A Stranger

by Loeka

Summary

How did it come to this? Oh wait, I remember now. My weakness for all things cute.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
"Take off your clothes."

The softly spoken words make me freeze.

Am I dreaming again?

He's still standing there. Watching. Waiting.

Slowly, I bring up my arms and pull off my top. The sound of it hitting the floor is almost too loud in the now heavy silence. Goosebumps erupt all over. It isn't from the chill. I can feel his eyes trace my body, even as he stays hidden in the shadows.

This is really happening.

The thought strikes like lightning, making a giddy smile rise. I straighten my back, every uncertainty falling away. My thumbs come up to play with the waist of my shorts. Slipping my thumbs beneath the hem, I pull it down, just a little.

He shifts without a sound, the movement more felt than seen. My smile grows sultry.

Slowly, oh so slowly, I push down the fabric, shimmying my hips. I turn around as they fall down the floor, step out of them and throw a heady look over my shoulder as I stand there clad in nothing but my panties.

Is that a sigh I hear?

I close my eyes, tilting back my head. If this is happening, I'm going to make it good.

My hands caress my neck, sliding down, feather light touches. My breath hitches as I add a hint of nails, the barest of bites.

That is most definitely a sigh. My smile grows.

I glide down my hands until they're resting just above my panties. My fingers slip underneath the fabric, stroking, caressing, dipping inside. I moan. It would almost be embarrassing how wet I am if it wasn't so hot.

"Take it off." His voice is lower now, more rough. I toy with the edges of the fabric, drawing it out. The tension rises even higher.

Finally, I push them down and step out of them. I don't look back. I don't need to. His gaze is so
intense it warms my body in the most delicious of ways.

"Turn around."

Mischievousness rises at his command. I look back over my shoulder while bring up a finger still moist with my own desire. I suck it clean.

"Make me."

A blur, too fast to track. Hard armor is pressed against my back and a gloved hand holds both my wrists captive. His other covers my throat, the cool leather a sensual contrast against my heated skin. He could snap my neck so easily. The hint of danger only adds to the excitement. I shiver.

A push, his arms turning me around, my back against the wall as he forces my hands up high. Moonlight illuminates the harsh lines of his bleached mask.

He doesn't make another move.

My eyes close as I feel him look over every inch of me. It makes me feel exposed.

It turns me on. Almost ridiculously so.

Then he's touching me, gloved fingers caressing my throat. I can't help but gasp, another shiver running through me.

His hand moves lower, gliding over my breasts. My breathing deepens further.

His touch goes lower, lower, lower.

He stops, right where I want him to. And he doesn't move. My eyes snap open. There are only shadows where his own should be. Somehow the sight is more alluring than anything I've ever experienced before.

I want.

Moaning, I shift my hips, needing him to just touch me.

He pulls back.

A strangled sound escapes me, frustration spiking. That bastard.

"Touch me, damn you," I order. The low laugh he lets out in return is almost as good as a caress. Almost.

"Make me," he taunts.

I narrow my eyes and take a moment to gather my scattered thoughts, deciding on what to do. Then I lift my leg, hook it around his waist and pull.

Sweet pressure, pure bliss. I shift my hips, needing to be closer, so much closer.

A shudder passes through him. My wrists are released and his hands tangles through my hair, tilting back my head. His other pulls me even closer, increasing that sweet, sweet pressure.

Yes.
I reach for him, grab his own hair and clutch at his shoulder. The proof of his desire pushes against me, exquisite heat even through fabric, fitting so perfectly. Then he rolls his hips.

A broken sound escapes me, my nails biting into unyielding armor and pulling at soft hair. More, I need more.

A too fast movement, my surroundings blurring, pushed down the bed with my wrists held captive once more.

I whine.

Then smooth leather finally touches me. I let my legs fall open, arch my back as those nimble fingers speed up. Stroking, petting, flicking, slipping inside, a harsh twist, straddling the line between pleasure and pain so perfectly and everything is tensing, tightening, so close.

He stops. No!

Letting out a strangled sound, my eyes snap open and I glare at the complete and utter bastard.

"I will hurt you so much," I swear, meaning every word. He lets out another low laugh, making another shiver run through me.

"I'd like to see you try."

I struggle to get free but I'm held down effortlessly. It increases both my anger and lust, the line between rage and passion blurred. I feel him shift and hear the sounds of moving cloth. My mind is too muddled to understand what that means, all my focus still on trying to get free. I just need him to touch me!

His hips snap forward without warning, filling me completely.

Yes, yes, yes!

Broken sobs, so full, so hot, harder, yes, more, don't stop!

He stops.

My shriek is captured by his hand. I glare at the shadows of his eyes. The blankness of his mask is mocking me.

Move. Move!

He moves.

Eyes closing, shivering, tensing, tightening, more, I need more!

Wrists suddenly free, voice released, desperately gasping for breath, moaning, screaming, blindly clutching at something, anything because his fingers are right there, stroking and caressing, yes, don't stop!

Back arching, stars exploding, oh god, yes, yes.

Silence.

Breathing heavily, sated and spent. Shivering as he pulls out. Lazily watching him as he gets off the bed, no energy left.
Wow.

I blink and he's gone.

Wow.

We have got to do that again.
Random Happenings (Create Ripples)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Pain.

It hurts, it hurts so much and I can't breathe, I can't breathe!

No air, so much pain, why can't I breathe?

What's happening to me?

"Mari, you have got to publish this. It's amazing!"

I feel myself blush as Tori continues to gush about my work. I didn't expect a reaction like this. I've never shared my work before, but I made an exception for my last story. It's a tale I wanted to share with my friends. It's also one that doesn't offer a view into my inner angst and issues. I don't write many of those anymore, but I still burn a page or two every once in a while. This is just a story, though.

According to Tori, it's also one of the greatest literary works of our age! Of course, Tori has a tendency to exaggerate. Still, everyone else also think it's good. Maybe even good enough to publish. Wouldn't that be something?

Even so, I feel uncharacteristically shy. The idea of strangers reading my work makes me uncomfortable. Not in the least because most of it is blatantly copied, even if no one here knows the original. The idea of publishing makes me feel like a fraud.

So I shrug.

"You're being too modest," Shiro informs me, stoic as ever.

"It's not that special." I protest because it really isn't. It's fun, but not to enough to get a reaction like this. Sure, it holds emotional value to me, but it doesn't to them.

Tori scoffs, letting me know exactly how much she disagrees with my opinion.

"Not that special, she says. It's a brilliant! A work of art!"

My cheeks burn. She's being ridiculous.

"It's just a story," I say.

"Yes, and Hokage-sama is just a man." This time it's Renji who refutes my protest, rolling his eyes so forcefully I'm surprised they don't fall straight out of their sockets.

"But--"

"No buts," Tori interrupts me. "You're going to find an editor, you're going to publish, and then..."
you're going to become famous across Konoha as the most amazing author ever!"

The others all nod in agreement. Maybe I shouldn't have given in and let them read it. I just didn't expect any of them to be so enthusiastic. Or forceful.

In hindsight, I really should have.

"Just don't forget about us little people when you become famous," Rukia teases with a smile.

"Like I'd let her. I'm going to milk your fame for all it's worth, living on your coattails while you haul in the cash," Renji says with an insufferable smirk.

"A plaque stating that the famous Mari buys her clothes from me would do wonders for my business," Shiro delivers deadpan, looking at me with far too amused eyes.

"Ooh, we could start a new line. Fantastic Fabrics, inspired and endorsed by Takahashi Mariko herself," Rukia plays along without missing a beat. I have to grin at their ridiculousness.

Tori's hand smacking down the table draws all our attention back to her and the satisfied expression she's wearing.

"Then it's settled. You're going to take this to a publisher even if we have to drag you there by the hair," she declares, because why should my own opinion about this matter in any way?

"Guys, really--" I try one last time but of course they don't let me finish.

"It would be better to tie her up. We have a cousin who's a ninja, he can make sure she won't be able to wriggle free." Because naturally Renji would say that. And naturally Rukia gives a cheerful nod of agreement.

"Excellent, that makes everything easier," Tori says. She's bright, enthusiastic, and utterly determined. This is going to happen no matter what.

Seriously, why do I even try?

I let out a defeated sigh and throw up my hands in surrender.

"Fine, I'll do it."

Rukia pats me on the head as if I'm an obedient pet.

"Good girl."

I laugh and push her hand away.

"You guys are such assholes," I tell them all with a grin.

"You love us anyway," Shiro quips with a twitch of his lips, his version of a smile. The uncharacteristic confession startles me, but then have to smile back. It's true, I do love them.

A loud squeal prevents anything else that could've been said and then I'm being embraced so fast it seems Tori moved with ninja speed.

"You won't regret this, you'll see!" Tori's loud voice so near my ears makes me wince, even as I continue to smile.
"I already do." My dry retort makes Renji and Rukia chuckle, while Tori pulls back just enough to aim a pout my way.

Honestly, all this for a modified version of the Lion King.

"I changed my mind," I blurt, nervousness at an all time high. I'm going to be sick.

"Too late." Rukia is much too cheerful. Why did Shiro have to give her the day off? I could've escaped Renji, but his sister is another matter entirely. Vows of future revenge don't work on her.

"No, seriously, I don't want to do this! I like writing, I don't like the idea of random strangers judging it." My protests are ignored completely, the two siblings keeping a firm hold on both my arms as they continue dragging me forward.

"Too bad, you don't get a choice," Renji informs me with a smirk that makes my hand itch with the desire to smack it right off his face. Unfortunately, I can't. Their grip is iron clad.

Despite my protests and struggles, I'm dragged inside the building. I curse my lack of muscles with all my heart.

The man behind the desk stares at us like the bizarre sight we are.

"Hello, sir. We have an appointment to the name of Takahashi Mariko," Rukia says with a cheerful smile, ignoring my continuing struggles to escape. The man gives us another long look, before he lowers his gaze and opens a planner.

"Indeed you do. Sato-san is expecting you. He's down the hallway, second door on your right."

Because of course people in Konoha don't ask questions when confronted with a sight like this. They just gossip about it later.

"Thank you for your help," Rukia says while she and Renji bow, forcing me down with them.

"I'm going to dye your hair a neon green." I hiss at her, already planning on how to do it. My best bet is to steal Renji's spare key to her place without him noticing and switch her brand of shampoo with a bottle filled with dye while she's at work. Then I just need to unobtrusively return Renji's key.

As for Renji, I'll think of a suitable revenge for him later.

"I'm fabulous enough to make that work," Rukia replies as though wearing any form of neon isn't one of her worst nightmares. Renji chuckles like the asshole he is. They resume forcefully marching me along.

As we reach our destination, I give in to the inevitable. Naturally, both Rukia and Renji notice. They share a much too smug look.

Renji knocks, waits for permission to enter, opens the door, and pushes me inside. With enough force that I almost fall over but I manage to turn it into a spin just in time, turning around so I face the door. The last I see of my oh so supportive friends is them cheerfully waving me on before they shut the door in my face, locking me in. I have no doubt they'll be guarding the exit to make sure I don't escape.

Taking a fortifying breath, I turn around and meet the gaze of an older man. He looks deeply unimpressed. Understandable, given at my unconventional entrance. Or maybe it's my lack of
"Takahashi Mariko, I presume?" He sounds only a little disapproving. Too bad.

Swallowing my groan, I bow. I'm here now, might as well see it through. I'll never hear the end of it if I don't.

Seriously though, I send out one copy. I didn't actually expect it to inspire an interest like this.

My very own book is displayed behind the window. I'm so choked up I almost cry.

"I love you guys, you're the best," I manage to get out, overwhelmed in the best of ways.

Renji bumps my shoulder gently.

"We know," he says with a warm grin.

"What would you do without us?" Rukia winks. She makes her green hair look fabulous, she really does. I'm so glad that I decided to go with a darker shade than neon. Her meddling is part of what led to this wonderful moment in time. Punishing her for it with neon would've been the height of injustice.

"Live a sad and dull life," Shiro answers the rhetorical question in his usual deadpan way. I chuckle.

"Enough chitchat, we have a book to buy!" Tori exclaims, bright and bubbly.

"Why do we have to buy it? You should give us a copy. We worked hard enough for it," Renji says, making Rukia roll her eyes in the way only her brother can inspire.

"We're being supportive. Besides, with Mari signing it, it'll be worth a fortune in the future. You can always sell it later and make back your money. Cheapskate."

"I'm not a cheapskate." Renji's denial is both expected and ignored.

"I'm going to display it above the counter and make everyone who enters bask in the brilliance that is the Lion Lord," Tori announces, making me feel even more mushy and warm.

"Less talking, more buying," Shiro orders, getting things back on track. Rukia nods in agreement.

"He's right, we're blocking the entrance."

"Then let's go!" With that, Tori hooks an arm through Renji's and drags him into the store. Rukia follows along at a more sedate pace.

I look through the window a moment longer. Look at the cover of my book. My book that's being sold in a real bookstore. Because people think it's good enough for that.

I feel overwhelmed in the best of ways all over again.

Shiro's hand comes to rest on my shoulder, making me turn my gaze towards him. He's giving me as soft a look as he is capable of.

"Daisuke would be proud," he says. The sentiment warms me further, even as it also causes a stab of grief. I still miss Daisuke. Miss his kindness and endless patience. But it's no longer as painful as it used to be. After two years, his loss has become a scar instead of an open wound. Still, hearing Shiro
say this makes me feel bittersweet.

It's the good kind of bittersweet.

I raise my own hand and give his a gentle squeeze.

"Thanks, Shiro," I say softly.

"You're welcome," he returns, voice just as soft and one corner of his lips a fraction higher than the other. His version of a warm smile.

I have the best friends ever.

"I can't believe you quit." Tori is actually hurt. Which is ridiculous, I haven't done anything to deserve that kind of response.

"I didn't quit, I'm just working part-time now," I deny. She's overreacting.

"You quit!" she accuses again.

"I did not," I deny again, starting to get annoyed by her reaction.

"Yes, you did."

"Did not."

"Did too."

"Did– you know what, I'm not doing this," I decide. If I don't, this will drag on forever.

Tori pouts and crosses her arms, still looking at me like I just murdered a puppy. I'm not liking the guilt this inspires, not one bit. There's nothing for me to be guilty about!

"You're overreacting, Tori. She'll still be here every day. Just not as much as before," Renji supports me as he continues setting the tables.

"Thank you!" I exclaim, happy for his back up.

Tori's pout becomes even more pronounced. Someone her age shouldn't be able to look that childish. She's older than me, for god's sake.

"You abandoned me. How could you?" she demands like I stabbed her in the back.

"Then why the hell did you agree? You're the owner, you could've said no," I point out more sharply than intended, but seriously, this is ridiculous.

"I didn't think you were being serious!" Tori retorts like it's supposed to be a valid argument.

"I brought over a new contract for you to approve! How did that not seem serious?" I counter incredulously. Did she think I waded through the battlefield that is Konoha's legal administration just for fun?

"I thought it was a joke!"

Apparently she did. I open my mouth to point out the absurdity of that statement but Renji speaks before I can.
"Ladies, you do realize we almost have to open, right? Now is not the best time to argue about this."

I sigh and bring up a hand to rub my eyes. He's right of course. I just hadn't expected Tori to react like this.

"I thought you wanted me to write more stories," I say while lowering my hand.

"Not if it means abandoning the Dancing Dragon!" Tori shoots back with a glare. As always, it's surprisingly intimidating. Tori isn't the type to glare, but when she does, she does it with as much conviction as she does everything else.

"I'm not abandoning anything or anyone!" I exclaim, fed up with this entire situation. "I just need more time to write! I've told you how hard my editor is pushing me! And may I point out that I wouldn't even be in this situation if it wasn't for you pressuring me to publish in the first place!"

Tori wilts, all her anger gone and her eyes becoming glassy. Oh shit.

"Stop, don't be like that," I plead. If there's one thing I can't handle, it's tears.

Tori sniffs.

"Look, I don't want to quit, but I don't have the time to both work here the entire day and still write enough to satisfy the demon from hell," I try, starting to feel a little frantic.

Her lips tremble.

"I'd have to stop meeting the others, no more free time, nothing but writing. I enjoy writing, it shouldn't be a chore."

A sob breaks through.

"Not that I don't enjoy working here, I do!" I blabber, officially in panic mode. "It's why I don't want to quit! Just, work a little less?"

Oh shit, oh shit, there's actual tears now.

Renji lets out an annoyed sigh before I can continue my blabbering. He marches over with a determined expression and halts next to a sniffling Tori.

He smacks the back of her head. Not hard enough to hurt but certainly hard enough to be felt.

"You're not only being selfish, you're being childish. Now get up and put on the water. We've got customers waiting," he orders without a shred of compassion. Tori turns a wounded and utterly betrayed look his way, eyes still glassy with tears. I'm so jealous of the way Renji ignores it with ease, going back to work instead.

His reaction makes Tori sigh. The sound is long, loud, and so mournful that it seems like she's just been told her entire family has died.

"Fine. Fine! But you better be the best part-time waitress to ever exist," she warns with a fierce glare and an accusing finger aimed my way. As always, Renji's peculiar brand of affection works wonders.

I smile, relieved we've managed to sort this out.

"That I can do." I enjoy being a waitress after all.
It lets me interact with the insanity that is Konoha's population in a fun and stress free way.

"I have to admit, I would've guessed you'd enjoy the Lion Lord more. It's more popular with boys than the Little Mermaid," I say as I lean on the counter. Coal black eyes look back at me from a placid expression.

"I found the tale of a girl determined to see her dreams come true no matter the personal sacrifice, no matter that she would be alone in a strange and unknown land, both touching and inspiring."

"And it has nothing to do with the cute and fluffy love story I somehow managed to write," I say dryly to the hidden romantic in front of me.

"Of course not," he denies as calmly as he does everything else.

Shisui laughs and gracefully bumps the shoulder of the younger boy sitting next to him. He gives me a mischievous look.

"Don't believe him, Mari-chan. I caught him crying his eyes out after he finished the wedding scene."

Everyone who knows Itachi even a little would know that Shisui is lying through his teeth. Doesn't make it any less amusing.

"I didn't cry."

I never would've been able to detect the hint of indignity hidden beneath Itachi's placid reply without Shiro's long friendship. It makes me grin.

"Of course not," I say patronizingly and resist the urge to mess up his hair. Itachi is ridiculously cute. After he gets through puberty, he's going to be one hell of a heart breaker.

It's unbelievably horrifying that a boy of eleven is already a ninja. Shisui being a shinobi at fourteen is only a little less so. But I've learned to live with this awful reality by now. Not like I can do anything about it.

"More tea?" I offer innocently. Shisui chuckles, while Itachi's expression remains placid as ever. He's definitely not pouting, nope, not at all.

These two kids are my favorite customers.

I've published four stories. I still can't believe it. Four. Stories. And they're popular! So popular I'd be able to quit working at the Dancing Dragon and still earn enough to make a living! Though it would be a poor one. But who cares! I could if I want to!

There's a reason Disney is such a cash cow. Was a cash cow? Whatever, not important. What's important is that I've published four stories!

"To four stories!" I exclaim. We all clink our cups together and throw them back once more.

"See, I told you. I knew you'd be amazing," Tori giggles, well over tipsy. I laugh loudly, the sake already having effect on me as well. I feel so very bubbly. Because I have four stories!

"I'm awesome!" I cheer, and get agreements from the entire table. I love these guys so much.
"Just think, five years ago you couldn't even write your own name," Shiro teases. His flushed cheeks are the only indication of how drunk he already is.

His remark makes Rukia cackle loudly, while Renji lets out a hilarious little giggle.

"And now I'm a famous author! Suck on that you stupid kanji!" Victory is sweet.

I refill our cups and lift mine in another toast.

"To victory!" I crow. The others all lift their cups before we empty them yet again. This evening is worth the upcoming hangover. I feel at home in a way I hadn't thought could ever be possible again. Except it's possible! I'm here with my friends, and we're having fun and we're celebrating and I love these guys so much. And I have four stories!

Life is wonderful.

I stare down the alley. Blink a few times. Rub my eyes to make sure I'm not seeing things. But no, the kid is still slumped next to the dumpster. He's either trying to hide ineffectively, or he just doesn't care about being seen.

I try to convince myself that he's simply out too late, that he lost track of time while playing. Seeing as the kid looks like he's planning to stay here for the foreseeable future, this doesn't work. I have a bad feeling about this.

What on earth is Uzumaki Naruto doing out here so late?

I should move on. This has nothing to do with me. If I leave right now, I can put this entire thing behind me and keep on blissfully ignoring the fact that I'm living in a fictional world. I've long since made peace with living in a dictatorship ruled by magical ninja, but the fictional part is something I still do my best not to think about too deeply.

A roar erupts from the alley. No stomach should ever sound like that but especially not that of a child. Which means my conscience won't allow me to leave. Damn.

"Kid, what are you doing here?" I call out. The blonde lets out a startled yelp, before he scrambles to his feet and hides behind the dumpster. A small whiskered face pokes out from the side, bright blue eyes narrowed with suspicion.

He's almost painfully cute.

"What're you doing here?" He also sounds much too accusing. I'm not the one hiding behind a dumpster.

I raise an unimpressed brow.

"I'm walking home. Shouldn't you be doing that as well?"

His eyes narrow further until they're nothing but barely opened slits.

"Why do you care?" That really shouldn't sound as heartbreaking as it does.

"Call it being a decent human being," I manage to return lightly instead of grimacing because of all the discomforting feels. "Empathy for strangers and all that."

For some reason, my answer only serves to make him even more suspicious, and thus, even more
cute. Be still my heart.

"You talk funny."

That's what the kid decides to focus on? To be fair, my accent is still pretty strong even after all these years. Still, really not the important issue here.

"Indeed I do. Now are you going to tell me what you're doing here or what?" I demand, refocusing on the matter at hand.

"None of your business!" he yells back, petulant in the way only children can be. I roll my eyes. He's going to make this as difficult as possible, isn't he?

"Maybe, but I'm here anyway. So I'll ask again, what are you doing here?"

I wonder how many times I'm going to have to repeat myself.

"What's empathy mean?" he returns instead of answering my question, because why should he make this easy in any way?

"The ability to both imagine and understand what someone other than yourself is feeling," I explain. "You know, caring about other people's feelings," I elaborate at his still puzzled look.

The kid scoffs, derisive and way too bitter for someone so tiny.

"Like you care."

Because of course it's not enough to break my heart, he has to go and stomp on the pieces as well.

"Yeah, well, I do. Now answer the damn question." Was that too harsh?

"I don't want to!"

Apparently not. I sigh and resist the urge to rub my eyes.

"Look, kid, I'm just worried. You're way too young to be out here this late. So I'll ask one last time. What are you doing here, and shouldn't you be getting home?"

Vivid eyes go wide with disbelief before they fill with tears. Oh no. No, I'm not dealing with a crying child, no way, absolutely not.

God, please don't let him cry.

"Liar!" he screams, the reaction as unexpected as it is bewildering. Before I can even attempt to regain my wits, he bolts, running by me so fast I have no chance of stopping him. Of course I'm still too shocked to even try.

As I watch his disappearing back, I can only wonder one thing.

What the hell just happened?

The next morning, I see a tuft of hair poke out from behind the dumpster. Even dirty, the color is unmistakable.

No way. Why on earth is the brat back?
I step closer so I can look behind the dumpster. When I do, the entire situation becomes even more bewildering. It also becomes horrifying. Because the kid is sleeping. In an alley.

What the ever loving hell?

I hesitate. Part of me wants to keep walking, wants to just ignore this entire situation. Except I can't leave him here, he's only wearing a shirt and shorts for god's sake. Doesn't the kid realize he's going to get sick?

I crouch down and gently poke his shoulder. It makes him snort and mumble something indecipherable, but he remains asleep.

Seeing him up close only reinforces the homeless urchin act he has going one. His clothes are dirty and he smells like he hasn't showered in days. Both of which can be explained by him sleeping in a damn alley of all things.

Does he sleep here regularly? No, impossible. This is Naruto, the hero of that comic my brother liked so much. The main character wouldn't be homeless. Not when he's not even six years old. Right?

...It does sound like a tragic origin story.

No, that wouldn't happen here. Konoha is many things, a lot of them horrifying when thought about too deeply, but never let it be said that it doesn't care for children in its own unique way. Kids can wander the streets without fear of, well, anything. Serious accidents are magically prevented, courtesy of passing ninja keeping an eye on them. It's one of the unspoken rules of this world.

Except this fact doesn't take into account that Naruto is a main character. By definition, he's an exception to the rules. Maybe even to the rules of childcare.

I've never hated the fact that I haven't read the comic as much as I do right now. Really, it's sheer luck that I even know enough to recognise the kid as the main character.

Then again, living in Konoha, it's kind of impossible not to know about the brat. Or to know that he's special.

Right now, he's just a child.

I gather my courage and shake him softly by the shoulder. It feels disturbingly thin.

The kid frowns and slowly opens those vivid eyes. He blinks up at me owlishly, before bright blue widens to an impossible size.

"AAARGH!"

His scream makes me wince and release my grip, reeling back as I try to escape the assault on my hearing.

"Good morning to you too," I snap with a scowl, rubbing my ringing ears.

The kid curls into a ball. Damn it, children shouldn't ever look so scared.

I do my best to even out my expression, not wanting to frighten him further, and I make sure my voice is calm and steady.

"Why were you sleeping here?" I don't have much hope that he'll answer me but the question still needs to be asked.
I'm right, the kid keeps quiet. I feel my own eyes narrow as blue orbs flicker to the side.

"Don't even think about it," I warn. I might've been too shocked last night, but I'm not right now. If he tries to run, I'll catch him.

The kid scowls.

"What're you doing here?"

Of course he doesn't answer my question, that would make things far too easy.

"Answer my question and I'll answer yours," I try to bribe. It doesn't work, just earns me a suspicious glare. It's completely unfair how cute he makes that look.

"I don't want to!"

If I didn't think he'd take the opportunity to run for it, I would rub my eyes with annoyance.

"Okay, let me guess. You ran away from home." That's the only possibility not involving child abuse that makes even a lick of sense. I'm really hoping I'm right about this.

His deepening scowl is answer enough. Bingo.

Thank god.

"Kid, you need to go back. People are going to be worried sick," I tell him, so grateful that the brat isn't homeless. I don't think my heart could've survived that.

Except blue eyes fill with tears. Head it off, head it off!

"Whatever the argument's about, I'm sure they didn't mean it," I gamble desperately. Anything to prevent him from crying.

I fail. Tears start falling without restraint. A strangled noise escapes me.

The kid sniffles and lowers his head while hugging his knees close. It's not an exaggeration to say that this is a physically painful sight.

"No one cares about me."

My heart shatters.

"That's not true," I try to comfort but it only serves to make his head snap up so he can subject me to a furious glare. Combined with his tears, his expression should be classified as a lethal weapon.

"Yes it is! No one does! You don't either! And I don't care, I don't need them, I don't need anyone. So leave me alone!"

Dear god, I think part of me has actually died.

This will not stand.

"Where's your home? Never mind, you're not going to answer. But you're an orphan, right?"

The flinch that result in feels like a knife between the ribs.

"So, the orphanage," I conclude, valiantly doing my best to ignore the systematic demise of my heart.
The kid somehow manages to curl into himself even more. I sigh and stand up, looking down at him as I debate on what to do. Well, there's really only one possible course of action. Tori will just have to forgive my lateness.

I swoop down and pick up the brat, making sure to keep his arms and knees bound by my embrace.

"What the– let go of me! You crazy old lady, put me down!"

Old? I'm twenty-five, thank you very much.

"You're kind of rude, you know that?" I tell him as I continue to ignore his protests and struggles. I start the long walk to the orphanage, located on the other side of the village. It isn't easy, he's a slippery one. He's also much too thin. Children are supposed to be soft and chubby, not thin and scrawny.

What the hell are they feeding him? For that matter, how on earth did he manage to run away in the first place?

"Let me get this straight. You didn't notice that he was gone for an entire day?"

Sayuki, the matron of the orphanage, scowls, taking offense at my words. It's completely intended that way. What kind of caretaker doesn't realize that one of her charges has disappeared for an entire day?

"In case it escaped your notice, we have a great number of children under our care," she says, so very prim and proper way.

It's true, the orphanage is filled to bursting. Every adult I've seen is run ragged by an unholy amount of children. It would be easy to lose track of one in this madness.

It's no excuse.

"He was sleeping on the streets! A five year old! What kind of orphanage are you running here?" I can't believe she's actually trying to excuse this.

"I'm five-and-a-half!" the brat protests loudly from where he's standing next to me. I give him a deadpan look before I return to condemning Sayuki with my glare. Her own scowl deepens in return.

"He always runs away, and he always comes back when he gets hungry. We have neither the time nor the manpower to search for him every time he decides to throw a temper tantrum."

"You don't have the– What the hell do you think orphanages are for? It's to take care of kids who can't take care of themselves! If you aren't doing that, you aren't doing your job right." Seriously, it isn't complicated. If she doesn't have the manpower, she should just hire some ninja to search for the kid. Prices have lowered enough for that to be easy even if she's on a tight budget. That's ignoring the fact that ninja would probably do it for free, given that the brat is the only thing standing between the Kyuubi rampaging.

"I can so take care of myself!" Both Sayuki and I ignore the brat. Sayuki lifts her chin imperiously.

"If it offends you so much, then you adopt him and take care of him instead." It's a challenge, pure and simple.

It takes the wind out of my sails, my shoulders slumping with defeat. I bring up a hand to rub my
eyes. Yeah, that's not going to happen.

"I'm really not the maternal type," I mutter. The thought of being responsible for a child like that is terrifying. I hadn't even been able to keep my pet hamster alive. Me plus a kid would equal disaster.

"Then stop telling me how to do my job." Her command is cutting and final. I close my eyes and pinch the bridge of my nose, before I look down at the brat. He's still pouting petulantly.

I sigh. I've been doing that much too often today.

Crouching down in front of the brat, I give him my most serious look.

"Brat. Stop running away. It's not healthy," I order, no matter that I don't have any hope of him obeying.

"Why do you care?" This time there's something desperate hidden underneath his words. Something that tugs at my heartstrings yet again.

"Because you're a child." It really isn't more complicated than that. "You deserve to be happy and safe."

Again, tears fill his eyes. Why do I keep making this kid cry? It's horrifying.

Releasing another sigh, I lift a hand to ruffle his hair, ignoring the dirt and grime. He freezes beneath my touch.

"You be good now.?" With those words, I stand up and walk out of the office, resolutely not looking back.

I've had enough distressing feels for one day.

"I can't believe you were late because of the demon brat," Renji repeats yet again while scowling my way. I valiantly keep on ignoring him.

"Leave her alone, I think it's sweet." At least Tori is being supportive.

"Sweet? You know what it did, how can you--"

"He's a five year old child. What was I supposed to do, just leave him there?" I snap, fed up with his behavior. Yes, I understand why, but damn it all, Naruto is not the Kyuubi. He's a child. Children aren't supposed to live on the streets. It's as simple as that.

"Yes!" Renji yells back, vicious and hateful in a way only this topic can inspire. "Maybe he would've done us all a favor and died."

I stare. I can't believe he just said that.

"Renji..." Tori is just as shocked as I am.

Very carefully, I put down the kettle I'd been washing. I'm afraid I might throw it at his head otherwise.

"I'm going to overlook that because I know you've been through more than anyone should," I say in what is an even voice through the greatest of efforts. "But Renji, I swear, if you ever say that again, if you ever again wish for the death of an innocent child, I will stab you in the balls with a rusted
knife. Do I make myself clear?"

Renji looks so conflicted, as if part of him can't believe he said that either. But also as if part of him completely means it. After a few tense moments, he gives a curt nod.

The silence that follows is heavy and strained.

It's going to be a long day.

"...Why are you back?" I demand slowly, unable to believe what I'm seeing.

The brat shuffles his feet. Not even a week and he's already back in the exact same alley. At least he looks clean this time. Though he still refuses to answer. He just keeps standing there instead, looking like a hopeful puppy.

But it's neither too late in the evening nor too early in the morning. I'm not responsible for this. I'm not.

Nodding to myself, I spin on my heel and keep on walking. I make it three houses past, before I stop, let out a loud groan, and stomp back to the alley.

Stupid conscience.

The brat is still standing in the exact same spot, looking so forlorn he just might as well stab me in the back. I'm sure it would be less painful. Fortunately for my health, he perks up at my return.

I cross my arms and scowl down at him, letting him know exactly how annoyed I am to do this.

"Did you run away again?" That's the most important thing here.

He hesitates and shuffles his feet some more. Why does he have to be so damn cute? This would be so much less painful if he wasn't.

He doesn't answer but I'm not going to give in this time. I keep quiet and stare the five year old down. How mature of me. It works, though.

"No," he finally mumbles, so clearly lying that it isn't even funny. I can feel a headache coming on.

"You..." I flail an arm, unable to articulate a response. Seriously? Seriously?

I look up at the sky, praying for strength. When I look down again, I'm sucker punched by an expression filled with a breathtaking amount of hope.

Too. Adorable. It isn't a compliment.

"All right. I can do this," I encourage myself and pick up the brat as his expression changes to one of confusion. At least he doesn't struggle this time. Instead his arms hesitantly come up around my neck in a tentative embrace.

Shut up, heart!

I resolutely start marching towards the orphanage, determined to get him back as soon as possible so I can forget this entire incident ever happened. But of course his stomach starts growling before we get there. At least it isn't an unholy roar this time.
"When is the last time you ate?" I demand. It comes out more sharply than intended, courtesy of the headache that's broken through.

"Dunno. An hour, I guess," he mumbles, vivid eyes observing me with a wary delight. Effortlessly reaching inside my chest and strangling my heart.

I give him an incredulous look. One hour, and his stomach already sounds like that? Just how much does this kid need to eat?

I sigh, exasperated with myself. Screw my weakness for all things cute.

Looking around, I spot a grocery shop nearby. There's some fruit on the stands outside. Good enough.

Walking over, I shift my hold on the brat a little, pick up two apples, and march inside. The gaze of the woman behind the counter flickers rapidly between me and the brat, before she looks at me like I've sprouted two heads. I can't find it within myself to even pretend to care. If she has a problem with me carrying the demon brat, she can go choke on it.

Thankfully, she keeps quiet.

I grab my wallet and manage to pull out enough money after some one-handed fumbling.

"Keep the change," I tell her. It startles her out of her shock and she opens her mouth. Presumably to say something but I don't stay long enough to find out what.

When we're back on the street, I tug at the brat's arm until he lets go of my neck. I push an apple into his hand.

"Eat," I order while resolutely keeping my gaze on the street in front of me instead of the brat. I just know those eyes have turned into lethal weapons once more.

The sound of munching reaches my ears. When the sounds stop, I give him the second apple. He eats that one in silence as well. Honestly, this kid.

He keeps quiet the rest of the way. I'm glad. I just want this entire thing to be over.

Finally, the orphanage comes into view. Not a moment too soon, my back is starting to hurt. Muscled I am not.

I put the brat down and point towards the building.

"Go inside," I order but of course the brat doesn't listen. Instead he aims those lethal weapons my way. He looks desperately hopeful. For what, I don't know, but that doesn't affect the sheer power of his weaponized cuteness. I rub my eyes to escape the view.

"Brat, go inside. And don't leave again."

He doesn't obey, just keeps looking at me. Mortally wounding me without any remorse whatsoever.

I spin on my heel and start walking away. After a few paces, I stop and look over my shoulder.

He's still standing there but now he looks like a puppy. A kicked one.

Just go. Keep on walking, you've done your good deed, now leave.
My feet carry me back. Traitors.

It makes the brat perk up with sucker punching hope. I crouch down in front of him. Up close, the staggering power of his sheer adorableness somehow manages to become even greater.

I put my hand on the top of his head and put enough pressure on it to make him turn around and face the orphanage.

"Go inside," I order again, though not as harshly as before. It's a lot easier to look at his back, the intensity of the assault on my heart lessened by a huge amount.

Messing up his hair on impulse, I stand up and give him a gentle push forward. It makes him stumble a little, before looks over his shoulder with a disbelieving delight that's even more powerful than his kicked puppy mode. I somehow manage to narrow my eyes with warning and point towards the entrance.

"Inside!" I command in a raised voice. The brat finally bolts towards the doors. He opens them, but then he halts and turns to face me again.

He gives me the most breathtaking, most beautiful, most adorable smile in existence. It's like the sun breaking through where before there had only been darkness. My poor heart melts into a puddle of goo.

With the greatest of efforts, I manage another warning glare. For some reason, it makes that sunshine smile grow even brighter. Then he finally slips inside the building and shuts the door. Thank god, now I can finally put this entire thing behind me.

"No. I'm not doing this again."

This time it hasn't even been three days, yet here he is. Standing in the same damn alley and looking like a hopeful puppy once more.

I rub my eyes, desperately praying this is just some hallucination my mind has cooked up. But no, he's still here.

"...This is going to become a thing, isn't it?" It's a rhetorical question. One that makes the brat beam like the sun. I let out a defeated sigh, giving in to the inevitable.

"Fine. But I'm not carrying you, you're way too heavy." I have to set some boundaries, if only to spare my back.

The brat's sunshine smile turns into an affronted expression.

"I'm not fat!" he exclaims. Apparently he isn't mute anymore.

"True, you're way too scrawny," I agree. "But I'm lazy and don't feel like carrying you across the village. Especially if you're going to keep doing this. I'd break my back."

The brat looks horrified, making me snort.

"Figure of speech. I wouldn't actually break my back." I could potentially develop a hernia, though. So, no carrying the brat back to the orphanage. Not when it's already clear that this is going to become a regular thing.

I hold out a hand for him to take.
"Come on, let's get this over with."

He stares at my hand like he's never seen one before. Or rather, like no one's ever offered one to him.

I force myself to roll my eyes and mentally curse my weakness for all things cute.

"I haven't got all day, brat. Let's go."

He hesitantly comes closer, before his own hand comes up with agonizing slowness. It's like he's expecting me to yank my hand back and say it's all a joke.

Will this kid continue breaking my heart every time we meet? No, I'll build up immunity if I keep being exposed. Of course I will.

When his hand finally grips mine, he melts my heart into a puddle of goo with another sunshine smile. I gently tug him along and start walking.

"Did you have lunch at least?" I ask in an effort to distract myself from all the feels.

"Nope," he cheerfully informs me. Cheeky brat. I give him a halfhearted glare. His answering grin is wide and unrepentant.

"Fine. I'll buy you some dango or something." I won't be buying him unhealthy things all the time, but right now I'm feeling vicious. If the orphanage doesn't want him hyped up on sugar, they should've kept a better eye on him.

His grin grows even larger. Combined with his whiskers, it makes him look incredibly foxy.

I need to make sure Renji never sees him like this. Need to make sure he never sees Naruto in general, really.

"Hey, hey, what's your name?" he demands. I blink down at him with confusion, before I mentally go over our previous encounters and realize that I never told him my name. Huh.

"Mary. Well, Mariko, but my friends call me Mary." Everyone does. I'm lucky that my 'official' name makes it seem like my real one is a logical nickname.

The brat stops moving so suddenly I almost don't notice in time. When I look down at him to find out why, I immediately wish I hadn't.

Those eyes. Oh god, stop looking at me like that!

"We're friends?" The desperately hopeful whisper eradicates what remains of my heart.

"Sure, brat, we are," I say in a much too soft voice. I would curse my weakness for all things cute again, except he's giving me a small bashful smile that somehow outshines the sun itself. It makes it impossible to regret my words.

The brat lets go of my hand and surges forward, hugging my leg like he's a particularly stubborn weed.

I give up.

Letting out a sigh, I reach down to ruffle his hair. It's addictive to do so. The wild locks are even softer than they look.
"Come on, Naruto, let's get you home."

The brat jerks up his head and looks at me with impossibly wide eyes, before he beams like the sun.

"Okay, Meiri!" His pronunciation of my name is a lot closer to the real thing than most ever bother.

I finally allow myself to smile back. It actually makes him beam even brighter.

"...You do realize you'll have to let go of me, right?" I ask when he doesn't make a move to stop clinging to my leg.

The brat gains a mischievous look and hugs my leg even tighter.

"No!" he exclaims with a foxy grin. I can't help the rueful twist of my lips. Such a cheeky brat.

I start walking again while dragging my leg along, and by extension, the brat as well. The giggles he lets out in return make me feel all mushy and warm.

Maybe this won't be so bad after all.

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Subject:
Takahashi Mariko

Personal Information:
Female
Birth Date: 2 May, 30 ME
Konoha native
Father: Takahashi Daisuke (deceased)
Mother: Takahashi Rumiko (deceased)
Civilian upbringing and education
Waitress at tea house, the Dancing Dragon
Author of literary series, Once Upon A Time
(see Personal History)

Distinguishing attributes:
Unique speech pattern, vowels bitten back and consonants drawn out
Permanently damaged chakra system from the Kyuubi Attack
(see Medical Records)

Observation:
Jinchuuriki regularly seeks the subject out. Subject buys the Jinchuuriki food and returns him to the orphanage. No deviation of pattern has been observed so far. Subject's behavior appear to be motivated by protective feelings towards children in general, and growing affection for the Jinchuuriki in particular. No visible interest in the Jinchuuriki's burden.
(see Observation Log)

Assessment:
Emotional attachment between the subject and the Jinchuuriki will continue to increase. Subject will gain moral authority over the jinchuuriki. Subject will not consciously abuse this authority. Subject will provide a positive social influence on the Jinchuuriki.
(see Threat Assessment)

Conclusion:
Subject poses no immediate threat. No intervention is needed at this time.

Chapter End Notes

This fic is inspired by [Dreaming of Sunshine](#), a self-insert fic written by the amazing Silver Queen. If you haven't read it yet, go do so RIGHT NOW. I promise you won't regret it.
"No cheating," I warn one last time.

"Ninja," he counters like him being one somehow invalidates my warning. I give him a dirty look. It transforms into a mischievous smile as inspiration rises. If that's the way he wants to play it.

"If you're going to be like that, I can always stop," I say while leaning back. I'm expecting the gloved hand that twines through my hair and halts my movement.

"No," he says, previous amusement gone. I chuckle.

"If you don't want me to stop..." I murmur in a low voice as I bring up a hand to lay on his knee. I dig my nails into the fabric. Hard.

"Don't. Cheat."

He keeps my head tilted back a moment longer, before he releases his grip and places both his hands on the bed. His silent agreement makes me chuckle again, though for a different reason than before. Having a ninja obey my commands is a delicious power trip. Him being an elite ninja only makes it better.

I quiet down as I look him over and realize there's an unforeseen complication to my plan.

"I have no idea where to even begin opening your pants." Not with that kind of armor in the way.

He tilts his head back and laughs. It pulls the lines of his covered throat taut and the sight is impossibly enticing. I want to pull down the fabric and suck and nibble until uncovered skin is ruined by hickeys.

The bleached mask comes down again, shadows where eyes should be. Somehow he still manages to radiate amusement.

His hands come up and those talented fingers disappear underneath the edge of pale armor. My own gaze is drawn towards his upper arms. I watch the play of muscles that small sliver of skin reveals and the tattoo I want to trace with my tongue. Again.

"Is there a reason you're so fascinated by my biceps or is this just another one of your quirks?" he teases. I answer without moving my eyes away from that sliver of exposed skin.

"Seeing as they're literally the only part of you that your uniform doesn't cover up, I think my mild obsession is entirely justified."

"Here I thought you had a kink for men in uniform."

"The unavoidable consequence of having a lover who never wears anything else. Though I'll admit that the armor does very nice things to me."

"Always happy to serve."

"You are a true patriot. Now shut up, I need to focus," I order as his pants are finally undone. I have no idea how he did it and I don't care either. The bare skin on display demands all my attention. He isn't completely hard yet, but the twitch I manage to inspire simply by looking...
I can work with this.

Looking up at him through my lashes, I give a sultry smile and lean back on my knees. He does so enjoy my shows.

My hands come up to caress my hips. Slowly, I slide them up higher. I cup my breasts and arch my back, pushing them together. An offering.

Another twitch.

I scrape down my nails hard. The sensation makes me gasp and I close my eyes as I savor the burn. Knowing that he's watching just makes everything so much better.

I shiver as I brush my hands downwards, a soft touch now. The contrast heightens the pleasure. When my hands reach my stomach, I stop and open my eyes.

He's still in the way only a ninja can be. A predator watching his prey.

Perfect.

I open my knees and I swear I see a shiver pass through him. My hands go lower, a soft caress at first, before turning sharp. Just the way I like it.

My breathing speeds up as I slip two fingers inside. Enough to be full, not enough to be fulfilled. A delicious tease. I moan.

His hands grip the sheets.

I halt my movements. Bringing up a glistening hand, I lean forward.

I touch him. The harsh breath he lets out is delicious.

I start stroking him, use a rhythm with just enough surprise, the wetness of my own desire making the movements fluid. His breathing deepens, the shadows of his eyes never moving away from me, trapping me beneath his gaze.

I feel so empowered.

I halt my caressing. Leaning forward, I let my breath ghost across.

Another twitch.

I brush my lips over velvet skin, before pulling back. One of his hands makes an aborted movement towards me, but then he clenches his fist and puts it back down the bed. He still remembers the rules.

That won't do at all.

Giving him a mischievous smile, I place my lips down the tip and let my tongue play with the slit. The taste of him is heady.

It's not nearly as heady as the way I can feel a shiver run through him.

Mentally preparing myself, I swallow him almost completely without warning. The choked up sound he lets out is perfect.

Hollowing my cheeks, I suck and use my tongue to caress and taste, taking him as deep as I can and
feeling him hit the back of my throat. He lets out a soft groan.

I hum.

His fingers tangle through my hair, clutching at the strands with desperation, on the edge of becoming painful as he pushes me down even further, almost making me choke. I barely manage to keep my throat relaxed.

His reaction is exactly what I wanted.

Curling my tongue, I hum again.

The sounds he makes. It's enough to make me shiver.

I pull back a little but can't get far away. Not with him holding my hair captive. He's unwilling, unable to let me go.

He's forgotten the rules. Excellent.

Breathing evenly through my nose as I prepare for what I'm about to do, I give him one last look through my lashes. Then I swallow him to the root and hum as hard as I can, making my very throat vibrate.

A hoarse shout, fingers yanking at my hair, his hips snapping up, liquid coating my throat. He's completely undone.

I slowly pull back and lick up the few spilled drops across my lips. The taste isn't unpleasant at all.

A satisfied grin grows as I see him lean back on the mattress, supporting himself with one arm like he's unable continue sitting upright without it.

I'm so proud of myself.

His fingers slowly release their grip on my hair. My scalp still stings from his grip in the best of ways. It's truly impressive that he didn't cross the line from pleasurable pain into plain pain. He didn't even yank a single hair out. Ninja control at it's finest.

A control I've managed to partially break.

So damn proud.

"So," I begin without any effort to disguise just how smug I'm feeling. "Did my trick meet your expectations?"

In a movement so fast I can't process it, I'm pulled up from the floor and pushed down the bed with my hands held captive above my head. He looms over me, shadows holding my gaze.

"Not bad," he says oh so casually. I laugh.

"Please, I ruined you." It's cute how he's trying to deny it, though.

"Is that so?" he counters, amused.

"It is," I confirm.

"Allow me to return the favor."
I raise a brow, intrigued. I'm definitely not going to say no to that, but I do wonder how he's planning to pull it off.

"By all means. Though I think your usual attire might cause some issues." Kind of hard to give head when you're wearing a mask.

"That's not what I meant."

Damn, that's a real shame.

"Oh?" I say in a request for him to elaborate. While it's a shame that he's planning something different than what I expected, I'm very curious as to what he thinks would be a suitable return favor. I'm sure he won't disappoint.

"Really, fine chakra control is underrated." His free hand comes up, sparks dancing over his fingers. "With enough precision, there are some very interesting applications."

Oh.

I was right, he doesn't disappoint. At all.
Where am I?

"Don't cry, honey, please don't cry."

"Get a medic, he's seizing!"

What is this place?

"I want my daddy!"

"Make it stop, just make it stop!"

What's going on?

"Mariko? Mariko!"

An older man grips my shoulders, tearful eyes meet my own. He's smiling.

"You're alive, thank the gods, you're– oh."

His smile fades away.

"I– I'm sorry, miss, I thought you were... Never mind."

He lets go and turns away. I grasp his arm without thought. I'm lost, scared, confused.

I don't understand.

"Where am I?"

"What?"

"Please. Please, I don't understand."

"Are you all r-- stupid question. Do you need anything?"

"Please. Please, please, please, please."

I'm crying, pleading for the world to make sense.

I want to go home.

Arms embrace me, offering warmth, comfort, safety. I clutch back with desperation.

The man is crying as well.

"Shh, it's okay, it'll be all right. Things will get better, you'll see. You're going to be all right."

"The Ninja Academy," I say in a flat voice while giving the brat an unimpressed look. It doesn't deter him in the slightest.
"Yeah, Sayuki said I can finally start this year! I'm gonna be the bestest ninja ever, dattebayo!"

I feel my eye twitch. The idea of the brat being turned into a killing machine is horrifying.

All right, that's unfair of me. It's not like ninja are serial killers. They are, however, part of an active military. I have no problem with that when it comes to adults, but when it comes to children... I shudder just from thinking about it. Children should play in the mud and be forced to sit through boring mathematics, not learn the most efficient ways to kill someone. Or learn how to infiltrate, how to gather information, and other general spyness. And they learn magic of course. Most horrifying of all, they learn combat magic.

"Right," I mutter, so disturbed with this entire conversation and the stark reminder that I'm living in a military dictatorship that produces child soldiers.

Naruto's expression turns crestfallen, immediately pulling me from my morbid thoughts.

"You don't think I can do it?" he asks in a small voice, looking so hurt and discouraged that it's physically painful to see. I would lie just to ensure he no longer looks like that.

Fortunately, I don't have to lie.

"I think you'll be the strongest ninja ever." He's the hero, of course he's going to be amazing. Even if it's truly horrifying to think of the brat as a ninja.

On the other hand, the Kyuubi is going to make him a target no matter what. That's what the whole plot was about, right? Something like that. The details aren't important. The fact that he's a hero in an action comic says everything there is to know about his future.

I do my best not to think about this fact too deeply. While stories like that are fun to read, the implications are terrifying when applied to real life.

My words make Naruto shine brighter than the sun.

"Yeah, I'm gonna be the strongest ever! You'll see, Mary-nee!"

I have to smile at his reaction. Naruto's cheer is infectious as ever.

"I'm sure you will be."

"You know I don't do children's clothing," Shiro says with his version of a harsh frown. Which means his brows are creased a minuscule fraction.

"Come on, just this once," I try to cajole.

"No," he rebukes, unyielding in his refusal. Doesn't mean I'm about to give up.

"Please? For me?" That works far more often than it should.

"No."

It isn't working this time. A different tactic is needed.

"But look at him," I say as I wave a hand towards the brat, who is wandering around in rare silence. He's adorably awed by his surroundings. "Don't you want to see what he'd look like when dressed properly?"
Shiro keeps silent but I know his refusal is just a little less firm than before. Shiro doesn't love making clothes, he makes clothes because he loves dressing people. The more striking colors they have, the better.

Naruto has near golden hair and eyes that put the sky to shame.

"That hair, those eyes. Tell me you're not itching to bring out their potential." Sure, I'm laying it on thick, but whatever works.

It does indeed work. While Shiro is still wearing his harsh frown, I can tell he's wavering. Time for the finishing blow.

"If you don't do it, we'll have to go to Madam Kaguya's." This is a lie, I would never betray Shiro by going to his hated rival. He knows it too, but that doesn't change the effectiveness of my threat. As evidenced by the way his lips curl down a fraction. A pained grimace of defeat.

It takes a huge effort to suppress my victorious grin.

"...Fine," he agrees reluctantly. Now I can let my grin break through.

Too easy. I didn't even have to bring up Naruto's love for blindingly bright colors and the inevitable fashion disaster that would lead to.

"You're the best." My sincere compliment results in another harsh frown.

"One time," he warns. I give an agreeing nod.

As if. There's no way Shiro is going to be able to resist the urge to dress the brat after doing it once.

"Naruto, get over here!" I call out. The brat wanders over, still bedazzled by the various outfits on display. He's never been here before and it shows.

Rukia trails after him with an amused smile.

"I take it we're making him some clothes?" she asks like she doesn't already know the answer. Shiro lets out a slightly deeper breath than usual. A great, resigned sigh.

"So it seems," he says, before he looks over Naruto with what I like to call his artist eyes.

"Late sunset," he muses. Rukia hums as she turns assessing eyes towards Naruto as well.

"Sunny skies," she suggests instead. With that, the fashion process is officially underway.

"Nature in bloom."

"Classical Leaf style?"

"Too subtle, he needs bold colors."

I let the professionals work with a smile. The sight of them gazing down at the brat like two ravenous wolves is hilarious.

Naruto, on the other hand, looks completely lost. He's never seen the fashion duo in business mode before and it makes him aim panicked eyes my way. Given the circumstances, that just makes everything even funnier. I wink at him.
"Don't worry, Shiro and Rukia know what they're doing. When you start the Academy, you're going to be the most fashionable brat to ever attend."

Naruto doesn't look reassured.

"I don't have money for this," he says in an unusually subdued way. The two wolves ignore it as they keep bouncing ideas. I myself wave his words away. The brat is always self-conscious about his lack of money, in a way that's ridiculous for his age. Comes from being an orphan, I suppose.

"Consider it a starting present." In the months I've known him, I've never seen the brat wear anything other than long shorts and too big t-shirts, alongside the occasional jumper on the rare occasions the temperature warrants it. Orphans don't have the luxury of anything more than the basics. Which, really, the brat should have at least one outfit for special occasions. What's more special to a child than their first day at school?

"A... a present? For me?" His smile is so shy and delighted that it turns my heart into a puddle of goo.

"Yeah, Naruto. For you," I say softly, can't help it. All my defenses are obliterated when faced with an expression like that.

Naruto's smile grows until it outshines the sun, before he races forward and attacks my leg with a hug.

"Mary-nee, you're the best!"

I chuckle and ruffle his hair. Rukia looks like she's just a second away from cooing as she looks down at him. Always nice to see I'm not the only one affected.

Shiro, of course, isn't affected in the slightest. This has less to do with an immunity to Naruto's weaponized cuteness and more with the fact that the outside world no longer exists to him. His eyes are gleaming with passion.

Really, Naruto is going to walk out of here with an entire wardrobe in the works.

"Say what? Repeat that."

"When I'm eleven, I get to live on my own! Isn't that so cool, nee-chan?"

No. No, it absolutely is not. Eleven year olds should *never* live on their own. I can feel a headache coming on.

"And why exactly is that?" I ask, unable to believe that we're having this conversation.

"That's what Sayuki said. She said if I'm still in the Academy when I'm eleven, I get my own apartment and my own money! It's awesome!" The brat is being much too enthusiastic about this.

I rub my eyes. Unbelievable. Sayuki wouldn't lie to him, though. The matron might not particularly care for Naruto, but she doesn't particularly dislike him either. At least, not because of the Kyuubi. She just has a lot of trouble with Naruto because he's an incredibly demanding child. Incredibly cute as well but so damn demanding. The caretakers at the orphanage simply aren't capable of meeting his constant need for one on one attention. There are too many other children to look after.

I never thought that could mean they'll just throw him out like this. Years from now, true, but living
alone at eleven is only marginally better than living alone at five – excuse me, five-but-almost-six. Which means it's horrifying instead of catastrophic.

I look towards Tori to make sure I'm not imagining this conversation. Judging from her amused giggle and complete lack of horror, I'm not. Damn it.

"Why?" I ask the world in general, not expecting an answer.

"Almost everyone who makes it to the final two years of the Academy graduates. Ninja are adults the moment they get their headband. It's easier for the orphanage to let those children go a little earlier instead of keeping them around. Especially with their present numbers. It's on a probationary basis. If they fail, they're still minors."

Renji is resolutely not looking our way, wiping down a table as if it's the most vital task in the universe. I stare at him, stunned. When Naruto is here, it's rare for Renji to speak more than two words to me, never mind a spontaneous explanation like that.

Renji has truly exceeded my every expectation these past months. While he has moments where he needs to be away from me, he's careful to ensure our friendship remains intact. Most of the time, that's easy to do. When Naruto isn't around, Renji is fine. When Naruto is here, though...

I try to keep Naruto away from the Dancing Dragon, I really do, but I spend so much time here that I can't prevent it from happening. Not when the brat can come and go whenever he wants during the day. He mercilessly exploits that privilege, showing up here almost every day.

Renji has never aimed even a single bad word at Naruto. He, in fact, somehow manages to ignore Naruto's very presence. The brat's loudness makes that an amazing accomplishment for anyone, but for Renji...

I meet him halfway as best I can.

I act normal.

"That's insane," I point out while placing my hand across Naruto's opening mouth as he glares at Renji.

Naruto hates being ignored. It's taken a huge effort to ensure he leaves Renji alone and I'm not going to let the brat ruin this fragile moment by being his usual brash self. I ignore his betrayed puppy look with a lot less effort than I otherwise would. I won't budge on this. He needs to leave Renji alone.

"Ninja are insane," I continue because really, who thinks a system that makes eleven year old kids live on their own is a good idea? Ninja, that's who.

Tori turns her concerned gaze away from Renji to give me a bright smile.

"Of course, that's what makes them so great!"

I roll my eyes. Even civilians are brainwashed here.

Looking back down at the brat, I raise an unimpressed brow as he licks my palm in an effort to dislodge it. Amateur.

"In that case, you're definitely going to become Hokage. You're the craziest person I know," I tell him, making sure his attention is back on me before I remove my hand. His giant grin lets me know I've succeeded.
"Yeah! The Hokage are the strongest, right? I'm going to be better than all of them, dattebayo! Then people won't be mean to me anymore!"

How does the brat keep doing this? Someone so loud shouldn't be capable of being so heart wrenching.

Renji disappears into the kitchen with a pile of dirty dishes as an excuse. We aren't going to be seeing him again.

"I'm sure you will be! You just have to work <i>really</i> hard. Becoming Hokage isn't easy, you know."

Bless Tori, always there with genuine cheer and enthusiasm.

"I know that! I'm still going to do it, just you watch!" Such an unbelievably loud little brat. No wonder he and Tori get along so well.

Tori crosses over and ruffles his hair, the soft locks too alluring to resist now that Renji's gone. As always, it makes a sunshine smile appear. That expression hasn't become any less effective, no matter how often I see it. I take comfort in the fact that Tori is just as moved.

But when her gaze slides towards the kitchen, her worry returns. Time for us to leave.

"Come on, brat, say goodbye. It's late and we need to get you back."

Tori turns a grateful look my way and it helps lessen my guilt a fraction. But what am I supposed to do, forbid Naruto from coming here? I can't do that, it isn't fair to him.

Him being here isn't fair to Renji either.

"Already? Can't we stay a little longer?" The puppy eyes are strong with this one. Exposure has made me capable of projecting an illusion of being unaffected.

The problem is that the brat knows it's an illusion.

"No," I say.

"Please, please, pretty please?" And he's actually learned to turn up the power. Manipulative little brat.

"No." I'm proud of how firm my voice remains.

Naruto adds a pout. Nope, not going to work. Mostly because I turn my gaze towards the ceiling. Avoidance, the best way to deal with this.

Tori's giggles aren't helping.

I hear his chair creak as the brat gets off it, before footsteps come closer and small hands tug at my pants. Don't look down, don't look down.

I look down. Damn it.

Huge, soulful eyes, shimmering with a hint of tears, made even more powerful by a trembling lower lip. I am defeated effortlessly.

"If we leave now, you can stay over at my place." I'm so weak.

The brat's act disappears like smoke and is replaced by a foxy grin, radiating smug satisfaction.
"Tomorrow too, right?" he demands. I let out a sigh but can't help the wry twist of my lips. Offer the brat a finger and he takes an arm.

"Tomorrow too," I agree.

Tiny arms hug my waist while a sunny and breathtaking smile is aimed up at me. Really, how am I supposed to defend myself against this?

"Mary-nee, you're the best!"

I sigh again, even as I feel my smile grow.

"Yes, yes, I know. Now go say goodbye."

The brat skips towards Tori. Who is looking at me in a pointed way. Really, the fact that I sometimes let Naruto stay over in my spare room doesn't mean anything. Neither does the fact that he visits me daily. Or that I always make him lunch. And often dinner as well. I'm not his guardian, nope, no way.

...They can't really expect him to live on his own. Right?

How did it come to this? Oh wait, I remember now. My weakness for all things cute.

I try to give the brat a serious look but I'm immediately forced to close my eyes. This is important, don't be weak, don't be weak.

I open my eyes and clear my throat.

"If we're going to do this, we need clear ground rules. You will follow them. Got it?"

Dear god, those eyes, the glimmer of tears, the trembling lips. Worst of all, it's entirely natural, not a hint of manipulation in sight.

"Got it." Of course he has to sound choked up as well. Clearly that expression alone isn't lethal enough. Why do I keep doing this to myself? This is going to end in disaster, I just know it.

Even with that knowledge, I raise my index finger.

"First. You will go to the Academy every day and complete all your homework." School is important, no matter how horrifying the education itself. His already starting to become regular skipping is unacceptable.

I wait until he nods in agreement. Words seem to be beyond him.

I do my best to ignore the tightness of my own throat and raise a second digit.

"Second. You will never train without supervision." He's a brat, he isn't old enough to do that unsupervised. Ninja might be insane but I'm not.

Naruto nods again, looking even more choked up than before. Damn it, my own eyes are starting to sting.

I order myself to keep going and raise a third digit.

"Third. You will go to bed on time, eat all your vegetables, wash every day and listen to me when I
tell you to do something." He needs to know that he's not going to get away with as much anymore. He needs to listen. Otherwise this is never going to work.

Another nod. I swallow my too tight throat and put down my hand. I give him a fierce look.

"Finally. You will not call me mother, mom, mommy, or any other variant. I'll be your guardian but I'm not a mother to anyone. Got it?" I can't do this without that distinction. Irrational, maybe, but I don't care in the slightest. This is terrifying enough already.

"Got it," Naruto manages to whisper as a few tears slide down his cheeks. The sight makes my breath hitch and I blink furiously to keep my own tears from breaking through. I'm not going to cry. Yet.

"All right. I can do this," I encourage myself and take a fortifying breath.

I pick up the pen. Put it to the paper.

I hesitate, blind terror surging with a vengeance. Which is ridiculous, I've gone to war with an unholy abomination masquerading as paperwork to get permission to do this.

But if I sign, there's no going back. Do I really want to be responsible for a child like this? Be responsible for his happiness and safety, his care and comfort. Be responsible for making sure that Naruto grows up into a decent person.

Can I stand watching him face danger after danger, knowing that I can't prevent it from happening? Knowing that I won't be able to protect him no matter how much I wish I could?

I look at him. He's still staring at me like I'm an impossible dream come true.

I can't back out now. It would destroy him.

Sucking in a sharp breath, I pen down my signature. It's official. It's done.

I am Uzumaki Naruto's guardian. god have mercy.

As Naruto surges forward and strangles me with an embrace, his entire body shaking with the force of his sobs of joy, I can't find it within myself to regret any of it.

This can only end in disaster. But what a way to go.

"Shh, it's okay, you're fine, I'm fine, we're all fine. Stop crying please," I beg as I continue rubbing the brat's back, desperately trying to calm him down.

"They wanted to hurt you!" Naruto wails into my shoulder. The fact that those drunks wanted to hurt him is a lot more distressing, actually.

"I would've kicked them in the balls before that happened," I try to reassure him. The continuation of his soul shredding sobs lets me know how spectacularly I've failed at that. My heart is dust in the wind and my adrenaline is still at an all time high.

"Come on, it wasn't that bad. That ninja took care of them easily. Nothing happened, there's no reason to be upset." A blatant lie but dear god, I just need him to stop crying.

Naruto's head snaps up and he gives me a furious glare. This is only a partial improvement, because seeing his ruddy face and his still tear filled eyes succeeds in shredding the remnants of my heart
down to the molecular level.

"I should've protected you! I'm a ninja too! I should've been stronger!"

While the sentiment is sweet, there's no way in hell that I'm going to encourage such stupidity.

"You're a small and scrawny academy student. You would've been destroyed."

The brat's face crumbles and he sniffs as new tears start sliding down. I let out a pained noise.

Quick, what can I say that's both comforting and not stupidity encouraging?

"Listen, Naruto. Just because you're not strong now doesn't mean you won't be later. And until you are strong, it's okay to let other people take care of you." There, that should do the trick.

Please, please, please let it do the trick.

It doesn't, his lips tremble harder and his tears fall down faster. He's on the verge of erupting into soul shredding cries once more. Head it off! Distract him!

"Did you see how fast that ninja moved?" I ask in a burst of inspiration. "One moment we're running and the next, fwoosh. Those drunks didn't stand a chance! It was amazing, wasn't it?"

His lips keep trembling but his tears stop falling, thank god. I need to remain careful though, this can easily turn catastrophic again.

"...I guess," he mumbles. I let out my most disbelieving scoff.

"You guess? I never knew someone could be so fast! Just bang, smack, and they were gone! It was awesome," I emphasize, forcing myself to grin.

Naruto gains a wobbly smile! Success!

"It was pretty cool," he says, no longer on the verge of lethal sobbing. For that, I want to cry with relief myself. Obviously I don't do that. It would ruin all the progress I've made.

"It was very cool," I correct with a sage nod.

"Do you think I'll ever be that strong?" he asks in a tentative voice, insecure in a way he almost never is.

"Of course," I confirm without hesitation, speaking nothing but the truth. "And if you're not stronger, you just have to be sneakier. If that doesn't work, you run away and come back later with friends." Might as well take the opportunity to impart some valuable life lessons.

Naruto gives me a highly indignant look. It's a beautiful sight, it really is.

"I'm not gonna run away! And I don't need help!"

I'm so glad he's back to his usual volume.

"Then you're an idiot," I feel confident enough to say without fear of immediate catastrophe. Again, I'm not going to encourage stupidity. "Running away is a good strategy for staying alive. And everyone needs help sometimes, you can do more together than you can alone. Only dumb morons don't realize that. And only prideful idiots turn down help."

Naruto looks incredibly insulted. The sight is even more beautiful than the last. While his eyes are
still red and his face is a mess of snot and tears, the danger of soul shredding crying seems to have officially passed.

Thank god.

"So," I continue in a firm voice. "Repeat after me. I will run away if a fight seems hopeless."

The brat keeps quiet with a mulish expression.

"Naruto..." I warn. He lets out a dramatic sigh that tells me exactly how much he doesn't want to do this. It's wonderful to hear.

"I will run away if a fight seems hopeless," he repeats like I just told him he has to finish all his vegetables. As long as he obeys, I don't care in the slightest.

"If I'm not strong enough to beat someone, I will go and find someone to help me," I continue. That and the previous are the most important rules for him to follow in a fight. Some idiots might call it cowardly, but I like to think of it as common sense.

"If I'm not strong enough to beat someone, I will go and find someone to help me," he repeats just as reluctantly as before.

"...I will unleash unholy pranks on any who hurt me or my friends."

Naruto gains a sunshine smile.

"I will unleash unholy pranks on any who hurt me or my friends, dattebayo!"

Thought that might work.

He surges forward and buries his face in my neck, clutching me tightly. He starts crying again, but it's not the soul destroying sobs from before. Just a release from the mess of emotions this night has brought. My heart creeps back into my chest and I let out a relieved sigh.

Note to self. Don't ever take Naruto outside on his birthday.

The brat is asleep at last. Which means I can finally allow myself to freak out.

"Shit," I mutter into my hands, feeling so worn down.

Shit, we were attacked. It doesn't matter that they were drunk and not in their right mind. We were attacked. Threatened and in very real danger.

What would've happened if that ANBU hadn't been there?

Shit. Shit, fuck and god damn it all to hell. This was the second most terrifying experience of my life. I couldn't even... We could have – Naruto could have –

Don't panic. Freaking out is allowed, panic is not. Deep breaths. Inhale. Exhale. Now just keep doing that.

It's been years since I last had to do this.

It's a skill you never forget.

Eventually, I feel more worn down than freaked out. Feel like I'll actually be able to get some sleep tonight.

With a sigh, I push myself to my feet and walk over to the remainder Naruto's birthday cake. I grab a plate and cut off a slice, before I grab one of my notebooks and open it to a blank page. Scribbling down a quick note, I tear it out, fold it, and walk towards the window. Opening it, I put the cake and note down the windowsill, and close the window.

I never thought I would be grateful for ninja paranoia. But without them keeping an eye on me, or rather, an eye on Naruto, things could've ended in ways I don't want to imagine.

The least I can do is show my gratitude.

Thanks for the rescue.

The plate is on the coffee table. The cake is untouched.

I probably should've noticed this sooner, but in my defense, I'm still rattled from yesterday. I've purposely gone through my usual routine of waking up, making breakfast and a lunch box for the brat, before waking Naruto and making him go through his own usual routine, ending with us eating breakfast together. Aside from Naruto being clingy in a way I don't mind in the slightest, I made sure everything was blessedly normal.

Which means I didn't pay attention to what had happened to my offering until now.

While Naruto finishes up his breakfast, I get off my chair and walk towards the coffee table. When I'm closer, I notice that my note is there as well, half placed underneath the plate. There's new scribbles peeking out from one of the folded edges. My offering might not have been eaten but at least I got a reply.

I pick up the note and unfold it.

I don't like sweet things.

I snort, inadvertently amused. He actually felt the need to break in just to tell me that.

Ninja.

"Hey, is that for me? Can I have cake for breakfast, please, please, pretty please?" Naruto begs when he notices what I'm doing.

"Finish your meal and you can have a bite," I call back as I walk towards the cupboards, rummaging through them. I know it's here somewhere, now where did I put it?

Aha! I pull out a bag of fried beans. It's one of the only non-sweet snacks I have except for fruit. What can I say, I have a sweet tooth. So does Naruto, though I'm careful to monitor his sugar intake. Having the brat hyped up is an absolute nightmare.

I scribble down another note.

Does this meet your refined tastes?

Folding the paper, I place both the snack and the note out on the windowsill. Sure, he can break in
whenever he wants, but I like to keep some boundaries. Insofar as it's possible to have boundaries when it comes to ninja. The fact that he's ANBU only makes it worse.

I should probably be more disturbed about the ease with which he broke in. And about being stalked in general. I know I would be if he hadn't saved Naruto and me, but the fact is that he did save us. It makes it difficult to be upset about the invasion of privacy when I'm feeling so grateful.

"Nee-chan, what're you doing?"

I'm startled by how near Naruto's voice is. I thought he was still sitting at the table. Apparently not.

"Feeding stray cats," I say. Given that Naruto is a newly minted six year old, the sarcasm flies over his head.

"Really?" he returns with a look that means he's trying to figure out why I'd want to feed stray cats. I feel a smile grow. Cute brat.

"No."

My reply makes him pout and cross his arms, offended at being made a fool.

"You're being mean!" he condemns.

"Why are you still surprised by this?" I counter as I turn towards the coffee table. I need to put the cake away. "And did you finish your--"

The cake is gone. I give the brat a flat look.

"Naruto. Where's the cake?"

The brat lowers his head and shuffles his feet, radiating guilt. The way he glances towards the sink lets me know where the plate has ended up.

I sigh. Of course. Admittedly, it's impressive that he managed to eat the thing so fast, as well as do so without drawing my attention. His mouth isn't even stained.

Even so.

"No cake for you tonight," I tell him firmly, making his eyes widen with horror.

"What! But--"

"No buts," I cut him off, bracing myself for the puppy eyes that will inevitably be aimed my way. I have to remain strong. Can't have the brat walk all over me now that I'm his guardian. "If you wanted cake tonight, you shouldn't have eaten it now. Now get moving, we're going to be late."

To my surprise, Naruto doesn't activate his puppy eyes. Instead he bites his lip and shuffles his feet some more, but this time it isn't because he's feeling guilty.

It's because he's afraid.

"Can't we stay home today?" he asks in a painfully tentative way. The urge to bundle him up in a blanket and stay home forever is almost impossible to resist. But I know from experience that if I give in to the urge today, I'll give in tomorrow as well. And the day after that. And the day after that.

After I first arrived in Konoha, I couldn't bring myself to leave Daisuke's home for months. I can't
afford to do that again. Not only is it unhealthy, it sets a bad example for Naruto. The best way to deal with your fears is to face them. I intend for us to do just that.

Besides, it's irrational to think there will be another attack. While many people dislike Naruto because of his loudness, rudeness, the Kyuubi, and various combinations of those three things, that doesn't mean they're going to hurt him. The only reason it happened yesterday was because of the date and because those two idiots were drunk. Also, we're being stalked by ANBU. While that should make me extremely uncomfortable, right now I can only feel grateful.

It means that Naruto is safe. So am I for that matter, which I won't deny is nice. It's Naruto's guaranteed safety that calms me down the most, though.

"You have school, so no," I say as I move towards the door. "Come on, I'll walk you." While the both of us might need to face our fears, that doesn't mean Naruto needs to walk the streets alone today. Or tomorrow. Or ever.

Yeah, I'm going to have to watch myself. It's deceptively easy to let fear dictate my life.

The brat stays put and activates his kicked puppy mode. I immediately avert my eyes to the ceiling, but then I take a deep breath and force myself to meet those lethal weapons head. Showing Naruto that I mean business. He isn't going to wheedle his way out of this.

"Won't Tori be mad if you're late?" he asks with false innocence, switching tactics. I give him a look that tells him this one won't work either. Not just because of my determination to act like everything's normal either.

"She's closed down today." We always are the day after the annual Get So Drunk We Can't Remember Our Own Names Let Alone What Happened That Night party. The monster hangover doesn't really allow for anything else.

This is the first year I've missed it. While I don't regret that I celebrated Naruto's birthday instead, I do feel a little sad. That party is – was, I suppose, one of the only moments I allow myself to dwell on all I've lost. But being a guardian means I have to be responsible. Which also means I can't afford to get drunk today. No matter how much last night makes me want a stiff drink or ten.

"Move it, brat," I order when he keeps standing in place. Naruto scowls as he realizes he won't be able to change my mind.

"Okay, okay, I'm going," he mutters sullenly and drags his feet over.

He still looks scared.

When he reaches me, I drop down my knees and pull him into a hug. The way he instantly clutches back almost manages to destroy my resolve to go out. I pull back a little and caress his cheek.

"It's all right to be scared, Naruto. I'm a little scared too," I understate in a soft voice. While I don't want to lie to him, it isn't a good idea to let him know just how frightened I am. It might be an irrational fear, but try explaining that to a child his age.

When he gives me a hesitant look, I smile reassuringly.

"However, it's not all right to give in to it," I continue firmly. As his guardian, I need to teach him this. "So we're going to kick its ass by acting like normal."

Naruto still looks uncertain, but not as much as before.
"And if you go to the Academy, you'll learn how to be strong enough to kick the ass of anyone who wants to attack you." If reassurance won't work, maybe bribery will.

It does indeed work. Naruto grins beautifully, his fear and hesitance gone in the blink of an eye.

"Yeah, I'm gonna to be the strongest ever! And I'll protect you too, Mary-nee!"

I chuckle and ruffle his hair. Sweet brat.

"Then you better get to school. You won't get stronger otherwise." My words make Naruto gain a fiercely determined expression. He jumps out of my embrace and races to get his sandals on.

"Come on, nee-chan! We're gonna be late!"

I laugh as I move to put my own shoes on. Nice to see last night has an unexpected benefit. Hopefully the brat will keep up his newfound determination. Getting him to go to school without whining would make for a pleasant change in routine. Especially when I'm going to be walking him to school forever. I'll work out a new schedule with Tori, she'll understand.

Just because I'm not going to let fear rule my life, doesn't mean that I can't do little things to make it easier to bear.

I'm feeling a lot better after unloading to my friends and having an otherwise blissfully normal day. The brat is feeling better as well, chattering like usual ever since I picked him up from school. From his detailed recounting, he was more hyper than usual, but otherwise he had a blessedly normal day as well. I open the door to my apartment.

The bag of beans is standing on the coffee table. It's unopened.

Seriously?

"–and Iruka-sensei is so mean, he said I wasn't trying but I was! Reading is really hard and– Nee-chan, are you even listening?"

"Reading is hard," I parrot back as I take off my shoes. The brat is a huge chatterbox. Sometimes you can only listen with half an ear because there are other things demanding your attention as well.

Like that bastard's refusal to eat my offering again. What the hell is wrong with fried beans?

"...Okay. So I said he's stupid and mean, and he got really red and he yelled so loud, and he said--"

I let out vaguely interested noises as the brat chatters on and walk to the coffee table. I pick up the note placed underneath the bag.

* I don't like fried things either.

I can't help the wry twist of my lips. So picky.

"What're you doing, nee-chan? Who's that from?" Naruto's suspicious tone makes me pay more attention his words. I open my mouth to answer but then I realize what a spectacularly bad idea it would be to tell him that an ANBU is following us around. The fact that I instantly realize this topic is off limits is a clear sign of how much I've gone native.

"No one," I settle on as a reply. Unfortunately, even the brat is bright enough to realize that's a load of crap.
"It can't be no one, there's kanji on that! Kanji don't appear from nowhere! Someone has to write them!" My, he even used real logic to argue instead of blindly accusing me of lying. I'm so proud.

"All right, it's none of your business. How about that?" I'm not lying, it really is none of his business. This is between me and the bastard who refuses to accept my gratitude.

"What! Nee-chan, that's not fair! You can't--"

"If you drop it, I'll make ramen for dinner."

Naruto shuts up. Too easy. Also, ramen is neither sweet nor fried. The bastard better accept the offering this time.

Wait a minute. Back up.

"You have trouble reading?" I demand as I finish processing his previous chatter. This is something he's never mentioned before, I'd definitely remember if he had. I'll deal with his rudeness to Iruka later, this is a lot more important.

Naruto turns ashamed. I've never seen that from him before. He looks to the side and crosses his arms.

"It's just really hard, okay? There are so many characters."

Don't I know it.

"Well this won't do at all. Come on." There's no way I'm going to let this stand. If I can master those damn kanji, the brat can too. Victory will be ours no matter what.

I walk to the bookcase, grab my copy of the Lion Lord, and sit down the couch. Naruto quickly joins me and plasters himself against my side with a curious look. I pull him across my lap and give his hair a quick ruffle. It's impossible to resist those soft locks when they're this close.

"So this is a book I wrote--"

"You write books?" the brat interrupts like I just told him that I frolic around naked during the full moon. I give him a deadpan look.

"Really? I write every day, how is this a surprise to you?" Seriously, it's not like I go out of my way to hide it.

...Except he just told me he has trouble reading. And he's ashamed about it. This explains why he's never asked about my writing.

"I didn't think you were writing books." He makes it sound like an insult.

"Fantasy literature, actually," I retort with a scowl, my professional pride rankled. Shaking it off, I get us back on track. "Not the point. The point is, I'm going to read to you, and you're going to sit here, quietly, and follow along the characters. Give me your hand."

Naruto extends a hand. I cradle it inside my own, before I extend his index finger and put it down the first character.

Maybe this isn't the best way to teach him. While I'll be the first to admit that the vocabulary of my novels isn't particularly complex, it is aimed at an older audience. Still, as an author, it feels like I'm betraying myself if I don't teach him by using my own work. And I choose the Lion Lord because
it's my oldest story, and thus, my least complex in terms of kanji. My writing has improved a lot since then if I do say so myself.

I clear my throat.

"Once upon a time, in a land far away, there lived a noble lion."

I place the bowl of ramen out on the windowsill.

*Just eat the damn thing.*

The bowl on the coffee table is empty. The picky bastard has accepted my offering at long last.

*Not bad.*

"Officially held under watch. Really, where did we go wrong?"

"I blame the New Years Incident. She was never the same after that."

I roll my eyes. Such caring friends I have.

"Thanks, guys. Real supportive of you."

Rukia gives a cheerful smile, while Shiro sips his tea with too amused eyes. Admittedly, this is a lot better than the worry of the previous day. Not that the worry hadn't been welcome, but now I just want to put the entire awful thing behind me. Which my friends know.

Because they're assholes, they've decided to help out by making fun of the fact that the brat and I are being stalked.

"Honestly though, a personal watch by the elite. You're moving up in the world," Rukia teases, the euphemism rolling off her tongue without thought.

The first rule about ANBU. Don't talk about ANBU.

"And of course it has nothing to do with the fact that I adopted Naruto," I retort in a voice that makes the dessert seem wet. Really, I should've realized long ago that we're being stalked. Like it or not, the Kyuubi makes Naruto a person of interest to the village, no matter how young he is. Of course he's being stalked. I've probably been stalked myself ever since the brat started hanging out with me, or at the very least checked out.

The good news is that I don't have to worry about being discovered as an illegal alien. If they haven't found out by now, they're never going to. Even with my official papers, this is truly astonishing. Konoha is a dictatorship ruled by spies. I thought that the only reason I got away with living here undetected is because I'm an unimportant civilian who doesn't warrant any real attention. Apparently this isn't the case. There's nothing suspicious about me or my behavior, as evidenced by me not being arrested even after being stalked by ANBU. To trained spies, I'm just another normal citizen.
I really have gone native.

"Was he hot?" Rukia sounds far too interested in this. Nice to see her priorities are skewed as ever.

"Seeing as it was dark, he only appeared for a about second and was covered up from head to toe, I honestly can't answer that." It's only because of the way he refers to himself in the notes that I even know our rescuer is male. Or claims to be at least. Amazing how many different ways there are to refer to yourself in Nihongo.

Rukia lifts her brows in a ridiculously suggestive way. The similarities with Renji are undeniable at times like these.

"Mysterious. Now that's prime fantasy material. The damsel in distress saved by the dashing nin." Her words actually succeed in making Shiro snort softly. I can't help but laugh out loud myself.

"Because I'm such a fragile flower." Honestly, if it had been just me, I would've been far less worried. I might not be particularly strong, but I can be vicious when the situation calls for it. Against normal civilians, I give myself pretty decent odds.

"Excuse me, can I have a refill?"

The words make me look towards... Kagome? Yeah, that's her name.

Duty calls.

"Coming right up," I call back and start making another cup of chai for her. She's not a regular, just another curious ninja. Business has noticeably improved since I adopted Naruto. People in Konoha are huge gossips in general, but ninja are the biggest of them all. Which means many of them are dropping by the Dancing Dragon to "subtly" question me about his adoption. Or to listen to me talk about him to my friends and analyze my every move, because why wouldn't spies keep acting like spies even in their free time?

Rukia waggles her brows again and chuckles when I roll my eyes. Ridiculous woman.

Having a hot and heavy tumble sounds like a wonderful idea, though. I could definitely use the release. Not that I haven't been having fun, I have talented hands. Still, it isn't the same as having a partner.

Of course, given that the brat now lives with me, arranging a booty call is going to be a lot more complicated than before. Shouldn't be impossible, though.

As for my stalker, he'll just have to deal with my shows, solo or otherwise. I'm not going to change the way I act just for his convenience.

The next morning, I almost miss that there's another note, placed on the bookcase. My curiosity is roused. I'd assumed this thing would stop now that my gratitude has been accepted, but he's written again? What for?

I unfold it.

No more food?

Because of course I'm expected to keep feeding my stalker. I scribble down a reply and place it down the same spot he did. It's high enough that it's out of the brat's sight, and it seems ridiculous
to place it outside when that bastard is obviously going to break in whenever he feels like. Damn ninja.

*It was a one time deal, motivated by exceptional circumstances.*

"Oh no you don't," I say, noticing just in time what the brat is trying to do. I yank the toothbrush out of his hand before he can execute his plan.

"Hey!" he returns, indignant.

"Naruto, you will not brush your teeth with chocolate. Ever." Honestly, this brat.

"But toothpaste is yucky!" he exclaims like it's a valid excuse.

"Too bad. Now give me the chocolate and brush your teeth. With toothpaste." He knows why this is important, I've explained it to him before.

The brat stubbornly keeps hold of the chocolate bar. I narrow my eyes.

"Now," I order in a tone that tells him there will be consequences if he doesn't comply. With great reluctance, Naruto obeys.

This guardian thing is a lot of work.

*The miso was delicious.*

*Stop stealing my food.*

"Can I have more?"

Naruto's question makes me shake my head. I should be used to this by now, and most of the time I am. Sometimes I can't help feeling incredulous all over again, though.

"Where do you keep putting it all?"

"I'm just hungry!" the brat counters like it's the most normal thing in the world to still be hungry after what he's already devoured.

"A bottomless pit, an actual bottomless pit. This world truly is an unfathomable place." Seriously, the brat eats almost as much as I do. Given that he's half my size, his stomach shouldn't be physically capable of that. This has got to be an effect from the Kyuubi, it's the only thing that makes a lick of sense.

"Yeah, I'm unfathomable!" Naruto exclaims with a pleased grin. "What's unfathomable mean?" he continues without missing a beat. I chuckle and refill his plate.

"It means you're a very special snowflake," I tease. "Who really should've turned into a snowball by now. How on earth are you still so scrawny?" I ask without expectation of an answer, marveling at the mystery that is his stomach all over again.

"I'm the most special *ever*, dattebayo!" the brat crows, before he blinks with realization. He frowns, adorably insulted, and I can't help but smile at the picture he makes.
"Hey, I'm not scrawny!"

"You really are. Doesn't make you any less special."

That shuts Naruto up. He squints at me with suspicion, trying to determine whether I mean it or not. When he correctly concludes that I mean it, he beams brighter than the sun.

"The most special, nee-chan!" the cheeky brat corrects with a grin, his chest puffing up with pride. My smile grows.

"The most special," I agree, earning myself even more sunshine and a heart melting hug.

This guardian thing is worth it.

---

The beef was a little dry.

**Seriously? Bastard.**

"Who's that for?" the brat asks as I place the meal on top of the book case.

"A stray cat," I answer. Naruto gives me a suspicious look from where he's seated at the table, trying to decide whether I'm being serious or not.

"You're making fun of me!" he decides. I grin. I wasn't making fun of him, I told him the truth. Or rather, I told him the truth in a metaphorical way.

If Naruto were older, I would give him a straight answer. Right now I simply can't trust the brat to keep quiet about this. Six year olds and secrets aren't compatible. Especially not when the six year old in question is a chatterbox.

Which is why I told him the truth in a metaphorical way. There's nothing unusual about a child talking about a stray cat being fed.

"I promise I'm not making fun of you." I'm really not. The fact that I happen to find my practical solution amusing is just an added bonus.

As expected, saying it's a promise is enough to get Naruto to believe me. In return for his unwavering faith, I'm careful to never promise something I don't mean or can't deliver on. I won't betray his trust like that.

"It's really for a stray cat?" he asks, no longer disbelieving, just curious. I give a sage nod.

Comparing ninja insanity to cat like behavior isn't a bad metaphor at all, if I do say so myself.

"It really is."

---

I'm touched.

**Damage control, nothing more.**

"Mary-nee, I don't want to!" the brat whines like he actually believes he can win this. I scowl. This is a routine I can definitely do without. Why does he always make this so difficult? It's even worse now that he's living me, and that's something I hadn't thought possible.
"Naruto, get in the bath," I order with a look that tells him my patience is wearing thin.

"I washed this morning!"

"And then you went to the park and rolled through the mud." Which I have no problem with. I do, however, have a problem with him tracking dirt all over our home. "Get in the bath."

The brat refuses to budge. I'm this close to picking him up and putting him in myself. Which I tell him by narrowing my eyes and pointing at the tub.

"Now."

With a scowl, Naruto finally gets into the bath. Then he splashes water all over me because of course he does.

I really hope he's going to grow out of his allergy to bathing soon.

---

**Congratulations on winning the war.**

I need a moment to realize what he's referring to. When I do, I feel an amused smile grow. With the benefit of hindsight, the bath war of last night has become funny.

It'll stop being funny when there's another one. Still, this had been worse than usual.

**It was a hard won victory. There was mud in places I literally hadn't thought possible.**

---

"Nee-chan, it's boring!"

I let out an annoyed sigh. I love the brat but there are times where I long for peace and quiet. Like when I'm trying to write.

"Naruto, shut up and do your homework." Homework which involves memorization exercises like usual. Being a ninja means being able to absorb and remember information down to the tiniest detail.

Naruto hates memorization exercises. Every time he gets an assignment like this, it's a struggle to make him finish it. Normally I'm more lenient and figure out a way to turn it into a game, but right now I just want to write. I'll play with him when he's finished, but not before. I know the brat is an hyperactive ball of energy who goes insane if he has to sit still for too long, and I make sure he gets plenty of work out in various parks, but when we're home there are times he needs to be quiet as well. Like when I'm trying to write.

"But--"

"No buts, just do your homework. Skip the things you have problems with, real problems, brat," I warn when shifty calculation crosses his face. Subtle Naruto is not. "I'll help you with those later. Now do your homework."

The only way to get Naruto work or play in relative silence is to be firm and unyielding. This is easy to accomplish when I want to write. Right now, the brat has no chance whatsoever of swaying me. By now he knows it too.

With a scowl and a great amount of pointedly silent drama, Naruto obeys. Good.

Time to continue describing the beautiful ice castle.
The structural integrity of that castle is lower than zero.

Oh hell no.

Read my drafts again and I will hurt you.

This is a boundary I won't allow him to cross. He can stalk the brat and me all he wants, he can break in whenever he feels like, he can even steal my food, but he needs to keep his sticky paws off my stories. Those are mine.

Am I overly territorial about my unfinished stories? Yes I am.

I'm surprised to see that the note has moved when I return from dropping the brat off at school. I thought he wouldn't reply until tomorrow like usual.

Cute. Like a kitten hissing at a lion.

I roll my eyes. Arrogant bastard.

Two notes in one day, I feel so special. And do you really want to test my creativity?

Warning delivered, I settle down the couch and grab my notebook. I have time before I need to be at work and I intend to fill it with writing.

...And it doesn't matter that the castle isn't structurally sound. Of course it doesn't.

"Everything all right?"

Renji's question pulls me from my musings. It's a calm day, I can afford to plan.

"Yeah, why do you ask?" I return.

"You're pretty distracted," he explains with the silent addition of, is it because of Naruto?

"I'm just thinking of something," I answer truthfully, silently telling him, no, it isn't because of Naruto. While it's impossible to avoid the topic entirely, both of us do our best to talk as little as possible about the brat. Renji is mostly fine as long as Naruto isn't here, but 'mostly' means that things are still easier when we don't breach the topic.

"What's gotten your head in the clouds this time?" he asks with a smile, relieved Naruto isn't involved.

"Something private." My words make Renji give me a suspicious look, wracking his brain in order to recall if he's done something to piss me off. He knows me so well.

"I'm not your target, right?" he asks after he fails to come up with an incident, wanting to make sure he's safe from my vengeance.

"Currently it's a potential target, not a certain one," I neither confirm nor deny with a grin

"But I'm not it?" he insists. I chuckle and decide to take pity on him.

"You're not it," I confirm. Renji lets out a relieved sigh. Normally he would've tried to figure out who I'm planning to prank, but that's when Riku, Akari and Yuuto enter. They sit down his section.
Renji gives me a look that means this conversation isn't over, before he goes over to take their order. I continue my previous musings.

The bastard is a ninja, so I'll have to be sneakier than usual. I also won't be able to retaliate as harshly as I wish I could. Right now, I'm thinking that my best bet is to write down a request for Tori to make some sugared onigiri to take home with me. That won't be unusual, I make Naruto's lunchboxes with what I take home. I'll write down the request during a busy period. While I'm pretty sure that the bastard stalks Naruto instead of me when we split up, I'm not going to risk him overhearing in case I'm wrong. I'll also add a plea to Tori not to ask any questions yet. Tori, while pushy in other ways, respects it when people don't wish to talk. By Konoha's standards at least.

After taking the sugared onigiri home, I'll make something sweet or fried for dinner. Hopefully, the bastard will steal some of my other food in order to show how clever he is. With any luck, he'll steal the sugared onigiri without suspecting their contents.

This is my first plan of attack. Time to think of a second, third and fourth.

After all, I'm pretty certain that bastard is going to try to call my bluff.

Bejeweled eyes? Really?

You asked for it.

"Mary-nee... you look really scary."

The brat's unusually subdued statement makes a vicious smile grow. I hope the bastard chokes on the onigiri, I really do.

My reaction makes Naruto turn even more wary. It's an amusing sight, but most of my mind is still on the sweet revenge I'm planning. Though I'm not sure I'll succeed The bastard is a damn ninja after all. An elite ninja, even. I'm not worried about failing, though.

If this doesn't work, I'll just keep trying until something does.

His dinner is untouched. Part one of my plan was a success. The question now is whether or not the bastard ate some of my other food. More specifically, whether or not he ate the sugared onigiri.

Time to find out.

That was one of the most disgusting things I have ever tasted. What did those poor onigiri ever do to you?

It worked! He ate the onigiri!

Today is a beautiful day.

Revenge is sweet.

I don't feel any surprise when I find a reply when I get back home. A kitten managed to trick a lion after all. His pride must be so hurt.

It won't work twice.
It is.

Sure, you keep telling yourself that.

"Why're you so mad at the notebook?"

"Because damn technicalities," I snap without moving my glare away from the pages mocking me. They're mocking me because the castle isn't structurally sound.

"What's that mean?"

"It means I hate my brain. Why oh why can't I let this go?"

Flipping to a blank page, I write down a question and tear it out.

Is it the material or the shape of the castle that makes it structurally unsound?

"Nee-chan, what's that mean?" the brat repeats with real annoyance, wanting a genuine answer to his question.

"I'm having trouble writing something because I don't have enough information," I explain while folding the note.

"Oh," he says, mollified by my explanation. "Are you going to get the information?"

"I better."

After placing the note on the bookcase, I decide to go play with the brat. I won't be able to continue writing until I have an answer to my question.

"What are you building?" I ask. Naruto happily launches into a detailed explanation of the misshapen monument he's creating with his blocks. His enthusiasm is more than enough to distract me.

I almost miss that the note has moved after I finish putting Naruto to bed. I hadn't expected a reply before tomorrow.

I'm definitely not complaining.

This must really be bothering you. I thought you wanted me to stop reading your drafts?

Like he's going to listen. Damn ninja. Still, now that I've calmed down, I've discovered that I can live with him reading my drafts. As long as he doesn't let me know that he's reading them that is. How native of me.

If he does let me know, I will hurt him again.

Because you are clearly someone who respects personal boundaries like that. Besides, do you see an invitation to read them? No. I'm asking for clarification on a previous statement, nothing more. Now answer the damn question.

...Except he's not going to answer as long as I'm here. Fortunately, his previous reply has shown that I don't need to leave the apartment to get an answer. I just need to be in a different room so he feels comfortable enough to break in. Because ninja are insane like that.

Time for a bathroom visit.
It worked, the note has moved!

I quickly unfold it, impatient for his answer. He's right, this is bothering me. A lot.

*It's the material. Ice is too fragile. The lower levels would shatter beneath the weight of the upper ones. Not to mention that the foundation is too narrow to prevent the entire thing from toppling over. When building with ice, think less high cylinder and more low pyramid. Also, smaller windows. Much smaller windows.*

Huh. This is actually helpful. I'm not sure what I'll do with the information yet, but it's helpful. Also surprisingly straightforward.

*I have to admit, I didn't expect an answer like that. Ninja don't seem like the building type.*

More like the demolition type. I've been to the Chunin Exams, I know what I'm talking about.

No longer annoyed but still unsure of what to do with this information, I decide to relax with some reading. It's something I do far too little now. Having the brat live with me full time has cut down on my free time enormously. I have to make choices on how I spend the time I have left. For the most part, writing wins out.

Later, after I return from another bathroom visit, the note has moved again. He's unusually chatty today.

*If you understand how something is build up, you understand how to bring it down.*

I chuckle.

*Much better.*

---

Shiro hands over the kimono without looking at me. I accept it in silence.

Most of the time, Shiro can look at me without being hurt. Without being reminded of her.

Right now he can't.

Some wounds never disappear. At best they become scars you carry with you for the rest of your life.

The most anyone can do is learn to live with them.

---

*What did you decide to do with the castle?*

*Mention that the ice is magical and defies the laws of physics.*

*How cheap.*

*Fantasy literature. Realism is not required.*

---

I lift my face from my pillow with a satisfied sigh. My hands are talented as ever. This is an excellent way to release tension. It's a shame I have to muffle my voice, but that's the price of living with a brat.
I still want a partner, though. My hands might be talented, but after a while, they just don't cut it. This used to be easy to fix, but it's harder than I thought it would be to arrange a booty call now that I'm a guardian.

Those are thoughts for tomorrow, though. Right now I just want to bask in the afterglow.

I've been wondering for a while now. For a civilian, you're surprisingly aware in some ways. You have to realize that keeping quiet doesn't make a difference.

That isn't insulting at all. And it's for the brat's sake, not yours.

Don't want him to catch you in the act?

Don't want to be interrupted before the good part.

Another sigh escapes me as I continue doing the dishes.

"What's wrong?" Tori asks from where she's busy with the books. I'll never be able to understand how she can actually like the hell that is the paperwork part of running a business in Konoha. It's the most horrible part of getting a new book published.

"Nothing." It really is nothing. Kind of nothing.

"That didn't sound like nothing," she says in a way that encourages me to unload. Still.

"It really is nothing, though. Nothing serious anyway." I won't deny that it's annoying, but it's not a big deal.

If I tell myself that long enough, it might even start to feel like it's true.

"But it's something?" Tori asks in that way of her that demands nothing at all, and it's enough to make me break.

"All right, it's something. Having a brat makes it difficult to go out and pick up a booty call." Which shouldn't be a big deal and yet it is.

My words startle a laugh from Tori, bright and amused. The sound makes my own lips twist in a wry smile. I suppose this is a little funny. Only a little, though.

Mostly it's frustrating. Far more than it should be.

"I can take him for an evening if you want," Tori offers like the treasure she is. There's just one problem with this.

"The brat doesn't like sleeping anywhere but his room. I don't want to force the issue." Naruto is incredibly attached to his things in general, but especially to his room. It's understandable, he slept with dozens of others in the orphanage. Having his own room is a Big Deal for him. It's almost as big as getting pocket money.

"In that case, want me to babysit?" Tori amends her offer. I give her a look of extreme gratitude. With some careful planning, that would actually allow me to go out and find a booty call.

"Tori, you are a gift from heaven," I say, meaning every word.
"You must really be frustrated," she teases with a smile.

"Like you wouldn't believe." It's gotten to the point that it's becoming ridiculous yet I can't help myself. I want a hot and heavy tumble with someone. More specifically, I want a hot and heavy with a stranger. Means things aren't complicated. Just pure and simple pleasure.

I like my sex with no strings attached.

_The fish could've used more salt._

_Ungrateful bastard. I feed you free of charge, and you actually have the nerve to complain?_

_I'm offering payment in the form of advice. I'm nice like that._

_You are a true friend._

Yes, right there, don't stop, _more_, just a little more – the door slams open.

"Mary-nee, wha--"

"_Naruto! Get out!_"

After my failed booty call has left and I've gotten the brat back into bed, I pace around in an effort to get rid of the sheer frustration I'm still boiling with. I decide to take a shower in the hope that it'll calm me down.

It doesn't work. Even worse, when I leave the bathroom, there's a note, prominently placed on the counter so that I can't miss it.

He didn't.

_That was hilarious._

Oh that absolute bastard.

_Shut up._

I can't believe the nerve of him. This is _not_ amusing _at all._

Stomping to the cupboards, I grab a glass and fill it with water while mentally cursing the bastard, the brat, my would be booty call and the entire world for good measure. The universe has it out for me, it really does. This is just one of many clear signs.

Another sign shows up when I turn around after finishing my drink. Because the note has moved. Somehow, in the time it took me to drain my glass, the bastard managed to break in, write something, and leave again, all without making a sound.

Fucking ninja.

_His timing was perfect._

Fucking ninja _bastard._
Shut up! How did you even manage to reply? I never left the room.

I throw the note down the coffee table, sit down the couch and glare at it. If he wants to keep acting like the bastard he is, I'm not going to make it easy for him.

Except my strategy doesn't take into account that ninja have magic. Without warning, the note teleports to the side. Of course it does. Either it was genuinely teleported, or he's using an illusion to hide what he's doing.

How nice to know the bastard might be stalking us from inside the apartment instead of from the outside.

I shouldn't want to know what he wrote. It's just going to aggravate me further.

I still want to know.

Cursing my damn curiosity, I unfold it.

I'm proficient. And don't you think you should've mentioned that there's a child living with you?

So now he's moved on from making fun of me to criticizing my life's choices. Unbelievable.

Seriously? I didn't look away once. And it shouldn't have mattered, I told the brat to stay out of my room tonight no matter what.

I had been very clear about this, to the point where I made Naruto promise to stay out. I can't believe that the brat broke his word. It feels like the greatest of betrayals.

I don't look away from the note. Just like before, it doesn't take nearly long enough for someone to unfold it, write something down and fold it closed again before it seems to teleport.

Very proficient. And to be fair, you were being loud.

I scoff. Of course I was being loud.

If you're not being made to scream, you're not doing it right.

The note doesn't teleport again. I feel a surge of vicious satisfaction.

Can't argue with that, now can he?

The tomato disguised as a brat flees into his room and slams the door shut. I smile with satisfaction.

There, that should prevent him from interrupting at the worst possible time ever again.

How explicit.

Information is the best prevention.

I don't think I've ever seen anyone blush like that.

This talk is an awkward rite of passage everyone has to suffer through.

And you made sure it was delivered in the most embarrassing way possible.
Damn straight I did.

Naruto pokes his food around with his chopsticks. When he dares to lift his gaze, he immediately blushes when he meets my own and averts his eyes back down.

I smile, pleased. Sure, he's young to get a detailed technical explanation like that, but I don't regret it. It's not like he's traumatized. He's just feeling very awkward. I'll give him another less technical and less embarrassing talk when he's a few years older.

On another note, it's sweet that he interrupted because he thought I was being hurt. I made sure to stress to him that this was a valid reason for him to break his promise, but I don't think he believed me. Or rather, my words didn't have the same impact as my actions.

Looking back, I regret my harsh response to his interruption. But what's done is done. All anyone can do is learn from their mistakes. For me, that means watching myself around Naruto when my temper snaps. For Naruto, I'm pretty sure it means he's never going to break a promise again. He won't ever interrupt my private time again either.

Which means I longer have to muffle my voice. Excellent. Well, I won't have to muffle it all the time. Can't make a habit of interrupting the brat's sleep. Still, I can now afford to be less careful on occasion.

The taste of pillow isn't the most pleasant thing to climax to.

---

Nice show.

**What can I say? I have talented hands.**

No longer worried about keeping quiet?

**Pretty sure the brat is never going to interrupt again, no matter how loud I get.**

You don't have any shame, do you?

**Says the stalker.**

Just following orders.

**Everything for the sake of duty?**

Exactly.

**Pervert.**

"—going to do the obstacle course again! It's really fun, there's hopping and jumping and climbing, and we need to be really fast! I'm going to be the fastest ever, you'll see Mary-nee, and I'll—"

I listen to the brat's chatter with half an ear, occasionally letting out a vaguely interested noise as we continue walking to the Academy. It's the same excitement he shows every time they do the obstacle course. I can afford to let my mind wander.

I wonder about the bastard's schedule. He seems to be the only one who's following Naruto and me
around, and that does raise certain questions. When does he sleep? What about bathroom breaks? He eats dinner at my place, but what about other meals? Ninja might have magic but they're still human. He has to leave sometimes, right? Does that mean another ninja stalk us when he doesn't? Or are there multiple stalkers and he's simply the only one who writes? Do more of them write? The handwriting is always the same but that doesn't mean much.

It seems extremely unlikely that the notes were written by more than one person, though. The bastard has a distinctive personality.

As we near the Academy, I put my musings away for now. I can ask him after I get home.

---

**I have a curiosity. Are you the only one stalking us?**

*That's classified.*

Of course it is.

*Let me rephrase. You're human, you need to sleep. Do you leave when you do, or do you actually sleep in whatever place you happen to be skulking?*

*Still classified.*

*Seriously?*

*Seriously.*

Really, he's acting like this is a matter of village security instead of an idle curiosity.

**What exactly do you think I'll do with this information?**

*Also classified.*

Of course. He must have an entire list of how I could abuse that information. Ninja are insane like that.

**Just how paranoid can you get?**

*There's no such thing as being too cautious.*

And here's more proof of their insanity.

**Thank you for providing yet another piece of evidence that ninja are insane.**

* Always happy to help explain common sense to a civilian.*

The worst part is that I'm pretty sure part of him means it. He actually believes that being paranoid is sane and reasonable behavior.

**I'm not even going to dignify that with a response.**

*You just did.*

There's no way these are written by more than one person. I refuse to believe that there can be multiple bastards like him.
"How do you keep managing this?" I demand as we start walking home. Seeing as we aren't going to the park today, I'd assumed that there wouldn't be a war.

I was wrong.

"We played ninja!" the pile of dirt disguised as a brat exclaims with so much sunshine even all that muck can't dampen it.

"And that means rolling through the mud?" I counter without real annoyance. Well, there's a little annoyance. Unavoidable with the unexpected war now looming in my near future.

Mostly I'm just so happy for him. Naruto has a lot of difficulties making friends. Some of it has to do with the fact that he's loud and rude, but the greatest cause is the Kyuubi. Or rather, the greatest cause is dumb parents.

I know that they're just worried. They don't like the idea of their children playing with someone who holds the equivalent of a bomb inside of him. Which is understandable from a theoretical point of view.

I don't feel the slightest shred of compassion for their worry. Not when that worry hurting my brat.

Unfortunately, there's not a lot I can do beyond offering Naruto comfort and advice when he's hurt by yet another rebuff when he tries to make friends. No matter how much I wish I could do more. Sure, I've had harsh words with some of the parents when waiting for the Academy to finish, but I can't force them to act differently. Neither can I force them to make their children play with Naruto. But Naruto is slowly getting the other children to accept him. He's now allowed to play with them during recess. It's a disgrace of the highest order that it's taken so long for them to allow that, but children can be cruel.

Yet even with all that adversity, even though it would be so easy for him to give up, the brat continues to fight to make friends. He's also winning that fight a little more every day.

He's amazing.

Unfortunately, he remains allergic to bathing as well. What fun this is going to be.

---

_I would enjoy another show._

**Too bad, I don't perform on command.**

_Never?*

**There are some situations where I don't mind.**

_I am intrigued._

**Such a shame you have no chance in hell.**

_Ouch. Am I that repulsive?*

_I like to have visual contact with any potential lover. I'm picky like that._

---

"So how's the guardian life treating you?" Shisui asks as I bring him and Itachi their tea.
"It's odd," I answer truthfully. "Life seems to pass more slowly and more fast at the same time. It also seems like the brat has become the center of my world." Which is normal, taking care of Naruto full time is the entire point of being his guardian. Still, it often feels like I'm no longer doing anything else besides that. I know it's irrational to feel that way. I still write, work, hang out with my friends, get harassed by the bastard, and a few other things to boot. Doesn't change the fact that it feels like the brat has taken over my life.

I'm definitely not complaining. Most of the time.

"Not having too much trouble? Naruto isn't exactly the easiest child to deal with," Shisui understates with a teasing grin. He hasn't seen Naruto often, but meeting the brat once is enough for anyone to realize that he's a lot to handle.

"Surprisingly, no. Mind you, it isn't always easy, but he listens to me a lot better since I adopted him." Which is a true blessing. This entire thing would've crashed and burned by now if he didn't. I'm actually amazed at the lack of any real disasters. Aside from the Birthday Fiasco, of course. However, while there haven't been any real disasters aside from the one, there are annoyances.

"I could definitely do without his allergy to bathing, though," I continue.

"You should ask Itachi for advice, he's great with children," Shisui says with a cheerful smile, definitely not teasing Itachi.

"I am not great with children," Itachi denies with his usual calm voice and placid expression. Shisui gives him a falsely disapproving frown.

"Of course you are, just look at how Sasuke acts around you," he argues.

"My little brother is the only child I spend a significant amount of time with. Making generalizations based on the behavior of one individual is foolish," Itachi helpfully informs Shisui. He's definitely not making fun of him, nope, not at all.

"Are you calling me a fool? Itachi, I'm hurt," Shisui returns with such a wounded look.

"My apologies for offending you," Itachi returns with a hint of what seems to be real sincerity. "I had forgotten how fragile your ego is." Emphasis on seems.

"See, that's not an apology. It's an insult," Shisui points out like he's doing Itachi a favor by explaining this.

"How astute of you to notice," Itachi counters without missing a beat. I chuckle, amused as ever by their banter. These two kids are hilarious.

It's a shame they don't come by more often.

I've already turned off my alarm when I realize there's something out of place beneath my palm. Opening eyes that feel far too heavy, I need a moment to understand what my sense of touch is telling me is there. When I do, I frown.

There's a note on top of my alarm.

What?

Half convinced I'm still dreaming, I rub my eyes and look again. It's still there. So, not a dream.
Why on earth has the bastard left a note on my alarm?

*I won't be writing for awhile. Don't set aside dinner until you hear from me again.*

I stare at the words, confusion turning to bewilderment. What the hell? Why? What happened? What's going on?

Is something wrong?

Groaning, I close my eyes. It's far too early for surprises like this.

I remain beneath my cozy blanket for a few moments longer, before I let out a deep sigh and get up

I can think about this after I've had some coffee.

"Nee-chan, why're you glaring at the window?"

I'm not glaring at the window. I'm glaring out of it. Yes, I'm aware that the bastard might be stalking me from inside our home, but glaring at a space that looks like a good spot for him to hide in is more satisfying than glaring around the room. Makes it feel like I'm glaring at him instead of just pretending to.

"A stray cat is annoying me." That bastard has been harassing me for weeks. Why stop now?

"Oh. Is it the same one you give food?"

"Yes," I answer curtly, not in the mood to elaborate. I don't even know why I'm so annoyed by this, I should be pleased to have some peace and quiet. Instead, I can't let this go.

Is he ignoring me? Did something happen? Is this because of our last conversation? Unlikely, there hadn't been anything out of the ordinary about it, but I don't have a better guess.

Of course, I wouldn't need to guess if he'd just write.

It's unbelievable that the bastard manages to be a bastard even when he's being silent. What an amazing talent to have.

Why won't he write?

"You're not giving the cat food?"

"No way in hell." It's not even because the note told me to. If that bastard wants to ignore me, he can kiss free dinner goodbye.

"Why not?" Naruto asks as he continues helping me set the table.

"I'm mad at him," I explain.

"Why? What did he do?"

"He's annoying me." By refusing to write.

"How?"

"By being annoying." Seriously, why won't he write?
"But how is he annoying?" the brat demands with an adorable frown. My evasiveness is starting to irritate him.

I should give him a straight answer. Or rather, a metaphorical one.

"By annoying me," I say instead. I'm in a bad mood and winding up the brat a little makes me feel better.

"Mary-nee! You're being mean!" His irked offense makes me grin a little. Naruto is even cuter than usual when he's worked up like this. I'll explain things to him later, but right now I want to keep winding him up.

"Poor you," I tease, mood already starting to lighten. It lightens further when Naruto pouts with annoyance. I chuckle.

But seriously, why won't he write?

"Why the bad mood?"

"Why the hell do you think I'm in a bad mood?" I snap, annoyed at her prodding.

Rukia looks at me like I've just proven my own point. I grimace. All right, yes, that wasn't the reaction of someone in a good mood. Doesn't mean she has to push like this.

"It's nothing," I say curtly. I want her to drop this.

She doesn't.

"Has she been like this the entire day?" she asks Tori, curious and not worried in the slightest. What wonderful friends I have.

"She's been like this since yesterday. And she won't say what's wrong!" Tori replies with a disapproving look aimed my way. I give her an annoyed one in return. What, it's a crime to be in a bad mood now?

"Is it because of Naruto?" Rukia continues with far too much amusement. How nice to see she finds my suffering funny.

"I don't think so," Tori replies. "This is more like that time she and Shiro had that fight, you know the one."

"It's so nice to be talked about like I'm not here," I say in my most sarcastic voice while given them both a withering glare. Neither of them are affected in the slightest. Assholes.

"We wouldn't have to if you would tell us what's wrong," Rukia returns without a shred of compassion. Why can't she leave this alone?

"Though luck, I'm not going to." It's not because of the first rule of ANBU, it's because I don't want to talk about this.

Tori lets out a sigh that tells me she's decided to respect my decision to keep quiet, because she's wonderful like that.

"Then you have to live with us talking about you like you aren't there." Rukia keeps acting like the asshole she is. No one can ever doubt the relation between her and Renji.
"In that case, I'll make things easier for everyone. I'm leaving." With that, I turn around and stomp towards the kitchen. Maybe I can at least lessen my aggravation with some furious cleaning.

"Wow, she is in an awful mood. And she's been like this since yesterday?"

The door closes behind me before I can hear Tori's reply, thank god. I have zero desire to listen to them gossip about me.

Why the hell won't he write?

I'm starting to get worried.

There's a note! About time. That bastard better have a good explanation for his behavior.

Except when I unfold it, the handwriting is different.

*Sorry, something came up and he had to leave. Don't worry, he'll be back soon. You can continue flirting then.*

You have got to be kidding me.

*Because of course there's a replacement stalker, why am I even surprised? And we aren't flirting.*

It's great to know that he isn't ignoring me, just gone for awhile. The news makes the worry of the past few days fade away.

How on earth did this guy get the impression that the bastard and I are flirting, though? That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard.

On another note, I'll be able to make sweet and fried dishes again. Nice.

"–so I said he's stupid, and the bastard said he's not but that I am! He's so mean!"

I let out a vaguely interested noise as I continue preparing dinner. I might be going a little overboard but I'm in the mood for something fried. It's been too long. Not that I've stopped making fried things, or sweet ones for that matter, but I've limited them to lunch. It'll be nice to have the flavors for dinner again.

As for the replacement stalker, he's out of luck. Unless he has the nerve to start stealing my food as well, I'm not going to feed him.

"Nee-chan, are you even listening?"

"The bastard is mean," I parrot back. Saying that word out loud makes me automatically pay more attention to what the brat was chattering about. I feel an amused smile grow.

It's hilarious that Naruto has found a bastard of his own. I don't know the name of his bastard and I'm not going to ask. Hearing the brat complain about his very own bastard is just too funny.

"...Okay. So then I–"

I continue cooking while listening to Naruto's detailed recounting of yet another argument with his bastard. As expected, it ends with the two of them getting into a fight during recess. It was, of course, broken up by Iruka, followed by them both getting yelled at. Ninja might be insane but even they
have enough common sense to not let six year olds fight each other.

They wait until they're seven year olds instead. Because that makes such a huge difference. I'm not looking forward to next year when official sparring joins the curriculum.

I'm so glad that Naruto heals at an abnormally fast rate. I assume it's because of the Kyuubi, but honestly, I don't care what the cause is.

Anything that helps him survive is something to be grateful for.

Sure you're not.

I don't even know what he looks like.

"Are you still mad at the cat?" Naruto asks when we start setting the table. It isn't difficult to see how he's come to that conclusion.

"He's away right now. I'll start feeding him again after he gets back," I explain.

"Where did he go?"

"I have no idea." Obviously he's on a mission but that could mean any number of things. None of which I want to think about too deeply.

"Why don't you know?"

"Because he's a stray cat, and stray cats sometimes disappear to mysterious places. It's one of their special powers." I'm getting rather good at talking in metaphors if I do say so myself.

"Cats have special powers?" Naruto demands with wide eyes, looking utterly adorable.

"They most certainly do." What else do you call ninja magic? "And stray cats have the most special powers of them all." They are elite ninja, after all.

"That's so cool!"

Naruto's instant acceptance of my words makes me laugh and ruffle his hair.

My brat is the cutest brat of them all.

He wears a mask.

Thank you for that illuminating description.

"Tori, Tori!" the brat yells as he runs to her and holds up his latest masterpiece for her to admire. "Look!"

"How cute!" Tori is the only one who can say that and mean it.

"Frogs are awesome!" Naruto declares, his passion making him even louder than usual. I don't
understand the brat's deep love the things, but it's cute to watch.

What isn't cute is the deformed blob that's supposed to represent a frog. It is hilarious, though.

"That's a frog?" Renji mocks too maliciously, but he keeps his voice soft enough that Naruto doesn't hear. I grin, so happy with his reaction. This is huge progress.

"Drawing isn't his strong suit," I counter just as softly. Renji doesn't smile but there's amusement alongside the hatred and grief that Naruto's presence always triggers. Moments like these are what make me believe that Renji will one day be able to separate his feelings for the Kyuubi from Naruto.

I don't mind the wait. The fact that there's any progress at all is a true miracle.

It's amazing how hard Renji is trying to overcome his scars. It's even more amazing that he's slowly succeeding.

_I don't know why I was surprised to find out he likes you._

_I don't know why I keep writing these things._

"No," I declare the moment I see what the brat is carrying. Where did he even find that? There's no pond or any other body of water in this park.

"But nee-chan, look! He's so cute," Naruto actually coos as he gazes down at the frog held in his hands with utter adoration. I'm surprised that the animal seems content to be held by him. It's not even trying to escape.

"Very cute. Now come on, we'll put it back where it belongs," I order firmly. It makes the brat aim his most powerful puppy eyes at me. I avert my eyes to the sky in order to escape their lethal power and start mentally preparing for the temper tantrum this situation is going to inevitably lead to.

"But Mary-nee--"

"No," I cut him off before he can gain momentum. It's harsh, but I won't be swayed about this. I've explained to him before why I won't allow pets and he knows I won't budge on this. The sooner he gives in, the better. "Let's go."

"Please?"

I'm almost grateful that he's holding the frog. Means he doesn't have a hand free to tug at my pants and trick me into getting sucker punched by those eyes.

"No," I repeat as unyielding as before.

"Please, please, pretty please? I promise I'll take good care of him," he begs and it's even worse than if he'd whined. He's going to be so mad at me. Even worse, he's going to be hurt. It's going to destroy my heart.

I'm still not going to give in. I told him no pets until he's old enough to take care of them on his own and I meant it.

"No. I already have a brat and a cat, I'm not adding a frog as well."
You have a near pathological need to have the final word.

There's an actual file on me and all my habits. How comforting.

"-not going to kiss you! That's disgusting-"

"No he's not!" Naruto interrupts like I just insulted him instead of a fictional character. Should've guessed he'd react like that.

"Do you want me to stop reading?" I return in a normal voice instead of the story one I was using before.

"No!" he answers as expected.

"Then shut up and listen. I promise she won't think he's disgusting later on," I add, because otherwise the brat won't obey. Not when his beloved frogs are being insulted.

Naruto pouts but also keeps quiet, mollified by my words. Good.

I continue reading The Princess And The Frog to him. He doesn't follow along the characters, the Lion Lord showed that isn't a good way to teach him. I got him other stories to practice with, a lot more simple than the ones I write. Naruto doesn't enjoy reading them on his own, but he does like doing it with me.

What we're doing now isn't practice. I'm just reading him a bedtime story. And when it comes to bedtime stories, Naruto insists I read him my own work.

It makes me feel ridiculously mushy. The brat is too adorable for his own good.

I'm definitely not complaining.

Don't worry, if you were a threat, you would've been taken care off a long time ago.

You're amazingly awful at being reassuring. I hope you're aware of this.

"I passed, I passed, I passed!"

"I knew you could do it." And I'm so damn proud of him.

"I'm awesome, dattebayo!" Naruto exclaims at an even louder volume than before, jumping around with giddiness and pride. The pride is completely deserved.

"That you are. You're a little genius." Not in the convenient sense of the word, but a little genius nonetheless. He worked so hard for this.

"Take that, you stupid test!" Naruto exclaims with vicious satisfaction.

"Damn straight." The fact that he only just passed doesn't matter, he passed. Naruto's ability to read has improved by leaps and bounds, but he's never going to be book smart. Doesn't mean he's stupid, and it definitely doesn't mean that he has to fail his written tests. He just has to work harder than most to pass them. It also means that when he does pass them, his victory is all the sweeter for it.

Tonight, we celebrate that victory by going out for ramen. The brat has more than earned it.
Of course I am. And good news! He'll be back tomorrow morning. The flirting can resume!

Jump off a cliff.

I'm not ashamed to admit that I make a beeline for the note the next morning. Nothing against the replacement stalker but I've missed the bastard. His absence has made me realize that he's become a friend. In hindsight, this shouldn't have come as a surprise. As evidenced by my other friends, I have a type. Namely, I'm fond of assholes.

What can I say, I have odd tastes.

I quickly unfold the note.

Did I miss any shows?

I grin. It's so nice to have him back.

I know just how to welcome him.

Your replacement decided to take over your correspondence.

The speed of his reply is a clear indicator that my welcome has the desired effect.

He did what?

His words are an even better one. I chuckle. I suspected he hadn't expected that to happen, and also suspected that he wouldn't be pleased about it. It's good to have my suspicion confirmed. Means I'll be able to tease him about this for quite a while.

My thoughts exactly.

"Let me get this straight," Tori says over the sound of Renji's laughter. She's stunned by the explanation this intervention has finally managed to wrangle out of me.

Apparently, I've been acting weird. While my friends at first assumed that it was because of adopting Naruto, they eventually came to the conclusion that something else must be going on as well. The result is this intervention.

"You're corresponding with an– with someone from the elite. Every day."

My, Tori almost said the A-word. There's no better indication of how dazed she is than that.

"Oh, she's not just corresponding."

It's been a long time since I've seen Rukia smile with such unholy glee. I truly fear for what she's about to say next.

"She's flirting."

I'm right to do so.

Renji's laughter grows louder, agreeing with his sister wholeheartedly. Shiro closes his eyes in his version of pained realization. I'm glad it's not the pain of remembrance but I'm far less pleased with
the realization part. There's nothing to have a realization about.

"Of course she is," he says like he should've seen this coming. I roll my eyes. They're all being ridiculous.

"I am not. How did you even get that impression?" I direct towards Rukia. I'm honestly curious how she managed to come to that ludicrous conclusion with the explanation I gave. Then again, she has a gift for seeing things that aren't there.

Rukia grins like the cat that ate the canary.

"Please, it's obvious."

"Really." My voice makes the dessert seem wet.

Tori's jaw drops.

"You are flirting!" she exclaims like the sky just turned green and she can't believe what her eyes are telling her.

I throw up my hands with exasperation.

"Why do people keep saying that?" Seriously, first the replacement stalker and now my friends? Who's next, the regulars at the Dancing Dragon?

Renji's laughter turns hysterical and he leans on Tori's shoulder for support. Tori keeps looking at me like the sky has turned green. Rukia keeps looking like the cat that ate the canary.

Shiro raises an entire brow. It's one of the most exasperated looks I've ever received from him.

"Mari. Subtle you are not."

I roll my eyes.

"Oh shut up." Assholes, each and every one of them.

We aren't flirting.

"Report."

"The subject continues to display no ulterior motives, showing only a genuine desire to care for the jinchuuriki. No direct intervention is needed at this time."

"And she and--"

"Crow's input is irrelevant to the mission."
Leads

The blindfold is new.

I tilt my head, wondering just what it is he has in mind. My hands come up to explore the heavy fabric, but his own cover mine and push them back down the sheets.

"No peeking," he orders. I grin.

"Wasn't planning on it," I say, and it’s enough to get his hands to release mine. “I'm curious though, what exactly are you up to? Should I be worried?"

"Don't you trust me?"

"Seeing as you're a very proficient ninja, I think it entirely reasonable to be suspicious of your motives."

"I might be, but you are a helpless civilian," the bastard says like he thinks this is just adorable.

"All the more reason," I retort. He chuckles.

I shift my weight from where I’m kneeling on the bed, straining my ears to hear what he’s doing. Naturally, I don’t hear anything except for what he wants me to. In this case, he wants me to hear a sound of warning. I halt my movements and raise an incredulous brow, uncaring of the fact that the blindfold makes the gesture useless

"I'm not even allowed to move? And you wonder why I'm suspicious."

"Don't worry, you'll enjoy this."

My curiosity rises further. So does my anticipation.

"Oh really? Is it another magic trick?"

"Something like that," he replies unhelpfully. I let out a meaningless hum in return, before I bring up a hand and slide it down between my breasts. I wonder how far I can push him this time.

"No touching yourself either." The command is stern. I grin and halt my movements, willing to go along. For now.

"I thought you liked me touching myself," I tease.

"I like it very much. Not this time, though."

"Spoilsport."

The bed dips and I feel the warmth of him at my back. He’s not touching me, not yet, but his presence so near is enough to make me shiver.

"So sensitive. I haven't even started yet." His voice is right next to my ear, uncommonly clear. The loss of my sight is heightening my other senses.

I open my mouth, another quip on the tip of my tongue – I choke.
Warm lips touching my neck, softly caressing, a hint of tongue.

"Wha–" My voice turns in a strangled moan as his teeth nip sharply.

"Quiet. Just relax," he says with bare lips ghosting over my throat. His mask is off?

*His mask is off.*

My hands come up without the conscious decision to do so. The urge to touch him is impossible to resist.

Except before I can touch him, my wrists are captured by hands.

They're captured by *bare* hands.

Oh that brilliant bastard.

"You are a genius," I swear, meaning every word. Why on earth haven’t we used a blindfold before?

Another chuckle, a playful nip.

"Thank you. Now shut up."

I shut up.

He shifts his hold on my wrists until they’re held captive in one hand. Feeling his skin on mine makes the gesture more intense than any other he’s ever made. His other hand comes up to caress my breast, calloused fingers trailing my skin. I moan.

His lips glide upwards, over my throat and jaw, delicately teasing my ear.

"Good girl."

The sensation of his breath is enough to make goosebumps erupt all over. I lean back my head on his bare shoulder. The heat of his skin is right besides me, utterly irresistible. I turn my head and shiver as my nose strokes across his skin, the sensation more delicious than I could’ve ever imagined. His own breath hitches.

Feeling mischievous, I nip at his jaw. The taste of him is heady in a way I hadn't known was possible.

My reactions makes the caress of his hand turn sharp, the bite of nails heightening the pleasure even further. I gasp again and pull at my wrists to free them. I *need* to touch him.

Calloused fingers slide down and the barest of shocks hit my nerves, making my stomach tighten in the most delicious of ways. I love his magic tricks, I really do.

His caress goes lower, *lower*, halting right where I want him to.

If he dares to stop now, I will hurt him. So much.

He doesn’t stop.

*Bare skin*, softly stroking, slowly adding more pressure, more speed. Another spark making me jolt, every sensation so much more intense, so perfect, everything tightening, tensing, *yes*, *more*, *almost there*. 
He pulls his hand away. A frustrated shout escapes me, fruitlessly struggling to get my hands free so I can touch that complete and utter bastard. When I fail to free myself, I push my body backwards, the desire to feel him overriding all else.

A warm hand stills my hips, the heat behind me pulling away before I can make contact. That complete and utter bastard.

I push my upper body backwards even further. This time he lets me.

Soft skin, hard muscles, glorious warmth. I shudder and lay my head down his shoulder as I feel him push even closer, his desire hot against my lower back, no more space between us. Turning my head, I lick his skin, taste salt and heat and I can feel him shiver against my back.

A complete and utter genius.

"Let go of my hands," I somehow manage to get out, barely able to speak through the haze of desire.

He nips at my shoulder almost too harshly, the perfect amount of pressure making me gasp.

"No."

Another frustrated cry, another useless struggle to get free.

"Bastard, let g–"

A broken shriek, bare fingers right where I need them, nerves set alight, ruthlessly undoing me.

Fucking ninja cheating bastard.

Don't stop.

Sparks growing more intense, shocks racing through me, more, I need more.

Shifting my hips, pushing closer, no space between, mind gone, only able to feel, yes, don't stop, more, right there, oh god, god.

Fireworks in the dark.

Wrist released, being laid on my back, dazed and disorientated.

Hands opening my legs, letting him, thoughts scattered, completely undone. Filled without warning, clutching blindly at his bare skin, stop, too sensitive, keep going.

Movements deep, so full, feeling every inch, bare skin covering every part of me, his lips on my shoulder. Yanking at his hair, nails digging into hard muscle, scraping down, a painful stinging on my hips in return, lost to sensation, yes, yes, yes.

Rhythm growing faster, tension building back up, feeling him tense beneath my fingers, so perfect, more, just a little more.

A shift and he’s hitting that spot, oh, oh!

Stars explode.

Feeling him shiver violently, spilling inside.
Silence, gasping breaths, his body covering mine, deliciously warm and heavy.

Mind slowly becoming a little more coherent.

“Wow.”

I realize I’ve rasped that out loud when I hear a soft, near shaken laugh in return.

"Very wow,” he agrees. When I feel him start to get up, I immediately tighten my grip on his hair, sudden urgency clearing some of my blissful haze. The protesting sound he lets out is ignored completely.

"And just where do you think you're going?” I manage to say in a husky voice ruined by screams.

There’s no way I’m going to let him leave already. He’s naked.

I have so many ideas where to take this next.
"It's Mary, not Marisan, Mary."

"Mari– Mari. Calm down, please."

"What the hell is going on? People are jumping on the roofs!"

"Mari, please, just... just come along. Please."

Hands grasping my arms, looking at a pleading and tired expression.

"Let go of me! Just leave me along– what the... Those... those are heads. But this isn’t..."

Dropping to my knees, bewildered and so scared.

Where am I?

Tears rising, sobs escaping.

I just want to go home.

Gentle arms embrace me.

"It's going to be all right, I'll take care of you. You're going to be be all right. Everything is going to be all right."

"–and then Ino said she wanted to know where I get my clothes but I didn’t tell her because she was being mean, and she yelled really high and hit me! She's so mean!"

"And of course it didn’t have anything to do with you being rude,” I retort in a voice that makes the desert seem wet. When using sarcasm with the brat, you have to exaggerate to make sure he gets the spirit of the message and not just the literal content.

"I wasn't being rude!" Naruto denies like he actually believes it.

"What exactly did you say to her?" I counter with a raised brow. Naruto crosses his arms and keeps quiet with a mulish expression, knowing I’m right but unwilling to admit it. I give a satisfied nod.

"That's what I thought."

Honestly, the brat needs to learn some manners. I do my best to teach him, I really do, but by now I’m convinced that being loud and rude is wired into his genes. Admittedly, I’m not the politest of people either. Compared to the brat, however, I’m the very picture of manners.

"But she was being mean!" Naruto exclaims like it’s a valid excuse. It could be valid in different circumstances, but it definitely isn’t in the ones he just described.

"When people ignore you, they’re not always being mean.” I point out for the millionth time. "Sometimes they just don't feel like paying attention to you. You forcing them to anyway, that's being mean."
Naruto pouts with annoyance, stubbornly refusing to submit to reason.

"Besides, if she's so mean, then why did you decide to talk to her in the first place?" It's uncharacteristic behavior. Usually the brat just yells at people, he doesn't attempt to hold polite conversation. Emphasis on attempt.

Naruto blushes.

No. Could it be?

I wait for his answer with bated breath.

The brat, still blushing in the most adorable way possible, brings up a hand. Apparently to rub the back of his head but the movement falters halfway through, his arm falling back down. He lowers his gaze and tucks in his chin.

"Sakura-chan likes her."

I burst out laughing. Naruto's head snaps up with a furious glare and it just makes me laugh harder, can't contain it. I see him open his mouth and quickly use a hand to cover it, still cackling like mad. If he says one more word, I'm going to drop to the floor.

After a few more moments of uncontrollable laughter in which the brat starts slobbering all over my hand, I close my eyes and take deep breaths, forcing myself to calm down. When I reopen my eyes, the sight of the still furiously glaring brat is almost enough to make burst out laughing again. I bite my cheek to contain it and take another calming breath.

"Well." It takes an enormous amount of effort to keep my voice steady. "If Sakura-chan likes her, you better make sure Ino likes you as well. If you don't, Sakura-chan will never like you either."

Naruto has a crush.

Today is a beautiful day.

---

The brat has a crush!

The civilian has noticed the obvious!

Nothing you say can ruin this for me.

"No."

"Please? For me?"

"No."

"Pretty please?"

Naruto actually manages to turn up the puppy power even more. I decide to keep quiet a little longer, enjoying the hilarious picture of the brat attempting to use his wiles on the bastion of willpower that
is Shiro.

"No."

They aren’t working. Yet.

A chuckle escapes Rukia’s control. Her grin lets me know that the only reason she’s containing her laughter is because of how much she’s enjoying the show as well.

"Pleeease? I promise I’ll pay for it. You can have all my pocket money for an entire year," the brat delivers with cuteness set to lethal. He means it, he’ll pay Shiro for the rest of his life if that’s what it takes. Even without being the intended target, my heart is a puddle of goo. I would’ve given in a long time ago.

Shiro is made of sterner stuff than me.

"No," he repeats, doing an excellent job of pretending to be unmoved. But while he’s not about to give in, not yet, he’s starting to waver. Any person would be when faced with an assault like this.

Naruto is utterly oblivious to this fact. He’s no longer quite so confident he’ll be able to sway Shiro. Doesn’t mean he’ll give up, not with what’s at stake. The brat will harass Shiro until his dying breath in order to get what he wants.

I decide to be kind and save my friend from that fate.

"Her eyes are even more brilliant than Tori’s.” My blatant manipulation earns me a dirty look. I somehow manage to keep a grin from breaking through. "I hadn’t thought such flawless green could exist."

Shiro’s look grows dirtier, visible even to someone who doesn’t know him. Rukia’s shoulder tremble faintly as she fights to contain her laughter.

Naruto watches our exchange with bated breath. The brat is smart enough to keep quiet. He knows interfering will only hurt his chances of getting what he wants.

"Not to mention her hair is the exact shade of cherry blossoms in bloom." There we go, Shiro’s lips turn down a fraction in a pained grimace of defeat. Even in this world of distinctive coloring, pink like that is striking.

I’m pretty sure that Sakura is an important character. I don’t recall much of the pictures my brother showed me, but again, pink like that is striking.

I mostly manage ignore this fact and all the implications it holds. Right now, she’s just a little girl. A little girl who Naruto has a crush on, which is the most important fact of all.

It’s how we ended up in this beautiful situation.

"...Fine," Shiro gives in, before he looks down at Naruto with what are extremely narrowed eyes for him. A fierce warning. "One, her parents have to pay, and I won’t give her a discount."

Naruto whoops with joy and attacks Shiro’s legs with a hug.

"Thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you!” he blares like a siren of sunshine.

Shiro looks at me like I’m responsible for every awful thing to ever happen to him. It’s enough to make Rukia lose the fight against her laughter, and I can no longer stop my own from breaking
through either. Not that I want to.

Too easy.

\[\text{A courting gift already? He moves fast.}\]

\[\text{He has the courage to go after what he wants.}\]

\[\text{And what's that supposed to mean?}\]

\[\text{It means I'm damn proud of him. What else.}\]

"She's so pretty," the brat actually whispers. I grin down at him.

"Of course. With Shiro dressing her, how can she be anything else?"

Naruto doesn’t even look up, just kept making moon eyes at the little girl smiling with delight as Shiro continues poking and prodding at the fabric pulled tight around her.

Kizashi, on the other hand, shoots Naruto an overprotective glare. I give a warning glare back.

Sakura’s father is one of the dumb parents, and while his attitude has improved greatly, it’s still not what it should be. In fact, his progress has taken a turn for the worse ever since Naruto developed a crush on his daughter. Understandable from a theoretical point of view even without adding in the Kyuubi, but there’s no way in hell I’m going to let him ruin this moment.

My warning makes him scowl but he stays quiet. Good.

Meanwhile, Ino, her own kimono being made by Rukia's capable hands instead of Shiro's, keeps up a steady stream of chatter that equally compliments how pretty Sakura looks and how pretty Ino herself looks.

Inoichi, one of the smart parents, is looking at her without even attempting to hide that she’s the center of his universe. It was he who beautifully manipulated Shiro into not only making a kimono for his daughter as well, but onto finishing both before the new year celebrations. Even I couldn’t achieve that.

Inoichi is so whipped. I, of course, am not.

If I keep telling myself that often enough I might even start to believe it.

Smiling, I spin on my heel while admiring the picture presented in the mirror. I once believed that a kimono would be restricting to wear but the outfit lets you move in ways you’d never expect from their appearance. Though that could just be a Konoha thing, all clothing here is easy to move in.

A kimono also offers a very nice view, if I do say so myself. It’s one I don’t see often either. Mostly because of Shiro but also because the outfit just isn’t that comfortable to wear. Easy to move in, yes, comfortable, no. Not to mention the time it takes to put it on. Or to get out of it.
I'll never understand how she could wear these all the time. Well, kind of these. Unlike hers, mine are always an unorthodox cut, never a traditional one.

Given that I don’t often wear one, when I do, I fully appreciate what the outfit does for my figure. Especially in combination with the rest of the work I put in. I’m not stunning and never will be, but I can pull of a damn fine pretty when I want to.

I’m a little startled to see a note and pen materialize on the dresser. Mostly I’m amused as I realize that the bastard must’ve gotten quite the eyeful. So did any passing ninja for that matter. I was so excited to put this on that I forgot to close the curtains. The bastard could be stalking us from inside the apartment of course, no matter that the things he says imply that he’s stalking us from the outside, but it's easier to imagine him skulking outside instead of in what seems to be an empty room except for me.

Nice kimono.

I grin and look out the window at where I imagine he’s skulking, before I spin around again for his benefit.

Isn’t it? You have to admit, it does amazing things to my figure.

That it does.

I chuckle.

Flatterer.

I’m curious, you have so many of them but this is the first time I’ve seen you wear one. Any particular reason for that?

As a matter of fact, there is.

It’s not one I will ever explain in detail. Not unless I get arrested and interrogated in ways I never want to think about, but it seems extremely unlikely for that to still happen. I was allowed to adopt Naruto. When factoring in ninja paranoia, the position as his guardian does imply a certain amount of trust, elite stalker or not. Or rather, it implies a certain amount of confidence that there’s nothing unusual about me.

I won’t deny that I’m reassured by this. Probably too much. Still, given that there isn’t anything I can change about this, it’s better to feel more safe than I am instead of letting fear rule my life.

As for his question, I can give him the basics. The odds of him not having figured those out by now are lower than zero.

Shiro keeps making me new ones but hates seeing me wear them. I respect that. Still, the new year celebrations are one of the few occasions worth it to dress up for. How about you? Any plans?

Or is he just going to keep stalking us? I hope not, that would just be sad.

Not really.

My hope was in vain.

That's just sad.
Sad enough to get some of those snacks?

Like he doesn’t know I’ve already prepared a box for him. One that doesn’t contain any sweet or fried things.

*We’ll see.*

With that, I leave my room to go check up on the brat. He was adamant about dressing himself, but I’m pretty sure he’s changed his mind by now. Konoha’s formal wear isn’t easy to put on for anyone, let alone a child.

I’m can’t wait to see the result. Naruto is going to look adorable.

“Are you all right?” The question slips out before I can help it. It’s a stupid question, one that doesn’t need to be asked.

He’s not all right.

Renji’s gaze flickers towards me but it’s immediately drawn back to Naruto as an especially flashy move makes the brat halts his stream of chatter to Shiro and Tori with a loud gasp. Naruto is adorably bedazzled by the show. I don’t blame him, seeing ninja dance with fire is literal magic. Normally I would be right there with him in being awed.

Right now I’m a lot more worried about Renji. We all are.

Rukia is standing close on her brother’s other side, her arm linked through his in an embrace all the more fierce for how very gentle it is.

I hadn’t expected them to show up. They said they wouldn’t. Unlike the rest of us, they have family to celebrate with. While they normally do join us for a short while, we all accepted that Naruto’s presence would prevent that this year. I’m touched that they still came but I hope they won’t stay for long. Renji shouldn’t be hurt. I know that’s impossible, even without Naruto his scars will sometimes bleed. But they shouldn’t right now.

Not on a day like this.

"...Yeah," Renji lies. “Yeah, I just...” He falls silent, still looking at Naruto with so much pain and grief. Scarred by a loss he’ll never be able to let go off. Not completely.

I don’t push. Neither does Rukia.

"Haru would’ve been his age." Renji’s voice is so soft I barely hear him. I step closer and gently link our arms together as well. Rukia lays her head on his shoulder, her embrace becoming even more tender.

Renji doesn’t make a move to embrace us in return. He doesn’t pull away either.

Sometimes the only thing you can do is be there.

Sometimes it’s enough.
Naruto halfheartedly protests that he isn’t tired yet as I help him get ready for bed. I’m not surprised in the slightest when he falls asleep the instant I finish tucking him in. He might be a hyperactive bundle of energy, but he’s also a brat and it’s way past his usual bedtime.

I leave his room with a smile and a yawn. I’m pretty tired myself. Given how long I’ve been on my feet, that isn’t surprising.

When I see the empty box and the note besides it, my smile grows.

*Thank you.*

I chuckle. So he can be polite. In exceptional circumstances, at least.

*Happy New Year.*

*Happy New Year.*

His reply comes with the addition of a small good luck charm, the kind sold a dime a dozen at every festival stall. It’s both touching and surprising. I suppose he’s a lot more affected by the holiday than I thought he was.

I hang the charm next to my bedroom window, close the curtains and start the long process of undressing. I do it all with a smile, this day doesn’t allow for anything else.

It wasn’t perfect. But it was still wonderful. A very nice ending to a very good year.

Here's to hoping the next will be even better.

---

I shoot upright with wide eyes.

What the hell was that?

I drop back down my pillow with a groan, feeling hot and bothered and completely exasperated with myself. I let out a deep sigh. So. That happened. My mind is truly a mysterious place.

Apparently visual contact isn’t needed after all.

I almost slide down my hands to continue where the dream left off, but when I think of who I somehow managed to dream of...

For the first time, I’m uncomfortable with the fact that he’d know what I’d be doing.

*That must've been some dream.*

I’m not even going to dignify that with a response. In fact, I’m not going to talk to him at all. Dinner, sure, but no talking.

I don’t know what he looks like, not one single detail. I don’t even have a voice. Why on earth did my brain decide to dream about him? And dream about him like that of all things? How the hell did it even manage to do so?
I’m overreacting. I know I am. It was a one time deal. Of course it was.

*Are you ignoring me?*

Not going to answer. I just... I need some time to make sense of this. And I need to stop dreaming about him.

Except after I leave the bathroom, the note has moved. Should’ve known his silence from yesterday was too good to last.

*Seeing as I didn't do anything out of the ordinary, this is caused by something on your end.*

And of course it’s too much to hope for him to not act like the bastard he is. He probably thinks a whole day of not being one is an amazing concession.

*Is it too much to ask for some peace and quiet?*

What part of me not talking to him doesn’t make it clear that I don’t want to talk to him? This isn’t like when he fell silent, the bastard is stalking us. He knows nothing is wrong. I just don’t feel like talking to him.

Not until I can get my brain to behave again.

I start making breakfast and don’t check to see if the note has moved.

Naturally, the bastard makes it materialize in front of me instead. He oh so helpfully adds a pen.

Most of me wants to ignore it, wants to just focus on making breakfast and not think about the confusing mess that is this entire situation.

I curse the part of me that makes me unfold it.

*Interesting.*

Oh damn it all to hell, he knows.

My reply is motivated by what I know is an irrational hope for him to prove me wrong.

*Interesting, what?*

I almost manage to resist the urge to make everything worse by reading his answer. Almost.

*You dreamed about me. Twice now.*

I have to close my eyes. That bastard is never going to let me live this down. The prospect is enough to make me want to despair, or start plotting vicious retaliation for when he inevitably acts like the bastard he is.

I take my frustration out on the paper.


*Or even what I sound like. And still I inspire dreams like that. Sometimes I even manage to impress*
myself.

Vicious retaliation it is.

Shut up.

I crumple up the paper and throw it down the trash, ending the conversation. I don’t have the slightest hope of him obeying of course, but that just means I have to start thinking of a first plan of attack. This time it won’t be as innocent as tricking him with sugared onigiri. I won’t let the bastard be a bastard about this. This entire mess is confusing enough already.

It’s so much better to focus on future revenge instead of those stupid dreams.

He doesn’t write.

I don’t understand, I expected him to make fun of this in the most obnoxious way possible. I’m still expecting it. He’s the bastard, it’s what he does.

Instead of fulfilling those expectations, he’s silent. Why? What is he planning? He must be planning something, it’s the only thing that can explain his silence. That, or he’s just enjoying the sight of me getting more worked up the longer he doesn’t write. Most likely a combination of the two. Bastard.

Why the hell is my brain making me dream about him? Even worse, making me dream about him like that?

The day started out so well, too. Thinking up plans of future retaliation proved to be a good distraction from those stupid dreams and I’d mostly managed to keep them out of my mind. Also helped by spending most of the day playing with Naruto in the park, a great way to physically work off my frustration. When we returned home, I was in what could almost be called a good mood.

The bastard, just by keeping silent, has destroyed all that progress. How talented he is.

I’m glad the brat picked up on the change in my mood and didn’t put up too much of a protest for either his bath or his bedtime. I also managed to resist the urge to make everything worse by writing to the bastard.

I told the bastard to shut up and for once he’s actually listening. I won’t give him the satisfaction of being the first to break. Which is also why I made him dinner, just to spite him by acting normal. I didn’t even make anything sweet or fried, despite the near irresistible temptation to do so. That might be irrational, but this entire thing is irrational, so I can’t even find it within myself to pretend to care.

I hope he chokes on every bite.

Finished with getting ready for bed, I turn off the light and rub my eyes. I’m not going to dream about him. I am not. I command my brain not to.

Walking towards my bed, the room suddenly becomes a little less dark. Not much but enough to be noticeable. I halt with a frown, confused by what could’ve caused this. Realizing where the light must be coming from, I turn around.

One of the curtains is open, letting in some moonlight. But I just closed –

"I’ve decided to help you with your problem."
Part of me realizes that I’m letting out a scream as I spin towards a voice that isn’t supposed to be here and what the hell is that a ghost – there’s an ANBU in my room. An ANBU. In my bedroom.

That absolute bastard.

"Why are you– no, I'm not doing this. It's bad enough you keep stalking me invisibly, now you're going to physically harass me as well? And what the hell do you mean, help me with my problem? I don’t have a problem. Except for being stalked of course."

My mouth runs on automatic, words spewing forth almost without me realizing what I’m saying. All of me is consumed with straining my eyes to their limit, I have to, can’t help it. I’ve never minded not knowing what he looks like, but now that I’m actually seeing him, the need to know is sudden and brutal and impossible to resist.

Except of course the bastard is standing just outside the moonlight, hidden almost entirely by shadows. He probably thinks it makes him look mysterious.

It does.

I can make out the distinctive bleached mask, hints of a darker color splashed across, cutting and harsh. The faint outline of a pale breastplate and shadows created by crossed arms. Every other part of him is obscured by darkness, impossible to see no matter how hard I try.

The final result is eerie and frightening. It’s exactly what a ninja assassin is supposed to look like.

...It’s an oddly attractive sight.

"I disagree, you've developed quite the issue. You're so unsatisfied that you're even fantasizing about men you don't have visual contact with," he mocks in a voice that’s surprisingly similar to the mental one I've unwittingly given him.

I raise an unimpressed brow. My own hands are more than satisfying, as he damn well knows. I've also managed not one but two booty calls since the disastrous First Attempt. I’m not frustrated. Anymore.

Even if I was.

"You're planning to fix that how exactly?"

"Take off your clothes."

I set down Naruto’s breakfast with a smile. It’s a beautiful morning.

"Nee-chan, you're being weird." The brat’s suspicious squint is hilarious. I ruffle his hair.

"Am I?" I return cheerfully. Naruto manages to narrow his eyes even further.

"Yes you are! You're smiling!" he accuses like it’s a crime to do so.

"What’s so strange about that? The sun is shining, the birds are singing. What's not to smile about?"

Naruto actually looks disturbed. So hilarious. I sit down and dig into my own breakfast.
"...Mary-nee. You're humming."

My smile turns into a grin and I hum louder just to make the brat squirm some more.

Really, the benefits of mind blowing orgasms are vastly underrated.

---

**We have got to do that again.**

He doesn’t reply before I need to drop off Naruto at school, but I’m in too high spirits to be annoyed by, well, anything. Not to mention that the circumstances are rather unusual. I can’t blame him for needing some time to think over my invitation.

I decide to give him until I return from work to answer.

---

“Did anything special happen?’’

Aside from having my brain melted by sex?

“Not really,” I answer. “Why do you ask?’’

Renji shrugs.

“You’re in a really good mood. I wondered if it was because of something in particular. Like, say, something to do with your secret admirer?” he finishes with a teasing grin. I roll my eyes, involuntarily amused. It’s ridiculous how my friends keep bringing up the imaginary flirting between me and the bastard.

“Nothing happened with him.” Nothing that’s any of his business at least.

“You sure? How do I know you’re not lying? You aren’t exactly willing to talk about him,” Renji taunts like the asshole he is.

“Who’s not willing to talk about who?” Tori asks as she appears out of the kitchen.

“It’s nothing,” I answer just as Renji does as well.

“Mari and her secret admirer.”

“Ah, I see,” Tori says to Renji with a sage nod and a mischievous smile, completely ignoring my own words. Now that he has an ally in his teasing, Renji’s own grin grows exceptionally. He’s in a really good mood himself. Which means he’s acting like an even greater asshole than usual.

“Oh look, customers,” I say as Natsu and a woman I don’t know enter with perfect timing. “I’ll go take their order.” With that, I make my escape.

I hear Tori giggle and Renji chuckle, but thankfully they don’t continue gossiping about me and the bastard. Out loud at least. Who knows what kind of silent conversation they’re having.

Honestly, it’s ridiculous how they and the fashion duo keep bringing up our imaginary flirting. The bastard and I are just friends. The fact that we slept together doesn’t change that. It’s just sex. Brain
melting sex, but still just sex.

We had fun. There’s nothing wrong with that.

I’m really hoping that he wants to continue having fun as much as I do.

He’s answered when I return from my shift. I’m not ashamed to admit that I make a beeline for the note.

I’m flattered. I thought you didn’t do repeat performances.

That is correct, normally I don’t. Normally my brain doesn’t dribble out my ears either. Besides, you’re going to keep stalking me anyway. It would be a shame not to take advantage. I had fun, you had fun, why not keep having fun?

I wait for his reply but none comes. Well, there’s no rush I suppose. If he didn’t expect an invitation for a repeat, he probably needs some time to think about his answer. I can be patient. Especially if being patient leads to more mind blowing orgasms.

I get comfortable on the couch and start writing.

I’m feeling very creative right now.

He doesn’t answer before I need to go pick up Naruto. The remainder of the day passes in silence as well. Instead of annoying me, I can’t help but be amused. It seems my invitation has caught him off guard to the point of speechlessness. How unexpected.

I decide to give him until tomorrow to reply.

Entering my bedroom, I close the curtains.

"I can’t argue with that kind of logic."

Spinning around with a scream because the room is supposed to be empty! I was the only one here!

Fucking ninja.

"You absolute bastard," I swear the instant I manage to regain my scattered thoughts. “Are you going to keep– black and straight hair,” I end in a flat voice as I notice the change. “Really. Just because it was dark doesn't mean I didn't notice your hair was light and spiky. It's a little late to try to hide that now.” Seriously, what does the bastard hope to achieve with this?

On another note, he doesn’t look as eerie as he did yesterday. With the lights on, he can’t be all mysterious and stand in the shadows.

In some ways, the added light does make him more intimidating. Without the darkness to obscure the details, it’s impossible to forget that his armour isn’t for show. It’s meant for heavy combat, and unlike most ninja outfits, it doesn’t even attempt to hide it.

On the other hand, seeing him casually leaning against the wall greatly reduces the killer ghost vibe he had going on yesterday.
...He looks even more attractive like this. Especially his upper arms and the sliver of skin revealed there.

The mystery that is my mind will never cease to amaze me.

"Because my hair couldn’t have been disguised yesterday?" he counters like it’s cute that I didn’t think of this on my own. I can’t help the wry twist of my lips. The worst part is that his words make sense. In this world of distinctive coloring, it’s pointless to hide your face without hiding your hair as well.

Even so.

"You're insane." He really is.

"I also make your brain dribble out your ears," he returns in a remarkably cheerful voice. He’s so proud of himself.

It’s definitely not without cause.

"True," I admit without hesitation. Credit where credit’s due and all that. “I’m willing to put up with a lot if you keep doing that," I add with a hopeful look. While it’s clear that he’s up for another round, I would really like for there to be more than one. If his paranoia demands those rounds always happen in uniform, I have no problem with that whatsoever.

He straightens with the grace only a ninja can have, his casual air replaced by a focus so intense it’s physical.

"Then I better get to work.”

“You are in a remarkably good mood.”

“Are you saying I’m usually in a bad mood?” I tease.

“Not at all. I’m merely saying that your high spirits are worth remarking on,” Itachi counters, placid as ever.

"Maybe I’m just happy to see you. It’s been awhile since you dropped by," I return with a smile. It isn’t a lie, I am happy to see him.

However, I will readily admit to myself that my high spirits are thanks to a steady supply of mind blowing orgasms this past week. I’m not about to tell that to Itachi, though. Or anyone else for that matter. What the bastard and I do behind closed doors is no one’s business but our own.

Things are different now, though. The bastard has taken to mostly writing in the evening. I’m pretty sure it’s because the brain melting sex means he’s less bored with his job of stalking us and he no longer feels quite as strong an urge to harass me.

I don’t mind the change in routine. Means I can focus on other things during the day without him distracting me, yet still enjoy our banter later in the evening. Banter that now leads to brain melting sex. Somehow it just manages to become even more mind blowing every time.

My libido has never been this high.
“My apologies, I’ve been busy,” Itachi says and I know he means it. He would’ve come by if he could. The life of a ninja is a busy one.

I mostly manage to ignore the horrifying implications that thought holds when applied to a boy not even thirteen years old.

"Too busy to visit your favorite waitress? Itachi, I’m hurt,” I tease instead.

“I hope my presence here today is a suitable apology for my absence,” he replies with an almost unnoticeable hint of mischievousness. I raise a brow in a silent demand for some elaboration. I don’t see how him picking up his little brother constitutes as an apology. Or why it would inspire mischievousness.

"Nee-chan, nee-chan, nee-chan!” The loud shouting draws my attention. Naruto really needs to work on his volume control.

A tiny battering ram almost knocks me over and small arms strangle my legs like weed while a breathtaking amount of sunshine is beamed up at me. Something amazing happened to him today.

"Sakura-chan played ninja with me!"

I grin. This will never get old.

"Congratulations." I say while ruffling his hair. Naruto beams even brighter and prepares to launch into an unending string of chatter detailing exactly what happened today with Sakura-chan.

"Nii-san!” The shout makes me lift my head just in time to see a blur shooting towards Itachi. Right before colliding with him, the blur somehow manages to halt and transforms into a dark haired child radiating with joy. "You came!

"I told you I would, otouto."

So this is Itachi’s little brother. I’ve seen him before of course, but always from a distance. Seeing him up close is incomparable. Shisui is right, he’s almost unbearably cute.

And Itachi is actually smiling a little. I’ve never seen him this expressive. It suits him very well indeed.

A tugging at my pants draws my attention back down. I look at Naruto with confusion. The brat is twisting the fabric in balled fists. He’s also glaring at Itachi’s little brother.

"What're you doing here?"

Wait, what?

The brat’s accusation makes Itachi’s little brother glare back, a scowl replacing his previous smile. He crosses his arms aggressively.

"What're you doing here?” he returns with as much hostility as the brat.

"I'm getting picked up by my nee-chan!” Naruto retorts like Itachi’s little brother just insulted one of his beloved frogs.

"Well I'm getting picked up by my nii-san!” the boy snaps back with just as much heat. I turn a bewildered look Itachi’s way, having no idea what’s going on here.
Itachi does. His eyes are positively gleaming with amusement.

My attention is drawn back down as I hear Naruto scoff. I see him giving the other boy a smug look, of all things.

"My nee-chan picks me up every day, your brother doesn't."

I gently smack the back of the brat's head on instinct, while Itachi’s little brother flinches in a way that's physically painful to see. He quickly does his best to hide it but it's more than clear that Naruto's words really hurt him.

"That was unbelievably rude and mean. Apologize," I order. Naruto activates his betrayed puppy mode but I remain strong. Behavior like this is unacceptable.

The brat adds a pout, refusing to submit to reason. I narrow my eyes in warning.

"Now."

Naruto scowls as he realizes that I won’t budge, before he releases a dramatic sigh that tells me exactly how much he doesn’t want to do this. Tough luck, I’m not going to let him get away with this kind of behavior. Being rude might be wired into his genes, but this is a step too far even for him.

"Sorry." It’s barely a mumble. Good enough.

It makes Itachi's little brother smirk. It’s a high quality smirk, the kind that will one day infuriate anyone it’s aimed at.

Right now it’s adorable.

"See? Even your sister thinks you're stupid."

His words, not so much.

"Sasuke." Itachi's admonishment is soft yet sharp, somehow easily heard above Naruto's cry of rage. I manage to grab the back of the brat’s shirt before he can physically assault the other brat. Who is looking incredibly chastised. Itachi has trained him well.

"Sorry," he says and it comes over a lot more sincere than Naruto managed. Still blatantly false, though.

The brat gives him a furious glare.

"You bastard!"

Wait, Naruto’s bastard is Itachi’s little brother? That’s... that’s even more perfect than I could’ve imagined! Why on earth hasn’t Itachi mentioned this before? Or Shisui for that matter? I have a valid excuse for my ignorance, but they don’t.

...Oh that sneaky little ninja. I don’t know about Shisui, but Itachi planned for this to happen exactly because I didn’t know.

“I will ruin all your tomatoes forever,” the brat vows in what he thinks is a threatening way but he only manages to hit cute and comical.

Or rather, it’s cute and comical to me. Itachi’s little brother looks genuinely worried, though he
quickly tries to hide it.

This just keeps getting better and better. Judging from the silent laughter dancing in Itachi’s eyes when I look at him, he agrees completely.

This more than makes up for his absence, it really, truly, absolutely does. In fact, the next time he visits is my treat.

"Brat, you will not ruin all his tomatoes forever," I order while doing my best to keep my laughter from breaking through. While this entire thing is hilarious to me and Itachi, it isn’t to the brat and his bastard. This is Very Serious Business. Which means I have to act like a responsible guardian and set a good example.

Naruto shoots me a look of such betrayal that it’s almost enough to make my control break.

"But—"

"No buts," I cut him off. If I don’t, I’ll lose the fight against my laughter, and that would truly hurt him. That has to be avoided at all costs.

The brat gives a sullen pout but thankfully obeys.

His bastard smirks again. The boy doesn’t say anything because of Itachi’s previous admonishment, but with that expression, he doesn’t need to. Naruto is smart enough to not react with violence again, but he does give a fierce glare back.

So adorable.

No, this is Serious Business. I need to remain strong.

"I didn’t expect you to behave so rudely in front of Mari-san." It’s the hidden teasing in Itachi’s voice that draws my gaze back to him. I raise a questioning brow but Itachi doesn’t explain, just keeps wearing that small and unbelievably cute smile. It really drives home the resemblance between him and his little brother.

His little brother lets out a derisive scoff.

"Why not? If she’s this idiot’s sister—" Itachi glancing down at him immediately makes him shut up. Very well trained indeed.

“You bastard, don’t call her stupid—”

“Brat, he didn’t call me stupid,” I interrupt to prevent a fight from breaking out. It’s sweet that he’s offended on my behalf, but I really don’t need him to protect me from a six year old. Especially not against imagined slights.

Once again, Naruto looks up at me like a betrayed puppy. I bite my cheek to contain my laughter.

This is important, don’t break down, don’t break down.

I still glance at Itachi to share in the hilarity of this entire situation. When I do, Itachi’s cute smile grows a fraction.

"Mari is not her full name,” he says with the same hidden teasing as before, before letting a beat of silence pass. Savoring whatever is coming next. "Her full name is Takahashi Mariko."

Black eyes almost bug out and a small jaw drops.
"You're Mariko?" The boy blushes. It melts my heart as much as it confuses me.

Naruto squints with suspicion as Itachi’s little brother lowers his gaze. Itachi himself is watching his little brother with gorgeous ruby eyes, ensuring this memory will forever be engraved in his mind.

His little brother fidgets with his shirt, before he shyly glances up at me through his lashes. He's ridiculously cute.

"I... I really like your stories."

I gape. Then I grin. So hard.

"Oh really? Which one is your favorite?" This is just precious.

I’ve never been more proud to be a writer.

"Frozen." he blurts and blushes a little brighter as he glances up at his brother. I share another look of silent laughter with the genius that is Itachi, the mastermind behind this beautiful situation.

This is too adorable for words.

It turns out that my fanbase includes two adorable Uchihas instead of one.

Should I be jealous?

Very.

Here I thought no one could ever replace me in your heart.

Sometimes I wonder why I keep putting up with you.

"Allow me to remind you."

“ Aren’t we cheerful today?”

My words make Tori laugh brightly, and she actually twirls around to face me.

“I’m having a wonderful day,” she says with a smile that lights up the entire room.

“Apparently,” I return with a grin. I was already in a great mood when I got here, but Tori’s high spirits have improved it even more. I’m not the only one affected, Renji can’t stop grinning like an idiot whenever he sees her practically dancing through the room. The Dancing Dragon has never been more appropriately named.

“So what’s the occasion?” I ask.

“My exceptional mood, of course,” Tori quips with a ridiculous attempt at a serious expression. I chuckle.

“You really woke up on the right side of the bed today.”
Tori’s eyes widen with surprise before she dissolves into hysterical giggles, laughing so hard she has to lean on the table to keep herself upright.

“Yeah, I really did,” she manages to get out before being overtaken by laughter again. I have to join in myself. Tori’s cheer is just so contagious.

It’s nice to see my wish for an even better year than the last is off to such a great start.

The stew was a bit flat. You should use more spices next time.

Be sure to keep that in mind when you make it yourself.

So defensive. I’m just offering some friendly advice.

See, when I’m the one who feeds you free of charge, it sounds less like advice and a lot more like criticism.

Not my fault you’re so touchy about offers of well intended aid.

You do realize that I can cut you off whenever I feel like it, right?

Well, we can’t have that. Might there be an alternative payment I can offer?

Now that you mention it, I do have a few ideas in mind.

“T’ma all ears.”

“No it’s not!”

“I don’t know, if you tilt your head just so...”

“It’s not, dattebayo! It’s a frog! It’s not a bunny!”

“But–”

“It’s. A. Frog!”

I couldn’t stop my smile from splitting my face even if I wanted to. I also can’t find it within myself to even pretend to care that the brat’s volume is bothering the other customers.

Naruto is glaring fiercely as he clutches his latest masterpiece close, defensive and indignant in a way only a handful topics can inspire.

Renji is looking down at him with a teasing grin.

"Are you sure? Because–"

"A! Frog!"

My smile somehow manages to grow even bigger. I have no idea why Renji has suddenly come around like this, but I hope with all my heart it never ends.
He's right, it looks like a bunny. Or its mutilated remains anyway. Why hang it up there, of all places?

I am never taking this down.

That's really what you want to see every time you walk out the door?

It really is.

And you call me insane.

You are. Completely.

I'm hurt.

So sensitive.

I don't know how I'll ever get over this.

My deepest apologies. Whatever can I do to make up for this grievous injury?

"I might have a suggestion or two."

"You've been in a great mood the past few weeks," Rukia threatens cheerfully. I suppose I should’ve seen this coming. She’s been dropping “subtle” hints that she knows something is going on for the past week.

I also happen to know that she’s bluffing. She’s got nothing on me.

So I shrug, totally casual and nothing out of the ordinary here.

"My writing is going well. Really well, actually. I’m experiencing what you’d call a creative high."

“That does always put you in a good mood,” Rukia agrees with a smile. She’s not convinced.

“Then there’s Renji and, well, how can I not be in a great mood when he and the brat are finally getting along?” It’s not a lie. Even without adding in anything else, that alone would be more than enough to put me in high spirits.

“Very true,” Rukia agrees with an emphatic nod, sincere in a way she wasn’t before. Ever since Renji has gotten over Naruto containing the Kyuubi, things have been so much better for everyone involved. “Things are so much better now that they’re getting along,” she finishes with a happy sigh.

She’s still not convinced.

"And Naruto has progressed to actual play dates at Sakura’s home.” I feel a grin grow just from saying the words out loud. This will never get old. “Though Ino still keeps chaperoning,” I add, hoping that Rukia will take the bait and change the subject to the brat’s love life.

Rukia sips her tea. Damn it, I’m running out of excuses.
"The brat is even starting to get along with his bastard,” I say, and curse myself for the hint of desperation I’m unable to keep out of my voice. Rukia, of course, smells the blood in the water. Her smile turns sharp like a blade, before she skillfully hides it like the gossip predator she is.

I bravely stick to my totally casual and nothing out of the ordinary behavior.

“Their fighting has turned almost playful,” I finish with a chuckle that definitely isn’t forced.

"All very nice things,” Rukia agrees serenely. “Very nice things indeed.”

Shouldn't have expected that to work. I avert my gaze to the side as I rack my brain for something else to distract her. When I fail to come up with something, I let out a resigned sigh.

The truth always works best.

"...He gave me a good luck charm." I don’t need to specify who.

Rukia’s brows shoot up high and her jaw actually starts to drop before she quickly snaps it shut. Then she grins like the cat that caught the canary.

"Oh really? When did this happen?"

“...After we came home from the New Years Festival.”

“How sweet.” The cat that caught the canary, the mouse, and cleaned out the cream for good measure. I roll my eyes to hide my relief.

I didn’t lie. I just didn’t tell the entire truth. Nothing wrong with that.

“The dedication you both show to your correspondence is truly admirable.”

Now I just need to live with the fact that Rukia is going to harass me about our imaginary flirting even more.

As long as it keeps her from prying any deeper, I can do that.

I chew my pen as I reread the scene, before I cross out a few sentences and rewrite them. I read it again.

It still sucks. Damn it all to hell!

I barely manage to resist the urge to slash my pen across the page, throwing the stupid notebook down the coffee table instead.

Screw fight scenes, they are so damn difficult!

I rub my eyes, annoyed with everything. It was so easy at first, too. Words kept flowing, the scenes unfolding before my eyes. Then I reached the fight and everything started going downhill. Including my mood. In a way it hasn’t since the brain melting sex started.

I need to go do something else. Need to let this rest and look it over tomorrow with fresh eyes. Preferably after another mind blowing orgasm to help boost my creativity.
My eyes slide back to the notebook.

...Damn it, I need to finish this. It’s almost done.

I lean over to pick it back up. Right before I do, a note materializes besides it.

*Having trouble?*

**I hate fight scenes.**

I’m about to place down my reply when I have a brilliant stroke of inspiration. I quickly unfold the note again.

**Want to help out?**

Who better to ask than a ninja? At the very least he’ll be able to give pointers on how to make the fight more realistic.

I impatiently wait for his reply. That bastard better not push my buttons by keeping silent. Not about this. I will hurt him if he does.

Fortunately for him, he doesn’t keep quiet.

*An invitation to read your unfinished work? You must really be desperate.*

I roll my eyes, not in the mood for our usual banter.

**Like you haven't been doing that anyway. Now will you help or not? And don't avoid the question, just answer yes or no. I am not in the mood.**

He takes longer than usual to reply and I just know it’s because he enjoys seeing me suffer. There’s literally no other explanation. It’s not like the question is difficult to answer.

Finally, the note teleports.

*What's in it for me?*

Really? *Really?*

Screw you!

I almost write that down but another stroke of inspiration occurs right before I do. I feel a slow smile grow. Well, if he wants incentive...

**I have an interesting trick involving tongue.**

"If that trick meets my expectations, I might be convinced to give some pointers."

At least I no longer scream when the bastard materializes out of nowhere. Still can’t help my startled yelp though, courtesy of my heart being stuck in my throat.

Damn ninja.
“No way!”

The muffled shout makes me frown with confusion.

Why is the brat awake?

When I hear a muted yelp, my mind clears enough to realize that I need to get up and find out. This sucks. Thanks to the bastard repaying my trick with a magical one of his own, I’m deliciously boneless. I was also halfway through falling asleep. But Naruto needs to be in bed.

Mind still fuzzy, I get up, hearing another muffled shout as I do. The shout is followed by the sounds of running feet before I hear... a window being opened?

I move faster, a little worry starting to rise. Why is Naruto opening the window?

"Brat, why aren’t you in bed?” I demand as I open the door. Given that I’m still drowsy and it’s dark, I need a moment to realize just what it is I’m looking at.

I’m looking at Naruto falling down from a flower pot and hitting the floor with a loud yelp, snapping me wide awake in an instant.

"Naruto!” I exclaim while running over, dropping to my knees in front of him. “Are you all right?” He looks fine and his expression isn’t hurt so much as it’s stunned but I still run my hands over him to check. I know he’s probably unharmed but my racing heart forces me to make sure.

"Mary-nee, I saw the cat." Naruto’s awed whisper shout makes me freeze.

He what?

I push my bewilderment away and continue checking him over. I can deal with his impossible words after I’m sure that he isn’t hurt.

"Nee-chan, did you hear? I saw the cat!” Naruto exclaims at an exceptional volume even for him and with a grin that just keeps on growing. I decide to ignore his impossible words a moment longer. While I’m now reassured that he’s all right, there’s an extremely important issue I have to address before doing anything else.

"Brat. Were you leaning out the window?” It needs to be asked, no matter that it’s a rhetorical question. I saw him do it. Or rather, the only reason he could have to stand on that pot is to get high enough so he could lean out of a window three stories high. What the hell? He knows that’s forbidden, knows that the rules concerning safety are not to be broken under any circumstances.

This is unacceptable.

Naruto’s excitement crashes with guilt. The brat was so leaning out of the window, no matter that it’s forbidden and he could have fallen to his death! It doesn’t matter that the bastard would’ve caught him, what matters is that Naruto doesn’t know that and he deliberately put himself in needless danger.

Before I can begin telling him exactly how unacceptable that is, never mind decide on a fitting punishment, the brat gains a fiercely determined expression.

"Mary-nee, I. Saw. The. Cat!”

His passionate exclamation makes another surge of bewilderment battle with my anger. I need a
moment or ten to make sense of that statement.

Looking at the brat’s overwhelming giddiness, I also realize that I won’t be able to drive home the importance of *not leaning out of a window three stories high* until I deal with his impossible words. So.

"You... saw the cat," I say out loud to see if it will help make sense of the words.

It doesn’t help.

How the hell did Naruto manage to see the bastard? And if he did, why is he still calling him a cat?

"Yes!" Naruto squeals at a volume loud enough to make me wince, before he launches into a torrent of words where breathing is optional. “I was looking at his dinner and then I heard him meow and the window was open and then he meowed again and I saw his shadow and he went to the kitchen and I tried to sneak up on him but he’s so sneaky because I heard him meow again but he wasn’t in the kitchen anymore so I looked back at his dinner and it was gone and I ran over and then I felt him against my leg and then the window closed and I saw the cat, dattebayo!"

By the time the barrage ends, Naruto is jumping up and down with glee.

I slowly process all he’s said. So, if I’m getting this right... the bastard used magic to make Naruto think a real cat broke in and ate dinner.

I close my eyes, torn between my remaining anger at the brat’s behavior and the sheer hilarity of the situation.

“I saw him, I saw him, I really did, I saw the cat, dattebayo!”

The hilarity wins out.

I burst out laughing. The bastard actually used magic to make Naruto think he’s a real cat! I know that the brat has tried to catch him in the act of eating before, but I never expected the bastard to play along like this.

This is just perfect.

I’ll have to show him my appreciation tomorrow.

---

*Your pointers are surprisingly helpful.*

I honestly hadn’t expected them to be. At least, not this much. I also hadn’t expected to feel so little annoyance over his writing invading my notebooks. True, I’m the one who asked him, but I still expected to be incredibly annoyed by his interference. Instead, I’m only a little annoyed.

*Always happy to serve.*

*Allow me to show my appreciation.*

And for the beautiful show yesterday of course, but why not combine my gratitude for both?

*If you insist.*
Any suggestions? Or do you want me to surprise you?

Can’t it be both?

Guess I won't be combining them after all. Not that I’m complaining.

My, aren’t we greedy. Tell you what, you get to choose tonight, and I’ll surprise you tomorrow.

That’s not going to work.

Oh?

How so?

Starting tomorrow, I won’t be around anymore.

Wait, what?

I’m going to need some elaboration on that.

Congratulations, you’ve graduated from constant surveillance to the occasional check-up.

I stare at the words, a tangled mess of emotions. On one hand, this is good. Really good. It means I can officially stop worrying about anyone ever discovering my past.

On the other hand, I’ve gotten used to the bastard stalking us. More than that, he’s a friend. I enjoy talking with him. The knowledge that I won’t be able to anymore is... extremely disappointing. Even without adding in the loss of mind blowing orgasms.

I don’t want him to leave.

I’m also starting to get pissed. He’s leaving tomorrow and he only tells me now? What the hell?

You couldn’t have mentioned this sooner?

I could have.

Oh that absolute bastard. He’s not even sorry!

Why didn’t you?

Where’s the fun in that? Besides, you’re the one who always complains about being held under surveillance. I thought you’d be happy about this.

Is that bastard actually going to act like there’s nothing out of the ordinary – of course he is, why am I even surprised?

I’m not going to play along.

Don’t pretend you aren’t acting like a complete bastard. You should’ve told me sooner.

I would like to point out that I don’t actually owe you anything.

That complete and utter bastard. I barely manage to resist the urge to crumple the note like the piece of trash it is without reading the rest of his reply.
Besides, I’m not going away forever. I just won’t be around all the time anymore.

And if you’d warned me about that sooner, I wouldn’t be reacting like this.

Seriously, what’s so hard to understand about that? Bastard.

Does that mean you don’t want to say goodbye?

I close my eyes, as exasperated as I’m conflicted. On one hand, I’m pissed as hell. On the other, if this is the last brain melting sex I’ll be having for... how long is he going to be away, actually?

**When are you coming back?**

That’s classified.

Of course it is. So, do I want to keep being righteously pissed at him, or do I want to work out my anger in a much more pleasurable way?

When put like that, the answer is obvious. However.

*If you want to have even the slightest chance of me welcoming you back, you better convince me it’ll be worth my while.*

“I will do my very best to leave a lasting impression.”

“Are you mad at the cat?”

Yes I am. Not that it matters, seeing as the bastard has *left*. Which is the whole reason that I’m mad. Kind of mad.

All right, I’m not mad. I’m... hurt. No matter how irrational that is.

“Mary-nee?”

I sigh. I'm really not in the mood to talk about this. But the brat deserves to know.

“I’m not mad at him,” I answer as I sit down as well and pick up my chopsticks.

Instead of digging in, I just poke at my food. I didn’t even have the heart to make something sweet or fried. Not tonight.

“But you didn’t make him dinner,” Naruto points out in an unusually subdued way while giving me a worried look. Is it that obvious how I’m feeling?

I muster a smile for him, not that difficult to do even in my current state. Admittedly, it’s a small smile.

“I must be away for a while,” I explain and let out an annoyed sigh just from saying the words out loud.

See, this is why it’s so ridiculous that I’m hurt by his absence. It’s not like he’s gone forever. He’ll be back.

Of course, I’d feel a lot better if I had even a vague idea of *when* he’ll be back. Bastard.
“Oh!” Naruto exclaims at his usual volume and with an expression of dawning realization. “That’s why you’re sad!”

I can’t help the wry quirk of my lips. Apparently it is that obvious.

“Don’t worry, nee-chan, he’ll be back soon! You said so yourself! Right?”

“Right.” I confirm and this time saying it out loud does make me feel a little better. I lean over to ruffle the brat’s hair, grateful for his magical ability to cheer me up, and bask in the sunshine smile it earns me.

The bastard might be gone for a while, but I still have my brat. I still have my friends. I’m not alone. I’ll be just fine.

“What has you in such a bad mood?”

“Why the hell does everyone keep asking me that?” I snap, completely fed up. Seriously, I’ve heard variants of that question more times than I can count these past couple of days.

Shiro, of course, is completely unmoved by my aggression. He just raises his brow the slightest bit. Silently pointing out that my own reaction more than answers that question.

I sigh and rub my eyes.

“Ever thought that me not saying what’s wrong might mean, oh, I don’t know, that I don’t want to talk about this?”

“The thought has occurred to me.” And then he’d disregarded it like the gossip he is. Wonderful.

“Why don’t you go revisit that thought,” I snap with a glare.

“Mari,” he chides in a way that only annoys me further. I know that he’s worried about me, I really do. Doesn’t change the fact that I don’t want to talk about this.

...Except my friends aren’t going to quit prying into this until they get an answer. And they kind of do deserve to know. I haven’t been the most pleasant company the past days.

I let out a tired sigh, most of my anger fading away. I’m overreacting. A lot.

The knowledge doesn’t make me feel any better.

“He left.”

Shiro blinks in a way that means he’s trying to figure out what I meant by that. Tough luck, this is all he’s getting. I’m not exaggerating about not wanting to talk about this.

When he figures out who I’m referring to, his eyes soften with sympathy. His shoulders also tighten slightly, awkward and uncomfortable with my confession. He has no trouble teasing me about my supposed crush, but hearing I actually miss the bastard is different. No matter how irrational Shiro knows that is.

I’m not her.
“...I’m sorry to hear that.”

“How kind,” I mock more sharply than intended, and grimace when Shiro’s eyes tighten with more than a little hurt. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to sound like that,” I immediately apologize. That was uncalled for.

Shiro’s hurt doesn’t disappear, making my guilt grow. It’s difficult to truly hurt Shiro, usually he just becomes annoyed. But even after all this time, I can still make his scars bleed in a way no one else can.

“I’m proud that you’ve finally become aware of your complete inability to temper your sarcasm.”

Shiro’s weak attempt at acting like normal makes me smile faintly. I’m grateful for his forgiveness.

“I’ll have you know that I’ve been aware of it for years,” I quip back, acting like normal as well. "I just don’t care about it in the slightest. Most of the time, at least.”

“I’m honored to be an exception to your indifference.”

I chuckle, the last of my guilt fading away as Shiro’s shoulders relax.

Honestly, I need to get a grip. The bastard being gone for a while isn’t the end of the world. It’s ridiculous to act like it is.

“I still can’t believe you didn’t tell,” I have to repeat again.

“I still can’t believe you didn’t know,” Shisui counters with a grin. “Seriously, it’s the idiot this and the idiot that. You can’t tell me that Naruto doesn’t talk about him just as much.”

“Oh, the brat talks about him all the time,” I confirm. “The only other subject to get so much attention is his precious Sakura-chan. But he’s never, and I do mean never, referred to him as anything other than the bastard.”

“And you never asked?” Shisui returns with mock innocence, acting like he doesn’t already know the answer.

“Hearing him talk about his bastard is hilarious,” I say in a solemn voice that’s ruined by my grin.

“But you didn’t ask even once? It’s been almost half a year.”

“And ruin the fun of the mystery that was his identity?”

“Are you saying we ruined your fun?” he returns with such shock, before giving me an contrite expression worthy of an award for best actor. “You have our deepest apologies.”

“I offer no such thing,” Itachi calmly interjects, the quiet contentment in his eyes revealing just how pleased he is with their little prank. "The results were quite satisfying."  "He takes another bite of the dango I treated him to.

“It was beautiful,” I wholeheartedly agree with Itachi, because it really was. The mystery leading up to it only made the reveal so much better.

“In that case, I take my apology back,” Shisui says with a cheerful smile, just as pleased with himself
as Itachi is. “We’re always happy to cheer you up– why are you looking at me like that,” Shisui demands in a startlingly sharp tone while turning to face Itachi full on, his mood switching from carefree to suspicious with a speed that gives me whiplash.

“I have no idea as to what you are referring to,” Itachi returns, placid as ever and taking the words right of my mouth.

“No, you do, that was your No Expression number eight, I Cannot Believe I Am Related To This Idiot,” Shisui accuses, making me snort with laughter. I only know a handful of Itachi’s No Expressions, Shisui doesn’t bring them up often. It’s always a delight to discover a new one.

“Do I need a specific reason to feel that way?” Itachi counters without missing a beat. Shisui’s eyes narrow further, his suspicion not in any way abated.

I watch the show with a grin. I still miss the bastard but it’s getting easier to bear with every day that passes. In moments like these, I barely even mind that he’s gone.

How can I be in anything other than a good mood with a comedy act like this?

Laid out on the couch, I stop writing and bite my lip. Maybe I should – scream as his mask appears right in front of me!

I punch out on reflex but my hand is somehow caught by his own before I can hit his chest, no matter that there's practically no space between us. The familiar feeling of his glove snaps me out of my shock.

Today his hair is messy and red. I glare, even as I feel my lips curve up in an involuntary smile. Of course this is how the bastard announces that he’s back.

He releases my hand and looms even closer, his body hovering over mine, so close I swear I can feel his heat even with all the layers between us. He’s almost touching me. Almost.

It’s ridiculous how turned on that makes me. I’m blaming the force of my reaction on knowing that his return also means the return of mind blowing orgasms.

"And hello to you, too. Did you have fun?" I ask in a voice that makes the desert seem wet. Seriously, he leaves for fifteen days, so what if I’m counting, and it makes him act like this? Do I even want to know what he’s been up to?

...Probably not. Probably very not.

"So much fun," he replies what I can only call a gleeful voice. He really is in a mood. “I feel like celebrating.”

I raise a brow, more than a little intrigued. I also have more than enough time before I need to go pick up the brat, so if he wants to celebrate...

"What do you have in mind?"

Surroundings blurring, feeling something soft beneath me, completely disoriented. I look around the dark with confusion, needing a moment to figure out what just happened.

I’m in my bedroom and I’m sitting on the edge of my bed. The lights are off, the door is closed, and
the bastard is standing in front of closed curtains. I feel a wry smile grow.

Ninja.

He starts prowling closer, because the bastard is incapable of something as mundane as walking. Not that I’m complaining. The sight is doing all kinds of delicious things to me.

"Undress." His voice is deceptively soft in the best of ways. I debate on being contrary just to speed things up, but decide to go along instead. For now.

I wonder where he plans on taking this.

My movements are slow and unhurried on purpose and I swear I almost see him twitch. I smile. I’ve missed teasing him.

I’ve also missed the mind blowing orgasms. A lot.

Letting the last of my clothing fall to the floor, I shiver as I feel his gaze wandering across, full of anticipation for what comes next.

"Kneel on the bed."

I grin. Such a soft voice.

I really wonder where he plans on taking this.

Kneeling on the bed, I wait for his next move. He prowls forward without a sound and leaves my sight. I feel the bed dip behind me and heavy cloth covers my eyes, the weight caused by what I realize is the metal plate of a headband. My brows shoot up with surprise.

The blindfold is new.

"Wow."

I realize I’ve rasped that out loud when I hear a soft, near shaken laugh in return.

"Very wow," he agrees. When I feel him start to get up, I immediately tighten my grip on his hair, sudden urgency clearing some of my blissful haze. The protesting sound he lets out is ignored completely.

"And just where do you think you're going?" I manage to say in a husky voice ruined by screams.

There’s no way I’m going to let him leave already. He’s naked.

I have so many ideas where to take this next.

"Away?" he counters in an uncommonly amused voice, the slight unsteadiness from before already gone.

"No you're not." He really isn’t.

"Cuddling isn't your style."

I feel a hoarse snort escape at his sorry attempt at an excuse.
"Correction, cuddling isn't *your* style." I'm not the one who always leaves in the literal blink of an eye. "Personally, I enjoy basking in the afterglow with someone. But I respect your quirks."

"Then why the protest this time?" he asks. I feel a huge grin grow, couldn’t contain it even if I wanted to.

"Because this time you're *naked.*" Just saying the words makes me grin some more. "Lie down and let me touch and taste to my heart's content."

He laughs in a way I’ve never heard from him before. He’s as high on happy hormones as I am.

"You have such a way with words."

"The benefits of being a writer," I return with glee. That’s an agreement if I ever heard one.

He takes hold of my hand still woven through his hair, his other grasping my hip. I release my hold on the soft strands.

Sudden movement, recovering my balance, working through disorientation. Being blindfolded means that I need a moment to figure out what just happened.

He’s rolled us over. I'm now sitting on his lap. He’s stretched out beneath me. Naked.

"You may explore," he graciously allows. I feel a giddy smile grow and waste no time in spreading my palms flat on his stomach. The feeling of soft skin over hard muscles is delicious. I slowly trail my hands upwards, savoring every touch. The sensation is heightened in the best of ways by my lack of vision. It’s enough to make me shiver.

It's enough to make him shiver as well.

I encounter unexpected roughness. When I realize what it is I’m feeling, I bend down and place my lips down the scar.

I start exploring it meticulously. With my tongue.

He shivers again. I chuckle and lift my head with a grin.

"I have so many ideas where to take this next."

---

"The cat’s back!"

"Yes he is," I confirm with a grin, placing the bastard’s dinner down the bookcase.

"See, nee-chan? I told you he’d be back!" Naruto exclaims like he heard it from the bastard himself and not from me. I chuckle and ruffle his hair.

"That you did."

Naruto smiles with an equal amount of sunshine and satisfaction, adorably pleased with himself. He’s acting like he’s the one who personally brought back the bastard.

"Now you won’t be sad anymore!"
My grin turns into a smile. It’s ridiculous how touched those words makes me feel. It also inspires more than a little amusement.

“No, I won’t.”

Hard to be sad with the prospect of more brain melting *naked* sex in my immediate future.

Finished with putting Naruto to bed, I leave his room with his smile and a desire to strike up another conversation with the bastard. Not just because it’ll hopefully lead to more brain melting *naked* sex, but because I’ve missed talking with him.

I freeze when I notice the position of my current notebook. The one that’s lain in the exact same place since he first showed up. It’s now laying on the opposite side of the coffee table.

He didn’t.

I walk over and open it to the first of far too many dog eared pages.

*Samurai don’t ride horses, they’re trained in chakra manipulation.*

I have to close my eyes.

He did.

While I’ve missed talking to him, I haven’t missed the way he likes to push all my buttons.

Well, not these buttons at least.

**Really. This is a thing now.**

His reply appears in the literal blink of an eye. That bastard is laughing so hard.

*Surprisingly enough, I enjoy doing this. Why stop?*

*Because I don't like it when you add to my drafts without my permission.*

*Are you saying it isn’t helpful?*

*I’m saying I don’t like it when you add to my drafts without my permission.*

*You did give permission. Not my fault you didn't specify that my help had to stop after one time.*

I have to close my eyes again. Of course.

Now. Is this a line in the sand I want to draw?

My first reaction is yes, yes I do. Viciously so.

...Except his technical nitpicking was very helpful last time. I also hadn’t been as annoyed as expected. That last remains the biggest surprise of all, no matter that I was the one who asked for his help. I’m both aware and uncaring of the fact that I’m fiercely territorial about my unfinished stories. I’m also much less irritated right now than I would’ve expected this situation to make me. Even when factoring in the return of brain melting sex. The *naked* brain melting sex.
...His help would improve the story. And my general writing.

All right then.

*Just make sure you limit yourself to technicalities. One word about my plot or characters and I will hurt you. I've already proven that I can.*

Because I will hurt him if he crosses that one.

*I will do my very best to resist temptation.*

Which means he'll actually behave. For now.

**Good boy.**

"I feel I should be rewarded for my good behavior."

---

So many nicks and cuts. They’re shallow, not that noticeable even to my heightened sense of touch, but they cover his entire palm. I turn his hand around and start exploring the back. The web of crisscrossing scars continues down to his wrist.

"Having fun?"

"Yes I am," I answer truthfully while continuing to explore his hand with my own. Trying to figure out what he looks like by touch is very fun indeed. Though I’m pretty sure that the mental image I’m forming is completely wrong proportionately speaking. Perception by touch isn’t my strong suit.

I don’t explore his face, no matter how much I want to. Given the insane lengths he goes to in order to keep his identity hidden, trying to map what he looks like without his mask is an unspoken boundary I won’t cross.

He lets out a lazy hum, basking in the afterglow just as much as I am. I didn’t even prompt him to stay this time, he wore me out to the point where I’m simply not up for another round. Yet even though I didn’t ask him to stay, he’s still here.

I’m definitely not complaining.

I bring his hand up to my lips and glide them across the scarred skin. If I wasn’t still riding the high of happy hormones, the sheer amount of them and all the implications that holds would’ve horrified me. As it is, I just enjoy the sensation, so different from anything I’ve experienced before.

I wonder how he got these.

He allows me to explore in silence, relaxed and sated. Well, I assume he's relaxed, but given his general insanity and paranoia, I’m certain that my assessment is correct. He would’ve already left if my actions made him uncomfortable.

The blindfold really is a stroke of pure genius.

“Did you get laid?”
“Why on earth would you think that?” I demand without thought and I’m so grateful it comes out more incredulous than shifty.

“You’re in a post-laid mood,” Renji answers, grinning like the asshole he is. All right, think. How to deflect? I can’t say that I did, in fact, get laid, that will inevitably lead to the question of who I got laid with. Except I can’t pretend that nothing has happened either, because it’s true that I’m in unusually high spirits.

“...He’s back,” I force myself to say. Just hearing the words out loud is enough to make me grin like a loon, despite my best efforts to contain it. He’s back and now we’re having brain melting naked sex. Really, it would be stranger if I didn’t react like this.

Renji frowns with a confusion that’s quickly replaced by shock.

“Wait, what? I thought he was gone?”

“He was. And now he’s back,” I return, amused at his incredulity. And very happy to see him accept the bastard’s presence as a suitable explanation for my high spirits. “I’ve graduated to the occasional check-up,” I elaborate to get this entire thing out of the way with in one go. Renji can inform the others.

“And you already knew he was going to return when he first left?” Renji demands, half incredulous, half with rising amusement.

“I did.”

Renji lets out a snort and shakes his head with a grin that’s equal parts mocking and amused.

“And you keep denying your crush.”

I roll my eyes with exasperation. This right here is why I didn’t want to tell my friends about his return.

“I don’t have a crush,” I deny without heat, knowing that my words aren’t going to make the slightest difference.

“Sure, you keep telling yourself that,” Renji patronizes. I roll my eyes again, even as I can’t help but smile as well.

The lack of teasing about our imaginary flirting was fun while it lasted, I suppose.

I have a curiosity. Do all ninja use tricks like you?

I am one of a kind.

Indeed you are. Still, is this common? Do you get taught these things? Please tell me the brat won’t be taught these things. At least, not until he’s well into his teens.

Why the curiosity?

Why the avoidance?

Maybe I don't feel like answering.
Maybe I don’t either.

Cute.

How long did it take you to figure out that particular quirk of mine anyway? Or did you read it in my file?

You are uncommonly curious today.

And your avoidance is only fanning the flames.

I know.

Bastard.

No, we don’t get taught. I’m inventive.

How kind of you to take pity on me. But seriously, other ninja have got to do this as well. It can’t be that hard.

Attempting to wound my ego. You really think that will work?

I do.

"You are correct."

"Does it bother you?"

"Hmm?" I’m absently aware that he’s asked something. I’m more aware of his fingers trailing down my back. My brain is still mush in the most delicious of ways.

"Your chakra system. Does it bother you?"

It takes a few moments for his words to make sense. When they do, I need another moment to realize what he’s referring to.

Right. That.

"Not really," I manage to articulate through the rush of happy hormones clouding my thoughts. Hard to be bothered by something I was born with.

"Not at all?"

My smile grows at his incredulous tone. Ninja.

"Nope."

"How? You're literally incapable of producing more than the bare minimum needed to survive. That's not even mentioning your complete inability to manipulate it."

My smile turns into a grin. He’s acting like I’m invalid. It’s understandable I suppose. Compared to him, I'm about as physically capable as a child. Having no magic must be one of his worst nightmares.
"I'm sure that would be a true tragedy for a ninja. I, however, am a proud civilian."

Though it had been incredibly strange to learn that I do, in fact, possess magic. It’s just that my chakra system is a horribly mutated one. According to the standards of this world, at least.

It’s no wonder magic was never discovered in my old world. Then again, the knowledge that magic does exist over there as well has made me look at old myths and legends in an entirely new light.

"Does it feel very different from before?"

"I don’t feel any difference whatsoever,” I quip with smug satisfaction, speaking nothing but the truth.

The fact that people attribute the 'damage' of my chakra system to the Kyuubi really is incredibly convenient.

"–and then I tackled him and he fell down, so I sat on him and he couldn't get up anymore! So the bastard tried to push me off but I tickled him and he laughed so hard, but then he–"

Rukia nods along with a grin as Naruto keeps chattering about yet another fight with his bastard. I’m pretty sure he and Sasuke will keep doing that forever. It’s their special way of showing their affection for each other.

"I don't know how you manage to live with him day in day out." Shiro says soft enough that Naruto doesn’t hear. I give him a smile as I continue putting up the chairs.

"He grows on you.” Whether you want it or not. I’m not complaining, but the fact remains that the brat has a way of being charming when he should be annoying instead.

Shiro lets out a disbelieving sound. Like the brat hasn’t wormed his way inside his own heart as well. I point this out to him with an indulging look.

"Why did Tori ask you to close down today?” he changes the subject. Poor Shiro, so in denial about his own feelings.

"I have no idea,” I answer truthfully. “She said she had something to do, but she didn’t want to talk about it. I didn't push."

"And why isn't Renji here to help?” Shiro asks in a way that means he’s become genuinely interested in the subject now.

"He also had plans. I also didn't push,” I answer with a grin, knowing my lack of knowledge is going to annoy him. “You can interrogate them later. Or ask Rukia, she probably knows where Renji is at least."

"Perhaps I will,” Shiro returns with slightly narrowed eyes, full of determination to get his answers.

Shiro is such a nosy person. Even by Konoha’s standards.

It's amazing how well he manages to hide it most of the time.
I’ll be gone again tomorrow.

What?

Already?

Careful, I might start to think you don’t mind being held under surveillance after all.

More like the mind blowing orgasms make your stalking a lot easier to bear.

Always happy to be of service.

Except you won’t be of service much longer.

Do I detect some disappointment?

Should I be glad about the lack of brain melting sex?

Point taken.

Be honest, you’re going to miss it as well.

Not that he’ll ever admit it. Saying he’ll miss our brain melting sex is far too close to saying he’ll miss me, and that’s something he’ll never admit out loud. The bastard is allergic to mushy feelings. As evidenced by him acting like there’s nothing out of the ordinary about him leaving without warning. Again.

I can already tell this is going to be a regular thing.

I won’t deny that it’s been surprisingly relaxing.

My brows shoot up with surprise. For him, that’s the equivalent of saying he’s been having the time of his life.

It’s an incredible boost to my ego. Apparently my bedroom skills are far greater than I realized.

Coming from you, that’s high praise indeed.

You know I can actually see your ego swell?

Is that the only thing swelling?

“That is without a doubt the worst pick-up line ever used.”

After the usual violent twitch I’m probably never going to be able to suppress, I turn around with a smile. He’s standing in his usual spot besides the window, arms crossed and casually leaning against the wall. Today his hair is blonde and curly.

“It worked, didn’t it?”

“Just for that, I should leave.”

I almost dare him to do just that, but knowing the bastard, he might actually take me up on it. I’m not going to risk the last brain melting sex I’ll be able to have in who knows how long.

“And here I was planning to celebrate my upcoming freedom with a bang,” I say instead, my smile
turning wicked.

“Well, I can hardly refuse an invitation like that.”

A heavy breath whispers across my skin, making me shiver with anticipation. Except then he starts pulling back because he's a complete and utter bastard.

My hands fly towards him but they're captured and pushed down the bed before I can grab his hair, preventing me from yanking his head back down where it belongs.

“Naruto is having a nightmare.”

The name makes a flicker of confusion join the haze of desire. Why the hell is he talking about the brat at a time like this?

Doesn't matter, what matters is getting his lips to resume their rightful position.

“If you don’t continue, I will hurt you,” I vow while trying to free my hands but of course his grip remains unyielding. A strangled sound escapes my throat, as frustrated as I'm turned on. That complete and utter bastard.

“Naruto is crying.”

Wait, what?

The sudden worry makes the haze of desire start to lift. I'm just about to demand why Naruto is crying when I realize that he’s already answered that.

Naruto is having a nightmare. Which is why he’s crying. Because nightmares are scary. And they require me to get up and comfort him.

I drop my head down my pillow with a groan. This is without a doubt the worst possible time for the brat to have a nightmare.

Actually, no. The worst possible time would’ve been about a minute from now.

I sigh deeply, knowing I have no choice but to get up. The mood has officially been broken. As the bastard has already realized himself. In hindsight, the heavy breath he’d teased me with was a sigh of disappointment.

“You should get dressed,” I tell him, so disappointed I won’t be getting that last mind blowing orgasm after all.

“Or I could stay until you return.”

My brows shoot up with surprise. I honestly expected him to leave. Naruto doesn’t get nightmares often and he’s only had one since the bastard and I started sleeping together. Just like now, the bastard had halted our fun so I could go comfort him. Unlike now, he left before I returned.

Then again, unlike now, he wasn’t about to leave for who knows how long. I’m not the only one getting cut off from brain melting sex.

“I like the sound of that,” I return with a grin, so happy to get that last mind blowing orgasm after all.
I’m also unexpectedly touched by his decision to stay. How far our friendship has come. “Let me know when I can take the blindfold off.”

The words have barely left my mouth before the cloth is gone from my eyes, so quick I didn’t even notice him releasing my hands. I look around with faint disorientation caused by the sudden return of my sight. I can’t see much, courtesy of the lights being off, but I’m certain that he’s gone. Turning the lights on confirms this certainty, erasing all shadows left to hide in. Even his uniform is gone.

While I know he’s using magic to hide, the mental picture of him hiding in my closet butt naked is hilarious. So hilarious that I don’t go to check if I’m right. I don’t want to ruin the fantasy.

Quickly throwing on some clothes, I push those thoughts away for now.

I have a brat to comfort.

“The cat’s gone?”

I look down at the brat with confusion. While the question itself isn’t unexpected, the way he asked is. I become even more confused, as well as a little worried, when I see his expression.

Naruto looks scared.

“Yes, he is,” I say slowly while putting our dinner down the table. I don’t take sit down my chair yet. Not until I figure out what’s making Naruto react like this.

“Where did he go?” he asks, just as fearful as before. Why is he scared?

“He’s away. But he’ll be back soon,” I add quickly as I see actual tears rise, worry overwhelming all else. “Naruto, what’s wrong?”

Naruto’s bottom lip trembles, shattering my heart in a thousand pieces.

“Did the ghosts get him?” he whispers, the lack of volume so unexpected it takes me a moment to register his actual words. When I do, I manage to bite down my lip just in time in order to contain a chuckle. This is Serious Business.

“No, the ghosts didn’t get him,” I say firmly while kneeling in front of him, grasping his hands and holding his gaze to impress my sincerity on him.

Naruto’s bottom lip trembles with the threat of tears once more, erasing all desire to laugh. Poor brat, still so shaken from his nightmare. Which involved ghosts, ramen, and a chicken named Monkey. The nightmare was an amusing one objectively speaking, but right now there’s nothing funny about it.

Not when it’s making Naruto feel like this.

“Then where did he go?”

“I don’t know, but I do know the ghosts didn’t take him,” I assure him, making sure my voice is strong and certain. “He’s just gone away for a while. That’s normal for stray cats.”

“But he’s not a stray cat!” I’m so glad he’s returned to his normal volume. “He’s our cat!”
This time I can’t contain my laugh, caught off guard in the best of ways. I knew Naruto liked ‘the cat’ but I didn’t know he considered him ours.

I can’t wait to tease the bastard about this. Then again, given his allergy to mushy feelings, I probably shouldn’t.

Probably going to do it anyway.

“He visits us because he likes us and considers us his friends. This doesn’t change the fact that he’s a stray cat. And stray cats like to wander. That’s why they’re stray cats instead of cats.” It’s a literal explanation instead of a metaphorical one, true, but I’m not entirely lying either. Even without the legal stalking, I can’t imagine the bastard doing anything but drop by whenever he damn well pleases.

“But why doesn’t he stay? We take good care of him!”

“Damn straight we do.” He gets free food, friendly banter, and mind blowing orgasms. The bastard is truly spoiled. Mostly by me, but a little by Naruto as well. Or rather, Naruto spoils him by being so easy to tease. As evidenced by the beautiful show of him trying to catch ‘the cat’ in the act of eating.

“So why doesn’t he stay?” Naruto demands, no longer afraid. Instead he's insulted and worst of all, a little hurt. Time to act like a good guardian and explain things to him.

“Because he’s a stray cat. Stray cats don’t like to stay in one place.” This is true for real stray cats, but for this particular metaphorical one, I feel confident to conclude that he doesn’t like it either. As evidenced by his high spirits ever since he no longer has to stalk us day in day out.

Well, that and the brain melting naked sex are responsible for his high spirits.

“He stayed before!”

“And now he left.” A bit blunt, maybe, but I don’t know how to explain why he left better than I already have. “He’ll be gone often from now on. But don’t worry, he’ll always come back.” Even the bastard wouldn’t just leave forever without warning.

...He probably wouldn’t leave forever without warning.

“You promise?”

I hesitate. I... can’t really promise that. Not just because the bastard might one day stop stalking us, no matter how unlikely that seems, but because he’s a ninja. Worse, he’s an ANBU. I can’t guarantee that one of his missions won’t go horribly wrong. Hell, I can’t guarantee he won’t have a horrible accident when off duty.

Daisuke’s death had been an accident.

Life isn’t safe. No matter how much I wish it was. But Naruto is a child. He doesn’t need to be confronted with this fact yet. At the same time, I can’t promise him something when I might not be able to keep my word. If the worst does happen, it’ll be the same as if I’d broken my promise on purpose. That would cheapen all others I make after.

“I promise he’ll do his best to come back,” I settle on. Technically not a lie. Even ignoring our friendship, the bastard will do all he can to return, if only because it’s his job.

I really hope this promise is enough to satisfy the brat.
It's enough. Naruto gains a sunshine smile. I swallow down a sigh of relief.

“Okay, nee-chan!”

With the issue of the bastard's absence out of the way, Naruto happily launches into chatter about his precious Sakura-chan, I sit down to start eating dinner, so glad the topic has shifted to safer grounds. The danger has officially passed.

Here’s to hoping this doesn’t happen every time the bastard leaves.

“He said I look tired. Can you believe it? I put all this effort into looking presentable and he actually has the nerve to tell me I look tired.”

“That asshole,” I say, doing my best to contain my amusement. Judging from the glare Rukia gives me, I fail. “You look lovely,” I offer as an apology, but that doesn’t make my words any less sincere. Rukia looks fabulous as always.

She’s also scowling at everything in sight.

“Men just don’t understand,” Tori soothes hypocritically as she pours another cup of jasmine, Rukia’s to go to comfort drink when she’s like this.

“Men are fucking assholes,” Rukia snaps, before taking a large gulp of the scalding liquid. How she doesn’t burn her tongue I’ll never know.

“Complete and utter assholes,” I agree with a solemn nod.

“Exactly! The nerve of him, telling me I look tired. I’d like to see him look perky with a kunai jammed into his stomach.”

“It’s the curse of being a woman,” Tori continues to soothe hypocritically. Not that I have any room to talk. We’re both part of the happy minority that isn’t bothered by our periods in the slightest. Unlike Rukia.

Most of the time, she isn’t that bothered by them either. However, every so often, they’re agonizing to the point where it makes her hate everyone who doesn’t have a womb, and thus, who can’t understand the pain she’s going through.

She’s hilarious when she’s like this. Yes, I also feel bad for her, this is obviously horrible for her, but again, I can’t truly relate. I only had minor cramps at worst myself, and even those disappeared after I started taking birth control. Say what you will about Konoha, but their contraceptive medicine is amazing. The benefits of living in a society obsessed with blood purity.

“The worst part is that he actually tried to put me on reparations. What, I’m suddenly an invalid just because I’m leaking like a sieve?”

“How dare he,” I agree instead of pointing out that she doesn’t, in fact, perform to her usual standards of perfection when she’s like this. Given that her mood doesn’t affect Shiro’s own perfectionism in any way, they always fight when she’s like this. Which always ends with Rukia coming to me and Tori to vent. Renji, with wisdom gained from long experience, always makes himself scarce in order to escape his sister's wrath.
“I know! Men are the worst,” Rukia continues to rant. Tori and I, being the good friends we are, allow her to vent to her heart’s content.

Sometimes friendship means you have to resist the urge to tease and lend a sympathetic ear instead.

No matter how hilarious your friend is being.

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"This is unacceptable behavior."

I manage to keep an insolent smile on my face instead of grinning with glee.

"The stains will never get out!"

Still smiling insolently. And giving another appreciative glance at the discolored spots across the blackboard. The splatter radius is very impressive.

"If he does something like this again, he’ll be suspended."

Now that I can’t let go unanswered.

"You're completely right, Iruka,” I say with as much sincerity as I’m capable of faking right now. Which isn’t much. “Permanent damage is unacceptable. I’ll make sure he only uses removable paint from now on."

The strangled sound he lets out is beautiful.

"That's not the point!"

Naruto is right, Iruka’s voice can go surprisingly high. I manage to give him a confused look instead of cackling with glee.

"It's not?"

"He shouldn't have put paint bombs in my desk in the first place!” he continues, voice no longer quite so high but still just as rattled. His reaction just makes everything so much better, it really does.

It’s not that I don’t like Iruka, I do. While he was an idiot at first, he got over it surprisingly quickly, and ever since then he’s been a good teacher to the brat.

But this is just beautiful.

“You're his guardian, discipline him,” he orders with the kind of authority only a ninja can have.

Under these circumstances, it doesn’t affect me in the slightest.

"Really, Iruka, if an academy student managed to catch a fully trained ninja like yourself off guard, I think he should be rewarded for his skill, not punished. It’s a credit to your teachings that he succeeded."

Iruka drops his head into his hands with despair.

Absolutely beautiful.
I'm back.

Perfect timing! Today is a beautiful day.

How so?

Naruto managed to prank his teacher. He managed to trick an adult ninja! Even better, he did it by doing exactly what Iruka taught him! I'm so proud. He's a little genius, he really is.

My curiosity is roused.

It was one of the most wonderful experiences of my life. My only regret is that I saw the aftermath instead of the direct result.

Tell me more.

Later. Let’s celebrate your return first.

So demanding. Maybe I'm not in the mood.

Well, I certainly wouldn't want to force you to do anything against your will. Such a shame, though. I was planning on giving you a demonstration. Just to refresh your memory on how I like to be touched of course.

“My mood might be open to change.”

I trail my lips down his back, enjoying the warmth of his skin. Halting my exploration as I encounter irregular skin, I bring up a hand to trace along the edges.

Such a long, jagged scar. I slide my tongue across.

"So what did he do?" His voice is lazy and satisfied. The bastard so adores basking in the afterglow as well. We really should've used the blindfold from the start.

"He was taught the basics of traps last week and the brat has been enamored ever since. He even used his precious pocket money to buy some material so he could experiment. It's probably been cleaned up already, but there were a few bushes with interesting colors in the park."

I recount the circumstances leading up to this beautiful day with a smile. He lets out an encouraging hum.

“He made some paint bombs and tried to hide them in his bag without me noticing. I did notice of course, the brat is the opposite of subtle. But he gave his word that he was only going to target Iruka, and a grown ninja should be able to defend himself against the pranks of a brat. So I allowed him to take them to school. And the little genius sneaked back into class during recess and put the paint bombs inside Iruka's desk."

My smile keeps growing with every word I say. This was beautiful.

"Where exactly did he place them?" he asks with a kind of open curiosity I rarely hear. Should've
known the bastard would enjoy this.

"That's the best part. He hid one in every drawer. And Iruka got hit by two." Just a few splatters of course, Iruka is still a ninja, but he got hit by two.

He laughs in the way only happy hormones can inspire and I have to join in myself. Naruto really is a little genius.

"I'm so proud of him." If the brat is already capable of tricking fully trained ninja now, he’ll be able to trick the villains that are going to come after him as well. Of course he will. He’s the hero, he’s going to defeat any who stands in his way.

God, please, let him be quick, clever, strong enough – sudden movement. When I finish working through my disorientation, I realize that I’m lying flat on my back and that he’s holding himself above me, his warmth a delicious tease.

"You've taught him well."

I grin and blindly twine my arms around his neck, accepting his kindly offered distraction.

"I can't take all the credit," I brag in a tone that means I'm doing just that. He chuckles.

"Still, very well done. In fact, this deserves a reward."

Well, after eight days of him being gone, I’m certainly up for another round if he is. Bless ninja stamina.

"If you insist."

"But nee-chan!"

"No buts." Honestly, why does he still try this? Granted, it doesn’t happen often anymore, but still. He knows I won’t budge on this.

"They're vegetables," the brat says like they’re rotten eggs instead of healthy food.

"As they are every time," I counter without mercy.

"I want ramen!" he shouts petulantly. He’s in a difficult mood today.

Thanks to the return of mind blowing orgasms, I can handle it with ease.

"And if you eat all of your dinner, there might even be a slight chance that I'll make some tomorrow."

Naruto turns on the puppy power. I take a bite of rice, completely unmoved, not wavering in the slightest. I have built up much resistance.

God, can’t make that sound even a little believable. But I am strong. I will endure.

Naruto adds a pout. I meet those lethal weapons full on to show him he has less than zero chance of convincing me to change my mind.
The brat drops the act with a scowl as he realizes I won’t budge. Then he sighs like he’s about to announce the end of the world.

"Fine." He looks down at his dinner with a grimace. Slowly, he picks up a few soybeans, before he puts them in his mouth with a disgusted expression and chews as fast as he can. He swallows them down and shudders with revulsion.

I grin. Such a dramatic little brat.

I’ll reward him by making ramen tomorrow.

He releases another doomsday sigh and gives a sullen look that asks, *there, you happy now?*

I smirk back, *yes I am.*

Naruto scowls but it’s soon replaced by a thoughtful expression. He turns the puppy power back on.

Five-to-one odds he’s about to beg for sugar.

"Can I have cookies for dessert?"

Bingo.

"Maaaybe." I drawl back. The brat releases another dramatic sigh.

"I'll eat all my vegetables." he says like it’s the greatest concession in the world. I grin.

"Deal. One, no more." I am not having the brat hyped up on sugar. Never if possible, but especially not at this hour. Getting him ready for bed is difficult enough as it is.

The brat visibly debates with himself on whether to wheedle for an additional cookie or not. He really is in a difficult mood. Not because anything bad happened, I would’ve heard all about it if that was the case. He’s just being difficult because he’s a brat.

I give him a warning look. He’s been pushy the entire day, and while it’s more amusing than anything else, that doesn’t mean I’m going to reward this kind of behavior.

Naruto pouts petulantly but bows down to the law. Excellent.

"Mary-nee, why does the cat get human food?" he decides to change the subject.

"Because he likes it."

"But he’s a cat and cats get cat food!"’ the brat exclaims with a firm nod, convinced of his own logic. “Don’t they?” he finishes in a way that means he expects me to agree. I give a solemn nod in return.

"Most of the time, yes." Logic like this needs to be rewarded even when talking about metaphorical cats. “However, cats, and stray cats in particular, are an odd and curious breed,” I continue with a smile that really wants to turn into a grin. I manage to prevent that from happening. If I grin, Naruto will think that I’m making fun of him, and I can’t have that. I’m telling him the truth after all. “They act in ways difficult, sometimes even impossible to understand. And this specific cat likes human food."

Though he dislikes sweet or fried things. Picky bastard.

Naruto squints at the untouched dinner on the bookcase, thinking about something so deeply I can
hear his brain work overtime.

"...How can the cat use chopsticks?"

I laugh, caught off guard in the best of ways. The brat is adorable.

"Nee-chan!" he exclaims, offended at my reaction.

"I've never seen him eat, so I don’t know how he does it." I answer with a grin I can no longer contain. As expected, Naruto gives me a suspicious look, trying to determine whether I’m telling the truth or making fun of him.

"But you leave chopsticks! That means you think he eats with chopsticks!" he accuses instead of blindly saying that I’m making fun of him. His skill at logical reasoning has improved with leaps and bounds lately. I’m so proud.

"I do indeed leave chopsticks,” I confirm with an admittedly awful attempt at a solemn nod. I’m unable to stop grinning. “But I do that because, well, if the cat likes human food, maybe he also likes eating the human way. It’s only polite to give him the option.”

Naruto’s confusion is hilarious. Then he shrugs and accepts this. I lean over to ruffle his hair.

My brat is the cutest of them all.

---

I have a request.

Oh?

Can you trick the brat into thinking a real cat broke in again?

Can, yes. Will, perhaps. I’m going to need more information before agreeing to anything.

Isn’t he hilarity of the brat’s reaction incentive enough?

It would be, if that was your only reason for asking.

Should’ve known it wouldn’t be that easy. Not that I’m desperate to hide the main reason for asking this, but given his allergy to mushy feelings, I’m betting he won’t be pleased with this.

Oh well. He’s the one who asked.

He missed you.

As expected, the note doesn’t teleport. I knew this was going to make his allergies act up.

I patiently wait for him to answer. Yet when the expected time passes and the note still hasn’t moved, I can’t help but become a little worried. Apparently his allergies are stronger than expected. I honestly didn’t think the brat missing him would cause a reaction as severe as this.

I’m starting to fear that he might’ve actually left. It’s only happened twice, but every time it has, it’s been prompted by the appearance of mushy feelings. I really hope that he’s still here instead. I also really hope that he’ll agree to do this.
Naruto truly has missed him. Not that he was suffering while the bastard was gone, but he’d perk up every time I started making dinner, and he always turned so disappointed when I didn’t put a meal aside. It would’ve been funny how much the bastard’s absence was affecting him if it wasn’t so heartbreaking.

Tonight, Naruto had lit up when he’d realized ‘the cat’ was back. It had even been enough to pull him out of his moodiness. For a short while, at least.

Given that the bastard is going to be gone more often than not, having another encounter with the cat would mean the world to him.

When the note finally teleport, I immediately snatch it up.

*I suppose I could be persuaded to indulge your request.*

I grin, so happy his allergies didn’t win out.

*Your generosity knows no bounds.*

*I wouldn’t go that far. Like I said, I need to be persuaded first.*

*Any suggestion on how to do that?*

“I’m sure I’ll be able to come up with something.”

I continue exploring the scar crossing his shoulder with one of my hands.

"Why do you never ask?"

The question makes a hoarse snort escape.

"Because for some reason I have this impression that you're not the type who enjoys sharing things about himself." My voice makes the dessert seem wet. He chuckles, the feeling of his laughter beneath my hand a pleasant sensation.

"Not curious?"

"So immensely curious," I admit without hesitation. Who wouldn’t be?

I’m aware that my curiosity is morbid and I don’t care in the slightest. I also don’t ask. It’s one thing to push each other’s buttons, nothing more than harmless teasing. It’s something else entirely to pry at old wounds.

Everyone has scars. No one likes it when they’re picked at uninvited.

"That one was caused by a water jutsu."

I freeze. Then I grin. So hard.

Uninvited is one thing, invited is another. I return to exploring the scar. The scar caused by a magical water attack.

"Really?” I mean, really? How do you even use water to create a scar like this? It’s not that I don’t
believe him, it’s just, well. How?

"Really. Got sliced with a water whip that cut through my armor like it wasn’t even there,” he kindly explains my unspoken question. “It took weeks to get back my full range of mobility.”

No matter that I was the one who asked, I know I would’ve been horrified if he’d told me this at any other time. With the happy hormones coursing through me, I can only laugh. The way he said that is exactly why ninja are insane. He gets sliced up by a magical water whip, and it’s important only in how it affects his ‘range of mobility’.

"I've said it before and I'll say it again. I'll say it again many, many times. Ninja are insane." This needs to be said. A lot.

He chuckles. I shake my head with a grin.

I live in a world ruled by magical ninja. And I’m sleeping with one of them. Without knowing his name or what he looks like.

How is this my life?

"How fares your cat?"

My head snaps up – I curse as tea spills all over the counter and quickly right the kettle. Recovering from my shock, I look up again to meet Itachi’s eyes. His expression is placid as ever, a tranquil gaze meeting my own. I can’t help the wry twist of my lips. Of course he knows.

"Sasuke told you?" Can’t imagine how else he found out. Then again, ninja.

“Indeed. He was adamant that Naruto must be lying. Sasuke doesn’t believe it possible for a cat to be ‘so sneaky’” The quotation comes through loud and clear. “–that he’s been seen only twice.”

I roll my eyes, even as my smile stays.

“Right,” I say, refusing to elaborate. Itachi has the annoying habit of getting a lot more information out of my answers than I like. All ninja do, but Itachi is especially good at it. While I’m aware that my silence is giving him additional information as well, it’s still better than saying something out loud.

“She’s playing a prank on him,” Tori explains, undoing all my hard work. I can’t help but hope her words will be enough to satisfy Itachi’s curiosity, no matter that I know it won’t be.

“Has been for months now,” Renji joins the betrayal of confidence with a grin, amused at the brat’s expense. As always, hearing him talk about Naruto like the asshole he is makes a warm glow rise, despite the fact that this is a topic I’d really like to avoid.

I grab a towel and start cleaning the mess I made, not contributing to the conversation in an effort to keep Itachi at bay.

“Indeed. I believe Sasuke first started mentioning your cat at the end of October.”

The effort was in vain.

Tori giggles.
More specifically, the prank started—oh.” Tori’s stunned exclamation is followed by bright laughter. Damn it, she knows. “It’s not a prank, it’s—”

She falls silent abruptly. Even without looking at her, I know she’s giving Itachi a telling glance. Because that isn’t suspicious at all.

Renji laughs like the asshole he is when he figures it out as well. I’m never going to hear the end of this.

“Seriously? Your cat?”

Renji’s glee comes through loud and clear. I give in to the inevitable and look up. Renji’s grin is even more gleeful than it sounded.

“It fits,” I retort and curse myself for the defensive way that comes out.

Renji’s grin grows, showing exactly how much he’s never going to let this go.

“You always did have a weakness for strays.”

“Excuse you, I have a weakness for cuteness,” I correct, not amused by his teasing.

Well. Maybe I’m a little amused.

“So you think he’s cute?” Renji twists my words, looking like the cat that ate the canary. The similarities with Rukia are undeniable at times like these.

I glare to show just how unwelcome his teasing is. Naturally, Renji’s grin grows even more satisfied.

“Wait, wait,” Tori interrupts in a voice full of merriment, drawing both our attention. “Naruto saw him? As in, he saw— a cat?” she corrects with another not suspicious at all glance at Itachi.

Itachi, of course, doesn’t react in the slightest. He’s amazing at acting like he didn’t investigate this whole thing for his own amusement. I suppose I should be grateful Shisui isn’t with him, a rare occurrence indeed. Shisui would never shut up about this.

Shisui’s absence also means that Itachi didn’t tell him about the bastard. That I do feel true gratitude for. In Konoha, not sharing gossip is the greatest courtesy anyone can give.

“Saw, is a bit of an exaggeration,” I give in to their questioning. I can’t help but grin when recalling what happened. “He spotted a moving shadow and felt fur brush his leg.”

To no surprise, the brat had been over the moon the second time it happened as well. He hasn’t been able to shut up about both his encounters with ‘the cat’ since then. While his inability to keep quiet did lead to the reveal of who the cat is to my friends, I can’t feel even the slightest bit of regret.

Not when Naruto has been a literal ball of sunshine ever since.

Renji shakes his head wryly.

“I can’t believe you actually managed to, ah. Tame a stray cat,” he delivers it’s supposed to be the height of witiness and wags his brows in the most ridiculous of ways.

“It’s not so surprising. You are an exemplary guardian to Naruto, after all.”

Itachi’s placid quip draws all our attention. Given that the cat is officially out of the bag so to speak, I
raise a sarcastic brow.

“I’m so happy you approve.” Seriously, I managed to keep the whole cat thing secret for months, and with just a few well placed sentences, Itachi has ruined it. On purpose. Because it amuses him.

My reply makes Itachi’s lips twitch with his version of a smile, entirely too pleased with himself. Damn ninja.

“And those two things are related because...” Renji drawls. Itachi turns placid eyes towards him.

"Many couples first attempt taking care of a pet to see if they are capable of raising a child together." His gaze slides towards Tori. "Have you considered getting a pet?"

Tori **chokes**. I stare.

No. She would've told. Right? Right.

"I'm getting back to work, those numbers won't balance themselves!" Tori flees into the kitchen.

...No. No, she would've told. She would have. This is Tori, she always tells.

Still.

I turn towards Renji with a raised brow, silently asking if he knows anything about this.

Renji lets out a long suffering sigh, the act ruined by the warm look he gives the kitchen door. He chuckles and gives me a playful wink, before walking to the table Hikari and Akira are seated at. Escaping the possibility of being interrogated about this. I grin.

He absolutely does know whether Tori has a new boyfriend or not. Shiro and Rukia, on the other hand, don’t. Those two gossips would’ve never been able to keep it to themselves. I shake my head. Whether or not she has a new boyfriend, Tori will tell when she’s good and ready. After which I will tease her endlessly for keeping this from us.

Looking back at Itachi, I see him calmly sipping his tea. As if he didn’t distract those two on purpose. My smile grows. Despite the fact that he was the one who revealed who my cat is, I’m still grateful for his assistance. Enough that I decide to indulge his curiosity a bit.

"The cat thing really is a prank. And the cat enjoys playing it very much."

Itachi’s lips twitch with another smile. I smile back and change the subject to Sasuke's and Naruto's upcoming graduation, unwilling to reveal anything more. Having gotten what he wanted, Itachi allows it.

Really, you’d never be able to guess just how mischievous Itachi is from looking at him. Or how nosy.

Ninja.

---

"I did it, I did it, I did it, dattebayo!"

"Hell yeah you did. High five."
Naruto jumps up and loudly smacks Renji's hand, before he resumes bouncing around like a hyperactive ball of sunshine. I'm so proud of him. He kicked ass and passed his exams with flying colors. Even the written portion was well in the green zone. Oh, his theoretical scores were low overall, but he still passed within a comfortable margin.

Tonight, we celebrate by going out for ramen. Or rather, Shiro and Tori are getting ramen while the brat bounces around the Dancing Dragon, to Renji's and Rukia's great amusement. Taking the brat to a restaurant and forcing him to sit still right now would just be cruel. Also physically impossible.

"I did it, nee-chan, I really, really did!"


He's the most amazing brat in the world.

---

*He did well.*

*He did amazing.*

*I don't know if I'd go that far.*

*That's because you're a bastard. If you have the nerve to insult him in any way tonight, I'm kicking you out.*

*Well, we can't have that.*

*Then don't be a bastard. He did amazing.*

*He did.*

*Much better.*

*Needs to keep working on his theoretical skills, but he's well above average when it comes to the physical part.*

*You really can't help yourself, can you?*

*I'll have you know that was a sincere compliment.*

*Do I even want to know what you consider a genuine insult?*

*What can I say, I have high standards.*

*Insanely high, apparently.*

"There are advantages to being a perfectionist."

"Funny, I don't see any from where I'm standing."

"Allow me to offer a demonstration."

---
"Why do you keep saying that?" It's an idle question.

"Because it's the truth." It's a blunt statement of fact. He chuckles.

"But why the word insane? My feelings are hurt."

"Poor you."

His fingers keep stroking down my back, his callouses rough but his touch so very gentle. A delicious contrast that's perfect after the previous heat and urgency.

"No reason at all?"

I smile, amused and in the mood to elaborate, courtesy of many happy hormones.

"It's mostly meant in the way I sometimes have real trouble understanding the way you think. You see the world in such a strange way."

He halts his caressing. Apparently I've managed to surprise him. Go me.

Honestly though, having real magic at your command? Screwing the very laws of physics? A life of constant secrecy and battle?

No wonder ninja are insane.

"I see the world in a strange way?" he demands, more incredulous than I've ever heard him be.

"And that right there is why I call you insane." It really is. The bastard can’t even imagine not living like that.

His fingers resume their lazy caressing. I feel like purring with contentment.

"No really, I?"

I laugh.

"All right, convince me. Why is my way of thinking stranger than yours? As a writer I need to know. Characterization makes or breaks a story after all." This should be good.

"You are sleeping with your surveillance watch. You have been for months. Without knowing what he looks like."

Oh he walked right into that one.

"And you were the one who started it."

His laugh is startled in a way it’s only been a handful of times. Another point to me. I shift my arms more comfortably beneath my pillow and shuffle even closer to him. The feeling of his skin against mine is delicious.


"This must really be bothering you," I realize with growing delight. It's so rare for him to be genuinely bothered by something.

He continues his gentle caressing and doesn’t reply. I’m so right about this bothering him. I chuckle
and decide to be nice.

"Unlike ninja, I believe in respecting people’s privacy. As long as you aren’t hurting me, you can be as insane as your paranoid little heart desires. Though I’ll admit that the mind blowing orgasms make it a lot easier to deal with your many quirks."

His caressing reaches my neck, making me relax even further.

Honestly though, it’s true. He might be an insane bastard but he’s never hurt me, or anyone I care about. He’s never made me feel unsafe either. And he could. So easily.

He never has.

The bastard is a good friend. With very nice benefits.

The least I can do is respect his quirks in return.

“You don’t mind just because you’re being bribed with sex?” he quips like the question isn’t important. The very fact that he’s still on the subject betrays that it is.

Really, he’s acting like I’m the one who initiated the anonymity clause.

"You're overthinking this,” I inform him. “Some things are simple. Such as the fact that two people who have brain melting sex experience much mutual pleasure.”

"You are shameless.” He sounds so very amused.

"Damn straight,” I agree without hesitation, before taking a moment to think that through. “Well, mostly shameless,” I amend. “I have some very odd buttons that set me off.”

In general, I find shame to be overrated. Imagine all the fun I would’ve missed if I had any. Well, if I had much of it.

His fingers gently comb through my hair, making me wish I could purr like a cat. I adore basking in the afterglow with someone.

"Just that simple?"

I smile.

"Just that simple."

I continue pretending to read, but in reality I’m keeping an amused eye on the proceedings happening by the coffee table.

"Stop fidgeting."

"She's taking too long."

"It's supposed to take so long."

"She's still stirring, she—"
"Sakura is doing it perfectly. We were taught this in kunoichi class, you don't get those, so you can’t
tell if she’s taking too long or not. I can.” Ino actually flips her hair while looking down her nose at
Sasuke, daring him to disagree with her. Sasuke crosses his arms with annoyance and an adorable
pout, but he keeps quiet.

It’s amazing how well Ino is already capable of making people bow down to her every whim. She’s
going to be terrifying after she grows up.

The brat keeps ignoring their argument, still watching with starry eyes as Sakura continues to stir the
tea just so. She finally puts down the chasen and very carefully fills one cup. She gives it the correct
number of turns and turns a shy gaze towards the others. After a moment of hesitation, she picks up
the cup.

She offers it to Naruto.

I can actually see the brat's heartbeat stutter, his cheeks bursting into flames. He gains a small
smile that somehow manages to outshine the sun itself and accepts the offering as though it’s the
most precious thing in the entire world, looking at his crush as though she just hung up the moon and
the stars. It makes Sakura’s cheeks turn rosy and she lowers her gaze with embarrassment, but she’s
smiling with bashful delight as well.

I lift my book a little higher to hide my grin and somehow manage to contain the laughter that wants
to break free. This will never ever get old.

It’s a shame the bastard isn’t around to enjoy this.

I stare at the scene before me with utter shock.

"My eyes!"

Rukia’s horrified exclamation reboots my brain. I close the jaw that has apparently fallen open
without my notice.

"It's not what it looks like!" Renji actually tries to deny while pulling up his pants, panicked eyes
locked onto his sister.

"What?" Tori exclaims indignantly, halting the straightening of her skirt. “What do you mean by
that?"

When the hell did this happen?

"How long has this been going on?” I demand, still trying and failing to process the obvious. I glance
at the people besides me to check if they’re sharing the same hallucination as me.

They are. Well, one of them is. Shiro is staring at Renji and Tori with the blankest of expressions, his
version of utter shock. Rukia, one the other hand, isn't seeing the same hallucination we are. Because
she's covered her eyes with her hands, every part of her radiating pure horror.

"Are you denying this? Us?” Tori’s demand draws my attention back to the impossibility happening
in front of me. My shock starts to make way for amusement. A lot of amusement.

“No, I just--”
“My eyes!” Rukia wails, interrupting Renji before he can recover from the grave mistake of trying to deny the obvious.

"Why didn't you tell us?" I ask, a grin starting to grow. This is just perfect.

Once again, my question is ignored.

"Are you ashamed of me?" Tori demands, glaring at Renji and completely ignoring the fact that her blouse is still wide open.

"No!" he denies in a hilariously panicked way, gaze flickering between Tori and Rukia. He's rattled in a way I've never seen him be.

"I can never unsee this, never," Rukia swears, still not daring to uncover her eyes.

"And on the counter?" I ask, barely managing to resist the urge to laugh. “Really?"

I never could’ve imagined they’d do something this unhygienic. I never could’ve imagined they’d do something like this at all, but especially not here of all places.

"Then what's with the denial?" Tori demands, still ignoring everyone but Renji.

Renji scowls, finally starting to recover from his panic.

"Excuse me for not wanting my sister to catch us in the act."

---

*I'm back.*

**Renji and Tori are a thing.**

*Since shortly after the beginning of the new year.*

**That long? Those assholes. Want to help me work off some of my frustration?**

"I thought you'd never ask."

I don’t even have time to turn around before my surroundings turn into a blur.

---

Wow.

Mind a fraction clearer.

Wow.

Trying to catch my breath.

I mean wow.

Sounds of rustling fabric. There’s something wrong with that. I just can’t figure out what.

With a huge amount of effort, I manage to focus through the tsunami of happy hormones.
I’m alone on the bed.

What?

"You're leaving?" The bastard always stays for the afterglow ever since the blindfold's gotten involved. This... can't be good.

He doesn’t answer but I keep hearing the sound of shifting clothing. He has to be doing that deliberately because I swear the bastard moves more quietly the further he relaxes.

What happened on his mission? No, I won’t ask, I will never ask. Because he's a ninja, a soldier, a trained assassin. Because his life is filled with violence and danger. I don’t have the right to pry at his wounds.

He wouldn't let me even if I did.

However, the bastard is a friend. I have the right to be worried. I also have the right to offer comfort.

"...Tomorrow's Sunday, the brat doesn't need to be woken up. I also have the afternoon shift." The sounds of rustling fabric halts. "Want to make sure I sleep in late?"

Bare skin pressed against mine, a hand tangling through my hair, tilting back my head. I shiver.

Unconventional, maybe, but the least I can do is offer him a distraction from whatever is haunting him. I don’t know whether I’m going to praise or regret this decision in the morning.

Lips trailing down my shoulder, gentle and soft. Then he bites down hard, flirting with the very edge of true pain. I let out a strangled moan.

Probably going to be both.

“Nee-chan, are you even listening?"

“The bastard is stupid,” I parrot back, the name pulling me out of my musings.

“...Okay. So I said he was being stupid, and then he got angry and told me I can’t do any better, but I can so do better, so I--”

I continue listening to the brat’s chatter with half an ear, occasionally letting out a vaguely interested noise.

Most of me is already worrying about the bastard again.

He didn’t stay beyond that one night. I don’t know whether it’s because he got a new mission or because he wants to be alone.

I wish he was still here. Wish I could do something to make him feel better. I probably can’t do more than offer a distraction, but that’s better than doing nothing. I hope he returns soon. It’s only been four days but already it feels so much longer. I’m pretty sure that time will keep slowing down with every day that passes. I get that he might want to be alone for awhile, I really do, and of course he should stay away for as long as he needs to, but...

But I have to know that he’s all right. Or at least that he’s getting better.
"What's gotten your head in the clouds this time?"

"I'm just wondering how I could've missed the fact that you and Tori have been hooking up right under our noses for months."

Renji rolls his eyes, not amused by me bringing up this topic yet again. Tough luck. I wasn't exaggerating about endlessly teasing Tori for keeping this from us. The fact that I can endlessly tease Renji about it as well is just a perfect bonus. It also offers a delightful opportunity to take revenge for his own inability to stop teasing me about the bastard.

"There's a reason we kept quiet about it, you know."

"It's just so obvious now," I continue, cheerfully ignoring his words. "You suddenly getting along with Naruto, Tori almost singing at work. How did I miss the fact that you're both regularly getting laid? And how did I fail to realize you're getting laid with each other?"

"You're astonishingly oblivious when it comes to romance," he answers my rhetorical question. I keep ignoring his words.

"That's not even mentioning all the times you two had mysterious plans that just happened to take place at the same time." I shake my head with a mocking smile. "How could I have been so blind?"

"By being astonishingly oblivious," he mocks back with an annoyed look, but there's a hint of a smile tugging at his lips as well. Only a hint, though.

"Really, how could you two keep this from us?" I ask without bothering to contain my grin.

"Very easily."

"And here I thought we were friends."

The annoyed sigh he lets out makes my grin grow.

"If you're going to be like this, I'm going to help Tori with the inventory."

"Is that the only thing you're going to be helping her with?" I pounce on the opening. Renji rolls his eyes and flees into the kitchen without bothering to come up with a retort. I chuckle. Revenge is sweet.

My mood soon drops after he's gone, though. I sigh.

I lied, Renji's relationship with Tori isn't what has me so distracted. Well, it does have me distracted, but for the most part I just...

I can't stop worrying about him.

---

*I'm back.*
And I’m so happy he is. I’ve been worried sick about him. The past eighteen days have been some of the longest of my life.

Seeing as he won’t like to hear about my mushy feelings, I pick a safer topic to talk about.

_The brat tried to prank Iruka again. Unfortunately, he failed._

*Well, he is just an academy student.*

I narrow my eyes, worry joined by indignity.

**And what’s that supposed to mean?**

Is he saying that Naruto is incapable of pranking Iruka? Do I need to remind him that the brat has already succeeded once? So what if he failed this time. He’ll get Iruka next time.

*It means there’s a significant gap in skill between him and a chunin.*

**Need I remind you that he’s already succeeded in pranking him once?**

And I was very impressed by that. Doesn’t change the fact that he’s going to fail a lot more often than not from now on. He’s lost the element of surprise.

**So what, he should just give up? He’s clever and determined. He’ll find new ways to trick Iruka.**

I didn’t say he should give up. This is good training for him. He just shouldn’t expect to succeed every time. Or even most of the time. He’s not exactly a prodigy.

Oh hell no, he did not just insult my brat like that.

*One day you will eat those words. He’s going to be the most amazing ninja there ever was or will be.*

And it has nothing to do with him being the hero of the story. Naruto is a genius. An unconventional one, true, but a genius nonetheless.

*So defensive. I’m even sensing some real hostility.*

I roll my eyes. Like he didn’t provoke me on purpose.

I’m so glad he’s back to his usual bastard self.

**Your powers of observation will never cease to amaze me.**

“I can think of a few other ways to amaze you.”

After my usual violent twitch, I turn around with an unimpressed look that’s ruined by my inability to contain a smile.

Today his hair is brown and spiky.

“After insulting the brat like that, I’m not inclined to be impressed by anything you do.”

“Allow me to make you reconsider that opinion.”
“What do you suggest he should do?”

“Hmm?” His hum is laze and satisfied. I continue tracing the small scar on the inside of his thigh. His own hand is gently gliding down my hip. Which is unusual. Normally he either lets me explore his scars, or he caresses me while I'm a boneless pile of happy hormones. It's rare for him to allow both at the same time.

I'm so glad he's feeling better.

“Naruto. Do you have any advice for future pranks?” I clarify. Mostly I'm no longer bothered by his slight against the brat, but even the happy hormones aren't enough to make me let go of it completely. If he has the nerve to insult my brat, the least he can do is offer some advice on how to improve.

“Team up with at least one other person,” he answers without hesitation, a pleasant surprise. Given his previous behavior, I thought he was going to keep being a bastard about this. For a little while, at least.

It’s also great advice. Why didn’t I think of this myself?

“He’ll definitely be able to get Sasuke to join. He just needs to make it a dare and Sasuke won’t be able to resist.” Sakura and Ino will be more tricky, though. “Sakura, I’m not sure. She doesn’t like to break the rules, but at the same time, she does enjoy the chaos of Naruto’s pranks. It’ll depend on what Ino does. And knowing Ino, she won’t agree without the brat offering some kind of bribe.” Well, bribe is a strong word. She’ll probably demand an unspecified favor to be paid somewhere in the future. Ino is is already frighteningly shrewd like that.

“With four to one, their odds of success improve immensely. Depending on their strategy of course. They’ll still fail without a good one,” he delivers like there’s no way Naruto will be able to come up with anything even remotely decent.

“I’m sure the brat will come up with something amazing,” I say in a warning tone. I will not allow him to insult the brat again.

“He’s not exactly subtle.” The bastard ignores my warning completely. I scrape my nails down his thigh. Not painfully but definitely hard enough to be felt. The only indicator of him being affected are the sudden goosebumps on the arm I'm using as a pillow.

It took me a long time to realize that goosebumps are a sign of him being ticklish.

“He’s creative,” I retort, scowling in his general direction.

“He’s glaringly obvious. Even you aren’t as transparent.”

I try to scrape my nails down his thigh again but this time his hand captures my own before I can. When I lift my other hand to take vengeance anyway, sudden movement prevents me from succeeding. After working through my disorientation, I realize that I’m sitting on his lap and that he’s holding my hands captive behind my back.

“It’s not nice to take advantage of someone’s vulnerable state like this,” he chides like he didn’t provoke me on purpose.

“It’s not nice to act like a bastard either, but that’s never stopped you,” I retort, my faint annoyance
joined by much less faint anticipation.

The anticipation is obliterated when he pokes my ribs, making me yelp with involuntary laughter, a reaction I can never help despite the fact that there’s nothing funny about this at all. I despise being tickled. Which the bastard knows, so why the hell is he doing this? This is one of the worst mood killers there is.

“I will kick you out, don’t think I won’t,” I warn with a fierce glare, not caring in the slightest that the effect is ruined by the blindfold.

“That would require you to be able to kick me,” he patronizes like the bastard he is.

Taking up the challenge, I try to do just that, despite the difficulty of doing so in my current position.

Naturally, the bastard rolls us over before I can succeed, trapping my legs with his own and pulling up my hands in the same smooth movement, holding them captive above my head.

“My, aren’t we violent today,” he says, not bothering to hide just how funny he thinks my reaction is. Bastard.

“My, aren’t we annoying today,” I counter, even as I can’t help but feel amusement as well. He really is in a mood. A very difficult one.

Despite the fact that it’s at my expense, I’m relieved. This is so much better than his previous behavior.

I’m glad that he’s managed to recover from whatever was haunting him.

Mostly recover.

He has a new scar. It’s low on his stomach, a thin cut I don’t know the exact size of.

He moved my hand away when I tried to trace it.

“I’m feeling so attacked right now,” he declares with mock hurt.

“Poor you.”

He pokes my ribs again, obliterating all traces of relief. That complete and utter bastard.

“Tickle me again and you can kiss any chance of another round goodbye.”

“Is that a challenge?”

Oh hell no.

“It’s a fact,” I snap because I will kick him out if he dares to do it again. I’m not exaggerating in the slightest about this being a mood killer.

I tense up when I feel his hand caress my ribs.

He wouldn’t.

I yelp with laughter that isn’t funny at all because he would, oh, he absolutely would, that complete and utter bastard.
“You absolute bastard,” I curse through helpless laughter, trying and failing to get free and he’s *still* tickling me and I swear I’m going to hurt him *so much*.

He halts his assault with a laugh, only enraging me further.

“Get off me!”

The words have barely left my mouth before both his weight and the blindfold are gone. I’m left blinking rapidly as I try to adjust to the sudden return of my sight, before sitting up and looking around.

He’s gone. Of course he is.

I drop back down my pillow with a groan. Yes, I would’ve kicked him out anyway, but him leaving of his own free will ruins the any trace of satisfaction I would’ve felt from doing it myself. Which is why he did it of course. Bastard.

I can already tell this visit is going to be his most annoying one yet.

As long as it means he’s no longer hurting, I can live with that.

“Is something the matter?”

“He’s being a bastard.” I blink with surprise as I realize what I just said. Huh. Apparently he’s annoying me more than I thought if I’m actually willing to talk about it. And I already considered myself to be incredibly annoyed indeed.

Insulting the brat and tickling me was just the tip of the iceberg. He’s only gotten worse since then.

“I’m intrigued. What could he have done to break your reluctance to talk about him?” Shiro returns with a raised brow and slightly upturned lips, far too entertained by my uncharacteristic behavior.

“He had the nerve to call the ending of my new story *predictable*.” Just saying the words out loud is enough to make me scowl. That bastard, daring to say that it’s *obvious* that the god damn hero of the *story* is going to win. Newsflash, that’s the entire point! I write fantasy, not tragedy.

“How dare he.”

“I know!” I agree, ignoring the fact that Shiro isn’t sympathetic in the slightest. He’s a good friend however, and so he allows me to rant in peace. And because he finds it amusing to see me like this.

“He said it was *obvious* she was going to win, that there was no suspense! No suspense. You know how I long I worked on that finale? I already had to rewrite entire chapters because of the demon editor from hell, and now I’m going to have to rewrite it again because of that complete and utter bastard. I swear, if he doesn’t watch himself, I’m going to hurt him *so much*.”

The only, and I do mean the *only* reason I’m willing to give him a pass this time is because I know he’s acting like this because he still affected by whatever happened to him. But I swear, if he dares to criticize my plot or characters again, I *will* hurt him. As I’ve warned him in the strongest of terms.

Here’s to hoping he doesn’t take my warning as a dare.

Given that it’s the bastard, I’m already planning out my retaliation in explicit detail.
I enter the apartment, place my precious cargo inside a pot and close the lid, before I walk to the brat's room and put my ear against the door. I hear some faint noises. Naruto is still inside. Good.

I sigh and rub my eyes, before I start pacing in an effort to calm down.

It doesn’t work.

With a groan I drop down the couch and bury my face in a pillow.

Just... pffft.

When I feel paper materialize on my hand, I lift my head with a glare.

That complete and utter bastard. I genuinely can’t tell if the fact that he stayed makes everything worse or not. I also can’t tell if I even want to know what he has the nerve to say about this disaster. Doesn’t stop me from opening the note.

*That was extreme.*

The words inspire is the most derisive scoff I’ve ever let out. You don't say.

For a few moments, I give some serious thought to just start ranting out loud to him. Except no matter how much I want to do that, I know that’ll only get me even more worked up and I’m trying to calm down. Worse, raising my voice might draw Naruto out of his room. I really don’t want to see the brat right now.

Not after the things he said.

I sigh and grab the nearby pen that appeared together with the note, before I change my position on the couch, spreading the paper flat across my knees. If I don’t press too hard, I can write like this.

*I’m overreacting. I know I am.*

Doesn’t stop me from feeling absolutely gutted. And pissed off. So unbelievably pissed off.

I don’t fold the paper, just keep it spread open across my knees. I’m not going to make this easy for him.

His reply appears as if drawn by an invisible hand. Bastard.

*Glad to see you still have perspective.*

I scowl, unable to believe he has the nerve to act like the bastard he is even after pulling something like this.

Bringing up a hand to rub my eyes, I ignore his words and try to look at this objectively. This is normal, unavoidable. I’ve known something like this would happen the moment I took Naruto in. I know it’s going to happen again. Because this is normal.

*It's not that bad. It isn't.*

More magically appearing text.
Keep going.

I let out another sigh but force myself to keep thinking this through and write it down. Not for him, for myself. To help me work through it.

*It's not like it's the end of the world. It was just a normal, if vehement argument. The kind that's unavoidable.*

Exactly.

At least he’s trying to offer comfort in his own twisted way. Though after what he did, that’s literally the bare minimum he should do. Still, while it doesn’t make me any less angry with him, putting it all on paper does help me feel a little less gutted.

**He's just a brat, a child. This is normal.**

Of course it’s normal. Naruto is six years old. Things like this happen. Because this is normal.

*It is.*

A brat, he’s just a brat.

*I shouldn't be hurt by this.*

I am. So much.

*Of course not. He didn't mean any of it.*

**He didn't. I know he didn’t.**

But hearing my brat say such things? God, it hurts.

*If it helps, he's feeling incredibly guilty right now.*

While I’d already guessed that, getting confirmation of the fact is still nice to my sense of vengeance. Irrational and petty, yes, but right now I’ll take anything I can get.

**Really?**

*I'm literally hearing him angst.*

I can’t help the wry quirk of my lips. Of course he is.

**That does make me feel a little better.**

*He's also working very hard on transforming his second favorite frog plush into... I'm not sure what exactly, but it involves scissors, socks and paint. And a fair amount of glue.*

Why does he tell me things like this, yet not – because he's a bastard.

**See, knowing this, I now feel I should intervene.**

*I don't know, it would be a poetic apology.*

I snort. True. And I still don’t want to see the brat. Not until I finish calming down. That’s going to take a while.
But first I need to deal with the bastard.

**Why didn’t you tell me?**

No, seriously. Why?

_Because this was hilarious. And he was taking surprisingly good care of it. Three days and it was still alive, hadn’t expected that. Also didn’t expect him to be able to keep it hidden this long._

Because he’s a bastard.

**Don’t do it again. He got attached.**

_You’re right, he did._

A complete and utter bastard.

_You so wouldn’t change your decision, even if you could._

_Surprisingly enough, I’m feeling a little guilty._

_How astonishing._

_Your capacity to feel is a true marvel._

_Thank you. Honestly though, I didn’t expect the fallout to be quite this spectacular._

_Of course he didn’t. Because he’s an insane bastard._

_Six year olds and secret pets are Very Serious Business._

_Noticed._

I glare at his reply. That bastard is actually going to avoid the issue, isn’t he? Of course he is, because he’s a complete and utter bastard.

_I’m not going to let him get away with this._

_Just in case it somehow isn’t abundantly clear, I am utterly, absolutely, unbelievably pissed off at you._

_Even a blind civilian would see that._

_Good._

"Want me to apologize?"

After recovering from my violent twitch, I turn around to find him standing in his usual spot, lounging against the wall with his arms crossed, completely at ease as always. Today his hair is purple and straight.

"No," I snap, barely remembering the need to keep my voice down and unable to believe the nerve of him. He’s acting like he didn’t do anything wrong! Like he isn’t a complete and utter bastard.

“You do _not_ get orgasms after pulling something like this.”

He actually dares to let out a sigh like I’m the one who’s overreacting. It’s a good thing he’s keeping
his distance because I’m feeling the genuine urge to kick him in the balls. I don’t know whether I’d be able to resist if he came any closer.

The fact that I know I would miss no matter how much I try just pisses me off even more.

"I'll let you know if he sneaks one in again," he offers like it’s supposed to be an actual concession. I have to close my eyes, dropping my head down the couch as exasperation rises alongside my anger. That’s not a concession. It’s literally the least he should do.

Except this is the bastard. The guy who stalks us whenever he feels like it, who comes and goes as he pleases. Who shows up with the expectation of food, banter and orgasms. The person who pushes all my buttons for no other reason than that it amuses him.

I lift my head. He’s still looks completely at ease, radiating nothing but idle interest. Acting like no matter what I decide to do next, it doesn’t matter to him one way or another. I feel a helpless smile grow.

The bastard is such a damn cat.

"It's a start," I say, and we both know it means that I forgive him. I forgive him because he promised this won’t happen again. Because he honestly regrets causing this. He’s honestly feeling guilty.

He wouldn’t still be here if he wasn’t.

The bastard, in his own insane way, is trying to make up. I accept the olive branch.

Though if he ever breaks his word, I will hurt him. So much.

"And do you have any further suggestions on how to earn your forgiveness?" he returns, sounding like his usual bastard self, no sign whatsoever that he cares about my forgiveness one way or another. I feel a thoughtful frown grows at this very interesting offer. While I’ve already forgiven him and he knows it, that doesn’t mean I’m not entitled to make him grovel. All of this is his fault. So how exactly should I handle this?

...That would work.

“Of course, you'd have follow my every command exactly.”

He chuckles.

"I might be willing to go along. This time."

I snort.

"This is going to be more than just one time."

"Oh?"

"This is going to be many, many times. Because all of this could've been avoided if you had told the instant you noticed that frog. You have a lot of groveling to do,” I say with a glare to emphasize how dead serious I am about this. He straightens with his usual grace.

"Best get to it then."

“Hell no,” I immediately turn down, unable to believe the nerve of him. This is not an appropriate time for this. “You are going to get lost until I finish dealing with Naruto, and then I
expect to find you in my bedroom, ready to do whatever I tell you.”

Just saying the words out loud is enough to make giddy anticipation start to rise. Having an elite ninja obey my every command? This is going to be so much fun.

But first I need to deal with the brat.

“As the lady commands,” he quips, before vanishing in the blink of an eye. I roll my eyes, even as I can’t help a wry smile.

Ninja.

My mood drops as I turn my gaze towards Naruto’s bedroom. I sigh. Best get this over with.

Taking a deep breath, I get up, walk towards the door and knock on the door.

“Brat? Can I come in?”

“No!”

I grimace. His yell was almost panicked. But was it panicked because he doesn’t want me to see whatever he’s doing to his plush, or because he’s still angry with me?

Please don’t let him still be angry with me.

“I just want to talk,” I say, my voice coming out smaller than intended.

Naruto doesn’t answer. After what feels like an eternity, I hear footsteps come closer. The door cracks open, hesitant and fearful eyes meeting my own. Shattering my heart into a thousand pieces.

“Hey, brat,” I murmur, the only thing I can think of to say.

Naruto’s bottom lip trembles and tears fill his eyes, grinding the remaining fragments of my heart into dust. He launches himself forward and strangles my legs like weed.

“I’m sorry, Mary-nee, I’m sorry! I didn’t mean it! I don’t hate you! I love you! I love you so much, love you the most and I didn't mean it, I really didn't! I love you!”

I close my own eyes, feeling misty-eyed as well. Which is completely ridiculous. I already knew he didn’t mean it.

Doesn’t make me any less relieved to hear him say it.

“I love you too, Naruto,” I say while bending down and so I can hug him. His arms release my legs so he can strangle my neck instead. I don’t care in the slightest about how uncomfortable his embrace is.

He sniffles, tears still falling down.

“You promise?” he asks.

“I promise,” I assure him, my voice coming out more choked up than intended.

Naruto buries his head down my shoulder and starts crying in earnest. While part of me desperately wants him to stop, I know he needs the release. I hum a meaningless tune, rubbing his back as his tears soak through my shirt.
I can't help but cry a little myself. I feel a lot better after I do.

Eventually, Naruto stops crying.

“Feeling better now?” I murmur.

“Yes,” he whispers, before lifting his head and giving me an anxious look. “What about you, nee-chan? Do you feel better?”

“I do,” I say truthfully, feeling a small but true smile grow. Part of me feeling better is caused by simple relief at having Naruto no longer crying, but most is caused by having made up with him.

Naruto lets out a loud sigh of relief, the return of his usual volume soothing me further. He gives a tentative smile back.

“I’m really sorry, nee-chan,” he repeats, erasing the last of my tension.

“So am I. I shouldn’t have spoken so harshly. I won’t do it again,” I apologize as well. While I don’t regret my decision to take his pet away per se, I do regret the way I went about it. I should’ve been kinder.

"I won't say I hate you again either! I promise," he says with adorable gravity, but that doesn’t diminish the sheer effect his words have.

I never want to hear him say that to me again.

"I'm very happy to hear that," I say while nuzzling his nose. Naruto gives a small sunshine filled smile back. Then the sunshine fades.

“...Did you make sure Gama-chan’s new home is nice?” he asks in a voice smaller than I’ve ever known it to be, hurt in a way that makes guilt drown out all else.

Luckily, I know how to fix that.

“Naruto, do you understand why I took him away?” I ask instead of answering his question. I will answer it of course, but there are a few other issues I need to get out of the way first.

“...Because you don’t like frogs?”

I snort, involuntarily amused.

“No, that’s not why I took him away,” I say, rubbing his back as his own embrace starts to tighten with fear again. “I took him away because taking care of a pet requires a lot of responsibility.” As I told him the first time I explained to him why he isn’t allowed to have a pet. "You have to buy him a nice place to live in, keep that place clean, never forget to feed him, and you need to know what he does and doesn’t like when playing with him.”

“I was so taking good care of him!” Naruto proclaims, insulted to the highest degree by the very notion that he would do anything else.

“You think you were taking good care of him,” I correct, because this is a very important distinction. “Have you read any books on how to take care of frogs? Not stories, I’m talking about boring books,” I clarify when Naruto opens his mouth to claim he has so read books on how to take care of frogs. Fairy tales don't count.
“There are boring books about frogs?” he returns like I just told him the moon is made of cheese. His reaction makes me grin a little.

“There are. And those boring books tell you how to take good care of them.”

If Naruto wants to have a pet frog, he's going to have to read and memorize them.

“...I really was taking good care of him,” the brat mutters sullenly, hiding his face down my shoulder again.

“If you want to have a frog,” I say, making Naruto’s head snap up, looking at me with shock and disbelief. “–you have to read those boring books, buy him a nice place to live in from your own pocket money, and you need to take care of him on your own. I’ll help at first, but I expect you to take care of him on your own eventually. If you start neglecting him, I will take him away.”

That condition isn't negotiable. I was shamefully neglectful of my own pets when I was a kid. I won't allow him to make the same mistake.

“You’re giving me a frog?” Naruto whispers like he can’t believe what he’s hearing.

“I’m telling you the conditions you need to fulfill if you want to have one,” I clarify with a look that shows just how serious I am about this. “Are you going to fulfill them?”

“Yes!” Naruto squeals at a loud enough volume to make me wince. His proximity to my ears makes it even more painful than usual. “I will, I promise I will! I’ll read every book and I’ll buy him the nicest home and I’ll feed him every day! I’ll take the bestest care of him forever.”

“You better,” I warn but can’t help but smile when faced with sunshine such as this.

“I promise, Mary-nee, promise, promise, promise!” the brat vows, somehow managing to beam even brighter.

“Good.” I pick him up. “In that case, I have something for you,” I say while walking to where I put down the pot.

“What, nee-chan?” Naruto asks, still outshining the sun itself.

Instead of answering verbally, I lift the lid from the pot.

Naruto actually stops breathing.

“Gama-chan.” The whisper shout is as awed as it is disbelieving. When Naruto manages to tear his gaze away from his beloved pet, the sheer joy radiating from him is enough to melt my heart. “You didn’t take him away.”

I almost had. I’d planned to, went downstairs with the intent to release it back into the wilds. I didn’t want to reward the brat for breaking the rules like this by allowing him to keep it.

I changed my mind at the last second. I just couldn’t bring myself to hurt him like that.

I’m so glad for my weakness.

“No, I didn’t take him away. But I will if you don’t take good care of him,” I remind him with a warning look. He needs to understand that I’m not exaggerating about this in the slightest.

Naruto yells with joy and strangles my neck once more.
“I will, I promise I will, I’ll take the bestest care of him forever, dattebayo!”

I laugh, the last of my guilt fading away. Closing the pot to prevent Gama-chan from escaping, I hug the brat back.

“Make sure you do,” I warn one last time, but the effect is ruined by the warmth I can't keep out of my voice.

“I love you, Mary-nee! You’re the best nee-chan ever!”

My smile manages to grow even bigger. I feel mushy and warm all over. While I’m definitely not looking forward to the inevitable future fights we’re going to have, I won’t deny that making up like this is an amazing rush.

Hopefully making up with the bastard will be just as pleasant.

I lazily trail my lips up and down the tiny scar on his shoulder, the only movement I’m currently capable of. I'm a boneless pile of happy hormones draped all over him. This was very wow.

Making up with him was amazingly pleasant indeed.

"Always touching and tasting." he teases, more sated than I’ve ever heard him be. I’m so proud of myself.

"Always stalking and talking."

He doesn’t react verbally to the words, but his hand starts gently caressing my arm. I let out a pleased hum, still tracing the small scar.

“You’re going to have to tone it down, though,” I murmur against his skin. I’m not mad at him anymore, but still. He needs to tone it down. A lot. I can deal with him being like this for one visit, but if he keeps this up, I’m going to end up insane. Not in a functional way like he is, either.

Naturally, the bastard lets out a long suffering sigh. Still acting like I’m the one who’s overreacting.

“I suppose I have been pushing it a little.”

“Only a little?” I return wryly.

“Just a bit,” he confirms like he’s doing it for my sake and not because he actually agrees with the assessment.

“Then tone it down a bit,” I counter with a smile, amused by his inability to admit any real wrongdoing.

“Is that an order?”

“It is if that’s what it takes for you to tone it down.”

He chuckles.

“As the lady commands.”
My smile grows. As we’ve just established, him following my commands is very fun indeed. I’m going to milk his apology for all it’s worth.

Judging from his own reaction, he won’t have any problem with that whatsoever.

"Same goes for my stories," I add, taking the opportunity to get it all out of the way. "Criticize my plot again and I will hurt you. A lot."

"The final fight flows well. The reveal that it was all a distraction to get him in the position she needed was satisfying to read," he actually compliments instead of acting like a bastard. He must be really feeling guilty. Good. Means he's aware of just how out of line he's been acting.

"Then why isn't there enough suspense?" I ask, taking advantage of his agreeable mood to get a straight answer.

This is really bothering me. I'm not surprised of course, there's a reason why I don't let people read my stories before they're finished. After they're finished, I can let go of comments like these, but not before. Which means I won't be able to let go of this until I've managed to fix the lack of suspense.

"I may have been exaggerating a little. It's not that there's no suspense, it's just that the genre makes it obvious that she's going to win. It's not like you write tragedy."

"You absolute bastard," I say with complete exasperation. That answer actually manages to make everything even worse. "You do realize I'm still going to have to rewrite the entire thing, right?" My brain won't allow me to do anything else. It doesn't matter that there's no real reason to do so anymore, he said there was no suspense, which means I need to fix this.

"Not my fault you're unable to deal with friendly advice in a healthy manner."

I shake my head with a helpless smile. He's such a bastard.

"I'm going to make you pay for this next time."

"I look forward to seeing what you come up with."

My smile grows.

Making him apologize like this really was a stroke of pure genius.

I sigh, annoyed with the world in general.

“Now that is an amazingly forlorn sigh. I have a feeling something might be the matter.” There's genuine concern beneath Shisui’s teasing tone. I manage to muster a small smile, trying to reassure him. Shisui doesn’t deserve my bad mood. Especially not when I'm pretty sure he was just passing by and only dropped in because of my inability to contain these depressing sighs. It would explain Itachi’s absence.

"Nothing, really. Just one of those days."

"By which she means she's pining over her secret admirer." Renji quips like the asshole he is as he passes by on his way to bring Akira his order. I glare at his retreating back. This isn't funny.

"A secret admirer, Mari-chan? Why haven't I heard of this before? I thought we were friends,” Shisui
says with a playful pout, relieved to find out it isn’t anything more serious. I roll my eyes.

"He’s not a secret admirer. Just someone I occasionally exchange notes with." And mind blowing orgasms.

"And by occasionally she means daily," Tori adds cheerfully before she disappears into the kitchen. Ever since they became public, those two have become so much worse. Love does strange things to people.

I roll my eyes again when Shisui aims an indredulous look my way. The entire world is being ridiculous. Including myself.

Honestly, you’d think I would’ve gotten used to him being away by now. There’s no reason for me to feel like this. Especially not after the fiasco that was his last visit.

Doesn’t stop me from missing him like hell.

He’s back! I unfold the note with a smile. Except when I do, the handwriting is different. I’m confused. The writing is familiar, but why on earth has the replacement stalker returned?

*I thought you should know he’s no longer tasked with monitoring you. He hasn’t been for quite some time.*

I scoff. Like I haven’t figured that out already.

"You knew?"

I roll my eyes, amused at his oh so unreadable tone. He’s actually flabbergasted. Like it’s supposed to be impossible for me to figure this out on my own. Arrogant bastard.

"You disappear anywhere from a week to a month with no rhyme or reason, and when you return, you stay anywhere from a few days to over a week. It wasn’t hard to figure out that you’re spending your downtime harassing me." In hindsight, his mission of stalking me and the brat probably ended when he first left a few weeks after the New Year. "Now give me the damn blindfold and get naked," I order with a playful smile.

"You don’t find it odd that I kept coming back?" he asks while prowling forward, sounding casual as always. The act might’ve worked if he hadn’t been so flabbergasted just a moment before.

He ties the headband around my eyes.

"You’re a ninja, your entire species is insane," I point out for the millionth time. This is literally all the explanation needed. I’ve also long since learned to roll with the inevitable consequences this insanity brings. He really should’ve realized that by now. "Besides, it’s not like I’m not getting any benefits out of this," I finish with a teasing grin in his general direction.

"True. Still, most civilians wouldn’t feel comfortable with someone of my profession dropping by of their own free will."

His lack of the A-word makes me chuckle. Even ANBU follow the first rule of ANBU. I give him
as serious a look as I’m capable of faking right now.

"Mind. Blowing. Orgasms. I'm willing to overlook a lot for those, I thought that was very clear by now."

"I feel used," he declares with mock hurt.

"No you don't," I counter, letting my grin break through.

"No I don't."

I trail my hand down his side, mapping out the familiar burn. I still enjoy exploring his scars, despite knowing them all in detail by now. Well, I know most. There are a few he doesn’t want me explore. It’s keeps being so fascinating to feel the different texture beneath my fingers.

"Why are you still so fascinated?"

Sometimes I swear the bastard is capable of reading my mind. Often times, really. If it hadn’t been for the fact that my past is still a secret, I would’ve thought he was using magic.

"You have so many," I murmur, most of my focus still on the skin that's somehow too smooth and too rough at the same time.

"Occupational hazard."

"I know," I say wryly. That really is a perfect opening.

Before I can take it, he lets out a resigned sigh.

"Because ninja are insane."

My smile turns into a grin.

"I have trained you so well."

He lets out a soft hum but doesn’t say anything. I slide my hand from his side to his chest, tracing the thin cut there.

"...Why insane?" he asks after a comfortable silence.

"You keep asking and I keep telling you. Some things are simple. Just accept them."

"That doesn't answer my question."

I halt my caressing with surprise. He still sounds lazy and satisfied, but the fact he rebuked my banter like that means this actually matters to him. And here I thought we’d already established why I call him insane.

I resume my caressing, thinking over my answer. I could answer with a meaningless quip, or tease him about being genuinely bothered by this, but...

"You have so many scars." The words come out more hushed than intended. Most of the time I don’t think too deeply about what those scars mean, courtesy of only being confronted with them when
basking in the afterglow. But when I do think about them, when I think about how he got them...

He keeps silent. That’s an even better indicator of how much this is bothering him than his previous rebuke.

I hesitate. If I continue down this line, if I say how worried they make me, I cross one of the unspoken boundaries between us. He knows I worry about him of course, but hearing me say it out loud isn’t something he's comfortable with.

I decide to take a different approach.

"Sometimes I try to imagine what it would be like if I could jump on roofs, or punch through stone, create fire with my mind, or any of the other fantastical things you can do. While I can imagine, I know I can't truly grasp just how much that must influence every moment of your life."

The words come out slowly, articulating something I never really talk about. I think about it sometimes, but I don’t talk about it. Not anymore.

I had, at first. After getting over the worst of my shock of finding myself in a fictional world where magic is real, and after getting the basics of the language down, I talked about it with Daisuke. A lot. He didn’t understand my incredulity and confusion of course, living among magical ninjas was normal for him. But he listened, and he explained as best he could. That allowed me to work through the worst of my difficulties.

It allowed me to reach the point where I can just roll with the inherent insanity that living in a world with magical ninja brings.

Most of the time, I don’t think too deeply about the strangeness of this world anymore. But when I do...

“I look at what ninjas can do, look at the sheer power you command, and I wonder. How would I see the world if I’d been raised a ninja? If I’d been taught from childhood how to use chakra, if I’d learned to think in terms of potential threats and underlying meanings. How would I see the world? How would it shape my thoughts?”

I can imagine it a little better now that Naruto is going to the academy. It’s already changing him. Not his personality, but the things he notices, the way he talks, even the way he reasons. It’s subtle, but it’s definitely there. He’s not being taught magic yet, that won’t be on the curriculum until next year. But he’s being taught how to fight and how to handle weapons. He’s being taught trap making and combat strategy. Hell, he’s even being taught a rudimentary form of psychology and how to manipulate people into doing what he wants. Or rather, doing what the mission requires. And he’s being taught this at the age of six.

I do my best to ignore the horror of it all. Naruto has to learn these things. Even ignoring the fact that he’s the hero of the story, the Kyuubi paints a huge target on his back. He needs to be able to defend himself.

No matter how much I wish he didn’t need to.

He’s just a kid. He's six years old. He shouldn't need to learn these things.

He does need to learn them. And sometimes, just sometimes, I fear the kind of person they're going to turn him into. Ninja aren't evil, but they are soldiers. They live dangerous lives. They put themselves in mortal peril in the name of the village.
They kill in the name of the village.

The bastard keeps quiet. For once, the silence is uncomfortable. I wish he would say something and give me a hint as to how he’s feeling.

I know he won’t.

I decide to return to his original question.

"It's why I call you insane. I just... I honestly don't get how you see the world, so I often have trouble understanding how you think."

I can't comprehend how he can do the things he does. I'm not naive enough by far to think he has no blood on his hands. Even ignoring the fact that he's ANBU, his scars reveal just how often he gets involved in lethal situations.

Him being alive reveals what happened to the people who fought him.

"...And you don't mind?"

I relax a little. Not at his tone, still as lazy and satisfied as before, but at the hand gently trailing down my arm. He isn't planning to leave yet.

"You're not hurting me and you've never forced me to do anything against my will. What’s to mind?" I return with a faint smile in his general direction. I might not be able to understand how he can do the things he does, but he's not an evil person. He's always treated me well, respecting my boundaries and decisions. Oh, he'll push my buttons like crazy, but when it comes to the truly important things, he never tries to take my choices away from me. In his own insane way, he even respects my privacy, never asking about my past. Not even on the rare occasions that I mention something about it myself.

When he stays silent, I resume tracing his scars. The evidence that he's survived every fight he's ever been in.

He might not survive every fight that comes.

"So why the fascination with my scars?"

I manage to summon a teasing smile, though it's admittedly a weak one. Trying to act like normal, no matter that our topic is anything but.

"I find it difficult to grasp how any human being can voluntarily put themselves through so many life threatening situations. I have a healthy survival instinct. Ninja don't. Because they are insane." I speak the words lightly but that doesn’t make them any less true. Yes, in my old world, there were soldiers as well, but I was never confronted with them like I am here. I didn’t live among them. Didn’t see the stark difference in their behavior compared to civilians.

Ninja are easy to spot, both in and out of uniform. Even ignoring the telling grace of their movements, there’s a constant sharpness to their gaze, a habitual awareness of their surroundings that never fades. And when something unexpected happens, they switch from normal to killer in the blink of an eye, becoming threatening in a way that always makes my animal instincts light up with panic. Most of the time the unexpected thing is something innocuous of course. Like the time Tori dropped a plate of onigiri in the kitchen and the crash transformed Shisui into a terrifying stranger for the briefest of moments, before he realized what had caused the sound and returned to his usual cheery self, acting like nothing out of the ordinary had happened. Like having reflexes like that is the
most normal thing in the world.

"I'm not even human to you? Ouch."

I'm so glad he’s returning to our usual banter. True, I was the one who decided to give him an honest answer, but this topic is far too heavy to dwell on for long.

"Of course you’re human. You just happen to be an insane one," I tease back. He chuckles. I'm pretty sure it's a genuine one and that he's relaxed again. The way he slides his hand into my hair and gently caresses my scalp confirms this. Most of me has relaxed again as well.

Part of me hasn't.

He has so many scars. He’s been hurt so many times.

He’s a ninja. He's going to keep getting new scars. He's going to keep being hurt.

No matter how much I wish he wouldn’t.

“Come on, Mari-chan. You can’t keep me in suspense like this.”

I absolutely can. Not in the least because it’s hilarious to see Shisui act like this.

“Watch me,” I taunt. Shisui’s answering pout makes my satisfaction grow even greater.

“I never thought you could be this cruel, Mari-chan,” he delivers with mock hurt.

“Then you obviously don’t know me that well.”

Shisui gasps and gracefully turns to face Itachi.

“Are you hearing this?” he demands, attempting to get some support for his suffering. “She’s torturing me!”

“Consider it an exercise in enduring hardship.”

The support doesn’t come.

“I can’t believe you,” Shisui accuses and while it’s exaggerated, there is a touch of true sincerity. “She’s keeping vital information from you as well.” Ah, yes, the professional term for gossip.

Itachi doesn't take the bait. He sips his tea, placid as ever.

Or rather, he seems placid to me. Judging from Shisui's sudden shock, he’s picked up on something in Itachi’s demeanor that I haven’t.

“You knew?” The demand is delivered with pure disbelief, not a hint of acting in sight. “Itachi, how could you keep this from me?”

“I was interested in seeing how long it would take you to notice the obvious.”

The quip makes me snort with laughter. Itachi's lips twitch and his eyes are noticeably content. Not bothering to even try to hide his amusement at Shisui’s expense.
“You took an impressive amount of time," he finishes, calm as ever and not mocking at all.

Shisui looks at Itachi with utter betrayal. I chuckle. Really, I don’t know why Shisui expected any different. Itachi loves pushing his buttons. Such as by keeping a juicy piece of gossip from Shisui just to inspire a reaction like this.

I’m grateful for this love. Without it, Shisui would’ve been harassing me about the bastard a lot sooner. I already know it won’t take long before his prying will start to annoy me.

Right now, however, it’s hilarious.

Honestly though, I barely talk about the bastard with, well, anyone.

What makes Shisui think he can suddenly convince me to spill the beans to him?

"Do you like it?" Naruto asks, adorably hopeful. I smile down at him, feeling so lucky to have him.

“I love it,” I assure him. My hearts melts further when Naruto beams like the sun. I place the pens and beautifully decorated notebooks next to my other presents. So this is what he’s been saving up for. I’m ridiculously touched.

“Told you she would,” Renji tells Naruto with a smirk. Really, the complete change in his attitude is the most wonderful present of all. Can’t exactly say that out loud, though.

I give him a warm smile instead. Renji answers with a playful wink.

"And now, it's time for cake!" Tori declares with an excited clap of her hands, grinning like mad. She’s been waiting for this moment every since we sat down. I have to admit, I’m very curious as to what she and Rukia have cooked up this year. Their baking skills are leagues above my own. Their cooking skill in general, really.

"I'll go get it. No peeking," Rukia warns before she stands up and walks towards the kitchen.


"If I'm old, then what about you? The big thirty is just two years away now."

"I'm young in spirit." he quips, lips twitching with a smile.

"Close your eyes!" Tori actually chirps. Honestly, I’m suppose to be the excited one, not her. I am excited of course, but Tori’s own enthusiasm puts mine to shame.

I close my eyes, listening with anticipation as Rukia returns. I hear her set down something in front of me.

I couldn’t stop grinning even if I wanted to.

"All right, open your eyes!" Tori says.

I open my eyes.

The cake is magnificent, covered in delicate frosting and looking absolutely sinful. On the top, there
are cheerfully winking candles.

It isn't the same as the birthdays I used to have in my old world. Pretty damn close, though.

"Make a wish, nee-chan!"

I close my eyes again and do just that. Sucking in a deep breath, I open my eyes and blow out all the candles.

Here's to hoping life will keep being this wonderful forever.

__________________________________________________________

I'm back.

Yet another delightful birthday present. This day just keeps getting better and better.

*Just in time to celebrate my birthday. Your sense of timing is perfect.*

*My, aren't we cheerful today. Did you have fun?*

*I had a wonderful time.*

*Glad to hear it. As it happens, I have something for you as well.*

*Really? I honestly didn't expect you to.*

*Such low opinion you have of me.*

*Keeps it easier to be pleasantly surprised.*

*"Trust me, you'll find this a true pleasure."*

__________________________________________________________

I laugh.

*"I was five."*

I laugh harder. When it finally dies down, I place my lips back on his forearm with a smile. More specifically, I place them on the small scar just beneath his wrist. Unlike his other hand, this one isn't covered in scars. Still has a few though. And one of them has just become my absolute favorite. Feeling it beneath my lips is enough to get me to chuckle again.

"Five." he repeats with exasperation. I laugh again and turn my head in his general direction.

"This one's my favorite,” I tell him truthfully.

"Really." He sounds so very unimpressed. My smile turns into a grin.

"Really,” I agree in a solemn voice as I bring up a hand to trace the wonderful little thing. I chuckle again.

"Five,” he emphasizes like it doesn’t make everything so much better. This is an even better present
than the new magic trick he showed, and that present was an amazing one indeed.

"That only makes it so much better." It really does. He was just a tiny little ninja when this happened. No, even better, a tiny little brat.

"It was the first time I tried."

"Only getting better." I try to imagine it happening. I fail, but oh, what fun I have in trying. I chuckle again, can’t help it. "You got this by cooking."

He lets out a resigned sigh.

"You're never going to let this go, are you?"

He knows me so well.

"Never in a million years. I'm serious, this one's my favorite, and I honestly don't think you'll ever be able to change that."

"You can't be certain of that," he counters with amusement, dropping the act of exasperation. It’s true, I can’t be certain of that. There are still so many scars I don’t know the story behind.

I’m pretty damn sure no other is ever going to come close to this one.

"Which is why I said right now," I point out. "But I highly doubt you'll be able to change my opinion. Though if you do somehow manage, you'll make my decade. Instead of my year like you have right now."

He really has. Because even for a ninja, he is absurdly graceful. Because I honestly can’t imagine him ever being clumsy enough to get a scar like this.

Because every other scar he’s talked about was born either from training or from deadly attacks. They were created by him learning how to kill, or from wounds meant to kill him.

All except for this gorgeous little thing. Just thinking of how he got it is enough to make me start chuckling again.

He got this when he was five years old. He got this by cooking.

Movement. I realize that I’m flat on my back and his warmth is pressing down on me in the most delicious of ways.

"It’s not nice to make fun of someone’s traumatic childhood." He sounds so very scolding. I grin. Apparently I said that out loud.

"Are you going to punish me?" I invite as I blindly twine my arms around his neck. He lets out a hum, his lips caressing my shoulder, teasing with a hint of tongue. I tilt back my head to offer him more skin. His lips slide up my throat, halting just below my jaw. I can feel him smile.

"It would be irresponsible of me not to. I'm afraid I can't let you go until I'm sure that you've learned your lesson."

My own smile grows. That doesn’t sound bad at all.
"I repeat, this is not okay at all."

"..."

"To continue without orders? To let her think you were still on duty? You know exactly how wrong that is, don’t pretend otherwise. So why? And don’t you dare give another crap excuse about free dinner."

"..."

“I’m not going to stop harassing you until I get an answer and I will resort to drastic measures if I have to, don’t think I won’t. I’ve been playing nice until now, but no more. Just save yourself the pain and come clean.”

"..."

"They are in a relationship."

"They are what now."

"They started sleeping together on a steady basis somewhere within the first week after his assignment ended."

"And you knew? Weasel, how could you keep this from me?"

"I assumed that finally realizing they are still in contact with one another would be enough for you to deduce the obvious. My apologies, I seem to have overestimated your powers of observation. Again."

"...We aren’t together like that."

"If you are sleeping with her on a regular basis, have been for months, and aren’t planning on stopping anytime soon, you really are. You really, really are."

"Both of them are in denial. They are pretending that what they share is nothing but a friendship with physical benefits."

"Shut up and focus. The target approaches."
He stops yet again, the complete and utter bastard.

“I will hurt you so much,” I swear, meaning it from the bottom of my heart. This is the fucking fourth time!

That bastard actually has the nerve to chuckle, his breath ghosting over the most sensitive part of me and making me shiver. I try to free my hands to get his tongue back where it belongs, but his grip on my wrists is iron clad. Worse, the way his arms are laying over my thighs prevents me from getting closer to him!

“If you don’t continue, I will–”

I moan, my voice lost as his tongue starts working again, licking with perfect speed and pressure, perfect sensations, perfect.

His tongue sliding in, arching my back, everything tense, pressure building, yes, so close.

He stops. No!

“I’m going to shove your mask down your throat!”

“I’d like to see you try.”

I tighten my legs wrapped around his back, trying to force him to get back to work. The complete and utter bastard doesn’t move in the slightest. Letting out a frustrated yell, I struggle against his hold as much as I can. I need him to just touch me!

One of his hands lets go of mine, my own immediately flying to his head and twining through his hair, trying to yank him closer except he keeps refusing to move!

No, he is moving. His hand is gliding over my thigh and settles right where I want him to. I tense in anticipation, knowing what he’s going to do and biting down the urge to yell at him to get on with. If I do that, he’s going to keep toying with me because he’s a complete and utter bastard.

Lightning, my body jolting upwards, his hold preventing me from flying off the bed and then his tongue is back, nerves alight, so close, oh god, yes, yes!

Stars explode.

Going limp, boneless and sated. Feeling him release his hold on my wrist. He gently sucks on the inside of my thigh. An absent part of me realizes that I’m going to have another hickey. Most of me is lost to bliss.

His lips trailing upwards, a trail of wetness left behind. Lazy kisses on my throat, one of his hands lifting my leg and wrapping it around his hips.

Feeling him enter slowly, a moan escaping me, too much, too sensitive, can’t take it.

Don’t stop.

My hands somehow on his back, my hips rolling in time with his, rhythm slow and deep. Heavy breaths filling the air, ghosting over my throat, feeling him tense beneath my hands. One of his hands
sliding down, caressing me, stop, too much, can’t take it.

*Keep going.*

Pressure rising again, pushing him even closer, skin sliding over mine, feeling his heart race.

A sweet release, sudden and catching me by surprise, vaguely hearing a sound escape me. Feeling him shudder, spilling inside me. Relaxing on top of me. Heavy breathing filling the air.

A soft sigh, his head turning so he can nuzzle my jaw. I hum and somehow find the energy to twine one of my hands through his hair, guiding him up.

His nose nuzzling my cheek, a smile growing in response. I nuzzle him back, feel him smile as well when I caress the corner of his lips. I tilt my head and meet his lips with my own, exchanging soft and lazy kisses. When we separate for air, he trails his nose over my own, gentle and sweet.

“I love you.”

He freezes. So do I when I realize what I just said.

His warmth is gone in an instant, the blindfold gone a fraction later. I’m left blinking rapidly as I try to adjust to the sudden return of my sight. I sit up look around for him even though I already know what I’ll find.

He’s gone.

I drop back down my bed with a groan.

I love him. As in, I’m in love with him.

I’m in love with the bastard.

How on earth did that happen?
"She is not Mariko."

"I know that."

"Then stop treating her like she is. The Kyuubi vaporized the building. Mariko is gone. She died."

"I know! And I know this girl isn't Mariko. But she's all alone, doesn't have anyone to take care of her. She can't even talk properly. I can't abandon her."

An anguished look is thrown my way again. A what I'm pretty sure is an angry expression is aimed at me once more.

"I saw you at the Tower today. You registered her as Mariko, don't deny it. Do you think you can replace your daughter like that? As if she's exactly the same? As if you can make her the same?"

Another anguished look, another probably angry glance. It’s obvious that they’re arguing about me, but why? Really hating the language barrier right now.

"Shiro, I swear, I'm not trying to replace Mariko or turn this girl into someone she's not. I couldn't even if I wanted to. But I can't abandon this girl, I just can't. I need this."

"...Fine. On your head be the consequences if this is ever discovered. I'll keep quiet."

"Thank you."

"I love you."

He freezes. So do I when I realize what I just said.

His warmth is gone in an instant, the blindfold gone a fraction later. I’m left blinking rapidly as I try to adjust to the sudden return of my sight. I sit up look around for him even though I already know what I’ll find.

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I love him. As in, I’m in love with him.

I’m in love with the bastard.

How on earth did that happen?

There’s no note the next morning and his dinner is untouched. I’m relieved. I need some time to
work through this.

Still no note, dinner untouched. Still relieved.

No note, dinner untouched. Now I’m starting to get worried.

*Everything alright? Aside from the obvious.*

No note, dinner untouched. Is he... is he ignoring me?

The bastard is ignoring me.

Fine. If he gets cold feet like this at the first sign of feelings, It’s a good thing I discovered that before trying to turn this into something more serious.

Damn it. Apparently I want this to turn serious.

"Eight months. Eight. Months. That's over half a year in case it’s escaped your notice.” Rukia is torn between delight and despair.

"And you kept giving me and Tori grief. Hypocrite."

I shoot Renji a dirty look. That’s a completely different situation. It is.

Renji grins back like the asshole he is, showing exactly how much he’s never going to let this go. Tori continues to stare at me in a daze, incapable of processing the confession forcefully torn out of me. Shiro has brought up a hand to cover his eyes. His way of expressing an unholy amount of long suffering despair.

"I told you we were still exchanging notes,” I say to Rukia, not caring in the slightest how defensive I sound. If an intervention like this doesn’t warrant it, nothing does.

Rukia replies with a derisive scoff, still looking conflicted about which emotion should win the fight for dominance.

"Flirting is completely different from sleeping with him and you know it."

“It wasn't any different from before,” I counter, unimpressed by her accusation. “Just with added orgasms."
Rukia looks as if she could cry. Whether from delight or despair still isn’t clear.

"It really is. You don't do repeat performances. Ever. I can't believe you've been in a relationship for eight months. Ten if you count the flirting."

I throw up my hands with frustration.

"We're not in a relationship! It was just sex!" What’s so hard to understand about that?

"You've been going steady for eight months."

...Oh damn it all to hell.

I drop my head into my hands with a groan, the realization hitting me with all the subtlety of a sledgehammer.

I’ve been going steady for eight months. As in, I’ve been in an exclusive relationship for eight months.

I’ve been dating the bastard for eight months.

"How did I miss this?” I ask myself, unable to understand I could’ve been so blind. It seems so obvious now.

"You're oblivious to any and all romantic feelings not written down, including your own. It's one of your greatest talents."

I glare at Renji. Having friends who understand you so well can be a real pain in the ass.

"Eight months,” Tori says, finally coming out of her stupor. She looks at me like I just murdered a puppy. "Eight months! How could you keep this from us? For eight months!"

I throw up my hands, fed up with everything.

"It was just sex!"

All four of them give me looks that show exactly what they think of my denial. I drop my head back down my hands.

"It started out as just sex,” I finally admit. Both to them and to myself.

Shiro sighs, Renji groans, Tori huffs and Rukia scoffs. Such caring friends I have.

"Well. It's progress at least." Renji’s remark, as resigned as it is amused, makes me lift my head.

"I swear, in the beginning it was just sex.” Sex with a friend, but still just sex. I can’t even tell when it became something more.

Was it when I he started telling me the stories behind his scars? When he was hurt and all I wanted to do was comfort him?

I sigh.

"It doesn't matter anyway. I think he broke up with me."

"Wait, what? What happened?” Rukia is overwhelmed by this sudden twist. I grimace, the question
making my chest tighten painfully.

"He's ignoring me." And it hurts far more than it should.

Then again, I’ve just realized that we’re in a serious relationship. Having that followed by the realization we might have broken up as well is a blow I hadn’t been prepared for.

"And that means he broke up with you?" Rukia demands, part incredulous, part gossip predator on the hunt. I rub my eyes, feeling so tired. Tired, and hurt.

"I don't see how it could mean anything else. He's always let me know if he had a mission. He didn't do that this time. Just, poof. Complete silence."

"Why? What happened?" Rukia demands while trying to bore a hole into my head with her eyes. I drop my head back down my hands to escape the sight, my heart clenching painfully. Do I really want to talk about this?

Surprisingly enough, I do.

"...I told him I love him." Even wanting to talk about this, my voice barely comes through.

"Oh, Mari." Tori’s voice is full of compassion.

"You what?" Renji’s is not. “You–"

"Love?" Rukia interrupts, once again sounding like she doesn’t know whether to laugh or cry. “And you didn't say anything for eight months?"

"It's a recent development,” I snap, lifting my head so I can glare at her. I’m confessing what an emotional wreck I am, and her reaction is to focus on the fact that I didn’t tell her sooner?

Rukia lets out a strangled sound. I’ve officially broken her. The knowledge inspires vicious satisfaction.

"So you just one day woke up and realized you’re in love with a person you’ve never even seen? Whose name you don’t even know?"

The words make me drop my head back down my hands, anger gone as fast as it had appeared. I sigh.

"Apparently."

Looking back, I can’t tell when my feelings for him started to change. When he first halted our fun because Naruto was having a nightmare? When I had a bad day and he needled me like the bastard he is until I started ranting out loud about it, leaving me feeling better after? When I mentioned my mom without thought and he didn’t ask any questions, despite how suspicious my sudden panic must’ve been?

"Are you sure he doesn't just need some time and space?" Tori’s question is gentle and full of genuine encouragement. If only it were that easy.

"I doubt it," I say, a weight falling down on me at the truth of those words. “He does feelings even less than I do."

"But he loves you back?” she asks even more gently than before but that doesn’t stop the question from piercing my heart like an arrow.
Does he love me back?

"No." He cares for me, but isn’t love. Not that kind of love.

Except he came to me for comfort. He’s told me the stories behind his scars. He’s even shared a childhood memory.

He always tries to cheer me up when I feel bad.

“Yes.”

Except he doesn’t want me to know what he looks like. Doesn’t want me to know who he is. He doesn’t want our relationship to become anything more than it already is. Or was, I suppose.

Oh, that hurts more than I can put into words.

“I don’t know.”

“If he’s been around for over half a year, I think it safe to say he has some feelings for you.” Shiro’s unreadable voice makes me lift my head, but I avert my gaze when I see the tense set to his shoulders and the pain lining his eyes. I can’t deal with his issues on top of my own right now.

I sigh. I’ve been doing that far too much this evening.

“Feelings, sure, but love? That’s another matter.”

“Look, Mari. Sometimes people just can’t admit they’re in love. Doesn’t mean it isn’t there.” Renji’s words of wisdom are delivered with a wry smile, aimed at himself as much as me.

“So you have to keep pestering him until it all blows up and comes bursting out,” Tori adds brightly. She and Renji look at each other like the besotted love birds they are. I grimace. While I appreciate the advice, the situation between me and the bastard isn’t the same as theirs.

“Don’t really see how I can do that. I don’t have any way to contact him except for writing. If he wants to keep ignoring me, there’s nothing I can do about it.”

But isn’t worth it to at least try?

Yes, it is.

“I can’t help but notice you don’t say he’s left.”

Renji’s pointed remark makes me scoff.

“That bastard’s been stalking me for months, as if he’s suddenly going to stop. I’m willing to wager he’s out there right now, listening in. Bastard!” I raise my voice to make sure he knows exactly who it’s aimed at.

“That doesn’t make you sound crazy at all,” Renji says like the asshole he is. I roll my eyes. Then I sigh and rub my eyes. This is so messed up.

“I’ll see what I can do.” I don’t hold much hope, though.

Being in love is awful.
Stop ignoring me. We need to talk this out.

“What’s wrong with the cat?”

“He’s being a bastard.” I can’t believe he’s acting like this. Yes, this is the epitome of mushy feelings, but to cut all contact without warning? Bastard.

“Is he sick?” Naruto’s genuine worry draws me out of my thoughts. I give him a confused look. Where did he get that idea from?

“Why would he be sick?”

“He didn’t eat his dinner! For a whole week.”

Ah. Yeah, that would be enough to make him worry.

“He isn’t sick,” I assure him. “He’s just being a bastard.” Of unbelievable proportions.

“You’re mad at him!” the brat exclaims with dawning realization.

“Yes I am.” Seriously, how old is he, five? No wait, a five year old would act more mature, as proven by the brat.

“Why?”

“Because he’s being a bastard.” Is he actually planning on ignoring me forever?

“Nee-chan!” Naruto’s irked offense makes me smile a little. I’ll explain why I’m mad later. Right now, I’m going to cheer myself up a little by winding him up further.

But seriously, how long is the bastard planning to keep this up?

Fine. From now on there will be no more dinner for you, and I’m going back to cooking sweet and fried things.

“Mary-nee, why’re you glaring out the window?”

“I’m commanding the cat to appear by thinking loudly.” More specifically, but cursing him out like the bastard he is.

“Oh. Is it working?”

My glare grows even more vicious, letting that bastard know exactly how pissed I am.

No note appears. If I wasn’t so angry, I would be hurt.
“No.”

If I wasn’t so hurt, I wouldn’t be this angry.

Really? I thought we were friends. Or are you denying that as well? Bastard.

"Nothing?" Tori asks gently. As though the answer isn’t obvious. I bite back a vicious retort with the greatest of efforts. I shouldn’t take my frustration out on her.

I should take it out on the bastard. I would if he’d just stop ignoring me.

“Complete and utter nothing. Bastard.”

The worst part is that it’s been long enough that I can no longer deny he’s gone on a mission. And he didn’t tell me. He could be fighting for his life right now and I’d never even know.

He could die and I’d never know.

Tori gives me a hug that does nothing to calm me down.

I can’t believe the bastard would do this to me.

Nice to know our friendship was never meaningful. Not to you anyway. Bastard.

I scowl down at the pages mocking me. They’re mocking me because I can’t write a damn thing. Literally, I haven’t been able to pen down a single sentence without crossing it out a moment later. This isn’t the first time it’s happened either, oh no. This has been going on ever since the bastard started acting like the bastard he is. I’d quit writing for a few days in the hope that it would be enough to get rid of my writer’s block, but no such luck. It’s still just as bad and just as infuriating as before.

I give into the urge to throw the stupid notebook away. The loud smack it makes against the wall makes vicious satisfaction rise. For a moment, I genuinely debate cursing out the bastard on paper. I’ve stopped writing him every day but right now I really feel like changing that.

Except seeing his lack of writing yet again is going to make me feel even more miserable. I sigh, my shoulders slumping as I’m forced to accept the inevitable.

I’m never going to get Sleeping Beauty finished. Right now, even the idea of writing romance makes me want to cut off my own hands. Actually writing it is impossible, screw that complete and utter bastard.

I have a deadline to meet. If I don’t make it, Sato will not only demand my deposit back, he’ll hound me like the demon he is until I spit out something worth publishing. Seeing as I have less than zero
chance of writing any kind of romance right now, no matter how minor a subplot, a lot of Disney stories are no longer available to me. A lot, but not all.

Cursing the bastard a few moments longer, I get up and grab a new notebook.

Time to reimagine Brother Bear.

“Still nothing?” This time it’s Renji who braves my wrath. I really don’t get why they keep asking. The answer remains obvious.

“Nothing,” I snap, cursing the bastard, my stupid feelings for him, and the entire world for good measure. Renji wisely changes the subject.

He changes it to the romantic dinner he had last night with Tori. Asshole.

I distract myself from the bastard by venting vitriol at the more than willing target that is Renji. For the most part, I succeed. For the most part.

Fucking bastard.

I feel a real smile grow as I see who just entered. Now this is a perfect distraction.

“Here I thought you’d abandoned me,” I tease when I arrive at Shisui’s table. I’m surprised he didn’t take a seat at the counter like usual. I’m even more surprised he’s here with someone who isn’t Itachi.

“I could never abandon you, Mari-chan,” Shisui assures me, but I’m more interested in the person seated in front of him. He’s a ninja with gravity defying silver hair. I genuinely can’t call the color white. The light gleams over the strands in distinctive ways. While I’ve gotten used to the rainbow that is the spectrum of natural hair colors in this world, his hair is exceptional even by Konoha’s standards. It’s beautiful.

It’s also the only identifiable thing about him. Every other part of him is covered up. The only thing allowed to meet the light of day is an eye. And an eyebrow the same silver color as his hair. Him being covered up from head to toe doesn’t mean he’s unreadable though, oh no. Even with the mask and the headband slanted over his face, the man is positively radiating boredom. He’s slouched down in his chair and his visible eye is lazily wandering the room. He looks like he couldn’t care less about being here. Or about anything, really.

My curiosity is roused. I welcome the distraction with open arms.

“So, peach sencha?” I ask Shisui without taking my eyes off the mysterious ninja. Here I thought the bastard was the only one who likes to cover up to this degree.

Damn it.

“You know me so well.” Shisui’s thankfully offers an escape from my inability to stop thinking about the bastard. I manage to summon a smile for him. A genuine one even.

“Indeed I do.” Shisui always orders peach sencha after he’s been away for a few weeks. “And what
can I get for you?” I ask while returning my gaze to his companion.

His companion gives no sign that he heard me. He’s not even looking at me, or at Shisui for that matter. His eye keeps lazily wandering the room, seeming to be bored with literally everything in the world.

I raise a questioning brow at Shisui, silenting asking what I’m supposed to do with this lack of reaction. Shisui is the one who brought him over after all.

“Don’t mind him, Mari-chan, he often acts like this. He’ll have the same.”

Well. Customer is king and all that.

“All right then. Be right back.”

I go to prepare their order. Just as I’m about to finish, Natsu and Kikyo enter. They sit down in my section. Damn. Now I won’t be able to keep chatting with Shisui. Or rather, not for as long as I like. Sharing gossip is a key part of Konoha customer service. And if they sat down in my section, they want to talk to me, not Renji.

“Go.”

I spin around with a startled yelp, my heart stuck in my throat. Renji chuckles like the asshole he is. Before I can tear him a new one, he continues talking.

“I’ll take them.”

I forgive him for being an asshole.

“You’re sure?” I ask, guilt rising at his offer. I haven’t been the most productive company. Or the most pleasant.

“Yeah,” Renji says with a warm smile. He gently bumps my shoulder. “Go chat with half your favorite comedy act.”

He’s an amazing friend. I give him a grateful smile.

“Thanks, Renji.”

Having gotten permission, I bring over Shisui’s order.

“–should wait until the second date,” I hear Shisui chatter as I come closer. His companion remains bored with the world, seemingly unaware that Shisui is even present. “The third? Don’t want to come on too strong.”

“New crush, Shisui?” I tease when I arrive, setting down the tray and pouring him a cup of tea. It’s been a while since he was interested in someone. He’s not one for dating around, but he’s still a teen. Hormones are a thing.

Wow, he’s almost sixteen already. How time flies.

“Maybe. Not certainly, but maybe,” he returns with a flirtatious smile. I resist the urge to tell him what a cute kid he is. He won’t be one for much longer, but right now, he’s still a kid. Who I keep expecting to fall for a boy, but until now, it’s always been girls. Wonder if this is the time that will change.
“Then I wish them the best of luck with Itachi’s kunai talk.” The ninja version of a shovel talk is terrifying in general, but judging from Shisui’s stories, Itachi’s are exceptional even for a ninja.

Shisui winces as gracefully as he does everything else, his smile dampening with worry.

“Yeah... Should probably warn her about that.” So, a girl again.

Shisui shakes his head ruefully, his smile as wry as it is fond as he picks up his cup.

“He’s way too overprotective.”

“Good friends often are,” I say while giving his companion another curious glance. He’s made no move to pick up his own cup. Or to do anything.

There’s something oddly familiar about him. Odd, because I would definitely remember if I’d seen him before. Well, if I’d seen his hair. Though even without that, the mask and the way he wears his headband are distinctive enough to stick to someone’s mind all on their own.

“Right, you haven’t been formally introduced yet,” Shisui says in response to me staring at his companion. “Mari-chan, meet Hatake Kakashi. Kakashi, meet Takahashi Mariko.”

“Just Mary is fine.” Why does he seem familiar?

The ninja, Kakashi, doesn’t react to my words in any way. I feel a flicker of amusement at his complete and utter disinterest with everything.

“Or not.” Really, if his apathy is as sincere as it seems, why did he even come here in the first place?

“He’s just mad that I dragged him over,” Shisui reveals with the specific cheerfulness that means he’s satisfied with a job well done.

“Mad isn’t the word I’d use,” I say while continuing to wreck my brain of any memory of this very memorable ninja.

Shisui lets out a dramatic sigh. Seems this Kakashi is a close friend if he can make Shisui act like this.

“Kakashi has the annoying tendency to act as though the world is the most boring place to be.”

Definitely a close friend. I wonder why Shisui hasn’t mentioned him before. Or maybe he did and I forgot?

“No offense, but the world is kind of the only place you can be,” I aim at his friend. Once again, the concept of boredom given life gives no indication he even heard me. Could it be?

“Is he deaf?” Never met a deaf ninja before, but there’s a first time for everything.

Shisui laughs.

“No, he isn’t deaf. Or mute. Just being difficult because I’m forcing him to socialize.”

“He’s acting very sociable indeed,” I return dryly, still trying to put my finger on why he looks so familiar. It’s starting to bother me a little.

I’d much rather be bothered by this than by the bastard.
Damn it.

“Isn’t he?” Shisui agrees like I wasn’t being sarcastic. I focus on him instead of the bastard that won’t stop haunting me. “I can’t remember the last time we– no, we managed a couple of months ago as well.”

“We?” I ask, inviting him to start up his antics.

“Me and Itachi,” Shisui answers to no surprise. “We bribed him into getting lunch.” Shisui shakes his head with wry amusement and sips his tea, not putting on an act, nope, not all. Then he gains a pensive expression I would’ve believed natural if I didn’t know him so well. Shisui should’ve become a comedian instead of a ninja, he really should have.

“Now that I think about it, he kept silent then as well. Only said two things out loud the entire time, and one of them was ‘itadakimasu’.”

“Am I allowed to know the other thing as well?” I play along, already smiling from the punchline about to come.

“One beef,” Shisui delivers with perfect timing. I chuckle.

Giving the living embodiment of indifference a final look, I put aside the question of why he looks so familiar and turn my full attention to Shisui.

“So, feel like chatting? Or do you want me to leave you to your company?” I really hope not. I’ll leave if he wants me to of course, but I could really use his company right now.

“Don’t be silly, Mari-chan,” Shisui says warmly, before his smile becomes cheerful in a way that spells further antics. Excellent. “The more the merrier. Who knows, with you here, Kakashi might even say three things out loud.”

“A truly ambitious goal,” I return dryly, so happy he wants me to stay. Only Naruto has been able to make me feel this good since the bastard decided to start acting like a child.

Damn it. I need to stop thinking about him. At work, at least. And when I’m with the brat. I succeed most of the time when I’m with Naruto, but even then it keeps breaking through.

“I aim for the stars,” Shisui agrees, once again offering a distraction.

“If the man doesn’t want to talk, I’m not going to force him to,” I say with a faint smile at the breathing definition of disinterest. Sure, he might genuinely not care about what’s happening, but even if his whole attitude isn’t an act, I still want him to know I won’t force him to talk. If he wants to pass the time in bored silence, that’s his business. “Forcing people to do something against their will isn’t nice, Shisui,” I finish to Shisui, my smile turning teasing.

“Mari-chan, you don’t understand,” Shisui returns with such seriousness. “I need your help. Kakashi is acting like a child and I have no idea how to fix it.”

I raise an amused brow and give a pointed glance at the concept of boredom given life.

“This is acting like a child?” More like someone who’s seen it all and can’t be bothered to become excited over anything anymore.

“Like you wouldn’t believe,” Shisui returns without hesitation. I’m pretty sure he means it, too. Apparently his friend has done something to genuinely annoy him. I grin.
“I’ll take your word for it.”

If it means Shisui will come by more often, his friend can keep acting like a child for as long as he likes.

Now if only the bastard would stop acting like one.

“Are you still mad at the cat?”

“Yes I am.” I’m also starting to get worried.

He’s ignoring me. It’s been long enough for him to have returned from his mission, even if it was a long one. The page I’ve written all my messages on remains free of a reply.

He can’t really be planning to keep this up forever. Right?

Will you stop acting like a damn child already? Answer.

Shiro hands over the kimono without looking at me. I accept in silence.

I would give anything to be able to talk about the bastard with him. Just once. Just to get it off my chest. The others are great, but Shiro is my best friend.

I can’t talk to him about this. It would hurt him as nothing else could.

It would make him incapable of looking at me without seeing her.

I wish Daisuke was still here. Wish I could rant to him as I did about every insane thing I encountered when I first started exploring Konoha. I haven’t felt the need to do that in years, but right now I want nothing more than to be comforted by his endless patience and kindness.

Daisuke is gone. Daisuke is gone, and his loss burns in a way I haven’t experienced in years.

I hate that the bastard has turned me into this walking wreck. I hate even more that I don’t know how to fix it.

Maybe alcohol will provide a solution. At the very least, it should offer a decent distraction.

Can’t think about the bastard if I can’t think at all.

“He’s such a fucking bastard.” With his stupid voice and his stupid blindfold and why is he ignoring me?

“A complete bastard,” Rukia agrees. She’s a good friend.
And he’s such a fucking bastard. A fucking bastard who isn’t giving me orgasms! I miss orgasms. I miss sex.

“I miss sex.” A lot. I wouldn’t be this mad with sex. But I’m not having sex! Because he’s a bastard!

“This is so unfair,” Rukia says. She’s right! This is so unfair! Why won’t he have sex with me? I want orgasms!

Should I give myself orgasms? But they wouldn’t be as good as his.

“You aren’t going to get a better opportunity than this,” Renji says. What’s that supposed to mean? What better opportunity?

“I’m not going to interrogate her while she’s drunk.”

I’m drunk? Yes I am. I drank a lot. I’m drinking a lot. I can do that because Naruto is sleeping with Shiro. And I’m drinking a lot because he’s a fucking bastard. Who isn’t giving me orgasms!

“Why won’t he give me orgasms?”

Renji snorts with laughter. That’s mean. Having no orgasms isn’t funny. Rukia understands that. She looks pained.

“He’s good at giving me orgasms,” I tell her because she understands. Renji doesn’t, he’s laughing again. This isn’t funny! No orgasms are awful. Rukia understands that. She looks more pained. That’s good. This is painful. This is very painful.

I miss the bastard. And I’m mad at him because he won’t have sex at me!

“Fucking bastard.”

I hope he dies in a fire.

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_Die in a fire!_

---

"Mary-nee, are you sick?"

I wince as the hellhole that is the inside of my skull grows so much worse. It feels like the most sadistic demon in existence has decided to throw a party inside my head.

“Yes I am,” I say in the softest voice I can manage. “So stay very, very quiet. Please.”

Naruto grows more worried, but I’ll admit to being more focused on not throwing up the few bites of breakfast I managed to force down my throat.

The brat comes over and hugs my waist with a tenderness I don’t often see from him. My stomach thanks him.

“I’ll be super quiet, nee-chan,” he says in a genuine whisper but I still can’t help but grimace. His voice is a cheese shredder grating over my brain. It’s sweet how concerned he is, though.
“Thanks, brat,” I murmur and ruffle his hair.

The movement turns out to be a bad idea. My stomach feels like it’s one moment away from trying to escape my body.

Naruto, bless his heart, remains silent. He tightens his hold on me a little, but thankfully not enough to make my stomach decide to abandon ship. Yet.

My plan to get drunk and forget about the bastard was a spectacular failure. Not only did I spend the entire evening ranting about him, or I did in the parts I can remember at least, but I don’t feel any better about the disaster that is our relationship. If anything, I feel worse. No matter how much of a bastard he’s being, I shouldn’t have told him to go die in a fire. I scratched it out but it would be just my luck if this was one of the nights he was around for. I hope he didn’t see it.

I just need him to answer.

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**I didn’t mean that. I should never have said that, no matter how drunk. I’m sorry. But just answer. Please.**

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“I really don’t know why you keep dragging him along. It’s obvious he doesn’t want to be here.”

“He needs to be seen more.” Shisui says like it explains everything. He feels no remorse whatsoever over his behavior. “This is good for him.” He also refuses to tell just what his friend has done to annoy him.

“I honestly feel guilty for charging him,” I say while glancing at Kakashi, seated as far away from Shisui as is possible. He’s slouched down a chair at the table in the furthest corner, tea untouched and a book in hand. Even when reading, he continues to radiate an unholy amount of apathy. Well, he seems to be reading at least. “He never even drinks the tea you order him.” He does pay for it, though.

“That attitude isn’t conductive to a healthy business,” Shisui says like he’s doing me a favor by explaining this. “You realize that, right?”

“I said that I feel guilty, not that I’m not charging him,” I retort without taking my eyes off the living embodiment of bored indifference. I figured out why he seems familiar the second time Shisui dragged him over. The distinctive book he’d been reading had jostled my memory.

Kakashi is an important character. While I don’t recall much of the pictures my brother showed me, I do have a vague recollection of a masked ninja with gravity defying hair reading the Icha Icha series. I’m pretty sure his hair had been grey instead of silver, but I chalk that up to the pictures being cartoon images of real people.

“I’m serious, though,” I say while returning my gaze to Shisui, seated at the counter like usual. He gave up on trying to get Kakashi to talk after the second time he dragged him over.

Itachi, on the other hand, always sits at a table with Kakashi. When Shisui isn’t with him, that is. The two of them are tag teaming Kakashi and stopping by with unprecedented frequency. Not every day of course, they all have missions, but sometimes it’s damn close. Both provide a great show even
when they're alone. Shisui with his antics, and Itachi, when I’m not there to chat with him, by staring unwaveringly at Kakashi. Who responds by reading his book without giving any indication he’s even aware of Itachi’s presence. An unstoppable force of calm meeting an immovable object of indifference.

I’m really curious as to what their friend did to annoy both Shisui and Itachi like this. Even so.

“You shouldn’t force him to come along if he doesn’t want to. It isn’t fair to him.”

“I’m not forcing him,” Shisui lies. “Well, not a lot.”

“Of course you’re not,” I say in a voice that makes the dessert seem wet. It earns me a shameless smile. I chuckle.

“So, about your admirer.”

My mood hits rock bottom.

“No,” I warn with a glare. I don’t care how curious he is or how often he brings it up, I’m not talking about the bastard to him. Shisui might know something is wrong, you don’t have to be a ninja to figure that out, but I have less than zero desire to share the details.

“Come on, Mari-chan,” Shisui has the nerve to wheedle. “You–”

“No.”

Shisui pouts like it’s supposed to make me change my mind. I return my gaze to the mysterious Kakashi, distracting myself with the enigma that is his appearance. He’s so covered up I can’t even guess an age. The hair makes me think old, but the lack of lines around his eye suggest he’s younger than I think he is. Given that he’s Shisui’s and Itachi’s friend, he’s probably a lot younger, though his height thankfully eliminates him from being a kid.

I hadn’t thought it possible for anyone to dress as anonymously as the bastard, but Kakashi certainly comes close.

Damn it.

“Is he actually reading or just using it as a prop to keep people at bay?” Don’t think about the bastard, don’t think about the bastard.

I’m glad Shisui goes along with the change in subject instead of trying to interrogate me some more. He’ll try again later, though.

“He is actually reading,” he says with a rueful smile at his friend. As if on cue, Kakashi flips a page, his eye moving in a way that indicates Shisui’s words are true. Still.

“He doesn’t seem to be enjoying the series.” Which is a true crime. Every single book in the Icha Icha series is amazing. The humor and drama are perfectly balanced, the characters are vivid, and the smut is sizzling.

Shisui’s eyes widen with surprise and he lets out a bright laugh.

“Of course you’re a fan,” he’s somehow deduced from me saying just that. “I should’ve known.”

“Got them all,” I confirm. Well, I haven’t gotten the latest yet. I’m not in the mood for romance. At all.
“And Naruto hasn’t read them by accident yet?” Shisui thankfully distracts me before I start thinking about the bastard again.

“The brat doesn’t read anything of his own free will unless I’m narrating it to him.” Not aside from books on how to take care of frogs at least. He won’t risk losing Gama-chan no matter what. “I also moved them and a few others under my bed when he came to live with me.”

“Good move. Unexpected, though.”

“There’s a difference between not being ashamed of natural urges and letting the brat read kinky bedroom play.” Though I’m definitely giving him the Icha Icha series when he’s older. The relationships depicted, both in and out of the bedroom, are wholesome and healthy. In the cases where they don’t start out that way, they’ve become so by the end. Good role models for the brat. It’ll teach him not to act like the bastard.

Damn it.

“Are you always planning on ordering him something he won’t even touch?” I ask with a nod at Kakashi. Don’t think about the bastard, don’t think about the bastard.

“I have hope that if I keep being persistent, he’ll give in,” Shisui says with a smile belied by the quick glare he shoots his friend. While the glare isn’t ninja terrifying, it’s a close call.

“Good luck with that,” I say, so happy to feel real amusement at his behavior. I have no desire to let the bastard drag me down again. “But seriously, I feel I should be charging you instead of him.”

“No, don’t do that Mari-chan,” Shisui says with such seriousness. “Him being made to pay is part of my nefarious plan.”

“In that case, I’ll be sure to leave the check with him,” I return with a grin, mood lifting further at his antics. “Can’t have your nefarious plan ruined after all.”

“That would be a true tragedy for everyone involved.”

I chuckle. I’m glad Shisui is here to distract me from the bastard.

He’s distracting me from the fear growing stronger every day. He might not be answering because we’ve really broken up.

He might not be answering because he can’t.

"Still nothing?"

"Complete and utter nothing. Bastard."

Tori embraces m. I hug her back too harshly, my throat too tight and tears filling my eyes.

Seven weeks of silence. No matter how much I want to, I can’t keep denying the truth. We really have broken up.

The only other explanation is too terrifying to think about.
“And to think, people believe you’re the kind one.”

“That is the common assumption.” Translation, this assumption is wrong. I chuckle.

“You need better friends,” I direct at Itachi’s captive. Kakashi, of course, gives no indication he even heard me. He’s not apathetic this time though, oh no. Instead he’s attempting to light Itachi on fire with the force of his glare. The glare is terrifying in the way only a ninja’s can be, cold shivers running down my back even though it isn’t aimed at me. He’d be running off customers if it wasn’t for the fact that he and Itachi are the only ones present. Normally his behavior would be a problem for customers to be, but I’m about to close up. Which will take a while, given that I’m on my own. I offered so that Renji and Tori could go on a date, to express my thanks for putting up with my moodiness for so long. As for Naruto, he’s keeping himself busy by playing with Sasuke, Sakura and Ino in the park.

I figured my evening was going to be a slow one. Luckily, Itachi arrived to brighten it up. His arrival alone had been a wonderful show. Seeing a furious adult dragged along by an uncaring kid was hilarious. Kakashi might not have been struggling against Itachi’s grip on his arm, but it couldn’t have been more clear that he was coming along unwillingly. He’d already been trying to set Itachi on fire with his eye when the two of them arrived, and he hasn’t stopped trying since. It’s as amusing as it is impressive how unaffected Itachi is by the visual promise of a slow and painful death.

“I disagree, Kakashi needs more friends like us,” Itachi says, placid as ever. His grip on Kakashi’s arm remains unyielding. “Perhaps it would finally convince him to act like an adult instead of a petulant child.”

Kakashi’s vow of murder manages to become even more terrifying. Even with the shivers running down my spine, it’s funny to see his indifference broken like this. It also reveals just how much Itachi’s and Shisui’s antics are getting to him.

Really though, acting like this just because Itachi forced him to sit at the counter? Maybe there’s some truth to him acting like a child after all.

“And of course you know all about acting like an adult,” I tease Itachi with a smile.

“I am very mature. Unlike some people.”

If a glare was a sword, Itachi would’ve been skewered a long time ago. I have no idea what Kakashi has done to make both Itachi and Shisui fixate on him like this, but it’s clear he’s suffering under their attentions. I would feel bad for him if it didn’t mean Itachi and Shisui are coming by more often than they ever have. A great distraction from thinking about the bastard.

They’re distracting me from the knowledge that we’ve really broken up.

We have to have broken up. The only other possibility doesn’t bear thinking about.
“Whoa! Nee-chan, did you see, did you?”

“I saw,” I lie, smiling at the brat tucked beneath my arm. He’s tugging at my clothes from sheer excitement and he’s already let out a loud gasp before I even finish speaking, all his attention on the fireworks going off. He’s absolutely mesmerized. It increases his cuteness factor by about a thousand.

I’m glad he’s having fun. While I refuse to make the same mistake as last year, the roof offers a decent enough view of the fireworks. And before that, Tori offered up the Dancing Dragon, closed because of the date, to hold Naruto’s birthday party. My apartment isn’t big enough by far to host four overexcited brats and my friends both.

It was a good thing everyone had plans to go to the festival. Means the party didn’t go on too long. More specifically, it didn’t go on long enough for the general populace to start working on the yearly event of getting blackout drunk. On this day, I refuse to let Naruto be outside when the alcohol level starts to rise.

Thankfully, the brat didn’t mind that the party ended early. He was, in fact, over the moon with it. It was so much bigger than the one he had last year. So much bigger than any he’s ever had.

Even after all this time, he sometimes still manages to stab me in the heart.

While Naruto would’ve liked the party to go on longer, he was more than happy to continue it at home with just the two of us. Or rather, the three of us. Gama-chan was a fully fledged participant, the chairs moved so we were seated in front of his tank and Naruto could show off his presents. The brat wanted to take him up with us to see the fireworks, but before I had to say what an awful idea that was, he remembered that frogs don’t like loud noises. So he explained to Gama-chan that he was going to see the fireworks and that Gama-chan wouldn’t like them because they’re so loud, before promising to be back soon.

I’m so proud of him. He’s more than risen up to the challenge of being a responsible pet owner.

“Whoa, it’s red and green! That’s–”

He stops talking with a loud gasp, attention hijacked by a new burst of colors. I watch him with a smile, his joy a better show than the fireworks could ever be.

It’s almost enough to keep my heart from breaking.

Today marks the first day I met the bastard. No matter how stupid, I couldn’t stop myself from adding a slice of cake to the note.

No matter how stupid, I can’t stop myself from hoping that this time he’ll finally answer.

It’s been a year since then, but I want to say it again. Thanks for the rescue.
He doesn’t reply. I knew he wouldn’t, of course I knew. Even if he isn’t away on a mission, this wouldn’t be enough to make him break his silence. I knew that from the start.

Doesn’t stop me from crying.

I’m never going to see him again, am I?

*This isn’t fair. You’re forcing me to keep having hope and it’s clear I shouldn’t. Just answer. I can’t have any closure until you do. I don’t think you can either.*

The crash makes me shoot up straight. What the hell?

I strain my eyes, the moonlight making everything seem colorless. When I realize what I’m looking at, my brain freezes.

There are three ANBU in my room. Three ANBU. In my bedroom.

Two of them straighten from their crouch – did one of them just wave at me? – and disappear in the blink of an eye. The only one left – are his arms tied together? – sits upright – that mask! – and suddenly I’m wide awake.

"Oh no you don’t." Scrambling from beneath the covers, I leap forward and land on his lap, almost smashing my head against his mask but he leans back right before I do.

I’m only absently aware of this, all of my focus on ensuring he can’t get away. Quickly twining my hands through his hair, I take hold hard enough to pull out the strands if he tries to disentangle my fingers. Yanking his head closer, I glare at the shadows where his eyes should be.

“You’re not going anywhere.”

Silence, his body still in the way only a ninja’s can be. The only difference between him and a statue is his warmth. I glare harder at the complete and utter bastard.

“You fucking bastard. Ten weeks. You’ve been ignoring me for ten. Weeks. Have the damn decency to break up with me in person like the adult you’re supposed to be.”

He still refuses to speak. I bare my teeth in a mockery of a smile.

“Nothing to say? No, you’re right, Mary, I’ve been acting like a complete and utter bastard. You owe me that much at the very least.”

Movement, my back on the floor, one of his hands cradling the back of my head, his body held over mine. Then he starts pulling back. I yank his hair so hard I almost pull out a patch.

“Leave now and I will hurt you *so much.*” I don’t care what I have to do to make it happen, I will find a way to hurt him if he dares to take off now.

“How exactly would you manage that?”
His voice sends a jolt through my body. I haven’t heard it in so long that I can’t help the rush of desire slamming into me, my body alight with a reaction born from all the other times he’s returned.

It does nothing to diminish my anger. If anything, it increases it, because I’m feeling like this when that bastard has the nerve to sound cold and dismissive.

“You’re a civilian.”

“I’d find a way. Even if it takes years, I’d find a way to get back at you no matter what.” I’ll break the first rule of ANBU left and right, I’ll save up and hire the best damn tracker if I have to, but I will find him and I will hurt him. So much.

He doesn’t react to my threat in any way. I tighten my grip on his hair even further, warning him with the force of my glare that I will make good on my threat if he leaves now.

He doesn’t leave.

“We aren’t together.” His voice is even colder than before, distant in a way I’ve never known him to be. He’s trying to act like we’re strangers. “You mean nothing to me.”

I won’t let him.

“Says the guy who’s been stalking me without orders,” I say with deliberate cruelty. “I was never the one who got invested first. You were.”

“It was just sex.”

“Mind blowing, brain melting sex,” I agree, not bothering to deny the truth. At first it really was just sex. “Then it became so much more. Just because you deny it doesn’t mean it isn’t true.”

He lets out a derisive scoff, switching from dismissing me to insulting me. Like that’s going to make me any more inclined to buy his act.

“Don’t try to make it more meaningful than it was.”

“So all your lovers know that the insides of your thighs are ticklish?” I break through his pretense, uncaring of how brutal I’m being. “That the small scar on your stomach is from a wound that came closer to killing you than any other has? That the one on your wrist is from the first time you tried to cook?”

The faintest of tremors runs through the hand cradling the back of my head. I continue ruthlessly, no shred of compassion left.

“I know you. And I know you because you let me. It wasn’t just sex. It hasn’t been for a long time now.”

A barely audible sound escapes him, so soft I almost don’t recognize the whimper for what it is. The realization strikes like lightning.

“What are you so afraid of?”

His hand leaves the back of my head and covers my throat. He tightens his grip. While it isn’t painful, it’s on the verge of causing me trouble breathing. I don’t care about the false threat in the slightest. I need him to answer.

I can’t convince him to stay without it.
When he finally speaks, his voice is soft and lethal. A naked blade that sends shivers down my spine. I ignore both my instinctive fear and involuntary desire. This isn’t the time for either of those things.

Not when I can hear the desperation hidden beneath the promise of death.

“You talk as if nothing can hurt you. Like you aren’t helpless. Like you aren’t weak.”

My heart clenches.

You stupid bastard.

“No one is safe,” I say gently, all my anger gone at the realization of why he’s been acting like this. “You’re no safer than I am, no matter how much stronger you are. You’ve already faced more danger than I ever will. You’ll keep facing danger time and time again. I’m aware of what that could mean one day, but I’m still willing to take that chance. Why won’t you?”

He laughs, but while it’s meant to be mocking, it only comes out broken. My heart breaks at the sound that reveals just how unraveled this whole thing has made him. I knew that his physical scars aren’t the only ones he has. I just hadn’t realized how deep his other scars go.

“You think it’s that easy? Just take a chance?”

“Yes. You only need to try.” Try and hold on tight, try and hope it won’t all be taken away again. That’s all anyone can do.

“Spoken like someone who’s never experienced loss.”

Oh, he did not just say that.

“I’ve experienced more than you can ever imagine,” I return furiously, all my compassion gone. “I have lost more than you could ever imagine.”

A spasm runs through the hand around my throat, his grip tightening to the point of pain, a strangled whimper escaping me. His hand is gone before I even finish processing what just happened. It erases my anger, worry rising instead.

He’s never hurt me before. The loss of control reveals just how fragile he is right now.

“A civilian, just a civilian. What do you know about loss.”

“My worry is obliterated.

“You think civilians can’t experience loss? What arrogance. Everyone can have everything taken at any time. It only takes one moment, one single moment for the world to shatter, to lose everything you hold dear.”

I lost my family, my friends, my entire world. Shiro lost the love of his life, sometimes still looks at me as if I’m a ghost that won’t stop haunting him. Renji saw his wife die and watched his newborn son suffer the same fate after taking a single breath.

“Life isn’t safe. We have to grasp every happiness that comes out way, hold on tight and hope it won’t all be taken away. That’s all anyone can do.”

He lets out a sound like a wounded animal and vanishes, my wrists aching and my hands holding empty air. No!
Lunging to my feet, I run to the open window and strain my eyes, trying to find him no matter how useless I know it is.

“You fucking bastard!” I scream, almost choking on my rage because he did it again, he left without warning and he’s such a fucking bastard.

I slam the window shut as hard as I can, trembling with rage and hurt and how could he do this again, how can he just leave, how can he not even try to make this work?

Why won’t he stay?

I burst out crying. An absent part of me is aware that my legs give out and then I’m sitting on the floor but I don’t care, can do nothing but cry because he’s gone, I’m never going to see him again, never be teased by him again, never hear him laugh –

“Nee-chan?”

The scared voice makes me open my eyes. Naruto is standing in the open doorway, terrified eyes locked onto me. I open my mouth to tell him – I don’t even know what.

It doesn’t matter. I can’t find my voice.

Naruto runs over and slams into me, tiny arms strangling my neck.

“You’re hurt! What’s wrong, tell me, I can help, I’ll make you feel better–”

“Shut up.” The harsh whisper escapes me without thought. It makes Naruto’s panic grow worse and I know I should comfort him and explain things but I just can’t. Not right now. “Please, Naruto. I’ll explain later, but please don’t say anything right now. I need to cry.”

I can’t even begin to describe how grateful I when he listens. He tightens his hold on me by a painful amount and starts crying himself and I don’t want him to cry but I can’t make him stop. I can only resume crying myself and hug him back as hard as he can stand, the last sane part of me taking care not to hurt him.

Stupid, stupid bastard.

"He's such a fucking bastard. With his stupid mask and his stupid blindfold and his stupid rainbow hair."

"You said it,” Renji says and yes! I did say it! Because it’s true! Because he’s such a fucking bastard.

"And he kept reading my stories! He even put in corrections! What the hell? Those are mine. My stories, my characters, mine.”

"That bastard,” Rukia says and he is a bastard! A stupid bastard who has the nerve to correct my stories! Why did I allow that? And why did I keep giving him food?

"I kept giving him food! I put dinner aside every night! I fucking stopped cooking sweet and fried things because of him. This is the gratitude I get?"

"He doesn't deserve you,” Tori says and damn straight he doesn’t deserve me.
"I hope he fucking chokes on blue balls."

Renji snorts with laughter. This isn’t funny! Tori understands that. She’s giving Renji’s arm a reprimanding smack. That’s good. And I hope that bastard never has sex again! Who cares about orgasms anyway?

“Or about his stupid tongue or his stupid fingers or his stupid ninja cheating chakra tricks!"

"Wait, he— hmph!"

I look at Tori with confusion. Why did she put a hand over Rukia’s mouth?


Hell no I don’t!

“I fucking don’t need him. I’m young, I’m awesome, I’ve got mad bedroom skills, I don’t need him.”

"Hell no you don’t,” Renji agrees and it’s true! I don’t need him!

"I don’t need his stupid notes and his stupid voice and his warmth and his laughter and, and–"

I burst out crying.

"I miss him. That bastard. I miss him so much."

The hangover from hell has finally abated. Today I feel human. I rub my eyes and carefully get up without waking Naruto, sprawled across half the bed. The brat has refused to sleep in his own bed ever since the bastard left for good. Not something that can continue indefinitely, but I won’t deny that his presence is a comfort I could really use right now. Even if that comfort does come with being woken in the middle of the night by flailing limbs.

While the drunken bitch session has done wonders in helping me gain some much needed closure, my heart still aches like someone ripped it out, put it in a paper shredder, and shoved the mangled remains back into my chest. I know that feeling is going to go away anytime soon.

No more notes. No more banter, no more laughter. No more lazy caressing. No more talks about anything and everything. No more bastard. He’s gone.

He’s never coming back.

After taking a moment to recover from the heartache that inspires, I pull myself together and walk to the window. Grabbing the good luck charm he gave me, I open a drawer and stuff it into the furthest corner, making sure I’ll never see or touch it. I’m not ready to throw it out, but I’m finally ready to admit our relationship is over for good.

No matter how painful it is to accept that.

After getting dressed, I throw some breakfast together and set Naruto’s portion aside for when he wakes up. After finishing my meal without tasting a single thing, I grab a new notebook and sit down the couch.

Everyone has their own way of dealing with loss. Shiro presents gifts that will never be received.
Renji pretends that nothing is wrong. Rukia buries herself in her work. Tori makes sure her loved ones are taken care of.

I write.

And because I’m fairly certain that bastard is going to keep stalking me, I write in English. I won’t give him access to my innermost thoughts.

Not anymore.

I stare. The brat keeps looking like a hopeful puppy.

“Do you like him?”

I stare some more. Then I burst out laughing, closing my eyes and holding my stomach as I laugh and laugh.

Oh Naruto.

When I regain control of myself and open my eyes, I see the brat beam brighter than the sun. It melts my heart in the best of ways.

Moving forward with a smile, I take hold of the carrier he eagerly holds up for me. The furious cat inside hisses at me like I’m the devil itself. Where did he even find it? And where did he get the carrier from? Please tell me he didn’t buy it. I’ll pay him back if he did.

“I found him in an alley and it was really difficult to catch him but I did,” Naruto chatters excitedly, trailing after me as I walk to the window. “–and I asked Kiba for something to hold him and it was so hard to get him into it and do you like him, nee-chan, do you?”

So he didn’t buy the carrier. Good.

As for whether or not I like the cat, well. I mostly feel sorry for it. The poor thing clearly doesn’t want to be here. It’s still hissing at me like I’m the spawn of the devil.

I open the window and set the poor thing free.

“Mary-nee!” Naruto’s betrayed yell makes my smile grow, can’t help it. Kneeling down in front of him, I pull the most wonderful brat in the whole world into a tight hug.

“Thank you.” I can’t even begin to describe how much this means to me.

Naruto hesitantly hugs me back.

“I thought you’d like him,” he says in a subdued voice, unsure of what to make of my reaction. I pull back a little and stroke the cheek of the sweetest brat in the world.

“I appreciate the thought more than I can put into words. But I don’t need a new cat.” The gesture alone has turned me into a puddle of goo, though.

Naruto gives a tentative smile back, still confused by my reaction.

“I just want you to be happy.”
I melt some more.

“T’ve just, you’ve been so sad ever since you started fighting with the cat, and now he ran away for good! I thought, if you had a new one, you’d be happy again!”

Is it possible for a heart to literally burst with love? It feels like it is.

“That’s very sweet of you,” I say while nuzzling his nose. Trying to make clear just how much this means to me. Judging from the ball of sunshine Naruto turns into, I’ve succeeded. “But the cat was special,” I continue, explaining why I set free the one he brought with him. “He can’t be replaced.”

Naruto bites down his lip in a gesture he’s picked up from Sakura, his confidence fading. Not as much as before, though.

“I just want you to stop being sad.”

Oh, that’s as touching as it is painful. The break up between me and the bastard has been hard on him. I tried to keep the worst of it away from him, but I know I failed big time. Even without adding in the final fight between me and the bastard.

Never again. From now on, I’ll make sure my own issues don’t become the brat’s.

Having said that.

“I’ll be sad for a while yet.” Saying anything else would be a lie. One Naruto would easily see through in the following days. Weeks. Months. Years.

I’m pretty sure I’m going to miss the bastard forever.

“But I’ll get better. Every day I’ll feel a little less sad.”

“You promise?” Naruto pleads, desperate for me to give my word and fearing that I won’t.

I’m so happy I can put his fears to rest.

“I promise,” I say earnestly, holding his gaze to make sure he knows I mean it even more than usual.

Naruto outshines the sun, before he surges forward and almost mows me over with a hug.

“You’re going to stop being sad!” he cheers, making me grimace. Only part of it is from the piercing volume so near my ear. I really haven’t been a good guardian if he’s been worrying about me this much. “Even though the cat isn’t here anymore?” he continues less loudly, another hint of uncertainty coming through. Definitely haven’t been a good guardian.

“Even though the cat isn’t here anymore,” I confirm, briefly closing my eyes from the pain those words inspire.

He’s never coming back.

Naruto stays quiet long enough for me to start worrying. Just when I’m about to ask him what’s wrong, he tightens his hug and whispers in a way he only does when he’s sharing a secret.

“I miss the cat.”
Oh, I have been an awful guardian. I was so caught up in my own heartbreak that I hadn’t even stopped to consider that Naruto would miss the bastard as well. Not this much at least.

I’ll never make the same mistake again.

“I miss him too,” I confess, something I didn’t even do when I explained to him why the bastard left. I couldn’t admit it. Not then.

I can now.

“Why did he leave?”

“Because he’s afraid.” My own reluctance to talk about this means nothing. If the brat needs to hear this, I’ll say it. In a thousand different ways and every day if that’s what it takes. He needs to understand this isn’t his fault. It isn’t mine either. It’s not even the bastard’s. Not truly.

Some wounds never heal. If you’re lucky, you learn how to live with the scars.

If you’re unlucky, you don’t.

“You didn’t drag your friend along this time?”

“We’re mad at him,” Shisui says like this is a new development. Whatever their argument is about, it’s escalated big time. “He’s being an idiot.”

“Of unbelievable proportions,” Itachi agrees with a note of true aggravation. Must be really serious.

I manage to muster a small smile and refill Itachi’s cup.

“How are you feeling?”

Shisui’s gentle question makes me sigh.

“Is it that obvious?” I ask despite already knowing the answer.

“It is.” Even Itachi is showing visible concern. Apparently I look as awful as I feel.

I shrug.

“Just life being life. I’ll get over it eventually.” It’s going to suck until I do, though.

“Is there anything we can do to help?” Shisui asks just as gently as before.

“You can distract me,” I answer without hesitation. Shisui replies with a cheerful smile, more than willing to indulge my request. He’s a sweet kid.

“In that case, did you hear about Sasuke’s latest scheme to get Itachi to stay home?”

I do my best to ignore the horror that a thirteen year old is regularly away on military missions.

“I have not.” Which means that whatever happened ended in failure. Naruto would’ve heard all about it otherwise, and thus, I would have as well. And if Shisui is the one bringing it up, Sasuke’s failure is going to be turned into comedy gold.
“His strategy was sound.” Itachi’s defense of his little brother comes as no surprise. In his eyes, Sasuke is a genius.

“True, it was,” Shisui agrees with an ease that means he’s about to needle Itachi. “His execution needs a lot of work, though.”

Itachi doesn’t seem to react in any way, but judging from Shisui’s satisfied smile, he’s succeeded in annoying Itachi. Criticizing Sasuke is one of the few things that can accomplish that without effort.

“What did he do?” I ask, and it’s enough to make Shisui launch into a comedic retelling of Sasuke’s plan to hide all of Itachi’s equipment. Itachi constantly interrupts with examples of what Sasuke did right. This, of course, offers Shisui the perfect openings to point out what he did wrong.

These two kids are my favorite customers.

“You don’t have to do this.”

“I want to.”

No, he doesn’t. I think he needs to, though. Still.

“I don’t want you to look at me and see her.” It still happens sometimes. Probably always will. But I don’t want to risk us going back to how we used to be.

Shiro remains silent, the pain lining his eyes becoming more pronounced. This whole thing with the bastard and me has been difficult for him. Reminding him of her in a way he hasn’t experienced in a long time. He’s dealing with it, far better than expected actually, but he’s also been looking at me like I’m a ghost that won’t stop haunting him painful frequency.

He used to look at me like that all the time. I hadn’t realized what it meant at first, it took a while before I was able to interpret his minute facial expressions. I learned to recognize his anger easily enough, his default state whenever we met in the first half year or so. The accompanying hurt was more difficult to spot, though.

I only learned to spot it when I discovered she’d been his fiance.

“You aren’t Mariko.”

Shiro’s soft statement startles me. Then my heart clenches.

I’m not her. I look like her, I look exactly like her, but I’m not her.

I’m Mary.

“You never have been,” Shiro finishes while closing his eyes, his shoulders tense in a way only she can inspire. Only I can inspire.

I avert my gaze, my throat too tight. We don’t talk about this much. The last time was... over two years already. During what had been our annual breakdown on the night the Kyuubi attacked. It’s been even longer since we talked about this sober.

Maybe it’s time we do so again.
“You sometimes look at me like I’m her.” And it never stops being painful. It never stops reminding me that this isn’t my world.

The most selfish part of me hopes he keeps looking at me like that forever. No matter how unhealthy it is for the both of us.

Shiro lets out a sigh that’s as pained as it is fond. Yes, I’m fishing for reassurance, but I can’t help it. This is something I still feel insecure about. Probably always will. Which is why I do my best to avoid thinking about this.

“I never would’ve look at her like that,” Shiro assures me as always, making me relax. I already knew that of course, but hearing him say it out loud soothes my issues to the point where they become manageable again.

Which means I can now help Shiro work through his own.

“You might have if she’d dressed like I do.”

My gentle teasing makes Shiro snort with involuntary laughter, a major victory. The warm look he gives me, one that isn’t aimed at her in the slightest, is an even greater one.

“You do have awful taste in clothing,” the fashion icon says like his own tastes are supposed to be the standard. I smile and grasp his hand. He twines our fingers together, but the look in his eyes is the one I hate seeing. My smile fades.

I don’t say anything more. Shiro isn’t like me. When he’s like this, he doesn’t want to be distracted. He just wants someone to be with him while he works through his grief.

Except, unexpectedly, Shiro swallows in a way that means he wants to say something. Something he thinks would be a bad idea for me to hear. I gently squeeze his hand to let him know it’s okay. He can tell me anything he wants. The fact I probably won’t like what he has to say doesn’t matter in the slightest.

“...You aren’t Mariko.”

Definitely not going to like this.

“But when I look at you, I see who she could have been.”

I close my eyes, my own issues flaring up with a vengeance. It’s one thing that I look like the twin of the woman whose life I’ve taken over. It’s something else entirely to hear the similarities go deeper than that. I already knew they did of course, Daisuke said the same thing sometimes. Told me how much I remind him of his daughter, despite all our differences as well. I’m rude, she was polite. I get wound up far too easily, she never lost her calm. I don’t really care what I look like, she never left home unless she was perfectly put together.

Those differences are superficial. Or they were to Daisuke at least. According to him, we share the same sense of humor. We have the same temper, despite the fact that she kept hers under far better control. We both have the need to have the final word, and we possess the same streak of vengeance.

It’s why I want Shiro to keep looking at me in that awful way of his. To everyone else, the differences in my behavior and my “speech impairment” were attributed to physical damage caused by the Kyuubi’s magic. I hadn’t been the only civilian by far who’d been diagnosed with mental damage like that.
Sometimes I fear it’s true. Fear that my past is just a hallucination brought on by the Kyuubi’s magic, that I really am her. I know I’m not, my memories are far too detailed, but sometimes I can’t help my irrational fear.

Shiro looking at me like that lays those fears to rest. He never forgets I’m not her.

Daisuke never forgot either. But he saw her every time he looked at me. He took care of me because it helped him cope with his own grief. I don’t feel any resentment for that. Don’t mind that he used me like that.

I used him the same way.

Shiro has never mentioned the similarities in mine and hers personalities, though. I don’t know if it’s a good or a bad sign that he’s doing so now. Does this mean he’s moving on from his loss? Or does it mean he’s getting worse?

“Do you wish you didn’t?” I ask in a voice that thankfully comes out even instead of tentative. I don’t want him to feel like he has to reassure me. This is about him, not about me.

“Sometimes,” Shiro says in the softest of voices. A confession he wishes wasn’t true. “But most of the time I don’t mind,” he continues in a stronger voice, looking at me in a way that shows just how much he means those words. While this isn’t about me, I won’t deny that it’s nice to have my tension soothed like this. Shiro is the most important thing here, though.

His grip on my hand tightens. A reassurance and a plea for comfort all at once.

“I do love you, Mari. Not as I loved her, but you’re... you’re very dear to me.”

It’s the closest he’ll ever come to saying he loves me because of how much I remind him of her. Not entirely, Shiro loves me for who I am as well. But he’ll never stop seeing her when he looks at me.

I’ll never stop seeing my world when I look at him. Most of the time it isn’t conscious, but Shiro knows about my past. He knows I’m not her.

He’s proof that my past is real.

“You’re my best friend, Shiro,” I say, the only way I can tell him I love him without hurting him. The only way I can express just how much he means to me.

Shiro’s lips twitch with a hint of a smile, some of the tension leaving his shoulders. Comforted by my words instead of hurt by them. I’m so relieved. In his current state, calling him my best friend is always a hit and miss. I wouldn’t have said it if I didn’t think it would comfort him of course, but I’ve been wrong before.

“Then tell your best friend all about your awful ex.”

A startled chuckle escape me, even as I feel my breath hitch as well.

The bastard is an ex. We’re no longer together.

We broke up.

I hesitate. Not because I want to avoid hurting Shiro, I really do think he needs to hear me talk about this. But do I want to talk about this? I’d wanted to talk to him about the bastard before, but this is different. This isn’t venting my frustration with him.
It’s sharing my loss.

“He wasn’t awful,” I blurt, the words suddenly impossible to contain. Guess that answers the question of whether or not I want to talk about this. “He was... he was wonderful. Insane and a bastard like you wouldn’t believe, but wonderful.”

As I continue pouring my heart out, I feel a weight I hadn’t even realized was there lift off my shoulders. Shiro might need to hear this, but I need to talk about it as well. Need to explain just why I fell in love with the bastard. Why it hurts so much that he’s gone.

Some wounds never heal. Others do. The only thing they need is time.

They heal a lot faster when you aren’t alone.

“You’re sure you don’t mind?” I have to ask again, can’t help it. Shiro I’m not worried about, but Renji... His relationship with Naruto might have improved to a level I hadn’t thought possible, but this is something I never expected to happen.

Renji waves my worry away.

“It’s fine. Me and Shiro will keep the brat entertained. Go and have fun.”

He’s an amazing friend.

“Oh, we will.”

Rukia is not. I give her a look that tells her exactly how not comforted I am by her mischievous remark. While I’d been looking forward to this when we were getting ready, now that we’re about to leave, this no longer seems like a good idea.

Rukia’s impish smile grows and she links our arms together. Preventing me from fleeing. Not that I was planning to do that. Yet.

Tori links our arms together as well, cutting off my last escape route. She throws an adoring smile Renji’s way.

“Don’t wait up,” she says brightly, showing the same mischievousness Rukia did. Not comforting at all.

“I’m not picking up a booty call,” I warn. Fun is good, sex is not. I’m nowhere near ready for that. Might never be again. Not civilian booty calls at least. The bastard has ruined those for life.

Rukia has the nerve to roll her eyes like I’m being ridiculous.

“The point of a girls night out isn’t to pick up a booty call. It’s to dress sexy, get tipsy, not drunk,” she warns like I’m in the habit of doing that. I give her an unimpressed look. I get shitfaced twice because of exceptional circumstances, and she’s already acting like I’ve got a problem. “–and make every man drool over us as we dance,” she finishes with a cheerful smile, ignoring my look completely. I can’t help the wry quirk of my lips at her typical behavior.

Tori gives a sage nod of agreement, endorsing those words of wisdom. It’s enough to make me give into the inevitable.
“Sounds like a plan.”

“So enthusiastic,” Rukia mocks without an ounce of compassion. I roll my eyes but can’t help but smile as well.

I might be overreacting a little. Yes, I’m still nervous, but having fun and driving guys crazy really does sound like a great idea.

And if the bastard is still stalking me and my actions make him squirm, all the better.

I stop writing and reread the last few sentences, before I scratch a few parts out and phrase them in a better way. Writing in my native language is surprisingly hard. Sure, I haven’t written in it in years, but to have this much trouble? It’s both strange and oddly discomforting.

The story itself, on the other hand, is developing almost too quick for my hand to keep up.

I glance down at Naruto when he falls silent. He’s huddled against my side and scowling down at his textbook. Studying is not his favorite activity. He knows there’s a reward waiting for him when he finishes this chapter, though.

After letting out a dramatic sigh, he gains a determined expression and starts reading out loud again. He’s going to pass this test no matter what. I’m so proud.

I ruffle his hair, making him fall silent again and look up at me, startled. Then he gives me his signature sunshine smile. I couldn’t stop an answering smile even if I wanted to. He returns to his studying. I return to my writing.

I’ll get over the bastard. Losing him isn’t the end of the world.

No matter how much it sometimes feels like it is.

I watch with a smile as Naruto tries to make his kite loop through the air, focused in a way he rarely is. Renji is kneeling besides him, explaining how to make the kite loop. Tori is watching them both without even trying to hide how her heart has turned into a puddle of goo.

Rukia links her arm through mine. We share a look of complete agreement, marveling at the sight so different from the last New Years Festival. Shiro is standing on Rukia’s other side, his own eyes warm as he looks at the miracle in front of us. Last year, Renji hadn’t been able to look at Naruto without being reminded of the loss of his family. Now, here he is, teaching Naruto tricks with his kite. No matter how long it’s been since Renji came around, there are still times where I’m overwhelmed all over again by it.

There are still times where I’m overwhelmed by how happy I am. There was a time I was convinced I’d never be again.

Things aren’t perfect. I still miss the bastard. I will for a long time yet. But I’m not alone. I have my friends and I have my brat.

I’m happy. That’s all anyone can ask for.
“You’re torturing him, you really are. Just look at him.”

I obligingly look at Itachi, munching on dango and not seeming tortured at all.

“He’s suffering, Mari-chan,” Shisui continues with such seriousness.

“He’ll have to suffer a little longer.” And I’m afraid he’s going to be disappointed with the result. This won’t be my finest work. Or even a good one. I’m not even sure Sato will want to publish it, that’s how much it sucks. Switching between languages isn’t good for my writing style.

Shisui gives me a dramatically wounded look.

“You are a cruel woman, Mari-chan.”

“You only just figured this out?” I counter, amused at his over the top antics. Amused, and worried.

Shisui and Itachi haven’t been around much, and they always seem more stressed when they do. Evidenced most clearly by Shisui’s over the top antics, but even Itachi shows the occasional sign. The greatest was when I asked if they’re all right. While Shisui tried to wave my words away, Itachi replied with a we are managing with a weariness noticeable even to someone who doesn’t know him. Even without Shisui’s grimace, I would’ve known something is seriously wrong just from that. At first I thought it had to do with their friend, Kakashi apparently has some personal issues he isn’t handling well, but by now I’m pretty there’s something more going on. Shisui and Itachi don’t want to talk about it, though.

They want to be distracted. I’m more than willing to help with that.

“I’m afraid you won’t like it much,” I say to Itachi. “There’s no romance in it.”

“Romance isn’t required for me to enjoy a story,” the hidden romantic says like he actually means it. Well, he does mean it, but the fact remains that he enjoys stories with a good romance a lot more.

“Liar,” Shisui accuses with a grin, as aware of Itachi’s romantic tendencies as I am. His fictional ones at least. I’ve never known Itachi to date. I’m betting that’s going to change when puberty kicks in full force.

“So what’s it about?” Shisui asks after Itachi gives no reaction to his accusation. He reacts to Shisui’s question though, his eyes narrowing briefly with open annoyance. Shisui smiles back with smug satisfaction.

“It’s about a hunter who gets turned into a bear,” I say with a grin. I won’t reveal anything of course, Itachi despises spoilers, but I can still pretend to play along with Shisui.

Itachi gives me a placid look that isn’t a warning at all. My grin grows.

“Obviously he tries to find a way to become human again.”

“And how does he do that?” Shisui asks like he’s genuinely curious and not trying to push Itachi’s buttons some more.

“You’ll have to read it to find out,” I say with satisfaction, revealing I have no intention whatsoever
of playing along. I chuckle at the betrayed gasp Shisui lets out. Itachi’s eyes turn content in a way that eases my worry.

I don’t know what problems they’re having, but I’m glad I can help them take their mind off them, if only for a little while. Hopefully their troubles will be over soon.

I miss having them around.

“Hold your hand here, nee-chan. Push down hard, it needs to stay tight!”

“Will do, brat,” I say with a grin and obligingly push down my hand where he wants me to. Wonder if this is the time we’ll get it right.

Naruto, focused in a way he rarely is, slowly and carefully pulls back the wire – the trap springs, paint splattering everywhere, my eyes closing on instinct as it hits me in the face. I hear Naruto splutter in a way that means he’s gotten some in his mouth and it’s enough to make me burst out laughing.

“Damn it!”

I laugh harder. The brat’s reaction just makes everything so much better.

“This isn’t funny, nee-chan!”

It really is. This fact is further confirmed when I open my eyes and see Naruto covered in even more paint than before. Seems the third time isn’t the charm after all.

“This is hilarious,” I manage to say before dissolving into laughter again. This time Naruto joins me, his annoyance no match for the comedy gold that is this situation. Best of all, he's finally grown out of his allergy to bathing, meaning I can enjoy this wonderful moment in time without worrying over a bath war later on.

Today is a beautiful day.

It no longer hurts quite so much that I won’t be able to tell the bastard about it.

“Spill,” Rukia demands like the gossip predator she is. She’s been unbelievably patient with me, but her patience has finally run out. She needs to know. Now.

I’m ready to talk about this now.

“His tongue is a gift from heaven.”

Tori laughs. Rukia smiles like a shark scenting blood.

“Go on,” she orders, determined to have her curiosity satisfied at long last. Tori waits for my answer with a smile, wanting to know more as well. Not as much as Rukia though, not by a long shot.

“He could do this thing, this twist that made me see stars every single time. And his tongue was nimble.” God, was it nimble. “I swear, when he went down on me, he reached places I didn’t know
were possible to reach. And his control! He once kept me right on the edge for over half an hour.” At the time, it felt like an eternity of torture, but when he finally granted me release... “I genuinely blacked out for a few moments when he pushed me over.”

“What about his ninja cheating chakra tricks?” Rukia asks, delighted by every word I’ve said and even more ravenous for details than before.

“I’m ruined for civilians forever,” I say without hesitation, meaning the words from the bottom of my heart. “He lit up my nerves with actual lightning.” How can normal sex ever compare again?

“No,” Tori breathes with equal shock and intrigue. A worthy reaction to information such as this.

“Details, Mari, we need details.” Rukia is on a mission and she will not be deterred.

With a grin, I give her the details she’s been thirsting after for so long. It’s still a little painful to talk about this, but mostly it’s fun. Even so, I lament the loss of brain melting sex. I’m never going to find another guy who can rock my world like he did. Won’t even try for who knows how long.

Fortunately, I still have a close friendship with my own hands. Isn’t the fireworks the bastard made me see, not by a long shot, but my hands are still talented. I make do.

But seriously, screw the bastard for ruining civilian booty calls forever.

“–and then he got so sad, so I hugged him, but he pushed me off and told me I’m an idiot! I’m not an idiot!”

I let out a vaguely interested noise, more focused on cooking than on the brat’s chatter.

“Nee-chan, are you even listening?”

“You’re not an idiot,” I parrot on instinct, the words making me pay more attention to what he’d been saying. Another fight with Sasuke. What a surprise.

“...Okay. So I told him I’m not an idiot and pushed him back, and he pushed me back even harder, so I–”

I continue letting out vaguely interested noises as the brat describes his fight with his – with Sasuke. Lately they’ve been getting into a lot of those even for them. Not surprising. Itachi hasn’t been home often, and when he is, he’s apparently as stressed as when I see him. Sasuke is worried about him. And hurt by how little time Itachi has for him.

The result is him taking his frustration out on Naruto. Not a nice thing to do, but, well. It’s not like I have any right to comment on his behavior. I would have anyway if Naruto was hurt by it, but for the most part he isn’t. The brat might not be booksmart, but he’s great at reading people. When it comes to the important things at least, the small ones fly right over his head. Naruto gets that Sasuke isn’t mad at him.

He’s worried about how Itachi’s absence is affecting Sasuke. I’m worried as well. The last time Shisui and Itachi dropped by, they’d looked worn down to the bone. Shisui’s antics were halfhearted at best, and there had been a bleakness to Itachi’s eyes that revealed just how bad things are. I did my best to distract them, but while I succeeded in cheering them up a little, the stress weighing down on them never disappeared.
I hope with all my heart their troubles will be over soon.

I startle at the frantic banging on the door. What the hell?

Naruto, after recovering from his own surprise, runs to the door and opens it.

“Shiro!” he cheers when he sees who it is but my own heart has leapt into my throat.

Shiro looks terrified.

“What’re you–” Naruto falls silent with a surprised yelp when Shiro picks him up and marches over to me. I’m already meeting him halfway, panic rising because what’s wrong, did something happen to Rukia, Renji, Tori, did one of them...

Please don’t let them.

Shiro pulls me into a tight hug, frazzled in a way I’ve known him to be less than a handful of times.

One of those times was when Daisuke died.

“What’s wrong?” I demand, hugging him back and embracing Naruto with my free arm, needing to assure myself that he’s safe.

Shiro lets out a shuddering breath, making my panic so much worse. He wasn’t this shaken even when Daisuke died.

“What’s wrong?” Naruto demands while tugging at his tunic, infected by my own panic. “Are you hurt? Is Tori, Rukia, Renji? We can help! Nee-chan, tell him we can help!” he demands while looking at me with a panic I would give anything to soothe but I can’t.

“Naruto, let him speak,” I say through the terror choking me. When Shiro remains silent, I resist the urge to grab him by the shoulders and shake him until he reveals what’s wrong.

Shiro lets out another shuddering breath, before he pulls back so he can meet my gaze.

His eyes are bleak in a way I’ve only known them to be in the first weeks after the Kyuubi Attack.

“Last night there was an attack on the Uchiha. The clan was wiped out. There are no survivors.”

The world shatters.

Naruto is plastered against my side, one of his arms strangling my leg. His other hand grips mine so hard I can feel it cut off my circulation. I clutch back only a little less tightly, sheltering him in the crook of my arm.

I should be paying attention to what the Hokage is saying. Should pay my respect to the dead by listening to their funeral speech.

I can’t hear anything over the ringing of my ears and the tightness of my chest. Can’t think over my horror and denial. So many are dead, yet I can only see three. Shisui, Itachi, Sasuke. They’re gone.
They’re dead. They were murdered along with their entire family.

They were just kids.

Ino slaps Naruto’s hand away when he tries to touch one of the flowers. Her dirty look is met by an equally dirty one from the brat.

“Don’t ruin it,” she snaps. I really hope this won’t end up in another fight.

“I wasn’t going to,” Naruto snaps back. At least he knows to keep his voice down while we’re here. Small mercies but I’ll take what I can get.

“Yes you were,” Ino accuses with a heat that means another fight is imminent. Great.

“Was not.”

“Was too–”

“Stop fighting,” Sakura interjects in a soft but sharp voice, glaring at them both. Mercifully, both Ino and Naruto subside, shame replacing their anger. Sakura is usually the timid one, but ever since this horror started, she’s displayed a temper I never expected from her. She’s also become the voice of reason whenever Naruto and Ino take out their frustration on each other.

“It’s important the flowers aren’t moved,” Ino apologizes to Naruto by explaining why she reacted like that.

“Why?” Naruto returns mulishly, but just the fact that he asked means he’s accepted her apology. Ino understands that and she wastes no time in explaining the meaning behind each carefully chosen flower and the position they hold. Naruto, despite his own bad mood, becomes interested despite himself.

I keep an absent eye on their conversation. Most of my attention is on the bed the three of them are sitting next to. On the little boy who still hasn’t woken up.

Shiro was wrong. There are survivors. Sasuke and Itachi are still alive.

Sasuke is alive because Itachi decided not to kill him.

I don’t believe what Inoichi told me. Itachi loves his family. He’d never do this. He can’t.

He’s just a child.

He’s a child who was part of ANBU. So was Shisui. The sweet kids who never failed to make me laugh were part of the village’s black op division. And it destroyed them.

How did I not how much they were suffering? I knew they were stressed, but how did I miss the signs that the horrors they had to commit were breaking them?

How can the Hokage put children in ANBU?

“He’ll wake up.”

Inoichi’s voice startles me. When I glance at him, sitting besides me, I see him give me a faint but
reassuring smile.

I’m not reassured.

When Naruto and I first learned of Sasuke’s survival, we both broke down, overwhelmed by joy. Then we learned that Sasuke is in a coma. We learned his mind was attacked by a magic the medics have never encountered before.

We learned he might never wake up.

The medics changed that prognosis only yesterday. Naruto broke down with joy again when we got the news. So did I, but my joy only lasted until we actually saw Sasuke. I wish more than anything that I could share his optimism, but looking at Sasuke, lifeless but for the rising and falling of his chest...

Will he ever wake up?

“The medics have stabilized his chakra,” Inoichi continues just as softly. Ensuring the kids don’t hear our conversation over their own. “It’s just a matter of time.”

I grimace. While I know he’s trying to be comforting, this is a situation in which no comfort can be found. Even if Sasuke wakes up, what kind of state will he be in? Ignoring the trauma of losing his entire family, there’s still the magic used on him. It was powerful enough that the medics weren’t even sure if he was going to make it that first week. Even now, they have no idea what was done to him. What Itachi supposedly did to him.

Itachi would never hurt Sasuke. It’s that, more than anything else, that makes me certain something else is going on. I don’t know what that something is, but the official line of Itachi snapping and murdering his entire family is bullshit. Even without adding that he supposedly snapped because Shisui committed suicide. Shisui committing suicide is about as likely as Itachi hurting Sasuke.

I’ll never say any of this out loud. This horror has brutally reminded me of the fact that I’m living in a military dictatorship. If I don’t pretend to buy the official story, Naruto will be taken away and I’ll be locked up and interrogated.

A lot of civilians are getting taken into custody right now. Most of them are returned home soon.

A few aren’t.

It’s been a long time since I wished this strongly that I was still living in my old world. Wish I could spirit Naruto away so he’ll never be turned into a child soldier like Itachi and Shisui were.

No, even worse. A child assassin.

Inoichi lets out a tired sigh and closes his eyes. Just for a moment, his strong front falls away. Everyone has been kicked in the gut by this horror, but ninja have it worst of all. Yes, civilians are getting taken in left and right, but so are ninja. And unlike civilians, when ninja aren’t being locked up, they’re being run ragged to make up for the sudden loss in manpower.

The Uchiha patrolled the streets. Not a day went by that I didn’t see one.

Without them, the village feels empty.

“I’m worried about what will happen after he wakes up,” Inoichi confesses. He skillfully fakes a smile for Ino when she glances at him. “He shouldn’t be alone.”
“Naruto will never leave him alone,” I return just as softly, most of my attention still on Sasuke. “He’d drag me over every day if he could.” The reason he can’t is because we aren’t allowed inside Sasuke’s room without supervision. More specifically, we aren’t allowed inside without Inoichi, and Inoichi just doesn’t have the time to do this every day. It’s a miracle he’s offered to do it twice a week. “That’s not even mentioning Sakura and Ino.”

“I know,” Inoichi says and this time his smile is real when he looks at his daughter. Proud of how well she’s dealing with all this. Doesn’t take long for his worry to return it, though. “But living on his own after something like this...”

What.

“Living on his own?” I demand incredulously, barely remembering to keep my voice down. “What the hell do you mean by that?” It can’t be what it sounds like. Even ninja aren’t that insane. Please don’t let them be that insane.

“He’ll have caretakers at first of course,” Inoichi says, making my horror grow. Are they actually planning to make Sasuke live on his own? “But they’ll be temporary and–”

“Inoichi, please tell me this isn’t what it sounds like,” I interrupt, needing him to wake me from the nightmare I’m in.

Inoichi closes his eyes and just for a moment, he looks worn down to the bone.

“He’s the Last Uchiha.”

I can’t even begin to describe how much I hate that title.

“We can’t put him with another clan. It would alter the balance of power too drastically, and in our current state–”

“So you’re planning to make him live on his own? ” I genuinely can’t believe what I’m hearing.

“Nee-chan? What’s wrong?”

I clench my jaw and bite back a vicious retort with the greatest of efforts. The retort would be aimed at Inoichi, but Naruto wouldn’t realize that.

“I just discovered something unpleasant,” I manage to say in an even voice, still glaring at Inoichi. “I’ll explain later.” This isn’t the place to rant about the insanity of ninja.

“Everything’s all right, little flower,” Inoichi says with a reassuring smile at the kids. When I glance in their direction, I see all three of them look at us with worry. “It’s like Mari said, we’re discussing something unpleasant. Why don’t you continue explaining what the pansies mean?”

After a moment of hesitation, Ino does just that. Her voice is halting and without the same passion as before, but it creates enough noise that the brats won’t hear us if we keep our voices down. They’ll still see us though.

Taking a deep breath, I manage to compose myself. When I speak, I ensure my voice doesn’t carry over.

“You can’t do that. It would destroy him.”

Inoichi closes his eyes and turns his body to the side. Preventing Ino from seeing how the weight of
the world seems to fall down on him.

“I’m afraid there’s nothing we can do.”

We’ll just see about that.

“Hokage-sama, with all due respect. Are you insane?”

The look he gives me makes me shut up immediately, but I rally myself. This is important.

“Sasuke might never recover even with the best of care. If you make him live on his own, he won’t recover.”

The leader of the village, the military dictator, the ninja more lethal than any other, continues to look at me in silence. He makes no pretense to be anything other than what he is, every part of him whispering that he could kill me in a hundred different ways before I could even blink. His eyes seem to pierce my very soul. It’s nerve wracking.

It’s completely irrelevant. I need him to change his mind. He can’t do this to Sasuke.

“You can’t be this cruel, this– this heartless! He is seven years old. Making him live on his own would be inhumane. And short sighted.” I add when none of my other words seem to get through, desperately trying to find an argument that would sway him. “If he doesn’t recover, he’ll never become an asset to the village. It would be a waste of his potential.” If empathy won’t work, maybe practicality will. No matter how infuriating it is that the need to look after a child isn’t enough.

The Hokage leans forward on his desk with a grace made all the more unsettling for his age. No one can move like that without magic.

It’s a magic honed to kill.

“What would you suggest I do instead?” he asks in a kind and gentle voice. A grandfather genuinely interested in what I have to say. It makes everything about him so much more disturbing. I have no doubt that’s exactly why he spoke like that.

Taking a deep breath, I meet that soul piercing gaze head on.

“I’ll take him.”

The Hokage raises a brow that makes me feel like a petulant child, the reaction as sudden as it is involuntarily. I clench my jaw and ignore the irrational doubts trying to smother me. I’m not being ridiculous. This is a good plan. Even ignoring everything else, Sasuke can’t be put in the orphanage. He needs personal attention in a way the caretakers there can’t provide. His hateful status as the Last Uchiha also prevents any ninja from taking him in. The loss of the Uchiha has created a power vacuum. Until the situation stabilizes, there’s no chance in hell of Sasuke being taken in by ninja.

I’m not a ninja. Normally that would exclude me from consideration without fail, courtesy of the other side of the curse that is Sasuke’s new status. Can’t have the Last Uchiha taken in by a mere civilian after all.

My situation is different. I’m Naruto’s guardian. If I’m qualified enough to look after the holder of the Kyuubi, I’m damn well qualified enough to look after the Last Uchiha as well.
The Hokage continues to patronize me by looking at me like my idea is childish and born of ignorance. Asshole. If I wasn’t certain it would ruin any chance of taking in Sasuke, I might have said so to his face. Might have.

Probably not.

“And why would you do that?” he asks, still speaking in the grandfatherly voice that makes everything so much worse. “More importantly, why do you believe I would allow it?”

I couldn’t stop my glare even if I wanted to.

“I’d do it because he is seven years old.” I can’t believe I actually have to spell this out. “And you’d allow it because you allowed me to adopt Naruto. If I’m considered qualified enough to look after him, I’m damn well qualified enough to look after the Last Uchiha as well.” Just saying the title out loud leaves a foul taste behind.

The Hokage leans back in his chair with impossible grace, nothing but ruthless calculation given life. It sends violent shivers running down my spine.

“It would give you more influence than any civilian has ever had.”

I scoff.

“I have since the moment I adopted Naruto.”

It’s not something I bother to think about but that doesn’t mean I’m blind to it. Even if I was unaware, this whole disaster would’ve shown the power I hold. Not only am I allowed inside Sasuke’s room while Sakura’s parents are not, but when I marched into the Tower and demanded an audience with the Hokage, I got one. If that doesn’t show the kind of pull I have, nothing does.

“I’ve never used it,” I continues, speaking nothing but the truth. Demanding an audience with the Hokage doesn’t count. Not when my reason for doing so is to save Sasuke. “I’m not planning on ever using it. I honestly couldn’t care less about having it. Sasuke needs to be looked after. That’s the only thing I care about.”

The Hokage keeps looking at me with ruthless calculation. The air becomes more heavy, to the point it causes me trouble breathing. Then it becomes so much worse, blind panic clawing at my mind because he’s going to kill me, I can see myself die in a thousand different ways, each more horrific than the last and he’s really going to kill me – no, he isn’t. I’ve felt like this before, on the night I first arrived here. Felt worse than this, so much worse.

I felt like I was already dying instead of about to.

The feeling was caused by the Kyuubi’s magic.

The Hokage is testing me.

I grit my teeth and dig my nails into my palms as I fight the urge to flee the harbinger of death. If I need to have my life flash before my eyes a few times in order to save Sasuke, I’ll do it.

The promise of death disappears without warning, leaving me gasping for breath and swaying in place, dizzy from the sudden relief. I only realize that I’ve closed my eyes when the Hokage speaks.

“Very well.”
It takes a few moments for the words to pierce my muddled thoughts. When they do, my eyes snap open, disbelief and hope warring with equal strength. Did I really just hear him say that?

“I’ll allow you to take in the Last Uchiha,” the Hokage says, confirming that my mind wasn’t playing tricks on me. He’s really giving me permission to take in Sasuke.

I sag down and close my eyes again, relief slamming into me even harder than it did before. For a moment, I genuinely fear that I’m going to pass out. Then I manage to pull myself together.

“Thank you, Hokage-sama.”

No matter my relief, the words still leave a foul taste behind. It’s a travesty of the greatest order that I had to beg like this to make sure Sasuke wouldn’t have to live on his own after seeing his entire family murdered.

The Hokage lets out a worn sigh and suddenly he’s no longer the most lethal of ninja. Just a tired old man carrying the weight of the world.

I might’ve felt compassion for him if he didn’t put children in ANBU.

“Caring for him won’t be easy.”

I resist the urge to roll my eyes. I won’t risk him rescinding his permission by being rude.

“I never thought it would be,” I manage to say in an even voice instead of a scathing one.

The Hokage chuckles. The sound is as worn down as the rest of him, but it’s still a chuckle. My brain breaks a little at seeing the magical dictator act so... so human. Someone who can put children in ANBU shouldn’t be capable of that.

“Be gentle with him, Mariko. Don’t make me regret allowing you to take him in.”

It should be a threat.

It sounds like a plea. A hopeless one.

I almost wish it was a threat instead.

If someone who can put children in ANBU thinks Sasuke won’t be able to recover from this, what hope do I have of proving him wrong?

“No, that one goes upstairs,” I say when I notice the top box Tomoki is carrying.

“It says ‘kitchen’,” he returns with a questioning look. It does?

Putting down my own box, I walk over and check... Tomoki obligingly sets down the tower of boxes taller than he is and holds out the top one for me to see. The box does indeed say ‘kitchen’.

“Hold on.” Opening the box a little, I discover that I wasn’t wrong after all. This one goes upstairs.

It holds the bastard’s good luck charm.

“I wrote down the wrong thing.” Not surprising, given how short notice this whole business is. “It
“I’ll correct the writing,” he says before he grabs the tower of boxes like they weight nothing and moves to the stairs. I grab my own box and continue to the living room.

It’s been a hectic few days. One of the conditions of taking in Sasuke is that I have to move out of my apartment. I was given a few different houses to choose from and told to pick one. Now. They don’t know when Sasuke will wake up, and they don’t want to risk me not being ready to take him in when he does.

At least I don’t have to pay for it. With the delay of my latest book, finances had already been tight, and with the village in lock-down, they’re about to get tighter. Or rather, they were. The Hokage has graciously decided to replace the paycheck I got from writing. My friends all act like I should be grateful for it, but seriously, him replacing my lost income is the absolute least he can do after forcing me to move like this.

Am I being petty? Yes. Do I care? Nope.

Even with a full paycheck, I wouldn’t have been able to buy a house as big as this. Not as a civilian. It isn’t enormous but it’s still spacious, in a way normally reserved for ninja. Or rich civilians.

I chose the house closest to the Dancing Dragon. It’s close to the academy as well, but all potential houses were close to the academy. Or rather, they were close to the Tower. Every one also had large gardens, once again a size only ninja or rich civilians can afford, and all were surrounded by trees. To make it easier for ANBU to spy on us I suppose.

I wish we didn’t have to move. My apartment is where I moved to after Daisuke died. It’s mine in a way his own place never was. We lived in one of the tiny and hastily built housings civilians who’d lost their home in the Kyuubi’s attack had been stuffed into, and unlike most, we’d never moved out. At first because we couldn’t afford it with just Daisuke working, but even after I got a job at the Dancing Dragon, we kept living there until he died. Looking back, I think it’s because he didn’t have the strength to build up another home. Not without me pushing him to do so.

I didn’t feel the need to do so until after he’d died. After he’d died, I found a place for myself and turned it into a home. Mine alone at first, and mine and Naruto’s after he moved in. Then it became the bastard’s as well, if only a little.

This place isn’t our home. Which doesn’t matter in the slightest because we have to move. I’m not allowed to take in Sasuke if we don’t.

“Nee-chan, come see, come see! My room has a secret closet!”

Naruto’s yell draws me out of my musings. I smile.

“Brat, get down here and help bring in our stuff! I’ll check out your secret closet later!” I yell back. Naruto had been even more reluctant to move than me, right up until he saw the house. Then he fell in love. This is only the second time we’ve been here, and he keeps finding new places to explore. I let him scamper off when we first arrived, he was too excited to be productive, but it’s time for him to start helping out. Not only do we need to get everything inside and unpack, we need to assemble the furniture, both the old and the new.

At least a genin team is helping us out. Without them, we never even would’ve gotten all our stuff here in one day. This was so short notice my friends couldn’t take a day off. Oh, they’re going to come by this evening, but they didn’t have the time to help out. Fortunately, there are ninja helping
us instead. Once again, my friends insist I should be grateful that they’re helping without me having
to pay for them. Once again, I don’t care in the slightest. This is the absolute least the Hokage should
do after making me move without warning.

“Okay, nee-chan!” Naruto yells back and I hear him come running down the stairs. My annoyance
fades and I feel another smile grow.

This place isn’t our home. Yet.

We’ll make it our home.

I freeze, my heart stuck in my throat. Then my brain correctly interprets what my eyes are saying is
there.

Tamaki and Momo just entered. Tamaki, not Shisui. Tamaki.

“So he’s doing fine?” Natsu asks gently, drawing my attention back to her. I clear my throat and
gather my scattered thoughts.

I hate that I’m seeing ghosts like this. Won’t happen for long, but right now it’s unavoidable.

It’s a brutal kick to the gut every time it happens.

“He is. The academy keeps him busy enough to stop him from worrying.” Not completely, that’s
impossible, but it distracts him enough.

In some ways it’s easier now that Naruto is going back to school. Means I can take a break from him
in a way I couldn’t before. In other ways, it’s more difficult. I’m having a lot of trouble letting Naruto
out of my sight right now.

I’m not the only one having trouble. Shiro is over at our place almost every evening, and Rukia is
doing the same with Renji and Tori. When Renji himself isn’t dragging Tori along to their family,
that is. All of us are making sure we see each other daily as well, no matter how briefly.

Everyone in Konoha is doing the same. Assuring themselves their loved ones are still alive and
trying to convince themselves that they aren’t in any danger.

We are in danger. No one can deny that no matter how hard they try. The massacre and the arrests
happening left and right have scattered the illusion of safety. This horror might not have caused the
same destruction as the Kyuubi did, but in its own way, it’s just as bad.

It’s reminded everyone of their loss. Not just from the Kyuubi attack but from the wars that came
before that.

It’s reminded everyone that life isn’t safe. Especially not life in a village ruled by magical assassins.

“What about you?” I aim at Kikyo, sitting besides Natsu. Partly to distract myself and partly because
I genuinely want to know. Aside from her husband, none of Kikyo’s loved ones have been taken
into custody, and he’s already returned home unharmed. It’s soothing to hear that people are doing
fine. Or as fine as is possible right now at least. “Not too much trouble stocking up?”

“No more than expected,” Kikyo says dryly, but the way she keeps fiddling with her cup reveals just
how stressed she is. “There was a brawl over the last batch of cocoa, but nothing worse than that.”
Ah, yes. The wonders of owning a business in a military dictatorship in lock-down mode. Outsiders trading goods in Konoha is a hassle in general, but right now, even the most trusted traders are being kept out. All traders who live here also had their schedules destroyed by having their excursions postponed. Which means there’s a frantic rush from people, shop owners in particular, trying to get as many imported goods as possible before they run out. Konoha is mostly self-sufficient, but variety is something that’s going to be scarce for awhile. Renji and I joined Tori in going to war in order to stave off that inevitability for as long as possible. We were mostly victorious. So were Shiro and Rukia.

The local producers, on the other hand, are going to see a boom in business.

“Hope the cocoa didn’t get damaged,” I say, earning a fleeting smile from Kikyo and Natsu both.

“It didn’t. The brawl was broken up quickly.”

Kikyo’s voice is light but the uneasy glance she gives the two ninja sitting at a nearby table, not regulars, is anything but. There’s a tension between ninja and civilians that wasn’t there before. It’s similar to how things were after the Kyuubi attack, except it’s so much worse. After the Kyuubi attack, most of the unease was aimed at the Uchiha. They’re – they were the police force. When civilians got into trouble with the law, it was the Uchiha who intervened. Now, every ninja is a potential herald of the regime cracking down. The tension will ease after we’re no longer in lock-down mode and the police force has been replaced, but right now, being around ninja is like walking on eggshells.

I’m doing an awful job of distracting myself from the fact that I’m living in a military dictatorship.

“Did you get what you were after?” I ask and determinedly listen to Kikyo complain about how she didn’t, in fact, manage to get the produce she was after.

Everyone in Konoha has experienced loss. Everyone in Konoha knows the best way to deal with loss.

You keep living. No matter how hard it sometimes is.

“So you distract him, and me and Sakura-chan–”

“No, Sakura has to be with me.”

“What? Why?”

“It’ll be suspicious if she isn’t. We’re always together during recess.”

“But I need her help with the traps!”

Naruto is on the verge of becoming too loud.

“Well I need her with me!”

So is Ino.

“What if you distract him by pretending you had a fight with me?”

Naruto and Ino look at Sakura like she’s a genius. Not without cause. That really is a great solution
to both their problems.

“You’re so smart, Sakura-chan.”

Naruto’s volume has left the alarming stage. Good.

Sakura’s cheeks turn rosy and she looks at Ino for reassurance. No matter how often Naruto compliments her, she never quite believes it. She does believe Ino, though.

“He’s right, you’re really smart.” Ino confirms without hesitation, also no longer on the verge of becoming too loud. She’s so proud of Sakura. It’s adorable.

“Okay, so you do that.” Naruto says, bending over the battle plans he drew with his crayons like he’s planning a war instead of a harmless prank. “Me and Sakura-chan will—”

“They make a good team,” Inoichi says soft enough that the brats don’t hear. When I glance at him, seated besides me, I see him watching the brats with the proud smile Ino inherited from him.

“They’re terrifying.” I return, only half joking. I’m damn proud of them as well, but that doesn’t blind me to the future. Sure, they’re doing harmless pranks now, but their plans won’t always be harmless. Part of me, a large part of me, fears the time their traps will turn lethal.

Most of me is relieved by how clever they already are. Means they’ll be able to protect themselves from anyone coming after them.

“Iruka would agree,” Inoichi says and looks at me with a silent question.

“He knows,” I say softly, watching the brats for any sign of them overhearing me.

They don’t hear me.

Normally I wouldn’t warn Iruka but these aren’t normal circumstances. He’s just as stressed and overworked as every other ninja is. Not giving him a heads up about the upcoming prank would just be cruel. Now that I have a better idea of what the brats are planning to do, I’ll pass on the details the next time I see him.

I’m glad Iruka didn’t even hint at me to tell Naruto not to do it. The brat need an outlet for his emotions. All three of them do. Planning an elaborate prank is a healthy way for them to vent. It also prevents them, Naruto in particular, from becoming absolute nightmares in class.

Inoichi acknowledges my words with a soft hum. He glances down at the papers in front of me.

“You filled in your general ID number instead of your annual one.”

I looks down the papers. When I spot my mistake, I resist the urge to groan. I don’t want to worry the brats over nothing.

“Why the hell do I still need to fill these in?” I ask without expecting an answer. This is ridiculous, I got permission from the Hokage himself. You’d think that would be enough to cut through any red tape, but no. I still have to fill in the mountain of forms needed to move, no matter that I’m already living in the house forced on me. That’s not even mentioning the abomination that is the amount of paperwork I need to fill in order to take in Sasuke.

“Procedures are in place for a reason,” Inoichi says like it’s normal to go to war with paperwork every time you want to get anything done in Konoha.
“You’d think adopting Naruto would be enough to cross my name off the list of potential infiltrators.” Seriously, what’s the point of doing this? It’s not like my credentials haven’t been scrutinized down to the most minute of details yet.

I genuinely can’t understand how they managed to miss that I’m a fraud.

“That isn’t the only reason we have for doing this.”

Of course it isn’t. There are at least three others, because that’s considered normal in a world ruled by spies.

“Ninja are insane,” I have to say, exasperated all over again by the absurdity of this world. Inoichi gains an amused smile and opens his mouth to say something – his head snaps to the bed.

“Sasuke!”

Naruto is already running before I can fully process that Sasuke’s eyes are open but Inoichi crosses the room with ninja speed and prevents him from jumping on the bed, thank god.

“What the– let go–”

“Naruto, be quiet,” Inoichi orders as only a ninja can, his eyes never leaving Sasuke as he keeps Naruto in place with one hand. His other hand gently takes hold of Ino’s when she comes to stand next to him. She and Sakura are holding hands as well, and their eyes are flickering between Inoichi and Sasuke, frightened and uncertain. Naruto himself is looking between me and Sasuke, just as scared and uncertain of what to do. Part of me processes all of this.

Most of me is focused on Sasuke. He gave no reaction to the noise. He doesn’t seem to be aware anyone is even present.

He’s looking up at the ceiling with empty eyes.

Getting off my chair, I move to stand besides the bed.

“Sasuke?” I ask gently. Once again, he doesn’t react. He’s lifeless in a way that feels like a knife to the chest, fear and worry threatening to choke me.

I gently take hold of his hand. It’s limp within my grip, still no sign of awareness in those unseeing eyes. My fear threatens to turn to panic but I ruthlessly stamp it down. If I break down now, I’ll ruin everything.

“Mary-nee?”

I look down at Naruto, now plastered against my leg. He gazes back with a fear I would give anything to soothe.

I can’t.

After a moment of hesitation, I decide on a course of action. Picking up Naruto, I seat him on the edge of the bed.

“Hug him. Gently and carefully. Don’t be loud.”

Naruto bites down his lip, fearful eyes flickering between me and Sasuke. Then he becomes more determined than I’ve ever known him to be.
Lying down next to Sasuke, he tenderly wraps his arms around him. Ino, her own expression as fierce as Naruto’s, climbs onto the bed, lies down on Sasuke’s other side and does the same. Sakura is right at her heels and she almost squashes Ino in her effort to hug Sasuke as well.

“It’s okay, Sasuke,” Naruto says in a voice as soft as it is fierce. “We’re here. We won’t leave. You’re not alone.”

“We’re here, Sasuke,” Ino says while tightening her hold on him, so careful to keep it gentle. Sakura does the same. “You’re not alone.”

For a moment, it seems as if Sasuke won’t react. Then, silently and with empty eyes still staring at nothing, he starts to cry.

My heart shatters.

“It’s okay, Sasuke. It’s okay,” Naruto repeats in a choked voice before he starts crying himself. He muffles his cries into Sasuke’s shoulder, a response to Sasuke’s own silence. Ino and Sakura start crying as well, hugging each other as much as they’re hugging Sasuke. I can no longer contain my own tears either.

I take hold of Sasuke’s hand again, silently letting him know I’m here as well. My other hand rubs soothing circles on Naruto’s back. Inoichi is rubbing Sakura’s back as well, and he’s cradling the back of Ino’s head like she’s made of spun glass. He isn’t crying, but he looks so bleak he might as well have been.

“It’s okay,” Naruto whispers and I would give anything for the words to be true.

They aren’t.

Sometimes the only thing you can do is be there. Sometimes it’s enough.

Sometimes it isn’t.

I keep stroking Naruto’s hair. He’s been asleep for awhile, but I’m still wide awake.

Sasuke is being kept in the hospital for one more night, to make sure the magic used on him has really faded. Tomorrow he comes home with us.

What will happen then? He was so... so lifeless. Aside from crying after he woke up, he showed no emotions of any kind. Didn’t do anything but sit listlessly as the medics subjected him to every test known to ninja and a few they came up with on the spot. He followed along Naruto’s, Ino’s and Sakura’s chatter with empty eyes, ignoring every question aimed at him.

How will he ever recover from this?

I let out a harsh breath and untangle myself from Naruto’s embrace, careful not to wake him. I need to move, pace, do something. Need to get rid of the fear clawing at my mind.

Going downstairs, I pace around the living room. While it’s better than sitting still, it doesn’t help me calm down.

I freeze when my eyes land on my notebook.
No. I can’t do that. It would send the worst kind of message.

It would calm me down enough to be able to sleep.

This is such a bad idea.

I can’t stop myself from doing it anyway.

Grabbing the notebook, I scribble down a message and tear out the page.

I don’t know if he’s still following me. I think he is, but I don’t know for certain.

If he’s still following me, what I’m asking of him is selfish and unfair. It sends the message that I’m okay with him following me.

I’m not okay with it. We broke up. Him following me despite that isn’t healthy for either of us.

I don’t have the strength to keep quiet. Not right now. I need this.

*Watch over him. Please.*

“–and that’s your bed, me and nee-chan put it together, and that’s your nightstand and look! It has a nightlight that looks like a frog! I picked it out myself.”

Naruto, holding Sasuke’s hand like he’s holding Gama-chan, determinedly keeps up a stream of chatter as he points out all the things that now belong to Sasuke. I’m so proud of him.

Sasuke looks at everything Naruto is pointing out with empty eyes. He hasn’t said more than a handful of words since he woke up. The energetic boy he used to be is gone, replaced by a lifeless doll. It’s a constant kick to the gut.

It makes me even more convinced that the official line of Itachi snapping is bullshit. He would never do this to Sasuke.

So who did?

My eyes snap open and I’m already out of bed and running down the hallway before I consciously process what I’m hearing.

Throwing open the door to Sasuke’s bedroom, I race forward.

“Sasuke, wake up!” I yell over his hysterical screaming, reaching for him and cursing myself for forgetting to turn on the lights. The glow of the nightlight isn’t strong enough for me to see if his eyes are open or not.

The moment I touch his curled up form, Sasuke lashes out, smacking my hand away with enough force to make me yell with pain.

The lights turn on. It makes me snap my head to the side on instinct and while part of me processes that Naruto is racing forward with panic, all my focus is already returning to Sasuke. With the lights
on, I can see that his eyes are open but there’s no awareness in them. My panic grows even worse when Sasuke scrambles into the furthest corner of his bed and huddles into a ball. He’s no longer screaming, but the way he’s rocking back and forth while mumbling to himself is almost as bad.

“Sasuke!”

Naruto jumps onto the bed but I manage to get my arms around him before he can reach Sasuke.

“Let go!” Naruto yells, struggling against my hold on him without looking away from Sasuke, his lack of focus the only reason I’m managing to keep hold of him. He’s terrified and it makes everything so much worse.

“Naruto, stop moving,” I say too harshly, too panicked to control myself. “You’ll hurt Sasuke.”

That makes him stop struggling. He clutches at me with a desperation that’s another knife to the heart, his eyes darting between me and Sasuke, frantic and pleading.

“We have to help him!”

I let out a harsh breath. He’s right, we need to help him. Which means I need to calm down.

“Nee-chan, do something!”

“Give me a moment, brat,” I say and close my eyes, taking a deep breaths as I try to think about this rationally. To my eternal gratitude, Naruto remains quiet. Mostly quiet. His panicked breathing threatens to destroy my composure almost as much as Sasuke’s indecipherable mumbling does. I have no idea what Sasuke is saying, but the animal terror in his voice reveals exactly how bad things are. Naruto starting to cry on my shoulder doesn’t help in the slightest. I rub his back on instinct.

All right, think. I knew Sasuke was going to have nightmares and Inoichi told me how to deal with them. What did he tell me?

I can’t remember no matter how hard I try. All I can hear is Sasuke’s mindless mumbling and Naruto’s muffled sobs.

Screw it. I’ll improvise.

Opening my eyes, I give Naruto a quick hug, before I disentangle myself from the deathgrip he has on me. I succeed only because he lets me. My heart is broken even further when I see him bring up his hands to cover his mouth and keep his sobs muffled but I can only focus on one thing at a time. Right now, Sasuke takes priority.

Carefully moving closer to Sasuke, who keeps giving no sign he’s even aware I’m here, I finally manage to make out what he’s saying.

“They’re dead, they’re dead, they’re dead.”

My heart is ground to dust. My panic also threatens to take over again but I ruthlessly push it down. I need to snap Sasuke out of the nightmare he’s still trapped in. How do I do that?

“Sasuke, listen to me,” I somehow manage to say in a voice that’s both firm and soothing. “You’re awake. You aren’t there. You’re with me and Naruto. You aren’t there. You aren’t alone.”

My words have zero effect. Time to try a different tactic.

Slowly and without ever stopping my talking, I reach for him. The moment I touch his shoulder, he
lashes out, never halting his heartbreaking mantra. I catch his hand and with a flash of inspiration, I quickly move even closer and lay his hand on my heart. A pained sound escapes me when he digs his nails in with brutal force but I ignore that and push his palm down my heart.

“I’m alive, Sasuke. You can feel my heartbeat. I’m alive.”

Eyes blank with animal terror glance up at me. While there’s still no awareness in them, just the fact that he’s looking convinces me that I’m on the right track.

“I’m alive,” I repeat before my attention is abruptly drawn to Naruto as he siddles up to Sasuke and grabs his other hand, yanking it onto his own chest as I did. He lets out a pained yelp when Sasuke digs his nails in and I’m already reaching for him to pull him back when Sasuke glances at him. I freeze, torn between conflicting impulses to protect them both.

In my hesitation, Naruto pushes down Sasuke’s hand even more, his fear overpowered by fierce determination.

“I’m alive too. You’re not alone, Sasuke.”

This time a spark of awareness enters Sasuke’s eyes. I smother the urge to pull Naruto away. Naruto wants to help Sasuke, and he seems to be succeeding. I can’t jeopardize that by giving in to my need to protect him.

“We’re alive, Sasuke. We’re alive,” I repeat and to my eternal relief, he stops his horrifying mantra. Sasuke’s breathing is still ragged and irregular, but when he glances at me this time, he seems to actually see me. Slowly moving closer, making sure to telegraph my every move, I gently bring an arm around his shoulder. This time he doesn’t lash out.

“We’re alive, Sasuke. We’re alive,” Naruto starts up his own mantra in a voice unsteady with the renewed threat of tears. I’ll deal with that just as soon as I’ve finished dealing with Sasuke.

Pulling Sasuke closer, I gently push his head against my chest so his ear is laying next to his hand. Sasuke shivers brutally and lets go of my chest so he can place his ear right on top of my heart, pushing down as hard as he can. Naruto plasters himself against Sasuke’s side and grabs the hand no longer clutching at me, laying it down his chest as well. This time Sasuke doesn’t dig his nails in, and I can see his other grip it just a little less tight than before. Naruto hugs him close.

“We’re alive, Sasuke. We’re alive.”

When Naruto’s voice falters and his tears break free, I move so I can rub his back and start humming a meaningless tune. My other hand is gently carded through Sasuke’s hair, cradling his head close as he keeps listening to the beating of my heart. Naruto buries his head against Sasuke and starts crying in earnest, one of his hands letting go of Sasuke so he can embrace me as well. I keep humming until Sasuke’s eyes close and Naruto stops crying. Only when both their breathing evens out and I’m certain that they’re asleep do I fall silent. I close my eyes, feeling exhausted down to my very soul.

What a mess. What a fucking mess.

“Is this going to happen often, nee-chan?”

My eyes snap open at Naruto’s fearful whisper. Seems he isn’t asleep yet after all.

He’s looking up at me in a way that grinds my already abused heart into pieces so small I’ll never be able to recover them all.
“I think it will,” I say softly, wishing more than anything that I could give a different answer.

I can’t. Anything else would be a lie.

“How do we make it stop?”

I hesitate. I don’t want Naruto to go through this again. Want to keep him safe and protected from all the horrors of this world.

I was the one who decided to take in Sasuke. No matter how hard I try, I won’t be able to shelter Naruto from what was done to him. Won’t be able to shield him from the consequences that come from being broken like this. And while I could tell Naruto to stay out of Sasuke’s room when he has a nightmare, I don’t think that would help either Naruto or Sasuke. Sasuke needs to know he isn’t alone.

Naruto needs to be able to help Sasuke. Sitting by and doing nothing would drive him mad.

“We keep doing what we did today.” At least, I think we will. I need to check with Inoichi first. Still, I think we did the right thing.

I desperately hope we did the right thing.

“It won’t stop his nightmares immediately,” I warn Naruto when his fear is replaced by determination. “He’s going to have them for a very long time.” Maybe forever.

“But they’re going to go away eventually?”

I close my eyes at the question I really don’t want to answer.

I need to answer it.

“I hope so. But they might not.” No matter how much I wish they would. “They won’t happen often, though,” I continue in a soothing voice when Naruto’s fear starts to return, rubbing his back to keep him calm. And to keep myself calm. “As time passes, they’ll happen less and less.”

Please let them happen less and less.

“Can’t we do something to make them go away faster?”

What I wouldn’t give to be able to say yes.

“I wish we could,” I whisper, barely able to get the words past my the lump in my throat. “But we can’t. Sasuke was very hurt. He’s going to remain hurt for a very long time no matter what we do. That doesn’t mean we aren’t helping him,” I add firmly when I see Naruto’s fear start to turn to panic. It’s one thing to tell him the truth, but I have zero intention of him thinking he isn’t actually helping Sasuke. He is. “We’re preventing him from getting worse.”

“He could get even worse?” Naruto’s horrified whisper is a knife to the heart. It’s also piercing enough to make me glance at Sasuke to make sure he’s still sleeping.

He is.

My reaction makes Naruto check on Sasuke as well, holding his breath as he waits for Sasuke to wake up. When he doesn’t, Naruto lets out a loud sigh of relief. Then he bites down his lip when he realizes how loud that was.
“He could,” I force myself to answer his question. I can’t lie to Naruto about this. Not when Sasuke is living with us. “That’s why it’s so important we keep helping him, even if it doesn’t seem like he’s getting better at first. We need to make sure he doesn’t get worse. That’s the only way he can start getting better later. And he will, Naruto. He’s going to get better.”

This time I am lying. I’m not sure Sasuke will ever recover from this.

Naruto needs to believe he will. It would destroy him if he doesn’t.

Naruto tightens his hug on Sasuke, though thankfully not enough to wake him. His panic is gone, replaced by unyielding resolve. For a moment, I see a glimpse of the man he’s going to be.

“I’m going to make him happy again, dattebayo.”

His verbal tic spoken so seriously makes my lips twitch with humor but mostly I’m overwhelmed with pride. Naruto isn’t an man yet. He’s a brat.

He’s the most amazing brat in the world.

“It won’t be easy,” I warn. Naruto can’t expect this to be over soon. “It’ll be more difficult than anything you’ve ever done.”

Naruto gives me an indignant look of the highest order, insulted by the implication he would ever give up on Sasuke.

“I know that. I’m not stupid, nee-chan.”

No, he definitely isn’t.

“I’m still going to do it, just you watch.”

I couldn’t stop myself from smiling even if I wanted to.

“You definitely aren’t stupid,” I say while caressing his hair.

“And I’m going to make Sasuke happy again,” he insists, not mollified by my compliment in the slightest. My smile grows.

“And you’re going to make Sasuke happy again,” I agree, squashing the fear of what will happen to him if he doesn’t manage to succeed. If anyone can help Sasuke heal, it’s the living sunshine that is Naruto. Sasuke will get better.

He has to.

My agreement is enough to satisfy Naruto. He looks at Sasuke and rubs his back with a tenderness he doesn’t often show.

“I’m so proud of you.”

Naruto’s gaze snaps up to me.

“You are?” he asks with a shy smile that outshines the sun itself. He’s always delighted when I say it, but this reaction is exceptional even for him. Not that I’m complaining. He soothes my worries just by being his amazing self.

“I am. I’m very proud of you.”
Naruto lights up some more. He lets go of Sasuke with one hand so he can embrace me.

“I love you, Mary-nee.”

Just like that, he manages to make me feel like this isn’t the end of the world after all.

“I love you too, Naruto,” I say softly. With a last sunshine smile, Naruto snuggles even closer to both me and Sasuke. He closes his eyes. The only sign of how affected he still is by this whole disaster is the tight grip he has on me.

I move so I’m lying more comfortably on the bed, careful not to wake Sasuke, before I pull the blanket over the three of us and embrace both Sasuke and Naruto. Naruto somehow manages to cuddle even closer to me and Sasuke. Even with the lights on, it doesn’t take long for his breathing to even out. I should probably turn the light off, but right now, I’m physically incapable of letting go of either of them.

I keep being wide awake. I’m no longer panicking, but now that Naruto has fallen asleep, my fear creeps back in despite how hard I try to prevent it.

What will happen to Naruto if Sasuke never gets better?

“I can’t do this.”

“Mari, breathe.”

“Don’t tell me what to do!”

“Didn’t realize breathing was optional.”

I laugh, a hysterical sound that’s closer to a sob and I really need to pull myself together.


It takes awhile, but eventually, I no longer feel on the verge of devolving in a gibbering mess.

“There you go,” Renji says, still gently patting my shoulder. The rhythmic tapping is grounding but I still wish Tori was the one who’d dragged me into the backroom instead of Renji. I could really use a hug right now.

Tori is watching Sasuke. Sasuke can’t see me like this. Which means I can’t run into the kitchen and hug Tori like my life depends on it.

“Renji, I can’t do this.” It’s so stupid that this is only hitting me now, when it’s far too late to change my mind. I can’t kick out Sasuke after already taking him in. It would destroy any chance of him ever recovering.

Except I can’t do this. Taking care of a hyperactive brat is challenging enough already, a traumatized brat on top of that is just too much. Sasuke’s nightmare has made that more than clear.

I can’t do this. I’m can’t do this. I’m going to ruin everything, ruin Sasuke and Naruto both--

“Keep breathing, Mari.”
I keep breathing. After a few moments of watching me intently, Renji nods with satisfaction. Like I’m not still on the verge of turning into a gibbering mess.

He grabs my shoulders and holds my gaze, serious in a way he rarely is. I only realize that I’ve put my own hands on top of his own and am squeezing too tightly when I feel his warmth beneath my palms.

“Now listen to me. You can do this.”

“I can’t–”

“You can. It’s going to suck balls but you can do this. You will do this.”

“How?” I demand with desperation, incapable of sharing his confidence. “I barely got through one nightmare. How can I keep doing this?”

“How?” I demand with desperation, incapable of sharing his confidence. “I barely got through one nightmare. How can I keep doing this?”

“I can’t do this to Naruto.” I snap, unable to believe Renji is being an asshole at a time like this. “He’s a child. He doesn’t understand the full consequences of Sasuke living with us. I do and I can’t do this to him.” Can’t put him at risk like this, can’t put him in danger of being scarred forever.

I need to send Sasuke away.

Renji lets out a sigh like I’m overreacting, the complete and utter asshole. Then he pulls me into a hug.

All my anger evaporates in an instant. I clutch back at him, tears rising as I’m overwhelmed by hopeless fear.

I can’t send Sasuke away. It would destroy him.

It might destroy Naruto as well. What kind of message does it send if I abandon his best friend right when he needs us the most? What would it do to Naruto if I ignore all his pleas to make me change my mind? I’d break his trust in me forever. I’d teach him that he’s powerless to make things better no matter how hard he tries. I can’t do that to him.
I can’t let him take on the responsibility for Sasuke’s recovery either.

“He’s going to be fine,” Renji tries and fails to comfort me. His hug feels like it’s the only thing holding me together. “He’s too stubborn to give up on Sasuke.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of.” The danger becomes so much more real now that I’ve said it out loud. “He’s determined to make Sasuke happy again.”

And it terrifies me. Sasuke was broken. Even at best, he’s always going to be haunted by this. At worst...

“What if he never gets better?”

“He will.” Renji’s answer is firm and spoken without hesitation. I’d give anything for his words to be true.

Everyone in Konoha has experienced loss.

Everyone in Konoha knows someone who failed to learn to live with their loss.

“You can’t be sure of that.”

“Yes, I can.” Renji pulls back so he can look me in the eye. Impressing the importance of his next words. “If you keep being there for Sasuke, he’s going to get better.”

I wish more than anything that I could believe him.

“Being there for someone isn’t always enough.” No matter how much you want it to be.

“No, it isn’t,” Renji agrees, his words heavy with the weight of an understanding that goes so much deeper than most. “But Sasuke is a child. Children are resilient. They can recover from things that would break adults forever. If you keep being there for him, he will recover.”

I hope so. More than anything, I hope he’ll recover. Yet even if he does.

“He’ll never be his old self again.”

“Of course he won’t,” Renji says while visibly resisting the urge to roll his eyes. Yet again acting like I’m an idiot. Asshole. “Doesn’t mean he won’t get better.”

No, it doesn’t. Except that isn’t the point.

“Naruto expects him to become his old self again.”

His reaction when he finds out that isn’t possible is what I fear most.

Renji grimaces. He fears Naruto’s reaction as well. Not helping my struggle to keep it together.

“...He needs to learn that isn’t always possible.”

“He is seven years old,” I hiss, unable to believe what I just heard. “He shouldn’t have to learn for years yet at the absolute least.” In a perfect world, he’d never have to learn at all.

The world isn’t perfect.

“No, he shouldn’t,” Renji agrees with the same understanding as before, taking the wind out of my
sails. “And Sasuke should’ve never lost his family like this. We don’t always get to choose what should and shouldn’t happen. We can only deal with whatever comes our way as best we can.”

I let out a harsh breath. Renji is right. We don’t get to always choose. Even in my old world, life could suckerpunch you without mercy. It could beat you down in the most brutal of ways.

It’s up to you to get back to your feet.

I take a deep breath and finally manage to pull myself together. I made the decision to take in Sasuke. It’s my responsibility to see that decision through, to make sure both he and Naruto are looked after and cared for.

It’s my responsibility to teach them both how to live with loss.

“There you go,” Renji says with relief. He lets go of me, and tension I hadn’t noticed because of my own breakdown fading away. While I know he isn’t one for physical affection, I still hug him again, needing to express my gratitude.

“Thanks, Renji.” He’s the most wonderful friend anyone can hope to ask for.

Renji awkwardly pats my back. I chuckle at the predictable reaction and let go of him.

“You’re an amazing friend,” I say with a warm smile, meaning the words from the bottom of my heart.

“I am pretty amazing,” he says with a faint smirk. Trying to lighten the mood by acting like normal.

“You’re also an asshole,” I play along.

“I have layers,” Renji quips back, his smirk transforming into a warm smile. He gently bumps my shoulder. “You’re going to be fine, Mari. You aren’t in this alone.”

No, I’m not. I’m surrounded by the best friends in the entire world.

Renji is right. I can do this. I’ll be fine, and I’ll make sure Naruto and Sasuke are as well. I’ll get back to my feet.

Getting back to your feet is a lot easier when you have people helping you up.

“You did the right thing.”

I let out a harsh breath, relief overwhelming me. Sure, my friends said the same thing, but hearing it from the ninja equivalent of a shrink soothes the last of my doubts.

Making Sasuke listen to my heartbeat was the right thing to do.

“What about letting him sleep on his own?” I ask softly, making sure the kids don’t overhear us from where they’re putting a bouquet of flower together. Or trying to at least. Naruto keeps adding flowers he thinks are pretty with no regards to the meaning they hold. Ino keeps snapping at him whenever he does, genuinely annoyed by his behavior. She doesn’t try to prevent him from adding the flowers, though. The reason why is clear from the worried looks both she and Naruto are shooting Sasuke.

Sasuke removes every flower Naruto adds and returns the remaining flowers to the positions Ino told
them they had to be in with mechanical movements. His standard behavior ever since he woke up. He performs every task he’s given with lifeless focus, whether it’s brushing his teeth, paying attention to Naruto’s chatter, or helping Tori in the kitchen. When he doesn’t have anything to focus on, he’s even worse, a slow and animal panic growing.

I haven’t found out yet what will happen if he doesn’t do anything for too long. Inoichi made clear that Sasuke needs to be kept busy right now, up and to the point of stocking his room with puzzles so he can tire his mind out enough for him to fall asleep.

Sasuke is sleeping far too little, the light in his room still on whenever I go to bed. Despite how much I want to change that, I can’t. Not yet. Maybe not ever.

I do my best to squash my fear. I already broke down once today. I’m in no mood to do so again. Instead, I distract myself by gauging the odds of a fight breaking out between Naruto and Ino. Still within acceptable limits. While they’re taking out their worry for Sasuke out on each other, that same worry is also keeping them in check. Good. Given that Sakura had to go straight home today, Inoichi or I will have to be the voice of reason if their frustration boils over, and we have matters to discuss. Matters the brats can’t overhear.

Except Inoichi still hasn’t answered my question. When I glance at him, I see him looking at Sasuke while wearing a faint grimace. Great.

“Bad move?” I ask with a grimace of my own. I already suspected it was. Have from the moment I made the decision, really. This morning, Naruto had demanded that Sasuke sleep in his room from now on. To both our surprise, Sasuke spoke up with an actual spark of life.

He doesn’t want to sleep in the same room as Naruto.

Naruto had been hurt in the most heart wrenching of ways. The brat is fiercely possessive of his room, yet he’d offered to share it with Sasuke. And Sasuke responded by spitting in his face.

In hindsight, this was probably the last straw that led to my breakdown at work. Yes, Naruto shook off most of his hurt, but this won’t be the last time something like this happens, not by a long shot. Right now Sasuke just isn’t capable of being considerate. He’s barely capable of making it through the day. If – when he gets better, we can work on his behavior, but right now I’m fighting just to keep him sane.

It’s a fight I have no idea how to deal with. Both the nightmare and the fallout from it have made that more than clear.

I don’t want Sasuke to sleep in Naruto’s room. I need to be able to reach him before Naruto does to prevent him from injuring Naruto. Sure, the brat heals with magical speed, but he shouldn’t get hurt in the first place. Yet I don’t want Sasuke to sleep on his own either. Not right now. He needs to know he isn’t alone.

Unfortunately, when I suggested he sleep with me instead, Sasuke rejected that as well. I hadn’t had the heart to press the issue. Not when this was the first time Sasuke showed a true sign of life.

Inoichi’s reaction makes clear I should have pressed the issue.

Inoichi lets out a soft sigh and rubs his eyes, the never ending stress he’s under briefly becoming visible.

“There are no good moves in a case like this,” he says in a voice that reveals just how worn down he is. “Sasuke needs a safe space he can retreat to. Having his own bedroom lets him have that.”
“But he shouldn’t be sleeping alone either,” I finish the unspoken message. Inoichi grimaces in agreement. “Do I move into his room?” I ask, hoping that’s a decent compromise. Unfortunately, Inoichi shakes his head.

“No. He really does need his own space. More importantly, you can’t afford to break your word to him.”

“I told him he didn’t have to move. I didn’t say anything about not moving in myself,” I counter but it’s half hearted at best. It might not break the letter of my word but it would break the spirit. Damaging Sasuke’s trust in me like that is indeed something I can’t afford.

“The best thing to do is to let him sleep on his own and calm him down after a nightmare,” Inoichi continues like I didn’t say anything. “I’ll get you a monitor so you’ll know even if he has a quiet one.”

While I’m still unhappy with the situation, that last does ease the worst of my worries. The fear of sleeping through Sasuke’s nightmares had been weighing on my mind.

“Sleeping with him after he’s had a nightmare if fine though, right?” I ask, addressing another of my worries. It’s one thing for Sasuke to wake up alone after normal dreams. It’s something else entirely for him to wake up alone after reliving the death of his family.

“More than fine,” Inoichi assures me. I sigh with relief. Then my attention is drawn to Naruto when he lets out a frustrated yell and hits Ino over the head with the flowers he’d been holding. She immediately yanks the flowers out of his hand and hits him back. Time for damage control.

Sasuke doesn’t even react to the fight breaking out. He just keepings moving the flowers with lifeless focus. I desperately hope he’ll start feeling better soon.

I know he won’t.

—have to keep it a secret, Gama-chan. Nee-chan can’t know.”

My heart breaks even further. Keeping my eyes closed, I ruthlessly push down the fear trying to take over. I said I would do this and that means no backing out.

It means I have to teach Naruto how to live with this. So.

Taking a deep breath, I open my eyes and knock on Naruto’s bedroom door. It’s hadn’t been fully closed, and when I push it open further, I’m hit with panicked eyes stabbing me right in the heart.

“Can I come in?” I ask softly. Naruto pretends I haven’t caught him red handed and fakes a smile. It doesn’t contain a trace of sunshine.

“Sure, nee-chan! I was just talking with Gama-chan. He doesn’t get why Sasuke is living with us now, so I had to explain it.”

I do my best to ignore how skillfully he used the truth to lie. This isn’t the time to be horrified by him being turned into a child spy. Or worry about one day no longer being able to tell when he’s lying.

Closing the door, I sit down next to him. Naruto is sitting down the floor with Gama-chan’s portable tank between his legs, gently petting his back. Gama-chan is tame as ever. If anyone else tried this,
he’d hop away, but Naruto can do practically anything to him without trouble.

“And what did you tell him?” I ask like I haven’t been eavesdropping the entire time.

“That Sasuke lost his family, so he’s very scared and hurt,” Naruto answers promptly, his previous act replaced by stubborn determination. “He’s living with us so we can make him feel better again.”

I hesitate. I really don’t want to talk about this. But Naruto needs to know.

“Yes we are. But sometimes I’m afraid we won’t succeed.”

Naruto looks like I just slapped him in the face. I knew that would happen but it’s still a knife to the gut.

“We will succeed,” I continue firmly, lying my ass off without any shame. Naruto needs to believe that Sasuke is going to get better. “But sometimes I’m scared we won’t, despite knowing that we will.”

I force myself to stop there. While I could force Naruto to confess his own fear, that wouldn’t do either of us any good in the long run. He needs to feel like he can come to me about things like this on his own.

Naruto hesitates, visibly debating on whether to come clean about his own fear or not. I keep quiet with the greatest of efforts.

“...So it’s okay to be scared?”

I swallow down my sigh of relief.

“Yes it is. It’s completely okay, and it definitely doesn’t mean that we’re giving up on Sasuke.”

Naruto lets out a loud sigh, overwhelmed by relief. I bring an arm around him and pull him closer so he can lean against my side. Naruto slumps against me in a way that makes my chest tighten in the worst of ways. He shouldn’t have to bear this burden.

Because of my decision, he has too. Oh, I asked him if he was all right with Sasuke coming to live with us, but that was more of a gesture than already else. I already knew how he would react. Of course I knew. Sasuke is his best friend. Naruto wants to help him however he can.

Naruto is seven years old. He doesn't have the right framework to understand what was done to Sasuke. Doesn't fully understand the risk it holds.

He doesn’t fully grasp what it will mean if Sasuke never gets better.

“I’m scared too, nee-chan,” he confesses in a whisper. Sharing the words like they’re a secret. I tighten my embrace on him and try to think of something comforting to say. Before I can come up with anything, Naruto rallies himself. He looks up at me with a breathtaking resolve. “But I won’t give up! I’m going to make him happy again!”

I hesitate. This is another thing I don’t want to talk about.

I have to. Naruto can’t go on expecting Sasuke to become his old self again.

“...He won’t be the same as before.”

Naruto frowns, confused by my words. I contain a grimace with the greatest of efforts.
“Sasuke is going to be happy again, but it’ll be in a different way than before.”

Naruto’s confusion grows. Damn it. How do I explain this in a way he’ll understand?

“...Because we can’t be his new family?”

Now it’s my turn to be confused. My reaction makes Naruto regain his usual confidence.

“It’s like the cat, nee-chan. We can’t replace his family.” he says with a wisdom that makes me ache. I don’t know whether to laugh or cry. On one hand, he’s spot on with his assessment. On the other, he’s so wrong it isn’t even funny. “But we can make him happy again! You did too!”

“It’s true, we can’t replace his family,” I manage to say in an even voice. “But this situation isn’t entirely the same as the cat.”

“Yes it is!” Naruto insists, convinced he’s in the right. “It’s worse, it’s a lot worse,” he amends with a grimace, his fear briefly breaking through again, but it doesn’t take him long to recover. “But it’s still the same!”

This time I can’t contain my grimace. I really wish I didn’t have to say what I’m about to.

“Naruto, how would you feel if you ever lost me?”

The immediate panic that inspires breaks my heart but I push on. I have to.

“And Shiro, Rukia, Tori, Renji. If you lost all of us at once, how would you feel?”

“But that won’t happen! Promise that won’t happen, nee-chan!”

“I promise it won’t happen,” I say without hesitation. Dangerous, yes, but Naruto is a child. He needs to believe he won’t lose us. Believing otherwise would damage him in the worst of ways.

Naruto lets out a sigh of overwhelming relief, calmed down by my promise. I really wish I could change the subject.

I can’t.

“But if you feel this bad at just the thought of losing us, imagine how much worse it would be if it actually happened. It won’t happen, I promise it won’t, but imagine if it did. Would you ever stop missing us?”

Naruto’s bottom lip trembles and his eyes are glassy with the threat of tears. A knife to the heart.

“No,” he whispers, choked up in a way that makes everything so much worse.

“And that’s why this isn’t the same as the cat,” I force myself to continue. “It would be if Sasuke had lost only one person, but he didn’t. He lost his entire family. He’s going to miss them forever.”

My voice falters, my throat too tight at the words that hit too close home. Most of the time I manage to ignore the loss of my entire world, but it never goes away entirely. It’s always there at the back of my mind. A loss I’ll never get over completely. A loss I’ll carry for the rest of my life. No matter how much I wish that wasn’t true.

I force myself to keep going. Naruto needs to hear this.

“And that’s why he won’t be the same as before. Sasuke used to have his entire family. We can’t
bring his family back, and so we can’t return him to who he used to be either.”

I’m no longer who I used to be either.

“He can be happy again, Naruto,” I say while holding his gaze, impressing the sincerity of my words. I’m proof that becoming happy again is possible after all. Possible, but not guaranteed.

Naruto needs to believe it’s guaranteed.

“He will be happy again.” Please let him become happy again. “But it won’t be the same happiness as before. He won’t be the same as before.”

Naruto is still on the verge of tears, one of his hands clutching at my clothes with a death grip. I pray to god that I haven’t just screwed him over forever with this speech.

I don’t know what else I could have said.

“...He’ll really be happy again?”

“Yes,” I lie without hesitation. Naruto sniffls, before he wipes his tears away and becomes the living embodiment of determination.

“It doesn’t matter that he won’t be the same. He’s my best friend. I’m going to make him happy again.”

Oh thank god. I don’t know what I would’ve done if he’d changed his mind about helping Sasuke.

I don’t want to think of what I would have done.

“I’m very, very happy to hear you say that,” I understate with a smile. Naruto smiles back, and while it’s small, it’s filled with real sunshine.

“You’re going to make him happy again too, nee-chan!”

I do my best to smother my fear.

“We’re both going to make him happy again.” We have to.

I don’t dare to think of what will happen to Naruto if we don’t.

I hug my knees to my chest, keeping my eyes closed as I try to get rid of the dream still haunting me.

I fail.

Letting out a harsh breath, I hug my knees even closer and fight to contain my tears. I haven’t had a dream this bad in years, but I should have known this situation would bring it all back. My family, my friends, my entire world. Of course this would make me remember. I lost even more than Sasuke did.

No, that isn’t fair. I have the comfort of knowing my loved ones are still out there, no matter that I’ll never see them again. They’re still alive. Sasuke doesn’t have that comfort. Compared to him, I’m lucky.
I don’t feel lucky.

Why me? It’s a question I always try to do my hardest to ignore, but right now I can’t.

Why me? Why did I end up in this world? I went to sleep on a perfectly normal day, and I woke up in Konoha just as the Kyuubi rained death and destruction over all. How did that happen? How did I get here?

Why am I here? Why did I have to lose my family, my friends, my entire world? Why did I have to be ripped away from everyone I’ve ever loved and everything I’ve ever known?

What did I do to deserve this?

These questions haunted me all the time when I first arrived here. It’s only after I came to the realization that I was never getting back to my old world that I managed to squash them down to mere whispers.

At a time like this, they rise back up with a vengeance.

Why me?

After wallowing in self-pity a little longer, I pull myself together. There are no answers. There never will be. That’s just something I need to learn to live with.

I have learned to live with it. I’ve learned to live with the loss of my entire world. My scars might bleed sometimes, but they’re still scars. They’re no longer open wounds.

No matter how much it sometimes feels like they are.

A hesitant tug on my clothes makes me look down. Sakura looks up at me with huge and fearful eyes, anxiously biting down her lip. Suckerpunching me without warning.

“Is Sasuke ever going to be okay?”

I return my gaze to where Sasuke is mechanically building a tower with blocks. Naruto and Ino are bickering over the fort they’re building, though it isn’t in danger of turning into a fight. Every so often, they glance at Sasuke with worry.

I lie without any shame.

“Of course he’s going to be okay. It’s just going to take some time. It’s going to take a lot of time,” I amend. Pretending otherwise won’t help anyone. “He’s very hurt right now. We can’t make that hurt go away quickly.” Or ever. Even at best, this will be a scar Sasuke carries with him for the rest of his life.

I don’t want to think of what will happen at worst.

Sakura’s fear grows worse, making me realize just how depressing my supposed pep talk was. Before I can recover from my blunder, her fear is replaced by stubborn resolve. Another appearance from the core of steel I never expected her to have.

She looks at Sasuke with a fierceness I would’ve found adorable under any other circumstances.
“Sasuke’s my friend. I don’t care how long it takes, I’m going to make him feel better. Ino and Naruto will too.”

My heart clenches. I can’t tell if it’s in a good or bad way. Sakura is just a child. She shouldn’t have to do this.

I can’t even begin to describe how grateful I am that she’s doing it anyway. She and Ino both. Naruto can’t do this on his own. Yes, he has me and my friends, but we aren’t enough. He needs his own friends to help him. Needs them to be there not just for Sasuke, but for him as well.

Sometimes the only thing you can do is be there. Sometimes it isn’t enough.

It damn well helps.

“Let me,” Shiro says when I start moving to the fire. I let him take the ingredients from me and take a seat at the counter. I yawn.

“You need to sleep more,” Shiro chides while starting to cook.

“Tell me something I don’t know,” I retort, most of my attention on Naruto’s loud make believe happening in the living room. Ino and Sakura have gone home, but Naruto is still just as energetic as ever. Sasuke isn’t, but judging from Naruto’s chatter, he’s following Naruto’s instructions to the letter. That’s something I suppose.

“Another nightmare?”

I grimace. That’s one way to put it.

“Not from Sasuke.” Thank god for that. His nightmares aren’t as infrequent as I want, but they’re more infrequent that I’d dared to hope for. “I dreamt about my past,” I explain, something I never would’ve done with anyone but Shiro.

As expected, Shiro gives me a worried look. I don’t want him to worry of course, but his reaction is still soothing. Helps me get rid of the irrational fear that my past was all a hallucination caused by the Kyuubi’s magic. It isn’t of course, but sometimes I can’t help but fear it is.

I smile at him to show it wasn’t as bad as it sounds. Or rather, I’ve recovered from it. Mostly recovered. The brat and Tori hugging me did me a world of good. Getting it off my chest just now has helped me even more.

“I’ll come by again tomorrow,” he decides. His concern warms me in the best of ways. Still.

“You don’t have to.” He really doesn’t. I’m fine. Or as fine as I can be at least.

“I want to.”

Well. That changes things. Shiro isn’t spending as many evenings at my place as he did in the beginning, but he still feels the need to look after me. Helps him remain in control of his fear of reliving the loss of her. Oh, he’s doing this out of worry for me as well, but that’s the root of his need.

I’m not complaining. I need him to be there for me as much as he needs me to be there, period.
We’re helping each other get back to our feet. We aren’t there yet, but we’re getting back up. We’re going to get through this together.

We have to.

“Takahashi Mariko.”

I look up with confusion. Did someone just call for me?

My confusion grows when I see the man standing in front of me. He’s a ninja, that’s clear even without him wearing a headband. Only a ninja can give off the impression that they could kill me in a dozen different ways before I could even blink.

He’s being rude. Normally ninja don’t wear their magic as open as this one does.

Normally they don’t look at me like they can’t decide whether I’m an obstacle to be eliminated or a tool to be used.

“...Can I help you?” I ask as the silence stretches uncomfortably. The ninja keeps looking at me like I’m a thing and not a person. Creepy. I glance down the hallway in order to escape the sight. To my growing disquiet, it’s empty, not a medic or patient in sight. Then he looks at the room Sasuke is in and every alarm I have starts screaming.

I quickly put down my book and get off my chair.

“I’m sorry, I don’t know your name,” I say while moving to stand between the creep and the door leading to Sasuke. It makes him refocus on me and this time cold shivers run down my spine.

He’s looking at me like I’m an obstacle to be eliminated.

“He’ll never realize his potential if you keep coddling him like this.”

I gape.

“Coddling him?” I repeat, unable to believe what I just heard. “He saw his entire family murdered. How would you feel if—”

“Danzo-sama.”

My head snaps to the side because that voice –

“It’s not often you’re seen here.”

It isn’t him. Of course it isn’t him. Even if he’s still following me, he wouldn’t just show up like this.

Doesn’t stop my heart from being crushed.

“Kakashi,” the ninja, Danzo, says with cool disapproval, making me refocus on the danger at hand. I don’t know what kind of danger it is, but it’s more than clear that it’s present. “You’re supposed to be on duty.”

“I’m on a break,” Kakashi says in a voice like a naked blade. He’s more terrifying than I’ve ever known him to be. Even his glaring at Itachi was almost tame compared to this. Every part of him
screams that he’s a weapon about to be used in the most lethal of ways. A promise of death made flesh.

He reminds me so much of the bastard.

“I wasn’t aware you were in need of a break,” Danzo says and it’s as much a reprimand as it is a warning. He doesn’t seem to believe Kakashi is going to attack him, despite the fact that Kakashi is all but death incarnate. Given the way Kakashi addressed him, Danzo is his superior.

Why is Kakashi threatening his superior?

“I wasn’t aware you held an interest in the Last Uchiha.”

He’s protecting Sasuke. Of course he is. Shisui and Itachi are – they were his friends.

All those thoughts fly out of my mind when Danzo looks over my shoulder at the room Sasuke is in. I barely resist the urge to take a step to the side and block his gaze. Whatever power play is going on is dangerous in a way I have no hope of defending myself against. I will if I have to of course, or try to at least, but I’m not an idiot. I won’t interfere unless absolutely necessary. No matter how infuriating it is to see this creep look at the room Sasuke is in with a calculation that should never be shown towards children.

Then the calculation fades. It’s still there, but compared to the intensity of before, it seems more habitual than anything else. Danzo’s lips curve down as though he’s tasting something unpleasant.

“Another wasted opportunity.” The words are aimed at himself. He sounds both scornful and resigned. I bite back a vicious retort with the greatest of efforts. How dare he speak of Sasuke as if he’s a thing and not a child.

I’ve never truly hated a ninja before. Danzo has succeeded in becoming the first.

My anger is obliterated by fear when he meets my gaze again. This time he isn’t looking at me like I’m an obstacle to be eliminated.

He’s looking at me like I’m a tool to be used. He only needs to figure out how best to utilize me.

“Do you require any assistance, Danzo-sama?”

The threat draws Danzo’s attention away from me. When he meets Kakashi’s gaze, every hair on the back of my neck shoots up straight, the most primal of instincts forcing me to keep very, very still. Then the moment passes.

“Return to your duties, Kakashi,” Danzo orders and walks away too gracefully. He doesn’t make a single sound aside from the tapping of his cane. It unsettles me for reasons I can’t explain.

Kakashi bows his head in what is supposed to be a gesture of obedience, but his gaze never leaves Danzo and he doesn’t stop being death incarnate.

It’s only after Danzo disappears from sight that I allow myself a harsh breath. Then I have to lean against the door behind me, the sudden loss of tension so strong I feel lightheaded. I rub my eyes, as tired as I am fed up with this whole fucked up world. Here I am trying to help Sasuke recover even the slightest bit, and that creep has the nerve call it a wasted opportunity.

Fucking ninja.
When I lower my hand, I see Kakashi still looking in the direction Danzo disappeared in. While he’s no longer quite a spectre of death, he’s still a naked blade ready to be used.

“Thanks,” I say, grateful for his intervention. I don’t want to think of what would’ve happened without him. Sure, he did it to protect Sasuke, but that doesn’t lessen my gratitude. If anything, it increases it.

I don’t want that creep anywhere near Sasuke.

Kakashi meets my gaze and I realize with mild surprise that this is the first time he’s ever done so. My surprise would’ve been stronger if he wasn’t looking at me like whatever he’s about to say next means the difference between life and death.

“If he ever approaches you, Sasuke or Naruto, inform the Third. Make sure Sasuke and Naruto know to do the same.”

I close my eyes with a grimace. Here I was hoping I’d been overreacting to that creep.

“Isn’t he supposed to be loyal to the Hokage?” I ask tiredly, more to give voice to my frustration than anything else. It wasn’t enough for that creep to show an interest in Sasuke, now I have to worry about him approaching Naruto as well.

“Shimura Danzo is a respected veteran and a trusted advisor to the Third.”

My eyes snap open at the painfully familiar voice so near me. Kakashi has soundlessly come to stand besides me, still a lethal weapon ready to be used. He isn’t threatening me though.

He’s warning me.

“Treat him with the courtesy he deserves.”

I swallow my too dry throat. This is so much worse than I thought if I’m being warned about a supposedly trusted advisor of the Third. If I don’t play nice and keep my head down, I’m going to end up arrested and interrogated. Or worse.

“Right,” I mutter, so disturbed by the stark reminder of how I have literally zero rights. If the Hokage, or anyone with a high enough rank apparently, decides to do, well, anything to me, I won’t be able to do anything about it.

“The Third appreciates what you’re doing for Sasuke. And what you’ve done for Naruto.”

I look at Kakashi with confusion. Is he... is he trying to comfort me?

If he is, he’s succeeded. The words are enough to make me calm down and start thinking rationally.

“Good to know.” I might have no rights whatsoever, but I do have the personal protection of Konoha’s military dictator. No idea how far that protection goes, but it’s there. As evidenced by being told that I should inform him if that creep ever approaches me or the brats. And by being told I’m apparently doing a decent job as a guardian to two of the village’s most valuable “assets”.

Having the personal protection of Konoha’s military dictator is a lot better than having nothing.

Kakashi remains a naked blade a moment longer, his gaze never wavering from mine. He seems to be searching for something. I suppose he finds whatever it is he’s looking for because he turns into the living embodiment of bored indifference. Stepping away from me, he slouches against the wall
and pulls out an Icha Icha volume. I can’t help the wry quirk of my lips at the familiar picture he presents. The only thing missing is a cup of untouched tea.

The only thing missing are Shisui and Itachi.

“Shouldn’t you be getting back to work?” I ask in order to distract myself. I don’t want to think about Shisui and I definitely don’t want to think about Itachi.

“I’m on a break,” he says without looking up from his book. I raise a brow at the positively mulish reply, his voice a stark contrast to the indifference every other part of him continues to radiate. Seems Kakashi really does have a childish streak.

He sounds less like the bastard now that he’s relaxed. Oh, his voice is still painfully similar, but his tone is further off and the difference in rhythm comes through more strongly.

“And you’re choosing to spend it here?” I ask, once again trying to distract myself from thoughts I don’t want to have.

For a moment, I think he isn’t going to answer. Which is how I remember that him speaking even a single word is very much an exception to the rule. Then he glances at the room Sasuke is in.

Well. Won’t argue with that.

Sitting down the chair Kakashi is standing next to, I pick up my book with the intention to return to my reading. I want to distract myself from this horrible encounter and all the terrifying implications it holds. To my frustration, I’m too wound up to succeed.

“This is the first time I’ve heard you speak,” I say, figuring it can’t hurt to at least try to strike up a conversation. I’m not surprised in the slightest when Kakashi acts like he didn’t hear me. His familiar behavior makes a faint smile grow. “You even said more than three things.”

I immediately regret my teasing. It’s far too soon to bring up Shisui like this.

Kakashi doesn’t react. I suppose he’s planning to return to his usual silence now that the danger is over.

Just as I’m about to give reading another try, Kakashi’s act falls away. He closes his eye and looks worn down to his very soul. But when he open his eye and looks at me, his gaze is warm in a way that catches me completely off guard. He’s looking at me like we’re close friends instead of distant acquaintances.

“Shisui would’ve been insufferable.”

I let out a startled chuckle, even as my chest tightens with grief.

“He absolutely would’ve been,” I agree, my breath hitching and tears rising. I can literally see Shisui smile with smug satisfaction.

I’ll never see it again for real. Never see him again.

Shisui is dead. Shisui is dead, and Itachi might as well be.

They’re gone.

Closing my eyes, I allow myself a few moments to wallow in my grief. Then I pull myself together and wipe my tears away. Sasuke can’t see me like this.
Kakashi has already returned to his act of indifference, seemingly reading his book again. Knowing I have no chance in hell of returning to my own reading, I decide to distract myself by indulging my curiosity instead.

“Are you really reading?”

“He trailed his lips lower, the taste of her skin heady and irresistible,” Kakashi reads out loud without hesitation, his voice dramatic in the most horrible of ways. “He could spend days mapping out her body like this, but right now his mind was on another price. The thought of tasting her there, of making her–”

“Stop, you’ve made your point,” I interrupt before he can ruin the series for me forever, torn between delight and horror. If he continues, I’ll never be able to read an Icha Icha again without hearing him narrate it in that voice.

Kakashi falls silent as if he never spoke in the first place, but there’s a difference to his act now. He’s still the embodiment of indifference, but instead of seeming bored, he now seems... content. He’s pleased with my reaction.

I suppose him having a sense of humor shouldn’t come as a surprise. He’s – he was friends with Shisui and Itachi.

“It sounds so bad when you read it like that,” I say with a smile, refusing to let my grief drag me down again.

“I can do other voices,” Kakashi actually banters back. My smile grows.

“Somehow I don’t think those would be an improvement.”

Kakashi meets my gaze and manages to convey such seriousness with just one eye.

He really was friends with Shisui.

“I do an amazing impression of the Third.”

I laugh. Now that I didn’t see coming. Joking about the military dictator isn’t something you do in Konoha. Even less so when you’re a ninja.

“Isn’t that treason?” I tease back and do my best to ignore how the joke hits too close home.

“Only if he hears me,” Kakashi returns with, well, a smile. It’s impressive how he can convey that expression simply by closing his eye just so.

“Okay, so you’re really reading them,” I return to our previous and safer topic. Jokes about a military dictator aren’t funny when the dictator is cracking down on the population. It’s no longer as bad as it was in the beginning, but people are still being taken into custody with frightening frequency. “But do you enjoy reading them?”

“I do. They’re fun and surprisingly moving.”

He seems sincere but that means nothing when it comes to ninja. Only one way to find out if he’s telling the truth or not.

“Which one is your favorite?”
In the conversation that follows, Kakashi reveals that he was indeed telling the truth. The various in-depth character analysis he gives make that more than clear. I also get into an argument with him because I genuinely can’t understand how he came to some of his conclusions. Did he even read the same books I did?

I’m so caught up in our conversation that I almost don’t notice the door opening. Almost.

Sasuke is lifeless as always. These sessions are supposed to help him get better, but so far there hasn’t been a single change in him. I know that’s normal, know it’s going to take who knows how long before there’s even a glimmer of improvement. But every time I see those empty eyes after a session that’s supposed to help him recover, I can’t help my growing fear that he’s never going to get better.

“Mari-san,” Yukino greets with a smile before she looks to the side with surprise. I follow her gaze and see Kakashi sauntering away, reading his book and bored with the world once more. Guess his break is over.

The danger is over. For now.

Focusing on more important things, I smile at Sasuke and hold out my hand for him to take.

“Ready to go back?” I ask, glad I no longer stumble when avoiding the word home. Sasuke’s animal panic when that word is aimed at him is even worse than this bleak nothingness.

Sasuke doesn’t reply, but he does grasp my hand. I remind myself that this is a good sign. Means he still trusts me, and right now, Sasuke needs to be surrounded by people he trusts above all else. Yukino and Inoichi also insist I need to offer him my hand whenever possible, though I definitely shouldn’t push when he doesn’t want to hold it. Given that they belong to a family of literal mind readers, I’m more than willing to follow their advice. I need all the help I can get.

That help doesn’t include the creep who thinks Sasuke is being coddled. Shimura Danzo needs to stay the hell away from him and Naruto both. I’m not above using my favor with the Hokage to make that happen.

Kakashi told me to inform the Hokage if that creep ever approached me or the brats. I intend to do just that.

“We need to talk.”

This can’t be good.

“What about?” I ask in a light voice, trying to keep things amicable. The way Kizashi scowls at me reveals friendliness is the furthest thing from his mind. Then he glances at Sasuke and his scowl transforms in a grimace.

This can’t be good at all.

“In private,” he adds like I didn’t say anything at all. I hesitate, before looking down at Sasuke.

“Can you wait for me here?”

Sasuke doesn’t look up at me, but the grip he has on my hand tightens a little. Then he lets go, sits
down the grass and starts counting the stalks one by one. Not something he can do for long without starting to become anxious, but it’s good enough for a quick conversation with Kizashi.

We move far enough away that Sasuke can’t hear us but close enough that I can spot the warning signs if he needs me to come distract him from his thoughts. I glare at the parents who are openly staring at him as they leave the academy grounds. At least the ninja, the few that are here anyway, have the decency to hide their interest. And their pity.

“You need to tell Naruto and Sasuke to stay away from Sakura.”

Wait, what?

“Why?” I demand, my full attention now on Kizashi, flabbergasted by the words I didn’t see coming at all. Sure, Kizashi used to be a dumb parent, but he’s long since gotten over it. What brought this on?

“Because they’re hurting Sakura,” he snaps. I open my mouth to point out what a load of crap that is but Kizashi continues speaking before I can. “She’s constantly worrying over Sasuke, constantly crying over him, and now she’s even starting to have nightmares!”

All the fight leaves me. Yeah, that does give him the right to demand this. I’d do the same for Naruto.

Or rather, I would if Sasuke wasn’t living with us.

“Tell them to stay away from her.”

I rally myself. Sure, he has every right to be worried, but demanding I cut Sakura out of our lives like this is ridiculous. So what if this isn’t easy on her. It isn’t easy on anyone. Hell, even without being Sasuke’s friend, she could’ve easily been reacting like this. Not as extreme, but pretending she wouldn’t have been affected by the massacre is ridiculous.

Everyone is affected by this.

“I’m not going to do that.”

Kizashi glares at me like I’m a mustache twirling villain who delights in tormenting him.

“You damn well will.”

My, he’s even cursing. He’s really serious about this.

Tough luck.

“I won’t. Sakura is their friend. Tell her yourself if you want her to stay away so badly.”

“We tried!” Kizashi yells with frustration, making me focus on Sasuke on instinct. He’s still counting grass with lifeless focus, but that doesn’t mean anything. Did he hear Kizashi? Probably. But he shouldn’t have heard what came before. “She won’t listen!”

Oh thank god. If Sakura really does cut all contact with Sasuke, she’ll cut all contact with Naruto by extension. And if she does that, Ino will soon follow. Which means Sasuke won’t have any friends left aside from Naruto, and even worse, Naruto won’t either. Not outside of school at least. Even then, not being able to play with Sakura and Ino at school anymore would be a blow he can’t deal with right now.
Naruto can’t do this on his own. If Sakura and Ino leave, Naruto will break. The only way to prevent that...

I push those thoughts away. I won’t abandon Sasuke. Not as long as Naruto can handle him living with us.

The only way he can keep handling it if Sakura and Ino keep helping him.

“This isn’t a good thing!” Kizashi snaps with the dirtiest look I’ve ever gotten from him, not pleased by my reaction in any way. I refocus on the matter at hand.

“So you want to teach her it’s all right to abandon her friends?” I demand, careful to keep my voice soft enough that Sasuke doesn’t overhear.

Kizashi grimaces. No, he doesn’t want to teach her that.

“...Sometimes the healthy thing to do is to cut people who aren’t good for you out of your life.”

He also doesn’t want Sakura to carry the weight of Sasuke’s trauma. Doesn’t want her to feel like she’s responsible for his recovery. I... can’t argue with that.

I’m doing so anyway.

“Sometimes you need to suck it up and deal with it. You can’t run away every time things get a little bad.”

“This is more than a little bad,” he says in the most scathing voice known to man. I ignore the fact that he’s right and continue like he didn’t say anything.

“And she wants to help Sasuke. Are you going to teach her that wanting to help others is wrong?”

Am I playing dirty? Yes I am.

Instead of taking the bait, Kizashi lets out a tired sigh, the fight draining out of him without warning. He looks at Sasuke with a mixture of pity and the iron resolve Sakura has been showing more and more. It makes fear start to rise.

I’m not going to be able to change his mind. That becomes even more clear when he meets my gaze again and his pity disappears completely, leaving behind nothing but unshakeable determination.

“Mebuki and I won’t allow Sakura to be dragged down with Sasuke.”

The words are a suckerpunch to the gut. Before I can even begin to recover from the brutal blow, Kizashi turns around and walks alone, leaving me on the edge of becoming a nervous wreck. I take a few deep breaths and force myself to keep it together.

Sasuke is going to recover. He has to.

It would’ve been easier to believe that if he wasn’t still counting grass with lifeless focus.

Clenching my jaw, I march over to him, planning to go straight to Inoichi’s shop. The odds of him being there are incredibly low, but I’ll leave a message for him. This is an emergency. After manipulating me into taking in Sasuke, Inoichi was put in charge of preventing this whole thing from blowing up spectacularly. If Sakura leaves, that’s absolutely what’s going to happen. Inoichi might want to help Sasuke, but he won’t allow Ino to break under the weight of his trauma. Which is what will happen if Ino doesn’t have Sakura to support her. He needs to make Sakura’s parents change
their mind.
If anyone can do that, it’s him.

“She isn’t going to abandon him.”
I desperately hope not, but even if she doesn’t...
“What if he’s right? What if Sasuke never recovers?”
“He will.”

Tori’s voice is soothing and the way she’s holding me close is even more so. Still can’t contain my
fear, though. I might’ve had the luck of catching Inoichi at his shop and having him assure me that
he’ll take care of Sakura’s parents, but that doesn’t stop Kizashi’s words from haunting me.
“What if he doesn’t?”
“He will. He’s already getting better.”
“No he isn’t.” There’s literally been no change in him since he woke up. How can she say he’s
getting better?
“Yes, he is. You said it yourself, he’s starting to sleep more, and he no longer constantly needs to be
told what to do. Renji and I have noticed it as well.”
“Just because he’s gotten used to working here–”
“That’s not it and you know it.”

I let out a harsh breath and force myself to look at this objectively. She’s right, Sasuke is starting to
sleep more, and he now does activities all on his own. Yes, he’s still doing them with lifeless focus,
but he no longer needs to be micromanaged in order to prevent a meltdown from happening. He no
longer needs to be constantly told what to do. These improvements might seem insignificant, but they
aren’t. Baby steps are important. I know that from personal experience.

Doesn’t alleviate my worry that he’s never going to recover.
“I’m just so scared.”
“I know,” Tory says while tightening her embrace on me. A safe harbour from the panic trying to
take over. “We’re here for you.”

Now guilt rises as well. She’s right, my friends are here for me. More than I could’ve ever hoped for,
they’re here for me.

I’m not there for them. Oh, I got the Hokage to replace my income from the Dancing Dragon to
lighten the burden Tori is under because of the lock-down, and I’ve taken on more hours as well, but
the fact that this lightens Tori’s and Renji’s workload is more of a side effect than anything else. The
main reason I’ve taken on more hours is because it allows me to take a break from Sasuke by having
him help Tori in the kitchen. Same with letting Shiro take care of me, it’s more for my benefit than
his. Truly being there for my friends? Supporting them and helping them with their own troubles?
No, that I haven’t been doing. At all. Hell, I had to leave Shiro’s birthday party early because Sasuke
had been starting to freak out. Shiro hadn’t blamed me, had even offered to take in Naruto for the night so he wouldn’t have to deal with the nightmare I knew Sasuke was going to have, but that just made me feel even worse. He’s my best friend, and I couldn’t even celebrate his birthday properly.

“I’m an awful friend.”

“You’re in an awful situation,” Tori corrects. While that’s definitely true, it doesn’t make my own words false. “And you’re in an awful mood.”

Also true. Still doesn’t make my words false.

“It’s okay. You’ll stop wallowing in self-pity soon.”

I let out a sound that might be a chuckle or a sob. She’s right yet again. I’m wallowing in self-pity.

I don’t know how to stop. Not right now.

The worst part is that this has been happening way too often.

Actually, no. That isn’t the worst part.

“This is going to keep happening way too often,” I mumble into her shoulder, frustration joining my self-pity. Because why shouldn’t I feel even worse than I already do.

“And we’ll be here for you for as long as you need,” she says while stroking my hair. I tighten my embrace on her, my eyes stinging with renewed tears.

“Thanks, Tori.”

I have the best friends in the entire world. I just wish I could be there for them in the same way they’re here for me.

I can’t. Not right now. I will if – when Sasuke has gotten better, but right now I need them. I can’t do this alone.

I can’t even begin to describe how grateful I am that I’m not alone.

Not anymore.

I managed to turn this world into my home after losing everything. I need to make sure Sasuke does the same.

No matter how impossible it feels to succeed.

“I want to go back to school.”

My head snaps up and my pen jerks across the page. An absent part of me curses my slip of hand but all my attention is on Sasuke. He’s looking at me with genuine life. Genuine defiance even.

I have no words for how relieved I am.

“Okay.”

Sasuke actually frowns. He’s showing confusion and suspicion! I want to weep with joy. Obviously,
I don’t do that. I don’t want to scare away this impossible miracle.

“I’ll talk to Iruka when we go pick up Naruto,” I manage to say in an even voice instead of a choked up one. Sasuke keeps giving me a beautifully suspicious look a moment longer. Believing me to be lying for some reason but I honestly couldn’t care less. He’s showing actual emotions!

When he concludes I’m being sincere, a breathtaking amount of determination rises. It’s even more wonderful than his suspicion.

He gets up from where he’d been mechanically completing a puzzle and walks to where Naruto’s school books are kept. Grabbing one about trapmaking, he sits down at the table and starts reading like his life depends on it. I have to close my eyes to keep myself from crying. I have no idea what triggered it, he’d just been making a puzzle as far as I know, but Sasuke is showing more emotion than he has in all the time since he woke up combined. It’s a priceless gift.

After composing myself, I put away my writing. I’m on a professional hiatus for who knows how long, but I still feel the need to write. Most of the time about the massacre, but sometimes about the bastard. More so since the appearance of that creep. Probably because of Kakashi’s painfully familiar voice.

Right now, the bastard is the furthest thing from my mind. I want to do nothing but bask in the wonder that is Sasuke showing emotions.

Taking a seat next to him, I smile at him when he glances up at me with that gorgeous suspicion. Sure, him being suspicious of me isn’t good overall, but right now, literally any emotion he shows is more precious than gold.

“Do you need help?”

Sasuke’s suspicions grows stronger and it warms me in the best of ways. I couldn’t stop my smile from splitting my face even if I wanted to.

“You’re a civilian,” he says like that makes it impossible for me to know anything about traps.

“And I’ve been helping Naruto with his homework ever since he started the academy.” Which he should know. He’s seen me do it often enough. “I know more than you think.” Won’t be able to keep up forever, but right now I’m still capable of understanding everything being taught. The material is aimed at brats who haven’t even hit double digits yet after all.

Sasuke hesitates, visibly debating with himself. I can’t believe how animated he’s being. I desperately hopes he’ll keep it up until we’ve gone to pick up Naruto. The brat will be over the moon. So will Sakura and Ino.

Coming to a decision, Sasuke turns the book towards me.

“How do you get the trigger to work?”

I’ve never been more glad for Naruto’s love of trapmaking. While I’m not an expert by any means, I’ve helped the brat enough to have a decent grasp on the basics. Even better, we’ve worked on the particular trap described in this chapter. Personal experience has taught me that the trigger is indeed the tricky part.

I start explaining how to get it right. Sasuke listens to me like his life depends on it. My smile grows even bigger.
Maybe things will turn out alright after all.

Naruto carefully peeks around one of the shelves stocked with fabric. He’s completely oblivious to Sasuke sneaking up behind him. Sasuke’s expression is intensely focused and blessedly alive.

Things aren’t perfect by any means. To Sasuke, this isn’t a game like it is to Naruto. It’s training. Everything is, from playing ninja to making puzzles. If I don’t manage to spin an activity as training, Sasuke isn’t interested.

Him being interested in anything at all is a true miracle. Yes, I’ll need to make sure he becomes interested in other things as well, obsessing over getting stronger like this isn’t healthy. But for now, his obsession is the most wonderful of gifts.

It means Sasuke is recovering.

My smile grows when Sasuke jumps on Naruto, making Naruto fall to the ground with a yelp before he laughs brightly and declares Sasuke the winner. Sasuke doesn’t smile, but there’s a satisfaction to him that’s almost as good.

“It’s amazing how well Naruto is handling this,” Rukia murmurs softly, drawing my attention. She’s halted her sewing and is watching Naruto and Sasuke with a smile.

“He’s the most amazing brat in the world,” I agree. Rukia’s smile becomes amused and she gives me a teasing look.

“A mother’s pride knows no bounds.”

I scowl. She can be such an asshole.

“I’m his guardian, not his mother. Big difference.” Sure, the roles are similar, but they aren’t the same. The idea of being someone’s mother sends cold shivers down my spine. That’s a responsibility I never want to deal with. Naruto is my brat. He isn’t my son.

Wow, can’t make that sound even a little believable.

Rukia’s smile grows. She’s far too entertained by my denial.

Am I being irrational? Yes. Do I care? Nope.

Rukia’s smile fades. She looks at Sasuke in a way that causes worry to replace my annoyance. I’m not surprised when she returns to her sewing with single minded focus.

Everyone has their own way of dealing with loss. This is Rukia’s way.

I don’t push for her to talk, but I do lay my arm around her. Trying to offer comfort.

Rukia halts her sewing and closes her eyes. Showing a pain that causes my own grief flare up.

“There was a girl in the police force, couldn’t have been more than sixteen.” Her voice is a hushed whisper, a confession she doesn’t want to make but can’t keep in. I tighten my embrace on her. “Her route brought her past our shop. She always stopped to look at the outfits on display.”

I have to close my own eyes, my throat too tight. I didn’t know any Uchiha by name aside from
Shisui and Itachi, but I saw them every day. I have countless memories of them walking the streets, chatting with one another and breaking up rowdy citizens.

The village feels so empty without them.

When Rukia speaks, her voice is so soft I can barely hear her.

“I don’t even know her name.”

“Kaoru.”

My eyes fly open at Shiro’s voice. Then I process what he just said and my throat tightens even further.

Shiro’s eyes are bleak in the most awful of ways as he looks at me and Rukia.

“Her name was Kaoru.”

Rukia’s breath hitches and she reaches for my hand, gripping it almost too hard. I squeeze back, both to comfort her and to remind myself that she’s still here. She’s still alive.

So many aren’t.

“Kaoru,” she whispers before burying her head on my shoulder. She doesn’t cry but it’s a close call. I gently stroke her hair.

Shiro hesitates, before he comes over and lays a hand on her shoulder. He looks at me with a pain I would give anything to soothe.

I can’t.

Everyone in Konoha has experienced loss.

Everyone in Konoha wishes they hadn’t.

“Thanks for doing this.”

“It’s no trouble. You need the night off.”

True, I do. Still.

“I know sleepovers aren’t a thing ninja do.” Comes from living in a culture that actively encourages paranoia. Civilians might host sleepovers from time to time, but ninja don’t.

“I’ll be supervising the entire time,” Inoichi says, proving yet again that ninja are insane. When he says he’ll be supervising the entire time, he means that he’ll be staying up the entire night to make sure the kids don’t leave Ino’s bedroom. Because clearly the brats are here to snoop around and steal classified information.

“Don’t think you can afford to lose sleep like that.” Sure, ninja need less sleep than civilians, but even months later, they’re still being run ragged. Inoichi is no exception.

“The loss is well worth it,” he says with a warm smile aimed inside. I can’t see the brats myself, but
their voices carry loud and clear. Naruto, Sakura and Ino are bundles of excitement. While Sasuke isn’t contributing more than an occasional monosyllabic sound, the other three are treating him like he’s a full blown conversationalist.

How did I convince Sasuke that a sleepover is useful to his obsession? By telling him it’s good practice for when he goes on missions outside the village. Learning how to evaluate new surroundings and all that.

Okay, so maybe Inoichi should be a little worried. Sasuke might well decide that sneaking out at night and exploring the compound is good training.

“We’ll see if you still feel like that in the morning,” I say to Inoichi, shaking off my worry about Sasuke’s behavior. I’m supposed to be taking a break after all.

“I will,” Inoichi returns, sincere in a way I hadn’t expected my teasing to inspire. I suppose I should have. Of all the duties he has, watching over his daughter and her friends has to be the most pleasant by far.

It’s relaxing. That’s something Inoichi is in dire need of. And because this is Inoichi, he combines that need with an official duty.Namely, keeping me sane. Not that he told me this in so many words of course, but keeping me sane is part of his job of making sure I don’t screw up Sasuke’s recovery.

I’m not complaining about him being assigned the job of making sure everything works out. I wouldn’t be able to do this without at least some form of professional aid.

Of course, aside from keeping me sane and taking a much needed break himself, there are at least five more reasons for why Inoichi offered to host a sleepover at his place. Even for a ninja, Inoichi’s tendency to have multiple reasons for everything he does is ridiculous.

“You’ll let me know if anything happens?” I ask, unable to help myself. I know the brats are safe with him, but the idea of them sleeping here fills me with unease. What if Sasuke has a nightmare? What if Naruto has one? Sure, they aren’t on the same scale as Sasuke’s, but they still leave him frightened and in need of comfort. Except I won’t be able to comfort him.

Maybe I should blow off this whole thing after all.

“Of course,” Inoichi agrees with an ease that makes me narrow my eyes at him. He better not be saying that just to pacify me. “If either of them have a nightmare, I’ll come get you,” he says with a much too amused smile. Damn ninja. His words do ease my worry though.

“You better,” I say and resist the urge to look inside. I already said goodbye to the brats. If I look inside and Naruto sees me, I’ll have to do that all over again. I don’t know if I’ll still be able to tear myself away if I do.

Inoichi is right, I need a break. More specifically, I need to get blackout drunk and become a weeping mess. So do my friends. They already did this on their own soon after the massacre, but a second time definitely isn’t a bad plan. Sure, this isn’t something that can become a habit in any way, but sometimes you just need to drown your brain in alcohol in order to stay sane in an insane world.

Sometimes you need to let it all out.

You can’t heal unless you do.
“This is– this is messed up. This is *fucked* up. This is a messed up *fuck!*” Wait, that isn’t right. Is it?

“Such a messed up *fuck*,” Rukia agrees because she understands. She’s even crying, that’s how much she understands.

I don’t like it when she cries. I hug her to try to make her feel better. Rukia starts crying harder and that isn’t good at all! I wanted to comfort her!

“Her name was Kaoru!”

And now I’m crying as well because her name was Kaoru. Her name was Kaoru and she’s dead.

“I miss home.” So much. This never would’ve happened there.

“I miss Kanna.” Renji is crying as well. So is Tori.

“I miss my mom!” she wails and oh, I do too. I miss my mom *so much*.

And then Renji and Tori are hugging each other, and Rukia stumbles to her feet and joins them and they’re all hugging and crying. I want to hug them too!

I don’t want to be alone.

I get up to join them but I fall back down with a pained yelp, landing in Shiro’s lap. Auw. I forgot he was petting my hair. He didn’t let go when I got up. That’s mean. He hurt me.

“You hurt me.”

Shiro bursts out crying. No! I don’t want him to be sad! Now I’m even more sad and I’m crying again, all of us are crying because everything is awful and life *sucks*.

“I want to go home.”

“I want you back,” Shiro says and then I don’t want to go home anymore because I love him, I love all of them.

I don’t want to leave them.

I hug Shiro. He hugs me back and I want to hug everyone else as well. I want to hug Naruto and Sasuke but I can’t because they aren’t here.

My family isn’t here either.

I cry. I cry because I’m never going back to my world. I’m never going to see my family again and it hurts, it hurts so much. I don’t like feeling like this.

Sometimes I have to feel like this. No matter how much I wish I didn’t.

“–and he showed us how to hide it better and it was so much fun and–”

“Brat, be more quiet, *please*,” I beg over the agonizing torture I’m being subjected to. I’d barely been able to stumble over to Inoichi’s place without losing the little breakfast – lunch really, I’d been able to force down after waking up. The cheese shredder that is the brat’s voice grating over my already
abused brain is something I simply can’t handle.

I’m unbelievably jealous of my friends. They only had to stumble to their home. I have to brave the sensory overload that is Konoha again. Worse, I have to do it with two brats, one of which is a chatterbox.

Naruto peers up at me with worry, his excitement broken my by behavior. Thankfully, his worry is soon replaced by realization.

“Are you sick again, nee-chan?” he asks in a blessedly soft voice. Still horrible to hear, but so much more bearable than before.

“You’re sick?”

I wince at the knife stabbing me in the brain, my eyes snapping to Sasuke at the same time. Then I have to fight a wave of nausea, the rapid shift in vision threatening to make my stomach leave my body.

I’m more focused on Sasuke’s panic.

“You can’t be sick!”

My worry is obliterated. Kill me now and end my suffering, please.

My agony grows when Ino speaks up. The words are a buzz, as is Sasuke’s horrifically loud reply that threatens to make my brain explode.

“Please, please, please be quiet.” An absent part of me is aware that I’ve closed my eyes and covered my ears with my hands, trying to block out the abomination that is the world. After a few moments of taking deep breaths and fighting to keep from hurling all over the floor, I manage to find a semblance of composure. When I do, I realize that I’m still hearing voices, though thankfully at a bearable volume. My hands over my ears prevents me from understanding what’s being said though.

A small hand has a vice like grip on my clothes. With a final deep breath, I open my eyes and lower my hands, braving the monstrosity that is the world.

The hand belongs to Sasuke, panicked eyes flickering between me, Naruto and Inoichi. It isn’t as bad as the animal panic after one of his nightmares, but it’s uncomfortably close.

Inoichi, kneeling besides Sasuke, is calmly explaining that my “illness” isn’t serious and that I’ll be fine tomorrow. Ino is standing besides him, clutching at his tunic and visibly restraining herself from joining the conversation.

Naruto is standing in front of Sasuke and assuring him that Inoichi is telling the truth. Sasuke is holding his hand with the same deathgrip he has on my clothes but Naruto doesn’t seem to notice. He just keeps assuring Sasuke that I’m fine.

I reach down and touch Sasuke’s hand. He immediately latches on to it like his life depends on it. My heart joins my brain in being tortured.

The movement makes Naruto and Inoichi fall silent.

“I’m fine, Sasuke,” I manage to say in a steady voice. “A little sick, but fine.”

Sasuke’s panic isn’t lessened in any way. I try to come up with something to say to calm him down
but my abused brain refuses to cooperate.

Sasuke looks at Naruto and squeezes his hand hard enough to make him wince.

“You promise she’s okay?”

Naruto looks at him with a gravity I would’ve found adorable under any other circumstances.

“I promise.”

I’m so damn proud of him. I’m also unbelievably grateful that his promise is enough to make Sasuke stop panicking. He’s still anxious but he’s no longer on the verge of a full blown meltdown. While his grip on my hand is still tight, it stops being painful.

“I’ll feel better tomorrow,” I assure him. Doesn’t matter if I actually do feel better or not, I’ll fake it if I have to.

Sasuke calms down a little more, thank god.

“It’s normal for people to get sick,” Ino bursts out, incapable of remaining quiet any longer. “Nothing bad is going to happen just because she’s sick.”

Sasuke tenses back up, damn it all to hell. Naruto glares at Ino for undoing his hard work. Ino herself is grimacing, aware that she screwed up. I don’t blame her, she didn’t mean to, but the fact remains that Sasuke is entering the danger zone again.

Ino looks at Inoichi with a pleading expression.

“You get sick like this too, right, daddy?” she tries to recover. Not a bad take either.

Inoichi gently rubs her back and gives me an amused smile. Making sure the situation doesn’t escalate by acting like normal.

“Not quite like this.”

Oh that is completely unfair. Ninja can pull an all nighter without being worse for the wear and they can magic away hangovers? This is the height of injustice.

“I’ve seen this illness before, though,” he continues to Sasuke, smoothing over Ino’s blunder. “Everyone always feels better the next day.”

He glances at me with a silent message. If it wouldn’t put me in danger of losing my lunch, I would’ve rolled my eyes. Like I don’t already know I’ll have to fake it tomorrow no matter how bad I feel.

Mercifully, Inoichi’s words are enough to make Sasuke leave the danger zone.

“Did you have fun last night?” I ask, steering the topic to safer grounds. Naruto and Ino immediately launch into detailed chatter about what they did during their sleepover. While I can’t help but grimace from the renewed assault on my poor brain, they’re quiet enough for it to be bearable. Thank god Sakura has already been picked up. Three brats chattering, no matter how quietly, would’ve been too much for me to handle.

Sasuke calms down further. Crisis averted.

Still, this is good news. Amazing news even. Sasuke cares for me enough to become panicked at the
thought of losing me, and he trusts Naruto enough to believe him when Naruto says that won’t happen.

He’s reaching out to us. He’s letting us help him.

We might really be able to get him back to his feet after all.

I listen to the feet running up the stairs and the door being slammed shut with a heavy heart, feeling so damn tired. Should’ve known it was too much to hope that things were going to be alright.

“He’s so mean!” Naruto wails into my shoulder, his sobbing breaking my heart into even smaller pieces.

“I know, brat, I know,” I murmur while rubbing his back. I wish I could say something to make him feel better but I can’t think over my exhaustion.

“I just asked if I could help with his puzzle! Why did he do that?”

Because he’s in more pain than anyone should ever be. Because what was done to him left wounds so deep they’re suffocating him. Because lashing out like this is one of the only ways he has to keep himself from drowning.

Doesn’t make it any easier to deal with. It’s even worse for Naruto.

How do you explain to a child that healing isn’t a smooth road? That for every step taken forward, there comes a time you take two steps back?

How do you explain that just when things seem to be getting better, they’re going to get worse as well?

“Nee-chan, why?”

I let out a harsh breath and force myself to come up with a coherent reply. Naruto needs me to keep it together.

“Sasuke is still very hurt. He still misses his family, and he feels guilty for having fun with you.” Guilt, anger, grief and so much more. “And because he doesn’t know how to deal with that guilt, he gets angry with you.”

“But that’s not fair!”

No, it isn’t. If Sasuke wasn’t traumatized by the loss of his entire family, I never would’ve allowed him to act like this. As it is, I can’t punish him for his outburst. Not as I should. He can’t keep his feelings bottled up all the time. It would drive him mad.

He’s going to get angry like this a lot more. Now that he’s come out of lifeless state, he’s starting to feel again. Both the good and the bad.

I would give anything for Naruto not to experience the bad.

I can’t. Not when Sasuke is living with us. Hell, I wouldn’t be able to prevent it even if he didn’t. This is going to happen at school as well. It’s a miracle it hasn’t yet, really.

“I didn’t do anything wrong!”
“No, you didn’t,” I say and pull back a little so I can look him in the eye. Needing to impress the importance of my next words. “You’re doing everything right.” More than I could’ve ever hoped for.

“Then why isn’t he getting better?” Naruto asks with a hurt and desperation that shreds my heart into even tinier pieces.

“He is getting better,” I say while caressing his cheek. “His nightmares are happening less, and he’s playing with you and the others again. He’s helping you plan your prank on Iruka. He’s having fun again.”

Saying it out loud eases a tension inside me. Sasuke really is getting better. Slowly and riddled with setbacks, but he’s getting better.

He might learn to live with his scars after all.

“It doesn’t feel like he’s getting better,” Naruto says with equal frustration and guilt. I do my best to smother my fear at what this whole thing is doing to him.

“And it sucks so much that it feels like that. Doesn’t mean he isn’t getting better.”

Naruto bites down his lip, his guilt becoming even greater. Damn it. I need to think of a way to make it go away. He has nothing to feel guilty about. It’s normal to feel angry and frustrated with Sasuke’s behavior. Especially after the screaming match they just had.

“I just didn’t think it would be this hard,” he says like it’s the worst confession he can make, god damn it all to hell. I’ve done my best to ensure he knows he can talk to me about things like this, but this makes clear that I’ve failed big time. I knew this hasn’t been easy for him, but I’ve let him down in the worst of ways by missing just how much he’s been suffering.

“I didn’t think it was going to be this hard either,” I confess. Saying it out loud makes the truth hit me in a way I hadn’t expected, my own temper flaring up before I can help it. “I didn’t think it was going to be this hard at all.” Yes, I knew things were going to be incredibly difficult, but I hadn’t expected for it to be this bad.

I hadn’t expected for unending exhaustion seep into my very soul.

“This is so messed up.”

“Yes!” Naruto yells with a frustration born from the weight he’s had to endure for far too long. “This is messed up and stupid and so unfair! I wish–”

He cuts himself, but the overwhelming guilt he shows reveals what he’d been planning to say.

*I wish Sasuke didn’t have to live with us.*

I briefly close my eyes, feeling worn down to the bone. Worn down, and afraid.

Can Naruto keep shouldering the burden of living with Sasuke? Of caring for him like he needs?

What will I do if he can’t?

“Sometimes I wish Sasuke didn’t live with us either,” I confess. Naruto’s eyes go wide and his jaw drops at the words he didn’t see coming at all. Under other circumstances, his shock would’ve made amusement rise.

There’s nothing amusing about this.
“But I don’t always feel like that. Do you?”

Please don’t let him always feel this way.

“No!”

Thank god.

“I want him to be here! I like playing with him and doing homework together, and he’s starting to talk again and yesterday he even told a joke– oh. Oh!”

Naruto looks like he just figured out the answer to every one of life’s mysteries. No matter that I’m still exhausted, I feel my lips quirk up at the picture he presents.

“He really is getting better.”

The relief that slams into me is so great I genuinely feel light headed.

“He is. Slowly and with a lot of difficulty, but he’s getting better.”

I can’t even begin to describe how grateful I am that Naruto has realized this as well.

Naruto bites down his lip, his previous guilt returning.

“I’m still mad at him,” he confesses like it’s a dirty secret. I give him a reassuring smile and caress his cheek.

“You have every right to be mad at him. Sasuke didn’t mean to hurt you but he still did.” That’s something we’ll have to work on. Later, after he’s recovered more. “I’m mad at him as well,” I lie. I’m not angry. Just exhausted.

If I was Naruto’s age, I would’ve been angry as well. A lot more than the brat is.

Naruto gives me an uncertain look. He’s figured out that I’m lying. Damn it.

“You don’t seem mad.”

“That’s because I’m also very tired,” I explain, careful to stick to the truth this time. “Caring for Sasuke is exhausting. I want to do it, but sometimes it feels like it’s too much.” Naruto needs to know it’s normal to feel like that. “There’s nothing wrong with feeling like that.”

“But you’re going to keep caring for him, right?” he demands with sudden panic. Great recovery I made there.

“Of course I will.”

I do my best to ignore the voice that says I won’t if it means keeping Naruto safe.

“I won’t give up just because caring for him is more difficult than I expected.”

Naruto’s panic is replaced by unyielding determination, thank god. He wipes his tears away and lifts his chin, pure stubbornness given life.

“I won’t give up either! I’m going to be there for him forever, dattebayo!”

I let out a harsh breath, relief slamming into me with overwhelming force. I don’t know what I
would’ve done if Naruto wanted to give up on Sasuke.

I do know. I just don’t want to think about it.

“I’m very, very happy to hear that.” I can’t do this without him. No matter how unfair that is to him. “You’re amazing, Naruto,” I say while caressing his cheek, needing him to know just how wonderful he is.

Naruto’s beams like the sun, making me feel better in a way nothing else can.

“I’m awesome, dattebayo!”

I chuckle and nuzzle the nose of the most amazing brat in the world.

“The most awesome ever,” I agree. Naruto surges forward and envelops me in a heart melting hug, soothing me even further.

“You’re the most awesome too, nee-chan!”

When he says it like that, I can’t help but believe him.

“Want to go play ninja?” I ask in an attempt to leave the last of our frustration behind. We’ve worked through everything that needs to be said and right now I could really use a distraction from this awful mess. So could Naruto.

He needs a break from caring for Sasuke. We both do.

Naruto hesitates instead of jumping on the invitation.

“...Does Sasuke have to come as well?”

Definitely needs a break.

“No. We’re going to play with just the two of us. You don’t need to feel guilty for wanting that, Naruto,” I say while pulling back enough to meet his gaze. This is important. “Caring for him doesn’t mean you always have to be with him. Especially not after a fight like this.”

Naruto doesn’t believe me, though he desperately wants to. All right, think. How to put this in a way that will make him stop feeling guilty?

“It’s like when you have a fight with Ino,” I say in a burst of inspiration. “You need to be away from her to calm down. Does wanting to be away from her also mean you want to stop being friends?”

“No!”

Step one is a success.

“And does it mean that she doesn’t want to be your friend anymore?”

“No!”

“Well there you have it. Sometimes friends don’t want to spend time together. That’s normal.” And healthy. Being attached to the hip twenty-four seven isn’t good for anyone. While Naruto isn’t quite at that level with Sasuke, it’s a close call. This fiasco has shown it’s a little too close. He used to be able to take a break of him at school, but that’s no longer the case. Sure, I make sure to spend time alone with him as well, whether it’s reading him stories before bed or playing with him while Sasuke
keeps himself busy nearby, but he’s still spending most of his time with Sasuke.

I’ll make sure to schedule more visits with both my friends and with Sakura and Ino. Without Sasuke.

“So we’re going to play ninja with just the two of us.”

“Can we go play in the park?” Naruto asks with sucker punching puppy eyes. The effect is even greater for how I hadn’t seen them coming at all. Even so, I hesitate. I’d been planning to play in the garden. While we need a break from Sasuke, I don’t feel comfortable leaving him alone in the house. Especially not after a fight like this.

Except Naruto and I haven’t gone to the park in ages. Not since we moved to this place and gained a garden.

We haven’t gone to the park since Sasuke moved in. Going to the park would do him a world of good.

Sasuke is being stalked by ANBU. Or at least, the house is being watched. Don’t know for certain if they’re following him around at school as well, but the house is definitely held under surveillance. The ANBU won’t allow him to come to harm.

“We can go play in the park,” I force myself to agree. The way Naruto outshines the sun convinces me that I’ve made the right decision.

“Let’s go, nee-chan!”

“Go put on your shoes,” I say with a smile, letting go of him so he can do just that. “I’ll be with you in a moment. I need to tell Sasuke where we’re going.”

We might need a break, but Sasuke needs to know where we are as well. If he leaves his room and can’t find us, he’s going to have a meltdown that makes his fight with Naruto seem tame.

“Okay, nee-chan!”

Naruto races off to put his shoes on. I get to my feet and go up the stairs, halting in front of Sasuke’s bedroom.

I knock. There’s no answer. I squash the irrational fear trying to take hold of me. I would’ve heard it if he’d left.

I need to make sure he hears what I’m about to say.

Opening the door, I see a lump covered by blankets on the bed. As I watch, the blankets are pulled down even tighter. So, not asleep. Didn’t think he was, but the confirmation is still welcome.

I hesitate. Should I go over and touch him, to reassure him I’m still here? Or should I respect his desire to be alone?

“...Naruto and I are going to the park. The one near our old apartment.”

No reaction. Is that a good or a bad sign?

“...You can join us if you want.”

I’m really hoping he won’t, but he needs to know it’s an option. Needs to know we aren’t
abandoning him just because we had a fight.

If he does join, I’ll make it up to Naruto thrice over.

Still no reaction. After another moment of hesitation, I resign myself to the inevitable. I’ve let him know where we’re going and that he’s welcome to join us. That’s the best I can do.

“See you soon, Sasuke.”

With that, I close the door and join the brat. His excitement soothes most of my worry over Sasuke. Playing with him in the park soothes it even further.

When we return home to find Sasuke sitting downstairs and working on a new puzzle, the last of my worry fades. Then, to my shock and wonder, he hesitantly asks Naruto if he wants to join him.

Naruto outshines the sun itself. He accepts Sasuke’s apology like it’s the most precious thing in the entire world. I watch him join Sasuke with a painful amount of hope.

Things might really turn out alright after all.

The door closes behind us with a resounding click that manages to convey both stern disapproval and complete exasperation. It makes everything even better, it really does.

Walking over to where the brat is squirming in place with nervousness, I kneel down in front of him, keeping my expression solemn with the greatest of efforts. Naruto becomes genuinely anxious. So do Sakura and Ino. Even Sasuke looks a little uncertain. Really, the others I can understand, but Naruto should know better than to worry.

Holding up my hand in the air, I allow my huge grin to break free.

“That was awesome.”

Naruto beams like the sun and jumps into the air to high five me, before bouncing around with giddy joy and pride.

“We got him so good, dattebayo! Did you see the glitter, nee-chan, did you, did you?”

It was impossible to miss.

“I saw.” Iruka’s hair is never going to be the same again.

“I made sure he was in the right spot!” Ino pipes up while beaming up at Inoichi, her own worries laid to rest by his wide grin, as proud as it is delighted. “You were right, daddy, he’s much easier to lead around when he’s angry.”

I snort with laughter. I knew Inoichi had given the brats pointers on their next prank, and in all honesty, it had been kind of horrifying to hear about him teaching the brats how to better manipulate someone. Hearing it after seeing the beautiful result turns it hilarious, though.

“She was awesome!” Naruto cheers, still bouncing around like the hyperactive ball of sunshine he is. Ino swells with even greater pride. “And he thought we had only two but we actually had four and he got hit by two and it was awesome, dattebayo!”
“But the glue,” Mebuki says, still stunned by the wonder we were just treated to.

“We needed to make sure the glitter would stick,” Sakura says with a shy smile at her mother, no longer nervous because of the reaction of the other brats, but not as jubilant either.

She doesn’t have to worry. Mebuki is just shocked by the sparkling artwork Iruka has been turned into.

Her daughter’s words are enough to make Mebuki break. She dissolved into helpless laughter, causing a chain reaction. I’m suddenly laughing as well and then everyone else is too.

Sasuke doesn’t laugh, but there’s a smile tugging at his lips. It’s a reluctant smile, one he’s doing his hardest to suppress, but it’s still a real smile.

It makes this day even more wonderful than it already is.

“I can hear you!” Iruka yells like he didn’t let the brats succeed in turning him into a work of art on purpose and it makes me laugh even harder.

For the first time, I truly believe that everything is going to be alright.

Tori and Renji laugh.

“He sparkled more than a noble during the chuunin exams.”

They laugh harder. My own grin is wide enough to make my cheeks ache. This was beautiful.

“But orange and pink?” Rukia asks with equal amusement and horror because of course she does. I manage to smooth out my expression with the greatest of efforts.

“It’s a great combination.”

Shiro actually scoffs, disgusted by the very notion.

“We need to have a talk with him,” he says to Rukia like this a matter of the gravest importance possible. He hasn’t even finished speaking before Rukia is nodding her agreement, wholeheartedly supporting the need for an intervention.

“How did they manage to hide it all?” Tori asks, delighted by everything about this.

“With a lot of creativity,” I say with an even bigger grin and launch into the events leading up to Iruka being turned into a work of art. Sure, he let them succeed, but that doesn’t diminish their accomplishment in any way.

As we continue laughing about the beauty that is Iruka being pranked, I feel a tension I’d been carrying for far too long fade at last.

We’re all right. We’ve gotten back to our feet. Now I just need to make sure Sasuke does as well.

After today, I’m convinced I’ll be able to.
I stare. Rub my eyes to make sure I’m not seeing things. But no, the image remains the same.

There’s a dog sitting on my stomach. A dog, wearing a headband, a vest, and radiating boredom.

Am I still dreaming?

“Yo.”

I’m still dreaming.

“So. A dream about a talking dog. That’s new.”

The dog, pug actually, gives me a look that’s as bored as it is disapproving. He’s cute.

I bring up a hand and scratch behind his ear. The pug closes his eyes with pleasure and I can feel his tail wag. Then he shakes his head and dislodges my hand. He returns to being bored with everything, acting like my petting of him never happened. He’s like the pug version of Kakashi.

This is a funny dream.

“Not a dream, lady.”

“Of course you’d say that.” Makes perfect sense for a dream to deny being a dream. Also, it’s really strange to see an animal’s lips move like that.

The pug sighs and it seems as though he’s asking the world what he ever did to deserve this. It’s impressive how he manages to put all of that in such a brief sound.

“Boss told me to wake you. One of your pups wandered off.”

I look at the pug with confusion.

“Your boss? And I don’t have puppies.”

Then again, this is a dream. Why shouldn’t I have puppies?

The pug looks at me like I’m an idiot put on this world specifically to torment him.

“Your mate. My boss. You asked him to keep an eye on the wounded pup. Well he’s wandered off. Boss thought you should know.”

I stare. Then I groan and let my head fall back down my pillow, unable to believe just what my subconscious has decided to cook up.

“This is one hell of a dream.”

The pug lets out another sigh that asks why he’s being tormented like this.

“Not a dream, lady.”

“Sure, whatever you say,” I say without lifting my head, in no mood to continue this dream. I don’t want to think about the bastard.

I yelp, my head snapping up. The pug bit me! Not painfully but definitely hard enough to be felt.

“Not. A. Dream. Look, I was just told to wake you and let you know about the pup. Boss followed him so he’s safe, but he thought you’d want to know.”
All right, let’s humor the figment of my imagination.

“Let’s say this is real. Where exactly did Sasuke wander off to?”

“His old den.”

What.

I sit up with sudden urgency. The pug hops off my stomach with more grace than a cat but I’m focused on far more important matters.

“Sasuke went to the Uchiha district?”

“Finally,” the pug says instead of answering my vital question. “Yes, he did.”

This is bad. This is very bad.

I’m really hoping this is just a dream. Or rather, a nightmare.

Getting out of bed, the pug avoiding my hasty movements with a graceful leap to the floor, I race into the hallway and turn on the lights. Quietly opening Sasuke’s bedroom, I find an empty bed. Even though I know it’s in vain, I turn on the lights and search his room.

He isn’t here. Damn it.

Going to Naruto’s bedroom in the even more vain hope that Sasuke might have crawled into bed with him, I quietly open the door. Naruto is sound asleep, limbs sprawled across the bed and the blanket half thrown off as always.

Sasuke isn’t here. God damn it all to hell.

Why couldn’t this be just a dream?

Quietly closing the door, I run into my room and put on the first clothes I find, before racing down the stairs and putting on my shoes. I take note of the fact that, yes, Sasuke’s shoes are missing. He’s really left the house.

Right before I’m about to go after him, a very important thought occurs. Looking around for the pug, I find him sitting on the stairs, still radiating boredom.

“Your boss send you?” That information is a lot more important now that I know this is reality.

The pug looks at me like he can’t believe I felt the need to waste air on that question.

“Already said he did.”

I close my eyes, a whirlwind of emotions slamming into me. I suspected he was still following me, but having it confirmed is something else entirely.

We broke up. He shouldn’t keep doing this. It isn’t healthy for either of us. It’ll make me start hoping again, no matter that I know this doesn’t change anything. He isn’t coming back.

He’s just going keep stalking me for the rest of my life instead.

He’s going to fear losing me for the rest of my life. For the rest of his life.
He needs to let go of me. For both our sakes.

Except I don’t want him to leave. Not because of the stupid hope rising against my will, but because him following me around means he’s following Naruto and Sasuke around as well.

It means he’s protecting them. The knowledge causes an enormous burden to fall off me. Yes, the Hokage becoming death incarnate when I told him about that creep made clear his personal protection extends well beyond what I thought it did, but I’d still worried. I hadn’t even realized just how much I’d been worrying until it disappeared.

Not all of my worry disappears.

The bastard is following Sasuke. He’ll keep him safe from physical harm.

That isn’t the only harm Sasuke needs to be protected from.

I open my eyes and look at the pug.

“Will you watch over Naruto?” Sasuke needs me right now, but I’d feel a lot better going after him if I knew Naruto was looked after while I’m away.

The pug laments his lot in life with another sigh.

“Lady, we’ve been watching over you and the pups for a while now.”

Of course. And of course the contrary bastard has a talking dog as his minion. Multiple minions if that ‘we’ is anything to go by.

I can’t tell whether I want to laugh, cry, or do both. Almost a year of silence, and the bastard still manages to push all my buttons without ever showing himself.

Almost a year of silence, and he lets me know he’s still following me around by sending over a talking dog. Yes, anyone who’s seen an Inuzuka dog knows not all animals are normal in this world, but still. A talking dog. The absurdity of living in a magical world hits me all over again.

Taking a deep breath, I pull myself together and focus on what’s important.

I have a brat to find.

Standing in the creepily quiet district, I feel completely lost. This place is huge. I have no idea where to even begin looking. I’ve never been here before. Sasuke always came to my place.

Where could he have gone?

A faint noise draws my attention. I run towards it, hoping it’s Sasuke.

It isn’t Sasuke. Unless he saw me and he’s hiding?

There’s another noise, further away. It’s exactly the same as the first.

It’s the bastard.

I let him guide me, no longer frantic but still so worried. He leads me to a house larger than all others.
When I hear the guiding noise come from inside, I realize what this place is.

This is Sasuke’s home.

Oh no.

I go inside as quietly as I can. Making any sort of noise in the ghost town outside was bad enough, but it’s so much worse in here.

It feels like I’m walking into a grave.

The bastard seems to feel the same because the faintest of creaks leads me to the stairs, so much softer than the previous noises. I bump into a few things on my way to the stairs, the darkness nearly impenetrable but I don’t dare to turn on the light. That would be even worse than the noises I’m causing.

Quietly walking up the stairs, I find myself in a dark hallway. Not nearly as dark as below, though.

A door is open, moonlight spilling over the floor. I walk towards it and look inside the room.

My heart shatters.

Sasuke is standing with his back towards me. He’s completely silent and his hands are balled into fists. The moonlight reveals he’s dug his nails in hard enough to draw blood.

Slowly walking forward, even more careful not to make a sound than before, I halt besides him and kneel down, making sure he can see me.

Sasuke doesn’t react to my arrival. He’s looking at the floor as though it’s the only thing he can do. As though nothing else exists.

He’s looking at the spot his parents were murdered.

“Sasuke?” I breathe in the softest of voices. Sasuke flinches violently but that’s the only reaction he gives. He keeps staring at the floor as though it’s the only thing that exists.

Hesitating only a moment, I move so I’m kneeling in front of him, breaking his line of sight. It succeeds in making Sasuke glance up at me but it doesn’t take long for him to look down again. Looking through me at the spot his parents were murdered.

He was the one who found their bodies.

I slowly lean forward, telegraphing my every move and looking for any sign of rejection.

There are none. Sasuke doesn’t seem to be aware I’m even here. The sight is painful in ways I can’t describe.

It’s nothing compared to the way he’s feeling.

I hug him. A brutal shudders runs through him and then he’s hugging me back, his hands clutching me with desperation as he presses his ear against my heart like he does after one of his nightmares. He starts shaking.

He doesn’t cry. I tighten my hold on him and close my eyes.

Some wounds never heal. At best they become scars you learn to live with.
At worst they never stop bleeding.

Sasuke is finally asleep. I’ve also finally managed to drag myself away from him.

Sitting down my bed, I close my eyes, worn down to my very soul. What a night.

After a few moments of feeling buried beneath the weight of the entire world, I pull myself together. The night isn’t over yet.

I need to deal with the bastard. The problem is that I have no idea how to do that. Yes, I could write to him, but I can’t think of anything to say to make him stop.

Or rather, I don’t want to.

I need him to stay. Need to know that Naruto and Sasuke are protected. Yes, the Third made clear I’m under his personal protection, and other ANBU are probably watching over us as well, but it isn’t the same. The Third is a military dictator who can put children in ANBU, and the ANBU are invisible strangers who put the good of the village first.

He used to be like that, once. He isn’t anymore. If he’s here, it isn’t because of his job.

It’s because he’s protecting me. More importantly, he’s protecting Naruto and Sake. I need that. I can’t take worrying over their physical safety on top of worrying over their mental well being. I just can’t. It’s selfish, but I won’t be able to keep it together without knowing that they’re safe. I might not have realized how suffocating that burden was until it fell away, but I’m aware of it now. I can’t return to carrying that weight, I just can’t. I’ll be able to if – when Sasuke has recovered more, but right now I can’t deal with it.

Which means I can’t bring myself to tell him to go away. No matter how unhealthy his behavior is for the both of us.

Coming to a decision, I go downstairs. Grabbing a notebook and pen, I scribble down a note and tear it out.

This is such a bad idea. It’s one thing not to tell him to go away. It’s something else entirely to encourage his behavior.

I can’t stay silent. I need him to know how much this means to me.

And suddenly I’m laughing, or maybe I’m crying. Either way, I feel a helpless smile grow. Almost a year, and the bastard still makes me feel better just by being his bastard self.

Almost a year, and I’m still hopelessly in love with him.

Right now it doesn’t feel like that will ever change.

_Thanks for watching over them._

“‘Yes I do! I have to do it alone, have to, have to!’”
“No you don’t! I’ll help!”

Naruto’s yell snaps me out of my horrified stupor. The horror remains but now my brain is functioning again as well.

“Sakura-chan and Ino will help too!”

Hell no they won’t. None of the brats are going to chase a goal as horrifying as this, not on my watch.

“Shut up,” Sasuke whispers harshly, his hands balled into fists as he glares at Naruto with a rage that heralds a meltdown.

Naruto glares back just as fiercely, his own frustration with Sasuke’s behavior boiling over.

“You’re being stupid!” he yells and I abruptly realize just how close to disaster we are. “A stupid prideful idiot!”

“Naruto, shut up,” I say harshly, startling him. He looks up at me with hurt betrayal and I’ll apologize and explain later, I’ll tell him that he did the right thing no matter how horrifying and absolutely not happening it is, but right now I need to focus on Sasuke. He’s dug his nails into his palms hard enough to reopen the wounds from last night and he’s trembling in place. He’s on the verge of breaking in the worst of ways. Maybe forever.

I need to stop that from happening.

Kneeling down in front of Sasuke, I resist the urge to grab his hands and make him stop hurting himself. He won’t allow that right now.

“Sasuke, look at me,” I say firmly and wait until those furious and anguished eyes meet mine. I hold his gaze, making sure my expression is as fierce as possible. Needing to make sure my next words have the right impact. “Screw Itachi.”

His eyes go wide and his jaw drops, completely caught off guard by my words. I continue before he can recover.

“He wants you to be alone, he wants you to think of nothing but him and how to defeat him. He wants you to be miserable.”

I don’t believe Itachi said those things to Sasuke. I can’t. Itachi wouldn’t do this.

It doesn’t matter what I believe. What matters is that Sasuke believes his brother did this. He believes Itachi really did say those things to him.

He believes he needs to do as he was told.

He doesn’t.

“So you’re going to do everything you can to be happy instead. You’re going to have fun with your friends and make your every dream come true. And if you ever do see him again, you’re going to laugh in his face because you did exactly what he didn’t want you to do. You’re going to take revenge for what he did by ignoring everything he told you to do. Because screw. Him.”

Sasuke’s breathing is ragged and erratic, his trembles having turned to shakes. Then he bursts into hysterical crying, agonized sobs torn from his throat as he falls to his knees. I catch him just in time
and hold him close. He grips me back as if I’m the only thing holding him together. I probably am.

I gently rub his back and pull Naruto close with my other arm when he hugs us both, his own cries joining Sasuke’s wounded wailing. I can’t stop my own tears from falling down either.

Sasuke needs this. He needs to let it all out, needs to grieve for all he’s lost. All that was taken from him. He can’t heal unless he does.

Doesn’t make it any less painful to witness.

I can’t stop smiling.

“No he’s not!”

“Hn.”

“He’s not. Take it back, you bastard~”

“Sasuke’s right,” Sakura interrupts, matter of fact and confident in a way she rarely is. “It’s ugly.”

Naruto looks at her with utter betrayal. Like she hasn’t made her opinion about this be known several times before.

“Sakura-chan,” he says like she just stabbed him in the back. “How could you? Gama-chan is cute and perfect.”

“It’s a frog,” Sakura says like she can’t believe how dense Naruto is being. “Frogs are icky. They aren’t cute.”

“Yes he is!” Naruto insists and thrusts out Gama-chan towards her. “Look~”

“Don’t bring it closer!” Sakura yells with sudden panic, scrambling to her feet and backing away from him. Naruto follows after her.

“But look~”

“Ew, ew, ew, get it away from me!”

Sakura runs away. Naruto, after putting Gama-chan in his portable tank, chases after her while yelling how cute Gama-chan is, determined to change her mind. Really, he should know this is a lost cause. Sakura has made her opinion about frogs perfectly clear on multiple occasions.

Sakura flees from him with the skills taught at the academy, yelling back that frogs are slimy and ugly and not cute. While it starts out serious, they’re soon grinning, the chase turning into a game.

I keep savoring the priceless gift I’m seeing. Ino is doing the same. She’s beaming at Sasuke.

Sasuke is watching Naruto and Sakura with a faint smile. It’s not the same as the one he wore before he lost his family, small and secret instead of wide and open.

It’s a smile he isn’t trying to suppress. My own smile splits my face some more.

He’s going to be alright. Oh, there are still going to be breakdowns and setbacks. There will still be
nightmares. But he’s going to get through them. He’s going to be alright. All of them are going to be alright.

Everything is going to be alright.

I tear out a few more pages and throw them into the fire. Seeing the pages consumed by flames is soothing.

It means it's really over. Not meaningless, the massacre will never cease to matter. Shisui and Itachi will never cease to matter. But they're gone. It's over. It's in the past.

We've gotten back to our feet.

I throw a few more pages into the fire, watching the paper I'd poured my heart out on turn to ash. This isn't the first time I've done this. I started burning my personal writing when I realized I was never going to return to my old world, and I've been doing it ever since. I did it with my rantings about the impossibilities I'm confronted with every day, the ninja hopping the roofs, the teleportation happening left and right, the casual breaking of the laws of gravity. I did it with my analyses of this militarized and paranoid culture, both the blatant and the subtle ways it permeates every layer of society.

I did it with my grief and pain over the loss of my home. Did it again with my grief over Daisuke.

I haven't needed to do it since then. Not like this. A few pages every so often, yes, but not an amount like this.

I'm not surprised by how much I've written. I don't like talking about things like this, but I still need an outlet. Writing gives me that.

Burning it gives me closure.

I tear out a few more pages and feed them to the flames. I live in a world where so many can be murdered in a single night. A world where people have superhuman strength and can control the very elements with magic. Where they screw over the laws of physics in ways I sometimes still have trouble believing is possible. A world where people use that magic to fight each other with subterfuge and sabotage. It's a great setting for a story.

It's terrifying to live in for real. We aren't characters in a book. We're real people living in a real world. All those grand and epic events that happen to characters in a story, aren't grand and epic in real life. They're just terrifying. Horrifying. Traumatizing.

The more important you are to the story, the worse your trauma will be.

I hadn't realized that Sasuke is an important character before he lost his family. His features aren't striking like those of Naruto or Sakura, or even Kakashi. But being the sole survivor of the ninja equivalent of a noble family makes it clear that he's important to the story.

I hate that. More than I can ever put into words.

The murder of the entire Uchiha clan isn't just a tragic background story for Sasuke. It's real. It created scars he'll carry with him for the rest of his life.
It created scars for all of us.

We live in a terrifying world. I don't often allow myself to dwell on just how terrifying it is, but there are times I need to.

Tonight, I worry. I grieve, I ache. I allow myself to be hurt by just how unfair life is.

Tomorrow I suck it up and continue living.

It’s finished. It’s done. It’s over.

We are over.

I look at the notebook containing the most cruel version of our story, undecided on what to do with it. If I didn't know for certain that he was still following me, I would burn it.

Except he’s still following me around. He still hasn’t let go of me.

I can’t let go of him until he does.

But am I ready for him to stop protecting Naruto and Sasuke?

Yes, I am. Ever since Sasuke’s breakdown after he went to his home, he’s been improving with a speed that takes my breath away. Oh, he isn’t fully recovered, not by a long shot. He’s still fragile in ways that make me ache just from thinking about it. But he’s gotten better. He’s happy again.

He’s allowing himself to be happy again.

Coming to a decision, I grab a blank notebook. I wrote this for myself, to work through my grief and gain closure.

I’m going to translate it for the bastard. Hopefully it’ll be enough for him to finally let go of me.

I do my best to ignore the part of me that hopes it’ll be enough to make him come back.

He doesn’t come back. Doesn’t do anything at all. Over a week of translating in every spare moment I have, and he didn’t show up or let me know he’s still here. I know he might be away on a mission, but that doesn’t stop my heart from breaking all over again.

I want him to come back. More than anything, I want him to come back. Now that I know for certain that he’s still following me, I miss him with an intensity I thought I’d gotten past. I miss bantering with him, miss him teasing me, miss the lazy talks we used to have. Miss how he brightened my day just by being here. How I always felt so at peace just by lying next to him.

I want him to come back.

I need him to move on. More than that, I need him to let me know he’s moved on.

Except this is the bastard. Whether he leaves or stays after reading our story, the odds of him letting me know what he’s decided to do are absolute zero.
No, that isn’t true. If he leaves, he’d let me know. Not by revealing himself, but he’d let me know. He wouldn’t let me go on believing he’s still here.

If he decides to keep stalking me, on the other hand, he won’t reach out to me in any way. In hindsight, he definitely hadn’t meant for his minion to reveal that he was still following me around.

His continued silence is either because he’s away on a mission, or because he’s planning on stalking me forever.

I open our story and write down a message in case it’s the latter. Then, because I can’t help myself, I go get the good luck charm he gave me and attach it the spine.

I need him to let go of me.

I want him to come back.

I can’t stop hoping that this will be enough to make that happen.

*To the bastard. Screw you.*

Two more weeks pass in silence. He might still be away on a mission, but with every day that passes, my hope dwindles. I wish I could stop hoping he’d come back.

I wish even more he’d just come back.

“Are you all right?”

Shiro’s soft question draws my attention. I smile.

“I’m fine.”

Shiro doesn’t believe me. My smile grows. His concern is touching. It’s also unnecessary.

“I’m fine, Shiro. More than fine even.” I really am. Yes, I miss the bastard like we only broke up yesterday instead of almost a year ago, but I’m not unhappy.

Looking out the garden, I watch as Naruto and Sasuke dance circles around Tori. Naruto and Tori are laughing brightly, while Sasuke is wearing that breathtaking smile of his. Rukia and Renji are seated nearby. Rukia is giving advice to Naruto and Sasuke, while Renji makes cracks every time Tori fails to catch them. Which is often. The training from the academy is really showing itself.

The sight of them all warms me in the best of ways.

How can be anything but happy at a time like this?

Shiro lays a hand on my shoulder. When I meet his gaze, I see that his worry has disappeared. His eyes are soft and his lips are quirked in a warm smile. Glad that I’m telling the truth. I smile back and gently squeeze his hand. Then I get up and give Tori some much needed aid in catching the brats. My sudden participation allows me to catch Naruto off guard, and his bright laughter as I catch him and swing him around warms me even further.

Life isn’t safe. You have to grasp every happiness that comes your way, hold on tight and hope it won’t all be taken away.
I’ve already lifted my glass of water to my lips before I realize it’s empty. Tearing myself away from my writing, I verify with my eyes that, yes, the reason I’m not tasting water is because there is none.

Putting down my notebook, I get up and go to the kitchen for a refill, my mind still on the dalmations being kidnapped. Maybe I should – scream as something covers my eyes except a hand is muffling my voice before it leaves my throat, a warm body molded against my back and an arm across my stomach, holding me as close. I freeze, my heart stuck in my throat for a different reason than the fear from before.

He releases my voice and embraces me with both arms, unyielding as steel and impossibly gentle at the same time. He’s holding me like I’m the most fragile thing in the world.

He’s holding me like I’ll disappear if he doesn’t.

He lays his head down my shoulder. I bring up my hands, a fleeting part of me wondering where my glass went but all my focus is on the impossible miracle happening.

I can’t believe he’s really here.

I grip his arm too tightly, part of me acutely aware that he isn’t wearing his armour or his mask, but he doesn’t complain. Doesn’t do anything but hold me. The silence is suffocating but I don’t dare break it.

I’m afraid he’ll disappear if I do.

The faintest of trembles runs through him, noticeable only because of how close he’s holding me.

“She dies.” His voice is so soft I wouldn’t have caught it if I wasn’t so hyper aware of him. I swallow my too dry throat and gather my courage.

“She does. And he breaks.” It’s the most horrible version of our story.

It’s what he expects to happen. Oh, not like this. This is probably even more cruel than what he imagined. But he expects me to die.

He expects that he’s going to lose me.

This time a shiver runs through him.

“He knew it would happen, he knew,” he says, broken in a way that makes my heart clench. I knew our story was going to make his scars bleed. Knew it would undo him in the same way our final fight did.

I can’t find it within myself to regret it. Not when it made him break his silence.

Not when it might be enough to make him stay.

“Why did he stay?”
“Because it was worth it.” Oh, how it was worth it. Even with the heartbreak that followed, even if he takes off again now, I’d do it all over again if I had the choice.

He wouldn’t. If he knew what he does now, if he knew what it would lead to, he would avoid me at all costs. He’d do everything he could to avoid falling in love with me.

He didn’t in our story. Despite giving myself a terminal illness and despite the fact that he saw me die day by day, he stayed. Right until the very end, he stayed. It’s something he never would’ve done in real life but realism was never the point.

The point was to see what would have happened if he’d stayed. It was to see if it would’ve been worth it even if it ends in the tragedy he fears it will.

It was. For me, it was worth it.

“It was worth the pain that came after.” I wish with all my heart he’d believe so too.

I don’t know if he can. Writing him made me realize just how deep his scars go. How raw and open some of them still are. I might not know what caused them but I know it left him terrified of opening up to people, of allowing anyone close. He’s terrified of losing the people he cares about. Worse, he’s convinced he always will.

He’s convinced losing anyone else will break him. Maybe it will. Whatever happened to him left him fragile in ways that make my heart ache just from thinking about it. No one has a right to pry at his scars. Not even me.

I can’t help myself from doing so anyway. Can’t help but confess the hope I can’t get rid of no matter how hard I try.

“He’d rather be broken than never have her at all.” That’s selfish of me, I know that. I don’t have the right to ask him to make himself vulnerable like that. To put himself in a position that might one day leave him shattered beyond recovery.

I’m doing so anyway.

Another tremble runs through him and he tightens his embrace. It should be too tight, but somehow he’s still holding me like I’m the most fragile thing in the world.

“I can’t lose you.”

My eyes sting with tears. I’d give anything to be able to tell him he won’t lose me.

I can’t. Life isn’t safe. No matter how much we want it to be.

"Someday you might. Even at best, someday you will. You can't avoid that no matter how much you try. Wouldn't you rather have me for as long as life lets you instead of forever regretting what you missed?"

A ragged breath escapes him, the sound breaking my heart even as I can’t stop myself from digging my nails into his arms, fear and hope threatening to choke me. I’m so afraid he’s going to leave.

I’m desperate for him to stay.

“I can’t.”

I dig my nails in even deeper.
“Yes you can. Just stay.”

It feels like the entire world holds his breath as I wait for his answer. When he does, my fear and hope grow even stronger.

“You could die.”

“So could you.” I know it isn’t the same. I’d break if I lost him, but I’d survive. I’d learn to live with his loss. I’d find a way to be happy again.

I don’t know if he can do the same. He might, but the odds of him managing to get back to his feet are so much lower than mine. Maybe it’s unfair of me to ask him to stay despite that.

Maybe it isn’t. As long as he keeps following me, as long as he doesn’t let go of me, my death will keep having the power to break him.

Is it really so wrong to ask him to be happy with me until that happens?

I gather all my courage once more.

“Stay. I love you.”

A wounded sound escapes him and he tightens his embrace even further. Holding me like I’m the only thing holding him together. I push on, have to. It’s the only chance I have at convincing him to stay.

“I love you, and I know you love me too. Stay.”

He keeps holding me like he’ll fall apart if he doesn’t. Time seems to slow down further with every moment that passes. The silence is so suffocating it almost seems caused by magic.

Stay. Please, stay. God, just stay.

“I’ll stay.”

I stop breathing, not daring to believe what I just heard. Another ragged breath escapes him.

“I’ll stay,” he repeats, the words seeming to be torn from his throat. All the air escapes me in a rush, tears breaking free as I realize he means it. He’ll stay.

He’ll stay.

He lifts his head from my shoulder and the arm I’m not still holding onto for dear life lets go of me. He pulls down the blindfold, the headband falling around my neck. I suck in a sharp breath at the realization of what this means, yet even though I know I have permission, I can’t bring myself to turn around. I can barely believe he’ll stay. The notion that he might reveal himself on top of that is too much to handle.

He takes hold of my chin like I’m made of spun glass and gives the gentlest of pressure. Inviting me to turn around. My body accepts the invitation without any input from me.

I laugh. I keep crying as well but that doesn’t stop me from being overcome by helpless laughter because of course, of course.

“I should’ve guessed, I really should have.”
Kakashi’s eyes are crinkled with a smile as helpless as my own. The one normally covered by his headband is still closed, and a tear slips out from beneath the closed lid.

“I put a lot of effort into making sure you didn’t,” he says in a voice as overcome as my own.

“Ridiculously so,” I agree, my smile growing larger the longer I look at him. “You even changed your voice, you absolute bastard.”

“I told you I can do other voices.”

My laughter is just as helpless as before. He did tell me, oh, he told me in so many different ways. How could I have been so blind? Him showing up out of nowhere to protect me, his refusal to say a single word before that. All the things Shisui and Itachi said, the in hindsight so unbelievably obvious hints they kept dropping. How he reminded me so much of the bastard every time I saw him.

“How did I miss this?”

“Romance isn’t the only thing you’re ridiculously oblivious to,” he teases like the bastard he is. I feel like I’m about to burst from sheer happiness.

“And you’re enough of a bastard to take full advantage of every one of my blind spots,” I tease back, cheeks aching from how hard I’m smiling.

I can’t believe he’s really here.

I let go of the shirt I only then realize I’d been gripping in the first place. Twining my arms around his neck, I weave my hands through his hair. The feeling of those soft strands is achingly familiar.

He’s really here.

And suddenly I have to kiss him, have to feel his lips against mine share the same breath as him and be as close to him as is possible.

He’s wearing a mask. The mask has to go.

I’ve already brought my hands to his face and am about to hook my fingers beneath the edge of the fabric when rationality returns. This is the bastard. Even with him allowing me to see him, touching his face with my hands is something else entirely. It’s something he’s never allowed me to do.

And suddenly I’m terrified for reasons I can’t explain. I know he isn’t going to leave even if he does tell me he doesn’t want me to touch him there, and him not wanting me to touch his face has never been an issue before. Why should it be one now?

Before my irrational terror can ruin everything, he moves his head so he’s leaning into my hand, my palm cupping his cheek. He’s looking at me with the same warmth he showed when he saved me in the hospital.

It calms me down in an instant. Part of me also admits that, yes, I really am oblivious to romantic love until I’m smacked in the face with it. There’s nothing platonic about the way he’s looking at me.

Most of me is focused on the warmth beneath my hand. The shape of his cheek, the curve of his jawline. Never felt before, yet somehow it’s as familiar as everything else about him. My thumb caresses the scar crossing his closed eye. I’ve never felt it like this either, know it only from fleeting brushes against my skin. Despite that, it somehow feels like I’ve done this a thousand times before.
Hooking my fingers beneath his mask, I gently pull it down. He keeps looking at me with that heart melting warmth the entire time. My eyes drink in the visage revealed. It’s the first time I’ve ever seen him but it doesn’t feel like that.

It feels like I’ve always known what he looks like. The nose that’s nuzzled mine so many times, the cheeks that have brushed against every part of me. The beauty mark I was so surprised by when I felt it for the first time.

The lips I know better than my own.

And then I’m surging forward, am met halfway by him and we kiss like we never stopped doing so in the first place. My hands are woven through his hair and my eyes are closed and oh, this is more than just familiar.

This feels like coming home.

When the need for air becomes too great, I pull away a little but I don’t have time for more than a single breath before his lips are on me again. I’m definitely not complaining.

When we finally do separate, he leans his forehead against mine. He’s looking at me like I’m an impossible dream come true. I’m fairly certain I’m looking at him in the same way.

He’ll stay.

He nuzzles my nose with his own. The joy I feel is so great it’s almost painful.

“Welcome back, bastard,” I say softly. It makes his breath hitch and my own heart skips a beat in response. Despite that, I can’t help but chuckle, a thought taking hold and refusing to let go. “You know, I think I’m going to have real trouble remembering your actual name is Kakashi.”

This time a harsh breath escapes him and he opens both his eyes. My own go wide at the sight I never expected to see again. Cupping his cheek, I brush my thumb beneath the distinctive ruby ringed by black. The part of me still thinking rationally wonders how he can have a Sharingan.

“Say it again.”

His plea makes those thoughts fly out of my mind. The desperation he shows makes my heart clench and turns my throat too tight. Which means my voice is stuck in my throat as well.

“Mary, please, say it again.”

I manage to find my voice.

“Kakashi.”

His breath hitches and the drops of obsidian spin faster.

“Kakashi,” I repeat and the faintest of trembles runs through him.

I’ll say his name forever if he needs me to.

“Kakashi, I love you.”

His lips meet mine again but this time I don’t close my eyes. I can’t. His own are holding me captive.

I never want to be set free.
He lifts me up as if I’m light as a feather, my legs wrapping around his hips like it was only yesterday since we last did this. He starts moving to the stairs and the desire slamming into me is as sudden as it is heady, every nerve set alight. I deep our kiss, my eyes closing of their own volation as he carries me up the stairs. Nothing exists beyond the taste of him, the feeling of his hair between my hands, the warmth of his body. The hand not supporting me is caressing my back, neck, hair, unable to settle on one spot. The sensation is almost as dizzying as his kisses.

I only realize we’ve entered my bedroom when he lays me down the bed, my eyes opening as his hands slip underneath my shirt.

“Wait.” I want to see him first.

His hands freeze and he stops making me dizzy with kisses. The haze of desire lifts enough for me to realize he’s looking at me with fear, so I quickly cup his cheek and give him a reassuring smile. To my eternal relief, it erases his fear.

Gathering my scattered thoughts, I remember why I told him to wait. My smile turns wicked.

“I think I’m entitled to a request. Or a million.” I really am. I’d do it all over again if it meant we’d end up back here, but the fact remains that he acted like a complete and utter bastard. I’m entitled to make him grovel.

Judging from his slow smile and heady gaze, he won’t have any objections whatsoever.

“And just what would you have me do?” he says in a voice that sends the most delicious shiver running through me. I’ve missed that voice.

I’ve missed him. So much.

I’ll never have to miss him again.

I drag my eyes down his body. When I meet his gaze again, the desire he shows thrills me in the best of ways. My smile grows.

"Take off your clothes."

"You can’t go in."

"She screamed!"

"Shh!"

"She's hurt!"

"Shh. She's not hurt, that was a good scream. But if you go in now, she will hurt you."

"She screamed. Screams aren’t good! And she wouldn't hurt me. Would she?"

"Remember when you spilled your drink on her story?"

"..."

"She'll hurt you so much more. That was a good scream. Good screams means no interrupting."
“...You promise she isn’t hurt?”

“I promise.”

"...If we can’t go in, then what do we do?"

"Hide our heads under our pillows and hope she doesn’t scream again really hard."
"Take off your clothes."

His smile grows, the sight stealing my breath. He looks gorgeous and oddly adorable. Almost boyish even.

In fact...

“How old are you?” I ask with rising dread. His height had made me eliminate the possibility of him being a kid, but if he’s actually a tall teen...

His smile turns into an even more boyish grin and I pray to god that he isn’t actually a teen.

“Twenty-two.”

Overwhelming relief slams into me. Twenty-two is good. Twenty-two is very good.

It means he wasn’t a teen when we started sleeping together.

“Now I feel old,” I say with an answering grin, so unbelievably happy that he’s an adult. If a young one. “It does explain your immature behavior, though.”

“Good thing you’re mature enough for the both of us,” he teases like the bastard he is, amused by what he clearly finds to be an utterly irrelevant issue. “Age brings wisdom and all that.”

“In other words, you have no grounds whatsoever to refuse any of my commands. Interesting.”

I drag my eyes down his body, the desire that had been dampened by worry flaring back up with a vengeance. His own gaze grows heady in response.

Leaning back so I’m lounging comfortably on the bed, I raise an impetuous brow.

“Well? Get to it.”

My expression might be impetuous but my voice is anything but. The idea of seeing the body I know as intimately as my own sends the most delicious of thrills through me.

“As the lady commands,” he actually purrs, the sound shooting straight through me. He flows off the bed with a grace I suddenly realize he’d been consciously repressing during the other times I saw him. Oh, he’d still moved like a ninja, but it wasn’t the liquid grace I was used to from him. Another way in which he’d been hiding his identity.

Those thoughts fly out of my mind when he gives me a mischievous smile. This time it doesn’t make him look boyish.

He slowly brings up his hands, somehow turning the movement into the most sensual of shows. It’s impossible to look away from them as he slowly peels off one fingerless glove. My eyes instantly zero in on the small scar on his now uncovered wrist. I could recognize it by touch anywhere, yet actually seeing it feels strangely illicit.

He obligingly turns his hand so I can better examine my favorite scar, yet I can't help but be
distracted. The sight of his bared palm is ridiculously alluring. I want him to touch me so badly.

I want to see him undress even more.

He pulls off his second glove with the same sensuality as before. While I know that hand is riddled in a never ending web of cuts, I almost can’t see them, that’s how fine they are. My hands itch to trace the lines I know are there. Then those clever fingers take hold of the edge of his shirt and I genuinely hold my breath.

He bares the tiniest sliver of skin. Then he stops. My breath escapes me in a helpless chuckle and I lift my eyes to meet his own. I’m not surprised in the slightest to see him give me a teasing smile, his eyes bright with joy.

“You’re such a bastard.”

“It’s part of my charm,” he quips back, his smile growing and his eyes brightening even further.

He’s beautiful.

“Your charm won’t save you if you don’t get back to getting naked.”

“Is that a challenge?”

I laugh. Of course he’d say that. I really should’ve known better than to dare him like this.

My laughter fades at the look he’s giving me. He’s looking at me like I’m the most beautiful thing he’s ever seen.

He really does love me. I already knew that of course, but the way he’s looking at me...

I clear my throat and give him a teasing smile. Or try to. I’m pretty sure my smile is as besotted as I feel.

“Are you going to take me up on it?”

He smiles with a playfulness that somehow manages to make him even more gorgeous. Then he fluidly takes off his shirt and my jaw drops. I knew he was fit, but actually seeing all that lean muscle... I might be drooling a little.

Then I register the small cut on his stomach. The burn on his lower ribs, the jagged line above it, disappearing onto his back. The angry cut crossing his shoulder, the three parallel lines curving down his forearm. All the scars I know so intimately by touch. Seeing them makes them seem both larger and smaller than what I imagined. It also makes my heart clench in a way I hadn’t expected.

I want to bundle him up in blankets and make sure he never gets hurt again.

“Do I meet your approval?”

The question draws my eyes back to his own. His voice was light, but there’s a tension to him, more felt than seen, that reveals he’s well aware of the direction my thoughts have taken. And it makes him uncomfortable. His allergies to mushy feelings acting up.

I give him a playful smile, showing I have no intention of dwelling on the danger of his job. Right now, I just want to savor the miracle that is him being here with me.

“Very much so. Now continue.”
“So bossy,” he mocks in a way that means I’ve succeeded in easing his discomfort, his tension fading away.

“So contrary,” I mock back, our familiar banter making me swell with joy. I’ve missed him so much.

“You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

“It is when it’s preventing you from getting naked.”

“Has anyone ever told you your mind has a one way track?”

“Has anyone ever told you you’re a bastard?”

“Yes,” he says with a sudden sincerity that catches me off guard. “Someone has.”

My heart skips a beat. He might as well have said he loves me out loud. I’m officially a puddle of goo.

To no surprise, my reaction makes his discomfort return. He might love me, but I don’t think he’ll ever be comfortable with admitting it. Which only makes his confession even more touching.

He changes the subject by toeing off his sandals with ridiculous grace and bending forward to take off the bandages wrapped around his lower legs. I’m definitely not complaining. The play of muscles I’m treated to is a delicious show.

He straightens back up, his discomfort gone. Instead he’s wearing that mischievous and breathtaking smile. He places his hands on the fastenings of his pants. Then he halts his movements because of course he does. I couldn’t stop myself from smiling even if I wanted to.

“You’re such a bastard.” Not to mention the biggest tease I know.

“You’re getting rather repetitive with your insults.”

“Why mess with what works?”

“So you’re going to call me that forever?”

Just like that, our banter stops being light hearted. He doesn’t wince or grimace, doesn’t even lose his smile, but there’s a tension to him that reveals he hadn’t meant to say that. At all.

Swallowing my too dry throat, I gather my courage.

“I suppose I am. Can’t imagine you ever not pushing my buttons,” I quip with a tentative smile, trying to smother my irrational fear. He isn’t going to leave.

God, please don’t let him leave.

“To be fair, you do make it ridiculously easy for me.”

I relax, my fear soothed by the real smile he gives. He isn’t going to leave.

He’s going to stay with me forever. The knowledge inspires an almost painful amount of joy.

“Just keep in mind that I will retaliate if you go too far,” I tease with a grin so wide it makes my cheeks ache. The notion of coming up with ways to get back at him for the rest of our lives is wonderful. “Like if you don’t get back to undressing. Now.”
“So impatient,” he teases back, his own joy stealing my breath yet again. Am I ever going to get used to how gorgeous he is? I hope not.

He finally resumes his movements, clever fingers nimbly undoing the fastenings. Then he drops his pants and my brain stops working. The sight of him, completely bare and his desire for me on full display, is the most heady rush possible.

He prowls forward and I swear I could come just from watching him move like this. An absent part of me tucks that interesting notion away for later.

He reaches the bed and takes hold of one of my feet, his eyes pinning me in place. He pulls off my sock, the movement both agonizingly slow and impossibly sensual. The gentle kiss he gives my bare foot is even more so. I shiver, more turned on than I’ve ever been. Surprisingly enough, I’m not feeling impatient. Which is good, because he gives my other foot the same slow and sensual treatment. My blood is rushing through my veins in the most delicious of ways.

He gets on the bed and prowls forward on his hands and knees, holding himself above me. I lay my arms around him when he gets into reach. The smile he gives me is as intoxicating as it is mischievous. I swear I could get drunk just from watching him.

He undresses me with agonizing slowness, bending down so he can caress the uncovered skin with his hands and lips at the same time, but I feel no need to hurry him along. Instead I savor the feel of him, touching me in all the ways I adore as he takes off my clothes. We’ve done so much more than this, yet somehow this feels more intense than anything we’ve ever done. He watches me the entire time, looking like he could touch me like this forever and want for nothing else. It’s the biggest rush possible.

By the time I’m as bare as him, I feel like a live wire, needing only the barest nudge to be send over the edge.

Naturally, that’s when he stops touching me. I grin up at him, laying my arms around him again as he holds himself over me, happier than I thought possible.

“If you stop now, I will hurt you.”

He’s gives me that breathtaking smile, his eyes crinkling adorably. The ruby of his Sharingan is even more mesmerizing up close.

“Reacting with violence whenever you don’t get your way isn’t healthy, you know.”

I hum in reply and weave a hand through his hair, gently pushing his head down. He comes willingly, our lips meeting and electrifying me even further. Our tongues twine softly, the warmth of his skin a delicious tease. He’s holding himself right above me, so close I only need to move the barest inch to feel him. I only realize I’ve arched my back to do just that when it causes me slight discomfort. To no surprise, he’s moved with me so his skin keeps hovering right over mine. I nip at his bottom lip and relish the smile I can feel against my lips.

“You’re going to have to touch me if this is going to go any further,” I say while caressing his cheek with my nose.

“I am touching you,” he teases back, his lips caressing my jaw. He trails the tip of his nose over the shell of my ear, takes the lobe between his lips and sucks gently. The sensation shoots through me with dizzying strength. I moan.

“Not what I meant,” I hear myself say in a husky voice, absently realizing that my grip on his hair
has tightened and that my fingers are digging into his back. He chuckles, the sound warming me even further. Then he grabs my hips and rolls us over in one smooth movement. Having so much of our skin touch without warning steals my breath.

“Is this more to your liking?”

His voice is low in the most delicious of ways. Hearing it also makes me realize that I’ve closed my eyes. When I open them, my heart skips a beat at the way he’s looking at me. I bring up a hand and cup his cheek, my thumb stroking over the scar crossing his Sharingan.

“Much better,” I say in another husky voice. It makes him twitch against my thigh, the feeling sending a shiver running through me. The drops of obsidian spin faster, and the gray of his other eye is nearly black with desire. He turns his head and playfully nips at my thumb, his eyes never leaving mine. One of his hands on my waist slides inwards, touching me just there. I moan, my eyes closing at the perfect sensation.

An almost too harsh spark, my eyes flying open and my hips trying to snap forward, held in place by his hand on my waist.

“Don’t look away.” The unspoken part might as well been said out loud.

Don’t look away from me.

My heart clenches.

“I won’t,” I promise, leaning our foreheads together and aching with the need to reassure him.

I succeed. He resumes his movements, caressing me in all the ways I adore. My breathing grows heavy, my hips rolling in time with his rhythm. Letting him guide me.

Letting him love me.

His movements speed up, pressure building, needing so little to be pushed over, captivated by his eyes, so close, yes, almost there...

Eyes closing without my consent, unable to keep them open.

Stars dance.

Slumping forward, boneless and sated. His body holding me upright. Savoring the feeling of his skin.

His hand gently taking hold of my chin, my release coating his fingers. He tilts back my head. I open my eyes. He’s looking at me like I’m the most precious thing he’s ever beheld.

Lips meeting softly, my arms twining around his neck, hands gliding over his back. Tracing achingly familiar scars as his tongue dances with mine.

His hand on my waist slides to my back and guides my hips up. I slide down slowly, the feeling of him making my breath catch. A shiver runs through him, his eyes closing briefly.

He’s beautiful.

Rolling my hips, his heavy breaths all I can hear. Skin sliding together, feeling his heart race against my own. His eyes never leaving mine.
Pressure rising, feeling him tense, tightening in return, both of us so near. His hand weaving through my hair, his other pushing me even closer. My own digging into his back, gasping, moaning, so close, wanting to feel him go first...

His eyes close. Feeling him shiver, spilling inside and pushing me over, my eyes closing with sweet bliss.

Heavy breaths ghosting over my lips, sharing my own in return. His nose nuzzling me, a smile growing in response. Opening my eyes and meeting the gray and ruby of his own.

“Apparently I was wrong,” I murmur while nuzzling him back.

“About what?” he returns with an audible smile, his eyes crinkling in that adorable way and his hand lazily stroking my back. My smile grows.

“You can do it right without being made to scream.”

His laughter makes my heart skip a beat. Then he rolls us over and the way he smiles at me actually makes me ready for another round, that’s how stunning he looks.

“I think we need to test that theory a few more times. Just to make certain it wasn’t a fluke.”

I laugh, overflowing with joy.

Being in love is wonderful.
Epilogue

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Five People Who Should Have Realized

“I’m not saying it’s bad, I’m just saying it isn’t great either.”

“How can you say that? It’s amazing.”

“It’s a cliché from start to finish.”

“What’s your solution then?”

“Have her suffer a lot more and die. Or him. That would work too.”

Yuugao sighs. Why does she even try?

Her reaction makes Mio grin, having way too much fun at her expense.

“It’s a romance, not a tragedy,” Yuugao says with resignation, already knowing what Mio’s response will be.

“And that’s why it isn’t great.”

Yuugao rolls her eyes with a smile. She really should’ve known better than to recommend this story to Mio. But while she’d expected Mio to start it, she hadn’t expected her to actually finish it. She only does that with stories she likes. Or she normally does at least.

“Why did you even finish it if you didn’t like it?”

“The sex was hot. Now that part I have no complaints about.”

Yuugao feels herself flush a little. Partly because she’s never going to get used to how bluntly Mio speaks about this, and partly because yes, those scenes were very hot.

“Do you think it’s based on personal experience?” Mio asks with no regard to the attention her bluntness has drawn. Most of it brief, but a few people are now listening in. While Yuugao wouldn’t feel comfortable talking about her own experiences like this, she has no trouble answering this particular question.

“Definitely.” The way Mariko-san walked alone made that more than clear.

Mio leers, making Yuugao flush a little more.

“I dropped by her place of work, you perv.” Honestly, Mio pretending that she observed Mariko-san at her home is ridiculous. Lord Third made very clear that area is off limits.

“She had sex while she was supposed to be working? Kinky.”

Yuugao rolls her eyes with a smile. Then she turns her head to the side with surprise, verifying that the glimpse she caught from the edge of her vision is correct. Mio follows her line of sight.
Kakashi-senpai is sauntering down the street, reading an Icha Icha as always. Actually reading, not pretending to. Yuugao will never be able to understand how he can do that in public.

She briefly debates on whether to accept his invitation or not. On one hand, she’s on stand-by. On the other, it’s been awhile since she last sparred with him.

She decides why not. She’ll just have to tell Senpai he needs to hold back more than usual. She can’t afford a day to recover when on call.

Dropping her payment down the counter, she gets up and ignores Mio’s long suffering sigh. Like Mio isn’t interested in saying hi to Kakashi-senpai herself. She wouldn’t be following Yuugao if she wasn’t. The invitation was clearly aimed at her alone.

She falls in step with Kakashi-senpai, Mio at her side. It draws a little more attention than Senpai always does, but not much. She and Mio are high ranked enough that them talking to Kakashi-senpai isn’t too out of the ordinary. Worth a brief moment of heightened attention but nothing more. Heightened attention from the shinobi at least. The civilians aren’t paying them more heed than they would to any other random Leaf nin.

Of course, not that many ninja are consciously aware of Kakashi-senpai’s presence. Or rather, not as many as should be aware of him. Senpai is amazing at projecting an air of harmlessness.

“Hi, Kakashi-san.” She might not be able to call him Senpai in public, but not giving him some sort of deference would just feel wrong.

Kakashi-senpai lifts his gaze from his novel with mild confusion, acting like he wasn’t the one to initiate their meeting. Even knowing that isn’t the case, his pretense of ignorance seems so genuine that part of her can’t help but believe it’s real. People who don’t know Kakashi-senpai, meaning everyone who’s paying attention to them, have doubtlessly concluded that Yuugao made the first move to approach him. Senpai is very talented.

“Yuugao. Mio,” he greets like he has no idea why they approached him.

“Kakashi,” Mio says in the same way she used to say Captain when not on a mission. A little respectful and a whole lot wary. “You’re in a good mood.”

He is?

Yuugao examines his body language more closely. Senpai seems relaxed as ever, no sign he’s either in a good or a bad mood. She’s inclined to trust Mio’s assessment though. Mio served with him longer than she did.

“So suspicious,” Kakashi-senpai says with mock hurt, seemingly entertained by Mio’s behavior. Mostly eliminating the possibility of him being in a bad mood. “What did I do to deserve this?”

Mio gives him a look that tells him he knows exactly what he did. Which, fair. Senpai is very playful when he isn’t on duty. Or he is again at least. When he was first released from ANBU... Yuugao wants to grimace just from thinking about it.

But then, the aftermath of the Uchiha Massacre hadn’t been easy on anyone. Even without adding in how personally affected Senpai was. How affected their whole team was.

Mio does grimace, though it isn’t because she’s thinking along the same lines as Yuugao. That’s the grimace she wears when she knows she’s going to be caught off guard no matter what she does.
Kakashi-senpai is watching Mio with open amusement. He’s definitely going to appear out of nowhere a few times when she least expects it, giving Mio the fright of her life. Then he glances at her and Yuugao realizes that he’s going to do the same to her. Oh well. It’s not like she hadn’t been prepared for that to happen. Approaching Kakashi-senpai, even when he’s the one to initiate the meeting, always holds at least sixty percent chance of him deciding to mess with you.

Yuugao gives him a cheerful smile, daring him to do his worst. Senpai’s eye closes in an answering smile, taking her up on her challenge.

Mio lets out a long suffering sigh, acting like Yuugao is crazy for enjoying Senpai’s favorite game. Really, she should take advantage of his playfulness instead of trying to avoid it. He always gives a hint right before he’s about to scare you, and the hint is always related to a skill you need to work on. It’s great training. And great fun.

“So, Kakashi-san,” Yuugao says, getting back to his invitation. She’s going to accept without stumbling over her words. “Would you maybe, that is, if you want to...”

Yuugao closes her eyes with frustration and inescapable mortification. Why does she always turn into a babbling mess when asking him? Yes, she admires Kakashi-senpai even more than she did before serving under his command, but she really should’ve gotten used to asking him by now.

“She wants to spar,” Mio saves her, even if she does do it in the most mocking way possible. Still better than Kakashi-senpai entertaining himself by feigning ignorance until she manages to spit it out. “A friendly one,” Mio finishes with a warning look at Senpai, letting him know she’s on call without making it obvious to anyone watching.

“I’m always friendly,” Kakashi-senpai says, both following Mio’s lead and enjoying the reaction he inspires without even trying.

Mio lets out a derisive snort that says exactly what she thinks of that. Yuugao rolls her eyes at her. It’s ridiculous how she and the others always act like Senpai can’t be nice without having ulterior motives.

“No need to feel left out, Mio. You’re always welcome to join us.”

Yuugao smiles, relieved. Sure, Kakashi-senpai was the one who extended the invitation, but just like she can’t help but become a babbling mess whenever asking him to spar, she can’t help but worry he’s going to turn her down every time she does manage to spit it out. Or have it spit out for her in this case.

“But for all the money in the world,” Mio lies. True, she doesn’t train with Senpai as often as Yuugao does, but their entire team makes a point of seeking him out on a fairly regular basis. Aside from Kenshin, but Kenshin joined after Senpai left. And aside from Tenzo, but Tenzo and Kakashi-senpai... have been on outs ever since Senpai was released from ANBU. The rest of them are still keeping in touch though. He might not be their captain anymore, but that doesn’t mean they’re just going to abandon him. Or stop taking advantage of his teachings.

Yet aside from Yuugao, none of the others ever asks for a one-on-one spar. And when Kakashi-senpai extends an invitation himself, one-on-one or otherwise, they always act like he’s going to torture them. Cowards.

Mio elbows her in the ribs, hard, not amused by the thoughts Yuugao isn’t bothering to hide. Yuugao makes a point of dispersing the impact with her chakra in the way Kakashi-senpai taught her, pleased when her stride doesn’t require even the slightest adjustment to account for Mio’s strike.
She can’t do it this well in battle by far, but she’s definitely improved.

“You’ve been practicing,” Kakashi-senpai says with open approval. Yuugao feels herself flush with pride. It’s rare for him to give verbal praise and it never fails to make her feel so accomplished. Deservedly so. Who wouldn’t feel good after being complimented by The Copy Nin?

The compliment also reveals that Mio was right. He’s in a good mood. A great one even.

“You really are disgustingly happy,” Mio says with equal surprise and suspicion. Really, she’s acting like Senpai being in a good mood is a crime. “Finally got laid?”

Yuugao rolls her eyes. Mio’s obsession with sex is ridiculous.

Senpai ignores the question and looks at her in a way that makes clear he’s about to say something, but Mio sucks in a sharp breath before he can, her reaction genuine and full of shocked realization. It attracts instinctive attention from the nearest shinobi.

“You did.” Mio’s voice is soft and disbelieving. Kakashi-senpai gives Mio a vaguely amused look, entertained by her coming to that conclusion for no reason. He gave no sign of either confirming or denying it after all. Still isn’t. Him being entertained by Mio’s claim is a normal reaction.

Mio’s shock grows, for some reason even more convinced that her assessment is correct.

“Holy shit, you actually got laid!”

This time Mio is loud enough to attract not just the attention from a significant number of shinobi but from nearby civilians as well. Mio doesn’t care about that one bit, still staring at Kakashi-senpai like she can’t believe what she’s seeing.

“Not everyone shares your hobbies, Mio,” Kakashi-senpai says with mock innocence. Once again, his reaction is normal and gives no sign of confirmation or denial. He’s in high spirits, true, but that could easily be because of something else. Like a high risk mission. Or maybe he and Tenzo have finally made up? Yuugao hopes so. Tenzo is really hurt by his behavior.

Yet Mio seems so sure of herself that Yuugao can’t help but wonder. Is she right?

“You got laid,” Mio continues like Kakashi-senpai didn’t say anything. “You. How does that even work?”

Yuugao looks over Senpai’s mask. She really wonders herself to be honest. Judging from the number of people now deliberately keeping Kakashi-senpai within auditory range, she isn’t the only one who wonders by far. Even a few civilians are listening in. Though that’s caused by the topic, not the topic in relation to Kakashi-senpai.

“And with who? Who’s crazy enough to do you?”

Now that’s uncalled for. Sure, Senpai is terrifying when on certain kinds of missions, but he’s nice the rest of the time. Weird, but nice.

Kakashi-senpai looks mildly insulted. Another normal response to Mio’s rude behavior, yet Mio is so certain...

“Really, I’m starting to think you want to join our spar after all.”

Still nothing out of the ordinary. Does that mean Mio is wrong? Or is she right and Senpai simply
thinks she’s making a big deal out of nothing? Has this happened before? Often? Or hasn’t it and is he only pretending it isn’t a big deal? All would fit. Though the idea of Kakashi-senpai being intimate with someone is... odd.

Yuugao really wonders what he does with his mask. It’s not like he can keep it on, yet the notion of Kakashi-senpai taking his mask off is one she just can’t process.

Mio shakes her head with open incredulity, no reaction whatsoever to Senpai’s warning. It’s funny to see her this flabbergasted.

“This is insane.”

Yuugao grins, the opportunity for a quote too good to resist.

“What is insanity but a difference in opinion?”

Yuugao stills as what should’ve been a meaningless quip turns into a thought too ridiculous to entertain except her reaction has made Mio halt as well and she’s looking at Yuugao with utter disbelief but it’s not the disbelief of thinking Yuugao isn’t right, it’s the disbelief of being unable to comprehend a notion so absurd it can’t be true except for some reason both of them think it is – Kakashi-senpai leaves her vision and she whips her head towards him, Mio doing the same. She’s just in time to see him turn a corner while reading his novel without a care in the world and she races after him while sending out her chakra, searching for his signature and Mio is right besides her, inhaling deeply for his scent –

Senpai is gone.

“No.”

Mio’s voice is a mere breath, as stunned as she is because no way.

Except Kakashi-senpai just panicked. Except so many things are falling into place. The way his mood lifted so suddenly, how he didn’t immediately started taking every high risk mission possible after he was pulled off protection duty. The way he’s regularly seen leaving the Tower just as the academy lets out.

“No way,” Yuugao hears herself breathe out because even with the pieces falling into place just no way.

“Oh this is just perfect.”

Mio’s shock has made way for glee. Part of Yuugao is aware of all the attention they’ve drawn but she’s not registering any danger and so she can’t pull herself out of her shock.

“Impossible,” she denies even as the pieces keep coming together.

“So completely possible,” Mio says with even more glee but Yuugao is still struggling with the realizations assaulting her, so many things suddenly making sense. The biggest of which is how much time Kakashi-senpai is spending in the village. He still takes missions out of the village of course, but most of the time he’s working on an administrative project or gone on a mission that doesn’t take him out of the village for more than a few days. He’s incredibly annoyed by that – has been pretending to be annoyed, how had she not realized? If Kakashi-senpai really wanted to be out of the village more, he would be. Oh, she doesn’t doubt that what he’s doing now is important, but there are other ways he can be just as useful. Ways that don’t involve him being in the village.
Kakashi-senpai wants to stay in the village. Kakashi-senpai, who started going stir-crazy whenever he had to pull internal duty for longer than a week, wants to stay in the village.

“Holy shit.”

It makes sense, it makes so much sense. Even the who makes sense. Senpai was part of the Last Uchiha’s protection detail. Of course he got attached.

But to get attached like this?

“Holy shit,” Mio agrees like it’s her birthday, the Spring Festival and the New Years Festival all at once. It’s enough to pull Yuugao out of her shock and she wastes no time in taking to the roofs. Mio is right besides her, in full mission mode as well. Yuugao grabs hold of her and flickers away. She isn’t leading them to their target though. Not yet. They need to plan first. This demands an in depth investigation, this demands a full blown interrogation.

Because Kakashi-senpai has a girlfriend. And looking back, Yuugao can’t understand how she missed this.

It’s so obvious.

---

You’re in a bad mood.

Why do you say that?

Because you’re pretending you aren’t freaking out.

Really?

You have until the brats are put to bed to stop ignoring me.

Time’s up.

Stop acting like a child. People knowing isn’t the end of the world.

I didn’t say anything. My friends won’t either. Can’t vouch for what they’ll get out of our silence, but our lips are sealed.

Final warning.

You asked for it.


"..."

Another moan.

"Kakashi."

A long kiss.

A chuckle.
"Thought that might draw you out."

“You do know me pretty well.”

A smile. A sweet kiss.

"Indeed I do."

A smile turning wicked.

“Now take off your clothes.”

"That was cheating."

"You’re so proud."

"Among other things."

A satisfied hum. Comfortable silence.

“Still going to get even though. When you least expect it." 

"I look forward to seeing what you come up with."

A chuckle.

"...

A sigh.

"Look at it this way. People will know. And it will drive them up the wall."

"...

"I mean, I'm not planning on acting any different. Are you?"

A slow smile.

"Exactly."

A chuckle.

"This is going to be fun."

Cat finishes restocking. He takes off his mask.

Tenzo allows himself to slump a little. This was... tiring. But it’s over. He’s given his report and he’s replaced the supplies lost. He’s also gotten a week off as a reward for a job well done. Tenzo is planning to take full advantage of that. His bed is calling him. His team will have to wait until later. Lion, Salamander and Toad might be waiting for him outside, but Tenzo really isn’t in the mood to chat right now.
Wanting to waste as little time possible before reaching the heaven that is his bed, Tenzo puts his mask back on without becoming Cat and leaves the supply depot – he stills. Lion, Salamander and Toad all turned to face him. That wouldn’t be unusual on its own, except they did it at the exact same time. Like they only do on a mission.

Like they only do when making a statement to a target.

Lion, Salamander and Toad move towards him like nothing is wrong. Like they aren’t positioning themselves to block off his escape routes. Tenzo unobtrusively shifts his balance to a more battle ready stance.

“Cat, my friend.”

Tenzo almost doesn’t catch the reflex to jam a root through Bear-taichou’s throat when he drops out of stealth besides to him, the twitch of his hands letting everyone know just how close he came to losing control. Part of him makes a mental note to work on his sensing. Again. He hates that Bear-taichou keeps managing to sneak up on him.

Most of him is panicking.

“Captain,” he greets in a voice that – reminds him too much of when he was still – doesn’t reveal anything at all. No fear or worry, nope, not at all. He hasn’t done anything wrong after all. The urge to flee is irrational. Tenzo knows that.

Doesn’t stop him from being ready to do just that.

“Is something the matter?” he continues in that – too familiar – same voice. Part of him is uncomfortable with how he sounds like Cat instead of Tenzo.

Most of him is frantically going over every single thing he’s done the past months, looking for anything he did wrong, anything that would explain why he’s being treated as a threat.

“No, of course not,” Bear-taichou says like this is just a normal chat. “Why would something be the matter?”

Because his team is acting like he’s their next target. His entire team. Jackal and Tiger are approaching from the sides, making him tense up even further. They take up position with the others and drop out of stealth, their body language casual, friendly, and ready for battle.

The part of him that – he doesn’t want to be anymore – is Cat is assessing his team’s weaknesses and calculating the most efficient way to take them out.

Tenzo still can’t come up with anything to explain this. What did he do wrong? What do they think he did wrong? Why are they treating him like an enemy, why has Lord Hokage – no. No, this isn’t official. He isn’t being taken in. They wouldn’t be doing this here if that was the case. They wouldn’t be this open with their intentions.

They wouldn’t do this to him, period. Others, yes, but not to one of their own. Never to one of their own. Not even if they’re ordered to. Senpai taught them that.

They want something from him, something they think he won’t give up without a fight, but this is friendly, not hostile. It is. He knows it is.

Doesn’t stop it from feeling – too much like when he was still – hostile.
Tenzo gathers his courage.

“Can I help you with anything?”

“Now that you mention it, there is something. Nothing important, just something we’re a bit curious about.”

Tenzo barely manages to resist the urge to become Cat.

“You wouldn’t happen to know anything about Kakashi’s girl, hmm?”

Oh thank the First himself. Tenzo lets out a deep sigh and briefly closes his eyes, can’t help it.

This is about Senpai. Not Tenzo and anything he may or may not have done. No accusations, allegations or suspicions. Senpai, not Tenzo.

“You do know.”

Bear-taichou’s predatory statement drags him down his high. He tenses back up as his team openly takes on battle stances, dropping all pretense that they aren’t on a hunt. Part of him is aware that he’s taken on an openly defensive stance in response.

“I, ah.” Tenzo falls silent, no idea what to say. The relief that he hasn’t done anything wrong is still overwhelming, but so is his returning panic. A different panic than before but one almost just as strong.

“It’s okay, Cat, you can tell us. Now.”

They want to know about Senpai. Worse, they want to know about Senpai’s girlfriend. Which means he has the choice between angering his team by keeping what he knows from them, or angering Senpai – further – by revealing it.

When put like that, the choice is easy.

Bear-taichou tries to immobilize him the moment he comes to a decision but Tenzo dodges his hold and flickers through the weak spot between Lion and Salamander, avoiding their attempts to intercept him and gaining enough room to manoeuvre before they’re on him. He creates two wood clones, one fully formed and one delayed, the surge of chakra send through the feet of his first clone to mask the move from Salamander’s chakra sense, before he has to focus on dodging Salamander’s kunai strike and Toad’s follow up grapple hold. He desperately hopes the second clone is growing subtly enough that Salamander and Lion won’t notice.

Drawing his blade just in time to meet Tiger’s, he moves with the force generated by her chakra wave instead of trying to negate it. The wave still brings him within Lion’s range as it was meant to, but moving with it allows him to avoid Lion’s attempt to put him in a choke hold.

His new position leaves him, as Lion intended, in a position where Bear-taichou can trap him in place with a hail of shuriken with wires attached. The shuriken are caught by Tiger, Jackal and Salamander, preventing them from damaging the walls.

They aren’t using their full strength by far. Why should they? It’s six on one, and Tenzo is incredibly limited by the need to avoid collateral damage. So are they, but again, it’s six on one.

His clone was being kept busy by Toad, barely managing to avoid the lethal attacks she’s using on it, but when Lion started herding him in position, it went about creating enough space so that Tenzo can
perform a replacement and have room to maneuver before Toad can strike. His clone’s movements reveal to his team what he intends to do.

It doesn’t reveal all he intends to do.

Tenzo performs a replacement just as the wires around him are pulled tight and chains it with another one, taking the place of the now full grown clone hidden in the earth and activating every stealth technique he knows.

Please don’t let them notice what he’s done.

Judging from the way they obliterate his first clone and focus on the second with non-lethal force, they haven’t. Tenzo doesn’t allow his relief to affect his performance, keeps ensuring no vibrations escape for Lion to pick up on, as well blending his signature with the earth to avoid Salamander’s notice. He’s taking a significant risk with this. If they notice what he’s done before his clone can create some distance, he won’t be able to get out of the earth in time to avoid capture.

To his eternal relief, his clone manages to create more distance by the skin of its teeth. Tenzo ensures he’s out of Salamander’s and Lion’s range before he creates another delayed clone. A thread of chakra slithers through the earth and coils below the floor.

He gets more time than expected before they figure it out. He hadn’t thought he’d be able to get his clone in optimal position, but he’s just finished doing exactly that when they catch on to his ruse.

The sheer amount of time he gains is caused by his team not giving it their all. They feel no rush to capture him, certain they’ll catch him no matter what he tries. Senpai would’ve had their hides.

Bear-tai on is the one to figure it out, as revealed by the sudden obliteration of his clone. Chakra flares as various tracking techniques are activated but Tenzo is already sending his clone up the floor and replacing himself with it before running through the hallway as fast he can. His team chases after him without bothering to hide from his chakra sense, their aggravation clear to sense. They’re giving it their all now, despite knowing that it’s already too late. He’s got enough of a headstart that they won’t be able to catch up before he’s out of HQ, and once he’s surrounded by nature, none of them will be able to track him.

Or rather, they won’t as long as he doesn’t slip even once. Tenzo might be skilled at evading notice, but they’re a hit squad. Hunting down targets is what they do.

Tenzo almost wants to cry. His plans of uninterrupted sleep are officially over. Instead he’s going to have to spend every moment off duty like he’s in the heart of enemy territory.

...Unless Senpai would be willing to let him stay at his place? Well, his girlfriend’s place, but Senpai has basically been living with her since – Itachi – the Uchiha Incident. Even without Lord Hokage’s decree, no one would dare to come after him there. Tenzo isn’t planning on breaking that decree of course, has no intention whatsoever of observing the Last Uchiha, the Kyuubi Jinchuuriki or their guardian. He just wants to take advantage of the perimeter Senpai has set up.

Except Senpai is still – furious – mad at him for reporting him. That – hurts – means the odds of Senpai letting him stay are depressingly low.

On the other hand, if Senpai lets him stay, the others won’t be able to interrogate him about his girlfriend. That’s probably enough make Senpai agree. Probably.

Tenzo really hopes Senpai will agree. He also wonders how the others figured it out. It isn’t obvious. Oh, in hindsight it absolutely, positively, unimaginably is. But Senpai is, or rather was, doing an
unbelievably efficient job at ensuring it didn’t even occur to people that there might be something to suspect. If Shisui – he ignores the ache that still inspires – hadn’t told, Tenzo never would’ve figured it out himself. Even though he really should have.

Looking back, it really is incredibly obvious.

The fact that you’re famous makes this so much better than I thought possible.

What makes you think I’m famous?

Strange ninja at the Dancing Dragon are "subtly" asking about “my boyfriend”. Almost every day.

Tea is the new sake.

It’s funny, looking back I really should have seen this.

Really.

Really, really.

Impress me.

You’re insane. You’re a former stray cat. You managed to keep this hidden for years. I rest my case.

“All right, I’m impressed. That last is a valid argument.”

“Must be really impressed if you’re taking over.”

“That’s not why I’m doing this. You need to go check on them, they’re getting too rowdy. A little more time and things are going to start breaking.”

"You know, you're going to have to face them sometime. Just your bi-monthly reminder."

"..."


"Don’t forget to make enough for your friend."

A teasing grin.

“And don’t hurt yourself.”

A long suffering sigh belied by a smile.

“Five.”

A chuckle. Another kiss.

“Have fun cooking.”
“Bye, Sensei!”

Iruka waves at Haruhi before looking back at the rest of his students. Most of them are already leaving, but a few – Mariko isn’t here. That’s more than just unusual. While she made a point of picking up Naruto on time even before taking in Sasuke, it’s become even more important to her since Sasuke came to live with her. And it’s even more important to Sasuke than it is to her.

Her absence is starting to make Sasuke panic. Iruka moves towards him before it can break free.

“She’s fine,” Naruto tries and fails to convince both himself and Sasuke. He would’ve been all right with Mariko’s absence if it was just him, but Sasuke’s fear is infecting him. Which in turn is worsening Sasuke’s own panic. “She’s just late.”

Sasuke’s panic grows worse. Iruka looks at the streets without halting his walk, searching for any sign of Mariko. He half expects to see her come running, but no. It’s up to him to calm down Sasuke.

This task would be easier if Ino and Sakura didn’t have kunoichi class. They’re good at keeping Naruto and Sasuke grounded. In some ways at least. In others they do nothing but goad them on.

“She’s fine,” Naruto repeats, Sasuke’s reaction making him even more anxious. Iruka resists the urge to move faster, keeping his movements calm and casual instead. If he acts like something is wrong, he’ll only worsen the situation.

Naruto glares at Sasuke, his growing fear expressing itself as anger.

“She’s fine!”

“What’s going on here?” he asks in his classroom voice, drawing their attention. As expected, his presence doesn’t calm down Sasuke in any way, but Naruto turns relieved. Good. If Naruto panics, Sasuke is going to have a full blown meltdown.

“Iruka-sensei! Nee-chan’s late!”

Iruka gives them both a reassuring smile. Once again, it doesn’t affect Sasuke in the slightest, but Naruto calms down further. Which in turn comforts Sasuke a little. The threat of his panic breaking free remains, though.

“I see. She probably lost track of time. Didn’t that happen a few months ago as well?”

It hasn’t happened in over a year. But the reminder that this has, in fact, happened before, makes Sasuke calm down a fraction more.

Iruka really hopes Mariko did just lose track of time. If something happened to her, no matter how minor, well. The results won’t be pretty. And if the worst has happened... but no, he won’t think of that. The odds of that happening are incredibly low.

“See, she’s fine!” Naruto exclaims with his usual confidence, relieved to be proven right. While it doesn’t calm Sasuke further down, it does prevent him from getting worse. “Iruka-sensei says so!”

“Of course she’s fine,” he agrees with all the certainty he can fake. Which is a lot. “Mari is on her way right now.”

She better be. He’ll give it ten more minutes, but if she isn’t here by then, he’s going to signal
someone to go look for her. Iruka can only stave off Sasuke’s breakdown for so long.

“Excuse me, but are you by any chance talking about Takahashi Mariko?”

Iruka looks with surprise at the shinobi who’d been walking to the Academy with clear purpose right until he heard Mari’s name. He’s not someone Iruka knows, not even by sight.

“We are,” he says, examining the man more closely. He’s unremarkable in every way. Too unremarkable now that Iruka is paying him more attention. Combined with him approaching Naruto and Sasuke on the one day Mariko just happens to be late...

Why is an ANBU interested in Naruto and Sasuke?

“Do you know her?” he asks, polite and respectful as an ANBU demands, and definitely not wary of what the ANBU wants with his students.

“Only by reputation,” the ANBU says like Mariko hadn’t dominated the rumor mill after she adopted Naruto. And again after she took in Sasuke. “She’s a good writer.”

Naruto beams, effortlessly won over now that Mariko has been complimented. Sasuke has a more sensible reaction, watching the ANBU with suspicion.

“Nee-chan’s stories are the best!”

The ANBU looks at Naruto with faint amusement.

“You’ve read them?” he asks, acting like this is nothing but idle chit chat. Like Naruto and Sasuke weren’t his intended target right from the start.

The question is, what does he want with them? Nothing bad of course, and nothing official for that matter either. He wouldn’t have been this open with his identity if this was done under orders. But that still leaves a lot of possibilities.

“Yeah!” Naruto enthuses, as always more than willing to talk. “The Human Gorilla is my favorite!”

“A good choice,” the ANBU says like he’s humoring Naruto. Did he actually read all of Mariko’s novels? Normally Iruka would say no, but the fact that an ANBU is interrogating a pair of eight year olds of his own free will reveals just how badly he wants to know something. “What about you? What’s your favorite?” the ANBU aims at Sasuke with a friendly smile.

Sasuke scowls and crosses his arms, refusing to answer. His suspicion is stronger than usual because of his anxious state, but he would’ve been on guard either way. There’s a reason he’s at the top of his class.

“He likes other stories,” Naruto explains to the ANBU, showing a tact only Sasuke can inspire. Iruka knows Sasuke used to like Mariko’s stories, but ever since he lost his family, he’s grown to... not hate them, but he’s stopped reading them.

He doesn’t want to be reminded of his brother.

“I see,” the ANBU says with a note in his voice that reveals he’s aware he just misstepped. He offers Sasuke another friendly smile but keeps most of his attention on Naruto, who’s clearly the easier target of the two. Not that this is saying much. Sasuke might be at the top of his class, but he’s still a child. Getting information out of him isn’t hard to do. “I’m partial to A Hidden Kiss myself.”
Iruka doesn’t bother to hide his surprise at the reveal of why the ANBU is here. While he hasn’t read Mariko’s stories himself, he knows people who have, and he’s definitely heard about her latest. He also knows a number of shinobi are asking around about her boyfriend. Shinobi no one he’s talked to knows personally, but he’d just assumed that was because they ran in different circles.

He’s right. They run in completely different circles.

But why on earth are ANBU interested in Mariko’s boyfriend?

Naruto scrunches up his nose, baffled by the ANBU’s statement.

“Why do you like that one? It’s stupid.”

Wait, what? Did Mariko actually read that story to him?

“You read it?” the ANBU says with the same incredulity Iruka is feeling and Iruka is convinced it isn’t faked.

Naruto lowers his eyes and shuffles his feet, radiating guilt. Revealing that he has indeed read it, but without Mariko’s permission. That makes a lot more sense than her reading it to him.

Sasuke relaxes a bit more, courtesy of the faint amusement he feels at Naruto’s behavior. He keeps being suspicious of the ANBU, though. Iruka is proud.

Naruto rallies himself. He crosses his arms defensively and looks up at the ANBU with a scowl.

“I didn’t read it!” he lies. “I just know it’s stupid!”

“I found it fascinating actually,” the ANBU returns, getting to the reason he’s gone through all this trouble. They? They. Ignoring the fact that Mariko’s tardiness implies that at least one other is most likely involved, multiple people – multiple ANBU have been asking after her boyfriend. “Do you think it was inspired by her boyfriend?”

Wow, the ANBU must really want to know if he’s being this blunt. Though given that he’s interrogating eight year olds, well. Subtlety would be a wasted effort.

Naruto and Sasuke look at him with confusion.

“Nee-chan doesn’t have a boyfriend,” Naruto says, convinced he’s in the right. It really is impressive that Mariko and her boyfriend have managed to keep their relationship hidden for so long. Even ignoring their break up, that still leaves two years of them keeping it from Naruto. Admittedly, Naruto isn’t the most observant child. Sasuke, on the other hand, is observant, and they’ve managed to keep it hidden from him as well. One of many signs that the guy she’s dating is a skilled shinobi.

He’s a lot more skilled than Iruka thought he was if he’s managing to keep information from ANBU as well. He’d assumed Mariko was dating a chunin, but this reveals she’s dating a jounin. One involved with ANBU in some way. He isn’t in it, the ANBU wouldn’t have made himself this recognizable if he was, but he’s still involved somehow.

For the first time, Iruka feels a genuine desire to investigate who Mariko’s boyfriend is for himself.

“She doesn’t?” the ANBU asks with expertly faked confusion. If he wasn’t this open about his identity, Iruka probably would’ve believed him.

“No!” Naruto yells.
“Why are you so interested in Meiri?” Sasuke demands, glaring at the ANBU. Iruka is very proud.

“I’m just curious,” the ANBU says with an act of sincerity that would’ve succeeded in lowering Sasuke’s guard under normal circumstances.

“Then why don’t you ask nee-chan yourself?” Naruto demands, now growing suspicious as well. He might not know why Sasuke is acting like this but he’s willing to trust his instincts. Iruka is proud of him as well.

The ANBU pretends that the idea of talking to Mariko herself hadn’t ever occurred to him.

“Huh. That’s a good idea. I’ll do that.”

The act is enough to mollify Naruto. He’ll need to work on that as he grows older. Sasuke’s suspicion doesn’t abate in any way though.

“But she really doesn’t have a boyfriend?” the ANBU continues. Iruka raises a pointed brow at him. There’s being blunt and then there’s this.

The ANBU ignores his silent message completely.

“No one she acts differently with? Who you never see except with her?” he presses, not even allowing Naruto to vocalize his answer before continuing on. “Who visits her only at home?”

Okay, this is going too far. Iruka is just about to interfere when he spots Mariko rushing to the academy. That explains the ANBU’s rudeness.

“Someone she spends private time with?” the ANBU continues to push and Iruka’s plans for interference are derailed as Sasuke turns embarrassed, his eyes darting to the side and his cheeks gaining a rosy tint. It’s such an unusual reaction that Iruka decides to let this play out just a little bit longer.

“No, no, no, no!” Naruto yells with a glare but the ANBU has already honed in on Sasuke.

“Seems like your friend doesn’t agree.”

Mariko gets close enough that she can start looking for Naruto and Sasuke. While she isn’t panicking, she’s definitely rattled. Before Iruka can draw her attention, her eyes zero in on Naruto and Sasuke. She stops running and bends forward, catching her breath as she’s overwhelmed by relief.

Naruto is looking at Sasuke with confusion.

“Bastard?”

Sasuke’s blush grows a little stronger. The ANBU pretends that he has all the time in the world as he waits for Sasuke to answer. Iruka is curious to see how long he’ll be able to keep up the act. Not long if he wants to get any more information before Mariko arrives.

Maybe he should interfere after all? But no, that’s no longer necessary now that Mariko is here.

Mariko has caught her breath enough that she can consciously process both his and the ANBU’s presence. His own doesn’t inspire particular notice from her, but the ANBU’s sparks a dawning realization. Then she becomes angry.

No, not angry. Furious. She might not know that the ANBU is ANBU, but she’s definitely aware of
why he’s here with Naruto and Sasuke.

Iruka definitely doesn’t have to interfere anymore.

Mariko marches over like she’s entering battle. Fortunately for the ANBU, Sasuke finally spits out an answer to Naruto.

“Good screams.”

Iruka can’t help but snort with amusement. Naruto himself turns into a tomato, while the ANBU’s eyes widen briefly. Iruka is pretty sure they widen with glee.

“Good screams?” the ANBU demands, almost too rushed. Trying to squeeze something more out of them before Mariko arrives.

Naruto ignores the ANBU, shuffling his feet and crossing his arms, uncomfortable and embarrassed.

“It doesn’t happen often.”

It definitely happens often. Ignoring all the other signs, Mariko’s walk alone reveals when her boyfriend is in and out of the village.

The ANBU undoubtedly wants to keep prying for more details, but unfortunately for him, Mariko has arrived.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

“Nee-chan!” Naruto yells with joy, running over and plastering himself against her leg. Sasuke is right on his heels, halting on her other side and immediately gripping her hand too tightly, overwhelmed by relief. “You’re late!”

“I got held up,” Mariko drawls in a glacial voice while giving a death glare to the ANBU. Her hand comes to rest on Naruto’s head, needing to assure herself that he’s fine.

The ANBU responds by turning puzzled and a little uncomfortable, acting like he has no idea why she’s behaving like this. Mariko ignores his act in favor of checking up on Sasuke, her anger making way for worry as she looks down at him. She squeezes the hand holding hers in a near painful grip.

“Are you all right?” she asks gently.

“You were late,” Sasuke says, trying to pretend he’s fine and failing miserably. Iruka resists the urge to grimace. The ANBU really went too far with this. There are many other ways to get the information he’s after. Ways that don’t involve terrifying Sasuke.

Mariko gives his hand a reassuring squeeze.

“I’m sorry. I lost track of time,” she says before she lifts her head and gives the ANBU another death glare. “It won’t happen again.”

“I’m sorry?” the ANBU returns with confusion, still acting like he has no idea why she’s behaving like this. Probably for Naruto’s and Sasuke’s benefit. Not that it’s going to help. Sasuke is now glaring at the ANBU as well. Mariko’s reaction more than enough for him to piece together that the ANBU is the cause for her tardiness. Naruto hasn’t come to the same conclusion yet, but his eyes are flickering between Mariko, Sasuke and the ANBU, aware that something is wrong. If the ANBU decides to go after him and Sasuke again, he’s going to need a new disguise.
“I was just talking with them,” the ANBU continues, now acting more placating than confused. “I meant no offense.”

“He likes your stories, nee-chan,” Naruto accuses with a suspicious squint at the ANBU. He’s somehow missed the fact that the ANBU is responsible for Mariko’s tardiness. “And he wants to know if you have a boyfriend!” Yet while he’s missed the obvious, he’s picked up on the reason the ANBU went through all this trouble in the first place.

Mariko closes her eyes with a grimace, exasperation joining her anger. She isn’t surprised by the interest in her boyfriend. Just furious about that interest leading to Naruto and Sasuke being interrogated.

“Of course he does,” she says to herself, needing to express her frustration.

“I’m just curious,” the ANBU says apologetically, dropping his act just enough to show Mariko he really meant no harm, though not dropping it enough to admit culpability to Naruto and Sasuke.

Mariko glares at the ANBU, telling him exactly how much she doesn’t accept his apology. The unconscious way she tightens her grip on Sasuke’s hand reveals why she doesn’t.

“I have no issue with you people questioning me.”

Iruka looks at her with surprise, completely caught off guard by the telling emphasis she used. Sure, her being aware that people are interested in her boyfriend is expected, they haven’t exactly been trying to keep it hidden, but to know it’s ANBU who are interested? And to not find this unusual in any way?

Who exactly is she dating?

“I have no issue with you people questioning my friends,” Mariko continues in the same even voice that’s practically screaming with fury. Then she glares at the ANBU so fiercely she would’ve registered as a threat if she wasn’t a civilian. “Pull something like this again and I will get help.”

The ANBU acts bewildered and wary. Iruka is inclined to believe the latter is sincere. Mariko has more than proven she holds no qualms in using Lord Sarutobi’s favor to benefit her loved ones in general, and even less qualms in using it to protect Naruto and Sasuke specifically.

“What did he do, nee-chan?” Naruto demands while tugging at her clothes, both wanting to understand what’s going on and wanting to protect her from the ANBU he now irrefutably considers a threat. Iruka doesn’t feel a need to diffuse the situation, though. The ANBU really brought this on himself.

“He made her late,” Sasuke explains while trying to flay the ANBU alive with the force of his glare, but the way he’s leaning against Mariko and his too tight grip on her hand reveals just how rattled he still is. How afraid.

Naruto startles, not having expected that answer. Iruka makes a mental note to plan in a few additional lessons on deductive reasoning. He’d already been considering it, Naruto isn’t the only one who needs more practice, but now his plans have become definite.

“He did?” Naruto demands with wide eyes aimed at Mariko. Wanting her to confirm that Sasuke’s claim is correct. Mariko’s scowl does exactly that. Naruto gains a scowl himself and joins Mariko and Sasuke in glaring at the ANBU. “That’s not a nice thing to do!”

Mariko and Sasuke couldn’t agree more.
“You’re mean! I don’t like you!” Naruto condemns while wrapping his arms around Mariko’s leg protectively.

“He won’t bother you again,” Mariko threatens in another glacial voice while cradling the back of Naruto’s head, once again needing to assure herself that he’s fine. She’s also unconsciously shifted her balance so she’s ready to pull both him and Sasuke behind her. She doesn’t think the ANBU will attack, but that doesn’t stop her from being ready to try to punch his lights out if he makes a move towards Naruto or Sasuke. Which is an impressive display of bravery, given that she’s aware of who the ANBU is.

“I really meant no harm,” the ANBU says with another apologetic look, his act of ignorance mostly gone. Iruka is inclined to believe that he genuinely hadn’t meant to terrify Sasuke like this. That would just be cruel.

To no surprise, Mariko remains wholly unimpressed with the ANBU’s apology. The ANBU might not have meant any harm, but the fact remains that he terrified Sasuke. That’s not something Mariko is inclined to forgive even in the best of circumstances.

These aren’t the best of circumstances.

“Stay away from them.”

The silent or else couldn’t be louder.

“Yeah, stay away!” Naruto yells. Sasuke wordlessly does the same with another fierce glare.

“I won’t bother them again,” the ANBU says, just solemn enough to show that he means it. Mariko warns him with a final glare that he better not, before she ends the conversation by looking down at Naruto and ruffling his hair. It makes Naruto beam up at her as always.

“Let’s go, brats,” she says, glancing at Sasuke to include him. When Sasuke keeps glaring at the ANBU, she gently squeezes his hand to draw his attention.

Naruto blows a raspberry at the ANBU, making both Mariko and Sasuke look at him. Then Naruto looks at him and gains a bright smile.

“Bye, Iruka-sensei! See you tomorrow!”

Naruto’s words make Mariko truly focus on him for the first time since she arrived. She hadn’t forgotten he was present, but she hadn’t been paying him any real attention either.

She is now. To Iruka’s discomfort, she’s also blaming him for allowing the ANBU anywhere near Naruto and Sasuke. He anticipates much attempted pranking in his near future.

Really though, she’s acting like he would’ve allowed any harm to come to Naruto and Sasuke. That’s more than a little offensive.

“See you tomorrow, Naruto-kun, Sasuke-kun,” he says with a smile at them, before allowing himself to show just enough indignity that Mariko will pick up on it but the boys won’t. “Mari.”

“Iruka,” she returns in a way that makes clear she doesn’t care one bit that she’s overreacting. She’s going to be encouraging Naruto’s “creativity” for a long time. Which, in turn, will lead to Naruto encouraging Sasuke, Ino and Sakura. What fun this is going to be.

Sasuke, of course, doesn’t say goodbye, already back to glaring at the ANBU. But he allows himself
to be tugged along by Mariko when she moves to leave.

“Nee-chan, why did he make you late?” Naruto asks while bouncing along, his anger already gone now that he’s no longer seeing the ANBU.

“Because he’s a nosy ninja who needs to mind his own business,” Mariko says in a voice as pointed as a kunai, all but verbally glaring at the ANBU. Now that she and the boys are no longer watching the ANBU, the ANBU allows himself a slight grimace. Aware of just how badly he screwed up.

“Oh,” Naruto says like her explanation makes perfect sense. But then, this isn’t the first time by far that Mariko has been annoyed by people’s curiosity in her home life.

Naruto’s reaction is enough to make the worst of Mariko’s aggravation fade, amusement rising instead. Which in turn makes Sasuke relax as well, his grip on her hand slackening until it’s no longer too tight. Mariko gives both him and Naruto a smile, making Sasuke relax further and causing Naruto to beam up at her.

“Nee-chan, do you have a boyfriend?”

Mariko’s smile turns into a grin, a burst of humor lifting her spirits.

“I don’t have a boyfriend,” she says, an inside joke she’s never going to tire of.

“He thinks you do,” Sasuke says with a quick glare over his shoulder at the ANBU, though it isn’t as fierce as before. The ANBU responds with a smile that’s as puzzled as it is friendly.

“He’s wrong,” Mariko says without looking back at the ANBU. She’s still amused, but there’s an undercurrent of returning anger as well. “So what did you do today?” she directs at Naruto, distracting herself before she can get worked up again. When Naruto happily launches into a detailed description of his day, Iruke stops enhancing his hearing and gives the ANBU an unimpressed look. Not something he would’ve ever done if the ANBU was on duty, but this is different.

Iruka doesn’t appreciate him coming after his students like this. At all.

“This was cruel,” he says with clear warning. Just like Mariko, Iruka has no trouble using Lord Sarutobi’s favor to protect his students. And when it comes to Naruto and Sasuke, that favor extends very far indeed.

“I didn’t think he’d react this strongly,” the ANBU says without a hint of shame, no longer putting on an act now that his targets are out of range. There is a fair amount of regret, though. Apologizing for his behavior and promising it won’t happen again.

Iruka couldn’t care less about his apology.

“But you knew he’d react,” Iruka counters, annoyed at the confirmation that the ANBU had known that Mariko’s absence would affect Sasuke, and thus, that it would make him an easier target. Which, really, Sasuke and Naruto are eight year old academy students. Questioning them under normal circumstances isn’t exactly hard.

“Didn’t have a lot of options,” the ANBU says, making Iruka look at him with surprise. An ANBU saying he doesn’t have a lot of options holds a wealth of meaning. Chief among them that something, or rather someone, is preventing him and who knows how many others from questioning Naruto and Sasuke. Which means this whole thing was probably thrown together as soon as they spotted an opening. That explains the sloppiness of this operation.
It also leaves on important question. Who exactly is Mariko dating?

“Didn’t expect her to get here so soon either,” the ANBU says, more to himself than to Iruka. He seems both annoyed and impressed. Really, sloppy operation or not, he’s acting like Mariko should’ve been easy to distract. Iruka would think he hadn’t observed her enough to know how important it is to her to both punctually drop off and pick up Naruto and Sasuke from school, except that clearly isn’t the case. Did he think she’d be an easy target just because she’s a civilian? Here Iruka thought ANBU were supposed to be above that.

Iruka briefly debates on whether to reinforce his warning, or to indulge his curiosity instead. But his warning was delivered clearly. The ANBU is aware both he and Mariko will interfere if something like this happens again.

Iruka decides to indulge his curiosity.

“She’s been dating a shinobi for awhile now,” Iruka says casually, immediately drawing the ANBU’s full attention. “It’s bound to have rubbed off.”

The ANBU gives him a considering look, debating on whether to take him up on his offer or not. Iruka hopes he will. He’s become genuinely interested in who she’s dating now, and he’s willing to trade information for it. Which he has more than a fair amount of. Sure, he’s never held true interest in Mariko’s boyfriend before now, but she’s been dating him for most of the time he’s known her. He’s picked up a lot of things about their relationship. Even for a civilian, Mariko isn’t exactly subtle.

The ANBU comes to a decision with a falsely casual shrug. Iruka resists the urge to openly perk up.

“Not like it’s a secret anymore. She–”

The ANBU stills like he just spotted a threat, throwing Iruka on high alert and making him rapidly examine their surroundings. What could make an ANBU – Hatake Kakashi is walking down the street without a care in the world. The ANBU flickers away.

No.

He keeps staring at Hatake Kakashi, half expecting him to look up from his porn and confirm the realization he’s just been hit by. Hatake Kakashi doesn’t do that of course but Iruka can’t interpret his indifference as anything but a pretense.

Because Mariko is dating Hatake Kakashi. Mariko is dating Kakashi Of The Sharingan. She’s dating The Copy Nin. The idea should be absurd except it explains so much. How they managed to keep it hidden from Naruto and Sasuke for so long, how Mariko never has a single identifiable trace on her. The interest the ANBU hold and the extreme measures they just went to.

It explains why Iruka has been seeing Hatake Kakashi leave the Tower so regularly just as class lets out. Hatake Kakashi didn’t start doing so right after he and Mariko got back together of course, that would have been far too obvious, but it was close. Close enough that Iruka should have made the connection. And now that Iruka is looking back, he can see how Hatake Kakashi always avoids entering Mariko’s, Naruto’s and Sasuke’s line of sight. Oh, he makes it seem like it isn’t intentional, expertly so, but looking back it’s so obvious that his avoidance is deliberate.

Most damning of all, Iruka never sees Hatake Kakashi leave the Tower when Mariko’s boyfriend is out of town.

Holy crap.
How had Iruka not realized?

You threatened them.

Damn straight I did. I can’t believe the nerve of them. Terrifying Sasuke just because they’re nosy assholes? They need to stay the hell away from him and Naruto both.

It won’t happen again.

Good.

Your threat was remarkably effective.

My, aren’t we proud of ourselves.

Of you, actually.

Oh?

You successfully threatened them. You would’ve succeeded even without my help.

"I’m incredibly turned on right now."

"Too bad you’ll have to wait until the brats are put to bed. I’m not leaving Sasuke."

“Are you sure I can’t convince you to change your mind?”

“Yes. But I won’t stop you from trying to prove me wrong.”

A wicked smile. A hand tenderly trailing down a cheek.

A delighted shiver.

“Challenge accepted.”

"Wow."

A satisfied smile.

"Very wow."

A breathless chuckle.

“That was definitely worth the teasing.”

“I live to serve.”

Fingers trailing over smooth skin. Comfortable silence.

"Why don't you mind?"
"You really want to hear the answer out loud?"

"..."

A sigh. A kiss.

"At the risk of making your allergies act up, you’re it, Kakashi. The one I want to spend the rest of my life with. So what does it matter that you need more time to meet the brats or my friends. It’s going to happen eventually. With a lot of freaking out– no, don't deny it, there will a lot of freaking out. Which we’ll get through of course, I’ve invested way too much effort for anything else. But until then, I will sit back and enjoy the ridiculousness of it all."

Eyes closing with incredulity.

"God, how is this my life? I–"

A long kiss. And another. And another.

A lower placed kiss.

A soft laugh.

"Don't know if you can top that so soon."

A warm look.

"Won't know until we try."

“Really. You too.”

“I thought I’d come see what all the fuss is about,” Inoichi says with a peaceful smile. Mari rolls her eyes with a wry smile of her own.

“Your life,” she says in her typical drawl. “So, what can I get you all?”

“Jasmine for me,” Inoichi says.

“I'll have the jasmine as well, as strong as you can make it. And five portions of onigiri,” Choza says. Mari gives him an amused look. She’s well aware that Choza is planning to eat all of those by himself.

“Shikaku?” Inoichi prompts.

“Jasmine is fine,” Shikaku makes the effort to say from where he’s slouched down his chair.

“Strong jasmine and five onigiri, coming right up,” Mari says before giving him a teasing smile. “Have fun spying.”

With that, she goes to prepare their order. Inoichi settles himself more comfortably in his chair and observes the other customers present.

Nearly all of them are shinobi. Inoichi keeps smiling peacefully, not a hint of a grin to be found. This is priceless.
He looks at Choza, keeping the most of the room within sight. The few blind spots he has are covered by Shikaku.

“How’s Choji?”

“Good, good. He’s finally completed the first stage.”

Now that’s unexpected. Last time he asked, Choji had still been struggling.

He and Choza continue their small talk, Shikaku occasionally adding in a remark of his own.

Inoichi doesn’t let his amusement show as he keeps chatting. The sheer curiosity about Kakashi’s relationship with Mari is hilarious. It’s also understandable. Kakashi has a reputation, and a girlfriend doesn’t fit into it. At all. Kakashi’s refusal to confirm his relationship with Mari only fuels people’s curiosity to even greater heights.

The basics of their relationship are well known by now of course. Mari and her friends might be tight lipped about the details, but they’re also civilians. There’s a lot of information to be found in their behavior in general, and even more in their reactions to certain questions.

People know Kakashi has been in a relationship with Mari for almost three years now. Which is impressive. Not many could keep it hidden for that long. Especially not when the people involved are as famous as Kakashi and Mari. Not that people didn’t know Mari was in a relationship with someone, you only need one conversation with her at most to figure that out, but people hadn’t been able to find out who it was. That is a truly impressive accomplishment on Kakashi’s part.

Of course, now that people know Mari is together with The Copy Nin, Kakashi’s efforts to keep their relationship private are in vain. Just by observing and questioning Mari and her friends, people figured out that Mari started sleeping with him long before she knew who he was, or even what he looked like. They know this whole thing started out as a friends with benefits relationship that grew into something more. They know Mari refers to Kakashi as her “cat” and that they regularly exchange love notes.

And that’s just what people have been able to figure out by watching and talking. Reading her latest novel reveals a lot more. The main characters might not be Mari and Kakashi themselves, but you can learn a great deal about writers in general by reading their work. Mari is no exception.

Her novel doesn’t reveal too much about Kakashi. The dynamic he has with Mari, yes, that the story makes more than obvious. But his innermost thoughts, his greatest fears and weaknesses, those remain hidden. Kakashi clearly had a hand in the story, in a way he didn’t have in her others. Preventing too much information about himself from being revealed.

He didn’t, however, prevent a number of his bedroom tastes from getting out. Inoichi is genuinely curious if it was a concession to Mari on his part, given that those parts were the whole reason she even wrote the story in the first place, or if he did it just to mess with people when they inevitably found out about his relationship. Or a combination of the two. All would fit. He’s betting it’s the first, though. When it comes to his home life, Kakashi takes the definition of need-to-know to a whole new level.

When Mari returns with their order, he chats with her about the latest antics of their kids. Inoichi definitely isn’t purposely avoiding the topic of her relationship with Kakashi just to frustrate their audience.

Mari is. The grin she wears and the frequent glances she gives the ninja present make that more than
clear. She makes no effort whatsoever to hide just how amusing she finds this whole thing. She’d be annoyed by it if people were questioning her directly, but right now they’re content to merely observe her. That’s something Mari has no problem with.

When Mari leaves without a single verbal reference to Kakashi, Inoichi can practically hear the mental groans of their audience. For the most part, people no longer come here to get information about Kakashi. They’re merely using their curiosity as an excuse to meet up and exchange information. Given that their excuse involves The Copy Nin, people who’d otherwise have no reason to interact with each other now have a reason to meet up. The teahouse is quickly becoming a hotspot for information.

Even so, there’s still a fair amount of genuine curiosity as well. Which means people still get frustrated when it seems like they’re going to get new information and then they gain nothing at all.

Not everyone is frustrated. By now it’s become a game to watch people get frustrated by the lack of new information. For some people at least.

Inoichi, of course, isn’t one of those people.

“This is ridiculous,” Shikaku mutters, expertly hiding just how entertained he is.

“It’s a bit much, yes,” Choza says like he hasn’t been prodding Inoichi to take him here ever since the news of Kakashi’s relationship hit the rumor mill.

“It’s to be expected, given who’s involved,” Inoichi says, setting up the stage.

Choza, always a good sport, helps him set it up further.

“I still can’t believe you didn’t know.”

None of them react as everyone’s full attention seamlessly returns to them, the casual conversation filling the air never faltering. Well, the shinobi are paying them attention again.

“I mean, your kids are thick as thieves. You must have noticed something.”

“Of course I noticed something,” Inoichi says with an unimpressed look, so insulted by the slight against his skills. Why, Choza is practically daring him to reveal all he knows about Mari’s and Kakashi’s relationship.

Fortunately, Inoichi is above such petty goading.

“But Mari doesn’t like to talk about him, and I never felt the need to pry.” Not of his own volition at least.

“But you really didn’t know?” Choza asks with such innocent interest. “That doesn’t sound like you.”

Of course it doesn’t. It’s Inoichi’s job to know things. The more information, the smoother the interrogation.

Coincidentally, this means that when Inoichi gossips, people listen. Not that this is in any way relevant to their current situation.

“I really didn’t know,” Inoichi says honestly and ignores the small slight to his pride he feels. His ignorance might have been caused by a lack of desire to pry into Mari’s private life when she so
clearly wouldn’t appreciate it, but he still should’ve put the pieces together a lot sooner. There are only so many people who’d go to such lengths to hide their identity. “Looking back it’s incredibly obvious, though. There was the whole...” Inoichi makes a gesture that could mean anything. “And then there was...” He makes another gesture.

“Right, I remember you mentioning that,” Choza says like he genuinely knows what Inoichi is talking about. “Those things definitely should’ve tipped you off. I should’ve realized myself even.”

“Right?” Inoichi returns with incredulity and whole hearted agreement. Why, if he’d actually shared some of the signs that are so incredibly obvious in hindsight, both he and Choza would have felt like fools when they finally discovered who exactly Mari is in a relationship with.

As it is, only Inoichi felt like a fool.

Shikaku sips his tea, lazy and indifferent and definitely not amused by his and Choza’s antics.

Really, Shikaku is acting like he and Choza are yanking their audience’s chain on purpose. They’d never do that. The fact that his and Choza’s conversation is making annoyance rise is merely an unintended side effect.

“How are the onigiri?” Inoichi asks. Choza obligingly gives an in depth review of their quality. Hearing an Akimichi wax poetry about food is always a treat.

The fact that the change in topic is frustrating their audience further is another unintended side effect.

He and Choza continue chatting, Shikaku occasionally adding a remark of his own. It’s partly meaningless small talk, partly a light hearted exchange of information, and partly planting some rumors for the benefit of their audience.

Mari occasionally moves to serve a customer or chat with the few regulars present, but for the most part she talks to Shiro and Rukia, seated at the counter. People allow it, they can get more out of observing her banter with her friends than by questioning her directly. Well, they can now. It was different at first, but this has been going on for a while now. As evidenced by the focus having shifted from getting information out of Mari, to exchanging information in general.

Inoichi gives some tidbits he knows will be of interest to his teammates, while Choza and Shikaku give him updates on some of his side projects. Most of it is positive, but one report from Choza does require him to make some slight adjustments to one of his plans. It would be a shame if he failed to get Shito to make up with his mother.

Inoichi keeps an ear on the various conversations filling the air, mentally filing away anything relevant. Of which there is a lot. Again, this is quickly becoming a hotspot for information gathering.

Inoichi is just telling Shikaku of a meeting he witnessed that Shikaku might find useful when he senses a distinct and rapidly approaching presence. He falls silent and turns to face the entrance. So does every shinobi present, the sudden silence startling the civilians. Subtlety has fled the building.

Because Konoha’s Sublime Green Beast Of Prey appears dramatically in the doorway and gives Mari the fiercest of stares.

Gai bursts into tears, blurs forward, and grasps a bewildered Mari’s hand.

“Such Flames of Youth! Mariko-san, you are truly a most Shining Flower among all of Konoha’s Beautiful Blossoms!”
Gai cries harder. Mari stares, her mind made blank the whirlwind that is Gai. Everyone else is staring as well. Stunned in the case of the civilians in general, horrified in the specific case of Shiro and Rukia, and full of gleeful anticipation in the case of the shinobi. Even Shikaku is openly smirking.

This is going to be great.

Mari’s friend and owner of the teahouse comes out of the kitchen, drawn out by Gai’s volume.

“What’s going on—” She falls silent when confronted with the flashy and obscenely skintight spandex that Gai is wearing.

Her words are enough to pull Mari out of her shock. She gains an amused smile as she looks over the dramatic picture Gai present, though there’s some worry over his crying as well. And some appreciation of Gai’s physical appeal. Her feelings are topped off with impersonal recognition.

“You must be Maito Gai,” she drawls. She might not have met Gai before, but everyone in Konoha has heard of The Sublime Green Beast Of Prey. He creates a spectacle wherever he goes. Not to mention that Gai’s name has been dropped a few times in the various interrogations she’s gone through. It soon became clear that she has no idea of who Gai is in relation to Kakashi though, and so people stopped mentioning him. No one wants to incur the wrath of The Copy Nin.

Gai’s tears disappear as quickly as they appeared. He gives her a blinding smile, releases her hand and strikes a Good Guy pose.

“Indeed I am! Konoha’s Sublime Green Beast Of Prey, Maito Gai, at your service!”

His teeth glitter in a display of chakra control as humorous as it is impressive.

Mari’s smile turns into a grin, delighted by the unexpected show she’s being treated to.

“A pleasure to meet you, Gai,” she says sincerely. The brightness of Gai’s smile increases, genuinely touched by her welcome.

“The pleasure is all mine! I have just finished reading all your work, and I am Delighted to meet the creator of such Youthful Stories! My Rival is a lucky man!”

Mari’s eyes widen with shock, immediately realizing who Gai is referring to.

“Your rival?” she demands, incredulous and desperately hoping that she understood Gai correctly.

Gai has no trouble confirming her assumption.

“Indeed! Kakashi is my Eternal Rival! His eleven wins to my nine are a Testament to his Skills!”

Mari snorts with hysterical laughter, looking like she just got the most wonderful of gifts.

“Your Eternal Rival,” she says to herself, almost unable to believe something as amazing as this could be happening.

Gai beams brighter, his already high spirits lifted even further by her own reaction.

“Correct! My Rival is Hip and Cool, full of Youthful Vigor and Unyielding Determination!”

The yell is accompanied by a hip movement that should be obscene with the outfit he’s wearing, but which somehow remains almost innocent. Almost.
Watching Gai is always such a treat.

“There is no other I Admire as I Admire him!”

Translation, Gai is hopelessly in love with Kakashi. And he never bothers to hide this fact. Or anything else he feels. Gai is open about his feelings in a way that inspires equal admiration and incredulity. Shinobi shouldn’t be able to act like he does, yet there Gai is anyway.

Mari, of course, completely misses the fact that Gai is head over heels for Kakashi. She would’ve missed it even under normal circumstances, but right now it’s literally impossible for her to pick up on it.

Right now, she can’t do anything but burst out laughing. She’s utterly delighted by the notion of Kakashi being chased around by Gai, well aware that he’d never agree to being someone’s Eternal Rival. Especially not to someone as attention grabbing as Gai.

It would’ve been different if Gai had approached her in private. By approaching her in public, however, Mari understands just how annoyed Kakashi must be by Gai’s insistence to claim him as his Eternal Rival. Though she wouldn’t be able to consciously articulate why she made that connection. She wouldn’t care about being able to explain the reasoning behind her conclusion either.

What she cares about is that she’s going to be able to tease Kakashi about this forever.

Mari’s laughter makes her friends break down laughing as well. Her coworkers at least. Shiro and Rukia are still horrified by the fashion disaster that is Gai. It’s made even worse by the involuntary attraction they feel.

Most other civilians start laughing as well, though not as manically as Mari and her friends. The shinobi take this as their cue to start chatting again, though this time no information is being exchanged. That would only distract from the wonderful show they’re being treated to. No one is bothering to hide that all of their attention is on Gai and Mari either. Only part of that has to do with the possibility of gaining new information about Kakashi. Gai alone is always worth watching. Grins, smiles and smirks fill the air.

Inoichi continues his previous tale to Choza and Shikaku, also not bothering to contain his grin as he keeps watching Mari, now leaning on the counter for support. She’s almost crying from the force of her laughter, her reaction spurred to even greater heights by the laughter of her friends.

Gai himself is watching Mari with a pleased smile, happy with the reaction he’s inspired. Gai enjoys making people laugh.

Yet while he’s pleased by her reaction, he’s also watching her with an intensity he rarely shows. Dissecting every single thing about her in a way he doesn’t often feel the need to do.

He’s making sure Mari loves Kakashi as much as her latest novel implies.

It doesn’t take him long to conclude that she is, in fact, as head over heels for Kakashi as Gai himself is. Whenever Mari thinks of Kakashi, she might as well be wearing a sign saying that she’s madly in love with him.

When he’s satisfied with his assessment, Gai strikes another Good Guy pose.

“Yosh! Mariko-san, you are a True Equal to my Eternal Rival!”
Mari laughs harder, oblivious to the fact that she just passed an important test. Gai wouldn’t have tried to ruin hers and Kakashi’s relationship if she’d failed of course, he’d never hurt Kakashi like that, but he wouldn’t have felt any real desire to grow close to her either. By his standards at least. To Gai, anyone who makes Kakashi happy is a person worth knowing.

Now that he’s approved of Mari completely, however, he wants to get to know her for himself as well.

Gai is lucky. Befriending Mari will be easy. Ignoring the fact that he could effortlessly win her over just by sharing tales of his challenges with Kakashi, Mari will genuinely like him for his personality. He’s loud, bright, stubborn as a mule, clever in all the ways that matter, and optimistic to a fault.

In other words, he’s an adult version of Naruto. Mari is going to adore Gai. And Gai is going to adore her right back. Only part of that will have to do with how happy she makes Kakashi.

And Kakashi is going to despair. He’ll never be able to escape Gai now. What a shame.

Inoichi wonders how Gai found out about Kakashi’s relationship. While an observant man, Gai has the disadvantage of the entire rumor mill working against him. Everyone is well aware that whoever let this knowledge slip to Gai, intentional or otherwise, is going to face the full wrath of The Copy Nin when found. This is a fate to be avoided at all costs.

Yet somehow Gai found out. Somehow, someone let something slip.

Inoichi wonders how that happened. He’s also so glad he just happened to pick this particular time to visit Mari.

When Mari finally regains control over her laughter, she wastes no time in inviting Gai to take a seat and to order whatever he wants, her treat. Gai tries to insist on paying himself but Mari won’t hear of it. She’s going to treat him no matter what. It’s the least she can do after he made her week like this.

Gai counters that he must pay her back some other way, his cheerful offer delivered with a mischievousness people who don’t know him are always so surprised by. When Mari tries to refuse, he skillfully steers the conversation so she’ll ask after the challenges between him and Kakashi. Less than a third of which involve spars. The rest are contests, each more silly than the last.

It delights Mari even further. Even better, Gai is more than willing to “repay” her for her treat by sharing, in detail, what happened during these contests.

Gai just became one of her favorite customers. By the end of this conversation, he’ll be her favorite, period. A few more conversations and she’ll start thinking of him as a true friend.

Kakashi is going to hate this. Inoichi, on the other hand, is quite pleased with this development. Mari already has a strong support system, but it never hurts to expand it. Same for Gai. And this is good for Kakashi as well. No matter how much he denies it, Gai’s refusal to leave him alone is comforting. If Gai were to ever stop, Kakashi would be incredibly hurt. His issues might prevent him from admitting it, but Gai is one of only two people that Kakashi considers to be his friends. Well, three including Mari, but Mari occupies another position in Kakashi’s support system. A far more vital one.

If Mari were to die right now, Kakashi would lose the final grip he has on his remaining sanity. That will change once he’s introduced himself to Naruto and Sasuke and be forced to grow close to them against his will, but for now, Mari’s continued survival is the only thing holding him together.

Which is why it’s so good that Mari and Gai are going to be friends. Gai’s involvement in her life
will make the relationship between Gai and Kakashi progress much faster than it otherwise would. Which means that if Mari does die, Gai will hopefully be able to keep Kakashi from following her. With help from Naruto, Sasuke and Cat of course, but Naruto and Sasuke aren’t old enough by far to support Kakashi the way he needs to be supported. As for Cat, he lacks the social skills needed to pull someone away from the edge. Especially when it involves a case as severe as Kakashi.

Inoichi has always known that Kakashi’s state of mind is unstable. You don’t need to be a Yamanaka to figure that out. But it wasn’t until he was called in to evaluate Kakashi’s mental fitness after he and Mari broke up that he realized just how close to the edge Kakashi is. How much he relies on coping mechanisms just to be able to function. It became even worse after he was discharged from ANBU and lost the anchor he’d build his entire sense of purpose around. Especially because the loss came on the heels of losing two of what had been only four people that Kakashi considered to be friends.

Despite that, Inoichi doesn’t regret recommending that Kakashi be pulled from ANBU. Yes, the loss has made Kakashi more fragile, but it offers him the opportunity to heal as well. He wouldn’t have been capable of that if he could still hide in the mindless obedience of Wolf.

It was a risk to pull him from ANBU. It was an even greater risk for him to get back together with Mari. She already held a position equal to that of ANBU in keeping Kakashi sane, but her importance became even greater after Kakashi was discharged. Unhealthily so. Kakashi getting back together with her has only worsened his codependency.

Despite that, Inoichi had been planning to get them back together. Yes, Kakashi’s codependency is unhealthy at the moment, but the relationship will eventually lead to him expending his support system to a decent level. It’ll take time of course, Kakashi has years of bad habits to break. But if things go well, he’ll one day be able to lose Mari and still live a moderately happy life.

And if Inoichi has to perform some nudges to ensure things go well, he’ll gladly take up that responsibility. It had grated when he’d utterly failed to help Kakashi during his evaluation. This is a great way to get rid of his lingering aggravation.

It’s a way to recover from the things he had to do to keep the village safe after the Uchiha Massacre. There are other things he does as well, but making people happy is one of the best ways to soothe his conscience.

All shinobi have coping mechanisms to deal with the darker aspects of their job. The trick is to develop healthy ones. And to maintain a strong support system.

Inoichi watches as Mari hangs onto Gai’s every word as he describes the dance off he had with Kakashi, some of the guilt gnawing at this mind fading away. Gai and Mari becoming friends is going to be good for everyone involved. It’s a shame it took this long for it to happen, but Kakashi needed time to settle into his relationship with Mari before it became public knowledge. Though Inoichi is genuinely surprised it went undetected for so long. In hindsight, it’s incredibly obvious. Even to people who don’t know Kakashi personally.

It was such a stroke of luck that one of Kakashi’s former teammates just happened to read Mari’s latest novel. Who knows how long their relationship would have remained hidden otherwise. Not that Inoichi had anything to do with that development.

He still can’t believe it took him evaluating Kakashi to realize what was going on, though. Mari’s had a cat for as long as he’s known her.
I'm back.

Laughter.

I'm not going to like this, am I.

You have a rival.

A loud snort, a wide grin.

You have an Eternal Rival.

Laughter.

I can't even

More laughter.

Feet running down the stairs.

“Nee-chan, what's so funny?"

"Obviously the cat's back. Idiot."

"Bastard!"

"No--"

Laughter being smothered, deep breaths.

“No fighting inside."

"But nee-chan!"

"No buts."

A pout.

A smirk.


"Why do you think the cat's back?"

"Idiot. She never laughs like that unless the cat’s here."

“Bastard. And really?”

“You’re such a moron. Just look.”

More laughter.

"...Huh. You're right. She never laughs like that unless the cat’s here."

"Told you."
This isn’t a big deal. Of course it isn’t. Their relationship is common knowledge by now. Dropping by would be normal.

Kakashi remains hidden instead. It’s irrational, but meeting Meiri in public feels dangerous. Like he’d be taunting fate even worse than he already is.

When he first agreed to stay, he expected her to die. He still expects it. He loves her and everyone Kakashi loves dies. That’s just the way the world works. But as the months passed and nothing happened to Meiri, the constant terror of losing her started to lessen.

It’s back now. Even stronger than before.

Their relationship is common knowledge. By now, the other villages will have heard of it as well. What if someone comes after her? What if they hurt her to get to him? What if he isn’t there to protect her?

What if he is there and he fails to protect her? What if he has to watch her die like everyone else he’s ever loved? Kakashi is never strong enough to save the people that matter to him. He won’t be able to save Meiri either.

He won’t be able to survive losing her. Won’t be able to pull himself together again.

Not without Wolf.

It was so easy to lose himself in Wolf. To have nothing matter beyond obeying the Third. But Wolf is gone – Wolf is gone – and has been since the Third dismissed him from ANBU. Which means Kakashi is now going on missions instead of Wolf. And it’s driving him mad. He can handle short missions, ones that take him out of the village for a few days, a week at most, but anything longer than that?

He worries. He does from the moment he leaves the village, but it’s manageable at first.

After a week, it starts turning to panic. What if something happens to Meiri while he’s gone? What if someone comes after her? What if she’s in the wrong place at the wrong time? What if she wanders onto a training field and gets hit by a stray technique, what if she falls and breaks her neck, what if she chokes on a drink and suffocates, what if she gets struck by lightning, what if, what if?

She is so vulnerable.

It’s different with Naruto and Sasuke. For one, he – can’t – doesn’t love them, though he’ll admit he’s grown fond of them. For another, they’re academy students. While they’re as vulnerable as Meiri right now, they won’t always be. They’ll be able to protect themselves eventually.

Meiri never will. Even if she trains every single day, she’ll never be stronger than a half trained academy student at best. The damage to her chakra system made certain of that.

Which means Kakashi can’t help but start thinking of worst case scenarios whenever he’s gone for longer than a few days.

If it was up to him, he’d never take on a mission that requires him to leave the village for longer than a week. Unfortunately, even with the need to protect Meiri, he still gets restless after a while. Which causes him to push Meiri’s buttons even more than usual, and while that’s fine for a short while, it
never takes long for it to reach the point where Meiri all but kicks him out the door, refusing to let him back in until he stops being an even bigger bastard than usual. Which leads to Kakashi taking on a longer mission, which leads to him struggling with a worry that only grows stronger the longer he’s away. It’s a vicious circle. Being away for a few weeks does help him get rid of his restlessness, though.

The upside of his anxiety is that he’s even more efficient than Wolf was at completing missions. The downside is that he’s on the verge of a panic attack the entire time. The only reason his mental struggle doesn’t make him sloppy is because he promised Meiri he’ll always take care of himself. He promised he’ll do all he can to return to her.

Kakashi has no intention of breaking that promise. He might not be strong enough to save her, but his protection is still better than nothing. Yes, his reputation makes Meiri a tempting target to some, but it works as a deterrent to many more.

Of course, Meiri would be a tempting target even without him. It was fine when she was only taking care of Naruto, the other villages believe he’s a decoy for the real Jinchuriki. The Last Uchiha is another case entirely, though. There’s a reason she was kept under such close watch until they managed to get their internal security back in order.

So really, their relationship becoming public knowledge is a good thing. It makes her a greater target in some ways, but in most it lessens the danger she’s in.

Now if only he can convince the part of him screaming he’s going to get her killed of that.

Kakashi focuses on Meiri’s scent and heat signature. She’s fine right now. Is having a lot of fun with the ninja still refusing to leave despite the hour, in fact. Among which are Yuugao and Mio, no longer in disguise. Now that his and Meiri’s relationship is public knowledge, they can drop by without compromising their identity as ANBU.

Kakashi makes a mental note to ruin another of Mio’s one night stands and to embarrass Yuugao in front of her crush again. Better security for Meiri or not, he’s still pissed that they outed his relationship. If they hadn’t figured it out, none of this would have ever happened.

Of course, his harassment of them is nowhere near to what he’s doing to Ichiro. Mio and Yuugao might have started this whole thing, but it was Ichiro who escalated it by revealing his relationship to the General Forces. Ichiro is going to pay for that. A lot. Which Ichiro knew would happen when he showed up at the academy, but that didn’t stop him from doing it anyway. Clearly, Kakashi is losing his touch. He’ll have to work on that.

Ichiro is ideal practice target. And really, the training will be good for Ichiro. If he can survive Kakashi’s harassment with his sanity relatively intact, he can lead – Wolf’s – his former team as well.

At least Tenzo respects his desire for privacy. Kakashi might have trouble – forgiving him – admitting his gratitude, but that doesn’t mean the feeling isn’t there.

He knows he’s being unfair to Tenzo. If Tenzo had acted as he did after his fight with Meiri, if Tenzo lost himself in Cat in the way Kakashi lost himself in Wolf, Kakashi might have reported Tenzo himself.

Or rather, Wolf would have reported Tenzo. Cat is a great asset, but Tenzo regressing like that would have awful long term consequences for his mental health, and that’s something Wolf wouldn’t have allowed. Even as Wolf, the safety of his teammates comes before all else. Orders can always be creatively interpreted to put their safety first.
Or rather, Wolf used creatively interpret orders. He no longer does because Wolf is gone – Wolf is gone – and Kakashi is still struggling with the loss of his greatest coping mechanism. Still struggling with the gaping abyss where there used to be detached calculation, with the terror and uncertainty where there used to be purpose.

The few who knew of the full extent of the division between Wolf and Kakashi called his behavior unhealthy. Kakashi has always disagreed with that conclusion. Wolf was how he managed to keep going after losing Sensei. Wolf was what prevented him from following Father’s example. Wolf gave him the time he needed to start putting the broken pieces of himself back together.

Tenzo taught him how to be Kakashi again.

It’s ironic. Before Tenzo, Kakashi never felt the need to be in control, content to let Wolf take the reins even when off duty. Oh, he felt things and he formed opinions on the things happening around him, but he can count the times he acted on them on both hands and still have fingers to spare. And that initiative always happened while off duty. Then he met Tenzo, and for the first time Kakashi took over during a mission. He prevented Wolf from killing Tenzo, no matter the physical pain it caused to keep Wolf from fulfilling his orders. Looking back, he’s still not entirely sure why he did it. Compassion, maybe. Pity, definitely. But Kakashi had felt those things before Tenzo, and it had never prevented him from letting Wolf carry out his duty.

Yet for some reason, he spared Tenzo. Then the Third placed Tenzo under Wolf’s command and suddenly Kakashi was taking control more than he ever had. Because Tenzo was exactly like Wolf. No feelings, no opinions not related to the mission, no existence beyond carrying out orders. That was fine for Kakashi, Wolf’s existence kept him functional, but Tenzo...

Tenzo didn’t have a split personality like Kakashi did. He didn’t have a safe outlet for flashes of likes and dislikes that had nothing to do with the mission, didn’t have a place to let himself feel things. And it was breaking him. No matter how hard Tenzo tried, sometimes he did feel things that had nothing to do with the mission. And he had no idea what to do with those feelings. Which meant they manifested as irrational acts that sometimes endangered the mission, which in turn caused Tenzo to spiral into despair because nothing is more important than the mission, which then caused him to act irrationally again, making Tenzo’s downward spiral even worse.

So Kakashi taught him how to compartmentalize those feelings. He taught Tenzo how to be Cat while on duty and Tenzo when he was off duty.

Ironically, Kakashi learned how to be himself again by teaching Tenzo how to do it.

But Wolf was still there. Even off duty, Wolf was always ready to take over when Kakashi needed it.

Except he no longer is. The Third ordered Wolf to leave ANBU. He ordered him to disappear, and Wolf always obeys the Third.

So Wolf is gone – Wolf is gone – and Kakashi is still struggling with that loss. Which means he’s still struggling with the anger and betrayal he feels towards Tenzo.

Because Tenzo knows exactly how important Wolf was to Kakashi. And he still reported him. Yes, the Third might have pulled Kakashi from ANBU even without that, but the mental evaluation he was under when – Itachi – the Uchiha Massacre happened definitely didn’t help.
So yes, Kakashi is still angry with Tenzo. Probably will be for a while yet. He was getting better before the reveal of his relationship with Meiri, but that reveal has thrown his – fear, terror, panic – anger back to the foreground. Irrational, yes, unfair, definitely.

Doesn’t stop him from being angry. Because of Tenzo, Kakashi can no longer hide from his fear and worry. Because of Tenzo, he has no respite from the panic constantly threatening to pull him under.

Because of Tenzo, it’s even harder to be with Meiri than it otherwise would be.

He know it’s unfair to blame Tenzo. And Kakashi does his best not to take it out on him, he really does. He just fails to succeed no matter how hard he tries.

He fails because he no longer has Wolf to fall back on.

Kakashi is going to get over Tenzo’s reporting of him eventually. In time he’ll be able to train with Tenzo again and have a conversation with him that last longer than a few sentences. But for now, it’s best for the both of them that he keeps his distance.

It soothes the part of him insisting he’s going to get Tenzo killed by continuing to associate with him now that he’s no longer his superior. Tenzo – can’t be – isn’t his friend of course, Kakashi no longer has friends, but an irrational part of him is convinced that merely associating with him would be dangerous to Tenzo’s health. He feels it a little with the rest of – Wolf’s – his former team as well, but his fear is so much stronger when it comes to Tenzo. Tenzo might not be his friend, but he’s the closest thing Kakashi has to it.

He’s as close to Kakashi as Shisui was.

Shisui not being his friend didn’t prevent him from dying – like Father – and if Shisui can die like that, it can happen to Tenzo as well.

He knows that Shisui didn’t die – like Father – because of him. Unfortunately, his guilt complex doesn’t care about that one bit. Kakashi can’t help but feel like Shisui’s death is his fault, despite knowing intellectually that isn’t the case.

He can’t help but feel responsible for Itachi – abandoning him – betraying them. Itachi hadn’t been his friend either, but for some incomprehensible reason, Itachi – is a traitor – decided that he liked him and started bothering him off duty, no matter how inhospitable Kakashi acted. Then Shisui joined in and the harassment became impossible to escape. It got even worse when Shisui befriended Tenzo.

Except Shisui and Itachi no longer bother him, because Shisui is dead and Itachi is a traitor. Because Kakashi doesn’t need to love people for them to – leave him – die. Interacting with him on a regular basis is more than enough.

Kakashi allows himself a silent sigh. This right here is why he needs Wolf. When he gets into a downward spiral like this, it’s almost impossible to pull himself out of it.

With Wolf it was easy. He merely had to let Wolf take over and he could hide for as long as he needed. He could ignore his feelings until they lowered to manageable levels again.

He can no longer do that. He has to carry these feelings all on his own, and there are so many times he fears they’re going to suffocate them. He hides just how unstable his state of mind is, having all his issues laid bare again would only make them even worse, but sometimes he feels like all it would take to shatter him in a thousand pieces is a single breeze.
When he feels like that, he’s found that there are two things he can do that allow him to claw himself back to a semblance of sanity. The first is to go to – Obito, Rin, Sensei – the Memorial Stone and dissociate for hours at a time. Not a productive thing to and he always feels wrecked afterwards, but it gets him out of the immediate danger of having a mental breakdown.

The second is to piss off Meiri. Not tease her like usual but genuinely annoy her. Push all her buttons until she snaps and vows to take revenge, until she calls him out on his behavior. Until she’s genuinely angry with him.

Having her angry with him makes it possible to regain control over the voice screaming that she’s going to die because she loves him. Not that she doesn’t love him even when mad, but having her angry with him is enough to soothe the terror threatening to pull him under.

He usually goes for the first option. Ruining Meiri’s day just because his issues are acting up isn’t fair to her. But sometimes the need to have her – stop loving him – angry with him is too great to resist.

Meiri never blames him for that. Oh, she gets mad at him, but she understands why he’s doing it. She’s willing to take this part of him in stride, as she does with every one of his neuroses. She’ll put her foot down if he does it too often, but otherwise she’ll let him off the hook with some harmless revenge.

Kakashi genuinely can’t understand why she – loves him – puts up with so much of his crap. It isn’t just this, it’s every time one his quirks, as Meiri calls his neuroses, acts up. Like his need to keep hidden from her loved ones. Does she want him to meet them, yes, of course she does. But she’s more than willing to give him the time he needs to get ready for that.

It isn’t a selfless act. The opposite. Meiri isn’t unkind but she is selfish. As long as she has him in her life in the way she wants, meaning in a committed relationship, she’s more than willing to ignore the frustration her friends feel at his refusal to introduce himself. There’s a limit to how much she’ll ignore of course, but it’s a pretty big limit. One made even bigger by her going out of her way to help her friends more than usual. She won’t apologize for not pushing the issue of him introducing himself, but she’ll offer some compensation for the frustration it causes.

Honestly, if it was up to Kakashi, he’d hide from her loved ones forever. It’s not like her friends need to speak with him. They’re Meiri’s friends, not his, and him avoiding them can only aid their continued survival. Especially when it comes to – Sensei’s son and Itachi’s little brother – Naruto and Sasuke.

Is the feeling that he’ll cause Meiri to lose her loved ones if he shows himself irrational? Yes it is.

Doesn’t stop him from feeling that way.

Of course, even in the best case scenario, he’d only be able to hide himself until Naruto and Sasuke graduate. That’s a milestone Meiri won’t let pass without him showing himself. And if he shows himself to Naruto and Sasuke, she’ll insist he introduce himself to her friends as well. It wouldn’t be fair to them otherwise.

Except he’s decided to introduce himself now. If he shows himself to her in public, she won’t let him get out of showing himself to her friends and Naruto and Sasuke. If he can reveal himself to strangers, he can reveal himself to her loved ones as well.

The irony is that revealing himself to strangers is a lot less anxiety inducing than the idea of introducing himself to her loved ones. Which is why he’s chosen to appear on an evening Meiri is closing down the teahouse on her own, her friends out on a date. All her friends already know about
him of course, but it’s different to show himself in person.

As for Naruto and Sasuke, he’s looking forward to that even less. Her friends he would only see occasionally, but Naruto and Sasuke? They would see him daily. They would interact with him daily.

Kakashi already knows how the whole thing is going to go down. Sasuke is going to be suspicious at first, but he’ll warm up when he sees that Meiri trusts him. Then he’ll start pestering him about training.

Kakashi can handle that. He already has several regimes in mind for both Sasuke and Naruto. The training at the academy is... adequate for what it's meant to do, but it’s also general. There are some variations per student, but it isn’t tailored to their specific needs. There are several points Naruto and Sasuke need to work on, and he’s long since composed different regimes to capitulate on their individual strengths and to lessen their weaknesses. He’s already giving them pointers through Meiri of course, but there are many things he can only teach them hands on.

Training he can handle. What he isn’t looking forward to is everything else. Naruto is going to accept him as part of “the family” right from the start. He won’t just pester him about training, though there will be a lot of that as well, but he’s going to drag him into games and make him awful drawings and ask him to show him “cool tricks” and basically destroy all the peace and quiet Kakashi finds in Meiri’s home.

Meiri, of course, is going to goad on Naruto and Sasuke the entire time. She’s going to enjoy every single moment of his suffering and she won’t feel a shred of shame over doing so. Sometimes he truly wonders why he – didn’t leave when he still had the chance – loves this woman.

Kakashi isn’t looking forward to introducing himself to Naruto and Sasuke at all. He – can’t love them – might be fond of them, but it’s a fondness best experienced at a distance. He’s perfectly happy keeping an eye on them for Meiri or passing along pointers for their pranks and training, but he doesn’t have any desire for more contact than that.

Unfortunately, being in a relationship with Meiri makes it impossible to avoid them in the way he wants to do. He can put it off, but he knew from the beginning that his decision to stay meant he’d have to reveal himself to them eventually. Ignoring Meiri’s awful attempts at denial, it couldn’t be more clear that Naruto and Sasuke are for all intent and purposes her children. Not in the same way, Naruto never knew – Kushina – his mother and so it was natural for her to take that place. Her relationship with Sasuke is different, she’d never try to replace his mother, but that doesn’t change the fact that she’s taken on the role of parent for him as well. Neither does it change that both Naruto and Sasuke treat her like she’s their parent, though Sasuke isn’t capable of admitting that yet.

He’s pulled out of his musing when Meiri goes into the kitchen. She’s putting some dirty dishes away, meaning he now has a set time to get into the optimal position to reveal himself.

He remains where he is instead.

Kakashi doesn’t want to do this. If he does this, he’ll no longer be able to pretend that everything is the same as before Meiri told him she loves him. It isn’t the same of course, but until now he’s mostly been able to pretend it is.

If he does this, he’ll no longer be able to do that. He’ll no longer be able to deny to the world at large that he’s in a committed relationship with Meiri.

He’ll no longer be able to deny that he loves her. Not that Kakashi isn’t excruciatingly aware of this
terrifying fact at all times, but by hiding their relationship from the world, his love for her felt hidden as well. Sure, their relationship might be public knowledge, but as long as he doesn’t confirm this fact, he can fool himself into thinking his love for her is still hidden.

He can fool himself into thinking that as long as he keeps his love for her hidden, there might be a small chance that he won’t lose her.

If he does this, that will change. If he does this, he’s going to lose her.

If he does this, he’s going to break.

Unlike before, Wolf won’t be able to take over until he can pull himself together again.

Kakashi closes his eye with a grimace, aggravated by his own thoughts. He’s overreacting. He knows he is.

Doesn’t make it any easier to silence the part of him screaming with terror.

He didn’t used to feel this way. Until Meiri told him she loves him, until their fight in which she tore apart his every denial, he didn’t fear for her safety. Oh, he’d been perfectly aware of just how vulnerable she is, but he didn’t truly believe something was going to happen to her. The deepest part of him assumed she’d always be there. Assumed he’d always be able to drop by and relax by bantering with her and by pushing her buttons. And by having brain melting sex, as Meiri so eloquently puts it.

That changed when – Itachi – the Uchiha Massacre happened. It made him break through Wolf for the first time since their fight, it made it impossible to stay away from Meiri. Made it impossible not to worry over her safety.

If the entire Uchiha Clan can be wiped out in one night, none of them are safe. Itachi might be a traitor, but everyone with even a lick of sense can see that something more is going on. Why didn’t anyone sound the alarm? Why were almost all the Uchiha in their District in the first place? There’d barely been a skeleton crew of the Police Force patrolling the streets, far less than should ever be allowed in peace time. And no one noticed when Itachi took out that skeleton crew.

Then there was the aftermath. Not so much as a whisper of the internal investigation was leaked. There were no purposeful rumors released, no spin given to the story. No damage control to lessen the blow to the Leaf’s reputation.

Most damning of all, the Third shut down any inquiry into the Massacre hard.

Itachi is a traitor and he wiped out his entire Clan. That is the only story allowed to circulate. And the fact that this is the only story allowed despite all the things that don’t add up, means something is very, very wrong.

It means – Itachi is a traitor – this was partly caused by internal politics.

Kakashi forces his thoughts away from – Itachi being a traitor – this topic. It he thinks too long about it, it starts driving him mad. Not merely because – Meiri isn’t safe – of the unease it inspires or because it makes him remember – Shisui and Itachi – that Itachi is a traitor, but because it just doesn’t make sense. It feels like he has all the pieces needed to understand what happened, yet for some reason – Itachi is a traitor – they refuse to come together.

Kakashi isn’t used to being unable to make sense of things. It’s – wrong – incredibly aggravating. So aggravating that he actually feels phantom itching in Obito’s eye whenever he thinks too long about –
Itachi being a traitor – this whole disaster.

It had been even worse in the beginning. Everything had been worse. His blind terror over Meiri’s safety, his struggle with Wolf’s absence and Tenzo’s – betrayal – involvement in it. His – pain – guilt over – losing – what happened to Shisui and Itachi. But he’d slowly been recovering. As time passed, he’d been able to gain control over the fear clawing at his mind, despite no longer having Wolf to hide in. There had been a few exceptions, Danzo’s visit to Meiri being the worst by far, but for the most part he’d been getting better.

He’d been getting better by watching over Meiri. By seeing her push through despite the fear she was struggling with herself. Fear that Sasuke would never recover, fear that taking him in would damage Naruto forever.

She feared that she was going to fail them both. Feared that she was going to have to choose between them. That she’d have to abandon Sasuke in order to save Naruto.

And still she didn’t give up. No matter how hard it got, no matter how many times she broke down, she always pulled herself together and kept going.

She kept fighting to become happy again. Kept fighting to make her loved ones be happy again as well.

She succeeded in becoming happy again. Not all the time, but the times where she was happy slowly started surpassing the times she wasn’t. Seeing that, seeing her recover from – losing Shisui and Itachi – something as painful as this, made it possible for him to start recovering as well.

And then Pakkun had the nerve to show himself to Meiri, and the confirmation that he was still watching over her was enough to make her decode their story. Or rather, one of the most – likely to happen – cruel versions of their story.

She forced him to confront the fact that he’s going to lose her no matter what. She’s going to die no matter what. Maybe, just maybe, it won’t happen soon – yes it will – but eventually she’s going to die. Eventually he’s going to lose her. And it will break him forever.

So why can’t he be with her until that happens?

Kakashi allows himself another moment to observe Meiri, before he pulls himself together. He said he was going to do this and he’s not backing out now. Because backing out would be useless. Him avoiding her in public doesn’t change the fact that everyone knows that they’re in a relationship.

Even so, he would’ve kept up his avoidance a lot longer if not for one important fact.

Gai knows. Gai, the person who harasses more than everyone else combined, knows. And unlike everyone else, Kakashi can’t threaten him into shutting up about his relationship while he’s within earshot. Gai just takes it as a challenge. And as yesterday’s harassment has proven, Gai is now constantly going to bring up his relationship with Meiri, asking how his “Beautiful Blossom” is doing, or chattering about the latest talk he had with her.

Because Gai is talking with Meiri. A lot.

That’s the worst part of this whole thing. Meiri likes Gai. She thinks he’s funny and entertaining. He’s already her favorite customer bar none, and only part of that is caused by the stories about him that Gai has no problem sharing.

Meiri and Gai are becoming friends. He knew that was inevitable, but actually seeing it happen is
something else entirely.

Gai – loves him – is never going to leave him alone. Kakashi was already well aware of this horrible fact, but Gai befriend Meiri means that he won’t be able to keep her presence separate from the – danger – rest of his life.

It means he can no longer delude himself into thinking his love for her is hidden. Which means it’s pointless to keep avoiding her in public as well. Not that Kakashi is going to make a habit of visiting her in public, but as long as he doesn’t do it even once, people are going to keep using her as an excuse to exchange information. It’s time to draw some very clear limits on what he’ll allow.

Using Meiri as an information hotspot isn’t something he’ll allow any longer. Gai has made sure of that.

When Kakashi finally finds out who orchestrated the slip up to Gai, he’s going to take revenge on an unheard of scale. And the very fact that he hasn’t been able to find definite proof of the culprit yet drastically lessens the pool of suspects.

He’s pretty sure Inoichi is the one behind it. Even ignoring his personal investment, this is exactly the kind of thing that meddlesome gossip would organize. Kakashi just needs to find a snippet of evidence to support his suspicions and he’s all set to go. Can’t harass the Head of the Yamanaka Clan without proof of his accusations after all. Or without blackmail, but Kakashi has long since gotten dirt on all the major players in Konoha. And most of the minor ones as well.

When his mental countdown for when Meiri leaves the kitchen reaches zero, he’s forced to admit he can’t put things off any longer. Putting some distance between himself and the Dancing Dragon, he grabs his current Icha Icha volume, opens it to his favorite scene, and unobtrusively slides out of stealth. Casually walking to the Dancing Dragon, careful not to notify the shinobi inside as to who’s approaching, he enters like there’s nothing out of the ordinary about him being here.

They way everyone falls silent and openly stares at him lifts his spirits a great deal. He might be having trouble with all the interest in his personal life, but he won’t deny it can be pretty entertaining as well. Meiri’s utter shock is especially satisfying. It’s been awhile since he caught her off guard like this.

She’s standing behind the counter, not yet talking with one of the customers, as he intended. It would be a shame to lessen the impact of his appearance by her first needing to finish a conversation before she can talk to him.

He walks forward while reading about Yami and Aiko being forced to share a room with only one bed, unobtrusively observing everyone present. Aside from Mio and Yuugao, he doesn’t personally know any of the shinobi present. He can take a decent guess at their rank and position just by looking at them, though. He can take an even better guess by analyzing where he’s seen them before and how they acted then.

Mio and Yuugao are the only Jounin present. Next to them there’s a group of three Chunin belonging to Intelligence, one of who is ANBU. There’s another Chunin that holds an administrative position in the Genin Corps, seated with two career Genin who work in Maintenance. No regulars, courtesy of the hour and this being one of Renji’s and Tori’s date nights.

He takes a seat at the counter, not bothering to hide his amusement at the shock aimed his way.

Meiri recovers first. A wide smile splits her face, every part of her radiating with joy. She knows exactly what it means that he’s showing up here.
She leans her arms on the counter, her stance so open that seven different ways to kill her instantly spring to mind. The number only continues to grow the longer he looks at her. It’s something that happens with every person he takes note of, but normally it’s more of a subconscious thing than anything else.

Not so with Meiri. With her, he’s always excruciatingly aware of just how vulnerable she is. It isn’t a big deal when they’re at home, but right now it makes his discomfort over this whole thing even worse.

She puts a hand beneath her chin as she look at him like a besotted teenager experiencing their first crush. Subtle Meiri is not. Which is part of why he was so reluctant to show himself to her in public. People can figure out a lot about his private life just from observing the way Meiri acts in general, and they can figure out a lot more by observing how she acts with him in particular.

Then again, her lack of subtlety does offer some interesting opportunities as well.

“Well look what the cat dragged in,” Meiri drawls like her every wish just came true. And like it’s the height of Wittiness. Kakashi contains a smile as – love – helpless affection rises. She might not be subtle, but Meiri’s ability to roll with unexpected happenings is nothing short of impressive.

“You really need to find some new material,” he mocks without halting his reading of Yami’s and Aiko’s antics or his observation of everyone present. Hilariously, him talking to Meiri is somehow even more shocking than him showing up in the first place.

He realizes he’s miscalculated when Meiri’s smile turns into a gleeful grin. He intended to barter like usual, and he’s succeeded in that. Too well, because he just gave her an opportunity to bring up Gai too great to resist. He doesn’t mind being teased about Gai at home, for the most part at least, but given his mood, he’d rather avoid it right now.

Seems he’s more rattled by showing up here than he realized.

To his relief, Meiri bites back the jab she wants to make. Sure, everyone present knows who she was about to refer to, but by keeping it unspoken, he doesn’t have to reply to it.

“Why mess with what works?” she counters instead.

“Here I thought you were creative,” he says, offering her a blatant opening. Showing his appreciation for her kind consideration.

As expected, Meiri pounces on his offer.

“And you say I’m unoriginal. The jabs at my creativity are getting old.”

They really aren’t. She isn’t annoyed by it for once, but under normal circumstances, implying that she isn’t creative is one of the easiest ways to rile her up. Not that riling her up is hard to do. She’s such an easy target.

However, this time he has a different target in mind.

“Then prove me wrong,” he challenges, still casual and vaguely amused, and definitely not grinning with anticipation.

“Oh, I will.”

The words dripping with innuendo cause Yuugao’s eyes to go even wider, while Mio’s jaw actually
drops. The others are just as affected. It’s one thing to know he and Meiri are sleeping together. It’s something else to have him confirm it like this.

Meiri drags her eyes away from him so she can look at the others. Her smile turns into a grin, as entertained by the reaction of their audience as he is.

Alas, her grin is enough to snap people out of their shock. Aside from Mio, everyone starts up some light hearted chatting, though they don’t make any effort to hide that all their attention remains on him and Meiri.

Mio, of course, keeps staring at them without even pretending to be polite about it.

Meiri returns her gaze to him and her grin turns into another besotted smile. The hand laying on the counter twitches in a telling way, letting everyone know that she’s used to pulling down his mask. It’s enough to make Yuugao fall silent and Kakashi can practically hear her brain crash. Mio and the others aren’t faring much better.

Meiri leans forward and kisses him over his mask, breaking their audience’s brains a little further. Part of him actually wants to pull down his mask so he can kiss her properly.

Most of him is ridiculously touched by her consideration. Kakashi is well aware that he is, as Meiri puts it, completely insane. All ninja are crazy from Meiri’s perspective of course, but that doesn’t change the fact that she’s right. From a medical view, he can’t be considered sane in any way. He’s a walking bundle of coping mechanisms who manages to hang on to functionality by the skin of his teeth. Some of those coping mechanisms take on very extreme forms.

Despite that, Meiri almost never urges him to leave his comfort zone. Not even unconsciously. And the times she does push, Kakashi can admit that she’s usually right to do so. He isn’t great boyfriend material by any definition of the word. Sometimes he needs a metaphorical smack to the head to ensure he doesn’t make this whole thing crash and burn.

He does his best to ignore the part of him insisting that Meiri won’t die if only he leaves her. Listening to it won’t accomplish anything. Even if he were to cut all contact with her, he’d never be able to bring himself to leave her unprotected. A fact Meiri is well aware of, which means she’d never stop trying to make him break his silence. And the longer he keeps quiet, the more vicious she’s going to become.

He really can’t take another incident like that of their story.

“I’m making miso,” she says. Normally he’d allow himself to smile, but the mere idea of being so open with his—love—affection where others can see sends cold chills down his spine.

“I’m touched,” he says in a voice that means he’s anything but. Meiri, perfectly aware of why he’s acting different than usual, reveals just how unusual his behavior is by letting her smile grow, but he’s fine with that. Or rather, he resigned himself to the fact that meeting her in public would reveal far more things about himself than he’s comfortable with. It’s only going to get worse when he shows himself to Naruto and Sasuke. In private, because the idea of being with those two in public is almost as bad as meeting Meiri in public.

Unfortunately, keeping their meetings private won’t prevent those two, Naruto in particular, from sharing every single thing they see him do with the world at large.

On the bright side, the revelations of how he acts at home are going to weird out a lot of people. Kakashi is looking forward to reinforcing the dichotomy between his reputation and what he’s
Lifting his gaze from his novel, he subtly shifts his balance to emphasize that his position is one in which he can take out anyone in the room before they can even react, and casually meets the eyes of everyone present. The sudden fear and wariness his blatant threat inspires is more than a little amusing. It’s even obvious enough for Meiri to pick up on it. Seems like he hasn’t quite lost his touch yet after all.

The Chunin from the Genin Corps and the two Genin from Maintenance decide that discretion is the better part of valor. They put their payment down the table and make themselves scarce, aiming a friendly and definitely not rushed farewell Meiri’s way. Meiri bids them a cheerful goodbye in return, her tone belied by the grin she wears. She might be far too revealing in some ways, but in others, she’s a perfect partner in crime.

It’s like she said. Neither of them are going to change their behavior. He’s going to ensure as little information as is possible about his private life gets out, and he’s going to keep messing with whoever he feels like. Meiri is going to keep living her life without any regard as to what people think of it, and she’s going to revel in the reactions his own behavior inspire. Teamwork at its finest.

Meiri looks back at him and gain another besotted smile. Her hand twitches in a telling way once more, informing everyone she’s about to kiss him again. Kakashi revels in the sensation and resists the urge to kiss her properly.

Despite the fact that he doesn’t kiss her back, her smile becomes even more infatuated.

It actually takes genuine effort not to give her an equally sappy smile in return. Kakashi isn’t used to hiding his expressions from her. He’s always been able to smile, grin, scowl, or let whatever else he’s feeling shine through. The only thing he had to modulate was his voice. Even his body language was free for the most part.

It doesn’t feel right to hide from her like this. Doesn’t matter that she’s perfectly capable of seeing through his act, it still doesn’t feel right. He doesn’t want to hide from her.

Not anymore.

It’s funny. In many ways their relationship is the same as before. They banter and tease each other. They leave each other notes and he stays out of sight much of the time.

In other ways, their relationship is completely different. He might remain camouflaged much of the time, but he’s also appearing whenever he feels like it. He's touching her whenever he feels like it. He plays games with her, making her look away from whatever chore she’s doing and completing it before she looks back. He’s letting himself be part of her life in a way he didn’t before.

He falls asleep with her in his arms and wakes up to her steady breathing and strong heartbeat.

Many things are different.

The way she smiles at him is exactly the same.

Really, even with his talent at self-deception, he should have noticed her feelings for him a lot sooner.

Or rather, he should have admitted to himself that she was in love with him. He didn’t because it would have meant leaving her, and even back then he was already in too deep. But he was still capable of leaving her.
He no longer is.

Strange how part of him doesn’t mind that.

Throwing caution in the wind, Kakashi turns his head so their audience can’t see his face and allows himself to look at Meiri like the love struck fool he is. Meiri’s smile becomes even warmer, revealing to their audience just what sentiment his own expression is conveying. He can literally smell their struggle as they try and fail to imagine what he looks like.

Most of his attention remains on Meiri, though. On the joy and love she’s revealing for all the world to see.

Talent for self-deception or not, he should have noticed that Meiri is head over heels for him a lot sooner. It’s not like she was being subtle about it.

But then, looking back, neither was he. Both of them were oblivious for a ridiculous amount of time.

Part of him is glad for that. If he’d realized what was happening sooner, he never would have ended up in this situation. Yes, this whole thing is terrifying, but he’s also happy in a way he hasn’t been in a very long time. In a way he didn’t think he still could be.

But really, he should have noticed a lot sooner.

Looking back, both of them were ridiculously obvious.

"I want you to meet someone very special."

"Who, nee-chan?"

"Brats. Meet the cat."

A loud gasp.

"We get to meet the cat that’s so cool where– whoa!"

"That’s not a cat."

"Where did you come from, one moment nothing then bamf you’re there!"

Another gasp.

"Can you teleport?"

"Mary, that’s not a cat."

"He is the catiest cat you will ever meet."

A snort, a grin.

"Well, maybe not the. Maybe."

An unimpressed look.

An excited yell.
"He's a ninja cat! Who can turn human and teleport! That's. So. Awesome, dattebayo! Hey, hey, can you–"

Movement.

"Whoa! Bastard, did you see? He teleported!"

"He stepped to the side to dodge you. Idiot. And he’s not a cat."

"No way, he teleported!"

"He really is."

"...He stepped to the side really fast. And he's not a cat."

"Sasuke, believe me when I say he really, really is."

Another unimpressed look. Movement.

"How did know? You have one eye!"

"...He's really a cat?"

"Can you teach me? Please, please, pretty please?"

Complete exasperation and resignation.

A soft smile.

"He really is."

And One Who Did

"You’re actually enjoying that piece of crap."

"..."

"Yeah right. You haven't stopped reading since you woke up, you’re enjoying it."

"..."

"Never figured you for a romantic."

"..."

"Are you... shit, you're smiling."

"..."

"No, you are. Your lips twitched, I saw."

"..."

"Oh for fuck's sake, stop reading the damn thing."
"..."

"Don't give a shit you're near the end, it's a piece of crap."

"..."

"In the end, they—"

"..."

"Fine, I'll shut up. Put those damn eyes away."

Itachi ignores Kisame’s continued grumbling and returns his now basic Sharingan to Mari’s novel. Using the higher form of his Sharingan might have revealed to Kisame just how important this story is to him, but Itachi—needs to stop seeing—cannot find it within himself to regret it.

He has already read the novel several times, could recite it word for word if he so wished, but right now he has a need to—block out the sight of—read it from start to finish once more. That need—to forget—is so strong he could not wait until Kisame was out of sight. Though he unsealed a spare copy of Mari’s novel instead of taking out the one he has read fifty-seven times. Even in his current state, the well worn copy would reveal more to Kisame than he is comfortable with.

A Hidden Kiss is a good story. Her best yet, in his opinion. The romance between the main characters is humorous and touching, and the resolution of the main conflict is emotionally satisfying. Even without the—anger, hatred, grief, pain—personal significance this story holds to him, he would have loved it—he no longer loves anything—As it is, he finds it comforting to—try to erase the sight of—read the evidence that his little brother is well cared for—as he must want—Ignoring the care Mari offers, Kakashi will protect Sasuke.

Kakashi would burn down the world to keep Mari safe. Given that by now Mari would willingly give her life to protect Sasuke, Kakashi’s full protection extends to him as well.

Mari will take care of Sasuke’s emotional wellbeing, and Kakashi will ensure his physical safety. Itachi—cannot afford to resent—is grateful for that. It—must be—is a boon he had not expected, given how deep Kakashi’s commitment issues run. Yet somehow Mari has managed to convince him to resume their relationship.

He is proud of her—Shisui would have been—This is an extraordinary accomplishment on her part. One that ensures Sasuke will be safe—as he must want because his little brother must be worth all the blood Itachi spilled—It will allow Sasuke to grow as strong as Itachi needs him to be.

One day he will meet his little brother again. One day he will be able to stop seeing the—blood, confusion, betrayal—death of—Kaoru, Nozomi, Saburo, Isamu, Tetsuro, Chiharu, Mother, Father, Shisui—his entire family.

Until then, Sasuke will be safe. Protected. Loved. Sasuke will be happy—as Itachi never again will be and cannot afford to resent—

His little brother is going to be all right.

Chapter End Notes
And so the story officially comes to an end. Hope you enjoyed! Also, a question. What do you think Mary looks like? I deliberately didn't describe her appearance, and I'm very curious as to what you imagine she looks like.
Sequel

I've posted a sequel to A Stranger! It takes place during Naruto canon and is written from Sasuke’s pov. Hope you enjoy!

(will be deleting this later on. I just wanted to inform people of the sequel)

End Notes

Beautiful art I commissioned for this fic. Comments, kudos and reblogs brighten my day :)

My tumblr

This fic is inspired by Dreaming of Sunshine, a self-insert fic written by the amazing Silver Queen. If you haven't read it yet, go do so RIGHT NOW. I promise you won't regret it.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!