development— it’s been happening before we made it through the Academy.”

“What kind of window are we talking?” Katsumi pressed, enjoying Ino’s ideas. “Three, five, ten years? Twenty?”

“Um, I’m thinking, like, maybe five to seven-ish years in the making, long enough for it to become a growing problem. So if that’s correct, we, the heir class—”

“Please don’t call us th—”

“The heir class,” she said a bit louder, “I’ll call us what I want, thank you— we came late to the party, meaning that the problem has been brewing before we were out of the Academy.”

“What do you think the problem is?”

Ino shifted, swinging her legs off of the bed and looking out the window for a moment before finally answering. “Obviously a conflict with one of the major villages or at least the ones attending the Exams with us now.”

Katsumi smirked. Ino was getting good. “Which village?”

“Amegakure probably because historically they’ve hated us, especially since the Second War.”

The heiress had a point there. Amegakure was one of Konoha’s biggest enemies after what transpired during the Second Shinobi War and Katsumi couldn’t blame them. It was before her and even her sensei’s time, but she’d read enough about it in history books and they had learned about it in class enough to know that to live in Ame during that time was opening yourself up to being murdered in your bed by a travelling garrison of shinobi who needed supplies. Ame was a warzone and anyone with enough money got the hell out of there as soon as the fighting broke out.
Most people didn't have enough money.

The fact that Ame was the battleground for a war that they had no part it was definitely enough to make them a suspect. Revenge was a solid motive. But, Ino wasn’t thinking enough. “Then why hasn’t Ame tried something beforehand? And better yet, why wouldn’t the Hokage train up the classes before us like he’s been doing with us? Like you said that’s an old problem, decades in the making.”

Ino sighed. “Plus Ame’s military might isn’t enough to match Konoha’s if reports of poverty are to be believed. Damnit, so not Ame.”

“Not Ame,” Katsumi repeated. “So that leaves Taki, Suna, Kusa, and Otogakure. Let’s do a breakdown, I take Kusa and Oto, you take Taki and Suna. You go first.”

“Ugh, you would give me the hard ones,” Ino complained, but perking up at the challenge all the same. Breakdowns were a fun game they had come up with when they had conversations like these whether they were dissect a person or a situation in this case. The objective was to take what information they were given and rule out possible ideas until they reached a working hypothesis and debate which one was the most likely to be accurate.

But for right now, they were just ruling out which village could be behind the conflict.

“Alright, the easy one to rule out first is Taki because they’ve historically stayed out of conflict between the Big Five unless, like, either we or Iwa were paying them, and since Iwa isn’t at the exams this year, that rules them out for the most part unless, like, they have some kind of hidden agenda that we don’t know about.”

There wasn’t much known about the Waterfall Village. They didn’t stray far from their borders, didn’t pick fights with anyone, and stayed the hell away from Konoha after one of their own tried to assassinate the Shodaime and failed. They weren’t likely suspects.

“Good. Kusa is a diplomatic village and Konoha right now is the most powerful shinobi village. Unless Kusa had some serious backing and hella insurance from, like, Kumo or Iwa — or hell, both — they wouldn’t cross us. They’re small and rely mostly on alliances to make it through and if Konoha is on the winning side and they’re opposite to us, they would be fucked. I would rule them out just because of that but, Orochimaru was wearing the face of a Kusa kunoichi when he first attacked us.”

“He could’ve stolen the hitai-ate. Or worn a henge. That doesn’t mean much,” Ino pointed out, crossing her arms over her chest.

Katsumi sighed. “Plus he could also be trying to throw us off his tail by wearing that Kusa headband and incite more distrust between us. I’m going to go on and say that Kusa’s out too just because there isn’t enough evidence to support it.”

Katsumi sent Ino a sharp grin. “This is where things get sticky.”

“Suna is a maybe because of all the mission-poaching courtesy of our shinobi. They’re poor and struggling.”

Katsumi narrowed her eyes in question. “According to whom? I haven’t really heard anything about Suna’s economy. Everything is super tight-lipped in the mission’s office about that and Suna definitely wouldn’t want that getting out.”

“Just an idea. I mean, it’s no secret that we’ve been taking a lot of Wind country missions and taking
their money when they could be spending it on their own people. That’s bound to cause some sort of discord.”

“Yeah,” Katsumi agreed, “but we’re allies, Konoha and Suna, and have been for decades. Would this be enough for them to throw all of that away? I mean, it’s not our fault that they aren’t producing enough quality shinobi and they would do the same to us if given the chance,” she pointed out.

“Honor and fairness are for samurai and you know it. These are shinobi we’re talking about; backstabbing is expected, welcomed, even. Our village is eating and theirs isn’t. Seems pretty simple to me.”

“Okay, that’s fair, but you said it yourself, Suna’s military is lacking. Most of their genin didn’t even make it past the first round so how could they possibly be a threat unless they were allied with someone bigger?”

The blonde groaned. “Ugh, why is this so fucking hard? I still think it’s Suna though because they can choose who they send to the Exams so maybe this is a feint? So that we think that’s all they have but, really, their might is with the jonin in the entourage with the Kazekage.”

Seafoam green eyes flashed across Katsumi’s brain, the memory of the red-haired boy with the terrifying chakra causing her stomach to lurch. If Suna wanted to take them out, whatever that boy was would probably be a problem.

Especially if he is what I think he is...

“Interesting angle, but we’re getting off-topic. This isn’t about who is present right now unless they’re going to stage a full-out invasion, which I doubt. This is about which village is enough to make the most powerful man in our village desperate enough to use green genin as a way to show off strength. Suna is a good idea because they’re a major village, but I’m not sure if the Hokage is scared of them so much as just a little warry.”

Ino rolled her eyes. “Whatever. I still think it’s Suna.”

“Moving onto our last contender: Otokagure, the new guy on the block. It’s totally Oto and I don’t even have to argue it, but I will for the sake of the rules. One, it’s Orochimaru’s village. Two, it’s Orochimaru’s village. Three, it’s Orochi-fuckin’-maru’s village.”

Ino made a face and looked at her. “One, the word ‘village’ is a strong word since they’re not legitimate without a Daimyo. Two, how are you so sure? Last I checked, Oto didn’t even have a Kage so much as it did an alleged council.”

“Oto doesn’t officially have a Kage, but I’m positive Orochimaru is the guy behind it. Think about it, this random ass village pops up out of nowhere within the past decade and the first time any of their genin come to a Konoha Chunin Exam, Orochimaru himself shows up and attacks us? Plus when I was in the forest, the Sound genin answered to him, called him Orochimaru-sama and everything. Too many damn coincidences to be anything other than a pattern.”

“Then why would they be invited to the Exams? Orochimaru hates the Sandaime and he knows this. Why willingly invite a snake into our midst?”

“Now that I’m not super sure of,” Katsumi admitted. “Maybe it’s a trap to lure him into a false sense of security and then shut Oto down while their military is split? To keep an eye on them—I don’t know, but I bet Orochimaru is the reason.”

“Wait, shut up, no,” Ino interjected, waving her hands in front of her face. “Nobody knows anything
about them. Nothing. Not their military power or their numbers, Sage, as far as I know, no one even knows where they’re located. And why the hell would they only send three genin then to the exams? I think they’re small and insignificant, but they have the potential to become a problem later.”

Katsumi hid her wince at the mention of the Sound team well. “Bitch, you’re just saying that because you’re sold on Suna being the culprit.”

Ino scoffed and swung her feet over the bed to stand up. “Because I’m right.”

“I dunno, if I had the choice of being scared of some starving desert people and Orochimaru, I think I’d choose the latter over the former,” she said as Ino stretched her arms over her head. “You heading out?”

The blonde nodded. “I want to practice my aim before it gets too dark to see, but I’ll probably swing round your flat tomorrow afternoon after training. This conversation isn’t finished.”

Katsumi laughed. “No it is not,” she agreed.

Ino opened the door and paused. “Be more careful, okay?” Bewildered, Katsumi nodded, unused to Ino blatantly showing that she cared like that without it being wrapped in an insult. “I don’t want the nurses to have to get you a hospital punch-card: go three times, get the fourth visit half-off, you know?”

There was a beat of silence.

“I hate you.”

“The feeling is very much so mutual,” Ino laughed, pushing open the door. “But seriously, do be careful, alright?”

Katsumi shifted to sit up straighter. “Yeah, yeah, I get it, mom.”

Katsumi was alone for the rest of the afternoon.

Thank the Sage.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Haha yeah, sorry this chapter’s a day late. There’s really no excuse tbh but I’ve been super writer’s blocked for like a month. This chapter took FOREVER to make and I’m still not really happy with it. *groan* But such is the life of a fanfiction writer, ne?

Europe was great! Greece had the best food out of all the countries I visited by far and had the prettiest beaches so shout out to Greece! Thanks for letting me go on hiatus until I got back in the states. It was a much-needed respite.

Ino and Katsumi are lowkey my favorite dynamic to write because they’re just two Libras (Li-bros) out here fuckin’ it up and serving looks. Their relationship is based on mine with a really close friend of mine’s so it was pretty easy writing their interactions. Kagome is a proud but scared mom ;-) I was tired of the whole “abused, neglected orphan” cliche so I decided to write a stable caretaker for our favorite brown-skinned girl. She’s honestly the least fucked up out of Team 7 so shout out to Kagome for
facilitating a fairly normal childhood. Sachi would be thankful.

Poor Katsumi. I love her, but she has a bit of an inflated sense of self-importance. Kagome probably doesn’t sleep well for a lot of reasons, not just because she worries about her. But hey, preteens, amiright?

I hope this chapter wasn’t boring because it was super dialogue-heavy. I just kinda ran with whatever went on in my head.

QoTP: Which character do y’all miss in the story now that I brought back Ino and Kagome?

Shoutouts: to the tumblr fam and our two newest members: fellowshipoftheflutes and drbkuodds!! Welcome to the dark side!

Eimhee: Oh they’re going to fucking LOSE it. Remember that episode in classic Naruto when they spent like an entire day trying to see what was under Kakashi’s mask? Yeah worse than that.

Octoskies: NOOO KEEP SENDING LONG COMMENTS I LOVE THEM AND YOU <3.

But yeah, Hiro is the true definition of a ride or die and I love her. KATSUMI NEEDED THIS RELAXATION DAY. Baby girl needs some self care and stress relief. Good thing Ino’s really good at that. They need a spa day, all of them. Katsumi’s gonna be fine tho. Fortunately, she has a pretty solid support system with Kakashi and Team Seven, Ino, her Academy boys, Mei, and even Inoka-sensei. But she’s totally gonna get the last laugh. PAPAKASHI IS MY FAVORITE THING TO WRITE. I swear to all that is good and holy, when I write Kakashi’s long-dormant paternal instincts jumping out, I gain like two years to my life. My crops are watered, the sun is shining, the harvest is bountiful. People need to learn to stop messing with Kakashi’s kids, honestly. Like he’s crazy and will kill anyone who messes with them I stg stop playing with this man. AHHHH I’m not looking forward to that conversation between the two of them. It’s not going to be a fun one. Katsumi’s gonna feel so betrayed that he didn’t tell her and Kakashi’s gonna feel so guilty and it’s gonna be a MESS.

Thanks for the long comment, I appreciate it so so so so so much!! And if you like dialogue-heavy chapters, I hope you liked this one lmao. It’s almost EXCESSIVE. ;)

Kurochach: Kakashi as a deadbeat teacher kinda pissed me off ngl. He taught them NOTHING. Nothing but tree-climbing and half-ass teamwork. He hardly taught team 7 because by the time they came back to him from their respective teachers, they were mainly taught by the Sannin and he got to kinda take credit as their official sensei. It was fucking stupid. And people still have the audacity to say he was the best teacher in the game. Like, don’t get me wrong, I love Kakashi, I really do. But his canonical teaching skills leave MUCH to be desired. Also, it was Zabusa!! Surprise!! Don’t feel bad for forgetting. I deadass forget things about this story and I WROTE IT lmao. And don’t worry about the characters not experiencing trauma! They’ll get that in spades. :)) Thanks for the comment!! ‘preciate it!

Lollipops4All: PapaKashi is my aesthetic. BAMF!Sakura is what keeps my skin clear and my crops watered. Thanks! Also, not spoiling anything, but don’t worry about the pairings. Any guesses on who it might be tho? So far no one has guessed the right person. ;)}
czat: I’m glad you loved the chapter and Katumi’s resting period. Lord knows the poor baby fucking needs it. Also Kakashi being a responsible adult is my kink. Surprise. And don’t worry about “commenting late”! I posted this late so I guess we’re even lmao. Thanks!!

Again, sorry this chapter was a day late.

Mkay, onto the next!!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!