Of Bonds and Hugs like Chokeholds

by RosesToPaint

Summary

So you think you can do 'Naruto' better than Naruto? Sarah didn't think so, but it looks as if she doesn't have a choice but to try. Living you favorite manga may sound like a dream, but all it is, is a ton of really, really hard work. And an identity problem in the making. An OC insert.
Her head hurts. There is a beeping noise somewhere in the distance and her body feels heavy and sore. She forces her eyes open, wincing even against the dim light of what appears to be a hospital room.

“What’s going on?”

Her voice is slurred and sounds strange to her own ears. Something stirs against her chest.

She looks down in confusion, but the only thing she sees is the dark hair and tiny body of a child she doesn’t know. “What-?”

Her throat hurts. What happened? The child suddenly snaps to attention. “Help! Help, she’s awake!”, the boy yelps, or at least she thinks he does. His voice is urgent and she understands so very clearly what he wants, but his words sound like complete gibberish to her. A woman bursts into the room, with an alarmed look on her face. She is wearing a nurse outfit and seems equally stressed and relieved to see her awake. “Uchiha-chan”, she says with a shaky smile. “It’s good you’re finally awake.”

What?

She stares blankly at the woman, not quite understanding. The woman’s smile wavers. “Uchiha-chan, can you understand me?”

What?

Her brain moves so very sluggishly. She must have been hurt pretty badly, because she could swear she just heard the nurse call her ‘Uchiha-chan’. Also, the woman’s words still sound alarmingly foreign to her. It’s silent for a few confused seconds, before she turns towards the nurse again. “What…did you call…me?”, she forces out, mildly surprised how easily the weird words fall from her lips. Does she have brain damage? The nurse’s eyes widen at that. “Ah – uh, Uchiha-san, I apologize! I mean no disrespect.”

There are so many things wrong with that sentence, she wants to point out. Instead she settles for, “What happened?”

“Nee-chan”, the little boy squawks, huddling nearly forgotten against her side. His eyes are big and teary and for the first time she realizes that he nearly reaches up to her shoulder.

What?

She jerks away from him in shock, looking down at herself. She is tiny. She lifts her hands staring at them in horror. Faintly she hears the nurse calling for her, somewhere on her left the little boy starts crying. Then everything goes dark.

When she wakes up again her heart is pumping as if she just ran a marathon or maybe she had a panic attack while sleeping. Is that possible? It’s completely dark now and she is alone. She flexes her fingers, presses them to her face, then curls them around the edges of the bed. Her arms barely reach that far. Yes, still tiny. Her name is Sarah, she’s pretty sure of that. No, she’s absolutely sure of that.

She is nineteen years old and a college student. Her parent’s names are Sofie and Arnold; she has an
older sister called Marie and since two weeks ago she has a gold fish that she still hasn’t named. It was a gag gift from her father because she moved out of the dorms and complained that she’s lonely now. Her best friend’s name is Evelyn ‘Call-me-Evie” and the last thing she remembers…is Evie’s slackened face as she sinks down to the ocean floor.

She takes a deep breath and releases it slowly, shuddering.

It was her birthday. She died on her own damn birthday. Evie had insisted on taking her parent’s little boat out on a joy ride to celebrate. Just them and a few of the adoring fan boys that followed her best friend everywhere. There was beer and cheap, sweet vanilla liquor that Evie had wheedled from her older brother’s girlfriend. It was fun, up until the point they realized that they were lost. It was dark and nobody was in any condition to drive a boat anymore. Grudgingly they decided to sleep on the boat. They dropped the anchor for the night and settled down, until Evie decided it was a good idea to go swimming.

“Come on, Sarah”, she grinned, “maybe that’ll lift the mood a little so we can keep it up for another few hours. I’m not tired yet.”

They had too much to drink and too little common sense. There was no warning, nothing. One moment Evie was there, the next she wasn’t. Panicked silence followed, before an arm snapped out of the water, just enough to whack loudly against the boat and then she was gone again. The boys refused to go after her. She remembers being furious at them. They’d fawned over her, made her expensive presents, promised to fulfill her every wish if she went out with one of them, but they wouldn’t save her from drowning. “It’s a shark”, Mark said, “I’m not going up against a shark.”

It wasn’t a shark, of course. It was cold and the alcohol had dehydrated them, it was a cramp, Sarah was sure of it. “There are no sharks here”, she snapped, diving head first after her best friend. Two minutes felt like an eternity before her blindly grasping hands made contact with cold flesh. She pulled, surprising herself as Evie’s face suddenly appeared in front of her, emerging from the dark out of nowhere. Then the current pulled at them. It was laughably weak.

Inanely she’d remembered making a game out of it with Evie; racing against the current. But it was dark and she was dizzy from the alcohol and was enough to disorient her. She didn’t know where up and down were anymore. The last thing she remembers is Evie’s arm being tugged out of her cold, cramping hands and she hopes to god it was someone who saved her and not the current. She herself is obviously either dead and in hell or in a coma.

She takes another deep breath and forces herself to calm down. The facts:

She is a child. Or at least the size of a child; her chubby little fingers are undeniable proof of that.

She is in a hospital but has no apparent injuries. All pain she experiences could be from drowning, so at least that makes sense.

People here speak gibberish. Maybe her brain didn’t get enough oxygen and now there is something wrong with her head – possibly.

The nurse called her ‘Uchiha-chan’, the boy ‘Nee-chan’. That sounded Japanese, which would explain the gibberish. It does not explain why she understood it, because she doesn’t speak any Japanese.

The nurse called her Uchiha-chan. Uchiha.

She quietly slips out of the bed and makes her way over to what she thinks should be the restroom.
She has to stretch her arms to reach the door handle and the light switch and the glaring neon light hurts her eyes. Determinedly she drags a little stool from the strange looking shower and pushes it in front of the washbasin. She climbs onto it with her eyes closed, little hands gripping the basin, and takes another deep, calming breath before opening them and looking into the mirror.

She is indeed a child. A pretty child. She still looks like herself but somehow…not. There is undeniably Sarah in the curve of her lips and the regal looking straight nose but also what must be ‘Uchiha-chan’ in her almond shaped eyes and round, cherubic cheeks. She might be eight or nine years old. Her hair is black and pin straight, her eyes so dark she can’t even make out her own pupil. She looks undeniably Asian.

‘Uchiha-chan’.

Could it really be? But how? Why?

There is obviously something strange going on but she simply refuses to believe that it is something Naruto-strange. Uchiha-strange. Possibly Uchiha-Sasuke-strange. She briefly thinks of the two Self-Insert stories on her alert list. She isn’t Sasuke. She can’t be Sasuke – she might be dead but there is neither enough emo nor madness in her to make that happen.

She’d probably marry Naruto and end up turning the whole thing into a yaoi comedy.

Then she remembers the little boy. Maybe that is Sasuke?

She wonders if they are supposed to be close.

No, the boy isn’t Sasuke. She shakes her head to get rid of the thought. There isn’t any hard evidence aside from a few words of gibberish and a name, so she doesn’t believe it yet. And as long as she doesn’t believe it, it doesn’t have to be so. How is it? *It isn’t over until the fat lady sings.* Or, you know, the nurse. She would ask her tomorrow.

The night is, as expected, restless. When the first nurse comes to check on her at around six, she finds a little girl sitting cross-legged on her bed, very deliberately reaching out for the safety bar at the side of it, at first with one hand, then the other. “How are you feeling, Uchiha-chan?” she asks with a frown. “Alright, I believe”, she answers. As odd as this whole thing might seem to the nurse, she is currently testing her own limbs, trying to get used to the much shorter reach. It was disconcerting last night to reach for something and have her hands continuously fall short of it. The nurse pulls up a chair. “Do you remember what happened?” she asks carefully. “Why you’re here?”

“No”, she says, because she doesn’t. Not really. The nurse looks unhappy. She licks her lips before reaching out for the poor little girl, so alone in the world now. She doesn’t quite touch her, but lets her hand rest close by. “I really shouldn’t be the one to tell you this, but you need to know. Uchiha-chan…something bad happened to your family.” The nurse watched her carefully until she nodded. “They are…gone”, she says, “You and Uchiha-kun…are the last of your Clan. I’m very sorry.”

Ah, she realizes distantly, the Uchiha Massacre. She doesn’t have to fake the shock and the hot tears streaming down her face. For some reason the bed is shaking; no, she is shaking. The tears come more violently now, but not for this family, but for the other one. For Sophie and Arnold and Marie, who she’d never see again, because *this is really happening.*

The nurse finally hugs her close as she cries. For whom, nobody has to know.

It takes about an hour before she calms down, her nineteen year old mind forcing her nine year old
body into submission. The hysteric sobbing turns into the occasional, painful hiccup and her body is taut to keep the shaking at bay. The next three days are spent alternately crying and stubbornly forcing herself to accept what happened.

She gives up the hope to just wake up in a different hospital after the second night and then spends about two hours panicking and scrambling for information about her supposed second life. She finds out her own name more or less by accident. Two nurses mourning little Sasuke-kun and little Hisana-chan, who would now have to take care of both of them in the hallway, right outside her door. She vaguely remembers that there is supposed to be some kind of orphan allowance from the Hokage. Taking a deep breath and steeling herself she sincerely hopes that Sasuke isn’t much harder to care for than a gold fish.
She doesn’t know her parents’ names but thankfully nobody dares to ask her about them, so that all kind of works out. She doesn’t know Japanese manners very well, but she is a child so they only gently correct her.

She doesn’t know how long she’s supposed to have been to the Academy, but when she tries to get into a combat stance she easily slips into a series of rudimentary katas. Her body knows how to do them.

At the end of the third day a tiny head pokes into her room. “Hisa-nee-chan…” Sasuke shuffles into her room. He looks deeply uncomfortable, shifting from one foot to the other as if he has to pee really badly. She scrutinizes him. He looks nothing like she expected. He is cute, yes. His hair is just as dark as hers, his eyes the same huge, shiny jewels that blink at her every time she looks into the mirror. There are still bruises on his jaw and neck and with those sad, sad eyes and the pathetic trembling lip he looks like something out of a child abuse awareness add.

She doesn’t know when he is supposed to turn so bitter. Maybe he still will, maybe the mere fact that he isn’t entirely alone now is enough to keep at least a little of his innocence. Finally she takes pity on him and tentatively opens her arms. He looks at her for a second, eyes going even bigger. Is she doing it wrong? Isn’t that what you are supposed to do with sad children, offer a hug? Before she can doubt herself any more, the little boy jumps at her, throwing her off balance and tumbling them both to the floor. The impact forces the wind out of her, but she is too surprised to be angry. Sasuke clings to her like a life line and she thinks maybe she deserves this. For all the times she did the same to Marie.

After his little episode Sasuke returns to being painfully shy.

She strongly suspects that they aren’t related very closely. She mentions this offhandedly to him and he flushes brightly and admits that he doesn’t know how they are related and that the nurse told him her name. They never interacted before the Massacre. One of the nurses is nice enough to look into it for her and apparently they are related through an entirely female line; their grandmothers having been sisters and their mothers cousins. Sasuke seems happy about it, glad to know that they are closer related than they could have been. The Uchiha Clan was vast; their lines could have intersected last during the First Hokage’s time.

The doctor clears them to go after another week. They are traumatized orphans, but they are physically fine and, no matter how much the nurses may protest, the hospital doesn’t have enough beds and no staff to care for them.

Hisana meets the Hokage the day they leave. Sasuke clings to her the whole time, as the kindly looking old man puffs his pipe, looking at them worriedly from behind his desk. “You have the village’s support, of course”, he assures. “It might not mean much to you right now, but your Clan was much loved and admired and beside the stipends from the Uchiha money and the Orphan Fund, very many good people have volunteered to assist you in any way you request.” She nods slowly but doesn’t say a word. She isn’t sure if the Hokage’s words are deliberate, if he expects her to understand, but what she hears is ‘They are trying to gain prestige through you’ and ‘If you don’t watch out, someone will snatch away one of you to get to your name and your money’. Whatever the old shinobi reads on her face however, it seems to satisfy him. “I have arranged for an apartment for you two. It’s a good neighborhood and all other tenants are shinobi. You are not alone.” ‘I am watching over you.’

She likes him, she decides.

In terms of difficulty, caring for Sasuke falls somewhere between parenting a kitten and watching paint dry, depending on his mood. For a little boy, especially for an Uchiha, he is surprisingly cuddly, constantly grabbing at her and occasionally knocking things over when they are in the way
of it. He doesn’t talk much but she doesn’t either. It might be an genetic-thing.

The apartment is nice. It’s smaller than she expected when hearing ‘apartment’, but this world is so very different from her old one that maybe it shouldn’t be that surprising. It’s not a bad thing, because, as she finds out, her body tires quickly and so cleaning more than one room a day is completely out of the question. Sasuke insists on helping, which is of course more of a hindrance than help, but it seems to satisfy him, so she occasionally pushes a duster into his chubby hands and shoos him along. And if he breaks some of the ugly vases that came with the place, well, she won’t be losing sleep over it.

Another few days pass before someone who can only be Umino Iruka knocks at their door. He is a surprisingly short man, stout and dark skinned. In reality his pony tail looks far less ridiculous. The vicious looking scar on his nose, in turn looks far nastier than she expected, nearly bisecting his nose and making his breathing sound a little funny. He nervously scratches at it and smiles at her with a mixture of sympathy and awkwardness.

“Hisana-chan, ohayou.”

Smiling he looks more like someone who teaches children, less intimidating. She bows a little, like the nurses at the hospital told her to. “Can I come in?” She steps aside for him and guides him to the sofa in what she hopes to be an acceptable manner. He doesn’t seem unhappy with her, so maybe she’ll be fine.

“Sensei”, she ventures, the title tasting strange on her tongue, like every new word she tries. “I suppose it concerns the Academy?”

“Yes. Hokage-sama thinks it is…time for you and Sasuke to join class again, so you can be with your friends.” As far as she knows Naruto would be Sasuke’s first friend and if Uchiha Hisana had friends outside of the clan, they would surely not be her friends. Instead of voicing any of this though, she only nods. She isn’t sure if he picks up on her skepticism but his brow furrows in a way that suggests he does. “In any case, you haven’t missed much of the course work yet, or at least nothing that you can’t catch up on.” He pulls a binder out of the grey satchel slung over his shoulder.

“The first part is yours; everything after the marker is Sasuke-kun’s.”

All awkwardness vanishes from his face as he looks at her earnestly. “It’s ok if you and Sasuke-kun come in a little later on Monday. I will make sure nobody bothers you before or between classes.” She nods again. This is probably more important to Sasuke than to her. The thought of girls following him around, trying to comfort ‘their Sasuke-kun’ makes her stomach churn unpleasantly. She doesn’t generally hit little girls, but she would make an exception for this. “Hisa-nee-chan?” Sasuke’s head pokes into the room. “Oh. Iruka-sensei.”

He does the ridiculous little pee shuffle again and she sighs. “Come here Sasuke. Say hello properly.” He straightens visibly, before marching towards his teacher. “Ohayou gozaimasu, Iruka-sensei.” A polite little bow follows and Iruka laughs. “Ohayou, Sasuke-kun. I came to bring a little homework for you two. I hope I will see you on Monday.”

With that he excuses himself. The moment he is out of the door both Sasuke and Hisana deflate. “I don’t want to go to the Academy”, Sasuke pouts. “I don’t want to see anyone yet.”

“I know”, she chides, “but if we want to become good ninjas we’ll have to go back.” He nods, but there’s still something stubborn to the set of his jaw. Hisana hesitates to bring up the Uchiha name to motivate him. Sasuke hasn’t said a word about revenge yet, much less about his brother. She isn’t sure if that is because in this universe he has no idea, or if he is purposely keeping it to himself.

Neither option sounds very convincing, as she doesn’t remember Sasuke keeping his noble goal to himself at any point in the Manga but, apart from losing his entire family, he doesn’t seem any more traumatized than he should be. There was nothing that might indicate heart break or anger over his brother’s betrayal.

Didn’t Itachi confront him, use Tsukuyomi on him? In that case he should have been bed ridden
much longer than her, shouldn’t he? There is still a good while before the Main Story is supposed to start and already things don’t make sense.

She considers making a list of events, while pulling Sasuke up on the couch, fingers tugging through his ridiculous hair in what she hopes to be a comforting manner. ‘Naruto’ used to be a much loved part of her life at one point, but it had only been maybe three years since she last touched a Manga and already she was forgetting things. Maybe it was a side effect of her death? But then again, maybe not. The way it seemed right now, she would have to stick around for quite a while and letting the memories of what might be her own future slip away would be plain stupid. She resolves to buy a notebook as soon as possible, maybe even today. All of their possessions are still in the Uchiha Compound, which is probably still being scrubbed down by a bunch of incredibly unfortunate Genin. They would need pen and paper for Monday, as well as probably a whole bunch of things she didn’t know about yet.

“Sasuke-kun, do you want to go shopping with me?”

He looks up at her curiously. “Shopping? We were grocery shopping yesterday.”

“Shopping for the Academy.”

“…aah.” He doesn’t look very excited, but she’d take what she could get.

Konoha is truly beautiful. The black-white of the Manga and the sloppy Anime didn’t do it justice in the least. It’s a network of topsy-turvy structures, colorful and full of cheery people. The village terrifies her. Up until now she’d only been to the tiny grocer around the corner, little Sasuke valiantly leading the way. Even now she relies on him to navigate the endlessly confusing streets, all the while holding her hand. He doesn’t even seem to notice that she has no idea where to go, even though she is supposed to be a native. It’s a disconcerting feeling to walk among the villagers, watching them go about their daily business in a way that is much more familiar to her than what she is doing right now and knowing she’d never be one of them. Instead she’ll be one of the ninjas, flitting in and out of her periphery vision like particularly badly dressed ghosts. Sasuke tugs at her hand excitedly, the happy buzz of the market affecting even him. She has no idea where to buy supplies of the scholarly kind in this world and for a few moments she contemplates the possibility of having to lug scrolls and inkpots around with her.

She doesn’t think that writing, even with a brush, would be too difficult for her. Reading seems to be possible after all. Iruka’s notes had been very illuminating. Apart from the fact that their course work didn’t look much more difficult than high school material, she’d also found that reading Kanji reminds her very strongly of reading a picture book. The only difference was that the pictures encoded much more complex information and weren’t nearly as colorful. Another tug, as Sasuke directs her into a side street. They end up in a rather small store, as she had come to realize are most stores in Konoha, stuffed to the brim with paper of all kinds. They walk past a shelf of scrolls in varying sizes, another one full of official looking papers of all sorts, rows of seals, stamps, inks in different colors and a whole wall depicting different brush strokes and the serial number of the corresponding brush model. It looks like a store Uchihas frequented.

With their budget cut, at least until she graduated from the Academy, she isn’t sure if maybe they should look into something cheaper. The prices on everything seem terribly high to her, but her grasp on the local currency is tentative at best, so she could be wrong. Sasuke, in turn, simply seems delighted to spot a familiar face in the vendor, who greets him with a smile and a pat on the head. “Hello Sasuke-kun, I figured you’d be by. After all, proper ninja never let themselves get short of paper.” The boy preens under his approving look.

She’d find other ways to save money, just for now.

In the end they didn’t need much. The owner fetched two neatly tied packages from the backroom; Academy sets, free for students and paid for by the Hokage. She kept the surprise off her face by forcefully projecting gratitude at the man. Maybe she shouldn’t have been so intense about it; he
seemed a little uncomfortable towards the end.

Now, with their bags packed with writing material and Iruka-sensei’s notes she doesn’t feel prepared in the least. It’s obvious that Sasuke feels the same, if for different reasons. She had only caught a glimpse at the Academy from their brief visit to the Hokage, but she can already tell that the building is far bigger than the Manga had led her to believe. Of course she had known, in theory, that the Rookie Nine weren’t the only graduates of their year. Even now she vaguely recalls a trio of girls that liked to bully Sakura. No, the Rookie Nine were only the best of them that took the Chuunin exams. But she still never had a concept of how big one year was supposed to be.

What exactly would the classes be like? Would she know the teachers? Probably not. She would recognize some of the students though. She worried about them the most. No matter what Iruka-sensei promised, if there is one thing she remembers about being a kid, it is that if you wanted to know something, you asked – teachers be damned. They would get to her, asking questions, expecting things from her. Sleeping is difficult that night. Only when Sasuke crawls into the bed next to her she can finally relax. He looks even more anxious, but also stubborn. She stifles a snort as he determinedly turns around but then shuffles towards her, bumping their backs together. If Sasuke has to do it, she can do it too.

After a while his breathing evens out; hers follows shortly after.
She lets Sasuke lead the way to the Academy. He’s reluctant, she knows, dragging his feet. It would be more logical to take him by the hand and simply power walk at this point, because they are far later than she’d planned. But she still can’t find her way around the village properly and she doesn’t want to risk making her little cousin suspicious. He is small, but annoyingly perceptive for his age – and he doesn’t have the same compunctions about pointing out her strange behavior as the adults might have had. She briefly remembers an incident at the tea house a few days back, where she’d been stumped by the menu. The characters had made perfect sense to her, but her brain hadn’t offered any explanations for the names. She’d finally ordered the only things she knew – dango and genmaicha tea, just to stave off Sasuke’s questioning look. Her fond memories of the newfound dessert are cut short as they turn a corner. The Academy appears in front of them so suddenly she almost wants to jump. Tucked away between the village and the Hokage Mountain, only accessible by navigating the long, confusing maze of back alleys, the building seems to disappear from view the closer you get to it. Now the compound sprawls out in front of them in all its impressive size and it makes her breath hitch just like it did the first time. They walk past the training grounds and into the building, not quite holding hands, but almost. Sasuke’s shoulder keeps brushing against her arm, but he makes no move to reach for her and she doesn’t either. Inside only silence greets them. Classes are already in full swing.


He looks reluctant, but strangely, she thinks it’s mostly because of her. “I-I see you at lunch, right?” He then squares his shoulders and marches off. Like a true Uchiha, she thinks wryly. Then she is alone in the entrance hall.

It takes about five minutes for her to break.

Her eyes dart around until she finds the restroom to her far right and she then she dashes off. She almost throws herself against the door in her haste to escape the panic squeezing her heart mercilessly. The door to the first stall hits the wall, and the next thing she knows is her head in the toilet bowl and the sound of her retching echoing of the porcelain. The door is still wide open behind her. What am I doing here?, she thinks, between dry heaves. What in the world am I doing here? They’ll know. They’ll know I’m some sort of impostor. How am I supposed to live here? I can’t even find my own classroom, how am I supposed to convince a whole village full of paranoid killers I’m Hisana?

She can feel tears welling up in her eyes and the familiar panicky tightening in her chest. A panic attack the nurse in the hospital had called it. “Completely normal”, she’d said. Knowing what it is, doesn’t make it any easier to deal with. There’ll be a war, Hisana remembers dimly. People would die and she wouldn’t be able to do a thing about it because she stopped reading the Manga. She doesn’t know how long she cowers in front of the toilet, willing her lungs to cooperate and just managing enough to keep herself from blacking out. That’s how a teacher finally finds her. The woman doesn’t say much, just rubs her back and firmly presses a hand against her chest, pressing and releasing again in time with her own breath.

“Hisana-chan, we were worried about you”, she finally says. “Have you been here the entire time?” She manages a weak nod, faintly wondering how long it has been. The woman nods in turn. “That’s ok. We’ll clean you up and then you’ll be just fine.”

“How-…how did you find me?”
The woman hums non-committally, instead steering her towards the washbasin. She wets a paper towel and wipes at Hisana’s face, keeping her still by the chin when she tries to turn away. “Iruka-sensei told me during lunch that Sasuke-kun joined his class during second period, but you still weren’t there. When I asked you cousin he told me you weren’t feeling well all morning, so I looked for you in the wash rooms. I apologize it took a while; there seem to be quite many of them.”

Hisana watches her in a quiet sort of wonder. She doesn’t recognize the woman, with her straw blonde pixie-cut and the stern blue eyes behind smart, slim glasses. This is her teacher. Does she know her well? She seems to care, at least. The blonde tilts Hisana’s face left and the right, before her pursed lips relax and slightly quirk upwards in a satisfied manner. “Come”, she finally says, “I have Mizuki-sensei covering class for now, we have a while yet. I will make you tea and then we can still make it for fourth period.”

The woman shuffles her into the staff room, shielding her from the curious glances of the other teachers. Hisana stands awkwardly aside as her teacher makes two mugs of tea and then leads her towards one of the tables in the back.

“Would you like to tell me what happened in the washroom?”

No. No, she really wouldn’t. But the tea is really nice and the woman, whose name she doesn’t even know, looks so very concerned for her, in a rather stern, no-nonsense manner.

“…the nurses say it’s a panic attack. I-I can’t help it sometimes.”

The other nods thoughtfully. “Did they say anything else about it?”

“Just that it’ll go away on its own.”

That is a lie, but they hadn’t commented any further on it, so apparently they didn’t think anything of it. “Ok”, her teacher says but looks unconvincing. “I will still make a note of it in your file. On the next PsychEv I would like the medics to know about it.”

She nods, unable to do anything else. “Now come, it’s time.” She takes both of their empty mugs and places them next in the sink before leading Hisana to a classroom in the opposite direction of Sasuke’s. Ito Osen-sensei it says on the door. Ito-sensei gives one sharp knock on the door before entering. She doesn’t wait for a reply and, even though it is her class room, that seems to irk Mizuki-sensei. Hisana doesn’t know what she expected. Mizuki was kind of the first antagonist, so she expected…something. For him to look slimy or evil, maybe. But he appears perfectly normal – apart from the unsettling glint in his eye as Ito-sensei briskly walks up to him, shooing Hisana towards an empty seat, and dismissing him with a few curt words and a nod. For a second she thinks, maybe Ito-sensei sees it too, because her eyes suddenly turn flinty; but then she resolutely turns her back to him. Maybe she imagined it, she thinks. Sensei’s eyes might just look like that.

Lessons are actually a relief. True to Iruka-sensei’s notes, they are at about high school level in terms of difficulty, but everything tailored especially to ninjas. There’s Mathematics, in which they calculate the path of throwing weapons at different angles and velocities; History and Politics, in which they discuss not only the history of Hi no Kuni, but of all countries, their social and political hierarchies as well as current events; Tai- and Bukijutsu, consisting of practical Taijutsu lessons and weapon practice; a language class, which, as all of the shinobi nations share a language, is called Adaptation and Infiltration and mostly consists of recognizing and replicating different local accents and customs; and finally Kunoichi classes. Much to Hisana’s surprise, she finds the last class of the day to be rather interesting. It is taught by Suzume-sensei, a fussy woman with wild, curly hair and impeccable make up.
“Today we have news to discuss. Let’s see who paid attention in History and Politics; we all know the Daimyo’s youngest son married last month. Who can tell me what his wife’s name is?”

One of the shorter girls far in the back is the first to raise her hand. “Tachibana Mei-sama.”

“That’s right”, Suzume-sensei nods. “Can you also tell me why that was so surprising?”

The girl hesitates. “I-I think because Mei-hime’s aunt offended the Daimyo? They were supposed to be married and…Aiko-sama turned him away for someone of the lesser clans?”

Suzume-sensei smiled. “Good, good. Did you keep up with current events?”

“Hai, I’ve read the reports that in came last Friday. They say that the Daimyo’s wife already hates her, because she held a formal dinner two weeks ago and she seated Aiko-sama next to Iwako-sama, the Daimyo’s esteemed mother.” There was giggling all around. “Iwako-sama is still bitter, because she thinks Aiko-sama would have made the better wife and she’s back to making snide comments towards Yuna-sama.”

More giggling. Basically, Kunoichi Class turned out to be one giant gossip session. It does make sense, Hisana muses that evening, lounging on the couch with her homework spread out over the couch table. After all, it is politics. The Daimyo’s family had scorned the Tachibana clan for quite a while because of the Daimyo’s bruised ego. She poked at her own bruise, left by a tiny fist earlier that day. Taijutsu class had been ridiculous. Apparently she is in fourth year, which makes her in fact around ten, she realizes belatedly, and a class full of ten-year old ninjas is also full of uncoordinatedly flailing limbs. It’s easy to see who is from a prominent ninja clan, their strikes more precise, even when practicing the Academy style, and who is civilian. Unlike the Uchiha katas, real fighting didn’t come so easily for her. It had been a small shock and it had cost her. She’d have to train more, get her reflexes up to speed. She’d felt her own movements choppy and unsure against the Hyuuga girl’s swiftly delivered onslaught. She’d beaten her, but only barely and with more luck than ability.

Her little cousin marches past the couch with a pout. He gathers a few apples from the kitchen, grabs his pack of shuriken hanging on the coat rack and then walks out the front door, very deliberately closing it behind him. She snorts.

The first day of Academy had predictably rubbed their nerves raw. She had given Sasuke quite a scare when she didn’t turn up during lunch and now he is sulking because she refuses to tell him why. No matter how cute he is, Hisana is still somewhat wary of her only living relative. There is no doubt that there is something dangerous about him and, with Itachi apparently out of the picture, she has no idea what could set it off in this universe. Their close relationship would have to be enough to keep him in Konoha. If he found out though how she’d broken down, she fears he might lose his respect for her. It might only be her own paranoia talking, but she wouldn’t risk it. Ninja are supposed to be strong.

She can’t tell him, but simply letting him walk off in a huff is also disconcerting. She has no real authority over him, so, as much as she would like to forbid him from leaving home alone, she can’t. Konoha seems to be a safe village, but Sasuke is a cute little boy. Not to mention that he would develop the Sharingan at some point; that’s two reasons to kidnap him. God, she already sounds like her mother. With a sigh she shoves her almost completed homework aside and makes to follow him. He doesn’t notice her, not even as she almost stumbles over a bunch of rowdy kids. It’s vaguely amusing and she wonders if she’s just that good, or if Sasuke isn’t quite as good as he always likes to boast.

The sun is starting to set when they arrive on the Academy training grounds. There are still quite a few students around, doing target practice or sparring under the watchful eyes of their parents. She
swiftly climbs a tree, to watch them from afar. Ninjas are still a strange sight to her. As Sasuke claims one of the targets for himself, she watches a bunch of Inuzuka brats go at it. They jump each other, yipping and yowling like puppies. Only an occasional clawed swipe or a yelp as someone sinks their teeth into someone else, indicates that they are not merely playing around. Someone goes flying and the adult watching them, a tall, vicious looking woman with wild hair, belly laughs. There are disapproving looks from what appear to be civilian mothers who are gathered a little further away. They very obviously belong to a group of boys practicing their Taijutsu in a far more orderly manner. Every once in a while one of them darts out to anxiously separate them before the fight becomes even remotely interesting. She watches them all lazily, lulled into half-sleep by the sounds of her cousin training. Time passes.

The steady thunk thunk thunk of Sasuke hitting the target is interrupted by a shrill voice. “Sasuke-kun~” someone chirps directly below her. Hisana snaps awake instantly.

It’s a blond girl, dressed in purple, who bats her eyes cutely in Sasuke’s direction; could this be Ino? “Sasuke-kun~” she repeats, this time louder. Hisana briefly wonders how such a small girl could produce such a volume. “Can you help me with target practice?”

There’s a gasp at her boldness as several more girls emerge from all sides. Hisana bites back a snort and watches the dramatics with interest. Marie had always said that there is no greater joy in life than messing with your younger sibling’s love life. She shifts on the branch, lying flat on her belly to listen more closely. “No.”

Ino pouts. “But you are so good at it and I can never hit the bulls-eye. Just show me once!”

“Sasuke-kun”, yelps another dark haired little girl, “I’m far worse at Bukijutsu!”

“Sasuke-kun, I’m really good at Bukijutsu~” “No, I’m better!”

“Go away.” With that he turns around and resumes practicing. The girls look torn between hurt and awe. “He’s soo cool”, Ino swoons. This time she really has to bite her tongue to keep quiet. Whether it’s the mental age difference or the fact that in the past few weeks she has spent almost every waking, and sleeping, hour with Sasuke, but what Ino thinks to be so cool – Hisana easily recognizes it as Sasuke’s awkward-face. There’s a good chance he really doesn’t know what they want from him, that they like him, and that he’s about five seconds away from bursting into tears from sheer overload. One of the girls opens her mouth again, as if to call him back, and so she slips from the branch, landing next to Ino almost silently. The girl startles. “Sasuke”, she says, ignoring them, “it’s time.”

She can feel them gawk at her for addressing him so casually. As far as she knows, she has the right to call him by name, simply because she’s the older one. Neither Sasuke nor the nurses had said a word about it and she isn’t going to cater to his fan girls’ expectations. “And who are you?” Ino huffs. Hisana slowly turns towards her, still aware of her cousin gathering his shuriken and stuffing them into his bag. “Uchiha Hisana.”

The girl’s entire face changes, morphing from annoyed over shocked to embarrassed, before settling on unconvincingly innocent. “I’m –” “Yamanaka, I know. I’m not impressed.”

The girl blinks at her owlishly, once, twice; then her mouth snaps shut with an audible click.

It’s kind of freeing, she thinks. Not giving a damn about politeness because she’s an Uchiha. There’s something akin to relief in Sasuke’s eyes. “Nee-san? I’m ready.”

She nods and then simply turns around to lead the way. Not few eyes follow them, most of them
strangely amused by her unabashed rudeness.

Yes, quite freeing indeed.
Hello everyone!
I don't usually do author comments, because I'm afraid if I answer questions I'll give away too much of the story. But I'm so happy that somebody is actually reading this, that I'm making an exception:D
I actually leave out a lot of information on how the whole thing happened because Hisana has no way of finding out how and is currently busy with a lot more immediate stuff. I do have a plan though. Still, I'm always grateful if somebody points out things I might have overlooked, because if that's the case I still have a chance to somehow explain it later, instead of realizing 20 chapters in that my story doesn't make sense:
If anyone’s curious, I actually have deviantart account with a crudely drawn Oekaki picture of Hisana:D I'm not much of an artist but I think it gets the point across. I'm currently working on her genin outfit as well:)
http://meloncupcake.deviantart.com/art/Uchiha-chan-531054600

Thanks for reading, I immensely enjoy your feedback!

All regret she might have had about being mean to a child vanishes completely, when she realizes just how much clout Ino has with the Academy students of all years. The children now watch her with a mix of awe and fear and nobody dares to approach her. What sounds like a lonely existence and is, apparently, a cause for concern to Ito-sensei, is in fact a small blessing. Classes are more enjoyable now that she isn’t constantly afraid to be noticed anymore. While sometimes boring, they are also easy and for the first time in her existence she is the smart girl, a prodigy. She isn’t quite sure if her brain works differently now, after all the Uchiha are quite famous for spitting out geniuses like nobody’s business, or if simply because everything is easier the second time around. It doesn’t take long for her to physically catch up with the others either. Thanks to a very informative, very voluntary, and therefore very empty, health class she has soon worked out a good training regime and the next time she faces the Hyuuga girl she lays her flat out on her back. She still worries though. In only two short years she would graduate and, compared to what she would have to face then, dragging her team along, this is quite literally child’s play. Confronted with ninja twice her size and mental age, would she still come out on top? On a brighter note, Sasuke seems to have forgiven her. Or maybe he just forgot, it’s still that age, after all. The likeliest answer though, is that he is just too busy to stay mad at her, trailing main cast members like ducklings. Just the other day ran into Naruto for the first time. He was cute – unimpressive but cute. A chubby faced, dirty, extremely determined little boy stalking her cousin as if Sasuke hadn’t already noticed him. Sakura turned up as well, rather unexpectedly, as well as a little Hyuuga girl that could only be Hinata, all following each other around the village, as Sasuke became visibly more distressed with each little follower he gained. And so she spent a few amusing afternoons watching Hinata watch Naruto, and watching Sakura watch Ino watch Sasuke, the latter desperately searching for HER. The ridiculousness of the whole thing strangely calmed her nerves and reminded her that yes, while all of them would be dangerous one day, right now they were children. Malleable and still at least a little innocent. But all innocence aside, when a few weeks later the whole thing turned into ‘Ino, Sakura and Naruto badgering Sasuke while Hinata stands confusedly on the sideline’ she was more than willing and able to kick a few baby teeth in, because Sasuke-baka is still her cousin and family comes first. So now, on a Wednesday afternoon, dirty and scuffy from Taijutsu class, she has her hand bunched in the collar of Sakura’s dress on her left and Naruto lifted by his waistband on her right, Sasuke but a distant a dot on the horizon, with Yamanaka still hot in pursuit. “Ok”, she says, shaking them both a little. Naruto squawks at the almost-wedgie. “What exactly makes you think it’s a good idea to stalk my cousin
Sakura turns red. Her lip wobbles alarmingly, and it would surely have gotten her out of trouble with Iruka-sensei. But Hisana is no adult. Also, she is a woman and more importantly she used to be someone’s little sister, who regularly squirmed out of ridiculous situations, sometimes engineered by her older sister, but mostly by own stupidity, and so she easily recognizes the clumsily layered deception by the stubborn glint in the girl’s eyes. Naruto, not half as clever, simply rambles and cusses with a surprisingly extensive vocabulary for a seven-year old. “Shut up”, she snaps, setting him down so forcefully, that he stumbles and lands on his butt. He’s even smaller than Sasuke, who is already rather short for his age. A little pang of guilt makes her instead turn to Sakura, who already towers over both boys. “I-I just wanted…You don’t understand. I like Sasuke-kun. I just want him…to notice me.” The whole thing sounds whiny and pathetic. She might have laughed, but knowing what kind of kunoichi this girl would become – could become earlier – does nothing for Hisana’s patience. “Now listen, princess-“ the girl makes an insolent face “Sasuke might be the heir of the Uchiha clan, but I’m three years older and until he comes of age I will be the matriarch of the clan. Guess who gets to decide who can date him?” Sakura pales a little. “B-but I would be a good girlfriend! I can…I’m good with tea ceremonies and I can cook well and Suzume-sensei says I’m the best in class at entertaining guests…” An incredulous laugh bubbles up her throat and very nearly escapes. Is this girl really trying to turn this into a job interview? “Shut up. I don’t care about that.”

Sakura’s face falls. She opens and closes her mouth once, twice, before settling for a confused frown. “Then what? Isn’t that what an Uchiha wife is supposed to be good at?”

Possibly. Hisana wouldn’t know. But if it is, she decides in distaste, then that’s real pathetic. “I want you to be able to kick ass. That’s what’s important. I don’t want you to look at people and hem and haw over how to please them; you look at them and they’re supposed to bend over backwards for you.”

She’s really getting into this. “You haven’t got the attitude yet and you certainly lack the skill to back one up.” Sakura’s lips thin in thought before her jaw visibly sets and her eyes turn flinty. “Ok. I’ll show you. You’ll beg me to marry Sasuke-kun someday!”

Hisana snorts. “Good”, she says, reaching for Naruto’s shirt, as the blonde tries to sneak off. “I’ll hold you to that. And what do you think you’re doing?” He whines, and there’s something akin to genuine panic in his eyes. She turns to Sakura. “What are you waiting for? Go train or something.”

As much as the jinchuuriki needs a noogie, she’s not about to let a still arrogant and slightly bloodthirsty Sakura witness that. That girl needs to learn some compassion as well, she thinks. Maybe she should have added that…? But that would have been a little hypocritical. When the girl disappears with a purposeful stride on her chubby little legs she turns to Naruto. He looks up at her in a mixture of stubbornness and fear, and with a start she remembers, that he’s probably used to being manhandled and yelled at. Instead of the more vicious noogie she settles for digging her fingers into his hair and rubbing until he wails, hair messed up beyond all recognition. He still looks stubborn then, but there’s also a bit of amused wonder now. “And you little punk? What do you want from Sasuke? You want to marry him too?” “WHAT? NO!” he gags. “But…”

Perfectly valid kiddie-logic. “If I get better in class, maybe the teachers will like me better…” He trails off with a far-away look, half hopeful, half desperate. It’s rather heartbreaking, she thinks. He’s annoying, but he’s also just a child. She watches him for a minute. He’s already fidgeting, unable to stay still. Should she do something? Get involved? She vividly remembers her breakdown a few weeks earlier. Being Sasuke’s cousin already put her in the thick of things; getting involved with
Naruto directly could be disastrous. What if she freaks out again? She can’t offer her friendship to this damaged little boy and then run away as soon as she gets scared again. She’s not that cruel.

But she won’t, because he’s looking at her almost hopefully. *Please be nice to me, I mean no harm.*

*Please don’t hate me.*

It’s hard to be afraid when he’s looking at her like that. Maybe, she muses, she is already seeing a bit of what everyone else will still take years to see. “Hmmm. I know what secret training he does. Wanna see?”

Maybe she could make Sasuke see it too.

Naruto explodes into a flurry of motion. “**YES, DATTEBAYO!**”

“Good. Then wait at the swings after class tomorrow. I’ll come and get you. You better take this seriously!” “**YES, YES!**” He runs off, nearly tripping over himself when he turns around to wave at her. Geez. She’d have to prepare Sasuke for this. He wouldn’t appreciate being taken by surprise by this whirlwind. Sasuke, as it turns out, doesn’t appreciate the whole thing either way. “He is the *deadlast*”, he says slowly and seriously, as if she might have fallen on her head on the way back home. “**Yes**”, she says, just as slowly. “And I’ll make him not the *deadlast.*”

“You don’t even train with me!”

“Well, you never asked me to!”

He huffs. “I don’t need your help, I’m the best in class!”

“Well then, why are you so upset?”

Sasuke looks at her with all the impotent fury of a seven-year-old. “B-but you’re *my* family!”

She pauses. “Yes. Yes, I am.”

Well, this is unexpected. It’s probably a good thing, she figures, that Sasuke has some real attachment to her. “Listen”, she says and tries to grab his shoulder, but he shrugs her off in a huff. “Listen! This is not about liking him better than you or such nonsense. This boy is kind of an idiot and completely alone. I just don’t want him to end up dead in a ditch somewhere because nobody taught him how to breathe and walk at the same time.” So maybe that’s a little extreme, but this is important. In Sasuke’s eyes Naruto would be an idiot anyway, so she couldn’t possibly make it any worse right now. She hopes. “You’ve seen him in the Academy, right?” He nods reluctantly. “He’s pretty bad, isn’t he?” Another nod. “And nobody likes him.” Sasuke shifts uncomfortably. She has him.

…”Ok, fine. But he better not be so needy.”

Oh buddy, she thinks. Nobody’s quite as needy as you are.
Training is, of course, a disaster. She didn’t really expect anything else, but it still makes her a little ill-tempered to see Naruto mess up in such fundamental ways. Ways that teachers should have already corrected. The Academy style is an odd mix of fluid movements and harsh blocks and punches. This is supposed to make it easier for beginners to learn, because evasive movements are instinctually swift, while powerful moves are instinctually harsh. It would then be the Jounin teacher’s job to figure out which parts suited their students best and then build on that to evolve it into something more personal.

But instead of the powerful ebb and flow of Konoha’s famous Burning Leaf style, Naruto currently boasted more of a Charred Cabbage Style – oddly disjointed, slow where it’s supposed to be quick, and quick where it’s supposed to be strong.

“No. NO. Your arm’s like a wet noodle – it’s a block Uzumaki! HOLD it. Again.”

He moves from an evasive maneuver into a block. The leg movements are right, but his arms don’t seem to get the message. “AGAIN. Punch me! And then evade again.”

Her own fist lands on his cheek, when he stumbles over his own feet. “Ne, ne, nee-chan…this is too difficult! Swift and then strong and then swift. How can I do that all at the same time??”

She sighs. Naruto’s style in the Manga wasn’t very sophisticated and mostly consisted of beating someone down with powerful Ninjutsu.

Maybe…

She squints at Sasuke, who abandoned training a while ago and now shamelessly watches them, munching on a tomato for lunch. Good. He better watch this, she thinks. Before he thinks I’m keeping secrets and gets all huffy again.

“Ok, break time. Uzumaki, grab a tomato, it’s time for the real secret training.”

Naruto looks skeptical, but takes a fruit out of Hisana’s bag. “With a tomato?” he asks.

“No, stupid. You eat, I explain.” He eyes the tomato, before nibbling on it.

Hisana falls into the default stance of the Uchiha style. In contrast to the Burning Leaf style, the Rising Phoenix style looks a lot more defensive. It’s designed to complement the Sharingan, but doesn’t rely on it. The enemy’s attack is caught and re-directed and the user’s defense is full of apparent holes, to tempt the attacker into stepping too far into the user’s range. It’s far less aggressive that Hisana had originally expected from the Uchiha, but apparently they liked making a fool of their enemy far more than parading around their superiority through brute strength. “What’s that?” Naruto queries, tomato juice dripping onto his shirt. Sasuke looks back and forth between them, torn between disgust at Naruto’s eating habits and incredulity that she apparently wanted to share their clan style with the heathen. “It’s a secret style”, she says, watching her little cousin very carefully from the corner of her eyes. “It won’t suit you as well as us, but maybe better than the Academy style.” “REALLY! That’s awesome, dattebayo!”

Under her stare, Sasuke turns away in defeat.
I always work so fast when I actually need to do other things:D

The peace between Naruto and Sasuke is a fragile balance, disturbed by the most ridiculous things. Naruto took the last tomato. Sasuke was faster in his katas. Naruto called him a teme. Sasuke called him a dobe. It’s stupid and it’s childish, but there’s none of the underlying affection that’s supposed to be there and it worries her.

Help comes from a completely unexpected source. “Iruka-sensei? You wanted to see me?”

“Ah yes, Hisana-chan. Come in, come in. I don’t have as much time as I’d like for this but it’ll have to do.”

She wonders for a second if she should close the door behind herself, but then again, this is a ninja academy – if someone wants to eavesdrop badly enough, they’ll do it through the closed door. She stands before his desk, hands folded behind her back and at attention, the way Ito-sensei had taught them. “Relax, Hisana-chan. You’re not in trouble.” He looks a little amused, but mostly worried. “I heard you have Naruto-kun under your wing.” It doesn’t sound reproving, so she merely nods.

“That’s…that’s good. Did you know that he’s improved considerably in Taijutsu class?” Naruto is still, quite frankly, abysmal, so no, she hadn’t known. She must have been too slow to squash down her surprise, because Iruka-sensei chuckles. “His Burning Leaf is still an abomination, but he’s been utilizing something else now. In my time I’ve worked with enough Uchiha to recognize their taijutsu style. So tell me Hisana-chan, not that I’m not glad, but why your clan style?”

She shifts uncomfortably. “Well, as you said, his Burning Leaf is a disaster. I don’t think it’s because he doesn’t train enough. He just can’t handle switching between different styles. When he keeps forgetting to switch from swift turns to hard blocks and then he tries to block with noodle arms. So I abandoned the academy style, because he needed results fast. And the Uchiha style is the only other one I know well enough to actually teach him. Otherwise I’d have to learn one myself first.”

Admitting this kind of stings. She hasn’t been here for long, but she has become quite attached to her prodigy status, and admitting that she can’t do something…it painfully reminds her of too many math tutors calling her an idiot. But Iruka-sensei nods happily, as if it’s not failure as much as it’s simply a great idea. “Good thinking, yes. As an instructor I’m not allowed to teach him more or differently than my other students, but someone else teaching him a specialized style is perfectly acceptable. But I’ve noticed that Naruto-kun and Sasuke-kun seem to have struck up a rivalry. Now, normally I wouldn’t say anything, because a little healthy competition is good for them. But I don’t think they like each other at all.”

Again, Hisana shifts. “Sasuke is very attached to me. He doesn’t like having to share me, so he’s been a bit abrasive with Naruto. And Naruto is nobody to take that lying down.”

Iruka-sensei snorts. “Quite. They are both very different personalities. They need something to balance each other out.”
In hindsight it’s so painfully obvious, she wants to kick herself. They need Sakura. What was she thinking? This could have upset the dynamics of the team completely. What if Naruto and Sasuke had hit it off immediately? They’d have Sakura trailing behind them like a puppy, confused and useless and not part of the team. Good for keeping Sasuke in Konoha, not good for their overall survival rates. As they were now, both boys were volatile components thrown together in cocktail shaker. Put the lid on, shake – instant explosion. With Sakura there Naruto would have something else to focus on beside Sasuke’s pregnancy mood swings and now that she had told Sakura on no uncertain terms to get stronger before even thinking about Sasuke again, her little cousin might get a bit of peace and quiet every now and then while the rest of his team squabbles.

“Teams usually consist of two shinobi and one kunoichi to ensure a more cooperative atmosphere”, Iruka-sensei says, as if he read her thoughts. “It’s of course a gamble to put together such a provisional team, when we might have to break them up after graduation. Though it may be worth a try.” She nods, a little more enthusiastically than proper for an Uchiha. “I suggest though, that you have a look at more taijutsu scrolls in the library. I’ll make a quick list for you with styles that you might find useful. I trust this won’t interfere with your own studies?” “No, sensei!” He nods. “Then good luck with finding yourself a kunoichi.”

It’s true that, should she push Naruto-baka enough to graduate with average scores, she might break up Team 7 before it even came together. If they worked out the way she intended them to, she’d talk to them. They’d just have to fake their scores.

But where the hell is Sakura? She hasn’t seen the girl for weeks now. Asking Ino would be an exercise in futility. The girl was still obsessed with Sasuke and would probably offer herself in Sakura’s place. She’d never be rid of that girl then. They must also have already broken up their friendship, Hisana muses, or Sakura wouldn’t have pursued Sasuke that emphatically. So where to find her? Stupid, she’s in Sasuke and Naruto-baka’s class. She’d have to send one of them for her. But whom? Sasuke would surely refuse. It’s Haruno Sakura, Hisa-nee. She can’t even throw a proper punch. What’s with the strays you’ve been collecting?

And any message Naruto delivers wouldn’t be received well, if at all. Oh my god, go away! You’re icky and my mother said not to talk to you!

Kids, honestly. That evening she lugs a bag full of scrolls home. Iruka-sensei’s list was far more extensive than she’d thought, but with so many possibilities she’s bound to find something. Because apart from the obvious advantages of mastering different taijutsu styles, she’d be damned if she taught Sakura the Uchiha style. Not after lecturing her about being undeserving. “Sasuke”, she calls into the kitchen, “what’s your last class tomorrow?”

“Buki Jutsu. Why? Are you picking me up?” He’s trying so hard not to sound so eager, it’s adorable. “Yes of course. But I also need to talk to one of your classmates.” She doesn’t need to see his face to feel his mood turn sour a room away. She puts the scrolls away and walks over to him. His face is mostly blank, but there’s a curl to his mouth that screams ‘brat’. God, having a little brother is such a lot of work. A bit awkwardly she hugs him. He doesn’t hug her back, just stands there, with his bowl of soup still in hand, stiff as a board. After a while he tries to extract himself from her, but she squeezes a little harder. The following struggle spills soup all over the floor and her pants, but she manages to wrestle him into something resembling a headlock and he submits with a long suffering sigh. “That’s right, let your nee-chan love you like a good boy”, she taunts amusedly. She frog-marches him into the living room and then sits him down on the couch. His head is still secured
under her arm and he looks sulky, but something heavy seems to have lifted from his eyes. “Alright. So Iruka-sensei said since I’m already dragging Naruto-baka’s behind through the academy, why not make a team of it. I need a kunoichi and I already have one in mind. But I’m not going to teach her the Uchiha style, because the last thing we need right now is for some girl to prance around thinking you’re going to marry her because of that.” Sasuke actually turns a little green at the prospect. “Who do you want to ask?”

She looks at him for a moment. “Haruno Sakura.” As expected Sasuke rolls his eyes, but he doesn’t say anything. No snarky comment? She opens her mouth to ask, but then decides to let sleeping dogs lie. “I’ll talk to her tomorrow and then we’ll go eat something, ok? I’m all out of ideas what to cook.” He snorts. “Yakitori?” “Yeah.”

Hisana’s promise of some alone-time with her put Sasuke in a good mood. The next morning he doesn’t complain when Naruto bursts out of some bushes to greet her and on the way to the academy he doesn’t only call him ‘dobe’ once. He is a difficult child, she thinks. Needy and insecure, even though he does his best to fake self assurance and independence. Raising him would be a chore and a half, but she’s gotten equally attached now, so she’ll manage. Needy yes, but also cute and protective in his own way. She pretends she doesn’t see him glaring at everyone who stares at her a little too long. There have already been several offers to adopt one or both of them. Sasuke has made it very clear though, that he doesn’t intend to go anywhere without her, which puts in turn the pressure on Hisana. She doesn’t think it was intentional, and he seems to have realized his mistake as soon as he spoke the words, but the damage is already done. She gets a lot of free stuff now, but also people constantly badgering her. **Uchiha-chan, why don’t you have some tea with me and my husband? I made fresh mochi just yesterday.**

**Uchiha-san, I would be honored to introduce you to my grandson.**

*Hisana-chan, why don’t you and Sasuke-kun live with us? Then you don’t have to be so alone anymore. Uchiha-chan, it would be such a waste not to cultivate your talent. My wife is a former Academy instructor, we could give you all the support you need.*

The one that made her blow a gasket though was **Uchiha-chan, a prodigy like you needs to dedicate all their time to training. Why don’t we take Sasuke-kun off your hands, you can visit him as often as you like.**

*Lady, I handle my clan affairs as I see fit. I’d thank you to mind your own business.*

She lets him think it was his glares that kept them at bay. He didn’t need to know she lost it at a nosy old bat and scared the crap out of half a dozen minor clans.

With a wave and a nod respectively the boys stay on the training grounds, while Hisana turns right towards her classroom. The bell would ring in fifteen minutes and she wants to talk to Ito-sensei before class. The taijutsu scrolls weight down her bag, but it is comforting rather than annoying. She has a plan now. Not a very precise one, but a plan nonetheless.

“Ito-sensei?”

“Come in.”

In contrast to Iruka-sensei’s homey mess of paperwork, Ito-sensei’s desk is strictly organized and neat. A stack of homework papers sits graded and tacked the left, a stack of unfinished work alphabetically ordered on the right. **“Uchiha-chan, can I help you?”**
“You might have heard how I’ve been helping Uzumaki Naruto with his taijutsu.”

“Yes, indeed. A very remarkable extracurricular activity.” She pushes her glasses up, and peers at Hisana with calculating eyes. “I have noticed no drop in your grades, if that is what you are worried about.”

“No, no. I already talked to Iruka-sensei…Umino-sensei, excuse me. He thinks it would be a good idea do include a girl in the training sessions, to get the genin team dynamics right, because Sasuke has somehow taken Naruto’s rivalry with him a little too seriously.” Ito-sensei nods again. “I see. But you know that, as a teacher, I’m not allowed to help you in this.”

“Yes, that’s what Umino-sensei said. I wanted to ask if you know somebody who could help us.”

“Oh?”

Training Sasuke and Naruto was all good and well. But she was not even a genin. If she could get some chunin to supervise, they could interfere when she messed up. She essentially needed a fail-safe authority figure to keep things under control.

“You could have asked Umino-sensei as well”, the woman points out. It doesn’t sound angry, but rather, curious. Oh. Because you actually look more like someone who could know the right people. Because Iruka-sensei is Iruka-sensei.

“Ah, because a supervisor would probably work with me more closely than with the others. And you know me better than Umino-sensei does.”

She nods again. “Yes, I actually have several people already in mind. I will make enquiries and get back to you once I have something definite.”

“Princess, you look…” – crappy – “…thin.”

Sakura actually seems proud. “Yes! I’ve been keeping my promise. Thank you for the wakeup call, senpai – now I’m actually slimmer than Ino-pig!”

There is a pregnant pause.

“Did you ever do that health class with Suzume-sensei?”

“Yes of course!” Sakura’s cheeks puff out in indignation. “I’m the top kunoichi of our year, I work really hard.”

“Did you even hear a single word of what she said?” “What?”

“You’re too thin.”

The girl looks at her as if she’s gone crazy. “Nonsense. My mother said I’m in really good shape! I eat regular, healthy and balanced meals, just like Suzume-sensei said.”

“And how much of it?”

She wants Sakura in this team, but the way she looks right now, a stiff breeze would bowl her over. Did she do this? Did she make the girl sick, just because she told her to train more? Sakura blushes to the roots of her hair. “A good amount! Half of what Ino-pig eats. My mother said if you want to diet properly, you only eat half the normal portions.”
Good god, this girl is seven years old. Why the hell is her mother talking about diets?

She’d have to force feed the girl. Maybe Sasuke could talk her into it?

“Ok, princess, I have a proposition.”

The girl’s face is still burning, but she looks eager. “I need a kunoichi for a practice team. I want you, Sasuke, and Uzumaki Naruto-baka.”

At her words Sakura’s face first brightens and then visibly falls. “Naruto?”

“Yes. That’s not negotiable. Take it or leave it. I can give you until tomorrow to decide, then I’ll have to look for a different girl. I’m sure Ino wouldn’t mind.”

“No, NO! I’ll do it!”

Of course she would.
With a little extra at the end :)

It’s not really important for the story, but canon anyway.

On another note: I need a beta reader T-T

is anyone interested?

“So you really think this is a good idea”, Sasuke says, thoughtfully chewing on his Nankotsu.

“No”, Hisana says, “I actually prefer Shabu-shabu. More filling, you know.” He throws her a scathing look. “Yes, I think this is a good idea. You’ll have to work in a team eventually and I could get an early recommendation for the Chunin Exam.” “Really?”

“Yes. If our supervisor thinks I have the makings of a team leader, he can recommend me. If my own Jounin teacher for some reason thinks my team isn’t ready, I can enter the exams with a make shift team.” Or at least, that is what Iruka-sensei told her. The inner workings of a ninja village are complex and interesting. There are a thousand rules and regulations, but at the same time countless exceptions and loopholes for everything. Should her team fail the Jounin test, she could get an apprenticeship. She’d still have to wait around for a year, because a Genin needs to participate in D-rank missions with a Genin squad to enter the Chunin Exams, but it would count as an early specialization – in other words, the first step towards Tokubetsu Jounin. In some ways that route actually interested her more than possible years with a bunch of twelve-year-olds. She conveniently suppresses the thought, that she’d technically also be twelve. Admittedly though, most of the attraction stems from the idea of taking the Chunin Exams with Team 7. An apprenticeship would give her an excuse to be a Genin for three years; something that would surely make Sasuke lose all respect for her otherwise. Or at least open the door for a lot of mocking. “I know you don’t like Naruto very much…or Sakura for that matter. But do you at least believe me when I say I see something in them? Something special?”

He seems to consider this. Not seriously, because his mouth does that funny little quirk, the one he also gets when he humors little old civilian ladies, but finally he gives something vaguely resembling a nod. “Fine. But if they lag behind I’m not waiting for them.”

“Sure, sure. Don’t worry, I’ll kick their butts into shape. Maybe in the end you even want to keep them. Like pets. Naruto-chi and Sakura-chi; they already follow you around like puppies.” Note to self, she thinks, no team-jokes until there is a team. “Alright, alright. I already set them straight once, I can do it again if they bother you. Ito-sensei said she’d find me a supervisor by next week, you won’t have to deal with them for a while yet anyway.”

Naruto takes the news a lot more gracefully. Or, well, gracefully for Naruto. “SAKURA-CHAN? That’s great, dattebayo! Then she’ll finally see that I’m a great ninja already!” She doesn’t quite have
it in her to tell him, that Sakura would probably need a few more years until she even considered him anything but a nuisance. “If you really want to impress her, you better train hard. I already told her a ninja who doesn’t take their career seriously can go right home and stay there. She took that real seriously.”

The boy nods, eyes wide and earnest. “Of course – I’m gonna be Hokage, after all!”

Sasuke rolls his eyes but stays quiet. She wants to think it’s because he’s coming to tolerate the loud blonde, but it’s more likely that he simply hopes Naruto succeeds just to get Sakura out of his hair. She can’t really blame him right now.

The coming Monday Ito-sensei takes her aside. “I found someone for you. He’s a Tokubetsu Jounin, and he’s hoping this might get him into the Jounin Exams. So this will be mutually beneficial. He will wait for you after class at the dango-ya, you know the one, close to the Genin training grounds?”

“Yes.” Ito-sensei nods, pleased. “Official training starts only when you are sure you’ll get along or this might hurt your career more than it helps.” So that means she’s supposed to leave the others at home. It makes sense of course. She’s supposed to handle them, he’s supposed to handle her.

Having the three brats there, especially as volatile as they are now, would only complicate a tentative first meeting. She feels vaguely, ridiculously reminded of a first date. The impression only intensifies as she arrives, at 1400 hours on the dot at the dango shop, fiddling with her clothes, like the nervous school girl in whose body she currently resides. She looks around the dingy little shop. Is this already a test? Is she supposed to find him? “Yo.” She viciously suppresses the urge to jump. Whirling around Hisana comes face to face with – “What.”

Grinning at her, an empty dango stick dangling from his mouth, is Shiranui Genma.

“Not very observant, are you, little lady?”

She stares at him. ‘How do you know Ito-sensei?’ she wants to ask. ‘How in all the world does someone like Ito-sensei know you?’ – and what made her think this would be a good fit? “Come on”, he says, throwing his arm around her shoulder and dragging her away. “This shop is a dump, and I feel more like Okonomiyaki anyway. Hope you’re hungry.”

While the Manga never gave much information about Genma, or at least that she remembers, fanfiction tended to portray him as a womanizer. They were half right. As Genma sits down across from her, carelessly throwing around a beaming smile, he seems entirely oblivious to the chaos he’s causing. Or maybe used to it? To their left two waitresses are pinching and showing each other, not very subtly fighting for their table. A quiet ‘ouch!’ announces the victor. The leggy blonde flounces over to their table, as the busty red-head disappears with a pout into the kitchen. “May I take your order?” she asks, not sparing Hisana a glance. Genma beams at the girl. “A big pot of genmaicha with two cups. Talk first, then food.” The girl gives him a vaguely stupid looking smile, before snapping out of it. “Right away!” His smile doesn’t change an iota as he turns back to Hisana. Not a womanizer, she thinks. Just good-looking and a bit of an idiot. “So Osen tells me you want to train a team.” Hisana nods slowly. “Yes. I’ve trained Uzumaki Naruto for awhile now” – there is no reaction to Naruto’s name – “and recently my cousin Sasuke has gotten involved. They’re both very…headstrong and Iruka-sensei suggested I add a girl to try and balance them out. I’ve already asked Haruno Sakura and she agreed.”

Genma nods to himself. At this point the waitress returns with a truly humongous pot of tea. She deposits it on the table, along with the cups, and looks to Genma for approval. But the man is still lost in thought. The girl then turns to her, obviously seizing her up, weighting the chances whether or not she’s young enough to be his daughter and if being nice to her would make a difference. It wouldn’t, Hisana thinks amusedly, as Genma causally lifts the huge pot and pours them both tea without even acknowledging her. The waitress huffs and leaves. “I understand the boys”, he says, “but why Haruno? I already have all of your files and she’s
good, but is that all?” She can’t very well tell him ‘Oh, you know, in the future they’re supposed to be the next Sannin, so I thought I’d keep them together’. Yes, that would go over well. “I…already spoke to Sakura before. She liked to follow Sasuke around and I told her to concentrate more on her training instead. But” – here she winces – “she took me a little too seriously, maybe? I feel responsible now, because she’s not taking care of herself.” That, at least, wasn’t a total lie. “What did she do?” “She’s not eating properly. Last week I almost didn’t recognize her, she looks as if she’s about to keel over.” He considers this. “That does sound like a problem. But why not let the parents handle it? They surely noticed such a weight loss?” The problem with ninja, she thinks, is that they all think, everyone is a ninja. Civilians don’t seem to exist to them, outside of service personnel and the occasional grandma, who needs her gets her garden weeded as a D-rank mission. “I don’t think her parents are aware that there’s a difference between healthy civilian portions and healthy ninja portions. And Sakura herself insists she’s only ‘dieting’.” He frowns. “How old is she?” Hisana gives him a look. “Ok. So you plan on doing what exactly?” “Train her into the ground until she’s so hungry she has to eat?” He snorts. “And plan B?” “Sic Sasuke on her. I probably should talk to her parents, but then she’ll only get angry and still won’t learn anything. I made some sort of impression on her already; maybe if she sees how I’m eating, she’ll come around?”

Genma scratches his head. “This is really not a problem I thought I’d see on a team of seven-year-olds. But I guess your plan’s not so bad. You should also talk to Suzume-san. If it’s about being thin and girly, maybe her girly-make-up-teacher-thingy can do something. Do you have a plan for the team as a whole?”

She gives a vague nod. “I think they should all learn about working as a team. Right now they’re all solo fighters. Naruto’s stubborn, Sasuke’s proud, and Sakura would probably just trail after them as the third wheel. Of course I also want them to get better. Naruto’s useless in everything concerning theory and Sakura is useless in everything but theory. Sasuke is…well, I just want him to have a few friends.” It sounds a little pathetic, both for Sasuke and for her, but it’s true. The boy needs friends. And she is exactly the kind of overbearing relative to get some for him. “Did you already plan something concrete for the next weeks?” “Well, Iruka-sensei gave me a list of taijutsu styles that I wanted to test out with them. I currently have five at home to study them.”

“Well”, he says, “that all sounds pretty good to me. Food!”

Maybe she shouldn’t have doubted Ito-sensei’s judgment. The guy is weird and a smart ass, but he doesn’t treat her like a kid and it’s nice. They seem to click in a way that reminds her a little of Marie. When they part ways he ruffles her hair and promises to come by the next day to have a look at those taijutsu scrolls. Proper training would start at the end of the week.

“How’s the supervisor?” Sasuke asks as she comes through the door. Nosy. “Hello Sasuke, I had a lovely day. How are you?”

He huffs. “Nee-san. I just saw you a few hours ago. Who is the supervisor?” “His name is Shiranui Genma. You’ll meet him sometime tomorrow.” He makes a face, obviously hoping she’d reveal a little more – uuhh, no playing favorites. She’d have to ease him into the equal treatment. He’d already meet Genma half a week earlier than the rest of the team. She doesn’t like that either, but she couldn’t very well kick him out of the house.

As it turns out, she doesn’t have to. Instead of ringing the doorbell, like a normal person, Genma lets himself in through her bedroom window like a creep. He’s also an hour early and in full stealth mode, which is why she jumps about a meter into the air when he blurts out a noisy greeting. “Hey little lady! You got those scrolls ready?” The scream stays in her throat through sheer willpower, but
she does throw a scroll at him in shock. “Oh hey, I know that style”, he says cheerily, after opening it and peering at the contents. “That makes it easier.”

“What. are you doing? Do you always break into girls’ rooms?”

“Naw – you’re special!”

“And that’s not weird at all?!?”

“Calm down, you’re what – six?” – “Ten!” – “It’s not like I’d walk in on any funny business.” “I could have been changing!” “But you weren’t.”

He looks completely unapologetic, which annoys her even more. She wants to throw something else at his head, but there’s nothing physical in reach and she’s all out of arguments. The ass. He grabs some more scrolls from her desk and makes his way back over to her window. “I’ll wait for you on training ground four – we’ll see what of those you can do and then we figure out how you could teach the other brats. Hurry up, I want to get started!”

Five hours later, dusk is rapidly approaching, she’s crawling home. For all his vapid grinning and smart-aliacking, the guy is a slave driver. They’ve picked out two styles to start with, and the other three he’d teach her later; all different, just to see what the team likes best. The first is a bastardized version of the Juuken. It’s a flowing style that strikes with an open palm and targets mostly the inner organs. It’s full of liver strikes and shots to the throat and really nothing to teach a Genin, but she likes the thought of them knowing it for emergencies – for Zabuza specifically. The second one is full of locks and holds to break joints and bones. It’s far better for the Academy, because nothing says you have to overstretch your opponent so much that you actually break something. But for it to be effective you have to get very close to your opponent first, so it’s tricky. She already knows that none of them will be any good for Naruto, Sasuke will attempt to master both, just to make a point, and Sakura will probably take to the first one, but would eventually benefit more from the second. Hisana is partly pleased but also impatient. Things are progressing, even if just a little, and she’s more than ready for the day to be over. Of course she’ll first have to brave Sasuke’s wrath, because she denied him meeting Genma just yet.

Contrary to her expectations, Sasuke is not pouting. Instead he is sitting in the living room, with only a small lamp turned on and a book on his lap. Hisana is bizarrely and fondly reminded of her father waiting for her in exactly the same way once or twice. She half expects her little cousin to ask ‘where have you been, young lady?’. He doesn’t. What she gets instead is a supremely disappointed look, a specialty of her mother. Sasuke closes his book with a snap, pointedly turns off the lamp and goes to bed. She watches him bemusedly, wondering what the hell just happened.

*~*~

He may be younger than Nee-san, but Sasuke isn’t stupid. He wants to yell at her sometimes, because of a lot of reasons usually, but he doesn’t. Not after he realized, that Nee-san would never really understand why he did it. For his young age, Sasuke was also surprisingly self aware. Enough to know, that, yes, he was a brat occasionally, and yes, it was not fair to want his cousin all to himself. But even that, no matter how much he wanted to do otherwise, was something he mostly expressed through sulky silence and glares. What Nee-san doesn’t understand is, that the thing that makes him want to yell the most, is the fact that he worries about her, and there is really nothing he can do about it. Nee-san does whatever she wants, and if that means leaving, then she does just that.
And if there’s something that scares Sasuke more than anything, it’s people leaving him again. Unfortunately, lately Nee-san has been doing a lot of leaving.
“Eat”, Sasuke snaps irritably, “and stop being so annoying. If you break in half like the stick you are during training, you can go look for another team.”

Ouch, she thinks, watching her little cousin glare at Sakura unapologetically, even as she shrinks away tear eyed. He really is kind of an asshole. She’d say something, but talking to Sakura turned out to be very much like talking to a brick wall. “You took an hour longer than the deadlast for your run yesterday – we could have been training during that time.”

Meaning ‘I could have been training during that time’. Hisana made them wait for Sakura yesterday, hoping that the exhaustion and the disappointed looks of her teammates would snap her out of whatever diet nonsense she came up with. Instead the answer was ‘I’m a girl, of course I can’t run that fast or that long’. Sasuke did not take kindly to that. They’ve spend three meals together since then – lunch at Ichiraku’s, dinner at her and Sasuke’s house for team bonding reasons, and now lunch again – and Sasuke has taken to more or less force feed the girl. Hisana didn’t even have to say a thing.

It’s a bizarre mixture of bullying and care taking, and she wonders if that is what the whole team has to look forward to. Her included, once her cousin reaches that age. She already dreads the day he grows taller than her, because she clearly remembers a gaggle of younger cousins suddenly thinking they’d have to protect her from the whole world. She resolves to instill enough fear in him, that’d he’d think twice about that kind of nonsense.

She throws a helpless look towards the trees, where she knows Genma is hiding, like he has for the last three days. The team hasn’t sensed him, couldn’t possibly, and he’s made no move to introduce himself. The asshole probably enjoys her suffering right now. This is my team, she reminds herself, and then snatches the chopsticks with dumpling out of Sasuke’s hand, that he’d been holding in Sakura’s face. She cuffs him around the head and eats the dumpling herself. “I’ll be making your lunchboxes from now on”, she tells the girl. “And you better eat everything that’s in it.”

“What about me?”, Naruto asks hopefully. “Yes, yours too. But that means no Ramen for lunch anymore.”

He gawks at her. “Oh – oh, maybe not every day, Nee-chan. Just once a week. Or less.”

She’d make him lunch alright. He’d probably run to Ichiraku’s afterwards anyway, because, god can that boy eat, but she’ll stuff vegetables down his throat in any way she can.

She doesn’t really worry about money issues. It’s not as if they are particularly rich – a lot of the Uchiha money apparently consists of the district itself, currently closed off until she comes off age and decides otherwise. But apart from the rather generous stipends that are deposited onto their account every month, they are also the recipients of bribes of various natures. After she forcefully rejected the monetary ones, she finds that buying things on tabs usually means these tabs will not so mysteriously vanish every once in a while, paid with the best wishes of various clans. No opportunity for her to say no, and, from her perspective, therefore no reason to feel indebted.

Pulling a recently acquired cookbook from the kitchen shelve, she wonders if Sasuke ever realized he had this kind of power in the Manga, or if she’s special; a ruthless little brat with no compunctions about taking advantage of those trying to take advantage of her. *Kaarage*, she thinks, *salted salmon and cucumber*. Maybe she could make some potato salad this weekend, for next week. And of course Sasuke’s tomatoes. Or maybe some tofu? She’s not very good yet at the traditional Japanese cuisine that seems to dominate Fire Country. She thinks of Kiri and Iwa and wonders if they all eat the same. At least Suna seems as if it might be a little different, if simply because they don’t have
access to fish. She misses spaghetti.

The next morning she is actually rather proud of herself. The bentos look nice and she’d peeled a few apples as well. Even if she wouldn’t be making Naruto’s bentos every day, at least she could talk him into a few of those.

Or maybe she wouldn’t have to. After Sasuke passive aggressively forced Sakura to eat all of her food like a good little Kunoichi, they ganged up on Naruto. “If I have to do it, so do you”, the girl snarls, stuffing apple slices into her teammate’s face, while Sasuke looms over the blonde menacingly. “If you run, I’ll start feeding you”, he said.

“Now now kids”, Genma says, as he drops down from above them, making Naruto choke on his last piece of apple and startling the rest of them into undignified squawks. “I’m all for healthy food, but it’s bad form to stuff your teammate like Inarizushi. “And who are you?”, Sakura snaps, suddenly embarrassed. “I’m Shiranui Genma. I’m a Tokubetsu Jounin – you may call me Genma-sama.” All three of them give him a flat look. “Or senpai, that’s also fine.”

“This”, Hisana intervenes resignedly, “Is our supervisor, who finally decided to grace us with his presence. Took you long enough.”

Genma scratches the back of his head unabashedly. “Yes, well, you had it under control. And I’ve been around.” With a flourish he produces a scroll from behind his back. “Also”, he says, excitedly widening his eyes at her, “I brought a peace offering!”

She is going to kill him. It’s going to be their first proper mission as a team, she thinks. Kill Genma and make it look like an accident. The scroll he’d so cheerfully waved in their faces is indeed full of ‘missions’. Using the term lightly. Of course missions of any kind are only available for proper Genin squads, even D-rank ones. The tasks written down in Genma’s scroll are what the mission office desk unofficially dubs ‘E-rank missions’ – less physically taxing and incredibly low paying jobs that are usually rejected or used as a punishment for particularly misbehaving members of the Genin corps.

While D-rank missions usually consist of painting houses, babysitting kids or weeding large lots, E-rank missions center around bringing food for the elderly, scrubbing public property (especially toilets) or washing dishes. The latter of which they are currently doing. She kind of wanted to stay out of it, being the team leader and everything, partly because of laziness but mostly because she wanted team 7 to bond without her. The decision was taken out of her hands though, when one of the kitchen aids simply shoved an armful of dirty pots at her. “Wash this.”

Now her hands are wrinkly from the dirty water, there’s crusty food under her nails and she’s had to snap at the kids twice to stop any kind of water fight from happening. Genma, meanwhile, is sitting in the front of the restaurant, eating dumplings and drinking hot sake. “They’re your team”, he said, “I’ll come running if anything explodes.” He’d then been escorted out of the kitchen by a simpering waitress.

“Naruto”, she snaps without turning around, “you throw that sponge and I’ll throw you.”
“Eeh...Hisa-nee, I d-didn’t-” “Don’t lie, baka”, Sakura cuts him off. “You’ll only make it worse!”
The girl speaks from experience. Not fifteen minutes ago she insisted that no, she didn’t just dunk Naruto’s head into the dish water. She got bopped on the head twice for it – once for picking on her teammate, once for lying to her team leader.
Team 7’s dynamic is a strange one. They seem to get along well enough outside of training and ‘missions’, but add a little stress to the equation and things get explosive. Training is already a challenge for Hisana, but this is a little too much for her still. It’s probably one of the best means of improving team work, but it is also one of the most taxing.

Reading the Manga it was always easy to judge Kakashi for being kind of a bad teacher. ‘I’d do this differently, and that – and I’d handle this so much better’. The truth is though, that team 7 is a bunch of brats and dealing with them 24/7 is eating away at her patience. Adding another five years to their age will change nothing, but substitute some of their immaturity with a dangerous cocktail of hormones.

After a week of this they’ve settled into a more or less comfortable routine. They meet after classes, at 2 pm, where she deals out the lunches. They force some vegetables down Naruto’s throat until 2:30 pm. Genma picks them up at 2:45 and escorts them into town to do something tenuous and embarrassing in exchange for money. At 5 pm there’s team training, followed by dinner at around 7, sometimes as a team, mostly on their own.

A well-rounded timetable for a Genin, but sadly not the end of Hisana’s day. Her promise to Iruka-sensei still rings in her ears. ‘Don’t let your grades drop’. Her head is in it, but her body is steadily pushed past its limits. “You know”, Genma remarks, “I admire your dedication, but maybe you should take a day off a week. The brats can train on their own and you won’t do a Nara and fall asleep in class.”

“You just don’t want Ito-sensei to lay into you.”

“And there’s that.”

A free day does seem nice, but if there’s one thing she knows about herself, it’s that she won’t be able to enjoy it. Free time means time to over think things. There doesn’t seem to be a choice though. “Go home.”

Sakura’s skinny arms cross over her unimpressively skinny chest. “You need to sleep. You lost weight and you look like crap”, she blurts out. The determined glare doesn’t do a thing to make her look menacing, not when the word ‘crap’ seems to sit so badly with her, blush crawling blotchily all over her big forehead. Hisana’s eyebrows rise without her consent. Lost weight? Oh the bitter-sweet taste of irony. She looks towards the boys. Sasuke squints at her unhappily, while Naruto looks back and forth between his teammates, trying to imitate both of them at once and ending up looking rather constipated instead.

“Did Genma-senpai put you up to this?”

There’s a guilty silence, before Sasuke says “No.”

So, yes.

It’s a little endearing how they seem to be unable to lie, but it’s probably not such a good thing for a ninja. They’d have to work on that.

So Hisana turns around, decidedly not pouting, and goes home.

It becomes a theme. Once a week the team refuses to work with her and sends her home. They probably already know they’re going to regret this. Hisana’s not used to so much free time anymore and so she keeps busy by sticking her nose into her team’s private lives. She ‘broke’ into Naruto’s
apartment, which wasn’t even locked, and threw away most of the contents of his fridge, consisting solely of spoiled milk, a single carrot and a lump of moldy cheese, took his ramen hostage and spring cleaned everything - a mild summer temperature of 35 degrees Celsius, inside and outside of the creaky old building.

She spent two Thursdays shopping for acceptable training attire with Sakura, lecturing her on the importance of proper skin coverage.

She even haunted Genma until he agreed to pay a little visit to Haruno-san. This turns out to be unnecessary.

Haruno Sayuri is a tiny woman with shiny blonde hair and forest green eyes. She is wearing a nice, half-formal Kimono as she approaches them on Friday afternoon with tiny, dainty steps. Hisana wonders if binding feet is a thing in the Shinobi Nations.

“Good evening, everyone.”

Even her voice is tiny and sweet. Dear god, is this what Sakura has to live up to?

Haruno-san bows deeply. “My name is Haruno Sayuri, very pleased to meet you. If you don’t mind I would very much like to take lunch with you.”

This is going to be great. There’s cold sweat breaking out on the back of her neck and as she turns to Genma – perhaps in the vain hope he would tell her no – she can see that his smile has turned very fixed. “Ah, uh – Haruno-san! Of course!” She scrambles for something a dignified Uchiha might say. “Please sit! We will be with you shortly.”

This woman is already making her feel inadequate, with the way she daintily unfolds a blanket onto the grass and sits down, elegant like a geisha. Sakura has turned faintly green. She’s not sure whether it’s because her mother is going to witness her being very unlady-like, or because she’s aware of the effect Haruno Sayuri has on other women. The way her eyes dart between Hisana and her mother strongly suggests both.

As much as she’d sometimes love to whack all of them, there are times when tiny glimpses of Team 7’s potential shine through and those make it all worth it. Hisana doesn’t know if anyone else can see it, but right now it’s clear as day to her. Training isn’t as much of a disaster as she’d feared. Sakura is still darting nervous glances every once in a while at her mother, but the casual way her team had dismissed the woman seemed to calm her as much as it surprised her. The girl’s match with Naruto is constantly moving in circles and absorbs therefore most of her attention. Halfway through Genma has started circling them in turn, and Hisana only needs a minute to understand what he’s doing: whenever Sakura looks as if her attention wanders to her mother, he moves to block her view. Sakura seems caught between relief and annoyance at it and instead comforts herself with quick glances at Sasuke, whose eyes are firmly on his teammates.

She wonders if anyone ever picked Sakura over her mother.

She wonders if anyone ever picked Sakura over anyone at all.

We’re your team, she wants to snap at her. Stop being like this, stop being so afraid. But Sakura is only seven years old.
Thank god I'm over my dryspell. I don't know how long this burst of creativity is going to last, so let's all enjoy it while we can! With added snippet from Sakura's pov.

She thinks about cutting training short, only to get lunch over with, but ends up drawing it out instead. Sakura is jumpy and her strange behavior is making the boys nervous. She hopes wearing them out will keep them from doing anything stupid. Of course nothing has ever kept Naruto from doing something stupid.

“You’re a real pretty lady”, he tells Haruno-san, rudely pointing with his chopsticks at her. Sakura’s carrot snaps in half between her fingers.

“Thank you very much”, the woman says with a small polite bow of her head, picking up a bit of plain rice und eating it without a single grain tumbling onto her kimono. Even her food is pretty; fruit and vegetables arranged in colorful little flowers.

Five more bentos sit next to her, right were the brats had disregarded them in favor for her ugly but nutritious ones.

Genma’s eyes keep flying back and forth between Haruno-san und Naruto, obviously anticipating disaster but unable – or unwilling, the asshole – to prevent it.

Sasuke seems to find his lunch most interesting. The way he keeps conscientiously shoving food into his mouth makes her think he, too, wants to badly say something that they’ll all end up regretting. “But you know”, Naruto keeps going, “I don’t think you should turn up for training anymore.” Haruno-san’s chopsticks freeze about a centimeter before her mouth, before she lowers them back into her bento. “What makes you say that, Uzumaki-kun?”

Sakura and Sasuke have frozen as well, and Hisana can feel a piece of salmon fall right out of her mouth. It lands on her pants with a soft ‘flup’.

“I don’t like how you make Sakura sad.”

Oh. Ouch.

Said girl looks as if she’s about to have an aneurysm, or maybe give Naruto one. She opens her mouth, but Sasuke silences her by sticking more rice into it. With his chopsticks. The poor girl faints.

Her cousin doesn’t even seem to notice, he’s far too absorbed in the drama going down on their little pink picnic blanket. “Sad?” she asks mildly, but there’s something calculating in her eyes. So that’s where Sakura gets it from.

“Yeah”, the blond continues, totally oblivious. “She’s been weird since you came. I don’t like it.”

She should really be saying something. “Haruno-san”, she hears her own voice say, “I think we should have a quick talk after lunch.” Why did she say that? Oh yes, because she’s the team leader and that lady would have punted the little punk right across town if he told her she couldn’t see her
daughter.

She might be small and dainty, but her fingernails were efficiently and brutally short and she was currently putting enough pressure on her pretty metal chopsticks to bend them just the slightest bit. “It’s about Sakura’s progress”, she adds a little helplessly. Haruno-san’s eyes turn to her. The grip on her chopsticks eases. “Yes, of course. Let’s enjoy lunch first.”

Sakura is out for the rest of lunch.

“She’s ahh – tired. Just taking an nap!”, Genma assures her mother. “We’ll give her five more minutes, then we’ll get the bucket. Ah- I mean…we’ll gently rouse her from slumber. Like you should do with a lady. Yes.”

She sends the boys on a run around the training ground and carefully steps over Sakura towards her mother. After a moment of hesitation Genma joins them.

“I understand”, Haruno-san begins carefully, “that somehow my cooking has become insufficient?” She looks at the bentos still lying next to them, unopened. “Not your cooking, Haruno-san.” This is terrifying, she thinks. The woman doesn’t look much older than her sister used to be, and she’s treated her sister’s friends with much less respect. She’s a nineteen years old (and a half, by now), why is this so scary? She refuses to be intimidated by beautiful people. Maybe, she muses, it’s the height difference. Physically looking up to someone always makes you feel weird.

“It’s not your cooking”, she repeats, a little more confidently. “But Sakura has this…notion, that she needs to diet. I’ve tried to talk her out of it, but she won’t hear it. I find it much easier to simply control what she eats for a while, until she understands. I meant to speak with you about it earlier, actually.”

The woman raises a delicate eyebrow. “Notion? So you do not approve? That a young lady has to take care of herself?”

“Kunoichi take care of themselves differently than civilian women.”

She seems to consider this. “Frankly, I consider this kunoichi business to be the notion. She will grow out of it eventually. I only fear that by that time, she will be too old to marry a good man. The diet I have her on is appropriate for a girl her age and weight. It’s only meant to get her used to watching her food intake, so that, when she comes to her senses, it won’t be so difficult to change her habits.”

Yes, she kind of suspected that. Haruno Sayuri couldn’t project more of a conservative aura if she stamped ‘TRADITIONAL’ onto her forehead. Her small and pretty forehead. Another thing that Sakura has not inherited from her mother, besides her lovely blonde hair and charming, airy voice. Yes, she thinks, keep talking like that.

The more she dislikes the woman, the easier it seems to grasp onto that Uchiha arrogance. She gives the woman a smile that feels more like a sneer.

“Haruno-san, I understand you are worried about your daughter. But as long as she is a kunoichi, I can promise you, I am very well versed in what she needs. My education covers many areas that a regular civilian has no possibility of knowing. A kunoichi knows best, what a kunoichi needs.”

Yes, so she’s basically implied that the woman is uneducated and can’t care for her daughter. Genma’s face in unmoving, but he feels distinctly scandalized. Haruno-san’s eyes narrow. “But sweetheart”, she croons, and it’s not a very nice tone, “you aren’t even a real kunoichi yet.”
Stupid *cow*- “And yet”, Genma finally cuts in, “she’s absolutely correct. Sakura’s height and mental
capacity are superior to those of her peers. And yet she is unable to build up the same muscle mass as
them. This can only be explained by illness or insufficient nutrition.” Pick one, Hisana thinks a little
meanly. Did you let your daughter get *sick* or do you not *feed* her enough. “Uchiha-kun is the best
ninja in her year” – is she? – “as is Uchiha Sasuke-kun. She has them both in top form. Your
daughter is in capable hands.”

The woman’s lips thin in anger, because there’s nothing she can say. Genma is a real ninja, and as
Sakura mentions every once in a while, her father is very much in favor of her being a ninja and
‘getting the foolishness out of her head while she’s young, Sayuri, please. Let the girl’.

“Fine.”

It does not sound ‘fine’.

“Fine, I will keep my advice and my motherly care to myself. She would have been grateful in a few
years, I hope you can bear being responsible when no man wants to marry her anymore.”

With that she turns away, a little less graceful and a little more rumpled and bitter, and leaves. Her
things are still all over the grass; the pink picnic blanket and the bentos, uneaten and by now warmed
by the sun. ‘How childish’, she muses. Haruno-san seemed so elegant and feminine. This is just
bratty and girlish.

Genma scratches his head. “Civilian woman don’t need to grow up like kunoichi. They bat their eyes
a little, get married, pop out some children and spend the rest of their lives being pampered. I’m
pretty sure nobody’s ever told that woman no.”

He claps her on the shoulder. “That was touch-and-go for a while, but you did well. Sakura you can
stop pretending to sleep now.”

Startled, Hisana whips around. Sakura is indeed already sitting up, looking a little sad and a little
sheepish at being caught. “I’ll leave you to it”, Genma says. “I’ll pick up the boys to get some food.
Meet you at Ichiraku’s.”

“Do you think…she’s right?” Sakura asks after a long silence. “That nobody will want me?”

Hisana ponders this for a while. “Civilians? Probably not.”

Sakura’s face falls. “You have too little faith in yourself. What would you care about civilian men? I
don’t think you’ll ‘get over it’ and quit. I think you’ll be a great kunoichi.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really. And as a kunoichi, you won’t want a civilian. You need a ninja, someone to keep up
with you. A Jounin – at least.”

Sakura nods fiercely. “At least.”

At Ichiraku’s Naruto is already at his fourth bowl. “Ne, ne, Sakura-chan, Nee-chan! What took you
so long?”
“Just a little talk”, Hisana says with a vague smile.

“Talk about what?!?”

“Mind your own business, idiot”, Sakura snaps. “Sasuke-kun, will you feed me again~?”

“What am I, your nanny?”

They bicker. Food flies. Some lands in the right mouths, most of it not. All in all, it’s been a good day, she thinks.

Hisana is, by nature, a problem solver. There is, however, one problem that she’s been valiantly trying to ignore.

“Everyone, please partner up”, Ito-sensei calls, silencing them with a sharp clap of her hands. “We will be holding mock tournaments next week, two versus two.”

Hisana looks around. She doesn’t know the name of even a single of her classmates.

There’s boisterous laughter as two boys partner up to her left, giggling behind her as two girls link arms. Of course being an Uchiha has garnered her a few admirers, but nothing like the faithful entourage Sasuke sports. She’s ‘the older one’, ‘the scary one’; boys admire her from afar, girls generally don’t like her very much.

It’s mostly younger students who think she’s the bee’s knees – or they do until team 7 throws a bitch-fit and scares them off.

“You’re not going to take **another team**, right?” Naruto asked suspiciously a few weeks ago. “You’re too busy with **us**, right? You don’t have time for other teams. And we are awesome, so you don’t need one either.”

This sentiment was echoed by the rest of the team. “Nee-san, you don’t spend enough time at home. Where are you going at night?” – “Nee-san, Ino-pig wants to go shopping with you, too! You won’t right? I tore my leggings, you have to come with me!”

They’re incredibly needy and usually she doesn’t mind. Making team 7 into a proper family is after all her main goal. But they do make it a little complicated to have other relationships.

Not that they are the sole cause of her social isolation.

Sarah was awkward. It was her superpower. She was Awkward Girl. She would have deserved a suit even, in rust red and yellow and printed on her chest – an aardvark.

There is a reason why Evie was her only friend. Hisana is, at least on the inside, still the same person. Yes, her head has gotten a little bigger, because, frankly, she’s a genius and it’s hard not to feel a little superior, but that hasn’t made her better with people. Whereas she used to be nervous because she felt inferior, she now feels annoyed because people have turned out to be ninety percent idiots. She’s not stuttering anymore, now she notices other people stutter and it’s annoying.

She’s vaguely aware that she should probably be more sympathetic – god knows it would have helped her if someone had been more sympathetic – but she can’t bring herself to. She loves team 7, and maybe Genma and Ito-sensei, but everyone else just seems so unimportant and not worth the trouble. They all say the same things, do the same things and after a while they all start to look the
same.

Is this what Sasuke felt like, this complete apathy? It’s a terrible feeling but she doesn’t know how to shake it.

“Hey, you want to be partners?” someone chirps at her right. She whirls around, thinking, for a second, that the question is directed at her. “No”, comes the rather rude answer. A blonde girl shrinks into herself. “I-I just thought…”

But the other girl isn’t even looking at her, she’s looking at Hisana. Dark hair, dark eyes, hands in her pockets and mouth turned down in annoyance. A Nara.

“You”, she says. “Let’s partner up.”

Hisana’s reaction is at this point reflex. “No”, she says, “I already have a partner.” Her hand shoots out, randomly grabbing one of the girls to her right.

She doesn’t want to get involved with a Nara. The very last thing she needs right now is a Nara. She can barely keep up her façade as it is; if someone were to poke and prod at all the holes in her story, it would fall like a house of cards. ‘Who are your parents? Why didn’t they kill you too? What do you remember? Why do you not talk to your old friends anymore?’

The girl raises an eyebrow.

“Yes”, it comes slowly from where her hand is clamped down on a lot of cloth. “Apologies, Nara.”

Hisana slowly turns around and comes face to face with a pair of sunglasses.

~*~*~*~*~*

It hurts sometimes, it really does. She knows her mother loves her, wants only what’s best for her. But hearing it so plainly breaks something important between them.

‘No man will want to marry her anymore.’

Every girl dreams of her prince to come one day, take one look at her and know she’s his princess. Even Ino does. ‘He will be a ninja-prince’, she used to say. ‘A Jounin.’

She has no doubt that Ino will one day get her Jounin – she’s pretty and smart and she isn’t afraid to go out and get what she wants herself. Sakura wants to be like that.

That’s why she wanted to be a ninja, she wanted to be like Ino.

When she told her mother, it was the first time in her life that she felt she had somehow disappointed her. ‘A lady does not chase men. A lady lets men chase her.’

It’s a terrible feeling, disappointing her mother. So she puts up with the diet, even if she likes cake so much. She drinks water and green tea without honey, when classmates drink fruit juice. Her mother teaches her to memorize things, poems mostly, even though it also helps with class, and how to dress. On some level she knows it’s holding her back. But it’s her mother – the thought that she could be wrong is inconceivable.
The picture she had in her mind, being as beautiful as her mother and as strong as Ino, it shatters the
day Nee-san takes her aside. ‘You’re too thin.’

It’s just a single sentence, but it’s the beginning of the end.
Oh my god, it’s so hard to find proper names for all these clan people. There will be Yamanakas and Naras and all in this story but there are only so many names that start with Ino- and Shika-

Even in canon there are some that don’t but that kind of feels like cheating. If anyone has suggestions I’d be more than happy to hear them.

Hisana is in love.

Aburame Shizuha is a complete and utter weirdo, like almost everyone in her clan. She’s quiet but not shy, always trying to quip up in a conversation with what she assumes to be appropriate.

“Sasuke-kun is so cute! I wish he was a little older.” – “Uchiha-kun is visually pleasing, but his character is egocentric and overbearing.”

“Don’t talk like that about him! He might be my boyfriend anyway!” – “Unlikely. Experience has shown that visually pleasing people prefer other, equally visually pleasing, people. Mizuna-san’s nose is more than 40 % bigger than is averagely considered attractive.”

“Stop that”, she finally snapps. “Sasuke is not going to be anyone’s boyfriend. You go away, and you, don’t get involved in these discussions!”

Situations like these are momentarily uncomfortable, but they have gifted Shizuha with a reputation that keeps even Nara at a distance. For now. But she’s grateful for every day the Aburame continues to be ‘a drag’.

She glares until the other girl scampers away and then grabs a handful of Shizuha’s coat and leads her towards one of the designated sparring areas. “We’re not going to train here.”

The girl nods slowly. “Agreed. Unnecessary exposure to the enemy must be avoided.”

Hisana eyes the girl, but between the high collar and her sunglasses there’s nothing to read on her face. “Genin training ground four, tonight. We can discuss our styles and how to work together.”

“Acceptable.”

Shizuha boasts three styles. The Burning Leaf style, which she confesses to dislike because of the same reasons Naruto does, a weird style called Weaving Wind that consists solely of evasive maneuvers, and the Aburame style. The last of them has Hisana a little envious.

It’s an understated style, full of minute but precise movements. During their spar Shizuha keeps incredibly close to her, dodging by only millimeters. It doesn’t allow for much strength in her punches, but it gets her so far into Hisana’s defense that she can easily reach several of her danger zones; liver, throat and solar plexus. “No room for powerful hits for either of us”, she explains. “We are a ninjutsu clan, in brute strength we are always outclassed. Either we keep so much distance that
they can’t catch us, or we go in far enough to arrest their momentum.”

While this is all very impressive, it poses a problem. “We’re both short range fighters.”

Shizuha nods. “I can attempt to serve as the long range part of our team, but my control over the Kikai is tenuous still. I will have to rely on bukijutsu.”

The thought doesn’t sit well with Hisana. Kunai and shuriken are all well and good, but they are only knives. Good to kill someone, but not enough to knock someone off your comrade. Of course nobody would be killed during an Academy tournament. She suspects they will not be allowed to use them at all. Her hesitance must show on her face.

Shizuha pushes her glasses up her nose. “Demonstrate your favored style please, I will analyze.”

And so she does.

The girl is strange; awkward, blunt and oftentimes vaguely insulting, but she’s also quite brilliant, Hisana thinks. She runs through a series of katas and feels herself relax. The movements are almost meditative and it feels nice not having to solve the problem by herself for once. It should be weird, it occurs to her, to show a stranger her style. Is it because she’s not a proper Uchiha? Whatever that might mean? It didn’t feel strange with Naruto and it doesn’t feel strange now either. It’s nothing that couldn’t be gleaned by watching her practice. And they might have to compete in exams, but they are still from the same village. This might be something to ask Genma. Though Shizuha didn’t hesitate to her the Aburame style either. Maybe it’s a case of ‘show me yours and I’ll show you mine’? The thought vaguely amuses her.

At the end of her demonstration she is in a better mood and a little out of breath. Shizuha is quiet for a moment longer before nodding decisively. “A suggestion:…”

They try it out against team 7.

“Ok”, Sakura says carefully. “You against us? Do you think that’s fair?”

“No”, says Hisana, in the same tone of voice. “We are only trying this out. This is not about winning or losing.”

Shizuha rights her glasses. “Correct.”

“Want me to watch?” Genma asks, scratching the back of his head.

Hisana hesitates. “…Honesty, while commendable, does not serve the purpose of a ninja”, the Aburame says quietly. “Fine, ok. Tell us if we’re on to something.”

Boy, are they on to something.

Defeating a team of seven-year-olds is not a big feat, but the way they do it has her almost snickering with glee. The Aburame style, while designed to move with the enemy, sharpens reflexes to such a fine point that they are also able to move with their partner, in a way that the Sharingan will one day allow Hisana. They stick together closely, to pose the smallest possible target. Hisana herself leads, while Shizuha shadows her closely, hands and feet darting out from under her arms, beside her neck, over her head, blocking and hitting as if she had two pairs of arms and legs; Hisana’s body shielding Shizuha, Shizuha’s quick hands shielding her. They flatten team 7.
They practice in a moderate tempo against Genma, who thinks them to be hilarious. “If it looks stupid but works, it isn’t stupid”, he says. “That doesn’t mean I’ll ever let you live this down.”

They glare at him and decide that the weirdness of the technique is completely irrelevant.

Sasuke is watching them attentively. That’s right, she thinks, when we both develop the Sharingan we’ll be able to do this too. He’ll be able to do this with all of his teammates. She has a vision of her cousin darting back and forth between Naruto and Sakura, diverting and redirecting punches and projectiles, followed by a rather ridiculous one of Naruto doing this with a bunch of clones, stepping onto each other’s feet and randomly bursting into poofs of smoke. She snorts.

There is much amusement to be had at the beginning of their first fight as well.

Akimichi Choumei, a short, fat boy and Yamanaka Inoko, an equally short girl with dark hair instead of the typical Yamanaka blonde, are both full of hot air. Without a Nara they are unable to pin them down. The match barely starts, and it’s already obvious. “Just you wait”, Choumei boasts, “we’ll flatten you in no time!”

His hand shoot out with such strength that Hisana is sure she could feel it approaching with her eyes closed. But he’s also slow. His fist misses her by almost five centimeters; Shizuha doesn’t even feel the need to get involved. They duck together, her teammate’s forehead pressed against her shoulder. She knows Shizuha’s eyes are closed. There is no need to be proactive yet, and it’s easier to feel her movements than to try and follow them visually.

The first few times Shizuha just follows her there are jeers about the coward hiding behind her teammate, but then they gain momentum.

The Akimichi-Yamanaka duo is clumsy and awkward still, Choumei trying to protect Inoko, and Inoko too hesitant to use proper violence. Two times she can feel Shizuha following her a beat too slowly, a perfect opening. But Inoko hesitates and by the time Choumei has reacted Hisana can feel an arm closing around her middle and yanking her out of the way. The next blunder costs Inoko. Hisana lands a blow against her throat; the girl chokes and is waved out of the fight by Ito-sensei. In the end they simply outlast Choumei. His stamina is surprising for a boy of his weight, but they are too quick for him and land repeatedly blows against his solar plexus, until something cracks. Ito-sensei ends the match when he starts crying.

There is still laughter when they have their second match, but it’s significantly quieter. After winning the third and fourth and fifth there is only silence and staring.

Ito-sensei still looks amused but also a little proud. It doesn’t even matter, that the Nara-Hyuuga team finally kicks their ass.

“This was enjoyable”, Shizuha says, massaging the bruises on her arm, left behind by the Juuken. “There is no shame in our loss.”

“No, there isn’t”, she agrees. The Aburame girl bows to her. “For now I will have to report to father, he is very anxious about our placement. I hope we can continue our friendly relations.”

Then she turns around and leaves. Weird kid, she thinks a little fondly. Still better than Nara.

“Yeah…that”, it comes unexpectedly from behind her, where Nara Shiki is leaning against the door frame, gesturing vaguely with her finger, “I want in on that.”
So, disaster postponed, not avoided.

She knows there is some sort of unspoken law that you don’t antagonize a Nara, because, no matter how lazy they are, they will doggedly pursue and crush you if you do.

Nara Shiki does not like being told ‘no’.

“I have decided”, she declares, “that the pros of an association with you outweigh the cons.”

“And I want that.” She gestures in the direction where Shizuha vanished not ten minutes ago. “You want Aburame? You can have her.” She likes the girl, but not that much.

Nara sighs. “Don’t play dumb, Uchiha. What a drag. You know who I’m going to be paired off with come graduation?”

“Officially? With whomever’s scores correspond with yours. Unofficially? Probably a Yamanaka and an Akimichi.”

“That’s right. Inoko’s probably not going to make it, but Choumei will. There’s Yamanaka Inomaru in Suzume-sensei’s class. I know them, we grew up together. They are like my own flesh and blood, but they’re also idiots. Who do you think is going to do all the planning, all the thinking and strategizing for the rest of our natural lives and then has to justify herself for it?”

She looks frustrated. “I want that”, she says, repeating the gesture a little more firmly. “The getting it and just doing it.”

She flops down on the bench next to Hisana, eyes fixed onto the ceiling, and with an unhappy frown. “Genin teams aren’t forever. I don’t want to be the only thinking one forever.”

This is so dangerous. But she gets it. It’s what makes her actually consider Shizuha’s offer of ‘friendly relations’. These girls are significantly younger than her, but they are the closest she can get to intellectual equals right now. The thought of keeping that around is…exciting. She feels like she’s been living wrapped up in cotton for the past few months; everything is dull and boring. This is not boring and she thinks, maybe, she can keep it.

She’s far more reluctant to introduce Shiki to team 7 than she was with Shizuha.

They are both quiet, passive observers, but the Aburame seems to be more familiar with the concept of ‘not your business’. She takes note, accepts it, and then files it away until further notice. Shiki takes note and picks it apart until she has all components neatly isolated. She won’t say anything either, but things are gradually added and lined up, that, when she decides to comment, it’s a fully developed and logical argument that you can’t lie your way out of.

The Nara is aware of her own flaws but uninterested in changing them.

She’s not pleased that Shizuha receives what appears to be preferential treatment but she also knows that their relationship is currently on thin ice, and that she’ll simply have to deal with it.

Naruto takes to their newest addition with fervor. Apart from a detached comment about the boy’s shaky standing in the village, Shizuha has shown no interest in antagonizing him. She calls him by his first name, which, rude, but it makes the blond so happy, that he keeps bothering ‘his new friend’
for a super ninja technique for the rest of the week. The Aburame takes it in stride and shows him how to balance a kunai on his nose.

Sasuke watches her warily for a while. Hisana wants to make fun of him for thinking every girl is out to get him, but he’s not wrong exactly, so she really can’t blame him. Once he decides that Shizuha is no danger to his virtue, he accepts her with a casual indifference that only Sasuke can pull off.

When Sasuke relaxes, Sakura does, too. Sizing her up as competition is an exercise in futility, as none of them have any idea what her face actually looks like, and thanks to her baggy clothes Sakura can tell herself that she’s at least, probably, slimmer than Shizuha.

She doesn’t actually care what Genma thinks, he’s still in the doghouse.

And while Hisana is busy carefully introducing her new acquaintance to the wolf pack, so to speak, it’s actually the team that decides careful is overrated.

“Look!” Naruto crows, “I brought your friend!”

It’s not Shizuha, it’s Nara Shiki.

The girl’s face mirrors her own; dispassionate dread and helplessness. She wanted to be introduced, but this was probably not what she had in mind.
Next chapter - finally:
I really like this fic. It's fun to write because I love world building and there's nothing like an OC-insert to point out things that would be totally obvious and ordinary to a normal Konoha citizen.

No team 7 in this one though - sorry!

They must make for a strange sight, she thinks. Three prodigies sitting under a tree, not talking to each other. The teachers are certainly looking at them as if they are already anticipating some sort of catastrophe.

Hisana is reasonably proud that their catastrophes are usually confined to training ground four, where they have been attempting to integrate Shiki into the fragile balance of their technique. It's been a bust so far, mainly because the Nara has no taijutsu skills to speak of.

"I trap people", she said. "It's what Naras do. They come too close, I trap them, one Akimichi or another bowls them over."

"This could severely hinder your career", Shizuha pointed out.

"Have you ever heard of a Nara doing any high profile missions? We rarely go farther than Chuunin. The only Nara Jounin I know of is the head of our clan and knowing him, it was more of an accident. I'm probably going to be an Academy teacher or some such."

That was three days ago.

"You could try a weapon", Hisana ventures.

"That would mean looking for a mentor", the Nara complains.

"It is highly probable that you Jounin instructor will be able to provide you with assistance", Shizuha interjects. Shiki gives her a lazy thumbs-up. "Awesome. Remind me again next year."

She closes her eyes, but before she can nod off Hisana gives her calf a half-hearted kick.

"You wanted 'in', now you're 'in'. And that means no slacking off, Nara."

"Fine, fine. You find me an instructor and I'll do it."

Which is, of course, not how it works. No self-respecting ninja will take on a student who couldn't even be bothered to ask for training themselves. Shiki's self satisfied smirk says she knows it too.

Nara Shiki's slacker tendencies aside, classes and her social life are working out pretty well so far. Team 7 is not in any danger of self destructing at any given moment anymore and the two friends she's – accidently – made are enough to keep her busy for now, so Hisana has gone back to comfortable disregard and ignorance of her classmates and the general populace. It's all in all a nice way to live, she decides. There's no way to know who of them might become important, who of them might be her Genin team at some point and who would be a complete waste of time, so she's waiting it out until graduation. It's probably not the best method, but neither of the girls makes any
move to do better and so she feels a little vindicated.

"You're all from the Noble Clans", Sakura reminds her one day. "Everyone wants to be friends with you, so you don't need to bother. But you also have to be careful."

"She is correct", Shizuha says, flicking her glasses further up her nose. "Otou-san cautions me regularly to be mindful with whom I associate. There are many…social parasites."

"Which is why I don't bother at all", Shiki adds. "Our clan basically comes with friends pre-made. Dad just grabbed his old teammates and said 'Guys, I made a girl – we need two boys now' and that was that."

Hisana snorts. "Really?"

"Yeah, Yamanaka Inoto-san insists that's pretty much exactly how it went down."

"We usually stay among ourselves", Shizuha muses, "which makes you an oddity."

In hindsight, this should have set her alarms off so hard.

"Sasuke, what is this?"

There's a fancy scroll lying on their kitchen table. It has strange ornamental seal on the side – in gold – and is bound together by a fancy looking crimson cord.

"A strange guy dropped it off", he says, trying for non-chalance and missing by a mile. "Glasses, high collar, I didn't ask."

Aburame. "Nee-san, what is this about?"

She unwraps the cord and presses a small burst of chakra into the pretty gold seal, just like they taught her in the Academy. It glows and reveals a pictogram of an insect.

"Is this a formal summons by the Aburame?"

Sasuke sticks his head out from under her arm.

"Don't be so nosy."

It is indeed a formal summons. Tea it says, but she is pretty sure 'tea' is not actually what it's about. "You better wear a Kimono", Sasuke smirks. "I remember those 'teas'. Okaa-sama and Otou-sama had them for Nii-san's teammates."

Her eyes snap upwards. She can't help but intently search his face for something, but there's only the smirk and a strange sort of wistfulness. Does he really not know anything?

"Oh yeah?" she asks nonsensically. Her mouth feels dry.

"They want to know why you're interested in one of them. I heard they don't even usually work with outsiders because most people can't stand their Kikai."

"Well…then you better help me buy one. I don't know a thing about formal kimonos."

Or kimonos in general, really.

Despite Sasuke's repeated protest, there's nothing much he can do to deter his cousin and so he ends
up dragged along for the ride. He huffs and complains, but finally insists, that she buy a half-formal, light blue one with white flowers because 'now you look like Okaa-sama'.

For a lack of experience Hisana can neither confirm nor deny that, but in Sasuke's choice she looks less like a doll and more like a proper person.

The saleswoman who got involved about half way through doesn't look very happy about it. "Uchiha-san, the pink one suited you so well! You have such pretty pale skin, like a doll…"

Hisana's carefully maintained blank façade slips into an unwilling grimace.

"Thank you Oba-san. I prefer this one."

The woman looks as if she's about to protest, but Sasuke cuts her off.

"Nee-san, I will gather your things while you change."

They both resolutely turn around, Hisana vanishing into the dressing room, Sasuke marching ahead to the cash register. The saleswoman follows him helplessly.

Hisana glares at the mirror the whole time while undressing. It's true, she'd admired her face the first few times she looked into the mirror. *It's nothing to be ashamed of*, she thinks, a little embarrassed anyway. Sarah's face always looked a little too masculine, with a square jaw and a prominent nose. She wasn't ugly, but men didn't usually look twice at her.

Part of her now takes a certain amount of glee in knowing that they would, this time around. A bigger part of her though feels vaguely threatened and a little helpless. It's already hard to be treated like a child when you're actually not. The last thing she needs is for them to take her even less seriously because she looks cute.

Everything about her face is exaggerated; the big eyes, the lips, the eyelashes. She scowls at her face – the same expression Sasuke wears when cornered by Ino and her friends. She thinks of cutting off her hair, to make her look a little more edgy maybe. But her hair is actually what she still likes most about her new self. In addition, she doesn't know how it might behave once she chops it off. A brief flash of herself with Sasuke's weird hair nips the idea in the bud. It's not as much of a problem with her peers. Chances are they've seen her beat the stuffing out of someone, and all little girls look kind of cute, so she's not that special. The teachers see her as a prodigy, like all Uchihas, so they don't care either. But older ninjas aren't easily impressed, so her face still overrides whatever impression her abilities might have made. She doesn't even want to think about the civilians. The thought of staying small and doll-like for the rest of her life is strangely upsetting. In her mind team 7 outgrow her like weeds while the faces of her friends watch from far above.

"Nee-san, are you done? I made Oba-san open a tab for us."

The sneaky brat.

"You have a kimono."

Shizuha doesn't even bother to make it sound like a question.

"I do."

The Aburame nods. "We will expect you at seven this evening."
Shiki watches them with mild interest.

"Nara-san, please expect an invite soon as well."

"Ahhh…how troublesome."

Hisana smirks. "Do I need to expect one from your clan too?"

Shiki snorts and waves her hand dismissively. "Only if you're really unlucky. If Kaa-chan finds out about you, you might get lunch out of it though. But you're probably going to meet my brother, because he's a busybody."

"Isn't being nosy too troublesome?" Shizuha's face is carefully blank, but her nose twitches suspiciously.

"Yeah. That's why they joke Kaa-chan had an affair with Inoto-san – Tou-chan's best friend. I like to rub it under Shikano-nii's nose whenever possible."

"You're a sadist."

The Aburame Clan compound looks nothing like the ghost town that the Uchiha left behind. It's significantly smaller, of course, but the biggest difference is the whole make up of the place. After stumbling though town in her kimono for half an hour, one tiny, wobbly step after another, she almost walks past it.

There's a nice ornamental archway, adorned by the same stylized bug as the summons scroll, but there's nothing flashy about it and it's not walled off like the Uchiha compound. Instead it parts a rickety but pretty stone wall, half hidden by trees. There's no guard posted, but there are people milling about. It's very quiet.

Inside the houses are scattered higgledy-piggledy, sharing back yards and or facing each other across small ponds. The whole place is illuminated by fireflies, and the crickets are so loud they nearly drown out the sound of children chasing after them. Here and there adults are drinking sake on front porches to make sure that no little wannabe ninja drowns in the ponds. Most of them are still wearing sunglasses, even in the rapidly fading sunlight, but she can feel them watching her too.

"Excuse me-" she tries to address one of them, helplessly lost. "Uchiha-san", the woman says in a pleasant voice. "I will show you the way."

The thought that they all know why she's here is a little eerie, but the Aburame is relaxed and nothing about her behavior seems suspicious. She leads her off the paved road and down a worn path through the grass. They pass beehives on the way and young men planting colorful flowers now that the sun is down. It's still warm but none of them have taken off the high collared shirts or their glasses. There are more children and more fireflies until they reach a house at the edge of the compound. Shizuha is waiting on the front porch.

"Uchiha-chan", she greets, uncharacteristically reaching for Hisana's wrist and squeezing it. "I apologize for not coming for you myself. It did not occur to me."

She's wearing a nice black kimono with lime green dots and a decorative string of tiny green glass pearls dangles from the leg of her glasses. "Thank you Shimi-ba-san."

The older woman nods and leaves without a further word. "Come, I will introduce you to my parents."
The Aburame bear the same strange likeness that all the greater clans seem to share among each other. Aburame Shimi could have been Shizuha's mother just as much as her actual mother. *It's probably the glasses,* she thinks, trying to match Shizuha's mouth and chin to her father and failing. They'd look more like proper people if I could see their eyes. They are very pleasant though.

"Uchiha-san, Shizuha tells me your grades are exceptional. Have you given any thought to an early graduation?" Aburame Shigure's greatest likeness to his daughter is the way they tilt their head inquisitively.

"No, I haven't", she admits freely. "I have Sasuke to think about. As a Genin I would have less time for him."

"That's admirable", he says. "Family is very important to us as well."

There's *something* in his tone. Hisana is sure she isn't being paranoid. But it doesn't sound like a threat and more like a gentle reminder of why she's here. "I'm actually very selfish", she says in the same careful tone. "I'm not good with letting go of people."

It's a strange evening with Shigure not quite interrogating her and Shizuha's mother, Shiria, carefully and silently watching them, only periodically refilling their teacups. It must be going well though, because Shizuha's face occasionally slips into something pleased before she remembers to control of her features.

When the tea is gone and the sweets are eaten it's approaching ten. Shiria puts her hand on her husband's shoulders, and his mouth, opened to pose another question, abruptly shuts. "It is late", she says, a pleasant, slightly foreign lilt to her voice. They are the first words Hisana hears from her all evening. "I am very glad that you accepted our invitation. Please forgive our initial suspicions."

Hisana can't quite suppress a grin. "So you aren't suspicious anymore?"

"Oh yes", she says, "very suspicious. Please continue to accept our invitations."

"A continued relation with our daughter will be satisfactory", her husband agrees.

It's easily the strangest evening she's ever had.

Shiria fills a small bag with colorful candy. "For your cousin", she says. "Upon further association we would welcome an introduction."

Shizuha leads her through the confusing, winding paths of the compound. The way back is a different one than Shimi-san showed her; she doesn't get another glimpse at the beehives.

"It was a nice evening", Shizuha says, as they stop in front of the archway. "I am very pleased you came. Okaa-san and Otou-san are also pleased."

"You said outsiders are unusual around here, but I didn't really understand until Shimi-san knew right away who I was."

She nods. "Yes, we are not very popular. Those who do not mind the Kikai and are not bothered by our straightforwardness do not find us … fun."

She says this so matter-of-factly that it makes Hisana a little sad. She reaches for the girl's wrist, like Shizuha did earlier this evening, and squeezes it.

"I will bring Sasuke the next time."
On the way back home a Kikai sits on her shoulder and only takes off when Sasuke opens the door for her.

"You're late Hisa-nee."

So she is.
Chapter 11

After the last light-hearted chapter, now something heavy to go along with it:

Thank you all very much for your comments! I’m so glad I’m not sending this out into an empty void on the internet. Someone is reading this!

The consequences of the summons for tea are twofold: Aburame are suddenly greeting her in the streets. It’s a little strange because she knows exactly none of them, but they nod at her and occasionally awkwardly remark upon the weather (which is continually nice) and it’s all actually rather charming. Team 7 watches the whole thing with bemusement, aware of a change but not entirely of its significance. Genma seems duly impressed.

“I don’t know what you did, but I’m about 90 percent sure it’s a good thing …?”

The Aburame’s sudden interest in her seems to set the other major clans on edge though. She didn’t think about what accepting an invite into their compound would mean, beyond the approval of Shizuha’s parents, but, as Genma points out, she’s resisted any kind of association with other clans for a pretty long time. The Aburame are the first she’s gotten close to in any capacity.

“You can probably expect an invite from the Hyuuga. I don’t think they will want anything from you, but you know how they are.”

Yamanaka Inoko approached her during lunch a few days ago, shoulders squared and a little apprehensive, until Shiki casually sauntered up to them. “I got this”, she said, waving the girl away, “we’re all good.” The relief on Inoko’s face was obvious and she retreated hastily.

There was also a scuffle between Sasuke and a persistent Inuzuka boy who apparently tried to befriend him and wouldn’t take no for an answer. This wasn’t much of a surprise either, because the dog clan isn’t one to be outdone easily. The only surprise was, in fact, that it wasn’t actually Sasuke who ended the confrontation and got into trouble, but Sakura and Naruto, who summarily punched the boy in the face and kneed him in the gut, respectively.

Poor Sakura was frog marched home by her mother that day, silent but stubborn, and Hisana had no doubt that any scolding would roll right off of her.

Naruto was carted off to the Hokage. Out of both of them he was probably supposed to be punished harder, but, as he proudly recounted just yesterday, the Hokage merely congratulated him on making friends and told him to be a bit nicer to his fellow leaf ninjas.

“Officially I am not to associate with you anymore”, Sakura only said, as she causally emptied her mother’s bento into the trash. “But I told her if I can’t see you anymore, I’ll punch every boy in the face until nobody wants to marry me for sure anymore.”
Privately Hisana thinks that’s a grand idea. Maybe it would make the woman lay off a little and it would certainly gain Sakura a fearsome reputation.

Sasuke seems pleased as punch – ha! – about it. Naturally, his face doesn’t show a thing, but he has stopped protesting when Naruto reaches over to steal some of his food and Sakura hasn’t gotten a single eye roll since the incident.
While this makes her a little giddy, it doesn’t negate the fact that her team punched an Inuzuka and she’ll have to do something about it.

She certainly isn’t going to punish them. Not even for show, because she wants them to be protective of each other. If Sasuke now returned the favor somehow she’d be fit to retire that very moment.

But she’ll have to apologize. So the Inuzuka got what they were after in the end. Maybe that was the plan from the start, she muses. It would explain why they haven’t raised much of a fuss about it.

It’s a little vexing, to be outsmarted by *that* clan, but no matter how wild and unruly they are, they wouldn’t have survived this long if they didn’t possess some kind of street smarts. So maybe it’s excusable. She’s up against adult shinobi after all. No matter if Inuzuka or Hyuuga, she’s outclassed regardless.

This means she’ll have to visit the Inuzuka, if Genma is right the Hyuuga – she’s not looking forward to that – and because of Shiki she’ll have to make some kind of gesture towards the Nara. At least. These three clans hanging together are a political disaster for an outsider.

She ends training a little early that day and tells Sasuke to go ahead and eat with his teammates.

“I still have something to take care of. See you at home.”

Then she goes home, locks herself in the bathroom and has a small, controlled freak out.

The room is tiny, which helps a little. It feels safe. She brought a bottle of water, an apple, a pen and her notebook. There are three names written on the last used page, underlined thrice.

Inuzuka

Hyuuga

Nara

She’s not worried about the Aburame. Currently they are only flattered and if she plays her cards right it’ll stay that way. The others, she doesn’t know what they want. The Inuzuka might only want to get ahead of the other clans, step on some toes, so to speak. But is that really all?

And despite what Genma said, the Hyuuga *will* want something from them. The rivalry between their clans was apparently legendary and she doesn’t know how just petty they are. Maybe they can’t pass up a chance to make life hard for a few Uchiha orphans. They’re the most powerful clan right now. She has no doubt they could force her into doing whatever they want.

The Nara are dangerous in an entirely different way. She doubts that they mean any harm, especially because Shiki is her friend. No, they aren’t a danger to the Uchiha, they are a danger to her personally.

The next day she marches up to Nara Shiki and pulls her aside. “I’m going to invite you.”
“What?”

“Tomorrow I’m sending Sasuke to you, with a formal invite to you and your brother.”

Shiki’s eyebrows furrow until they meet in the middle of her forehead, a slim, dark monobrow. “This is a big, fat ‘screw you’ to the Inuzuka clan, isn’t it?”

“And to the Hyuuga, because I’m expecting an invite any day now. You said your parents aren’t going to invite me, because it’s basically stupid and the Nara aren’t particularly famous for their involvement in politics. Which means everyone knows you don’t give a crap about the Uchiha as a clan. I can’t exactly invite your parents – our apartment is a whole in the wall. But I can invite you, and to make it more official, your brother.”

Shiki grins. “So that they’ll know you prefer us anyway. That you do whatever you want even though they’re forcing your hand.”

“There are more than enough Inuzuka in our year. Why did they try to involve Sasuke who has no say and doesn’t care? They’ve been trying to make me react, either by making friends with him or by antagonizing him.”

“Which was a mistake. I get it.”

Shiki sighs. “Ok, alright. We’ll come. Tou-chan already suspected something like this. He thinks this is the funniest thing, you know? Do I need to wear a kimono? Please, no.”

Yes, she does have to. But Shiki is mollified by the promise of sweets and homemade curry, which doesn’t fit the occasion at all, but is pretty much the fanciest thing Hisana can cook up herself. And it isn’t as if anyone is going to tell.

She drags out Sasuke that evening to buy a kimono. Her cousin has grown like a weed in the past months and she doesn’t want to risk upsetting him by unburying his old kimono that might hold memories and probably doesn’t even fit anymore. As expected, he grumbles and complains, but finally decides on a very simple, Uchiha-blue design. Hisana is satisfied; he might bitch about it, but Sasuke usually does what he’s told to the best of his abilities.

While Sasuke dutifully carries his kimono home, Hisana darts ahead of him to buy groceries. They arrive home almost at the same time, with her cousin nearly closing the door in her face.

“That was quick, Nee-san.”

“I want this all to be over, so I’m hurrying.”

He snorts. “Do you know how to write the invite?”

“No, do you?”

He gives her a flat look. “I’m eight.”

“Well, excuse me; I thought you were a prodigy?”

She actually agonizes over the invite the least. If she wrote something like ‘Friday 7 p.m., please don’t turn up early’ it would probably be pretty close to what a typical Nara invite would say. She imagines Shiki’s parents having a giggle about it and then just sending their kids at half past five.
anyway. Not that they’d arrive before eight.

She manages something half formal that doesn’t sound too awkward. Her penmanship is acceptable too, even though Sasuke snorts at it, the little brat, so she’s reasonably satisfied.

The Nara also seem satisfied, because they bother to show up on time.

Shiki is wearing a simple brown kimono with pink flowers and a half-dead look that tells Hisana she didn’t manage to take her nap today. Her hair is in braids. It looks terrible.

“Oh sheesh. Food’s that way”, she blurts out before she can help herself. Shiki snorts and casually walks past her. “Tadaima.”

All that’s left on the front door is an awkward looking Nara Shikano. Shiki doesn’t usually talk about her brother, apart from the obligatory ‘troublesome’ that, Hisana figures, is often associated with siblings in general and Nara siblings in particular. He’s a little older than them, twelve or thirteen maybe, shortly after graduation. It occurs to her that she should have expected that, since she’s never seen him at the Academy.

His kimono is the same brown color as Shiki’s only without any pattern. He’s even wearing the same exhausted expression.

Only his eyes are a shocking, ice blue. She suddenly remembers Shiki telling her about her mother’s alleged affair with a Yamanaka and has to grin. It appears Shikano knows exactly what she’s thinking because his face turns a little grumpier still. “Come in, before your sister eats all the food.”

He mumbles something that could have been a greeting and shuffles past her.

In the kitchen Sasuke looks incredibly put out while Shiki sniffs the pot of curry.

“If you’re so hungry you can sit down. The sooner everyone is sitting properly, the sooner there’ll be food.”

Shiki smirks and rolls her eyes a little. “You sound like Kaa-chan.”

They eat in the living room, because the kitchen table is actually a western one and she felt obligated to make a little effort at least. After all this was supposed to be an official thing.

“So, how was the Aburame compound?” Shiki asks through a mouth full of curry. Her brother pinches her in admonishment, which only makes her choke.

Sasuke’s face gets impossibly grumpier as he fills her cup with water instead of tea. She gulps it down and winces.

“Sheesh. I was only asking.”

Shikano gives her a look. “Don’t talk with your mouth full.”

When Hisana makes to answer though, he leans eagerly forward.

“It was nice. You’ve never been there?”

“They’re pretty isolated. I’ve walked past the gate once or twice but you can’t really see anything with the trees and what not.”
“It was nice”, she repeats a little slyly. “You really need to see it for yourself.”

Shikano deflates and Shiki makes a face.

“Oh come on.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

She might be a little self-absorbed, but Hisana has enough awareness to know, that she witnessed something special. This is her experience and she isn’t going to share it.

She hasn’t even told Sasuke all that much, though, honestly, that was as much to actually make him come along the next time as anything else.

Her little cousin doesn’t exactly dislike her friends, but, in his little world where he’s the strongest, they uncomfortably confront him with reality. They are older, taller, meaner and Sasuke doesn’t like feeling inferior. It doesn’t help, of course, that none of them take him all that seriously. Shiki usually pokes and prods at his weak spots for fun and Shizuha … doesn’t quite know what to do with him, so she ignores him. Which is almost worse.

The Nara siblings polish off the curry in record time. “Not as good as Kaa-chan’s”, says Shiki, “but I’ll take it, ’cause it comes without the nagging.”

“If you didn’t like it, you could have left a little more for me”, Sasuke gripes and reaches sulkily for the last piece of bread.

“If you eat too much, you’ll get fat”, she says and snatches the bread from under his fingertips. Not even Hisana’s quick reflexes can prevent the scuffle that follows.

“You know”, Shikano says and claims the abandoned bread, “Tou-chan was a little worried about you.”

“Oh?”

Yes, she’s expected this, but the full attention of a Nara is disconcerting at the best of times.

“Yeah”, he says lazily, picking out the soft insides of the bread. “I mean, you had that nervous breakdown at the beginning of last year, right?”

She stiffens. Ito-sensei wouldn’t have told anyone.

“I mean”, he continues, unperturbed, “it’s not exactly a surprise after … whatever happened exactly.”

Next to them Sasuke tackles Shiki to the floor.

“I saw”, he says. “How did you think Sensei found so quickly? She wasn’t even sure you’d actually come in that day.”

“…So?”

“So, I’d love to tell him there’s nothing to worry about. But that would be lying and he’d know that right away. I will tell him though, that Nee-chan and I have it under control.”
She can feel herself relax a little. “Do you? Have it under control?”

He shrugs.

“Whatever it is that’s wrong with you, you’re a kid. I can’t imagine anything you could be up to that the two of us can’t handle. Also” – he slants a look at Sasuke and carefully puts the piece of bread back near his plate – “I don’t think you’re doing anything stupid. Not with him to take care of.”

Shiki bursts into boisterous laughter, as she lets Sasuke wrestle her into a head-lock.

“I give, I give! Take the stupid bread. But don’t come crying when your fangirls abandon you, because you’ve gotten chubby.”

The boy triumphantly snags up the bread.

“Nee-chan”, Shikano quips, “It’s time to go home.”

Shiki grins. “Had a good chat?”

She looks at Hisana with a strange glint in her eyes.

“Come on, Sasuke. Let’s bring our guests to the door.”

Shikano marches out of the door much more confidently than he walked in earlier that evening. He gives Hisana and Sasuke a quick salute. “I’ll be walking ahead. Hurry, Nee-chan.”

For a moment Hisana doesn’t know what to say. The earlier conversation rattled her and Shiki’s eyes still hold that strange and unfamiliar look. The decision is taken out of her hands when the girl hugs her.

“I don’t know what’s going on”, she whispers in her ear, “but you have my back, I’ll have yours.”

Then she ruffles Sasuke’s hair and moseys off. “Thanks for the food!”

“Your friends are terrible”, her cousin hisses and bites viciously into his piece of bread.

“What – HEY! That’s just the crust!”
More politics – are you bored yet? We’re almost done

For everyone else who is wondering: Potterinu asked me if this is going to be yuri (Thanks for asking, it didn’t even occur to me that it could look that way).

No, it’s not. I like to write really close platonic friendships, so there will subtext, but I have no pairings worked out yet. Hisana is still too young, and even as Sarah she had no experience with boys/men. What I will do – as you’ll see very soon – is play several pairings for laughs.

Shinobi are always scheming, and I don’t put it past them to already plan their seven-year-old’s weddings.

Sorry for the long wait, btw – AO3 has been messing with me lately; I can rarely get to the ‘My Works’ page without everything freezing up, so I can’t update when I want to.

Between the Nara and the Aburame Hisana has quite enough of clan business. Her nerves are wrecked and she has half a mind to just tell the Inuzuka to shove off.

They’d probably get a kick out of it and prime gossip for the next five years. She hasn’t heard anything from the Hyuuga yet, which is a relief.

Maybe she and Genma were wrong and they don’t care about a bunch of orphans enough to get involved. Even if those orphans are what’s left of the mighty Uchiha Clan.

She knows she’s dragging her feet in this. A talk with the Inuzuka is something that has happen. She just doesn’t know how.

She can’t – and doesn’t want to – apologize, because that would mean agreeing that they were at fault. Hisana flat out refuses to give them that. They provoked her team and earned what they got. But she can’t very well walk up to their clan compound and say ‘Hey, just checking in’ either. She could just go confront the brat.

The idea actually appeals to her. She’d heckle him a little and maybe she could force them into making the first step. They’d have to acknowledge then, that it’s them who want something from her. She would, officially, only be talking to the boy who bullied Sasuke.

She feels a little ridiculous to hatch some nefarious plan over who’s right and who started it, but it’s all power play at this point. The clan is dead, but by befriending an influential and mostly isolated clan she went and made herself interesting. She made her clan interesting again. Sasuke is undeniably the heir, but he looks up to her and she has connections. It’s not hard to see why they would be at least curious about her. The Nara affair made the whole situation worse, of course. They’re now affiliated with two clans at best, four at worst.

For the adults, there’s also the Naruto thing.
So even if it’s vaguely ridiculous, she decides to go through with it.

Until she realizes, that the little Inuzuka boy is probably Inuzuka Kiba.

Team 7 is one thing. She actually wants them around, to shape them, and to possibly influence future events. For her own future survival as well as theirs. They’re going to be in the thick of things. She’s invested now in all ways that matter.

But the rest of the Rookie 9? Ino already gives her palpitations every time they cross paths. Team 7 she can control, because they love her. They value her opinion. Changing everything else is just causing further ripples in the pond that she can’t calculate.

What if it’s Kiba who gets onto team 7, because his clan wants to keep him close to them? As far as she remembers, it’s not like his grades are much different from Naruto’s. Who is going to replace him on team 8? What if that person screws up and team 8 dies? If Hinata is dead, who is going to save Naruto during the invasion? Not to mention that it would throw the whole Hyuuga Clan into chaos.

She’s being dramatic of course. That Kiba being in team 7 will directly lead to Naruto’s, and in turn Konoha’s, death is a little far-fetched at best. But what if?

She needs to calm down now, first of all. This isn’t something she can run away from, so making it happen sooner rather than later would be best.

But how to turn this situation around? How could this work in her favour?

Not very easily, she has to admit.

Of course, technically, Kiba did bully Sasuke. While anyone who knows her cousin would freely admit, that Sasuke is above boyish taunts, it does give her some sort of foothold.

After all, Naruto and Sakura thought they acted in their teammate’s defense. They overdid it, but Kiba initiated it.

Was that enough leverage to make them come to her? What if they just kept provoking her team until she gave in anyway?

“I don’t know why you’re fussing like this”, Shiki finally says, finally pulling the ever present little notebook out of Hisana’s hand. “Have you ever asked Sasuke if he maybe wants to handle this himself?”

“Have Sasuke handle it?”

She shrugs. “Why not? He needs to learn sometime to manage his own business. I know Shikano-nii threw me to the wolves enough times already.”

She’s not wrong.

“This is a scuffle among boys”, Shizuha agrees. “You are taking this too seriously. No clan would be offended to let them at least attempt to talk it out.”

“So”, Hisana ventures, “I tell Sasuke to go knock on the Inuzuka Clan’s door to … talk about their feelings?”
Shiki cackles. “Not quite.”

There is, thank the gods, no ridiculous letter involved. Or scroll. Summons. Whatever.

Instead she simply takes Sasuke aside and, for the first time, actually thinks to ask him a pretty vital question: “Say, what was that about with the Inuzuka kid?”

Sasuke shrugs. “It wasn’t anything. He followed me around a lot and wanted to train together. But he’s no good at anything, so I didn’t want to. When I told him so he got angry. He called me a weirdo.” He frowns. “You know the rest.”

That doesn’t even sound so bad. She would have to talk to Naruto and Sakura after all. Name calling was no reason for violence. Not even for a ninja. They should be able to handle cheap trash talk and not lose their cool.

“Did you talk to him afterwards?”

“Not really. He’s pouting like a child. You don’t want me to apologize, do you?” He looks so appalled, she wants to laugh at him.

“Nothing of the sort. But I think you do need to talk to him. We can’t simply ignore the whole thing.”

He doesn’t look very happy, but also not quite ready to argue, so she carefully pushes ahead.

“If we just sit on this, the boy’s mother will make him approach you to smooth it over. It’s good diplomacy training after all. I’d like it if you were the mature one and talk to him first.”

Sasuke hems and haws at first, before settling for glowering at her.

“You’re manipulating me, aren’t you?” he finally grumbles. She startles a little.

“Hmm … well, yes, I suppose. But only because I love you.” And also, because she selfishly hopes that, one day, Sasuke will carry just a little of this particular burden for her.

The words just bubble out of her, mostly because Sarah remembers her mother using them about a million times. There are fond memories involved, and if she feels the words, why not say them?

Sasuke though, freezes and with a start she remembers, that he probably heard those words last from Uchiha Mikoto, his mother.

They stare at each other. Hisana fights the urge to take the words all back and make it worse in the process. Instead she politely averts her eyes, while Sasuke collects himself.

“Hm. Well, ok. I will talk to Kiba”, Sasuke finally says. He fidgets visibly, before awkwardly patting her on the shoulder. “Don’t worry, I will take care of this.”

Then he turns around and flees.

A beat of silence.

Hisana cracks up.
No matter how ridiculous, she does feel a little relieved that Sasuke is ‘taking care of this’. And indeed, the next day her cousin swaggers up to her, visibly self-satisfied.

“I talked to Kiba. He didn’t exactly apologize, but he agreed that he was too aggressive.”

“Oh? How did you pull that off?”

She remembers Kiba as a pretty proud Genin. Any sort of compliance sounds uncharacteristic. Sasuke smirks.

“I approached him when his sister came to pick him up.”

That little brat.

“He didn’t dare argue while she was listening in.”

She hooks her arm around his neck and squeezes him. “You little sneak; I can’t believe you did that.”

Instead of squirming away, she can feel him grin into her shoulder.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Of course he doesn’t. “Come on”, she says, “we’ll have to talk to your team now.”

“Do I have to come?”

“Yes. Because Kiba is going to be there too.”

This time he does wriggle out of her hold. “What? But I took care of it!”

“It’s not you who’s in trouble. But Naruto and Sakura will have to apologize for overreacting.”

Now that Sasuke basically put Kiba in his place, they can be gracious about the rest. She’ll make the brats apologize to teach them a little humility and get the Inuzuka off their back all at once.

Her cousin looks torn. On one hand, she’s sure, he’d love to see Naruto and Sakura sweat a little. On the other hand, he’s kind of fond of them and hesitant to see Kiba get any sort of satisfaction out of this deal.

“Come on”, she coaxes, “they need to learn their lesson too.”

In the end he drags his feet, but comes along. She’s glad for it, because she’d have dragged him kicking and screaming if necessary. Sasuke might not be in trouble, but this is team business and she wants him to be present.

If only to watch him and see how he reacts to Kiba looking down on at least Naruto.

Picking up the noisy blonde is a matter of minutes. He whines and complains the whole way, but when Hisana points out, that Sakura will have to apologize too, and will probably need a strong shinobi to stand beside her, he straightens up and marches ahead. Sasuke rolls his eyes. “I’m not that easy, am I?”
He kind of is. Sasuke simply has different buttons than Naruto, but they are no more difficult to push. “Nooo”, she drawls, “of course not.”

Good thing Sasuke has selective hearing as well, so he just nods proudly to himself and turns away from her. That boy. How did he manage to become an avenger?

Sakura is shoved out of the door by her mother.

Haruno Sayuri proves to be an unlikely ally in this; her glare catapults the girl all the way down the street. When Sakura tentatively turns around, maybe to flee after all, her mother still stares at her from behind the curtains of their kitchen window. She turns around like a good girl and keeps walking.

For the first part of the way Naruto and Sakura bravely soldier ahead, but as soon as the Inuzuka compound comes into view, they fall back without any hint of subtlety.

Sasuke gleefully goes ahead and informs one of the passing Inuzuka shinobi of the purpose of their visit.

They are led towards a big house at the center of the compound. It’s a little bigger than the Aburame compound, Hisana thinks, and far louder. There are also children playing here, but they are screaming and laughing loudly. The supervising adults are right at the thick of things, swinging around kids by their arms and throwing the older ones into bushes, where they shriek and come right back for more. ‘Toughening them up’ probably.

Inuzuka Tsume is waiting for them already, arms crossed and grinning fiendishly. Kiba is half hiding behind her, as if expecting more trouble and humiliation.

“Uchiha-kun”, she croons. “So we meet after all.”

“Inuzuka-sama.”

She gestures for Naruto and Sakura to come forward, to hurry this along and hopefully keep Tsume from spouting off anything ridiculous.

They look stiff and nervous. Tsume shoves Kiba forward. He goes dragging his feet, and only after his mother kicks him in the butt.

“We are very sorry”, Sakura says robotically. “We shouldn’t have hit you. So hard.”

“But you shouldn’t have bothered Sasuke-teme”, Naruto adds. “You know he can’t take care of himself, we have to protect him.”

Sasuke looks incredibly put out. Before he can open his mouth though, Hisana’s hand shoots out to poke him in the ribs. It drives the air out of his lungs with an audible PFHUAA.

Kiba looks as if his birthday has come early.

“Yes, well, I’m kind of dangerous, so of course you had to protect him!”

The way Sasuke inches away from her suggests that he doesn’t need any reminder to shut up.

“Apology accepted”, Kiba says grandly.

“Awesome. Nee-chan can we go home now? We apologized and I think we deserve some Ramen, dattebayo.”
“What a great idea”, Tsume simpers, “Kiba, why don’t you go with them. To celebrate this spanking new friendship. I’ll invite all of you.”

She shoves some coins into the baffled boy’s hands and dances off. Friendship? Sasuke stares after the woman, aghast. That crafty bitch.

Naruto looks torn between free Ramen and lugging Kiba around. Sakura screams into her hands. Yes, this is how she loves her team best.

They probably make the most comical picture at Ichiraku’s.

She knows Teuchi is watching them like a bomb that might go off any minute. She surely feels like she’s sitting on one. Sakura was clever enough to strategically place Sasuke between Naruto and Kiba. She has apparently no scruples to abandon her crush in that particular minefield, while she herself hides behind Hisana. “Nee-san”, she whispers, “do we have to keep him?”

“Not if I have any say in this”, she whispers back. Naruto is already on his fourth bowl. Awe and disgust have kept Kiba quiet until now, but he’s rather quickly getting over it and turning a dangerous amount of attention to Sasuke. Said boy is concentrating pointedly on his food. “I really scared you, didn’t I?” he asks gleefully, and in this moment he looks a whole lot like his mother.

“No.”

“Aww … Don’t be like that. It’s no shame to be afraid of Kiba-sama.”

“Listen here, idiot – “

“Shut up both of you – “

“OH MY GOD, NEE-CHAN, DOES TEME HAVE TO APOLIZIGE NOW?!”

Does this day ever end?

“Say”, Inuzuka Hana inquires, in between bites of jerky, “what exactly is your angle, kaa-chan?”

“Isn’t it obvious”, Tsume asks, leaning over her oldest child’s shoulder and stealing a strip of meat from right under her nose. “Didn’t I teach you anything Hana-chi?”

Hana grumbles at the much hated nickname. “Well, it’s not like they can do anything for us, right? And that Sasuke-boy doesn’t seem all that fond of Kiba. Or, you know, the other way around. I don’t think they can manage to stay friends.”

“Good thing that’s not what I’m after then.”
Tsume lifts herself onto the kitchen table. “What do we have? – Kiba, who’s a loudmouth with no outlet, no proper friends and no motivation to better himself. But he’s also loyal and shrewed. What we want the girl, Hana-chi. She’s clever – if we push your brother onto her for long enough, she’ll realize what a catch he could be.”

“I don’t think the little brat will let that happen. Their cousins like, twenty times removed. The Uchiha have done worse in the past.

“He’s a possessive little annoyance, but once he’s old enough he’ll see the advantages too. Instead of producing one or two pureblood Uchiha, there’ll be twice as many halfbloods who can … marry each other for all I care.”

“Wait – wait, Uchiha? You don’t want her to be one of us?”

Tsume waves her away. “Honestly? We don’t exactly need Kiba. He’d spend the rest of his live being the ‘spare’. He’d be much better off somewhere, where he can actually fight his way to the top. That clan will need all the fighters it can get.”

She snags the last strip of jerky from Hana. There’s a brief scuffle, that ends with Hana’s head squeezed between her mother’s knees. “But marry?” Tsume causally devours the meat as Hana wheezes. “It’s worth a try, but I’d be honestly ok if he just knocked her up, too. Old Fugaku would turn in his grave.”

I always imagined the Inuzuka as shrewed little deviants:D
Kiba is a real pest.

Naruto has, in true Uzumaki-fashion, adopted the mutt as soon as it became clear that they were of equal mind. Much to everyone else’s annoyance, they were also of equal voice box. This has resulted in a slightly surprising partnership between Sasuke and Sakura – surprising, because it’s uncharacteristically serious and professional in nature, and also: Sasuke – born from simple self defense.

In about three weeks, Kiba has therefore half completed and half destroyed all of Hisana’s carefully laid plans.

Team Sakura-Sasuke: complete.

Team Sakura-Sasuke-Naruto: not so much.

“Say”, she asks the boy, headache rapidly approaching, “do you enjoy tormenting me?”

“Tor-what?”

“Forget it.”

While incredibly disruptive, Kiba’s continued presence is a surefire sign that the Inuzuka more or less consider their objective complete and have turned their attention elsewhere.

Now she only needs to be rid of him, without looking as if she were rid of him.

One of the now semi-regular scuffles between Kiba and Naruto give her just the right idea.

“What about a tournament?”

The mention of any sort of competition silences the boys immediately. Sakura tugs at her.

“I don’t think this is a good idea, Nee-san …”

“Shh, I know what I’m doing.” More or less.

“A tournament?” Kiba scratches his head. “Everyone against everyone?”

“No. I want you to go talk to your classmates and pick teams. Then I’ll give you three weeks to train like you life depends on it and afterwards the teams compete against each other.”

He makes a face. “But a real ninja always fights alone!”

Surprisingly it’s Naruto who contradicts him first. “Nuh Uh. There are tons of teams around. Genma-baka had a team. And the old man trained a team too!”

Kiba seems genuinely impressed. “Then I’ll have the best team ever! You’ll see, we will wipe the
floor with you.”

He runs off without a further word. Immensely self-satisfied Hisana turns towards Sakura.

“Will you ever doubt me again?”

“Not when it comes to handling idiots, Nee-san.”

The next day Sasuke reports the enthusiastic agreement of their classmates. It’s really rather exciting, Hisana thinks. This will give her the opportunity to have a look at all the Rookie 9, without actually having to interact with them.

There is a little bit of fangirl left in her, after all.

They don’t see Kiba for two weeks after that. He doesn’t even check in with them to taunt Naruto; apparently he’s taking this very seriously. Team 7 also seems invested. Team dinner falls flat several days a week now, because they’d rather spend the time on teamwork exercises and strength training. She’s known Naruto to be a hard worker if he needs to, but she expected the other two to be much calmer about this. Upon questioning them though, the answers to this little mystery seem obvious in hindsight.

“I want to show Ino-pig how good I’ve gotten! She’ll be fuming!”

“They’re idiots, but they’re mine. That means they have to be better than the other idiots.”

Well, a gift horse and all that.

Genma at least, seems appreciative.

“This is great”, he gushes, “so great! They’ll win, I’m so proud.”

“You haven’t done a darn thing.”

“Well, no, but if they kill it, I’ll rake in the credit anyway. My superiors won’t care.”

At least she can count on Genma to support her in this. She’s half worried a teacher might get behind her – possibly – half-illegal tournament plans and puts a stop to it.

But another two weeks later nobody has tried to get her into trouble.

Genma has reserved an entire training ground. There are kids milling about and, oh sheesh, parents.

None of them look angry, more excited. Genma is flitting back and forth between them. While this calms her down a bit, her heart immediately shoots back up into her throat at the sight of Ito-sensei doing the same.

“S-sensei!”

She curses the nervous stutter and plasters a bland smile onto her face.
“Hisana-chan, hello.”

Ito-sensei rights her glasses and puts a hand on Hisana’s shoulder. It squeezes uncomfortably tightly.

“Hisana-chan, would you be so good and explain to me, in detail, why I had to find out about this from Genma?”

“It was … an impromptu affair.”

“Three weeks ago it might have been an impromptu affair.”

Yes … sensei’s full attention is not something she usually thrives for. She very suddenly remembers why.

“It was actually just supposed to be a small thing.”

“You were trying to keep Kiba-kun busy, I’ve heard.”

Hisana’s head snaps up. “How?”

“I am acquainted with Inuzuka Tsume; Kiba-kun’s sudden interest in you and Sasuke-kun has her name written all over it. And once I mentioned a few keywords, Genma folded like a house of cards.”

That traitor. She takes a deep breath. Sensei still doesn’t seem angry, though she’s starting to think that doesn’t mean a thing. So she does the only thing she can do.

“Am I in trouble?”

There is a lengthy pause, in which Ito-sensei watches the excited children, and Hisana’s pulse shoots through the roof. Genma is now ushering three-man groups into different corners in what looks like make shift battle arenas.

“No. This might actually be good for them. At this age we don’t put much emphasis on teamwork yet. I think that’s a major fallacy in our curriculum.”

She turns back towards Hisana. “I am, however, disappointed with you naivety. Did you really think a whole class could participate in this without any of us hearing of it? And without any medics or parents present?”

In hindsight, this may have been a little stupid. Team 7 flounces towards them, decked out in full battle gear. They are covered, head to toe, in dark, sturdy clothes; all of them a wearing masks to cover their mouths and noses. She really wishes Kakashi were here to see this.

“What in all the world are you wearing?”

Sakura gives her a reproachful look.

“Nee-san, don’t you always talk about proper skin coverage in battle? And didn’t you also say ‘all battles are serious battles’?”

She does remember saying something like this to Naruto, after he goofed off repeatedly against Sakura. Who in turn broke his nose twice. If he weren’t the Kyuubi vessel, she would have had to drag him to the hospital.

“But … the masks?”
Naruto excitedly beckons her closer. "Pepper bombs", he breathes into her ear and bursts into giggles. Oh yes, he’s planning to humiliate Kiba. Next to her, Ito-sensei is inconspicuously covering her mouth. Her face is calm, but her shoulders are trembling with hilarity. Then her hand vanishes and she’s entirely composed again.

“As I see it, the tournament is about to start. I will leave you to your team meeting.”

Indeed, Genma whistles through his teeth and everyone snaps to attention.

“Listen up, brats: We’re going to draw the match up out of a hat now. You better listen closely, because I’m not going to repeat myself. If you miss your turn, you’re out.”

Team 7 is in this case named team 2 and first up against team 1.

Team 1 is an interesting one, at least from Hisana’s point of view. The kids are all super excited, of course and not very concerned with whom they are actually fighting. For a moment she wonders whether or not she should warn them.

She decides against it. This is a learning experience and, if necessary, she can lecture them after they’ve lost.

She’s rather sure though, that at least Sakura has already realized the implications of facing Hyuuga Hinata. Said girl is looking slightly green around the gills at the prospect of fighting Naruto. Hisana has no doubt that, at this point, she could easily beat him. But she doesn’t seem to be in the right mindset for it, so one of the others will probably take on the blond. She doesn’t know what would be more fun to watch: a fight between Hinata and Sasuke or the Hyuuga girl and Sakura? Sasuke is arrogant; he won’t take her seriously if she uses the Academy style. If Hinata is proficient with the Juuken, though, he will have to. But then it might be already too late.

Sakura’s taijutsu is not yet very sophisticated, but the force is devastating. She’s nowhere close to punching holes into the ground – Hisana doubts anyone but Tsunade can teach her that – but she’s fierce and her anger is terrifying. She’s also more shrewed than Hinata.

One thing Hisana hadn’t factored into the initial plan, was that little Academy students, if left to their own devices, would inevitably form teams with their friends, rather than balanced ones. As far as she remembers, Hinata was always very shy, and never had many friends.

Therefore her teammates are two wimpy looking girls, one blonde, one red-headed, who were probably left over and banded together out of sheer necessity.

Looking over the rest of the teams, she can make out the classical Ino-Shika-Cho set up, Ami and her strange looking friends, and who she assumes to be Aburame Shino, far apart from what appear to be his teammates.

“Cousin Shino was very excited”, a voice says behind her, and Hisana very nearly jumps out of her skin.

“Shizuha. I never heard you coming.”

The girl gives a slight, half-embarrassed shrug. “I have been practicing my stalk.”

She turns back into Shino’s direction, and Hisana can make out her brows furrowing.

“They asked him to be on their team. He was very pleased. But when they found out that he cannot actually do any of the clan techniques yet, they became angry.”
“What do you mean, he can’t?”

There’s a beat of silence.

“Go get ready”, she tells her team. “I don’t want to see you lose the first fight.”

“What?! BUT NEE-CHAN –“

Sasuke looks back and forth between them, but then nods. He cuts off Naruto mid-rant by grabbing the scuff of his neck and dragging him away.

“Wish us luck, Nee-san”, Sakura chirps.

They prance off, completely ignoring the aghast looks of parents following them.

Shizuha fidgets, which is uncharacteristic.

“It is … not something we tell outsiders. I should not have said anything.”

Hisana considers that for a moment. It’s true, that she doesn’t feel much attachment to the Uchiha’s clan secrets. She won’t go blurtling out the intricacies of the Sharingan anytime soon, though, so she does understand. The Kikai are probably a sensitive subject no matter how you look at it.

“Ok”, she finally says.

They watch Genma shut up the cheering parents and direct Ito-sensei and even Mizuki-sensei and Iruka-sensei to oversee several fights going on at once.

“It is his tenth birthday next month”, Shizuha finally offers quietly. “That is an important age for us.”

“We missed your tenth birthday.”

“By a few weeks”, she agrees.

“We can get cake after this”, Hisana decides. “Let’s get closer to the fight first.”

She grabs the girl by the wrist and drags her towards the team 7 match.

They pass Shiki, who is so furiously whispering to the Ino-Shika-Cho team, that she doesn’t even see them. Hisana tugs at her ponytail and they vanish into the crowd before the girl has time to turn around.

It turns out that Hisana didn’t need to worry. The whole of team 7 looks pumped for the fight. Even Naruto watches all of the girls with calculating eyes. It looks strange on his sunny, chubby face and maybe a little chilling.

“They seem very determined”, Shizuha comments.

“They better be. If they embarrass themselves, we’ll never be rid of Kiba.”

Shizuha stares at her and Hisana belatedly realizes, that this leap of logic must seem rather outlandish to her.

“It’s … a long story.”

Genma whistles and on the field chaos breaks out. She’s proud to say, her team is not part of it.
Neither is Hinata. The two other girls, who’ll she bet belong to the cheering civilian women across from her, run forward with break-neck speed. While fast, their eyes are entirely focused on Sasuke, who they’re probably deeming the most dangerous of the three. If they had paid a little attention to their surroundings, they would realize that Naruto has vanished. It’s a low-level genjutsu that only holds for a few second, but it’s enough. A second later he reappears behind Hinata, whom he rightfully deems the most dangerous one.

The girl squawks and blocks his hit on sheer instinct. She doesn’t seem to have realized yet, whom exactly she’s defending against, which is why she lands a harsh blow against Naruto’s sternum. He’s catapulted across the field. Only Sakura’s quick reflexes save him from being thrown right out of the arena and therefore disqualification. She catches the shorter boy around the middle and throws him towards Sasuke, who looks deeply unhappy defending against the girls by himself. As soon as Naruto’s out of the way, she takes his place against Hinata.

“Oy teme, need help?”

Sasuke’s answer are two hits against blondie’s kidneys and a vicious stomp into the red-head’s instep. The girls drop like stones, one unconscious, the other howling.

“No.”

They both stalk towards where Sakura and Hinata are trading blows. Hinata has activated her Byakugan; Sakura’s right arm is out. She weaves through the Juuken admirably though. The fight ends abruptly when Sasuke’s arm shoots out, impatient with the fight, to grab Hinata’s neck. She startles and Sakura lands a left hook into her stomach.

The girl wheezes and faints.

Genma’s whistle officially ends the match.

“Victor: team 2.”

He throws the girls over his shoulders and carries them off, out of the marked off arena.

There’s some commotion as their parents fuss over them and curse at Genma about the ‘much too violent match – don’t you have a doctor or something?!’. He tells them, yet again, to shut up.

“If they can’t take a simple knock out, maybe they should rethink their careers. Nothing’s broken or even bruised. They’ll be fine.”

He looks around for an Hyuuga adult; when he finds none, he puts the girl down in front of Hisana. “Just wait until she wakes up.”

Hisana fights off the initial onset of ‘nonono’ and nods. The team is currently being mobbed by Sasuke’s adoring fangirls.

Next to them Hinata stirs. It takes a moment until her eyes clear of the post-knock-out haze. The moment she recognizes them, what little colour has returned to her face drains again immediately.

“E-e-ehh … Uchiha-san …?”

“Tree against one were impossible odds”, Hisana finally says. “Well done.”

Hinata squawks out something unintelligible, bows hastily and runs.

Alright, I don’t know what’s currently going on at AO3, but now that I’m using a different browser I can update again:D
Even if I have to re-do the formatting:(

The Ino-Shika-Cho match has come to an end. When Hisana and Shizuha arrive they are all looking a bit worse for the wear, but proud.

“Hey.”

Shiki whirls around. “I knew it!” She grabs her ponytail protectively. “Don’t touch the hair.” Hisana grins. “So how was the match?”

“Great”, Ino brags. “We wiped the floor with them.”

Her black eye tells a slightly different story, as does Shikamaru’s exasperated sigh. The other team though, consisting of three rowdy and frustrated looking boys, looks even worse than them.

Ino is blinking at her with big, expectant eyes. What does she want, praise?

Probably, it occurs to her. But she really, really doesn’t want to give it to her. She considers simply ignoring the girl, but Shiki is grinning at her like a fox. Busted.

“I will watch your next match”, she finally offers. The second most annoying blonde in her life lights up like a Christmas tree. It’s slightly creepy to watch her genuine smile turn suddenly into a haughty smirk the second team 7 arrives.

“Ino-pig”, Sakura chirps, and she still seems a little battle high, “I see you’ve got a new look. Bruise-purple is a good colour on you.”

“It’s the colour of the kunoichi”, Ino snaps, “You wouldn’t know, hiding behind Sasuke-kun.”

Sakura’s smile turns sour.

“Cut it out”, Hisana directs. “You can have it out in the arena.”

“You won’t be having it out in the arena”, she tells Sakura, after dragging them away under the guise of a team meeting.

“What? But you said –“ “That was a lie. I don’t want you to fight Ino. You can’t win this.” Sakura looks devastated. All signs of the former enthusiasm are gone and she suddenly seems inches smaller than before.

“You don’t think so?” Maybe this came out wrong. She takes the girl by the shoulders and gives her a firm shake.

“Listen. You can’t win this. It doesn’t matter if you lose a fight against her or beat her. In Ino’s eyes you won’t beat her today. I don’t want Sasuke to fight her either. Naruto, you’ll do it.”
“What? Why him and not me?”

Even Sasuke looks a little put out, if only for the principle of the thing; she’s sure that he had no intention of wasting any time on Ino.

“Because it wouldn’t do either of you any favours. Sakura, if you lose, do you really want to face her afterwards? And if you win – you heard her. She’ll be convinced you only won because of Sasuke. Sasuke, if you fight her, you’ll only encourage her. I know girls like her. She’s pretty and she knows it. Her clan is big and famous and nobody ever had any doubts she’d make it. If not on active duty, then in T&I, because the Yamanaka basically own it. Her self-confidence knows no bounds right now. I outright rejected her more than once and she simply ignored it as if it didn’t happen.”

Sakura looks a little less sad and a little more thoughtful now – still not happy, but mostly ok.

“Yeah. That kind of sounds like her.”

“So”, Sasuke muses aloud, “we have to let Naruto beat her, because it’s the lesser evil. And what do Sakura and I do then?”

Said girl perks up at being included in Sasuke’s plans.

“Yeah. We have to do something about Ino-pig somehow.”

“You’ll wait it out. Today Shikamaru and Choji are enough trouble for you. I don’t know how many of their clan techniques they already know, but they are dangerous in any case.”

All three look skeptical.

“Don’t underestimate anyone today. You have a really rare opportunity, one you’ll only ever have again during Chuunin Exams. The opportunity to closely observe your peers.”

Sasuke’s head snaps up.

“You want us to watch them and remember for the future.”

Yes, this is the one thing most important – the very thing they were supposed to do during the Chuunin Exams in the Manga. She hopes that, maybe, an earlier opportunity at this may drive the lesson home properly. She half hopes they lose even, just to teach them a lesson. If losing is even possible for them is anyone’s guess. The more time passes the more she wonders about the differences between Manga and this strange reality she’s come to know. Can Main Character luck keep them safe here?

There has already been a little break down, including embarrassing bawling, when she realized that, if not, Sasuke could really die during the Wave mission. The whole thing still feels far away – three and a half more years until Sasuke graduates – but she already expects a repeat performance when the time approaches.

“Their styles are going to evolve and mutate”, she says, swallowing around the lump in her throat, “but the basics are not going to change. Long-range fighters are going to stay long-range. Taijutsu users are going to keep relying heavily on taijutsu. The Nara are a ninjutu clan. They use shadow based techniques to hold their enemies in place or even attack them.”

“That’s … all very interesting, Nee-chan”, Naruto says carefully, “but Shikamaru always sleeps in class. Maybe he’s the exception?”
Hisana snorts. “You know Shiki – she’s also lazy as all hell. No, the Nara are famous for spitting out geniuses. He might be lazy but if Ino kicks him into gear, he’ll run circles around you.”

Another reason, why she wants Naruto to deal with Ino – so that her two geniuses can focus on outsmarting Shikamaru. Or more like, overwhelming him. She doubts anyone can flat out outsmart the Nara boy.

Sasuke obviously doesn’t like what he’s hearing, so he at least will take her words to heart. If only to prove her wrong. Sakura also starts nodding absently, possibly already scheming.

“Can you do that?” Naruto suddenly asks. He sounds uncharacteristically serious as he considers his teammates. “Can you two take out Shikamaru?” Sasuke huffs. “You doubt us?”

Hisana watches them carefully. They are still bickering, but now there’s something else under the jeers and shoves. Familiarity. A certain sort of grudging, familial affection. She’s never quite felt so proud and accomplished. “Who’s your next opponent?”

“No idea”, Sasuke says suspiciously calmly. “Sakura, go find out.”

Naruto opens his mouth, but Sasuke silences him with a meaningful look. The blonde’s jar snaps shut with a click.

“On my way”, Sakura says and hurries towards Genma, who is, despite his earlier harsh words, carrying a notebook with the match up around.

“It’s them”, Sasuke says and hooks his arm into Hisana’s. He’s nodding towards a group of girls huddling near Iruka-sensei. Ami and … whatever her friends are called.

“They were making fun of Sakura-chan”, Naruto says with a frown. “They keep saying she’s ugly. Why’re they doing this?”

“Because girls are mean, Naruto-baka”, Hisana says gently. “Boys hit hard, but girls hit where it hurts.” The blond makes a face, caught somewhere between horrified realization and disillusionment.

“We thought if she can’t fight Ino, we can let her have this”, her cousin offers, deliberately ignoring his teammate’s predicament. “Maybe it’ll work off her temper.”

“So basically, you’re planning on using them as punching bags.”

“Basically.”

The whole match is completely ridiculous; Hisana’s not even sure how they won their first fight. The girls – Ami, Kasumi and Fuki, she learns – are a joke. They slip into textbook taijutsu stances. All their movements are perfect and surely worth a perfect score in class, but it becomes apparent that they have no idea what they are doing. They are slow, and whatever they’re trying to string together to withstand Sakura’s assault, it seems ill suited and blocky. Sakura fights fast and dirty; Ami is the first to hit the ground.

“That’s cheating!” she squawks. “I don’t know these moves, how am I supposed to block them?”

The other girls try to shield her but Naruto darts between Fuki and Kasumi and they spring apart like startled birds. Mission accomplished, he backs away to safety where Sasuke is circling the group. They perform this awkward dance a few times more: Sakura lashes out and knocks one of them to the ground; when the others try to protect her, Naruto interferes. None of the boys takes a direct part in the fight.
Finally Sakura lands a good hit on Fuki. The girl wails dramatically. She tries to run but is stopped by Sasuke; she throws up her hands and screams for Iruka-sensei to call off the match.

“It’s unfair! They have Sasuke-kun and we’re all girls!” In retaliation Sakura knocks out Kasumi with a punch in the nose. Blood sprays.

“Don’t involve me in this”, Sasuke says calmly. “I haven’t touched either of you.” A swift kick in the butt sends Ami crashing into her fallen teammate and Iruka-sensei decides to end the charade.

“Ok, ok. Victory team 2.”

He lifts Sakura’s bloody hand dispassionately before going to check on the losers. Even from afar Hisana can tell he’s scolding them while he pats them down for injuries. His face gets even grimmer as he finds none.

“You three need to take your training more seriously. Kunoichi Studies is not all there is to a being a ninja.” The fight did nothing to temper Sakura’s ire.

“What’s wrong with them?” she fumes. “I beat them all fair and square and they still say it was Sasuke who did it? Everyone saw!”

She probably doesn’t even notice how she’s addressing her crush, and how, for the first time ever, she’s glaring at him.

“Don’t be angry with me”, he says in the same calm tone he used on Ami, “be angry with them.”

“Don’t fight”, Naruto says firmly. “Not now.” Sakura growls at him, but she does seem to remember that her team is not the enemy. ‘The enemy’ is, in fact, readying for the next fight. Team Ino-Shika-Cho, or team 5, is up against more familiar faces. Shino and his two nervous looking teammates appear awkward next to the well oiled machine they’re about to face. Ino, Choji and Shikamaru have their heads together, the latter unwillingly, to discuss their battle plan.

A bandaged leg has been added to Ino’s injuries and there’s a big band aid on Shikamaru’s cheek. Choji seems entirely unhurt. Every time the Aburame tries to engage in any sort of conversation with his teammates they just shake their heads and back further away to whisper among themselves. Hisana winces. She knows it’s hard to make the first step. And to be rejected for it like this must sting quite a bit. She waves over team 7 and they quietly squat down on the sidelines to watch.

“So who am I supposed to root for?” Hisana asks Shiki.

“I honestly don’t give a crap”, Shiki answers. “Ino-chan could use a good beating, Choji-kun can take one and Shika-kun doesn’t care either way. If this day ends with all of them alive, I’ll count it as a win.”

“Then please root for cousin Shino”, Shizuha quips from behind them. “He looks very distressed as is.” To Hisana he still looks like every Aburame, motionless and mostly unaffected, but it stands to reason that he’d at least feel as dejected every other rejected eight-year-old.

“How did they do up to now?” Shizuha shrugs her shoulders and makes a vague so-so gesture.

“They are average in skill and exceptionally lucky.”

“Good combination.” Their match is overseen by a big, burly man Hisana’s only ever seen from afar. Funeno Daikoku-sensei is currently teaching the lower years and Sakura and Naruto greet him with an enthusiastic wave. He good-naturedly raises his hand in greeting.
“Everyone, get ready”, he rumbles and the sound effortlessly carries over to them.

“Who are those boys?” she whispers to Shizuha. “I am uncertain”, she admits. “The one on the right, cousin Shino called him Aki-kun, looks like he might be a Sarutobi. The other is called Daisuke-kun; I believe he is from a civilian family.”

Her eyes wander over to a cheering man in merchant clothes and a woman hiding her face against his arm. Daikoku-sensei whistles. Immediately Choji positions himself in front of his team, while Shikamaru quietly steps away to the side. Ino is coiled to spring – the lure to their trap.

Aki and Daisuke slip into a fancy but unwieldy looking formation. Shino is watching them impassively. The slight turn of his upper body looks innocuous enough; only Hisana’s familiarity with Shizuha’s style lets her recognize it as the Aburame basic defensive position. In a matter of seconds Ino collides with Aki. She wants to wince, but the only one who yells is Aki, as Ino digs her knuckles sharply between his ribs.

He doubles over and with a kick she sends him crashing into Choji, who lifts him up and throws him out of the arena. Aki is out. Daisuke stares at them in horror. He turns around to look at Shino, for help maybe, but the Aburame boy is gone. Instead Shikamaru makes a choked noise and then a yelp as he crashes into Ino and both are catapulted out of the arena.

Where the Nara used to stand Shino is watching them silently from behind his round glasses. It’s Choji against two boys now. An unfavorable position, but he is truly huge for an eight-year-old and towers above both of them, and Daisuke is shaking so hard, he seems more like a hindrance than help. The boy’s mouth opens, but before even a word can come out Choji punches him in the head and he drops like stone. Shino seizes him up; two heads taller than him, three times as wide and angry.

“Forfeit”, he says quietly. Daikoku-sensei whistles.

“Victory team 5.” To Hisana’s immense relief, Ino slinks away with her head hanging. Her performance was alright, certainly better than most kunoichi she’s seen so far, but most of their success is obviously to be attributed to Choji’s intimidating figure.

“She reeeally wants to impress you”, Shiki confides.

“Yes, so I’ve noticed.”

“Then why aren’t you a little nicer to her? She’s a bit of a diva, but you set Sakura straight. Why not her?”

Hisana slants her a look.“Do you want me to?”

“Maybe. She knows me too well, so she won’t listen to me; her parents see nothing wrong with being proud of herself – and can you see Shika-kun or Choji-kun telling her to ease up a bit? She’d beat them stupid.”

In the Manga Ino seemed to have straightened out herself during Sasuke’s absence. If everything goes according to plan, Sasuke won’t be absent though, so there’d be no reason for her obsession to fade. Would she really never grow out of this childish behavior? Hisana rings for the right words.

“I don’t like … how she treats Sasuke. Sakura was easy, because she just wants to be liked by anyone at all. Sasuke was always just … secondary; even if she wouldn’t say so. I don’t know what to do with Ino, without making both Sakura and Sasuke unhappy.”

Shiki seems to consider this. There’s a long silence, in which team Ino-Shika-Cho licks its collective
wounds, Shizuha speaks in hushed tones to Shino and Shiki thinks.

“You should come to eat with us tonight”, Shiki finally says. “We’re all meeting for yakiniku; Choji-kun’s and Ino-chan’s family and us. To celebrate, or, you know, distract them.” Hisana can almost feel the colour draining from her face. “Come on”, Shiki wheedles. “You survived Nii-chan and he’s basically the worst of all of us in one annoying package.”

She shakes her head, but Shiki has already set her mind to it. “Hisacchi, they’re all curious about you, don’t fight it ~”

“This sounds wrong and slightly alarming”, Shizuha informs them. This time both, Hisana and Shiki, jump a foot into the air.

“Do I need to buy you a bell?” the Nara squawks. “I have been practicing my stalk”, Shizuha repeats patiently. “What is the fuss about?”

“She’s trying to push Ino onto me”, Hisana says and immediately feels like a child. Shiki gapes at her.

“Did you just snitch on me?”

Shizuha’s face turns very slowly to the side. She stares into the air for a second, where she seems to be ringing with herself, before looking back at them.

“Yes”, she says nonsensically, “Hisana-chan, Shiki-chan, I want to introduce my cousin, Shino-kun.”
SO-MANY-BATTLES

I’m no good at describing combat scenes but I’m giving it my all. 
Naruto without combat is like … I don’t even know. Ramen without noodles?

Ok, no need to scream.

Shino is, of all the Rookie 9, by far the least dangerous to her. The boy is tall for his age, but so weedy, he almost swims in his coat. When he bows his hair flops all over the place. She kind of wants to ruffle it.

“Nice to meet you”, he says. Shizuha stands beside him like a proud mother. To her Shino’s loss seems to be entirely unimportant.

“Yo”, Shiki greets with a lazy grin. “Well done, little man.”

“Unfortunate choice in teammates”, Hisana agrees.

“They did their best”, Shino demurs. “We did our best.” Shizuha picks at his jacket, straightens it and brushes off non-existent dust.

“Cooperation in you Genin team will be more successful”, she offers. He suffers through her fussing with admirable stoicism.

“Agreed. Onee-san, I will go and buy tea now; I shall return shortly.”

After another bow he marches off, shoulders straight and hair flopping in the wind.

“Ah”, Shizuha sighs, voice still completely monotone, “cousin Shino is my favorite. He’s very cute.”

Shiki’s mouth twitches but she keeps mercifully silent. Sasuke has made his way through the crowd; Naruto and Sakura are nowhere in sight.

“Hisa-nee, we have a plan.”

“Good”, she praises, ignoring Shiki’s curious look, but she’s not easily appeased.

“What?” she needles and reaches out to mess with Sasuke’s hair. “What plan? Are you the enemy now?”

He struggles helplessly for a second before he can wriggle out of her hold. Choji and Shikamaru seem to have collected themselves as well by now. They make as if to come over, but when Ino catches a glimpse of Hisana, she shakes her head vigorously. Choji makes an encouraging motion towards Sasuke, but she still looks unwilling. One last longing look at her crush and she disappears into a group of giggling girls. The boys exchange exasperated looks.

Choji waddles ahead, happily waving at them; Shikamaru follows at a more sedate pace. He now has a bandage on his other cheek as well.
“You look like a hamster”, Shiki greets.

“Troublesome woman”, he grumbles. “Don’t even say it.”

“What?” she croons, “That you got hip checked out of the arena? Because you underestimated you enemy, even though I warned you?”

Shikamaru rolls his eyes, but she waves a forbidding finger at him and reaches for Sasuke again. “Be more careful next time; I heard they have a plan.”

By the time he can get rid of her this time around, his hair is a perfect fit for his mask – he looks just like his future-teacher. It’s incredibly charming and Hisana can’t bring herself to save him.

“I’m leaving”, he huffs. “Our next match starts in ten minutes. Against Kiba’s bunch of losers.”

He gives them all a nod. “Hisa-nee. Shizuha-san” – and after a glare at Shiki – “Troublesome woman.” Then he turns around and flounces away. Shiki’s eye bug out of her head. Behind her, Shikamaru bursts into riotous laughter.

They find the right arena just in time to see Kiba try to talk the trash talk of a much older boy.

“You stand no chance,” he brags gesturing towards the boys posing to his right and – of course – himself. “But don’t be too sad, we have an unfair advantage; three boys against three girls.”

Team 7 looks incredibly unimpressed. “I kind of really wanted to punch him in the face”, Naruto remarks to Sakura, “but if you want you can have him.”

“No thanks”, she says, “I don’t kick puppies. Sasuke-kun you want a go at Kiba?”

Her cousin still hasn’t smoothed his hair down, and so Hisana nearly chokes when he replies with a supremely distracted, “Who?”

Kiba nearly explodes. For a second she can almost see Kakashi and Gai-sensei superimposed over them. Next to him his teammates are still flexing non-existent muscles.

“You just laugh, I’ll show you!”

Ito-sensei ushers them apart. “Settle down. You have two minutes to prepare – please take your positions.”

There are short last-minute whispers, before they meet in the middle of the small arena. When Naruto looks for her in the crowd, she gives him a wave and a wry grin. Ito-sensei whistles.

Maybe it’s prejudiced, but in Hisana’s head, main characters are the most dangerous. In any case it’s all kinds of naïve and stupid – after all she’s more than weary of Shiki’s sharp eyes, and the Aburame as a whole are rather scary. It’s still a surprise that the most devious of Kiba’s team is not actually Kiba himself – it’s the weedy dark haired show-off that nobody seems to know.

He weaves through them, grabs Sakura’s arm and twists. There’s a yelp and then a crack as her forearm breaks. For a second everyone else freezes. Kiba and Naruto aim identical looks of horror at the boy and Sasuke actually stumbles a step in Sakura’s direction, before he catches himself. Far to the left, Kiba’s second teammate yells for him to stop.

“Hiro! What are you doing, let her go!” Hiro sneers and gives her a shove.
“Shut up, Yuki. You said you want to win. I’m winning this.”

Sakura is clutching her arm. Her shoulders are shaking and Hisana’s sure she’s crying. There’s an outcry from the parents but Ito-sensei lifts her arm to silence them.

“This is … unfortunate, but not against the rules. Unless team 2 wants to forfeit, the match continues.”

“We’re not giving up”, Sakura sniffs, and ignores the nervous looks of her teammates.

“Her first broken bone?” Shiki asks.

“Yes, I’m pretty sure. But there are medics around; better here than in a real battle.”

Sakura’s pain threshold has always worried her more than the boys’. Sasuke’s been trained since he was tiny and Naruto has been kicked around all his life – it’s not a nice childhood but it toughened him up. Sakura though, for all her precociousness and mulish disposition, is a pampered civilian girl. She’s worried but also a little proud that the girl’s hard head seems to translate to a high pain threshold.

The boys are all staring at each other, unsure how to proceed. Nobody wants to be the first to re-start the battle and Hiro is still scowling and pointedly not looking at anyone.

“Prepare yourself”, Ito-sensei says, “On my mark, re-engage!”

She whistles. This time the boys don’t hesitate: Naruto hits Kiba in the face with something that explodes into grey all over the place. The pepper bombs. The Inuzuka howls and clutches his face. Sasuke uses the distraction to grab Hiro by the neck and pull him away from Sakura, who has her eyes set on the last boy. Said boy swallows thickly.

A strange reaction, Hisana thinks; he’s facing an injured girl. Most of his peers would be jeering and cocky, sure of their victory. Then she remembers that this isn’t the first time Sakura’s fought one-armed today. In fact, her opponent might have watched alongside them how Sakura cornered Hyuuga Hinata with just one arm. He’s certainly not wrong to be nervous.

There’s also another thing most of them seem to have forgotten: Sakura has another pepper bomb. Hisana’s pretty sure that, initially, she’s planned to throw it in Ino’s face. Since that’s not going to happen she flings it at him with remarkable speed. He dodges narrowly, but Sakura’s arm suddenly snaps back and the bomb comes along, hitting him square in the neck. Ninja wire, and – … not a pepper bomb. It explodes with a high pitched noise that has the spectators jump in surprise.

A few feet away Kiba gives another agonized whine and tries to cover eyes and ears all at once. The boy though doesn’t just jump. He starts swaying; there’s blood is dripping out of his ears and he looks dazed – his eardrums ruptured. When he shakes off the haze, he tries to reach for her, but his legs don’t obey. Instead of taking the ten steps straight ahead to her, he sways far to the left and falls over.


Sakura gives him a jaunty little wave before skipping over to Kiba. Her foot comes down hard on his back and she turns to watch her teammates. Sasuke and Naruto have engaged Hiro in the other corner of the arena.

He’s keeping up with both of them; it’s truly remarkable. Maybe another child prodigy, she thinks. One that the Main Story simply didn’t care for before. Konoha is full of wunderkinds after all.

“Look at that taijutsu style”, someone whispers from behind. “Doesn’t that look a bit like the Shimura Clan’s?”
“Who knows”, someone else says, considerably louder, “old man Shimura had so many affairs – ‘- not all willing, I hear –‘ ‘- never officially claimed ‘-“

The whispers are getting louder now, bolder, and she can see Hiro take notice. His distraction costs him: Naruto lands a solid punch to his shoulder.
“- too many running around, can’t possibly keep up with all of them –“

“SHUT UP!” Hiro gives Sasuke an almighty shove and simply sidesteps Naruto. “SHUT UP, YOU DON’T EVEN KNOW WHAT YOU’RE SAYING!” He’s breathing heavily; not all of it from the fight. “DON’T YOU DARE TALK ABOUT ME!” Some of the spectators look indignant, as if he were the one behaving outrageously. His eyes sweep over the crowd with a wild look, like a cornered animal. He stomps his foot.

“You have NO right!” For a split second there seem to be tears in his eyes, but before she can take a closer look, he runs from the arena.

“Hiro-kun!” Iruka-sensei calls. „Hiro-kun, please come back.“ But the boy is already gone. “Victory team 2”, he calls hastily, before hurrying out of the arena himself. On the way he shoulders through some of the whisperers rather viciously. “I hope you’re proud of yourselves”, he says and gives chase.

Oh wow, Hisana thinks. Konoha is not a nice place for orphan children, is it? She looks at Naruto from the corner of her eyes; he looks completely floored. When they walk over to her, it’s in a very subdued mood.

“This wasn’t a good victory”, Sasuke says grimly. Hiro has obviously ruffled his feathers. As far as she knows none of his peers has ever given her cousin such trouble, and now there might never be a chance to fight him. She hopes he doesn’t try and befriend the boy – ‘befriend’ quote, unquote, as this is Sasuke – no matter how much she pities Hiro right now.
If Shiki made her sweat, the attention of ‘old man Shimura’ might send her into cardiac arrest. A medic is taking care of Kiba and his teammate. Both boys are pouting extensively; the medic looks amused. Another medic, a tall man carrying a knapsack, is already smiling at them from a few feet away. He jogs over cheerily.

Aha, Hisana thinks, opportunity.

The man kneels down next to Sakura; he still dwarfs her by almost two heads. She presents her arm with a grimace. No doubt she’s never been in contact with a medic before. Sakura’s parents are both civilians and this is her first serious injury – at most she’s seen a civilian doctor. Instead of the pain she’s visibly bracing for, there is only the faint, mint green glow of the yin chakra. “Oh”, she only manages. The medic chuckles.

“I know, it’s a little cool, but I’m almost done.” He probes the bone with nimble fingers and then applies more chakra.

“Medics are highly respected.” Hisana is trying for casual, but she’s intently watching the girl’s eyes as they are fixed onto the healing chakra. “It’s incredibly difficult to become one. Your chakra control needs to be as close to perfect as possible. Only few people ever manage more than the basics.”

She ignores the visibly flattered medic, in favor of watching awe bloom all over Sakura’s pale face.
“They have to have extensive knowledge over the human body, so it’s better not to mess with them.”

There’s a moment of silence.

“This is great”, Sakura breathes. “I’ve read about it.” Then her face falls. “But they aren’t allowed to
engage in combat. I want to fight.”

“That doesn’t mean we don’t have to be exceptional in battle”, interjects the medic, a good amount of pride in his job written all over his face. “We are only sent on the highest ranking missions after all. Most enemies know to eliminate us first, so we have to be able to protect ourselves – if we die, there’s no one to heal our teammates, after all.”

“So you do fight?” she asks, the glimmer back in her eyes. “Of course. We just don’t *pick* fights. Our team is supposed to protect us, but that’s not the main objective of the mission; they’re not constantly babysitting us.”

The rest of the conversation descends into the specifics of an apprenticeship. The only time Hisana has to interfere, a little panicked, is when Sakura wonders aloud whether or not she even needs a Genin team or if an immediate apprenticeship might not be best.

“I don’t think you should discard such an opportunity”, she says hastily. “After all, to make Chuunin you need a Genin team sooner or later. It might be best to do it now, rather than when you’re older and stuck with a bunch of younger kids.”

The medic agrees vigorously. “I have a colleague who did that”, he muses. “Nice guy, but he’s not really part of us, you know? We were all Genin together at least for a while. Hard, honest work kind of forges a bond between people, and he’s just never been part of that. Pity.”

Once Sakura’s arm been welded back together, the boys descend on her like wolves. Naruto, completely ignoring all protests, forces her into a bear hug. She’s nearly a head taller than him, so he has to bend back pretty far. With Sakura struggling he almost topples over.

“Quit it”, Sasuke grouches, even while he’s crowding in on them and brusquely grabs Sakura’s arm to inspect.

“Don’t worry, little man”, the medic says. The conversation has obviously put him in a good mood. “Her arm’s as good as new.”

He makes as if to pat Sasuke’s head, but her cousin’s glare makes him decide otherwise the last second. His arm hovers awkwardly.

“Haha! Ha … yes. Please consider”, he tells Sakura, “we’re always looking for medics.”

With a last wave he power walks away.

“You don’t always have to be so … prickly”, the girl scolds her teammate. Sasuke sputters.

“Prickly?”

“Yes”, Naruto crows, “like a hedgehog, dattebayo!”

Before a scuffle can break out, Hisana wraps her arms around their necks and pulls them tightly against her. Both boys wheeze and Sakura giggles.

“Come on, it’s lunch time. Let’s get some food first, and then you can beat the crap out of each other.”
Oh thank you! Whoever lets me post on my favorite browser again - now I can finally post without my formatting being eaten. Guys, you are way behind.

I've been posting like crazy on that other site (am I allowed to say its name or are they going to throw me out for it?), so I'm posting in rapid succession to catch up. Have fun!

They get lunch at – surprise – Ichiraku’s.

For once, nobody’s complaining. The atmosphere is relaxed and Sakura is enthusiastically describing her first taste of healing chakra.

“It’s just a pity”, Naruto finally says between mouthfuls of noodles, “that I didn’t get a crack at Kiba. I was really looking forward to it.”

“Then none of us got what we wanted”, Sasuke muses. “You didn’t fight Kiba, I didn’t get to fight Hiro and Sakura won’t be fighting Ino.”

“That sounds really shitty if you say it like that. But it was a good day, dattebayo.”

“Is a good day”, Sakura reminds him. “So don’t eat too much, we still have some more matches to go.”

Once they return, Hisana pulls Genma aside. “How many matches to go?”

“For your brats? Two at most. For team Yamanaka” – here he rolls his eyes dramatically – “just one. While you were gone they steam rolled another Hyuuga’s team by knocking his teammates flat and ganging up on him. That girl nearly scratched his eyes out.”

“Naruto, be careful”, she warns.

“I’m tough as old boots”, he boasts, but she whacks him upside the head.

“I don’t care if you can grow back half your insides. She gets your eyes, I will personally staple them back into your skull.”

No jokes about losing eyes; there’s going to be enough of that in her future as it is.

Naruto salutes out of sheer fear. “Gotta teach me that”, Sakura remarks.

“Any advice for us?” Sasuke enquires. So he does remember her warnings.

“An Akimichi’s biggest advantage is their physical strength. Stay away from Shikamaru’s shadow. Be quick about it.”

It isn’t much, but her cousin nods thoughtfully anyway.
“Ok”, he decides, “the plan’s still good.”

“Of course it is, it’s my plan after all!”

“Is it now?” Sakura scoffs. Close by Mizuki-sensei is ushering a completely unfamiliar team into an arena. Team 7 joins them, still amiably bickering.

This time she does hear very soft footsteps approaching, before a voice says “This will not be an easy fight.”

It’s not Shizuha though, but Shino.

“Do you know any of them?”

“I know their names. Hirose Kaori” – he indicated towards the short, black haired girl that hunched a few feet away from her teammates - “I have never seen her interact with anyone beside the teachers. Fujimori Hisao” – his finger wanders left, towards a tall, lanky boy with straight, white blonde hair – “Utatane Koharu-sama appears to have taken an interest in him. Inoue Tatsuya” – the runty looking boy with the gold blond ponytail and glasses – “he appears to be a ninjutsu prodigy.”

All three of them seem determined to win. The best three teams, she thinks, are all balanced male-female-male teams. She wonders at the correlations for a second, but there’s something else that has been bothering her for a while now.

“The ability gap in your year is pretty vast.”

Shino nods. “It is mostly those from civilian families who fall behind.”

Hisana thinks back to Ami and her team. She certainly feels no love for them, but it still strikes her as supremely unfair that they suffer under such a disadvantage. Haruno Sayuri’s way of thinking still makes the hair at the back of her neck stand up straight. It’s not unreasonable to assume, that those girls’ parents might be the same.

But then she thinks of Hinata and realizes that ninja clans bring their own disadvantages.

There aren’t very many spectators left. Most of the parents went home when their children were eliminated; only some of the ninja families were left, as well as the teachers and medics. Far to the right she can see Shizuha and Shiki with what would be team 10.

Mizuki-sensei impatiently waves her team over and for the first time she feels truly nervous.

“This isn’t right. I feel like this shouldn’t be happening.”

“Onee-san says you have good intuition”, Shino quips. “They have not been attending the Academy for almost a year now.”

Her mind races with possible explanations. Utatane Koharu, she remembers, of the Konoha Council. Does Danzo have anything to do with it? But Utatane has no relation to Root … as far as Hisana remembers, she has no idea about Danzo’s betrayal.

Today she’s come into contact with the evidence of Danzo’s existence for the first time. There’s a difference between knowing things in theory and witnessing the ripples it makes first hand, she finds. The mere thought that his eyes and ears are everywhere – and probably on Naruto and everyone that surrounds him – is more than chilling. The only thing that keeps her from actively wasting any thought on it is the watchful eye of the Sandaime that follows Naruto just as doggedly. All of the
Council has, of course, a vested interest in seeing both her and Sasuke die, too. But Itachi is still alive, so this doesn’t really worry her yet.

The sound of Mizuki-sensei’s whistling startles her out of these grim thoughts.

There’s no funny posturing or trash talk this time. In fact, there’s none of what made the previous matches so funny and charming – these are not children bumbling about.

It takes only a split second and the entire enemy team is gone. Instinctively Hisana knows it’s a genjutsu, but this should not be possible. Sasuke tries to dispel it, but nothing happens. Then his head jerks back, as if punched. Blood sprays.

Naruto and Sakura yelp. “Where are they?”

Something hits Naruto in the back of his neck. There’s a crack and a howl and another crack as his leg bends at an unnatural angle. He drops.

The girl, Kaori, reappears behind Sasuke. She aims a kick at his stomach; he blocks once, twice, the third times his fingers break with an audible snap. What the hell happening here? She catches Shiki’s wide eyed look. So it’s not her, this really isn’t normal.

“This is too much, Sensei stop this”, an older woman says from across the field, but Mizuki-sensei stays silent. More blood sprays, but it’s neither Sasuke’s nor Sakura’s.

It’s Naruto’s and Tatsuya, the ninjutsu boy, is standing above him, fingers formed into a futon jutsu – one she recognizes only, because she’s read ahead of her own curriculum.

“He’s already down”, she yells, “What the hell, Mizuki-sensei!”

“Sensei!”

“This is unfortunate, but not against the rules”, he echoes. His face is expressionless, but there’s an eerie glint to his eyes.

There are more cries of outrage as Sakura is caught in a genjutsu and starts crying. It’s a small, heartbreaking sound as she simply sits down and gives up.

She wants to do something, stop them, anything. But she’s honestly not sure if she herself stands any chance in this. Frantically she searches for Shizuha and Shiki in the crowd.

One of the adults is quicker than her. It’s an Akimichi woman. She stomps onto the battlefield and grips the still invisible Hisao out of thin air. He struggles in her meaty hands but it’s useless.

“Hey!” Mizuki-sensei calls, “don’t interfere! This is a learning experience!”

He makes as if to forcibly remove her from the field, but the shrill sound of Ito-sensei’s outrage stops him in his tracks.

“Are you insane? Oh my – medic!”

She pries Kaori off Sasuke and takes a threatening step towards Tatsuya, the last one standing. He is smarter than his teammates though, and simply raises his hands in surrender. The two Medics are already on team 7. They are calm, so there doesn’t seem to be anything to worry about, but Sakura is still crying while everything else is deadly quiet. Genma shoulder through the onlookers, Iruka-sensei
hurrying after him.

Mizuki-sensei is already blustering.

“If this is how you’re pampering future generations —“

Ito-sensei throws Kaori at Genma’s face. He catches her with ease and, ignoring her indignant protests, throws her over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes.

“How dare you”, Sensei snarls, stepping so far into Mizuki-sensei’s personal space that their noses are almost touching. Her tone quiets so far that the words become indiscernible, but they’re hissing into each other’s faces like angry cats.

Hisana leaves them to it in favor of checking on her team. She approaches the only very slowly, half afraid of what she’d see or that she might startle them.

Her cousin is sitting despondently on the floor; legs thrown out wide and hunched over. He looks a lot like he did at the very beginning: a small boy, unable to deal with what he just witnessed. The medics seem to be done with him. There are still scrapes along his arms and legs, but his ribs appear to be healed and his hands look fine.

Naruto is being tended to by a short, elderly woman. She mostly pokes at him with sharp fingers, probably only watching over the Kyuubi self-healing his vessel. He’s already whining and complaining again, trying to squirm away from her.

“Baa-saan - … ouch, that hurts! I’m ok, I’m ok!”

She ruffles his hair in passing. He really is though as old boots. The medic from earlier today is sitting with Sakura. She’s not physically hurt, only frightened, she realizes. They’re talking in hushed voices.

“Genjutsu plays on your fears”, she hears him say. “It has nothing to do with reality, only with your head and what the aggressor knows about the victim. I believe, since he didn’t know anything about you, it was a generic one. Your mind came up with it all on its own – that doesn’t mean it’s real in any way.”

They are discussing the specifics of genjutu. Sakura is nodding along. With every statistic the medic spits out, a little colour returns to her face. She’s in good hands for now, Hisana decides, and turns back to her cousin instead.

“What is it?”

It sounds harsh, she realizes, as soon as it’s out of her mouth, but Sasuke gets it.

“I’m not sure. It’s just … I knew them. They weren’t bad, but I beat them lots of times. And suddenly they disappear and now …”

…and now they’ve returned as super-powered monster ninjas. Sasuke’s frown deepens.

“It happened so fast.”

He sounds irked, more than shocked now. Of course they’d have bruised his ego.

“You were outclassed. It happens. As long as it makes you train harder, not give up, that’s fine.”

“Were you ever defeated, Hisa-nee?”
She sighs and drops down next to him. “Yeah. But I’m not ashamed; that day all us were defeated.”

She’s reluctant to leave them alone. They’re squabbling again already, but every once in a while there’s a telling silence that makes her skin crawl.

There’s no victory lunch, as she’d hoped, of course and they’ve left the training grounds as soon as the medics gave their ok. She didn’t even want to stick around to find out whether or not there even would be a final.

According to Shiki, most definitely not.

“I don’t care”, she said, incensed. “None of you is getting anywhere near those little sociopaths.”

There was no protest from team 10 at all.

When they left, Ito-sensei and Iruka-sensei were still in the middle of a heated discussion with Mizuki-sensei and Genma fervently trying to decide what to do with the psycho team.

She really doesn’t care how it’ll end.

They don’t go to Ichiraku’s. Lunch feels like an eternity in the past, but it seems wrong to wallow in their defeat in front of Teuchi-ji’s eyes. So they walk home Sakura first. A few hours before sundown she gets twitchy and confesses that she should be home by now.

Haruno Sayuri is not happy to see them. She takes in Sakura’s bruised and dusty appearance and her eyes bug unattractively.

“Sakura! Your clothes! Please don’t tell me you walked through the village like this – what will the neighbours say!”

She grabs the girl by the arm and drags her inside, away from possible prying eyes. “Look at yourself – like a heathen!”

She throws them a wild glare. “Go! I don’t want anyone to see you lurking around here!”

The door slams shut in their faces.

“Maybe”, Hisana wonders aloud, “this wasn’t such a good idea.”

Naruto is sleeping on their couch tonight. She wishes they could have dragged Sakura along, but Haruno Sayuri is truly impossible and refused to open the door, no matter how long they rang the doorbell.

So now there are two pre-pubescent boys sitting on her couch and pouting, with no puffer zone between them. She fights the urge to erect some sort of physical barrier between them – couch cushions, if they had any.

“I want you two to behave. Your teamwork today was impressive, keep it that way.”

Sometimes she feels more like their mother, than a sister. Three years age difference isn’t even all
that much and in fifteen years or so it’ll cease to be of any importance. But up until then she’ll have to resign herself to playing the mother hen.

“This sounds as if you were leaving”, Sasuke comments.

“That’s because I probably am.”

As if on cue someone knocks onto the door.

“Door’s open.”

“’Door’s open’?” it comes from the entrance hall, “What kind of ninja are you?”

“None yet”, she deadpans. Shikano sticks his head into the living room.

“I’m supposed to scare you into showing up.”

He looks supremely unenthused.

“What are you – her lackey? Weren’t you the older one?”

“I don’t even know anymore.”

“You’re whipped, aren’t you?”, Naruto jeers, “That’s what ‘whipped’ means, isn’t it?”

She leaves the idiots to it.

For a second she considers dressing in her nice kimono, but then she remembers with whom she’s eating and opts for something simple. Which means pretty much what she’s already wearing, only clean, and a pair of simple civilian shoes.

“You could just tell her no”, Naruto’s voice echoes through the flat when she steps out of the bedroom.

“Or I could choose to live another day in relative peace. Hisana-san, are you done?”

“Let’s go before you fall asleep in my living room.”

The boys promise to be good – for a given value of ‘good’ – and she ends up being the one dragging Shikano along.

“You can’t just come to get me and then go home yourself! I don’t believe this …”

Fifteen minutes later they arrive at a rather run down looking yakiniku place not far from the Konoha Hospital. Shiki is already waiting impatiently outside.

“Everyone’s already sitting down! Hurry up; if you eat with an Akimichi you’ve got to be fast.”

This seems to wake up Shikano like all her nagging hadn’t. He snaps to attention and shoots past his sister with a speed she wouldn’t have expected from a Nara.

“You’re actually the first, apart from Kaa-chan and me”, Shiki confesses and winks at her.”You just got to know how to push his buttons.”

It seems that Shiki at least knows to take the whole thing slow. Inside there’s indeed only a woman sitting on a huge corner booth; beside her a sulking Shikano.
She’s not a Nara, Hisana recognizes the instant the woman gets up to greet her.

“Uchiha-san! How lovely you could make it!”

She seems genuinely pleased, but she’s wearing the same fox-like grin Hisana has come to fear from the woman’s daughter. Not a Nara by birth, but Hisana can easily imagine that her holding her own in a clan of geniuses.

Hisana is strategically positioned across from *Nara-san*—that is going to get confusing with so many of them—and next to Shiki. She strongly suspects her other side will seat a Yamanaka of some sort.

There’s no small talk, because apparently there is no clan in Konoha less interested in polite chit chat than them. Instead there is talk about food and a rather serious battle plan to keep the Akimichi away from theirs.

“Allright”, Nara-san says, smacking the table with both hands. “I’m going to get your father. Inoichi-kun and Ino-chan should be here soon.” Then she turns to Hisana, “She has been talking about you almost as much as about your cousin. Don’t be intimidated if everyone is curious.”

Then she squeezes out of the booth and hurries away.

“Ok, who exactly is going to be here?” Hisana asks, casting a careful look around the humongous booth and fearing the worst.

Shikano waves off. “Akimichi”, he emphasizes. “It’s just Shika-kun, and Ino-chan, and Choji-kun and their parents. *We* are only here because of you.”

Shiki kicks him.

“What he means is that we are here so you aren’t alone with them. In other words, Nii-chan, you’re getting yakiniku because of Hisa-chan.”

“Yes”, he says, breaking out into a lazy grin, “that’s right. And that’s also the reason I was so nice and volunteered to get you.”

“You volunteered?” Hisana asked in surprise. With all the zeal he’d displayed she would have thought Shiki had forced him. “Sheesh, why couldn’t you have let your sister come instead?”

“Oi”, he protests, “you should be grateful. It could have been Inoichi-san; after all it’s his daughter who’s obsessed with your family.”

She has to bow to this superior argument.

The door opens with a bang that has every waiter in the place jump. There’s rumbling laughter and the sound of heavy footsteps—the Akimichi have arrived.
There’s only bonding and politics in this one, but I do hope this clears up some of the confusion I read about in the comments – only to make way for more confusion, because I’m introducing a whole lot of people right now. Not all important, but still.

The first face that appears is a familiar one; the woman who stopped Hisao. Fresh-faced and happy she only vaguely resembles the Valkyria who marched so easily into the middle of a fight. An enormous man is following her. The puppy fat she’s come to associate with the Akimichi of her class has turned mostly into muscle; his arm is wider than the waitress frantically trying to get out of his way. Not far behind waddles Choji, still plump and generally pleased with the world.

“Aaaah – hello everyone!” the man booms out and pats his belly. “I’ve been looking forward to tonight.”

To Hisana’s surprise both Nara children jump up to greet him.

“Chouza-san, long time no see!”

There’s a rather touching scene as Shiki and Shikano are passed around and squeezed until they turn blue.

“Good evening, Hisana-san”, Choji finally addresses her.

“Choji-kun”, she acknowledges and tries for a smile. Pleased, he sits down across from her.

“Ah”, the woman booms, “it’s you! I should have known, not many girls know how to handle Shiki-chan.”

“Oh!” said girl protests.

“It’s true, isn’t it? That’s a good thing; you don’t want to be liked by everybody, it’s only trouble. Akimichi Cho, please call me by my first name”, she addresses Hisana.

And then the small restaurant is suddenly full.

Shiki’s mother walks in with her husband in tow, followed by a woman who is undoubtedly her sister and who is dragging along the infamous Nara Shikaku and Shikamaru. They are closely followed, and occasionally hurried along, by Yamanaka Inoichi, only accompanied by his daughter.

People shuffle back and forth around the table, greetings are exchanged. Hisana is offered several first names, Yamanaka Inoichi being the sole exception. He pointedly sits down across from her, moving Choji a seat down in the process.

Hisana refuses to fidget under his grim look.

Ino, snatched by the back of her shirt by her father, is sat down next to him; longing looks at the free seat next to Hisana are resolutely ignored by everyone.

The mood changes radically again when the Nara women finally wrangle their husbands into their seats. Shiki’s father, who curtly introduced himself as Nara Shikarou, is shoved into the seat on
Hisana’s left. His wife squeezes in next to him, while Shiki climbs over the table to sit on Hisana’s right. Across the room several waitresses watch the chaos with a mix of amusement and exasperation.

“Everyone ready to order?” Choza booms and a flood of girls immediately scuttles over to assist. Drinks are brought; sake for the adults and melon juice for the children.

Inoichi is still sending her dark looks, but he’s not saying anything, so she tries to ignore him.

The food is good. The atmosphere is light and there’s a constant tussle about everything edible that everyone is engaging in with enthusiasm. Hisana takes to sneaking food from the surrounding Naras’ plates, because Shiki doesn’t seem to mind and the girl’s father doesn’t bother to defend his food. She herself only turns a blind eye towards Ino, who has taken to stealing some of her vegetables. When Shikano tries the same, she smacks his fingers with her chopsticks.

Everyone is very amiable, but she still can’t quite shake the nervousness. She’s not here for the fun, after all. Or at least, not entirely.

“How was the rest of the tournament?” she grudgingly addresses Ino. The girl jumps at a chance to spill the beans.

“It was terrible! Mizuki-sensei insisted we still have a match – for formality’s sake. He said it’s important to ‘face your own limits’. Shiki-nee-chan said that means ‘getting humiliated in front of witnesses’. Gemma-senpai was really angry. He yelled at them a lot about using ‘excessive force’, but he couldn’t really punish them or anything.” She flicks her hair over her shoulder and rolls her eyes dramatically. “I think we should probably have tried at least. But then again, they beat Sasuke-kun. They were really weird.”

Hisana nods carefully.

“I heard they used to be in your year.”

“Yeah”, Choji quips up between mouthfuls of meat, “but they were boring, so we didn’t play with them. And then one day poof – just gone. We all thought they’d quit. It happens.”

“In hindsight, that was probably naïve”, Shikamaru admits. “They were pretty good, after all. You don’t just quit when you’re good.”

“Except”, his father suggests, “for family reasons.”

“Nah. Then there’d have been some sort of good-bye party. We had some of those before.”

Hisana herself has had one of those, too. A boy in her class, Mamoru-kun, quit after his older brother died and he had to step in as the new heir to their family business.

“I also heard”, she says, “that elder Utatane-sama took an interest in one of them.”

“The Aburame know a lot”, Shikaku remarks and Hisana freezes. How did he know that? He hadn’t been there, had he? The table has gone suspiciously quiet; then only sound is that of someone chewing.

She remembers, quite suddenly, that this man was Konoha’s most esteemed Jounin Commander, and curses herself. She shouldn’t assume that nobody is watching her, when she clearly knows that
everybody is watching her. Wasn’t there a freak out? She clearly remembers a freak out.

She still feels a little justified in being caught off guard. She does have to watch out for them, but they are also Shiki’s family and she – maybe stupidly – considers them allies at least. All she has thought about until now, is *the enemy* watching her. Shiki is smirking broadly at her; there’s clearly a bit of schadenfreude in there and she thinks that, maybe Shikaku’s remark was supposed to be reassuring rather than a threat. Maybe she’s been over-analyzing them.

“People tend to dismiss them”, the man continues, outwardly unaware of her racing mind. “It’s a good thing they’re not interested in exploiting this sort of folly. I am, of course, *unaware* whether or not Utatane-sama has something to do with pulling them out of the Academy. It is a known fact that all Elders take a *very keen* interest in emerging talents, however. The Council only consists of exceptional shinobi, so they are more than capable of protecting themselves; pitting their guards against each other has become somewhat of a popular past time though. I imagine, if they were to hear of such a tournament, the chance of measuring those guards against their peers would be quite appealing. Hypothetically.”

The medics, she realizes. Their teachers must have asked around the hospital for volunteers. Of course the elders would have eyes and ears there too.

“The learning curve of genin is steep and evens out among chuunin”, Shikarou quips in a calm, gravelly voice. “Those *hypothetical* guards could be worlds ahead of you now; you will all reach this particular point in ability soon enough. Pitting students of such different levels in ability against each other might be morally reprehensible but not an unusual method to drive home the reality of our profession. What do you say, was it effective?”

Hisana is openly staring at him now. She doesn’t know what is worse: the fact that these abilities are still supposed to be genin level, or the fact that *this* is the sort of monster she’ll become too.

“It was – it …”

Words have left her. She doesn’t even know what *it was*, only that it was frightening and that it shouldn’t have happened. Shiki’s mother, who sheepishly introduced herself as Sachiko, takes pity on her.

“Don’t worry, dear”, she says and reaches over to playfully tap Hisana’s hand. “It’ll all become less frightening while you’re actually doing it. The only true cure for fear is familiarity.”

That sounds logical, so she decides to simply take it as it is presented, even if she can’t quite accept it emotionally yet. From the corner of her eye she can see Ino staring at her with a considering look, as if it’s truly new to her that an Uchiha might be frightened of anything.

“Is Sasuke-kun better now?” she finally asks, “And Forehead too, I guess. She got really beaten up.”

She seems completely unaware that her father’s face has acquired an uncanny likeness to that of an ill-tempered bulldog at the mention of Sasuke’s name.

For now Hisana decides not to comment on the obvious exclusion of Naruto from Ino’s concern. She nods.

“He’s ok. It really irked him that they lost, but I think he’s far more hung up about their match with Inuzuka Kiba’s team. They all are.”

“You mean Hiro-kun, right?” Shikamaru asks. “It ended pretty abruptly.”
There’s pointedly no mention of Danzo’s possible paternity.

“Sakura’s … not ok I think. I’d have rather kept her around for a while, but her mother is not a fan.”

“Of what?”

“Well, of me, mostly. Being a ninja in general, too.”

Ino gawks at her.

“What? But she always talked about how great ninjas are.”

“Yes”, Hisana agrees, “probably ninjas who aren’t her daughter. She thinks Sakura is wasting everyone’s time and so she should just hurry up and become a housewife already.”

Several heads turn her way.

“Uhm”, Shikamaru’s mother blurts out, “isn’t that a little early? I mean, it’s not like she’ll have to get married before she hits eighteen, right? Shikaku and I met pretty late.”

Said man huffs and sinks lower into his chair. It’s obvious the topic makes most of the Nara men uncomfortable and even Chouza looks a little unhappy, while he gulps down half a liter of beer.

“I’m not sure when she wants her to settle down, but I guess ‘as soon as possible’ is about right. She said she’s worried nobody would want Sakura when she’s all bulky like kunoichi get sometimes.”

This time it’s Inoichi who takes offense.

“I’ll have you know, my wife was a taijutsu user; female muscle rarely builds up as big as male muscle does.”

“I know that”, she feels forced to remind him, “but Haruno-san wants her to be a civilian girl, with a civilian husband. I’m pretty sure those would be intimidated by any sort of muscle.”

“Then why in the world would she send her child to the Academy in the first place?” Cho fumes. “Give the child a dream and then take it away – that’s terrible.”

“She said she thought Sakura would get tired of it by herself. When she figures out she’s no good, or doesn’t fit in, or whatever else she tells the girl on a regular basis.”

Ino is nearly vibrating out of her seat by now. Her mouth opens and closes occasionally, as if she’s readying herself for some sort of protest, and her hands have turned white around the edges of the table.

“But … she was always so nice! I don’t understand, why would she say that?”

“She’s a civilian, Ino”, Shikamaru quips, “they’re not like us.”

His mother whacks him.

“Don’t be so dismissive! I’m sure she has reasons to dislike ninjas. I agree though, that Sakura-san shouldn’t have to suffer for it. Has anyone tried talking to her?”

Hisana makes a vague ‘so-so’ gesture.

“Genma-senpai talked to her, but she was really rude and didn’t want to hear it. I’m just waiting for
Sakura to graduate, so her mother can’t force her to quit anymore. Legally, at least.”

Sakura’s will is strong, she’s proven that already, but Hisana knows that mothers are always a special case. She does worry occasionally if Sayuri could pressure and guilt trip Sakura into quitting before Tsunade arrives to act as the better role model. And isn’t that sad? – A drunk gambler preferable to Sakura’s own mother.

“At least there’s you”, Chouza offers, “as long as someone takes an interest in her career, she’ll have a support net. Her mother might be a big influence, but don’t underestimate the power of shared sweat and pain.”

She remembers hearing something like this today already, so she nods.

“At least I’ve talked her out of her diet”, she says and casts a side-long glance at Ino. She’s moving into dangerous territory right now. How much can she give away, before she’s betraying Sakura’s trust and how much does she have to give away to get the reaction she’s looking for?

Ino’s surprise is purely ego-centric.

“Why? What’s wrong with diets?”

“They’re torture”, Choji says, but apart from him nobody seems to feel compelled to comment.

“You’re dieting, aren’t you?” Hisana asks.

“Yes”, the blond preens, “I read about it in one of Kaa-chan’s old books. The trick is get slim muscles, so that you can still pose as a civilian woman. It’s hard, but I want to be like Kaa-chan was. When I told Forehead, she said she’s also going to diet and that she’ll be slimmer than me to impress Sasuke-kun.” She pouts. “I don’t know who’s slimmer – probably me – but Sasuke-kun hasn’t said anything yet, so it’s still on!”

There are so many things wrong with that statement; Hisana takes a moment to decide where to even start.

“Ok, first of all: Sasuke doesn’t care about your diet. Trust me. There’s probably nothing he currently cares less about. I’m telling you the same thing I told Sakura: If you want to impress him, beat him. Sasuke’s general disregard for people is unisex – either you’re better than him or you’re uninteresting.”

There’s a visible sigh of relief from Ino’s father. She’s not quite sure what exactly Inoichi feared tonight, possibly that Ino and Sasuke could one day decide to elope, but whatever it was, it seems to be put to rest for now.

Great; she just pulled her cousin’s galley off the rocks, now the Yamanaka patriarch only hates her.

“Second: how exactly do you diet? Because I get the impression you and Sakura don’t do it the same way.”

Ino ponders this for a second. “Well, I rarely eat meat to keep the protein to a minimum. Green veggies – even though I don’t like them – and I only eat sweets on Sundays. And on my birthday. Oh yes! – I’m cooking alone now, so I can control how much I eat of everything.”

That sounds … reasonable. If she represses the instinctive reluctance to give a child a kitchen knife; Ino is a ninja after all and Naruto, stupid, clumsy Naruto, does more dangerous things on a regular basis.
More curious eyes have turned their way.

“Why?” Inoichi asks, “How does Sakura do it?”

She doesn’t actually want to say it out loud; wherever the line between ‘feeding necessary information’ and ‘talking too much’ may be, she’s pretty sure that would be crossing it.

“She ate too little”, Shiki says instead, casually, as if it’s really no big deal. “Apparently her mom knows as much about our lifestyle as she does about parenting.”

Hisana and Sachiko both reach out to pinch her.

“What just go spilling people’s secrets”, Hisana hisses.

“Don’t be rude”, Sachiko admonishes.

“Ow, ow – ok! I’m just saying … parents can mess up a lot.”

There’s a general murmur of agreement, followed by a more leisure debate about civilian born ninjas and their handicaps.

The transition of topics is so smooth, Hisana feels it must be scripted. It probably is.

After that an invisible pressure lifts from Hisana’s shoulders. It seems as if all topics that needed discussing were worked through and everyone could go back to enjoying the food. There’s more joking now, as well as some old family stories to embarrass just about everyone on the table.

At the end of the evening, just before ten, she’s almost sorry to leave. There’s more hugging and promises to meet again. Ino is suspiciously quiet, as she’s been most of the evening.

“I think I’ll have to talk to Forehead again”, she muses, just before following her father out of the restaurant. “Obviously she still needs me, so I guess I can be gracious and help a little more.”

Hisana does pointedly not to snort and instead nods solemnly.

“Yes, I think that would be best.”

This earns her a little smile and a wave before the girl hurries away. On her way back home, she can’t help but think that it has been a productive day. Not a nice one, despite the rather pleasant ending, but a good one nonetheless.

~*~*~*~*~*

“You were right”, Shikarou muses, as they leisurely make their way back home.

“Wasn’t I?” Shiki preens. “I told you so.”

Shikaku rolls his eyes. “Yes, yes, alright. She was rather fun. I’m curious to see where this will go.”

“So that means we’re not getting involved?” his wife wondered.
“No no. There’s no need for that yet, I think. It would just mess with the data. And the fun.”

“You’re going to drive that girl into an early grave”, Shikano warns, only half joking, but all he earns is suppressed giggling from his female relatives and a pat on the shoulder from his father.

“What in the world are they talking about?” Choji whispers to his father, as they slowly follow just a few feet behind. Chouza only shakes his head.

“Nara-talk. Don’t think about it too much.”
Chapter 18

I’ll have to go over all the chapters at one point because apparently I’m a formatting slob and I still don’t have a beta reader. Please, someone take pity on me.

While Hisana likes to think of team 7 as her biggest problem, that’s not actually true.

In fact, those annoying, antsy children have turned into a real team. They still fight, but just last week she caught Sasuke laugh out loud at his team’s hijinks.

It was summarily pressed down, as soon as Sakura and Naruto realized what exactly they were hearing, but it was most definitely the first care-free, child-like laugh Hisana has ever heard from her cousin. It’s been two years. She’s never heard him genuinely laugh for two whole years. The realization hits her rather hard.

But no, her most pressing problem is currently one of her own making.

“So, graduation,” Shiki says apropos of nothing.

“Please don’t,” Hisana groans. “I don’t want to think about it until I have to.”

“That’s uncharacteristically short-sighted of you,” Shizuha muses, “Is there something bothering you in particular?”

Yes, but she’s not even sure what it is. The one thing labeled ‘Graduation’ in her head – capitalized and everything – has always been team 7’s graduation. In turn her own has completely blindsided her.

“I am very nervous,” Shizuha confesses. “I have tried observing our classmates to estimate which of them might be our possible teammates, but there are several unknown variables yet.”

Shiki waves her concerns away.

“You’re worrying too much. I already know mine of course, but there’s not much you could do even if you knew. Just … relax and let it happen.”

While not great advice, it’s pretty much the only advice they get. Ito-sensei, too, only told them good ninjas were flexible in mind as well as in body, and they should remember that once they were paired off. Which basically equates to ‘shut up and get along’.

There is a certain truth in Shiki’s words as well though: she’ll get who she’ll get. It’s not as if she knows any jounin that could potentially be her teacher or as if she knows any other of her classmates by name.

Her friends even garner a certain amount of entertainment of her inability to call them anything but
‘that blonde chick’, ‘that Hyuuga’ or ‘that other Hyuuga’. Is she self-centered? Probably.

Turning her attention towards this amorphous mass of unknown faces is therefore an exercise in futility. There’s no way she can match names and faces, much less how good any of them perform in any given subject. She’s not even sure anymore if she’s still on top of her class.

“You are,” Shizuha assures her. “It is likely that you will be paired with the worst performing student and someone in the middle field.”

That is exactly how it went down with team 7 in the manga, so the probability is indeed high; but for whatever reason Shizuha’s tone suggests otherwise, which immediately makes all of Hisana’s alarm bells go off.

“You know something.”

“I know nothing.”

Yes, sure, of course.

Whatever Shizuha may know or not know, graduation is rapidly approaching, and Hisana has no more luck getting her to spill as the day comes closer.

“You know what is making me nervous?” Shiki finally says, two days before their last weekend.

“That Inomaru has been talking incessantly about his new ‘grown-up genin outfit’. It makes me feel inadequate.”

“So Shiki-chan does possess female pride,” Shizuha remarks, which only earns her a half-hearted whack.

“No, it just makes sense – we’re officially ninja now and if we don’t look the part they won’t take us seriously. But I don’t want to go shopping.”

“Then ask your mother,” Hisana points out, “She’ll be happy to do it for you.”

There’s some grumbling about still being dressed by her mother, but she knows that’s not really an argument against the general Nara-laziness. “I also doubt,” she adds, “that anyone will take you seriously with your work moral, no matter how you dress.”

“Can’t even argue with that.”

She can’t deny that she’s also a little nervous. On the one hand, she’ll only meet a bunch of kids that she’ll have to lug around for the next however many years – on the other, from any mission onwards now there’s a legitimate chance she’ll die.

The more childish part of her – the one who still thinks it’s just so cool that she’s living in a manga – is hung up enough over the thought of her very own genin team, that she’s actually losing sleep over it.

The only one more excited about the whole thing than her is Naruto.

“Nee-chan,” he breathes, eyes comically wide, “you’re going to be a real ninja now! You got to tell me what it’s like!”

He wriggles closer to her, in the process shoving Sasuke out of the way, who collapsed right next to her after their Friday endurance training.
“You already know what it’s going to be like,” she protests. “A surprise practical part and a written one about pretty much everything. Afterwards I’ll go and try not to get myself or my team killed.”

There’s a little noise coming from Sakura and then the girl is suddenly right in her face. “It’s more than that! It’s an honor to serve the village. And you’ll get a team – a proper team!”

There’s a moment of silence as the kids let that sink in. Sakura is the first to collect herself. “Uhm, does that mean we’re not meeting for training anymore?”

Technically it does. Officially, team 7 is her school project of sorts; after graduation she’ll have other duties.

“Well …,” she says instead, “I don’t know about training. But as long as I’m home you could still see me in the evenings. And I want you three to keep up with your training, even if I’m not around. I’m sure you could ask Genma-senpai to help you out a little.”

“That’s right,” Sasuke snorts. “He still hasn’t gotten that promotion, has he? He’s going to need some more extras on his CV.”

And because Sasuke is scarily often right about people, that’s exactly how it goes. With team 7 in good – good-ish – hands, she can properly focus on her own problem. Or rather, panic.

It does strike her as bizarre that the last-minute cramming for a ninja graduation exam is the same as for all other final exams she’s ever taken anywhere, even though she’s more than confident about her own abilities for once.

When Monday comes she just wants to get it done already. Her class is scheduled for exams around mid-day; she wishes that would mean sleeping in, but she’s too nervous to sleep and Sasuke still has school, so she might as well walk him there.

During the course of the weekend her cousin has gotten suspiciously quiet; not the usual Sasuke-quiet where he still can’t keep the snarking to himself, but really quiet. She only really realized on Sunday evening, when she closed her books for good and noticed that he’d been home the whole day and she hadn’t heard a peep of him. Her head was far too full of facts and figures for serious conversation though, so she decided not to ask at least until the end of the exam.

On the way to the Academy he’s still completely silent and dragging his feet. “Hisa-nee?” he finally asks, two streets away from their destination, “What you said on Friday … you’re not really going to die, are you?”

Her first instinct is to say ‘No, of course not’, because you’re supposed to reassure children like that, aren’t you? But then again, she doubts that Sasuke of all people would be satisfied with empty promises and platitudes.

“Probably not,” she settles on. “I’m going to be a genin, they aren’t going to send us on dangerous missions for a while. Also, I’m an Uchiha; we’re kind of a rare commodity.”

He winces, but it’s the truth. A truth he’s going to be hearing for the rest of his life.
“There will be my jounin teacher who’s supposed to watch out for me. But there’s always a chance I’ll die. We’re ninjas.”

It’s as simple as that. While he doesn’t seem happy with her answer, it does seem to satisfy him in a grim sort of way. In front of the gates he hesitates briefly, but in the end he simply gives her a stiff wave and a ‘good luck’, before purposefully walking away.

Idiot, she thinks fondly. But at least he’s trying.

Too much time is a problem she very rarely faces. It’s nice to simply wander the streets of Konoha, with at least four hours to kill. Going home is not an option; she’s afraid she might crack open her books again. She considers going to bother Genma, but there’s no guarantee that he’s home and she might possibly be a little afraid of his man-cave, too. Instead she seeks out the little tea house Sasuke and her like to visit because her cousin likes their home-made senbei crackers.

It’s still early, but the village is already bustling with merchants and ninjas alike. It’s nice to sit down and simply watch them for once, instead of being part of it.

The owner, an elderly lady that everyone only calls Baa-chan, quickly ushers a tired-looking waitress her way, a cup of her preferred genmaicha tea already on her tray.

“You’re in luck,” the girl says as a greeting and puts down the steaming cup in front of her, “the water’s just stopped boiling.”

It’s still cool outside; soon it’s going to be too warm for tea, but right now the hot cup is more than welcome to warm her hands. She orders some mochi and settles down to people watch. Briefly she wonders what the others are doing – Shiki is probably still asleep, Shizuha might be up and studying – but she discards the thought when her mochi arrive. Strawberry, her favorite. Of course absolute peace never lasts long in Konoha.

“GOOD MORNING, HARDWORKING CITIZENS OF KONOHA! CAN I TROUBLE YOU FOR MY MONTHLY SWEET INDULGENCE THIS VERY FINE MORNING?”

Hisana nearly chokes on her mochi. Two years, she thinks, I’ve managed to avoid him for two years. Why now?

A shadowed figure strikes a dramatic pose in the doorway.

"Dear god …,” Baa-chan echoes from somewhere. “Is it that time again?”

“Indeed!” Gai cries out. His indoor-voice is only slightly less deafening than his outdoor-voice. “I have come for my favorite treat in all of Konoha – your delectable strawberry mochi!”

Hisana glances down at her own plate and despairs.

“Why?” she whispers to a nearby waitress. “Why here?”

“Darling, I’ve been asking that since I’ve started here ten years ago. He’s only here once a month, because apparently he can’t eat sweets like a regular person. You just got unlucky.”

Ten years, she thinks. She appears to be incredibly lucky actually, or she would have run into him far sooner.

Maito Gai is a hulk of a man, and as he approaches the counter he dwarfs everyone he passes.
Hisana has only ever seen one person look like that and it had been a body-building champion on television.

He looks incredibly impressive and while most ninjas in the manga appeared to cringe away from his personality, the civilians seem to do it out of sheer fear of his humongous muscles. He turns around, to flash a thumbs up and … - she nearly chokes for a second time, this time even without the mochi.

Gai’s face is actually rather normal, but his eyebrows are decidedly not. She briefly remembers what her sister used to call ‘statement brows’, before — no, just no. The weirdest thing about Gai is, in fact, that he would look completely normal, if it wasn’t for his — really very shiny — bowl cut and the incredibly unfortunate spandex. His nice guy pose does not magically make rainbows or beach scenes appear, but his teeth are indeed very white.

Hisana fights the urge to avert her gaze in second-hand embarrassment and instead carefully hides her face behind her mug.

Please hurry with the mochi, she thinks. Hurry and make him go away. Baa-chan seems to have similar thoughts and Gai is served politely but unusually quickly; in a matter of minutes three neatly packed mochi are shoved into his arms and a pair of waitresses with fixed smiles frog march him to the door.

“What lovely, prompt service! The youth is still strong in you, Baa-chan — I will return next month!”

Maybe she exhaled too loudly in relief. Maybe Gai can smell fear like a shark. Or maybe she really is unlucky. Whatever it is, it makes Gai turn towards her with the accuracy of a heat seeking missile just before he reaches the door.

“WHY HELLO!” he cries, outdoor voice already back in service, “AREN’T YOU GENMA-KUN’S GIRL?”

She’s not sure if Gai’s definition of ‘being someone’s girl’ is the same as everyone else’s, but she’s too shocked to agree or deny either way. One of the waitresses has grabbed onto his arm, desperate enough to try and bodily pull him out of the establishment. She might as well be a bug on his jumpsuit, as easily as he simply drags her along to make his way to Hisana’s table. Oh dear god.

“You are acquainted with Genma-senpai?” she grits out, half-afraid she’ll start stuttering in horror. Up close Gai is even bigger and his spandex even more embarrassing; sitting down her face is about level with his crotch. The situation feels more and more bizarre and horrifying.

Gai takes her question as an invitation to sit down and unpack his mochi.

“One cup of green tea, please!” he addresses the waitress, who visibly sags in defeat.

From somewhere in the kitchen she can hear Baa-chan’s wail of despair before it tapers off and she barks at someone to ‘get that god forsaking tea already’.

“Genma-kun and I were part of a most youthful team!” Gai informed her. “Together with Ebisu-kun and our esteemed Sensei Akimichi Chouza!”

Two common acquaintances. How in the world did she manage to evade him for so long? Does today make her more lucky or unlucky?

While she ponders this, Gai has spied her last half eaten mochi.

“Ahh, you also know the wonders of Baa-chan’s youthful strawberry mochi! You have good taste!”
He takes an oddly dainty bite from his own mochi.

“\textquoteonly{I look forward to this every month,\textquoteonly{" he confides, \textquoteonly{My rigorous training plan does not allow for more indulgence – but that makes it all the more special!\textquoteonly{}}

Baa-chan herself brings Gai’s tea, apparently only to cast Hisana a pitying and apologetic look. ‘My bad’ it seems to say as she puts down a glass of chilled grape juice down in front of her.

“On the house,” she promises. She does love Uchiha privileges, Hisana thinks, happily eying the dark red drink. If she were anyone else, she’s sure Baa-chan would have kicked her out alongside Gai, since it’s actually her mere presence that keeps the jounin here.

“I’ve heard of your … special … training,” she admits.

“So the Sublime Green Beast’s reputation precedes him,” Gai trills in delight. “My greatest aspiration is to inspire young ninjas to enjoy their youth to the fullest! It is always a joy when my voice reaches yet another ear!”

He flashes another thumbs up and grin. There’s mochi stuck between his teeth.

“Today the graduation exam is held,” he suddenly remarks, “Are you not participating?”

“My class is scheduled for 12 o’clock.”

“Marvelous! Genma-kun spoke highly of you; if you’ve worked hard, I’m sure you will succeed!”

She wonders if one grows numb to Gai’s histrionics over time or if it’s a skill acquired through hard work. She’ll have to ask Genma.

“I’m not actually worried about that,” she confides, for reasons unknown. “It’s more what happens after.”

Apart from the aura of kookiness that seems to surround him, Gai mannerism makes him seem almost harmless. He feels … trustworthy, somehow. She briefly remembers how Gai’s team would turn out and feels just the slightest bit justified in spilling her guts to him. More than she would telling Kakashi, at least.

The jounin’s enormous eyebrows furrow in thought and he downs the piping hot tea in one gulp. Steam is coming out of his nose, but he doesn’t seem to notice.

“Joining a genin squad is a momentous and joyous occasion that only happens once in your life – twice if you’re lucky!” he finally pronounces. “Even if there is conflict and differences in opinions, teamwork will always prevail against enemies and disagreements alike! The genin team is the family of all those who never had family; you will learn to love them.”

After this unexpectedly profound judgment, he swallows the last tiny bite of his sweet and flashes another nice guy pose.

“Yosh! Such unexpected, youthful talk over delicious strawberry mochi! I must go now, there is a mission I need to prepare for.” He casts her a somewhat guilty look. “I admit to procrastinating; I would have missed my ‘first Monday of the month’ visit otherwise.”

He swivels around to address the entire tea house once more.
“GOOD BYE, YOUTHFUL CITIZENS! WISH ME LUCK AS I GO OUT AND REPRESENT OUR NOBLE VILLAGE!”

“Good luck,” Hisana tells him faintly, and then the Sublime Green Beast of Konoha is gone and the room has gotten a lot quieter, and just a little dimmer.

This needed to happen; I didn’t even know how much I actually needed this to happen until I wrote it.
This time there’s a little extra at the end: 20 random facts about the characters in my fic.

Someone asked for more men in Hisana’s life – here.you.go.

Around 11:30 o’clock Hisana makes her way back to the Academy. She’s still nervous, but it’s a good nervousness now – the one you get before vacation, the I’m-looking-forward-to-this kind.

Everyone meets in their regular class room, where Ito-sensei meticulously sorts them into an order Hisana can’t quite decode and hands them forms to fill out.

“Name, registration number, finger prints, blood sample on the sealing matrix, please. Maki-kun, I saw that! Don’t mess with the matrix!”

One after another she ushers them into the hall, where Iruka-sensei leads them wherever they need to be; none of the two appear to be part of the exam committee. Hisana only briefly catches sight of Shiki, who is the very first to be lead out of the room, and can do nothing more than wave at Shizuha, who’s been positioned at the other end of the room, firmly kept in place by Ito-sensei’s warning glare.

After an hour only about half of them have been called up and there are only two more people in front of her: a fidgeting Inoko, who can’t seem to decide whether she’s more scared of Hisana’s prolonged proximity or the upcoming exam, and a red-headed boy who’s been picking his nose for almost fifteen minutes now.

She hates all of them.

Whatever good mood she scrounged up that morning has evaporated. She wants to go home and sleep, she wants to eat lunch and – most novel – she wants Sasuke. While undeniably a brat, her cousin’s presence usually has a calming influence on her. Up until now it was an effect she’s only passively observed; this is the first time she consciously wishes he were here to calm her.

Nose-picking-boy’s chair scrapes against the floor; he wipes his hands against his trousers and stomps out of the door where Iruka-sensei is already waiting. Wow; she sure hopes for both of them that he’s not the deadlast of this class.

The next ten minutes are spent chewing her lip and cracking her fingers. When Iruka-sensei’s face appears at the door she nearly jumps out of her skin.

There’s a peculiar mix of godyesfinally and god pleasenotyet swirling in her head as she walks over to him. The door closes with a very final sounding thud.
“Don’t worry,” Iruka-sensei says, “It’s just an exam. You’ve had these every year”

Which is very true and doesn’t help in the least.

She’s led into a room with only three tables spaced as far apart as the room will allow; there’s two ninja patrolling the desks. She recognizes none of them.

Iruka-sensei leads her to the only free desk close to the window and wordlessly hands her the test. He pats her encouragingly on the shoulder.

*Question 1: If a kunai travels at a velocity of 30 miles/h at an angle of exactly 90°, calculate the trajectory path x.*

…

About ten minutes in, Iruka-sensei escorts a frazzled looking Inoko out of the room. She is quickly replaced by a boy in a baggy, lime green shirt.

*Question 5: Name and describe the fan signals used in court and how they can be adapted to ninja code.*

…

Another ten minutes and nose-picking-boy is led away sniveling; a girl in pigtails takes his place.

*Question 10: Name the major royal houses of the Shinobi Nations in order of overall importance and their current head of house.*

…

*Extra-credit question 11: Name and describe the effects of one C-rank genjutsu, ninjutsu and taijutsu technique each.*

…

When Iruka-sensei taps on her shoulder, Hisana’s head is still so full of numbers and random facts that she doesn’t immediately comprehend what he wants from her.

‘Come’ he mouths and gestures towards the door. She leaves her test for the patrolling ninja to collect and dumbly follows her sensei in a familiar post-exam haze. He leads her towards yet another room for the practical part.

“Almost done,” he says before shoving her inside.

She doesn’t quite know who she expected to be part of the exam committee, but it’s a small mercy
that Mizuki-sensei isn’t. He and Iruka-sensei are probably too young, Hisana guesses. Suzume-sensei is there, as well as Funeno Daikoku-sensei and a woman she vaguely recognizes as one of the Hokage’s office chuunin.


There’s a shuffle of papers and Daikoku-sensei motions towards a nearby chair.

“Kawarimi no Jutsu, if you please.”

She can do that.

**Tiger, Boar, Ox, Dog, Snake.**

There’s a familiar, if disquieting sensation of compression and wind as the world disappears and then reappears with a soft *plop*. She hasn’t quite managed to make the process noiseless, but the ‘plop’ has gotten a lot softer since the first try. The examiners’ faces are stony and unreadable.

“Bushin no Jutsu, please,” Suzume-sensei says.

**Ram, Snake, Tiger.**

There’s not actually all that much to the technique, which makes Naruto’s failure with it even worse. She tries to picture herself before forcing out the right amount of chakra. There’s no strange feeling attached, like with the Kawarimi no Jutsu, only the slight fatigue that comes with chakra usage. It takes more concentration then the Kawarimi for the simple reason that Hisana still has trouble picturing herself as she is sometimes. The first horrifying try had resulted in a vaguely Sarah shaped clone instead. But while Hisana panicked, Ito-sensei had only congratulated her on using Bushin and Henge at the same time. It hadn’t gotten her nearly enough extra credit to make up for the small heart attack.

“Henge no Jutsu,” the chuunin woman commands.

**Dog, Boar, Ram.**

The technique works best with a familiar form, but she’s here to impress. There’s an explosion of smoke and Yamanaka Inoichi stands in front of the examiners.

The office chuunin barks out a laugh.

“Ok, Uchiha-san,” she says, “you’re clear for this part.”

As if on cue, Iruka-sensei knocks.

“Written exam: passed,” he says with a small smile. “You’re ok to go. Congratulations.”

He hands her a small metal square; it’s surprisingly light and dark blue cloth unfolds from under it. Her own Hitai-ate.

“Please don’t linger on the grounds,” Suzume-sensei adds. “Regulations, you understand.”

That’s just fine by Hisana – all she wants is to go home and catch up on sleep.

After swinging by the grocer’s and buying that special, expensive matcha tea she’s been eying – to
celebrate – she does just that.

She tucks the forehead protector under her pillow and falls asleep. She sleeps deeply and without dreams; the only time she nearly wakes up is when a new weight settles into the bed – Sasuke. Who’s probably procrastinating on his homework. It’s almost six in the evening when she wakes up the next time.

“So you passed,” Sasuke mumbles from next to her.

“How did you guess?”

“I saw the tea in the kitchen. Also, you didn’t really think you’d fail, did you?”

Brat. No she didn’t.

“What about your homework?” she asks instead.

That shuts him up. Team 7 comes over that night, including Genma, completely uninvited. They squeeze into their small living room to eat the last of Hisana’s home-made potato salad and drink the raspberry lemonade Genma brought. It’s loud and it’s great and it does feel a little like family.

The next morning comes too soon.

She hasn’t slept properly, yet again. This time the reasons were too much food and her long day-time nap, so her mood is less grumpy and more sleepily satisfied.

Silently she settles into the free seat between her friends and simply starts to doze.

Shizuha and Shiki exchange a look.

“Are you ok?”

“I’m good. I just decided I don’t care what happens today.”

“Again, uncharacteristically short-sighted of you,” Shizuha muses. “Do you possibly not handle stress well?”

Just then the door opens and Ito-sensei strides in. Instead of the usual stack of papers, she’s only carrying a small red notebook this time.

“Everyone, listen up for the last time! Congratulations to you all – you are now officially ninja of Konoha. Today you will be assigned to your genin teams, who will stay with you for the first part of your career. Please listen closely; I will call your names. Team 1: …”

It’s dead silent as Ito-sensei calls out the teams, except for the initial gasps of surprise or the occasional bouts of protest that are silenced immediately.

“Team 6: Yamanaka Inomaru, Akimichi Choumei, Nara Shiki – your jounin sensei will be Inuzuka Dai.”

“Oh no …,” Shiki sighs and lets her head drop onto the desk with a small thud.

Her teammates don’t seem any more enthused.
Inoko, who against all expectations passed, is assigned to team 8 alongside nose-picking-boy and someone Hisana vaguely recalls as being good at taijutsu. She looks even more unhappy.

“At least her teacher’s a Yamanaka,” Shiki groans. “I feel zero pity for the girl. Zero.”


For a moment Hisana is confused. There’s another Aburame in her year? Indeed a boy in a baggy grey hoodie and square glasses makes his way over to them. She can’t recall having seen him before; she makes the strategic decision not to tell Shizuha.

A blonde boy also shuffles over. In contrast to the Aburame, who both radiate general contentment with themselves and the world, he seems horrified to be stuck with two of the freaks.

“Team 11,” Sensei finally announces, “Uchiha Hisana, Eguchi Sora, Sone Mitsuharu – your jounin teacher is Hyuuga Kohaku.”

Hisana’s head wants to turn into several directions at once; to the room at large, to see who her new teammates are, and to Shizuha, to ask if she knew. Did she act like that because she knew it would be a Hyuuga. Curiosity wins out over anger and a vague sort of betrayal.

There are two boys stomping their way over to her. One of them is tall and weedy; he moves a little awkwardly, as if he just went through a growth spurt and doesn’t quite know where his limbs end yet. He’s wearing a sunshine yellow t-shirt, which she hopes he doesn’t intend to keep, and a dumb grin. He kind of reminds her of Naruto a little, except taller and with darker coloring.

The other boy is of more average height. His defining characteristic is his white blonde hair that goes past his chin; there’s a thin braid neatly tucked behind his ear. He’s wearing battle garb already and his face is carefully blank. The only sign of nervousness is a bandage wrapped around his left arm that he constantly keeps scratching.

“I’m Sora,” the Naruto-look-alike introduces himself. He gives a sloppy bow and nearly knocks his head against Shizuha’s desk in the process.

“Sone Mitsuharu,” says the white haired boy in an unexpectedly soft, wispy voice. “N-nice to meet you.”

“Uchiha Hisana,” she says and gives a sitting bow, even though the boys probably know who she is.

Sora drapes himself over a nearby chair, while Mitsuharu carefully sits down on a desk.

Hisana’s head has cooled a little by now; thinking about it, it was obvious who her jounin teacher would be. The Hyuuga are the only viable choice to teach a doujutsu user after all – apart from Kakashi.

In fact, a Hyuuga might even be the lesser evil this instance. It’s years too early for Kakashi yet; he’s probably right in the middle of his team-failing-rampage. Yes, she should have actually expected that.

Under the table she reaches out to squeeze Shizuha’s wrist. Next to her the girl breathes a shaky sigh of relief.
Despite that, as soon as Ito-sensei bids her farewell and leaves them to wait for their jounin instructors, Hisana excuses herself, grabs both other girls and drags them out of the door.

“Ok, spill. One or both of you knew about this. How?”

Shiki scratches her head.

“I just know that Shikaku-ji ‘expressed some interest’ in your career. We tried for a Nara jounin to get into your team, but the Hokage basically told us to mind our own business. He’s kind of protective of his bunch of little orphans.”

Shizuha pinches her.

“Ouch – sorry! Ok, the rest of the mighty Uchiha clan then.”

Hisana personally doesn’t give a crap about what everyone secretly calls their clan. Chances are it’s still far kinder than it actually deserves.

“We have tried similar,” Shizuha admits. “Shigeru-kun was supposed to be part of your team.” She casts a sidelong glance at Shiki. “It appears our good intentions might have disturbed a hornet nest, so to speak. The Inuzuka suddenly wanted to get involved as well. Hyuuga Hiashi-sama insisted that he’d already claimed the position of your jounin instructor.”

Ah. So that’s why the Hyuuga weren’t interested in their little power games. They’d already won the war, without ever showing up to the battles.

“Hokage-sama already had someone in mind, he said. But the Hyuuga clan is very influential and they did have a point; the Sharingan is a variant of the Byakugan. A Hyuuga will be able to help you develop it. I am unsure who Hokage-sama wanted to suggest, but Hyuuga-sama forced his hand. In turn he insisted your teammates would be from minor clans, because he would not assist them in using you to ‘stick it to each other’.”

Hisana is pretty sure a bullet engraved ‘Kakashi’ just very closely shaved by her ear.

“Basically,” Shiki concludes, “we’re all assholes and we’re sorry.”

Hisana sighs. Assholes with good intentions.

“Forget it,” she says. “Just … it’s fine. It could be worse. It’s not like it changed anything; Hyuuga-sama was going to get his way, one way or another.”

When she opens the classroom door there is a resounding thunk and a yelp. Sora is rubbing his forehead and grinning sheepishly at them.

“Politics,” he says, “Awesome! I didn’t think I’d ever get to see them.”

“That’s because you’re not supposed to,” Hisana snaps, “they’re ninja politics. Don’t eavesdrop on my private conversations, you idiot.”

Shiki snickers.

“Looks like team 11 is already establishing a pecking order – and Sone-san is obviously the whipping boy.”

“Please don’t fight,” Mitsuharu begs, “It hasn’t even been ten minutes yet.”
The slight stutter has vanished, but his voice has slowed considerably. It sounds as if he’s pronouncing every word with the utmost care.

“Fine,” she agrees, “but only because I want this team to work out. My business stays my business until I say otherwise.”

Sora raises his hands in defeat.

“Can’t blame me for trying; we got the Uchiha, of course I’m nosey.”

Great. She’s ‘the Uchiha’ now.

Not long after the first jounins start to drop in; on the very front of the line: Hyuuga Kohaku.

As the name ‘Kohaku’ is unisex, Hisana had been wondering whether their instructor was going to be a man or a woman; she keeps wondering for almost an hour into meeting Hyuuga Kohaku.

No words are exchanged, only a vague gesture meant to make them follow. Hisana only has time to throw a good-bye over her shoulder before following her team out of the room. They walk in utter silence for a while.

Even after two years of living in Konoha, Hisana is aware that she doesn’t know all the small streets and shops populating it. Despite being a ‘village’, Konoha is far too big to know entirely by heart. So she’s not surprised to lose her orientation after two left turns off the main road that she’s never bothered to explore. Mitsuharu turns back to her, eyes wide in an unvoiced question: ‘Where are we going?’ She can only shrug in response.

Before the boy can think to jostle Sora’s shoulder to ask him, their Sensei ducks into an inconspicuous shop. It’s a teashop.

One far fancier than she’s ever seen. It’s quiet, except for the sound of a shamisen coming from somewhere. The patrons are mostly nicely dressed, older adults who only speak in hushed voices. Their Sensei ushers them to a table not far from the door, where they sink onto the zabuton cushions.

The boys wince and awkwardly arrange themselves into something socially acceptable. Especially Sora seems to have problems controlling his gangly legs. Hisana herself, admittedly a little smug, sits down in a perfect seiza.

Kunoichi class might have been a little ridiculous at points, but Suzume-sensei insisted they at least mastered the art of holding the seiza for two consecutive hours.

Everyone’s legs nearly fell off, but right now every minute was worth it; if only because she is the only one not getting dismayed looks.

Their sensei waits until everyone is properly seated before raising his hand just the slightest bit. A nearby, traditionally dressed serving girl bows and leaves for the kitchen.

They sit in silence.

And they wait.

After fifteen minutes Sora starts twitching. It’s not exactly a surprise but still unwelcome. Their sensei is watching them all like a hawk, impasive but vigilant, and she wants nothing more than
suddenly develop telekinetic powers and freeze her teammate in place.

After another fifteen, Mitsuharu is starting to look a little pale. Hisana’s feet start to feel a little numb.

Fifteen more and she has to pinch Sora when he opens his mouth to probably blurt out something that would get them all into trouble. The boy chokes and shuts up.

After nearly an hour of motionless, wordless sitting the serving girl arrives. There is, to Hisana’s astonishment and relief, no tea ceremony. Instead they are merely served a cup of deep green, fragrant tea each and then left alone.

Another two minutes pass without anyone moving. Hisana herself isn’t sure what exactly they are waiting for, so she doesn’t think to stop Mitsuharu as he carefully reaches for his cup. A second before he makes contact, their sensei’s hand shoots out to slap him sharply on the wrist.

“Manners,” Kohaku-sensei chides in a deep, definitely male voice. They return to waiting.

The serving girl arrives with a small china bowl of pastel colored candy that she puts right in the middle of the table.

This time nobody makes a move, until their sensei himself reaches for his tea. A relieved sigh wrangles its way out of Hisana’s throat without permission. The tea is mild and tastes like spring.

One sip, two sips.

“You pass,” Kohaku-sensei allows. “Just so.”

Twenty random facts:

1. Sarah’s best friend Evelyn was a sports swimmer; that’s why she got overconfident and thought she could go out and swim in the dark.

2. Sarah’s father gifted her with the un-named goldfish, because she was allergic to cats and dogs. Initially Marie had suggested a tortoise.

3. Even though it’s been two years since the Uchiha Massacre, Hisana and Sasuke are still sharing a bed; partly because they don’t have enough space for two beds, partly because she has the suspicion that Sasuke isn’t quite ready yet and she doesn’t want to make him say it.

4. In truth, she still isn’t ready either.

5. Hisana is a far bigger deal to the Aburame than she suspects; the last time a non-clan member set foot into the compound of their own free will was before the war.

6. The reason Hisana was talked into dinner with the Ino-Shika-Cho clans was not actually to get to know Ino, with Shiki’s family being the support, but to meet Shiki’s family, all others being the metaphorical beard.

7. Ito Oosen-sensei used to lead a squad specialized in infiltration and sabotage; this is how she knows Genma.
8. Also part of that squad was Suzume-sensei. They had a falling out after a mission went wrong; they’ve been avoiding each other since.

9. Shiki and Shikamaru are actually closer related through their mothers, who are twins, than their fathers, who are distant cousins.

10. Michiko and Sachiko, the ‘Nara wives’ initially dated each other’s husbands. They switched after the first two dates, decided they liked it better and just didn’t tell anyone. The whole thing came out after Sachiko took pity on Shikarou who kept calling her by the wrong name in front of her father and didn’t understand why the man hated him so.

11. Shikano is not actually the result of an affair – his maternal grandmother is blonde and blue eyed. Still, nobody quite knows where he got the gossiping from.

12. The reason students call all teachers by their last name in Ito-sensei’s presence is because she’s a stickler for propriety and has been known to deal out detentions by the dozen.

13. Shizuha loves cute things and is not afraid to say so; she’s genuinely confused why anybody would find that funny.

14. There’s a small one-sided rivalry going on between Shiki and Shizuha about who can claim best-friend rights to Hisana; right now Shizuha is the only one engaging in it – Shiki has realized that her most ardent contest is actually Sasuke.

15. Kiba did have a little-boy crush on Hisana; the first one to figure this out is – shockingly – Naruto.

16. This crush dies a miserable death during the tournament, when Hisana fails to check up on him after the match against team 7. He’s currently pouting.

17. The promotion Genma is angling for is the one he already has in canon: tokubetsu jounin. So yes, he’s probably getting it.

18. The reason Haruno Sayuri seems so hard-headed and without sympathy is because she had to marry her husband at a very young age; in turn her family has always been overly indulgent with her, to make up for it.

19. The Harunos have a paper making business. Most of the fancy scroll paper Hisana and Sasuke saw when getting their school supply was actually Haruno-made.

20. Naruto’s proficiency in the Uchiha clan style has more to do with how badly he wanted to impress his then only friend and less with inherent affinity. He simply had more motivation to work hard and a different emotion attached to it as opposed to the Burning Leaf Style that he only associated with failure.

There’s probably going to be more at a later point, but I only wanted to mention things that already happened and won’t be discussed further, so I don’t accidently spoiler my own story:D
Chapter 20

No, I'm not actually writing them this fast; I have some more already written, but currently I'm still cranking out a chapter every two days or so. Let's see how long it'll last!

Hisana can see in Sora’s face that he’s stifling a whoop of joy. Good boy, she thinks. Don’t make him take it back.

“Kohaku-sensei,” he ventures instead, cringing away as if afraid he might get hit too, “what was this about?”

“A test,” their sensei says, still impassively sipping his tea. “A jounin sensei is allowed to test their team for the character traits he or she thinks most important for a ninja. Does someone know what I consider important?”

It’s impossible to tell with his eyes, but Hisana feels as if they are lingering on her. A challenge.

“Trust,” she tries after a minute, perhaps too optimistically. “For a ninja it’s important to trust your team. You were trying to see how long we would follow your orders without any information to go on.”

“How quaint. Not entirely untrue, however.”

Heat blooms high on her cheeks, no matter how furiously she tries to suppress it. Her teammates cast her pitying looks. That’s two of them who got snubbed. She knows they’re probably trying to be supportive, but it only serves to make her angrier.

Maybe, she thinks, Kakashi is the exception. No matter how screwed up he is – possibly because of how screwed up he is – he is the one of rare kind to value teamwork so much.

“Obedience,” Mitsuharu finally whispers so quietly she almost doesn’t hear him.

“Correct. A ninja has to be obedient. To their Hokage, to their village, to their duty. But obedience is a tricky thing. There are layers upon layers of good intentions, conflicts of interest and misinformation involved. Absolute obedience is foolishness, absolute disobedience is madness. I will teach you when to be obedient and when to question. And most importantly: how to do it.”

After that enigmatic pronouncement there is another prolonged silence as they drink tea; Sora even dares to take one of the candies from the china bowl.

“I believe introductions are in order,” Kohaku-sensei finally decides.

Both boys stare at Hisana, unwilling to be the first. Cowards, she thinks wryly. The atmosphere is more relaxed now, as if an invisible pressure has been lifted. Her own embarrassment feels a little more distant than before; she tries not to dwell on it.
Kohaku-sensei’s expression hasn’t changed an iota since he rebuked her, but she thinks there might be a faint softening around his eyes now. Encouraged, she decides to try again.

“Uchiha Hisana,” she says, making a conscious effort to keep her voice quiet and even, as not to disturb the faint clang of the shamisen. “My favorite food is strawberry mochi and I want to make tokubetsu jounin before my cousin graduates.”

Kohaku-sensei nods slowly.

“Ambitious; we will see if that can be arranged. But it is only a short-term goal.”

“I … have very many goals,” she settles on. With a pointed look she wills her teammates to change the topic.

“Sone Mitsuharu. I-I like dogs a-and … - “

Mitsuharu’s brows furrow; he takes a deep breath and continues slower. “I like dogs and I want to be an Academy teacher.”

Sensei considers him for a second before he nods again.

“You lack confidence. That will be corrected.”

Mitsuharu squawks before chugging more tea to stifle the sound.

“Straighten up,” their teacher instructs, “you are a shinobi. Only less than 40% of all applicants are allowed to attend the Academy. Of those 40% only 20% graduate; even less on the first try. By tomorrow nearly half of them will have to return to the Academy or settle for a long, thankless career in the Genin Corps. You are not one of them.”

All this is again delivered in perfectly placid monotone, but it makes the boy suddenly look considerably taller in his seat.

“Eguchi Sora,” Sora finally says, still wary. He’s the only one who hasn’t had to take a sideswipe yet. “I like to cook” – here he stiffens as if bracing for a remark – “and I want to be an Anbu.”

This is a surprise. Or maybe it isn’t; everyone who graduates the Academy has big dreams that survived years of mentally straining work and punches to the face.

Still, she has the sneaking suspicion a putdown is on the way.

“Fifteen minutes and approximately twenty seconds,” Kohaku-sensei reminds him gently. “That is how long you were able to sit still before you started fidgeting. Anbu work days, weeks, months sometimes, in undercover missions that require hours of complete stillness at a time.”

Sora’s shoulders sag but there’s a stubborn set to his mouth that Hisana knows all too well; team 7 has mastered it.

“So what?” he grouses “I can learn that.”

“You can,” Sensei agrees. “You will.”

Finally he drains the last of his tea, folds his hands and fixes them with stern eyes.

“My name is Hyuuga Kohaku. My goal is to make you into shinobi beyond reproach.”
For the first time the corners of his mouth tilt up into an approximation of a smile. It is not a nice one, but a frosty, brittle thing that gives his white eyes an eerie glint.

“I will work each and every one of you to the very bone; drive you to the edge of what you think you can endure. I will shatter you, and you will like it, because I will remake you into something stronger than what you are now.”

Hisana gapes at him.

The strangeness leaves Kohaku-sensei’s eyes as quickly as it came and he reaches for one of the colorful candies.

“Tomorrow morning at eight I will wait for you on training ground six. It is entirely your decision if you want to be come. You passed my test; I will train whoever thinks they can entrust themselves to me, even if it is only one of you.”

When they leave the teahouse it is early evening and the sun is just starting to set. Kohaku-sensei accompanies them back to the main street and then leaves them to go home by themselves.

There’s an awkward moment of silence, in which she’s alone with the boys.

“A-are you going to show up?” Mitsuharu asks carefully. “I-I’m not sure what to do.”

Sora sputters.

“Of course I’m showing up! He’s obviously crazy – do you know who’s the best ninjas? The crazies. The Sannin, The Copyninja, The Seven Swordsmen of the Mist – they’re all a few sandwiches short of a picnic. If someone can get me into Anbu it’s him.”

He’s … not wrong.

“I’ll be there too,” she agrees. “Someone told me lately, your genin team is supposed to be family. I don’t have enough of that to be picky.”

The boys goggle at her, before a startled laugh bubbles out of Mitsuharu.

“Then I’ll be there too. Wouldn’t want to miss out after all.”

“Who is on your team?” Sasuke’s voice echoes from the kitchen as soon as she opens the door.

“Hello to you too. Nobody you would know. But my sensei is a Hyuuga.”

Sasuke’s head emerges in the doorway.

“Hyuuga?”

“Yes; apparently Hyuuga Hiashi pulled some strings and now I’m under his thumb.”

She tries to keep her tone light, but Sasuke appears to have become more observant. There’s a clatter of dishes in the sink and then he slinks over to her like a cat.

“Indirectly,” he says. “Right?”
“Indirectly,” she agrees and he sinks down next to her on the couch. She’s still taller than him, she realizes smugly. They’ve both been going through some growth spurts lately, but the top of his head still barely reaches her chin.

“Also, I have the strange feeling Kohaku-sensei likes to see how far he can bend rules and orders. We’ll see in how far he actually is a bad thing for us.”

“I’m relieved,” her cousin admits. “At least they finally did something. I kept waiting for the other shoe to drop.”

He’s right. This doesn’t mean they’re safe from other underhanded maneuvers that could be in the making right this very second … but that could also be the paranoia talking, so she tries not to think about it. Sasuke’s hand grips her shirt.

“The clan is just us now,” he says. “They can’t make us do anything, they can’t hurt us, they can’t even talk to us if we don’t let them. Everyone knows us. They can’t touch us.”

He’s right, she realizes.

“We don’t even have to play their games with them,” he continues, “because we don’t need them.”

We do, she thinks, but I can’t tell you that. I can’t tell you that a few years from now there will be a war and that the elder council will implode, with Danzo’s finger on the detonator.

“No,” she says, “we don’t need them. But we want them. We can’t know what the future brings and you can never have enough allies.”

He sighs, as if impatient with her, yet indulgent against his better judgment. It’s probably easy to forget how young he is when he acts like this. She can imagine what Kakashi, what everyone saw in him. The genius, their hope for the future. Sasuke is strong, but he is also still a child, not an adult in a child’s body. She’ll never forget that.

She pinches his cheek, strangely desperate to turn him back into the kid she knows.

“You don’t need to worry about that, I have it all under control. If nothing else, Sensei will turn me into a killing machine.”

She can’t quite keep the humor out of her voice. With Sasuke’s face stretched into comical shapes it’s easy to forget the shiver of fear that went down her spine not even an hour ago. Fingers dig into her side and she releases his face with a hoot.

“Did your day go better?”

“Please, don’t start asking about my day like a mother hen. If something happens, I’ll tell you.”

Alright, she thinks. Just food then. That she can do.

She spends the rest of the day describing the test and her teammates in excruciating detail, relishing in her cousin’s child-like amusement. If she embellishes at points, it is for purely artistic reasons.

The next morning starts deceptively normal: she wakes up at six, showers, kicks Sasuke out of bed, throws together breakfast and packs their lunchboxes with the rest of last night’s dinner. In fact it’s so normal, that she almost follows Sasuke all the way to the Academy, until he reminds her that she
needs to be almost across town in about twenty minutes.

She barely manages to be there on time.

Kohaku-sensei and Mitsuharu are already there. They wait in silence. At 8:15 on the dot their sensei turns towards them.

“It appears we will be on our own.”

“No, no wait!”

Sora is racing their way, sweat beaded on his forehead.

“Wait for me! I’m here!”

“You are late,” Sensei remarks, “We will have to curb this particular habit as well.”

Training is … something else. For as long as she’s capable of intelligent thought, and not only the base instinct of run run run she falls into after the third hour of suicide runs through the woods, she thinks of Gai’s training regime and what he would think of this. If he would think this youthful.

Every once in a while she swerves to avoid a kunai aimed at her or to pick up one of her stumbling teammates. Every so often, someone picks up her.

“There are several things we need to work at to build a solid base,” Sensei said earlier that morning.

“You need endurance – practical endurance, no ninja spends hours running on straight, paved ground – and, as Hisana-san pointed out, you need to trust each other. Teamwork.”

Watching out for others becomes instinct as some point. There are two shapes moving next to her, in front of her, sometimes behind her. If one of them stops moving, she picks them up until they start running by themselves again. Sometime during the later hours, long after the adrenalin has set in, she feels something strange in her leg; it buckles under her. Someone grabs her under the arm and just keeps dragging her along.

“That’s enough.”

Kohaku-sensei materializes in front of them. For a second she wants to lash out; ‘enemy’ her jittery body says and her brain isn’t working properly. Two of their sensei’s fingers dig into the side of her neck and she spasms. It’s as if suddenly the world comes back into focus. Next to her Sora makes a noise, caught somewhere between a yelp and a snarl. She jerks away from him, startled.

“What’s going on?” she whispers, confused by her own hoarse voice. “What was that?”

Was that the Juuken?

“Merely a shock,” Kohaku-sensei placates her. “To call your brain to order.”

Mitsuharu emerges from the tree line. There’s a hunted look in his eyes. When she turns back to Sora, she can see the same one on his face. His eyes flicker back and forth between her and their teacher but there is little recognition there; the lights are on but nobody’s home.
“Give him a moment,” the jounin instructs. It only takes a minute until her teammate’s erratic breathing calms. When Mitsuharu inches closer it finally returns to normal.

“Whoa,” he breathes, “that was intense.”

As if on cue, his legs give out.

“That,” Kohaku-sensei informs them, “is what happens if your body is driven to the brink. Seasoned shinobi are able to control themselves even during these extreme circumstances. As you have undoubtedly realized, differentiating between friend and foe in this state is instinctual. You were unable to recognize each other, and yet you were ready to attack me when I detained one of you. Your response was learned during the last hours. In the future you might have to recognize fellow leaf ninjas merely by their hitai-ate. That also can be learned.”

Right now she finds that hard to believe. All she remembers is fear. She can’t even properly express why she felt compelled to help her teammates; doing anything more complex than running in that state …

“Your adrenalin high will ease very quickly now. Hisana-san, your leg needs tending to. I will accompany you all to the hospital.”

At once she remembers the strange, numb feeling in her leg, and suddenly it’s not so numb anymore. There’s a kunai sticking out of it.

“Oh,” she croaks.

It’s only a flesh wound that’s bandaged quickly, but it annoys her the whole half-hour walk to the hospital. The rest of her team is also limping and stumbling, so she can at least confidently ignore the looks they get.

Dirty, beat up ruffians, accompanied by a completely unaffected Hyuuga. No, they are not under arrest, this is official business. If she didn’t feel as if she had been put through the meat grinder, she might have felt like laughing.

The medics are exceptionally nice to them. In fact, they continuously cast dark looks at Kohaku-sensei, while a bunch of nurses fusses over them.

Healing chakra does indeed have a cool, minty feeling to it, Hisana finds. Clean, as if she just brushed her teeth. The newly healed flesh continues to tingle long after the session is over.

Like the day before, Kohaku-sensei accompanies them to the main street, before leaving them to their own devices. It’s still light outside, but during this time of the year that doesn’t mean much. She can’t even tell what time it is anymore.

She barely manages the way home. Sasuke is already at the door, anxiously awaiting her return.

“Oh thank god,” she croons and collapses onto him. “Bed please.”

“Food first,” he insists, but his protest falls onto deaf ears. Hisana’s already fallen asleep.
Chapter 21

Wow, this is a large one. Very dialogue-y, but that was necessary I guess. Hope you still like it.

There are pics of Hisana now:

Part I

Part II after graduation

There’s no training on Friday. Instead they meet in the little teashop to methodically review their progress – they’re instructed to take notes.

This time they’re allowed to choose their own tea, encouraged even, because for all his insistence on obedience, the jounin seems to be all for forming your own opinions. There’s even sweets.

After two o’clock she’s free to do whatever she wants for the rest of the day. She’s strongly tempted to just go back home and sleep. Instead she goes looking for Naruto.

At this time of day Ichiraku’s is her best bet.

Ducking into the shop, she spots Naruto’s blond head right away. The midday sun reflects off his hair and makes it shine like a beacon; there’s a stack of bowls next to him that wobbles precariously whenever he hits it with his elbow.

“Baka,” she says and he jerks to attention like a well trained puppy.

“Nee-chan! What are you doing here?”

“What now, aren’t you glad to see me?”

He sputters.

“Yes, yes! I thought you were busy with your new team.”

She reaches over to ruffle his hair and sits down next to him.

“Beef ramen, please! Just because I’m busy doesn’t mean I don’t have time for you anymore.”

“I’ve come to see you yesterday and the day before,” he whines, “and you were always already asleep.”

Oh. Yes, that would be true. Kohaku-sensei has been carefully taking them apart in the last few days, just as promised. ‘To control your environment you first have to control yourself,’ he said. So he’s actively been trying to make them lose control in whatever way possible.

“My sensei is a slave driver,” she explains. “We haven’t even gotten any missions yet, because he thinks we’re not ready.”

“Whaaaat … that’s boring, dattebayo … We’ve got to meet your team! I’ll straighten out your sensei for you!”
That’s kind of the last thing she wants. Her bond with her team is tentative at best – it hasn’t been a week yet – and she doesn’t know how they’re going to react to the Kyuubi container. She wants them to trust her judgment first, wants that her say-so is enough to give Naruto a chance. Also, the thought of Naruto calling Kohaku-sensei’s eyes freaky makes her stomach flip flop in dread.

“How’s Sakura?” she asks, hoping to distract him. Naruto makes a face.

“Fine,” he grumbles, “or that’s what she says. Senpai is a bit worried. Ino wants to be friends again, but Sakura-chan says it’s only because she wants to get to the teme.”

She pokes him in reproach and he bursts into snickers.

“Sasuke-chan,” he corrects with a grin.

“But … Ino’s been trying for a while now, right? I thought they’re already friends again?”

“Nee-chan, you’re way behind. They’ve been talking. It’s been fine. But now Ino’s been turning up during training. Where Sasuke is.”

“So Sakura doesn’t trust her?”

“Well,” he hedges, “can’t really blame her, right? Ino is Sasuke’s biggest fan and Sakura-chan is his friend.”

For a girl this connection is obvious. That Naruto of all people figured it out surprises her. She wonders if Sakura explained it to him.

In any case, she needs to talk to Sakura. After all it was Hisana herself who encouraged Ino to mend their friendship. She didn’t expect there to be any resistance on Sakura’s part, which was probably foolish; Sakura is stubborn as a mule, just like her mother.

Her ramen arrives, steaming and fatty and smelling strongly of beef. Suddenly she’s really hungry. Teuchi smiles knowingly at her.

“First week as a genin, right? My friend Hayama – from the bento shop downtown, you know the one – his kid did it last year. Poor boy was always eating or sleeping.”

Hisana laughs.

“That’s exactly what I want to do too.”

She’s not usually so open with adults, cautious of being too friendly and inviting the wrong people to meddle in her life. There’s a bland quirk of her lips especially reserved for polite chit chat with strangers. But Teuchi always did and would take care of Naruto and she feels she owed him better than that.

“Ayame-nee-chan!” Naruto suddenly blares, wriggling in his seat. “Ayame-nee-chan, come and listen! Nee-chan is a real ninja now!”

Ayame’s head pops out from the kitchen. The girl is only a few years older than Hisana and one of those civilians who think ninjas are the best thing since sliced bread.

“Is it true?” she gasps. “What is it like? Are your teammates dreamy? Who is your teacher – are they famous?”

Then she slaps her hands over her mouth, shocked by her own forwardness. Teuchi snorts.
“Girl, being a ninja isn’t all romance and fairy tales,” he intones, as if he’s told her a million times already. “You’ll see once Wednesday-Miso-Ramen comes back from the hospital – got half of his leg blown off, I heard. We’ll see if you still find him dreamy like that.”

Ayame blushes and huffs.

“He’s charming and a gentleman. I don’t care if he’s missing all of his leg.”

She says it so vehemently, Hisana’s inclined to believe her. Teuchi shakes his head and returns to the kitchen. Once he’s out of sight, Ayame leans over the counter.

“Are they though? Dreamy?”

“Yeah, Nee-chan, are they?” Naruto jeers and makes kissy faces at her.

“Eat your ramen,” she deadpans. “Nightmarish more like,” she tells the girl. “No, that’s probably not fair to the boys. But Sensei definitely is.”

“Who is it?” she breathes, eyes wide and sparkling in anticipation.

“A Hyuuga. I don’t know if he’s famous, but he’s insane, so probably. Hyuuga Kohaku.”

“Hmmm, doesn’t ring any bells,” Ayame admits in disappointment. “But that doesn’t mean anything. Maybe he’s got a nickname?”

“Hyuuga?” Naruto asks, reinforcing Hisana’s decision that he’s never going to meet Kohaku-sensei. “Don’t they have those freaky eyes?”

“Naruto, I will have freaky eyes at some point. Don’t call them that.”

“So what about your teammates?” Ayame prods doggedly. Hisana only shrugs.

They’re both awkward little boys to her; she honestly can’t say.

“Aww – you’ll have to bring them!”

“Yes, Nee-chan, bring them!”

“You’ll eat them alive and I still need them. At least until the Chuunin Exams.”

The two deviants giggle stupidly. Hisana drains the last of her ramen.

“Naruto, do you know where Sakura might be?”

He shrugs.

“At home, I guess? She’s been taking off earlier lately to go straight home – avoiding Ino.”

On her day off, tired and – still! – hungry, the Haruno home is probably the very last place she wants to be. This has less to do with the house itself and more with the woman who opens the door for her.

“Haruno-san, good afternoon. I have to speak to your daughter.”

“Of course you do,” the woman sneers. “I heard Genma-sensei is her team leader now, so you really have no business here anymore. Please leave; I don’t want the neighbors to think we’re associating
with hooligans and murderers.”

The pleasant veneer that used to cover her derision seems to have completely fallen away. Hisana gives a mental shrug. If that woman wants to play dirty, she can do that.

“If you don’t want the neighbors to know, I’d suggest you get Sakura now. Or I’ll feel forced to knock on someone else’s door and tell them a sob story about how she’s not allowed to see her friends anymore. Maybe even give them a letter to pass to her – not sealed, of course, so anyone can read it.”

“Sayuri-chan,” it booms from inside. “Darling what’s taking so long? Who is it?”

Sakura’s father, a tall hulking man with scarlet red hair, appears in the doorway.

“Haruno-san,” Hisana simpers in her best little-girl-voice, “good afternoon! I was just telling your wife how badly I need to talk to Sakura-chan!”

“Oh?” he says and slightly crouches down to her with a smile, “Is that so? Did she cause you trouble, that little brat?”

His voice is fond, as if he expected no less from his daughter. It’s not that brat who troubles me, Hisana thinks.

“Oh no,” she says out loud, “you see, I told Ino-chan – you know, from the Yamanaka Flower Shop, she’s such a sweet girl – I told her she should make up with Sakura-chan, because they were such good friends. But it seems I caused trouble instead.”

“Daichi-kun,” Sayuri blusters, “don’t let that little monster lie to you! She’s putting all kinds of ideas into Sakura’s head – “

Hisana puts her hand over her mouth, affecting a hurt gasp, and averts her gaze.

“Sayuri! She’s just a child! For heaven’s sake, I told you: if Sakura wants to be a ninja, let her try. One day she’ll see it’s not the right world for such a gentle girl; but until then stop trying to force her.”

He turns towards Hisana.

“You’re the Uchiha girl, aren’t you? Terrible business with your family, terrible business. I’m sorry that my wife hurt you, she’s just worried.”

Sayuri looks incensed rather than worried. Her lips are pressed into a thin line, as if it physically hurts to keep her scathing words from bursting out.

“Come, Sayuri-chan,” he grouses, gently steering her back inside by the shoulders. “I think you need a cup of tea and some quiet time. I will get Sakura.”

Sakura appears not two minutes later, with her arms crossed and a scowl.

“Nee-san, did you mess with Okaa-san again?”

“She started it.”

They stare at each other for a moment before Sakura’s scowl disappears.

“Nee-san, what are you doing here? I mean, not that I’m not glad, but I thought you were busy?”
“I heard you’ve acquired a stalker, so I thought I’d check in.”

“I-no-pig,” the girl huffs and closes the door behind her. “If we’re going to talk about this, I’ll need ice cream.”

“Alright, I could eat.”

She doesn’t actually expect Sakura to last until they reach the ice cream vendor just off the main street. The girl looks about ready to explode, red-faced and teary-eyed, but she does last. In fact, she lasts until they each get a cone and reach a nearby bank to curl up on. Hisana is hit by a vague sense of déjà vu; it’s a scene she knows well, with herself being Sakura and Marie buying the ice cream.

“I can’t believe her!” the girl suddenly bursts out, while Hisana takes the first lick of her ice cream.

“She – she just turns up after training and then during training! We’re talking now – that’s great, I mean, she needs me, right? I’m the only one who can stand her little ego trips for long – I can be her friend! I really though she’s serious, but now … it’s obvious she’s trying to use me to get to Sasuke. We’re friends now; the timing is really suspicious, right?”

Her face is red like a tomato now and ice cream is dripping down her hand.

“Alright,” Hisana says, trying to take in all the information, “Alright, I think you got that all wrong. Eat your ice cream and let me explain.”

Sakura stares desolately at her melting cone; she takes a bite out of it – a bite! Hisana shudders – as if it’s a punishment.

“Ok, listen: I talked to Ino before. It’s been a while, I guess shortly before she started talking to you again. And she told me she wants to try and be friends again. I encouraged her, because I think it’s a good idea for you to have girl friends.”

“I have you,” Sakura points out. Which is sweet, but misses the point by a mile.

“Yes of course. But I can’t always be there. You even said so, I was really busy this week. I’ll be busy again, with missions maybe, or training, or exams. Wouldn’t it be nice to have someone else to talk to?”

“I don’t want to talk to her if she’s using me.”

“She didn’t say a word about Sasuke. It was just about you.”

“So then she really wants to be friends. That doesn’t mean she doesn’t want Sasuke too. I don’t want to be friends with someone who’s only taking me as a nice extra while they’re really angling for something else.”

That’s true of course, but an entirely different problem.

“Say, Sakura … do you still like Sasuke?”

Instead of blushing to the roots of her hair, like she did the first time, Sakura’s shoulders sag.

“Maybe. Yes. But not like … like before. We’re friends now! It’s different. I like how it is right now. I want it to stay like this. He doesn’t need to be my boyfriend; I just want him to like me.”
This is good, Hisana thinks. This is great. She has no idea if Sasuke would ever return such feelings, but *this right here*, it means they could still be friends even if he never does. This is solid.

She’ll need to talk to Sasuke, but right now she thinks he would be the lesser problem.

“But now,” Sakura continues, watching her own feet dangle from the bench, “Ino is there. And boys have always loved Ino – even while they still thought girls are icky, because she’s funny and cool and has awesome secret techniques. She’ll be a great ninja. And even my parents think *I* won’t.”

Oh yes, the parents. This conversation is long overdue, even though Sakura’s by far not old enough for it. For a nine-year-old their parents should still be heroes; invincible and always right. But Sakura is also a prodigy in her own right, and Hisana wants to put a stop to these self doubts before they have even more time to fester like an infected wound.

She grabs Sakura’s melted, forgotten ice cream and throws it and her own into the nearest trash can, before taking the girl’s hands.

“You know your mom and I don’t get along, right? She’s your mother and you love her, and I really want to like her just because of that. But I don’t. Because I think she’s wrong about you and she doesn’t want to change her mind.”

Sakura makes a face as if she wants to protest, but there is nothing to protest. It’s true. She loves her mother, but her mother thinks she’s a stupid girl playing games. There’s no convincing her otherwise – she’s tried.

“I know she only wants what she thinks is best for you, but she’s hurting you with it. You should know though that your father is very proud of you.”

“He also thinks I’ll change my mind.”

“Yes, because he’s a civilian. Everyone says we’re all the same, but that’s a lie. Have you ever shown him a jutsu before? I’m sure you told him and he thought it was cute and entertaining, but that’s because he hasn’t seen it. He hasn’t really realized what you are doing. My bet is, he’s already had to do with ninjas, and they scared him. He’ll always have a hard time thinking as his cute little daughter as one of them.”

Sakura shrugs.

“He does trips sometimes,” she admits. “Long ones for business. Then he hires ninjas for protection; especially if he has to carry a lot of money around.”

“Imagine someone tried to rob him then, and the ninjas killed them. Just like that. I’m sure he thinks you could never do that, because good people like you don’t kill people.”

“Iruka-sensei says … that sometimes you can’t avoid it. That people who risk their lives for things like money, don’t value any lives. ‘You protect those who can’t protect themselves. Those who decide they can pit their lives against yours don’t need or want your protection’.”

It’s indoctrination in its truest form. Those romantic notions that seasoned ninjas so look down upon in civilians is exactly what the Academy uses to ease its students into the reality of their new lives.

‘You’re not killing, you’re protecting,’ is what they tell the student.

‘It’s you or them,’ they tell the genin.
‘It’s risk optimization,’ learns the chuunin.

‘It’s your duty,’ knows the jonin.

‘Do it,’ hears the Anbu.

“That’s right,” Hisana says. “You’re a protector. But they don’t know that. Yet.”

Sakura nods.

“They’ll have to see it when I graduate, right? I can show them then. When I have the hitai-ate, no one can say I’m not a real ninja.”

“That’s right,” Hisana encourages and reaches up to ruffle Sakura’s hair. “Until then, you’ll just have to be extra strong. You have your team. They believe in you – I believe in you. Genma-senpai believes in you, too.”

At the mention of her team Sakura’s tentative smile evaporates.

“Hey,” Hisana reminds her, “didn’t we just establish that you’re going to be a great ninja? Secret clan techniques don’t mean a damn thing. Did you ever ask Naruto and Sasuke what they think?”

“No,” she admits sheepishly, “because it’s silly and they’ll laugh. I don’t want them to think …”

…that you’re jealous.

“Ask them,” she urges. “I talked to Naruto today and he wasn’t too happy about Ino’s little visits. Because they make you unhappy. And how do you think Sasuke feels? To be chased all over the village because he’s ‘so cool’, not because they actually like him.”

“So you don’t think they’ll forget all about me?”

“Of course not. You should give Ino a chance. If she’s really honest about it, you could gain an important friend. If she’s not serious, it’ll hurt, but she won’t take anything away from you. She doesn’t have that sort of power.”

“That – that’s good. I can do that. It’s just … the first time I’ve ever had so many friends. I don’t want to share.”

There’s an opportunity there, Hisana can see it. It doesn’t quite feel right to use this, Sakura’s trust, to manipulate her, but she doesn’t know if there’ll ever be such an opportunity again. So easy and so perfect.

“You’re growing up Sakura, you might have to get used to sharing them.”

“What, why?”

“Because you might not be a team forever. You’ll graduate. At last one of the boys will probably be on a different genin team. That doesn’t mean they won’t be your friends anymore. Just that you don’t get to keep them all to yourself.”

The girl fidgets, her brain working on overdrive.

“How do I … ?”

‘How do I get to keep them all to myself?’
“What do you think? If you want something, you have to fight for it.”

“You’re right,” Sakura blurts out abruptly and jumps up from the bench. “I need to talk to the boys, right now.”

She runs a few feet, before turning around and running back to throw herself at Hisana.

“Thanks Nee-san! I need to go now, take care and don’t work so hard!”

And then she’s gone, hair whipping behind her like a banner in the wind.
This is probably a little exhausting to read because of the many scene changes, but it ties up a lot of loose ends.

It’s only late afternoon. She doesn’t want to go home yet, despite the draining heart-to-heart with Sakura.

She swings by the Aburame compound next. At this time of day it’s nearly empty. The crickets are chirping and the fruit trees are carrying so many apples and pears that the branches are hanging low enough to pick them by hand.

It’s still not as impressive as it is in the evenings but also easier to navigate. She makes a few wrong turns – left by the asters or by the dahlias? – but eventually she finds the beehives and from there she knows the way.

Shizuha’s mother awaits her on the front porch. Hisana has gotten used to it by now; there’s no surprising an Aburame. She suspects there are several kikai strategically positioned all over the place. It’s what she would do.

“Hisana-chan,” the woman greets and gently touches her ear with two fingers. “It’s good you’re here. Shizuha is in her room, please talk to her.”

This sounds ominous. Shizuha’s room is upstairs. Standing in front of her door, she brushes over her own ear.

“Buzz off,” she tells the kikai hiding in her hair, “I know she’s worried but spying isn’t allowed.”

The bug humms loudly in protest but after she shakes out her hair it takes off.

“Shizurin, your mother is worried – that worries me.”

The door opens only a little; she takes it as an invitation.

Shizuha is sitting on her bed, cross legged, with a pen and a stack of papers. She’s not wearing her glasses or her overcoat, which gives Hisana a start.

“I came to see how it went with your team. Not so well, I take it?”

Instead of taking the chair, she sits down on the bed. It feels a little brazen for her Japanese-y tastes, but ‘Sarah’ thinks Shizuha’s mood might be calling for it.

“Kaede-sensei found us … unsatisfactory.”

“You didn’t pass?”

Shizuha shakes her head.
“But how? You’re good. Shigeru-san is good too, right?” – or they wouldn’t have tried to put him into her team, she thinks – “What about the other one – Inoue?”

Without her overcoat covering half of her face, it’s easier to see the bitter twist of Shizuha’s mouth and the tightening around her eyes.

“Kaede-sensei tested how we react to stressful situations. She … placed us in the middle of the forest outside of Konoha. We encountered bandits. Inoue-san tried to save himself. In the process he abandoned us.”

Hisana snorts. Shocked she slaps her hand over her mouth, but it’s too late. Shizuha looks at her with annoyed grey eyes.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry, I don’t know why I laughed. I just imagined him trying to barter you off …”

“It was a little amusing,” she admits. “Up until the ‘bandits’ revealed themselves to be Sensei’s clones. She said shinobi cannot be selfish, that he isn’t mature enough yet. That meant she had to fail all of us. Shigeru-kun is also attending the Academy for another year.”

“What about you?”

“Temporarily. Ito-sensei offered to help me look for an apprenticeship. If that is unsuccessful, I will return to the Academy. The Genin Corps are not an option.”

Hisana nods in agreement. She’s already heard too much about promising careers ending early, because someone’s ‘temporary’ stay suddenly turned permanent as they are bogged down in paperwork.

“Can I help somehow? You’ll need recommendations – maybe Genma-senpai can give you one. There might be someone else I can introduce you to.”

Gai and Shizuha are not a duo she wants to bring together, but as a last resort …

The eccentric jounin would surely love to rescue a hopeful genin from the very unyouthful Genin Corps.

“That would be great. Thank you.”

She gathers the scattered papers and shoves them into a desk drawer.

“You passed,” she says without any doubt. “Tell me about your team.”

They part two hours later, with Shizuha in a better mood and a promise to see each other on the next Friday.

The Aburame’s unexpected failure has unsettled her a little. On the way to the Nara compound she considers that maybe Shiki could have failed the test too. Until her own she’d always thought they only tested for teamwork, or at least the capability for teamwork. Now that she knows better, and has seen how easy it is to fail, she thinks that Dai-sensei might have found team 6 unsatisfactory in another regard.

The Nara compound is different from the idyllic Aburame and the chaotic and confusing Inuzuka
compounds, or even the regal and well-groomed Hyuuga compound that she’s only ever seen from afar.

It’s very simple, surrounded by well-groomed, dense grass, and an extensive forest behind. Shiki told her that the forest is so big that it reaches beyond the village walls and that they have their own gate for the deer. It’s patrolled by Nara guards and otherwise only used in emergency evacuations.

When she knocks on the door it’s Shikano who opens.

“Oh thank god, it’s only you.”

“Hello to you too. What’s that supposed to mean?”

He sighs and scratches his head.

“It’s that Dai-sensei. He’s been turning up here every day for surprise visits. He kicks up a fuss for an hour and then drags away Shiki-chan for ‘team bonding’. Sometimes he already has the rest of the team in tow, so that they can eat us out of house and home and babble our ears off before we can get rid of them. And with ‘we’ I mean me.”

She snorts.

“So Shichi passed.”

“I wish she hadn’t.”

“Don’t be an asshole. I’m sure your team isn’t all sunshine and daisies either.”

“No,” he admits, “but I’ve learned to ignore them until they go away.”

Someone comes stomping down the stairs.

“Nii-chan, is it Sensei again?”

“No, it’s worse!”

Hisana whacks him half-heartedly before she simply steps past him.

“It’s just me. I wanted to see if you passed.”

“Ahhh.”

Shiki comes down the rest of the stairs and loops her arm around Hisana’s.

“So you’ve already talked to bug-girl. Let’s go out; jiji’s just mowed the lawn, it’s nice out.”

With ‘out’ Shiki means the herb garden behind the house. Apart from the large gardens inside the forest, most houses have a smaller private one. There’s lavender and basil, mint, chamomile and a handful more that she can’t name. Shiki snatches a few stems of mint. She offers one to Hisana and shoves one into her mouth.

“Thanks. So your team is annoying?”

The girl snorts and slumps down onto the grass.

“You already knew that,” Shiki reminds her.
“Well, yes. But now that you’re a proper team I thought you’d get it together.”

“We’re ok,” she dismisses. “I’ve known them forever. We might not always get along, but we understand each other. It’s Dai-sensei who worries me more.”

She plucks a chamomile flower and starts chewing on the head.

“He tries to force us to be friends. I mean they’re kind of family? You don’t need to be friends with your family. They’re special.”

They doze in the grass for a while, before it starts to drizzle and then to pour, and they have to take cover.

Sachiko offers them towels and food. It’s venison stew and Hisana really doesn’t have the strength to say no.

She goes home with a pot full of stew for Sasuke and with a borrowed umbrella.

Her cousin is home and already fed, as it looks.

She shoves the pot into the fridge and ponders how to best tell him about her earlier talk to Sakura. There’s really no elegant solution, so she wings it.

“Sasuke did you talk to Sakura today?”

“Hmm,” it comes from the living room.

He sounds vaguely constipated, which probably means the girl’s pitched the first few ideas to keep their team together.

“I talked to Sakura today,” she wheedles. “She was a little upset.”

“About Yamanaka,” Sasuke guesses.

So he does pay attention. It’s good that he’s not only fixated on Naruto this time around.

When she comes into the living room Sasuke is not as distracted as his voice has been suggesting. Instead he’s sitting on the couch, hands folded in his lap, and attentively waiting for her to come through the door.

“What is it?” she questions suspiciously.

“Nothing. But you sound as if you’re working up to something important.”

She grimaces. Caught out.

“Can you imagine that Ino could replace Sakura?”

He ponders this for a minute.

“Maybe. Sakura’s taijutsu is good, her genjutsu and ninjutsu are passable. Yamanaka’s ninjutsu is better, but her taijutsu and genjutsu are only passable.”
It’s a logical argument, but it disappoints her. Still, she keeps her face neutral. What she wants is the
truth, not what Sasuke thinks she wants to hear.

“In her abilities,” he continues, “Sakura is nothing special. She is book smart and inventive, but
Yamanaka is street smart and shrewd. The one thing Sakura has, that Yamanaka doesn’t, is that she’s
*trying*. I don’t think I want a teammate who stops trying because she thinks she’s good enough
already.”

“So you prefer Sakura because … ?”

“Because she’s never satisfied with herself.”

And that’s feeling Sasuke knows well, she realizes. He prefers her, because he understands her. It’s a
thing all of team 7 has in common. Naruto and Kakashi, too, are always pushing themselves to their
very limits and beyond, because their best is never quite good enough.

“Sakura thinks Ino is a threat to her position in the team,” he realizes. “That’s also why she’s
suddenly spewing all these ideas how to keep us together.”

“Do you want to stay together?”

And that’s the most important question. She has no doubt Naruto wants to hold on to them with
everything he’s got. Sakura has flat out told her she’s scared to lose them. What does Sasuke think?

“I guess I’ve already got them trained anyway?”

Even as he says it and his brows furrow, his lips quirk up. He’s embarrassed; she’s not going to get
more out of him, but it’s enough. The rest Naruto and Sakura will have to work out themselves. She
can only encourage them.

“So with what did Sakura come up?”

“She wanted to do a petition first. Have Iruka-sensei and Genma-senpai sign it; maybe a few others.
But Senpai said we’re ninjas, we have to think like ninjas. The best idea yet is that we simply fake
our test scores. Sakura aims for the best theoretical and the worst practical scores; Naruto aims for
barely passing – not that he’ll have to fake that – and I’ll get the top scores in everything. In theory
that would get us into the same team.”

“Sounds good to me. But that also means a lot of pressure on your skinny little shoulders; you’ll have
to get a near perfect score.”

He scoffs.

“That’s what I’d do anyway.”

It’s late evening when she gets one last visitor. Genma comes crawling through their bedroom
window. She has a little freak out over the unexpected intruder that wakes Sasuke and nearly K.O.s
Genma with a shoe.

“For god’s sake,” Sasuke snaps. “Senpai can’t you wait for tomorrow, like a normal person?”

“Tomorrow she’ll be too tired again,” he whines.

“Then why didn’t you come *earlier*?”
“Because I only just escaped Gai.”

Hisana groans.

“He didn’t follow you here, did he?”

“No, no. But be ready, he’ll come for you at some point. To congratulate you on your youthful team.”

She ushers him out of the room to put on a sweatshirt. It’s summer, but the nights are cool and she’s tired. Sasuke is already half asleep again. When she tells him she’ll be back later, he only mumbles something grouchy that might have something to do with kicking Genma somewhere painful, and pulls the blanket over his head.

She shuffles into the living room, where Genma has helped himself to the Nara’s stew.

“You owe me so much food already, do you really want to add this to your list?”

He only grins stupidly at her.

“So I heard you’ve got the Grouch,” he starts while shoveling more food into his mouth. “Hey – this is good. Did you make this?”

“’The Grouch’?” she echoes disbelievingly. “And no, you’re eating Nara Sachiko’s food. Chances are you’re never getting it again.”

“Aww. Oh well. Your sensei, I mean. You know, he was a few years below me in the Academy, but we did the Chuunin Exams together. He’s a mean fucker, that one. Feels like he’s got something to prove, because his sister is also some sort of prodigy.”

There’s something weird in his voice that she can’t quite put her finger on. It’s not a usual Genma-emotion; he’s not the type to dislike people, even if they deserve it.

“Why are you telling me this?”

“To make sure you’re careful. About him and about his clan.”

“I am careful. I don’t just walk up to clans and invite them to use me.”

“Don’t you? Because it looks as if that’s exactly what you’re doing.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

He shoves the bowl of stew her way, untouched since the first spoonful.

“You’re forgetting about your good friends the Nara clan.”

“I’m not forgetting them. I’ve just … temporarily put them on the backburner, because I thought they like me.”

“Oh, they do like you just fine. And I doubt they’d let you walk straight into any seriously dangerous traps. But I know Nara Shikarou, and he’s a fan of tough love. If he thinks letting you get your ass handed to you in a game with low stakes will keep you from these adult power games you’re playing, he’ll watch with a bucket full of popcorn.”

“I’m not playing games! What are you talking about? And if I were, why would I tell you about it?”
This is getting really dangerous. She’s always more or less dismissed Genma, because his ‘job’ really has nothing to do with her little machinations. He’s never seemed the type to be nosy either. It appears she was wrong. They’re staring at each other over the coffee table in the dark, none of them willing to back down.

“Maybe you should tell me, because I’ve watched you not play this game for years now and – unlike your little friends – I know you’ve been mostly playing it by ear. Which is so incredibly stupid, I don’t even have the words. And now I’m watching you try to pet a raging, slavering wolf because you think it’s a puppy.”

Does he think she’s doing this for fun? That she has any choice in this if she wants to protect Sasuke and herself?

“I know,” he grits out, more controlled but still obviously seething, “that you take this team business very seriously. Normally I would be all for that, especially because you seem to need all the make-shift family you can get. But some things are just not worth it.”

She wants to take a minute, to calm down and collect herself, because that went seriously below the belt. But she’s afraid he’ll take it as surrender, which it is not. Hisana stubbornly crosses her arms.

“This is my team. If it’s worth it or not is my decision. Thank you for your concern, but I think I want to go to sleep now. Take the door out; the window’s not for people.”

She sleeps badly that night. Whatever it is that spooked Genma so, it’s not a triviality. Whether it has to do with the Hyuuga as a whole or her sensei specifically, she’ll have to find out. Maybe Gai can help.

She sure hopes so.

rin/-rin und chi/-chi: variations of –chan (see “euphonic suffixes”); they can be either added with a hyphen or integrated into the name (Shizu-rin = Shizurin, Shi-chi = Shichi)
Despite the fact that Kohaku-sensei is pretty much the furthest thing from a Kakashi, ‘teamwork’ is a lesson he hammers into their skulls with the all the force of a demolition ball. After nearly four weeks she knows her teammates not only by their footsteps and their chakra signature, she can also distinguish them by their scents and breathing patterns.

Only then, at the end of their first months together, he announces their first mission.

“We will be away for a while,” he warns them, “so remember to pack accordingly.”

“How long exactly?” Sora enquires and is met with a calculating look.

“Two days at least.”

The boys can barely contain their excitement.

“Our first mission!” Sora crows. “Can you believe it? Finally we’re doing some real ninja work!”

“I can’t believe Sensei thinks we’re ready,” Mitsuharu sighs happily, “I thought he’d get us killed before we make it anywhere near the mission desk.”

“You do know,” she cautions, “that we’re getting D-rank missions first? They’re nothing but glorified chores.”

“I don’t even care. At least we’re doing something and we’re getting paid!” Sora cheers.

“Oh that’s right,” she remembers, “We’re getting payed. This is my first paycheck all to myself – I don’t even know what I’m going to do with it.”

“Eh – don’t you have spending money?” Mitsuharu asks. “I always thought as an Uchiha…”

He trails off uncomfortably.

“Well,” she allows, “I do get a stipend. But it’s all for groceries and ninja gear.”

“I know that feeling,” Sora commiserates, “I’ve got a big family and my old man’s not making much. I’m probably going to fork over most of it, but hey – every ryo counts, right?”

They amble down the main road only half keeping an eye out for supply stores.

Hisana herself possesses only a set of blunted practice kunai and shuriken each. But no matter how inconsequential the mission, using them would be unprofessional. According to Ito-sensei you could never be careful enough; being caught unaware with no usable weapon could mean your death.

There are no ninja shops on the mainstreet, but on the side streets. There’s supposedly a system to it, but Hisana hasn’t quite managed to figure out what it is.
Mitsuharu seems to know where he’s going though. He takes a sharp turn left and they simply follow him.

There’s always an obvious difference between ‘ninja streets’ and ‘civilian street’. Both are narrow and mostly dimly lit, but places ninjas frequent are often far cleaner and less ornate. Instead of the colorful round awnings and hand painted swinging signs, there are efficiently printed ones and only black-and-white posters of special bargains tacked to the doors.

“All right, so what do we actually need?” Sora stops them. “I know I need some ninja wire, but what else?”

“Didn’t you pay attention in class?” Hisana scolds. “Apart from weapons we need basic med equipment, food and flares. I don’t think we’ll be leaving Fire Country on the first mission, so cloaks and thick boots won’t be necessary yet – a thick, waterproof blanket seems like a good idea though.”

“I think we should split up,” Mitsuharu suggests. “We’ll get the food, you’ll get the weapons and all that? I’ll tell you my standard model, so that should be fine …”

She nods in agreement. They’d be saving time and she can be sure that everyone really does have everything they’d need. Mitsuharu scribbles down two serial numbers, while Sora just gives her a helpless look.

“I’ll take the Konoha standard, I guess? Should be fine.”

“You have a standard model?” she hears him ask Mitsuharu as they walk away.

“Well, yes,” says the other boy, before launching into a detailed list of pro and cons on different shuriken designs.

She shakes her head in amusement.

Hisana’s actually looking forward to the weapon shop the most, which is why she decides to leave it for last. Her mother used to complain that she wasn’t fun to shop with, since she’s the type to get bored as soon as she has what she really wants.

“You’ll get yours last next time,’ she’d say everytime. ‘So I don’t have to listen to your nagging.’

_All that_, as Mitsuharu put it, leads her to the general equipment shop first. It’s a big one, far bigger than it looks from the outside, and for a moment she thinks she might have accidentally walked into the wrong store. At first glance it looks like a supermarket, with rows of low shelves, stacked with specialized equipment. There’s winter and desert gear, boots that are supposed to be fireproof, gloves of different materials – even special bras for kunoichi, to store weapons and poisons. Above this particular shelf she spies a poster saying, ‘For poisons and medical supplies, please enquire at the register’.

Fascinated she inspects a set of razor sharp faux fingernails, before remembering that she actually has a job to do. She grabs three of the level 2 blankets – for Konoha winters – as well as a package of standard emergency flares to share, before making her way over to the counter.

The man behind it is obviously a former shinobi. His left forearm is missing and there’s an ugly scar running down his temple, before disappearing into his grizzled beard.

Hisana tries for a polite smile, which nearly slides off her face in amazement as his surly expression
neatly turns into a beaming smile.

“Hello Ojou-san! How can I help you?”

Startled she presents the blankets and the flares to him.

“And … I need medical supplies, please. Also, do you have an introductory scroll for poisons?”

As it turns out, no he doesn’t. Instead he writes down two titles to borrow from the library for her, before vanishing into a backroom. He returns with three differently colored small packs.

“The navy one is for medics, the black one the standard pack, and the gray one is the standard but for extended missions. Which one do you need?”

She leaves the store with three standard packs, a bag full of emergency supplies, and a certain piece of paper burning a hole in her back pocket. She really wants to go to the library now, but there’s really no time before they’re leaving tomorrow. Instead she tries to turn her attention to the next stop on her list.

The weapons shop seems quiet and abandoned compared of the bustle of the general equipment shop. There are still people milling about, but the storefront’s size simply doesn’t allow for many customers at once.

There’s a young woman behind the counter, loudly chewing gum, who greets her with a wink even while another customer tries to haggle with her about a package of senbon.

“Cheepskate!” she hears the girl curse.

For a while Hisana aimlessly wanders through the store, looking at all the interesting things. The kunai she finds easily enough – even Mitsuharu’s fancy ones – as they are simply dumped into neatly labeled boxes.

The shuriken aren’t so easy to find. She finally has to ask one of the other shoppers, who giddily shows her a wall hidden behind a folding screen. There’s holes drilled into it, labeled with serial numbers. The other shopper, an older boy, reaches into one of the holes and pulls out a wooden pole carrying the shuriken.

“Cool, right?” he says excitedly. “They had them installed after some civilian kid nearly cut his fingers off.”

“No accidents yet with the kunai?” she asks, only half joking.

“Dunno; I figure the owner thinks if you manage to cut yourself on a kunai you deserve it or something – after all there’s a handle and all.”

She takes some of the Konoha standard again, and a few of Mitsuharu’s specialized ones. They look nasty, with barbs at the tips and serrated edges. They’re a little lighter than hers, Hisana realizes as she weighs them in her hand. Probably handle differently too.

The most interesting thing by far though are in a backroom that she can only enter after showing chewing-gum-girl her identification.
She’s never been to a weapon shop. Her family was never a fan of them, so the closest she’s ever
gotten before landing in Konoha were the dulled decorative katana her sister’s boyfriend brought
from a business trip to Japan. She remembers being awed, sheathing and unsheathing them, just to
hear the metallic sound it made.

She must have been around sixteen back then, right in the middle of her Naruto-phase.

So while the small weaponry is all very entertaining, she’s far more interested in the big one.

In contrast to the storefront, there is no mass production here; every model is displayed by a single
exemplar, the rest is neatly stored away.

There’s an ornate Katana propped up on a rack. Something that looks like a cross between a battle
axe and a pick axe is mounted on the wall; a poster above says, ‘Foldable!’.

There’s more: Bokken of different woods; several pairs of daggers, ranging from plain to intricately
designed; something spear-like – she keeps forgetting the name – that boasts trenches to make blood
cleanly run off.

“Aren’t you a little young for this?” a girl by the katana snips.

“Aren’t you a little old to be nasty to kids?” she deadpans.

The girl turns away in a huff.

Hisana watches two shinobi debating the pro and cons of two different tanto.

“It’s just for one mission,” one of them says, exasperated, as if he’s repeated it several times already.
“I think we can do with a maru for one, lousy c-rank mission.”

“Yes, of course – until someone decides to take a swing at us and slices through this piece of scrap
metal like butter,” hisses his blonde friend.

The other man shushes him.

“Don’t talk like that about Madoka-chan’s work; she’ll kick us out and then we have to go shop at
Genta-jiji’s. That old man’s a genius, but his work’s really gone to the dogs with the arthritis.”

“Hey,” she says; the men stiffen and throw her shifty looks. “Who do I need to talk to about katana?”

Blondie relaxes.

“That would be Madoka-chan at the counter. You’re a beginner, right? Might have to make an
appointment.”

Behind him his friend is sneakily shuffling the swords around, letting the more expensive one
disappear back into a closet and taking a cheaper one.

Hisana thanks him and makes her way out of the room.

“Hey,” it echoes behind her, “you think you can sneak me a toy sword and I won’t notice?”

She grins. Ninjas are a weird bunch. Now that she has the opportunity to watch them in their private
moments, they’ve lost a lot of their intimidation factor.

They’re people – killers on the job, but not monsters. It’s a little closer to what she thought of them
before her death, but this time backed by real life experience. She’s more than eager to experience the rest of ninja real life now.

Swords are supposed to become Sasuke’s deal, so she feels a little bad for considering stealing his thunder. But she really wants to at least try and learn the basics. Most ninjas know the basics, she tells herself. Just to see what it’s like. She throws a longing look at sleek looking oodachi and goes to search ‘Madoka-chan’.

‘Madoka-chan’ introduces herself as Goya Madoka. Despite her young age she appears to be a popular weapon smith.

“I’m the weapon smith,” she grins, “though that’s prob’ly nothin’ much ta boast about; my only competition’s an old dude with the arthritis and the cheapskate two streets ova – only uses third rate material, if ya can believe it.”

When Hisana tentatively asks for an appointment, the girl only laughs at her.

“Sweetie,” she says, ‘ya know how many beginners I get ev’ry month? One. Mabbe two or three after graduation week. Kenjutsu’s a dyin’ art; senbon an’ daggers are where it’s at. I’m not sendin’ away any hopefuls, or all my best payin’ customers will’a died off in a few years.”

Hisana’s not sure what to make of this information. On one hand it eases her mind a little, because she’d be keeping something important alive, something Goya seems pretty enthusiastic about; on the other hand it would most definitely be weird if Sasuke and she decided to specialize in sword art. Or at least noteworthy. Would that be a bad thing?

“Have a sensei yet?” Goya asks. “‘Cause this is definit’ly somethin’ ya gonna need a sensei for.”

“For the basics, I think so, yes.”

The girl looks her up and down with a frown.

“Gimme ya arm,” she says, pulling a measuring tape out of her back pocket. “How old’re ya? Which side ya gonna favor?”

There’s a barrage of questions she has to answer before Goya is satisfied.

“Ya tall for ya age,” she says, “that can go one a’ two ways: either ya gonna keep shootin’ up like a weed, so you’re gonna have ta keep buyin’ new stuff; or ya gonna get stuck at this size. Wouln’t risk it; keep stickin’ with the cheaper stuff ’till ya sure ya not gonna grow anymore.”

She pulls out a bokken from one of the stands and experimentally holds it to Hisana’s shoulder.

“This one,” she finally says, “not gonna want ta use a sword in battle right away. Lots a’ practice first.”

It’s a nice bokken; relatively plain, but of dark wood and a smooth hilt that lies nicely in her hand. ‘3.600 ryo’ says the price tag, which is far more than she can spare.

“Don’t worry,” Goya says, patting her head, “like I said, it’s not like someone’s gonna come an’ snatch this one up. Ya come back when ya got paid.”

Yes, she’d do that. Hisana throws a last longing look at the bokken, before she hands Goya the kunai
and shuriken.

“I'll just take these ones then. And some ninja wire, please.”

When she meets up with the boys they wear the same wistful look she must be sporting.

“This is great,” Mitsuharu sighs, “there’s so much stuff to see. There was this girl peeling oranges with neko-te. Or this huge guy carrying an ono around.”

Sora snickers.

“I had to take him by the arm at one point, because he kept wandering off.”

They shuffle their purchases around; Sora shoves a bag of packaged food into her hands. They awkwardly bid their good-byes for the day. Tomorrow is going to start especially early, and there’s still Sasuke whom she needs to catch before he goes to sleep.

Info

‘Maru’ is a sword forged from a single slab of hard metal – it’s the cheap sort.

3.600 ryo are about 36.000 yen (that’s around 300 USD or 250 €).

‘Neko-te’ are metal claws that can be attached to the fingers.

An ‘ono’ is a battle axe.
The next morning Hisana is up before the alarm clock rings. For a moment she considers waking Sasuke, but then the boy won’t be going back to sleep and it’s only four in the morning.

Instead she turns off her own alarm, quickly checks Sasuke’s, and then leaves the bedroom to get dressed. During the next hour she checks and re-checks her backpack, eats a quick breakfast and places about a hundred sticky notes all over the place to remind her cousin to eat his breakfast, that his bento and dinner are in the fridge, and to regularly check in with Genma.

She’s still annoyed with the man, for planting a seed of doubt in her belly that’s been spouting and crawling all over her insides. Her team is a useless thing to worry about, since there’s nothing she could be doing about them anyway, and she thinks she already has the measure of her teammates at least.

Her sensei is still a big fat question mark, dancing in front of her face. It irks her, but it’s not like she can walk up to him and demand he spill all his secrets. She hopes that the upcoming mission will shed some light on his character. Up until now, he hasn’t interacted much with them, preferring to let them work things out between themselves. Apparently the jounin instructor isn’t part of the team in his eyes – or not enough to take part in the team work exercises.

When she reaches the gates of Konoha she starts shivering. It’s pre-mission jitters, she realizes; a mixture of excitement and dread. She’s never been outside Konoha.

Only Sensei is waiting at the gates, both of her teammates are still missing.

They wait in silence for the boys and they leave in silence, only briefly interrupted as they sign their names into a little red book at the gates. She’s gotten used to it by now and in the morning she feels it’s preferable to idle chit-chat when her brain isn’t entirely awake yet. After half an hour of walking it occurs to her that they should have asked where they’re going by now. The dreadful little flower in her belly shudders as she realizes she’s already been conditioned out of asking questions.

She debates asking, just to make a point, but something inside her head keeps telling her ‘no’.

‘It’s nonsense.’ – ‘I’ll know when we’re there.’ – ‘Do you really want to risk a scolding?’

Before she can work up enough aggravation to override her own trepidation, Kohaku-sensei comes to a stop. They’re in the middle of the forest; there’s nothing here.

“Ahh … Sensei?” Sora finally says, “Is there something we might have to know?”

Kohaku-sensei forms a ‘kai’ and a genjutsu unravels in front of their eyes. There’s a strange hole in the moss, just below one of the Fire Country’s famous mammoth trees.

“This,” their teacher announces, “is your final test for the first stage of your training. Your ‘mission’ lies inside this hidden compound. I’ve taken the liberty and ordered this mission myself; it will count as a C-rank, as it will possibly span several days.”

“‘Possibly’?” Hisana asks faintly. “‘Hidden compound’?”

Dear god, she hopes this is not one of Orochimaru’s former hideouts. It probably is.

“As I said,” Sensei repeats patiently, “this is a C-rank; the compound has been cleared out and your
mission is simple: find your way out. Follow me.”

He ducks into the hole and there is a metallic noise of a heavy door opening.

Mitsuharu throws them a wide-eyed look, but follows the jounin.

“Oh,” she hears him say, muffled through the moss. “Wow.”

Now curious the other two follow them. There is indeed a big metal door and it opens into utter darkness. It’s eerie; she can hear the birds chirping and there’s warm sunlight coming through the moss, but there’s a cold draft coming out of the pitch black and a strange, dank smell that reminds her of the sewers.

A small fire comes alive just in front of her eyes and she flinches back. It’s Kohaku-sensei; there’s a flame burning in his hand.

Behind him Mitsuharu looks completely out of his element. When she takes her first step inside the building seems to swallow the sound.

“I sure hope we’re still getting paid for this,” Sora whispers behind her. “Or I’ll pee my pants for nothing.”

“You stay right here,” Sensei tells Mitsuharu, who gogles at him.

“M-me? Why?”

There’s no answer, as Kohaku-sensei leads the rest of them deeper down the corridor. The further they get away from the door, the more the natural light starts to fade.

“Sora-san, this way, Hisana-san, I will come back for you.”

And then she’s alone in the dark, with only the sound of her own breathing and the rats for company. She’s tries to remember which turns they took, but it’s as if the air pressing down on her has erased all memories. She’s not even sure anymore which way she’s facing. She tries to feel for a wall, but only ends up losing her bearings entirely.

Hisana’s never been particularly afraid of the dark, even as a child. She still can’t help but strain her ears for the last traces of her team’s footsteps. There’s nothing, or is there?

There’s a noise to her left – is it a rat? She kicks out, but her foot only meets air.

She shudders. How long has it been? She needs to pee.

Are those footsteps?

This time she’s right; a light comes around the corner and stings her eyes.

“Come,” Kohaku-sensei beckons and takes a left turn.

Having company now is nearly electrifying and completely distracts her from noting any more turns they make. When Kohaku-sensei stops, she nearly walks right into him.

“Hisana-san, all your flares please.”
Startled, she hands them to him.

“Mission objective: find your way out,” he says, turns on his heels and walks away.

For the second time she finds herself alone. Bracing for the paranoia before the last light has faded lets her keep a clear head.

She’s not hearing anything – there’s nothing to hear. Only the rats. ‘Find your way out’, he said.

Right now Hisana wishes she’d studied more katon jutsus; currently she’s only proficient with one of them.

“Katon: Gokakyu no Jutsu,” she whispers, trying to keep the chakra drain to a minimum.

She’s converted the chakra too close to her lips; it burns like chili against her skin as soon as it leaves her mouth. A golf ball sized fireball shoots through the air, illuminating just for a short moment the room she’s in. It’s dirty, but empty except for a metal table shoved up against the wall. There’s only one way out straight ahead.

The chakra drain is still too big, she realizes. She can’t quite place how long she waited alone in the dark, but she has a rather solid grasp on the time she’s spent around Sensei’s light. Hisana thinks they must have walked for almost an hour before the dark and about 30 minutes after. There might be shortcuts, but she doesn’t want to assume so and end up being wrong. There’s also Sora to consider and possibly Mitsuharu – she has no idea what Sensei ended up doing with him.

In any case she doesn’t think she can keep casting jutsus. There needs to be another way.

She feels her way around towards the doorway, careful not to stumble over the door ripped out of its hinges and discarded on the floor.

She slinks through the opening, staying firmly pressed against the wall. It’s gritty beneath her fingers and uneven. In some places the plaster is splintered in strange patterns, as if a fist impacted it at one point. There’s been a battle here, she realizes.

In this new room the noise changes. She makes an experimental tap of her foot and the echo suggests something bigger than the last room. The hallway – she remembers passing through it.

There was another, bigger room before that, an assembly hall maybe.

Another noise rips her out of her thoughts. It echoes strangely off the walls; she can’t tell where it’s coming from. Rats, Hisana tells herself, this place must be crawling with rats.

Her heart is racing and she can’t tell why. Does she go left or right? She thinks she has to go right.

She keeps close to the wall, occasionally touching door handles, and then suddenly touching nothing, as she meets a junction.

She can’t remember a junction – did she go down the wrong way? Maybe it was left after all? No, it wasn’t. She shakes her head to get rid of the insidious, irrational panic. Dear god, is she really going to let a little darkness defeat her? Switch walls – that’s what she has to do; just keep going on the other side.

For a few disconcerting steps she loses contact with the wall, before her hand reaches the opposing one. The gap from wall to wall feels huge.
She was right, the other wall keeps going. There’s a door at the end of it. It’s locked.

Was it locked before? Did Sensei lock it when he left? How is she supposed to open it – kick the metal door in?

She ponders this problem earnestly for a minute, before realizing she still has her backpack. Her head is weirdly empty. Cursing herself she rummages in one of the smaller pockets until her fingers close around something that could be her lock picking set. She fumbles with it, until it snaps open, spilling its contents all over the floor. The sound seems so incredibly loud that she freezes. What was that noise? Not the spilling lockpicks – no something else. Were those footsteps? Impossible – she’s alone down here.

No, no she isn’t’. This could be Sora.

No, it’s only been … about twenty minutes.

Not enough time for Sora to get anywhere near here. Carefully, quietly she sinks to her knees and lets her fingers flutter over the floor trying to catch the small metal pieces without scraping them over the rough concrete. It’s only been twenty minutes – twenty-three – and already she’s a mess.

It takes almost three minutes until a soft click echoes through the hallway. Hisana tries to open the door; it’s heavy and it makes a terrible creaking, metallic sound.

Only a few inches. She only needs a few inches to squeeze through.

She presses her shoulders through first, canting her hips inwards like she remembers from the Academy. For a second she’s stuck, ribs pressing against the heavy metal of the door with every breath. She empties all air from her lungs, sucks in her stomach and slides through the rest of the way.

Her backpack is still on the other side of the door, but that can’t be helped. After another calming breath, she feels her way around the new space. Where’s the next door? There’s no door. It’s a room, she realizes, a dead end.

It’s been forty minutes.

Goddamn it, she’ll have to squeeze back out. Back out where the noise is. There is nobody – there can’t be anybody even though she heard the footsteps because Sensei said so. It’s not as if he would be lying, would he?

She presses her hand against her mouth to stifle the sound of her own breathing and tries to concentrate on any chakra that might be near. It’s like a sixth sense, the awareness of a ‘disturbance in the force’ so to speak. As if being watched, only more obtrusive.

There is of course no chakra signature – because nobody’s there. Or they’re hiding.

It’s no use; she needs to get out of here. The door isn’t coming closer on its own.

She shifts back through the crack, this time more smoothly, picks up her backpack and starts searching the walls again.

60 minutes.

There’s another door. It opens noiselessly, but as she steps inside, the sounds change again. She walks along the wall. And walks … and walks. What is going on, a genjutsu?
No genjutsu, she thinks angrily, get a grip already. A few minutes of darkness and you’re going crazy. But the wall doesn’t end; even a grudging ‘kai’ does nothing. She could cast another jutsu. One more, just to make sure it’s not an illusion. She’d be revealing her position, making herself a target but … then she’d see that there’s nobody there.

“Katon: Gokakyou no Jutsu.”

Her small fireball shoots into the void and illuminates nothing. It’s the assembly hall, and she can’t even make out the walls.

It takes her two hours to get out of the hall. It eats most of her chakra reserves and tears at her nerves. The good news are that she’s actually seen a rat now, and she manages to convince herself that she’s not being followed. The bad news are she needs to take a nap now – and she’ll have to take it standing up … because of the rats.

When she wakes up Hisana has lost all sense of time.

It’s a constant succession of food, walking, sleeping, food, walking, sleeping. She doesn’t know where she is anymore.

She’s lost.

Fighting against the paranoia becomes harder and harder. It’s only small things: she keeps kicking for rats but never actually hits one; there are footsteps seemingly echoing from everywhere; and sometimes she thinks she can feel movement in the air. She tries to ignore these gnawing suspicions, so it takes her by surprise the first time she actually feels something.

Someone is breathing. Someone familiar.

“Haru-san …?”
Teamwork! Teamwork!

Whoop – chapter 25!

Sooo, some slightly bad news: classes start again soon, so I probably won’t be so quick to update anymore. I have no plans to abandon this fic, but if I have to channel my creativity into my assignments there might not be much left for you – sorry:(

On the upside: I’ll probably be churning out chapters like nobody’s business around Christmas, and in March the semester is already over again.

A hand grabs her arm.

Startled she tries to grope for a chakra signature, something to confirm her suspicions, but there’s nothing.

Before she can decide to break the hand – just in case – there’s a tap in the crook of her elbow; a signal. Tap … tap –tap.

There’s a moment of silence and stillness.

“I-I think …. there’s someone in here,” a familiar voice breathes against her ear. “No chakra!”

Hisana’s so relieved, her knees buckle. She catches herself, before she can tumble both of them to the floor, but it’s a near thing.

“What are you doing here?” she hisses.

“Fetching you,” he answers, voice high in surprise. “What else should I be doing?”

“Getting out maybe? What happened to you? Where did Sensei take you?”

“Nowhere,” he confesses sheepishly. “He left me right by the door. But I couldn’t just walk out and leave you guys here; don’t you know it only takes fifteen minutes of sensory deprivation to cause hallucinations?”

She didn’t. But that would explain the paranoia. It’s not paranoia if they’re really out to get you, something sing-songs inside her head, but she squashes it down.

“So there’s probably nobody else down here but us,” she suggests.

“No, no! There’s this strange feeling of being watched. And I heard the footsteps, I’m sure of it …”

“Was that before or after those fifteen minutes were up for you?”
Mitsuharu makes a frustrated noise.

“Does it even matter? I still wouldn’t risk loudly bumbling around down here.”

It’s the first time she’s heard him getting annoyed; the darkness is doing things to him too.

“Did you see Sora-san on your way here? Sensei left him before me, but he took a route off to the other side. You should have run into each other.”

There’s a sound as if her teammate is shaking his head.

“No. Maybe he’s already outside?”

“What if he isn’t?”

There’s no helping it, they have to look for him.

They switch off every hour, one of them leading, the other one being pulled behind. It’s easier in some ways, now that she’s not alone anymore, but also harder in others. The hallucinations have gotten less, but in the few instances they appear, she’s all the more convinced they’re real.

Mitsuharu has them too, but he’s far more resolute in ignoring them than her. The only sign of stress is the shaking she sometimes feels from him. But he refuses to sleep and after a while he’s more of a wrack than her, bodily exhaustion just as devastating as mental one.

Ironically that’s the point at which Hisana finally gathers herself. With someone else’s worries to take care of it’s easier to push back her own and do what has to be done.

She’s never seen herself as a care-taker; she’s only the younger sibling, the selfish one that needs care rather than giving it. Everything she’s done in the past few years – taking care of Sasuke and pushing team 7 onto each other – they were all things that had to be done. Yes, she enjoyed most of it, but the initial motivator was selfishness.

Even now she keeps them around for selfish reasons; they’re family and she’s possessive of them. She has no such connection with Mitsuharu – yet – but his weakness puts her into a familiar role and gives her back a few inches of ground beneath her feet.

“Come on,” she repeats patiently for the fifth time. “I will keep watch, you need to sleep. It’s a closed room, we checked twice. Nobody’s in here and nobody can get inside without stepping right into my wire trap.”

She’s no good at traps and they both know it; traps are Sora’s job. But it’s a simple one that she couldn’t possibly mess up and her mental faculties are still in better working order than Mitsuharu’s.

“Sleep,” she orders, finally throwing her teammate’s blanket over his head.

“Oh,” he says. “Oh, this is actually better.”

It takes five minutes until his breathing evens out.

Food, sleep, walking. Food, sleep, walking.

They detect Sora’s chakra signature somewhere down a small hallway. It’s only a quick flare up and then it’s gone. They look at each other and then scramble to get closer to it.

“There’s no door here,” Hisana growls in frustration. “This makes no sense; there must be other
connections between the various rooms.”

They can’t split up down a hallway; they’d never find each other again. But Mitsuharu pulls a rope from his backpack.

“Hold on to that. Let’s listen at the walls and see where exactly he is.”

She taps onto every door first, but there’s no reaction. There’s a tug on the rope though, so hear teammate’s apparently had more luck.

“Here,” he whispers, “listen to this.”

He taps onto the wall and a muted knock answers.

Tap-tap … tap. – ‘Sora’

It’s their missing teammate. She listens to Haru tapping back his own name. There’s a moment of silence before the next message comes back.

‘Help. Not alone.’

Next to her Haru releases a shuddering breath. This can’t be true. They are alone down here, who the hell else would be prowling this dark, dank place like an animal if they don’t have to?

“It’s the hallucinations,” Haru repeats, and she’s not sure to whom he’s speaking – her or himself. “He’s been alone longer than us. It was a rat that startled him.”

That must be it, she thinks. She really has no idea how long they’ve been down here, but adding together all her lucid spells it should be around 50 hours. It feels longer that. For a little more than half of it she’s been alone; Sora for all of it – there’s no telling in what state he would be in. The paranoia must have eaten him alive.

“Come,” she whispers. “He’s between these two rooms; in fifteen minute we’ll get to him.”

‘Don’t move.’

‘Understood.’

They crack open the right door and split up to feel along the walls. Hisana’s hand closes around something like a doorframe. It’s broken and splintered; a wood chip digs into her finger and stays there. She tugs at her end of the rope and a few seconds later Mitsuharu’s hand clamps down on her shoulder.

“I can feel it too,” he whispers. “Can’t you?”

She thinks she can – she doesn’t. There’s no presence, no chakra, no sound as far as she can tell. But there’s something.

“I don’t care,” she hisses, finally hitting her breaking point. “If there’s someone, we stand a better chance together. And if this someone was any damn good at their job, they would have already found and killed us.”

It’s true. All fear aside, this theoretical person seems to have skills superior to their own and appears to have been tailing them in the dark for at least 50 hours now. There might even be multiple of them, if not at least two of them hallucinated all of it. Clones, she remembers dimly, they could be using clones.
No, that would be suggesting a degree of organization that doesn’t fit with the very important detail that they haven’t been *caught* yet. There is nobody following them – nobody could possibly be this skilled and organized while *completely screwing it up*.

She pulls Haru along with her as they stumble into another adjourned room. It should be sharing a wall with the hallway – the left one.

“Sora?”

There’s no answer.

“T-there’s something,” she hears her teammate whisper. “It’s … a metal closet. And it’s locked.”

A soft tapping noise is coming from it. Hisana’s heart drops down into the pit of her stomach. 50 hours in a closet; they needed to get him out of there. She fumbles for her lockpicks, but her teammate is quicker. There’s a click and the door bursts open. Sora tumbles out of it, right into her.

“Go!” he hisses furiously, “Go, go, go – we have to leave!”

“Sora-san, Sora-san calm down!

She tries to wrestle him onto the floor, but he’s bigger than her and hysterical.

“Stop it!” Haru hisses. “Sora, calm down.”

“You don’t understand,” he gasped, “I haven’t been here the whole time! I just took a look inside and someone locked it behind me!”

“What?” she whispered, grip going lax on his arm.

“That was only two, maybe three hours ago!”

They stumble back into the hallway, all three of them holding hands like the children they are. Sora is leading, frantically trying to find the way back into the hallway that he came from.

“There’s just one more door that way – it has to be that one. Hisana-chan, give me some light!”

“Katon: Gokakyu no Jutsu!”

They chase the fireball down the corridor, all caution about being seen thrown overboard.

“Left! Hisana-chan!”

“Katon!”

Red hot panic is creeping up her spine; there’s definitely something chasing them now, she can feel it. Behind her Mitsuharu yelps and speeds up. He overtakes her and suddenly she’s pulled along by two pairs of longer legs.

“Hisana-chan!”

Both of her hands are occupied; without thinking she spits out a stream of scorching chakra that shoots out between her teammates like a golf ball sized bullet. There’s a big metal door ahead. Sora latches onto it, pulling with all the strength born of desperation and fear. It cracks open and then
there’s light.

They stumble out into the open, scrambling for purchase on the moss and climb up into the woods. Once they get the proper footing, they fall into battle formation, waiting with bated breath for the enemy to appear.

Kohaku-sensei steps out from the bunker, straight faced and perfectly put together.

“W-what?” she stutters out. “Sensei?”

Behind her Haru sags to the floor.

“You were following us,” Sora states, aghast.

“Correct,” Sensei admits. “To monitor how you would react to stress. I did not expect such an … extreme reaction.”

“We thought we were going to die,” Hisana stresses.

“On my watch?” Sensei asks, and there is genuine bewilderment in his voice. “Letting my genin squad die on my watch would mean demotion.”

“Demotion,” Hisana repeats weakly. “Of course. Wouldn’t want to get demoted.”

Sora screams in a mix of frustration and excess adrenaline. Then she’s suddenly dragged down to the floor, huddled against her team. Sora is shaking, as if coming down from a high. Haru is sniveling quietly; the aftermath of a short cry.

Hisana herself lets her head sink against the grass and just breathes in the smell of the woods. It’s clean and warm, the complete opposite of the bunker.

“I … apologize,” Kohaku-sensei says to her dim surprise. “I intended to add a certain urgency to your mission. You were only supposed to realize that you were being hunted after reuniting. The fact that you did notice means that I … might have overdone it a bit.”

Hisana turns her face towards him; his mouth is pressed into a thin line. Disapproval. This time directed at himself, rather than them. Only now she sees that his shirt is distinctly ruffled, and there’s a smudge of dirt on his jaw.

“What was it?” she rasps. “What we felt. This … terror.”

“Killing intent. A low level, usually used to scare civilians into compliance. An underhanded but popular tactic to avoid the usual, official channels. I did not calculate the impact it might have in extended social isolation.”

She doesn’t even care anymore. ‘A mean fucker, that one,’ she remembers Genma saying. No, she thinks. Not mean. Just … stunted.

She takes another look at her teacher’s face and suddenly sees the connection to Kakashi she’s been unconsciously looking for the whole time – the connection all child prodigies share.

*A little boy training alone.*
‘Look at him’ – ‘Prodigy’ – ‘Don’t you want to make your father proud?’


‘I don’t want to play with you’ – ‘There’s no time to play, don’t you want to make your clan proud?’

‘You’re special’

‘You don’t fail’

‘Why did you fail?’

Isolation does strange things to children.

She doesn’t have the strength to be sad for him. Later, when she’s slept and hugged Sasuke and thanked god that her cousin would never know this abyss that swallows children like him whole. Maybe then she would find it in her to forgive him. Right now she just wants to go home. No, there’s still almost an hour to walk. She’d rather sleep right here in the woods.

They do sleep in the woods.

Kohaku-sensei has proper food and tea stored away under a root of the mammoth tree.

They eat and drink in silence and then curl up to sleep right where they’re sitting.

Hisana’s only halfway gone, when she hears the boys talking in low voices next to her.

“What did Sensei do with you?” Sora asks curiously.

“Nothing.”

“What nothing? Where were you?”

“By the door.”

“You came back? Why would you do that?”

“What else was I supposed to do? Just walk out and leave you there? The dark makes people crazy; I couldn’t just leave you there.”

Sora hums in agreement.

“Good of you,” he says. “Real good of you.”

They make it back early the next day. Their internal clocks are all kinds of messed up, but nerves didn’t allow anyone proper sleep that night. So when their teacher wakes just before dawn, all three of them sit up wide awake.

The march back to Konoha seems to be over in the blink of an eye; Hisana suspects she might have sleep walked part of it. When they approach the gates, she straightens her back and purposefully puts
the swagger back into her walk. It’s hard. She doesn’t feel like swaggering at all.

But if Genma is one of the guards posted, she doesn’t want to give him any reason to go off on her again. Now that she’s slept and calmed down a little, she’s suddenly found the capacity to be angry at him again.

But the guards are other familiar faces: two dark haired men, one with a bandage across his nose and a soul patch, the other with a bandana styled hitai-ate. She doesn’t remember their names but she does recognize them from the original Chuunin Exams.

They sign their names into a little black book and make another of their awkward stops right past the gates. As their teacher bids a hasty good-bye, they linger, undecided.

She feels uncomfortable to leave her team now. Both boys seem equally torn between staying and going running to their families.

“Guys,” Sora says and throws his arms out dramatically. “I- …”

He slumps, seemingly running out of steam. Hisana snorts and reaches out to punch him in the shoulder.

“Catch you tomorrow,” she decides and playfully hip checks Haru on her way. She only gets a few feet further until she hears the boys start to laugh.
New chapter!

Have fun:)

Her friends are not amused.

While the nightmares fade gradually during the next week, she’s still jumpy and hyper vigilant of every noise. Hisana can’t relax properly, even in the safety of her own home. Sasuke, even subconsciously, seems to have picked up on it. For the first few days they cling to each other – one afraid of being alone again, the other afraid of being alone again – until Shizuha puts a stop to it.

“This is not doing either of you any favors,” she insists. “You both need to learn to deal with fear on your own.”

She’s right of course. Hisana’s clinging to Sasuke, to team 7, as her support, forgetting that children this age are entirely unequipped to deal with a frightened, slightly traumatized older sister figure.

Disconcerted and for the first time aware of how potentially unhealthy their strange co-dependency could become, she takes the other route: In the morning she allows herself a quick hug from every team 7 member that comes her way, and for the rest of the day she either hides on the genin training grounds or sequesters herself away in the library.

She’s twitchy and lonely without the children. Shiki is busy with her own team and Shizuha’s continued search for an apprenticeship keeps her swooping around the village like a courier pigeon. Everyone is doing their own thing, except for her. But dragging anyone down with her is simply not an option.

It’s too easy to become self-centered when you’re scared, Hisana thinks. And she’s self-aware enough to realize that she’s prone to getting lost in her own drama on any given day.

Yet it still surprises her how, in hindsight, she’s made quite so many mistakes that need to be corrected. One of the most glaring ones is a problem she’s thankfully allowed to dig her fingers into with vigour.

Her own team is a work in progress. They’ve been together for only a few short months, so it’s not like they have to be best friends forever. But Hisana can’t help but feel that it’s mostly her fault that they aren’t.

Up until now she’s accepted her own graduation and its consequences rather passively.

Yes – she’s got a team!

Yes – she’s a proper ninja now!

But a far too big part of her is still thinking of team 7 as her team and that’s not right. They are Sasuke’s team, not hers. She has no doubt that she’ll forever be ‘Nee-chan’ to Naruto, that Sakura
will always look to her for advice, and that she’ll forever be the sole owner of a particularly big part of Sasuke. But they, too, would grow up one day and have their own lives and careers.

Sora and Haru are her team 7, and she owes them a little more than a cursory pat on the back every now and then. So reducing the boys – her boys – to being the backdrop for her own small scale battle with Kohaku-sensei’s supposed sinister motives has been a pretty stupid, short sighted move.

And so she starts to regularly drag the boys out for food or extra training, and even shamelessly imposes on them in their free time.

Haru takes to this new development with enthusiasm; he’s an only child without many friends, so his days are mostly empty and rather lonely. His family is proud of him, but they’re civilians and obviously don’t really understand what it is he’s doing.

He reminds her a bit of herself as Sarah – a little too weird to love, and desperately clinging to the one friend that sticks around.

Sora is a little less appreciative of her sudden interest. Her suspicions were spot on; he is an older brother through and through. At home there are constantly kids hanging off his arms or on his back, climbing all over him and begging for sweets and play time. He does most of the housework, takes his siblings to school and all around compensates for the obvious lack of one important person: his mother.

His familial situation, their small house and the mess, seem to embarrass him. On one notable occasion she’s caught him wearing an apron, trying to feed five hungry, jabbering mouths with vegetables; he kicked her right out again.

This whole thing – this bonding – is awkward and silly and she’s known she’s been acting wildly out of character even before everyone started throwing her weird looks. But it’s easing her nerves, this new project, and she simply tries to see it as a challenge to wrestle older boys into compliance now instead of younger ones.

Thanks to this newfound familiarity with her team, it’s also far easier to look at her teacher a little differently. She’s been leery of her Sensei from the start, and Genma’s little outburst only enforced the impression of an enemy in her own ranks tenfold.

But despite the exhausting, mentally draining, and often painful and humiliating training, they’ve never been in any actual danger around him – now that she thinks about it, what has she ever even seen of her Sensei but his public persona as a Hyuuga and just the tiniest glimpse of his true inner workings?

While it’s been surprisingly easy – as well as gratifying – to force her presence upon the boys, she’s at a loss about how to bond with her teacher and how to, maybe, scrape out a little more of his real personality. There’s no guidance to be found in her memories of the manga – after all Kakashi wasn’t actually very close to team 7 – and her own head offers nothing that wouldn’t simply earn her a weird look and a polite refusal.

She carefully breaches the subject with the rest of the team, with mixed results.

“I don’t understand why you would want to spend any more time with him than you have to,” Sora repeats for what must be the fifth time. “Doesn’t he give you the willies?”

“He scares the crap out of me,” she admits easily. “But someone clever once told me, ‘The only true
cure for fear is familiarity’.”

Both boys cast her skeptic looks.

“Well,” Haru says, “as long as I can get familiar with him from a distance, you have my blessings.”

She’s tempted to tell him that that’s probably not how it works, but thinks better of it.

“He’s going to be around for a pretty long time,” she says instead. “Do you really want to pee your pants every time he looks at you until you’re a chuunin?”

“I’ll have you know I usually have very good control of my bladder,” Sora remarks. “That time in the bunker doesn’t count. I’m pretty sure you both peed yourselves too.”

That’s true, but she’s not going to give him the satisfaction and admit it.

“Don’t talk about it,” Haru begs. “I was just scared the rats were going to … well, you know. I’m never going to be able to pull my pants down in the dark again.”

“Well thank god I don’t have that particular problem,” Hisana remarks. Both boys freeze and turn a pale pink, as if just remembering that she’s still there. “What?” she asks callously. “I’ve been raising my cousin for two years now; you think there’s anything in your pants I haven’t seen yet?”

And that kills this particular conversation.

She gives it another try a few days later. Neither boy suspects anything when she drags them out on a Monday to visit Baa-chan’s teashop. Sora comments in passing on the cooled watermelon juice advertised in bold kanji outside, and she takes the chance to lure them in with the promise of a drink on her.

She almost feels a little bad for them, but naivety has to be stamped out of every genin at some point, so it might as well be her doing it. This time Baa-chan does throw her a dark look and – yep, she’s not getting free things here anymore, but that’s fine. Maybe a basket of those fancy plums from uptown would buy her forgiveness later.

“Ah … are the mochi any good here?” Haru asks, thoughtfully eying the menu.

“Oh you have no idea,” Hisana says in amusement and taps her finger on it. “You’re going to want those.”

It’s a nice day; the hottest part of the summer is over now and they’re only left with the last warm winds and a lot of sunshine. Just enough to sweat a little, but not enough to empty the streets on midday anymore. They’re amusing themselves with comparing their tans – Hisana reasonably gold-brown, Haru still chalk white with blotches of sunburn, and Sora somewhat approaching Lightning Country native – when a silhouette strikes a dramatic pose in the doorway.

“BAA-CHAN, YOUTHFUL LIGHT OF KONOHA! IT HAS BEEN TOO LONG!”

Bright red melon juice drips out of Sora’s mouth and onto his white shirt. Behind them someone slaps some money onto the table and flees.

“MOCHIIIIIIII …!” a voice screams in the kitchen, sending all employees into overdrive to comply. Before Hisana can consider raising her hand in greeting, Gai has already spotted them.

“Hisana-san!” he booms, making Haru jump and Sora spill even more juice. “What a delight to see
He strides over to them, nimbly dancing through the bags and feet in his way.

“Oh good god,” Haru breathes. “Who’s that?”

“And why the hell do you know him?” Sora hisses.

“A cup of your most youthful tea!” Gai orders from the resigned looking waitress and the kitchen crew promptly slows down to their usual tempo.

“No, no, no!” Ba-chan whines and glares at Hisana. Make that two baskets of plums. The jounin flops down at their table with a grin and a thumbs up.

“You must be Hisana-san’s youthful team! I am the Magnificent Green Beast of Konoha – Maito Gai!”

“That’s … awesome,” Sora deadpans. Mitsuharu makes a strange, strangled noise, as if the words got stuck in his throat.

“Gai-senpai,” she croons, “what a lucky coincidence! May I introduce my team to you: Sone Mitsuharu and Eguchi Sora.”

Gai sniffs and wipes his eyes.

“How touching to see a team spending their free time together – you must be such good friends already!”

“If this is on purpose,” Sora hisses quietly at her, “then we won’t be for much longer.”

She pinches him, smile still fixed on her face.

“Yes … it’s such a pity not all of us are here though.”

It’s this point at which Haru seems to realize what’s going on. His face morphs into a row of expressions that tell of mixed feelings; realization, shock, anger, disbelief, resignation and then finally something like wry humor.

“Yes,” he agrees carefully, “such a pity that Sensei didn’t want to come.” Sora looks at them in disbelief, before pinching her back. Not a second later Haru winces as well as their teammate withdraws his hand from under the table.

“Ahh,” Gai says, oblivious of the pettiness going on under his nose. “Many jounin instructors find it difficult to relate to their charges at first.”

“I think it’s a bit more than that,” Sora grousches. “If he keeps it up like this, we’ll be dead before the Chuunin Exams.”

“Genma-senpai also thinks we should be careful around him,” she adds. At this both boys turn their startled gazes onto her. This is new information for them too. Ups. “He says,” she continues, “that Kohaku-sensei can’t be trusted.”

Gai nods as if that explains everything.

“Hyuuga Kohaku?” he ventures. “Yes, Genma-kun is not on good terms with Hyuuga-san. They had a … youthful squabble during their own Chuunin Exam that nearly cost Genma-kun his
promotion."

Oh ouch. That would explain why he’s holding a grudge, but not the degree of vehemence he displayed.

“So you don’t think he’s dangerous?”

Gai waves his hand in a pish-posh gesture.

“No, no. I’m sure Genma-kun was merely worried Hyuuga-san might not have outgrown his youthful hot-headedness yet.”

“Hot-headedness’?” Haru repeats disbelievingly.


The conversation with Gai hasn’t laid her worries to rest the way she’d hoped. If the jounin doesn’t think Sensei is dangerous, then she trusts his assessment, but as Genma implied: ‘not dangerous’ doesn’t necessarily mean ‘not worth watching out for’.

By now the situation among the team has calmed down a little; they’re all around more comfortable with each other and they’ve stopped sending their teacher guarded looks all the time.

Now that they’ve passed Sensei’s bungled up ‘final test’ they’ve also moved on from strength and stamina training to bukijutsu and taijutsu, which she rather enjoys. Much to the boys’ initial delight they have also started on actual missions.

“This … is bullshit,” Sora huffs. There’s a rice paddy stretching out in front of them, plants growing willy-nilly. “How can someone fuck up planting rice? And how did nobody notice?”

“We’re getting paid for this,” Haru hums. “Don’t think about it; we’re getting paid.”

Kohaku-sensei unfolds the mission scroll.

“I hope you’re more familiar with proper rice planting than the last team,” he remarks mildly. “Or do I need to explain what exactly is wrong with this picture?”

He raises an eyebrow questioningly.

“Did they get paid for this?” Hisana asks instead.

“They did,” he confirms, “and today they will pay you for cleaning up their mess.”

He gestures towards the old rice farmer who grins toothily at them from a few feet away.

“I’m not coughing up a ryo for this,” he yells good-naturedly, “’s not my fault you ninjas have no real-life skills.”

She squashes down the urge to whine like a little girl. The water is dirty of course, so she’ll be scrubbing away mud and plant pieces not only from under her fingernails, but also her shoes. “You know what?” she grumps, “I don’t even care.”
She pulls off her shoes to throw them somewhere in the dirt, before rolling up her leggings and stomping right into the water.

A squawk claws its way out of her mouth. “It’s cold!”

“Genius,” Sora remarks drily before also kicking off his sandals. If she splashes him with water when walking by, it’s purely by accident.

The water is really damn cold. It’s the end of summer, so she would have thought that maybe it has warmed up, but apparently not.

“There’s a stream right below,” Sensei informs her. “That is where the water is coming from and that is why it is so cold.”

In contrast to Kakashi, Kohaku-sensei does take part in D-rank missions, she observes in amusement. He looks decidedly out of place, leisurely picking and re-planting rice sprouts with them, every once in a while fishing his hair out of the cold water.

“Oh!” she blurts out, pulling the attention of her teammates like a magnet. Instead of losing the sandals and wading through the water with them, Kohaku-sensei is standing on the water, carefully navigating around the sprouts.

“Can you teach us that?” she asks. “I want to know how to do this.”
Hey everyone!

Last chapter before classes start - please enjoy! There's a little extra at the end. And a question!

Chakra manipulation is fun.

It’s one of these milestones that team 7 established without meaning to: meeting your team, tree walking, Chuunin Exams, and … well, your team splitting up, but she’s not going to think about that.

No; chakra manipulation is great.

Sensei flat out refused to teach them water walking before they master tree walking, so that’s what they’re doing first. Still wet and sweaty from the mission, barefoot and hyped up, they’re staring at their teacher like a bunch of over excited puppies, wriggling and eager to learn. It’s probably the first time they’ve looked like that, which would explain Kohaku-sensei’s slightly wary look.

“Chakra,” he starts slowly, “is the life force in your body. Similar to blood, it circulates without your conscious thought, but it can be manipulated more efficiently. You have all shown proficiency with a hand full of D- and E-rank jutsus, so you should be familiar with the basic chakra manipulation via hand seals.”

Here he pauses until they all nod.

“Good. Now, using hand seals mechanically forces the chakra through specific channels that shape it in a certain way. For tree walking a basic version of this has to be achieved without seals.”

“How is that supposed to work?” Haru enquires. “And why can’t we do it with hand seals?”

“As I said, hand seals mechanically force the chakra through the necessary channels – imagine it like a stream being redirected by an artificial trench: Every seal opens for a split second a particular gate to lead a certain amount of water into a trench. What you achieve that way are short, precisely directed bursts of chakra for a jutsu. Tree walking is different; what you want is not a quick burst, but a steady stream to anchor you to the tree. There is in fact no practical difference between keeping these gates open for a longer time with the help of a seal, and forcing it open through chakra control – except that using seals for tree walking would be unnecessarily complicated. Tree walking is a simple exercise, so it would be akin to opening all of your trenches when in fact all you need is to spill a bit of your water.”

“So in theory,” Hisana muses, “it should be possible to do every jutsu entirely without seals, as long as you have enough chakra control to know exactly which trench is opened by which seal.”

“That is correct. If you are curious, you can attempt to channel your chakra into a singular seal and try to compare the feel of it to the others.”

“I don’t feel much when doing seals,” Sora admits. “Is that … not normal?”

Sensei shakes his head.
“That is in fact normal. Chakra control is like a muscle that needs to be trained. After mastering this exercise you will begin to feel it.”

He makes a go-ahead motion and takes a step back.

“I will observe.”

Hisana remembers all too well Naruto catapulting himself off the tree on his first try. She laughed back then, thinking him an amusing idiot. Now that she knows from experience what it feels like to bruise your butt, she simply tries to learn from it.

Carefully she tries to channel a bit of chakra into her feet, before deciding that this is probably not a good way to start either.

Instead she tries to coat her hands in it, vaguely recalling the mint green glow of yin chakra. At first nothing happens. Trying to force it only makes her face go hot with blood, so she turns to watch her teammates.

Sora is lying on the grass and – reasonably carefully – tapping his foot against a nearby tree. His face is screwed up in concentration, but nothing seems to happen.

“Look!” Mitsuharu yips excitedly.

Like her, he’s trying it on his hands first. He offers one as if to high-five her and when she touches it, she sticks to him. There’s a faint buzzing under his skin, like Shizuha when she’s particularly aggravated.

The buzzing abates and they unstuck themselves with a weird, smacking noise.

“Ugh.”

She fights the urge to wipe her hands on her leggings. It’s not wet, but the sound makes the hair on the back of her neck stand up.

“How did you do that?” she asks, eyes trained on her own hand. Haru shrugs.

“Do you know this weird feeling when you force a shiver? It’s kind of like that, only … you don’t let go, you pull it into your hands.”

She contemplates this for a second, still staring at her hand. Forcing a shiver …

She tries a few times without success, but then there’s suddenly something at the base of her skull, like an additional muscle. Hisana flexes it and it sends her shoulders snapping forward and an electric charge down her spine. For a split second it’s crawling all over her, then it’s gone.

“Oh damn!” she squawks, suddenly afraid she might have broken something in her body.

“A chakra surge,” Kohaku-sensei’s voice sounds from a few trees over. He’s not looking at her, but the veins bulging around his eyes indicate that the Byakugan are activated. “That was a good start. Try again.”

A bit uncomfortable, she obeys. The second time she manages to direct the shiver down into her hands, but before she can attempt to put it onto the tree, the feeling’s gone again.
It takes patience and a weird sort of flexing, that’s not quite muscle and more nervous system, to get a more or less steady stream, but once she has a handle on it the rest is easy enough.

Sora has managed to walk a few steps up the tree, still lying on the grass with his shoulders, and Haru is carefully crawling up his tree on all fours, not yet confident enough to let go with his hands. Hisana, eager to try it out properly, simply stomps her foot onto the bark a few times to test the chakra attraction and then pulls herself horizontally against it. She wobbles for the first few steps, thrown off by the two different gravitational pulls, but then makes it almost until the first branch, before she falls off.

“Oh ouch,” Sora snickers as she rubs her butt. She throws a stick at him.

It takes her about fifteen minutes more to safely get to the first branch. By that time Haru has managed half the distance and Sora is still lying in the grass, feet occasionally bouncing off the tree like a rubber ball.

“How should I try it on water now?”

Kohaku-sensei regards the two boys thoughtfully, before giving a nod. She slides down the tree, wincing as a ripping noise announces the death of yet another pair of leggings, and walks over to him.

“Byakugan.”

Veins bulge around his eyes. It looks slightly unhealthy, the way they’re pulsating, turned grayish-blue by the chakra glowing beneath the skin.

“There is a stream up north, approximately 500 yards away,” he informs her. “I will watch.”

He doesn’t follow her when she starts to run but, turning back, she can see that the Byakugan are still activated. Must be useful, she thinks, for watching a bunch of kids. She wonders if any Hyuuga children ever manage to sneak out of their rooms at night or if they always get caught. Or if sneaking out is beneath Hyuuga of all ages anyway.

The stream is only about ankle deep, but cold. It’s not the sort of motivation she would have expected from Sensei – rather something like a deep, dirty pond, so that, if you fall in, you’ll get brackish water up your nose. But then again, she knows he’s watching, so it’s not as if she’d dare to slack off either way.

A quick test reveals that yes, walking on water is harder than walking on trees. She strongly suspects that walking on moving water is especially difficult, which would explain why Sensei preferred the puny little stream to any possible brackish ponds.

By the time Haru comes skipping through the bushes, her feet are cold as ice.

“How’s wrong?” her teammate questions, watching her curl up in sunny spot.

“I need a break,” she huffs, dimly remembering what her mother used to say about cold feet and urinary tract infections. Do medic nin deal with such things?

“And also, I’d love to see if you can do it better.”

After all Haru might have taken longer for the actual tree climbing, but he was quicker to concentrate his chakra properly. The boy shrugs.
“If you say so.”

Watching Haru tumble into the stream again and again lifts her spirits somewhat. At the same time she dearly wishes to spontaneously develop the Sharingan – it must be priceless for learning chakra control. As it is, she can only observe how the tumbling gets less and the steady steps become more. Haru himself is no help in figuring out the her problem.

“I’m sorry. I just … make it go that way.”

Sora never actually joins them. When he comes through the trees it’s accompanied by Kohaku-sensei, to officially finish the lesson. There’s a streak of dirt on his forehead and he’s pouting.

“We will meet again here tomorrow,” Sensei announces. “And every day after, if necessary.”

Chakra control is indeed like a muscle. A well hidden one that she’s never used before, but a muscle, and after a while it concedes defeat. Not to her, though. Not exactly.

The thing about Kohaku-sensei is that he seems to have a pretty clear idea of how things are supposed to work and how to make them work. It’s equally creepy and a little comforting that, even if her body rebels against her, Sensei can make it submit through sheer force of will.

After four more hours with no satisfactory results, he simply seals enough of their tenketsu, that the chakra has no choice but to go the right way. All they have to concentrate on then is to keep up a steady stream of it. It feels a little like learning with training wheels – if training wheels made the rest of her body feel like a ten ton weight.

“Your muscles are only supplied with a minimum of chakra now,” Sensei informs her and Sora. “Once you’ve mastered water walking I will unblock them.”

It does the trick.

After only an hour she’s able to step onto the stream without so much as getting her toes wet. It’s weird, because she can still feel the water moving beneath her feet, but it’s also fun, because a little tweak of chakra will make the stream carry her along like a conveyor belt.

Yes, she thinks in amusement as she’s tugged along like a paper boat, behold the fearsome arts of the Konoha ninja.

The fun and games last until Sora has managed to wobble his way onto the water.

“That’s quite enough,” Sensei calls from further upstream. “Gather around.”

He pulls a bundle of small, thin papers from his jacket and presents them to the team.

“Does anyone know what this is?”

“Chakra paper,” Hisana blurts out without thinking. Kohaku-sensei stares her down.

“Thank you Hisana-san,” he says pointedly, “The next time raising your hand would be appreciated.”

Months of scolding and occasional jabs at their manners have made team 11 mostly impervious to
embarrassment, so she only smiles sheepishly.

“As you should already know,” he continues, “there are five basic chakra natures – as well as yin and yang chakra. Differently natured chakra is used in different natured jutsus. Every person has an affinity for at least one elemental chakra nature. You will need to channel a small amount of chakra into these papers to determine your primary affinity.”

“‘Primary’?” Sora quips, “So there’s a secondary one?”

“Yes. Though that needs to be determined by experience. The paper will only react to the nature most prominent in your chakra. Mastering two natures is a jounin level ability, so there is no need to worry about it yet.”

He hands out a paper to each of them, before demonstrating.

Between his fingers wetness crawls up the paper, as if it had been dunked into water. After a moment the paper collapses under its own weight.

“Awesome!” Sora grins. There’s a moment of silence in which he concentrates on his paper, before it crumbles in his hand. “Earth, right?” he cheers, blowing the dust out of his hands.

Sensei nods.

“Oh.”

Next to her a piece of Haru’s paper flatters to the ground, cut clean in two.

“Hisana-san,” Sensei prompts.

She turns towards her own paper and concentrates. There is the slightest tickle in her fingertips, where the chakra enters the paper, and then water is running down her arm.


The roaring of waves in her ears almost drowns out the voices of her teammates. Her lungs tighten in phantom pain, trying to press out water that’s not there anymore. She shivers, the memory of cold water all around her still fresh as ever.

Haru’s hand on her shoulder snaps her out of it.

“Well,” he says, “at least that explains why it didn’t work out with the katon jutsus.”

It does, she realizes belatedly. While she’s managed to will the Gokakyu no Jutsu into compliance, all other katon jutsus have given her trouble to a point where she’s considered simply giving up.

“Unusual but not unheard of, for an Uchiha,” Sensei muses. “This will not pose a problem. In fact, with a suiton a doton and a futon user this team is well rounded enough.”

She’s … disappointed. A fire nature affinity pretty much comes with the Uchiha name, and now she has the absolute proof that she’s an impostor – not good enough for the clan jutsus. Even a raiton affinity wouldn’t have been so bad; at least she would have shared that with Sasuke.

“Now,” Sensei startles her out of her thoughts, “a few simple techniques to start you off …”
It’s slightly creepy, her affinity. She’s not quite sure if it’s a coincidence, if ‘Hisana’ herself was not quite … right, or if her death has done something to her. Something real and physical enough to change this body she’s possessing.

That’s why she’s slightly apprehensive when Kohaku-sensei shows her the hand seal for her first C-rank suiton jutsu.

“Go ahead,” he encourages. “Suiton jutsus are not as violent in nature as katon jutsus; if you have mastered the Gokakyuu, you will have no trouble with this.”

She smacks her hands together in a tiger seal.

“Suiton: Teppodama!”

He’s right. It’s the same sensation of chakra drain, but instead of converting outside her mouth, she can feel it starting to change even as the chakra crawls up her windpipe. Shocked by the eerily familiar sensation, she chokes. Water spurts out of her nose and drips onto her feet. Somewhere behind her Sora starts laughing.

“Are you ok?” he chortles.

She opens her mouth to answer, but instead of words there’s only more water coming out.

“Again,” Sensei says patiently, “don’t let it frighten you. You can stop the conversion at any point; it is not real, physical water until you let go of the chakra. Sora, concentrate on your own work.”

Chastised, her teammate turns away. Just a second later a yelp announces his own failure.

“I’m stuck …!” he cries, voice strangely muffled. When she turns around he’s sticking head-first in the ground, legs kicking uselessly.

Sensei blinks very slowly and his lips press into a thin line; there might have even been an almost inaudible sigh.

“Please continue, while I dislodge your teammate.”

She spits out the last traces of stale tasting water and complies.

“Suiton: Teppodama!”

This time Hisana is more prepared for the choking sensation of the chakra conversion.

Water shoots out of her mouth in a big stream.

It’s not like Gokakyu, she corrects. Yes, the buildup in her belly is the same, as is the way the chakra bubbles out of her as if someone shook a soda can, but that’s where the similarity ends.

In a way, she thinks, this is more violent even. Instead of blowing out the ignited chakra like a fire-breather, elegant and deadly, the suiton jutsu fills her mouth with cold water to the bursting point before propelling it out like a jet stream.

Afterwards her lips are cracked and bleeding.

“Better,” Sensei comments, from where he’s still instructing Sora. “Not perfect, but getting there.”
Three facts about ...

Sora

1. Sora’s siblings are all boys. Until the very last one his mother kept hoping for a girl. There is a whole trunk of dresses that she made stowed away under his father’s bed.

2. Sora’s father is only a genin. After a long and rather depressing stint in the Genin Corps, he was ready to take the Chunin Exams for a pay raise, to feed his growing family. But two months before the Exam Sora’s mother got sick. He stuck around to take care of her, and by the time the next Exams came around she was dead. After that he was too scared of dying and leaving his children alone, so the promotion never quite worked out.

3. Sora might have been classified as a taijutsu prodigy – if his body hadn’t suddenly decided to take a break from that while going through puberty. In a matter of four weeks he grew two inches, and currently he’s not even able to tell where his limbs end anymore.

Mitsuharu

1. Mitsuharu’s father is a bladesmith immigrated from the Land of Iron. In Iron he used to make swords, but in Konoha he was put out of business by a man called Morine Genta, who wasn’t particularly nice about it. Now he makes cooking knifes. (15 years later, when Morine got ‘the arthritis’, he was put out of business by Goya Madoka– who promptly received a set of top quality cooking knifes in the mail.)

2. Haru is actually the oldest of team 11, with Hisana’s birthday being two months after. Sora is almost 9 months younger still.

3. While easily frightened, Haru has impressive control over his reactions to fear. Under pressure he might start to stutter though; the resulting effect can be quite bizarre, as he still has perfect control over his facial features.

Kohaku-sensei

1. Kohaku-sensei inherited his ‘temper’ from his grandmother. While playing the obedient wife in public, she famously chased her husband all over the Hyuuga compound when he dared to interfere with her parenting. To this day Kohaku-sensei himself has never chased anyone anywhere – that doesn’t mean he doesn’t occasionally think about it.

2. Kohaku-sensei is in fact regularly mistaken for a woman. As this is a rather common problem among Hyuuga men, he’s actively trying not to take it personal.

3. Hisana’s suspicions about clones in the bunker were spot on. Kohaku-sensei used them to monitor each of them by having them crawl along the ceiling. That’s why nobody ever saw him.
1. Sasuke is an emotional eater. The first two evenings of team 11’s first ‘mission’ he spent on the couch, gobbling up Hisana’s homemade potato salad.

2. Sasuke is currently the only thing keeping team 7 from hunting down team 11. He worries his team might embarrass his cousin, because Naruto has expressed the suspicion that the boys might be ‘more ninja-y’ than Hisana, and therefore more likely to know cool jutsus, and no crush in the world could keep Sakura from wanting to ogle *older* cool shinobi.

3. Sasuke is a restless sleeper and often kicks or talks in his sleep. Because of that Hisana has considered using her genin pay to move them into a bigger apartment with two bedrooms. Sasuke has already found several ads under the bed and therefore realized what’s going on. His way of putting a stop to this is repeatedly professing how much he likes their apartment, as well as taking the apartment listings out of their newspaper every morning.

---

Ok, so as I said, I might not be able to write as quickly for a while. That doesn't mean that I'm not working at all on my story! On the contrary - I have decided to take on a challenge. From myself.

There are several genres/tropes that I remember loving at the beginning of my fanfic-reading career. Back then I only had a tentative grasp on the stylistics of the English language, so I could read whatever topic caught my fancy without being put off by the terrible writing style. Looking back through a list of my favorite fics, I now realize they were all terrible. No, you don't understand - they were **immensely, heartbreakingly horrific**.

But even today these tropes (which I by now know have the reputation of being mostly written by 13-year-olds) are my guilty pleasure reading.

I'm obviously talking about SI/OC-insert stories for one. But also timetravel stories and crossovers (in the Naruto fandom often with Harry Potter). So I have decided that I will try my hand at all of them. For after **Bonds and Hugs** I have already a rough draft planned out for a timetravel story (starring Sakura) and a Naruto/HP crossover (starring Kakashi).

My question to you: do you have guilty pleasure tropes? If yes, which are they? I'd love to hear, and maybe pick a few of them to try out.
Hey everyone, I brought the new chapter along!

As you may or may not have noticed, I’ve adjusted the rating to M for Hisana’s humor and Sora’s occasional potty mouth:)

Another thing is that more ninja typical violence is coming, so the rating might go up further pretty soon.

It’s not until their first D-rank mission that Hisana remembers that genin do not solely exist to clean up crap. It’s an escort mission from Konoha to a small town called Otari, around four hours of travel north. A young man named Asano has sold his father’s pottery in the village and now faces the problem of having to safely transport the money home.

“Nobody cares about pottery,” he explains sheepishly. “Doesn’t matter what it’s worth. Money on the other hand …”

They don’t expect much more than a handful of bandits, or a few people who simply decide to take a chance. ‘Opportunity makes thieves’, as her mother used to say. It’s still incredibly exciting.

“Take the bokken,” Sasuke advises. “If anyone tries to lock you in a bunker again, hit them right between the eyes.”

She’s never shown anyone in her team the bokken. It’s been lying under her bed for almost three weeks now, and the most she’s done with it are basic kenjutsu katas that still feel a little foreign. She’s been meaning to ask Kohaku-sensei for instructions, but keeps putting it off. Instead there is a row of kenjutsu scrolls lined up next to her side of the bed.

So when she turns up that day, bokken strapped to her belt, the boys swarm her like curious puppies.

“Is that from Goya-san?” Haru asks, gauging the balance point.

“Cherry wood, right?” Sora assesses. She looks at him in surprise.

“What do you know about wood?”

“I know all about wood.”

She snorts.

“Oh, I just bet you do.”

“Why does everything sound like such a bad thing when you say it?”

They’re all carrying knapsacks this time, rather than their bulky backpacks. Still, team 11 is equipped for much more than four hours of travel. Dragging a civilian along would at least double the time and
also add at least two breaks that would be wholly unnecessary to them. All in all they are looking forward to around fourteen to sixteen hours of travel, depending on Asano’s speed and whether or not they would run into any danger.

For once, Sensei arrives last. A possible reason for this becomes apparent when Asano takes one look at his eyes and turns white as a sheet.

Hisana forgets sometimes that ninja are weird to normal people. Sensei must look like some sort of demon to them.

“Asano-san,” he greets, ignoring the way their client leans away from him, “my name is Hyuuga Kohaku, and I will be leading this mission.”

There’s an awkward moment of silence in which Sensei waits for Asano to introduce himself, and the man utterly fails to force out even a single word. Finally Sensei takes pity on him and addresses team 11 instead.

“Come along now.”

It’s still early, six in the morning to be precise, so there’s mist wafting all over the forest and swirling onto the road. Autumn is in full swing; for the next mission they will have to buy winter gear already. Asano is already shivering in his thick coat.

The walk itself isn’t so bad. By now Hisana is used to a much higher travel speed, so a civilian pace seems more like a leisurely stroll through the park. There’s not much to see except for the trees, but she’s taking point for the first two hours, so her mind is occupied enough. They pass fields and occasionally a few other travelers, each of them giving her a small heart attack until they’re out of sight again, but otherwise everything is calm. It’s only after the first break that trouble arises.

“Group of seven coming from north-west,” Haru announces, “ETA 10 minutes.”

Hisana can feel nervous energy trying to take a hold of her limbs. She shakes it off.

“A band of salespeople, maybe?” Sora suggests, but Haru shakes his head.

“Moving too fast to carry much.”

“Evasive maneuver?” Hisana quips. “They might not have noticed us yet.”

They move east, but it’s of little use. She can feel their faint chakra signatures splitting up, half of them coming their way.

“They’ve changed direction,” Sora realizes. “It’s as if they already know we’re here.”

“The Great Fall Market ended a few days ago,” Sensei reminds them, “a lot of salesmen are going home with full pockets this time of the year.”

He’s still calm, which calms her down in turn. The six people pursuing them might only be simple bandits, but it’s still the first time she’s confronted with people who are truly out to hurt her. The thought is strangely upsetting to the peace-loving civilian in her.

“So they’re trawling the woods for victims,” she muses. “They probably already know all the most popular travel routes.”

“ETA 5 minutes,” Haru reminds them, “prepare for contact.”
From the corner of her eyes she can see him reaching for his kunai holster, while Sora is slipping into a defensive stance close to Asano.

Hisana shifts her center of gravity, falling into the familiar combat stance of the Uchiha style.

There’s a rustle in the bushes and Haru yips, “Incoming!” before three grown men break through the tree line and onto the road. One of them is wildly swinging his sword – half rusted and splintered at the cutting edge – the other two are armed with simple wooden batons. When the biggest of them realizes that they’re only children, he starts to laugh.

“Easy pickings, boys!”

Hisana has just enough time to wonder how he could have overlooked Kohaku-sensei, before he takes a swing at her. It’s pure instinct that makes her jump back. Three kunai sink into the man’s body; one into his arm, two into his left leg. He curses and instead turns to Haru, who is absolutely stone-faced.

Snap out of it, she thinks, trying to shake the fog of surprise and adrenalin. There are two more of them making a run at Asano, the only barrier between them Sora, who is barely half as big as big as them.

“Give us the money and maybe we’ll let you go,” the man with the sword leers, making a grab for Asano. But Sora plants a foot into his gut that has him stumbling backwards.

Before the other man can take a swing at her teammate, Hisana barrels into him.

They tumble into a tree, wheezing and grasping at each other. He tries to get his arms around her neck, but she squirms out of his hold and dropkicks him in the shoulder. There’s a cracking noise and a howl as it pops out of its joint. There are more men coming out of the woods, she realizes. The other four.

A nasty looking blond tries to punch her in the face, but she catches his fist and twists. With a snap his arm breaks. The man’s rat face twists in pain and anger, before he tries to punch her again with his other fist.

‘Right between the eyes,’ she hears Sasuke’s voice say, and with a dull plonk her bokken comes down onto the man’s forehead. The hit is barely hard enough to split the skin, but he sinks to the ground in a dead faint.

“Some help over here,” Haru calls ducking and twisting between two of the bandits like a dancer. One of the men tries to ram his knee into his sternum, but he catches it with a flat palm, smacking it hard enough to crack the kneecap. “Oh!” he gasps wonderingly, “False alarm; I’m good after all.”

Someone skids past her, narrowly avoiding the fallen blonde man. It’s another bandit, with Sora’s shoe print neatly stamped onto his forehead. He looks disoriented, and before he can collect himself Hisana’s bokken hits him against them temple.

One more man moves past her, but he’s fleeing. A kunai is still stuck in his arm and his eyes are wide open with fear. She lets him pass.

Fallen bandits litter the floor.

“Uhm, do we just … leave them here?” she wonders aloud. Kohaku-sensei seems to materialize out of thin air right next to her.

“Tie them up,” he instructs. “There might be a bounty we can collect.”
They tie four of the bandits together, before hoisting them up a tree like an ugly piñata. They’re the only ones left, with one fleeing the scene and the other …

Sora had been suspiciously quiet. At first Hisana attributed it to the post-battle low; she only realized how wrong she was once they’d dragged the bandits off the road. There was the blond one that she’d knocked out with her bokken; the big burly one with the dislocated shoulder; a bald man, littered with Haru’s kunai like a pincushion; and a tall, slim man, his forehead still clearly showing the print of a Konoha ninja sandal. A bit further away, head at an odd angel and eyes staring emptily into the sun, lay the man with the rusty sword.

“No need to tie him up,” her dark haired teammate remarked dully. “Just prop him up agains the tree.”

While Haru and her are busy comforting Asano, Kohaku-sensei whisks Sora away to have a talk. What exactly they’re talking about, she doesn’t want to know. Chances are she’ll find out soon enough.

“I’m very sorry,” Asano whispers, as if afraid Sora might overhear them. “I thought they would send experienced professionals with me – if I’d known that you would be so young …”

“We are professionals,” Haru assures him gently. “And this is how we gain experience. It was … unlucky that you had to witness this, but I assure you we knew it was a possibility.”

“As you’ve seen we can handle bandits,” Hisana adds. “We’d simply hoped the situation could be solved without killing.”

When Sora and Kohaku-sensei return from the woods, their teammate looks grimly satisfied. They don’t talk about it.

There’s only one more person who decides to take them on that day – a pick pocket right after they enter Otari. But Haru grabs his hand before it can sink into Asano’s pocket and fixes him with a stern look.

“No,” he says firmly and the young man trips all over himself trying to get away.

They deliver Asano the last few yards to his doorstep, where he thanks them profusely and offers to put them up for the night.

None of them feel like spending any more time away from home and so they refuse as politely as possible. It’s barely afternoon; if they hurry they’ll be back before midnight.

As it turns out, there’s no bounty on the bandits. She’s kind of glad for it. Something tells her Sora wouldn’t have wanted anything to do with that money. There’s no word on freeing the men on their way back. They’re hardened criminals after all; if they aren’t able to free themselves, well …

It’s just past ten when the village gates slowly emerge from the dark.
The guards give them commiserating looks as they sign their names into the little red notebook and schlep into the village.

Again, Sensei vanishes without saying much, but this time not before squeezing Sora’s shoulder encouragingly. The boy doesn’t react at all, face showing no emotions. It looks unnatural.

Haru casts her an uncertain look, obviously unwilling to just leave, so Hisana makes an executive decision.

“Come on,” she coaxes, “we’re getting you home.”

They walk in silence.

Sora’s house is never quiet. Even now, when most of his siblings should be asleep, the lights are on and there’s noise coming from inside. The closer they come the more clearly she can distinguish the different silhouettes flitting to and fro. Sora looks through the window longingly, but makes no move to step closer to the door. Hisana sighs. If it were Sasuke she would hug him now, but Sora and she don’t have that kind of relationship. So instead she bumps her shoulder into his.

“Go on, they’re probably waiting for you.”

He looks back and forth between her and Haru, before nodding.

“Good night.”

His voice is hoarse, but there’s a familiar forcefulness in it. He’ll be ok.

“That was terrible,” Haru whispers, as soon as the door closes behind their teammate. “I thought he of all people …”

Yes, she’s also expected Sora would take his first kill better. Better than them at least. Then again, there seems to have been no crying either, so maybe he is taking it rather well.

“I’m glad it happened now though,” she admits. “It had to happen sooner or later, so I’d rather have it like this – without excessive bloodshed and on a short mission. Imagine we’d have to keep going for another two or three days.”

Haru winces.

“At least we’re one third done now”, she concludes. “Though I’m not looking forward to my own. Or yours, for that matter.”

Sasuke is still awake. Of course he is, she thinks fondly. He knew she’d be home before the day is over. When she comes in there is class work spread out all over the table and a plate with a half eaten sandwich is balanced on the arm of their couch. Sasuke looks her over critically, before simply handing her the rest of the sandwich and letting her clean up. She eats while undressing.

There’s dirt everywhere. Even when she knows that all the grime and sweat has been washed away, she still feels unclean somehow. When she’s done her skin is scrubbed red and raw. And yet, putting on new clothes goes against every instinct; it feels as if she’ll dirty them with whatever invisible filth is still stuck to her skin.

When she shuffles back into the living room, Sasuke has already put her things away. Wordlessly
she sinks onto the sofa next to him, and for the first time in a while she just hugs her cousin, nose buried in his hair. She’s not sure what he read in her face, but whatever it was, it keeps him still and quiet.

“Did you puke?” she finally asks incredulously and wrinkles her nose.

His head snaps up, scandalized.

“I might have overdone it with the training today. But I brushed my teeth,” he insists.

“Yeah, might have to do it again though.”

It’s just such a ridiculously normal and irrelevant topic that she relaxes against her will.

“No, but seriously, go brush your teeth.”

I’ve learned a new word: ‘to schlep’ (=’to drag’). I was real surprised, because ‘schleppen’ means ‘to drag’ in German too. Turns out ‘shlepn’ is Yiddish – that’s where it comes from:)
Thank you all so much for your suggestions and comments! Every single one of you makes my day:) I loved genderbender and the gamer AUs, so those are definitely on my list now:D Also, I remembered that I really liked civilian pov stories about the ‘creepy’ ninjas, so I might cook up one of those too.

**Someone asked me whether or not Hisana and Sasuke will get together:**

The beauty of the thing is: I don’t know yet. Probably not, because they’re family, but nothing’s 100% certain yet. There’ll be shippy moments in any case, because Hisana’s his friend and sister and only family all squashed into one, so that’s a pretty powerful bond. And also, let’s not kid ourselves, Sasuke is definitely the possessive/obsessive type, even if it’s just platonic.

**Spoiler Itachi**

After all, look at the Itachi mess: he used to love and idolize his brother, which morphed into the obsessive pursuit to kill him, and once he found out that it wasn’t Itachi’s fault at all, he was more than willing to instantly forgive him and raze the whole world to the ground instead.

**Spoiler Itachi End**

No matter Sasuke’s upbringing, there’s definitely a certain sort of madness in him that’s pretty closely linked to his feelings of love and attachment.

A lot of ramble in this AN – I’m so sorry! I actually never wanted to do that:(

There’s an unexpected visitor the next day.

Hisana isn’t sure what it says about her that, when she walks into the living room that morning, still bleary eyed and wearing her night shirt, it doesn’t startle her at all that someone has apparently bypassed all her traps and is now sitting on their couch.

“Shizurin.”

“Good morning,” her friend greets. There’s a moment silence.

“Tea?”
Sasuke takes the early visit with slightly less composure. As Hisana is making tea and heating up a few leftovers for breakfast, he stumbles into the kitchen in shorts and socks. Her cousin takes a single look at Shizuha, turns around, and flees.

“Well, at least he’s awake now,” Hisana muses.

Shizuha’s not usually the type just turn up somewhere, especially not so early, so there can really only be one reason.

“You found an apprenticeship?” she enquires, putting a cup down in front of the Aburame and flopping down on a chair.

“Yes,” Shizuha confirms, sounding pleased. “I have acquired a position in T&I.”

Hisana stares at her.

“You? At T&I?”

She rings for words, trying to get across just how wrong that seems.

“Shizurin, I don’t have to tell you that you’re a great ninja and I have all the confidence in the world in you – but you’re also the nicest person I know. What do you want in T&I? Do you even have the stomach for that?”

“Have you ever been to T&I?” her friend asks instead.

“No, can’t say I’ve ever had the urge.”

“There’s more to it than beatings and thumbscrews. Yamanaka Inori-sensei will teach me how to create psychological profiles and analyze body language. I prefer interrogation over torture.”

For a moment she tries to picture Shizuha like an outsider would see her, maybe two or three years from now.

An Aburame, high-collared and eyes hidden behind sunglasses, staring you down from across the room. Kikai are crawling all over her and now they’re slowly making their way over to you.

Yes, that would work, she realizes. That would work really well. Shizuha’s character might be mellow and compassionate, but she sure doesn’t look it and the Aburame in general are feared, even within Konoha.

“So when are you going to start?”

“Tomorrow. I will have to visit the Hokage today to sign of the apprenticeship contract, and then hand it in tomorrow morning. Then I can start.”

When Sasuke dares to come back to the kitchen, fully dressed and ready to go, Shizuha has already left.

“What’s wrong?” he asks, watching his cousin stir her soup with a lackluster expression.

“Nothing, nothing. Just some news. Shizuha’s with T&I now.”
“Isn’t that good? T&I is prestigious and well-paid.”

That’s true. She’s glad for her friend, proud even. Her dour mood has nothing to do with Shizuha directly.

“You’re right. It’s also relatively safe, so I guess she’s off to a good start.”

No, her mood has nothing to do with Shizuha herself. Maybe it’s the reality of their situation finally sinking in. With Sora’s first kill yesterday and Shizuha’s sudden interest in torture and interrogation, she’s once again confronted with the fact that they’re essentially child soldiers. They’re only genin, but that doesn’t make them any less ninjas. She’s not sure if Sasuke’s flippant response has to do with his age, or if growing up in a ninja village is its own form of desensibilization.

She considers her own character to be rather staunch by now, which is probably why the whole thing only darkens her mood instead of sending her into another panic attack. But putting the word ‘killer’ next to the faces of her friends and comrades does leave a bitter taste in her mouth.

They’re not at war currently, so everyone is allowed a lot of leeway.

_They’re kids, make them weed gardens. They’re so young, let’s start them off easy._

But fact is there’s no time to mess around. Especially not for her. Maybe that is what Sensei has been trying to drill into their skulls with his break-neck pace.

She has plans to make, she realizes, and all the tools for it are at her disposal. There is a library just around the corner, maybe ten minutes away; there are two unread books on poisons stacked on her nightstand; her bokken is stowed away in her closet, and the right teacher is waiting for her on the genin training grounds, as he has been every day for the past few months.

Sitting in the kitchen of their small apartment, her cousin puttering about in the next room, it’s easy to fool herself into thinking that this is a safe space. It’s not.

In this universe safety is an illusion. Right now, in this very moment, there might be a squad of jounin just outside Fire Country – or maybe even inside – bleeding out on the floor. They’re never going to make it back to their friends and families. They’ll die there, in the dirt. It doesn’t matter that their home is safe; it won’t be of any use to them where they are.

In this very moment Orochimaru’s people are picking up people from the streets – children, the sick and the poor, to conduct his experiments on.

Right now Danzo is sinking his claws into every orphan he can get a hold of, to warp them into something obedient and cold and inhuman. It’s happening right outside this door.

And in a few years the Akatsuki will come tearing down this village, this kitchen, and there will be nothing left but rubble.

This is no safe space. Not really. She mustn’t forget that.

This morning she takes her bokken with her. It’s time to ask Kohaku-sensei for a favor.

As a Hyuuga Kohaku-sensei is predictably skeptical of any weapon bigger than a kunai.

“I am proficient with a katana, so I can assist you in the basics. However, I strongly advise you to
seek a specialized instructor later on,” he warns, examining the bokken. “One and a half shaku. That’s appropriate for a wakizashi – is that what you want to keep, or do you plan to go bigger?”

“I’m not sure yet,” she admits. “I like the thought of having a longer reach, but I worry about close quarter combat.”

She thinks back on the oodachi hanging in Goya’s shop; it’s a lovely sword, but is it practical?

“So more likely shorter,” he assesses, and then looks her up and down. “We can start you off with this. I expect you will grow rather tall, so a short sword will not take away from your reach.”

It’s true that she’s shot up another inch. But no matter how pretty the Uchiha were, none of them seem to have been especially tall. She doesn’t think she has the right genes to keep going like this.

Instead of voicing her doubts she settles for, “If you think that’s best.”

Her days are eaten up rapidly. Team training, kenjutsu tutoring, self-study. She feels like a college student again; all work, no play. But she has a goal in mind, so that helps.

“You want to do what?” Sora deadpans. “You do realize that the next Chuunin Exams are in Kiri, don’t you?”

“Well, yes. I know we’re not on particularly friendly terms,” – Haru makes a strangled noise – “but it’s not like it’s going to get any better. The year afterwards they’re in Suna. Do you want to wait three years until they come here?”

“I don’t care,” Haru squawks, “I’ll take Suna, but not Kiri. Please don’t make me go to Kiri. They’re crazy over there.”

“I’m sure that’s what they say about us,” she argues weakly. But Haru is right; out of all the Hidden Villages, Kiri is the craziest one. But there’s no way that she’ll go to Suna. Not with Gaara still on a rampage over there.

There is, however, another thing that she forgot to figure into her plan.

“You will not go to Kiri.”

Kohaku-sensei’s tone books no argument.

There’s a familiar sensation of something raising its hands in surrender inside her head. ‘Ok, alright – whatever you want.’

Trained response and her own stubborn nature are both clawing at her. The conflict must have shown on her face somehow, because Sensei watches her, pointedly not saying anything further. Only when her temper has settled with the realization that if he’s made up his mind there’s no changing it, he chooses to elaborate.

“You will not go to Kiri, because you might remember that, up until recently, there has been a purge of all kekkei genkai.”

Oh. Oh, that’s right.

“While you may not have activated your Sharingan yet, I have no doubt that the possibility you could do so would make you a target for every ninja that crosses paths with you. While the
parameters of the Exam itself would mostly protect you from any foul play, there would be nothing to protect you outside of it. I would prefer to keep an eye on my team during such vulnerable intervals, which would not be possible in Kiri.”

“Why not?” Haku asks in confusion.

“Possessing a kekkei genkai myself, I would be in a certain amount of danger also. The clan would not let me attend.”

It is not until later that evening that she realizes her teacher has inadvertedly saved her from a huge mistake. The Mizukage is not yet Terumi Mei, but Yagura – who is currently being controlled by Uchiha Madara. The man would certainly be very surprised to hear how there seems to be one more Uchiha walking around than he’s currently aware of. Yikes.

For better or worse, she’s not going to attend the next Chuunin Exams.

While that’s certainly doing great things for her overall life expectancy, it also throws a spanner of massive proportions in her works. How is she supposed to keep an eye out for Sasuke in his Exams now?

A small part of her also bemoans the fact that she’ll be doing C- and D-ranks for a whole year more. Naruto was right. Dear god, he can never know, but Naruto was right: D-rank missions are the worst.

The only distraction she has is yet more training; there’s another katon jutsu she wants to learn, as well as a genjutsu. Neither of those are particularly well suited to her, as katon jutsus are the exact opposite of her affinity, and genjutsus need a level of chakra control that goes above genin level.

But she’s nothing if not stubborn. On a certain level she is an Uchiha after all – a made one, if not a born one – and she does feel entitled to at least a little of their legacy. Being denied part of it has only made her more determined to get all the rest.

Coincidence is her alley in this. Or maybe her adversary, she hasn’t quite decided yet.

There is a woman in Konoha who is famous for her genjutsu. Hisana has never met her; how would she – Yuhi Kurenai is a jounin and god only knows where those spend their free time. As coincidence wills it Kurenai is the first of the jounin teachers she meets, though it’s not under entirely favorable circumstances.

Someone knocks on her door, two hours after training. Fall is coming to a close, so the weather outside is cold and unfriendly. The faces that greet her are not much warmer.

“Who are you even? Go get your own teammates!” Sora snaps irritably.

“What are you – a little girl? ‘Boho! I don’t want to share my friends’; grow up already.”

“Shut up, Nara!”

“Uhm, guys?” Hisana says, “not that I’m not happy to see you, but … what are you doing here? Both of you at once.”

“There’s a mission,” Shiki answers, throwing an annoyed side-long glance at Sora. “You need to come with us. Pack for a few days.”
Hisana is tempted to ask questions, but Shiki’s face is uncharacteristically blank and Sora is visibly nervous. Whatever emergency this is, it’s an ugly one. She grabs her bag, always packed just in case, and leaves a note for Sasuke. ‘Emergency. Don’t know when I’ll be back. Call Genma.’

“They’ve found a group of missing-nin at the borders to the Land of Hot Water. *A lot of them.* They’re not very high ranking, genin and chuunin level mostly, but they’ve got a whole bunch of civilians around that could be used as hostages,” Sora informs her.

“That sounds like a job for a jounin squad. What do we have to do with it?”

“Oh, there’ll be jounin going. We’re not there to kill the missing-nin,” Shiki assures her, looking distinctly uncomfortable now.

“We’ll be going undercover” she says, “they’re disguised as a traveling circus, but they’re actually involved in the slave trade. There have been children going missing all over the place in the past two years. That’s how we even found them.”

Hisana takes a shaky breath.

“So we’re … infiltrating the whole thing? Or are we freeing the kids?”

“Both. The children will be traumatized and we are closer in age than the jounin, so they’re more likely to trust us to help them. Some of us will go join the actual ‘circus’ and pass along information, some of us will be ‘caught’ to be sold and protect the children.”

“How many squads?”

“Four. A jounin squad, a chuunin squad, and two genin squads – I’ll be leading one, Shizuha’s taking the other. She’s already waiting by the gates.”

There are a lot of people already by the gates. She recognizes only few of them; Suzume-sensei and Ito-sensei are part of the chuunin squad and both look less than happy to see them. There’s a woman in fishnets harassing them – Mitarashi Anko? Not far off there’s a Hyuuga woman talking in a hushed voice to Kohaku-sensei. To their right there’s a woman with long dark hair and violently red eyes. Yuhi Kurenai.

Someone touches her wrist.

“Shizurin. I’d say it’s good to see you, but …”

Shizuha only nods.

“Yes. The circumstances are unfortunate.”

There’s another girl standing not far off, rummaging in her pouch, that Hisana vaguely recognizes.

“Who’s that?”

Shiki snorts and whacks her arm.

“You’re the worst. That’s Hoga-san –we’ve only been to school together for six years.”

Hoga, perking up at the mention of her name, gives a tentative bow into their direction and returns to her searching.
“Nice girl,” Hisana remarks. “I like the uncomplicated ones.”

There’s a moment of silence in which all of her friends exchange pointed looks.

“What do your senseis know about this?” she suddenly remembers. “I don’t see any Inuzuka, but maybe a few Yamanaka …?”

“Inori-sensei is the one that informed me,” Shizuha answers, vaguely pointing towards the group of chuunin, where a tall blonde woman is trying to pry Anko off Ito-sensei. “She will be leading the chuunin squad.”

“As far as I know Dai-sensei was informed but not invited,” Shiki offers. “He’s not very subtle, after all. Inomaru and Choumei are over there though.”

“Where’s Haru-kun?” Hisana asks Sora. Her teammate makes a face.

“He was with Sensei when I left to get you. But I imagine he fled.”

Both crane their necks to watch their teacher. To everyone else’s eyes it might look as if he’s engaged in a perfectly placid conversation with the Hyuuga woman. But there’s a familiar tilt to his head that means he’s not quite angry yet, but getting there fast.

“Should we … break that up?” she wonders aloud. Sora’s eyes nearly pop out of his head.

“Are you crazy? I’m attached to my limbs – literally and figuratively. Let’s leave it that way.”

A shrill whistle interrupts them.

“Alright ladies, gather your skirts – going out in five!”

---

**Shaku** = measuring unit for katana; 1 shaku = in modern time standardized as 11.9 inches/30.3 cm

**Wakizashi** = 1 – 2 shaku long sword; became popular for indoor combat because it was customary to take off a katana (and apparently the accompanying tanto) when stepping inside, but not the wakizashi

**Oodachi** = 3 shaku or more (so about the same length, or longer than a katana); due to its size unsuitable for close quarter combat and more often used by cavalymen to take down foot soldiers even while sitting high on a horse. Because of the great size oftentimes worn on the back or carried by hand.

When comparing oodachi and katana of equal length, the difference is that katana are worn cutting edge up, the oodachi cutting edge down; and the oodachi has more of a curvature. The fighting style, in contrast to the katana, focuses on downward cuts.

**About sword classification**: the different definitions are often muddy, because there was never any norm in place, so sizes and customs differed in every time period. Generally speaking the size of the
blade, as well as the size of the handle (so one handed or two handed) are important.
Setting the stage for some action:

The plan is a little complicated:

Shiki’s team, consisting Inomaru, Choumei, and the unassuming looking Haru, would ‘sneak’ into the circus’ evening performance, get caught, and then express desire to join them. Since most of the performing crew seems to also consist of children, Kurenai seems reasonably sure that they would be accepted at least temporarily to lure in more children.

Shizuha’s team, consisting of Hisana, Sora, and Hoga – who is adept at some basic medical jutsu – would wander around the missing-nin’s preferred hunting grounds and let themselves get captured.

Once in contact with the kidnapped children, Hoga would offer first aid, while Shizuha’s kikai would relay information to the chuunin squad. They’d then prepare for the breakout.

The rest would be handled by the older ninja.

The jounin squad would spring a surprise attack on the missing-nin, while the chuunin squad would initiate the liberation of the kidnapped children.

“I have a bad feeling about this,” Hisana admits, only ten minutes after they set out.

“I’d be worried if you didn’t,” Shiki says, “you’d have to be an idiot not to be.”

It’s not only the fact that they’re going up against proper ninja for the first time – that has to happen at some point after all – but also that her team is split up. She likes the thought of having Shizuha around, and she trusts Shiki to keep an eye on Haru, but it still doesn’t sit right with her.

It’s a long way to the border. They stop regularly, to conserve strength, but she’d rather they’d speed through it and just start the mission already. The more time they spend doing nothing but running, the more time Hisana’s mind has to go into overdrive and come up with the most terrible scenarios.

What if the children are already all dead or sold?

What if one of them dies?

She’s by far not the only one having these thoughts. Shizuha is constantly going back and forth between her and Shiki, orbiting them like a nervous little satellite. Hoga, who apparently also has no team, has started counting heads at every opportunity, obsessively trying to make sure that everyone is still there. Even Kohaku-sensei is constantly herding his pupils together, ill-tempered and snippy, but very careful to always have all of them in reach.

“If you die before we even reach our destination, I shall be very displeased.”

When they reach the Land of Hot Water two and a half days later, Hisana’s nerves are already rubbed raw.
Two scouts are sent out – Anko and Suzume-sensei – and they set up camp in a dense forest. So close to Hot Water, humidity is increasing rapidly. It’s a disgusting sort of weather that makes the clothes cling to Hisana’s back and, now that the sun is down, makes her feel twice as cold. She’s almost glad when Shizuhaka throws down a bag of clothes next to them.

“Your disguises. Tonight Hisachi and Hoga-san will get captured first. Tomorrow Shichi’s team will approach the circus, and Sora-san and I will get captured. If everything goes according to plan, Sensei’s team will come for us two days from now.”

There are two kimonos in the bag, one dark brown and muddied at the hem, the other a muted yellow and mended unskillfully in several places.

Hisana takes the brown one, leaving the clean kimono and the only pair of tabi for Hoga, who is looking determined but a little green in the face. No reason to make it harder on the poor girl.

“Come on,” she says beckoning Hoga away from the group. “Let’s get dressed. Sensei?”

Even though her voice barely rises, Kohaku-sensei’s head snaps up immediately.

“Can we use chakra this far out?”

He shakes his head.

“Not until the scouts come back. What do you need?”

She points to her muddy kimono and wriggles one incongruously clean foot at him. He throws her a bottle of water and shoos the girls along.

“Maybe you shouldn’t clean the hem,” Hoga says, voice quiet and tentative.

“That’s not what I’m doing,” Hisana grins, pouring the water onto the ground and rubbing her feet in it. “I’d be a strange village girl, clean like a princess.”

The girl watches her in bemusement.

“Aren’t you scared?” she finally asks.

“I am so scared,” Hisana admits easily. “But my team is here, and two of my senseis, and my best friends. And did you see Yuhi-taichou face? I think she’s taking the mission pretty personal. There’s no way anyone is going to die out here.”

It’s true; Kurenai seemed fiercely angry at the thought that someone has been hurting children in Fire Country. Of course fear follows no logic, so yes, she’s afraid.

“I wish my Sensei was here,” Hoga admits bashfully. “But she’s still at the hospital and really angry with me.”

“Why?”

“Because I volunteered for this. Sensei doesn’t think I’m ready to go on missions. But taichou needed a genin medic, and there aren’t many of us. Better me than Maki-chan – she still cries when she gets scared.” Without being asked Hoga re-does the sloppy knot on Hisana’s obi.

“I’ll be in so much trouble when I come home.”

“No way. She’s only worried, not angry. I’m sure she’ll be proud when you come back and tell her
you did well.”

Hoga smiles thinly.

“Maybe.”

“Are you ready?” Shizuha’s voice carries over from between the trees.

“We’re done,” Hisana confirms. “Just a second.”

They stumble back into camp, Hoga clumsy in the unfamiliar shoes, Hisana wincing as yet another stone digs into her bare feet.

“Hey,” Sora grins, “you almost look like a girl now.”

“Almost?” she gasps disbelievingly.

“He means if you had boobs,” Inomaru supplies helpfully. “If you had boobs you’d look like a girl.”

“Do you want to die?” Choumei hisses aghast, apparently the only member of team 6 to retain a healthy amount of fear of her.

“T-that’s not what I meant!” Sora assures her hastily and aims a kick at the Yamanaka. “I’d never say that.”

“But you were thinking it!” she cries, half laughing now. “I can’t believe you!”

“Us?” Inomaru grins, “You do know that Shiki’s been taking bets whether or not you beanpole will ever grow some?”

“I planned on sharing the winnings,” Shiki calls from somewhere. “You can buy yourself a push-up with your share.”

Next to Hisana Hoga snorts.

Suzume-sensei and Anko return not even an hour later.

“The circus is about two miles out, just outside Takahaba. The next show will be tomorrow, so that suits us just fine,” Suzume-sensei informs them. “Team Shiki can sneak in, ’get caught’ and then confess your ambitions to become a performer.”

“Lay it on real thick,” Anko advises, “Terrible parents, tragic childhood, whathaveyou. The rest of you brats has it even easier. They’ve been taking kiddies from all over the place, so we’d just have to put you somewhere just outside of town and bam!” She smacks her fist into her palm. “Trap snaps shut. Man, I envy you. We’ve got to bum around here for two days until we get some action. And then it’s all ‘blah, blah, watch for the civilians Anko! Blah, blah, don’t break public property, Anko _-’”

“Yes, that’s quite enough,” Kurenai cuts her off. “If you’re bored you can check over our weapons tonight.”

Anko pales.

“Y-you know what? I’m suddenly real tired, I think I should go to bed already.”
She affects a yawn and dances off.

“So that’s how you get rid of her,” Suzume-sensei muses. “Good to know. There’s a row of wagons right next to the performer’s wagons. They’re under a genjutsu, so we think that’s where they’re keeping the children. I couldn’t risk a look inside, but judging by the size there must be about six children in each wagon – that makes 18 children in total. They might split you up; don’t lose your heads over it. We will find you.”

Takahaba is not a big town. Or at least not in comparison to Konoha. Then again, Konoha is probably the biggest town in all the Elemental Nations.

Hoga and her will pose as sisters, they’ve decided. They look reasonably similar with their dark coloring and so they will only have to remember one cover story.

Yamanaka Inori brings them inside under a genjutsu and then leaves them to fend for themselves.

It’s just before sundown and the streets are getting less busy. Half remembering the map Shizuha showed them, Hisana steers Hoga into the general direction of the redlight district. It’s full of winding, dark alleys; a place where nobody would notice two girls going missing. It’s an indication of what sort of town Takahabe is that nobody tries to stop them.

They dodge only some of the men wandering around, occasionally letting them grab at their kimonos and then kicking them in the shins, and generally make a spectacle of themselves.

“I hate it here,” Hoga breathes, and Hisana is pretty sure that she’s not merely acting.

“I know,” she says, to both Hoga-her-sister and Hoga-the-kunoichi. “It won’t be for long.”

The girl squeezes her hand as if looking for reassurance, once, twice. They’re being followed. She’s not entirely sure yet if it’s their target or just a pervert, so they slow down and let him catch up.

“Hey,” a male voice calls, “are you two even old enough to wander around here?”

It’s a young man, in his mid-twenties or younger. He looks unassuming, non-threatening, and his eyes are full of concern and indignation.

“Where are your parents?”

Hoga shivers.

“T-they … they … you can’t make us go back!”

Hisana shushes her.

“We can take care of ourselves, is what she means,” she says. “And we’re old enough for a job. They told us they’re always looking for workers here.”

“Sweetheart,” the man says carefully, “do you even know where you are here?”

“Does it matter?” she snaps and pulls Hoga behind her. “We need to eat, don’t we? It’s none of your business anyway.”

“If you need food, I can feed you,” he offers. “Just – this is not the right place for young girls.”
He offers his hand to her and she stares at it in feigned suspicion.

There are callouses on his hand. Not the kind you get from field work. Kunai callouses.

“You’ll feed us?” she checks. “No funny business?”

“No funny business,” he promises. She takes his hand.

They don’t go far. Hisana expected him to at least actually feed them – something laced with sleeping pills maybe – but his approach is far less elegant. He leads them only three streets further, before she can feel two more presences following them. She braces herself, and then someone pulls a bag over her head. There’s a dull pain blooming on the back of her head.

It’s not enough to knock out a genin, but she ceases to struggle anyway; next to her she can feel Hoga sinking to the floor. Someone throws her over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes, and with a surge of chakra they’re gone.

Eventually someone pulls the bag from her head and tosses her to the floor. Hisana keeps her eyes closed, just in case.

A door closes, then another one. Someone touches her arm.

“Hey! Hey, wake up – Nee-san? Are you ok?”

When Hisana opens her eyes it’s dark. The only light source is a candle, high on a shelf above them. It takes a second until she gets used to it. The one shaking her arm is a little boy, scruffy and dirty and about Sasuke’s age.

“Nee-san, can you hear me?”

“I’m ok,” she assures him, rubbing her smartening head. “Just got a bump on the head. Hoga?”

No answer.

“How?”

She really hopes they didn’t get separated. The others would come tomorrow already, so it’s not as if they’d be alone for long. But they’re in enemy territory; being alone is never a good thing.

“Here,” she hears the girl hiss. “They hit me really hard!”

Hisana shuffles over to where the noise is coming from and makes contact with metal bars. They’re in cells, she realizes. About two square metres big; just enough for two or three children. Hoga’s hand reaches through the bars and pats her hand.

“Are you ok?” she asks.

Hisana nods.

“I’m fine.”

“You know each other?” the little boy asks in surprise. “Two at once … they don’t do that very often.”
“You’ve been here for long?” Hisana asks, squinting to make out the rest of the wagon.

The boy shrugs.

“A few weeks. Longer than most.”

He gives her a grin that lacks quite a few teeth.

“Knocked them out myself,” he says proudly. “They like the ones with good teeth better. You’ve got good teeth. Want help with that?”

“N-no thanks,” Hoga declines for both of them. “We’re not staying long anyway.”

“What do you mean?” a shy voice comes from one of the other cells. It’s a girl about their age. Her yukata is old and faded, and there’s a smudge on her chin that might be either dirt or blood. There is a pause while the kunoichi check for chakra nearby.

“We are here to free you,” Hoga finally announces and tries for a smile. Her lip is split, so it comes out more like a grimace.

“Good job you did so far,” someone else hisses. It’s a tall, reedy boy, sitting just behind the dirty girl. “Getting yourselves caught.”

“Shut up, Daisuke,” the toothless boy snaps. “Nobody’s asking for your opinion.”

They glare at each other and Hisana is briefly glad for the bars separating them.

“Please,” Hoga tries, “don’t fight. We’re not alone, there are more of us. I’m a doctor – is anyone hurt?”

“Who isn’t hurt?” Daisuke spits out and the makes a pained noise, as his cellmate kicks him in the shin.

“Be quiet already,” she growls, a complete change from her earlier behavior. “All your doom and gloom is scaring Yuki-chan.”

Only then Hisana realizes that there is someone else sharing the cell with Daisuke and the girl. It’s a little toddler, maybe three or four years old, who is clinging to what’s left of the girl’s obi.

“Look Yuki-chan,” the girl croons, “someone’s come to save us. We’ll go home soon, to Kaa-chan.”

“Kaa-chan,” he croons back, shyly smiling at them.

“I’m Rui and this is my little brother,” she says, bowing shallowly. “I apologize for my rudeness; my back is injured.”

There’s a small aisle separating them, but Hoga sticks her hands as far through the bars as they will go.

“Let me have a look.”

Rui shakes her head.

“Thank you, but I’m not getting undressed with these idiots around.”

“What?” Daisuke mocks. “You think I want to see your skinny back?”
She aims another kick at him.

“You could have a look at Yuki-chan though,” she says, leading the boy closer to them, “He hurt his hands.”

Lying on the floor, Hoga has managed to twist her shoulders through the bars.

“Just a bit closer,” she beckons the child. Yuki-chan smiles and reaches for her.
**Important:** I've adjusted the rating to **Explicit**; that doesn't mean there's going to be angst and horror in every chapter, but occasionally there will be **Graphic Descriptions of Violence.**

There are five children in their wagon. Rui and Yuki have been there for only two days, Daisuke for six. The toothless boy, who introduces himself as Kenta, has been around for more than 25 days.

“I’m not good with counting,” he admits, “so I just stopped. But I’ve seen many come and go. Three or four days, then the circus moves and at the next stop they’re gone.”

There’s one more person with them, a silent boy in Hoga’s cell, who only shakes his head whenever they try to speak to him. He’s injured; his ankle is broken, but he won’t let Hoga anywhere near it. The last cell is empty.

Time moves slowly. After the initial introductions there’s suddenly nothing to say to each other anymore. Nobody wants to talk about how they got here, and there’s no use in going over their escape plan, because Daisuke still refuses to believe that someone is coming for them and gets upset whenever they mention it. One after another they drift off to sleep.

Hisana herself is wide awake. She has the first shift; she’ll sleep later.

The next morning she’s awoken by the door opening and dousing the whole wagon in bright sunlight. They are thrown some food; apples and bread. One man, a short but burly guy that reeks of ninja, has them come to the bars, to examine their faces and force some water down their throats.

“You better behave,” he tells Hisana, squeezing her jaw with dirty fingers. “Things don’t go how they did with your mama ‘round here.”

“Chuunin,” she assesses grudgingly as soon as the men are out of hearing range. “Together we might be able to overwhelm him, but I wouldn’t risk it.”

How someone like that could make chuunin is beyond her. He doesn’t seem like someone with enough discipline or brains, but his raging chakra levels can’t possibly lie.

“Let’s hope they get him before we have to try,” Hoga sighs. “It’s kind of selfish, but I really hope I won’t have to kill yet. Then Sensei would really be angry.”

“You’re a medic, but you’re still a ninja, aren’t you?” Hisana asks in confusion, “Your Sensei surely knows that you might have to hurt someone someday, doesn’t she?”

Hoga gives a non-committal shrug.

“Yes, sure. But she still likes to think we’re the scholars, you know? We’re supposed to protect, not hurt. The last line of defense, not the brawlers. And here I go and volunteer myself to do something like this.”

“Well,” Hisana offers, “maybe you and your sensei just have different views on what it means to
They’re fed once more, just as it becomes darker again. It’s the first time Hisana is forced to sit by idly during a mission and wait of the others to get their shit together.

It makes her nervous and snappy, so she refrains from interacting with the children, and lets Hoga do all talking. The girl is good with the traumatized kids.

Maybe, she ponders, it’s because she’s a medic. Bedside manners, and all that. As the light fades further, her thoughts are drawn towards the rest of her team. She worries about Shizuha and Sora more than she worries about herself and Hoga.

Shizuha is soft-hearted and the furthest thing from inconspicuous; a dangerous mix in an undercover mission. And Sora … she still remembers him dead-eyed and unresponsive after their mission to Otari. This is the first time they’ve left the village since then, and already they’ve put him in a situation where he might have to kill again.

She tries not to think of Haru, trying to pose as a natural entertainer with only razor-tongue Shiki and her cahoots for company. Oh, the Nara will make sure to bring him back in one piece, certainly. But she’s not the kind to coddle someone emotionally.

Which might be for the best in the long run, but still …

Haru is **fragile**.

“I can see you fussing from over here,” Hoga remarks. “Have a little more trust in your teammates. I’m sure they’re as eager to prove themselves as the rest of us.”

Hisana makes an agreeable noise.

“That doesn’t mean I have to like this. I’d rather be out there and have an eye on them myself.”

That seems to amuse Hoga.

“What will you do if you’re not around to lead them by the hand? They’ll have to learn someday. You said it yourself: nobody’s going to die on Yuhi-taichou’s watch; so better now than later.”

She’s right of course.

A soft noise jerks her out of any further thought. Something small and jittery lands on her cheek. Hisana’s not sure whether to be relieved or more anxious.

“So they’re here. Tell Shizurin we’re fine and to watch out for any more ninjas. We’ve only counted one chuunin so far.”

The kikai flies off with barely a sound.

“So that means they’re in the other wagons. I wonder if they’ve been split up,” Hoga muses. “It would be better for the mission if we had someone in every wagon.”

As time passes she only gets more nervous. A whole more day. Twelve more hours. One more meal. One more sundown. Two more hours.

“Are you ok?” she whispers to Hoga, trying to mask her own growing discomfort.
“So far, yes,” the girl confirms. “I’m a bit worried how to get them all to safety. We can’t organize them in the middle of a battlefield.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Hisana says. “Just grab them by the hand and run for the nearest chuunin. You’re the medic; it’s not your primary job.”

Chances are that the jounin will take care of this so quickly, that nobody will have to evacuate very far. Hoga makes a face.

“I didn’t come here to be a coward,” she says.

“Last line of defense,” Hisana reminds her. “Don’t make us lose our medic.”

Not long after midnight more kikai come crawling through every hole of the wagon. Rui squawks in disgust, while her little brother scoops them up eagerly with his chubby hands.

“What in all the world – “ Daisuke sputters.


Something nips at her.

“Ouch! Ok, ok – not creepy. Special. Sheesh, aren’t you touchy.”

Rui makes another disgusted noise and sinks down into a corner. Hisana is not a fan of bugs either. But the kikai are buzzing with familiar chakra; they’re comforting rather than disquieting. Maybe it’s a sign that she’s spent too much time with the Aburame clan, but she can’t really see them as anything but part of Shizuha anymore. It’s not as if they are dirty or diseased or dangerous to her.

“It’s starting,” she warns them. “The kikai are probably here to protect you. Don’t brush them off; they’re useful.”

Hoga makes a strange noise.

“I’m sorry Shizuha-san,” she yips into the dark, “I don’t think I’m comfortable with this…”

“Get a grip, Hoga,” Hisana snorts. “You’re a ninja, and they’re not out to get you.”

Knowing better by now she herself resists the natural urge to brush off the bugs that are crawling into her ear and dangerously close to her eye. Her chakra is familiar enough to them that they’re looking for a way to crawl into her. It’s not the first time this has happened, and she knows they’ll give up when they don’t find any of the small holes usually littering an Aburame’s skin.

Instead of answering, Hoga gives her a slightly disturbed look and reaches for her cellmate. The boy whines pathetically, but his resistance is futile against Hoga’s firm grip.

“Get ready,” the girl tells the others. “As soon as the fight starts we bust out of here.”

Rui hoists her brother against her chest. The boys can only stare at the door in anticipation.

There’s a flare of chakra – and another one. Then the first scream echoes through the night.

“Now,” Hisana snaps, breaking the lock on her cell with a well-placed kick. The cell door next to her bursts under the force of Hoga’s fist. Together they rip the door of Rui and Daisuke’s cell out of its hinges.
“Go, go, go!”

Outside more and more chakra signatures explode. They kick open the wagon door, the genjutsu turning to smoke around them.

The circus grounds are big; there are at least twenty wagons of performers, some of them stumbling out of their beds still in their night gowns, and the huge circus tent. On their right another, shabbier wagon appears out of thin air and a door goes flying.

“Sora-kun!”

Her teammate’s head whips around.

“Hisana-chan!”

He looks relieved.

“Shizuha-san’s not with you?”

Before Hisana can shake her head, one more wagon appears, as the last genjutsu breaks. There’s an overwhelming humming noise coming from inside it.

“Oh sheesh,” Sora winces, “I guess she’s fine without us.”

“Let’s go!” Hoga urges them, still struggling with her former cellmate.

Hisana grabs Kenta by the hand and ushers Rui along.

“Daisuke, don’t fall behind! Towards the woods – maybe we can hide there!”

Sora is already yelling at his own charges, and judging by the sound of splintering wood, Shizuha is already on her way too.

They have to pass the circus tent if they want to avoid the fighting going on between the showman wagons. Hisana nearly has a heart attack as someone comes shooting out of the huge, darkened pavilion. It’s Anko.

“Keep running!” the tokubetsu jounin instructs. “Follow me; I’ll get you to the forest.”

Smoke bursts from beneath the tent as if a bomb has gone off. Somewhere in the middle of it she can feel Kohaku-sensei’s chakra signature pulsating like a stubborn candle refusing to go out. Anko snickers.

“Hurry, hurry, I don’t wanna miss out on the action.”

There’s another familiar chakra signature hurtling towards them. For a second Hisana is confused – who is it? Then Choumei’s roundly shilouette appears, coming at them with top speed.

“Stop!” he cries, trying to slow down. But his momentum is too high, and his legs too chubby, so that he almost races right past them. In the last second Anko manages to grab him by the arm.

“We need your help! The others -” he huffs out something unintelligible.

“What?” Sora snaps impatiently.
“They’ve got the others! They’ve known who we are from the beginning – they have three jounin with them! I only just got away.”

Anko’s face turns from playfully vicious into something truly ugly.

“Haru,” Sora blurts out. “Is Haru ok?”

Choumei winces guiltily.

“Alright,” Anko decides, “you’re going to have to get to the forest by yourselves. I’ll head for the brats.”

She casts the frightened, scruffy children a considering look.

“And you better hurry, before one of them pees where they stand.”

A small part of Hisana wants to protest, but the bigger part knows that it would only be wasting time. Someone has to evacuate the children, and maybe even some of the adults wandering the battle field in confusion and fear. And there’s no way that they’d be able to cope with even one of the jounin. Anko on the other hand stands more than a fair chance.

“Let’s move then,” she urges the others. “Come on. The sooner the civilians are safe, the sooner we might be able to go back and *do* something.”

“She’s right,” Hoga says, voice shaking. “We have a *job* to do.”

Sora throws them a wild look and for a second she thinks he’ll make a run for it anyway. But in the end he nods.

They encounter no real resistance on their way towards the woods. Only a few of the civilian circus workers try to stop them, but they are easily shoved aside or knocked out. Nobody has the time to spare to ascertain whether or not they really are the enemy, so they deal with them in the most efficient way. Unconscious people don’t get into trouble.

Every once in a while one of them has to double back and carry one of their charges for a few minutes until they catch their breaths. Only Rui seems to be driven by the wild instinct to protect her sibling. She never once stumbles or whines but only runs and runs and runs.

“Let’s stop here,” Choumei calls from further ahead. “There’s a ledge we can hide under; it’s easily defensible.”

He points towards a rock formation protruding from the ground. There is in fact an overhang, where a large standing stone has sunk crookedly into the mud.

There are ten children in total; Hisana doubts they would be easily defensible anywhere. But Hoga slams a fist into the ground and mud splashes high, then rapidly dries into sturdy enough looking walls.

“Earth affinity,” she says gleefully. “I can stay here. You go and get the others.”

“You sure you’ll be fine?” Sora asks, casting the mass of frightened children a skeptical look.

Hoga shrugs.

“I’ll be fine enough; Shizuha-san is on her way, isn’t she? Go, hurry.”
There’s only a second in which the group listens to the growing drone of Shizuha’s hive coming closer, then Choumei is off like a shot. Startled, Sora follows him. But Hisana hesitates.

Hoga is a short, weedy girl, with little muscle mass to speak of. Most of the children she’s supposed to protect already tower over her by a considerable margin. It seems ridiculous that she should be protecting them instead of the other way around.

“Go! We’re safe for now,” the girl urges.

It’s all Hisana needs. She catches up with the boys easily enough. Without the children to drag along the way back seems almost laughably short. ‘Safe enough’, she thinks worriedly, is not ten minutes by foot away from battle. They slink past the wreckage of the collapsed tent, dodging grasping hands and the odd piece of splintered, burning wood. The place is loud with the sound of people crying. Not children, but adults.

She’s not sure if all of them knew about the slave trading; if some of them simply think her team to be monsters that came over them like a divine plague. She doesn’t want to know either. It’s already hard enough to live with the knowledge that she’ll have at least permanently crippled a hand full of them in her haste to reach safety.

“We need to get to the wagons!” Choumei calls over the noise. “There’s more of them under a genjutsu.”

Hisana eyes the long line of showman wagons in trepidation. There are people milling about; they don’t actually know how many ninja are with the circus, so genin and chuunin could be hiding everywhere among the innocent.

“Onto the wagons,” she cries in realization. “Use the wagons!”

She kicks off the ground and lands onto a rickety roof; the force of her impact very nearly puts her foot through the old thatching. The others follow her. From above it’s easier to see that not many of the wandering performers are actually injured. They are shocked, confused, and frightened by the smoldering remains of the ten, but most of the fighting is taking place around the outmost wagons now. She can feel no actual civilian chakra signatures there; only the bright, familiar flames of the jounin and chuunin teams and the high-tension vibrating of the enemy.

And further off, past the tree line, there is also the anxious flickering of her friends.
Important: This fic has a warning now, because ninjas. Graphic descriptions of violence follow.

They give the fight a wide berth.

Instead they follow Anko’s chakra signature further into the forest. There are more familiar ones emerging now; Inori-sensei and Ito-sensei for one.

They find the latter collapsed against a tree, conscious, but barely so. There’s something big and hairy leaning over her, about the size of a dog. Hisana throws a kunai at it, which the thing easily deflects with a long, bald tail.

“A rat?” she squawks out, unable to help herself.

The animal turns towards her, arms akimbo.

“Yes, I am a rat,” it says in a grand-fatherly voice, “You have a problem with that, little missy?”

“Ah – uh, no!”

“Good,” he says, “now run along and help your little friends. I might be old, but I am still able to look out for my Oren.”

A summon, she thinks faintly. How surprisingly grotesque. She always kind of imagined them to be … well, cute maybe. Pakkun at least looked as if he was supposed to be cute. Maybe even the toads and the slugs too.

Only with effort can she pull herself away from the strange sight. There are more rats around, she realizes. Smaller ones, an endless stream seemingly coming from behind Ito-sensei’s back, and going only in one direction: the fight.

Sora and Choumei rush past her without stopping, but she ignores them.

“We … might need help,” she starts, unsure whether or not she is allowed to ask someone else’s summon for anything. “Choumei-san says there’s a bunch of jounin with them and they have the rest of our teams.”

Ito-sensei’s eyes flicker over to her. All Hisana gets is a weak tilt of her head, but the rats apparently understand more; a smaller stream of rats splits off to chase after the boys.

“Go,” the big rat says, “We will send help as soon as possible.”

The boys are far ahead of her.

It comes as no surprise that they didn’t wait for her, but instead already charged straight into the little clearing that reveals two more shabby wagons. There is a seal of some sort painted onto one of them.
Chakra suppression maybe, she thinks. She recognizes Shiki and Haru, but their signatures are far weaker than they are supposed to be in this proximity. Sickly somehow.

On the grass, there is chaos. A cluster of fat snakes is crawling all over the place, and rats are swarming around, continuously launching themselves at the enemy. Anko looks exhausted; Inori-sensei is lying face down in the grass.

There are two men facing the only remaining tokubetsu jounin, both mostly uninjured, kicking at summons at an almost leisure pace. One of them looks awfully familiar.

“Ah,” he says, peering around Anko and smiling at her, “I have to say, this isn’t the right place for a young girl either. Have a taste for danger, don’t you?”

“Don’t talk to her,” Sora snaps.

He’s holding his arm, which is sluggishly dripping blood onto the floor. Next to him Choumei is fussing over Inori-sensei’s prone form. Unconscious, she realizes with relief. Not dead. Yet.

“You three stay the hell out of this,” Anko snaps, spitting a wad of blood onto the ground. “I have more than enough vermin tripping me up here.”

She gives one of her own snakes a moody kick.

“Bitch,” it hisses.

“Oh,” one of the men interjects, “but wouldn’t it be so much more fun with company? God knows you’re not particularly entertaining.”

He flicks a kunai with such speed, Hisana has no time to dodge. One of the rats launches itself in front of her face, catching the weapon aimed at her forehead with its body, and then vanishing in a poof of smoke. In the split second it takes her to realize that she almost died right here in this godforsaken backwater woods, Anko has already collected herself.

“Go!” she screams, “Get your damn teammates and run!”

Hisana pulls a kunai and jumps into action. Dodging the occasional attack thrown her way, she jumps onto the sealed wagon. It’s more solidly built than the others; there are no windows, and there’s a thick line of metal across the cracks of the door that suggest it’s welded shut. A few kicks do nothing; a teppodama only sprays her with the backsplash.

Maybe the seal does more than suppress chakra. Maybe it’s quite literally a seal. She can’t think – not with the kunai constantly aimed at her back. She deflects a few more of them, but it’s no use; as soon as she turns around, she can hear the next one coming.

There’s a thunk thunk as the boys land hard on the wagon’s roof.

“Any of you know anything at all about seals?”

It’s not a very advanced one, she already knows that much. It’s a simple matrix, but it’s using values she’s never seen before.

“I thought you’re the genius here,” Sora says nervously. “We can buy you time, but that’s pretty much it.”

They slide down onto the grass to shield her. The clink clink of metal hitting metal is still unnerving,
but Hisana turns back to the seal. She really wishes she’d paid more attention during the sealing unit – screw that, she did pay attention.

Think! If you know how to disable the matrix the values don’t matter, she reminds herself heatedly. Where did she see this before? It’s a basic closing and containment seal. Closing down chakra, sound, entrances, information, …

The graduation exam. The matrix to take their chakra sample – it’s the very same one. The unknown values could stand for oppression, she realizes. It would explain why the chakra inside seems so weak. After that unraveling the matrix is almost too easy.

She feeds destructive yang chakra into the center point and watches the paint bubble and peel off.

“Got it! Choumei-san – can you open the door?”

They switch places, and the Akimichi digs his fingers under the metal strips and rips them right off. There’s an almighty crash and the whole door sails over her head and into the battle. Anko curses.

“Be careful where you throw that crap!”

Before they can even set a foot inside the wagon, one of the jounin appears right in the doorway. The boys are easily lifted off their feet and thrown at Anko, who collapses under the weight.

A fierce pain explodes in Hisana’s face, and then she’s suddenly flying. Her back collides with something solid. She blacks out.

When she comes to, someone is touching her face.

“Wake up girl, hurry, hurry.”

Something warm is dripping down her nose and her vision is wonky.

“It’s just blood; you’re just bleeding a little. Hurry, hurry,” says the same voice.

Confused she tries to find the source. It’s one of the rats; it’s standing on her shoulder, paws braced against her face.

“How long was I out?” she rasps.

“Not long, not long, few minutes. Hurry, get your friends. Help is coming.”

It scurries off into the field. She has no time to see how Sora and Choumei are. Anko is on her last leg; Hisana really needs the rest of her team as soon as possible. Fresh, unused chakra reserves and Shiki’s brain. Shakily she gets to her feet. Anko has one of the jounin by the collar, the other is covered in summons; snakes and rats have sunk their teeth and fangs into his face and arms. For the moment he’s blinded. She makes a break for it.

Again something hits her in the head. Even with a boa slung around his neck, squeezing until his face turns purple, the jounin is standing above her again. There’s a wild, angry look in his eyes. He opens his mouth, and Hisana recognizes the beginnings of a katon jutsu and then – his head snaps back.

The jounin is sent flying back towards his partner, crashing face first into the floor. For a second Hisana thinks it’s Kohaku-sensei who saved her, hand extended in the Gentle Fist Style, but it’s not.
It’s the Hyuuga woman. She looks angry, and there is a single, bright red scratch below her eye, but her chakra is still burning bright and she seems largely unharmed.

“Go,” she tells Hisana. “Now.”

Again she struggles to her feet. This time no one stops her on the way to the wagon.

Inside a strange sight greets her. Shiki, Haru, and Inomaru are lying flat on the floor, neatly lined up. There are seals stamped onto their hands and foreheads, while their legs are still kicking, trying to get up.

“Hisana-chan!” Haru yelps. “What are you doing here?”

“What are you doing here?” she rasps out, “Getting caught like idiots.”

Gravity seals. Carefully she smudges out the singular value they contain.

“That’s embarrassing,” she teases weakly. “Out of commission because of some fuinjutsu.”

“You look like hell,” Shiki greets her, ignoring the jibes.

There’s a crash from outside and the wagon shakes.

“Maybe we should keep the chit chat for some other time,” Inomaru suggests nervously.

Outside Sora and Choumei have dragged Anko and Inori-sensei off the battlefield. Instead the Hyuuga jounin is handling her two opponents all by herself.

“Look at that,” Shiki comments, impressed. “She’s running circles around them.”

They run over to the boys, to help, patch up some injuries, drag the injured further away from the fight – but instead of relieved faces, they find panicked eyes focused on them.

“Three,” Anko forces out. “You said there are three jounin. Where’s the other one?”


They all stare at each other.

“Run you idiots!” the tokubetsu jounin howls. “Hyuuga hurry the fuck up! There’s one more!”

Leaving Anko and Inori-sensei to their fate, they race back towards the circus. Shiki, Haru and Inomaru trail them in confusion.

“What the hell is going on?”

“We left them alone,” Choumei admits guiltily. “Hoga-san and Shizuha-san are alone with the children.”

Shiki curses. It takes twelve minutes, maybe fifteen, but it feels far longer until they reach the rock formation. In front of Hisana Sora stops dead in his tracks. Startled, she crashes into him and they tumble to the floor. From where she’s lying she can clearly see vivid red staining the ground. The rest of the team shoots past them.
“No!” she hears Choumei curse. “Goddamnit!”

Hisana scrambles to her feet. Just behind Hoga’s wall of mud, Shizuha is lying.

“Unconscious,” Shiki assures her hastily, “Just unconscious.”

It’s true. Shizuha’s chest is still moving, and the blood isn’t hers. It’s Rui’s. Her body is crumpled against the rock, head hanging strangely crooked onto her shoulder, and slit throat gaping wide. Everyone else is missing.

“What do we do now?” Sora whispers behind her.

He’s still sitting on the floor, staring at Rui’s body as if he can’t quite comprehend what is wrong with her.

“We need to find the others,” Hisana says. “Hoga is still out there somewhere.”

“What if she’s dead?” Haru suggests in a quiet voice.

Hisana thinks of metal bars groaning under the little medic’s fist.

“No,” she says. “Until we find her body I won’t believe she’s dead.”

They decide to split up. It’s dangerous, but no one of them is under the delusion that they could take on a jounin even all of them together. The only thing they could do was round up those who got away and hope for their own jounin to hurry up and get here.

The first light of dawn is breaking through the trees. While the light is a welcome change, it does nothing to help them navigate the woods any better. Hot Water is famous for its early morning fogs, brought by the cold wind from Frost Country.

Hisana feels for Hoga’s chakra signature, but there is none. She must have suppressed it. The creeping fog makes the woods even more threatening than the dark. Every leaf rustling makes her ears twitch and her hands shake in anticipation. There’s no way that the children can make sure to be caught by the right people, so they try not to get caught at all. It’s like they’re playing a giant game of hide-and-seek.

The first time she stumbles over someone, it’s a corpse.

A young boy, only vaguely familiar. One of Sora’s maybe. His head is twisted grotesquely and his eyes are wide in surprise. There’s bile making its way up her throat. She can’t leave him here. If she just leaves him here, the animals will eat him.

For a moment she only stares at the small body, undecided. Then she hoists it – him – onto her shoulder. The trees in Hot Water are the same thick oak-like ones that grow all over Fire Country. They don’t get as tall, but it’s enough to keep a little body safe from scavengers.

The second time she finds a child, she nearly cries in relief.

“Yuki-chan,” she whispers, kneeling down and trying to look unthreatening. “You know me! Come here!”

She’s no good with such small children; Hoga would have been much more suited to this. She remembers how easily the boy had taken to her and tries to mimic the medic’s body language.
Carefully she shuffles over to him. He’s clearly frightened, traumatized possibly, by his sister’s death. But in the end he toddles into her arms.

She’ll need to go back to the rocks. There’s no way she’ll trawl the woods with Yuki in tow. It’s so wrong to bring him back to where his sister’s blood is still staining the mud, even if her body is already carefully wrapped in cloth and hidden away. But Hoga’s wall still stands, and Shiki and Shizuha are still there. It’s the safest place they have right now.

There’s a cracking in the undergrowth; Hisana freezes. Not a ninja, she tells herself. If it were, you’d already be dead. Jounin don’t make noise. An animal? Or maybe …

“Hoga?” she whispers.

“Nee-san!” it comes back.

Kenta stumbles out from behind a tree. He has a black eye and he’s limping.

A flash of chakra makes Hisana snap to attention.

“Shh,” she tells the boy, who is looking at her with wide eyes.

She twists around, trying to find the source. There’s no noise, no presence, nothing she can see through the fog. Slowly she waves the boy over to her.

“Take Yuki,” she whispers. “If I tell you to run, go that way. My team is waiting there.”

Kenta nods. He reaches out to take Yuki from her.

This time the chakra is like an explosion right in her face. For a second she’s blinded, stumbling backwards and trying to shield Yuki with her arms.

Something warm and wet splatters her face, clumping her eyelashes together and leaving a metallic taste in her mouth. There’s so much of it.

“Kenta,” she wheezes out, dragging her sleeve over her face. When her vision clears, it’s not Kenta who’s standing in front of her, glassy-eyed and pale.

It’s Hoga.

Her knees have sagged; whatever spirit is still left in her is expelled with a last shaky breath that disperses into the fog. The only thing holding up her body now is the slim blade wedged in her throat and splitting her chin.

“Ah,” Kenta says. “That’s not how it was supposed to happen.”

Dispassionately he pulls the blade out of the body, letting it sink into the mud like a ragdoll.

“But I guess one dead brat is as good as another dead brat.”

Blood is dripping into her eyes; it burns. Numbly she tries to wipe it away, eyes glued to the crumpled form on the floor. But more wetness follows, running down her cheeks and dripping onto her collarbone. She barely notices as Kenta forms a ‘kai’ and the genjutsu cloaking him disperses. The man standing in front of her is entirely unfamiliar. Tall, grey haired, surprisingly old. He takes a step back to scrutinize his handiwork. The limp is gone.
She stares at him; the information doesn’t quite compute.

“You give me the kid, I’ll make it quick, no hard feelings,” he says in a deep, gruff voice. “You’re going to see your friend real soon, so no need to cry.”

I’m not crying, she wants to say, but she’s not entirely sure if that’s true. Yuki whimpers against her chest, a soft high pitched noise that snaps the world back into focus.

“It’s ok,” she tells him, her own voice sounding oddly far away. “I think you should have a nap now.”

The boy stares up at her with teary eyes.

“When you wake up, it’ll all be ok,” she promises, only feeling a grim sort of satisfaction when his eyes drift shut.

The man watches her in interest as she puts Yuki down against a tree.

“Pretty confident, aren’t you?”

He nudges Hoga’s body with his foot.

“She was also pretty convinced you’d be back for them. And hey – you are! Just a little late.”

He spits onto the floor.

I hate you, she thinks distantly. You should die.

It won’t bring Hoga back, but it’ll do something. Bring back balance. Restore Karma. A life for a life. Yes, that would be good. She wonders is she’s said that out loud, because the man’s face twists into something supposedly mocking, with a strange hint of something in the corners of his eyes.

“Are you afraid?” she asks apropos of nothing.

It seems like the thing to ask, even though a jounin really shouldn’t be afraid of her. He twitches minutely.

“Understandable,” she continues, eyes glued to his rhythmically pulsating carotid artery. “You’re all alone now. Even if you get the children, we have killed all your partners. Your friends. What would you do with them, all by yourself? You fucked up. You should have run.”

He snarls at her. His shoulder twists inward and the bloodied blade shoots out like a snake at her. She sidesteps it, digging her fingers into his hand on the hilt and pinning it against a tree.

“You fucked up,” she whispers gleefully. “We are coming for you. Even if you run, we won’t stop looking for you. Do you have family? Children? – No, but a wife.”

It’s as if she can see his brain working behind his eyes.

“Maybe it would be better if you just killed yourself.”

“Shut up!” he yells at her; sweat is running down his face, and his eyes keep flickering back and forth between her face and his pinned hand.

“Shut up already!”
His fist comes at her from the other side, but she ducks and rams her knuckles into his throat. Choking, he stumbles back and trips. Pathetic, she wants to say. Didn’t they teach you not to broadcast your next move?

“No, no – it’s great idea, just listen,” she croons. There’s a sick sort of satisfaction as she takes his hand and places the blade against his throat.

“Your wife will be safe then, we won’t look for her. And if you do it yourself it’ll be quick, and you’ll see your friends real soon.”

He stares into her eyes, breathless and speechless.

“Go ahead,” she coaxes, pressing the blade more firmly against his throat. There’s a sickening shluck, as she encounters no resistance, pressing it deeply into the flesh. It only takes three minutes until he’s bled out; she can’t, won’t, look away from his eyes.

“No hard feelings,” she tells him.
Oh dear god, I wrote almost 1,000 words and then deleted it again – three times. This was so hard and I don’t even know why.

But here you go, the aftermath:

(Also, at the end a little bit of music for you to listen to.)

For a few long moments she just kneels there, staring at the dead man, feeling absolutely nothing. Then she goes to pick up the still sleeping Yuki.

There is no question about leaving Hoga’s body. There’s not. She can’t possibly phantom leaving it here with her murderer. It is hard to look at Hoga’s face; guilt is already gnawing at her, but she owes it to the girl. Her teammate. The one she was supposed to protect.

She was also pretty convinced you’d be back for them.

There’s no agony on her features, or surprise or fear, or anything at all that Hisana would have expected from someone who knew they were going to die. Instead there’s a vicious sort of triumph that reads, ‘I beat you. You killed me, but I still beat you.’

The girl’s body hoisted over her shoulder, warm blood running down her back, and Yuki pressed against her chest, she slowly makes her way back to the rock. The rest of the genin and the Hyuuga woman are already waiting for her.

Hisana wordlessly hands Yuki over to her and spreads out Hoga’s body on the floor. Only then the others seem to realize that the girl is dead.

Shizuha, still supported by Shiki, makes a noise that Hisana has never heard before and buries her face against the Nara’s arm. Somewhere further off she can hear someone vomiting.

While the others fuss over the body, someone pulls her back by the shoulders. Blood is wiped off her brow, her hair is put into some semblance of order.

“You failed,” the Hyuuga woman says, straightening Hisana’s clothes and examining her face.

The Byakugan are activated, a faintly irritated red around the edges.

“You failed your team. He was in your cell – you spent two days with him and you did not realize his deception. You left your teammate alone with him, and you let Hoga-san die because of it.”

Fingers press into her temples and her forehead. There’s a dull pain, and then a pressure behind her eyes vanishes that she hadn’t even noticed.

“I let you have the kill,” the jounin says firmly, “because it was your privilege and your duty. I hope this will be a lesson to you.”

“Onee-sama,” Kohaku-sensei’s voice drifts over from behind her. “That’s quite enough. I don’t
appreciate you getting involved with my team.”

“For the time being this is also my team,” the woman rebukes him. “And I will correct the misbehavior you seem to allow so freely.”

She releases Hisana’s face to stare at her brother. For a moment they just stand there, heads tilted like two giant birds seizing each other up for a fight.

“Airi.”

Kurenai’s voice cuts through the tension like a knife.

“This is neither the time nor the place for this. Keep your family affairs at home.”

Hyuuga Airi bows her head minutely and turns away.

“We caught the remaining jounin two miles out – the mission is completed as soon as we turn over the children to the town,” Kurenai tells them. Several jounin appear in swirls of leaves, scooping up children and vanishing. Kurenai takes up Hoga’s body, cradling it to her chest with a regretful expression.

“Regrouping at camp in twenty minutes,” she instructs, “don’t be late.”

Then she, too, vanishes. There’s a moment of heavy silence.

“You did well bringing the body back,” Kohaku-sensei tells her.

He doesn’t say Her parents will be grateful, like they do in the movies sometimes. They both know her parents won’t care.

“You’re not going to scold me?” she asks, almost hoping he will.

“No. There is no use in repeating what my sister said. She is correct, you made a mistake.”

He watches her intently, looking for a reaction maybe. She gives none.

“If it comforts you, you will not be the only one to be reprimanded. All of you should have known better.”

The including Hoga herself is implied, though Kohaku-sensei is too polite to say it.

“What Onee-sama fails to understand,” he adds, “is that the blame for such things can rarely be laid at a single person’s feet. Now, I understand there is something you need to show me.”

He presses the same spots Airi did just moments prior. It’s easy to drum up the will to activate the Sharingan. It’s not a particularly nice Kekkei Genkai, she thinks. It feels a little like hatred, but also like justice and righteous anger.

“It has been a while since I have seen a Sharingan,” Sensei comments. “Well done.”

It doesn’t seem like a victory.

She doesn’t have enough control over it yet to deactivate it, so he re-seals her tenketsu for the time being. They make their way back to camp in silence. Every once in a while Shizuha, who’s legs are both broken, is shuffled onto someone else’s back, but no words are exchanged at all. Six children were carried off by the jounin – six of originally ten. That made four dead children and one of their
own, because of one measly little chuunin who managed to sneak through their defenses right under their noses. Not even the missing jounin. A chuunin.

The way back home is torture.

Nobody sleeps a wink, the jounin dealing with the grieving parents, the genin rounding up the bodies. All of their chuunin are entirely out of commission. Vulnerable as they are they can’t stick around any longer, so they take off without rest.

It’s almost four days of sleeping only in hour increments and carrying injured people on their backs. For three very uncomfortable hours Hisana has Anko clinging to her neck, giving her the most awful pep talk in the history of ever.

“I did much worse your age than let some comrades die. You’re gonna do much worse until you’re my age. You have no idea how many people die all the time.”

Coming home is not as comforting as she hoped. It’s in the middle of the night; Sasuke is already asleep. She’s dirty, tired, moody – and quite frankly, she smells a little funky. For a moment she simply stands in the genkan, backpack sitting on her feet, unsure of what to do. Eat, shower, sleep? Shower, eat, sleep? Sleep, fuck the rest?

Any of those things sounds so incredibly normal; she doesn’t know if she can do them. She doesn’t know how to do them anymore. People are dead and she’s going to eat a sandwich now.

A little confused and trying to do everything at once, she simply takes off her dirty clothes and leaves them there. In underwear she pats into the kitchen, fixes herself some food, and then sinks down on the cold tile to eat. It’s dark in there, but comforting. For a moment she doesn’t have to look at herself and wonder what sort of person she is to let her teammate die and to feel so little about ending a life herself.

In the bathroom she has to turn the light on. A little unwillingly she looks into the mirror; the image makes her stomach churn unpleasantly. She looks gaunt and pale. There’s still some blood crusted into her forehead, and small, circular bruises have formed all over her face. Kohaku-sensei must have sealed and unsealed her tenketsu more than a dozen times in the past few days, until she gained enough control over the Sharingan to turn them off herself.

They flare to life with the tiniest burst of chakra.

Like this she recognizes herself even less. Her Sharingan are a dark, rusty red, one singular tomoe spinning lazily in each eye. They look foreign and strange on her. She yawns, eyes watering and squeezing shut. The next time she looks into the mirror, her eyes are their usual black. For a few more moments she examines her smartening, bruised jaw and the way her cheek split open under someone’s fist. She looks terrible; Sasuke is in for a fright.

After a disappointing lukewarm shower she crawls into bed. It’s not as satisfying as she remembers. It’s still the same almost-but-not-quite-cheap cotton sheet, the same heavy comforter, the same somewhat beat up pillow. She can’t sleep in it. The last time she slept in this bed feels so incredibly long ago.

Quietly, as not to wake her cousin, she takes a spare blanket from their wardrobe and goes to sleep on the couch.
The next morning she wakes up to Sasuke sitting by her feet. He’s looking at her in bemusement, eyes flicking back and forth between her split cheek and the bruised tenketsu she knows to be right in the middle of her forehead.

“Is there any particular reason,” he starts somewhat put out, “why you didn’t find it necessary to wake me up when you came home? Or why you’re sleeping on the couch?”

She stares at him.

“Did we get married while I was away?”

“I don’t know – is that the only way you’re going to keep me updated on your major life decisions?”

“Like sleeping on the couch?”

“Like dying.”

He raises an expectant eyebrow and she snorts. When did he grow up so quickly? And who the hell gave him permission?

She flashes her Sharingan at him in hopes to distract him. He fidgets.

“I know you’re trying to change the topic,” Sasuke says at length, “but … let me see.”

He shuffles closer to inspect her eyes. Watching him like this is strange; she can predict his movements so easily. Every minute change in his face, every aborted muscle twitch. She knows he’s had the irrational urge to touch her eyes, and that irks him. The little twitch in his hand and the tension around his mouth tell her so. She knows that he’s jealous. Curious too. And also uneasy. Hisana thinks about showing off a little, already forming the words he’s going to speak with her lips, but decides against voicing them. It’ll scare him; and a scared Sasuke is an angry Sasuke.

“How did it happen? How did you …?”

“Someone died,” she says after some consideration. “A teammate. Not … - a teammate, but someone I was supposed to look out for. I messed it up.”

And this is my punishment, she thinks. The memory of Hoga’s body and her murderer forever burned into my brain.

Sasuke’s face displays a confused mixture of awe, giddiness, and pity. Pity, mostly for her, not for Hoga. It should probably worry her, but right now she doesn’t have the capacity to. Maybe later, when she doesn’t feel like death warmed over.

“You saw it?” he asks a little breathless. “What did you do?”

“I killed him.”

The wonder on his face she could have read without the Sharingan. She lets them fade, unwilling to deal with her cousin’s creepiness on such an intimate level. Hisana already knows he’s not quite right, she doesn’t need to see it too.

“What was it like?”

“I didn’t like it.”
And that’s no lie. She didn’t hate it either, but she most definitely didn’t like it. Her tone effectively ends that venue of conversation.

“Does that have anything to do with why you’re sleeping on the couch?”

It was of course optimistic and not a little naïve to think that her cousin wouldn’t wheedle the reason for her camp out right out of her. Her answer provokes a strange mixture of quiet disbelief and patient sympathy onto his face that worries and warms her in equal parts. ‘You are silly,’ it says, ‘but I will indulge you.’

She hopes that his callousness in regards to human lives really does stem from his upbringing, not from his personality itself. She’d see soon enough probably; for now she allows herself to smile at his suggestion that they simply go buy new sheets today.

The heavy feeling stays. She can lock it away somewhere deep inside for a while; team 7 makes things better. But their presence is like a band aid over an infected cut – the pressure takes off the edge, but it can’t drive out the sickness that keeps incubating inside. As soon as they say their good-byes she can feel the guilt gnawing at her again.

For a few days she seeks out Shizuha.

They both saw things they can’t forget.

They both feel guilty.

But instead of spending each other comfort, they make each other sick.

“Of course,” Shiki says, “you need to work through your problems, not dwell on them.”

She looks haggard and tired; between Hisana and Shizuha she barely has time to get over her own crippling self-doubts.

“I led my team into a trap,” she admits, voice vibrating with suppressed self-loathing, “this could have ended very differently for us. What if Choumei hadn’t gotten away? And if I’d seen this coming, maybe Hoga-san would still be alive too.”

Even Hisana’s teammates have their own weights to shoulder.

“I did nothing,” Sora tells her, wide-eyed and ashamed. “You broke the seal, and you freed the others. I didn’t do a damn thing to protect my team. That guy beat the crap out of you – what was I doing while that happened?”

But you were trying, she thinks. If you only knew how much older I am than you, maybe you wouldn’t ask so much of yourself.

But while she feels for him, she can’t take this burden from him.

“You’ll take care of him, won’t you?” she begs Haru. “Please. I can’t – …“

Haru pats her head awkwardly.

“It’s fine. You two already – … it’s the least I can do.”

She functions. They all do. Maybe it’s one of those regrettable side effects of being a ninja; one day
you just break a little, and nobody can fix you up entirely anymore. And every day the crack gets a little wider – until someday someone comes to put you down like a dog, because you've slowly crossed over onto the wrong side of ‘dangerous’ without noticing.

No, she functions flawlessly in the field. Their teamwork has only gotten better, they are efficient and driven, D- and C-rank missions are completed by the dozens a week. It’s elsewhere the cracks are showing.

Hisana’s not really interested in anything anymore. Even small failures discourage her. Minor, trivial things make her unreasonably angry.

“I did not think we would have to talk about this,” Kohaku-sensei remarks the next time she nearly bursts into tears during training. “You took your first kill remarkably well, after all. It appears I was mistaken.”

He steers her away from her worried looking teammates, sits her down and pushes a cup of tea into her hands. She’s not sure where it came from – she never is. It’s just one of these things about Sensei; as long as he’s around, tea is always in reach. She stares down at it, somewhat helplessly.

“I am relieved I was mistaken,” he suddenly says, effortlessly picking up the conversation where he left off. “It may sound odd, but I am immensely relived. There’s only one kind of ninja that makes their first kill without taking mental damage: born killers. I do not believe that that is what you are.”

“It isn’t … that,” she grits out, rubbing at her chest, right over where her heart squeezes painfully. “I don’t regret killing that man.”

“That is not what I was referring to either. The official reports will classify him as such, but that man was not the first life you were responsible of ending.”

There’s a moment of silence. It hurts to hear it again, but it’s the truth. She’s strangely glad even that Kohaku-sensei is not one to sugar-coat things; it makes it easier to believe him about other things as well. He watches her carefully.

“You do realize, intellectually, that you are not solely responsible for Hoga Chisato’s death? That the entire mission was very nearly a failure because our intelligence was faulty? That, even if you had been there, there is no guarantee that you would not have simply been killed alongside her?”

She nods.

“Good. Then I want to introduce you to someone.”

---

This is the music I listen to while writing stuff. Some of these songs will definitely feature big time during the later chapters - sometime I'll make you a list about what song corresponds to which scene.

Right now I'll give you this one:

Hoga's Death: Shimomura Yoko     Destati
I love dramatic classical style music (especially by Kajiura Yuki). Of course they are far too grand to fit this story, but if they put me in the mood to write some tragic, angsty violence, then hey!

I’m curious if you’ll be able to put the right songs to the right scenes without my help.
Chapter 34

Phew – next chapter!

Soo, I received a totally awesome fanart from Pretend Fiction to chapter 32, you should totally check this out: http://whorianhavilliard.tumblr.com/post/132705228183/uchiha-hisana-in-of-bonds-and-hugs-like-chokeholds

She’s not comfortable with this.

In fact, the only thing that keeps her from running is Kohaku-sensei’s hand on her neck. He’s been steering her around like a puppy since they stepped foot into the Hyuuga compound ten minutes ago. It’s huge, imposing, and the most traditionally Japanese building she’s ever been in, with none of the western influence that gives Konoha its slightly more modern feeling. And now she’s standing on its back porch, still carrying her shoes in hand, and staring into the face of a boy who can only be Hyuuga Neji.

He’s surprisingly short – though it might simply be that she’s too tall – and there are stark white bandages across his forehead where his hitai-ate should be. For a moment she’s confused, before realizing that he’s one year her junior and must therefore still be an Academy student. Neji is staring right back at her, projecting a mix of distrust and anger.

“This,” Kohaku-sensei says, “is cousin Neji. I believe both of you have some … frustration to work off. I thought you might be able to help each other.”

Sensei’s hand pushes her forward, and she stumbles a few steps into Neji’s direction. She lets her shoes drop into the grass and jumps barefoot in front of the boy. There’s an agitated crease between his eyebrows; it’s not overly noticeable, but still far more emotive than she’s used to from his clansmen.

A moment of tense silence follows as they size each other up, unsure about this novel and admittedly strange situation, and then Neji’s hand shoots out at her like a viper. He’s so fast. Startled, she bends back, trying to evade his strike.

She overbalances and falls right onto her ass.

He stares down at her, just as bewildered as Hisana herself. Then she drives her feet into his gut to put a respectable distance between them. He doesn’t even stumble. Instead he skids a few feet, only moved because the ground gives way beneath him. His hand already forms the snake seal, but then he shoots Kohaku-sensei a wary look.

“Go ahead,” the jounin encourages, “but whatever tenketsu you seal, you are responsible of unsealing.”

“Byakugan.”

All right, she thinks. If you want it that way. Her Sharingan flare to life, and Neji lights up in a dim, purplish glow. She stares. Is that chakra? He’s closing in on her again, and only when their hands collide she realizes that this is nothing as physically real as chakra. Neji is practically vibrating with hundreds of micro movements, ready to spring into every direction, to change tactics on the fly. Her
Sharingan is trying so hard to capture all of them that the reddish color of his movements is bleeding into his chakra signature.

He feints left and charges right, but she slides her foot right into his path and ducks to ram her shoulder into his chest.

He wheezes, but his flat hand comes down on her back. Pain explodes on her shoulder blade, and she braces for the dull throbbing of a blocked tenketsu. It never comes.

There’s no time to be surprised; this close up she can’t analyze him properly, so she lets her fist shoot up to his chin. He jumps back, her knuckles only grazing his skin, and lands once again a safe distance away. Somewhere in the back of her mind she registers Kohaku-sensei’s chakra signature moving away from them. Though something else occupies a far bigger part of her brain.

Why didn’t he seal her tenketsu? It was a perfect opportunity – and he clearly intended to do so before. Once more she slides too far into his personal space, barely dodging the sharp burn of the Juuken. She jams her knuckles into his ribs – and in turn catches the palm of his hand against her temple. Hisana staggers backwards, disoriented. His hand is a blur as it seals three tenketsu in her arm before she can shove him away.

They stare at each other, panting.

She cracks her shoulder. On one hand, if she gets close enough he can’t get at her tenketsu, though she’s not sure why. On the other hand … his hits still hurt. A grin tugs at her mouth, even as Neji’s frown deepens into a fully fledged scowl.

She doesn’t know for how long they tear at each other. Only when Kohaku-sensei’s chakra signature makes an appearance on the porch Neji’s hands sink and Hisana allows herself to relax.

There’s a sharp pressure on her arm as he unseals the tenketsu there, and four more on the side of her ribs. Then he walks away without a word.

“Are you feeling better now?” Sensei wants to know.

She does. Right now she’s too tired to feel much of anything at all, but it’s a good tiredness. A satisfied kind. Hisana goes home still a little high on adrenaline and grinning like an idiot.

Three times a week Kohaku-sensei leads her to the Hyuuga compound after training, so that she and Neji can beat the crap out of each other.

They don’t talk. Hisana doesn’t know or care if this is simply training to him, or if it is just as therapeutic for him as it is for her. They don’t hate each other, she doesn’t think. But they aren’t friends either; they are simply using each other, and that’s fine. Hisana doesn’t need a friend, she needs someone she can hurt without feeling bad about it. Kohaku-sensei at least seems pleased with the results.

“You’re calmer,” even Haru remarks at the end of the first week. “It’s nice. We were worried.”

She ruffles his hair.

So for a while things are good. Hisana doesn’t even care when Hyuuga Airi catches her leaving the
compound one day, grabbing her by the scuff of her neck.

“You look like a ruffian off the streets,” the woman grits out from behind clenched teeth, pulling Hisana away from the prying eyes of the Hyuuga guards. “For god’s sake, don’t you care how much shame you bring to your clan, running around like this? You look as if you just had a roll in the hay.”

Airi yanks out her braid none too gently to pick grass out of her hair.

“That might be because I did just have a roll in the hay,” Hisana chirps. “With your cousin.”

Gleefully she watches the woman immediately jump to the wrong conclusion. Airi hisses like a teakettle.

“Aren’t you glad O-nee-sama?”

“When Hiashi-sama finds out about this—”

She breaks off suddenly, and her face twists into something wry, as if just realizing that the day Hyuuga Hiashi found out about this wouldn’t be a good day for any of them.

“Hiashi-sama better not find out about this! Now turn around, you stupid girl, so that I can fix your hair.”

While the Hyuuga patriarch never does seem to hear of her supposed love affair with Neji – or, she thinks, he would have already turned up on her doorstep – the entire rest of the clan seems to be made up of busybodies that know absolutely everything. On more than one occasion she’s noticed a Hyuuga clansman giving her a wide berth or sending her pitying looks.

“What’s wrong with them?” Sasuke hissed at her just last weekend, when two Hyuuga women noticed them on the market and promptly abandoned their groceries to flee discreetly.

“Apparently I have connections,” she told him in wide-eyed wonder. “I feel like I just started dating a mafia boss.”

While this is all very amusing, the change brings a long overdue visitor to her door.

“Genma.”

For once he’s actually knocked on the front door instead of breaking in. His face is serious, and for a moment she’s braced for another fight. Then he visibly deflates. Reassured, she motions him inside. It’s not as if she shouldn’t have expected it. After all, even if Hyuuga Hiashi hasn’t realized that she’s been regularly visiting his compound, village gossip is sure to have carried the news to every office chunin in the village. Of course Genma would have heard.

She’s not angry at him anymore, just disappointed. It sounds like something her mother would say, but it’s true. But in a way that’s almost worse than being angry. For a long while Genma had been the adult in her life; the one who knows how things are supposed to work and show her the ropes. He’d supported her for almost three years, and then he let her down when she would have needed him the most. But he’s only human and not even that much of an adult. She’s thought long and hard about that; Genma is at most twenty-six or twenty-seven years old. In her other live she might have trusted him with a potted plant, but not with a bunch of children.

It’s been almost five months since their fight too, so she can look at the whole thing with a clearer
head now. Even so, their argument opened a rift between them and made space for someone else to step into Genma’s place. Kohaku-sensei is by no means as funny or easy-going as the chuunin, and his affection is sparse and hard-won, but he’s taken the position as her confidant nonetheless. She suspects that this is in fact what a proper team leader is supposed to do.

Slouching on her couch, Genma looks as if he knows that his visit is damage control at best.

“This all didn’t really work out how I planned it,” he admits.

“There was a plan?”

“Well, no. Not a proper one. So yeah, when I heard the Hokage saddled you with a Hyuuga I kind of panicked. I just wanted to warn you – it just didn’t turn out so well.”

She nods. It’s not an apology exactly, but she’ll take it.

“It’s fine,” she assures him. “But I haven’t changed my opinion about the whole thing. I like my team. I like Kohaku-sensei.”

Genma makes a face, but doesn’t say anything. She’s grateful, because, forgiveness aside, she’s ready to fight him on this again.

“Please tell me you’re at least careful around Hiashi-sama. He may appear nice enough, but he’s shrewd and callous.”

So that’s what he heard. Hisana is a little surprised that the rumors of her and Neji haven’t reached the gossipmongers of the mission desk yet; but then again, Neji will be the head of the branch house. Nobody would go out blabbing about his personal business to an outsider. The fact that the rumors are still going strong is already proof that nobody’s even dared to breach the subject with Neji himself.

“I wouldn’t know what Hyuuga-sama is like,” she tells Genma grimly, taking just a little pleasure in his confused face, “because Kohaku-sensei keeps me well away from him.”

“Then what the heck are you doing inside the Hyuuga compound?”

“Beating the stuffing out of one of their prodigies.”

He stares at her. It probably seems strange to someone who doesn’t know the whole story, but she has no intention of telling him that Neji and her are taking their aggression out on each other so that they can be functional members of society the rest of the time. So she just shrugs at him.

“I like it. It’s different than sparring with my teammates. They know me too well by now.”

Genma sighs in defeat.

“Alright, I see. Just … if you need help, I’m still here.”

“Yeah, I know,” she admits with a slight smile. “I didn’t think for a moment that you weren’t.”

Neji’s eyes narrow at her.

After six weeks he still looks at her with the same expression – pent up frustration and a certain amount of animosity. At first she’d though his sour look stemmed from the Hyuuga clan’s typical
dislike of the Uchiha, but by now she’s pretty sure it’s simply her. They circle each other, doujutsus blazing, waiting for a mistake, a second of inattention. Hisana stomps her foot forward, startling Neji into action.

She catches his flat palm with her fist, chakra scraping past her knuckles harmlessly. She sneers at him in wild triumph. So that’s it – he can’t focus his chakra accurately enough in his palms. The Juuken comes from his fingertips.

And if I get too close, she thinks, catching his other hand by the wrist and twisting it upwards, hitting me gets awkward. Hisana shoves her knee into his gut, forcing the air out of Neji’s lungs. He twists out of her grip and backs away.

Right now Hisana still has the upper hand; she’s older, taller, and more experienced. But in a few years, she has no doubt he’ll wipe the floor with her in a taijutsu match any day. She can’t wait to see it. He bares his teeth at her. She beckons him over.

The Kiri Chuunin Exams are approaching rapidly, and would have passed without Hisana noticing, if not for Shiki.

“We’re going,” the Nara informs her, slouching so far into her chair that she very nearly slides off. “I don’t know what Dai-sensei is thinking. We’re going to get our asses handed to us.”

Hisana pats her hand consolingly.

“There, there. If you just lie down and give up, it’ll be over real quickly. We can take the Exams together the next time.”

Shiki snorts.

“You just don’t want to sweat to death alone in Suna. No, if I already have to drag my carcass all the way to Kiri, I’m going to ace this shit. No way I’m taking another Exam next year.”


Only two weeks later Hisana sees team 6 off as they leave for Kiri. They’re not alone; there’s a rather big congregation of genins milling about the gate.

“So the great Uchiha-sama isn’t coming?” a grating voice comes from her left.

The owner of said voice is absolutely unfamiliar to her.

“I’d ask who you are, but that would imply I care,” she says, a little miffed that some random stranger would try to pick a fight with her.

The girl flips her hair over her shoulder and braces her hands on her hips.

“I,” she hisses, “am one of the top kunoichi of our year.”

‘Our’. Oh – a classmate. For a moment Hisana genuinely wracks her brain for a name, or even a single memory of this person. She draws a complete blank.

“And since I am going to participate in the Chuunin Exams, and you aren’t,” the girl continues,
unaware of Hisana’s internal struggle, “I think a little more respect would be appropriate.”

“Oh shut the hell up, Hanada,” Inomaru grousches, his teammates in tow.

Hanada’s face sours for a split second, before twisting into something akin to a smile.

“Ino-kun! I didn’t realize you were around …”

Shiki’s cough sounds suspiciously like ‘bullshit’. She shoos the girl away with her hands.

“Take your stupid somewhere else,” the Nara gripes, “I already have a headache. Don’t need another one.”

“What’s it with her?” Hisana asks, bewildered, as she watches Hanada stalk off in a huff.

“Oh please,” Inomaru says, “as if you don’t know.”

“It’s **Hisana-san**,” Choumei intones, as if that’s supposed to mean something.

Team 6 shares a look. What the hell?

“Hanada has a **big fat** crush on Sora-san,” Inomaru informs her gleefully. “And as his teammate you’re In Her Way. Big time.”

For a second all Hisana can do is giggle stupidly.

“That’s sweet,” she finally huffs. “In a completely bitchy way. But sweet. Sora’s going to love this.”

When they finally leave, Hisana waves them off a little wistfully. It’s hard to see Shiki leave Konoha – to maybe return as chuunin – without her. But she has faith in the Nara girl, as well as her idiotic teammates. They’d be fine. Hisana herself has an amusing week to look forward to, because Sora’s **totally not** going to love this.

If Hisana thought that her life would settle down a little, now that there’s almost a year left until the next Chuunin Exams, she would be wrong – of course.

Once Neji forces the second stage of the Sharingan out of her – by completely shattering her kneecap to pieces – there’s yet another addition to her life. This one in equal parts anticipated and dreaded.

Hatake Kakashi introduces himself by stringing her up by her ankle.

“Oh,” he says, “that was easy.”

---

I love the Hyuuga siblings. I don’t know why – they just strike me as funny.
Writing Kakashi was hard work, but rewarding.

**BTW:** I made a [tumblr](https://tumblr.com). Not that I have any idea what I’m doing. It’s going to be a fic rec thing mostly, but also occasional news and snippets about my stories.

This is one of the greatest shinobi Konoha has ever seen. This is Hatake Kakashi, son of the White Fang … - is what Hisana has been telling herself for nearly half an hour now. She’s still hanging in the tree, forcing her chakra to keep her blood flowing properly so that she won’t pass out, listening to the man sitting below jabbering on.

“A student all of my own – I couldn’t be more proud and excited,” he warbles, and she wants nothing more than to kick him in the head.

She presses down on the urge to flash her Sharingan at him in agitation, to just let out the negative emotion in a harmless way. She knows it would only serve to amuse him – her puny second stage against Kakashi’s mature three tomoe. He might only have a single one whereas she possesses two, and it might not even be his own, but it’s still a Mangekyou, and even one of them is worth a hundred of hers.

“Would you stop it already?” she finally snaps. “If you wanted a student, you’d already have one. Now let me down, before I have to puke.”

For a moment he only regards her with a sad, sad hang-dog eye, before he shrugs. She crashes down onto the floor head-first as the wire snaps, contorted into a painful pretzel.

“Maa … not very patient, are you? But your chakra control is pretty good, I guess. I’d have thought you’d pass out after ten minutes.”

“It’s the power of youth,” she jeers.

He narrows his eye at her speculatively. Hisana really wants to be at least a little respectful. After all, she knows what sort of person Kakashi is – was still becoming even – and she holds a great deal of admiration for him. It’s just so hard when he’s such an asshole. Also, she ponders a little bemusedly, he doesn’t look very impressive at all, so it’s difficult to keep in mind that he’s sort of the best elite shinobi Konoha currently has.

Of course canon manga Naruto commented often enough that he looks boring and ordinary, which, by all means, should be even more impressive, as every single jounin she’s ever met looks like a jounin. Kakashi kind of slouches a little, just enough to look as if he probably has a desk job, and he plays stupid incredibly well. Even now that he’s dropped the simpleton act, he still gives off the vibe of the weird but generally harmless neighbor.

“I’m late for training now,” she informs him, trying to put her clothes into some semblance of order.
“Naah,” he says, “you’re not going there today. I already cleared it all with Haku-chan.”

“‘Haku-chan’,” she repeats flatly.”Of course. Because why not?”

“Glad to hear you’re seeing it my way. Now, let’s have a look at those peepers.”

‘A look’ in this case means that his hands shoot out too fast to dodge, prying open her eyes before she can do as much as give a squawk of protest.

“On,” he tells her, and she reluctantly activates her doujutsu. “Off.”

It vaguely feels like a visit with the optometrist.


“Are you messing with me?” she snaps.

He gives her a stupid eye-crease.

“Eh – just a bit.”

Whatever she might have expected from her lessons with Kakashi, what follows is not it. For several days they engage in what he calls ‘Episodes of ‘Looking at things with Kakashi’’, which is literally **looking at things with Kakashi**. Hisana is sure the Hokage will forgive her if she can only stomach so many hours of her new Sensei saying, “Oh look – a bird!”

“Oh look – a stone!”

“Oh look – Anko … let’s walk a little faster.”

“What are we doing?” she finally asks. “I can’t imagine you wasting so much time just to torture me. No, you know what? I can. But I’m pretty sure this is still not how it would go down.”

“Tsk, tsk, tsk. How do you expect to use your superior vision if you don’t know what you’re seeing? The first thing you need to know is that **you can trust your eyes**. If things don’t look the way they are supposed to, it’s not because they’re failing you. It’s because you can’t properly interpret what you’re seeing.”

She thinks back to Neji’s purplish chakra glow and gives a slow nod.

“It goes against everything you have learned as a ninja,” he says, “so I’ll hammer it into your skull until it makes you sick. Oh look – a dog!”

And so she looks at the dog.

It’s true after all; the first thing an Academy student learns is ‘don’t trust your eyes, they can be deceived’.

“If you learn how things look in an ordinary setting, you will realize when there’s something off. **Seeing** it means nothing if you don’t **notice** it. Oh look – a flower!”

They wander the training grounds like that, Kakashi whistling cheerfully, Hisana feeling vaguely idiotic. Once every plant and woodland creature is examined, they take to the streets of Konoha,
Kakashi randomly pointing at things, Hisana following him like a duckling. Not a single ninja they pass gives the weird pair so much as a strange look. Hisana isn’t sure what the base line for Kakashi’s behavior is, but either they already know his methods, or they only know him as an easily distracted dork. Chances are that both options are equally true.

It’s the civilians that are most disturbed by them, and she sees more than one mother hastily leading her child away from them. One fat older woman with a tiny dog even loudly complains about ‘the crazy ninjas disturbing good citizens’, and how they should basically all be locked away until the next war breaks out.

“Oh look – a bitch,” Kakashi hums mildly, taking his time to point his finger at the dog. “Oh no; it’s a boy. My bad.”

Kakashi also takes over her kenjutsu training.

“D’aww,” he croons, weighting her bokken, “that’s so cute. A tiny bokken for a tiny student.”

He pats her head patronizingly. She stares up at him with a wry sort of resignation. Kakashi is one of the tallest people she’s ever seen in the village; compared to him everyone is tiny.

“I’ll grow,” she assures him. “After all, I’m still in the springtime of my youth.”

The jounin twitches.

“No,” he scolds, grabbing the scuff of her neck and shaking her, “bad puppy.”

“The fire of my youthful soul cannot be contained,” she wheezes, trying to breath around her own collar strangling her.

Kakashi tweaks her nose.

“I’ll bring the spray bottle,” he warns her. “I don’t want to hear any dirty words from you, young lady.”

She snorts.

Training with Kakashi is a challenge. While Kohaku-sensei prefers an authoritarian ‘Do as I say’ style, Kakashi’s ‘Look underneath the underneath’ is pretty much the complete opposite of it that oftentimes sends her spinning into paranoia. Nothing is ever exactly what it seems like, and even if Hisana is supposed to do as she’s told, it’s never quite in the way she expects. And so she spends her time alternately getting her ass kicked and wandering around Konoha, randomly pointing at things. Of course it’s only a matter of time until she runs into someone she knows.

“Oh look,” she deadpans, “Shikano-kun.”

“Indeed?” Kakashi says, eyeing the uncomfortable looking Nara boy with interest. “Look how his chakra is fluctuating.”

The jounin leans down to her in a stage whisper.

“I think you weird him out.”

I think we weird him out, she doesn’t say. For a moment Shikano looks torn between running away and possible gossip.
“Ok, I bite,” he finally sighs, “What in all the world are you doing? And who’s that old man?”

They ignore Kakashi’s mock wounded ‘Oi!’.

“My new charge,” Hisana says, “Now that he’s retired he needs someone to take walks with him, so he doesn’t feel so unwanted. Oh look, Kakashi-ojii – a cat.”

To her horror Kakashi actually does produce a spray bottle and squirts it in her face.

“Down, girl.”

Shikano’s jaw nearly hits the floor.

“You know what?” he decides, “I’m going home. I don’t want anything to do with this. At all. Shiki’s due back in two weeks – don’t miss it.”

He power walks away.

“Pretty quick for a Nara,” Kakashi remarks, spraying her in the face once more, maybe just for good measure. Needless to say, with Kakashi in her life things get immeasurably weirder.

The spray bottle stays, with the jounin’s firm insistence that this is how he got his dogs housebroken. She even meets said dogs, which quickly makes her switch from leggings to pants, because they are more easily mended after a nin-dog rips out the seat of them. On the upside, she’s gotten far more proficient with her needle work now, since she, on one memorable occasion, tried to pawn off fixing them to her new Sensei – “After all this is your fault anyway.”

She quickly abandons that notion again after he returns them with a henohehej sewing onto her butt.

The day Shiki is due to return Hisana and Shizuha picnic at the gate. Officially the genin and newly minted chuunin will come back around noon; but ‘noon’ can in this case mean anything between 11 am and 7 pm. So after excusing herself from team training she goes to collect Shizuha from T & I, and they make their way to the east gate, where Nara Sachiko is already sitting with a book.

“Oh lovely,” the woman purrs, “please have a seat. I’ve been all alone all morning – Shikarou-kun and Shikano-chan are still busy. You must be Shizuha-chan!”

She croons over the bewildered Aburame girl for a second, before squishing Hisana’s cheeks together.

“Hisana-chan, you’ve lost weight! Have a sandwich; you need to get a bit more meat on those hips.”

They are soon joined by a dainty blonde woman who introduces herself as Yamanaka Inokku – Inomaru’s mother – and a portly woman with fiery red hair, whom the Nara woman calls ‘Chocchi’ and who is apparently Choumei’s mother. As the blanket gets more crowded, Shizuha sinks against Hisana as if she’s trying to disappear. Sachiko will have none of it.

“It’s such a pity we haven’t been introduced sooner,” she says, squeezing Shizuha’s hand and leaving a sweet bun behind. “Shiki-chan is so possessive of her friends – you’d think we’d try to eat you.”

Sachiko’s laugh is a dark ‘hohoho’, completely at odds with the dainty way she covers her mouth.
Hisana suffers the hubbub with a patient smile. It takes almost until 2 pm that Shizuha realizes she doesn’t need to talk, just listen and eat the food she’s given. After that the last bit of tension vanishes. More parents have by now set up camp around the gate, much to the delight and consternation of the guards, who are being plied with tea but also distracted from their duties.

It’s shortly after four when the tower guard yells, “Incoming! Group of twenty!”

When Hisana tries, she can feel team 6’s chakra signatures in the distance.

“Oh,” Shizuha says, “now I’m excited.”

Sachiko throws the girl a fond look, before directing her attention to the gates. Soon the first ninjas arrive. Most of them wear only sheepish smiles, shrugging at their parents. Failed.

When the first new chuunin arrives, an older boy with a bandana, proudly showing off his chuunin vest, one of the women starts to squeal. He’s pulled into an embrace by his mother, over whom he towers by almost two heads. When team 6 arrives, all three of them wearing the vests, the roar from their little picnic blanket is almost deafening.

While Choumei and Inomaru suffer their mothers’ attention almost happily, Shiki is already complaining, trying to hide her grin against the collar of her vest.

“Calm down, woman – it’s been two months, I just want my bed.”

As soon as Sachiko releases her, Hisana and Shizuha are on her.

“Now that you’re promoted the next cake is on you,” Hisana chirps, peeling Shiki out of the vest while Shizuha holds their friend still.

“Hey,” the Nara girl squawks from under Aburame’s arm, “what’s that supposed to mean?”

Hisana swings the chuunin vest around her shoulders like a cape.

“It means what it means. You’re the biggest earner of us now – we’ll be your leaching trophy girl friends.”

There’s a flash from somewhere, and Hisana has to blink bright white spots out of her vision.

“Aww,” Sachiko croons, face half hidden behind a camera. “And now everyone smile for Sachi-oba!”

While team 6 still trains together more often than not, they have been officially dissolved now – due to the promotion of all its members.

Shiki’s missions change too. Instead of the countless number of D-ranks that used to occupy most of her day, she now takes mostly C-rank ones that take longer to complete, but also give her more free time between missions. Hisana and Shizuha approve immensely, because now their friend is far more often available.

“About that apprenticeship …,” Shizuha starts, almost two months after Shiki’s promotion.

The Nara rolls her eyes.

“I’d hoped you’d have forgotten that by now.”
Shizuha taps her own forehead.

“Never.”

Hisana snorts. Making Shiki do anything is certainly a challenge. Making her do something that might mean another promotion – and therefore extra work – is nearly impossible. Still, she agrees with Shizuha. Letting their friend languish in some desk job or as a teacher would be a complete waste.

“Come on,” she wheedles, “running errands is boring. At least do something to keep your big, fat brain occupied.”

“Nooo …”

In a matter of days they have at least convinced her to look into a few things, few of which garner even vague approval from Shiki. Predictably she eventually lands in Tactics. While certainly suited to the Nara girl’s capacities, her choice is mostly influenced by the fact that, during peace times, Tactics has markedly little to do. Most of their work consists of drawing up contingency plans, in case their contingency plan for the contingency plan doesn’t work.

“It’s the worst,” Shiki says dreamily. “Everything’s already been done before. And now we have to find a way to do the same thing again – but different. I love it.”

Hisana is happy for her friend. So of course she loses sight of what she’s setting herself up for.

“T & I works closely with Tactics,” Shizuha eventually remarks innocently. “It’s nice to have Shiki-chan around. Hisana-chan – do you know who else works with us?”

“Yeah, Hisachi,” Shiki coos, batting her eyelashes at Hisana, “do you?”
Chapter 36

Ok – next chapter there’ll be more action (probably). And don’t worry, after the Chuunin Exams there’ll be more team 7 again.

Hisana’s schedule is swamped. Occupied. Full to the point of bursting.

Between Kakashi-sensei, Kohaku-sensei, Neji, and her ever demanding cousin, there’s no way that she’ll be able to take on an apprenticeship, no matter what Shizuha and Shiki say. She is a little curious though, because for tokubetsu jounin she’ll surely need one. While Kohaku-sensei merely cautions her about spreading herself too thin, Kakashi-sensei has a different problem with it.

“Mou … InSab? But that’s so boring.”

Hisana wants to disagree. Infiltration and Sabotage did have an introductory course in the Academy, which she thought was rather interesting back then. Apart from that she’s pretty much guaranteed a position there because of her Sharingan. No one forges documents quite like an Uchiha, after all.

“You can forge stuff later, if you really want. Much later, when you’re old and nobody wants you in the field anymore. No student of mine is going to be a desk ninja.”

He says ‘desk ninja’ like he says ‘youth’ – as if it’s something obscene that nobody should ever hear him utter. No, according to Kakashi-sensei Hisana is going to be the best thing you can be as a ninja – “I’m making you a tracker.”

“A tracker?”

She looks at him with not a little skepticism. Trackers are great, sure. But she has no special talent – no Byakugan, no Inuzuka nose, nothing that would make her any more useful at it than any other ordinary ninja. The only special thing about her are her eyes; shouldn’t she be utilizing them? The jounin makes a dismissive noise.

“Don’t rely on your kekkei genkai. It’s a lesson the Hyuuga should have learnt ages ago. You are not your doujutsu. You are Hisana-chan.”

It’s a nice thing to hear, she realizes a little dimly. Kakashi-sensei is probably the first to have figured this out simply because he’s been ‘Kakashi’ far longer than he’s been ‘Sharingan no Kakashi’. Most of the doujutsu users are ‘Hyuuga’ or ‘Uchiha’ at least as much as they are their own person. But if Kakashi-sensei thinks that she would be good as one, then she’s not really inclined to disagree. For all his fooling around, he does seem to take her training pretty seriously.

“Of course,” he tells her wryly, “If you screw up, what would the Hokage think of me?”

Probably that she’s yet another student he’s very inconspicuously trying to get rid of. Again, Uchiha-privileges, she thinks. If she were anyone else, it would be exactly the thing he’d be doing and there’d be no repercussions at all. For a moment she wonders if he hasn’t been trying to bully her into giving up herself, despite his earlier words.
Then again, two things can be true.

“Tracking is an art,” Kakashi-sensei says, and it sounds for once as if he means it. “It is also a trade, of course. But you will never be more than just an ok tracker if you don’t transcend that initial stage and start thinking about it in a more abstract, creative way.”

She nods, still not entirely sure where this is going.

“There are three methods of tracking: sight, scent, and chakra. As you probably know the Hyuuga track by sight, the Inuzuka by scent, and the Aburame by chakra.”

Again she nods – the first two make sense, the latter comes as no real surprise. She knows that the Aburame are a tracker clan, and the bugs have neither a sense of smell, nor very good eye sight. But they do eat chakra – all chakra. Of course they’d be sensitive to it. Kakashi-sensei crinkles his eye at her.

“You, my dearest student, might be able to pull off two and a half of those.”

Ok, so tracking is pretty cool, but also –ouch.

She’s been trying, for more than two hours now, to channel chakra into her nose.

“You won’t be as effective as an Inuzuka of course,” Kakashi-sensei said, “but there are still things you’ll have that they don’t. And a jack of all trades is always welcome anywhere.”

It’s a weird feeling; it’s not just her nose that she needs to enhance, but more the part between her nose and her throat. Kakashi-sensei watches her critically, Sharingan uncovered to check her progress.

“Further back,” he instructs. “The secret of scenting something is not just in the nose. We smell with our nose and our tongue. If you can taste the scent then you’re on the right track.”

The first time she gets it right, she nearly hurls all over the jounin’s shoes. Her brain isn’t made for so much olfactory input; tears shoot to her eyes and she gags.

“Too much,” she wheezes, “oh god, is it always like that?”

“You’re young,” he merely says. “Use less chakra until your brain has made the proper pathways to process this kind of information. But hey – you found the right spot.”

She glares at him with watery eyes.

With less chakra it’s easier, but also harder. The nausea is gone, but like this it’s more difficult to tell where a smell is coming from. The training Kakashi-sensei puts her through to rectify this reminds her a lot of ‘Looking at things with Kakashi’. Only this time it’s ‘Smelling things with Kakashi’ – which sounds so wrong, she doesn’t want to think about it.

The concept is really easy: The jounin hides a perfumed handkerchief somewhere, and Hisana has to find it. They upgrade to more difficult items eventually, after she’s learnt to recognize them. When her sensei has her tracking particular flowers across the forest, Hisana spends two of her free afternoons in the Yamanaka Flower Shop and has Ino show her the different sort of plants that grow around Konoha – much to the girl’s delight.
“This is so cool,” Ino sighs. “I wish I could do that – I mean, I recognize flowers by their smell, but only, like, when I hold them to my nose.”

“It’s not so hard once you get the hang of it,” Hisana admits. “Your team might need a tracker someday. You could try.”

She almost regrets her kind words when the Yamanaka throws her a vaguely worshipful look.

“You think I could do it? Really?”

“Yes, yes. Sure you could.”

Her team is a little less happy about Hisana’s enthusiasm.

“Haru-kun, come here.”

She takes her teammates arm and sniffs. The look he gives her is decidedly weirded out. The scent she picks up is familiar enough – after all Kohaku-sensei taught them how to track each other in a more basic way already. But like this she can pick up more things about him than just the general scent of the laundry detergent his mother prefers and the soap he uses. There’s also what he had for breakfast and several things that he must have touched at some point today, as well as a base scent that she’s come to associate with human skin.

“You should switch to a different soap,” she tells him. “You smell like vanilla; I could track you down like that from miles away. And I’m not even that good yet.”

“Oh good,” Kohaku-sensei remarks somewhat offhandedly. “For a moment I worried that I might have to remove you from Kakashi-senpai’s influence. I am relieved it is just that.”

What did he think she was doing? No, better not ask. But after that she’s a little more aware of how weird it must look.

Shiki thinks it’s hilarious when Hisana turns up on her front door, formally asking for a sniff.

“A what?”

“I want to know what you smell like.”

The Nara semi-discreetly sniffs her own armpit.

“Not like that you weirdo.”

After Shiki has laughed herself stupid about Hisana’s new vocation, she does allow her to sniff her arm. It’s terribly awkward – strangely more so than with Hisana’s own team – and the Uchiha hastily takes her leave when Shikano walks in on them, Hisana’s nose in the crook of Shiki’s elbow.

“No,” he says, “no. I don’t know what’s wrong with you lately, but it’s super creepy.”

The whole thing is terribly embarrassing; still, she can’t help but exaggeratedly sniff in Shikano’s direction as she passes him by. He flinches almost violently, much to his sister’s delight. Thankfully, after this Shizuha bears the whole thing calmly and doesn’t even bother to ask questions.

“I am a tracker too,” she reminds Hisana. “Go ahead.”
Despite that reassurance it takes a while until Hisana is comfortable with the whole scent tracking business again.

“You realize,” Kakashi-sensei says delicately, “that you don’t need to ask everyone for permission? Nobody has to know that you’re taking their scent.”

No, but it kind of seems like a violation of privacy otherwise; she’d rather deal with a little embarrassment than feel like some sort of human predator. Even though that’s basically what she’s training for – in a sense.

Two months later Kakashi-sensei is looking at her with a self-satisfied expression.

“How do you feel about ‘Looking at Things with Kakashi’ season 2?”

“Not particularly inclined to a repeat.”

“It’s a good thing it was a rhetorical question then, isn’t it?”

Tracking things by sight is bullshit.

“I am not touching that,” she tells him, vaguely gesturing towards the wet spot on the forest floor.

“But Hisana-chan, it’s just a little pee.”

“YES.”

Kakashi-sensei scratches the back of his head.

“You know,” he starts innocently, “I really considered making this an official apprenticeship. But if you’d rather not …”

“What,” she replies, not even bothering to make it sound like a question, “You mean it’s not already?”

“Well no, not officially. What, did you think it would be as easy as just doing it?”

He watches her blank expression with polite interest.

“I just realized you’re superfluous on my CV then,” she informs him.

The jounin visibly wilts.

“I could have asked Gai-senpai,” she muses, just to drive in the knife a little deeper. “I’m sure he’d gladly make me his apprentice.”

She didn’t think it was possible for a grown man to pout like that.

“All right,” he finally caves, “let’s start smaller then.”

Animal tracks turn to human tracks turn to … pee, eventually. She does see the reasoning behind it – has from the beginning. That doesn’t mean that she’s all too happy to put her face near the puddle, just to see how far it’s sunken into the soil. Thankfully it’s just as easy to block her nose with chakra as it is to enhance it. There’s no way she can look at it properly while smelling it too.
There’s one bright silver lining on her horizon. One that outshines Sasuke’s current moodiness, the humongous pile of paperwork for her impending apprenticeship, and yes, even Looking at Things with Kakashi: The next Chuunin Exams are only four months away. As travel takes about a week, and the official registering should be done rather early, Kohaku-sensei announced that they’d be leaving a little more than three months from now.

“Chuunin Exams,” Haru breathes, a little paler than usual. “Are we ready?”

“Of course we’re ready,” Sora scoffs. “We’re a whole year late actually.”

Hisana has to agree; she feels confident. Of course it’s always easy to feel strong when you’re at home, your family and friends in easy reach, and no one is actively out for your blood.

“You will be fine,” Kohaku-sensei says, and that is that.

Hisana lets her teammates believe it’s because he has so much confidence in them; nobody has to know that the Exam after that is held in Kumo – another country that no Hyuuga is allowed to step foot into. Then again, she knows her sensei well enough by now to know that he’d have little scruples to make them wait yet another year. So maybe he does think they’re ready.

“I want to come,” Sasuke tells her, as soon as he gets the news.

Hisana sighs.

“I know. And I wish I could take you along, but I can’t.”

“Why not? You will be gone for almost two months – you’ve never been away that long.”

“Suna and Konoha are not exactly the best of friends;” she reminds him. “We are allies, but outside of war and trade that means nothing. Our team has Kohaku-sensei, so we’ll be fine. But I can’t be sure that I can always have an eye on you.”

The noise that leaves Sasuke’s mouth is more than derisory, but he doesn’t say ‘I can take care of myself’, for which she’s glad. It would only lead to an argument.

“We aren’t allowed to take anyone along anyway,” she tries to appease him. “It’s classified as a mission.”

She’s not naïve enough to believe that Sasuke’s silence is agreement. It’s defeat, yes, but likely he’s angry with her now. That doesn’t really worry Hisana, but she does feel like whacking him over the head in exasperation. She loves Sasuke – he’s just so difficult sometimes. It’s been getting worse in the past few months. He’s become easily riled half the time and withdrawn the rest of it. Genma assured her it’s nothing to worry about though.

“The girls have been getting worse;” he admitted with a sigh.

“Since the Yamanaka girl seems to have calmed down, they’re without a leader now, so they’re getting bolder. It’s worse for Sakura-chan; Sasuke-kun can deal.”

She’s noticed it too. Admittedly, Hisana hasn’t been home as often as she should. Apart from Sundays, which are usually off, she really does work hard. It’s a strange deviance from the first few
months of her genin career, and she’s not sure if she likes it. At first she felt that she couldn’t protect Sasuke, now she feels they’re not as close as they should be anymore.

“I’m hoping I’ll be here for your Chuunin Exams,” she tells him, as if not even noticing his mood. “That’s why I’m taking the Exams now – I might make proctor at yours.”

“I don’t need you babysitting me,” he says, but the look in his eyes is interested. “What sort of proctor?”

She shrugs, unconcerned.

“Practical if I can. Maybe I’ll just be security standing around somewhere, but I am angling for the public matches. Not sure if they’ll let me with you there, but …”

This seems to appease him. Honestly, she’s not entirely sure what’s going on in his head sometimes. Hisana can’t even be sure why exactly he wants to come along to Suna. Maybe he’s just curious. Maybe he worries about her. Maybe it’s something else entirely. It’s a little disconcerting that she can’t tell anymore when she used to be able to read him like a book. But he’s growing up. It’s probably normal.

As long as Naruto and Sakura still have influence over Sasuke, whatever is happening can’t be too worrisome. Probably it is just the girl-problem. Contrary to popular belief Sasuke is not a complicated person, after all. People just like to read too much into him; it might be the broody tragic orphan thing. The dangerous thing about him is that his emotions run rather deep; anger doesn’t fade easily, betrayal is never forgiven, and changing his opinion is like trying to move a mountain.

“I’d rather you be there,” she says. “but the next Exams in Konoha are after your graduation. You really think I should wait that long?”

For a moment he looks at her as if he wants to say yes. Hisana isn’t sure what she’d do then. But her cousin shakes his head.

“No. I just want –“

He makes a frustrated noise. There’s a beat of silence in which he’s visibly struggling to express himself.

“I don’t like this,” he finally settles on. “I don’t trust Suna, I don’t trust your team, I don’t trust that you won’t do something stupid out there.”

The mix of indignation and fondness he provokes is a familiar one. She ruffles his hair, both of them aware that she can’t promise him that it won’t be so.
There is a huge commotion at the gates of Konoha.

More teams than a year ago have gathered at the west gate, ready to depart to Suna at a moment’s notice. Which makes Hisana’s current predicament even worse. She throws Sora a grateful look as the boy tries to place himself between her and the other genin teams, shielding the scene of stupidity from view.

“Are you quite done now, shishou?” she growls, decidedly not looking at her left where Kakashi is currently sewing a patch onto her arm – the very same one gracing the cutesy little vests of his stupid nin-dogs.

“No, now,” Pakkun placates her from his perch on her lap. “I think it looks very fetching, don’t you Kakashi-kun?”

Kakashi doesn’t answer; she strongly suspects it’s because he’d start giggling otherwise.

“All right,” he finally announces, an odd tremor to his voice that strongly suggesting that she’s right. “All done. Now you’re formally associated with me.”

“Was that really necessary?”

It isn’t Hisana who is complaining this time. It’s Kohaku-sensei, whose expression is so flat it’s almost funny.

“But Haku-chan, no need to be jealous – I have a spare one for you.”

Sensei visibly struggles for composure.

“Leave. Please,” he breathes.

It’s immeasurably comforting to know that it’s not just her Kakashi is driving up the wall.

The copy-nin shrugs.

“Ok, ok. I see I’ve overstayed my welcome.”

He pats Hisana’s head fondly and condescendingly all at once.

“Be a good girl and don’t give your team trouble.”

The following shunshin mercilessly blows dust into her face.

“He does that on purpose,” she wheezes, gripping Haru’s shirt and trying not to suffocate.

“Most likely,” Kohaku-sensei deadpans.
Two hours until departure.

Team 7 is sitting around her in a circle like a bunch of puppies, bags strewn across the grass, and mood swinging back and forth between worry and excitement for her. Or at least that’s what the boys are doing. Sakura has latched onto Haru, who is looking at Hisana with mild panic.

Oh no, she thinks gleefully, you ran the moment Kakashi-shishou turned up; I’m not lifting a damn finger for you.

“Senpai~” the girl chirps, “You’re going to make chuunin for sure, aren’t you?”

The unattractive chortle at Hisana’s back can only come from Sora.

“Nee-chan,” Naruto shrills, drawing her attention back to him like a homing beacon. “You’re going to kick butt, I know it! Don’t worry, you’ll be great!”

“Baka,” she says fondly, reaching out to pat him on the head; for a second she has a flashback of Kakashi doing the same to her earlier in the day, and suddenly she feels inexplicably dirty.

The truth is she is nervous now. It started about a week ago with a slight tremor to her hands that appeared every time the topic was brought up. Two days ago then, when she started packing her bag, there’s been a weird sickness in her belly that wouldn’t go away, no matter how much water she chugged to drown it. Both have disappeared now, the trembling and the sickness, but they were quickly replaced by a less conspicuous but constant low-level panic.

“Stick to your teammates,” shishou advised, predictably picking up on her racing pulse. “You will be fine.”

But while the boys are a great support, she had always counted on Shizuha to be there. That is, until the Aburame informed her that her mission count isn’t high enough yet, and that she’d have to join a genin team after all, as soon as the next batch of Academy students graduated. Now she’s alone; no Shizuha, no Shiki. The only other familiar presence is Hanada glaring at her back.

After failing the last exams the girl’s team is trying again this year, and her attitude towards Hisana hasn’t changed in the least. Her only comfort is that Sora looks equally grumpy; the girl’s affections seem to spook rather than flatter him. Once Haru has extricated himself from Sakura’s skinny arms the girl finally comes ambling over to her.

“Rations?” she asks.

“Check.”

“Desert gear?”

Hisan pulls the edge of her white coat from her bag.

“Check.”

“Documents?”

“Uh … -“

Sakura snatches the bag from her with a scowl.

“Give me that. Seriously, I’m checking this for you.”
When one of the jounin whistles for them to get moving their good-bye isn’t a tearful one. Not like
the masses of parents crying and embarrassing their children. Sakura and Naruto pull her in for a
group-hug.

“We believe in you,” the blond repeats firmly.

Sasuke’s farewell is even more subdued. For a moment they just stare at each other; then her cousin
reaches out to fist his hand in her shirt.

“Don’t take too long,” he tells her, tone demanding as always.

“I’ll see what I can do,” she answers.

No fear, no doubts, no second thoughts. Don’t let them screw with you, his face says. She flashes her
Sharingan at him, brief but fierce. Let them try.

From the corner of her eye she can see Haru hugging his parents and Sora waving his siblings good-
bye. Two more minutes.

She turns away.

It’s an eight-day journey to Suna.

Hisana has never been in the desert; most of the genin haven’t. Traveling under the aggressive sun
and sleeping in the cold makes her feel raw and used up. After two days there’s sand everywhere; in
her hair, in her eyes, in her underwear. Her skin is chafed red and her feet are burnt. But she isn’t
scared anymore – at least not of the journey itself. Instead she lets the presence of five genin squads
and the comforting weight of her bokken carry her through the day.

She pats the wooden sword slung from her belt fondly. Team 11 appears to be the only one carrying
non-standard weapons. Hisana knows there’s a pair of long, slim daggers hidden up Haru’s sleeves,
each no wider than a pair of chopsticks, and there are steel plates sewn into Sora’s gloves. For a
moment she wonders if the others are also hiding away their trump cards, or if they are every bit the
children Naruto and Sakura were during their first Exams.

She half-hopes not; Suna ninjas are animals, and naivety could be deadly there.

After four days in the desert a troop of suna nin comes for them.

They are two four man squads, dressed in airy white garb.

“They are here to make sure we reach our destination,” Kohaku-sensei informs them, tone heavily
implying ‘without making trouble’. On the eighth day the Village Hidden in the Sand appears before
them like a mirage, flickering in the hot mid-day air. The stone wall hiding the village itself,
ornamental but worn by sandstorms, looks like something out of Sarah’s old history text books. It’s
like the ancient city of Petra is appearing right in front of her.

The impression is lost when they make it through the gates. For a moment Hisana can only stare. The
architecture is like nothing she’s ever seen before. While the buildings themselves seem to be made
of stucco and relatively simple in colour and design, the landscape is a bizarre mix of towers and
spheres, giving the village a messed-up futuristic sort of feel.

“How dreary,” Haru comments, and she can see what he means.
Sand is thick on every surface, there are no plants anywhere, and everything looks sort of unfinished – as if someone had deemed it functional and then called it quits. They are marched towards the huge center building. Inside it’s cooler. After six hours of heat it’s a relief. Hisana can hear some of her companions groaning out loud; next to her a jounin teacher keeps one of his charges from sinking onto the cool floor.

“Registration for the Chuunin Exams,” croaks an elderly woman behind a large, polished desk. “Please fill out these forms.”

They are provided with rather nice rooms – or so Kohaku-sensei says.

Accommodations are nothing like at home. In the short time they’ve been here Hisana has come to realize that almost nothing in Suna is like it is at home. She is sharing a room with Kohaku-sensei, while the boys are across from them. Luckily they don’t have to share a bath with the other Konoha ninja. All this, according to the jounin, constitutes ‘a nice room’ in Suna.

“They aren’t as wealthy as Konoha,” he reminds them. “And the desert isn’t as generous as the forest. They live here despite the sand, not because of it.”

It makes sense. Konoha prospered because it was a nice place for civilian farmers to settle. The fertile land brought the farmers, which in turn brought the merchants.

Suna is almost entirely dominated by ninjas. There are merchants, but few of them. After all there is nothing here for them. Suna is too far out of the way for trade, there is no land to farm, and no money to spend on entertainment. All they have is a need for food, weapons, and clothing. Luxury is sparse.

It shows. The rooms are austere, the only decorations tapestries or admittedly lovely etchings in the walls, and the bathroom only consists of a deep basin in the floor that can be filled with cold well water and a hole in the ground. Hisana retrospectively thanks globalization and the internet for telling her that this is probably the toilet.

But no matter how strange Suna accommodations may be, after last week she’s disproportionally grateful for some cold water to wash herself and a bed to sleep in. Luckily high-thread cotton sheets are one of the few luxuries that they do get.

Despite its questionable appearance, Suna is very interesting. They have a week to kill before the Exams start, and so team 11 takes to wandering the village, scoping out the competition and having fun with the local cuisine. Dimly Hisana remembers wondering about foreign food at one point; there certainly is no fish in Suna. She eyes her scorpion on a stick with morbid interest. ‘Tail and claws,’ the vendor said. ‘Leave the body.’

She watches one of the cooks dispassionately whack a scorpion against the trencher and then chop off the stinger. He rams a stick through it and then throws it into a skillet as if it’s nothing. Hisana takes a bite of the tail. Salty.

Next to her Sora is eying his centipede in trepidation. In contrast Haru looks much happier about his grilled cactus paddle.

“So what do you think?” Hisana starts. “We haven’t seen much of the other villages yet, but we got a pretty good look at our Konoha competition. Anything interesting?”
Haru makes a thoughtful noise.

“I don’t know many of them by name,” he admits, “but there is this boy – he moves really strange. I think there might have been something strapped to his leg.”

“I know who you mean,” Sora says. “The one with the dark hair … naah, I don’t remember his name. But he was in our year. Mizuki-sensei’s class. What the hell would he be strapping under his pants?”

“Maybe it’s hidden by genjutsu,” Hisana suggests. “I’ll have a look at it if I can. Would make sense though.”

Someone is listening in.

She can feel a chakra signature, tense and unmoving, right around the corner. She smoothly links arms with Haru and taps onto his hand, just in Sora’s line of sight.

_one person. unknown._

There’s no reaction and she doesn’t expect one.

“How is it?” Sora asks, motioning to the remains of her scorpion. “Can I have some?”

When she hands it to him he taps against her hand.

engage.

The look in his eyes is still questioning. She grins at him. Haru sighs in defeat.

engage.

Sora takes a chunk out of the scorpion; the look on his face is one of alarm. In a show of laughter Haru and she pull apart, and Hisana uses the moment to grab onto whoever is hiding behind them. Her hand closes around fabric and she pulls. A blond head emerges, Suna hitai-ate glinting in the sun.

Temari.

For a moment Hisana is hit by a wave of panic. If Temari is here, does that mean her brothers are nearby? But the girl doesn’t look scared, or even wary – just pissed. Swallowing down her fear for now she decides to play dumb.


A weight leans onto her shoulder and Sora’s voice sounds near her ear, more derisive than she’s ever heard him.

“Let the kid go, Hisana – I bet she’s not even old enough for the Exams. No threat at all.”

For normally being such a dork he plays the role of the asshole shockingly well. On her other side Haru has completely frozen, face stuck in a familiar cold shock-expression; chances are that he’s recognized the girl.

“Don’t you know who I am?” Temari hisses, trying to pry Hisana’s grip off her shirt with surprising strength.
“No one really important ever starts an introduction like that,” she informs the girl delicately.

The blond reddens in frustration and embarrassment. Hisana lets go of Temari’s shirt anyway and then pointedly turns her back on the girl. Dismissed. Temari’s bluster is almost audible at this point; luckily she’s also clever enough not to start a fight, and so she angrily stalks away. There is a moment of silence.

“D-do you know - …?”

A frosty glare of consternation has by now taken over Haru’s face. Sora snorts at him and reaches out to pull at his cheek.

“Get a grip Haru. You look as if you’re about to go on a killing spree.”

The other boy winces, but his expression visibly relaxes.

“T-that was the Kazekage’s daughter,” he slurs, trying to bat away his teammate’s hand.

“Seriously? No wonder she was such a brat.”

Hisana watches them in bemusement. In theory Temari’s team isn’t old enough to participate yet. If the Academy system in Suna works the same as in Konoha Kankurou still has a year to go, Gaara two. Then again, would the Kazekage really make his oldest daughter wait for his sons? Wouldn’t it make more sense to separate them – at least until Gaara has graduated? And they do take their Exams together two years from now.

But that could have been a ruse – there was no evidence in canon, as far as she remembers, but it would have made sense if Temari were at least chunin already, only smuggled in to keep Gaara in check. Or maybe she’s just supposed to let off some steam out there. She’s twelve, after all – a good age to get your ass beaten and learn some humility.

Well, it’s not as if there’s anything to be done about it now. If Temari shows up in the Exams it must be with a makeshift team, and Hisana is quite confident that her own team can at least manage that much.

On eating scorpions: To eat scorpions one has to remove the stinger and the venom glands, which are also located at the tip of the tail. It is possible to eat the scorpion’s body, as is custom with the smaller species, but some insect cooks discourage that – scorpions are slow digesters, so it’s possible that their stomachs are still filled with what they ate quite a while ago, i.e. flies and other insects. Of course one could gut them properly, but somehow I don’t see that happening at a shady street vendor.

On eating centipedes: I’m talking about Scolopendra gigantea, not those adorable little house centipedes. They can be eaten, but apparently are an acquired taste (either described as ‘fish gone bad’ or ‘almost like chicken’ – which is not very helpful, since fish and chicken obviously taste nothing alike).

On Suna cuisine: Desert tribes usually eat little meat, because it’s too rare and animals are too precious. Instead they eat cheese and drink milk. There’s also melons and dates, millet, and dried and pounded vegetables. I took the Tuareg in particular as my model for this, because they’re half-nomadic, and their diet isn’t quite as limited as a completely nomadic tribe’s. The insect eating part happened because it’s an interesting addition to the milk and cheese, and possibly a meat substitute.
for particularly hungry and burnt out shinobi. I’m pretty sure ninjas have no compunctions about this sort of things.
I have another little extra for you at the end of this chapter. I hope you enjoy it:

For more information about my current/future projects and a few interesting links, please have a look at my tumblr.

---

*Great Hall B, 8:30 a.m.*

That’s all the card says.

Great Hall B is a big conference room in an administrative building. Hisana knows where it is, simply because she’s seen the signs at the day of their arrival. But even if she hadn’t known, the droves of ninjas marching towards the same location from all over the village would have certainly given her a hint. She’s a little overwhelmed, in all honesty. Konoha is pretty big, and there are constantly all sorts of ninja milling about, but she’s never seen so many in one place. That they are mostly from foreign, possibly hostile villages only sends more adrenaline down her limbs.

The boys are a reassuring presence beside her, Haru keeping up with her hurried pace easily on her left, Sora matching his far longer stride to them on her right. They press into the crowded hall, squeezed between gloomy looking pre-teens and truly terrifying looking young adults. The stench of sweat and fear is thick in the air, which reassures her far more than it should. Hisana’s hand finds the henohenomoji sewn onto her arm; she feels oddly like the predator right now, rather than the prey, even in the face of ninjas twice her size.

Despite the size of the crowd it is quiet. No chatter echoes through the hall, foot steps are all silenced to nothingness. It’s a good thing, or they would have missed a familiar voice croaking, “Chuunin Exam, registration for the first task! Over here please.”

There’s a creaking noise, a desk scraping over tile, and suddenly the old woman becomes visible above the heads of the assembled genin.

“For team registering, please refer to desk one – for single registering, please refer to desk two.”

A confused murmur and a jolt go through the crowd, nearly taking Hisana off her feet.

“I repeat,” the old lady rasps, voice dying rapidly, “team registering on desk one – every member of the team needs to sign! For single registering, please refer to desk two. The first task starts in twenty minutes.”

“Single registering?” someone questions in the front. “We can do that? B-but what of our team?”

The old lady clears her throat wetly.

“All participants can register as single participants – the remaining members of the team will either have to withdraw from the Exams, or register as single participants.”
There’s a moment of silence. Then chaos breaks out.

“Single participants?” Hisana wonders out loud, whirling around to her team.

But the boys are gone. She growls. Someone, a Kiri shinobi, very nearly steps onto her foot; she’s pushed further into the crowd, disoriented. Great. The boys must have been swept away too.

“Sora? Haru?”

Predictably there’s no answer. She squeezes through the crowd, once again rather glad for her height. She can’t quite overlook them all, but a good part of the younger ones. In any case it will make her easier to find. Feeling for chakra is as good as impossible in this place – when she tries the backlash of the assembled ninjas sends her into a vicious bout of vertigo and leaves her with a mild headache. A little more carefully she channels a little more chakra into her nose. She shudders. In theory Hisana knows that most shinobi are a bunch of filthy, stinky barbarians; actually smelling it full force is an experience on a whole other level.

Beneath the general stink of fear and sweat there’s old blood, unbrushed teeth – and definitely someone who didn’t shower today somewhere close to her. She recognizes Haru’s scent first. But tracking him through the hall only leads her back to where she started. What the hell is going on? She sniffs again, trying to contain a grimace at the hulking Iwa-nin next to her. Did he roll in manure? Is that a thing Iwa-nin do in their freetime?

Only ten more minutes. The line at the single register is getting longer. Should she - …? No. She hates the idea of doing this on her own, and there’s no way the boys would stop looking for her to sign up – she’d be leaving her team to fail for sure.

Haru’s scent is clearly somewhere close. But it’s coming from a Suna kunoichi armed with a battle axe. She looks at the girl in confusion, trying to take a more inconspicuous sniff.

“Rui?” the girl asks, just as bewildered.

Rui?

“Maki-chan?” someone calls next to her.

“Akiko!”

“Mamorou-kun!”

She blinks, disturbed. Five minutes left; the yelling is getting more desperate, and the Suna girl is still looking her with such a familiar tilt of her head. The mimics are all wrong, the size and the voice too. Hisana’s Sharingan flare to life even before she makes the conscious decision to activate them. The kunoichi doesn’t even blink, as if she hasn’t noticed Hisana squinting at her with red eyes. He probably hasn’t.

Spindly nets of chakra are layered all over the hall. There’s a young girl with a Kumo hitai-ate next to her, wearing the guise of a Kiri shinobi. Two Ame ninjas are narrowly walking past each other again and again, one disguised as a weedy Konoha kunoichi, the other as a much older Kumo ninja. The suna kunoichi is still staring at her, but this time she can make out Haru’s face under the genjutsu.

“Rui?” the girl says again, while her teammate’s mouth forms ‘Hisana-chan’?

“Kai,” she mumbles, careful not to alert any of the others, before reaching out for him.
‘Genjutsu’

A second passes, Haru’s eyes flickering back and forth between her and the competition, before he too shakes off the illusion.

“Where’s Sora?”

They find him standing in line for the team sign up. When they walk up to him he waves at them cheerily.

“You already broke the genjutsu?” she asks in surprise.

It hurts her pride a little that he was apparently faster than her, despite the Sharingan, but the annoyance disappears when she realizes how relaxed he looks; as he never doubted they’d turn up in time.

Sora shrugs.

“I stumbled around for a while, but then I saw someone throw off the illusion. In hindsight, it was pretty obvious, huh? So I got in line already – I knew you’d find both of us quicker than the other way around.”

They make it, but barely.

The elderly woman leads them out of the hall, genjutsu still firm in place. They leave behind the other contestants, none of them any the wiser. Hisana isn’t sure whether to be surprised or not, that there are in fact a good number of singular ninjas with them. In Konoha this would have been certainly a trick – a way to weed out those incapable of teamwork or selfish enough to leave their comrades behind. But this isn’t Konoha, and Suna seems to be just fine with the weird make up of their group.

Hisana counts six complete teams, one of them a Konoha cell with an Inuzuka in the lead, and one of them a Suna team with a familiar blonde. Temari. Hisana elbows both of her teammates, too startled to be inconspicuous. The the Kazekage’s daughter catches Hisana’s look, just as both boys recognize her. She gives the girl a razor sharp smile that she hopes is convincing enough to cover up her apprehension. To her bewilderment Temari looks at her just as disturbed as Hisana feels; a quick glance at the boys shows that they are all sporting the exact same creepy expression. Oh.

“Good one, Haru-kun,” she whispers, suddenly strangely amused.

“My face hurts,” he whispers back, mouth trying to twitch back into something more neutral.

“Whatever you’re planning with her, I hope this is worth it.”

Temari’s teammates are indeed, to her relief, not her brothers. Instead they are big, nasty looking ninjas with veiled faces – maybe the Kazekage really does want her to have a taste of defeat before entering the Exams for real. Or maybe he hopes Temari’s extra experience will lead Gaara through his own Exam with the fewest causalities possible. Maybe both. Fact is that those two hulks look more like bodyguards than teammates, trying to wall the girl in between them. Much to Temari’s annoyance, apparently.

The number of single participants is even higher than the number of teams; Hisana counts nine singular ninjas, most of them predictably from Kiri, but also a good number from Kusa and Iwa. And Hanada. The girl comes bounding over to them, completely unmoved by the tension in the room and the loss of her team.
“Can you believe it?” she drawls, latching onto Sora’s arm and completely ignoring the rest of them.

“Konoha would have never let us compete by ourselves. This is so much better. You know, those losers cost me my promotion last time. Good riddance.”

“Don’t say crap like that,” Sora snaps, trying unsuccessfully to extricate himself from her. “I know Arata and Shin. There’s nothing wrong with their skills.”

This is new information. Hisana shoots Haru an inquiring look, but the boy only shrugs. Never heard of those two either. Hanada makes a dismissive gesture.

“Anyway – they could have signed up too. Not my fault they didn’t.”

Sora’s retort is cut short by the arrival of the first proctor.

Hisana’s jaw nearly hits the floor; she’s not the only one. The proctor is an elderly man – far over sixty certainly – with a kindly, wrinkled, nut-brown face. Most of his hair is gone, except for a few tufts of white cotton candy. He’s huge. She’s never seen such a huge person before; the man towers over all of them by at least three heads and his arms look as if he likes to bend steel in his spare time.

“Yes, good morning, yes,” he greets them, Suna accent thick and rough in his voice. “There’s quite a few of you left, yes.”

He scrutinizes them, fingers tugging on a tuft of hair.

“We’ll have to change that, yes.”

He pulls down a lever behind him and opens a door to the outside. Sunlight bursts into the room, and after only a few seconds the air gets noticeably hotter.

“That’s your first task, yes.”

A few of them hesitantly step closer. Baking under the sun, walled in by the building itself, is a miniature castle, surrounded by a garden. There are watchtowers, a gate and a building about the size of three regular houses.

“Eh … what?” someone blurts out.

The proctor’s laugh is decidedly less benevolent than his appearance.

“This is the castle of Akihiko-dono. Inside there is a fully functional household: Akihiko-dono and his wife, his children, his servants and guards … and a political hostage, yes.”

Someone gives an impressed whistle.

“You will infiltrate the castle and retrieve the hostage, yes. Please, single participants line up here; you will go first. Every participating unit will have two hours, yes.”

“That … means camping out here,” Haru realizes.

“Food and drink will be provided,” the proctor assures them. “But settle in for a long wait, yes.”

They are last. Of course they are last. Sweaty, annoyed and in desperate need for alone time team 11 watches most of the single participants flounce out of the castle victoriously and long before the two
hour mark.

“See,” Hanada chirps, “I told you getting rid of the extra weight can only help things along.”

Her glare makes very clear whom she considers the extra weight. After almost 16 hours the sun has long since set even in Suna. They make up for it by shining huge spotlights onto the castle, blazing just as viciously as the desert sun.

“Any way we can make it in under two hours?” Sora enquires, dark shadows under his eyes despite several naps. Hisana shrugs.

“Depends on how good you are with the henge.”

To her it’s stupidly, glaringly obvious – though that might admittedly be because she read Naruto religiously for quite a while. The first few volumes are still vivid in her mind, even after all these years. After leaving behind the guilt that profiting from Naruto’s ingenuity would have provoked just a few years ago, stealing a part of his Shadow Shuriken technique won’t keep her awake for even a single night. Not with her promotion up in the air, and with it a great deal of her future.

She’s not sure if that makes her a cheater, or just a ninja.

The boys need thirty minutes to transform into inanimate objects. It’s apparently harder than it looks – which makes Naruto’s spontaneous mastery of it all the more impressive. Sadly the jutsu does nothing to decrease mass, so they both weight the same. It’s a bit of a struggle to cast a genjutsu on herself and then scale one of the woodden watchtowers with them, but she manages. There’s a guard at full attention just a few feet abow her, but the genjutsu holds.

From here she has a good view on the gardens and the entrance of the house. There are four patrols, as far as she can see. Their guard patterns aren’t particularly sophisticated, but they are fast. There seems to be no one else outside though, so she’s pretty confident that she could get at least the boys into the house. The only problem would be that she has no way of knowing what’s inside the house.

There could be more guards. It could be a fully fledged trap. They could walk right into Akihiko-dono. This is a Chuunin Exam, so she’s pretty sure assassinating the noble is not in the cards – on missions like this they’d cause an international incident.

But judging by the guards all of the house’s inhabitants should be civilians, so the boys should be able to sneak past them.

“All right,” she hisses, watching the guard above her carefully, “I can get you to the front door. If I’m right you’re going to have fifteen seconds to open the damn door and get inside before the next guard comes along. You better be ready.”

Hisana carefully loosens her hands from the tower, letting the weight of her entire team drag her body into the horizontal. Two kunais, straight past the guards. She can do that.

The last man vanishes around the corner and …

thunk thunk

It’s maybe 50 feet of gardens she has to throw across, but the sheer weight of the kunais is staggering. They hit the grass not far from the veranda, but the impact makes more noise than she anticipated. Sora releases the henge, grabs a hold of the Haru-kunai and slithers into the building.
There’s no further noise. Hisana allows herself a moment to relax. From here on her team will take care of the hostage.

In the meantime Hisana will have to think of something for the guards. She crawls further up the tower, genjutsu sliding from her body like a whispy cloak, and pokes her head over the railing. The last thing the guard sees are her Sharingan spinning in the dark.

---

7 things about the Nara household

6. Shiki’s homelife is rather idyllic: Unlike Michiko, who rules her family through fear, Sachiko prefers manipulation and the swift, petty retribution that only a mother can give. Her husband is more than fine with that. If a bit of vinegar finds its way into his tea every once in a while, well, he still prefers it to the yelling.

7. Shikarou is generally an authoritarian father who doesn’t show much affection physically. Many people think that means he’s distant to his family, but that’s not true – he’s just sort of an awkward duck. People of the Nara clan know how pleased he is actually with his children, because he calls Shiki ‘his princess’ and Shikano ‘his heir’. Outsiders simply don’t get the privilege of information about them.

8. Shikano is the cuddly sort of older brother. While he would vehemently deny that in public – and in fact has done so several times – he used to be the one to carry Shiki around on his shoulders, take her places, and generally bow to her every whim. As they got older he started putting on a harassed face, but in truth he still dotes on her.

9. The reason why Shikano is rather interested in Hisana is that she is Shiki’s first proper friend. He also wants to meet Shizuha, to which Shiki replied, “She’s skittish; you’ll scare her away.”

10. People are always confused as to why Nara men oftentimes marry strong willed women, as most of them repeatedly express that they only want their peace and quiet, until they actually meet ‘the one’. The reason is, most likely, that as they get older they start remembering something their fathers have been telling them since they were little boys: ‘The only woman worth marrying is the one that can put the fear of god in you.’ – of course the second part of it is only spoken aloud when the wife is nowhere in hearing range: ‘Because that way no one ever messes with your family, and you have your peace and quiet.’

11. While Shiki acts a lot like her mother, she looks just like a Nara. The most notable instance of that is her wiry hair; while mostly wrestled into a severe bun, Sachiko likes to braid it, which makes her look a little like Pipi Longstocking.

12. While the members of the Nara household engage in vicious games of Shogi – complete with betting household chores – they also enjoy Go, Mahjong, Bagh Chal, and Go Fish.

---

If there’s someone you’d like to know more about, please speak up! I’m doing these ‘xx things about’ mostly about the major characters, but if there’s someone else you’re interested in, I’d gladly
give it a go.
So … I did something I’ve never wanted to do: I did a pov change. Hope you don’t mind. It seemed necessary and I think it turned out ok.

There is a time limit.

Sora doesn’t give two shits about the official one – if they need two hours for this crap then they don’t deserve to become chuunin. He’s pretty sure the examiner gave them so much time to give them a wrong sense of security. The truth is much closer to twenty minutes, which is about as long as Hisana can fool the guards outside. He knows the limits of his teammate’s kekkei genkai very well. It’s not the solution to every problem; currently it’s only a useful tool wielded by an inexperienced little girl. All she can do for now is knock out the guards, and it’s only a matter of time until one of them realizes that they’re suddenly short a few men.

Haru’s weight pulls at him as he crawls along the ceiling and he has to suppress a wince every few feet when his belt cuts into his skin in a particularly vicious way. He’d have preferred the other boy to do this part. Haru is better at genjutsu than him, and stealthier too. If one of the servants scurrying along the hallway were to look up … well, it would be pretty bad. But Sora is physically stronger, and there’s no way his weedy teammate would be able to carry him in any capacity, much less upside-down.

Another servant’s chakra signature comes his way. It’s slower this time, though the steps don’t sound any less urgent. It’s a woman in a kimono and she’s carrying a tablet with tea.

Aha. He has no idea what the hostage looks like, or anyone of Akihiko-dono’s family, and there’s no way to be sure for whom the tea is. But if he follows her, he’ll at least find someone important. He crawls after the woman, careful not to make a sound while the teacups clink away below him.

She leads them towards a shoji door. He wants to curse – of course things can’t be easy even once in his life. The door slides open and the servant girl daintily shuffles inside. Never has Sora ever wasted a thought on the mechanics of a shoji door. Most of the time he even forgets they exist – his family home, old and creaky, and most official buildings use more solid wooden doors. Now he kind of wonders if a class on architecture might not be useful for every ninja. An unmoving piece of bamboo connects the door to the ceiling, a not even knee high wall of paper; right now it might as well be a fifteen foot, solid stone wall. Maneuvering over it in the few seconds that the girl needs to open and close the door is pretty much impossible.

Annoyed, he shuffles closer, carefully poking a hole into the washi paper with his finger before pressing his eye to it.

Akihiko-dono is a fat elderly man dressed in flashy attire. Surrounded by his family like adoring fans he looks more like an empereor than a lowly noble. Like a villain out of a trashy samurai novel. But then he laughs and he sounds like the jolly old man that sells candy outside the old Uchiha district. His wife titters in response. She’s a lovely lady, dressed in equally flashy clothes and her hair full of ornaments. There are two dark haired children, maybe five or six years old, who share their mother’s dark hair. The only one out of place is a little red-headed girl.
Sora allows himself a petulant whine. A child. Great. Because he’s so awesome with kids. His own siblings don’t count – they fear the power he wields over their food, so they’re easy to control. Also, this one is a girl. They cry. Often.

The sound of teacups being set rips him out of his thoughts. Fifteen minutes. It doesn’t matter how to get the girl out – not yet at least. First he has to get her alone. But how? Fresh tea is being served; he doesn’t think they’re going to go to bed anytime soon. They could cause a commotion outside, hope to catch her in the confusion. But then Hisana-chan’s efforts to get them inside undetected would have been in vain. This is a stealth operation; they need to be clever about it. He takes the Haru-Kunai from his belt and rams it into the ceiling with a thud.

“I’m all out of ideas,” he admits. “Come on, help me out a little.”

Haru emerges with minimal smoke effect and no noise at all. There’s a moment of silent panic as he almost falls off the ceiling, only clinging on with his knees. Sora jerks him upright.

“I-I can find her room,” Haru suggests, a little out of breath and eyes still wide with nerves. “If I make n-noise there – if I break something – maybe she’ll be called away.”

“What if you get the wrong room?”

12 more minutes – maybe less. He wishes he’d signed a summoning contract right about now. Some communication with the last member of their team would be appreciated.

“You know what,” he decides, “screw stealthy. When she’s gone they’ll realize what happened and why. They just can’t know that it’s been Konoha doing the dirty work.”

“So … we just blow something up and hope Hisana-chan understands?”

“Basically.”

An explosion rocks the east side of the estate.

Hisana flinches as if struck. For a moment all she can do is stare, watch the guards on the ground shout and scramble for cover. What in all the world was that? An explosion tag, certainly; the blast was relatively small – for a ninja. For a civilian this might have been the biggest explosion they’ll ever see outsight of war. She drops down from the tower and snatches one of the surprised guards to drag him into the bushes. He stares at her, mouth open as if to scream, but no sound comes out. Middle-aged, distinguished looking with his mustache. Perfekt. She knocks him out, careful to preserve her chakra.

“Henge.”

The other men have by now gathered their wits.

“Go!” one of the yells. “Protect the Lord!”

Three of them hasten inside the building. Hisana follows the rest of them towards the bombsite.

It’s the garden that has taken the worst of the blast. The trees are gone and and the earth is scorched, but only a few shingles have been knocked loose on the estate. A distraction. Of course, she reminds herself. The boys might be a little impulsive, but even they wouldn’t have risked accidentally blowing someone up. In a dramatic poof of smoke someone appears on the empty, half-splintered
watchtower. It’s a familiar figure, but it’s not Haru.

A girl with a Kiri hitai-ate is staring down at them with a stony expression that strikes a chord with Hisana. The girl drops down in their midst, raising a cloud of dust and vanilla scent. That damn sopa, she thinks in hilarity.

“Kiri!” she yells in a generic male voice, hoping that nobody notices that her voice doesn’t match her face. But adrenaline is on her side; the guard in charge raises his sword.

“Get her!”

Haru sweeps through them, easily downing two men, and grips Hisana by the scuff of her neck.

“Sora’s inside. I got this,” he tells her, before throwing her clear across the garden. She plays dead for a few precious seconds, listening to the footsteps of more men rushing past her. When they fade she jumps to her feet and bursts into the estate. A servant girl squawks and Hisana grabs her wrist.

“Akihiko-dono,” she gasps at her, “is he safe? Is the family safe?”

“Yes, yes,” the girl yelps, “they are in the saferoom!”

Hisana grips her ribs and affects a wince.

“Save yourself!” she tells the servant, who scurries off with a panicked look.

She follows Sora’s chakra signature deeper into the estate. More servants hurry past her, but none of them seem overly frightened. Sora must still be hiding; an open fight would have had more of an effect on them. She rounds another corner, nearly running straight into two men, positioned left and right in front of a door. Somewhat smugly she realizes that Sora is already inside the room. Another Henge turns Hisana into the captain of the guard.

“Two more intruders in the north wing!” she snarls, stumbling towards them.

“Sir!”

One of them immediately runs towards her, trying to support her limping form. He’s young, maybe too young to convince his companions, but he’ll have to do.

“Go!” she tells them. “I can still guard a damn door in my old age, but not going jumping after those young bucks anytime soon.”

The men share a look and her heart nearly stops. “Go!” she urges and they run for it. As soon as they’re out of earshot she scrabades together the dregs of her chakra for a last Henge into the young guard. Then she stumbles into the saferoom as if she’d just escaped certain death. Four men snap to attention, pointing yaris at her. Safely bracketed between their protectors and the wall cowers Akihiko-dono’s family. He himself is nowhere in sight. Finally one of the guards recognizes her face.

“Boy!” he snaps. “What are you doing? Don’t abandon your post!”

“Sir,” she squawks, “please, it’s not safe anymore! All men have been ordered to fight the intruder! She’s on her way; we need to relocate!”

A fearful murmur runs through the room. Only one person is conspicuously not speaking. Hisana eyes the elderly guard right next to a little red-headed girl. In the small room Sora’s chakra signature
is almost overwhelming. It feels a little surreal that nobody else seems to notice. Finally someone helps the noble’s wife to her feet.

“Let’s go,” the guard barks. “We need to move quickly then.”

The woman hurriedly tucks her youngest child into her arm, his sister is foisted onto another guard. Before someone can volunteer Sora snatches up the little red-head. For a moment Hisana almost forgets to breathe. Can they really be that lucky?

“Quick!” she urges and is brushed aside by one of the more senior guards.

“Don’t think this will get you a promotion,” he jeers. “Braver men than you are fighting outside. You’re just the messenger. Couldn’t they have sent some servant?”

She gives a helpless shrug and an insolent face for good measure. Then she deliberately flares her chakra. It’s a distress signal. Any ninja in the vicinity would know in a matter of seconds where she is – luckily they’re currently the only ones. Sora stares at her for a long moment and then joins in.

Haru will come for them. She’s not sure if he’ll get what’s going on, but right now he only needs to turn up.

They round a corner when something whistles past her ear. A kunai thunks into the wall and she only has a second to realize there’s another explosive tag tied to it. She ducks away, bumping right into Sora and the girl. The explosion is almost laughably tiny. It’s still enough to rip a hole into the wall and scatter debris everywhere. There are men yelling as Haru blasts a Futon into the mess, whirling up dust like a miniature tornado. Next to her Sora makes a break for it. She follows him outside, past the unconscious people littering the lawn, and up onto a watchtower.

“We made a mess,” she states unhappily. “I’d thought we’d be cleaner about it. In and out, you know.”

“No helping it,” Sora says and, in a puff of smoke, releases the Henge. The girl on his arm sniffles.

“I want to go home,” she blubbers.

“We’re bringing you home,” he says, trying to smile at her. “That’s why we’re here. Your kaa-chan and tou-chan want to see you again.”

“No,” the girl insists. “I want to go home. To Mei-dono and Akihiko-dono!”

They share a helpless look.

“Extraction time?” Sora suggests.

“Extraction time,” she agrees. “You’ll have to do it, I’m out of chakra. Give me the girl.”

There’s another small explosion of smoke and a butch shinobi stands in front of her, Kiri hitai-ate wrapped around his bulky biceps. He winks at her, expression entirely at odds with his harsh features. Her teammate jumps off the tower, dropping into the grass like a stone, and then shoots back into the estate like a bullet.

“It’ll be fine, you know,” she tells the girl, feeling compelled to at least try and comfort her. “You’ll meet some nice people, see some nice places. And in a few years you can come back if you want.”

The girl only sniffs. There’s more yelling before the rest of her team storms back into the garden. Hisana ducks her head, hiding her own Konoha symbol against the girl’s fiery hair, as Akihiko-dono
himself stumbles after them.

“You ok?”

She musters Haru, who only nods curtly. He’s out of breath and a little scuffed up, but that seems to be all.

“All right; let’s go.”

They drop down from the tower once more, this time not into the grass, but onto the cold stone on the other side. Three of the great spot lights turn off one after another and the noise on the other side dies down immediately. In the sudden half-dark Hisana can already feel the fatigue set in while adrenaline is still making her limbs shake. It feels like a sickness; violent, cold shivers taking control of her. Next to her Sora’s shoulders sag. He suddenly looks only half as tall anymore. Haru yawns.

There’s the sound of wood creaking and the great gate opens to reveal Mei-dono, Akihiko-dono’s lovely wife. She walks towards them with small, dainty steps and a mild smile.

“Caused some chaos, yes?” she says.

Hisana can feel her jaw drop. One last Henge is released and the examiner bends down to them. He takes in the little girl’s slightly dusty clothes and tugs at her hair.

“But you have the girl – and she looks fine, yes. What do you say?” he addresses the red-head who is still clinging to Hisana’s neck. The girl’s watery pout is replaced by a bright smile and she gives a thumbs up. The examiner nods contemplatively.

“Passed. But a little more stealth would have been nice, yes. Someone still has to clean that up tonight.”

When they return to their rooms everyone is already asleep. It must be around three or four in the morning; in a few short hours the sun would rise. All adrenaline is long gone by now and the brief surge of happiness has been completely replaced by a bone deep tiredness and the familiar mission-low. They trudge up the stairs in silence. For a moment Hisana envies her teammates, who stumble towards their own room, occasionally bumping into each other. She already knows what is still awaiting her.

True to her expectations, Kohaku-sensei is still awake. He is sitting cross-legged on his bed and there is a chair in front of him. Dirty, sweaty, and shivering she resigns herself to her fate.

“Tell me,” Sensei says, “… about everything you did wrong today.”

Anyone noticing what Kohaku-sensei is doing?
Sheehs ... it's been so long since I updated. Sorry about that.

They have three days of ‘reprieve’ before the next task starts.

‘Reprieve’ because Kohaku-sensei pushes them hard. Hisana thinks the results of the last task may have amused him somewhat, but he also made it very clear that chaos won’t be the answer to everything.

“You are all quick thinkers and very familiar with each other,” he said. “That saved you. But one day you will be assigned to other teams – temporarily or permanently. Please remember that. They might not be as quick and they will certainly not know you in the way your genin teammates do. You need to figure out a way to communicate over distance. Preferably soon.”

They practice more advanced hand signals and chakra flare patterns and how to leave inconspicuous marks on trees and stone. But all of these methods have a limited range of meanings or need visual of one or both of your teammates. They can be intercepted or worse – misinterpreted. It’s an art more than a science; not something you want your life to depend on. And yet, knowing all this makes her feel a little safer.

The morning of the next task dawns bright and early. In Suna the sun rises at shortly past 5; they’re up and moving even before that. The second task is going to take place outside of Suna proper, and Hisana has more than a bad feeling about it. The memories of their trek here, of gritty sand in her mouth and the freezing cold at night, have left her with a healthy respect for the desert. With the first rays of sunlight on their backs they march towards the massive gates of Sunagakure, yet again without their teacher. With a surge of satisfaction Hisana realizes that there are considerably less ninja joining them this time.

There is a group of people already awaiting them.

Sora stops dead and Hisana nearly walks into him.

“You see that?” he blurts out.

As she peers around him the reason for his bewilderment becomes apparent. At least twenty children are sitting in the sand just outside the gate. None of them older than ten and all of them with bright copper hair. A familiar little girl separates from the group and dances towards them with a smile.

“Good morning,” she chirps and unapologetically plants a foot in Haru’s stomach to climb him like a tree. When she finally sits comfortably on his shoulders she adds, “I’m Aki. We’ll be working together again today, please take care of me.”

More and more red-haired children separate from the group, presumably searching out the teams that ‘liberated’ them. Aki points a finger to the gate.
“That way,” she instructs, spurring Haru on like a horse. “It’s not far – just a few minutes running distance. I’ll lead you there!”

True to Aki’s words they don’t need to go far. They do need to climb a rock though, which sucks worst for her quiet teammate, Aki still clinging to his neck like a limpet. Team 11 is one of the first to arrive. There are two single participants, also accompanied by children, as well as whom Hisana assumes to be the proctor, a pretty lady wrapped from head to toe in white linen. She shares the children’s red hair, tied back in a loose braid.

In the next fifteen minutes more and more people trickle in, until there are four teams and twelve single participants. The last task decimated almost half of the teams, but only weeded out two single ninjas. The thought makes her uncomfortable. Do those people really deserve to be there? Solo missions aren’t unheard of, but someone so selfish and completely incapable of teamwork – she wouldn’t want to work with that sort of person. But Suna doesn’t just seem to tolerate it, but reward it. Hisana has no doubt that the last task must have been far easier for a singular ninja. In and out – no back up, but also no one to consider in your plans. Bad for a real-life mission, but nearly perfect in an exam where you only have to prove yourself.

Across from them she watches a little red-haired boy repeatedly reaching for Hanada’s hand. The girl keeps stepping away from him, hissing and spitting like a cat. On their other side Temari is carrying a giggling little girl on her back.

The proctor claps her hands and all conversation stops dead.

“I am your proctor for the second task,” she starts in a strangely deep voice. “And this is your arena.”

She stops her foot and the ground gives way, crumbling into tiny pebbles to reveal a perfectly circular hole.

“This rock houses an intricate maze of tunnels and caverns. Your goal is to move your reclaimed hostage through the rock to the ground level while eliminating your competition.”

Hanada visibly sputters.

“An escort mission?” she squawks. “B-but that’s unfair! That means the team participants have an advantage!”

The proctor smiles thinly.

“Acting on your own has advantages and disadvantages. A chūnin has to be aware of all of them – and live with the consequences of their choices.”

Hanada’s sour face feels a little like justice. Hisana throws Aki a worried look.

“What about you?” she asks the girl. “Will you be ok? If we mess up, I mean.”

Aki grins a toothy grin at her; she’s missing both of her canines.

“Don’t worry, Nee-san! The Sada clan is known for their Doton jutsu – my brother helped make this cave, so I know it inside out. And watch this!”

She flexes her arm and the whole limb turns a sickly gray. Aki knocks on her biceps – it sounds solid.

“Hard as rock!”
The Sada woman stomps her foot once more and a whole cluster of holes opens up.

“I trust everyone signed the proper documents already. You have six days. Though I’d advise to hurry – there’s no food or water hid anywhere down there. You should know yourself how long your provisions will last.”

Hisana exchanges a quick look with her teammates.

“It’ll be fine,” Haru says quietly. “It can’t possibly be worse than the bunker. At least we are together.”

Sora grins. Hisana shrugs playfully.

“Oh, I don’t know. Days on end in the dark with you two – I can’t promise I won’t try to get rid of you.”

Her smile comes out sharper than intended and Sora flashes it right back at her.

“I’ll give it two days,” he stage whispers to Aki, “and then Hisana-chan will be the most dangerous thing down there.”

Aki snickers. They gather around the nearest hole. Hisana kicks a pebble inside; for a long moment there’s no sound. Then a muted clicking.

“Oh damn. That’s deep.”

“I’ll go first,” Sora offers. “Then Haru, to secure the perimeter while I catch Aki-chan.”

Hisana nods.

“I’ll try to memorize who is closest to us.”

Sora unwraps a length of rope from his belt; Hisana and Haru wrap one end around their waists, while their remaining teammate wraps it around his arm.

“On my mark,” the proctor calls. “Ready! … Go!”

Sora’s weight nearly takes both of them off their feet. Then there’s a deliberate tug and Sora’s weight disappears. He must have either reached the bottom … or the end of the rope.

They pull up the rope and Haru wraps it around his arm.

“I’ll try my best,” Hisana promises, “but be prepared for a sudden fall.”

While far slighter than Sora, Haru is still heavy. Once his weight disappears Hisana turns to Aki. To her horror the girl completely disregards the rope and simply jumps. After a long moment there is the unmistakable sound of an impact and a grunt of pain that is fortunately Sora’s. Unwilling to let anxiety build up she follows Aki’s example. Hisana’s fall is a little more controlled; feet firmly planted on the walls she slows herself by pumping chakra into the stone. The rock is brittle, blasting dust and rubble into her face, and after a few meters one of the walls gives way to nothing as the tunnel opens up into a cavern and suddenly she’s going into free fall. Panic grips her; there’s nothing to hold on to. Adrenaline forces her Sharingan to activate. She barely has time to take in the muted outlines of the cave, the strange natural chakra that forms psychedelic patterns in dim blue, and then it’s suddenly over, her teammate breaking her fall.

“Fuck, you need to lose weight,” he wheezes.
She’s too creeped out to whack him. Chakra pulses off the walls and disperses like smoke; the view pales in comparison to her teammates’ chakra networks that glow an iridescent blue. She’s seen this before – many times – but in the dark it’s overwhelming. To her brain the images follows no logic. There’s so much light, but it’s not illuminating anything. Next to her Sora is nothing but a luminescent skeleton against the backdrop of the steel blue natural chakra of the cave. She reaches out to poke a finger against his cheek.

“What are you doing?”

“I can see you,” she says.

“I can see you too,” he retorts. “Your eyes glow in the dark, did you know?”

Sort of. She dimly remembers something about that, but it didn’t seem important at the time.

“Does anyone have the rope?”

Haru’s hand gropes for her. She reaches for him and he presses it into her hand.

“I can lead us for a while,” she says, “take hold of the rope.”

There’s not much to lead. Hisana guides them out of the cavern and into a long tunnel. Every once in awhile she can hear someone stumble behind her, but there’s no way to get lost. It’s almost an hour in that they reach the first fork. The left entrance is covered by genjutsu; she hesitates. The air is musty and still.

“Boys … left or right? There’s genjutsu on one, but that doesn’t have to mean anything …”

Behind her Haru crouches to feel for a few stones.

“You have good ears,” he says, “don’t you?”

Listening for an echo is not one of Hisana’s favorite things. She’s trained her hearing, yes, but her ears are not the same as her nose. Interpreting the way sound waves rebound is not the same as sniffing out the source of a scent. It’s more complex, more abstract. She hurls a stone down one way, then the other.

“Left one is longer,” she decides after a second. “Let’s try.”

The rock maze is not a simple walk underground. The tunnel leads them upwards, turning so steep that they have to use chakra to crawl upwards. Her fingers cut deep grooves into the brittle rock; every once in awhile she can hear one of the boys cough and sputter. They keep choosing junctions by echo, trying to ignore the way they seem to go into the wrong direction. It takes almost a day of self-doubt until they are rewarded with a steep drop. Provisions will last for only two more days. Hisana wonders if any of the other teams have realized yet that they need to share food with their hostage.

The Sharingan constantly eats at her chakra. It’s not much, but the drain makes her weary in an entirely mental way. Her eyes dry quicker each hour and her senses are dulled while all of her attention is focused on her eyesight. When they walk into a team it comes as a surprise.

There’s a feminine yelp when they turn a corner and someone in front of her recoils. Her fist shoots out without hesitation, meeting and cracking a cheekbone. A Katon jutsu lights up the tunnel,
momentarily blinding everyone and then there’s a pair of large hands around her neck. She makes a blind grab for her opponent. But only when the fire dies is she back in control. Somewhere ahead of her there’s the sound of fighting and she hopes to all that is holy that her teammates have the upper hand.

In a split second decision she lets go of the man’s hands. It goes against every instinct to let him choke her; air is cut off immediately and her legs jerk without her consent. But it frees her hands for a quick sequence of hand signs and then she spits a sharp burst of water into his face. It’s only a mouthful, only what can squeeze past her opponent’s hands, but the Teppodama hits him square in the forehead. His head jerks back violently and then she’s on him, ramming her fist into his face until blood sprays into her face.

There’s a moment of confused fighting while Hisana rings with dizziness and other shinobi blindly tries to flip them. She gropes for her bokken and presses it against his throat. He struggles, succumbing to his own urge to grab at her sword. In panic he tries to break her fingers away from the wood, but her grip is like an iron vice. See how you like it, she thinks wildly. He bucks like a horse beneath her, but she simply leans her weight against him until he stops struggling. For a long second she simply sits there, straddling his still body, shaking like a leaf. Then a pained grunt echoes down to her and she jumps up to aid her teammates.

When she arrives, still dazed and unsteady on her feet, the fight is as good as over. There is a girl’s head caught under Sora’s arm; Hisana bypasses him to reach their last opponent. His back is turned towards her, entirely distracted. He doesn’t notice her until she delivers a swift kick to his backside. The shinobi stumbles and Haru’s hand catches him in the throat. He crumples, wheezing and gagging, windpipe crushed. Haru freezes, listening to the sounds of his opponent suffocating. Hisana can see him claw helplessly at his throat and is for the first time grateful for the darkness that surrounds them.

“Come,” she beckons her teammate. “Let’s take Sora and move on.”

Haru shakes his head in the dark.

“N-no. I can’t …”

He hesitates. But then draws one of his blades and, with a smooth flick of his wrist, slits the man’s throat. Hisana stares at him.

Behind them the sound of the girl’s feet scratching at the ground ceases. Sora lets her slide to the ground with a soft thud.

“Guys?” he rasps quietly. “You ok?”

“W-we’re ok,” Haru rasps back. “We’re ok.”

He’s still shaking, so she takes his elbow, carefully steering him around the body and away.

“So … what now?” she questions, turning towards the last strange chakra network glowing in the dark. The small person opens his arms beckoningly. A little hesitantly she pokes him in the cheek.

“Tap.”

“Urgh, I’m dead!” a boyish voice chirps. “Victory for team Aki. Team Yuki is out. I’m staying right here!”

He pushes his back against the wall and the stone swallows him until there’s only his face left poking out of the wall.
“Gonna scare the next one real good,” he snickers.

For a long moment they simply stand in the dark.

“Ahh … has someone seen the rope?”

While Hisana scours the ground for it she can hear Sora exchange a few low words with Haru, before he picks Aki up from the ground and shoves her at the shaking boy.

“Haru’s on Aki-duty,” he announces. And that is that.

They move through the maze at a speed that almost worries Hisana. Are they missing something? Are they taking the right path? But there’s no genjutsu she misses and they haven’t hit a dead end yet. She doesn’t know if that’s worrying or not.

They pass two more teams, lost and stumbling about in a cavern. They sneak past, creeping up on a single participant. Hisana reaches out, trying to get at the sensitive pressure point on her neck, but then she jerks around with a gasp. They stare at each other. Then the kunoichi starts to scream. The eyes, Hisana thinks in horror, it’s the damn eyes.

They glow in the dark, did you know?

A fist to the temple knocks the girl out, but the damage is already done.

There’s movement at their backs.

“This time they’re prepared for the Katon illuminating the cavern; in the afterglow of the flames they all stare at each other as the other two teams, one Kiri, one Suna seem to notice each other for the first time. Hisana’s eyes zero in on a girl with a tantou and a man with a club … the Sharingan burns the picture into her brain and once the fire dissipates she takes off like a shot. The Suna kunoichi and the Kiri shinobi are the greatest threats, she’s reasonably sure of that. They’d need to take them out together so … she’s picking off the small fries first.

Behind her another Katon scorches the vault. The sharp zing zing of Haru’s daggers tells her things are well in hand. Instead she skids past the slightest Kiri nin and rams his head against the wall. He sags to the floor like a wet paper bag. Once more hands wrap around her bruised neck and a knee hits her in the back. There’s an unhealthy crack and the sensation that follows catches her entirely off guard. A choked off scream rips out of her.

Hisana’s elbow finds her opponent’s solar plexus, once, twice – the third hit something gives way. His grip loosens enough to pry his fingers off her neck. She hits him once more, easily weaving through his blind defense. His nose breaks with a satisfying crack. Followed by the even louder cracking of his skull as a club crashes into his temple and drives his head deeply into a stone column. Blood and tissue spray, his head is squished like a grape.

The earth quakes; dust fills the air, pebbles rain onto their heads as the column crumbles. There’s barely enough time for the shock to register.

And then the entire ceiling comes crashing down on them.
New chapter - whoop!

When she comes to there is rubble pressing in on her.

Her leg is pinned – probably broken – and something feels terribly wrong with her elbow. It takes a second before Hisana can gather her withs enough to activate her kekkei-genkai. But the Sharingan reveals nothing. A stone plate has formed a tiny cavity around her upper body, but there’s no room to move. She has no idea how long she’s been unconscious; all she knows is that the air feels entirely too thin.

A little shaky Hisana takes stock: She’s injured, unable to move, and there’s a finger poking into her cheek that’s not her own. She bites at it, but there’s no reaction. Feeling for a chakra signature is futile; whoever is attached to the other side of this finger has no chakra left to give off and the rubble around her is too thick to feel anything. Right now she’d happily trade her kekkei genkai against Kohaku-sensei’s Byakugan.

As it is, she’s immobile, as good as blind, and alone with a body.

For a while she drifts in and out of consciousness. Her legs are numb, which isn’t good, and the inside of her head is slowly but surely turning quiet. Alone the slow, steady lub dub, lub dub of her heart fills the silence; she tries to concentrate on that. The only sign of how much time has passed is the fact that the finger on her cheek is turning colder every time she opens her eyes.

She sleeps.

Another earthquake makes Hisana’s eyes snap open. More rubble, she thinks wildly. The stone plate can’t handle more rubble. The panic that rises in her chest feels entirely animal and she doesn’t have enough energy to wrestle it down. Tears roll down her cheeks; they’re hot on her freezing skin.

A hand grips her leg.

She yelps in pain, fighting the urge to kick out and hurt herself more. But she has skin contact now and – a tremor of disbelieving hope runs through her whole body. It’s Sora. She’d recognize his chakra signature anywhere. The hand feels around her leg, probing at her injury, before disappearing again. The earth trembles once more, before the rubble crumbles away from her cheek. Her teammate reaches for her, blindly sticking his finger up her nose. She tries to recoil, but the stone won’t let her.

“Ew,” Sora’s voice echoes from below. “Oh ew. You alive in there?”
She opens her mouth but no words come out. Her throat is dry and when she coughs it feels as if she’s dispelling an entire tablespoon of dust from her lungs.

“You found me,” she croaks in disbelief. “How did you-?”

Sora disrupts her with a derisive snort.

“Oh please. I’m a Doton type – you think I won’t find you in a bit of rubble?”

He digs a bit more earth away from her face.

“Give me a few more minutes and I’ll get you out of here, no trouble,” he says. “Got to dig out your leg first, it’s pretty messed up.”

“Haru?” she asks belatedly.

“He’s ok. He and Aki-chan got out all right. It’s just us who got unlucky. Ah, well – and them.”

He pokes at the finger still sticking out of the dirt.

“And their kid? The hostage.”

“Aki-chan said not to worry. They’re not just rock hard, they’re apparently some sort of little Doton monsters. Just give me a second, I’ll get you out!”

And then she’s alone again. Or not entirely. The pressure is suddenly off her legs; more rubble simply falls away from her. Then Sora’s hand takes her wrists and pulls.

Moving through earth is disconcerting she thinks dimly. She’s not the one leading, so she can close her eyes against it, even though there’s probably no need to. There seems to be a thin film of chakra over her, keeping anything from getting up her nose or even scraping at her skin too much.

And then she’s breathing fresh air again. Or maybe that’s being generous, but the stale air at the mouth of the cavern feels almost incomprehensible – as if her lungs are unfolding completely for the first time ever.

Another hand reaches for her upper arm to pull her up. It’s Haru. Her view is getting fuzzy around the edges, so she closes her eyes.

“I don’t think I can walk,” she admits.

She can feel Haru shrug against her.

“We already expected that. To be honest, we’re just glad you’re conscious.”

They hoist her onto Haru’s back, Aki trailing after them with small uncertain steps.

“Nee-san … I can’t help, but you’re all right, aren’t you? I mean, you can always give up.”

Hisana gives a snort that quickly turns into a cough.

“I’m fine,” she rasps. “We’re not giving up as long as anyone can still carry me.”

“Then we’re good,” Haru quips up, trying to shift her weight away from her injured leg. “You’re not that heavy.”
“Oh I don’t know,” she mumbles against his shoulder. “I distinctly recall someone telling me to lose some weight.”

They take turns carrying her. All she can currently do for her team is being their eyes for two to three hours. She gets tired easily; Hisana thinks she might have a concussion.

They try to avoid other teams. She’s a liability at best, and with Haru protecting her there’s only Sora to shield Aki. It forces them onto the defensive and that doesn’t sit well with any of them. Every once in awhile a scuffle can’t be avoided, though. Hisana is predictably of little help, but once an unsuspecting ninja walks right into her visual range and she puts him to sleep before the rest of his team realizes what’s going on. It knocks her out for almost six hours. Sora warns her not to do shit like that again. Everyone’s mood hits a new low after that.

When they reach sunlight again – three, maybe four days in – she doesn’t even realize. There’s heat and light and it just doesn’t compute. Someone takes her off Sora’s back and she can feel the soothing cold of yin chakra on her leg. The next hours are nothing but a blur of heat and cold. She doesn’t care anymore; her job is done, they’re out. It’s endorphins that carry her into unconsciousness.

As it turns out they’ve been sort of lucky.

The cave in cost them time, but it also took out a whole slew of competitors. Hisana doesn’t know if they all died and she actively tries not to think about it too hard. It shouldn’t matter; all Konoha participants are alive, if in parts injured and out of the running. When the six days are up there are no more than eleven participants that made it out in time. This in turn means no preliminary matches. Again it feels like a bitter sort of luck. In Hisana’s condition a fight would have been completely out of the question; she would have had to forfeit. But now there’s an entire month to heal and prepare.

It takes almost two weeks to get back onto her feet again. They’re two anxious weeks. The boys visit regularly and she can see how nervous they are, which in turn makes her nervous.

“There’s no privacy here,” Haru complains. “Wherever you go to train, there’s always someone there watching you.”

So Kohaku-sensei keeps them moving, even takes them out into the desert to get some peace and quiet. Once she joins them she almost wishes to be back inside the creepy but air-conditioned hospital. It’s the middle of summer and without the buildings of Suna to throw shade they can’t keep it up for longer than two hours at a time. To make matters worse, Hisana’s throat still feels sore and abused. She’s been choked twice in a very short time and she’s inhaled a lot of dust during the cave in. Her lungs are fine, but her pharynx has been chafed raw.

At this stage of their training they have all learned to ignore a certain level of discomfort, but this is more than Hisana is used to. Still, getting rid of the nervous energy in her limbs makes all of that almost worth it. Moving, fighting is a relief. She’s finally back on her feet again – not at the mercy of strange, unfamiliar shinobi. Foreign shinobi. The note of xenophobia coloring her thoughts makes her a little uncomfortable. It sounds nothing like Sarah. Not for the first time she becomes aware of how much she’s changed; Hisana knows that in this world foreign more often than not does equal dangerous. Especially with something as delicate as medic-nins involved. No wonder that Kakashi-
shishou doesn’t like hospitals.

Luckily her leg has healed well enough. The medics acted as if it wasn’t a big deal. Honestly, if she’d seen it on anyone else Hisana might not have batted an eye herself. But there’s something deeply disconcerting about seeing your own bone, and your flesh hanging in strips. About feeling the wind on your raw, exposed nerves. It’s an entirely novel sort of pain.

Training is moving, accordingly, slowly.

Hisana doesn’t feel as if she’s slowed down much – if there’s one thing she has to thank Hyuuga Neji for then it’s teaching her how to fight through discomfort – but she does know that a well aimed hit to her stiff parts will make her legs collapse like a house of cards. It’s frustrating to know that she’ll have to work on this before she can actually prepare for the matches, while her teammates are already miles ahead of her. Presumably.

There’s a loud *plonk* as her scroll topples down the bed and rolls several feet along the floor. She’s still holding the other end, glassy, tired eyes not moving up from the text. Team 11 has been split up for now. Kohaku-sensei comes by once a day, assessing her injuries and checking in on her progress. It’s all he can do, now that his students may very well have to fight each other; the less contact they have right now, the fairer he can divide his time and his advice between them. And while the boys – fully mobile and ready to beat the crap out of someone – may have an advantage right now, Hisana is furiously working on hers.

Kakashi-shishou may be a useless lump most of the time, but he does take an unholy glee in sticking it to people. And now that Hisana is officially part of ‘Team Hatake’ – alongside his pack of dogs, how flattering – she enjoys more of the benefits this brings.

The scroll on her bed is a ninjutsu scroll; it describes, in boring and overly complex detail, advanced chakra control techniques for chakra conducting weapons. Hisana’s bokken is still very much made of normal wood, but her teacher’s annoyingly vague note assured her she’d “find it useful”, smiley face. Hisana’s current hypothesis, shaky and entirely unsupported by anything resembling facts, is that wood might be a little more forgiving of foreign chakra than forged, compressed metal. After all, it still retains some of the tree’s natural chakra pathways. Somewhere. She thinks. If they’re even accessible to her.

Infusing things with chakra isn’t really all that difficult. The process described in Kakashi’s scroll is the same one used for chakra paper – just on a larger scale and more controlled. The paper is, after all, destroyed in the process, which would be counter-productive in this case. Hisana is strongly tempted to ask Kohaku-sensei for help; the Juuken might very well be a simple, if violent, chakra infusion. Then again, if it is, there is no guarantee that her teacher is allowed to share the particulars of if with her. She’s an outsider. Worse, she’s an *Uchiha*.

Nevertheless, the thought has given her an idea.

Hisana scoots off her bed and hobbles over to the door. Kohaku-sensei still isn’t back, even though it’s already pitch black outside. She knows that the room across is just as empty and silent as hers; the boys are still out too. Opening the door gives her a thrill anyway.

The corridor is empty; to her right a flight of stairs descends into darkness, to her left only two more rooms house another Konoha team. And on the end of the corridor ... a yucca palm. The edges of its
leaves have turned brown and the decorative clay pot is chipped. Hisana has the strong impression it’s been hurriedly put there just for them and has since then been forgotten by the innkeeper. Her knee pops uncomfortably, the sound echoing off the walls, as Hisana makes her way towards the plant. It’s taller than her, but she lifts the dry, gritty feeling pot off the ground and heaves it back into her room.

Her joints keep making a racket and she thanks all deities that the upcoming matches aren’t exactly a stealth exercise. At least her leg has stopped hurting.

She slumps down onto the floor, the plant firmly wedged between her legs. Hisana tugs at the leaves thoughtfully. It’s a desert plant – sturdy. This might even work.

Her Sharingan activate. The palm tree’s chakra signature is faint and gently pulsating, its intensity caught somewhere between the loud, erratic pump of animal organisms and the steady background hum of inorganic material.

The leaf between her fingers is thick and she can only guess at the number of chakra veins curling through it. Even with her finger pressed to it, Hisana can’t feel anything beside the faint overall signature, as if it’s exhaling chakra through every stoma; not for the first time she wishes she could exchange her kekkei genkai for the Byakugan. Instead of dwelling on her own short-comings she lets her chakra skirt along the edges of the leaf, before pushing at the foreign energy. There’s a sizzling noise and she jerks her hand back.

“Oh for the love of-“

The leaf crumbles away, blackened and burnt. The stress impulse makes yucca’s entire chakra signature flare. Interesting.

For a moment Hisana considers brushing the singed parts away and simply pressing her finger into the sap. But the notion strikes her as weirdly cruel somehow. She reaches for the trunk instead; the chakra shivers against her hand as if the palm tree is already anticipating the next blow.

“You’re giving me performance anxiety,” she informs the yucca. “Stop that.”

Kohaku-sensei’s appearance takes her by surprise.

He doesn’t knock on the door, but simply barges in inelegantly. It’s light outside and she blinks up at him blearily. He blinks back.

“You’re late,” she informs him, immediately feeling like someone’s mother.

“And you have popped a blood vessel in your eye,” he returns flatly. He eyes the yucca tree somewhat wearily before making his way over to her. He smells dusty and like blood and sweat.

“Turn those off,” Kohaku-sensei grumbles and Hisana needs a second to grasp what he means. She deactivates the Sharingan reluctantly, hissing when the room suddenly feels much brighter. “What have you been doing?”

“I’m trying to … infuse things with chakra.”

“And you started with a living thing?”

The ‘you idiot’ goes unsaid but definitely not unheard.
“It already has a - …”

Hisana gestures vaguely towards the plant while her teacher examines her eyes, squishing at the surrounding tissue. She makes a face.

“Yes,” he agrees, “an entire system already full of chakra. Why not start with something that cannot push back?”

The light sensitivity eases in one eye and he moves on to the next.

“Yes, well, Kakashi-shishou might be a bit of a sadist, but I’m pretty sure he’s not going to send me on a wild goose chase. Why would he give me a reading on chakra infusing weapons if it’s useless to me?”

“I did not say that it is useless,” Kohaku-sensei huffs. “You need to learn how to listen. If you cannot infuse a weapon, what can you do with it? This should really not be new information to you.”

Hisana stares at him for a long moment, and then an embarrassed flush crawls over her cheeks.

“Oh.”
Chapter 42

Nearly 8 glorious weeks of no class lie before me and I intend to use them wisely. Especially now that I’ve scrapped the entire bullshit-chapter-42 that just wouldn’t cooperate and wrote the entire thing new.

I think (hope) that the next one will be easier.

As a sorry/thank-you I’ve added a little extra at the end:

Morning dawns bright and intense. The heat hasn’t settled in yet, won’t for at least a couple of hours. Right now the nightly cold is still driving goose bumps up civilian arms. But the nervous energy inside the arena is enough to heat up every ninja in the vicinity.

Hisana scuffs her shoes against the dusty ground. She’s not ready.

She’s not the only one.

Haru is a comforting presence at her back but she can sense him fidgeting even from here. Sora’s tall frame in front of her blocks the proctor from their view, as if it could delay the inevitable. His face is unsettlingly blank. Hisana runs her thumb over the back of her bokken.

It’s almost embarrassing. No, scratch that, it’s absolutely embarrassing. She’d been so caught up in how to dumb down chakra infusion, that she overlooked something far more basic and far more logical: chakra coating.

It’s not as if they’ve been doing it with kunai since the Academy. After all, a regular kunai can only fly so far before the impact dwindles down to all the force of a cotton ball. Infuse it with chakra and you can triple your reach. She’s going to kill Kakashi; couldn’t he just have said so?

“It is probably fortunate that you tried this on a living thing first,” Kohaku-sensei noted that night. “Your eyes I can repair; if you had accidently burst your bokken … that is one thing I cannot repair.”

She purposely did not comment on his backwards attitude about bodies and weapons. It’s nothing she hadn’t heard before.

Gripping the bokken tightly now she even almost gets it.

There are a quite a few familiar faces around, roughly half of them of Konoha. She recognizes Hanada’s sullen face in the crowd, as well as a Hyyuuga boy with a twitchy eye. Temari, down one bodyguard, seems to have lost the reckless fearlessness. Like this she appears more like the girl Hisana remembers from the manga – she’s not sure if that’s reassuring or worrying.
The proctor is a short, stocky man. His face is almost entirely obscured by traditional head garb and when he finally speaks it sounds rather muffled.

“Finally… the … ah, finals.”

He coughs lengthily and whacks his tagelmust, which releases a sizable could of dust, before continuing in a much stronger voice.

“Yes. Without further ado … I, we, will decide the … the pairings.”

There’s no fancy tech to randomly pair people as she expected – instead he flicks his hands, presenting them with a row of thin wooden sticks, not much bigger than matchsticks.

“Come, come.”

He beckons them with the sticks. Sora turns around to make a disbelieving face at them. She keeps forgetting in what a bad state Suna’s economy currently is. The village and its citizens are proud, which means that everything is always clean and in good repair. But in moments like this it hits her like a brick to the face. Not for the first time her eyes trail over the spectators. No rich businessmen or nobility; the highest ranking functionary in the crowd is the Kazekage himself and a couple of his councilmen. How insulting it must be for him, she thinks. But then again, he will have expected it. The arena may be grand, but there’s a notable lack of decorations, and festivities around the village are rather low-key.

She wonders how many village outsiders there were at the beginning. There’d been so many in the first few days, but they’d dwindled rapidly. The contestants are almost neatly divided into Suna and Konoha, with the exception of a short, bulky boy with an Iwa hitai-ate. Was Konoha simply more stubborn than the others? Or was their mere presence here already an overture of friendship towards their village? During the last task it must have been easy for Suna to simply rig a thing or two and get rid of any undesirable contestants.

Hisana gets pulled out of her thoughts when Sora moves towards the examiner. Her teammate picks a match with pointed fingers, as if afraid it might already be part of the battle and would explode any second. He unrolls a scrap of paper from it.

“Three,” he announces with a frown.

Encouraged, Hanada stomps up to them. She jerks a match out of the examiner’s hand and unrolls the paper almost greedily.

“Two,” she breathes, stealing a strangely disappointed glance at Sora.

Temari’s broad teammate claims the next match, and then leers down at the girl. “Two.”

Hisana snatches her own match before Temari herself can take it.

“Four.”

The Kazekage’s daughter glares at her.

“One,” she drawls, unrolling her paper, “Fitting – start off with a bang.”

Hisana forces herself not to roll her eyes, mindful of Kohaku-sensei in the stands. Haru eyes the last matches with trepidation. Two of the three would pitch him against his teammates; he hesitates. Hisana elbows him.
“Go! It’ll happen sooner or later anyway.”

He grabs the left one, unrolls it and breathes a sigh of relief.

“One.”

The last two snatch their matches before throwing wary looks around the contestants.

“Nice, nice,” the examiner coughs, grabbing a piece of chalk before unveiling a rickety old blackboard. In big looping characters he writes down the matchup.

“Match 1: Sabaku no Temari vs. Sone Mitsuharu.”

The chalk squeaks loudly enough to make everyone flinch.

“Match 2: Saito Gorou vs. Mami Hanada.”

Another squeak.

“Match 3: Eguchi Sora vs. Mori Akiba.”

This time everyone collectively covers their ears.

“Finally … the fourth and last match: Uchiha Hisana vs. Hyuuga Naoki. Interesting, very interesting. The first match begins tomorrow at sunrise.”

Suna in the early morning hours is a whirlwind of activity. At half past five the sun rises, only slowly overcoming the frigid temperatures of the night. And for the next two and a half hours the entire populace of Suna appears to struggle to fit in as much physical labor as possible, before the temperatures climb back into unbearable territory. The whole process is then repeated at about eleven at night, an hour after the sun has set. And so, giddy with nerves, team 11 experiences for the first time Suna as only the natives know it.

A yawn forces its way out of Hisana’s mouth; she feels exhausted, but there’s already the scent of breakfast in the air and it makes her stomach growl embarrassingly. It is still fully dark out but in their team’s usual food haunt an old lady is scraping eggs over a hot metal platter. They’re treated to the customary unhappy look and grumble – ‘damn Konoha ninjas’ – but Hisana has learnt not to take it too seriously by now. The food is good, though spicy, and it’s being cooked right in front of them; there’s no way a grumpy Suna civilian can spit in it without anyone noticing.

Kohaku-sensei sinks into the seat next to her. He looks impeccable as always, but there is a steep line between his eyebrows that wasn’t there when they left Konoha. Great, she thinks dimly, we’ve aged him prematurely.

On her other side Haru looks vaguely sick while Sora tries to force some eggs into him.

“Come on, just a little. If all fails you can at least throw up on her.”

“I don’t think throwing up will be a problem,” the other boy mumbles.
Kohaku-sensei digs up a small bottle from his hip pouch and slides it along the table.

“Take two of these at least.”

When Haru pops the lid and tips some into his hand they are bright blue rather than the muted red of the regulation soldier pills. “Hyuuga recipe,” their sensei admits. “It is mostly carbohydrates, sugar and caffeine. Take them at the start of the match and then hurry. You will crash around midday.”

“Isn’t that sort of … doping?” Hisana ventures carefully. Her team turns to stare at her increduously.

“Eh …” Sora starts awkwardly, “Not sure if you’ve noticed yet, but there’s a lot of people around here with unfair advantages.”

He very pointedly directs his eyes to Kohaku-sensei whose Byakugan appear almost blue in the dark. Point taken, she muses, thinking of her own opponent.

“To answer your question,” Sensei adds, “any body or mind altering substance is allowed under the poison clause. Whether you turn this ‘poison’ against yourself or your opponent is your decision. I assure you every clan member you’ll ever meet during an official match will have their own way of boosting their performance. I am sure the Uchiha have their own written down somewhere.”

Might be worth looking into. Haru slides the pills into his breast pocket, still a little green around the gills.


“We will see how you fare before your match.”

Today the arena is a little more crowded than yesterday, but still not even half full. The Kazekage is still looking down at them from his seat of honor; for Temari’s match the entire council is in attendance, probably sweating in their bulky dignitary robes.

Hisana and Sora have their stone-faced teammate tightly wedged between them, half worried he may faint, half afraid he might run. Ten minutes until sunrise; Haru’s stomach growls uproariously and some of the other contestants throw him wild looks. He turns to them, spine rigid, eyes blank and they flinch away. Hisana chokes on a laugh. Kohaku-sensei breathes deeply and she wonders if he’s secretly rolling his eyes.

“The pills?” he prompts, and Haru unwinds his arm from Sora to pat his breast pocket.

“Now would be a good time.”

Haru fumbles them out of his pocket and places them strategically between his back teeth and cheek. Around them the chatter dies down when the examiner raises his arm. Above, the Kazekage rises from his seat.

“Today we are gathered to witness a rite of passage – a test of skill, strength, and will.” He gestures grandly towards the contestants. “Today we will honor those who have put their minds and bodies through the toughest of trials to serve their villages. I trust we will see truly spectacular things and hope that you will find reassurance in the fact that these young people are the ones protecting and serving you. And also,” his voice rises as he graces them with a mild smile, “I hope you are entertained. Welcome to the Suna Chuunin Exams.”
He looks very much like Gaara this way, Hisana thinks, clapping absentmindedly.

A sharp whistle calls the first contestants down into the arena. To Hisana’s surprise there’s no need to give Haru a shove. He throws back his shoulders and slowly walks down the stairs. Sora gives her a look that’s halfway caught between worry and astonishment.

Temari from her end drops down into the arena with a showy flourish. Good, Hisana thinks wryly. Get it all out of your system, so you can act a little less like a bitch next time.

The two ninja face each other. It makes for a vaguely funny picture; short, almost chubby Temari and slim, dainty Haru. But Hisana knows from own painful experience that those weedy arms pack quite a punch. The Kazekage’s daughter throws out her chest and puts her hands on her hips, trying to play up any physical advantage she might have, but it makes her look no more intimidating, only bratty.

“First match of today!” the examiner calls, lifting his tagelmust to let his voice carry. “Sabaku no Temari of Suna!” – thunderous applause from the audience – “And Sone Mitsuharu of Konoha!”

Polite clapping. Hisana steps one foot onto the barrier and whistles loudly enough to make Kohaku-sensei scowl. Next to her Sora giggles like a school girl and belts out a silly whoop.

“Please take five steps apart,” the examiner continues through the noise.

It almost looks like an old-fashioned duel as they march towards opposite ends of the arena. They face each other and then – a whistle. There’s a fan strapped to Temari’s side that’s about as long as her forearm. It snaps into the girls hands with a flick of her wrist. For a moment Hisana expects Haru’s blades to slide out of his sleeves, but they stay put. Instead he relaxes his stance, slides sideways and goes for an open handed style. That’s right, she remembers, they’re both wind nature. It’ll either be two forces continually colliding head-first, or they’d have to outmaneuver each other.

And Haru is good at maneuvering. He’s also deceptively shrewd and had Temari pegged for a hothead form the very first day. Just standing there, waiting, sends a twitch onto the blond’s face that speaks of someone used to commanding respect – or at least obedience. Her first attack is rash and a product of impatience. With a grand wave of her fan a shower of senbon rains down on Haru who doesn’t even bother stepping aside. Instead catches them in his long sleeves. When he shakes them out the mettle clatters to the floor in a heap.

It’s a taunt, clearly, and it works like a charm.

Temari bursts into action. Her fan only produces small gales of wind but they’re strong enough to surround them in a cloud of sand and dust. For a moment there’s only confusion and the sound of hurried punches, before a futon jutsu blasts through the dust screen. It’s been maybe two minutes, but Temari has gained a black eye and Haru’s jacket is crooked. When the Suna-nin sends another gale his way he manages to angle right through it, but it shaves off a few strands of his hair that blow away with the wind. This time the stiletto blades do make an appearance. They shoot out at Temari but are immediately deflected by a second fan. She does make a striking figure like this, but there’s an obvious skill gap there that comes with age and can’t be bridged with theatrics.

Meanwhile Haru isn’t deterred. His daggers keep shooting out like scorpion stingers; Hisana has never seen him do anything like that. And when Temari’s confidence grows, sure that they’re on equal footing, Haru spits a Futon: Daitoppa point blank at her face. She hits the ground with a quiet ‘thud’ and doesn’t get back up again.
The audience is quiet except for scattered, uncomfortable murmurs when the examiner announces the winner. Only when the Kazekage himself starts to clap the applause gets louder. Haru walks up the stairs on shaky legs. He seems a little dazed and Sora’s enthusiastic hug nearly topples him.

“Great job,” she tells him earnestly, before sitting him down on a bench. Hisana wonders if the weak knees are from the fight or if he’s already burnt through Kohaku-sensei’s soldier pills.

“I think,” he admits, “I’d like something to eat now.”

9 random facts

1. Gai is far more accomplished in political games than Hisana thinks – he just thinks that a child should be a child for as long as possible, so he refuses to engage in them with her.

2. Baa-chan’s teahouse is rather close to the hospital. There’s a running gag going around among the regulars that this is on purpose; if you insult her cooking, you’re going to need a medic A.S.A.P.

3. The bunker was in fact one of Orochimaru’s former hideouts. Hisana’s first dead end with the heavy metal door – was it used to keep people out, or in …?

4. Hisana works better under pressure. She still hasn’t realized, and probably never will, that she’s performed the Katon: Gokayku no Jutsu twice without seals in the bunker.

5. There is a grocery shop that Kohaku-sensei has stopped visiting, because the old lady owner keeps trying to set him up with her grandson. He’s tried telling her several times that this is a fruitless endeavor, but she apparently keeps forgetting. He has the sneaking suspicion that the poor woman also knows Airi – and that she just hasn’t realized yet that there are two of them.

6. Ito-sensei’s elderly rat summon is called Ritsu.

7. Airi is about four minutes older than Kohaku.

8. The worst injury Hisana ever inflicted on Neji was a broken jaw. There was a moment of shocked silence, after which Hisana very hurriedly went to get Kohaku-sensei while Neji calmly sat down and waited for her to come back.

9. Most Hyuuga are aware of Hisana’s visits – the branch house is rather glad that she takes the brunt of Neji’s bad moods, so they keep her secret from the main house.
All right, here’s the next one!

Please be aware that I have no talent for fight scenes – so thank you SO much for your feedback about the last one. It was very reassuring. But this one nearly killed me anyway.

**BTW:** I’ve decided to split this fic. Sounds terrible, but it won’t make the updates come slower or quicker than they would have anyway. I simply find fics with much more than 50 chapters personally unattractive and intimidating. So … BaH has maybe 10 more chapters to go. Part 2 will be called **Of Cutting Cords and Forging Chains** and will cover the canon timeline (or at least most of it).

Hisana sends the boys along while she and Kohaku-sensei stay behind to analyze the match between Hanada and Temari’s remaining bodyguard. They leave with a cheery promise to bring her sweets and tea.

As soon as the two contestants step into the arena Hisana activates her Sharingan; a flare of chakra tells her that she’s not the only one using a doujutsu to follow the fight.

“You should preserve your chakra,” Sensei tells her, but she only grins at him.

“Did you know,” she drawls, fishing a little bottle of her own from her pocket, “that the Nara supply about 90 percent of Konoha’s medicinal herbs? They even make their own chakra replenishing pills.”

Which is only slightly illegal, because the recipe isn’t registered with the hospital. She shakes the plastic container, making the little black tablets rattle inside. They taste terrible but they do the job. While the regulation pills supply you with a hefty boost and can cause internal bleeding if overused, the Nara version is far less potent but can be eaten like bonbons – if you can deal with the persistent peppery taste.

The referee whistles and Hisana fixes her eyes on the pair downstairs. The winner will be pitted against Haru, and the Sharingan will help her reproduce their moves for a mock battle later on.

Saitou Gorou is, to her surprise, a genjutsu type while Hanada appears to be a jack of all trades. He manages to catch her in an illusion long enough to land a single hit, but for such a slim girl she holds her ground remarkably.

In the end she simply outlasts him, faster and more agile than his bulky frame. Interestingly there’s not a single flashy ninjutsu in this fight, yet the crowd seems more animated than during Temari’s match. Maybe it’s easier to appreciate the entertainment value if you don’t care about the constants, she muses. It’s midday and after the examiner lifts Hanada Mami’s hand in victory he announces a break until afternoon when the sun has passed the zenith.

The air is stifling at this point and Hisana is pretty sure she needs to re-apply her sunscreen. The Konoha regulation stuff simply isn’t made for Suna weather. She hopes the boys didn’t forget her tea.
When they step out into the streets, carefully avoiding a gloating and battle-high Hanada, Haru and Sora are already jogging up to them, arms loaded with plastic bags.

“Stuff,” Sora presents proudly, shoving one of them into Hisana’s hands. There’s iced tea buried at the bottom and when she pries open one of the paper packages there are shiny black beetles inside. She makes a kissy-face at her teammates and Sora swoons dramatically. Haru’s face has regained its color – or as much color as it usually has – and when he hands Kohaku-sensei his share of the kill he seems more relaxed than she’s seen him since Konoha. This is good for him, she thinks. A little confidence boost. She hopes it’ll stay that way even if he screws up tomorrow.

Sora’s nerves show in a different way than their teammate’s. Instead of going quiet he becomes louder, trying not to think about the match and work off nervous energy. Hisana isn’t sure what the better way is – think everything to death and plan a million strategies or not to overthink. Hisana is more like Haru that way, going quiet and driving herself crazy. So she has no idea how to help Sora. A little helplessly she takes to ignoring his erratic behavior and laughing a little louder at his silly jokes.

Around 4 o’clock the heat hasn’t gone down one bit, but the sun has lost enough of its bite to make it bearable. Akiba is already there, lounging in the stands. He looks absolutely confident and it makes Hisana nervous. At first glance he has nothing to be confident about. Sora is at least a head taller than him and there are no notable weapons on him. A ninjutsu specialist? It would make sense; those are usually heavy-hitters.

Sora’s eyes immediately fixate on him, mouth snapping shut mid-sentence, and from that moment on they might as well not have existed. The spectators fill the stadium and the examiner takes his place, but her teammate pays none of them any attention. Instead he causally swings his legs over the barrier and drops into the arena.

When the examiner has them take the customary five steps apart Sora walks them backwards.

“W-what’s wrong with him?” she hisses at Kohaku-sensei who only shakes his head.

“What do you think you look like during battle?”

A shrill whistle sounds from below, followed by a collision so loud that Hisana whips her head around.

“Whoa!”

Unremarkable little Akiba has hulked the hell out – it can’t be anything but a kekkei genkai – and has crashed head first into a hastily erected stone wall and this is a B-rank technique … what have her teammates been doing without her? There are eerie veins running up and down Akiba’s legs and his shirt seems to have become a little tight. He breathes out black smoke before climbing the wall like a spider. But when he gets to the other side Sora is already gone.

They watch aghast as the Iwa-nin stomps around the arena, trying to find a trace of his opponent’s chakra. She absently wonders how long he can keep this up; his chakra signature is fluctuating like crazy. Sora is still nowhere to be seen, but Akiba’s stomping is getting more frantic –
“Look at that,” Haru breathes.

She leans further over the barrier, straining her eyes, and snorts out an incredulous laugh. Akiba isn’t stomping in anger – he’s trying to avoid Sora’s hands darting out of the ground, trying to pull him under. “This is so bizarre,” her teammate whispers next to her. Hisana has to agree. Every once in a while Sora succeeds catching Akiba’s foot and dragging him to the knee into the ground, but the Iwa-nin’s enormous strength lets him free himself in a matter of seconds.

Neither of them can keep this up forever, Hisana thinks worriedly. She sincerely hopes Sora can end this on his own terms instead of letting Akiba drag him out of the ground.

With a wet, sucking noise Akiba sinks down up to his thighs, and this time Sora comes crawling out of the sandy ground behind him. His chakra is depleted, but there’s still this hyper-focused expression on his face, as if he isn’t worried at all. And then he slides into a stance that looks suspiciously like the Juuken. Next to them Kohaku-sensei makes a surprised little noise.

‘Genius’. The term had fallen only once in connection to her dorky teammate; she wonders how true it is exactly. There’s no chakra gathered in his hands, but except for her and the two Hyuugas in the stands nobody knows that. His moves are almost perfect and a murmur goes through the crowd; the Kazekage leans forward interestedly. Akiba stumbles back, bewilderment distorting his face even more than his kekkei genkai. Sora’s swipe misses him by inches.

They circle around each other, the hypnotic movement only broken when Akiba has enough and charges forward. There’s a sickening crack when his foot catches Sora’s shin and it snaps clean in half. Hisana’s stomach turns when she glimpses white bone. But Akiba’s petty victory costs him; instead of collapsing Sora grasps his collar. None of his strikes is charged with chakra, except for the last one, catching Akiba directly between the eyes. The boy slaps his hands to his face.

“He hit it,” Kohaku-sensei says, sounding unreasonably pleased. “He hit the tenketsu. I am afraid though that was too much chakra.”

For a moment Sora only stares, as if unable to belief he actually hit anything at all, and just for a second he looks like her teammate again. Do it, she thinks, do it now. And he does. Shifting his weight onto his broken leg he throws up his foot and brings the heel down on Akiba’s ribcage. Blood spurts out of the boy’s mouth and the examiner ends the match in a hurry. Two medics come sprinting into the arena, one sinking down next to an unmoving Akiba, the other only just catching Sora as his injured leg collapses under him.

Only now Hisana realizes how out of breath she feels. Popping another Nara pill she makes her way past her team and into the arena. Her match is next, so nobody stops her, even when she steps past the medic and leans down to her teammate.

She doesn’t ask how he is, because he looks like crap. Instead she wants to know, “How did you do it?”

He grins at her tiredly and reaches out to poke her in the forehead where Kohaku-sensei used to seal her Sharingan.

“Seen it enough on your face. Only one I know though.”

Strangely, Hisana doesn’t feel nervous about her own match at all. Maybe it’s because she’s seen both her teammates succeed already. Or maybe it’s because she’s been dealing with Hyuuga for
years at this point. Whatever it is, Naoki has Neji’s cheekbones and Kohaku-sensei’s nose and he doesn’t scare her at all. She fights the urge to smile at the scowling boy.

They face each other across the arena. It’s the first time Hisana has to perform in front of such a crowd – and it is a performance. She remembers vividly that during the Konoha Chuunin Matches Shikamaru was rewarded for his quick thinking and self-awareness even though he lost. *You may lose, but make it good.* For the first time she’s glad for the sparse attendance instead of disappointed. The whistle sounds.

As one they shoot forward to enter close combat, doujutsus blazing. Naoki’s Juuken is spread out over his entire palm, so her usual technique of blocking won’t work. Instead she goes for his wrists, twisting them out of the way while trying to get her foot somewhere close to his chest. He’s good, she thinks. Not as fast as Neji, but stronger and damn wily. Never once does she manage to pin his hands. He yanks her legs out from under her and they both tumble to the floor. For a moment they wrestle, but before it can descend into a crude brawl she rolls them to the side and gives him a kick. He skids over the sandy ground in a straight line.

Hisana pants. She can’t let him get too close. Only one mistake and she’ll have a problem.

When Naoki jumps to his feet, Hisana comes to a decision. She draws her bokken.

He eyes her weapon with a hint of apprehension, before trying to dart a hand past her defense again. In turn he gets a harsh whack to his wrist.

She aims the point at his sternum again and again until she slips past his quick hands. He wheezes at the impact, but nothing gives yet. Too slow, not enough force. Hisana jerks the wood back, grabbing it in a hold more reminiscent of a bo staff to drive him backwards.

A good thing, she thinks, that Hyuuga aren’t usually proficient with weapons.

Their hands are dangerously quick though and so it doesn’t take him long to grab a hold of the wood and do exactly what Kohaku-sensei warned her of: he pumps it full of chakra and it bursts in both their faces. Time slows down as the Sharingan fixates on a splinter directly aimed at her left eye. She bats it away. Only a split second of distraction, but it’s enough. Naoki goes for it. A familiar dull pain marks her right arm as useless as the Hyuuga seals a row of tenketsu at her shoulder.

She stumbles back, thoughts racing. No jutsus, no weapon, no use of her arm. The Hyuuga advances on her, eyes still wary, as if she were a wild animal. His breathing is equally hard and she takes pleasure in the fact that no matter what, she won’t make it easy for him.

Her Sharingan feel itchy and irritated, but she forces more chakra into them. Come on, she thinks, come closer, come on. They lock eyes. Illusions are useless; the Byakugan sees though them as easily as she does. But this isn’t an illusion. His eyes go glassy for a moment and he sways. Hisana gives him a serene smile that he returns somewhat stupidly. Her hold on him is tentative. He’s fighting it, shaking his head and blinking his eyes as if it would get rid of the fog in his brain.

But it’s enough for Hisana to grab hold of what’s left of her bokken. The biggest splinter is almost the size of her forearm and it ends in a nasty, jagged point. The broken wood digs into her palm. It’s fine, she thinks and makes herself take calm, measured steps towards the boy, muffling her chakra signature and stopping any killing intent she might be giving off. No need to be alarmed. I’m not the enemy. She feels relaxed and tired. **They** are relaxed and tired.
When she stops in front of him something flickers in his eyes. Alarm, maybe. Awareness. But she sticks the splintered bokken into his shoulder and it doesn’t matter anymore. Whatever control she might have had on him breaks with the sound of his flesh giving way. His hand shoots out, fueled by adrenaline and instinct, and catches her in the throat.

Hisana is thrown backwards by the force of his strike. The pain is negligible, but the shock drives the air out of her lungs and nothing comes back in. Pressure builds up deep in her chest. She desperately tries to shake off the fog of false calm created by her own technique, but it’s useless. Caught between panic and confusion she watches Naoki stagger closer, eyes cleared by the shock of pain, and does the only thing that comes naturally: she kicks at the broken fragment in his shoulder, her foot catching it athwart. She’s not sure what happens – can’t muster enough brain power to wonder – but something makes an ominous sound inside the Hyuuga’s body.

She watches, spots dancing in front of her eyes, as her opponent collapses. The sound of the examiner’s whistle is distant but she tries to cling to it. A pair of hands reaches for her and then her vision grays out.
Chapter 44

Shesh, so many fights! It’s pretty easy to design a fight when there’s some sort of story around it, but arena fights are really difficult. Especially Hisana vs. Sora was hard because they’re both taijutsu types.

Upon request: At the end there’ll be a who-is-who to remind you of all the OCs running around here.

The beeping of a heart monitor is eerily familiar. For the first time in her new life Hisana comes to and knows immediately where she is and what happened. It may be that the Suna hospital smells like a completely different brand of antiseptics than the Konoha hospital, or that the air-conditioning makes it just a little too cold. Whatever it is, it propels her from unconsciousness to alertness in a split-second. Her throat is sore – déjà vu – and there’s a tube stuck in her nose.

From the chair next to her Haru watches her with an unusually reproachful expression.

“Is this going to be become a regular thing? Visiting you in the hospital, because you don’t know when to quit?”

His mouth is drawn into a severe downward quirk and his hands are twisting in her bed sheet. She wants to tell him not to be dramatic, but her voice won’t cooperate.

“Hyuuga Naoki crushed your windpipe,” he informs her solemnly. Hisana makes a face and touches her jugular gingerly. There’s no scar, but it feels tender inside.

“Well, at least she has to shut up and listen now,” Sora’s voice quips from the other side of the room. When Hisana sits up she can see him occupying the only other bed in the room. His leg is in a cast and he’s reading a magazine.

“Hospital buddies,” he drawls, lifting his arm in a mock show of solidarity. Hisana lifts her own arm before flipping him off. What she wants to know right now is whether or not she won. But with Haru’s disappointed eyes still fixed on her face and Sora – the hypocrite – radiating disapproval she feels it might be a tad tactless. Thankfully her teammates know her well enough by now.

“You won,” Haru admits, but sounding almost unhappy about it. “Barely. You knocked out Hyuuga about ten seconds before fainting yourself.”

The shaky breath of relief that escapes her chafes at Hisana’s throat like sandpaper.

“Hyuuga’s fine, by the way,” Sora adds. “You dislocated his shoulder and broke his collar bone, but other than that you’re worse off than him. Sensei came this close to pulling you out though. They didn’t think they’d be able to fix you in time for round two and he didn’t want you participating when you’re not a 100 percent.”

“Luckily for you,” Kohaku-sensei’s voice comes from the door, “I could locate a specialist. You will need to attend another healing session tonight, but you will be ready to participate tomorrow.” Then he turns his attention towards Sora. “You will be fine as well.”
“What about Akiba?” her loudest teammate asks in an uncharacteristically small voice. Kohaku-sensei only shakes his head minutely.

“I cannot help him. His jounin sensei will take him back to Iwa tomorrow; the rest is up to their medics.”

That evening she spends an informative hour with one of Suna’s best medics. It’s a matronly woman who scolds her the entire 60 minutes, only pausing to ask “Does this hurt?” every once in a while. Apparently they managed to pop her windpipe back into place like a dented plastic bottle, so there was no actual tearing to mend. But it’s still a delicate apparatus and so her voice will sound a little scratchy for a while. Hisana’s biggest concern though is the scarf she is supposed to wear to keep her throat warm and protected. It sounds like something her mother used to nag her into and in Suna’s hellish temperatures it’s torture.

“Your throat is a medical miracle, girl,” the healer lady tells her waspishly. “By all means, it should have given out by now. You better wear that scarf tomorrow or I’ll personally come to drag you out of that arena.”

The next morning she feels both wired and drained. The sun hasn’t come up, but the nurses are already bustling up and down the hallways, so getting up isn’t as difficult as it was last time. Hisana wraps the ugly grey scarf around her neck and knots it tightly while Sora is tugging on his pants on his bed.

They meet Haru and Kohaku-sensei for breakfast. Hisana would have expected the mood to be better than yesterday, but the atmosphere seems even tenser somehow. By entering the second round their chances for a promotion are better, but she knows her team thinks about winning. And today at least one of them will be out of the running.

Without Sora’s good-natured babbling the entire team descends into absolute silence. Haru seems lost in his own thoughts, Kohaku-sensei appears reasonably pleased with the silence, and Hisana herself doesn’t even know where to start. She doesn’t manage to eat much; when Kohaku-sensei ushers them to the arena it’s almost a relief.

Before Hisana can take the steps up into the spectator stands Haru’s hand catches her arm.

“I’m staying down here,” he says quietly. “I- I don’t think I can make the track down the stairs again. It feels … like walking to your death.” He takes a deep breath, shakes off the nerves. Instead he busies his hands by untying and retying Hisana’s scarf. “I don’t know if I’ll get to see your match. Be careful. Don’t let anyone at your throat again – one day you won’t be so lucky anymore.”

Hisana nods slowly. Then her teammate beckons for Sora to come back down to him. She and Sora pass each other on the stairs with wary, tired looks.

“Don’t hold back against her,” she hears Haru downstairs. “Don’t be insulting …”

Haru’s opponent for today is Hanada. The girl’s long dark hair stands out starkly against the almost white, sand covered ground. From this far Hisana can’t make out her face, but the way she stands seems different from yesterday. There’s still arrogance in the overt straightness of her spine, but she looks like business. As if, under all that bustle, there’s actually a capable ninja hidden away. She’s wearing gloves this time, as well as knee and elbow protectors. Looks like Hanada had her very own
dramatic watch-my-back moment while Hisana wasn’t looking.

Hisana watches the girl run katas for a few short moments before her eyes are drawn back to Haru doing stretches. They’re both about the same height and of similar build: Speedy and agile. Neither of them has a particular field of expertise but both are reasonably well-versed in taijutsu. It will probably all come down to how good Haru is with his blades. They’re not a surprise anymore, but a weapon is a weapon.

The crowd is even more excited today. When the contestants step forward there are already whistles and cheers coming from the front rows; the examiner’s own whistle is very nearly lost in the noise.

Haru’s assessment of the situation seems similar to Hisana’s. He pulls out his daggers without foreplay or fanfare. He wants to end this fast. The audience cries out when Hanada completely ignores them. She shoots towards him, catching both blades in gloved hands and drives her foot into his stomach. There’s a strange metallic noise as metal hits leather.

“There is steel wiring in those gloves,” Kohaku-sensei assesses. “Not enough to make them completely impenetrable, but enough to stop the cutting edge.”

One of Haru’s blades has clattered to the ground, but the other he’s wedged out of Hanada’s grip. He rams it into her foot, drives his knee into whatever soft part he can reach. The girl stumbles back with a yelp. She tries to put distance between them, but her foot is still pinned to the ground. Hisana has seen, participated, in close close combat, but those two are too far up in each other’s business. It’s not quite sloppy yet, but getting there, both trying to get away while refusing to let go.

Finally Haru manages to wedge his dagger from Hanada and they push away from each other. They both look shocked, as if the entire thing escalated far quicker than expected. Haru’s eyes dart towards Hanada’s bleeding foot, and for a second there’s a small smile on his face. Then he calmly walks towards his wayward dagger, grabs it, and for the first time, turns towards his opponent with something bordering on eagerness. Temari scared him, Hisana realizes with some astonishment. The daughter of the Kazekage – of course she would. He doesn’t know the things she knows.

But Hanada is a former classmate. She’s never seen Haru seriously fight against someone he knows and considers an equal. That strange sense of familiarity and relief that Hyuuga Naoki gave her, he must be feeling something similar right now.

They collide with the screeching sound of grinding metal. Hanada is good; her footwork is exceptional despite her injury. Again and again she halts Haru’s attack simply by stepping into him and forcing him onto the defensive. But what interests Hisana more is her teammate’s knifework. “Look at that,” Sora breathes, elated. They look at each other and then at their teacher.

“But Haru’s mouth opens in surprise, she breathes out a bright yellow mist.

The arena goes quiet in confusion and then Haru starts to cough.
It’s so violent that he actually drops his daggers, hands flying to his chest. Hanada pointedly stands and watches, before drawing a kunai from her pouch and holding it over his head with it. That enough? her face says. The examiner hesitates but then whistles sharply to end the match.

They carry a still coughing Haru to the sideline. When she and Sora walk down to him, Hisana is relieved to see that, while he seems in pain, his lips haven’t turned blue. They crowd around him worriedly, but the medic shooes them away. “No worries, no worries. An irritant, nothing more.” The man unceremoniously shoves an inhaler into her teammate’s mouth. “You two should worry about yourselves.”

In a way her match with Sora is the one Hisana dreads the worst. Whether she wins or loses, it'll shift something in their dynamic that she would have rather left un-shifted. For the past year and a half team 11 has languished without any sort of hierarchy. There is an unspoken agreement between her and Sora to watch out a for Haru, who used to be a little feeble and still dislikes taking the lead, but other than that there was rarely ever a clear team leader. Today will establish who exactly is the stronger fighter.

It doesn’t feel at all like any of their sparring matches. The look on her teammate’s face is too intense for that. There’s no teasing, no jokes. It’s the same one he gave Akiba and it makes her nervous. Don’t be insulting … Haru’s voice echoes in her head. Sora’s eyes are fixed on her throat; she wonders what he will do. He might be too.

When the whistle sounds she doesn’t give him enough time to decide. It’s been a while since Hisana has used the Uchiha taijutsu style instead of the Burning Leaf bastardization she’s come to favor. Or any other style really. Using taijutsu against Sora may even be a bad idea, but she can’t help but try anyway. It’s easy, comfortable, switching back and forth between two, then three, then four styles, trying to catch him off guard. Her Sharingan makes her a little faster than him, but Sora is notably stronger than her. Even his passive blocks are sure to leave marks on her arms. Right now she’d give anything to have her bokken back.

Using ninjutsu will be hard as well; water nature is weak against earth nature. So instead she slides away and behind him, unashamedly firing a Great Fireball at his back. It only singes his elbow, barely catching him as he sharply turns away, but the awful stink of burnt flesh catches her by surprise. Momentarily startled, she catches Sora’s fist to her shoulder.

They exchange blows with such force it whirls up the sand around them. Hisana can feel her fingers crack ominously, but adrenaline keeps the pain away. They know each other far too well; whenever she tries to exploit a weakness, he has already found one of hers. Every trick he tries to pull on her she already knows, and Sora’s refusal to look into her eyes makes catching him in a Sharingan genjutsu impossible. Frustrated, she plants a kick against his chest to push him away. “Sulton: Teppodama!”

It’s the smallest Teppodama she’s ever managed to produce, but the force behind it sends it towards her teammate like a bullet. They both stand in shock as it pierces his shoulder, slugging into the wall behind him. Now, she thinks, look at me. He doesn’t. Instead his eyes involuntarily jerk towards his shoulder. Well, she decides, that’s good too then. “Magen: Kyoten Chiten.”

The feel of the genjutsu crawling over them both like something alive is still fairly new. The
Sharingan assists her in spinning the illusion, adding details, adjusting it just so. And when Sora looks at his shoulder he will see a hole much bigger than the real one. He won’t feel any pain, Hisana doesn’t know how to do that, but it won’t occur to him how odd that is. And when he looks up to see her run towards him, her expression will look like panic. He doesn’t see the fist coming that strategically hits him in the temple and knocks him out.

Behind her the examiner blows his whistle and Hisana nearly jumps out of her skin.

The medic-nins are already closing in on them and Hisana takes a moment to breathe. The entirety of the stadium – the stands, the crowd, Kohaku-sensei’s eyes on her – come rushing back. There’s cheering and Hanada’s restraint clapping carrying over from the sideline; she waits for the rush of victory to come, but it doesn’t. Instead she feels vaguely ashamed with her teammate lying at her feet. This isn’t right, she thinks vaguely. This is serious. People get hurt, don’t you understand? It never really occurred to her before, but as she kneels down next to Sora it hits her like a brick. This isn’t entertainment – people can actually die here, have died here.

The boy’s eyes have already opened again. He still looks a little spacey while the medics ply him with smelling salts, but he reaches out and pats her elbow with a vaguely friendly looking grimace.

“With this the contestants for the final round tomorrow are decided,” the Kazekage announces.

“Hanada Mami and Uchiha Hisana.”

Hisana lets the cheering of the crowd wash over her unacknowledged, eyes fixed on the ground, her hand firmly gripping Sora’s shirt.

---

The most important non-canon people:

Eguchi Sora: Hisana’s youngest teammate. Taijutsu specialist and full-time dork.

Sone Mitsuharu (Haru): Hisana’s oldest teammate. Soft-spoken and awkward with an intimidating face.

Hyuuga Kohaku-sensei: Team 11’s squad leader. Well-meaning but emotionally stunted.

Aburame Shizuha (Shizurin): Hisana’s first friend in Konoha. An Aburame with a tact problem. Currently apprentice to T&I.


Current non-canon people:

Hyuuga Naoki: Random Hyuuga boy who’s giving Hisana trouble in her first match.
Saitou Gorou: One of Temari’s bodyguards/teammates. Big but apparently not all that clever. Lost his match against Hanada.

Mami Hanada: Former classmate with a nasty attitude. Won her match against Saitou Gorou. Has an embarrassing crush on Sora.

Mori Akiba: Random Iwa-nin with a strange kekkei genkai. Lost his match against Sora.

**Other non-canon people:**

Shimura Hiroyuki (Hiro): Possible son of ‘old man Shimura’. Broke Sakura’s arm during the Academy matches and left Sasuke unsettled.

Hoga Chisato: Former classmate of Hisana. Died during a botched genin mission and awakened Hisana’s sharingan.

Nara Shikano: Shiki’s long-suffering older brother.

Hyuuga Airi: Kohaku-sensei’s naggy older twin sister.

Hirose Kaori, Fujimori Hisao and Inoue Tatsuya: Psycho team who defeated team 7 and had to be stopped by Mama Akimichi. Under the guidance of Elder Koharu?
Chapter 45

So here’s the next one already! No fighting this time, because I think we all need a break from the tournament. Instead team-fluff and Temari.

48 hours until the final match starts.

Hisana isn’t sure what to think about the fact that she’ll be facing Hanada of all people. Despite the girl’s rather impressive performance against Haru and her overall … solo success in the tournament, the entire thing feels a little weird to her. It should be someone more impressive. Someone from Suna, older, intimidating, a genius. Someone she can rightfully fear. Hanada just feels sort of anticlimactic. Then again, some sort of confrontation has been brewing between them for some time now – started by Hanada’s embarrassing obsession with Sora and not at all helped by Hisana’s penchant for needling her with unmitigated disregard. Dear god, Kakashi-shishou has been rubbing off on her.

This time nobody is spending the night in the hospital. She’s grateful for this small mercy, because after today she feels that team 11 may have some things to talk about. Even though she’d dearly love not to. Haru has been throwing her covert looks for the whole walk back, still occasionally coughing, and the reappearance of Sora’s cheer is somewhat eerie. Kohaku-sensei, in typical fashion, doesn’t pick up on her unease. In fact he seems confused why she would visit the boys in their room when she could be taking a nap.

“You will need your strength,” he advises earnestly, “I will endeavor to prepare you for Hanada-san as well as I can.”

“Yes, well,” she hedges, “I’ll go to sleep soon. But first I really need to make sure we’re all ok.”

Kohaku-sensei’s brows furrow and for a long moment he appears to think this over. “Why would you not be ok? You all performed well today.”

Hisana stares at him. Oh dear. “I want to make sure Haru isn’t too disappointed and Sora isn’t angry with me.”

Judging by Sensei’s blank face this clears up exactly nothing, but he nods anyway. Hisana slides out of the room, exasperated and a little fond. Good to know that Sensei wouldn’t know how to hold anything against her if the occasion ever arises.

When Hisana knocks at the boys’ door she can hear hectic rustling on the other side. “J-just a moment.”

Haru opens the door, hair in a messy braid and eyes sleepy.

“Are those … chickens on your pyjamas?”

He turns a little red, but his expression is pointedly haughty. “S-so?”
“Oh nothing,” she demurs in amusement. “Love the color; baby blue’s your thing.”

Her answer coaxes a smile out of him, so things can’t be too grim on this end. He lets her inside the dark room. The only light is coming from the bathroom where Sora is making a lot of noise. “Girl incoming,” she calls lightly.

“You sure?” comes a grunt back. Asshole. In retaliation she throws herself on his bed without taking her shoes off. With every passing minute she feels a little more comfortable. Nothing horrible has happened yet. She turns her attention away from the bathroom light and towards the teammate that is currently nodding off on the other bed. There’s a book in his hands and it’s been continuously inching closer to his face; by now Haru’s nose is almost touching the pages.

“You ok?” she asks quietly. Haru is quiet for a long moment, until he turns sleepy eyes to her.

“You worry too much about the wrong things,” he finally settles on. “My pride is bruised. I will be fine. I think … maybe I’m not ready for promotion anyway.”

She turns towards him properly, confused.

“Who says you won’t be promoted? You won the first match and you were good in the second.”

He shrugs serenely. “I was ok. It’ll be nice if it works out. But if it doesn’t – well, I won’t be too disappointed is what I’m saying. I’m no good with telling people what to do. And chuunin are team leaders, right?”

That’s true enough. But Hisana does think he’d be good if he tried. Haru has a good head on his shoulders; the problem is that he simply isn’t aggressive enough. His stony face is probably the only reason people don’t walk all over him.

“You’ll be fine,” she tells him. “Even if you’re not promoted. There’s always next time. Plenty of people aren’t chuunin yet.”

He makes a merry little noise. “I just remembered, Hanada’s team will still need a third member, right?”

The breathy laugh that escapes Hisana is a strange cross between horror and hilarity. “Don’t say that.”

A towel comes flying out of the bathroom and hits her square in the head.

“If team 2 does the exams with him, he’ll be fine,” Sora insists. Much to Hisana’s disappointment his pyjamas seem to be plain and boring, if a little holey.

“How do you know them?” she wonders, not for the first time. He’s commented favorably on Hanada’s team before. The names seemed completely unfamiliar to her, but then again Hisana isn’t known for her face or name memory.

“They all live in my neighborhood,” he admits, shoving Hisana’s dirty shoes off his bed and brushing off the sand she tracked in. “They’re good guys, just a bit … naïve maybe. Mami has them wrapped around her finger and she keeps ditching them.” He scratches is head. “Idiots.”

When he notices Hisana’s lingering look, Sora scoffs. “What? Don’t try to coddle me. I lost, but I think I did good.” He kicks at her leg. “Let’s put it on the kekkei genkai. No way I can defeat something like that.”
Hisana winces and strategically decides not to tell him that her genjutsu was mostly ordinary. His assessment is true enough to be left uncorrected after all.

“We should still work a bit on our genjutsu,” Haru mumbles unexpectedly, before his eyes slide shut again.

Sora kicks her out after that.
It’s not quite late yet and the Suna weather gives her real trouble going to sleep. Hisana has no idea how the boys can simply block out the heat and pass out like that. It’s cooler inside than outside, but it’s still not the sort of cold she is used to sleeping in. She misses her own bed and Sasuke’s snoring. Well, no, Sasuke doesn’t actually snore. He is, however, a loud breather. It helps her fall asleep knowing there’s someone else in the room. Kohaku-sensei sleeps either never or so silently and motionlessly that it’s unnatural. She can’t quite tell yet the difference between his different forms of stillness. One day, she contemplates, I’m going to find him and he’s dead. And I won’t notice.

She opens the door to find the room in darkness. What now then? Stumble around in the dark and wake him, or use her Sharingan and risk waking him with the chakra flare? Hisana closes the door and decides to go out.

It’s still hot, but with six o’clock come and gone the worst is already over. The streets are still empty though, except for a few foreign ninja who stuck around for the final matches. She recognizes a Kusa kunoichi with a wicked looking bagua saber as one of the ninja buried under the rubble with her during second task. For one irrational heartbeat she considers saying hello but then thinks better of it. The girl looks ill-tempered, cheeks red from the heat.

In the past weeks Hisana has come to know Suna fairly well. The boys love exploring the streets, no matter how often they get lost in the process. The residents are not entirely friendly, but very honest and straightforward, so she feels reasonably at ease alone. But she doesn’t want to eat or train and so she’s at a loss of where to go. There are no teahouses in Suna, mostly because tea isn’t really something you drink in this heat. Killing time is a luxury that is mostly indulged by higher ranking shinobi who are old enough to visit bars at night.

“You lost?” a familiar voice quips up behind her. Temari’s chakra signature is a blazing beacon in the empty streets. It’s a show of confidence rather than sloppiness. ‘I am here, what are you going to do about it?’

Hisana really doesn’t want to talk to her. Any further contact with the girl could end in disaster – Gaara being her most urgent fear. She’s pretty sure the Kazekage has kept his youngest son safely locked away as long as foreigners are in the city. But she can’t be sure for how long Gaara is going to put up with it. Finding his siblings might be high on his list then, especially when Temari has done something interesting, such as participating in the Exams.

The Kazekage himself worries her too. She has no way of knowing how long he will still live, when exactly Orochimaru will kill and replace him. A coup isn’t planned in a matter of weeks; he must have been deceiving them for longer than that to form a treaty with Oto that would fool the elder council.

“Temari-chan, right?” she beams at the girl. “What a coincidence!”

Hisana hopes her voice isn’t as wobbly as it feels. Saying hi to that Kusa girl looks pretty appealing
right about now.

“Oh, so now you’re friendly,” the blond returns waspishly. “Someone told you who I am?”

Hisana’s smile drops instantly. “Don’t get cocky. I thought I’d be a little nice now that Haru handed your ass to you. What do you want?”

For some strange reason her rudeness seems to mollify the girl. She shakes a bit of fresh air into her loose day robes before swaggering towards her.

“I just thought I’d say hello. You know, *basic courtesy*. Also, you’re going to be in the final match. I want to know why.”

The girl leads her through a number of shadowed back alleys. The heat collects here and makes the air taste stale and thick. Every now and again they pass civilians carrying crates with non-perishables and bottles of alcohol.

“What is this?” she asks the younger girl, who is obviously no older than twelve and really shouldn’t be here either. “The shadowy underbelly of Suna? Should I be worried?”

Temari snorts inelegantly. “Don’t be stupid. I’m showing you where my people spend the day. It looked like you were bored anyway, so don’t complain.”

They duck into a little hole in the wall. The stairs lead underground and hot wind is blowing out of it and into the alley. Hisana squints her eyes against the sting of the air. The inside still smells somewhat musty and the only light comes from a number of enormous candles, but it’s a lot cooler; someone has put a fan behind a block of ice that is slowly melting into the clayey floor. Nobody seems to care.

“Do you drink?” Temari asks her, throwing her shawl from her face. “I know Konoha is pretty stuffy, but here you’re a proper adult when you graduate. A little alcohol I can get my hands on.”

“No thanks,” Hisana decides after weighing her longing for a beer against the appearance of her not quite fourteen-year-old body. “And we’re not stuffy, we just care about our children, thank you very much.”

Some of the adults are eying her carefully. Hisana has no doubt that most of them are ninja; her Konoha hitai-ate and attire stand out like a sore thumb. Temari ushers her to a sturdy looking table at the back of the room before darting away to the bar. For a few nervous minutes Hisana is alone under the locals; one man even turns around to point blank stare at her. When Temari comes back she’s carrying two glasses with thick pink liquid. She kicks the man in the shin until he turns back around and plops down next to Hisana.

“Here, that shouldn’t offend your delicate sensibilities too much.”

She leers at Hisana; in the half-light she looks like a shark: All teeth, and far too much aggression pent up in that little body. “I thought your whole clan was dead. What the hell does an Uchiha do here?”

Hisana very nearly chokes on her sweet drink. “Your mother teach you no tact? – Oh wait…,” she shoots back pointedly. Temari’s face twists into something angry and then pained.
“Touché,” she concedes unhappily. “Let me rephrase that: I’m surprised to see an Uchiha in Suna. I’m even more surprised they let you leave their little golden cage.”

This time Hisana outright snorts at her. “You think I’m some sort of fancy songbird?” For a moment she entertains thoughts of her curmudgeonly cousin singing for anyone. “Forget it,” she tells the blonde. “I’m a ninja – I’m only useful as long as I do my job. I want to do my job. And what are you doing in the Exams? You’re what – twelve?”

“So?” the girl protests in annoyance, just like Hisana knew she would. Temari is only a year younger than her teammates, but she seems awfully young. Were her boys that young only last year? She thinks of Kohaku-sensei’s training and wonders, not for the first time, if the stress of it hasn’t actually aged them prematurely. If it did, she’s more than grateful for the effect it had on Sora and Haru. Being so used to their youthful faces it frequently escapes Hisana that they’re by all accounts hormone driven 13 year-old teenage boys. And yes, she’s occasionally caught either or both of them staring down her shirt, but neither of them has dared to make any comment yet so the entire thing is still humorous to her. She knows Inomaru – the only other cheeky teenage boy she knows – would have said something stupid already instead of politely averting his gaze when caught.

She observes the barely restrained emotion on Temair’s face, unable to match it to anything she’s ever seen on the faces of her friends. The spoiled, sheltered daughter of the Kazekage? Maybe. The man must love his children in some ways or he wouldn’t have so many of them. His first born is sure to be something special to him. The heavy guards that accompanied his only daughter during the Exam suggested as much. “And I’m only … preparing,” Temari admits. “I have younger brothers and we’re supposed to take the actual Exams some other time. I’m the babysitter.”

The last is said with no small amount of resentment.

“Brothers,” Hisana commiserates lightly. “Such pests.”

Temari shoots her a haunted look. “You have no idea. Kankurou is trying so hard to act like an adult it’s embarrassing. And Gaara is …” Her voice trembles at her youngest brother’s name. “Gaara is different.”

“But you love him anyway,” Hisana ventures.

Temari looks at her incredulously, but after a few seconds of contemplation her eyes go sad. “He’s my little brother,” she finally settles on, rolling the words around in her mouth as if they taste strange. “Gaara is my little brother.”

Hisana nods before taking a chance. “So, am I going to meet them or what? Where are they?”

Temari shoots her a calculating look from under her eyelashes, swishing around the dregs of her juice in the glass. “Oh, you know … around.”
Temari’s pronouncement is not as enigmatic as she may have intended it – but it still doesn’t fail to pull the rug out from under Hisana’s feet. The girl is clever, very much so. Not enough to have cooked up whatever this is, but enough to be let in on it. Enough that someone obviously sent her to feel Hisana out. For what exactly, she isn’t sure. The things Temari asks her are inconspicuous. She doesn’t mind admitting who her teachers are; her family business is mostly a matter of public record; Temari has seen her fighting style for herself. The information the blonde offers in return are no less freely given. Temari is good with ninjutsu. She’s training with several teachers at once because she has no proper genin team yet. There’s a man called Baki that her father is eying up for the position of her jounin teacher. She’s closer to her father than any of her brothers.

The entire affair is conspicuously inconspicuous. When she goes home that evening, Hisana is only really sure of two things: She really likes Temari, and something troublesome is coming her way.

Nerves are her constant companion the whole way back to her room. Whatever it is that Temari hinted at, it’s going to happen in the next two days. Kohaku-sensei has no intention of sticking around longer than they need to finish the tournament; Hisana secretly suspects he dislikes the heat. Right about now she dearly wishes she’d know what the Ichibi vessel’s chakra feels like. Don’t be paranoid, she scolds herself. Why would the Kazekage let his unstable son loose on the village just to stick it to you? She can’t possibly be unlucky enough to meet all of the Naruto cast before she’s good and ready. There could be a million other things he could want from her – even though there are none she can think of right now.

Only when the hotel comes into view Hisana can feel herself relax. If she screamed now, she’s reasonably sure Kohaku-sensei would be quick enough to come and save her. The thought feels vaguely pathetic, but there might be a confrontation with pre-Chunin-Exam Gaara on the horizon, and she really fucking needs an adult right now. Or, you know, at least an ‘adult’.

She doesn’t dare wake Sensei up and tell him. The uncomfortable question of ‘How do you know about the super secret Suna Jinchuuriki?’ is one she isn’t eager to answer at all. Then again, this is a lot more dangerous than messing with one or two Konoha clans. The worst that can happen to her at home is being locked away – because they’ll either think her crazy or want to use her to win the war Shimura Danzo style. She’s not sure how that would impact the course of the war, but at least something would be done about it. She’s also, maybe arrogantly, sure team 7 would break her out eventually.

But a meeting with Gaara – being wiped out here – would mean nobody could interfere with the Main Story anymore. She distinctly remembers reading time traveling fanfictions where timelines simply corrected themselves. Gaara would feel no remorse for killing her, right now he simply isn’t capable of that, and her death could very well be the new catalyst for Sasuke’s slow descend into madness. All her work for nothing.
Once again someone stronger than her has backed her into a corner. Hisana crawls into bed, taking comfort in the fact that, at least for now, her team is around to watch her back. It’s the only thing that lets her fall asleep.

The next day wears on her nerves. While the boys have been relegated to their room, Hisana spends the entire day with Kohaku-sensei in one of the Suna training grounds. Now that the last contestants are both of Konoha, Suna spies are nothing she has to deal with any longer. But training ground C is an even plain; no trees, no rock formations – it feels like an invitation. ‘Look at me standing around without cover – come and get me.’

If Kohaku-sensei notices her jitters, he seems to blame the upcoming match. Having him around is a small comfort; at least if she dies today she won’t be alone. Training is hell in more than one way.

Facing Hanada is almost a relief.

The girl’s sneering face is an achingly familiar evil. Annoying, arrogant and selfish – Hanada is a lot of things, but at least she’s not a killer. Not in the sense Sabaku no Gaara is. For the final match the arena has filled up with people. Watching them clap and cheer drives the fear out of her. She still feels nothing but derision for the spectacle, but at least she’s reasonably safe here, under the watchful eyes of natives and foreigners alike. The dark haired girl in front of her is currently Hisana’s biggest, most real problem. The sooner that problem is taken care of, the sooner they can get the hell out of Suna.

The crowd goes silent when the Kazekage rises from his seat. “Most esteemed guests – welcome to the last match of this most exciting contest!” He bows to the excited racket of the spectators. Then he holds up his hands, quieting the crowd once more. “Today the best of our contenders will show you of what they are capable to advance to the rank of chuunin. Mami Hanada –“ he gestures grandly to the other girl, who pushes out her chest in pride “– Uchiha Hisana –“ he catches Hisana’s gaze and holds it just a second too long “– we are looking forward to see the best you can do.”

The proctor bows to him and holds out his whistle like an offering. “Please take the customary five steps.” Then he takes the whistle and blows it.

There’s a certain sort of calm that can only be found in a fight. It’s a powerful thing, Hisana finds. More powerful than the fear of dying in said fight, obviously. Powerful enough, that the Kazekage and his entire family vanish from Hisana’s mind when she meets Hanada’s eyes across the arena. Her Sharingan flare to life and she leers at her opponent. Hanada’s eyes twitch in return, fighting against the urge to close. It’s the last thing Hisana registers before they fly at each other. The kekkei genkai gives her an edge, makes the opponent’s movements register faster than normal, but it doesn’t help Hisana’s speed. And Hanada is damn fast. This is a fight without blocks – instead they keep avoiding each other, narrowly missing a punch, narrowly sidestepping a kick. They switch positions, ducking away and dancing past each other.

Hisana spits a small teppodama at the other girl, tiny, the size of a ping pong ball. Hanada bends backwards; it shaves past her and hits the wall. The Sharingan register a tiny hole in the stucco before Hisana jumps away from a vicious kick aimed at her knee. They move in circles. She knows Hanada’s stamina is formidable. Hoping to wait her out would be a stupid move. Something needs to give.
She throws a kunai, but it’s easily swiped out of the air by Hanada’s steel wire gloves. And there it is – just the tiniest moment of inattention. Not even a second of distraction.

The Sharingan burn with chakra as Hisana flings a hand full of senbon at the other girl and dives right after it. Hanada makes a grab for the needles. It only takes a split second for her to register Hisana’s movement, but it’s too late. There’s no time to jump out of the way, to retreat. She has to meet the attack head-on, and it’s too much. The moment the last senbon harmlessly hits the floor, Hisana is on her, thighs wrapped around her neck.

They crash to the floor, and only one of them is prepared for the impact. Hanada chokes, legs reaching out to wrap around Hisana’s head, trying to twist them into a ball of limbs, but Hisana has already rolled back and off her. She can feel Hanada’s nose break against her lower back, the crack of it muffled. For one awkward moment they’re staring at each other’s faces, Hanada, bloody nosed and flat on her back, Hisana kneeling above her, and the same idea seems to flash through their minds.

“Dokugiri!”

“Teppodama!”

Hanada’s poison mist hits Hisana’s water bullet head on. There’s backsplash coming at her, colored a sickly yellow, and Hisana jerks away as if stung. It misses her by inches, harmlessly splattering onto her arms and hands. Handa has no such luck. Hisana braces for a counter attack that never comes. Only when the crowd cheers around her she realizes that Hanada hasn’t moved an inch. Instead her legs scrape helplessly against the ground, hands clawing at her face. The techniques haven’t cancelled each other out, the way Hisana suspected. Instead the yellowish irritant has congealed into a thick mass, covering most of the girl’s face. Hanada’s torso shakes with muffled coughs, her only free eye staring at Hisana in panic.

It’s instinct when she reaches out to free her opponent – her alley, a Konoha ninja – from the though mask, but it’s hardened into something almost rubbery.

“Hey!” she cries, “hey we need help!”

The proctor looks a little confused, as if not quite sure what she wants from him. Hisana turns to the medics instead. “Get here you idiots! She’s suffocating – I’ll forfeit if that’s what you want!”

Only then they seem to realize the gravity of the situation. The whistle blows and the medics come running immediately. Hisana is shoved aside; someone rams a small tube into Hanada’s throat. Someone lifts Hisana’s hand as she sits there, simply trying to catch her breath, get down from the battle high that’s already tinged with bitter, jittery panic.

“And the victor of the Suna Chuunin Exams – Uchiha Hisana!”

The crowd cheers. She sneers at them.

On the way back to their hotel room Hisana’s team flanks her like bodyguards, a stony faced Kohaku-sensei bringing up the rear. The Chuunin Exams are a disgusting spectacle, she thinks, picking flecks of yellow goo off her arm. They itch and bite a little; she doesn’t want to know what literally inhaling this stuff would mean. They boys immediately picked up on her foul mood, so a celebration falls flat. Instead of congratulations she receives a bottle of soda and the room to herself to brood for a while. Which is also good.
In the evening they are called to see Kazekage. It’s a bit startling to see all the match contestants once more; most of them she’d already forgotten. Even Hanada, red-eyed and still coughing, is wobbling up the path to the Kage’s office. Only Mori Akiba, the hulk-like Iwa-nin is notably absent. Hisana thinks back to Kohaku-sensei’s enigmatic pronouncement in the hospital and decides not to ask Sora, stiff and silent beside her.

The Kazekage’s office looks almost exactly like the Hokage’s office. The color is a little drabber, and the family photos that littler Sarutobi-sama’s desk are missing, but the makeup is almost eerily similar.

They line up in front of the desk, the Kazekage watching them with only mild interest and not a hint of a smile. “Now,” he drawls. “We are going to announce who earned a promotion. There’ll be no protests, no negotiating. Your villages’ envoys all voted as well, so believe me when I say you’ve all had a fair chance.”

He shuffles a few papers, before standing up. A man comes up next to him, holding a stack of generic chuunin vests.

“So where are we … ah yes. Saitou Gorou.” He casts his own man a wry look. “Though you performed … admirably, I’m afraid a man your age should know better than hoping to outlast a young woman. Maybe next time.”

The Suna-nin doesn’t even twitch. Hisana wonders whether this village simply beats discipline into their ninjas the way Konoha does it with teamwork, or if her hunch is right and Gorou is a long-time genin for similar reasons as Kabuto.

“Hyuuga Naoki. You have shown impressive command over your body and a firm grasp on the Hyuuga taijutsu style. It has also come to my attention that you displayed extraordinary leadership qualities during the first few tasks. You have hereby been promoted.”

Naoki’s calm façade cracks momentarily into a smile before he takes one of the chuunin vests and immediately puts it on. When his eyes flicker to her Hisana winks at him. She has no desire to fight with anyone here anymore.

“Sabaku no Temari. You haven’t yet shown the maturity needed in a teamleader. Your skill speaks for itself, but I’m afraid a promotion is still a while off.”

Temari shrugs good-naturedly, not upset in the least.

“Eguchi Sora. Your taijutsu is impressive and above all your peers. While I think a bit more awareness of your surroundings would be preferable, the Konoha envoy has assured me that your single-mindedness will serve you well. You are hereby promoted to chuunin.”

Hisana can literally see the energy shoot up her teammates spine and bubble over. He reaches out to hug the bewildered Naoki next to him before eagerly making a grab for his own chuunin vest.

“Sone Mitsuharu. While your skills with the dagger are notable and your ninjutsu solid, we felt that you haven’t displayed the forcefulness necessary to operate efficiently on your own. Your tentativeness was your downfall this time. I wish you good luck the next time.”

An invisible weight seems to have been lifted from Haru’s shoulders. He sways into her side before catching himself. His secret smile, hidden away behind his long hair, tells Hisana enough not to worry.
“Mami Hanada. You have shown to be extremely versatile – a desirable trait in a chuunin. While I’m afraid you lack any leadership skills whatsoever,” – at this Hanada’s face sours considerably – “Your combat skills go well beyond the scope of a genin. It was no easy decision, but you are hereby promoted to the rank of chuunin.”

Hanada’s squeal of excitement turns into a nasty cough halfway through, but that doesn’t stop her from reaching for a vest.

“Uchiha Hisana.”

Hisana jerks to attention, suddenly nervous. She does want to be promoted after all, despite her distaste for the public matches and the Kazekage himself. The man leans forward to her, mustering her as if the decision were still pending.

“Since the very first match the Konoha envoy has voted against your promotion. You gave no thought to your own well-being. Your skills are without a doubt above reproach, but single-mindedness appears to be a team problem.”

From the corner of her eye she can see Sora wince at this.

“However, luckily for you, Suna’s values differ greatly from Konoha’s. We have found your determination and your absolute focus on the mission to be commendable. While short-sighted at times, you have shown willingness and ability to make up for it with quick thinking and reliable instincts. The Konoha envoy relented, only because there’s something you showed to value above the mission: the life of your fellow Konoha ninja. You are hereby promoted to the rank of chuunin.”

The last chuunin vest is summarily shoved into her arms.

“Congratulations to all new chuunin. For the rest of you: Good luck next time.”
Chapter 47

Oh sheesh, that’s a long one. Even with a little extra outsider pov at the end.

Hanada is staring at her.

It’s not the usual heated jealousy that the girl tends to direct at Hisana, but something more considering. It’s nothing outright positive, but there’s not ill intent either. “Uchiha,” she finally says, voice still scratchy and painful sounding. “We need to talk.”

The rest of team 11 turns towards her, half braced for a fight, but the muted, almost shy look she sends them is enough to catch both boys off guard.

“All right,” Hisana agrees easily. “Go on.”

Hanada looks at her as if she didn’t really expect her to say yes. A bit lost she stares at Hisana, then back at her team. “Come on,” Hisana finally says, taking pity on the usually so forceful girl. “I’m not hungry yet. Let’s get something to drink.”

The boys look at her as if she’d spontaneously lost her mind. Maybe because Haru’s stomach has been growling for half an hour, too nervous to eat, or maybe because Hanada could very well try to murder her in a dark alley, but Hisana only shrugs. “I wanted to talk to her anyway.”

“Well,” Sora finally allows, “if you say so. See you back at the hotel.”

Walking the streets with Hanada feels decidedly less safe than doing it with her team. For a brief moment she regrets not following them back to the hotel, but whatever Hanada wants from her, Hisana can smell an opportunity for business.

She leads Hanada through the Suna back alleys, amused to see that they are just as busy as they seem to be during day time. The little hole in the wall she’d been to with Temari is easy enough to find and entering it for the second time doesn’t feel nearly as daunting. The barkeeper is a familiar face now – even if only vaguely – and she’s secure in the knowledge that at least half of these people know that the Kazekage’s daughter likes her. There’s no danger here. No more than in the rest of Suna, anyway.

Behind her Hanada is vibrating with tension. “Do you drink?” Hisana echoes Temari’s words only half seriously, curious what the answer will be. It takes a second before the words seem to click.

“No thank you,” Hanada cries in a high-pitched voice, apparently torn between a newfound need to be polite and the old habit of being a bitch to Hisana. A few of the patrons flinch at the volume.

Hanada’s keigo is a little rough around the edges, as if she doesn’t use it very often. The girl herself seems to notice, grimacing a little when she stumbles over her words. It’s interesting. Hisana has long since stopped trying to figure out how she knows this language – Japanese, or whatever passes for it. It’s only every once in a while now that she takes active notice of it. For a moment she ponders
whether she’d have noticed Hanada’s slip ups immediately after waking up in Konoha, or if it’s only her familiarity with Shizuha’s constant flow of low, perfect keigo that makes her take notice.

“You sure?” she wheedles, maybe a bit sadistically, watching the other girl struggle with whether or not being a chuunin makes her enough of an adult to drink. When no immediate answer comes she instead turns to the barkeeper who is watching them with mild interest.

“Ya friend’s a lightweight, huh?” he asks with a toothless grin. “Got some palm wine, if ya want.”

“No thanks,” she decides, unwilling to be entirely defenseless in a strange village. The threat of Sabaku no Gaara is still hanging over her head, even if it feels a little more distant than it did yesterday. The man tuts at her, but fishes a bottle with a familiar pink liquid form a shelf instead. “Young ninjas – no idea ‘bout the good stuff. How you ever gonna grow big ‘n strong without vitamin a?”

“‘Vitamin Alcohol’, ” a lady at the bar informs them. Behind Hisana Hanada makes an appalled noise. She kicks her.

“Sorry about my friend,” Hisana tries apologetically under the ninjas’ narrowed gazes. “She’s a bit … sheltered.”

She slaps down some coins, flashes them her most disarming smile, and takes their drinks to a nearby table. Hanada follows with a scowl, unwilling to be alone with the strange Suna-nins. “So,” Hisana starts, before the stupid girl gets herself into real trouble, “what do you want?”

“Sensei said I should probably thank you. So … thank you. For, you know. That was – “ she struggles with herself “ – … appreciated.” She doesn’t look very appreciative.

“You are welcome,” Hisana purrs, viciously downplaying what was actually the truth. She doesn’t like the girl, doesn’t care much about what she is doing and how she is feeling in general. But … But. She is still a Konoha ninja. Sora cares about her in some capacity. She is mean-spirited and self-centered, but she also has a certain amount of skill that Hisana can’t help but respect. There’s no way she can ever really dismiss Hanada, no matter how much she likes to pretend. Hisana has pondered how the little annoyance may fit into her life then, if so obviously not as a friend, or god forbid, a rival – though she has no doubt Hanada thought it would head that way. No, no matter how much she actually doesn’t mind any of Kakashi-shishou’s habits that may have rubbed off on her, a rival simply won’t do.

Instead, there’s something that came to her only very recently.

“Say, Mami-chan,” she starts carefully, pointedly ignoring Hanada’s outrage at the familiarity, “now that we have left this … silly, silly animosity behind us why don’t we become friends?”

Hanada’s eyes clearly state that there’s nothing she’d love less than that. “I mean,” Hisana continues, unabashed, “we were clearly having a moment right then. All friendshippy. And I think Sora would love it if all his friends got along, don’t you? He’s so big on teamwork.”

She sips on her glass unhurriedly while Hanada squirms on her chair. “He’s was disappointed you don’t seem to be interested in us, Haru and me. Saving each other’s lives … that forges bonds, you know?”

“Oh! Yes, of course!” Hanada breathes, a calculating glint entering her eyes, “Why, no, you must have misunderstood – Hisana-chan. You see, I simply didn’t think … you’d want me to intrude.”

There is a vague awareness in Hanada’s face; some sort of acknowledgement that they’re playing a
game, even though she’s not yet sure where Hisana is planning to take it. The power dynamics of it are clear though, at least for now.

“I know you must be so tired right now, with your recent injury,” the Uchiha simpers, somewhat theatrically pressing a palm to her cheek, “and we’re in no hurry of course, but I’m in dire need of a new sparring partner. And you have such interesting talents! Wouldn’t it be just perfect for a little bonding between us?”

The expression on the other girl’s face might be suppressed triumph or low-level panic, Hisana isn’t entirely sure, but Hanada quickly dons a face she’s seen Sakura wear around Yamanaka Ino about a million times already.

“Oh that’s just so sweet of you! Of course I will help you, I’m sure you would do the same for me!”

Hanada swats at her arm and gives a high-pitched giggle. It all feels very much like a performance – overdone and fake – but no matter how generally irksome Hanada is, she isn’t stupid. She has recognized her first ever opportunity for politicking and forging some sort of alliance with Hisana will serve her well in the end. A business partner is always a good thing to have.

“Oh, you know,” Hisana demurs, “there’s really just one thing in particular I need your help with. And I know just the thing to pay you back.”

Maybe it’s karma for being mean to a little girl. Cosmic payback of some sorts. But when they leave the bar Hanada announces she has a last check up at the hospital before they leave tomorrow and that she won’t be accompanying Hisana back to the hotel. It’s a bit as if someone had thrown a bucket of ice water in her face.

It was easier during day-time to convince herself that a murderous, insane Jinchuuriki isn’t waiting for her around the next corner. Especially so when she has company. But there’s no use in begging a teenage girl to pretty please take her home, someone might want to kill me. Hanada is half a head shorter than Hisana and Gaara would probably eat her whole anyway. So she waves the girl good-bye with the last bit of faux cheer she can scrape together.

It’s still hot outside, even when the sun has sunk almost an hour ago. But the chill that shakes Hisana is entirely coming from inside her. Not quite fear, but getting there. Every now and again she can catch glimpses of people moving inside their homes, lamplight throwing their long shadows onto the streets. These people wouldn’t, couldn’t help her, but their presence is still a comfort.

Really, Hisana is reasonably sure that Suna won’t risk a war with Konoha for butchering one of the last Uchiha. But ‘accidents’ do happen. Especially if Gaara is involved, and she really does think that the Kazekage doesn’t understand his youngest son nearly well enough to properly assess the risk here. Ironic, really, because he of all people should. As his father. As his Kage and maker. As someone who’s had to clean up after the red-head for a pretty long time already. Short-sighted, short-sighted, she thinks. Whatever his deal is with her, is it really worth risking to piss of the Hokage? Her cousin? A bunch of other major clans who are all fairly fond of her? If Sasuke wanted to kill the Suna Jinchuuriki for this, Hisana is about ninety percent sure that at least the Aburame would assist him. Not the Nara maybe – too dangerous – but Shiki herself may be a different story.
So lost in thought, comforted by memories of her friends, she almost doesn’t see it coming.

Hisana turns a corner and the force of his presence nearly takes her off her feet. In the middle of the street, lamplight casting its comforting shadows on him, stands Sabaku no Gaara. All four foot and five inches of him. He would have looked almost inconspicuous, if not for the malevolent chakra that pulsates from him like sickness. Bile rises up in Hisana’s throat. How foolish of her – thinking she wouldn’t recognize his chakra. As if this hot, acid, disgusting chakra could be anything but him. In the half-light she can’t make out his face, only the color of his hair. A gust of warm desert air blows over her neck and raises goose bumps all over her skin.

He’s so small, she thinks irrationally. Like Naruto. Naruto, who’s chakra was warm and bright and who’d never made her feel as if her heart is about to jump out of her throat. Get a grip, she thinks as the boy cocks his head, almost as if he can hear said heart thumb wildly inside her chest. Could he smell fear? Chakra has already crawled up her face, enhancing her senses. She can smell her own fear, as well as the rotten, metallic scent of old blood that clings to this small boy.

Don’t run, she thinks. Running is useless. But what else could she do?

There is no warning, no outward sign of tension before sand gathers around her. Hisana jumps and the trap snaps shut below her, spraying dust and gravel everywhere. She kicks off a wall, hoping to sail right over it, but there’s no escaping the sand; it shoots after her like a striking viper. The Sharingan flare to life with a burst of panicked chakra, but it’s of little use. Every time she doubles back the sand follows her. The reaction time is amazing and terrifying.

Half a plan is already forming in Hisana’s head, but it goes against every single instinct she has. Again the sand tries to encase her like a wave of water and only now she fully appreciates why they call him Gaara of the Sand Waterfall. Instead of turning tail and running back down the dark streets like she desperately wants to, she shoots forward. Dust explodes all over the street when she bursts through the sand that trickles onto her hair and face like from a giant hourglass.

The only sign of Gaara’s surprise is the slight widening of his eyes before he regains control of his features. Hisana can see them now, a perfect shade of malachite and absolutely blank. He doesn’t care about her. He doesn’t hate her. He only wants her dead.

Despite Gaara’s impassive expression the sand around him grows more frantic the closer she gets to him. Hisana’s arms are chafed raw from any contact with the sand and her nerves are frayed. The Ichibi’s chakra is toxic. Dodge left, doge right. For one terrifying moment her hand is caught; her bones crunch together painfully before she can free herself.

“Suiton: Teppodama!” she wheezes, summoning as much chakra as she possible can. The drain is overwhelming. Water shoots towards the Jinchuuriki and is stopped by a wall of sand. Just a bit more, she thinks, as the almost white sand turns dark and sludgy. “Suiton: Teppodama!”

The wall sinks sluggishly to the floor, too heavy to hold. Gaara’s face twists in disbelief and anger as he tries to will it into action. Hisana fumbles for the small bottle of Nara pills in her vest. The small ‘plop’ of the lid seems almost comically out of place. Familiar bitterness stings her tongue when she pops three of them at once while her opponent is distracted.

Stone is ground up into more sand; the crunching noise is so loud Hisana can almost believe someone will hear and come for her. But there’s no time for such foolish hopes. The pills kick in with a dizzying surge of her chakra. “Teppodama!”

This one is smaller, more concentrated, and hits the Jinchuuriki head-on. Gaara stumbles; stones drop back down to the ground, abandoned and forgotten as he touches his face, wet sand dripping onto
his feet. “Come on,” she whispers, “come and get me yourself.”

Whatever detachment Gaara may have felt towards the fight, it’s vanished. She’s gone and made it personal now. He snarls at her, fear and fury warping on his childish face. The Ichibi’s chakra is so thick in the air that Hisana can’t help but turn away and retch. Gaara seems to take no pleasure in such a petty victory; instead he stares at her as if she were some rabid, alien animal. As if it were his life they are fighting over. “Come and get me,” she repeats hoarsely, spitting onto the ground to rid her mouth of the taste of vomit. And then he moves.

Yellow has eaten up his green eyes. Hisana tries to block his attack with a kunai, but it breaks under the sheer force of his violence. She slides out of the way quickly, but her shoulder cracks ominously where it overstretches as the broken weapon is knocked out of her hand.

A sharp, stinging pain behind her eyes warns her that the Sharingan is reaching its limit. She can force more chakra into it, but a few blood vessels must have already broken. Hisana needs him to come closer. But not too close. Her breathing is heavy and loud in her own ears. In grotesque fascination she watches blue veins crawl over the boy’s pale skin, a sickly yellow spreading like a rash before his arm turns into … something.

Lighting fast he pins her against a wall. A feminine scream echoes from inside the building, but neither of them spare it any attention. The pressure on her sternum is enormous; Hisana’s ribs crack and snap like match sticks. “Look at me,” she hisses, feeling the blood of a punctured lung bubble up her throat. Gaara stares at her, yellow eyed and delirious, as if he can’t help himself. This will work, she tells herself in wild hope. This has to work.

“Let me go,” she tries, but his claws only wrap more tightly around her torso, eyes flickering away. “Look at me!”

They stare at each other in a bizarre sort of stalemate. She has to have some sort of hold over him, or she would be long dead, Hisana realizes. “Let. Go. Now.”

She forces down the panic, tries to recall a feeling of peace and calm. Sasuke is at home now. Already asleep, probably. She recalls the texture of their bed sheets, the sound of his not-quite-snoring. She feels tired. Exhausted and worn out. It’s late; midnight is no time to fight. It’s time to sleep.

“Go to sleep,” she tells him as leans his half-transformed forehead against hers, sand-armor scraping at her face. “Now.”

Gaara’s lips curl up in disgust to bare his fangs. The anger is returning to his eyes, but she wills him into compliance. Yellow eyes flicker to green and back, even as his grip on her tightens more. Her vision is getting fuzzy and blood is running freely from her mouth. Almost, she thinks. So close. “Now!” she hisses one last time before her vision turns black.

The Kazekage watches as a squad of jounin pries his youngest son off the Uchiha girl. His transformation is wavering, sand dropping in wet chunks from his monstrous arm. Shaking and shivering like this he looks even more like the animal that he is. Tonight won’t be a good night for the citizens of Suna; the tailed beast is awake now, for better or worse.

“Did it work?” Baki asks in mild interest, voice rising over the whimpers of the Ichibi’s panting
vessel.

“Not yet,” his superior admits. “But maybe one day.”

“And … is that a good thing?”

The Kazekage’s eyes the unconscious girl, fussed over by his personal medic-nins.

“I haven’t decided yet.”

There you go: Gaara for your entertainment.
Hello~

Next chapter my friends – aaaand **10 facts about Suna (to say good-bye)** below.

**Blance_DuBois** and **Ivy**: You two are sweethearts. The truth is flaming doesn't bother me in the least. It's a rite of passage and I guess I was long overdue.

Oh yes: two or three chapters more until we’re done with BaH. Please remember there’ll be a **sequel**, so don’t be confused.

---

When Hisana opens her eyes, the first thing she sees is the moon. She’s lying on a bench, and for one blissful heartbeat she really can’t explain herself why. If Sasuke left me here I will kill him, she thinks nonsensically, head pleasantly fuzzy. But then she registers the biting cold of the desert night and memories come rushing back to her. She’s alive.

She’s alive! What the hell happened? Hisana sits up, swaying when all her blood rushes to her head. Inside her chest her heart is already kicking into overdrive. Adrenaline heats up her limbs almost instantly. Everything in her is looking, reaching for the enemy, but there is none. No malicious chakra. No chakra at all in the vicinity even.

Disoriented Hisana stumbles away from the bench, trying to fit the image of this street to her memory of the fight. This isn’t where she fought Gaara. The street is perfectly still and dark; across from her bench Hisana recognizes the food stall where team 11 likes to eat breakfast. The grumpy old lady who runs it has left her basket outside. Hisana lifts her hand to her face. By all rights it should be bruised all to hell, but it’s perfectly fine. Incredulously she flexes her fingers; not even a twinge of pain.

The last thing she remembers are the Ichibi’s eyes on her. More importantly, its **claws** on her. She pats down her torso and finds not even a single tender spot. Only the dirt on her vest and a rip in her sleeve are proof that it wasn’t all just a terribly vivid dream. Unconsciousness has eased a little of her shellshock, Hisana finds, but not nearly all of it. She slumps back onto the bench, all energy leaving her as abruptly as it came. Her inner clock says that it’s probably around three in the morning. In a few short hours the sun will come up; Kohaku-sensei said they’ll leave before that. She really needs to go now, **leave the open, exposed streets**, but her legs won’t cooperate.

Panic attack? No, not quite.


After a few repetitions her head starts to clear. With wobbly arms Hisana pushes herself off the bench; the cold wind bites at her exposed skin, driving her forward. She can’t stay here. Whatever happened tonight, she won’t get any explanation here. And for the first time since Hisana opened her eyes to this strange world of ninjas, she feels she needs to talk to someone.
When she stumbles into her hotel room it’s under Kohaku-sensei’s admonishing eyes. Hisana ducks into the bathroom, intent on avoiding any conversation, and when she gets back out the look on his face has changed. Whether he caught sight of her dirty, ripped clothes or maybe the look in her eyes, but her teacher appears to have scented trouble.

For the first time ever Hisana thanks the heavens for Sensei’s inability to be a normal human being. She does want to tell someone, but Sensei is still a Hyuuga. She loves him, the way she loves both her boys, team 7, even stupid Kakashi-shishou – but she won’t tell any of them, because they’re all dangerous in their own way. While her friends are inexperienced and telling them would accomplish nothing but trouble them, her teachers are a different story. Kakashi-shishou would tell the Hokage. He would need to. And from there on the affair would be in the council’s hands. There’s nothing Hisana wants less than that.

And Kohaku-sensei … he would need to report to his head of clan. At this point handing Hyuuga Hiashi anything on her still feels like suicide.

Without a word she slips into bed and closes her eyes. Sensei won’t ask, she knows, because he doesn’t know how. She also knows that she probably won’t shake his suspicious looks the whole way back home. Slowly but surely Hisana’s breathing evens out. The room’s other occupant never does go back to sleep.

The next morning comes far too early.

Whatever sleep Hisana managed to get last night didn’t erase the heaviness of her bones; she strongly suspects it was less sleeping and more losing consciousness. Haru’s hand catches her elbow, squeezing comfortingly. “Are you ok?” He’s frowning; seriousness always looks a bit out of place on his face. “Did Hanada-san … say anything to you?”

From the corner of her eye Hisana can see the rest of her team eying them like hawks.

“No,” she drawls, trying to drudge up some sort of humor. “Mami-chan and I are super best friends now.”

For a brief but hilarious moment Haru loses control of his face and it scrunches up in a mix of horror and fear. Hisana snorts at him. “No. Believe me, nothing Hanada could say or do would make me lose sleep the way I did last night. It’s excitement I guess – finally going home. ‘Course I’m paying for it now.”

He hums in agreement. “You’re not going to miss Suna?”

Trudging through the streets, heavy bag on her shoulder and the excited chatter of the Konoha crowd all around, makes her a little nostalgic. Hisana turns around, watching as the Kazekage building gets smaller and smaller. She’s lucky to be alive. Logically she should be more eager to leave, put as much distance between her and Gaara as possible. But she can’t help but feel that the danger has passed for now. Whatever the Kazekage wanted from her, it hadn’t been her life. And Suna is a beautiful city. The hard wind, the searing heat … It’s going to be weird to be back in Konoha’s more temperate climate just when she’s gotten used to it all. She shrugs.

“A little maybe.”

“Me too,” Sora asserts loudly from her left. “The people were so friendly.”

Snickers rise from the around them before Kohaku-sensei’s forbidding look quells them. ‘Spoilsport,’
Sora mouths at them, but Hisana is following their teacher’s eyes to something far above their heads. Sitting on a roof not far away she can make out a figure dangling its legs. Temari raises a hand at her, face carefully blank.

Out of her teammates’ sight Hisana waves back.

On the way back through the desert there is considerably less complaining. Hisana wonders whether everyone is either too shamed by their failure or too *adult* to complain now that they’ve made chuunin. Or maybe, she thinks, they have simply gotten used to sand everywhere the way she did.

But when the sandy desert turns into steppe everyone still breathes a collective sigh of relief. Home is getting closer with every step.

When the Konoha gates come into view some of her companions are visibly struggling not to dash ahead. The nervous, happy energy is contagious. And then a jounin teacher lets his team run the last few yards with an eye roll, and under Kohaku-sensei’s appalled eyes the entire formation falls apart.

“Well then,” he allows, “If you must.”

Before Hisana can fully appreciate what he just said Sora is already hop-skipping away. She and Haru share an amused look before following him. Two vaguely familiar faces let them scribble their names into the little red book, Konoha symbol stamped on the front. A lot of teasing and shoulder clapping ensues, and then they are finally ushered inside. Hisana has barely time to process what she is seeing before someone crashes into her. Her arms close instinctually around Naruto’s slight shoulders. He’s not *quite* as small as she remembers and his weight nearly takes her off her feet.

“Nee-chan – I thought you were never coming back?” he wails.

“What?” she chokes out, amused and alarmed in equal parts. From her right Sakura latches onto her arm.

“Shut up, baka!” she gripes. “*We* told you she was coming back. You’re so ridiculous!”

The girl’s pink head very nearly reaches Hisana’s chin by now, and sheesh is that girl going to keep growing like this?

Sasuke hasn’t joined his team. He’s awkwardly standing a few feet away, hands in his pockets, shoulders hunched. When the rest of team 7 finally releases her, Hisana walks over to him with measured steps. Can’t be uncool, she thinks in amusement. “What, no hug? Do you want to shake hands instead?”

He glowers at her, not deigning that with an answer. “You took too long.”

“Yes, well, I won the tournament if that counts for anything.” She plucks at her chuunin vest and Sasuke’s scowl smoothes out into something vaguely pleased.

“Of course you did. It’s good you’re back, Genma is a huge pain.”

“You are a huge pain,” Shiki’s voice drawls and Hisana whirls around to come face to face with her
friends. “We wanted to take care of your family while you were away – that ungrateful brat shut the door in our faces.”

“I’m here for two minutes and you’re already complaining.” Despite her words Hisana can’t help but grin at the other girl.

“I was super grateful,” Sakura pipes up from somewhere behind her. Shizuha, quiet until now, reaches out to fuss with Hisana’s vest, before unexpectedly reaching out to hug her. Hisana directs helpless eyes at Shiki who shrugs and smirks.

“She missed you.”

Before she has to make a decision – awkward back patting or bear hug? – Shizuha gives a satisfied little noise and releases her. “Welcome back.”

Not much changes at first. Team 11 has been disbanded but they still train together. Hisana will still see Kohaku-sensei – or is it Kohaku-senpai now? – every weekend when she beats the crap out of Neji. The only difference now is that she can take solo missions now or choose to be put into different make-shift teams.

In theory she should be doing the bulk of her missions with her shishou now, but Kakashi is conspicuously absent. When she asked for how long, the office chuunin at the mission desk only shrugged. Even Gai-senpai, lured by the news of her promotion, had no insight to offer. “My youthful rival is always supremely busy!” he insisted. “No need to worry yourself – he will return successfully or I will run two-hundred laps around Konoha on my hands!”

Without Kakashi-shishou to take up a good third of her day, Hisana finds with more time on her hands than she’d like. Sasuke isn’t far from graduation, so his training has become more intense. She loves to poke and prod at his weaknesses, point out what exactly he could be doing better to score higher marks, but he will only put up with it so often. Her absence has done him well in some ways, she thinks. He’s still attached to her, but nowadays it seems to be less expressed in physical proximity and more with pointed questions about her day and general well-being.

He has also taken on a larger share of the housework, which is in equal parts disturbing and amazing. Disturbing, because if there’s one thing more bizarre than watching Uchiha Sasuke cook, it’s watching him scrub the bathroom. Amazing, because he’s actually very good at both. His anal retentiveness pays off that way, she guesses. Maybe there’s still hope that he’ll turn into a well-adjusted adult one day.

Opening her little notebook to the last pages – she really needs a new one – Hisana skims through her notes of the last few weeks. ‘Clan recipe?’ it says on one of them, underlined twice. The bottle of Nara pills is still half full, but … it’s time. Hisana really needs to visit the Uchiha compound before Sasuke graduates. This reason is as good as any. But before that she still has something else to do.

The Aburame compound is picturesque as ever in the evening. While the Inuzuka compound a few streets over is slowly descending into chaos as the adults try to round up any wayward kids, there are only a few people actively wandering around here. Hisana figures that most of the Aburame children have no problem with their bedtime; she knows Shizuha likes to go to bed ridiculously early if she
Hisana sticks out like a sore thumb, trudging through the dimly lit gardens, but nobody tries to stop her. When she reaches Shizuha’s family home the girl is already waiting on the front porch. “Hisana-chan,” she greets quietly, a cup of coffee in hand and glasses slightly askew. “It is good to see you, but I will have to leave in a short while.” There is a mission bag packed and ready at her feet.

Hisana reaches out to straighten out her friend’s glasses before smiling sheepishly at her.

“Sorry, but that’s not why I’m here anyway. I need to talk to your dad.”

If Shizuha is surprised it she doesn’t show it.

“He is in his study,” she offers, making way to let her inside.

Aburame Shigeru is the quiet sort, even for one of his clan. He only speaks when spoken to and those who know him only superficially know that his wife likes to take the lead in any given situation. Few people outside of his yearmates are aware that he is also Aburame Shibi’s younger brother and once made a dangerously valiant attempt to take the title of heir from him.

Sitting across from him without his good natured wife or daughter as a buffer is intimidating. Not as intimidating as if it would be to face Shiki’s father, Hisana reminds herself firmly. He never invites her to speak, but his body language seems comparatively approachable, so she claps her hands together in apology.

“I’m very sorry to bother you, but I believe I’m in trouble and I don’t know who else to ask for advice.” Silence. – But no rebuff or dismissal either. Hisana stumbles through her story with only the barest idea of what she is getting into. To her mortification she can feel tears rising up as she finally chokes out, “I don’t have anyone else to ask. Shishou and Sensei wouldn’t be able to help me and … the Nara scare me.”

For a moment she is caught up in her own confession. Then the sound of glasses clicking down on a desk pull Hisana from her dark thoughts. Aburame Shigeru is pinching the bridge of his nose.

“I do not understand,” he says quietly, “what the Kazekage was thinking. That was … akin to committing political and economic suicide.”

His eyes, Hisana thinks, look a lot like his daughters’. He pulls a stack of papers from his desk, shuffles them irately and then takes a few surprisingly sloppy notes. Upside down Hisana can read the angry strokes of a “council meeting” as well as the date of next Thursday.

“I agree that the Elder Council should not be made aware sooner than it needs to,” he finally decides. “However, it would be beneficial to inform a few selected members of the larger council. I will need to speak to my brother, as well as Nara Shikaku.” At Hisana’s apprehensive look he only shakes his head. “The only reason he would do this is because the potential gains outweigh the potential losses. This attack on you was only the beginning. Suna has been a shaky ally for years now; if they decide to turn against us the Hokage has to know. The Nara clan has repeatedly spoken in your favor already. There is no need to fear them.”

He reaches out to put a heavy hand on her shoulder. “If all goes well, you will have no need to worry. The Hyuuga will not dare to openly dismiss your story and I know that Inuzuka Tsume is fond of you.”
“Do I … need to speak in front of them?” The idea of telling the story again, maybe even in front of Danzo, is unsettling.

“The Hokage may want to hear it. But concerning the council, all is well in hand.”

It’s the most comforting thing she’s heard in months.

The next morning Hisana waits until her cousin has left the house. There are keys to the compound’s front gates hidden in her night drawer. Originally she placed them there to keep Sasuke from thinking about his old home. By now she simply doesn’t want him to get ideas. Hisana has no idea what happened during the massacre and for the past few years she had no desire to find out. The Uchiha compound is full of ghosts and discarded possessions.

The village has put most personal items in storage – Hisana hates the thought of having Sasuke go through them one day, deciding what to keep and which teddy bear to keep for his children – but the furniture remains, and Sasuke’s and Hisana’s childhood homes haven’t been touched at all.

She’s a bit curious about what sort of person Hisana was, but mostly the thought of this dead little girl whose body she’s wearing makes her feel ill. Seeing her family photos, touching her possessions, seems wrong somehow. But she needs to go. Once Sasuke graduates he will be made head of the clan, and that means the compound will be open to him despite her wishes. And Hisana currently has no idea what he would find there. Would he puzzle together what happened? Did Itachi leave a trail of bread crumbs for him to follow?

The possibility alone is unacceptable. And if she finds those records about the Mangekyou she’s going to destroy them. The thought feels right somehow. The secret of the Sharingan would die with her and Itachi. And Madara, a little voice whispers in her head.

She shakes off the thought. Madara will have to wait. It’s eight in the morning and she has a lot to do already.

---

10 facts about Suna

1. Suna’s specialty is not actually anything shocking such as fried insects. It’s a kind of rice pudding with sweetened goat milk and ground up chili. It’s so hot, civilians give it to the sick to ‘sweat out the sickness’.

2. Water is not as hard to come by as some may think. The small pond in which Elders Chiyo and Ebizo like to fish is fed by an underground spring. Ponds like that exist in most bigger buildings. The downside of this is that most of Suna is built on the cavernous system that houses this spring and the resulting stream, and every once in a while some parts cave in.
3. The stream resurfaces somewhere in Ame. Nobody has figured that out yet though.

4. The drink Temari gave Hisana actually a mix of three things: water, rice syrup imported from Ame, and pomegranate juice.

5. The red-headed children and proctor of the first and second task are part of the Ando clan. Their kekkei genkai is earth based at works a little like Suigetsu’s: While they don’t turn into stone, they can harden their skins considerably and mold earth and stone like clay. Gaara’s maternal grandmother was an Ando; that’s where he gets his hair.

6. The old woman who put the genjutsu on the contestants before the first task was Elder Chiyo. While not active in politics anymore she does enjoy making life hard for people.

7. It’s true that Suna doesn’t have guests often. The Kazekage actually expected far less people to show up, so they were in a spot of trouble when a few business men showed up and there were no special seats for them. Baki suggested they put them next to the contestant seats. He was also made to deal with them when they complained about the sweaty smell later.

8. While Suna may look impressive, many of the stucco buildings are actually empty. It’s not that they were left over after a mass exodus, but rather they were designed to be empty. It makes the streets a little more difficult to navigate for intruders and they give shade. Many of them only hide the entrance to underground rooms.

9. Temari’s bodyguards, Ueda and Gorou, are in fact both career genin. Only Ueda, however, is in fact a career genin. He works in intelligence and uses his rank to gather information for the Kazekage directly. He forfeited before the matches started as not to draw attention. Saitou Gorou on the other hand is a man of brute force and keeps screwing up his match fights. Consensus is that he’ll never be promoted.

10. Temari deliberately took Hisana to a bar full of ninjas. The entire conversation was watched by at least six on-duty ninjas who immediately reported to Baki. The barkeeper was also the one who reported her and Hanada’s departure, so that Gaara could be maneuvered into the right position before she arrived.
Chapter 49

Oh god, I'm so nervous about this chapter. You're either going to love it or HATE it - chances are half of you are going to rage quit.

Anyone who decides to stick around: I love you and I'm your biggest fan.

The Uchiha compound is the biggest district in Konoha. Since the massacre it has been completely closed off, leaving almost a hundred family homes to slowly decay. That most of them are still in acceptable repair after so many years is a testament of the clan’s wealth; this sort of craftsmanship must have cost a fortune.

Hisana feels like an intruder when she opens the wrought iron gate that the village had installed. It creaks so loudly that she almost fears someone might come to look what she’s doing. But then she remembers that the entire district is a ghost town; no one cares what she is doing here. There’s nothing left to steal, nobody to care if she vandalized anything. Hisana is amazed that nobody else appears to have tried either. She figured some precocious Academy student or a bunch of bored genin may have come and defaced a few walls. Or that maybe someone would have looked around for interesting things to take home and brag about. But everything seems completely undisturbed and no dirty-sweaty-child scents linger in the air. Wandering the empty, silent streets Hisana wonders if maybe they felt the lingering tragedy of the place too and thought better of it.

Finding Sasuke’s family home is the easiest task. It’s located in the middle of the compound, bigger than the other houses and with the Uchiha fan displayed on the garden gate like a badge of honor.

The lock broke and hasn’t been repaired yet; nevertheless there is a small silver key dangling on Hisana’s keychain. She pushes carefully against the door, silently apologizing to her cousin. Stepping into the house where his family died without his knowledge feels like the most intense violation of privacy she’s ever committed. It’s for Sasuke, she reminds herself. And if not her, who else will do it? The house is dark except for what little light comes through the dirty windows. The electricity has been turned off, of course, and Hisana hasn’t thought far enough ahead to bring candles in the middle of the day.

The kitchen and living room seem undisturbed. Whatever furniture might have been upturned during a fight has been righted by the clean-up crew. A thick layer of dust coats everything. Apart from that the entire downstairs area looks as if the occupants may come through the door at any minute. It’s not as eerie as Hisana would have expected – maybe because she’s seen too many real-life horrors to be scared of ghosts anymore – but rather infinitely sad. Right by the door there is a picture on the mantle, turned on its face. Next to it three pairs of slippers, one a faded pink, two in Uchiha-blue. Hisana knows Sasuke used to have a matching pair at home until he outgrew them.

Other than those sad little reminders of family there is nothing conspicuous downstairs. The only thing she takes with her, quietly and already thinking ten years ahead, is a small photo album tucked into her bag. She knows if Sasuke finds out about Itachi he will burn every picture of his brother he can get his hands on. And then he will come to regret it.

Throwing a few cautious but thorough looks around the dojo reveals it to be clean in the loosest sense of the word. Carefully walking around the darkened spots on the floor, scrubbed until the
lacquer came off but never quite the same again, Hisana inspects the bare walls and searches for lose floor boards. When nothing turns up she hurriedly abandons the room. To be sure she bows on her way out, paying respects to whatever is left of her first cousin, once removed and her husband.

Going upstairs she gets a taste of what it would have been like for Sasuke to sneak out at night. It’s so quiet there that she fights the impulse to hold her breath. The room at the end of the hall is Fugaku-sama and Mikoto-hime’s bedroom. It’s very neat in the way parents’ bedrooms always seem to be, but apart from the photos of Sasuke and Itachi littering every corner it is also very empty. Hisana wonders if they loved each other, or if it was a marriage of politics and convenience. Both are equally likely and both could be equally true. Looking through Mikoto’s belongings she finds a diary that she doesn’t want to open but has to anyway.

There must be more of these, she realizes. The first pages don’t date back very far; the first entry talks animatedly about Sasuke’s sixth’s birthday. The last used pages, about halfway into the simple ninja issue notebook, talk mostly about Itachi’s increasingly stand-offish behavior. She worried about him in those last weeks. ‘I’m afraid he may lose his way someday’ it says somewhere. And ‘We cannot let this distance from the clan grow.’

Did Sasuke’s mother know about the planned coup and about how heavy it lies on Itachi’s conscious? Hisana sincerely doubts she would have written it down in such a flimsily protected little book in any case. What to do with it will be Sasuke’s to decide. The book gives nothing away but Itachi’s restlessness. She has no doubt her cousin will rationalize it away.

Fugaku doesn’t seem to hold with such silly things as personal journals. Hisana knows that as the head of his clan he will have kept some sort of record but she’s unlikely to find it in his bedroom. The most personal item she finds is a drawing, sloppily titled ‘From Sasuke, to Otou-chan’ neatly folded and hidden in his sock drawer.

The second bedroom belongs to Sasuke. Hisana spares it a few sad moments, admiring the posters on the walls. One of them depicts the Hokage Mountain, another a heroic looking drawing of Sarutobi Sasuke. There’s a toy kunai lying in the middle of the bed. Everything else seems to have been packed and taken to their apartment.

Itachi’s bedroom looks very much like his parents’: Very neat and empty of all personal belongings. Did he clean it out when he got the order to kill his clan? Did he pack a bag to take with him? – And what was in it? Or did he simply never have much? For the first time ever Hisana actively worries for her oldest cousin, not about him. What must it be like, living with criminals if all you want is peace? He has kindred spirits of sorts in Nagato and Konan, but she cannot imagine Itachi approving of their actions in any way, shape, or form.

The manga mostly described him as a gentle soul. A pacifist in a violent world.

She takes the most care looking through his room, patting down walls, sniffing for unusual scents. Finally, in a secret compartment on the underside of his bed Hisana finds a photograph of his family and a letter. It’s faded and blotchy, as if someone had been crying on the paper, and starts with ‘Itachi, I fear I may fail …’ and ends with ‘I’m so sorry’. At the very bottom, in neat, blocky characters, it is signed ‘Shisui’.
A chill runs down Hisana’s spine. This is definitely something she needs to destroy, but it may have been the last thing Shisui ever wrote apart from his suicide note. Something inside her hates the thought of losing it. So instead she folds it very small and stuffs it in her bra. The photo she puts back where it belongs, neatly sealing the compartment back up. Hisana purposely doesn’t think about why he didn’t take it with him.

The last room upstairs is Fugaku’s office. Hisana already dreads it. The clan head’s office is sure to be full of ‘important’ documents; she has absolutely no desire to trudge through them all. But that’s exactly what she does. Luckily her clan’s lawyer appears to have taken everything concerning finances and political entitlements, so a lot of the shelves are empty. It’s still mid-day when she can finally decide there’s nothing worth worrying about here. Hisana did, however, find records of Sasuke’s immediate family. It’s not a family tree as much as it is a record of who inherits what if somebody dies, but it does list Mitoko’s father, Sasuke and her common grandfather, as ‘Uchiha Isamu’. All the really important documents must be hidden elsewhere, she thinks. The shrine would make sense as a hiding place. Its name escapes her at the moment, but there can’t be too many shrines around.

However, in a few hours she is meeting Haru and Sora for training tonight, so that will have to wait for another day. Right now she needs to see where her own family lived.

It’s the most vexing thing, but she has no idea where Hisana’s house could possibly be. On a gamble she looks in close proximity first; Mitoko’s close relatives may have settled somewhere near.

It still takes her almost an hour and a half until she spies a cracked vase through a dirty window. A genin team cleaned out the fridge, she knows, and someone … took care of whatever immediate family ‘Hisana’ had, but nothing else should have been touched. This must be her house. She presses her nose to the glass and indeed she can make out childish characters etched into the ugly vase. It reads ‘Hisana’.

The scruffy key on her chain fits perfectly into the lock. Two pairs of abandoned slippers await her in the hall – two people who died here. They are both adult slippers, big enough for grown men; one of them has silly pictures of a tiger on them. Hisana strolls through the living room, smaller than Sasuke’s but cozier, randomly touching things they could have touched. An old, faded runner on a chest of drawers speaks of a feminine touch long grown cold. Hisana’s mother must have been long dead already.

But there have been efforts to spruce up the place. ‘Artsy’ pictures hang on the walls. It looks very much like something a man bought trying to think of something a woman would like. She snorts a little, caressing the gaudy picture frames and wondering at the painful throb of her heart. A little less conspicuous, almost like an afterthought, someone added a smaller frame the ensemble. It hangs a little lower than the others, but right next to a well-used armchair.

Hisana easily recognizes her own face in it, though younger, but the boy is unfamiliar to her. She takes the frame off the wall and carefully plucks the photo out of it.

He’s older than her, maybe sixteen or seventeen, and very handsome. My brother, she thinks faintly. No, Hisana’s brother. She trails a finger over his face, marveling at their similarities. Their eyes are exactly the same, and even the straight, aristocratic nose that she always associated with her former self looks perfectly natural on his face.
It’s not a posed picture, but rather a candid shot. Her brother is clutching her by the waist while she holds on to his head, fingers gripping tightly enough in his hair to make him wince. But there is a huge smile on his face, pressed sideways against his sister’s belly, even as she is obviously yelling at him. He loved her really a lot, she thinks sadly, rubbing at her chest right where it aches. An older brother. Irrational tears well up in her eyes; something inside her feels decidedly empty.

Unable to look at it any longer Hisana finally turns the photo around and finds a faded date at the back. It was taken in the summer, some six years prior; the script below reads ‘Hisana and Shisui’.

For a few minutes Hisana stares at the words, only vaguely understanding what they’re saying. Then she carefully checks herself for signs of shock. But her breathing is strong and steady, and while she feels a little light headed it’s only to be expected. No, the anxiety attack she’s been expecting the second her head could grasp just who this boy in the picture is, isn’t coming. Because of course – of fucking course Hisana couldn’t have been a normal girl. It was so obviously too much to ask.

And Shisui. Thank god he isn’t here to see it, she thinks, heart breaking just a little. He would have known immediately. The way he looks at her in that picture – he would have realized that an imposter had taken over his sister. It would have killed him; she knows that with absolute, unshakable certainty. Turning the photo back around, her brother’s face winking up at her, Hisana nearly gives up and leaves the house. She wants to be here even less now, but at the same time she also wants to know who her parents were.

Hisana gets her wish. Inside her father’s bedroom she finds a photo taken during the war. On it a woman with Shisui’s face, holding the young boy by the hand, and their father, strong and tall, proudly presenting his small toddler daughter to the world.

Hurriedly Hisana decides it’s enough for today after all.

She ducks into the guest bathroom, free of all personal items, and wipes furiously at her face before she goes to meet her old team. Her eyes are a little red, but she resolves to blame it on allergies. But Hisana shouldn’t have worried. By the time she reaches the training grounds her face doesn’t feel so hot anymore, and if the boys notice that anything is off they don’t say anything. The photo of her and Shisui is still tucked safely into Sasuke’s photo album, his letter to Itachi in a separated pocket of her training bra. It’ll be fine there until she has a better idea; Hisana sincerely doubts Sasuke would feel the need to search there.

“Training always does you good,” Haru remarks after almost two hours with a wry quirk of his lips. He sinks down next to her, throwing both his teammates bottled water before flopping down on his back. “No matter how angry or sad you are, if you can beat someone into a pulp you suddenly brighten up.”

“Right?!” Sora squawks from next to her, as if happy to hear that he’s not just imagining it. “I think she’s a bit of a sadist!” Hisana shoves at him good-naturedly.

“I’m not a sadist,” she insists. “It’s just therapeutic. Have I told you what I do every Friday? There’s this uptight little Hyuuga – …”

She’s interrupted by a familiar chakra signature entering the grounds. Choumei, taller than when she’s last seen him after team 6’s promotion, drops from one of the trees with a surprisingly quiet thud.
“Hisana-san, I’ve been looking for you,” he announces, as if proud of himself that he did finally discover her. Only now she realizes that he’s wearing medic-nin scrubs.

“Chocho!” Sora crows from his spot on the ground. “What gives?”

“No,” the other boy dismisses him, “Not you, idiot. Hisana-san, the head medic sent me. Your shishou has finally returned and he’s making a racket. Would you please make him lie down and get treated?”

Surprise ...?
Chapter 50

Ok, here’s the last chapter of BaH – thank you all so much! I love you guys, especially after your incredibly positive response to the last chapter.

I really thought you’d all hate that twist because it’s basically a classic Mary-Sue. As a big, fat thank you I’ve included a tiny not-quite-extra at the end.

‘The little tragedies of the Uchiha complex’ – let’s see if you found them all in the last chapter. Also, stay tuned for the sequel; it should be up next week at the latest and will be called Of Cutting Cords and Forging Chains.

Kakashi-shishou has many weird habits and strange idiosyncrasies. It’s a condition that afflicts all outstanding ninjas – though some more than others – and usually the Konoha Hospital is equipped and inventive enough to deal with all of them. Yuuhi Kurenai doesn’t like windows – let’s put her in the basement. Maito Gai gets restless – put him in the children’s ward, they’ll tire him out. Yamanaka Inori hates the noise – fine, make space for her with the coma patients.

But Hatake Kakashi is famous for two things in equal measure: His Sharingan and his peerless paranoia. Every time he comes back from a mission injured enough to conk right out, which is luckily not too often, the entire hospital goes into overdrive, preparing for him to flip the hell out as soon as he wakes up. As it’s Kakashi we’re speaking about ‘flipping out’ mostly means he’ll rip the drip out of his arm, sneak out of the window and point blank refuse to return as long as his own two legs can still carry him. He doesn’t give two shits if said legs are broken and he may have internal bleeding. Like so many ninjas before him, he has still not quite understood that bleeding inside his body takes priority over bleeding on the outside of his body.

And so Hisana finds him fighting off three nurses and a doctor, trying to convince them that they only nicked his kidney a little, and really he woke up by himself, he can walk it off.

“You. Are. Hemorrhaging!” one of them cries in desperation, his voice much louder than Kakashi-shishou’s comparatively calm ranting, but he is still talked over effortlessly.

“And you are exaggerating. I feel fine. Nothing that a little exercise won’t cure.”

Kakashi sways a little, until one of the younger nurses steadies him by the shoulder. He brushes her off almost incidentally. He looks ragged, with bags under his eyes and his hair matted to his forehead. There’s a small pile of bloodied bandages on the floor, trampled on when the medic-nins tried to restrain him.

“You cannot walk off chakra exhaustion!” the doctor insists. “Do I have to inform the Hokage?!”

They struggle against each other, her injured teacher only just keeping the upper hand.

“Shishou,” Hisana finally announces herself, startling everyone in the room. “You’re late. I’ve been back for almost a week and you weren’t there to congratulate me.”

Kakashi seems flummoxed by her appearance as well as the completely unexpected topic, and it’s enough for the medics to finally wrestle him back onto the bed. He still stoutly refuses to lie down,
but at least he’s sitting now. The nurses cast her suspicious looks but appear to count their blessings. She ignores them, eyes fixed on Kakashi-shishou and trying to assess the extent of his injuries.

“Hisana-chan,” he greets, still hazy, after he’s pulled himself together a little. “You. Here. … Don’t tell me you were worried for your old teacher. Or are you here to bust me out?” He looks so hopeful. It’s absurd that a ninja of his caliber should be frightened of his own employer’s medics, but Hisana vividly remembers the apprehension she felt in Suna’s hospital. All these strangers prodding and poking at her – it certainly set her teeth on edge then. Because they are strangers, no matter how familiar their hitai-ate may be.

“Originally, yes,” she lies, “but I think it’s much more fun seeing you act like a brat. So maybe I’ll just stay and watch.” She crosses her arms in challenge while the hospital staff gawks at her.

Kakashi actually seems to take offense at that.

“I’m not acting like a brat,” he informs her delicately, strategically ignoring the doctor hissing, ‘Yes you are!’ “I simply can’t stand their fussing. Every time the same thing.”

Of course, you idiot, she thinks. Because you’re always coming in with the same thing – half dead and low on chakra. But instead of scolding him Hisana rolls her eyes and taps her imaginary watch.

“Seriously?” she asks, taking care to let a tad of impatience leak into her voice. “I thought we could get this done quickly so that we can go back to training. My team’s been split up, in case you hadn’t guessed” – she plucks at her chuunin vest – “and I’m bored and underutilized.”

Her nonchalant tone seems to distract him from the medic-nins hurriedly taking his vitals. “So can we get on with it please?”

“He needs bed-rest,” the doctor insists, even as he releases the mystical palm technique and pats down Kakashi’s now healed side. “We can’t fix chakra exhaustion.”

“He’ll have to sleep it off, yes I know,” she replies. “But he can do that at home, right? Like I said, I have a lot free time right now. I can make sure he doesn’t do anything stupid.”

The medic-nins release him into her dubious care with a mixture of worry and relief. Hisana understands their scruples; no one can keep Kakashi-shishou from doing something stupid if he truly sets his mind on it. But if there’s someone who can give a valiant try, it’s her. He point blank refuses to get a tetanus shot, but after twenty minutes Hisana manages to maneuver the jounin out of the hospital, the staff only mildly apprehensive.

It’s a good thing, she muses, that her teacher is currently really only half present or she wouldn’t have managed to pull one over him so easily. Hisana strongly suspects that the same thing will occur to him after he’s slept a little. Chances are he’ll make her regret trying to manipulate him afterwards; he’s too devious not to. But right now Kakashi only cracks his back and sighs in relief. “So you are worth all that trouble,” he assesses mildly. “I was wondering.”

“Thank you so much,” she snipes resisting the urge to reach out and lead her wobbly companion by the elbow. “I did you and the medics both a huge ass favor. Don’t think I’ll forget.”

It’s the first time that Hisana is anywhere near her shishou’s personal space. She’s never visited him at home – even though she would have loved to drag his late ass out of there often enough – and she
has no idea where he spends his free time. They meet regularly on training ground 14, and every once in a while she sees him wandering around near the Hokage Tower, but that’s basically it. If they need to meet up outside of training he comes to find her; it’s never been the other way around. She’s never questioned it – after all he’s important and probably has things to do.

But in last few weeks before the Chuunin Exams she’s come to wonder if it isn’t an entirely personal choice on his part not to include her in his private life.

Thinking about it more closely, Hisana isn’t sure if that is because Kakashi really is sort of damaged after Obito and Rin, and so he tries to keep everyone at a distance, or if it’s just one of his little games again that she just hasn’t realized they’ve been playing.

The truth is hard to discern with Kakashi, because it usually lies somewhere in the middle. Secretly she hopes he’ll stop messing with her if she just appears disinterested enough. It’s a tactic that works with most children, she finds. At the very beginning he’d tried engaging her in a game of ‘What’s under the mask?’, probably to … assert dominance or something equally silly.

When Hisana baldly shot him down the topic ceased to be an issue. She’s never seen under it, but he’s never made an overt effort again to really conceal his face from her either. Mutual indifference. She’d call it ‘respecting boundaries’, but that would be a lie.

She hopes it’ll be the same with his apartment now, because now that the topic has come up she would really feel safer knowing where to find him if she needs to. For both their sakes.

To Hisana’s mild surprise he doesn’t live anywhere notable. It’s a nice area – respectable even – but not too nice. Most of his neighbors appear to be civilians but there are also a few academy students running around, judging by their ninja sandals.

“Just a moment,” he says politely before disappearing into his apartment, not quite closing the door behind him. There’s the sound of traps snapping shut, an exasperated sigh and a few more suspicious noises before he lets her in. “Excuse the mess,” he drones and it sounds more like a reflex than anything genuine. Hisana doesn’t know what impresses her more: That someone taught Kakashi manners at some point, or that he’s actually bothered to remember them.

“Don’t mind me,” she replies equally flatly. Her teacher’s apartment is surprisingly neat. Hisana doesn’t know what she expected; Kakashi isn’t the type to do things half-assed, so of course he would be neat. But she expected … something. Something equally quirky as he. But his apartment is just an apartment. He doesn’t have any pictures in his small, drab looking living room and no plants either. There are a few dog bowls in his kitchen and a knife block, but that’s basically it.

She shoos him towards the couch and he lets her. “You can leave, you know,” he offers. “I don’t really need someone to look after me. This isn’t my first rodeo.”

“I am aware,” she says tartly. “And apparently you still haven’t learned anything – which is what really concerns me.”

He chuckles, affecting embarrassment, before all emotion neatly slides off his face. “You are dangerously close to overstepping your bounds, love.”

“Yes,” she agrees. “I love doing that, just ask literally anyone. I’m not here to corner you on … whatever hang-ups you have about the hospital. But you’re sort of the closest thing I have to a proper team right now, so I look out for you even if it pisses you off.”
That was severely below the belt, and she knows it. But if there’s something that gets to Kakashi it’s
the team angle, and Hisana can see his resolve crumple even as he gets angry.

“Fine,” he relents prosaically. “Do what you like. But if you want to talk about training you will
have to come back tomorrow.”

Kakashi’s kitchen says a lot about him, Hisana thinks.
She absolutely refused to go home right away, to let his pettiness chase her out. Instead she left him
to read his stupid book and now snoops through the apartment for anything interesting. She
deliberately stays out of the bedroom – he’d probably let the traps kill her if she dared to try – but
everything else is fair game. The bathroom yielded nothing interesting apart from the fact that he
keeps a bottle of flowery woman’s shower gel under the sink, which she tries not to think about.

The kitchen though is not as abandoned as she first suspected. In fact his pantry is stocked to the
point where he could probably survive a famine and feed half of his district too.

And when it hits eight p.m. and she starts to look for food to force onto him, Hisana stumbles upon
the expected quirkiness in a very strange place.

Kakashi’s fridge is full of Tupperware.

Hisana opens one of the plastic containers, finding a jumble of neatly chopped raw vegetables, boiled
meat, and quartered fruit, as well as a small container of cheap yoghurt.

A bit bemused she looks through the rest of them, but they all look the same. Veggies, fruit, meat,
yoghurt. The containers appear to be color-coded but she really doesn’t understand how. What in the
world do you cook with something like this? “Shishou,” she calls a bit apprehensively, “What’s
wrong with your fridge? … I’m not getting take out for you.”

Kakashi waddles into the kitchen, still every bit as unenthused as an hour prior.

“Did it go bad?” he asks, “There’s more in the freezer.” Hisana musters the veggies; they look a bit
dry but still edible. “Looks ok to me,” he offers.

“Yeah, but what is this? What do I … do with it now?”

“Nothing,” he answers. “I’m eating it.” And then he grabs the container and takes it back to the
living room. “Close the fridge, will you.”

She stares at his back.

… Oh, ew.

“What?” she calls after him, hurriedly putting everything back where it belongs. “How can you live
like that?”

This isn’t a one-time thing – there are at least ten more of those, packed and ready, not counting
whatever is in the freezer. It rubs her the wrong way how blasé he is about this. This apartment is
obviously where he lives; it’s not like Genma’s place, just something where he goes to sleep. He live
here, spends time here, and yet there’s absolutely nothing apart from his couch that appears well-
loved. No pictures, no trace of hobbies, no joy anywhere. Not even a food preference is discernible
from the contents of his fridge, because he eats like he’s fueling a machine.
For one frightening moment Hisana considers if Kakashi simply doesn’t have a personality to display except for the cheery mask he wears, but then she remembers that the manga absolutely said differently. But then what is this?

“I’ll have you know this is very nutritious,” he tells her, apparently re-gaining a bit of his good humor at her apprehension. “I calculated exactly what I need to keep my current level of muscle mass and vitality. I have a rotational schedule – it’s served me well for years.”

“How … sad,” she finally settles on. “You really know how to suck the joy out of everything.”

He rudely points his chopsticks at her.

“You should consider it too. After all, you’re here because you want me to train you properly, aren’t you?” His eye gleams at her mischievously. “Now that Kohaku-chan is going back to his regular schedule I’m supposed to pick up the slack. We can do that, but then a few things are going to change for you.”

“Oh yeah?” she forces out, now actually a bit worried. He nods absentmindedly, as if already thinking up potentially painful things for her. “Well, fine then. I can take it. As long as you can make me tokubetsu jounin before the year is up.” That would still give her about seven months before Sasuke graduates. Kakashi-shishou makes a non-committal noise. A few moments pass in tense silence; she just knows he’s doing this on purpose.

“I think I can swing that,” he finally agrees. “It won’t be pretty and it won’t be easy, but you asked for it.”

Half way across the village an ANBU sneezes into his mask.

“Someone’s thinking about you,” his partner says, before planting his foot into the other man’s stomach with enough force to send him flying.

“Oh be quiet,” Anbu Cat grumbles and picks himself up from the floor.

As promised, you little extra.

The little tragedies of the Uchiha complex

1. Sasuke and Hisana’s great-grandfather, Uchiha Isamu, was married twice. His first marriage ended childless when his wife died on duty. His second wife was their common great-grandmother, Uchiha Aine.

2. The reason Itachi didn’t need to break the lock in Hisana’s house was that since Shisui’s death their father had become despondent and temporarily unable to take care of his daughter. Neighbors and close family therefore came and went at all hours of the day to cook and clean. Nobody bothered to close the door after themselves.
3. Three pairs of slippers remain in Sasuke’s childhood home. Those of his parents and Itachi’s.

4. The stubborn stains in the Uchiha dojo were where Sasuke’s parents died.

5. The silly tiger slippers in Hisana’s house were Shisui’s.

6. If Hisana had looked a little closer at the vase in the kitchen she would have seen that it was actually inscribed ‘For mommy and Hisana, by Shisui’.

7. Sasuke left his toy kunai deliberately behind. The day his clan died was the day his childhood ended. He decided he had no use for toys anymore – he’d get the real thing soon enough.

8. Itachi left the photo of his family behind, because looking at family photos is something ninja do who have something to come home to. He couldn’t fool himself into thinking they were still alive and that his mission would end one day.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!