**Breathe (Don't Falter)**

by silenceia

**Summary**

A child displaced by powers she cannot control, Jasmine Potter must learn to adapt to a strange life in an even stranger land.
Chapter 1

When Jasmine Potter wakes on the morning of July 12th 1987 to the shrill demands of her aunt, her hair is no longer the drab brown the woman forced her to dye it the previous day. There's no explanation for the return of the red colour, and even though she loves it, she dreads Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon's reaction to this oddity.

Her allotted bathroom time is short. She doesn't waste it by dwelling on the unhealthy pallor of her skin and the dark bruises caused by her cousin Dudley's roughhousing and his parents' grabbing hands. Jasmine can't risk not eating today - for the last two days she went hungry and her stomach aches from the emptiness. More than that, she gets dizzy if she moves too quickly.

Shower finished and hair hastily braided, Jasmine rushes into the kitchen on quiet feet. The caution is unnecessary — the telly's noise drowns out what little noise she makes. But it's a habit by now — good girls should be neither seen nor heard.

Today's a Sunday, and it's looking to be a decent one, too. Uncle Vernon is taking Dudley on a father-son-bonding outing to a rugby game, and Petunia is invited to a tea party with the assorted wives of Privet Drive. This means that Jasmine will be sent to Mrs. Figg's house. There, she'll be free to read the old woman's books, eat the sweet cookies she bakes, and cuddle her cats.

She finishes cooking breakfast and setting the table in time for her family members to tromp down the stairs. While she cleans up, the dissonant melody of her relatives' conversation drones in her ears: Vernon speaks of his company and complains about the government while Petunia shares the neighbourhood's latest gossip, accompanied by the noises of Dudley devouring his food.

Quiet as a ghost, she finishes up with the dishes and slinks back into her cupboard. Once they're done eating, the Dursleys will spend the morning attending church, a place they forbid Jasmine to go because she's a bad girl and people will talk.

This is fine. Jasmine prefers to stay in the cupboard under the stairs over visiting somewhere everyone hates her.

Not that any places exist where such isn't the case.

At least no one spotted the reappearance of her red hair.

Jasmine gets lucky. Aunt Petunia drops her off at Mrs. Figg's place. Listening to the endless chatter about cats seems a small price to pay for the cookies and the cats she can play with.

Cats are great. Their fur is soft and most like her right back. If they don't, they opt for staying out of her way. It shows consideration no human being has ever bothered to give Jasmine. Not even Mrs. Figg, who only talks about her own woes and never pays attention to what others have to say.
She isn't unkind though, and for that Jasmine is grateful.

Petunia retrieves her niece in the afternoon and puts her to work in the kitchen, expecting that her husband and son will return ravenous after their big day. The number of potatoes she has Jasmine peel while she prepares steak and salad doesn't bode well: There'll be enough leftovers that saving them for tomorrow instead of letting Jasmine have some would make more sense to her.

At least Mrs. Figg gave her enough cookies that her stomach no longer hurts so bad.

Eventually, Vernon and Dudley return, both in a foul mood: Dudley missed a show he likes to watch due to getting stuck in traffic. The ensuing tantrum stressed his father out enough that he goes straight for the liquor cabinet to pour himself a drink while his wife attempts to comfort their son.

Petunia sees Jasmine's longing glance towards the potatoes — just one should be fine, right? — and hisses at her for being so greedy. After that, Jasmine does her best to make herself scarce and unnoticed, disappearing into her cupboard as soon as she can.

Falling asleep is impossible. She's hungry to the point of nausea even though Mrs. Figg fed her cookies earlier. Then there's the thirst — it makes her head pound with a dull ache.

Her slightly broken alarm clock, pilfered from Dudley's trash two months back, reads nearly midnight when Jasmine can't take it anymore and leaves the cupboard in search of food. It's a terrible idea, she knows that. But her stomach is eating itself up and her head hurts, she really needs to drink something.

No one paid her much attention all day, and now they're all asleep. So she feels safe enough to venture out anyway even though just sitting up on her lumpy mattress makes her dizzy.

She finds her way to the kitchen. Bumps into a doorframe once, but it's quiet enough that Vernon's snores don't pause.

It's dark inside the room, but she won't risk turning on the light. The neighbours will see and talk. It might be too risky to even open the fridge.

She has to drink before eating anyway - her throat is far too dry.

The Dursleys keep glasses in a cabinet Jasmine needs a stool to reach. Drinking from the tap would be easier, but the sink is stainless steel and water drops hitting it might make enough noise to wake Petunia or Vernon.

Finding the stool (usually used so Jasmine can reach the stove for cooking) in the darkness is an adventure. Navigating around furniture when she's this unsteady on her feet is difficult. But she manages.

Except the glasses are in the cabinet's back, so she has to bounce on her toes to get that extra bit of height.

Her fingers close around a glass, the stool wobbles, and Jasmine crashes to the ground, her head
hitting the floor painfully. The glass shatters on the kitchen tiles.

Whimpering, she clutches at her head, which feels as though it was split open. Bright light suddenly illuminates the kitchen, and she groans when it sends daggers of pain into her brain. Squeezes her eyes shut, but they widen the next moment because a meaty hand is digging into her skull, grabbing her hair, yanking her upwards.

Uncle Vernon is yelling at her, his face an ugly puce colour, spit sprinkling Jasmine's skin. She barely hears a word, her head is spinning, her skull ringing. The slap he sends across her face makes it worse, and the edges of her vision narrow. The lights flicker to the beat of her pounding heart, and Vernon's skin suddenly goes ashen. By her hair he drags her down the corridor to the cupboard and yanks open the door. Throws her in, the force of it sending her crashing into the small shelf on the opposite wall.

Her head snaps against the edge of it, her vision flashes white, and then — nothing.

As far as Jasmine Potter knows, she's always been a normal girl. Odd things happen around her sometimes, but they've never been her fault, no matter what her relatives' opinions are.

While bright and observant for a child her age, she's utterly and completely wrong about that. It might be accurate to say Jasmine Potter dies that night.

For after Vernon Dursley slams the cupboard's door shut, terrified out of his mind and masking it with anger, something wholly unusual occurs.

Jasmine's body lifts off the mattress, a strange power rushing from her. It whirs around her limp form, making a sound like the screech of a door with rusty and unoiled hinges being forced open.

The unconscious girl convulses, her body contorts, and her mouth opens in a silent scream. Light flashes — and Jasmine Potter disappears.

The meadow is lovely. Soft-looking grass interspersed with little flowers, their star-shaped white blossoms glowing in the moonlight. A large weeping willow's branches sway gently in a mild breeze.

The peace is destroyed by an infernal noise — as if the world itself were screaming.

It doesn't go unnoticed. A moment after it starts, a masked figure blurs into the scene, just in time to shield his eyes from the blinding light shining from a rip in the air, as if someone had torn a hole in reality.
Then it's over, the meadow as peaceful as it was before.

Under the tree lies the motionless form of Jasmine Potter.

Chapter End Notes

Here we go... the long-awaited (for those that knew it was happening) rewrite of Growing Strong.

Fair warning - this one's gonna deviate from the original version *heavily*
Chapter 2

The room appears to be a regular hospital room at first glance, housing only one patient. Two things make it stand out from any other room in the village hospital: Its location in the high-security wing and the occupant it contains.

"She hasn't woken?" Sarutobi Hiruzen asks, contemplating the girl that ANBU Hound had retrieved from the site of her sudden appearance.

"Once, during surgery," Shiranui Genma, the guard assigned to her reports. "They put her under right away."

Hiruzen nods, frowning at the motionless redhead on the hospital bed. In all his years, he's never encountered a case like this. At first, he'd assumed her to be an Uzumaki, perhaps sent over by a kind of last-resort seal. But the information Yamanaka Inoichi extracted from her mind as soon as he could safely do so disproved that theory.

And as if she wasn't enough of a mystery, lodged deep within her Inoichi had found a parasite, leeching from her very essence.

All of Inoichi's attempts at removing it had failed until Hiruzen had signed off on a highly risky procedure: To use medical ninjutsu to stop the girl's heartbeat so that the leech had no life force to feed on anymore. But to do such a thing to a child... it was a vile operation, and he feels dirty for approving it — especially considering the medical complications upon her arrival.

But it was successful. Outside its host, the wretched thing had withered away into nothingness.

"She's not expected to wake for another day at least," Genma adds, drawing him back to the present.

That gives Hiruzen enough time to decide on a course of action. Inoichi extracted enough information from her to determine just how little threat she posed. If she weren't from a different world, Hiruzen would have had her delivered to the orphanage.

But, considering the amount of power she had, leaving her to fend for herself would be unwise. The child hadn't appeared by mere accident. She had tunnelled through the fabric of reality and released enough energy to raise hairs in all of Konoha — and likely even further. It was a nightmare to cover up.

Certain parties were still looking into the incident. Hiruzen needed to keep an eye on that. He trusts his advisors, but he isn't blind to their views.

But what to do with the child?

It becomes obvious soon that he will have more than ample time to prepare, for the new arrival doesn't wake for quite longer than estimated.
Nightmares haunt Jasmine's sleep. Endless brightness envelopes her, darkness rends her apart, pain drowns out every clear thought.

She dreams of being in a place she knows makes up her own innermost self. It's there she encounters a wretched thing, and when it notices her presence, it lunges for her, fangs lodging in her chest even as chains appear out of nowhere to rip it away. Jasmine screams in pain, attempts to fight it off, yet it only burrows deeper.

And then, suddenly, it goes limp, and so does she. Like puppets with their strings cut, she and it both collapse. The beast is ripped from her, and even weakened, it tears a chunk of Jasmine with it as it disappears. The wound hurts, and though a strange light comes to soothe it, she grieves the loss.

An eternity she spends in this place, which is both bright and dark, cold and warm, everything and nothing. Adrift in an odd state between sleeping, waking, and dreaming.

She sees her parents dying for her, killed by a monster wielding what can only be magic. Observes as she's pulled from rubble by a man she knows she loves, only to be handed to a large and hairy stranger, who then passes her to strangers. They leave her at Privet Drive, alone for long hours until Petunia finds her.

She spends endless time locked in her cupboard under the stairs, hungry and weak, tiny spider-feet crawling over her skin.

Re-reads Mrs. Figg's books while the cats huddle around her, traces her name on the pages, written under the image of a plant.

Relives Dudley hunting her through the streets of Little Whinging.

Over and over, her fingers close around that glass only to topple and fall.

Again and again. There's no end in sight, and Jasmine wonders if this is hell.

Strange sounds and scents surround her when she wakes. She lies on a bed and figures she must be in a hospital, because she definitely isn't in Dudley's second bedroom. There are tubes stuck in her skin, and were she not so drowsy, she would panic.

Her room has no windows, she's unable to see the outside. Its white walls are blank, there's not even a clock.

Perhaps Vernon finally dumped her in a loony bin, like he threatened once or thrice.

Sitting up takes her a few tries. Getting to her feet makes her dizzy, and just standing drains her of what little strength she has.

Jasmine decides against pulling out the tubes and walking to the door. Instead, she lays down on the bed again and waits.

It's miserable. The only thing she can do is contemplate her confusing dreams which is frustrating.
at best since they make little sense, but there's nothing to distract her from them either.

Her parents died in a car accident, they weren't murdered. Plus, things like magic belong in books and movies, not the real world. That's why Aunt Petunia forbade both Dudley and her from looking at such things.

And yet.

And yet Jasmine's hair is red when she dyed it brown. It's not the only odd thing that ever happened around her either. All those little incidents that weren't her fault, but which she was always blamed for...

Perhaps this explains the hurtful things the Dursleys always call her — freak, unnatural, evil.

Her fingers rub at her scar as she recalls how dream-Jasmine received it. Green light heading for her, something worming inside. She shudders and imagines a slimy worm squirming in her brain.

Dimly recalls that thing tearing into her.

It wasn't real. Jasmine only dreamed it. Motorcycles don't fly, people can't turn into animals, and she's just a normal girl.

Maybe if she keeps telling herself that, she'll believe it.

It's as if a veil was lifted from her eyes, and now that it's missing she wants it back.

At least she's doesn't have to suffer in solitude for long. The door opens and what Jasmine guesses is a doctor walks inside. He wears a white coat and has a stethoscope dangling from his neck. A nurse follows in his wake.

Neither talk as they examine her. Jasmine can't bring herself to speak either, though she can't swallow a gasp at seeing the doctor's hands glowing with green light. Where it touches, the pain fades.

Okay, so magic might be real, and she doesn't want to think about what that means for the other things she dreamed about.

He says something, a vaguely amused look on his face, but Jasmine has no clue what the words mean.

The duo leaves soon after, though the nurse returns promptly with a tray of food. It's a small helping of rice and soup, a glass of water. She's uncomfortably full soon and almost leaves leftovers. But who knows when she'll get her next meal, so she forces it all down.

Afterwards, she's tired and falls into a deep sleep. Hours pass without dreams.

Jasmine finds herself still alone the next time she comes awake. Someone had to have visited, though, because a glass of water waits at her bedside. Jasmine gulps it down and wishes there were more.

The door swings open and three men enter, as if her thoughts had summoned them. They look strange, their clothes unlike anything she's ever seen anyone wear. The eldest one has on a red robe, a loose white jacket around his shoulders, and an oddly shaped hat on his head. To his left walks a man with blond hair longer than Aunt Petunia's, who would have a fit if she saw it. The third visitor's hairstyle is no less odd, tied back into a spiky ponytail that reminds her of a pineapple.
Two scars mar his face, and Jasmine struggles not to stare at them.

He, same as the long-haired one, wears a weird headband with an unfamiliar symbol on it.

Something about them sets alarm bells ringing, makes her think that they're dangerous. It's the way they hold themselves, the way they walk, the way their eyes take in every single detail about her and the room in an instant. Whatever it is, it unsettles her, but it also piques her curiosity.

The three study Jasmine, and she examines them right back. The silence worries her.

"Hello?" she finally greets.

The two men flanking the older one exchange a quick glance. The remaining man however gives her a friendly nod and speaks a word that has the sound of a greeting though again, like with the doctor, she doesn't understand.

Maybe she hit her head really hard. A brain injury. That happened in one of Mrs. Figg's novels.

The old man says something to his companions that has them relaxing. The pineapple-haired guy drags a hand over his face, muttering under his breath before focusing on Jasmine. Pointing at himself, he announces, "Shikaku," and introduces the blond as Inoichi. The wrinkly one is Hokage-sama.

"Jasmine," she answers, feeling lost. Uncertain.

What in the world is going on here?

The man called Inoichi repeats her name, but he's unfamiliar with English, making it sound awkward.

She frowns. Perhaps if she... yeah, that seems like a decent idea. With her hands, she mimes writing on her hands. Hokage-sama, aiming a curious look at her, produces pencil and... a paper scroll? How odd.

Something's off about this entire situation. By now Jasmine is pretty sure that the Dursleys abandoned her in another country so they wouldn't have to bother with her anymore. Which, fair enough? She broke a glass and would have stolen food.

Jasmine is handed pencil and scroll.

She's always enjoyed drawing and she's doodled jasmine flowers before, fascinated because a thing so pretty carries the same name as her.

She points at her drawing. "Jasmine," she repeats and gives the men a worried look.

Hokage-sama's face lights up with understanding. "Riko," he translates.

Riko. That's acceptable, Jasmine supposes. It's still her name. Just a different word, but one they can pronounce.

She smiles and nods, trying to mask the confusion over everything else.

Silence follows before Hokage-sama exhales and gestures to Inoichi. The man nods and approaches Jasmine. She eyes him with trepidation.

Can't help the flinch when he raises his hand, the memory of Vernon striking her all too fresh in her
mind. Inoichi retreats at once, and whatever he says has a soothing cadence. For long moments he waits, and she realises that he's asking for her permission to come closer.

He's not her uncle. And he showed her more consideration than any other person Jasmine ever met. So she nods.

Inoichi steps forward slowly and again places his hand on her forehead gently. A strange buzzing comes from his palm and Jasmine tries to jerk back, but her forehead sticks to him, she can't get away and then it's too late - clear thought is ripped from her.

Hundreds of foreign words and their meanings flow into her mind. Symbols, *kanji*, flash before her eyes. Sentence structure, word order, pronunciation. She drowns in information, and pressure builds up in her skull until she's sure it's about to burst and all the words will spill on the floor.

She wants to scream but can't find her voice.

And then the ordeal is over. Inoichi withdraws his hand from her forehead. Jasmine scrambles back, clutches her head, gasps for air. Her breath is coming too fast, she's drowning in words, tossed about like a leaf trapped inside a hurricane.

Something cool seeps through the tubes into her veins, and the world goes soft before it fades.

Jasmine wakes up to miserable pain. Her head is pounding, her mind in chaos.

*Inoichi gave her a language.*

She laughs incredulously and stops because she sounds crazy. Even given the crazy situation. Magic is real, she's somewhere nobody understands English, and she woke up from a sleep that lasted long enough she was sure she was dead.

Jasmine spends the next few hours attempting to sort out the chaos of her thoughts. Tries to speak sentences, goes hunting for words that are now hiding in her memory. The sheer quantity of knowledge is too overwhelming to grasp, but leaving it unattended seems a terrible idea.

Plus, she has nothing else to do. At the very least, it distracts her from dreams that might be rooted in reality.

"My name is Riko," she practices saying.

Every word she gathers up and puts meaning to tastes like victory.

Some time passes. The nurse brings more food and then helps Jasmine shower.

She can't suppress a distressed whimper upon seeing herself — good lord, her *hair* — in the
mirror. It's *that* bad.

The nurse, sympathetic, ends up giving her a new haircut. Jasmine feels odd about it: Petunia, for all she complained about her hair, had always refused to make it shorter. It had reached past Jasmine's waist, last she remembered.

By the time the nurse finishes trimming Jasmine's red locks, they only tickle her shoulders and her head feels oddly light now. The sensation isn't unpleasant and she likes how the strands curl, no longer dragged down by their own weight. Instead of falling in her face — *"To hide that ugly scar,"* Petunia's used to say — they frame her features. Her bright green eyes stand out starkly, which distracts from said scar.

She's given clothes that are entirely different from the shapeless dresses Aunt Petunia used to supply her with. A dark t-shirt and grey shorts in her size, or they would be if Jasmine weren't so thin. Losing so much weight — she can count her ribs, can see the blue of her veins under her chalk-pale skin — means that the clothes swim around her.

She still looks like a different person. The difference that the haircut and clothing make startles her. Jasmine straightens and tentatively smiles at her reflection.

Her relatives won't like her appearance once she's sent back, but she'll enjoy it while it lasts.

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Jasmine stumbles out of the bathroom, her body still weak and her legs protesting the movement. She pauses when she's met with the sight of Hokage-sama and Shikaku waiting for her.

Inoichi's absence comes as a relief. On the one hand, he'd given her a language. On the other, it had *hurt*. A lot. She'd assumed he was *okay*, but then he caused her pain by merely touching her.

Hokage-sama speaks, voice friendly. Jasmine recognises the words *Riko-chan* and *evening*. A greeting? The question he asks after that, he has to repeat at a slower pace. Only then does she understand he's asking how she's feeling.

The vocabulary is in her brain, but it hasn't settled yet, and she hasn't figured out just how all those words fit together in a sentence. It's hard to form a clear thought at all, with her mind in so much chaos.

It'd take time, she supposes.

"Better," she answers, and then adds, "Sir."

He nods and says something else. She recognises the word *pretty*.

If he's talking about her looks, then he's just saying it to be nice. She's skeletal and far too pale, the shadows under her eyes are awfully dark. Fixing her hair and clothes won't change that.

She wobbles over to the bed and collapses on it. With care and effort, she asks, "Where am I?"

The old man sighs. He speaks slowly, mindful of her poor language skills. "You are in Konohagakure no Sato in the Country of Fire."
Jasmine feels a distant sense of fear. That name is wholly unfamiliar. It sounds like something from a story.

She shrugs with forced calm. "My relatives brought me?"

"Someone found you unconscious on the outskirts of the village. We regret to tell you that we have no way of sending you back."

Perhaps it should be a shock to hear this, but Jasmine doesn't have the energy to care. And it's such a Dursley thing to do, to knock her out and leave her somewhere she has no way to return from. Uncle Vernon had made threats to that effect often enough.

Well, if nothing else, she's rid of them. That's good.

But now she has nowhere to live.

"Okay," she answers quietly, clenching her fingers in the bedsheets to hide their trembling.

The duo exchanges a look. "As you have nowhere to go, I offer you a home in our village," Hokage-sama continues.

As if she even has a choice. Jasmine nods weakly and attempts to seem grateful. "Thank you."

She may not have liked the Dursleys, but being abandoned is still painful.

"Shikaku-kun here has agreed to take you in. For discretion's sake, you will be a distant cousin of his wife who had to move here."

She only understands half of his words at most, but the gist of it is clear. This stranger is supposed to let her live with him. He hasn't even talked to her yet beyond introductions.

Yet staying with him seems a better choice compared to going to an orphanage. The Dursleys had always told her how lucky she was that they had taken her in instead of leaving her in one of those awful places.

"I'm afraid you must stay a few days longer in the hospital." Hokage-sama suddenly smiles. "Welcome to Konoha, Riko-chan."
Chapter 3

The days until Jasmine — Riko now, she best get used to that — can leave the hospital pass with agonising slowness. Her saviour is the nurse who brings her simple books to read, which helps with getting a handle on the language Inoichi crammed into her brain. But it exhausts her.

At least her headache has gotten better. Though it tends to return whenever she reads for longer than an hour.

Jasmine is almost glad when Shikaku arrives at her room and tells her it’s time to go. Only almost. The man’s a stranger, she doesn’t know him at all, much less trust him.

He gives her comfortable open-toed shoes, so that’s a point in his favour. In the last few days, people have given her nicer things than she’s received her entire life.

Shikaku leads her through several corridors until they reach a lift that takes them downstairs into an entrance hall.

Her eyes grow wide when they exit the hospital. The air smells good, everything looks green and vibrant after days cooped up in her colour- and windowless hospital room. There are more trees than she’s ever seen in one place before, especially such large ones. A wall surrounds hospital and lawn, with a currently opened gate being the only exit. Behind it, she spies a busy street.

It’s beautiful, Jasmine thinks. Peaceful.

Or perhaps she spent too much time in the hospital. Even if that’s the case — she will savour it.

She’d learned to enjoy the little things a long time ago. The quiet and easy moments.

Shikaku holds his hand out to her. Jasmine — Riko — eyes it in confusion.

“The street is busy,” the man explains. “I don’t want you to get lost. That would be troublesome.”

“I’ll be careful,” she mumbles.

“I won’t harm you, little one,” he assures her.

“Didn’t think that!” Jasmine protests, and hopes she didn’t offend him too much.

He crouches down in front of her. Like this they’re almost at eye-level. “I promise not to hurt you,” he says.

She stares at him. Why is he doing this?

“You’re under my protection. It’s okay to be scared, but you don’t have to be.”

Jas- Riko blinks slowly, attempts to process his words. He stands again and holds out his hand once more.

With trepidation, she slips her cold little palm into his. It closes around hers, calloused and warm. It’s not unpleasant.
He tugs her forward and they set in motion. Down the path towards the gate, and then through it. Jasmine stares and is suddenly grateful for Shikaku’s hand anchoring her.

It’s too much.

People everywhere, talking to each other, calling out greetings, merchants praising their wares. She sways on her feet when a group of men leaps across the street at roof-level. A gaggle of children runs by, throwing wooden stars at each other.

Shikaku points out shops as they walk past, describes the wares they sell. He indicates people and explains which ‘clans’ they come from — ‘Inuzuka’ for example are the ones with triangles tattooed on their cheeks and work with dogs. The folks with the white eyes are ‘Hyuuga’, who are also nobility in addition. ‘Aburame’ wear sunglasses and bulky cloaks, and they use bugs, whatever that means.

They pause for a few minutes so Shikaku can exchange a greeting with an ‘Akimichi’, who comes out of a restaurant to greet him. The large man studies Jasmine with curiosity and she tries not to hide behind Shikaku.

He doesn’t seem to expect her to answer him, which is a relief. There’s too much to take in to even begin sorting out the words in her head.

After an endless walk through busy streets (and the realisation that Hokage-sama must be really important, what with his face carved into the rock wall overlooking the village, and just what was he doing, bothering with her?) they arrive in a quieter neighbourhood. Enormous trees shade everything and the houses, all but hidden between them, are a good distance away from each other, with large gardens surrounding them. The light that falls through the canopy has a greenish tint to it.

It’s silent, the atmosphere peaceful. Relaxed. Jasmine likes it.

“The Nara Clan compound,” Shikaku announces. “Your new home, little one.”

Jasmine looks at him with wide eyes and he gives her a smile before he tugs her along towards a large house hidden between azaleas higher than the building itself.

The interior of Shikaku’s home is kept simple and spacious. It feels comfortable in a way Privet Drive No. 4 with its polished surfaces and carefully arranged furniture never did.

“We’re home,” Shikaku announces after directing her to take off her shoes and leading her to a door. She blinks, wondering who he was addressing.

“Welcome home. You’re late,” is what greets them from the mouth of brown-haired woman with a no-nonsense face, standing at the stove of a spacious kitchen. A boy who looks like a miniature of Shikaku slouches at a large table with what she thinks is homework in front of him. What table space he isn’t occupying is loaded down with an overwhelming amount of dishes.

“Ah, sorry.” Shikaku scratches his head sheepishly. “But we’re here now. Riko-chan, meet my family. My wife, Yoshino, and our son, Shikamaru. Everyone, this is Riko.” He tugs at her hand, prompting her to step out from behind him, though she stays close. Her cheeks burn as woman and boy stare at her.

Yoshino’s expression goes from unamused to smiling brightly so abruptly that it gives Jasmine whiplash “Hello, dear!” she greets. “Welcome to the family! Why don’t you take a seat, we’ve
preparing a welcome dinner—"

“Does that mean I can stop doing homework?” the boy yawns.

“Shikamaru, you’re being rude!” Yoshino hisses. “And yes, we’re eating now. Don’t think you’ll get out of doing it later, though!”

“Troublesome,” Shikamaru mutters, carelessly gathering up his book, papers, and pen and dumping them into a bag at his feet. Then he looks at Jasmine. “Yeah, hi.”

Dinner is awkward. Jasmine — Riko, they call her Riko here, and she really should get used to that — barely speaks, has trouble getting words out of her mouth, can’t even understand half of what they’re talking about. The food is delicious, but she’s full after just a few bites. And she’s so tired, the walk and seeing so many new things exhausted her. Plus, her legs hurt.

She’s content to listen to their conversation. Shikaku works in the village administration, she gathers. Yoshino stays at home and takes care of clan stuff, whatever that entails. Shikamaru is a student at an academy, training to be a ‘ninja’.

He asks if she will be one, too.

“Don’t know,” she mumbles.

What *is* a ninja? The word sounds familiar, she *thinks* she might have seen it on one of Dudley’s video games before? But it probably doesn’t mean the same thing in this language. And those games are all about the blood and explosions. She doubts Shikamaru does anything like that. He seems nice, nothing like Dudley.

After dinner, Shikaku shows her upstairs. “Your room,” he says, opening the door and turning on the light.

Jasmine stares, stunned, too tired at this point to grasp that the beautiful room — it’s spacious, has a large window, wooden floors, cream-coloured walls and shelves filled with books — is supposed to be hers.

They gave her food and a room, didn’t even make her help with the dishes, though they had so many dirty ones after the meal.

Perhaps tomorrow everything will make more sense.

Shikaku raises his hand, making sure not to startle her. “May I?” he asks.

Jasmine stiffens, but gives him a shallow nod. Trembles when he makes contact.

He ruffles her hair.

It’s *baffling*.

“Good night, little one,” he says. “Sleep well.”

She blinks after him as he leaves. “Good night,” she whispers when he’s long gone.

Even though she’s tired to the bone, sleep is slow to claim her that night.
“So,” Yoshino says, as Shikaku and her share a late-night drink in his study. The children are in bed. “That’s the girl.”

“What to you think?” he asks his wife.

She tilts her head.

“Troublesome,” she sighs, and he cracks a grin. The sight of it paints a triumphant smile on her face. Kami, he loves her so very much.

“Indeed,” he agrees, thinking of the wide-eyed waif that he is now responsible for. So confused and off-balance, thrown into an unfamiliar world, in poor health at that. Not to speak of her mental condition — the file Inoichi wrote up did raise concerns.

Children were resilient, though. And he’d see to her safety from now on. As safe as Shikaku could make her, even while directing her towards the life of a shinobi as per his mission parameters.

She’d heal from the damage her former caretakers had wrought. That, too, he would ensure.

Yoshino swallows the remainder of her drink and stands. “Come along. It’s been a long day. You need rest.”

“That coming from you,” he drawls, smirking. “What a rarity.”


Shikaku wonders how he ever got so lucky, to be blessed with such a wonderful family. He certainly doesn’t deserve them.

But that doesn’t mean he won’t do right by them.

Jasmine never was a heavy sleeper, and she absolutely isn’t used to light shining into her sleep space. As soon as the rays of the sun tickle her nose, she wakes up. The clock on the wall reads five in the morning.

Straining her ears, she determines nobody else is awake, or at least no one is making noise.

If she were at the Dursleys’ house still, she’d start making breakfast. But she doesn’t know if she’s allowed to here. This isn’t her house and she has no idea how to cook any of the dishes they’d served yesterday.

Plus, there were a lot of leftovers last night. They might not want to make more food so soon.

For a while, she lies in bed, dozing. Then she climbs out to inspect the room that she still has trouble believing is hers.
It’s a room. For her.

Maybe they haven’t cleared out their cupboard under the stairs yet?

In the closet she finds an assortment of clothes that had to have been purchased for her. They’re all in her size. All look new, too.

Jasmine ignores the dresses and skirts and pulls on calf-length trousers, shirt, and a hoodie. For a moment she considers finding a bathroom, but she doesn’t want to go wandering in a house that isn’t hers. Instead she inspects the bookshelf — no one said she couldn’t read — before deciding on the slimmest novel. Better to start small, reading in this new language exhausts her.

The windowsill is a comfortable place to sit: the window looks out over the garden, giving a good view of the azalea bushes. She begins to read, soon riveted on the *Tale of the Gutsy Shinobi*. It’s confusing, has many words she doesn’t understand, and the world is utterly foreign to her. But the characters are engaging and the story is interesting.

Her reading progress is slow. Two hours have passed, and she’s only gotten through the first chapter when a knock at the door disturbs the silence. Jasmine — Riko, darn it — startles, head lifting from the book. “Yes?” she calls out.

Yoshino opens the door and blinks at seeing her curled up on the windowsill. “Good morning, Riko. I’m glad to see that one person in this house besides me is an early riser. I was just coming to wake Shikamaru and you up. We eat breakfast in half an hour.”

Jasmine takes a while to make sense of the multitude of still-foreign words. Yoshino has a quick was of speaking, as if she doesn’t want to waste time on words.

“Okay?” Riko answers hesitantly. “Um, I help with breakfast?”

“No need, take your time,” Yoshino answers, but gives her a smile. “Thank you for the offer, but the medics said you should go easy on your body for a while longer.”

She leaves as swiftly as she arrived. Jas- Riko hears her hammering on a door, hollering for Shikamaru. She winces because Aunt Petunia used to wake her up in that manner, and it was never pleasant to be on the receiving end of.

Her muscles are stiff when she climbs off the windowsill and walks over to the door. She really needs to use the restroom now. Fortunately, it’s easy to find.

After Jasmine’s business in there is done, she still has time to spare, so she goes back to her room to read a little more. On the way, she passes what must be Shikamaru’s bedroom, the door of which gapes wide open. She can’t help but sneak a glance inside.

A snort escapes her at the sight that greets her.

From the looks of it, Shikamaru crawled out of bed after his mother woke him. Now he lies on his stomach, sound asleep on the carpet. His hair, not tamed in yesterday’s ponytail, sticks up in every which direction. It looks like a fluffy hedgehog and she feels the strangest urge to run her hand over it.

But she knows he has school today, so she knocks on the doorframe, producing a quiet sound. He doesn’t so much as stir, so she tries again louder. Shikamaru answers with a muffled noise. Jas - Riko looks at the clock on his wall. “Food in fifteen minutes,” she relays hesitantly.
Shikamaru grunts. One of his hands moves and gives her a thumbs up. It falls back on the carpet a moment later.

Jasmine shrugs and takes that as her dismissal, fleeing into her room.

He makes it to breakfast on time, to the surprise of his mother.

Over the following days, Riko settles into this odd new life of hers. Most of the time she spends in her room reading aloud to herself. All the family members are busy during the day: Yoshino takes care of clan business, Shikamaru goes to school, Shikaku is the 'Jounin Commander'. Jounin, she learns by slogging through the Tale of the Gutsy Shinobi (only understanding about a third of it), is the highest ninja rank after village leader.

Shikaku as the one to command the jounin must therefore be very important to the village. Besides being the Nara clan head. Again, it makes her confused. What is he doing, taking her in? And she still doesn’t understand why the village leader (called ‘Hokage’) dealt with her personally.

Maybe it’s just what Hokages do. Jas — Riko doesn’t know how leading a village works, after all.

She’s pretty sure Little Whinging’s mayor never bothered with homeless kids that showed up out of nowhere, though. So it strikes her as odd.

Attempts to think of an explanation remain unsuccessful, so she tables the mystery. She has enough on her plate learning to even speak properly, not to mention figuring out how this place works. Yoshino takes her shopping one day — clothes, just for her, why? They gave her so many already! — and she didn’t realise it the first time she walked through the village, but she has yet to see a single car or bike. And paying attention to it now, everything seems so old-fashioned.

When she looks at a map later that day, she finds nothing familiar. No mention of the UK, or Europe, or America.

That must be why they can’t return her to the Dursleys. From her… dreams, she remembers talk of how the magical world is a secret to normal people. Riko’s seen them do magic here, so if the Country of Fire is a magic nation, then it makes sense she never heard about it.

Again, she leaves the issue for later pondering. Her immediate concerns take priority.

The weekend comes and with it Shikamaru’s one day off from the Academy. Even on Saturdays he has half a day of lessons, which surprised Riko, but on Sundays the students can recharge their energy.

Not that Shikamaru attends school as much as he’s supposed to. It was awkward when Riko witnessed Yoshino scolding him for skipping lessons so he could play with his friends. The woman
gave him extra chores — and Riko couldn’t help noticing how few there were and how quickly he finished them, not even coming close to the workload the Dursleys burdened her with.

But those chores are non-existent on a Sunday, apparently.

Riko finds herself rather flummoxed when after breakfast, he asks, “Has someone shown you around the compound yet?”

She shakes her head no.

“Cool, come on.”

Confused, Riko follows him after looking back at Yoshino and Shikaku, both of whom are giving their son approving smiles.

Riko takes less than one minute to decide that she’d absolutely be willing to wage battles on Shikamaru’s behalf. And it’s because he asks her, “Is there anything you want to see?”

He looks rather bemused by her awed stare at being asked what she wants. When he realises no answer is forthcoming — the words just won’t come, and what’s she even supposed to say, she knows nothing about this place — he starts the tour of the compound. Oblivious to the fact that he’s just earned her undying loyalty.

Shikamaru is good company. He walks at a slow pace, making it easy for her to keep up with, and he uses simple words. She gets to see the family ‘dojo’, the clan shrine, the cluster of buildings that make up the Nara headquarters, comprising the clan assembly hall, a library, a clinic, and research facilities. Headquarters is where his mom works, Shikamaru tells Riko.

It’s completely different from Little Whinging. Unfamiliar, but she likes it. The big trees have stopped unsettling her, too.

When they leave it behind, she notices an enclosed area. It has to be really big, because she can’t see how far the high wooden fence extends. Behind it looms a meadow leading up to a forest.

“That’s the clan forest. Want to have a look? Can’t go in without permission, though.”

Riko nods. The two of them approach the fence and at Shikamaru’s prompt, climb a tree, overlooking the meadow. For a while, they sit in companionable silence. She relishes the chance to rest a bit and enjoy the gorgeous view. Everything in this place seems so vibrant compared to what she knew before.

Little Whinging was a grey town. Even the green lawns seemed drab and somehow artificial.

A small group of deer steps out of the clan forest. Riko’s feels something in her chest clench. She can’t stop staring, before her eye images of her dreams flashing: The man she now knows was her father, turning into a stag and back. His friend, her uncle, holding her steady while she laughs, sitting on the animal’s shoulders. Her heart hurts.

“What’s wrong?” Shikamaru asks. She tears her eyes from the deer. Her mouth opens and clothes, the words just not coming, because how can she put into words something she isn’t even sure is a dream or reality?

He shrugs and mutters a word under his breath which she identifies as troublesome. She cringes. Shikamaru uses that word a lot and so does his father, but so far they hadn’t applied it to her.
“Are you okay?” Shikamaru asks, giving her another weird look.

“Fine,” she mumbles. He doesn’t appear convinced, but he refrains from pressing the matter.

They return to the house not long later. Yoshino has lunch ready for them and makes them set the table. Riko is glad she’s allowed to help now — it was unsettling to just sit while everybody else worked.

After the meal, she expects Shikamaru to leave. He has friends, she knows it, a boy named Chouji mentioned pretty often at mealtimes, plus the people who skip class with him. Surely after this awkward morning, he’d prefer spending time with them? It’s his only day off from school during the week.

But no, he grabs her wrist and pulls her outside on the porch that overlooks the garden behind the house. A pair of cushions and a small table wait for them there. Shikamaru makes her sit and disappears only to come back with a wooden board and two little bags. He takes a seat across from her, placing the board on the table. It’s a board game, she saw Dudley play them with Piers Polkiss when he was younger and not aware of video games yet.

Shikamaru pulls several wooden pieces out of the bags he brought and sets them up on the board.

“What we doing?” Jasmine asks, worried because she's never played a game with anybody. The only games she’s played are hopscotch in the schoolyard, late when every other student had left, and tic-tac-toe against herself.

“We’ll play shogi,” Shikamaru answers, giving her a determined look. A stubborn glint in his eye, he explains the rules, and Riko can’t shake the feeling she’s being tested or challenged.

*Challenge*. That’s new, and she finds she detests the thought of losing. Who cares if she can’t remember the rules for each shogi piece? She wants to win!

Shikamaru annihilates her. Riko glares at the board.

“Again,” she demands.

They play away the whole afternoon. Shikamaru ought to be bored by now, Riko reckons, but with confusion she realises he looks satisfied instead, and she’s sure it has nothing to do with winning because the only thing he asks after a win is, “Again?” unless she’s quick enough to demand the rematch first.

Losing is frustrating, but she *likes* the struggle. The fight. The triumph of capturing one of her opponent’s pieces. The challenge of working around a problem and attempting to read Shikamaru’s next move from his inscrutable face.

Ever since waking up, confusion was her constant companion. This game, shogi, is unfamiliar and confusing, too, but it’s something she can conquer. It distracts her from all the other stuff that makes no sense.

Yoshino comes out a few times during the afternoon to bring them snacks and drinks, but otherwise appears happy to leave them alone. They’ve played for hours when Shikaku returns from work - earlier than usual, there’s still time until dinner — and sits down nearby. He says nothing, just looks at the board. Riko is successful in not paying him much attention, busy with the game, trying to figure out Shikamaru’s next move and how she will counter it and how he’ll react and so forth. It’s a little overwhelming, but she’s not giving up. This is *fun*. 
She loses the match. “Again?” Shikamaru asks.

“Again,” she huffs. He grins.

Shikaku clears his throat, drawing both their looks to him. He holds out his hand toward Riko. In it lies a bundle of hair ties in various colours. One even has tiny flowers on it. Another, stars that glitter in the sunlight. “For you,” he says.

She stares at the colourful pieces of fabric. They’re so pretty. Riko’s never owned anything like that before.

She can justify being given clothes as a necessity. This, though, is clearly a gift. And, she considers and reviews the ponytail-hairstyle of every Nara Clan member she has seen so far, it means something.

The three of them pretend that her hand doesn’t shake as she holds it out to receive the hair ties. Like he did before, Shikaku reaches out. She shudders and remains still as he ruffles her hair before he leaves. “I’d enjoy playing a game of shogi with you sometime, Riko-chan.”

She can’t muster a response besides blinking, her thoughts reeling.

Distracted, she suffers a devastating loss in the next match.

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Jasmine — Riko, why won’t the name stick — is on her place on the windowsill, once again reading. She’d finished the Tale of the Gutsy Shinobi and started on a book about the Country of Fire.

She thinks her reading skill is getting, if not faster, then smoother. Practising so much helps.

A knock sounds on the door. It’s still novel to her that nobody enters her room if Riko doesn’t give permission. “Come in,” she says.

Shikaku comes in. She gives him a questioning stare.

“How was your day?” he asks.

Riko blinks at him slowly. “Fine,” she replies with some confusion. Why does he care?

But she had a good day. Saw the compound, spent time with Shikamaru. Got to see the deer. Then played shogi the entire afternoon.

“T’m glad to hear it,” Shikaku says. He ruffles her hair once again, and she finally decides she can tolerate how that feels. “Sleep well, Riko.”

“Good night,” she answers quietly.

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Chapter 4

Riko settles into a comfortable routine. Still a morning person, she gets up early and finishes her morning routine before reading until it's time to assist Yoshino with breakfast.

After the family with the addition of Riko have had breakfast together, she'll help Yoshino clean until the woman shoos her out. At which point she's left to her own devices. She uses the time to read outside on the porch or take walks if she's brave enough to leave the house on her own. This is a rare occurrence, but she likes the deer so much that she dares to occasionally, just for the chance to see them from afar.

She usually takes lunch with Yoshino, and after that the woman will escort her to physical therapy at the clan clinic, where she has to do stretching exercises and build up muscle. Riko isn't a fan, but it passes the time and the way her body aches afterward is actually sort of satisfying.

The rest of the afternoon, Yoshino tutors her in various things — reading and writing, Maths, etiquette, tea ceremony. They spend whole afternoons arranging flowers, cooking, or making trips into the shopping districts. On especially hot days they go swimming together, something Jasmine has to learn beforehand.

Dinner is a family thing, though Shikaku doesn't always make it home from work in time. The evenings Riko has to herself. Sometimes Shikamaru and her watch a movie together or play a game of shogi.

Sundays are a break from the routine — on that day of the week, no activities are scheduled for her. Shikamaru spends most of them with her, though sometimes he'll leave her in order to play with his friends from school. One day he takes her with him to meet his best friend Chouji, which is pretty awkward. The boy doesn't know what to do with her, and Riko has trouble finding interesting things to talk about. In the end, he silently offers her potato chips from his bag. She accepts them, and that's that.

The three of them watch the clouds together that afternoon. It's comfortable, peaceful. Riko figures that Shikamaru is her best friend at this point while Chouji is his best friend — therefore Chouji is now her friend. He's nice enough.

She meets his clan, the Akimichi, later when they invite the Nara and the Yamanaka over for a barbecue.

It's definitely something.

Three clans having a party together is a huge production. The amounts of food served — and eaten — are incredible. So many big people fussing over Riko, who's still thin and shaky on her feet, is scary. She ends up clinging to Shikaku, all but sitting on his lap. He looks terribly amused.

Inoichi is there, too. They exchange no words. Riko settles for giving him a cautious nod.

He gave her a language. Even if it hurt, it was helpful. The problem is that she decided to trust him and he caused her pain. It's hard to shake the instinctual fear after that, but she's trying.

Inoichi has a daughter named Ino. She's cute and cheerful, and Riko spends most of their conversation staring at her in confusion. Why does Ino bother talking to her when Riko has nothing to reply with and can't understand half of what she's saying? Still, Ino seems friendly. Riko would love to be friends with her.
That evening is stressful and exhausting, but she enjoys it anyway. It's nice to be included.

Not many days after that, Yoshino begins Riko's combat training. "Everybody needs to know self-defence," is the explanation she gives her. Which, fair enough? In the beginning, it's not too different from physical therapy, but soon Yoshino has her practising things that would have been really useful the last time she had to deal with Dudley and his friends.

Training is hard, unfamiliar, and she walks away with bruises most afternoons. But Riko enjoys the lessons. They would horrify aunt Petunia, and that makes this 'taijutsu' thing even more fun. Like the games in the schoolyard she never got to join, except more exciting.

Shikaku gives her and Shikamaru lessons of his own. They're focused on learning and adapting: He'll describe scenarios and list resources they have access to. Then they have to decide what they'd have to do to succeed. This, too, is fun, especially since Shikamaru and her are allowed, even encouraged, to work together. Even better, she comes to learn there aren't really any wrong answers here.

Shogi is another part of training, Riko realises. The books she reads, too.

She likes that. It makes her feel like she has a purpose. Like she's wanted here.

One Saturday evening, Shikaku asks Riko to follow him to his study. She has visited it before, but never had the opportunity to explore.

"Take a seat."

She looks around with curiosity as she sinks into a chair. It's an interesting room, lots of books and maps, a large window with a nice view. Mounted on one wall are a set of deer antlers.

Shikaku waits patiently until she's finished taking in her surroundings. Patience seems to be a quality he embodies.

He is so very different from Vernon Dursley.

"You've been with our family for several months now," he says once she's turned her attention back to him. "You've settled in well, Riko."

"Thanks?" she asks, wondering where this is going.

"The new semester at the Academy starts in April."

In other words, classes begin next week. "You… want me to go to school?" she guesses, swallowing hard.

"Only if you think you're ready."

Riko frowns. She's seven years old and living with the Nara family has taught her to think things through. That and figuring out how to word things delays her responses by a few minutes. "Why?" she wants to know.
Shikaku regards her in that way he always does in lessons when he wants her to find an answer by herself. "You tell me."

She gives him the obvious answer. "To learn things."

"What things?"

And isn't that the grand question? But it's not hard to answer. "Ninja things," she replies, and breathes out in relief when he confirms it with a nod.

It wasn't difficult to figure out. The training, the books they gave her, the fact that just about everyone in this place seems to be a ninja or have a life that revolves around the business.

"Why do people become shinobi?" she asks.

"To protect that which is important to them from those who would destroy it," Shikaku answers easily, though his tones is grave.

What is important to Jasmine — to Riko? What does she want to protect?

"It's peacetime," she points out.

"It never lasts. And even in peaceful eras, crime doesn't disappear."

She considers it.

Konoha is for all intents and purposes her home now. She likes it here, loves Shikamaru and his parents, quiet afternoons in the sun playing shogi, long walks to watch the deer.

The village is a good place.

And she's read enough to know it's the exception to the rule on this continent. It needs protection.

Protecting is what shinobi do.

Of course she'll become a ninja if Shikaku requests it.

"Okay," she decides with a nod.

"Okay?" Shikaku asks.

"Okay."

As far as she knows, kids start learning at the Academy around the age of five, earlier if the parents don't have the time to teach them reading and numbers beforehand. Sending a child older than six to the beginner's classes implies arrogance and conceit, since it means they believe their kid needs less schooling.

Riko is well over seven years old, far from the optimal age. But, she reasons, it's not the first time she's been unpopular in school.
It's comforting that she blends in with the crowding children in the courtyard, even though they're all younger than her. She's small enough and staying in the background is easy considering how loud everybody else is. Not to mention, her red hair isn't all that noticeable among the eccentric hairstyles she sees.

Still, the huge crowd of people intimidates her. Riko would rather just disappear. Go back home to books and shogi.

But no — she wants this. This is about being useful and protecting her home. And even Shikamaru, the laziest boy she's ever met, is learning to be shinobi, so clearly there's a need for them.

A loud crack rends the silence, and in a large cloud of smoke a group of chuunin appear. It impresses Riko more than it should, she's seen Yoshino do far more impressive things.

There's a speech about how important training new shinobi is, how they'll grow to be the pride of Konoha. It's full of tree metaphors: new leaves, growing branches, roots. It doesn't mention what according to Shikaku shinobi are all about. The speech weirds Riko out, and her applause is half-hearted when it ends.

The new students are split into classes. Riko doesn't care much who she'll be in class with — she knows none of the other students anyway. She sees a few Akimichi and a Yamanaka, but no Naras start this term, and from what she knows, the class assignments are loosely determined by skill level. That means the kids who had prior training are going to one class and the rest to others where they can catch up together. They'll get shuffled around during the term, too, depending on how well they do.

Predictably, Riko ends up in the group with the lowest skill level. She stares up at the board displaying the class assignments with mixed feelings.

On the one hand, she's starting at rock bottom and that is discouraging. On the other, nobody has expectations for her to meet. The only way is up.

"So..." she says with forced enthusiasm to Yoshino and Shikaku, who accompanied her here. "This is it."

"Go on, then," Yoshino orders her. "Work hard. We'll be going over your lessons later."

Riko is ridiculously relieved at the confirmation that their training together isn't over.

Shikaku ruffles her hair, mussing her ponytail. "You know where to find me if you need me, little one."

Plus, Shikamaru had already assured her that he'd find her during lunch break.

She swallows thickly, manages a smile at her caretakers, and turns to disappear into the Academy.

The classroom is large, with a high ceiling and built like an auditorium. Riko doesn't envy the teacher, standing so far below in front of the blackboard with no way to hide.
She picks a seat close to the room's centre. Tries to convince herself that she doesn't stand out as much as it feels like. But now that she's in a class of civilian born children (except for a short Inuzuka and a thin Akimichi clinging to a nervous-looking kid with no clan insignia), her colouring makes it hard to blend in. Her saving grace are her comparatively drab clothes — every other girl in the classroom wears one of those flashy kunoichi dresses.

The garments might be pretty, but according to Yoshino, unless one spends a ton of money at a shinobi outfitter instead of buying from the rack at a civilian store, the dresses are impractical. Fine for children just starting out, but in the field? Nothing but an unnecessary risk.

Not that it's even certain Riko will make it that far. Many of the aspiring shinobi drop out during schooling or are asked to leave. It's not exactly an easy career path.

Their teacher, Hiroshi-sensei, calls for attention. Roll call follows, the sensei examining every single student who answers. Riko attempts to memorise the names of her classmates, but there are too many.

It could be her imagination, but his eyes seem to linger on her. She figures it's because starting the Academy at her age is so unusual.

After Hiroshi-sensei finishes calling names, he launches into yet another speech about the glory of shinobi life. Riko is pretty sure that shinobi and glory don't belong in the same sentence, because according to her books shinobi are sneaky and trick their enemies before resorting to combat, but nobody else looks bothered, instead they're following the teacher's words with more than a little excitement.

The speech continues with warnings about how hard the training is going to be. "Not all of you will make it to graduation," Hiroshi-sensei warns them. He gives an overview of skills he'll teach, attempting to make it sound more fun than it'll be in reality, and finishes by announcing that they'll have a quiz right now.

He doesn't even give them time to panic.

1) Name the elements of the shinobi chain of command.

2) List the Hidden Villages and the countries they serve.

3) Consider the diagram on page 5. Which shinobi is most likely to take out the target?

There are fifteen pages. Diagrams and pictures take up a lot of space, but it's still so many questions. Riko has never even seen a test this big. Fifteen pages! She's surprised to find she can answer a lot of it, but several questions remain a complete mystery. What in the world is a bijuu?

Still, she feels okay about the quiz, now glad she spent so much time at home reading.

By the time lunch break starts, they have to hand their papers in. What a relief that it's over — there's only so many times she can bear going over the answers again.

She finds Chouji and Shikamaru under a tree, lunchboxes on their laps. "Hey," she greets and dithers for a moment before Shika rolls his eyes and gestures for her to sit. Chouji gives her a greeting smile.

"Still alive?" Shikamaru asks.

"Mm," she hums, starting on her own lunch. "Had to do a quiz."
"Wish we could swap. We had to run laps and do push-ups all morning."

Shikamaru is two years ahead of her in school. She can only imagine what he's already learned.

Chouji makes a comment to Shikamaru on homework their class has to do, and Riko tunes them out, looking around the chaotic schoolyard instead. Most kids are playing ninja, running and yelling. Several older boys are sparring. A teacher separates a brawl not far away from them. A cluster of girls stands together, giggling and stealing glances at the involved boys.

This is when she sees him — black hair, pale skin, dark eyes. Hands in his pockets, he stares into the distance soulfully. Riko's never seen a boy so enchanting, and isn't it odd, calling someone that? But he is. She bites her lip — maybe she should go introduce herself-

"Sasuke-kun!" a shrill voice exclaims, and a girl with wild brown curls runs past, right toward the boy. She leads a pack of similarly loud girls, without exception wearing expressions of fanatic worship on their faces. Within moments, they surround the boy.

Any wish to approach him dies a vicious death.

"What was that?" she asks, deeply unsettled.

"Uchiha Sasuke," Shikamaru groans. "He's in our class. That was his fan club. Wanna join? Ino's the leader."

"No thanks." She cringes at the thought. Shikamaru sighs in relief.

Lunch break ends soon after.

Riko returns to her classroom. Her entrance goes unnoticed, which she notices with no small amount of relief.

The other class members enter the room in groups. Her new classmates appear so familiar with one another already. Perhaps they knew each other beforehand and wanted to become shinobi together? It must be nice to have friends like that.

Maybe she could join one of the groups. But... she doesn't see herself fitting in. The girls with the lovely hair and dresses have banded together, giggling as though they've known each other for years. A group of boys reminds her unpleasantly of Dudley's gang. Other than that, the groups appear to be determined by earlier friendships that she hesitates to intrude on.

And they're all so young. The things they talk about so inane.

They probably wouldn't like her anyway. Nobody wanted to play with her in Little Whinging, and she's sure it wasn't all Dudley's fault.

Hiroshi-sensei enters the room and leads the class outside for a physical test. It's a relief — after being cooped in the classroom for that quiz, she's ready to get moving.

The warm-up exercises aren't too different from those Yoshino always makes her do. Less extensive, actually. It's disappointing.
After that, though, they have to run laps, do push-ups, sit-ups, and squats. They're being timed, too, which puts pressure on them to finish quickly.

Riko can barely move after the laps, but she refuses to give up so soon. She keeps going with the push-ups even though her muscles hurt awfully. When Hiroshi-sensei yells at her because her form isn't correct, the exercise becomes even harder, but she can do this. She continues with the sit-ups, and she grits her teeth through the squats.

Her legs tremble like jelly. Arms are on fire. Every breath burns in her lungs. She doesn't know how she makes it through cool-down stretches.

Thankfully, school is over after that.

Riko knows Shikamaru's classes won't end for another two hours, so she makes her way home on shaky legs without company.

It's a bad idea. She's never walked around the village on her own, has always been with Shikamaru or either of his parents. That she gets lost shouldn't surprise her, but it does so regardless.

She resigns herself to bumbling around the village — Konoha is so much bigger than the small town of Little Whinging — until she finds something familiar. Maybe if she sees a Nara somewhere, she could ask for the way? An Akimichi might work, too.

"You look a little lost, kid," a voice drawls from above. Riko startles so hard that she jumps and squeals. Combined with her exhausted muscles, this results in her falling on her bum — or it would have if the speaker hadn't reached out lightning-quick to steady her. "Sorry about that."

"It's fine," she squeaks in a high voice she'll later be embarrassed about.

The guy speaking to her is a shinobi. A chūnin at least, he's wearing the vest and all. He might even be a jūnin. She can't tell and she doesn't want to ask, because what if he gets offended that she doesn't know?

"I'm Genma," the man says, and she wonders how he can speak with a needle hanging from his mouth without losing said needle.

Riko doesn't reply, instead regarding him with masked suspicion. She's won't tell a random stranger her name. Even if he is a shinobi.

"You're a Nara?" he asks curiously with a look at her book bag, which has a small print of the clan signet on it.

"They're fostering me," she admits reluctantly.

"Well," he muses, "I was going in the direction anyhow."

With that he turns and begins to walk. Riko debates with herself for a moment, but really, she wants to get home. She's already late. So she scrambles after Genma, who grins with considerable smugness when she catches up to him. A scowl forms on her face in response.
"So," he says. "Academy, huh?"

Riko makes a noncommittal noise and wonders how he figured that out.

"It's the reddish colour of the dust on your clothes," he explains. "Not to mention the obvious signs of training. Today's your first day?"

She throws him a deeply suspicious look and he lifts his hands with a laugh. "It's not a secret that term started today, kid. Everyone knows."

"Uh-huh," she mutters.

"Here's some advice on being a good shinobi: Notice things," Genma continues. With a side glance at her, he adds, "It'll help you not get lost."

Riko glares at him, annoyed because he's *right*.

"Well, here we are," Genma announces then. "Take a left at the end of the street. Need me to walk you-"

"No!" she yelps, because the thought of him having to walk her to her door and tattling to Yoshino is *the worst*.

Genma raises an eyebrow and grins. "I'm hurt."

"Then why're you laughing?" she snaps before she can think better of it.

Genma continues to chuckle. "You're adorable, kid. Don't get lost again."

He turns to leave. Riko glares after him and grabs his sleeve.

"Thanks," she growls out, and he laughs in earnest.

"You're welcome," he gets out between guffaws. "Take care, kid."

Riko huffs and stomps off to the Nara compound.
Chapter 5

Riko's muscles are beyond sore the day following her Academy debut, even though she did the exercises that Yoshino told her would mitigate the worst aches.

At least she's not alone in her plight, her classmates are in similar or worse condition.

She can't help but notice that the class seems smaller today. A handful of students missing, and she should probably know how many exactly.

"Notice things," the annoying Genma's voice echoes in her brain, and yeah. She's got to work on that.

Not because he said so, though!

Either the teachers deemed these students unsuitable to shinobi life or those kids decided on their own that it wasn't for them. But it strikes her as stupid to pass judgement on children younger than six years after just one day. Equally stupid to give up so soon.

Personally, Riko thinks that maybe they stayed home because their muscles are killing them and they can't walk. She could certainly relate to that.

Hiroshi-sensei hands the results from yesterday's testing out first thing in the morning. He also reveals a leaderboard for the class members, proudly taking up the back wall of the classroom. "The rankings for the students in your entire semester are displayed in the hallway," he informs them over the chatter of kids comparing their test results and rankings.

The scores are grouped by gender, and it stuns Riko to find her name at the top of both the girls' and the complete class' leaderboard. Her test results are far from perfect. She got 68% of the theoretical exam correct, and her practical scores aren't exactly stellar, either. Akimichi Keiichi, whose metabolism won't let him gain weight, did better than her with the exercises, and so did the tiny Inuzuka and two of the civilian boys.

Eavesdropping tells her that the kids who excelled at the physical stuff scored low in the quiz. She figures she only got first place because she did overall okay in both theory and practice.

The jealous looks shot at her are completely unnecessary, in her opinion. The Yamanaka boy nearly beat her score. She isn't even ahead by much, has a lot of room for improvement. There isn't a single thing that a classmate didn't manage better than her — it's only with all the scores combined that she scraped first place.

Riko attempts to become invisible when the whispers of know-it-all and teacher's pet start. One civilian boy is outraged to be outscored by a girl not even from a clan, and she's clearly not from here, too.

She elects to ignore it. Trouble too often ends with her painted as the culprit, and she hasn't missed that Hiroshi-sensei seems friendly with this boy.

It doesn't matter though. She'll be a good ninja and so will keep doing her best.

Classes continue to be a challenge. No games and few breaks, the teachers much stricter than she remembers the ones in Little Whinging being, though she supposes preparing kids for life as shinobi is a serious matter. Especially considering that they'll finish their schooling much quicker
than British children.

Combat classes start today, no time wasted. Beginning with the warm-up exercises and stretches, then going straight into learning the first kata, and in the last hour, sparring. Those spars naturally look nothing close to professional, seeing as most students have zero experience barring a brawl or two.

Riko is surprised she does well in comparison to many. She can thank Dudley and his gang for that, she supposes, and more than that, Yoshino's self-defence training. The Akimichi gives her trouble, but speed and a feint win her the spar. Inuzuka Hiji would probably best her, but Hiroshi-sensei makes them fight other people instead.

After three days, Riko realises she was wrong about P.E. classes being easier than Yoshino's training. Yes, the exercises aren't too much of a challenge — but they take up five hours every day except Sunday. What they lack in quality, quantity more than makes up for.

By the end of the week, her civilian-dominated class has halved in size.

"That's weird," Shikamaru muses when she tells him. "No one from our class ever dropped out."

"We all had training before starting, though," Chouji points out, munching on a snack. "Must be different for civilians, I guess."

Riko shrugs. The constant practice doesn't bother her that much. While it's exhausting, she's used to working hard, some days, the Dursleys made her work outside in their garden all day. Combat training is much easier than that, with lots of breaks, too.

A couple of weeks in and enough students have dropped out to warrant combining the four initial classes into three. The first class — comprising clan kids — sees no change at all aside from a student joining. They split the remainder into two classes, the second holding the more promising students and minor clan kids and the third the rest.

Riko ends up in the second, having performed well enough.

She sees the difference in skill level right away. The theory lessons are the same, but the practical lessons? They're much more challenging. She still manages all the exercises, but in spars initially she gets kicked around a lot.

Only by the boys manage to, though, unless they're holding back, which they quickly learn not to do. Except for Inuzuka Hiji, her fellow aspiring kunoichi just don't seem to want to put in much effort. They seem afraid of getting dirty and sweaty, which is weird. Even more confusing, the teacher lets it slide. If anything, Hiji and Riko are frowned upon for their zeal in taijutsu.

Hiji and Riko hold place two and three of the girls' rankings in their class. Number one among the girls — and the entire class — is Uchiha Hotaru.

Hotaru is pretty, smart, and strong. Everything a kunoichi is supposed to be. She wears the Uchiha symbol embroidered on all of her garments, she moves with grace and confidence, and in taijutsu classes she's untouchable. Even at age five, even though she's just started at the Academy, the teachers sing her praises.

The only reason they put her in the second class and not the first is that she was born blind.

A week after the new class assignments, Hotaru sits next to Riko and says matter-of-factly, "Your chakra feels weird and I like your voice."
Startled, Riko only stares at her for a few moments. "Thanks?" she asks. "I don't know how to sense chakra. What is chakra?"

"Oh, it's easy," Hotaru scoffs, waving her hand and then holding it out to Riko. "Take it and close your eyes. There, done. You're sensing chakra."

"Uh, no," Riko answers. "I sense nothing."

"Try harder, idiot, it's not like it's difficult!"

"Yes well," Riko snaps, dropping Hotaru's hand, "I guess that makes you a terrible teacher, you brat!"

Hotaru gasps. So does every classmate eavesdropping on their conversation. For a beat, the classroom is dead silent.

"Well, I never," Hotaru huffs, and then, "I can do it and I'm blind!"

"If I were blind, I'd probably be good at it, too!"

Hotaru pauses. "Maybe. Also, you pass."

"Oh, great." Riko lets out a snort. "And what do I pass, pray tell?"

"You and I will be friends," the five-year-old drawls, a smug grin on her face. Riko is too busy gaping at the sheer stupidity to protest, which means the brat has won.

Uchiha Hotaru, Riko later learns, is endlessly frustrated by the overprotective nature of her teachers and parents, even more so than her clan's dismissal of her talent.

"Just because I'm not gonna have the sharingan," Hotaru complains, because she likes complaining more than just about anything, excluding her pet rabbit and sushi.

"What's the sharingan?" Riko asks, because that's a word she hasn't heard yet and has no translation for.

"See?" Her new friend waves her hand around. "This is why I like you. You're dumb."

Stupid brat. Rude and arrogant. "Classic Uchiha," the Kurama in their class sneers and has a bottle of water upended over his head, courtesy of Riko.

She gets detention for it, but it's worth hearing Hotaru's delighted laugh.

Having a friend makes the whole world different, Riko finds. Even though she's two years older than Hotaru, they get along well. Suddenly she has someone to sit with in classes, someone to team up with for group assignments, someone to mock the boys' ridiculous boasts with. She introduces Hotaru to Shikamaru one lunch break and the two get into a glorious battle of insults.

Yoshino has Riko extend an invitation for Hotaru to come over for tea. A week later Hotaru drags her to the Uchiha compound to play with her pet rabbit, which carries the uncreative name Usagi-chan.

She might have had a bad start, but Riko can honestly say she's happy with how school life is going now.
One night, a loud knock wakes the Nara household. There isn't even time for Shikamaru and Riko to get dressed. Yoshino bursts into their rooms and hurries them to the clan's assembly hall, where other parents are arriving with kids in similar states. A heavy tension lays over the room, and Riko sits close to a grim-faced Shikamaru who explains to her what they need to do in case of evacuation orders. "We're the clan head's kids," he says, his face grim. "It's troublesome, but the brats look up to us. So we have to stay calm."

It doesn't come to that. Morning comes and a messenger from Shikaku gives the green light for everyone to return to their quarters. Classes are cancelled for the foreseeable future.

Later that day, Shikaku sits them down and tells them, "It's likely that those in the know will be ordered to stay silent about what happened yesterday, but I don't want you two ignorant and no gag orders have been issued yet, so I'm telling you now. Do not talk about this outside the house." He takes a deep breath, and Riko feels dread pooling in her stomach. "Last night, the Uchiha Clan was massacred. The only survivor is Uchiha Sasuke — your classmate, Shikamaru."

The world stops.

Riko… Riko's brain is empty. Blank. All thoughts wiped away.

(Dust particles around her stop moving. Her fingers are shaking, but the water in the glass she's holding remains unmoving. A flower bouquet behind her loses colour.)

"But Hotaru had a rabbit," are the nonsensical words that eventually leave her mouth in a thin, shaky voice.

"Do you want me to go get it?" Shikaku asks her calmly. Riko can only stare up at him, trembling, disbelieving.

Hotaru can't be dead. She's five. Who would ever want to kill her?

Shikaku leaves again. When he comes back in the late evening, he sets Usagi-chan down in Riko's arms. He leaves again soon, but in the morning, she finds everything she needs to take care of the animal next to her bedroom door.

She attends the mass funeral held for the Uchiha Clan in a daze.

School starts up again and Riko… Riko just feels lost. The place next to her is empty and cold. The entire school just feels deserted. All the dark-haired, black-eyed students, missing.

Dead.

It's the same in the village. A cloud of grief seems to hang over everything. The Military Police building is closed, the doors barred. Barely anyone smiles, conversations are hushed.

Yoshino lets Riko get away with lounging on her bed while hugging Usagi-chan for two days, then the woman orders her out of her room and into the family dojo, where they train until Riko can't even stand anymore.

It takes an embarrassingly high number of days for Riko to notice that Shikaku is doing the same with Shikamaru, and she realises Yoshino and Shikaku are worried. Because an entire clan —
arguably the strongest clan in the village — was wiped out in a single night.

Riko throws herself into exercises after that. Yoshino runs her through drill after drill and every single time Riko falls, she rises again. The woman has to order her off the training ground to get her to stop. And afterwards, Riko will study and study until her eyes burn. In class, she writes her notes in code for practice, forces herself to keep track of the classroom at the same time as she takes notes and memorises the lesson contents. When she finishes exercises before the time limit, she tries to sense chakra.

She'll absolutely protect the Nara Clan.

Despite being exhausted to the bone when she falls into bed every evening, her sleep is restless. Haunted by nonsensical memories, spectres of Hotaru, and dancing letters before her eyes. In her dreams, she keeps seeing her parents' murder, only it's Hotaru begging for her life.

She rejects any offers of friendship from her classmates, unwilling to replace Hotaru. She tolerates Shikamaru and Chouji — they there before Hotaru and having them around is easy — but that's it. Training and studying take up all her time. It doesn't really help, but the distraction at least keeps her from thinking too much. Even though it feels entirely undeserved, her grades improve, and none of her classmates volunteer for spars with her any longer.

Riko doesn't have the emotional investment to be surprised when towards the semester's end, after over a month of consistently scoring the top grades in her class, she's transferred to the first class, the class with the highest skill level.

Again, she notices the difference in skill level upon entering, and the quantity of lesson contents she has to catch up on is overwhelming no matter how far ahead she was in her previous class.

She spends most of the two weeks off between semesters attempting to catch up, only taking a few days' break because Yoshino puts her foot down.

At least in the taijutsu classes she keeps up. Sort of. She ranks somewhere in the lower middle field of the class. No matter how much she's trained, it's only been half a year since she started. The clan children received training for their shinobi career since they were born.

Riko still claws herself up the rankings point by point.

It's hard. Somehow the clan children, even though they are younger than her, can run double the amount of laps she manages, can jump further and higher, can carry much more weight. Are just faster and stronger, which makes no sense when Riko is older than them.

It makes her train harder, she even beats some of them in spars, but never quite reaches their level of strength. Finally, Riko asks Yoshino about the difference in power she just can't seem to make up for.

"Two reasons," Yoshino answers her. "One, they're using chakra subconsciously. Don't worry about that for now, you'll get there. Two, they were born for this. It's not just training — it's breeding. Their bodies are much better suited for this line of work than yours. You were born a civilian, Riko. A proper diet and physical conditioning will mitigate some of your disadvantage, but you'll never be as physically strong as your peers. That's why I've been focusing on your speed and evasion in our taijutsu training."

It's not a satisfying answer in that it doesn't offer a solution. She can't change her body. There's no way to increase her training, as it is she's already toeing the line of too much. And if Yoshino wants
to wait with chakra practice, she probably has good reasons for that.

But it's frustrating, knowing that even putting in all that work, she'll still be weaker than everyone else.

Clearly something needs to be done about that. They're shinobi, in a fight anything goes, and there are tons of extra skills that she could compensate with. It's just a matter of finding the right thing. Something that suits Riko.

She wishes she knew more about magic. But all she has is what she remembers from the dreams. There's no textbook, no teachers, and not once did her parents ever use it without those wooden sticks. Were those wands, like in the kid's tales Mrs. Figg sometimes told? Or were they called something else? Since she has no other option, she'll just go with wands.

Riko doesn't have a wand. She doesn't even have magic like her parents did. Yeah, things have happened around her before, but her father could shape-shift and turn a bathroom into a beach with one gesture. Her mother conjured stars on the ceiling and made flowers bloom in the night. Meanwhile, Riko can't even make a pillow hover, and she's tried often enough that at this point she's sure she's defective.

Better to focus on skills that have a real chance of being useful.

Riko's in her second Academy year. It's going fine. She now scores within the top three despite attempts from the other students to sabotage or badmouth her. Even though she isn't using chakra to help her. Through practice, she's become decent at sensing it, at least.

Yoshino promised to help Riko access her chakra soon, though.

Riko is sure she'll be the top runner for the entire grade, if she's already outscoring most of her classmates without it.

Her schedule is the same as it was in her first year. Some subjects added, some dropped. Taijutsu class now includes kunai and shuriken practice, kunoichi classes have moved on from cooking, tea ceremony and etiquette to flower arrangements and poisons. On rainy days they stay inside for dance practice, which is surprisingly enjoyable.

She doesn't like Thursdays. Other than the kunoichi classes and weapons practice, school is tedious and frustrating these days. Plus, some clan kids don't take kindly to her trying so hard to beat their scores — but at least she has Shikamaru to spend lunch breaks with. Only on Thursdays she doesn't get to see him until classes end, their lunch breaks being at different times.

Sitting under their regular tree by herself makes her feel pathetic since the place is highly visible to everyone else and her classmates have nothing better to do than talking about her in loud voices. So she spends the time wandering the schoolyard. That's how she finds a peaceful spot between some trees where a swing hangs from thick branches. A blond boy around her age occupies it, staring with sad eyes at other students playing, but he seems quiet enough, she'll take what she can get.

"Mind if I sit here?" she asks, just to be polite. "Everywhere else is full."
The boy startles and nearly falls off the swing. Apparently struck speechless, he gapes at Riko. Up close, she notices blood on his mouth — an almost-healed split lip.

She frowns and rummages around for a tissue. "You should clean that up or it'll get inflamed," she says, handing it to him. He takes the tissue mutely and stares at it like he's never seen one before. Then he looks at her like he isn't sure she's real.

Riko sinks down and unpacks her lunch.

The boy's stomach rumbles audibly. He doesn't appear to have noticed, stare now switching between the tissue and her, again and again, like he's trying to figure out a difficult Maths problem. Riko doesn't get what the big deal is, but whatever. She found her quiet corner to eat lunch in, so that's what she'll do.

His stomach growls again. She can't see his own lunchbox anywhere.

Okay then. Yoshino always packs a lot anyway, and Riko knows how much it sucks to go hungry. Especially with as much exercise as Academy students do.

"Want some?" she asks, holding out her bento box. "Can't finish it by myself."

The promise of food startles the boy out of his stupor. Her first impression of a quiet boy was dead wrong. "Okay! What's that? Is that sushi? I've never had sushi! Or a home-cooked lunch! Do you like ramen? What's your favourite kind? Mine's Naruto ramen, 'cause it's got my name in it and it's also ramen and ramen's the best!"

Two pieces of sushi disappear and find obvious approval before Riko finds her voice. "I've never had ramen."

The boy — Naruto? — gasps in horror. He rambles about noodles for the entirety of lunch break. It doesn't make Riko miss the silence she so sought, and Thursdays become much more bearable after that encounter.

"And he stared at me like I was some kind of, I don't know, mystery fairy for spending time with him. It was really awkward so I gave him food," Riko recounts to Shikamaru later on the way home.

"Troublesome," Shikamaru comments with dry amusement. "I wonder what that feels like."

Riko really doesn't appreciate not being in on the joke, but no matter what, Shikamaru won't share. Weird.
Chapter 6

In late November of Riko’s second Academy year, Shikaku teaches Riko to access her chakra. She’d expected Yoshino to be the one to instruct her, used to having the woman supervise her training. Her foster father doing it instead is a surprise.

His teaching style is very much different from Yoshino’s. Less physically demanding, but it often gives her headaches from having to think so hard.

Even though Riko has become decent at sensing chakra, especially her own flowing through her body, using it is like trying to capture smoke in her fingers.

It takes a while to realise that she’s going about it the wrong way — why would she need to grab her own chakra? It’s already right where it needs to be, inside of her! — and instead tries simply moving it throughout herself. This new approach works much better.

“Good job, little one,” Shikaku says, quiet enough not to break the state of concentration she’s in. “Circulate some to your legs and try running a lap around the house.”

It’s easy, coaxing the chakra to her legs. *Keeping* it there, however, is tough. It moves, it slips away when she doesn’t stay focused. As if it has a life of its own, testing Riko, almost playfully so. She didn’t expect that using her chakra would be like playing hide and seek with a ghost inside her own body.

No matter how unexpected, she’s still giddy with joy, feels like she could jump ten metres high, run faster than the wind and never get tired. Chakra is *fun*.

That’s what she thinks until she suddenly has no more left and takes a painful fall. Nauseous, her head spinning, sitting up is impossible for Riko.

Shikaku carries her to the hospital. “Chakra exhaustion can be dangerous,” he explains. “Especially for children.”

“But I was only running laps,” she slurs. It’s hard to form words, almost as hard as following a train of thought to the end is in her state. This is chakra exhaustion? It’s the *worst*. All of her strength has leech from her body. “My classmates don’t collapse.”

“Riko, you were born to civilians,” Shikaku points out. “Small chakra reserves aren’t unexpected. You’ve never used it before, nor did you receive preparatory training before you came to live with us. A proper diet, physical exercise, meditation, and continued use of chakra will help expand your reserves. Don’t compare yourself to others, it’s pointless.”

What he says makes sense, but what is Riko if not weak, when she clearly isn’t strong? Physically, she’s already frailer than her classmates. Now chakra-wise, she also turned out to be pathetic.

What kind of shinobi is she supposed to be like this?
No matter how tiny her reserves, access to chakra catapults Riko’s ranking to a solid first place. Even when she isn’t actively using it, she doesn’t need to put a lot of effort in combat training anymore, so much so that her sensei has his teacher’s aide spar with her instead of her classmates.

It’s still something of a surprise when she’s moved up a grade.

Once again, her life becomes a lesson in catching up to her new classmates. They’ve already started on basic ninjutsu, like lighting fires and escaping from bonds. She’s way behind on that.

“What’cha doin’, Ricchan?” Naruto asks, munching on the bento box she offered him. He rarely has his own lunch. Though sometimes he brings crackers to share between them.

She glares at the scroll in her hand. “I’m studying.”


“I know!” she whines.

“Let’s do something fun instead!”

“No.” Riko clenches her fists. “I refuse to let this idiotic technique beat me and I won’t lose to some stuck-up brats-” She takes a deep breath.

Her new class isn’t happy with her addition to their ranks, sees her as an intruder. If they don’t gossip about favouritism, they whisper about arrogance and cheating. An upstart is what they call her.

She’ll show them an upstart!

“ Heck yes! You can do it!” Naruto cheers. “You’re the best, Ricchan! You can be my, uh, you know, when I’m Hokage but I’m sick so somebody needs to do the thing-”

She laughs. “Thanks, Naruto.”

“So what’s this boring scroll about?” he wonders, poking her shoulder.

“Escape jutsu,” she grumbles. “For when you’re tied up.”

“Oh! I know that one! I’ll show you, it’s super easy, believe it!” Naruto scrambles over. “Gimme your hands!”

That’s right, Naruto is two years ahead of her — no, wait, just one year now that she skipped a grade. He knows all this already. Sort of. Riko heard from Shikamaru, who’s in Naruto’s class, that he isn’t the greatest student. To put it mildly.

But if nothing else, learning from him will be fun.

Riko doesn’t acknowledge that the bullying has become a problem until she’s in the hospital with two broken ribs and a black eye.
It was a group spar.

An argument can be made that teaming up against her was a sensible strategy because melee combat is the one area where she isn’t behind her classmates — the opposite, really. It might also have been that they overdid it on accident. Spars can get intense.

Except her notebooks and lunch boxes have mysteriously vanished all month until she figured out storage seals — fuuinjutsu rocks — and after that it was hissed insults and crumpled paper thrown at her, legs stuck out to trip her, and some uncreative pranks.

On the one hand, it’s taught her to pay attention to her surroundings. On the other, it landed her in the hospital. She’s on her own, too: Yoshino and Shikaku are out of the village on clan business, Shikamaru’s class is camping in a training ground for survival exercises this week, which means Naruto’s away, too.

Riko wonders if she’s reading too much into it, but the timing of this accident, right when all of her almost-family is absent, strikes her as suspicious. Like they waited for this opportunity. Though what her classmates fear would have happened had they struck while her caretakers were in the village, she doesn’t know.

Well, some parents have the tendency to show up at the Academy to yell at teachers or other parents, sometimes even students, for more or less asinine reasons. Shikaku and Yoshino aren’t her real parents though and Riko can’t see them doing something like that.

Those idiots probably just wanted her to suffer in the hospital by her lonesome.

Well… they were successful, so props to them for excellent planning.

She’s not even mad. Sure, the broken ribs hurt something fierce, but the nurse gave her some painkillers and they kicked in fast, so Riko’s now in a fantastic mood.

Besides, sitting in the emergency ward of a ninja hospital is an adventure in and of itself. In the past ten minutes alone she’s seen a man being carried in by five dogs and an Inuzuka toddler fused to his puppy, much to his mother’s annoyance.

“Now here’s a happy face,” a voice to her left drawls.

“Hi!” she greets cheerfully back.

It’s - what’s his name again? Gerry? No, that’s stupid, there are no Gerrys in Konoha. It’s Ger… Gem… Genma!

Riko beams at Genma. He’s got an epic black eye which means his and her face match. Plus lots of blood all over him. But it’s fake blood. She knows how to tell the difference, and it’s the cheap stuff too. The colour is nice on him, though.

Whoops, she said that out loud.

“Wow, they got you on the good stuff, huh, kid?” Genma grins. “And for your info, red is great, but you should see me in pink.”

Riko bursts into giggles.

“So what are you in here for?” he asks, making himself comfortable on the bed next to hers and getting fake blood on the sheets. “Got lost again?”
“That was one time,” she whines, not even questioning that he remembers something that happened ages ago. “Group spar.”

Genma whistles, and how is he doing that with senbon stuck between his teeth? “The others look as bad as you?”

“They ganged up on me,” Riko huffs. “Cowards.”

“Take it as a compliment.” He grins at her. “They only do that when they can’t win otherwise. Shouldn’t your sensei be here with you?”

“Eh.” Riko waves her hands dismissively and gets distracted by the ceiling light above her. It casts a little rainbow when it flickers. It’s so pretty.

“Earth to kid,” Genma sing-songs. “Where’s your sensei?”

“No clue!” she answers happily, turning her attention back to him. Jun-sensei dropped her off in the ER and returned to teaching classes.

Genma looks decidedly unhappy though and that sucks. Happy Genma is more fun unless he’s annoying. He was annoying last time she met him, and he was pretty happy then.

She figures it’s okay if he’s annoying, so long as he’s happy.

Genma guffaws. “Kid, you’re a treasure,” he says. He takes several tries because apparently Riko’s confused face is hilarious and he keeps laughing.

“Thanks?” she asks. “How’re you doing that with the senbon?”

“I’ll show you when you’re not doped up to your gills anymore,” he chuckles. She beams at him.

“Thanks! What’s with the fake blood?”

“Mission gone weird. Walked in on the client attempting to fake his own murder. Nobles,” he scoffs, shaking his head in exasperation.

Riko giggles. She has absolutely no clue what he’s talking about. “Do you like being a ninja?” she asks.

“When there’s no cross-dressing involved,” he answers. “I can rock a dress, but high heels are the worst.”

She laughs absurdly long at that mental image. “You’re funny!”

“And you’re adorable. What’s your name, kid?”

“Riko,” she answers. “Does this mean we’re friends now?”

Genma grins. “Absolutely.”
A few days of bedrest and Riko is as good as new. Nobody is happy about her training accident, but nobody can prove that it was in fact *not* accidental.

There’s a simple solution to prevent further training incidents though: body armour. Riko is against it — the light and flexible kind she needs is expensive and has to be custom-made for her size to prevent uncomfortable chafing, which just isn’t worth it when she’s a growing girl. Yoshino puts her foot down however, and she’s not someone Riko wants to argue with.

The skintight mesh is uncomfortable, Riko prefers her clothing loose and airy. But she might as well get used to it. It’s not like she’ll get around wearing armour once she graduates.

Still. It’s *unnecessary*.

But rather satisfying to see one of those idiot classmates of hers kick Riko only for her to get up and hit back harder with only a bruise to show for it when normally she’d have curled up on the ground gasping for breath.

She probably shouldn’t be casually dispensing violence, but they started it and they remind her of Dudley. She’d fantasised about retaliating against her cousin and never got to do it.

This isn’t exactly the same, but it’s close enough. Besides, they all signed up for a life of violence. No need to feel guilty.

“*It’s time for a new stage in your training,*” Yoshino tells Riko and hands her a bokken.

It’s heavy and feels awkward under her fingers. She swings it experimentally.

Huh.

 Doesn’t feel bad at all.

Riko has taken to haunting the various libraries in Konoha because of her constant game of catch-up for Academy classes. During free school periods, one can find her in the school library. On weekends, the Nara clan library or Shikaku’s and Yoshino’s personal book collection are where she spends her time, if she isn’t training.

It’s rarer that she’s in the public library due to it being a lot busier than the others and strangers inevitably approaching her to tell her how good it is to see children study for once and asking if she needs any help. She doesn’t like when strangers randomly talk to her. Especially when they call her cute.

However, it can’t be denied that the shinobi section of the public library is well-stocked when it comes to basic knowledge. The clan library has a lot of books, but they’re mostly for niche aspects of shinobi life.
Riko would suspect that she’s turning into a book ninja if it weren’t for the fact that she’s doing so much better in practical lessons than theory ones.

She just figures she’ll do better if she knows more stuff. It’s not like it’s a secret that clan kids have an advantage over civilian born shinobi since they get training and special techniques from their families. Since as a clanless orphan Riko has none of that to fall back on, she needs to compensate with book knowledge — and basic chakra exercises and non-combat jutsu are all available in the public library.

It’s not an uncommon sight to find her sitting in a corner with books and scrolls stacked high around her, glaring at the pages as if she were in a fight to the death with literature itself. There’s a reason that shinobi rarely go to the public library, and it’s because the books inside are without exception dry theory and utterly boring. All the interesting stuff either got snapped up by important people or hidden behind a clearance level.

Still. Needs must. As far as she knows, no matter what creepy dreams (possibly memories) say, she’s not blessed with any special powers or privy to any cool moves. Hence, she has to invent her own, but this is easier said than done.

Jutsu theory sucks. It’s like there’s a genjutsu over every single word, telling her she needs to take a nap right now. But she won’t let boredom beat her, no matter how it makes her want to stab the book with a blunt practice kunai.

“Well there’s a happy face,” a vaguely familiar voice above her drawls. She looks up, still glaring, because he snuck up on her, which is rude. Riko’s chakra sense has gotten pretty decent, but there’s nothing to sense from Genma. It’s like he’s invisible.

Plus, he’s teasing her.

“What?” she snaps at him. He grins.

“But Riko, we’re friends.”

She valiantly resists the urge to hide under the table at the reference to the hospital incident during which she made a complete idiot of herself. Why couldn’t she be blissfully forgetful of what happened in her drugged state?

“Who are you again?” she tries, anyway.

“The guy who promised to show his most adorable friend how to use senbon.” He shifts a little and the senbon in his mouth gleams in the light. “But I guess I have the wrong person…”

His eyes gleam with mirth.

Damn it. He’s got her now.

Well, she can suffer his company if it means she gets a new skill out of it.

Side Story: Fun with catapults
(Written for worldtravellingfly’s prompt: “Friendship is when you prank together”)

“Goggles?”
“Got ‘em!”
“Balloons?”
“Ready!”
“Helmets?”
“All set!”
“Life vest?”
“You got it!”

Naruto and Riko salute each other. Behind them towers the catapult they built together from logs, rope, and rubber bands. The shovel part is filled with balloons, which have paint and glue and glitter inside. The only thing missing…

Riko and Naruto climb inside. “This is gonna be awesome!” Naruto crows. She grins at him and holds out her hand.

“Don’t let go,” she orders.

“Not for anything!”

Riko draws a kunai and throws it. A rope snaps. The catapult groans and then-

They’re flying! The houses below them pass by at dizzying speed. Riko laughs with abandon and beside her, Naruto screams in joy.

All too soon, the descent begins.

Naruto and Riko plunge into a deep lake. It’s cold and dark instantly, but the life vests drag them up soon enough, and both of them gulp for air before they burst into exhilarated giggles and high-five.

Around them, the angered shouts of civilians whose houses were pelted with prank balloons sounds through the air. “Uh-oh,” Riko snickers. “Let’s run!”

“Way ahead of ya!” Naruto shouts back, already making for the shore.

“Hey!”

She loses the race, but Naruto waits for her, and together the friends run for the hills.
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Senbon are incredibly awkward to hold. With kunai, the handles are shaped to provide an optimal grip. It’s nothing like that with senbon. They’re just oversized needles, heavier and more sturdy, but still needles, and they’re not built for convenient throwing.

It’s been an hour since her introduction to this weapon and Riko’s fingers ache. The longer she’s clenching it, the more it feels like her fingers will be forever stuck in this position.

“Yeah, time for a break,” Genma drawls. “Here, I’ll show you some exercises for relaxing your hands.”

“This sucks,” Riko mutters under her breath, flexing her fingers and rotating her wrists the way he’s showing her.

“Yep,” her self-declared friend agrees. “Takes a lot of practice. Any idiot can throw a kunai after a few weeks of training. This? It’ll be months before senbon will be of any use to you, and you’ll have to study your ass off to even know where to hit for it to actually be effective.”


She can’t even complain because she signed up for it.

“I think that’s enough on how to hold senbon. Let’s start on throwing.”

Riko blinks.

Throwing, already? She can’t even hold the weapons right and now she’s supposed to lob them at the targets scattered across the training ground?

Genma’s apparently a mindreader, because he continues, “There’s no right way to hold them. You have small hands, so you can’t grip senbon like I do. You have to figure the details out yourself, and the best way for doing that is by using them. You’re never going to hold them for long anyway. If you have them in your hands, you throw them before your opponent can register it. Otherwise your chances of hitting anything effectively lower significantly.”

“Huh.” Riko tilts her head. “Makes sense.”

“The trick to throwing them is giving them a little push with your chakra,” Genma begins his explanation. “Air resistance is a bitch and they’re not going to get far if you don’t add that boost. Even then, they’re only effective at short-range.”

“How do I do it?”

A shrug. “You just do it.”

She crosses her arms and scowls. “But how?”

That infernal grin again. “You’ll figure it out.”

“You’re supposed to teach me.” She taps her foot in annoyance. “You promised!”
“And I’m teaching you, aren’t I?” He chuckles at her. “I’m serious. Practice a bit and it’ll happen on its own. Little things like that, your chakra will adapt for you. Like with speeding you up in combat.”

Right, Riko read about that sort of stuff. She still shoots Genma a deeply suspicious look. “Fine.”

“Then let’s get to it.”

It’s an exercise in frustration. Few senbon even make contact with the target, and the very rare one that manages to stick can be attributed to luck. Genma, though, doesn’t seem to think so. “Let’s move onto the next exercise,” he suggests.

“But I haven’t beaten this one yet,” she protests.

“You’ve got the basics down, it’s fine,” he waves her off, then unseals a new target. This one is vaguely humanoid-shaped and has lines, circles, and dots painted all over it. “This target indicates the spots you need to hit for senbon to be more than annoying stings. Since you know the basic throwing technique now, you can practice that and your aim.”

She frowns. “Ugh, fine.”

Genma grins and ruffles her hair before leaping away to secure the target a fair distance away. Distant enough that the lines and dots are too blurry for her to make out unless she squints really hard. Any aiming is going to be guesswork. Dammit, Genma isn’t making this easy at all. She doesn’t exactly mind much, but it’s frustrating.

He watches as she keeps missing. Sometimes she even loses track of her own senbon, especially as the shadows grow longer and the projectiles no longer glint in the sunlight. With the target now shaded, even when squinting she can’t see the lines on it, has to do it from memory.

Genma hums thoughtfully. “This may sound like an odd question, kid,” he interrupts just as she’s about to throw again. “But do you have trouble seeing the lines?”

Riko shoots him an incredulous look. That’s a joke, right? He placed the stupid thing so far away! Probably so she’d be forced to figure out the chakra thing, and also memorise the spots she needs to aim at, she figures. “It’s over ten metres away,” she tells him slowly. “Obviously I can’t see them.”

“Mm,” he nods. “I thought so.”

She eyes him in annoyance. Why is he always so weird?

“Well.” He crosses his arms. “What would you say if I told you that I can see all the dots and lines perfectly clear?”

“Are you having me on?” she demands, crossing her arms, forgetting she’s still holding senbon, and dropping them with a curse when she stings herself. Genma chuckles, and Riko glares up at him.

Stupid weird adult. If he even counts as one.

“You, kid, need glasses,” he concludes with finality, moving towards the target. “Let’s pack up here and then I’ll take you home.”
She stares at him incredulously. “Glasses. Me.”


“I can’t be a shinobi with glasses!” Riko sputters. “That’s so-”

Genma snorts. “Of course you can. You could even become a shinobi blind. It’s just an extra challenge, is all. You’re hardly the first one. I’ve no doubt you can do it. Especially since you’ve been near-sighted all this time and still managed to be good enough to skip ahead in school. I wouldn’t have even noticed if you hadn’t squinted so hard. You’re good, kid.”

She stares at him, her cheeks heating. “You- but I-”

“You coming?” he asks, finished with sealing the stupid target away. “If we get a move on, I’ll score an invitation to stay for dinner.”

Riko instantly lobs a senbon in his direction. It sticks in his flak jacket.

“Oh, look at that,” Genma comments. “Perfect aim.”

Riko isn’t sure she’s buying all this “You need glasses” business until the moment the optician puts the frames on her face.

Her mouth drops open.

Oh, wow. She’s, she can see. Really see. She turns her head, and she can look out the window and identify the plants on the opposite house’s balcony. Can count the bricks, the cracks, can finally understand the shapes Shikamaru sees in clouds.

“Riko?” Yoshino asks.

“Hmm?” she hums absently, too busy trying to take in everything she never saw before. “Yes?”

The optician clears his throat, and Riko pulls herself together and pretends she was paying attention all along. “These glasses were made specifically to cater to a shinobi’s needs,” he informs her. “They’re very durable and the glass itself will crack, not shatter, if hit. It will also be resistant to scrapes, though I do not recommend testing this. The thick frames may seem rather unbecoming, but the material allows for them to withstand chakra-based attacks, though they may become deformed, especially if great heat is involved. If you’ll turn your attention to the nosepads, you’ll notice they cover a significantly larger part of your nose than regular glasses would, this is because you may want to use chakra on them to keep the glasses sticking in place. The material is designed to withstand that kind of prolonged stress.” The man pauses. “The cable temples were tailored to hook optimally behind your ears. Again, contact points for you to secure them with chakra are provided. Furthermore, you can attach a strap to ensure that even if they come off, they will still be on your body. As an extra feature, we provide these clip-on lenses for very bright surroundings.”

Riko blinks slowly.

She’s got the the best glasses ever. Who cares if they take up half her face? She can see!
“On some missions, you may want to take the glasses off,” the man tells her. “They indicate you possess the funds to afford them and access to medical expertise, which may endanger you on intelligence-gathering missions. I recommend you also train without your glasses.”

Considering she’s done that all her life (at least, the part she spent in Konoha), that shouldn’t be a problem.

“As an alternative to the glasses, we also provide goggles and monocles,” the optician finishes. “Do you have any questions?”

Riko shakes her head.

“The maintenance,” Yoshino speaks up.

“Ah, yes.” And he launches into a well-practiced spiel about keeping the glasses clean and not attempting to bend the frames into different shapes without attending lessons with him beforehand. She’s also not supposed to dip the glasses in acid, though why he even feels the need to tell her that, she has no idea. “Be mindful, in extremely cold temperatures, the frame’s material will become brittle and prone to breaking. I also recommend to keep back-up glasses in any case, and a monocle because preparation wins wars.”

Riko’s not planning on fighting any wars, but she nods anyway. “Thank you, Makoto-sensei. I’ll keep that in mind.”

“You do that. That will be all. Nara-sama, the bill will be sent to your address.” Riko winces at the reminder that she’s costing her foster family a good deal of money. She better graduate soon and start paying them back.

“Very well.” Yoshino nods, and steers Riko out of the shop.

Outside, Riko is soon distracted by all the sights she’d missed before. Konoha is like a whole new village now.

“I suppose we'll have to focus your training on chakra control, for the time being,” Yoshino muses. “Oh well, you can never be good enough in that area. And it’ll help your reserves, too.”

Riko nods dutifully.

While the majority of Riko’s class either actively dislikes her or practices indifference, Tachibana Fumio has recently become the notable exception. He’s made a habit of seeking her out to tell her how great she is, ever since she won a group spar. He sits next to her in classes and beams at her whenever she chooses to address him.

It’s sort of nice but also rather troublesome. He talks all the time. And she isn’t exactly looking to make friends — it still feels too much like replacing Hotaru.

Naruto’s the exception, somehow slipping right through her resolve, but that's okay because they don't see each other that much, being in different classes.
Fumio is smart and capable. Top five of the class, and working much harder than the others due to being from a civilian family. She figures he’ll make second place in the class rankings by the end of the year, since she will take first place and skip another grade so she can make it into Shikamaru and Naruto’s class and maybe, possibly, end up on a team with one or even both of them.

She wasn’t looking to make a new friend, but Fumio is a good guy and he’s never done anything to hurt her or make her angry. He’d stopped being friends with the guys who cracked her ribs by the time she came back, and had been looking a little lost and lonely. Riko’s been in that situation of not belonging, knows how much it sucks, and it costs her nothing to be friendly.

“So, uh, do you want to get some cake after school, Riko-chan? I know this great little café that you’ll just love!” Fumio asks, looking rather nervous.

On the one hand, cake. On the other hand, she has a very tight schedule and today’s afternoon is reserved for more goddamn jutsu theory or potentially a training session with Genma, followed by taijutsu lessons with Yoshino before dinner. The evening would be spent playing and cuddling with Usagi-chan the rabbit.

“Ha, who’d want to hang with that freak,” Kurama Akihiro scoffs. “She smells!”

Riko is about to say something ill-advised, but Fumio beats her to it. “No, you smell!”

“What did you just say?!”

“I said you smell!” Fumio jumps up. Riko watches incredulously as he shakes his fist like that old pumpkin vendor did at Naruto during the Great Pudding Bomb prank last March. “Riko-chan is cute and amazing and smart and she smells really good, you bas-”

It’s at this moment that Jun-sensei comes in and puts a stop to the impending brawl.

“Okay,” she says later, when their teacher isn’t looking. “Cake sounds good.”

His smile lights up the entire classroom.

After school, they go to a little café owned by Fumio’s uncle. “My little sister loves the strawberry cakes here,” he chatters. “She’d eat them all the time if she could. They’re delicious! What’s your favourite kind of cake, Riko-chan?”

“Green tea.” She shrugs, and tries not to let on that she’s only ever eaten cake at the Akimichi compound. Cake isn’t really a thing in the Nara household. Yoshino makes amazing cookies, however.

They enter the café. Riko instantly has regrets. The air smells too sweet because there are scented candles and flowers everywhere. Soft music plays from old-fashioned speakers, dainty chairs are arranged around delicate tables, a shiny black piano sits in a corner.

Riko feels vaguely uncomfortable but can’t put her finger on the reason why. Mentally shrugging, she lets Fumio pull her to an empty table near the piano. “I practice here sometimes!” he tells her. “My dad builds pianos, you know? My older brother is learning it from him. I wanted to be a shinobi because that’s so much cooler!” He grins, revealing a gap in his front teeth. “I’ll keep playing the piano though. I like it a lot!”

She smiles back. “That’s pretty cool. I don’t really play an instrument. Well, we tried out some in kunoichi classes, but it turns out I’m better at listening.”
“Nice! Which ones did you try out?”

They keep talking. It’s nice. Riko is glad she went for the cake in the end. Even if it turns out to be 
way too sweet for her liking. But cake is cake, and it’s free, too, since Fumio is the nephew of the 
shop owner.

Who’d ever turn down free cake? Not her, that’s for sure.

Cake meetings become a regular thing that Riko looks forward to. It’s also nice having someone to 
sit next to in class and share notes with. Even if she still feels like she’s replacing Hotaru.

But it’s been enough time that the ache of her absence has dulled. A wound scabbed and scarred 
over.

It helps that he’s about as unlike Hotaru as it gets.

The day starts out normally until Shikamaru asks if she wants to come spend the day the Akimichi 
place with Chouji and possibly Yamanaka Ino, who visits pretty often at her father’s behest.

“Sorry,” she says. “I’m meeting Fumio for cake?”

Normally she’d pick Shikamaru and Chouji over Fumio and too-sweet cake in a heartbeat, but 
they’d been trying to find a time that suited both their time tables for the entire week, and Sunday 
afternoon was the only thing that fit.

“Oh right.” Shikamaru uncharacteristically scowls. “Your boyfriend.”

Riko blinks slowly.

“My what?”

“You heard me,” he answers.

She blinks again. Boyfriend. That’s something the girls in class tend to giggle about, usually while 
talking about Uchiha Sasuke. It has something to do with marriage. She’s not quite sure what 
exactly makes marriage so special though — as far as Riko knows, a spouse is just a friend whom 
she’d promise to be together with forever, no matter what. And she’d be allowed to call them 
hers and vice versa.

Which does sound nice, but the ownership of people aspect does not appeal.

Also, Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon were married, and she really doesn’t want that kind of 
relationship with anyone. On the other hand, it seems really nice in Yoshino and Shikaku's case.

“I’m pretty sure I'd know if he was my boyfriend?”

If the boyfriend thing was so important, then it's something Fumio would talk to her about, right?

Shikamaru gives her a long stare. “You have absolutely no idea what’s going on, do you.”
Riko huffs. “I know you’re acting weird. What’s the big deal about boyfriends anyway?”

“You’re ten years old, you troublesome kid,” Shikamaru grumps. Like being ten months older than her makes him so much more adult! She glares at him.

“What’s age got do do with anything?” she demands, throwing up her hands in exasperation.

Shikamaru stares at her with an infuriatingly deadpan expression. “You missed sex-ed classes when you skipped grades, didn’t you.”

Riko blinks slowly. “Missed what now?”

He face-palms before he turns on his heel and shouts, “Mom!”

Yoshino gives Riko The Talk.

Riko usually likes the woman’s blunt way of explaining things, but in this case it’s mildly horrifying. And by the time it’s over, it’s time for her cake appointment with Fumio.

Who, according to Shikamaru, has been bragging about having a girlfriend named Riko. Considering she now knows what that’s supposed to lead to…

What’s she going to do?! She can’t even bring herself to look any male in the face after that info dump!

Cake. Think about cake.

“Hi, Riko-chan!” Fumio’s excited voice greets her.

“Hi!” she squeaks, voice at least two octaves higher than usual.

“Everything all right?” he laughs. His laughter is all bright and friendly, just like his brown eyes. Fumio isn’t outstandingly pretty, with his brown hair and eyes he won’t stand out in a crowd, especially not in Konoha. She likes that about him, just like she likes his laugh.

But he’s not her boyfriend and she doesn’t want to get married!

She’s known him for less than three months! And she's ten!

Riko stares at Fumio’s guileless grin and oh kami-sama she can’t do this. “I’m fine!” she answers shrilly and looks for an opportunity to escape, but Fumio’s already taken her hand and now pulls her to their café.

He likes to hold her hand. She likes to hold his. It’s nice and it never seemed weird before. Naruto and her hold hands all the time.

But now it is weird.

Oh God, is Naruto her boyfriend, too? Riko isn’t a crier, hasn’t shed a tear since she realised she’d only be yelled at for that sort of thing, but in this moment her eyes sting.
Friends. She thought they were friends and now she’s realising that she might have been wrong about that, because boyfriend and friend are a different pair of shoes and the realisation hurts.

Fumio chatters on throughout the date, either not noticing her inner meltdown or trying to reassure her by ignoring it. Riko honestly doesn’t know and she’s not going to figure it out anytime soon with her mind spinning the way it is.

She feels like she’s choking on her sticky sweet cake. The flickering lights stress her out.

“You’re not eating, Riko-chan,” Fumio points out. “Are you-”

Startled, Riko stabs her fork into her cake.

The pastry explodes with a deafening bang just as the lights blow out. She’s not the only one to scream. Chaos breaks out in the café, people panicking. Someone, a shinobi from the looks of it, shouts, “Everyone outside!” and Fumio and Riko waste no time slipping out before the doors get crowded.

“That was crazy!” Fumio yells over the noise, eyes wide. Riko nods wildly, heart beating quickly.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” she chokes out. “I’m fine.”

Her hands are shaking. Unbidden, her mind flashes back to her last night at Privet Drive. The lights had flickered then, too.

Was that magic?

She can’t shake the suspicion that this incident was all her fault.

Fumio is still eyeing her with worry. He’s also holding her hand again. Where before it felt nice, now it’s just uncomfortable. “Are you really okay?” he asks. “I mean, you probably are, you’re so cool and smart and everything, and it’s not like I was scared, so you definitely wouldn’t be! I’m just asking ’cause you look a little pale, haha. Probably my imagination.”

He laughs weakly.

Now that she’s looking, he’s looking pale himself. God, what’s she doing, only thinking about herself? “I guess I freaked out a little,” she admits awkwardly. “Been a weird day…”

“But it’s okay now!” Fumio lightens up. “Because everything seems to be fine and we’re together.” He squeezes her hand and moves closer.

Riko blinks, realising a moment too late what’s happening.

His lips meet her cheek. “I’m really happy we’re together,” Fumio says softly.

A strangled noise escapes her.

Yeah. No. No no no.

“I gotta go,” she chokes out.

“Huh?”

Already retreating backwards, hand snatched from his, Riko mumbles, “Left a deer in the kitchen”,
turns around and runs.

Fumio chases her. Riko can sense his chakra closing in on her. More importantly, she can hear him shouting her name.

Using the rooftops is generally advised against unless one is a shinobi on a mission. Alas, desperate times call for desperate measures, and this is an emergency. So she takes to the rooftops. Just a few blocks should be fine.

Fumio isn’t one of the best in class for nothing, though. He’s the best in tracking, too. Though to be fair, their class doesn’t have any Inuzukas.

He’s still following her. It’s starting to freak her out.

She launches herself off of the roof into a thicket of bushes. Riko knows how to hide her chakra, a skill developed alongside her sensing abilities. She’d always been stealthy enough, known better than to draw attention to herself. Quietly, she sneaks through the greenery and squeezes through an unkempt hedge until she ends up in a light-swept garden that looks more like a meadow. There’s even a pond, surrounded by weeping willows.

In the middle of the garden sits a large house that has a rather traditional look to it. A little bit like the Nara house, but bigger and far less inviting.

Yeah, this is private property and she should leave. She thought she was hiding in a park, but nope, it’s someone’s garden and she just intruded. And are those targets and posts for shinobi training?

Oh boy, she’ll be in so much trouble if she accidentally broke into a shinobi home. Riko nods to herself. Time to leave-

“Riko-chan?” Fumio yells from a distance. She cringes and looks around for the best escape route. Her eyes catch on Uchiha Sasuke, standing right there in between the targets with a pissed look on his face and a kunai in his hand.

“I’m so sorry,” she says, slowly retreating. “I was just running away, well not really running away, more like, uh, hurriedly avoiding this guy who’s my boyfriend but I didn’t know about that, I thought we were just friends who, okay, ate cake together regularly and held hands and maybe I should have noticed but in my defence, I skipped the relevant Academy classes and anyway, I didn’t mean to break into your property, I thought I was hiding in a park and-”

“Riko-chan?”

“Crap!” she yelps, because Fumio’s voice is way too close now which means he also intruded on private ground in pursuit of her and the entire situation will turn into more chaos once he sees her with Sasuke. Fumio gets weird when she talks to or about other boys.

Well. This is already mortifying enough, she might as well be pathetic all the way. She shoots Sasuke a pleading look. “Can you just please tell him I ran past you? I swear I’ll never bother you again.”
Riko can hear Fumio crashing through the underbrush now. She wastes no time scrambling up a tree and hiding in the foliage.


She peers down and shudders at the level of anger Uchiha Sasuke radiates despite being completely expressionless.

Fumio bravely asks, “Have you seen a girl with red hair? I tracked her, I think something’s wrong with her and I’m worried…”

The silence is stifling. Fumio looks like he’s contemplating running away while also not subtly casting searching looks around.

“That way,” Sasuke snaps, jerking a finger in a random direction.

“Thanks, Uchiha!” Fumio yells and takes off again.

Riko waits a minute before she climbs down from her tree, tracking Fumio’s chakra until he leaves her admittedly short range. “He’s gone,” she mutters and aims a smile at Sasuke. “Thank you.”

He stares at her stoically, looking all kinds of unimpressed and angry. Riko shivers. “Yeah, I’ll just go. Sorry again!”

She turns on her heel and runs.

Chapter End Notes

Certain events in this chapter are based on true events *sweat drops*
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Technically, somewhere it's still the 28th, aka my birthday

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Riko makes it into Shikamaru’s class less than a year before it’s set to graduate. Her last teacher advises against skipping another grade for that reason — it’ll take her months to catch up to her new peers and by then graduation will be imminent.

She takes the option anyway. One, because Jun-sensei told her she wouldn’t make it, which annoys her. Two, Naruto and Shikamaru. Three, Fumio.

If anyone suggested she was avoiding Fumio, Riko would vehemently deny it and she would be lying.

Being around him is just so awkward now! Yeah, after a week of avoiding him after the cake fiasco, they’d had a talk (because Shikamaru tricked her into it, the scheming monkey) and it was every bit as awful as she feared even though they said they’d continue being friends, so now she’s dodging him to the point of moving up another grade.

She kisses her free time goodbye once more.

Riko walks into class feeling as if she were being released from prison, but only to face the gallows. Being the new one in class never got easier, despite it happening rather frequently.

This new class is significantly more… lively than the last one. Two boys brawl in the background. About a dozen girls surround Uchiha Sasuke’s desk, and two of them are one hair-pull away from a full-on catfight by the looks of it.

This kind of chaos never happened in her old class. Riko isn’t quite sure what to think of it, but all that noise is a little overwhelming.

On the bright side, nobody’s noticed her yet. She slinks past the gaggle of squealing girls and pretends not to notice Sasuke’s glower as he recognises her from the incident.

Now where is — ah. There.

“I’m gonna pass next time for sure, Sakura-chan! Believe it!” Naruto insists to a girl with pink hair. She’s evidently one of Sasuke’s admirers and may or may not have elbowed a girl out of her way, Riko isn’t sure. “Ricchan said I could do it!”

The girl whirls on him, clearly incensed. “Oh, shut up about your imaginary friend, you’re not fooling anybody! Everybody knows you don’t have any friends, dead-last!”

Riko’s jaw drops because holy moly. Yeah, she’s witnessed bullying before, but she’s never seen someone be so incredibly blatant and unapologetically mean about it.

“Excuse me,” she says tightly. “Who did you just call imaginary?”
Naruto startles and turns around. His face lights up in happiness. “Ricchan!” Riko braces herself just a moment before she has an armful of Naruto.

Kami-sama, she loves his hugs so much.

“Hi, Ruto,” she mumbles into his shoulder.

He lets go of her and grins. There’s a gap where one of his front teeth is missing. He didn’t want to tell her how he lost it. “What’re you doing here? Come to visit and see how awesome I am?”

“Nah, I-”

“You exist?!” It’s the pink-haired girl, Sakura. Naruto gushed about her before, the ‘smartest and prettiest girl in the world’.

Riko eyes her critically. She doesn’t look so pretty now, and she certainly doesn’t seem very smart.

“I’d like to think so,” Riko answers tartly, eyes narrow. Sakura’s mouth opens and closes in triple succession, not unlike a fish’s. “Naruto’s my best friend.”

Naruto beams at Riko. “You’re my best friend, too!”

“But- but!” Sakura protests. “No one wants to be friends with Naruto!” She makes a disgusted face, as if the very idea of it is repulsive. “He’s stupid, rude, and a liar!”

Riko narrows her eyes. “I want to be friends with Naruto, so that makes you the liar.”

The girl glares at her. “What’s your problem?” she shouts. They’re drawing looks, but Riko is too angry to care.

“I don’t know, the fact that you decided I don’t exist? Or are bullying my friend? Ring a bell?” Riko retorts and glares back. She has a fantastic glare thanks to her piercing green eyes. Sakura has green eyes, too, but they’re a soft moss green. She has a significant height advantage, though.

The girl scoffs. “I guess if you’re friends with Naruto-baka, that makes you a loser too. Four-eyes!”

“If not being one means not being friends with him,” Riko snaps. “Then yeah. I guess I am.”

The classroom is silent, everybody staring at the two of them attempting to murder each other via eye contact. They remain in their standoff until the teacher arrives, at which point everybody finds their seats. Riko would have liked to sit next to Shikamaru, but he has Chouji next to him and since there are three seats to a desk, she wouldn’t be able to sit with Naruto.

Iruka-sensei has Fumio in tow. The other boy is all but bouncing with excitement and shoots her a beaming grin. Riko resists the urge to slam her head into the nearest solid surface.

Just great. Fumio skipped a grade to follow her. As if her life wasn’t stressful enough.

At least it can’t get that much worse.

“As you have no doubt noticed, we’re welcoming two new students in class today. Fumio-kun and Riko-kun have both moved up a grade. Since graduation isn’t far away, I want two of you to tutor them — you’ll get extra credit, of course. Any volunteers?”

Naruto jumps up and shouts, “I’ll do it, Iruka-sensei!”
“Naruto, your grades aren’t good enough,” Iruka shuts him down mercilessly. “You don’t even show for class regularly.”

Snickers sound throughout the class.

“I can do it,” Shikamaru yawns, raising a hand lazily. Several jaws drop at the sight of Shikamaru actually volunteering for something.

“Look at that, she’s got all the losers wrapped around her finger,” comes a not so-subtle-whisper from Sakura. Riko glares at her. First she insulted Naruto, now Shikamaru? Not cool.

“Thank you, Shikamaru,” Iruka says. “Unfortunately, your grades aren’t quite up to par either.” He sighs. “Anyone else? No? Okay, then I’m assigning the tutors. Sakura, you’ll tutor Fumio. Sasuke, you’ll help Riko catch up.”

A second of horrified silence, then all hell breaks loose. Seemingly every girl in the class (plus Naruto) jumps up and cries out in protest. Several shout that they want to tutor Riko after all. She just stares in mute horror.

Sasuke turns and gives her the most terrifying glare she’s ever seen.

“I’m so sorry,” she mouths at him. It does nothing to pacify him.

“Enough!” Iruka shouts. Is his head supposed to be that big? The entire class quails. “You didn’t volunteer earlier, so that’s how it is now. Sakura and Sasuke, come see me after class.”

He starts the lesson then. Riko shoots Naruto a wide-eyed look. “Your class is crazy,” she whispers. “What the heck was that?”

Naruto shrugs sullenly. “Sasuke-teme’s a bastard. He isn’t even that great! Hey, you’re not allowed to go crazy over him, Ricchan!”

“I can go crazy if I want,” Riko answers tartly.

“Yeah, okay, but you can’t stop being friends with me!”

“Why would I want to stop being friends?” She eyes him incredulously.

“Promise, Ricchan!”

“Only if you promise, too.”

“Okay!” They shake on it. Riko is utterly confused but happy. Friends forever. No take-backs. That’s pretty great, right?

Being the new kid has never been this stressful before. Riko makes a break for it the moment lunch break starts, Naruto loyally following along, Shikamaru and Chouji finding them a few minutes later.

“So that was a thing,” Shikamaru yawns, sinking down and closing his eyes. Riko makes an
unintelligible noise around her rice ball, simultaneously rooting around for the storage seal containing her textbook.

There’s no time to waste! The more she studies, the less time she’ll have to spend with Sasuke, which means there’s less risk of him murdering her.

“But it sucks that you have to spend time with Sasuke!” Naruto complains.

Riko swallows the last of her lunch. “Is he really that awful?”

“Yes!” Naruto shouts, at the same time as Shikamaru makes an inconclusive noise.

“He’s okay,” Chouji says loyally, but he looks a little worried.

“Who’s okay?” A boy swings into the little nook they all found themselves in. Riko’s eyes zero in on his head because. Tiny dog. “You talking ‘bout me?”

“No, ‘cause you’re stupid, Kiba!” Naruto shouts.

“Shut up, Naruto!” The newly named Kiba turns to Riko and gives her a grin. “Riko, right? I’m Kiba and this is Akamaru.” The dog barks.

“Nice to meet you, Kiba and Akamaru,” she answers. “We were talking about Sasuke.” She holds up her textbook. “I’ll study and hopefully he won’t murder me brutally.”

Kiba barks out a laugh and sits down, ignoring Naruto’s grumbles about it. “A girl who doesn’t like him, that’s a new one. Need help?”

“I didn’t say I didn’t like him,” she protests. “I just don’t… uh. I don’t even know him! I guess I don’t dislike him? He doesn’t seem too terrible.”

He did save her from Fumio that one time.

“He looked like he wanted to kill you,” Shikamaru points out.

“So did Sakura.” Riko shrugs. “Nothing special.”

Shikamaru gives her a look. “It’s not something you should get used to, you troublesome girl.”

“Eh.” She makes a vague hand gesture. “No use worrying about it.”

Kiba’s eyes dart between him and her. His nose twitches as he sniffs the air. “You’re… close?”

“She’s my sister.” Shikamaru leans back against the wall. Riko’s breath hitches.

Sister.

She would kill for Shikamaru.

“Yoshino-san and I are distantly related. I’ve been staying with Shika’s family since I was six,” Riko explains, sounding far more calm than she feels. The lie has been told often enough that it flows off her tongue smoothly.

“Huh, that’s cool.” Kiba drops to the ground in a sprawl, Akamaru hopping off his head and shuffling over to Riko, who is delighted at this turn of events. She holds out her hand for him to sniff.
“Hi, I’m Riko,” she tells the little dog, because she knows enough about ninken to be aware that treating one as less than a person is all kinds of unwise and likely to piss off the human partner. Nevermind the ninen.

Akamaru yips and bumps his head against her hand, clearly demanding scritches. Isn’t that cat-behaviour? Riko mentally shrugs and obliges with a delighted laugh.

“What, you want scritches, too?” Riko asks curiously, wondering exactly how far the dog characteristics of Inuzuka clan members go.

Kiba looks up at her through his lashes. “You offering?”

“Uh, I-” she begins when Shikamaru interrupts,

“He’s flirting, moron. You’re also flirting.”


“What the hell, man?” Kiba whines to Shikamaru.

“What the hell, Kiba!” Naruto shouts and launches himself at Kiba. They roll out into the courtyard. Akamaru gives a small bark, licks Riko’s hand, and then bounds after the two brawling boys.

Riko stares after them. “I don’t get it.”

“You. Follow.” Uchiha Sasuke glares down at Riko, who tries her best not to quail in a visible way.

She’s usually fine if people glare at her, the majority of the female students in the Academy have been glaring at her all day and all it did was make her somewhat grumpy. But Sasuke looks so much like Hotaru. It throws her off-balance. Added to that is the remembered humiliation of having begged him for help in a very embarrassing situation.

Riko kind of wishes Naruto were here, but he’d yelled something about there being an event at Ichiraku’s and skipped the last hour of school to be there.

If he were here, there would be a brawl and chaos and even if she had wanted to, she wouldn’t be able to trot after Sasuke like a prisoner about to face execution.

“Where are we going?” she asks.

He gives her a look for thinking he’d be stupid enough to give her an answer out loud when there’s like a dozen girls trying to shadow them without getting noticed. Riko feels a stab of annoyance, rolls her eyes and gives a look of her own.

He could always lie. That would get rid of at least some of them.
She makes a mental note to touch up on her illusions. They would certainly be useful in situations like this. But training with Yoshino has been all about ninjutsu lately while Genma’s been drilling her in the use of senbon and mentioned something about getting started on immunising her against at least two kinds of poisons before graduation. So the only thing she can do with illusions so far is break them.

Riko can do a really good clone though, so the next time they turn around a corner she flicks through the necessary seals and a perfect — if immaterial — copy seamlessly takes her place and walks down another street.

Sasuke glares at her, presumably for thinking of something he didn’t, and copies the manoeuvre.

They end up at his house. Riko has the strong suspicion that she’s the only girl in the village who knows where he lives because there’s a distinct lack of fangirl siege surrounding the high hedges around it.

Less witnesses when he murders her, she figures.

“You know, you don’t have to do this,” she tries when he unlocks his door. He turns and glares at her, but she continues bravely, “It’s not the first time I’ve skipped a grade. I’ll catch up on my own time, no problem.”

“Shut up,” he snaps, opens the door, and enters.

The door remains open.

“Well then,” she mutters. “Let it be known I was last seen in his company by about a dozen girls who will all cover for him if I mysteriously disappear.”

She comforts herself with the knowledge that with that number of people covering up her demise, there’s bound to be conflicting stories. Those girls didn’t seem to have much in the way of common sense, and seemed to get more stupid the more of them shared breathing space.

Riko still has a senbon ready in her sleeve when she finally follows Sasuke into the house.

Chapter End Notes

Poor Kiba just wanted scritches.
Sasuke is a terrible teacher. Absolutely awful. Horrendous. It’s kind of incredible, really. Riko is a little bit in awe of how he just utterly fails at explaining things.

Even more impressive, he’s completely oblivious to his own shortcomings.

Naturally, when he realises the tutoring session isn’t going to plan, he instantly blames her.

Two hours in, they’ve silently come to the agreement that Sasuke will just write Riko a study schedule, supply her with the necessary books, and look over her homework assignments. All of it can be done without talking. It can even be done with a minimum of glaring, not that he seems to understand that.

On the upside, he reminds Riko less of Hotaru with every passing moment.

“That’s enough studying,” Sasuke finally decides, done with his own homework. Riko eyes him dubiously but nods. She’ll continue her studies at home. “Come on.”

He leads her outside to the small training space where he falls into a fighting stance.

“Rules?” Riko asks.

“No weapons.” He gives her a derisive look. Not that they’d help you, his eyes seem to say. You’ll lose.

She refrains from bristling. According to Yoshino, kunoichi are above such displays. Make them eat their words through skill, she advised.

Riko does have the skill. Her abilities in combat are the main reason she keeps getting bumped up in the Academy.

Sasuke attacks first. He’s fast, almost too fast for her eyes to follow. The only warning Riko has is the look in his eyes just before he charges.

But she’s fast, too. She has to be, at age ten her physical strength is low and she only weighs sixty pounds soaking wet. Taijutsu-wise, she’ll never be a heavy hitter, but she makes up for it in speed and evasion.

Again and again, she weaves around Sasuke’s attacks. Small and slippery, she ducks and dances, darting in with quick attacks and jumping away when he blocks and counterattacks. He’s good, leagues better than anybody else her age that she’s fought before. Her one advantage is that he telegraphs his attacks — it’s the look in his eyes, the way he draws back to gather momentum.

It’s lucky he doesn’t attack her glasses, to say the least, but then she loses them anyway to a hit that gets a little too close, but she keeps on going. Pushes her chakra sense to the limit, and every time he launches another assault, she knows just a tiny moment in advance because his chakra spikes.

The two of them whirl around each other faster and faster, an intricate dance of punches and kicks, blocks and counters. Bruises bloom on her body, but he’s accumulating his fair share, too. Her arms start to ache, her breath beginning to come short. Sweat lines Sasuke’s brow, and blood drops from the split lip she gave him at the cost of a twisted arm.
It feels good. Fighting like this. Neither of them are holding back, not anymore. It’s magnificent.

Finally, Sasuke sweeps his leg behind Riko’s. She grabs him as she falls, and they both tumble to the ground. Him sitting on her chest, a hand at her throat. Both of them breathing hard. His eyes are wide, stunned. Riko’s are the same.

It’s over?

It’s actually over.

Somehow, the spar — though that word feels inadequate — had felt like it would never end. Like it should never end. But now it has.

Sasuke stands up with jerky motions and walks away. Riko stays on the ground, still catching her breath. “See you tomorrow?” she croaks after him.

“Hn,” he grunts, and she can’t tell if that’s a yes or not.

Riko hobbles back to the Nara compound. She pulled something in her leg during that spar. Serves her right, they hadn’t even stretched beforehand. Stupid. She kicks an empty juice can and immediately feels guilty for not picking it up and disposing of it properly.

“Well someone’s grumpy,” a familiar voice drawls. Riko jumps to the side, but unfortunately Genma is a jounin with very good reflexes, and a moment later she finds herself picked up and tucked under his arm like a sack of potatoes. She attempts to stab a senbon in his leg. It doesn’t work. “You look like you got run over by a cart, punched in the face, and then rolled in the dirt.”

Damn it. She was hoping the hit that grazed her wouldn’t turn into a black eye. Naruto’s gonna blow a gasket.

At least her glasses are intact, if bent out of shape.

“Found a sparring partner,” she explains blandly. Genma begins to walk, carrying her dangling under his arm. “We may have overdone it, but it was awesome.”

She is so going to spar Sasuke again.

Genma sighs. “You might want to look into medical jutsu if you’re planning a repeat.” He’s walking in the direction of the hospital now.

The medics know her face by now. She’s there a lot. It’s not her fault! Training is just hard and her teachers are overprotective, and she’s a bit of a messy fighter. As in, she ends up messed up despite doing everything mostly by the book.

Also, fuuinjutsu is a little hazardous even at the beginner’s level.

And then there’s the chakra exhaustion, which Riko finds herself suffering from at least once a week.

…learning medical ninjutsu would probably be a good call.
Actually, it’s a really good idea because her chakra reserves are tiny. Not quite as pathetic as they used to be, with the constant exercise they had to increase, but it’s becoming apparent that Riko’s going to have to pick a specialisation that doesn’t bring with it a need for high-cost techniques and keeps her from high-level frontline combat.

Medical ninjutsu seems perfect, honestly. And now that she’s thinking about it, she really likes the thought of healing people.

Genma hands her over to the faintly exasperated medic that Riko is pretty sure was assigned to her. Nara Shiori has those huge brown eyes that always look utterly disappointed when Riko comes in with a new injury. It makes her feel ten inches tall. “Sorry,” she mumbles.

“I’m sure you are,” Shiori-sensei says mildly. In her thirties, her hair is already lined with white strands. “Stay off that leg. I’ll notify your family and the Academy to keep you out of taijutsu classes. Your black eye should fade in a few days.”

Damn it.

“I’ll have your mother bring you by for a checkup on the week-end.” Shiori-sensei gives Riko a stern look. “Now, tell me what you're going to do in order to get healthy.”

“Stay off my leg,” Riko responds dutifully, and then continues, “Take it easy, don’t jump around, don’t study fuuinjutsu unsupervised, don’t climb trees, eat my greens, drink the yucky shakes.”

Shiori-sensei nods, satisfied. An expectant look at Genma has him promising to keep an eye on her.

“Hey, Shiori-sensei,” Riko speaks up. “Where should I start with learning medical ninjutsu?”

The medic’s eyes light up. “Oh, wonderful!” she exclaims. “Did you know, Riko-chan, that medical ninjas aren’t allowed to get hurt because they need to be able to heal their comrades?”

“No,” Riko answers. “I didn’t know that! Medical ninjas are pretty amazing, huh?”

“They are.” Shiori-sensei gives her a warm smile. “I’ll make arrangements for you.”

“Thanks!” Riko beams at her. “Healing seems like a neat thing to know, as a ninja.”

Shiori-sensei smiles back.

Because he insists on being helpful in the most annoying way possible, Genma carries Riko home. “Shiori said to stay off that leg,” he insists cheerfully when Riko glares at him. “It definitely doesn’t have anything to do with the prospect of Yoshino inviting me in for dinner.”

She sticks out her tongue at him.

Entirely by his design, they arrive at the Nara house just in time for the meal. Shikamaru is lying on the porch with Usagi-chan the rabbit napping on his chest. Next to him sit Ino and Chouji.

“Good evening!” Genma greets cheerfully. “I come in peace bearing a gift!” He holds Riko out in front of him.
“Hi,” she says dryly.

“Still alive, I see,” Shikamaru drawls. “Nice black eye.”

“I gave him a split lip,” Riko reveals triumphantly. “You can put me down now, Genma.”

Genma obliges. The moment he does, Ino darts forward and grabs Riko’s hands. “Riko-chan! Let’s have a girl talk!” She pulls Riko with her into the house, up the stairs, and into her room. How Ino knows where Riko sleeps is a mystery and should probably remain so.

Somehow, they end up holding hands on Riko’s couch. “Tell me everything!” Ino commands with eager eyes.

Riko blinks owlishly. “About what?”

“About Sasuke-kun!” Ino leans forward, eyes gleaming. “Come on, what was it like? What did you talk about? Oh, did he mention me at all?”

“Erm,” Riko says. “No? He didn’t mention you. And we didn’t really talk. Just studied, and then had a spar-”

Ino gasps. “A spar!”

“Yeah, and now I have a fracture in my leg and a black eye.”

“I’ll show you how to cover that up,” Ino waves her off. “Come on, give me all the details! What was he wearing?”

“Same stuff as he did in school? Why would he change?” Riko leans away from Ino. The look in her eyes is freaking her out a bit.

Ino continues interrogating her. One day, Ino's going to take over the I part of T&I. Maybe even the T, who knows. Now the handholding makes sense — Ino has her fingers on Riko’s pulse so she’ll be able to tell if she lies.

“Last question,” she announces. “You aren’t interested in Sasuke-kun, are you?”

“Interested?” Riko blinks in confusion. “I mean sure, he’s interesting I guess? He’s not not interesting. He’s not boring?”

Ino giggles. “Oh, you’re so cute. I keep forgetting that you’re a kid!”

“You’re only a year older than me!” Riko protests.

“Uh-huh.” Ino snickers. “I mean, you don’t like like Sasuke-kun, right?”

Oh. Ino wants to know if Riko wants to be Sasuke’s girlfriend.

“No!” she exclaims, horrified. She doesn’t want to be anybody’s girlfriend. The whole thing with Fumio was awful. She’ll take friends over boyfriends any day.

“Good!” Ino grins and hugs her. “Then we can be friends!”

It’s not like it is with Naruto’s hugs. Ino is softer and smells like flowers. Her hold isn’t as tight either. It’s different, but it feels just as nice.
“Okay,” Riko nods. “Friends sounds nice. What does that have to do with Sasuke though?”

Ino pulls back and for a moment, a shadow runs over her face, her eyes pained. Then the look is gone. “I’ve lost friends over him before.” She shrugs and laughs. “Not taking the risk again.”

Riko wants to ask more, wants to hug Ino again because that’s awful, losing a friend, but just then Yoshino calls them for dinner and the moment is lost.

Because Riko has to stay off her leg, taijutsu training is on hold. Instead, she gets to go home from school earlier.

Just because taijutsu is out doesn’t mean Yoshino won’t train her, though. Her foster mother holds out a piece of paper towards her. “Channel chakra into it,” she orders.

The paper ends up drenched in water. And sparkling, for some reason. “That’s odd,” Yoshino mutters. “Well, at least we know your nature now.”

“Water, huh?” Riko looks down at the paper with some surprise and a little disappointment. She’d expected wind. Or even fire, that could have been fun. Water is… well.

It’s just water.

“Just like me,” Yoshino confirms, a pleased smile on her face. Riko looks up in surprise. Yoshino is the strongest woman she knows. Water suddenly sounds a lot better.

What follows, however, is utterly boring. And annoying. Sitting under a waterfall for hours while trying to make her chakra mirror the water’s movement is not her idea of fun. Why couldn’t it have been fire? She’d get to sit in the sun then.

After several hours, she all but crawls back home, looking and feeling like a drowned kitten. Shikamaru and Shikaku are sitting on the porch, playing shogi. Both look amused at her appearance.

“Water nature?” Shikaku asks, obnoxiously mirthful.

Riko tackles him. Shikaku laughs and catches her and wow. First Ino and now Shikaku, Riko’s getting all the hugs and she likes it. There’s something about Shikaku’s arms around her that makes her feel small and precious.

Water really isn’t so bad after all.

Life takes a bit to settle into a new routine, but eventually it does. There’s of course the Academy. Tutoring sessions with Sasuke with spars once a week. Medical training. Learning water-natured ninjutsu. Training with Genma.
And, of course, studying in every bit of free time Riko can manage. At least now that they’re in the same class, she gets to spend a lot more time with Naruto. And since becoming friends with Ino, the girls in class have left her alone, only shooting her looks full of loathing when Ino isn’t looking.

It’s nice, having a friend who is a girl. There are so many things Ino knows. She’s witty and cool. Kunoichi classes are a lot more fun with her around.

And it’s not just Ino — the number of friends Riko has keeps rising. Kiba, Shino, Hinata…

School is suddenly something she looks forward to.

“Welcome back to your last term at the Academy,” Iruka welcomes the class, which slowly settles down.

Naruto, bouncing up and down on his seat, punches the air. “Yatta!” he shouts.

“Troublesome,” Shikamaru.

“No, just trouble,” Riko giggles. It’s true. Not a week passes that Naruto doesn’t get chased around by a mob of angry villagers for some prank he pulled. He never gets caught, however. Unless ninjas are involved, but Naruto rarely pranks those.

It’s good to see him in high spirits. He’d been pretty down the last week, having failed the graduation exam for the second time. No matter how hard he tries, the bunshin no jutsu gives him trouble.

Third time’s the charm. Naruto can do it, Riko has no doubt about that. And then they’ll be on a team together and go on adventures. It’s gonna be awesome.

She’s been training hard and studying even harder. She’ll be a good shinobi, she’s sure of it.

All her hard work is once again paying off. Riko’s climbed up the ranks, right now just a step above Ino’s, but she’s sure she can get close to Sakura’s level, too. The graduation exam would influence the final rankings quite strongly, and from what she’s heard from Naruto, they’re heavily focused on the practical skills. Sakura’s rank is built on theory.

Riko really wants to beat that girl, both metaphorically and literally. Sakura hasn’t gotten any more bearable. Loud, rude, arrogant. But blushing and sweet the moment Sasuke comes near. To be fair, that is a thing almost all the girls in class do.

(They doesn’t get it. Sure, Sasuke’s pretty okay when it’s just the two of them and they get to beat each other up, and he’s very nice to look at. But why nearly every girl — and even a whole lot of grown women, what the heck, creepy — become idiots around him remains a mystery.)

At the front, Iruka continues his lecture. It’s boring. He’s an interesting teacher, but ninjutsu theory is boring even when one hasn’t studied it before. Which Riko has.

…would anybody notice if she replaced herself with a water clone?
“Someone’s motivated,” Genma comments from behind where Riko keeps hitting a training post.

Her knuckles hurt, and if they weren’t bandaged for protection, she would have started bleeding a long time ago.

“I’m not good enough!” she growls, and launches into a spinning kick. The training post barely trembles.

In class today, Sakura shattered one.

Her foot hurts. Tomorrow she’ll have a bruise from landing that kick.

“Okay.” Genma picks her up and carries her away from the training post. “Let’s talk about this.”

He sets her down on a fallen tree. Riko crosses her arms and glares at him defiantly. “What about training?”

“Talk first.” He sits down next to her.

She looks away.

“Why do you think you’re not good enough?” Genma presses. “Someone say something to you? Because they’re wrong.”

Riko sniffs and hates herself when tears start to fall. “I really wanted to be a medic, okay?”

“Yeah,” Genma says cautiously. “You were pretty excited about it. Classes not going well?”

“Classes are fine,” she snaps, and hiccups. “Were fine. They kicked me out!”

He stiffens, features smoothing out and eyes hardening. “They what now,” he asks flatly.

Wiping her sleeve over her wet eyes furiously, she chokes out haltingly, “I didn’t do anything wrong! They just — they have these test seals for chakra control, you know? Channel in specific amounts or increase chakra input at a steady rate to make them light up, and if you can do that, you’re qualified to begin supervised treatment on human patients. And my control is good, I did it, but then they were suddenly saying the readings were off, did a ton of tests which ended inconclusive, and then they t-told me I can’t be a medic because my chakra is weird and they can’t spend resources on my medical training if I won’t be able to work at the hospital anyway! ‘Cause they’re worried my chakra might be harmful, but it’s not! Every animal I’ve ever healed was fine! This isn’t fair!”

She’s sobbing in earnest now and she hates that she can’t stop the tears, which makes them come even stronger.

“A-and my reserves are tiny so I c-can’t do a lot of ninjutsu, and my body’s constitution is weak so taijutsu mastery is out, too, and I’m not a genjutsu type either! I’m not good for a-anything!”

Genma puts an arm around her shoulder and tucks her against his side. Riko clings to him, tears leaking into his flak jacket. More than sad, she’s angry. Impotent rage roiling in her chest, and she hates feeling like this. So helpless. Ikeda-sensei just relayed the information, demanded her access badges, and then she was escorted out. Nothing she could have done, and she’s wasted so much
He takes a while to say anything, taking deep, controlled breaths for a minute.

“That’s not true,” he answers eventually. “So what if you have limitations? You’re still good at a lot of things. Your chakra control is good enough to use the Mystical Palm technique, and I’ve seen you heal your scratches and bruises, which is more than what most shinobi manage. I can’t even do it.”

“It’s not enough!”

“You’re eleven,” Genma snorts. “You haven’t even graduated yet. And for the record? You’re getting really good with that sword of yours, and I know your chakra sense is going to be in high demand one day. Konoha doesn’t have many sensors. There are a ton of things you can do.”

She sniffs. “But I really wanted to be a medic.”

“I know.”

“It was like I got a purpose. Felt g-good. Like I found my place.”

“Sorry,” he says. “Life’s like that sometimes. Kicks you right in the balls. And you know what? You can still heal, you know how to do it. Someday, you’ll save someone’s life with that.”

For a while they sit in silence. Finally, Riko leans away and gets to her feet. Takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly. “Training,” she declares with a forced grin.

“You got it, kid.” Genma ruffles her hair. She catches his hand.

“Thanks,” she says quietly.

“You’re welcome.”

The day starts out normal enough. Riko sits in the classroom between Shino and Kiba, dozing with her head resting on her arms. She’s exhausted. Ninjutsu training has left her depleted of chakra, and she studied until after midnight.

Naruto hasn’t arrived yet, and neither has Iruka. If there is a connection between their absences, it will be troublesome-

There they come. Naruto’s chakra is loud, she knows where he is the moment he enters Academy grounds, and it almost drowns out Iruka’s steady and subtle signature. It doesn’t take long for Iruka to burst through the door of the classroom, dragging a tied-up Naruto behind him and setting him down at the front for everyone to see. Riko winces at the expression of wrath on his face. “Tomorrow is the graduation exam!” he shouts at her friend. “This is no time to be causing trouble, you idiot! You’ve already failed the exam twice!”

Ouch. Harsh.

Wait a minute.
“The graduation exam is tomorrow?” Riko squeaks. Half the class turns to stare at her incredulously. The rest are too busy witnessing the ongoing lecture from hell Iruka is delivering upon Naruto. Heads are not supposed to be that big.

“The exam is indeed tomorrow,” Shino says. “Why? Because it is the end of term.”

Riko whimpers. Akamaru jumps off of Kiba’s head and burrows into her lap.

“What do you have to worry about?” Kiba asks incredulously. “And how do you not notice that you’re about to graduate? My mom hasn’t shut up about it all month!”

“Yoshino-san expects me to keep track of things like that on my own,” Riko moans, fingers curling in Akamaru’s fur. “But I forgot and I’m going to fail. I haven’t studied at all-”

Actually, she hasn’t done anything but study, but not for the exam!

Below, Iruka shouts, “Class, line up. Time for a review test on the henge! I want you all to transform into me.”

Whining about this being all Naruto’s fault, the class does as told. Riko manages to place herself next to the now untied Naruto. “What did you do?” she asks in a desperate attempt at distracting herself from impending doom.

He scratches the back of his head sheepishly. “Painted the Hokages’ faces,” he answers with a proud grin.

Riko blinks slowly. “You painted the what now?” she asks.

“The Hokages’ faces, on the mountain!” Naruto beams at her. “It was awesome!”

No wonder Iruka was so mad.

“Are you insane?” she hisses, then pauses. “How’d it look?”

Her best friend doesn’t get to answer, Iruka calling his name. Naruto runs forward, grinning mischievously. Oh no.

“Henge!” he calls out, and smoke bursts around him. Where Naruto stood is now a woman with an impossible figure, completely naked, smoke only barely covering the essentials. Her hair is dark red and her eyes are green. Iruka’s nose starts bleeding.

Riko hides her face in her hands, shaking her head in denial.


“Is that yo-” Kiba begins. Riko knocks him out, runs forward, and dropkicks the naked woman who transforms back into her best friend, whom she drags out of the classroom.

“Ricchan!” Naruto beams at her full of pride. “I call it the Sexy Jutsu!”

She makes a strangled noise.

“Are you okay?” Naruto asks, smile dropping and damn it. Puppy eyes.

Riko clears her throat. “Uh. Yeah. Just thinking that it would look better with blond hair. Not everybody likes a redhead.”
“No way!” Naruto exclaims. “But you’re so pretty!”

She laughs weakly. “Thanks. It’s just. A little weird. A naked girl that looks kind of like me.”

Except tall and adult and with curves, so really, not like her at all.

“Freaked me out a bit,” she adds.

“Ohay! I’ll make her blonde!” Naruto grins at her. “I just thought you’re the prettiest girl in the world, so I based it on you, ‘ttebayo.”

Riko stares at him for a moment, cheeks heating up. She opens her mouth and closes it again.

…she’d rather he never use that thing again, but. Baby steps.

After school, Naruto is dragged off to clean the defaced monument. Personally, Riko prefers the painted faces. They look much more cheerful after their makeovers.

At home, she goes straight for the training fields. Never mind her exhaustion, she has to review all Academy-taught jutsu and go through all the kata.

“Nervous?” Shikaku interrupts. Riko startles and spins on her heel. Her foster father gives her a mildly curious look. “Would you like to play a game of shogi?”

It doesn’t sound like a question. She bites her lip, but relents. “Sure. Why not. I only graduate tomorrow.”

Shikaku huffs a laugh. “It’s that time already?”

She gives him a withering look and sinks down on the cushion. “Evidently.”

“You’re not going to learn anything new the afternoon beforehand.”

“But I can improve my skills.” She moves a piece forward.

“I have no doubt that you’ll do well,” he says calmly.

“But it’s too soon! I’m not ready!” Riko clamps her mouth shut, but the words are out.

Shikaku sighs quietly, reaches out, and ruffles her hair. His eyes are warm. “You are. We made sure of it. Yoshino sings your praises. And I’ve watched you work day and night. You’re going to be an exceptional shinobi, Riko.”

She sniffs a little. “Really?”

“Really.”

“Thank you,” she mumbles. He smiles and opens his arms. Riko doesn’t waste any time and shuffles closer, leaning into the hug.

“I’m very proud of you,” Shikaku tells her. “Now, I do think you need a break and some sleep.
You need to be well-rested tomorrow.”
The day of the graduation exam comes bright and early. Riko wakes up well-rested, her mind clear. Yesterday’s panic is now cool determination. She can do this.

“This is so troublesome,” Shikamaru complains as they walk to school together. Riko bumps his shoulder with her own.

“Cheer up,” she says. “Last test we have to take. No more lessons and rivalries. Only extensive training with jounin, teamwork drills, and missions!” She pumps her fist.

Shikamaru gives her a withering look.

“You can’t fail on purpose,” Riko adds. “Think about Ino’s reaction. Think about Yoshino-san’s!”

They both shudder. Evasion drills with Shikamaru’s mother and her favourite ninjutsu, the water whip, come to mind.

The two of them walk into the classroom. They’re among the first to arrive. Several students are already occupying their seats, heads in their books in desperate bids to cram in some last-minute knowledge. Others are muttering to themselves with vacant looks on their faces.

Naruto is one of the latter. Face pale and sweaty, hands pulling at his hair, he’s clearly panicking.

Riko sinks down in the seat next to him. “Are you okay?” she asks.

“Haha! I’m fine!” His grin is bright and fake. “I’m not scared! An awesome ninja like me won’t fail!”

“Of course not,” she agrees soothingly, sounding far more certain than she actually is. Naruto doesn’t do well in tests. “You got this, Ruto. You passed the written test last time. The rest is a piece of cake.”

Naruto perks up. “Yeah! I’ll definitely pass!”

Unless they’re testing the bunshin. In that case… well. She hopes they won’t.

Soon enough, the remaining class members trickle into the classroom. When Iruka finally enters, it’s like a switch flipped. Instant silence.

The graduation exam begins.

The written portion of their (hopefully) final series of tests takes up the better part of the morning. It’s difficult, but she knows the answers to almost all the knowledge questions and she knows how to solve the rest, or can at least make plausible guesses. Riko has a good feeling when she finally sets her pen down after double- and triple-checking her answers.

After lunch break, the practical part begins. First, they have to throw senbon and shuriken at
targets from an increasing distance, then they switch to moving targets. Riko’s never been exceptional with shuriken, her hands are a little too small for her to hold them comfortably, but she makes up for it by showing off her skill with senbon for extra credit.

Following target practice, they have to clear an obstacle course during which they have to demonstrate their grasp on survival skills. Lighting a fire, building a shelter, identifying edible plants. A spar against Iruka’s assistant is the finale of the physical portion.

“A two-minute spar,” Iruka explains. “You don’t have to win against Mizuki. The spar ends if either of you leave the ring or if the time-limit is met. If you drive Mizuki out, you get bonus points.”

She nods, examining Mizuki. Keeps her chakra sense sharp on him.

He’s a nice enough teacher, but she’s noticed his chakra getting agitated when Naruto is nearby in a way that unsettles her. It only makes her more motivated to give this her all.

The man is tall. It’ll be inconvenient for him to bend down to hit her, so she needs to look out for kicks. His legs and arms are long, it gives him much longer range than she has. She’ll have to get close if she wants to get a hit in.

So all that isn’t optimal for her.

On the other hand, she’s seen him walk around the village with a shuriken big enough to cover his entire back. Chances are he’s a ranged fighter, so his taijutsu might not be amazing.

“Begin!” Iruka shouts, and she lunges for Mizuki instantly, to his surprise — normally, she tries to get distance at the beginning of fights. But she knew that was what he’d expect.

He still manages to block her first punch. She weaves around it and hits a pressure point on his arm — not a debilitating hit, but painful.

Either he’s holding back a lot or he’s not that skilled. Sasuke in his place would have already thrown three punches and/or kicks.

Mizuki darts forward with a fist aiming for Riko’s face, but she’s already rolled out of his range. He takes a step in her direction and she moves. His leg becomes her stepping stone as she catapults herself upwards, running up his body, then landing on the ground behind him in a low crouch.

In her hand she holds his hitae-ate. A clear enough sign that she could have hit any of the soft spots on his head and neck.

“Stop!” Iruka calls out. She straightens. “Well done. You pass. You should be careful about going for the hitae-ate though. It’s fine in this setting, but keep in mind that most ninja would be very enraged to have theirs stolen.”

“I understand,” Riko answers. “Sorry, Mizuki-sensei.”

“No problem, no problem. I shouldn’t have let you get your hand on it,” Mizuki waves her apology aside. Somehow, his words aren’t reassuring.

It’s his chakra. He’s tense, agitated, no matter how easygoing he makes himself out to be.

She makes a mental note not to touch any opponent’s hitae-ate again.
“Thank you, sensei,” she says before she goes back to the classroom to await the ninjutsu portion of the exam. The final stage.

Riko sits with her friends and watches them leave without returning one by one. She doesn’t have a surname, so her name is called only after everyone who does is gone. It means she’s the third to last to go into the test.

Forcing herself to hold her head high, she walks into the examination room. Her mouth is dry and she has to hide her hands in her sleeves to obscure the shaking of her fingers, but Iruka and Mizuki, sitting behind a desk with lines of neatly arranged hitae-ate in front of them, don’t know that.

“Please demonstrate the bunshin no jutsu,” Iruka orders her.

Her hands form the seal and a likeness of her pops into existence next to her. Iruka stands up, inspects it, then sits down again.

“Just one, but executed excellently,” he comments. “Congratulations. You pass.”

Iruka holds a hitae-ate out to her. Riko feels a smile spread on her face when she takes it eagerly and wraps it around her forehead, where it covers her lightning-shaped scar.

Riko did it.

She’s a kunoichi now.

———

When Riko steps out of the Academy, her foster parents and brother are already waiting for her. She’s too giddy to hesitate and throws herself at Shikaku, who catches her and twirls her around like a little girl. When he sets her down, Yoshino hugs her also.

“I’m proud of you, dear,” she says warmly.

“Oi,” Shikamaru speaks up. “What about me?”

Riko laughs and hugs him, too.

“Troublesome girl,” he sighs.

Chouji’s family passes by and more congratulations are exchanged. Riko is so happy that she hugs even Shino when he walks past, causing him to freeze and replace himself with a log as soon as she lets go. Kiba drops by and tries to hug her, but Akamaru jumps into her arms before he has a chance.

She can’t remember ever being so utterly happy.

Then she sees Naruto sitting on a swing by himself and her stomach drops at the look on his face.

He didn’t pass. Riko makes a beeline for him, but someone steps in her way and once she has a clear line of sight again, he’s gone and she can’t see him anywhere. When she remembers to use her chakra sense, she only feels his presence fading out of her range. Riko’s shoulders slump.
She should have trained with him more. Should have studied with him. Shouldn’t have been caught up in her own training so much. He might have passed if she’d just made time for him!

Riko grits her teeth and swears to herself that he will pass the next exam, she’ll make sure of it.

The Akimichi are holding a joint celebration with the Nara and Yamanaka at their compound. Yoshino and Shikamaru make their way there, but Shikaku holds Riko back. “We need to go see the Hokage first,” he says quietly, seriously. “Follow me.”

Riko frowns. Did she do something? What’s this about? The only remarkable thing about her is that she skipped a few grades and graduated at age eleven. She’ll turn twelve in just a bit over four months, though.

The Hokage tower is next to the Academy, so the walk is short a short one. Shikaku leads her straight into the Hokage’s office.

Safe for the village leader himself, it’s empty.


“Good afternoon,” the old man says. “Congratulations on your graduation, Riko-chan.”

He smiles at her warmly. Riko flushes and can’t suppress a proud grin.

“Thank you,” she mumbles.

“Please, have a seat.” He gestures to a chair. Shikaku pulls it closer for her and she sits down. Hokage-sama speaks again. “You have now graduated, and thus the time has come to entrust to you some rather sensitive information.”

She sits straighter, mind whirling with questions. Sensitive information? She’s a genin!

The Hokage leans forward, fingers steepled against one another. Riko does her best to look calm and ready for whatever he’s about to tell her. The tension in the room is thick, and she’s worried now.

“I’m sure,” he says gravely. “That you have wondered about how you came to be with us. Why it is that you cannot find the place you called home on any of our maps.”

She blinks. Whatever she expected, it wasn’t that.

Riko swallows. “It did cross my mind, Hokage-sama,” she answers just to fill the silence that follows his words.

He leans back. “The truth is, until you arrived, none of us had ever heard of your home. Of vehicles that traverse the air, of countries without shinobi, living in peaceful coexistence.”

She has to process that for a minute.

What? What does that mean?
“I don’t understand,” she whispers, shaking her head. Shikaku’s hand finds her shoulder and squeezes lightly.

“What I am saying is that four years ago, you appeared in Training Ground 3 out of thin air. One of my jounin was nearby. He described it as a rip in space that ejected you.”


“You had a serious head injury, leading to brain haemorrhage. You would likely have died had the shinobi not taken you to the hospital immediately.”

“But you told me I was found on the outskirts of the village,” she protests weakly. Training Ground 3 isn’t exactly central, but it’s not on the outskirts of Konoha either.

They lied to her?

This is also the first time she hears about how severe her injury was.

“Not knowing if you were a threat, Yamanaka Inoichi examined your mind.”

Riko closes her eyes and takes a deep breath. The dreams she had while she was floating in darkness, the memories of her parents, their deaths, her life at Privet Drive that repeated over and over until she wanted to scream and beg for it to stop.

She saw them because Inoichi was rooting through her memories.

“He verified that the anomaly was caused by you. You are not of this world, Riko, and you hold a kind of power that we have never seen before.”

Her eyes, open again, are locked on him, and she’s trembling. Magic, it has to be, but… *it isn’t supposed to be like that.*

“We determined that you were merely a civilian child, however extraordinary your talent. Inoichi also found a kind of parasite resting inside of you, which he swiftly removed.” The Hokage’s voice seems to come from far away.

She remembers it. That thing, clinging to her, ripping her up as it was yanked out of her. Tearing a piece of her away.

The room is shaking, or maybe she is. No, there’s a definite rattling sound, and the picture frames on the Hokage’s desk are shaking, the paper stacks rustling.

“Calm,” Shikaku murmurs to her, crouching by her side. “You’re safe with us, little one.”

Shikaku. *Shikaku.*

*“Shikaku-kun here has agreed to take you in,”* that was what they’d told her back then, after she woke up.

But it doesn’t *work* like that. Whatever is inside her, it’s *messed up,* and they thought she might be *dangerous.* And no shinobi would take in something dangerous to raise within their own family. And that means…

She was a mission. The Hokage gave her to Shikaku as a mission. He thought she was some kind of super-powered freak, so he placed her with his trusted advisor and his family, who had steered her towards shinobi-hood.
Who’d made her love them until she never wanted to imagine a life without them.

And it was all so she could be a weapon. It was a lie.

The overhead light bursts. Cracks form in the window and the glass coverings of the pictures in the room. A glass of water on the Hokage’s desk freezes. The plant in the corner withers.

She stands abruptly, Shikaku’s hand falling off her shoulder and she’s glad that it does. Can’t stand the gentle touch, even though she misses it the moment it disappears.

“I need to think,” she says, and her voice sounds high and thin. She doesn’t wait for permission, just runs for the door and then she’s in the hallway outside, speed-walking past doors, not really seeing where she’s going, just know that she has to get out of here-

The world closes in on her. Squeezes.

When it spits her out, she’s in a meadow. Grass interspersed with little white-blooming flowers, a weeping willow at the centre. The Hokage tower is nowhere in sight.

Right. Super-powered freak.

Riko sits down heavily and stares blankly at the willow.

Now what?

Eventually, Riko gets up from her spot on the ground. She has no idea where she is, but coming across stumps marked by kunai and wire she figures that it’s probably a training ground.

Something tells her that it’s Training Ground 3, the place she supposedly landed in when she… arrived.

She walks slowly, breath carefully measured, and comes upon a river, which she follows to a wide clearing. There’s a man there, standing in front of a large slab of stone. Definitely a shinobi, and going by the flak jacket he’s wearing he’s got to be chuunin or higher. Which means he’s definitely aware of her, she wasn’t exactly stealthy.

Riko makes her way over to the stone. It would be rude to ignore him now and literally any distraction from the latest revelations is one she’ll cling to with a death grip.

She steps up next to the man. Is sure she’s never met him before, she’d definitely remember that gravity-defying hair and the mask.

He’s just standing there, looking at the slab of stone. Riko follows his gaze, squinting at the tiny script on the stone surface.

It’s all names. There must be hundreds of them, and for a moment they blur into one big mass. Then she picks out one in the middle and starts reading at random. She recognises a lot of the surnames — among others, there are Akimichi, Uchiha, Hyuuga. Nara.

She studies the names more closely, scanning for more Naras, until finally she stumbles upon Nara
Megumi. Riko knows that name — she was a cousin of Shikaku’s and sometimes came by for tea with Yoshino. Her funeral was a year ago, she was killed on a mission.

It takes a minute to single out another name she knows. Again, a shinobi killed in action.

It’s not hard to figure out what this monument is for, then. A place to remember fallen comrades.

Riko lowers her head and clasps her hands together, mumbling a few prayers for the deceased before she turns and walks away. Ten minutes later she returns with an armful of flowers. She’s not exactly great at flower arrangement and pretty sure she got some flower meanings wrong, but she did her best and anyway, aesthetics aren’t the point of leaving flowers before a memorial.

“Sorry for intruding,” she says quietly to the silver-haired shinobi, whose scrutiny she felt sharpen the longer she took to place the flowers just right. Then she leaves.

The urge to smash something into pieces has drained from her.

Now she’s just tired.

Exiting the location, a sign tells her it was indeed Training Ground 3 she landed in, and she definitely isn’t going to consider if the location is in any way significant. It was coincidence she landed there, is all.

Riko shuffles through the village slowly, no particular destination in mind, though the thought of returning home — no, the Nara compound — makes her queasy.

Someone falls into step beside her. Riko can’t find it in her to be surprised. Genma has a habit of just showing up when she’s out and about in the village.

Is that a coincidence? Or is it just more mission orders? The thought hurts.

Did anybody even spend time with her because they wanted to? She bites her lip, her eyes stinging, but shinobi aren’t supposed to cry, at least not where anybody can see.

“So,” Genma speaks up eventually, after she refuses to acknowledge his presence for several minutes. “I see a hitae-ate there. Congrats on making genin.”

Riko doesn’t reply. Why does he even insist on talking to her? He doesn’t have to, if he’s guarding her or whatever.


She shoots him her worst glare. Just go away, she thinks, even though she wants him to stay, but at the same time just can’t stand his company right now.

“Scary,” he drawls in response to her glare, then grabs her before she can react and tucks her under his arm before the world disappears in several shunshin jumps. He sets her down in front of an apartment complex, a hand on her shoulder preventing her from running.

“So you are kidnapping me?” she asks listlessly, wondering if she should run. Her mind spits out a list of procedures to stick to in cases like this but she just doesn’t care. What’s the point?

“She speaks,” Genma comments. “It’s a friendly kidnapping. I’m pretty sure we should talk about this.”

“Oh yeah?” She shoots him a look. “What’s there to talk about? I’m just mission orders. Got it.
Gonna leave now.” She turns on her heel.

Genma turns her right back around.

The pissed expression on his face shocks her right out of her apathy. Genma never gets angry. She’s stabbed him in training, she’s tried to (non-lethally) poison him, there was an incident with an explosive tag, and not once has he ever done anything but laugh it off or egged her on.

He smoothes his facial features out with the ease of training.

“You’re wrong,” he says with chilling calmness. “You were only my mission when I guarded you in the hospital when you were about this tall.” He indicates about knee height. Ass. “Everything else was of my own free will. Anyone who says otherwise is lying and trying to hurt you. Got that?”

He’s nearly growling by the end. There’s a weight to his words that leaves little doubt that he’s telling the truth.

She nods, words failing her.

“Good,” he says. He leads the way into the apartment complex, not bothering to check if she’s following. She could leave now, he’s giving her that choice.

Riko follows him in. They stop in front of a door, which he unlocks.

His place is nice. Surprisingly spacious, a large open kitchen, a cozy-looking couch. Nice big windows with security seals on the frames. “You eaten yet?” Genma asks. “The graduation exam had to be exhausting.”

She shakes her head. “Shikaku took me to the Hokage right after.”

“And you panicked and ran.” Genma sighs and shakes his head. “They could have waited one day and let you be happy.”

Riko shrugs, hugging herself. Genma gets busy in the kitchen.

“Thanks,” she says quietly.

“You’re welcome,” he answers.

“I don’t want to go back to them.” She sinks into an armchair that’s so soft it all but swallows her.

“You can stay here,” Genma offers without hesitation. “Eventually you have to talk to them, though. And just so you know, Yoshino has no idea and neither does her spawn. It’s highly classified information.”

Riko nods tiredly. Genma comes over and places a plate filled with food on her lap. “Eat. Then sleep,” he orders.

“You aren’t the boss of me,” she mumbles, but begins to eat and nods off when she’s done.

Only to jerk awake when sirens start to blare. A fuzzy blanket falls off of her. Genma shunshins into the room.

“Okay, kid,” he orders briskly. “Stay here, I’ll see what’s going on. Weapons are in the storage seals under the kitchen sink, in that closet, and that scroll over there. Anyone comes in who isn’t
wearing a Konoha hitai-ate, you get out of here and find help. Got it? I sent a message to your family so they know where you are.”

She nods mutely. He leaves through the window.

The wait is agonising. Through the window she sees shinobi heading to the Hokage tower. The sirens keep ringing, instructing everybody above genin rank to report to their superiors.

She’s only got two kunai and a handful of senbon on her right now plus her bokken in a storage seal. It’s nowhere near enough, so she goes through the stores Genma indicated to stock up.

He comes back in less than twenty minutes, a guy with a scar all over his face in tow.

“Hypothetical question,” he announces. “Suppose there’s a scroll with incredibly powerful forbidden techniques in the Hokage’s office and your friend Naruto heard about it. What would he do?”

Uh. What.

She blinks at him, but from his demeanour, he’s asking as a higher-ranked shinobi, rather than her friend.

It’s easy to answer. “Badger Hokage-sama to let him look at it because he’s an awesome ninja who needs all the awesome jutsu to become the best Hokage ever. He’d keep it up until Hokage-sama treated him to ramen and told him that he can’t look at it until he’s jounin, which he can’t do unless he eats his vegetables like a grown-up. Cue pointed look at Naruto’s Miso Ramen bowl.”

Genma gives her blank look. “That was specific.”

“Why do you ask?” Riko gestures outside. “What’s going on, are we under attack or something?”

Genma’s companion clears his throat. “Uzumaki Naruto supposedly stole the Forbidden Scroll from the Hokage’s office. His whereabouts are currently unknown. It’s suspected that he did it because he failed the graduation exam.”

Riko stares at him incredulously.

What. It makes absolutely zero sense.

He’d failed the graduation exam twice before and the only thing he ever did was mope for a few hours, eat ramen, and throw himself into training. Not go on a stealing spree. Also, if he knew about that scroll, he’d never have shut up about it.

“You sure it wasn’t an imposter?” she asks, a sick feeling beginning to pool in her stomach.

“Hokage-sama is certain it was the real Naruto,” Genma says. “We have to find him and bring the scroll back. Would he leave the village, Riko?”

She shakes her head wildly. “Never. He’s never been outside, not even on training excursions. And he loves Konoha so much.”

“Okay. Where would he go, then?”

Riko bites her lip, mind racing. “Somewhere he can train. A training ground, one of the more secluded and deserted ones where nobody can glare at him. Not Training grounds 21, 33, or 55. He
doesn’t like them.”

Genma nods. “Thanks. We’ll find him.” And he and his friend are gone.

Riko waits for a minute.

They’re hunting her best friend. Who is hated by so many people for inexplicable reasons! If the wrong person found him, he could get hurt.

She takes a slow breath and draws her chakra deep into herself.

The trick to masking chakra is not to draw everything in - a void space will get noticed by any sensor worth their salt. One has to draw in just enough to blend into the environment, and keep adjusting it. Like a chameleon. Civilian chakra level in a populated area. Small animal in the shrubbery. Hashirama tree in the deep forests around Konoha, though imitating plants is hard, almost impossible for anybody who isn’t a decent sensor. Riko’s practiced for years, though, to keep that reminder of Hotaru.

Stealth is going to be important here, nevermind that she isn’t trained in it. The sirens have stopped wailing, but the curfew would stay in effect until morning arrived or a different signal indicated otherwise.

As a genin, she really has no business being out and about.

With all the jounin looking for Naruto, this would be hard. Unless… yeah. That could work!

“Henge!” she whispers, and the jutsu settles over her. She recalls the way Iruka-sensei’s chakra feels. It’s not exactly easy to make her puny reserves broadcast chuunin level chakra signature, but it’s not impossible. Her chakra sense was most frequently practiced during boring school lessons, so his is a chakra she knows well.

Riko pastes on a suitably urgent expression, slips out the window, and goes to find her best friend.

Training Grounds 17 and 22 are a bust. No trace of Naruto there. He’s good at traditional hiding, but his chakra is a beacon, bright and loud.

The training fields he usually frequents, the ones close to his neighbourhood, are deserted as well. What’s more, there are people searching them.

He’d go somewhere nobody would expect him, she reasons.

The only place that comes to mind is Training Ground 44, otherwise known as the Forest of Death. A restricted area, but she knows where some of the entrances are located. It’s not even that far, and with all the shinobi out and about, nobody looks twice at her speeding past at ninja speed.

It should be impossible for a place to emit killing intent. Yet the Forest of Death seems to do exactly that. The area is fenced in, signs telling people to keep out. But somehow, it feels more like the fence exists to keep the forest in, rather than curious visitors out. The trees seem to strain against it, yet not even a root reaches through the chain links.
There’s definitely some fuuinjutsu at work here. Riko swallows dryly.

Naruto wouldn’t really go in there, would he? She casts out her senses, but it’s like the forest gives off its own chakra that layers over everything like a blanket. She senses things moving in there, old and cruel and hungry. Beckoning her to go inside.

Naruto has no sensing abilities at all. He’d charge right in.

Well then. She takes a step forward and-

“All right, that’s as far as you go.” She squeaks out a decidedly non-Iruka like noise and tries to run. Genma lands in front of her. “He is not in there, kid.”

Oh, damn him! How did he know?

“I figured you’d go look for him the moment my back was turned,” he explains dryly without prompting. “I also figured you wouldn’t lead me to him if you knew I was following you.”

Riko cancels her henge and glares at him. “You followed me?” she demands, outraged.

“You disregarded orders! I told you to stay put!” Genma throws up his arms. “You have no leg to stand on here, brat! And you were about to go into the Forest of Death! Do you have a death wish? You nearly gave me a heart attack! And what were you thinking, impersonating a chuunin?!”

“That it would work? Which it did, until you ruined it,” Riko points out.

Genma mutters something unflattering under his breath. She huffs.


Shunshin isn’t Riko’s strongest technique but she uses it anyway and falls over the moment she lands, dizzy. Genma lands on a tree above her, looking incredibly unimpressed. “You done?” he asks.

“Nope.” She shunshins again and nearly throws up. Genma applauds slowly.

“You really need to practice that,” he comments. “I’ll be watching. With a camera.”

“Oh screw you!” She uses a kawarimi this time. Much better. Why didn’t she do that in the first place? Behind her, Genma curses, but she’s already hidden her chakra by now.

Finding Naruto takes a bit of a backseat to getting away from Genma, which is why it comes as an utter surprise when her best friend’s chakra comes into her sensing range. She freezes in place.

Genma lifts her by the back of her shirt. “Got you,” he says blandly. She slaps a hand over his mouth.

“Shut up!” she hisses and aims a kick at his midsection. “Naruto’s here somewhere!”

He curses and drops her. “Where?” he asks. He’s staring at something on the ground. She follows his eyes.

Blood. Kunai and blood and a huge shuriken. Bile rises in her throat.

What if that’s Naruto’s blood?
Above her, the trees groan.

“Hey,” Genma whispers. “Calm down. We’ll find him, okay?”

She takes a deep, shuddering breath. “Okay.” Her eyes catch on the big shuriken. It looks familiar. She was thinking about it just a few hours ago. “Mizuki-sensei has one like that,” she says slowly.

He’s probably not the only Konoha ninja to use a weapon like that, though, so she could be wrong. She hopes she’s wrong, because that looks like a lot of blood. Mizuki-sensei isn’t her favourite teacher, but the thought of him bleeding out somewhere is sickening. And what about Naruto? Did he get attacked here? And Mizuki defended him, but they both got taken away?

How does that tie in with the supposed theft of the scroll?

“An Academy teacher?” Genma questions, eyes stormy. “Damn it. Stick close to me. If you can, you grab whoever got injured, get them out of danger, and provide first aid.”

“Understood,” she answers tersely. Standing perfectly still, even though she feels like she’s vibrating out of her skin.

The two of them follow the trail of blood. It’s not obvious, but it’s clear that whoever hid the tracks did a rush job. Plus, Riko can sense the direction Naruto’s chakra is coming from.

When they get close enough to hear voices, Genma signals for them to halt. Riko lands soundlessly on a large branch next to him.

“Don’t touch Iruka-sensei! I’ll kill you!” Naruto’s voice. He’s okay. But angry, angrier than Riko has ever heard him, his voice actually sounding dangerous. His chakra feels different, angry, and it’s so potent that it drowns out everything else.

But wait — Iruka-sensei? What?

“Idiot!” That’s Iruka-sensei. “Run away!”

“I’ll kill you in one shot!”

Mizuki-sensei.

She’s never heard his voice sound like that. Unhinged. Angry. Smug.

Her mind reels with realisation. Betrayal.

Genma holds up three fingers. Two. One. The two of them launch into motion, just as Naruto’s chakra flares.

She bursts into the clearing just as it turns orange, filled with hundreds of Narutos, all of them looking half-feral with anger. Riko can’t even see Mizuki.

But she does spy Iruka, surrounded by a guard of Naruto lookalikes. His clothes are stained with blood, and she wastes no time in dropping down at his side.

It’s hard, calling up medical chakra in this situation when she’s scared and determined and angry all at the same time. Medical ninjutsu requires a clear state of mind and absolute focus and control. In this moment, Riko has neither.
She takes a shuddering breath and shuts all the chaos in her head out. Green chakra blooms under her fingers. Iruka-sensei says something, but she ignores it. Focuses only on mending the damage to Iruka’s body.

By the time someone shakes her and draws her out of her almost trance-like state, the clearing is empty of clones.

“That was fun,” Genma says. “Let’s never do it again.”
Chapter 11

Mizuki tied up and Iruka’s wounds treated to the best of Riko’s mediocre healing ability, they make their way to the somewhat crowded Hokage Tower. Genma has to carry her since she’s feeling kind of dizzy — it was a long and exhausting day and she’s not made of chakra.

He sets her down once they arrive, so at least that bit of indignity has a minimum number of witnesses.

In the Hokage’s office, they give their reports.

Riko kind of feels like hugging Genma when he bullshits some story about how he took her with him to track down Naruto instead of revealing how she ran off in the guise of Iruka against direct orders to stay.

Naruto rambles his report with enthusiasm, still riding the high of his victory over Mizuki. Finally, the whole thing is explained: Mizuki lied to Naruto about a hidden graduation exam that entailed stealing the forbidden scroll in order to become genin.

It’s not exactly what Riko would call a believable lie, but then, their teachers are supposed to be trustworthy. And Naruto’s never been the brightest and was emotionally compromised after failing the exam.

Halfway into the story, Mizuki wakes up. “He’s a demon!” he screeches, barely coherent. “He’s a demon and he has to die—”

Riko’s stares at him because, uh, what, and the force of his sheer malice stuns her.

Someone knocks him out again. “Take him away,” Hokage-sama orders. He sighs deeply. “It’s been a long day. Iruka, go to the hospital. Raidou, escort Naruto-kun home, please. Riko-chan, the jounin commander is waiting for you outside. Everyone else, return to your posts.”

Shikaku is standing in the hallway when she steps out of the office. Riko swallows dryly.

The last time she saw him was after storming out of the meeting where she… found out the truth. She’s so tired. Far too tired to be mad and hurt at someone she cares about so much.

They stare at each other before he crouches down and picks her up. “Let’s go home,” he says quietly.

She wraps her arms around him. “Okay,” she mumbles.

His arms are still as warm and reassuring as she remembers, and soon she’s asleep.

Riko wakes up in her own bed, the events of yesterday still fresh in her mind.

It takes herculean effort to get up and face the music. It’s early still, surprisingly so, after the late
night she’d expected to sleep into the late morning. But the sun is barely up and here she is, wide awake.

She dithers for several minutes, weighing the idea of slipping out of the window and just spending the day elsewhere. But.

There’s a hitae-ate tied around her head. Riko’s a ninja now, and she’s not about to start her career by running away from inconvenient truths.

…technically, she started her career by disregarding direct orders and breaking the rules after running out of the Hokage’s office, which isn’t optimal. But at least it wasn’t cowardly? Maybe?

Well, no need to continue the negative trend. With a grimace, she leaves her room, brushes her teeth, and then shuffles down the stairs.

Shikaku is sitting on the couch, waiting for her. He looks up at her approach. “You’re up early,” he comments, stating the obvious.

Riko swallows. “That’s my line.” She eyes him warily but comes closer, sitting down in the armchair across from him.

He slides papers towards her. Riko picks them up with a slight frown and stares uncomprehendingly. “What are these?” she asks in a strangled voice.

Adoption papers,” he answers nonchalantly. “Hokage-sama, Yoshino, and I already signed. It’s just missing your signature, then you’ll be a member of the Nara Clan.”

Riko makes a strangled noise.

“I couldn’t do it before,” Shikaku explains. “Conflict of interest while the mission was still ongoing. It annoyed Shikamaru to no end. He asked what was taking so long every other day. Very troublesome.”

A blank stare is all he gets from Riko.

“Do you need a moment?” he asks. She nods mutely and continues to stare at him.

Adoption. Her. Into the Nara Clan. By Shikaku. Can he do that?


“Why?” she croaks.

He raises a brow at her. “You’re a part of this family. Have been for years. It’s just a formality at this point.” He holds out a pen. “Please sign it. Shikamaru is plotting and he has his mother’s ruthlessness. I’m actually quite sure Yoshino is planning to help him. It makes me a bit worried.”

She takes the pen and stares at it for a good while. It’s a very nice pen. Shiny.

The clock ticks in the background.

Her hand moves without her telling it to. The pen meets the paper and leaves a crooked signature. Something snaps, and her hand is her own again.

Riko turns and eyeballs Shikamaru, standing behind her. His shadow retreats into its regular shape.
“You were taking forever,” he says unrepentantly.

“Is that signature even legal now?” she asks blankly.

“So long as none of us tell the administration that it’s technically not yours, it’ll be fine. Shikamaru, don’t do that again, it was Riko’s choice.” Yoshino swoops down out of nowhere and scoops up the papers. “I’ll go file this, then. Welcome to the family, Riko-chan. You may call me mother.”

She skips out the door, humming to herself.

Where had she even come from? For that matter, when did Shikamaru get so stealthy?

“Mom’s gone, I’m going back to bed,” Shikamaru announces. “Later, sis.”

Riko makes a noise like a teakettle. Shikaku gives her a fond grin.

“Welcome to the family, Nara Riko.”

Hours later, they sit in the sun, Shikamaru and Riko with Shikaku in front of them. Their father. The thought sends a mixture of elation and panic down Riko’s spine and she doesn’t know if she’ll ever get used to it. If she ever wants to get used to it.

She’s now part of the clan, part of a family, and she never wants to forget how incredible that is. How special.

Sure, she had a family before. But she never knew her parents, even if she remembers them from her dreams. There’s a little shrine that Yoshino helped her build to remember them by, but they’re the past and the Nara are her future.

And she really is a Nara now. Not just fostered, but legally.

Her fingers clasp into a seal and she attempts to direct chakra into — it’s hard to describe, and she’s not entirely sure she understood it. It’s not so simple as to focus the chakra through her feet into her shadow. It has to go into a void, sort of, and then she can feel her shadow. Connected to her. Like an added limb, or rather, a second body.

Her shadow twitches on the ground, just the tiniest bit. She can feel sweat lining her brow as she tries to move it the way she wants to. How hard can it be to make her shadow wave a greeting?

On the ground, her shadow hand sort of melts. She glares at it and loses control of the technique. Her shadow turns into an undefined murky blob.

Shikamaru’s shadow pokes it with a shadow stick. “I think it’s dead,” he says.

“Then stop poking the corpse,” she answers.

On the ground, her blob shadow swallows up the stick. Then grows limbs and human-ish proportions.

“And now, vengeance!” Riko mutters, scowling in concentration.

Her shadow is supposed to punch Shikamaru’s. Instead, it turns into some kind of… thing. With very long arms that are sort of melded together. It looks vaguely unsettling.

“Wow, you’re bad at this,” Shikamaru comments blandly. His shadow has grown another stick and once again pokes hers, which tries to defend itself weakly and goes back into blob shape.

“You killed her!” Riko gasps in outrage. “You monster!”

“It was an abomination,” Shikamaru says solemnly. “It had to be done.”

“But she didn’t do anything to you!” Riko turns away from him. “How could you be so mean?”

Shika’s shadow pokes hers.

Nu-uh. Her blob turns blobbier. Shadow Riko is not home. Shadow Shika can go poke someone else.

He pokes again.

And again.

A single lance shoots out from Riko’s shadow and pierces into shadow Shikamaru.

“Ow,” he says blandly, the clown.

“How do you like it now, hm?” she crows triumphantly.

“I see your control is improving,” Shikaku says mildly, eyes twinkling with amusement. “Don’t worry about the shape - it takes practice. You can work on it in your own time. I’ll teach you the next stage of the technique once you can make your shadow run your Academy katas.”

Riko smiles at him and sets to work.

In the evening, Riko goes to find her best friend, a basket full of food clutched in her hand. He’s not home, however, so she disables his paint bomb traps, picks his lock, and goes inside.

As always, it’s messy.

Riko is by no means a neat freak, but she likes to keep order in her room. Naruto, however — well if there’s an opposite of keeping order, he does it. She pinches her brow.

There’s just something about Naruto’s place that triggers whatever obsessive cleaning instinct runs in both her and Petunia Dursley’s blood. She’d told him multiple times how important living in a clean environment is, but it has yet to stick.

The fridge is her first victim. There’s so much expired food there. The milk carton makes odd
muddy sounds when she shakes it, so with a disgusted grimace she seals it away into a haphazardly
crawled seal, to be destroyed later.

She can’t find any vegetables at all. Riko ends up throwing all the expired perishables out and
places the food she brought into the fridge.

His cupboards are at least stacked with cup ramen, and she figures while that’s not exactly healthy,
Naruto won’t give himself food poisoning with those.

Naruto’s kitchen is tiny and the fridge was the worst of it. It doesn’t look like Naruto ever uses the
stove beyond cooking water, so at least that’s easily cleaned.

There are some dirty dishes in the sink but those, too, are done quickly.

Everything could do with a good scrub, but it’d do for now. She doesn’t have that kind of cleaning
equipment on her right now.

Riko goes back into his living room. Takes in the chaos and decides she’ll just get him groceries
instead of taking that on.

Naruto is still not back by the time she’s stocked his fridge with fresh groceries and the space
under the sink with proper cleaning supplies, since he clearly can’t be trusted to get them on his
own.

And then she does end up sorting through the piles unsorted clothes, scrolls, and snack wrappers
despite not particularly wanting to, since it’s bothering her.

But it’s getting late and he rarely stays out after dark, so she sets to warming the food.

She calls out “Welcome home!” when she hears the door.

“Huh? Ricchan?” Naruto runs into the kitchen. He’s all muddy and dusty, apparently having
trained all afternoon.

“I made you a graduation dinner,” she explains. “Wash up.”

He looks at her with misty eyes before he shakes himself. “Okay!” he shouts and takes off toward
his bathroom.

Dinner is cheerful. Naruto chatters a mile a minute and praises Riko’s cooking to the heavens until
she’s red in the face, even though it’s nothing special.

It’s good to see him all right. She was a little worried. The whole Mizuki thing was awful. Their
teacher, a traitor! With access to Academy students! The thought is unsettling. Riko wasn’t
particularly fond of Mizuki-sensei, but he was an okay teacher and not in a hundred years would
she have suspected him of turning on the village.

“Let’s have a sleepover,” she suggests, and Naruto’s grin is blinding with the happiness it
broadcasts.

“Awesome!”

It’s late by the time they’re tuckered out from excitement and chatter. Curled up in Naruto’s bed,
neither asleep, but both content.

“I got adopted,” Riko whispers.
Naruto sits up straight. “What?” he shouts. “You — you got a family now?”

She laughs. “I guess. It feels so weird. Nara Riko.”

“I could have adopted you,” Naruto grumbles, laying back down. “Not stupid lazy Shikamaru.”

Riko bursts into giggles and wraps her arms around him. “You’re my family, too,” she decides.

Naruto sniffs and burrows into her. “I’m not crying!” he insists.

“It’s okay.” She tightens the hug. “I don’t mind.”

She wants to tell him. About the power — magic? — she supposedly has, which brought her to Konoha. About being manipulated into a military career. About being someone’s mission and how much that hurt to find out.

But she can’t get the words out.

A day later Riko drops into Sasuke’s garden. It’s their designated sparring day. She’s not exactly sure if that’s still a thing now that they’re both graduated, but they didn’t stop after he didn’t have to be her homework tutor anymore, so maybe they won’t stop now.

He’s already waiting, so she figures she got it right.

“Hi,” she greets, waving, “Congrats on graduating.”

Sasuke grunts and observes as she does her stretches and wraps her knuckles. Once she jumps up and gives him a nod, he wastes no time attacking.

After almost a year of sparring together, fighting him is instinct. She knows how he moves, knows his tells, and he’s the same when it comes to her. It’s become familiar and comforting, even though kicks and punches and throws have bruises appearing all over their bodies.

She never feels more in the moment and herself than when she’s trading blows with Sasuke.

Over the passage of months, the way they fight has changed. Riko’s taijutsu, flighty and evasive previously, has become much harder and vicious. Sasuke is the opposite — where his style was confrontational and straightforward before, he’s adopted a number of crafty moves.

The spar ends when Riko manages to get him on the ground, only to lose the ensuing grappling match.

He rolls off of her and they just lay there on the ground, catching their breaths.

She rolls to her knees and concentrates. Pale green blooms from her hands and she offers them to Sasuke, who shifts close enough for her to repair the scratches and bruises on his skin. Then she does the same for herself.

“Are we gonna keep doing this?” she asks. “I mean, we’re gonna have missions and stuff. And training. So… will we have the time?”
Sasuke shrugs and rolls to his feet. Riko does the same.

“T’m just gonna keep coming by if I’ve got the time,” she decides. “If you’re not in the mood, you can always kick me out.”

“Fine,” he grunts, and she stares at him in astonishment, because hey! Verbal acknowledgement!

Maybe she isn’t the only one who sort-of enjoys the time they spend together.

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“Oi. Riko. Wake up, you troublesome girl.” Shikamaru pokes Riko insistently.

She groans and bats his hand away.

“Go away,” she whines, before her brain catches up with her. Because. It’s Shika waking her up. Shika, who won’t get out of bed willingly before noon, while Riko tends to rise with the sun.

So either this is an imposter or she missed something important.

“We’re supposed to be in the classroom for team assignments in fifteen minutes,” Shikamaru tells her.

Riko freezes.

Oh no. She slept in. On one of the most important days of her life.

She shunshins straight to the bathroom and nearly cracks her head open on the sink when she falls over.

It’s a stressful start to the day and she runs the whole way to the Academy, running into class without taking a breather beforehand. If she had, maybe she would have noticed the dead silence inside and been a little more cautious. As it is, she has absolutely no warning as she comes face to face with the sight of Naruto crouching on a table, kissing Sasuke.

It’s.

What.

She moves backwards out of the room, shakes her head, then walks in again. Naruto is no longer on the table and the females of the class are surrounding someone laying on the ground, all screaming over each other.

Riko uncaps her sizeable water bottle, draws out the content, and then with a pulse of chakra disperses it all over the screeching gaggle of girls, making it rain over them.

Squealing, the girls look up, and pale when they meet Riko’s cold glare.

“You’re done. Scram,” she orders tonelessly. “You should be above this. We’re genin now.”

They skedaddle.
Riko picks Naruto up and winces. *Ouch.*

She takes him to the back of the class, once again calling up the Mystical Palm Jutsu and running it over Naruto’s face.

“That’s so cool, Ricchan!” Naruto beams at her, which has to be painful, what with his swollen lips and the black eye.

There has to be rules against injuring fellow shinobi, right? Those girls were *way* out of line.

Unless Naruto kissed Sasuke against his will? It’d looked accidental to her though, now that she’s thinking about it, and the girls only screeched about *how dare Naruto touch Sasuke* rather than about assault.

Oh damn, did anyone ever talk to Naruto about *consent*?

She’ll have to remember to ask for the full story later.

“Don’t distract me,” she mutters to him. “Healing stuff is *really hard* and I’m not great at it.”

“Hey, what are you doing?”

Riko winces and loses focus. The green chakra disappears.

Well, Naruto looks good enough, she supposes. He’s easy to heal.

“Oh,” she mutters. “Hi Fumio.”

Her one-time friend and accidental boyfriend gives her a shy grin. “Hey, Riko-chan. What was that jutsu just now?”

Riko figures she can just… act normally. “Medical technique. The one medical ninja use the most. Works on most injuries.” She shrugs, wondering how long it will take Iruka to arrive.

Oh damn, what if she ends up on a team with Fumio? That would be so *awkward*.

“Are you going to be a medic?” Fumio asks eagerly.

Riko winces. Medical ninjutsu is still such a sore spot. “I’ve considered it. I really admire medical shinobi,” she replies.

It’s the truth. He doesn’t need to know that she got kicked out of the program ages ago, despite all her hard work.

Because of her chakra being *odd*. And yeah, she really doesn’t want to think about that right now, so soon after the incident in the Hokage’s office.

“That’s cool!” Fumio says. “I’ve been thinking of becoming one myself!”

“Really? Good for you.” She gives him a strained smile. “Good luck.”

“Hey, hey, Ricchan, can I be a medic, too?” Naruto tugs at her sleeve. Riko doesn’t get to reply, Iruka-sensei choosing that moment to enter.

He doesn’t waste any time.
“Beginning today, all of you are real ninja, though you are still merely rookie genin. The hardest part of your life lies before you.” Iruka stares them down. The class is silent, hanging onto his every word. “You will be assigned duties to fulfil. But you won’t have to do this alone. Today, you’ll be split into teams of three, and each team will have a jounin-sensei to guide and train you on your path to becoming outstanding shinobi who Konoha can be proud of. You will follow your sensei’s instructions and advice as you complete your duties.”

Riko notes how a number of her classmates looks negatively surprised at the prospect of being placed in teams. She doesn’t get it — she herself is pretty happy about not having to do this alone. And really, how didn’t they know about team placements?

“Now, the teams are as follows…” Iruka starts listing names and team numbers in no particular order. As expected, Shikamaru ends up with Ino and Chouji on a team. Kiba is teamed up with Hinata and Shino. That’s the majority of her friends out of the running, but on the plus side Naruto is still free.

And then Iruka announces, “Next, Team Seven: Nara Riko, Uzumaki Naruto-,” Riko’s heart jumps, and an wide grin spreads on her face- “and Uchiha Sasuke.”
“Team Seven: Nara Riko, Uzumaki Naruto, and Uchiha Sasuke!”

Riko blinks, stunned.

*Sasuke*. On her team.

Huh.

Could be worse. She’s okay with it.

Everyone else isn’t.

“Iruka-sensei! Why does a great ninja like mmph-”

Riko slaps her hand over Naruto’s mouth and gives Iruka-sensei a fixed smile. That’s right, everything is *fine* here. Naruto was absolutely not going to say anything rude about their third team member.

(Riko knows Naruto’s opinion of Sasuke pretty well. He has a specific tone of voice just for complaining about him.)

“Iruka-sensei!” Haruno Sakura jumps up, her face furious. “Why is *she* on Sasuke-kun’s team?!” She points at Riko. “I’m the number one kunoichi in the class! I should be with Sasuke-kun!”

Iruka is unimpressed. “Sakura-kun, Riko-kun beat your scores in the final exam. She’s now ranked first among the girls and her practical scores are among the best overall, unlike yours.”

Wait. What?

Sakura jerks back as if Iruka had slapped her.

“Furthermore, she has displayed a more mature attitude concerning Sasuke than the majority of the girls here, despite being a year younger. I assure you, genin teams are selected with the utmost care.”

Well, if they didn’t hate Riko before, they do so now.

“Any more complaints?” Iruka asks. “No? Then we’ll go on. Team Four, Tachibana Fumio, Haruno Sakura, and Ota Eiji. Team Twelve…”

On and on he goes.

Then, finally, “Your jounin sensei will pick you up after lunch break. I recommend preparing for skill assessments. Class dismissed — and good luck to all of you. I’m proud to have been your teacher.”

Riko wastes no time jumping out of a window because the girls look like they’re *seriously* considering murdering her.

“Ne, Ricchan, where’re we going?” Naruto shouts, catching up to her.

“Lunch, Ichiraku, my treat!” she yells back.
One by one, teams get picked up by their new senseis after lunch break.

Team Seven is the last one left.

Ten minutes pass.

“He’s gonna show up, right, Ricchan?” Naruto asks anxiously.

How is she supposed to know? They don’t even know the name of their new teacher. Or their gender, for that matter.

But if she doesn’t do something, Naruto will get antsy, and that would be bad for everyone involved.

“Okay!” she says brightly, clapping her hands. “Who here wants to learn how to make explosive tags?”

Naruto instantly forgets all about their jounin sensei and goes starry-eyed. “I do!”

Even Sasuke perks up in interest.

Riko pastes on her best confident smile because to falter is to lose his respect, and she worked very hard to gain that. At least, she thinks she gained it at some point, just a little bit.

A quick jump takes her down to the space Iruka usually occupies when he’s teaching. There’s pieces of chalk neatly lined up on the desk, cut to perfect throwing size. She grabs one. “I’m actually a lot better at storage seals, but explosions are more useful in a fight, so I’ll show you those first. They’re pretty fun, too! Grab a piece of paper and take notes, yeah? Uh, use a pencil. No ink for now. Seriously, it’s important.”

Iruka-sensei would be so mad if they blew up the classroom.

Three hours. It takes three whole hours before their jounin sensei deigns to show up. A time span filled with Riko sweating bullets while trying to answer Naruto’s numerous questions.

He’s. A terrible fit for fuuinjutsu. Even for a beginner. His penmanship is a nightmare and he just doesn’t get that leaving out the squiggly lines will destabilise the whole seal and make it go boom, instantly killing the maker.

“But exploding is the point of explosion tags!” Naruto insists stubbornly. “Why can’t I just write fire on the paper and be done? Why’re there numbers? This is stupid!”
“Right,” Riko concludes. “You’re not allowed to make your own tags without me there. If you do, I’ll make you eat vegetables instead of ramen for the rest of your life.”

Fuuinjutsu and impatience are a bad combination. She definitely should have started with storage seals, after all. Those have their own dangers, though, and are way more complicated.

Actually, she should have begun with calligraphy, but that would never have kept his attention.

Naruto stares at her in horror. “No!”

Riko nods heavily. “Yes. Don’t think I won’t.”

“Ricchan!”

Someone clears their throat. Riko spins around.

It’s a man.

She can’t sense him. How long has he been standing there?!

He also looks familiar. Silver mop of hair, mask, standard jounin uniform — it’s the guy she saw staring at the memorial stone.

“My first impression,” he announces, “I’m terrified. Please don’t play around with fuuinjutsu. It’s irresponsible and dangerous.”

Riko narrows her eyes.

She isn’t playing. She knows what she’s doing, she’s studied a lot! For years! Anyway, where does he get off about being responsible when he took three hours to get his butt here?

“Meet me on the roof in five minutes,” he orders and disappears in a puff of smoke.

Five minutes. They’re on the ground floor. The Academy building has six floors. There’s no central stairway and the corridors are a maze. Getting to the roof within five minutes is impossible without running at full speed.

Unless one walks up the side of the wall. Riko could do that.

Naruto tears out of the room, yelling, “Come on, Ricchan!”

Sasuke runs after him.

Riko stares after them, shrugs, and takes her time cleaning up the blackboard. Then makes her way out the door and navigates the numerous hallways at a leisurely pace. She arrives five minutes later than she’s supposed to.

“Ricchan, what took you so long?” Naruto whines.

She gives him a deadpan look. “I got lost on my way to the toilet. I’m so sorry you had to wait for me a whole five minutes, time you will never get back during which you could have done something important.”

Naruto stares at her blankly.

Their new sensei coughs. “Right. Let’s start with some introductions.”
He looks at them. They stare back.

“Likes, dislikes, hobbies, dreams,” he prompts.

Riko plops herself down between Sasuke and Naruto and crosses her arms.

“I’ll go first,” sensei announces cheerfully when none of them cooperate. “My name’s Hatake Kakashi. I have no desire to tell you my likes and dislikes. Hm, dreams for the future… and I have a lot of hobbies.”

The three of them level unimpressed looks upon him.

“Your turn! Let’s start on the right.” He motions at Naruto, who perks up.

“I’m Uzumaki Naruto! I like Ricchan and ramen! Especially when Ricchan or Iruka-sensei eat together with me! I don’t like the three minutes you have to wait to cook them! My dream is to be Hokage and make all the people in the village acknowledge me!” He pauses. “Hobbies… pranks, I guess?”

No surprises there, though Riko is rather flattered that she ranks before ramen in his likes.

“Next,” Kakashi says.

Right, that’s her.


What is her dream?

To be a good kunoichi? No. Not really. It’s something she wants to be, but not a dream.

When she thinks of things she wants in life, what comes to mind is the Nara home, her and Shikamaru feeding the deer, playing shogi, hugging Shikaku, studying with Yoshino. Eating ramen with Naruto and plotting out his next prank, giggling with Ino, training with Genma, even her slugfests with Sasuke.

“I guess I’m already living my dream,” she says finally, not entirely sure if it counts. “So I figure I want to protect it, now.”

Kakashi nods. “Your turn.” He looks at Sasuke.

Sasuke’s introduction sends chills down Riko’s spine. ‘To kill a certain man,’ echoes in her head. How can someone be so sure they want to kill? She can’t even imagine taking a life. Riko never wants to do it, ever.

“Right.” Kakashi claps his hands together after a tense and awkward silence. “We start our duties tomorrow. But first, we’ll do something, just the four of us.”

Naruto bounces in excitement. “What? What is it? What’re we doing?”

Kakashi stares at them from a droopy eye. “Survival training.”

“S-survival training?” Naruto stutters.
Kakashi chuckles darkly. A cold wind blows, making all of them shiver. The sun no longer seems bright. A sense of uneasy fear creeps up on Riko.

The feeling of something foreign poking at her.

Genjutsu. It’s a genjutsu. She should break that-

“Out of the twenty-seven graduates, only nine will be chosen to become genin. The rest will be sent back to the Academy. In other words, tomorrow’s training will be a text with a sixty-six percent failure rate, and I will be your opponent.”

Well.

That’s. Dreadful.

Naruto breaks out into vehement protest, which Kakashi promptly ignores. “Meet me at Training Ground 3 at five in the morning. If you’re smart, you won’t eat breakfast. Anything else you need to know is on these papers.” He hands over said papers. Then he disappears.

So does the genjutsu.

Team meeting over, Sasuke leaves without a word. Naruto in contrast shouts something about preparing and training before he, too, runs off. Leaving Riko to figure out her own plans for the next day.

She really doesn’t want to go back to the Academy.

Desperate times call for drastic measures.

Genma is not in his apartment, which isn’t a surprise but was still worth checking and also pretty much her only lead as to his whereabouts. It’s usually him who finds her, unless they have a pre-arranged meeting for training.

She bites her lip.

Well. He did tell her where to ask if she really needed him, and this is an emergency. Her career depends on it!

Riko feels vastly out of place, walking up to the Jounin Station. The people that she passes in the corridors eye her with varying mixtures of amusement and confusion. Some even with disapproval, and a few make to talk to her and probably tell her to get lost, but Riko is slippery when it comes down to it. Dodging around a few corners and walking closer to the nicer-looking people discourages the pursuers.

The “Are you lost, kid?” question is asked quite a few times anyway.

“Nope!” she answers every time, with an added, “I’m visiting someone.”

Considering she knew the codes necessary to even get onto this floor, they let it go.
The door to a sort of common room or lounge is open, which saves her the trouble of having to knock and wait for an answer. Before she can even let herself think about chickening out, she walks in.

Almost instantly, every eye is on her. Riko’s hands start sweating, but she pastes a smile on her face. Kunoichi lessons taught that happy smiles would lead to being dismissed by most males. The room is occupied by men almost exclusively.

“Are you lost?” some guy asks.

It’s getting old. She knew the bloody codes, damn it! It’s not like one can walk into the Jounin Station by accident!

“Who cares?” a voice crows, and a moment later a weight drapes herself over Riko’s shoulders. She nearly stumbles, the sudden necessity of supporting a fully grown woman’s weight throwing off her balance, but chakra is a wonderful thing and she manages. “She’s cute!”

Riko eyes the woman. She’s fully aware of her own lack of height, and the position this lady has chosen to assume, leaning on Riko like that… “Okay, that can’t be comfortable.”

“Aw, are you concerned about me, honey-pie?” the woman croons into her ear. “I could just eat you up.”

“Thanks?” Riko asks, refusing to let the feeling of deep unsettlement show on her face. “I’m looking for Genma.”

“And got me instead.”

She licks Riko’s cheek.

Right. Long live the inventor of the kawarimi. The woman squawks when she’s suddenly holding onto a floor lamp.

“I’m generally down for hugs anytime,” Riko tells her, heart pounding. “But that was gross.”

The woman throws her head back and laughs raucously.

“I’m looking for Genma?” she tries, eyeing the window on the other side of the room.

Someone clears his throat. “Sorry, he isn’t here.”

Riko turns her head as much as she can without losing sight of Anko. “…Raidou-san?” That was the name of Genma’s friend from last week, right?

He gives her a friendly nod.

“Do you know where I can find him? It’s kinda urgent.” She wouldn’t be here otherwise.

“Sorry, kid. Anything I can help you with?”

Well. If he’s offering, and with Genma off who knows where…

“My team’s jounin-sensei said he’s going to test us tomorrow and I don’t think he wants us to pass.” Riko makes her eyes wide and worried. “I don’t know what to do.”

“Aww,” the woman from before inserts herself into the conversation. “Do you want Anko-
neechan to *convince* him?" She cocks her hip to the side. Her honestly awesome trench-coat falls open, revealing armour that leaves nothing of her proportions to the imagination.

“Anko,” Raidou sighs. “Behave.” He turns back to Riko. “Can’t help you with the test itself, and if your sensei doesn’t want you, you’re better off without him. Who did you get?”

Hm. If she says the name, it’ll probably get back to Kakashi.

Then again, he’ll probably hear about this anyway. She’s pretty sure she’s the only redhead in Konoha, with the exception of Akimichi Chouza whose hair colour isn’t exactly natural, so the moment anybody tells him a red-haired girl visited the Jounin Station and asked about the test, he’ll know it was her. So, she’s got nothing to lose.

It’s not like he *forbade* them from asking for help.

“Hatake Kakashi.”

The room goes silent. An unholy expression of glee spreads over Anko’s face.

Genma walks in at that moment, looking around in confusion before his eyes fall on the vaguely unsettled Riko. “Okay, what did you do?” he asks.

“I got Hatake Kakashi for a jounin sensei?”

He gapes.

Then he starts grinning.

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It’s early evening. Riko knocks on Sasuke’s door frantically before she darts around the house and finds him in his training space. “Get your supplies,” she orders. “Team meeting at Training Ground 3.”

He shoots her an incredulous look. Considering she just barged in, fair enough.

“Look,” she says. “I asked around and Kakashi failed the last seven teams he was given. I also learned that literally every jounin in the village lowkey hates him, even while they love him.”

“…What are you on about.”

Sasuke’s voice is flat and judging.

Well, his bad mood is his problem. *Riko* just had to sit through what had to be every jounin in the entire village bombarding her with advice and telling her just what kind of horrible things Kakashi had done to them. “Haruka-san from Intel has to hunt down his reports *personally* because he won’t hand them in for at least a week. Once, on a mission, he was gifted a terribly ugly hat by an old lady and wore it for three weeks, and he told everyone that it was a gift from Aoba-san. He invited countless people for meals and then disappeared halfway through, leaving all manners of decoys, from straw puppets to giant plushies. For ten years, Anko has been trying to look beneath his mask, and every attempt failed miserably and embarrassingly. Also, they think a team will be good for him. Even though we will likely suffer greatly. But they say it’s worth it for the things he could
teach us.”

Riko folds her hands primly.

“Then I went to find the teams Kakashi failed before and they laughed at me and said we’d fail just like them and also that I’m a stupid little girl playing at being ninja. It pisses me off and I’m gonna stick it to them. Aside from that, Naruto’s my best friend and you’re pretty okay sometimes, so I really want to make this team work.”

She gives him an expectant look.

“So. Team meeting at the Training Ground. Whatever happens, we’re in this together, so we might as well prepare together. And I think trapping the hell out of that training ground is a good idea. So get your supplies, I’ll get Naruto, and we’ll meet there.” Riko turns on her heel and throws a wave over her shoulder. “See you in a bit!”

Riko is absolutely tired the next morning, and her body is stiff and achy due to camping out in the training ground. But they got done so late that she just wasn’t in the mood to walk back to the Nara Compound on the other side of the village. Even Naruto’s place seemed too far away. The only one who lives anywhere close-by is Sasuke, and while he might have let her crash in his garden shed or something, he’d never have agreed to house Naruto in any capacity.

So that’s how Naruto and her ended up sleeping curled around each other on a thin blanket. Thankfully it was a mild night or she probably would have gotten sick, but it couldn’t exactly be called warm, which is why she spends a few hours doing stretches and warm-up exercises after waking up. Naruto, bless him, sleeps soundly and is as loose and limber as always when he wakes, in addition to being completely awake.

Riko is a morning person, but Naruto’s on another level entirely.

Sasuke arrives, even grumpier than usual, not even giving a nod in response to her greeting.

Considering it was her idea that kept all three of them awake until well past midnight, fair enough. Provided he fell asleep instantly, he’ll have gotten four hours of sleep at most. On the other hand, they trapped the entire training ground. As a team. And she’s pretty sure even Sasuke found it in himself to be impressed with the stuff Naruto came up with. Not that he or Riko are slouches themselves, but Naruto is an inspiration.

They eat breakfast together — well, not together, just at the same time, but Riko still counts it as a win, even if it’s just bland and dry ration bars.

“They should make these ramen-flavoured,” Naruto grumbles.

“You can always send out a clone and get proper breakfast from Ichiraku,” Riko suggests, silently agreeing.

“But Ricchan!” Naruto exclaims, “Kakashi-sensei is gonna be here in like five minutes and he said not to eat!”
She shrugs. “I’ll seal the food, then, and we can have it for lunch. It’ll even still be warm.”

That’s all it takes to convince Naruto, and twenty minutes later his clone is back with five bowls of ramen. “Teuchi-jii says it’s on the house and good luck to Team Seven!”

“Ramen,” Sasuke says judgementally. “For breakfast.”

“If you don’t want them-” Riko begins.

His baleful glare when he snatches a bowl is a work of art.

The three of them munch on their breakfast ramen in silence.

It takes another three hours for Kakashi to arrive.

It’s eleven. He said to be here at five.

“You’re late!” Naruto shouts at him, all the outrage a twelve-year old is capable of echoing in his voice. Riko opts for giving Kakashi her best neutral look, while Sasuke glowers darkly.

“Maa, you see, a black cat crossed my path, so I had to take the long way,” Kakashi reveals cheerfully.

“Liar!” Naruto screams.

Even more obscenely cheerful, Kakashi continues, “It also told me this training ground is cursed, so we have to go to another one. Training Ground Sixteen, last one there’s a slowpoke!”

He disappears in a puff of smoke.

Riko’s jaw drops in outrage. “He changed the location! That ass!”

With a murderous look on his face, Sasuke throws a kunai with unerring accuracy. It hits a buried explosive tag which promptly explodes, setting off a chain reaction and a minor flood.

“He’s going down,” Riko says, deadly calm.

“Ricchan, come on, we’ll be late!” Naruto yells and makes to run.

Nu-uh! She grabs the back of his jacket. “We’re going together,” she growls. “All three of us, so nobody is a slowpoke, and then we’ll bloody show him that we’re not playing his stupid game.”

“Game?” Naruto asks.

“He’s trying to prank us,” she explains, setting into motion at a slow pace. “We’re pranking him back. He made us wait and then he tries to make us look stupid by running to the next location like complete idiots. Anyway, let’s go slow, he can wait for us. We can get dango on the way or something.”

“Sweet!” Naruto cheers, clearly not understanding all of her reasoning but going along with it anyway. Sasuke’s apparently pissed enough at Kakashi that he’s willing to make him wait as well, even if it means spending time with them.

Kakashi gives them the worst disappointed puppy eyes when they finally get there.

Riko doesn’t feel guilty in the least.
This training ground resembles the one they just left in that there’s a lot of forest, a river, and even a large clearing. But it’s entirely different in that the river is utterly wild and loud and the trees here are gnarly mean things that seem to whisper threats every time a gust of wind blows through them. The kind of forest that belongs into a ghost story. It’s interspersed with tall and sharp rocks.

Kakashi sets an alarm clock down on one of those rocks. Then he holds up two little bells. “Here are two bells,” he says. “Take them from me before the alarm sounds. It’ll go off in an hour. Any of you who don’t have a bell by that time will be tied to a tree and I’ll eat lunch right in front of them.”

Again with the killing intent. Riko swallows harshly, and when Naruto squeezes her hand she squeezes back.

“And the person without a bell fails the test and will be sent back to the Academy,” Kakashi finishes.

Well.

_Shit._
Riko should be staying calm and making a plan.

Instead her heart is beating too hard and she can’t think past ‘But I only just got my team, you can’t split us up!’

Naruto appears as shocked as she feels. Sasuke’s face is inscrutable, but the look in his eyes is angry. She can’t tell if that anger is directed at Kakashi or if he’s already planning on ditching Naruto and her.

Either way, she doesn’t like when he gets like this.

“You can use your weapons,” Kakashi continues. “You won’t succeed unless you come at me with the intent to kill.”

Yeah, Riko doesn’t think she’s going to have much of a problem with that. Naruto’s her best friend. Sasuke sort of is, too! Kakashi can’t take them from her!

She can totally get them a new jounin sensei. Either talk Genma into it or any of the dozens giving her advice yesterday. Heck, she can ask Shikaku to help get them someone else! There’s got to be an advantage to being the adoptive daughter of the Jounin Commander.

Riko must have missed part of the conversation because Naruto is suddenly charging at Kakashi with a kunai in his hand, subsequently ending up with that same kunai pointed at his own neck. She didn’t even see Kakashi move!

Dammit, this isn’t going to be easy.

“Don’t get so hasty,” Kakashi says. “I haven’t told you to start yet.”

“Didn’t tell us not to either.” She glares at him, eyes on the kunai that’s far too close to breaking Naruto’s skin.

Something’s boiling under her skin. It’s powerful, but it doesn’t feel good. It just feels scary and overwhelming and Riko doesn’t want it to come out, but if he doesn’t let go of her best friend-

Kakashi releases Naruto and surveys them. “Seems like you’re in the right mindset now,” he muses. “I guess we’ll start…”

The three of them fall into ready positions.

“No!”

As much as Riko would love to launch herself at Kakashi and kick his face in, that’s not how it works. She leaps back, hiding in the underbrush close to the river, rolling through the mud to obscure her scent. At least she doesn’t have to worry about being noisy — the river drowns out every other sound.

It’s not exactly comfortable, crouching behind a rock in the water. Her feet and legs are slowly growing numb in the cold. But she doesn’t have chakra to waste for water-walking and this is the best place to observe what’s going on in the clearing.

Her jaw drops, and it’s decidedly not because she’s awed by her friends’ display of cunning and
Riko stares in horrified disbelief at Naruto who’s standing there and shouting about fighting Kakashi fair and square to get the bells for himself and her.

Which is sweet, but she reckons her best friend is a bloody moron.

Kakashi beats him and his dozen clones while reading a book. He’s not even looking. Riko swallows heavily.

Naruto’s might not really be great at taijutsu, but he doesn’t suck this bad and- oh crap that’s a hand seal for a fire jutsu! Riko lurches forward, reaching for her senbon, but she loses her footing in the water and spends precious moments trying to remain standing, only managing it by sticking a hand to the rock with chakra.

By that point, Naruto’s already gone flying into the river, unfortunately a ways down from Riko, into the shallower parts. If she wants to reach him, she’ll have to leave her cover.

He’s at no risk of injury and seems to have a surplus of idiocy that needs to be let out, so she stays where she is. Observes Naruto jumping out of the river with a multitude of kage bunshin, and Kakashi somehow makes him look even more incompetent despite his use of such a high-level ninjutsu.

Soon, Naruto dangles from a tree by his feet after falling for an extremely obvious trap. Kakashi lectures him until he’s hit by a hail of shuriken, coming from the direction of Sasuke’s chakra. He replaces himself with a log, somehow making it look like he was actually wounded for a heart-stopping moment.

He could be anywhere now. Logically, he’d go after Sasuke or her next, since he’s supposed to test them. Or he could wait for them to find him, which they kind of have to, to get those bells. Which will be all kinds of impossible to do, if he’s even half as good as Genma claimed.

On the bright side, she knows where Kakashi isn’t, which is in the clearing he left Naruto. She’ll have to be quick, but she can definitely get Naruto down.

“Behind you, Riko,” Kakashi says.

She spins on her heel and flings a barrage of senbon at him, but again he replaces himself, this time with a straw puppet.

“Too slow,” he says, and when she turns to look, his hands are forming the rat seal.

He’s not the only one who can use kawarimi, though, and a moment later she’s on the edge of the river, leaving a rock in her place. Now on stable ground, her fingers twist into seals. From the water, slightly glowing chains burst out, speeding at Kakashi.

His hands are still forming his seal.

The surroundings lurch. Blur. Nausea takes ahold of her. Thousands of water drops envelop Riko and the sound of the river has become unbearably loud. Her legs give out under her, and her water chains burst as her control breaks.

She falls. Distantly, she hears Kakashi say something about genjutsu skills, but she can’t make out the words. It’s all she can do not to just let the beckoning darkness sweep her away.
Riko grits her teeth and waits the initial disorientation of the genjutsu out. She can’t muster the control to break it right now.

The world is silent when it stops. Shakily, she draws herself to her feet. Crams a ration bar into her mouth, hopefully that’ll make her feel less drained and disoriented.

“Riko,” a voice moans from the river. She looks up.

There, his clothes drenched in far too much blood, floats Shikamaru.

The world stops. All she can hear is her heartbeat. Her perception narrows down to the boy in the river. Her brother. “Help me,” he pleads.

“Not real,” she whispers. “Not real, not real, not real!”

She can’t sense his chakra, can’t sense Naruto’s or Sasuke’s either, she’s still disoriented, this is definitely the genjutsu, but it doesn’t matter because her brother is dying and she has to help him. A stumbling step forward, another. Shakily, she stands on the water’s surface. It’s too wild to find a secure stance, so she runs forward, using the rocks jutting out from it as footholds. Reaching out just as he floats past. Her fingers brush his body and he just.

Disappears.

“Riko,” he says from behind her. She spins - he’s standing right there, blood dripping from his mouth, and this clothes, she can see the awful wound in his chest. “It hurts, make it stop.”

Her hands light up green with medical chakra and she reaches out. Again he dissolves, reappearing to her left. “Help me, please,” he begs desperately. A dry sob escapes her.

“I’m trying!” she cries, reaching again, but he’s suddenly too far away. “No!”

“Help me, it hurts, I don’t want to go,” Shikamaru keeps saying, but no matter what she tries, she can’t get to him.

She falls to her knees, hands covering her ears. “Stop,” she whispers. “Stop, stop, stop!”

His voice isn’t muffled in the least, in fact, it seems to get louder the harder she tries to drown it out, and she just — it hurts, it hurts so bad, and she needs it to-

“Stop!” she screams, and something inside of her tears apart.

Like a howling wind, it rips through the fabric of the illusion, of rocks and trees. She curls up, ducks, protects her head with her arms.

It’s silent now. She feels drained, and she’s almost too scared to look up, terrified of what she’ll find. But she has to.

Riko finds herself sitting in a circle of destruction. Splintered rocks, a tree upside down, another shredded, gouge marks in the grass. Her breath hitches.

She did that.

And right now, she can’t deal with this. Whatever she did. Oh hell.

Slowly, she gets to her feet. She can sense her team again, she notes distantly. Quite far away. The illusion had lured her away from them. Sasuke’s chakra is agitated, wavering, fighting.
She takes a deep breath. “Just an illusion,” she whispers. “Not real.”

Shikamaru will be home, waiting for her. Or with his team, far away from here. He’ll be fine. This isn’t her first genjutsu experience, Yoshino specialises in that discipline, and damn, Riko should have been able to deal with this.

She needs to focus on the present. She’s got to move. Sasuke’s fighting and if he’s put under a genjutsu like that, then she doesn’t know what will happen, but it won’t be good.

On his bad days, he doesn’t even see her when they spar, and it’s awful every time it happens.

Riko gets moving. The first few steps are shaky, but the movement evens out soon, the physical action strangely soothing.

When she finds Sasuke, he’s buried from the neck down in the ground, and for one heart-stopping second she thinks it’s just his head, but his chakra says he’s alive and her chakra sense doesn’t lie while her eyes are clearly absolutely unreliable.

And he’s talking. “Riko,” he says. “Get me out of here.”

She nods numbly and gets paper and ink out. The mini-explosion tag is the work of half a minute. With a kunai, she digs a small hole in the ground, takes a step back, and sets it off.

It loosens the ground, makes it a lot easier to get Sasuke out.

“Are you hurt?” she asks, scanning him.

He looks okay, if a little dirty and annoyed. No terribly blank and lost look in his eyes, and that’s — that’s good, isn’t it?

“Hn,” he grunts, watching her with narrowed eyes. “You?”

She waves him off. “Just a genjutsu,” she answers, and her voice almost doesn’t shake at all. “Let’s get those bells, yeah? We go there, I distract Kakashi, you free Naruto, we improvise from then, sound good?”

“We don’t need Naruto,” Sasuke says.

Maybe he doesn’t, but Riko isn’t going to give up on him. However, explaining that is beyond her right now and they’re on a time limit, so she just shrugs. “Free him anyway?”

He grunts. It’s not a no, she’ll take it.

They run to the clearing together. Naruto is for some reason tied up in a different place with Kakashi standing next to him.

“That’s good,” Riko mutters while Sasuke scurries off into the bushes.

Okay. She can totally distract Kakashi.

Riko strolls into the clearing. “Ricchan!” Naruto shouts, beaming, like everything’s gonna be fine now that she’s here.

“Yeah. Hi,” she answers with a small wave.

Well, Kakashi’s attention is on her, so that’s one goal accomplished. Now to get him away from
Naruto and *keep* him distracted… urgh.

“Are you giving up?” Kakashi asks curiously.

She shrugs and walks closer. “I *suppose* it might look like that, huh?” Stopping next to the alarm clock, she jerks her chin at it. “Since we only have… two minutes left? Wow, time sure went by fast. What was it you said? ‘Take the bells from me before the alarm sounds to pass the test?’”

“To sum it up, yes.” He tilts his head curiously. “What are you up to?”

“Buying more time.”

Her hand snatches forward, grabs the alarm clock, and smashes it against the rock. Kakashi blinks.

“No alarm, test doesn’t end,” she announces triumphantly. “Loophole!”

Naruto cackles in the background. “Go, Ricchan!”

“Riko-chan, that was my favourite alarm clock,” Kakashi complains.

“Sorry,” she answers unrepentantly. “You’ll have to find another one to put on your shelf and never use.”

“You wound me.” He gives her a sad look. Like a puppy. She almost feels bad. *Almost,* but he’s a mean old man and he tied up her best friend, made her think her brother was dying, buried Sasuke alive, and she’s not feeling at all friendly towards him. “That sounds like a *you* problem.” She starts walking backwards.

“Mean.”

He disappears. Riko throws herself to the side and flings half a dozen senbon, spread out wide and aimed at the area she just left. Kakashi lands next to where she stood a moment ago, batting the weapons away.

On the periphery of her sensing range, she registers Sasuke’s chakra moving with purpose towards Naruto, and she knows Kakashi notices, too, by the slight tilt of his head. She has to keep him occupied!

Physically, Riko’s not particularly strong. So she unseals her bokken from storage and attacks Kakashi with that, not giving herself a moment to hesitate. Her lack of strength she tries to make up with speed, agility, and timing. Jumping around, rolling, evading.

She can’t win against a jounin, she knows that, but that’s not the point. All she has to do is keep him busy so he won’t stop Sasuke from freeing Naruto. None of her attacks connect, but at least Kakashi hasn’t got time to read his book or mock her.

Her style is evasive, which isn’t optimal for this job, but she won’t let that stop her. She’s got a bag of tricks, or rather, a pouch full of storage and explosive tags, she can *do* this.

She launches herself at Kakashi again, bokken swinging. He steps aside, *way* too fast for her to follow, but the moment he disappears she drops and rolls so he can’t grab her, coming up slicing in an arc around herself and following with a spinning kick which ends up smashing against the metal guards of his gloves. Gritting her teeth against the pain, she gives herself momentum by abruptly twisting her hips, swiping one-handed with her weapon, with the other reaching for one of the seals stored in her pocket.
In the heat of the moment, she’s not quite clear which seal her fingers find, but that’s okay. It’ll do something and they can all be aimed.

Kakashi grabs her wrist and twists. Riko’s bokken goes flying in one direction and she in the other. Still airborne, she slaps the seal on her palm and points it at him, channelling chakra.

A hail of senbon comes flying out with the speed of bullets.

Kakashi turns into a log again, which doesn’t even surprise her anymore. She’s got no idea where he is now, but that’s not important — what matters is that he doesn’t get to Sasuke. She sticks a senbon into her mouth in preparation. Sasuke’s almost at Naruto’s side now, and the ropes binding him must be made of stern stuff because a thrown kunai just glances off.

Dust picks up as air begins to curl in a spot beside Naruto.

Shunshin. Kakashi’s going to appear there. Riko’s too far away, but.

He’s not the only one who can do shunshin.

She’s never managed the technique as fast as she does now, the world blurring, one moment here, the next there, landing right in front of Kakashi with none of the disorientation or unstableness she usually feels from it.

Kakashi jumps back to dodge the senbon she spits at him with a tiny push of chakra from her mouth. Sasuke reaches Naruto and pulls at the knot holding him secured. With a shout, Riko’s best friend runs forward, clones poofing into existence at his side as he launches himself at Kakashi.

The jounin defeats them as easily as he did before, but it gives Riko time to get out another seal, this one containing water. The ground floods and once more she forms chains, dropping to her knees at the awful chakra drain, but she doesn’t cancel the technique.

This time, she manages to wrap one around Kakashi’s foot, slowing him down just that little bit. “Sasuke!” she yells.

He’s close enough and he’s faster than Naruto by a lot, and he’s almost there, has almost got the bells, he’s reaching out-

Kakashi disappears.

An alarm clock rings.

“I had a back-up alarm!” the man informs them cheerfully, holding up the ringing clock. “I guess that means…”

She’s going to kill him, him and his stupid schemes and back-ups.

“We pass,” Sasuke says smugly and what. Riko stares in disbelief at the bells dangling from his hand.

She drops the chains and sits on her bum, not caring about the muddy ground. Dirt’s already crusted all over her, what’s a little more?

“Ha!” Naruto cackles. “We beat you, Kakashi-sensei!”

“Maa, I’m not your sensei yet, Naruto-kun,” the man answers, eyes crinkling. “Now then, Sasuke, you have the bells. Which of you goes back to the Academy?”
Sasuke’s eyes widen, like he’d forgotten the stakes of the test. Riko sure did, and now that she’s reminded of it, her stomach drops. She looks to Naruto, who’s definitely Sasuke’s last choice for a teammate and knows it by the crestfallen look on his face.

There’s no way she’ll let him go back to the Academy, absolutely not, so she turns back to Sasuke and jerks her chin toward Naruto. “Give it to him,” she says, eyes stinging, because damn it, this isn’t fair and she liked this team in those few moments they worked together.

“Eh?” Naruto asks dumbly. Then, “No! Ricchan gets a bell, it’s not fair if she doesn’t, she smart and cool and strong—”

“I’m not! I did like two techniques and I’m all out of chakra and I fell for a stupid genjutsu like an idiot—”

“I’m an idiot, I should go back to the Academy, I dunno what a genjutsu is!” Naruto shouts.

“You’re both idiots,” Sasuke snaps and lobs one bell each at her and Naruto.

Naruto stare at him, slack-jawed. Riko blinks slowly.

What.

“Are you okay, Sasuke?” she asks. Maybe it’s not Sasuke. It could be an imposter! “What was the last assignment Iruka gave us?”

Sasuke gives her an annoyed look. “Give me back the bells,” he says, and yeah, it is Sasuke.

“No take-backs!” Kakashi answers cheerfully. “So let’s see. The rule of the test was that at least one of you would fail. Shinobi must follow the rules.” His hands form seals, and dark clouds gather in the sky above, lit up by flashes of lightning. Killing intent falls over them. “Are you prepared to face the consequences?” Kakashi asks darkly.

Naruto draws a kunai. Sasuke’s got shuriken out so fast, she can’t even see it. Riko tries to stand up, fails, and settles for palming a stack of seals.

“Bring it!” Naruto shouts.

“Then…” Kakashi intones. “You pass!”

The clouds fade away, the sun shines merrily upon them. Kakashi smiles, his eye closing happily, no threat at all.

“Hah?” Riko asks intelligently.

“Huh?” Naruto continues.

“Hn,” says Sasuke, which Riko supposes means about the same thing.

“In this test, your teammates became risks to your own future. To pass, I needed to see if you’d abandon them to save yourselves and therefore fail, unable to accomplish the objective on your own — or work together and pass.” Kakashi pauses. “On missions, you’ll be constantly threatened, and your team is going to be your lifeline. If one member abandons it, all of you could die. Do you remember the stone in Training Ground Three?”

They all nod.
“The names of heroes to the village are carved into it. My best friend’s name is on it.”

Riko winces. That’s — considering the specific kind of heroes that are being honoured with that memorial…

“So cool!” Naruto shouts with stars in his eyes. “My name’s gonna be on there someday!”

“No!” the word escapes her far more sharply than she means to, but. “It’s for shinobi who were killed in action, Naruto.”

Her best friend’s face falls.

Kakashi nods at her. “She’s right. In the shinobi world, those that break the rules are called scum, but those that abandon their comrades are worse than that. You proved that you understood that in this test. So all of you pass. Congratulations.”

Naruto looks at him with a face as if he’s going to cry. “I’m a ninja,” he whispers.

“All of you are,” Kakashi corrects, and strikes a pose. “Starting tomorrow, Team Seven will begin its duties!”
Chapter 14

Kakashi dismisses the team for the day and Naruto runs off to train immediately, hollering a “See ya later, Ricchan!” over his shoulder. Sasuke dithers for a moment, but whatever made him hesitate to leave is trumped by the need to not let anyone beat him in anything, even the quantity of training.

In the general spirit of celebration, Riko forgot that she’s kind of injured and also very exhausted, and gets a rather unpleasant reminder when she tries to stand and follow her best friend.

Her leg hurts, which isn’t surprising, considering she slammed it against a jounin’s armoured glove.

It’s probably a fracture, she realises morosely, prodding at the forming bruise.

She should start wearing guards on her legs. Arms, too. Her body can’t take a whole lot of damage, isn’t built for it.

For now — ever since learning storage seals, she's all but stopped putting back stuff unless people asked for it, which means she still has a pair of crutches somewhere on her person, and probably a splint, too.

Yep. She finds the things she needs pretty quickly.

Now — hospital or clan clinic? Hospital’s a detour on the way home, clan clinic means every Nara clan member will know about her injury (and the events leading up to it) by dinner time. She really wants to see Shikamaru, though, and she might see him faster if she picks the clan clinic.

Then again, it’s only noon. He’s unlikely to be home, busy with his own team. And at the hospital, they’ll fix her up faster, without much fuss. The medics at the clan clinic believe in natural healing, she’d be off duty for the rest of the week.

Hospital it is. Luckily, she’s got practice in walking with crutches.

Kakashi clears his throat.

“Oh,” Riko says without enthusiasm. “You’re still here.”

“Yep,” he answers, eyeing her as she pushes herself up with the help of the crutches.

They’re nice and heavy and she could totally use them like she does her bokken.

“I’m going to the hospital,” she tells him and begins hobbling forward.

Kakashi walks beside her. Thirty seconds pass before he picks her up and walks with triple her speed. Stupid tall people with their stupid long legs.

“I can walk,” Riko protests and attempts to hit him with her crutches, but it’s a bad angle, so she only succeeds in waving them.

“If we walk at your pace, we’ll reach the hospital in three hours and you’ll be in pain the entire time,” Kakashi points out cheerfully. “But we can do that if you want to.”

“No one’s forcing you to walk with me.” She glares at him. His eyes crinkle in a smile.
Amusement practically wafts off of him, and damn it. She’s stuck with this ass for a jounin sensei now.

“My cute student is injured, I could never leave her behind.” They’ve made it out of the training ground already, are drawing looks from pedestrians.

“Creepy,” Riko mutters. Kakashi gives her a hurt look that instantly makes her feel guilty even though she’s mad at him. She changes the subject. “What was that book you were reading?”

His eyes widen with glee. She leans away when the book in question appears in his hand with a puff of smoke. “Riko-chan, my dearest student,” he says. “Let sensei tell you about this book… but always remember, lightning jutsu does not work like that.”

Icha Icha apparently contains mind-blowing action, superb drama, intense mystery, exquisite worldbuilding, extraordinary characters, and heart-stopping romance. Book one is now in Riko’s hand, she herself dazed from Kakashi’s passionate lecture on its amazingness. But hey, she likes reading, and maybe this’ll tell her something about what kind of person Kakashi is, so she opens it to the first page.

She’s instantly hooked. Doesn’t even realise when they arrive at the hospital until a familiar voice wheezes, “Kakashi, you didn’t.”

“Hm?” Kakashi hums. He’s definitely reading along with her. She’s absently batted at his face away twice already.

“Go away, Genma,” Riko mutters, eyes glued to the pages. “Busy.”

“I recommend putting that away before the nurses see,” Genma comments.

“Sound advice,” Kakashi agrees, grabs the book, and stuffs it his pocket. She gives him a pleading look. The female lead was just about to throw down with the creepy guy! “You can have it back after we’ve seen the medic.”

Genma snickers. “So, got yourself a team, huh?”

“What’re you even doing here?” Riko grumbles.

“Figured you’d manage to land yourself in a hospital bed again, so I waited here,” he answers, and yeah. That’s fair.

“Again?” Kakashi repeats.

“Problem child,” Genma explains, pointing at Riko. She sends him a glare. “So they passed your test? I’m asking because there’s a betting pool.”

“I didn’t know you were friends.” Kakashi blinks curiously.

“Accident,” Riko mutters. “I was on the good painkillers and now I can’t get rid of him.”

“She adores me.”
“Great!” Kakashi beams, and before she can blink she’s suddenly in Genma’s arms with the book on her stomach and a log where Kakashi was just now.

What the heck.

Since when are people allowed to kawarimi out of a conversation?

“That technique should be banned,” Genma comments sourly.

“Put me down, I can walk,” Riko demands.

“No,” he answers. “The medics would murder me.”

Yeah. Exactly.

Riko wakes at dawn the next day, sore and starving and kind of tired. She’d managed to read half the book (skipping the sex stuff because it’s weird) and is maybe having regrets about it, what with the night before having been seriously short as well, setting up traps in Training Ground Three. What’s going to happen with that, anyway? Should they go and clean it up? Do they have to book the training ground for that?

She resolves to ask about it later. For now — food.

When she shuffles downstairs, she finds breakfast all prepared in the fridge, along with a chakra-replenishing pill and a note saying “Well done, little one.” It makes her feel all warm and fuzzy inside.

After breakfast, she decides to enjoy the early morning on the porch. Just relax a little bit, look at the clouds, listen to the birds singing… she makes it for four minutes before the book’s in her hands again.

“What’re you reading?” Shikamaru plops down next to her. She stiffens.

The last time she heard his voice was in the genjutsu. Her heart starts beating harder, and she keeps her eyes glued to the words in Icha Icha. Too terrified to look at him.

He hadn’t been home yet when she got back yesterday afternoon, and despite her determination to see him she’d fallen asleep almost immediately.

Chakra exhaustion sucks.

“Book,” she answers.

“Duh.” They sit in silence together. “Heard your sensei tested you.” He pokes her leg. The medic had fixed it yesterday, but it still sort of itches and she’s supposed to take it easy.

“Yours didn’t?” Riko asks, turning the page. Sex stuff again, eww. Isn’t using lightning jutsu that way dangerous?

“Nah. Asuma’s pretty cool. Team treating you okay?”
“Fine. Kinda troublesome,” she answers, skimming over the next scene. Yikes, fire jutsu is definitely not applicable in that situation. Can she skip this? Where does the plot start up again? “Kakashi’s weird, Sasuke’s grumpy, and Naruto’s Naruto.”

She should really look at Shikamaru. Her brother.

“You okay?” he asks. Riko closes the book slowly and turns her head.

Reaches out and pokes his chest. It’s intact. She breathes out.

He’s fine.

“Yeah,” she answers. “I’m great.”

Riko is punctual, arriving at the training ground their team has been assigned.

Her leg aches. The medic mended it yesterday but sternly reminded her to take it easy. She was going to listen to him, but that book was just impossible to put down right on time, so she ended up having to run in order to not be late.

Sasuke’s already there, standing on a pretty red bridge over a small river, glowering down at the water. If his fangirls could see, they’d melt into puddles.

She frowns. Riko likes to think that she knows Sasuke decently well, or at least more than the average person. But she doesn’t know much about him. He likes tomatoes — she figured that one out because his fridge is full of them and he grows tomato plants in his garden. She also knows he can’t cook because he didn’t kick her out of the house when she started bringing or making dinner as a thank-you for putting up with her during their study meetings.

That’s about the extent of what she knows about him, if one doesn’t count her familiarity with his taijutsu. It’s definitely not enough.

She joins him on the bridge, sits on the railing so she doesn’t have to stand on her leg. When she shoots him a side-glance, he’s still glaring down at the water.

The silence is uncomfortable.

“I like playing shogi,” she announces. “And pranking villagers with Naruto, but you can’t tell anybody about that. I think it’d be really cool to have a summoning contract someday, preferably one with wings.”

Sasuke looks at Riko as if she’s grown a second head. She grins back nervously.

Before he can answer, Naruto comes running, shouting, “I’m not late!” at the top of his lungs.

“Morning!” she answers with a wave. Naruto beams at her and doesn’t slow down in the least, arms reached out to hug her.

Not noticing the fact that she’s sitting on the railing of a bridge. They all end up falling off, right into the river. How Sasuke got caught up in it, Riko doesn’t know. He glares at them, but because
he’s soaking wet just like her and Naruto, it looks far more adorable than intimidating.

“I’d help you dry that,” she says — it’s one of the first applications of basic water manipulation she taught herself — “But the medic said not to use chakra until I’ve recovered more of my chakra.”

Like she doesn’t know by now how chakra exhaustion works, but they always feel the need to lecture her.

“Hn,” Sasuke sneers, and she translates it to ‘Whatever’.

It might also mean ‘Thank you Riko, that’s so nice of you, I hope you recover soon,’ but she isn’t that optimistic.

“Should be fine by tomorrow,” she adds.

“Okay! D’you need anything?” Naruto asks. “I can get you ramen!”

“It’s morning,” Sasuke gripes.

“It’s ramen, bastard!” Naruto bristles. “It’s got protons!”

Protein. He means protein. At least Riko thinks he does, but she’s not about to correct him in front of Sasuke. Who looks at Naruto with the most expressionless face that Riko’s ever seen before turning away and staring at the water again.

“I wonder where Kakashi-sensei is,” she muses to nobody in particular.

“Right?” Naruto crosses his arms in annoyance. “It’s our first day! I wanna show everyone how awesome I am!”

Sasuke makes a condescending noise. Riko rolls her eyes heavenward. And three, two, one…

“You got something to say, bastard?!” Naruto yells.

“Problem, dead-last?” Sasuke sneers.

Yep. That’s what she thought they’d say. They’ll end up brawling in the next ten seconds, and the day won’t get better from then on.

Riko should probably do something about that.

“I wonder which of you is better at using chakra,” she says, rubbing at her chin. “Naruto has more, but Sasuke’s more skilled…”

Naruto gasps and points dramatically. “I’m better! I’m an awesome ninja!” He pauses. “What’s chakra?”

She stares at him blankly. Did he just — he seriously just asked that? What? Is he for real? How did he get through the Academy? How can he even use ninjutsu?

“He doesn’t have more.” Sasuke gives her an offended look.

Riko shakes herself.

“Uh, yeah, he does,” Riko tells him, ignoring Naruto’s preening. “I’m a decent sensor and his
chakra’s brighter than the freaking sun. His control sucks, though. Really sucks. Anyway, Naruto, chakra’s the stuff that makes jutsu work.”

“Oh, okay.” Naruto settles down for a moment, then brightens. “If I’ve got more, I’m better than the bastard!”

She eyes Sasuke’s steadily darkening mood with some worry. “If you can’t use it, it’s useless, though, so I’d say right now Sasuke wins. But! Let’s test it.” Riko forces a grin on her face. “Whoever can learn tree-climbing with chakra the fastest wins!”

Wait, Sasuke might already know that exercise-

Naruto squints at her. “But we can climb trees already.”

Riko grins at them and walks onto the training ground, picking out the closest tree that allows for decent visibility. Just this little bit of chakra should be fine, right? Sending a silent, guilty apology to the medics, she walks up to the first larger branch a few meters above the ground. “Like this,” she says, sitting down, grinning at their awed faces (though Sasuke’s better at hiding it, and whew, he doesn’t know the exercise). “Focus chakra on your feet and walk up. It’s easier if you run first — means you don’t overthink what you’re doing.”

At least, that’s how it had worked for her.

“Anyway!” she announces. “First to make it to the top wins!”

Riko’s sprawled out on her tree branch, dozing lightly in the sun.

“Not reading?” Kakashi’s disappointed voice asks right next to her. She startles and the only reason she doesn’t fall off the tree is because he grabs her by the back of her shirt and hoists her up again.

She gives him a disgruntled look. “Finished the book in the three hours you made us wait.”

Kakashi’s eye crinkles. “And did you like it? Who’s your favourite character? What did you think of the plot? Don’t you agree that Taiki is such a dream-“

“Give me the next book,” she demands tartly. He chuckles and ruffles her hair. Irritated, Riko bats it away. “Stop that.”

“You’re a great kid. I think you might be my favourite,” he muses, peering down at the boys who are busy running up trees, occasionally stopping to glare at the other’s (limited) progress.

“Because I like the book?” She eyes him dubiously.

Happy eye-smile. “It’s a sign of good character!”

Right. Kakashi is clearly full of crap. She knew that already, thanks to Genma and all the other people, but still. He’s ridiculous.

“After training.” He picks her up and shunshins down. Then calls, in the most stupidly chipper voice Riko has ever heard, “Maa, my cute little genin are practicing all by themselves! Sensei’s so proud!”

“You’re late!” Naruto yells. Sasuke crosses his arms and nods, clearly agreeing, which, wow. Riko lives in a time of miracles.

“Sorry, sorry,” Kakashi apologises in the least apologetic tone of voice possible. “I got lost on the road of life-”

“Liar!”

“Hey,” Riko says. “Put me down.”

“But you need rest, Riko-chan!” He blinks down at her. “Genma said I should carry you everywhere.”

She gives him a flat stare. Soon as she can, she’ll stab both of them. Ridiculous old men.

“Let’s go on a mission!” Kakashi announces cheerfully. “Are you ready, Team Seven?”

Naruto instantly forgets that he’s angry and whoops. “Yes! I’m gonna kick ass! Let’s go, let’s go!” Even Sasuke smirks in anticipation.

Riko’s teammates are way too easily manipulated. And they clearly don’t know about D-rank missions. Peering up at Kakashi, she wonders what new fresh hell awaits them.

“Team Seven,” the Sandaime Hokage says gravely. “Are you ready for your first mission?”

He puffs on his pipe with gravitas suited for a war council. Beside him, Iruka looks faintly exasperated.


The Hokage’s eyes twinkle. “That’s good to hear. Your mission is-” he makes a dramatic pause. “Weeding the Soma family’s gardens.”

A pause. Then Naruto screams, “Whaaaat?!” loud enough to be heard in all of Konoha.
Side story: What happened in Training Ground Three

It’s been two hours after Uchiha Sasuke, Uzumaki Naruto, and Nara Riko passed the bell test. Kakashi’s handed off his adorable kunoichi student to Genma. He’d guessed there was some kind of mentorship between them, seeing as Riko had spat a senbon at him during the test - Genma’s signature move.

He fully intends on finding his friend later and grilling him on the details. And ask what the deal with Riko and the hospital is, while he’s at it. Look into her medical records, if necessary.

But for now, he has a report to give.

“They passed,” he tells the Sandaime, who regards him intently.

“I see. Your opinion of them?”

“The boys are as expected. The girl…” he pauses thoughtfully. “Has come a long way.”

He remembers finding her, bleeding, too small and thin, signs of neglect all over her. Her hair Uzumaki-red. Kakashi now knows she’s not a member of that clan, had been informed of that fact when he was assigned this team. But he didn’t know back then, and if nobody had told him, he’d never have guessed either. She uses fuuinjutsu, and those chains she formed from water…

Clearly Yoshino had made the same assumptions as to her heritage and trained her accordingly. It’s not a well-known fact that the Nara matriarch is distantly related to the once-famed Uzumaki, though not a direct descendant, but those that were aware had clearly connected Riko’s red hair to Nara Yoshino’s distant cousins.

Kakashi’s going to need to figure out which disciplines the kid had been trained in.

More importantly, he needs to analyse the dynamic of the team. It’s clear to him that Naruto and her share a friendship. Less obvious is the familiarity between Sasuke and Riko, which is a pleasant surprise.


“Ah, Training Ground Three needs to be cleared of traps. Kids got creative,” he adds fondly.

“It will be taken care of,” Sarutobi replies and makes a note on his papers.

Tenten and her team wait for their sensei at their usual training ground, all three of them already hard at work: Neji gracefully performing his katas, Lee doing crunches and counting them out loud, and herself training her accuracy with kusarigama. She keeps an eye on her teammates to make sure they don’t strain themselves, as Gai had promised them to get them another C-rank mission, or else he’d walk four hundred laps around the village on his hands, and if he failed to do that, he’d do one thousand push-ups on one hand, and if that didn’t work…

She sighs. She loves her team, she really does, but sometimes…
Her sigh doesn’t go unnoticed. Immediately, Lee jumps up. “Tenten! What troubles you? I shall—”

Tenten (thankfully) doesn’t get to hear the feats Lee will accomplish in her honour because Gai-sensei appears in a plume of smoke. “Yosh! My youthful students! Today, we shall be departing on a C-rank mission!” He strikes a pose and gives them The Smile.

“Yes! Gai-sensei! I’m burning with the Flames Of Youth!” Lee shouts, mimicking the pose.

Tenten and Neji exchange a long-suffering glance. Hers is resigned, his annoyed more than anything.

Personally, she thinks he really should accept his lot in life. They’re stuck together, and neither herself nor Lee nor Gai is ever going to give up on their team.

“Just tell us what it is?” she cuts into Gai and Lee’s antics. The sunset background hasn’t made an appearance yet, but it’s only a matter of time and she’d love to avoid it if at all possible.

Fat chance of that. Gai-sensei appears to be even more motivated than usual. “Our mission has been requested by my Hip And Eternal Rival Hatake Kakashi himself! We shall not fail to win this challenge with the Power Of Our Youth!”

Neji and her straighten. How interesting - a challenge from their sensei’s rival? They’ve heard about Hatake Kakashi, of course - Gai-sensei recounts their challenges often enough. They’ve seen them from afar, too, though only Lee was impressed with the drawing contest.

Neither man was particularly skilled.

“Yosh!” Lee shouts. “We shan’t fail! What is this most perilous of tasks, that your most respected rival must ask for our aid?”

“Traps have been set in Training Ground Three! We shall protect our fellow comrades by disposing of them!”

She deadpans. “So… we need to clean up after your rival.”

“Oh no, Tenten! My rival has finally taken on the most youthful challenge of teaching a team, and it was his students who set the traps! It is clearly a competition between our teams!”

“…he can’t have had them longer than a day,” she feels the need to point out.

Those kids probably don’t even know of Gai’s existence yet, never mind any rivalries!

Also, none of that changes that they have to clean up after Gai’s rival and his brats.

“I see!” Lee’s train of thought clearly doesn’t mirror hers, as his eyes begin to shine. “We shall compete with your most honoured rival’s team! We shall make you proud, Gai-sensei!”

Gai’s eyes fill with tears. Behind him, the sun sets over a peaceful ocean, even though it’s noon and they’re in the middle of the village. “Lee!” he sobs.

“Gai-sensei!” Lee begins to cry as well, staring at Gai in absolute worship.

Gah, it never gets any less awkward to watch.

“Lee!”
“Gai-sensei!”

Even Neji never managed to figure out how the background scenery appeared every single time this happened. Nor has he found a way to see through it, not even with his byakugan.

Training Ground Three looks mostly normal. A bit of a crater and some rather big puddles, but otherwise Tenten can’t spy anything off.

Neji, though, clearly sees something else when he activates his doujutsu. “Who are the members of Hatake’s team?” he asks, a faint note of interest in his voice that has Tenten perking up.

Neither of them entertain the possibility that Gai-sensei might not know the names of his rival’s students. It’s Gai.

Gai rubs at his chin. “The Uchiha boy, Uzumaki Naruto, and the top-scoring girl in their year - Riko is her name, I think.”

“Uchiha Sasuke? Of the Uchiha Clan?” Lee asks, as if there are any other Uchiha around.

Tenten shakes her head in exasperation. Lee’s obsession with defeating geniuses descending from famous clans is becoming unhealthy, if he’s about to strike up a rivalry with some kid he’s never met.

“People call him a prodigy,” Neji speaks up, considering. “The other boy must be the dead-last of their year, then.”

Typical. Of course they focus on the boys. But Tenten has kept an eye on the girls set to graduate after her. “The girl was a surprise. Everyone thought it’d be Haruno Sakura who’d take the top spot,” she recounts. “She dominated the class for years, had top scores. But Riko beat her in the final exam.”

A surprise. The girl, in Tenten’s opinion, looked like a strong gust of wind could blow her over. Perhaps her success was owed to excessive studying and booksmarts? Maybe Sakura had an off-day?

“So Uchiha’s team left this behind?” Neji nods towards whatever he’s seeing that Tenten doesn’t, and gives a rare smirk. “This should be interesting.”

Tenten is rather surprised at the investment Neji’s showing the situation. It must be because both Neji and Sasuke are supposed to be geniuses. She has to admit, she herself is curious as to who of the two is stronger. Though testing it now wouldn’t be fair - Neji clearly has experience on his side.

Then again, the opponent is an Uchiha.

“Yosh!” Lee shouts with determination. “Let’s win this challenge!”

It’s clean-up. Tenten rolls her eyes. This wouldn’t even be remotely taxing on them, her team was practically made for this mission: Neji with his byakugan can locate all the traps, she herself is
more than skilled at disabling them, and Lee and Gai can deal with springing those traps that could otherwise not be dealt with.

The only reason this task isn’t D-ranked is because of the weaponry involved and the location being a shinobi training ground.

“Yes! Neji! Lead the way!” Gai-sensei prompts.

They follow Neji into the forest. The Hyuuga bends down and swipes a few branches on the ground away, revealing strands of ninja wire leading in different directions. “Cut them. It’ll disable five projectile-launchers.” He points to where those are located. Tenten inspects the traps and confirms Neji’s assessment.

“The traps themselves aren’t bad,” she says critically, “But it’s never a good idea to connect so many. Look, they can all be disabled at once, and if you find one, you find them all.”

Gai-sensei nods, pride shining from his eyes. “Then let us not waste any time!”

Tenten nods and unceremoniously cuts the wire. Immediately, a series of clicks and snaps follow, and suddenly, dozens of kunai come flying from everywhere.

The four of them have excellent reflexes, however, and the projectiles are deflected without too much difficulty. Tenten is still relieved when the bombardment stops. “Must have overlooked something-” she begins, but then Gai-sensei throws her out of the way of a volley of burning arrows. Neji and Lee, meanwhile, have to deflect shuriken. She tries to get to them, but just that moment, the arrows hit a tree nearby, and the tell-tale hiss of an explosive tag fuse burning down has her fleeing as fast as she can - almost running into a rain of senbon that... trail glitter after them? Neji, meanwhile, has a pitfall opening beneath him.

“Back to the clearing,” Gai yells, but. How?

This is so not a C-rank.

Why the hell weren’t they told about a trap specialist being on that team?!

Sarutobi Hiruzen raises his eyebrows (he never could control just a singular one at a time) at the sight of the team of the team he sent three hours earlier to clear Training Ground Three. All of them, even Gai, even the Hyuuga, look as if they fought a war against clowns and lost. Caked in multi-coloured dirt, covered in cuts. Tenten’s hair, tangled in ninja wire, is undone and parts of her outfit burnt off, revealing charred armour underneath. She supports Rock Lee, the usually energetic boy so exhausted he can barely keep his eyes open, his green outfit covered in obnoxiously pink glue. Hyuuga Neji - dear kami, if he laughs, the Hyuuga clan will take political action.

Gai covered in orange glitter is fairly tame in comparison.

“Hokage-sama!” Gai booms, a beaming smile on his face. “Our team was regretfully forced to retreat due to injury! We recommend sending a team of trap specialists to clear away the remaining traps. To make up for our failure, Team Gai shall-”
“Take a trip to the hospital,” Hiruzen finishes for him. “Thank you for your efforts. Please hand in your reports within the next three days.”

Gai and team leave. Hiruzen puffs his pipe in contemplation.

How curious.

(Tenten, Neji, and Lee came to the conclusion that Uchiha Sasuke’s genius wasn’t exaggerated. Him specialising in traps was unexpected, but it couldn’t be anyone else — the majority of those weapons had been too high quality to belong to either of his teammates, both of them no-name orphans.)

(Team Gai decided that redemption could only be accomplished by beating Team Seven, specifically Uchiha Sasuke.)

(It took two more teams going over Training Ground Three until it was once again deemed safe to enter.)
Chapter 15

Things sort of settle into a routine, for as much as they can when the new routine is so, well, new. Mornings are reserved for team meetings — a minimum of two hours spent waiting for Kakashi, followed by some D-ranked mission once he finally shows up, and team training for what’s left of the afternoon. Though some days they skip either training or missions. And Thursdays they have off completely.

It’s pretty fun, in Riko’s opinion. She likes it. Her team’s decent, so long as Sasuke and Naruto aren’t left to their own devices. Especially not Naruto.

They can’t be left together, either. Their stupid rivalry jeopardises D-ranks. It’s rather stupid, but on the other hand, they’re both working harder when the other is there to compete with.

On her own time, she continues to train in shadow manipulation and whatever else she feels she needs to improve on. Added to that is the occasional sleepover with Ino (“I spend too much time with boys, and your hair is out of control!”), spars with Sasuke, hanging around with Naruto, and being whisked away by Genma for more training.

It’s exhausting, but fulfilling. Riko wouldn’t have it any other way.

Today’s training is different from the usual. Normally, it’s the three of them having to do something and Kakashi making it even more difficult than it already is for training and entertainment purposes. They never know what’s coming next. That one time they simulated an escort mission, and suddenly they were ambushed by a swarm of squirrels.

Riko’s team learned a lot that day, most notably the fact that their jounin sensei is insane.

Other times Kakashi pits them against each other because according to him, they’ll get more familiar with how they fight that way, which will improve teamwork.

But today, it’s completely different, at least for Riko. Not in what they’ll be doing but in the fact that she’s blindfolded. For the rest of the week, Kakashi said. There’s a sticking seal on the thing, too, so the black piece of cloth is practically fused to her skin.

“Don’t worry, Ricchan!” Naruto babbles from her left. “I’ll show you where to walk! Gimme your hand, it’s gonna be fun!”

Riko holds out her hand into the vague direction of his voice and chakra. Kakashi grabs her wrist. “Nope!” he cheerfully says. “This is training. Sasuke and you will treat Riko as you would normally. She needs to hone her sensing ability, and this should teach her some tracking as well.”

“But why her?” Sasuke asks mulishly.

“Yeah!” Naruto agrees. “I wanna learn, too!”

“Because her chakra capacity is far below average,” Kakashi reminds them dryly. “And she’s not
blessed with great stamina either. Between you three, she needs that edge the most. May I remind you of the last four hospital visits.”

Riko huffs. “Only one was actually necessary, but you just had to panic-”

“Anyway,” Kakashi talks over her loudly, “You can learn after Riko’s got the basics down. I’m not dealing with more than one of you walking around blind.”

A beat of silence. Then the sound of ripping cloth. “You can’t stop us, Kaka-sensei!” Naruto declares.

“Hn,” Sasuke agrees.

Kakashi sighs deeply. “Well, I suppose if you really want to do this…”

“Hey Riko!”

“Hi.”

A bark.

“And hi, Akamaru,” she adds. A tiny weight hits her chest and she clutches the small dog on reflex. He licks her chin and she giggles.

“So…” Kiba says. “You’re walking the puppies.”

“D-rank,” she explains.

In the background, Naruto wails. Sasuke is swearing. It probably has something to do with the amalgam of various dog chakras piled around them. Some of them are really big. Her assigned puppy reaches her knee, and he feels small in comparison with what she can sense Naruto wrestling with. And those are supposed to be puppies?

“And you’re all three blindfolded,” Kiba points out the obvious.

“I can neither confirm nor deny that,” Riko answers. “Because I can’t see.”

The dog whose leash she’d wrapped around her arm runs in a circle around her in an attempt to tie up her legs. Smart little shit. She spins along with him so this ploy of his won’t succeed.

She only got one dog. The boys decided they’d split up the rest between them.

Riko’s okay with that, all things considered, though she would have liked it if they’d asked her opinion on that plan.

“But why?” Kiba asks in confusion.

“Sensor training. The boys felt left out, so they blindfolded themselves. Then sensei made it so they can’t take the blindfolds off. Something about learning about consequences.” She pauses. “I’m almost entirely sure it’s just for his entertainment.”

Riko’s dog pulls at the leash in order to get in on the fun.

“They just fell into the water, didn’t they?” she asks idly. She hasn’t visited the Inuzuka that often before this, just a handful of times on Kiba’s invitation or to bring Usagi-chan to the vet, but she remembers the little ponds the dogs like to use for bathing.

Kiba snickers, which is answer enough. “Sensor training, huh?”

“And some tracking.” She’s supposed to sharpen her nose with chakra. On her first try, she nearly passed out from overload.

“Cool,” Kiba says. “Gotta go to team training, but come by later and I’ll give you some pointers. Dinner sound okay?”

She shrugs. “Sure. Sounds great.”

Akamaru barks happily and gets more slobber on her face.

“Sure buddy, sleepover’s okay, too,” she agrees. “Thanks!”

“Sweet! Come on, Akamaru, we’re gonna be late! Later, Riko! Hey you! Yeah, I’m talking to you!” The dog she’s supposed to walk gives a startled whine. “Don’t be a brat, she’s my friend.”

Dog barks back unrepentantly.

“Her sensei promised you what?” Kiba asks incredulously.

Riko groans. “If we get to talking about Kakashi-sensei, you’ll definitely be late. I’ll fill you in later.” Akamaru licks her one last time and launches himself at Kiba.

“Yeah, okay, later!” he yells and runs off. She tracks his chakra as best she can. It’s hard — there are a lot of other people around, and their chakras are really similar to his.

In the background, it sounds as if Kakashi is giving unhelpful advice to the boys. Something about, “To beat the dog, you must become the dog.”

Her annoying charge barks. Riko crouches down. “Okay, here’s the deal. I’ll walk you and we can play after, and I’ll get you treats, too, and we can even splash around in the pond together, but it’s super crowded in there right now, so we’ll wait until the others are gone. Okay?”

Dog huffs.

He drives a hard bargain, clearly.

“I’ll give you scritches every time I come by,” she promises. “Who’s a good dog?”

The dog’s chakra goes happy and eager instantly. Puppy, she reminds herself. She reaches out a hand and a cold, damp snout bumps it. Yay, more dog slobber.

“Oh, okay,” she tells him. “I can’t see right now, so you gotta show me where to go and not, like, lead me into a ditch somewhere. In exchange, I’ll owe you a favour.”

Puppy barks happily and takes off. Riko lets herself be pulled along with him.
She better get out of dodge before Kakashi throws yet another character-building obstacle at her.

It’d be very hard to fend off squirrels while blindfolded.

When Riko returns from walking her new puppy friend, Naruto and Sasuke still haven’t managed to make it out of the Inuzuka compound. They did make it out of the pond, though.

The spectators at least seem to be having fun. “Ten on the Uchiha,” she hears someone say.

“No way,” another guy laughs. “Yama outweights him ten to one.”

“Hey,” Riko says. “Aren’t you mad? We got hired to walk the dogs and they haven’t even made it off the compound?”

“What? No, they’re just supposed to exercise with them,” the guy laughs.

“Bloody Kakashi!” she swears. Then she adds, “Ten on the dog. The small mean one behind Naruto.”

“Good eye,” the probably-Inuzuka says.

“Oh haha,” she mutters. Her puppy friend paws at her leg and whines. “Aw, you wanna go play, too? Yeah? Okay!”

Riko unclips his leash. He barks happily and leaps into the fray. Bowls Sasuke right over. He trips over a dog and lands on Naruto. It’s highly satisfying to observe, even blindfolded.

Her Inuzuka companion catcalls. He’s not the only one.

Naruto makes gagging sounds. Both of Riko’s teammates’ chakras feel disgusted. “Did they accidentally kiss again?” she asks curiously.

“Happens a lot?”

Riko shrugs. “Um. Yes.”

At least four times that she knows of.

Guy guffaws. “Yo, Tsume! Can we hire them again?”

From somewhere, Kiba’s mum bellows, “Hell yes, but you’re paying! Yo, is that Riko there? Heard you’re staying over, so get your ass over here, I’m not making dinner alone!”

“Okay!” she yells back. “Sensei, I’m going!”

Kakashi’s usually somewhere nearby. If he wanted to, he could stop her.

“Have fun!” he replies cheerfully from… above? Above. Maybe a rooftop. A tree? Eh, whatever. He’s okay with Riko calling it quits for today, she won’t waste any time getting out of dodge.

Then she considers how to get to Tsume. The boys vs. puppies battlefield is kind of in the way, and
it’s *everywhere*.

That’s probably why Kakashi sounded so happy. Stupid sensei.

Okay then. She focuses on her chakra sense. Lots of dog chakras, moving too fast and all over each other to keep track of, but she can figure out the general direction of their movement. And Sasuke and Naruto’s chakras are obvious amid the chaos. Sound tells her that the ground has long since turned to mud. Everything smells like wet dog.

If she’s quick and silent, she can probably make it across unbothered. All the dogs are distracted.

Nothing for it. Here she goes!

Instantly, her puppy friend barks in excitement. She can just hear it. “*New friend coming to play!*”

All dogs zero in on her.

“Oh fu-” she manages to get out before she’s buried alive under dogs.

Riko is attempting to chop carrots. It’s pretty hard to do while blindfolded, and she’s got to keep a cooling pack stuck to her head with chakra at the same time as well. She hit her head in the scuffle with the dogs.

The puppy from before’s sitting at her feet, pressed to her leg. One upside to being blindfolded: She’s finally found a way to resist puppy eyes.

“You done with those carrots?” Tsume yells from the other side of the kitchen.

“Yes!” Riko replies. “But they’re probably really ugly.”

“Eh, brats will eat anything I put before them and you’re currently blind, so who cares?” Riko hears her voice coming closer, and the soft pads of her partner Kuromaru’s paws following in her wake. She’s pretty sure they’re making those noises for her benefit only.

Dull rustling noise of something being dumped before her. “Sort through these,” Tsume orders.

“Oh, and those are…” Riko says awkwardly.

“Figure it out yourself.” Kiba’s mum bustles away.

Great. Riko carefully channels chakra to her nose — not too much! — and sniffs experimentally. The scent is familiar, but it’s too much, too multi-faceted, for her to place it. Cautiously, she reaches out and feels with her hands.

“Beans!” she exclaims.

Puppy friend barks in confirmation. She really should find out his name.

So. She knows it’s beans now. But how will she sort through them without her eyes?
Well, Tsume wouldn’t have given her an exercise impossible to solve, so it’s probably to do with her nose. Is she supposed to sniff out the bad ones? But she doesn’t know how the bad ones would smell, and picking out the scent of one individual bean when there are so many others is going go take forever.

“Hey, buddy,” she says to the puppy. “You know how to do this?”

A proud bark. That’s a yes.

“Wanna help?” she asks.

Excited tail-swishing sound. Awesome.

And that’s how she ends up showing beans to a puppy, who tells her if it’s a good or a bad one. After a while, she gets the hang of it herself, committing the scents to memory. She’s only wrong half the time!

After the beans, it’s tomatoes and then mushrooms. It gets harder because Tsume’s started to actually cook, and the scent of meat frying is pretty strong.

A door slams. “I’m home!”

Girl’s voice. Smells sort of like Kiba, chakra is also pretty Kiba-ish, and smells like dogs. Multiple dogs. “Hey Riko! How’s that rabbit of yours?”

“Hana?” she asks.

“Who else?” Kiba’s sister laughs. Behind her, her ninken shuffle into the kitchen.

“Usagi-chan’s fine,” Riko answers. With a twinge of sadness, she adds, “Doesn’t do much of anything anymore.”

Not that Usagi ever did much besides sleeping, but nowadays, that seems to be all he’s doing. Hotaru’s old pet is getting on in years.

“Huh. Bring him by sometime, yeah? Mum, I’m taking a shower!”

“Shower your dogs, too! They stink!”

“Mum!” Hana whines.

“Get moving, brat!”

Hana and her ninken-entourage leave the kitchen. Not too long later, Kiba and Akamaru come barrelling in and are almost immediately kicked out to clean up.

Dinner with the Inuzukas is lively. “Where’d your team get off to?” Kiba asks. “Figured Naruto’d at least insist on sticking with you.”

Riko shrugs. “Sensei grabbed him and Sasuke and disappeared. Something about survival training while blind in an onsen. I’m only half sure they won’t get their asses eaten by mutant koi fish.”

Tsume guffaws.

“What the hell, Kurenai-sensei doesn’t give us fun training like that,” Kiba grumps. “It’s all formations and rules and babysitting missions with her.”
“Wanna swap?” Riko asks hopefully. Okay, she can do without babysitting, but she’d hands-down trade it for chasing that goddamn cat again. Kiba would probably have a lot of fun with that mission.

“Nah,” Kiba says. “Team’s pretty cool. Sure, Shino’s creepy and Hinata’s shy, but we’re doing okay. What about yours?”

She shrugs. “We. Get along. Sometimes? I mean, I get along with the boys. But they suck at working with each other. And Kakashi-sensei’s the worst. It’s never boring, though.”

Riko actually likes her team very much. It’s fun. Even when she wants to punch them a lot and is frustrated with the boys’ rivalry. She wouldn’t trade her team for the world.

Akamaru, who commandeered her lap much to the puppy’s displeasure, whines and pushes his little head into her stomach. She giggles and scratches him behind the ears the way she knows he likes.

“Okay, kids, all done? Then get lost!” Tsume announces. “Hana, you’re helping me with cleaning up. Kiba, get Riko settled.”

“Got it!” Kiba grabs Riko’s hand and pulls her along. “You okay with sleeping in my room? I mean, Akamaru’ll be there, too, and Momo’s gotten attached to you, so it’s not like it’ll be just us, but you’re a girl and girls get weird—”

“Where else would I sleep?” Riko asks in confusion. “And why would it be weird? I crash at Naruto’s place all the time, it’s not like that’s any different.”

“I dunno!” Kiba exclaims. “It’s just, Hinata nearly exploded and Kurenai-sensei was super scandalised when I wanted to have team sleepover in my room, and she gave me this super long talk about propriety. I didn’t get it and it didn’t make sense, but I guess girls and boys are supposed to sleep separately.”

“ Weird,” Riko mutters. “Boy and girl stuff is stupid.”

“Yes!” Kiba agrees emphatically. A door opens and she’s pulled into a room that has his and Akamaru’s scent all over it.

“Like, Naruto still talks about Sakura all the time!” Riko tells him. “And she still tries to stalk Sasuke all the time when we’re out on D-ranks, and it’s really annoying. How does she have so much time? And what is the point?”

Kiba groans and lets go of her hand. A moment later what feels like blankets are shoved into her arms. “So glad Shino’s too creepy to have fangirls and Hinata’s too shy to get crazy about it.”

“Hinata likes Sasuke?” Riko asks in surprise.

“Nah, not him.” Kiba rummages around. “Er, you want a mattress or something? Akamaru and I sleep on furs on the ground, but I can totally get you something!”

Riko waves him off. “That’s fine.”

“’Kay, then I guess we’re done. C’mon, sit, let’s talk noses.”

She sinks down. Instantly, she has a lap full of dog. Momo, Kiba called her puppy friend. As she promised, she begins running her finger through his fur. Huh, he’s kind of fat.
“It’s hard,” she admits. “I keep losing track of the stuff I smell, and I never know what I’m smelling!”

“Huh, never had that problem. Guess it’s a practice thing? I mean, I’ve been doing it forever.” Kiba laughs. “But there’s some tricks when a scent is too strong or too weak, or when there’s just too many scents. I’ll show you!”

“Awesome. I really appreciate it!” she says gratefully, and resolves to do something nice for him at some point. Maybe draw him some storage or explosion seals? But the Inuzuka clan probably keep a supply ready for members.

Maybe some food pills, then. The Nara clan makes the good stuff, and Yoshino made it clear that she could take some any time, as long as she wrote down in the log how much would need to be refilled.

Something to think about later.

“Eh, no problem!” Kiba’s chakra gives the impression of a happy grin. “It’s cool talking with a friend again! I never see the Academy crowd anymore!”

“Me neither,” Riko agrees. “Aside from Shika’s team, of course.”

“We should get everyone together again!” Kiba decides. “Like, uh, let’s meet up Sunday evening. At Yakiniku Q. Your team, mine, Shikamaru’s. No senseis allowed.”

“Deal.” Riko grins. If she plays her cards right, she might even trick Sasuke into going.

“Okay!” Kiba claps his hands. “Training time! Let’s go to the training grounds and get your nose going!” He jumps up. “Last one there’s a loser!”

And he runs off.

Not fair! She doesn’t even know the way!
“Why Yakiniku?” Naruto complains mulishly. “Ramen’s better!”

“Because three teams won’t fit into Ichiraku’s,” Riko points out reasonably. “Anyway, mostly we’re meeting up to complain about our jounin sensei—”

“Sensei can hear you,” Kakashi says sadly.

Riko gives him a thumbs-up. “—and brag about who learnt the coolest stuff and did the most missions. It’ll be fun. Besides, they’re our friends, we should keep in contact. It was really fun meeting hanging out with Kiba again, you know?”

“I guess,” Naruto grumbles. “Kiba’s lame, though. And we’re totally the coolest team!”

“But if you two don’t show—” She points at Sasuke and Naruto’s chakras, would have added a pointed look if she weren’t still blindfolded—“Then we’ll be the lamest.”

Sasuke’s chakra feels stubbornly opposed to going. Naruto doesn’t seem too happy either, which is pretty unexpected. She figured he’d be happy to be invited somewhere, but apparently not.

“I can’t show how much ass I kick in a restaurant!” he exclaims.

Riko facepalms. Of course that would be the problem.

This seems like one of those times Ino would roll her eyes and huff, “Boys.”

“Boys,” Riko huffs. “It’ll be fun, so I’m going, and if you don’t show we’ll have a great laugh about the four times you accidentally kissed. That I know of. Who knows what you do while I’m blindfolded.”

“No,” Sasuke says. “You won’t.”

“Watch me.” Why do they think it’s a secret anyway? There were witnesses every time.

“Ricchan! You wouldn’t!” Naruto gasps in horror. “And we don’t do nothing just ’cause you can’t see!”

The boys were both rid of the blindfolds after a day. Riko didn’t ask.

“Uh-huh,” she says doubtfully. “Anyway, you know the time and place. Your choice if you show up or not.”

“You should,” Kakashi backs her up unexpectedly. “You’ll be working together with them soon enough. They might save your life someday. Plus, enjoying your downtime is important.”

His voice sounds like he’s smiling.

“If you all go, I might let you go on a C-rank,” he promises.

Instantly, the boys’ chakras sharpen with determination. “We’ll go!” Naruto shouts. “We’ll definitely go! Bastard, if you don’t go—”

“If you forget the meeting time, dead-last—”
“I won’t! I bet you’ll forget!”

Riko pinches the bridge of her nose.

At least they agreed to come.

That evening’s get-together presents Riko with a heretofore unprecedented problem.

She doesn’t know what to wear! And she’s blindfolded, so she’s very unlikely to figure it out anytime soon!

Yakiniku Q isn’t the kind of place one has to dress up for — Shika’s team goes there all the time after training. But most of the others, she hasn’t seen in weeks, and she really doesn’t want to look like a colourblind monkey, which is what the kid they had to babysit yesterday called her.

It’s not like she can see what she’s putting on in the morning! So if she leaves the house in the old orange hoodie Naruto had given her for some birthday, paired with sleep pyjama shorts, and nobody tells her, then it’s not her fault!

Riko huffs in frustration, grabs a bunch of clothes and tosses them into her backpack, then jumps out the window.

Her landing is smooth. She’s gotten better at sensing chakra. Or, well, not better but more skilled. The grass below has very little chakra, but it’s there, like a thin carpet of light.

Luckily, the way to Ino’s house isn’t far, and it’s easy to find, too — the scent of flowers is noticeable enough.

Even more lucky, Ino is home, Riko can sense her in her room.

“Hello, Riko,” Inoichi’s voice greets when she enters the flower shop. “I see sensor training is going well.”

“I’m not tripping into everything anymore,” she confirms. “I’m here to see Ino?”

“Upstairs.”

“Thanks.”

Now where’s the damn door? She treads carefully. Flower pots are really, really hard to avoid walking into.

If she remembers correctly, it was a wooden door, with a metal doorknob. But it she tries sniffing it out, she’ll end up sneezing because of all the flowers around.

“Little bit more to the right,” Inoichi says helpfully.

“Thanks,” she repeats gratefully and feels for the doorknob. There! “Later, Inoichi-san!”

“Have fun.”
She finds Ino easily. The scent of perfume is intense, and Riko pulls the chakra from her nose. “Ino?” she calls out, knocking on the door. “It’s Riko!”

The door opens. “Hey Riko, how are you do- what are you wearing?!”

“I need help,” Riko whines pathetically. “Please help me?”

“Yeah, obviously,” Ino says dryly. “Come on in. Please tell me you didn’t walk around like that.”

Riko stays silent.

“No, he was definitely having fun,” Riko corrects her. “I heard him and Naruto snicker.”

“He would never!” Ino gasps. “You’re wearing a yellow hoodie with pink polka dots and dog ears! And purple leggings!”

It appears Riko’s closet has been pranked. So that’s what her team had been up to that night she’d stayed over at Kiba’s.

Someone would pay for this.

She empties out her backpack full of clothes. “What of this is wearable?” she asks.

Ino’s silence and the horrified feel of her chakra do not bode well.

“My team is nothing if not committed to its endeavours,” Riko states into the silence. “Ino? Will you please point out to me the most horrifying combination of the assorted clothes?”

“Why?” Ino asks warily.

“I’m going to really embarrass them now,” Riko answers darkly. “They will rue the day they decided to mess with my clothes. Is there anything with glitter?”

Riko makes her way to the restaurant on her own because Ino refused to be seen with her in her current get-up any more than necessary. Fair enough.

Inoichi had choked when she’d walked past him, and now, walking through the streets, she’s definitely drawing looks as well.

According to Ino, she’s wearing an orange thing that’s less shirt and more sequins, a shiny gold jacket, and a rainbow skirt paired with white leggings embroidered with frolicking dogs. And to top it off, Ino had given her a giant purple bow to tie her hair back with.

Someone better take a picture of this because she’d really like to see herself right now.

Yakiniku Q’s scent makes the restaurant easy to find. Shika, Chouji, and Kiba are already there, so Riko walks in.
They freeze when they see her. The familiar sound of Shikamaru facepalming follows. Kiba starts howling with laughter.

“Hi Riko,” Chouji greets, as if this is perfectly normal.

From the feel of his chakra, he finds nothing off about how she looks, which makes her rather concerned for his sense of aesthetics.

“Hi,” she greets.

“What happened to you?” Kiba gasps out. Akamaru barks.

“My idiot team pranked my closet,” she explains cheerfully. “I’m getting them back. I am blindfolded. They have to be seen with me.”

“But so do we,” Shikamaru deadpans. “So troublesome.”

Kiba snickers. Then he perks up. “Yo, Shino! Hinata! Over here!”

Riko frowns. She can pick out Hinata’s chakra, but only faintly. Shino’s, however, is barely there, and… it’d always felt odd before, but now? If Kiba hadn’t called him by name, she wouldn’t have known a human had just entered.

She files that bit of information away to examine later. At least Shino still has a scent. Hasn’t learned scent-erasing jutsu yet, but it’s probably only a matter of time, with Kiba on his team.

They exchange greetings. “You look nice,” Hinata tells Riko shyly, and seems to mean it. For whatever reason.

“Thanks. You smell good,” Riko replies, since she can’t exactly compliment Hinata’s appearance right now.

Hinata makes a tiny squeaking noise that might be distantly related to a thank-you.

Ino is the next to arrive, but not two minutes later the rest of Riko’s team bursts in as well. Well, Naruto bursts in, Sasuke ambles after him as if he were just strolling in.

“Sasuke-kun! You came!” Ino squeals. Riko startles at how the feel of her chakra shifts, going bright and excited with genuine happiness. It’s a lovely thing to witness, so pure and innocent.

So that’s what it means to be in love, Riko realises. It makes chakra go like that. It’s beautiful.

“Hey, hey!” Naruto shouts. “We’re here, the most awesome — Ricchan?!”

“Hi!” Riko greets cheerfully, jumping up in all her shiny and sparkly glory. “I saved you seats!”

“Riko looks great, doesn’t she?” Ino gushes, vengeance in her chakra. Riko kind of wants to hug her because she’s awesome. “Her new look is so inspiring!”

“Yeah, those leggings are great!” Kiba agrees.

He’d think that. They’ve got dogs on them.

“Hahaha, yeah…” Naruto laughs awkwardly. Sasuke pushes past him and unceremoniously drops
down next to Riko, nodding tersely at the greetings aimed at him. Naruto sits on his other side with an annoyed mutter about having wanted that seat.

“Cool, that’s all of us!” Kiba laughs. “Let’s order!”

“Yes! Food!” Chouji shouts, his usual shyness completely disappeared at the prospect of food. It’s like his chakra’s been set aflame.

“The cool thing,” Shikamaru speaks up, “is that we’ll get discounts for being shinobi, showing up with our teams, and having an Akimichi here.”

“Sweet!” Kiba decides, and Akamaru barks in excitement.

It’s a pretty great evening. Loud, fun, everybody shouting over each other in an attempt to out-brag the rest.

(“We have the worst sensei, believe it!”)

“Don’t be proud of that, you loser!”

“Now don’t look,” Shikamaru says quietly-

“Okay, I won’t,” deadpans Riko.

“But our stupid senseis just took a table across the room. Don’t look, I said!”

“Ow! Don’t kick me!”

“What do we do?” Ino hisses. “And I can’t see them!”

“You can’t recognise them. Why? Because they’re in henge,” Shino elaborates dryly.

“Except Team Seven’s sensei,” Hinata, who surprisingly had managed a tiny bit of conversation today, continues.

“Yeah, your sensei just has a fake moustache.” Kiba snickers. “Glued to his mask.”

A moment of silence. And then…

“Yeah, Kakashi-sensei is so lame!” Naruto yells.

“So lame,” Riko agrees instantly.

“Yeah,” Sasuke finishes.

They high-five. Well, she and Naruto do. Sasuke refuses.

“Asuma-sensei smokes all the time!” Ino catches on. “It’s so unhealthy! Try getting that smell out of your clothes!”

(“You smoke around the kids?” a woman’s voice hisses in the background.

“Not in closed quarters!”)

“Ha, suckers. Kurenai-sensei’s the best!” Kiba brags, sticking out his tongue at them.

(In the background, someone radiates extreme smugness.)
“Yeah, but I bet you wouldn’t know what to do when an army of squirrels ambushes you, so who’s the real winner here?”

It might not have been the best idea to roast Kakashi in his hearing range, but in Riko’s opinion, it was worth it.

Even if he’s got them chasing that stupid cat again after gruelling training all morning. And he still hasn’t let her take the damn blindfold off.

So that’s not much fun.

“You promised us a C-rank,” she grumps at him while Sasuke attempts to wrestle the cat into submission. Naruto throws a few shadow clones into the mix, which makes the task quite impossible.

“Hmm…” he muses. “I did, didn’t I?”

“Yes!”

Glaring at him while blindfolded is pretty futile, but she tries anyway and gets her hair ruffled for her effort. It’s not exactly the optimum outcome, but it’s not the worst it could be either.

“Maa… let’s see if the Hokage’s got a good one for us, then,” Kakashi decides. “I can’t tell you no when you’re wearing a Puppy #1 shirt. It’s too adorable.”

She files that bit of information away for later consideration. Out loud, she says, “You’re being a creepy old man again, sensei.”

Kakashi makes a wounded noise. “So mean. Sensei’s not old.”

“C-rank,” she reminds him. “Let’s go, chop chop, we don’t have all day.”

In the background, Naruto shrieks when Tora the cat pops his shadow clones.

Right.

They should definitely deal with that first. It’s a good thing she’s gotten better at using her shadow! Now it even gives a strange sort of sensory feedback, which is pretty awesome when she’s blindfolded.

The Hokage tower is crowded and it’s absolutely annoying that just about every jounin can hide their chakra. Plus, in closed quarters it’s hard to locate people by scent. At least her shadow is more helpful, but only in very short range — if a jounin comes that close to her, she’d be dead if it were an enemy.
Sasuke gives an annoyed huff and grabs her wrist, dragging her with him. As far as guides go, he leaves something to be desired in both attitude and care, but is still better than Naruto, who’s busy attempting to wrangle the (now tied-up) cat.

“Sasuke-kun!” Ino’s chakra is bubbly and excited as she runs up to them, coming from the direction of mission assignment. Her team follows behind at a more leisurely pace. “Guess who got a C-ranked mission?”

Sasuke stiffens, his hand on Riko’s wrist tightening.

Right. Ino’s exuberance makes him uncomfortable. Riko’s going to have to talk to her about that, but for now — she pokes her head out from behind her teammate. “Hi Ino! Congratulations! We’re getting one, too!”

“Oh, wonderful!” Ino’s chakra does this beaming, warm thing that Riko has learnt means smile. “Let’s meet up when we get back and compare notes!”

“Okay!”

“Might be a while,” Shikamaru grumbles as the rest of Ino’s team comes closer. “We’re guarding this bridge-builder guy for a few weeks at least.”

*This guy*, Riko guesses, is the person following in Team Ten’s wake. Civilian, unwashed, stench of alcohol.

She doesn’t scrunch her nose up in disgust, but it’s a near thing. They’re supposed to treat clients with respect and good manners.

As if on cue, the man sniffs disdainfully. “These brats are even smaller. They’ll let anyone become a ninja, huh? I suppose I lucked out not getting them, even if the blond girl’s completely useless. At least she’ll be pretty in a few years.”

Ino sucks in a sharp breath, coupled with a tiny sound of hurt. It’s only a tiny reflection of the pain her chakra reflects.

In the space of a heartbeat, the atmosphere in the room shifts to polite hostility. Sasuke slowly takes his hand off of Riko’s wrist, chakra roiling. Only Naruto is oblivious, still busy with Tora.

“Ino’s worth twelve of you.”

Riko doesn’t realise it was her who spoke for a good moment, and even afterwards she can’t bring herself to regret it no matter how rude it was. Not when Ino’s chakra quivers in gratefulness.

That thing is bubbling under her skin again.

She was hoping that it disappeared. It hasn’t shown since the bell test.

Kakashi’s hand is suddenly on her head, and huh, is she shaking? “Best get going, Asuma,” he advises cheerfully. “The day’s not getting younger. And Ino-chan? He needs you more than you do him. Just something to think about.”

Riko could really hug her sensei right now. She settles for fistling a hand in his flak jacket.

Ino’s chakra goes still. Then it sort of jumps, similar to what it did when she noticed Sasuke.

“Come along now, team,” who must be Asuma-sensei speaks up after a small, awkward pause.
“Have a good one, Kakashi.”

“Have fun on your mission.” Shika mutters to Riko in passing, his shadow passing hers. It feels like a fleeting embrace.

“You too,” she whispers back.

Team Ten leaves, the now sweaty bridge-builder in tow. Riko breathes out and slumps against Kakashi, just a bit. She feels strangely exhausted.

“Argh!” Naruto shouts. “You stupid cat!”

Things go back to normal. They hand the cat over, get their cheeks pinched in thanks by Tora’s owner Shijimi-sama, who by now is pretty familiar with their faces. “Such sweet and dedicated children,” she gushes to Kakashi. “I wished my own were a little more like them. Here, dears, have some sweets!”

“Thanks, lady!” Naruto exclaims, Tora-troubles instantly forgotten.

Riko isn’t sure he ever caught onto the fact that Shijimi-sama is the wife of their country’s daimyou.

The lady pays the mission fees and leaves with her cat clutched to her. Riko would bet that Tora will be escaping again sometime next week.

“Hmm…” the Hokage muses. “For your next task… helping with groceries, the potato fields need to be weeded and-”

“Actually,” Kakashi speaks up, “I think they’re ready for a C-rank.”

“We totally are!” Naruto agrees.

Sasuke doesn’t say a thing, but she imagines him giving one of those stubborn looks.

“Same,” Riko says, just to have said something.

“Hmm…”

It’s only two days later that they finally get their hands on a genin-appropriate C-ranked mission. Unfortunately, the last available one was given to Shikamaru’s team, so it was two more days of D-ranks for Riko.

At least it was just one per day, and the rest Kakashi spent drilling them on formations and basics.

Riko finally got freed from the blindfold.

Readjusting to that is surprisingly hard.

“All right, team,” Kakashi says seriously. “We meet back here in an hour. And we only leave once I’m satisfied with the supplies you packed. Dismissed.”
They don’t waste any time in taking off towards their respective homes. Riko needs little time to pack — at Yoshino’s advice, she’d prepared storage scrolls for missions in advance. Only a few odds and ends need to be grabbed, plus one of the Nara med-kits that are kept ready for active shinobi.

The house is empty. Sadly, Riko doesn’t have the time to track down her adoptive mother, who could be anywhere in the compound, so she leaves a note instead.

Shikaku, at least, is easy to find, he’s in his office like he’s supposed to. She’s a bit hesitant in knocking on his door — what if he’s busy? He’s an important man! — but then she does it anyway.

“Come in,” he answers, the door muffling his voice.

“Hey,” she says awkwardly after shuffling in. “I got a C-rank outside the village.”

He probably figured that out from one look at her. She’s all packed up and ready to travel, hair braided back, wearing a sturdy hoodie, and the leggings that fully cover her legs are thick and and lined with mesh armour.

“Message run?” he asks, confirming that suspicion. She nods and he gets up from his chair.

“Nervous?”

Riko shrugs, stuffing her hands into her hoodie’s pockets. “Not really.”

It’s the truth. She’s excited and tense, but not particularly jittery. There’s very little risk of combat on a message run. Even then, she doesn’t think she’d be very nervous.

It simply feels like she’s finally doing what she trained for all those years. Nothing more, nothing less.

“Take care out there,” he tells her quietly. A bit of rummaging, and then he’s holding out a notebook for her. “If you have downtime.”

Riko takes it. She’s not an artist by any means, but she does like drawing and doodling and it’ll allow her to jot down notes on whatever comes into her head as well.

It just seems like an odd thing to give someone before their first mission. Wouldn’t a weapon be more appropriate?

“Sometimes,” he tells her, as if the thoughts were written on her forehead, “a shinobi needs something to focus on that isn’t fighting. I had a shougi set when I still operated outside the village — I gave it to your brother when he left on his first C-rank. Inoichi used to pick flowers and press them. Chouza collected new recipes.”

“Oh.” The word feels inadequate, but she can’t think of anything else to say. She stares down at the notebook. “Thank you.”

“And this is from your mother.” From beneath his desk, he retrieves-

“A katana?” she breathes, stunned. Numbly holds out her hands for the weapon. It’s surprisingly heavy.

“It’s not seeing much use these days,” Shikaku muses. “So Yoshino wanted you to have it. ‘Swords want to be used,’ she said. She’d have liked to give it to you herself, but I suppose that’s
just life.”

Riko swallows heavily and withdraws an empty storage seal. A puff of smoke, and the weapon is stashed within. After a second’s contemplation, she tucks it in one of the hidden compartments in her belt, meant just for keeping paper seals in them. Silently resolving to figure out a more permanent location on her body to store it in.

It’s a real katana. And with how high Yoshino’s standards are, even when kenjutsu isn’t her specialisation, it can’t be anything but high-quality. It’s very likely going to be Riko’s main weapon, so it’ll need its own space where it’ll always be when she’s not using it and where she can retrieve it from at a moment’s notice.

Something to figure out later. She should get moving.

“Tell her thanks?” she asks quietly. “I have to go.”

Shikaku nods. “I’ll see you when you get back, little one.” He holds out his arms. Riko doesn’t hesitate to hurry into the hug.

“I’ll see you when I see you,” she mumbles. It’s much harder than she thought it’d be, to step out of his arms and to the door. “Bye.” And before she can chicken out, Riko quietly adds for the first time in her life, “Dad.”

She runs before she he can say anything.
Chapter 17

In an instance of surrealism, Kakashi is already waiting at the gates when Riko arrives. So is Sasuke, who eyes him with no small measure of bewilderment.

“Hi,” Riko greets. “Sasuke, is he who he pretends to be?”

Her teammate studies Kakashi dubiously. “He claims to know about the squirrels.”

“We told that one to the others in a restaurant full of people,” Riko argues. “Anyone could’ve overheard.”

“My students are adorable when they’re suspicious,” Kakashi gushes. His eye crinkles up in a smile.

Yeah, it’s definitely Kakashi.

“Ricchan! Bastard!” Naruto comes running at an impressive speed, considering the incredibly oversized backpack on his back. He halts abruptly and points at Kakashi. “What! Who are you?”

“Claims to be Kakashi-sensei,” Riko answers doubtfully, eyeing him critically. “Personally, I think the hair’s a bit off.”

Naruto whips out a stick and pokes at Kakashi. “I don’t buy it.”

“Me neither.” The three of them exchange looks. “Let’s set him on fire.”

Sasuke pulls an explosive tag from his pouch.

“But not inside the village,” Riko adds reasonably.

“Agreed!” Kakashi announces. His one eye is smiling at them. “Naruto. Your backpack looks heavy.”

“Yeah! I packed extra stuff I’ll definitely need!” Naruto beams proudly. “But it’s a secret what’s in it!”

Riko and Sasuke exchange a deadpan look.

It’s definitely ramen.

“I have the stuff from the list you gave me, too! Except I couldn’t get a compass that points north. And they were all out of rations at the supply place. But I got other stuff, and rations are terrible anyway!”

Sasuke, Kakashi, and Riko stiffen.

The supply office exists for the sole reason of providing shinobi leaving for missions with basic supplies: first-aid kits, blankets, rations. They never run out.

Something is very wrong with what Naruto had just told them.

“I see,” Kakashi says cheerfully. “Don’t worry.” He ruffles Naruto’s hair. “Sensei will take care of it. Why don’t you three wait for me a little?”
And gone he is, leaving awkward silence in his wake.

“Let’s go, then.” Riko forces a grin and holds out her hand for her best friend, who beams at her and takes it.

“Hey Ricchan? Are you okay? Are you nervous? Because you’re making a weird face!” Naruto gives her a thumbs-up. “Don’t worry! I’ll definitely protect you! And think of how many new ramen flavours we’ll find!”

Riko sighs. Forms her smile into something that feels more natural, and she hugs Naruto right there, in the street. “You’re my best friend,” she whispers into his ear. “I don’t need you to protect me.”

“Eh?” Naruto asks, hugging her back. “You’re my best friend, too, Ricchan! Are you really okay? We can… we can wait with the C-rank if you’re scared!”

She laughs. “I’m fine. I am.” Clearing her throat, she steps back. “I bet Kakashi will take at least one hour to do whatever he’s doing.”

“Two,” Sasuke snorts.

“He wouldn’t!” Naruto shouts. Then he stops. “Forty minutes.”

The three of them exchange looks.

“I have a card deck with me,” Riko reveals.

“I got potato chips!” Naruto exclaims. They high-five before staring at Sasuke expectantly.

He returns the look. Time stretches.

“Tea,” he finally caves.

And that’s how Team Seven ends up having a picnic at the village gates.

Shimogo is a little port town in Fire Country. Parts of it are picturesque and well-kept, like the house of the noble they’re delivering their message to. It’s over with quickly, Kakashi handles the talking efficiently. Within an hour of arriving, they’re already leaving the noble’s mansion.

It feels anticlimactic. She was hoping for something interesting, considering the days of tedious travel through tree-tops.

This was, all in all, surprisingly boring, considering Riko has yet to experience a D-rank without some kind of hiccup.

At least it’s not baby-sitting.

Kakashi books a room in a hotel. “No need to camp in the woods,” he claims. Smiling at them, he suggests, “Why don’t you three head out to have some fun? But no going off by yourself.”
“Ramen!” Naruto cheers. “I saw a stand down the street! Can we go? Let’s go! I bet it tastes different from home!”

Riko grins. “I’m in! Sasuke?”

“No thanks.”

“Okay! See you later!”

“Be back before eight,” Kakashi adds. “Have fun!”

Holding hands, Naruto and Riko head down the street. The ramen shop is easily found. As far as ramen go, it’s better than cup ramen, but not as good as Ichiraku’s.

“Well yeah! Ichiraku’s is the best,” Naruto explains when Riko puts that observation in words. “Hey! This is a port town, right? Let’s go see the ocean!”

The two of them head towards the dockland area.

“It’s so big,” Riko marvels when they find it and suddenly come face to face with the sea. The air tastes of salt and smells of fish. Wooden pontoons creak, water gurgles constantly.

No pictures or descriptions do justice to what she’s seeing in front of her. A part of her urges to take a step onto the water, just to see what it feels like to stand on the ocean.

“Yeah,” Naruto agrees. “I’m glad we get to see it together!”

For a while, they just stand there, two genin staring at the water. It’s starting to get dark and chilly, however, and - “Something’s off,” Riko mutters, looking around uneasily.

There’s nothing to see with her eyes. But her chakra sense tells her something rather different. Some people are interested in them, and they don’t feel at all friendly.

Nobody here besides Naruto feels friendly, actually. Not just in this part of the docks, but in the entire city. She’d chalked it up to the citizens’ unfamiliarity with shinobi, but now, with the light of day waning, she’s no longer so sure.

“We should go back to the hotel,” she suggests quietly. “It’s getting dark.”

“Okay!” Naruto happily trudges alongside her.

When he turns to go back the way they came, Riko pulls him in another direction. “Not that way,” she says tightly. “Crowded.”

Deeper into the dockland area they venture. There’s got to be other exits. If not, there’s always the rooftops.

At least with darkness falling, they don’t draw as many looks. Just two kids scurrying around. There’s a lot of children here, dressed in rags, their hands dirty and calloused from work.

The fishermen and merchants look more like pirates than anything.

Riko doesn’t like this at all. Even Naruto’s caught on to the uneasy atmosphere.

The docks are crowded, but certain areas are given a wide berth — the warehouses with the Gato Corporation logo on them are heavily guarded, and the people hurry past while averting their eyes.
There’s just something really off about all this.

“Over there! Grab that redhead!” somebody orders behind them.

Her and Naruto start running, diving into the crowd. A bunch of Naruto’s clones pop into existence and cause further confusion. Riko pulls her hood over her head, but hands are already grasping for her, and what is even going on?

She channels chakra to her legs, grabs Naruto, and launches both of them into the water. The cold is a shock, and Naruto’s struggling, dragging her down. But she’s a good swimmer and her skills with water manipulation are well-trained. With some effort, she manages to drag Naruto and herself to the surface. “Quiet,” she hisses.

Above, people are looking for them. Why, she has no idea.

Tiny sound of something hitting the water. Splashing steps. Riko pales.

Somebody is walking on water. A shinobi is looking for them.

This is bad.

She pulls her chakra tightly into herself, but it’s futile — Naruto’s chakra is a beacon, loud and bright, and even a low-level sensor will find him in a heartbeat.

The wooden piers creak in tandem with her heartbeat. The water around her shivers.

Riko wraps herself around Naruto. She’s never carried a passenger when using shunshin, but she can’t think of any other way to get out of this.

Her and Naruto land in an alley, not far from where they were before. “Ricchan, why did he want you?” Naruto asks after stumbling in disorientation, eyes wide, and Riko’s sure she’s not looking any better.

“I don’t know,” she breathes. Her breath is coming hard. By some miracle her glasses are still on her face, and she hastily wipes water droplets off.

There’s nothing special about her! Aside from the… the stuff that there’s no way people here would know about! She’s just some random genin — why would this person go after her and completely ignore Naruto, who’s way more remarkable?

She chances a look back, glasses back on her nose. There, on the water surface, a dark figure stands. A flash of light catches on the metal of their hitae-ate. Kirigakure, but the symbol is slashed through.

A nuke-nin.

What business does a nuke-nin from Kiri have with Riko, of all people?!

“We’re going back to the inn,” Riko mutters, grabbing onto Naruto’s hand.

Except Naruto’s hand isn’t where it’s supposed to be. Neither is the person usually attached to his hand.

“Hey you! What do you want with Ricchan?!” he shouts from the exit of the alley.

She’s going to kill him.
“Look at that. Another rat from Konoha.” The missing-nin takes his time walking up to Naruto, who gulps but stands his ground. The area clears of civilians quickly. “I’ll make you a deal,” the man suggests in a conversational manner, as if he and Naruto were old friends coincidentally meeting in the street. “Tell me where the redhead is and you get to live.”

“W-what? I’m not gonna do that! What do you want? I’m not letting you touch my friend!”

The shinobi chuckles. “Cute. And here I thought the others would be getting all the fun with that bridge-builder while I was stuck here…”

Riko sucks in a sharp breath.

Bridge-builder.

Shikamaru.

“What do you want with Ricchan?!” Naruto yells again, taking a step back.

“Hmm… I guess I’ll just go find her myself… but what to do with you?” The man chuckles roughly. Cold killing intent seeps from him, feeling like hands cutting off her air. Naruto appears frozen.

The nuke-nin’s holding a tanto now, strolling closer.

No. No.

If anyone asked her later, she wouldn’t be able to tell them how it happened. One moment, she’s standing in the alley, watching in terror as the man makes to kill Naruto for the sole reason of killing him.

The next, she’s leaped over Naruto right at the shinobi, and her new katana clangs against the tanto he’d raised on reflex, his eyes widened slightly before his mouth twists into a smirk. “There you are, sweetie.”

He grabs her wrist and flings her into an assortment of barrels. She gasps in pain, and at the moment of impact, every light in the vicinity just. Blows out. Gone.

It’s completely dark, but Riko — she’s trained for that. She doesn’t need her eyes. Naruto’s where he was before, chakra horrified and scared and want-to-move-do-something-but-can’t. The shinobi’s chakra is all but invisible now, but she can smell him, can hear him cursing under his breath about fucking red-haired demons and this is her chance. He’s distracted!

She wastes no time attempting to push herself out of the crushed barrels, instead replacing herself with a clay jug some homeless guy had used to collect money in. It shatters when it falls to the ground, shards and a meagre amount of coin clattering to the ground.

Riko leaps forward. Swings her sword with a hoarse cry.

It hits only metal. A powerful kick sweeps the legs out from under her and a large hand wraps around her throat. Riko chokes, her katana hitting the ground. She claws at the hand, but he’s wearing gauntlets.

“Did you think that would work?” he croons. “I’m from Kiri. I don’t need light.”

Her blood’s boiling under her skin, and she’s too small for her body, she needs air and — she
needs to do something, she’s trained for this, they had classes for situations just like this, but it’s like it all disappeared from her brain and she can’t breathe - crap - do something - hidden sleeve pocket-

Shaky fingers find a wad of paper. Chakra, how does chakra work again, *come on-*

Nuke-nin howls as the flash tag goes off right in his and Riko’s face. He clutches at his eyes and Riko, having closed her eyes just in time, scrambles to her feet and before she can even think about it, kicks him right in the face, scoops up her katana, and *runs.* Grabs Naruto and flees.

She’s not sure how they make it back to the hotel. Just remembers falling through the window with Naruto in tow, breath going hard and hurting in her throat. When she tries to say something, her voice comes out as garbled nonsense and it *hurts.*

Kakashi’s hand settles on her head. “Calm,” he orders her. “Sit.”

Her legs give out beneath her. Her back hits the bedframe behind her.

“Naruto, report,” Kakashi commands.

“Is Ricchan gonna be okay?!” Naruto asks, panicked. “There was — there was this guy? We were just walking home and he yelled ‘Grab her!’ so we started running? And we sort of fell into the water, and then we weren’t in the water anymore and this guy, he wouldn’t tell me what he *wanted* from Ricchan! And Ricchan was all scared and stuff—”

She punches his leg. Glares up at him. “Ricchan, your eyes are all red!”

Popped blood vessels. Great. “You,” she rasps out, and *crap,* that *hurts so bad,* like she’s using sand paper on the inside of her throat. “You *idiot.*”

“Riko, no talking,” Kakashi orders tersely. Sasuke pushes a glass of water into her hand and she gulps it down greedily. It hurts even more than talking, but feels a little better after. “Naruto? Slow down.”

“So we got out of the water,” Naruto recounts. “And the guy was there and I asked what he wanted and he wouldn’t say! And then he got out a sword but Ricchan attacked him and he threw her, and then everything went all dark and I couldn’t see anything? Heard stuff happening, and then we were running and now we’re here and Ricchan’s *hurt-*”

Riko glares at him.

She’s absolutely *furious.*

“Riko, you attacked this man?” Kakashi interrupts Naruto’s rambles. “That was rash.”

Her eyes snap to him. Mouth opens and closes.

He can’t *possibly* believe-

“We,” she begins, ignoring the pain in her throat. “Got away. Shunshin. Safe.”
“Write it down.” Kakashi pushes pen and paper at her. “No talking.”

She grabs the paper, rips it up, and throws the pen at him.

“Naruto,” she growls out. “Left hiding place. To ask a nuke-nin from Kiri why he was hunting us. Was going to be killed. So yeah. I attacked.”

“Ah.” Kakashi pauses and turns back to Naruto. “That was very stupid.”

Naruto gasps in outrage. “But he was after Ricchan!”

“And now she’s injured because you decided to confront him when you and her were relatively safe.” Kakashi’s voice has steel in it. He suddenly looks impossibly tall and unforgiving.

Naruto shrinks. He looks at Riko. “But I-”

She glares and looks away.

“You placed yourself and your teammate in very grave danger,” Kakashi continues. “Think about what you’ve done. You’re in time-out. That means you sit in that corner over there and your team doesn’t talk to you. I’m going to take care of this.” He moves to the window.

“Wait!”

There’s something she needs to tell him, but what was it again? Something — something that nuke-nin said! It was — something to do with Shikamaru? Her brother, who’s guarding a-

“Bridge-builder!” she rasps. “He said… something about a bridge-builder. That he got left here but his — his friends get to have fun with a bridge-builder.” She gives him a pleading look. “Shikamaru—”

“I’ll see what I can find out,” Kakashi promises. “Sasuke, you’re in charge.”

He disappears through the window.

Sasuke drags Riko to the bathroom and helps her clean up. She’s got wooden splinters everywhere and feels bruised all over, but luckily her body armour protected her from the worst of being thrown into those barrels. No broken bones.

She coughs every so often and swallowing is difficult. Mild nausea persists, but she’s not vomiting or feeling particularly light-headed, though she keeps drooling, and she just knows that Sasuke is filing every detail of her physical condition away, though he doesn’t say anything beyond ordering her where to move and asking which storage scroll she keeps clothes in.

As soon as she can manage, she uses a diagnostic jutsu on herself, checking for internal injuries, like lungs filling with fluid and what other consequences of strangulation she can recall. Silently resolving to look up this stuff once she gets back home. Maybe look into medical ninjutsu once more, because the small amount she remembers feels absolutely inadequate right now.

She got lucky, so very lucky, that the stranger had made the mistake of gloating, because it’d given
her the time to set off that flash tag. If he’d wanted to, he could’ve had her unconscious in moments, and death would’ve followed soon after.

This — she came so close to dying — Naruto could have died —

“Riko,” Sasuke’s voice snaps her back to reality. “Do you have medicine for this?”

She shakes her head and signs a no for good measure. Kakashi had only just begun teaching them Konoha standard sign, so she knows just a little bit. Sasuke, surprisingly, already knew it fairly well.

Why it wasn’t taught to them in the Academy, she has no idea.

Now she’s got a good reason to learn. It’ll be days before she can talk again without pain, she’s pretty sure.

Sasuke and her leave the bathroom. Naruto is sitting in the corner as Kakashi ordered him, resembling a small orange heap of utter misery, shooting her sad looks from his blue eyes.

Riko grits her teeth and looks away, ignoring the stab of guilt. She’s still mad at him, damn it! No matter how sad he looks right now!

“I’m sorry, Ricchan,” he whispers. “Please don’t stop being my friend!”

Her head whips around. She stares at him incredulously. “What?” she croaks and ends up coughing painfully, hard enough that she doubles over.

“No talking,” Sasuke orders, throwing Naruto a pissed look.

“I’m not-” she begins, and he slaps a hand over her mouth, glaring at her.

“She’s not going to stop being friends with you, idiot,” he sneers at Naruto.

“But-” Naruto begins.

“She’s pissed because you’re an idiot and she’ll get over it,” Sasuke rolls his eyes. “You’re supposed to know her better than this, dead-last. Now you both shut up!”

He gives Riko a glare. Can’t believe you made me say this sappy shit out loud, he seems to say.

She licks his hand that’s still on her mouth. Sasuke yanks it back with a horrified face. Riko beams at him.

Sasuke is her friend, and the realisation brings her a giddy sort of joy.

But she’s still angry and in pain, so that fades.

“Is Sasuke right?” Naruto asks her, heartbreakingly hopeful. Riko nods grumpily. Sasuke throws his hands up and stomps over to the luggage.

Kakashi doesn’t take that much longer to return. Half an hour at most, though it feels like eternity.

He climbs in through the window, a grave expression on the visible part of his face. “Are you all still awake? Okay. Sasuke, what’s the state of Riko’s health?”

“Nothing broken. No internal injuries. Shouldn’t be lasting damage, so long as she doesn’t talk.”
He glares at her. She pokes out her tongue at him.

*Fit for combat,* she signs clumsily.

“Good,” Kakashi says. “Rest the night. We’re travelling to Nami tomorrow to back up Team Ten.”

Riko forces herself to take a deep breath when the implications hit. That there are indeed missing ninja after the bridge-builder her brother’s team is guarding, and they *don’t know.*

It might even be too late already. That — that genjutsu from the bell test flickers through her head, Shikamaru’s lifeless body, and she shudders.

But she can’t think like that! They’ll go and save them. Shika’s smart, Ino’s a great kunoichi, and Chouji shouldn’t be underestimated either! They’re a good team, and the nuke-nin won’t know what hit them.

It’d be *fine.*

“Unless one of you is against it,” Kakashi continues and adds gently, “This will be dangerous. Nami no Kuni isn’t a good place right now. We can go back to Konoha and ask the Hokage to send reinforcements.”

“What? No!” Naruto exclaims. “That’s Ricchan’s brother’s team, and they’re lame so they definitely need help!”

Sasuke crosses his arms and glares at Kakashi.

Riko has the *best* team.

Kakashi eye-smiles at them. “Good. Then get some sleep, we move early tomorrow.”

After a cup of ramen for breakfast (except for Sasuke, who’d rather eat a ration bar than breakfast ramen, weirdo that he is), the four of them are on their way. While they travel, Kakashi briefs them on the situation.

Megalomaniac entrepreneur took over the small island state of Nami no Kuni by controlling by building a monopoly on shipping goods. The bridge-builder’s project — a bridge connecting Nami to the mainland — threatens his monopoly on trade.

As if an insanely rich man who employs nuke-nin and a small army of civilian mercenaries couldn’t take control of the bridge and go on as before.

“Riko, if you use your voice again, we’ll gag you. And it’s not just about the bridge,” Kakashi tells them when she points it out. “Gato forbade the people of Nami from building that bridge. If Tazuna finishes it, it becomes a symbol of hope and defiance, a sign that Gato couldn’t prevent them from building it. He needs Tazuna and that bridge destroyed to crush the people’s spirits once and for all.”

“But we won’t let it happen!” Naruto punches his fist in the air. “We’ll kick Gato’s ass, right, Ricchan?”
Riko gives him a thumbs-up back.

This morning, things between them were back to normal. A long hug before breakfast and that was that.

Kakashi had merely watched with a sharp eye.

“Okay,” he announces. They’ve reached a drab little beach not too far from a tiny fishing village. From a scroll he unseals a little rowing boat.

Because apparently he has one with him at all times. That item definitely wasn’t in the Academy guide to packing for missions.

Maybe she should get one herself. It certainly comes in handy now.

The four of them climb in, all grabbing the oars and beginning to row. If Riko ever does acquire a boat, she’d like it to be one with an engine.

Then again, in a situation like this, that would be too noisy to avoid garnering the wrong sort of attention. Aside from their rowing and the sound of the waves, there are no noises out here.

The longer they row, the thicker the fog seems to become. Damp cold seeps into Riko’s bones until she’s shivering.

At their slow pace, it takes hours to reach the shore of Nami no Kuni. Finding Tazuna’s house doesn’t prove too difficult, thankfully. Everybody knows him, and Kakashi turns out to be very good at asking questions without raising suspicion.

The information that Tazuna made it back to his house and had even worked on his bridge since his return, has a weight lift off of Riko’s heart.

Shikamaru must be fine, then, right? His team had safely gotten the bridge-builder back home?

Still the doubt and fear persist.

Kakashi leads them to their next location. It feels a little weird to just stroll up to it, but their sensei claims that no enemy spies are nearby. Somehow, that doesn’t feel particularly reassuring.

The door flies open before Kakashi can knock. Ino, hair askew, stops just before them. Opens her mouth and can’t seem to get words out, which, considering it’s Ino, can’t mean anything good. “Hello, Ino-chan,” Kakashi says calmly. “Team Seven, ready to back you up.”


Riko stares back helplessly.

Ino doesn’t cry. It just — it just doesn’t happen.

“Hey!” Naruto pushes past them. “Hey Ino! Are you okay? What happened? Do you need a hug?”

Ino throws herself at him, sobbing with abandon. Naruto sort of pats her hair and babbles friendly things at her.

“Let’s go inside,” Sasuke suggests, warily eyeing Ino and Naruto. Kakashi nods sharply, but just then Shikamaru comes to the door. He, too, looks tired.
But he’s alive. He’s fine. She can breathe again.

Shikamaru looks at her. “We need a medic.”

She stares back and says, “Oh damn.”
Chapter 18

Shikamaru ignores the rest of Team Seven and his own sobbing teammate. Instead, he grabs Riko’s hand and pulls her into the house. She can smell the blood, the sickness, the rot long before they reach the makeshift sickroom.

Team Ten’s jounin sensei lies there on the bed, skin so sallow it appears grey. His upper body is wrapped in blood-soaked bandages. For a long moment, Riko can’t even tell if he’s breathing, the sound so quiet, and his chest neither rises nor falls.

And his arm — she has to take a moment to just. Breathe and swallow down bile.

“The sword cut through his forearm and continued into his torso,” Shikamaru recounts flatly. Emotionlessly. “He took heavy hits before, but was able to avoid debilitating injury until then. We transported him here since he wouldn’t have survived the trip home. Tazuna’s daughter is experienced in treating injuries of that sort and was able to stop the bleeding and administer first-aid.”

Riko nods dazedly before she takes a deep breath, slaps her hands against her cheeks to knock herself out of it, and hurries over to her very first serious patient.

Her chakra capacity is low. She got kicked out of the medic program before she could learn to mend much more than bruises, minor burns, and cuts. There’s not much she’ll be able to do here, so she has to prioritise.

The most life-threatening problems first, then hope for the best with everything else.

Not even when she was shadowing Shiori-sensei at the hospital had she seen an injury this bad. She swallows harshly.

There’s no place here for insecurity and second-guessing. Asuma-sensei’s very life depends on her.

Her hands light up green on the first try. She runs them over his torso in a broad sweep, information on the damage echoing in her mind. The sheer magnitude of the injuries is almost overwhelming.

“Kakashi-sensei,” she speaks up absently. “There’s a med-kit in one of the storage seals in my pouch. Can you-”

“On it.” She barely even feels him releasing her pouch from her thigh, too focused on trying to — on just trying to make a difference.

The most she can do is a shoddy patch job, and it’s only going to cover the absolute worst as she perceives it. Infection, sickness, fever — the only aid she can give for that is medicine, the rest his body has to do on its own, Riko lacks the knowledge and skill to treat it with ninjutsu.

At least Asuma’s chakra is strong. It will, hopefully, boost his healing speed.

There’s damage to his lungs. His ribs. A huge flesh wound in his side that someone — Tazuna’s daughter? — had stitched closed, but it’s inflamed and leaking pus. Several more deep lacerations, an infection that’s causing a fever, severe internal bruising, and, of course, half of his arm missing.

In the end, the most she can do is heal the bruising, clean out the the wounds and disinfect them,
stop the worst bleeding. She doesn’t even know where to begin with healing the infection or lowering the fever beyond the old-fashioned ways.

With the remainder of her chakra, she attempts to close the most severe wounds. Any real medic would kick her ass for the scarring her hack job will leave behind, but Asuma doesn’t have any other options.

Finally, the green light on her hands begins to fizz out. Even then, she pushes it just that bit further, pours everything she has into healing just one tiny bit more, and maybe another, and then—Lights out.

Sunlight tickles Riko’s face. It drags her from the murky darkness of confusing and restless dreams into awareness.

It takes her a long time to muster enough energy to open her eyes. She feels so wrung out that it hurts. Nauseous, too, and so, so cold.

The light hurts sends stabs of pain through her head.

She can’t hear anybody else in the room. Hasn’t got the chakra to enhance any of her senses.

Can barely scrounge up enough focus for one brief activation of her chakra sense in short range. Enough to tell her that Ino is somewhere below her plus two civilians, and that’s it. She’s completely spent.

No Asuma. A tiny noise escapes her, close to a sob.

He was dying. He could be dead right now, probably is, and she can’t — she can’t do anything right now, she’s completely useless, she failed-

It’s with those thoughts that she passes out again.

The next time Riko wakes up, she feels little better and her stomach is eating a hole into her body. It feels like hours that she’s just lying there on her bedroll, feeling too awful to do anything at all. Eventually, though, she hears a door slide open.

With monumental effort, she turns her head. It’s a kid, a boy wearing an unflattering blue overall and a bucket hat. At finding her awake, he glares at Riko. “You’re gonna die.”

She blinks slowly. Is he… threatening her?

“Gato’s gonna kill you!” the brat insists, clearly not pleased with her lack of reaction.
Riko is mostly just confused. Who is this kid? Why is he talking to her? And isn’t Gato just going to order someone else to kill her? Being filthy rich and presumably employing an army’s worth of mercenaries, he doesn't need to get his own hands dirty?

“He’ll kill you!” the boy repeats.

“Hi,” Riko croaks and crap. Ow.

Her throat. Shit. She forgot about getting choked by that nuke-nin, and she’s parched, too, which doesn’t make it better.

To her embarrassment, her eyes tear up. It just really hurts and she feels so wrong and bad and she’s helpless and of her senses only her eyes and ears are working, which isn’t enough-

The kid pales and runs away, door slamming behind him. Riko stares at the empty space.

Okay. That happened.

His mad dash must have caught some attention, because not a minute later Ino enters the room. She looks… tired. Sad. Nowhere near as well-groomed as usual.

“You’re awake!” she exclaims. A few hurried steps and she’s at Riko’s side. A loud kiss lands on her forehead and one of her hands is grabbed and squeezed. Ino smiles at her, eyes suspiciously shiny. “Hey.”

“Hey,” Riko rasps. Ow.

“I’ll get you something to drink. And eat,” Ino instantly announces and jumps up and makes for the exit.

“Wait,” Riko manages at a volume just above a breath, which hurts a lot less. “Asuma?”

Ino pauses, shoulders slumping. “Not dead yet.” She turns her head and forces a grin. “I’m sure he’ll be fine! He’s, he’s strong! Formerly one of the Twelve Guardians, you know? It’s got to count for something!”

With that, Ino runs out of the room. But soon she’s back, helping Riko sit up and hand-feeding her a helping of fish soup since Riko can’t so much as hold a spoon right now, isn’t even strong enough to sit without leaning against Ino.

“What happened?” she asks in a whisper once the food is gone. She’s already drifting off into sleep, but clings to awareness stubbornly.

Ino swallows heavily. “We were attacked by these two nuke-nin from Kiri, they called themselves Demon Brothers. We’d only travelled for a day at civilian pace! But even though Tazuna lied about mission parameters and difficulty, we continued anyway because… because.” She laughs bitterly. “We thought we’d be fine. Asuma said we could handle it, and he, well, he’s Asuma. Of the Twelve Guardians! But then that — that Zabuza showed up, and he — I could barely even move. I was so useless! Chouji hit him good in the end, but then this fake hunter-nin showed up and took him away. And here we are, I guess. We didn’t even know how to send for back-up, but then your team showed up.”

“Mm,” Riko hums, lulled by Ino’s fingers carding through her hair. There’s something about the name Zabuza that sounds familiar, that’s important, but she can’t put her finger on it, and Ino’s touch feels so nice.
“Rest,” Ino orders.

Riko falls asleep.

It’s dark the next time Riko wakes up. She feels better, the food must have helped, she can even turn her head without feeling like crying at the nausea.

Naruto is sprawled out on one side of her, one leg thrown over hers and, as a quick glance tells her, an arm over Sasuke’s chest. On her other side, Shikamaru lies wide awake, watching her.

“Hey,” she whispers hoarsely.

He barely even blinks. Riko bites her lip, not knowing what else to say. Is even kind of relieved when her stomach growls. He instantly gets up, returning with a bowl of rice and an apple that he peels and slices for her with meticulous accuracy, as though no other task is as important as this one.

She forces the solid food down and feels uncomfortably full after. Exhausted once again. Before Riko slips off into dreamland, she manages to grab her brother’s hand.

It’s warm, and he clutches hers so hard that she has to suppress a wince.

The next few days pass in a similar vein. Wake up, eat, sleep. Talk to the various people that happen to be around. Most of the time that’s Ino or Tsunami, the bridge builder’s daughter. Kakashi drops in frequently, though, and he’s put the boys to work, either guarding the bridge or training in the nearby forest.

Two dog summons and Ino meanwhile guard the house.

Slowly but steadily, Riko recovers. Keyword being ‘slowly’. She still hasn’t recovered enough to safely use chakra again — after how drastically she depleted her reserves, they’re slow to refill. But at least her throat is healing.

The wait, she thinks, the wait is the worst. Kakashi said that Zabuza — presumably still alive — would go after Tazuna again, that Kiri shinobi were known for their persistence. But there’s no way to tell just when he would strike.

“As soon as he can,” was all Shikamaru said about that.

“He seemed the eager sort,” Ino had added.

It depended on how good he was at ignoring injuries, they concluded.

Asuma’s condition remains unchanged. Riko had been to see him every day, but there’s nothing she can do beyond feeding him medicine and smearing ointments onto his wounds.

She’s worried. They’re steadily running out of medicine. Shikamaru already had a severe dent in his supplies when Team Seven arrived. Riko’s own stock is dwindling quickly, and Kakashi’s weren’t extensive in the first place.
That’s why she asks Shikamaru to gather herbs in the forest in the morning.

He’s all too eager to get out of the house.

His steps barely make a sound on the soft forest ground. Shikamaru isn’t trained in stealth, but moving quietly always came easily to him. He enjoys the silence.

Here, in the woods, it’s peaceful. For just a little bit, he can forget the events of the past days. Can pretend that he’s home, in the Nara forest.

The notion is laughable, though — he can taste the ocean on his tongue, hear the cries of the seagulls in the distance.

But at least he’s alone. It’s only past sunrise and just about everyone else had been asleep, save Riko and Kakashi. Who had, surprisingly, let him go into the forest on his own.

Shikamaru finds himself stupidly grateful for that. Here, there’s no one to pretend for. No need to cut back the biting remarks that want to spring to his tongue all the time, now.

He likes his team, he does — but they’re soft, and all Shikamaru has inside of him right now are barbs and edges. The last thing he wants is to hurt them, so he stays away from Ino and Chouji. Both of whom seem to agree on giving him space. He avoids Riko, too, unless she’s asleep. Otherwise, Ino keeps her company, alongside Naruto if he was available, whom she seemed to have struck up a surprising tentative rapport with. Chouji either sat with them or spent his time around Tsunami.

Shikamaru, surprisingly, had found an odd new kinship with Sasuke.

He hadn’t sought his sister’s sparring partner out, but somehow they had drifted together anyway. If anyone had told him he’d one day come to appreciate Uchiha Sasuke’s company (however reluctantly), he wouldn’t have believed it.

Yet, of the various group members, Sasuke is the easiest to be around.

It’s logical, he supposes. The same thing that had made him so wary of the other boy, that dark anger and uncompromising drive to be better, the not wanting to be around anyone — that’s in Shikamaru, now. Every second he doesn’t spend on training, on getting stronger, on doing something, feels like he’s failing his team. Again.

Once more, he replays the fight against Zabuza — one man versus the four of them, but even though they had numbers on their side and their opponent fell in the end, Shikamaru’s squad was the clear loser.

If he’d just been better, if he’d just-

Logically, he knows that it would’ve made little difference. He’s a genin. Ino and Chouji are genin. Momochi Zabuza is known as the Demon of the Mist and one of the Seven Swordsmen, as Kakashi informed them after they’d given their report to him.
The only one who had stood a chance was Asuma-sensei. But Asuma had been arrogant, had underestimated Zabuza. Hadn’t even known who he was and not cared either, just dismissed him as a threat — and he’d paid the price.

It makes Shikamaru so angry. Every time he checks in on his sensei, he’s torn between wanting to cry and wanting to shake him and demand what in the world he was thinking.

He can guess easily enough. Asuma returned from his service at the daimyou’s court less than a year ago. Where he’d been one of the strongest, most respected men. Admired, fawned over, and he could handle any of the tasks the daimyou required of him with ease.

Some nuke-nin from Kiri — that was just scum compared to someone like him. Couldn’t possibly be a threat.

Shikamaru had, until that fight, appreciated Asuma’s easygoing nature. It had been very compatible with his own. Now — now it makes him shake his head in disbelief, how irresponsible it was in retrospect.

He takes a deep breath, the clean air smells of grass and wood and the sea. Not like home, but soothing enough.

Finding herbs, that’s what Riko asked him to do, with that worried look in her eyes that told him they were running out of medicine and that Asuma’s condition wasn’t improving the way she’d like. Her anxiety was palatable.

So was her worry about Shikamaru.

Yesterday, when he returned from training, she’d asked if he wanted to watch the clouds with her. It was all he could do not to yell at her. He’d just. Turned around and gone.

With a scowl, he crouches down and begins searching for useful plant life. The manual labour is familiar, and he finds an odd sort of temporary peace in doing it.

His mother will be pleased when he returns with such an improved work-ethic, he thinks darkly.

A soft noise sounds behind him, a shuffling step. He spins around.

It’s a girl. Wearing a pretty, if impractical and rather worn kimono, sporting silky and well cared-for hair, with a face Ino would rave about for hours. She takes a startled step backwards, a delicate hand rising to her mouth, a soft “Oh!” escaping her.

Shikamaru takes a step back as well. “Sorry,” he mutters.

He didn’t — he didn’t mean to scare her. Or anyone. He’s just… not himself these days, and he hates that, but he doesn’t know how to go back to normal.

“It’s okay,” the girl answers shakily. “You’re- you’re a shinobi?”

Shikamaru nods jerkily.

“I’m very sorry for disturbing you,” she mutters with a short bow. “I’ll leave-”

“You don’t have to,” he interrupts. “You’re here to pick herbs, right?” He eyes the basket hanging from one of her arms. “Here’s a good spot. What are you looking for?”

“That’s very kind of you,” the girl answers, some of her tension fading. She smiles lightly.
“Merely something to help against pain, and whatever else I can find for eventualities. In this country, being prepared is wise.”

Yeah, he can see that.

The people here don’t deserve what’s happening to their country. And what happened to Asuma, no matter the man’s faults and blunders, won’t go unanswered. Gato is going down, that, Shikamaru swears to himself.

Killing Zabuza would be satisfying as well, but he’s not the true evil here. Rationally, he knows that.

But emotionally? He wants to slaughter Zabuza and everyone who works with him, raze Gato’s entire corporation into the ground, and then burn down Tazuna’s damn bridge and house.

“Over there.” Shikamaru points at a patch he hasn’t gone through yet. “The blue-veined leaves. Make tea with them.”

“Thank you very much,” she replies politely, and follows his directions.

He gets back to his own work. For a while, they work in silence before the girl speaks up again. “Forgive me,” she murmurs, “but I can’t help but notice that you seem troubled. I’ve heard of a recent altercation between shinobi, revolving around Tazuna-san, and to see you searching for medicinal herbs…”

“You want to know if some of us are injured,” Shikamaru deduces.

“Forgive me for overstepping,” she whispers. “None of us have any love for Gato. The rumours of Tazuna receiving aid from shinobi — it gave us hope.”

And now she wants to know if she should give up that hope.

“Gato is going down,” he promises darkly. “Then we’re all going home and live long lives.”

“I see,” she murmurs. “May I ask you another question?”

He checks himself before he can let out an annoyed breath. She doesn’t deserve his anger, not when it’s not directed at her, when she’s done nothing to harm him.

“I might not answer,” he only replies. “And if I do, you answer a question of my own.”

“Fair enough,” she concedes with a smile. “Why did you become a shinobi?”

Unexpected.

He eyes her sharply, though his expression doesn’t slip. They had classes in the Academy about social interaction with civilians, and Ino supplied lessons of her own. This question is too personal to fit into the conversation or persona she’d projected so far.

Her guise was nearly perfect until now. He might not have noticed anything off if she hadn’t gone down that line of conversation.

If him catching on will make any difference is up in the air. Shikamaru isn’t a combat shinobi.

“Because my family and friends are,” he answers with a shrug, like he isn’t priming his shadow and compiling strategies. At the very least, the forest terrain is to his advantage. “It gives me hives
to imagine them fighting without me to watch their back.”

“Yes,” the girl murmurs with a faraway look, “It’s when we protect those precious to us that we are truly strong.” She shakes herself, returning to the present. “You had something you wished to ask me?”

Anything he’d like to ask would reveal that he’s caught onto her ruse. And then he’d most likely die. It’s the logical conclusion.

“Not really,” he answers. “It was more about a fair trade than anything.” He laces his fingers together behind his back and looks at the clouds peeking through the canopy. “Eh, a deal’s a deal.” He looks back at her. “Do you like cloud-watching?”

She blinks, startled. “I - I don’t know.”

Shikamaru turns and strolls back in the direction of Tazuna’s house. “Try it sometime. It’s peaceful.”

A lazy wave at the enemy shinobi, and he makes his way back to his team, all the while expecting — preparing — for a kunai in his back.

But it never comes.
“The kunoichi only looked for pain-relieving herbs, not any with true healing properties,” Shikamaru informs the assorted members of Teams Seven and Ten grimly. They’ve all assembled in Asuma’s sickroom. “That means his injuries are healed or weren’t debilitating in the first place. Zabuza will make his move in a matter of days. Maybe even today.”

Next to Riko, Ino clenches her fists.

“Very well,” Kakashi replies evenly.

How can he be so calm? Riko feels like she’ll vibrate out of her skin.

He continues, “No more training. Naruto and Chouji, we’ll go to the bridge tomorrow. Shikamaru and Sasuke, you’ll follow at a distance, use stealth. Ino and Riko, you’ll guard Tazuna’s family and Asuma. I’ll leave Uhei and Akino with you. Riko, try to stick to support skills. You’re not recovered enough yet for combat.”

All of them nod, Riko uneasily so.

It’s her team’s first real battle, their first true test, and they’re splitting up. It feels wrong.

She wonders if Ino feels the same, but her friend’s face gives nothing away.

The next day, the two of them stand next to each other, staring after the group as it departs.

Wondering in what state they’ll return.

If they’ll return at all, but Riko refuses to acknowledge that niggling worry.

Their comrades do come back in the evening after an eventless day that Riko and Ino spent mostly in silence.

Riko’s fellow kunoichi kept busy. Pacing, stretching, helping Tsunami with any number of menial tasks the woman could think of.

Meanwhile, Riko sat on the patio and attempted to sense for potential attacks while meditating.

Meditation is supposed to help recover from chakra exhaustion. Riko doesn’t even have much to refill, and it’s still taking so long that it’s beginning to worry her. There’s chakra exhaustion, and then there’s chakra exhaustion. After a certain point — which she most certainly passed when attempting to heal Asuma — it can have unfortunate consequences.

She should be fine, this is the first time she’s suffering from exhaustion to this extent. It’s the chronic chakra depletion one needs to be wary of, because without treatment there’ll be lasting damage. Much like malnutrition — one skipped meal isn’t healthy but woun’t hurt much in the long run. Chronic starvation however would ruin a body.
She’s already short enough, damn it.

“Everything calm here?” Kakashi asks her after everyone’s finished discussing the day’s lack of events and has gone to rest or unwind. He sinks down to sit next to Riko and joins her in looking out over the ocean. Both she and the dog on her lap — Uhei — get a pat on the head.

“Yeah,” Riko answers.

She almost wishes something would happen. The tense wait, the dread and anticipation, the not-knowing…

“I just want this to be over,” she finishes quietly.

“We’ll be back home by the end of the week,” Kakashi promises. His eye crinkles up in a smile. “It’s going to be okay. With any luck, the back-up I requested will be here soon.”

Transporting Asuma without the help of a medic would be impossible, after all.

“I have a question,” slips out of her mouth. “Back in Shimogo. Why did that guy go after me?”

“Ah…” Kakashi sighs. “Because you have red hair.”

She blinks, a hand going up to self-consciously run over her ponytail. “Huh? What’s wrong with red hair?”

He makes a sound of wry amusement. “Nothing. But once, there used to be a clan renowned for their strength, determination, and exceptional skill in fuuinjutsu. So greatly were they feared that in the Second Shinobi World War, Kiri and Kumo joined forces in order to destroy them. It just so happens that most of their members sported red hair.”

“Oh.” Riko considers that for a moment, her brows furrowing. “He thought I was one of them.”

“Yes.”

“But I’m not.”

“That doesn’t matter. You can’t prove it. Enemy shinobi won’t give you the time to, anyway.” Kakashi’s voice is grave. “Those that remember that clan will hunt you. To them, you’ll be a higher-priority target than Sasuke.”

Riko swallows dryly.

What clan is he talking about? She’s never heard of anything like this, and she’s read the history books about all of the big wars.

A clan more feared than the Uchiha sounds absurd. And Riko of all people being mistaken for one of them?

She’s nothing special!

“How do I stop it?” she asks unhappily. “The assumptions. I’m not from that clan. What clan was this, anyway?”

“I can’t tell you that.”

Riko gives him a blank look. “What?”
Kakashi shrugs. “Just be hard to catch. Problem solved.”

She huffs. Typical. “You’d know.”

Team Seven’s jounin sensei makes a point out of kawarimi-ing away from anything remotely bothersome. Restaurant bills, kunai to the face… it’s an extraordinarily aggravating habit.

“Your sensei is wise.” Kakashi nods sagely and smiles down at her. “Now, I do believe it’s dinner time, and it’s rude to make people wait.” He stands up.

Riko grabs his leg and attempts to trip him into the ocean for having the audacity of lecturing her about not being late, but he doesn’t budge, is rooted to the planks.

It’s totally uncalled for to lift her by the back of her hoodie and carry her into the house like some unruly kitten. Uhei, dislodged from her lap, is equally displeased. They trade a commiserating look, one which forges a pact between them to achieve vengeance on Kakashi.

Someday.

She’ll make him wait for it.

Dinner is awkward. Uncomfortable.

Shikamaru broods, eats in silence with a dark expression on his face.

When he and the others came back, he’d been in the worst mood she’s ever seen him in. Hadn’t even returned her greeting.

Frustrated that their enemy hadn’t made his move today.

Chouji and Ino sit next to him, Ino whispering into his ear urgently. Shikamaru’s listening to her, a neutral expression on his face, and Riko resists the urge to eavesdrop. Instead, she focuses on Naruto’s chatter and what she’s pretty sure is Kakashi messing with everyone by flirting with Tsunami. Tazuna twitches every time Kakashi so much as moves a finger.

Riko approves.

She doesn’t like Tazuna at all. Can barely bring herself to look at him. His deception — the consequences it had — she can’t forgive him that.

Except for Naruto, they all seem to be in silent agreement on that.

The awkward dinner becomes even more so when Tazuna’s grandson has a meltdown and begins yelling at them for even trying to fight, since they’ll all die anyway.

“But that’s our job,” Riko points out in confusion. “We even get paid to do it.”

In the second of stunned silence, an amused snort escapes Shikamaru, and it’s definitely worth the screaming match the brat and Naruto get into after.
The next morning passes in a similar vein. Staring at the backs of their comrades as they leave. Off to fight one of the Seven Swordsmen and his partner, who’d been good enough to fake being both a harmless civilian on one occasion and a hunter-nin on another.

It’s not exactly reassuring.

But there’s no better option. Riko isn’t recovered yet and the the family can’t be left without protection, anyway.

“Let’s go over our supplies again,” Ino suggests wearily, and Riko goes along with it after Uhei nudges her toward her friend.

Upstairs, in their designated room, they split up the available kunai and shuriken between them. Riko crafts a few additional flash tags and a handful of explosives, but those are for absolute emergencies only. Using them might mean compromising the structural integrity of the house.

The sheer impracticality of building a house on stilts into the water is enough to give Riko a headache. From a strategic viewpoint, it’s an absolute nightmare. Far too easy to sabotage.

Uhei’s partner Akino, who’d been sleeping in the corner after a shift of night watch, suddenly jumps up, growling lightly.

Riko tenses. Sharpens her chakra sense, which she hadn’t been able to keep up continuously.

*Shit.*

They have visitors.

As if on cue, a crash sounds downstairs and Tsunami screams in fright. Her kid shouts her name.

Akino takes off like a rocket, Ino hot on his heels. Riko quickly pulls her hood over her red hair, sticks a senbon into her mouth, and hurls herself out the window to land lightly on the sturdy wooden platform the house is built on.

She allows herself a relieved grin when a man inside howls in pain, and Uhei’s growl is low and triumphant. As soon as she can, Riko will give him a treat.

There’s no warning. No noise, no chakra, and the scent of the ocean drowns out just about every other one. One moment there’s nothing and she thinks they’ve won. The next her head is pulled back harshly and a kunai is at her throat, the senbon falling out of her mouth and hitting the wood with a soft *plink* noise. “One sound,” a woman croons softly into her ear. “One sound, and you’re done.”

Riko stands frozen, her heart racing. They’d *snuck up* on her. Even now, she can’t feel their chakras!

And Ino doesn’t know they’re here. Ino is inside, talking to Tsunami and her son gently, calming them down, checking them for injuries.

“Oh just kill her,” a man hisses. “Too young to be useful.”
“Oh no,” the woman purrs. “Look at this!” And she pulls Riko’s hood down. “She’ll fetch a good prize, don’t you think? Such nice hair.”

“Fine,” the man snarls. “I’ll get the target. Knock her out.”

He disappears from view, as if the surroundings had swallowed him up. But then she sees the shimmer in the air where something vaguely human-shaped moves.

The woman snickers softly. “Now, if you don’t move, this doesn’t have to hurt.” Riko feels her move her hand. Then the smell of something sharp and herbal hits her nose, strong enough to overtake even that of the sea.

Poison. Sedative?

Heedless of the knife at her throat — someone needs to warn the others! — Riko shouts, “Ino, watch out!” and slams the back of her head into the woman’s face. She stumbles back, momentarily distracted, and Riko stabs a senbon from her sleeve through the woman’s wrist, making her drop that kunai.

Distance, she needs distance! Riko lunges forward, away from her attacker-

“You little bitch!” the woman screeches. Grabs at Riko’s hood and pulls sharply, and the collar bites into her throat and cuts off her air.

Presses painfully against the bruises where that nuke-nin tried to choke her to death. Riko gasps for breath uselessly, a brief second of panic paralysing her.

But she decided on including a hood in her outfit for a reason.

The fabric comes off with a snapping sound. Riko spins on her heel to face the kunoichi.

Watches, gasping painfully, as the tall kunoichi attempts to fling the hood to the ground. It sticks to her fingers like glue, won’t let her move them. Little seals glow on the fabric.

“What?” the woman hisses, then focuses back on Riko. “You!” she snarls. “You redhead demon, I’ll kill you, I’ll kill your family, I’ll-”

Riko believes her. Sees the rage, the murder reflected in those pale blue eyes.

But it’s not going to happen, because Riko will stop her right now.

Her mind is calm and smooth, and she forms a seal with her fingers without hesitation.

The hiss of an explosive charge priming cuts into the enemy kunoichi’s litany of threats. The woman curses and lunges to the side, and then realises where the sound is coming from. Her eyes widen in horror. “No, don’t-”

Riko’s hood, stuck to her fingers, explodes. In that moment, Riko’s mind spits out every modification she’d made to the regular explosive seal before she’d embroidered it into her hood: To be triggered only by her own chakra via handseal, limited in range, not particularly powerful.

But enough to cripple the woman’s fingers and sear her arm and side in order to stop her from doing ninjutsu and also to impede her movements.

That’s what was supposed to happen.
Instead, the kunoichi is completely engulfed in white flame. Riko stumbles back, startled, and raises a hand to protect her face, ducking against the scorching heat.

Finally, the woman’s grip on her stealth slips and Riko can sense her chakra — cold like deep water and fluttering in panic and pain.

A high-pitched, agonised scream sounding from the pillar of white-hot flame.

Riko stares in shocked horror at the sight of a charred body falling onto the wood.

Heavy, rasping breaths, sounding like it’s trying to form words even now. The woman no longer has eyes to stare at her with, and her face — her entire body — has become unrecognisable.

Riko stands, frozen. Stares at what she’s done. The scent of burned flesh and hair sears her nostrils, and absently, she thinks it may never leave her nose.

The horrible sound of the kunoichi struggling to breathe stops after a minute, and what little chakra she had left winks out. She lies still.

Dead.

A crash from inside snaps Riko out of her motionlessness.

Ino! There was another shinobi, she’s got to-

Riko launches herself through the window and lands in the ground floor bathroom. Crosses the room, throws the door open. Stops. There’s a hole in the wall, two thuggish men — civilian — on the ground nearby. Tsunami’s on the ground, too, on the opposite side of the room, clutching her stomach as blood leaks out. Her kid is unconscious in a corner, Akino sprawled out next to him, Uhei in another corner with his front legs bent awkwardly, but still attempting to drag himself forward. But Ino and the man — they’re not here, where are they — there!

Asuma’s room.

Asuma, who has a bounty worth millions of ryo on his head, his head but not the rest of his body. Asuma, who’s completely helpless.

No. No, no, no!

She needs to be there right now-

(the world squeezes down on her)

-and then she suddenly is. Crouched on the post of his bed, watching Ino, bloodied and with a ferocious expression on her face, her hair scattered all over the floor, hold the remaining attacker in place with binds made from pure chakra.

Binds that are flickering. Failing.

The seals come so easily, and even though there’s no water, chains slip into existence, lifting from Riko’s shadow and shooting for the would-be killer, but he’s not going one step further, he’s never hurting anybody again-

She has him, she’s got him bound, the chains immobilising him. Ino’s binding technique releases with a snap, and with a hoarse cry, the Yamanaka drives a kunai right into his throat.
Chapter 20

Ino doesn’t pause for a moment. She yanks the kunai out of the man’s throat unceremoniously, and he crumples to the ground with a wet gurgle. Not a minute passes before he’s dead. The girl watches the entire time.

Riko topples off the bedpost and only just manages to catch herself. For a moment the world goes black, but it passes and she keeps herself upright, a hand clinging to the bed for support.

*Ah,* she thinks, *Right. Chakra exhaustion.*

Kakashi did tell her to pace herself and stick to support skills. Which, technically, she did. Sort of. With the kunoichi earlier, she only activated low-cost seals, and with this one, it was just a few of chains.

“Do you have any body scrolls?” Ino asks with a blank look on her face.

Riko shakes her head mutely.

Ino looks at the mess to her feet. The blood from the enemy shinobi’s throat is soaking into the thin layer of blond hair there. Only now Riko registers that Ino’s ponytail is a whole lot shorter than it used to be. She must have used it as a sort of conductor for those chakra binds.

“Normal storage seals will have to do,” Riko mutters. She’s *tired* and her mouth feels slack. “Are you injured?”

“I’m fine,” Ino answers curtly, despite the way she’s hunched over and has blood leaking from her shoulder. “You?”

“Not a scratch,” Riko replies and wow, that’s ridiculous and she almost has to giggle.

She *should* be injured. But the only thing she’s missing is her hood.

With clinical detachment, Ino seals the corpse away. “Is yours dead, too?” she asks.

“Yeah.”

“Okay.”

They make their way back into the living area. It looks just like Riko left it, except for the fact that Tsunami has lost consciousness and Uhei crawled a good bit of distance further on his injured legs. Also, one of the thugs is waking up.

Ino sneers, stalks over, and slits his throat. His companion is already dead, Riko realises blankly, his throat a torn mess.

Explains the blood on Uhei’s snout.

None of that is important right now.

Riko hurries to Tsunami’s side and kneels down. The wound on her stomach isn’t too bad, rather shallow actually, but she’s losing blood, and with how unsanitary the surroundings are right now she might get an infection. “We need to get her into a clean room.”
And then Riko is going to have to swallow a chakra pill, sterilise the injury, and heal it up as much
as she can before wrapping it.

Ino helps carry the woman into her room and watches with sharp eyes as Riko treats the injury to
the best of her abilities. “She jumped that man,” she recounts slowly. “Jumped on his back and
screamed and tried to scratch out his eyes. Bought me time.”

It’s a miracle Tsunami didn’t die.

“What about the kid?” Riko asks.

“Just a bump to his head. Doubt he even got a concussion.” Ino shrugs carelessly, eyes still on
Tsunami.

Riko nods and tries not to consider how cold Ino is being right now. “Come here. We need to wrap
your shoulder.”

Ino complies easily, not even flinching when Riko cleans out the wound, disinfects it, and wraps it
tightly. “I need to take care of the other bodies,” she says. “And fix up that hole in the wall. And,
and-” She takes a deep breath. “I’m starving.”

Riko shrugs. “Kitchen’s still intact. I’ll cobble something together. Or dig up a ration bar. Should
have some somewhere.” She ruminates in her pockets.

Yep. There’s a ration bar alright. She hands it to Ino, who gobbles it down.

“Okay.” Ino squares her shoulders. “Okay. Clean-up, then real food. I’ll come to the kitchen when
I’m done.”

“I’ll have a look at the brat and the dogs,” Riko volunteers.

“Right.”

Ino almost runs out of the room. Riko follows at a slower pace.

It takes several hours to put things back to rights. Both Ino and Riko are exhausted, but neither even
consider resting. Instead, they clear away the rubble, scrub away blood, patch the hole in the wall
where the thugs entered, replace the scorched planks from Riko’s… well, she wouldn’t call it a
fight.

Furniture must be put back in place, pictures hung on the wall, dinner prepared. And the injured
need to be checked upon regularly.

The manual labour is mindless and distracting, but eventually, there’s nothing left to do. Riko finds
Ino standing in the living area, staring blankly at the spots where the floor is scrubbed clean.

“We need to scrub the whole floor,” Ino announces. “It looks weird with those light patches. You
can see where we cleaned, and that means you can see where it isn’t clean, and that’s embarrassing
when guests come over.”

“Ino,” Riko mumbles. “Are you okay?”

“I want to clean,” she snaps. “It’s messy.”

“It looks fine,” Riko says. “You need rest. I need rest.”
They both know that they *can’t* rest. Another attacker might come after them, or Gato might send more thugs. It’s the reason neither of them had hurried to the bridge, where their teams might be fighting for their lives right now.

Aside from the fact that in their conditions, they’d have been more hindrance than aid.

“I’m *fine!*” Ino spins around to face her and nearly loses her footing.

She’s very clearly not fine, but she’s also obviously not listening.

“I’m not,” Riko answers. “I need a shower, but I don’t think I’ll manage alone.”

Ino falters.

“And to be frank? You need a shower, too,” Riko adds tiredly. “Come on.”

Her friend looks down at herself. She’s still got blood on her clothes and skin, is sweaty and dirty from cleaning. Riko doesn’t look a whole lot better, minus the blood, but she’s pale enough to rival a corpse.

Ino only seems to realise this just now. Before Riko’s eyes, she seems to deflate, almost crumble. “Yeah,” she murmurs. “Alright. Shower.”

They go to the upstairs bathroom, grabbing clean clothes on the way. Their old ones don’t seem salvageable.

Riko knows she’d rather never see her hoodie again.

She also knows that she can’t exactly throw it away. There are still intact seals sewn into it. They’ll need to either be rendered unusable or cut out of the whole garment.

Ino helps her wash up in silence and then orders her to wait in their quarters.

“Eat something, you look terrible,” are her parting words.

Riko obeys without protest, but keeps an ear out. Even if she hadn’t, she’d have heard Ino’s sobs not long after the shower stops running. With a quiet groan, she forces herself to her feet and knocks softly on the door. “Can I come in?”

There’s no answer.

“I’m coming in,” Riko decides, and gives Ino a few moments to protest before she cautiously enters.

Ino is staring at her reflection in the mirror. “My hair,” she sobs.

Her formerly lustrous blond mane reaches only past her ears now, forming a messy, choppy halo around her blotchy face.

“I can try to even it out,” Riko offers tentatively, not knowing what else to say.

It’s not like Ino’s breakdown is actually about her hair.

“But you don’t know the first thing about fashion!” Ino cries. “All your hoodies are formless bags!”
“They’re comfy and hide tons of tricks,” Riko defends. “And the hood can hide my face! They’re useful.”

“Ugh.” Ino sniffles and stares at her reflection. “Get me some scissors. I’ll do it myself.”

Riko roots around in her storage seals and eventually finds the requested scissors. She has three pairs: a tiny one meant for nails, the other one for cutting wires and pretty big and unwieldy. The third one is for cutting paper in zig-zag lines. Riko doesn’t know why she has them.

All three are in top condition, however.

“Do you just carry random stuff with you everywhere?” Ino mutters, eyeing the available choices.

Riko musters a tired grin. “Storage seals rock.”

She can just hoard everything and never run out of space.

Ino huffs. “Can’t argue with that.”

And she grabs the biggest pair of scissors and just. Chops all her hair off at the sides, leaving little more than stubble. Leaves it a little longer on the top of her head. Riko stares because… Ino’s hair is her pride, she loves it, loves caring for it, and she’d thought Ino would want to grow it out as soon as she could?

Ino eyes herself in the mirror with a critical look. “Good enough,” she decides eventually. “What do you think?”

Riko stares at her. “Looks nice.” She bites her lip. “Are you okay?”

“What’s it matter?” Ino snorts, turning away from the mirror. “It doesn’t change a thing if I have long hair or not, enemies are still going to try and kill me.”

“It matters,” Riko mumbles, looking away. Staring at her own hands. “Maybe I should cut my hair, too. That’s twice it’s gotten me in trouble.”

Or had it actually kept her alive? The woman would’ve probably killed her if it weren’t for her red hair. So that she could sell Riko later. She shudders.

“I’ll cut it for you,” Ino offers, “If you want to. You’ll just mess it up.”

Riko frowns. “I don’t want to.”

Ino shrugs. “Suit yourself.” She walks out of the bathroom and makes her way downstairs, with Riko trailing after her at a slower pace. Checking on the injured again. Akino had dismissed himself in a moment of consciousness once he realised it was safe to do so. Uhei remains, his legs splinted. Neither Tsunami nor her son have woken up so far, and Asuma’s condition is unchanged as well.

That done, Riko sinks down on a couch in the living room, Uhei shuffling over to rest at her feet. Ino, meanwhile, paces. Circles the living room, out of the front door, patrols around the house, checks upstairs again. The entire time, her eyes are uncharacteristically hard, with occasional flickers of confusion, and she keeps running a hand over her cropped hair.

Riko doesn’t have the energy to argue with her that she should rest. Feels herself slipping off into an odd state between sleeping and waking. Her mind is blissfully empty, idly registering sensory
input but not analysing it. Ino throws a blanket over her at some point, and then she’s even comfortably warm.

The moment she feels her teammates’ chakra on the horizon of her chakra sense, it’s like a switch has been flipped.

Team means safety.

Riko drifts off into sleep.

Riko is a pretty active sleeper, she has weird and confusing dreams all the time. That’s why she’s pretty sure she’s still asleep when she wakes up with her head pillowed on a sleeping Shikamaru’s lap and her legs sprawled over Genma’s, of all people.

“Rise and shine,” her mentor says upon finding her awake.

She stares for a moment and then decides that she’s not dealing with him right now. It’s her dream.

Riko closes her eyes again.

He pinches her big toe.

Damn it. Not dreaming after all.

More out of habit than anything, she tries to muster up the energy for a glare and comes up empty. “Our medic wants to yell at you,” Genma tells her, entirely unimpressed, and he carefully puts her glasses on her nose. Huh, someone must have taken them off of her at some point while she was sleeping.

“I’m not injured,” Riko protests tiredly.

Just very, very exhausted.

But all in all, she’d gotten more scratches from cleaning up the house than from the actual fight.

“You’re the back-up sensei called?” she asks.

“Yep.” Genma eyes her seriously. “Raidou, Iwashi, Iyashi and me.”

Aside from Iyashi, she knows those names thanks to her visit to the Jounin Station.

“He’s a medic,” Genma answers her unspoken question.

Riko blinks slowly. She should be relieved, since they really need a medic, but everything feels so distant right now.

“He’s looking at Asuma right now,” Genma continues. “Well, has been for the past, oh, five hours? If you’re lucky, he’ll be too exhausted to yell at you, actually.”

She can’t think of an answer to that.
Five hours, huh?

“Is everyone okay?”

“Yeah. Little scratched up, but everybody who needed to be dealt with was.”

“Gato,” she surmises. “Zabuza?”

“Gato’s dead, Zabuza and his apprentice decided not to continue their mission after their employer kicked it. Kakashi worked something out with them. They’ll clear Nami of Gato’s cronies and walk free.”

That’s a relief, huh.

“ Heard you got into a bit of a scuffle yourself,” Genma says lightly, but his eyes are intent on her. “Yamanaka Ino had quite a report.”

Riko shrugs.

What’s there to say?

“I killed someone, yeah,” she confirms what she figures Genma wants to know. “Body’s in storage. Didn’t have a body scroll, so normal it’s in storage.”

“How’re you feeling?” he asks quietly, looking at her inquisitively.

Riko looks away. “Not much of anything. Tired, I guess.”

Which is — isn’t that weird? She should be… she killed a person. Somehow.

And yeah, killing is a thing most shinobi eventually end up doing, she knows that. Academy lessons sort of talked around it, but Yoshino was pretty clear that it would happen at some point.

Just. It was an accident. It went so fast.

“Where’s sensei? And the others?” she changes the subject.

Genma eyes her for a moment longer before he answers, “Sleeping, helping at the bridge, scouting the town, preventing angry mobs of recently liberated people. The works.”

“The dogs?”

“Fine.”

She breathes out. “I’m tired.”

“You look tired. If you’re even half as tired as you look, I’d figure you shouldn’t even be awake right now. Tell you what, you get something to eat and zonk right back out. Iyashi can just yell at you next time you wake up. Sound good?”

Riko is still on the couch when she wakes up next, but it’s Kakashi who sits with her this time. Neither Shikamaru nor Genma are anywhere nearby, as far as she can tell. There’s a chakra resting upstairs and Tsunami somewhere in the kitchen, but that’s it.

“Where…” she mumbles.

“Naruto and Sasuke are guarding the bridge,” Kakashi reveals easily. “Raidou is helping your brother’s team with training, Genma and Iwashi are having a look around town. The medic is upstairs.”

Riko nods slowly.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Kakashi asks quietly.

She looks down at her hands. “Not really,” she answers.

“Alright. But you’re going to see a Psych operative when we get back.” His tone brooks no argument. Riko swallows heavily.

Genin aren’t required to have regular check-ups with the Yamanaka-dominated Psych division, and neither are chuunin unless they worked certain types of missions. But a jounin sensei or direct superior could make therapy sessions mandatory, if they thought it necessary.

She’s eleven and burnt someone to death. It probably is necessary. But how it’s supposed to help, she can’t imagine.

“What’s Psych like?” she asks quietly.

“Well,” Kakashi answers brightly. “I see my shrink once every two weeks, if missions allow it, and she gives me cookies and I bring her flowers, and she lets me summon my dogs for her to cuddle. Pakkun’s her favourite.”

“That sounds nice,” Riko whispers.

“I’ll introduce you when we get back,” Kakashi promises.

She nods in thanks.

Therapy doesn’t seem so daunting now.

Recovery is slow. Iyashi the medic is not happy with Riko’s everything.

He’s the huffy sort. It makes her uncomfortable, so she avoids him. Sticks with her brother and friends instead, though during the day they tend to train in the forest, if they aren’t scheduled for a guard shift.

It rankles that Ino can take part in that now, her injury all but healed by Iyashi, whereas Riko’s chakra exhaustion keeps her too tired and drained to do much of anything. At least after a few days, she’s finally allowed to walk around again, and Kakashi summons a big dog with the rather fitting name Bull, who can guard her if she wants to go on walks and carry her back if she overestimates
the distance she can walk.

The freedom to walk where she pleases comes as a great relief. The house had started to feel like a prison.

Long, slow walks along the beach are nice for unwinding. And light exercise where nobody, especially not Iyashi, can see — that makes her feel better as well.

She just… wants to avoid people for a bit. Alone time is good.

That’s how the days pass. Slowly, peacefully, until one day at the beach Bull starts growling while she’s slowly working her way through a kata with Yoshino’s katana that she’s trying to familiarise herself with.

Riko falls into a ready stance, even though her legs are already shaking from previous exertion.

The man doesn’t even make an attempt at stealth. He’s just right there, tall and lanky and radiating danger.

He fits the description of Momochi Zabuza perfectly.

This is probably a very bad situation, she realises distantly. But for some reason, she doesn’t feel like her life is at stake here.

“D’you even know how to use that, brat?” he growls disdainfully, glaring at her katana as if it personally offended him.

Her mother gave her that. Riko narrows her eyes.

Her hood is up, hiding her hair from view. She’s still got red eyebrows, though. “Last time someone from Kiri talked to me, they wanted to sell me into slavery,” she says in a clipped tone. “You gonna pull something like that?”

Zabuza snorts. “Pathetic. No. Answer the question.”

“You gonna kill me?” Riko continues.

“Think I’m stupid? Think I don’t know who your teacher is?” he snaps back.

“Great.” Riko eyes him warily, one hand running over Bull’s fur. “Then I’m going home.”


“You’re suspicious,” Riko points out tartly. “Ever heard of stranger danger?”

“Heh.” And he grins, revealing many sharp teeth. “I’ll just find out for myself.”

Her eyes widen when he’s suddenly gone, and it’s more instinct than anything that has her spinning on her heel, katana up to block his weapon. The force of the giant butcher knife sword thing he wields almost bowls her over.

It should have thrown her all the way across the beach.

“You suck,” he concludes.
In the blink of an eye, Riko shifts her weight and stance and his stupidly oversized sword slides off of hers, leaving her free to stab forward. Next thing she knows she’s launched into the ocean.

Crap, the medic’s going to kill her.

Grimacing, Riko wades back to the beach, where Bull is still growling at Zabuza. But not trying to kill him, which is nice, since the last thing Riko wants is another death battle. “What do you even want?” she demands from the stranger.

Zabuza grins. “I’m fucking bored and you have a sword.”

Fog begins to thicken around them.

Bull presses close to her. She runs a hand over his fur. “Go get sensei,” she murmurs.

The dog makes a noise of protest, but they don’t have any other option here, seeing as Riko is in no shape to run anywhere. Bull himself isn’t the fastest runner, and that’s without carrying her. Plus, Zabuza is clearly not looking to kill her, just… playing around? So she should be fine on her own for a little while.

They aren’t too far away from their base. Kakashi can be here within minutes.

She’s pretty sure Bull has figured out the same thing, because he takes off. Leaving Riko alone in the fog with a bored Kiri nuke-nin.

Damn, but she’s so glad for the blindfolded training back home now, because without sharpened hearing, she’d be done for.

And he’s still playing with her. He could’ve killed her ten times over in the first minute, but instead he keeps letting his sword slice through the air audibly. Giving her that one moment to react. To evade, to redirect his strikes, to attempt a counter. She pulls on every bit of technique Yoshino has taught her, because she has too little chakra to work with to even make herself a tiny bit faster.

She’s on the ground in three minutes, arse thoroughly kicked, and she can’t get up. Her body too heavy to move. Even when Zabuza towers over her with her katana in his hand.

...this could go really badly, really quickly, and she wasn’t scared of him before, but now- now she’s suddenly remembering the sort of things that can happen to shinobi taken captives by enemies. Especially kunoichi.

“Entertainment’s over,” she informs him, trying to keep her voice from shaking. “You can go now.”

“Heh.” He carelessly drops the katana on the sand next to her. “Fucking brat. Red hair, huh?”

“Got a problem with it?” she snaps tiredly, which is a stupid thing to do, but she’s just so done with people obsessing over her hair colour. And it makes her feel less helpless.

“Don’t give a fuck.”

Then why is he still here?

“Tell your teacher the Gato Corporation has been dismantled,” he adds before his body bursts into water. Riko gets a face full of it, sputtering.

A bloody water clone! And he calls her rude!
Kakashi appears a moment later, and crap - that’s probably the end of her nice and relaxing walks with Bull.
Chapter 21

After her encounter with Zabuza — she can’t believe one of the Seven Swordsmen of Kiri singled her out — Riko still gets to take walks, but only if Kakashi or Genma accompany her. In addition, she can no longer take a step without at least two of her peers jumping up to coincidentally go wherever Riko’s going.

Her privacy is all gone. But at least she gets the occasional hug in exchange.

Zabuza doesn’t show his troublesome mug again.

Still, she’s relieved to hear that they’re all going home the next day. The bridge is all built and Iyashi declares Asuma safe for transport, which Genma’s squad will be taking care of with some sort of transportation jutsu.

Kakashi would be walking the genin home, though Riko, who isn’t in any shape to travel at ninja speed, would have to ride piggyback the majority of the way.

At least they let her walk across the damn bridge on her own two feet. It’s a huge thing, awe-inspiring, and the entire town is there to cheer the Konoha-shinobi on as they are given the honour of being the first to walk across the structure.

The people of Nami are celebrating, have been doing so for days and days, and all Riko can think about is the fact that she took a life. Whenever she closes her eyes, she sees the fire and hears the screams, smells the burnt flesh. It keeps replaying on an endless loop.

She’s so glad to see the last of Nami no Kuni.

Genma and his team have already relayed all the relevant details to the Hokage by the time Riko and companions make it back home, so reporting to him is a mere formality that requires little time.

Unsurprisingly, Kakashi takes them all to the hospital after. Riko really should have seen it coming.

She lets the medics administer their techniques in silence and takes the pills and injections they give her without protest. Soon she slips off into a sleep that should have been dreamless but isn’t. Something’s at the edge of her mind, intangible, disappearing when she tries to look closer. But it’s there and it unsettles her.

It’s not a restful sleep. But whatever the medics did while she was out, it took the edge off of the chakra exhaustion.

Shikaku is in the room when she wakes. “Hello, little one,” he greets quietly when she notices his presence.

“Hey,” she croaks with a bit of delay, the sight of him at her bedside not immediately computing.
He eyes her intently and she waits with trepidation for whatever he’s going to say. There’s no way he doesn’t already know about the mission and how it went. Probably knew as soon as Genma’s team came home.

“The medics say you can come home with me, if you promise to take it easy.”

Riko exhales. They’re not going to talk about it right now. Good.

“Okay,” she croaks, her voice hoarse from sleep, and sits up, wincing at her stiff muscles. How long was she asleep?

Does it matter?

Shikaku’s eyes are heavy on her, but he makes no move to help her. Riko is grateful for it. She feels weak enough already without someone rubbing it in.

“Are the others okay?” she asks.

“Kakashi sent them home.”

Riko frowns.

Both her teammates are orphans. Neither have anyone waiting for them. The thought of Sasuke in his big house and Naruto in his cramped apartment, alone, is depressing.

She’ll visit them as soon as she can.

Just… not now.

The house is silent when they arrive. At her questioning look, Shikaku informs her that, “Your brother is with his team and your mother should be home soon.”

Riko nods.

“Do you want some time to yourself?”

“Yeah,” she mumbles, and immediately feels guilty for it because she hasn’t seen him in weeks and she should spend time with him, shouldn’t she? It’s only right. And it’s only early afternoon — he took time off from his job just to sit at her bedside in the hospital. “Sorry, I—”

“It’s fine, Riko,” he sighs and ruffles her hair with a wry smile. “You have nothing to be sorry for. Take all the time you need.”

She ducks her head and scurries off into her room where she falls onto her bed and just stares blankly at the ceiling until a rustle pulls her out of her thoughts. With a groan, she rolls to her feet. “I’m back, Usagi-chan,” she murmurs, kneeling beside the rabbit, who has free reign of her long since bunny-proofed room.

He mostly sleeps all day, anyway. She’s flattered when he expends the energy to crawl into her lap and boop her hand.

“Sorry,” she tells him, “Took longer than I said I would.”

Her first C-rank mission was supposed to take up to a week at most. Instead, it was almost a month in total.
For a while she sits there in silent, running her hand over the bunny’s fur.

She doesn’t stop petting him when the tears begin to fall.

In the afternoon, Shikaku comes up to bring her food. Riko has no appetite at all, even though she hasn’t eaten lunch yet, but she forces it down anyway.

Food helps with chakra exhaustion, and she needs to be healthy if she wants to start training again anytime soon. In the meanwhile, her old medical textbooks are now stacked on her desk, three lying open.

If she’d only just been a bit better…

“You know,” Shikaku muses, “Your brother and his team all went to the hospital this morning to request lessons in medical ninjutsu.”


She doesn’t know if the medics can fix an injury of that magnitude. And even then, he’ll miss a limb.

Team Ten is down a sensei, no matter the outcome of his treatment.

“Sarutobi Asuma is receiving the best treatment the village can give,” Shikaku tells her after a small pause. “His genin will be transferred to the care of another jounin.”

“Who?”

The Ino-Shika-Cho formation is traditionally under the care of a teacher from the Sarutobi clan. But she’s pretty sure there are only very few members of that clan left.

“It’s still in discussion,” Shikaku answers. “Done eating?”

Riko nods.

“Good.” He stands up. “The clan clinic needs herbs from the forest. Want to help me find some?”

She blinks.


Riko’s never gone into the forest before. Only Nara clan members have access. They can bring visitors if necessary, but Riko vaguely recalls someone mentioning hefty restrictions on that.

It doesn’t matter anymore, she’s Nara Riko now, so there’s no hindrance to her visiting.

The forest is beautiful. Peaceful. The feel it gives off — it’s like the opposite of the Forest Of Death, and even though Shikaku and her walk for hours as they pick herbs, she doesn’t feel as exhausted as she should by the time they sit down in a clearing.
Shikaku unseals two bento boxes. “Dinner,” he announces before explaining, “It’s just us two today. Your mother’s dealing with a few things, Shikamaru’s staying over at the Akimichi compound with Ino.”

Probably something to do with their joint venture into medicine, Riko would wager. Shikamaru’s been scarily not-lazy the past weeks.

It’s beginning to worry her. Some days, he barely looks himself anymore.

“Thanks,” she says quietly. “Not just for dinner. For-” she gestures around them, at the forest, at the basket filled with herbs. “Just, thanks.” A pause, and she adds, “Dad.”

“You’re welcome, daughter,” he answers, smiling.

Riko sucks in a startled breath.

“Dinner?” he asks.

She nods mutely and he unpacks the food.

After eating, they play a few rounds of shogi until visitors arrive.

The deer look bigger up close, not quite as delicate as they did when she observed them from afar, before she was allowed in here. A tall stag with spiralling antlers leads them, and his eyes reflect a strange, inhuman sort of intelligence.

“His name is Rikumaru,” Shikaku murmurs to her as the stag walks towards them. He comes to a stop in front of Riko, eyeing her curiously, and she stares at him with widened eyes, heart beating quickly.

“Hi,” she chokes out. “I’m Riko.”

The stag studies her for a bit longer before he brushes his snout against her forehead. His breath is warm on her skin, her glasses fog up.

She reaches out with her chakra sense, and just like that, she isn’t so anxious anymore. Rikumaru’s chakra — feeling unlike any animal she’s ever sensed before, like he’s not quite of this world — radiates warmth. Welcome. Friendship.

A smile forms on her face and, moving slowly, Riko raises a hand and begins petting his fur carefully until he bumps against her again and walks over to Shikaku. The two stare at each other for a long moment, as if holding a silent conversation, then the man gives the stag a respectful nod — a bow, almost — and as sudden as they arrived, the herd leaves.

“He likes you,” Shikaku muses thoughtfully.

Riko answers, “I like him, too,” though that doesn’t quite cover it. Whatever just happened had a weight to it.

Like it was important.
Team Seven was given the week off so its members could recover their reserves and health. And in addition, to make time for therapy appointments.

Konoha’s Psych division, headed by the Yamanaka clan, is one of the things that sets the village apart from the likes of Kiri or Suna. No other country’s shinobi administration spends much thought on the mental health of its fighters — some even take pride in having their forces be loose cannons.

Not Konoha. Konoha takes care of her people. And that entails regular psych evals and contact with a representative of Psych. “As long as you’re on a genin team, your jounin sensei determines if you’re fit for active duty. Once you reach chuunin rank, you’ll be taking documented psych evals with the Psych division at regular intervals. If you work in mentally-taxing specialisations, you also have regular therapy appointments,” Kakashi tells her, and when he looks down, his eyes crinkle reassuringly. “It’s not as scary as it sounds.”

Riko shoots him a deadpan look from where she’s dangling under his arm while he walks. Carrying her around like a sack of potatoes. “Not as scary as some weird old guy climbing in through my window and carrying me across the village while I’m still in my sleepwear.”

Which at least isn’t as embarrassing as it could be. An oversized T-shirt with a pink rabbit on it and shorts with a kunai pattern are still pretty terrible, though. And she’d really like some shoes. But she looked worse during her blindfolded training.

“Maa, Riko-chan, you really should’ve been better prepared for your first therapy appointment.”

She pinches Kakashi. He aims a wounded look at her that could’ve put actual puppies to shame. “My cute students don’t appreciate their poor old sensei,” he laments.

“Did you do this to Naruto and Sasuke, too?” she asks curiously.

“Not yet!” he answers cheerfully.

Yeah, she’s absolutely swinging by Sasuke’s and Naruto’s places to warn them about this. Chances are Kakashi will spring Psych appointments on them in completely different ways because he’s annoying like that, but they should know to expect shenanigans.

“Here we are,” Kakashi announces, stopping in front of a modest two-story house on one of the blocks that unofficially belongs to the Yamanaka Clan. It’s not that they have a claim on this part of the village, it’s just that somehow only Yamanaka inhabit it. “Look sharp, you want to make a good first impression, Riko!”

He doesn’t set her down, so she can’t exactly follow his advice as he knocks on the door.

A few minutes later there’s a shuffling sound before the door opens. A young woman with blond hair stands in the door frame.

Her nightgown definitely beats Riko’s pyjamas in taste. So does the haori thrown over her shoulders. “You knocked,” she says. “I’m so proud of you, Kakashi.”

She sounds genuinely happy, too, and her smile is a thing of beauty.

Kakashi crinkles his eyes at her. “Good morning, Fuji! Riko, say hello to Fuji. She’s the best, and she helped me with my own first experiences with death.”
“Hello, Fuji-san,” Riko says dutifully, adding a little wave. “It’s very nice to meet you.”

“It’s nice to meet you, too, Riko. I didn’t know Kakashi would be bringing you by at six in the morning.”

“Neither did I,” Riko tells her.

“And neither did I!” Kakashi seconds cheerfully, the moron. “We have so much in common already.” He sets Riko down. “You two have fun now.” And he disappears, leaving Fuji and her alone in their sleepwear.

Does this count as a pyjama party? Possibly.

Fuji sighs softly. “Oh well. Do come in.” She steps back, and Riko follows the invitation. “Have you had breakfast yet?”

Riko shakes her head, casting a look around. It’s a nice house, from what she can tell. Polished wooden floors in the hallway, same in the cozy living room Fuji leads her to. Couches and a tea table stand on a fuzzy rug to one side, a dinner table with matching chairs to the other. An assortment of odd knick-knacks and figurines sits on the shelves. In the corners stands a bunch of plant pots. There’s a huge cactus, a palm, and proudly displayed on a little pedestal stands a blooming wisteria bonsai.

Fuji excuses herself for a few minutes and returns with tea and stretchy slippers for Riko’s feet. She takes a seat on the armchair opposite Riko, pulling up her legs and sitting in a curled-up position. “We’re both in our nightwear,” she says at Riko’s curious look. “We might as well get comfortable.” She sips at her tea.

Riko shrugs and sits cross-legged on the couch. She nearly burns her mouth at the tea. “Your house is nice,” she says, just to break the silence.

“Thank you. I like it, too.” Fuji chuckles at her. “I’m sure you have questions, Riko? Are you comfortable with me calling you that?”

“Yes?” Riko asks, because that’s her name, why wouldn’t she be? “I don’t know how this works. The therapy thing. Are you a shrink? Kakashi said he was taking me to my first session, so I guess you must be? Just, uh.” Her brain catches up with her mouth and she gestures vaguely. “Unexpected.”

She sort of figured it’d be someone like Inoichi. Maybe even Inoichi himself. At least someone old. Instead, it’s this pretty lady who looks younger than Iruka-sensei.

Fuji gives her a knowing look and Riko’s cheeks heat. She fiddles with her tea cup.

“That’s alright,” the woman says calmly. “It’s your first experience with the Psych Division, and you only just graduated.”

“I thought it’d be in some big building,” Riko blurts, “With someone scary.”

The woman smiles at her. ‘Common misconception. We’re not T&I, don’t worry.” She sets her cup down and folds her hands in front of her. “Let’s introduce ourselves, shall we? My name is Yamanaka Fuji, I’m nineteen years old and a member of Konoha’s Psych Division. I work primarily with children in and around your age group, Kakashi being the glaring exception. I enjoy taking care of my plants and baking.”
Riko blinks at her. Nineteen. Kakashi said she talked him through his first kill.

Either Fuji started her career young or he had therapy late in his life.

Fuji looks at her expectantly. Riko jolts and hastily introduces herself. “I’m Riko, the Nara adopted me a while back, I’m almost twelve and a genin. I like drawing.”

“That’s a lovely hobby,” her new shrink comments encouragingly. “Okay, I’m not sure if Kakashi has told you what to expect beyond the bare basics, so here’s how I work. Our goal will be to ensure that you can handle personal hardships and work-related stress in a healthy manner that allows you to enjoy your life. Simplified, this means that I will both help you find healthy ways of coping and attempt to find and minimise the source of what causes you mental distress.”

Riko nods uncertainly, and because she doesn’t know what to say, takes another sip from her tea.

“That means the two of us need to agree on a few rules, if that’s okay with you,” Fuji continues. “In an ideal world, we’d promise to be honest with each other. However, that’s not very realistic, considering our careers. So instead, we’ll use a password if there’s something we can’t or don’t want to talk about. Mine is Merrythought. Sound alright?”

“Isn’t the point of therapy to talk things out?” Riko asks in confusion. “And then you get better?”

Fuji tilts her head. “Talking about things isn’t always helpful,” she explains. “In case of traumatic events, it can even be harmful. It depends on the patient. The difficulty is realising when you’re staying silent because you’re not ready to talk, or because it’s easier that way. But that’s what I’m here for — to help you with things like that.”

“I’m not traumatised,” Riko mutters, looking away.

“And I didn’t say you were.” Fuji gives her a soft smile, and Riko flushes even more. “I’m only trying to answer your questions.”

“Sorry.”

“No worries. Next rule: If, at any point, you feel uncomfortable with me, I need you to notify me or Kakashi. You can terminate therapy at any time if you feel like I can’t help you, but in that case it’s imperative that you continue with someone else. It can seriously hurt your career if you don’t.” The young woman fixes Riko with a grave look. “And don’t hesitate because you think you might hurt my career. This is about your well-being.” She pauses. “Now, if I feel like I can’t continue your treatment, I will refer you to someone I feel would be a good fit, but the decision of you go with this person will lie with you.”

Riko clears her throat. “Is that likely? Does it happen a lot?”

“Not so far in my career,” Fuji assures her. “I’m quite proud of that, to be honest.”

“What are the other rules?”

“Just two more things,” Fuji holds up a finger. “One, do the work. Therapy is an active process and requires effort and emotional labour. I may also give you homework in some form. It doesn’t have to be successful — I just want you to promise you’ll try.”

It sounds reasonable enough. Why wouldn’t she do the work?

“Sure. What’s the last rule?”
Fuji grins. “Be on time.”

Riko blinks. “Uh… what?”

“If we have an appointment, try to be punctual. It’s a little thing, but it’ll get you into the habit of thinking of therapy as a serious matter.”

“How’s that working out with Kakashi?” escapes Riko. She slaps her hands over her mouth and wishes the ground would swallow her up.

But Fuji only laughs. “Oh, that’s a work in progress.” She shakes her head exasperatedly. “Do you have questions?”

“Er… not yet?” Riko thinks hard. “I don’t think so. Uh, do we start right now?”

“No.” Fuji stands. “Today’s for getting to know each other, and I don’t know about you, but I could use some breakfast. I was planning on baking cookies today. Do you want to give me a hand?”

Riko jumps up, already nodding. “Yes!”

“Then let’s go wash up. I think I have a spare tooth-brush somewhere you can use…” Fuji taps a finger on her lip thoughtfully. “My clothes won’t fit you. You know what, we can just do this in pyjamas. Like a slumber party.” She giggles mischievously and startles a laugh from Riko, who instantly decides against getting a change of clothes from Ino’s place.

This whole therapy thing is looking pretty okay, all things considered!
Riko leaves Fuji’s place in the early afternoon after a hearty meal, a box of the best cookies she’s ever eaten tucked under her arm. She’s still in her sleepwear, but now wearing a dark haori over it. The garment is way too big, but it covers the rabbit shirt, so she doesn’t look quite as ridiculous as before. And Fuji even gave her geta sandals to wear, which are the type of shoe she favours. They’re too big for Riko and hard to walk in, even when she cheats with chakra to stick them to her soles, but it’s still better than running around barefoot.

Luckily Sasuke’s house isn’t far from here and if she plays her cards right, he might loan her some shinobi sandals. She and him do have the same shoe size.

Riko’s teammate isn’t in his private training ground, something that surprises her. Sasuke trains day in, day out, unless he’s doing homework. Which doesn’t happen anymore, now that they’re genin. As far as she’s aware, she’s the only one who committed to learning a theory-based skill like fuuinjutsu.

Not that she has time to do it full-time or look into anything more complicated than storage-related seals, no matter how much she’d like to.

Sasuke takes a while to answer the door, but eventually it swings open. “Hey,” she greets.

He takes in her appearance and rolls his eyes, but it’s not like he has room to talk today. Sasuke looks weird. Riko’s never seen him wear anything other than his shinobi gear and it throws her off.

“What do you want?” he asks flatly in that I’m busy and you’re annoying tone that he usually defaults to, if he bothers with verbal answers at all.

Riko figures that a truly annoyed Sasuke would have just closed the door in her face, so he’s not actually too busy to deal with her.

“What’cha you up to?” she asks, because that’s less rude than enquiring about his messed-up hair, the ink-smudges that made their way from his fingers onto his face, the lack of arm- and leg warmers, his bare feet, and the shadows under his eyes. He doesn’t even have his kunai pouch secured to his leg, instead it dangles from his hand as though he’d grabbed it as an afterthought. His scent is off, too, he smells like fish rather than campfires. She’d suspect an imposter if his chakra didn’t mark him as the real deal. “And I just wanted to check on my teammates, it’s weird not having you in sensing range after the mission.” She frowns, absently fiddling with the haori’s wide sleeves. “Visiting Naruto later, wanna tag along?”

“I’m busy,” he brushes her off. “You’re not supposed to be taking long walks.”

Right, the joys of chakra exhaustion. “I didn’t, sensei dumped me on a therapist this morning. Her house is just a few blocks away,” Riko explains hastily. “Reason number two for visiting you! Be on the lookout for sensei-related chaos.”

Sasuke huffs and ties his kunai pouch around his leg before going back into the house. He doesn’t close the door behind him, so Riko takes the silent invitation and shuffles inside after him, trailing his steps to the kitchen.

Her jaw drops when she enters. The normally organised and clean space is in chaos, and the odour of fish nearly makes her tear up before she dials her sense of smell down. The kitchen island is a mess of books and scrolls, loose paper sheets filled with notes covering every normally free
Some are even pinned to the kitchen cabinets.

Riko nearly chokes on her spit when she sees what they’re about. “You’re learning medical ninjutsu?!”

It explains the dead fish on the counter. And the box filled with live fish to the side, which he must have gotten from the market.

Shikamaru and his team are one thing, but Sasuke? Learning healing, of all things?

When the heck did the world turn upside down?

“Hn,” he grunts, which is the least satisfying answer he could give. She stares at him expectantly, motioning for him to go on as she sits in the one chair that isn’t occupied by study materials.

He doesn’t say anything further, though.

“What brought this on?” she prompts finally. “You weren’t interested in medicine before.” At least, not that she can tell. The books and scrolls are all beginner’s material, so he can’t have been at it for long.

Did he start after the mission, like Shikamaru's team?

Sasuke grunts uncomfortably. “Team needs a medic.”

Riko blinks at him. “I have that covered, though.” For all that she got kicked out of medic training. Doesn’t mean she can’t read the material and train on her own time. She can say with confidence that she isn’t complete garbage.

“You give yourself chakra exhaustion most of the time.” He gives her an annoyed look. “It’s stupid and unsustainable. The only other option for medic is Naruto.”

Riko shudders at the thought of Naruto as a medic. Yikes.

“Besides, what happens if you get hurt, stupid?” he demands, crossing his arms. "And you get hurt a lot."

Oh.

“The team would be without a medic,” she answers quietly.

Okay. He has a point. She looks at Sasuke with wide eyes. He huffs and turns away, glaring at a dead fish.

“D’you wanna study together sometime?” Riko asks. “I have loads of books and notes. We can keep them here. And, uh, set up a room for practice. Exploded fish is really hard to clean, so maybe don’t do that in the kitchen."

“I don’t need your help,” Sasuke snaps, suddenly glaring at her. She raises her hands.

“Didn’t say you did! It’s just, learning this stuff takes a lot of time, and I think it’s the coolest thing you’ve ever done! I don’t want it to cut into your regular training time more than it has to, is all.” Riko stares at him. “We’re a team.”

A tense silence follows.
“Hn,” he finally agrees tersely. Riko beams at him.

“Great! I’ll go get the study materials and you can pick out a room for studying and another for practice-”

“You’re supposed to rest,” he reminds her sharply. “Go home.”

Riko’s mouth snaps shut.

Right. She completely forgot.

“Come over for dinner,” she blurts. “I’ll tell Naruto, too. And sensei, if I can find him. It’s weird not having you around after Wave.”

Sasuke stares at her, frozen.

“Shika has his team over all the time,” Riko insists. “Think about it? It doesn’t have to be today. Come over whenever you want.”

She pushes back to her feet and scurries out of Sasuke’s house, nearly tripping over her feet in Fuji’s geta sandals. It’s only outside that she notices she forgot to ask Sasuke for sandals, crap, but if she goes back inside now she’ll look like a moron.

Riko is halfway to Naruto’s apartment when her body begins protesting the exertion and she instead turns in the direction of home. He probably won’t be at his place anyway, training instead at this time of day.

By the time she’s reached the village’s main street she’s really exhausted, and she still as a ways to go. The Nara Compound and Naruto’s place are on opposite sides of the village and Sasuke’s place an equal distance from both, but not in a convenient way.

Contemplating the merits of just sitting down and taking a minute or ten to rest, Riko eyes a bench under a tree nearby. Unfortunately, an old lady and her gaggle of grand-children are faster.

She looks up when someone clears their throat politely. The woman’s standing a few steps away and clearly a kunoichi. Looks vaguely familiar, too, and… yeah, she was there when Riko looked for Genma in the Jounin Station. Stayed in the background, though, preferring to watch.

“Can I help you?” Riko asks curiously, examining her. She’s beautiful, with her purple hair and warm brown eyes. The standard uniform looks good on her, and Riko perks up in interest when she sees the katana strapped to her back.

“I was going to ask you that, Riko-chan,” the woman answers. “You look like you should be resting.”

Riko grimaces because this is embarrassing. “I’m on my way home and misjudged the distance, uh…” She eyes the woman and tries to remember if she’d ever been introduced.

“Uzuki Yugao,” the kunoichi offers, crouching down. “Would you like a ride home? Or I can take you to your father’s office, if you want. I would really advise against you walking. That looks like
a nasty case of chakra exhaustion.”

It takes a moment of hesitation, but Yugao seems sincere and her chakra feels friendly and open. Riko nods and climbs on her back. “Shikaku-san’s office is closer,” she says.

Yugao shrugs a little. “I have time. If you want to go home, it’s no trouble.”

Riko hesitates again, but... yeah. Shikaku is working, and he’s important. She really shouldn’t interrupt. “Home would be nice, thank you, Uzuki-san.”

“Yugao is fine, Riko-chan,” the woman replies warmly, beginning to walk. “You’re welcome. I’m happy to help out a fellow kunoichi.”

For a few minutes, she carries Riko in silence, apparently quite happy to do so.

“So, um,” Riko speaks up. “You use kenjutsu?”

“I do,” Yugao confirms. “Are you interested?”

Riko nods, then remembers the kunoichi can’t see her do that. “I’ve been learning for a few years. Yoshino-san teaches me.”

“You must be quite good by now.” She tilts her head. “Would you like to train together sometime? Once you’re better, of course.”

“Erm.” Riko blinks at the back of Yugao’s head in confusion. “Sure? That would be nice, but we don’t really know each other?”

Yugao sighs. “There are only a handful of kenjutsu users in Konoha,” she explains. “It’s more of a Kiri and Kumo specialty. We like to support each other and train together. And besides... being a kunoichi is different from being a shinobi.” She glances back at Riko. “We don’t necessarily receive the training we need before it becomes relevant. I like to watch out for my fellow kunoichi.”

Yugao smiles at her gently when Riko gives her a completely lost look.

“When are you cleared to train again?” she asks. “I’m stationed in the village until the Chuunin Exams are over.”

“I have the week off,” Riko answers, still confused. “So after that. Wait, Chuunin Exams are in Konoha this year?”

“Coming up next month,” Yugao confirms. “New graduates are rarely nominated, though. Your team would have to work very hard to impress Kakashi-senpai enough to convince him.”

Even as exhausted as she is, Riko feels a spark of excitement. Chuunin Exams! They might get a promotion! No more D-ranks!

Then reality catches up with her and she remembers how her one non-D-rank went. How far she’s outclassed chakra-wise. That her team might be disbanded if one of them does make Chuunin. That’s not to mention Kakashi-sensei possibly being reassigned.

Riko likes her team. It’s a good team for the most part! Plus, she’s nowhere near ready for a promotion.

Chuunin are supposed to be able to lead teams. Riko just barely survived the last week. She can’t
be responsible for other people’s survival.

“I don’t think I want to take them yet,” she says finally.

Yugao hums neutrally. “You may not have a choice, considering your teammates and your looks. It will be years before the exams are held in Konoha again, and I rather doubt you’ll be allowed to take them in a different village. Some may advise you strongly against waiting. You should be prepared.”

They’ve reached the Nara compound, and the kunoichi crouches down to let Riko slide off her back. “It was very nice to meet you properly, Riko-chan,” she says. “I look forward to training with you.”

Riko nods slowly, reeling from that last bit of advice. The warning that she might not have a choice. That can’t be right, can it?

“Yeah,” she answers slowly, cautiously. “Me too, Yugao-san.”

Yoshino is busy in the kitchen when Riko comes trudging in. Raises an eyebrow at her state and points at a chair.

“Food will be ready in a few,” she informs her. “Did you spend all day in your sleepwear?”

“Sensei kidnapped me from my bed,” Riko defends.

Her adoptive mother gives her a look. “And what does that teach you?”

Riko sighs. “To sleep in clothes I can fight in and to keep supplies on my body even while I rest.”

“Very good.” Yoshino nods. “Try to keep up your sensing during sleep as well.”

A bowl of soup lands in front of her. Riko begins eating dutifully. “I invited Sasuke for dinner,” she remembers. “I don’t think he’ll actually show up, but he might someday. Was gonna ask the others, too, but. Uh. Couldn’t walk that long.”

She's invited Naruto before, but for some reason, he always found an excuse not to come to her house. But maybe now will be different?

Yoshino gives her an approving smile. “Shikaku and I would both like to meet your teammates. Team is family, remember that, Riko.”

Riko smiles, something warm curling in her stomach that has nothing to do with soup. “Yeah,” she agrees softly. “Uh, this kunoichi helped me get home. Uzuki Yugao? She says she uses kenjutsu, too, and we might train together sometime?”

“Hm.” Yoshino hums, busying herself with cleaning the stove. “She’s quite capable, and I’m running out of things to teach you with the sword. It’s not my specialisation. You could learn a lot from her.”

“I’ll do my best,” Riko promises. “Can I ask something?”
“You can ask me anything.” Yoshino gives her an amused look.

“Okay.” Riko hesitates. “I heard the Chuunin Exams are taking place here soon.”

The woman pauses for a moment, then resumes her cleaning. “That is true, yes.”

“Do I have to take them?”

Yoshino sighs and sits down across from her, abandoning the stove. “It’s your choice, Riko. You can say no.” She fixes her with a serious look. “But it will be at least two years before the exams are held in a safe location again. Plus, your team is high-profile and this is a very public event — it will improve your status and that of the village if you make a good showing, which I know you will.” A pause of consideration before she adds, “And there’s the matter of your Uchiha teammate. His clan name alone will draw crowds.”

Riko frowns and looks at her hands. “What’s Sasuke got to do with anything?”

“In some villages, you’re required to sign up for the exam in teams of three, and Konoha is one of them. Many people will want your teammate to take part in this one, which means you and Uzumaki-kun will also have to.” Yoshino eyes her seriously. “I can’t tell what will happen. Nobody can force you to take these exams, and they’re not the only way to get promoted either. What I do know is that you’re capable and it will be a good experience in a more controlled environment than you’ll find on a mission.”

“You think I should take it?”

“I think there are a few weeks to go and you should rest. Make your decision when it becomes relevant. Your sensei might not even nominate you.” Riko’s adoptive mother eyes her shrewdly. “Do you have other questions?”

Finished with her soup, Riko leans back, frowning. “Yugao said something. About kunoichi being different from shinobi.” She gives her mother an uncomfortable look. “And the training being insufficient, or something.”

“Ah.” Yoshino, too, leans back. “I see.”

“What does that mean?”

Yoshino frowns heavily before she seems to come to a decision and looks at Riko seriously. “It means that our system favours those who are privileged. You have noticed preferential treatment towards clan children during your education, I’m sure.”

Riko nods.

Wasn’t like it was subtle. But it seemed sensible, to divide the students up by the level of prior training.

Still, it did rub her the wrong way that clan kids got free passes for yelling during classes or brawling when those from civilian families got scolded for the same thing.

Then there was a difference in lesson quality. Moving up the class ranks, Riko had noticed that as well. Had played catch-up for almost all of her school life.

“Shinobi are divided in categories,” Yoshino’s voice cuts into her reflections, “Clan and not-clan. Stemming from a shinobi family or a civilian one. Certain specialisations are regarded higher than
others. And gender matters as well. There are many that value kunoichi less than male shinobi.”

Riko blinks at her in confusion. “Like… saying girls can’t fight?”

Yoshino chuckles, but it’s not a joyful sound. “At the most base stage, yes. It goes a little deeper than that. Things have gotten better since I was a genin, but not to a satisfying level. Stagnating right now.” She shoots Riko a more reassuring smile. “Perhaps your generation will change that, who knows. You’ve got a lot of potential and a very promising work ethic, Ino-chan is quite capable and motivated…” Her voice trails off. “As for advanced kunoichi training — you’re eleven. It’s neither appropriate nor relevant right now.”

She stands and goes back to the stove. This is clearly all she’s willing to say, and it’s only opened up new questions.

“You look tired. Go rest.”

It only occurs to Riko later that she never did get an answer what kind of training she’s neglecting.

———
Riko is curled up on her therapist’s comfy sofa two days later, nibbling on cookies. “Does it really matter so much whether you’re female or not as a shinobi?” she asks. “They always told us in kunoichi classes that girls are just as strong as boys.”

She feels a little guilty about asking when Yoshino had reminded her about inappropriate and not relevant after Riko tried to get more details out of her, but not guilty enough to let it stop her. How can it not be relevant, when Riko’s a kunoichi herself?

Yamanaka Fuji hums, sipping her tea. “It matters less for some and more for others.”

Riko looks at her questioningly.

“For members of certain clans, it doesn’t matter at all. The Inuzuka are an example, or the Aburame.” She tilts her head. “Members of the big clans are generally spared the worst sexism, at least from outsiders. Nobody wants to risk offending someone with a powerful clan at their back. I suppose it’s worse for women from civilian families… especially since among civilians, the term kunoichi still carries certain rather antiquated implications.”

“Like what?” Riko asks, frowning.

“Like them all being trained in the art of seduction and manipulation,” Fuji replies bluntly. “Many civilians feel that sex should be reserved for the marriage bed. Women’s purpose in general is to get married, is the common opinion.”

Riko stares at her, cookie forgotten. Cheeks heating up at the mention of sex, but ignoring that…

“But that’s so… I mean. What if I don’t want to get married? It’s not their business!”

“It’s not,” Fuji agrees. “You’ll find that traditional societal values are incompatible with a shinobi’s, and especially a kunoichi’s, lifestyle.”

Riko frowns. “So civilians don’t like kunoichi? I don’t… I never noticed that.”

Mostly she just gets comments on how she’s cute and how lucky she is to be on a team with Sasuke.

Okay, there’s the occasional incident where she’ll get yelled at by the less friendly clients on D-rank missions, but that’s not because of her being a kunoichi. Right?

…but they rarely yell at the boys, and never at Sasuke. It's almost always her.

“Not all kunoichi,” Fuji answers. “Medics are exempt, being a healer is compatible with traditional feminine values. Clan kunoichi face it less, too, people will overlook a lot when the women in question are related to influential people with deep pockets. Plus, clan characteristics make them unsuitable for seduction and infiltration, and then there’s bloodline issues… but the clanless kunoichi face a lot of prejudice.”

Riko shivers uneasily. She’s not clanless, but she used to be. And what if the Nara hadn’t adopted her?

“You don’t have to worry,” her shrink says gently. “Your father’s the jounin commander, and your colouring is striking enough that clan heritage is simply assumed by anyone who looks at you.”
“But what about everyone else?” Riko stares at her. “It’s not fair. And, I mean, do kunoichi really, uh, do *that* for missions?”

It came up in Icha Icha, but those are *fictional*, and also, the people always fell in love before anything ever happened.

“Have sex?” Fuji asks bluntly. “Sometimes, yes. A lot more than that goes into seduction, though. Reading the target, the situation, playing your role. Gaining their trust, distracting them so thoroughly they won’t notice anything but you, making them forget what the word secret means…” She pauses. “You’re uncomfortable.”

“It’s just.” Riko is so utterly confused. “Sex is for when you’re in love, and…”

Fuji sighs softly. “Riko. You don’t need to be in love to have sex.”

“I… what?”

The blonde woman sets her cup down and leans forward and gives her a serious look. “Sex and love have only to do with each other in that it’s nicer to do it with someone you trust and whose touch you enjoy. Friends can have sex. Strangers can, too. What matters is that you’re comfortable and safe.”

The clock on the wall ticks away for quite a while before Riko can digest that. “I. But. As a *mission*?”

“Seduction is a mission.” Fuji pours herself new tea and takes a sip. “So are assassination, extermination, infiltration, and espionage. A shinobi who has the skills will be asked to use them.”

She looks at a speechless Riko and softens.

“You’re eleven and a genin. It’s not going to matter to your career for a long time. These missions are also not given to the untrained. And before any training is offered to you, there will be careful consideration of the individual’s personality and suitability. Even then, it’s simply that — an offer. Nobody is *obligated* to take it.” Another awkward pause before she murmurs, “This bothers you.”

“I’m…” Riko’s voice trails off. “I don’t. It’s.”

“No hurry,” Fuji tells her gently.

“It just makes me feel so *stupid!*” Riko bursts out. “I don’t — I don’t know anything, even after Yoshino-san told me about sex and stuff!”

“You’re eleven,” Fuji reminds her again. “Learning is a part of life.” She smiles at Riko. “And knowing about sex is an entirely different thing from figuring out what you’re comfortable with.”

“I just don’t understand,” Riko mumbles. “I thought you were supposed to be in love.”

“Riko.” Fuji gives her a serious look. “That’s how it normally works, yes, but it doesn’t for everyone, especially not shinobi. Sex isn’t necessarily the act of consummating a romantic relationship. It can simply be a recreational activity between friends. Stress relief, physical comfort… and it can be a weapon, yes. We’re shinobi, and we use what we have at our disposal.”

Riko looks down at her hands.

She’s already taken a life, using a mere piece of clothing. Even if she didn’t mean to, she *did*.
“You’re young,” her therapist says quietly. “I’m answering your questions because you asked, but you need to understand that right now, it isn’t relevant to you. In an ideal world, you won’t have sex for at least three to four years, and I’ll question the character of anyone who’ll ask you before that age. That said, if you never want to have sex at all, that’s fine. And if you never fall in love in a romantic sense, that’s also fine. What matters is that you’re happy and comfortable in your future physical and emotional relationships.”

A few minutes of silence follow, during which Riko attempts to sort her confused thoughts out.

Mostly, she realises after a while, she’s relieved. Because the whole romance circus was bothering her. The thing with Fumio, the constant fangirl drama Sasuke has to deal with, Ino’s rambles about boys.

Riko doesn’t have to deal with that. She can just go on as she has, do her thing.

Fuji clears her throat. “It might reassure you to read up on the regulations of mission assignment. You’ll find they’re quite thorough, covering everything from minimum age and rank, training requirements, and the intel that must be disclosed to the operative before they can be assigned any such mission.” She pauses. “Additionally, there are laws that protect you if you refuse to do a mission on grounds of personal beliefs and morals.”

That sounds a whole other can of worms. “I’ll read up on it,” Riko agrees quietly. “Can we talk about something else now?”

“Yes, please.”

Riko is rather proud of herself for thinking ahead and putting her study materials into storage before her therapy session.

Sasuke’s flabbergasted face on beholding the small mountain of books, scrolls, and notes she withdraws would be kind of funny, if Riko weren’t a little insulted on behalf of medics everywhere.

“What,” she asks, “You thought this would be easy?”

He gives her a blank look.

“Medical ninjutsu is one of the most difficult disciplines a shinobi can learn,” Riko informs him, eyes narrowing. “You’ll study your ass off for years, you’ll be asked to stay behind while others fight because medics need to stay alive to heal others, and you’ll draw people from the brink of death and not be thanked for it because it’s your job. It’s not something you can half-ass or learn on the side while you train cool stuff.”

A tense silence follows her little rant.

“Sorry,” she apologises finally. “I really wanted to be a medic. They kicked me out because my chakra’s weird. I’m still mad about it.”
“I can handle it,” Sasuke snaps at her. “Shut up.”

Riko gives him a long, sceptical look. Her teammate answers with a stare of deepest loathing, grabs a scroll, and throws himself into an armchair to read. Completely ignoring her existence.

Well. At least he’s motivated. She grabs a scroll of her own, but can’t focus.

“Hey,” she speaks up. “Do you have the legal framework for mission assignments somewhere here?”

Sasuke grunts. “Why.”

Riko shrugs. “Some stuff my therapist said I should read for reassurance? And honestly, after how the last mission turned out, I do want to know how misclassified missions are handled after they’re over.”

“Hn.” He stands up and walks out of the room, and Riko scrambles to follow him. Down the corridor, up multiple sets of stairs, and holy crap.

Sasuke’s house has a huge attic, and it’s filled with stuff to the brim. Stacks and chests full of weapons, scrolls, piles of clothes that look like they’ve never been worn. Jars with random items inside, she sees one filled with sand, another with cat-shaped buttons. And a quarter of the whole place is all books, crammed in shelves, stacked in chests, or piled in stacks.

It’s all terribly dusty, though she can smell that Sasuke visits frequently enough, and there are footprints on the filthy floor where he’d gone to retrieve things in the past.

He gestures at the library portion of the attic. “Somewhere in there.”

Right. Riko eyes the mess dubiously. There’s definitely no system to how the books are shelved.

She can always look this stuff up at home, but she’s here now and the attic just makes her itch. It’s probably not all stuff that was used by people that are long dead, but the books and scrolls… some of the weapons…

It’s creepy up here.

“Thanks,” she says. “Do you mind if I sort the books a little?”

Sasuke shrugs stiffly. “Whatever. When you’re not on rest anymore.”

And he stalks out of the attic, leaving Riko alone in the gloom. She swallows and steps over to the books, boggling at the sheer quantity. From Physics essays to children’s books, there seemed to be some of everything.

Not ordered in the least, unfortunately, so it takes a lot of rummaging before Riko finds what she’s searching for — a dusty, yellowed book that looks like it eats smaller books for breakfast. She blows some of the dust away and makes her way back downstairs, shooting a long glance at the remaining books.

Later.

Sasuke doesn’t look up when Riko sits back down with the law book and begins reading her way through the yellowed pages. He’s too busy glaring at a list of chakra exhaustion symptoms.
It’s a little surreal, being in the hospital without an actual injury.

Also surreal to be talking to the medic who years ago told her point-blank that they couldn’t keep her in the program because of her chakra being odd, without actually informing her how it was odd.

It was before she knew about the whole inter-dimensional relocation thing, which she still doesn’t like to think about because it just brings up uncomfortable questions and suspicions. She did wonder if her weird chakra had anything to do with what she remembers her parents could do, but there was no way to find out.

Still isn’t, really.

Riko is pretty sure that the magic her parents wielded so gracefully is defective when it comes to her. Only when she’s upset does she see the evidence of its existence, but the sheer scale on which it shows is frightening to the point that she’d rather not have it at all. She’s got zero control and it actually killed someone in Nami no Kuni.

But right now, it doesn’t seem to matter because Ikeda-sensei is excitedly rambling about taking her back into the program and also making her his apprentice. She stares at him in a daze.

“What a marvel!” he’s saying. “This chakra of yours — it kept Sarutobi Asuma alive and stable, locked in a stasis until he was transported here! The potential applications… we must explore this!”

Riko opens her mouth and closes it again. Just yesterday, she’d told Sasuke that she’d wanted to be a medic. And today, the chance is just handed to her. The same thing that got her kicked out is now her way back in.

Ikeda is gushing again, and it’s so strange. She’s never seen him be anything but stern before. “If we can figure out how you did it, oh, and we need to find out the limits. Yes, of course. Goodness, so many tests we’ll need to run, I must admit I’m rather excited, my dear.”

“Tests?” Riko repeats confusedly.

Ikeda waves her off. “Oh, nothing too invasive. We’ll map your chakra system, extract some chakra for analysis, will have to draw some blood and bone marrow, that’s all. Test if we can replicate what you did with Asuma, then expand on the results, see what else your chakra can do…” He makes a note on his clipboard. The file there looks brand new and has a photo of her on it.

She has a really uneasy feeling about all this. On the one hand — she would love to be a medic.

On the other…

“You said full-time apprenticeship?” she asks apprehensively. “I can’t leave my team. We’re preparing for the Chuunin Exams.”

Well, would prepare for them, once their week of leave was over.
“Your team?” Ikeda blinks at her. “They’ll find a replacement. It’s no big deal, though I commend your character for thinking about them. Very considerate of you. I’ll see to it personally that they’ll be given a capable kunoichi to replace you.”

Riko stares at him, brain momentarily fuzzy before the words sink in. “Excuse me?!” she demands. “You can’t be serious! The Chuunin Exams are coming up, I’m not leaving my team!”

Ikeda frowns lightly. “If you’re concerned about the difficulty of getting promoted as a medical shinobi, I suppose I can pull some strings. You’ll be chuunin within the year, provided you work hard.”

Her mouth has dropped open. She jumps up from her chair. “I don’t want to leave my team!”

The medic huffs. “Calm yourself. Do you not understand the gift you’ve been given? The importance of what I’m trying to do? The difference you could make to this hospital, to Konoha? Whatever your genin team is doing, I assure you, here is where you will shine. They’re only holding you back, girl.”

“They’re not!” Riko yells, and her blood is buzzing now, but she doesn’t care. “They’re my friends and I’m staying with them!”

Ikeda jumps up himself and towers over her. Riko takes a step backwards. “Foolish girl! Cease your shouting! Do you not understand the chance I’m giving you?”

“What is wrong with you?!” she shouts. “You kicked me out! Then I do something cool and you suddenly want me to quit my team to be your good little apprentice, and I’m supposed to be grateful about it? Fuck you!”

The window of Ikeda’s office flies open by itself and Riko wastes no time flinging herself outside. Keeps running until she finds herself alone in some abandoned training ground, breathing hard.

Her fist impacts a tree and it shatters apart. Riko jump back in surprise, staring with wide eyes first at the heap of splinters, then at her unharmed but slightly glowing knuckles.

She keeps staring and her hand keeps glowing even when she opens it and shakes her fingers out.

Riko makes a high-pitched noise when someone behind her clears his throat. She stuffs her hand into her sweater’s pocket and punches right through the fabric.

“Relax,” Shikamaru’s voice says. “It’s just me.”

She turns and forces a grin. “Oh. Hi.”

He gives her a long stare. “Heard you yelling and then saw you tearing out of the hospital like you had hunter-nin chasing you.”

“Right,” she says weakly, “You take medicine lessons in the hospital now.”

“Uh-huh,” he confirms, eyeing her hand until she hides it behind her back. “You’re not supposed to be running. No strenuous activity.”

It’s got to be a conspiracy, everyone being up in her business about resting. First Sasuke, now Shikamaru.

“Are you going for actual medic specialisation or just field medicine?” she asks.
Field medics are more focused on practical lessons. Trained to treat wounds quickly and efficiently to keep comrades alive in the field. It isn’t like the in-depth training the medics at the hospital have to finish — field medicine is patch job work.

On the other hand, field medics have more freedom to fight and time to train other skills.

…might be a good option for Sasuke, but with the way his kitchen had been overflowing with study materials, she’d just thought it obvious that he was going for the full medic ride. Maybe she should ask about that?

“Field medicine,” Shikamaru answers. Then jerks his head at her torn pocket. “You need help with that?”

“You have lessons,” she points out.

“It was almost lunch break anyway,” he shrugs, walking over. Riko jumps back because what if she hurts him.

Shikamaru sighs and sits on the grass. Points a the ground in front of him. “Sit, you troublesome girl.”

Riko dithers for a moment, but sits eventually. A decent distance away. Well out of touching range.

“Show me,” he orders, and after a moment of hesitation, Riko pulls her glowing hand from behind her back. “This the first time it happened?”

Riko cringes. “Not like this.”

Her brother rubs a hand over his face. “Okay. What is it supposed to do?”

She’d like to sink into the ground right about now. “I don’t know. It’s… nothing like what my parents could do.” She looks away from his sharp eyes. “Something’s wrong with it, I’m pretty sure.”

Shikamaru sighs, and for a moment he just looks tired, but it passes and he’s all business and seriousness again. He hasn’t been sleepy or lazy since she found him in Nami no Kuni. “What’s it done so far?” he asks.

Slowly, she recounts the previous incidents. Glosses over Kakashi’s test and only hints at her first kill, and she’s sure he notices it but he doesn’t pry. But the Fumio thing, the time she was told the truth after her graduation to genin, and what happened just now in Ikeda’s office — those events she can talk about in more detail.

“So every time it happened so far,” Shikamaru says slowly, “it was when you were scared, angry, or feeling trapped.”

She grimaces and nods. “I don’t like it,” she admits quietly, staring down at her still glowing hand. “It shouldn’t — I don’t think it’s good to have something this dangerous being activated by feeling… by feeling like that.”

He makes a considering noise. “Kids tend to activate their kekkei genkai in high-stress situations. Self-defence mechanism. Control comes later.”

Riko blinks at him.
Can it really be called a kekkei genkai? It’s different — she’s not from here, her thing isn’t from here, so the rules don’t apply, do they?

Not like she can explain that, though, and she doesn’t exactly have any other information to work with. Treating it as a kekkei genkai is as good a starting point as any.

“Troublesome,” Shikamaru mutters under his breath. “Fine. Are you okay with people knowing about this?”

Riko jolts and looks at him wide-eyed. He stares back patiently.

“I…” she begins and trails off. “No.”

How could she be okay with word getting out that she has some freaky kekkei genkai but zero control over it? No. Absolutely not.

“Sensible,” her brother by adoption comments. “Shouldn’t spread information about your abilities around. Gives you an edge.”

**Abilities.** Right. Like she can actually use it. She’d rather be rid of it altogether.

“First things first,” Shikamaru continues. “Turning that off. How did it happen last time?”

“It was just a quick thing then,” Riko mumbles. “Boom, done, gone.”

He nods. They both look at her glowing hand. “And you’re calmer now,” he points out. “But it’s still going. Maybe if we distract you? Or we could try breathing exercises. It should go away if you relax.”

She gives him a doubtful look.

“It’s not like it’ll go away if you ask nicely,” Shikamaru points out. “Just try.”

Riko shrugs. “Okay.” She looks at her hand. “Please stop?”

Shikamaru huffs. “Not what I-”

He falls silent when her hand glows a little brighter and then goes back to normal. It feels tingly now. Oddly sensitive, and when she pokes it — **ow**.

“Huh.” Riko blinks, then looks at Shikamaru blankly. “That was easy.” She flexes her fingers. Crap, that **hurts**.

“You are so troublesome,” he grumbles. “Try turning it on again.”

Her mouth drops open. “I only just got it to go away!”

“And how will you learn to control it without using it, huh?” He gives her a deadpan stare. “Sometime today, sister.”

Huffing at him, Riko glares at her hand. “Please do that again.”

Nothing happens. Riko stifles her disappointment while Shikamaru groans. “Of course it couldn’t be that easy. Fine, we’ll work on it later.” He eyes her sharply. “If you want this kept secret, you need something to explain away the weird things that happen around you. The explosions, fine, no problem, you draw your own explosive tags all the time, just use them more frequently and people
will draw their own conclusions.” He pauses, frowning.

“The window today didn’t explode, it just flew open,” Riko points out, grimacing. “I guess... I could learn chakra strings? To explain that away?”

“Good idea.” Shikamaru rubs a hand over his face before he flops over and lays on the grass with his arms spread out on other side of him. Stares up at the sky blankly.

Riko scoots over carefully. “You okay, Shika?”

He makes a grunting noise. “Not really.”

“Do you, uhm.” She pauses, not entirely sure what she’s doing. “Do you want to talk about it?”

His answer is a bleak look. “What’s there to talk about? Sensei overestimated himself, got arrogant, and then nearly got us all killed and himself crippled. You gave yourself Stage Four chakra exhaustion to save him. Then you got attacked and both you and Ino were forced to kill while the rest of us were away.”

Riko winces, searching for anything to say.

Shikamaru heaves a sigh and looks away, focusing on the clouds above. “If you want to help, give me a hug.”

Okay. That she can do. She stretches out next to him on the ground. Rests her head on his shoulder and carefully wraps her arms around Shikamaru. Some tension drains from him and he pulls her in tighter.

They stay like that, and neither of them mention that he’s skipping an entire day of lessons just to cuddle her in an unused training ground.
Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

This was one of my favourite chapters to write :D

There's a character appearing here who belongs to the light of my life, my darling wife @EmptySurface, from her incredible and mindblowing fic Hear the Silence. I have her whole-hearted permission to use him.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The day after the disastrous and insulting offer from Ikeda, Riko gets up early. Chokes down her awful-tasting 'Will definitely cure your chakra exhaustion, you'll see' protein shakes before leaving the house.

She has a jounin sensei to track down.

There’s every chance he’s still asleep at this hour, which means he can’t run away. She just has to find his address first.

Riko tries Genma’s apartment first, but he doesn’t answer her knocks. Either he’s still sleeping or not home. Not on a mission, though, she’s pretty sure about that. He usually notifies her beforehand, though sometimes he gets sent out on short-notice and can’t do so.

The Chuunin Exams are coming up, though, and since Riko heard about it, she’s begun to notice that the jounin presence in the village is noticeably higher than she’s used to.

It’s even more obvious when she enters the jounin lounge. The last time she was here, just a handful of people were present. Now, it’s crowded, and she feels eyes following her progress through the various rooms.

Someone steps in her way. A man dressed in dark blue from head to toe, a bandanna covering his hair and sunglasses over his eyes, gives her a stern look. “This location is reserved for shinobi of rank tokubetsu jounin and above, little girl. You aren’t supposed to be here.”

Riko blinks up at him in consternation, annoyed at his patronising tone.

“You should be in the Academy,” he lectures, righting his glasses. “In fact, I shall escort you. Skipping is irresponsible and shouldn’t be tolerated-”

“Whoa, Ebisu,” a vaguely familiar voice interrupts, and a hand lands on the man’s shoulder. It belongs to Gemma’s friend, Raidou. He’d been in Nami, too. “Cool down. Riko’s okay. She’s also a genin, did you overlook her hitae-ate or what?”

The guy flushes. “Well, her height-”

Riko is so tempted to kick his shin, but bad idea. “I’m looking for Kakashi-sensei or Genma,” she cuts in. “Do either of you know where they are?”

Raidou pushes Ebisu to the side and gives Riko a friendly look. “Haven’t seen Kakashi today, but
“Genma’s over there.” He points to where Genma’s sitting on a sofa, talking to a green-clad man who’s standing on his hands.

Riko squints.

Nope, that’s actually happening.

Okay then.

“Thanks, Raidou-san,” she says gratefully, sketches a quick bow, and shuffles over to Genma. Passes Yugao on the way and gives her a small wave, which is returned.

Genma notices her approach and looks away from his friend.

“Hey, kid. What’s up?” He pats the space next to him, and Riko sits down with a small sigh of relief. Stupid chakra exhaustion. “This is my old genin teammate, Gai.”

“Old!” the man exclaims, hopping to his feet and giving Riko the cheesiest thumbs-up she’s ever seen, with the addition of a grin so gleaming she suspects genjutsu involvement. “I assure you, I am in the Springtime Of My Youth, young kunoichi! It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance!”

Riko blinks at him, taking a while to digest the vehemence of that statement. He’s so sincere, it feels like a brick to the face.

“It’s nice to meet you, too, Gai-san,” she answers then, giving him a tentative smile. He beams at her like she handed him his weight in gold.

“And Gai, this is my friend Nara Riko,” Genma continues, like this is all perfectly normal. “She’s on Kakashi’s genin team.”

Gai’s smile intensifies. “How wonderful, to meet my Eternal Rival’s student and teammate’s friend! Truly a glorious day! I shall run four-hundred-"

“Yes, yes,” Genma waves him off while Riko stares owlishly at the man.

Rival? What?

“What did you want, kid?” Genma asks her. “You alright?”

She pulls herself together, flushing at being caught staring. So rude. Yoshino would scold her. “I’m looking for sensei, actually,” she says quickly. “Ikeda-sensei made me an offer to become his apprentice yesterday.”

Genma frowns, and Gai’s enthusiasm is dialled down by a lot suddenly.


“Yes, well, I’m not taking it.” Riko scowls down at her hands, still so angry. “He wanted me to leave my team so he could do tests with my chakra, blood, and bone marrow. I said no, he got really pushy, told me my team could replace me with any kunoichi, that he’d get me a promotion within the year and he was giving me the chance of a lifetime.” She pauses. “I told him the F-word and jumped out the window.”

When she looks up at Genma again, he’s staring at her, his face blank. “Ah,” he says. “Good job.”
“And now,” Riko adds firmly, “I’m going to find Kakashi-sensei and tell him what happened, because he’s my jounin sensei and I don’t think Ikeda talked to him about apprenticing me, which is against the rules. Also, sensei will kick his butt.”

“Mm,” Genma hums absentely and stands abruptly. “Well, I have work to do. Gai, do you mind helping Riko find Kakashi?”

Gai, who was staring thoughtfully at Riko, snaps to attention and gives another blinding thumbs-up. Riko blinks owlishly. Are those... waves in the background? “I shall help young Riko-san find her teacher! If I can’t, I shall do A Thousand Push-Ups on my pinky finger! If I fail at that, I shall walk A Thousand Laps around the village on my hands! And if I-”

“Sometime today, Gai.” Genma pokes his friend’s shoulder before he grins down at the dazed Riko. “Don’t worry about anything, kid. See you later.”

“Have a nice day?” Riko asks, and then she’s alone with Gai. Plus the jounin crowd, some of whom are definitely listening in.

This is totally fine. Everything is great. Not awkward at all.

“Yosh!” Gai strikes a pose. “Let us go, then, young Riko-san, to find My Eternal Rival!”

He gives her an expectant look.

Okay then. He’s Genma’s friend, so this should be fine. Riko gets up from the sofa and, because Gai is still in his pose all by himself, experimentally punches up in the air and adds a determined, “Okay!”

Gai gives her a beaming smile that makes her feel ten feet tall and warm and gooey inside, so it was definitely the right action. She grins back, deciding that Gai is totally alright in her book. His chakra feels nice, too, so warm and friendly.

“Forgive me, young Riko-san!” he says. “I couldn’t help but notice that your Youth is diminished by exhaustion, and we may have quite a walk in front of us! May I have permission to carry you?”

“Er.” Riko shrugs. She is exhausted “Sure, okay? Thanks. And just Riko’s fine.”

Instead of crouching down and letting her climb on his back, Gai picks her up and sits her on his broad shoulders, which. “Whoa,” she breathes, staring, because this is how tall people see the world. Wow. “This is awesome. Thank you, Gai-san!”

He laughs, a deep, booming thing that goes through his whole body. “You are very welcome, young Riko! Let us depart now!”

They get a lot of odd looks when Gai walks out of the building with her on his shoulders, but the moment they recognise Gai, they seem to shrug it off and just go about their business. Even when the man pretty much shuffles through doors on his knees so Riko won’t get knocked off of him. It’s pretty fun.

“So, uh,” she speaks up after he’s fallen into a light jog, clearly knowing where he’s going. “You’re rivals with Kakashi-sensei?”

Gai grasps at his chest, over his heart. “He has not spoken about me? Kakashi! How could you!” Riko stares down at his face in horror because those are tears, what does she do. Also, wow, those
are some bushy eyebrows. But then he composes himself and chuckles a little. “As expected of my rival! That hip attitude of his…” He focuses back on Riko. “Indeed I am! We have been rivals for a long time. Forty-eight wins, forty-nine losses… he is stronger than I! But I shall not rest until I have caught up!”

“I don’t know,” Riko muses. “I mean, forty-eight wins is amazing, and the numbers are really close? Can’t be that much of a difference in levels.“

He laughs. “An insightful thing to say, young Riko! Kakashi is teaching you well!”

“Uh-huh,” Riko agrees. “He’s pretty great. So you two are friends?”

“Indeed!” He spreads his arms. “Friends! Rivals! Comrades, Partners! We have known each other for a long time, and he has made my life infinitely richer and more enjoyable! I am glad and honoured to have met him!”

She blinks, taking all that in. “Wow. You really like sensei, huh?”

Gai chuckles and shoots her a warm look. “I do.”

They reach a cheap-looking apartment complex not far from one of Konoha’s cemeteries, and Riko looks around curiously when Gai strides up to the door. “Kakashi-sensei lives here?”

“He has an apartment here, yes,” Gai answers, entering the complex and jogging up the stairs until they’re on the third of five floors. He knocks on the door of an apartment at the end of the hallway, Riko now on his back instead of sitting on his shoulders because the ceiling is low. “Kakashi, My Eternal Rival! Your student is in need of your assistance!”

“Maybe he’s asleep,” Riko speculates when there’s no answer. It’s still early in the morning.

Gai hums, produces a key, and unlocks the entrance door, Riko blinking at the casual evidence that he’s good enough friends with her sensei that he can enter his apartment uninvited.

It’s empty inside, though. No Kakashi, very little furniture, but bunches of pillows and blankets, and it smells a lot like dog.

They leave the apartment complex and Gai heads in another direction, clearly having a good idea where he’s going. On the way, he stops at a flower shop and gets two nice bouquets.

“Do you want one, too, Riko?” he asks.

She blinks, momentarily thrown. “Uh, you really don’t have to.”

“I want to!” he answers easily, considering the selection and then pointing out a bouquet of daffodils. It looks nice and cheerful. Riko can’t quite remember if daffodils mean respect or friendship, only that the leaves and especially the bulb are poisonous, but either way, her adoptive mother will be happy about getting some flowers.

“Those are nice,” she agrees. “Okay. Thank you, Gai-san.”

She seals the bouquet away after he gives them to her and then they’re on their way again. A few minutes later, she realises where they’re going — the memorial stone.

That explains the flowers, she guesses.

Kakashi-sensei is standing in front of the memorial like he was doing the first time Riko
encountered him. He doesn’t look up when they approach, and Gai doesn’t call out. Just walks up to the stone, coming to stand beside Kakashi silently, and lifts Riko off of his shoulders.

She follows his example when he places the bouquets he got on the ground in front of the memorial. One is dogflowers, the other a mix of asters and anemones.

For a few minutes the three of them stand in silence before Kakashi steps back and clears his throat. “Hello, Gai.” His eye crinkle at Riko when he turns to her. “And hello, Riko. I wasn’t aware you two knew each other.”

“Your Youthful Student and I met just this morning, my hip rival!” Gai gives Kakashi a beaming grin and a thumbs-up. “She was looking for you, and my dear teammate Genma asked me to assist!”

“Oh?” Kakashi sensei’s hand ruffles her hair, and he crouches down in front of Riko with his eye doing the smile thing. “And what does my precious student need her dear old sensei for?”

Riko looks up at him. “Precious student needs sensei to kick someone’s butt,” she tells him solemnly.

His hand grows a little heavier on her head. “What did they do?”

Riko swallows. “Want to pull me from the team to be a research subject,” she whispers, and where she was righteously furious before, now she just feels more sick than anything. “Said I was replaceable.”

Kakashi keeps smiling, and there’s something very reassuring about it. He sits down on the spot and pulls her with him to huddle against his side. “Maa, Riko-chan, why don’t you tell me the whole story,” he prompts. “And sensei will take care of it all.”

So Riko takes a deep breath, orders her thoughts, and recounts the entire conversation. Paraphrases some parts because she doesn’t remember the exact wording, she should really work on memorising things better.

Her teacher listens to it all, occasionally asking for clarification or context about her medical training and the end thereof, and she can tell he’s as angry as she is, yet not once does his arm around her shoulders tighten or his smile waver.

Gai is listening in, but the way he’s facing the memorial instead of them gives the illusion of privacy, and she doesn’t mind if he hears anyway. He already heard it this morning. Probably along with several other jounin.

“And then I ran out of there,” she finishes, frowning.

Kakashi ruffles her hair. “I’ll take care of it.”

“Okay,” Riko agrees quietly, ducking her head. “How?”

Because she may have asked him to kick Ikeda’s butt, but. That’s not how it works. Violence doesn’t solve the problem, and then Kakashi might get in trouble, and there are rules and stuff…

Beating someone up is what kids do. And they’re not, none of them are, legally at least.

Kakashi’s eye blinks at her. “I’ll file an official complaint.”
Riko gives him a blank look.

“In fact!” He stands up. “I’ll do it right now.”

“A complaint?” she asks incredulously. “That’s…”

Kakashi smiles down at her. “It all depends on who you complain to, Riko-chan!” he tells her cheerfully before he turns to Gai. “Would you mind taking Riko to Fuji for her appointment, Gai?”

Riko doesn’t actually have an appointment today.

Gai turns and gives Kakashi a beaming grin, and Riko again realises with horror that tears are streaming down his face. “Kakashi! Your love for your disciple is beautiful and heart-warming! I shall let it inspire me to show my own students the love I feel for them! And if I fail, I shall carry them on my back a thousand miles!”

“Gai,” Kakashi prompts patiently.

The tears disappear in favour of the gleaming smile and thumbs-up. “I shall bring Riko to Fuji-san right away!”

“Thank you, Gai,” Kakashi tells him and picks Riko up to hand her over like some kind of helpless kitten. Then she’s sitting on Gai’s shoulders again and Kakashi ambles away with a lazy wave.

Gai sets Riko down in front of her therapist’s house.

“I must be going now, young Riko!” he announces regretfully. “My students await my arrival! I wish you the best of luck, it was a delight to meet you! May your Youth shine brightly!”

“…yours, too?” Riko manages, still taken aback by the force of his enthusiasm and sincerity. “Have a good day, Gai-san.”

He beams at her, teeth gleaming and his thumb up, and disappears.

Riko blinks because was that a sunset in his background? But then she gets her bearings back and rings the doorbell, hoping that Fuji won’t mind that she’s here without an appointment.

The door isn’t answered by Fuji but by a tall man with hair more grey than blond. His eyes are the pupil-lacking Yamanaka-blue. He gives her a mildly curious look. “Good morning,” he says. “Can I help you?”

She stifles the surprise. “Um, yeah, good morning,” she answers. “Sensei sent me to see Fuji? I don’t have an appointment today, though.”

“My daughter is with a patient right now,” the man — Fuji’s father! — informs her calmly. “She should be done soon, however. Please come in.”

He steps back, and well, it’d be rude to refuse an invitation and Kakashi had told Gai deliver her to her therapist’s house for a reason, so Riko slips into the house, the smell of breakfast hitting her nose. “Sorry to intrude,” she mutters politely, slipping off her shoes. “I’m Nara Riko, it’s nice to
“Yamanaka Toge,” he returns. “Have you eaten breakfast already?”

“Yeah,” she fibs. Riko did have her awful protein shakes. They don’t exactly count as a meal, but they fill her up so much that nothing else goes down. She was planning on eating a real breakfast later.

Yamanaka Toge nods. “You can keep me company while I eat.”

Riko nods and follows him to the kitchen. Sits down on the chair he indicates and doesn’t protest when he puts a plate in front of her.

“Help yourself,” he says, making a small gesture at the spread of food.

“Thank you, sir,” she mumbles and does as told. They eat in silence for a while.

Toge is the one to break the silence. “You’re one of Maito Gai’s students?” he asks.

He must have heard the man outside. Wasn’t like Gai was being quiet.

“No,” she replies. “I’m with Team Seven, our sensei is Hatake Kakashi.”

“I see.” Another bout of silence. Riko chews her rice slowly.

“Explains why I’m with Fuji, huh?” she mumbles awkwardly, because the silence is making her somewhat uncomfortable. “Since she’s his therapist, too.”

He hums. “She is. We’re very proud of her.”

“She’s great!” Riko says emphatically. “Really good at explaining things and putting me at ease and it’s really fun baking cookies together!”

“That’s good,” he comments. “Having a comfortable relationship with your therapist is very important.”

She nods along, even though she doesn’t quite get it, but she only just started having therapy. Understanding would probably come with time.

Toge starts clearing the table when she’s finished eating.

“Can I help?” Riko asks, feeling kind of guilty because she showed up uninvited and got served food and is being waited on.

“If you want,” he agrees easily, and she jumps in relief and starts doing the dishes while Toge puts away food, which she can’t assist with because Fuji is peculiar about how her fridge is ordered. When he’s done with that, he grabs a dish towel and they work side by side in silence.

“Thank you for your help,” he says when they’re done. “Has Fuji shown you the library yet?”

Riko shakes her head, and he motions for her to follow him down the hallway to a wooden door. The room behind it is spacious and bright. Shelves filled with scrolls and books line one wall, large windows overlooking a small garden another, couches and plant pots the rest. One corner has a large desk with a small pile of opened scrolls on it.

Toge gestures at the shelves. “Go ahead.”
He himself pulls a scroll from his pouch and sinks down in an armchair. Riko hesitates for a moment before she approaches a shelf. They’re all scrolls about plants, which is interesting, but she’s read a lot of those already, so she figures she can look at the other stuff first.

On the next shelf she finds *A Genin’s Guide To Promotion*.

Riko grimaces. Right. Chuunin Exams are coming up and her week off will be over the day after tomorrow. She needs to start figuring out how to train for the eventuality of being signed up for the exams.

No time like the present. Riko pulls the book from the shelf and ambles over to one of the couches relatively close to where Toge sits, but still a respectful distance between her and him.

She can just tell that she’ll hate this author by the end of the first page.

‘There are several ways for a genin to reach promotion. The most common is the successful completion of the Chuunin Exams [see pg. 34]. Genin who show the necessary qualities of a chuunin but are barred from taking part in the exams [list of reasons see pg. 37] may be promoted by the village administration. Finally, a genin may be field-promoted by a superior in high-stake situations [see pg. 156].’

Riko leafs through the pages until she reaches the section about the Chuunin Exams. Gulps at seeing how thick a chunk of the book it makes up.

But maybe… she checks out the list of reasons that’d potentially exclude her from the exams. It’s a bust, however — it’s mostly to do with non-combat specialisations and villages Konoha shinobi refuse to enter. With the exams being held in her own village and her decidedly not going into medicine, she’s got no ground to stand on if she does get signed up and wants to refuse.

To make matters worse, it turns out Konoha only lets genin sign up in teams of three. Which, okay, she knew that, and it’s reassuring not having to do it alone, but on the other hand if it weren’t for that rule she wouldn’t need to be stressing about the exams at all.

Since Sasuke definitely falls both into the People We Don’t Send Into Foreign Villages and People Who A Promotion Would Look Super Good On categories, she as his teammate is pretty much screwed.

So’s Naruto, actually. She’ll have to warn him, for all the good it’ll do — he’ll just be more excited than anything. Doesn’t mean she won’t tell him anyway.

Okay then. Looks like she’s doing this, after all.

“Um, Toge-san?” she speaks up timidly, and the man raises his head from his scroll to look at her. “Do you know the exact date the Chuunin Exams begin?”

He hums. “They’re scheduled to begin on the first of July. Nominations can be handed in during the week before.”

Riko mulls that over, frowning. It’s the end of May, she’ll have about a month to prepare. Less when she accounts for team training and missions. Her health needs consideration, too.

What skills can she reasonably acquire or increase during that amount of time? Maybe the book will have some tips for that?

“Thanks,” she tells Toge absently, already leafing through it again, and yep, her hunch was right.
She’s not all that happy with what she’s reading, because according to the author, aspiring chuunin need to show at least the beginnings of a specialisation. Not only that, but the showing a genin makes in the exams significantly influences their future career — demonstrate tactical skill and look forward to leading missions, exhibit expertise with traps and expect an increase in capture assignments.

So now she suddenly has to decide what kind of shinobi she wants to be and figure out how to look and act the part within four weeks, while still doing missions. No pressure at all.

At least it doesn’t require a specific specialisation — more like broad directions, the book conveniently providing a list for the reader. Things like tactics, combat, Intel, or medicine, and she can forget about all of those for various reasons.

Her eyes catch on stealth.

“You expect to be nominated for the Chuunin Exams?” Toge’s voice asks so peacefully that she doesn’t even startle at having her thoughts interrupted.

She looks up, finding him eyeing her curiously. “I hope not,” she answers.

He gives her a questioning look.

“No ready,” Riko explains, tapping her finger on the book. “But it might not be up to me, so I’m preparing.”

“Sensible,” Toge comments. “Some would say that would make you a good candidate for promotion. Why do you think you aren’t ready?”

She blinks at him in bafflement. “I’m… just not?”

His expectant stare and silence make that answer seem silly and inadequate.

Why doesn’t she want to be a chuunin? She was excited when she first heard about the exams. Chuunin get to do real ninja stuff.

Real ninja stuff didn’t work out well for her or anyone last time.

The moment that thought comes into her head, she can smell that woman burning again, hear her scream in agony, remember how her chakra felt in that moment.

The way it disappeared.

“Riko.”

And then after, holding the second shinobi in her chains, watching Ino drive a kunai into his throat.

“Riko,” the voice repeats sharply, and then Toge is crouching in front of her. “Breathe, child.”

She sucks in a shuddering breath and lets it out shakily.

“Well done. Again.” His tone brooks no argument, and there’s a hand on her wrist now, his fingers on her pulse.

Her breathing slowly normalises, but her heart is still beating far too hard.

“Where are we?” he asks her calmly, like this is all fine and normal.
“Konoha,” she chokes out. “Fuji’s house.”

“And why are you here?”

“Therapy.”

Toge leans back, looks at her seriously. “Was this your first flashback?”

Was that what it was? Riko nods, her hands clenching in her sleeves so she won’t feel the trembling of her fingers. “Killed someone.”

Saying it out loud makes it real, and the words hang in the air between them. She can taste the smoke on her tongue.

“A reality almost all shinobi have to face,” Toge informs her bluntly.

“I didn’t mean to kill her,” she whispers. “But with the other one, it was easy holding him down for Ino, and it went so fast, and I’d do it again, but I can’t get it out of my head, and they’re dead and I’m not sad.”

“You defended yourself and your teammate,” he says. “Of course you don’t.”

“Don’t even feel guilty!” She stares at him and her eyes sting. “I killed people and the only one I care about is me.”

He looks at her evenly. “You defended yourself and your teammate,” he says. “Of course you don’t.”

A hoarse, unintelligible noise tears itself from her throat. “I feel dirty. I feel different.”

“That only proves you’re human,” Toge tells her quietly. “It’s when you feel nothing that you need to worry.”

She stares at him in silence.

“Taking a life is a serious matter,” he continues. “Every shinobi deals with it differently. Some accept it as yet another part of life. Others try to forget.”

“I don’t want to forget,” Riko whispers.

“And there’s nothing wrong with that.” He considers her. “You need to find a healthy way of handling the memories, especially as more accumulate. As for the flashbacks, there are exercises that will help you pull yourself back to the present. Do you want me to teach them to you?”

She hesitates, and a part of her is pointing out that he’s not her official shrink, she should be doing this with Fuji, but he’s here and offering, and it feels like he gets it.

So the only thing she says is, “Okay.”
Where did Genma take off to? To do something entirely unrelated, I'm sure.

Yes, Gai talks in caps about especially youthful things.
Chapter 25

It’s Riko’s last day off and she finally scrounges up the energy to visit her best friend. Her physical state is still less than optimal, but she manages the stairs in his apartment building without having to sit down. It still winds her, but there’s no comparison to what this would have done to her body at the beginning of the week.

Since it’s morning, he’s actually still home when she knocks, his chakra bright and awake on the other side of the door, and she can smell the familiar scent of instant ramen.

The door opens and a pyjama-clad Naruto stares at her, his adorable nightcap still on his head, a cup of ramen in his hand. “Ricchan?” he asks. Then brightens. “Ricchan! You’re here!”

“Oh,” she greets. “Good morning.”

Naruto beams at her, sticky hand grabbing hers and pulling her inside. “I missed you! Come in! Let’s eat ramen!”

Riko chuckles and lets herself be dragged into his tiny, messy kitchen that always awakens her cleaning urges. Her fingers are already reaching for dirty dishes while he scampers for the little stool he needs to get at the higher cupboard, where the nice instant ramen are.

“How was your week?” she asks and lets the ensuing enthusiastic chatter flow over her.

Naruto played with Sarutobi Konohamaru and his friends, saw Iruka-sensei, ate at Ichiraku’s, trained a bunch with his clones. His life is so wonderfully simple. “You bet I’ll kick Sasuke-teme’s ass tomorrow!” he declares, so utterly convinced of his ability that she almost believes him.

Experience has taught her differently, though. She’d bet anything that tomorrow’s brawl will end in another accidental kiss.

“Looking forward to it,” she comments.

“How was your week?” Naruto asks her, all but bouncing in place. “Kakashi-sensei said we should let you rest and stuff, and you were so sad when we came back, so I was worried!”

She really wouldn’t call her week restful.

“It was fine,” Riko answers. “Met some people, started therapy. I’ll be in the clear for light training starting tomorrow.”

“Awesome!” Naruto grinned. “We can kick Sasuke’s ass together!”

She chuckles. “I wouldn’t call that light exercise.”

“Uh-huh,” he shakes his head, “With someone as awesome as me, you won’t have to lift even a finger!”

Riko laughs. “Okay then.”


Her mind blanks.
What.

How does Naruto not know what therapy is?! A significant part of any Konoha-shinobi’s life? Has he never heard of Psych evals, either? The Psych department?

She knows he’s not quite as stupid as most people think he is, but good heavens. Times like this, it’s hard to remember that. Skipping all those Academy classes was so dumb of him. Her fingers pinch the bridge of her nose.

“Therapy,” she says, fighting to not sound completely judgemental about it, “Is not a hobby. It’s when you go to see a specialist from the Psych division and they help you deal with stuff in your life that makes you so unhappy that your head goes weird.”

Naruto makes a confused face. Then it turns into horror. “Ricchan, you’re unhappy? What’s wrong? Are you okay? What do you mean your head goes weird? Is it because of the mission?” He gasps. “You don’t want to quit the team, do you?”

“Naruto!” she snaps, then has to take a deep, calming breath.

He looks at her with big, hurt eyes.

“I’m not quitting,” Riko says, her voice tight. “And I’m not unhappy, I’m just working through some stuff, and sensei thought it’d be good if I started going to therapy. Because of the mission. So my head doesn’t go weird. It’s preventative.”

“Oh.” He looks down at his empty ramen cup. “Ricchan, what happened on the mission? Kaka-sensei wouldn’t say, and he wouldn’t let us ask, either.”

Kakashi is the best sensei.

Riko doesn’t answer for a while. “We got attacked,” she says finally. “And I killed one of them.”

His face falls. “Oh,” he says again. Looking lost and small.

“It was self-defence,” she explains in a small voice. “I didn’t mean to.”

Which doesn’t make anything better. Killing people by accident is bad. Definitely worse than doing it on purpose. Or maybe not? Because that would be murder. Except it’s not bad in combat, it’s just... a thing that happens.

She should talk to Toge again about it. Who’s apparently her therapist for anything death-related now, and Riko still has no idea how that happened. Fuji, however, was entirely unsurprised and completely cool about it, and Riko has both of them for shrinks now.

Which is pretty cool, actually.

Naruto’s still looking lost and helpless. Riko doesn’t like it, and she’s maybe a little hurt, too, because... yeah.

He’s good through and through, and she’s his best friend, but now she’s killed someone and doesn’t really see anything wrong with it. It doesn’t fit. It’s also not something he can smile away.

She doesn’t want it being smiled away.

But she’d rather he try that than treat her differently now.
Riko turns back to scrubbing dirty dishes, waiting anxiously for him to say something.

It takes him a while to work through his thoughts. He doesn’t do that a lot, never has to do it. Naruto just doesn’t think much, his world blissfully uncomplicated.

Hers used to be less convoluted, too, when they were still in school.

“Self-defence?” he asks finally.

“Mm,” she confirms.

He frowns. “So… they would have hurt you if you hadn’t fought back?”

“Not just me,” Riko says quietly. “Ino, Tsunami, Inari, Asuma, the dogs, all of us.”

Another pause, and he’s thinking hard.

“Then,” he says slowly. “Then I’m glad you’re okay, Ricchan, even if you had to kill. I mean, they were bad people! And you didn’t do it on purpose! So, um. It’s okay.”

Riko looks at him blankly and doesn’t know what to think.

On the one hand, nice, he doesn’t hate her. On the other hand, she wasn’t apologising. Or looking for his approval, or anything like that.

It just happened and she wanted him to know, that’s all.

“So anyway,” she says, “That’s not really why I’m here. Two things.” She holds up a finger. “One, open invitation to dinner. Two, the Chuunin Exams are starting in four weeks, so we should prepare. I’ve figured out a tentative training plan and reading list for me and I think we should do the same for you, figure out what specialisation—”

“Ne, Ricchan, what’re the Chuunin Exams?” Naruto interrupts, his face basically one big question mark.

Riko stares at him and takes a deep breath because wow.

Just. Wow.

Her team is going to crash and burn in the exams.

“They’re a series of tests for genin,” she explains slowly. “If you pass, you get promoted to chuunin.”

If he scores a promotion, she’ll eat her hitae-ate.

After a moment of parsing her answer, Naruto goes starry-eyed. “Chuunin?! Oh man, I gotta take those exams! Everyone’s gonna see how awesome I am, and then they have to make me chuunin, and then I’ll be one step closer to becoming Hokage, and it’ll be awesome! Ha, I bet the old man’s gonna make me Hokage right away!”

He snickers, lost in his fantasies, not noticing her entirely unhappy face.

“Yeah, anyway,” she speaks up again, “We’ll need to figure out a training schedule—”

“Don’t worry, Ricchan!” He focuses back on her and gives her a thumbs-up. “I got it! I’ll train
super hard, believe it, and I’ll kick everyone’s ass and become chuunin!”

“It really isn’t that easy,” she begins, but he’s way too excited to listen.

“Oh man, I can’t waste a minute!” he exclaims. “I gotta go train! C’mon, Ricchan, let’s go!”

She digs her heels in when he grabs her hand to drag her to the nearest training ground. “Can’t, I got chakra exhaustion, remember? Also, you’re still in your pyjamas.”

He laughs sheepishly. “Right! Almost forgot!”

“Completely forgot, more like,” she comments. “Ruto, you really gotta prepare for the exams, seriously, they’re no joke.”

“I will!” He shoots her another thumbs-up. “Thanks for telling me, Ricchan, you’re the best!”

Riko manages a weak smile. She’ll just try talking to him again and it’d be fine, right?

Sasuke takes the news of her first kill with a disinterested shrug. “You’re alive,” he says, as if that’s all there is to say, and returns to his medicine studies.

Riko blinks at him for a moment.

Maybe it is all there is to say. Shinobi kill. She isn’t special for having done it.

Only has to process it. Deal with it in a healthy way, whatever Toge means by that.

“Chuunin Exams are coming up,” she moves on to the next point of business that brought her here after leaving Naruto’s place. “We got four weeks. Since they’re held in Konoha and you’re you, we’ll probably get signed up.”

He looks up, eyes gleaming with interest. “Hn,” he says.

“I recommend preparing,” she adds. “My schedule will be tight, we’ll have to forgo our spars, sorry about that.”

Sasuke shrugs and goes back to the scroll he’s reading. When she peers at the content, she sees the instructions for chakra scalpels.

Trust Sasuke to go for the combat-suited medical jutsus first. Riko really isn’t surprised. Or impressed.

“You need better chakra control for that,” she comments and digs out another scroll from the pile she donated to his learning endeavours. “Here. Master those exercises first.”

He gives her an annoyed look.

“Don’t give me that face, chakra control is a basic and necessary skill.” She raises an eyebrow. “Not just for medicine. It’s going to make you stronger in general. Make your taijutsu faster and stronger, your ninjutsu more efficient and precise, will also improve your speed in learning new
techniques.”

“Whatever,” Sasuke huffs.

Riko throws the scroll at his head and stands up. “I’ll see you tomorrow for team training.”

“Hn.”

At least he isn’t giving her a damn stress ulcer like Naruto, but she has the beginning of a headache now.

He doesn’t seem the least bit interested in doing anything together, and there’s no sign of him being unhappy about sparring appointments being cancelled.

Riko comes home around dinner time, having visited the Academy library for more information on the Chuunin Exams. Didn’t find much, since the materials there are meant for prospective genin rather than chuunin, but did find a guide to using chakra strings, so it wasn’t a complete loss.

She’s surprised to find a visitor at the dinner table.

“Hello, Raidou-san,” she greets, nonplussed at his presence.

“Riko,” he returns with an incline of his head. “Good to see you.”

“Likewise.” She sinks down into the chair next to a sullen-looking Shikamaru.

Yoshino drops a plate in front of her. “Raidou-san is Shikamaru’s new jounin sensei,” she informs her briskly. “He saw fit to introduce himself to us promptly.”

Her voice rings with approval.

“I see no reason to waste time,” he says calmly. “Team Ten has a lot of potential. I’ll do my best to help them reach it.”

Riko shoots a questioning glance at Shikamaru, who’s eyeing the man with sharp eyes.

“I’m quite glad to hear it,” Yoshino comments. “Enough time has been wasted.”

“We didn’t waste time,” Shikamaru objects in annoyance. He turns to Raidou. “We’re not dropping field medic classes.”

The man nods, eyeing him consideringly. “I wouldn’t ask you to. I’m impressed all of you are taking them. If you give me your schedule, we’ll work around your lessons. It’ll be hard work and you won’t have much free time, however.”

“Good,” Riko’s brother says curtly and stands. “I’ll get the schedule.”

He walks out of the kitchen. She stares after him for a long moment before turning back to her meal.
“That boy, honestly,” Yoshino sighs. “Please make sure he has some free time.”

“I will,” Raidou agrees somberly. “Let me know who his therapist is, too, and when his appointments are scheduled.”

“Of course.” Yoshino’s mouth twists in displeasure. “Asuma really did his team a disservice.”

Shikamaru’s new sensei coughs delicately. “He tried his best, I’m sure.”

“I’m not,” Riko’s mother scoffs before her eyes fall on Riko. “How was your day, dear?”

“I saw my teammates, visited the library, and made a tentative training schedule for the upcoming month,” Riko reports dutifully.

Yoshino nods approvingly when she shows her. “Appropriate. Let me know if you need help with anything.”

“I will.”

Riko doesn’t fist-pump when the clan clinic clears her for light exercise the next morning, but it’s a near thing.

“Good luck,” the old lady who runs the clinic says amusedly and hands her a piece of candy. “Off you go, Riko-chan.”

“Thanks, Sayuri-sensei!”

She’s got four hours until her team meets, another two until Kakashi is likely to show, and she’s going to use them. Her month is going to be busy, there’s no time to slack off.

Her glasses go into a storage seal in her sleeve, the world becoming blurry and uncertain. It’s not as good as the blindfold, but far less obvious. Riko sharpens her senses.

She’s gotten way too used to relying on her eyes again over the course of the mission and the week after. Sloppy. From now on, she’ll only use her glasses for reading, and that’s it.

That done, she heads to the clan armoury to stock up on supplies. The old man in charge, incidentally Sayuri-sensei’s husband, observes while she picks through senbon and kunai. “Might want to pick something up to store them in,” he recommends sedately, pointing at a shelf full of storage scrolls.

“I’m good, I can make storage seals myself,” she says absently, eyeing a tanto with interest. “Thanks, though.”

She’s got Yoshino’s katana, but the tanto looks so pretty.

“Oh?” He sounds interested. “Show me. You any good, we’ll work out a deal.”

Riko looks up, blinking at him. Deal? What’s that supposed to mean?
Old man holds a sheet of paper and an ink brush out to her.

“That’s the wrong kind of paper,” Riko points out.

Old man (she doesn’t know his name, should really learn it) swaps out the paper without a word. She grabs both it and the ink brush. “What kind of storage seal?” she asks.

“Standard.”

Simple enough. She’s finished four minutes later. He examines her work before he nods abruptly, pockets it and stalks over to the really expensive storage scrolls to throw one at her.

Just touching it, she can tell that it’s high-end. Currently inactive chakra lock, reinforced, proofed against the elements.

“Open it.” old man grunts at her, and she follows the directive and her eyes go wide. Beautiful, intricate seals stare back at her. The professional kind that she’s definitely not able to draw right now. Her seals are more like homemade cookies compared to expertly baked gourmet pastries.

“I’m not the youngest anymore, kid. Help me out a few hours a night and I’ll show you how to make those and more. Will let you look at the nice stuff I get in here before it hits the shelves, too,” old man tells her gruffly.

Riko blinks at him.

She was just visiting to buy some senbon, and now she’s getting a part-time job? Just like that? “Uhm,” she says, thrown.

But hey, this could be good, right? Useful new skills, even if they aren’t quite relevant to her exam preparations. And her current schedule has open space at night.

“You get paid by the hour,” he informs her. “Plus bonus for special commissions you finish.”

“I don’t have a lot of time,” Riko warns him. “Might only manage a few nights a week.”

He waves her off. “I’ll draw up a contract and send it to your house.”

“Cool. Thanks.” She flounders for a moment, then goes back to her browsing when he huffs dismissively.

She picks up several senbon and kunai packages and takes them to the counter, where the old man notes down her acquisitions so the costs can be charged to the clan funds. Perks of being part of a clan shinobi, she gets a monthly budget to cover work- and health-related expenses, in exchange for being part of her mission pay going to the clan. It balances out in her favour.

Old man reaches below the counter and puts a really nice hunting knife on top of her small pile.

Riko blinks. “Uhm.”

“Every shinobi should have one of those,” he grunts. “Now get lost. No, don’t just take it, you daft girl, test the balance and quality first, or do you just trust every weapon handed to you?”

“Right.” Riko winces because yeah, he has a point. At least Yoshino covered how to do it in her training, otherwise she’d really embarrass herself here.

Old man observes her sharply and doesn’t say anything more. At this point feeling seriously lost,
Riko tests the knife (*really nice*), packs up her new stuff, and scurries away with a muttered goodbye.

So that was… *something*.

The jounin lounge is as crowded as it was the last time Riko visited, and she suspects that they’re all just hanging out there in the early mornings to gossip before the day’s work begins. It’s kind of nice, seeing this kind of casual camaraderie.

Yugao sits in a corner next to a vaguely familiar man who carries a sword just like her and doesn’t look all that healthy. It takes Riko a moment to place his face — he’s the jounin sensei assigned to Fumio’s team. She nods a greeting at him.

“Hello, Riko-chan,” Yugao says, eyeing her curiously. “Your week off is finally over?”

“Hi,” Riko answers. “Yeah, it is. Still need to be careful about chakra use and heavy exercise, but otherwise, I’m good.”

The woman smiles. “I’m glad to hear it. When do you have time to meet up?” She turns to her companion and explains, “Riko-chan is a kenjutsu user.”

He gives her an interested look. “Gekkou Hayate,” he introduces himself, his voice hoarse and the words followed by a cough.

Riko resists the urge to squint at him to figure out if he’s got any visible symptoms of illness beyond the pastiness of his skin and the shadows beneath his eyes. Maybe she should have kept her glasses on.

“Nara Riko,” she answers politely. “It’s nice to meet you.” She turns back to Yugao. “Early mornings and evenings would work, and I can probably get sensei to give me some afternoons off.”

Unless Kakashi drilled them in chakra control and formations, team training usually consisted of spars. Where he mostly focused on Naruto, who had the most to catch up on. Riko isn’t strictly *essential* for that. Tended to stretch and run katas while that went on, most of the time.

“Early mornings work for me,” Yugao says after a moment of consideration. “Do you know where Training Ground 48 is?”

No, and Riko distantly recalls that all training grounds with a four in their name have some kind of restriction on them, so she might have some trouble finding it. She shakes her head and listens carefully to Yugao’s instructions.

“I look forward to working with you,” the older kunoichi finishes.

“Me too,” Riko answers honestly, ignoring the flutter of nervousness. “I’ll see you tomorrow?”

“Absolutely. Have a good day, Riko-chan.”
“You, too. And you, Gekkou-san.” Riko nods at the man and scurries away, scanning the room for Genma. Which, considering he usually hides both his scent and chakra, isn’t successful until he speaks up in another corner of the room she’s searching. “Over here, kid.”

She weaves her way through the room and drops down into a seat next to him. “Hey.” Then she blinks. “Sensei?”

It’s indeed her jounin sensei, sitting in an armchair opposite of Genma and her, Icha Icha in his hand. “Yo!” he greets, obnoxiously cheerful.

“Hi,” she returns, giving him a mildly suspicious look. But hey, he has a life outside of Team 7. “How’d the complaint go?”

Kakashi gives her a serene eye-smile. “He’s facing an inquiry and won’t trouble you or anyone else again.”

Huh.

Genma nudges her. “What’s up, kid? Need anything?”

Riko shakes herself a little. Right. She’s here for a reason. Actually, it’s pretty convenient that her sensei is here, since he’s got the final say in anything to do with her training.

“Chuunin Exams are coming up,” she says, there’s no way they don’t already know that. “I want to learn stealth.”

Kakashi sniffs. “My kids are growing up.”

She rolls her eyes at him.

“Let’s discuss this somewhere more private,” Genma suggests. “Come on.”

They end up in a meeting room. Riko’s beginning to wonder about just how big the jounin lounge really is.

“So, going for a promotion, huh?” Genma asks.

“Just preparing,” she answers, shrugging, trying not to let on how uneasy the thought makes her.

He hums and she’s certain he’s aware of the whole involuntary nomination possibility. “Good thinking. Why stealth?”

She was expecting that question, so her answer is prompt. “It ties in well with my low chakra capacity and sensor abilities and will allow me to end fights before they even begin. I don’t necessarily plan on specialising in stealth, but it definitely is a very useful skill to have for any shinobi.”

Plus, she isn’t built for much else.

And then there’s the whole thing about her hair colour making her a target for murder and kidnapping, but she’s so not getting into that right now. Really should figure out a way to hide it, though, before the village starts crawling with foreign shinobi.

“How’d the complaint go?” she asks. “Any other skills you want to learn?” Genma asks her.

“Chakra strings.”
Genma chuckles. “Finally got sick of having to jump to get books from high shelves?”

Riko kicks his shin. “Other than that, I’ll work on improving my existing skills and study a lot.”

Kakashi ruffles her hair. “This is why she’s my favourite,” he tells Genma proudly.

“Bet you tell that to all your students,” Riko grumbles, shooting him a glare. Her hair had looked decent for once, and he ruined it. “Anyway? Stealth training?”

“You got it.” Genma gives her a lazy thumbs-up. “The usual afternoons?”

Riko shoots a questioning glance at Kakashi. “If that’s okay?”

“Maa, Riko, you seem to have it all worked out.” He crinkles his eye at her. “Leave Thursday afternoons for individual training. Your sensei’s still got a few tricks to teach you.”

She blinks at him because Thursdays are her team’s day off, so they can rest and take care of personal business like groceries and restocking on supplies. “Okay?” she asks. “I will. Thanks.”

Riko gets another hair ruffle for that.

“Do you want to see my schedule?” she asks, because it does concern him and the team. They’ll have to work around each other a lot. Or, well, Kakashi and she would, the boys just seem content to suffer through team training and missions and then take off to do their own thing, with the exception of going for food together on rare occasions.

Kakashi hums in consideration when she pulls out her schedule.

She looks at it and realises how inaccurate it is after this morning’s developments and begins drawing a new one, now including Yugao and her new part-time job.

“You’ve been busy,” Kakashi comments, steals her pencil, and draws big hennomenohemijis on her Thursdays.

“Well, yes,” she says, because obviously. “The Chuunin Exams are no joke and we only graduated just over two months ago. We’ll be behind everyone else.”

“At the pace you’re going,” Genma drawls, “I’d say no one should underestimate you.” He stands up. “Got work to do. I’ll see you around, kid.”

“Mm, have fun,” she replies absently, eyeing Kakashi who’s now crossing titles off of her reading list and adding new ones. “Sensei, I’m pretty sure that one’s not accessible to genin.”

People tend to be weirdly fussy about fuuinjutsu.

“No worries,” he answered cheerfully, “I’ll get you the books you need.”

That sounds like a bad idea, but she’d wanted to read that book since forever, so.

“Thanks, sensei.”

The month is shaping up to be a busy one.
By the time her teammates arrive for their first team meeting since the return from Nami no Kuni, Riko has run through all the Academy taijutsu kata and is now doing the kenjutsu forms she learned from Yoshino. Only this time, she’s not using a bokken but her katana, the weight of which is still unfamiliar.

She’s barely used it since she got it — there’s been so little time to train with it.

Sasuke is the first to arrive, sinking down on the ground and watching her exercise while doing his own stretches. Naruto shows up soon after. He smells like dirt and sweat, so he was probably training before the meeting, just like her.

“Whoa, Ricchan!” he shouts. “You look so cool! It’s a real sword!”

Seeing as she’s in the middle of a kata, she can’t reply.

“I could learn to use a sword!” he chatters. “Hey, Ricchan, where can I get a sword? Can you show me where? It’d be so cool, us two, sword-fighting side by side!”

The fantasy is a nice one.

It’s kind of shattered by his next words.

“Ricchan, you can teach me how to use a sword!” he exclaims, like it’s the best idea ever. “Then I’ll have something cool for the Chuunin Exams!”

Riko takes a deep breath and ends her kata. Puts the katana away, takes another deep breath, and lets it out slowly.

Gotta stay calm. It’s Naruto. He doesn’t know any better because he’s been alone most of his life. In his head, it probably is that easy.

It just rankles, not the least because he’s seen her practice with a bokken often enough, but only when she brings out real steel, he suddenly thinks it’s cool. Nevermind that her skill is far less with the unfamiliar katana than it’d been with the wooden bokken.

“No,” she says, and her voice comes out surprisingly even. “I can’t teach you.”

“Eh?” he asks. “Why not?”

She manages a tight smile. “No time. I’m training for the exams, too, remember?”

There’s so much more she could say here. That it took her years to get to this level of skill. That she’s still nowhere near good enough to teach anybody. How he’s being all kinds of disrespectful, not even asking if she wants to, and simply because he wants to look cool for exams he didn’t even know existed until she told him yesterday.

But she keeps it inside because a part of her is afraid he’ll say something like, “Eh, I bet I can do it in a month, I’m the man who’ll become Hokage!” and she just knows she’ll end up doing or saying something she’ll regret.

Naruto laughs sheepishly. “Right, yeah. I forgot! Just, it’d be so cool!”
“Yeah,” she agrees. “Sure. Cool.” Damn it, she desperately needs a subject change. “You look like you were training, how’s that going?”

He instantly launches into chatter, interspersed with varieties of “I can’t tell you, it’s secret training, but it’s so awesome,” and she barely catches Sasuke’s quiet scoff.

The only thing that surprises her about it is that she almost agrees with him, and that doesn’t bode well.

They used to get along, and now… now it feels like Naruto is just.

Is just the same as always.

It’s her who’s different. Who just can’t seem to see how his cheer and adoration make up for the sheer carelessness of the things he says and does anymore.

Riko shakes her head.

No. No, she’s just tired, and her head is messy from the mission, and she’s stressed over the Chuunin Exams, and… and it’ll all go back to normal once that’s over.

The moment Kakashi arrives, Naruto jumps up and shouts, “You’re late!”

“Maa, a mime needed directions to the market, but he wasn’t a very good mime, so it took him a while to explain what he wanted.”

“Liar!” Naruto yells.

“So mean.” Kakashi shakes his head sadly. “But you’ve been training! Sensei’s so proud.”

Riko, currently twisting her body into a pretzel because flexibility is useful, manages a sarcastic salute. Sasuke, head stuck in another medicine scroll, barely looks up.

“Kaka-sensei!” Naruto plants his feet. “Teach me a cool jutsu so I can become chuunin!”

And here they go again.

“Mm, Riko told you about the exams, then?” Kakashi blinks at them. “I haven’t decided yet if I’ll nominate you, you know?”

“Eh?” Naruto blinks. “Nominate me?”

Sasuke looks up.

Riko sighs deeply. “You can’t just show up for the exams. If you’re part of a genin team, your jounin sensei has to vouch that you’re ready. If not, you need a letter of recommendation from whoever your direct superior is.”

She would have told him that, had he not run off to train.
“Exactly!” Kakashi smiles at her. “Well said, Riko.”

“Ricchan’s the smartest!” Naruto gives her one of those grins that make the world seem warm and bright. “So Kaka-sensei has to tell the old man that we’re totally chuunin-material?”

Not quite how she’d word it, but hey. He got the gist of it.

“Which you’re not,” Kakashi tells them bluntly.

Silence falls over the group.

“Only one of you is anywhere close to ready,” he continues.

Riko eyes Sasuke, who sits a little straighter. Naruto beams, “It’s me, it’s me, right, Kaka-sensei?!”

“It’s not,” Kakashi shoots him down mercilessly. Naruto deflates, then aims a baleful glare at Sasuke.

Their sensei speaks up again. “It doesn’t matter who I’m talking about. If you want to take part in the Chuunin Exams, convince me you can do it. You have four weeks.”

Well, that’s a relief, a part of her thinks. She can just… not convince him. And at this point, she has her doubts Naruto will succeed. Only Sasuke stands a chance.

Then her brain catches up with her. The convince me line… that’s definitely a motivational tactic. And he said four weeks, but nominations are in three — he’ll make them work hard to the last last day, rather than risk any of them relaxing once they’ve got the nomination under their belt.

Damn it. The hope that she’d get out of the exams after all shrivels up and dies.

At least her teammates are looking determined now, their faces set in fierce glares, eyes locked on Kakashi.

“I made training schedules for all of you,” their sensei continues. “I expect you to keep to them. If you don’t, you’re out. If you fail a mission, you’re out. Is that understood?”

Naruto gulps, and even Sasuke looks wary.

Riko is just resigned to her fate now. “Yes, sensei,” she says.

The other two echo her after a pause.

“Good.” He claps his hands and the grave atmosphere vanishes when he smiles. “Now go and catch Tora, my cute little students!”

It’s Riko’s first session of stealth training. She’s already pretty exhausted — Kakashi stepped up his game with team training and aside from the Tora mission, they got sent on message runs all over the village, and she was the only one who actually had any idea about the procedures of entering certain places.
Well, Sasuke might have known, but he left it all to her, since he hates talking and is too busy studying.

“What do you know about stealth?” Genma asks her when he arrives. “What is stealth?”

“The art of moving about unnoticed,” she answers, frowning, because the answer feels somehow inadequate.

He hums. “There are different types of stealth,” he begins to explain. “Depending on your environment and the type of enemy you’re trying not to be noticed by. The classic is invisibility — sneaking around, hiding yourself from perception. But in a crowd, you don’t want to do that, you’ll want to blend in instead. Another thing you need to consider is your objective — if you’re evading someone, you’ll need to be fast. If you’re infiltrating somewhere, you need to be patient and careful.”

Riko nods, thinking it over. “So… where do we start?”

“The classic.” Genma suddenly smirks, and she eyes him warily. “We’re playing hide and seek. And for every time you get caught…” He reaches into his pack and withdraws a headband with attached rabbit ears in glittery pink.

She stares in horror.

“You’ll have to wear these for an hour,” he finishes. With a glint in his eyes, he adds, “For this week, I’ll still give you time to get ready. You have a minute to hide. Go.”

Riko blinks at him for a moment because — that’s it? That’s all the instruction she gets? What about learning actual stealth jutsu?

“No crutches,” he answers her silent questioning. “Forty-five seconds.”

She wastes another second staring and then runs.

Training Ground 48 is well-hidden. Without Yugao’s instructions, Riko wouldn’t have found it. As it is, she has to navigate through several layers of genjutsu and cross two barriers to get inside.

But if she thought it was some super dangerous, intricate, challenging training ground, she was wrong. It’s just… empty. A wide area with no trees, no grass. The ground is paved stone in uniform grey, completely flat.

Yet by no means is it ordinary or boring. Whatever barriers and genjutsu are set up here, they make the area seem like it goes on forever. It’s just Riko, the stone ground, and the endless sky above her.

Making her feel small and insignificant and like she’s the only person in the entire world.

“It was built for privacy,” Yugao’s voice says from behind her. Riko is ridiculously relieved to see another human being. “And to allow you to focus only on your training with no distractions. Also, the genjutsu people wanted to show off.”
She gives Riko a serious look and doesn’t comment on the rabbit ears stuck to her head.

“It will be just us and our swords in here.”

Riko suppresses a shiver and nods.

“Are you ready?”

Swallowing under Yugao’s grave stare, Riko forcibly relaxes her tense muscles. Takes a deep, calming breath. Only then does she nod.

“Then let’s begin.”

Yugao walks Riko to her team’s training ground after their session. “How long have you been training in kenjutsu?” she asks.

Riko, body aching, she’s sure to have so many bruises tomorrow from evading by rolling on the paved ground, has to think for a moment. “Two and a half years,” she answers and has to blink. It doesn’t sound long at all. She feels like she’s been learning the sword all her life, somehow.

Yugao tilts her head in consideration. “I see,” she comments thoughtfully.

The woman looks as fresh as she did this morning, not a scratch on her, and Riko doesn’t think she even broke a sweat. She’d been so graceful, so quick, so incredibly skillful, while Riko jumped all over the place trying to get through her guard. It was like trying to cut smoke.

Up until today and not counting Momochi Zabuza, Yoshino had been the best kenjutsu user Riko had ever met. Yugao, though, is on an entirely different level.

It’s a humbling experience, to say the least.

“You have potential,” Yugao’s voice interrupts her thoughts. “Do you plan on specialising in kenjutsu?”

“For combat, yeah, I think so,” she admits. “I like swords a lot.”

Yugao hums. “I can see it. You look comfortable with a katana in your hand. I can tell you have solid foundations and you know how to move. However, you need to work on stamina and speed. More importantly, you waste a lot of energy with unnecessary movement.”

The criticism rankles, mostly because Yugao is right. “Thank you,” Riko mutters, trying not to sound sullen.

The other kunoichi shoots her an amused look. “It comes with experience, and you’ll get plenty this month. If you want, I can show you a few useful moves as well.”

“I want,” Riko instantly says, then flushes because wow, rude. “Sorry, I-”

Yugao laughs. “Prepare to work hard, then, Riko-chan.”
It’s surreal to get to the training ground and find her team already assembled.

“It’s surreal to get to the training ground and find her team already assembled.

“Ricchan!” Naruto waves wildly, turning from where he was watching Sasuke attempt to get in a hit on Kakashi. “Get this, Kaka-sensei’s already here! Huh, who’s that pretty lady?”

Riko cringes a little because manners.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, Riko-chan,” Yugao says quietly.

“Yeah, uh, have a great day,” Riko answers. “Thank you very much for helping me with my training.”

“You’re welcome. Thank you for allowing me to help. I find myself pleasantly surprised at how rewarding teaching is.” She smiles briefly before she disappears.

“Ricchan! Ricchan, who was that?” Naruto asks her eagerly. “She looked pretty!”

Riko fights for patience. “We train kenjutsu together,” she explains. “Naruto, please don’t talk about a stranger’s looks where they can hear, it’s rude.”

Naruto gives her a confused look. “Eh? Okay. Why’d she leave?”

“Because,” Kakashi is suddenly behind Naruto. Sasuke has collapsed in the background, laying on his back and is, from the sound of it, attempting to catch his breath. “Yugao is a very high-level kunoichi with many duties, and it’s very generous of her to spend free time on helping Riko with her training.”

“Oh.” Naruto mulls that over before he brightens. “I guess Ricchan’s just that amazing! Hey, d’you think she’d train me, too?”

“Because,” Kakashi is suddenly behind Naruto. Sasuke has collapsed in the background, laying on his back and is, from the sound of it, attempting to catch his breath. “Yugao is a very high-level kunoichi with many duties, and it’s very generous of her to spend free time on helping Riko with her training.”

“Oh.” Naruto mulls that over before he brightens. “I guess Ricchan’s just that amazing! Hey, d’you think she’d train me, too?”

“Here’s a lesson, Naruto,” Kakashi answers. “If you want training from someone, show respect for them and their skill, prove that you’re a good fit for a student, and approach them yourself.”

He walks back to Sasuke and puts him on his feet.

“Either way,” he says, “Right now, no one will teach you any special skills because you’re lacking in all the basics, and correcting that is my job.”

Naruto grumbles. “I bet I could get someone to teach me something cool!”

Sasuke scoffs. “As if, dead last.”

They’re brawling within moments. Riko makes to step in, but Kakashi’s hand lands on her shoulder, holding her back. “Sensei?” she asks in confusion.

“We’re going to play a game,” he says seriously. He makes a shadow clone. It henges into her, complete with rabbit ears. “Today, you’re not joining missions or training. You’re just observing. Put on your glasses.”

She frowns up at him, but retrieves her glasses from the pouch. The world becomes clear and sharp
when she puts them on.

“Make sure they don’t notice you following,” he adds.

“But why?” Riko asks, eyebrows pulling together.

He pats her on the head. “You’ll figure it out. Now go hide.”

Still frowning, she runs off into the trees.

Her brawling teammates don’t notice a thing.

Watching her team interact without her taking part in it is weird. It’s like they’re in their own bubble, and Riko’s looking in through a glass window. Kakashi’s clone looks and acts exactly like her.

It separates the brawling boys exactly the way she would, tells them not to fight until missions are over for the day and they’re allowed to spar.

Sasuke and Naruto stare at each other resentfully and sulk until Kakashi claps his hands and informs them of their duties for the day. “Today, we’re painting Maeda-san’s fence and shed, weeding her garden, and mowing her lawn. Chop chop!”

He disappears in a smoke cloud, which is pretty normal for him.

“He says we,” Riko’s doppelgänger complains, “but he always disappears.”

Crap, she sounds so bitchy. Does Riko sound that bitchy? And Kakashi has overheard it? Is that why she’s observing? Because she’s rude and Kakashi is making a point?

“How,” Sasuke grunts his agreement.

“Yeah!” Naruto waves his arms. “Why do we have to do stupid D-ranks? We did a C-rank already! He never teaches us anything cool!”

Something flickers over the clone’s face, but it’s gone before she can identify it. Does her own face do that, or is that just a Kakashi-reaction?

“Sensei teaches us plenty,” the clone says.

“But it’s just Academy stuff and formations,” Naruto whines. “No new moves!”

Riko’s counterpart sighs. “Let’s do our mission. The sooner it’s over with, the sooner we can train. Anybody know where Maeda lives?”

Both the boys look at her expectantly.

It makes the real her uncomfortable somehow.

Clone-Riko is the one to lead the way into Konoha proper. Is the one to ask at the mission desk for
the address and the one they tell, “Remember to ask your sensei next time, girl.”

Clone-Riko handles talking to the client, a middle-aged woman who looks at her like something she found stuck to the bottom of her shoe and gives her so many specific instructions to remember that it makes the real Riko want to throttle her. “And no funny business!” Maeda finishes. “I’m not paying for a shoddy job!”

She slams the door when she goes back into her house.

The fake Riko turns to her teammates, who are a step behind her and glaring at each other. “You got all that?”

“Ehehehe, of course, Ricchan!” Naruto fibs, scratching at the back of his head. Sasuke merely shrugs.

Neither look repentant under her unimpressed stare.

“The dark green for the shed,” the clone says in a clipped tone. “White for the fence. Don’t touch the flowerbeds with the roses. Don’t break the lawn mower.”

At this point, Riko is feeling uncomfortable because she knows how this’ll go.

It’s just so much worse watching it like this, when she doesn’t have to focus on keeping her team in line and working.

The clone assigns herself the weeding because no one in their right mind would want Naruto to do it. Sasuke gets to do the painting since she’s not trusting Naruto to get the colours right either. Mowing the lawn should be relatively safe for him to do, at least.

Riko wants to sink into the floor, watching the disaster unfold. Or rather, not unfold, because the clone does exactly what she’d do — keep an eye on the boys’ behaviour and double-check their work in between doing her own. Keeps Naruto from running and crashing with the lawn mower. Jumps in before he can accidentally give one of the flowerbeds a new look. Shows him how to rake the freshly-cut grass together because lawn mowers in Konoha neither run on fuel nor collect the grass automatically.

Clone Riko then inspects Sasuke’s job and makes him do it again because he might have finished quickly, but he did the work sloppily — all so he could sit down and stick his head into another medic scroll, and even then she has to paint over patchy parts of wall and fence.

The client still ends up yelling because look at that, fake Riko overlooked some weed.

The real deal feels like crying, watching her apologise to the client and keep Naruto from yelling back while Sasuke glares mutinously.

“Finally done!” Naruto cheers. “Man, that took forever!”

“Hn,” Sasuke grunts. “We’re wasting time. Let’s get to training.”

Riko takes a deep, calming breath when the boys take off, Naruto grabbing the fake’s hand and pulling her along.

She’s… she’s not going to cry, she isn’t, this is… this is fine, it’s just. Shit.

From her vantage point, she can clearly see the moment the flowerbeds catch on fire.
The boys plus the fake Riko are waiting in the usual training ground. Kakashi appears in a puff of smoke, as he usually does.

“Kaka-sensei!” Naruto jumps up. “You’re late!”

“Mm.” Kakashi peers down at them. “I’m going to teach you something today.”

“Awesome! Is it something cool? Is it a super powerful jutsu?” Naruto bounces up and down.

Sasuke looks at their teacher with anticipation.

“It is very cool,” Kakashi confirms. “Have any of you noticed something off today?”

Sasuke frowns, and Naruto squints.

Fake Riko disappears in a puff of smoke, startling both of them. Kakashi goes rigid for a moment, letting out a slow, controlled breath before he looks at where the real Riko is hiding. “You can come out now,” he says.

Riko slowly shuffles over to them, not looking at either of her teammates, though she can clearly hear Naruto’s confused “Eh? Eh?” and the rustling of his clothes as he looks between her and Kakashi.

“Riko, do you have anything to say to your teammates?” Kakashi peers at her. “And before you do, please imagine any of your friends suffering through that kind of treatment.”

She freezes.

Has to take a deep breath when an image of Ino going through today’s D-ranks flits into her mind.

“Ricchan?” Naruto asks, his tone one of utter confusion.

Riko looks at Kakashi.

“Today,” he obliges her silent request, “Riko wasn’t on the mission with you.”


She’s still not looking at him.

“I told her to observe,” Kakashi continues neutrally. “It was past time to deal with an issue that has been steadily getting worse. I was hoping that after the Nami mission it would have gotten better, however, yesterday’s message runs proved that it didn’t.”

Another pause.

“Riko?” he prompts.

She takes a deep, shuddering breath and turns to face her team. Her face feels weirdly numb.

“Ricchan?” Naruto eyes her with his large, blue eyes. “Are you okay? You look sad! D’you need a
hug?” He takes a step towards her.

Without thinking about it, she takes one back, and his face falls even more. She instantly wants to hurry to him and tell him everything’s okay.

“Riko?” Sasuke asks, sounding vaguely unsettled.

Another deep breath rattles in her lungs. She lets it out slowly.

Words. What are words.

“Today was…” she says. “Not good.”

There. Good beginning. It’s words. Success.

“I got to watch. Us. You. Doing a D-rank.” They know that already, Kakashi told them.

Naruto opens his mouth to say something.

“Let her speak,” their sensei cuts in, his tone brooking no argument.

“It wasn’t…” She frowns, looking down. “Watching you talk to me. The fake me. I…”

Words gone missing again, damn it. Riko stares at her hands as if they might be written there, but nope.

No convenient speech written there.

“Were you comfortable, watching your teammates interact with you?” Kakashi prompts, and she’s stupidly grateful that she doesn’t have to fill the silence by herself.

She shakes her head. “I hated it. I… you. You both. I don’t know. We’re…”

Riko looks up again, and her voice is small and fragile.

“We’re a bad team,” she concludes, and she’s staring at Sasuke now, who looks frozen in his position. “You only care about your own training. I have to handle all the talking on my own, even when the clients are assholes, even though you know procedures as well as I do and they wouldn’t behave that way towards you, you leave me to do it. The moment you can, you disappear into your scrolls and leave us hanging. I can’t rely on you and you make me feel like a stepping stone.” She turns to Naruto and hates herself for every word that tumbles from her lips, but his watering eyes aren’t enough to stop them. “I can’t trust you to do any simple thing. You don’t listen to instructions, you don’t pay attention, your rivalry with Sasuke interrupts training and keeps getting in the way of our missions. I can’t do my own work because I have to do yours. You’re loud and careless and you don’t think, and the worst thing is, you don’t try to do better. I’m not your caretaker but missions fall apart the moment I stop doing it. I can’t rely on you either.”

Her arms wrap around herself. “Right now, it feels like I’m carrying the team by myself, because it doesn’t seem like either of you care about more than your own progress. I’m very tired.”

Riko looks at Kakashi, whose eye is unreadable.

“Sensei, I’d like some time off from Team Seven,” she requests quietly.
Chapter 27

Riko isn’t quite sure where she’s going. Lost in thought after Kakashi gave her the okay to leave.

“Take all the time you need,” was what he said.

Time to do what?

She just wanted to… not have to look at her team for a while. A day or two. While she figures out how to go about fixing things. Make up some rules and reasons to follow them.

They’re still a good team, or could be, they managed well enough in the beginning.

When she tries to pinpoint just when things started slipping and became so unbalanced, she comes up empty. There’s no specific event that she can think of. But at some point during some assignment she must have figured she could take over the talking parts of missions since they made Sasuke uncomfortable, Naruto sucked at them, and really didn’t take her that much effort. And she’s always helped Naruto out with the things he just doesn’t have the head or the knowledge for.

How that turned into doing half their work in addition to (or rather, at the cost of) her own full share, she doesn’t know.

Especially when on some select missions, like when they have to walk dogs, they barely let her do anything.

And now she’s apparently on indefinite vacation. Right during the month before the Chuunin Exams, which in Konoha are taken as teams.

That, she concludes, is pretty awful.

“Hey! Riko-chan?”

She turns, blinking at the sight of her old classmate Fumio.

“Hi,” she greets back. “Long time no see.”

Being around him used to feel awkward and uncomfortable after the incident where he thought he was her boyfriend. But right now, those sentiments seem hilariously insignificant after everything that happened since then, and she’s desperate for a distraction.

The boy grins at her. “What’s with the rabbit ears?” he asks.

“I can stop wearing them when I don’t fail at stealth anymore,” she replies, like everything is normal and just fine. “My mentor’s weird.”

Fumio laughs and she remembers how nice it was when she thought they were just friends. Having fun together, two civilian-born Academy students in a system that prioritised clan heritage. “Sounds like it. What are you doing?” he wonders.

“Just walking,” Riko answers vaguely. “Team training ended early.”
“Cool. It’s our day off today. Do you maybe want to catch up?”

That… is that him asking for a date again? Her hands start sweating. “Err…”

“Just as friends!” His cheeks flush and he flails awkwardly. “I just- nevermind. I’ll just go. I-”

“Yes!” she blurts out. “If it’s just friends! I could use a friend. Please.”

Fumio’s face now resembles a tomato, and she’s probably not much better, with how warm her cheeks feel. “There’s a tea place nearby,” he suggests. “We, uh, dango?”

She nods frantically. “I like dango!”

“Okay! Um. This way?” He points down the street. “I… yeah.”

“Let’s go,” she suggests and sets in motion. Fumio falls in step beside her.

The silence is beyond awkward.

“I’m sorry!” he almost shouts. Then, haltingly, “About. You know. It was. Not cool of me.”

Sticking around to talk to him was actually a bad idea because her cheeks are on fire now. “It’s okay!” she squeaks. “Um. We were. Kids.”

“Uh-huh,” Fumio agrees doubtfully, and she can feel him eyeing her. “I guess?”

“Anyway!” She searches desperately for something to talk about. “How’ve you been? Since graduation?”

Fumio lights up, jumping on the subject change. “Really good! My team’s great, and… you know I started medic training?”

Oh. Right. That. It feels so long ago that she implied interest in becoming a medic to him, despite having already been kicked out of the program, and he’d jumped on it.

Now she’s wondering if he started learning because of her.

“I didn’t know,” she settles for saying. “Do you like it?”

He beams. “Yes! It’s great! I mean, it’s super hard, but it just — it feels right, you know? Like I’ve found my place. I didn’t… it’s just hard sometimes, being from a civilian family, and as a medic, it doesn’t matter. So, uh — thanks for the tip, I guess!”

Riko’s lips tip up. “That’s really cool.”

Fumio flushes. And his chakra jumps in happiness, the way Ino’s used to whenever she saw Sasuke.

Oh. Um.

He still likes her.

That’s… awkward. But he said getting dango was just as friends, so… maybe it’s still okay?

She’ll just treat it as friends hanging out together, and that’ll be that. It’s not like either of them have much time to meet up anyway. This is the first time she’s seen him in two months.
Holy crap, graduation was just two months ago.

It feels like *forever*.

The two of them reach the dango shop. “My treat,” she insists. “You should be proud of yourself, and I just got paid.”

Because if the guy doesn’t pay, it’s not a date. All Icha Icha novels are in agreement, that’s got to count for something.


After their orders have been handed out to them, they find somewhere to sit; Fumio beginning to chatter about the medic training program. It’s nice, hearing about it, even if it makes her wistful and sort of jealous. But he’s *so happy* about it.

“I’d have had lessons today,” he finishes, “But Ikeda got demoted for unprofessional conduct and they haven’t decided who’ll replace him yet.”

Riko blinks at him.


Kakashi did it. There’s suddenly a warm feeling in her stomach.

“So how about you?” Fumio asks, her all his attention. “How’re things going for you?”

“I…” her voice trails off. “Yeah.”

He blinks at her.

“Things are… going,” she tries again. “It’s been… interesting.”

“Okay?” Fumio looks at her cluelessly.

“Stressful,” she corrects herself, sighing. Staring down at her dango. “It’s… a little hard right now.”

“Oh. That sucks.” There’s an awkward pause. “Do you want to talk about it?”

Riko sighs. “Not really. Just… my team.”

“Ah.” Fumio nods. “Uzumaki and Uchiha, huh. That’s some combination.”

“You’re telling me,” she sighs.

“I mean, I’ve got Eiji and Sakura, and things are great now, but they weren’t in the beginning. Hayate-sensei actually threatened to drop us.” Fumio grimaces. “We still fight a lot, but… they’re my team.”

Riko nods tiredly. “We’re the opposite. Things good in the beginning, but now… yeah. We’ll fix it, but until then.” She shrugs.

“You can do it,” Fumio says, full of confidence. “You can do anything.”

She really doesn’t know about that.
“It just sucks, you know? Since the Chuunin Exams are coming up and all, and you have to take them as teams…”

He perks up. “I didn’t know that! Wow, promotion, huh? That’d be cool!”

Riko blinks at him. He didn’t know? What… oh.

Just like her teammates, he had no idea, and she somehow assumed everyone but them knew when she herself only found out by coincidence.

Wait, that means the other teams might not know either. Did she ever tell Shikamaru? What about Kiba and his team? Both Teams Eight and Ten consist of clan heirs, with the exception of Kiba. Chances are they’ll be signed up, too.

“I don’t really want to take them,” she tells Fumio. “It’s only been two months since we graduated. I’m still figuring out genin things and we’ve done just one not-D-ranked mission.”

“Yeah, but it won’t hurt to try, right?” He grins at her. “It’s just tests.”


He pauses for a moment, frowning, but then he shrugs. “But any mission is risky, right? And simulation, that means it’s a controlled environment. We’d still be safer than on a real mission, so I think it could be a good learning experience? Don’t have to pass on the first try.”

Riko stares at him, mouth slack.

Fumio’s foot nudges hers. “You okay, Riko-chan?”

She shakes herself, still staring at him. “I didn’t think about it like that,” she says numbly, and a part of her wants to hug the stuffing out of him.

The Chuunin Exams suddenly seem a whole lot less scary.

Riko and Fumio stay and chat for another hour before he regretfully tells her about having to study for a test.

“We should do this again sometime,” he suggests, and his chakra is so painfully bright and hopeful.

She doesn’t like him like that and him having those feelings makes her uncomfortable, makes her feel closed-in, trapped. But talking to him again was really, really nice.

“Yeah,” she agrees. “Maybe after the exams?”

It nothing else, they’d have something to talk about.

“Great!” He grins. “Today was great! It was really cool talking to you again.”
She nods. “I’ll see you around, I guess? Good luck with your test.”

“Thanks!” A cheesy wave, and then he’s running off.

Riko still has a bit of afternoon left, and… yeah. She’ll see Shikamaru later and inform him, so that’ll be Team Ten taken care of, if they don’t already know about the Chuunin Exams.

Getting the news to Team Eight, however, requires a little more initiative on her part.

Not that much, though. She’s been welcome in the Inuzuka compound ever since the first time she visited. The guy guarding it today (the second guard must be using stealth) greets her by name. “Here to see Kiba, Riko?” he drawls.

“Yeah,” she confirms, scrambling for the man’s name. “Kami-san?”

His parents must have a weird sense of humour. It’s Kami for hair, but yeah. She can just imagine the puns.

He smirks at her toothily and pats the hulking dog at his side. “And this is Raiden.”

“I’m visiting Kiba,” she tells him.

He barks and licks her hand. She grins and scratches him behind the ears when he bumps his head against her palm in invitation.

Then she spends a few minutes just petting him and giving him a belly rub. Doesn’t stop even when she hears the steps of both human and animals approaching.

“Shameless,” Inuzuka Hana’s voice huffs above her. “Momo, you brat.”

Momo whines.

“Oh, don’t give me that,” she snorts. “I don’t care how good she is at giving scritches, you’re slacking off. Get back to work.”

The small dog rolls to his feet and licks Riko’s hand in thanks before he waddles away.

Riko stands up again. “Hello.”

“Hey,” Hana greets back. “Been a while.” She sniffs the air and tilts her head. “You smell sad. No
wonder Momo went right for you.” At Riko’s questioning look, she elaborates, “Therapy dog, among other things.”

“Ah.” Riko mulls that over. “That’s cool.”

Hana shrugs and moves toward the house, her three dogs shuffling after her. “Coming?”

“Sure.” Riko catches up with a few quick steps. Frowns when they enter. “Kiba’s not home?”

“Been training your nose, huh?” Hana shoots her a considering look. “Don’t think the rabbit ears distract from you not wearing your glasses. You going into tracking?”

“Uh, not right now?” Riko shrugs. “It’s just sensor training for now.”

“You should consider it,” Hana advises her. “Could always ask mom for training if you want.”

Riko’s focusing on stealth right now, but tracking might come in handy at some point. The two disciplines would go well together.

“I will,” she nods.

“Go and wash up,” Hana advises her. “You’re staying for dinner, right? Because Kiba’s not showing up earlier than that. Our dad’s home for once and he wants to show off what he’s learned since the last time he was around.”

Blinking in surprise, Riko stares at her.

Kiba’s got a dad?

Well, yeah, of course he has a father, but this is the first time she’s heard anything about it. She’d sort of assumed that he was out of the picture, for some reason.

“His missions tend to take him out of the village long-term,” Hana explains, noticing her confusion. “Now get cleaned up, you smell like D-rank missions.”

Riko scurries into the back of the house. By now, she’s learned to keep a change of clothes on her at all times, so when she goes to the kitchen where she hears Hana move about, she at least looks and smells decent.

“Come on, help me cook,” Hana orders and points at a small mountain of vegetables while she seasons huge slabs of venison. “Chop those.”

“Sure thing.”

The two of them prepare the meal in amicable silence for a while, then Hana speaks up. “So what’s got you so down?”

Riko pauses in cutting her carrot, frowning.

The idea of talking about her teammates to people they don’t even know, it feels kind of wrong. On the other hand, she wants to talk to someone, and she likes Hana.

“Rough patch with my team,” she mutters and doesn’t know how to continue, so she leaves it at that.

Hana makes a sound of acknowledgement. “Let me guess,” she muses, “You ended up being
pushed into a role you don’t enjoy, the support kunoichi who does more than her share of work, keeps her team organised, provides emotional assistance, handles logistics and relations, cooks, cleans, and does whatever else work there is that isn’t cool or ninja-like.”

Riko stares at her open-mouthed.

The other girl gives her a thin smile. “Welcome to the kunoichi experience. I recommend growing some fucking claws.”

“How did you know?” Riko asks her, utterly thrown.

Hana snorts and viciously stabs the steak she’s preparing. “Happens to most of us. Just wait until you grow boobs, then it gets really fun.” She sighs, the anger leaking from her. “I’m sorry. It sucks. You’re a good kid and a nice girl and that makes it a lot worse.” She pins Riko with a look and her eyes are fierce. “Claws and fangs and a goddamn spine, Riko. That’s how you make it as a kunoichi. Don’t you let anybody turn you into someone you are not. Got that?”

Riko swallows heavily. “Okay,” she whispers, and she means it, even if she’s pretty sure she isn’t grasping the full scope of what Hana really means.

But she doesn’t want to be the team mom either. That’s not right. They’re supposed to be equals, and neither of her teammates have the right to act like brats just because she’ll clean up their messes.

“Good,” Hana says, darkly satisfied. “Much better. The hurt little girl attitude won’t get you the results you want in the long run. Show them how good you are and demand that respect.”

“But I’m not…” She isn’t anything special, or that good. Naruto can outlast her in any fight. Sasuke will straight-up beat her in skill. Her ninjutsu is limited by her tiny chakra reserves. Her own… kekkei genkai terrifies the crap out of her.

“None of that,” and that’s Tsume’s voice, coming from behind them, Riko spinning to face her. How long has Kiba’s mom been there? “You’re good, brat. Got a brain and know how to use it. Got some good fucking sense. Decent nose and ears.” Tsume prowls closer. Clawed fingers grab Riko’s hand and curl it into a fist. “You’re a kunoichi, and we are dangerous.”

Transfixed, Riko stares up at her until the woman chuckles gruffly and lets go, turning to the food that’s about ready to be cooked.

“Looks good,” she decides. “Let’s turn that into a meal before the brats return.”

The three of them get busy again. More vegetables being chopped and seasoned, filling huge pots, Tsume barking orders and trading barbs with Hana. Cooking is almost finished by the time Kiba and Akamaru bounce into the kitchen, chattering a mile a minute at the tall man and dog following in their wake.

So that’s Kiba’s father. He moves fluidly, completely without sound, and even though his dark eyes are intent on his son, there’s something about him that makes her believe that he was aware of every person in the room and what they were doing way before he ever stepped inside.

“Hey, Tou-san,” Hana greets casually.

“Hana,” he returns, his voice carrying a sort of sedate calmness, and he strides over and gives her a brief half-hug. His hand brushes against Tsume’s as he walks past.
Such brief, covert contact, and yet… it means something.

“Hey, Riko!” Kiba exclaims, only just now noticing her. “Finally back from your C-rank? We did one the other week, tracked down some bandits. But man, you guys took long, and Team Ten wasn’t around either. Anyway! This is my dad!”

By the end of his rambling torrent of words, he’s reached her, and like it’s the most natural thing the world his arm wraps around her shoulder and pulls her against his side. Akamaru gives her a greeting bark.

“Tou-san, this is Riko!” Kiba introduces. “We’re friends!”

“Inuzuka Arashi,” Hana informs her, rolling her eyes at Kiba. “And his partner Tenshi.”

The man nods at Riko, and his ninken — so big, whoa, and that’s one huge scar on the dog — trots forward to sniff her hand. Then he huffs and trudges back to his partner’s side.

“It’s nice to meet you,” Riko says. Not quite intimidated, but with a very healthy dose of respect.

The man is so tall.

His only reply is a considering hum before he moves to Tsume’s side and begins helping her at the stove, seamlessly slotting into the space next to her, and there’s not a moment of clashing — it’s like he’s been standing there all along, they work with and around each other perfectly.

“So, C-rank?” Kiba prompts her. “What kind?”

Riko blinks and returns to the subject of conversation. “Delivery, but we ended up getting intel that Team Ten was on a misclassified mission, so we went and assisted.”

Kiba whistles, impressed. “So that’s why you took so long.”

She shrugs. “We’ve actually been back for over a week, but I had chakra exhaustion and stuff kept coming up, so I couldn’t really visit.”

“You got into a fight?” Kiba asks her, absently pulling her to the ratty couch in the corner of the kitchen.

“Yeah, but I got the exhaustion before, by healing Asuma-sensei.” Riko grimaces.

Her friend whistles again. They’re sitting now, and Akamaru plods down in her lap, barking a demand for scritches. Riko obliges. “Damn. Sounds like some mission. You staying over?”

She was actually planning on heading over to the clan armoury tonight, because of her new job, but it’s not like she has a set schedule for which nights she’ll work. That’s all up to her. Anyway, she only signed the contract yesterday after going over it with Yoshino, and it still needed to be reviewed and signed by the clan head at that point. Going tomorrow instead of today should be fine, especially since she’s suddenly got loads more free time.

“Sure,” she agrees, smiling a little when Akamaru licks her hand. “Have to leave at dawn tomorrow, though. Training appointment.”

“That early?” Kiba asks curiously. “Your sensei’s really pushing you, huh?”

“Uh, no, that one’s on me,” Riko corrects. “Actually, that’s kinda why I’m here? Didn’t know if you already knew, Fumio didn’t, don’t think Shikamaru does yet, either. So I figured I’d just drop
by and check.”
Kiba blinks at her. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Oh! Right. The Chuunin Exams will be held in Konoha next month.”

It’s like a switch has been flipped in the room. Riko startles, because, uh. What? Why does the information seem to surprise them? Every adult she’s spoken to about the exams so far knew about them.

But those were also some really high-ranking adults, come to think of it.

Did she accidentally reveal classified information just now?

“Seriously?” Kiba seems oblivious to the sudden tension. “Aw man! But Kurenai’s a stickler for rules, no way will she sign us up so soon.”

Riko stops mulling over the abrupt shift in atmosphere and looks at him seriously. “Don’t be so sure,” she says quietly. “Hinata is Main House Hyuuga, which means she’s not allowed to take the exams anywhere but Konoha. And Shino’s a clan heir. There’s a chance that you’ll get signed up just because the next opportunity for them will be years from now.”

“Huh.”

Tsume laughs gruffly. “Well, that’s pretty interesting, huh?” She elbows her husband. “Stick around for the month. You’re due a vacation.”

The man nods silently and Kiba whoops in delight.

Riko’s eyes dart between them. “You really didn’t know?”

“Kid,” Tsume huffs, giving her a toothy grin. “Chuunin Exams are only officially announced once everything’s already been organised by people who are not Inuzuka, ‘cause we’ll absolutely go and warn everybody we value about promotion fuckery, which can make things awkward for some people. Before the official announcement, it’s need-to-know only.” She leans forward, her teeth startlingly sharp. “So thanks, brat. Did us a solid. You come by when you’ve got some free time, yeah?”

More confused than ever, Riko nods.

She already had a standing invitation, but it’s nice to hear it again.

And then Kiba asks, “So what’s with the rabbit ears?”

Chapter End Notes
There's once again an easter egg from EmptySurface's amazing fic Hear the Silence. Again, I've got permission.

Momo the emotional support dog is a corgi. That is all.
After her kenjutsu appointment with Yugao, Riko returns home for a shower and breakfast. Oddly enough, her adoptive father and brother are still home. Her mother is nowhere to be seen.

“Good morning,” she greets them. Both look up from the serious-looking conversation they were in.

“Hello, Riko.” Shikaku gives her a nod and a smile. “Your employment contract with clan armoury has been reviewed and filed. You’re good to begin anytime you want.”

“Thanks.” Riko blinks. “Wow, that was fast.” She eyes the two of them, pretty sure she interrupted something serious. “I’ll just-” Making a vague gesture in the direction of upstairs, Riko retreats.

Her shower is quick, more of a catlick than anything since she was planning on more training today. Vacation from Team Seven means she’s got an unexpected amount of free time, and she’s not going to sit around and wallow.

Since things keep coming up, she seals up a few more changes of clothing, several books from her reading list, and miscellaneous other necessities. Just as she leaves her room, she remembers to throw her dirty laundry in the hamper.

The male members of her family (she doubts the novelty will ever wear off) are still in the kitchen when she comes down and makes for the fridge.

“Hard at work?” her adoptive father asks her, a note of amusement in his voice.

“Mm,” she confirms, retrieving the plate that has a note saying ‘For Riko’ attached to it. It makes her all warm and gooey inside. “Want to train a lot this month.”

Riko turns in time to see him nod approvingly, and that makes her feel even warmer, cheeks heating a little.

When she sits down at the table, she figures she might as well tell them what her training is about. It really isn’t a secret anymore that she knows about the exams even though she shouldn’t.

“Because of the Chuunin Exams,” she finishes, eyeing her brother, but sees Shikaku sit straighter and give her an attentive look from the corner of her eye.

Shikamaru doesn’t look surprised at all. More annoyed than anything. “Figures,” he says, an edge to his voice, and glares at the table in front of him.

Their father clears his throat. “We were just speaking about the exams,” he explains to Riko.

She blinks in surprise.

So much for need-to-know and keeping the information from spreading. But at least this saves her from getting scolded for warning all of her former classmates.

“That’s cool,” she comments, and gives Shikamaru a smile. “We could train together!”

He scoffs, stands abruptly, and stalks out of the kitchen without even looking at her.

Riko stares after him, speechless, feeling like he’d just slapped her. What the heck?
Shikaku sighs deeply. “He and his team won’t be taking the Chuunin Exams,” he informs her.

She turns to stare at him. Her adoptive father looks weary, she realises. Tired.

“They… won’t?” Riko questions hesitantly, trying to wrap her head around the idea. “But…”

He shakes his head. “Team Ten went through a traumatic experience that left them very shaken both as a team and as individuals. None of them are in any state to be promoted, and they also only just lost their first jounin sensei. Namiashi will have had them three weeks by the time exam nominations are scheduled, and that’s far too short.”

Namiashi… that has to be Raidou’s surname.

“I guess that makes sense,” Riko mutters, looking down at her breakfast, appetite gone.

It just feels surreal. Shikamaru is her older brother. Has always been ahead of her, someone she tried very hard to get on the same level as.

And now she’ll be taking the exams before him, if her team gets its act together.

Somehow, that makes her feel lonely.

“He actually wanted to take the exams?” she asks, because that part is the most surprising. But then, maybe it shouldn’t be.

Shikamaru changed on that mission.

“All three of them did,” Shikaku confirms. “They’ve become rather ambitious since their return.”

He sounds as tired as she now feels.

Despite her lack of appetite, Riko begins eating the food left for her. None of what she just learned changes that she desperately needs to train. Shikamaru made it clear that he doesn’t want to talk to her, so there’s no point in going after him.

There’s nothing she can do, nothing she can think of that might help rather than make it worse.

“Enough of that,” Shikaku says. “You’re about ready to learn more of our clan jutsu. Moving your shadow is well and good, but you’ll need a little more for the Chuunin Exams.”

Riko looks up in surprise to find him eyeing her steadily.

Somehow, in all her scheduling and training plans, she’d completely forgotten that she’s part of a clan with its own characteristic way of fighting.

“When do you have time?” he asks her. “Team training starts at ten for you, correct?”

She winces, and he gives her a curious look.

“No team training for a while,” Riko tells him, feeling awkward. “We have… stuff to work out. Amongst ourselves.”

“Oh,” he answers, “That’s always troublesome.” He gives her a serious look. “Teams are hard work, and your teammates are… strong personalities with an unfortunate lack of maturity.”

Riko lifts her shoulders and lets them drop. “I’m working on it.”
“Riko,” Shikaku says seriously. “There’s no point if not all three of you actively put in an effort to improve. Teams don’t work like that.”

She doesn’t have a reply for that.

Isn’t all that hopeful, either. Neither Naruto nor Sasuke have ever given much priority to working with each other, even working with her is something that comes and goes. The moment there’s a cool task, she’s usually left behind. Or, the other extreme, if it’s a particularly unsavoury task, they’ll do a good chunk of her share. She’ll be left with the boring, repetitive jobs that are neither fun nor awful. Plus the organising of everything, the communication with the clients, double-checking, correcting sloppily-done jobs, keeping an eye on the easily-distracted Naruto…

That’s not what cooperation is supposed to look like. Riko’s shoulders slump.

Her teammates, Shikamaru, the stupid exams, the amount of work she has to do, and she’s still working on coming to terms with her first kill. It’s… tiring.

Her father sighs quietly. “So you have time today?”

She raises her head again. “Yeah. Therapy in the late afternoon and I want to start at the armoury tonight, but I’m free until then.”

“Think you want to spend some time training with your old man, little one?” He smiles at her.

The corners of Riko’s mouth quirk up. “Yeah. That sounds really good, Dad.”

Riko’s shift at the clan armoury begins with an hour-long lecture on security, confidentiality, and things she isn’t allowed to do under any circumstances. Followed by being handed a stack of papers she has to sign before she’s allowed to do anything. They’re non-disclosure agreements, set up between her and the clan, her work contract mentioned them, so she’s not that surprised.

But holy crap, they’re thorough.

At least they’re formulated without any loopholes, not impossible to parse through. Full of legal jargon, but nowhere near as complicated as the law books she’s still slogging through during study time. She almost doesn’t need a reference book to get through it, though old man Rikuto (she finally learned his name, it was on the signed copy of the contract she received) did provide one before he left her alone in an empty office in the lower levels of the armoury.

The beginning pages are simple enough, nothing too off-putting at first glance. A list of the information she has to keep confidential for an indefinite period: vendor lists, financial information, skills taught to her during her employment.

Her eyebrows begin to raise, though, when she finds ‘business practices’ on the list. Which includes a note on ‘manner of acquisition of materials’. Why, exactly, does that need to be kept a secret? Doesn’t the clan just… buy stuff?

And then she gets to the last point of that list, which takes up an entire two pages on its own. Detailing in no uncertain terms how she can’t share customer identities and what, exactly, they
decided to acquire. And furthermore, how she can neither disclose nor document what that implies about their activities, missions, specialisations, chakra nature, personality and a whole host of other things that absolutely dumbfound her. Religious beliefs are even on that list. And sexual preferences.

What the heck does a clan armoury carry in their inventory that has to do with those?!

Riko is pretty sure she doesn’t actually want to know.

She’s almost relieved when she gets to the next big point of the non-disclosure agreement. Namely, the exceptions. Again, it starts out tame — she can disclose information if the recipient party is cleared by the clan, or if it’s a higher authority than the clan leadership. Which, considering the clan head is also the jounin commander, would only be the Hokage? Does it work like that? Or are clan head and jounin commander two separate positions that happen to be filled by one person? What, exactly, does higher authority mean in this case?

Rikuto helpfully provided her with a notepad and a pen, so she scrawls the questions down.

The next two items on the list of exceptions don’t raise any eyebrows — she’s not just allowed but obligated to disclose confidential information if a higher law than clan autonomy rules applies, and if village safety depends on it.

And then the next warhammer to the face hits.

Five pages on how exactly it is or isn’t excusable if a presumed non-hostile party manipulates information out of her. Non-hostile parties being defined as allies, teachers, superior officers, team members, friends, family members, lovers, spouses, or any other kind of trusted individual. Using genjutsu, mind-affecting ninjutsu, verbal and emotional manipulation, abuse of trust and personal relationships, mind-altering substances, threats, physical violence, seduction.

Riko has to take a moment to just. Process that.

She feels nauseous now.

And the next item makes it worse. Detailing legal protection if information is forced out of her by an actually hostile party, using any kind of interrogation method. A number of which are listed there, and Riko’s stomach turns reading it all.

She has to fight down the urge to vomit.

This was supposed to be a simple part-time job! Is learning some fuuinjutsu really worth it?

Riko reads the rest of the agreement with a strange sort of detachment. If she has any suspicions of someone screwing the clan or the village over, she’s supposed to report to clan leadership and let them handle the matter.

If she breaks the agreement, well. That’s treason. Don’t do it.

The only saving grace is the last page — listing measures to protect her. Who exactly will know the details of her employment and what it entails, where those will be documented and what clearance is necessary to view the relevant files, under what circumstances the information might be released and to whom. That the clan will take legal and military action in order to protect her if she’s at risk because of her position here.

She still holds off on signing until Rikuto comes back into the office.
“Questions?” he grunts at her.

Riko doesn’t need to look at the notepad next to her. “Higher authority than clan leadership, does that mean higher than clan head or jounin commander?” she asks.

“Clan head.”

“That’s both a social, political, and military authority,” she points out. “Just to be clear, we’re talking higher authority in a military sense?”

“Obviously,” he sneers. “If political pressure is put on you, you go to the clan and they’ll deal with it.”

She nods curtly, resolving to look up the identities of those higher authorities. And read more books.

Then she shoves the pages on torture and manipulation his way and gives him a blank look. “Why,” she says.

Rikuto scoffs at her. “Your generation,” he mutters under his breath. “Naive. Fucking peacetime education.” He fixes her with a look. “You’ll be privy to sensitive and useful information, brat. Information makes you a means to an end for enemies. Shinobi care little about human decency in general and not at all if there’s a mission to be finished.” His eyes pierce into her. “You may think this is just a small, relatively meaningless job, but people’s lives will depend on you doing it well and discretely. This document-” A gnarly finger stabs at the papers, “Exists for your protection, the clan’s protection, the entire village’s protection. If you can’t handle even the potential of risk, then do the village a favour and do D-ranks until you’re allowed to retire.”

Riko stares at him mutely before looking at the papers.

“What has happened before?” she asks, pointing at the lists that boil down to how, exactly, she might get hurt for working here.

The old man bares his teeth at her in a feral grin. “All of it.”

She swallows hard, looking at the papers.

“This is normal, isn’t it,” she says quietly. “For any place like this. Or a job in administration. Even teaching.”

The realisation makes her feel small. Cold and lost.

They just keep coming these days, the uncomfortable revelations of what being a shinobi really means.

Why didn’t the Academy warn them about things like this?

“Are you signing or not,” Rikuto demands. “Don’t waste more of my time, girl.”

Riko stares at him. Then down at the stack of papers. Finally, she pulls them towards herself.

She’s a kunoichi. She signed up for this. And she already knew it wasn’t going to be easy or comfortable. This… is just another thing. Her father wouldn’t have co-signed the employment contract if he didn’t know about this.

If he didn’t approve of her doing this, if he didn’t believe she could do it.
Slowly, painstakingly, she puts her name on every single page.

Wondering what else she didn’t know about being a kunoichi. What else nobody warned her about.

But then, there was never any other path for her, was there? The village took her in because she has a power she’s expected to learn to control, but by the time she found out, she already loved it as her own home, loved the family that made her one of their own.

If she could go back in time, Riko would change very little.

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Riko doesn’t get any lessons on professional fuuinjutsu her first night on the job, which shouldn’t surprise her. Really, she’s still reeling so much from the prior revelations that she wouldn’t be able to muster the required focus anyway.

What she gets instead is a tour. It turns out the biggest part of the armoury is below-ground, several basement levels’ worth of storage, office, and fabrication space.

The upstairs warehouse that she normally gets her supplies from is only for basic things and some eye-catching nice stuff, it turns out. She had no idea.

Downstairs is where the important business takes place. The crafting, the fittings. There’s a smithy, a room specifically for drawing seals, a room to test out weaponry. An entire basement level filled to the brim with crates full of weapons, armour, fabrics. Rikuto calls it the magazine.

She catches a glimpse of a room full of high-quality weapons — beautiful, clearly expensive and custom-made, and some of them so strange that she has no idea what they’re called.

“This is a lot for a clan armoury,” she comments, staring around with wide eyes, and staring curiously at the few doors she isn’t allowed to approach.

Rikuto grunts. “We don’t outfit just the Nara clan, we also cover the Yamanaka and Akimichi. Some of this goes out to the village and other shinobi consult us for custom work, too. Obviously for a higher fee. Speaking of work, follow.”

He opens a door. It’s another empty office, though this one is a little nicer than the one she read and signed the non-disclosure agreement in. It has a nice desk, plenty of shelf room with some books already in it, a cushy chair, and a locker.

“This is your space,” the old man informs her. “You do your paperwork here and any other tasks we don’t have a designated room for.” Then he points at a stack of scrolls and books she hadn’t noticed. “Memorise those. Find me in the magazine when you’re done. Bring the reference book.”

And he leaves her alone in her… office?

Riko has an office. It makes her feel strangely adult for a moment.

She sits down on the chair and pulls the scrolls towards herself, somewhat dreading what she’ll find after signing the NDA.

But it’s just study material. Specifically on weaponry and how to test quality, materials, sharpness,
balance, chakra conductivity. A lot of information on weapon maintenance and cleaning. Another scroll on material pricing categorised by the country it was from. Then, shipping costs.

It’s all dreadfully dry and boring, but she’s getting paid for it, and if this is what she needs to do to get lessons on drawing seals that aren’t just modified versions of standard stuff with a hefty dose of improvisation added, then she’ll do it.

No knowledge is ever useless, after all.

Those memorisation exercises from the Academy definitely come in handy during times like this. Riko is good at them, thanks to all the practice she has with studying.

It’s still almost midnight when she’s reasonably sure she’s got it all down.

‘Bring the reference book,’ Rikuto told her, but there are several on the shelf.

He probably meant one related to the material she memorised, Riko reasons, and so grabs the reference book on weaponry. Casts a wistful look at the fuuinjutsu books, but that’s probably for another day. Rikuto seems like the kind of man who’ll make her earn her lessons and test her dedication by ordering her to do annoying and tedious jobs before she’ll get to learn anything remotely cool.

She’s right.

Riko finds him in a section of the magazine that’s just… a mess. Stacked crates and barrels full of unsorted weapons, fabrics, metals. And it might just be her, but… some of it smells faintly of blood, earth, and smoke.

So that’s why she’s not supposed to disclose anything about acquisition practices, huh. It’s loot.

At this point, she can’t even bring herself to be surprised anymore.

“Start with the kunai,” Rikuto grunts at her, pointing at four crates filled with kunai. “Check quality, sharpness, size, balance, weight. Polish before you package them if they pass, five to a case. Make sure the labels on the cases fit the kunai you put inside. If you’re not sure about something, you better ask before you screw up.” A gesture to a clipboard. “And document that shit.”

He himself is busy with a pile of fuuma shuriken.

“Yes, sir,” she says and steps forward to begin her task.

“None of that sir shit,” he scoffs.

Riko blinks at him, halting in her movement. “What am I supposed to say instead?”

“Come up with something.” His voice is disdainful.

Still better than what some of the D-rank clients throw at her team, though. She can deal with his unpleasantness. The clan is paying her for her time and she’ll get useful skills out of it.

“Rikuto-ojisan?” Riko tries dubiously.

He gives her a contemptuous glare. “Hell no. Get to work, girl.”

And she almost does what she always does when it’s a mission client treating her like that. Almost
falls back into that pattern and makes polite apologies to placate him.

But something stops her. That part of her that is done letting herself be pushed around and used. And in her head, she hears Hana’s and Tsume’s voices echo about fangs and claws.

She doesn’t want to be miserable working here. And really, he was rude first.

So she gives him an ironic salute and drawls, “As you wish, ossan,” before turning away and going for the kunai, inwardly trembling with trepidation.

She pretends to ignore the huff he aims at her back. But that's all the reaction he has, and that's... okay.

He'll let her get away with a bit of attitude.

The work is, as expected, tedious and annoying. She has to examine every single kunai, sort it, and make a strike in the appropriate column on the sheet she found on the clipboard.

And examining means weighing, balancing, running a leather cloth over each one to check for scratches and see if the blade is even. After that it’s testing the sharpness by cutting flimsy pieces of paper. Then laying it on a reference sheet to see which regulation size each kunai falls into.

It takes ages.

But it needs to be done. Comrades rely on those kunai every day.

Riko’s never going to take a kunai for granted ever again. Or looking at an armoury the same way as before. She didn’t realise how much work went into even the little things.

Hours pass and she’s on the last barrel when she gets a kunai that’s just off. Too light, not sharp at all. Riko puts it aside and goes on. But two kunai later, and there’s another that’s the same. She frowns.

Another four are fine, then she has another dud.

Three times is a pattern. Riko looks at the crate with a scowl and decides to test her theory. Another five faulty weapons later and she’s certain of it.

“Ossan, someone’s trying to pull a scam on us,” she speaks up, frowning.

The old man, busy examining a naginata, drawls out a derisive, “That so?”

“The kunai at the surface are fine. Anything below is scrap.” She points to the pile of defective kunai she found in the crate.

He puts the naginata down and walks over to where she’s sitting. Crouches down and roots through the crate. Then makes a displeased noise because apparently he can tell something’s off with just a look and a touch. “You package any of those?”

Riko shakes her head. “Didn’t find enough intact ones.”

“Put them back. We’re returning them.” Rikuto points at the label on the crate. “Blacklisting that supplier.”

He stalks out of the magazine, leaving her to toss all the defective kunai back into the crate. Then, nothing to do, she waits. Shakes out her aching hands and flexes her fingers. Gets up and does a
few stretches.

Rikuto returns after a while and slaps a lid on the barrel, nailing it shut after. Then slaps a big sticker on it. “Take it to the mailroom,” he orders before he hands her a bundle of freshly-addressed letters. “Deliver these. Throwing them into the mailboxes is fine, not many are gonna be awake to receive them. Go home after, kids need sleep.”

And he returns to the naginata.

Okay then. It’s no different from a D-rank, she figures. And she does receive upper limit D-rank pay for every hour of work, so this is completely fine.

“Good night, then,” she mutters, and gets to work.

The crate is quickly relocated, and then Riko’s leaving the armoury to hurry into the village.

Konoha at night is eerie. So silent, the streets deserted with the exception of the occasional shinobi hurrying by. It’s way past four in the morning. There’s still some life in some of the bars she passes by, but otherwise, the village is asleep.

Riko examines the letters in her hands and plots out her route according to the addresses on them. Rikuto’s sending her to what she suspects is every weapons store and armoury in the village — presumably to notify them that the newly blacklisted supplier is bad news.

There are quite a few places to visit, Konoha being a rather large shinobi village.

At least she can just throw the letters in without having to talk to people. Saves her a good bit of hassle.

...she can’t help but think bitterly about how much time the absence of her teammates saves her in addition to that.

It takes her over an hour of running all over the village to find every place. After all the D-ranks with her team, she’s familiar enough with Konoha, but she still accidentally confuses street names and ends up taking unnecessary detours. Then there’s the fact that some of the addresses were for the village armouries, who do require explanations (but in the end save her a bit of time, promising to notify their other branches promptly so she can strike them off of her route). Finally, there are fellow clan armouries.

Not every clan maintains one, she now knows the Akimichi and Yamanaka are supplied by the one she works at. Then there are clans who consider themselves above weaponry, like the Hyuuga. But Riko does have to visit the Kurama and Aburame compounds, to name just a few, and do some explaining.

Her final destination is the Inuzuka compound, though. It just seemed like a good place to finish with, and she might even score some snacks.

“Whoa, Riko,” the guard — it’s Inuzuka Kami again, awesome, he’s nice and his hair is cool; shaved at the sides but long and spiky otherwise — rumbles upon seeing her. “You look dead on
“Got a delivery for the armoury,” she answers, barely suppressing a yawn as she waves the last remaining letter. Kami’s ninken scuffles closer to press against her. “Hey, Raiden,” she greets, and carefully pets his shaggy fur when he nudges her hand.

“Gotcha. C’mon, this way.” Kami motions for her to enter the compound and then falls in step with her. Growls something into the darkness to whoever else guards the compound with him. “Got anywhere else to go tonight?”

Riko shakes her head and manages a tired grin. “Saved the best for last.”

He huffs a laugh and snatches the letter from her hands, then opens the door to Kiba’s house and pushes her inside. “I’ll deliver this for you. Get some sleep.”

The door is closed behind her before she can reply. Riko blinks owlishly.

Well. She figures Tsume and them won’t mind if she crashes on the kitchen couch?

Except when she’s made her way into the kitchen and is about to sink down and curl up right there, something huge, warm, and furry presses against her side and herds her out into the hallway before she knows what’s happening.

Riko stares at the dog partnered with Kiba’s father. He’s almost as tall as she is. “Uhm,” she says. “I can explain?”

Tenshi snaps his teeth and keeps herding her down the hallway until they’re in front of Kiba’s door. He butts it open with his head, the door not having been shut all the way.

It doesn’t stop there, oh no, Riko doesn’t even get to protest intruding on Kiba’s room before the ninken pushes her towards the sleeping boy, who’s dead to the world and also looks like he dragged himself onto the furs straight from the training grounds.

This is creepy, isn’t it? Her just going into Kiba’s room while he’s sleeping, and then she’s tumbling down beside him courtesy of a bossy dog with a fondness for head butts.

Kiba mutters something in his sleep and shuffles closer, an arm draping over her shoulders. This is no surprise, Kiba sleep-cuddles her whenever she stays over. It’s pretty great.

Tenshi huffs, satisfied, then fixes her with a stern look. “Puppies need sleep,” he growls.

Riko manages a sleepy glare. “Fine,” she mumbles. The dog definitely outranks her. And it’s so nice and comfy. She’s really tired. “G’night,” she yawns.

And that’s about the last thing she remembers before falling asleep.
The next morning, Riko sleeps in. This is completely okay, it’s her scheduled rest day. She’s been working a lot, and she’s got to give her body a break. It’s still not entirely recovered from the chakra exhaustion.

There’s a moment of disorientation when she wakes up in a familiar pile of fur and limbs, which is nice, but not how she was planning to sleep for the second night in a row.

She won’t complain, though. Kiba’s nest of furs it comfortable, the cuddling is great, Akamaru’s there. It’s heavenly.

Still, she has to use the bathroom, so she attempts to wiggle out of Kiba’s hold.

“Five more minutes,” he mumbles into her neck, nuzzling closer.

Riko knows from experience that five minutes will turn a lot longer, so she continues her efforts. Which makes him hold on tighter, so clearly a different strategy is needed.

If training with Kakashi taught her anything, it’s that kawarimi should never be underestimated. She substitutes herself with a pillow and scurries out of the bedroom she wasn’t supposed to be in in the first place.

Fifteen minutes later, Riko is showered, dressed in fresh clothes, and feeling a lot more human than before. She might have underestimated how unused she is to working through nights.

Kiba’s parents plus their canine partners are both in the kitchen when she makes her way there.

“Good morning,” Riko greets them awkwardly because having a standing invitation is one thing, coming into the house and sleeping there without the owners being aware quite another. But at least Tenshi the dog approved, so it’s not as bad.

“Morning, Riko,” Tsume answers, pointing at a chair. Riko sits down. “My brat son’s still asleep?”

“He said five more minutes,” she reports.

The woman snorts, clearly knowing exactly what that means.

“I’ll wake him.” Arashi stands smoothly and strides out of the kitchen, Tenshi at his heels.

Riko stares after him, wondering at the way he moves. So smooth and purposeful, it’s like the air itself parts for him.

A plate full of food and a glass of warm milk land in front of her. She startles, blinking down, then looking up at the woman who put the meal there.

“Eat up, kid,” Tsume orders, and so Riko does. Making a mental note to drink her anti-chakra-exhaustion shake later at home.

“Thank you for the food,” she murmurs.

“No problem. Thanks for the hard work.” Tsume chuckles to herself, like she knows something Riko doesn’t. “What’s your plan for the day?”
Riko swallows her current bite of food. “Er, mostly read. Give my body a day of rest, so today’s just gonna be stretches and some kata, nothing strenuous.”

The woman hums consideringly. “Kiba could use a sparring partner who isn’t attached to any specific clan taijutsu,” she informs Riko. “You interested? We’ll throw in some lessons as compensation.”

Uh, what. Riko blinks at her.

That… definitely sounds like a formal arrangement. Which, this is the Inuzuka clan. The least formal clan in all of the village.

Also one of the clans known for their skill in taijutsu. Which is, in Riko’s opinion, the one shinobi discipline one can never be good enough in. Weapons, ninjutsu… both require resources that can run out, and at that point, it’ll come down to running or fighting with her bare hands.

This is a really good deal. Not only will Riko benefit from taijutsu practice against a capable partner, she’ll get lessons for it as thanks.


Tsume snickers. “Should’ve asked before saying yes, for future reference. And that depends on what you wanna learn from us.”

Riko thinks it over. The obvious answer is tracking, of course. But she’s already working on stealth, kenjutsu and sensing, has an overwhelmingly long reading list, she works a part-time job several nights per week, and therapy also takes up a significant amount of time and energy.

It would be very unwise to add another discipline to master into the mix, so she tells Tsume, “Stealth.” Then frowns because that’s such a broad answer, and she’s learning the basics from Genma already, so she adds, “How to avoid being tracked.”

Tsume grins and nods. “You got it.” She holds out her hand and they shake on it.

After a day of studying and periodic stretching with therapy in the afternoon, Riko is back to training in full. Kenjutsu, afterwards a few hours of solo practice, a short break, and she’s back at the Inuzuka compound.

Considers again that she’s been spending more time here than at home. She’d brought it up with Fuji during their appointment yesterday, to which her therapist replied, “It seems to me like it’s become a safe space for you. Hardly any chance of encountering the people causing you distress right now. Don’t you think that’s a good thing, Riko?”

It both is and isn’t.

The people ‘causing her distress’ are her friends. Her brother, though she doesn’t blame him at all. His jounin sensei lost an arm in front of him and even now still is in a coma, and Shikamaru has to adjust to a new sensei, has been excluded from exams he actually wanted to take while the rest of their generation is participating.
Still, it’s hard being around him, right now. She spent a good chunk of yesterday at home, and running into him was… not good.

“You, Riko!” It’s Inuzuka Kami and Raiden again, but there are two other men guarding the compound entrance already, which makes Riko wonder why he’s here. “I hear we’re teaching you a thing or two today!”

Ah. That explains it, she supposes, though she’d expected her lessons to be with Tsume or Hana. But then, Hana’s a veterinarian, which has to be a busy job in a village with so many ninken, and Tsume as clan head would be even busier.

“I’ll be in your care,” she answers, giving him and his ninken a polite bow. “Thank you for taking the time—”

A startled squeak escapes her when Kami laughs, picks her up, and throws her over his shoulder. “Let’s get going!”

He takes her into a nearby training ground that’s all deep forest, Raiden trotting at his side.

“What’cha know about tracking?” the man lugging her around asks.

Riko frowns. “It’s… following someone by finding traces they left. Like scents or footprints.”

Kami hums and sets her down. “Today’s exercise: My sister is somewhere in this forest. Find her.”

She stares at him. Isn’t she here to learn how to avoid leaving tracks? But apparently she’s getting a lesson in tracking instead?

Then again, she supposes it makes sense. Knowing how tracking works will be helpful in avoiding it later.

“Chop chop,” Kami prompts. “The longer you wait, the colder the trail gets!”

A number of hours later, Riko comes back to the Inuzuka compound, her head swirling with lessons about scents, tracks, interpreting noises, and chakra residue. Even though Kami didn’t explain a whole lot, just pointing things out and leaving her to figure the clues out herself.

It was more informative than all the tracking lessons the Academy taught put together. Hard to learn it in a classroom setting, especially when the teacher has to keep control of thirty kids during an outdoor exercise at the same time.

Riko didn’t manage to find Kami’s sister, though. Which kind of sucked because she’s actually supposed to be Riko’s teacher, according to Kami. A stealth specialist.

But Riko learnt lots just looking for her.

They’d continue another day. She has to keep up her end of the deal now, which means sparring with Kiba. Kami delivers her to one of the Inuzuka training fields, where she finds Kiba and Akamaru practicing some kind of combo move.
“You stretched and warmed up?” Tsume asks her, half an eye on her son while her ninken barks an order at him and Akamaru.

“Need to stretch,” Riko tells her, moving to the sidelines to do just that. She’d already stretched in the morning, but it’s always better to be safe, especially before a match.

It’s not like she doesn’t know that she’s got a tendency to go overboard in combat. Which is often necessary for her to actually score a win, but yeah, she’s working on it, and until she’s got it figured out, she’ll do her best to prevent as much damage as she can.

Once she’s finally stretched and her hands are wrapped in bandages, Riko makes her way back to Tsume. “I’m ready,” she announces.

This is fine, it’s just like an Academy spar, no need to be nervous. She’s good at taijutsu. Even beats Sasuke occasionally. Granted, it tends to be through trickery, but still. A win’s a win.

Kiba, though. Kiba was about the only one in class who could give Sasuke a real work-out. And that was while using Academy taijutsu. Here, he’s allowed to use his clan taijutsu. Here, he’s allowed to use his clan taijutsu.

She’s learned a lot since graduation, though. And it’s Kiba, he’s a friend.

It’d be a lot easier if there weren’t so many watching people around.

Then again, she should probably get used to it, considering the final stage of the Chuunin Exams would be highly public.

“Great,” Tsume answers. “Kiba!”

The boy perks up and comes over, giving Riko a wide grin. Akamaru’s tail wags and he barks a greeting.

She waves back. “Hey, guys!”

“Yo, Riko!”

“Yeah, you brats can be adorable later,” Tsume huffs, earning offended squawks from all of them. “Get to it!”

Sparring with Kiba and Akamaru is vastly different from doing it with Sasuke. They aren’t as fast as Riko’s teammate, but their teamwork is perfect, and keeping track of two opponents isn’t something she’s used to.

Then there’s the fact that she’s become reliant on sensing the spikes of angry intent that precede Sasuke’s attacks — Kiba doesn’t do that. There are peaks of intent, but nowhere as intense, not reliable enough to base her defense on.

For Kiba, fighting seems to be instinctual, similar to Riko, even though he moves in an entirely different way than she’s familiar with. So much closer to the ground, on all fours more often than not, and then he and Akamaru combine into two dog-human hybrids.

Fighting Sasuke — or Naruto, for that matter — is straightforward.

Not so much with Kiba. He moves around as much as she does, goes for blind spots, backs off, uses hit-and-run tactics, and he brings out smoke bombs a minute into the spar. Riko is so glad she’s trained in low-visibility combat.
The match drags on for a while, the two of them evenly matched, for some definition of the expression. He’s strong and very well-trained, zero hesitation in his moves, but she’s fast and her evasion skills are highly practiced. And all the training she’s been doing with Yugao and Genma is definitely paying off.

Kiba still wins in the end. All three of them are on the ground, and she’s not great at grappling matches even against one opponent, her small size and low physical strength seriously hindering her. Plus, there’s two of them and one of her.

“Yield,” she coughs. “I’m done.”

Kiba rolls off of her, or at least she thinks it’s Kiba. Kind of hard to track who’s who in the whole mess, and they’re sort of merged, too.

It changes how their chakras normally feel.

“Me too,” he groans. “Hell, when’d you get so tough? Didn’t fight like that back in the Academy.”

A poof, and yeah, it is Kiba, since the other one just turned into Akamaru.

Riko makes an exhausted noise. “Neither did you.”

“Huh. I guess.”

Legs step into her field of vision. Riko’s eyes follow them upwards to look at Tsume, who crouches down and picks all of them up. “That wasn’t complete garbage,” the woman grunts. “Let’s get you brats patched up, and then we’ll go over what you did well and where you messed up.”

The day following Riko’s first spar with Kiba is a Thursday. Meaning she’s meeting with Kakashi today, if that’s even still a thing after the blow-up with her team.

Only one way to find out. She goes to the training ground and when she finds it empty, begins working her way through katas.

He arrives ten minutes later.

“Hello, Riko,” he greets, eye crinkling at her in that familiar way, a hand raised in greeting like they just met coincidentally in a grocery store.

She finishes with her kata. “Hey, sensei.”

For a few moments, it’s all she can do to stare at him, because she hasn’t seen him since he gave her time off.

Kakashi sits down and points at the spot in front of him. “Let’s talk.”

Slowly, Riko walks over to him and sinks down.

“How’s your week going?” he asks her. “Keeping up with your training plan?”
Eyeing him cautiously, Riko launches into telling him about all that she’s been learning this week.

He hums in consideration and smiles at her. “You’ve been a busy bee. Good job.”

Riko ducks her head, finger drawing on the ground. “What about the team?”

“What about it?” Kakashi asks her bluntly, startling her.

“You are the one who taught us to put the team before everything else,” she points out.

Her sensei tilts his head. “Which you both did and didn’t do. You need to realise that you are also a part of the team, Riko-chan, and to care for the team entails caring for yourself.” He fixes her with a look. “Not trying to do the work of three without much reward or thanks.”

Riko ducks her head, only for Kakashi to sigh and prompt her to look up again.

“I’m not blaming you for anything,” he says firmly. “You shouldn’t have ended up in a situation where you felt you needed to do this in the first place. Your teammates failed you and so did I. I’m very sorry, Riko.”

She opens her mouth and closes it again, no idea how to deal with this. What to say here.

No one has ever given her an apology like this, and “It’s okay,” wouldn’t cut it, she’s pretty sure of it.

And at the end of the day, it isn’t okay.

“It’s not your fault,” she finally says.

Kakashi shakes his head. “I’m responsible for this team,” he says calmly. “And I ignored the problem when I shouldn’t have. The three of you have never been in a team before. I shouldn’t have expected you to figure it out all by yourselves.” A pause, then he adds, “Though I don’t think it was unreasonable to have expected the boys to look past their own noses.”

Silence follows his words.

“Today is about you,” Kakashi informs her. “If you want to talk about the team, we’ll do that. Otherwise, I’ve been meaning to teach you something I can’t entrust to either of your teammates.”

She stares at him. “But-”

“Riko,” he cuts in. “You are not the one who has to put an effort into fixing team dynamics right now. Besides, the boys need to do some serious reflecting and having them attempt D-ranks without you around is turning out to be quite educational. And entertaining.”

She closes her mouth and replays what he just said in her head.

The boys. Doing D-ranks without her.

“That’s a disaster,” she chokes out.

Kakashi beams at her. “It is!”

“I need to-”

“Nu-uh!” He waggles his finger at her. “You focus on yourself, Riko. The boys won’t bother you.
And now, the two of us have things to discuss!”

They end up at his apartment, sitting down at his table.

Riko eyes her sensei warily. What did he mean by what he said earlier? Teach her something he can’t entrust either Naruto or Sasuke with?

Naruto, she can understand — there are so many things he just isn’t suited for. But Sasuke? What does she have that Sasuke doesn’t, besides a small amount of social skills?

“My teacher,” Kakashi finally speaks up, “Was a fuuinjutsu master.”

Her eyes widen. Of all the things… “Fuuinjutsu?”

“Yes.” His voice is more serious than she’s ever heard it. “I’m by no means a master, but I’d confidently call myself adept at it. However, I rarely make use of the art.” A pause. “He left me quite a bit of material when he was killed. I like to think he’d have wanted it to be passed on.”

She stares at him, her mouth slack. “Sensei-”

He holds up his hand to stop her from speaking. “I know that you love fuuinjutsu. It’s obvious when you speak about it, or when you tried to teach the boys, no matter how ill-advised that was. You go into your own world when you draw. Sensei was the same way.”

Riko’s eyes feel suspiciously hot and she’s maybe sniffling a bit. She doesn’t even know why.

It’s just, she didn’t know anyone paid that kind of attention to her. About the things she likes. She’s never made a big deal about fuuinjutsu.

“I don’t even know a lot,” she manages to choke out. “I’m not very good. It’s just storage stuff and some explosions.”

“And that’s why we’re here,” Kakashi tells her patiently. “So you can learn.” He pulls out a scroll from his pouch and hands it to her. It’s medium-sized and plain, but when she opens it, she realises how thin and fine the paper is, how high the quality. It feels almost silky. And then she sees the seals, and they’re so lovely, so perfectly drawn, they take her breath away. “This was his library scroll,” Kakashi adds.

Riko stares up at Kakashi.

A library scroll.

Those are rare and extremely complicated to make! Involving seals folded into each other, storage that sorts items into categories, and it requires so much detail and planning.

“I’ve removed some sensitive material and a lot of his personal notes,” her teacher continues. “But all the annotated reference material, the books and scrolls, quite a bit of his research, it’s in there.” He fixes her with a grave look. “I can’t give it to you just yet because you have no way to keep it safely hidden. But you’ll have access whenever we’re in this apartment, and I’ll let you keep one item at a time for self-study.” He scratches the back of his head. “What we’ll do is this: During our solo training days, I’ll teach you how to use the reference materials. How to put a seal together from them, depending on what you want to do. To recognise the purpose of an unknown seal. The more advanced principles and techniques of fuuinjutsu. How to apply them.”

He gives her an expectant look.
“What do you say?”

“I…” She stares at him, and her lip is definitely quivering. “Thank you so much, Kakashi-sensei.”

He hums, and his eye crinkles up in a happy smile. “Thank you, Riko-chan. I’m glad to pass this on to someone who’ll value it.”

Riko and Kakashi talk fuuinjutsu all day until it’s so late that he just lets her crash on his pull-out couch after mooching dinner from his neighbour. She makes a mental note to get the poor guy something for the trouble, even if by the sound of the conversation, it’s a long-standing tradition.

He isn’t there when she wakes up, but there’s a plate with a small breakfast on the counter and a note saying ‘Most important meal of the day, Riko-chan,’ signed with a henohenomoheji.

Riko spends a minute being soppy over that before she wolfs it down and leaves for kenjutsu with Yugao.

After that, it’s solo practice, her first attempts at forming chakra strings.

Her chakra control is good, the problem is getting the strands solid and strong enough to actually move anything.

More hours are spent fruitlessly attempting to find her Inuzuka stealth teacher in the forest, then sparring Kiba, then studying. It’s no surprise that Riko’s exhausted when she goes into work the following night.

She’s glad tomorrow will be another scheduled rest day. Just gotta finish her work shift now.

It’s not too different from last time, minus the signing of documents with distressing implications. This time, though, it’s not kunai she’s sorting. Boxes of shuriken and senbon, and less tedious.

And once she’s done, Rikuto actually lets her touch the cool stuff. The big weapons, and he actually shows and explains a few things. How to determine materials, the best way to sharpen certain types of blades, which polish and weapon oil to use. Gauging how much a weapon is worth.

The best thing is, he even lets her take a few swings with them! Gives her pointers what some of the more outlandish items are good for!

She’s sad to leave in the early hours of the morning, even though it’s getting hard to keep her eyes open.

Weapons are awesome.

Swords are still her favourite, though.
Things have just fallen into a sort-of routine when Yoshino calls for Riko one evening just as she’s getting ready for work. Last time, she and Rikuto actually did something fuuinjutsu-adjacent — Riko assisted in making professional ink brushes. Which involved washing animal hair, examining every single hair, soaking them in various concoctions, then drying them via a complicated seal for ages, time during which Rikuto made her practice wood-carving. She’s not good enough to make the handles for ink brushes yet, but it’s just another thing to practice.

Then she got to watch him mix the glue to hold everything together, and the less said about that stuff, the better. It involved bones and animal hide and smelled really bad.

Riko’s never taking an ink brush for granted again. Now she knows why fuuinjutsu equipment is so expensive.

“Your teammates are here!” her mother shouts.

Riko about freezes, her hands immediately sweaty.

Sasuke and Naruto? Here? What?

It’s already dark outside. Way past the time visiting is still polite. And Kakashi told her the boys wouldn’t bother her without his permission.

It’s got to be an emergency. Maybe something to do with the D-ranks they’re doing without her, and she knew that was a bad idea. They’ve almost set houses on fire before, and that was with her present.

She jumps up, grabs her things, and runs downstairs. “What’s going on?” she asks briskly.

“Ricchan!” Naruto’s expression crumples the moment he sees her, and then he’s running forward with a kind of despair on his face that stops her short.

Sasuke doesn’t look so great, either.

Shit. What happened? Is Kakashi okay? Did the team get in trouble because of her not being there? Fuck, did the administration decide to replace her with a better kunoichi since they haven’t even talked in two weeks and the Chuunin Exams are coming up?

And then she’s got her arms full of sobbing Naruto, blubbering something completely incoherent and getting snot all over her shirt.

“Ruto?” she asks, dread curling in her stomach, and she pats him on the back. “Naruto, what happened?”

No answer forthcoming. She looks at Sasuke instead and gets a really unhappy look before he stares at the ground.

“Naruto?” she tries again. “Hey, what’s wrong?”

“Ricchan!” he wails, clinging to her desperately.

Riko’s getting really worried now, and she needs to know, and this isn’t working.
“Naruto!” Her voice is sharp, snapping like a whip the way Yoshino’s does in training. She pushes the boy away from her and keeps one hand firm on his shoulder. With the other, she grabs his chin and tips it up so he’s looking into her eyes. “Tell me what’s wrong,” she orders.

The boy sniffs. “Ricchan, it’s horrible!”

“I can’t help if you won’t tell me what’s going on,” she says firmly, trying to keep control of her voice. “What’s **wrong**?”

“You can’t leave the team!” he cries. “Please don’t leave the team! It’s terrible without you! We miss you and we’re sorry!”

Huh?

…what?

She stares at him blankly. “Excuse me?”

“What the idiot said,” Sasuke speaks up, and he sounds like it physically hurts him to do so. “Come back.”

Riko stares at him, who’s determinedly avoiding her gaze. Back at Naruto, who’s wiping his nose now and giving her a tearful look from his huge blue eyes. Then to Sasuke again.

The silence stretches and with every moment that passes, her incredulity lessens while her fury rises.

“Let me get this straight,” she says, taking her hands away from Naruto slowly. “You show up here, at **my home**, to ask me to come back.”

“Please,” Naruto whispers. “I miss you so much, Ricchan. You’re my **best friend**.”


“It’s what he taught us,” Sasuke speaks up, looking directly at her for the first time this evening. “Those that don’t follow the rules are scum. Those that leave their teammates behind are worse—”

“Get the hell out of my house,” she whispers. He cuts off abruptly.

Naruto flinches back from her. “Ricchan?” And he sounds like she kicked him, soft and vulnerable and **hurt**. Part of her, a big part, is sorry. The rest of her is **furious**.

“You two,” Riko says slowly. “Come to my house against direct orders from our jounin sensei, not giving me any warning or time to mentally prepare myself for this conversation. Without consideration for my schedule, you come here demanding my time and attention. Make me think that it’s an **actual** emergency, since that’s the **only reason** you ought to have for coming here before I’ve made clear that I’m ready to see you after you treated me like crap. And you do this,” she takes a deep breath. “So you can gang up on me, give me that sorry excuse for an apology, and emotionally pressure me into coming back.”

“Riko—” Sasuke tries.
“Get out of my house,” she repeats, her face beginning to feel hot and her eyes stinging. “This isn’t how teammates act. This isn’t how friends act. I think this may have been the most self-centered, entitled thing the two of you have ever done. But congrats, at least you did it together.” Riko shakes her head slowly, her hands clenching into fists. Stares at them and feels like she’s looking at two strangers. “I’m late for work.”

She strides out of the house, past Naruto and Sasuke.

“Work?” Sasuke echoes.

Riko ignores him and shunshins out of sight.

She has a life outside of her team and she intends to live it.

Rikuto-ossan takes one look at her face and grunts in displeasure. “You’re not working tonight. Get lost.”

Riko stares at him.

“Come back when you’ve dealt with your shit,” he growls. “Or learn to channel it. But you’re not setting foot in here tonight.”

She nods tightly, turns on her heel, and stalks away.

Her thoughts are spiralling. The longer she thinks about what her teammates just pulled, the angrier she gets, the less she can stop thinking about it.

And she recognises what it means when her skin begins to feel too small, her blood charging.

The last thing she needs is another episode.

Riko isn’t even aware of where her steps are taking her, but then she’s standing in front of Kakashi’s door and hell, why not? She knocks.

It opens less than a minute later, Kakashi, wearing only a towel around his waist, water dripping down a body riddled with more scars than she’s ever seen on anyone. There's an ANBU tattoo on his shoulder that somehow doesn’t surprise her in the least.

He’s got his mask on, though. Did he shower with it on?

“What’s wrong, Riko?” he asks.

“I’m angry and I don’t know where to put all the-” She makes makes a jerky motion with her hand. “Rage.”

She doesn’t really get angry. Offended, annoyed, yes. Nothing like this. The closest she ever got was with Ikeda and his offer of apprenticeship, but that was very different.

It wasn’t personal.
What’s curling in her gut right now is a kind of cold anger that feels like it could snap at any moment. And when it does, it won’t be yelling or punches that follow. It’ll be worse.

There’s so much energy coursing through her that it hurts.

“Okay,” Kakashi says. Disappears inside for maybe ten seconds, and then he’s stepping out dressed in what she recognises as an ANBU uniform. “You okay with me shunshining us to a training ground?”

She twitches her head in an approximation of a nod.

“Putting my hand on your shoulder now,” he announces and then does just that. The world blurs around them for several seconds. They land in some training ground she doesn’t recognise. “Okay.”

“Okay, what?” Riko asks blankly.

“Get it out.”

She stares up at him. Her hair’s kinda floating around her head now, her skin buzzing. Something’s inside her and it wants out. “I don’t know how.”

Kakashi shrugs. “Blow something up. Yell and scream. Attack me. Take up pottery. Make a joke to release tension.”

Riko blinks at the last two options he put forward, but then shakes herself.

Normally, she’d pick the attack option because sparring is great for releasing stress. But right now- “I’d hurt you,” she chokes out, remembering how she disintegrated a tree last time, killed that woman in Nami, and that thing during the bell test…

Her teacher hums noncommittally. “Then we’ll try exercise,” he decides. “You have your katana with you?”

She doesn’t leave the house without it anymore.

“Good,” Kakashi says after she confirms with a nod. “Let’s see if that helps. Go on ahead.”

Riko swallows and unseals her weapon. Her first swings are clumsy and unsteady. But there’s something about using her katana that just always… straightens out her mind. Streamlines everything that goes on in her head. Makes it go smooth.

She loses track of time as she makes herself work through her katas.

Collapses to the ground when she reaches the end of the last one, like a marionette with its strings cut. Realises she’s covered in cold sweat and shaking, even though just a moments ago her movements were smooth and graceful.

Kakashi sits down next to her crumpled form. “Better?” he asks.

“It doesn’t hurt anymore,” Riko whispers after a pause. Still feels an echo of her blood tingling, but it’s negligible. Small.

“That’s good,” he comments, patting her on the head. “What happened?”

She shifts to lay on her back. Stares up at the night sky. Then does something she never thought
she’d do — she rats her teammates out. “Naruto and Sasuke came to visit me.”

“Ah.” Kakashi’s tone is light and conversational. “Did they, now”

Riko would be surprised if he didn’t already guess it. She still has Naruto’s tears and snot all over her. He can definitely smell that.

“Mm,” she says tiredly. “Abused the team motto to justify it.”

“I see.”

“I’m angry.” She stares up at the darkness above her contemplatively. “I don’t think I’ve ever been this angry before.”

It’s different now. A calm kind of fury. Neither explosive nor cold, a matter-of-fact kind of anger.

“You have very good reason to be angry,” Kakashi comments. “They committed a breach of trust, no matter their intentions.”

Silence follows.

“Yeah,” she finally agrees and feels so tired. “They did.”

Her teacher sighs softly. “What do you want to happen after this, Riko?”

And isn’t that the question of the ages.

When Riko stalks into the team meeting the next day — late so Kakashi will actually be there already — both her teammates are shocked.

Naruto jumps up and runs towards her. “Ricchan, we’re-”

She side-steps him and continues onward, not responding to his chatter.

Sasuke gives her a cautious look, but she doesn’t look at him either.

“Hello, Riko,” Kakashi greets her, like she didn’t crash on his couch once again last night, like they hadn’t had met up for fuuinjutsu days twice now, like he doesn’t know a damn thing about what happened the previous day.

Maybe she should have let him handle dishing out the consequences to Naruto and Sasuke’s actions. But… no. No.

She’s doing this herself. When it comes down to it, both the boys have shown her that while they care about her, care about her a lot, even — they don’t respect her.

Never mind that they’re some of her best friends.

Kakashi can’t earn that respect for her, she has to do it herself.

So.
“I’m back,” she says to her teacher, refusing to look at either of her teammates.

“Maa, that’s nice,” he muses. “So you think you’ll be able to work together again?”

Riko looks at her teammates. Sasuke, staring at the ground. Naruto, looking all tearful and miserable.

“Yes, sensei,” she answers, her voice cool. “Unless anyone has objections? Or something else to say? Maybe you’d like to tell sensei something?”

No words forthcoming from either of them. No confessions of their actions last night.

She didn’t think so.

“Eheheheh,” Naruto instead laughs uncomfortably, scratching the back of his neck. “It’s good to have you back, Ricchan!”

“We’re on-duty right now,” she answers neutrally. “I’d appreciate it if you could be professional and called me Riko.”

Naruto stares at her, and his face falls as he parses the words.

“But-“ He looks all crumpled again. “It’s my name for you!”

She crosses her arms. “I don’t care what you call me on your own time, but at work, I’m Riko.”

“But-“

Riko turns back to Kakashi. “Today’s mission?”

His eye crinkles at her. “Maa, why don’t you three head to the mission desk and see what’s available?”

She nods curtly. “Understood.”

And she strides away, leaving their usual training ground for the direction of the village centre. After a moment, the boys scramble after her. Naruto flanking her on one side, Sasuke slightly behind her on the other. Just like normal.

“Are you still mad at us?” Naruto asks hesitantly.

“Yes.” She doesn’t look at him, keeps up a brisk and purposeful pace.

“We apologised,” Sasuke mutters.

Riko snorts derisively. “That wasn’t an apology, and you didn’t even say the words.”

They reach the tower and she steps in without hesitation. It’s busy and noisy inside, which prevents any further conversation. She greets a few familiar faces from the jounin lounge in passing.

Can sense Sasuke’s confusion, but Naruto is the one who points out, “Ricchan, you know so many people!”

She doesn’t feel like answering, and he called her Ricchan again despite her asking him not to, so she doesn’t. Enters the right room, lines up in the queue for mission assignment.
“It’s Iruka-sensei!” Naruto exclaims. “Hey, sensei!”

Riko grabs him just as he jumps forward to cut ahead of other waiting people. “You can greet him when it’s our turn,” she snaps quietly. “He’s busy.”

There are some people eyeing their group in consternation now because yeah, her teammate wasn’t exactly quiet. She crosses her arms and stares back impassively, but does give Fumio — his team second in the waiting line — a nod when he eyes her in concern.

It’s at that moment that his female teammate, Haruno Sakura, notices Team Seven, which happens to have her crush Sasuke on it.

It turns out Naruto isn’t the only unprofessional genin around, because Sakura squeals loudly. “Sasuke-kun! It’s been so long!” And then she’s running up to him, not sparing a glance at anyone else, and attempts to shove Riko out of her way.

Riko shifts her centre of mass, grabs Sakura’s wrist, and changes her trajectory. Takes another step and twists, and then Sakura is stumbling back into the direction she came from, halting with a look utter confusion on her face because the entire move took less than a second. “Huh?”

“It’s Sakura-chan!” Naruto waves wildly. “Hey, Sakura-chan!”

Great. Now the whole room is staring at them.

Riko turns to her teammates. “Go wait outside,” she orders quietly. “Both of you.”

“But-”

“I can get us a mission perfectly fine and far quicker without you causing a ruckus everywhere we go.” She crosses her arms. “Either you step out or I do.”

“Hey, you can’t talk like that to Sasuke-kun!” Sakura speaks up, scandalised. “He’s-”

Sasuke quickly exits the room, dragging Naruto after him.

Sakura huffs at Riko, opening her mouth.

“Don’t,” Fumio cuts in firmly before she can unload whatever tirade she has in store for Riko. “Go talk to him outside if you want to, but you’re making a scene.”

His other teammate — Eiji? Was that the name? — nods silently, looking uncomfortable with the entire situation.

Sakura closes her mouth and looks around, apparently only just now realising that all activity in the room has come to a halt. She wilts and wordlessly steps back into the waiting line.

Fumio gives Riko an apologetic smile, to which she responds with a weary shrug.

It’s been less than an hour with her team and she’s already tired. She’s got to keep it up, though. If she folds for even a moment, gives in to Naruto’s damned puppy eyes or whatever Sasuke’s doing, she’ll be right back where she started.

“Claws and fangs and a goddamn spine,” Inuzuka Hana’s advice echoes in her mind.

It feels really awful, though. She feels mean. Maybe she's not doing this right.
The queue moves forward slowly. Fumio’s team exits the room. From the lack of squealing outside, Riko surmises that either Sasuke is hiding or Sakura learned some bloody self-control since they graduated.

Another two teams get assigned their missions, then it’s Riko’s turn. Iruka calls her forward. “D-rank?” he asks.

“Yes, please.” She hopes it’s not the damn cat again.

“Mm, Intel needs people to deliver papers,” Iruka relays, handing her the mission scroll, but then hesitates. Riko waits for whatever he has to tell her. “I hope you got over whatever happened. I know the boys can be a handful and a little rough around the edges, but I’m sure they didn’t mean whatever they said to hurt your feelings. If you’d like, I’m always willing to lend a listening ear.”

He gives her a concerned smile. “In any case, it’s good that you’re back. Those two are quite helpless without you, Riko-kun.”

Riko gives him a blank look, because.

“Iruka-sensei,” she says, and somehow her voice is even. “They’re graduated shinobi and I’m not their mother.”

There’s a pause, then he leans back and frowns at her. “Riko-kun, that was… quite insensitive. They’re both orphans—”

“So am I.” The words just slip out, and Riko… really isn’t sure what she’s feeling right now. More anger, maybe, because this isn’t fair. She retreats a step from the desk and takes a deep breath.

“You’re overstepping. I’ll take my leave. Have a nice day, Iruka-san.”

She hurries out of the room, not looking at anyone, or dwelling on how rude she was just now towards a shinobi of superior rank. Instead, she goes to find the boys, both of whom are lurking around the corner.

“We have a mission,” she announces and hands the mission scroll — the contents of which she’s already memorised — to Naruto and eyes him expectantly.

“Eh?” Naruto asks, blinking at the item dumbly. “Ricchan? Why’d you give me the scroll?”

“It’s Riko,” she corrects, crossing her arms. “And why do you think I gave it to you, huh?”

“Give that to me,” Sasuke grunts and grabs the scroll.

“Oi, give it back, bastard!” Naruto tries to retrieve the mission assignment. “Ricchan gave it to me!”

Sasuke snorts and holds it out of his reach.

Riko huffs and flicks her fingers, retrieving the damn thing with a couple of chakra strings before striding down the corridor. “Take the brawling to a training ground.”

There’s a moment of stunned silence, then they’re both hurrying after her. “Wait up!”

“No. We’ve been assigned a mission. I intend to do it.” She doesn’t slow or turn to look at them. “You do whatever, but you better not get in my way.”

Another pause, and then Sasuke is suddenly in front of her. He doesn’t seem to care — or notice —
that he’s kind of blocking the corridor. “Riko.”

She stops, gives him a neutral look. “Sasuke,” she replies in the same tone. “What did I just say about not getting in my way?”

He frowns at her. Then utters, each word like pulling teeth, “We’re… a team.”

“So?” she asks him, raising a brow.

Sasuke frowns at her some more.

“We’re supposed to get along,” Naruto says in a small voice. “As a team.”

Riko scoffs. “No. We’re supposed to do our jobs, because the village relies on them, and nobody cares if you have a stupid rivalry going on or if your feelings are hurt because these things are bigger than that, and if you can’t look past your own issues enough to actually get your asses where they need to be, then you really should reconsider your career.”

Naruto stares at her, speechless, eyes big and mouth open. Sasuke’s cheeks have red splotches on them, and for once he doesn’t look so pretty.

“Then maybe you shouldn’t run off,” he sneers at her.

She gives him a disinterested look, hiding the wince. He’s wrong, damn it. “I’m not going to hold your hands anymore. You pull your own weight. You do your own work. And if you can’t be bothered to focus enough on the mission to actually ask what it entails, then I really have nothing to say to you.”

And she pushes past him with her head held high. The gaggle of onlookers parts before her to let her pass as she leaves her two stunned teammates in the dust.

Once she’s outside, she shunshins out of sight because like hell is she making it easy for them to follow her, and because she doesn’t want them to see her pale and shaking in a close-by alley.

They can always ask Iruka what mission she took.

By the time the boys show up at Intel building, Riko’s already signing out.

The humongous stacks of paper she’d delivered to the Archives by herself, with the help of a neat storage scroll she had on hand. Working at the clan armoury comes with benefits.

She can’t wait until she can make professional scrolls herself.

“Decent work,” Yamashiro Aoba tells her. Another familiar face from the jounin lounge. “Timelier than expected.”

“Thanks,” she answers. “Have a good day.”

He bids her goodbye with a lazy wave and she exits the building.
“So, uh,” Naruto speaks up, looking and sounding way out of his element. “Where do we pick up the, uh, deliveries?”

She gives the boys a dismissive look. “I finished the mission just now.”

And she leaves for the training ground, idly wondering what kind of training Kakashi has in store for them today. She doubts it’ll be pleasant — he’d been quite displeased hearing about the details from last night.

Was unhappy when she asked him to *not* lecture the boys or punish them directly, though he agreed in the end.

Whatever today’s team training will entail, it's bound to be educational.
Chapter 31

Instead of having Riko join team training, Kakashi sends her off to her therapist.

Fuji has tea and cookies ready when she arrives.

“Would you like to tell me why you’re here today?” the woman asks her, head tilting in curiosity.

“Sensei’s going to indirectly punish the boys in team training and doesn’t want me to see,” Riko deadpans, trying to gloss over how uneasy the thought makes her.

Her shrink hums. “You’re back with your team, then?”

Riko shrugs. “They came to see me last night. Surprise visit. Against orders and all that.”

“Oh dear.” Fuji pauses and gives her an expectant look. “How do you feel about that?”

“Angry.” Riko frowns. “It’s… it wasn’t even… they showed up and Naruto cried on me. I thought it was an emergency, but then he said things suck without me and they were sorry and miss me, and begged me not to leave the team. And Sasuke was just… ugh.” She pauses. “I was just… you talked to me about emotional manipulation. When we discussed my relationships with friends. And I kept ticking off the list while we talked. The crying, then the… the guilt. ‘Ricchan, you’re my best friend.’” Crossing her arms, Riko scowls at her tea cup. “It wasn’t an apology because it was about them. They’re sorry because me being gone sucks for them. And they didn’t even address the… the reason I left! Or, or promise to do better, and when I came back today, they weren’t better. I just. I hate this.”

Shit, her eyes are stinging again, but she’s on a roll now.

“I don’t — I know they don’t really — don’t really know better. Don’t need freaking Iruka to tell me they’re orphans who have nobody to teach them better, I know, damn it, and what the hell, he doesn’t even know what’s going on and he isn’t part of the team or our sensei anymore, and I just wanted to have a mission assigned! Anyway, why does he blame me for them being… being shit at D-ranks and teamwork and just- They’re graduated shinobi! Iruka graduated them, but then he says they’re ‘helpless without me’, like it’s a compliment and cute or something? And I’m younger than them!”

The silence is deafening when Riko stops for breath, her chest heaving and her eyes very close to leaking.

“It’s not fair,” she whispers and her voice hitches.

“It doesn’t sound like it is, no,” Fuji agrees. “Let’s untangle this, then.”

She waits until Riko makes a small noise of agreement.

“Let’s separate this mess into smaller, manageable parts first. Divide and conquer.” Fuji folds her hands. “Your teammates and your… former Academy teacher, yes?”

Riko nods.

“We’ll get to him later. So, your teammates. We’ve talked about them before.” She taps her finger on her cup in thought. “To break it down further, looking at them individually would be the
obvious solution, but we’ve done that before. Today, let’s look at them as shinobi. Give me a report of their actions today. The facts.”

“…we went to pick up a D-rank mission. Naruto failed to behave professionally. He addressed me in a manner that would undermine my standing with clients or superiors. Personal matters were brought up when it wasn’t appropriate. Sasuke’s presence in the mission assignment office caused a former classmate to approach us in an unprofessional fashion, and while that can’t be blamed on him, he neglected to discourage her or otherwise defuse the situation, leaving me and her teammates to do so instead. During this, proceedings in the office came to a complete halt, and I requested he and Naruto leave the room. I picked up the mission on my own.” Riko frowns. “Once I met back up with them, they didn’t ask about our objectives or showed interest in the mission scroll and instead chose to engage in personal drama. I finished the mission on my own.”

“Do you feel they’ve learned anything in the time you were gone? Made an effort to improve?”

“No.” Riko looks at her unhappily. Stated like that, it sounds even worse.

Maybe that’s unfair. Maybe they did learn and make progress.

But they acted just like they used to.

Fuji nods. “Your next concern seems to be insecurity that you were the one acting unreasonably in this because ‘they are orphans who don’t know better.’” She leans forward and gives Riko a serious look. “Riko, are you aware that almost every young orphan in Konoha with the physical capability enters the Academy with the aim of serving as a shinobi? Do you know just how many of your peers grew up without families, and in what kind of ways they lost them? Uzumaki-kun and Uchiha-kun aren’t isolated cases. Yet, how many people do you know who act the way they do?”

All Riko can do to stare at her.

Because what.

“Being an orphan or having lived through traumatic events is no excuse for treating others like stepping stones and side characters in their life story,” Fuji concludes. “There’s a line where being a supportive friend turns into a becoming a crutch and accessory for someone’s convenience, and that’s a toxic state for a young kunoichi to be in.”

Silence follows. Riko’s eyes are wide, her mind blank.

“Would you like to talk about something else?” Fuji asks, her voice softening. “Process this?”

Riko nods mutely.

Fuji gives her a thumbs-up and moves on to the next item. “That leaves the Academy teacher. Would you please tell me what happened?”

Scraping her brain back together, Riko recounts the short interaction with her old teacher.

Her therapist is silent for a while. “I’ll be honest,” she says finally. “Reporting him for inappropriate conduct is unlikely to succeed.”

Once again, Riko boggles at her. “Report him?” she chokes out.

Fuji eyes her calmly. “You said it yourself, he overstepped. He’s neither your jounin sensei nor your direct superior in any way. He’s also not informed enough on the situation to give the kind of
advice he did, and certainly not trained for it.” She looks appalled. “As evidenced by the effects of his words, and I shudder to think about how often he’s tried what he thinks to be help before. I’m very glad you realised that his advice was unsolicited and unhealthy.”

“Oh,” Riko says weakly. “But I… he’s Iruka-sensei. I don’t want him to get in trouble. He’s nice. A good teacher.”

“That doesn’t change what he said and did.” Fuji frowns. “We live in a society where even the smallest mistake can have deadly consequences — for us or for our comrades. Maybe not immediately — it can take years. But comments like his, they have an impact, and left unattended can cause serious problems.” She leans forward. “I never want you to believe that your purpose is to carry those two boys or anyone else on their way to success, and that’s what Umino-san ultimately implied. And I don’t want it to happen to anyone else, either, which is why it needs to be made clear to him that he must never do it again. Even nice people have to face consequences when they mess up.”

Her words make sense. It’s just… that’s someone Riko knows. Someone who taught her, who risked his life for Naruto, and whose wounds she attended to that night after graduation. Someone Naruto cares about very much.

And taking official action is serious.

“…you said reporting him wasn’t likely to succeed,” Riko mutters.

“No,” Fuji agrees, her voice neutral. “This was a very short incident. And while public enough, the key witnesses — the fellow members of the mission assignment panel — sit through dozens of interactions every day. If they recall it at all, what they’ll remember is the ruckus surrounding your team just before. Added to that, what Umino-san said will have sounded like friendly and harmless advice to them, while your reaction would be considered exaggerated and cold.” She gives Riko a telling glance. “The mission assignment panel is unfortunately all-male. While you’re just one young kunoichi. It’ll be word against word and that won’t end well for you.”

“This is the sexism thing again,” Riko surmises bleakly, recalling that talk. And Hana’s rant about ‘the kunoichi experience’. “Isn’t it?”

“I’m sorry,” Fuji says gently. “Yes.”

“I should just get used to that, huh.” Riko crosses her arms and stares at the floor.

Her therapist’s voice is a little sharper than she’s used to. “No. You absolutely shouldn’t.”

Riko looks up.

Fuji fixes her with a look. “Getting used to it means accepting it, which means letting it continue.” She sighs and leans back. “Back to the issue at hand, I’d recommend against taking official action. You’re still a fresh genin and Umino-san is very popular. People will get angry on his behalf and it could seriously damage your career. That said, that doesn’t mean there’s nothing we can do.”

“…what can we do?” Riko asks her.

The smile her shrink gives her is thin and sharp. “You can talk to Kakashi. As your jounin sensei, he is more than justified — expected, even — to take exception to a chuunin butting in on his team’s business.” She pauses. “Whereas I can arrange for a mandatory Psych Eval for Umino-san. Determine if he’s suitable to teach the next generation of Konoha’s shinobi. Ensure he’s aware of where his duties begin and end. And of course, I’ll notify the colleague responsible for his mental
health of this incident.”

Considering the tone she says that in, Riko has a feeling that it won’t be nearly as harmless as it sounds.

And… didn’t Ikeda get outright demoted after Riko complained to Kakashi? She doesn’t exactly want that to happen to Iruka, but Fuji made a very good point when she said that it couldn’t be allowed to continue.

What if he gives advice to some other kunoichi who’d then go on believing herself responsible for her teammates’ behaviour and shortcomings?

It was miserable and exhausting for Riko and she doesn’t wish it on anyone else.

The prospect of there being consequences for Iruka’s misplaced offer of guidance isn’t entirely unsatisfying.

Over the following week, things with Riko’s team remain strained.

The day after her talk with Fuji, she told them, “I’m not ending our friendships and I still care about you very much, but you two need to put in some serious work both as shinobi and friends before I forgive you. And kicked-puppy looks or brooding silence will achieve the opposite.”

That of course didn’t stop either of her teammates from looking like either a small heap of misery or a brooding smear of darkness. Naruto’s feeling sorry for himself and Sasuke acts like Riko’s mere existence is offensive to him, apparently having taken her refusal to accept his not-apology as an insult.

If her not pandering to his will for once is enough to make him turn into a complete ass towards her, then she’s not going to put in a whole lot of effort into fixing that particular friendship.

As for Naruto… she tried going for ramen with him when he invited her. First it was more badly hidden anxious looks like she’d disappear on him, then after some light conversation, he seemed to decide she’d forgiven him, which she hadn’t. So when she made that clear when he tried for a hug…

Attempting to mend that relationship just made it worse.

She wants the easiness of her friendship with Naruto back so badly. The warmth and the hugs and the laughter. That bright spot in her life.

But he can’t even seem to figure out what he’s apologising for when she asks. Even if ‘being stupid’ or ‘making her work too much’ were the real issue, the way the answers sound like wide guesses wouldn’t have gained him a whole lot of favour.

At least on the mission side of things, they’re improving. Since she isn’t giving them a chance to not pull their weight anymore.

Riko does her fair share of the work without compromise, unrelentingly professional. Won’t take
over anyone else’s job and especially won’t let Naruto try to cover hers.

That, or she does the whole mission by herself, leaving the boys with nothing to do.

But that’s only a problem twice, and then it stops happening. She counts it as a success.

Things are… painfully stilted and unenjoyable. Lacking the camaraderie she remembers entirely. But at least the work is getting done, and with far less incidents than she’s used to.

It doesn’t drain her as much anymore. Even if she’s less happy — at least she feels like a kunoichi, rather than a frazzled caretaker.

And she needs all her energy. Has so much to do. Kenjutsu practice, clan training, stealth lessons with Genma, get-away training with Inuzuka Kami and his sister (whom Riko finally found), fuuinjutsu days with Kakashi.

Regular team practice after D-rank mission is a thing again and if they aren’t doing formations, then Kakashi is drilling the boys, especially Naruto, in taijutsu.

“What about her,” Sasuke demands. “Why does she get ninjutsu scrolls?”

“Because Riko made her own training arrangements for taijutsu and due to her chakra capacity isn’t as trained in ninjutsu as I’d like,” Kakashi answers. “Whereas both you and Naruto already have powerful jutsu to fall back on. Riko is currently extremely reliant on close combat and evasion, which is a risky style of fighting when she physically isn’t particularly resilient.”

She tunes the conversation out. Ninjutsu is hard enough without distractions. The techniques Kakashi has her working on are of low level in theory, but they’re tricky. Spitting out a water bullet is basic, but getting speed, size, and shape right isn’t. Covering herself in a sturdy layer of water takes focus and awareness of her own body. And turning into a puddle requires her to temporarily give up her own body, which is absolutely terrifying.

Plus, she doesn’t exactly have much time to learn! The days are passing so quickly, not to mention the nights. Yugao’s busier these days, which means less early-morning kenjutsu appointments, and if she can sleep in more that means it’s okay to work at the armoury during the night.

It’s not the healthiest of sleeping schedules, she’ll admit that. But she is getting the recommended amount of sleep for a girl her age. Her mandatory rest days are also still in her schedule and she keeps to them religiously, no matter how tempting it is not to.

No matter how much crossing off every passed day on her calendar feels like a noose pulling tighter around her neck.

It’s almost a relief when on the next fuuinjutsu day, Kakashi tells her, “I nominated the team for the Chuunin Exams.”

Riko exhales heavily. “Okay.”

“You don’t have to take them,” he says. “It’s your choice.”

“Is it?” she asks, a hint of bitterness in her voice. “They’re a team thing and Sasuke is expected to-”

“It’s your choice,” Kakashi repeats seriously. “There won’t be any repercussions if you decide not to take them. I promise.”
She stares up at him, something tight in her chest. “Thank you, sensei.”

His eye crinkles at her. “You’re welcome, Riko-chan.”

Him giving her that choice should be a relief. Riko should be jumping at the chance to back out. She never wanted to take the exams.

And yet… and yet.

“Something on your mind?” Kakashi asks idly, his eye now on the pages of Icha Icha Nobility. When he got out that book, Riko has no idea.

“Mm.” Her eyebrows pull together as she tries to verbalise it. “I’ve… done all this training.”

“You have,” Kakashi agrees.

“Learned so much. Not just… not just by studying or sparring.” She blinks at her hands in realisation. “All the people I met. The things that happened outside of training — with the Inuzuka, and getting a job with all that implies, even the bad stuff like Ikeda or the team dynamics getting so messed up. It’s… it’s all helped me grow. I’m not the same as I was when we got back from Nami no Kuni.”

Riko looks up to find Kakashi eyeing her attentively.

“I wanna take the Chuunin Exams,” she breathes. “And I want to pass them and get that promotion.”

Her teacher’s eye has crinkled into another smile and when he answers, his voice is warm. “You have learned a lot. I’m very proud of your progress.” He pauses. “I nominated Team Seven because you’re in it.”

Spellbound, Riko hangs onto his every word.

“You’re a hard worker and a responsible young kunoichi,” he continues. “You take your duties seriously, you care about your comrades and can work with them even under less than optimal conditions and lack of compatible work ethics. In the past month, you’ve shown courage, determination, maturity, and exceptional management and problem-solving abilities. I believe that you’re ready to advance in the ranks more than any genin of your generation.” He reaches forward and ruffles her hair. “Sensei’s very proud and looking forward to when you outrank the boys, Riko-chan.”

Riko sniffs and wipes at her eyes. “Sensei,” she says.

“Yes?”

“I’m going to hug you now.” She stands up resolutely and crosses around the table.

Kakashi has more than ample time to kawarimi away, but he doesn’t. Instead, he lets her wrap her arms around him and even pats her head while she buries her face in his shoulder.
Kakashi announces his nomination to the rest of Team Seven the following day.

Whereas Naruto instantly forgets that he’s in a miserable funk and throws himself at Kakashi with a declaration of “I love you, Kaka-sensei!”, Sasuke is frowning down at the application slip they all received. He seems uneasy when he finally looks up, glancing at Kakashi and then Riko.

“It’s just a nomination,” Kakashi informs them once he’s shaken Naruto off. “It’s up to each of you if you’ll take the exams. They begin on the first of July, read the information for when and where to hand in the signed slip carefully if you do decide on sitting the tests.”

Naruto is grinning at the small paper, holding it out in front of him like it’s the answer to all of his problems. Maybe it is, in his head. He’s got that ‘I’m closer to the Hokage seat’ look on his face. “Chuunin Exams,” he raves. “Chuunin Exams.”

“Well, someone’s decided quickly,” Kakashi surmises dryly. “What about you, Sasuke?”

Sasuke’s chakra, for all that he appears impassive, is roiling with unease. But he looks at Kakashi and nods firmly.

Their jounin sensei returns the nod and looks at Riko, not letting on that she already gave him her answer yesterday and they hugged over it. “And you?”

“I’ll take them,” Riko confirms.

Kakashi claps his hands. “Maa, my cute little students are growing up!” His eye crinkles up. “Mm, you decided quickly. It’s good that you’re all taking them, since you can only enter in teams of three.”

That seems to startle both boys, which makes Riko frown. Didn’t she tell them that, when she informed them of the upcoming exams three weeks ago? She did, right?

Frowning, she tries replaying the conversations in her head, but it’s been weeks since then.

…uh. No, she didn’t get around to telling them about it being a team thing. Naruto got so excited once she told him about the purpose of the Chuunin Exams that she didn’t have a chance. And with Sasuke… she doesn’t remember clearly, but she’s pretty sure she didn’t spell it out for him.

Whoops?

Well, they could have done their own research. Had more than enough time, and the information is readily available to any genin.

“Here’s the plan,” Kakashi continues, the levity now gone from his tone. All three of them straighten. “No more D-ranks until after the exams. Starting now, we’ll focus on preparation. The Chuunin Exams aren’t going to be anything like the tests you’re used to from your Academy days. It’s not just a test of your combat prowess. They’ll test your resolve, your tactics, your endurance, and your loyalty to the fullest extent. You can and most likely will get hurt. There’s even a risk of death. Treat this as seriously as you would a mission.”

Riko can hear Naruto dry-swallowing in the short silence that follows.

Sasuke’s fists are clenched.

“Good, you’re finally taking this seriously,” their teacher comments. “Today, you’ll each make a list of the supplies you need and those you already have. That includes weaponry, clothing, food,
medical supplies, and the means to transport them all. Plan for several weeks — four should be sufficient, more would be ideal. Bring your lists and what supplies you already have to training tomorrow.”

All of them nod, and Naruto looks pale now and glances at Riko from the corner of his eye, and she guesses he’s gauging how open she is to writing the lists for him.

Not at all, since it isn’t urgent just yet and Kakashi made it clear that he’d be dealing with any issues tomorrow. Naruto can only benefit from trying to figure it out himself.

“You’ll have the three days before the exams begin off,” Kakashi informs Team Seven. “To get your supplies, to put your personal affairs in order. The last of those three days is a mandatory rest day. No training at all. You’ll need to be in the best condition you can reasonably be. Any questions?”

When none are forthcoming, he sends the three of them on their way.

Riko has been compiling supply lists for four weeks now and started stockpiling just as long ago, which leaves her with no homework to do.

Hm, it might be worth it to ask Kiba if their team got nominated? They probably did, if even Riko’s disaster of a team scored a nomination.

Asking is really just an excuse to visit and maybe score some Inuzuka stuff in exchange for Nara goods. Kiba’s clan makes the sturdiest (and coolest-looking) shinobi clothing and she could stand an armour upgrade.

“Riko.”

Riko turns, her face neutral. “Sasuke.”

She did notice him trailing after her, but his house is in the vague direction she’s taking, so she figured it was nothing. Apparently, that was a misassumption.

He says nothing, just eyes her, his chakra still radiating unease.

Riko has “I can’t read minds” at the tip of her tongue, but she controls herself. It’s the first time he’s approached her since the not-apology. Since she gave Naruto a chance, Sasuke gets the same.

Plus, the Chuunin Exams start in just a few days. They can’t afford team morale getting any worse than it already is. So she can spare the patience to wait for him to make himself speak, even if he’s been an ass to her all week.

It's not like she invited friendliness.

Eventually, he stops hesitating and just goes for it. “Kakashi shouldn’t have nominated us.”

Riko blinks at him, forgetting to keep up the neutral veneer. “I don’t follow?”

He looks frustrated. “Earlier this month, he said he’d only recommend us if we didn’t screw up. And we did.”

She makes a small sound of acknowledgment. Doesn’t comment on the fact that this is the first time he verbally admitted to ever making a mistake.

“So he shouldn’t have,” Sasuke concludes and looks at her expectantly.
Riko shrugs.

Her teammate narrows his eyes on her. “You knew.”

“Knew what?”

“That we’d get nominated no matter what.”

She shrugs again. “Mm.”

And now he looks pissed.

“The information was readily available, Sasuke,” she tells him with a raised brow. “I even told you that it was very likely we’d score a nomination.”

“But not after we-” He cuts off and glares at her.

Riko gives him a deadpan look.

Yeah, no, he has no room to be angry about her not talking to them after the grand implosion of Team Seven.

“Well, now you know,” she finally says, crossing her arms. “If that’s all, we both have things to do.”

Sasuke stomps off without another word.

Riko rolls her eyes and continues to her own destination.

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The last three days before the Chuunin Exams are reserved for individual preparative measures.

Riko already finished most of her preparations, but some things are still left to do and more got added yesterday during team discussion. Being a Nara, she volunteered for getting all medical supplies. Sasuke’s list is extensive in that department, even more so than hers.

No basic kits in this team.

Sasuke is getting all the food rations to make it fair, and she was itching to offer to acquire those, too, what with the Nara discount she gets at all Akimichi places. It’d save so much money.

And when Kakashi decided he and Naruto would be going to pick up explosive and flash tags, she kind of wanted to slam her head into a wall because she has several stacks’ worth at home, enough to outfit five teams with. Plus, it’s fuuinjutsu.

Riko suspects she might have developed a compulsive need for controlling things somehow, because having to agree not to do these things herself makes her twitch. Even though rationally, she knows it should be fine.

When she witnessed how sullen and sloppy the boys were when Kakashi makes them perform maintenance on all their weaponry, it was no longer a mere suspicion. Made her want to tear her
hair out, fighting the urge to just do it for them.

Especially since she’s come to find weapon maintenance rather soothing. There’s just something about laying out all her blades and senbon in front of her, taking care of every single one, and then tucking everything into the designated space, that makes her feel satisfied and reassured.

Side-effect of her job at the clan armoury.

The entire day was one frustrating exercise in exercising self-control.

Yet another issue to talk through with Fuji.

However, this morning, all of that seems blissfully distant and insignificant. Riko burrows deeper into Kiba’s hold, not quite awake yet.

Sleepovers at the Inuzuka compound are the best. She’s slept in Kiba’s room more than her own during her month of preparation and training. And she has absolutely no regrets about that. Her strengthened friendship with Kiba is the best thing to come out of this month.

Riko’s far too comfortable to move or fully wake up this morning. But there’s something poking at her, demanding her awareness.

_Literally_ poking her, she discovers when she reluctantly follows her mind’s directive and shifts a little. Nope, not her imagination or a remnant of a dream. Something oddly hard rests against the side of her hip where Kiba’s thrown a leg over her.

When she wiggles a little, Kiba makes a small, sleepy moaning noise.

The thing pressing against her… _uh_.

Riko’s eyes fly open and a little squeak escapes her. If Kiba and her weren’t so thoroughly entangled, she’d be on the other side of the room right now.

He makes another small noise and his eyes open. “Mm? Riko?” His voice is heavy and hoarse from sleep. “You have a nightmare again?” One of his hands pats her back soothingly. “’s okay, you’re home.”

“Um,” Riko says blankly, and her cheeks are steadily heating up. “You, er.”

She gestures vaguely in the direction of the… development. Wiggles her hip for emphasis.

Kiba freezes and he makes a panicked _meep_ kind of sound.

“It’s, er, perfectly natural?” Riko offers tentatively, cheeks now completely on fire. Not that she’ll ever admit it, but she’s read up on male genitalia. For reasons.

_(Icha Icha’s sex scenes are _really_ unrealistic. It’s not just the lightning jutsu.)_

He makes another horrified noise.

Riko really doesn’t know what to say here. Maybe she should disentangle herself from him? Get them both some space?

Except when she moves, Kiba tenses up even more.

_Um._
“I don’t like you like that!” he blurts out and flaps his arms about. “This — it’s just — uh-”

Riko nods wildly, mildly horrified at the thought. “Don’t like you like that either! Or anyone!”

“Anatomy!” Kiba’s head bobs up and down, and his arms around her finally loosen. A moment later, he’s on his feet and running for the door. “Shower!”

She stares after him, not sure why she’s feeling a little hurt when she herself would have run if she could have, after that first realisation.

Akamaru yips questioningly.

“Don’t know, either,” she mutters, sitting up. “This stuff is weird.”

Well, she’s definitely awake now. Might as well get up, she has things to do. Has to pick up her new shinobi wardrobe from the Inuzuka outfitter after it’s been tailored to fit her. Then she’s spending this day and the next at the armoury, where she’s finally started making her own scrolls under the old man’s supervision. She’ll need them for all the gear she’s been stockpiling over the course of the month. Right now, it’s all over the place in random seal tags stuffed into her sleeves and pockets.

Organised storage is a must. Riko needs to do some serious inventory. She knows what she has, but where to find it is anyone’s guess, which isn’t acceptable.

And she also has to embroider some fuuinjutsu into her new clothes. No more sewing paper tags into the lining like she used to — Riko put her employee discount to good use and splurged on thread specifically made to stitch seals into fabric with. And with Kakashi’s help, she worked on optimising the seals she used in her clothing before and during the C-rank-that-wasn’t.

Part of her feels sick at the prospect of wearing things like that again because her gruesome first kill involved clothes and seals.

But she’s been making progress in her therapy sessions with Toge, talking about what happened in Nami. Has accepted that it might happen again.

At the end of the day, weaponised clothing is just one of several ways she could kill an enemy. It’s a tool, same as a kunai.

She’s a kunoichi, she needs to be ready to make use of every weapon at her disposal.

Has to be prepared to kill again, no matter how much the prospect sickens her.

Akamaru licks her hand and lets out a small, worried woof.

Riko runs a hand over his head. “I’m okay,” she mumbles. “Let’s see about getting up and breakfast and stuff, yeah?”

He hops onto her lap and bumps his head into her stomach. Obliging, she indulges him in scratches for a few minutes before getting to her feet.

After quickly washing up in another bathroom, she ambles to the kitchen. Nobody’s awake yet, it seems, and a look at the clock tells her why that is. It’s way too early to be awake.

Too late to go back to bed, though, and since the bed is in Kiba’s room, where he’ll return soon… yeah. Uh. No.
Way too awkward.

Akamaru keeps her company while she putters around the kitchen to prepare breakfast, happily munching on his bowl of dog food.

Eventually, Kiba comes into the kitchen. His face takes on an unfortunate red hue when he sees her, and Riko’s own cheeks begin to burn again.

Her friend comes to help her with the food in awkward silence. The two of them work around each other, jumping at every accidental touch.

It’s a relief to finally sit down and eat. Riko focuses on her plate and doesn’t look up, pretending to be fully concentrated on eating. Only chances one veiled glance at Kiba, which reveals that he’s going with the same course of action, looking as miserable as Riko feels.

Once the dishes are done, she mutters, “I should probably go.”

“Lots to do, right.” Kiba nods.

Riko doesn’t move, her feet kind of rooted to the ground. The situation is uncomfortable and so awkward, but leaving on this note just feels wrong.

“I guess I’ll see you at the exams?” she asks uncertainly.


She stares up at him. “Oh,” she breathes, and the realisation hits her pretty suddenly. “You’re my best human friend, too.”

He flicks her a quick, relieved grin and doesn’t ask about Naruto. Already knows what’s going on there, at least the basics. Riko hasn’t talked a lot about her team’s issues to him, but she wasn’t entirely silent about it either.


Is this going somewhere? Shit, what if it is? But his chakra isn’t doing the thing Fumio’s does when he looks at her, and he said he didn’t like her like that, and crap, she doesn’t want it.

“But you’re like, a kid!” Kiba blurts. “Not that- I mean, I know it’s just a year between us, but! You’re tiny!”

“Oh, thank goodness,” Riko sighs in relief.

“So, uh, I wouldn’t mind maybe in a few years,” he finishes quickly. “But. Not now. Definitely not now.”

She nods frantically. “Right! Agreed.”

“We cool?” He eyes her hopefully.

Riko manages a smile. “Yeah! Totally cool. Never been cooler.”

“Good! Good.” His head bobs up and down. “So yeah. Good luck with stuff. In the exams. Not
that you need it, but yeah. Good luck.”

“You too,” Riko answers, smile now feeling a little more natural. “And Akamaru.”

They stare at each other for a moment. She isn’t sure who moves first, but the next moment, they’re hugging.

Jump apart a few seconds later, Riko’s cheeks on fire again and his not looking any better.

“I’ll see you,” she squeaks and almost runs out of the house.

The evening before the exams begin, Riko sits in her room with her rabbit on her lap. She’s just finished stitching storage seals onto her new fingerless gloves.

They fit seamlessly when she pulls them on. The black silk, Aburame-made and extremely durable, shimmers when the light hits right. Whereas the dark thread she used for the seals that begin at the centre of her palms and spiderweb outwards to cover them seems to absorb the light instead.

She draws her katana. Then — moment of truth — twitches her chakra at the seal currently touching the sword’s handle.

Without a sound, the weapon disappears, the thread on her gloves lighting up momentarily.

So far so good. Riko takes a deep breath, holds her hand out, and focuses chakra to the glove again.

Her katana appears, exactly the way she’d held it when sealing it away.

A small smile spreads on her face, and she repeats the action a couple of time before she holds out her other hand. When next she stores away the katana, it reappears in that hand. Riko beams in triumph.

Linked storage! Sure, each seal could only hold one item, but this way she can carry her katana without anyone instantly knowing what weapon she fights with, and she saves the few precious moments she’d normally spend having to draw it.

And those moments might mean the difference between survival and death.

Any advantage matters, no matter how small.

Riko practices sealing and unsealing and switching hands another few times before she finally disappears the katana in her right and, after a moment’s contemplation, seals her hunting knife in the other.

Then she resumes petting Usagi-chan. Feels a little guilty because she kind of neglected him this month especially, and in general since she graduated from the Academy.

Life’s just been too busy.

And now she’s heading for the Chuunin Exams with no idea how long they’ll last, and if she does get promoted, she’ll be even busier.
“Sorry in advance,” Riko murmurs to the pet that used to belong to Uchiha Hotaru, Riko’s first friend, if only for a short while. Who blasted into her life and left it just as suddenly, but left such an impact on her.

Usagi-chan of course doesn’t reply, looking absolutely comfortable in her lap, eyes closed in bliss as she runs her hand over his floppy ears and his back.

“I love you,” she adds seriously. “And I wish we could spend more time together.”

There’s a knock on her room’s door. Riko casts out her chakra sense — she generally doesn’t keep it up at home — and stiffens in surprise. “Come in,” she calls out quietly.

A moment later, Shikamaru walks inside her room for the first time since the dreaded mission. “Hey,” he says.

“Hey,” Riko replies cautiously, trying for a normal tone. Like he hasn’t been avoiding her nearly all month. She’s barely seen him since that dreadful conversation where she found out he wouldn’t be taking the Chuunin Exams with her.

Not that she blames him. But yeah, she’d be lying if she claimed that it didn’t hurt.

Her brother sits down in front of her, face set in a light frown. For a few moments, there’s silence.

His chakra is agitated, but uncertain, and maybe he just doesn’t know how to start the conversation?

“I haven’t seen you around a lot,” Riko offers tentatively. “How have you been?”


“Busy, huh,” she murmurs. “Me, too.”

He nods. The conversation comes to a halt.

“Asuma-sensei woke up,” Shikamaru says abruptly.

“Huh?” For a moment, the words don’t compute, and when they do, she doesn’t know what to say.

Neither does Shikamaru, it seems.

Shouldn’t he be happy?

“Oh,” she comments eventually. “When?”

“Last week.” He frowns at the floor in front of him. “They let us see him today.”

Riko looks at him expectantly. “How’s he doing?”

Noncommittal shrug. “Unhappy. We didn’t stay long. Ino thinks he blames us.”

“Oh.”

What’s she supposed to say to that? She doesn’t know Asuma. Met him twice, never talked to him, and he was dying the second time.
Only thing she did was keep him alive after his injury.

She gets that he’s unhappy about losing an arm — who wouldn’t be? And he’s a shinobi, the injury is definitely bad for his career — but blaming his students or even making them suspect he does isn’t okay.

They were genin fresh out of the Academy. None of them should have even been on that mission, and as far as she knows, he did have the chance to make them all turn back.

Why didn’t he? Because he’s supposedly a really strong guy who used to guard the daimyou?

It still seems irresponsible to her. Team Ten isn’t combat-oriented the way Riko’s team is.

“So,” Shikamaru says. “Chuunin Exams, huh?”

Riko nods, grateful for the subject change, though she’s a little surprised at where he chose to take the conversation. “Yeah. Starts tomorrow afternoon.”

He nods, looking like he already knew that much. “You nervous?” he asks.

She considers for a moment. “Not really,” she realises then, mildly surprised.

It seems to surprise Shikamaru, too. “No?”

Riko tilts her head. “I’ve done all I can,” she explains. “There’s no way I could be more prepared than I am right now.”

He nods slowly. “Right.”

More awkward silence follows. Riko has a feeling that he expected a different answer.

“Though I could use some sleep,” she adds with a frown.

Shikamaru nods slowly. “Yeah. Probably.” He gets to his feet. “Good luck with the exams.”

She gives him a small smile back. “Thanks. Good luck with training.”

He returns the smile, then leaves the room.

Riko deflates with a sigh, rubbing a hand over her face.

Progress. No matter how awkward and draining that conversation was. It’s still an improvement.

She strokes the rabbit on her lap one final time.

“Sleep,” she murmurs. “Tomorrow’s the big day.”
Chapter 32

When Riko wakes up the next day, she knows something is wrong. *Off.*

She checks her alarm in a small panic, but it’s still early and the Chuunin Exams start at noon anyway, there’s no way she could have slept that long. Yoshino promised to wake her up in the morning, too.

Determined to figure it out, she rolls out of bed, and her eyes fall on Usagi-chan’s rabbit pen. There’s a moment of disconnect when she realises just what is wrong.

It’s too silent.

Stiffly, Riko walks over to the pen.

Her rabbit is under the upturned box where he usually sleeps. Motionless and far too stiff.

For a long while, it’s all Riko can do to just stare at her dead animal friend.

He was old, she supposes blankly. Had already been fully grown when Shikaku retrieved him from Hotaru’s house so long ago. Hana had even told Riko that she should prepare herself for the eventuality when she last brought him over for a check-up, since the rabbit hadn’t done much more besides sleeping for a while now.

Riko reaches out and pulls the box cover away. Then runs her fingers over Usagi-chan’s soft fur.

The body feels cold and oddly hard. Nothing like he’d felt yesterday when she’d cuddled him all evening. Then, he’d been alive and warm and comforting.

What’s she supposed to do now? She stares at the dead rabbit.

Frowns because something about his position is *odd.* Riko reaches out and lifts the body.

He was laying on a scroll. Small and red and innocuous, the item rests on the soft blanket Usagi-chan used as his bed.

She places the rabbit aside and performs the trap-detecting jutsu she learned at the armoury when she and Rikuto went over mission loot that clan members had dropped off.

Nothing. It’s just a scroll. She picks it up.

A brisk knock sounds at the door and Riko hastily stuffs the scroll in her pouch and stands up.

“Riko, it’s morning,” Yoshino’s stern voice says. “You need to get ready for the Chuunin Exams.”

“I’m up!” Riko calls out. “Uh, can you help me with something, please?”

Her adoptive mother opens the door and steps inside. Keen eyes take in the situation in an instant.

“Oh. I see.”

Riko flaps her arms helplessly.

Yoshino sighs softly and walks over to her. Gently puts her arms around Riko and pulls her close.

“I’m sorry for your loss,” she says quietly, running a hand over Riko’s hair.
Staying silent, Riko leans into the hug. Wraps her arms around her mother and closes her eyes that suddenly sting with tears.

It’s real, isn’t it?

Usagi-chan is really dead. Her constant source of comfort, the one thing that helped when Riko lost Hotaru. Gone.

Now all Riko has left of her first friend is the memory.

Life has to go on and Riko still has one of the most important exams of her life to get ready for. After Yoshino and her have buried the body in the backyard, with a smoothly shaped rock as grave marker, she makes use of mental exercises taught to her by Toge and puts the death of her pet to the back of her mind.

The Chuunin Exams might be a blessing in disguise, with how they don’t leave room to think of anything else.

She decides not to take the morning’s even as a sign of things to come.

He was an old rabbit and Riko isn’t superstitious.

Riko spends the morning grimly focused on stretching, meditating, going over her supplies once again. Checks her paperwork three times, not that there’s much to do wrong. It only requires her signature.

She has lunch with her family. All of them have already wished her good luck in the days before, same as her various teachers and mentors.

Everything she needed to hear from them, she already has. But it’s still very nice to have them all be here for her.

“I’ll see you soon,” she says after the meal, and now she actually is nervous. Feels sick with uneasy anticipation.

Her various family members give her hugs and well-wishes, and then Riko is off to face the exam she’s dreaded all month.

Both of Riko’s teammates are waiting when Riko arrives at the Academy, where the contenders are supposed to hand in their applications.

“Hey,” she greets, startling both of them.

“Riccha- Riko?” Naruto squawks, squinting at her.
“Outfit change,” she explains, gesturing at herself. “And for the exams, calling me Ricchan is fine.”

Both of her teammates look underwhelmed by her attire, which is rich because neither of them appear to have put any effort in theirs. They look the same as they always do.

“You look, er, nice!” Naruto claims uncertainly.

Riko almost rolls her eyes. “Thanks.”

Her outfit wasn’t chosen for looking amazing or intimidating. It’s about stealth and camouflage. Blending in, being dismissed.

Riko’s attire makes her look entirely unremarkable, or at least she hopes so. Khaki trousers, tight enough they don’t flap or wrinkle, but not so tight as to cling to her skin. Sandals that look regulation, but with more flexibility, the toes separate and far less revealed, allowing for more protection and better foothold.

Her jacket isn’t quite as unremarkable. During the past week, Riko has seen some of the foreign genin wandering about, and all of them seemed to be making some kind of fashion statement. Going for intimidation and all that.

And well, Riko is on a team with a boy who wears obnoxious orange from head to toe and another who has the Uchiha symbol plastered all over his back. If she were the only one with nondescript clothes, it’d be very obvious that she’s trying to be underestimated. Give away her game.

No thanks.

So her jacket is a red so dark it’s almost black, has the Nara symbol on the back in brilliant white, and the hood has fluffy fur trimming the same colour as her hair, so even if strands escape from the firm bun it’s in (secured with pins and a fancy sort of hair net), it won’t be immediately obvious it’s her hair.

There’s a lot of foreigners around, and Riko doesn’t want to be mistaken for a member of a legendary but extinct clan again.

Hence, the hood isn’t coming off. It’s stuck to her head with chakra.

It’s also big enough that it makes her face look small and pale in comparison, and the fluffy trim takes attention away from her features. She looks like she picked the jacket for the coolness, but failed at realising that it doesn’t do her any favours.

Her glasses add a nice nerdy touch to her appearance.

Sasuke hands Riko a bag full of ration bars and other nutritional supplements silently, not commenting on her looks. She nods and hands him the medical supplies he listed, and some he didn’t.

Naruto gets some as well, but it’s just the standard basic kit for him and an abundance of bandages.

“Thanks, Ricchan!” He bounces in place while he gives her a small stack of explosive tags that she pockets without protest, never mind that she has her own.

Acquiring them was his job, and she isn’t going to look down on that.
“Let’s go,” Sasuke says, his voice tight.

Riko nods and falls in step half-behind him, Naruto on his other side. She’s safer looking like a follower, and with Sasuke’s reputation and the way he holds himself, he looks the most like a leader out of them.

Naruto doesn’t protest the formation, since Kakashi had gone over this with them in team training.

The three of them enter the Academy’s crowded hallways. She’s tense already, the idle scrutiny of other genin unsettling her. Small mercy that their attention seems to focus mostly on Sasuke, who holds himself straighter, a light smirk now on his face. Naruto gets his fair share of looks, too, but is clearly dismissed as a non-threat.

Riko only gets passing glances, as she’d hoped.

They’re supposed to go to the assembly room on the third floor, yet a sizeable crowd is assembled before the one on the second. But wait — that’s the right room number?

No, hold on, there’s something foreign prodding at her chakra. Genjutsu.

But then, does that mean this whole crowd fell for it? Riko casts out her chakra sense and grits her teeth at the feedback of so many chakras. Untangling it, following the threads to the owners, is impossible.

But there’s a definite smugness and knowing radiating from some people, which means they’ve caught on and are aiming to be underestimated.

She also senses a huge accumulation of hostile chakras on the floor above them, and it makes her feel tiny and scared.

Most of the crowding genin seem to be distracted by the commotion taking place in front of the bait room’s entrance — a pair of boys blocking it and rebuffing any attempts to enter violently. Bystanders break out in sympathetic, somewhat condescending whispers when a kunoichi lands on the floor after taking a hit to the face.

Already on the ground is a boy who bears a striking similarity to Kakashi and Genma’s friend Gai. Same outfit, same haircut.

Should she help?

But they’re older genin. If they haven’t noticed the genjutsu yet, then they probably shouldn’t take the exam. And if they have, then clearly this is staged and interfering would be a bad idea.

Her team should just use the distraction and be on their way.

Except Sasuke is heading right for the commotion, looking all smug, damn it. He’s clearly realised there’s a genjutsu, but isn’t trying in the least to be subtle about advancing to the next floor.

Okay then. She didn’t want to be taken seriously in the first place, this is a good opportunity, no matter how humiliating.

Riko tugs on her overconfident teammate’s sleeve. “Sasuke-kun,” she says softly, but makes her voice carry just far enough. “I need to go to the bathroom.”

Snickers sound all around them.
Sasuke turns and scowls at her, but his eyes flicker in realisation. “You should have gone before, Riko.”

She cringes. “Sorry.”

“Oi, don’t be mean to Ricchan, bastard!” Naruto snaps at Sasuke.

“Can we just go?” she asks hastily, a hand on Naruto’s arm.

Sasuke huffs in annoyance, giving her a look like he thinks this is completely unnecessary, and turns jerkily, leading them away from the crowd. One of the bullies at the door jeers, “Might as well quit if you’re not even potty-trained!”

The crowd laughs.

Riko’s hands close around Naruto and Sasuke’s arms tightly before they can start a fight. “Don’t you dare.”

They’ve almost made it when the boy who looks like Gai flash-steps before them. Riko stops short.

His speed just now was incredible.

And his injuries are gone.

“Halt!” he announces. Then, completely ignoring Naruto and Riko, he asks Sasuke, “What’s your name?”

Sasuke’s voice uses that arrogant tone she remembers from their Academy days. Riko can’t say she missed it. “Who wants to know?”

“You're a rookie, right?” an equally condescending voice drawls from behind.

She copies Sasuke when he shifts his stance to be able to keep an eye on both the Gai-lookalike and the Hyuuga who asked. Naruto is less subtle, whirls around with that angry expression he gets when people ignore everyone except Sasuke.

Behind the Hyuuga stands the brown-haired kunoichi who got beaten up, gaze trained on Sasuke as well. Not a trace of having taken any hits left.

That circus was definitely a ruse, then.

Riko would hate to be in Sasuke’s skin right now. All three of the strangers are glaring at him.

“I’m under no obligation to tell you,” Sasuke sneers and jerks his head at both her and Naruto. “Let’s go.”

She gives the three genin an uneasy glance, then hurries after him, hand slipping into Naruto’s to pull him along.

“Dammit, why is it always about him?” Naruto growls, glaring at Sasuke’s back.

“Does it matter?” Riko asks grimly once they’re out of earshot. “They have beef with him and that seemed personal. Sasuke? What was that about? The girl didn’t even swoon.”

Sasuke grunts and shrugs, which means he doesn’t know.
Great. They haven’t even made it to the actual exams and Sasuke already has enemies. For all that those three are from Konoha just like them.

They trudge through an indoor training hall on their way to a path that’ll take them to the assembly hall listed on their nomination slips. Riko quietly explains to Naruto about the genjutsu and the bathroom ruse, and he pretends he knew all along.

“Uchiha Sasuke,” the cold voice of the Hyuuga drones from above, where an observation platform overlooks the hall. “Did you truly think you could fool us?”

He’s flanked by his teammates, neither of which look particularly friendly.

Sasuke stares back, face set in his characteristic arrogant smirk.

He really has absolutely no clue what they’re talking about, Riko reckons.

“So you continue to play the fool,” the Hyuuga sneers. “As if you don’t know what I speak of.”

A part of her wants to laugh, because what.

And they’re being so dramatic!

"Uchiha Sasuke!" the Gai-lookalike shouts, jumping down and falling into a fighting stance. "My name is Rock Lee! I challenge you to a fight, right here and now! I must redeem myself in the Name Of Youth!"

Sasuke looks at him, utterly weirded out, but falls into a ready position all the same. Always up for a fight, the moron.

It’s at this point that Naruto snaps. “Oi!” he shouts, stomping forward. “What the hell’s your problem?! Why aren’t you interested in fighting me?!”

Both Lee and Sasuke ignore him. “You know who I am, and yet you still challenge me?” Sasuke questions darkly.

“Stop it. This is a bad idea.” Riko’s voice is firm and she frowns at both of them. Then looks up at Lee’s teammates. “Aren’t you going to do something?”

Hyuuga doesn’t even deign to give her a passing glance. “This is none of your concern, girl.”

Naruto growls lowly, and even though she dialled her chakra senses way down, she feels the anger pouring off of him. “I’ll take care of it.” He cracks his knuckles.

“Naruto, no!” Riko hisses.

“I only want to fight the Uchiha,” Rock Lee dismisses him entirely.

“Damn it!” Naruto roars and lunges for him.

Shit. Riko makes to jump after him, but Sasuke’s hand closes around her wrist. “Wait.”

“But Naruto-”

“Wait,” he orders. “And think.”

She grits her teeth. “Says the guy who’s just begging for a fight!”
“He brought my clan into it,” he snaps back, eyes calculating as he watches the horribly one-sided match between Naruto and Rock Lee. If Riko had anything to substitute herself with… but the room is completely barren of material. She should start carrying her own logs. “And does it look like this guy can be talked out of a fight?”

Riko glares at him.

Naruto goes tumbling across half the training hall, and Rock Lee never even bothers taking his eyes off of Sasuke.

No, de-escalation is impossible here, Sasuke is right about that. He’s also right about not letting her jump into the fight with zero clue what the guy can do.

Damn it, she’s supposed to keep her head.

And clearly she needs to trust her teammates more. Or at least Sasuke, since he sort of kept his head.

Still. “What’s your damn problem?” she snaps at the team threatening them.

Riko thought the two upstairs were just observing, but the mood of the kunoichi flips instantly and she leaps down, aiming a furious glare at Sasuke. Absolutely spitting mad. “What our damn problem is? What our damn problem is? Three months ago, we were given a mission. Do you know what that mission was? Do you? Guess, please,” she hisses.

Silence follows. The Hyuuga drops down elegantly, standing at Rock Lee’s side.

Riko stares at the girl blankly. “Catch Tora the cat?” she guesses, just to say something.

"We had to clean your fucking mess at Training Ground Three, Uchiha!" she shouts. "Do you know what we went through? My shirt got burned! Lee was dyed pink! Gai-sensei glittered orange! Neji’s rainbow curls! The feathers! And it was all your fault! We failed our mission because of you, Uchiha Sasuke! So we, Team Nine, challenge you!"

“Uh, what.” Riko blinks at her, replaying the words in her head. What’s that got to do with Sasuke?

Wait.

Those traps… and Training Ground Three? Three months ago?

Her team did trap the hell out of the place in preparation for Kakashi’s test, and then he spontaneously changed the location, so none of it ever mattered.

“Ah,” she breathes, and looks at Sasuke with a look of realisation, which he returns. “Uhm. Right. That.”

“So you see,” the kunoichi sneers. The buns on her head remind Riko oddly of a panda bear.

“Please step aside, Riko-san!” Rock Lee requests.

Hyuuga just stares at her with haughty displeasure, like she isn’t worthy of even that bit of attention.

It pisses her off. She has as much right to be here as anyone else! Really, they are the ones making complete idiots of themselves, blaming Sasuke over a mission they failed to humiliating levels-
“…rainbow curls,” Riko says slowly to the Hyuuga with the long, perfectly swishy and shiny hair. He freezes.

Riko begins to grin.

“Feathers,” Sasuke drawls.

Hyuuga twitches.

The kunoichi, now dubbed Panda Buns in Riko’s head, makes an angry noise. “Stop that!”

“Are we talking about that?” Naruto asks, finally sitting up, much to Riko’s relief. “Who got the pink glue?”

“Bushy brows,” Sasuke answers, lips now curled into a smirk.

Riko looks at Lee in his green suit. Imagines it covered in pink glitter glue. A snicker escapes her. Then she looks at Hyuuga and she repeats, “Rainbow curls.”

Naruto snickers, and it’s all Riko can do not to completely lose it.

Hyuuga gives her a murderous glare. “Silence, little girl.” Then he turns to Sasuke. “You’ll pay, Uchiha.”

“I didn’t do it, Rainbow,” Sasuke answers, now really smirking. His hand lands on Riko’s hood. “It was the ‘little girl’.”

A moment of stunned silence. Riko stares up at him, something warm curling in her chest, because he’s defending her. Sort of.


“I mean.” Riko tilts her head. “Sort of? Yes?” It was her idea, at least. The execution was a team effort, though. “I guess-” Her eyes fall on Rainbow Hyuuga again and she yelps out, “I guess!” before slapping a hand over her mouth and burying her face in Sasuke’s shoulder so she doesn’t break down laughing.

“Uchiha-san!” Lee shouts. “It’s most unyouthful to blame a teammate for your crimes! I expected better of a member of the prestigious Uchiha Clan!”

Sasuke stiffens and Riko resurfaces from the safety of his sweater, but then Rainbow Hyuuga speaks again.

“You’re obviously lying, Uchiha,” he sneers. “The corners of your mouth are twitching and the girl cannot even get out the sentence without stuttering.” He takes a step forward and points dramatically at Sasuke. “You cannot fool these eyes!”

That’s it.

Riko loses it. Breaks down laughing so hard she has tears in her eyes.

Naruto isn’t far behind on his spot on the ground, and she thinks even Sasuke is shaking with mirth.

“Stop laughing!” Panda Buns shouts furiously.
Riko points at her. “You cannot fool these eyes!” she wheezes.

Panda Buns makes a noise like a steaming tea kettle.

“You’ll pay for this,” Hyuuga seethes darkly.

“Cannot… fool… eyes,” Naruto gasps, fists pounding the floor.

Riko’s eyes meet his and her lips spread into a wide grin, which he returns, and Sasuke’s arm is holding her up because her legs sure as hell aren’t carrying her. For a moment, it’s like none of the bad stuff ever happened, and she can *see* the team the three of them *should* be. And she says, “I love our team so much.”

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Naruto, Sasuke, and Riko are finally on their way again, the Idiot Three having stomped off in a complete snit after Riko’s declaration of love, which Naruto fervently echoed and Sasuke dropped her on the floor for. Too much mushiness for him — or those three — to handle.

“You laughed,” Naruto suddenly says in an awed tone, staring at Sasuke.

Sasuke walks faster.

“I saw it!” Naruto crows, hurrying after him. “You can laugh!”

“Fuck off, dead last,” Sasuke sneers, but it kind of misses the usual level of gravitas, what with him trying to power-walk away at the same time.

“No way! Do it again, bastard!” Naruto grins mischievously. “You cannot fool these eyes!”

Riko bursts into more giggles.

“Ha! I saw your lips twitch!” Naruto shouts after Sasuke.

She has to run to catch up to them, but it’s so worth it.

The Idiot Three might prove troublesome in the future, but for now? She’s glad they showed up. A good laugh with her team doesn’t fix everything, but it feels like progress. Some of the awful tension gone.

Finally, they reach the assembly hall. Outside the door, Kakashi is waiting. His eye crinkles up at the sight of them. “Maa, aren’t my cute little students in good spirits today,” he drawls.

He listens, eye warm on them as Naruto excitedly rambles the entire story at him.

“Mm, sounds like you had fun.” He grows serious. “That’s over now. These tests are going to push you to your limits. But I have faith that you three can do it. Naruto, Sasuke, Riko — I’m proud of you three.” With one last smile and a wary look at a misty-eyed Naruto, he steps aside. “Now go.”

The boys go in first. Riko hesitates in the doorway and turns back towards her sensei.

“Go on,” he says. Then holds his book out toward her. “Good luck charm.”
Her lips tip up and she takes the book. Then draws out her own copy of the same book and gives it to him. “See you later, sensei?” she says quietly.

“Of course, Riko-chan.”

She takes a deep breath and enters the exam room.

_Show time._
Chapter 33

Entering the assembly hall, it’s all Riko can do to just. Stare.

There are many people here. It’s overwhelming, and that’s not mentioning the level of tension with so many shinobi from so many places crammed in one place — she all but sways on her feet.

A lot of them are glaring at her. She can see some smirks. The thoughts of ‘Easy prey’ are all but written over their faces.

Rationally, she knows they probably do that with everyone who enters, but it doesn’t feel that way right now. Maybe she shouldn’t have dawdled and let Naruto and Sasuke go ahead on their own, because now she is by herself. She swallows heavily, cold sweat breaking out over her skin.

“Oi, Riko! Over here!”

Her head snaps around and she’s hurrying in the direction of Kiba’s voice before her mind has even put together that it’s him. His team stands in the corner of the room just to her left, and both Naruto and Sasuke are with them.

“Hey, guys,” she greets. Breathes a sigh of relief when Kiba draws her into a quick half-hug. Naruto and Sasuke look on owlishly.

“You okay?” Kiba asks quietly, leaving his arm around her shoulders.

She shrugs and keeps her face blank, no matter how much she wants to grimace. “’s a lot of people.”

Akamaru barks in agreement.

“It is.” Shino nods. “How many? Fifty-one teams are assembled in this room.”

Riko gulps. That’s… one hundred and fifty-three people. And she only has her team and one sure ally in Kiba, and two less certain allies in his teammates.

Fumio might be another ally, but she can’t see him anywhere in the crowd. Nor his teammates.

“Hello,” Hinata greets haltingly. Her face flushes when she looks at Naruto, and she turns away quickly.

Huh.

Odd.

“Where’s Shikamaru’s team?” Sasuke asks Riko, a frown on his face.

Right, he and her brother had some sort of friendship thing going on back in Nami. Or at least tolerated each other’s company more than that of others.

She shrugs uncomfortably. “Didn’t get nominated by their new sensei.”

Sasuke’s frown deepens and he gives a small acknowledging sound.

“Man, it sucks,” Kiba complains. “Woulda been cool if all of us could do this together. Ah well.
Wonder how far we’ll get…”

He smirks at Riko’s teammates, revealing his sharp teeth.

“You seem confident, Kiba.” Sasuke returns the smirk, competitive as ever.

“We won’t lose to you.” The way Kiba says it, it’s a statement of fact rather than a boast, and it clearly irks Sasuke, by the way his eyes darken.

He also doesn’t appear to like the way Kiba has his arm wrapped around Riko, but tough luck. She likes it, Kiba’s her friend, and the physical contact helps with the nerves.

“Ha!” Naruto’s temper flares up. “Sasuke might, but I won’t lose to you!”

“Sorry, Naruto-kun,” Hinata says quickly, “I’m sure Kiba-kun didn’t mean it that way.”

Oh, she’s wrong about that. Kiba meant it exactly that way.

And, having practiced with him all month, Riko is pretty sure he could take either of her teammates in a fight right now. His father’s training had to be hellish, not that Kiba ever complained.

“Eh?” Naruto asks with a confused look at Hinata, who blushes even more and looks away again, the tips of her fingers pushing against each other.

…and dear. Riko feels a little sorry for her.

It’s a very hopeless crush. One, Naruto’s still got a thing for Sakura and two, he barely knows Hinata exists.

“Hey, you guys,” an unfamiliar voice speaks up from the side. When she turns her head, she sees a teenager with a Konoha hitae-ate, glasses on his nose, grey hair tied back in a low ponytail. “You should be more quiet.”

The expression on his face is kind of annoyed and even though Riko wasn’t loud, she feels a bit guilty for disturbing him.

“And gone is the guilt. Riko gives him an unimpressed look. He just had to make it about girls, like boys don’t yell five times as much as girls. But it’s okay when boys yell, because they aren’t expected to be quiet and refined.

Riko is so over the entire sexism thing. It’s everywhere!

The boy introduces himself as Kabuto and goes on to warn them about the foreigners — like it isn’t obvious they aren’t exactly feeling friendly towards her village in general and her group in particular — and then goes on to give them a whole lot of information about the exams. Since they’re rookies and all and clearly know nothing, whereas this is his seventh try in four years at a promotion.

Riko is just uneasy about the whole thing, especially when he takes out info cards and imparts weirdly specific information on them. About which villages sent how many participants, then on individuals. Sasuke asks about the Idiot Three otherwise known as Rainbow Hyuuga & Pals, which is kind of enlightening.
Eventually, he ambles off with a friendly wave.

“He was nice!” Naruto exclaims enthusiastically.

“There’s no way he took the exam seven times in four years,” Riko points out, frowning after him.

“Indeed,” Shino agrees, to her surprise. “Why? Because the exams took place in Kumogakure last time and Iwagakure before that, and Konoha doesn’t send genin to those villages. This leaves only six opportunities for Kabuto-san to have taken the exams during the past four years.”

A beat of uneasy silence, then Hinata speaks up tentatively, “Maybe he was, maybe he was including this attempt already?”

“Maybe?” Riko agrees uncertainly.

“Still useful information,” Sasuke decides, but he’s frowning.

Naruto squints after Kabuto, now looking suspicious, eyes squinting. “Where’d he get it, though?”

Riko blinks at him. “That’s a very good question,” she says slowly, mildly surprised that it was Naruto who asked it. But occasionally, he does have moments of brightness.

“He said he had two-hundred cards,” Kiba murmurs. “And those guys you asked about, this is their first try. He shouldn’t have info on them unless he looked at their files. If all his cards have information like that…”

“Could be a plant by the examiners,” Sasuke points out.

“Indeed,” Shino agrees. “Why is this a reasonable suspicion? Two genin on the second floor were chuunin in disguise, testing participants in genjutsu detection.”

“Well, if it’s a test, we should let the examiners know that we caught on,” Kiba decides firmly. “Get some extra points.”

All of them share determined glances and nod, but then there’s a commotion and they all get distracted, because the one team from Oto — according to Kabuto, a new village and seriously obscure, he knew next to nothing about it — is attacking the boy. Right there. In front of everyone.

Kabuto is still a Konoha shinobi, and clearly Riko’s team and Kiba’s think the same way because they all make ready to rush the Oto team, but then a plume of smoke appears with a loud bang and a group of adult Konoha-nin appears.

Wearing T&I uniforms, what the hell is going on?

The man at their center, a man with an unforgiving expression on his scarred face, growls, “Quiet down, you worthless maggots!”

His voice isn’t loud, but his commanding tone freezes the entire room. This man is dangerous.

The team from Oto backs off at his directive.

“Thanks for waiting,” he drawls mockingly. “I’m Morino Ibiki, and the first phase of the Chuunin Selection Exams begins now.”
It’s a written exam. A *paper quiz*. They’re testing *knowledge*.

And teams get a collective score. Which is both good and bad. On one hand, it’ll save Naruto, who’s absolute *crap* at written exams. On the other hand, he’ll seriously drag Sasuke and her down, and if he can’t answer even one question, all of them fail.

Riko reads through the test questions and comes to the conclusion that her team is doomed. She *can maybe* answer half of them. The medicine problem, the weaponry question, and the cypher — those she’s pretty sure about. Less so with the Maths thing and the obligatory shuriken trajectory problem.

The rest is a mystery. She doesn’t know anything about Taki’s second-most important export product, and the rest or the questions are even more obscure.

With the exception of the tenth question, which is missing. To be revealed later, it says on the paper, and it’s implied to have special rules.

None of that matters, though, if Naruto’s paper is blank at the end. Riko is *not* comfortable leaving it all up to the last question.

So. They’re going to have to cheat.

The rules actually *invite* cheating, what with how getting caught once only results in point deduction, rather than immediately getting kicked out. It’s probably even the *real* objective of this test, not that knowing that helps in any way with actually pulling it off.

Damn it. She doesn’t have much skill in spying beyond what the Academy taught.

And she’s got to figure it out before Naruto does anything stupid and gets them all disqualified. Then there’s Sasuke, but he’ll have to fend for himself, sitting too far away for her to help. He should at least be able to answer the medicine question.

Okay then. First, she needs a target to cheat off of.

Five rows ahead of her, Akamaru barks.

*Well.*

That’s the first question answered. Riko stares blankly at the back of Kiba’s head, on top of which Akamaru lounges with perfect view of the surrounding contestants’ papers.

So she doesn’t have to figure out the cheating thing, that’s… neat, though it feels wrong to be using her friend that way. Then again, *maybe* his ninken shouldn’t be spelling out the answers for everyone to hear.

Riko resolves to give Akamaru some treats after this. It’ll have to be good enough.

For now, she sharpens her hearing and starts writing down the answers, and *hopefully* they’re correct. They look plausible, at least.

Twenty minutes have passed. Riko is set.
That leaves her teammates. Seating assignments for the test were decided by drawing numbers. She’s seated near the center of the room. Naruto’s a heap of misery two rows ahead of her to the right. Sasuke’s somewhere on the other side of the room, behind her where she can’t see him.

Riko frowns to herself. Then her head snaps up at the sound of something sharp whistling her direction, and her hand snaps out and grabs the kunai before it can thunk into the paper of the genin next to her.

Who startles so hard that he jerks back, tips over with his chair, and lands on the ground.

She blinks in surprise at the kunai she’s now holding.

Morino is staring right at her without blinking, and so are his helpers. “Number 45,” he says coolly. “Strike five. You fail. Get the hell out.”

Riko sits back down in her seat — number 44 — and casts a sympathetic glance at the shell-shocked Ame-nin on the ground. He picks himself up and scurries away after a confused glance at her.

His teammates join him in silence.

The incident repeats all over the room from then on as more people get caught cheating. Some try arguing, others have to be physically dragged from the room, which, what.

At least that takes the examiners’ attention away from her, but she still feels the heavy scrutiny.

She just caught a kunai, it was nothing special!

Riko shakes herself. Focus! She needs to help Naruto out before he either cheats on his own or doesn’t cheat at all.

But how?

Morino Ibiki is staring at her. Which is terrifying.

She forces a smile and gives him a thumbs-up. It doesn’t make him stop.

Fuck it, she has a test to pass, he’s just trying to stress her out, this is fine. Naruto is the priority here!

Okay. Okay. She takes a deep breath and makes herself focus. What can she do here? There has to be some skill she can use for this.

Kagemane? Control Naruto’s body and make it write the right answers?

She’s only ever practiced it on her father, and even that was draining. And she can’t control it that well yet. Plus, with how much chakra he has, it’s going to be so hard to keep it going.

Riko figures it can be Plan B. Can’t go into the next test with chakra exhaustion.

Dammit, what else?

Ah.

Well.
She blinks down at her paper.

It could work. Completely shameless, but they can be caught cheating four times before failing. She just has to trust that enough of her answers are right to compensate for the loss of points.

And that it won’t piss off the examiners too much to let her go on.

She erases her name on the paper and fills in Naruto’s. Strike one.

Attaches a chakra string to her paper and flicks another over to her teammate’s. Swaps them out, startling Naruto so hard that he nearly falls off of his chair, but at least he doesn’t yell. Strike two, possibly three.

Fills in her own name in place of Naruto’s. That’s strike four.

Riko exhales shakily. Her fingers are trembling.

Holy crap. She just did that.

The staring has begun anew.

So much for remaining inconspicuous and blending in!

But she and team are still in the running, and thirty minutes of test time are still left.

They better not count her filling in the answers on Naruto’s test sheet as another cheating attempt. But no, nobody throws a kunai her way while she scrawls the answers onto the paper.

Done!

Riko takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly. Holy crap, she actually did it!

Sure, she’ll have gotten eight points deducted from the nine she hopefully had, if her answers were correct, but those points should now be regained with the answers she just wrote down. Net gain of one point, all in all, and Naruto has no empty paper to disqualify him from continuing the competition. And there’s still the tenth question left.

If there’s a minimum number of points a team has to have to move on or if only a certain number of the highest-scoring teams gets to continue, well, it’s looking pretty bad for Team Seven. Hopefully, Sasuke will have enough points to get them through this thing.

But yeah, this was the best she could do. Once this is over, she’ll look into what she could have done better. Because holy crap, she should have a way to get information to her teammates without anyone catching on. Such an oversight in her training.

Riko takes a few minutes to just. Breathe.

When she looks up again, Morino is still staring her down, and she has a feeling he’s not impressed.

That’s his problem, she’s done. He can go suck a lemon, she passed the damn test.

Just hit her with the last question and get it over with, damn it.

He might be a mindreader because just then, he speaks up. “Very well. We will now begin the tenth question.”
It’s like a switch flipped in the room, everyone sitting straighter, fearfully tense.

“Before we get to it, I’ll go over the added rules for this question.”

And then he doesn’t continue because that one Suna boy returns from the bathroom. Maybe someone should have gone before this whole thing began.

The boy is led back to his seat and Morino continues, attention finally not on Riko specifically, but rather on the room at large. “These are the rules of desperation…”

“So that happened,” Riko mutters to Kiba on the way to the Forest of Death, where the next stage of the exam will be held. Akamaru is in her arms, munching on treats.

“Uh-huh,” Kiba agrees.

Their teams all made it through the tenth question, which turned out to be more stressful than what came before. Also rendered all the previous question meaningless, but Riko isn’t that miffed about it.

Morino imparted a damn powerful message right there at the end. About how serious all of what they’re doing is. And the risk it carries.

His scars… Riko shudders.

Of course, she’d known rationally, had signed her work contract with the armoury knowing that someday, someone might torture her for information. But seeing evidence of why such a thing is necessary makes it so much more real.

“You good?” Kiba asks, elbowing her.

Riko startles. “Yeah, sure. Just thinking. Next test is gonna be… I mean, Anko’s a little…”

She still remembers when the woman licked her.

“Mm.” Kiba nods. “Yeah. And Naruto painted a target on your backs, too.”

She grimaces.

It was an inspirational speech, sure, but she really could have done without it. Bad enough that people have been side-eyeing Sasuke and the giant clan insignia on his back from the start. Worse that she drew not-insignificant amounts of attention herself, what with catching kunai and cheating in a highly visible way.

But Naruto basically took over the entire room, and no matter how encouraging, how stirring it seemed at the time…

Being on everyone’s minds when it’s more than likely they’ll all be stuck in the Forest of Death for the next test is a very bad thing.

“Speaking of,” she sighs, “I should go be with my team.”
“Me too.” He nudges her shoulder. “See you later.”

Riko transfers Akamaru back to him and hurries to find Naruto and Sasuke.

“-and then, whoosh, my paper was gone and there was one that was filled out, but it was Ricchan’s handwriting!” Naruto’s telling the other boy. Then he notices her. “Hey! Ricchan!”

“Where were you?” Sasuke asks, eyebrows drawing together as he looks around. He’s tense.

So is Riko, what with so many hostile people around. Seventy-two people passed — twenty-four teams are left.

“Talked to Kiba,” she answers. “Owed Akamaru some dog treats, since I cheated off of him just now.”

“Hn.” He frowns. “You’re close.”

She shrugs. It’s Naruto who says, “Yeah, they’ve been friends since Riko made it into our Academy class.” He then squints at her. “But you didn’t hug back then.” And suddenly, his face pales and he stares at her in horror. “Ricchan! Are you and the dog bastard like that?!”

He makes a weird gesture with his pinkie finger. Riko has no idea what it means.

Sasuke looks at her expectantly, clearly not sharing her confusion.

“Like what,” she asks confusedly.

“Like this!” Naruto makes another mysterious hand movement. Then he takes a deep breath and makes a pained face. “I’m, uh. He’s annoying! And loud! Thinks he’s the best at everything! But you, if he makes you happy–” And he starts sniffling. “Then that’s good!”

She stares at him blankly. “Okay? Thanks?”

Sasuke mutters something under his breath before he grunts, “Get a move on.”

Riko’s not gonna ask. It’s not important right now. The second test is just ahead of them, and it’s taking place in that training ground.

The crowd of genin assembles before the main entrance. Riko holds her team back from listening to Anko in the first row. She absolutely doesn’t want all those people at her back where she can’t see.

Enhanced senses are useless in a crowd.

“You’ll soon find out why it’s called the ‘Forest of Death’,” Anko informs them with a smirk. “Heh, this test is gonna be fun. We just have to take care of the pesky legal details first.” She holds up a bunch of papers. Her smile takes on a serene note. “Sign these so I won’t be held responsible for your deaths. I’ll be nice and explain the test first.”
Riko swallows.

Just like a mission, she reminds herself. Risk of death is *normal*. And she already signed a death waiver for her armoury job. With the assurance that her death would be looked into if it related to her work there, but it’s still a death waiver.

This is *normal*.

Or not.

With growing worry, she listens to the mission parameters. There are two types of scrolls, each team gets one, and they have to reach the tower at the center of the forest with at least one scroll of each kind and all teammates alive and accounted for. Every team starts from a different entrance.

They have five days. No quitting in the middle. Once they enter this forest, the only way to get out is to finish the mission or survive until the deadline.

Riko has a really bad feeling about this test.

Maybe she should take this last chance to back out?

This is so much worse than she ever imagined.
Riko’s team got a scroll of the ‘Heaven’ type and its male members are arguing over who should carry it as they wait for their guard to open the gate into the forest.

“I should take it!” Naruto declares. “I’ll definitely keep it safe!”

Sasuke snorts derisively. “It doesn’t even fit in your pouch. I’ll take it. I’m best-suited to defending it.”

“I’m best-suited to defending it,” Naruto imitates him mockingly, making chicken motions with his arms and wiggling his butt.

Riko sighs and grabs the scroll from Sasuke. “I’ll take it.”

And she stuffs it into her backpack. Would have sealed it away in her glove storage, but her chakra sense says something is in that scroll, and it’s never a good idea to stuff fuuinjutsu objects into storage seals unless they’re conceptualised for and keyed to that exact fuuinjutsu.

“But Ricchan!” Naruto protests.

“You throw yourself into fights head-first which risks unnecessary damage and Sasuke would be the obvious pick,” Riko explains, trying to sound reasonable instead of annoyed. “I’m also the best at evasion.”

Neither boy looks pleased.

“You can have a fake scroll,” she offers with a sigh. “Decoys are important.”

Rooting around in her backpack yields a blank scroll with similar lining to the Heaven scroll. From her storage scroll of miscellaneous items, she gets out ink and brush and paints the kanji for ‘Heaven’ on it.

It won’t hold up to a truly scrutinising eye, but chances are that those hunting for a Heaven scroll wouldn’t actually be able to tell, since they’d only have seen the Earth type up close.

Also, they’d be pressed for time.

Naruto at least is mollified, but Sasuke sulks.

Like they don’t have bigger problems than a bruised ego.

Riko rolls her eyes before staring at the forest looming behind the fence again. All of this feels like a mistake. But ultimately, she’s come to the conclusion she’d regret quitting more than not, no matter what they’ll face in that forest.

The test is straightforward enough, her team isn’t half-bad combat-wise. Plus, with her sensor abilities, they’ll have a significant advantage when it comes to finding targets and laying ambushes.

After the lesson from the first test — about how dangerous being a shinobi is, but one can’t just avoid or quit a mission out of fear — Riko just can’t bring herself to back out.

For better or worse, she made her choice.
Pressing her lips together, she shrugs off her jacket and turns it inside out before putting it back on and quickly stuffing gear into the appropriate places.

She’s a lot more comfortable now that she’s clad in olive green rather than dark red. Much more sensible in a forest, and people watching out for her won’t be looking for this colour.

Fuck, she’s tense.

But the closer noon creeps, the calmer she becomes.

This is it. This is a mission, and there’s no room for fear.

Finally, the guard looks at his watch and then pulls out a key to unlock the gate for them. Steps aside without a word.

“Okay!” Naruto shouts and punches a fist forward. “Let’s go!”

And without further ado they enter the Forest of Death at a brisk run, taking to the trees immediately.

The second phase of the Chuunin Exams has begun.

The first screams start only minutes later.

Half an hour into their run and Sasuke touches down on a branch that hisses suspiciously before it explodes. An instant later, a tall boy flickers in front of Riko, kunai aimed for her throat.

She throws herself out of the way purely on instinct. Grabs her attacker’s wrist and pulls, her free hand slamming against the back of his elbow. There’s a crack and he howls in pain, but thrusts something at her. Another tell-tale hiss-

The explosion is loud enough it leaves her ears ringing, but the only thing that burns is a log.

For a moment the scene is overlaid with that of her first kill, but she pushes it away, lunging at the shinobi from above, and then the handle of her katana cracks down on his head. He collapses instantly and Riko leaps away again.

She can hear weapons clanging in the background and multiple Narutos shouting, and-

A strong gust of wind catches her from the side and blows her off her tree branch. Riko employs another kawarimi and when she lands Sasuke’s already hit the attacker with several fireballs.

“Ha!” Naruto’s clones shout, and a severely bruised teenager tumbles to the ground. Only now does Riko see the Suna hitae-ate on the hostile team.

For a moment, they’re all silent, breathing heavily. Naruto’s twenty clones poof away.

Riko takes a deep breath. “’Kay. Let’s check them for their scroll.”

She drops to ground level and quickly begins searching the wind jutsu user — a lanky kunoichi —
for the scroll. The boys do the same with the other downed attackers.

“Anyone injured?” Sasuke asks sharply as they work.

“No.” Riko shakes her head. Her ears are slowly stopping to ring and the wind jutsu only threw her off, rather than hit her like a wall. She’s okay.

Her fingers finally find something solid in the kunoichi’s robe-like attire, but it turns out to just be a small fan. Decent quality paper, very sturdy, clearly a weapon.

Riko pockets it. The three had just used lethal force against her team. She can steal a weapon without feeling guilty.

Anyway, it’s a nice fan.


Of course it’s the wrong kind. Well, it’d make a better decoy, at least, and they could maybe use it as negotiation material.

Sasuke makes a displeased noise. “Let’s get out of here.”

They quickly tie the three genin up and are on their way again.

Two hours of moving later and Riko’s reasonably certain that they’ve shaken any pursuers. It took running through an area that was infested with hordes of spiders tall enough to reach Riko’s hips, but they made it thanks to liberal applications of fire jutsu, kage bunshin decoys, and explosive tags.

She drops down in a natural shelter formed by enormous roots, exhaling wearily. “Break time.”

The boys follow her example, Sasuke grabbing her calf and pushing up her trouser leg. One spider got a far too close for comfort, but its bite didn’t get through the thick and sturdy fabric of her trousers.

But whatever acid they spit — thankfully not very strong — it seeped through, and now her skin itches.

“Thanks,” she says hoarsely when he begins washing the stuff off without commentary and then smears a herbal salve on her leg.

He nods tightly, then turns to Naruto who got swarmed by spiders at some point. “Jumpsuit off,” he orders.

“Oi, bastard-”

“Need to check for injuries,” Sasuke snaps at him.

Riko begins munching on a ration bar while they bicker. Sasuke looks close to ripping Naruto’s clothes off himself, so she says, “I’ll give you ramen if you do it, Ruto.”
He lights up with excitement and all but tears off the outer layer of his clothing. Problem solved.

Naruto turns out to be fine. The lake he jumped in at some point must have washed off the spider spit before it could do any harm, and he’s always been hardy.

Riko’s fair British skin just damages easily.

“I gotta take a piss,” Naruto announces and turns to the shrubbery.

She turns her head away to give him privacy, trying not to listen to the sound of him relieving himself. Instead focuses on preparing his promised ramen while Sasuke sinks down next to her and chows down a ration bar of his own.

“Need to hunt a scroll down,” he mutters, frowning. “It’s going to be harder the more time passes.”

Riko nods. “I don’t think we still want to be out when night falls,” she agrees with a shudder. The spiders were bad enough, she has a feeling she really doesn’t want to meet the nocturnal vermin.

Naruto is finally done and comes running over. “Ramen!”

“Wash your hands, dead last,” Sasuke snaps and throws his water canteen at him with unerring accuracy.

The other boy rolls his eyes but does as told. Then smiles blissfully when she finally hands him his ramen. “You’re the best, Ricchan!”

She grins back. Here, in the forest, with danger surrounding them and having just escaped a nest of man-eating spiders, all the difficulties they had seem very distant. Naruto and Sasuke are her friends and the three of them are Team Seven.

And then the ground begins to tremble, a huge inhuman chakra appearing just below them. Riko jumps up, Sasuke only a beat behind, and grabs Naruto’s collar before they leap away from the little shelter. “My ramen!” Naruto squawks as the bowl clatters to the ground.

Just as the earth rips open and something gigantic breaks free. There’s dust and wood splinters everywhere, and as the enormous tree that sheltered them falls, it sounds like it’s screaming. A shudder goes through the whole forest and Riko by extension.

A gargantuan snake stares down at them and she trembles with a primeval sort of terror.

She’s prey.

The wind whistles sharply and wood splinters hit her skin, and wait. They’re surrounded by trees, why is there wind-

Oh fuck!

With the dust everywhere, it’s clearly visible that the giant funnel of wind is aimed right at her and Naruto. Riko plants her feet, but the dry, loose dirt ground slips away under her. She grits her teeth and crouches down, face turned away from the wind, and stabs her katana deep into the earth as a handhold, the wind tearing at her mercilessly. Attempts to shield Naruto with her body. He clings to her, face hidden in her stomach.

It won’t stop, the wind keeps going, and she can’t sense a thing anymore, the noise is
overwhelming, and holding onto her katana hurts.

Her grip is slipping, and the ground disappears under her feet and she’s clinging to her sword like a banner to a flagpole in the midst of a hurricane. And it’s not enough.

Naruto’s losing his hold on her and she’s only sticking to the katana by her fingertips anymore.

The ground shakes as something heavy impacts it and something in her mind screams that she forgot about the snake, but it doesn’t matter because she just lost her grip.

And her world

slows

down.

Everything is suddenly very clear. Sasuke’s chakra is to her right, desperate, but his way to Naruto and her is cut off by the monstrous snake bearing down on him.

And there’s another chakra, entwined into the infernal wind. Foul, insidious, amused by their struggle. But its attention is on Sasuke.

It isolated him. Is testing him with almost scientific curiosity.

And underneath that is an overwhelmingly foul craving.

Whatever it wants with him, Riko won’t let it happen.

The chains burst from her body, shadowy constructs that wrap around the humongous trees and yank sharply, and Riko and Naruto tumble through the air, suddenly no longer inside the wind tunnel. Reality is fast again, spinning past her, and then she crashes backwards into a tree root, her head bouncing off, and things go black very suddenly.

She can’t have been out for more than a moment. The noises are still the same, she hears the snake hiss, the wind jutsu dying down to her left or maybe her right, everything is spinning and she’s nauseous. Her body hurts everywhere.

But she doesn’t have the luxury of safety. Can’t rest. So she forces her eyes open, the light sending a stab of white-hot pain through her head, and it’s like — it’s like some part of her, on the outer edges of her mind, pushes back against it. There’s something there, just out of reach.

Something alive in the black spots in her vision. Wild and angry.

Riko has other priorities right now. More than likely has a concussion, and her brain feels so slow. Her glasses were lost somewhere, as was her hitae-ate and everything her hair was secured with. It hangs in her face wildly.

Every noise is too loud.

She works herself to her feet and nearly throws up doing so. Takes in the scene without comprehension.

The snake just exploded, dozens of Narutos bursting from the body, and there’s blood and slime all over the place.

Sasuke suddenly appears beside her and his eyes are red. She stares uncomprehendingly, but it is
his chakra and that can’t be faked. His hands glow a gentle green, press against her back, and some of the pain disappears.

He doesn’t stop, even when the enemy finally shows their face. Riko’s vision is blurry, all she can make out is long black hair and beige clothes. Can’t even tell gender, and their voice reaches her from an odd, echoing distance, like she’s underwater.

Their chakra is no longer hidden and her knees buckle at how wrong it feels. Utterly and completely inhuman.

The something in her head recoils from the feel of it.

The… the creature is smirking, licking their lips with a too-long tongue. Holds up an Earth scroll—wait, don’t they need that one to finish this test?—and swallows it in an obscenely slow manner.

And then—

Her knees hit the ground but the pain barely registers because she can’t breathe. Head filled with visions of blood and fire and green light heading right for her, hitting her, she’s dead-

Beside her, Sasuke throws up, and the noise jars her into action. Or attempted action, because she can barely stand, and then Sasuke suddenly grabs her hand and yanks her back down. She smells blood, and yeah—he’s bleeding, but he’s the one holding the kunai, and his lips say something about killing intent.

Why can’t she focus? Why does her mouth taste like blood, why is her breath rattling, and why does he look so terrified?

She bends over and coughs wetly, but warm hands steady her. Chakra seeps into her.

A distant shout, and she looks up. Sees an orange figure with blond hair, standing between the creature and her and Sasuke.

Naruto.

She tries to stand, because he’s is trying to fight that thing, and again Sasuke holds her down. “But-” she chokes out.

She has to help him!

“You’re injured,” she deciphers Sasuke’s words.

No. No.

Right in front of her, just two long jumps away, Naruto is tossed up into a tree and crumples to the ground. Riko tries to stand again, but her legs won’t obey.

Desperately, her fingers clench in Sasuke’s shirt, and she’s desperate. “Help him!”

His teeth grit and he jerks his head, denying her. Keeps trying to heal her. Is even somewhat successful, she can feel him fixing things, but it’s so slow, and she still can’t move.

To the side, Naruto slowly gets up, wiping blood from his mouth. “Don’t worry about this freak, Sasuke. I’ll definitely protect Ricchan and you, so just heal her.”
Oh no. Oh no, no, no.

Sasuke is the medic. He can’t fight because who else will fix the team after?

But Naruto. Naruto is losing, even if his chakra is suddenly different, stronger, overwhelming, even if he’s tossing another giant snake around like it’s nothing.

“I won’t-" he breathes to the attacker, who’s just smirking from on top of their dead snake- “I won’t let you touch my friends!”

Naruto fights.

And he falls.

Sasuke finally lets go of Riko, who still can’t move and is frozen, staring at Naruto’s crumpled form. He’s still alive, she can sense it, but he won’t move, and his chakra is all but gone.

That thing put some seal on him and he could be dying and it’ll be her fault.

Her other teammate takes a step away from her, then another, and she looks up to find him with weapons in his hands, staring at their attacker with grim determination.

Shielding Riko.

“No,” she whispers. Then, louder, “No!”

The creature chuckles, licking their lips. “I can finally test you to my satisfaction, Sasuke-kun.”

Sasuke wastes no time with talking. The fighting begins anew. For a moment, Riko is almost hopeful that her teammate is winning.

But still that awful chakra only tastes of entertainment.

Delight, the longer the fighting goes on.

Riko can’t walk, so she begins crawling over to Naruto’s unconscious form. He’s still breathing, but his chakra is stuttering and that’s a bad sign.

Still, she keeps most of her attention on Sasuke’s fight, hoping against hope that the thing will make a mistake in its arrogance.

It does. But it doesn’t matter.

The creature just shakes the burned, melted skin off, revealing something different underneath, and Sasuke drops in exhaustion, only steps away from Riko and Naruto. Still shielding them, a kunai held up, crouching because he’s panting for breath so hard that he can’t stand straight.

Fighting to the last, and Riko is trying and failing to stand again. The world is spinning once more, and she can see strange colours, taste chakra on her tongue. Oddly metallic.

“Who the hell are you?” Sasuke forces out.

“My name is Orochimaru,” they — he — replies, but it seems to come from a great distance.

The world has gone slow again.
Orochimaru is still talking, eyes dark and intent on Sasuke. His chakra tastes like giddy anticipation.

The *something* in Riko’s head is very close now. Almost touching the parts of her that are *Riko*. It’s wild, powerful, achingly bright, and *dangerous*. And, she realises with a jolt, *familiar*.

*This* is what made her blood charge to the point her body felt too small to contain it. What killed that Kiri kunoichi, what saved Asuma, and what was behind all those other incidents.

This is her *magic*.

And as she perceives it for the first time, it studies her right back with something like *wonder*.

In slow motion, Orochimaru’s neck stretches unnaturally, their mouth bared to reveal snake-like fangs. Striking for the motionless Sasuke with greedy satisfaction, *so close to the key component, has waited so long, so many plans*—

She *won’t let it happen*. Sasuke might be an ass and an idiot, but he’s her friend and teammate, crouching there, willing to die shielding Riko and Naruto.

He’s her friend and she loves him *so much*.

Riko *reaches* and thinks, *please*.

Her magic answers the call eagerly, jumping in wild joy.

And the power rushes into her, all of it, all at once. Filling her. Overflowing. Too much, nowhere to go, her body too flimsy a vessel to contain it all. Riko’s world turns blindingly bright, a million scents assaulting her nose, the noise of the forest *deafening*, and her every nerve is on fire.

She’s a star trapped in a girl’s body, and what stars do is *burn*.

Brilliant flames lick out of her skin, her clothes unravelling, disintegrating. When she looks at her gloved hands, it’s to see the fabric burn away bit by bit, and what a shame about those lovely seals she put so much effort in—

The seals in question glow as if in response to her thoughts, and where the fabric disappears, the seals *don’t*. Cling to her skin, layering over her palms like spiderwebs, burning into her flesh and *ow*, that *stings*.

It doesn’t matter. Riko steps forward, is suddenly in front of Sasuke, her hand slapping Orochimaru’s head away. Time is speeding up again and that probably means she doesn’t have long left.

This, she knows, the magic, it’s killing her. She didn’t expect that, but it doesn’t matter. Despite the white-hot pain she’s never felt more alive. There’s *too much power* inside of her, and her skin is glowing, her every vein lit up, and her laughter is wild.

The world is at her fingertips and it needs to not have Orochimaru in it.

Riko lunges forward, her katana flying back into her hands from wherever it was still stuck in the ground. Immediately it starts glowing, the white fire concentrating into the blade.

The man — neck a reasonable length again — tilts his head in interest as he regards her. Says something she can’t make out or has any interest in hearing. But he’s holding a sword of his own
now, and then their blades clash against one another.

Hers shatters. The shockwave blasts the two of them apart.

Riko frowns at the broken pieces on the ground and they float back up, reassemble back into a katana, fusing together like it was never broken.

Orochimaru is back on his feet and she does not like the look in his eyes. Needs him gone. Her time is running out.

She swings her sword in a wide arc and that lovely fire streams out in an expanding wave. The thing that is Orochimaru escapes into the trees and then bears down on her from above, and there’s dozens of snakes hissing out from his sleeves.

Another swing from her sword makes them disappear but the moment costs her. He’s on top of her, a hand grabbing her hair and jerking her head back, but he yanks his hand back just as fast, the flesh melting.

With a scoff, he discards his skin entirely, leaving an empty husk behind, and she stares at his undisguised self for the first time.

She needs him dead. Why isn’t he dead already? What’s she doing wrong? Riko frowns in confusion.

He’s too slippery!

Her shadow expands, hunting for his, hunting him, and for some reason he seems delighted when she catches him. Riko snarls and leaps forward, and again their swords clash, and wasn’t she trying to avoid that? Why, though?

Her katana shatters against his, and ah, that was the reason. This happened before.

Wait, why is he still able to move? Her shadow — her shadow? Is gone? Where’d it go?

She jerks in surprise when scaly bodies wrap around her arms and jerk them behind her back, small, sharp fangs piercing her skin. Snakes had shot out from Orochimaru’s sleeves, and he’s right in front of her.

Her flames burn through the scales, but they seem sluggish now, with a dull, greyish tint to them. The whole world’s leeches of colour and oh.

It’s not the magic, it’s her who’s all slow and cold.

But she still has all that power, even if her body is giving out on her, and it needs to go somewhere. Orochimaru is right there in front of her, and there’s no conscious thought to it, no planning at all. Her hunting knife just drops into her hand from the storage seal that used to be on her glove and is now burned into her skin, and she jerks her arm free and stabs him in the side with every bit of power she can still muster.

For a moment nothing happens.

Then the world goes white and Riko knows no more.
Chapter 35

It’s dark when Riko wakes up. The place she’s in has a strange sense of familiarity to it, even though she can’t remember ever being here. It’s a meadow, soft green grass interspersed with little white flowers that almost glow in the moonlight. The air smells sweet, the wind gentle in her hair.

She stands up and marvels at how loose and limb her body is, how relaxed she feels, she can’t remember ever being this comfortable.

Mm, she should be going somewhere, she suddenly knows. So she sets in motion slowly, grass tickling her bare feet pleasantly.

Ah, there’s her destination just ahead now, a sort of veil, and she can just make out the blurry outlines of two people behind it. They’re holding hands. One has red hair just like Riko.

She begins to run towards them.

And suddenly, the scene blurs, something wrenching in her chest. Murky black and red bleeding over her reality.

The last thing she sees is the faint gleam of smiles from the waiting couple. Then it’s all gone.

It’s dark now.

Riko floats in a space of nothingness.

Though floating implies that she has a body here, if a non-place can be described as ‘here’. But she lacks a word that fits.

She’s been ‘here’ before, hasn’t she? So long ago, when she was so very young and scared, after Vernon threw her into the cupboard under the stairs.

Riko is still young and scared, so did anything ever change?

Does it matter anymore?

She keeps drifting.

Eventually, the darkness changes. There’s… someone. Something. In here with Riko. A bright thing. She isn’t alone.

That, too, is familiar. Riko reaches out.

It’s… a lot more cautious in reaching back this time. Worried.

Scared of hurting her, like when she-

Ah.
When Riko wakes up, it’s to the sensation of dull pain, radiating throughout her entire body. Most of all, she feels heavy. Constricted, confined to her body when before she was in that other place.

That shouldn’t be unexpected, she supposes. After… after.

Yeah.

She takes stock of her physical state. Lying on a sleep roll, she’s wearing unfamiliar clothes. Can’t feel the concussion anymore or whatever injuries she had before she went down.

No major damage, then. Just ache and heaviness.

Her chakra levels are okay, too, which… It wasn’t chakra she used, so it makes sense.

Speaking of chakra, Naruto’s is next to her. Worryingly… not small, that’s not the right word. But distant somehow?

But stable, not stuttering like the last time she’d sensed him, after he was hit with that seal.

He's asleep, going by the sound of his breath.

Sasuke's chakra is just a few meters away, alert and tired at the same time.

And… there’s a third person nearby, Riko hears their laboured breath but can’t sense any chakra from them at all.

Wherever they are, it smells strongly of bear. She opens her eyes and stares up at a tall cave ceiling.

Riko casts a look around. Naruto is asleep next to her. Sasuke sits with his back to them at the cave entrance, a kunai in his hand. Keeping watch, clearly.

The stranger whose chakra she tails to sense turns out to be a girl, sitting a short distance away from him. It’s dark, so Riko can’t tell for sure, but from her posture, she’s the picture of absolute misery. Arms hugging her knees, face buried in the small space it creates.

Riko makes a small noise and Sasuke's head whips around. A moment later, he’s crouching down beside her.

There’s a bandage over half of his face, hiding one of his eyes. She stares in worried confusion. He didn't have any facial injuries, last she saw him.

“Hide your chakra,” he orders in an urgent tone. “Right now.”

She jerks in surprise and confusion, but does as told. If he’s using that tone, it has to be important.

There’s an uneasy feeling curling inside her chest.

Sasuke turns to the girl, who’s looking up now. “Good enough?” he demands.

Ah, and there’s the chakra Riko couldn’t sense before. The girl frowns in concentration, then nods.

Now that she’s not hiding her face anymore, Riko can just make out glasses on her face and a hitae-ate on her forehead. She can’t tell exactly what the symbol on it is, not wearing her own glasses and it being dark, but it’s decidedly not Konoha.
“Who-” Riko begins.

“We’re moving,” Sasuke cuts in, and he’s so tense that Riko shuts right up. Her teammate is barely hanging on by a thread, it sounds like. “Karin, are you recovered enough to carry someone?”

The strange girl cringes. “I’m sorry,” she whispers. Then, desperately, “I, I can support someone while they walk!”

Sasuke just nods. “Riko, can you walk?”

She nods.

Just how much time had passed since she lost consciousness? What in the world happened?

And who in the world is Karin?

They walk for hours, as stealthily as is possible for a group of four in their circumstances, which isn’t stealthy at all. Sasuke carries the unconscious Naruto, has only basic stealth training, and he walks into several trees because his depth perception is shot with one eye covered by bandages. Riko’s body is so heavy she has to lean on the Karin girl. Who isn’t exactly in peak condition either, and they make noise while they walk.

Rather cynically, Riko reckons that Naruto is the most stealthy out of all of them, being asleep.

There’s no talking. Karin just points the way, occasionally being very urgent about it, and it doesn’t take a genius to figure out that they’re being hunted. The girl is clearly a sensor, evidently with a better sensing range than Riko.

Only when dawn breaks do they stop, hunkering down in an abandoned animal den. It’s not much more than a hole in the ground, but it’s well-hidden and a nearby river drowns out what noise they make.

All of them drop down the moment they can. Karin’s face is grey with exhaustion and lined with sweat, her eyes sunken in, and she’s all but collapsed against Riko.

It’s only now that the sun is rising that Riko notices that the kunoichi’s hair is red. Brighter than Riko’s, but the colour just as vibrant.

Which, huh. That’s... Riko's never met someone else with such red hair before.

“You okay?” Riko asks her quietly while Sasuke sorts out Naruto.

It’s so wrong for the normally obnoxiously vivacious boy to lie so limp and utterly still.

Karin nods against her shoulder. “Tired.”

Sasuke comes over. “Eat, then rest,” he tells the girl and gives her a ration bar.

She takes it without protest, munches it down, and then curls up right where she is, her head close to Riko’s thigh. Out like a light almost instantly.
For a moment, there’s just silence. Then Sasuke’s hand digs into Riko’s shoulder almost painfully, and the next moment he’s clenching her to him, arms wrapped around her so tightly that it’s hard to breathe. Riko stays frozen in shock for a good long while, but he doesn’t let go. His face is buried in her hair and his breath comes in choked gasps.

She has no idea what to do, completely out of her depth.

Eventually, she wraps her own arms around him, her hands hesitantly rubbing up and down his back. Sasuke shudders and clings to her tighter.

They stay like that for an indeterminate time before he draws back and hands her water and a ration bar. Watches sharply as she gobbles down both.

Both of them pretend the hug didn’t happen.

She stares up at her teammate. “How long was I out?”

“Six hours.”

She takes that in.

It’s far shorter than she expected. The… attack happened in the early evening. From what she remembers, she had serious injuries — she was dying — and Sasuke wasn’t in good condition, either. Had been exhausted to the point of being barely able to stand.

But both of them are in relatively good physical condition now, aside from, apparently, Sasuke’s face. For the life of her, she can’t even begin to guess at what happened that necessitated bandaging half of it.

“Naruto?” She looks at the motionless boy, chewing on her lip.

“Physically fine.”

“What’s going on?” she asks finally.

He gives her a neutral look. “When you… fought, you lit up on every remotely skilled sensor’s range. Apparently your chakra glows.” His voice is flat. “The competition reacted accordingly.”

Riko cringes.

That explains the hunters, she supposes.

“According to her,” he points at Karin, “You haven’t stopped glowing to her senses, either. That’s how she found us.”

“Found us,” Riko repeats dumbly, and checks her stealth level again. Her chakra is still thoroughly hidden, and clearly it needs to stay that way. “Why?”

He shrugs. “She isn’t a fighter and got separated from her team. Said your chakra felt…” His face is utterly unimpressed as he quotes, “‘Bright and precious and lovely.’”

Riko blinks. “Uh.”

Sasuke glares at her from one eye. “Don’t ever do that again, whatever the hell it was.”

She ducks her head. “I didn’t know I could…”
“I don’t care,” he snaps. “Just *don’t.*”

Riko nods noncommittally. Of course she won’t set out to do it again, but she won’t dismiss the option either if another a similar situation happens again.

They, her magic and her, will just… be more careful.

She looks up at him again. “What happened to your face?”

He turns away from her. “Go sleep, Riko.”

Her eyebrows draw together. “Did you get attacked? Let me take a look, I’ll-”

“Just leave it!” he snarls, spinning around to her, and his one visible eye is red. Riko jerks back, raising her hands.

He deflates almost instantly, eye flickering back to the normal black, and presses his lips together.

“Just,” and now he only sounds tired. “Leave it alone.”

Riko nods slowly. “You need to rest,” she says finally, acquiescing for now.

Sasuke sneers, mood dropping again. “Says you of all people.”

She holds his stare. “You’re currently the only one able to fight. We can’t afford you being too tired to do so. I’ll keep watch.”

He glowers at her. “Fine,” he huffs.

“Fine,” she echoes. “Did any of my stuff survive?”

The clothes she’s wearing are definitely Sasuke’s, so she isn’t very hopeful. Last she remembers, everything on her body went up in flames.

So it’s a pleasant surprise when he hands her a storage scroll, her hitae-ate, and her hunting knife. And… the scroll she found under Usagi-chan’s body.

Huh. She’d completely forgotten about it.

“Thanks,” she says gratefully and takes the items. Blinks at her hands because… yeah. Storage seals burned into her palms. They’re very clearly visible now.

Frowning, Riko dismisses that for now, instead inspecting the scrolls for damage while Sasuke spreads out his sleep roll and lays down. Almost immediately, he drops off into sleep.

Eyeing him worriedly, Riko considers just… checking on his face while he’s sleeping.

But no. That would be a breach of trust, wouldn’t it?

He’d tell her if it was a serious injury. That would be relevant information to getting out of this whole mess alive.

Speaking of, the damn Heaven scroll she carried is gone. Shit.

Wait, they got a spare from that Suna team that attacked them an eternity ago, right? Sasuke should have it.
That’s half of their ticket out of this hellhole. If they can just get the counterpart… otherwise, they’ll be stuck in the forest the full five days.

It hasn’t even been one full day yet.

The fact that that person clearly was no ordinary genin, that nobody else in the exams will be like him, is of little comfort.

What was the name again? Obo- Ono- Oro? O-something-maru.

Wait.

“Fuck,” she breathes, her eyes widening.

And then she very firmly focuses on her storage scrolls because she just. Can’t deal with that realisation right now. Or ever.

He’s dead, right? She killed him? Please?

Her storage scroll looks fine and so does the Usagi scroll.

Why just those two scrolls survived, but the food scroll and weapons scroll didn’t, Riko has no idea. It’s a shame because she got those from Rikuto and they’d been really high-quality. The one she has left over was made by her.

Maybe that’s the reason it survived her magic? But that doesn’t explain the mystery scroll.

Either way, her food, medicine, and weapons stores are toast, along with all the weapons and armour she had on her body. The loss of her katana, inherited from Yoshino, stings. The notebook she got from Shikaku is also ashes, and even though she’d never used it — why had she never used it? — she feels even more guilty over its destruction.

She shakes her head. Priorities.

Sentimentalities aren’t helpful right now.

At least she has some basic weaponry and a few changes of clothes in her surviving storage. The clothes aren’t outfitted with fuuinjutsu, unfortunately, but it can’t be helped.

Riko quickly slips into her own clothes and begins stashing away weapons.

That reminds her… she picks up her hunting knife. Which she stabbed Orochimaru of the Sannin with, magical explosion included.

It looks fine. Not melted or anything.

When she holds it into the sunlight, there’s an odd shimmer to it. Almost like a reflection of flames.

Shuddering, she looks for somewhere to put it. The holster is somewhere in her storage, she knows it. She just has to find it.

Or… she eyes the seals on her hands speculatively.

Do they still work? The designs are the exact same as they’d been on her gloves. The seals on her skin right now aren’t made from anything chakra conducive, though.
But then, it’s her skin. So maybe they’ll still be functional?

Riko frowns. If they work, then they’ll work fine, just as they’d had when they were just embroideries on silk. If not, then nothing would happen. She’d designed them that way, because precautions are important for seals meant to go on clothes.

The risk is minimal.

She takes the knife and twitches her chakra.

And slaps her arm over her mouth to keep in the scream of pain.

It burns. Her hands seize up as the chakra in both of them goes nuts.

It’s over as soon as it begun, and Riko wipes her sleeve over her eyes. It comes away wet.

The pain in her hands is subsiding quickly, and the knife is gone.

Good news, the storage seals still work.

Bad news, it hurts like hell in ways that make her think there’s lasting damage. How exactly, she can’t say for sure. But she can guess why it’s happening, and she should have considered that before trying it out.

There are a lot of chakra pathways located in the hands, forming a delicate network. Seals, however, form their own artificial network.

Which was fine when the seals were on gloves. Now that they’re etched into her skin, incompatible with her chakra pathways?

Opposite of fine. Very, very bad.

Chakra needs to flow. What she did to herself clogs, collides, and connects the pathways. Makes it so chakra channelled through there doesn’t know where to go.

And if there’s too much? Like a balloon filling with too much air, it’ll go pop. She’ll lose use of her hands at best.

Riko grits her teeth and glares down at her hands. Clenches and unclenches them into fists a few times. For now, they seem fine.

Any buildup should eventually reduce naturally over time, small mercies, or at least she hopes so.

She’ll be careful. Avoid using techniques that channel chakra to or through her hands. Like… medical ninjutsu. Or, or… chakra strings. And. Basic water manipulation. Anything with hand seals, really.

Can she even cling to walls with her hands anymore? Hopefully. Earlier, she managed to unseal something from her storage scroll without noticing anything amiss, so small things are clearly still possible.

Riko stares blankly at the dark lines burned into her skin.

Good thing Sasuke has at least the basics of medical ninjutsu down, she supposes, letting her hands sink and her head drop against the wall behind her. She feels like crying.
This whole thing was a mistake.

But she has to stay alert. Team’s relying on her. All of them are so far from safe it’s *laughable.*

A few hours later, Karin is the first to wake. There’s barely an outside sign of it, only a slight tension in her body that releases with a small sigh when the kunoichi sits up and rights her glasses.

She looks a little better now, so that’s good.

“Morning,” Riko greets her, voice hoarse.

The other girl flinches a little. “Good morning,” she whispers.

Riko hands her her water canteen without a word and Karin guzzles it down greedily.

“I’d give you something to eat,” Riko says quietly, “But my food storage burned up, so we’ll have to wait for Sasuke to wake up.”

“I’m fine, uh, Riko-san.” Karin shakes her head.

“Just Riko’s fine.”

The kunoichi shoots her a weak smile and nods. Then hugs her legs again, resting her forehead on her arms. Looking small and miserable and scared.

It’s funny. Academy lessons and books always said to be wary of foreign shinobi. To never trust them, to avoid them if at all possible. Made it seem like they were all bogeymen, out to kill them all.

But Karin with the Kusa hitae-ate is just a girl.

“Do you,” Riko begins and hesitates. Karin looks up and gives her a questioning glance. “Can you tell me what happened to Sasuke’s face?”

Her fellow redhead looks down. “Oh,” she says quietly. “No, sorry. It was already like that when we met.”

Riko nods slowly. “Thanks anyway.”

So Sasuke presumably got into another fight before Karin showed up. Then why is he in okay physical condition? He was barely able to stand at the end of the fight against Orochimaru.

Unless… Riko looks at Karin. “Are you a medic?”

“No!” The girl’s voice is vehement and it takes both of them by surprise. Karin flinches, paling. “I’m sorry! I, um, I’m not. But I heal. Please don’t…”

She doesn’t finish the sentence.

Riko stares at her. Clearly that was a sensitive topic. Okay. Noted. “Thanks for healing my
teammate,” she says.

Karin deflates. “It’s, um, it’s fine. I’m not trained for combat and he clearly is, and I can’t survive this on my own, so it made sense to ally with him.”

“Mm,” Riko murmurs, mentally reviewing Sasuke and Karin’s interactions. It kind of sounded like healing Sasuke put her out of commission, which would have been a big risk to take for the sake of an alliance.

But then, she was, still is, clearly desperate. And Sasuke would have been in no position to turn down help or leave Karin behind.

So, a risk, but it was calculated.

“Why’d you pick us to ally with?” Riko finally asks. “People are hunting us. We’re a big target right now.”

Karin shrugs uncomfortably, face reddening. “Because you needed help and I have useful skills, so you’d benefit from protecting me,” she says honestly. “And all of your chakras are nice. Yours especially.” She looks at Riko, something like awe in her eyes. “I’ve never felt anything like it! It’s… it shines. I thought, the person it belonged to just couldn’t be bad.”

Now Riko’s own face is heating up, too. “Well, uh. I try? You, your chakra’s nice, too. When it’s not invisible.”

The other kunoichi smiles shyly and ducks her head.

A moment of silence is all it takes for her to look miserable again, though.

“So, um,” Riko says. “What’s your goal?” Immediately cringes because that kind of sounded like she’s accusing Karin of nefarious plans or something. “I mean, what do you want to… is there anything you want? Right now?”

Karin stares at the ground in front of her, giving no indication that she’s offended or anything. “I just want to survive this. Find my team and go home. I didn’t even want to come here.”

Riko can relate to that. She should have gone with her first instinct of staying far away from the Chuunin Exams.

“We can maybe look for your team?” she offers hesitantly. “They, uh, did you have a plan for if you got separated?”

The girl shakes her head. “It’s… I’d have been expected to find them. But I couldn’t. They were just… we were in an argument and I got too… so they sent me to get water and when I came back they were hiding. Teach me a lesson, scare me a little, show me how dependent on them I am.” She hugs her legs tighter. “And then things happened and I couldn't find them again.”

Riko stares at her. “That’s awful. What kind of asshole teammates do that?! In the freaking Forest of Death in the middle of a death exam? What the hell?”

With every word, she gets more furious.

Karin gives her a weak smile and shrugs. “They only put me on the team for the exams. I’m just supposed to keep them healthy for the finals. It’s not that bad, really. Just gonna get through this and then I won’t have to deal with them anymore.”
Riko’s lips press together. “Not that it’s any of my business, but you deserve better.”

The other kunoichi stares at her for a beat, face reddening even more, and then abruptly jerks her gaze away. “Yes, well,” she mutters. “They’re probably dead anyway, so what does it matter.”

“It just does,” Riko answers. “We’ll figure out what happened to them and until we do, you’ll be safe with us. If you want to stick around, that is.”

Karin hiccups, and when she looks up to stare at Riko again, her eyes her shiny. “You’re not ditching me?” she asks, fingers suddenly clutching the sleeve of Riko’s hoodie desperately.

Taken aback at the vehemence and oh shit, Karin is crying, Riko blinks but shakes her head. “No? Of course not? You healed Sasuke, we’d be dead without you. And you’re — you don’t deserve all of…” She waves her arms, indicating the forest around them and all the awfulness it contains right now. Lamely, she finishes, “You’re nice.”

One moment Karin is staring at her, the next Riko is holding an armful of quietly sobbing Kusa kunoichi. She makes an ‘oof’ sound at the impact and spits out a few red hairs that got into her mouth.

Riko sits frozen for a moment before she tentatively wraps her arms around the girl.

Too thin, she notes absently. Frail.

She gently rubs Karin’s back in an attempt to comfort her, which leads to her being clutched even tighter.

Okay. This is fine. Clearly the girl needs this.

And Riko would be lying if she said she couldn’t do with a hug herself.

Sasuke wakes up not long later. He doesn’t comment on Riko and Karin’s embrace. At this point, Karin has stopped crying and is just holding onto Riko with her face buried in her neck.

“I’ll get us food,” he says tonelessly and leaps out of their shelter.

Riko hears him walk into something outside and stops herself from going to check on him.

It’s just because of his eye being covered. He’s okay. She can’t sense anyone else nearby and Karin hasn’t said anything of the sort, either.

And there’s nothing she can do to help. Her body is weak and shivery and her hands are fucked — a fact she’s desperately trying not to think about.

Riko stays where she is and waits.

It takes a while for Sasuke to come back with some roots he dug up. That means the attempts at fishing — she heard splashing noises, something stabbing the water — were unsuccessful.

They couldn’t have risked a fire to cook the fish anyway. And what if someone poisoned the river?
There’s a number of Suna teams around, and Suna is known for poison users. It’s not unlikely. Too risky.

The three of them eat in silence.

“Sleep,” Sasuke orders her afterwards and damn it, she hates being so useless.

Riko wakes up when Naruto does. Or rather, when Naruto starts mumbling uneasily in his sleep. Something about protecting and hiding, and he jerks from side to side.

“Should we wake him up?” Karin asks uncertainly while Riko works herself into a sitting position and stretches. Joints pop and crack.

Sasuke shrugs sullenly and looks at Riko.

“Yeah,” she sighs and shuffles over to him. Shakes his shoulder.

Slaps a hand over his mouth when he shoots up with a yell. He throws himself to the side and presses himself flat to the ground, eyes darting around. “Everyone, hide! Where’d that guy go?”

Riko touches his shoulder. “Just a dream, Ruto. It’s okay. He’s gone.”

At least, she hopes so. But she doesn’t know for sure, and Orochimaru… the Sannin are legends. She’s not sure even her magical inferno could have killed him.

A monster to the point her chakra sense classified him as non-human.

What did he want with Sasuke? His eyes? Riko remembers them changing — so he awakened his, what was it called again? Right, sharingan.

Her eyes find his face while Naruto throws himself at her in a hug, blubbering messily and asking if she’s okay, which she absentlv gives a false answer to.

Sasuke awakened his sharingan in the fight. Now one of his eyes is covered by bandages.

Can that be a coincidence?

She thought he must have been in another fight and gotten an injury. But Karin said his face was already covered when she found their team. And then she healed Sasuke to the point where his exhaustion mostly disappeared and all the bruises and scratches from his bout with Orochimaru vanished.

So why is he still wearing those bandages, if Karin healed him?

“We need to move again,” he cuts into her thoughts and Naruto’s babble, looking grim. “Karin says some team’s looking for us again.”

“Oto,” Karin clarifies.
Riko’s eyes meet Sasuke’s.

She… dimly remembers a musical note on Orochimaru’s hitae-ate. Oto’s symbol. But before that, his hitae-ate said… Kusa? Her eyes flick to Karin’s face and then back to Sasuke in a silent question.

He jerks his head no.

Okay then.

“Eh? Who’s that?” Naruto asks, only now noticing Karin and squinting at her. Then his eyes widen and he jumps in between Riko and her. “Stay back!”

Karin flinches and Riko grabs Naruto and drags him back down. “Karin’s a friend, Naruto,” she grunts. “Look, I know this is all confusing, but we need to be quiet and get out of here to somewhere more defensible before the Oto team catches up with us.”

“We shouldn’t run!” Naruto protests instantly. “I’ll kick their asses, we’ll get their scroll and then we’ll become chuunin!”

“Don’t be stupid,” Sasuke says flatly. “Riko can barely walk, you don’t have a clue what’s going on, Karin doesn’t specialise in combat. We’re getting out of here and ambushing them later.”

“Oi, you aren’t the boss of us!”

Riko puts a palm over his mouth again. “Quiet, I said. We’ll put it to a vote. All in favour of running, raise your hand.”

Sasuke and her both do. They give Karin an expectant look, and the girl looks entirely too startled at getting a vote, but right now, she is part of their team.

Karin tentatively raises her hand, face flushing again.

Naruto glares at her.


Shaking the Oto shinobi proves to be a challenge. Between Karin and Riko’s sensor abilities, they manage to keep ahead of them, and traps and waves of Naruto’s kage bunshin slow them down, at least.

It’s not something they can keep up, though. Riko is now being carried by a Naruto clone and the probably only reason Karin won’t ask to be carried, too, is that she doesn’t trust Naruto in the least after his stress-induced first reaction to her presence. He keeps glaring suspiciously at her, too.

The one good thing is that Sasuke manages not to walk into any more trees. It’s still probably sensible to avoid tree-hopping for now.

“We can’t go on like this,” Riko finally says during a short break. “They’re too persistent and we aren’t stealthy enough to shake them completely.”
Neither of the boys have stealth or tracking counter training.

“Ambush, then.” Sasuke crosses his arms.

Naruto perks up at the prospect of fighting.

“But they found all the traps,” Karin speaks up, and then instantly ducks her head when they all look at her.

“She’s right.” Riko frowns. “If they found and got around all of our traps, they’ll figure out an ambush, too. It’s not gonna work.”

“Then we fight them!” Naruto exclaims, like it’s the most obvious thing in the world. “You guys can just stay back, I’ll do it! I’m tired of Sasuke always doing the cool stuff anyway!”

Riko takes a deep breath, trying not to get angry. Cool stuff. What the hell is wrong with Naruto? There’s nothing cool or fun about any of this!

All of them almost died! Or worse, depending on whatever Orochimaru was planning!

She fights to keep a cool head. They didn’t really have the time to explain everything that went on while he was out. And his chakra is messed up somehow — even if he doesn’t seem to notice, that’s an integral part of who they are, and it’s got to be affecting him both physically and mentally.

If she loses her shit here, nothing is going to get done, and then all of them will die.

“Well, if you plan on fighting them-” Karin’s voice is loud and shrill. “Then do it without me! I’m not going to die here!”

“Unlike you, I’m not a coward!” Naruto growls back at her. “I’ll do it, just you watch!”

Sasuke scoffs and stomps off between a few trees. “I’ll find something to eat.” His chakra is roiling with… Riko isn’t entirely sure, but it’s not good.

Naruto goes in the opposite direction, sitting down against a tree and sulking.

Riko takes a deep breath. “Naruto, you can’t fight them all by yourself.”

“Yes, I can!” He glares up at her. “I know you all think I’m useless, but I’m not! I’m the man who’ll become Hokage!”

She inhales another time and lets the air out slowly. In the back of her mind, her magic brushes against her. Neither reassurance nor threat, simply present. Just a little out of reach.

So much smaller, now, and feeling tired after everything. But it’s there. Reacting to her anger.

“You’re not useless,” she enunciates carefully, fighting for calmness. “We’re currently in an incredibly dangerous situation, all of us are injured or impaired in some way, enemies are looking for us, the entire forest is a death trap, and you’re making it all about yourself. Who cares if and how the job gets done or how unglamorous it is if we’re all alive in the end. So you’re not going off to fight three people on your own. We’ll figure something else out.” Riko turns to Karin. “We’re all going to survive this. And personally, I don’t think avoiding a hopeless fight makes anyone a coward.”

Karin eyes Naruto with distrust. “Me neither.”
“Let’s all take a little break now, yeah?” Riko rubs at her forehead. “I’ll go talk to Sasuke.”

She doesn’t wait for a reply and goes to track down her final teammate. He hasn’t gone far, just out of view, not quite out of hearing distance yet.

His knuckles are bleeding and the tree next to him has a suspicious dark patch on it. The look on his face is dark enough that it sends a shiver of fear down her spine.

It also pisses her off. The situation is serious and neither of her teammates are making it easier with their tantrums and ego trips. And she’s running out of patience.

This isn’t a fucking D-rank.

“Wanna talk about it?” she asks finally.

“Go away.”

She’d figured as much. Unfortunately, if he’s affected to the point where he goes off the moment Naruto puts his foot in his mouth, they probably need to.

There’s several things they need to talk about, actually.

“What happened to your eye?” she asks bluntly.

He doesn’t reply, just turns his head to glare at her.

Riko crosses her arms. “I’m sorry my questions inconvenience you, Sasuke,” she tells him in a flat voice, “But we have bigger problems and if you can’t fight, then we need to know that. Consider it in our planning.”

“I said to go away.” His fists clench, and she spies a red shimmer to his eye.

“I’ll even start,” Riko goes on like he hasn’t said anything. He always tells her to shut up or go away, and even if he means something else a lot of the time, she’s tired of it. “My hands are fucked. I can’t channel chakra through them.” She holds up her palms and unwraps the bandages she’s covered the dark lines with. “The seals from my gloves burned into my skin when I… yeah.”

Sasuke stares at her hands, face pale.

“So. What’s going on with your face? Spill.” She gives him an unamused look as she rewraps the bandages.

He doesn’t reply, his fists clenched. Teeth gritted. Opens his mouth, then closes it, and turns his head away in a jerky motion.

Her lips press together. She exhales slowly. Tries to breath the irritation away. Someone has to keep their shit together. “If you can’t talk about it, are you okay with me making guesses? You can just nod or shake your head.”

Sasuke grunts an affirmative after a small pause.

Okay. Riko eyes him dubiously. “You’re injured.”

And he shakes his head.

Uh. Not an injury? Riko kind of blanks. There goes her line of questioning.
“You’re… not injured.” She slowly says, rubbing at her temples and pausing. “Is it like my hands? That’s not really an _injury_ either. More like a physical condition?”

Sasuke gives her a look that she’d almost describe as _bored_, if he weren’t so tense.

“So… it’s your eye, isn’t it.” She’s got a sick feeling curling in her gut.

A nod.

“Lasting damage?” she asks quietly.

Another confirmation.

Fuck.

Sasuke is down an eye.

“Can I see?”

His teeth grit. But slowly, he reaches up and unwraps the bandages.

Riko sucks in a sharp breath when she sees his right eye. It’s no longer the captivating black that makes him so attractive. Instead, it’s gone milky white, so pale she can’t even see the outline of where his iris ends and his sclera begins without her glasses.

She can’t think of anything that could have done this.

“Something to do with your sharingan?” she hazards her best guess blankly.

“You died.”

For a moment, Riko just stares up at him, mind empty. Um, what? She heard that wrong, right? What did he just say in that bland tone of voice, devoid of any sentiment? Weren’t they just talking about his eye?

“I fixed it,” he adds. Begins to rewrap the bandages clumsily.

She’s still staring. “What?” she choke out, shaking her head. “You what? What are you even talking about?”

But oh, this makes sense, doesn’t it? She _shouldn’t_ be alive. Should have died, _knew_ that the magic was too much for her body to handle, knew it was going to kill her the moment it filled her up.

Riko _died_.

She... knew that. Didn't acknowledge it, but the realisation has been there at the background of her mind since she woke up.

And _Sasuke_ was what pulled her back?

From that lovely place she can’t quite remember beyond the fact that two people were waiting for her.

And now she’s here. In a body that feels strangely uncomfortable, and she’s not talking about the ache and fatigue. It feels like an ill-fitting dress made from itchy fabric.
She reaches forward and takes the bandages from him. Sasuke holds still while she covers his blind eye up again.

The eye he apparently sacrificed to bring her back from the dead.

Done with concealing his blind eye, she takes a step forward and wraps her arms around him. “I didn’t know you could do that,” she says weakly.

Sasuke stands stock-still for several moments, and Riko is just about to step back when he slowly hugs her back. Holding her lightly, as if he’s afraid she’ll shatter otherwise.

“It just happened,” he admits lowly.

She sighs softly and relaxes against him.

Sasuke is warm. Fire-natured chakra and all that, and it’s really nice, even if he’s stiff and awkward.

Eventually though, she draws back. “Thank you,” she murmurs. “Didn’t mean to die.”

He huffs and turns away. “Don’t do it again.”

Well, yeah. That’s the plan.

Even if a small part of her yearns to return 'there'.

“Come on.” Sasuke jerks his head back towards the temporary rest site.

Riko falls in step with him wordlessly. “We can’t fight the Oto team,” she murmurs.

“No,” Sasuke grunts. Then adds, “Orochimaru sent them.”

Yeah, definitely not fighting them. Anything that creep planned for them has to be bad.

“Did I kill him?” she asks hesitantly.

“There was no body.” Sasuke scowls, but then smirks. “But I heard him scream.”

Riko nods.

So Orochimaru had most likely survived, huh? That’s not good. At all.

But it’s not an immediate concern. For now, they have to survive his ever-persistent minions. While also avoiding getting munched on by the man-eating vermin and skirting around every other team in the goddamn forest.

…Actually.

What if they just didn’t?

Riko might just have the beginnings of a plan to ensure everyone’s survival.
-- PLEASE READ --

In advance: This does not apply to the majority of you readers. Most of you are wonderful and I truly appreciate you.

Okay, here we go. This has been building up.

I really dislike having to explain my writing decisions, and this will be the last time I do it.

Three things I'd like to address:

1. The characterisation of Naruto

Last chapter was apparently controversial where he's concerned.

Which a good number of readers made known in varying levels of outrage. Some were really rude, actually. I've enabled comment moderation for that reason, because I will not have that content in my comment section. Also, it's insulting. I hate that this A/N has become necessary.

Please consider the following: *This is not canon.* Due to the Wave mission going differently, like Naruto never interacting with Haku and also Haku not dying, he lacks a great deal of character development that he had in canon. He's never lost anyone, never seen how brutal and heart-breaking shinobi life truly is. He still sees the world through rose-tinted glasses.

Naruto is a good kid. But he is still a kid. He is *not* the Shippuuden version of himself so many think he should be. He also is in no way the smarter fanon version of his character.

And yes. For each instance that he's behaved immaturely in this fic, I can name several canon examples.

Which I won't do on demand. It's not my job to justify myself for my writing, and I certainly am not obligated to provide you with proof and sources. You can read the manga or watch the anime and see it for yourself.

Fact is, I consider very carefully every characterisation decision I make, can explain and support them all ad nauseam.

2. Riko's characterisation.

She's not perfect. She's eleven. She's been in this world for five years. A year of which she spent recovering from the health complications of dimension travel, learning the language, adjusting to the culture. The rest of the time she spent constantly trying to catch up to her peers. She hasn't had free room for much of anything else.

An eleven-year-old girl is not going to save the world single-handedly and solve
everyone's problems, like for example by teaching Naruto. She isn’t good enough to
teach him, and he already has teachers. It’s not her job or responsibility. She’s a
student herself.

Also she’s an unreliable narrator. That means that things you see through her eyes
aren't necessarily what's actually happening. She is very wrong at times, and she
doesn't have all the information either.

3. Sexism!

There is a steady stream of people who keep telling me more or less polite variations
of the following: "The Naruto world isn't sexist at all in canon and how do you support
writing it this way?"

In canon, the story/backstory/motivation of nearly every female character revolves
around a man. By the end, they fulfil the roles of mothers and wives. There are very
few kunoichi we see in a combat capacity, and even less that we ever see winning a
fight without the help of a man. We don’t see a single healthy friendship between two
female characters, either, even the one between Sakura and Ino is tainted with rivalry.

That is what I consider sexist writing and worldbuilding.

The 3:1 shinobi to kunoichi ratio also speaks for itself. It’s not natural, and the
worldbuilding needs to provide a reason for it.

**TL;DR: I'm the author. Have some faith that I know what I'm doing and am not
making baseless worldbuilding decisions. Don't make demands or tell me how to
write. In any case, it's fanfiction and tagged as ‘Not Canon Compliant.’**

That said, again, this seems like a lot but the majority of you are wonderful people and
I treasure every comment that comes from a good place.

\-- END A/N --\n
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**Chapter 36**

Absolutely nobody is impressed with Riko’s plan.

Or well, with the five percent of a plan she has. It’s more of an idea than anything.

And yes. It’s reckless and risky, but it’s something.

“If you drop the stealth, any team with a remotely skilled sensor will come after us,” Sasuke
growls at her. “I’m not a sensor, but I sensed that.”

“That’s the point,” Riko replies, crossing her arms. “Oto’s hunting us specifically. Our team
versus theirs, we don’t stand a chance. Add a few other players into the equation and the outcome
won’t be so certain.”

“It won’t be just a few,” Karin speaks up, her face pale. “You’re — your chakra — you’re like the
sun. Everyone else is the moths. It’s, we can’t handle it. Bad plan. I’m sorry.”

Sasuke nods in complete agreement.

Riko’s mind is stuck on ‘You’re like the sun’. “My chakra thing is that noticeable?”

“What chakra thing?” Naruto asks, his voice dull, and she blinks. Had all but dismissed his presence, just relieved he was being quiet for once, even though she feels bad about being so... so callous. “Why aren’t you telling me what’s going on? We’re supposed to be a team.”

Sasuke scoffs harshly. “Rich, coming from you.”

Naruto jumps up, chakra flaring in rage. “You bastard, get off your high horse—”

It’s all too much suddenly, and Riko slides down against the tree behind her. Feels so tired, as if the whole world just piled on her shoulders, and she’s not strong enough to keep her knees from buckling.

She watches the arguing boys — oh look, Karin’s joining in now, and they need to relocate like yesterday, with all this noise it doesn’t even matter whether Riko’s apparently bright-ass chakra is masked or not, the whole damn forest can hear them — and feels a hundred years old.

She died yesterday. Today, she’d like to avoid a repeat, but some part of her just wants to sit here and not move for at least a month.

That would be bad. But it’d be so easy.

Her voice is hoarse when she speaks up, “I’ve got a kekkei genkai.”

Riko doesn’t know what it is that makes everyone’s head snap around to her. The boys rarely ever listen to anything when they get caught up in their arguing. “Are you okay?” someone asks, but she feels so distant from the situation that she can’t tell who spoke.

“I’m still alive,” she answers, and there’s something incredibly amusing about that statement that she just can’t put her finger on. “Naruto. Sorry for not explaining. Scary things happened while you were out. We don’t mean to exclude you, but we can’t handle talking about it right now, or answering questions, or—”

Her voice cuts off before she can say anything about dreading his probable reactions.

The only reaction she might be able to handle would be a non-reaction, and she’ll never get that from Naruto, not through any fault of his own but simply because it’s not who he is. He’s loud and bold and has his heart on his sleeve, and whenever she tells him anything, she has to deal with his emotions on top of her own — whether that be joy or outrage on her behalf, or anything else.

And that used to be fine. Something she loved him for, even. It gave her support and validation, it made her happy, and she got to listen to him in return, offer help and comfort. They’d hug and the world would be okay again.

It doesn’t work here. It hasn’t worked for a while now.

“Anyway,” she says blankly, after the pause has stretched to uncomfortable levels, “Kekkei genkai. Special ability inherited from my biological parents. It makes my chakra different and I’m very easy to find, if I don’t hide it.” She pauses. “Our first priority is survival. We need to work together. So stop fighting and yelling. Ultimately, we’re stronger in a group than we’re on our own,
but not like this.” There’s something like determination in her now, as if her speech gave her back a bit of strength, and Riko stands up. Because the three others are looking at her like she’s- like she’s right, like they’re behind her on this.

They’re actually listening to Riko for once.

“We need to agree on a plan, and then we need to execute it without anyone going off,” she finishes. Crosses her arms. “I get that using my chakra as bait is risky, but it is a plan, and it’d cause a lot of teams to run into each other. Make a battle break out, and we could use that.”

“No,” Sasuke says flatly. “Not risking you.”

She gives him an even look. “Risks can be minimised. I’m not talking about me running around with my chakra in the open — just one ‘accidental’ flare of it will draw attention and people here, slow the Oto team down, and we can scurry away in the meantime. Find somewhere to hunker down, get some actual rest, and then hunt ourselves one of those stupid scrolls so we can get out of here.”

Maybe if she weren’t feeling so oddly calm and removed from the situation, the stubborn glare he levels on her would make her indignant, but now, she merely stares back neutrally.

“No,” he repeats.

Riko nods. “That’s one against.” She looks at Karin and Naruto. “Yes or no?”

Karin hesitates. Glances at Sasuke, then at Riko, clearly no longer as sure of her rejection of the idea as before.

Naruto speaks up, squinting at both Riko and Sasuke. “So you really don’t want to fight those bastards.”

“No,” Riko says, and Sasuke nods in complete agreement.

“So we gotta run.” Naruto nods to himself, making a small ’aha’ sound of understanding. “And Ricchan wants to prank them.”

Calling it a prank when the situation is so serious isn't quite right, but if that's how he can make sense of it, then she'll take it. Is just grateful that he's not arguing anymore.

“Basically, yes,” she agrees exhaustedly. “If you’re up to it, you could make decoys with your kage bunshin.”

He perks up at that. “Okay! I think it’s a good plan!”

“It puts her in danger, you idiot!” Sasuke snaps harshly at him.

To which Naruto responds with a confused look. “But we’re already in danger,” he points out, like it’s obvious. Which. Yeah. It is. “And besides, Ricchan’s got us.” And when he grins, all warm and confident, Riko suddenly feels a lot less distant from everything. A spark of warmth lighting in her chest. “We’ll definitely protect her!”

Sasuke merely gives him an empty look that bothers Riko a little, now that her cocoon of calmness has gotten thinner in the face of Naruto’s unwavering spirit.

It’s probably because she died despite both their attempts to protect her, and wow, she needs to not
think about that.

Karin’s small voice cuts into the pause. “Okay.” When all of them turn to her, she swallows heavily and looks down at her feet. “Then I think, I think we should do it. Oto isn’t going away and we’re too tired to outrun them. And, uhm, I can help avoid getting caught. With my chakra sense.”

Riko nods at her and turns to the pissed-looking Sasuke. “If you have a better idea, let’s hear it.”

He doesn’t have a better idea, judging by the murderous glare he levels on her.

“Let’s do this, then.”

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It’s a sad little group that makes it to the tower on the third day of the Chuunin Exams. All of them sporting wounds and completely exhausted, even Naruto. But they made it.

Got the bloody scroll, shook the damn Oto team off, and all of them are still alive somehow.

Karin pauses suddenly. “My team’s here,” she says faintly.

Riko gives her a blank look, halting in her own walk. So do the boys. “Huh?”

“My teammates,” the other girl elaborates, and she seems to wilt before Riko's eyes. “I guess — I guess I should go.”

“Oh. Right.” Riko rubs a hand over her face. She’s so tired. “Forgot you weren’t actually a team member.”

Karin sniffs. “Me too. I — thanks for everything.”

“You, too,” Sasuke says stiffly.

Riko hesitates. “You… don’t have to go. Maybe. I — they’re not very nice to you, are they?”

That wasn’t the right thing to say, clearly, because Karin tenses and looks away. Looks five years older and tired. “They’re not that bad, really, we had some good times. Anyway.” She forces a smile. “Good luck. It was nice meeting you.”

Without waiting for a reply, she runs off. Riko stares after her.

“Ricchan, where’s Karin going?” Naruto asks, eyes locked on the spot the girl was last visible. “What do you mean her team isn’t nice to her?”

“He’s not Konoha, so whatever. We’re wasting time,” Sasuke cuts in. “Let’s go.”

He stalks away, and Riko wonders about the way his fists are clenched, his body stiff as he walks. Something tells her he’s as unhappy about Karin leaving them as she is.

“But she’s a friend!” Naruto protests, which makes Riko blink. Last she checked, he disliked Karin. Treated her like an intruder, even though they did manage to work together.
Then again, he’s friends with Kiba, Shikamaru, and Chouji, and that also involves a great deal of being grumpy and insulting towards them. Maybe he’s just like that with friends who aren’t Riko? She’s not sure.

It’s not important right now, anyway. There’s nothing she can do for Karin, a kunoichi from Kusa.

“Let’s go into that stupid tower,” she mutters, and trudges after Sasuke.

They find themselves in a big entry hall. Nobody there, it’s empty, except for the official chuunin motto plastered to the wall.

*If lacking Heaven, seek wisdom. Be prepared.*

*If lacking Earth, run in the fields. Seek advantages.*

*With both Heaven and Earth, danger becomes safety.*

*These are the principles that guide a _____.*

Ah. Heaven and Earth. Like the scrolls. And the missing word would be ‘human’, and there’s probably a reason they left it blank.

Anyway.

“So glad it’s an easy riddle,” she sighs. Kami-sama, she’s so tired. “Open the scrolls.”

“Riddle?” Naruto asks, face looking like one big question mark. Sasuke frowns at her.

Seriously. Is the the only one who did any research on chuunin? Really? Nearly every scroll and book, every promotion training guide she opened, had that quote right at the beginning, in the preface.

She points at the words on the wall. “That’s the chuunin motto. Means if you want to be a successful shinobi, you’ve got to train both body and mind, which is what ‘Earth’ and ‘Heaven’ are metaphors for.” With a glance at Naruto, she adds, “Metaphor means saying ‘something is like something’ to make it easier to understand. Now open the scrolls.”

A beat passes, then the boys do as she asked.

Inside the scrolls are summoning type seals, and a moment after they’ve tossed them, a person appears.

Riko should probably not feel so apathetic at Iruka’s appearance.

Naruto, of course, is overjoyed when their former teacher announces that they passed. The teacher repeats Riko’s explanation of the chuunin motto, though he uses more words. Then he sends their
team off with directions to the tower’s sleeping quarters and the information that they’ll have to sit and wait until the five days are over before stage three begins.

He looks like there’s more he wants to tell them, but then he doesn’t and the three of them just go.

There are enough empty rooms for at least a dozen teams to stay in the tower, but Riko doesn’t care about any of them and instead follows her nose to find one of the few occupied ones, so goddamn relieved that Kiba and his team made it. She wouldn’t know what to do if anything happened to him.

Without letting herself hesitate, she knocks on the door. Hears someone inside get up, and then the door swings open to reveal Aburame Shino.

“Hey,” she greets hoarsely. “You guys got some room for us?”

“We do,” Shino replies after a moment’s pause. “Why? Because dangerous and hostile individuals inhabit this tower and you are allies.”

He steps to the side, having said his piece.

“Thanks.” Riko manages a smile and walks inside, her teammates following after her.

Immediately, she gets an armful of dog and huffs out a laugh, hugging Akamaru to herself. There’s something so incredibly comforting about holding a warm, fluffy body that she almost starts to cry.

They really made it through the forest!

“Always so dramatic,” Kiba huffs at Shino as he stands up and turns to Riko’s team. “Man, you guys look like hell. Get some sleep.” He gestures toward a free bunk bed. His arm wraps around Riko’s shoulders and then he pulls her down with him onto his sleep roll on the floor.

Considering he sleeps on a pile of furs instead of a bed when at home, she figures the ground is just more comfortable for him.

Sasuke nods at him, sits down on the lower bunk, and knocks out almost instantly.

Naruto points at Kiba. “No funny business!”

“Read the room, moron,” Kiba scoffs, absentmindedly arranging Riko on his lap. She leans her head against his shoulder and closes her eyes, stress just draining away from the simple, familiar contact. “Nobody’s messing with anyone here until the exams are over. Now be quiet, she’ll wake up.”

Riko isn’t asleep, doesn’t have plans to rest for a while, but if it gets Naruto to go to sleep and be quiet, she’ll pretend for a few minutes.

Naruto huffs, but he doesn’t say anything more, and she hears him climb into the upper bunk. Soon, he’s snoring lightly, dead to the world.

“Hinata-san?” Riko speaks up softly. “Can you take a look at my hands?”
A small moment of surprised silence. Then the other kunoichi answers, “Yes, of course, Riko-san.”

“Can’t this wait?” Kiba mutters, but doesn’t stop Riko from shifting until her back leans against his front. “You’re dead on your feet, all of you, and you- something’s different.” He pauses. “Hey, maybe we should take you to the infirmary.”

She shakes her head. Begins unwrapping the bandages, revealing the dark, slightly raised seal lines on her swollen palms. Her fingers feel clumsy and bloated. The skin around the burns looks inflamed.

Riko’s been trying to use as little chakra as possible, but she can’t stop its passive circulation through her body. It’d be like halting her blood flow.

And to get through the forest, she needed a little more than simple passive circulation.

Kiba’s gone very still behind her.

“Hinata-san?” Riko prompts quietly. “Please?”

“…of course.” Hinata presses her fingers together in what Riko figures must be the activation seals for the byakugan, and a moment later there’s a small pulse of chakra as the veins near her eyes abruptly become more pronounced.

Riko stays still. Let’s the other kunoichi pick up her hands and turn them this way or that while she examines them.

Finally, Hinata’s eyes go back to normal.

“How bad?” Riko asks softly.


Riko’s breath leaves her in a deep, resigned sigh. “Thank you.” She turns to Shino. “There’s chakra build-up in my hands. Would it be possible for your kikaichuu to drain it? Sorry, I swear I’ll make it up to you.”

With how much of Shino’s face is covered, she can’t read his face. He stands motionlessly.

Riko cringes. Asking that had probably been some kind of faux-pas, but she doesn’t exactly have any other options and losing her hands is unacceptable.

“That is agreeable,” Shino finally answers. “You will owe me nothing. Why? Consuming your chakra will strengthen my kikaichuu for the upcoming battles. Furthermore, you are a comrade and as such, it is my honour to assist you. In addition, it is I who owes you a debt. Your early warning of the Chuunin Exams allowed me to prepare and research.”

Riko boggles at him.

Insects begin crawling from Shino’s sleeves. She’s seen his bugs before, but he rarely has more than a handful at a time outside, if at all.

This is a lot more than that.

“Oh,” she mutters. “I don’t know about strengthen. Something happened to my chakra. It’s…” different.”
“It’s turned bright,” Hinata adds quietly. “Not blue, but white-gold.” She activates her byakugan again. “I can still see the blue, but it’s almost completely drowned out. A lot of it is in your hands.” Her brows furrow lightly. “It’s like you have two chakras, and the bright one isn’t affected by the seals on your palms. I could be wrong, but… it almost looks like it’s not quite confined to your chakra system.”

“I wasn’t aware you had a kekkei genkai,” Shino comments. “But I am not offended. Why? A shinobi must always guard information on their abilities.” He nods to himself. “I shall instruct my kikaichuu to only consume the ‘blue’ chakra, as that seems to be what is causing you harm, Riko-san.”

She nods faintly, a little overwhelmed by how in stride Team Eight is taking everything. Then again, Shino houses a bug hive in his body. Her chakra mutating is probably not much of a big deal to them.

Riko holds out her hands to him. “Thank you.”

Instead of answering, he raises his hands toward her and the kikaichuu take flight. It feels so odd, all those bugs enveloping her hands. Looking at it is kind of off-putting, too.

But she can’t deny that it’s helping. The pressure in her fingers fading away, the deep ache not disappearing, but at least becoming background noise.

She could have cried from the sense of relief. The pain had steadily built up over the hours until it felt like her hands were one impact away from exploding.

“Thank you so much,” she repeats hoarsely when the kikaichuu finally withdraw back into Shino.

“You’re welcome,” Shino says, something odd in his voice.

Kiba wraps his arms around Riko from behind and tips them over on their sides. “Great. Now sleep.” He drags his blanket over both of them.

Being held like this is nice. It feels like a safe little cocoon where nothing bad can touch her.

Riko is asleep the instant she closes her eyes.
Chapter 37

A knock on the door rouses Riko from her sleep. For a blissful moment, she thinks she’s back in Kiba’s room at the Inuzuka Compound. Then the events of the past few days tumble into her memory and she tightens her arms around Kiba before she gets to her feet.

Sasuke is awake, sitting on his bed. Naruto is still out, dead to the world, one of his legs hanging over the edge of his bunk.

Shino opens the door.

“Yo,” Kakashi greets.

Riko isn’t sure how it happens. One moment, she’s standing next to a slowly-waking Kiba, the next she’s wrapped around her teacher and crying silently into his uniform.

Kakashi freezes.

Then Naruto’s there, hugging her, sticky hand patting her hair and he’s rambling reassurances at her. His chakra, even messed up as it is, warm and familiar and making her feel safe.

She’s distantly aware of Kakashi manoeuvring their team out of the room to an empty one. Naruto gives him a rambling report, Sasuke tersely cutting in with corrections and then taking over when it gets to the part Naruto was unconscious for.

He skips over the part where Riko died. Just says that she was out of commission after her ‘kekkei genkai’ went haywire and that his eye got injured.

“I activated the sharingan,” he adds, almost as an afterthought.

“Congratulations,” Kakashi tells him, a hand absently patting Riko’s hair. “I can’t train you while the second test is still ongoing, but there are a few exercises I can give you. You have two days before the next stage.” He pauses. “I need to talk to Riko in private. All of you, stick with friends. Don’t walk around alone.”

The boys leave. Kakashi sits down, Riko tucked in under his arm, and waits until she’s ready to come out.

“What does Orochimaru want with Sasuke?” she finally asks, her voice hoarse.

“His eyes, most likely.”

“Eye. ’s just one now,” Riko mutters after a pause. Still feeling sick at the thought.

Especially for Sasuke losing an eye is catastrophic, not just physically but mentally, considering what eyes meant to his clan. She remembers all too well Hotaru’s rants about it, such a long time ago. “There was — he saved me. And his eye turned like that.” Her arms wrap around her legs and she leans her forehead against her knees.

“Did it, now,” Kakashi says, and there’s something odd in his voice.

She laughs. It’s not a nice sound. “He says it just happened. I didn’t even — but he really cares, huh.”
“I suppose he does.” He ruffles her hair. “Tell me what’s wrong with your hands.”

Riko shows him wordlessly.

“Ah.”

“I should back out of the exams, huh,” she mumbles. “All of this was a mistake, next phase is combat, I’m down my main weapon and I can barely use my hands.”

“That’s up to you,” Kakashi tells her. “It also depends on your opponent. You have plenty of skill, certainly enough to win a fight against regular genin. There should be a recovery period between the second and third phase, anyway. You’ll have a few weeks of preparation.”

That made sense. And the time wouldn’t just be for the benefit of the genins’ health — the tournament that made up the final stage of the Chuunin Exams required a heavy amount of organisation, and a good part of it could only be done after the final contestants had been determined. Programs and advertisements needed to be sent out, nobility and other influential people coaxed into attending with the promise of an enjoyable stay and excellent entertainment. Tickets would have to be sold, travel arrangements for foreigners made.

All so people could watch Riko and her fellow genin risk their lives in battle for their amusement.

She doesn’t want to do it.

It all feels meaningless anyway, after they had to fight for their very lives in the forest against a… man that outclassed them so far that it’s hard to believe it happened at all.

Who would care about a promotion or impressing nobility or whatever after all that?

“So I just wait and see what happens next, huh.”

“It’s your choice,” he answers. “From this point, it’s all up to you.”

Right. No more team tests. She takes a deep breath.

There’s something oddly freeing about the thought of being responsible for only her own survival, though there’s no way she won’t watch over and support her teammates as best as she can.

Still.

“I got this far,” she muses tiredly. “Might as well see it through.”

There’s heavy doubt in her mind that she’ll actually score a promotion out of the deal — all the exams had done so far was highlight how very out of her league she and her teammates are — but she doesn’t want to leave it unfinished. And maybe she’ll get lucky.

If there’s a chance to be promoted, she’ll take it. Because after the exams…

She’s not sure that she can make her team work. Or rather, she knows she could, she just doesn’t think she wants to anymore because it involves making herself cold and giving orders and constantly demanding they listen, and it already sucked during D-rank missions. In the field, it’s a thousand times worse, and she just can’t deal with Naruto’s constantly looking like a kicked puppy, convinced she hates him, while Sasuke stews in resentful silence when they have other priorities, like actually surviving the whole thing.

They did cooperate in the end, she supposes, but considering just what it took to get there, it’s
just… not worth it. And it’d only last until the rivalry bullshit between the boys started again.

Riko’s coming to accept that while Naruto and Sasuke are her friends, the three of them shouldn’t have been put on a team together.

“That’s the spirit,” Kakashi says and ruffles her hair. “Keep out of trouble until it starts and do your best to prepare.”

“Yes, sensei.”

Team Seven takes the room next to Team Eight’s, but somehow ends up spending more time in their quarters than their own. Their three former classmates don’t seem to mind, Shino reasoning, “Because numbers grant safety and our strategies from this point on are individual, therefore there will be no team meetings to be spied on.”

It’s gratifying to see that at least one person had done the same kind of research Riko did.

Riko still feels a little guilty because it seems like Hinata isn’t sleeping well with them in the room, but the other girl rejects her offer of giving Team Eight more privacy with surprising vehemence.

Nothing to be done about it, and Riko supposes it’s Hinata’s choice. The kunoichi would hopefully catch up on her sleep during the hours Sasuke, Naruto, and Riko hole up in a secluded training hall where they attempt to smooth out the problems brought on by their respective injuries.

Which, well. It’s not exactly going well. Sasuke’s taijutsu’s gone down the drain, his balance completely off and his aim skewed. Meanwhile, Riko is down to trickery, evasion, and very little in the way of attacks.

Naruto, at least, doesn’t seem to notice that his chakra isn’t quite the same as before. He has so much that it doesn’t matter a whole lot, especially since his fighting style is that of a brawler, not reliant on control.

The few days until the end of the second stage of the Chuunin Exams aren’t nearly enough to get used to the new circumstances, but they straighten out the absolute worst of it. Which is a good thing, because more teams arrive and Riko’s aware that there’s a limit to how many people can compete in the finals.

Any more people and the numbers will have to be cut down, and that means preliminary matches.

Grimly, she begins making preparations for a fight. It’s not exactly optimal that she only has days instead of weeks, but everyone’s in the same boat. The only ones in top shape are the Suna team and Kiba’s, it looks like.

If she has to go up against any of them, she’s surrendering the fight. Kiba’s a challenge at the best of times and she owes Shino and Hinata one.

And what they’ve told her about the Suna team is enough to convince her not to go up against any of them. She just hopes her teammates have the same amount of sense.
They probably don’t.

At least she’s sure Kakashi would be around to stop a match if any of them were about to die.

Preliminary matches become likely when the team of Kabuto, the suspicious guy who approached them before the first test, arrives at the tower during the night leading up to the fifth day. They become a certainty when Fumio and Haruno Sakura’s team shows up with only three hours to spare, headed straight for the infirmary after Riko, who’d been keeping an eye on the entrance, gave them a heads-up about them.

She goes to make last-minute preparations. Kiba offers her one of his spare mesh shirts, and she takes it without argument. There’s no room for pride here — her own armour burned up, and even if she feels kind of pathetic, having to accept it like charity, it’s better than fighting without protective gear.

Besides, she’d do the same for him in a heartbeat. Even if her shirts would be way too small for him.

Preparations done, Riko’s team goes to lurk in the assembly/training hall that’s been dusted off for the occasion. At present, it’s empty, but it’s obvious that soon all the genin that made it this far would be called here in order to fight for the chance at fighting some more later, with the difference of doing it in front of a huge crowd.

Familiarising herself with the prospective stage for the upcoming battles is definitely a good idea, and if Riko hides a few surprises here and there, well, nobody said she couldn’t. It’s just common sense, really.

She perks up when she detects a familiar chakra from the direction of the entrance.

Or rather, the shadow of a familiar chakra. It’s still big enough for her to sense, but it’s only a small fraction of what Karin had before she left to meet up with her teammates.

Frowning, Riko waves to her teammates. “Karin made it. Can we go see her?”

Kakashi told them not to walk around alone, and since Kiba’s team is still holed up in their room, she’s stuck asking her teammates to accompany her.

Not like that’s a bad thing, Naruto could get in trouble in a paper bag, much less a tower full of hostile genin. There’s no way she’s leaving him alone. And Sasuke has a target on his back.

“Ohayou!” Naruto hops down from the railing, which he’d been practicing pull-ups on. Sasuke joins them silently and they make their way in the direction of the entrance.

They have to wait until some chap has welcomed the Kusa team and explained the whole chunin motto and what it has to do with the scrolls they hunted before they can go talk to the three.

“Hey, Karin-“ Riko begins, and then the words get stuck in her throat.

Karin looks awful. One of her teammates is half-carrying her slumped form and it’s obvious she
can’t walk on her own. Her skin is pallid and she smells of sweat, her eyes are sunken in with dark bruises beneath them. She seems thinner as well, her clothes hanging off of her frame in a way they hadn’t before, and it hasn’t been that long.

Her teammates, in contrast, are the picture of health. All but brimming with chakra, and while they’re dirty from the trek through the forest, neither seem to be injured in any discernable way.

“-are you okay?” she finishes hoarsely. “Come on, let’s get you to the infirmary, yeah?”

The guy supporting Karin’s weight puffs up. “Look, Konoha, this is none of your business, and she wants nothing to do with you. Go away and mind your own-”

Karin lets out a choked sob, jerks away from her teammate, and stumbles over to Riko. Throws herself at her in an uncoordinated lunge and clings to her, shaking violently, and her body feels so, so frail. Her chakra feeble.

Riko catches her in her arms and hugs her gently. Shifts them around so she’s between Karin and her teammates, and she can’t help but notice that Sasuke looks utterly pissed.

“Karin,” he says tightly, “They did this to you?”

The older girl’s fingers clench in the fabric of Riko’s jacket. That’s enough confirmation.

A sick feeling curdles in Riko’s stomach. Those two, Karin’s teammates, put her into this state? What did they do?

“I don’t wanna go back,” Karin sobs into her shoulder. “I wanna stay with you, can I please stay with you?”

“That’s enough fraternising, Karin!” The other Kusa-nin snaps irritably. “Get back here!”

“Of course you can stay, Karin,” Riko says gently, ignoring the surge of anger. “Let’s take you to the infirmary, yeah? You look like you could use a bit of rest. Naruto, Sasuke, come on? Naruto, can you please send a clone to find Kakashi-sensei?”

“Yeah, yeah, of course,” Naruto says, sounding a little overwhelmed.

Sasuke falls in step with Riko, ignoring the shouted orders from the two Kusa genin. Who don’t seem invested enough to fight to stop their teammate from getting spirited away. “Just let ’em take her, we got where we needed to, sensei will get her back,” she hears them mutter.

They get to the infirmary and sit Karin down on the bed. A medic comes bustling over, and Karin flinches away instinctively, backing into Riko, who tries her best to calm the girl down.

The medic takes a step back and keeps her distance, though it’s obvious she wants to help. Sasuke sits down beside them and Karin seems fine with that, at least. “They didn’t ask,” he says in a flat tone.

Karin shakes her head, his statement apparently making sense to her. Everyone else seems as clueless as Riko is.

Her aspiring medic of a teammate turns to the actual medic and all but demands she bring medicine for chakra exhaustion, plus something for Karin to eat, preferably liquid. And yeah, considering how low Karin’s chakra is compared to what it used to be, that’s probably the right call. The
nausea that comes with chakra exhaustion makes it hard to eat anything solid, Riko knows that very well.

The medic scurries away to carry out the order and Sasuke turns back to Karin. “I’ll heal it,” he says. “Unless you object.”

Karin holds out her arm to him wordlessly and he pushes her sleeve back. Angles his body so Naruto — blessedly silent, and looking way out of his depth and also like he wants to ask what’s going on very badly — can’t see.

Riko goes numb when the reason becomes clear.

Her friend’s skin is covered in human bite marks. Some of them in neat rows, made with clinical precision, others clearly more haphazard and messy. Two fresh bites are on her forearm, one of them inflamed and oozing clear fluid.

Sasuke works quickly and efficiently. Pulls the sleeve back down just as the medic returns, and Kakashi is following in her wake.

“Maa,” he says, but it lacks the levity with which he normally interacts with the team outside of serious situations. “What are my cute students up to now?”

Riko’s has no idea what exactly is going on, but one thing is for sure: “Karin’s not going back to Kusa,” and Karin’s grip tightens until it hurts, but Riko doesn’t so much as flinch.

Sasuke nods in agreement and crosses his arms.

“Yeah!” Naruto adds. “They’re mean!”

“I see,” Kakashi comments and eyes Karin curiously. “And what does Karin-san want?”

Riko can’t help but notice how incredibly unthreatening her sensei seems. Completely harmless, which boggles the mind. Kakashi is anything but.

That’s a stealth skill, too, Genma mentioned something like this, but this is the first time she’s seen it in action. And man, does Riko want to learn it. It doesn’t exactly tie in all that much with her current skillset, but being taken for harmless strikes her as generally a good thing. Plus, Kakashi can do it, and Riko wants to be just like him someday.

“I want to stay,” Karin says hoarsely. “With Riko and Sasuke. Just please don’t send me back.”

Kakashi’s eye crinkles up. “Alright,” he says. “We’ll start the immigration process right away. That means a Yamanaka will do a sweep of your mind to verify your intentions and sincerity. You’ll have to sign a lot of paperwork.” He tilts his head. “Seeing as you saved three rather prominent genin, I doubt anyone will object.”

Karin nods hesitantly. “I don’t — I won’t use my kekkei genkai anymore. Not for anyone.”

Kakashi only shrugs. “Alright. Unless the ability endangers citizens, no one in the village can legally govern usage of a kekkei genkai outside of wartime. You don’t even have to disclose more than basic information on it.”

Some of Karin’s tension fades. “Okay,” she breathes and absentmindedly begins eating from the bowl of stew Sasuke stealthily put into her hands. “What do I need to do?”
“I’ll take you to the immigration office right away.” Kakashi looks at Riko, Naruto, and Sasuke. “It would be helpful if you three wrote down a statement to vouch for Karin’s character and why you think she should be accepted as a new citizen.”

Riko isn’t sure how much the words of three genin will count, but if her teacher thinks it’ll help, she’ll absolutely do it.

Sasuke already has paper and pen in front of him and is writing furiously.

“Can I borrow a pen and paper?” she asks quietly, but Kakashi is one step ahead and gives her and Naruto both the requested items.

Riko furrows her brows and stares at the blank page in front of her. Does her best to recall how documents like this should be worded in order to be taken seriously. It’s a good thing she’s worked her way through Konoha’s constitution and other legislation.

Is it a good idea to mention her father is the Jounin Commander? Hm. Definitely can’t hurt to include it in an off-handed way, she concludes. Even if it makes Riko feel like a self-important prat, Karin might benefit.

When finished, she hands the paper back to Kakashi, who scans it and then gives her a smile.

Naruto, who’d been scowling at his paper with what he considers an expression of deep thoughtfulness and the occasional impressed nod in agreement with his own words, pushes his paper at their sensei right afterwards. From the short glimpse, Riko can tell it’s not long or structured at all, and he’d been finished quicker than her, apparently just waiting for someone else to get done so he wasn’t the first to hand in his paper.

It’s what he used to do with written tests in the Academy.

Kakashi smiles at Naruto, too, and then looks at Sasuke who’s still writing furiously, as if he wants every kanji to stab the reader’s throat out.

He takes another few minutes to finish up before he holds out his statement to Kakashi.

Riko’s pretty sure she saw it signed as, ‘Uchiha Sasuke, Clan Head’.

Which, wow. She feels significantly more confident about name-dropping Shikaku now.

Their teacher gives Sasuke a beaming eye-smile and pockets the papers. “My adorable students,” he gushes. “Sensei is so proud.” He grows serious then, though. “I won’t be here to watch your matches. If you need help with anything, ask Maito Gai or Shiranui Genma.”

Riko swallows heavily but nods, as do her teammates.

Kakashi being absent feels like yet another lifeline cut, but making sure Karin never has to return to Kusa takes priority.

Besides, Genma will apparently be there, and that’s very reassuring. Gai, too, but Riko only met him the one time. It left a lasting impression on her, though.

He was pretty cool.

“I’ll see you in team training tomorrow at the latest. Usual time and place, attendance mandatory barring hospitalisation,” Kakashi informs them firmly. Then he looks at Karin. “Are you
comfortable with me carrying you?”

The girl hesitates for just a moment, and Kakashi simply summons his biggest dog. Karin squeaks in surprise.

“This is Bull,” Kakashi introduces. “He won’t mind carrying you.”

“He’s nice,” Riko agrees, and the dog licks her hands and gives her large, sad eyes until she starts scratching behind his ears. His tail wags.

Karin tentatively reaches out to pet the dog.

“Okay,” she says shakily before looking at Riko, Sasuke, and Naruto. “Good luck in your fights.”

They all say their thanks, Naruto adding assurances that there’s no way he’ll lose, since he’ll become Hokage.

It makes Riko want to throttle him, and that sentiment towards someone who’s her friend is just as uncalled for as his words. He doesn’t mean ill, he’s just bad at reading the room.

 Damn it all, this whole exam thing has her far too stressed out. She just needs some sleep and for this whole thing to be over. Then she can be around the more exhausting people in her life again.
Not even an hour after Kakashi and Karin have left, the remaining chuunin candidates gather in the assembly hall. Twenty-three genin in total. Riko assesses them all, tuning out Hokage-sama lecturing them on the true purpose of the damn exams (replacement warfare, apparently, which sounds like a load of crock.)

He also mentions prestige and reputation, and that’s more truthful. Riko has to stifle a bitter laugh — there are so many of Konoha’s genin left over that they can’t make anything but a good showing for the nobility. Half the fights in the finals will feature her village’s shinobi, and yeah. That does send a clear message about the power level of Konoha, doesn’t it?

As if they didn’t have the home advantage from the start. This whole fucking thing was rigged in their favour. They’ll probably rig the matches, too, make sure not too many foreigners make it through.

Set them against each other.

Absolutely none of the genin are pleased about being used for replacement warfare and exhibition matches. Several of the more temperamental ones speak up — Naruto and Kiba, most notably, but others also ask questions incredulously and mutter uneasily amongst themselves, clearly broadcasting their surprise. All of them from Konoha.

The only confusion the foreigners show is directed at the outraged reactions and outright disrespectful questioning of Hokage-sama’s explanations.

Confusion which Riko shares, but at this point the fact that only a handful of her peers researched the exams and their purpose beforehand isn’t news to her anymore. She has no trouble keeping her face blank and keeps studying the competition.

There’s only a handful of people she’d chance a match against. She’s not fighting anyone from Oto or Suna. Kiba’s team is right out, too. Rainbow Hyuuga, forget it. And Kabuto’s team? They’re all much more experienced genin and they give her the creeps the longer she studies them, for reasons she can’t put her finger on.

That leaves only Karin’s teammates, Fumio’s team, Panda Buns and Rock Lee, and Riko’s own teammates. Seven of twenty-two possible opponents.

Riko hopes she’ll get to fight one of the Kusa guys. For how they treated Karin, she’d put her all into making them regret, no matter how much she doesn’t want to be here anymore.

“I’d like to explain the final test now,” Hokage-sama says gravely, and Riko just wants to get on with it at this point. Preferably without another long-winded explanation from the Professor.

Thankfully, the proctor seems to have the same idea, and she’s so grateful at the revelation that it’s Genma, even if it means she won’t be able to tap him for training. Provided she makes it through
“The third and final phase of the Chuunin Exams is a tournament-style competition. You’ll be fighting one-on-one battles until a winner is determined,” Genma informs them, not wasting any time on dramatics and mystery. “Problem is, there’s too many of you, so we’re cutting the number in half by holding a preliminary exam. Each of you will fight a randomly decided opponent, and the winner advances to the finals and has the chance to be promoted to chuunin.”

He simply talks over the protests against having to fight matches right now, when the teams didn’t even have the same amount of time to rest and recover after the Forest of Death.

“You can quit anytime,” he says flatly. “It’s not like this is a real mission.”

Ouch.

With the implication that quitting now would be akin to abandoning a mission halfway through, Riko is sure that nobody will take the easy out. But to her surprise, Kabuto does, citing injury.

He seems no worse-off than anybody else, in Riko’s opinion. Sure, he has a pretty bad limp going on, but it’s definitely not the worst condition anyone here is in. Fumio’s team hasn’t even had time to clean themselves up, and she’s pretty sure his male teammate has a broken finger.

But then, Kabuto’s probably a plant of the examiners for some hidden purpose, so it makes sense that he’d back out now. Which reminds her that she didn’t get around to telling one of them that she caught on, but at least Shino told her the other day that he did.

Riko is still curious about Kabuto’s teammates who didn’t back out, but she can think of a few possible explanations.

It’s not important right now.

The rules of engagement for the preliminaries are quickly explained — there are none beyond a fight ending by forfeit, unconsciousness, or death. Examiners may jump in to stop a fight that already has a clear winner.

“That thing-” Genma points at something high up on the wall- “Decides who you’ll be fighting against. Let’s get started.”

Er, what? What is that?

If she squinted, she might be able to see, but then everybody would know she’s near-sighted. Her old classmates already do, but at least she could try to fool everyone else.

Riko keeps staring up with no idea what she’s looking for.

There are a few gasps when the something makes a ding sound. Kiba curses under his breath.

Damn it, what’s going on? She lost her glasses, it’s too blurry and the lighting is bad!

“First match: Hyuuga Neji versus Hyuuga Hinata,” Genma supplies helpfully, and when she turns face him, he’s looking in her general direction. Clearly having realised the problem.

She’s so glad he’s the proctor.

“Everyone else, get on the upper level where you won’t be in the way.”
The match between Neji and Hinata is horrifying.

One of Riko’s hands is clenched in the railing in front of her, the other is clutching Kiba’s so hard that she must be cutting off his blood flow. His grip is just as firm, and when she chances a sidelong glance, he has his teeth bared, feral with rage, and his gaze is locked on Hyuuga Neji. A low growl rumbles in his throat, echoed by Akamaru.

Riko has no doubt that if they weren’t holding onto hands, he’d have launched himself at Hinata’s opponent. She’s not far from it herself, but Kiba’s sensei has a hand on each of their shoulders, and something done by the woman is keeping them paralysed, rooted to the ground.

They can only watch Hinata’s cousin absolutely take her apart, physically and mentally. Riko wants to shout at Naruto to stop yelling at Hinata to get up, wants this fight stopped, why isn’t anybody stopping this?! The winner is clear, Hinata’s gotten hit so often now, and with the Gentle Fist, the risk of lasting damage is so high, and isn’t it obvious that Neji means to kill her?

Naruto needs to shut up. Hinata wouldn’t keep trying so hard to squeak out even a single hit if he weren’t encouraging her so much, and she just took a Gentle Fist hit to the chest and still gets up because he’s yelling that she can do it.

These exams aren’t worth ruining her body for.

Hinata’s match is about to be called and Naruto shouts for them not to as if it’s his call. A moment later, a barely conscious girl is standing up again, from a blow that made her spit blood for the third time. She’s got internal injuries for sure.

The first match of the preliminaries concludes with Hinata hurriedly being carted away by the medics on stand-by. Their words making it clear that Hinata might not survive to the evening.

All because of one guy who can’t see past his own grudge and a boy who doesn’t think about the consequences of his actions and words. And look at that, they’re in a pissing contest now, Naruto swearing to defeat Neji on Hinata’s behalf, like he’s ever looked twice at the girl. Like he’d ever talked to her before yelling at her to fight a hopeless, unnecessary, deadly match.

Kiba who, the moment the paralysis wore off, had jumped down to be with his teammate, is now just staring blankly in the direction the medics took Hinata. Standing completely motionlessly.

And then, like a switch flipped, he launches himself in the direction of the boys with a feral snarl and no warning, and it’s a good thing Riko had her senses trained on him.

One moment she’s on the upper level, the next she’s tackling Kiba before he can touch Naruto, who’s blocking his path to Neji. Or maybe he was the target, Riko isn’t sure and it’s not a priority.

Stopping Kiba is, and he’s — he’s lost it, and they’re rolling over the floor, his teeth snapping and claws scraping, only her familiarity with his way of moving and the armour he lent her keeps her from injury in the few short moments before the jounin once more intervene. Sasuke’s there, too, but Gai has no trouble keeping him from attacking Kiba while Riko’s tucked away behind Genma.

Kiba’s sensei and Yugao’s friend Hayate are both holding Kiba back, talking to him in quiet
Voices. Whatever they’re saying, it must be working, at least to a small degree. Instead of attacking, Riko’s friend has just gone still, eyes trained on Neji.

“Eh?” Naruto asks, only now catching up with events, sort of. “Oi, Kiba, what the hell’re you doing, attacking Ricchan?! I’ll kick your ass!”

Riko snaps.

“Will you just fucking shut up?” she shouts, and her voice thunders through the hall. It shuts up every last whisper in the background. All eyes are trained on her now.

She’s too angry to cower. Stands straight instead, fists clenched.

And oh, there’s that wonderful buzzing under her skin again. No more than a tingle, so much weaker than before, but it’s there and it feels so good.

Makes her feel alive and warm and strong. Something slotting into place.

“Ricchan?” Naruto asks uncertainly.

“Okay, as entertaining as this is,” Genma cuts into the conversation, sounding utterly unimpressed. “I want to get done sometime today, so everyone go back to where they’re supposed to be. And just so you know, fighting outside of sanctioned matches will get you disqualified next time.”

In silence, everyone returns to their place on the upper level, and Riko stands apart from either of her teammates.

Kiba finds a place close to her, not quite touching, but he’s there. Knuckles white as they clutch the railing, and there’s very little human left in his face.

Shino’s on his other side.

“We’ll now begin the next match,” Genma announces dispassionately down below.

An odd electrical shuffling sound follows his words, and ends with that ding sound again. Up here, she’s a little closer to the screen that announces the matches, but she still can’t make out the names on it.

“Will Uzumaki Naruto and Inuzuka Kiba come down here, then,” Genma says.

Now it’s Riko’s turn to clench her fists around the railing so hard it hurts.

“Yes! Going second!” Naruto hops down. “And against Kiba, too!”

Kiba vaults over the railing without a word and sets Akamaru down next to him. The small dog’s been quiet, too, she realises. Hasn’t made a peep.

Shino comes to stand next to Riko.

“Naruto will lose this match,” he says. “Why? Because an Inuzuka in a rage is a fearsome thing indeed.”

Yeah, that’s quite obvious.

Down below, Naruto points at Kiba. “I won’t let you get away with what you did to Ricchan!”
She’s almost looking forward to seeing him lose, Riko realises distantly. How did he even get the idea that she was Kiba’s target?

“Perhaps you’d like to fix your clothing,” Shino points out delicately, for his standards.

Riko looks down at herself.

Yeah, okay, she’s a mess. At least Kiba’s nails didn’t get through the armour.

“No,” she mutters.

This was her last change of clothes. And the match that’s about to start is far more of a priority.

Two of her best friends pitted together. Or whatever Naruto is these days, she doesn’t know anymore, why is this so confusing? She loves him.

Kiba doesn’t react to Naruto’s nonsense. Eyes trained on him in an unsettling way.

“Oi, Akamaru’s gonna get hurt!” Naruto protests.

“That’s not your concern,” Genma answers flatly. “Begin.”

With a quiet snarl, Kiba lunges forward, and he’s fast.

So much faster than Naruto, who barely has time to give a startled yell and try to bring up his guard before Kiba is on him.

A fist smashes into Naruto’s jaw, followed by knee to his stomach. Naruto stumbles back, but Kiba doesn’t let up. Hit after hit and kick after kick land, and he isn’t pulling his punches. Aims for the soft and debilitating spots, the ones they weren’t allowed to target in Academy spars.

Riko’s teammate goes down and Kiba still keeps going. Her eyes are locked on their blurry forms, and she’s shaking.

She might be angry at Naruto, but she can’t watch him being decimated like this.

Who cares if she’ll get disqualified for interfering in the fight, someone has to stop the match.

It’s just when she’s hopped onto the railing that Genma and the jounin sensei intervene and drag Kiba back from Naruto’s unconscious body. His face bloody and swollen, and Riko swallows heavily and vaults down to have a closer look.

His breathing is shallow.

That’s that, then. Fight over within just a few short minutes. She stares down at her teammate, feeling distanced from everything that’s going on. Mind suddenly flashing back to Naruto falling while trying to take on Orochimaru, and her breath hitches. Nails digging into her palms as she rolls them into fists.

Genma declares Kiba the winner.

Riko stands stock-still while the medics cart Naruto away. Kiba also leaves, accompanied by a jounin she’s never seen before.

That’s probably for the best, she figures blankly.
Then she stiffly climbs up to the upper level again to watch the next match. Doesn’t register much of it, which makes her feel distantly guilty because Fumio is her friend and shouldn’t she pay attention to what the girl from Oto is doing?

Some sound-based genjutsu, but Fumio manages to break it. Wins the fight without much problem, though he does get hit by some senbon.

No drama in this one. Just a regular match.

“Let’s get to the next fight,” Genma mutters.

There’s a pause after the screen makes the announcement for the next battle.

“If Tenten and Nara Riko would come down,” Genma says then.

Oh. Riko blinks.

It’s her turn to fight.

Tenten turns out to be Panda Buns, the female member of the Idiot Three, otherwise known as Gai’s team. One of the few people on the list genin Riko resolved to not immediately forfeit a fight against.

She’s simultaneously relieved and disappointed about that fact. In a distant way because all this doesn’t quite feel real anymore.

“Begin!” Genma announces and jumps out of the way.

Instantly, Tenten jumps back while hurling shuriken at Riko, who leans to the side and lets them fly past her.

Panda Buns lands. There’s something calculating about her. “Didn’t you have glasses before?” she asks.

“Disguise,” Riko answers blandly.

Tenten huffs. “It won’t help you here.”

“Duh. Not wearing them now, Panda Buns.”

The other kunoichi doesn’t reply. Just throws-

Riko throws herself to the side because senbon are small and quiet and impossible to see in time, she can’t evade them as easily as shuriken.

She rolls to her feet again and throws a kunai of her own. Tenten deflects it casually. “Disguise, I see,” she scoffs. “You needed those glasses. Also, Panda Buns? Really?”

Damn it. So much for keeping that handicap secret.
“Whatever,” she mutters.

Tenten snorts and starts running, circling around Riko. What that’s supposed to accomplish is unclear, other than showing off how fast a runner she is.

Pretty damn fast, in fact, and then she suddenly leaps up high, a scroll in her hand, paper whipping through the air as she flips like an acrobat. Twirling and spinning, so fast she seems like a whirlwind. Hands touching seal after seal on her scroll with absolute certainty and-

*Wait a minute.*

That scroll. It’s familiar, she’s seen it before, smelt that paper, that glue, *Rikuto* made that-

She throws herself backwards just as weapons begin to appear. Tenten grabbing them and launching them with pinpoint accuracy.

Riko runs. Ducks, rolls, deflects what she can’t evade. Grunts when a sickle slices a deep gash into her shoulder, but just keeps *going* because if she doesn’t, she might *die*. Tenten isn’t pulling her *punches* at all.

And then there’s suddenly nowhere to go, she’s backed into a corner and there’s a hail of weapons coming at her-

She’s not sure she’s ever pulled off such a fast kawarimi without hand seals and her punch grazes Tenten’s face, whose reflexes are unfortunately excellent.

“What the- the hell did that log come from?!” Tenten squawks, leaping back.

Riko’s too busy trying to stab her to tell her about hiding logs and seals in this room just in case.

Distantly, she hears someone cough.

Tenten catches herself soon enough and unseals a bo staff from storage, and then it’s Riko on the defensive again. Wishing she had her katana, and shit, Tenten is *really good* with that bo. Riko’s jumping and flipping around like a lunatic, trying to evade the worst of her attacks. Success is limited, and the other kunoichi keeps hurling blades at her, too.

“What is that all you can do?” Tenten hisses at her. “Run away? Pathetic.”

Riko ducks down, but the bo’s end catches the top her head anyway and she stumbles, dull pain shutting down thought for a moment. Her mouth tastes like blood when she catches herself on her hands, she must have bitten her lip on accident.

She looks up at Tenten above her and bares her teeth.

Twitches her chakra, curls up her body, and shields her face.

The explosive seal goes off right next to Tenten’s feet, and she can feel the heat, the shock wave. Hears Tenten’s scream, tracks her chakra as she’s thrown across the room.

Tastes ocean air on her tongue, the scent of burned flesh and hair overpowering-

It’s a flashback, and it’s *so hard* to drag herself out of it, to remember how to do it in this situation, when they feel like they reference a different lifetime.

Riko drags herself to her feet, breathing hard, and she’s having trouble focusing. The room spins
around her. Eyes locked on the blurry form of the girl she has to defeat. If she just takes her out, all this will be over, right? She’ll get to live?

The other kunoichi is working herself to her feet, breathing hard, skin burned in places, but it looks like her clothes were fireproof.

Riko takes a step forward, fingers clenched around a kunai, but she crashes to her knees and throws up before she can make it any further.

Can make out her opponent crouching when she forces herself to look up again. Each hand braced on a slim scroll, and she knows what’s in there. Was there when Rikuto-ossan drew the seals according to the custom order.

She’s not going to survive what’s in there. Barely managed the last one. Those scrolls can fit so many weapons, way more than what Tenten unloaded on her before.

Kunai? Where’s her kunai? Fuck, she can’t remember, and she wants her katana so bad-

The kunoichi leaps into the air, scrolls unfolding on either side of her. Steel beginning to glint.

Riko’s hands burn when she unseals the hunting knife, and she distantly hears a moan of pain that must be her own. The knife sits in her hand, reassuring and warm. It doesn’t change that a rain of weapons is shooting for her, and she doesn’t want to die.

She doesn’t throw the knife. It just moves. Shoots straight for her attacker’s twisting form in the air, and is it glowing? Like a small cyclone it spins through the hail of steel, throwing all the blades off-course.

Then it hits the kunoichi, hilt-first, in the forehead, and she just. Crumples, limply falling to the ground. So does the knife.

Riko stares blankly. The other girl moans quietly, but she’s not moving.

Oh. Okay. She’s not dead. That’s, that’s good. Right? There’s a Konoha hitae-ate on the girl’s head. That means comrade.

Why did a comrade try to kill her? What’s going on here? All these people just watching, aren’t they her comrades, too? Why’s nobody doing anything? Did she do something to make them angry?

Her hands hurt so bad she wants to cry.

“Tenten! Get up!” a boy in green shouts. “It’s not over yet! You can still win!”

No. No, that’s not right. If the kunoichi gets up, then Riko’s done for, and she doesn’t want to die.

Riko just has to cross the distance and- and finish it. Somehow. She can do that. Just has to get to her feet first. Or crawl, maybe. But she’ll try standing first.

Getting to her feet takes forever. She stands, swaying, everything spinning, and crawling would have been better.

“Winner of this match is Nara Riko!” a familiar voice announces, and Riko spins around. Genma catches her before she falls. “Medics!” Then, quieter, “It’s okay. You’re alright, the match is over, you’re safe in Konoha. Please let the medics take care of you, kid. Yeah? Nobody is going to hurt
you.”

She’s still not sure what’s going on here, but Genma says it’s okay. Genma’s her friend. This is fine. Isn’t it?

So she nods, and that nearly knocks her out. What is wrong with her?

“Pretty sure she has a concussion,” he tells the medics when they show up. “C’mon kid, let’s put you on the stretcher, yeah? They’ll take you to the infirmary and then you can get some rest.”

Riko doesn’t want to. She still can’t remember how she ended up here, and Genma isn’t acting like he’s coming with her. Why can’t she stay with Genma?

But then she’s on the stretcher and can’t get up.

“Uchiha, you can’t go with her,” Genma’s saying. “You still have your own match to fight.”

“I don’t care,” Sasuke’s voice grunts. “I’m going.”

Several people speak up against that. Riko only recognises two of the voices — Shino and Gai. The rest? Strangers.

“I doubt your teammate would want you to throw this opportunity away just so you can hold her hand,” someone says.

Riko makes a sound of protest. Holding hands with somebody sounds pretty good to her, even when her hands hurt so much.

They’re trying to tell him how Sasuke as an Uchiha has a responsibility to represent the village in the exams when another familiar voice interjects, “I’ll go with her. I’ve already had my match, so it’s fine.”

It’s Fumio.

“I’ll stay with Riko until you can be there,” he’s saying.

There’s a long pause. Then, tersely, Sasuke grunts out, “Fine. Thanks.”

“She’s my friend, too.”
Chapter 39

Chapter Notes

Guess who's birthday it is today <3

The stretcher with Riko on it is lifted, and she’s jostled as the medics set in motion. Fumio’s talking to her, but she’s having trouble following the words.

Everything hurts. Her eyes are falling closed. She’s so tired, all she wants to do is sleep. But she can’t. Still doesn’t know what’s going on, it’s not safe here. Where’s Kakashi-sensei?

“Ah, Hiroki-sensei?” Riko’s heard that voice before, but it didn’t sound that eager then. It belongs to… glasses? Guy with glasses. And cards, for some reason? Something was up there, but her mind drifts before she can grasp the memory. “I’m terribly sorry, there was an incident with one of the patients, we can’t use this room right now. The Oto kunoichi… well, she’s not fit to be around anyone from Konoha. I’ll, um, lead you to another room. If that’s alright.”

When Riko manages to turn her head enough to see him, Glasses is cringing.

The newly named medic in charge, Hiroki-sensei, sighs exasperatedly. “These exams, I swear. Very well. At least we have enough alternatives prepared. Thank you, Kabuto-kun.”

The medics set in motion again. Kabuto falls in step next to Fumio. “Congratulations on your match, Fumio-kun.”

“Thanks. Can’t believe I made it this far.” Fumio laughs bashfully. “It feels unreal. Making it to chuunin would be amazing. I’m so close now.”

“I’m sure you’ll make it,” Kabuto answers. “You’ve been such a hard worker from the moment I knew you.”

“I’ll try my best.” Fumio glances at Riko and gives her a smile. “Let’s become chuunin together, right, Riko-chan?”

She manages a small smile back. “Cake,” she rasps back.

“Yeah, we’ll have cake to celebrate.”

Maybe Kabuto isn’t so bad. He and Fumio keep chatting, and the other medics seem comfortable with him. It’s just that she’s not all there right now. Because of stuff. Yeah.

They enter a new room, sparsely outfitted with medical appliances. It’s dusty and gloomy. Smells like it hasn’t been in use in forever.

“No, this won’t work,” Hiroki-sensei huffs in displeasure. “Kabuto-kun, what is the meaning of this?”

“Ah, everywhere else is in use, terribly sorry.” Kabuto scratches the back of his head sheepishly. “It’ll have to be here.”
Hiroki-sensei stills. “I see. A pity.”

The mood in the room shifts. Chakras sharpening. Weapons being drawn. What?

A hoarse chuckle fills the air and Riko freezes. Her eyes open wide, her breath turns into quick shallowpants, because she’s heard that sound before. Just days ago.

No. No, no, no. This is impossible, she killed him, or came close, she died for it! He can’t be here!

But there he is. Stepping through the door, a satisfied smile on his inhuman face.

Riko freezes, her breath stalling in her throat, terror paralysing her. The stretcher drops to the hard stone floor, and she groans in pain, her head impacting the ground. For a moment, all she can see is white. Around her, Fumio and the medics drop to their knees, two retching. Another passing out. Out of everyone, it’s only Hiroki-sensei who barely remains on his feet, a scalpel in his hand.

Kabuto, though, isn’t affected. He’s perfectly fine and smiles as Orochimaru comes to stand next to him, and they’re blocking the way to the door.

“How unfortunate.”

Fumio makes a choked, gasping noise. His body locking up. Tipping to the side.

Riko reaches out, ignoring the pain. Fumio can’t die. No. She won’t let him, he’s her friend, they were going to do things together, and her hand is glowing-

Her fingers touch his leg, light travelling up his calf and-

He’s gone suddenly, and with a crack his body impacts the wall on her right. Crumples to the ground, neck bent an impossible angle. His chakra’s gone.

The light on her hand snuffs out.

Her friend. Fumio. No.
She tries to crawl towards him, but a foot catches her shoulder and forces her onto her back. Presses her down, and she can’t move it.

“Please,” she whispers.

Orochimaru smiles down at her. “You’re such a special girl, Riko-chan. I have a gift for you.”

Kakashi doesn’t want to be here. It’s the day after the Preliminaries, and he now knows he never should have left his team in the tower on their own, even if the jounin presence was so high and the Hokage himself was attending the matches.

Yet two people were murdered just a few hallways away from the arena and Orochimaru put his cursed seal on, of all people, Riko.

He should be guarding her right now, but he has two other students, one of which would be fighting in the finals of the Chuunin Exams by the end of the month. He’s got a responsibility towards them.

And the boys would only cause trouble if he didn’t show.

From what he hears, Sasuke already did, demanding visiting rights to Riko’s hospital room this morning. Had thrown a fit when he found out that Riko hadn’t actually been transferred there, like he’d been told after he’d won his match against Shigeri from Kusagakure.

Letting him anywhere near the heavily guarded containment room his student currently struggled for her life in would be a terrible idea. Same with Naruto, but he at least wouldn’t make a ruckus anytime soon — even with his accelerated healing, recovering from his match would take him a few days.

Kakashi hasn’t had time to look at the footage from the preliminary matches yet, but he’s seen Inuzuka go feral before.

Naruto, who tended to make bold announcements and demand acknowledgement before actually engaging into a fight, never stood a chance against an opponent whose only goal was quick and brutal retaliation. There would never have been a moment for him to recover from the first hit.

Callous though it might be, it’s for the best, Kakashi figures. The boy’s heart was in the right place, but he lacked too much basic skill and knowledge for even a genin, much less a chuunin. Too naïve and self-centered as well. Kakashi wants to throttle Umino for graduating him.

At least he managed to convince Ebisu to take Naruto on for the month. The man had owed him a favour.

That leaves Kakashi to train Sasuke. It’s not something he looks forward to, but as a teacher, he would try his best to do right by all his students, and there’s little he can do for the other two right now. Besides, for Sasuke, there existed no acceptable alternative option, with the boy having gained the sharingan but lost an eye.

At least Sasuke made some progress in his attitude. Shown concern about his team and that young
Kusa kunoichi, who was currently sitting through evaluations and questioning.

He keeps the team meeting — location changed to Naruto’s hospital room — brief. Dodges questions about Riko, just telling them that she’d been taken to a special facility because of health complications and couldn’t receive visitors.

“You have three days to recover,” he tells the two boys flatly. “After that, your focus will be on training.”

With that, he leaves them to their own devices. Makes his way to the facility Riko’s had been taken to.

Genma looks as tense and cold as Kakashi feels, standing next to the girl’s bedside. Her limbs had to be restrained to keep her from hurting herself. As it is, even unconscious, she struggles against them, her face twisted into a grimace. Small whimpers drop from her throat in between laboured breaths. Pallid, skin wet with cold sweat, and the heart monitor reveals her frantic heartbeat.

The Cursed Seal looks so wrong on her, revolting, as it visibly leaks sludgy purple chakra into Riko’s body. Every so often, her own chakra flares brightly as that strange power of hers tries to fend it off.

“I told her she was safe,” Genma says quietly.

Kakashi doesn’t reply.

There’s nothing to say. They’d failed Riko.

———

It hurts. She’s on fire, but it’s so, so cold.

Every time she breathes, it’s agony. Why won’t it stop?

It has to. Eventually. Right? Please?

The pain is already more than she can endure. But the- the wrongness. Of that, of that stuff inside of her. Spreading.

Making her different.

She can barely think anymore. Hears voices, sees things, phantoms. Fumio dies over and over, trying to defend her, just like that medic she’d never even talked to before. She’s in Nami and kills that Kiri nuke-nin again and again. Is back in Little Whinging with the Dursleys. Sees her parents be murdered. Naruto crumbles in the Forest of Death. Hotaru is talking to her. Orochimaru’s laughs echo in the distance.

Fangs pierce her skin while she’s utterly, completely helpless.

The cold keeps worming its way through her body, and she tries. Tries so hard to fight it, but it’s eating at her. Consuming her bit by bit, and she’s so tired, her magic exhausted.

There’s nothing left to fight with, and then there’s just pain.
Riko wakes up, her eyes blinking open.

Mind blank. She just stares blankly at the ceiling and thinks about nothing.

“Riko?” a voice asks, and her heart jumps in her throat with instant panic. She’s on the other side of the… hospital room in an instant, breathing hard.

Staring at the speaker through the haze of purple chakra that her body is emitting, and she makes a high, distressed noise. Tries to get that stuff off of her, flinching away when her fingers make contact.

It’s inside of her, and the worst thing is, it feels good.

Like she’s powerful.

“Riko,” the voice repeats, and she knows it. “You’re in a containment room. You were attacked three days ago and in the course of the incident, were inflicted with a dangerous and harmful seal. We need you to calm down so we can discuss your options.”

Calm down? Calm down?

“Take a deep breath,” the man is saying, his tone commanding. “Let it out slowly.”

There’s something about his voice that makes it impossible not to at least try.

And if she calms down, he’ll tell her how to get rid of this… this Seal.

“Good,” the voice says, and she’s collected enough now that she can recognise the speaker. A Yamanaka. Toge. Her therapist? “Well done, Riko.”

There are others there, but she’s focusing on him. He’s the one with the information and he helped her calm down.

“Do you recognise me?” he asks her. “If you can’t speak right now, blink once for yes. Twice for no.”

She blinks once. Things aren’t clear, but she knows his name. Knows he’s helped her before.

“Very good,” Toge tells her. “Do you recognise the people in the room?”

Riko looks at the other two men. They’re… Kakashi-sensei. And Shikaku. Her father.

“Very good,” Toge repeats when she blinks again. “The man who attacked you was Orochimaru. What he put on you is called the Cursed Seal. As far as we know, it is activated by negative emotions. The recipient gains increased chakra levels and physical strength while it’s active, but it corrodes the mind. Our intel on it is sparse, so I cannot tell you what that means for you specifically.” He leans forward. “It’s entwined with your chakra system now. We can’t remove it without killing you in the process.”
She stares at him.

She needs that thing out of her.

“What we can do is seal it,” he continues. “It will hurt. There’s a risk of permanent damage. But it will keep it under control. The other option is to leave it as it is, keep you under tight observation, and train your mental discipline so that it will never be activated. It’s your choice.”

Having Kakashi seal up the Cursed Seal puts Riko out of commission for another two days. Even afterwards, she’s on strict bed rest.

“I’ll check on you,” her sensei promises quietly. “But I have to train Sasuke. He’s fighting the kunoichi from Suna.”

Riko nods, staring at her hands. They’re wrapped up and encased in casts which are covered in medical seals to keep their condition from worsening.

“If he wins, he’ll face either Dozu from Oto or Gaara from Suna. I’ll make sure he can survive either.”

Kakashi seems to be waiting for a reply, so she nods again.

She can’t bring herself to use her voice.

Just. Can’t.

“I want you to meet someone,” Kakashi says. “He’ll keep you safe.”

Right. Security. Nobody knows what exactly Orochimaru wants with Riko, or they’re just not telling her. But he wants something, or he wouldn’t have given her that thing, so she’s constantly with a bodyguard. When it’s not Kakashi, it’s Genma or Yugao. Sometimes it’s her father or mother, but they’ve both got their own duties. Can’t take much time off in a delicate situation like the Chuunin Exams.

“Are you okay with me calling him in?” Kakashi asks her.

She shrugs.

It’s not like she’s got much of a say.

The man who walks into the room after Kakashi flickers his chakra in a simple pattern looks vaguely familiar. It’s… Kakashi’s neighbour? The one he mooched food off those times Riko stayed over.

“This is Tenzou. Your bodyguard for the month.”

’Tenzou’ gives her a nod but doesn’t say anything.

Riko nods back. Doesn’t speak either, though she’d have liked to know why he’s replacing Genma and Yugao. But she supposes they’re required elsewhere. Konoha would need every shinobi on
hand once spectators for the final matches started arriving.

Her participation in the finals is up in the air right now. Dependant on her recovery rate.

If she was cleared by the medics, she’d be fighting Rock Lee. In the unlikely event of her squeaking out a win, her next opponent would either be Kiba or Hyuuga Neji.

“Well, you two have fun now!” Kakashi tells Riko and Tenzou cheerfully, waving, and then leaves a log behind as he disappears.

Leaving her with a complete stranger.

Okay.

Whatever.

Riko leans back in her pillows and goes back to staring at the ceiling. Determinedly not thinking of anything at all. The drugs they have her on make it easier. Keep her from freaking out and accidentally hurting herself, like last night when she woke up and panicked because she’d had a nightmare and her body felt wrong. Disconnected from her.

Tenzou says nothing. Just takes up post beside the window and stands there.

Hours pass like that, but eventually there’s a knock on the door before her adoptive father enters with two women, a Hyuuga and an Aburame, following behind him.

“Hello, little one,” he greets her. “I hope you had a restful day.”

She gives him a blank look back. Then flicks a glance at his two companions.

Shikaku sits in the chair next to her bed. “These are Hyuuga Hitomi and Aburame Michi. They’re experts on treating injuries to the chakra system.”

The Hyuuga steps forward. “With your permission, we would like to see what we can do about your hands.”

Ah. That makes sense, huh. Riko nods and holds out the two useless clumps that her hands currently are.

Hyuuga Hitomi takes off the cast and bandages and like burning needles, feeling returns to Riko’s hands. But she doesn’t make a sound.

This pain is better than the numbness.

Better than the wrongness.

For what feels like forever, the women examine Riko’s hands, quietly discussing between themselves all the while. Strange tiny white Aburame bugs crawl over her skin and over the dark lines of the seals on her palms.

Eventually the women step back, exchanging a glance.

The Aburame begins summing up the extent of Riko’s injuries. How exactly her chakra flow is disrupted and how it accumulated in her hands. The consequences.

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“Under normal circumstances, this injury would most certainly be career-ending, no matter the
treatment,” she informs.

“‘Normal circumstances’?” Shikaku echoes evenly. The women exchange another look.

“Riko-san’s chakra system is…” Hyuuga Hitomi hesitates. “Underdeveloped by around six years. It would fit a four-year old.”

That breaks through the haze in Riko’s brain because *what*.

What she just said is *impossible*.

Mammals began developing their chakra systems while they were still in the womb of the mother. Chakra systems thus grew at the same pace as the owner. They *could* be malformed, unusable, or differ in strength, but they should logically always match the age of the owner.

Shikaku, however, doesn’t look surprised at all. Like he knew about this.

Riko considers distantly that she’s too tired for this.

“We believe that in time, Riko-san’s still-developing chakra pathways will adjust to the seals on her hands. Work around them,” Aburame Michi explains. “To accelerate the process and ensure this goes well, we suggest surgically laying new paths. This will also solve the issue of harmful chakra accumulation and reopen the circulation.”

Staring down at her hands, Riko wonders how exactly someone would lay new chakra paths in someone’s body. Then her eyes fall on one of Michi’s bugs, still crawling over her skin.

Oh.

The Aburame host bug hives in their bodies. Have pathways for the insects inside of their bodies, and Riko doubts they’re born with those. So how would they get there?

That question has a rather obvious and off-putting answer.

Michi confirms it. “During the course of the operation, my kikaichuu would carve out those pathways under our directions.”

They’d *eat* their way through Riko’s hands.

That sounds so painful. But if it saves her hands — her *career* — then it’s a no-brainer.

“How much time will you need to prepare the surgery?” Shikaku asks, and they all start talking plans and schedules.

Even though this is important, literally determining her future, Riko zones out.

After the surgery, the medics tell Riko that she’d be staying in the hospital for another week. Too drowsy from painkillers, she doesn’t have much of a reaction.

And when the drugs wear off, it’s the pain making her incoherent instead. If she could have
chopped off her arms, she would have.

It’s all she can do to carry out basic tasks. She eats when someone holds chopsticks or spoon to her mouth, she follows the medics to the bathroom when they tell her it’s time for a shower or to relieve herself, she sits for therapy when Toge comes by, and she closes her eyes when she’s told to sleep.

Genma, Kakashi, Shikaku, Yoshino, they all tell her she doesn’t need to worry about anything. That she should just focus on getting better. Forget about the Chuunin Exams, even though she’d in theory be healed enough to compete by the time the finals take place.

“Nobody is going to make you fight,” they say. “It’s up to you, but you’ll only have days to train while your opponent will be in peak health after an entire month of preparation. He’s an aspiring taijutsu master, you don’t have anything that counters that.”

She never reacts to the advice in any way.

Just does everything they say will fix the state of her body and stays silent.

Three days after the surgery — two weeks and four days left until the final test — and she’s coherent enough to look at the small stack of books next to her bed. They’re from the shelf on her desk at home, she realises. The unread ones.

Law, medicine, fuuinjutsu, a few adventure novels.

The silence is getting to her. She’s on different medication now to help her hands heal and they don’t make her fuzzy anymore. It’s becoming hard not to think.

Nothing to distract her from — from what happened.

Maybe reading would distract her. She reaches for a book and pauses at the sight of her hands. Or rather, the fuuinjutsu-covered boxes they’re encased in. The inside is filled with some sort of rubber-like material that would have made moving her fingers impossible, even if the seals hadn’t completely paralysed her hands.

She can’t grab things, can’t hold anything, can’t turn pages. Might as well not have hands at all. Reading like this is impossible.

Riko lies back down, the small spark of motivation gone.

For the next few hours, she just lies there in miserable silence. Thoughts haunting her despite her best efforts to ignore them. Fumio, Hiroki, Orochimaru, Kabuto. The fighting, the terror.

The Cursed Seal.

Riko turns to stare at the books again as if she can absorb the contents just by looking at them.

“Would you like me to read to you?”

Her head snaps up. She doesn’t recognise the voice.

It was Tenzou. He hasn’t spoken until now, and she didn’t make an effort to communicate, either. Just ignored him.

That’s bad manners, isn’t it?
She should — she should. Try to do better.

Just *try*.

“Please,” she chokes out, voice hoarse from disuse. Clamps her mouth shut again immediately, but it must have been just enough, because Tenzou walks over and examines the selection of books.

“Which one?” he asks.

“Pick.”

Tenzou just nods and grabs one of the law books. Sits down and cracks it open.

His voice is dry and monotone, but it chases the silence away.
Riko is released from the hospital eventually. She’ll still have to come in for several hours each day to get check-ups and treatments, though.

Her hands are still encased in the boxes, but if no disasters happen, it’ll only be for another week.

Yoshino walks her home. Riko can’t see or sense Tenzou anywhere, but he’s supposed to be her bodyguard. He’ll be around somewhere.

“Here we are,” her mother says quietly. “Let’s have lunch.”

Yoshino fills the meal with conversation while feeding her. Doesn’t seem to expect Riko to reply, which is good. A relief.

She still fails at speaking to the people she loves, the words just clogging up in her throat and choking her. The only one she’s managed a bit of conversation with is Tenzou.

It makes little sense. Toge tells her that some people cope like this, but it’s not an explanation. It doesn’t fix her.

Healing takes time, he says.

“Why don’t you bring lunch outside for your guard?” Yoshino suggests, fills a plate, and holds it out.

Riko nods, lets her place the plate on one of the boxes on her hands, and brings it to the backyard. Tenzou is still nowhere to be seen, so she just leaves the food there for him to find.

Goes upstairs into her room and stands stock-still in the doorway.

It’s her room, and yet it isn’t.

It’s empty. She completely forgot Usagi-chan died.

Riko backs out of the room and almost slams the door shut, her heart beating unreasonably fast.

She returns back downstairs, into the backyard. The plate is empty, and she stares for a moment before she takes it back inside.

“What do you want to do today?” Yoshino asks her. “Rest?”

Not really. She shakes her head.

Apart from her hands, she’s physically mostly fine.
The part where she feels like a foreigner in her body is all in her head, or so she’s been told. The Cursed Seal is contained. Her chakra is all her own.

Yet, she knows there’s something wrong. That something inside of her isn’t Riko.

Yoshino sighs quietly. “Make sure to be back by dinner, if you’re going out. I’ll go have a word with your bodyguard about your medication schedule.”

Tenzou is well-aware of that information, since he was in the room when the medics gave all those instructions. But Riko doesn’t say anything when Yoshino heads outside.

Just sits down quietly, eyeing the dishes that she can’t do because her hands are all messed up. Even once she has use of them back, they’ll never be the same as before, Aburame Michi and Hyuuga Hitomi were clear about that. Her hands would still hurt, possibly for the rest of her life.

There’s no way to know just yet. Riko’s situation is unique.

She goes into the family library and sits on one of the pillows. Closes her eyes.

Medic’s orders clearly forbade any kind of physical exertion, which means training is out. But sensing isn’t really physical. Neither is meditation.

This is something she’s still allowed to do.

Yoshino checks in on her occasionally, but seems to have other things to keep her busy.

After a couple of hours, Riko gets up and goes outside. Making her way out of the Nara compound, aiming her steps to a side street with several tiny shops.

Tenzou falls in step with her the moment she exits the compound.

She looks up at his face. Mouthes a greeting.

“Hello,” he answers calmly. Tenzou is always calm. He’s careful with her, but he doesn’t treat her like she’s fragile. Or broken, or helpless, or like he’s trying to make up for something that isn’t his fault.

And he didn’t know her before the Chuunin Exams. Can’t compare her to before.

Riko can’t stop herself from leaning against him for a moment.

Physical contact is good. Grounding. Makes her feel normal.

She hates not being able to touch people with her hands. Can’t bring herself to ask someone to touch her. And almost all the people she’s interacted with since the… attack, they’re so cautious with her. She’s gotten careful shoulder pats, and that’s it.

Tenzou doesn’t seem to mind. Makes no comment, but for a moment she feels his hand on her head.

They visit two stores, a cake shop and a flower store. Both civilian-run businesses because she can’t make herself enter the ones she’d normally go to. Riko almost runs out at the odd looks the storekeepers give her, what with her stupid hands and whatever, but the steady presence at her side keeps her calm enough to get her business done.

Then they’re on their way through the village. Tenzou doesn’t ask where they’re going.
After a while, it’s obvious anyway.

Riko’s never visited the graveyard properly before. Nara funerals take place in the Clan forest, and she wasn’t allowed in until recently.

Her steps drag more the closer they get, but she doesn’t stop.

Has to see.

She follows the scent of freshly-upturned earth. Passes two graves with unfamiliar names before the tactic leads her to the one she’s here to see.

Tachibana Fumio.

Her legs collapse under her when she reads the name on the grave. For a long while, she can only stare blankly at the place her friend is buried.

Dead. Gone.

It was all real. Not part of the dreams and hallucinations.

Slowly, she pulls the bag holding the two cakes she got closer. Manages to rip it open and push one of the cakes on the grave with her stupid encased hands. The second cake — she’d eat it, but unless she sticks her face right into it, it’s not happening.

So much for that cake-eating appointment they had. First she let him die, now she can’t even do this right.

A quiet sigh, and then a wooden fork stabs into her cake before holding it to her mouth. Riko stares at Tenzou, who gives her an even look back from his droopy eyes.

Riko takes the bite. Eats the entire cake, fed to her by Tenzou.

Neither of them acknowledge her silent sobs when they start.

They sit at Fumio’s grave for hours. But eventually, Riko gets up. Stands hunched over, a box-enclosed hand resting on the headstone, lips pressed together for several minutes.

“He was going to be a medic,” she whispers hoarsely. “We were gonna be chuunin together.”

She wipes a sleeve over her eyes and takes a shuddering breath. Straightens. There are — she has to keep going. Can’t fall apart here, or more than she already has the past weeks.

“You’ve made up your mind about the finals, then,” Tenzou surmises.

Riko looks up at him. Nods once.

There wasn’t ever a question about that in her mind, not since she regained clear thought. After everything that happened, she won’t back out now.

Not after-

The adults can argue for her to stop all they want, it’s still her choice, and it might be stupid and reckless and they’re probably right about encouraging her to back out. But this one time, she won’t try to live up to everyone’s expectations.
This is for her.

And for Fumio.

“I see,” Tenzou says.

She gives him a strained smile and steps back from Fumio’s grave. Ambles her way through the graveyard until they’re in front of another fresh grave. Yakushi Hiroki, the medic who’d tried to defend her from Orochimaru.

“The flowers?” she prompts Tenzou hoarsely. “Not — not all of them.”

Tenzou follows the directive silently.

Riko stares at the headstone.

“He just-” She swallows heavily. “Just chose to-

The medic hadn’t stood a chance. Was outclassed and outnumbered, Orochimaru had even offered him and the others an out, but he still stood up in defence of Riko, whom he’d never even talked to before.

Even though medics are the ones who are supposed to be protected. It’s in the rules. They’re precious.

“Because you’re a shinobi of Konohagakure,” Tenzou answers her solemnly. “You’re a comrade, no matter your rank or your age. We don’t give up on comrades or leave them behind.”

“Oh,” she breathes.

Riko knew, of course. But in action… in action it’s suddenly terrifying. To know that people would die for her. Have died for her, when they don’t even know her.

She stares at the headstone for a long moment and wishes she could have known the man who chose to defy Orochimaru for the principles he believed in.

“Let’s go,” she eventually says and turns away.

Konoha has several graveyards, large ones at that. It comes with being a shinobi village, Riko supposes bleakly. The one Fumio and Hiroki’s graves are located in is the general shinobi graveyard, where the majority of shinobi were buried.

Her next destination is the one inside the Uchiha Compound.

Being here is eerie. It’s so silent.

Riko hasn’t set foot here since the massacre. Could never bring herself to.

Even though Hotaru was her first friend, Riko never visited her grave. Refused to truly acknowledge that she was truly gone. She’d moved on with her life and done her best not to think about it so much.

“Sorry,” she says to the tombstone with her friend’s name on it. “I’m a coward.”

There is, of course, no reply. Hotaru is long gone, and if ghosts existed, then Riko doubts Hotaru’s would be hanging around a dreary graveyard.
Whatever Riko was hoping visiting her grave would give her, it doesn’t happen. This is just a place. She doesn’t feel any different, nothing’s changed.

“The flowers?” Riko nudges Tenzou.

The man obligingly sets the remaining flowers down onto the grave. They only linger as much as it takes her to pay her respects to the dead, Hotaru specifically and the Uchiha in general.

Where to next?

Kakashi-sensei isn’t home, which doesn’t surprise Riko much. He’s busy training Sasuke for the final event.

She should maybe check on her teammates.

*Should.*

But she’s tired and just can’t muster up the motivation. They make her so exhausted.

What *is* a surprise is that her teacher’s apartment isn’t empty of humans according to Riko’s chakra sense. She tilts her head, wondering why that chakra feels so familiar.

Ah.

Riko knocks. The chakra doesn’t move, but it isn’t *asleep.*

It makes sense, she supposes. If she were staying at Kakashi’s, she wouldn’t open the door either, seeing as visitors would be there for him, not her.

Leaves her with two choices, announcing her identity verbally or dropping the stealth mode of her chakra. Both make her chest feel tight with anxiety.


A moment passes, then there’s a scrambling sound and the door flies open.

“Hi!” Karen breathes, her eyes wide.

Riko takes in her appearance. “You look better,” she comments hoarsely.

Nowhere near as drained as before.

Colour rises in Karin’s cheeks. “Thank you! Um, do you want to come in? How have you been? Did you win your fight? I, there are cookies?” With a look at Riko’s hands, she adds hastily, “I’ll feed you!”

For a moment, Riko stares at her blankly because wow. So many words, so much energy. It’s overwhelming. But not in a bad way, and it’s nice not being treated like she’s fragile or looked at differently.
“Okay.” She nods and enters the apartment. “This is Tenzou.”

“Hello!” Karin squeaks out, scurrying into Kakashi’s kitchen and coming back with a bowl of cookies. They look exactly like the kind that Fuji makes. He must have had a recent therapy appointment. That, or he discovered a talent for baking.

“Uchiha-san.” Tenzou nods at Riko’s fellow redhead.

Wait, what? Did he just call her-

“Uchiha?” Riko asks in utter bamboozlement.

“Um.” Karin’s facial colour is beginning to match that of her hair. “I, uh. Yes. Sasuke-san, er. He. Yeah.”

Riko is completely lost now, but Tenzou proves to be reliable. “Uchiha Sasuke took exception to Kusagakure’s demands to have Karin-san released into their custody and filed for her adoption into the Uchiha clan.”

…what.

“That doesn’t sound like Sasuke?” she offers.

Karin shrugs helplessly. “I didn’t ask him to! I have a clan already! Well, had, I guess. Don’t know their name, Kaa-san died before I was old enough to keep important secrets, and they’re extinct except for me, so. Um. Anyway. It was nice of him.”

“Right,” Riko says slowly.

It still doesn’t sound like Sasuke, but who knows. He was protective of Karin back at the infirmary, she did save all their asses in the second phase of the exams, and well.

The Forest of Death clearly rattled Sasuke. Maybe he’s turning a new leaf? Trying to be nicer? Who knows. It’s good for Karin, she supposes, and Sasuke’s business is his own.

“Congratulations,” she adds lamely. “But you’re staying with Kakashi-sensei?”

“Sasuke’s busy and his house is creepy.” Karin holds a cookie to Riko’s mouth. “So until I have my own place, yeah.”

Riko casts a glance around. Kakashi’s place isn’t exactly what she’d call homey. There’s very little furniture, and from experience she knows his fridge tends to be empty. If he wants food, he mooches from — Riko side-eyes Tenzou — his neighbour. Who isn’t spending enough time at his place to cook this month.

Is Karin living off of cookies? Is Riko eating her dinner right now?

“Do you want to have a sleepover?” she asks hesitantly. “At, uh, my place.”

Karin lights up. “Really? Yes!”

Riko manages a smile and takes a bite of the cookie. Chews and swallows while she scrambles for a new subject to talk about. “What’re you doing this month?”

“Killing time.” Karin laughs uncomfortably. “I’ll have to go to the Academy here if I want to be a
Konoha kunoichi.”

“And do you?” Riko frowns. Last she checked, Karin didn’t seem all that happy being a shinobi.

The other girl shrugs with a wry, self-deprecating smile. “What else would I do? It’ll be good to learn some real fighting skills, at least. So long as no one makes me heal, I’m okay with it.”

Alright then.

“What’s your month look like?” Karin gives her a dubious look. “Training?”

“Far as I’m able.” Riko sighs. Then hesitantly asks, “I could use help with my chakra sense? You’re really good at it.”

Karin lights up. “Sure! I’d love to help you!”

Flummoxed at the easy agreement, Riko mutters, “Thanks, you don’t have to.”

“I know.” Nudging her with the half-eaten cookie, Karin tilts her head. “But you were kind to me even though we’re from different villages, and you helped a lot, and maybe it was just because of—” She points at Riko’s messy mane of hair and then tugs at her own. “But it meant a lot to me.”

Riko blinks at her. “Huh?”

What about their hair? Wait — ah.

She’d completely forgotten about the whole red hair deal. How the colour implies clan heritage. That, apparently, actually applies to Karin. Even if she doesn’t seem to know much about it.

“I don’t actually have any clan blood,” Riko clarifies, feeling guilty for giving Karin false hopes. “It’s just red hair, sorry.”

“Oh.” Karin slumps in disappointment, but then she perks up. “Then you being nice, it just means even more! Of course I’ll help you! Let’s be friends, Riko!”

The corners of Riko’s mouth tip up. “I thought we already were.”

It’s the strangest sleepover Riko’s ever had. Neither of her parents bat an eyelash at Karin’s or Tenzou’s presence, though.

Why Tenzou’s staying visible now, Riko has no idea, but she supposes it doesn’t matter much.

Having two people in her room means she isn’t alone in it. And Karin doesn’t need to be asked to touch her. When they go to sleep after a long lesson about chakra sensing, she almost immediately starts snoring and a few moments later is plastered to Riko’s back.

“Tenzou?” Riko asks, once she’s certain Karin’s truly asleep. “I had a knife and a scroll. At the tower. I’d like them back.”

When she first woke up, she’d been in a hospital gown, none of her belongings anywhere to be
seen. In the days after, she’d gotten casual wear, replacement glasses, and books. But no weaponry, armour, or anything else combat-related.

It’s galling, but not an immediate concern, seeing as she can’t do much of anything anyway. Still, at least some armour would have been nice. Reassuring.

“Very well.”

“Thanks.”

She falls into an uneasy sleep soon after.

Shikamaru is at the breakfast table when Riko and Karin make their way downstairs. His eyes lock on her the moment they come in view.

He looks different. Dark clothes similar to the standard shinobi uniform, bandage-wrapped hands, and he has a black eye. Training injury, probably, or at least Riko hopes so.

Other than that, he looks far less brooding than he has ever since Nami.

It’s been over two weeks since she last saw him, huh.

“Riko,” he greets, taking her in with a sharp gaze that makes her feel like everything that happened is written on her forehead, and the curse and all that’s wrong with her besides. If she could run, she would.

But she only nods a greeting at him.

“Good morning, Riko, Karin.” Yoshino nods at both of them. “Sit down, breakfast. Did you sleep well?”

Bless Karin, she breaks into chatter immediately and gives Riko an excuse not to talk before Shikamaru has to leave for training.

After breakfast, Karin goes home, but judging by the hopeful expression on her face when Riko gives her a standing invitation for dinner and sleepovers, she’ll be back this evening. Which, good. Riko isn’t sure how she’ll manage sleep without her.

Once she’s gone, Tenzou escorts Riko to the hospital, where she’s stuck for several hours with Hyuuga Hitomi and Aburame Michi fussing over her.

When she’s finally allowed to leave the hospital or the day, she goes back to the Nara compound. The moment they have some privacy, Tenzou offers her a bag. Peering inside, Riko sees the items she asked him for — hunting knife and mystery scroll. And a box-shaped item that has her blinking because she knows what it is, but hasn’t seen one of them since her time with the Dursleys ended.

A video cassette.

She didn’t know those existed here.

“What’s that?” she asks, frowning.

“Footage of the preliminary matches,” Tenzou answers blandly. “They ought to be helpful in your preparations.”

Riko stares at him, stunned.
“They won’t cancel the advantage your competition has over you,” he adds. “The quality leaves something to be desired.”

Still goggling at him, she asks, “Do you like hugs?”

Tenzou freezes. She thought his face was blank before, but now it’s more so. That’s a no, she figures.

“That’s okay.” She nods. “I’ll thank you some other way. Where can we watch the recordings?”

“There’s a room in the Jounin Station.” His voice is wooden.

“Can we go now?” There’s no time to waste. She’s already over two weeks behind on training and the only thing she knows about her opponent is that he specialises in taijutsu. At least she got an impression of his character outside of the preliminaries, his team having confronted hers.

How she’s going to prepare for that fight when she isn’t even cleared for exercise, when she can’t even use her hands, is another matter. But she’ll figure it out. She can do this.

They watch the videos over and over. Some of them make Riko sick to her stomach — Temari from Suna versus Haruno Sakura is one of them. Or Oto’s Zaku against one of Karin’s teammates.

But none of the matches horrify her as much as what Sabaku no Gaara — also from Suna — does to Yoroi from Konoha. She’s so glad he’ll be fighting the other remaining Oto shinobi, but if Sasuke won against Temari, his next fight might be Gaara and that would be bad.

And there’s nothing Riko can do about it.

She has her own match to worry about. Rock Lee is terrifying, and he doesn’t get any less so no matter how often she replays his fight against Shino.

It’s not that he’s brutal or ruthless, he’s the opposite. Courteous, earnest.

The problem is, Riko has nothing to counter him with. There are no tricks to his fighting style. No weak points. He’s pure strength and skill and dedication. He even overcame the fact that he’s incapable of nin- and genjutsu.

Things are looking bleak.

Still, she has to try. Has to do this, needs to win for once in her life, not on a fluke or a strange kekkei genkai but on her own merits.

Just, she needs to do this!

Fighting in the tournament is the one choice she can control.

“How do I fight a taijutsu specialist?” she asks Rikuto-ossan at the armoury later that night. There’s no work she can do with her hands boxed in, but she’s been sitting in a corner watching him go about his duties silently, and he hasn’t kicked her out yet.
Rikuto’s another person she can manage to talk to.

“Why the hell would you?” he grunts back.

It’s not the most helpful answer he could have given her, but it’s not useless either. He has a point. She can’t fight Lee directly if she wants to win.

“Thanks,” she says. “Come watch my match?”

He makes an annoyed sound. “The hell are you doing sitting there?” he demands. “Go do something useful.”

Riko holds up her hands. “Can’t.”

Sneering at her, the old man points her to the door. “Out. Third level. Sort the scrolls into piles.”

Fine then.

But, “Speaking of scrolls,” she says. “I found one and I don’t know what it does.” Somehow, awkwardly, she manages to produce the mystery scroll from Usagi-chan’s death bed and shows it to Rikuto. It survived her… encounter with Orochimaru, there’s got to be something special about it.

He examines it with sharp eyes before he draws it open.

“Summoning contract,” he grunts eventually, his voice perfectly neutral. “Rabbits.”

Riko blinks at him.

Rikuto rolls the scroll up again and dumps it in her bag. “Get to work, brat. I’m not paying you to sit around.”

She walks out of the room, mind reeling. A summoning contract? Those are rare.

And what was up with Rikuto? Does he know anything about where that scroll comes from? About the contract?

Rabbits, huh? She’s not sure what to think, if she even has the chakra to support a summoning contract, but she’s fairly sure that rabbits have never come up in the list of high-level summons the Academy touched upon. If they’re a weak summon, it might work out.

And… it’s rabbits. The scroll was on Usagi-chan’s death bed.

She wants to try.

Later, though, and she’ll need to check where the rabbits rank in terms of chakra requirements.

But… that’s one mystery solved.

Riko goes down to the lower levels, still deep in thought, but she pulls herself together when she steps through the barriers warding the room. Her chakra signature is keyed into it, but the sensation of the barrier sliding over her — probing, searching — is eerie and makes her uneasy.

She’s been in this room before, but she doubts she’ll ever get used to it.
It’s a library. Rows and rows of metal shelves, all protected by barrier seals, and they’re filled with unlabelled scrolls. The temperature of the room is cool, the air dry, and her steps almost echo. It’s not particularly big, just a decently sized room, but the atmosphere sends chills down her spine.

Riko shakes herself, shaking off the inexplicable fear of being in this room by herself, and looks around for the scrolls that she’s supposed to sort. To the side, she spies a few wooden crates, and her hunch proves correct — there are indeed unsorted scrolls in it. They smell of unfamiliar cleaning materials rather than paper, but she thinks she catches a waft of the solution Rikuto uses to get rid of blood.

Enemy loot, huh. She eyes the scrolls, at this point resigned rather than surprised. Getting entirely too used to handling gear taken from corpses. At least the scrolls are clean, unlike the weapons and uniforms Rikuto-ossan makes her deal with sometimes.

To sort the scrolls into the shelves and update the registry — at least she’s familiar with the filing system — she’ll need to look at the contents.

Opening scrolls without hands is doable and nobody’s around to watch her embarrass herself, not that she cares anymore if anyone laughs at her.

There’s a job to do. The fact that Rikuto thinks of her as someone still capable of work, of being useful, it means so much.

So she doesn’t intend to get distracted, but the scrolls have Kiri water jutsu in them. A Water Dragon is definitely too high-level for her, but it’s interesting. And it gives her an idea — Konoha doesn’t have a lot of water users, but this library is full of jutsu and other information from all over.

There must be something helpful in here. She just has to find it.

And her employee benefits mean she can research here without having to jump through all the hoops it’d normally take, at least for the non-sensitive things. All she has to do is notify Rikuto.

The smile feels foreign and grim on her face, but it’s something.
Kakashi is training Sasuke for the finals and neither of them is anywhere to be found.

Riko goes to see Naruto instead. Her motivation for it is low, but it’s low for everything. Emotions remain muted. Not non-existent, but it’s as if they’re swathed in cotton.

Toge says that isn’t such an unusual reaction and that they’ll work it out.

If he says so, it must be true. He knows what he’s talking about.

The walk to Naruto’s place blurs by her — one moment she’s set in motion, the next she seems to have already arrived, and her watch shows that it took the appropriate amount of time, but if anyone asked her which route she took or if anyone greeted her on the way, she wouldn’t be able to answer.

That’s fine. Tenzou’s around somewhere, she’s safe enough.

Naruto isn’t home, so she shrugs to herself and goes to check the training grounds he usually frequents.

She finds him in the third place she inspects and blinks in confusion because he’s arguing with a strange man about… training? Geta sandals, long white hair, tall and broad, and the way he holds himself — the stranger is clearly a shinobi, though she can’t see village insignia anywhere. Instead, he’s got ‘Oil’ written on his hitae-ate.

Wait, that actually rings a bell, and… wouldn’t it make sense for him to show up when his former teammate is threatening the village? Or maybe it’s just a coincidence.

Well, she’s found Naruto, and him yelling at the most respected of the Sannin is probably not the greatest idea, so she walks closer and says, “Hello.”

“Teach me something-” Naruto spins around to face her, and his face lights up. “Ricchan!”

Words are still hard, and she only nods. His face falls a tiny bit and she feels a faint sting of regret. But the words just keep getting stuck in her throat.

“Are your hands okay?” He’s staring at the boxes enclosing them now, frowning worriedly.

There’s something tense about him, in the way he looks at her.

Scared. Insecure. And that’s her fault, probably, but she doesn’t have the energy to try and fix it. Doesn’t know where to even begin.

Belatedly she realises that he asked her a question and she hasn’t answered yet. Conversation is hard.

“They’ll be… fine,” she replies slowly.

It’s not untrue. Eventually, her hands would be okay. Not the same as before, but… functional.

Her hands are the last of everything that’s wrong with her.

The man Naruto was yelling at is watching Riko, and she stares back. Opens her mouth for a
greeting since Yoshino taught her manners, but Naruto interjects, “Ricchan, don’t talk to him! Ero-
sennin’s a weird old pervert!” He leans closer and, in a loud whisper, adds, “He wrote those gross
books Kakashi-sensei reads!”

“I know,” Riko answers. “They’re good.”

Naruto stares at her, horror slowly spreading over his expression.

Jiraiya of the Sannin starts to laugh. “A fan!” he exclaims, and his voice is jovial and friendly. The
kind of voice people would trust instantly. “What’s your name, young lady?”

“Nara Riko.” She looks at him, and she probably should be more in awe. It’s one of the Sannin.
The world’s best fuuinjutsu master. “It’s an honour to meet you, Jiraiya-sama,” she adds with
awkward delay.

“And you, my dear.” He winks at her. “I’ll leave the brat in your capable hands.”

“Hey!” Naruto spins around to Jiraiya. “Don’t-”

The man disappears in a puff of smoke. Naruto blows up his cheeks in annoyance. He looks like a
chipmunk.

“I wanted to talk to you,” Riko says, and her voice sounds oddly bland. She should… put more
into it. Yes.

“Yeah,” Naruto agrees quickly, and that nervous anxiety is back in his eyes. His head bobs up and
down. “It’s been a while!”

“Yes.” She sits down, her legs are getting tired.

Her childhood friend drops down beside her. “They wouldn’t let me see you in the hospital,” he
win?”

This is exhausting, and she’s running out of words.

“Do you remember…” She frowns. “In the forest. With the snakes. Orochimaru.”

Naruto shivers, but he plays it over with a grin. “Yeah, but we kicked his ass good! Right, Ricchan?” He elbows her with a grin, and maybe everything is alright in his world. Maybe it’s just
that simple for him to move on.

“He attacked again after my match,” she answers. “I got hurt, so I have to rest a lot.”

“Oh.” Naruto stares at her worriedly. “But you’ll be okay, right?”

She shrugs absently, staring at the sky now. Not a cloud in sight. Shikamaru must be sad — but, ah
right, he doesn’t look at the clouds anymore.

“So they tell me,” she replies vaguely. “How are you? You got hurt, too.”

He startles and then pastes a smile on his face. “I’m okay! Oh man, Kiba got me good there, haha.
So fast! I’ll train a lot, and then I’ll get him next time! I wanted to kick that Neji-bastard’s ass,
though…”

Riko makes a vague sound of agreement. “If Kiba doesn’t manage, I’ll do it.”
Provided she manages the unlikely feat of beating Rock Lee.

“Eh? You’re in the finals?” Naruto asks her. “But you got hurt, Ricchan!”

She shrugs again. “I won my match.”

“But…” He stares and blurts out, “You’re not like them!”

Riko tilts her head in confusion, frowning lightly, because she has no idea what he means. Who he’s comparing her to.

There’s no need to ask, though, he’s rambling already.

“Like, that Neji guy is all—” he gestures wildly—“Mean, and he’s got all that stuff with his hands, and the creepy eyes, and Kiba’s crazy, and Sasuke’s super strong, and the Suna team is scary — not that I’m scared! I’m totally stronger than them — but you’re, you’re not weak, I’m not saying you’re weak, you’re really good—”

“Not really,” she mutters. “I’m not that great.”

“You are!” Naruto protests. “You’re the best!”

No, she isn’t, and he’s more naive than she thought if he believes that. Everyone else who made it through to the finals is incredible in some way. And she...

“I’m just Riko,” she murmurs. “That’s what you meant, isn’t it?”

He slumps. “I didn’t mean it like that!”

“It’s just the truth.” She shrugs, laying back to look up at the sky.

After a pause, Naruto drops down next to her, and she can feel his stare on her face.

“What have you been up to?” she asks quietly, ignoring the stare. “This month. Sensei’s training Sasuke and I haven’t been around.”

He must have been lonely, she realises with a faint sting of guilt and sadness. Regret.

“Training,” he says after another pause.

Their conversations never used to be so… halting. Uncomfortable.

His words get faster as he speaks, as if in an effort to grasp for that easy friendship they had. “Yeah, Kakashi-sensei stuck me with this closet pervert guy for training! But he’s weak, and lame, and then I met this other pervert who’s super open about it! But he’s also crazy strong and he knocked out my teacher, so! He’s got to take responsibility and train me! It’s just lame stuff though. I only get tadpoles. And there was some stuff about weird chakra…”

She closes her eyes, Naruto’s familiar voice lulling her into a doze.

This is nice. It’s peaceful. Like nothing bad can touch her. The dark things in her head can’t reach through the warmth of the sun, the chatter about wonderfully normal things, the brightness of Naruto’s chakra.

Eventually, his stream of words slows, and he gets more quiet, hesitant. Breaks off.
“Ricchan?” he asks haltingly, and he sounds so young. “What’s going to happen?”

Riko opens her eyes. “I don’t know,” she whispers, and she sounds young, too, but old at the same time.

Here’s the part where she should tell him. That the future of their team is… limited.

That they don’t have healthy relationships as teammates, that being teammates is changing their friendship in bad ways, and that she’d rather be his friend than his teammate.

That she’s messed up and her future as a kunoichi is uncertain.

So many things he needs to know, that they should talk about, that are important — and the words are stuck in her throat. Clogging it, choking her.

“We’ll figure it out,” Naruto says firmly, like he can make it happen just with the strength of his will.

That’s not how the world works, but for just this moment, Riko can believe him. It’s such a nice fantasy.

When Riko gets home, she doesn’t expect either of her parents to be there. Yoshino should be at a meeting and Shikaku has barely been home at all with all the Chuunin Exam business.

And yet-

“Mom and Dad are inside with Aburame Shibi,” Shikamaru says, apparently having waited on the porch for her to return. “They want to talk to you.”

Riko frowns. If it was just her adoptive parents, fine, but the head of the Aburame Clan? She’s seen Shino’s father a couple of times before, but she doesn’t remember him ever being in her family home, and they’ve never talked before.

Is this about her hands? Aburame Michi’s bugs dug the new chakra channels into her flesh. But that’s a medical procedure, nothing to do with clan business.

Riko looks down at herself, wondering if she’s presentable enough to meet a clan head.

Not really. Her trousers and jacket have dirt on them from where she laid on the training ground with Naruto, and both have seen better days in general.

Does she care? No, but Yoshino does, so Riko makes an attempt to at least dust herself off. It’s awkward with the clunky boxes on her hands, but Shikamaru takes pity on her and helps, patting her down.

That’s nice of him. She should thank him.

She should talk to him and everyone again. How’s she supposed to brave the Chuunin Finals if she can’t even bring herself to talk to the people she loves?
It was doable with Naruto, but then, despite everything that happened, he’s Naruto. Shikamaru notices so much more than him.

And she and him were barely speaking even before this whole thing.

“I looked at the clouds today,” she says.

His head turns slowly, eyes finding hers. “Yeah?”

Riko glances to the side. Can’t take the probing eyes, gleaming with sharp intelligence all focused on analysing her. “There weren’t any.”

Shikamaru sighs quietly and pats her shoulder. “Go inside. I doubt you’re in trouble.”

She gives him a questioning look. He’s not coming inside with her?

“Got a nighttime exercise,” he mutters. “Good luck.”

Riko nods and they part ways. Shikamaru makes for the compound’s exit and she heads inside. She passes a mirror on the way and halts. Some part of her winces.

She looks like a ghost. Far too pale, and her eyes seem huge. The glimpse of the Cursed Seal on the back of her neck, just beneath the hairline, sends a cold shiver over her, makes her stomach clench with sudden nausea.

The hatred piercing through the numbness takes her by surprise, and for a moment she can barely breathe, her shoulders locking up and she wants to rage and destroy; draw blood, and she clenches her fist—oh.

Her hands are still boxed in, right, and shit — Riko sways on her feet and catches herself against the wall. What was that just now?

She sucks in a deep breath and lets the air out shakily. The seal on her neck throbs painfully.

Oh.

They didn’t tell her that would happen. Just that the containment seal would hold as long as her will kept strong enough.

She, shaking, feeling cold and small and helpless, tries to breathe through the terror of the realisation that Kakashi sealing the curse up doesn’t mean that it’s gone or dormant. Starts listing the things she sees, hears, smells, senses.

The seal stops doing that, goes back to being an unsettling-looking mark on her skin, and it’s all she can do not to throw up. This was going to happen again, wasn’t it?

She’ll be dealing with this for the rest of her life. Having something in her head, trying to take her over and turn her into a hate-filled monster.

Riko can’t look at it anymore. Just can’t, and she yanks her hair free from its tie and the shoulder-length mess of dark red curls — the colour of blood, but that’s not a good thought either — obscures the bastardisation of everything fuuinjutsu stands for.

That’s better.

She’ll figure out a more thorough and permanent way to hide it later. Or maybe Yoshino will have
an idea. That could be a good conversation starter.

Thinking of Yoshino reminds her that her adoptive parents plus a clan head — head of a noble clan to boot — are waiting for her. There’s no time for... this.

Riko takes a deep breath and goes to the fancy tea room where Shikaku and Yoshino receive guests.

Aburame Shibi-sama shares numerous physical traits with his son. His skin is more tan, though, and his face weathered. He exudes a presence that Shino lacks, but might grow into at some point. His chakra is hidden well.

Riko’s adoptive parents sit across from him, and all three are nursing tea.

The whole setting appears relaxed and comfortable, rather than formal and stiff.

“There you are, Riko,” Yoshino speaks up when Riko pauses in the doorway. “Come in.”

Cautiously, Riko steps into the room and sits where Yoshino indicates, between her and Shikaku.

Introductions are made. Aburame-sama has a deep, calming voice. The hum of his bug hive is almost soothing.

“Shibi is my former genin teammate,” Yoshino tells Riko with a warm smile at the man, but there’s something reserved about the way she holds herself.

Riko blinks slowly at that.

Huh.

How come she never thought about the fact that her mother must have had a genin team, too? She’s heard so much about Shikaku’s iteration of the Ino-Shika-Chou combination, but this is the first time Yoshino ever mentioned a team of her own.

Isn’t that strange?

“Shibi wanted to talk to you,” Yoshino explains.

Riko nods and eyes the man cautiously. What’s this about? Is it to do with her hands? It was one of his clan members that laid the new chakra channels in them, but again, that was a medical issue and nothing to do with clan business. But it’s the only possible reason she can think of.

“My son sends his regards,” Shibi begins. “And his apologies — during the Chuunin Exams he assured you that his kikaichuu would not consume the chakra your kekkei genkai provides you with, but he couldn’t prevent individual bugs from ingesting small amounts. Until the members of our clan complete puberty, their symbiotes can be quite quirky.”

Her eyebrows draw together and she stares back uneasily.

Shino’s bugs ate some of her magic? And now his father and clan head is here about it? She doubts it’s just to extend the apology, though it is appreciated.

Shino helped her so much without hesitation or asking for an explanation, in a situation designed to make them rivals. Of course she forgives him. It’s not his fault that a couple of his bugs took a nibble when they were draining the chakra build-up.
She wants to tell Shibi all of that, but everyone’s looking at her and the words get stuck.

So she just waits for whatever he wants from her.

Shibi reaches into his coat and withdraws a wooden box. Sliding back a cover reveals a small glass window which lets her look at the contents of the box.

It’s bugs, just three of them. Kikaichuu. But they’re off. Too big, all of them. One bug has too many wings, which are coloured a brilliant green. Another is zooming around at dizzying speed. The third one glows.

And all of them are bouncing against the small window as if trying to reach her and Shibi calmly puts the box away.

“When Shino’s symbiotes consumed your secondary chakra, he noted an increase in their speed, intelligence, durability, and wilfulness,” Shibi begins to explain. “While interesting, the effects were temporary. However, one of them laid eggs while in this state. Most of them inert or not capable of survival — except for the three that resulted in the specimens I showed you.”

Even if she could talk, Riko would have nothing to reply to that.

Just. What?

Shibi-sama doesn’t seem to expect a reply. He just continues, “The Aburame Clan is very interested in exploring this phenomenon. We believe there is a potential to breed entirely new species of insects with your help, Riko-san.”

She blinks at him, still trying to digest that she caused magically mutated bugs.

“There would, of course, be compensation,” Shibi adds matter-of-factly. “Please consider our request and let us know your decision. If you have any questions about the process you’d assist us with, do not hesitate to ask.”

He somehow manages to make his abrupt goodbye polite and courteous.

Silence follows. Yoshino pours Riko a cup of tea, but even if she had the hands to hold it with, she doesn’t think she’d have touched it. Too thrown by this development.

Consuming her magic mutated the Aburame bugs?

And now they want to breed them? Because they think it’s interesting? And might be useful?

Ha. That’d be a first, her ‘kekkei genkai’ being good for something.

“Would you like some time to think it over?” Shikaku breaks the silence.

Riko nods. Then she shakes her head. Frowns.

What’s there to consider? It’s not like she can use the magic for anything. Why wouldn’t she let Shino’s clan have a piece of it?

It might even yield some information.

“Since you can’t give written agreement and haven’t been informed about procedures, answering the request will have to wait,” Yoshino comments, something shrewd in her eyes. “If you do decide on a positive answer, let me know and we’ll discuss what you’ll request as compensation from the
Aburame.”

Oh.

Right, compensation. And legal stuff. Because this is clan business, what with the Aburame clan head making a request of a Nara clan member in the presence of the Nara clan head.

She’s going to have to research clan laws, huh.

That’s definitely not happening until after the Chuunin Exams are over. There’s just no time.

The boxes come off of Riko’s hands when there’s just a week and a day left until the finals. When she raises them in front of her face, they look pale and thin and have odd bruises snaking over them. Strange puncture scars are dotted across her skin where bugs must have entered and exited.

Her storage seals stand out starkly against the skin in raised lines.

Ugly. Her hands are ugly now, but when she flexes her fingers, when she flicks out an experimental chakra string it works and the ache is a faint, distant thing.

She’s never, ever taking her hands for granted again. They’re wonderful.

Nodding to all the advice and information from the medics, Riko can’t stop moving her hands. Marvelling that she can feel again. She doesn’t care that it hurts.

“You’re cleared for physical exercise,” the medic says disapprovingly. “But we recommend not straining yourself. Avoid excessive channelling of chakra through your hands as well.”

Riko nods, and a few minutes later she’s walking out of the hospital, fingers twisting into dexterity exercises. Making her way to the team training ground, which she figures should be deserted, with Naruto busy learning whatever from Jiraiya-sama and Kakashi having taken Sasuke who-knows-where.

She has so much work to do-

The Oto shinobi steps out in front of her and Riko stills. Her eyes locking on the symbol on his hitae-ate, the musical note identical to Orochimaru’s.

Ignoring the taste of bile in her throat, the phantom burn of the Cursed Seal — it can’t do anything, damn it, it’s contained — Riko gives the boy an impassive look. According to the videos, this should be Abumi Zaku. He won against Karin’s teammate by continuously blasting him with wind jutsu. He’d be fighting the puppeteer from Suna.

“Heh,” he says, and looks her up and down with a sneer on his face. “So you’re the one.”

Whatever that means, it can’t be good.

How are the Oto-nin still allowed to be here? Orochimaru revealed Otogakure to be his creation, and he’s obviously an enemy of Konoha. Has killed a number of comrades. Put the Cursed Seal on Riko. Why haven’t Zaku and his teammate been disqualified and picked up to be questioned?
But here the boy is, walking freely. Talking to her, who was targeted by Orochimaru.

Tenzou is just one chakra-flare away, she reminds herself, and holds Zaku’s stare before she shrugs.

He laughs and leans forward. Smiling, but the look in his eyes is hideous. His chakra feels unpleasant, too. Angry, jealous, hateful. “It should have been Uchiha,” he drawls. “But you’re both so weak, I’ll crush both of you, and it’ll be me Orochimaru-sama looks at.”

Oh.

She supposes that explains why he’s allowed to walk around Konoha. It’s because he can’t keep his mouth shut.

“At least the Uchiha is a worthy opponent,” Zaku drones. “You? You should be running scared, little girl.”

Yeah, she knows that.

“I’ll grind you into paste,” he snarls, and Riko just looks at him.

Crazed, murderous eyes, but his chakra feels almost desperate.

“I feel sorry for you,” she says and walks past him.

A wordless snarl of rage, his chakra spiking, and Riko spins around to face him, dropping down and rolling, and not a moment too soon because wind comes shrieking out of his hands and he’s swinging them to follow her evasive move.

And then freezes because Genma is suddenly there, a hand clamped around Zaku’s wrist, and the expression on his face is stone-cold. “Fighting between contestants before the matches will not be tolerated,” he says neutrally. “For the duration of your stay, you are now restricted to your residence. Follow.”

He doesn’t look at Riko, and she knows that it’s because he’s the proctor for the next test and there are rules, but it still hurts. Feels personal.

Like he can’t even look at her anymore now that she’s so… broken.

Genma leaves with Zaku in tow and the boy shoots her a furious glance, as if trying to eviscerate her with his eyes alone.

She feels strangely robbed. Had snapped into combat-readiness but now the fight is gone, leaving her filled with energy that has nowhere to go. Thoughts spiralling while she turns on her heel and jogs the rest of the way to the training ground.

And then she just stands there, in the middle of it, and tries to clear her head. Breathe.

He was just trying to get into her head, and right now, she’s letting him win. Calm down!

“Riko, you need to calm down,” Tenzou’s voice says from close-by, which isn’t helpful, and she just told herself that! Why is he only showing up now, anyway?!

She lets out an aggravated snarl, and that feels good. Freeing. “I’m calm!”

“No,” he answers flatly. “Take deep breaths.”
Riko spins around to face him. After weeks of numbness, the anger feels great. Like breaking out of a glass cage.

And oh, it’s suddenly there again. The magic. Bright and blazing, humming in her veins, making everything sharp and vibrant. Making her feel strong and warm, a puzzle piece slotting into place.

“Riko!” Tenzou’s voice snaps sharply, and he’s tense.

“I don’t want to,” she breathes.

“Calm down. That’s an order.”

Riko stares at him and laughs bitterly. “Then maybe don’t let those people near me in the first place!” she shouts and hates how shrill her voice sounds. “Bodyguard, my ass!”

“Riko,” he warns.

“Bet everybody’s happy it’s just me who got cursed instead of precious Sasuke!” She laughs again, and then she can’t stop. Just keeps laughing and laughing, so hard she can’t breathe and it sounds like sobbing, now.

The magic dies from her system. She tries to hold onto it, but it’s fleeting like smoke, immaterial. Gone, and her neck pulses-

There’s a burst of chakra, and Riko stumbles back, but suddenly she can’t move. Is trapped, shackles around all her limbs, her torso, her neck.

Dazed, she stares at Tenzou, whose face is impassive, his hands pressed together in the snake seal. He’s restraining her, and this should be impossible. Mokuton, Wood Release, died with the Shodaime Hokage, despite dozens of attempts to recreate it. But there it is — wooden restraints keeping her immobilised, growing from Tenzou’s body.

Riko can’t feel her chakra at all anymore. But the Cursed Seal has also gone inactive, and she can breathe again. Hear her own thoughts, have her own emotions.

“Control yourself,” Tenzou orders tightly.

*How* can he have Wood Release? Her eyes flick up to the Hokage monument. Senju Hashirama’s face, as always, looks out into the distance.

“You’re not the only one to have her life disrupted by Orochimaru,” he tells her evenly, a finality in his tone signalling that this is all he’s willing to tell her.

She looks back to him, her body now slack in the wooden restraints. She’s tired and drained. Being unable to so much as sense, let alone access her own chakra, feels utterly wrong, but the relief of having the Cursed Seal’s weight on her mind lifted is worth it a thousand times. Riko hadn’t even realised how off it’d made her until Tenzou did… his thing.

Right now, in this moment, she’s just Riko. Alone in her head.

“Are you calm now?” he asks, and she nods silently. The wood melts back into the ground, and Riko sways on her feet but manages not to fall on her bum.

There it is again, the goddamn curse. But it’s easier to tell now where it begins and Riko ends. At least for the moment, when she’s had a minute’s reprieve.
Maybe it’ll get easier with practice.

Taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly, Riko forces her legs to keep steady. Firms her stance, tentatively drawing on her chakra again. It obeys as it should, and she forces down the unsettlement at how easily Tenzou snatched it away from her.

She’s only got a week to train for the finals. She can’t afford distractions.
Riko blinks when upon her return from training, five days before the finale of the Chuunin Exams, she finds Kiba and Akamaru in front of her door.

“Hey,” she greets, quietly confused. It’s always been her visiting him since their Academy graduation, by her own choice. Before that, they didn’t really have a Just-Kiba-and-Riko friendship, it was a group thing with their Academy crowd.

He jolts, looks to have been half-asleep. Akamaru is asleep on his lap.

“Sorry,” she says softly. “Have you been waiting for long?”

Darkness fell almost half an hour ago.

“No big deal, you weren’t expecting me.” Kiba shrugs and gets to his feet, Akamaru safely deposited on his head. “Training for the big day, eh, Riko?”

She manages a weary smile. It feels foreign on her face. “Fishing for information on the competition, Kiba?”

Kiba huffs a laugh, steps forward, and draws her into a gentle but firm hug. “Happy birthday, Riko.”

“Huh?”

“Happy twelfth birthday,” Kiba says, and the words don’t make any more sense the second time. “Sorry I haven’t been around. It’s been...” His voice trails off.

“Difficult?” she finishes, leaning against him, and remembering what he looked like the last time they saw each other. How he lost it after Hinata fell. The look on his face as they led him out of the arena.

“Yeah,” he answers hoarsely, and hugs her tighter before he lets go and takes a step back. Tries for a smile. It comes out as tired as her earlier one felt. “Enough of that. Here’s your present.” He holds out a small package toward her.

Riko receives it, staring down at it. Even in the darkness, she can tell he wrapped it himself. It’s clumsily done. “Today’s my birthday,” she says blankly.
“I’ve had it on my calendar for weeks now,” Kiba tells her, sounding proud of himself.

“I didn’t.” Dragging her eyes up from the birthday gift, Riko stares at Kiba, and her voice is thin and small. “I forgot.”

Kiba blinks at her. “Your family didn’t celebrate?”

“I stayed with Karin last night,” she whispers. “I wasn’t home.”

She’s shaking. Has to take a deep breath and let it out slowly.

“Hey, you okay?” Kiba reaches out tentatively to draw her back into a hug. “You don’t look so good.”

Riko laughs wetly. “I forgot my own birthday.”

He shrugs. “We’ve got a lot going on. Can always celebrate later. It’s not the end of the world.”

“No,” she agrees, and her voice almost breaks on the word. “It’s fine.”

Except she’s never forgotten her birthday before. No matter how busy. No matter what. Because there was a time when she was the only one who’d remember. Who would tell her happy birthday and do some small, fun thing as a present to herself.

Her family here does celebrate it. Not a big party or anything, but a nice breakfast, dinner at a restaurant later, and the afternoon off. A few small gifts.

It’s a special day. *Her* day.

And she forgot.

Kiba smooths a hand over her hair.

“Let’s go inside,” she rasps and tugs him towards the house. Nobody calls out a greeting when they enter and it doesn’t surprise her — she’s hardly seen Shikaku, the Chuunin Exams cause him so much work. Yoshino, too, but when Riko’s hands were boxed, she’d been around constantly.

Shikamaru’s upstairs in his room, though, she can sense him clearly. He appears to be sleeping, his chakra at low capacity. He’s been training hard ever since Raidou took over as his team’s jounin sensei.

“I haven’t eaten yet, have you?” she mutters to Kiba as she leads him towards the kitchen.

“Yeah, but I’m hungry again.”

She flicks on the light and stills at the sight of the table. There’s a small pile of packages and a card reading ‘Happy birthday’ left on it.

Her throat feels tight, but she only walks over and places Kiba’s gift with the heap of presents before she goes to the fridge. Bowls and boxes filled with her favourites greet her.

Even though everyone in the family has been so busy, they’d been here to celebrate with her today, and Riko wasn’t there for it. Too caught up in her own drama that she forgot that there are still *good things* in the world. That life goes on.

Kiba makes an appreciative sound and helps her set the table. Both of them hungry, they eat in
silence, then clear up and do the dishes.

“So you gonna open the presents or what?” he asks her once that’s done.

Riko eyes the pile. “Yeah,” she murmurs.

A bunch of new hairties, a scroll holster, ink brushes, and a block of fuuinjutsu ink. Pen and notebook. Thread to embroider seals into cloth with. A pair of sturdy gloves with armour protecting the back of her hands, flexible otherwise.

It’s a good haul.

She opens Kiba’s gift last. Blinks at the small box revealed beneath the wrapping. “You… got me jewellery?” she asks, befuddled.

“Well, you’re a girl,” he defends. “Girls like this stuff!”

“Uh-huh.” Still eyeing him blankly, she notes that his cheeks are flushing.

“Anyway, I figured you’d get weapons and armour from everybody else, so.” Kiba huffs at her. “Nee-san says girly stuff is important, too!”

…he asked Hana for advice on what to give Riko?

She stares at the box again and opens the lid. “Oh,” she breathes, and picks up the necklace. It’s simple and long enough that she can easily hide it under her shirt. Thick enough that if anyone pulls on it, it won’t cut into her skin.

Riko lifts it up in front of her face, examining the three fangs dangling from it. They’re large and definitely real.

“They’re hollow,” Kiba informs her. “You can keep food pills in them or something.”

“Yeah,” she murmurs absently, wondering if she has an ink brush small enough to fit in one of these.

Well, she knows how to make them. It’s not an issue.

Or she could make tiny storage scrolls to go into them? That could definitely work.

“You like it?”

Riko jolts and looks up at Kiba, who stares back uncertainly. Then she throws the necklace over her head, steps over to him, leans up on her toes, and kisses him on the cheek. “Yes. Absolutely.”

His face flushes red. “Great!” he squawks. “Awesome!”

“Yeah.” She smiles up at him. “You wanna stay over?”

He nods jerkily.

A while later, they’re on her bed.

“Your room smells like rabbit,” Kiba grumbles.

“Mm.” She can’t smell it, thought the scent dissipated. It’s been almost a month since Usagi-chan
died. But she supposes she did keep the rabbit in her room for years, Kiba must be picking up on that. “Yours smells like dog. Anyway. Tired. Sleep.”

He makes another huffy noise, but settles down. Pulls her against him awkwardly.

Hm, they haven’t slept together since the… male biology incident. And, well, the chuunin exams, but that was different.

She should not be thinking about male biology while he’s hugging her. He’s already being awkward, she doesn’t need to be awkward, too.

Riko blinks when the door to her room opens and Shikamaru comes strolling in. Takes in her and Kiba’s position, then shrugs and flops onto her bed. Pokes her in the back. “Happy birthday.”


“Dumbass.”

She kicks him. “You gotta be nice to me. It’s my birthday.”

Kiba snickers.

“You guys together or what?” Shikamaru asks blandly.

“Just friends!” Kiba informs him hastily while Riko rolls her eyes.

This again? And here she thought only Naruto and Sasuke were dumb enough to just assume that.

“Tired,” she repeats. “Sleep.”

Surrounded by her best friend and her brother, it’s easy to drop off.

The nightmares leave her alone that night.

Riko wakes up to the sound of her mother’s chuckling. When she cracks an eye open, the woman is standing in the doorway, which Shikamaru must have accidentally left open last night.

“Good morning,” she says mildly. “Breakfast will be ready in twenty minutes. Inuzuka-kun is invited.”

Having said her piece, Yoshino leaves.

Kiba makes a panicked sound and attempts to extract himself from the multiple limbs wrapped around him. Riko considers the current situation blearily.

It’s not exactly clear who is hugging who. Who knew that three genin and one dog could get so entangled?

Shikamaru makes an annoyed sound. “I’m in bed with my sister and her boyfriend.”

“Don’t forget Akamaru,” Riko mutters back.
The ninken licks her chin, and Shikamaru squawks when his wagging tail hits him in the face.

“How are you so calm?” Kiba hisses at all of them, still attempting to disentangle himself, but he ended up on the bottom of the hug pile and Shikamaru is firmly wrapped around him, while Riko is sort of sprawled over both, and she’s not entirely sure whose legs are hooked with hers.

Akamaru appears to have turned liquid, she’s not sure how he fits between all of them, yet still has room to move.

“’cause it’s nice,” Riko answers. “Hugs are good.”

“Nara-san just invited me for breakfast!”

“Well, yeah, would have been rude not to,” she points out in confusion.

“Seeing as you’re in my sister’s bed,” Shikamaru adds blandly.

“You’re in your sister’s bed!”

Akamaru yips and hops out of the bed, using Shikamaru as a launching pad, and scurries out of the room. Presumably in search of food.

Shikamaru grunts. “This is so troublesome,” he complains, making no move to get up or let go of Kiba.

“You got yourself into it all on your own,” Riko informs him and finally pushes up with a regretful sigh. “And nobody’s anybody’s boyfriend here.”

“Uh-huh.”

Riko pokes him until he finally rolls off of Kiba, who shoots up and scrambles off of the bed. “Need to use the bathroom!” he blurts and then he’s already gone.

“He sure does,” Shikamaru drawls, clearly amused.

She peers at him, all smug on her bed, and doesn’t ask what’s so funny. Shikamaru has a strange sense of humour, most of the time she doesn’t get it.

It’s nice seeing him in a good mood about something, though.

“You’re talking again,” he says idly. Like it’s no big deal.

Riko shrugs slightly and matches his light tone. “Today’s a good day.”

Her brother eyes her. “Why?”

“Hugs and cuddles.” She goes to her dresser and picks up a clean change of clothes.

He makes a considering noise. “Physical contact, huh.”

“See you at breakfast.”

Her shower is a short one since she’s planning on training later anyway, and she also doesn’t want to be late for breakfast, both because Kiba seems to be freaking out over something and because she already missed her birthday dinner.
Kiba is already downstairs, looking a little less nervous as he helps Yoshino set the table. Akamaru is eating from a plate, his tail wagging.

“Morning,” Riko says, and decides not to stand awkwardly in the doorway. Instead, she grabs a bowl to carry over.

“Good morning,” Yoshino greets her, like this is all normal and those aren’t the first words she’s heard Riko say in weeks. “Happy belated birthday. We’ll have a proper celebration after the exams are over.”

Riko nods. “Thank you for the presents.”

“I actually wanted to get you a replacement for your katana,” Yoshino sighs. “But Rikuto doesn’t have anything of the right quality in store right now. It’ll have to wait. You can borrow one of my back-ups for now.”

“Thank you,” Riko mutters.

Shikamaru strolls into the room just as breakfast is all set up and mutters a greeting.

“Sit down, kids,” Yoshino orders. Riko ends up between Kiba and Shikamaru. “Enjoy your meal. Thank you for your help, Inuzuka-kun, Riko. Shikamaru, you’ll be doing the dishes.”

“Troublesome,” Shikamaru mutters.

“Kiba’s fine, Nara-san,” Kiba says awkwardly.

“Very well.” Yoshino shoots him a speculative glance, looking amused, and her voice is mild. “So which of my children brought you home with them?”

Kiba stares at her blankly and his colour steadily reddens.

“Riko did,” Shikamaru answers in his place, and nudges her.

“He showed up by himself?” she clarifies. “To give me a birthday present.” She reaches to her neck to show off the necklace. For now, one fang holds food pills, the next chakra pills, and the last one needle, thread, a thin roll of medical tape, and painkillers.

Just in case.

“That was very thoughtful of you, Kiba-kun.” Yoshino nods, and gives Riko an approving nod. “You’re welcome here anytime.”

Kiba nods jerkily and gives Riko a mildly panicked look.

“Anytime,” Shikamaru echoes in a slow drawl, and he casually throws an arm over Riko’s shoulder, giving Kiba a smirk. “Last night was nice.”

See, that’s what she means by Shikamaru’s sense of humour being weird. He’s having fun and Riko doesn’t get what’s so amusing, or why Kiba’s face is so red.

“I’m sure it was,” Yoshino comments blandly. “Do be safe, you three.”

…what?

Shikamaru clearly gets his sense of humour from his mother.
‘Sorry,’ Riko mouthes to Kiba, who looks horribly embarrassed. It’s pretty obvious that whatever the joke is, it’s at his expense.

Which is kind of mean, actually. She narrows her eyes at her family members.

“I’m gonna go train,” she announces slowly and gets up. “You coming with, Kiba, Akamaru?”

Kiba jumps up. “Yes!”

“Have fun,” Shikamaru says. “See you around, Kiba.”

“Tell your mother I said hello, will you?” Yoshino adds. “And good luck for your match.”

“Yes, ma’am!” Kiba yelps, and then they’ve fled from the kitchen.

“I’m so sorry,” Riko mutters when they’re far enough from the house. “That was so rude.”

Kiba makes a small, miserable sound. “It’s fine.”

“Not really.” She sighs. “I don’t really get what’s going on, but they’re not supposed to make my guests feel bad.”

“Not bad,” he mutters. “It was just teasing.”

“Still. Not cool. I always feel welcome and comfortable at your place, I was hoping it could be the same the other way round.” Riko frowns at the ground before she looks up again. “I’m sorry.”

He stares at her for a moment, then he cracks a grin and nudges her shoulder. “It’s cool, Riko.”

Eyeing him for a few seconds, Riko eventually decides that he means it. “Okay.”

“See you at the finals?”

“Yeah.” She manages a small smile, though the thought of the Chuunin Exams turns her stomach. Only four days left now, and the doubts and second thoughts are beginning to eat at her.

Kiba grins at her. “Second match is ours!”

“Yeah.”

Because she doesn’t know how to lie believably about looking forward to any of it, Riko steps forward and hugs him. “See you then,” she murmurs. “Thank you for coming by. It was really nice.”

“Yeah, it was,” he agrees, hugging her back, and Akamaru barks an agreement.

She reaches up and scratches the dog behind the ears, the way he likes it. His tail wags, and then he hops off of Kiba into her hastily held-out arms.

“Hey,” Kiba says suddenly.
“Mm?” Cuddling Akamaru to her chest while he attempt to lick her face off, which, ew, Riko gives him a distracted glance.

“Can I kiss you? On the mouth?”

Riko nearly drops Akamaru. “What?!” she sputters, not sure if she heard that correctly. “Why?”

His cheeks are red. So are his ears. “I’m confused! I just wanna try?”

She stares at him blankly, her own face heating up. “Confused,” she repeats in a high pitch. “About what?!”

“I don’t know!” He flaps his arms. “You! Shikamaru!”

“What’s that got to do with kissing?!”

Akamaru makes a protesting sound when she apparently holds him too tightly and leaps over back to Kiba, who catches him and puts him on his head. “I don’t know!” he repeats. “You kissed me yesterday!”

“On the cheek!” Her cheeks are heating up. “That’s different from the mouth!”

“Yeah, but!” He flaps his arms again, looking not unlike a helpless chicken. “Exactly!”

Kiba looks at her like she has all the answers. And he’s clearly distressed, in a way she hasn’t seen from him before. He doesn’t really do that, is easygoing and friendly aside from the occasional burst of temper. This is new.

Riko takes a deep breath, making herself calm down. Okay. They can… talk about this. Like grown-ups. She’s twelve now.

Not that it feels any different from eleven, but it means something, right?

Anyway, Kiba’s her friend and she doesn’t like seeing him so distraught. If it’ll reassure him… she can do it. Besides, they’re both fighting in the arena in just a few days, and him going in distracted against someone as brutal as Neji would be really, really bad.

Her kissing him could be a matter of life and death!

“Fine,” she says, and steps up to him, wrestling down the flutter of nerves. It’s just a kiss. Mouth on mouth. No big deal!

“Fine?” he echoes blankly, blinking at her like he’d completely forgotten what he asked her.

She shrugs, leans up on her toes, and presses her lips to his briefly before she steps back.

Well. That was a let-down. No tingling lips or earth-shaking realisations of love like books told her there would be.

Just mouth touching mouth. Not half as nice as a hug.

Kiba doesn’t seem to see it that way because with a squawk, he jumps back belatedly. “You kissed me!” He stares incredulously.

Riko blinks at him. “Yes?”
That had been what he wanted?

Still staring at her, Kiba says nothing for a long moment before he blurts, “Do it again.”

“But I already did it.”

“Yeah, but I didn’t know you were going to do it and then it was already over. I missed my first kiss!” Kiba gives her a pleading look. “Just one more?”

She shrugs. Well, it hadn’t sucked the first time, so why not? Again Riko crosses the distance between them and this time, Kiba’s hand reaches out to press against her cheek, cradling it.

That… feels nice.

The kiss is better this time, too. Lasts longer. And he smells good and familiar. His lips are soft and careful.

Riko blinks up at him when it’s over, and considers that she’d wouldn’t mind doing that again sometime. “That was nice,” she breathes.


Somewhere in the distance an explosion goes off — nothing unusual in Konoha with its numerous training grounds — and they both jump.

“Right, I’m… gonna go. Training and stuff,” Kiba mutters, shuffling awkwardly.

“Uh-huh.” Riko hugs him quickly. “See you soon.”

“You got it.”

It doesn’t occur to her until hours into her own training that she never asked if he was any less confused now.
The day of the Chuunin Exam finals dawns bright and early and if Yoshino hadn’t given her something to help her sleep, Riko wouldn’t have rested at all.

Breakfast with her family is… Riko doesn’t remember much of it later, it just passes her by. Shikamaru loads up her plate, Yoshino stops her from helping with the dishes, and Shikaku’s already at work — that’s about all she recalls later on.

She’s strangely calm. Yesterday, she couldn’t sit still, was sick with nerves. Today, none of that. It’s like the inevitability of battle has settled something inside of her. There’s no going back now, not anymore.

Today’s the day, and all her fear and dread is buried under cold focus. Which is good. No need to worry about the Cursed Seal messing her head up right now.

Or at least she hopes so.

After an hour of meditation, followed by thorough stretching and warming up, Riko spends the rest of the morning sitting in front of Fumio’s grave in Tenzou’s silent company. There’s nothing left to do or study that’ll make a significant change to her performance today.

Officially, the finals are supposed to start at noon. Riko makes her way to the arena half an hour before that, just in case there are last-minute changes to the schedule or she overlooked anything in the info package Tenzou delivered to her.

When she arrives in the arena, the seats above are already filling with people and she can smell the various foods being sold. The noise, too, is overwhelming.

She’s the second of the contestants to arrive, only Hyuuga Neji — otherwise known as Rainbow Hyuuga of the infallible eyes — is already present.

If he got in trouble for trying to kill Hinata, there’s no sign of it.

He flicks her a disdainful glance before he subtly turns away, somehow making the tiny movement seem like a personal dig and entirely dismissive and derisive of her ability, her as a person, and the unfortunately patchy dye-job she gave her hair yesterday.

Well, that’s his problem, not hers. If he wins against Kiba and she against Lee, it’ll only help if he goes into their match underestimating her.

She stops wasting time thinking about him and instead examines the battlefield.

It looks the same as when she explored it four days ago and again last night. Loose earthen ground with grass growing on it, to her right a small copse of trees takes up about a third of the arena. Looking in from the ground, it looks dense, but when she had a look from the audience seats the other day, the trees were actually spaced far enough apart and the crowns thinned out enough to provide uncomfortably good visibility from above.

An unrealistic battlefield, one she’ll never encounter in nature, and she made sure to explore it
thoroughly.

At least the undergrowth is dense enough to provide decent cover. She’ll need that. Every advantage she can get.

Of course, her opponent will have scouted the arena out, too. Everyone will have done it. So who knows how much use it’ll be.

Riko casts another glance around and stuffs her hands into the pockets of her jacket. The nerves are back, suddenly — not overwhelming, though, more like a distant hum at the edge of her mind, and it somehow makes everything sharp, her attention heightened.

One by one, the other contestants trickle in. Riko covertly surveys them all but keeps her distance, especially from Sabaku no Gaara and Abumi Zaku from Oto. He and his fellow Oto-shinobi are definitely edging closer to her, and Zaku is giving her an unsettling grin that makes her stomach lurch with revulsion.

Damn it, neither Sasuke nor Kiba are here yet. Genma is on the other side of the arena and pretending not to know her due to his role as a proctor. That leaves only two potential allies — Hyuuga Neji and Rock Lee. Not exactly optimal.

Then there are the two other Suna candidates and just. No. The puppet user smells like poison, and the girl, Sasuke’s opponent, has a similar expression as Hyuuga Neji on her face.

Zaku is eyeing her like food and he’s striding toward her now.

Screw it. Riko takes a few steps to the side where Rock Lee is warming up far too enthusiastically. Why he’d do push-ups right before the matches, she doesn’t know.

“Hi,” she greets, and then she doesn’t know what else say. She probably should have thought this through better.

Lee jumps up. “Yosh! It’s my opponent! I apologise, but I cannot engage in conversation with you before our match, Riko-san!”

He salutes her. Riko blinks at him owlishly.

His level of sincerity is right up there with Gai’s. Like a sucker punch to the stomach.

“I know,” she answers. “But I don’t like how the Oto guy looks at me. Can I stay near you?”

Suddenly alert, Lee’s head snaps toward Zaku, who has halted but is still giving her that ugly, hateful but coveting stare. Like she’s got everything he wants out of life and he’ll cut it out of her body to get at it. It makes her shiver in disgust because she knows the reason is Orochimaru’s interest. Why in the world would he want that?

“Do not worry, Riko-san!” Lee shouts, with a thumbs-up and a blinding grin very much like his teacher’s. “I shall protect you!”

“…thanks,” Riko mutters.

So maybe Lee isn’t so bad. The moment an outside threat appeared, he instantly forgot that they’re supposed to fight later on.

Hyuuga scoffs. “Asking your opponent for aid? Pathetic. Quit now.” His face produces an
expression between a smirk and a sneer that makes him look very attractive for punching purposes. “Neither of you will ever amount to anything.”

…wow.

Lee’s expression becomes tight, but he doesn’t slip in his smile. “My apologies, Riko-san,” he says. “But I won’t lose our fight. It’s my goal to defeat Neji in order to prove that he’s wrong.”

Riko isn’t sure it’ll work like that. Attitude adjustments don’t happen through beatings. Anyway, Hyuuga tried to kill his cousin — daughter of the clan head no less — and he came very close to succeeding, not showing any sign of hesitation or remorse after the fact either.

Whatever the deal with him is, it goes a lot deeper than merely *attitude*.

“Apology accepted,” she tells Lee absently. “And thank you,” she adds, gesturing vaguely in Zaku’s direction.

She’s tempted to tell them not to underestimate Kiba, because both of them are clearly assuming that he isn’t a factor in this tournament, that Neji will win *for sure*. But the last — and only time — they saw Kiba fight, he’d been feral, and if they’ve made false assumptions about his personality, fighting style, and potential weaknesses, then her friend will definitely benefit.

So she doesn’t mention Kiba at all and does a few more stretches to pass the time and get out of conversation, until the boy himself shows up.

Riko blinks at his appearance. Never mind the clothes, who cares about the dark, bulky jacket and the trousers that clearly have integrated armour. Kiba’s expression is dark and hard.

Unlike usual, Akamaru doesn’t rest on his head, is instead walking by his side, eyes locked on Hyuuga just like Kiba’s are, with an unblinking stare.

Is it a good idea to walk over to them? Will that ruin Kiba’s acting? *Is* he acting?

No. She hugged Kiba right in front of every competing team before the first exam. Stood with him before his preliminary match. Everyone already knows they’re friends.

So she walks over and stands near him. “Hey,” she mutters.

“Riko,” he greets, not taking his eyes off of Neji. “I like the black hair,” he adds, quieter.

“I don’t.”

It feels like she’s hiding from the problem. Which is *irrational*, if the whole world will believe she’s from some universally-feared dead clan due to the red colour, then it’s only common sense not to display it in a highly public event.

Still.

He glances at her but doesn’t ask. It really isn’t the time and place for it.

Noon approaches. The audience is beginning to quiet down, the building anticipation palpable.

The closer showtime comes, the more the world seems to slow down. A sort of cold focus layering over Riko’s mind and body, and her heartbeat seems impossibly loud in her ears.

A minute to noon, Genma makes his way over to them. “Anyone know when Uchiha Sasuke will
“Arrive?” he asks neutrally.

Riko, like the other genin, doesn’t so much as twitch, carefully controlling her expression.

Sasuke not already being here is strange. She knows how eager to advance he is. Jeopardising his chances at doing so by something as stupid as being late would be very out of character.

Did something happen?

A gong sounds and the audience goes silent. The hokage stands and begins speaking, greeting the spectators, making special mention of the daimyou’s representative and the kazekage, and then launches into a spiel about international cooperation that contradicts everything he said before the preliminaries about replacement warfare and whatnot.

It’s all a lie, a sham, and seems like such a waste.

People died for this.

There’s roaring applause at the end. Riko tunes it all out.

“And that’s that,” Genma says dispassionately. “Same rules as the preliminaries. All of you except Hyuuga Neji and Inuzuka Kiba, go up to your spectator’s box. It’s through that door.” He points it out.

They set in motion. Riko mutters a good-luck Kiba’s way and a joking “Try calling him Rainbow Hyuuga,” and leaves the field.

She keeps well away from Zaku, Gaara, and everyone else on the dark and narrow stairs. Does her best to stay in the shadows.

Then she reaches the spectator box and if Rock Lee notices that she’s using him as a shield against Oto and Suna, he doesn’t mention it. She’s not sure he’s even aware of her, all his attention seems focused on Hyuuga and Kiba below.

The match begins.

Only the most dignified audience members stay in their seats when the match ends. The rest of the stadium roars, shouts, most of them applauding and cheering. A fair few are outraged, though, and Riko thinks she hears someone cry about losing money they bet.

Inuzuka Kiba and Akamaru beat Hyuuga Neji.

She doesn’t care that she’s making a fool of herself in front of the other contestants — Riko cheers and joins the audience in chanting her friend’s name.

Next to her, Rock Lee looks like his whole world crashed down on him.

“Neji lost?” he breathes, his eyes locked on the medics carrying the unconscious and battered Hyuuga away.
Kiba and Akamaru don’t look so hot either and when the medics gesture for him to come along, Riko doesn’t see him argue. But he turns towards the spectator’s box and sends her a thumbs-up. She beams and shouts praise to him.

There’s a bit of intermission during which a few chuunin sweep the ground for explosive tags, and Riko is fairly sure that Kiba used every single one she ever gave him and then some. Akamaru placed them continuously, and there was only so long that the Hyuuga could keep up his spinning chakra dome thing.

Neji was good, extremely good, but Kiba was well-prepared, and his and Akamaru’s teamwork was impeccable. He’d stayed at a distance, too, only taken a few hits.

It’d thrown Neji off, he seemed to have expected the other boy to attack mindlessly, and the things Riko heard him saying about the Inuzuka clan — she’s not sure she would have managed to keep her composure the way Kiba managed with ruthless focus.

He’d retaliated viciously without replying to the insults. Hadn’t talked at all, except to bark to Akamaru.

They’d been fast, clever, and they must have trained like hell to get so much better in the space of a month.

“Nara Riko and Rock Lee,” Genma speaks up, and his voice easily carries up to the competitor’s box, despite him not raising it at all. “If you’ll come down into the arena.”

Her heart skips a beat.

It’s time.

Lee vaults over the railing onto the battlefield and after taking a deep breath, Riko follows suit.

The noise down here is muted. When she’d examined the arena a few nights ago, she’d found fuuinjutsu high up on the walls, and she couldn’t make that much sense of them beyond the fact that they had something to do with sound. Seeming to amplify it in one direction and muting it in the other.

Either way, she’s glad the audience noise is only a manageable background hum. It’s still a distraction, but she can work with it.

Genma gives them both a once-over. “Are you both ready?’’ he asks, voice neutral.

“Yosh!’’ Lee exclaims, and though his enthusiasm seems to have taken a hit with Hyuuga’s defeat, his determination all but radiates off of him. “Let’s have a youthful fight, Riko-san!’’

He’s regaining his equilibrium, bolstering himself, she reckons.

“Yes, sir,’’ she answers Genma, as if they’re both perfect strangers. The way he’s barely looked at her, that’s clearly what he’s going for. Or at least, she hopes that that’s what it is.

Even so, it stings.

Genma only nods and steps back.

Riko plants her feet. Tenses her legs.

The gong sounds and the audience quiets down. She takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly.

Rock Lee disappears, is suddenly right in front of her, kicking up.

His kick hits a log and Riko runs into the copse of trees in the moment of confusion, her heart beating in her throat. She knew he was fast, had watched the videos, but experiencing it in person is a whole different pair of shoes.

Doing her best to keep track of his chakra, Riko disappears into the shrubbery and stays low to the ground, her chakra pulled deep into herself. She’s practiced stealth every moment she could spare and as far as she knows, Lee has no significant tracking skill. He’s not going to find her anytime soon unless she messes up or he gets lucky.

But while stealth prevents her immediate defeat, she can’t win like this. She’s only buying herself time.

Time, however, is a powerful weapon, and so is patience. Lee runs after her into the shrubbery, correctly assuming that this is where she went, and while he’s not quiet about it, he makes up for the noise in speed. Advancing deeper into the thicket, and he isn’t stupid enough to throw caution to the wind.

Doesn’t matter. She’s not about to try ambushing him in a way that brings her close to him. He’s a freaking taijutsu master and spent a full month training. Whereas she was on medical orders not to physically strain herself for the better part of the month.

But being physically active isn’t everything there is to shinobi training. She still had her mind. Her hands, after they took the boxes off and she regained fine motor control in the following days. There are ways to prepare that don’t involve katas and sparring practice.

Riko keeps track of him while she flits through the forest. She’d mapped it all out before, but it got kind of torn up during Kiba’s match. It doesn’t make that much of a difference, but she has to recalculate a bit for placing the surprises she’s prepared.

Lee is at the section close to the arena walls now, and Riko legs it out of the thicket. He’s still busy with some sloppy traps she laid as decoys.

She slaps down one last seal tag, claps her palms together and extends chakra. Can feel it activating the seal at her feet, then connect to one on the roots of a tree, and skip from there to one just metres away. Like chain links, they light up on her chakra sense, and when the last one arms-

Riko holds her breath as the barrier springs into existence, forming a dome over the copse of trees. Locking Lee inside, and it’ll hold for a while because she had those seals charging up on ambient chakra for over a week.

She can’t quite suppress a wild grin. It worked! Watching it in action, all coming together, is thrilling. Even in the middle of a fight.

Lee lets out a surprised yell and he moves quickly into view. Stares at her through the barrier, which hangs between them like a shimmering veil.

“I see!” he shouts. “You lured me into the forest!”

Riko doesn’t waste time replying. Just grabs a small scroll from her pouch, unrolls it, and presses
her hand to the seal drawn there. Her palm comes away wet because with a hiss, mist is being pushed out and starts to obscure the surroundings. She places the scroll on the ground — it’ll keep going until all the stored water has been released as tiny droplets. They’re on the inside of a cloud now.

Lee has wasted no time testing her barrier, tossing things against it — kunai, rocks, wood, then a leaf and when nothing comes away damaged, he aims a kick at it.

A ripple goes through the dome and it dents in an almost elastic way before returning to its shape without a sign of weakening.

That’s what she loves about fuuinjutsu. Riko can’t pull off any of the techniques she found in the library, all the things that could win her a fight. But with seals, she can mimic them. Not particularly well, but for a much lower cost, and if it works, it works.

She takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly before she goes stealth again. Her opponent is still attempting to overpower the barrier, and damn, his kicks are powerful.

Any moment now, he’ll realise that he can just dig himself a path underneath the dome, but the longer he exhausts himself, the better.

This fight is going pretty well so far!

She’s got to keep going now, she’s still only bought herself time. Riko reaches into her pouch—

And freezes. Looks up, though through the mist, she can’t see Lee. But she hears a loud boom, a crash, can feel the ground shaking, and the next hit is far too powerful.

She hears him cry out in determination, and the next impact on the barrier has all the blood leaving her face. That’s too much!

The dome shudders. Flickers.

And holds.

Riko lets out a shaky breath, staring in the direction, her legs feeling weak.

This is bad. Using that kind of force, he could pulverize her with one hit! She should have prioritised figuring impact-absorbing seals out and putting them on her armour! But there just wasn’t time. And if everything went okay, then he’d never get that close!

It sure would be reassuring to have them now, even if she’s not sure she could make a seal capable of absorbing that.

Fuck. Fuck, she needs to. Do something? Yes.

Get moving! Another few more hits of that level and the barrier might actually collapse. She needs to be out of dodge before that happens. Visibility is low, but it’s not completely gone. Standing out in the open like she’s currently doing, he will see her.

Where can she go that he won’t find her or think to look?

Well.

Riko ghosts up to the barrier’s edge, using Academy-taught skills to dig herself a tunnel into the
dome, and then she’s under the cover of the trees again. There’s no mist here — the barrier keeps it out.

She stays clear of Lee. It feels like all she’s been doing the entire fight was run, but she can’t stand against that kind of force.

There’s got to be something she can do, though-

What is that chakra-buildup?! Her breath hitches and she presses closer to the ground.

There’s so much chakra pouring off of Lee, her sensor ability becomes completely useless, and even without it, she can feel it against her skin. The shockwaves coming from him. Hot, dry wind whipping against her skin.

From where she sits, she can just barely see Lee launch himself at the barrier again, or rather, she sees him disappear and then he’s smashing against it.

The dome shatters and he’s gone. She can sense his chakra, far too fast, flitting all over the arena except the copse of trees, and Riko retreats deeper into it.

Boggling at the damage she finds, there are trees smashed in half, trails of destruction, and she almost breaks into hysterical laughter when she sees just what did that.

Training weights. He threw off training weights, and they were so heavy that they went through trees and left craters! When she nudges the thing with her foot, it doesn’t so much as budge.

She’s so doomed, but it’s too late to back out now. The moment he’s got her in view she’s done for, and there won’t be any time to say ‘I give up.’

Also, she doesn’t want to give up.

But the way Lee’s chakra feels, the way he’s zooming over the battlefield with zero pattern or reason — he’s in no mental state to hold back. Whatever he did to himself, it’s messed up his judgement.

He’s bouncing all over the arena, so fast he’s everywhere at once, and there are tremors and crashing sounds every time he makes contact with the wall and then he’ll change direction until he hits another wall, tearing through anything in his way.

Then he passes by only metres away from her, and she realises that he’ll go through her, too, and he might not even notice. His skin has turned lobster-red, his eyes are all white with power, and with the heat he gives off, he seems more demon than person.

She’s not sure he even remembers that they’re from the same village. Comrades.

Maybe if she puts up sharp wire and he runs into them — no. If it ended up working, he’d cut himself to pieces.

He was nice to her before and now he’s using lethal force. But she can’t think about that right now, it’s not important, survival is the priority. She’s not going to die for these stupid exams.

There’s nothing she can do against power like that, not without her kekkei genkai or the Cursed Seal which is burning, offering her power if she only just reaches out, and no. No, it’s not worth it.

Even when he doesn’t remember, they’re still comrades, and she’s not taking the fight to that level
like he did.

If she can just find Genma without Lee noticing, tell him she’s throwing the fight, she might get out of this.

With the way chakra is pouring off of Lee, she can’t sense anything else, can’t find Genma that way.

But it works the other way round, too.

Riko flares her chakra in the standard distress pattern they were all taught at the academy, and it should be safe enough to do so. Even if Lee were a sensor, he’s in no state to use chakra sense.

Here’s hoping that her oh-so-bright chakra would get someone’s attention.

Genma appears next to her only a few harrowing moments later.

“I forfeit,” she grits out.

He nods and holds out his hand. “I’ll shunshin us out.”

Riko grabs on and he squeezes her fingers gently before the world disappears in a whirl and they’re in another spectator box, and she stumbles in disorientation at the abrupt change of scenery. This box has a bunch of screens in the back, showing surveillance footage, and a shinobi with sunglasses monitors them.

He looks familiar, but she can’t for the life of her remember his name right now.

Genma pulls at a cord and the gong sound from before sounds — the same one that signalled the beginning of a new match. Speaking into a microphone, he announces calmly, “Nara Riko forfeits. Rock Lee advances to the next round.”

She swallows heavily, swaying, realising what she just did. Her stomach sinking, nausea rising as the shame hits.

Genma looks down at her. “It’s the right decision,” he says quietly. “These aren’t supposed to be life-and-death battles, especially not between comrades.”

Riko lets out a long breath and her hands ball into fists.

She’s a failure.

Her lips press together, and she nods jerkily, not agreeing but not willing to argue.

“Someone ought to talk to Gai about teaching his brats moderation,” Sunglasses says from the back. “These are exhibition matches and he opened two chakra gates! Against a fellow Konoha-shinobi!”

That makes Riko feel a little better. The man seems genuinely upset.

“Thanks, Aoba,” Genma sighs. His hand squeezes Riko’s again, and she hadn’t noticed he was still holding it. “Wanna stick around here a bit, kid?”

He’s smiling at her, all warm and soft, and there’s none of that awful distance and painfully professional bearing anymore.
She supposes it doesn’t matter anymore since she threw her match.

“Sure. Thanks,” she answers.

“I’d better get down there again.” He nods over to the other man. “That’s Yamashiro Aoba, if you have questions, ask him.”

Right. That was the name. He works in… Intel? Yeah, that sounds right.

Riko nods and Genma lets go of her hand after one last squeeze. Instantly, she misses the warm contact.

Peering over the railing of the box, she can clearly see Genma talking to Rock Lee and the boy then being escorted away by medics. He seems seriously unsteady on his feet now.

Aoba scoffs quietly, muttering something under his breath that she can’t quite make out.

Down on the battlefield, Genma picks up her mist-producing scroll — it stopped spewing any a while back, and the mist has cleared up a lot by now, which she thinks has something to do with the way Lee tore all over the place like a human hurricane and the chakra he released.

There were shockwaves, and now, after the fact, Riko begins to shake.

“Oi, kid,” Yamashiro speaks up. “Catch.”

He throws her something, and she snatches it from the air purely out of reflex.

It’s a ration bar.

“Come here, sit and eat,” he orders.

Riko obeys mindlessly, distantly glad that someone’s telling her what to do, has a plan and all. She’s not sure where he spirited the blanket from, but only moments after she’s sat down, he’s wrapped her up after asking permission.

“It’s shock,” he informs her, and he isn’t looking at her but at the surveillance screens in front of him. “Your body is reacting to being close to the sudden release of massive chakra quantities. Not uncommon. Especially bad for sensors and people with low chakra capacity. Can be trained away, though.”

On the screens, she can see staff repairing the arena walls via Earth jutsu, and she thinks they’re sweeping up her barrier tags, too. Will she get them back?

It doesn’t really matter, they were one-use only. She’s got the designs in her notes.

At least Genma has the mist scroll, he’ll give it back if she asks. That one is reusable.

“I’d have sent you to the medics, but it’s not a good idea having you around him,” Yamashiro is saying, nodding to a screen showing an infirmary. Hyuuga Neji is in there, out cold, and Rock Lee is receiving treatment.

She shivers, looking at him.

“Anyway, you’re not injured,” Yamashiro keeps talking, his voice firm. “Finished the ration bar?”

Riko nods after a slight delay and he hands her a water canteen and a box of mochi that’s already
opened and half-empty.

“To chase down the taste,” he says, and then touches a hand to the comm-unit in his ear. “Uchiha’s still not here. How much more time can we waste on repairs?”

Riko blinks and examines the screens. There’s a surveillance feed from the contestant’s box, and yeah — no Sasuke to be seen.

Kiba is the only Konoha shinobi in there right now. He’s got Akamaru, though.

She shivers at the thought that his next opponent will be Lee.

At least Kiba is a lot sturdier than her and has a lot more options for close-combat.

“Hey, Nara, do you have any idea when Uchiha’s showing up?” Yamashiro asks her.

Riko shakes her head.

Sasuke not being here is worrying. It’s so unlike him, and it’s starting to worry her.

With most of village resources being focused on the exam, could it be that someone got to him? He’s got an extremely valuable kekkei genkai — he could be targeted. Has been targeted before, until Orochimaru turned his primary focus to Riko, but that doesn’t necessarily mean that he’s lost interest.

He’s with Kakashi, though. It doesn’t get much safer than that.

But nobody’s invincible and Orochimaru is one of the Sannin.

“No, she doesn’t know,” Yamashiro speaks into his comm-unit. “We’ll skip ahead to the next match. If he’s not here by the end this round, we’re gonna disqualify him.” He listens to Genma’s reply. “Yeah, I know. This whole exam is a goddamn mess. Who thought it was a good idea to throw so many green kids into this?”

There’s another pause.

“I don’t care how talented they are or how many of them are future clan heads,” he scoffs then. “They’re green and you know it. They’ve barely done any C-ranks!”

He makes an aggravated sound and says nothing further. A minute later, Genma’s voice sounds up from the battlefield. “The match between Uchiha Sasuke and Temari of Sunagakure is delayed. We apologise for the inconvenience. Kinuta Dosu and Sabaku no Gaara, please come down into arena.”

The audience’s reaction is almost instant. Riko can hear the unhappy murmurs, even a few yells coming in from outside. On the surveillance screens, she can see the dolled-up nobility with their painted faces frown and mutter amongst themselves, some of them gesturing to the leaflets with the match schedules.

Yamashiro fiddles with his comm-unit, she thinks he’s switching to another frequency. “Send someone out to look for Uchiha,” he barks into it, then listens to the reply and grits out a sharp affirmative before he presumably switches back to the Genma channel.

He pinches the bridge of his nose.

“Yamashiro-san? Are you okay?” she asks tentatively.
“I’ll be very glad when this whole nightmare is over,” he mutters. “And it’s Aoba.”

She nods.

“Most of these people are here because of Uchiha,” he says after a pause, gesturing at the screens depicting the unhappy audience. “I’ve never seen the ranks reserved for nobility so full. Tickets were sold out days after they went on sale, and you can’t imagine for how much they went for on the black market after.” Shaking his head, he mutters darkly, “And now he’s fucking late. There goes his promotion, I guess.”

Riko stares at him.

“What?” he asks. “If he doesn’t take his potential new rank seriously enough to show up on time, then he’s not ready to hold it. Simple as that.” Making a derisive sound, he adds, “They’d have thrown it at him if he’d just made a halfway decent showing, but there you go.”

What?

Hold on.

“What do you mean, ‘thrown it at him’?” she demands.

Aoba flicks her a glance. “Would have made for good publicity. Tragic backstory, high nobility, the whole prodigy spiel — the nobles eat it up. They’re here to see him succeed. Alas, they also don’t stand for disrespect. Too bad, so sad.” He doesn’t sound sorry in the least.

Riko is still staring at him, absolutely incredulous.

He’s saying that they’d have just. Handed Sasuke a chuunin rank. Just like that, because it looks good. Without him actually earning it.

Whereas the rest of them have to struggle like all hell, risk their lives, work their goddamn asses off to even have a chance.

It’s never been so obvious to her how unfair privilege is. And how privileged Sasuke grew up.

Even considering the tragedy that led to it — it’s not okay.

“‘Prodigy spiel’,” she repeats.

Aoba shrugs. “Looking at his records, he’s pretty average for an Uchiha. Kind of below, actually. But I guess people just love Shoving praise down his throat.”

He sounds bitter, almost caustic about it.

“You’re saying he’s not a genius?”

Her mind has gone blank.

That’s. What?

Sasuke being a genius had been one of the universal truths that accompanied her all throughout Academy life, even before she joined his class. He was the ideal teachers referenced. The one everyone admired, wanted to be like, minus the tragic past obviously.

And sure, she knows he’s… not as great personality-wise, as people generally assumed. But he’s
always been more than capable enough, better than any other student she’s met, that she just firmly believed he was indeed a prodigy.

“He’s a good student, I’ll give him that. Has potential,” Aoba answers flatly. “But genius? No way.”

She stares at him for a moment longer, then turns her attention back to the screens, her mind reeling.

Down in the arena, Kinuta Dosu is fighting Gaara now.

She honestly doesn’t know who to root for here. On the one hand, Kinuta is from Oto and she wants Oto gone. On the other, there’s Gaara’s everything, and also the fact that if Sasuke wins against Temari, he’ll fight him next. Mostly, she hopes that they’ll both knock each other out.

They watch the screens in silence.

Dosu is doing surprisingly well. Fast and evasive, and the device on his arm appears to be emitting invisible pulses that make Gaara’s sand lose shape.

Then he gets into close range.

Just once, he swings his arm at his opponent.

The skin on Gaara cracks. Peels off. And he loses it.

“Ah shit,” Aoba mutters. “Kid, piece of advice. Look away. You don’t want to see that.”

Riko casts him a glance. Remembers the footage of the preliminaries, and determinedly turns her gaze to the surveillance screens showing the audience.

Somewhere in there, Rikuto-ossan should be sitting. Karin. Naruto. Shikamaru and his team. Her classmates. Her family and clan. So many people she knows, and even more she doesn’t.

No wonder the ANBU presence is so big.

Not watching the fight doesn’t help. She can still hear the sounds, the begging, and the abrupt end of it. And she sees the audience reaction, the horrified parents covering their children’s eyes. More than one person getting up with their hands pressed over their mouths, staggering away or just vomiting right there.

Her mind is only too eager to fill in what happened.

She takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly. “Is this normal for Chunin Exams?”

“No,” Aoba says darkly. “Not in the least. You ask me, this smacks of sabotage.”

Great. That’s not reassuring at all.

He touches his comm-unit again. “Uchiha’s still not here. Drag out clean-up as long as you can, then start the next match. Let’s hope this one drags on.”

Genma must have given him an affirmative, because nothing further is said until the next fight starts.

“What did Lee do back there?” Riko eventually asks, because she liked it better when he was
talking.

“Forbidden jutsu,” Aoba answers readily. “Know what the chakra gates are?”

She nods, and he launches into an explanation that has her swallowing harshly.

It sounds terrifying, and if it’s forbidden, then how is Lee allowed to use it? Just like that, out in the open? Is it like Naruto, with his kage bunshin?

What exactly warrants a jutsu be labelled as forbidden?

“Generally the risk to the user,” Aoba informs her when she asks, not looking at her but watching the screens. He seems more pleased with the fight between Kankurou of Suna and Zaku of Oto. It’s flashy and Kankurou appears to have a flair for the dramatic.

It veers into creepy territory, but in a way that has a certain entertainment value.

“Or ethical issues,” he adds. “But depending on the situation it’s used in, it’ll be overlooked.”

Yeah. She’s starting to realise that for shinobi, just about anything goes. The rules are just guidelines.

“You know a lot,” Riko comments, side-eyeing him.

“It’s my job.”

Comes with being part of Intel and his current assignment, she supposes.

Sasuke still hasn’t shown up by the time the next match concludes with Kankurou’s win.

“Goddammit,” Aoba mutters.

“You gonna disqualify him?” Riko asks.

“We’ll give it a few minutes,” he answers, and says to Genma, “Announce that we’re having a delay because the staff has to clear the poison away. Not gonna fool anyone at this point, but nobody can argue that we shouldn’t do it.”

Genma makes the announcement a moment later.

“I would love to disqualify him,” Aoba tells her then, “But we want him to fight. Seeing as we advertised him as the main attraction, we gotta deliver.” He makes an annoyed sound. “You bet your ass at least half of these people will demand their money back if we don’t.”

Privately, Riko thinks they brought that on themselves. It’s not like Sasuke asked to be used as a PR device.

Being late is his own fault, though.

The poison is finally cleared away and when nothing further happens, the audience gets even more restless, yelling complaints and she’s half-expecting riots to being.

Aoba heaves a sigh. “Screw it. Call it, Genma. We can’t- for fuck’s sake, Kakashi.”

Riko stares at her jounin sensei and Sasuke, who just appeared in a swirl of wind and leaves down on the battlefield.
“At least they’re finally here,” Aoba growls. “Get on with it. This better be good.”

There’s a bit of an exchange between Genma, Kakashi, and Sasuke where everyone makes sure that nobody has missed the fact that it is indeed Sasuke who arrived.

Aoba’s running commentary makes it all seem so ridiculous and needlessly dramatic.

Though even without that, Riko is pretty sure she wouldn’t have bought it.

Genma finally calls Temari down and Kakashi disappears off to who knows where. Riko half-expects him to appear behind her, but he doesn’t.

Maybe that’s a good thing, because Aoba is still cursing him out.


Anticipatory silence falls, like the whole stadium is holding its breath.


Temari doesn’t move at all, eyes him unimpressedly.

Then she raises her hand and looks at Genma.

“No. You have got to be fucking kidding me,” Aoba says blankly.

Temari’s voice is utterly calm. “I forfeit.”

Pandemonium breaks out.

Chapter End Notes

Matches of Round 1:

1. Hyuuga Neji vs. Inuzuka Kiba
2. Nara Riko vs. Rock Lee
3. Uchiha Sasuke vs. Temari
4. Kinuta Dosu vs. Sabaku no Gaara
5. Abumi Zaku vs. Kankurou
“Um. Are you okay now?” Riko asks hesitantly.

Aoba takes a deep breath. “Yes.”

“You sure?”

“Yes.”

He spent the last five minutes ranting. It was kind of scary at first but got progressively more ridiculous as he went on cursing Kakashi, Sasuke, the Chuunin Exams, Temari, Gaara, Lee, Kakashi, the entirety of Suna, every kage who ever existed except the Yondaime Hokage, the daimyou, nobility in general, and someone called Danzou, for some reason. That name sounds familiar, but she can’t place it right now.

She feels a little sorry for Aoba now, but she also has the most inappropriate urge to laugh.

He’d kill her, though.

One comrade trying to murder her is enough for today, thank you very kindly.

“I’m glad this disaster is so amusing to you, brat.” Aoba glowers at her.

“I’m not laughing!” Riko assures him quickly, trying very hard to keep the twitching corners of her mouth under control.

It’s fine as long as she doesn’t think about him yelling how “that creepy old fuck should eat a bag of unwashed dicks and choke on them!”

Shit, she thought about it.

“Yes, you are!” He throws up his arms. “You’re laughing right now!”

“No, I’m not,” she chokes out. “Honest!”

“I can see it! Just you wait, when this is all over, I’m buying myself a farm and then I’ll live there with a few pigs and no people, forever.”

Riko bursts into giggles.

“That’s it!” he huffs before he grabs the box of mochi and pulls it out of reach. “See if I share any more sweets with you, you horrible brat!”

“I didn’t even take any!”

“And now you never will,” he promises firmly, and she laughs again.

Behind them, Genma chuckles, and both their heads snap around. “Making friends, I see.”

“No. She’s the worst,” Aoba growls at him. “Right after Kakashi. And that damn Suna chit plus
her unhinged brother. Also the Uchiha brat. Definitely Kakashi. Gai and his idiot students. And Kakashi.”

Aoba appears to have a special grudge against Kakashi.

If all these people are worse than her, then her standing can’t actually be that bad, Riko muses to herself.

“Long list,” Genma comments.

“You’re also on it,” Aoba informs him loftily.

Genma signs something to Aoba who scoffs and turns away. Riko eyes them curiously, but if they didn’t say it out loud, then it’s probably none of her business.

“You doing alright, kid?” Genma asks her, grabbing a chair and sitting next to her.


In the preliminaries, Tenten certainly had no qualms about launching sharp steel at Riko in ways that would have been lethal if she’d hit. Not to mention the boggling quantity of weaponry she lobbed her way. How could she even afford that many weapons?

Then there was Lee opening his chakra gates earlier, and she really should think about something else.

Like Neji during the preliminaries, trying to kill Hinata, his cousin.

“I’m going to have a serious conversation with Gai when this is all over,” Genma says in a mild tone of voice. “Believe me, you’re not the only concerned party here.”

Riko frowns at him. “So…”

“There’s going to be an investigation,” Ao informs her flatly. “Those three clearly need to face disciplinary action. They aren’t fresh genin anymore. Lethal measures against comrades in a setting that clearly didn’t require such can’t be overlooked.” He produces a derisive sound. “And all of them ought to be seeing a shrink. You ask me, the Hyuuga boy should be taken off the active roster and spend a good chunk of time in Psych.”

“Wait,” Genma speaks up, now looking troubled. “You saying they don’t have therapy already?”

Aoba gives him a bland stare. “Only records of them in relation to Psych is Gai recommending Hyuuga Neji for therapy, but nothing came of it. It was never enforced for unexplainable reasons.”

That can’t be right.

For genin, if the jounin sensei recommended therapy, then said genin went to therapy or got suspended. Aoba isn’t making sense.


Aoba only shrugs. “Go back down,” he orders. “Second round of matches needs to start.”

They’d had an intermission break during which numerous audience members walked out in a snit. While others full-on rioted, but the instigators were quickly escorted from the premises.
It’s calmer now, but the atmosphere is still tense.

“Let’s get it over with,” Genma agrees on a sigh. He stands up, gently pats Riko’s shoulder, and then shunshins down. A moment later, his voice sounds over the arena. “Rock Lee and Inuzuka Kiba, please come down to the battlefield.”

Riko tenses up. The small bubble of safety created by the casual camaraderie of Genma and Aoba bursts.

Kiba and Akamaru versus Lee. She takes a deep breath and tries to keep control of the fear.

Aoba slides her the box of mochi. She stares at it blankly, then at him. He isn’t looking at her, though, instead fully focused on the surveillance screens.

Riko takes one of the mochi. It tastes like dust, but she doesn’t care. Her eyes are locked on the monitor showing her former opponent and her best friend.

Kiba’s face is grim. Akamaru looks so small on his head.

Lee appears just like he did before his match with Riko. Bouncing in excitement, and he’s saying something about Neji now.

She shivers, her arms wrapping around herself.

Sure, Kiba is very good at taijutsu, but definitely not on Lee’s level. He’s got to be short on explosive tags now, too. And while both he and Akamaru are wearing quality armour, Lee shattered a barrier Riko charged for over a week. Armour’s not going to do any good.

“Genma will step in if it gets bad,” Aoba says off-handedly.

“But Lee-“ she chokes out.

“His teacher was Genma’s genin teammate. He can handle the student.”

“I hate this.” Her voice is hoarse. “Watching.”

The waiting. The being unable to help.

Aoba grunts an agreement. He’s tense, too.

She’s learning to dread the sound of announcement gong.


“Forfeit!” Kiba shouts, throwing himself to the side because Lee instantly lunged. He needn’t have bothered — Genma restrained Lee the moment the word left Kiba’s mouth.

Aoba buries his face in his hands.

Riko laughs shakily in absolute relief and wipes a hand over her eyes. Then she slides Aoba the mochi box.

He grabs a mochi and crams it into his mouth. “How’s the audience doing?” he asks drably.

She eyes the screens. “Disappointed,” she answers diplomatically, which is an understatement. Kiba had been a crowd favourite.
That’s nothing compared to Lee’s reaction — he looks utterly crestfallen. Is trying to convince Kiba to change his mind, which, what the hell.

“Announce the next match,” Aoba growls into his comm-unit.

Next match… Riko freezes.

“Sabaku no Gaara and Uchiha Sasuke, come down into the arena.”

“No,” she breathes.

“Genma will step in,” Aoba reminds her, but it’s not much of a comfort as she watches Sasuke drop down into the arena. Gaara appears to be taking the stairs.

Kiba leaves the arena through an exit that she supposes will lead him into the spectator ranks. There are enough empty seats by now that he’ll find somewhere to sit. Riko doubts anyone will check him for a ticket.

Her face feels cold and her hands clammy when she looks back to Sasuke, standing silently a short distance away from Genma.

Sasuke, who she just learned isn’t a prodigy. Who’ll be fighting an unhinged boy whose preferred move is squishing people like grapes even though they were already restrained and unable to fight.

“I’m gonna find Kiba,” she says abruptly, standing up. The blanket slides off of her shoulders as she makes for the door.

Kiba won’t mind if she cuts off his blood circulation by holding onto his hand while they watch the fight.

“Huh?” Aoba looks up. “Hey, wait!”

Riko, halfway out the door, halts and stares at him.

“Take this.” He throws her a small item.

Catching it, Riko blinks at the small piece of technology. “A comm-unit?” she asks confusedly.

“Something stinks about this whole thing,” he answers, gesturing at the screens. “Check in once you’ve met up with your friend. We don’t have cameras everywhere. Actually.” He stands abruptly and walks over to her.

For a moment she thinks he intends to abandon his post in order to escort her, but he steps out into the hall, flares his chakra in an unfamiliar pattern, and a moment later an ANBU operative appears.

Aoba’s voice is a lot more businesslike than before when he orders, “Escort her to Level Five, Sector F.”

The ANBU — that mask, what kind of bird is that? — signs what she figures must be an affirmative, because Aoba nods sharply and goes back inside.

“Please follow me, Nara-san,” the ANBU tells her in a distorted, tinny voice, and sets in motion.

It’s definitely good that Aoba organised a guide for Riko. The hallways all look the same and she’s not particularly familiar with the arena’s interior layout, had only scouted out the fields, walls, and audience ranks.
The noise of the crowd is a constant background hum. Ebbing up and down, and then there’s a collective excited sound — the fight must have started.

Can’t ANBU-san pick up the pace a bit? She eyes their back, not even able to tell their gender with the way their cloak obscures their body shape. It’s probably a man, with how they move and how broad their shoulders are, but she can’t be entirely sure and she doesn’t want to assume.

…why’s this ANBU wearing a cloak? It’s not part of the standard uniform, she’s pretty sure. And the temperature is way too warm to warrant it.

There must be a reason, though, because every single ANBU operative she saw on Aoba’s surveillance screens was wearing a cloak just like that.

Maybe it’s to do with all the dignitaries and visitors from outside Konoha. Trying to elicit some kind of reaction from them? Do cloaks make ANBU less or more intimidating?

It’s just strange. She’ll ask Genma about it later, she figures.

ANBU-san keeps leading the way in silence. It’s been a while since they left Aoba behind.

Riko frowns slightly.

Yeah, she isn’t exactly familiar with the interior of the stadium, but this direction, she’s fairly sure that going right would have taken them to Kiba faster.

It might be a secret ANBU route, though.

But even then, they should be going up, not downstairs.

Nobody’s crossed their path for the last three minutes. When she casts out her chakra sense, the nearest person she senses is at the edge of her range and moving away.

The crowd noises are a lot softer here.

She stares at the ANBU’s back and a strange calmness falls over her.

This shinobi isn’t taking her where they were ordered to, and she can’t think of a single reason for it that bodes well for her. In the worst case, it’s an attempt at abduction.

Keeping her breath even, her steps at the same pace, Riko considers her options. If she uses Aoba’s comm-unit, the ANBU will notice she’s caught on before she gets a word out, those things make clicking and cracking noises.

Same goes for yelling for help or flaring her chakra. Nobody is close enough to arrive before the creep takes her out. It’s just the two of them here, he’s successfully gotten her alone.

She’s under no illusions — she’s at a severe disadvantage in a fight. The narrow surroundings work against her and her would-be captor is good and experienced enough to either be an ANBU or believably pose as one.

Slipping away is also not a viable option. The ANBU — fake ANBU? Traitor ANBU? — is clearly far more familiar with the building’s layout and its hiding spaces than she is.

Okay then.

Riko bides her time until they’re at the top of another stairway.
Then she channels her chakra into her leg and kicks the ANBU down the stairs hard. Tangled water chains go around their legs to keep them from regaining their balance and footing, and she leaps after with a kunai in her hand.

ANBU grunts and rolls on their back, sweeping out with a kick before she can smash the handle of her kunai into the back of their head. His kick grazes her enough that she goes stumbling into the stairway’s wall. Thank fuck she’s wearing armour.

She hurls her kunai and it sinks into the hand the ANBU’s using to support himself as they try to get up, nailing it to the floor. A pained groan, and chakra spiking is her only warning before a gust of wind slams into her and sends her into the stairs.

The final impact leaves her breathless and disoriented.

Another pained grunt from the ANBU and she hears her kunai clatter away. The floor creaks as they stand up, and the sound of a katana being drawn is unmistakable.

Riko stays still, feigning incapacitation as they come closer. Makes a small, pained groan, her eyes pressed shut, hand pressing to the back of her head as though she’d hit it.

Then they’re towering over her, and she presses her eyes shut and activates the flash tag under her free hand. The light is blinding even through her eyelids.

This time, the ANBU is startled enough that she manages to knock them out, and she doesn’t let herself think. Just grabs wire and trusses them up as quick and thoroughly as she can, yanking the cloak off of — him, it’s a him, as she suspected, and her hands are shaking.

When she’s sure he can’t move at all anymore, she stares blankly down at her… captive.

Fuck, she made a captive.

If she was wrong about all this and he turns out to be an actual ANBU, her career is over, she considers faintly.

But now that he’s no longer wearing the bulky cloak and she’s got time to study him — that’s not a Konoha ANBU uniform. Or a Konoha uniform at all.

He’s clad in the tan colours of Suna, and Riko’s mind has gone so quiet. This can’t be.

Then, just to make sure, she grabs another kunai and slices into the fabric covering his shoulders.

No ANBU tattoos at all. Instead, there are colourful swirls tattooed into his skin, and in the Academy they were all taught about the characteristics of foreign village shinobi and their cultures. These types of tattoos are something the citizens of Kaze no Kuni sometimes get done for spiritual reasons.

There’s no doubt about it — this is a Suna shinobi. A Suna shinobi just tried to abduct her!

Suna is Konoha’s ally though.

But allies don’t pretend to be ANBU- fuck.

Riko’s mouth goes dry.

He’d pretended to be ANBU. He’d fooled Aoba. He’d known the chakra pattern Aoba used to summon him! Had known the right signs!
This Suna-nin is intimately familiar with Konoha ANBU protocols. Where had they gotten that kind of intel? It’s not taught to anyone outside of ANBU or the people that work closely-associated with them!

She feels very cold when she remembers just how many ANBU guards there were in the arena, doing crowd control. All of them wearing the same kind of bulky cloaks.

Her hands shake when she digs Aoba’s comm-unit out of her pocket and clasps it to her ear. “Come in, Aoba,” she chokes out.

A crackling sound, then Aoba’s voice sounds through the speaker. “Where are you?” he demands.

“I don’t know, lower level,” she answers and then hastily continues before he can ask anything else, “The ANBU. Imposter. Suna.”

“What-“ he begins, and then cuts off. “That’s- no.“ A long pause, and then, very quietly, “Shit.”

“Aoba, he fooled you,” Riko breathes. “With the signing, and the-“

“Riko,” he interrupts, and his voice is eerily calm. “Are you injured?”

She shakes her head, then remembers he can’t see her. “No.”

Bumps and bruises, that’s all.

“I have a mission for you,” he says, still in that awfully calm voice. “Get out of the stadium. To the hospital. Give the receptionist the following code.” He recites a series of numbers and words. “Be quick, but don’t look suspicious. Can you do that for me?”

“Yes, sir,” she whispers. “Aoba, what about-“

“Repeat the code back to me.”

Riko follows the order. He makes her do it two more times before he’s satisfied.

It’s beginning to sink in. The fact that Suna has turned on them, and they’re in the village. Could be anywhere, have already inserted themselves into freaking ANBU.

Another terrifying thought hits her. “The Hokage,” she breathes numbly. “He’s up there with the Kaze-“

“Riko. We’re at war,” Aoba interrupts, and how can he be so calm? He’s- kami, he’s in that surveillance box alone and guarded by potentially fake ANBU, who might be listening in on his every word. “Right now, you’re the most important person in all of Konoha. Go do your job.”

“Yes, sir,” she chokes out and takes a step forward. Another. Her foot bumps against something which skids over the ground — the Suna-nin’s katana.

Riko picks it up without thinking about it and gets going.
The streets outside are mostly empty, but there are some kids chasing each other around in some game, the shops are open, and restaurants have provided more outdoor seating than she’s ever seen. Clearly prepared for the crowds of tourists brought about by the Chuunin Exam finale.

Some of the seats are occupied by people who must have walked out of arena, if the indignant discussions she catches bits of are anything to go by.

It makes her feel sick to her stomach as she walks instead of tearing through the village like everything inside her demands.

None of these people have an inkling of what’s going right now, the looming disaster. That they could all die today.

Aoba said it was war. The enemies are already inside of the village, and it doesn’t look like Riko’s side is prepared at all. Not for an attack from their allies.

Former allies.

The stadium is located somewhat out of the way, close to a business district, but it’s not too far from the hospital, which is probably by design. She feels like everyone is staring at her as she walks towards her destination, as if she’s got a giant sign over her head. Even though everything is normal.

A part of her wants to scream. Shake them all, yell at them to get to safety. Bundle up all the kids and drop them off at the nearest evacuation point.

But she keeps going. Walks into the hospital at a brisk pace and goes straight to the receptionist, and the woman greets her with a friendly smile. “Hello, Riko-chan, what can I do for you? Did you get hurt in your match, or do they need more medics?”

Is this really the right person to give the codes to?

But that’s the mission and it’s not Riko’s place to question orders. She just has to trust Aoba.

“Riko-chan, are you okay?” The receptionist tilts her head in concern.

Riko recites the code and the woman’s smile fades instantly, her face paling.

“I see,” she says, quiet but determined, and stands abruptly. Suddenly, there’s nothing soft about her anymore. Her chakra flares in a pattern Riko doesn’t recognise.

All activity ceases, heads turning to stare at her, except for the few civilians in the entrance area who look up in confusion at the sudden shift in atmosphere.

Three ANBU appear out of nowhere and Riko tenses up, her hand going to the looted katana currently stuck to her hip with chakra because she didn’t take the time to unclasp the sheath from its previous carrier.

These ANBU aren’t wearing the bulky cloaks, though, they’re clad in the standard uniform, and their masks have a higher level of detail. Actually look like the animals they’re supposed to represent.

“Konoha is under attack,” the receptionist says, and her calm tone of voice is oddly similar to Aoba’s. “Deploy defensive measures. Evacuate all patients who are ready for transport.” She gestures to a male nurse. “Ready supplies and prepare for a great influx of patients. I want
everyone on deck.” Turning back to the ANBU, she adds, “Assemble field medics.”

She keeps giving orders, appearing perfectly in control of the situation.

Then she turns to Riko. “Follow.”

They end up in a cozy staff room, but it might as well be an interrogation cell as Riko gives her report to the receptionist, an expressionless man in T&I garb, and what she thinks might be an ANBU captain.

Outside, she can hear how busy things suddenly are, but it might as well be happening in a different world.

Even while she speaks, the three in front of her are signing rapidly back and forth and their chakras flicker in complicated patterns, and operatives flit in and out of the room in reaction.

It feels like forever ago that she left the stadium, but glancing at the clock reveals it was only ten minutes ago.

Ten minutes during which the whole world turned on its head.

The receptionist gives her a brisk nod and strides out of the room. The possible ANBU captain disappears without so much as a whisper, leaving Riko with the T&I shinobi. She thinks he might be a Yamanaka; he shares some of their traits, but he doesn’t look the least bit approachable unlike other members of his supposed clan.

“Heart to the Chuunin Management Facility,” he orders her coolly. “You’ll receive your orders there. Dismissed.”

“I’m a genin,” slips out of her mouth, and she cringes inwardly. This is not the time to be questioning orders.

But she’s not a chuunin.

“The Genin Corps Office is further away and doesn’t serve as a command central in times of emergency,” he answers evenly. “You have your assignment. I won’t repeat myself.”

Riko scurries out of the room, a lump stuck in her throat.

Okay. Okay, this is really happening.

After stopping a vaguely familiar nurse for directions to the Chuunin Facility, Riko exits the hospital. She’s two steps out of the gates when a mighty crashing sound shatters the illusion of peace. Without thinking about it, Riko leaps up onto a roof.

Her mouth goes dry at the sight of five colossal snakes in the far distance, flattening the village walls and everything else in their path.

Then she looks in the direction of the stadium.

Her team, her friends, her family, they’re all in there with who know how many Suna infiltrators, and she’s out here. For an absurd moment, she almost runs that way, some part of her convinced that she can save everyone if she just goes there.

But then she hears the screams in the distance and kicks herself into gear. She’s wasted enough time already and she has her orders. Her friends and family are all shinobi, not helpless, and they
have each other. While the civilian population don’t have anything to defend against shinobi.

It’s still the hardest choice she’s ever had to make. But Konoha is under attack, and Riko will do her part in defending it.

Shikamaru suspected something was going to go down at the Chuunin Exam finale.

Anyone halfway observant could see it. The indicators were all there, starting with the glaring fact that his father wasn’t here in the audience, watching Riko’s match.

Then there was the heightened security.

He assumed the blatant ANBU presence was supposed to be a deterrent, a warning to attackers. When he discussed it with his team, they agreed.

Yet, it’s clear now that the security measures backfired because he just saw multiple ANBU kill the operatives next to them and then toss off their cloaks to reveal themselves as Oto and Suna shinobi before he slumped in his seat and pretended to be asleep like the rest of the audience, heart beating in his throat.

Shikamaru is fairly sure his village was on the lookout for hostile action from Oto, with what happened to Riko and all that.

But nobody saw Suna coming.

On his leg, Ino’s hand twitches into signs. Like him, she’s slumped forward against the seat in front of her. Naruto, who sat on her other side, is sprawled over her lap now, drooling on her thigh. She must have pulled him down and her body is shielding him from the fighting going on around them, above them.

‘What do we do?’ her signs spell.

He doesn’t know.

Shikamaru doesn’t have a strategy for this, can barely think past the shock and disorientation. If they so much as move, they’re dead. There’s only chaos around them, he has no information, he couldn’t even tell if the shinobi who just leaped over them was an enemy or ally.

He can’t even risk waking Chouji for fear he’ll do something to draw attention, and he wishes he’d thought to pull him down and shield him the way Ino did for Naruto.

‘Wait for opportunity,’ he signs back.

Opportunity for what, he doesn’t know yet. They have to get out of the fight zone for sure. Find a higher-up? A combat specialist to support? Or look for his sister, his friends, wherever they are?

Warm, wet droplets hit the back of his neck, corresponding with the sound of a wet gurgle almost directly behind them. Shikamaru’s breaths come shallow and fast. Ino grabs onto his hand desperately, and it’s just a small comfort, but right now it means the world.
If they die, then it’ll be together.

Then a choked cry, and familiar chakra washes over them.

“Shikamaru,” his mom breathes, landing beside them. “Ino-chan, Chouji-kun.”

“Mom,” he choke out, looking up. She’s covered in blood, and it’s not all from other people.

Around them is a small bubble of calm now, but where it ends, he can see the fighting going on.

His mother is a genjutsu specialist, but he doesn’t think she can keep up whatever she’s doing for long, and she shouldn’t. Needs to save her energy for- for the battle. For survival.

He wakes Chouji up and Ino does the same for Naruto, slapping her hand over his mouth because Mom is talking quickly. “You have to get out of here,” she informs them urgently. “The Suna genin took off for somewhere, Genma-kun sent Uchiha after him. One of Kakashi-kun’s dogs is waiting at exit C with further orders. I’ll cover your escape.”

Shikamaru processes the orders faster than the others and nods.

“Be safe,” Mom whispers. “I love you and your sister very much.” Her lips press to his forehead for just a moment and then she’s gone, has thrown herself into the fray again. He loses sight of her almost immediately.

Shikamaru grabs his team plus Naruto and they hurry to get out of this deadly chaos.

Chapter End Notes

We’re going back to updates every two weeks after this chapter because my uni has finally managed to organise online studies, so my free time is dwindling.

Stay healthy, everyone!
“Pursue and surveillance only,” the exam proctor told him. “Don’t engage if you can help it.”

Sasuke is neither a tracker nor trained for surveillance. Hell, his only experiences with missions of that nature involve a half-feral cat.

He’s a *medic*. Or training to be, anyway.

But Shiranui only had Sasuke available, so this is how it has to be.

Not that Sasuke is complaining. He wants his fight *finished*. Prove his strength. If he can’t beat Gaara, then how will he ever beat *that man*?

(If he focuses on that, then it’s easier to ignore the screams in the distance. The people who must be dying right in this moment, and when he leaps high, he spies the enormous snakes in the distance. It must be Orochimaru’s doing, and thinking about *him* and what Riko did to herself to stop him—)

He has a mission. He’ll carry it out. If he gets to bring down Gaara and possibly his teammates, too, even better.

Sasuke slows down when he passes the village bounds. It would be foolish to proceed without caution. For all he knows, the Suna team could be meeting up with a battalion of their fellow invaders. He could be heading into an ambush.

Tracking Gaara and his team gets progressively harder from there. Academy lessons don’t really cut it for something of this level, but he knows he’s on the right path when he comes across a trap of shoddily-placed explosive tags.

The Suna genin clearly don’t have experience in placing traps on trees or navigating forests. They’re making less progress than any Konoha-nin would have.

Otherwise they’d have lost him by now, and acknowledging that thought *grates* on him.

Even more irritating is the realisation that this mission would be much less unsettling if he weren’t on his own. He’s never done a solo mission before.

At age thirteen.

*Pathetic.*

When *that man* was thirteen, he—

Sasuke is almost glad when the Suna girl, Temari, waits for him in the next clearing, and wastes no time swinging her fan. Unleashing a storm of cutting wind his way.

That, he can deal with. Combat. Uncomplicated, and he’s good at it. No room for intrusive thoughts.

Temari is well-rested and ruthless, while Sasuke’s not exactly fresh after his fight with Gaara. Which had been an exhausting farce of a match. Minutes after the start, in a moment where everything was obscured by sand, the proctor had grabbed him and ordered him to drag it out, play for time, with no explanation but that it was mission orders.
Sasuke could only play the game of cat and mouse so long before Gaara got strange, and he knew he had to end it.

He’s faster than Temari even with the after-effects of chidori slowing him down, and she’s not all that creative, either. Still, she has stamina, and is successful at keeping him at a distance.

This is dragging on too long — he’s got to use fire, no matter how unpredictable and destructive the results might turn out in combination with her wind-

A howl, and Temari gasps in surprise before a loud crashing sound follows.

Sasuke peers out from behind his cover.

…is that Kiba?

Riko’s lost track of time.

She doesn’t know this part of the village. She doesn’t know the names of the three chuunin she’s currently stuck with. This is the fourth team she’s joined — whenever they drop a civilian group off at an evacuation point, there’s chaos and a harried pair of admin shinobi with clipboards attempting to keep order; and unless one approached in a tight group, they’d grab the nearest number of individuals and either toss them onto a squad lacking that number or assign them as a new squad. Rank doesn’t seem to matter at all, there are more than a few genin around, her last squad only had one chuunin and otherwise consisted of genin entirely.

None of the people she’s worked with are in any way familiar to her. No time’s wasted on introductions, either. Everyone’s been assigned a number because it’s quicker to document who’s on a squad that way, rather than using names. Some have even painted the numbers on their clothes to save themselves the “what’s your number” dialogue before they’re sent off to yet another unevacuated block of the village.

Though as time goes on, the admin people more often than not forgo the documentation in favour of speed. No longer checking off the numbers that leave and return.

It’s complete and barely-controlled chaos, hurried, loud. All she can do is follow orders, go where she’s told, and then run from door to door to make civilian families and individuals drop what they’re doing, grab their emergency packs, and get moving.

Most people don’t even have an emergency pack, even though it’s part of village regulations and inspections can happen at any time.

There’s no time to argue with people who want to pack things last-minute, or talk them out of bringing non-essential items. They have to get going immediately.

This was not how she thought she’d learn to use killing intent.

The teachers made village evacuation sound so neat and organised in the Academy. They’re anything but. It’s nothing like evac drills, either.
There are tears, men and women getting angry and not wanting to cooperate, some even getting violent, but the worst-

“Kaa-chan isn’t here,” the little boy on Riko’s back says. “You have to go back for kaa-chan! I want my kaa-chan!”

“Can you tell me where she usually shops for groceries?” she asks. “I’ll see if-“

“Go back!” he shrieks. “Kaa-chan!”

The huge, broad-shouldered chuunin who was in charge of her last squad and got tossed on this one alongside her takes the boy and cradles him to his chest. Murmurs calming words to him while the other two squad members and Riko rally this batch of evacuees to get moving.

Big Guy must be using genjutsu, because the little boy is asleep in seconds. He gives Riko a nod and hands him back.

The kids are the worst. The families that aren’t all accounted for. The tears and the pleading, desperate attempts at bargaining to go back for missing loved ones.

Her group hurries back to the evacuation drop-off. Riko tries to tell someone in charge about the missing mother, but doesn’t even get to finish the first sentence before he points at yet another squad for her to join. She doesn’t think he even listened, and she can’t really blame him. He’s got a panicked-looking man talking at him about his missing wife and a genin trying to catch his ear at the same time, and they have to — they have to prioritise the people they can save. Can’t spend time looking for the few who are unaccounted for when there are still so many blocks full of big bulks of people left to go.

Big Guy is with her again and she casts up a glance at him. He’s tall and broad, could definitely use a shave. Riko isn’t great at gauging ages, but she’d tentatively put him in his late twenties.

Other than him, the team is made up of a hard-faced chuunin kunoichi and a terrified-looking genin who doesn’t look older than fifteen.

They run towards the next block at the highest speed they can afford.

But when they get there, the block is eerily silent, the windows of the quaint little houses are broken, the doors kicked in, and the people that had been outside at the time of attack clearly didn’t die cleanly.

“Retreat, now,” the kunoichi barks, and she’s palming kunai now.

The genin boy also draws a kunai, and he’s shaking.

Riko casts out her chakra sense, a hand on her stolen katana. Beside her, Big Guy relaxes his body.

The four of them slowly make their way backwards.

She’s only got an instant of warning when chakra spikes on her awareness, and she gets out a cry of alert before the Oto-nin are on them.

Genin boy doesn’t make it through the skirmish, and Riko stares at his lifeless form until chuunin kunoichi seals his body up without a word. She does the same with the enemy bodies, in a differently labelled scroll. “Let’s go,” she snaps.
Riko makes to limp after the woman, but Big Guy grabs her and swings her on his back. “You’re hurt, Small Stuff,” he explains, his voice deep and so rumbly, she can feel it in her whole body.

“Okay. Thanks, Big Guy,” she mutters and drops her forehead against the back of his broad neck for a moment before she pulls herself together.

They can’t afford any distractions, and… that boy won’t be the last person she sees die today, she’s well aware.

The sounds of destruction and fighting are a lot closer now. The enemy’s main force is pouring into Konoha, pushing towards the village centre, and Riko doesn’t know any details of what’s going on, but overheard that it’s difficult keeping the enemies out when they’ve been sabotaged from the inside.

And there are still so many people left to evacuate.

They didn’t send evacuation squads to the outer ring from the beginning, and it makes her sick to think about that. All the people living and working there, given up as lost, nobody coming for them because the enemy already seized that area and they have to prioritise.

The snakes are still at large, and all anyone seems to be able to do is slow them down and keep them distracted in the outer parts of the village.

There are no more skirmishes before they reach the overrun Chuunin Facility. Big Guy takes Riko to the small field hospital set up in one of the rooms there while their kunoichi squad mate disappears to report and drop off the body scrolls.

A vaguely familiar-looking medic fixes Riko’s leg, absently informing her that “It’ll scar,” and that’s that.

She and Big Guy go to get their next assignment, and nobody tries to stop her. Yesterday, an injury like this would have made the medics order her to rest for at least two days.

This is how it works in a war, she supposes blankly, and the guy in front of them has a much worse injury than her but looks grimly determined to head out again and again. As many times as it takes, regardless of personal risk.

He’s not the only one. When she looks around, there are a whole lot more injured than last time she was here. And none look ready to quit. Riko isn’t so much as considering it, either.

It’s just a jarring contrast to before, is all.

And she’s being treated like a soldier. She hadn’t realised just how much she’d been sheltered before all this.

Big Guy and her are stuck with a pair of chuunin that she’s pretty sure man the guard booth at the village gates. Something tells her she’s seen them somewhere else, but the memory escapes her.

It doesn’t matter right now, anyway.

The two exchange a curt greeting with Big Guy, pause for a moment at seeing her, but then only wave them along. Then they’re out in the streets again.

“Stay combat-ready,” Spiky-Hair Chuunin advises tersely. “This is a priority evacuation.”
Shouldn’t a priority evacuation have taken place ages ago?

Maybe it was overlooked in the chaos. Or the situation came up only recently.

Their route takes them close to the outer districts, and kami-sama, the snakes are *humongous*, larger than life from just a few blocks away. There’s so much fighting around them — troops of Konoha shinobi throwing ninjutsu and explosive tags at them while also being harassed by enemies — and every attack just seems to glance off of their scales.

“Fucking things are covered in protective seals,” Spiky Hair mutters to her and Big Guy. “Through here.”

A trip through an alley and they’re standing in a field command station. There’s barriers around it, two field medics are working on injured people — not healing, but readying them for transport — and everyone else here all has the look of combat shinobi.

The only one who doesn’t-

“Karin?” Riko chokes out, horrified, because that red hair is unmistakable, and the girl sits huddled in a corner near the injured.

She looks up. “Huh?” she says in confusion.

“We’re here to evacuate Uchiha-san,” Pretty Boy Chuunin informs the jounin who appears to be in charge. The man nods and gestures at Karin to get up.

How did Karin even end up here? Wasn’t she in the arena, watching the fights?

Karin hastily follows the unspoken order and scurries to Riko’s side. She’s pale, dusty, and has a split lip.

“Can you walk okay?” Riko asks her, because Karin doesn’t look all that steady on her feet.

“Yes,” the other girl answers quickly. “I’m- don’t carry me.”

“Alright,” Pretty Boy Chuunin agrees. “Please-“

A deafening crash, and the earth shakes. The jounin in charge reacts instantly and raises an earthen wall, not a moment to soon because rubble is raining down everywhere. “Snake’s locked on!” someone screams. “Evacuate! Everybody grab an injured!”

Riko just reacts, grabs some unconscious kunoichi’s arms and heaves it over her shoulders. Stands with some effort, and makes to leap away.

And then she freezes because the enormous snake is right above them, and it’s a primal sort of terror keeping her locked to the ground, but also — all the injured. Still laying there, more than they have the numbers to carry, and they’ll all end up crushed.

Suddenly, it’s all there. All that energy, the magic, *so much of it* inside of her. An ocean of power, ready for the taking, and Riko doesn’t hesitate, just reaches.

The light fills her, and for a moment, everything aligns. She’s *warm*, strong, and this feels so utterly right, this is what she’s meant to be, and she knows, she *knows* that the snake is *nothing*-

Then the seal on her neck *burns*, something dark and cold and foreign flooding into her system and attacking the light, and Riko’s body seizes up as if electrocuted, and she can hear herself scream.
Above, something explodes against the snake’s eye, and it doesn’t appear injured, but it does shake its head and turns its attention elsewhere.

Big guy is suddenly there and hauling her up. She’s gone limp, the burning is over, but her body won’t respond and the magic is gone.

It feels. Horrible.

Utterly wrong.

And it hurts so bad. She’s freezing cold.

Riko can’t see where they’re going, has been thrown over Big Guy’s shoulder, hanging there limply. Can only feel him jump about, hear weapons whistling around them, the shouts of comrades and enemies alike.

Eventually, Big Guy sets her down, and her body is still shaky. But she can stand if she leans against the man.

They’re in a small group — the other two chuunin, one of them setting Karin down, and a few of the people from the makeshift command station and the injured they’re carrying. Plus some newcomers, must be from some other squadron, and they too look like combat specialists.

The snake is rampaging close-by, and everyone instinctively presses into the shadows the surrounding structures — more or less ruined — provide.

One of the newcomers asks urgently, “Are any of you fuuinjutsu users?”

Looks are exchanged, and everyone shakes their heads.

“Me,” Riko rasps out, raising her hand.

The jounin stares at her and his face blanches.

“Nobody else?” he asks, and closes his eyes for a moment when none of the others speak up. His voice is hoarse with regret? “Come with me.”

“What’s going on?” Pretty Boy asks while Big Guy lifts Riko up again, and the group splits up — half of them taking off with Karin, and the others, Riko included, following the jounin.

“We have someone who can take out at least one snake, but he needs a seal for it.”

They land in another makeshift command station, and this one feels like its barriers are stronger, and there are more people, too. The injured are set down near where three medics are hard at work, and Riko — on her own feet again — staggers after the jounin with Big Guy and the other squad members close behind.

Jounin guy speaks up again, pushing through a group of shinobi who appear in heavy discussion, “Found you someone, Nara.”

Nara?

Riko is pushed forward into the middle of the group, and there’s finally the first real familiar face in what has to be hours. It’s Rikuto-ossan, and she wouldn’t have thought he’d be fighting in the invasion; he’s so old and his arthritis impedes his coordination.
But there he is, and he’s staring at her blank-faced, looks at jounin guy, and growls, “No.”

The people who’d been arguing have fallen silent, and there’s something like horror on almost everyone’s faces.

“Ossan?” Riko breathes.

“Get her out of here,” Rikuto snarls at jounin guy. “Find someone else. She’s a kid. She’s family.”

Jounin guy sucks in a sharp breath, and so do several others.

Unease churning in her gut, because somehow, she knows something is seriously wrong, she asks, “What’s going on? He said you need me for the snakes?”

“Don’t need you, brat,” Rikuto growls, shaking his head.

“We’ll send for- for someone else, someone older, there’s got to be someone available,” jounin guy says, but he doesn’t sound very convincing.

Another guy — chuunin, she thinks, but he’s so dirty she can’t discern the uniform — sneers, “We don’t have the time, everyone’s busy, and we’re dying like flies. Make her do it.”

Riko’s never seen someone bundle as much destruction into a simple glare as Rikuto’s doing now, and the speaker stumbles back. “No.”

“Would someone tell us what’s going on?” Pretty Boy asks impatiently. “I think she can decide for herself, whatever you’re talking about.”

If anything, that’s got everyone paling another two shades.

Somewhere in the distance, the screams get louder, and the shadow of the giant snake passes over them, but the beast doesn’t appear to notice the gathering — must be the barriers doing something, or maybe a protective genjutsu.

Huh, the snake’s got tomoe markings all over its scales. They look a lot like the Cursed Seal on her neck.

“I’d like to know,” she speaks up.

Instantly, several men and the one kunoichi present shake their heads, but then Rikuto suddenly barks, “You fuckers back the hell off, it ain’t your business.”

Another one of those glares shuts down any protest, and the majority of people find something to busy themselves with. Some taking off, presumably to try dealing with the snakes or to distract them.

Pretty Boy sticks around after exchanging a glance with Big Guy, and the jounin from before also stays.

“Come here, brat,” Rikuto orders, sitting cross-legged on the ground. After a moment, Riko approaches and sinks down in front of him.

Stares at him with trepidation.

“This is the seal,” he informs her and withdraws a scroll. Unrolls it.
Riko studies it.

It’s a small one, structured oddly — like a spiral. Has some unfamiliar symbols, and she’s not sure about the way everything links together. But she can recognise that it’s a destructive seal, an explosion of sorts.

Lacking a lot of the security constraints one should always put on seals of that nature, and she’s not sure just how it’s triggered or charged.

It’s powerful, though, she can tell that much.

She looks back at Rikuto. “I don’t understand what the problem is.”

“The only way to control when this abomination goes off is to put it on a person who can trigger it,” he answers evenly. “I need someone to put it on me.”

Riko stares at him. Her mind gone blank, refusing to understand.

Pretty Boy makes a horrified sound of understanding.

“Go home,” Rikuto says.

“You’d die,” she whispers, her voice thin and weak.

“I’m old and I’ve been wasting away for years now,” he answers, his voice flat. Emotionless.

She shakes her head, disbelieving, not wanting to hear this. “You can’t—“

“You young fools are dying in droves against those damn snakes,” Rikuto continues. “The seal will absorb all the chakra in the vicinity before it detonates. With that, I reckon I can take one or two of ‘em down. Buy you some more time to survive.”

Riko stares at him mutely, and everything’s gone cold.

“You can’t do that,” Pretty Boy Chuunin says. “We’ll hold out, you don’t have to die for us!”

“Shut up, boy!” Rikuto flares up, his voice a vicious snarl, and there’s a horrible, wrathful expression on his face. “Ain’t doing it for you. Ain’t doing it for the village or the clan. Not even for that brat over there, or any of the stupid children you’re raising for slaughter.” He laughs bitterly. “I’m doing it for my Kaisei, because she died in an attack just like this and I wasn’t there and her home was destroyed.”

She buries her face in her hands. “You’re going to die,” she chokes out. “You’re asking me to kill you.”

“You ain’t gonna do shit, brat,” Rikuto hisses. “Go. The fuck. Home.”

A laugh escapes her, and it sounds like a sob. “But you’ll find someone else to do it. It’ll just take longer.”

He doesn’t appear to have anything to answer to that.

Riko raises her head again, her hands leaving her face and coming away wet. Then she looks at jounin guy, at the people who’d been arguing, and those of them who’re still around and clearly watching, listening in.
“You’re all going along with this?” she demands hollowly. “If I were someone else, you’d already have-“

“We have no way to kill the snakes,” Jounin guy rasps. “Nothing’s working. We’ve tossed explosives in their mouths. Some tried from the inside and it didn’t work. Even once the elite jounin launch out counterattack, we have no guarantees that there’s anything they’ll be able to do. They’re flattening the village.” He jerks his head at the chuunin who’d spoken earlier. “He’s not wrong. We’re dying in droves. Nara’s the only one who’s got something guaranteed to work.”

She stares at him mutely. Only a bone-deep, resigned sort of horror left.

“You want me to do it,” she breathes.

He looks away.

Can’t even look her in the face or confirm it out loud as he asks her to do something that’ll kill her friend and clan member.

“Who was Kaisei?” she asks, her voice a low rasp as she stares at Rikuto again. Memorising the lines of his weathered face desperately.

Wanting just a few moments longer, forever, until this nightmare is over and things would go back to normal, and she’d be back working at the armoury and weigh kunai, dust off shelves, trade barbs with him.

“Loved her,” he answers. “Made it all worth it.” He pauses. “You look a lot like her.”

Riko shakes her head, eyes pressing shut and then opening again wide because this- this is the last time she’ll ever get to look at him, and there won’t even be a body left after. “There’s got to be another way.”

If only her goddamn magic weren’t- blocked.

She even tries to reach for the Cursed Seal’s power, but it doesn’t respond.

“I don’t have one,” he answers with finality. “Nobody else has come forward. I won’t ask someone to take my place.”

“I-“

“Don’t you dare.”

Her mouth snaps shut.

For a while, they just look at each other.

In the distance, still in her sensing range, chakras wink out like little lights extinguished, and the sounds of her home being torn apart keep going with no signs of stopping.

“Ask me to do it,” she whispers numbly.

Rikuto gives her an even look.

And then he does.
It’s a strange sound. A strange sensation to Riko’s chakra sense.

As though the world sucks in a deep breath and holds it for one endless moment.

She presses her hands over her ears and Pretty Boy Chuunin who’s carrying her does the same. They and everyone else are running away from the blast site.

Even with the distance and the covered ears, the boom is impossibly loud, and the shockwave makes Pretty Boy stumble, but he catches his footing again.

Riko buries her face in the back of his shoulder, her breaths gone shallow.

Rikuto-ossan is dead. Killed by a seal she put on him.

Pretty Boy squeezes her knee and keeps moving. Big Guy and Spiky Hair follow closely, the four of them headed back to the Chuunin Facility. She’s not sure where everyone else disappeared off to—maybe delivering the injured to the hospital, or joining the efforts focused on the remaining snakes.

Or maybe they took up positions to distract and delay the targeted snakes in case Rikuto’s seal failed.

Riko doesn’t know.

She doesn’t want to know.

They’re back in the facility soon enough. Pretty Boy sets her down and keeps her close, a hand on her shoulder. Big Guy walks in front of them, clearing the way, while Spiky Hair brings up the rear.

She thought they’d ask for their next assignment, but when it’s their turn to speak to the admin shinobi in charge, Pretty Boy pushes her forward and announces, “She’s a fuuinjutsu user.”

Admin guy looks up from his list and stares incredulously. “Then what the hell’s she doing in the field?” he huffs. “Fuuinjutsu users have orders to be in the tower, drawing!”

Riko looks up at him blankly.

“I’d guess,” Pretty Boy answers mildly, his hand squeezing her shoulder reassuringly, “That she was following the orders of someone in charge like you who forgot to ask her specialisation, like they were supposed to do. Didn’t they do that for us, Kotetsu?”

Spiky Hair makes a thoughtful sound. “Yes, yes they did, Izumo. You?” he asks, directed at Big Guy.

“Yep,” the large man rumbles, staring unblinkingly at Admin guy.


Admin guy huffs again and shifts uncomfortably. “Well, one of you get her to the tower,” he orders, and Pretty Boy nudges her to move towards Big Guy. “The other two—“
Big Guy swings her on his back again, and she doesn’t catch the rest of the orders as they hurry toward the Hokage tower.

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