like a river

by Millarca

Summary

She didn't ask to be Haruno Sakura, but if she has to deal with being her, then so will everyone else.

Or: like a river, we get swept up in the moment (all things are in flux)

Notes

Disclaimer: I don't own Naruto, obviously.
A/N: I have no idea where this is going and this is self-indulgent as hell, so don't expect any intricate plot lines or steady updates. Also unbetaed, so please excuse any mistakes. Other than that, enjoy! XD
Her name is Maria. She loves her dad, likes animals more than humans, subsists on caffeine and sarcasm, works too many hours, and doesn’t care for labels or social norms.

(Maria dies, and Sakura is born. It should have been simple. It isn’t.)

A depressed toddler makes for a strange creature. Barely a year old and already deep in mourning for all the things she lost. Maybe she’s gone insane; maybe she’s still dying. Others might have called it a gift. She calls it a curse and can’t decide whether to laugh or cry, so she does both.

Her new parents are alarmed by this un-toddler-like behavior, but she can’t bring herself to care. Not yet. It feels too raw, too soon, too fucking something.

(She doesn’t even try. She doesn’t know if she ever will.)

Time passes; she’s still mourning, but learns to hide it better. Her new parents don’t deserve whatever-the-hell this is. Dealing with a new baby is one thing; having to deal with her weird shit is another thing entirely. She tells herself to stop being such a selfish bitch and move the fuck on—somehow, she does.

Slowly, she goes through all five stages of grief, only to one day find herself back at the beginning.

It happens suddenly. One moment, she’s half-dozing, half-gazing at these giant-ass face-carvings over her mother’s shoulder as Mebuki grills the grocer on the freshness of his overpriced peaches, then the next moment everything adds up and sends her mind reeling.

*Haruno. Konoha. Shinobi. Hokage. No fucking way,* she thinks, with a detached sense of horror, then buries her face in Mebuki’s neck and goes back to sleep.

(That’s all she does for the next three years. Denial is a wonderful, beautiful thing.)

Maria never wanted kids, but was somewhat good with them whenever her coworkers roped her into babysitting, mostly because she was the adult in this equation and the little brats knew it.

Sakura, the adult trapped in a child’s body, doesn’t have the patience for their bullshit.

“Go ‘way, forehead freak! We dun wanna play with ya, ugly!” little Ami cries and throws a handful of dirt in Sakura’s face.

*She’s just a kid,* Sakura reminds herself as she wipes her face with the back of her sleeve. Instead of blowing up at the insensitive brat, she sends Mebuki a look that manages to convey *I told you so* and *I tried,* then retreats under the shade of the trees to nap in peace while Mebuki goes to have a long talk with Ami’s parents.

It’s not the first time Mebuki’s dragged her to the park in hopes of ‘socializing’ her, of getting her more active and less of…well, in Kizashi’s words, ‘a budding bum’. She’s even heard him joke about Mebuki cheating on him with a Nara once, which…yeah, let’s just say poor dad’s lucky the couch is so ridiculously comfy. Sakura’s going to marry that couch one day and they’ll have super soft cushion babies and be happy together forever and ever. Couch Quality Time™ has practically
become a Haruno family tradition these days, much to Mebuki’s despair.

It’s the first time, though, that she comes face-to-face with what she’s been desperately trying to avoid and would’ve been totally happy continuing to deny for the rest of her (second) life.

“My, aren’t you a pretty one?” Uchiha fucking Mikoto coos at her, her sons standing behind her and examining Sakura with curious, unblinking black eyes, as if she’s some sort of endangered species one rarely sees outside its natural habitat and how is this her life?

Sakura squints up at her, then at her sons, then promptly decides she doesn’t have the patience for Uchiha bullshit either, turns her back on them and goes back to sleep. She can feel Mebuki’s disapproving glare burning against the back of her neck and can almost hear the why-are-you-like-this-oh-kami-where-have-I-gone-wrong-with-this-child lecture that’s coming after they get home. Oh, mother, if only you knew...

Thank the gods, Mikoto takes the hint and leads her little ducklings away, probably to go bother some other poor, unfortunate soul that has no idea of Uchiha drama. With Sakura’s shitty luck, that person ends up being Mebuki. The gods have forsaken her, truly. A grimace spreads across her face that Sakura hurries to cover up with an overexaggerated yawn to escape Itachi’s scrutiny—he’s still dissecting her with his too-pretty eyes of fucked-up torture, goddammit!—when someone else sneaks up on her, laughing and poking her cheek.

“That was kinda rude, chibi.”

Sakura cracks one eye open to meet another pair of too-pretty eyes and, right then and there, realizes she’s doomed. What the hell is up with these Uchiha and staring and their fucking perfect genes and and and—

“You’re rude,” she huffs, batting his hand away, fed up with all the poking and prodding and interrupting her precious nap time and shattering her wonderful, beautiful denial.

His lips tilt up in amusement, and wow, that smile is so unfair, seriously—is today like, National Uchiha Appreciation Day or something?—so Sakura can be excused for closing her eyes and copying Gaara’s forced sleep sttic like nobody’s business. It’s tricky to fall asleep on command, but something she’s practiced so religiously that by now, it’s become second nature. The last thing she hears is the Uchiha’s laughter and Mebuki’s shout of, “Sakura, don’t you dare—!”

After the obligatory lecture, Mebuki spends an hour glorifying the ways of shinobi and the Will of Fire and how great it’d be if Sakura joined the Academy like those nice Uchiha boys. Apparently, Mikoto had been very convincing, especially when she spoke the magic words: oh, don’t worry, Mebuki-san, she’ll surely make friends there.

Sakura is so done.

(She says no, of course. Mebuki says yes. Sakura stays awake for thirty-seven hours in silent protest until Kizashi kicks her off her beloved couch-husband because you can’t hog Kuma-chan, young lady! Again, how is this her life?)
Meeting four prominent members of the illustrious Uchiha clan—read: those fucking persistent walking trauma cases—cements one thing in Sakura’s mind. Her glorious days of denying reality are over. Which, okay, fine, she can deal with this. She so can. Sakura just has to keep her distance and everything’s going to be just fine, right? Right.

Or that’s what she’s forced herself to believe in order to get up in the morning. Problem is, once you meet the Uchiha it’s like, mission impossible to un-meet them. (Gods know she’s tried. Why her, just… Why?)

It doesn’t matter where she hides or how rude she is or that she’s made it her life’s goal to knock herself out the moment an Uchiha enters her line of vision. There’s got to be a trick to this avoid-all-things-Uchiha art; Sakura just has to find it and she’ll be set for life. Maybe reading up on chakra-sensing will help? Sakura’s supposed to be good at chakra control; not that she’s checked since, y’know, she’s not going to be a ninja. No way in hell, huh-uh. No matter what Mebuki wants. She’s already done this whole ‘make your parents proud by getting a well-paying job’ stint once, and while it wasn’t all bad, it wasn’t all it’s cracked up to be either. Financial security does not necessarily make one happy, just self-sufficient. Also, the life expectancy of ninja sucks major balls. Sakura didn’t spend the better part of four years getting over her death to give up now when she’s finally—finally—managed to get her shit together.

It’s not like she’s that important in the grand scheme of things. No, really. The manga was called ‘Naruto’ for a reason, although with the way things ended, it’d have been more accurate if it was called ‘Alien Family Drama Through the Ages’. Oh, Sakura was there, somewhere in the background, healing dudes and pulverizing shit and getting no character development whatsoever. But, hey, that’s life for most female characters in shōnen manga, so. What did the original Sakura contribute to the—oh. Uchiha Sarada.

Yeah, no. Let’s just…not go there. Ever. No more baby Uchiha, huh? That’s…damn, that’s fucking awful. Just because they’re way too high maintenance doesn’t mean they shouldn’t exist. Which they won’t, if the timeline continues as is. If she doesn’t get off her ass and do something about it. See, this is exactly why she should stay the hell away from anything Uchiha. She’s a four-year-old civvie kid, for gods’ sake. There’s literally nothing she can do that won’t result in a) being lobotomized via Yamanaka mindfuckery, b) being brainwashed into a dead-faced baby assassin by Danzō, or c) being vivisected by Orochimaru to unlock the secrets of non-consensual reincarnation.

Sakura would just rather… Not. At least not while the Sandaime is still Hokage. If he could brush off Danzō’s countless, abhorrent crimes against the world, nature, humanity, and everything in-between, an assassination attempt on Hiruzen among them, then what hope does Sakura have of him listening to a four-year-old’s fantastical tale that basically amounts to: oh, I read it in a manga in my previous life, by the way, your old pal Danzō is a dick, you should totally kill him, yeah. There’s willful ignorance, and then there’s Hiruzen’s pathological need to never call Danzō out on his bullshit.

Tsunade, on the other hand, might be persuaded to at least hear Sakura out without any serious brain damage involved, but by the time she becomes Hokage, it’ll be too late for the Uchiha, so that’s also out. As for the Uchiha themselves, well… First of all—and Sakura can’t stress this enough—right now, they are kids. Child geniuses who grow up to be monstrously strong teenagers.
with suicidal tendencies, a history of bad decisions, an unhealthy amount of loyalty to the village, and Sakura doesn’t even know what else, but she’s sure there’s bound to be more on account of them being Uchiha teenagers. If there’s one thing Sakura can bet on is that Uchiha teenagers will do some pretty fucking stupid shit for love. Exhibit A: Obito. Tunnel vision and teenage hormones is a downright terrifying combination. When they care, they don’t just focus—they obsess.

Case in point, it’s been two months since she met him and, for whatever demented reason, Uchiha Shisui won’t. Stop. Stalking. Her. Also, poking various parts of her body, can’t forget that goddamn poking fixation Uchiha seem to naturally develop.

“Again with the silent treatment, hm?” Shisui hums, sadistic delight ringing through his tone, when all his insistent rib-poking elicits is a mere grunt of annoyance from Sakura. As befitting an individual whose questionable hobbies include stalking little girls and playing with their body, he’s encouraged by her silence. “You’re breaking my heart, chibi.”

A heartbroken Uchiha, what a rare find. “Good. Maybe now you’ll start using your brain instead,” she deadpans, because the silent treatment obviously isn’t working, and she’s too tired to fake childish mannerisms. (He wouldn’t buy it, anyway. Sakura suspects he’s intrigued by her Nara-like habits, and that’s precisely what led to this headache.) “And don’t call me chibi.”

“Oh.” Shisui laughs as he flops down onto the ground beside her, and by the two soft thumps that follow, Sakura guesses he’s brought his cousins with him this time. Joy. “But I don’t even know your name, chibi.”

“Bullshit,” she coughs into her fist, earning her a snort from Shisui, a poke in the thigh from Itachi, and an admonishment about bad language and impressionable younger brothers when Sasuke repeats the expletive with impish glee. It’s true that Sakura never personally introduced herself to them, though, never gave them permission to use her first name. Once she does, it’ll be game over; give these Uchiha an inch and they’ll take a mile, she’s well aware.

“Just—” Sakura sighs, rubbing her lids with the heel of her palms, vainly hoping the Uchiha trio won’t be there when she opens her eyes. “Go away. Forever.” Alas, no such luck. Shisui is staring at her, all curled lashes and mischief and challenge in his grin, and Sakura can’t help the next words that spill out of her throat. “Is this something that you do, like, on a regular basis? ’Cause if it is, I don’t understand how nobody has reported you yet, unless… Ah. I get it now. The police force is being run by the Uchiha clan and all. You have an…understanding…with the Chief.”

There’s a choking sound that she thinks comes from Itachi’s side because Sasuke is too young to get her innuendo and Shisui appears to be more entertained than shocked. His grin sharpens as he eyes her with something akin to triumph.

“Careful there, chibi. The KMPF was established to protect the civilian population and enforce the law. I’ll have you know that false accusations are within its purview.”

“What does that mean, nī-san?” Sasuke pipes up, brows furrowed in confusion and lips half-bitten. It’s…disgustingly adorable. Sakura struggles to reconcile this cute, pouting kid with the guy who’ll go all Kill Bill on the five Kage if nothing deviates from the script.

Before Itachi can enlighten his baby bro, no doubt using the first age-appropriate explanation he can come up with on such short notice, Sakura adopts an expression that says butter wouldn’t melt in her mouth and drawls out, “It means that freedom of speech isn’t tolerated around these parts. It’s a human rights violation and the good people of this village won’t stand for it any longer. You should think about moving before they rise up in rebellion. I hear Kumo has a thing for dōjutsu.”
Shisui lets out a dramatic gasp, clutching at his chest as if she’s just dealt him a mortal blow, but his eyes gleam with humor. Thing is though, Sakura isn’t joking. If the Uchiha clan packs up and moves to Kumo, it’ll solve a lot of future problems. Granted, it’ll create a host of different issues, but at least they’ll be alive to deal with them.

“You’d have me move to a village that tried to kidnap a little girl and will probably do unspeakable things to gain the Sharingan just to get rid of me? Wow, chibi, ruthless. You’ll go far in the ranks with that sorta mindset, I can see it.”

“Will not,” she hisses, stubborn and petulant and every inch the four-year-old she’s supposed to be, then does what she should have done from the start.

“Oi, chibi, we were having a moment! Don’t go falling asleep in the middle of—”

(Sakura doesn’t want to like them, really, she doesn’t, but well… They just won’t go away. And, okay, maybe the Kumo idea isn’t the best she can do. She sleeps on it.)

Chapter End Notes

For anyone wondering about ages and stuff, at this point in time, Sakura (civvie) is 4, Itachi (genin) is 9, and Shisui (jōnin) is 12.
Shisui can’t pinpoint what it is that first draws him to this little civilian pink-haired girl with a penchant for hardcore napping and avoiding troublesome Uchiha so strong that she might actually out-Nara Shikaku-sama if she really tries. He thinks it might have been the hair. It’s just so...so bright and eye-catching and un-fucking-believably pink that his Sharingan flares on instinct to dispel the genjutsu some smartass—read: Itachi, his too-clever-for-his-own-good brat of a cousin —cast on him as revenge for some prank he might have pulled in a fit of boredom.

(If anyone ever asks, he’ll deny both to his dying breath.)

When he realizes that he isn’t under the effects of a visual genjutsu, it only takes him half a second to decide he absolutely has to meet this girl, if only to discover how the hell she can snub Mikoto-sama to her face. Nobody, and he means nobody, is brave enough to even think of trying it.

Shisui quickly learns that it’s not a matter of fearlessness or social ineptitude or any sort of genuine mental disability, but sheer, mulish disregard for the world and the people living in it out of principle. It’s...wow, actually, it’s kind of impressive in a way. This tiny slip of a girl could give Fugaku-sama some pointers on how to handle the Council of Elders and where they can shove their suggestions ‘for the good of the clan’, because that’s how you do it.

Still, learning the how of it all doesn’t tell him from where that attitude stems, so he perches his ass on the closest tree branch he can find and listens in on the conversation as Mikoto-sama sits with the girl’s mother, commiserating over the annoying habits of their husbands and cooing over their precious babies, all the while gathering intel like the damn fine pro she is.

(The Intelligence Division cried rivers of tears the day she announced she was semi-retiring in order to focus on her family and clan duties. Shisui’s heard there’s even an altar of her enshrined somewhere deep in the bowels of T&I that half the personnel still prays to for guidance, but that’s Mikoto-sama for you.)

“—just don’t know what to do anymore. How can I show her that it’s okay to not be normal when other kids treat her like...like that horrible Ami girl? Ah, excuse me, Mikoto-san, I didn’t—I mean, normally, I wouldn’t speak ill of others, but... Did you know that her mother more-or-less told me it’s Sakura’s fault if she’s weird enough that Ami doesn’t like her? I swear, that woman has no shame!

“My Sakura’s such a bright girl, Mikoto-san... When she was two, Kizashi started doing this thing where he’d sit her on his lap and read the newspaper to her as if she could understand him, you know? I thought it was hilarious at first—I swear, my husband can be such a dork—but then Sakura started asking questions like...like ‘what does this word mean’ or ‘how do you write this kanji’, and I realized she was actually paying attention and learning how to read and write. By herself, can you believe it?

“Sometimes, I think she might be smarter than me, and that’s why she doesn’t believe me when I tell her there are kids out there who’l like her just the way she is. I just—just don’t want her to spend the rest of her life hiding like this because she’s afraid to act like herself and let others in.”

Oh, sweet kami, he thinks, torn between incredulity and a delirious sort of giddiness, it’s another Itachi. Suppressing the urge to bang his head against the tree or break out in hysterical laughter—because what the fuck? Is this for real? Like, how?—he turns to face his cousin, who is already gazing up at him with deep-knowing eyes from the branch below his, wearing an expression that is
a perfect mixture of Fugaku-sama’s cold-ass disapproval and Mikoto-sama’s soulful disappointment.

“Shisui,” he says, voice chillingly soft, “please, don’t.”

So polite, his baby cousin. That particular inflection never fails to make grown-ass men flinch and wish they’d never partaken in any kind of criminal activity during the days Itachi shadows his father at the police station. Too bad it never works on Shisui.

“Aw, c’mon, Tachi-chan,” he all but chortles, leaping down to his cousin’s branch and casually slinging an arm around Itachi’s shoulders, “it’ll be fun, I promise.”

“For whom?” Itachi murmurs, almost to himself, but all the same follows after him as Shisui makes a beeline for Sakura’s napping spot, also collecting Sasuke on the way there. Probably more out of an obligation to rescue that poor, unsuspecting girl from Shisui’s clutches than out of any real desire to connect with another human being. Because that’s what Itachi does. A regular hero, that’s his baby cousin, yep. And he wonders why every girl in his ever-growing fanclub plays the damsel-in-distress card once he leaves the safety of his home. It’ll be a sad day in Konoha for the female population when Itachi finally gets a clue.
There’s a conspiracy going on. Sakura doesn’t know when it began forming, but she’s willing to bet it was the day Uchiha Mikoto saw her face and decided Sakura would make the prettiest Uchiha accessory. No way is her eldest son, the vaunted heir of the Uchiha clan, spending his off-duty time trying to entice a no-name civvie to join the Academy via inhumanly acrobatic displays of shurikenjutsu without her permission. (Or, more like, without her express order to do so. Or else. Mikoto very much feels like an ‘or else’ type of mother, despite the sweet-smiling image she projects to this poor, gullible village, and isn’t that scary as fuck?)

Sakura calls bullshit on Itachi’s excuse of needing to improve his honed-to-perfection-since-age-four accuracy. Shisui’s offhand comment—*in case you ever need to poke someone in the eye with a sharp object, chibi*—is more believable, but Sakura still doesn’t buy it. Mainly because this doesn’t look like something one can learn from simple observation, which is the extent of what she’s willing to do. Forget about emulating Uchiha motherfucking Itachi, Sakura’s feeling mentally exhausted just watching him. Hell, Sasuke’s already conked out, using her lap as a pillow no less, after failed attempt number six to pull off these gravity-defying stunts, and she’s sure he’s got way more stamina than her since he actually trains.

So, basically, to sum up: Sakura’s tired, cranky, she’s missing her afternoon nap because of these idiots, and of-fucking-course, it’s *then* that Shisui chooses to ask the million dollar question.

"Okay, chibi, now I gotta ask. What *is* your problem?"

“Define problem.”

“Being coy isn’t cute at your age, chibi.”

“Excuse you. And drop the chibi.”

“You can’t deflect forever, Saku-tan.”

“Watch me, Shicchan.”

“Sakura-san.” Itachi, ever the consummate mediator, is a natural at stopping them before they can really get going, voice soft, but wrapped in steel, with an undercurrent of *you two are being ridiculous, please stop it.* “I would greatly appreciate it if you would be so kind as to answer my cousin’s question.” *So we can finally go home,* is what goes unspoken, because Itachi is too much of a conflict avoider to come out and say it to Sakura’s face, but not above hinting it in the nicest guilt-inducing way possible, the manipulative little shit.

Fuck it, she thinks, having reached her quota of bullshit for the day, and gives it to them raw. “Look, I get it, alright. Chakra is awesome, shinobi are the definition of badass, Konoha is the greatest thing since fried ice cream. I’ll give you all that, even if I’m not one hundred percent sold on some of the finer details.” Her gaze connects with Shisui’s, hard and flinty and brutally honest, and how he doesn’t even blink or show the slightest trace of shock reveals he’s masterminded this whole thing in order to get her to this point (and letting her know it, too, the sly asshole). It’s too late to halt her tongue, though, and maybe she needs to say this, because *someone has to.* “Question is, would you sign up your kids for the shinobi life if you didn’t have to because of, y’know, reasons? Like, peer pressure and clan expectations and stuff. I mean, you’re set to graduate the Academy at twelve. *Twelve,* Shisui. I’ll grant you, the mortality rate is way better than it was during the Warring Clans era, but *still.* Konoha was literally built to fix that sort of thing, so I don’t
understand why we’re letting kids graduate so. Freakin’. Early.”

Silence falls. Nothing but soft exhalations, the beat of her heart drumming beneath her ribcage, the pull of Shisui’s eyes as he stares at her like—

She lowers her gaze to the child napping on her lap and strokes Sasuke’s hair, Itachi’s eyes mapping the slow motions of her fingers, pupils dilated, an unfathomable expression on his too-pale face.

“You know,” Shisui breathes out a laugh, “I think this is the most I’ve heard you speak, ever, and I can’t even bring myself to tease you about it after hearing all that.”

When Sakura shrugs, but doesn’t speak or raise her gaze, Itachi reaches out a hand and places it on top of hers. It’s larger than hers, warm, callused; it makes something snap inside her. Being comforted by a nine-year-old whose hands must be dipped in red by now feels so, so wrong. Sakura should be the one doing the comforting, for gods’ sake, and yet here they are.

“Sakura-san.” Itachi pauses, hesitating for a split second, grip growing tight around her wrist. “Did something happen to you?”

Oh. Oh. Great. And now she feels stupid on top of it all. Sakura should’ve guessed something would get lost in translation, really. Itachi’s pacifistic nature was borne of trauma after witnessing some pretty fucked-up shit, so it’s no wonder he’d come to that conclusion. Not that getting reincarnated into a world where murdering people in cold blood is the coolest job ever isn’t traumatizing, but…yeah, moving on.

“Yes, Itachi-san,” she says, tone as dry as can be, lifting her head and meeting his eyes squarely. “It’s called reading history books, not being brought up on a diet of shinobi propaganda from birth, and developing a healthy sense of self-preservation. It works wonders for your critical thinking skills. You should try it.” And she means it.

Caught aback by her snarky retort, Itachi blinks, quietly bewildered, while Shisui snorts with laughter.

“She’s got you there, Tachi.” Patting his still-flummoxed cousin on the back, he grins at Sakura, a self-satisfied, wicked twist of lips that promises bad things for her future. “These are some dangerous opinions, chibi. Not something people should really talk about, ya know? I gotta say, I didn’t know you trusted us that much. I’m so touched, I could hug the stuffing outta—”

Oh, hell no. Sakura cuts him off with a flat stare. “Go die in a fire.”

“A fire, Saku-tan? Really? That the best you can do?”

“What, Uchiha are known pyromaniacs. One of these days you’ll mess up a Katon jutsu and I’ll finally be rid of you.”

“Cute. Delusional, but cute,” he sing-songs and even has the gall to poke her cheek, the bastard. Not only that, but he doesn’t even have the decency to let her slap his hand away, drawing it back so fast, that it’s barely a blur. Rolling his eyes—Sakura swears there’s a flash of blood-red—he waves said appendage in front of his face with aplomb, and if that’s not a blatant taunt, then she doesn’t know what is. “Nah, I’m not saying you’re wrong—hell, I should know, I graduated at six, I got to know what war does to kids up close and personal—but if you feel that way, why not do something about it, hmm? How do you expect anything to change if you won’t even try?”

Before Sakura can fully comprehend the insanity that’s just come out of his mouth, something
tingles in her brain. Next thing she knows, there’s an amused whisper, a suggestion to play along, and—and she’s watching a five-year-old Itachi, decked out in full Hokage regalia, giving a rousing speech from atop the Hokage tower, with the people of Konoha wildly cheering and stomping their feet and shouting ‘Godaime-sama’ at the top of their lungs. What. The. Fuck? Genjutsu, her deductive abilities numbly supply. Shisui’s talking to her, yes, but he isn’t talking to her at all.

Sakura takes it all back. Itachi has nothing on Shisui, the most manipulative little shit of them all. The fact that Itachi is five in this, frankly, utterly ridiculous scenario says it all—Shisui’s been planning this thing for a long-ass time, and Sakura’s just made his case for him without even meaning to. Shisui’s oh-so-deviously-worded and strategically-intoned finisher (and Itachi’s reaction to it) more than confirms it.

“If Uchiha Madara could ally with his mortal enemies to build this village, even after the death of his beloved brother at their hands, so children wouldn’t have to go to war, then anything is possible. Even a civilian girl becoming Hokage.”

It’s subtle, the emotional upheaval that flits across Itachi’s face, like the world’s most understated Eureka! moment, and Sakura, well… Damn. Sakura doesn’t even have to try hard to feign a picture-perfect look of wide-eyed, shell-shocked indignation, because honestly? She’s kinda feeling it.

“Becoming Hoka—wait, are you serious right now? Did you just…try reverse psychology on me? I can’t believe you’d stoop so low—no, you know what? I do believe it, ‘cause it’s you.” And to drive the point home, she gives Shisui her best stink eye. “Fire, Shicchan. Lots and lots of fire.”

So. Sakura may or may have not planted the seeds of a teeny-tiny revolution in Itachi’s mind. A revolution that she now has to support and play an active part in if she wants to survive this whole baby ninja business. Fuck her life. This is why we can’t have nice things, is her first thought, then, I’m never missing my afternoon nap again if this is the shit that happens when I do.
Chapter 5

After six months full of Uchiha crazy, an introduction to Shinobi Tactics 101 Itachi-style, and many, many revolution talks, meeting the esteemed Uchiha clan head, AKA Uchiha “A+ Parenting” Fugaku, is inevitable.

It happens like this: Fugaku makes the mistake of coming home early the day Mikoto invites (bullies) Sakura for a visit; he enters the courtyard to find her sprawled like some sort of human-starfish hybrid on his hard-as-iron zabuton; their eyes meet.

(It all goes downhill from there.)

Lips pressed together into a harsh line, Fugaku stares—he stares down at her messy, lounging form, the whole of his demeanor broadcasting thinly-veiled suspicion, with the barest touch of disbelief, as if he desperately wants to ask why, in Amaterasu’s name, is there a pink-haired girl just chilling on my engawa, but is far too dignified to raise the question.

A pink brow arches in a ‘can I help you?’ manner, and he all but blanches for a fragment of a second, gaze glazed and slightly unfocused, implying he’s experiencing an involuntary flashback. Interesting, she thinks, now wide-awake and scenting blood. Mikoto’s too damn difficult (scary) to talk back to, what with her too-sweet smiles and I-will-poison-your-tea-if-you-give-me-lip vibes—the woman’s a force of nature, no joke—but Fugaku? Fugaku’s fair game as far as she’s concerned, and if Sakura has to suffer through regular dinners with his high-handed ass, then so will he. Misery loves company and all that petty shit.

“Yo.” She cracks a yawn, cavalier to the point of insult, then looks him straight in the eye and says, with a Kakashi-level drawl and artless sincerity, “Your zabuton are so not comfy.” Fugaku’s jaw doesn’t drop, but Sakura can tell it’s a near thing, if the way his facial muscles stiffen is anything to go by. Also, the almost-palpable ‘excuse me?’ affront radiating from his pores. “I mean, if your intention was to drive your guests away, then it’s definitely working, but if not?” She gives a lazy shrug, her meaning loud and clear. “Food for thought.”

Translation: this is why you don’t have any guests of non-Uchiha breeding, you stick-in-the-mud bastard. How do you expect people to like your clan when you make them sit on these abominations? Get some better cushions ASAP.

Silence, then there’s a minuscule twitch near the corner of his left eye, a slow-spreading, horrified realization that screams of past traumas violently resurfacing and why the fuck is this happening to him again. Without ever uttering a single word to Sakura, he pivots on his heel and heads inside, his voice carrying through the paper-thin walls, a whisper-soft echo of butt-hurt fury, as he whines to his wife about redhead menaces with uncouth manners and no filter and Mikoto, I thought we agreed no more—

Heh. Fucking A. Sakura gives herself a mental pat on the back, vowing to fill the shoes of Kushina’s legacy, because that right there? That’s a thing of beauty.
carved from stone, but there’s an air of low-key schadenfreude to his mien that betrays his assistance in said scheme. As usual, Sasuke’s a cinnamon roll, happily-and-obliviously stuffing his face with impressively neat manners for a four-year-old, no doubt courtesy of his mother, and speaking of which…

Contrary to her sourpuss of a husband, Mikoto’s observing Sakura’s less-than-stellar table manners with a rueful sort of fondness, overfilling plates, making small talk, and being an all-around perfect hostess without batting a lash. Sakura might’ve been tempted to think of it as a normal family dinner, with no ulterior motives or underlying Uchiha bullshit, if not for—

“Have you changed your mind about the Academy yet, Sakura-chan?”

—yeah, that. She just loooves how Mikoto seamlessly slips that yet in her sentence, like it’s aforgone conclusion and the real question is when, not if. No pressure or anything. Subtlety, thy name is Mikoto.

Cheeks bulging, Sakura absently nods as she keeps chewing. “Mm.”

Resistance is futile, she’s come to learn, though not yet wholly accept. Sakura bitterly mourns for her lost (second) youth, casting a filthy glare sideways and memorizing Shisui’s stupid, grinning mug for future target practice sessions.

Mikoto’s smile gains a victorious edge that fools absolutely no one. “That’s wonderful news, dear girl. Once you graduate, I’m sure you’ll be put in a great team!”

The loaded stare she directs at Fugaku, his rapidly paling complexion, how Sasuke perks up at the mention of genin teammates—they all telegraph you’d better pull some strings and get our son in that team, dear husband. Or else.

Poor guy looks like he wants to argue, oh-so-very-badly, but… One, this isn’t the time or place to do it; two, he doesn’t even know where to start; and three, it’s a losing battle, anyway. While his mind is suffering a mini-aneurysm, his body goes on autopilot—Fugaku picks up his chopsticks and resumes his meal as if nothing’s wrong, nothing at all, because that’s all he can do, really.

Unfortunately (for him), Sakura’s not done with this discussion. “Nah, no team for me,” she shakes her head, then drops the bomb, “I wanna join the police force when I graduate.”

Fugaku freezes as he is about to bite into a piece of calamari. Slowly, with an eerie, dead calm, he sets his chopsticks down onto his plate and locks eyes with Sakura. When he parts his mouth to speak, his voice is devoid of inflection or even life. One single soulless word comes out. “What.”

Indolent, no remorse whatsoever, Sakura shrugs. “Yeah.”


‘Cause Team Seven has the shittiest luck, ever. ‘Cause if you don’t start networking your ass off, your clan’s done for. ‘Cause Shisui’s a manipulative little shit. ‘Cause your kids don’t deserve what happened to ‘em. Pick one. Besides, Uchiha genin do it all the time—they start off as interns, and if they ever want to climb up the ranks or join the regular shinobi forces, they team up to take the Chunin Exams. It’s, like, an unwritten rule that only they are allowed to do so, true, but nowhere in the KMPF charter does it state that others can’t. She’s done her research, yep. There’s no way Sakura can say all that, though, so she goes with, “‘Cause if you wanna change something, then you gotta start from the inside.”

At that, Fugaku seems at a loss for words. He works his jaw for a few seconds, then asks, tone
measured and a little astonished and tinged with wry undertones, “You have issues with the way the police force operates?”

“No.” Sakura’s lips curl into a mirthless smile. “I’ve got issues with the way the village treats its people. I just figured the police force is a great place to start fixing things.”

Finally, Fugaku gets it. Understanding flashes in his eyes, irises red like angry, bleeding wounds, mouth mimicking her smile. It’s too jaded an expression for a four-year-old’s face, but looks right at home on Fugaku’s.

“Hn.”

“Mm.”

“In that case, I regret to inform you that the police force isn’t accepting recruits outside of the Uchiha clan,” he says, and it sounds less like a rejection, more like a tease, all wrapped up in a challenge.

“Doesn’t matter,” Sakura tells him, all casual familiarity and irreverence. “I’ll still join.” What she means is you’ll have me, jackass, and you’ll be grateful to have me, and judging by the pained grimace Fugaku doesn’t even try to conceal, he knows it, too.

“That’s not for you to deci—”

“I want to join, too, tō-san!” Sasuke blurts out, eagerly, near shaking with excitement, only to quickly slap his hands over his mouth, mortified by his own daring. Apparently, interrupting Fugaku mid-sentence is a big no-no in this family—oh, shit. Sakura belatedly remembers they have an audience, and that Shisui is a part of it. For the sake of her (remaining) sanity, she’s almost too afraid to check—

Yeeaah. Shisui’s sporting the widest shit-eating grin in the history of ever, like, she’s the gift that keeps on giving and where the hell has she been his whole life, which…just. No. Fuck no. Sakura refuses—she keeps her attention on Fugaku, who gazes back at her, unamused, in a look-what-you’ve-done-now sulk. Sakura swears off Uchiha family dinners.
Chapter 6

It’s another regular day at the park for the core members of Team Fuck Canon, filled with abstract revolution talks, basic chakra theory, and pretend-playing—except for Sasuke, he’s legit playing with the other kiddies in the sandbox—when Sakura comes to an epiphany.

It’s all well and good to aim for the Hokage seat, but presenting an ideal candidate isn’t going to be enough. Not with the way things are—public opinion’s gone to the dogs after the Kyūbi attack, Hiruzen’s married to his no-rocking-the-boat policies, Danzō’s got a raging hard on for the Founders’ kekkei genkai, Obito’s fucking shit up like it’s going out of style, and the Uchiha Elders are a bunch of Pre-Fourth-Shinobi-World-War Sasukes. Don’t get her wrong, Fugaku’s trying, boy, is he trying, but at the end of the day, he’s just one man.

What it all boils down to is this: they can’t do this alone. They need support from the Sandaime, from the other clans, from the shinobi forces, from the civilian population—

“We need Hatake Kakashi,” she ends up musing aloud, teeth sweeping across her bottom lip, warming up to the idea by the second.

In the middle of his lecture on the various practical applications of tree-walking, Itachi pauses, blinks once, and descends into a deep, contemplative silence, which is par for the course with him, really. Shisui, on the other hand, likes to air his thoughts as soon as they form, which is why he stares at her owlishly, with no small degree of bafflement, and blurts out, “As in, Sharingan no Kakashi, Undesirable Number One?”

Ah, yes, there’s that teensy-weensy issue with Obito’s Sharingan to consider—the Uchiha clan gets hung up on the silliest things, honest—but dude’s still alive, so. They’ll understand, like, way, way down the line. Probably. Stifling a sigh, Sakura sits up and spells it out for them.

“As in, the Yondaime’s prized pupil, Hokage Candidate Number Three.” If she didn’t have their attention before, that surely does it. “I mean, think about it for a sec. Every Hokage’s had close ties to a previous Hokage in some way. Logic dictates the next one’s gonna follow that pattern. You with me so far?”

Humming low in his throat, Shisui falls back onto his elbows, eyes heavy-lidded, but keenly focused, and Itachi’s lips quirk up into a proud smile, the kind he gifts his baby bro whenever Sasuke hits another milestone. Already cottoned on to her train of thought, huh? Damn geniuses.

“So, on the one hand, we have the Sannin. Jiraiya’s allergic to responsibility. Tsunade’s gone AWOL. Orochimaru…do I even have to explain that one? Not to mention, I’m pretty sure the whole reason he went missing-nin in the first place was ‘cause he was butt-hurt Sarutobi picked Namikaze over him and the rest was just…collateral.” Here, Shisui collapses to the ground, tremors of laughter coursing through his body, choking out a jumbled string of words —collateral, what even, you’re the best, Saku-tan, don’t ever change—while Itachi’s smile turns indulgent in a what-am-I-to-do-with-you way. Shamelessly, Sakura winks at them. “And on the other hand, we have…?”

When it becomes obvious she expects them to pick up the slack, they exchange a drawn-out glance, mutely debating over who will speak first. Shisui wins by way of opening his damn genius mouth before Itachi can blink, the speed demon.

“Hatake Kakashi,” he half-laughs, half-purrs, and oh, he’s so digging this direction. “He’s got the
right connections."

*Kakashi, you poor bastard,* Sakura thinks, cackling inside, *karma’s a bitch, my friend. That’ll teach you not to ignore kids who need your fucking help.* Okay, maybe she’s a tad peeved on the original Team Seven’s behalf, sue her.

Not to be outdone, Itachi follows right after his cousin, and thus begins Kakashi’s Saga of Bad Hair Days.

“He is a respected war veteran with an established reputation throughout the Elemental Nations.”

“He’s young enough to grow into the position if the Sandaime starts grooming him now.”

“He is indirectly affiliated with the Uchiha clan through Obito-san’s Sharingan.”

“Bingo.” Sakura grins, a vicious, gleeful thing that doesn’t go unnoticed, and bids them to lean closer as if about to share a deep, dark secret. “Best part is? He *doesn’t want* the job either.”

Like a startled cat, Itachi rears back, apprehension deepening the faint lines beneath his lids, and Shisui openly gawks at her, something close to envy written all over his face.

“Wow, Saku-tan, that’s just—” Shisui opens and closes his mouth, then opens it again, seeming impressed beyond words. “Where do you even get your information—no, seriously, *where*?”

“You’d be surprised at what you can learn if you keep an ear open,” she informs him, deadpan, jerking her head towards the nearest cluster of gossiping, giggling mothers. “I mean, look around ya, Shicchan. What do you think all these ladies talk about? The daily romancing of their overworked hubbies or the academic accomplishments of their snot-nosed toddlers? Hatake’s like, prime guilty pleasure material.”

If dead silence can emit *judgement,* then Itachi’s mastered the fuck out of it. A smirk tugs at the corners of her mouth, one that has no business being on a four-year-old’s face. Evidently, Shisui’s already met with puberty and its lovely, lovely perks, because he mirrors her smirk with an extra waggling of brows. Sakura nods sagely.

“Not that I can blame ‘em, ‘cause, c’mon, let’s be honest here. Confirmed bachelor, last of his clan, nobody’s seen his face, the whole ‘hip and cool’ thing he’s got going for him? ‘Course they’d wanna have his babies or something. Hatake’s a fine piece of—” At Itachi’s soft, deliberate cough, Sakura censors herself, not that it makes any difference. “—gluteus maximus.” Totally true, by the way. Sakura’ll forever remember the day she caught a glimpse of Kakashi in the market from behind; she can also encapsulate the Hatake experience in one sentence: *dat ass tho.* Man, that was an awesome day. “So, anyway, yeah. Never underestimate the gossip-mongering ways of pent-up housewives in this village. S’really no wonder Jiraiya makes a killin’ out of Icha Icha in these days of peace.”

To Sakura’s complete un-surprise, Shisui’s the one nodding sagely now, studying the throng of female perverts, intently, an awareness in the depths of his gaze not there before, all calculation and manic delight.

“I find this…highly disturbing,” is all Itachi can say, tone dripping with *judgement.* Also, warily watching his cousin from the corner of his eye. With good reason, as it turns out.

Not one to mollycoddle, especially when he’s having fun, Shisui laughs as he twists the knife deeper. “Get used to it, Tachi. In a few years, *you’ll* be Hatake.”
“Ha! Ain’t that the truth? When Itachi’s gaze seeks her out, utter betrayal on his too-pretty face, Sakura gives him a stare full of pity and you’ll just have to deal. Poor kid looks like he’s sincerely, wholeheartedly rethinking the Kumo option. “What you are proposing…” he prods Sakura, in a painfully transparent change of subject, still highly disturbed.

Spine cracking in one languorous stretching motion, Sakura hits the ground with an ungraceful flop and goes with the flow, if only so she can go back to sleep soon. These Uchiha might be blessed with perfect genes, but she needs her beauty sleep, dammit. That’s her story and she’s sticking to it.

“We fan the rumors of his eligibility and let him come to us. Sarutobi’s been holding out hope one of his students might return to take the hat, so he hasn’t pressed Hatake yet, but if people start talking, well… If Hatake’s forced to acknowledge there’s a very real possibility he might get saddled with Hokagedom if nobody else steps up…”

Sakura shrugs as she makes herself comfortable, getting ready for some shut-eye, and right on cue, they pick up where she leaves off.

“He will endeavor to sponsor someone else in his stead,” Itachi finishes for her, ever-helpful and accommodating to her nap schedule, unlike his rude asshole of a cousin.

“And who better than the cheeky brat who went to all the trouble of setting him up out of freakin’ nowhere? Hatake’s the king of petty revenge as the rumors go ‘round the Jōnin station.” Shisui snickers, poking her in the stomach the very moment she starts to doze off, for fuck’s sake. She’s killing him tomorrow. So. Dead. “Sneaky. Clever. I like it.”

“The only issue I foresee with this plan is…” And now there’s a second sort-of-apologetic-but-not-really stomach-poke. Correction. Both are soon-to-be-dead rude assholes. “If Hatake-san can trace the rumors back to their source—namely, us—other… concerned parties will be able to do so as well.”

Aggravated to the nth fucking degree, Sakura’s lids fly open and she pins them with a wrathful ‘gods, why me?’ glare. “Yeah, but does it really matter?” she grits out, gaze moving from Itachi’s worried face to Shisui’s grinning mug and back again. “You’re the heir of the Uchiha clan, so practically untouchable. Shisui’s a Jōnin, so he’s gotta know what he’s doing…for the most part. I’m just the civvie kid you hang around sometimes, so relatively above suspicion, but—” Tuning out Shisui’s quip of love ya, too, chibi, she sucks a breath in, slowly lets it out, and carries on as if Itachi’s (so, so valid) concern doesn’t terrify the hell out of her. “Look, nothing’s risk-free in this world, Itachi. If this is something that you wanna do, you gotta prepare yourself for some hard choices in your future.”

As Itachi sinks into one of his deep, contemplative silences, Shisui’s grin grows hard, all blood on teeth and visceral feeling. There’s something in his eyes, in the coiling tension of his muscles, wildly, dangerously possessive.

“Oi, no need to be so gloomy, kids. Nobody’s touching you on my watch.”

Sakura peers into his eyes, and even though she knows it’s a placebo, a promise he might not be able to keep, even though she knows she shouldn’t—she feels safe.

“I’m relieved to know you’re still living up to your stalker tendencies, Shicchan.”

“Don’t mention it, Saku-tan, happy to be of service.”

Service, my ass. It’s your goddamn duty after dragging me into this mess. And with that (so not)
reassuring thought, Sakura goes the fuck to sleep.

Two months after Konoha starts singing the Copy-nin’s praises and clamoring for his upcoming inauguration, please-and-thank-you, Kakashi tracks them down, eye-smiling and all but oozing a friendly sort of killing intent, like: *let’s be friends, I promise not to kill you. But I could, oh, I could.* Somehow. He isn’t borderline S-rank for nothing.

“Hello, children. What a fine weather we’re having lately, ne? Mostly clear, with intermittent periods of heavy local gossip.”

“Long time no see, Kakashi-senpai!”

“Good afternoon, Hatake-san.”

“Yo, Future Godaime-sama, you’re late.”
Chapter 7

In true Team Seven fashion, Hatake Kakashi has the worst luck, ever, Sakura reaffirms as she keeps munching on Mikoto’s abso-fucking-lutely divine mochi. Also, the worst timing. There’s no other explanation for why he chooses to approach them on this particular day, at this exact moment, when all three of them just happen to be on the mother of all sugar highs and no-fucks-given moods, the poor, unlucky bastard.

“Maa, kids these days.” Kakashi sighs and casually leans his back against the tree they’re all sitting under, shoulders slouched and arms crossed over his chest, lone eye crinkled in something that masquerades as mirth, but too biting, too cynical to be merely that. “No respect for their elders.”

Itachi, bless his peace-loving heart, can’t let that slide. “On the contrary, Hatake-san,” he denies, voice soft yet firm, head bowed just so, with all the impeccable manners his mother has painstakingly instilled into him. No lie, no deception, an arresting, guileless smile hung on the edges of his lips. “Rest assured, we hold the utmost respect for your person.”

Which, wow, Itachi, smooth. Halfway sprawled across Shisui’s legs, Sakura slants her head far back to catch Shisui’s eyes, sharing a half-smug, half-proud yep-that’s-our-boy smirk, then both point a thumb in Itachi’s direction and speak in total sync. “What he said.”

A white brow rises loftily. “Really now? You have a funny way of showing it.”

Unfazed, Sakura raises an equally lofty pink brow. “It got your attention, yeah?”

“All right.” Kakashi’s chin dips in mock-acceptance, posture still loose, still carefree, but there’s zero levity in his visible eye now, and holy shit, he’s pissed the fuck off. “It got a lot of people’s attention.”

Good thing Sakura’s so blissed out, that it’s an impossibility to even grasp the concept of fear, much less feel it in her bones. You rule, Mikoto. Popping another mochi into her mouth, nirvana melting on her tongue, she shrugs in a ‘what can you do?’ manner. “You can blame Shicchan for that. Uchiha, ya know? Bunch of drama queens, the whole lotta ‘em.”

Lo and behold, Shisui gasps and cranks the drama up to eleven, all outraged betrayal and how could you, Saku-tan, I thought we were friends, no mochi for you, snatching the bag of mochi from her hands and holding it out of her reach, the spiteful little shit. Sakura has a millisecond to think oh, no, you didn’t and this means war, before her instincts take over and she twists around in his lap to lunge at him, all but wrestling him down on the ground for possession of the divine mochi.

“However amusing this is—” In a motion too quick to register, Sakura finds herself hauled up into the air, one hand clamped onto the collar of her shirt, being shaken back and forth, like a misbehaving puppy or something. Off to the side, Shisui, the rude asshole who’s too goddamn fast to ever get caught, is laughing at her. Sakura drags her gaze along the length of said offending arm and scowls up at its owner; her knee jerks in a tell-tale sign that she’s about to kick him in the—Kakashi releases her in another too-quick motion, sending her landing face-first into Shisui’s stomach. And, well… At least that cuts his laughter short. “I think it’d be best if one of you three could ‘fess up right about now.” Kakashi eyes them, one by one, gaze intense, no-bullshit, at the end of his patience. “What do you want, little terrors?”

“Peace,” Itachi tells him, smiling, all Gandhi-like and shit, as if he’s reached enlightenment in the space of an afternoon. It’s the mochi, Sakura swears it’s the mochi’s fault. Itachi tends to get weird
when glutted on sweets. “We want peace, Hatake-san.”

In stunned silence, Kakashi stares at him, then at the mochi, then back at Itachi. Birds are chirping, the wind’s chiming, the sun’s shining, and Kakashi keeps staring. Sakura’d be feeling sorry for him, but…nah, bastard deserves all this and more.

“Ah. I…see.” Haltingly spoken, full of rasp and what-the-actual-fuck. One hand rubbing at the nape of his neck, Kakashi sags against the tree and lifts his gaze skyward, what Sakura instantly recognizes as her patented ‘are you screwing with me, gods?’ look on his masked face.

“Mm.” Deciding he’s probably had enough of Uchiha bullshit—for the time being—in a rare show of compassion, Sakura grabs Shisui’s bag of mochi, ignoring his startled shout of oi, that’s mine, chibi!, and extends an arm towards the Copy-nin as a peace offering. “Mochi?”

As if in a trance, Kakashi lowers his gaze to examine the offered sweets, a spark of humor reigniting in his sole eye, though wary enough not to try them until they do so first, the paranoid ass. “Bribing me with food?”

Plopping herself down onto Shisui’s lap, because she now has to share the goods like, ugh, the adult she is, Sakura shrugs. “Whatever works.”

“Yes,” Kakashi hums, thoughtful and resigned and the tiniest bit put upon, as he slides down the tree’s bark to sit beside Itachi, long legs stretched out and crossed at the ankles. “I’m beginning to understand that’s how you do things.”

“Thanks, senpai!” Shisui chirps.

“Yes,” Kakashi chirps back.

“So,” Sakura begins around a mouthful of honest-to-god ambrosia, only to pause when Shisui pokes her puffed-out cheeks with a laughter-filled rebuke to swallow first, Saku-tan! Sticking her tongue out at Shisui after she’s done chewing, Sakura wipes her sticky hands on the front of his shirt amid his indignant squawks, because manners. Also, Itachi’s a mean little tattler; having Fugaku on her ass about your frankly atrocious manners and the police force has standards and we accept nothing less than excellence and blah blah blah is the last thing Sakura needs. “You in?”

“What, just like that? No sweet-talking? No buying me dinner? Now I think I’m offended.” And he legit looks offended, somehow, someway, so much so that it makes Sakura conflicted about the correct course of action here. Like, should she roll her eyes or hit him upside the head or ask for acting tips or what? “I’m not that cheap, I’ll have you know. You’ll have to do a lot better than a serving of mo—oh, wow, where on earth did you buy these?”

Wait, what? When did he even—? There’s not even a micro speck of powder on his mask, for crying out loud. Sakura gives in and rolls her eyes.

“Mikoto-sama’s homemade green tea mochi with red bean paste filling. Awesome, yeah?” Shisui laughs as he coils an arm around her waist and draws her up against his torso, resting his chin on top of her head, like she’s going to run away and take all the mochi with her at the first opportunity. How well he knows her. Well, not today, but…yeah, definitely something she’d do. Because, y’know, sweets can’t be good for Itachi in great quantities.

Kakashi examines the mochi again, then fixes Itachi with an indecipherable stare. “If Uchiha Fugaku gets to eat like this every day, then why’s he such a wet blanket?”

“Tō-san doesn’t like sweets,” Itachi admits in flat, even tones, criticism rolling off of him in thick
waves, and Sakura has to struggle not to face-palm. Of all things, that’s where you draw the line? What the fuck, Itachi? Seriously. Gotta be the mochi, yeah…

“That explains a lot.” Kakashi nods as if that makes all the sense in the world, probably just to mess with her, the bastard. “Alright, you have my attention. Let’s talk peace. Since you’re clearly the instigator, you first, pinky.”

Fucking called it. Sakura pastes a saccharine smile on her face that puts him on his guard faster than you can say mochi. “I know you know my name’s Sakura, so use it, Ka-ka-shi-kun.” His name is squealed in the most vapid, breathless, fangirl-ish pitch her throat can produce, the or-I’ll-keep-calling-you-that heavily implied, and Kakashi winces. Message received. If her smile is a touch unhinged, well… You do what you gotta do. “What else d’ya wanna know?”

“What I want to know, Sakura-chan, is what do you hope to accomplish by making my life difficult. You should be glad I’m such an understanding person. Others might have reacted… badly.”

No shit, Sherlock. “It’s partly ‘cause you are ‘such an understanding person’ that we chose you,” Sakura deadpans, complete with air quotes and resting bitch face.

“Oh?” Nonchalant, but faintly aloof, suspiciously so. The infinitesimal crease in Kakashi’s mask, that spasm in his jaw, how he modulates his voice—they all indicate he finds her face hilarious.

Well, alright then. If that’s how he wants to do this. Sakura can do aloof. She’ll regret it, she’ll hate it—

(There’s a boy falling off a cliff, smiling, eyeless, drenched in redredred—)

—it’ll be worth it. She sinks into Shisui’s warmth and lets the rhythm of his heartbeat soak through her skin as words surge out of her throat, like a cold, relentless onrush, like the Naka river swept that boy away.

“Doesn’t it strike you as strange how easy it is to play the blame game in this village? Like, ‘oh, the Kyūbi attacked. Madara could control it. Let’s blame the Uchiha clan, yeah.’ Never mind that they were also attacked, but who the hell cares ‘bout that little detail, right? Nobody knows what happened to cause it, but facts be damned, everyone’s entitled to an opinion, right?”

By the end of her little speech, Kakashi’s gone rigid—face blank, motionless, absent the merest spasm of jaw muscle or mask crease. If she strains her eyes, she can see a storm brewing in his eye, a jagged edge to his presence, something painful to look at. No more Mr. Aloof Guy, huh? Shock, she guesses, bad memories, ghosts living in the marrow of his bones, eating him from the inside out.

(Shewants to stop; she’s not done yet.)

“I talked with the Chief ‘bout that day. D’ya wanna know what he said?” Sakura waits for him to answer, to pick up the broken pieces and hide them somewhere she can’t see them anymore. It’s pointless if he doesn’t want to listen, so she waits and waits and waits and—Kakashi tilts his head, barely, still rigid to the point of pain.

“That they were focused on minimizing civilian casualties, evacuating people to the shelters, and rescuing the injured or those left behind, like the KMPF’s supposed to do during a village-wide crisis in the first place. Obviously, they wanted to do more, but anyone can make such claims after the action’s over. I believe him, but I happen to be the minority here—also, a literal minor—so a
fat lot of good that does him. They did all that, and instead of gaining some gratitude or even some sort of acknowledgement, they get branded as bijū-tamers and brushed aside like a dirty little secret.”

Breath in. Eyes falling shut, stinging, imprints of red beneath her lids. Breath out. Shisui’s arm is heavy, hot-skinned, a grounding bond. Sakura opens her eyes and delves into the present—the variations of black in Itachi’s eyes, iris indistinguishable from pupil, the way he stares at her like she’s a bloody revelation, the rise and fall of his chest, steady, healthy, alive.

“Now, Itachi wants to be Hokage and bring peace to our world. He’s got the potential, the pedigree, the right mentality, good intentions and all that jazz. You could say Konoha would be blessed to have him, and it wouldn’t be a lie, even if we’re being a little bit biased. You’re a smart man, so lemme ask you. Knowing all that, if nothing changes for the better, what would you say are his chances of getting the hat in, say, ten years or so?”

She meets Kakashi’s gaze head-on, daring him to look away, to dismiss her out of hand, to feed her some sugar-coated bullshit. Kakashi does none of these things—he holds her gaze, testing the truth of her conviction, an amalgam of hard metal and assessment, then quietly says, “Low.” A sigh, defeated. “Very, very low.”

Sakura simply nods. “Xactly.”

With a humorless chuckle, Kakashi scrubs a hand down his face and grits out through masked lips and gloved fingers, “And you two? Anything to add?”

“Nope,” Shisui chirps, all but beaming at the Copy-nin, at the same time as Itachi takes pity on the man and confesses, “In the spirit of full disclosure, tō-san is growing weary of this treatment, Hatake-san. Assuaging the clan’s worries, their discontent… It has been difficult for him lately. Sandaime-sama has been made aware of his concerns, and yet…”

“He hasn’t taken any action so far,” Kakashi completes the boy’s sentence, shoulders slumping further; basically, one step away from saying fuck this shit and vamoosing before he decides to do something monumentally stupid like, get involved in this epic clusterfuck.

Sakura feels for him, really, she does, but well… If she can’t get away, what gives him the right to say adios, amigos? You’re not a special snowflake, Kakashi, she thinks, vindictively entertained. C’mon, suffer with me. I promise you’ll regret so hard, that you’ll forget to angst over the usual stuff. Like your stupid-ass guilt complex. That thing has seriously got to go.

“Nope,” Shisui chirps again, determined to get on the Copy-nin’s last nerve or die trying, apparently.

In response, Kakashi flashes a sardonic smile at the total brat and chirps back, “Couldn’t be any blunter, huh?”

Oh, you poor, magnificent bastard. Bad, bad move. From where she’s pressed up against his body, Sakura can feel the rippling of sinewy muscle, the vibrations in his Adam’s apple, as Shisui just about convulses with silent laughter.

“You want blunt?” he asks, for the mere sake of it, and he sounds fucking delighted. Still, he waits for Kakashi’s (oh-so-very-cautious) nod, because everybody knows consent is sexy, before he lays it on him, no lube, no foreplay. “Alright, here goes. Hokage-sama might have done nothing, but that’s not the case for his Council. Elder Shimura approached me with a recruitment offer last month. Gave me a whole speech ‘bout ‘the great tree that is Konoha’ I’m pretty sure he must’ve
ripped off of the Nidaime, ‘cause he’s such a Senju Tobirama fanboy. Also, apparently, he was best buddies with my grandfather and I remind him of Kagami-ji-san—he smiled at me, y’know, which, eww, creepy.”

All previous amusement flees her mind in an instant—the blood drains from her face, leaving behind ashen skin and fragile bones and pure, helpless dread. Sakura swivels around to take Shisui’s cheeks between her palms, pulling his face down and glaring up at this laughing loon, a hair’s breadth away, fury so hot that it burns away the chill running through her veins. In a tone that stretches solemnity to the uttermost, instead of a question, she hisses out a demand. “You didn’t take his offer, right? ‘Cause he’s a creepy old man and you know what creepy old men do to little boys, right, Shicchan?”

“No way, Saku-tan!” Aghast at her insinuation or the promise of pain in the way she digs blunt nails into his skin or maybe an even blend of both, Shisui gasps out a hasty denial. “Said I’ll think about it, then got the hell away from that creeper.”

_Good boy, Shicchan_, her glaring eyes tell him as she pats his cheeks once, twice. _You’ll live to see another day._

“Maa, maa,” Kakashi sees fit to interject, right as Sakura’s beginning to calm down, with his precious, uncalled-for, sharp wit, “let’s not accuse our most venerable Elders of such heinous crimes, ‘kay?”

Suddenly, irrationally angry, Sakura turns her sizzling glare on him and bites out, all sarcasm and bitter disappointment, mentally transmitting _goddammit, you’re our last hope and don’t you dare let these boys down_, please, “As opposed to other heinous crimes they might or might have not committed in Konoha’s name under the banner of patriotism?”

At this out-of-left-field onslaught of—god forbid—_feelings_, Kakashi panics and goes all Sheldon Cooper on her. “You know what… I changed my mind. I don’t like blunt. At all. Go for subtle, children. Unseen, unheard, like the air we breathe, that kind of subtle.”

“What you mean is, if we wanna keep breathi—”

“Subtlety is a lost cause, I see.”

“Expecting help from our upper management is a lost cause. Question is, you gonna be the same as those geezers? I know you worship Icha Icha—”

“Hey, now, leave my Icha Icha out of—”

“—and your hair’s white and all—”

“I’m not even twenty, for your informa—”

“—but there’s gotta be a limit to your old man traits.”

There’s a long-ass pause, a Western-worthy stare-down, then Kakashi breaks it off with the lamest one-liner, ever. “Has anyone ever told you how incredibly lucky you are that your face is cute?”

Sakura’s mood goes from angry-confrontational-ferocious-mama-bear to so-done-with-this-bullshit in two seconds flat. She buries her face in her hands, wallowing in self-pity, because that’s obviously the only kind of pity she’ll get around here. “Don’t. Remind me. Just… Just don’t. What do you think got me into this mess to begin with?”
“Your face? Really?”

*What, my pity party isn’t enough to convince you? ‘O ye, of little faith. Just wait for it—*

True to form, Itachi sets him straight. “Kā-san likes cute things.”

For the second time today, Kakashi’s rendered speechless, neck craned back, beseeching the heavens for deliverance. She changes her mind; Sakura loves that kid when he’s OD’ed on sugar.

“That…also explains a lot,” he mutters, wryly, an iota of hysteria lurking in his voice. Stretching his neck, Kakashi brings his attention back on her, having singled her out as the spokesperson for some ridiculous reason (that’ll surely come back to bite her in the ass some day or, *worse*, cut into her nap schedule, dammit). “So, hypothetically speaking, if I were to join your totally-*not*-seditious kiddie club, what would that entail?”

“The usual?” Since Kakashi does feelings as well as he does punctuality, Sakura takes care not to blow it, keeping a lid on her manic joy. “You know, uh, planning, training, endearing the Uchiha clan to the village one rumor at a time? You, specifically, though…”

The pointed stare she sends her boys’ way speaks volumes. *You gonna let me do your dirty work for you? Tsk, tsk—for shame, boys. What would Mikoto say to that, I wonder?* Like the clever boys they are, they get the memo in record time.

“I’m joining ANBU, so please take real good care of me, Kakashi-senpai!”

“Yondaime-sama was your sensei. It would be an honor to study politics and leadership skills under your tutelage, Hatake-san.”

While Kakashi’s busy analyzing the situation—read: being neck-deep in Uchiha bullshit—he’s found himself in and what it will mean for his future, Sakura slyly adds, “If you could also put in a good word at the Jōnin station, so more people’d be willing to take missions with Uchiha, that’d be great! Oh, also, maybe visit the Uchiha district more often? With company? I’ll talk to the Chief about all this, no worries there.”

“You don’t ask for much, do you?” he grumbles, though there’s no real heat in it. “You’re so damn lucky you’re cute.”

A glint of sadistic glee enters his lone eye—*oh, noes, gods-fuck-shit, someone, anyone, save me!* Sakura instinctively latches onto Shisui for dear life, who of course doubles up with laughter, the ignorant moron. Shitshitshit—

“Incidentally, do you know who also happens to like cute things and training and has way more free time than I do?” How Sakura’s face loses all color screams she damn well knows the identity of said lover of cute things. Kakashi gives her his signature eye-smile, the petty—*gods, so fucking petty—asshole. “I think this will be the start of a youth—oh, sorry, I meant beautiful friendship.”*

All Sakura’s deeply traumatized brain can compute is: *so not hip and cool, dude.*
Kakashi has no fucking clue how it happens.

One day, he leaves on a mission to Kaminari no Kuni—standard solo S-rank assassination, zero chance of KIA teammates, twenty percent risk of mortality, eighty percent risk of injury, two hundred percent shoving a Chidori into someone’s chest, the whole works. Two months later, he returns to find out he’s been appointed Hokage-to-be in absentia.

As he strolls down the main street on his way to the Hokage tower, men salute and clap him on the back, women giggle and swoon at his feet, children go wide-eyed with hero-worship and call out his name.

Konoha’s become a madhouse. There’s nowhere he can hide. Someone’s done this to him. There’ll be hell to pay.

It takes him one day, eight hours, seventeen minutes, and fifty-three seconds to track that someone down. Because he’s Hatake motherfucking Kakashi and he’s pissed the fuck off and nobody fucks with him.

Except, apparently, for two fun-size Uchiha and an itsy-bitsy pink one. They are child geniuses like him. They tell him clan secrets. They drown him in feelings. They compromise the everloving hell out of him.

It takes them two hours, eleven minutes, thirty-nine seconds, and four servings of the sweetest mochi he’s ever had to bring him into the fold. Best goddamn teamwork Kakashi’s ever witnessed, he’ll give them that. These kids will go far.

(Kakashi still has no fucking clue how it happens. And they call him a genius… Shows what Konoha knows. Okay, maybe the itsy-bitsy pink one is the tiniest bit right.

He gives up.

Now, how to break the news to his Hokage?)

“Let me see if I understand this correctly,” Sarutobi says, slowly, in tones Kakashi’s intimately familiar with, in what years ago he dubbed the ‘Kakashi’s Done Fucked up Again, Oh, Great Monkey Sage, the Paperwork’ Hokage Voice.

(Minato-sensei had one of those, too, though Kakashi used to simply call it: Oh, Kakashi, why. But after Minato-sensei’s death, well… Kakashi’s got a history of picking up his late team’s quirky habits. Minato-sensei’s naming sense isn’t even hurting anyone, honestly, Genma, what do you mean it’s all relative—)

“You are requesting a decrease in the frequency of S-ranked missions for the next six months due to the addition of Uchiha Shisui to Team Ro. An addition, I might add, I have not yet approved based on the fact that the shinobi in question hasn’t yet filed for an ANBU transfer. Furthermore,
instead of using the specialized facilities allotted to ANBU for the express purpose of conditioning new members, you wish to reserve Training Ground Three. *Indefinitely.*”

Sarutobi exhales a nimbus of smoke, then calmly sets his pipe down and awards Kakashi with his complete and undivided attention. His desk is so laden with scrolls and files—pile after pile after pile—that it’s a small miracle how he even finds a spot of empty space to plant his elbows, hands clasped under his chin, brown eyes old, soul-weary, slashing straight through him.

Kakashi almost cringes at the mere sight of it. There are three universal truths in the shinobi world they live in. One, Kageship is the worst career choice, ever; two, slow-death-via-bureaucracy is the stuff of nightmares for combat shinobi everywhere; and three, desk shinobi are the true villains and pissing them off guarantees you a one-way ticket to Paperwork Hell.

Hence, why Kakashi keeps his mouth shut and tries his damnedest not to piss their God off. More than he already has, that is.

“Kakashi.” Sarutobi drags his name out, so very, very tired of its sound, each gravelly syllable a warning to *cut the bullshit. Right. Fucking. Now.* “I want to understand you, truly, I do—I *have* been striving to do exactly that for years, with varying levels of success, if we are being candid—so please…” A pause. *Don’t make me call for Inoichi* echoes ominously in the deafening silence. “Help me understand what brought *this* on.”

What brought this on, he asks. Yeah, Kakashi’d like to know that, too. *Screw it,* he thinks, one part amused, one part resigned, and wholly, irrevocably out of fucks to spare, having surpassed the point of no return ever since that doomsday meeting, aptly dubbed: ‘The Day I Met the Pink Devil and Her Red-Eyed Minions’.

Despite the threat of a Yamanaka-styled Intervention thrumming in the space between them, Kakashi’s posture becomes slack, careless, hands stuffed in his pockets, all signs of deference thrown out the window with extreme prejudice. Or, in Inoichi’s terms: *a suicidal career move hinting at a plethora of psychological issues that might one day lead to the actual suicide of Patient 269 as his recent mission reports indicate. Immediate removal from ANBU strongly recommended. I would also like to note that these files are for Hokage-sama’s eyes only, Kakashi. Please stop reading and put them back where you found them. I. Will. Know. Either. Way.*

Without a smidgen of self-preservation, Kakashi parts his mouth and out of it spills the kind of batshit crazy that only emerges during his biannual mandatory psych eval sessions, the kind that never fails to be every Yamanaka’s wet dream, bane of their working life, and reason to drink on the job all rolled into one. “Weell, you see, Hokage-sama, there are these kids, cute kids, ridiculously so, one of them is even *pink,* and I mean not just pink but *bubble gum pink,* which is frankly terrifying in ways I never thought gum could ever be and, uh, where was I—oh, did I mention the *pink*?”

Sarutobi stares at him for a few seconds, then says, matter-of-fact, “Yes. Yes, you did. Several times.”

“Oh. Okay, good, that’s, hmm…well, I felt it had to be said. So, anyway, yes, there are these cute kids and I, uh, maybe, kind of, sort of *might* have promised to train them? Together?”

This time, no reply comes forth. Sarutobi merely sits behind his desk, elbows digging into the lacquered surface, a man of precise military bearing. Staring at him, quiet, still, *biding.*

Kakashi clears his throat and powers on through in much the same reckless manner. “Shisui’s one of them. *Not* the pink one. Obviously. But, uh, he’s *very* attached to the pink one—I mean, attached
in that special way Uchiha sometimes get, you know? I would try to separate them, honestly, I would, but again, Uchiha, you know?"

Finally, a reaction. Lids sliding shut, Sarutobi unclasps his hands to massage his temples in slow circles, speaking past thinned lips, still in that terribly matter-of-fact tone. “I suppose next you will be telling me that Uchiha Itachi is the third member of this group.”

“Maybe?” Kakashi hedges rather than states, only to change his tune, abruptly snapping to attention, when Sarutobi opens his eyes and gives him that look, his ‘I Am Calling Inoichi’ Hokage Look, instead of his ‘I Am Thinking of Calling Inoichi’ Hokage Look. “I mean, yes, Hokage-sama.”

“I see.” Sarutobi sighs, calmly picks up his pipe and relights it, placing it between his lips; he exhales another nimbus of smoke, then he—he smiles. At Kakashi. “Permission granted. Now, if that is all?”

The dismissal in his voice is clear as crystal. Caught flat-footed, Kakashi falls back into old patterns, deciding that obeying his military superior is of vital importance in this case, and turns to leave. Through the door, not the window; he’s already in hot water, no need to push his luck—

Sarutobi’s voice arrests him mid-stride. “Oh, and Kakashi?”

Gods, but he’s really the unluckiest son of a bitch to ever walk the earth. Kakashi can just tell by the sheer, positive, near-physical presence of feelings, which Sarutobi emanates like a sieve. He’s not going to like what comes next. Not one bit.

(He’s so fucking right.)

“I am very glad to know there is a grain of truth in the rumors circulating around Konoha as of late. I never would have expected you to assume the role of a sensei without being ordered to do so in a few years. That was included in my future plans for you, after all. Speaking from experience, believe me when I say you will find it rewarding in ways that words simply cannot describe. I am expecting great things from these children. Minato would be proud of you, and so am I. You will make a fine Hokage one day. Dismissed.”

As for Gai… Kakashi has no words.

(He wishes neither did others. Again, world’s unluckiest son of a bitch, standing right here.)

To make a long story short, while Kakashi’s lazing about the Jōnin station later that morning, Gai as usual appears with a freakish, too-bright smile and a freakish, too-loud challenge—

“Kakashi, my eternal rival, I challenge you to a youthful toe wrestling contest!”

“Sorry, no can do. I’m meeting my minions in an hour, so I’ll have to take a rain check on that. You’re more than welcome to tag along, though. Cute kids, you’ll love them, promise. Oh, but watch out for the pink one, she’s got a nasty habit of tricking you into—”

“Kakashi—I—you—why did you never tell me you had sprouted seedlings? You’re always so hip and cool! Yes, I fully understand now. Of course, you would be the first of us to plow Konoha’s fertile soil.”

“What.”
“Yosh! Wait for me, seedlings of my rival! To make up for all the birthdays I missed—”

“No, wait, Gai.”

“—I, Maito Gai, Konoha’s Sublime Green Beast of Prey—”

“You’ve got it all wrong.”

“—promise to do everything within my power to help you fan your—”

“They’re not actually—”

“—FLAMES OF YOUTH!”

“—mine.”

—and as usual disappears with an even more freakish, too-bright smile and a freakish, too-loud misunderstanding.

“So, Kakashi,” Genma starts after Gai’s gone—probably in search of a pink mini-Kakashi; also, youthfully announcing the joyous news to all and sundry in the process—because when does Genma ever not start. “About those seedlings of yours… Who’s the lucky woman you plowed?”

“Not another word, Genma. Not. A. Word.”

Chapter End Notes

Oh my gods, you beautiful people, you! I’m frankly overwhelmed by all the love and support I’ve received. You guys are the absolute best. You brighten my days and make me insanely, ridiculously happy, so thank you so, so much. I’mma reply to each and every review when I find some time to sit down, promise. <3

Also, I’ve got a question for you. Do you like the extra POVs? Yay? Nay? It isn’t an official poll or anything, so don’t feel pressured to answer. But if you do like them and want them to continue and feel like sharing your opinion, whose POV would you like to be next?

I hope you enjoyed the update and I hope you’ll have a wonderful day! Onward! XD
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sakura never thought she’d say this one day, but… It sure must feel pretty fucking awesome being Sasuke. No, seriously. There’s a perfectly valid reason for that—and his name is Itachi.

Sasuke, apparently, is too young or too innocent or too something to be exposed to the unnatural wonder that is Maito Gai. Or so Itachi’s decreed. Sakura knows there’s no fairness in this world, but sometimes… Sometimes, she forgets the insane lengths Itachi’ll go to in order to protect his baby bro from unsavory influences, which… Good for Sasuke, yeah, I’m all for sheltering kids from this fucked-up world we live in, but what about me, Itachi? What, I don’t do it for your big bro feels? What more must I do for you to hide me in your closet and never let me out, huh?

Not only that, but Shisui’s even worse, the sneaky fucker who’s kidnapped Sakura from her nice, warm, soft bed. In the middle of the goddamn night. While she’s been sleeping the sleep of the blissfully dead. Without so much as a by-your-leave.

So here she is, in some godforsaken training ground that seems kinda familiar, at the freaking ass-crack of dawn, sleep-deprived and still in her fuzzy pajamas and draped over Shisui’s back, blearily beholding the spectacle that is Kakashi not-introducing Gai in all his youthful glory.

“We all know Gai—” he begins, pouring out an obnoxiously fake cheer, like it’s a fact of life or something, bypassing the subsequent explosion of youth and heartfelt oaths with enviable unflappability after years upon years of practice. “—yes, thank you, Gai, that’s nice, I know Sakura-chan’s in good hands, yes, no need to tell me twice. And this—” Kakashi then wraps an arm around the stiff shoulders of the brown-haired teen standing beside him, quiet, awkwardly, giving off an easily-detectable ‘what am I even doing here?’ confusion. “—is my cute kōhai, Tenzō. He’ll be helping Shisui with ANBU’s side of things, teaching him standard team formations, offensive and defensive patterns, sign language, operational protocol and the like.”

Oh, so that’s Yamato, Sakura’s foggy brain murmurs, coming awake, eyes wide open and x-raying the aforementioned teen from head-to-toe. Huh. Didn’t expect to meet him so soon. Aw, poor guy, looks like he hasn’t yet totally shed his Root conditioning. Gotta start calling him Tenzō now…

Under the pressure of their combined scrutiny, Tenzō full-body twitches once, obviously alarmed and feeling all at sea, then rapid-fire flashes Kakashi a few signs in what Sakura guesses must be their super-duper secret ANBU code for Mayday! Mayday! Mayday! and what do I do now and don’t just stand there and laugh at me, senpai, somewhat relaxing at whatever-the-hell Kakashi signs back. With clearly painful reluctance, he breaks out in a fairly-stilted-but-classic Team Seven introduction, and really, Kakashi? I mean, really?

“Hello, everyone. My name is Tenzō. I—like nature? And Konoha, yes, I like nature and Konoha. My hobbies… Architecture. I dislike exhausting my chakra for frivolous reasons such as building extravagant dog houses. My dream is to one day have a…a family.”

Shisui slants his head at an angle that allows him to have direct eye contact with Sakura, an inquisitive, mildly-weirded-out gleam in his gaze, that she correctly interprets as is it just me or does this guy come off as a total tool with the personality of a garden gnome and the nature of a forest fairy? Sakura narrows her eyes in a stern, scolding manner, though she doesn’t hold much hope of Shisui behaving himself for even a second, a wordless hiss of see what creepy old men do
to little boys? That could’ve been you, so be nice to him, Shicchan. And as a bonus, Itachi seems to agree with her, if the way he immediately shifts modes—the switch from Perfect Uchiha Heir™ to Shisui No™ as natural as breathing—is any indication of his inner thoughts.

A grin stretches across Shisui’s mouth—the same grin he’d once given Sakura, the pure evil one that got her into this mess—as he turns to greet Tenzō with all the manic happiness of a hamster on a running wheel. Gods, it’s too fucking early for this shit, Sakura thinks, burying her face into his back and smothering a heavy sigh. R.I.P. Tenzō. I tried. Itachi tried. It just wasn’t meant to be. P.S. Blame Kakashi. Always.

“Nice to meet you, Tenzō-senpai! I really love Konoha—oh, and family’s important to me, too, you know? I’ll be in your care from now on.”

“Yes. That,” Tenzō readily agrees, like the willing victim he is, executing a long, deep bow, which, wow, can rival Itachi at his most formal. “Please take care of me as well, Shisui-san.”

Thrilled at this submissive type of response, Shisui throws Sakura off his back, no warning, no preamble, the rude asshole; now burden-free, he sidles up to Tenzō unimpeded, casually replacing Kakashi’s arm on the teen’s shoulders and leading him away from possible witnesses, all the while chattering poor Tenzō’s ears off. “Oi, oi, no need to be so formal, senpai. I don’t mind if you ditch the -san, really, I don’t. Let’s get along, yeah? You can even think of me as your cute kōhai like Kaka—”

Taking advantage of this unexpected chance to catch some Zs, Sakura curls up where she lands on the grass, and if not for Itachi poking at her left side with his damn toes, she’d have succeeded, too, for fuck’s sake. Shit list, Itachi. She glares up at him, baring her teeth in a mockery of a smile, while he keeps poke-poke-poking, smiling down at her as if he finds this hella cute and not, y’know, life-threatening. You’re so on it.

“Itachi-kun, you’re with me!” Kakashi cheerily butts in on them, because the world is evidently filled with rude assholes, grabbing Itachi by the waist and throwing him over his shoulder like a sack of rice, and damn, if he doesn’t sound fucking ecstatic for picking the least troublesome one. “Let’s go over there, ‘kay? Far, far away from here. So, what’s your main eleme—”

Before Sakura can digest this sudden turn of events, she’s loudly, unpleasantly reminded that Maito Gai resides on the same plane of existence, despite plenty of evidence suggesting he, as a unique life form beyond human comprehension, by all rights, should be on a completely different one, what is life?

“Yosh! Tell me about yourself, young cherry blossom! And may I say how beautifully fitting your name is?”

Lying flat on her back, Sakura gazes up at the vast morning sky, all pretty colors and humbling sensations of eternity, fiery oranges blending into soothing blues, contemplating the meaning of life with vacant, bloodshot eyes, and sluggishly mumbles, “Uh, thanks, Gai-sensei, ‘ppreciate it.”

It’s the wrong thing to say, she quickly learns, although way too late for a do-over. Ballistic is too tame a word for the state Gai enters out of the fucking blue. Startled, Sakura jolts upright, heart somersaulting inside her chest, and stares at his wildly, unnaturally contorting figure. Speechless, horror-struck. What the fuck did she just say to cause—

“G-Gai-se-sen-sei…y-you—I—did you hear this, Kakashi? Young Sakura called me sensei! This is the greatest day of my life, truly, I’m in the springtime of—”
Cue manly sobbing, sparkles and ocean waves crashing endlessly and fucking seagulls loop-the-looping in the sunset background. On and on and on it goes, until Sakura finally gets a grip, a fatalistic kind of resolve suffusing her soul, and calls out his name.

“Uh, Gai?” No response, nope, nada. Sakura’s lips thin as a terrible, terrible suspicion takes root in her mind. She…shit, she’s really going to have to do this, isn’t she? Why, gods. Just… Why. Deep inhalation. Sakura opens her lungs and expels his name on her next breath, screeching in so high a pitch, that only the original Sakura could possibly reach, the one she vowed never to let slip from her throat, feeling dead inside. “GAI-SENSEI?”

_Bam!_ Instant reaction. Gai’s head whips towards her sitting position, waterfalls of tears still streaming down his cheeks, smile blindingly bright, rows of too-white teeth and euphoria. When he addresses her, his voice has gone down several decibels, mercifully, significantly lower, or at least as low as Gai can do. Sakura’ll take it. Anything is better than that which will never, ever, be spoken again.

“Yes, my youthful pupil?” he _croons_, and holy fuck, please kill her now, he probably thinks it’s a done deal, this…this Gai-sensei-and-Sakura thing.

To distract herself from this second terrible, terrible suspicion, Sakura ends up blurting the first un-fucking-real thought that crosses her poor, abused brain. “That’s a bastardized Yin-Yang release, isn’t it?”

Because, _really_, what else can it be? Yin-Yang release’s _supposed_ to be the only unbreakable chakra shit around here, right? Right. Screw Hagoromo and his psycho alien family and their goddamn monopoly on Yin-Yang release; Gai is _Gai_, and if he wants to spam some sort of bastardized Yin-Yang release just for shits and giggles, then _he fucking will_. End of story. Sakura’s come to _genuinely believe_ that—not even an hour in his presence, and _he broke her._

Gai’s face cycles through the whole gamut of human emotion, as if he’s simultaneously on cloud nine and down in the dumps and can’t decide which way to feel, but there’s bone-melting warmth in his eyes when he looks at her, something proud, an inner conflict decisively settled.

“As expected of my eternal rival’s seedling.” Wait, what? He’s _still_ on that? _That’s_ what he’s been struggling to accept all this time? It’s not even true, for gods’ sake. “Indeed, my youthful pupil, it is.” See? He even _admits_ it, like, like it’s kid’s stuff to him. “How did you know, young cherry blossom? Not even Kakashi has figured out the secret behind my technique.”

And Gai _winks_ at her, pressing one finger against his lips and making shushing sounds, all mischief and too-thick wiggling brows, like: _Don’t tell daddy now, you hear? What Papa Kakashi doesn’t know won’t hurt him. It will be a little secret between the two of us, teacher and student, Gai-sensei and Sakura. Our very first youthful secret! Isn’t that great, young cherry blossom?_

Sakura… Pretends this part of the conversation—read: all unsaid things therein contained—never happens, nope, never heard it, _nevernevernever_—

“By process of elimination, actually.” She _hears_ herself speak and _feels_ herself shrug, like an out-of-body experience, so fucking zen, that she’s transcended feeble human logic and the constraints it imposes on reality. Wow, this feels super nice, maybe she should stay like this forever. “I know Kakashi _hasn’t_ figured it out yet, so that excludes a lot of chakra stuff _he_ knows, like, genjutsu and Yin release and whatnot. And Itachi’s really, _really_ good at explaining chakra theory, so you can say I took an educated guess based on what he taught me. I mean, it can’t be legit Yin-Yang release ‘cause that’s supposed to be impossible without the fabled Rinnegan or whatever, but people experiment with weird chakra shit all the time, so I thought why not? ‘Sides, if anyone could break
the fundamental laws of chakra, that’d be you, Gai-sensei.” And she believes it.

(Which is why she plans to abuse the hell out of it. Yin-Yang release, even Gai’s crazy-ass version, is the stuff of legends. If she has to sacrifice the rest of her sanity for it, well… Obito’s not going to KO himself. Neither will Zetsu, for that matter. These damn Uchiha owe her so, so much for this utter bullshit. Also, as the final touch, Sakura follows her own advice and blames Kakashi. Retribution will be hers and it will be glorious in ways no one but Gai will understand. This, she vows.)

“Such…such an astounding degree of faith you have in me, young cherry blossom! YOUR FLAMES OF YOUTH BURN SO BRIGHT!”

“Yeah, about that… Please teach me, Gai-sensei.”

“SAKURA!”

“Okay, seriously, this is where I draw the line, for real. Let’s just calm down and, uh, y’know, train?”

“Yes, let us train our bodies until we can no longer feel the pain of our hard work!”

“Oh, let’s not go that far.”

Coincidentally, Tenzō ends up being the only one who understands her. Sakura shares with him the last mochi for that.

“Maa, what’s this I hear about gratuitous sensei-calling, Sakura-chan?”

“What, you want me to call you sensei? Really? Teach me something, Kakashi, and I’ll think about it.”

“So cruel. See what I mean, Ten—hello, Tenzō, are you there? Earth to Tenzō?”

“What did you do to him, Shicchan?”

“Hm? Oh, he wanted to know what’s my family like, so I showed him bits and pieces. Everyday stuff, you know? Like that time a destruction of ninneko got into Fugaku-sama’s hidden booze cabinet.”

“You didn’t.”

“Hey, he signed the waiver! You can’t pin this on me, Saku-tan.”

“Kakashi-senpai. I don’t think I can come with you to visit the Uchiha district this Sunday, after all.”

“Oh, come now, Tenzō. Don’t be a killjoy. Think of it as…expanding your social horizons. Where’s your sense of adventure gone, hm?”

“I left it back at ANBU HQ. With the other sane people.”

“Tenzō, Tenzō, Tenzō… I’ve told you before, you mean boring people.”
“No, I am quite sure I meant *sane.*”

“Here, Tenzō-san, you can have half of my consolation mochi.”

“Thank you, Sakura-san. I will treasure this moment forever.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to all the amazing responses, I’ve got quite a few POVs to write! I’ll try to include all your suggestions, um, maybe except for Danzō? I’mma be mentally scarred for life if I delve into his mind, so. Yeah, no.

Also, don’t take the chakra theory seriously. It’s pure crack and it obviously won’t be Sakura’s badass KO move or anything. Just laugh? Onward! XD
“Maa,” Kakashi drawls out, seeming quite blasé, face half-hidden behind an Icha Icha copy, his plate of dango still untouched, “this is nice.”

And by this, he means the assorted crowd of onlookers and bystanders—loitering outside the tea shop, watching their little pow-wow with curious, all-dark eyes, a queer sort of fascinated bemusement clinging to particles in the air, an almost-hostile wariness long-steeped into the ground.

Shisui laughs it off, as if this is just another normal Sunday afternoon for him, which it probably is. “Oh, don’t mind ‘em, Kakashi-senpai. We don’t get many visitors, you know, so they’re just curious is all.”

One thin brow climbs up Kakashi’s forehead, so high it near disappears beneath his hitai-ate. “If this is them just being curious, then I don’t want to know what it’s like when they’re interested, Shisui-kun,” he replies, tone drier than Suna’s desert.

“No,” Sakura agrees with a miserable sigh, face down onto the table, pink locks splayed messily, arms falling listless to her sides, “no, you really don’t.” Sighing again, she merely turns on her other cheek to solicit Itachi’s attention, doesn’t even bother rising, abused muscles screaming bloody murder at the littlest motion. “Tachi, go talk to your folks and tell ‘em to back off or something. Please?”

“I will see what I can do, Sakura.” She must be a sorry sight, indeed, because Itachi smiles, his Sasuke-smile, the one he flashes his baby bro when Sasuke’s being an adorable little brat, and ever-so-gently pokes her forehead. Also, in a move that has Sakura swearing eternal gratitude, he takes Shisui with him. “Please excuse us, Kakashi-senpai. We will return momentarily.”

In the lovely hush that descends after their departure, Sakura becomes one with the table, relishing the welcome reprieve, until Kakashi chuckles in a way that rubs salt into her wounds, that is. “What’s the matter, Sakura-chan? Feeling tired, are we?”

And oh, there’s the utter bastard she’s come to love to hate and hate to love. We going there right off the bat, huh? Alright, just fine with me. I owe you a reckoning, Kakashi. No time like the present. It is so on, bro. Bring it. Sakura finally detaches her face from the table and slips two spoonfuls of honey in her jasmine tea, all the while stirring lightly, not once looking at Kakashi, engaging in (totally not) casual conversation. “Gai-sensei kept me up all afternoon yesterday, talkin’ ‘bout taijutsu styles and shinobi types and career specializations. And stuff.”

Something that catches Kakashi off guard; he lowers his precious porn to stare at her with an arched brow, hitai-ate marginally askew, mystified. “Why would he do that now? You can just rely on the Academy style until you make genin, can’t you?”

It sounds equal parts rhetorical and questioning, as if he doesn’t really want to know the answer, but can’t stop himself from asking. Sakura raises her head and gives him this look of profound pity and oh, you poor, deluded bastard, like he’s an idiot savant who’s so sucked into his comfort porn, so out of touch with reality, that it’s a true wonder how he can still function in human society.

“‘Cause it’s best to know that kinda stuff early on, so he can devise a training regimen that fits my future style, duh. ‘Sides, I’m a civvie, which means I can’t join the Academy ‘til I’m six unless I got permission from Hokage-sama, and Gai-sensei doesn’t do taijutsu Academy-style, ya know.
“See, this is exactly why I’m never callin’ ya sensei, Kakashi. I dunno ‘bout ANBU recruits, but you really suck at training baby ninja.”

Of course, Kakashi takes exception to that, confirming he’s a poor, deluded bastard with no sense of proper child development. Which, good for her, bad for those poor, unfortunate kids Sarutobi’s going to foist on him one day.

“Hey, now, you take that back, Sakura-chan. Itachi-kun is greatly benefiting from my amazing instruction and my vast repertoire of foreign and native shinobi techniques, I’ll have you know.”

“Well, yeah. Itachi’s… Itachi. It’s got nothing to do with your lame teaching skills and all to do with his insane learning skills. Obviously. If Itachi’s your main example of baby ninja standards, then what d’you call those kids chasing after the Inuzuka ninken that almost ran us over yesterday?”

“Career chūnin hopefuls? At best?”

“You’re hopeless.”

“Now that’s just slander and totally uncalled for.”

“S’totally not and ya know it.”

“And?” he asks, pointedly, abandoning what’s obviously a sinking ship, as he leans back in his seat with a go-on-enlighten-me gesture.

“And what?” she shoots back, quizzical, if a little too innocent. Kakashi rolls his sole eye, and Sakura drops the act, having won this round, unholy glee slathered on her smug face. “We decided to go with chakra-enhanced taijutsu—oh, plus working on speed and stamina on the side. Like, Tsunade-level super strength, Gai-style.”

Every muscle in Kakashi’s body contracts, then abruptly freezes. “That’s…” He swallows once, throat bobbing, still staring in the general vicinity of her face, but a little off the mark, his mind gone far, far away. “…either the most genius or the most ridiculous idea I’ve ever heard, but…” he trails off again, losing what little focus he’d previously retained, staring off into space woodenly. “It came from Gai. So it will probably work. And that’s the crazy scary part.”

“I know, right?” Sakura nods to herself, self-satisfied, all too eager to bury the metaphorical kunai deep in his back; also, revealing the sheer depths of her brokenness after that fateful meeting with Gai. “I’ve already picked my eternal rival, too.”

Silence, then there’s a strangled noise, something crawling out of Kakashi’s throat like the snarl of a feral beast as it writhes and gurgles in its death throes. “You what.”

Unperturbed, she shrugs her shoulders, seeing nothing wrong with this picture, to Kakashi’s mounting dread. “Gai-sensei insisted. He said, and I quote, ‘having a worthy rival to surpass is one of life’s greatest challenges and will fuel your Flames of Youth most explosively, young cherry blossom’. I just went with it ‘cause, y’know, smashing some dude’s face in sounds like good stress relief and I need that shit like crazy with the sort of messed-up life I lead.”

Again, Kakashi can’t help but ask questions to which he really doesn’t want to know the answers, the suicidal idiot. Sakura’s counting on that, actually.

“I’m kind of afraid to ask, but… Who is it?”
“A.”

“A…what? A random kid who picked on you at the park? A random shinobi you saw on the street and thought ‘oh, yes, he’ll do’?”

“No.” A pause; a head shake, slow and cruel and definite. “A.” Sakura beams, all sparkles and pretty spring flowers blooming round her face. “The Yondaime Raikage.”

Sparing a fleeting moment to revel in how Kakashi blanches, all his fears realized—like, oh, gods, Gai’s infected her with his…his Gai-ness, I’m witnessing the beginning of the end, where the fuck did I stash the brain bleach—she forges ahead, pulling no punches, as if she’s on a kami-given mission (and kami’s name is Gai).

“Gotta aim high, y’know. Otherwise, why even bother, right? Gai-sensei was over the moon when I told ‘im, even swore he’d help me reach my goal by, uh, enduring the wrath of Kumo’s Vibrant Rhyming Tentacle Beast? Whatever that is, ‘cause his words, not mine. I mean, I think he was saying it guards the Raikage, so we have to get past it first and he volunteers for the job, but who can really tell with Gai-sensei? So, anyway, yeah, that happened.” Still beaming, she takes in every inch of his frozen form, looking him up and down and expectant. “Aren’t you happy for me, Kakashi?”

Silence, glorious, beautiful silence. Kakashi’s face, well… Now, that’s a Blue Screen of Death Face™, if ever there’s been one. Pretty sure she’s fried the synapses in his brain, yeah. All of a sudden, he sucks in a sharp breath, coming alive with a vengeance.

“Maa, Sakura-chan,” Kakashi sing-songs, a crazed glint in his eye, a man who’s been brought to the edge of insanity and is about to go off on a murder spree all the way to Kumo. “Wouldn’t you be more interested in something like, oh, I don’t know, IRONMENTAL NINJUTSU? Since you’re styling your training after Tsunade-sama and all? With your kind of chakra control, you’re exceptionally suited for medical training, you know? Let’s just forget this whole my-Eternal-Rival-the-Raikage business and go with that, ‘kay?”

“Uh-huh.” Sakura regards him dubiously. Should she push or—fuck it. Whatever. She’s come too far to turn back now, anyway. “I know, Kakashi, but you are forgetting a couple of important details here. I don’t have the temperament for that stuff. Not to mention, medic-nin plus busy hospital work equals sleep deprivation to the extreme. And that’s assuming I’ll somehow manage to muster the mental fortitude to actually push through the downright brutal, awfully demanding schedule required for serious medical training, to begin with. Which, again, highly unlikely. I mean, just think about it for a sec. Me. Sleep-deprived. All kinds of difficult patients. Power to pulverize shit with my pinky. How d’you think that story will end?”

That takes the wind out of his sails, that murderously crazed glint dimming, gradually, until there’s only defeat to be found in his sole eye. A sigh gusts out of his lungs; Kakashi appears to be the very picture of downtrodden. “Ah.”

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“Yep,” she gives a firm nod, popping the ‘p’ for emphasis, and Kakashi smiles weakly. “Course, that’s not to say I’ll skip out on first aid lessons, but if we absolutely need a medic on the team, then Itachi’s a lot more suited to the role.” From the corner of her eye, Sakura spies the return of her boys, so she forestalls whatever Kakashi’s about to say in reply by patting their respective chairs, mutely urging them to sit their ass down and listen. “Which also brings us to the subject I wanted to discuss today.” Silence, and all eyes on her. “Uchiha medic-nin.”

Shisui, of course, is the first to open his mouth, even as he’s still half-goggling, half-grinning at her. “Uh, Saku-tan…” There’s a peculiar expression on his face, a bizarre mixture of apologetic
and exhilarated, because he knows whatever argument he’ll pose, well… She’s going to shred the everliving shit out of it and cheerfully burn the pieces while Fugaku gazes into the pyre and mournfully watches as the wind carries the ashes away. “Not to kill the mood or anything, but you are aware of the fact that Uchiha, traditionally, don’t become medic-nin, right?”

“Yeah, well, that’s a stupid-ass tradition and it’s gotta go, like, yesterday,” she fires back, not missing a beat or the way Shisui’s half-grin transforms into a full grin made of teeth, anticipation and savage pleasure. Ally acquired, check. One down, two to go. “Look, not counting the fact that the Sharingan’s an awesome aiding tool for medical training and it’s a terrible waste not using it this way, flooding Konoha General with Uchiha will also help the clan reconnect with the village like nothing else will. Funnily enough, people tend to show a great deal of respect and gratitude and hell, even loyalty to a degree, when they happen to owe you their life and the lives of their loved ones, you know.”

“Agreed.” Pensive, Itachi dips his head, not entirely on board despite his verbal assent, but Sakura knows she has him by the simple fact that he speaks at all. “I will fully endorse this plan. My personal opinion, however, is irrelevant in this case. Sakura.” Here, he falters for a sliver of a moment, perhaps unwilling to share his thoughts; or perhaps, more like, dissatisfied by their content and that he has to share it. “You will be hard pressed to convince even tō-san of the considerable benefits this venture will bring to our clan, much less the Council of Elders. Pursuing a medical career is…not done. Our pride goes deep, as you well know.”

And, well… Sakura snorts. “That’s the whole selling point, Itachi,” she tells him, smirking, but dead serious all the same, cutting Itachi off with an airy wave of her hand when he makes to object. “No, hear me out first.” Polite as he’s raised to be, Itachi does. Bless that boy and his manners. “Senju Hashirama was a badass healer and that didn’t stop him from kicking Uchiha Madara’s ass all over the Valley of the End. ‘Course, he was lots of other badass things, but he was proud to be a healer and encouraged others to embrace medical pursuits, his own granddaughter included. See where I’m going with this?”

Kakashi rubs his chin between two fingers, face closed off, but clearly thinking, while Itachi’s mouth curves ever so slightly, as if he’s greatly amused by his ancestor’s repeated losses to that bipolar ball of fluff and badassery or Sakura’s particular brand of call-it-like-I-see-it and not-giving-a-fuck. Shisui, well… Shisui’s expression doesn’t actually change. Gods help her, mad grinning seems to be his default look whenever Sakura talks of revolution. All three get an inkling within seconds of each other. Tch. Surrounded by freaking geniuses.

“The Uchiha clan’s greatest warrior, beaten by the Senju clan’s greatest healer. What does that say about your clan’s disdain for choosing a medical career, huh? That you’re a clan of petty grudge-holding losers? That you’re a clan of blind morons who can’t see past your silly prejudices? More to the point, you keep looking down on medic-nin and yet one of ‘em trashed your ex-clan head. If they’re so pathetically weak that they’re not even worth the barest consideration, what does that make you in the eyes of Konoha?” Not waiting for an answer, Sakura licks her lips, feeling kind of parched, and wraps her speech up, so she can finally enjoy her damn tea, maybe even catch a nap while she’s at it. “Truth is, there’s nothing wrong with being a medic-nin, and Fugaku understands that on some visceral level, but his pride won’t let him admit it. Just like it won’t let him rest after hearing all that.”

There’s a four-way deadlock, chock-full of tension and what-the-actual-fuck, then Shisui cracks up, only pausing to breathe and slip a sentence or two in between mad laughter. “Fugaku-sama’s all about the clan’s image, true. Attacking him there will definitely go a long way to convincing him. I’ve told you this before, Saku-tan, but now I just have to say it again. Wow, chibi, ruthless.”
“Piss off, Shicchan,” she huffs and purses her lips, intent on making the perfect cup of tea now that she’s said her piece, and thank the gods for small favors, he’s too busy busting a gut for a comeback.

“Sakura-chan—” If only Kakashi could also take the goddamn hint to leave her the hell alone, the asshole. “—are you one hundred percent positive being an iryō-nin isn’t for you? Because you sure sounded passionate when—”

Just for that, Sakura decides to be an even bigger asshole. “You can start callin’ me Haruno ‘Diplomatic Nightmare’ Sakura, Kakashi, ‘cause the first time our paths happen to cross? A’s and mine? In the fighting words of that awesome Anko lady we met at the dango-ya last week, ‘Come at me, bitch.’”

Kakashi looks like he’s regretting everything.

Lips curling over the rim of her cup, Sakura smiles as she sips at her honey jasmine tea, a slow, decadent trickle of heat filling her mouth and spreading inside. Retribution tastes oh-so-very-sweet.
Somehow, someway, despite swearing off Uchiha family dinners, Sakura finds herself attending yet another one. This time, she’s in like-minded company at least. Kakashi’s seated across from her, trapped between a talking-a-mile-a-minute Mikoto and a happily-munching Sasuke, alternating between staring down morosely at his too-full plate, listening to Mikoto’s babble, albeit with only half an ear, and shooting Sakura this stony look of deep self-loathing and why the fuck am I here.

(As always, the answer is: Shisui and because fuck you, that’s why.)

In between bites, Sakura makes a sort of woe-is-me noise, something between whining and sighing and feel my pain, dude, that Kakashi ends up emulating five seconds later once Mikoto’s words actually sink in.

“My, you’ve grown up, Kakashi-kun. I still remember you as that aloof little boy who used to obey rules to the letter, you know, and now look at you! Reading Icha Icha in public and flouting social conventions as if they were made to be broken. Kushina-chan would be so proud of you!”

Over the ridiculous bird’s nest that is Sasuke’s head, Mikoto catches Kakashi’s eye and smiles. Like, I-am-not and step-one-toe-out-of-line-and-you’re-out and corrupt-my-babies-and-they-won’t-ever-find-your-body smiles.

There’s a piece of eggplant held between his chopsticks—Kakashi zeroes in on the poor, suspended veggie, a primal sort of hunger to his scrutiny, as if devouring its flesh will grant him the answers to what men have been puzzling over since the beginning of time, i.e. the female mind. He swallows hard, then croaks out, “Uh, yes, well… Thank you?”

“Oh, don’t mention it, dear,” Mikoto waves him off as she laughs; also, somehow, finds an empty corner in Kakashi’s plate to deposit a generous serving of carrots. “Here, let me refill your plate! You need more Vitamin A in your diet, good for healthy eyes, you know—what have they even been feeding you in ANBU these days?”

Nonplussed, Kakashi blinks, single lid moving so unbearably slow, that Sakura’s brain feels compelled to mimic him on instinct. In the space of that mutual blink, the eggplant disappears.

“Protein bars?” Sakura hears Kakashi kind of blurt in a way that connotes he has absolutely no clue what he’s saying or what the hell’s even going on anymore. Well, that makes two of them.

“My goodness!” A gasp falls off of the seam of Mikoto’s mouth, partially covered with her palm, and the scary thing is… She’s genuinely distressed over Kakashi’s complete failure to, y’know, feed himself properly. “Now, that won’t do at all! You will be coming for dinner every Sunday, won’t you?”

Mikoto may as well have said you’ll be a good boy, won’t you, Kakashi-kun? Oh, yes, you will. Sakura knows it, Kakashi knows it, hell, Fugaku probably knows it best of them all. (Which is why his gaze never strays from his filled-to-the-brim plate, unlike the rest of his family, who are watching this whole drama unfold like it’s primo entertainment and the only thing missing is the buttered popcorn, because gorging on steamed veggies just doesn’t have quite the same impact.)

All Kakashi can say is, “Hai, Mikoto-san.” Hands stiff, white-knuckled, gripping his chopsticks like a lifeline.
Mikoto beams with pride, as if Kakashi’s averted some sort of terrible disaster like civil war, and claps her hands together. “Wonderful!”

And that’s how Hatake ‘Warning: Awkward Island, Do Not Land Here’ Kakashi gets himself adopted into the Uchiha clan. An event from which he’s unlikely to ever recover, judging by his heavier woe-is-me noises and deeper descent into self-loathing territory. But, hey, the food is literally to die for.

Of course, now that the adoption’s been made fucking legit, Fugaku deigns to lift his gaze from the truly fascinating contents of his plate and acknowledge his newly acquired clansman.

“All is forgiven, child. Now tell me, how is that transplanted Sharingan of yours? Have you noticed any ocular degeneration?”

It strikes her like a thunderbolt, sudden and electrifying and all at once. Fugaku’s asking about the **Mangekyō**, because obviously he is. Even if Kakashi’s perplexed expression reveals he hasn’t yet discovered its awakening, Fugaku knows or, at the very least, suspects. Huh. Well, damn. Will you look at that? Not all of Itachi’s and Sasuke’s prodigious brains come from Mikoto, after all. Color her impressed. Wicked Eye Fugaku, indeed. Smart Fugaku is **smart**.

**Sarutobi, you old fossil, you old fool,** Sakura thinks, utterly disillusioned, with no small amount of hair-tearing exasperation, why, oh, why, did you let those Council dicks ride roughshod over you and not make this man Hokage after Minato shuffled off this mortal coil in the name of self-sacrifice and shit? Fugaku even went so far as to name his own son after your old man, for pity’s sake. What more proof of his loyalty do you need? Like, seriously, what. **Power, prestige, lineage, intelligence? A rare sense of responsibility? The mother flippin’ Will of Fire? Dude’s got it all in spades. Have some common fucking sense, grow a goddamn spine, and for once in your life, tell those Council dicks to go get bent and do your friggin’ paperwork while they’re at it.**

“No, Fugaku-san, not as such. It’s just…” Kakashi struggles for words, breath hitching in his throat, voice lowering an octave. “Using it comes at a cost,” he rasps out, and it’s clear he’s not referring to the physical aspect of what it costs him to use the damn thing, despite the fact that’s what he chooses to elaborate on. A shrug, a slow roll of his shoulders, but too tight, too well-timed to be natural. “Chakra exhaustion is never fun, you know—bed rest even less so. I should really take better heed of my limitations on its usage. Or so the medic-nin tell me.”

Kakashi’s entire being is an edge of discomfort and please-drop-it. Subtle, but unmistakable.

With his customary grunt, Fugaku does. “Hn.”

Unfortunately (for both of them), Sakura isn’t half as accommodating or intimidated by raw feels or man-pain or whatever sacred-moment-between-men they’re having. No way is she missing this perfect segue into selling Uchiha medic-nin to Fugaku just to spare their pride.

“You know what would help with that? Like, big time?” she all but chirps, totally in contrast with the heavy-as-fuck mood, nudging her boys with both elbows, a not-so-covert follow-my-lead message that has them snapping to attention in point five seconds. “If the medic-nin in question had an intimate and thorough understanding of the Uchiha clan’s anatomy and physiology—and the Sharingan, in particular—by, say, being one themselves.”

Before Fugaku can make heads or tails of the crazy she’s just unloaded on him, Shisui grins that grin of madness and revolutionary spirit, nodding rather vigorously, whereas Itachi’s reaction is far
more sedate, but equally supportive.

“Oh, yeah, that’d be awesome, Fugaku-sama!”

“I will have to concur, tō-san.”

“You three,” Fugaku says after a prolonged stretch of staring, steely-eyed and cold as ice, then pauses again to dab at his mouth with a napkin, an obvious signal dinner’s over and boy, are they in for it now. “In my study,” is barely out of his mouth when Mikoto heaps a steaming pile of vegetables onto his plate, all too-sweet smiles and finish your carrots first, dear. Fugaku’s face pales a shade as he hastens to tag on, “After dinner.”

Sakura and Shisui share a glance full of wryness and get-a-load-of-this-guy. Whipped, they mouth at each other with matching grins, at the same time as Itachi pokes them right in the kidney and Kakashi surreptitiously dumps his extra veggies onto their plates, the jerks.

‘After dinner’ turns out to be Sakura and Revolution Co. sitting seiza on Fugaku’s still hard-as-iron zabuton in his study—which is so much bullshit, by the way—listening to the man as he lectures them on what constitutes as appropriate dinner conversation and pontificates on tradition and clan pride and what-have-you by turns.

—have allowed you a great many liberties on the sole condition that you will be acting with the prosperity of the clan in mind, but there comes a point where I have to wonder if our understanding of this stipulation is even remotely similar.”

Wait, what? Sakura blinks her dry eyes and tunes back in. Oh. Ooh, Fugaku’s finally gotten to the point. Yay. Also, wow, it only took him one and a half hours; he’s learning. Last time, Fugaku got overly ambitious and went on for just short of three hours straight. Needless to say, Sakura fell asleep somewhere between we should lead by example and such behavior is beneath us, thus missing the salient points of Fugaku’s lecture on decorum or some shit.

“Eh, probably not,” she agrees with a jaw-cracking yawn, then gives him a thumbs up à la Gai-sensei, complete with Colgate smile and Nice Guy Pose™ seiza-style. “S’all good, though. You’ll like the end result, I promise, so don’t sweat the small stuff, alright?”

Strangely enough, Fugaku recoils in shock, as if she’s just punched him in the balls or something, only to go still as stone midway through, composure yet intact, if horrifically fractured.

(Kakashi had the exact same reaction the first time she tried it out just for shits and giggles. Not only that, but he didn’t dare come near her for five whole days afterwards. Oh, the long, glorious, uninterrupted naps… That’s when she glimpsed what true genius is in this world. Gai is a genius among geniuses, and nobody will ever convince her otherwise.)

“That doesn’t reassure me in the slightest,” he declares, slipping into his Chief persona out of pure reflex, with the kind of calm that implies he’s gone past shock and straight to coldly meting out justice. “For the sake of fairness, however, I will afford you one last chance to provide a rationale for your highly controversial methods. Explain to me—in great detail, if you please—how the inclusion of medic-nin in our ranks will benefit the clan.”

Pfft. Yeah, right. If Sakura starts counting on the fingers of both hands how many ‘last chances’ Fugaku’s given her so far to ‘provide a rationale’ for the bullshit she springs on him like, every other week, then she’ll be all out of fingers and still counting. Dude’s a huge softie, make no mistake. Sasuke’s the only one in this family who’s in the dark about this open secret, and lately…
not so much. Kid’s a pro at taking his cue from others—mainly, Itachi—the cheeky lil’ copycat. Sakura’s whole you-don’t-scare-me-Fugaku attitude is kind of rubbing off on him. Slowly, but surely. If Sakura’s enabling his new-found streak of rebellion, well… Nobody’s told her to stop yet. (Fugaku doesn’t count. Obviously.)

“Gladly,” she purrs, face splitting from ear-to-ear, all fangs and malice and biting promise, revved up and ready to throw down, because goddammit, her knees are killing her and someone’s got to pay for that pain. Fugaku’ll be begging for a Gai-smile by the time she finishes, mark her words. “So, here’s the deal.”

And Sakura goes to town on the Uchiha medic force spiel, while Fugaku just kneels there, stays quiet and listens. Quiet. Listens. That’s all he does for the next hour—honestly, at one point, he’s so still and statue-like, that she wonders if he’s accidentally-on-purpose attempting suicide via pumping himself full of Nature Chakra.

“You…” he tries, a little disoriented, a little desolate, and there’s a dark world of epithets condensed into that you, as if he’s come home from work to find his family murdered in cold blood, his house burned down to the ground, his cats butchered into tiny pieces strewn across the lawn, and yours truly cackling like a psycho killer over the ruins of his life. Patiently, wisely, Sakura says nothing and waits. Fugaku tries again, something safer, something that won’t play merry hell on his blood pressure. “… I will ponder over your words.”

Translation: I’m staying holed up in my study to brood away in peace and quiet and inexorably drink myself to oblivion, so I can forget your very existence and the sheer lunacy with which I am presented every time you open your mouth. And if that doesn’t work, I might have to resort to blunt force trauma to the cranium. Here’s to hoping I’ll be so drunk that my inevitable fall down the stairs will result in a severe case of amnesia.

“Mm. You do that.” Laughter bubbles up in her throat; Sakura has to bite the inside of her cheeks lest it escape the confines of her mouth and then she’s really going to be in for it. “Pondering is, uh, totally awesome, yep, people should do lots and lots of that stuff. We, uh, we’ll be in the courtyard, being productive and training and…yeah.” Which, a barefaced fib, but that’s what Fugaku likes to hear, so. Sakura’s dealt him enough damage for one night. Might as well go easy on him just a bit. A little white lie here, a little keeping her laughter to herself there, y’know, small mercies and all that out-of-sight-out-of-mind shit. You do you, Fugaku. Like, keep calm and think dark thoughts. Or whatever makes ya happy. Peace, man. “Just holler if ya need us, ‘kay? Bye!”

And so saying, they hightail it out of there. If only she didn’t have to be carried out thanks to her wrecked knees. Bridal style. Shisui, you asshole. Way to ruin my badass exit.
There comes a time in every man’s life when he’s consumed by the desire to go on a week-long bender and begin to question all of his life choices. For Fugaku, that time comes twice.

The first time happens when he has the displeasure of making the acquaintance of one Uzumaki Kushina, Konoha’s resident jinchūriki, self-proclaimed queen of pranks, and, most crucially, Mikoto’s best friend.

(In the end, Fugaku survives this tragic tale of woe and hardship at her hands, barely, and only because Kushina literally doesn’t.)

The second time happens when he has the equal displeasure of making the acquaintance of one Haruno Sakura, Konoha’s resident revolutionary, self-proclaimed queen of naps, and, most crucially, Mikoto’s adopted daughter.

Dear kami, he thinks at first sight of that menace of a child, violently assaulted by wretched memories of red hair and humiliating pranks and insolence, clinging to his self-control by the skin of his teeth, it’s a little Kushina.

(In the months that follow, Fugaku discovers exactly how many similarities are shared between them, and how deeply, how tenaciously, they are entrenched.)

She has Kushina’s penchant for foul language and casual, effortless disrespect. She has endeared herself to his family without his consent or even caring to obtain his favor. She fears neither kami nor man. Worst of all, she has ideas.

Kushina, too, had ideas—as in, radical solutions Minato was all too willing to implement, with nary a second thought, as was always the case with him and everything related to the red hot-blooded she-devil he was mad enough to marry.

If there is one thing Fugaku can state with absolute certainty, it is this: Konoha, for better or for worse, would have been a vastly different place had they lived—and, come hell or high water, Little Kushina will make it so. Of that, Fugaku harbors no doubt. He pities the fool who will stand in her way, in the way the river flows and takes everything with it. History has taught him this lesson well—one rebellious element dies, and another arises in its stead. Trying to dam that river is a task for fools.

(For the record, Fugaku is no fool. The Council of Elders, on the other hand… They learn that lesson the hard way during one memorable clan meeting.)

They come in from above—

(through the chakra-reinforced ceiling, how, no, more importantly, why, no, never mind, Fugaku damn well knows why, but still, why, gods, why)

—as if the heavens themselves are raining down judgement upon his clan for the sins of their forefathers—

(Madara’s sins, of course, it all comes back to Madara and his thrice-cursed eyes and his warmongering reputation, what possessed him to enslave the Kyūbi of all things, what’s wrong with the time-honored tradition of setting your enemies on fire, is a nice Katon jutsu too lowly for
the likes of Madara, is that it)

—slicing through the air to land as one synchronized unit in a low crouch that is accompanied by an ominous semi-quake as the floor almost caves in—

(that is Little Kushina, most assuredly, and Sage help him, given her exceptional chakra control and borderline fanatic worship of the Maito boy, Fugaku estimates it will take three years maximum before those hairline cracks evolve into mile-wide craters)

—oh. They didn’t break through the ceiling. There is another perfectly reasonable explanation, and now that Fugaku’s not gripped by fierce claws of shock, it becomes painfully evident. As preposterous as it may sound, and as audacious as it may be… They lay in wait, concealed under copious layers of area-of-effect genjutsu, Shisui’s doing no doubt, for gods only know how long, only to reveal themselves now, and nobody noticed because, well… Who would ever expect to be ambushed by a pack of wild children within their clan’s sanctum? Certainly not Fugaku. Unlike these senile old relics, he hasn’t yet reached Madara’s astronomical levels of paranoia, although he’s progressively getting there.

Privately, he makes a mental note to have the floor reinforced as well. Just in case. An oversight on his part, not having done so before, true, but as previously stated, who can honestly blame him? Fugaku dares any one of these old fools to step forth and accuse him to his face as the furtive glances they cast his way en masse blatantly insinuate.

Fugaku closes his eyes and prays for patience. No words have been spoken yet, and he feels exhausted. While everyone is distracted by this entrance-slash-child-invasion-slash-prelude-to-aggressive-peace-negotiations, he unseals the flask of sake he’s taken to carrying on him everywhere these days—an absolutely deplorable habit, he’s well aware, but needs must, judge him after you’ve seen and gone through the shit he has—and manages two fortifying swigs before he realizes Elder Kanae’s caught him in the act. Staring at him in the midst of chaos and utter, speechless bewilderment, sharp-eyed, unimpressed, as if to say, I saw that, Fugaku-bō, and I see where this is headed, so be a good lad and share, yes?

Damn that devious crone. Fugaku’s never been able to sneak anything past her, ever since he was an untried boy, and he’s come to suspect he probably never will, thus he’s left with no choice but to share. Discreetly.

“Yo.” Little Kushina has the nerve to wave at him, lazily, devil-may-care, as if she’s a messenger from the gods, truly, the answer to his prayers, and he should kneel before her presence in awestruck devotion. “We saw you needed help and came to save ya, Chief. You can call us Konoha’s Majestic Cherry Blossom Hurricane and Sidekicks. To the rescue!” Here, there’s a minor dissent, a heated, verbal exchange of that’s not what we agreed, Saku-tan and shuddup, Shicchan, you’re ruining my awesome intro, all the while his eldest son, his pride and joy, silently regards this ludicrous display of positively certifiable antics with a long-suffering kind of, dare Fugaku say it, affection. “Listen up, people! Don’t hesitate to call on us if you ever need help, ‘kay? We’ll answer! This, I swear on my pride as Gai-sensei’s most youthful pupil! Like, ya feelin’ sad and old and lonely, or maybe ya feelin’ wronged and discriminated and oppressed by the village—”

This—is this all the Hatake boy’s fault. Why did he ever think it a grand idea to introduce what is clearly the second coming of Kushina to the Maito boy? He recalls Minato’s fond exasperation, how he every so often used to sigh the words oh, Kakashi, why, and can’t help but repeat it in his mind.

Things, more or less, continue in this manner, without rhyme or reason, until Elder Kanae, in a frankly-terrifying-and-fueled-by-sake loss of temper, declares she is too old for this shit, bands
together with the bane of Fugaku’s life, and cowers her fellow Elders into resentful submission—and by that, Fugaku means they *sulk*. Horribly, petulantly childish, like five-year-olds whose favorite toy has been taken away as punishment for bad behavior.

*Honesty*… What are they even thinking, skulking around and scheming to bring about civil war, when they can’t even justify themselves to mere children? Not for the first time, Fugaku questions whether these are genuine symptoms of dementia or typical behavior for Uchiha once they go past a certain age. This *will not be him* in a few decades? Surely not?

And, well… If they can succumb to their inner child, then he doesn’t see why *he* has to keep up appearances for the sake of empty pride. Uncaring of their sullen glares, Fugaku throws his head back and drains his flask in five swallows, hoping for sweet, sweet oblivion.

(It’s *not enough*; sadly, it *never* is.)

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After that disastrous clan meeting comes to a hilariously anticlimactic finish, involving surly, grumbling Elders, smug, grinning children, and several servings of matcha tea and sakuramochi, Fugaku labors under the pitiful delusion of his torment being over.

Then his eldest son returns home, a mantle of quiet pride sat on his shoulders, and announces in a voice oh-so-soft that makes his news all the more devastating, “I would like to join the Uchiha medic force, to-san.”

All his carefully constructed plans, all his hopes and dreams and great expectations, Itachi’s promising future—*everything* goes up in flames before his very eyes. Only… Itachi is a gentle child, Fugaku’s known that for years; perhaps, *too* gentle. In truth, the medic force will be a perfect fit for his boy’s disposition, and, well… Maybe he doesn’t need them, all those plans; maybe he should be content with what he has—the weapon of mass destruction and anarchy that is Little Kushina, that is. Hence, even though it pains him to do so, Fugaku admits defeat and renders his tentative agreement. What else can he do, honestly?

It doesn’t end there, of course. Because he made the wonderful choice of procreating twice, he now has twice the amount of trouble. Fugaku loves his sons—he *does*, deeply, unconditionally—but there are *some* days…

“To-san, I have made an important decision,” Sasuke tells him later that evening, in the respectful tone Fugaku’s drilled into him, acting far more mature than he has any right to be, but there’s a stubborn twist to his mouth that’s all *trouble*. “I will marry Sakura.”

At this juncture, Fugaku’s received so many consecutive shocks to his system, that he *can’t* possibly be any more surprised. He doesn’t even bother asking why, he *knows*—knows all too well how Sasuke’s been starved for attention, how he’s been imitating Itachi to the point where it becomes obsessive, how he’s been seeking self-validation through his family, only to be cast aside as a matter of low importance during these turbulent times.

Until recently. Until Little Kushina sank her teeth into their hearts and built her home there. Until she tore into Itachi like the self-proclaimed hurricane she is and corrected these issues with her trademark fusion of ruthless logic and tough love.

Fugaku only caught the tail-end of *that* conversation, only enough to understand the gist of it. Words were thrown about indiscriminately, words like *congenital idiocy* and *unhealthy expression of love* and *dying with regrets* and other things that made little to no sense outside of context, but from that point on, Itachi’s never once neglected Sasuke.
(And if Fugaku now takes a few extra afternoons off to train his boys… Well, that’s his business, I’m allowed to spend time with my sons, honey—)

Sasuke’s a smart boy, maybe not on Itachi’s level, but Fugaku’s never doubted his intelligence or his ability to grasp the situation if it directly affects him. In Sasuke’s mind, Little Kushina is his staunchest ally and should never leave the clan and for that to become reality, his sole example is marriage. What Fugaku does doubt is his son’s grasp on the fine print. Sasuke doesn’t understand the concept of marriage, only that it means you can bring someone into the clan. Permanently. And that’s all that matters in Sasuke’s mind.

As his second son stands there and stubbornly waits, Fugaku thinks back on the open affection in Itachi’s stares, in Shisui’s touches, in the way they gravitate towards each other with Little Kushina as their center of gravity, the core that binds them together, that pushes them forward and into greater heights, that helps them stay true to themselves. In lieu of these facts, all Fugaku can say is, “I wish you the best of luck, my boy.” Sage knows you will need it.

After all, Sasuke is not so much asking for his clan head’s permission as stating his intentions, waiting for his father’s blessing. That, Fugaku can freely give.
Chapter 13

When things seem too good to be true, they usually are. Sakura, as a trueborn cynic and one of Fate’s favorite dolls, knows this well.

One little coughing fit in the middle of a spar, that’s all it takes for reality to come crashing down on her. In all honesty, it doesn’t really surprise her, oh, no—it exasperates her.

Itachi, the self-sacrificing moron, waves it off like it’s nothing of importance, citing some lame excuse about Katon and smoke inhalation and whatnot. Point is, whatever the fuck he’s trying to sell, Sakura’s not buying it, and judging by the way his features pinch in worry and not-this-bullshit-again, neither is Shisui.

(In fact, Shisui hasn’t been buying it for months, as he later confesses when Sakura corners him, with a sickeningly sweet smile and a softly lethal purr, and all but commands to spill, Shicchan, or face my Flames of Youth. Needless to say, he sings like a canary.)

Left with no other avenue, since Itachi’s obviously not budging an inch, Sakura goes home and does something she’s been skillfully evading ever since Mebuki’s first-and-only attempt to publicly celebrate the wonder of Sakura’s birth. In exchange for Mebuki’s permission to go on a trip of rather vague destination—with Kakashi, of all people, which, what the fuck, mother? Why is that the only reason you agreed? Are you—blushing? The hell happened when you met him?—Sakura fulfills Mebuki’s lifelong dream of throwing her daughter a grand-scale party for her upcoming fifth birthday. With, y’know, people attending. And, ugh, dressing up and shit.

The things she does for the sake of peace.

(But mostly for Itachi.)

Feathering a travel backpack so large and heavy that Sakura’d never been able to carry pre Gai-sensei—

(Mebuki’s gone a tad overboard in her excitement over her little girl’s first trip outside Konoha, don’t forget to take lots of pictures for kā-san, baby girl, oh, and souvenirs for tō-san, he likes that Oolong tea they sell in—)

—Sakura raps on Kakashi’s door and waits. There’s a flare of chakra, a snap of ninja wire, then the door slides open a crack and Kakashi’s head peeks out. All Sakura can see is a perpetual case of bed head—tufts of white hair falling over his eyes, black fabric stretching across his face, as he half-smother a yawn, half-frowns down at her, classic I-was-sleeping-dammit body language.

“Yo.” Forcing the issue of her presence via wedging her huge backpack between the narrow gap and Kakashi’s shins, Sakura grins up at him, all cheek dimples and schadenfreude and now-you-know-how-I-feel. “Start packing, Kakashi. We’re going on a field trip!”

With a drowsy ‘why me?’ rumble of a groan, Kakashi rubs his face, the pads of his fingers digging into his closed lids, without once dislodging his mask. Somehow. When he resigns himself to reality and grudgingly accepts that no, he’s not seeing things, yes, she’s not going away, and oh, shit, she now knows where he lives, goddammit, fuck his life, lethargy gives way to this shuttered look of impotent rage, of someone whose ass is about to experience close encounters of the third kind and there’s no chance of escape.
“Gai gave you my address, did he?”

“Yep.”

“Here to drag me into another crazy mess, are you?”

“Yep.”

“Resistance is futile, is it?”

“Yep.”

“Come in, little pink hellion.”

“Don’t mind if I do.”

“I do mind, actually.”

“Tough shit. I’ve brought chocolate mint tea, by the way.”

“Kitchen’s to your left. I only have dog treats, just so you know.”

“Figures.”

Twenty minutes later, Kakashi is wide awake, though still sporting a ridiculous mess of bed head, perched on a stool and slouching over the kitchen island, sniffing at the contents of his cup with mild suspicion, the paranoid ass.

Sakura quirks an unamused ‘really?’ brow at him. Kakashi quirks an unamused ‘yes, really’ brow back at her.

Fucking finally, he blows on his cup, inhales again, then takes a slow, careful sip, all the while eyeballing Sakura for nonexistent tells of sabotage. She hopes to kami there’s a rip or some sort of filter built into that mask, because ew, Kakashi, germs.

“So.” A low hum of pleasure, and something wary, driven by paranoia. “Where is your cohort of red-eyed minions?”

If even chocolate mint tea isn’t enough to sweeten him up, then she doesn’t know what will. No, wait, that’s a lie. A new release of Icha Icha’d probably do the job, but she’s pretty sure even Jiraiya’d balk at getting filthy porn material from the mind of an apparent five-year-old, super pervert or not.

Fed up with men and their silly preconceptions in general, Sakura gives up and rolls her eyes. “Itachi’s got clan stuff with the Chief, something about preparing to screen applicants for the medic force, and Shisui’s tryna get a summoning contract.”

“The Uchiha clan is primarily contracted with felines, right?”

“Yeah, but he wants to be original, so he’s going for reverse-summoning.”

“That’s kinda dangerous.”

“Well, yeah. It’s Shisui, so. Exercising caution is like, not even on his list of priorities. He’s probably gonna come back with crows or weasels or something equally small and conniving just to
rub it in our face.”

“True, that.” Kakashi concedes her point with a grimace, which deepens as he steels himself, evidently sensing she won’t let him circumvent the real issue forever, and cuts to the chase. “So, what’s this about a field trip, hm?”

“While they’re busy doing their own thing, we—” A pause; a Mona Lisa smile, full of sadistic vibes and implications. Sakura gestures between them, for emphasis and shit, in case he may miss the memo, which… Oh, yeah, he’ll try, no ifs, ands, or buts about it. “—are gonna be hunting down Tsunade.”

“Tsunade,” he repeats, right on cue, lost and confused and say what now, a dull, uncomprehending echo. Near tortoise-slow, clarity shines through the glassy film over his gaze, arranges itself in semi-coherent thoughts and leaps out of his mouth, voice rising higher with every sentence he all but spits at her, until he’s practically choking on his own saliva. “Of the Sannin? The Shodai’s granddaughter? The Sandaime’s student? The S-rank big shot who’s been gallivanting around the Elemental Nations, merrily drinking and gambling her way through an early retirement for the past decade? That Tsunade?”

Mona Lisa smile etched on her lips, Sakura nods. “The very same.”

Seconds, maybe even minutes, pass. Kakashi stares, keeps staring, paralyzed. Then, “Maa, Sakura-chan,” he sing-songs, murderous intent bleeding through, eyes crinkling at the corners, the poster boy for baby serial killers. “What’s this about? Really.”

What she hears is I can totally strangle you in ten different ways and still make it look like an accident, so don’t tempt me, ne?

Well, time to cut the bullshit. Not that she’s afraid he’ll follow through—Kakashi’s too much of a marshmallow to go all Ted Bundy on her ass—but better safe than sorry. So she looks him dead in the eye and says, “I suspect,” articulating each word with precision, “and Shisui does, too, for a while now,” and taking no prisoners, “Itachi’s sick.”

“Ohay,” Kakashi drawls out, then chuckles wryly, but there’s no humor in it, only concern and the slightest pang of hurt and maybe a sense of impending doom. “Okay, let’s say you’re right. Why can’t Itachi-kun just—oh, I don’t know, visit the hospital?”

The stare Sakura shoots him is so poignant, so glaringly expressive, that it needs no further interpretation. This coming from you? Like, seriously? Nonetheless, she does use words to get her point across, because bloody geniuses they may be, they’re also so emotionally stunted, that she has to spell things out for them first to get the ball rolling.

“Cause he’s Itachi. Duh.” A scoff, all fucking kinds of pity, exasperation and gods save me from suicidal morons. “D’you think he would? Right now? When things are finally starting to change for the better? C’mon, Kakashi, let’s be real here. Itachi’s more liable to suffer in silence than screw this up for his clan with whatever personal issues he’s going through. Sound familiar?”

Being caught out like this, unceremoniously and without the barest shred of tact, Kakashi blinks, an oh-so-innocent ‘who me?’ flutter of lashes, but at least he has the grace to remain silent, even if his silence resembles a diatribe of whoever fed you this bullshit is a malicious liar who lies, why, I’m a perfectly adjusted individual, honest, the paragon of mental health, thank-you-very-much.

Riiight. And she’s his biological daughter. Sakura, too, blinks, then rallies again, because if she tackles Kakashi’s many, many problems, they’ll be here all month. “‘Sides, getting Tsunade to
come treat him is like, killing two birds with one stone. Itachi gets some grade A medical help, the Uchiha medic force gets a professional opinion on how to go about setting things up, they do all that by accepting help from a Senju, and to top it all off, Tsunade comes home. Which, a dream come true for Sarutobi. It makes for awesome Uchiha PR with a side of politicking on the sly. It can’t get any better than that. Seriously.”

This time, Kakashi, the poor, delusional bastard, seems more prepared to parse what’s what and put his foot down. Good fucking luck with that, Kakashi.

“You know what,” he coos, as if she’s being adorable as all hell, but sadly, he’s the adult here and thus has to be the voice of reason and say no to her cuteness-is-me face. “I’m not even going to try and understand the insidious ways in which your mind works, Sakura-chan. Let’s just say you’re a tiny pink ball of evil schemes and leave it at that. Still, I feel compelled to point out a major flaw in this crazy plan of yours.” And oh, here comes the piss-on-her-party bit. “Have you taken into account the insignificant-to-you fact—and trust me on this—Tsunade-sama doesn’t want to come home?”

Sakura shoots him that stare again, the one that implies he’s being deliberately obtuse and like hell is it helping his case, oh, no, quite the opposite.

“Then we’ll just have to convince her, won’t we?” she tells him, dialing up the cute factor, and, much to his quiet horror, the Mona Lisa smile makes a triumphant return. “I mean, it’s not like we’re asking her to stay or anything. Just heal a sick kid and share her genius hospital admin experience. After that… Well, she’s free to go on her merry way—hell, we’ll even pay for her time. In clan favors, dōjutsu medical knowledge, and cold, hard cash.”

Mouth slightly agape underneath his mask, Kakashi lets out a strange noise, like, a cross between a drowning man and a dying dolphin. “That…might just work.” Shaking his head, he picks up his cup, seeking comfort in its swirling depths, and all but whines. “Why is it we? Why can’t it be you and literally anyone else?”

Mirth floods her lungs. “Because, Kakashi—” His name rolls off her tongue on a peal of laughter, tangled in a web of feelings, an unapologetic kind of truth. “—you’re the only expert tracker I trust for this job. Nobody else.”

Lo and behold, Kakashi chokes on his tea, all wounded animal noises and begone, feelings, you do not belong here. “Why don’t you stab me in the heart while you’re at it?”

“Promise to stand still?” Quick as a snakebite, Sakura whips out a kunai from the pouch she’s not-so-secretly filched from Shisui, because you never know when Danzō may come a-calling, and tries to point it at his heart. Key word: tries. Problem is, Kakashi’s so freaking tall even while sitting, that she ends up pointing somewhere near his stomach, which… If she’s bound to hit low, then a useful rule of thumb is to always go for the groin. Either nobody’s ever told Kakashi that rule or he’s simply not a fan or he’s just too hip and cool for this kind of dick move, because he makes a show of crossing his legs as he levels a droll stare on her kunai-wielding hand.

“Oh, I would. If I thought it might help improve your aim. Sakura-chan, don’t take this the wrong way, but frankly? Your weapons’ handling sucks. Stick to taijutsu combat, ‘kay?”

“Oh, I will. Gai-sensei says I’ll be able to punch through mountains in a few—”

“Okay, time for you to go now, tiny pink juggernaut in the making. Up you go! I need to pack, then go inform Hokage-sama of our impromptu field trip, which I’m sure will go over well. I’ll meet you at the gates in an hour, ‘kay?”
“So, see ya there in four hours. Got it.”

“You know, you can always ask Gai. I can guarantee you he’ll be up for the job.”

“’Course, he would. Unlike you, Gai-sensei’s awesome like that, but he’s not the best guy for undercover work, ya know. Unless you think he’ll be an asset instead of a hindrance. In that case, I’ll be more than happy to take him with us on—”

Kakashi slams the door in her face. Well, okay then.

Kakashi, the utter bastard whose sole ambition in life is to live up to his title as the king of petty revenge, arrives at the gates five hours late, a suspiciously blank-faced Tenzō on his heels, tagging along, ostensibly for moral support (according to said petty bastard), but in reality... Because Sarutobi doesn’t trust the Copy-nin to babysit a monkey summon, much less a human child.

Please ensure he doesn’t lose the poor girl, Tenzō-kun. I don’t want to have to inform her parents that one of my elite Jōnin trackers somehow, accidentally, displaced their daughter from their happy household. Or the Uchiha clan, for that matter. Indeed, I will be very cross with Kakashi should that awful scenario come to pass, and so will Inoichi, and you have my permission to tell him so verbatim, thus Tenzō dutifully relays when they make camp later that night, chakra pulsing in erratic rhythms, in a manner that screams he’s laughing his ass off, amid the soft crackle of burning logs, Sakura’s gleeful snickers, and Kakashi’s quite vocal mock-offense at what he refers to as blatant and vicious defamation of character, I’m hurt, Tenzō, deeply, you can stop laughing any time now.

It sets the tone for the rest of their epic journey in quest of the Legendary Sucker.

Ironically enough, they end up stumbling across Tsunade purely by luck, while she’s halfway through a winning streak of legendary proportions that has, in turn, ignited her legendary temper as she interprets it as an imminent sign of her legendary bad luck striking again.

(Or, well, she suspects whatever is soon coming will be Bad News, but... Tsunade doesn’t even know the half of it.)

Also, halfway to getting totally plastered.

“Hello, Tsunade-sama. Lovely day to get lost on the road of life, isn’t it?”

“I’ll pretend you never said this, Hatake-brat, and spare you the pain of several broken bones, bruised organs, and soft tissue injuries, compounded by a mild-to-severe case of internal hemorrhage and possibly concussion. If you play it smart and fuck right off in the next three seconds. You feel me?”

“I’m afraid he can’t do that, lady doc, so feel free to break him at your leisure.”

“Now, wait a damn minute, Sakura-chan. That’s totally not what I signed up for. You promised me copious amounts of sugar and absolute zero pain, I remember, I was there—you said, and I quote, ‘You do the trackin’, I’ll do the talkin’, Tenzō’ll probably do the trees, ain’t nobody gonna be hurt on this mission, and there’s even gonna be lollipops if you’re a good man-doggie.’”

“Oh, don’t be a baby, Kakashi. We’ll just pay her cute assistant to heal your lil’ boo-boos afterwards, so you’ll get your lollipop. And if you’re really, really lucky and play your cards right,
she might even kiss it better. Suck it up for now, ‘kay? ‘Sides, what’s a little pain compared to the success of the mission—Shinobi Rule Number Four, yeah?”

“Okay, brats. Your three seconds are up. Now, I’m not in the business of hurting little girls, no matter how smart-mouthed they are, so you’ll pay her share along with yours, Hatake-brat. Take it as a strong incentive to not even think about putting the moves on Shizune—wait, is that tree laughing? The fuck is this shit? I know I’m not that drunk yet.”
Chapter 14

In the end, miraculously, nobody gets hurt. Not even Kakashi, something that Sakura is all too happy to lord over the Copy-nin, all insufferably smug grins and casual told-you-so reminders, which he habitually rebuffs via immersing himself in Icha Icha and adopting a flippant ‘see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil’ facade that has the unfortunate consequence of grating on Tsunade’s nerves. Okay, so, nobody’s gotten hurt yet, Sakura amends.

Instead, they all relocate to Tsunade’s hotel room for privacy. Or, more like, the illusion of it, what with her hair-trigger temperament and long history of indoor violence, regularly inflicted upon buildings, walls, and poor, innocent furniture.

“So,” Tsunade begins with a fearsome scowl, very much sober, very, very much annoyed that she must be in such a rare state of abstinence in order to get this headache of a meeting over with pronto. “You’re the Mokuton brat Sarutobi-sensei wrote me about a few years ago, huh?”

Tenzō, who’s so far existed in a routine of having the time of his life while impersonating trees and randomly fucking with people’s perceptions in the name of mother nature, stiffens at her admission. “Hokage-sama wrote to you in regards to my circumstances?”

There’s shock layering his otherwise toneless voice, minuscule traces of confusion, and something else, curious, tentative, a coiling vine of hope. Tsunade clicks her tongue, though less out of unkindness, more out of harsh realism, slaying whatever stirring emotion the poor teen may have felt at its inception.

“Nah, nothing so detailed, brat, so don’t get your hopes up. Just mentioned you existed is all. Guess he thought he could tempt me to return and take you in or something. That’s just how Sarutobi-sensei is, ya know—a bleeding heart to the fucking core. Probably what’ll do him in, old fool that he is… I can just bet he’ll be like this to the bitter end, that man.”

“Oh. I…see.” Still confused, but now more sure-footed, Tenzō nods slowly, almost mechanically, no doubt taking her words at face value. Hell, he even attempts a pitiful imitation of a smile to show he’s not begrudging her for the blunt way she just shot him down. “I understand completely, Tsunade-sama. You don’t have to worry about the issue of bloodline theft in my case, though. To be honest, we’re not even certain if the Mokuton can be passed—”

“What the hell happened to ya, brat?” Tsunade demands more than asks, scowling harder when Tenzō sheepishly zips his mouth and refuses to elucidate, obviously baffled by both the ease of his acceptance to absolve her of any responsibility towards his person and his reluctance to regale her with his sordid tale of mad science and human suffering.

“A series of unfortunate encounters with creepy old men,” Sakura cuts in dryly as she takes over from Tenzō, having extracted the whole sob story out of the ex-Root shinobi in the course of their journey, because there’s abso-fucking-lutely no need for him to just sit there and take this shit from Tsunade of all people, especially when he’s the victim here. “Remember your teammate? The one so obsessed with immortality, that he kind of turned unethical human experimentation into a favorite pastime of his?”

Cue pin-drop silence. Tsunade’s expression goes through some complicated shit, all deep furrows and contrition, old-living regret carved into the lines of her face. “Orochimaru,” she says at last, syllables spaced out and falling from her lips like a condemnation, and she sounds fucking gutted.
In the face of such malaise, Sakura tries her best to keep her voice devoid of inflection or undue blame. It’d be like accusing Naruto for Sasuke’s cray cray and one-man crusade against the world, and that’s just... Well, wrong. “Yeah, him happened first, then the rest just followed his lovely example of medical ethics and common human decency. Which is to say, the total lack thereof.”

It certainly pays off. Expression smoothing out, Tsunade draws breath deep into her lungs, draws all those complex feelings back inside her chest, then rolls her shoulders, arms folding beneath her cleavage, and drums red nails against her bicep. “Alright, I get it. Orochimaru is the lowest of earthworms and should never be allowed near children, nothing new there,” she admits through clenched teeth, giving off a rather impatient nonchalance. “I still don’t see what’s this got to do with me, though. Unless you’re having medical problems with your kekkei genkai, brat?”

Even though her last question is clearly addressed to Tenzō, it doesn’t look like he’s any more willing to communicate, so Sakura takes over again, carrying on in the same vein, albeit a lot more cheerfully. “Oh, no, Tenzō’s feeling just peachy, really. ‘Cause who knows what kinda stuff Orochimaru messed up in his body. I mean, except for collecting data, even he had deemed this whole ‘let’s make Mokuton super soldiers out of poor orphan babies’ business a failure. Tenzō was a statistical outlier, that one miracle baby, ya know.”

“Fine,” Tsunade agrees at once, with another careless shrug, if a little too readily. “I’m interested in studying the mutations in his DNA, anyway.” Brows creasing thoughtfully, she eyes Tenzō with a professional sort of intrigue, that soon morphs into something teasing, smirking, a sly arch of red lips. “Hell, I’ll do you one better, brat, and find out if you can pass the Mokuton on to your kids. Am I nice or what?”

There’s only one correct response to this yakuza-like proposal, and everyone knows it. Poor Tenzō’s left with no option but to smile his stilted approximation of a smile and bow his head in enforced indebtedness. “Thank you, Tsunade-sama. I am very grateful for your kindness.”

“Damn right, you are.” A huff, self-gratified, still smirking like the cat that got the cream. Tsunade then barks at her thus-far-silent apprentice to take him to your room, Shizune, and get me some samples stat—oh, and no funny business!

Which, of course, Sakura takes to mean Tenzō’s about to drop his pants for the cute assistant and thus land himself in the fortuitous position to get some. When Tenzō rises from his seat to walk past her, following after a shyly-smiling Shizune, Sakura flashes him a thumbs up and a saucy wink, mouthing go for it and whatever you do, don’t resort to Icha Icha lines and good luck, soldier. At that, Tenzō almost misses a step, stumbling over his own feet, all but projecting an aura that says he’s equal doses terrified and eager to try this romance thing out like, every other overly hormonal teen out there. Feeling all proud and shit, Sakura nods in encouragement, in an attaboy! kind of way, and off he goes to play doctor. Realistically speaking, she gives it a五十-fifty chance of success. Not bad, not bad at all.

“Now...” Tsunade clears her throat, loudly, a knowing gleam in her eyes, a telling sign she didn’t miss the byplay, but she’s far too amused to kick up a fuss over it. “What’s the real reason you’re bothering me?”

“Medical problems is what we’re here for, honest,” Sakura insists, the very picture of earnestness and I’m-a-small-child-please-have-mercy, mentally preparing herself to pull out all the stops. “We’d like for you to come treat a sick child. Before you say no, perhaps you’d like to know what we’re offering in exchange for your services?”

Dubious as all get out, Tsunade lifts a beautifully groomed blonde brow, as if to say pull the other
“Sarutobi-sensei wouldn’t have approved of your little field trip without a solid reason. No, the real question here is…” she trails off, gaze grown narrow, shrewd and analytical and drop the cutie pie act, brat. “Who’s the sick kid?”

Well, game’s up. “Uchiha Itachi,” Sakura, oh-so-graciously, informs her. There, she’s said it, let Tsunade make of that what she will.

And oh, there goes her other brow, shooting up in genuine puzzlement and come again? “That’s… Fugaku’s kid, right? Huh. Now that’s more like it.” Apparently satisfied with whatever conclusions she’s reached, Tsunade moves on to the meat of the matter with the kind of efficient prioritization all battle-hardened medic-nin are known to possess. “What’s wrong with him that nobody can treat him back home? Unless standards have really fallen since I left.”

“Frankly?” Suppressing a wince, because this is going to sound really, really stupid, Sakura bites her lip in second-hand embarrassment, before she sighs and comes out with it. Quick, like ripping off a band aid. “We don’t know, but based on the current symptoms, we’re guessing some sort of congenital lung disorder or maybe even an autoimmune. It’s not like he’s ever visited the hospital to get a real medical opinion.”

Cue pin-drop silence again. Tsunade stares at her. Stone-faced. Sakura can do nothing but resolutely stare back. Also, wow, awkward.

“What.”

“Yeah.”

“Does that brat have a death wish?”

“That’s what I said. And he wants to be a medic-nin with that sorta mindset, if you can actually believe it. I mean, what kind of healer can’t even take care of his own—”

“Wait, what?” Abruptly, in the middle of Sakura’s tirade now that she’s finally found a kindred spirit to commiserate with, Tsunade puts a hand up in the air like, woah, hold up, run that by me again? “Are ya telling me the spawn of that mean lil’ prig, the heir to that clan of stuck-up assholes, wants to be a medic-nin? And Fugaku’s okay with that?”


A snort; a wry twitching of lips, then Tsunade chuckles and says, utterly shameless, “Go hunt Jiraiya down and ask him for that story when you’ve hit double digits, brat. There’s a reason that pervert took off like a bat out of hell the day Fugaku took over the KMPF and hasn’t so much as come within two miles of Konoha’s hot springs ever since. Far as I know, at least.”

Heh. That so? Jiraiya, huh? Well, Sakura’s not half bad at hunting down Sannin, so why the hell not? Plus, she’s kind of neglected Naruto in all her Uchiha drama. Might as well do something nice for the main protagonist of this shit-show for a change. Although, on second thought, it’s debatable whether Jiraiya even qualifies as nice, but he’s something alright, so. Whatever. Close enough. Given that poor kid’s thirst for any manner of familial connection, Naruto’ll be grateful…ish. Hopefully.

“Kakashi-kun,” she calls out to the Copy-nin, who’s halfway into an Icha Icha reading coma by the looks of it, batting her lashes and sweet as molasses, a show of glittering jewel-green eyes and I need you, baby.
“Maa, Sakura-chan,” Kakashi calls back, lowering his lurid book a few centimeters to gaze at her with this sappy look of love-struck devotion, a palm placed on his heart over his Jōnin vest and a blush creeping up his cheekbones from beneath his mask.

In total-eclipse-of-the-heart silence, they share a blockbuster-worthy moment that has all the makings of gold romantic comedy bullshit, like, something straight out of an Icha Icha ending scene if, y’know, Jiraiya ever kept it somewhat PG, to which Tsunade’s (un)lucky enough to have secured front row seats. Judging by her thunderous expression, she wants a fucking refund on her ticket, and she hasn’t even paid to watch the movie premiere.

“Sightseeing does sound nice.” Kakashi hums, putting on a performance of giving voice to his thought process for some convoluted reason only he can rationalize; also, confirming he’s been paying attention to the conversation. “I mean, it’s your first trip outside Konoha and all. It’d be a real shame if you missed out on all the fun places to be—we can’t have that now, nope. Plus, you did say Mebuki-san expects lots of photos, and I would just hate to disappoint her.”

And he sounds so fucking sincere, so aghast at the mere thought of letting her mother down, that Sakura just has to know. Even if that knowledge, in all probability, will psychologically scar her for life. “Okay, now I gotta ask. What’s the deal between you and kā-san—”

Sadly (?), it will forever remain a mystery, as Tsunade’s, evidently, had enough of their bullshit and she’s not afraid to make it known. Balls of steel on that one.

“Oi, Hatake-brat, you the team leader, right?”

“Why, yes, Tsunade-sama, so nice of you to notice, thank you ever so much. I swear to kami, I get no appreciation—”

“Oh, for the love of shōchū, shut your trap. Why’re you letting a little girl do the talking for you?”

What she doesn’t have is experience in dealing with Kakashi’s special brand of authority issues, because she’s clearly not aware of the fact Kakashi’s liable to interpret orders any way he feels like it at any given time. Case in point: tell him to shut up once, even as a figure of speech, and he will, oh, yes, he will, but only when you do want him to speak. Getting a clue after ten seconds of mute staring or so, Tsunade scowls and cracks her knuckles, an explicit, menacing threat of speak now, or I will silence you forever. Kakashi gets the message. Maybe this nobody-getting-hurt-on-this-trip trend will continue, after all.

“Oh, but I thought we cleared that up already? Team leader or not, I’m just the designated tracker here. Sakura-chan’s the one who has the dubious honor of actually convincing you—and she’s doing a mighty fine job of it so far, isn’t she?”

“Che. In your dreams maybe.” Tsunade’s scowl doesn’t lessen, per se, but it does become somewhat softer when she fixes Sakura with her full attention. Like, piss-me-off-I-dare-you and I-still-don’t-hurt-little-girls and Kakashi-will-get-it-in-your-place softer. “Alright, cherry bon bon. Let’s hear it, your oh-so-tempting offer. Go on, hit me with it.”

“Straight up?” Sakura opts to stress instead, to ascertain they’re on the same page, and Tsunade grins her assent. “Okay, can do.” She nods firmly and, before Tsunade can have a change of heart, presses forward with all the metaphorical grace of Gyūki in a china shop. “You will agree to come and examine Itachi with the prospect of fully healing him, or if that’s not medically feasible, then creating a long-term treatment plan to the best of your ability, and we’ll pay any monetary price you name. Within reason, obviously. In addition to that, I am pleased to inform you that the Uchiha clan is planning on establishing a medic force.”
Here, Tsunade makes to interrupt, eyes burning with questions and what-the-everloving-fuck, but Sakura wants to get the whole thing out in the open first, so she gestures for silence and goes on with barely a second’s pause. Caught aback, Tsunade blinks at her sheer, bull-headed gall, jaw hanging half-open, then snaps it shut, only to smile ruefully, as if she’s witnessing something nostalgic, something she’s not seen in a long while and terribly misses.

“An ambitious venture that will incite much controversy, yes, we’re well aware. Now, here’s where you come in. You will kindly offer your medical expertise and any further assistance or advice you feel comfortable imparting to the Uchiha clan for this grand undertaking. In return, we’ll allow you access to the private Uchiha medical archives dating back to the Warring Clans era, back you up in any clan councils you wish to attend, and of course pay you for your services. I mean, separately from the cost of Itachi’s treatment.”

With that being said, Sakura comes to a full stop, not that Tsunade yet notices, not with the way she keeps gazing at Sakura with this wistful light in the depths of her gaze. It doesn’t last long, of course. One moment, Tsunade’s caught up in whatever-the-hell she’s reminiscing, all soft, gleaming gold eyes and melancholy, then the next moment, she’s grinning at Sakura, a thin slash of lips, razor-sharp with mockery and hard-learned life lessons.

“Oh, is that all? What, you done? Nothing else to add? Maybe you’re planning to cure general idiocy while you’re at it?”

Not taking it to heart, Sakura rolls her eyes in a good-natured manner, going as far as to humor the acid in Tsunade’s tongue. “Nah, I’m not in the habit of trying to achieve the truly impossible. That’s all we’re asking for, promise.” Because she knows Tsunade’s unlikely to believe in pretty words, though—not anymore, not after all the shit she’s been through—Sakura’s come equipped with indisputable evidence, which she proudly presents after a little rummaging in her backpack. “And here’s the contract to prove it. Like it is legit stated in no uncertain terms, you’re under no obligation to stay after the contract’s been fulfilled. No loopholes, no ambiguous legalese fuckery, no escape clauses for either side.”

She holds out the contract, waiting patiently even as her arm starts feeling strained, not rushing Tsunade, who’s indeed gone pale as a ghost, as if conceding to merely skim through the terms enclosed within this damning piece of evidence will result in some cataclysmic disaster like, say, the world ending tomorrow. Or something. Still, Tsunade reaches out a hand to take it, however hesitant, however distrustful she is while reading it through, from the first letter to the last and back again, and that’s all that matters in the end.

“So, whaddya say, Tsunade-sama?” Sakura’s face splits into a grin full of trust and playful teasing, all but conveying I believe in you and let’s cause some havoc. “You gonna sign that thing and save a stupid kid’s life and maybe even start up that ingenious med project those Council dicks shut down all those years ago?”

Slowly, almost unconsciously, Tsunade’s gaze unglues itself from the damning contract and follows the direction of Sakura’s voice. There’s a fragile quality to the arrangement of her forever-young features—need-despair-bitterness-loathing—and Sakura wonders if this is the moment where the Slug Sannin starts cussing them out and punting them halfway across the Land of Fire, one by one, all the way back to Konoha, empty-handed, with nothing to show for it besides bruised bodies and regret.

“Laying it on a bit thick there, aintcha?” is what comes out instead, kind of choked-up with unshed tears, with unsound laughter. “You, cherry bon bon, would make one hell of a bitchy nurse. Gotta hand it to ya, brat. If nothing else, I like your bedside manner.” With a half-disbelieving, half-
hysterical *oh-what-the-hell* under her breath, Tsunade signs.
Chapter 15

Convincing Tsunade to take a little side trip and go after Jiraiya requires far less effort than selling her a brief medical stint in Konoha, but if Sakura’d been armed with foreknowledge, she might’ve been far less inclined to make that effort.

Oh, well, no use crying over spilled milk. Que sera sera.

It goes down something like this: Two Sannin and a pink-haired almost-five-year-old. At a Kiri brothel-slash-watering-hole-slash-bounty-hunter-joint. On a manhunt for the last Sannin and broken bonds. In the midst of civil war and genocide.

(Shit can only escalate from there.)

They find Jiraiya in his natural state of being—and what a fabulous sight it is. In other words, a little shit-faced, with a lapful of nubile young hostesses, boasting about outlandish feats nobody wants or needs to know, but someone is being paid to listen to, clearly, all the while giggling like the super pervert he’s proud to be.

Sakura’s pretty sure there must be a ‘walk into a bar’ joke that fits this scene, but Tsunade doesn’t look like she’s in a joking mood, so she keeps her smart-ass mouth in check for now.

In retrospect, maybe she should’ve gone with the others. Only… Kakashi’s out scouting the area for possible threats, something she’s got no experience in yet, and Tenzō and Shizune begged off to save their virgin eyes from the horrors dwelling within this fine establishment. Or, more like, to sneak off and go on a date, something she’s got no desire to be a third wheel in, but hell yeah, good on them. Sakura wholeheartedly approves.

Tsunade, literally and metaphorically, looks down at her erstwhile teammate, who’s mildly wasted and deep in tits-n’-ass land and too absorbed in weaving tall tales to notice them, cocks a hip and opens with, “Still the same whore-mongering fool as ever, I see. Some things never change.”

As he’s about to knock back his tankard, Jiraiya kind of chokes, kind of jolts into motion, arm flung out and half-spilling his drink over his chest, and whips around to face them. “Who the fuck sai—Tsu-Tsu-Tsunade?” Eyes like saucers, near popping out of their sockets, he splutters as he tries to make sense of what his optical nerves are transmitting to his inebriated brain. And, wow, he goes from zero to sixty, all rapture and hearts in his eyes, a broad, stupid, lecherous grin bisecting his cheeks. “Wha—hime, is that really you? Or are my eyes deceiving me? Nonono, it can’t be! Your beauty can’t be faked—I know them well, yes, those ripe, juicy, bountiful melo—”

“Jiraiya.” Flat, unimpressed, the herald of an epic beatdown. Tsunade cracks her knuckles. “Eat dirt and die.”

(Jiraiya eats so much dirt, that he’ll probably be shitting high-grade fertilizer for days on end. Kiri’s field crops will thank him at least, so there’s that.)

“So,” Jiraiya starts once the punishment game’s over, once Tsunade’s hurled some clipped words at him about money and idiot sick kids to give him the highlights. His body is one giant bruise, a patchwork of split, swollen flesh, but he’s grinning like an utter fool, like nothing can bring him down, wearing the face of a man who lives by the motto: self-preservation, what is that. Also, obviously not buying her bullshit excuses for a second. He steals a glance at Sakura, who’s
humming while she sips at her strawberry milk (and steadfastly refusing to think why that’s even on the menu), short legs kicking under the table, the very image of a kid on her first field trip, something bemused, but wistfully tender, catching at the edges of his grin. “What’s with this entourage of Konoha’s finest young blood, hime? Finally feeling homesick, are ya?”

A vein bulges in Tsunade’s temple. “Che. I ain’t here to chit-chat and reminisce about the good ol’ days, Jiraiya,” she all but snaps, voice tight and seething, gold eyes gone dark, twin coals of betrayal. “Did. You. Know?”

In the wake of her fury, Jiraiya flinches back as if burned to the bone; slowly, cautiously, he ventures, “Know what, hime?”

“That he sank to such low depths. That he went so far as to dare desecrate my family’s resting grounds.” A hiss, angry and revolted and devastated, ugly emotions avalanching across her pretty face. Tsunade doesn’t name who he is—perhaps because she can’t; perhaps because it’ll be too cruel to him, too painful for both of them—but she doesn’t have to. “Need I go on?”

Understanding washes over him. “Ah.” Jiraiya lets out a heavy sigh and grimaces, a cracked mirror, a reflection of all those ugly emotions, and he doesn’t say the name either. He steals another glance at Sakura, who’s pretending to be a part of the lovely decor (as much as a five-year-old can realistically be in this sort of place), while eavesdropping without the slimmest iota of shame, and clears his throat meaningfully. “Maybe we should continue this conversation away from young eyes and ears?”

“Oh, kinda late for that. Ain’t that right, cherry bon bon?” Snorting, Tsunade’s quick to disabuse him of any notions he might have entertained about preserving childish innocence or whatever, by outing her and brutally destroying his false image of Sakura the Clueless Civvie at the same time. Her mouth quirks up into a hard smirk, almost viciously proud, as she huffs and flicks Sakura on the forehead, yeowch, holy mother of fuck—!

“Girl’s one smart cookie, so don’t even go there. Who did you think told me?”

Jiraiya looks like he honestly doesn’t know what to reply to that, or how to take Tsunade’s fondness for this tiny pink child, so he chooses to focus on what feels familiar to him.

“Well, uh, kind of?” With an awkward chuckle, he scratches at the back of his neck and sort of babbles, fearful and repentant and trying to cover his ass. Oh, look, grovelling, Sakura thinks, amused, as she rubs her poor, abused forehead. Oh, how the mighty have fallen. “I mean, I wasn’t one hundred percent sure, but I, uh, strongly suspected, yeah. S’why I’m here in the first place, actually. Got a solid lead ‘bout him lurking near Kiri these days, probably planning to nab a few kekkei genkai kids in all this bloody chaos, if I know him—and I do know him.”

Sakura and Tsunade both raise a sardonic ‘gee, you think?’ brow, but only the Sannin speaks. “Oh?”

Bolstered by this unprecedented lack of violence visited on him, Jiraiya brightens and nods rapidly, forgetting all about Sakura in his mad rush to spill his guts to Tsunade in a transparent ploy to remain intact. Or, at least, as intact as he already is, which, miracle of miracles, considering he’s got no missing body parts yet, Sakura reckons he’s pretty damn intact.

“Yeah, rumors say the Kaguya clan’s getting restless, and you know what that means. Bloodthirsty, boneheaded lunatics, the lot of them. I’d say there’s a good chance of ‘em doing the world a favor and wiping each other out in short order. Oro’s never been the type to miss that kind of festival.”

No, definitely not it. As suicidal as he might have been, and as much as the mangaka sucked at naming kids, he couldn’t have been actually called that. Oh, well, K-something, so. Special K, yep, let’s go with that. For now. Point is, Orochimaru may be sniffing at Special K, but he hasn’t yet bought the product. Maybe—and that’s a big maybe—there’s a chance here. Tsunade’s already on board this saving-sick-kids ship. What difference will one more make? A whole fucking lot, probably, but meh. They’ll cross that bridge when—if—they get there.

“—you thinking, Jiraiya?” Tsunade’s saying when Sakura’s stray musings conclude, shadows of worry in her voice, in her bright gold eyes, and it’s like watching a solar eclipse. Beautiful, but rife with danger. “Isn’t it kind of pointless, though? You following him here, I mean? What can you do all alone in the middle of enemy territory? If you start something, you run the risk of bringing the whole Bloody Mist down on your head. I know you like to play the fool, but you ain’t that stupid, Jiraiya.”

‘Cause if you are, I’ll beat you within an inch of your life, then heal you and do it all over again, for as many times as it takes to knock some sense into your thick skull is what goes unspoken, but not unheard.

A shrug, helpless and long ago resigned, shoulders buckling under a heavy load. Jiraiya smiles, a true smile, however tired, however self-deprecating it is.

“Can’t help it, hime. If there’s even the slightest chance of pinning him down, then I just hafta try, ya know. For Sarutobi-sensei’s sake, too.” Another shrug, this one way lighter, and oh, gods, that broad, stupid, lecherous grin from before. Seriously, dude? The fuck is wrong with you? Like, here’s this poor woman, this total Mother Teresa, fretting over your sorry ass out of the goodness of her heart, and you’re about to go all ‘you and me baby ain’t nothin’ but mammals’ on her? Just, just how many shades of wrong are you, old perv? “Anyway, let’s not go picking at old wounds now—much too depressing for your beauty.” Yeah, fucking called it. Your funeral, old perv. “I haven’t seen your gorgeous bo—face, no, wait, I meant faaargh—!”

There’s the sound of grinding bones, as Tsunade’s fist connects with Jiraiya’s face, and an unmanly cry of nopleasenottheface! Which, of course, soon turns into an emasculated shriek of thefacetheface!

Well, as they say, ignorance can be educated, crazy can be medicated, but you can’t fix stupid.

“Say, lil’ lady?” Jiraiya groans more than speaks, while Tsunade’s in the restroom to wipe his blood off of her knuckles and touch up her makeup and shit. Apparently, Jiraiya’s the exception to her hemophobia or something, because she’s only had one mini freak out episode and that’s after she’d pummeled the daylights out of him. His body is an even worse giant bruise, hunched over and racked with the occasional spasm, but even with the sting in his split lips, he still manages a quarter of a smile when Sakura widens her eyes and points to herself like, you talkin’ to me?

“I’ll be five in three weeks,” she chirps, holding five fingers up to, y’know, show she can count or something, and he snorts. There’s laughter in his eyes, and something else, forlorn, close to longing twined with regret. Until all cutesy mannerisms flatline, that is, and she deadpans, “Why, you into that?”

A slow, confused blink. Jiraiya’s head lolls to the left side, then to the right side, as if he’ll be able to see the whole picture if he just tries to look at her from another angle, then he’s drawing himself up like an extremely offended orangutan and waving a finger in her face.
Okay, listen here, shortcake. Let’s make one thing clear first. Despite the, uh, places I happen to frequent in my line of work—" Cue said finger pointing at the scantily clad women, the heavily scarred patrons, the old bloodstains on the walls, the… Well, everything. “—there’s only ever been one creepy pedo on this team, and it ain’t me, ‘kay? This manly Toad Sage is all about the ladies! Got it?”

“M’kay. Gotcha, old perv,” Sakura agrees with a lazy thumbs up, without the merest reservation or pause, which, funnily enough, gives him pause. Hell, he even lets the ‘old perv’ tagged on at the end slide. “Why you askin’ then?”

Head tilting sideways again, Jiraiya scrutinizes her from head to toe, taking in her kunai pouch and whatever pitiful muscle definition she’s built so far, lingering on places and—okay, fine, he mostly stares at her fantabulous hair with this I-am-amazed-they-brought-this-to-bloody-Kiri and for-the-love-of-melons-please-put-a-wig-on look on his battered face. Which, talk about pot calling the kettle black. At some point during his examination, he must’ve cottoned on to the fact she’s just messing with him, because he shakes his head and huffs a surprised laugh. Not only that, but he’s considerate enough to get with the programme out of his own volition.

“You ever run into a blond kid ‘round your age? Blue eyes, whisker marks on his cheeks? Likes pranks, er, what else—kinda loud, maybe even has a verbal tic?”

Huh. Well, will you look at that, Jiraiya has a heart, Jiraiya cares, quick, someone give this man a hug. Don’t worry, old perv, Sakura thinks, grinning inwards, eyes a glow-in-the-dark green, venom dripping down the points of her teeth, you’ll get all the hugs back in Konoha. From, y’know, your frickin’ adorable godson, the five-year-old sunshine boi you’re criminally neglecting, you ass.

She doesn’t even need to pull out the big guns, i.e. the puppy-dog eyes of doom and join-the-revolution. A stroke of luck, if ever there’s been one. Although, speaking of luck, there are two and a half members of the original Team Seven on this (for all intents and purposes) ‘escort mission’… Yeeaah. Awesome. Not. Something’s gotta give soon, but again, fuck that noise, they’ll cross that bridge if—when—they get there.

“Naruto,” she clarifies with an eye-roll, fed up and all out of patience for his half-truths and subtle-I-am-not bullshit, leaving out his clan name as an extra precaution. She can bet Jiraiya’s already put up privacy seals, but best not to tempt fate, yeah.

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“Yup, that’s the one.” Jiraiya nods, rather forcibly, plastering a goofy smile on his face that’s more fake than half his alleged sexcapades, letting the ‘old perv’ slide again. Idly, Sakura wonders when he’ll notice, if he ever will. “So, uh, is he…?”

And he stops there, seemingly out of words, as if even he himself has no clue what the hell he’s supposed to ask. Gods, but he’s a hot mess. She should like, sic Mikoto on his mega-pervert ass before Naruto comes into the picture. Poor kid doesn’t deserve Jiraiya’s wishy-washy bullshit on top of it all. With another eye-roll, Sakura drawls out a fairly sarcastic, “Alive? Last time I checked, yeah.”

“No, not that, I would’ve heard if he—” Jiraiya waves her off in an instant, then runs a hand through the crazy mane he calls hair, agitated, nervously; he swallows once, tries again. “I meant is he, uh, you know, what’s the word—happy? Yeah, that. Is he a happy kid?”

So, he’s been getting regular reports from Sarutobi on Naruto’s health, but Sakura guesses that’s the extent of what he gets and now he needs some damn reassurances from an outside sort-of-impartial source. Okay, she can do that, why the hell not, though not without having some fun at
his expense. Information never comes cheap, after all, and Jiraiya should know that better than most.

“Oh.” A gasp, full of shock and compassion and sudden enlightenment. “Ooh, I get it now.” A one-of-a-kind ‘why didn’t you say so?’ epiphany. Sakura dips her head, tapping a finger against her chin, pretending to be deep in thought, while Jiraiya’s features scrunch up in bewilderment and what-the-fuck-just-happened. “Well, I can’t say life’s been treating him right from what I’ve seen so far, being an orphan and all, but he’s always smilin’, so.” And to make it stick, Sakura serves him the Gai-sensei Special Combo. “Don’t worry, old perv. Naruto’s a real tough kid. Nothing can bring him down for long, so you, uh, do your thing and he’ll do his.”

Recognition flickers across Jiraiya’s face, followed by shivers, precog-like bad feelings galore, ‘abort, abort!’ sirens blaring in his ears, and a long-dead-and-buried sense of responsibility pulling an Edo Tensei and gunning for his sweet, carefree, wandering-hermit way of living life. He opens his mouth, closes it, and again. Like, a botched human-to-goldfish henge. Then, a horror-struck mutter of, “Why do I feel like a terrible misunderstanding’s just been made?”

At that, Sakura’s smile goes supernova. “Nope, no misunderstanding, we’re good, promise. I’ve no idea what you’re talkin’ about, old perv.”

Frantic and bug-eyed and very, very close to hyperventilating, Jiraiya struggles to put his thoughts into words, a futile exercise in damage control, verging on pathetic, truly. “Now, listen here, shortcake, I—I’m not—h-he’s not—

“Oh, I know, I hear ya loud and clear,” she all but croons to him, all there, there, hush now, sweetie, mama’s gonna make it alright and soothing shit like that. What she means is my lips are sealed, Naruto’s safe, nothing to see here, people, and if how Jiraiya’s face falls into despair is anything to go by, he, too, hears it loud and clear.

“Nonono, I don’t think you do! In fact, I think you’re just making it worse! Stop lookin’ at me like that! I swear on my literary genius, shortcake, I had nothing to do with his conception, nothing at all—”

“That so? I’ve read Tale of the Utterly Gutsy Shinobi, y’know. Great book, really loved it, ‘specially the whole ‘let’s make love, not war’ message. Funny how Naruto’s named after the hero, huh? Oh, but I’m sure it’s all just a great coincidence, yep.”

“You—nothing I’ll say will convince you he’s not mine, yeah?”

“Nothing short of a legit paternity test, yeah.”

“Who’s pregnant?” Kakashi legit has the worst timing, ever; also, a true gift for sowing chaos and mistaken assumptions wherever he goes with minimal effort on his part, the king of trolls. “Sakura-chan, don’t tell me—kami, what am I going to tell your mother—”

“Oi, Kakashi, you sly dog, you,” Jiraiya breathes out of the blue, gaze comically wide and darting from Kakashi’s (so damn fake) pale, horrified, I’m-so-screwed face to Sakura’s (so damn real) pale, horrified, what-the-fuck face, back and forth, like he’s just been whacked upside the head with some kind of revelation and is still reeling in the aftermath. “I didn’t believe the rumors at first, but there’s no denying it now…” A leery twitch of brows and lips, then Jiraiya slams a fist against his knee and roars with laughter, reduced to a bulky mass of man and choppy, wheezing sentences. “Shortcake’s yours, ain’t she? Definitely got your brains. Lil’ lady just takes after her mother in looks, huh. Must have been one fine spring beauty. Way to go, kid! Ach, if only Minato could see you now! C’mon, Kakashi, don’t hold out on me now! Gimme all the juicy details and
I’ll make a star outta—"

Naturally, that’s when Tsunade returns from her bathroom break, just in time to catch Jiraiya’s porn star bid—all hell breaks loose.

By the next morning, Kiri’s down one brothel-slash-watering-hole-slash-bounty-hunter-joint (not a great loss), Jiraiya’s black and blue to the point where his bruises have bruises (ditto), Tsunade’s in a snit, Kakashi’s playing it cool by keeping mum about the whole daddy issue, and Sakura is so done.

“Okay, seriously now. What the hell, Kakashi? Gai-sensei’s one thing, but why does everyone keep believing you’re my—ugh, I can’t even say it without throwing up a little in my mouth.”

“You’re too young to know.”

“Too youn—oh, I’ll show you all kinds of You—”

“Maa, maa. No need for the ‘Y’ word now. When you’re older, Sakura-chan, you can ask your mother about the day we met, ‘kay? I promised Mebuki-san she’d be the one to tell you, and you know me—I will never, ever, break my promises if I can help it.”

“This…is so much bullshit. Also, Youth on you, Kakashi.”

“Now, that’s just petty, Sakura-chan.”

“Yeah, you’d know.”

On a side note, Tenzō and Shizune come back rosy-cheeked and holding hands. With a pet pig. A tiny pink cutie that’s somehow able to smell debt collectors coming from a mile away and carry stuff ten times her weight. Tonton has the Slug Sannin at buhi. (“She says hello,” Shizune translates, excited as only new mothers can be, and Tenzō proudly nods.)
“Well…” Nose wrinkling prettily, Tsunade glances over at Jiraiya as she examines her nails, loose-limbed and speaking casually, but battle-ready all the same. Today, they are red as copper, a hue disturbingly similar to the soil of Kiri after generations of blood-spilling. If she’s affected by the last vestiges of the massacre laid before their eyes, she hides it well. “Your prediction came true, Jiraiya. Who’d have thought—”

Sakura, too, tries not to focus on the grisly sights, barely paying attention to the Sannin’s repartee, searching instead for something living, something pure and white, untainted by bloodlust.

“—you any good at craps? ‘Cause if you are, you’ve got a hot date with a casino I happen to know.”

“Oh! Been a long time since I tried my luck at craps, but I can be your arm candy any time you want, hime. Just say the word and I’ll be there—”

There! Near the riverbank is a lone boy, squatting down, cradling a flower in his palms, splattered in red—Sakura feels a wave of stark relief deluging her lungs, then she’s racing ahead, running towards him, the Sannin’s voices barely filtering through her ears, until they fade away completely. Oh, thank the gods, there you are, Special K. Just…just stay there…don’t you dare move—

“—tryna pull now, shortcake?”

“Knowing her? Probably gonna give the Kaguya brat one hell of a pep talk, flash me those big green peepers of hers ’til I agree to check ‘im over, and drag ‘im back home with us.”

“What—wait, is that even allowed?”

“Who the hell cares, Jiraiya? It ain’t like Sarutobi-sensei will send the brat back to Bloody Mist once he’s in Konoha, ya know.”

“You know what, hime, you’re absolutely right. Whatever. I don’t even care anymore. Where the hell’s Oro, anywa—”

“Hey—hey, you!” Sakura’s shouting before she’s even reached the boy, breathless and pumped up and grinning so wide, so utterly giddy with hope, that her face kind of hurts. Also, probably coming off as a total nutjob, but he should be used to seeing that type of unhinged grinning, what with his aggro clan and all, right?

Lo and behold, Special K doesn’t bat an eye, cool as a fucking cucumber, if a bit guarded; he slants his head, curious and cat-like, and repeats after her, slowly, like it’s a foreign war cry and not, y’know, a greeting. “… He-y?”

Coming to a halt at a reasonable distance—read: close enough to talk without yelling, but out of weapons’ reach—Sakura crouches down to his level and tones down the madness in her grin. It’s still brilliant, but softer, warmer, an open expression of let’s just forget the dead bodies and be friends, ‘kay. “Yeah, hey—means hello, like, a friendly greeting, ya know?”

“Oh,” is all Special K says, and he sounds so fucking lost, that it’s not even funny.

“What’s your name?” she asks, partly because that’s what usually follows, partly because she now
feels like an ass for dubbing him Special K and needs to replace it with his real name before the
damn thing sticks in her mind. Isolation’s done a number on this poor kid, obviously, but knowing
something and seeing it firsthand are two entirely different things. “Mine’s Sakura.”

Pale green eyes study her face, closely, quietly, reminiscent of the way Itachi used to stare at her in
the beginning, not threatened by her, not at all, simply…not knowing what to make of her and not
liking that. Then, “I am called Kimimaro.” A pause, long and charged with tension, something
inscrutable passing through his gaze. Almost as an afterthought, he adds, “Of the Kaguya clan.”

Huh. That’s…like, seriously? So not safe in Bloody Mist, giving your last name away like candy
on Halloween, especially if it’s a clan name with a well-known kekkei genkai. Either he plans on
killing her (likely), or he’s all out of fucks (more likely), or possibly both (most likely). Works for
her, anyway.

“My’s Sakura.” she chirps, all smiles and sparkles and bubbly as fuck, and it’s clearly
not what he expected. Sakura can see it in the fractional widening of his eyes, the way his lips
contort around her cute mangling of his name, how his fingers caress the petals of the red flower in
his grasp, an absent-minded, near compulsive pattern. “You like flowers, huh? That’s…a camellia,
right?”

At that, Kimimaro’s gaze falls on the camellia—he holds it delicately, counts the number of its
petals with the pad of his thumb, one by one, stopping at the yellow stamens that form its center. “I
—yes, I think I do,” he breathes out once he’s mapped its shape, a little timid, a little surprised at
his own admission, and he doesn’t protest the nickname either. “I like its color. It is…” Kimimaro
trails off, maybe due to his limited vocabulary, face creasing in dismay, the most expressive he’s
shown so far. “Bright,” is what he settles for, and she can tell it’s not enough, not even close to
whatever complex word he needs.

Score! Now we’re talkin’! Thanks, Mikoto, you and your ikebana lessons rule. “Never seen one
before?” Sakura guesses. A slow shake of his head is all she receives, which, yeah, figures. Any
pity she might’ve still retained for his dearly departed clan crumbles into ash and dust. Child-
abusing fucks, she spits, furious and disgusted, though not so callous as to actually spit on their
corpses, which, by the way, urgh, she can still glimpse fucking everywhere. Lovely, just… Lovely.
Ain’t she a fucking Persephone or what?

“Well, I’m named after a flower, but I guess you’ve never seen sakura trees either, huh?” Sakura
humms and plays with the ends of her hair since she’s come to the conclusion he’s kind of a visual
person. True enough, it draws his eyes, his curiosity, green alight with questions. “I don’t know if
they can even grow ‘em in Kiri. But anyway, yeah, they’re pink, so.” Smiling, she shrugs. Thanks a
bunch, Kishi, you suck. You, too, dad. Mom’s definitely naming the next kid. “Get it?”

“Your hair…” In a blur of movement, Kimimaro’s invading her personal space, reaching out a
hand to touch her hair, a mere brush of fingertips and skin-heat. Okay, scratch that, he’s more of a
tactile person, yeah, that’s cool with her, no biggie. Also, woah, fast. Damn, kid. “It is…” Again,
he struggles for words. “Soft.” And, wow, is that a smile? An upturn of thin lips, so faint she
almost misses it, but holy shit, kid’s got a killer smile, the kind that’d make grandmas want to
pinch him senseless, the kind that’d get him an insta-fanclub in Konoha. Well, it’s either that or
Orochimaru, so. Poor kid’ll just have to deal. “I like it,” Kimimaro says at last, like he’s made
some sort of breakthrough in how-to-human, and boy, does he look happy for his standards.

Eh, whatever, it’s not harming anyone. Hell, Shisui does it all the freakin’ time, the touchy-feely
monster. Sakura laughs and lets him pet her hair to his heart’s content. “Thanks, Kimirin. It’s
mostly good genetics, but conditioner helps a lot.”
Another cat-like head slant. “Conditioner?”

“Mm. You put it on your hair when you wash to make it soft, also to strengthen it, so it won’t tangle or break when you brush and all.”

“Oh,” he says again, still so fucking lost that it’s just plain sad, but listening.

Instead of getting worked up over what she can’t change, Sakura reciprocates and twirls white strands of hair between two fingers, gingerly, feeling her way around the silky texture—so unfair, dammit.

“Huh. Your hair’s super soft even without it, though. Man, you sure won big in the genetic lottery, ‘cause, wow, you’re pretty enough to put Tachi to shame, and that’s saying something.” Like, the gods’ honest truth. Kimimaro’s expression becomes more lost, if that’s even possible; Sakura can’t help but think of Itachi and smile fondly. “That was a compliment, by the way. There’s no deeper meaning in it. Sometimes, people say stuff like that ‘cause they want something from you, but I told you just ‘cause it’s true. If I wanted something, I’d rather tell you than pull this crap. In any case, just say thanks and you’re golden.”

Kimimaro blinks once, then decides to follow her advice, albeit still somewhat painfully lost. “Thank you?”

Eh, he’ll get it. Someday.

“You’re welcome!” Sakura nods and decides to make her adoption pitch, because time’s running out and who knows when Orochimaru’ll come crawling out of the woodwork. With his teammates in such close proximity, one might wonder if he’ll appear at all. Except, Orochimaru’s like, the ninja version of a Hollywood diva—he lives for fashionably late arrivals and big audiences and monologues and all that jazz. Sakura bets he’s already watching their little convo, disguised as some random corpse, like the total creep he is. “So, you got a place to stay now that, er—you know?”

Unsure of how to phrase now that your batshit clan basically committed mass suicide and went out in a blaze of glory and shit, Sakura chews on her bottom lip, keeping it vague, but Kimimaro’s quick on the uptake when it comes to ninja bullshit at least.

His grip slackens, and the camellia slips through his fingers, only to be caught at the last second—he stares down at the blood-red of its petals, then stares up at the pastel-pink of her hair, transfixed, in a daze. “No,” Kimimaro says, and it’s terribly hollow, purposeless, a voice without color.

Sakura tugs on his hair, sweetens her tone, her smile. “Wanna come with me?”

Something shifts in his perception at that precise moment. Sakura doesn’t know what, exactly, triggers it, but Kimimaro gazes at her as if he’s seeing her for the first time, as if he’s coming awake from an awful dream and she’s the first real thing he sees. For the first time, he speaks her name.

“Sakura.” There’s a gentleness to his mien, how his tongue wraps around each vowel and consonant, and his features are sharply defined, all angles and clear-cut lines and beautiful red accents, sharp enough to cut yourself on them. Kimimaro tucks a section of her hair behind her ear, the wild one that’s always falling in her eyes, and pins the camellia there. He’s a study in contrasts, she thinks, resigned to the fact there’s no fairness in this world.
“Where are you from?” he asks, the first assertive action on his part, and she’s tempted to reply from the land of damn geniuses with fucking perfect genes, y’know, your kind of people. Now please excuse me. Imma crawl back to my gutter, so I can cry and rage at the world for this injustice.

“Konoha, the Village Hidden in the Leaves.” At the slight furrow between his brows, she huffs out a laugh. “You know, the shinobi village in the Land of Fire? We have all kinds of trees and flowers if you like that sort of thing. And sun. Yeah, lots of that stuff.”

“You are training to be a shinobi?” His brows draw apart in shock, rigid denial in his body language, a boy whose worldview has just been flipped on its head. Kimimaro seems so flabbergasted by the very idea, that it startles another laugh out of her.

“Yeah, I know—I don’t look like it, right?” Not offended, Sakura channels her chakra and taps her heel against the ground, concentric cracks forming on impact, then schools her expression to one of severe honesty to reinforce the gravity in her next words. “But, Kimirin, appearances can be deceiving, ya know, so never, ever, let a pretty face fool ya, ‘kay? ‘Specially if it’s an adult face, those are usually the worst. Got it?” Kimimaro flicks his gaze between her face and the cracks beneath her foot, less shocked, more thoughtful, and dips his head to confirm he’s absorbed her lesson. “I mean, you’re living proof of that. You’re only what, eight years old or so? And I bet you were the strongest in your clan, yeah?”

“Nine, I think.” Lost, uncertain, a hitch in his breath. Kimimaro looks thrown aback, but just as quickly, his expression firms and he’s nodding again. “I...am. In a fight, yes, the strongest.” He then fixes his gaze on her hair, on the bright red flower he’s gifted her, maybe to ground himself, maybe because he doesn’t like his previous train of thought. “There are Sakura trees in Konoha, like your hair?”

It’s sweet and heartbreaking and Sakura wants to glomp him; also, kick the shit out of dead Kaguya assholes. It’ll probably spook him, though, so she reins in the goddamn feels and all but babbles to distract herself from her violent impulses.

“Yep. They’re very pretty—oh, I bet you’ll just love hanami festivals, remind me to tell ya all about it later—but not all that impressive. I mean, if you wanna see impressive, then you gotta check out those huge Hashirama trees. Our first Hokage grew them all by himself, had an awesome kekkei genkai that could do that, so you can still feel his chakra in ‘em. You have one, too, right?”

Instead of a verbal response, Kimimaro offers an actual demonstration, a bone protruding from the underside of his wrist, the process smooth and seamless and fascinating in a morbid sort of way. Sakura doesn’t even hesitate to pull the bone out—’lo, killer smile, lovely to see ya again. I’m not jealous, nope, not one bit, perish the thought (she’s totally crying deep down inside, yeah)—and thoroughly examine it when he gives her the go-ahead. Tsunade’s sure to know all kinds of med trivia about it, but all Sakura can tell is that it feels denser than it should be and hella pointy and she can definitely stab people to death with it.

“Wow, that’s pretty awesome, too. What else can ya do with it? I mean, I know you can skewer people and, uh, badass stuff like that, but could you maybe, uh, make me a hairpin or something?”

Apparently, nobody’s ever explored the artistic side of the Shikotsumyaku, because Kimimaro shoots her this wide-eyed look of mystified wonder and I-will-never-understand-you. Nevertheless, he’s all for indulging her whims, the sweetheart. “I—can try.”

That’s as far as he gets before the moment’s fucking ruined. One moment, they’re chatting about mother nature and stranger danger and hair accessories, then the next moment, Orochimaru’s
looming over them, all prettiness and hair flipping and dripping in finesse and shit.

“Well, isn’t this touching?” A hiss of a laugh, gold eyes slanted and cold-blooded and stalking them like prey, an exact antithesis to Tsunade’s warm gold.

Why, oh, why, is it always the pretty ones? Sakura sighs and gestures towards the Snake Sannin with an all-encompassing wave of her hand. “Kimirin, remember what I told ya ‘bout pretty faces?” Like the child genius he is, Kimimaro takes the hint in less than a second and lets out a soft hum of enlightenment. Sakura nods sagely. “Yeah, that’s a prime example of what I meant.”

Something that Orochimaru finds absolutely charming, if the subtle spike in his interest is anything to go by.

“Oh, you flatter me, little sweet,” he rasps, delighted, and Sakura’s got an inklng that he truly means it in some small part. Like, people must be calling him all sorts of nasty names behind his back, but in all seriousness, who in their right mind would ever come out and call him pretty to his face? Sakura, that’s who. But, hey, don’t knock it ’til you’ve tried it. “Now, please, be a good girl and sate my curiosity. I know Sarutobi-sensei put an age restriction on the honey pot missions. Was I mistaken? Or have morals changed so drastically in my…absence?”

Wait, what? Did…did he just call her a…scarlet woman? Okay, yeah, that’s going a bit too far. Sakura’s not above using underhanded methods to achieve the results she wants, true, but even she’s got limits, lines she won’t cross. Sannin or no Sannin, she’s not about to take this shit lying down. Oh, hell no. The ends don’t justify the means. Some things are sacred. I ain’t the one seducing people for their bodies. Bring it, you…you whore of Babylon.

There’s a bite to her words, a hint of sass and sarcasm and how-fucking-dare-you, as she purses her lips and drawls out, “I wouldn’t know, but I’m going to take a wild guess and say no. I mean, technically, I’m not even attending the Academy yet.”

Contrary to her expectations, instead of being insulted, Orochimaru still appears charmed as all hell and intent on humoring her for the time being. Ha! See, it works. Nobody can resist sass and backtalk.

“But you are receiving training, yes? I can tell by the quality of your chakra. It feels…structured. Exceedingly so for your age—and that is not all, oh, no. I have not encountered such a high level of refinement in anyone since dear Tsunade. If I had to liken it to something, then it feels like a surgical scalpel. Children your age… Well, unless they are truly exceptional, their chakra feels like…a plastic party knife.”

His delivery is a clinical sort of deadpan that clashes horribly with his overall image, so much so that Sakura looks at him in askance for a few seconds. You tryna pull the honey pot thing now? Really? Hypocritical much? “Thanks, dude who’s too pretty to be real,” she deadpans, then rolls her eyes and sighs, a little bit over-dramatic and a whole lotta petty and no, thanks, whore of Babylon, nudging Kimimaro with her shoulder, because hello, valuable life lesson here. “And there you have it, ladies and gents. See what I meant about compliments, Kimirin?”

Kimimaro lets out another soft hum, bludgeoned with another eye-opener, and even tries to shield her with his own body. Oh, Kimirin, you poor thing, he ain’t here for me, but thanks, anyway.

Orochimaru, the slick fucker, takes particular notice of this. Sakura can practically hear the wheels turning in his head as he reassesses her value and the pros and cons of snatching her up to be used (at best) as leverage.
“My, my.” Orochimaru’s voice slithers across her skin, heavy and silken. Perhaps amused. Gods-fucking-damnit, shit’s getting real. “You are quite special, aren’t you, little sweet?”

And oh, thank fuck, that’s when the cavalry arrives in the shape of one legendary sucker and one super pervert. So gallant, her heroes. Also, holy shit, Tsunade’s the mother of badass. Now, that’s some serious earth-shattering shit, hell yeah, that’s how you make an entra—wait, the fuck is this shit? Why, in the name of all that is awesome, is there a freakin’ toad with puckered (ridiculously Botox-like) lips blowing kisses and batting its (ridiculously fake) lashes at Orochimaru—not that Sakura’s judging, she’s not, honestly, whatever floats its boat, it’s just—her eyes. There are some places no toad should ever go, some things no woman should ever have to see. Why, Jiraiya. Also, fuck you, Jiraiya.

“You can bet your lily-white ass she is,” Tsunade all but snarls, her chakra a fucking mountain of protective rage, placing herself between them and her ex-teammate. “Cherry bon bon’s also off limits.”

“Tsunade-hime.” A sigh, silk-soft and full of serpentine things. Orochimaru inclines his head and smiles—not a smile, never a smile, more akin to a cruel, twisted manifestation of affection. “I was wondering when you would reveal yourselves. It has been quite a long time, hasn’t it?” He then turns his head in the direction of the Toad Sage, who’s in the middle of having it out with his drag queen of a summon, i.e. getting bitch-slapped and educated on the affairs of toads and love. “Jiraiya,” he sighs again, in a mockery of civility, in a way that implies he’s seen this one too many times before and why must he see it again now. “You are looking...well.”

As he’s fighting for his summoner rights (and tragically losing), Jiraiya takes a breather and fires back, “Yeah, wish I could say the same, Oro, but I really don’t like the look of you these days,” which doesn’t go over well with his summon, who obviously likes Orochimaru’s looks quite a lot and is not at all shy about showing it.

“What a shame.” Orochimaru shrugs, although it’s too graceful to be called a mere shrug, and dismisses him without further ado. “Oh, well, you can’t please everyone.”

It’s for the best, really, since Tsunade’s patience is hanging by a thin, fraying thread, and damn, if she’s not pissed the hell off. “Let’s cut the small talk, Orochimaru. I’ve also got a question for you.”

“For you?” Gold-slit eyes appraise her tense form; Orochimaru flashes her that not-smile, darkly amused, indulgent. “I am all ears, dear Tsunade. Ask away.”

“When I return to Konoha,” she grits out, voice like the lash of a thorny whip, hands balling into tight fists, “will I find my grandfather’s remains where they should be?”

Whatever he might’ve imagined she’d ask, this is clearly not it. Orochimaru narrows his eyes, stays quiet long enough to expose that he’s weighing his answer, calculating the level of rage it will incite in her and his chances of survival. Ultimately, he must’ve liked his odds, because he gives a curt nod, superficially composed and emitting an unrepentant sort of apathy. “Why, yes. I suppose so—to my knowledge at least. There may be some internal parts missing, but I can assure you, I did not cause any, ah, shall we say, aesthetic damage to his remains. I merely extracted a few samples of his DNA material, nothing more.”

Tsunade, too, nods, as if she’s known all along and only asked as a precursor to the real question she needs answered. For a split second, she falls apart at the seams, agony smeared on every inch of fragile skin, lips trembling, drops of blood seeping from her clenched fists. It lasts no longer than the span of a breath—she inhales deeply, pierces him with searing gold eyes, then goes all
And woah, welcome to ground zero. Absolute fucking stillness. Orochimaru’s face blanks out so unnaturally, so eerily fast, that it’s plain to see he’s one step away from totally losing his shit and that this actually hurt like a motherfucker. Like, the calm before the storm and all that shit personified.

His mouth barely parts to hiss a single vehement word, and even that is a struggle, a strain on his self-control. “No.”

Well, fuck. Tsunade looks like she needs a stiff drink (or three dozens) to forget she ever unearthed this goddamn tragedy. Jiraiya’s staring at his fellow Sannin with this conflicted look of morose helplessness on his ashen face, like he can’t decide which of the two he should lay into or-slash-and comfort, even though there should only be one option. Hell, Orochimaru’s still wound so tight, so furiously silent, that he’s an angst-fest waiting to happen.

“I see,” Tsunade chokes out, chest heaving, as she tries to regulate her breath, to lock up all that pain and throw the key away. Crossing her arms below her chest, she tosses her head back and juts her chin out, exuding aggravation and impatience and what-the-fuck-are-ya-all-looking-at. “Then that’s it, I guess—I mean, there’s nothing left to say, is it? Let’s get this over with, so we can finally ditch this depressing place. Damn weather’s murder on my hair.”

And that’s that. Oprah’s over, people, but stay tuned, one Three-Way Deadlock coming up next. Or so Sakura assumes. Jiraiya, it seems, disagrees.

“Wait a minute, hime,” he cuts in, voice scratchy and raw, and even though he’s speaking to Tsunade, his gaze’s settled on Orochimaru with single-minded focus, churning with old-festering betrayals and whys. He clears his throat, tries again. “I’ve also got stuff I need to ask him.”

Pity for him that Sakura’s right on the money. Orochimaru’s way past the point of giving a flying fuck, if he ever gave one in the first place, as evidenced by the uncharitable way in which he callously dismisses his ex-teammate yet again.

“I am afraid I no longer feel quite as magnanimous, Jiraiya. No, my mood has turned rather sour, indeed. Whatever questions you feel the need to ask will have to wait until the next time our paths happen to cross.”

“Or, and I’m not saying this to be funny, I can just beat them out of you here and now. Yeah, that really works for me, Oro.”

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Silence. Except, y’know, Jiraiya’s guffaws. That’s…that’s so bad it can only be rectified via foot-to-the-face. Orochimaru’s foot, to be precise. Jiraiya goes flying halfway across the field of corpses. Tsunade nods. Sakura nods. Hell, even Kimimaro nods. Balance has been restored to the world. Until Jiraiya flies back, that is, red-faced and yelling and lamer than ever.

“Oi, that’s cheating, temē! We were still talkin’!”

“No, we were not. I refuse to call that a conversation.”

“What’s that supposed to mean, Oro? Are you saying my superb linguistic abili—”
“Oh, for the love of—I hate to agree with him, but he’s got a fucking point. Shut your stupid face and fight, Jiraiya!”

“Wha—hime! Whose side are you on here? What’s will all the hate—”

This… Yeah, no. Sarutobi can be useful for once and tackle this whole Sannin drama. Uchiha drama’s enough for her, thank-you-very-much.

Resisting the urge to face-palm, Sakura hooks her arm through Kimimaro’s and all but marches away. “Let’s just…quietly walk away while the sad old people are busy tearing each other apart. In more ways than one. Whaddya say, Kimirin? Wanna come with me? To Konoha?”

“Yes.” Kimimaro doesn’t even pause to think about it—he follows along, matching her pace, pale green eyes tracking that splash of red woven into her hair. “I would like to see the sakura trees,” he confesses, softly, smiling.

Aww. Sakura melts on the spot. “Awesome. I promise you won’t regret it, Kimirin.” That’s a promise of a lifetime, her eyes tell him, sincere and thrilled and so fucking relieved. She squeezes his arm, Kimimaro squeezes back, and off they go into the sunset, leaving the Sannin to their drama. “Now, lemme tell ya all about hanami season—”

Kakashi, the asshole who’s been off doing only gods know what while Sakura’s been busting her ass all day long to save poor Kiri orphans, returns half an hour after the Sannin’ve begun duking it out, two extra poor Kiri orphans in tow. Or, well, one poor Kiri orphan and one angry Kiri hardass.

“Look what the cat dragged in, kids!” he sing-songs, all glee and pettiness and having the frickin’ Demon of the Hidden Mist in a headlock, a serene Haku trailing behind, a too-pretty smile on his too-pretty face, and hugging a baby snow bunny.

“You mean the dog—woah, hold up, that’s…” Sakura stops mid-sentence and just… Stares. And stares. And stares. This…wasn’t part of the plan…mission…whatever. Were they even supposed to be here? Like, this shit’s for real? Trust Kakashi to screw the plot six ways from Sunday without even trying. “Wow, is that Kubikiribōchō?” is what finally makes it out of her mouth, because screw it. Also, screw Canon, nobody even cares anymore.

Zabuza flings Kakashi’s arm off of him with all the viciousness of a rabid squirrel and glares at her, somewhat mollified by her casual observation, though still pissed as fuck. “You’ve got good eyes, pink brat.”

Huh. For a man of Zabuza’s disposition at this point in time—and by that, she means pre talk-no-jutsu-ed by Naruto—that’s downright friendly. Maybe she can try to pull one of those off and go from there? Pfft. Nah. Where’s the fun in that? Besides, she’s not Naruto. Sakura’s got her own way of fixing shit. Hence, “So you’re, uh… Peaches n’ Cream?” is her next casual observation, because again, screw it.

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“The fuck did you just call me?” Zabuza roars and lunges at her, leaking killing intent all over the place, only to be intercepted by Kakashi mid-lunge and put in a headlock again. Good to know he’s got her back no matter what. “I’ll fuckin’ butcher ya, pink brat!”

Sakura’s expression transforms into one of utter, crushing disappointment and oh, man, that sucks. “What, you’re not? But—but Kakashi told me that’s your alias in the Bingo Book. ‘Cause, uh, you’re a fruitcake?”

Totally true, by the way. Coming up with absurdly insulting nicknames for random dudes listed on
the Bingo Book is what they did to pass the time as they huddled around the campfire every night during their epic quest. In Sakura’s honest and unbiased opinion, this area is where Kakashi’s genius truly shines. Not that Zabuza seems to appreciate it, the humorless bastard who can’t take a joke to save his life.

“Say that again, pink brat. I fuckin’ dare ya—”

“Maa, maa. Remember the rules, Momo-chan? No violence unless it’s Icha Icha Violence, and frankly? No offense, but you’re not my type. It’s the teeth, if you were wondering. I don’t do bestial—”

“Finish that sentence, Copycat, and I’ll fuckin’ gut you. With my teeth.”

Ignoring this weird-ass version of frenemy banter—trash-talk? Foreplay?—Sakura smiles at Haku and motions for him to take a seat beside her and Kimimaro. “So, you’re with Peaches n’ Cream?”

Haku, bless his pure Snow White soul, takes it all in stride and has no qualms about socializing in the midst of chaos, murder, and mayhem, if you count the Sannin drama unfolding in the far distance. “I am with Zabuza-sama, yes. My name is Haku. Pleased to meet you.”

“Nice to meet ya, Haku. Name’s Sakura—” Sakura takes it upon herself to do the introductions since Kimimaro’s too reserved to speak up on his own, making a mental note to correct that, effective immediately. “—and this is Kimirin. Or, well, Kaguya Kimimaro, but you can just call him Kimirin. You don’t mind, right, Kimirin?”

Taking her hand in his, Kimimaro shakes his head, then admits, unabashed, “No, I…like it.”

Which earns them a discrete double-take from Haku, but no comment on it. “Very well. Kimirin, then,” he agrees with a kind smile that reaches his eyes. Not only that, but he has the grace to sympathize with Kimimaro’s loss and really, truly mean it. “Please accept my sincerest condolences.” When all Kimimaro does is blink in confusion, Haku clarifies, “For your clan?”

“Oh.” Another slow blink. Realization sinks into the depths of Kimimaro’s eyes, but that’s all. “I… do not mind,” he replies, as blunt as he is the truthful, somehow deciding now’s the perfect time to see if he can make Sakura a bone hairpin, probably because he’s so far out of his comfort zone, that he doesn’t know how else to cope with Haku’s sympathy. “Sakura is taking me to Konoha,” he informs Haku, as if that’s the only thing that matters, the only thing that makes sense in his world.

It makes not an ounce of sense in Haku’s world, though, if the downward curve of his lips is any indication. “You are leaving Kiri?” he asks, and there’s a note of distress, of genuine alarm, in his voice.

Kimimaro’s either not keen on sharing the reasons behind his sudden emigration to greener pastures or simply not well versed in multitasking, so Sakura replies in his stead while he refines his artistic skills in peace. “Yep. Kimirin likes trees and flowers, you see. Konoha’s full of nature. Also, there’s no discrimination against kekkei genkai users, so.”

It pacifies Haku, not completely, but enough to alleviate his inborn opposition and distrust, to awaken a yearning sort of hope in him that brings back his smile. “I…see. It sounds nice, that kind of place.”

To him, it would be like paradise on earth, yeah. Sakura knows better, but it still doesn’t make it any less true, doesn’t negate Haku’s point of view.

“Well, it has its fair share of problems. Nothing’s ever perfect, y’know, but I can tell you it’s
certainly better than Kiri. I mean, right now at least.” Having said her piece, Sakura shrugs. “You plannin’ on staying here?”

“I will go wherever Zabuza-sama wishes to go,” Haku says, no hesitation at all, because of course he will, dammit.

Oh, well, you can’t win them all. Instead of attempting to change his mind, which she’s already written off as a waste of her breath, Sakura goes for the next best thing. “Mm. Well, if you’re ever passing through the Land of Fire or need political asylum or something, come visit us, yeah?”

“Why?” It starts as a whisper, quivery and bewildered and near inaudible. Haku glances at Kimimaro, then at Sakura, then down at the snow bunny nestled in his lap. There’s a wet exhalation, almost a hiccup, something vulnerable, jagged, an icy edge to his words. “I understand why Konoha would offer asylum to Kimirin, but…why?”

*Why do you care? Why do you want me?* Sakura hears all that and more. Endless doubts and self-hatred, the cries of a boy who’s given up on the world because the world has given up on him first, who’s placed his trust and obedience and raison d’etre in one person’s hands because that man’s been the only one who’s bothered to care, however selfish, however mercenary his motivations may be.

“You’ve got a kekkei genkai, right?” Sakura states more than asks, not beating about the bush, and Haku’s head snaps up, his expression glutted with horror, as if she’s…well, Orochimaru. Or Danzō. Or something. Sakura feels, ugh, *unclean*, but takes it like a champ and soldiers on through sheer force of will. “Don’t bother denying it. It was obvious by your reaction when I mentioned there’s no discrimination. Plus, I’m not judging here, so you don’t have to hide it. Konoha, remember?”

Slowly, little by little, his horror leaches away, though his wariness remains strong, even as he takes a leap of faith and dares to confirm it. “Yes, I do,” he murmurs, in a tentative show of trust, diluted with traces of resignation, still kind of bracing himself for some type of rejection or disgust to cross her features, and she sighs.

Sakura’s lips quirk up into a faint smile of unbearable fondness and *oh, my brave little soldier* and *why are you so goddamn pretty*. Haku is just too fundamentally pretty for words, shampoo commercial hair and tragic past and gender confusion bullshit notwithstanding. It’s in his eyes, the purity of his smile, the brilliance of his soul, all things he should never have to sacrifice for the ambitions of a misguided fool with arguably good intentions. For his sake, she tries to do right by him.

“Look, I’m sure you must’ve had it tough—I mean, obviously, Kiri’s a literal slaughterhouse these days—so I’m not asking for details or anything. I’m just telling you that if you ever need help, my door’s open. And by that, I mean the Uchiha clan’s door is open to you. ‘Cause I kind of live there half the time now. Because of reasons. Please don’t ask.”

It’s too little, too sparse in words and feels and all that kumbaya shit, but she doesn’t want to overplay her hand, or scare him away, or, gods forbid, dump her fuck-load of Uchiha drama on the poor boy. He’s suffered, she’s suffered, they can bond over their mutual suffering some other time, preferably when they’re old enough to drown their sorrows in a fuck-ton of alcohol. Thus Sakura leaves it at that, not pressing him for something he’s not ready to give, holding Haku’s gaze with compassion and no expectations and *ball’s in your court now.*

And, miracle of miracles, it works like a charm. Ha! Who needs talk-no-jutsu therapy when you can have fuck-my-life commiseration? Not her, nuh-uh.
“You…” Haku’s psyching himself up to tell her something important, but loses his nerve at the last second. A smile forms on his lips, ripped at the edges, still pure, still brilliant. “Are you certain they would welcome us until we can return to Kiri?” he asks instead.

In a rare instance of courtesy, Sakura doesn’t call him out on it. There’s only so much courtesy she can stomach, though, so. She snorts. “Oh, yeah. The Chief is a sucker for hopeless cases.” Eyes sparkling with mischief, no compunction whatsoever, Sakura sets about talking up Fugaku and the Uchiha clan in general, all the while ruining reputations like nobody’s business. “Like, get this. Two months ago, he raised hell in the red-light district just ’cause there were rumors of child trafficking. Turns out there was no selling of minors going on, but he still didn’t leave until he had investigated all the brothels and solved all cases of client abuse in the process. I hear half the courtesans are madly in love with ‘im now ’cause he still receives thank-you cards and, uh, invitations to visit them. Free of charge. Hell, the whole KMPF’s been offered a thirty percent discount for life, if Shicchan’s to be believed. I know ’cause the Chief’s wife wasn’t the least bit amused when she found out, but hey, that’s how the saying goes, right? No good deed goes unpunished.”

Try as he may, Haku can’t curb his mirth, even as he excuses himself and presses the back of his hand against his lower face to suppress the sweet sound of his giggles. “He sounds like an interesting man,” he remarks once he’s calmed down, polite to the max, though his eyes are laughing.

In total contrast, Sakura grins without the barest shred of decorum, because hell yeah, Fugaku’s awesome and she’s so damn proud of him and he deserves all the praise in the world.

“That’s just how the Chief is, yep, the sense of righteous justice is strong in this one. It’s done wonders for his standing in the village lately.” No, really. Fugaku’s wasted on Konoha. Haku’s wasted on Zabuza. Add that Fugaku’d trade Sakura for Haku in a heartbeat and it’s a match made in heaven. As for Zabuza, well… Sakura makes a mean peach cobbler? “So, just keep it in mind, yeah?”

“I will,” Haku promises, smiling that too-pretty smile of his, and she can tell that he means it, that he’s grateful even if it may amount to nothing in all probability. “Thank you, Sakura. I appreciate your kindness.”

Of course, Zabuza has to wreck the moment, because he and Kakashi are cut from the same cloth, the rude assholes whose allergy to feelings can be classified as triple S-ranked.

“Say goodbye to your new playmates, Haku.” Twice as pissed, itching to blow this joint, glowering at an aloof, Icha-Icha-reading Kakashi. “I’ve had enough of tree huggers to last me a lifetime. Crazy assholes are fuckin’ crazy. I don’t know what the fuck they’re smokin’ in Konoha, but I want none of that shit.”

Ooh. Oh, burn. If Sakura’s reading the smug slouch of Kakashi’s shoulders right, Zabuza must have lost bad, like, all caps bad. Her mouth twists into a pout, vivid green eyes peeking from beneath thick lashes, her best puppy-dog-eyed look. “What, you leavin’ already, Peaches n’ Cream? But—but we haven’t even exchanged mail addresses yet.”

“Call me that one more time, pink brat, and I fuckin’ swear to kami, I’ll—” There’s the screech of swords clashing in a parry and a streak of creative threats, morally and-slash-or anatomically wrong for the most part. Only his well-honed reflexes save the Kiri-nin from being gutted like a fish. Zabuza snarls in rage as he holds off Orochimaru, pushed back a couple of feet, but not backing down, all the while cussing all things Konoha out. “The fuck, asshole? Do you mind? I’m trying to put the fear of kami into this pink brat! This is why nobody likes Konoha ninja. You’re all
a bunch of fuckin’ rude shithedds with a sense of entitlement the fuckin’ size of your Hokage mountain. I mean, seriously, what the hell is up with that thing? What, you got a rugin’ hard on for your leaders, that you can’t even get outta bed if you don’t see their giant fugly-ass mugs first thing in the morni—"

“Step aside, Momochi-kun. I merely want the children. I have no time to correct your fallacious views at the moment, but rest assured, we will be resuming this conversation at great length should we meet again in the future.”

“No fuckin’ way, pedo freak! I called dibs first. You want the brats, we’re gonna have a big problem. First of all, this one’s mine, and second—eat steel and die, you sick motherfucker!”

And, well… That happened, yeah. Trapped inside a freaking igloo, Sakura wriggles her way out from underneath a body pile that consists of Kakashi, Kimimaro, and Haku. Or, no, not Kakashi, his Kage Bunshin. Nice to see she’s their top priority, but gods, she almost got crushed, need some fucking air—

“You alright, cherry bon bon?” her gorgeous angel of salvation calls out as she obliterates the whole thing with one flick of her fingers and digs Sakura out.

Patting her body down to make sure she’s got all limbs attached and all organs inside, then repeating the process for Haku and Kimimaro (Kakashi escaped, the bastard, because he’d rather face Orochimaru than feelings), Sakura takes a moment to catch her breath as she watches the two—no, wait, make that three-vs-one battle. “Yeah, no worries, we’re good. Peaches n’ Cream’s got it covered. Looks like Kakashi’s also joining in on the crazy fun—oh, look, the old perv’s back, too. So, yeah, I think we’re gonna be just fine over here.”

Which…is not so accurate once Sakura takes a long, good look at her angel of salvation. Tsunade doesn’t look so gorgeous up close. In fact, she’s a bloody mess, hair matted to her scalp, clothes ripped, covered in wounds and bruises and so much blood. She’s trembling so bad, that you can hear it through her voice when she opens her mouth and spews out a tsunami of self-blame. “Sorry, I got kind of distracted, my own stupid fault really, and he slipped by like the damn snake he is—"

Sakura walks over to her shaking figure and parks her ass on Tsunade’s lap, using her sleeve to wipe at the Sannin’s face, making no mention of the constant flinching her slow motions elicit. When she’s cleaned Tsunade up to her satisfaction, Sakura grasps Tsunade’s face between her palms and presses her forehead against hers, until Tsunade’s breath evens out and her body stops shaking, then leans back to stare into her eyes as she talks to her. Gently, never raising her voice, a low murmur filled with concern and patience. “Hey, hey, Tsunade-sama, s’totally fine, promise. Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” Tsunade says, more to herself than Sakura, a rasp of contrition, but there’s also determination in the way her chakra resonates with every word that slips past her lips, something broken just enough to be made unbreakable. “Yeah, I will be. It ain’t gonna happen again. I’ll bet my life on that.”

“I believe you, Tsunade-sama.” A smile spreads across Sakura’s face, a dazzling flash of teeth that she follows up with a sassy tease. “‘Sides, I went all in the day I found ya, ‘cause you’re a sure win, dontcha know?”

At that, Tsunade barks out a laugh and flicks her on the forehead. “You, cherry bon bon, don’t play fair.”

And you don’t hold back, sweet mother of mercy, hurts like a mofo—! Blinking back tears, Sakura
hums through the pain and makes herself comfortable in Tsunade’s lap. “Mm. Want me to keep talkin’ to ya?”

Cool fingers glide across her forehead, and suddenly, there’s no stinging pain, not even the memory of it. Oh, yeah, Tsunade’s an angel alright. Sakura sighs in bliss, and Tsunade laughs, all but cuddling her. “Sure, why not.”

Pleased as punch, Sakura locks eyes with Kimimaro and waggles her fingers in a lazy ‘c’mere, darling’ hand gesture, pulling him into her arms when he comes close enough to touch. To be fair, he comes willingly, not that Tsunade minds.

“Okay, well, this is Kimirin, and he’s got an awesome kekkei genkai. He’s decided he’s coming with us to Konoha, so please give him that checkup whenever.” She then points over at Haku, who’s keeping a polite distance and doing an admirable job of pretending he doesn’t find Konohannin as strange as his guardian claims they are, though a lot more accepting of their weirdness and maybe a tad envious in his case. “And this is Haku, who I’m guessing also has an awesome kekkei genkai. He’s with Peaches n’ Cream for some reason I have yet to discover, but dude can’t be that bad. I mean, he’s fighting that creepy old man for Haku, so he must’ve some redeeming qualities.” Recalling that Haku’s a self-taught healer or at least a specialist in herbal remedies, she breezily suggests, “D’you also want a free checkup, Haku? Tsunade-sama’s the best medic-nin in the whole wide world, y’know.”

Here, Tsunade pinches Sakura’s cheek as if to say, you ain’t fooling nobody, brat, but I’ll go along with it. Carry on, cherry bon bon, carry on. “Che. Why the hell not. Up to you, brat,” she says to Haku, as breezily as Sakura, if not more so.

“I would like that.” With a smile that can outshine Konoha’s sun, Haku bows his head, and it’s the first time Sakura’s witnessed true happiness on his too-pretty face. “Thank you, Tsunade-sama.”

They depart from Kiri in a rush. With three extra refugees. A platoon of Kiri hunter-nin on their tail that Kakashi jauntily leads on a merry chase. Coincidentally, the very moment Tenzō and Shizune come back from their second date, their beautiful family increases by a factor of two, what with Kimimaro fanboying over nature stuff, Haku fanboying over healer stuff, and Tonton mothering the stuffing out of Haku’s pet bunny. All’s well that ends well.

(Except, of course, for the feared Demon of the Hidden Mist, AKA Peaches n’ Cream to anyone who isn’t named Haku.)

“How. Just… How the fuck did this happen?”

“Wow, you can’t even walk on your own and you’ve still got energy to bitch and moan, Peaches n’ Cream?”

“Don’t talk to me right now, pink brat. Just… Fuckin’. Don’t. And quit it with the fruitcake bullshit.”

“Tsunade-sama, do men go through, ya know, that time of the month?”

“That’s it. You’re so fuckin’ dead, pink brat.”

“No, cherry bon bon, but as a premier medical researcher, I’m interested to know if they could. You know, for science.”
“Later. I’ll kill the fuck outta you later, pink brat.”
Hiruzen can’t wrap his mind around it.

‘It’ being the fact he’s somehow found himself in the unheard-of position of continuously having to play catch-up with the happenings in his own damn village. Very bizarre happenings at that, yes, very unusual, indeed. That is not to say they’re unwelcome, but… He would very much appreciate a little forewarning, for Sage’s sake. He is a man of advanced age, after all, and shock isn’t really good for his constitution. Neither is stress, for that matter, not that anyone (read: Kakashi) seems (read: cares) to take that into account these past few years.

(Kakashi will definitely be the death of him one of these days, of all the crazy Uzumaki seals, why did you have to go and use the Shiki Fūjin, Minato? Not a day goes by that I don’t regret showing you the Scroll of Seals, you inconsiderable, self-sacrificing, foolish—)

So, yes, Hiruzen is the dictionary definition of stressed out. His desk is swamped with all manner of tedious paperwork, his students are three different kinds of disappointment, his village is on the brink of civil war, international relations are at an all-time low, and the possibility of peaceful retirement is but a dream. Or, well, no, that is how things used to be before it.

Now, all of a sudden, there is such an abundance of promising Hokage candidates, that whoever his final choice may be, he honestly can’t go wrong. The Uchiha clan has discarded all notions of rebellion in favor of throwing their everything into the medical field. Two of his students have temporarily renounced their wandering ways and come home. Three Kiri refugees are crossing Konoha’s gates of their own volition to seek political asylum. Last but not least, for some unfathomable reason, his most recent correspondence with Kumo is being personally conducted by the Raikage’s brother, which… What does ‘Mister Eight thinks Miss Pink is cool, name the time and place, ya fool’ even mean? Or, well, no, Hiruzen has an inkling of what it means, it’s just…

Quite frankly, it boggles the mind. Then again, ‘Miss Pink’—better known to Konoha as Haruno Sakura—lives to boggle the mind. Hiruzen hasn’t even met her face-to-face yet, merely observed her from afar through his crystal ball, and he can already tell there is something rather fey about this girl. Others might have described it as ‘having an old soul’; Hiruzen’s more inclined to describe it as ‘there is something wrong with this child’. She’s…too mature, too self-aware, too clever for her own good, and not in the conventional way child geniuses tend to be. Hiruzen’s seen his fair share of child geniuses over the years, and whatever Haruno Sakura is… Well, child genius isn’t the right word for it. Most certainly not.

Except… His gaze leaves his crystal ball and travels over to the left corner of his desk, the spot that used to be laden with Uchiha-related paperwork, now miraculously bare, then trails over to the right corner, the spot that used to be laden with Kakashi-related paperwork, now also miraculously bare. If he’s being honest, Hiruzen’d forgotten what kind of wood his desk was carved from. (It’s mahogany, actually, and what a lovely wood it is, truly, an exquisite piece of carpentry.)

Haruno Sakura is the one Hiruzen has to thank for this much awaited miracle. She’s a revolution all on her own, a force of nature, the kind that sweeps you up and throws you into chaos, that breaks you down and builds you up and asks for neither permission nor forgiveness. She’s the whole reason behind it. When Hiruzen looks at her, at what she’s accomplished so far and the grand plans she’s set in motion for Konoha’s future, he doesn’t see an anomaly that needs to be investigated or an insurgence that needs to be stopped. He sees Hashirama-sama’s ideals, and Tobirama-sensei’s ruthless efficiency, and, gods willing, the possibility of peaceful retirement becoming a reality.
So, yes, there is absolutely nothing wrong with this child. Why? Because Hiruzen says so, and he is the Hokage, which means his word is law.

Konoha will thank him for it someday. Or not. Being Hokage is indisputably the most thankless job in the world.

Hiruzen smiles at the motley crew of adults and children occupying his office, cataloging everything of importance as he smokes his pipe. When his stare comes to rest on Tsunade’s face, he can’t help but drink her in like a parched man lost in the desert. She’s pressing her lips together, like she always does when she’s fighting back a smile, and it’s just so quintessentially Tsunade, that it almost brings him to tears. Gods, but he thought he’d never see her again…

“Welcome back, Tsunade,” he begins, and if there’s a faint quiver in his voice, nobody is quite so rude as to point it out. “I am so glad to see your face. You haven’t changed at all.”

“Yeah, well…” Tsunade appears unaffected, but the deep concern that wells up in her eyes tells a different story. She’s an emotional creature, a stunning dichotomy, tough as nails but fragile as glass, all beauty, brains and brawn. Of course, rather than expose that tenderness, the precious heart that makes her care, she goes on the offensive, because that’s always been Tsunade’s way of showing love. “Can’t say the same about you, Sarutobi-sensei.”

Hiruzen’s smile turns a little self-deprecating. “Stress, I am afraid. It takes its toll on the body, as you know, and I’m not getting any younger.” Tsunade raises one finely sculpted brow, severely unimpressed, and Hiruzen barks out a laugh. “Oh, don’t look at me like that, Tsunade. That is all there is to it, I promise.”

Not that mere words can allay her worry. “Che. We’ll see,” she scoffs, in full-on healer mode, tone hard and unyielding, an unmistakable command of you’re getting a full checkup the second we’re done here and an implicit threat of you better pray your test results don’t make a liar outta you.

And oh, he’s terribly missed this prickly bedside manner of hers. No one has tried to strong-arm him into taking care of himself in years, not since his dear Biwako… Ah, well, best not touch that. There is only so much his poor heart can take before it gives out on him.

“I suppose we will,” Hiruzen acquiesces with a sigh and a smile, both soft and tired, but as he shifts his focus and greets his other wayward student, his expression becomes fixed. “Now, isn’t this a pleasant surprise? I am very happy to see you, Jiraiya.” Still fond, still sincerely elated, but there’s a chagrin, something atypically displeased, the weight of failed expectations crushing half the joy of this reunion. “How long will you be gracing us with your presence, if I may ask?”

Jiraiya freezes for a couple of seconds, then starts to fidget and sweat and ramble, gaze frantic and darting towards every possible exit, like a rabbit caught in a snare. “I, uh, don’t rightly know? A few day—” Hiruzen’s immaculate control slips, his chakra a razor-sharp noose twisting around Jiraiya’s neck, an acute, wordless rebuke. “—weeks! I meant, uh, a few weeks, yeah.”

“Excellent.” Hiruzen beams at him, smile remaining fixed, carrying across all those failed expectations for which Jiraiya now has to atone if he knows what’s good for him. Also, adding a subtle reminder to speed things along. “I am sure there will be many people who will want to reconnect with you. Why, I can even name someone who has been waiting to meet you for a very long time. You won’t deny them the pleasure of your company, now will you?”

A grimace flashes across Jiraiya’s face as he steals a glance at the frame that holds Minato’s portrait. It’s an ever-present, silent judge, one that Hiruzen’s had to face after every visit to Naruto-
kun. Jiraiya’s never experienced this kind of soul-flaying pain—how it feels to look into the boy’s warm blue eyes, so much alike his father’s, and not know where to even begin to apologize for how much he’s failed them.

“Course not, sensei!” Jiraiya’s laughter reverberates throughout the room, bouncing off the walls and drilling into Hiruzen’s ears. As per usual, his student’s up to his clownish antics, chipping away at Hiruzen’s patience with each deflection and booming guffaw. “You know me, I like to make connections everywhere I go. I mean, obviously, who wouldn’t wanna meet me, the gallant Jiraiya, the one and only Toad Sage of Moun—”

“Yes, indeed,” Hiruzen cuts him off, not amused, not willing to entertain his charades this time. “Who wouldn’t.”

Enough is enough, Jiraiya. Clean up your act, or I will seriously reconsider allowing you to apprentice Naruto-kun. Judging by the way Jiraiya’s eyes go wide with panic and please-don’t-do-this-sensei, his message’s been received. What will come of it, though… Well, only time will tell.

“Now, Kakashi…” Hiruzen addresses the Copy-nin, who doesn’t even stand at attention, as if being contrary just for the sake of being contrary is wired into his DNA. Oh, Kakashi, why. For the umpteenth time, Hiruzen curses his predecessors’ martyr syndrome. Next time someone has to play the martyr, Hiruzen’s going to be the one, duty be damned. This…this is where half a decade of dealing with Kakashi’s bullshit has driven him to. Hiruzen’s been trying—gods, but he has—to be sympathetic and lenient and understanding and all that ‘we should be supportive’ nonsense Inoichi preaches (but doesn’t actually use himself in Kakashi’s case). Nothing works. There is only one solution when faced with the batshit crazy that is Kakashi: embrace the madness yourself.

Hence, Hiruzen smiles at him, his Kakashi-smile, the one he’s perfected for whenever that brat is being a royal pain in his ass, the one that lets Kakashi know he’s blown it and now’s the time to pay the piper. Kakashi realizes it, too, staring at Hiruzen with this tortured look of deep-seated self-hatred, spine gone ramrod straight, his copy of Icha Icha Paradise nowhere in sight.

“As I understand it, you, my boy, have gone above and beyond the line of duty. It warms my heart to see you taking initiative, especially when it brings such outstanding results. Well done, Kakashi, very well done. I believe you have earned yourself a bonus this time. Shall we say, one month of paid vacation?”

Why, he asks with a thousand-yard stare. “Oh, it was nothing, Hokage-sama,” is what actually comes forth. “Really. It wouldn’t feel right taking sole credit when it was, uh, the result of team effort, you know? I’m good, honestly, no vacation time needed, none at all.”

Because, Hiruzen answers with a thousand-watt smile. “Nonsense, my boy,” is what actually comes forth. “I have already filed the paperwork and it is being processed as we speak. Enjoy your free time, Kakashi.”

Translation: If I have to be stuck here, waist-deep in this new insanity you have brought to my village, then so will you. Let us see who breaks first.

“Thank you…Hokage-sama. I…appreciate it.” Excruciatingly slow, chock-full of whys and misery, like pulling teeth.

Kakashi looks like Hiruzen’s just kicked his puppy. Hiruzen couldn’t care less.

“I am sure you do,” he drawls as he relights his pipe and takes a long, satisfying drag, all the while observing their…guests. Hiruzen’s not one to stereotype or put people into boxes, but… These two
boys have seemingly nothing in common with the savage monsters spawned from Bloody Mist—

(For example, Momochi Zabuza, whose jaded glare has never left Hiruzen, absorbing every word
and action, a black hole of distrust and resignation feeding into his paranoia, as if this is all an ill-
fated series of coincidences that will lead to an inglorious death. Amusingly enough, he is the only
one to think so.)

—holding hands with Sakura-chan, being adorable and deceptively harmless as all baby
carnivores, all three flashing him their own version of puppy-dog eyes and please-adopt-me. On
any other occasion, Hiruzen’d have dissolved in a puddle of goo, and taken them out for dango,
and, yes, maybe even secretly adopted them.

(What, everyone knows Sakura-chan loves dango. Hiruzen’s not a stalker or a creeper or—an Uchiha. He just—he loves children, alright? All children. Goodness, he even liked Kakashi as a child, not to mention Orochimaru used to be the cutest thing ever, Hiruzen’s not exaggerating, not at all, it is not a character flaw, Danzō, and I have not taken it to extremes; in any case, there are far worse traits I could have inherited from Tobirama-sensei and, more to the point, I don’t want to hear that from you—)

Hiruzen’s smile adopts other qualities, more diplomatic in nature, even though he’s well aware that
he’s not fooling anyone. Still, as far as he is concerned, there are certain procedures to be followed.
Becoming a political animal is kind of an occupational hazard when you’ve been Hokage as long
as Hiruzen has, and they’re shinobi, not savages, despite their place of birth.

“Momochi Zabuza-san and Haku-kun, is it?” he prompts, ever the politician-slash-genial-host-
slash-god-of-desk-shinobi, which earns him a grunt from the adult and a smile from the child.
“Allow me to welcome you to Konoha. You have come to seek political asylum, yes?”

“N-yeah,” Zabuza agrees, rather gruffly, and it’s clearly not what he would’ve said had Sakura-
chan not viciously stamped on his foot, green eyes blazing with an inner fire, a non-vocal warning
to behave yourself, that’s the effing Hokage you’re speaking to, for kami’s sake. What a delight,
this girl. “Yeah, I guess we have,” he reiterates, albeit a tad conflicted, not wholly committed.

“I thought so.” Hiruzen tilts his head, graciously, dismissing the byplay as nothing out of the
ordinary. When your measuring stick for lack of deference is Kakashi… Well, Zabuza comes off as
grudgingly respectful at worst. “There will be certain conditions, of course, but I would be willing
to come to an arrangement that would be beneficial for both parties.”

Zabuza squints at him, warily, his hackles raised, his paranoia coming back in full force, until
Sakura-chan stamps on his foot again, digging her heel into his toes, another non-vocal warning to
stop being a brainless moron and listen to his offer first. If he strains his ears, Hiruzen swears he
can almost hear his ANBU trying, and failing, to contain their snickers up in the rafters.

“Alright,” Zabuza releases a growl-like sound, furiously embarrassed and possibly nursing a
couple of bruised bones, eyes pitch-black and burning holes through the ceiling, and oh, if glares
could kill… “Name your terms.”

Hiruzen maintains his I-strongly-believe-in-compromise smile, having spontaneously developed a
case of selective deafness, and rattles off said terms. The sooner they can reach an agreement, the
sooner he can kick them out of his office. Whatever happens between Zabuza and his ANBU
afterwards is not—and will not be—his mess to clean up. Thank the gods for small mercies, that
honor falls to Kakashi. Or his ANBU Commander. Or anyone with a sufficient degree of authority
over his ANBU Corps who isn’t Hiruzen.
“If you can prove that your intentions are genuine through a series of tests—nothing too invasive, I assure you—and if you agree to take missions for Konoha as an independent contractor, then I see no reason to turn down your request.”

What little skin remains on display—i.e. not covered under his bandages and his hitai-ate—folds into deep creases. Hiruzen assumes this to be Zabuza’s ‘thinking face’. It looks a tad…constipated.

“So, what you’re saying is…” he mulls out loud, disgruntled, but not outright hostile, merely stating facts. “I let your Yamanaka rummage through my head to prove I ain’t a spy and I work for ya during my stay here—and that’s it?”

From the corner of his eye, Hiruzen watches as Kakashi claps silently, mockingly, applauding the Kiri-nin for his brilliant powers of deduction. Determined not to break character, Hiruzen also spontaneously develops a case of selective blindness. “Essentially, yes,” he confirms, without pause, pretending he doesn’t see Zabuza flipping Kakashi off either. My, the perks of old age…

Zabuza’s expression changes from constipated to something feral, awfully defensive, a wild beast backed into a corner and coiled to lash out at the barest provocation. “What about Haku?” he challenges, bold as brass, a rumble of killing intent thundering through his tone.

“What about Haku-kun?” Hiruzen repeats deliberately, blithely, with such naturalness that Zabuza relaces before he’s even conscious of his body’s instinctive reaction, which, of course, doubles his tension once he becomes cogent of it. Hiruzen’s old, and bone-weary, and prefers to avoid confrontation, yes, but being all that is a sign of danger, not weakness, and any shinobi worth their salt knows this. You don’t survive to Hiruzen’s age by being nice; no, you have the luxury to be nice because you’ve survived to this age. “He is a child, Zabuza-san. I cannot allow him to attend the Academy, if that is what you are asking, but what you choose to teach him in your own time is none of my business. As far as I am concerned, Haku-kun is not a registered shinobi of Kirigakure and thus not a part of our negotiations.”

Zabuza bristles, then forcibly shakes it off, then bursts out laughing, a low, harsh chuckle that grows into an enormous belly laugh. “You know what, Sandaime-san…” He looks Hiruzen dead in the eye as his laughter ebbs into something sober, like blood on hands, cold and dry and stuck under your fingernails. Killer to killer. “You might be the first Konoha-nin who’s kinda alright in my book.”

Hiruzen, too, laughs. “I will take that as a compliment.” An ANBU agent materializes at his signal, slipping a money pouch to a smug Kakashi with a sulky mutter of damn you, senpai, we won’t forget this, while ‘accidentally’ bumping Zabuza on the shoulder, as if the Kiri-nin’s to blame for their collective poor discipline and Kakashi swindling them out of their hard-won earnings. Good thing Hiruzen’s selectively deaf and blind; otherwise, he’d be duty bound to reprimand them for their lack of proper conduct, and he’s really not in the mood for this crap. “Uma will escort you to T&I. Once your evaluation has been concluded, you will be required to attend a meeting of the clan head council where our negotiations will be finalized and your claim for refugee status will be officially recognized. I look forward to seeing you there, Zabuza-san.”

“Ya will,” Zabuza promises, with a brazen assurance Hiruzen privately admires, and follows Uma out of his office, though not before ruffling Haku-kun’s hair and shooting Sakura-chan a loaded stare and a guttural, “Take care of Haku while I’m gone, pink brat,” to which he receives a thumbs up and a cheeky, “Sure thing, Peaches n’ Cream.”

“Sakura-chan.” For the first time, Hiruzen feels an easy smile tugging at the corners of his mouth—no sorrow overshadowing his joy, no strings attached to his kindness, only pure, undiluted warmth. “It is lovely to finally meet you, child.”
“You, too, Hokage-sama!” Sakura-chan grins an infectious, Youth-inspiring, toothy grin she’s clearly copied from Gai in every respect—

(Behind her, Kakashi groans and makes a valiant effort to brain himself with his Icha Icha Paradise. Hiruzen’s already mentally stamping those apprenticeship forms Gai’s taken to leaving on his desk before every single mission briefing and after every single mission report for the past two months, all the while rhapsodizing about the joys of teaching and Sakura-chan’s youthful progress. Free entertainment of this caliber doesn’t come his way ofte—er, excuse him, young talent should be nurtured is what he meant to say, and Gai is the best teacher for Sakura-chan, yes, no question about that. Separating them would be nothing short of cruel at this point; Hiruzen isn’t in the business of breaking up happy families of choice, for goodness’ sake.)

—then squares her shoulders and says, straightforward, with refreshing familiarity, “By the way, I like your chair. It looks super comfy, like my couch.” A pitiful sigh escapes her lips as she gazes at his (very, very comfortable) chair, eyes full of longing, green like spring, but flecked with autumn. “I missed Kuma-chan.”

And oh, it is a meeting of the minds. Right then and there, Sarutobi Hiruzen understands Haruno Sakura; he connects with her on a deeper level—an unbreakable bond between two people who’ve been cursed by the gods to live in interesting times.

“It is the little things in life that count, true.” Hiruzen nods gravely, and they share a meaningful ‘we be of one blood, ye and I’ glance, acknowledging one another as kindred spirits. “You named your couch Kuma-chan?” he asks, all too happy to indulge her, in part because Kakashi’s background suffering is a balm to his aching soul, in part because he has faith she will come to him when she wants help. That one glance told him all he needs to know about Haruno Sakura. Truth, and trust, and Hashirama-sama’s dream living within the grasp of her tiny palms.

Sakura-chan makes an unladylike sound, a snorting sort of giggle, and shakes her head. Hiruzen has a gripping feeling of déjà vu—she’s so very like Kushina, prancing around in his office and liberally speaking her mind, a whirlwind of red hair and mischief, all witty banter and laughter.

(If his next outing with Naruto-kun just so happens to take place in the Uchiha district…in clear view of Mikoto by chance… Well, Hiruzen hopes Sakura-chan likes Mikoto’s homemade ramen as much as her dango.)

“Nah, tō-san did,” she explains, tone fondly amused, if a touch exasperated. “I used to call ‘im honey bun, but tō-san said no self-respecting son-in-law of his should be named that. It’s gotta be like, manly or something, so. We compromised. Kuma, ya know, ‘cause bears like honey and are super protective and strong?”

“That is a wonderful name, Sakura-chan. Perhaps I should name mine as well. This old girl has been faithfully supporting me all these years without ever asking for anything in return.”

“I know—that’s what they do. You better treat her right, or you’ll have to answer to Kuma-chan.”

“I promise I will.”

“Good. Glad we had this talk.”

“Yes, I enjoyed our talk as well. Thank you for indulging this old man, Sakura-chan. Know that my door will always be open should you wish to have another talk. Please keep up the good work.”

A smile blooms on her rosy lips; a full-power Gai-smile, so luminous it nearly sears his retinas.
Additionally, it drives Kakashi to another suicide attempt—suffocation, this time, via cutting off his air supply as he buries his face into the pages of his Icha Icha Paradise with a woeful groan. Hiruzen returns her smile with one of his own, not as blindingly radiant, but just as heartfelt. There’s a wealth of unsaid things that passes between them in the course of this light-hearted exchange, they’re both aware. Ah, retirement. So close…

“You got it, Hokage-sama! Leave it to me—I won’t let ya down, promise.”

“I have no doubt, dear girl.” And Hiruzen means it. Believing in her is as easy as falling off a log, truly, one of the easiest decisions he’s had to make in a very long time. Shinobi are so used to sticking onto every surface with an instinctive application of chakra, that they’ve simply forgotten how to fall. How to trust. It saddens Hiruzen. But while he’s on the subject of bullheaded shinobi… “Oh, before I forget, a missive has arrived for you.” Hiruzen keeps his gaze on her adorably curious face, but his attention is reserved for Kakashi as he delivers the killing blow. “From Kumo.”

Kakashi enters a lifeless state, more statue than man, skin an ashen gray, a pale imitation of his eye color. Sakura-chan blinks once, then blurts out, “What, really?”

“Yes, really.” Hiruzen nods, handing over the aforementioned document, which she then proceeds to read aloud for everyone’s benefit. Apart from Kakashi’s.

Abruptly, Sakura-chan flies into a frenzy, an eruption of manic gestures and phrases such as gotta find Gai-sensei and time to up our training and ohmigods, it’s so happening, interspersed with hell yeahs and a variety of triumphant exclamations in the same vein. Each squealed word creates a new fissure in Kakashi’s marble-like exterior, takes his will to live and grinds it up into dust. In the middle of her daydreaming (something about punching the Raikage in the face?), she grabs both Kiri boys by the hand and bolts out—in search of Gai most likely—at which point, Kakashi’s spirit is hovering over the debris of the man he used to be in mournful silence.

Surprisingly, Tsunade stomps off after the children, cursing about damn hyper brats under her breath. Unsurprisingly, Jiraiya skips off after her, hollering about stuff no sane man would ever utter in public at the top of his lungs.

Kakashi stares at Hiruzen. Hiruzen stares back. Then Kakashi breaks down with an utterly piteous noise, almost a canine whine, that is music to Hiruzen’s ears. Hiruzen will savor its memory for the rest of his days.

“Why.”

“Because.”

It takes Inoichi two days to give his verdict on Zabuza, mainly because their personal views on the medicinal properties of Konoha’s native flora massively clashed. Never let it be said Inoichi’s known for his ability to let things go. His ability to destroy all sense of ego, on the other hand… Infamous.

All but having camped in T&I to smooth their ruffled feathers, Hiruzen spares no further thought to his students’ whereabouts. Honestly, how much trouble can they stir up in the span of two measly days? Tsunade’s made it abundantly clear she’s only here to treat Itachi-kun and assist the Uchiha clan with their medical project. And Jiraiya… Well, in the event of an unlucky bathhouse encounter with Fugaku, he may be enjoying the hospitality of the KMPF’s special Jiraiya-proof holding cell for the foreseeable future, but that’s the worst of it, right? Right.
The moment Tsunade slams the doors open and strides into the chamber with all the belligerence she’s known to possess, the status quo goes to hell in a handbasket. Hiruzen feels as if the world’s just tilted out of its axis and shifted into this new reality where pigs can fly, hell’s frozen over, and the Senju clan head and the Uchiha clan head have somehow become casual drinking buddies.

Tsunade’s beaming at a grim-faced Fugaku with a crow of delight—now that’s some good shit, Uchiha-brat—as Hiruzen keeps on watching, pipe nearly slipping off the seam of his mouth, an aftertaste of something categorically wrong lingering on his tongue. Did that really just happen? Yes, Hiruzen thinks, terribly blindsided, yes, it did. He may be old, but he still has a mind like a steel trap; now, it’s gone all topsy-turvy, so much so that he’s half-convinced someone’s switched his tobacco with…well, whatever Zabuza accuses them of smoking. Good gods, will wonders never cease?

(They won’t. Evidently.)

Shikaku, unprecedentedly, is wide awake—he’s propped his chin in the palm of his right hand, content to observe the proceedings for the time being, but there’s an awareness in his silence, in his languorous posture, that only an imbecile would mistake for boredom. Inoichi seems more preoccupied by the fact that Kakashi’s chosen to attend a clan head meeting instead of sending a (two-to-four hours late) shadow clone as he’s wont to do than the drunken Senju-Uchiha alliance. Hiruzen can’t blame him; also, he foresees an unscheduled psychological evaluation in Kakashi’s immediate future. Chōza, bless his big heart, is taking everything with his trademark good cheer, predisposed to see the best in everyone; it’s why he’s probably the happiest (and sanest) among their sorry lot.

Tsume appears supremely entertained; then again, Tsume always treats these meetings as a renewable source of entertainment, usually at her fellow clan heads’ expense—most notably, Hiashi’s, who, in total contrast, appears supremely not-entertained. That man… If sucking-the-fun-out-of-everything had a face, it would be his. Hiruzen can’t fathom how Hiashi, of all people, got blessed with a cute angel for a daughter, whereas he got punished with an uncute rebel for a son. No, seriously, how. If anyone’s even listening up there, Hiruzen demands a swap; he rather thinks he’s earned it after putting up with everyone’s bullshit for forty-plus years.

As for Shibi… Well, Hiruzen’s going to take a shot in the dark and say he’s in his element; he can never actually tell with that one, but it’s an established fact that all Aburame have four common denominators—a strict adherence to logic, weird speech patterns, OCD tendencies, and (what’s relevant here), somewhat paradoxically, an insatiable love for gossip. Hiruzen’s willing to bet his prized Icha Icha Gold Collection that two thirds of the Kakashi-centric rumors can be laid at their feet—the murderously jolly look Kakashi’s directing at Shibi every now and then reveals Kakashi’s harboring the same suspicion.

The Council triad remains the only constant, unfortunately, which is par for the course. Hiruzen used to think it was a good thing—Homura’s officious nature, Koharu’s focus on the greater good, Danzō’s war hawk ideology, their differing opinions, that they were hell-bent on pushing and pulling until Hiruzen examined all angles before he made any kind of important decision. Once upon a time, they’d been the best support staff any leader could ask for, often toeing the line between advising and dictating, yes, but still helpful. Only, it hasn’t been that way ever since the accursed Kyūbi attack and the beginning of Hiruzen’s equally accursed second tenure. Perhaps it is simply due to old age. Some people (Hiruzen included) mellow out and like to see the glass half-full; others become ornery old military bastards who see it half-empty.
Case in point: Koharu is the first to voice her opinion, but at least she has the sense to wait until Hiruzen’s wrapped up his speech, unlike Homura, whom Hiruzen’s had to glare into shutting his mouth six goddamned times so far.

“If anyone has no further objections, let us move on.” Hiruzen leans back in his chair, exhaling a spiral of smoke that mimics the shape of the Konoha leaf, and everyone understands he even says as much out of courtesy. Except for his Council, apparently.

“Temporary or not, Hiruzen, someone will need to supervise these…recent additions.” Koharu’s acidic tone, her expression, as if she’s bitten into something sour, how she turns up her nose at Hiruzen’s decision—they all broadcast her derision for his ‘soft-hearted acts of sheer folly’ as she calls them.

Normally, Hiruzen’d have had to fight tooth and nail to secure their conditional approval, sacrificing something else in the process—the Uchiha clan, if they had their way, the short-sighted fools—but not this time.

“That so?” Tsunade drawls in his place, a sly smirk playing on her lips, then drops the bomb. “It’s fortunate Kaguya-brat’s staying with us then.”

Gods, but he missed her, his bold, crafty, mercurial, sharp-tongued, beautiful girl. Especially the ease with which she steamrolls her way to victory. With a sigh of euphoria, Hiruzen sits back and lets her run this show, something that every clan head in attendance keenly notices.

“And how long will you be staying in the village, Tsunade?” Koharu elects to ask instead of contesting Tsunade’s guardianship claim, because she’s learned to choose her battles wisely, if nothing else.

“Who knows? Does it even matter?”

Tsunade even has the gall to shrug. Koharu’s expression sours further.

“Of course, it matters. If you aren’t here to supervise—”

“And who said I’ll be the one doing the supervising? All I said is that he’s staying with us.” Koharu’s unrelenting stare says she won’t drop this matter until Tsunade puts something of substance on the table, and Tsunade tsk’s under her breath. “If you must know,” she huffs, with an air of innate self-importance that grates on Koharu’s nerves, the ‘you don’t need to know’ almost palpable, “Shizune and Tenzō will be responsible for the brat. Satisfied now?”

Koharu, quite obviously, isn’t. And thus it begins, this battle of wills.

“I understand Katō Shizune is your apprentice and thus under your full authority.” Unlike Tsunade’s biting way of speech, Koharu’s words are slow and careful and it is transparent how she makes a concentrated effort to rein in her affront at being spoken to in such a lofty manner. “Tenzō, on the other hand, is a shinobi of Konoha—”

“—and has the Mokuton. Which means he’s family. Even if I ain’t in the village, he’s got the right to bear the Senju name and live in the clan compound, to say the least of what he’s entitled. End of story.”

“You cannot—”

“You’ll find that I can. It’s private clan business, remember? Unless clan law’s changed since last time I checked? In which case, I think it’s time we talked about the Hyūga clan and that fucked-up
seal of theirs.”

Naturally, Hiashi doesn’t take kindly to her criticism. Or being dragged into ‘one hell of a catfight’, to borrow Tsume’s terminology, whose running commentary has Shibi literally buzzing in his seat.

“There has been no amendment in clan law,” Hiashi stresses, haughty and mortally offended and frostier than the Land of Snow, “and I would appreciate it if you did not bring up matters that bear no relation to your clan, Senju-sama.”

Again, Tsunade gives an apathetic, bordering on insulting, shrug; essentially, giving him the brush-off. “Have it your way, Hyūga-brat. Still fucked up, though.”

At that, Hiashi’s face closes off. Hiruzen’s certain Hiashi’d never dignify that with an answer, if not for the fact Hyūga loathe not having the last word. It is one of their major pet peeves, one of the most vexing, too, in Hiruzen’s experience. And oh, here it comes.

“Duly noted,” Hiashi replies, in a monotone, in what Hiruzen considers to be a form of sarcasm in the language human ice blocks speak.

“Enough of this,” Koharu intercepts Tsunade before she can initiate another battle of wills—with Fugaku’s blessing no less; gods have mercy, Fugaku’s actively enabling her, if his subtle ‘burn that little pissant’ toast is any indication—and she does indeed sound as if she’s had enough. “If the Senju clan takes responsibility for the Kaguya child, then someone else has to accommodate Momochi Zabuza and his apprentice.”

“No need.” And now, Fugaku’s the one to brush Koharu off, exhibiting an amazing level of elocution for a man who’s been holding his own in an admittedly inconspicuous drinking contest against Tsunade for the better part of three hours (and counting). “The Uchiha clan has already claimed responsibility for them.”

Just like that, with one flawlessly enunciated sentence, Koharu’s rendered speechless. Hiruzen’s oh-so-very-tempted to join them; they have high quality alcohol, they’ve left their patience at the door, and they’re all for protecting children. The more he ruminates on this groundbreaking coalition between Senju and Uchiha, the more inviting it becomes.

“And who gave you permission for that, Fugaku?”

Silence saturates the atmosphere, dense and oppressive and suffocating—it spreads like fog, like a lung infection, rushing down Hiruzen’s throat and filling his chest cavity with dread. Oh, Danzō… Why must you do this, old friend? How can you tar friends and foes alike with the same brush? This, what you have done, it is a disservice to Tobirama-sensei’s memory. He might have never fully trusted the Uchiha clan, but he never meant for you to go this far…

A smirk slashes across Tsunade’s cheeks; a mean slice of lips red as blood, the spiteful side of satisfaction. As Hiruzen regards her, the predatory, vengeful eagerness to her profile, everything clicks into place. Cutting down Koharu must’ve been the appetizer, whereas this…well, this is the main dish she’s ordered. Next to her, Fugaku’s gone stone-cold, the muscles in his face locked tight, the Sharingan spinning, a violent swirl of red and black. Both are out for blood—and Hiruzen… He can’t find it within himself to deny either of them.

“Hoh?” Tsunade sneers at Danzō, not disguising the sheer depths of her contempt for him, like he’s nothing but a piece of excrement she can’t wait to scrape off of the bottom of her sandal. “Since when does he need anyone’s permission? Again, private clan business.”
“They are not part of the Uchiha clan,” Danzō points out, rather reasonably, it has to be said.

Alas, Tsunade’s descended from Uzumaki stock, and the Uzumaki clan and reason divorced a long time ago. Ergo, “Still a matter between clans,” she corrects, all fire and hot-blooded passion, all Uzumaki spirit.

“Momochi Zabuza doesn’t come from a clan.” Matter-of-fact, indisputable, spoken in that same reasonable tone.

Hiruzen frowns, suddenly wary, suspicious. Danzō is a lot of things, but an optimist isn’t one of them. If a plan of attack proves to be ineffective, instead of recycling it in hopes of different results, he’ll cut his losses, regroup, and devise another plan of attack. There is something amiss about his persistence, as if he’s goading Tsunade into—

Clicking her tongue, she throws out an offhanded, “His brat does, so same thing,” and oh, it finally makes sense.

Danzō’s gaze glints with some unidentifiable emotion. He is in a bind, Hiruzen guesses, though he can’t be entirely certain. (It’s been years since he last claimed to know Danzō’s mind; frankly speaking, he didn’t want to know.)

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“Does he now?” It rings out sharp and distinct, less like a question, more like a confirmation.

Dryly, Tsunade snorts. “Well, yeah. Why else would they flee from Kiri? Not that it’s any of your business, Danzō, but speaking of which—” A pause. Tsunade’s mouth curls into that red-lipped smirk. It is insidious, how it shows no teeth, and yet…it hungers for blood. “—I’d love to talk to you about Tenzō some time in the near future.” A monstrously strong pressure. “And other related matters.”

“I will clear my schedule one of these days,” Danzō says, and Hiruzen can’t tell whether that is a joke or a taunt or even an honest invitation; it falls flat regardless.

“You do that,” is all Tsunade says, and hers is a promise of brutal vengeance.

(Later, with the meeting over and the chamber empty, Hiruzen will sit there alone for hours, appraising the cracks wrought by raw chakra pressure, barely deep enough to count as surface damage, and think of Hashirama-sama.

That is how Danzō will find him when he seeks him out to ‘express his concerns’ as he always does. His old friend is predictable like that.)

“Nothing good will come of this, Hiruzen.”

Danzō’s spine bends as he rests his weight on his walking stick, but his tone of voice is uncompromising, discordant to his stance, an ultimatum. Fix this, is what he implies, before I have to step in and fix it myself.

That, too, is such a predictable line, one Hiruzen’s heard so many times, that by now, he’s grown sick of it. Still, he gives the same line he always does in response. One last time, he promises to himself, for the sake of our long friendship, for the boy who loved Konoha more than anything in the world.

“What would you suggest then, Danzō?”
“Extract whatever information you can out of Momochi and then quietly dispose of him.” Of course, there’s only one type of advice Danzō can offer. Extenuating circumstances mean nothing to him, not unless he can use them to his benefit, mold them into a specific shape as one molds figurines out of clay. “The boy might be useful, so I will reserve judgement for now, but he should be trained in the meantime. I can offer the specialized training he needs—you know that will be in Konoha’s best interests.”

Hiruzen closes his eyes and just…breathes. There’s a darkness in Danzō, he knows. If Tobirama-sensei had chosen differently, it might’ve been his. As things stand, the only darkness Hiruzen knows is the kind he sees whenever he shuts his lids and lets Danzō take action in his stead.

Little by little, his sentimentality fades away with every slow breath. He expected this, yes, but still… It’s hard to accept his old friend is gone and never coming back, hard to speak the words that make it real.

“Don’t you mean in your best interests?”

“Everything I do is in Konoha’s best interests,” he says, his voice strong, his conviction stronger still.

“Once, maybe that was true—but not for a long time now. I wish I could believe you, old friend. This—the person you have become… I hardly recognize you anymore. Every night before I go to sleep, I find myself asking what would Hashirama-sama and Tobirama-sensei do were they in my place, and I don’t like the answer. You feel it, too, don’t you?”

Danzō doesn’t even falter in the face of Hiruzen’s heartbreak. “What are you trying to say, Hiruzen?”

“I am saying that change is upon us and perhaps it is time for us to step back and let it come. The new generation is full of promise, isn’t it? Konoha is on the verge of becoming what Hashirama-sama envisioned, and I have no intention of trampling over his dream. We have fought long and hard to reach this point. We have warred and bled and sacrificed to enrich this soil. If we allow our paranoia to destroy the fruit of our labors, then it will all have been for nothing. Even you cannot wish for that, Danzō.”

Irritation pulls at the edges of Danzō’s mouth, but it’s the sort Hiruzen’s familiar with, brought to the surface due to the literary devices Hiruzen employed in his speech rather than the speech itself. Hiruzen’s always been better at thinking up nature metaphors, something that never failed to draw out Tobirama-sensei’s pride and Danzō’s envy. So, there are still some parts of his old friend buried underneath the cruelty, the self-interest, the shady dealings, the immoral practices… For a moment, Hiruzen dares to hope—

“You cannot be serious, Hiruzen,” Danzō scoffs, and there’s another sort of irritation to the set of his mouth now, the likes of which Hiruzen last saw on Orochimaru’s face the day he announced his successor.

It slays the remnants of affection in Hiruzen’s heart for him, drains his capacity for mercy. He made that mistake with Orochimaru once; he’s not about to repeat it. If Danzō’s contemplating the idea of replacing him or, failing that, going rogue… Well, Hiruzen will have to strongly object. With lethal force.

“I have never been more serious in my life, old friend,” he says, and it sounds like a eulogy, the last time he’ll call him that. Sarutobi Hiruzen, Danzō’s childhood friend, steps down, and the Sandaime Hokage emerges. “Do not push me on this, Danzō. You will not like the repercussions.”
“You are a blind fool and you will come to regret this, Hiruzen,” Danzō warns, a detached look in his eye, an emotional disconnect in his voice, as if Hiruzen’s also already dead to him and he’s now speaking to a stranger who happens to wear his face, and Hiruzen can’t help but agree.

On this, Danzō is more right than he thinks. Hiruzen’s regrets are legion, yes, and Danzō ties with Orochimaru for the honor of being his greatest failure.

“Better a blind fool than a heartless monster, Danzō.” It pains him to say this, but what hurts more is that it’s nothing compared to the pain of all those children Danzō’s destroyed, all those lives he’s ruined, all those horrors he’s dead-set on perpetrating unless he’s stopped. “Oh, and when Tsunade comes to have that talk, do remember she has my full endorsement. Obstructing her will be akin to treason, and it would ill behoove you to go down that path twice.”

Danzō turns his back on Hiruzen and walks out without a backward glance. Hiruzen closes his eyes and just…breathes.
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

I'm kinda dead on my feet and maybe hate holiday season just a little atm--die, paperwork, just...die--so don't mind my lukewarm wishes. I promise I MEAN THEM. Or, I will mean them once I get off work and someone FEEDS ME. Why do I have to work throughout the holidays?? T.T

So, with that said: Merry Christmas, lovelies! Or Happy Hanukkah, Happy Yule, Happy Kwanzaa, whichever holiday you're celebrating. I hope you'll all have a wonderful time with your loved ones.

As always, thanks so much for all the love and support. I read and cherish all reviews and will reply even if it takes me some time to get back to you all. You're all wonderful human beings and I absolutely adore you! Enjoy! XD

Sakura’s first impression of Sarutobi Hiruzen goes somewhat along these lines: Oh, wow. Old man’s still got it. You tell ‘em, dude. You keep fighting the good fight, my soul brother. If you keep this up, you might just get your happily ever after with your super comfy chair. Man, now I’m so jealous, like, you can’t even imagine—

This largely positive opinion of hers might have been influenced by the fact he gave Kakashi a dose of his own medicine. Not that she actually took the time to fully appreciate this glorious moment. Sakura might have been a tiny bit distracted by the news that Killer B is all for throwing down. Which, hell to the yeah, baby. Okay, she was a hell of a lot distracted, sue her.

After reading between the lines—or, in layman’s terms, making sense of Killer B’s special way of expressing himself—she’s ninety percent certain Killer B never told his brother any of this shit, but whatever. Details. A will get the memo someday. Like, the day she smashes his face in. For sure.

Also, she’s one hundred percent certain this will all end in tears. Whose is the real question.

(Definitely Gai’s. And, probably, Kakashi’s.)

When she finally tracks Gai down, Sakura’s so ridiculously happy, so pumped up and feeling on top of the world, that she doesn’t even put up her usual token protest when he joyously scoops her up and launches into his Gai-sensei-and-Sakura thing.

“Sakura!”

“Gai-sensei!”

Gai’s on her like white on rice, blubbering all over her and squeezing the life out of her, big, fat tears running down his cheeks. That’s her teddy bear of a sensei, yep. So cuddly. Holding onto him like a pink baby coala, Sakura buries her face in the juncture of his neck and shoulder and melts into him, paying no mind to his (kind of gross) sweat-slicked skin. Knowing Gai, he’ll have her sweating like a pig in no time, anyway.
“Didja miss me, sensei?” she half-sighs, half-giggles, because everyone likes hearing they’re loved and she’s no exception. Plus, Gai’s the only shinobi she knows who doesn’t shy away from feelings—no, correction, he revels in them—and Sakura loves him all the more for it. Shisui comes close, yeah, but he’s not on Gai’s level, not by a long shot. “‘Cause I sure missed you.”

“Of course! Have no doubt!” Gai assures her, loudly and emphatically, not missing a beat, then dials it back a notch.“You were sorely missed, young cherry blossom.” His voice is a soft croon, a thick, fuzzy blanket wrapping around her heart; Sakura feels pleasantly warm, like a cat curling up in front of a cheerful fire burning in the hearth and basking in the warmth—like coming home. “Oh, but where are my manners? Who are your young friends, my youthful pupil?”

Huh? What frien—oh. “Oh, right!” Sakura laughs as she scrambles down her favorite human heater, flouncing over to her Kiri tag-alongs, who’ve been patiently waiting for her reunion to be over like the uber-polite boys they are. “Lemme introduce Kaguya Kimimaro and Yuki Haku,” she says, smiling winsomely, all encouragement and don’t-be-shy-now-boys, slipping between them and urging them forward with a gentle push on the back. “Kimirin, Haku, this is my awesome sensei, Maito Gai. I told ya all ‘bout him, remember?”

Well-accustomed to the eccentricities of Konoha ninja after five days of traveling with their company, Haku carries out a textbook formal self-introduction. “Yes, I do remember,” he says once the formalities have been observed, not at all put off by Gai’s…exuberance, flashing the spandex-clad man one of his too-pretty smiles and meaning every word he speaks. “Sakura was certainly not exaggerating. I can see why you are renowned for your honest personality and dazzling footwork, Maito-sensei.”

 Cue another round of manly waterworks and Gai squeezing the life out of Sakura. Except, this time, Sakura’s staring off into the sunset with this broken look in her dead green eyes as a flock of fucking seagulls serenades them. She loves him, really, she does, but… Sakura’s got a once-per-day limit for the mindfuck that is the Sunset of Youth. Also, she has the sneaking suspicion that Haku’s actually referring to Maito Dai; then again, there’s no real difference (unless you count their hairdo), so never mind. Why did she miss this again? Someone, anyone, please rescue me—

“You are Sakura’s sensei?” her knight in shining armor cuts in bluntly, and Sakura vows to do something nice for this kid later. Maybe take him to the Yamanaka flower shop and introduce him to Ino? It’s like, guaranteed they’ll hit it off. They’re both all over nature stuff. She talks a lot. He…doesn’t. She’s very into emotions. He…isn’t. They’re made for each other or something, so.

Releasing Sakura from his bear hug, Gai plants his hands on his hips, standing with his feet shoulder-width apart, tall and immovable and glowing with pride. There’s just…so much green, that he can easily pass for Hulk’s little cousin. Only, y’know, with less Hulk Smash and more Flames of Youth. “Indeed, I am, young Kaguya.”

“Sakura speaks highly of you,” Kimimaro states, apropos of nothing. Very, very seriously, as if it’s some sort of divine mandate. With arctic green eyes, he looks Gai up and down for five whole minutes, while the man stoically endures his probing gaze without moving a muscle, then nods with resolution. “I trust her opinion.” Executing a graceful bow on par with Haku’s, he throws Gai a curve ball that catapults him straight into a third round of hysterics. “If it would not be an inconvenience, I would also like to train with you, Gai-sensei.”

“You—did you hear this, Kakashi? I have just gained another student! What a glorious day this is, truly, I have never felt more blessed—”

As Gai celebrates the acquisition of a new disciple in the only way he knows how, Kimimaro cuts his eyes over to Sakura with an adorable ‘did I do good?’ expression. Sakura…well, she can’t not
glomp him now. A little off to the side, Haku keeps smiling his too-pretty smile, quietly adjusting
to the fact this is the new normal, because he’s flexible like that. Gotta love this kid and his ‘when
life gives you lemons, you should make lemonade, find someone whose life has given them vodka,
and have a party’ outlook on life.

“There you are, brats!”

And oh, there’s the Slug Sannin crashing their party like a blonde meteor. Business as usual.

Transitioning from an aerial flip to a handstand, Gai pauses in the middle of his victory dance to
gawp at her. “Tsunade-sama?” he breathes out, dumbstruck, frozen upside down.

Tsunade’s brows hike up her forehead as she takes in his ridiculous pose, but her expression isn’t
mocking or shocked or even remotely close to the looks Gai usually garners. If anything, she’s
displaying a great deal of wonder, the kind a geneticist might feel in the presence of identical
twins. “Huh. You’re Dai’s kid, right? Damn, the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.”

At that, Gai starts tearing up again. Panicked and frantic to prevent yet another fucking round of
the Sunset of Youth, Sakura remembers the reason she sought Gai out in the first place. “Listen,
Gai-sensei,” she all but gets in his face since he’s still balancing on his hands and thus at eye level.
“I just got the best news ever!” Crowned with light, a halo of unbridled joy and wildflowers. “The
Raikage’s brother—he wrote to say…” Here, Sakura pauses to take a deep breath. Gai, too, inhales
deeply, hanging on her lips. “…they have accepted our challenge!”

In the blink of an eye, Gai surges forward and lifts her up in his arms—round and round and round
they dance, heedless of their audience, lost in their own world where Sakura and A go all out in the
most epic slugfest in the history of epic slugfests, while Gai holds Killer B off and proudly cheers
from the sidelines and Kakashi regrets all of his life choices and weeps in the distance.

“Yosh! That is most excellent news, my youthful pupil!”

“We gotta up our training, sensei! Like, today.”

“Yes,” Gai agrees at once, latching on to her last word, with Kimimaro’s levels of seriousness,
“yes, we must.” Cutting their dance short, he puts Sakura down and spins on his heel to face the
Slug Sannin, who’s wearing a smirk that conveys exasperation and something between shoulda
seen this coming and how do I always get mixed up with your crazy lot.

(Note that she never turns them down, though. Tsunade can play hard to get all she likes, but if she
wasn’t willing to be dragged along for the ride, there’s no power on earth that could move her.
And everyone here knows it.)

“Tsunade-sama.” Gai bends his waist in a full ninety-degree bow—and stays that way for the
remainder of his impassioned little speech. “I would like to request a youthful spar between the two
of us. Please allow me to test myself against a shinobi of your caliber to discover my current
limits.” And now, Sakura’s the one tearing up, goddammit. “For the sake of my student,” Gai
chokes out, “to fulfill her dreams,” emotions running high, “I, Maito Gai, Konoha’s Sublime Green
Beast of Prey,” voice rising higher still, “swear to surpass them! TODAY!”

Gai’s entreaty, Sakura’s goddamn-you-feels state of mind, Kimimaro and Haku adding a
layer of unintentional mental pressure by being natural-born emotional predators—nothing escapes
Tsunade’s shrewd, analytical stare. Thing is…she’s all warm goo inside, so. She almost gives in;
only the thought of being labeled as a pushover is holding her back. Or so Sakura guesses based on
Tsunade’s facial gymnastics, ranging from a prominent scowl to a barely discernible moue and
everything in-between. To tip her over the edge, Sakura attaches herself to Gai’s leg like a limpet and sneak-attacks Tsunade with her killer combo of please-oh-please and I-will-love-you-forever face. Predictably, Tsunade’s not amused (but also not immune to it).

“Well…” Heaving a ‘why do I put up with you?’ sigh, the Slug Sannin shakes her head and caves in to their united pleas. “I was getting kind of rusty, so why the hell not.” She’s got a reputation to uphold, though. A crimson grin, slow-spreading, equal parts beautiful and terrifying. Tsunade cracks her neck and makes a come hither motion at Gai. “Still, don’t think I’ll go easy on you, brat.”

Not a moment too soon, Sakura gets out of their way, bouncing over to Kimimaro and Haku, all the while cheering like crazy for both sides and trying to cajole the boys into following her example. Which, truth be told, they do, just…with a fuck-load of dignity and repressed emotion. Eh, baby steps.

(Jiraiya, on the other hand, is not so lucky. Also, he’s too old to be taught new tricks. Heh. Sucks to be him.)

“I would never dream of it, Tsunade-sama! LET US FIGHT WITH OUR FULL POWER!”

“Hoh. You’ve got guts, brat. I like it.”

“HERE I COME! DYNAMIC—”

“I finally caught up to you, Tsunade-hi—”

Coming out of his Shunshin, Jiraiya only has a millisecond to mouth oshi—before he goes airborne with an echoing ‘iiiii’ and Gai’s shoe print stamped onto his face. Ooo. Ouch. That shit’s gotta hurt, man. Bad timing on your part, old perv.

Well, as previously stated… Business as usual.

There’s a slew of old adages originating from her first life applicable to the clusterfuck of epic proportions that her second life is turning out to be. Calligraphy lessons—which, to her teacher’s ire, Sakura treats more as an artistic outlet than an intro to fūinjutsu—help with refreshing her memory. Itachi likes haiku. Shisui likes limericks. And Sakura likes little nuggets of wisdom that Fugaku rarely, if ever, appreciates. Prideful ass. Man, Sakura lives for Fugaku’s face every time she proudly presents him with yet another (in her opinion) pithy masterpiece, insinuating they apply to his clan’s collective mentality. Like, the classic: Two wrongs do not make a right. Or, always a crowd-pleaser: Where there is no wood, the fire goes out. Or, her personal favorite: Man plans, and God laughs.

(Sakura has a shit-ton of plans. But as the saying goes… Even the best-laid plans sometimes go wrong. It’s not that she fucked up somewhere. It’s just…

Fucking Sasuke.)

Entourage in tow—sans Jiraiya, because Fugaku; she’s still waiting for that ‘mean lil’ prig’ story, by the way—Sakura marches past the threshold of her home away from home with an upbeat sing-song of, “Honey, I’m home!”

Given that she can sense Shisui’s chakra react to the sound of her voice, honing in on her with what feels like the equivalent to a mighty cry of huzzah!, it’s only a matter of time before—
“Welcome home, chibi!” Of course, Shisui being *Shisui*, he doesn’t just greet her like, y’know, a normal person, oh, no; he *pounces* on her, the asshole. It happens so friggin’ fast, Sakura doesn’t even see him coming, for fuck’s sake. One moment, there’s a familiar scent wafting into her nose, a familiar energy rushing over her skin—metal polish and spices, hot and sweet, like a day in summer, like wild things—then the next moment, she’s lying sprawled underneath him with his face buried in her hair and he’s stage whispering to her. “Uh, Saku-tan? Are you aware you’ve been *followed* home?”

At the risk of stating the obvious… No shit. Sakura lets out one of her Shisui-induced ‘gods, why me?’ groans and bangs her head against the floor, then headbutts him just for the hell of it. “No, really?” she stage whispers back with an eye-roll as he grunts in surprise rather than pain and mock-glares down at her. Ugh, those long curled lashes. It should be a crime for a boy’s eyes to be this fucking pretty. Sakura cries foul, but nobody’s listening. Like, ever. Gods, but the *injustice* of it all… It *burns*. “I had no idea, but thanks for letting me know, Shicchan.”

“Anytime, Saku-tan!” he of the too-pretty eyes chirps and—he *motherfucking pokes her forehead*. Oh, *hell no*. He *did not just*… Needless to say, Sakura spends the next five minutes rolling on the floor, locked in a dirty forehead-poking death match, with her pride as Konoha’s number one hard-headed bitch on the line. Which, obviously, she wins hands down. Gai’d be so proud of her. Yay for monster foreheads. Ino’s so damn right. If you’ve got it, flaunt it, baby.

“So...” Shisui huffs out a breathless laugh as he nuzzles his red-and-slightly-swollen forehead against her collarbone, treating it more like a badge of honor than a mark of shame, not the least bit chagrined over his resounding loss to a five-year-old (technically civilian) girl. Not a sore loser, this one. A shining example of individualism and nonconformity; Sakura chalks it up to Shisui’s life goal of being the most *un*-Uchiha Uchiha to have ever lived and refuses to delve further into his psyche. That way lies madness, and possibly mochi. No wonder they’re teetering on the edge of co-dependence. “You wanna explain?”

Snorting, Sakura shoves him off of her none too gently. “Over dinner, yeah. ‘Cause lemme tell ya, I can’t live another day without Mikoto’s cooking.” Like, seriously. S-rank ninja can’t cook for shit. Unless it’s fish. On a stick. *Unseasoned.* Don’t get her wrong, Sakura likes fish as much as the next person, but having the exact same thing for breakfast, lunch, and dinner? For three weeks straight? If not for dear sensible Shizune and her propensity to stock up on ready meals, they’d have all starved to death. Or sworn off fish for life. True fact.

Shisui, too, snorts. “Can’t argue with that,” he says, wryly, knowingly, an unspoken I-totally-get-what-you-mean, still clinging to her back in spite of her best efforts to be rid of his excess weight—okay, fine, she admits it, that’s a goddamn lie. Her efforts are weak as all hell, because yes, she missed the crazy fucker. Shisui’s such a…well, a **handful**. He’s a manipulative little shit, and an adrenaline junkie, and an honest-to-god stalker; basically, a lunatic even at the best of times, but he’s her lunatic. And if he ever entertains any stupid-ass ideas of self-sacrifice or some shit, then he’s got another thing coming. Same goes for Itachi, naturally. These damn Uchiha… Gods help her, she’s in it for the long haul.

(At this rate, Sakura’s fantabulous hair will turn prematurely gray at the tender age of five—and should that…that abominable travesty occur, there will be nothing to dispute the issue of her dubious paternity. She’ll be forever mistaken for *Kakashi’s spawn*. Oh, the horror…)

“Oh, by the way—” Shisui’s voice breaks her out of her mini-meltdown, and Sakura can’t decide whether she should thank him or cuss him out in advance. Mostly owing it to the glee underlying his oh-so-casual delivery, that *I-know-something-you-don’t* and *boy-will-you-be-shocked* and *sorry*—
The text continues as follows:

This… Sakura knows damn well Shisui only does this when he’s taking the measure of someone; specifically, when they happen to hold a higher position of authority. He did it to Kakashi. He did it to poor Tenzō. Now, he’s doing it to Tsunade. Sakura’d have loved to have been a fly on the wall when he did it to Sarutobi and the Three Stooges, because no freaking way he didn’t. You have to fucking earn his respect for Shisui to afford you even a modicum of professionalism. (Fugaku doesn’t count. He’s family. And that’s a whole other matter.)

Apparently, it hasn’t escaped Shisui’s notice that Tsunade’s been examining him in the meantime, lingering on the almond shape of his eyes, the soft black curls framing his ears, how mischief licks at his mouth and thrums in his chakra. A low hum full of mirth works itself out of her throat. She smirks at him, then reaches out a hand and tousles his hair, making the gesture seem terribly fond and terribly patronizing at the same time. In a ‘aww, you’re adorable, pity you’re not yet housebroken, let’s fix that, shall we?’ kind of way. Somehow. It impresses the hell out of Sakura. Wow, woman’s got mad skills. Gotta get me some of that stat.

“Yep—I mean, yes, ma’am.” Shisui bobs his head and readjusts his posture to exhibit telltale signs of submission, though Sakura can recognize it’s primarily for show. He’s not there yet. Curious? Absolutely. Seen what all the fuss is about? Maybe. Ready to worship at her altar? Not so much. “You knew Kagami-jī-san?”

“Oh, wow. Really?” Just like that, Shisui’s gone all respectful and starry-eyed and shit, as if he’s standing in the presence of an earthbound goddess who’s come to regale him with many a glorious tale of unrequited love and drunken shenanigans. The worst part is… He’s sure as fuck going to be inspired by his grandpappy’s lovesick tomfoolery. “I never knew that! Tell me more? Please?”

Tsunade snorts. “Definitely one of Kagami’s.”

When Tsunade does go into delightful detail during the tragicomic social catastrophe that is a classic Uchiha family dinner, Sakura wants to feel sorry for Uchiha Kagami after the fatal blows dealt to his reputation—because he sounds like a real swell guy, honest—only… She just… can’t. Not when Tsunade keeps sending her these poignant ‘oh, you poor thing’ looks in between
revealing how he’d also been the biggest stalker to ever stalker and how her grand-uncle’s saving grace was the fact Tobirama’d been the greatest sensor to ever sensor.

The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree, indeed. Lesson learned, Tsunade, lesson learned.

In all the excitement packed into the introduction between Tsunade and Shisui, Sakura sort of forgot one very crucial detail. Or, no, not so much forgot as pushed to the back of her mind. Temporarily. Which, turns out, big—nay, humongous—mistake.

“Okay.” Eyes glued to the aforementioned extra guest, Sakura only speaks after she manages to strike the perfect balance between being calm and anything but calm. She might have snapped three pairs of chopsticks and Fugaku’s patience in the process, but who the hell cares? Mikoto bulk-buys them, so it’s not like there’s a shortage. Fugaku’s patience, on the other hand… Well, that’s always in short supply, anyhow. “Can someone…please…tell me what the hell did I miss? ‘Cause when I left, I’m pretty sure Uzumaki Naruto was like, persona non grata or something.”

Because the blond ragamuffin is sitting. Right. Fucking. There. Moreover, to Sakura’s great confusion, he and Sasuke appear to be in the early stages of building the world’s most epic bromance. They’re all smiles and inside jokes and getting on like a house on fire. Only thing missing to seal the deal is a cool special handshake, and she can’t be entirely certain they haven’t made one already. Not that that’s a bad thing; quite the opposite, in fact. It’s just…

Mikoto mothering the everloving hell out of him is a given. She’s like, his secret fairy godmother (Sakura knows she’s been checking up on Naruto and leaving him anonymous little gifts, food stuff, et cetera, et cetera, twice a month). Fugaku accepting his presence as if the boy’s always belonged at his dinner table? One word: whipped. Itachi and Shisui not batting an eye? See above reason. But Sasuke? Prone to random fits of jealousy over the silliest things, craving the attention of all his family members without exception, awfully territorial baby Sasuke? Bonding with Naruto? Like the long-lost brothers they are in the spiritual sense? What. The. Fuck?

“Yeah, well, that is all Sasu-chan. We had nothing to do with it, honest,” Shisui attempts to explain with a negligent wave between himself and Itachi, adding to Sakura’s great confusion instead of allaying it. To be fair, he’s probably so used to dealing with all sorts of crazy, that in his perception, Naruto’s presence registers as a wonderful deviation from regular Uchiha bullshit. Unfortunately for him, Sakura’s all out of equanimity at the moment. “Apparently, they met at the park and kind of hit it off?”

Yeah. There goes the fourth pair of chopsticks. Shisui stares at the slain utensils, then at her eerily calm face, then clears his throat and tries a different approach.

“Okay.” Soothing, hypnotic, the voice of a beast tamer as he sweet-talks a tiger into not eating him after pulling its fucking tail. “Truth is, you know how Sasu-chan is the jealous type, right?” Shisui waits until Sakura nods tersely; also, nabs the remnants of her chopsticks, thus depriving her of a weapon with which to stab him should his beast taming ways tragically fail. “So, Fugaku-sama might have, uh, ranted to Mikoto-sama within earshot of Sasu-chan? Something about how you remind him of Uzumaki Kushina? Bright hair, bad manners and all?”

Wait, what? What did he just—? Sakura’s mental processes screech to a halt so abruptly, that she almost gives her brain whiplash. Holy. Shit. Hot damn. HolycrapBatman—

“Yeah, Sasu-chan found out there’s actually an Uzumaki clan, then misconstrued Fugaku-sama’s tirade and assumed you actually have Uzumaki blood, then it all kind of snowballed from there. Once Sasu-chan realized his mom used to have an Uzumaki best friend, and now supposedly so do
we, he got super jealous. So, basically, he went out and got himself one. And since there’s only one Uzumaki living in Konoha…” In Shisui’s expert medical opinion, evidently, the best first aid for someone in shock is to inflict an even greater shock on their addled brain. Hence why he just… carries on. “Man, Fugaku-sama totally flipped out the first time Sasu-chan dragged Naru-chan to dinner, but then Mikoto-sama had already secretly adopted Naru-chan, and you know what that—”

Sakura grabs him by the shoulders and shakes him. Hard. Partly to force him to shut up, partly because she’ll die if she doesn’t get even a secondhand account of the beautiful shit that went down in her absence.

“Tell me you’ve got photos. Please.”

She’s not above begging if she has to. Luckily, while Shisui’s an asshole who gets his kicks from burying (so not) innocent little girls neck-deep in Uchiha bullshit, he’s not that type of asshole.

“Oh, yeah.” And oh, there’s that shit-eating grin, dripping with self-satisfaction and copious amounts of I-fucked-with-Fugaku glee. “Stop by the police station on your way home. I’ve pinned an awesome collage on the bulletin board in the break room—you can’t miss it.”

Is it bad of her that she high-fives him under the table? Fugaku seems to think so, judging by how his glare communicates cold-ass affront and the advent of an ‘after dinner’ lecture in his study. Does she feel the need to apologize? Hmm, let her think about—pfft. Nah. Besides, Fugaku’s got gallons of expensive booze to get him through their special brand of crazy, whereas all she’s got is blackmail photos she can’t even use since everyone’s already seen them. Aside from whenever she needs a pick-me-up, that is, because Fugaku’s ‘woe is me!’ face is legit a thing of beauty. From where she stands, he’s got the better deal by far.

“Oh, that.” Shisui laughs, coating his tone with light humor, but his eyes have gone dark, chillingly similar to Itachi’s—an abyss of dangerous impulses, and something else, selfishly, viciously possessive. “Well, Sasu-chan’s a young boy, you know, and like all young boys, he’s kind of going through, uh… a phase? Yep, just a phase, nothing to worry about, promise. But, uh, you know how Tachi gets when it concerns Sasu-chan, right?”

“His big bro senses are tingling?” she deadpans.

“Oh. Sakura has a bad feeling. “His big bro senses are tingling?” she deadpans.

“Something like that, yeah. Anyway, I’m sure Sasu-chan will grow out of it soon. We’ve decided to give it time? ‘Til, um, he graduates from the Academy? That good for you, Tachi?”

“Yes,” Itachi concedes with a perfunctory nod, and oh, he speaks. “Until then.”
Oh, boy. Her bad feeling grows stronger; so does her reluctance to stick her cute button nose into whatever-the-hell their business is.

“Uh-huh.” Oh, wow. Will you look at that? A lovely, noncommittal response. Nice going, me. Who cares ‘bout standard Uchiha family drama? Not me, nuh-uh. She should leave it at that, really, she shou—

“Just out of curiosity—” Gods-fucking-dammit. What the hell, mouth? Which brainless moron gave you permission to act, huh? ‘Cause it wasn’t me. “What happens if it’s not a phase?”

“We’ll just have a friendly chat with him,” Shisui fucking chirps, laughing it all off, at the same time as Itachi asserts, flatly and with quiet menace aplenty, that: “We will…talk.”

Oh, is that all? Well, why didn’t ya say so? I feel so reassured now… Sakura’s oh-so-very-tempted to let loose and go all snarky queen bitch on the duo, but she knows her boys. If she does that, they’ll get defensive, and then the situation will be F.U.B.A.R. So, reason. She’ll go with that for now, yeah. If that fails… Well, all bets are off.

Sakura fixes them with a harsh stare to drive home that she means business. “I don’t like the way you’re sayin—”

“A…boy…thing…? What even—no, wait, hold up, does that mean what she thinks it means? The fuck? No way—there’s just… No. Just no. This—is so fucking surreal, that Sakura begins to question if it’s even happening. Why, oh, why, didn’t she keep her big mouth shut back when she could still pretend ignorance? Now—fuck, now she’s become invested.

“I will—if you answer me this,” she promises, dead serious, falling back into the tried-and-true Sakura method when faced with Uchiha bullshit: delegating. “What does the Chief have to say about his son’s…phase? He got a problem with it?”

Ironically enough, Shisui looks appalled. “Wha—no! Why would you even think that?”

Sakura is so very close to being done. “Oh, I don’t know, Shicchan. Why don’t you tell me? What am I even supposed to think, huh?”

Shisui opens and closes his mouth, helplessly, bereft of words, and Itachi answers in his place. Itachi, who looks equally appalled, but still, somehow, all flat tones and murderously quiet. “Tō-san doesn’t…disapprove of Sasuke’s…choice.”

So, Fugaku doesn’t disapprove, but Itachi and Shisui do. Extremely. Which, again, the fuck? Sakura feels horribly lost. It…honestly, it makes no fucking sense. Never mind the fact they’re getting riled up over a five-year-old’s hypothetical future sexual orientation, which is utterly ludicrous in and of itself, but to assume they actually have a say in it? Bullshit. They better come to their fucking senses soon. Or they’ll hear what she has to say about that kind of prejudiced, controlling, disrespectful, asshole-ish attitude.

“Good,” she says, tone clipped. “Okay, then.” But it’s not okay, her gaze telegraphs, hard and implacable and daring them to feed her some bullshit excuse for their, frankly, unacceptable behavior. Both avert their eyes in what Sakura interprets as a potent mixture of guilt and shame. Or so she wants to believe. She can’t have misjudged them that bad. Right? Ugh, this is giving her a
major headache. Best to forget all about it for now. They’ll revisit this discussion if or when—please, gods, let it be never—it actually becomes an issue. “Glad we cleared that up.”

Of course, that’s when Shisui’s voice box resumes functioning normally. He pastes a quasi-cheerful smile on his face, all too quick to agree, all too eager to put this nasty business behind them. “Yeah, we’re all good, but enough ‘bout us. What’s up with—” There’s a pensive hum, as if he’s searching for a suitable (read: safe) manner in which to broach the subject, then an amused snort as he jerks his head in the direction of the Kiri refugees, who’ve gravitated towards Naruto and—surprise, surprise—seem to be getting along swimmingly. With raised brows and blatant interest, he draws out, “You know?”

*Smooth, Shisui, real eloquent.* “We found ‘em in Kiri,” Sakura says simply, emphasis on the last word, and she doesn’t have to elaborate for them to get it.

“Clan kids?”

“Yep.”

“Tō-san will agree to take them in.”

“Yep.”

“Okay, so that explains them.” Shisui then points Tsunade out in much the same way. “What about her?”

Fed up and firmly in the mood for serving some just desserts, Sakura unloads three weeks’ worth of pent-up frustrations on their sorry asses. It begins with a huff of, “Tachi was being stubborn,” continues with a hiss of, “and stupid,” and ends with an oh-so-innocent shrug. “What else was I supposed to do?”

For the first time this evening, Itachi expresses an emotion that doesn’t scream of violence quietly brewing in the dark recesses of his mind. Bluntly put, he looks floored. Shisui, who looks equally floored, as always takes it upon himself to sum up a portion of their initial thoughts, even though it’s clear to see they’re still processing.

“Only you, Saku-tan.”


“Hey, um, are you—are you really an Uzumaki?”

At the shy question coming from an adorable blond bundle of nerves and naked hope, Sakura sits up straight and beckons him closer, patting the cushion near her left thigh as if to say *sit down, son, ’cause this is a gonna be a long conversation.* Game on. Thank kami she’s been forewarned about Fugaku’s idiotic blunder—you so owe me, dude—so she can let him down easy. Last thing Sakura wants is to sprinkle more grief on top of the shitfest that is his life.

Sakura arches a ‘why, hello there, sunshine boi’ brow, her body language open and welcoming, and offers him a teasing smile. “Who’s asking?”

In light of all these signals, Naruto’s shyness vanishes—he wastes no time plopping himself down and launching into a loud, quirky introduction of both his name and purpose for approaching her.

“I’m Uzumaki Naruto, ‘ttebayo! Nice to meetcha! Sasuke said your name’s Sakura, right? And,
um, you might be an Uzumaki? Like me?”

“Well, I dunno ‘bout that,” she admits freely, nose wrinkled in thought, and it’s the truth. “I mean, I gotta ask my parents to be sure, but I don’t think there’s ever been an Uzumaki in our family tree.”

As expected, Naruto’s face falls, though it doesn’t last long. “Oh,” he exhales wetly, half-smiling through his disappointment and dashed hopes, and Sakura guesses it’s almost a habit by now.

“Mm. But you know what? See that pretty lady over there, the one talking to Sasuke’s parents? She’s an Uzumaki on her dad’s side.”

Naruto’s head whips around so bloody fast, that Sakura pities his poor joints. Good thing he’s got Kurama stuck in his gut.

“Really?” he ends up whisper-yelling, newborn hope in his bright blue eyes, straining his neck this way and that, trying to memorize the contours of Tsunade’s face. Bless his ramen-loving heart, Naruto doesn’t do subtle.

Half her attention on Naruto’s smiling ‘family found, woohoo!’ face, half on Tsunade’s unsmiling ‘what did you do now, cherry bon bon?’ face, Sakura snickers. “Yeah, everyone knows the Shodai’s wife was an Uzumaki, and she’s his granddaughter, so.”

Something passes through Naruto’s gaze, too brief and complex to decipher at a mere glance, and his smile falters for a split second. “Her grandpa was like Hokage-jiji?” he asks, a little subdued, a little…betrayed.

Ah, shit. Naruto’s suffering a kind of information blackout—which, by the way, verging on stupid—due to the simple fact nobody, ever, tells him shit. Except for dead people and giant masses of chakra. Literally. How can they even expect him to make informed decisions like, wanting to be Hokage? True, they teach that stuff at the Academy, but come on, let’s be real here. He’s a kid. With the attention span of one. That’s on the teachers, not on him. Shoving basic knowledge into his noggin is in their job description, for crying out loud.

Well, time for an abbreviated history lesson. If Sarutobi doesn’t like it, then he can kiss her ass. Fugaku’s already spilled the beans on Kushina, anyway.

“Not only that, but his brother was the Sandaime’s sensei. You know, the Nidaime?”

“Wow. I didn’t know that! Why does nobody ever tell me—no, wait, I didn’t mean it like that—”

Poor kid is on an emotional roller coaster, desperately wanting to make a good impression on Sakura, but also to hate on the adults in his life while crying on her shoulder. And that’s not even counting the look on his face when he’s stealing glances at Tsunade. Naruto’s pulling off so-sweet-I-can-give-you-cavities-please-adopt-me by merely existing (like hell is Tsunade immune to it, not when she can’t even say no to Sakura’s, admittedly, inferior version of the same thing).

“Hey, s’totally fine, Naruto. I know ‘cause I like to read, ‘s all. If you’ve got any questions, you can always come to me, and I’ll try to answer as best as I can, ‘kay?” she says by way of consolation, barely bracing herself when he flies into her arms with a muffled cry of thanks, Sakura-chan, you’re the best! in between sniffling and rubbing his cheeks against the front of her shirt. O-kay, then. Naruto’s big on touch. Good to know. “Why don’t you go talk to her? I’m sure if you ask nicely, she’ll tell ya all about her family. Tsunade-sama’s kinda like me, ya know, just…Older. But, uh, do me a favor and don’t tell her I said that?”

Silence, then there’s some maneuvering that results in Naruto peering up at her from where he’s
situated himself with his head resting on her lap, eyes impossibly blue, the color of the sky on a sunny day. “B-but—” he chokes out, a vulnerability to that little warble in his voice, a fear of rejection that Sakura’s heard once before. Haku’s been exactly the same.

“Trust me, she’ll like ya,” Sakura tells him, injecting pure warmth into her voice, the curve of her smile, the touch of her fingers as she strokes his hair.

Naruto pulls his bottom lip inside his mouth, chewing on it while he thinks over her words; it pops out when he’s ready to talk, red-raw with bite marks that fade away even as he speaks, picking up steam until he’s all but babbling. “Sasuke said you’re smart and, and pretty, but sometimes, you—you’re not very nice to his tō-chan, but I—I think you’re really, really nice, ‘ttebayo! So, so if you’re not nice to that Uchiha temē, then he—he prob’ly deserves it!”

_Uh-oh._ Fun fact: Naruto’s loud enough to wake the dead. Which might be the only thing that saves their friendship. Since, you know, the whole of Fugaku’s expression implies that Sakura’s dead meat. Despite the very real threat of her imminent murder, or maybe because of it—two words: _Fugaku’s. Face._—Sakura can’t help but burst out in hysterical laughter.

“Thanks, Naruto. I think you’re super nice, too.” _And a riot._ “Also, lemme tell ya a lil’ secret.” Taking the hint, Naruto snickers and turns his head to the side as Sakura lowers her own, mouth hovering over his ear. “The Chief’s actually one of my most precious people. That’s why I’m not very nice to him. See, it’s like this. I love him, so I want him to be the very best person he can be. Sometimes, that means I have to tell him stuff he doesn’t like when I think he can do better. Get it?”

“I get it, yeah!” Wide-eyed, Naruto nods fervently, as if he’s suddenly seen the light or something. No, seriously. Perhaps he has—his next words do reveal a new layer of maturity. “And—I promise I won’t call him temē no more—but only ‘cause he’s your precious person, Sakura-chan.”

“Awesome.” For Naruto’s sake, that is. Fugaku’s lectures on the proper forms of address suck balls. “Now, go on. I promise Tsunade-sama doesn’t bite, ‘kay?”

“Okay. I’ll talk to ya later, Sakura-chan?”

“Sure, I’ll be around. See ya later, Naruto.”

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