Growing Strong (BEING REWRITTEN)

by silenceia

Summary

A young Jasmine Potter escapes a terrible home situation by teleporting herself to the Elemental Nations. Against all odds, she will turn her life around, gain family and friends, and finally… Grow Strong.

Warning: Abuse in first chapter, mentions of abuse in following ones.

Entire work is posted on Fanfiction.net.

Notes

I own neither Harry Potter nor Naruto.
Escape

13 July, 1987, Little Whinging

Harsh hammering against the door of my cupboard awakens me. Blearily I open my eyes and blink a few times, trying to clear my head.

"GIRL! Get up and make breakfast!"

More hammering. I kick the threadbare blanket off of me and swing my legs over the edge of the mattress.

"GIRL! Get UP!"

"I'm up, Aunt Petunia," I say. Then I grab my toothbrush and towel, push myself to my feet and walk over to the door, just as she rips it open and harsh light from the corridor shines in my eyes, causing me to stop and blink sudden tears away. She reaches for my shoulder and drags me out. I manage to keep from wincing when her fingers dig into the bruises that Dudley caused when he shoved me aside against a wall while running towards his friends. I don't think he even consciously registered my presence, which is probably a good thing.

Aunt Petunia sneers down at me. "Clean yourself up. You look like you slept in your clothes." Probably because I did. It's not like I own pajamas. "And your hair looks like rats live in it." I nod and walk to the bathroom. "And hurry it up! I want breakfast on the table when Diddykins comes down!" Petunia yells after me. "And good morning to you too," I think, closing the bathroom door behind me. Inside, I turn toward the mirror. The face that stares back at me is unnaturally pale and framed by dark red hair that actually does currently look like rats played in it. On my forehead, an odd scar shaped like a lightning bolt mars my otherwise flawless skin. Spring green eyes that seem too big for my face stare at me hauntingly. Other kids eyes don't look like that, I think. Sighing, I grab the hairbrush and attack my hair with it until it falls slightly less messy to my mid-back. Then I quickly strip off my clothes and get under the shower. Looking down at myself, I see the faded bruises lining my body. Images of Uncle Vernon flash through my head, his booming voice echoing "Worthless!", "Ugly!" and "Freak!", insulting my parents and praising himself for taking in ungrateful me, all while his fists crash into my small almost seven year old body.

I shake my head and shove the memories away, then turn the water on. If I don't hurry up, Petunia will come and yell at me. Thankfully, Uncle Vernon isn't awake yet this early on a Sunday.

After I finish my shower, I towel-dry my hair, brush it again and braid it, then dress myself and brush my teeth. I grab my towel and toothbrush and leave the bathroom. The Dursleys don't want me to keep anything anywhere in the house except for my cupboard, and I'm sure that if they could, they would lock me in there too and pretend I never existed. But they can't do that since they need someone to cook and do laundry and clean and mow the lawn and paint the white picket fence and wash the car and and and. I try not to think about this. And when I do, I tell myself: "You are Jasmine Potter. You like reading and learning complicated words, observing people and running. Someday, you will escape from here and you will be free. You'll have friends and a home. Someday, you will be happy."

After putting my things away, I walk into the kitchen, hearing the sounds of the television from the living room where Petunia is probably sitting with her eyes glued to the screen so she can't miss a single detail of whatever gossip surrounds whatever royal family today. This afternoon, she will be meeting with other women to drink tea and discuss the newly acquired gossip unless some scandal
happened to someone her little club actually knows. I'm glad they aren't meeting here at Privet Drive today. Petunia always locks me in the cupboard when the other women come.

While thinking about this, I take out bacon and eggs and set about making breakfast. Sunday mornings are my favorite, because Vernon and Dudley sleep in and Petunia watches the television. This leaves me alone in the kitchen with the food. On Sunday mornings I don't have to eat just scraps. And after breakfast, the Dursleys will go to church where freaks like me are not allowed, but that's okay because they'll take me to stay with old Mrs. Figg and she lets me eat lunch and after that, she takes a nap. She usually makes me take one too, but I know that she'll fall asleep in just fifteen minutes and then sleep for around two hours. And in those two hours, I get to go to the living room and read her books. Mrs. Figg has a lot of those, most of which are romance novels, but there are also books full of mysteries and adventures, books containing freedom, happiness, beauty and knowledge. They take me into foreign and strange worlds far away from Little Whinging. Those two hours of reading are worth having to spend time with Mrs. Figg who constantly rambles on about her numerous cats.

I have finished making breakfast, just as Uncle Vernon comes down the stairs with Dudley right after him. Petunia comes into the kitchen and greets her husband, then smothers Dudley in hugs and kisses and silly nicknames.

Breakfast is always a surreal affair for me. While they sit and eat and talk, I quietly clean the stove, scrub pans and pots until they are perfectly clean and put things away. It's like I'm invisible, a ghost floating around silently, here but not here. The Dursleys don't notice me observing them, studying them. At first glance, they seem like a perfect family, eating together in familial bliss. But looking closer, there are fissures in their perfect image. Vernon drones on about the government, his business and how much better he is than his colleagues and how he could do a so much better job than his superiors. Petunia replies with gossip about the neighbors and what knowledge she has acquired while watching the telly earlier. Occasionally they take breaks from their respective topics to marvel over Dudley when he actually says something instead of cramming as much food as possible in his mouth. Usually his sentences start with "I want". None of the three actually listen to each other. It is not just me that is removed from them, they are removed from each other too, and they don't even know it.

After breakfast and cleaning up, I am sent to my cupboard while the Dursleys get ready to go to church. For Petunia, this means putting on makeup and a flower-patterned formless dress that hides what few curves she has. Vernon will put on a suit complete with an obnoxiously colored tie. Dudley will play computer games until his mother comes and dresses him in knickerbockers and a dress shirt and then places a straw hat on his pudgy head.

It is the same. Every. Single. Sunday. Every Week of every month of every year since I can remember. The thought of having to endure this for years to come is distressing. I'm trapped in a prison without bars, wearing shackles that no one sees, pressed down by weights made of dull routines.

"GIRL!" Uncle Vernon bellows. And I walk out of my cupboard and follow his voice, because I am 'girl' and in this house, I don't even have a name.

The rest of the day progresses as expected. Petunia sends me over to Mrs. Figg where we sit on the couch and stroke her cats and I pretend to listen to her talk and talk and talk about them. Hours later, she gets up to make lunch and leaves me with her cats. They at least are blissfully silent. Sometimes I wonder if I should feel guilty that I like them more than her.

Until two years ago, I used to adore Mrs. Figg. She actually called me by my name and talked to me.
I craved that attention she seemingly gave me. The realisation that I was wrong about her came after my first week of school.

I had been excited for weeks about starting school. I had told her all about which school I would go to, that I would read tons of books and find friends, and she had smiled and nodded. When I visited her that Sunday after my first week in school, she never mentioned school. She sat me down on the couch, handed me Ms. Emmy and was near tears telling me how Mr. Tibbers had had a splinter in his paw and the poor dear was limping. She never noticed that I wasn't walking right because I had twisted my ankle during my very first game of 'Jasmine-hunting'. That was when I realised that I was nothing more to her than the girl who listened to her talk about her cats. She didn't care enough to want to know me. She didn't notice when weeks later I stopped smiling and started flinching at sudden hand gestures in my direction.

After lunch, Mrs. Figg goes to lie down and I pretend to do the same. When I'm sure she is asleep, I sneak back into the living room. I walk over to the shelves and pull out a book. Then I sit down and proceed to lose myself within a world where people are strong and good always wins. Where girls like me get saved.

Petunia comes to get me about two hours before dinner which is always at 7 pm. Apparently after the Dursleys had lunch at a restaurant after going to the church, she went to her tea drinking club and Vernon took Dudley to a Rugby game. The only reason she tells me this is because she expects her darling Duddykins and her dear husband to be beyond starved when they return, so I am expected to peel what feels like thousands of potatoes and chop hundreds of onions while she prepares steaks and salads, and I just know that we will have so many leftovers that they would rather save them for tomorrow instead of giving some to me, especially since they know I got lunch from Mrs. Figg.

When Vernon and Dudley return, they are indeed hungry and in addition to that agitated because they were stuck in a jam on their way back. I don't think it could have been that bad since they are still in time for dinner, but Dudley acts like he is a returning war hero long believed to be dead by his family and Vernon is in a foul mood. I suspect that as much as he loves his son, being stuck with Dudley in a car with no escape had him entertaining the idea of giving him up for adoption. Upon their return to Privet Drive Vernon goes straight to the drawer in which he keeps his whiskey and pours himself a glass, glaring darkly at nothing in particular. Suddenly I am glad that I will most likely be sent to my cupboard.

I shouldn't have assumed I would be that lucky.

The Dursleys have sat down and I am carrying over plates of food over to the table. When I am bringing the salad bowls Petunia made for every member of her family separately depending on their likes and dislikes, Dudley kicks at my legs and I lose my balance and the salad ends up all over Uncle Vernon's shirt and trousers. I start to tremble as I watch his face go from its normal reddish color to puce and then to purple. Then he stands up and barely a moment later I bounce of the wall and the left side of my face is burning where he backhanded me. *Get up get up get up run away!* My mind screams at me. I only manage to turn my head in the direction of his voice that is roaring at me but can't quite overcome the rushing in my ears. I watch disoriented as he stomps over to me and grabs my forearm and hauls me to my feet, dragging me into the corridor in the direction of my cupboard. Once there, he buries his fist in my gut, driving all air out of my lungs *oh god I can't breathe* and throws me to the floor, my head hitting it painfully. His leg moves and something heavy slams in my side and I can feel something crack, *are those my ribs?* Vernon turns and stalks out, slamming the cupboard's door behind him, shutting the light out.

I don't know how long I lie there, taking in shallow breaths of air, trying desperately to hold on to
consciousness, counting my own heartbeats because there is nothing else to focus on.

...sixty-eight, sixty-nine, seventy...

"I can't do this anymore," I whisper into the darkness.

...seventy-three, seventy-four, seventy-five...

"I need to get out of here."

...seventy-eight, seventy-nine...

Sometimes really weird things happen around me. Like that time I turned my teacher's wig blue. And that other time when Dudley shoved me against a wall to get to his friends faster and something just clicked inside me, and suddenly he was tripping over nothing and crashed into all his friends and all of them fell over.

...eighty-three, eighty-four, eighty-five...

And then that time when I desperately wanted to escape from Dudley and his gang and was suddenly standing on a rooftop.

...eighty-nine, ninety, ninety-one...

I thought I was desperate then.

...ninety-eight, ninety-nine, ninety-ten...

I wasn't.

But now I am.

So I focus everything that I am, every fiber of my will, on wanting to escape, on desperately wishing to go somewhere they can't follow. Somewhere I can grow strong. Where I won't be alone anymore.

Somewhere to belong.

...ninety-eleven... no that's not right...

And the wish grows inside me, filling me, and I feel power surging through my veins, and I make it coil around my wish, pressing it into one tiny drop of wantwantwant.

...better start over again...

And then I let it loose.

It burns through my body, scorching me inside, and then my body isn't enough and it bursts OUT, lifting me off the ground, whirling and whirling and whirling around me, and I hear wild laughter somewhere in the distance is that me? and then it starts pressing in on me, drowning me, crushing me into tiny pieces but I don't fall apart because it pushes me together and it hurtshurtshurtsmakeitSTOP!

And then it's gone.

...one... two... three... ... ...
I'm not in my cupboard anymore.

...four... ... ... ... five... ... ... ... ...

I think I am dying.

...six... ... ... ... ... seven... ... ... ... ... ... ... eight... ... ... ... ... ...

Over me, leaves sway in a gentle breeze, the moon illuminating the gigantic tree that I am lying under. Around me I can see a lovely clearing full of flowers with little star-shaped blossoms blooming in the moonlight.

*Not a bad place to die.*

As I fall asleep, a ghost with a dog-mask lands in the branches above me.
Awakening

Waking up is usually a quick affair in my case.

Not today. When I first become aware of myself, my mind feels like it's floating through space. It's a nice feeling. There are no worries, no dangers, no pain, no thoughts. So I stay there. Can minds smile? If they could, mine would probably have a really dopy smile on its mind-face. And maybe giggle stupidly. I could stay here forever, I think. Mind-me blinks in realization. Heeeeeyyy... I have thoughts again! I find this hilarious. I mind-giggle some more. Being dead is funny. Wait, I am dead? No one answers my question. Maybe I should try talking to myself. Or thinking to myself. I think I will call it thalking. Then I realize that thalking to myself would be pointless since I can't tell myself anything I don't already know.

Now that I am actually thalk- I mean thinking about my situation, I decide that I don't want to stay here forever after all. Being dead is going to get boring really fast. I decide that this can't possibly be the end.

Shouldn't there have been a tunnel with a light at the end? Or just a light without a tunnel? Maybe a flock of angels? Then again, with all this darkness around me, I can't really see anything. Idiot, I think. Of course you can't see anything when you have your eyes closed.

So I open my eyes.

I blink. My vision is blurry but clears when I blink some more. A woman in white clothes is leaning over me, eyes focused on where I suspect my chest is located. I can't really feel my body, so I have to guess where everything is. I manage to move my eyes around so I can see what the woman is staring at. However, what I am seeing doesn't make sense.

The woman's hands hover over my ribs. From her hands, pale green light is spreading out and seeping into my body. I stare at this for a while, then I manage to tear my eyes away, refusing to even think about what is happening. To distract myself, I look at what I can see of the rest of my body. Bad idea. It's not very pretty. Dozens of needles stick out of my skin, connecting tubes to machines that I can see out of the corners of my eyes.

A man walks into my field of vision, he too is wearing white. His mouth moves and the woman straightens and turns towards him. His mouth moves again. I realize he is talking, but I don't hear a thing. My hearing is gone.

It's too much for me. Black closes in on me and I fade away.

The next time I wake up, my mind is much clearer. I open my eyes and look around. I think I am in a hospital room because it looks similar to one I have seen on the telly when Aunt Petunia watched a television series that took place in a hospital. My being here probably means I am not dead, which I'll consider a good thing so long as the Dursleys are far away from me. The needles are gone which I am really grateful for. I tap my hand on the mattress. My hearing is back, thank God.

The room I am currently in is not the one that I woke up in before. This room is bright, with white walls, light grey floor and a large window. From where I am lying on the bed, I can only see the sky that seems so much bluer than I remember.

I try to sit up but my arms won't support me and I fall back onto the pillow. I decide to stay there.
Even this little movement has exhausted me. Instead of moving, I finally allow myself to think about what happened. *Did all that really happen?* I ask myself. It must have, because the Dursleys have never even taken me to a doctor, much less a hospital, so someone else must have brought me here. But from what I remember of my injuries, I should have been in pain, and I am not. I shouldn't have been able to even try to sit up like I did earlier, and I didn't feel any pain when I fell back down. And the woman with the green-glowing hands, how could she have been real? Hands don't glow. I decide that some of what I remember might be real, but my brain may have added a few details. Then again... whatever I did to leave my cupboard, all that power... are glowing hands really so impossible?

My thoughts get interrupted when a knock sounds and what I recognize as a nurse steps in. When she sees me awake, she smiles at me and says something in a different language and looks at me expectantly. *Uh-oh,* I think.

"Excuse me. Do you speak English?" I ask her. *Please say yes, please say yes...*

She looks confused. "Nani?" she asks me. My stomach drops.

"That's a no, isn't it? No English?"

A blank stare is my answer. Then she says something else and almost runs out of the room, slamming the door shut behind her.

Great. Just great. I have finally managed to escape, and where do I end up? Somewhere no one speaks my language. And not only that, she didn't even recognize the word 'English'.

*Where the heck am I?*

I decide to give sitting up another try. I need to look out of that window. It isn't easy, but this time I manage. Exhausted, I sit on the bed. Now that I only need to turn my head to look outside, I am scared to do it. Something tells me that once look, nothing will ever be the same again. But then again, I wanted a new life. So I take a deep breath, but before I can turn my head toward the window, the door opens and three men walk in.

They don't look like anyone I have ever seen before. The one that must be their leader since the other two are flanking him is an old man with tan skin and a white goatee. I don't spend much attention on his face because his clothes distract me. Mainly his hat. He wears a red robe held together with a white sash and a white loose jacket around his shoulders. On his head sits a large red hat and adorning it is a symbol, which is what is distracting me. I am pretty sure that symbols like that are mainly used in Asian countries. Maybe I am in China or Japan?

The other two men both wear dark clothes with olive-green vests that look like they are really sturdy. They also wear fingerless gloves that have some sort of armour too protect their hands. Aside from their clothes, they look very different. The one on the left wears a red sleeveless jacket over his vest and his long ash blond hair is worn spiky on the top of his head and tied in a long ponytail in the back. A headband with a metal plate engraved with a symbol I have never seen before is tied around his head. *That symbol must be important to him if he wears it on his forehead,* I muse.

The last man wears a sleeveless jacket over the rest of his outfit too, but his looks to be made out of some sort of skin. His dark hair is tied back in a ponytail that is so spiky it reminds me of a pineapple. Two scars mar his face.

It's not the way they look that makes me think that the three of them are dangerous. It's the way they
hold themselves, the way they walk, the way their eyes take in every single detail of the room in an instant, and I decide that I want to be like that someday.

I wonder what they see when they look at me.

I'm tiny for my almost seven years and too skinny for even my small height. I don't have a mirror, but after what happened to me, my skin is probably even paler than usual. I don't even want to think about what my hair looks like after who knows how many days of unconsciousness.

I wonder if they notice the haunted look in my eyes. I'm almost completely sure they do.

They stop a few steps away from me. I stare at them. They stare at me. Now I know what insects must feel like when they are caught and observed under a magnifying glass.

"Please tell me one of you speaks English." I decide to break the silence.

Blank looks. Bugger.

The blond man says something. Now it's me giving them a blank look.

Some tension seems to leave their bodies. The two men flanking the old man exchange a quick look, barely noticeable, then look at me even more intensely than before. I think the blond one may have said something that would definitely have drawn a reaction from me had I been able to understand their language. Now there's a thought. Maybe I should try the same thing.

"When I sneeze, elephants come out of my nose." No reaction. They definitely don't speak English. Considering what I just said, that's probably a good thing.

We stare at each other some more.

"I'm so glad this isn't awkward or anything." Some part of my brain wonders what's wrong with me. I normally hate talking in front of others since the reactions of the listeners usually consist of either derisive laughter, harsh words or condescending stares as if I wasn't even worth answering to. In Uncle Vernon's presence, I don't talk at all unless directly spoken to which almost never happens.

The old man suddenly smiles at me warmly. I wonder why. It's not like I have done anything that could have endeared me to him. I look at him confusedly. He says something and smiles at me some more. The other two start to smile too, the pineapple-haired one chuckling and saying: "Mendokuse." I'm pretty sure I was just the subject of a dumb joke.

Pineapple-Man steps forward and points to himself. "Shikaku." he says. Then he points to Blondie: "Inoichi." Inoichi points at the old man, saying: "Hokage-sama."

"Jasmine Potter," I say. Blondie repeats my name, stumbling over the syllables awkwardly. I frown. That's going to be really annoying if nobody can pronounce my name. Then I have an idea. I mimic writing something in the air and Hokage-sama produces a pencil and a scroll out of some hidden pocket of his robe. He gives both to me. I study the scroll carefully before I figure out how to open it. Once it's opened, I draw a few jasmine flowers. Then I hold show them the scroll, pointing at the picture, saying "Jasmine" and then pointing at myself.

Their faces light up with understanding. "Riko," Hokage-sama says, pointing at me. "Riko?" I repeat, testing it out. Then I nod and smile at him. I can live with Riko as my new name. It's still my name, only it sounds different.

For a few seconds nobody says anything, but it isn't as awkward as it was before. Then Hokage-
sama sighs. "Inoichi." he says, and from his tone, I can tell he has just given an order. Inoichi straightens. "Hai, Hokage-sama!" he replies, then walks toward me. I tense. Then his hand suddenly stretches out toward my face and I throw my arms up to protect myself, scooting backwards until my back hits the wall behind me. Inoichi pulls his hand back fast and takes a few steps backwards, lifting his empty open hands as if trying to tell me he meant no harm. I don't think I believe him. Out of the corner of my eye, I can see Shikaku and Hokage-sama exchanging grim looks.

Oh god they are mad at me no no no please don't hurt me!
I cringe, awaiting the pain, but it never comes. They just stand there watching me while I draw in panicked breaths, arms still up guarding my face, knees drawn to my chest to protect the upper part of my body. Eventually Shikaku grabs the scroll that must have fallen to the floor when I moved and pulls out a pencil of his own, drawing something. Then he walks towards me and I tense even more, but he only lays the scroll on the bed and takes a few steps backwards.

I lower my hands and pull the scroll towards me, the whole time never taking my eyes of them which is really difficult considering Inoichi is standing at the foot of the bed and Shikaku has rejoined Hokage-sama on the right side of my bed. They don't move from their spots, so I decide I can chance a quick look at the scroll.

I look at the picture Shikaku has drawn and have to laugh. It's a really crappy drawing of a small person in a bed with three stickmen standing in front of her, lifting knives to a cute-ugly looking monster-dragon-thing with fangs. One of the stickmen wears a ponytail and the top of his head seems to be on fire, one has a rectangle over its head that might be a hat and the third one's head looks like a pineapple. The person in the bed...

"My hair does not look like that!" I say and give Shikaku an offended look. At least I hope it doesn't.
I decide to find a mirror and a hairbrush sometime soon. Shikaku smirks at me, which is when I realize that the tension has faded from my body. I narrow my eyes at him. He's a sharp one.

I turn my head toward Inoichi again when he moves towards me, and this time I don't panic. He sits down on my bed and reaches for my head again. Then he sees the scroll and gives Shikaku an evil look, hissing something at him while pointing at the stickman representing him. I'm pretty sure he is complaining about the depicted hairstyle too. Shikaku continues smirking. Hokage-sama shakes his head like an indulgent grandfather.

Inoichi turns toward me again. I stare at his face. His green eyes are friendly, and I manage to not flinch when his hand comes to rest on my forehead. He closes his eyes and something flows out of his hand into my head and suddenly I am not in the hospital anymore.

Salad flies through the air and hits Uncle Vernon. He backhands me, drags me put of the kitchen and to my cupboard. His fist sinks into my stomach and I can't breathe anymore. His foot crashes into my body. Then I am alone. Power courses through me and out of me and crushes me and then I lay dying under a tree.

I am in school. Behind me, I hear running footsteps and then something shoves me against the wall. I look up and see Dudley's plump backside moving away from me, running towards his usual group. I narrow my eyes and glare at his back, and then something in my head clicks and Dudley is flying headfirst into his gang and the floor is filled with wailing seven year old boys trying to entangle themselves from each other. I laugh.

It's my sixth birthday. The Dursleys locked me in my cupboard yesterday evening and have left the house. I don't know how long it will take them to return. I'm really thirsty.

A rolled-up newspaper hits me on the back of my head and wakes me up. Disoriented I look around.
My math teacher with the newspaper in his hand sneers at me and says something mean. All the other kids laugh at me. Then, the teacher's wig is suddenly an electric blue color.

Aunt Marge is visiting and I am serving dinner. Aunt Petunia and I prepared a lot of food, so I don't think I'll have to be hungry tonight. When the Dursleys finally lean back patting their stomachs, I walk towards them to clear the table. Right in front of my nose, Marge takes the leftover roastbeef and potatoes and places them in front of the two bulldogs she brought. The food is gone in seconds.

I am running from Dudley's gang. Piers Polkiss said earlier today that he would break my leg when they catch me. I don't really believe him, but I am scared anyways. I can run faster than them though, and I think I can hide in the gardens on Primrose Lane. But Andy Mitchell is suddenly coming from that direction and I have to dart into an alleyway and I run and it's a dead end but I don't stop running and then wind wraps around me, lifting me up and releasing me on a rooftop within a split second.

I am in the grocery market with Aunt Petunia. A man in purple robes notices me. Tears start filling his eyes, and he grabs my hand and shakes it while telling me what an honor it is to meet me.

Aunt Marge has come to visit. She and Uncle Vernon are now in the living room drinking whiskey. Marge yells for me to bring her dog food. I walk in and they are talking about my parents. Marge says that if kids turn out wrong, it's always the mother's fault. I turn toward her and Vernon and ask her how that is possible when Vernon looks like a walrus and she like a bulldog and their mother can't possibly have carried the genes for both animals. That evening Vernon hits me for the first time.

The first week of school has passed. I am sitting with Mrs. Figg on her couch, cuddling Ms. Emmy while my heart is breaking because Mrs. Figg never acknowledged me the way I thought she did.

It's my second day of school. I am standing in the school's playground. In front of me, Callie Andrews and her friends sneer at me and mock my looks and clothes. I laugh and then open my hand in front of Callie's nose. Sitting on it is the spider I swiped from the bushes next to me while she was busy talking. Callie screeches and she and her friends run away while I laugh. They never mock me again.

I am four and a half years old. Mrs. Figg is asleep and I am supposed to be napping, too. But I don't need to sleep in the daytime when I can do that in my cupboard whenever Vernon makes me go in there. I think once I am bigger, I'll be able to do more chores and then he'll have a reason to let me stay outside. I tiptoe down the corridor to the living room. So often have I wanted to look at Mrs. Figg's books, and now I finally can. I study the titles, then I pull out a book about flowers. Reading page after page, I am fascinated how many different flowers there are. I turn to the next page and my name stares back at me. I start to smile. My name is a flower and it's in a book! I read the page about Jasmine over and over until I can recite every word written on it and the image of my flower is burned into my memory.

I turned four three days ago. After Vernon leaves for work and Petunia goes upstairs to play with Dudley, I sneak out of my cupboard. Running silently to the kitchen, my goal is not the fridge but Uncle Vernon's newspaper that he left on the table. Then I run into the living room where under a mountain of Dudley's toys a book is buried. It's a children's book that is supposed to help kids learn to read with the help of pictures. Aunt Petunia tried to use it to teach Dudley to read so he'd have an advantage in school, but after five minutes, he threw it into a corner and started to cry. The book has since been forgotten by everyone except me, and I grab it to hide it and the newspaper under the mattress in my cupboard. Next Sunday during naptime at Mrs. Figg's, I will teach myself to read the newspaper.
I am three years old. I am sitting terrified in the cupboard under the stairs. Uncle Vernon grabbed me earlier and told me that this is my room now because he doesn't want Dudley anywhere near me anymore. Something crawls over my left hand. I give a small shriek and shake whatever it is off. Then I curl into a tiny ball on my mattress and start to cry.

I wake up to loud rumbling. I open my eyes and an enormously hairy face looks down at me. We are flying through the air. I start to cry because my face feels cold because of the wind and Mama and Papa aren't here. The man holding me looks sad and rumbles something with a deep voice, and eventually, I fall asleep again.

I am sitting happily with my Mama and Papa on the floor. Mama is cutting crowns out of paper while Papa taps his wand to them to make them golden and glittery. I giggle and clap my hands excitedly. Mama asks him to get something to drink for her and Papa kisses her cheek, ruffles my hair and walks out of the room and down the stairs to the kitchen. Mama laughs softly and runs her hand over my hair to smooth it down. Then a crash sounds from downstairs. "Lily! He's here! Take Jazzy and run!" "Fool!" An ice cold voice hisses. "You cannot run!" Crashing sounds come from downstairs. Mama jumps up and takes me and runs to the fireplace that we sometimes sit in front of while Papa reads me a story. She throws something into the fire, but nothing happens. She takes a deep breath and hugs me tightly to herself while walking over to my cot, and then she lays me in there. The crashes downstairs have stopped. Mama leans over me, her long beautiful red hair touching my face and whispers to me: "Don't worry, Jaz. I won't let anything happen to you. Mama and Papa love you very much, sweetheart." A teardrop falls onto my cheek. Then she straightens and stands in front of me as someone enters the room. "I won't let you touch her!" Mama hisses at him. "Stand aside, you silly girl!" the cold voice from before orders. "I only want the girl!" "No, not Jazzy, never Jazzy! Take me instead!" Green light flashes and Mama falls to the floor unmoving, green eyes staring up at the ceiling blankly. Something enters my line of sight. It walks towards me, cold red eyes glaring at me hatefully. His wand points at me. "Avada Kedavra!" the Thing hisses, and green light hits me and then it flashes back to him and its high cold voice screams. The world around us explodes and I scream too, but I stop in horror when something cold and WRONG worms its way into my head and it hurts so much. I want my Mama and Papa but they don't come and I cry and cry and cry until everything goes dark.

I'm back in the hospital and I can't breathe. My skin feels icy cold and I am shaking and I can hear a high-pitched whine that sounds like it's coming from a dying animal. Someone grabs my shoulders and says something to me and my head shoots up to look at the blond man and I don't want him to touch me! I try to shove and kick him away and I am back in the room with Mama lying on the floor - why won't she move? - but when I blink I am back on the hospital bed and I clutch at my head, fingers digging into my forehead - rip that Thing out of me! – and something touches my neck and everything goes dark.
Numb

When I open my eyes, it's nighttime and I'm alone. I'm lying on my bed and something is keeping my arms from moving. When I look at them, I can see bandages on my wrists tying them to the bedframe. They are probably meant to keep me from trying to claw my face off again. That kind of behaviour might be frowned upon in a hospital. I wiggle my arms experimentally. I can still move them along the frame of the bed, so I push myself to sit up, leaning against the wall behind me.

I take a deep breath. Push the air back out. Stare up at the ceiling. Look at the walls. Look at the drawn curtains of the window. I wished they were open. I'd really like to see the sky.

I feel numb. Cold. I know I should probably try to sort my head out, but I can't muster up the motivation. Coward, a part of my mind whispers. So what? I think back. I'll do it later.

Instead I try to figure out where I am. Somewhere far away from Little Whinging and Britain, that's for sure. The symbol on the old man's hat is probably Asian, but that doesn't mean I'm actually in Asia somewhere. I didn't recognize any of the three men's clothing styles, but Shikaku and Inoichi's clothes – don't think about Inoichi! – seemed to be made for combat. But they can't be soldiers since they don't wear their hair short. Maybe they are Hokage-sama's bodyguards? I frown. That can't be right either. They seemed to be too independent for that.

Then there's the language thing. Hokage-sama didn't recognize English, and he appears to be some kind of leader. So if someone important doesn't recognize a universal language like English, what does that mean? And it's not like I've sent myself to some outback village cut off from civilisation, there is electricity here and they definitely have very good doctors.

Maybe this is some sort of hidden society? That would explain their odd clothes. And glowing hands could be normal here. They might all be able to do weird things, and they need to hide it from the rest of the world. If normal people found out about that, who knows what they would do to them?

With a start, I realize I am not one of the 'normal people'. Neither were my parents – don't think about that!

I frown. I'm still nowhere near close to figuring out where I am, but at least I have a theory what this place is, so long as I ignore the part of my mind that screams "It's impossible!" at me.

I stare into the darkness around me for a while, not really seeing anything.

Mama and Papa were murdered.

The thought breaks through the numbness.

Vernon and Petunia always told me they were worthless drunks who died in a car accident, and because of that, I never thought about them much. Now that I remember the truth, I don't know how to feel. A part of me wishes I had never found out and I hate myself for that. But thinking about how much they loved me, when I know they are long gone? It kills me inside. Before, I never knew how much I lost.

Selfish. I deserve to suffer. It's my fault they are dead. The Thing was after me.

I wonder if being placed with the Dursleys was my punishment. I wonder if I should return to them.

I try telling myself that it wasn't my fault. My parents could have run. Mama even told the Thing to
I take her instead. I was just a kid. I still am just a kid. I've never hurt anyone that hasn't hurt me before. I am not a bad person.

I almost manage to believe myself.

I think about the monstrosity that killed them. Red eyes, chalky white skin, reptile-like nostrils in place of a nose. It wasn't its looks that made it so fearsome. It was the so blatantly flaunted hatefulness on its face. Monster, a voice in the back of my mind whispers fearfully. I tremble remembering the terror. Then a completely different feeling breaks through the fear.

I want to kill it. Make it suffer. Break its bones, make him bleed, see the cold light fade from its red eyes, looking up at me begging for mercy that it won't receive. It took my loved ones away from me. Hatred and rage build up inside me, replacing fear, overriding the sadness and pain. My hands curl into fists.

Anger is good. It makes me feel strong. I've always been so weak. Enough of that.

I've had enough of being scared.

I must have fallen asleep at some point, and when I wake up to the nurse coming in, the numbness is back. The nurse says something, but I turn away from her and look at my right hand. So small and soft. Pathetic.

I register when the quality of the light changes when I hear the nurse draw the curtain and open the window. I can't muster up the motivation to look outside. Dead, dead, dead. Your fault, your fault, your fault, my mind whispers to me.

The nurse leaves and when she comes back, she places a tray with food in my lap and unties my wrists. A distant part of my brain registers that I haven't eaten anything since coming here. I should be hungry, but I'm not. I just stare blankly at my breakfast.

The nurse takes something from the tray in her hand. I hear a snapping sound and then she places something in my right hand. Looking at it, I see it's a pair of sticks. I think I'm supposed to use them to eat, but I have no idea how. When the nurse notices how awkwardly I hold my sticks, she must realise this and proceeds to show me how to eat. Then she sits in a nearby chair that I didn't notice before and watches me. Apparently, she isn't leaving until I have eaten up. Maybe she thinks I'll stab myself with my sticks and try to drown myself in the small bowl of soup that is part of my breakfast now that I am no longer tied up.

I manage to awkwardly eat. It takes a while. I have no talent whatsoever in eating with sticks.

Wonderful. Not only do I have to learn a new language, I have to learn to eat too.

After I have eaten, the nurse ties my wrists once again to the bedframe and then takes the tray of empty dishes and leaves. I'm not alone for long though. Soon enough, Inoichi enters. He says something that I interpret as a greeting. I recognize the word 'Riko'. My name here. I decide I like how it sounds. 'Jasmine' sounds soft and pretty. 'Riko' has a... stronger ring to it.

I register Inoichi looks tired. I'm pretty sure he saw all the memories he made me relive yesterday. I wonder if he only saw them or if he lived them like I did. I'm hoping he lived them. He made me relive all that pain. He better have felt it too.

He moves toward me. When his hand reaches for my forehead again, I don't even try to pull away. I
should be scared or maybe angry after what he did to me, but I don't feel anything. I still feel numb inside. Detached. Like this is happening to someone else.

A part of me is hoping I'll see my parents again when I feel that strange energy seeping from his hand in my head again. But that's not what happens. Instead of falling into my memories, information falls into me.

Hundreds of foreign words and their meanings flow into my head, corresponding symbols flashing before my inner eye. Sentence structure and word order. Diction. Pronunciation. So much information, I am drowning in it and my head feels like it's going to burst and all the words will come spilling out on the floor and fill up the room and fall out of the open window. The pressure inside my head grows and grows and I think I'm going to scream.

And just when I think I can't take anymore, it stops and Inoichi takes his hand off me. I fall back against the wall, gasping for air. My mind is drowning in information; inside my head I'm tossed around by a whirlwind of words like a leaf in a hurricane.

Inoichi touches my head again and I fall unconscious.

I wake up again. I'm back to lying on my bed instead of sitting. My wrists are still restrained. That's okay. I don't feel like moving anyway. My head feels like someone took a sledgehammer to it from the inside. At least I feel less numb now.

The chaos in my mind has settled somewhat. It's still a complete mess but I am not drowning in all the new knowledge anymore. Which is when it hits me.

_Inoichi gave me a language._ I laugh at the thought, but I stop because my laughter sounds unhinged.

I spend the next few hours trying to sort out the chaos that is my brain. I pick up word after word, examine it and its meaning and put it to wherever its English counterpart is stored. Look for the corresponding symbols – _Kanji_ – and the information on how they are supposed to be pronounced. Try to create a sort of mental filing system. Attempt to make my mouth form the unfamiliar sounds. It's time-consuming work, but rewarding. It will probably take a while until I can speak this language, but I think I might be able to understand what people are saying around me.


During reading time at Mrs. Figg's house, I used to love looking up the words I found in the books I read. I couldn't own anything material, so I collected words like other people collect stamps or coins. My vocabulary might be larger than Uncle Vernon's.

I think I'll try to forgive Inoichi for invading my mind. Giving me a new language and so many words more than makes up for it.

I don't know how much time has passed when the nurse comes in again carrying another tray of food. Just like before, she unties me and watches me eat. I don't pay her any attention. I am too deep in thought and also distracted fumbling with my _chopsticks_. Before she leaves, I ask her _– I can communicate again!_ if I can use the bathroom. I'm pretty sure I butchered the sentence horribly, but she helps me stand up and walk to a door I hadn't been able to see from my bed. Is it normal for hospital rooms to have adjoining bathrooms? It seems pretty luxurious to me.

In the bathroom that thankfully looks like the bathrooms I am used to, I look into the mirror and give a distressed whimper. The nurse gives me a sympathetic glance and pats my shoulder.
Apparently my hairstyle was the only thing Shikaku drew accurately in his silly little picture.

I've had enough of worrying over my appearance. Petunia for some odd reason never wanted me to cut my hair even though she constantly complained about how it looked. I narrow my eyes at my reflection. No more. I turn toward the nurse and ask her to cut my hair.

She hesitates but then nods and leaves the bathroom. While she is gone, I use the toilet and then turn to the mirror once more to study my reflection. I don't really look any different from when I was at Privet Drive. Still small and scrawny and pale. My eyes look somewhat dead though. In the bathroom's light, the lightning-bolt scar on my forehead stands out against my skin.

I pause. Does my scar have anything to do with the Thing that crawled into my head? And what am I going to do about the Thing anyways? The thought of something so vile and wrong sitting inside my head, possibly behind my scar, disgusts me. I feel violated. What if it's doing something to me? What if it's rotting me from the inside?

I squash that line of thought. Nothing good will come of it.

The nurse enters the room again carrying a chair, a pair of scissors and a comb. She sits me down on the chair and tries to run her fingers through my hopelessly tangled hair. She asks me a question. I have to search my mind for a little until I can piece together what she said. "How much do you want me to cut off?" was what she wanted to know. I suppress the brief joy I feel at being able to understand what she said and think about her question. Then I indicate with my hands how much I want her to cut off. She considers it, then she nods and starts snipping off the long strands of red, sometimes turning my head a certain way and running a comb through my hair.

I'm tense at first, nervous at having a stranger touch my head so freely and hearing the snipping sounds the sharp and pointy scissors make. I relax after a while though when nothing bad happens. After what I think was about half an hour the nurse is finished and turns me to the mirror.

My hair now reaches just past my shoulders. The red waves still look tangled and messy and wild, but in a good way. It's a layered haircut and looks easily manageable. In the front, my hair is shorter and frames my face nicely.

If I were less skinny and pale and if I didn't have my scar, I might consider myself pretty.

My head feels so much lighter now. It's a good feeling.

"Thank you," I whisper to the nurse.

She smiles at me. "You are welcome." Then she points me toward the shower, collects her haircutting supplies and leaves me alone. I hear her come in a few times while I shower, probably to clear away the large amount of red hair that's on the floor. When I step out of the shower, I see she has left a towel and clothes for me.

Looking into the mirror after putting the dark T-shirt and light grey shorts on, I think I look like a new person. The difference a new haircut and clothes that actually fit me make amazes me. I straighten up. I'm not the weird looking girl that lives in a cupboard anymore. Now I am a survivor.

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When I step out of the bathroom, Hokage-sama and Shikaku are waiting for me. I cast a searching look around, but Inoichi is nowhere to be seen.

"Good evening, Riko-chan," Hokage-sama says friendly. "How are you feeling?"
It takes me a bit to figure out what he said. I'll have to practice communicating with people. Considering I'm not much good at conversation even in English and will also have trouble forming the foreign words, that'll be awkward. Still, it's a hundred times better than having to learn the language from scratch. Thanks, Inoichi.

"I am feeling ... better," I reply, stumbling over the words.

"I can see that. You look very pretty, by the way."

No joke. The last time he saw me, I looked like Medusa and was trying to claw my face off.

I walk over to the bed and sit on it. I feel tired. My mind is exhausted, and my body is still weak. Let's get this over with, I think.

I try to think of a good start to this conversation but can't come up with anything. And I can't even talk about the weather because I still haven't looked out of the window. Which reminds me of the reason I wanted to look outside in the first place.

"Where am I?"

Hokage-sama sighs deeply as if preparing for something. "You are in Konohagakure no Sato in the Country of Fire," he says. I frown. His answer doesn't make anything any clearer. "Where is that country? Somewhere in Asia?" I ask. He seems to think about how to answer. "The Country of Fire is part of the Elemental Nations," he says eventually. Before I can ask, he takes a deep breath and tells me: "You aren't in your world anymore. You... traveled dimensions."

I want to ask him to repeat that because I must have misheard that. Ask him if he's joking. Tell him to stop lying. Impossible. No way. Can't be. Stop joking. You're lying!

I don't do it. My voice has gone missing. I think I'm going to faint. Again. That would be my fifth time unconscious since coming here, a part of me registers. I decide I'll stay conscious after all. I shake my head, trying to clear it. Take a deep breath and count to ten. Force myself to think this through.

I walk over to the window and look outside.

My room has a great view; I'm probably on the fourth or maybe fifth floor of the hospital.

I can see a city. The roads aren't paved and I don't see any cars or bicycles. There are light-colored houses with colorful roofs. On the roofs people are running at insane speeds, occasionally leaping from house to house, flying right over busy streets. I see a man walking up a wall. Another one appears out of thin air, surrounded by a whirlwind, leaves scattering everywhere.

I look at this for a few minutes. Then I turn away from the window, walk back to my bed and look at Hokage-sama and Shikaku again. My mind that was in complete disarray before now feels crystal clear. No fear. No doubts. It's not the numbness from before, it's far beyond that.

"So what happens now?" I ask calmly. Hokage-sama looks surprised at my lack of panic and frantic questions.

It's Shikaku that answers me. "No one can know. Only the Hokage, Inoichi and I know that you aren't from this world. Should certain men find out about it, you'd be better off dead. Especially if they learn that you had the power to send yourself from one world to another."

"Why are you helping me?"
Hokage-sama looks serious. "Because what was done to you is unforgivable. There is no greater sin than hurting a child. I would like to offer you a home here in this village."

As if I have anywhere else to go.

"But you hurt me too. You made Inoichi read my mind. Made me relive all those things. Why did you do that to me?"

"Riko-chan, this world is dangerous. We needed to make sure you weren't a threat. The technique Inoichi used was designed by his clan to find and examine the memories the target's mind considers the most important. It was not his intention to make you relive all that you have been through. And once the technique started, he couldn't stop it without risking damage to your mind."

"Where is he?"

Shikaku answers me this time. "Inoichi is resting. The technique to transfer knowledge puts an enormous strain on the user's mind."

I am silent for a while, thinking about my situation and what answers I need.

"That power I used. The things I have seen people do here. Tell me about that."

"The power is called 'chakra'. It is the mixture of the physical and spiritual energy a person has. We use it to perform our 'jutsus' - our techniques. The things you have done so far were uncontrolled and triggered by your emotions. You will likely never be able to recreate your previous actions," Hokage-sama explains. It takes me a little while to translate what he told me. Good thing he doesn't talk that fast.

"So I could learn to control this... 'chakra' and learn 'jutsu'?"

"You could if you chose to become a shinobi and enter our Ninja Academy. Shinobi are the main military power of this village and the Country of Fire. Most of them come from 'Hidden Villages' like Konohagakure. Hidden Villages train ninja from a young age so that they can perform missions such as acting as bodyguards, gathering information, retrieving stolen items and hunting criminals. Ninja are expected to be loyal to their village for life and defend it from any threat."

I am silent for a long time.

"I can't make that decision right now. How much time do I have until I am too old to enter this academy?"

"You can be admitted so long as you are under the age of nine. To be granted admission, you must be willing to protect Konoha and endure hard training. You are also required to be healthy in mind and body."

I am almost seven years old right now, which means I have a little over a year to decide if I want to become a ninja. Since a healthy body is required and I'm seriously malnourished, I couldn't enter right now anyways. As for the healthy mind... I should be able to fake it. Except for one thing.

"What about the Thing that crawled into my head?"

"Ahh, I was wondering when you were going to ask. Riko-chan, it's already gone. Your mind is completely your own."

I blink. My previous unnatural calmness is shattered. "What? What do you mean it's gone? How the
heck did that happen? When did it happen? I didn't notice a thing! How do you even know it's gone? Are you completely sure? And-" I blurt out in English, but I'm pretty sure they understand what I'm saying anyways.

"Slow down, Riko-chan," Hokage-sama interrupts me, looking amused. Before I can say something I will regret – how dare he treat this as a laughing matter? – Shikaku explains.

"When you were first brought here, you were dying. Our doctors worked on you for hours. Your heart stopped three times. It's a miracle you survived at all. We're assuming that the parasite left you when your heart stopped, and it didn't come back when your heart started beating again."

I don't believe him. It sounds too good to be true. After all the bad things that have happened to me, this problem just solves itself while I'm asleep? It can't be real. But I can't quell the small spark of hope that is growing inside me.

"Inoichi examined your mind yesterday after you were knocked out. He would have found anything that didn't belong into your mind."

I draw a shaky breath. "Why didn't I notice it leaving?"

"You didn't even know it was there in the first place," Shikaku deadpans.

I'm somewhat grateful that he doesn't mention I was technically dead at the time the Thing supposedly left me. I really don't want to think about the fact that I came back from the dead. Three times. I'll obsess over that later when I'm alone.

Well. Apparently they really do believe the Thing is gone. Since they were paranoid enough to make someone read my mind on the off chance I might be a threat, I'm inclined to believe that they were thorough in verifying I'm not possessed.

I'm not possessed! The Thing is gone, gone, gone! I mentally sing happily.

And I only had to die multiple times to get rid of it. Let's not think about that, I tell myself again.

"So," I say out loud. "What happens to me now?"

Shikaku smirks at me. "You are coming with me."

I blink. "I am?"

"You are."

I wait for Shikaku to become a bit more forthcoming with an explanation. He stays silent. I decide to stare at him until he cracks. He continues smirking -so annoying!-, not bothered at all. I feel like we're playing a game and the first one to talk is the loser.

Hokage-sama shakes his head at us. "Shikaku has offered to adopt you into the Nara Clan since you will need help adapting to life in Konoha. In this village, being a member of a clan also offers you a considerable measure of protection. Officially, you'll be a distant civilian cousin of Shikaku's wife and you had to move here because you recently lost your family. You two can work out more details later."

"Adopt me? Why would you do that?" I ask Shikaku, completely dumbfounded. Helping me and explaining things to me is one thing. Making me a part of his family? Completely different. There's got to be a reason for it.
"Yoshino-chan always wanted a daughter" Shikaku says, still wearing that annoying smirk.

Apparently I'm not going to get an actual explanation. I'll have to find out on my own. There has to be some kind of ulterior motive. I'll play along with whatever Shikaku is up to until I know what he wants.

"Fine," I say. "When do we leave?"
As it turns out, we can leave immediately. Apparently I look surprised at this, because Hokage-sama tells me that my body should be fully healed from the aftereffects of my world-switching since I've been in the hospital for three weeks.

Three.

Weeks.

I put that on my rapidly growing List of Things to Absolutely Not Think About In The Near Future. I'll focus on the more immediate concerns.

I ask about the aftereffects he mentioned.

"The way you used your chakra put an enormous strain on your body, especially considering your age. Since you pushed a large measure of it uncontrolled out of your body, you damaged your chakra system. It's not permanent damage, our medics ensured that, but the subsequent trauma it resulted in means your body and mind won't let you use your chakra in that way ever again, even if you wanted to."

Great. Not only did I beam myself to another world, I almost killed myself doing so. Actually, I did kill myself since my heart stopped. And stop that train of thought right there. That's on the List, remember?


Oh joy. That probably means the members are all completely weird. "Freak!" I can hear my uncle's voice echo through my head. Shut up! You don't get a say anymore!

I've teleported myself into another world. I technically died three times and came back. I woke up from a coma. Vernon seems so inconsequential now.

After Hokage-sama has procured a pair of open-toed shoes for me, we walk through a bunch of corridors to a lift which transports us downstairs. Stepping out, I can see we are in a large hall wherein a pretty nurse sits behind a counter filing something. Some people are waiting in front of her. An illuminated sign on the wall behind her reads 'reception' which takes me entirely too long to decipher. Note to self: Practice reading.

Shikaku taps me on my shoulder and I flinch, noticing that I haven't moved since leaving the lift. He leads me towards the large double doors leading outside while Hokage-sama walks over to the counter. Looking back, I see him joining the end of the waiting line, but when the people notice him, they bow and let him walk to the counter, where the nurse instantly snaps to attention. Huh. Hokage-sama must be more important than I thought, given the respect those people show him.

I lose sight of them when we step out the door. Outside, the air smells clean and good. I can hear birds singing and people talking in the distance. There is a large area of green grass in front of the hospital. Trees are growing along the high wall that surrounds both hospital and the surrounding area. For a moment, I think I see a person moving in a tree, but it must have been my imagination. A paved path leads in a straight line from where we are standing to an opened but guarded gate in the wall. Behind the gate, I can see a busy street.
It's beautiful. Peaceful. Nothing at all like Little Whinging. For the first time, I think that I might like staying in Konoha. I don't think I'll ever get tired of how fresh the air smells. So alive. Everything seems so much more vibrant here.

Or maybe I was just in the hospital too long.

Shikaku pulls me a bit to the side so we don't block the hospital entrance while we wait for Hokage-sama. He doesn't attempt to make conversation, but I think he is watching me while I look around. He isn't looking in my direction though when I sneak a covert glance at him.

Hokage-sama joins us a minute later and Shikaku holds his hand out to me. I eye it like one would look at a venomous viper. He doesn't take the hand back. "Take my hand," he says.

"Why?" I ask, eyeing it suspiciously.

"So you don't get lost." His slow drawl is so annoying.

"I'll be walking right next to you," I say.

"Don't be troublesome."

"I'm not. You are."

"If you don't take my hand, I'll pick you up and carry you." My eyes widen in near-panic at the thought of that much physical contact with another human being.

I slip my small hand into his large one. It feels calloused and warm. I stomp down the part of me that likes the feeling.

The three of us set out along the pathway toward the gate. The guards greet Hokage-sama and Shikaku. They call Shikaku 'Nara-sama'. Does that mean that he's the leader of this 'Nara Clan'?

We walk through the gate and I stare. I'm suddenly glad that I am holding Shikaku's hand. I saw the city from the window, but being right in the middle of it is completely different. People are everywhere, talking to each other, bowing and calling greetings when they notice Hokage-sama. He is soon delayed by well-wishers and acquaintances while Shikaku and I keep moving. I'm glad for that. This would be even more distressing if people crowded around us.

I try to take everything in while we walk. The houses, the stores, the people... I try to read the street signs and advertisements. Keep an eye out for ninja. I see a group of children running into a side street, throwing wooden stars and knives at each other. Shikaku is actually really helpful. He points out different restaurants and stores, telling me what they sell. He points out a few ninja and explains to me how to recognise what clan they come from. Ninja clans, I learn, are groups or families of shinobi. Different clans are known for distinctive fighting styles and take pride in different values.

There are the Inuzuka who work in partnerships with dogs and are fiercely loyal to those they consider part of their pack. One can easily recognise them by the red markings on their face and their elongated canines.

We see an Aburame Clan member that wears their characteristic sunglasses and a wide cloak that hides almost all of his body. Apparently they house colonies of bugs in their bodies that they can use for different things. I think this is really creepy in a cool way.

Creepy but not as cool are the Hyuuga with their white eyes that they can see chakra with. I don't get how that benefits them, but to each his own, I guess.
Shikaku talks for a few minutes to an Akimichi who comes out of a restaurant to greet him. The large man shoots me a curious look, but Shikaku doesn't introduce us.

I want to ask about the Nara Clan, but I'm distracted when we enter a different street and turn to the right. My mouth drops open. The street we are on now must be Konoha's main street, and at the end of the street is a red tower, a sign on it proudly displaying the kanji for 'fire'. But what captured my attention is the rock wall behind that. More specifically, the four giant faces that have been carved out of the rock and proudly look over the village. The third face looks familiar. Isn't that old man Hokage-sama?

"They are the Hokage, the leaders of Konoha. They are acknowledged as the strongest ninja to have ever come out of the village."

Huh. The old man is apparently the strongest of a village of people with superpowers. And I thought he was a nice old man.

We walk toward the tower and enter it.

Inside, Shikaku leads me past a desk and up a set of stairs. There are a lot of ninja here, most of them wearing the same green vests that Shikaku and Inoichi wear. Some of them call greetings to him. A lot of them give me curious looks.

There are some female ninja too. I eye them interestingly. I've never met women that can fight. The female ninja look so confident and strong. I want to be like that. Guess I'll be going to the Academy in a year then. *I need to get stronger.*

We walk along a hallway past many closed doors. "Where are we?" I ask.

"This is the Hokage Tower," Shikaku answers me. "We're here to acquire your citizenship and file the adoption papers."

I'm really going to be staying here. And I'm going to be adopted. In my hospital room, this seemed all so far away. Now it's minutes away from happening. I take a deep breath and force myself to stay calm. I'm getting really good at that.

We walk into an office. Shikaku releases my hand and sits behind a desk – must be his office then – and points me to a couch. Grateful I sink into it. I won't admit it to Shikaku, but I'm exhausted after our walk here. So much has happened today.

I look around the office. It's well lit thanks to the large windows. The wall on the opposite side of the couch I'm sitting on is taken up by shelves filled with books.

It's a nice room, I suppose. Comfortable. We sit there for a while without saying anything. I'm guessing we are waiting for Hokage-sama.

The silence is getting to me. Without the distraction of the busy streets, the thoughts begin to creep up on me. *I need a distraction.* "What's the Nara Clan like?" I ask hastily. Shikaku looks at me and I think he knows exactly what I'm doing. "Well," he says. "We like to play shogi and we sleep a lot."

What am I supposed to reply to that?

I'm saved from having to answer by a knock on the door, then Hokage-sama enters. He's carrying a few papers that he puts in front of Shikaku who mutters "Troublesome" and begins filling forms out. I turn to Hokage-sama. "What's the Nara Clan like?" Shikaku looks up from his writing to give me an amused look.
"Well. The Nara Clan is known for their intelligence and also their extensive knowledge of medicines. They use special jutsu that entails the manipulation of shadows. I'm sure Shikaku will tell all about the clan if you ask him."

I give him a look. "He said they like to play shogi and sleep a lot," I tell him. Hokage-chuckles. "That they do, Riko-chan, that they do. They are great ninja though when they are motivated." The last part of that statement sounds ominous. Apparently I'm joining the clan of lazy people. At least they are supposedly smart. Shikaku definitely is, even if he is annoying.

I sigh and lean back against the couch. I want to close my eyes just for a bit, but I'm worried I'll fall asleep. "What's shogi?" I ask.

"It's a two-person strategy game. I'm sure you will be playing it soon."

Shikaku stands up and hands the filled out papers to Hokage-sama, then turns to me. "Welcome to the family, Nara Riko."

After we have said our goodbyes to Hokage-sama, we leave the tower. Shikaku has taken my hand again. I didn't resist this time.

I'm overwhelmed. Dazed.

Nara Riko. Member of the Nara Clan.

"Welcome to the family." I'm trying very hard not to hyperventilate.

"We're here," Shikaku says, startling me. I didn't realize our surroundings changed. We are in a calmer area of the village now. There are a lot of trees and hidden behind them are houses and gardens.

I am lead to a fairly large house surrounded by trees. Shikaku opens the door and we enter and take our shoes off. I look around. The interior is kept simple and spacious with wooden furniture. It's comfortable and well lit. I could learn to feel at ease in here.

Shikaku leads me through the house to another room. "We're home," he says, entering the room. Home. This is my new home. Wait, who did he talk to?

I follow after him into what I see is the kitchen. A boy my age who looks like a younger Shikaku slouches at a table. At the sink, a brown-haired woman is cleaning dishes. She turns towards us. For some reason she is glaring at Shikaku.

"Ahh, sorry I'm late," he says, scratching his head sheepishly. "Yoshino, Shikamaru, this is Riko-chan. She'll be joining our family." Family. Oh god.

The two of them turn to look at me. Then the boy yawns. "Troublesome..." he says. I get the feeling I'll be hearing that word a lot in the future. I've already heard Shikaku say it a few times.

"Shikamaru! Don't be rude!" The woman hisses. Then she turns to me and her behavior completely switches to friendly and warm which is really unsettling. "Welcome, Riko-san. I'm Yoshino. It will be good to have another girl here."

"It's nice to meet you, Yoshino-san," I say. My slow speech and careful pronunciation causes her to raise her eyebrows, but she doesn't comment. She points at the boy. "This lazy one is Shikamaru.
And he is going to help me set the table for dinner now," She says threateningly. Shikamaru mutters "Troublesome" again.

Shikaku pushes me toward the table to sit down. I'd offer to help Yoshino and Shikamaru, but at this point I don't think my legs will carry me much longer. I give Shikamaru an apologetic look when he sets a plate in front of me.

The table quickly fills with food and soon we all start eating. *Chopsticks, here we go again,* I think.

The food is delicious. And I can eat all I want.

"So where are you from?" Shikamaru asks me. Shikaku answers for me in a serious tone, "Riko is Yoshino's distant civilian cousin from the Country of Birds. She is here because her parents died recently in a bandit's attack."

Shikamaru's gaze sharpens at this and I realise he might be a lot smarter than he acts. "I see," he mutters. "Troublesome."

Yoshino looks searchingly at Shikaku, a grim look on her face. Then she gives him a nod. "Well," she says. "Are you going to be a ninja?" I nod, causing Shikaku to raise his eyebrows. *Right. Haven't told him about that decision yet.*

Yoshino answers me. "Good. I will train you, since you won't be able to learn the clan jutsu. We'll start in a month, once you have put on a little weight."

"Thank you," I tell her softly. She frowns. "Don't thank me yet. I won't go easy on you."

Nothing much is said after that. After dinner, Shikaku shows me upstairs to my new room. I should probably inspect it, but I'm so tired, I just go in and fall on the bed, still in my clothes. Shikaku chuckles and ruffles my hair. I tell myself I'm not protesting because I'm too tired. *Good night, Riko-chan."

"Good night, Shikaku-san," I whisper back and fall asleep.

A/N: You guys are amazing. So many reviews! As a bonus, I've written a scene from this chapter in Shikaku's POV. Enjoy!

**Shikaku**

Shikaku watches the little girl eye his hand as if it's going to bite her. She looks adorable, frowning like that. Not that he can tell her that at this point in time. It's too early for that kind of teasing.

"Take my hand." he tells her. She doesn't.

"Why?" she asks, still eyeing his hand. He can see a hint of fear in her bright green eyes. Kami, he wants to kill those relatives of hers that forced her to become so paranoid.

"So you don't get lost." he drawls slowly, which seems to annoy her. Good, that will distract her.

"I'll be walking right next to you." she almost growls her reply.

She surprises him. So tiny and fragile. Her eyes look haunted. But when she isn't scared or thinking about her past, they sparkle like there is a thunderstorm inside her head.

Yesterday, after Inoichi read her mind, she broke. The keening sounds she made, the way her fingers
dug into her head, drawing blood... But today, she is different. Determined. She stands bolt upright, analysing every single word that is said to her, every single thing she notices.

*Will of steel*, he thinks. *She'll be one hell of a fighter someday.*

"Don't be troublesome." he tells her, annoying her even more. She can't deal with kindness yet. Irritating her will have to do for now.

"I'm not. You are."

He was the best person to take her in. The Hokage wouldn't have been good choice; he is already too busy to spend much time with his grandson. Inoichi wouldn't work either. After seeing her past, he'd never treat her like a normal girl. So he volunteered to adopt her. Troublesome, but no way around it.

He didn't expect to like her so much.

"If you don't take my hand, I'll pick you up and carry you."

Her eyes widen, he sees her fighting down the fear. He feels almost guilty when he sees that, but it's worth it when she slips her small and soft hand into his. Her eyes soften for just a moment.

Nara Riko. He's looking forward to being her father.
Family

Chapter Notes

Some people have been asking me if Britain and Hogwarts will actually be important in this story. The answer is, yes it will be extremely important, but we won't meet anybody from England until the end of the sequel that I'm planning. This series will be consisting of four parts, and Britain will be dealt with in Part III.

I wake up. From the light that falls through the window, I'm guessing it's early morning. I look around the unfamiliar room from my bed.

It's spacious. The floor is made of wood. There's a desk with a chair, a closet, a dressing table and an empty shelf. *I wonder if I'll be allowed to keep books here.* A nightstand with a lamp on it sits next to my bed. The lampshade is cream-colored with little images of deer on it. Looking towards the window, I can see the curtains match the lampshade.

My room is beautiful.

*My room. New home. Clan. Family.* The thoughts make me feel like I'm on the verge of a panic attack. I guess it will take time to get used to it.

I sigh. *I really switched worlds.*

The thought is so ridiculous; I consider breaking into insane laughter. And yet, it actually happened. There is no other explanation for my being in this place other than all this being a very long and incredibly detailed dream in which I can actually feel pain. Extremely unlikely. Then again, so is dimension-traveling.

I don't yet know if I can consider being here a good thing. What I do know is that not being in Little Whinging anymore is a very good thing.

I'll just have to make the best of it. It's not like I have any desire or even any way to go back.

I get out of bed.

In the closet I find some clothes that Shikaku must have gotten for me. I grab a T-shirt and shorts and set out to find a bathroom. When I step out of the room, I see Yoshino who is just moving in my direction. "Good morning", I say.

"Good morning, Riko. I was just coming to wake Shikamaru and you up. It's good to see that one person in this house besides me wakes up early. We'll be eating breakfast at eight." I nod in understanding and then ask her where the bathroom is. She tells me and then strides toward the room across from mine while I leave in the direction she indicated. Behind me, I can hear her hammering her fist against the door while yelling for Shikamaru to wake up. Poor him. I know what that feels like.

After cleaning myself up I make my way back to my room since I still have a few minutes to spare. Shikamaru's door across from mine is gaping wide open and when I sneak a quick look inside, I have to grin. I guess now I know why Yoshino woke Shikamaru up the way she did.
From the looks of it, Shikamaru managed to crawl out of his bed after being woken up. Now he is lying on his stomach soundly asleep on the carpet. Out of its ponytail, his hair is sticking up in every direction. It looks like a black, fluffy hedgehog. I have the strangest urge to run my hand over it.

I walk inside, kneel beside him and shake his shoulder. "You know, we have to go down for breakfast soon, and I'm pretty sure Yoshino-san will come and wake you up with a bucket of water or something if you don't show up on time," I say. "So you might want to get up." Shikamaru makes a muffled unintelligible noise.

"Was that a 'troublesome' or a 'five more minutes'?" I ask him. He mumbles something else. I look at the alarm clock on his nightstand. The alarm that he obviously didn't set. We have about three minutes left. No way will he be on time. Unless... "I can delay her for five minutes, but you better be downstairs then. You have about eight minutes." He grunts something else, then one of his hands moves and gives me a thumbs up. It falls back limply to the carpet a moment later.

I'm not entirely sure why I decided to first enter his room and then to help him. I don't even know him. Maybe I feel sympathetic because of the way Yoshino woke him up? Or it might be because seeing him like that on the floor genuinely amused me and I haven't had much to laugh about lately. Or at all.

Shoving that depressing thought away, I make my way downstairs to the kitchen. "Good morning" I greet, entering the room. Yoshino is setting the table, Shikaku is already sitting. "Morning, Riko-chan," he says. "Sleep well?" I nod. Yoshino greets me as well. Since I have a word to keep, I ask her about the different foods on the table, thereby distracting her from Shikamaru's absence. He arrives a few minutes later. Yoshino gives him a sharp look and looks pointedly at the clock but doesn't say anything when he sits next to me.

Breakfast is mostly silent. Shikamaru looks as if he's going to fall asleep any second and Shikaku doesn't seem to be a morning person either. I'm not necessarily shy, but I don't much like talking either, so I don't initiate a conversation. Yoshino seems to be deep in thought about something so she stays silent too.

After breakfast, Shikaku leaves for work. He says good-bye to Shikamaru and me and tells us to not be troublesome, whatever he means by that. In this household, that word seems to hold many meanings.

Shikamaru and I help Yoshino clean up the kitchen, then she orders Shikamaru to show me around the house and the clan compound. The tour of the house doesn't take long, though I would have liked to stay longer - much longer - in the library.

We leave the house through the back door. There is a nice garden there and adjoining it is what Shikamaru tells me is the family training ground which I eye interestingly.

He leads me through the compound, pointing out a few houses that either belong to especially 'troublesome' clan members or have some sort of function, like the clan's meeting hall. We walk past a shrine that is so well hidden between the trees, I wouldn't have noticed it had Shikamaru not pointed it out. A cluster of buildings contains the clan library, research facilities and a small clinic.

Shikamaru is pretty good company. I think he may have taken a liking to me as well after I helped him this morning. It's kind of hard to tell with him though.

I notice a large area that is surrounded by a high wooden fence. I can't even see where the fence ends. Behind the fence there is a meadow that ends at the edge of a forest.
"That's the Nara clan forest. The deer we tend to live there. Only members of the Nara Clan may enter. Want to walk closer?" I nod. Shikamaru leads me toward the fence. "The entrance is a little farther away from here and we wouldn't be allowed inside without an adult anyway. But I know a spot that's got a good view."

His viewing spot turns out to be a wide branch on a particularly large tree near the fence. Shikamaru shows me where to step, so climbing up is easy. We are only three meters above the ground, but the difference that makes is amazing. We sit there in companionable silence for a while, looking over the meadow. Then a small group of deer led by one with large antlers steps out of the forest.

Thump. My heartbeat is suddenly very loud in my ears. I'm feeling lightheaded. My breath comes in short bursts. I can't stop staring at the stag. "Riko?" I barely hear Shikamaru's voice over the rushing sound in my ears. "What's wrong?"

"My heart hurts," I whisper.

We leave the tree soon after that. Neither of us says anything.

My mind is in chaos. What the hell was that?

"Are you okay?" Shikamaru asks me.

No. I'm not okay.

"I'm fine."

He doesn't believe me, of course. But he accepts my answer and doesn't ask more. He doesn't even say it's troublesome.

We arrive at the house. Inside, we join Yoshino in the kitchen to help prepare lunch. I'm on autopilot. I just do as I'm told. I don't even taste the food that I eat.

After lunch, Shikamaru grabs my wrist and pulls me outside on the porch that overlooks the garden behind the house. He leaves me there and goes back in the house to come back with two cushions that he places on the porch floor. He pushes me down to sit on one, then goes back inside and returns with a wooden board and two small bags. He sits on the other pillow in front of me and then sets the board between us. Handing me one of the bags, he opens his own and pulls a number of wooden pieces out of it, setting them up on the board. Looking down at the bag in my hand, I ask: "What are we doing?"

He looks up from where he is moving the pieces in place. "We are playing shogi."

Shikamaru helps me set up my side of the board and then explains the rules to me. I make him repeat them for me and then we play.

I quickly revise my opinion of him. Shikamaru isn't smart. He's a genius. He annihilates me.

I narrow my eyes at the board.

"Again," I say.

We play away the whole afternoon. I still get annihilated, but I think I'm starting to get a feel for the
Shogi is just what I need to turn off the confusion. It requires me to focus and calculate. All the thoughts that usually rush through my head and go in every which direction are now focused on trying to win. My mind feels clear while we play.

Yoshino comes out a few times to check on us and bring us snacks and drinks, which is nice of her. She might not be that overbearing after all.

A few hours in, Shikaku steps out on the porch. It's currently Shikamaru's turn and he's sitting there with his eyes closed, the fingertips of his hands joined together in a circle. He does that whenever he is thinking hard. In the first few games, he didn't do that. I must be getting better if he actually has to work to win now.

Shikaku doesn't interrupt the silence; he just sits down next to the board and looks at the game. I don't pay him much attention, staring at the board myself, trying to figure out the moves Shikamaru could make and how I am going to respond to them and what he is going to do then and so forth. I'm pretty sure I'm overlooking a number of possibilities, but for the first time in my life, my mind is challenged. It's... exhilarating.

I still lose the game, but it's entirely worth it. It's not about winning.

After we are finished, Shikaku holds something out to me. "For you," he says and opens his hand. There is a bunch of hair ties in various colors on it. I blink. "I thought you might want to wear your hair like we do," Shikaku explains. "You don't have to if you don't want to."

I stare at the hair ties. My throat closes up. I've never received a gift before. And this is not just any kind of gift, it's something that will show I belong to the clan.

My hand shakes a little when I hold my hand out and he places the hair ties in it. Then he reaches out and ruffles my hair. I just sit there numbly, staring at the hair ties in my hand. He turns to leave, saying over his shoulder: "We'll have to play a game of shogi sometime, Riko-chan."

"Yeah," I say, my voice sounding a bit rough. "We will."

Shikamaru and I play another game of shogi, which I lose again. After that it's time for dinner. Yoshino made Shikaku help her this time, so Shikamaru and I don't have to. It's so weird to have other people doing things for me. I constantly feel like I have to jump up and help.

After dinner, Shikamaru and I go to our rooms to settle in for the night. We stop in front of our doors. "G'night," he mumbles, then goes into his room without waiting for an answer. "Good night," I whisper after him.

I realise he hasn't called me troublesome all day.

I walk into my room and start, then I start to smile. Two boards of the previously empty shelf have been filled with books. I almost run toward it and scan the titles.


I pull that one out first. Since I'm supposed to be Yoshino's cousin from the Land of Birds, I should know about the country in case anyone asks me about it. That's probably why Shikaku – it couldn't have been anyone else – placed it on the shelf in the first place.
I leave my room to take my second shower of the day, brush my hair and teeth and clean my face. After that, I walk back to my room and place my new collection of hair ties on the dressing table. Then I settle down on the bed and start to read. It's slow going, my mind still hasn't processed all the information Inoichi put inside it. Plus, he apparently didn't give me a complete vocabulary; I have to guess at the meanings of some sentences. Still, reading is reading, and the topic is fascinating.

Seven chapters into the book, a knock sounds on the door and Shikaku enters. "Is something wrong?" I ask him.

"Just wanted to tell you good night. How was your day?" He says, sitting down on the edge of the bed.

"It was good." I wonder if I should tell him about the deer. But I don't even understand what happened myself. So I don't.

"That's good to hear." He ruffles my hair. Again. I tell myself I don't like it. Again.

"Good night, Riko-chan."

"Good night, Shikaku-san."

The following days, I settle into a comfortable routine. Mornings, I get up early and, if necessary, save Shikamaru from Yoshino's wake-up methods, which he is very grateful for.

Breakfast all of us eat together. We don't talk much during that time, but it's a comfortable silence. After that, Shikamaru and I go outside to watch clouds or just lie in the sun. Well, he watches the clouds, I usually have a book with me to read. Sometimes, we go to the tree to look at the deer. I don't have the same reaction anymore I did the first time I saw them, but watching them still makes me feel a bitter-sweet pain in my chest.

One day, Shikamaru takes me into Konoha and introduces me to his best friend Chouji, a shy boy who doesn't appear to really know what to do with me. In the end, he settles for saying hello and then offers me some potato chips, which I accept. Then the three of us watch the clouds together and by the end of the day, we are friends.

Being with them is... comfortable. Peaceful. Chouji is the kindest person I have ever met, and Shikamaru is quickly becoming my favourite person in Konoha. He is smart, but he doesn't flaunt it. He doesn't talk that much, but what he says is always intelligent. He helps me with my reading when I don't know a specific kanji. When I don't feel like talking, he stays silent, when my anxieties creep up on me, he challenges me to a game of shogi and the anxiety goes away. We both relish not having to hold back our intelligence when we talk to each other. Spending time with Shikamaru is wonderfully uncomplicated.

Some days, I spend with Yoshino. My initial apprehension for her faded when she took me into the village to shop for clothes. She is actually a nice person, she just shows it differently. She lets actions speak, like pointing out useful books and showing me how the clothes here are worn since I have yet to develop a good fashion sense.

A week after my adoption, I am formally inducted into the clan. Of course, the Nara Clan's understanding of the word 'formal' is a little different from say, the Hyuuga Clan's. The whole affair consists of the clan members meeting for dinner in the clan's meeting hall. Shikaku makes an announcement and then everyone starts eating and after that, everyone goes to their friends and talks to them, occasionally someone walking up to me and welcoming me. I'd envisioned the whole thing to be much worse.
What is much worse is the barbecue that Chouji's clan, the Akimichi Clan, invited us and the Yamanaka Clan to. The three clans are very close, and apparently the Clan Head of one of them adopting someone into his family is a big enough deal to throw a huge party.

The minute we arrive and the Akimichi women see me, they are appalled at my obvious malnourishment and start fussing endlessly over me. That isn't so bad, but during the course of the evening, they start calling me 'cute' and 'adorable'. Some of them actually try to pinch my cheeks. By the end of the evening I am practically sitting on Shikaku's lap because they freak me out. He doesn't comment, but his eyes look as if he is trying very hard not to break into hysterical laughter.

Shikamaru teases me about that evening endlessly.

The only good thing to come out of it was a conversation I had with Inoichi. I'd asked him if he could help me remember more about my parents. He said he wouldn't use his clan jutsu on me again because of what happened the last time he did. However, he told me to come visit him at his house sometime so he could show me some meditation exercises that might one day allow me to remember them better.

Now I'm meeting with Inoichi once a week for mental exercises, which I think I desperately need. My mind is a chaotic place, and I have nightmares almost every night. Most of the time, they are about my parent's deaths. Sometimes I dream about waking up in the cupboard again and all this having been a dream.

At Inoichi's house, I also meet his daughter Ino, a pretty blond girl my age. I already saw her at the dreadful barbecue but didn't get to talk to her then. She's nice enough I suppose, even though I don't really understand most of what she's talking about – fashion still eludes me.

Ino has already started going to the Academy, unlike Shikamaru, Chouji and me who are waiting until we turn eight. Shika says they'll probably graduate at the same time anyway. He thinks their fathers actually planned having their children all during the same year so they could raise their Mini-Mes as the next famous Ino-Shika-Chou Team.

Apparently, Inoichi is still getting teased about having a daughter.

After a month, Yoshino starts training me as she said she would. Shikamaru has been forced to join in. It's mostly just stretches and building up muscles. We're also taught how to hold and throw kunai and shuriken, though we have yet to become good at it. There is a lot of meditation as well, to help us feel our chakra.

Yoshino says she'll start training us in taijutsu when we start lessons at the Academy. Ninjutsu we won't learn until after our first year there. Shikamaru will then learn to use the Nara Clan's Shadow Manipulation that I'd love to learn too, but it's unfortunately something that only born Nara Clan members are able to use. I guess I'll have to figure out my own way of fighting.

Shikaku trains us as well, though his training is different. He's training us in using our minds. This means he gives us hypothetical situations with available resources and we have to figure out the best course of action. We have shogi matches that take hours, and even when Shikamaru and I try to take Shikaku on together, we lose.

Evenings I spend reading. I learn about this world, the different countries and their Hidden Villages. I learn about their history, especially the wars. And I learn everything I can about Konoha and its ninja – how they are organised, what types there are, how they operate.
Every night, unless he's delayed at work – he's the Jounin Commander – Shikaku comes in to ruffle my hair, ask about my day and tell me good night.

Life's good.

I am lying in my bed, already half asleep. Today was exhausting. Yoshino had us running so many laps my legs feel like pudding. Shika said he can't wait until we learn to enhance our movements with chakra. I told him he'd have chakra exhaustion on top of sore muscles then. He was horrified. It was hilarious.

The door opens silently and Shikaku comes in. He wasn't at dinner earlier, so he must have gotten delayed at work.

"Still awake?" he asks.

"I was reading until a little while ago," I answer.

He sits on the edge of my bed like he always does. "How was your day?" he asks.

"Not bad. A little troublesome," I answer him. "Yours?"

"Same." He ruffles my hair. "Good night, Riko-chan. Sleep well."

I'm silent for a little while. "Good night, Dad," I whisper then.

His hand on my head stills. I can hear him swallow. Then I feel him lean down and press his lips to my hair. "Sweet dreams, Riko-chan."
Shikamaru and I are sitting in our tree, watching the deer graze near the Clan Forest. Well, I am watching. Shika is leaning against the trunk with his eyes closed. If I didn't know better, I'd say he was asleep. We were talking until five minutes earlier though, and even Shika doesn't fall asleep that fast. That I know of.

"We start at the Academy tomorrow," I say.

Shika grunts affirmatively.

"What if we aren't in the same class?" I ask him. I'll only know him, Chouji and Ino at the Academy. There's no way those three won't be put in the same class, even if Ino has already finished her first year. They'll keep Ino-Shika-Chou together. I, however, might end up somewhere different.

"Even if that happens, we'll still see each other during breaks. And there'll be enough dropouts that they'll merge the leftover classes at some point. You know that," Shika answers me.

"I'm still worried."

"You'll do fine. You'll just make some new friends."

He doesn't tell me I'm being troublesome. That means he's worried as well. He's still trying to make me feel better.

"You're right. I need a sidekick anyways. You have Chouji and Ino-chan told me about her friend Sakura. I want one too."

"Troublesome..." Shika says, amused. He cracks an eye open. "Don't pick anyone too weird, Ri."

It's been over a year since I first arrived. A lot about me has changed since then.

My hair is pulled up in a high ponytail, strands in the front framing my face. My scar isn't as noticeable anymore. In the mornings, when I look into the mirror, my eyes look serious, but not haunted anymore.

I am no longer too thin and my skin color is still pale, but not unnaturally so. I've grown a bit since coming here, but I'm still small for my age and likely always will be, thanks to the lack of nutrition in my previous life.

I'll make the best of it. Being small can be a very good thing for a ninja.

My arms and legs are lined with sleek muscles thanks to Yoshino's training. My hands are no longer soft, they now have calluses from kunai and shuriken training now.

That's the changes on the outside.

On the inside... well. It could be worse.

I'm a lot calmer than I used to be. Inoichi has taught me ways to calm myself down and keep my head in stress situations.

My parents' deaths still haunt me, but the guilt has faded a little. I've learned not to think about them
I still need to overcome my fears and anxieties. I'm not too worried, though. Because the biggest change in my life... I have a family now.

There's Yoshino who nearly cried the first time I called her Mom. She always knows what to do and she believes in me.

Then there's Shika. My extremely lazy kindred spirit. I've never told him my secrets, and he still knows me better than anyone else. There is no one in this world or any other I trust more than him. With one exception.

Shikaku. My dad. The one who made me a part of this family. Whom I didn't want to like and who weaseled himself into my heart anyway.

I have people I love and who love me back. They are now the reason I want to be a strong shinobi.

Yoshino made a celebratory dinner tonight. It would make an Akimichi proud, though it can't quite match one of their meals in quantity.

"So..." She says. "You two are starting at the Academy tomorrow. Finally." She adds with a look at Shika.

Shika could have gone to the Academy years ago. He was too lazy though. It annoys Yoshino to no end that he's wasting his potential. I don't think he actually is. He's just... taking his time.

"I'm sure you two will do well." Again a look at Shika. "You are both starting on the road to becoming ninja and adults tomorrow. I'm very proud of you both." This causes Shikamaru to raise an eyebrow.

"Thank you, Mom," I say and kick him under the table so he'll say something as well.

"...Thanks, Mom," he mutters, shooting me a dark look.

She smiles at us, looking pleased. Then she turns to Dad. "Say something," she orders him.

He swallows whatever is currently in his mouth. "...Troublesome," he mutters. Mom glares at him, ramming one of her chopsticks into a piece of meat on her plate. The message is clear.

"Alright kids," he starts. "I'm very proud of you two as well. So don't get into too much trouble, don't skip more than the minimum attendance requirement allows you to or you'll have to do extra credit, and don't snore if you fall asleep when the lesson bores you too much. It tends to annoy the teachers."

Mom rams her second chopstick into her tortured piece of meat.

Dad hastily says: "Better yet, don't skip or sleep at all, and do your very best at school!"

I decide to help him. Mom looks really scary right now. "We will, Dad! Right, Shika?"

"...Right. Sure. Whatever."

Mom doesn't look remotely appeased. Oh well. I tried.

Shikamaru tries a distraction tactic. Not to save Dad though. He probably wants to avoid a
preemptive lecture on skipping and sleeoing in class. "What subjects do you look forward to, Ri?" he asks me. Distracting Mom by talking about school. Not a bad plan.

"I don't really know. I guess I'll enjoy the practical lessons more. I'm really looking forward to learning to use chakra." Plus, the theoretical lessons are going to bore me to tears. That's the downside of reading so many books over the past year. "What about you?"

"...History." Translation: Nap time.

"I didn't know you were interested in history," Mom says suspiciously. Shikamaru just shrugs.

After dinner, Mom sends us both to bed so we'll be well rested tomorrow. I'm not really tired though, so I grab a book on encryption and codes and start reading. I'm thinking of basing a code on English. I've started teaching Shikamaru the language and it would be fun to send each other messages no one else can read.

Then again, since no one knows English here, why bother encrypting at all?

A knock sounds on the door and Shikaku comes in.

"Still not sleeping, Riko-chan?"

"I'm not tired."

"Nervous about tomorrow?"

"A little," I admit. "I'm worried they'll separate me and Shika."

He ruffles my hair. "Don't worry. Even if you do end up in different classes, you'll have some subjects together. Anatomy, Encryption & Decryption, Trapping, Strategy & Tactics and First-Aid will be taught in smaller groups and the classes will be mixed up for that. It's likely they will put the two Nara kids in those classes together."

"I didn't know that. Thanks, Dad."

"You're welcome, Riko-chan. You should sleep now. Yoshino is right, you should be well rested tomorrow."

"Okay. Good night, Dad."

"Good night, Riko-chan."

The next morning, Mom and Dad walk us to the Academy. It's a huge building at the base of the Hokage Monument. In the school yard in front of it, a crowd of children and their parents have assembled. We quickly manage to locate Chouji and his father, who is easy to spot even among a crowd this big. Next to him, Inoichi and Ino are standing. Ino is currently talking to a girl with pink hair.

I feel the weirdest urge to touch that hair.

Maybe I'm being influenced by Dad's hair ruffling habit.

Ino greets me and introduces the girl as her best friend, Sakura. Sakura greets me friendly and asks me if this is my first year, but before I can answer, a loud crack sounds and a large cloud of smoke
appears in front of the entrance of the Academy. When the smoke disperses, a group of chunin is standing there. I look around. Judging from the expressions of most of the kids, they are extremely impressed.

One of the chunin delivers a speech about the importance of training young ninja and how we will grow up to be the pride of Konoha. He gives a glorified description of what being a ninja is about and then introduces the teachers, himself included, that will each lead a class. There will be four classes for the beginners.

Four classes. And come graduation, there will only be one left. The thought is scary. *What if I don't make it?*

*Don't be ridiculous,* I chide myself. After what Shika dubbed 'Mom's troublesome training from hell', I should be fine. Even though we never sparred or learned any taijutsu. It was mostly training to prepare us for the Academy.

The chunin motions one of his colleagues forward to call out the students in his class. No names I recognise in there. They're all civilians. Probably a good idea to teach them all together. Most clan children already received some training and education. Civilians don't have that luxury.

*Bugger.* I'm known to be of civilian descent, even if I have a clan name. I might not be put with Shikamaru. *Oh god.*

I have bad memories about school. I need Shikamaru near me.

Chunin number two introduces himself as Hiroshi-sensei. He calls out a few names, civilians again, and then: "Nara Riko." The next name is Otori Ayaka. I'm not in a class with Shikamaru. Worse, I'm the only student with a clan name in a class made up of civilian kids. *Oh no. Please, no.*

I have to use one of Inoichi's exercises to force away the panic that rises up in me.

I listen to the rest of the names that are called. Ueda Daisuke, Uno Akemi, Uzumaki Naruto, Yanagi Rei. I've never heard of any of their surnames before.

When Uzumaki is called, the atmosphere seems to change. I see a few civilians mutter to each other. A few mothers exchange dark looks, then bend down to whisper to their children.

I narrow my eyes. Something is going on here.

After our names are called, we are expected to say our goodbyes and follow after our sensei. I turn to my family. "So..." I say with forced cheerfulness. "This is it."

Yoshino looks fierce and determined. "You can do it. Show them what you're made of," she says. I nod, a lump in my throat preventing me from speaking.

Shikaku ruffles my hair. "If something is wrong, you know where to find me."

Shikamaru walks over to me and in a rare show of affection, places his hands on my shoulders and leans his forehead against mine. "I'll see you during lunch break, sis," he says. Then he lets go.

I feel like crying. But I straighten my spine, lift my head and follow my new classmates into the Academy.

We arrive at our classroom. It's quite large, has high ceilings and is built like an auditorium. No way to hide in here.
We take our seats. I end up somewhere in the middle of the room between a girl with nondescript brown hair and a rather large nose and a large boy that looks like he spent his whole life pressing weights.

I look around. I stand out like a sore thumb with my red hair. Plus, I'm the only one that bothered to wear actual shinobi clothing. I'm wearing a long sleeved mesh armor shirt under a grass green shirt with short sleeves. It's tied with a black belt around my waist, matching my black shorts and black shinobi sandals.

I'm so glad I ignored all the flashy colorful kunoichi dresses in the store mom took me to. At least the green I'm wearing is neutral.

The only one that stands out as much as I do is a small blond boy – though not as small as me – with golden blond hair and goggles on his head who wears a bright orange T-Shirt and has whisker marks on his cheeks. They don't look like any clan markings I've seen before. He is bouncing excitedly on his seat, grinning widely.

Hiroshi-sensei calls for our attention, then he calls our names out one by one so he can check our attendance. He seems to memorise all of our faces while he does so. I do the same. It wouldn't do to not know the names of my classmates and possible future comrades. The girl next to me is named Mura Ai and muscle-boy answers to Kuramoto Dai. I inwardly snort. 'Dai' translates to 'big, large, great, vast'. A fitting name for him.

When Hiroshi-sensei reaches my name, I can hear some people whispering: "Isn't that a clan name?" and "Aren't the Nara the creepy ones with the shadows? You know, the ones that can make you do stuff?" I hear them say. I want to hide beneath my desk and make myself small and insignificant. But I can still hear Yoshino's voice in my head, telling me: "You can do it. Show them what you are made of." So I force my face into inexpressiveness, sit up straight, lift my chin proudly and calm my mind like Inoichi taught me to do.

I doubt I'll be making any friends here, but I can damn well make them not want to mess with me.

Hiroshi-sensei calls out a few other names until he gets to Uzumaki Naruto. When he calls out his name, a dark look flits across his face so briefly, I doubt anyone besides me noticed. I stiffen. I've seen looks like that before, and they never mean anything good. The moment Uzumaki – the blond boy I noticed before – cheerfully shouts out "Here, dattebayo!" the boy next to him pales and looks around as if he wants to go sit somewhere else.

What the hell is their problem? That's got to be the least threatening kid I've ever seen, and they are acting as if he's some kind of monster!

I mentally shake myself. Getting distracted on the first day is not a good idea. I can figure out what the deal with Uzumaki is later.

Hiroshi-sensei finishes calling names and proceeds to give another speech on the glory of being a ninja. Then he emphasises how hard the training is going to be. "Some of you" he eyes Uzumaki with a cold look on his face "will not be able to pass the Academy and become ninja."

You'd think the boy would have been intimidated. But he jumps up, points at Hiroshi and shouts: "No way! I'm gonna pass the Academy in no time at all and become Hokage!"

"Twenty push-ups, Uzumaki." Hiroshi points at the floor next to Uzumaki's desk.

"Yatta!" Uzumaki yells and throws himself to the floor and starts doing his push-ups with abandon.
If Shika's listlessness had an opposite, it would be Uzumaki's enthusiasm.

Hiroshi continues to talk, giving an overview of all we will learn in our four years here. Maths, science, geography, history and culture are the subjects one would find in a normal school too. Then there are subjects like anatomy, first-aid, strategy & tactics, encryption & decryption and shinobi law that are unique to shinobi schools. Practical lessons will consist of taijutsu, ninjutsu and genjutsu training. There will be several workshops and camping trips. Veteran shinobi will be holding lectures on the areas they specialise in, though those lectures will only take place during our last year. Kunoichi lessons are recommended but not mandatory for girls. In those lessons we will learn important infiltration skills such as - hold on a second. Flower arrangement? Embroidery? Cooking? It sounds like a class for becoming housewives.

I'll at least take a look at it. It might be more useful than it sounds.

Hiroshi tells us that all new students will go through an evaluation and thus will be tested on their knowledge and their physical capabilities. The results will make up the initial rankings that will be updated continuously. Eventually, in a few years, the rankings will determine who Rookie of the year and top kunoichi is, and they will be very important for deciding team placements.

To gauge our current level of knowledge, Hiroshi hands out a test sheet made up of several pages of questions. I read them.

1. How many Hokage have ruled Konohagakure and what were their names?

2. Name all Hidden Villages and their respective countries.

3. Name the elements of the shinobi chain of command in a Hidden Village.

There are a hundred and fifty questions on various subjects. I can answer every single one of them. It's ridiculously easy. I wonder what Shika will have to say about this test. It's a waste of ink to even answer one of the questions. But I do it anyway because if I do well, maybe they'll put me in a class with a higher skill level. And if not, I'll still be at the top of the class and my classmates will think twice about messing with me. Hopefully.

We have time to fill out the test until lunch break starts. When I finish, I still have an hour to spare. I lift my hand.

"Hiroshi-sensei?"

"Yes, Nara-san?"

"I finished my test. May I leave for some self-study in the library?" Hiroshi looks startled.

"You are already finished?" As an answer, I hand him my test papers that he looks through, looking astonished.

"Alright, Nara-san. You may leave."

I give him the kind of regal nod that I have seen Yoshino do when we get visitors from other clans that aren't the Yamanaka, Akimichi and Inuzuka. Then I collect my things and leave the room.

Outside in the hallway, I lean against the wall and take a deep shaky breath. Way to draw attention to yourself, Ri. But it was necessary. I'm the only clan child in there. I have to display confidence and arrogance, or else I'll make myself a target. Don't show any weakness.
They'll probably single me out anyway. I have no idea what I'm going to do if that happens.

I sigh and shake the thoughts off. I should go find the library since I told Hiroshi I'd study there. He might check if I actually did go there, especially after the way I drew attention to myself. *Bugger. This is going to be so troublesome, isn't it?*

I find the Academy library on the second floor. It's not very big, but what matters is the quality of the books, not the quantity.

The chunin manning the desk looks surprised when I enter. "I'm here for some self-study. Hiroshi-sensei let me come here since I finished the knowledge evaluation so quickly," I explain before he can ask.

"Alright, kid. Name?"

"Nara Riko." He raises an eyebrow and writes something on a sheet of paper.

"Do you want a tour around the library?"

I shake my head no and thank him for the offer.

I walk around the large room and look at the different categories. The books are mainly about the subjects taught at the Academy. Some of them I have already read.

I pull a book on anatomy out and walk to a table near a window. Mom hinted that the taijutsu style she wants me to learn requires extensive knowledge of the human body, so that's what I will study.

I sit down and look out the window. I start when I see Shika and a bunch of other kids that are probably his class in one of the Academy's training grounds. They are all running laps while their chunin sensei is shouting instructions. I envy them.

At least Shika will be jealous too when he hears about my day so far.

I turn to the book and start reading until it's time for lunch. Then I leave the library after a friendly 'good bye' to the chunin.

I find Chouji and Shika sitting under a tree, eating lunch. "Hey," I greet them and sit down next to Shika, taking my own lunchbox out.

"How bad was it?" Shika asks while Chouji gives me a greeting nod. He can't talk because he has his mouth full.

"Troublesome," I reply. "We had to fill out a test to evaluate our academic standing and I finished early. I got to go to the library and read."

"Man, I wished we could swap classes. We had to run laps and do push-ups and sit-ups the whole morning."

I give him a smile. "What's your class like? I didn't get to hear your assignment."

"Lots of clan heirs, some ambitious civilians. They all want to be the best. It's troublesome. Yours?"

"Full of civilians. I don't know anyone and they don't like me because I'm from a clan. And I don't like our sensei."

"That sounds rough," Chouji says. "Are you going to be okay?"
I give him a rice ball from my lunch which makes him smile. He gives me a piece of sushi back. Akimichi show friendship and caring through sharing their food.

"I'll be fine. I have you two here, don't I?" I say.

"You do," Shika says. "Why don't you like your sensei?"

"There is a student he doesn't seem to like. He had this really mean look when he called his name. And he made him do push-ups."

"The Uzumaki kid?"

So Shikamaru noticed the weird tension during the class assignments too. I nod. "It's... not good," I tell him.

"He can't sabotage him, though, can he?" Chouji says uneasily.

I smile at him and give him a tomato to cheer him up. "I'll keep an eye open. If anything happens, I can always tell Dad." Chouji looks relieved. Sweet boy that he is, he feels for others.

I look around the school yard. It's chaotic. Most of the kids are playing ninja and run around yelling. A few boys are sparring. Across from us, a teacher has to separate a brawl.

Then I see him. Black hair. Pale skin. Dark eyes. Hands in his pockets, he stares into the distance. He is the most beautiful boy I have ever seen. My heart beats faster. I should go introduce myself. He isn't talking to anyone. Maybe-

My thoughts get interrupted by a shrill voice. "Sasuke-kuuun!" a girl with curly black hair screeches, running past us toward the boy with an expression of fanatic worship on her face. And she isn't alone. Behind her, a gaggle of girls follows, similar expressions on their faces. Disturbing.

I squash my budding attraction to the boy viciously and stomp on it a few times for good measure. I blame Mrs. Figg's romance novels.

No way am I going near him. What if whatever is wrong with those girls is contagious?

"Who is that?" I ask, nodding towards the boy who is now surrounded by moon-eyed girls. What the... is that Ino?

"Uchiha Sasuke. He's in our class," Shikamaru answers.

The last Uchiha. Of course it had to be him.

Sometime during the last year, Konoha went into lockdown. No one really knew what was going on, except that the Uchiha were attacked. It was the first time I've ever seen Mom in her chunin uniform, ready for battle.

The lockdown was eventually released, but we didn't see Dad for days on end because he was dealing with the aftermath of losing so many shinobi. He looked like he had aged years when he finally came home.

I want to go over and shake those idiotic girls, yell at them to leave him alone. Tell them they are selfish brats and vapid morons. To talk to him not to try and be his friend but to make him tell them how pretty they are? It disgusts me.

The boy says something, breaks out of their circle and walks towards the Academy. As he walks
past our tree, I can see him better.

His face is completely expressionless. But his eyes... the emptiness in his eyes. The horrid loneliness. I feel it echo inside me. *They are dead, dead, dead. Sightless green eyes stare up at nothing...*

If it weren’t for my family, I might have become like him. The thought chills me.

He walks into the Academy building and vanishes from my sight. I release the breath I didn’t realise I had been holding. I feel thrown off balance.

I need to stay far, far away from Uchiha Sasuke.

Lunch break ends soon after that. I think Shika noticed something wasn’t okay, but he didn’t ask in front of Chouji.

On the way to my classroom, I shove the insecurity I feel about having to be in that class down. The warm sense of camaraderie I felt when I was with Shika and Chouji wavered when Uchiha walked past us and now as I take my seat, it vanishes completely.

The people that are already in the room whisper and I can feel their eyes on me. I force myself to stare at the blackboard instead of looking at them. I ball my fists. *No weakness.*

The classroom fills. Uzumaki runs in and takes a seat in the front, bouncing up and down again. No one seems to want to sit next to him, instead they throw him distrustful and cold looks. He just keeps smiling with that big and stupid grin, but somehow it doesn't look as real as it did before. A part of me wants to go and talk to him and make him smile again.

No one sits next to me either. I tell myself I don’t care.

Hiroshi enters and tells us we are going outside for the physical part of the evaluation. Thank God. This classroom feels like a prison. I need movement.

While we file outside, I observe the groups that are already forming in our class. There are some girls with fashionable haircuts and clothes who are gossiping about something. A few boys, obviously familiar with each other, are talking to each other with boisterous voices and sweeping hand gestures. Most of the remaining students seem to have elected Kuramoto Dai as their leader and are now trying to ingratiate themselves with him. They remind me of Dudley and his gang, only Kuramoto is muscular instead of fat and doesn’t seem to be as stupid. Though it would be hard to be dumber than Dudley.

Outside, Hiroshi leads us to a training ground – the same one I saw Shikamaru’s class training in earlier – and has us stand in line. After leading us through a series of warm-up exercises, the test starts. On his command, we are to do fifty push-ups as fast as we can. A few of the fashionable girls look horrified.

Hiroshi yells "Start!" and I throw myself to the ground and start doing my push-ups. I want out of this class. I have to be the best. Thanks to Yoshino’s preparation, I actually have a chance to achieve that. Granted, Uzumaki finished his push-ups earlier in class pretty fast, but I can beat that. And Kuramoto may have a lot of muscles, but he also has much more weight to press.

I make it. When I jump up, drawing Hiroshi’s attention to me, everyone else is still on the ground. Our teacher quickly marks my time down and praises me, looking surprised at me again. Kuramoto finishes a few seconds later, but he doesn’t get the praise I did. He throws me a hateful look that I counter with an expressionless one. *Don't show any fear.*
We repeat the same exercise with sit-ups and squats. Kuramoto beats me by a hair's breadth when doing sit-ups and seems smug about it. The smug look fades when I finish my squats before him.

Next is running. We are supposed to run ten laps around the training ground. Most of the girls and some of the boys look like they can't even stand anymore. Kuramoto however looks arrogant and behaves like he has already won, drawing admiration from his new followers who also assure him I must have cheated earlier somehow.

I can see why he would expect to be faster than me. He is tall and obviously has muscles and stamina. I on the other hand am small and thus have shorter legs which gives me a disadvantage. However...

I love running. Something about the speed, the wind in my hair, the pounding footsteps on the ground... it makes me feel free. And I am fast. When Yoshino noticed that, she gave me additional stretches and exercises that would help me achieve even more speed, and she had me train my stamina. Ten laps are nothing.

When Hiroshi gives the starting signal, I draw past everyone and easily leave Kuramoto in the dust. He doesn't even come close to catching up to me and I can hear him growl frustrated when during my fifth lap, I draw past him a second time. After, Hiroshi asks me with a frown if I used chakra and is surprised when I tell him I haven't learned how yet. It makes me wonder how fast I will be when I actually can use chakra.

While waiting for the others to finish – some girls and one boy had to give up and are now on the floor trying to recover – I do some cool-down stretches to help relax my muscles. When Kuramoto has finished his laps, he walks over to me.

"Here we go, I think."

"You think you're so much better than us, eh, Nara?"

Don't show fear. Don't show weakness.

I slowly straighten myself from my stretching exercise and give him a condescending look. Considering how much taller than me he is, that is not easy to do.

"I would not assume to be better than anyone else when it's just the first day, Kuramoto-san," I reply in an even tone. "Should I have made you feel... inadequate, I apologise."

"Just 'cause you're in a clan, doesn't mean you're better. You're only good now 'cause your family gave you training. I bet in a week you'll be the weakest here."

As if he didn't receive training. His muscles can't have come from nowhere.

"Thank you for the compliment. You did well as well. Your times are the best after mine," I tell him.

"What compliment?" he asks dumbly.

I give him another condescending look. "You told me I was good because I trained hard with my family."

He growls at me. "This isn't over!" he bites out and storms over to his friends that have now finished their laps too.
First day. One win.

Four years to go.

When everyone has finished their laps, with the exception of the ones that had to give up, Hiroshi leads us through the standard cool-down stretches. After that, he tells us our test results and the initial rankings will be out tomorrow and dismisses us.

I have around an hour to wait for Shika and Chouji to finish the theoretical portion of the evaluation, provided their class has the same time limit we did. As I am leaning against the tree the three of us ate lunch under, I mull over the events of the day.

I have received the worst class assignment possible.

I haven't made a single friend and in my class, and it's unlikely I ever will.

I aced the evaluation.

Kuramoto Dai and I have somehow become rivals.

Uchiha Sasuke makes me remember things I'd rather keep buried forever.

Some kind of secret surrounds Uzumaki Naruto.

All in all, today could have gone better. The only good thing about today is that I likely secured a high rank in the initial rankings, though that could have some bad consequences as well. A lot of people will be jealous, and that won't make my life any easier.

The Academy hasn't even really started yet and I'm already tired of it.
The next day, Shikamaru and I are standing in front of the Academy. Every muscle of my body is sore. Mom started training me in taijutsu yesterday. Shikamaru will mostly train with Shikaku from now on, and Yoshino will focus her lovely, undivided attention on me.

The taijutsu style she wants me to learn isn't actually an official style and doesn't have any kata. It works by darting in fast, hitting the opponent in a weak spot and then jumping away. It requires speed, agility, precision, medical knowledge, focus and constant attention. And a lot of hard work. Yoshino ran me through drills designed to train reflexes and agility yesterday. This meant that she used a water jutsu that looked like a whip and I had to try and evade it. Over and over again.

"You are small," she said. "In this taijutsu style, your height is an advantage. However, if your opponent hits you, you might be done for. So don't get hit."

The logic of her reasoning is hard to argue with, but her methods leave something to be desired. I have bruises on my bruises.

"So," I say. "We should go inside and look at our ranks." Or I should. Shikamaru probably looked at the knowledge evaluation, figured out the minimum amount of questions he had to answer to not become dead last and thus target of mom's wrath, and then spent the rest of the time sleeping.

Shika puts a lot of effort into not making an effort.

We go inside. In front of the rankings board a large number of students is already assembled, staring up at their ranks. Some of them look pleasantly surprised, some are smug and a lot of them are disappointed.

I scan the rankings. There are two columns, one for the boys and one for the girls. I find my name easily enough. Above Yamanaka Ino's. Directly above Haruno Sakura's. Right at the top.

I'm numb. I did not expect to beat two girls that have already been going to the Academy for a year.

I can't be first place. I can't.

This will make me the target of jealousy and competition. And Ino and Sakura, once potential friends, will now want to be my rivals. I know Ino can be very competitive. And I don't know Sakura at all and she seemed nice enough yesterday, but nobody wants to lose their place in the top.

"Shit," Shikamaru says with a grim look.

He's the only one I told about my status as a pariah in my class. The looks and whispers. The crippling pressure.

My high rank is not going to get me placed in a different class. Dad told me yesterday. There won't be any reassignments to different classes until the number of dropouts equals the headcount of a full class. I should have stuck to doing the Nara thing and flown under the radar. I could have told my class I was born a civilian. They would have forgotten about my clan name soon enough.

"I know. I really messed this one up," I say.

"You did what you thought was right. And some people will think twice about starting trouble with you now."
"Not until I have proven myself in a fight."

He doesn't argue. We both know I am right.

We figured out the whole secret of the Academy yesterday, when it was too late to change anything.

The Academy is designed to put us under pressure and make us compete with each other. That is the real reason the rankings exist. It has nothing to do with team placements and fancy titles after graduation.

Nobody wants a ninja that cracks under pressure. Nobody wants a ninja that gives up in the face of adversity. Weak-willed ninja are useless.

So they pit us against each other and make us compete. Put us under psychological pressure so we either crack or get stronger. Force us to strengthen our mind and will or else. The number of dropouts isn't so high because of the physical requirements. It's because of the psychological ones.

Only those strong of body and mind will last.

I have portrayed myself as one of the strong. I have announced to the entire Academy that I intend to be at the top. There is no going back from this. Not with the black '1' before my name.

If my rank falls too far, I will be considered a failure. If I want to keep it, I'll have to fight for it over and over again and keep winning. It will get worse until the taijutsu spars start. Then a clear hierarchy will be established. The strongest on top, the weakest at the bottom.

Shikamaru doesn't tell me not to worry. He doesn't tell me I'll be fine and get through this alright. We both know I might not.

Shika and I went back outside. I needed fresh air.

Currently, we're discussing our plan of action. It's not much of a plan.

"You're Top Girl now," Shikamaru says. "Keep that title. Ask mom to step up your training. You need to be ready for the taijutsu spars when they start."

I nod numbly.

"You can do this. You're strong. And you have Chouji and me here. It'll get better once the classes get merged."

"Yeah," I say, my voice wooden. "I'm sure it will."

"You should go to class now. You shouldn't be late."

I nod and we stand up and walk into the building. Shika squeezes my hand once and then I'm alone.

I sigh and make my way to the classroom.

I walk into the classroom with my head held high, face expressionless. I can feel the eyes on me. Hear the whispers, though now they are tinged with jealousy and longing.

Top Girl.
Kuramoto is glaring at me, whispering something to one of his followers who gives me a malicious look. I sit down somewhere in the middle of the room and take out my notebook and textbook. Our first class will be history.

I've read so much about that subject; I doubt the teacher will tell me anything I don't already know. I'll pass the time by writing my notes down in code.

Hiroshi comes in right on time and starts the lecture. Two minutes later, Uzumaki storms in without knocking, apologising for being late.

"Uzumaki. You are already dead last. Since you don't intend to do this seriously, maybe you should think about quitting."

Snickers sound through the whole room. Huh. I didn't know he became dead last. It's weird though. He didn't do that bad in the physical tests. He was pretty fast doing his push-ups, and his squats and sit-ups didn't take all that long either. He finished his laps last, but he didn't give up like some of the other students.

And what's up with Hiroshi? Teachers aren't supposed to openly discourage students from becoming ninja. Putting them under pressure? That's fine. Outright telling them to quit? Not fine at all.

"I'm not gonna give up! I'll definitely become Hokage!" Uzumaki says with so much conviction and confidence, I can't help but admire him a little. Here he stands, dead last, all eyes on him, all his classmates laughing at him, his sensei telling him to quit, and he smiles and keeps believing in his dream. It makes me think that maybe I can get through this too.

Hiroshi has Uzumaki doing push-ups again and starts the lesson.

I quickly realise that boredom isn't my only problem. I can feel their eyes on me. Every time I lift my hand so I can answer a question, I hear them whisper. They are all waiting for me to make a mistake. To slump in my seat for just a little, to display one moment of weakness. By the end of the lesson, I'm a nervous wreck.

It's worse for Uzumaki. Hiroshi singles him out multiple times to ask him questions, and each time, he sheepishly scratches the back of his head and says: "I don't know" and the others laugh at him. Our teacher doesn't tell him to quit again, but the snide comments he makes concerning Uzumaki's intelligence aren't much better. It doesn't appear to bother Uzumaki much though. There is no tension in his neck that I can see, meaning he doesn't feel threatened like I do.

Maybe Uzumaki and I could be friends. I could really use an ally in here.

But given how much everyone seems to either hate or fear him, do I really want to risk becoming friends with him? It could make things worse. And he'd probably not want to be friends with me anyways. Top Girl and Dead Last. We'd make a fine pair.

I mentally shake myself. It wouldn't do to dismiss the possibility outright, no matter how unlikely a friendship between us is. I'll just watch him for now and decide later if I should talk to him.

The lesson ends. We have a five minute break, and then we'll have our first lesson in Shinobi Law with a different teacher. I'm looking forward to my first real shinobi class.

Akio-sensei arrives a minute late and launches right into the lecture. And he is boring. He drones on and on with no apparent voice inflection and no effort at all to make the topic even remotely interesting. He doesn't ask us questions, he just continues to hold his sermon until the bell rings, then he grabs his things and leaves without a word to us.
Well. That was disappointing. At least it's lunch break now.

I meet Shika and Chouji under our tree again. The moment I sit down with them, I can feel the tension falling off me. It feels like coming home. I want to break down crying and tell them how awful my school life is, but I don't want to burden Chouji with my problems. There is nothing he can do anyways and the best way he can help me is to be himself around me.

I already know how helpless Shika feels about my situation and how angry it makes him. No way am I doing that to Chouji too.

When Chouji asks me how my day so far went, I tell him I did well in class, even if it was boring. I feel guilty about not telling him the whole truth. I know it would hurt him if he ever found out.

We have been sitting there talking for about a half hour when Ino joins us with Sakura in tow. "Hey Ino-chan, hello Sakura-san," I greet them.

"Hey Riko-chan," Ino says friendly, and Sakura just gives me a tight nod. "I just wanted to congratulate you on your high rank. I look forward to competing with you." She gives me a smile, but I can see in her eyes how much she wants to beat me. How much she wants to be where I am now. *Oh Ino. If only you knew.* Sakura doesn't say anything, just stares at me with a determined and focused expression as if she is preparing for a battle.

I want to tell them I don't want to compete with them. That I never meant to put myself in this situation, that I'd much rather be friends with them. But it would be an insult to them if I rejected their veiled challenge, and any friendship is going to be tainted by rivalry and competition.

"I look forward to it as well," I tell them. "Let's all do our best!"

They give me determined smiles, then they say their goodbyes and flounce away toward a group of girls in pretty kunoichi dresses. As soon as they're gone, I let out a sad sigh.

"What's wrong?" Chouji asks me. I give him a smile and a rice ball.

"Competitions are troublesome," I say.

Understatement of the year.

Lunch ends soon after that. Our class has taijutsu class now.

At the moment, it's only physical conditioning and learning kata.

It has become Kuramoto's main goal in life to beat me. After every exercise he finishes, he looks to me to see if he was faster. If he was, he gives me smug and condescending looks that last until the next exercise. If he wasn't, which is more often the case than not, he glares at me as if he wants to crush me. When Hiroshi shows us our first kata and explains how the movements could be used against an opponent, his looks at me tell me he is imagining using those moves on me.

It makes my skin crawl. And for the first time, I'm scared I might really get hurt.

Over the next month, I throw myself into training and getting stronger.

I let Yoshino run me through drill after drill. When I fall, I get up again. If I can't do what she asks of
me, I practise and practise until I can. If I can still stand when she ends a training session, I ask her to let me keep going.

She teaches me how to throw precise lightning fast punches. The footwork she drills into me allows me to turn and twist, to take quick, graceful steps around an opponent and get into his blind spots before he can react. We spar until I can't stand anymore.

My steps and movements become graceful. My reflexes improve to the point that I almost always notice surprise attacks and can evade them four times out of ten. The way I hold myself changes. Even when I am not training, I stand in a way that would allow me to break into movement at a moment's notice.

I run and run and run until I can barely walk anymore and have to drag my feet to get home.

Evenings I spend reading and studying until my eyes burn and I can't keep them open anymore and fall into a fitful sleep.

I dread going to school every morning. My situation hasn't improved. Kuramoto has become the leader of my class and he has turned almost everyone against me. They don't bully me outright and it has never gotten physical, the teachers make sure that kind of thing doesn't happen. The psychological pressure though is unbearable.

Wherever I go, I feel their looks and sneers. Whenever I say something, they whisper and giggle. Sometimes my notebooks vanish, not that they will be of much use to whoever took them since they're encoded. And it's not just my class. Civilians from other classes look at me with cold eyes too. Almost all the kunoichi in training look at me with jealousy and whisper about me whenever I walk by. I went to the kunoichi classes once and never again. Anything I could learn there, Yoshino can teach me, without the added mental stress.

The only time I can relax a bit is during lunch with Shika and Chouji that we now have in a secluded spot on the rooftop, where no one can follow us. The only class I enjoy is Anatomy. It's taught in a smaller group, and Shika is part of it.

I can feel the changes in me. I sit in the back of the class now, where no one can sit behind me. I'm constantly aware of my surroundings and try to let nothing escape my attention. People standing behind me make me nervous. Sudden noises sometimes make me panic inwardly. I feel constantly threatened.

There were some offers of friendship, but I rejected them, distrustful of the motives behind them.

I keep up my facade of arrogance and inexpressiveness everywhere I go except during lunch. Sometimes I'm scared that I'm becoming my facade.

My family worries about me. I know Shika talked to dad who now squeezes my shoulder whenever he walks past me. Mom knows something as well and she always gives me whatever training I need. Shikamaru actually asked dad to train him so he can get stronger too.

I don't know what I would do if they weren't here.

It's time for our taijutsu spars. Shikamaru's class already started sparring a week ago.

Hiroshi explains how this will work. Since it's the first class on sparring, he wants to see everyone fight and see who is strong and who isn't.
The principle is simple. Two people fight. The winner stays and fights the next person. The loser can sit down and watch the rest of the matches. The strongest is the one last standing.

The consequences of this won't be that simple. One win against the right person can push a person's social standing to the top. A loss can destroy it.

I am paralysed with fear behind my cool facade. I sparred with Yoshino, but this is different. These aren't people I trust not to hurt me. These are people who want to see me on the ground.

The spars start. The first match is between two girls. I know they are friends, and they are both afraid to get hurt and to hurt each other. They stumble through their punches and one of them nearly trips when evading a kick. It's horribly awkward to watch.

The girl that wins loses the next round to a boy that I think is Kuramoto's friend. He wins the next match too but loses the one after that.

And so it goes on, until it's Kuramoto's turn. Of course, he wins. Hiroshi praises him.

Kuramoto has become our teacher's favourite over the last month, even though I'm still Top Girl, at the top of the class and should logically be the favourite. Hiroshi just doesn't quite know what to do with me, a tiny girl that by all logic should be weak but keeps winning. Kuramoto makes more sense to him.

The next match is between Kuramoto and Uzumaki Naruto. Of course.

Hiroshi hates Naruto. Of course he would pit him against Kuramoto, who is the strongest and meanest in the whole class and hates Naruto too and taunts him at every turn since he never gets a reaction out of me. Naruto always yells back how he is going to beat him and become Hokage. It amuses Kuramoto to no end to tell him the exact reasons why he won't.

Naruto never gives up though. He skips classes, but he always comes back. Every morning, he runs through the door of the classroom with an excited grin on his face and possibly an apology for being late. No teacher seems to like him, especially since he is a troublemaker and occasionally pranks them, but no matter how much he is yelled and laughed at, Naruto keeps on believing in his dream.

I don't want to watch this match. I don't want to watch the only person here who is just good and happy be crushed by Kuramoto.

And crush him Kuramoto does. Punch after punch rains down on Naruto and why doesn't Hiroshi stop the match?! I want to scream at them to stop, but I'm paralysed. I my head it's not Kuramoto and Naruto I see but Vernon and a red haired girl.

By the end of the match Naruto is lying on the ground, blood dripping from his face where his lip is split, black eyes already forming.

Some students mutter worriedly when they see him like that. How dare they? After they laughed at him and mocked him, they don't have the right to pretend to care about him. Not when they'll just go back to mocking him tomorrow.

I never talked to him, much too busy with my own drama. I pretended to ignore him, even if I was watching him. I'm not much better than those whispering.

Hiroshi declares Kuramoto the winner with a satisfied expression on his face and moves to drag Naruto out of the way of the next match. But before he can reach him, Naruto moves. Drags his hands to himself. Places them on the ground. Moves his feet into position. And slowly pushes himself up on his feet, obviously in pain but not asking for help. Stands awkwardly, holding his side,
looking so much taller than Kuramoto at that moment. Then he hobbles away, favouring his right leg. Beaten, but not broken.

After a moment of silence, Hiroshi clears his throat and announces Kuramoto's next opponent and the spars continue, but I'm not really watching as Kuramoto pounds opponent after opponent into the ground, though not half as brutally as he did Naruto.

My match will be the last of the day, the finale, the triumph of Kuramoto against his most hated rival. It's obvious Hiroshi is setting it up that way. If he were being fair, he would have pitted me against an opponent my size first, and he certainly wouldn't have set Naruto against Kuramoto. He wants Kuramoto to win.

I wait as Kuramoto wins match after match. I'm not scared anymore. My mind is clear the way it is when I play shogi. Seeing Naruto stand up like that... it did something to me.

Last one left. I move forward before Hiroshi can call my name.

I stare at Kuramoto. He smirks at me. "I'm going to beat you bloody, bitch," he says, giving me a bloodthirsty grin, high on his previous wins. Naruto's blood still stains his knuckles.

I look at him. "My name is Nara Riko. But it makes no difference, because I'll win, no matter what you call me."

He growls. "Let's end this!" he says, taking his fighting stance while I sink into the stance Yoshino taught me.

Hiroshi gives the starting signal.

Kuramoto jumps forward, his fist flying towards my face. I step forward, lean my head to the side, letting his fist fly past my face. Two more quick steps and a sharp turn and I am standing behind him before he even realises that his punch didn't connect. Then I place a small hand softly on his neck.

He freezes. I could easily send him into unconsciousness now, or even kill him.

I beat him without throwing a single punch and causing him any pain.

"Winner: Nara Riko," I say tonelessly, because Hiroshi is speechless. Then I take my hand back, turn on my heel and leave them staring after me.
Naruto

I'm walking across the schoolyard.

Normally we would have had a discussion about the spars and all we did wrong, but I didn't think I could stay and look at Hiroshi anymore. Something needs to be done about him, but he hasn't actually done anything that's against the rules. It's not like someone getting hurt in a spar is that uncommon. Especially when it's the dead last.

I'll tell dad about him anyways. Hiroshi will make a mistake at some point, and I'll be waiting. I just hope Naruto doesn't get hurt like that again.

Speaking of Naruto... as I walk across the schoolyard, I can see him. He's sitting on a swing that hangs from a particularly large tree. In the shadow of the tree, I almost didn't see him.

Before I can think about what I'm doing, I have changed directions and am walking towards him. He looks up to stare at me when I walk to the tree and sit down, leaning against it. "Hey", I say.

He stares at me, apparently speechless. In his large blue eyes, disbelief is warring with hope. I feel horrible. I should have talked to him earlier. Even a hello would have been enough.

I reach into my bag and give him a tissue. "You still have blood on your face," I tell him.

He takes the tissue reverently and stares at it with wide eyes. Then he looks up at me again.

"You're supposed to wipe it off and clean your face. You should probably disinfect your split lip, too," I tell him. He's still at a loss for words. If he doesn't say something soon, this is going to get awkward.

He slowly starts to wipe the blood off of his face, never taking his eyes off of me, as if I'd vanish into thin air the moment he looks away.

"I thought you were really cool, standing up like that after Kuramoto beat you," I say. "I was hoping you'd win."

"Really? " he asks me. "You thought I was cool?"

I nod. "I'm Riko," I tell him, because I don't know if he even knows my name.

"I know! You're Top Girl and you're really smart!" he says, grinning at me, apparently having shaken off his temporary shyness. Then he pauses. "Why're you talking to me?"

"Because I want to be your friend."

He freezes. His mouth drops open. His eyes widen impossibly.

I'm starting to get nervous. What if he doesn't want to be my friend? What if-

"Do you like ramen?"

"What?"

"Do you like ramen? I think the ramen at Ichiraku's are the best! Especially the Miso Ramen, but the Pork Ramen is awesome too, and the Tofu Ramen..." he chatters on about ramen.
"Uhhh, Naruto... I've never eaten ramen before."

His mouth drops open and he stares at me in horror. Then he jumps up, grabs my hand, pulls me to my feet and starts dragging me after him.

"Naruto?" I ask, starting to freak out. "Where are we going?"

"We're gonna eat ramen, dattebayo!"

"You don't need to drag me."

"Ahh," he says, slowing down. He grins at me, sheepishly scratching the back of his head with the hand that isn't holding mine. "Sorry 'bout that."

"Don't worry about it."

We walk hand in hand through the streets of Konoha. I don't really know why I'm not pulling my hand away. We're practically strangers. But after the stress of the last few weeks, it feels really good to have a connection with someone.

"How'd the spars go? Did Kuramoto win?" Naruto asks me.

"No. I did."

His mouth drops open again and he stares at me in shock. I feel a little uncomfortable. Maybe I shouldn't have said that after he lost to Kuramoto.

"That's so cool! You've got to tell me all about it! Did you kick his ass? Did you punch him in the face? Did you-"

"Slow down. And I didn't really punch or kick him. I just got behind him really fast and then went for his neck."

"Wow. You're really strong, ne, Riko-chan?" he says, beaming at me again. There is admiration in his eyes. I've never been looked at like that.

"I wouldn't say I'm strong. Just fast. And he underestimated me."

"But you won against him! 'Course you're strong, dattebayo!"

I give him a hesitant smile. He grins back.

I think I just made a new friend.

We arrive at a small restaurant that looks like it's been around for a long time. 'Ichiraku Ramen' it says on the front. Naruto pulls me inside.

"Hey Teuchi-jiisan!" Naruto yells.

"Hello Naruto-kun," an older man greets him from behind the counter. "What will you be having today?"

"Ohhh, Naruto-chan, is that your girlfriend?" a pretty brown-haired girl asks, eyes locked onto our still joined hands.
I rip my hand away. "We're just friends!" I say, irrationally panicking. Naruto has a really dumb grin on his face. The girl gives us a knowing look.

"If you say so," she says.

"Really. Just friends."

"Of course."

"Ayame, stop teasing Naruto-kun's friend," the older man reprimands her.

"Ne, ne, Jiisan, Riko-chan has never eaten ramen before!" The horror in Naruto's voice is evident.

"Oh, my. We can't have that, can we?" Teuchi says in a friendly voice. "What will it be, young lady?"

I think I like this man. He and Annoying Ayame are the first people I've seen that don't glare at Naruto.

"I'll take the Miso Ramen, please."

"Me too, dattebayo!" Naruto yells.

We climb up on the high stools in front of the counter. It probably looks pretty funny, since we're both so short.

"So, Naruto-chan, what happened to your face?" Ayame asks, looking at him concerned. He looks a little better than he did right after his spar, but the black eyes are hard to overlook. Plus he was still limping when we entered. I should probably have taken him to the infirmary, but he's just so distracting.

"Spar in taijutsu. But it's alright, Riko-chan kicked his ass!" When did he start calling me Riko-chan? We haven't even been talking for an hour.

Teuchi gives me an impressed look. Then he places a large bowl of noodles in front of me. "It's on the house," he tells me, with a fond look to Naruto.

"Thank you" I say, oddly touched. These are good people. They don't even know me, and they give me food because they think I defended Naruto.

"Riko-chan's really cool! She's really smart and strong, too! She said she wants to be friends with me!"

Well that's embarrassing. When I said that, I didn't think he'd tell the first person he knows. Naruto might turn out to be a troublesome kind of friend.

"Awwww! That's sooo sweet of you, Riko-chan!" Ayame gushes. I kind of want to hit her. The second person to call me Riko-chan in the space of knowing me for minutes. And she thinks I'm Naruto's girlfriend. Infuriating.

"Ne, ne, you gotta eat or your noodles will get cold, Riko-chan!" Naruto says, excitedly bouncing up and down on his stool.

I break my chopsticks and self-consciously take my first bite, Naruto is staring at my face the whole time, apparently not wanting to miss one detail of my reaction to his favourite food. I swallow.
"And? And? Did you like it? It's good, right?" Naruto asks, sounding a bit anxious. Troublesome...

"It is." And it really is. It's delicious.

"Right? Right?"

"Troublesome. Yes, I liked it. Very much."

Naruto beams at me again. Then he gets distracted when Teuchi places Naruto's bowl of ramen in front of him.

"Thanks, Jiisan!" Naruto breaks his chopsticks and starts to eat. I stare. The speed with which the noodles disappear from his bowl is mildly disturbing. His food is gone in seconds and Teuchi places another bowl in front of him with a fond smile. The process repeats itself.

After bowl number five I turn to Ayame, momentarily forgetting that she's annoying.

"Is that normal for him?"

She grins. "He can eat up to fifteen bowls. And he isn't even fully grown yet. Now eat your own ramen, or Naruto will think you don't like them."

Heaven forbid. He might start to cry.

I turn back to my bowl and continue eating.

After I finish, I look at the clock. "Naruto, I have to return to the Academy soon. My brother will be worried if I'm not there when his class is finished."

"You got a brother?"

"In class 1A. His name is Shikamaru."

"Is he as cool as you?"

I'm not 'cool'. During the spars, I was terrified until I saw Naruto get up after being beaten. My win is only the result of hard work. Hard work I only did because it distracted me from my situation in school and because Kuramoto scared me. In class I'm antisocial and cold. There is nothing to cool about all that. Still, I don't want to correct him.

"You can meet him tomorrow. We usually have lunch together with another friend."

His face lights up at the prospect of me talking to him again tomorrow.

"Yatta! I'll definitely be there!" he shouts.

Troublesome.

I wait under the tree where we used to have lunch. Shika comes out soon enough. We start on our way home.

"You look happier," he says.

"I am." I smile at him.

"That's good. How'd your spars go?"
"Oh." I shrug nonchalantly. "I won."

He smirks at me. "Never doubted you. You won me a few Ryo, by the way."

"You bet on me?"

He bumps my shoulder with his. "Always, Ri."

I have to blink a little so the burning in my eyes goes away.

"Hey, you remember when you told me not to get a too weird sidekick?"

He gives me a wary look. "Made a friend?"

"Naruto. He's... really enthusiastic. And obsessed with ramen."

Shika sighs. "Troublesome..."

We arrive at home.

"Shika? Do you want to play shogi?"

"Sure. Ri?"

"Yes?"

"Welcome back."

The next day I walk into class, emotionless mask in place, cold glare sweeping over my peers. I walk gracefully to my usual seat in the back. Naruto isn't here yet. Neither is Kuramoto.

I haven't been sitting down for more than a minute when someone sits next to me.

"Hey Riko! How are you today?" It's Otori Ayaka, one of the fashion-obsessed girls.

"Fine." I give her an expressionless look. "What do you want?"

"I can talk to you, can't I?"

No. No she can't. She never did before. Why start now?

Another girl comes over. "Good morning, Riko! Do you want to sit with us?"

What is going on? I know this girl hangs out with Kuramoto. What is their plan?

"I'm fine here," I say coldly.

Three boys walk towards us, grinning confidently. "Yo Nara," the tallest of them says in what he probably thinks is a cool manner. "How's it going?"

"Fine."

"Cool," he says. "D'you want to hang out with us later?"

"I have plans." If training with Yoshino and maybe playing shogi with Shika counts as a plan.
"Right, of course you do!" The boy – I believe his name is Fumio – says. He laughs sheepishly. "Tomorrow, maybe?"

Another girl joins us. "Hey, Riko-san! A few of us girls are planning a sleepover, and we wanted to ask, do you want to join us? It would be really cool if you came!" She smiles at me.

Kuramoto saunters into the classroom. He looks around expectantly. Only two boys join him and start whispering urgently to him. Then Kuramoto notices me, surrounded by our classmates.

The glare he gives me is so full of hatred that my expressionless mask almost breaks.

I get it now. I beat Kuramoto. They don't want to follow him anymore. I'm the new leader. All those surrounding me abandoned him. If I didn't dislike him so much, I'd feel sorry for him.

The girl that invited me to her sleepover party still looks expectantly at me. Three more people join our group, greeting me as if I were their best friend. As if this were normal.

I feel caged in. All of their eyes staring at me, waiting for my answer, smiling at me. I can't clear my mind. Can't talk. Can't move. I can't deal with this new kind of pressure.

Naruto runs into the classroom, looking around excitedly. When he sees me, surrounded by admirers, not waiting for him, he looks crushed. Because of me. My one friend in this class, no matter how new, is hurt because of me.

"Ugh, I hate that boy. He's so loud and stupid. He should just quit!" Ayaka says hatefully.

I find my voice again. "Shut up!" I hiss. The glare I level at her makes her flinch back. "Naruto is worth twelve of you!"

I stand up, take my bag, break out of the circle they formed around me and leave those people who abandoned their friend staring after me. I stride to the front row where Naruto sits now, head held low like I have never seen him do. My fault.

No. Their fault.

"Naruto? Can I sit with you?"

He looks up, disbelieving. His eyes dart to the group I left behind, then to me, then back again. "What about your friends?" he asks me, dreading the answer.

"Those are not my friends. You are."

His mouth drops open. "Really? You mean it? You really want to be my friend?"

"Really. I mean it. I said so yesterday, didn't I?"

His answering smile is so bright, it almost hurts to look at it. "Yeah!" he says. "Let's be friends, Riko-chan!"

And I sit down next to him. Dead Last and Top Girl.

Fine pair indeed.

We're meeting Shika and Chouji on the rooftop for lunch.
"So" I say. "This is my new friend Naruto, and these two are my brother Shikamaru and his best friend, Akimichi Chouji."

"Nice to meet you, dattebayo!"

"Troublesome... nice to meet you."

"Nice to meet you, Naruto-san."

I'd feared this would be awkward, since neither Shikamaru nor Chouji like to talk that much, but I needn't have worried. Naruto talks enough for three. He quickly draws Chouji into a conversation about different kinds of ramen while Shika listens amusedly. I sit down and steal a tomato from his lunchbox. When I take out mine, he takes a rice ball.

"How was your day so far?" Shika asks me.

"Weird. Really weird. Most of my classmates seem to have decided that they have to follow me around now after I beat Kuramoto. It's troublesome."

Even after I left them like that, they walked up to me, completely ignoring Naruto and trying to get me to sit with them or accept their invitations. It was disgusting how fast their loyalties switched from Kuramoto to me. They only left me alone when Hiroshi came in.

"And Hiroshi hates me now. I don't know why. I know Kuramoto's his favourite, but I only beat him in a spar. That's not enough reason to glare at me the whole time."

Naruto looks up from his conversation with Chouji. "Hiroshi's dating Kuramoto's mom. I overheard them talk once."

_Bugger._ That's really not good. If this whole mess is something personal for our teacher, things could get even worse.

What Hiroshi made us do yesterday could have gotten Naruto and me seriously hurt. If I hadn't trained excessively over the last month, I _would_ have gotten seriously hurt, I'm sure of it. Naruto has somehow recovered from his injuries yesterday – maybe he went to the hospital – but what if he receives a lasting injury next time?

Shika looks grim. He doesn't like this anymore than I do.

"We should tell dad," I say. "Maybe he can do something. I mean, it's a conflict of interest if Hiroshi is involved with a student's mother, isn't it? Shouldn't he get reassigned to another class?"

"So long as they aren't married, it's not reason enough to remove him from class. It would be different if it were a graduating class, but you're only in first year."

_Bugger._ I guess I'll have to continue training hard, then. And keep my eyes open.

I have to watch out for Naruto now, too.

The next few weeks pass much faster than the ones before it.

Naruto sits next to me in the back row every day now. He likes the front more, but when I told him ninja should try to keep their backs covered and keep track of everyone in the room, he moved to the back with me. It has the added benefit that it makes it harder for the teachers to glare at him.
Lessons are much more interesting with him next to me. He can't sit still for very long and always has to do something with his hands. This results in him drawing silly little pictures or building towers with his school supplies or other things like that. One memorable Shinobi Law lesson, we built a small catapult out of pencils and rubber bands and used it to bombard Akio-sensei with chalk pieces whenever he turned around to write on the black board. Of course he suspected Naruto, but since the catapult was built on my desk and hidden by my textbook, and no one would ever suspect the model student, he couldn't punish him without proof.

My classmates still continue to pester me. They won't take the hint that I genuinely can't stand their presence. Instead they declare my cold attitude toward them 'cool'. It's better than the cold looks and whispers from before, but not by much. I still can't go anywhere without someone watching me and whispering still follows me everywhere.

Shikamaru once teased me that I have fangirls now. I hit him. One does not ever joke about fangirls.

Kuramoto continues to hate me. He and the few friends that didn't leave him haven't changed their behaviour. They still follow my every movement with cold eyes and insult me as often as possible. In taijutsu, they do their very best to beat me, but by now I'm so far ahead in taijutsu that it will take them a while to catch up to my level. And by that time I will already be much farther ahead. It makes me worry that they might try something else someday.

I won a few more fights in taijutsu class, much to Naruto's delight. He won one against Fumio, the annoying boy that is slowly developing a crush on me and continues to invite me to 'hang out'. No matter how much I try to discourage him, he continues to pester me.

Hiroshi dislikes me even more now that Naruto and I sit together. He doesn't do anything obvious. It's more small things, like not calling on me in class unless I'm the only one with my hand lifted, and criticising my answers harshly when that happens, not that there is much he actually can criticise.

Mom trains me harder than ever. I told her and dad about Hiroshi and Kuramoto, though I didn't tell them how awful it was before I won that spar. I'm pretty sure though that dad has an idea about it. He likely keeps an eye on my and Shikamaru's lives.

Shikamaru and I spar at home now, too, though he complains about it. He isn't as fast as me, but he fights with his mind, too and against him, I lose sometimes.

I'm getting stronger. I have a friend in class now. My life isn't perfect, but it's definitely improving.

---

Naruto and I are currently in Training Ground 32.

This training ground is located more in the outskirts of the village and consists of a lot of forested hills. After the we snuck in, the two of us climbed the highest hill and now we are very busy.

I am currently tying strings of ninja wire, a multitude of rubber bands, rope and a bed sheet into a complex contraption, using the surrounding trees as anchors. Naruto is filling a large number of voluminous balloons with orange and pink colour.

"Remember, fill only seventy-three of them. And we need to weigh them all together before we launch them."

We are pranking Hiroshi.

"I found Hiroshi-sensei's address," Naruto told me about four hours ago.
"I'm gonna paint his house orange," was the following sentence.

My inquiries as to how he was going to achieve his objective were answered with: "I'll wait until it's dark, and then I'll paint while he sleeps."

Horrible plan. Hiroshi lives in a neighbourhood that is inhabited by a lot of ninja. Naruto would definitely get caught. So I offered to help him under the condition that we use pink colour too. Naturally Naruto accepted. After orange, pink is his favourite colour, not that anyone besides me knows that.

I crouch down and check the diagrams that took me an hour to draw. Then I go over the corresponding calculations again.

"Done, dattebayo!" Naruto cheerfully calls out to me. "Can we weigh them now?"

"We should to tie them together first. That'll make weighing them easier too."

"Yatta!" Naruto shouts and starts tying the balloons together. I continue tying wire, rubber, rope and bed sheet together and adjusting them. Then I climb a tree and check the direction of the wind.

"We can weigh 'em now!" Naruto calls up to me.

I climb down. We weigh the tied-together balloons.

"Perfect," I say. We load the balloons into the bed sheet. Then we climb up into the tree and Naruto puts his goggles on while I pull out binoculars.

"Can I launch it, Riko-chan?" Naruto asks me, bouncing excitedly, eyes shining happily.

"Don't fall off the tree."

"Can I? Please?"

"Fine. You have to cut this wire over here." I point the wire in question out and hand him the pair of scissors.

He grins manically. Then with great flourish, he cuts the wire.

Ropes tighten. Wires move. Rubber bands contract. The bed sheet is launched forward and catapults the seventy-three colour-filled balloons into the air. They fly in a perfect arc over forested hills, streets and houses right against the front side of Hiroshi's home.

I imagine the splattering sound they make when through my binoculars, I see the house turn a cheerful mix of orange and pink.

Deeply moved, we watch the result.

"It's beautiful," I breathe.

"Yeah. We've got to do that again," Naruto answers.

"Want to go for ramen?"

"Race you!"

Troublesome boy. But an awesome friend.
Shikamaru and I are sitting in our living room with dad, trying to access the chakra in our bodies. This weekend, Shikaku finally started instructing us on how to do it. I'd thought Yoshino would be the one to teach us, but dad offered to take over our training for the weekend since she has been working so hard training me.

We have been at it since yesterday, but trying to control chakra feels like trying to grab smoke. Every time I think I've almost got it, it escapes me. Shikamaru has no more luck than I.

"Don't force it, kids. It's *your* chakra. *You* control it."

Easier said than done. Both Shika and I are able to feel our chakra since Yoshino had us meditating a lot before the Academy started. But we've never tried to actually use it.

Well, I've used it before, but those were uncontrolled bursts of chakra triggered by mental stress and strong emotions. Using chakra like that is dangerous. I actually damaged my chakra system when I traveled to this world, and I was incredibly lucky not to have died. Well, not to have died permanently.

I need to learn to control it without being angry, scared or desperate.

I try to reach for my chakra again, and it eludes me. It has done that since we started this exercise.

*Okay, Ri. I think. This isn't working. Try doing it another way.*

Maybe I'm not supposed to try and *grab* it. Maybe it would work better if I tried *directing* it.

I deepen my breaths and slip into a meditative calmness. I can feel my chakra inside me better now. It's chaotic and unfocused, like always. Shika said it felt like that for him, too when we talked about it.

I reach for my chakra, not to grab it, but to try and make it flow in a controlled way. I'm not actually trying to access it, just floating it around inside of me. It feels weird, but it's a good kind of weird.

"Good job, Riko-chan. Try circulating it through your body now."

I try, but it's hard to control. It tries to fall back into its previous chaotic state.

"Don't force it. It'll work better if you are calm. And good job, Shikamaru. You're getting there."

I take a deep and force the frustration away. Once I am calm again, I start directing my chakra through my body, not pushing it, but guiding it clumsily wherever I want.

It's like something in my head snapped into place, like using a muscle that's always been there but has never been used on purpose. It's *easy*. It's *instinct*. Why did I think it was hard to do before?

Shikaku was right. I looked at it like it was separate from me, but it isn't. It's *mine*, and I don't just control it, I *am* it. All that tingling energy inside me, I feel like I could jump ten meters high, run faster than the wind and never ever tire out. It's *wonderful*.

"Well done, Riko-chan. You'll need to even out the flow of chakra inside of you, but that's a matter of practice. Now, if you are in trouble within the village walls, you can flare your chakra and the shinobi in the vicinity will feel it and come help you. This is how you do it..."
Shikamaru managed to access his chakra shortly after me, and after he taught us how to flare it, dad let us run around the training ground and try out the new possibilities. It was a bit painful, since our minds still have to adjust to the new power and speed in our movements, and we tripped so often, we were covered in dirt after that training session, to Shikaku's amusement. Entirely worth it though.

Life continues on as usual. I go to class and sit in the back next to Naruto. I endure my classmates' admiring stares, Kuramoto's hateful glares and Hiroshi's cold looks. During lunch break, Naruto, Shika, Chouji and I continue to meet and share food. The day after we noticed that Naruto never had a lunchbox, all of us came with bigger ones so we could share with him. It was both funny and sad to see how reverently he ate each bite we gave him.

I don't use chakra in my taijutsu class. That would make it boring, and I don't want my classmates to start hating me again for receiving extra training. But it's hard. Now that I can access all that power inside me, not using it seems like such a waste.

Life seems peaceful at the moment, but I can't help but think that the peace is shaky at best. That Kuramoto is going to try to attack me. I'm worried about the situation with Hiroshi too, but I don't think he's going to try anything as obvious as last time, especially given how spectacularly his plan backfired.

Still, at some point the peace will be broken.

I enter our classroom. As soon as I enter, a familiar voice calls out to me.

"Mornin', Nara! Do you want ta hang out with me today?" Tachibana Fumio asks. "I got tickets for that new movie, and we could go there together!"

"I have plans," I say coldly, sweeping past him toward my usual seat in the back row.

"C'mon, Nara! It'll be cool, and we could totally spar together later. You like sparring, right?"

Not particularly. There is hardly anyone in this class that I couldn't beat in under a minute. Boring.

"I have plans," I repeat, sinking into my seat.

"Then I could sit with you now, instead of hanging out later! Ya don't have plans now, do ya?"

*Take a hint, idiot!*

"The seat next to me is taken."

Right on cue, the door bursts open and Naruto storms in.

"I'm not late!" he cries, then runs to his place next to me. "Good morning, Riko-chan!"

"Good morning, Naruto," I reply.

Fumio glares at Naruto for having taken the seat he had wanted to occupy. I'll have to thank Naruto for saving me from Fumio's company later.

"I suggest you return to your seat now, Tachibana-san," I dismiss him.

Fumio looks as if he wants to say something else, but just in that moment, our teacher comes in, so he has to leave.
"Fumio again, huh?" Naruto asks me.

"I'm considering just going out with him so he'll stop annoying me." Plus, Shika's and dad's reactions might be fun to see. And maybe they'd get rid of him for me... Now there's a good idea.

"No! He's not good enough for you, dattebayo!" Naruto almost shouts, staring at me in horror. Hopefully Fumio didn't hear him. He'd definitely misinterpret it.

"Alright, alright. I won't go out with him. Now be quiet, the lesson is starting." It's our Culture class, which I like for several reasons. One, it isn't taught by Hiroshi. Two, I actually learn something new here. Three, the teacher, Aika-sensei, makes it interesting.

Not today, though. Today's lecture is about the Land of Birds, which I studied all about since I'm supposed to come from there. So I look around to watch my classmates instead. Fumio is following the lesson and occasionally sneaking glances at me. Otori Ayaka is gossiping with her one remaining fashion-obsessed friend. The rest already dropped out. And Kuramoto...

I'm getting an uneasy feeling. Kuramoto and friends are whispering urgently to each other. Some of them look a little skeptical about whatever he is telling them. Kuramoto seems to be trying to convince them of something, gesticulating with his hands.

He's definitely planning something, and he's enlisting his friends to help. *Don't overthink this, Ri. It might not have anything to do with you.*

I'll just have to be more careful until I know what he's planning.

---

History class, Lunch and taijutsu class pass uneventfully, except that Kuramoto throws me unsettling side glances when he thinks I'm not paying attention, making me think that whatever he is planning actually does have something to do with me.

Taijutsu ends early today, like it does most days. Naruto managed to get detention earlier in history, so he has to return to the Academy building with Hiroshi while I wait for Shikamaru and Chouji alone on the swing where Naruto and I talked for the first time.

Naruto and I have become good friends. He's funny, kind and actually really smart, though it's more street smarts than book smarts. Book smarts, he's hopeless at. I tell him the more interesting details of the lessons, like about fights and wars in history class, so he doesn't fail his tests completely, but I don't foresee him getting rid of the 'Dead Last' label anytime soon, at least not in academic subjects. In taijutsu, he's doing a bit better since I spar and exercise with him when we wait for Shika and Chouji after class, but he still has a lot to catch up on and he doesn't have Yoshino to beat him into shape.

I look up when I hear steps approaching. It's one of Kuramoto's friends. I get up from the swing.


"Uh, hello Nara-san. Uh, I need to tell you something. About Dai."

I narrow my eyes. He was one of the ones who looked skeptical this morning when Kuramoto was talking. Maybe he'll tell me what Kuramoto is planning.

"So talk," I order.

He looks around anxiously. "Not here," he says and walks deeper into the shade of the tree. I follow
him.

Must be something really bad if he's that paranoid. But it's good to see that someone is trying to warn m-

Pain explodes in my head as I am slammed into the tree. Hands grab my arms before I can move and hold me in place as a fist is driven into my stomach. I try to get my bearings, try to shake the dizziness off but the next punch is to my face and my head snaps back. I taste blood in my mouth.

The hands let go and I fall to the ground. Standing above me is Kuramoto with his friends, a cruel grin on his face.

It was a trap. And like an idiot I walked right into it.

I flare my chakra as hard as I can, but then a kick slams into me and I lose my focus.

"Told you, bitch." Another kick. I try curling up to present less of a target. "I'm gonna beat you bloody!" Vernon – no, Kuramoto stomps on my arm. It snaps. He laughs sadistically. "You ain't ever beatin' me again!"

Black closes in on me, but I try with all my might not to lose consciousness.

"What is going on here?" An adult's voice. I manage to focus my blurry vision enough to see a man with a chunin's vest walking towards us. "What are you doing, Dai?!"

Shit. Shitshitshitshit. It's Hiroshi.

"She flared her chakra. Someone's going to come soon. What were you thinking, attacking her like that?" he almost yells.

"She had it coming! I was gonna teach the bitch a lesson!"

"Get out of here, all of you. I'll take her away, I know someone that's been interested in her, he'll take her in. Don't talk to anyone about what you did and saw today, or expulsion will be the least of your problems, understood?!"

They mumble affirmatives. I somehow manage to flare my chakra again, but it cuts off when another kick – much stronger than the ones before that – hits me. I cough and gasp for air and try to move. A hand grabs my throat and lifts me to my feet, slamming my back against the tree. I blurrily recognise Hiroshi's face in front of me and then he's suddenly gone and I'm slipping to the ground again, my back still against the tree. I hear screams and there are new people there with white masks, wrestling them to the ground. It's over in seconds.

One of the masked ones – ANBU, a part of my brain whispers to me - lands next to me. "I will take you to the hospital now." I try to reply, but a piercing pain in my torso only has me gasping out: "Ribs!"

The ANBU nods and very carefully lifts me into his arms. Then wind wraps around us and we're moving.

Everything goes black.

I'm in the hospital when I wake up. From the light coming through the window, I'd guess it's morning.
What am I doing here – oh.

Right. Kuramoto attacked me, and Hiroshi was there, too. And then I fainted when the ANBU used what must have been shunshin.

"Riko-chan. You're awake."

I turn my head in the direction of the voice.

"Hey Dad," I mumble.

He kneels next to my bed. "How are you feeling?"

"Weak."

He squeezes my hand. "You'll be okay, sweetheart. I promise."

"They attacked me," I whisper, voice shaking.

"I know. Me and Inoichi questioned them personally."

"Good," I sigh. "He was gonna take me away to someone."

Dad looks suddenly very, very serious. "You absolutely must not mention that to anyone, do you understand? Not even Shikamaru," he says so quietly, I barely understand him.

"Okay," I murmur.

"I mean it, don't even think about what Hiroshi said."

"I understand. Just... will it be dealt with?"

"We're trying, but it's not that easy. Now forget we ever had this conversation."

I nod. "I'd like to sleep some more, please."

He smiles at me. "You do that." He reaches out and very gently ruffles my hair. "Sleep well, Riko-chan."

"Tell Shika and mom not to worry, 'kay?"

"I will."

He stands up and walks to the door. Once he has left the room, I breathe out heavily.

Hiroshi wanted to take me away to someone. Shikaku ordered me to not talk or even think about that. From the way he spoke, he knows or at least suspects the identity of Hiroshi's contact.

"I know someone that's been interested in her, he'll take her in."

It has to be someone in the village. Someone high up, if the Jounin Commander can't deal with them easily. Someone dangerous.

Someone that would hurt me if I talked about nearly being kidnapped.

I need to get stronger.
I have to stay in the hospital for the rest of the week. Apparently, I had several broken bones, a rib almost pierced my lungs and I had a concussion.

During my stay, I am visited by Shikamaru who brings a shogi board, Chouji who brings me food and Naruto who brings me a cup of ramen.

They tell me the Academy has been temporarily closed down because the teachers are all required to attend an 'evaluation of teaching skills'. I'm pretty sure that it's not teaching skills that will be evaluated there.

They ask me about what happened, and I only tell them Kuramoto and his friends ambushed me and beat me up, but were caught doing so.

"So do you think they will be returning to the Academy?" Shikamaru asks me.

"Unlikely," I tell him. He raises an eyebrow enquiringly.

"Dad mentioned he and Inoichi handled it personally," I explain.

"Ahh. Glad to hear that," Shika says, though I get the distinct impression that he would have liked to 'handle it personally' too.

"I'm gonna kick their asses, dattebayo. No one messes with my friends!" Naruto growls angrily. It's not the normal loud Naruto-kind of angry. He sounds dangerous, and his eyes tell me he means every word. It makes me feel warm inside, that he cares that much about me. Still, I don't want him to get in trouble.

"Just prank them for me, please?" I ask him.

Naruto's face brightens. I can practically see the ideas developing behind his eyes. Naruto is scarily creative when it comes to pranks. "You got it, Riko-chan!"

"Prank?" Shika asks, suddenly interested. He turns to Naruto. "What did you have in mind?"

Uh-oh, I think when Naruto starts talking and Shikamaru listens avidly. With Naruto's crazy ideas and Shikamaru's brains and vengefulness...

Creative Naruto is scary. Motivated Shikamaru is scarier. Both together... best not to think about it.

"So!" I turn to Chouji, deciding to ignore the imminent formation of the Duo of Doom. "Do you know how many dropouts there have been in total? Our class had four, and now Kuramoto's group of five is gone, too. And I know there have been five dropouts in 1C. What about your class and 1B?"

Chouji munches on his potato chips thoughtfully. "There have been two in our class, and I think there were four or five in 1B. Why do you ask?"

"Because we will be redistributed into new classes when the number of dropouts equals the headcount of a full class, which is twenty. With Kuramoto's group gone, we now have twenty or twenty-one less people than we started with. So it will probably happen soon." I smile happily.

"Naruto and I could end up in your class!"

"Riko-chan, what if they separate us?" Naruto suddenly exclaims, momentarily distracted from his and Shika's plotting.
"They'll keep us together. The teachers think I'm a good influence on you." I'm not. I just make sure Naruto doesn't get caught as much.

"Oh, okay." Naruto looks relieved. Then he turns back to Shikamaru. "We'll need to catch a lot of bugs to do that."

"I know a guy," Shikamaru replies. "He'll help. Now about the frogs..."

I tune them out. There are things that are best not known.

I return to the Academy the following Monday. It's obvious something is going on since all students in our year are assembling in the schoolyard instead of entering the building.

"Let's wait over there." I point to our old lunch eating spot. Shika nods. While we walk there, I catch a few snippets of conversations.

"...redistributing the classes, too many dropouts, you know..."

"...assigned new teachers, something about incompetence..."

"...Ando's furniture eaten by termites, only in his room..."

I turn to Shikamaru. "Termites? What did you and Naruto do?"

"Sometimes, a man's got to do what a man's got to do," he replies stoically.

I refrain from pointing out that he's only eight years old.

We reach the tree. "You sure you should be back in school already, Ri?" Shika asks me.

"I'm fine," I say and lean my back against the tree.

"You've been flinching at every loud noise on the way here and you've been checking escape routes at every corner."

"Paranoia is a ninja's friend."

"Riko-chan!" I flinch and whirl around in the direction of the voice. Naruto looks at me confused. "You alright, Riko-chan?"

"Fine," I bite out.


"There you are!" I flinch again and turn around to Chouji. He gives me a concerned look. "Are you okay, Riko?"

Before I can answer, a loud bang from the direction of the Academy building nearly gives me a heart attack. In a cloud of smoke, a group of chunin appears, much like they did on our first day of school, only there are some chunin I haven't seen before among the Academy staff.

"Attention, students! Because of the high number of dropouts, you will be redistributed into three classes instead of four. Your teachers will now announce your class placements!" one of them calls out. He motions a fairly young chunin with a scar across his nose forward.
"I am Umino Iruka, and I will be the teacher for class 1A!" I tense. 1A was the name of Shikamaru's class. *Please, please, let me be in his class.* Shikamaru grabs my hand and squeezes it. Iruka continues.

"Class 1A will consist of its original members with the addition of Uzumaki Naruto and Nara Riko!"
We follow Iruka to our classroom. Shikamaru walks next to me and Chouji and Naruto are behind us.

I try to remember who belongs to class 1A. I know Haruno Sakura and Ino are members. Then there are of course Shika and Chouji. I think Shika mentioned a 'troublesome Inuzuka' once. And Uchiha Sasuke, whom I really wanted to avoid.

It'll be fine. I doubt he'd seek out my company anyways. I'll just be normal and polite if we ever talk.

We enter the classroom and I immediately scan the room's occupants and possible escape routes. Iruka is standing behind the teacher's desk, sorting out papers while waiting for everyone to file in and take their seats. Uchiha Sasuke is sitting by himself in the front row. In the back row, an Aburame sits, studying the incoming students. In the row before him, a tiny Hyuuga girl is looking at Naruto. In a seat in the middle row, an Inuzuka with a little white dog on his head sits, animatedly talking to a civilian student next to him. Some civilians are scattered across the room.

"Ne, ne Riko-chan, can we sit in front today? It's the first day!" Naruto asks me, big eyes looking at me pleadingly.

I sigh. I'd really rather sit in the back, but I know Naruto wants to make a good impression on our new sensei. "Fine. Just today."

"Awesome!" Naruto grins and runs toward a seat in the middle of the front row. I inwardly groan. The seat he left empty for me leaves me to sit between him and Uchiha Sasuke. So much for avoiding him.

"We'll sit behind you, Ri," Shikamaru murmurs and he and Chouji walk to the middle row. I slowly walk toward Naruto.

"Good morning, Uchiha-san," I greet him stiffly when I sink into my seat. I force a smile onto my face.

"Hn," he replies, throwing me a disinterested side-glance, then turns his attention back to the front.

"Oi! Riko-chan talked to you, bastard!" Naruto says way too loudly. Sasuke twitches and starts to turn towards us. I panic. I really don't want him to look at me with those dark eyes that remind me of everything I don't want to be reminded of.

"Naruto!" I hiss. "Calm down and don't insult people!" Sasuke pauses his movement.

Naruto looks at me surprised and a little hurt. I force myself to calm down. Shikamaru may have been right, maybe I should have held off on returning to school so soon. I am way too tense.

"Sorry," I mumble. "I appreciate you defending me, but please be a little more civilized about it, okay? I don't want you to get in trouble on the first day in a new class."

"Fine," Naruto mutters. "I'll try."

I bump my shoulder into his and give him a smile. "That's all I ask, 'Ruto."

He gives me a bemused look. "Ruto?"
I shrug. "Friends have nicknames for each other, don't they?"

His previous bad mood evaporates and he gives me his happy Naruto-grin. "Okay! I'll call you Ri-chan, dattebayo!"

I give him an approving smile, happy to have distracted him from his anger at Uchiha Sasuke. "Alright. You can call me that."

I want to say something else to keep the conversation going, but just then the remaining female members of the class enter the room in a group, giggling and talking. Some of them glare at me when they see me sitting next to Sasuke. I tense. I don't want to end up hated by my class again.

They stop looking at me though when two of them run forward. "Sasuke-kun!" They coo at him. "We're sooo glad you are in our class again! It was so scary when they said we'd be redistributed!"

Sasuke ignores them. He just sits there, no expression on his face, not giving any sign he notices the increasing number of girls crowding around him, fawning over him.

I've seen that before. I used to do the exact same thing when my fan club in my old class pestered me. If he didn't remind me of my past so much, I'd talk to him, just to let him know that he isn't completely alone in this world.

"Riko-chan!" I flinch a little as Ino's voice rips me out of my thoughts. I turn to where she is standing in front of me.

"Hello Ino-chan," I reply. "I look forward to being in the same class as you."

"Me too! And just you wait, I'll take that Top Girl spot soon enough!" She replies cheerfully, but the determination shines through in her eyes.

Sakura joins her. "I look forward to competing with you as well, Riko-san. May the better kunoichi win."

I nod, not showing my worries at the thought of rivalry on my face. "Very well. I look forward to it," I reply.

"So you are Nara Riko. The Top Girl," a nasal voice says condescendingly. "Aren't you a cute little thing."

The girl that spoke is one of the ones that glared at me before. She has brown eyes and purple hair that she wears in an asymmetrical hairstyle. Sakura seems to fold into herself when she approaches us. Ino on the other hand straightens and glares at her, looking as if she wants to say something rude.

My cool and arrogant mask goes up automatically in reaction to the girl's hostility. "And you are? I'm afraid I have never heard of you before."

The girl scowls at me. "I am Kuroda Ami. You were in 1D before, weren't you? You will soon notice that this class has much higher standards than your previous one. Things won't fall into your lap here. The Top Girl spot will go to someone that deserves it now."

By now, most of the girls that were fawning over Uchiha have turned to our conversation, eyes darting between the two of us, anticipating the outcome of our confrontation. Several of the boys in the classroom are listening now, too. I can even feel Uchiha's gaze on me, sending my mind into hyper-alert.
Great. Just awesome. Why do I always have to end up the center of attention?

I lean back in my seat, giving Ami a slow and arrogant smirk. "That sounds... entertaining," I drawl like dad does when he wants to annoy me. "I look forward to competing with Sakura-san and Ino-chan."

Ami's face reddens at being so obviously dismissed as competition. Some of the girls shoot her unsure looks, not knowing what to do. Ino and Sakura on the other hand stand a little straighter, Ino giving me an approving look.

I resist the urge to look around to gauge the reactions of those sitting behind me.

"Alright everyone, take your seats!" Iruka's voice calls, ending our conversation. The girls all scramble to take their seats.

"Can't go a second without being troublesome, can you, Ri?" Shikamaru's amused voice says from behind me.

"I do my best," I reply.

"Ri-chan?" Naruto says. "Girls are really scary."

"I am a girl," I remind him.

"But not like them. You aren't a girl girl," Naruto's voice sounds perfectly serious.

Shikamaru lets out a bark of laughter. Chouji tries to hide his giggle. I think I hear an amused snort from Sasuke's direction, but when I shoot him a side-glance, his face is impassive and turned to Iruka.

I shake my head at all of them. "If you are done being troublesome, the lesson is starting. Pay attention."

After checking our attendance, Iruka spends the next hour quizzing us on what we have learned since starting at the Academy. So far, he isn't doing a bad job as a teacher. He doesn't single anyone out and he doesn't mock anyone. He isn't particularly nice to Naruto, but he doesn't glare at him either.

After being quizzed, we are led outside where we have to complete exercises, much like in the evaluation on our first day of school. I don't make first place this time, though. Uchiha Sasuke completes his exercises faster than I, and I barely manage to keep up with Inuzuka Kiba. Aburame Shino is only moments behind us.

I'm still much faster than all the girls, though. Take that, Ami!

I wished Iruka would make us run laps. I'd really like to know how I measure up to my new classmates when it comes to running.

"Alright, everyone, well done so far. After lunch break, I would like to see you spar."

"My blood runs cold at the thought of sparring, my heart starts to beat harder. My eyes feel too wide in my face."

"Deep breaths, Ri," Shikamaru murmurs from next to me. "Troublesome girl."
I force myself to listen to his advice, taking deep breaths and calming my mind like Inoichi taught me to do. Breathing the beginning panic away.

We decided to have lunch in our old spot under the tree. I sit with my back to the tree and Shikamaru and Naruto on either side of me. Chouji sits in front of us. He and Naruto are currently locked in a discussion about different kinds of noodles. They have discussions like that regularly.

Shika nudges my shoulder. "You okay?" he asks me.

"I will be. And until then, I can fake it," I murmur, leaning against him. "Besides, I've got you here, right?"

"Right. Troublesome," he answers.

We sit there in silence, watching the students laugh and play around us. Carefree and innocent. I envy them.

"Ne, ne Riko-chan! Do you wanna go eat ramen with me after school?" Naruto's voice rips me out of my musings.

"Sure. I haven't been to Ichiraku's in a while." I give him a smile. "What about you two?" I ask, turning to Shika and Chouji.

Shika shrugs. "We're going to watch clouds. Come join us when you're done eating."

I nod. "We should get back to the training ground. Class is going to start soon, we should warm up before our spars."

"Yatta!" Naruto yells. "Let's go! I'm gonna kick everyone's ass!"

Shika groans. "You two are troublesome."

We aren't the only people at the training ground when we arrive. Inuzuka Kiba is there with some other boys, and I recognise Aburame Shino inspecting something – bugs maybe? - at the base of a tree.

Naruto starts doing the stretches and warm-up exercises I taught him, and Chouji joins him while Shika just lies on the ground and closes his eyes. I sit down next to him and start doing a breathing exercise Inoichi taught me. I don't want to panic when it's time for my spar.

Our classmates and Iruka arrive soon after I started. Iruka leads us through the standard stretching and warm-up exercises, then the spars begin. Iruka draws the names of the opponents from a small box. I relax a little when I see that there won't be a repeat of my first sparring lesson.

The first match is Haruno Sakura versus Shikamaru. Of course he wins against her, but what is more impressive is the fact that he made it look like he just managed a lucky win when he really could have beaten her in seconds.

After that, Chouji loses against Inuzuka Kiba, but he puts up a good fight. Inuzuka is just too fast for him.

The next two matches are between civilian students. Then Ino loses against Aburame Shino. A civilian girl is beaten by Hyuuga Hinata who apologizes multiple times afterwards. Another match
between civilians follows.

Then my name is called. My opponent is Ami.

That's just ridiculous. Of all nineteen available options, it had to be the girl that tried to intimidate me before and surely dislikes me now. At least I am sure I can handle her.

"Troublesome," I mutter as I step forward, holding my hand in the Seal of Confrontation. Ami steps in front of me and glares at me, imitating my hand gesture. I give her a grin, showing my teeth. She pales.

"Begin!" Iruka calls. Ami immediately starts running towards me, apparently trying to overwhelm me with sheer momentum. I wait until the last moment, then I step aside, stick my foot out and trip her. When she is on the ground, I immobilize her by sitting on top of her.

"An ...uh... unconventional way of beating your opponent. But well done, Riko," Iruka says. "You can let her up now."

I release Ami and stand up. She rolls to her feet and glares at me.

"Now do the Seal of Reconciliation."

I hold out my hand and she threads her fingers through mine it, still glaring at me. Then she yanks her hand back and stalks away. I return to my place next to Shikamaru. "Troublesome girl," he tells me. "Are you okay?"

I nod. "I'm alright," I murmur back.

It seems I can handle sparring. It's direct and confrontational. What I can't handle is the fear of suddenly being trapped and attacked out of nowhere.

I look around. Two civilians are left, and Uchiha Sasuke and Naruto.

I inwardly groan. Naruto's luck is similar to mine. He will probably end up sparring Uchiha.

I really hope it won't be a repeat of the Kuramoto-Naruto fight. If it even looks like it, I'm going to jump in and stop the fight. No way am I watching Naruto get hurt like that again.

The next match is indeed between the two remaining civilians, which leaves Naruto and Sasuke to go last. When their names are called, our classmates cheer for Sasuke and shout encouragements. I can almost see Naruto come to the conclusion that if he beats Sasuke, it will be him they'll cheer for.

I can't even criticize that reasoning. It actually happened to me in my old class.

I touch his shoulder. "Don't lose your head, 'Ruto. You can do it." I don't actually think he'll win, but it's more about showing him encouragement. I don't like that everyone cheers for Sasuke and no one for Naruto.

He grins. "Don't cha worry, Ri-chan. I'll kick his ass and show everyone how awesome I am!"

Naruto and Sasuke step forward, hands in the Seal of Confrontation. When Iruka calls for them to begin, they both storm towards each other, Naruto raising his fist. The next moment, Sasuke has grabbed him and somehow thrown to the ground. He kneels over Naruto, his fist stopped centimeters in front of his face. Naruto stares at him wide-eyed.

I let out a relieved breath. Naruto didn't get hurt.
Sasuke gets up and turns his back on Naruto, walking away with his hands in his pockets. Naruto continues lying on his back, staring up with a shocked expression. Then he sits up and glares after Sasuke, saying: "So annoying!"

I'm starting to get the feeling that something more than just the spar happened there.

As we agreed before, Naruto and I went to Ichiraku's together. Now we sit at the bar with our bowls in front of us. Naruto is just staring at his bowl though.

"Alright, spill," I tell him.

"What?" He looks at me confused.

"You've been weird since your spar with Uchiha. What's wrong?"

He turns back to his bowl with a somber expression, stirring his noodles with one of his chopsticks. I wait patiently for an answer.

"...his eyes," he says then.

"What about them?"

"Those were the same eyes everyone looks at me with. Only... stronger. But... he didn't even see me." He doesn't look at me while he says this. We never really talk about how everyone treats him. Naruto despises being seen as weak.

I sigh and push my bowl away. "Naruto. Do you know what happened to the Uchiha Clan?"

He looks surprised. "Uhhh..."

"You have to promise to never talk about it in front of Sasuke, okay?" I give him a serious look.

He gulps and nods.

"About a year ago, the entire Uchiha Clan was massacred. Sasuke is the only survivor. He is... he lost his entire family."

Naruto's eyes are wide. He turns back to his bowl, staring at it with a vacant look. "Orphan, huh?" he murmurs.

"Yeah," I say softly, turning to look down at my own bowl.

Just like me. Sasuke is just like me.

Naruto's head snaps up and he punches his fist into his other hand. "I'm still gonna beat him!" he says determinedly. "I'm gonna beat him and become Hokage!"

I give him a smile. "Yeah. I'd really like to see that."

He starts. "Ri-chan, are you okay? You look really sad right now, even if you're smiling," he asks me worriedly.

I really don't want to talk about it. But... Naruto shared something with me. I should do the same. And he's my friend, right?
"I... Sasuke reminds me of things I don't want to remember," I say, not looking at Naruto. "I... a long time ago, I wasn't a Nara. And I had another family then. But... I lost them."

"Lily, take Jazzy and run!" echoes through my head. I squeeze my eyes shut and take a shaky breath. "No, not Jazzy, never Jazzy! Take me instead!"

Warm arms wrap around me, pulling me back to the present, keeping me from falling apart.

I've never been hugged before. Not even by my family. It feels... wonderful. Naruto smells of ramen and sunshine. It's so warm. It feels like home.

"Am I doing this right?" Naruto asks anxiously.

I bury my head in his shoulder and throw my arms around him, squeezing him hard. "I don't know," I whisper back. "But I think you are."

We stay like that for a while. I think Naruto needs the hug as much as I do. When we finally pull apart, his eyes look shiny and mine are burning a little.

Naruto climbs back on his chair and we both continue to eat our now cold ramen. Neither one of us says anything, but words aren't necessary. I think in that moment, Naruto understands me better than anyone else in the world.

Teuchi places a fresh bowl in front of us when we hear someone come into the restaurant. "Good evening! One Pork Ramen, please!" a familiar voice calls out.

"Iruka-sensei?" I ask, surprised.

"Eh? Oh hello, Riko... and Uzumaki," he greets me in a friendly way and gives Naruto a wary look. "Do you two come here often?"

"Yeah! Ichiraku's is the best! Ri-chan and me come here all the time and eat together!" Naruto cheerfully answers.

Teuchi laughs. "It's true. Those two are some of my best customers."

Iruka looks a little perplexed at Naruto. I decide to confuse him further. "Ruto has a small addiction to ramen. He rarely eats anything else outside of school."

"Oh, uh, well, you should eat vegetables too, you know, uhh..."

I almost feel sorry for Iruka. The poor guy looks really awkward. Obviously Naruto isn't what he expected.

"Ne, ne, do you like ramen, too, sensei?" Naruto asks.

Iruka looks almost relieved at the simple question. "I do. They are my favourite food," he says. I start to smirk. He really shouldn't have said that.

"Really? Mine too! And Ri-chan's! We both like miso ramen the best, what's your favourite? Is it pork ramen? 'cause that's what you ordered and Ri-chan said ninja always have to pay attention to what people do. So is Pork-Ramen your favourite or are you just in a pork ramen mood and like something else better? I think..."

Iruka looks somewhat overwhelmed. I know how he feels. My first conversation with Naruto involved a ramen-monologue too.
"Why don't you sit down, sensei?" I ask him, because he looks like he needs someone to tell him what to do.

He nods mechanically and moves to sit on the free chair next to Naruto.

"Do you come here often, sensei?" I ask him.

"Ahh, sometimes for dinner," he says, looking disconcerted as Naruto beams at him. "But, Naruto, you really shouldn't eat only ramen. It isn't healthy."

I raise an eyebrow. So now he calls him Naruto, huh?

"But I don't like vegetables! Ramen's better!"

Iruka goes into lecture mode and starts explaining why vegetables are important and how a balanced diet works. Naruto has this dumb expression on his face that he gets when he pretends to understand what he's told but really doesn't. But he looks happy about Iruka attention, too.

I shake my head at them. Iruka hasn't even realized it yet, but Naruto has sucked him into his orbit. I'm happy for Naruto. I have my family, but Naruto only has me, Shika and Chouji. He should have an adult watching out for him, too.

I smile a little to myself.

I was placed into Shikamaru's class, together with Naruto. I kept my panic somewhat under control all day and I managed to behave normally in Uchiha Sasuke's presence. I won a verbal and a physical match against Ami. I received my first ever hug from Naruto. And Naruto made friends with someone.

All in all, today turned out to be pretty good.
A week has passed and I have gotten more comfortable in my new class, though I have yet to talk to anyone besides Ino, Sakura, Shika, Chouji and Naruto. Classes have gotten slightly less boring with Iruka as our teacher. Naruto has started an incredibly one-sided rivalry with Uchiha Sasuke and has taken to challenging him to fights in taijutsu. He always loses and ends up embarrassing himself. I tried to talk him into going about his rivalry a little smarter, but Naruto has a one-track-mind when he is focused on something. The whole class now knows about his status as Dead Last and all the girls with the exception of me and Hyuuga Hinata hate him for challenging Sasuke constantly. It's... troublesome.

When I enter the classroom the today, Naruto is already there, sitting in the front row, for some reason glaring at Sasuke who sneers back at him. The seat between them is empty.

I turn to Shikamaru. "Do you want to sit with me in the back?" I ask hopefully.

Shikamaru gives me a look. "Naruto will be troublesome if you don't sit with him."

True enough. Naruto would probably stare at me with big, sad, blue eyes all day and I'd feel like a horrible person. Then he'd ask me after school in a small voice if I was angry at him while looking like a kicked puppy. I'd assure him I was not, and then I'd have to buy him ramen to cheer him up.

I sigh. "Sit behind me then?"

"Sure." At least I'll have someone I trust watching my back.

Naruto interrupts his glaring when I sit between him and Sasuke.

"Morning, Ri-chan!" he greets me cheerfully. "Is it okay if we sit here today?"

"Good morning, 'Ruto. And it's alright," I reply and give him a smile. Then I turn to Sasuke and give him a greeting nod, meeting his eyes for only a split second. "Good morning, Uchiha-san," I address him quietly, grateful my voice doesn't shake.

"Hn," he replies and turns away from me. I hear Naruto taking in a breath, possibly in preparation for yelling at him for not answering me properly, so I distract him by asking about his plans for today. Naruto has just launched into a complicated explanation about different kinds of colors and glues when the swarm of female classmates comes in giggling and squealing. As soon as they see Sasuke, they crowd around him, blushes on their cheeks and eyes glowing in fanatic worship.

I still can't get over how Ino is part of them.

I see Naruto's disgruntled and jealous expression. "Trust me," I tell him. "You don't want them to fawn over you instead of him. They'll drive you insane."

Naruto doesn't answer and resumes his previous glaring at Sasuke. I mentally sigh. Troublesome, idiotic rivalry.

Iruka enters the classroom and everyone calms down a little. "We will start training with chakra today," he says. Excited whispering fills the classroom. Naruto turns to me. "Awesome! Then we can jump over roofs and stuff! Imagine all the pranks we could do!" he says, grinning.

I give him a smile back. "It will only be meditation and control exercises at first. It will probably take
a while before you can roof and tree hop."

I can already do it. Yoshino taught me how, and then she chased me all over the compound with her water-whip, which made practicing less fun than it could have been. I haven't really done it in front of anyone else except Shikamaru though.

"I'll learn it in no time, and then I'll learn awesome jutsu and become Hokage, dattebayo!" Naruto shouts optimistically.

"Alright, quiet everyone!" Iruka shouts. When the class has calmed down a bit, he says: "As I said, we will start training with chakra today. Because of that, today's lesson will be on chakra theory and how it works." Disgruntled murmurs sound through the room. "And we will only have our first ninjutsu class when I am sure you have grasped the basics of chakra theory."

Smart. Offering ninjutsu training as a reward for doing well. Though calling it ninjutsu training is a bit of a stretch. We won't learn actual jutsu until after our first year. It really will only be about accessing and controlling chakra at this time.

Iruka starts the lesson, and I make sure to pay extra attention. I already know most of what he is saying, but it can't hurt to hear it twice. Occasionally, I nudge Naruto's shoulder so he'll pay at least a little attention.

Two hours later, Iruka leads us outside to the same training ground we used yesterday.

"Alright, students!" he says. "Which of you can already access their chakra?" I, along with Aburame Shino, Hyuuga Hinata and, of course, Uchiha Sasuke, lift my hand.

Shikamaru can do it too but he probably wants to use the meditation exercises as nap time. Troublesome boy.

"I will give the four of you some control exercises. Just wait over there while I give your peers their instructions." We nod our affirmations and start moving to where Iruka indicated we should wait. I don't want to leave Shika, Chouji and Naruto, but at some point I'll have to stop relying on them so much. Plus, maybe I could make some new friends.

The four of us stand around in silence waiting for Iruka. It's really awkward. Sasuke leans against a tree, frowning at nothing. Shino stands around with his hands in the pockets of his cloak. It's impossible to tell what he's looking at behind his sunglasses. Hinata seems to be trying to make herself as small as possible and looks as uncomfortable as I am starting to feel. Her hands are lifted in front of her, forefingers pushing against each other. I stand with my back to the fence of the training ground in a spot where I can both see my current company and keep an eye on the meditating group.

The minutes pass. I really can't stand the silence, but I don't want to be the first one to break it.

Finally, Iruka arrives.

"Alright, tell me what control exercises you have already finished and which you are currently working on," he tells us.

"Umm, I am working on Leaf Floating," Hinata says in a very quiet, nervous voice.

"I as well," Shino states.

Iruka turns to Sasuke.
"I can already do ninjutsu," he says.

We all stare at him. I don't know why I'm so surprised. He does come from an elite clan, and I have heard teachers praise him as a genius.

"I see," Iruka says. "Still, chakra control is important and will allow you to use jutsu more efficiently. Which control exercises have you already done?"

"Leaf Floating and Leaf Spinning." The standard exercises, apart from Tree Climbing and Water Walking. Those two are hard to practice at our age because we lack the stamina and chakra reserves that are required to properly train them.

Iruka nods and turns to look at me. "And you, Riko?"

"I started Kunai Balancing yesterday." Yoshino would never be satisfied with only the standard exercises. Kunai Balancing is a more advanced exercise where the user must use their chakra to balance a kunai on its tip on the palm of their hand. Even more difficult is balancing it on a fingertip.

Yoshino can balance five kunai at once, one over each of her fingertips. She told me that when I master the exercise to the point that I can balance two at the same time, she will start teaching me actual jutsu.

Iruka nods. "Alright. Shino and Hinata, continue to practice the Leaf Floating Exercise. Sasuke, I will show you the Kunai Balancing Exercise. Riko, you will continue working on Kunai Balancing.

Here, I will give you a kunai."

"I have one," I say and pull out the kunai dad gave me the day after I was released from the hospital. Yoshino gave me a new wide belt made from black fabric and showed me how to hide the kunai underneath it. Then she had me practice pulling the kunai out quickly without looking, and after that she taught me a few ways to use it in close combat.

Iruka looks surprised. My three classmates stare at me. I suppose it's somewhat unusual for an eight year old Academy student in her first year to carry around a sharp weapon. Though I wouldn't be surprised at all if Sasuke did the same thing.

Iruka shakes the surprise off and starts to explain Kunai Balancing to Sasuke. Hinata and Shino stop staring at me and both go to find leaves for their exercise.

I start focusing on my own exercise. I really want to start learning actual jutsu so I won't be so weak should I get attacked again. Next time will be different.

After a half hour, I am thoroughly frustrated. The kunai seems to mock me. I haven't made any progress at all, the kunai only stands stable for around a second. It's so much harder than floating and rotating leaves.

"Nara. Why do you carry a kunai around?"

I start. It was Sasuke that spoke. Shino and Hinata are a little ways from us, practicing their own exercises.

I take a deep breath and turn to look at Sasuke. "Because," I say softly. "I tend to have really bad luck." I block out the memories that threaten to assault me. I can't break down in front of Sasuke.

He's still looking at me, thinking over my words. Of all the people in this village, he probably understands what I'm not saying the most. I wonder if he sees my past reflected in my eyes like I
sometimes see in his.

"Hn," he says, and turns back to his kunai. I let out a relieved breath.

Troublesome. How am I supposed to be a strong ninja if I can't even talk to one classmate? *Pathetic,* I think. *Too weak.*

I should talk to him. Say something about the exercise, talk about school, commiserate about his fangirls. But I'm a coward and I can't bring myself to open my mouth, so we continue our exercise in silence.

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Months pass.

By the end of our first term, every member of class 1A has managed to access their chakra and got started on Leaf Floating. I can now balance one kunai over the tip of my forefinger and another over my palm, though one always falls down after a minute. Still, Yoshino decided it was good enough and started to teach me the *Kawarimi no jutsu.*

My first ninjutsu. I'm one step closer to becoming a real ninja.

School life has gotten more comfortable, and both Naruto and I have expanded our circle of acquaintances. During the meditations for accessing their chakra, Naruto made friends with Inuzuka Kiba, who is about the only person who has near as much energy as him and can't sit still any longer either. This resulted in them cutting class a lot, Shikamaru and Chouji joining in more often than not. I'd have joined them, but they seemed to want to have some 'boy-time', and besides, I have a reputation to uphold and a title to keep.

I have managed to establish a weird camaraderie with Aburame Shino who is really quite intelligent and second place in the boy's rankings. We don't talk much, and when we do, it's mostly about class. He appreciates that I don't mind his bugs or listening to him talk about them, and I like his calm and collected demeanor. We usually sit together when Naruto and them cut class.

I tried talking to Hyuuga Hinata, too but she is so shy, she can hardly get a word out in my presence. I still greet her and give her a friendly smile when I see her, but until she gets less shy, I don't see us becoming closer.

Ino and Sakura think of themselves as my rivals now. Academically, Sakura is almost as good as me, and Ino is good with taijutsu and practical lessons, but neither are good in both areas, so I keep my Top Girl spot. It helps that they spend a significant part of their time fawning over Sasuke instead of training.

The rivalry puts a strain on their friendship though. Both want Sasuke, and both want to be Top Kunoichi come graduation. Sometimes I see one of them eyeing the other jealously, and I've heard them make snide comments about each other to the other girls they hang out with. It makes me sad to see their friendship crumble, but there is nothing I can do about it.

Sasuke and I haven't really talked again besides a few sentences in ninjutsu class, where we have the same exercises to complete.

One time, some people from my old class including Tachibana Fumio saw us and immediately surrounded me to ask how I've been doing and how they'd try to get in the same class as me. I got invitations to hang out and Fumio proved that his crush had not subsided at all by asking me out three times in that one conversation. They only left when Iruka came over to scare them off.
Sasuke didn't start talking more after that, but he started looking less cold in my presence.

In Naruto's presence though, he is an arrogant jerk. Every time he wins against Naruto, he lifts his nose in a dignified sneer, causing all the girls to swoon and Naruto to yell at him. The two can't seem to stand each other. Sometimes, though, I think they both see each other as friends, though they'd never admit it, least of all to themselves.

I continue to train hard almost every day with Yoshino. Thanks to her, my taijutsu has become good enough to win a spar against Kiba, though he did underestimate me. Now he works extra hard during taijutsu class and I can see he wants to have a rematch. He hasn't challenged me to one yet, though, but I suppose that's just a matter of time.

Mom also has me training with shuriken and kunai. My accuracy has gotten a lot better than when I first started, but it's not at the level it needs to be to be useful in a fight. I'll get there someday, though. I've also asked her about maybe training with senbon, seeing as they'd complement my taijutsu nicely, but she doesn't want to teach me until I've gotten better with kunai and shuriken.

I'm getting stronger, but more than that, I'm getting faster. With chakra now augmenting my movements, I feel like I am flying when I run and jump through trees and over rooftops. Even without chakra, the only one in our class that is faster than I is Sasuke.

It's Friday afternoon and I'm walking through Konoha's main street. Naruto and I got separated after we were nearly caught redecorating the storefront of a restaurant that continuously refuses to serve Naruto. He chose to escape by jumping over rooftops while mocking the owners. I chose to pretend to be a shocked bystander and blend into the crowd. Now I am slowly making my way to the Nara compound. Yoshino has something to do today, so I have a day off from training and don't have to hurry.

I take a turn into a side street, looking at the displayed goods of the different stores. I'm not really into shopping, but I do keep my eyes open for nice things or new books. And when I study the store window of a candy shop, the reflection shows someone running towards me.

It's Tachibana Fumio. Ugh. Time to leave.

I make a big show out of looking at my watch, then I channel chakra and take to the rooftops in a hurry, as if I had just realised I was late for something. I chance a quick look behind me. He is following me.

I run over a few more rooftops as fast as I can, then I drop down into the streets again and run a few blocks, trying to shake him off. It doesn't work, I can hear him calling for me. Troublesome!

I run through a few more streets and then I see a fence with an abandoned looking forest right behind it. Likely a training ground. Without stopping to think, I hastily climb over the fence and hide behind a tree.

Not a second later I can hear Fumio run past my hiding place, yelling: "Nara? Do you wanna train together?"

I let out a relieved breath. Most training grounds are off limits for anyone below genin level, so he didn't think I would hide in here. The moron likely didn't even notice I was running and hiding from him at all.

Shikamaru may have been onto something when he called him my fangirl. I'm just glad Fumio's the only one.
I take a look around me. Naruto and I snuck into a few training grounds, but none of them were as densely wooded as this one.

I'm curious now. No one expects me at home right now, and I have nothing to do. Besides, if I leave, I might run into Fumio again. Why shouldn't I take a look around? It should be safe enough. If this were a dangerous training ground, it would have been secured better.

I walk deeper into the forest, palming my kunai in my hand just in case. I haven't really gotten over Kuramoto's attack and the subsequent anxiety, but most of the time, I manage to control it. So long as I don't let it control me, it could actually be useful since it makes me more aware of my surroundings.

The forest seems normal, a little neglected, maybe. It's probably not frequented very often. I walk deeper inside, towards where I can hear water. The forest seems lighter in that direction, too.

I stop right at the edge of a clearing, hidden behind trees. The clearing is quite lovely, with tall trees and soft grass. A small creek is responsible for the water noises I heard.

I don't spend much time looking at the scenery, because training in the middle of the clearing is Uchiha Sasuke. He is doing kata I don't recognise, gracefully executing the movements. God, he's beautiful, a voice in the back of my mind sighs. I block it out.

I shouldn't watch this. I shouldn't be here.

I'm about to leave the way I came from when Sasuke suddenly tenses and whirls around. "Who's there? Show yourself!" he commands.

Bugger. Caught. I put my kunai away and walk out from behind the trees into the clearing. Awesome, Ri. Now he probably thinks you are some fangirl stalking him.

"Nara," he says, face expressionless when he looks at me. I fight down the dread his cold look evokes in me. I can feel the bad thoughts and memories creeping up on me.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know you were here," I say. "I was just... uh... evading someone and ended up in here..." my voice trails off. I can't rip my eyes from his.

"Evading who?" his cold voice asks.

"Tachibana Fumio. From my old class. He's... well he likes me a lot for some reason," I answer.

"I remember," Sasuke states.

"Ahh, that's right, you saw him that one time... in ninjutsu class, was it?" I laugh nervously even though there's nothing funny. God, this is so awkward. Distract him!

"Uhh... do you want to spar?" The moment the question comes out of my mouth, I want to take it back. I should be trying to get away from him, not pick a fight with the best student in the Academy. I've seen how he fights. He's been labeled a genius for a reason.

He gives me a considering look, then nods curtly. Cursing my idiocy, I walk towards him. A tiny part of me though is flattered that he considers me a worthy opponent and didn't send me away.

Sasuke and I have never fought each other before, but we've seen how the other fights. I would be lying if I said the thought of sparring him didn't excite me. His taijutsu is the best in our class, and he never loses. He's fast, strong and his form is flawless.
I stop walking when I'm only a few steps away from him and sink into my fighting stance. He tenses and assumes a ready position. Then we look into each other's eyes, waiting for the other to attack.

Sasuke is the first one to move. Almost faster than my eyes can follow, he runs forward, fist flying out towards me. I dodge his attack, then dart in, snapping my own fist forward, but he blocks it, and I jump away again.

And so the fight begins. His attacks are direct and sharp, while mine are light and flowing. Again and again, I jump in to attack and dance away when he blocks me and moves to counterattack. Faster and faster, we whirl around each other in an intricate dance of punches and kicks, blocks and counters. And when our eyes lock, I can see the look of anger, rage and so much hatred in his glare that isn't directed at me but at someone only he can see, and I feel everything I've buried deep inside me flare up, the anger and hatred for my parent's killer, all the crushing guilt and self-loathing, the hurt I still feel over their murder, the frustration at being so weak and pathetic, the mind-numbing fear of someday losing everything I've found here, of not being able to protect those I've come to love, of returning to that dark and lonely place. And everything he and I feel is communicated in our attacks, our screams of rage and torment contained within our fists, and it's painful and glorious. We are broken and whole, dead and alive, chained and unleashed.

For the first time in my life, I let go and let myself be everything I was scared to be before, and it's magnificent.

I lose all sense of time. My mind is in a place where nothing else matters but moving and feeling. It could be hours or seconds that we dance around each other in this fight that has become so much more than that.

Finally, Sasuke sweeps his leg behind mine and I fall to the ground. Before I can move, he kneels above me, one hand on my throat. We are both breathing hard, and for the first time he is really looking at me and I at him. Seeing each other without memories and pain obstructing our vision.

I don't know how long we stay like that until he takes his hand from my throat and moves back to sit on the ground next to me. I stay where I am, lying on the ground, staring up into the sky, more at peace with myself than I have ever been before. My breaths are ragged and my vision is blurry, but I don't realise I am crying until Sasuke's hand wipes the tears away. When I turn to look at him, he is staring at his tearstained fingers as if he's never seen them before.

No word is spoken. He stays until my eyes are dry again and my breathing has calmed down, then he stands up and walks away.

"Same time next week?" I croak after him, my voice sounding as if I haven't used it in years.

"Hn," he replies, and I can't tell if that's a no or a yes.

But he's there the next week and the week after that and every week following them.

We don't talk. We aren't friends. Outside of our fights, we hardly exist for each other. But Uchiha Sasuke has become one of the most important people in my life, because he is the one person I can truly be myself around.
Since I started fighting Sasuke regularly, it's been as if I was freed from invisible shackles I didn't even know were there. I feel more at peace with myself, calmer, content. Not so anxious anymore, though still paranoid. I've started accepting the parts of me I don't like, the memories that used to haunt me. They still haunt me, but I no longer hide from them. They are a part of me and helped make me the person I am. And I think I like who I am.

The effect those spars have on my training is tremendous. My taijutsu becomes much faster and vicious. My movements, quick and graceful before, now become instantaneous and sudden. I have yet to beat Sasuke, though.

With my mind more calm and focused, my chakra control has improved as well. I can now balance three kunai with no problem at all, and I am working on adding a fourth one. I've learned the Kawarimi, Henge and Bunshin no jutsu during the second term of our first year in the Academy. As a result, I am usually bored in ninjutsu class and use the time to practice my chakra control. Still, I can't wait to learn something new.

Mom stands in front of me, holding a piece of paper towards me. "Channel chakra into it," she orders me.

She spent the last three hours testing me on the use of the three ninjutsu I've learned so far, the Kawarimi, the Henge and the Bunshin. It was the fun kind of test, though. She told me to retrieve a book from the Konoha civilian library and bring it back to our house without getting caught by her. Then she gave me a one minute head start, and the game started.

Mom didn't go easy on me. I ended up having to use seven different transformations, create sixteen bunshin in total and replace myself eighteen times. I ran all over the village at full speed, and I would still have gotten caught had I not run into Naruto, who delayed Yoshino for me. Using other people wasn't against the rules of the test, so I passed and now I get to learn real ninjutsu.

The Academy ninjutsu are fine and useful, but not very exciting. Unlike this. I know that that paper will tell me the nature of my chakra, which means that Yoshino intends to teach me elemental ninjutsu. And my chakra nature will greatly influence my path as a shinobi. Still...

"Isn't Nature Transformation a chunin skill? I'm only nine years old."

"Best to start early. I don't believe in holding someone back because of their age when they are well capable of learning."

I glow with pride. Yoshino believes I can learn Nature Transformation at my age.

I take the paper and channel my chakra through my fingers. Immediately, the paper is drenched.

"Water?" I say, surprised. For some reason, I'd expected wind. Or fire. Fire would have been fun.

"Yes. Just like me," Mom says, looking pleased. I smile. She is the strongest woman I know, and I really like the thought of being like her, though I still have a very long way to go.

"Alright," I say. "How do we start?"
Apparently, we start by giving me a scroll and leaving me to my own devices after pointing me to a training ground with lots of water available.

That is where I've been for the last two hours. Training Ground 22. Filled with ponds, creeks, a lake and a small waterfall. I'm starting to intensely dislike it. The water is ice cold.

Exercise Number one: Sit under a waterfall for hours and try to focus on your chakra patterns while tons of water fall on your head and you slowly lose the feeling in your extremities.

Why couldn't I have had fire natured chakra? That's at least warm, and the scroll said fire users only have to do breathing exercises, preferably while sitting in the sun.

I decide to call it a day and crawl out from under the waterfall, trying to get the feeling in my limbs back. When that's done, I start making my way toward the Nara Compound, looking and feeling like a half-drowned cat and dripping water all over Konoha.

On the porch at the front door, dad and Shikamaru are sitting playing shogi. Dad raises an eyebrow at my appearance, looking amused. "Water element, Riko-chan?"

I scowl at him. Then I jump forward and throw my arms around him, drenching him in cold water. He laughs and catches me in a hug. "Troublesome girl," he says. I grin into his shoulder.

Water might not be so bad after all.

Thankfully, I finish the Cold Shower Exercise within a week. After that, the next exercise is to stick my hands in water and using chakra to move it around. With all the chakra control exercises I've completed so far, that doesn't take me long to master.

The next exercise is much harder though. The result will someday prove very useful on missions, but right now it's just frustrating. I'm supposed to use my chakra to gather the moisture in the air into an orb of water that has the annoying tendency to blow up in my face and drench me if I don't keep my chakra stable.

If I master this, I won't ever have to worry about dying of thirst unless I'm in a desert. Plus, utilizing the moisture in my surroundings is a vital skill for any water user. Unfortunately, my chakra reserves aren't large enough yet to keep practicing this for long. Hopefully, they will increase, given the strain I repeatedly put on them.

It takes me over two months to achieve a satisfying result. It's still too slow for my liking, but I can gather an orb the size of a water melon in my hands. It only explodes one time out of ten.

Exploding water balls. I'm so going to make a jutsu out of that, someday.

After finishing the Exploding Waterball Exercise, I can finally start learning actual jutsu. Though due to my still relatively small reserves, I won't be doing anything much higher than E-ranked jutsu.

The first technique I learn is incredibly simple and amazingly useful. Mizu no Warua, or Trick of Water, only needs a flick of the fingers and a tiny amount of moisture on them. The water then streaks from the user's hand to the enemy's eye, irritating and blurring their vision. It takes me a while until I've figured out how to aim it right, but it's no more difficult than throwing shuriken.

Uo Tsuba, or Fish Spit, is a simple jet of water shot from the mouth. It isn't very strong, but it can stun an opponent if aimed right. It's also the base for several higher level water techniques that I intend to learn someday.
The next jutsu I learn is much more complex. Mizu no Yaiba creates a sharp sword out of water. The shape can be manipulated by the user. It starts out as an E-ranked Jutsu, but with improving control and increasing chakra input, it can be developed into an A-ranked Jounin skill.

It takes me the better part of two years to develop the Jutsu to a satisfying level. But the end result is worth the effort. I now can use a sharp blade made of water that is durable enough to not be destroyed by regular weapons, and I can vary its size from a tiny dagger to a blade the length of my own body. It actually impressed Yoshino when I showed her. Now she teaches me kenjutsu so I can exploit the technique's full potential.

She also teaches me the Mizu Bunshin no Jutsu, which turns out to be very useful for skipping classes without getting caught. Of course, I can't use them for taijutsu class, since one good hit will destroy them and the water clones only have one tenth of the original's strength. But leaving one in Shinobi Law or History class while I am outside with Naruto, pranking villagers? It's the perfect alibi.

I'm growing stronger. I'm learning to really fight, and I am learning actual ninjutsu.

"Welcome back to your last term at the Academy," Iruka greets us once our classroom has calmed down a bit. Naruto, bouncing up and down in excitement, punches his fist in the air and yells: "Yatta, dattebayo!"

Naruto and I are sitting in the front row since this is the first day of the new term. On my other side sits Sasuke, who barely gave me an acknowledging nod. Behind us are Shikamaru, Chouji and Kiba.

"Troublesome..." Shika mutters at Naruto's yell.


It's true. In the last three years, Naruto has grown more rebellious and loud. Not a week passes that he isn't chased by angry villagers for a prank he pulled. He got fed up with the ignorance people treated him with and decided that if they refused to acknowledge him, he'd just force them to give him attention. Now he runs around in an obnoxious bright orange jumpsuit and constantly does stupid things. He's become our class clown, much to Iruka's annoyance.

He's still good old ramen-obsessed Naruto, though. My awesome sidekick and best friend.

I give him an hour until he's bored with school again. He'll probably start cutting class in two days.

Oh well. He wouldn't be Naruto if he followed the rules. And he has me to make sure he knows the most important contents of the lessons. Though the Bunshin no Jutsu continues to elude him, no matter what I try. This caused him to fail the Graduation Exam twice. He was allowed to take it earlier since he started the Academy at age seven, a year earlier than me.

I'm hoping that we will both graduate at the same time so we can be on the same team. If only they don't test the Bunshin no Jutsu...

I listen with half an ear to Iruka's lecture. It's only a recapitulation of what we learned in in the previous three years. I'm tempted to pull a Shikamaru and sleep through it. Or leave a Water Clone and escape.

I can't wait to graduate. The Academy is so boring. The only things interesting are the spars in
Ninjutsu is now only used to practice my chakra control, since I learned the Academy
ninjutsu years ago. I've practiced them a lot too, playing pranks with Naruto and escaping the
victims. Konoha's population has yet to figure out my participation in Naruto's pranks.

Naturally, I'm still Top Girl. I'm also second place in our year, with Sasuke being first. Shino is close
behind me, though. Sakura and Ino on the other hand have fallen further behind me. They broke
their friendship at the beginning of our second year and are now much too busy competing with each
other to really compete with me. Annoyingly, their rivalry entails being the most obnoxious Sasuke-
fangirls ever and having everyone in class listening to their shouting insults at each other.

The only thing more annoying than Sasuke's fangirls is my own fangirl. Tachibana Fumio is now a
member of our class, since there is only our class left. He asks me out whenever he can, follows me
around and tells me how awesome it would be to go out with him. Constantly. I really think I'll end up
strangling him someday. I've had nightmares about him ending up in my genin team.

Naruto developed a crush on Sakura for reasons unknown. He is less annoying about it than Fumio,
but Sakura still tried to punch him through the floor the first few times he asked her out. That stopped
though when I challenged her to taijutsu spars every time she did it. Now she just yells at him.

Outside of the Academy, though, life is interesting enough. There are pranks with Naruto, shogi
matches against dad and Shika, the fights with Sasuke and training with Yoshino.

I can't wait to begin my shinobi career, though. I know it won't be all fun and games, that it will be
dangerous. But I am itching to use all that I have learned, to fight for my village and make my family
proud.

During this term, Yoshino teaches me support skills. First I learn how to detect and dispel genjutsu,
which is easy so long as I know that I am being placed under one. It's harder though once Yoshino
starts surprise-attacking me while I am cooking or doing homework, but eventually, I learn to keep
my senses open and be on my guard.

Once I have that skill down to Yoshino's satisfaction, she starts teaching me how to cast illusions. It
comes to me much easier than ninjutsu. It needs precise chakra control and a good imagination, both
of which I have. I also learn a more complicated genjutsu that messes with an enemy's balance.

Much harder to learn are medical skills. I only learn a few basic medical jutsu, enough to stop
bleeding, heal bruises and minor burns. I doubt I'll ever become a medic. Molding medical chakra is
hard. I don't complain, though. Yoshino is right, it is a very important skill, especially since I will
most likely be on a team with two boys and male shinobi rarely learn medical ninjutsu. For some
dumb reason, most people seem to perceive healing as a feminine skill.

Time passes quickly outside of the classroom with all the training and studying I am doing. I barely
have time for my friends, though I do my best to not neglect them too much. Shikamaru, I see at
home all the time, Chouji is happy enough seeing me during lunch breaks, and Naruto I go pranking
with while a Water Clone takes my place in class.

Mizu Bunshin. Best jutsu ever.

So given how busy I am and how much I am learning and preparing for when I become a genin, I
don't notice how close graduation is until the day right before it.

The day starts normal enough. I sit in the back of the classroom with Shino next to me and Hinata on
my other side, since Naruto isn't here yet. Come to think of it, neither is Iruka... Uh-oh.

Anytime now, Iruka will... there he is.

Iruka comes through the door of the classroom, dragging a tied-up Naruto behind him and setting him down in front of the whole class.

"Tomorrow is the Graduation Exam! This is no time to be causing trouble, moron! You already failed the exam twice!" Ouch. What did Naruto do for Iruka to be this angry? Hold on a second...

"The Graduation Exam is tomorrow?!" I ask Shino, horrified.

He turns to me. I get the feeling his eyes behind his sunglasses have an incredulous look in them. "Yes. You appear shocked at this."

Before he can continue to speak, I start to ramble. "Oh Kami, I didn't notice that it was tomorrow! Crap, I didn't study for it at all, oh no, I've got to review and train..."

Surprisingly, it's Hinata who interrupts me. "A-ano, I don't think you need to worry, Riko-san. You are the best kunoichi in class."

I force myself to take a deep breath. "You're right, Hinata. I just panicked for a second. I just really really didn't notice time passed so fast. I mean, it feels like yesterday that 'Ruto and I got placed in this class. Do you remember that? Ha ha..."

I don't think I convinced them that I wasn't panicking anymore.

Thankfully, Iruka's voice rips me from my thoughts. "Time for a review test on the Henge! Transform perfectly into me!" he yells, still looking pissed.

We all walk to the front and stand in line. I place myself next to the now untied Naruto. "What did you do?" I whisper.

He scratches the back of his head, grinning sheepishly. "Painted the Hokage's faces, dattebayo," he answers.


Naruto grins at me proudly and is about to answer, but Iruka calls his name and he has to transform. I see a mischievous grin flash across his face. Uh-oh, I think for the second time that day.

"Henge!" Naruto yells and smoke wells up around him. Once it's dissipated, a woman stands in his place. A gorgeous woman with whisker-marks and lustrous blond hair in pigtails. And she is completely naked, save for a few tendrils of smoke in strategic places.

Iruka is catapulted back by an enormous nosebleed.

I hide my face in my hands, mortified. "Tell me my best friend did not just transform into a naked woman," I beg Shino.

I hear Naruto's transformation release with a bang, then I hear him laugh. "Gyahaha! I call it the Sexy Jutsu!"

I shake my head in denial. "No no no, didn't happen."
"You dumbass! Don't invent stupid skills!" I hear Iruka yell.

I whimper. "It did happen, didn't it?"

In the background, I can hear Sakura scream at Naruto, followed by a hitting sound.

"Please don't answer that."

After school, Iruka drags Naruto off to clean the monument.

It's a shame. The prank really is a masterpiece.

So while Naruto is cleaning, I go home to review and practice the Academy ninjutsu obsessively.

"Nervous, Riko-chan?" Shikaku's voice says from behind me, startling me. I whirl around with senbon ready in my hand. He raises an eyebrow. "Do you want to play shogi?"

It's not really a question. More of an order to take a break.

"Sure," I say, forcing a smile. "Why not?"

We sit down with the board between us and start playing. Nothing calms me down better than a good shogi match.

"So you graduate tomorrow," Dad says.

"Mmmm," I answer affirmatively, still thinking about my next move.

"You'll do fine," he assures me.

I look up. "How do you know? I'm not... I don't feel ready!" And I don't. For all I have trained, all I have learned, I don't feel prepared for leaving the Academy and becoming a legal adult. I don't feel ready for fighting for my life and that of my team, for possibly taking lives.

Shikaku reaches out and ruffles my hair, looking into my eyes with a warm look. "You are," he says. "Yoshino made sure of that. Don't tell her I told you, but she told me that some of your skills are already chunin level."

"Really?"

"Really, Riko-chan."

I sniff a little. "I love you, Dad."

He smiles, then he pulls me into a hug. "I love you too. And I'm very proud of you for coming this far."

He releases me and then points to the game. "Your turn, Riko-chan," he says and I know he isn't just talking about the game.

The next day, Shikamaru and I arrive at the Academy early. After my talk with dad yesterday, the fear from yesterday was replaced by calm determination.

I can do this.
"Graduation, huh? Troublesome," Shikamaru mutters next to me. I bump his shoulder with mine.

"Last test we have to take for the next few months. Cheer up, Shika!" I say. "No more troublesome lessons and rivalries. Only extensive training with a jounin, teamwork drills and missions that are really chores, possibly without a day off for the next few months."

Shika doesn't answer me.

"And don't even think about failing on purpose. Imagine what mom would do!"

We both shudder. I'm not the only one who got an introduction to the water-whip.

Entering the classroom, I see we aren't the first ones to arrive. Several students are sitting in their seats already, books in front of them, trying desperately to get in some last-minute studying. Others sit with vacant looks, muttering to themselves.

Naruto is one of them. His hands are pulling his hair, and he looks slightly green in the face.

I sit down next to him. "Calm down, Ruto. You'll do worse if you panic."

Naruto gives me a bright fake grin. "I'm not scared! An awesome ninja like me won't fail!" he says with fake bravado.

"Alright," I say soothingly. "Don't worry about the written test, you've taken it before and passed. You'll do fine in taijutsu and weapon throwing too."

I don't mention ninjutsu. If they test the Bunshin no Jutsu again... he might not pass.

Naruto perks up at my words. "Yeah! I'll definitely pass, dattebayo!"

I smile at him, feeling a little guilty for doubting him. But if he goes into the Exam all nervous, he definitely wouldn't pass. He has a chance now.

While we talked, the classroom filled. All twenty-seven members of class 4A are here.

When Iruka comes in, everyone is silent instantly, the atmosphere becomes tense. I straighten. The Graduation Exam has begun.

The first portion of the test is a written Exam with questions that remind me of the Evaluation on our first day of school, so long ago. Just like back then, I finish early, double- and triple checking my answers, then finally laying the papers face down in front of me.

After lunch break, the practical portion starts.

First, we are given a number of kunai and shuriken and are sent one by one into the training ground where targets of varying sizes and distances have been arranged. I manage to hit every target, though I miss the bull's eye twice. Still, it's a good showing.

Then, we have to spar Iruka's assistant, Mizuki, whom I don't really like. He's nice, answers questions and is generally helpful... but something about him bothers me.

It's probably nothing. Just my usual paranoia.

Nevertheless, I'll have less of a problem sparring him than I would Iruka.
"Alright, Riko," Iruka says. "You have two minutes to spar Mizuki. You don't have to win, you only have to stay in the ring for those two minutes."

"And if Mizuki leaves the ring?" I ask.

"Then you'll have passed, too."

I nod and step into the ring, opposite Mizuki.

I assess my opponent. Tall. Good, he'll have to bend down to hit me. Long arms and legs so he has longer range than me, I'll have to get up close so he can't use that advantage.

I've seen him run around with large shuriken on his back, so he's probably a mid-range fighter, not a close-combat type. My advantage.

"Begin!" Iruka calls, and I jump into motion instantly, surprising Mizuki. He blocks my first punch and counters, but that was my plan. I dodge his counter and try to hit a pressure point on his arm, but he evades. So slow.

If I weren't in the middle of a fight, I'd laugh. This guy has nothing on Sasuke. He would have already thrown three punches and tried to kick me.

And Mizuki has the same rank as Yoshino? She'd beat him in a second.

Mizuki throws a punch at my face, but I'm already gone, having jumped out of range. He takes a large step in my direction, and I use his still moving leg as a stepping stone to catapult myself upwards, step on his shoulder next, then jump to the ground behind him and land in a crouching position.

His hitae-ate bandana is in my hand.

"Stop!" Iruka calls. I straighten immediately.

"Well done, Riko," Iruka tells me. "You pass the taijutsu test. You should be careful about going for an opponent's hitae-ate, though. It's fine in this situation, but keep in mind that ninja take pride in wearing their village's symbol and would be very enraged to have it stolen."

"I understand. I apologise, Mizuki-sensei," I say, holding his bandana out to him.

"No problem, no problem. I should have been more careful as well and not let it get stolen," Mizuki says with a smile, waving my apology aside. It should have reassured me, but something tells me he isn't being completely honest.

I give him a relieved smile anyways. "Thank you, Mizuki-sensei," I say sweetly.

He nods, then tells me to go back to our classroom to wait for the ninjutsu test.

Once I am inside the classroom, I join Chouji.

"How did it go?" I ask him.

He shrugs, offering me a few potato chips. I take some. "Fine. Not too sure about the written test, but the kunai and shuriken one went okay, and taijutsu was alright, too," he says. "How did you do?"

I give him a smile. "Passed everything so far, I think."

We wait in companionable silence until everyone has gathered in the classroom and Iruka and
Mizuki come in.

"For the ninjutsu test, you will do the Bunshin no Jutsu. When your name is called, come to the next room."

Naruto in front of me slumps. Bugger. I reach out and squeeze his shoulder. "It'll be fine," I murmur to him.

"Yeah," he mumbles shakily. "I can do it!"

One by one our classmates are called out of the room. No one talks. We are all too tense.

"Nara Riko!"

I stand up and walk to the door, feeling the eyes of my peers on me. A few wish me good luck.

I enter the room, head held high. Iruka and Mizuki are sitting behind a table, a number of neatly arranged hitae-ate in front of them.

_I want one of those._

"Please demonstrate the Bunshin no Jutsu, Riko," Iruka says.

My fingers form one seal, and five replications poof into existence. Iruka stands up and inspects them, then he sits down again.

"Congratulations. You pass," Iruka says, holding a hitae-ate with a black headband out to me. I take it, starting to grin.

I tie it around my forehead, covering my scar.

I'm a ninja now.
Mission

When I step outside of the Academy, my parents are waiting. I throw myself directly into dad's arms. He grins and twirls me around like a little girl. Then I hug mom too, thanking her for all her hard training.

"I'm very proud to be your mother," she tells me, and I have to blink back a few tears. Shikaku ruffles my hair.

Soon Shikamaru joins us, his new hitae-ate tied around his arm. As soon as I see it, I run to him and throw my arms around him, congratulating him. He hugs me back, congratulating me too. Then our parents are there, patting him on the back and praising him. Soon Chouji, who passed, too, joins us with his family, and there are more congratulations. Shino comes over, and because I'm so happy, I hug him, causing him to freeze. When I let him go, he replaces himself with a log. Kiba and Hinata join us, Kiba looking like he wants to hug me, but Akamaru jumps into my arms and gives me a happy bark before Kiba gets the chance.

I don't think I have ever been happier.

Then I see Naruto sitting on the swing by himself, and my stomach drops when I see his face.

He didn't pass.

I start moving towards him, but someone steps in my way, and when I can see the swing again, it's empty. I look around, but can't see him anywhere. My shoulders slump.

I should have trained with him more. I was so focused on my own training, I didn't spend enough time with him studying. He might have passed if I had been a better friend. This is my fault. Because of me, his chances at fulfilling his dream have dropped again.

I vow to myself that he will pass the next exam, and if I have to sic Yoshino on him to beat him into shape, I'll do it.

That night, we go out to celebrate with the Yamanaka and Akimichi at one of the Akimichi's restaurants. The celebrations are interrupted though when alarms sound through the village, calling anyone of chunin level and higher to the Hokage Tower. Our parents all immediately follow the summon. Chouji, Ino, Shika and I are left in the restaurant with the Akimichi restaurant owners as our guards.

We wait in tense silence. Outside, I can see ninja running, and I keep my hands close to my weapons. Then Yoshino bursts through the door, startling us all. She ignores the questions thrown at her and looks at me.

"Come with me," she orders, and runs out of the restaurant again.

I run after her after one second of surprise.

I'm a ninja now. I have to protect my village.

Yoshino waits for me outside. "Uzumaki Naruto. Where do we find him?" she says.

I freeze. Oh no. Something happened to Naruto, I have to find him, I have to help him, I should have
"Riko!" Yoshino says sharply, snapping me out of my panic. I straighten and shove the panic down. This is a mission. I have a friend to help.

Yoshino asked me where to find him, because she knows I'm his best friend and know him best. So he can't have been kidnapped or attacked, because then she wouldn't need me to find him. He has gone somewhere of his own free will, and mom thinks I can find him.

"I don't know where he is. Tell me what happened, and I'll figure it out," I say, looking her straight in the eyes.

She appraises me for a moment, then she nods. "Uzumaki is believed to have stolen a scroll containing secret high level techniques from the Hokage's office. Our orders are to bring him and the scroll to Hokage-sama immediately. The scroll mustn't, under any circumstances, leave the village and fall into enemy hands."

"He'll be at a Training Ground," I say and start running. "Secluded and private, most likely in the outskirts of the village." Yoshino follows me, trusting my reasoning without question.

Naruto would never betray Konoha. He must have taken the scroll to learn from it. He must have done it because he didn't graduate and thought it would help him. Or it's a prank. Probably broke into Hokage-sama's office and grabbed a random scroll, or the coolest looking one. God, Naruto, you bloody idiot!

"Not Training Grounds 21, 33 and 51," I call to Yoshino. "He doesn't like those."

She nods curtly. "This way. We'll check 17 and 22 first and then work our way around the village. If we find him, you are to talk to him and try to make him come with us peacefully." I nod. No use in telling her that there's no way Naruto would try to attack us. She's just being cautious.

We reach Training Ground 17, but mom doesn't sense anyone's chakra there, so we run to 22. On our way, we see two other chunin, and Yoshino informs them to check the training grounds for Naruto. They don't even ask questions and leap away.

Oh God. If my assumptions about Naruto's whereabouts are wrong, Yoshino could get in big trouble.

I shove the worries away. I know Naruto. He'll definitely be training.

I don't know what I'll do if we don't find him.

He isn't at Training Ground 22 either, so I follow Yoshino to the next one. Training Ground 39. Dense forest, high trees. A small house in a clearing, likely used for simulations.

It's obvious a fight happened here recently. A multitude of kunai is scattered around, and a large shuriken with fresh blood on it lies discarded on the ground. There's blood splattered on the ground, too. Oh God, please, not Naruto.

Yoshino and I leap behind a tree; she draws kunai, I pull out senbon.

My heart is in my throat. I force myself to stay calm.

"There's no one near that I can sense," Yoshino murmurs after a few seconds. "We'll have to track the enemy. I know you'd follow me anyways, so I'm taking you with me. But you're only support,
and if I tell you to run, you run, even if I'm not coming with you, understood?"

"Understood," I whisper, my heart breaking at the thought of possibly having to leave her behind. I don't have a choice, though. If I didn't agree, she'd knock me out, and then she wouldn't even have back-up.

She squeezes my shoulder once after putting the kunai away and then we run to the crime scene. A trail of blood leads into the trees. Yoshino follows it, I leap after her.

"Mom," I call softly. "It might just be a coincidence, but I've seen our assistant instructor with a shuriken of that type."

She nods. "Description."

"His name is Mizuki. 5.8 feet tall, long limbs. Straight silver hair to his shoulders, hitae-ate worn in the form of a bandana. Green eyes. Standard chunin attire, large shuriken on his back. Likely uses mid-range attacks. Relatively slow taijutsu. He was friendly and helpful during lessons, but something about him put me off."

She nods again, not doubting me for a second. "If he's hostile, I'll take him out. You are to go to the injured party and provide medical assistance."

I'm so beyond glad now that she drilled medical ninjutsu into me. If I got there and couldn't save Naruto... I don't even want think about the possibility.

Yoshino suddenly halts and I land next to her. She looks around as if she is listening to something, then she leaps in a slightly different direction from the one we followed before. She must have sensed something, then. I follow her, noticing she moves more carefully and silently than she did before. I try my best to do the same.

A minute later, she halts completely, motioning for me to take cover in the branches of the tree next to the one she stands on. We both assess the situation and listen to what is said.

"Don't touch Iruka-sensei. I'll kill you!" Naruto - thank God he's okay! - growls below us, sounding dangerous. He stands in front of an obviously injured Iruka, facing Mizuki, who has an ugly expression on his face.

"Idiot!" Iruka yells. "Why did you come out? Run away!"

"Shut up! A punk like you I'll kill in one shot!" Mizuki shouts at Naruto with a bloodthirsty grin on his face.

"Try it! I'll return the pain a thousand times over!" Naruto growls, forming a hand seal. I prepare to jump in to save him, senbon in my hand. From the corner of my eye, I see mom pulling out shuriken.

"Then do it, Demon Fox!" Mizuki shouts. Huh? Demon Fox?

"Kage Bunshin no Jutsu!" Naruto yells, and the forest turns orange. My jaw drops.

The ground, the surrounding trees, everything is covered by perfect replications of Naruto. I see one hanging from a tree branch. These are solid replications!

Incredible. How much chakra does Naruto have? No wonder he could never do the regular Bunshin. He probably completely overpowered the technique.
And I didn't teach him the Mizu Bunshin because I didn't think he could do it without the normal Bunshin to base it on. I can be such an idiot sometimes.

Mizuki looks around himself with a terrified expression, staggering as if his legs won't carry him anymore.

"What's wrong?" the Naruto-army yells. "Weren't you going to kill me in one shot?"

Mizuki gives a horrified girlish whimper.

"Well then" the Narutos say, cracking their knuckles and grinning in anticipation. "I'll kick your ass!"

And an orange wave of yelling Naruto's rushes toward the screaming Mizuki. I snap out of my state of shock and jump down to Iruka.

"Riko? What are you - Yoshino-san?"

"Don't talk," Mom says from behind me and moves forward to kneel beside Iruka, lifting her hands that start to glow green. I turn my back to them and look around for possible threats while she provides first-aid. There's only the orange army though, congregating around something that I'm guessing is Mizuki, judging from the hitting sounds I can hear. After a while, the Narutos disperse into smoke, leaving only one standing beside a thoroughly beaten and unconscious Mizuki.

He's standing there, scratching the back of his head, grinning his sheepish Naruto-grin. "Heh, might have overdone it a - Ri-chan? What are you doing here?"

One moment I'm guarding Mom and Iruka, the next I'm wrapped around Naruto, squeezing him as hard as I can. "You idiot!" I whisper. "I was so worried about you!" I bury my face in his shoulder, shaking and inhaling his scent, trying to hold back the tears.

His arms wrap around me. "Sorry, Ri-chan. But it really wasn't my fault. See, Mizuki tricked me, and then I learned this jutsu, and then Iruka came and Mizuki wanted to kill me with his giant shuriken and Iruka protected me and then-"

"Shut up. Don't ever do that to me again, okay?" I interrupt him. "Never!"

He squeezes me a little harder. "I'll try, Ri-chan."

We stay like that for another minute, then I reluctantly release him and he lets go of me.

"Naruto" Iruka calls. We turn around. Both he and mom are smiling at us. "Come over here, I have something for you."

Naruto walks over to him. I move to stand next to mom and she puts her arm around my shoulder. I lean into her, closing my eyes as I allow the stress to fall away from my body. She rubs my shoulder comfortingly. "You did well. I'm very proud of you," she murmurs.

I open my eyes again and give her a tired grin. "We make a good team, Mom."

She smiles back. "We certainly do."

Next to us, I hear Iruka's voice. "Congratulations on graduating, Naruto." I blink and swirl around to look at them. Naruto stands with an amazed expression on his face in front of Iruka, a hitae-ate tied around his head in place of his goggles. Iruka's forehead is empty. He gave Naruto his own hitae-ate.
I start smiling. Iruka let Naruto graduate! We can be ninja together now!

Iruka continues speaking. "Let's celebrate! I'll buy you a bowl of ramen!"

Naruto looks like he's going to cry. Then he tackles Iruka in a hug, just like I did to him earlier.

I sniff and rub at my eyes. "I'm not crying," I tell mom.

"Of course not," she says.

"I just have something in my eyes."

She ruffles my hair like dad usually does. "I know, sweetheart."

I sigh, leaning into her once again. "So long as you know that."

What a day. We took the Graduation Exam. Shika and I graduated. Naruto didn't. Then I ended up doing my very first mission with Yoshino and watching Naruto kick a traitor's ass, revealing himself to be much stronger than anybody ever expected. And then he graduated.

I'm starting to get the feeling that being a ninja is going to be extremely troublesome.
The day after the Mizuki incident, I spend the early morning watching the deer from high up in Shika's and my tree.

After Naruto stopped hugging Iruka like some kind of deranged orange monkey, we returned to the village. Iruka and mom took us straight to the Hokage Tower where we gave Hokage-sama our reports and I finally understood how Naruto and Mizuki ended up fighting in that forest. I think they left a few parts of the story out due to my presence, though.

Naruto didn't get into much trouble. Hokage-sama told him that stealing from his office was a crime, but since his instructor tricked him into doing it, it wasn't really his fault. He should have been able to trust Mizuki.

I'd been worried that Yoshino would get in trouble for dragging a fresh genin into the whole mess, but Hokage-sama praised her quick thinking and my actions, not that I actually did much.

After we were dismissed, Naruto dragged Iruka to Ichiraku's while Yoshino and I walked back to the restaurant.

"Interesting friend you have there," she said.

"Naruto's the best," I answered her.

When we entered the restaurant, Ino immediately grabbed me and dragged me into a corner where Shika and Chouji were already waiting. Then she proceeded to interrogate me.

Definitely her father's daughter, that girl.

I gave her a heavily edited version of the night's events. I only told her that Naruto had gotten in trouble and I helped find him, that Mizuki turned out to be a traitor and attacked both Iruka and Naruto but was defeated in the end.

All of them were suitably impressed and jealous, but I'm pretty sure that Shika figured out that I wasn't telling the whole truth. He didn't ask any questions, though.

I think back to the night's events.

Mizuki betrayed the village and tried to kill Naruto and Iruka, all for wanting to gain power.

I shake my head. I can't understand why someone who had a good job and was well respected would throw it all away. And try to blame his betrayal on Naruto of all people, the most honest person I have ever met.

"Demon Fox!"

Why would he call Naruto that, with so much hatred in his voice?

There is only one demon fox I have ever heard of, the Kyuubi. The giant nine-tailed fox that could crush mountains and cause tsunamis with one swing of one of its tails. It attacked the village twelve years ago and killed a large number of both ninjas and civilians.

The hero of the village, the Yondaime Hokage, killed it but sacrificed his life in doing so.
Why would someone call Naruto a demon fox when the village has such a tragic history with one? And come to think of it, I've heard people in the streets whisper about him, calling him a monster, and I've noticed those whispers since we became friends when we were both eight years old.

Who calls a child a monster?

Then there are other things. The cold, hate-filled looks the villagers throw him. Parents telling their children to stay away from him. The fact that Naruto lives by himself in a small apartment when he should really be living in the orphanage.

Maybe it has something to do with Naruto being born on the day of the Kyuubi attack. Maybe those idiotic villagers think he is some sort of reincarnation of the Kyuubi. Except that can't be. Naruto told me that his parents died fighting the Kyuubi, so he would have already been born when the Yondaime killed the fox, so it's got to be something else.

How did the Yondaime kill it anyways? Something so powerful, a demon with nine tails...

Nine tails...


The Kyuubi wasn't killed, it was sealed away. Into a person. Into Naruto.

Naruto is a jinchuuriki.

I knock on Naruto's apartment door, hoping he'll be there. I know he doesn't spend too much time in here, but it's still early and it did get pretty late yesterday, not to mention he had to be exhausted after that jutsu, so hopefully he slept in and is still here.

I knock again. "Ruto, it's me, Riko!" I call.

I hear something shuffling inside, than the door opens and a bleary eyed Naruto, still in his pyjamas with the most adorable sleeping hat ever on his head, stands before me.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to wake you up. But I brought you ramen, so please forgive me?" I hold an extra-large to-go cup of Teuchi-jiisan's absolutely delicious Miso Ramen under his nose. Normally I wouldn't condone eating ramen for breakfast, but considering what I want to talk to him about, he deserves some ramen beforehand. Probably after, too.

Naruto's face lightens up instantly and he snatches the cup away from me. "Thanks, Ri-chan!" he cheerfully says, then he grabs my hand and pulls me into his apartment. I've been in here before, but with how messy Naruto is, it always looks different when I come to visit.

There are open scrolls depicting and describing exercises and stretches lying around, school books tossed into a corner, a large number of empty ramen cups on the table and floor. Piles of dirty clothes occupy a chair standing in a corner.

Naruto pulls me into the kitchen and places his ramen on the table, then fills water into a kettle. While the water heats, he jumps onto the counter and pulls a cup of ramen out of a cupboard. Then he pours the heated water from the kettle into the cup and places it in front of me.

"Now we can eat together, dattebayo!" he says. "You shoulda brought something from Ichiraku's for you, too, Ri-chan. I only got cup ramen here."
I'm touched. He made sure I had something to eat before he even touched his own ramen. Even if it's cup ramen at nine in the morning.

"Thanks, Ruto," I say softly.

"You're welcome," he grins at me. "C'mon, you gotta eat! It tastes even better when you eat it with a friend!"

How could anyone ever think someone this nice and good could be a demon? The village must be blind.

"Three minutes wait, remember?" I tell him.

He grumbles. "I can't stand those three minutes! They're so long, dattebayo!"

I giggle at him. "Eat your ramen before they get cold," I tell him. "You'll be finished before me anyway."

He grins at me, then digs into his ramen with gusto. It's gone in seconds. When he's done, he heats some more water and pulls out five more ramen cups and places them on the table. And so we eat cup ramen for breakfast together, Naruto still barefoot, in his pyjamas and with his sleeping hat on.

It's great. It feels like home.

Once I've helped him clean up his kitchen, we move to the living room. While he is in the bathroom showering and getting dressed, I clear away the empty ramen cups, pick up scrolls and place them and the books into a neat stack that I place next to his bed.

The difference this makes is amazing. There is suddenly so much floor to see.

"You didn't have to clean, ya know?" Naruto says from behind me.

"I know, but I was bored. You took sooo long in the shower. What are you, a girl?"

"Eww, Ri-chan. Take that back!" he shouts, and I laugh.

Then I sigh, sit down on the floor and tap the spot next to me. "I need to talk to you," I say. "Come sit with me."

He sits down next to me with a confused expression. "'bout what?" he asks.


He stiffens and turns away from me. It hurts to see how he closes off the moment I broach the topic. At least he's aware of the fox. It would suck to have to explain it to him.

"I had a Thing in my head, once," I say, offhandedly. "Some sort of parasite, crawled in when I was only one year old. It's gone now, though."

Whatever Naruto expected me to say, that wasn't it. He turns back to me, eyes confused. I continue to talk.

"So I get it. I get how you feel about having something that's not you inside you. And I won't ever stop being your friend because of something like that. You're Naruto. You love ramen, you can't keep your room clean to save your life, you can be really dumb sometimes and you're my kami
Naruto's eyes are the size of plates, looking at me like he did that first day when I told him I wanted to be his friend. Like I am going to vanish if he so much as blinks. So much fierce hope and disbelief in his eyes. "You really mean it? I'm your b-best friend?" he whispers.

I feel myself soften. "Of course you are, Ruto," I say.

A radiant smile like I have never seen before from him spreads across his face. Then he tackles me in a hug, burying his face in my shoulder, arms around me like he never wants to let go.

And I vow to myself that I won't ever let him be alone again.

I leave Naruto's apartment about an hour after that with a promise to see him at the Academy for our Genin Orientation on Saturday and return to the Nara Compound, where dad and Shikamaru are already waiting for me.

Today is the day we swear our oaths to protect Konoha and the Akimichi and Yamanaka Clan.

I've been looking forward to this. It means I'll really be a part of our three clans. It's just as good as becoming one of Konoha's shinobi. It means I belong.

We meet Ino and Chouji and their fathers at the memorial of our three clans. We're all in a solemn mood when we line up in front of the memorial stone. Chouji is the first one to speak his oath.

"I hereby swear that, as the sixteenth head of the Akimichi, I will entrust the oath entrusted to me by the fifteenth to the child that will become the seventeenth! In order to protect both the Yamanaka and the Nara clans and to protect Konoha, I, Akimichi Chouji, will now come forth from my chrysalis and as a butterfly— spread my wings!"

After he has spoken, Chouza, his father, pulls out a small box from his pocket and hands Chouji a pair of earrings. "You're a man now, son. Someday, you'll have your own children to raise and protect, and loan them these earrings with your oath in them."

After that, Ino steps forward to speak her oath.

"I hereby swear that, as the sixteenth head of the Yamanaka, I will entrust the oath entrusted to me by the fifteenth to the child that will become the seventeenth. In order to protect both the Akimichi and Nara clans and to protect Konoha, I, Yamanaka Ino, will bloom into a flower of strength!"

Inoichi hands her his earrings, his eyes looking shiny and proud when he looks at his daughter. Instead of saying anything, he pulls her into a long hug.

Then it's my brother's turn.

"I hereby swear that, as the sixteenth head of the Nara, I will entrust the oath entrusted to me by the fifteenth to the child that will become the seventeenth. In order to protect both the Akimichi and Yamanaka clans and to protect Konoha, I, Nara Shikamaru, will become a warrior of shadows!"

The oath I swear is a little different from his, since I am not a future clan head.

"I hereby swear that, as a member of the Nara, I will entrust the oath entrusted to me by the fifteenth clan head to my children. In order to protect both the Akimichi and Yamanaka clans and to protect Konoha, I, Nara Riko, will become a warrior of shadows!"
When dad holds our earrings out to us, his eyes are full of pride. "These are the earrings that my uncle and I wore. May they remind you of your oaths. From now on, you two are full members of the Nara Clan."

After a celebratory lunch at the Akimichi Clan Hall, dad whisks Shikamaru away to disclose important knowledge to him from clan head to clan heir.

Yeah right. They'll probably just play shogi, I think. I go to find Yoshino. I have three days before my ninja life really starts; I could learn useful things in that time.

"Hey Mom!" I greet her when I find her working in our garden. She greets me back.

"Now what do you want, Riko?" she asks me.

"Training."

"What do you want to train? Improve what you already have, or learn a new technique?"

Good question. A new technique won't be ready in three days. The techniques I already know, I have already perfected to the best of my ability. There won't be much improvement in just three days.

But there is one thing I have wanted to learn for years...

"I'd like to learn the shunshin, please."

Mom raises an eyebrow, looking amused. "Of course you do. Very well, come with me."

"What, no grueling test to see if I'm ready first? No chase all over Konoha? No water-whip?"

She gives me her sweetest smile. "If you miss the water-whip, don't hesitate to tell me. I'll reintroduce you anytime."

It's moments like these that make me understand why both dad and Shikamaru fear her anger.

If she hadn't decided to leave active service to raise Shikamaru, she'd most likely be a jounin now. She certainly has the skills, since she didn't slack off during her years off-service. She continued to hone her skills and learn new ones, even if she didn't need them.

A kunai slamming into a tree centimeters from my ear rips me out of my thoughts. I've launched a handful of senbon and taken cover before I can even think about my actions.

Yoshino trained me well in dealing with surprise attacks.

"Good reaction, but too late. Always pay attention to your surroundings," Yoshino says sternly.

I nod. "Hai!" I say.

She nods. "Take the kunai."

I check it for poisons first. Yoshino has never poisoned me before, but she did warn me to be wary of enemy weapons, and I wouldn't put it past her to teach me the lesson that way.

Mom looks at me approvingly. "I'll teach you the shunshin if you can learn a C-ranked ninjutsu first. Listen up. This is called Suikusari no Jutsu..."
A day later, I make my way through the dense forest of Training Ground 25. When I reach the clearing, Sasuke is already there.

I breathe a sigh of relief. I didn't know if he would still come after we graduated.

We give each other greeting nods, then take our fighting stances in front of each other, eyeing the opponent motionlessly and waiting for the slightest twitch of muscle to announce the start of the spar.

We jump into motion at the exact same time, him leaping toward me with a punch, me diving down to swipe his legs with my own. Both attacks miss and we seamlessly move into the next stance, our bodies moving instinctually.

After years of fighting each other, we know each other's reactions better than our own. We glide from stance to stance, attacking and countering, evading and dodging, never pausing. Punches connect, kicks bruise our bodies, dirt mars our clothes and skin, but it doesn't matter. Nothing matters but moving and feeling.

I have never felt closer to another person than I do when I'm trading blows with Sasuke. We share our burdens and feelings through violent brushes of skin and physical pain. Nothing comes close to the kind of understanding we have developed.

With the passing years, our fights have changed. We have both gotten faster. My flowing, teasing taijutsu has become more brutal, hard and vicious, the movements instantaneous and unpredictable. His became softer, he started including my way of moving in his, evading and dodging more instead of only blocking and defending. While my attacks became stronger, his got lighter and more varied. He learned about the weak points of his body just by remembering the spots I targeted.

Our fight ends abruptly when Sasuke grabs hold of my arm and my face is pressed into the ground a moment later. Our harsh breaths are the only human sounds to be heard. A moment later, he lets me go and sits heavily on the ground, trying to catch his breath while I just roll onto my back and stay there, waiting for my own breathing to calm down, looking up at the sky.

Once my breathing has calmed, I roll to my knees and focus chakra to my hands until they glow a pale green. I offer them to Sasuke and he moves closer and lets me heal his bruises and scratches. Then I take care of my own body. Once I am done, we finally work ourselves to our feet, aching bodies protesting against the movement. We look at each other for a long moment, then we walk away in different directions, and seconds later, the clearing is empty and deserted as if nothing had ever happened here.

"Troublesome. Ri, wake up," Shikamaru's voice wakes me the next day. He hasn't even finished his sentence when I've already dived behind the cover of my bed, kunai in hand, ready to defend myself. Then I blink when I recognise it's Shika.

"Oh, it's you," I say, relaxing. "I thought mom had come to wake me up again."

It's no wonder my paranoia never really disappeared. Yoshino's training took care of that. She conditioned me to respond to threats the second they register in my awareness. She did this by randomly attacking me in all kinds of manners. One of her favorites was waking me up in the middle of the night with her water-whip, hence my extreme reaction to Shikamaru.

Wait a minute. Why is it Shika of all people waking me up?

He shakes his head at me. "Troublesome..." he mutters. "Our Genin Orientation starts in fifteen minutes."
My eyes widen in horror. Of all the days to oversleep, it just had to be this one. One of the most important days of my career. Without a word, I grab my clothes and run past Shika to the bathroom to get ready.

The day doesn't get much better.

The first thing I see when I run hurriedly into the classroom is Naruto kissing Sasuke.

I stop short. Then I move backwards out of the classroom. Outside, I shake my head a few times, then I approach the classroom again.

"Are you alright, Ri?" Shikamaru says in a reluctantly amused voice as he approaches. He only just arrived since he didn't run as fast as me to the Academy.

Lucky him. He didn't have to see that.


He shakes his head. "Troublesome..." he mutters.

I let Shikamaru enter first. When I step in after him, I hear a shrill voice screech: "Narutoooo! How dare you steal Sasuke-kun's first kiss?!" Several other high voices shout out similar statements. Hitting sounds follow.

Shikamaru turns around to me. "Naruto kissed Sasuke?"

I let out a long suffering sigh. "Yes. Must have been an accident."

Shika shakes his head. "That idiot."

I let the other noisy girls to finish their shouting first. When I reach in and pull out a thoroughly mistreated Naruto. Ignoring the girls' protests, I drag him after me to the back row where I sit him down in the window seat and start running green-glowing hands over his swollen face until it looks somewhat normal again.

"That's so awesome, Ri-chan! Thanks!" he beams at me.


"We weren't done with him yet, Riko!" a shrill voice says loudly from behind me.

I turn around, schooling my face into a cold expression. "Yes," I tell Sakura, Ino and the girls behind them flatly. "You were."

Sakura gapes at me. "But he kissed Sasuke-kun!"

"And it's not your problem. Go back to your seat and mind your own business." I make a condescending shooing motion with my hand.

Sakura looks as if she is going to strangle me and opens her mouth to scream at me, but just then, Iruka comes in, so she doesn't and runs to sit next to Sasuke, leaning close to him with a light blush on her face, as if she hadn't just tried to beat Naruto into next week.

The girl has some serious mental issues. Hopefully I won't be on the same team as her.

Iruka starts speaking. "Beginning today, all of you are real ninja. But you are still merely rookie
The hard part has just started," he pauses, looking at us with a serious expression on his face. "Now... you will soon be assigned duties for the village. So today you will be divided into teams of three, and each team will have a jounin sensei. You will follow your sensei's instructions as you complete your duties."

Several of our classmates look negatively surprised at the prospect of being placed in teams. Probably thought they'd graduate and become heroes immediately. Most of them wanted to be ninja because they thought it would be fun. To them, it's a game.

I wonder how long it will be until they realise it's not.

Iruka continues. "Now, the teams are..." and he starts to announce the team placements. The first three teams are made of civilians.

"Now, Team Four: Haruno Sakura, Tachibana Fumio and Ota Eiji."

Both of them look crestfallen at not being on the same team as their respective crushes. I sigh in relief. I'm not in on a team with them.

I'm pretty sure that strangling a teammate would get me in trouble.

"Next, Team Seven... Nara Riko, Uzumaki Naruto and Uchiha Sasuke!"
Team

I feel a warm feeling of happiness at being on the same team as my best friend and my... whatever Sasuke is.

"Iruka-sensei! Why does a great ninja like me have to be on the same team as that bastard?" Naruto shouts, pointing at Sasuke.

And there goes my happiness. I'd forgotten the two of them don't get along at all. Troublesome.

Still - we can make this work. I think.

"Sasuke's grades were first among all twenty-seven graduates while you were Dead Last, Naruto. We have to do this to balance out the teams, understand?"

Several people snicker as Iruka calls Naruto out on his grades. Sasuke doesn't even look at Naruto when he says: "Just don't get in my way, dobe."

"What did you call me, teme?!" Naruto jumps up, fists clenched.

"You want a fight, dobe?"

Awesome. My teammates hate each other. Why can't anything ever be easy?

I resist the urge to bang my head against the table multiple times.

Iruka sighs and continues to announce the teams while Naruto next to me pouts. As expected, Shika is on a team with Ino and Chouji. The only other team worthy of note is Team Eight which consists of Shino, Kiba and Hinata.

"Alright," Iruka concludes. "This afternoon we will introduce the jounin senseis. Take a break until then."

A long lunch break. Likely to give the new teammates a chance to talk to each other.

Ugh.

Either Naruto or Sasuke on my team would be fine, great even. But both together? What was the administration thinking?

"Ne, ne, Ri-chan, do you-"

"Yo Nara-chan! D'you wanna eat lunch together?" It's Fumio, my male fangirl, reminding me that team assignments could have gone worse.

"No."

"Well, d'you wanna hang out later? We could talk about our teams and stuff!" he says, grinning at me.

"No."

"Oh, okay. Maybe tomorrow then?"
"No."

"I don't want us to lose touch just because we're in different teams. Speaking of which, poor you. Uzumaki and Uchiha. You got stuck with the-"

"Oi! You-" Naruto begins to shout.

"I'm sure we will be an outstanding team," I interrupt in a warning tone. We will be outstanding. I'm just not too sure if it will be in a good way.

"Right, right, it's your team after all, and you're amazing. I bet you're ten times better than Uchiha! Just don't forget about me, alright?"

*I'll be happy if I never see or hear of you again.*

"Hey, I was wondering, what kind of ninja do you admire?" he asks eagerly.


He looks surprised at getting a real answer out of me. Normally I just brush him off. "Medical ninja? Uhh, why?"

"Well," I say, in an earnest voice. "it takes such hard work and intelligence, and healing is such an amazing skill. Really, I think they might be the most important ninja of the village! Why, I'm thinking of becoming one myself!"

"Really? Me too! I'm going to be the best med nin there is! I was going to the hospital to ask for lessons today! Right now, in fact!" he stumbles over the words, excited at the chance to impress me.

"Wow, Fumio!" I force an admiring smile. "Get going then!"

"Yes, right, see you later!" he yells, and tears out of the room. Thank God he's gone.

"Really, Ri?" Shika, who heard the entire exchange, drawls. "Did you just manipulate him to take the most time-intensive and difficult path a shinobi can take so he won't have time for you anymore?"

He sounds mildly impressed.

"Konoha does need more medical ninja," I say.

He shakes his head at me. "Troublesome."

"Ne, ne, Ri-chan, d'you wanna eat lunch together? Since we're on the same team now, dattebayo!" Naruto says excitedly.

I look around for Sasuke. He's gone. Probably left while Fumio was pestering me.

"Sure, Ruto." I look at Shika. "Are you having lunch with your team?"

He sighs tiredly like an old man. I pat him on the shoulder in sympathy. "Have fun with Ino. I'll see you later."

Naruto and I have lunch together on the rooftop. He chatters on happily about how awesome being a ninja is going to be and that he'll show everyone how much better than Sasuke he is, and that they'll have no choice but to make him Hokage then.
Mid-ramble, his stomach interrupts him and he jumps up and runs away. I just stay where I am. I have a feeling I don't want to know what the problem is this time.

I stay on the rooftop, lying in the sun until it's time to go back and meet our jounin sensei.

I wonder who it will be and what he or she will be like. Since Naruto is a jinchuuriki and Sasuke is the last Uchiha, it likely won't be some no-name. Sadly, I don't know many jounin in the village.

I shake my head as I get back to my feet. I'll find out soon enough.

When I enter the classroom, I sit down next to Sasuke. Miraculously, the seat next to him was still empty.

His eyes shift in my direction and our gazes meet when I sit down. We exchange a look of mutual acknowledgment, telling each other silently that we appreciate the other's presence. Then we turn to look to the front. The whole exchange barely took a split second.

Soon, Naruto runs in and sits next to me, mumbling something about a stomach ache. Then he perks up and starts talking about becoming a ninja again, while I listen to him and nod from time to time.

One by one, adults enter the room and then leave with their teams, until we are the only ones left.

Ten minutes pass.

Thirty minutes pass.

"He's gonna come, right, Ri-chan?" Naruto asks me anxiously. Sasuke looks at me as well.

How would I know? I don't even know who our sensei is. Then again... I'm a ninja, aren't I?

"Give me a second."

There is a sink in the back of the classroom. I block the drain and turn on the water. Once there is enough, I run through a few a hand seals.

"Mizu Bunshin no Jutsu" I murmur, and a perfect copy forms itself out of the water and gracefully steps from the sink.

"Whoa, Ri-chan, that's so cool!" Naruto cheers. Even Sasuke looks interestedly at what I am doing.

"Thanks, Ruto," I and water-me chorus. Then she runs to the window and jumps out.

"What's she doing?" Naruto asks.

"I sent her to gather information. We'll know more soon."

I actually sent the clone to ask mom for advice, but that doesn't sound half as ninja-like.

Naruto grins at me. "Awesome idea!" he cheers. Sasuke gives me an acknowledging nod.

We sit down again. Waiting for my clone to return is better than waiting for a sensei we don't even know, but it's still boring.

I take out a handful of senbon and start balancing them on my hand like I used to do kunai. Doing it with senbon takes less chakra, but more precision. At the moment, I can do it with six senbon.
"Whoa, Ri-chan! How are you doing that?" Naruto exclaims. "Can you teach me?"

I pause. "I could," I say slowly, thinking hard. "But you have a lot of chakra, so it will be harder for you. You should start with another exercise first."

Naruto grins. "Alright! What do I do?"

I contemplate what to do. I know his control is atrocious, and now that I know about his large chakra reserves, I know the reason for that. I remember he even had trouble floating leaves back in the Academy. So he should start with an exercise that takes less precision and more chakra and then work his way down to smaller exercises.

I nod. "The first exercise is called Tree Climbing Exercise. It's something all ninja have to eventually learn, so pay attention."

I notice Sasuke is listening closely as well. I try not to get nervous.

"It's a control exercise where you use chakra to stick yourself to a surface, like this." I stand up and start walking towards and then up the wall of the classroom. Behind me, Naruto exclaims in surprise. I can feel Sasuke's eyes following me.

I jump down from the wall. "We can't really practice it inside a classroom. Basically, you focus chakra to your feet and run up a tree, and when you notice you can't go further, you make a kunai mark at the highest point you reach. Then you do the whole thing again and try to make the next mark above the previous one."

Naruto looks as if he wants to run outside and run up the next tree he finds. I smile a little at his enthusiasm. "You can try to channel chakra through your hand though and stick it to the wall. It'll help you later when you do it with your feet."

"Yatta!" Naruto yells and runs to the wall, already forming the Ram Seal to focus his chakra. I shake my head at him fondly. So troublesome.

I return to balancing my senbon. Where Sasuke is sitting, I can see him trying to stick his hand to the table in front of him, practicing much more subtly than Naruto.

I smile a little. Maybe this team will work out better than I thought.

My water clone returns after a half hour of control practice.


"Our jounin sensei is Hatake Kakashi. Yoshino-sama says that only he would keep you waiting for so long. And you are likely going to have to wait for another few hours. She gave me cookies for you to make the wait easier," Water-me says and hands me a large box. I nod in thanks and tell her to go to the sink to dispel herself.

_Hatake Kakashi_. I don't know of many jounin in the village, but his name I have heard of. A genius shinobi and elite jounin, arguably one of the strongest ninja in the village. _Not bad._

"Who's Yoshino-sama?" Naruto asks.

"My mom. For some reason, my clones always address people very formally." Though Yoshino is the only one they address with –sama. I wonder why that is. And didn't Water-me call Naruto Ruto'? Are my clones developing awareness? Are they trying to confuse me? Will they try and take over my
Stop thinking, you idiot.

I sit down and open the box my clone gave me. A large collection of cookies is inside. I take a few and motion for my teammates to take some too. Naruto beams and quickly snatches a few chocolate cookies. "Your mom is awesome!" he says. "These are delicious!"

"I'll tell her you said so," I reply. I look at Sasuke. "You can take some as well, if you want. The ginger-orange cookies are quite good. Not as sweet though," I address him verbally for the first time in years. He takes one of the cookies I indicated and starts eating it. Once he's finished, he takes another.

Yoshino is a genius. One box of cookies, and there is peace and silence in the classroom.

Well, I think, that's one way of dealing with a bad hair day.

He looks harmless. I know he's not.

"My first impression," he announces flatly. "I don't like you."

Naruto looks dejected. Sasuke's eyes narrow. He's worried.

I, on the other hand, am annoyed. He tells us he doesn't like us after making us wait for over two hours?

I don't think so, mister.

"Meet me on the roof in five minutes," Kakashi says and then vanishes in a puff of smoke. Shunshin. I really want to learn that.

After a second of surprise, Naruto jumps up and runs out the door. Sasuke follows him quickly.

I pocket my senbon and take my time with closing the box of cookies and sealing it in a storage scroll. Then I make my way to the rooftop at a leisurely pace.

I arrive five minutes late.

"Ri-chan! You took so long!" Naruto complains.

"I got lost on my way to the toilet," I say vindictively. "I'm so sorry to be a whole five minutes late. You must have waited so eagerly for my arrival. I am sorry for wasting your precious time in which you could have done something useful."

Naruto gives me a blank look, obviously not getting it. Sasuke looks amused, though. Kakashi coughs a little.
"Right. Let's begin with some introductions," he says. "Tell me your likes, dislikes, hobbies and dreams for the future, stuff like that."

"You first," I say flatly, sitting down.

"Ohh, me? My name is Hatake Kakashi. I have no intention of telling you my likes and dislikes. My dreams..." he trails off. "I have a lot of hobbies."

Well, that was helpful. Not.

"Now it's your turn." Kakashi motions to Naruto.

"I'm Uzumaki Naruto! I like Ri-chan and ramen! Especially the ramen Ri-chan and Iruka-sensei buy me! What I dislike is the three minutes to cook cup ramen! And my dream is to surpass all the Hokage and make all the people in the village acknowledge me!" Naruto says cheerfully. "

Right. No surprises there, except that my name comes even before ramen. I smother a flattered giggle.

"Okay, next," Kakashi orders.

"My name is Uchiha Sasuke. There are a lot of things I dislike and I like... sparring. Also, I have an ambition that I have no intention of leaving as just a dream. To revive my clan... and to kill a certain man."

Kakashi looks serious. Naruto seems to be wondering if it's him Sasuke is talking about.

I have to suppress a shudder. 'To kill a certain man,' echoes through my head.

I remember hateful red eyes, a cold high voice hissing 'Avada Kedavra'!

My fists clench when I remember the rage and hatred that I feel for my parents murderer to this day. How much I still want to kill him, even though I will never see him again.

"Next, the girl," Kakashi says, distracting me from my past.

"I'm Nara Riko. I like my friends and family. I dislike bullies. My dream for the future..." My voice trails off.

What is my dream?


Become strong? I want to, but it's not my dream.

Protect my precious people? That's not my dream either; it's something that goes without saying.

Then it comes to me.

"My dream is something I already have," I say firmly, thinking of my home, of mom, dad and Shika, of Naruto, Chouji and Sasuke. Of pranking and laughing, reading and playing shogi. "What I want is to protect it."

It's silent for a moment.

"Okay!" Kakashi says then, clapping his hands together. "We will start our duties tomorrow!"
"Yatta!" Naruto cheers, punching his fist in the air. "What kinds of duties?" he asks eagerly, eyes full of excitement.

"First, we are going to do something with just the four of us," Kakashi says. I'm starting to get an ominous feeling.

Naruto starts bouncing. "What? What is it?"

Kakashi chuckles darkly. "Survival training."

A cold wind blows over the rooftop. The sky seems to be darkening. Fear creeps up on me.

I disable the minor genjutsu easily, but the unease won't go away.

"S-survival training?" Naruto asks, looking scared.

Kakashi chuckles darkly, sounding slightly unhinged. My hand inconspicuously drifts to my belt where my senbon and kunai are hidden.

He stares at us with his one eye. "Out of the twenty-seven graduates, only nine are going to be Genin. The other eighteen will be sent back to the Academy. In other words, tomorrow's training will be a test with a sixty-six percent dropout rate, and I will be your opponent."

I freeze. I've never heard about this test. And from Kakashi's demeanor, I don't think he expects us to pass. I don't think he wants us to pass. I feel dread creeping up on me.

"Graduating the Academy means only that you have the potential to become shinobi. You have yet to pass my test."

I tune out Naruto's protest and calm myself down. Even if I don't pass, there is always the option of becoming an apprentice, or becoming a medic, or joining the Cryptanalysis Team. Then there is the Genin Corps, basically the foot soldiers of Konoha, I could work myself up from there. And I could always go back to the Academy for a year and then try again. I have options.

I look up when Naruto's protest dies down. Kakashi talks again.

"Meet me at Training Ground Three at five in the morning. Don't eat breakfast, you'll just throw it up."

He vanishes in a shunshin.

I walk home in a daze.

To come this far, to go through so much to get here, only for one person to threaten it all... my shoulders slump.

I don't know what this test is, but Kakashi doesn't expect us to pass. And he said he didn't like us. Considering he is the only one who decides if we pass... those are some really bad odds. I feel disheartened.

No one is home when I arrive, so I just go upstairs to my room and grab a book, lying on my bed to read. I don't register the words, but it's better than worrying about Kakashi's test.

It's quiet at dinner. Shikamaru is eating with his team and dad got held up at work, so it's just Yoshino and me. She seems to sense I don't want to talk, so she doesn't say anything. After we have
cleaned up, I go upstairs again and lie on my bed, staring blankly up at the ceiling.

Cryptanalysis would be a good career choice. I love codes and puzzles. Or apprenticing with someone. Maybe with mom. That could be fun. And studying medicine... I'd be good at it. And I could always...

I brush my hair behind my ears. My fingers catch on my new earrings.

Yeah right. My fists clench. Hell no. I'm not giving up!

Enough of lying around like some pathetic weakling. Some guy thinks I can't do it?

He's wrong.

I jump up from my bed and change my normal outfit to a black one. I grab my supplies and go down to the kitchen where I grab a few nutrition bars. From the shelf, I grab one of the filled storage scrolls that Yoshino keeps ready to hand there. Then I leave the house.

Just as I walk out into the night, Shikaku comes home.

"Going somewhere, Riko-chan?" he asks.

I give him a determined smile. "I've got places to be."

He smirks and ruffles my hair. "Have fun, Riko-chan."

My smile widens. "Oh, I will."

I arrive at Training Ground Three a half hour later. It's dark, but the moon provides enough light to see.

I sneak silently through deep forest until I arrive at a glade. A minor genjutsu hides me from view.

I look around to check if anyone is near. My chakra sense isn't very reliable yet and only works for close distances, so I have to rely on my eyes, ears and my instinct.

The glade is deserted. In the moonlight, it's quite beautiful. It's enclosed by forest, only to my left, a large river borders it. Three stumps are lined up in a row a little ways from me, and to my right, a large dark structure stands opposite from them.

As I walk closer to it, I recognise it's a large stone shaped a little like a kunai.

I only see the names carved in it when I am just a few steps away from it. There are a lot of them, but I don't recognise them. Then my eyes catch on a name.

Nara Mamoru

I've never heard of him, but I study the names more closely. There are several more Nara, and I find more clan names on there. Then I find a name I actually recognise.

Nara Megumi

I knew her. She was a cousin of Shikaku's and sometimes came by to drink tea with Yoshino. We went to her funeral a year ago.
I know what this stone is now. It's a memorial for all those who died fighting for the village.

I lower my head in respect and say a few prayers for the deceased ninja. I wish I had some flowers to leave here.

When I straighten, I am even more determined to pass Kakashi's test. I want to honor those ninja's sacrifice by becoming the best ninja I can possibly be. So I can protect what they died for.

I start by scouting out the area, mentally making notes and creating a map in my head.

Then I take out storage scrolls and unseal their contents, lining them up neatly. A few handseals, and five water clones form and take the supplies, running to do the tasks I order them to do.

Then I move toward the river and get to work.

Kakashi really shouldn't have told us where he was going to test us.

I wake up when I hear Naruto's tired voice mumble a greeting. I'm on my feet instantly with senbon in my hands. Except there is no ground beneath me because I slept in a tree, so my landing is rather painful. Thankfully, a bush cushions my fall.

I curse Yoshino's training.

When I have worked myself back to my feet, I see Naruto and Sasuke staring at me. Naruto still looks half asleep, Sasuke looks alert and currently has a bewildered expression on his face, probably because I just fell out of a tree and that doesn't happen every day.

"Ne, ne, Ri-chaaaan" Naruto says through a yawn. "Why'd you fall out of a tree?"


"Why did you sleep in there?" Sasuke asks me, sounding bewildered.

"'Cause I was tired." I groan and stretch. Then I pull a storage scroll out and unseal a large pillow, lean it against another tree and curl up against it. "Wake me when 'kashi comes," I mumble and close my eyes.

"Ne, Ri-chan, Kakashi is gonna be here soon! It's five am, he said to meet him here then!" Naruto says, sounding panicked.

"'m here, aren't I?" I mutter into my pillow. "Lemme sleep. Only got an hour b'fore."

"Why? You knew we had a test," Sasuke says. Whoa, he's talkative in the morning.

"'zactly. Tell you later."

I fall asleep again.

When I wake up again, feeling a lot more awake, the sun is up and Sasuke and Naruto are leaning against the tree on either side of me. Kakashi is nowhere to be seen.

"What time is it?" I ask.

"'round nine," Naruto answers, looking bored out of his mind. His stomach growls. I pull out my
storage scroll again and unseal the nutrition bars and hand one to him and one to Sasuke.

"But Kakashi-sensei said not to eat!" Naruto protests.

"He also said he'd be here at five am, and that was four hours ago. Eat. You can't do training on an empty stomach." They both take their breakfast and eat. I eat one, too. "The order not to eat didn't make sense, anyway. He probably wanted us to be stressed and weak for his test," I explain.

"But that's not fair!" Naruto complains.

Sasuke snorts. Naruto glares at him. "You got something to say, teme?"

"We're ninja. We don't fight fair. Dobe," he answers.

Before Naruto can say something rude, I cut in. "Exactly. It's like a prank, you know?"

Naruto's face lights up and he nods. If there is one thing he understands, it's pranking.

"But we're ninja, too. We can prank him back, understand?" I smile maliciously. Naruto starts to grin. Sasuke's eyes widen in realisation.

"You trapped the training ground," he says incredulously.

I grin. "Took me seven hours."

"Ne, Ri-chan, you're awesome!" Naruto says.

"I know. But we'll still need a plan to defeat him. He's a jounin, we'll have to work together." I say. Then I pull out the map of the training ground I drew yesterday. "But first things first. Look closely. This is where the traps are..."

Kakashi arrives at eleven o'clock.

"You're LATE!" Naruto yells, pointing at him. Sasuke and I just glare mutinously.

"Maa, a black cat crossed my path, so I had to take the long way," he says, eye crinkling in a way that makes me think he's smiling under his mask.

Sasuke twitches. Naruto shouts "LIAR!" at him.

I give him a beaming smile. The kind that Yoshino gives before doing something really mean, usually involving her water-whip.

He stops smiling and clears his throat. Then he pulls out an alarm clock and sets it down on one of the three stumps.

"The alarm is set for noon." Then he pulls out two bells and holds them up. "Here are two bells. Your task is to take them from me before the alarm sounds. Those who cannot get a bell by noon get no lunch. I'll tie you to one of these stumps and eat right in front of you."

*That's why he told us not to eat... Devious.*

"And as there are only two bells, at least one of you will definitely be tied to a stump. And... that person fails the test and will be sent back to the Academy."
I swallow and force myself to stay calm. I didn't expect him to put us under pressure like this.

One of us will fail. But we won't get the bells unless all three of us work together.

It will be fine. So long as we stick to my plan, we'll get the bells.
Bells

One of us will fail. But we won't get the bells unless all three of us work together.

It will be fine. So long as we stick to my plan, we'll get the bells.

Is this a test to see if we could place the mission over our own future? It might be. Maybe he'll pass all three of us if we work together.

On the other hand... there is no guarantee. It might really be what it looks like. Genin teams normally consist of three genin and one jounin, but there are exceptions. Not many, but it does happen.

I mentally shake my head. First we need to get the bells. We can decide what to do with them after.

I adopt an appropriately shocked look at Kakashi's explanation of the test so he'll think I'm some naive Academy brat. Naruto looks shocked, too, but I doubt he's faking. Sasuke's eyes have a dark look in them.

"You can use your shuriken. You won't succeed unless you come at me with the intent to kill."

"But that's dangerous!" I exclaim dramatically.

"Yeah! We could kill you!" Naruto exclaims.

"In society, those with no talent often complain the loudest. Well, ignore the Dead Last and begin when I say-"

Naruto storms toward Kakashi with a kunai in his hand. Then Kakashi is suddenly behind him, hand on Naruto's head, his own kunai pointed at his neck.

Fast! I realise. Sasuke's eyes narrow.

"Don't get so hasty. I haven't said 'start' yet."

Kakashi releases Naruto. "But it looks like you're in the right mindset now. We're going to start now."

The three of us fall in ready positions.

"Ready... Start!"

The three of us leap away in different directions.

Step one: Isolate Kakashi in the glade so we can launch many pointy objects at him.

Naruto stands in front of Kakashi, shouting something about fighting fair and square and getting the bells for himself and me.

That bloody idiot!

I watch in horrified disbelief as Naruto and his clones get their asses kicked and poked by Kakashi, who is reading an orange book with a light blush on his face while doing it. Naruto makes a complete idiot out of himself when he ends up brawling with his own clones. Then he winds up
dangling from a tree by his feet after falling for a trap so obvious, it doesn't even deserve to be called that.

Kakashi lectures him until he is hit from behind by a multitude of shuriken.

I guess now I know where Sasuke is.

_Not_ where he's supposed to be.

I growl furiously. Those bloody morons. What do they think they're doing? First Naruto crashes the plan, then Sasuke thinks he has an opportunity and tries to get Kakashi by himself.

Well. I'll let Kakashi kick their asses so they'll see some reason. I'll have to keep an eye on them so I know when to approach them. And I need a new plan to defeat Kakashi. All of that, I have to do within less than an hour.

I need to come up with a new word to describe how troublesome this is.

Unfortunately for Sasuke, his surprise attack doesn't work. Kakashi replace himself with a log. Which means he could be anywhere right now. _Bugger._

With all the plotting and thinking about my teammates, I completely forgot that I am one of Kakashi's targets as well.

_Right. Time to run._

I hurry through the forest as fast as I can. My stealth skills wouldn't work against an elite jounin anyways. I briefly entertain the idea of using my water clones, but Kakashi would notice if suddenly I had only one tenth of my previous chakra level. And I can't use the majority of my traps because then Kakashi would stop underestimating me – at least I hope he underestimates me – and make sure to neutralise me more permanently then he did Naruto.

Wait a minute, why am I running? All it does is separate me further from my wayward misguided teammates. If Kakashi wants to catch me, I don't stand a chance at evading him anyways.

I stop moving, my thoughts racing. While he was dealing with Naruto, he spouted a lecture on taijutsu. It stands to reason he'll give Sasuke and me each one lecture, either about ninjutsu or genjutsu.

Sasuke was always the best in ninjutsu class. I was just as good, but I didn't make it as obvious. Plus, he's an Uchiha. So he'll probably get the ninjutsu lecture. That leaves genjutsu for me.

Good. I can deal with genjutsu. Yoshino made sure of that.

"Behind you, Riko-chan," Kakashi's voice says. I shriek in fake terror, whirl around and launch a barrage of senbon at him, but he's already gone. "Good reaction, but too late." When I have turned around toward where his voice is now coming from, his hands are already forming the Rat Seal.

Thousands of leaves whirl around me, and my senses go haywire.

_Keep your head. You know this isn't real._

The normal technique for releasing oneself from a genjutsu uses a simple burst of chakra to disrupt the foreign chakra's influence. I can't do that here, Kakashi would notice and try something else. Thankfully, Yoshino made sure I knew exactly what to do in cases like this. A more complex
technique of freeing oneself from illusions relies on locating the foreign chakra in the body and countering it only where it's affecting the system. It's practically a medical skill to break a genjutsu this way.

It takes me a few seconds, but I manage to do it. Then I make a big show out of looking around disorientated, screaming in fright and pretending to faint, looking like a complete failure of a kunoichi, finished off by a simple genjutsu.

I stay on the ground for around five minutes until I am sure Kakashi is gone, then I jump up and get moving. Time is running out. I have two stubborn idiots to find.

I jump through the trees, keeping my senses open. Then, by sheer luck, I hear bells jingle. I mute my chakra as good as I can, place a hiding genjutsu on myself and move slowly and stealthily in the direction I heard the sound from. It wouldn't do to get caught now.

I arrive just in time to see Sasuke launch a large ball of fire at Kakashi. Whoa. If I weren't so angry at my teammates, I'd be impressed.

The ground and trees around the two has been peppered with kunai and shuriken, there are craters from explosions and limp wires hang from the trees where they have been cut through. Kakashi looks a little worse for the wear, his clothes are ripped and burned in places.

It appears Sasuke used a few of my traps on Kakashi. I feel a surge of pride at seeing that they actually managed to touch an elite jounin.

I watch from my hiding spot as Sasuke realises Kakashi evaded his attack and then gets pulled into the ground. Only his head is still above ground. He's effectively immobilised.

"Lesson Three: Ninjutsu," Kakashi tells Sasuke. He says a few other things, then pulls his book out and leaves in the direction of the glade.

I wait a minute to give Sasuke time to curse himself for losing, then I move out from my hiding spot and drop my genjutsu. Sasuke blinks at me. "Riko," he says.


"Get me out of here. And don't call me that."

I drop the smile. "I don't think so."

He looks at me incredulously. "What?"

"I'm not releasing you until you have listened to what I have to say," I say in a hard voice.

"Riko," he says in a threatening tone.

"Don't even think about intimidating me. You are going to listen to me."

It's not like he has a different option. He glares at me.

"You and Naruto abandoned the plan. Abandoned me!" I hiss at him, trying to hide the hurt in my voice. His eyes widen in realisation.

"Riko..."
"Shut up! I am going to release you, and you are going to do exactly as I say, unless you want to go back to the Academy, are we clear?"

"I..."

"Are we clear?!"

He nods.

I dig him out using the technique we learned at the Academy. Once his arms are free, I leave him to free himself. When he's out, I stand up and turn my back to him. I start moving towards the glade where I saw Naruto last. He follows.

"Here's the new plan. We're going to the glade where Kakashi and Naruto should be right now. I distract Kakashi, you get Naruto. Naruto activates the barriers around the glade with his shadow clones and you attack Kakashi and get him to what I marked as spot C on the map. I'll immobilise him, you get the bells. Understood?"

"We don't need Na-"

"We do. Now stop talking."

"I was going to get a bell for you."

I whirl around to look at him. "I don't want the fucking bell! I want us three to be a team! I want to fight together with you! The bells are worthless if you are alone in the end!" I yell.

I'm breathing hard. He stares at me wide eyed.

I take a deep breath and turn away from him again. "Just do what I told you to do," I say, my voice sounding rough. I leap towards the glade. We only have a couple of minutes left, if at all.

We arrive at the glade but stay hidden behind trees. Naruto for some reason is tied to the middle one of the stumps now. Kakashi stands in front of him.

"You get Naruto and tell him what to do," I order.

Then I straighten and walk into the clearing, head held high, not even attempting to surprise our opponent, who stands between me and the tree stumps.

"Ri-chan!" Naruto calls out.

"Riko-chan," he says, sounding mildly surprised. "Have you given up?"

"I am here," I say coldly while pulling out shuriken, "to pass your stupid test!"

"Maa, Riko-chan, your time is up. It will be noon in a half minute. And Sasuke. Even if you free Naruto, it's too late," Of course he noticed Sasuke sneaking behind him to get to Naruto.

I give him a cold look. "The test is to get the bells before the alarm sounds."

"And it sounds in ten seconds, Riko-chan. You lost," he says friendly.

I throw my shuriken. He catches the shuriken that would have hit him and lets the other two soar past him.
"You need to work on your aim, Riko-chan. And the time is up now."

I grin triumphantly when the shuriken that missed him near their real target.

"Guess what? It's not. Your alarm won't ever sound now."

The alarm clock shatters as the shuriken hit it. Kakashi's eye widens.

"And now we have all the time we need to get those bells," I finish. Then Sasuke attacks him while Naruto's clones run to the corners of the glade. A moment later, transparent blue walls form and encase the glade.

It's just a basic Academy level barrier, the inefficient kind that takes ages to set up before one activates it and only holds for a limited amount of time, but it will keep Kakashi from running.

I didn't just set up weapon launchers and pitfalls.

I run towards where I told Sasuke to lead Kakashi. Naruto joins in the fight with his clones, forcing Kakashi to jump back.

A fireball from Sasuke forces him to dodge. Almost there.

Naruto's clones launch a barrage of kunai and shuriken. Kakashi evades in my direction. Yes!

I focus my chakra. Miniature explosive tags go off all around us, and from the small craters they leave in the ground, water geysers shoot up.

The previous night, I spent hours gathering water, compressing it into large orbs and then burying them in the ground in various locations. The explosive tags going off destabilised the orbs and caused the compressed water to expand in the direction of lowest resistance – the holes the explosions caused.

Now water falls down all around us and floods the ground. My hands fly through a sequence of seals and then I kneel down to slam them into the water. "Suikusari no Jutsu!" I yell. Multiple chains made of water shoot up and wrap around Kakashi, binding him.

I haven't exactly mastered the technique yet. I still need an outside water source to do it, and the chains are unstable and drain too much chakra. It's enough for this situation, though.

"Sasuke!" I yell. A moment later, he is there, ripping the bells from Kakashi's belt. I drop the chains but stay on the ground, exhausted.

I already spent a lot of chakra compressing the water orbs earlier. Using the chains now drained me. Naruto's hands are suddenly there, pulling me upright and steadying me. "I've got you, Ri-chan," I say. I nod weakly.

I want to yell at him like I did Sasuke for leaving me alone and ruining the plan. I'm too exhausted though. I can barely stand.

Besides, we have the bells now.

I look at Kakashi who is looking at Sasuke.

"Now, Sasuke, you have the bells. Who goes back to the Academy?" Kakashi asks in an expectant voice. I tense at the question. There is a weird undertone I can't decipher in the way he talks.
Sasuke turns to look at Naruto and me. Our eyes meet.

He turns back to Kakashi and hands him the bells. "Keep the bells. We are a team. No one leaves." I hear Naruto's breath catch. I freeze in surprise.

Sasuke said that because of what I told him.

"'One of you will fail.' That was the rule, and a shinobi must follow the rules," Kakashi reminds him.

I've had enough of him. I'm tired, exhausted and my emotions are all over the place. He can shut up now.

"Shove the rules up your arse. You heard Sasuke. No one leaves."

"Yeah!" Naruto shouts. "That's right, dattebayo!"

"I see," Kakashi says and straightens. His hands form seals, and dark clouds gather in the sky above us, lightning flashing through them. Suddenly, he seems fearsome and powerful. "Are you prepared to face the consequences, then?" he thunders.

Sasuke pulls out shuriken. I draw my senbon. Naruto palms a kunai.

"Do your worst," Sasuke says at the same time Naruto shouts: "Bring it!"

"Well then..." Kakashi says. His eye curls into a smile. "You pass!"

Huh?

The clouds fade away, and the sun breaks through. Kakashi's frightening aura disappears.

"You three are the first to pass the real challenge of this test. Because there were only two bells, one of you was guaranteed to fail, so your teammates became risks to your own future. The test was to see if you would abandon them to save yourselves and thus, fail, or work together and pass." He pauses. "On missions, you will be constantly threatened. You team will be your lifeline, and if one of you abandoned it, all of you could die."

He motions to the memorial stone. "Do you know what that stone is?"


Kakashi nods. "Yes. The names of all ninja killed in action are engraved there. My best friends' names are on this stone."

He takes a deep breath. "In the shinobi world, those who break the rules are called scum, but you know what? Those that abandon their comrades are worse than scum."

We stare at him wide-eyed. Naruto looks at Kakashi as if he's going to cry.

"You proved that you understood that in this test. So all of you pass. Congratulations," Kakashi-sensei says warmly.

I let myself fall back on the ground, sitting there, staring numbly at Kakashi. Sasuke's expression is indecipherable, but the look in his eyes is relieved. Naruto slowly starts to smile, whispering "I'm a ninja," with a slight hint of disbelief in his voice.

"So now that I have explained the test, how about you explain your actions. I admit, I was worried about your performance at first."
I give Kakashi a bright smile. "Everything went exactly according to plan," I say cheerfully. "We made you think we had completely abandoned each other first." I shoot a beaming smile at my teammates. "Then Naruto acted like a complete moron by rushing in without thinking, failing in a spectacularly idiotic way and then falling for a completely obvious trap. I pretended to fall for your genjutsu, which I broke seconds after you cast it on me. Sasuke fooled you into thinking he was an arrogant idiot trying to fight you all by himself. Then I collected Sasuke to free Naruto and we went after you, utilising the barriers and traps that I placed during the night before the test. The part with the alarm clock was improvised though. Didn't expect you to put a time limit."

By the end of my cheerfully delivered speech, Naruto and Sasuke look somewhat guilty, though that's hard to tell with Sasuke. I'm still smiling brightly.

Kakashi looks at me as he knows exactly what really happened. "You devised the plan?"

I nod. "I am a Nara, you know."

"Alright. Good job on thinking like a ninja and shaping the battlefield to your advantage. You did very well."

I smile proudly.

"And good acting, Naruto and Sasuke. You two had me completely fooled with your performance. I honestly thought you two were trying to do defeat me on your own."

Naruto laughs awkwardly. "Ahahaha, yeah, we fooled you good, dattebayo!"

"Hn," Sasuke says.

"Okay!" Kakashi strikes a cool pose, giving us a raised thumb. "All of you are ninjas now! Starting tomorrow, Team Seven will begin its duties and take missions!"
Teamwork

After Kakashi dismissed us, he takes me straight home since I'm not really in any shape to walk. I'd have liked to talk to my teammates about the test, but I guess it will have to wait until tomorrow. I'm not sure what I would have said anyways.

Kakashi sets me down on the porch in the back of our house.

"You shouldn't be too mad at your teammates," he says.

"Am I that obvious?" I ask.

He chuckles. "No."

"I'm not as angry as I was before. Sasuke got the point already. And Naruto is Naruto. He'll learn," I tell Kakashi.

He nods.

"How much did you know about what was going on anyway?" I ask.

He does his eye-smile thing. "I've watched since you started setting up your traps."

Well that's embarrassing. I didn't notice him at all. And it means he knows how pretty much everything went wrong in the beginning.

"Time to work on my awareness skills, then," I mutter.

He chuckles again. "Maa, Riko-chan, it will be a long time until you'll be able to detect me when I don't want to be noticed."

He takes out his little orange book, opens it and turns to leave. It says 'Icha Icha Paradise' on the book's cover and it has a picture of a man chasing a curvy woman on it. I raise a brow.

"That book any good?"

His head snaps back to me, his one eye comically widened. It gleams ecstatically. He puts one hand on my shoulder.

"Let me tell you about this book..."

Kakashi finally leaves after a half hour of passionately advertising the Icha Icha series that apparently contains mind-blowing action, superb drama, intense mystery, exquisite passion, extraordinary characters and heart stopping romance. He even lent me his book.

After his overzealous advertisement, I am a little wary of opening it. I have only observed fanatic worship this intense on Sasuke's fangirls before. I don't really want to catch whatever obsession Kakashi has.

But Kakashi said it was the best literature in all of the Elemental Nations by far. I'm curious...

No. I'm too tired to read now anyway. I'm completely exhausted. I'll just sleep for now. No reading weird books recommended by my apparently mildly demented sensei.
When I wake up, it's daybreak and I'm starving. I walk down to the kitchen and find a full meal left for me by Yoshino in the fridge. She must have noticed my chakra exhaustion and decided to just let me sleep.

On the table, two special chakra replenishing pills have been laid out for me, and a little sheet of paper has "Well done, Riko-chan," in dad's handwriting written on it. I smile. My family's way of caring never fails to make me feel warm inside.

After eating and freshening up, I decide to enjoy the early morning on the porch. I sit there, listening to the birds' singing and the tree's rustling, feeling the warmth of the rising sun on my face. I'm content. Calm. There is just this little something nagging me in the back of my mind...

I throw my hands up in exasperation and take out the annoying book. I can't resist the curiosity. It's driving me insane. I start reading.

When Shikamaru comes out of the house some time later, I hastily hide the book in my belt next to my kunai. I'd never hear the end of it if he found out what I was reading.

"Good morning!" I say, probably a tad too cheery.

He gives me an inquiring look and sits next to me, lifting his face to the sun. "Morning," he answers.

We sit in silence for a bit, enjoying the morning together. At least, I try to. I'm itching to get back to reading.

"Your sensei tested you?"

"Yours didn't?"

"Nah. Asuma's pretty cool. How'd it go?"

"Trouuublesome. Very much so."

We're silent for a little while. I really want to finish that book.

"Your team treating you right?" Shika asks. I inwardly groan. Why, oh why must he be so nosy on this particular morning? Why is he even awake already?

"Fine. I'll make it work. I might have to learn the water-whip though."

Shikamaru winces.

"What time is it?" I ask. No matter what his answer is, I'll just say I have to meet my team and then I'll find a quiet spot to read until the actual meeting time.


"Shit! We're supposed to meet in fifteen minutes!" I jump up and race inside to put on my shinobi outfit and collect my gear, then I run out with a yelled "Later Shika!" past him and out into the village.

I arrive at the training ground Kakashi told us to go to. Looking around, I see the training ground is mostly made up of forest. A little bridge over a small river is nearby. Sasuke is standing on it, glowering down into the water. He looks grim.
I frown. I know how he moves in a fight. I know his pain like it is my own. I know *him*, just like he does me.

But I don't know what he likes to eat, if he likes reading and what he does in his free time. I may know *him*, but I know nothing *about* him.

I join him on the bridge and sit on the railing, looking into the water flowing beneath us. I can feel his eyes on me, but when I shoot him a side-glance, he is still glaring down at the water.

This isn't normal for us. Usually, when we are near each other, we meet each other's eyes at least once, giving each other a silent acknowledgement. We share looks of annoyance when our respective fans approach and looks of respect when we succeed in class. This... is uncomfortable. And it's because of my anger yesterday. Because of him leaving me behind.

"There are a lot of things I dislike, and I like... sparring."

"We are a team. No one leaves."

"I was going to get a bell for you."

Troublesome.

"I'm not angry anymore," I say softly.

Now he looks at me. I meet his gaze and give him a hesitant smile. The grimness slowly leaves his eyes and he gives me a tiny nod. We turn to look at the water again.

"I like to play shogi. I also like pranking villagers with Naruto, but don't tell anyone I do that. My favourite food is miso ramen. My favourite animals are deer. I want to have a flying summon someday and fly around with it," I say offhandedly. "How about you?"

He turns to stare at me as if I've grown a second head. Before he has a chance to answer, Naruto comes running, yelling: "I'm not late, I'm not late!"

"Good morning, Ruto."

"Morning Ri-chan! Are you feeling better? You looked real tired yesterday, dattebayo!" He asks me, a worried look in his eyes.

"I'm feeling better. My clan is good with medicines, so I'll be back to normal in no time at all," I answer. He gives me a relieved grin. Then he looks around. "Huh? Where's Kakashi-sensei?"

"Late. *Again,*" I answer. Naruto groans. Sasuke looks annoyed. I can't tell if it's at Kakashi's lateness or at Naruto. Probably both.

"But it's our first day! We're gonna go on missions! I've gotta show everyone how awesome I am, dattebayo!" Naruto complains.

"Hn," Sasuke says in a condescending manner.

"You got something to say, teme?!" Naruto shouts.

"You have a problem, dobe?" Sasuke replies arrogantly.

*Thunk. Thunk.*
One kunai hits the floor a millimeter from Naruto's feet. He yelps and jumps back, looking around wildly. The other kunai hits the bridge's railing right next to Sasuke's arm which he pulls back reflexively before whirling around to face the attacker.

I give them my sweetest smile, another kunai already in my hand.

"Ri-chan, your smile is really creepy," Naruto says uneasily.

Another kunai nearly buries itself next to his left foot. He yelps and jumps back again. Sasuke snorts amusedly. A senbon whistles past his face. His eyes widen.

I shake my head at them, sighing sadly. "When someone throws weapons at you, you pull your own and get behind cover. Immediately. You don't stand around and stare."

"But, Ri-chan-" Naruto protests.

"Both of you obviously have to learn how to deal with surprise attacks. Lucky for you, I am a very helpful person and I will give you looots of practice," I say cheerfully. Then I launch a barrage of senbon at both of them. They evade narrowly. Sasuke draws a kunai, his eyes gleaming. Naruto on the other hand looks insecure.

Hmm. That just won't do.


The reaction is instant. He gives me an indignant look, points his finger at me and shouts: "I'm not scared! I'm better than Sasuke, dat-" His words cut off when he has to avoid another senbon.

"Oh yeah? Prove i-" I jump up on the bridge's railing to evade Sasuke's shuriken. He smirks at me.

His next barrage of shuriken forces me to jump of the railing. As far as the two boys know, I've just been forced to take a cold bath. They can't see me standing on the water's surface unless they lean over the railing.

I hear Naruto's boisterous laughter. "Take that, Ri-chan!"

Is he aware that he's laughing about something Sasuke did? I shake my head and smile. Those two are so easy to manipulate.

I grin and form three hand seals. Then I lean my head back. "Uo Tsuba!" I shout and a large jet of water shoots out of my mouth into the sky and then falls down onto the bridge. I hear Naruto curse. "Not fair, Ri-chan!"

Oh, the joys of being a water user.

The two of them, Naruto now dripping wet, jump over to the riverbank. When they see me standing on the water, Naruto's mouth drops open. Sasuke looks miffed that I'm not submerged in water.

I grin and jump back. "Catch me if you can!" I yell and run laughing towards the training ground. Behind me, I can hear my teammates run to the bridge to cross the river and follow me, Naruto yelling threats at me.

In the training ground, I run up a tall tree and then sit on a high branch. Even if they tree hop, they can't reach me in the spot I'm in. I grin when I see them run into the clearing so far beneath me. They look around, no doubt searching for me.
"Up here!" I yell, waving down at them. They look up and see me on my tree.

"Oi!" Naruto yells. "That's cheating! You can't go hiding up there!" Sasuke has a somewhat cute irritated expression on his face.

"I'm a ninja, cheating is what we do!" I call down to them. "Besides, it's not hiding if you know where I am!"

"It's still cheating, dattebayo! Get down!" Sasuke looks like he actually agrees with Naruto. I'm having so much fun right now.

"Well, you could just come up here if you miss my company that much!" I shout and giggle. Then I stand up and take a few steps around the branch so that I'm hanging upside down. "It's not that hard! And I already told you how to do it! Focus chakra to your feet and stick yourself to the tree!"

I throw two kunai down to them. "And don't forget to mark the highest spot you reach!"

They stare up at me dumbfounded. I start gathering an orb of water in my hand.

"Well? Get going!" I order and throw the water ball down. They jump to the side, but the water bomb explodes and shoots water everywhere, so they still get drenched. I laugh out loud.

"You!" Naruto shouts. "I'm gonna get you for this, dattebayo!" He grabs one of my kunai and starts running towards my tree.

Sasuke just looks pissed. He yanks out a kunai of his own, forms the Ram Seal and then starts running up my tree. After about fifteen steps – not bad for a beginner – the bark gives way beneath his foot and he has to jump back down. Naruto only makes it two steps, then he falls back down, directly on his head. Ouch.

I'm a genius. I found a way to stop them from antagonising each other, get them to train their chakra control and make them learn to control their anger.

...the only problem is that I am now the target of their united wrath. But I have at least a week until they reach me on my tree, and after that, I can always find a lake and then they'll have to learn water walking. And when they finally manage that, we'll be on a lake with lots and lots of water available and hopefully, I'll have learned the water whip by then, provided mom is willing to teach me the technique.

"You can't stay up there forever, Ri-chan!" Naruto yells up at me. "You gotta eat and stuff!"

"Less talking, more training, Ruto," I tell him while pulling out a nutrients bar. "And if you focus on what you are doing now, instead of what you are going to do to me later, you'll finish the exercise faster."

He glares at me. "You just wait! I'll be up there in no time!"

I laugh and get back to sitting on the branch. Then I take the book out and finally continue reading.

"You aren't reading, Riko-chan?" a disappointed voice says right next to me.
I jump up and away while throwing a barrage of senbon at the owner of the voice. Then I realise it's Kakashi. "Sorry sensei. And I finished the book in the three hours that you made us wait."

"And did you like it?" he asks eagerly, his eye looking hopeful.

"I want the next book," I tell him.

His eye blinks happily and he ruffles my hair. I bat his hand away and jump out of reach. "Stop that!" Only dad gets to ruffle my hair.

"You're a good kid, Riko-chan."

"Because I like Icha Icha?"

"It's a sign of a good character."

"Riiight. Anyways, you have to promise to protect me from Naruto and Sasuke today. They are kind of... mad at me right now."

"Why would they be mad at you?" Kakashi asks.

I lift an eyebrow and throw a few senbon in the direction of my teammates like I did in irregular intervals for the last three hours. A clang indicates that one of them deflected the senbon with a kunai. A muffled "Dammit, Ri-chan!" tells me it wasn't Naruto.

"Ahh. Yoshino-san's training method, I take it?"

"She sometimes uses the water whip, too."

Kakashi winces. I lift an eyebrow in surprise. "When did you get introduced to the water whip?"

"Maa, Riko-chan, don't get caught reading by your mother, alright?" he sounds a tad worried. I grin proudly. Hatake Kakashi is scared of my mom.

"Of course I won't. I mean, she would come after you, and why would I ever want my mom to kill you? Not to mention, if my dad found out about you corrupting me..." I shake my head in mock pity. "Thankfully, I don't have a reason to get you in trouble, I mean, it's not as if you're constantly late or anything, right?" I give him an innocent look.

He gulps. "Right."

I hum. "An hour of lateness would be excusable, I suppose. But if you're later than that..." I make a whip sound. He winces again.

I make a mental note to ask mom what exactly she did to him. It's bound to be amusing.

"And you'll protect me from my evil evil teammates, yes?" I make my eyes as wide and sad as possible.

"You're the evil one."

"Pleaaase?"

"Alright."

I beam at him and pat his shoulder. I'd pat his head, but he's too tall. "Good sensei."
"I'm not a dog."

"Yes, yes. Of course not. Now why don't you let the rest of the team know you're here?" I say encouragingly. "Here, I'll even give you this book!" I hold his book out to him.

He looks at me. "That's my book."

"It's alright. You can have it." I pat his shoulder again. "Now go do your job."

He shakes his head, sighing defeated. Then he shunshins away.

A moment later he appears on another tree branch. "Maa, my cute little genin are practicing all by themselves! I'm so proud."

"You're LATE!" Naruto shouts, pointing at him. Sasuke glares.

"I'm sorry, I got lost on the road of life-"

"LIAR!"

I can see this becoming a ritual. At least I blackmailed Kakashi into only being an hour late.

"Well, let's go get a mission, then!" Kakashi cheerfully announces.

Naruto instantly forgives him and whoops. "Yatta! I'm gonna kick ass, dattebayo! Let's go!"
Sasuke smirks in anticipation.

Poor them. They obviously don't know about D-ranks. Should I warn them or enjoy the reactions?

I drop down from my tree. "Sounds good. Let's go!" I say cheerfully. Naruto and Sasuke exchange a look. Then they pounce on me in a stunning display of teamwork. Sasuke grabs me and holds me down while Naruto starts tickling me. I shriek and start laughing. "Stop it!" I yell, interrupted by squeals of laughter. I try to kick Naruto away, but it doesn't work. Instead, all three of us fall to the ground.

"Say you're sorry first!" Naruto shouts. I try to free myself from Sasuke's grasp, but of course he knows how to keep me restrained.

"Never!" I gasp out. "Kakashi!"

He looks up from his book. When did he even start reading? "Hm? Oh, keep playing, kids. We have a few minutes."

"You trait- arrgh!" I shriek when Naruto hits a particularly ticklish spot. Damn him. It's not the first tickle attack I have been subjected to. He knows my weak spots. "I'm sorry! Please stop!"

They let me go and stand in front of me, arms crossed in front of them. "Let that be a lesson to you, Riko," Sasuke says haughtily.

"And don't you ever do it again, dattebayo!" Naruto shouts, pointing at my form on the ground.

I groan and pull myself to my feet. "Of all the times for you to develop teamwork..." I mutter. Louder, I say: "You are going to regret this."

I'm so going to learn the water whip.
Kakashi leads us to the Mission Assignment Desk. "Team Seven reporting for duty," he says.

Next to me, Naruto vibrates with excitement. The entire way here, he talked about saving princesses and defeating evildoers. Sasuke's face is expressionless, but his eyes tell me he is looking forward to receiving his first mission. I'm more looking forward to the faces they'll make when our mission is announced. I wished I had a camera.

Behind the desk, Hokage-sama sits with Iruka on his left and a chunin I've never seen before on his right side. "Ahh, we've been expecting you," Hokage-sama says with a benevolent smile on his face. Iruka gives Naruto and me a friendly look and raises an eyebrow at our rumpled and dirty clothes. Kakashi receives a wary look.

Hokage-sama rummages through a box of scrolls and then pulls one out. "Team Seven," he says gravely. "Are you ready for your first mission?"

Sasuke nods curtly. I nod too, barely able to hold in my amusement at Hokage-sama's behaviour.

"What is it, Jiji? Escorting a princess? Fighting monsters? Hunting bad guys?" Naruto asks, bouncing up and down, unable to stand still.

Hokage-sama's eyes twinkle with amusement. "Your mission is..." he announces dramatically, "weeding the Soma family's gardens!"

Naruto's shouted "WHAAAAAAAHHT?!" is probably heard all over Konoha.

I'm so happy he's on my team. D-ranks with him are going to be thoroughly entertaining.

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**Omake**

**Traps**

Two hours after Team Seven passed the bell test, Kakashi stands in front of the Hokage.

"They passed. Team Seven will take missions starting tomorrow," he reports unnecessarily. He doubts the Sandaime doesn't already know of the students' success.

Sarutobi regards him seriously. "I see. What is your opinion of them?"

"Naruto and Sasuke... as expected. They both need a lot of work. Riko-chan..." he thinks back to her interest in his beloved Icha Icha. "She has potential."

She is also the key member of Team Seven. She is Naruto's closest friend and both are fiercely loyal to each other. And Sasuke... he'd thought the boy an antisocial loner hell-bent on avenging his clan, but it's obvious he cares for Riko a great deal, and she is probably the only person he cares for at all.

Those three reminded him of his own team at first, but it's obvious that their dynamic is very different, even if Naruto resembles Obito in his behaviour and Sasuke's reminds him of himself. Riko's presence changes things.

"Very well," Sarutobi says. "I expect reports on their progress. You're dismissed."

"Ahh, I'd like to inform the village that Training Ground Three will have to be cleared of traps."

"It will be taken care of," Sarutobi replies.
Tenten waits with her team for Gai-sensei at their usual training ground. He'd told them yesterday in his usual flashy manner that he'd take them on another C-rank mission today. And if he couldn't get them a C-rank mission, he'd walk four hundred laps around the village on his hands and if he couldn't achieve that, he'd do one thousand push-ups on one hand and if he couldn't do that...

Tenten sighs. Immediately, her teammate Lee jumps up. "Tenten! What troubles you? I promise I shall-"

He never gets to finish his sentence because Gai-sensei appears in a cloud of smoke. "Yosh! My youthful students! We shall be going on a C-rank mission today!" he shouts, striking a pose and flashing his gleaming smile at them.

"Yes! Gai-sensei! I'm burning with the flames of youth!" Lee shouts.

"Just tell us our mission," Neji says in his usual stoic manner.

Gai-sensei appears to be even more motivated than usual. "Our mission has been requested by my Eternal Rival Hatake Kakashi himself! We shall not fail to win this challenge with the power of our youth!"

Tenten and Neji straighten interestedly. A challenge from their sensei's rival? They have heard about Kakashi, of course, Gai-sensei talks about him often enough.

"YOSH!" Lee shouts. "We will not fail! What is our task?"

"Traps have been set in Training Ground Three! We shall protect Konoha's ninja by disposing of them!"

Tenten sweat-drops. "We have to clean up after your rival?"

"No, Tenten! These traps have not been set by him! My rival has finally taken on the youthful challenge of teaching a team, and it was his team that set the traps! It is a competition between our teams!"

Tenten asks herself how that changes the fact that they have to clean up after Gai's rival.

"I see!" Lee shouts, flames now appearing in his eyes. "We shall compete with you rival's team to see who is better! We will make you proud, Gai-sensei!"

Tears start running down Gai's cheeks, evening sunlight appearing behind him. "Lee!" he says through his tears.

"Gai-sensei!" Lee answers, tears appearing in his eyes too, looking up at Gai in absolute worship.

"Lee!"

"Gai-sensei!"

Tenten and Neji look away as their teammate and sensei share a manly hug in front of a large sunset. They still haven't figured out where the background scenery comes from. Not even Neji's byakugan can see through it.

They arrive at Training Ground Three, and Tenten is shocked at the state it is in. Even Neji lifts a surprised eyebrow. Craters from explosions litter the ground, and a part of the glade they are in appears to be flooded. Kunai and shuriken pepper the floor, and, curiously, a destroyed alarm clock
"Who are the members of Team Kakashi?" Neji asks, a note of interest in his normally stoic voice.

Gai rubs his chin, thinking. "The Uchiha boy, Sasuke is his name, and Uzumaki Naruto. I don't know the female member's name, but she was Top Kunoichi of their year."

"Uchiha Sasuke? Of the Uchiha Clan?" Lee asks. Tenten inwardly shakes her head in exasperation. Lee has an unhealthy obsession with defeating geniuses descended from clans, such as Neji.

"People call him a genius," Neji says, considering. "The other boy must be the Dead Last of their year, then."

"The Top Kunoichi of that year was named Riko, I think," Tenten speaks up. As the Top Kunoichi of her own class, of course she had been interested in the strongest kunoichi in training of other years. She hadn't been all that impressed with Riko, though. The tiny girl looked as if a strong gust of wind could blow her over. She probably was all about book-smarts and exam scores, unlike her.

"So Uchiha's team left this behind?" Neji nods toward the messed up training ground and smirks. "This will be interesting."

Tenten is surprised. Neji rarely feels challenged. It's probably because both Neji and Uchiha Sasuke are hailed as geniuses. She has to admit, she herself would like to know which of the two is stronger.

Lee looks determined. "Yosh! We will win this challenge, Gai-sensei!"

Tenten smirks determinedly. It is a challenge, she supposes. Besides, her team is perfect for this mission. Neji can locate the traps with his byakugan, and she herself is an expert on weapons and almost everything that can be done with them. It should be easy enough for her to disable the traps. And should they have to spring a trap, Gai-sensei and Lee, not to mention Neji and herself, would be more than capable of dealing with the consequences.

These should only be Academy level traps, after all. The only reason their task is not a D-rank is because there are weapons involved and the location is a training ground.

"Alright!" Gai calls. "Let's start! Neji, activate your byakugan!"

Neji does as ordered. "There are no traps in the glade itself anymore. But I can see some in the forest."

They follow Neji into the forest. Neji bends down and swipes a few branches on the ground away. Under them, several strands of ninja wire lead in different directions. "If we cut those here, that should disable these five weapon launching traps." He points out where those weapon launchers are located. Tenten inspects the traps and nods, confirming Neji's assessment.

"Neji is right. The traps themselves aren't bad, but it's never smart to connect so many, since they can then be all disabled at once," she explains.

Gai nods approvingly. "Well done, my students! Let us disable this trap and move on to more challenging ones, then!"

Tenten nods and uses a kunai to cut the wires in the right places. Immediately, a series of clicks and snaps is heard, and suddenly, dozens of kunai fly toward them from everywhere. The four of them quickly jump back, hastily deflecting the kunai with their own. She breathes a sigh of relief when the kunai shower stops. "We must have overlooked somet-" she starts, but then Gai-sensei tackles her
down and she sees a volley of burning arrows pass over them. Her teacher grabs her and pulls her
back. She sees Neji and Lee have evaded in another direction and both are busy deflecting shuriken.
She moves to help them, but just then, the arrows hit a tree near them and she hears the sound of
wires snapping and the telltale hiss of an activated explosive tag, and she jumps backward as fast as
she can as a rain of needles goes down and the tree the arrows hit explodes. "Back to the glade!" she
hears Gai-sensei call, but she is too busy trying to escape the pitfall that is opening up beneath her
feet to obey his order.

And she asks herself: **How the hell is this a C-mission?!**

Sarutobi Hiruzen raises his eyebrows at the sight of the team that he sent out two hours earlier to
clear Training Ground Three of traps. The four of them, even Gai, look as though they fought a war
and lost. Their skin and clothes are marred with cuts and stained with dirt. Tenten's hair is undone
and parts of her shirt appear to be burned off, and pieces of ninja wire are tangled into her hair. A
few senbon still stick in the fabric of her pants. She supports Rock Lee, who looks so exhausted he
can barely stand anymore. His normally green suit is drenched in an obnoxious pink color that drips
onto the floor. Hyuuga Neji looks as if someone emptied a bucket of mud over him and he favors his
right leg. Gai's arms appear to be glued to his body by a sticky substance that glitters orange.

"Hokage-sama. Our team had to retreat from the mission due to injury of the members. We
recommend sending a team of jounin trap specialists to complete the mission," Gai reports.

"I see," Hiruzen replies. "Thank you for your efforts. Please visit the hospital to have your injuries
treated and hand in your reports within the next three days."

And since this mission, the genin of Team Gai have wanted to redeem themselves by defeating
Uchiha Sasuke whom they decided to be the mastermind behind their humiliating defeat.

It took two more teams until finally all the traps were cleared away and Training Ground Three was
once again deemed safe to enter.
It's been two weeks since our genin career started.

The three of us are painting some old guy's garden shed. The two hours before that, we had to build it. That was really not fun at all, because while Naruto is enthusiastic, he lacks brains, and Sasuke knew everything better but actually had no clue at all about construction, and neither of them wanted to listen to me because they were too busy bickering. Kakashi was his usual unhelpful self and just sat around reading.

"Dobe, just use your Shadow Clones," Sasuke finally says, apparently sick of manual labour. My eyes widen in horror.

"Are you insane? Then we'd have like twenty Narutos with access to paint, that's just asking for trouble!"

"Oi!" Naruto yells indignantly.

Sasuke's eyes widen in realisation. Then they narrow again. "Then you use your Water Clones."

I sigh. "I can't. They're behaving weird, and until I've found out what's wrong with them, I'm not going to use them. I'll ask Kakashi today after training if he can help me figure out the problem."

"Ne, Ri-chan, what's wrong with them?" Naruto asks.

I frown while I explain. "It's nothing really... bad. It's just, they address people in a different way that I would. And they shouldn't be able to move further than a few blocks away from me, but they are. They are too... independent from me."

I spent yesterday afternoon going through our library researching the Water Clone jutsu, trying to find information on weird behaviour the clones might display, but the scrolls said that water clones shouldn't have any behaviour or personality at all. When I asked mom, she told me that her clones hardly ever speak, and that I should go ask Kakashi since he's a ninjutsu expert, so that's what I'll do today.

"Hey, Ruto, what can your clones do?" I ask.

He frowns. "What d'you mean? They're clones!"

"Well, different types of clones can be used for different things," I start to explain. "Like, my water clones should only have one tenth of my strength, chakra and intelligence and should only be able to do a limited number of jutsus. But my mom can use a higher level clone technique that's called Water Reflection Clones, and they have one third of her strength and chakra and can use more jutsu. Of course, the chakra drain is different for the two, so you have to decide when to use which type of clone."

Naruto's face lights up in understanding. He hardly ever understands anything unless it's explained with the help of an example or a demonstration, which is why he had so many problems in the Academy where the teachers explained concepts and facts but hardly ever used examples. Luckily, after years of knowing Naruto, I know how to explain things to him in a way that he understands.

"So, like, normal bunshin can't touch stuff and kage bunshin can?" he asks.
I shake my head at him, grinning. "Something like that. So, what can your clones do?" Sasuke listens interestedly to our conversation.

"I dunno, they can touch stuff," Naruto says.

Right. Of course Naruto has no idea. I probably should have asked differently.

"Well, I saw them bleed during the bell test. Does that mean they can feel pain?" If so, that would mean that they are incredibly complex chakra constructs. "And what does it feel like when they dispel?"

He frowns and makes a clone. Then he pinches it and the clone yells "Ouch!", punches him and dispels itself.

I raise an eyebrow. I'm glad my clones aren't that independent. It appears the shadow clones have the personality of the caster.

Naruto stands up, still frowning. Then he turns to me and asks: "Ri-chan, I wanna try something."

I shrug. "Sure. What is it?"

He creates a clone and runs away. "Huh?" I ask intelligently.

"Boss thinks he felt where he pinched the clone. He wants to check if he can get memories from us, dattebayo!" the clone tells me.


"Really? Awesome!" the clone yells. Then he stills. "Uhh, what now?"

I sweat-drop. Trust Naruto to come up with a good theory and not know how to verify it. "Try to send him the memory," I tell the clone.

Clone-Naruto looks up. "Did you just say that you'd take me to eat ramen to see if he'd get the memory?" he asks accusingly.

I sweat-drop again. Apparently, the clone forgot he wasn't the original. "No." I roll my eyes. "I'm really going to Ichiraku's with him later, alright?"

"Sweet!" the clone shouts. Then he presses his eyes together and concentrates. He kind of looks constipated that way.

I listen around for Naruto's reaction. Nothing happens. "Well, that didn't work," I say, thinking hard. Sasuke reaches out and punches the clone and it dispels. "Hey, good idea!" I say. "Wait, you did do that to see if Naruto gets the memories when the clones dispel and not just to punch Naruto's face, right?"

He gives me a deadpan look. From the distance I can hear a cry of "Awesome! Ramen, dattebayo!".

"On second thought, don't answer that."

Kakashi listens to my explanation of my water clone problem. So do Sasuke and Naruto who decided to stick around after team practice.
"Make a water clone," Kakashi tells me. I nod.

"Let's go to the river, there's more water there," I say.

My teammates watch as I stand on the surface of the river and form the hand seals. Water-me rises from the water and stands next to me. She waves at my audience. "Hey, Ruto and Sasuke-san!" She cheerfully says. Then she gives a short bow to Kakashi. "It's nice to meet you, Kakashi-san!"

Kakashi looks at me. "I can see why you are concerned."

He steps closer to water-me and inspects her. "The level of detail is incredible," he says when he steps back.

"Level of detail?" I ask. That wasn't mentioned in the scrolls I read.

"Water clones are only a D-ranked technique. They are generally easy to tell apart from the original because they only mimic the overall appearance but not small details like faded scars or small rips in the clothing, for example. An experienced user could make the clone believable, but a fresh genin like you shouldn't be able to. However, this clone could fool some jounin."

"Whoa, that's awesome, dattebayo!" Naruto shouts. Sasuke and I on the other hand are frowning.

"That doesn't make sense. I've only used the technique for around a year. And what about the weird behaviour?" I ask.

"Hmm, I wonder," Kakashi muses. Then he reaches for his hitae-ate and pulls it up. I jump back in surprise. The eye that was hidden beneath his forehead-protector is bright red with three comma-like marks evenly distributed around the pupil. A scar that runs vertically across the eye indicates that it was implanted.

I stumble a few steps back, not able to take my eyes off his red one. Red eye... irrational fear rushes through me. I feel black closing in on me and-

"Riko-chan? Are you alright?"

"Yeah," I say automatically, feeling anything but. My voice sounds weird. "I was just surprised, that's all, sensei."

I take a deep breath. That's Kakashi-sensei, Ri. He'd never hurt you. He has nothing to do with that murderer!

"Really, I'm fine. What is that eye?" I ask, my voice sounding a little shaky.

Kakashi gives me a wary look but lets it go. "A sharingan."

"Isn't that the Uchiha bloodline limit?" I ask, because Naruto looks so confused.

"It was implanted when I was younger. I'll take a look at your clone now."

Kakashi focuses on water-me. Naruto is staring fascinated at Kakashi's sharingan and Sasuke is staring at me as if I am a puzzle he can't quite solve.

"It looks to be a normal clone, but there seems to be something else clinging to it. A different kind of chakra. I've never seen anything like it before," Kakashi says. He pulls his hitae-ate back over his sharingan and some of the tension leaves my body. My fingertips still tremble.
"Different chakra?" Naruto asks. Sasuke is still looking at me.

Kakashi turns to me. "Do you know of any recorded bloodline limits in your biological family?"

"I – no, I'm from a civilian family, I don't know of anything like that," I answer. In my head, I see daddy turn a paper crown golden and glittery. Magic. I'd blocked the memory out.

I need more information on magic. Guess I'll have to do the meditation exercises Inoichi showed me and hope that I'll remember more of my parents soon.

"Hmm," Kakashi muses. "Well, I don't see a problem with you using the water clones, but we'll keep an eye on their behaviour. Now, I'd like to see what other ninjutsu you have..."

Sasuke surprisingly offered to walk me home after I demonstrated every jutsu in my repertoire for Kakashi with his red, red sharingan eye and the rest of my teammates who were suitably impressed by my skills, though only Naruto was vocal about it.

Unfortunately, I'm really exhausted now, so Naruto and I will have to eat ramen some other time. It's probably better that way. I have a lot to think about.

Apparently, the strange chakra which I know to be magic also clings to my water bomb, water chains and the water sword, but according to Kakashi, that's not a bad thing since it makes my techniques stronger. That's something, at least. I can deal with the magic if it makes me stronger and the only side effect is that my clones behave a little oddly.

Unfortunately, Kakashi had no idea why the rest of my jutsu aren't affected. I wonder if it's because those particular three techniques are the ones I put the most work into. If that's the case, he should take a look at my medical techniques too, and my genjutsu. They'd be affected the most if my theory is correct.

"Are you alright?" Sasuke's voice interrupts my thoughts.

"Sure. Why wouldn't I be?" I ask, carefully making my voice sound normal.

"I can read your body language. You're lying." Well it was worth a try.

I sigh and sit down on a nearby bench. He sits next to me, not saying anything. I stare down at my hands, not getting any words out. Finally Sasuke breaks the silence.

"You were scared of Kakashi's sharingan," he states bluntly.

"It just... reminded me of something," I reply.

He waits for me to elaborate.

"My parents... were m-murdered. That... his eyes, they were..." I can't get the words out. Oh god, the memories...

Sasuke grabs my shoulders hard, turning me to face him. Startled, I look up into his eyes. "Your parents were killed by an Uchiha?" he growls, eyes that aren't seeing me full of anger and hatred.

I shake my head. "No! Kami, no, it wasn't an Uchiha, calm down Sasuke," I whisper, covering his hands that are squeezing my shoulders way too hard with my own. "It was just the eye colour, no sharingan, okay?"
Slowly, his hands relax under mine. He squeezes his eyes shut and takes a deep breath.

"Really, it was just the surprise, Sasuke," I try to reassure him. "I'm fine now, really, I promise." I give him a shaky smile that he can't see because his eyes are still closed and I know he's fighting back the bad memories, just like I had to earlier.

Luckily, I know the cure for this problem.

"Do you want to go spar?"

After our spar, Sasuke has to practically carry me home. It turns out that sparring with chakra exhaustion is more exhausting than normal sparring. Still, it got my head - and hopefully Sasuke's too – sorted out, so it was worth it.

We arrive at my house. On the porch, Shikamaru is playing shogi against a man with a cigarette in his mouth. His jounin sensei? Shika mentioned Asuma smoked a lot.

"You know" I say, my voice sounding rough after my exhausting day "if our mom catches you smoking around Shika, she'll think you're a bad influence and kill you in a painful way."

Both of them turn to me and Sasuke. Shika raises an eyebrow at my current state. "What happened to you?"

I shrug. "We had to build a garden shed and paint it. It was horrible."

I can practically feel Sasuke's amusement rolling of him when Shikamaru gives me an annoyed look. No doubt am I the only one who picks up on it though.

"Troublesome girl," Shikamaru says. He lifts an eyebrow at Sasuke. "Do you play shogi?"

I kick him in the side. "Manners, Shika. You haven't even introduced us to your guest who is still smoking in mom's territory."

"Asuma-sensei, my troublesome sister Riko, her teammate Sasuke," Shika drawls, pointing at each of us when he announces our respective names. Then his eyes lock on my arm that's around Sasuke's shoulders and Sasuke's arm that's around my waist to support me. His eyes narrow and his gaze turns calculating.

I have no idea what he's thinking, but I have feeling it's time to get Sasuke out of here.

"Thanks for taking me home, Sasuke. See you tomorrow?"

"Hn," he answers and after we disentangle us from each other, he leaves.

Shika looks after him, eyes still narrowed. I kick him again. "Behave," I say and turn to walk inside. I have a feeling he's cooking up something troublesome.

Another week passes.

Team Seven continues to train hard and complete D-ranked missions. Kakashi continues to be late, but never more than an hour.

Tora-chan continues to escape from her owner.
It's the fifth time we've had to capture the cat that belongs to the overly affectionate wife of the Fire Daimyo. Now Naruto is carrying it toward the Hokage Tower, stomping like a little child and complaining about the injustice of a great ninja like him having to catch annoying cats and doing chores for the village. I explained the importance of D-ranks to him, that they're for developing teamwork and that the civilians need to see that ninja aren't just stone cold killers, so he stays calm when we get the missions assigned, but as soon as we're out of Hokage-sama's hearing range, he starts ranting. Sometimes I feel like ranting, too, and I know Sasuke is annoyed at having to do glorified chores. We don't complain outright, but we've stopped trying to calm Naruto down.

D-ranks are annoying. If we have to be subjected to them, then the village can be subjected to Naruto's rants. Still... why shouldn't we get a C-rank mission? Our teamwork has vastly improved, and even Naruto and Sasuke sort of get along now, in their own way. Most of the time, they communicate through insults.

"Kakashi-sensei?" I ask. "Do you think you could ask Hokage-sama for a C-rank mission? My brother's team already left two days ago for their first one."

"What?" Naruto yells. "No way! What mission did they get?"

"They have to escort and protect some old drunk that's building a bridge in Wave Country," I repeat what Shika told me.

It sucks. I'll probably not see Shikamaru for over a whole month. Who am I going to play shogi with to distract myself from worrying about him? A real mission is just what I need.

"No fair! Kakashi-sensei, let's go on a C-mission too!" Naruto demands.

"Yeah. I think we're ready, too," I tell Kakashi. "Don't you, Sasuke?"

"Hn."

"See, sensei? That was an agreeing 'hn'. Sasuke wants to go, too!"

"Maa, I suppose I could ask for a C-mission. You three have worked hard after all," Kakashi says after a little pause of contemplation. I beam at him.

"Awesome! Come on, guys, hurry up!"

Our mission is to deliver some scrolls to a noble lord that lives in the port town Shimogo, which is actually not that far from Wave Country, though it's unlikely we'll run into Shika's team since they won't pass through Shimogo and even if they do, they'll be traveling at civilian speed and our team won't. Still, it would be nice to meet Shika and complain about troublesome missions, companions and senseis, and just make sure that we're both alright.

We meet early the next morning at the gates of Konoha. Naruto is already there when I arrive, but there's no sign of Sasuke and Kakashi.

"Ri-chan!" Naruto yells and waves wildly at me when I arrive. I grin at his antics.

"Morning, Ruto! Excited?" I ask.

"You bet, dattebayo! I've never been out of the village!" he says, bouncing up and down.

I grin. I'm just as excited. I've never seen the world outside of Konoha either, though I can't tell that
to Naruto, as much as I want to. Officially, I'm still supposed to be born in the Land of Birds.

"And, imagine, all the different kinds of ramen we could eat!" I say instead. "This is gonna be so much fun!"

Sasuke arrives and we both cheerfully greet him. He gives us a greeting nod in return. Since he doesn't look too sociable this morning, I continue to chat with Naruto about ramen, adventures and our general awesomeness. Sasuke just listens.

Kakashi shows up only five minutes late - a new record – and we set out.

I quickly realise that the mission isn't going to be half as fun as I had hoped it would be. Since we're traveling the ninja way, all we do is jump through trees which gets old after a while. At the speed we're going, we'll have reached our destination by late afternoon. We're probably going to be back home tomorrow.

We reach Shimogo nine hours later and deliver the scrolls with no problems arising which should be a good thing, but I can't shake the feeling that everything went far too easily. Team Seven can hardly do a D-rank mission without one of us getting in trouble (Naruto) or accosted by fangirls (Sasuke), so why should a higher ranked mission be an exception?

It's probably just my usual paranoia.

Still, something about the town makes me uneasy. There is an unusual amount of homeless people sitting in the streets; a lot of them are just children. The people going about their business seem stressed and don't talk much.

It's nothing obvious, the atmosphere in this town just seems... tense.

"Alright!" Kakashi's voice rips me from my thoughts. "Mission accomplished! Let's meet up here in an hour, you can all get yourself something to eat."

"Ramen! Ramen!" Naruto yells excitedly. "You coming, Ri-chan, Sasuke? Sensei?" he asks hopefully. "I saw a ramen stand earlier!"

Sasuke shrugs, which translates to "Alright, but only because I have no alternative."

Kakashi eye-smiles and says: "I better keep you two out of trouble, so I'll come too."

"Ri-chan?" Naruto asks me hopefully.

I take a look around us. I can't shake that uneasy feeling, and my instincts have yet to let me down. I was right about Kuramoto, Hiroshi and Mizuki. Why shouldn't I be right about this?

"Actually, do you mind if I join up with you later? I just want to take a look around the port. You can order for me, okay?" I feel a little guilty at his slightly disappointed look. "You can test out the best kinds of ramen around here for me, and then you can order those for me, alright? I expect a full report on the quality of ramen outside of Konoha!"

That cheers him up. "Alright, dattebayo. Let's go!"

"Maa, Riko-chan, take care. If you aren't there in a half hour, we'll come looking for you, understand?" Kakashi tells me.

I smile at him. "I'll be fine. I won't get in trouble, I'm the responsible one, remember?"
He eye-smiles at me and they turn to go, though Sasuke looks reluctant. "Don't worry. If it makes you feel better, I'll use a genjutsu that makes people overlook me, alright?" He doesn't look convinced, but he gives me a short nod and turns to follow Naruto and Kakashi.

I let out a breath. Time to go investigate.

Like I promised Sasuke, I place a genjutsu on myself so that people's eyes will pass right over me. It isn't actual invisibility, it just makes me inconspicuous. They won't see a ninja, they'll just see an unremarkable citizen, someone easy to dismiss.

I walk along the streets and the town square, but nothing much is happening there. People don't stop to talk each other, so there are no conversations to eavesdrop on.

Well, this is a port town, isn't it? Of course the town square wouldn't be the real centre of activity. If there is anything going on, it should be at the port, so I make my way there.

It's a busy place. There are people everywhere, loading and unloading ships and boats of all sizes, stacking boxes on top of each other or carrying them into large warehouses. Fishermen discuss fishing areas and quotas. Better dressed men compare the quantity of merchandise to lists and armed guards oversee everything.

The guards are the first thing that give me pause. They look more like what I imagine pirates would look like than security guards. The workers go out of their way to avoid them and keep their heads down when one of them passes. Some of them even flinch away when they notice one near them.

Aren't security guards there to make people feel more safe? What's going on here?

I take a closer look around. Even though this place seems busy, the atmosphere is even worse than it was around town. And the conversations I overhear as I inconspicuously move through the crowd are all about business, there are no friendly talks going on. The only thing that piques my interest during my eavesdropping is the name 'Gato' that especially the men with the lists mention a lot, often in threatening tones.

I've heard that name before. In the Academy, we were taught about the current political and economic situation, and Gato was mentioned as the head of the Gato Shipping Company and one of the richest men in the world. Looking around, I notice that there isn't one warehouse that doesn't display the crest of the Gato Company, and all of the larger and most of the smaller ships bear it, too.

Curiouser and curiouser.

I still lack answers. What I need is a place where people talk and socialise, a restaurant or a bar, maybe. I should be able to overhear something there, but I'll have to hurry up since my team will come looking for me in around ten minutes.

I manage to find a bar between the warehouses. It's a dark and dirty place and I wouldn't take a drink from one of the barely clean glasses if someone paid me. A lot of the pirate-looking guards are here, talking with rough and boisterous voices and occasionally letting out harsh bursts of laughter. The entire place makes my skin crawl, but I still go inside after reinforcing my genjutsu and position myself in a dark corner from where I can oversee the entire bar and listen in on conversations.

It's a bust. There is more about Gato and shipping business, the men brag about their jobs and some of them mention intimidating people and even beating them up, but there is nothing really concrete that can't be dismissed as exaggerated tales of drunk men. Frustrating. And now I have to leave because my half hour is nearly up. But as I walk out, I catch a snippet of a sentence that makes me
stop short.

"...after that bridge builder."

Bridge builder. Shika's team is guarding a bridge builder not too far from here. That can't be a coincidence.

Forget making my team worry, if whatever is going on in this town has something to do with my brother, I need to know.

"Gato ain't needin' them ninja when he's got us!" An at least six foot tall man wearing a katana boasts. "Bet we could kill the old man ourselves!"

My eyes widen in horror and I run out of the bar, sparing no further thought on stealth. Panic courses through me. I take to the rooftops and run and jump at full speed until I see the ramen stand Naruto pointed out earlier. My team is just walking out, and I land directly in front of them.

"We need to go to the Country of Waves."
Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I own neither Naruto nor Harry Potter.

I land directly in front of my team.

"We need to go to the Country of Waves."

"What? Riko-chan, calm down," Kakashi says in a calm voice. Naruto and Sasuke are staring at me with worried looks.

I force myself to take a deep breath even though I'd much rather scream and shout and cry because Shikamaru and Chouji are in danger and what if they get hurt? What if they-

I force myself not to think about that.

But we have to get going. I can't lose them.

"I overheard a conversation. The man Shika's team is guarding, he's being targeted by ninja! We've got to help them, they think it's only a C-rank but it isn't and what if something happens to them, what if-"

Kakashi's hand on my head stops my imminent panic attack. "Deep breaths, Riko-chan. Explain from the beginning."

I force myself into something resembling calmness and start explaining what I know about Shika's mission. Then I tell them about the things I observed around town, about Gato having a monopoly on the shipping industry in this area and the thug-looking guards. About overhearing that Gato sent ninja after the man Shika is guarding.

"And Gato is one of the richest men in the world! He can afford a lot more than some no-name missing-nin! Team Ten is prepared for an easy C-mission, this could be a B or even A-mission, and they aren't exactly combat specialists! They need help!"

"How sure are you about this?" Kakashi asks me, dead serious, his normal gaze boring into mine.

"Completely sure," I reply, holding his gaze.

"Alright!" Kakashi claps his hands. "I'll send a message to Konoha, and we'll set off to Wave Country tomorrow."

"Tomorrow? But-

"Riko-chan, we already took nine hours to travel here, you three need to rest. You won't be of much use if you arrive completely exhausted. Also, you need to calm down. I can't let you come with us in that state of mind."
I stare up at him shock. Not let me go save my brother? He can't-

"Understood," Sasuke says. "Riko, you haven't eaten yet." He grabs my arm and pulls me to the ramen stand. Kakashi takes off.

"One Miso Ramen," he orders for me after sitting me down. A distant part of my mind notices that he remembered my favourite food.

Naruto bursts in after us. "Ri-chan, they'll be alright, dattebayo! Shika's smart, remember? And Chouji isn't bad either! We're gonna go and kick ass together and it'll be fine, alright?" he tells me, sounding anxious himself.

I nod mechanically, horror scenarios playing out in my head, high cold laughter echoing, green light flashing, Shika staring up sightlessly at the ceiling. I bury my face in my hands and try to get control of myself but it's not working, I can't breathe, it's not-

"Your ramen are here," Sasuke says and I hear him place the bowl in front of me. I feel Naruto's hands pry my hands away from my face and then rubbing my shoulders comfortingly and I turn around and grab him so I can hide my face in his neck and breathe in his comforting ramen scent. His arms wrap around me and we stay like that until I can breathe normally again and don't shake anymore.

"Thanks. Both of you," I mutter when I finally extricate myself from Naruto's arms and turn to my now cold ramen.

Naruto orders some more for himself and we eat in silence. My mind is whirling, coming up with new plans and ideas by the second and discarding them just as quickly.

"Alright," I finally say. "Naruto, I want you to send out transformed shadow clones and find out as much as you can about Wave Country, the bridge builder and Gato. We need more information. Wait until we have some privacy to do this." Naruto nods, uncharacteristically serious.

"Sasuke, after Kakashi you are our strongest fighter. If we get into a fight, Kakashi will most likely fight anyone of jounin level. That leaves us to deal with the rest. You will be our main offense while Naruto runs distraction and takes care of the small fry. I'll do support."

At this, they frown. "But Ri-chan, you're as strong as the bastard, dattebayo!" Naruto protests. Sasuke doesn't even contradict him.

"I'm also the only one with medical skills. If something happens to one of you, I need to be alright. I hate it, but we can't risk me getting hurt. I... we don't know what condition Team Ten will be in when we arrive," I force the words out.

Naruto growls. "They'll definitely be alright. They've got to be."

I nod. Something else isn't even thinkable.

Kakashi eventually came, checked us into a cheap hotel and told us to rest and left again. Now we sit on the floor and Naruto tells us everything his clones find out, which I write down in a basic Konoha code so that Kakashi can read the notes later. Sasuke and I come up with plans and occasionally direct Naruto on where to look for information or ask him to find out something specific, and then he makes another clone and dispels it to distribute the new orders to his clones.

What we find out isn't pretty.
Apparently, Gato successfully took control of the Wave Country's economy years ago by isolating the country and preventing free import and export. Then he started oppressing the populace by using his hired thugs. He slowly crushed the country's spirit and smothered any attempts at rebellion, which succeeded until a while ago when the bridge builder Tazuna started building a bridge to connect Wave Country to Fire Country. If that bridge is completed, Gato's shipping company will no longer control the country's economy.

So of course, Gato decided to make sure the bridge wasn't built, but while he managed to slow Tazuna's progress down, he couldn't stop it completely, so he decided to have him assassinated by ninja.

I guess he just didn't think of just setting the bridge on fire, or waiting until it's completed and taking control of it. Moron.

I can guess what Tazuna was thinking when he came to Konoha. He didn't have much money, so he commissioned a C-ranked mission instead of the necessary A-rank, assuming that he'd still get chunin to protect him, but instead he got a team of rookie genin.

If Shikamaru is hurt, I'm going to kill him.

"Good job, Ruto," I praise Naruto. "You've got a knack for gathering information."

He gives me a happy grin. It isn't every day he's praised for his abilities. "Thanks, Ri-chan!"

I clap my hands. "Alright! We should get some rest. I'll-"

"I'll take first watch," Sasuke interrupts me, his eyes daring me to protest.

"Thank you, Sasuke," I just say. No use in arguing.

We go to sleep. At least Naruto does, but I can't bring myself to calm down, which is a shame since both boys refused to let me sleep on the floor and forced me to lie down in the only available bed. After a while, I sit up and join Sasuke who is sitting on the window sill, staring out into the silent night. He looks at me for a moment, then turns back to look outside.

"Go to bed, Sasuke. At least one of us should get some sleep."

He doesn't move. We just sit together in silence and stare out of the window, and slowly, my mind quiets down and I let myself fall asleep.

When Kakashi wakes me up, I'm back in bed with Naruto and Sasuke sleeping on the floor. He must have taken over Sasuke's watch after I fell asleep.

"Feel better, Riko-chan?" he asks me.

I nod. Then I get out of bed and after stretching, pull out the results of our information gathering and hand them to Kakashi. "Not sure how much of this you found out when you were gone, but take a look at it," I mumble and move to wake up my teammates while Kakashi reads.

I briefly entertain using one of mom's wakeup methods, but it wouldn't be a good idea on a mission, so I just shake Sasuke's shoulder and wake Naruto with a whispered "Ramen for breakfast."

He shoots up and shouts: "Where? Where?"

I giggle and tell him to freshen up and while I prepare a cup for each of us.
Of course, since I'm a responsible kunoichi with medical knowledge, I make him eat a nutrients bar before I gather water from the air into the cup and then heat it up with my chakra, thereby abusing a basic water manipulation exercise to eat cup ramen for breakfast.

Naruto declares me his personal hero right after the Yondaime Hokage.

Sasuke eyes Naruto and me in disgust while we eat our ramen.

"Would you like a cup, too?" I ask him, just to see his annoyed twitch which never fails to amuse me.

Kakashi finishes reading our notes and claps his hands to get our attention. "Alright, good work on the information gathering. It will certainly be useful."

We all nod, accepting the compliment.

"Now, we need to get into Wave unnoticed. It won't be easy. Gato has his spies in all the ports, and it will be hard to find someone to give us a ride on their ship."

I speak up. "Actually, we sort of came up with a plan for that. All we'd need is a small boat and I can make the water float us to Wave. It would take some chakra, but I should be fine if I take a chakra replenishing pill afterwards."

"Maa, my cute little students have been busy, eh?" Kakashi eye-smiles at us. "Where do you suggest we embark from?"

"There's a fishing village named Mino. It's small enough to be ignored by Gato, and the currents there would practically drift us directly to Wave's coast, at least that's what Naruto found out from some fisherman."

Now Kakashi really looks impressed. "Which one of you came up with the idea of using the currents?" he asks.

"Sasuke," I answer, giving Sasuke an impressed smile.

Kakashi nods. "Good job, you three. I'm impressed. We'll use your plan. Are you ready to go?"

We reach Mino after a three hours' run.

Calling it a village is too kind. It's just a handful of small houses grouped around a pier where a few boats are tied. Kakashi takes us to a little beach outside of the village's view and unseals a small rowing boat from a scroll.

Prepared for all eventualities, that's Hatake Kakashi. I wonder what happened to him that made him think carrying a boat around with him was necessary. Does he take it with him wherever he goes?

We all get into the boat, Naruto and Sasuke sitting in the front with a compass and a map, me sitting in the back with my hands in the water and Kakashi standing next to me. It takes more chakra than I expected, but once we reach the currents, it gets much easier to direct the boat.

We reach the coast of Wave Country after about an hour and take a short rest for my benefit while Kakashi seals his boat away again. Then we disguise ourselves to look like Wave civilians and set off to look for Tazuna's house in the hopes that Team Ten already arrived there.

It's so weird to see Naruto wearing something that isn't orange.
We find Tazuna's house easily two hours after infiltrating Wave, thanks to Naruto's clones.

I'm terrified when Kakashi knocks on the door. If anything happened to Shikamaru, if he isn't here...

The door opens, and the most beautiful thing I've ever seen looks at us. His eyes widen when he takes in Kakashi. "That was fast," Shikamaru says. I run forward, squeeze past Kakashi and throw my arms around him.

"You're okay, thank Kami you're okay!" I whisper into his ear as I cling to him. I have to blink away a few tears.

"Ri? They sent you?" he sounds surprised. Then he shakes me off, grabs my hand and drags me into the house.

"Shika?" I ask, confused.

"Asuma's dying," he replies in a grim tone and my heart drops. Shika pulls me into a room that smells of blood, sweat and decay. On a mattress on the ground, Asuma-sensei lays, deathly pale, his upper body wrapped in bloody bandages. I hurry to the makeshift bed and kneel beside him, hands already glowing green in a diagnostic jutsu.

I assess the damage. Shit.

"What caused the wound?" I ask. Asuma's body is slashed open, like someone tried to cut him in half diagonally across his chest.

"A giant sword shaped like a butcher knife, wielded by one of the Seven Swordsmen. I managed to get him with my shadow before he could finish the strike, but... Can you help him?" Shika asks me sounding anxious.

I run my hands over Asuma's body again, my head filling with information of his damaged organs, bones and muscles. I've only ever learned first-aid medical ninjutsu, enough for superficial wounds and burns.

Still, I know how to use the Mystical Palm Technique to mend cells back together, how to encourage them to replicate faster to accelerate healing. I have a vast amount of theoretical knowledge about the human body and its workings. It will have to be enough.

Asuma is going to die if I don't do anything. There really isn't anything to lose by trying.

"I might be able to keep him from dying," I say grimly. "But I'll be completely useless once I'm done."

I focus my chakra and switch from the diagnostic jutsu to the Mystical Palm jutsu and begin to heal Asuma. I lose all sense of time while I work, there's only Asuma's body and the power that slowly and steadily leaks out of my hands into his body. First I focus on stopping internal bleeding. Then I turn to Asuma's damaged organs. By some miracle, Asuma only suffered minor damage to his lungs, and I somehow manage heal that. The rest of his injuries are trickier to deal with. I don't have nearly enough chakra, not to mention experience and knowledge, to fix things, but what I can do is push them back where they belong one by one and accelerate the natural healing process. It's tedious, draining and slow work, and a real medic would probably be horrified at the imprecise and unpractised way I slowly patch Asuma back up, and there will likely be horrible scarring, but he'll live and that's all that matters.

When the green light of my hands finally starts to fizzle out, I drag my hands away and manage to
mumble something about medical pills in my equipment before everything goes black.

Sunlight tickling my face awakens me and I force myself to open my heavy eyelids.

I look around. The room I'm in isn't all that big, and on its other side a bedroll and a backpack indicate that I'm sharing it with someone else. Judging from the small makeup kit next to the pillow, it's Ino. At the moment, no one else is here.

I feel weak. I've had chakra exhaustion before, but never like this. I doubt I could even stand up. Maybe sitting will work?

I slowly manage to push myself into a sitting position.

*Now what?*

I sit there for a minute, thinking about my options.

I don't really have any. I have no chakra, can't move and am completely alone. I'm doomed to be bored. I can't even unseal a book from my storage scroll.

The only thing I can really do is meditate and do mental exercises until someone notices I'm awake. Since I wanted to start doing that anyways so that I can someday remember more about my parents and magic, that's what I do.

Inoichi once told me that the first step to gaining control of one's mind and memories is to create a mindscape. And to do that, I'll have to meditate to calm and clear my mind.

Considering I tend to have a lot on my mind at any given time, learning to clear my mind could take my years.

Well, I have to start somewhere.

After around two hours of meditation, I hear the door to the room slide open. I open my eyes.

Frowning at me is an about eight year old boy with dark hair and eyes wearing a somewhat unflattering blue bib overall and a hat that kind of looks like a bucket. His eyes stare at me seriously. Then his look shifts into a glare.

"You're gonna die," he tells me.

*Huh?*

"Like, right now?" I ask him, completely befuddled.

"Gato's gonna kill you!" he hisses at me, glaring at me angrily.

Oh man. The poor kid clearly has some serious mental issues.

"Well, thanks for the warning. But I'm really not too concerned about Gato killing me 'cause if I don't eat something soon, I'll die of hunger. Would you mind terribly bringing me something to eat? My name's Riko by the way. What's yours?" I give him my best winning smile hoping he won't go completely psycho on me.

He gives me a contemptuous look and runs out of the room, slamming the door behind him.
Well, that went well.

But his mad dash away from me must have gotten someone's attention, because a minute later, the door opens again and Ino enters.

I look her over. She looks fine, except for the fact that her arm is in a sling.

"Riko-chan! You're awake!" she exclaims. She takes a few quick steps towards me, kneels down and throws her arms around me. "Thank you, thank you, thank you!" she whispers into my ear while she squeezes me. I awkwardly hug her back.

"Uhh, Ino-chan, what are you thanking me for?" I ask.

She leans back a little, beaming at me. "You saved Asuma-sensei! He woke up yesterday!" she tells me.

"Yesterday?" I frown. "How long was I asleep?"

"Two and a half days."


"Yeah, everyone was really worried. Your sensei practically had to drag Naruto away, and Shika wasn't much better. Even Sasuke-kun was worried, he is such a caring guy. You're so lucky to be on the same team as him. Anyways, they only left when I told them I'd take care of you since I'm stuck here, too." She taps her injured arm.

"Where are they now?" I ask worriedly. "And what happened to your team?"

She starts to answer, but my growling stomach interrupts her and she laughs. "Let's get you something to eat first, alright? I'll be right back, Riko-chan."

She leaves and comes back after about ten minutes with some bread and fruits and a glass of water. While I devour my meal, she starts explaining.

"We didn't notice something was off until we were attacked by these two guys, the Demon Brothers, they called themselves. Well, Shika noticed something, but we didn't think much of it. Anyways, it turns out that this really rich guy hired missing-nin to kill Tazuna, but we all decided to continue the mission anyways. Asuma-sensei sent for back-up, though. Anyways, someone snuck us into Wave Country, and we weren't all that far from here when we were attacked again."

"One of the Seven Swordsmen, right? Shika said it was one of them that hurt Asuma-sensei," I ask.

Ino nods. "Right. His name was Zabuza. Asuma-sensei fought him. We... we could barely move with his Killing Intent pressing down on us." She shudders at the memory.

I rub her shoulder comfortingly. I can still remember the Killing Intent resistance training mom put me through shortly after our final year at the Academy started. It was the most awful training I had ever gone through.

"Anyways, Asuma-sensei fought against Zabuza, but that guy sent a water clone after us. We managed to destroy it, but I still got my arm broken and Chouji was knocked out. And then the real Zabuza got through Asuma-sensei's guard and if Shika hadn't caught Zabuza in his shadow, he would have cut him in two, and there was so much blood..." Ino looks as if she's going to cry. "But then out of nowhere, this hunter nin kid shows up and throws two senbon and Zabuza's dead, just
like that, and then the hunter nin took the body away and we just did what we could for Asuma and went to Tazuna-san's house. And we really thought Sensei was going to die, but then you showed up and saved us." Now Ino really starts to cry. "I was so useless! I couldn't do anything! If it hadn't been for Shika and if you hadn't come..." she sobs and I lean forward and hold her in my arms while she cries.

After a few minutes, she leans back and furiously wipes her tears away. "Sorry," she mutters. "It's just..."

"I get it, Ino-chan," I say softly. "And you'll get stronger, don't worry."

She sniffs and nods.

"Now where is the rest of our teams?" I ask.

"Naruto and Sasuke-kun are guarding Tazuna-san, and your sensei is training Chouji and Shikamaru," she answers me. "Kakashi is really cool, you know? He just took charge of everything, and you should have seen him when he scolded Tazuna for lying, scared him real bad, too."

"I bet I can do better," I mutter under my breath, and Ino gives me a weird look.

"And Kakashi has a really nice butt," she announces.

"Ino-chan!" I shout, mortified.

"What? It's true!"

"But I have to look at him daily, and now I'll end up checking his butt out, just because you mentioned it!" I groan.

"If he were my sensei, I'd stare at his butt all the time!" Ino answers unrepentantly.

Time to distract her from my sensei's posterior. "No you wouldn't. You'd be too busy staring at Sasuke."

She grins. "True enough. You've got to tell me all about what it's like to be on a team with him! Does he talk about me sometimes?"

I decide not to tell her that he takes detours just to avoid coming near Yamanaka Flowers.

"He doesn't talk much in general," I say diplomatically.

She sighs dreamily. "He's soooo cool! Strong and silent! Wait, he doesn't talk about Forehead-Girl either, right?"

I shake my head. The only fangirl worse than Ino is Sakura, after all. Sasuke even stops Naruto from talking about her. Sometimes I think he's scared that she'll show up the moment her name falls.

"So who else is here? And what was up with that kid with the fatalistic attitude?" I ask, distracting her again.

I listen attentively while she tells me about Tazuna's family. The kid, Inari, is Tazuna's grandson and apparently lost his stepfather Kaiza when Gato had him executed. The poor boy was completely demoralised when that happened. The other person living here is Inari's mother Tsunami who Ino describes as "really pretty and a good cook".
The conversation eventually shifts, and we end up chatting for hours about our teams, teachers, D-ranks and training, and surprisingly, I enjoy talking to her like this. I really only spend time with troublesome boys, so this is a nice change. I think Ino could become a good friend.

"Hey Ino-chan? When we get back to Konoha, we could meet up and train together sometimes, if you want?" I ask her.

She beams at me. "It's a promise, Riko-chan!"

Ino eventually agrees to help me get downstairs to wait for the boys. It's exhausting and I'd probably have fallen after the first step if it weren't for her. Downstairs, I briefly meet Tsunami who really is as pretty as Ino said, check on Asuma who seems to be recovering, and then we sit down outside on the porch with a few snacks Tsunami gave us.

It's a really nice place. The house is quite large and sits on a wooden platform above the ocean. Runways connect the platform to the land. From where Ino and I are sitting, we can overlook all of those runways.

"What are Shika and Chouji training, anyways?" I ask Ino.

"Tree Climbing," she answers. "I already know how to do it."

"Can you do Water Walking, too?"

"No, can you?"

I smile at her and explain to her how to do it, and then I lean back and enjoy the sun while Ino trains. Because of her injuries, she has to avoid falling into the ocean, but there is no risk so long as she only practises setting her feet onto the water while sitting on the platform. Later, once she gets the hang of that, she carefully walks on the water beside the runways.

Sometime during the early evening, Sasuke and Naruto arrive with a tall old man in tow. As soon as Naruto sees me awake, he runs forward and tackles me in a hug while I laugh. In the distance, I hear Ino unsuccessfully trying to impress Sasuke with her new water walking skills.

I finally manage to pry Naruto off of me and sit up. The old man walks past us and enters his house. I glare after him.

"Ne, ne Ri-chan, what's that look for?" Naruto asks, poking me in the shoulder. I poke him back and he starts tickling me until Sasuke grabs him and throws him into the water.

"My hero," I wheeze out, looking gratefully at Sasuke.

"Hn," he says.

"Bastard!" Naruto shouts, pulling himself to stand on top of the water. Then he starts running towards us but has to stop when I launch a few senbon at him.

"That's for tickling me, Ruto-baka!" I shout, sticking my tongue out at him.

"But Ri-chan!" he protests.

I throw another senbon.

"Fine. I'm sorry," he pouts.
I grin at him. "I forgive you."

He steps back onto the platform. "Are you feeling okay, Ri-chan?" he asks, looking at me worriedly.

"It's just chakra exhaustion. I'll be fine in a few days," I reply, giving him a reassuring smile. "Anyways, tell me what you've been up to while I was out."

His face brightens and he starts chattering about training, the bridge, guarding Tazuna and Inari with Ino sometimes interjecting to correct him or to add something and soon they start squabbling and completely forget my and Sasuke's presence. I didn't even know it was possible to distract Ino from Sasuke.

Sasuke sits down next to me and hands me his water canteen. I give him a smile. "Thanks, Sasuke," I tell him and drink.

"Get better soon," he answers, not looking at me.

I bump his shoulder with mine. "I will, I promise. I'm sorry I worried you."

He gives me a curt nod and then we just sit there, listening to Naruto and Ino argue until Kakashi, Shika and Chouji arrive.

"Hey guys!" I call out to them. "I'm awake!"

"Stating the obvious, you troublesome girl," Shika replies and sits down next to me. Kakashi and Chouji greet me as well and Chouji offers me an apple which I gratefully take.

"Ri," Shika says. I look up and focus on him. "If two senbon pierce the neck in these two spots," He shows me said spots on Chouji's neck. "would it be lethal?"

I frown, thinking a bit. "Not necessarily," I say then. "It's possible to paralyse the victim or put it in a near death state that way, I think. But the easier spots for a lethal attack are a little lower."

Shikamaru curses.

"What's wrong?" I ask him.

"Zabuza is still alive."

After eating dinner – Tsunami really is a good cook – we have a team meeting in Asuma's room to discuss our plan of action.

It really isn't all that different from what everyone was doing when I was asleep. Shikamaru and Chouji will train with Kakashi while Naruto and Sasuke guard Tazuna at the bridge. Ino and I will stay at Tazuna's house to guard Tsunami, Inari and Asuma. Naruto will leave two shadow clones with each group to communicate in case of an emergency.

According to Shika's estimation, Zabuza's injuries will keep him from fighting for at least week, which leaves us with another four days to prepare and in my case, recover. After those four days are up, the boys and Kakashi will accompany Tazuna to the bridge with two of them disguised as workers.

Ino and I will stay at the house and protect Tazuna's family since they might be targeted as well. It should be fine since it's doubtful that Gato has more ninja in his employ given that no one attacked Team Ten while they were weak and no one knew they got us as their back-up.
I don't really like this plan. Ino isn't a bad fighter, but her arm is broken. Asuma isn't even capable of sitting up right now. Then there is the handicap of having to protect two civilians.

If worst comes to worst, I'll have to defend them all.

Omake: Scare

I listen to Tazuna's heavy steps coming towards where I am hiding in the shadows. When he has just passed my position, I soundlessly step right behind him and let two senbon shoot past his ears, close enough that he'll have felt the air draft.

He jumps and whirls around wide eyed. He looks surprised when his eyes fall on my small form.

"Let me make one thing clear, Tazuna-san." I give him my sweetest smile, left hand idly playing around with another two senbon. "The only reason you are still alive is because I don't want my brother to fail his first real mission."

I let the two senbon fly, and two thin streams of blood appear on the sides of his neck.

He gulps, his eyes widened in fear, sweat starting to appear on his skin.

"I might reconsider at some point!" I announce happily, then giggle and skip away.

Behind me, I hear Tazuna's knees hit the floor when he realises how easily I could have killed him before he even knew I was there.

I smile cruelly.

He'll never lie about a mission again.
"Why do you bother to try so hard?! No matter how hard you train, you are still no match for Gato's men! No matter what glorious claims you make or how hard you work, when facing the strong, the weak will only end up dead!" Inari shouts at us, tears and snot dripping from his face.

*Oh man. Is the little idiot trying to get rid of us or something?* I reach for my glass of water to take a drink.

Naruto looks up. Instead of resting after coming back from guarding Tazuna, he and Sasuke sparred and worked on their taijutsu. Now Naruto is completely exhausted and dirty, unlike Sasuke who only has a few decorative smudges of dirt on his clothes. Shika and Chouji already went to bed after finishing their training, so it's only Team Seven, Ino and Tazuna's family at the dinner table.

"Whatever, kid. I'm not like you," Naruto answers.

"I'd hate to be like you! You don't know anything about this country and you're being so nosy! What the hell do you know about me?! I'm different from you who laughs all the time and doesn't know any real pain!" Inari shouts.

Anger surges up in me. My hand tightens around my glass. *How dare he? How dare that little wretch-*

I can practically see something snap in Naruto. "Is that why you're pretending to be the main character of a tragedy and cry all day?" he says in a low, angry tone, too pissed to shout "An idiot like you can just keep crying. You crybaby!" he growls.

Inari flinches back from his furious glare.

"Naruto!" Ino protests. "That's too much!"

Naruto gets up and leaves.

My glass shatters in my hand, the shards drawing blood. The shattering sound seems to wake everyone from their shocked stupor. Tsunami jumps up. "I'll get a first-aid kit!" she says. "We need to wrap that!"

I stand up. "Don't bother," I say coldly. She looks taken aback by my tone. I turn my glare on Inari. "You are a disgrace to your father's memory," I hiss at him. Then I turn around and stalk out of the room.

I find Naruto a little ways from the house, punching a tree. Blood drips from his knuckles to the ground.

"Oh look, we match," I remark when I approach, waving my own injured hand.
His head snaps up when he hears my voice. He must have been too lost in thought to hear my footsteps.

His eyes widen when he sees my bloody hand. "Ri-chan, what happened?" he asks me anxiously, rushing forward and grabbing my hand to inspect it. I hiss when he accidentally touches one of the shards lodged in my flesh. He lets go of my hand as if it's on fire and apologises hastily.

"Don't worry about it," I say, giving him a lopsided smile. Then I pull him with me to sit on the ground and lean against the tree he punched.

We are both silent for a little while. Naruto has a dark look on his face. I lean against him and lay my head on his shoulder. "D'you wanna talk about it, Ruto?" I ask.

He shrugs sullenly. "Not really. You know everything about me anyway."

I smile a little and snuggle closer to him. He leans his head against mine.

"Ri-chan?"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks for being my friend."

"No," I murmur. "Thank you."

We sit there in peaceful silence until Sasuke joins us, a first-aid kit in his hand. He doesn't say anything, just grabs my injured hand and starts cleaning the cuts and pulling the shards out. I wince a few times, especially when he pours disinfectant on my hand, but I don't complain. Instead I grab him and pull him to sit on my other side.

"I'm glad the three of us are a team," I say.

"Me too, dattebayo!" Naruto says immediately.

Silence.

"Oi, bastard!"

More silence.

I kick Sasuke's leg. "Say something!" I order.

"Hn," he finally says.

"I knew it, dattebayo!" Naruto cheers.

"See, was that so hard to admit, Sasuke?" I ask, grinning.

He kicks my leg and I giggle.

This is where I know I belong, with Naruto and Sasuke at my side.

The next morning, Ino and I stare after Shikamaru, Chouji and Naruto who are flanking Tazuna on his way to the bridge. Kakashi and Sasuke left earlier disguised as workers. It had to be them since they were the only ones aside from me and Asuma who knew how to mute their chakra and thus
actually stand a chance at deceiving Zabuza.

I'm worried. They might be fighting one of the Seven Swordsmen of the Mist today, never mind his accomplice whose abilities are unknown to us but who is good enough to disguise himself as a hunter-nin.

At least they have Kakashi with them. And Shika devised some really good strategies for the rest of the team. They should be fine.

I have my own worries. I have two civilians to protect, one of which is a rather obnoxious kid that probably won't listen to orders, and my only help is Ino whose left arm is broken, Asuma-sensei who can't move, and one of Naruto's clones that can be destroyed with one hit.

Not to mention I am not completely recovered from healing Asuma. I only have about three quarters of my chakra available. Plus, I only healed my hand to the point where it wouldn't hinder me in a fight, but it still hurts a little.

"Alright," I say. "Clone-Ruto, you are staying with Ino-chan and me inside the house."

We should be able to deal with any attackers, so long as they are civilians. If they are ninja... well. That would be a little more complicated.

We aren't Gato's main target, though. It's Tazuna he wants dead, and for an assassination, hostages aren't really needed, so hopefully he'll leave us alone. Still, it can't hurt to be safe.

Ino and I go inside, Clone-Ruto right behind us.

Tsunami is in the kitchen, cleaning dishes and humming a song to herself. The brat is nowhere to be seen. "Let's go upstairs and check if Inari is there. We've got to go over some safety rules with him," I suggest, and my companions nod.

Inari isn't upstairs.

"Bugger. I hope he didn't run off into the forest."

"Where could he be?" Ino asks, furrowing her brow. "Hey, maybe he's just using the bathro-

A crash sounds downstairs and we hear Tsunami scream.

"Mom!" Inari's voice exclaims. Ino and Clone-Ruto start running toward the stairs. I climb out of a nearby window onto the roof and run across it so I can get the attackers from behind. When I hop down in front of the hole that was slashed into the house wall, the two attackers are already down with Ino fiercely glaring down at their unconscious forms. Tsunami huddles against the wall, arms thrown protectively over her head. Broken dishes litter the floor. Inari is standing on the kitchen door sill, shocked eyes leaking tears.

I breathe a sigh of relief. No one hurt.

"Where's Clone-Ruto?" I ask.

"Went 'poof' after punching this guy." Ino points at one of the attackers. Then she lets out a short laugh. "We did it! We protected them!"

I smile a little. "Yeah! Good work, Ino-chan!" Then I look at Tsunami and her son. "Are you both alright?"
Tsunami shakily stands up and nods. "Thank you, Ino-san, Riko-san," she says gratefully. Then she walks to Inari and kneels before him and starts comforting him.

I allow myself to relax.

That was easy. I didn't even have to do anything. "We should probably fix this hole in the wall," I comment. "I'll get some planks. Ino-chan, is your arm alright?"

"You bet!" she answers cheerfully. Then she punches the air. "I totally kicked ass! Wait until Forehead hears about this, she'll be sooo jealous! And Sasuke-kun is gonna be so impressed!"

I shake my head at her antics, smiling to myself. "Oh Ino-chan. You're so-"

I freeze when suddenly I feel a large presence looming behind me. Cold, sharp steel touches my neck. My heartbeat accelerates and cold sweat breaks out all over my body. I don't dare move one muscle.

Ino pales as she stares at whoever is standing behind me.

"Well, well, well," A silky, male voice drawls behind me. "Two little girls playing ninja." He chuckles and strokes my throat with his kunai. Tears start to gather in my eyes.

Tsunami and Inari look at me with horror in their eyes. Ino appears frozen.

"Don't play around, Kenta," another man says. "We have a job to do. Kill her and get the information."

Information? What's going on? Oh God, I don't want to die!

Kenta laughs. "Ahahaha! Look at their scared little faces! Aren't they cute, Taro?" He leans closer and sniffs my hair and I want to throw up. "Now, sweetheart, tell me where Sarutobi Asuma is, and I'll let you live a little longer," he croons into my ear.

I'm not going to die here. No way in hell.

My hand shoots up and grabs the sharp blade on my neck while I whirl around and ram the back of my head into his face. I hear something crack at the impact.

I jump backwards through the hole in the wall into the kitchen, clutching senbon in my bloody hand, breathing hard. Adrenaline courses through me.

"Ino. I need you to protect Tsunami-san and Inari-chan," I order, voice calm.

"But-" she starts to protest.

"Ino-chan. Please. I can't fight and protect at the same time. Watch my back, alright?" I say urgently.

The man that threatened me – Kenta - glares at me hatefully and I tense. "You'll pay for that, you little bitch!" he growls out, wiping his bloody nose. The other one – Taro – gives me a look so free of emotion I inwardly shudder. "I told you to kill her, Kenta," he scolds his partner.

They are both wearing hitae-ate with a slashed Kirigakure symbol on them. Kenta is the taller one of the two and has strange purple eyes and grey hair that he wears slicked back. Taro is more muscular and carries a katana on his left side. His eyes are light grey and his head is shaved bald.

"Ino. I've got this," I tell her again. "Keep them safe, okay?"
I hear her move. "Understood. Don't lose, Riko-chan."

I nod, never taking my eyes off my opponents.

"What do you want with Asuma-sensei?" I ask, stealthily gathering water chakra in my hand. I need to get out of the house, to the ocean. It's probably not the best idea to face Kiri shinobi near that much water, but it's the only chance I have.

Kenta gives me a disconcerting grin, revealing pointed teeth. "We want his head, sweetheart. We'll get a lot of money for it."

"Doesn't Gato pay you enough?" I ask.

"Oh, we don't work for Gato anymore. This will be much more rewarding," he replies, giving me an oily grin. "And I'm going to enjoy making you scream, sweetheart."

I smile back sweetly and thrust my hand forward. The modified water bomb shoots towards them and they jump back as it explodes and sprays boiling hot water and senbon everywhere except in my direction.

I quickly run through the hole.

Kenta and Taro are standing about fifteen metres away on the water surface.

*Perfect.* I jump onto the water, hands running through seals. A water clone forms next to me. Another one forms invisible to my opponents under the water's surface.

Kenta and Taro both form the Tiger Handseal and mist rises up from the water all around us. Within seconds, the world around me is white. I can barely see my own feet anymore.

Well. It works both ways. They can't see me either.

I exchange a quick glance with Clone-Riko next to me and she starts forming handseals. I form three handseals of my own and my sword of water starts to grow in my hand.

I strain my hearing, but the only thing I hear is the sound of the waves all around us.

My water blade now has the length of my body.

I hear something whistle through the air and whirl around to bring up my sword, just in time to deflect Taro's sword strike. He doesn't hesitate to attack me again, and I swing my sword, but just then, Clone-Riko finishes her jutsu and Taro stumbles as the genjutsu warps his perception and his strike misses me. His balance is thrown off and he falls directly on my blade and-

I stare uncomprehendingly at the headless corpse and the lone head floating in the water that slowly turns red under my feet.

*Dead. He's dead. I killed him.*

I distressed whimper escapes my throat and my water sword bursts as I lose control over my chakra and my hand covers my mouth. Tears start to gather in my eyes and-

Something grips my ankles and I scream as I am pulled underwater.

The cold water shocks me back into focus. I try to kick out at Kenta's hands holding my ankles in a death-grip, but he doesn't let go until we are about five meters underwater. Then he shoots up with
an outstretched kunai, and a deep gash appears in my upper arm and immediately starts leaking blood.

I have to get out of this water. My sight is starting to blur from the blood and chakra loss, and it's so cold and I can't breathe...

Kenta shoots towards me again, he must use some kind of water jutsu to accelerate himself like that. This time, his fist drives itself into my stomach and drives what little air I still had in my lungs out.

*Oh God. I'm going to die, aren't I? Please, no...*

He floats in front of me, victorious grin on his face. He pulls out a mean looking curved dagger and then suddenly, his whole body is bound by silvery chains of water held by my two clones. Then one of them *pulls*, and his neck bends at an odd angle and stays like that even when my clones release the chains.

Black closes in on me. I distantly notice one of the clones wrapping her arms around me and moving, and the light changes around us and I can breathe again. I gasp for air and accidentally breath in water and end up coughing and sputtering as my clone drags me out of the water and stands on the surface.

"Riko-chan!" Ino yells, jumps from the runway onto the water and runs towards me. Then she half carries me to the runway and helps me up. "Where are they?" she asks, looking around frantically.

Right. The fight was all hidden in the mist and under the water. She didn't see me ki-

I cough up more water at the thought of what I did to Taro and Kenta.

"Ran off," I gasp. "You gotta wrap my arm, or I'll bleed out. And a chakra replenishing pill would be great." She nods and takes some of the bandages from around her waist and wraps them around the wound on my arm. Meanwhile, I take a little case out of my kunai holster, retrieve a chakra and a blood replenishing pill from it and quickly swallow them. Out of the corner of my eye, I see my clones dragging something out of view, probably Taro's-

I jerk out of Ino's grasp, lean over the runway's edge and vomit, tears leaking out of my eyes. Ino gently holds my head and rubs my shoulders, all the while murmuring about how everything is going to be alright and how I'll be better in no time at all. When I have finished vomiting, she helps me up, slings my arm over her shoulders and walks us back into the house where she makes me rinse out my mouth and swallow another two pills since I vomited up the previous two. After that, she helps me change into dry clothes, sits me down on the couch in the living room and stitches up my wound and rewraps it.

"Thank you, Ino-chan," I mumble tiredly.

She gives me a tight nod. "I wished I could have helped you more. I should have-

"If you hadn't been there, Tsunami, Inari and Asuma-sensei would have been defenseless. I could only fight because I knew you had my back. And you still have a broken arm, so fighting would have been difficult for you."

I shudder at the thought of an injured Ino facing those two. Of Ino helpless in the mist, of her being dragged underwater to be sliced, beat up and drowned all at once.

Now I'm glad I killed Taro and Kenta. It means Ino is safe from them.
She nods, but I can see she doesn't really believe me.

"Where are Tsunami and Inari?" I ask her.

"I left them upstairs. I figured since those two were after Asuma-sensei, they'd leave Tsunami-san and Inari-kun alone so long as they didn't get in the way," Ino answers. "I should go and tell them that the danger is gone for now."

I nod and lean back on the couch while she leaves the room, trying hard not to think about the fight. I wished dad were here. I could really use one of his hair ruffles right now.

I look up when I hear someone come in. It's my two clones.

"Where'd you go?" I ask.

"We hid the bodies. We thought it would be better if the civilians didn't see them, Riko-dono."

_Dono? That's a new one._

I nod tiredly. "I figured as much."

We look up when we hear Ino's and Tsunami's voices approaching. They appear to be... arguing?

"It's too dangerous! You can't go!" Ino protests against someone.

"Everyone is fighting! We should, too! I'm sure if we all stand against Gato, we'll win!" Inari answers in a determined voice as he storms into the room, a small crossbow slung over his shoulder and his hat replaced by a small helmet—no, it's just a cooking pot that he secured around his head with a piece of cord. Ino and Tsunami follow after him.

"You're still a child!" Tsunami argues in a worried voice.

Inari turns back to her and gives her a determined smile. "I'm still a child, but I know what it means to fight! Because I'm dad's son!"

"Honey..." Tsunami's voice trails off and she looks as if she's going to cry.

I clear my throat. "Going somewhere, Inari-chan?" I ask in a mild voice.

Both of them whirl around when they hear my voice. Their eyes widen when they notice my clones. Inari shakes the surprise off and gives me a firm look. "Yes. I'm not going to cry anymore!" he tells me. He looks like a little warrior.

I look at him, considering. "I was wrong about you. I'm sorry. You aren't weak after all," I say then.

His mouth drops open, and his eyes start to shimmer. He abruptly turns away, shoulders shaking. _Great. I made the kid cry again._ Way to go, Ri.

"Damn it!" he sobs. "I decided not to cry anymore!"

I inwardly groan. I have no idea how to deal with a crying kid. There is no help coming from Tsunami and Ino either. They probably hope his crying will deter him from running off to fight.

_What would Naruto say?_
I put my hands behind my head and give him a big grin. "What'cha talking about? It's okay to cry when you're happy, datteb-" I hastily cut off my speech. No way am I saying that word.

Now Inari really starts to cry.

I suppose that's what I get for trying to copy Naruto. I should have just said 'hn' and been done with it.

Inari finally sniffs, wipes his tears away and gives me a big grin. "I'm going now, Riko-nee-chan!" he announces.

*What the heck? Nee-chan? At least he's leaving now.*

"Ino-chan, please go with him."

"What?") Ino almost shouts, dumbfounded. "You can't possibly consider-"

"You can't stop him. And it's way past time the people here learned to stand up for themselves. Besides, he's going to ask the other people in town for help, isn't he? And he'll be safe if you go with him," I reason with her.

"But I can't leave you here alone!" she yells.

"Eh, I've got these two here." I gesture to my clones. "And I doubt there will be more attacks on this place."

She still looks stricken, but when Tsunami announces that she will go with Inari, she finally nods, hugs me and the three of them leave.

"You got this under control?" I ask my clones.

"Yes, Riko-dono," they chorus, and I lean back and fall asleep.

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**Location: The Bridge**

"Looks like you got beaten pretty badly," the small man says, a smug grin on his face. "I'm disappointed, Zabuza." Behind him, his band of thugs grins bloodthirstily.

"Gato," Zabuza growls. "Why are you here?"

Troublesome. Shikamaru thinks, his fingers already forming his thinking seal. *It seems as if we have a new opponent.*

Gato chuckles. "The plan has changed. Well, it actually didn't, I planned this from the beginning. Zabuza, I'm going to have you killed here. I never planned on giving you any money." He laughs again.

"Why, you!" Naruto next to Shikamaru growls.

Enraged on behalf of his enemy. Troublesome idiot.

Gato continues to gloat. "See, hiring ninja from the Hidden Villages is expensive, so I just hire missing-nin who are easy to take care of afterwards. I have the ninja battle each other, and once they're weakened, I kill them off with numbers. A good plan, don't you think?"
Except for the part where you told us about it. Shikamaru casts a look around. None of their group are in good condition. Kakashi is obviously exhausted from his battle against Zabuza, and none of the four genin got out of their battle against the fake hunter-nin – Haku – unscathed.

At first it had seemed as if they were going to win. Sasuke had been more than capable of taking Haku on in taijutsu; he'd even managed to rip that mask from the boy's face. But then Haku had used his Ice Mirror Technique, and Sasuke had nearly died in the rain of needles Haku had unleashed on him. It was only because Haku seemed to be averse to killing that Sasuke survived. Naruto ran into the dome of mirrors to help Sasuke, and they both distracted Haku with their clones and fireballs enough for Shikamaru to catch him with his shadow while Chouji attacked the mirror from the outside with an enlarged fist. His best friend had paid for using that technique, though. Chouji hadn't yet mastered the jutsu, and now the arm he used in his attack dangles uselessly at his side.

Chouji only one-armed. Both Naruto and Sasuke peppered with needles, though Sasuke seems to have awakened the sharingan during the fight. Shikamaru himself handicapped by having to hold Haku in his shadow. Kakashi exhausted.

Their opponents are mostly finished though. Haku is held in Shikamaru's shadow, and Kakashi managed to take out both of Zabuza's arms. The fight had been almost won, but then Gato showed up with a small army of thugs.

*Bugger,* as Ri would say.

Gato drones on. "The only problem in the plan was you, Zabuza." He gives a short laugh. "The Demon of the Hidden Mist? What a joke! Hehe, you're just a cute little baby devil!"

The men behind him jeer and hoot loudly at Gato's lame insult. They're probably getting paid for that, too.

"Kakashi, this fight is over. I have no reason to go after Tazuna now," Zabuza calmly states.

Shikamaru starts to smirk. Gato made a mistake in coming here and revealing his true intentions.

"You're right," Kakashi states.

Shikamaru releases his hold on Haku and the boy wastes no time in jumping to his master's side, ready to be a useful tool. Naruto starts running towards Gato, only to be held back by Kakashi.

Gato points his cane at them. "Kill them all!" he orders his men, and his goons start to run forward. They halt when an arrow hits the ground in front of them. Everyone turns to stare at the one that shot it.

"If you come any further onto our island, the citizens of this country will stop you with everything they've got!" Inari shouts, a grim look on his face and a crossbow in his hands. Behind him, a large group of fishermen and farmers shouts similar statements while holding up makeshift weapons made from farming and fishing tools. Tsunami and Ino are there too.

Saved by the crybaby. Shikamaru didn't see that one coming. How troubles-

*Where is Ri?*

Naruto had reported earlier that two of Gato's men had wanted to take Tsunami hostage but that they had been dealt with easily. But something must have happened to keep Ri from accompanying the brat instead of Ino.
"Inari!" Naruto shouts, starting to grin.

"Hehe! A hero always shows up at the last second, right?" Inari yells back, a giant grin making its way onto his face, too.

Shikamaru opens his mouth to ask about his sister, but someone beats him to it.

"Oi. Where's Riko?" Sasuke asks.

Shikamaru feels a stab of annoyance. He doesn't like how Sasuke seems to always hover around his little sister when she is near. Or how Ri and him have their private spars that she never divulges details about. Shikamaru is the only one she told about those at all.

Sasuke is too troublesome for his little sister.

"Oh, Sasuke-kuun! I'm so glad you're alright! I never doubted you!" Ino cheers. "Riko-chan is back at the house, we got attacked by these two missing-nin, and Riko-chan made them run off, isn't that amazing? She got injured though, so she had to stay behind. She and her clones are watching the house. It's so sweet how you are worried about your teammate!"

Ri. Fighting two missing-nin. Injured.

"Kakashi-sensei, let's finish this," Shikamaru says, palming a kunai. From the corner of his eye, he sees Sasuke and Chouji do the same.

"Yeah! Kage Bunshin no Jutsu!" Naruto shouts and a dozen clones appear beside him.

Kakashi gives a firm nod and creates a multitude of clones of his own while letting out a burst of Killing Intent.

Gato's men turn to flee, pushing and shoving each other in their haste to get onto the boat they came with.

Shikamaru inwardly curses. They can't let Gato escape.

He needn't have worried. When the horde of men has finally left the bridge, Gato is still there, lying on the ground in a pitiful heap, senbon sticking out of his limbs. Shikamaru hadn't even seen Haku throw them.

Kakashi appears next to the man and checks him over. "He's dead. His men trampled him to death," he states.

The citizens of Wave country start cheering and throwing their hats into the air, hugging each other with tears in their eyes. Freedom is theirs at last.

Good for them, but Shikamaru has more important things than some country's fate to worry about.

His sister is hurt.
I slowly wake up. For a blissful moment, I feel fine, but then the memories of my fight come crashing back into my head and I curl into a ball, squeeze my eyes shut and try to battle the onslaught of memories. My breaths are too shallow, my heart beats too fast and strangled sobs escape me despite how hard I'm trying to hold them back.

A large warm hand comes down on my head to rest there.

"Maa, Riko-chan, take deep breaths, alright?" Kakashi's voice says. I try to follow his advice and focus on the warmth of his hand on my head.

Breathe in, breathe out.

I finally uncurl and slowly sit up, distantly noticing how weak I feel. It's not as bad as it was after healing Asuma, but I doubt I could even Kawarimi right now.

I look around. Kakashi and I are the only ones in the room.

"Do you know what happened?" I ask in a raspy voice, and Kakashi holds his water canteen out to me. I greedily drink.

"Your clones reported to me," he says.

"I killed them," I whisper, staring at my hands.

"I took care of the bodies."

"I'm sorry," I whisper, voice breaking. "I didn't mean to k-kill them." I bury my face in my hands, shoulders shaking with silent sobs.

Kakashi doesn't try to comfort me, which I am grateful for. I think I'd fall apart if someone touched me right now.

He sighs. "Riko-chan. There is no shame in what you did. You did what you had to do to protect your comrades. You are a shinobi and fighting and killing will be a part of your life. There is nothing you can do about that."

"I know t-that," I sniff. "B-but I k-killed them!"

"You did, and sooner or later, you'll have to kill again. And you'll have to learn to deal with that."

"D-do you t-think I'm w-weak, c-crying for an en-enemy?"

"No. Never," He pauses. "You can cry all you want. Everyone else is outside. No one will hear."

"T-thank you, Kakashi-sensei."
And he sits there silently while I cry and sob my heart out until I fall asleep again.

I'm alone the next time I wake up. I lie there for a few minutes, not really in the mood to get up.

I feel a little more peaceful now after crying so much. I still feel horrible for taking two lives, but I don't regret doing it. I would do it again if it meant protecting my comrades.

I groan and sit up. Someone left a few sandwiches, an apple and a glass of water next to my futon and I devour everything hungrily. After that, I shakily stand up and make my way to the door. The house appears to be empty, but I can hear voices shouting from the outside, so I move to the door that leads out onto the porch in the back of the house.

I step outside and look around. On the water, Sasuke and Naruto are sparring with a pretty girl with long black hair— or maybe a boy? It's hard to tell from the distance- while Ino cheers Sasuke on. To my right, Shikamaru and Chouji lie and stare up at the clouds. To my left, a decidedly pale looking Asuma plays shogi against a very tall and muscular man with greyish skin. A giant sword that looks like a butcher knife lies next to him on the ground.

I blink. "Asuma-sensei, are you aware that you are playing shogi against the A-rank missing-nin that nearly cut you in half the last time you met?" I ask.

Asuma looks up. "Good morning, Riko-chan. And yes, I am aware of my opponent's identity, but thank you for pointing it out." He turns back to the game.

"Ri. You're awake," Shikamaru drawls as he comes to stand next to me.

"Stating the obvious," I answer, giving him a quick smile. He puts an arm around my shoulder.

"Good to see you alright, you troublesome girl," he murmurs.

"Likewise, Shika," I reply. "So how did that happen?" I jerk my chin in the direction of the game. "Because last I checked, he was an enemy."

"We're all best friends now," Shika says with an annoyed expression.

"Huh. Did Ruto give them the Ramen Talk or something?" I ask.

"The what?" Shika asks.

"Never mind."

"Brat. Quiet. I'm concentrating," Zabuza growls while glaring at the board as if he's trying to set it on fire with his eyes.

"Do I even want to know?" I whisper to Shikamaru.

"They never really finished their fight. Now they are trying to battle it out over shogi since they're both injured," Shika murmurs back. "It's troublesome."

More like idiotic, I decide as I watch the two glare at the game as if their lives depended on it.

Both Shika and I wince as Zabuza sets a piece forward.

"Do you think he'll start killing people when he loses in two moves?" I ask.
"I have my shadow ready," Shika murmurs back. "He won't get far."

"Brats," Asuma says around his cigarette. "Shut up."

We retreat and sit next to a sleeping Chouji and watch the spar on the water.

"So who's that?" I ask, gesturing to the black haired person. "And is it a guy or a girl?"


I raise an eyebrow at his wording.

"You'll understand when you talk to him."

Ino finally notices me and stops her fawning over Sasuke. "Riko-chan! How are you doing?" she asks and hops over to hug me.

I'm distinctly uncomfortable. I lied to her about killing Taro and Kenta.

I don't even know why I did that. It just happened. Maybe I didn't want her to start fussing over me. Maybe I was worried she'd treat me differently. Or my mind was just in denial about having taken two lives.

I'm not going to tell her now. Ino is too... innocent to burden with the knowledge. I'd rather keep her happy and unknowing. Same with Chouji.

I don't even want to tell Naruto, but I know I'll have to. I'm just scared he'll look at me differently, that he won't want to be my friend anymore. Which is stupid, because he's Naruto, and he'd never ever desert me, but the fear won't go away.

I'm even worried about telling Shikamaru. Not because I'm scared he won't like me anymore but because he'll worry about me, just like I would if he had been the one to make his first kill.

I'm not afraid of telling Sasuke.

"I'm fine, Ino-chan," I say, awkwardly hugging her back. I step back from her embrace as soon as I can. "How are y-"

"Ri-chan!" someone yells and I am being tackled in a hug by something orange and wet.

The worries instantly go away and I laugh and hug Naruto back. "Happy to see you, too, Ruto," I say. Then I throw him off of me into the ocean and stand up.

Naruto's head breaks the water surface. "You're mean, Ri-chan!" he complains. "You're behaving like the bastard!"

"Hn," I say and smirk, and his face drops in horror and he jumps out of the water and points at me.

"You take that back!" he shouts.

I continue to smirk. "Hn," I repeat. Then I crack and start to giggle. "Oh Kami, you should've seen your face!" I gasp out.

Shikamaru shakes his head. "You two are idiots."

Naruto and I exchange a look. Then we grab Shikamaru and throw him into the ocean. We high five
when he resurfaces and calls us troublesome.

"Oh, Ri-chan, you've got to meet Haku!" Naruto says excitedly and starts pulling me toward where Sasuke is still sparring with his opponent. "He's really nice!"

I'm not going to step foot on the ocean any time soon. No way. I can still feel Kenta's death grip on my ankles as he pulled me under. The terror of being completely helpless and drowning.

"Just get him here, Ruto. My chakra is low, so no water walking for me today," I say, giving him an apologetic smile.

Lying to my best friend. I'm the worst.

"Okay, Ri-chan! I'll do that, dattebayo!" he says and runs off.

I can feel Shikamaru's eyes on me. He always notices when I'm not being honest.

"Later," I say in English. He nods.

"You two have a secret language?" Ino asks.

I shrug. "Sure do."

Naruto comes back dragging Haku with him, Sasuke trailing behind them. My eyes meet Sasuke's, and we have one of those wordless exchanges. His eyes ask if I'm alright. Mine answer that I'll be, and in response, his narrow.

Naruto introduces me to Haku who appears to be the most soft-spoken person I have ever met. And he seems to have taken a liking to Naruto.

Wonderful. Now Naruto goes around picking up stray ninja. Troublesome.

We spend the rest of the day just lazing around in the sun. I watch the boys take up their sparring again, play shogi against Shika and Asuma – I lose against Shikamaru but win against Asuma -, talk to Ino and share potato chips with Chouji. When Tazuna comes back with Kakashi from the bridge and Tsunami and Inari return from wherever they have been all day, we have a large, loud dinner and Inari clings to me and Naruto the whole time.

It's a good day.

It's night time and I lie awake in my bed. From the other side of the room, I can hear Ino's deep, even breaths.

Even though the day was exhausting, I find myself unable to sleep. It's not that I have too much on my mind, I just can't seem to rest.

I silently get up. Maybe some fresh air will help.

Outside, I enjoy the cool breeze and stare out at the moonlit ocean, the only sound I hear is the swooshing sound of the waves. It's a beautiful and peaceful scenery, but I don't feel any calmer.

A pebble stone hits the wooden floor next to me. I turn around and look around searchingly.

Sasuke sits on the rooftop. I hadn't even noticed him when I walked outside. Yoshino would have my head for being so careless.
I start walking up the wall and sit down next to him. We sit in silence for a few minutes. I want to say something, but I have no idea how to actually talk to Sasuke.

"I killed them," I say eventually after failing to think up a good conversation starter.

He turns to look at me. "Your attackers," he states.

"Yes," I confirm.

"So?"

I shrug helplessly. "I don't know."

"Liar."

"I'm not!"

He gives me a look that says: *Don't insult me. I know you better than that.*

"What do you want me to say?" I snap. "That I'm glad they're dead? I am. That I'm sorry I killed them? I am. That I'm a lousy shinobi because I shed tears for my enemies and I refuse to kill my emotions? I fucking *am*! And I really don't know what I'm supposed to be feeling because I'm so damn confused! I shouldn't be glad that I took two lives, that's just wrong, and I shouldn't feel sorry because they would have killed me and one of them was going to torture me to death *underwater* and I nearly *died* there all alone, and I was so bloody scared! So don't you dare call me a liar when I *really don't know!*" I almost shout the last part. "And you know the worst part? Killing them was *easy*. One moment they're alive, the next they're not. It should've been harder. I *hate* that it was so easy! I don't *want* to be a killer!" I'm breathing hard when I finish my rant.

*Feel better now?* his eyes say.

*I really hate you sometimes,* my own answer.

"You aren't a killer."

"I killed. That makes me one."

*Don't be an idiot.*

"I'm not."

He gives me an annoyed look. There's no judgement, no pity, no questions in his gaze.

"Thank you," I say softly, bumping his shoulder with mine. He looks even more annoyed and turns away from me. Considering myself dismissed, I stand up.

"Good night, Sasuke," I say.

He doesn't answer – not that I expected him to – and I leave.

Back inside, I walk into the room that Shikamaru shares with Chouji and Asuma. I gently shake Shika's shoulder. He groans and opens one bleary eye.

"Hey," I whisper. "Can I stay with you?"

He gives me an affirming grunt, scoots back a little and lifts his blanket so I can slip in. I burrow into
his chest and he puts an arm around my shoulder. I sigh contentedly.

"You alright, Ri?" he murmurs.

"Mmm," I sigh.

"I know you lied to Ino."

I stiffen and he rubs my shoulder reassuringly.

"Were you going to tell me?" he asks.

I nod against his chest.

"You'll tell me if you need anything," he orders.

"Can we play shogi tomorrow?" I whisper.

"Of course, troublesome girl," he mutters back and pulls me tighter against him.

I hug him back and drift off to sleep.

The next morning, Naruto and I are walking through the forest. He was a little confused when I interrupted his conversation with Haku to ask him to take a walk with me, but he came with me nonetheless. On the negative side, I'm pretty sure Ino now thinks I have a crush on Naruto. Troublesome.

"...and then Haku threw lotsa needles, even more than you when you're mad, and he jumped between his mirrors but the bastard could see him with his sharingan so he threw fireballs and I made clones and then Chouji punched the mirrors with a giant fist and then Shika was like: 'Kagemane no Jutsu: Success.' and then..." Naruto chatters on about the fight at the bridge.

I think I'll get Chouji's version later. Shika would just say telling me is too troublesome, Sasuke already used up his conversation capacity for this week and Kakashi would try to ruffle my hair and tease me for being concerned if I asked him.

I suppose I could ask Tazuna, but he has this annoying tendency to stammer and sweat in fear whenever I turn my attention on him. Maybe I overdid it a tiny little bit when I scared him for putting Shikamaru in danger.

"It sounds like an amazing fight," I tell Naruto with a slight smile. "I'm sorry I missed seeing you kick ass."

He grins at me. "I'm sorry I missed your fight, too! I bet you were awesome with your water and stuff!"

My smile fades and I look away. "Yeah, about that..." I murmur.

"Ri-chan?" Naruto asks. "What's wrong? Does your arm hurt?"

"No, it's not my arm..." my voice trails off and I stop walking. Naruto stops too and looks at me anxiously.

"You've been weird since you woke up yesterday, Ri-chan," he says carefully.
Sometimes I forget how well Naruto knows me.

"Come sit with me," I say and start climbing a tree, sitting down on one of the higher branches. He sits down next to me and looks at me worriedly.


He looks startled. "W-What? Why?"

"Because..." my voice trails off. "You're my friend, right? You won't leave me, Ruto?"

He glares at me, offended. I smile.

"Right, dumb question."

"Damn straight, Ri-chan."

I stare back at my hands. "When I fought those two, they didn't run off."

"Huh?" he asks, confused.

"I... they... well it's... I was just..." I say, wringing my hands until Naruto grabs them and holds them still. "I killed them!" I blurt out.

Naruto rears back and stares at me, shocked.

"And I really didn't mean to! It just happened and it was really my clones that did it, but they are me, so it might as well have been. And it all went so fast and I was so scared and-" my voice breaks. "And then Taro didn't have his head anymore and there was so much blood-" I can't stop bluring out what happened to Taro and Kenta, even though Naruto is the last person I'd want to burden with the knowledge.

"... and then I just told Ino-chan they'd run off," I finish and take a deep breath, feeling guilty at seeing Naruto's wide-eyed horrified expression. He appears to be lost for words which has never happened before.

I sniff a little. "I could really use a hug now," I whisper.

So he hugs me and when his words come back, he tells me what an idiot I am to think he wouldn't want to be my friend anymore just because of what happened and that I'm not getting rid of him, no matter what.

"Promise?" I ask.

"Promise, Ri-chan," he answers, and that's that.

"Kakashi-sensei?" I ask.

The two of us are currently guarding Tazuna, though that's more of a formality now. There are no more assassins after Tazuna now.

"What is it, Riko-chan?" Kakashi asks, looking up from his book. Today, it's Icha Icha Violence, arguably the best book in the series.

I swallow. "I... seem to have developed a fear of standing on and being inside water," I admit. I also
have nightmares whenever I'm not sleeping next to Shikamaru, but that I'll have to deal with on my own.

Kakashi puts his book away and gives me his full attention. This is a serious matter.

Mental issues can end a shinobi's career. In my case, it's even more worrying because water is my element. A water ninja afraid of water? Useless.

"How?" Kakashi asks me.

I hesitantly tell him the details of what Kenta did to me. Then I tell him about how I tried to make myself step on the ocean when everyone else was asleep and ended up nearly having a panic attack.

"I'll work with you tonight. Go to bed early," he says.

Kakashi wakes me up sometime after midnight and takes me to a small lake.

"Try walking in a deep as you can," he says.

I kick off my sandals and do as he says. I make it until the water reaches my upper thighs, then my body refuses to move. Kakashi walks on the water towards me and pulls me out. As soon as I am standing on top of the water, my legs start to shake and my heart starts to beat way too fast and my field of vision closes in.

Kakashi gathers my helpless body in his arms and sets me down on the shore. He kneels before me.

"I can help you, but it won't be pleasant," he tells me. "We can wait until we are back in the village and take this to a professional, if you want."


"Alright. I'm going to teach you how to remove oxygen from water so you'll be able to breathe underwater. Then we'll practice until you can control the fear."

The training is horrible. I'm pathetic.

Kakashi has taken me off bodyguard duty and has me training every night.

The technique itself is easy enough. But to have me practice it, Kakashi repeatedly uses the Water Prison Technique on me. The first few nights, I end up having flashbacks, panic attacks and vomiting. More than once, I have hysterical crying fits. Kakashi is merciless and makes me go through this again and again.

After around a week, I manage to shut the flashbacks out and push the panic away enough for me to keep breathing in the Water Prison. That's when Kakashi starts throwing me into the lake.

He ends up having to save me from drowning.

Training continues on in this manner. I start to lose weight and develop dark circles around my eyes. My teammates and brother start to notice how pale I constantly am and start to worry about me.

I don't tell them how I spend my nights now. They would only try to make me stop and rest.

I don't think they would understand that I have to work through my fear of water, even if it makes me miserable. I'm unable to sit around and wait until I get better. I just don't work that way. It's
impossible for me to live with any kind of fear controlling me.

Eventually, the training does what it's supposed to do. I learn to numb myself to the fear and panic. I manage to walk on water, and I can even deal with it when Kakashi attacks me from below and drags me under. If I want to, I can stay underwater for over an hour. I even find a way to negate the water resistance so I can swim and dive much faster.

Maybe one day, I'll enjoy being in water again.

---

During the three weeks it takes to finish the bridge, I spend the daytime with my team and Shikamaru's, playing shogi, training with my team and sometimes Ino and evading Inari. The brat has become entirely too attached to me. Thankfully, he is just as attached to Naruto who doesn't mind one bit, so I can usually dump him on Naruto who has never been far from me since I told him about my first kills. Neither have Sasuke and Shikamaru, but they are less obvious about it.

Another thing...

"Suiton: Mizu no Tatsumaki!" I shout, and a rapidly spinning vortex of water lifts around me from the shallow water. It lasts for about three seconds before it collapses.

"More chakra!" Zabuza growls. "Keep it stable!"

I managed to talk (blackmail) Zabuza into teaching me a water jutsu, the Water Tornado Technique that can act as both offense and defence. Kakashi was thoroughly amused the first time he saw Zabuza growl instructions at me, looking like he very much wanted to be doing something else, like strangling me. Shikamaru and Sasuke were less amused about me seeking lessons from a missing-nin and insisted on being present for every session to glare at Zabuza. Or each other. For some reason, the two of them have developed a troublesome hostility.

It must be a boy thing.

So time passes quickly, with my nights spent training with Kakashi and the days spent training with Zabuza or spending time with my friends.

---

Two and a half weeks have passed. It's early morning and I'm sitting on the railing of the almost completed bridge. I just watched the sun rise over the ocean after waking from a nightmare.

I hear almost silent steps behind me.

"Leaving so soon? Naruto will be sad, Zabuza-san, Haku-san," I say, turning around to look at them.

"Brat. Keep training," Zabuza growls and walks past me. I grin. Coming from him, that's as good as a farewell hug.


"You as well, Riko-san," he answers in his soft voice. "Would you please tell Naruto-kun that I very much enjoyed his company and that I'm sure we'll see each other again someday?"

I smile. "Of course I will. And I'm sure too that one day, we'll meet again. After all, we're friends, right?"
He gives me his soft, kind smile. "Goodbye, Riko-san," he says and turns to follow his master. I stare after them as their figures grow smaller in the distance.

I doubt that's the last I have seen of them.

Naruto was indeed thoroughly dismayed to discover Zabuza and Haku gone, though Haku's message did cheer him up. He promised to train hard so he could be as strong as Haku when the time comes to see him again.

Now, it's finally time to leave Wave Country. I can't really say I'm sad about that. There aren't all that many good memories here. I can't wait to get home.

The whole town has assembled to see us off at the now completed bridge. We'll be the first ones to cross the Great Bridge of Freedom.

Cheesy name, but it does have a nice ring to it.

To the cheers and shouted farewells, we finally start on our way home.

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**Omake: Blackmail**

"Zabuza-san? Would you be willing to train me in using water jutsu? I promise you won't regret it if you do."

"Get lost, brat."

**Ten minutes later:**

"Ruto? I think Zabuza hates ramen."

**Forty-five seconds later:**

"Oi! Sword-guy! What's your problem, huh? Ramen is the best."

"Get lost, brat."

"-food in the entire world! There is miso ramen, pork ramen, seafood ramen, tofu ramen, Ichiraku's Special Surprise Ramen, naruto ramen-"

"Get lost, brat!"

"-and obviously, miso ramen is the best, Ri-chan says so too and that's what the bastard eats when he pretends he's eating with us against his will, and you can eat ramen everywhere-"

"GET FUCKING LOST, BRAT!"

"-how can someone not like ramen, no wonder you're evil, you need ramen, then you'll be happier and ramen will always love you-"

"SHUT THE HELL UP!"

"-cup ramen can be taken anywhere, you only have to wait three minutes for the best food in the entire world to be ready, Ri-chan could even teach you how to make ramen with chakra, she's the bestest teammate ever, dattebayo! But of course, Ichiraku ramen are the best, but cups are better than"
no ramen at all. And I bet if you ate more ramen then..."

**Five hours later:**

"Zabuza-san? Would you be willing to train me in using water jutsu? I promise you won't regret it if you do."

"Get the fuck lost, brat!"

**Five minutes later:**

"Ruto, do you know if Haku-san has ever eaten ramen before?"

**Two hours later:**

"Zabuza-sama, I would like to eat ramen with Naruto sometime."

"ARGH!"

**One hour later:**

"Zabuza-san? Would you be willing to train me in using water jutsu? I promise you won't regret it if you do."

"Leave me the fuck alone!"

**The next day:**

"Ino-chan, Zabuza said blondes are stupid."

**Five minutes later:**

"YOU! Just because I'm blond, doesn't mean I'm stupid! I almost became kunoichi of the year and only Riko-chan was better than me in shuriken throwing among all the other girls, and none of them were blond, you sexist asshole-"

"WHAT THE FUCK IS WRONG WITH YOU TREEHUGGERS?!"

"Oh, and now you hate Konoha, too, what the fuck is wrong with YOU, huh? And there are tons of incredible kunoichi that are blond, just take my mom, she's a genius with poisons, and then there's..."

"LEAVE ME ALONE!"

"And I'll have you know, my hair colour is perfectly natural, how dare you even think that I used hair dye..."

**Two hours later:**

"Zabuza-san? Would you be willing to train me in using water jutsu? I promise you won't regret it if you do."

"GO TO HELL!"

**Two minutes later:**

"Ruto? I think it's Zabuza's fault that Haku never ate ramen before."
Ten seconds later:

"YOU ABSOLUTE RAMEN-HATING CHILD-ABUSING BASTARD! POOR HAKU, BECAUSE OF YOU HE NEVER ATE RAMEN BEFORE, RAMEN IS THE BEST FOOD IN THE ENTIRE WORLD..."

"NO! NOT AGAIN! I'LL KILL YO- WHERE THE FUCK IS MY SWORD!"

"NEVER ATE MISO RAMEN, PORK RAMEN, SALT RAMEN..."

Meanwhile:

"Ri, you are insane."

"I'm just determined. Now help me, this thing's heavy, Shika."

Five hours later:

"NO, I WILL NOT FUCKING TRAIN YOU! DON'T EVEN ASK, JUST LEAVE ME ALONE, YOU FUCKING TREEHUGGERS!"

"Well, then I will just go and tell Chouji you called him fat, and then I'll tell Kakashi you like Icha Icha as much as him, and then I'll tell Ino you called her fat, and then I'll tell Haku that you are really really mean to me and he'll stare at you with his big sad eyes for the rest of the week, but he won't say anything because he is just that nice, and you'll feel like a complete dick."

"...I'm going to kill you."

"And imagine how Haku will look at you then... if he looks at you at all..."

"..."

"I'll see you in training tomorrow. Ten am, don't be late."

The next day:

"Zabuza-sama, are you sure teaching Riko-san an A-ranked technique is wise? She could die of chakra exhaustion."

"Haku, don't question my training methods."
Teaching

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

We’ve just finished giving Hokage-sama our reports and now should be heading to the hospital to have our injuries treated. I however have other plans.

I knock on the door of the Jounin Commander's office.

"Come in," Dad's voice says and I enter.

"I'm sorry, am I disturbing?" I ask when I see the man standing in front of dad's desk.

I've never seen him before. He is old and leans on a cane, though his hair is still black. Bandages are wrapped around his head, concealing the right half of his face and covering his eye. His right arm appears to be injured, it looks to be resting in a sling under his robes.

"Don't worry, Riko-chan," Dad says. "Danzo-sama was just leaving."

Danzo Shimura, war hawk, advisor to the Hokage and village elder. I remember him being mentioned in history class.

The man turns to study me with an expressionless face. Something about his perusal makes my skin crawl.

"Your adoptive daughter, I presume," he says to Shikaku, still looking at me.

I give a short bow. "Honoured to meet you, sir."

"I hear you are quite a talented kunoichi," he states. "An outstanding student in the Academy as well."

"Thank you, Danzo-sama," I answer.

I don't like this man. At all.

Why would he know about my Academy achievements?

The old man turns to walk away. "Think about my words, Shikaku," he says coldly and leaves the room. Dad and I watch him in silence.

When he's gone and I've closed the door behind him, I turn to dad. "What the heck just happened?" I ask, mildly freaked out.

Danzo mentioned my Academy status. That suggests him having an interest in me.

Something tugs at my memory.

"I'll take her away, I know someone that's been interested in her, he'll take her in," Hiroshi's voice echoes through my head.

"Don't even think about what Hiroshi said."
"Don't worry about it, Riko-chan. Be a good girl and sit down," Dad says.

I stiffen and nod.

Before Shika and I started at the Academy, dad taught us certain things. One of those was that if someone tells us not to worry, there usually is something to worry about. Another one was his advice against being a good girl or boy.

What dad is telling me is to be suspicious and keep my eyes open.

"I'm happy to see you back from your mission," Dad says, and just like that, I start to cry.

I can feel him put his arms around me and sit me down on the couch where he just holds and rocks me while I sob into his shoulder. The whole story comes blubbering out of me, the worrying about Shikamaru, the fight, the kills, the nightmares, the fear of water and Kakashi's hellish training to overcome it.

Once I calm down a bit, dad hands me a tissue.

"Sorry," I mumble.

"You have no reason to be, Riko-chan." He leans forward and ruffles my hair, and for the first time since we arrived, I feel like I'm really home.

"Can I stay here for a little bit?" I ask. "I'm really tired."

"Of course, Riko-chan."

He gets up and sits down behind his desk again while I curl up on the couch.

"I really missed you, Dad," I whisper.

"I missed you as well. I'm very glad to see you return in one piece," he answers. "Now sleep, you little trouble."

My lips twitch at the new nickname. "Little?"

"Little. Goodnight, Riko-chan."

"Goodnight, Dad," I murmur and close my eyes.

It's the first nightmare-free sleep I've had in weeks.

I'm at home when I wake up the next day.

After freshening up, I try to come up with something to do today. Hokage-sama gave both my and Shika's team the week off, so now we have lots of free time. I suppose I could train, but really, I've had enough of that in Wave.

I decide to get breakfast first. When I enter the kitchen, dad is already there. I raise an eyebrow and look at the clock. "Shouldn't you be at work already?" I ask.

"Taking the day off. Good morning, Riko-chan."

"Morning, Dad," I walk over to the fridge and fill a plate with food. Dad already has an empty plate
in front of him.

I sit down and start eating.

"Got plans for today?" dad asks.

"Not really," I answer.

"Good. I want to show you something."

I raise an eyebrow in interest and finish my breakfast. After I've cleaned up, I follow dad out of the house.

"Are we going to the Clan Forest?" I ask, recognising the path we walk on.

"Don't ask so many questions, Riko-chan," he drawls.

"Troublesome..." I mutter, and Shikaku chuckles and ruffles my hair.

We arrive at the gate of the fence.

"Surprise!" dad announces in a fake cheerful tone. "We're going to the Clan Forest!"

I shake my head at him exasperatedly.

Dad smirks. "Let's go."

We walk through the gate. I look around interestedly. I've only ever seen this place from the outside.

Dad leads me into the forest.

"The Clan Clinic needs some herbs. Want to help me find them?" he asks.

Of course, that's just an excuse to spend time together.

I smile at him. "Sure, you lazy old man."

He smirks. "Brat."

We spend the next few hours walking through the forest and picking the herbs dad points out to me while also explaining their uses and what medicines can be made from them. It's awesome. It's been ages since he and I did something together, just the two of us.

When we have found all that we need, dad leads me to a clearing where we sit down and he unseals two lunch boxes.

"Thanks, Dad," I say. *For the company, for distracting me, for being exactly what I need...*

He smiles at me. "You're welcome, Riko-chan."

After we have eaten, he unseals a shogi board and we start playing until we get visited by the deer, led by the stag with the large antlers.

"That's Rikumaru," Dad murmurs as the stag walks towards us and stops right in front of me. He lowers his head and stares at me with eyes that seem too intelligent for an animal. And as I look into his eyes... I feel something in my chest uncoil. Like I can breath easier now.
"Hello," I whisper to him. "I'm Riko."

Rikumaru gently brushes his snout against my forehead and I giggle softly. I reach out slowly and carefully pet his fur. "Let's be friends, Rikumaru," I tell him, and he bumps his snout against me again, then walks over to dad. The two stare at each other for a moment, then dad gives Rikumaru a respectful nod and the deer leave.

"He likes you," Dad states.

I smile. "I like him too."

We spend the rest of the day just lazing around in the forest. We play shogi, stare at clouds and talk and it's glorious.

It's the best day I've had in months.

Sad, the next day, dad has to work again, and mom has taken up some shifts at the hospital now that Shikamaru and I aren't at home as frequently. Shika isn't in the house either, so I'm on my own again.

What to do? Dad advised me to take some time off of training and do things I enjoy, but I can't think of anything except reading and playing shogi.

I swing by Yamanaka Flowers, but Ino isn't there, so I don't stay long. Naruto isn't in his apartment or at Ichiraku's and our usual training ground is deserted.

I am completely by myself, and I am not enjoying it. I am all alone with my thoughts and memories.

I walk through the streets, trying to think of something to do that isn't training, when...

"KONOHAMARU!"

Huh, isn't that Iruka's voice?

"NO! YOU CAUGHT ME!" a child's voice yells.

This sounds familiar.

I walk around a corner and see a very nostalgic scene: Iruka-sensei tying up a young boy with colour on his face. His lecturing is familiar as well.

"Now this brings back memories, Iruka-sensei," I muse, chuckling.

Iruka looks up and sees me. "Riko! Your team is back from your mission? You were only supposed to deliver a scroll, but you were gone for over a month!"

"OI! Lemme go!" the kid yells. We ignore him.

"Yeah, we had to back up my brother's team, their mission turned A-rank..."

Iruka pales.

"But we're all fine!" I hastily say. "I bet you'll find Naruto at Ichiraku's tonight!"

"You know the boss?" the kid says, stopping his struggle against Iruka's ropes.
"Boss? Are you talking about Naruto?" I ask. I study the kid. Colour on his face and clothes, goggles on his forehead... Very familiar.

"Naruto-niichan is my rival! Because I'm gonna be Hokage!"

Extremely familiar.

Oh dear. I don't think Konoha can handle another Naruto.

"Ruto is my teammate and best friend. My name's Riko, what's yours?" I ask.

"I'm Konohamaru!"

"That's a good name," I say appreciatively. For some reason, he beams at me now.

First Inari, now him. Do I attract the brats or something? At least he isn't crying.

"Ahh, Riko, what are you doing right now?" Iruka asks me.

I sigh. "Walking along the streets by myself, completely bored. We've got the week off."

"Would you like to come help me out at the Academy?"

I blink at him, surprised. "Just like that? I'm only a rookie genin."

Iruka shrugs. "So? I'll be there, and I'm sure the kids will be happy to see a real ninja so close to their age."

Hmm... On one hand, that means more brats. On the other hand, I really have nothing better to do.

"Sure, I'll come."

Iruka leads me to the Academy training ground where the class is waiting. On the way here, Iruka told me that they are all first years and they now have taijutsu class.

I study the kids.

Kami, they're all so small...

This seems to be the class with the clan kids and talented civilians. I see an Akimichi boy, and there's one of my younger cousins, Nara Chie. There is also a Hyuuga girl. She stands by herself and holds herself much like I did before I met Naruto. She must be Top Girl, then.

Iruka releases Konohamaru who bounds over to two kids who also wear goggles.

Oh great. More Naruto copy's.

The girl has orange hair that she wears in two very large pigtails that stick up in the air like horns, and there appears to be a permanent blush on her face. The boy wears glasses and has snot dripping from his nose. Eww.

Iruka claps his hands. "Quiet everyone!" he waits until everyone has fallen silent. "As you can see, we have a visitor today. Nara Riko here graduated a few months ago and has agreed to assist me today. Everyone, give her a nice greeting."

I smile as the children greet me with variations of "Hello Riko-senpai." Konohamaru's voice though
shouts "Hey Ri-nee-chan!"

*Ri-nee-chan? Oh bugger.*

The orange haired girl raises her hand.

"Yes, Moegi?" Iruka says.

"Uhm, could Riko-senpai maybe tell us about being a ninja?" the girl asks.

Iruka turns to me. "What do you say? You up for it?"

The kids stare at me hopefully with their big, innocent eyes. I inwardly groan. *So troublesome.*

"I can answer a few questions, sure," I say, and Iruka gives me a smile and motions me forward.

"Alright, who has a question for me?" I ask. Several hands shoot up.

I motion to a black haired girl. "What's being a ninja like?" she asks.

Hmm, how to answer that?

"It can be a lot of fun, but it's also a very big responsibility and dangerous, too. You have to work and train really hard," I settle for saying. "Next question."

"How strong are you?" the Hyuuga girl asks.

Another hard question.

"That's hard to say. I like to think I'm good for a genin and I did beat some people that were above genin level." At least I'm guessing that Taro and Kenta were chunin, I could be wrong, though. "However, strength isn't something that can be measured so easily. It's about more than just beating enemies and knowing lots of jutsu."

The children look confused, Hyuuga more so than the others. "What does that mean?" she asks.

I shoot a questioning look at Iruka and he gives me an encouraging nod back.

"In my opinion, being strong is about never giving up, about overcoming one's limitations. It's about doing the right thing instead of the easy thing, about standing up for what you believe in." The children all look at me with wide eyes. "Someone really smart once told me that people become truly strong when they have something important to protect. That is what I believe, too."

They all stare at me with admiring eyes. I hear someone whisper: "She's so cool!" I suppress a flattered grin. These kids are kind of cute.

Hyuuga still has a confused frown on her face.

"So, any more questions?" I ask.

Konohamaru jumps up. "Ri-nee-chan!" he shouts. "Show us a cool jutsu!". Several other kids perk up and start begging me for a demonstration, too.

"Should I?" I ask Iruka.

"Come on, Iruka-sensei!" the kids beg their teacher.
He laughs. "I don't see why not."

The kids cheer. I grin. Time to show off a little.

"Alright, do you guys see that tree?" I point at a nearby tree.

"Yes!" they chorus.

I step in front of the tree and run through the handseals. "Suiton: Suikusari no Jutsu!" I call, and dozens of silvery water chains materialise out of thin air and wrap themselves tightly around the tree.

I've gotten a lot better with my ninjutsu since Wave Country.

"Ohhh!" the kids exclaim in awe. I dispel the chains.

"Whoa, Ri-nee-chan, that's so cool! Can you teach me that?" Konohamaru calls out.

I laugh. "Maybe when you're a genin, Konohamaru-kun."

"Awesome!"

I half expect him to end his sentences with 'dattebayo'.

"Alright, calm down, kids!" Iruka calls out. "We'll practise kata now! Fall in line!"

The kids grumble and do as they are told. "Riko, would you go to the front and demonstrate? I'll go around and correct the kids."

I nod and move to the front. We start doing one of the Academy katas, Iruka occasionally asking me to help him demonstrate how the movements can be used against an opponent. After that, Iruka has the students pair up and practice applying the movements of the kata to an opponent while we go around and correct and help them. Surprisingly, I find myself having fun teaching. And the kids love me.

It's balm for my soul.

The week of vacation passes.

The mornings, I spend with Naruto or Shikamaru and Chouji.

Afternoons, I continue to help Iruka out at the Academy. Spending time with those children makes me happy. It feels so good to use my abilities to help others instead of using them to fight.

Evenings, I spend doing light training and studying.

On the third day, I notice I'm being followed on my way to Training Ground 22 - the training ground where I learned to use water jutsu. I decide to wait if something happens. Since I noticed my follower so easily, I doubt it's someone dangerous.

I start practicing kata with the wooden sword I brought. Later on I'll move on to doing them with my water blade.

The whole time, I'm aware of someone watching me. I disappear behind a waterfall for a moment to make a clone, and then I conceal myself with a genjutsu while my clone trains in my place.
I sneak around the training ground and appear directly in front of my stalker. Hyuuga Hanabi gives a startled squeak and lashes out with a juuken strike that I evade.

"Hello, Hanabi-chan," I greet pleasantly, as if being stalked and attacked by the daughter of the Hyuuga Clan Head is a perfectly normal occurrence. "Wonderful day for training, isn't it?"

"Yes, Riko-senpai. It is," she says suspiciously, but the light blush on her cheeks betrays her embarrassment.

I find this highly amusing.

"Now, are you going to tell me why you were following me?" I ask, suppressing a grin.

"I wasn't following you!" she hisses. Kami, she's so cute. Like an angry little kitten.

"Sure you weren't," I say friendly. "Want to learn how to conceal your chakra when hiding?"

"That is acceptable," she says haughtily. It's all I can do not to break down laughing.

So for the rest of the week, I teach Hanabi how to properly tail someone without getting caught and train her in stealth skills. I couldn't ask for a better student. The girl is talented and smart.

And adorable, but I can't tell her that.

"You're different," she says on the second day.

"How so?" I ask.

"You're strong."

"Plenty of people are, Hanabi-chan, and many more so than me."

"But you are friendly," she says. "You help people!"

And Hanabi is obviously not used to that. I feel a surge of anger at whoever taught her that kindness equates weakness.

She is probably a very lonely person.

Well, she has me now. I'll take care of her.

I reach out and ruffle her hair. She bats my hand away angrily, blushing.

So freaking adorable.

"C'mon," I say. "I'll teach you how to use senbon."

After my week off is over, I can no longer visit the Academy, but I still make time to meet Hanabi every other day after completing troublesome D-missions and team practice. I suppose it was only a matter of time until the Hyuuga Clan noticed my spending time with their heiress.

The summon to a meeting with Hyuuga Hiashi-sama causes mom to give me an impromptu lesson on manners, etiquette and how to not accidentally insult clan heads and how to make an insult seem accidental. After that, she insists on doing my hair and dressing me in a formal kimono. And because mom is mom, the hair needles double as senbon and the kimono is a formal battle kimono. I didn't
even know such things existed.

The garment is ice blue and embroidered with little red jasmine flowers. It has wide sleeves – perfect for hiding senbon and concealing handseals – and is surprisingly easy to move in, thanks to it being only knee length.

On the back, the Nara Clan crest is proudly displayed.

I look like a princess when I look into the mirror. A really badass ninja princess.

*Bring it on, Hyuuga.*

They make me wait a few minutes when I knock on the gate of the Hyuuga Compound. Really, it's a fairly basic attempt to make visitors feel unimportant or piss them off. Thankfully, my time in the Academy prepared me for idiotic head games and power plays. My cold facade is firmly in place, just waiting to be used.

The gate opens and a Hyuuga stands before me with an arrogant expression on his face. "What is your business with the Hyuuga?" he asks after looking me over and sneering. A blatant insult, considering my current appearance.

"Hyuuga Hiashi-sama is expecting me. I do not appreciate being made to wait," I say coldly, sweeping past him without waiting for an invitation. "Lead me to him."

I can play this game too.

The Hyuuga scrambles for a moment to catch up with my fast, graceful strides. He starts leading me towards the main building. On the way, he wisely chooses not to talk to me.

The Hyuuga Compound consists of three large buildings. The main building is directly opposite the gate and the other two are placed so all three form a square. I suspect the gardens and training grounds as well as smaller houses are hidden behind these larger buildings. The whole complex is surrounded by high stone walls.

Everything seems to be very traditional and formal. There are people with long dark silky hair and pale, pupil-less eyes everywhere, staring at me with penetrating glares and expressionless faces.

I can see why they would stare. This place is done entirely in neutral colours, anything that isn't made of wood is white or grey. Even the people wear kimonos in these colours. I with my red hair and ice blue kimono am the only spot of colour in this world of grey.

I kind of like that thought, though I don't appreciate being stared at. It reminds me of my early Academy days.

The as yet unnamed Hyuuga leads me into the main building and through a confusing maze of hallways and paper sliding doors. I try to memorise our way, but soon lose my sense of orientation. It's quite obvious that this, too, is a tactic to throw visitors off balance.

Oh well. Should I have need to suddenly flee, I can always escape through the ceiling. The houses are all single-storied buildings, so taking to the rooftops shouldn't be that difficult.

We finally arrive in a large room that is entirely empty of furniture, yet exudes tradition and elegance in its simplicity. To the sides, Hyuuga members, all wearing the same light grey kimonos, stand lined up along the paper walls, staring straight ahead. Directly opposite the door, looking straight at me,
sits the embodiment of all things Hyuuga in seiza. Stern face, long dark hair, penetrating glare. Simple white kimono, black haori. From his posture, it's obvious that this is Hyuuga Hiashi, the leader of the Hyuuga Clan. Next to him, Hanabi sits, wearing a cream coloured kimono, trying to be just as expressionless as her father.

I am momentarily confused at the lack of Hinata, but it's not my main concern.

I step into the room and gracefully bow to Hiashi, sparing no attention to my guide that seamlessly joins the Hyuuga lining the walls. "Greetings, Hyuuga-sama," I say politely when I have straightened again.

"Nara Riko," Hiashi's imperial voice sounds. He gestures to the floor in front of him, not one movement wasted. "Sit."

What am I, a dog?

I walk over to where he indicated, taking care not to move too fast or slow. I gracefully sink down to sit in seiza as well.

He studies me with cold indifference. I do the same to him. Neither of us looks away from the other when another clan member moves forward to formally prepare tea for both of us and Hanabi.

"I understand that you have been training my daughter," Hiashi finally breaks the silence, reaching for his teacup.

"He spoke first. Small victories.

I incline my head in affirmation and reach for my own cup to take a sip of the bitter tea and avoid a verbal answer."

"Why," Hiashi states. Does he always make his questions sound like orders?

"I have grown fond of Hanabi-hime," I say, calling Hanabi by her formal title. "I do not mind sharing knowledge and skills with your daughter."

"Do you think the training that I gave her lacking, Nara?" he thunders, instantly enraged.

I narrow my eyes at his rudeness and set my cup down.

What I want to answer is: Yes, you emotionless oversensitive bastard! You should be teaching her to live, not to kill! You should be letting her spread her wings! You are crippling her by isolating her! I doubt you even know her favourite colour, which is red! Do you even care about her?!

"Hyuuga," I state, ice cold rage filling me. My gaze is unforgiving. "I have found Hanabi-chan to be an exceptionally talented child and teaching her is a joy. I do so because I care for her. Never once did I criticise her previous education. It would do you well to not forget your upbringing."

In this moment, I am Nara Riko, daughter of the Nara Clan Head and Jounin Commander, student of Hatake Kakashi and proud shinobi of Konohagakure. I will not be insulted by him.

"Why should I let my daughter train with you," he says coldly.

"Because she wants to be trained by me," I reply, just as icily.

He gives me a cold glare that is just as unforgiving as my own. "Hanabi," he orders. "Is it your wish
to learn from Nara Riko."

He says my name like it is something distasteful. It is obvious what he wants her to answer. *Asshole.*

Hanabi shoots him a nervous look. "Yes. It is, Father," she replies then, disregarding his wishes. I feel a brief flash of surprise, followed by a warm feeling in my chest. I force myself not to smile at her.

Hiashi eyes me, cold rage in his eyes. There is nothing he can do now. To forbid Hanabi from seeing me after she explicitly stated that she wanted to would be a deliberate insult to the Nara Clan.

And pissing of the Nara is something that only an idiot would do.

"Very well," he states. "You may continue to see my daughter. However, you will not interfere with her training as heiress and Hyuuga Clan member. Any training you give her will be in addition to the one the clan gives her."

"Of course," I agree.

"I will be evaluating the results of your tutoring, Nara-san," he states threateningly.

"I expected nothing less of you, Hyuuga-sama," I reply calmly.

He nods tersely. "Hanabi, escort your guest off the property."

"Yes, Father."

Neither of us talks as I follow Hanabi through the maze until we run into Hinata. She looks at us, startled. "Hanabi-chan, Riko-san." she murmurs in a surprised tone. "Uhm..."

"Onee-sama," Hanabi says. "You know Riko-senpai?"

"We went to school together," I tell her. "How have you been, Hinata-chan? Is your team treating you right?"

"Uhm, it's been going well. What are you doing here, Riko-san?" she asks, fiddling with her hands.

"I just had the most interesting conversation with you father."

Hinata looks up, startled at the mention of Hiashi.

Poor her. After meeting that man, I can understand how she came to be so shy and insecure.

"What for?" she asks.

"He heard that I've been training with Hanabi-chan and wanted to meet me."

"You train together?" Hinata asks, protective sharpness entering her voice. I'm entirely unused to her being anything but shy and sweet, but it's a good look on her.

I'm glad to see that at least someone cares about Hanabi as a person.

"Riko-senpai showed me how to throw senbon, and she taught me how to hide from shinobi, Onee-sama!" Hanabi tells her sister, for the first time sounding like the happy seven year old she should be.

Hinata relaxes. "That is very kind of you, Riko-san," she says, giving me a shy smile that I return.
"I enjoy Hanabi's company very much." I say, ruffling the little girl's hair. She bats my hand away.

"Don't do that!" she hisses, and I chuckle. Hinata giggles softly and gives me a warm look that fades when she sees something behind me. I turn around.

A Hyuuga boy who can't be much older than us walks towards us. Unlike the rest of the people I have seen here - Hinata being the exception - he isn't wearing a kimono. Instead he, he wears a khaki shirt, almost black shorts and blue ninja sandals. Bandages are wrapped around his right arm and leg. He glares at Hinata who folds into herself as he walks past us and disappears.

I decide not to ask. I don't want to make Hinata even more uncomfortable.

After that episode, we say our goodbyes to Hinata and Hanabi leads me outside.

"See you tomorrow, Hanabi-chan," I say, smiling at her.

She nods. Then she asks: "You are really strong, aren't you? Like you described in the Academy."

"I do my best," I answer.

"No one ever talks back to father," she says. "Why would you do that?"

I shrug. "'cause you're worth it. See ya tomorrow, Hanabi-chan."

But I can't leave because Hanabi is suddenly wrapped around me. Then she jumps back with a horrified look in her eyes.

"I- uhh- I..." she stutters, then she turns around and runs away like the hounds of hell are chasing after her.

Oh man.

This is going to be so troublesome.

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**Hiashi**

He watches as his youngest daughter sprints away after hugging the Nara girl.

He doesn't like her. She lacks respect.

However, her boldness impressed him. It was what finally convinced him to allow her around Hanabi.

The clan elders are already trying to control his daughter and mold her into their idea of a Hyuuga Clan Head. He refuses to let his child grow up to become a cold and unfeeling shadow of herself. However, there isn't much he can do against it.

Until that girl showed up.

Nara Riko did not back down from him. She stood up for Hanabi. She cared enough about her to risk making him and the clan her enemy.

He may not like her, but it will be beneficial to have her teach Hanabi independently. He wants his heiress to learn that boldness and resolve, that willingness to stand up for her beliefs. She could really change the Hyuuga if she had that.
The elders would never be able to control her.

So he'll put up with Nara Riko's disrespect. He can excuse her behaviour so long as it is on behalf of Hanabi.

However, if she hurts his youngest, he'll destroy her.

Chapter End Notes

About the issue of who is the Hyuuga heiress, it says in the wiki that when Hinata and Hanabi were younger, the elders decided to have them duel and Hinata lost because she didn't want to hurt her sister. That was interpreted as weakness, so Hanabi became heiress and Hiashi started to ignore Hinata. They don't say when this happened, but I figured it must have been before Hinata's graduation, since that was when Hiashi told Kurenai that he didn't care what happened to Hinata.
Nomination

Life has become very busy since I started tutoring Hanabi during the afternoons. The girl is troublesome, but so adorable. I have a lot of fun teaching her.

My own training is going well, too. I've been working on building my chakra reserves and improving the jutsus I already have. Since our stay in Wave, I've gotten a lot better at controlling water. Mom was suitably impressed with almost everything.

Though she nearly had a heart attack when I showed her the jutsu Zabuza taught me. Apparently it's an A-ranked one and the chakra exhaustion could kill me.

The bastard told me it was a C-rank.

...maybe I shouldn't have been so annoying about convincing him to teach me.

Well, I still have a badass jutsu now, so whatever. I haven't exactly mastered it yet, but I will soon.

Though it's highly unlikely I will have need of it anytime soon. We, Team Seven, saviours of Wave and completors of A-rank missions, are back to doing D-rank missions. We're all annoyed having to do this, and out of sheer boredom, Naruto and Sasuke have made a competition out of who performs better. The results are mixed, but it is somewhat hilarious to watch, so I don't stop them.

Though after today, I might have to.

Our first mission today was to weed some woman's garden. Naruto ended up ripping out not just the weeds but the herbs as well. The client was not pleased. She actually punched Naruto. Then I threw senbon in her general direction and got lectured by Kakashi. Apparently, throwing pointy things at clients is frowned upon.

The next mission after that disaster was to fish trash cans from a river and Kakashi forbade me from using my water jutsu. Instead, the three of us had to stand in the cold water and do everything manually. And spending time in water really isn't my favourite thing to do. The only excitement came when Naruto slipped and nearly fell down a waterfall. He survived by making a chain of clones and clinging to a nearby tree. He still hit his head though.

After that, we had to walk the Inuzuka's dogs. Naruto insisted on walking an evil dog that was bigger than himself and got pulled into a trap field. The dog was fine. Naruto was not.

What idiot left a hole in the trap field's fence anyways? Someone ought to report that.

And the whole time, Kakashi read his book. Go figure.

Now Sasuke and I are supporting Naruto while we walk back to the training ground. Though knowing Naruto, he'll be fine once we arrive.

"Man, Ruto. You've got to be the only person that gets in life-threatening situations during D-ranks," I state.

"Usuratonkachi," Sasuke mutters.

"What was that, bastard?" Naruto shouts.

"Behave, or I'll be forced to throw sharp pointy objects at you two," I warn them.
Naruto mutters something unflattering under his breath and Sasuke cuffs the back of his head.

Naruto takes a deep breath to launch another tirade. I pull out my senbon.

I get distracted though when Kakashi looks up from his book. If something distracts Kakashi from Icha Icha, it must be important. I follow our sensei's look. Over us, a hawk flies. A message?

"Let's call it quits for today," Kakashi says. "I have to go submit the mission reports now."

Now that will be a fun read for Hokage-sama.

"Team Seven incurred the wrath of their first client by misinterpreting their orders. The client physically attacked team member U. N., causing team member N. R. to strongly discourage the client from hiring genin ever again.

During the following mission, the team members risked their own health for the sake of the environment. Especially team member U. N. showed exceptional enthusiasm, even throwing himself off waterfalls to collect trash cans.

Team member U. N. once again showed himself to be all around exceptional during Team Seven's third mission. While walking the Inuzuka's dogs, he, in an outstanding demonstration of... bravery selflessly pointed out an obvious flaw in the security system of Konohagakure. He effortlessly disabled several traps that could have otherwise endangered citizens of the village, all while protecting the dog assigned to him.

The members of Team Seven completed their missions to the best of their abilities. Team member U. N. must be commended for his willingness to sacrifice himself for the good of the village, but he really should learn to think before he acts. Team member N. R. clearly showed herself to be loyal and protective of her teammates, though she should learn to curb her enthusiasm in acting on it. Team member U. S. diligently completed the tasks assigned to him but showed a concerning amount of antisocialness.

Report submitted by jounin Hatake Kakashi, who observed all this while reading a book."

"Can I write the report?" I ask.

"Maa, Riko-chan, no," Kakashi says and shunshins away.

I pout.

"I'll be going home then," Sasuke says and walks away. For some reason, this annoys me greatly.

"Have a nice day, Riko and Naruto," I mutter. "Why thank you, Sasuke, have a nice day too!"

"Ri-chan?" Naruto asks.

"Really, is it so hard to follow common rules of behaviour? I mean, he didn't even say goodbye! He didn't even say hello, for that matter. Hell, he didn't really say anything at all!" I complain.

"Uhm..."

"I mean, it's not that hard. It's just two words. 'Hello.' and 'Goodbye.' So easy. But no, he doesn't even wave at us!"

"Ri-chan..."
"He's our friend, right? I mean, come on! We are together all the time!" I rant. "And-

I get distracted when a rock approaches. A square rock with two holes that looks suspiciously like eyes.

Team Seven. Never a dull moment. Though this is weird even by our standards.

Naruto eyes the not-rock suspiciously. Then he pretends everything is normal and walks a few steps. The rock follows. Naruto stops walking. So does the rock. It lies there innocently when Naruto turns around. His eyebrow twitches. He starts running back and forth with increasing speed. The rock gallops behind him.

I wish I had a camera.

Naruto abruptly stops and whirs around to glare at the suspicious rock. Then he points at it dramatically. "A square rock with two holes like that does not exist!"

I sweat-drop. Really Naruto? A moving rock, and you focus on the fact that it's square?

"I should have expected that from the man who is my rival!" the rock squeaks with a child's voice.

I raise an interested eyebrow as the rock starts to glow and three smoke bombs go off.

"What's going on, senpai?" Hanabi's voice asks from behind me and I start.

"Hanabi-chan! When did you get here?"

"Just now."

"Good job, I didn't notice you approaching at all!" I praise her. She blushes.

"It's thanks to your training, senpai," she says.

"Aww," I say and ruffle her hair. "You're so awesome, Hanabi-chan."

She bats my hand away and glares at me. "Stop doing that!"

So cute.

Behind us coughing sounds. I turn back to my previous source of entertainment.

Konohamaru and his friends are on the ground, coughing. "Too much gunpowder!" Konohamaru coughs out. I sweat-drop again.

Konohamaru looks up at Naruto in realisation. Then the three do an obviously practised introduction.

The girl does a twirl. "The one that possesses the sex appeal of an adult and the female ninja of the Konohamaru Corps, Moegi!" she announces.

No. Just no.

The snot-and-glasses boy does a somewhat awkward pose. "The one who loves dividing numbers, Udon!" he calls out.

Dividing numbers? Really?

"This village's number one ninja, Konohamaru!" Konohamaru shouts, doing a cool pose.
Then the three chorus: "Together we are the Konohamaru Corps!" and do a team pose.

"Oh it's you," Naruto says. "Huh, what's with the goggles?"

"We copied the old you, Niichan!" Konohamaru shouts proudly.

*And really sucked at it, too.*

"Huh," Naruto says.

"You're so cold lately, boss! Come play ninja with us!" Konohamaru says.

Time to escape. I'm so not getting caught up in a game of playing ninja.


"Oh, hey, Ri-nee-chan!" Konohamaru calls out, only now noticing me. I'm instantly crowded be those three tugging at my clothes.

*Annoying brats.*

"Come play ninja with us, too!" they say. *Bugger.*

Hanabi sniffs haughtily. "Obviously, senpai has much better things to do than *play* with you of all people."

"Mmm? Who are you?" Naruto asks.

"Oh, right. This is Hanabi-chan. I've been tutoring her. Hanabi-chan, this is my teammate and best friend, Naruto."

Naruto grins. "Nice ta meet ya!"

"Pleased to meet you, Naruto-senpai." Hanabi gives a quick bow.

"Oi, Ri-nee-chan, why would you train her!" Konohamaru shouts. *I'm* the number one ninja!*

Hanabi glares at him. "Your grades tell a different story, Sarutobi. You couldn't beat me if you tried."

*Note to self: Talk to Hanabi about her attitude towards classmates.*

"Why, you!" Konohamaru yells, pointing at her. "You're just a little girl!"

"And you are a loser!" Hanabi growls back.

"Now, now, you two, calm down..." I say.

"Oi! Konohamaru isn't a loser, dattebayo! You little brat!"

"Ruto, calm down!"

"Konohamaru could beat her in a heartbeat, dattebayo! He's way better than the brat!"

I still. He did *not* just say that about my cute little Hanabi-chan.

"Don't underestimate Hanabi-chan! She kicks ass!" I hiss.
"Does not!" Konohamaru yells.

"Do too!" Hanabi hisses back.

"Oh yeah?" Naruto asks. "Let's see it. Konohamaru versus Hanabi, let's go to the training ground!"

"Fine!" I growl. "Let's go!"

Konohamaru runs ahead, his friends and Naruto in tow. Hanabi and I follow at a slower pace. When we round the corner, we see Konohamaru on the ground, two ninja standing in front of him. He obviously ran into one of them.

I study the two. They are a little older than us and definitely not from Konoha since both wear Sunagakure hitae-ate. The girl wears a short light purple battle kimono and has her spiky blond hair in four pigtails. On her back, she carries a large fan.

She looks much more dangerous than the other kunoichi in my year.

The boy wears a black full-body suit with a red and yellow circle on front. His hood is up and I see there a cat-like ears attached to it. He also sports purple face-paint. On his back, he carries a mummy-like thing.

The girls is wind-natured, probably a long to midrange fighter. The boy... Suna is famous for their puppeteers. That thing on his back is probably a puppet.

"That hurt," the boy says. He grabs Konohamaru by his scarf and lifts him.

"Konohamaru!" Naruto exclaims.

"Stop it," the Suna girl says. "We're going to get scolded later."

"Hey! Let go of Konohamaru!" Naruto shouts.

"Hanabi-chan" I murmur. "Stay close to me."

"Understood, senpai." Hanabi falls into a ready stance.

The boy grins smugly, still not letting Konohamaru go. I shift closer, hands close to my senbon filled belt.

"But I want to play around a little!" he says, tightening his hand on Konohamaru's scarf. The kid chokes. I open my mouth to say something, but-

"Bastard!" Naruto shouts and charges him. He never ever gets close. The boy's fingers twitch and Naruto falls to the ground with a shocked expression.

Definitely a puppeteer.

"Ohh... Leaf genin are weak..." the boy says. He brings a fist near Konohamaru's face. "I hate rude brats... makes me want to kill them!"

"I am not involved in this," the girl states, turning away slightly.

Enough of this.

I step forward, senbon in my hand. "You are threatening to attack a citizen of Konohagakure," I state
"So what of it?" The boy says. "Hey, you are pretty cute!"

Eh?

Something small smacks into the boy's hand and Konohamaru falls to the ground. A pebble hits the ground.

I breathe a sigh of relief. *So Sasuke didn't go home.*

The boy looks puzzled at the stone, holding his hand. Then he looks up with a shocked expression and turns in the direction the pebble came from.

Sasuke sits there in a nearby tree, another pebble in his hand, looking ridiculously cool.

"What do you think you're doing in another's village," he states.

Suna-girl blushes. I inwardly roll my eyes. Really, Sasuke? Turning foreign kunoichi into fangirls?

"Another kid that pisses me off..." Suna-boy mutters, glaring at Sasuke.

"Get lost," Sasuke orders, crushing the pebble in his hand. *Show-off.*

"He's so cool!" Moegi shouts with hearts in her eyes. Naruto and Konohamaru look embarrassed.

"Hey, I would have beaten that guy, dattebayo..."

"Liar!"

Great. Now Naruto looks pissed, but at the wrong person. Sasuke was just trying to help.

"Get down, kid! I hate brats like you who think they're so clever!" Suna-boy states, taking the mummy-puppet down from his back and placing it in front of him.

"Hey! You're going to use Karasu?" Suna-girl exclaims.

*Shit. This is going to escalate.*


I start gathering water chakra in my hand.

"Kankuro. Stop," a cold voice orders.

Huh?

A boy hangs like an overgrown bat from a branch of the same tree Sasuke sits in. Judging from my teammate's expression, he didn't notice him.

"You're a disgrace to our village," the boy states.

*That one is dangerous.*

The boy is our age and has dark red hair and piercing green eyes with black circles around them. His skin is unnaturally pale. On the left side of his forehead, the kanji for 'love' is tattooed on his skin.
A distant part of my mind notes that we could pass for siblings if it weren't for that ice cold look in his eyes, as if he thinks nothing of our lives.

"Ga-Gaara," the suna-boy, Kankuro, stutters, sounding scared out of his mind now.

"Why do you think we came all the way here?" Gaara says.

"Li-listen Gaara, they started it!"

Say what?


And the worst thing is, I believe him.

I shift my stance so I can defend the kids better.

"I-I'm sorry, I'm really sorry!" Kankuro stutters, and the girl starts apologising too.

Gaara abruptly turns to Sasuke. "Excuse them, you guys."

He and Sasuke stare at each other expressionlessly, each sizing the other up. Then Gaara bursts into a cloud of sand and reappears in the street, two steps away from me.

Way too close.

"Let's go. We didn't come here to fool around," he says and walks away, only sparing me a passing glance.

"Wait," I say. "State your business in our village."

They turn around to look at me. My mouth is dry and I'm mildly terrified, but I don't let it show.

Suna-girl is the one to answer. "Hah, you're clueless?" she scoffs and holds up a traffic pass. "Don't you know anything?"

I narrow my eyes at her. "Answer the question, Suna shinobi."

She places a hand on her hip arrogantly. "You're right, we're genin from the Village Hidden in the Sand. We have come here to take part in the Chunin Selection Exam."

"Chunin Selection Exam...?" I hear Naruto ask confusedly.

"Exactly what it sounds like, Ruto," I tell him. I turn back to the girl. "I see. Have a pleasant, peaceful stay in our village and do make sure that your teammate does not threaten any more members of Hokage-sama's clan."

Her and Kankuro pale in realisation.

"Y-yes," she murmurs. The three turn and start to walk away.

Sasuke suddenly lands next to me. "Hey. What's your name?" he asks after the suna shinobi.

Suna-girl quickly turns around. "Me?" She asks with an eager smile. "I'm Temari."

"No. The one with the gourd."
Gaara turns around. "Sabaku no Gaara." *Gaara of the Desert.* "I am also interested in you. What's your name?"

I don't take my eyes of the suna shinobi, but I can hear the smirk in Sasuke's voice as he states: "Uchiha Sasuke," with a slight emphasis on 'Uchiha'.

They stare at each other.

"Hey, hey, what about me? Do you want to know my name?" Naruto asks eagerly from behind me.

"I'm not interested," Gaara states. "Let's go," he addresses his companions.

They jump away.


"Hai, senpai!" I hear her come closer. Then there is a sharp intake of breath. "We're being watched," she says, almost inaudibly. Sasuke next to me tenses.

"Alright, everyone, let's get out of here," I order.

We end up at Ichiraku's. *Of course.* We ditched the Konohamaru Corps at the Hokage Tower, so now it's just Team Seven plus Hanabi who looks around interestedly. I doubt she has ever been here before.

"Hey Jiisan!" Naruto shouts. "Hey, Ayame-nee-chan!"

"Naruto-chan!" Ayame exclaims. "And you brought your girlfriend!"


Ayame the Annoying never gives up. "If you say so..." she says.

Hanabi's eyes shoot between me and Naruto speculatively.

"Naruto-kun, Riko-chan! Your usual?" Teuchi asks. "And what will it be, Uchiha-san and the young lady?"

"Hello Teuchi-jiisan," I greet him. "This is Hanabi-chan."

Hanabi gives a quick bow. "Pleased to meet you, sir," she says. "I'll have what Riko-senpai has."

"That will be the Miso Ramen. A good choice, young lady. What will you be having, Uchiha-san?"

"Tomato Ramen."

We all sit down on the stools. I sit between Naruto and Hanabi, and Sasuke is on Hanabi's other side.

"So what did you see, Hanabi-chan?"

"I only saw the Suna shinobi briefly. The boy with the painted face has average chakra levels and carries a puppet with him. The girl has above average chakra levels, but isn't remarkable otherwise.

Gaara has extremely large reserves, and his chakra seems to be... unstable." Hanabi frowns. "His gourd seems to contain sand."
"Sand?" Sasuke asks. He must really be interested in Gaara if he's actually asking for clarification.

She nods. "And I think there were traces of chakra in the sand, Sasuke-senpai, but I can't tell for sure."

"So, you said we were being observed, Hanabi-chan?" I switch the topic.

Hanabi nods. "There were three, two males and a female. The female had slightly smaller than average chakra reserves and carried senbon with bells attached to them with her. The two males both had larger than average reserves and appear to have undergone body modifications. One of them had some sort of channel in each of his arms, and the other one had a metal device covering his right forearm. There were holes in it, so I believe he might be capable of expelling poison through it."

"Whoa. You can tell all that with just one look?" Naruto asks. Even Sasuke looks mildly impressed.

I grin proudly and ruffle Hanabi's hair. "Told ya Hanabi-chan is awesome."

Hanabi for once doesn't bat my hand away.

"Ne, Ri-chan, what're we gonna do?" Naruto asks.

"Eat ramen. Itadakimasu," I say, just as Teuchi places our food in front of us. I shift a little so that Hanabi will be spared the sight of Naruto's eating manners.

I pretend to focus on my food while I watch Hanabi cautiously takes her first ever bite of ramen. Her face lights up and she takes another one. Seems she likes it, then.

I finish my bowl. "We can't really do anything. We don't know who our stalkers were and if they were watching us or the sand nin. It could have just been contenders for the chunin exams scoping out the competition, you know. Really, the only thing we can do is keep our eyes open. As for the suna shinobi, we don't have to worry about them since we're not in the exams."

"Ne, Ri-chan, how do I get into the exams?"

"Forget it, Ruto. You can't get in there without being recommended by your jounin sensei. And we've only been genin for two and a half months, so we're unlikely to be nominated, since the tests are supposed to be really tough."

"I think you could do it, senpai," Hanabi says. I smile at her.

"We could probably all handle the tests, what we lack is experience," I tell her.

"We did an A-ranked mission," Sasuke interjects. "We could handle it."

"Yeah, dattebayo! We're the best team!" Naruto shouts.

"You did an A-ranked mission?" Hanabi asks, sounding shocked.

Naruto grins at her. "Yeah, that was awesome! See, we only had to deliver a scroll, but then..."

And he launches into a horribly embellished story of our mission in Wave Country while Hanabi listens wide-eyed.

We step outside the restaurant and say our goodbyes. Naruto takes off, saying he wants to train.
"Come on, Hanabi-chan, I'll walk you home," I tell her.

"I'll go with you," Sasuke says.

I blink surprised. "Huh? Why?"

"A team of ninja was spying on us today. You shouldn't go alone, Riko. It's not safe."

I still. I kind of forgot about that over ramen and storytelling. "Alright then."

Today is sparring day, anyways. We'd meet up later in any case.

We walk in silence, all of us alert. I constantly cast looks around and make sure we keep to the busier streets. Sasuke does the same, and I notice Hanabi activate her byakugan more than once to check for pursuers.

When we arrive at the compound, the gate is opened immediately. No pesky waiting for the heiress.

"Oi," I tell the Hyuuga that opened the gate. "Tell Hyuuga-sama that Hanabi-chan should have an armed escort with her until the chunin exams are over. Hanabi-chan, I'll wait for you after school if I have time for you. If not, go straight home, alright?"

She frowns unhappily. "Understood, senpai," she answers and walks into the compound. Sasuke and I leave.

"What's wrong?" I ask. "Something is bothering you."

I'm pretty sure it has something to do with Gaara and the Chunin Exams. He's been brooding ever since we talked to the suna shinobi.

Sasuke doesn't answer me and starts walking down a different street than we came from. I roll my eyes and follow him. I have no idea where we are going, but I'm guessing he wants me to come with him since if he wanted to be rid of me, he'd just take off instead of walking at civilian speed.

Sasuke leads me into a really nice neighbourhood. Large gardens, sprawling mansions, well-kept streets... definitely upper class.

"Do you live around here?" I ask, taking in the surroundings. No one really knows where Sasuke lives. The fangirls in the Academy used to speculate about it all the time, and some even tried to follow him to find out.

I doubt the village would let him stay in the empty Uchiha Compound by himself. As far as I know, the place is off limits. I once walked past the entrance, and there was warning tape all over it.

He shrugs. I guess that's a yes.

Sasuke finally stops in front of a property hidden behind high hedges. He opens a large wooden gate and lets me in.

Whoa.

Sasuke lives in a large house that stands in the middle of a wide garden that is made to look like a meadow. There are some large trees too, the kind that take a hundred years to grow unless someone can use Wood Release. I can even see a small lake, surrounded by weeping willows.

It's really, really beautiful.
I look around wide eyed, trying to take everything in while I follow Sasuke into the house. The interior is gorgeous too. It's all polished wooden floor and large windows. The whole place is big.

So this is where Sasuke lives. All alone. I can't imagine what that must be like.

Sasuke leads me into what appears to be a living room. I'm guessing that Sasuke uses this room more than others, because there are kunai and shuriken left haphazardly on tables and other furniture, and some scrolls lay on a tea table. The walls are lined with shelves and filled with books. There are floor to ceiling windows, and a glass door leads outside into the garden.

The thought of Sasuke spending hours in here all by himself makes me sad. I don't even want to think about how he coped with the isolation before he became part of Team Seven.

Were our spars the only real interaction he had with a human being back then?

"Do you want something to drink?" Sasuke asks, face unreadable.

Kami, I am probably the first person he invited here since he moved in. Not that it was actually an invitation, he just walked and I followed.

"No, I'm good," I say, feeling awkward. "This is a really nice place."

He nods. "I know of someone that made chunin at ten," he says abruptly.

So that's what's wrong. He's already twelve.

"So?" I ask. "You're Sasuke."

He stares at me. *I'm not strong enough.*

"Bullshit," I whisper. "You're amazing."

Something in his eyes shifts. I have no idea what the look he levels on me means, but I know it is something important. It makes my heart beat a little faster.

He stares at me for the longest time.

"I want to fight you," he says suddenly. "Really fight you."

*Huh? How did he come to that conclusion?*

Normally, I know what he's thinking, but today, he confuses the hell out of me.

Well, if he thinks fighting will solve all his problems, who am I to argue?

"Alright. One week from now, Training Ground Three," I say. "I'll ask Kakashi to supervise."

He gives a sharp nod. "No traps," he says.

"Killjoy," I grumble. "Fine. Do you want to spar now?"

He relaxes a little and gives me a small smirk. "Let's go, Ri."

Okay. Sasuke just called me by my nickname. Either he's under a genjutsu or I am. Or I missed something in our conversation.

Forget confusing, this is completely absurd.
I am in so much trouble.

The next day, we wait for Kakashi at our usual training ground. He is much later than usual. It's definitely been longer than an hour. I really ought to learn the water whip.

While we wait, we're playing hide-and-seek to practice our stealth. I leap stealthily through the trees, senbon in my hand.

"Got you, Ruto!" I shout and throw. He whirls around and deflects them with a kunai.

"Catch me first, Ri-chan!" he shouts and makes five clones. All the Narutos head off in different directions. I launch more senbon after them, but only two clones get hit and dispel. I jump after the rest but have to twist in mid-air when a volley of shuriken is launched at me. Unfortunately, I see the wires attached to them too late to Kawarimi and end up tied to a tree.

I'm so glad Sasuke only used practice wire and not the kind that cuts into skin.

"You lose," Sasuke says, landing before me.

I smirk. "Aren't you forgetting something?"

His eyes widen as ten Narutos leap at him, yelling "Sasukee!

"Morning, my cute little students!" Kakashi appears next to me in a shunshin. Neither of the boys spare him any attention, they are too busy brawling.

Kakashi clears his throat.

He still gets no attention. He turns to me. "Riko-chan, they are ignoring me," he complains.

"Get him, Ruto!" I yell, ignoring him too.

Serves him right for being late.

I finally manage to free myself of the wires and throw a cold water bomb into the pile of remaining Narutos and Sasuke.

"Oi!" Naruto shouts, and Sasuke uses his distraction to get a punch in. While he attacks, I leap at him to kick him, but before the kick can connect, Kakashi is there and throws all three of us off the tree. We land in a groaning pile on the ground.

When we have disentangled our limbs from each other, Naruto jumps up and shouts: "You're LATE!" at Kakashi, while Sasuke glares and I make a whip sound. Kakashi winces.

"Sorry, sorry, I got lost on the road of life today..." his voice trails off. "Anyways, I know this is sudden, but I've nominated the three of you for the Chunin Selection Exam. Here, take these applications." He holds three pieces of paper toward us.

We all stand frozen, staring at him dumbfounded. "This is just a nomination though. Whether you take the exam or not is up to each of you. Those who wish to take it, sign those papers and turn them in at Room 301 by 3 pm in five days. That is a-

"Yatta! Kakashi-sensei, I love you!" Naruto shouts and throws himself at Kakashi.

"Cut it out, get off me!" Kakashi tries to shake Naruto off. I grin and jump our sensei too, hanging
off his back while Naruto clings to his front. "You two brats, stop it!" Naruto and I giggle like mad until we're suddenly hugging a log and fall to the ground in a tangle of limbs. Even then, we are still laughing.

"Anyways." Kakashi says from a branch above us. "That is all." And he throws the nominations at us and vanishes in a shunshin. Naruto and I try to jump up to catch our nominations, but we're still entangled and end up falling back down again.

"Idiots," Sasuke says, and leaps to catch the pieces of paper while Naruto and I disentangle our limbs. Sasuke hands us our applications. I read mine.

Nara Riko

_I, Hatake Kakashi, nominate the genin named above to take part in the Chunin Selection Exams._

_Hatake Kakashi, jounin_

"Chunin, huh?" I ask. "Are we going?"

"Yatta!"

"Hn."

"Right, stupid question." I smile, first at Naruto, who beams at his recommendation, then at Sasuke, who has a pleased smirk on his face. Our eyes meet.

_Sea ms we’ll have to postpone that fight, Sasuke._

"I bet there'll be tons of strong guys in there! Like, that Kankuro!" Naruto babbles. "Everyone's going to see how awesome I am, and then I'll become chunin, and then I'll become Hokage, dattebayo!"

"Naruto," Sasuke says.

"Huh?"

"Become stronger than me first!" Sasuke challenges. Naruto stares at him. New determination radiates from his eyes as the two glare at each other.

I throw a few senbon at them, and both whirl around and block them with their kunai.

I smile at them. "Don't count me out! You'll have to beat _me_ too!"

We all have determined smiles on our faces as we stare at each other.

"This'll be so awesome," Naruto says. "We're all taking the exams together!"

"Hn," Sasuke says, still looking pleased.

"Yeah. We're going to kick ass!"
A lot of people have been asking how Growing Strong is a crossover. The answer is, I am currently planning for this story to have four parts, and Part III will take place entirely in England. Because of course certain people won't leave Jasmine/Riko alone...

Part I and II will be set in Naruto's world and there won't be that much magic, but there won't be entirely no magic either. Part IV is a surprise (which really means that it hasn't been entirely planned out yet...)

After Kakashi's announcement, we all go our separate ways to start preparing.

All I know about the chunin exams is that there are usually three tests, the third one being a tournament and the other two changing with every exam. Though I can make an educated guess that they'll test survival in one of them and our intelligence in the other. Maybe there will be a mock mission, escorting or gathering intelligence perhaps, since those are the most common chunin missions.

With a start, I realise that we'll probably be tested in teams, since chunin usually don't work alone.

*Sneaky, Kakashi. Not telling us that so we won't feel pressured, huh?*

I make a mental list of what I need to do. I doubt I could improve my combat skills significantly during the short time I have left until the exams, not if I want to be well rested by the time they arrive. So I'll focus on the little things that will prove useful outside of fighting.

I should definitely brush up on my medical skills, but that would take more time than I have. So I'll just stock up on medicines and supplies. I'll need storage scrolls and explosive tags, smoke bombs and maybe some flash tags, as well.

Hmm. I don't have any skill in fuinjutsu besides making basic storage scrolls, but it would be infinitely useful to be able to make my own tags and scrolls. And it would only require some mental work to learn. Five days should be enough for learning to make explosives and better storage scrolls.

My next stop will be the Academy then. The library there should have the information I need. Maybe I could ask Iruka for pointers. And I need to tell Hanabi about the nomination since I won't have much time for her while the exams take place.

I should probably gather some information, too. Competition will be fierce, and we'll likely be targets, what with us being rookies, Sasuke being an Uchiha and Naruto and I coming across as weak at first glance. I'll need to have a good plan for scoping out the foreign competition, but it shouldn't be too hard to find out about the nominated teams from Konoha. There is bound to be gossip about them, at least about the ones worth mentioning. Then I'll see if I can't get some information from Iruka, and maybe old Academy records. The jounin sensei's identities would be helpful, too.

I'm halfway to the Academy when I feel a slight tingle in my chakra system that tells me a genjutsu is
being placed on me. It makes the air around me seem colder, and mist starts to rise up around me. A feeling of isolation creeps up on me.

So far, so good. It's fairly basic for a genjutsu and not dangerous at all when the victim knows what is happening, so I won't release it until the assailant shows himself, which I hope he'll do when he thinks me helpless under his genjutsu.

"Ri-chan!" Naruto's voice yells from the mist. "Where are you? Ri-chan!"

It's a trap. I know that, but it goes against every instinct not to answer, not to go find him.

My attacker must be someone that knows about Naruto and my friendship, and he knows Naruto's nickname for me. That rules out the foreigners currently in the village. Unless it's a genjutsu master that is merely planting suggestions in my mind, but the technique is too basic for that. If it were a master, I doubt I would have noticed the genjutsu so easily.

"Ri-chan! Ri-cha-AHHHRGH!" Naruto's voice screams in pain. "Help me! Please! Ri-chaaa-" his voice cuts off abruptly.

"KAI!" I scream. The mist dissipates and I look around panicked. *Oh God, what if it wasn't part of the genjutsu, what if Naruto is hurt, what if he needs me, what if he's dying...*

But there is no one around. I'm still on the way to the Academy, forest on one side of the road, an empty field on the other, houses in the distance.

Ice cold fury rises in me. My hands form seals almost without thinking.

*Riko.* Yoshino's voice echoes in my head. *This genjutsu is called the Melting Flesh Illusion. Do not ever use it on an ally.*

"Magen: Hyoukai Nikutai!" I scream. For a moment, nothing happens. Then a pain filled howl fills the air.

After a half minute of screams, I let the technique fade. I hear my attacker fall to the ground from the forest. I palm a kunai and run toward him.

Iruka crouches on the ground, patting himself frantically to make sure his flesh didn't melt from his bones.

"You," I seethe. "You made Ruto die in my head!" He freezes when he hears my voice. I grab his collar and pull him up, only to punch his jaw and send him to the ground again. "You son of a bitch! Why would you do that?" I whisper, furiously wiping angry tears away. "Y-you... I used *that* jutsu on you!" My knees hit the ground. "Dammit, why, Iruka-sensei?"

"It was a test, to see if you were ready for the Chunin Exams. The illusion might become reality then."

"And do I pass?" I hiss through my tears. "Was it worth it, making me hear N-Naruto scream in pain, begging for help? Are you satisfied?"

"I-"

"Do I pass?!"

"Yes. You do."
"Great. Go to hell, Iruka."

And I stand up and leap away.

When Naruto opens the door and enters his apartment, I jump up from where I was waiting inside and crash into him, throwing my arms around him and squeezing him as hard as I can.

"What the- Get off- Ri-chan?" he recognises me. I give a shaky, unhinged sounding laugh at hearing his voice, fine and alright and not in pain. "What's wrong, what happened, are you okay? Are you hurt?" he asks, sounding panicked. His hands flit around as though checking me for injuries.

"I'm okay," I whisper.

*I'm okay because you are okay.*

"Can I stay here a little?" I ask, not letting him go.

His hand settles on petting my hair. "Of course, Ri-chan."

I go to the Academy the next day. It's currently lunch break, so I have to be stealthy to not get mobbed by the kids.

In the library, I quickly find a book on basic fuinjutsu and start reading and taking notes.

I may have underestimated fuinjutsu. Making storage scrolls is one thing, but understanding the concepts behind them is entirely different. Seals are *complicated.*

"Fuinjutsu, huh?" Iruka's voice remarks from behind me. "Certainly a useful skill."

"I should thank you," I say bitterly without turning around. "I'm a lot more motivated to keep Naruto and Sasuke safe now."

He sits down on the opposite side of the table I'm using. "So you will still be entering the exams, then."

I look up from my book. "Yes. Did Naruto and Sasuke pass your test, too?"

"They didn't get the same test you did, but yes, they passed. So did the other nine rookies."

So all twelve rookies will be taking part in the Exams. Shika's team, Hinata's and Fumio's.

"Iruka-sensei. I'm sorry about what I said to you yesterday. I understand that you were merely doing your job. Would you please help me prepare for the exams so that I can keep my team safe?"

"You are forgiven, and I apologise, too. The test was necessary, but it was cruel to use that method on you. I'd be happy to help you prepare," Iruka answers. "After all, you've been helping me out as well, haven't you?"

I give him a small smile. "Thank you."

"Now, what would you like my help with?"

I'm walking Hanabi home from the Academy, mulling over the information I gleaned from Iruka. Of
course, he wouldn't tell me anything outright, but he did mention which senseis nominated their teams. Now it's just a matter of asking around and keeping my ears open.

"Congratulations, senpai!" Hanabi tells me. "I'm sure you will do great!"

"Thanks, Hanabi-chan. I'm sorry I won't be able to spend much time with you during the exams." I ruffle her hair.

She bats my hand away.

"I'm going to miss your company," I tell her.

She blushes. "I... I won't miss you! It's not like I like you or anything!"

I chuckle. She's so transparent. "I'm sure you won't."

"Anyways, is Naruto-senpai your boyfriend?" she asks in a conspiratorial tone.

I choke. "No! Definitely not!"

"Then Sasuke-senpai?"

"I'm single!"

"Are you sure?"

"Yes! I am sure!"

"But the ramen lady said..."

"Well, Ayame has been saying that since Naruto and I were eight. She has always, always been wrong. Now drop it!"

Hanabi looks disappointed. Troublesome brat.

We arrive at the compound. "Would you mind telling your sister that I'd like to talk to her for a moment? If she's there, I mean."

"Alright, senpai. I'll be right back." Hanabi vanishes into the compound.

"What do you want with Hinata-sama?" The Hyuuga that has been following us from a distance asks.

"None of your business. Suffice to say, it will be beneficial to both of us."

The Hyuuga doesn't look pleased with my answer, but doesn't say anything else.

"Senpai! Onee-sama is here!" Hanabi says.

"That was fast," I say appreciatively. "Thank you Hanabi-chan. Hello, Hinata-san."

"H-hello Riko-san," she answers shyly. "I was just heading out."

"Would you mind if I walked with you for a little? I wanted to ask you something."

She shakes her head, and we say our goodbyes to Hanabi and leave the Hyuuga Compound behind.
"So I hear your team will be participating in the chunin exams," I say.

"Yes, Riko-san," she says, a little more cautious.

"Us, too. And Shika's team, and Team Four, too," I tell her. "And I've been thinking, us rookies should stick together since we'll be targeted because of our inexperience."

Her head snaps up. "An alliance?"

"Of sorts. I was thinking more along the lines of a non-aggression pact for the first two tests. Like, we don't attack each other and share information if we think the others are in danger. Stuff like that. But I wouldn't say no to a full alliance."

"I-I'd have to ask my team," she smiles a little. "But I like the idea."

I smile back at her. "Glad to hear that. Are you meeting your team now?"

She nods. "Uhm, would you like to come with me and ask them yourself, Riko-san?"

"I'd like that."

Hinata leads me through a heavily forested training ground. In a clearing, we find Shino and Kiba with a gorgeous woman with black hair and ...crimson eyes. Yikes.

I've gotten better, but I'm still not all that comfortable with red eyes. I definitely need to do something about that issue.

A light bark sounds and Akamaru jumps into my arms. I laugh and cuddle him. "Hey, Akamaru-chan. I've missed you too!"

He barks again. "I'm doing well," I answer. I scratch him behind his ears. "How are you?"

He yips. "Glad to hear that."

"Riko!" Kiba says boisterously. "Stop stealing my dog and give me a hug!" He opens his arms invitingly, waggling his eyebrows and looking ridiculous.

I giggle and set Akamaru down. "Just this once and only because I haven't seen you in ages," I say and walk over to him. He catches me in a bear hug and swings me around.

"Alright. You can let me down now."

He doesn't. I kick his shin. Hard.

"Ouch!" he yelps. He lets me go. I turn to Shino.

"It's good to see you again, Shino," I tell him honestly.

"You as well, Riko-san. Why are you here?"

I smile and turn to their jounin sensei. Kurenai, Hinata told me her name was.

"Kurenai-sensei, may I have a few minutes with your students? It won't take long, I promise."

She gives me a cautious look and nods. I give her my best disarming smile and turn back to Team Eight.
"All the rookies have been nominated for the Chunin Exams," I say. "I'm here to suggest a non-aggression pact, maybe even an alliance, between our teams, for the duration of the first two tests."

Kiba looks dumbfounded. Shino gives a slight raise of his eyebrows, which means he's just as surprised as Kiba. "We'll discuss it," he says. I nod and step away to give them some privacy.


I shrug. "We were all friends in the Academy. I'd rather not fight them unless I absolutely have to."

"Why aren't your teammates hear with you?"

Good question. I have yet to tell them. Oh well, I'll just do that when everyone's agreed. Easier to ask forgiveness than permission.

Naruto and Sasuke would insist they were able to do everything alone. I'll just let them focus on their training for now, and tell them later when I have concrete, useful results.

I shrug. "I'm the most diplomatic. The boys are... well, they are boys."

Kurenai chuckles. "I hear you. Kiba is a handful, and Shino is difficult in his own way."

"I can imagine. Boys are so troublesome... at least you got Hinata. I have to deal with Kakashi-sensei on top of that, too."

"Is your sensei not fulfilling his duties?" She asks in a concerned tone.

"Oh, Kakashi isn't that bad. He's almost never later than an hour, and he stops reading Icha Icha when our lives are threatened," I tell her earnestly. "He's gotten a lot better."

Kurenai lets out a small burst of Killing Intent. "He neglects his team and reads that- that thing in front of impressionable children?!" she asks incredulously.

_Oops. Sorry, Kakashi. Seems you are in trouble. Let's not tell her that he already corrupted me._

"Well, it could be worse. He could smoke, like Asuma-sensei."

That appears to have made it worse. _"Asuma smokes around his team?!"_ she hisses.

And now Asuma is in trouble too. I should just shut up now.

Rescue comes in the form of Kiba's loud voice. "Oi, Riko!"

I walk back to Team Eight. "So, are you in?"

Shino speaks. "We have decided to establish a non-aggression pact with Team Seven. Why? Because it will benefit us both and you would be strong opponents. Why not a full alliance? Because we believe we are strong enough to fight for ourselves."

"Great!" I say. "I'm so glad to hear that. Let's hash out the details."

The next team on my list is, of course, Shika's. I'd have asked him first, but he wasn't at home earlier, so now I have to look for him.

I find Team Ten in a training ground close to the barbeque restaurant Chouji's aunt and uncle own.
Ino is currently sparring with Chouji – and appears to be losing – while Shika and Asuma are playing shogi.

"Hey," I say, sitting down next to them. The two of them grunt and continue to stare at the board. I study the board. The game is almost over. Shikamaru has already won, though Asuma doesn't appear to have noticed yet.

Shika makes his move and then turns to me. "Spying on the competition, Ri?"

"Still working on that. Want to join a non-aggression pact with Teams Seven and Eight? And possibly Team Four, too?"

He shrugs. "Troublesome. Sure. Though you knew I was going to answer that."

I grin. "It's always polite to ask."

"You ask the other teams already?"

"Team Eight," I pull out a sheet of paper. "This is the agreement we came to."

He scans the paper and nods. "Sharing information, no attacking the pact members and providing medical aid to them. Nice. We'll join in, but it'll be a full alliance."

I expected as much. Team Ten is more for sneaky missions. If they get in a fight with another team, they'll have to rely on smarts and strategies. My own team on the other hand pretty much consists of attack specialists, so of course Team Ten would want us for extra protection.

Add to that the fact that Shika and I are siblings and our teams have been friends since Wave and it's a given for us to work together.

I nod. "Alright. We'll share information, supplies and medical aid, and we'll come to your aid should you need it. You'll do the same for us."

He nods. We shake on it.

"Good. Hey, do you mind asking Team Four for me?" I ask hopefully.

Shika gives me a deadpan look. "Ri, ninja life isn't always fighting and life threatening danger. Sometimes, you have to do the really unpleasant things. Sometimes, you have to talk to Tachibana Fumio."

"Nara-chan! You're here for me? I haven't seen you in forever! It's so good to see you again!"

"Yeah, so sorry about that. Do you want to - err - hang out?" I throw up a little in my mouth saying those words.

The two of us are currently in the Konoha Hospital. I walked in just as he was leaving.

He beams at me, brown eyes shining. His long-time dream of 'hanging out' with me is finally coming true. "Yes! Let's go! I know this great little café that you'll love!"


The effort I put in for these exams...Naruto and Sasuke ought to be very grateful.
Fumio leads me to a café not far from the hospital. We step inside. I look around and instantly regret it.

There are scented candles and flowers everywhere. Men and women of all ages stare at each other lovingly over heart or flower shaped cakes. Flowers and hearts have also been painted on the walls, and they are printed on the waitresses' uniforms. Soft music plays from invisible speakers.

Screw it. We don't need Team Four.

I kawarimi the hell away.

I spend the rest of the week studying and collecting information. I meet up a few times with Hinata to tell her about my findings, and she in turn tells me about her own. Team Eight is quite good at spying. Shika and I spend our evenings playing shogi, and we share our information then.

We also raid the clan's medicine stores, and I write countless explosive and flash tags of all sizes.

Now it's the evening before the exams start, and I knock on Sasuke's door. I already visited Naruto earlier.

I had to tell them about the alliance at some point. I decided to put it off as long as I could to give them less time to protest. And at this point, I have enough information to distract them.

The door opens. Sasuke stands there and stares at me surprised.

"Hey!" I say. "Can I come in? I figured out some stuff about the exams and I thought I'd share. I'm nice like that."

He moves aside wordlessly and I enter. We sit down next to each other in the living room where we talked the last time I was here.

I pull out a pile of papers and set them on the table.

"So. First things first, I asked around a little and we will be tested as a team during the first two tests. Second, we have an Alliance with Team Ten and a non-aggression agreement with Team Eight. Here" I take out two sheets of paper "are the details. Read them later."

He stares at me.

"And I know you aren't going to tell me that we don't need the help, because as a smart shinobi you know that any help is welcome and it would be very stupid to refuse aid when it is offered, unless it comes from an untrusted source. It's not like you would reject the idea of an alliance out of a misplaced sense of pride, wouldn't you?"

"You should have asked us."

"Sorry," I say unrepentantly.

He looks at me. *That's all you are going to say?*

I shrug. *Yes.*

He glares. Then he seems to realise something.

"What about Team Four?"
I wince. He raises an eyebrow. "Talk."

"No."

"Riko."

Oh great, he's back to normal, calling me by my full name again. Thank God, it really freaked me out when he called me 'Ri'.

"Nothing happened," I insist.

"Liar."

I glare at him. He looks amused.

"If you don't tell me, I'll ask Naruto if he knows."

"He doesn't."

Exactly, his eyes tell me smugly.

_Bastard_, I answer. If he asked Naruto who has no clue, Naruto would pester and annoy me until he decided to just torture it out of me by tickling me. And then he'd mock me mercilessly for running away in a decidedly Kakashi-like manner and after that, he'd go kill Fumio for trying to trick me into a date. Maybe he'd even go to Shikamaru to revive the Duo of Doom and prank Fumio within an inch of his life before they both kill him.

...On second thought, that would have its merits, too.

"You know, I am supposed to be the blackmailing person in the team, not you. You are the cool, brooding one," I tell him reproachfully.

_Talk._

"If you must know" I say primly. "I approached Tachibana Fumio, and he responded to my presence in an entirely inappropriate manner."

Now he smirks, his eyes dancing with sadistic glee at my fangirl troubles. "Elaborate."

I look away from his infuriatingly amused face. "We went to a café."

Silence.

"And?"

"And there were heart shaped cakes and flowers and candles and music and disgustingly happy couples everywhere, and have I mentioned the heart shaped cakes?"

Sasuke breaks down laughing.

Sasuke. Laughing.

These two words do not belong in the same sentence.

"It's not funny, asshole," I growl.

He stops laughing, but he's still grinning, so I try to kick his shin, but he evades me.
"So you ran away?" he asks.

"Kawarimied and will you stop grinning!" I growl.

His grin gets wider. I glare at him.

"You're so immature," I say.

*Says the girl that failed to form an alliance because she was terrified of heart shaped cakes.*

I glare even harder. "Stop grinning or I'll set you up on a date with Sakura."

That wipes the grin off his face and puts one on my own.

"You wouldn't."

"Wouldn't I?" I ask.

He glares. "We were talking about the exams."

I allow myself a smug smile. "In case you're wondering, I did ask Hinata to talk to Team Four in my place, but she was rebuffed. They said they didn't need help." Poor Hinata felt really bad about that, too. I'll strangle Team Four's members if I get the chance during the exams.

"None of us could find out what the first two tests are going to be, but we do know who the proctors are. Test number one will be proctored by Morino Ibiki who works with Ino-chan's dad and she said he loves head games and psychological warfare, so the test is probably going to involve those things. We'll have to see underneath the underneath and all that stuff. I doubt there will be any fighting."

He nods, looking disappointed.

"Proctor for the second test is Mitarashi Anko. She is widely regarded as sadistic and slightly insane."

Sasuke gives me a deadpan look.

"Not like me," I say. "Anyway, Shino put a bug on her, and she has been visiting Training Area 44 a lot. That one is also called the Forest of Death, so it'll be a survival test. There's supposed to be some really nasty overgrown beasts in there, and poisonous plants and all that, not to mention the other teams from villages that hate us, so it'll be hell."

He frowns and nods. "And the third test?"

"A tournament with one on one fights, in front of the village and daimyos from all over the world."

Sasuke's eyes light up at the prospect of fighting.

"We'll have to get that far first. The first test is going to be easy, but the second one... there's no way to predict what's going to happen," I warn.

"Anyway, we also spied a tiny little bit on the competition. These sheets," I point to a pile of sheets "are profiles of the people we deemed potential threats."

I take the top nine sheets. "And these are the teams we definitely have to watch out for. The Suna Nin we met a week ago, they're the Kazekage's children and won't be easy opponents. The girl uses wind jutsu and the boy is a puppeteer. Both are terrified of Gaara. According to Team Eight, his
chakra levels are insane, unstable and he smells of blood and sand. We're definitely staying out of their way as long as we can."

"We could take them," Sasuke says.

"We don't know that for sure. I'd rather not risk fighting them before the third test. Should we be forced to fight them before that, we need to eliminate Kankuro and Temari first before we deal with Gaara. Naruto's job will be Kankuro since his clones should be able to deal with puppets easily. Sasuke, Temari is most likely wind-natured, so you're best equipped to handle her with your fire jutsu. I'll keep Gaara of your backs until you are done and then we'll fight him together."

I point to the next three sheets. "These are the three that spied on us last week. They're from Hidden Sound, some new hidden village that no one seems to know anything about. They're also the only team their village sent. I don't know about you, but I find the fact that they picked us of all people to spy on when there are no bad relations between our villages somewhat suspicious."

"You said they might have been spying on the Sand Nin."

I give him a look. "We're Team Seven. When isn't trouble about us? Anyway, we don't know what abilities their body modifications grant them. If we fight them, avoid getting close to the one with the metal arm. The other boy most likely has the ability to expel something from the canals in his arms, so keep moving when you engage him. I don't think we need to worry too much about the girl. She uses senbon and we all know how to deal with that..."

Sasuke snorts. I give him a wry grin and spread out the next three sheets. "Team Nine, also known as Team Gai. Jounin sensei is Maito Gai, elite jounin and taijutsu specialist, his strength is said to rival Kakashi-sensei's. The team members are Tenten, weapons specialist and her year's Top Kunoichi, Rock Lee, taijutsu specialist, and Hyuuga Neji, genius of the Hyuuga Clan. They're a heavy assault team and have been genin for a year."

Neji is actually the boy I saw at the Hyuuga Compound, the one that glared at Hinata.

Sasuke pulls his profile toward him and studies it. "Genius?"

"And from what I hear, arrogant, antisocial and overconfident. Gee, that sounds familiar..."

He jabs me in the shoulder and I poke his ribs in retaliation.

"Other than those teams, we'll have to watch out for Rain shinobi. Relations between our villages are somewhat bad, so they might specifically target Konoha ninja. Though let's face it, we'll be targeted in any case. Not only are we rookies, but you are Konoha's genius Uchiha and Naruto offends everyone simply by wearing orange. And that's when he isn't talking..."

"Did you inform Naruto of all this, too?" Sasuke gestures to all the papers.

"Yeah. Not sure how much he'll remember, though. I also told him not to trust anyone other than Teams Eight and Ten, no matter how nice they seem."

"Good call. And good work."

I smile. "Thanks, Sasuke."

"Was that all?"

My smile fades. "No. There's something else I'm here for."
Are you sure? His eyes ask me.

I nod.

He squeezes his eyes shut, and when he opens them, they are sharingan red. My mouth goes dry and I freeze.

Red eyes.

They don't look like Sasuke's eyes any more. I don't know how to read these.

Sasuke blinks again and his eyes are back to normal. We can stop.

"No," I whisper, swallowing. "Do it again."

He complies, and I lean closer to him, until all I can see is his eyes that I stare into for what seems like hours. Until I find him behind all that glowing red.

Don't fear me.

I don't.

And to prove that, I punch him. Of course, he saw it coming with his new eyes and his hand snaps up to grab my wrist. He smirks.

"You are slow, Ri."

"Cheater."

Jealous?

"You can let go of my hand now," I inform him. He blinks, then drops my hand as if it's on fire. I raise an eyebrow at his weird behaviour, but I decide not to ask. I doubt I'd get an answer anyway.

"I should head home now," I say. "We've got a long day tomorrow."

"Hn."

"See you tomorrow. Good night, Sasuke."

I arrive at home.

"There you are," Mom says. "I wanted to give you something for the exams."

She holds a longish thing wrapped in purple cloth out to me. I take it and unwrap it.

I suck in a sharp breath.

It's a sword. Not only that, it's the exact length and shape of my water sword. I draw it and swing it around, mesmerised by the sound it makes as it cuts through the air.

It's absolutely perfect.

"Is it really for me?" I ask, disbelieving that such a beautiful weapon could really be mine.
"Yes. It'll be a good alternative for your water sword if you are out of chakra. You should also be able to channel chakra through it. Do you like it?"

"Like it?" I ask, still disbelieving. "I love it. It's perfect!" I sheathe the sword and throw my arms around mom. "Thank you, thank you, thank you!" I whisper.

She hugs me back. "Make me proud, daughter."

I move back and smile at her, eyes burning a little. "I will, Mom."

I sit at my desk, going through my notes one last time. The door opens and dad comes in.

"Nervous, Riko-chan?"

"Could be worse. At least I'm prepared," I answer, nodding to my right.

"I can see that," he says, looking at the small mountain of storage scrolls lying there. "Can you even carry all these?"

"Sure. In another storage scroll," I deadpan.

He shakes his head at me. "Troublesome brat. Just don't put explosive tags in a storage scroll, that never ends well."

"I know, Dad. Any other advice?"

"Don't lose your head."

I wonder if he means that figuratively or literally. Both, I guess.

"I'll do my best."

"Don't worry. I have full faith in you." He ruffles my hair. "Now your brother, on the other hand..."

I chuckle. "Shika will be fine. He's trained hard since Wave, and so have Ino and Chouji. And we'll watch out for each other."

Dad leans down and hugs me. I bury my face in his shoulder and breathe in his familiar scent.

"Be careful, Riko-chan. Come back home."

"Yeah," I whisper. "I promise I will."

The next day, I meet Naruto and Sasuke outside the Academy. Shikamaru and his team should already be inside.

"Hey! Ri-chan!" Naruto shouts and waves at me wildly. Sasuke gives me a nod. "Whoa, Ri-chan! What's with the new outfit? You look pretty!"

I'm wearing a grass green battle kimono, much like the one I wore to the Hyuuga Compound. It's got lots and lots of hidden bags and pockets, perfect for hiding scrolls and weapons. The long and wide sleeves hide the multitude of filled weapon holsters and storage seals strapped to my arms. The kimono also hides the mesh armour covering my upper body.
Of course, I still wear the obligatory kunai pouch strapped to my thigh, over my dark brown shorts, but that's just to fool enemies. There are also bandages wrapped around my lower legs, hiding even more storage seals.

"The old one didn't have enough room." I grin. "Here." I hold out two envelopes. "I made some explosive tags for you guys."

"Awesome!" Naruto cheers. "Explosive tags!"

"And don't use them for anything other than emergencies. That means no blowing up trees and no using them for fishing, Ruto. And they're not fireworks, either. Understood?"

He gives me a look. "I know that, Ri-chan! I'm not a kid anymore! I was nine when the fireworks thing happened!"

"That was seven months ago. You were eleven."

"And I've gotten lots more mature since then!"

"You blew up that river two weeks before graduation."

"That was ages ago!"


"Stop wasting time, you idiots," Sasuke grumbles. "Let's get inside."

**Two days earlier:**

**Hinata**

She walks toward the training ground where she knows Team Four trains. Her hands feel sweaty and her heart pounds too hard at the thought of having to talk to them, of all their eyes looking at her, but Riko-san is trusting her to do this and she doesn't want to disappoint her. She, along with Kurenai-sensei and her team, is one of the few people that don't judge her for being shy and insecure.

She might even be a friend.

Hinata supposes she admires Riko a little, because she is brave enough to do all those things that she herself never dares to do. Riko befriended Naruto-kun, the person she admires the most. She stood up to her father, blatantly told him to mind his manners, even.

So she'll do her best to convince Team Four to join the Rookie Alliance, as Kiba-kun named it. Just to be a little more like Riko-san and Naruto-kun.

Team Four looks up at her approach. Their sensei stares at her out of eyes with dark circles around them.

All of them stare at her. Hinata's heart beats in her throat, and she can't seem to speak.

The jounin suddenly lifts his hand and gives a dry cough, and Hinata instantly worries about his health. The man with his pasty skin and sunken eyes looks as though he should be resting.

The cough seems to shake up Team Four from their stupor.
"What is it, Hinata?" Sakura-san asks, rather forcefully. "We are training."

Hinata tries not to flinch, she really does. She just can't help it sometimes.

"Ano..." she starts hesitatingly, despising her shaky, trembling voice. "O-Our team and Riko-san's team-"

At the mention of Riko-san, Tachibana Fumio slumps, a picture of depression. Ota Eiji, a boy with light brown hair and hazel eyes, rolls those same eyes at him disdainfully.

"Ohh, what about Sasuke-kun's team?" Sakura-san asks eagerly, jumping up and staring at Hinata with a disconcerting shine to her beautiful green eyes.

"U-uhm" Hinata stutters, taking a small step backwards at Sakura's forceful behaviour. "o-our t-teams-"

She stops talking, takes a deep breath and tries to calm her nerves. She is so, so scared they will laugh at her. But Riko-san and Naruto-kun would never falter, they would not be deterred by nerves. So just this once, just for a little, she will pretend to be as strong as them.

"We wanted to ask if you would like to work together with us, for the chunin exams," Hinata says, only a minor tremor in her voice, and she is sure only the jounin hears.

"No," Ota Eiji growls at her. "We're strong enough. We don't need you spoiled clan brat's help!"

Hinata falters, her forced confidence shattered.

"Eiji!" Sakura screeches at him. "Don't talk about Sasuke-kun like that!"

She turns back to Hinata and gives her a bright smile. "We'd love to help Sasuke-kun!"

Hinata is a little scared of her now. "Ano..." she says, voice trembling. "I-It's to help e-everyone, T-team Ten and my own team, too."

"Oh," Sakura says, frowning. "Well, I'll help Sasuke-kun, but everyone else... I mean, you are alright, I guess, but I'd rather not be around Shino with his bugs, and Ino-Pig is so annoying lately, always bragging about her mission with Sasuke-kun, can you believe it? And don't even get me started on Naruto-baka, he's such a loser!..."

Sakura continues her speech, but Hinata has stopped listening. An entirely new feeling has taken hold of her when Sakura started insulting her loved ones. She feels... protective. Of Shino-kun, of Ino-san, who she doesn't know very well, and of Naruto-kun. Of all those part of the Rookie Alliance.

She always had to be protected and sheltered. She is tired of it.

There isn't a trace of a tremor in her voice when she cuts into Sakura's tirade. "You have said enough, Sakura-san. I do not believe your team should be a part of the alliance anymore. I wish you well for the exams."

And with that, she leaps away, not seeing the displeased expression Gekkou Hayate levels on his wide-eyed genin.
We enter the Academy, Sasuke in the lead and Naruto and I flanking him. Uchiha-sama and his loyal followers...

Let's not tell Naruto that that's what we look like.

We walk along the familiar hallways among other Chunin contenders, and I immediately notice the Genjutsu cast upon the area. How anyone can not notice that we are in the second floor instead of the third is beyond me.

Naruto doesn't count.

In front of us, a small crowd has formed before the fake room 301. Some sort of confrontation is going on there.

"Hah! You plan to take the Chunin exams with that? You should quit now!" someone says as we approach, and there's the sound of someone hitting the floor.

"Please, let us through!" a girl's voice begs. There's another hitting sound.

I'd hit them too if they were stupid enough to fall for that Genjutsu.

The crowd mutters statements like 'horrible' and 'she's just a girl'. I inwardly shake my head. It really is better if those people get weeded out now.

"What did you say? Listen, this is our kindness. This exam isn't easy. We failed it three times, we've seen people go crazy or die in there."

Aha. They're already testing us before we even reach the examination room.

"And Chunin are supposed to lead missions. The lives of your comrades will be in your hands. Yet, kids like you think you can pass."

Those guys couldn't be more obvious if they tried.

We're now close enough to see what's going on. There are two boys blocking the door to the fake Room 301, and both look distantly familiar, though I can't put my finger on it. On the ground before them, a boy in a green spandex suit sits on his rear, and a brown-haired girl wearing a pink top crouches next to him. Both have bruises on their faces. Next to them, Hyuuga Neji stands.

Team Nine. Apparently they want to be underestimated. In theory, this isn't a bad idea, but in practice, they'll just be painting targets on their backs. Well, that's their problem.

We walk through the crowd.

"Ruto," I whisper. "Play along, okay?"

Naruto wouldn't have noticed the Genjutsu, and with so many people around us, neither Sasuke nor I can tell him.

"Sure, Ri-chan!" Naruto grins back at me, his complete trust in me shining through his eyes.

"Oi, you three! Where do you think you are going!" One of the guys guarding the fake exam room
shouts. "The chunin exam takes place in this room!"

"Oh, we aren't here for the exams!" I answer quickly, before Sasuke can give anything away. I aim a disarming smile at the two. "We're here for the trapping skill evaluation in Room 413."

"That's right, dattebayo!" Naruto declares, a mischievous glint in his eyes. "We're Team Seven, and we're the best trappers ever! 'specially the bastard!"

I have to give it to Naruto, he's a great actor. And making everyone believe that Sasuke is the best trapper out of all of us is just ingenious. Misdirection at its best.

The two boys give us an amused knowing look. "Ah, well, go on then! Good luck!"

"Thanks!" I chirp back. "You too!"

The three of us turn to walk away. In a blur of green, the boy wearing green spandex – Rock Lee - flashes in front of us. His injuries are gone.

*Fast!* I realise.

"Halt!" he announces. "What is your name?" he asks Sasuke, completely ignoring Naruto and me.

"You're supposed to identify yourself before you ask that," Sasuke states in that condescending voice he normally uses to rile Naruto up.

"You're a rookie, right?" an equally condescending voice asks from behind us. Sasuke and I shift our stances casually so we can see both Rock Lee and Hyuuga Neji. Naruto just whirls around to face Neji, looking aggravated about something. He probably feels ignored. I share the sentiment, but I'm used to it by now. It will be so much fun to show them how wrong they are later.

Behind Neji, the brown-haired girl – Tenten – stands, gaze trained on Sasuke as well.

I'd hate to be in Sasuke's skin right now. All of Team Nine is glaring at him for some reason.

"I am under no obligation to tell you," Sasuke states. "Dobe, Ri, let's go." He grabs our arms and drags us after him as he walks away from those three.

"Stop dragging me, bastard!" Naruto growls. "Dammit, why is it always about you?"

"Never mind that. Sasuke, what did you do to them?" I ask. "They seemed completely fixated on you. The girl didn't even fangirl."

Sasuke lets go of our arms and shrugs. "Don't know. Does it matter?"

"Guess we're about to find out," I answer, turning around. Glaring down at us from a balcony behind us is Team Nine, led by Hyuuga Neji.

"Uchiha Sasuke. Did you think you could fool us?" he asks, glaring at us coldly.

*Okay. Weird. What's he talking about?*

"Uchiha, blah blah blah. Why is it always about him?" Naruto grumbles quietly.

"Hyuuga Neji," Sasuke states. "Your problem is?"

"So you continue to play dumb," Neji asserts. "As if you don't know what I speak of."
Sasuke is currently trying very hard to hide his confusion, but the almost unnoticeable tick in his right eyebrow gives him away. But someone who doesn't know him wouldn't notice that.

"Uchiha Sasuke!" Rock Lee shouts, jumping over the balustrade and falling into a fighting stance. "My name is Rock Lee! I challenge you to a fight, right here and now! I must redeem myself in the name of youth!"

I'd laugh myself silly at Sasuke's 'What the fuck' – face if I weren't sharing the sentiment.

"OI!" Naruto shouts. "What the hell is your problem with Sasuke!"

Tenten steps forward, and from the looks of it, she is spitting mad. "What our problem is? WHAT OUR PROBLEM IS? Two months ago, we were given a mission. Do you know what that mission was? Do you? Guess, please," she hisses.

We give her blank looks. "Catch Tora-chan?" I guess.

"We had to clean your fucking mess in Training Ground Three, Uchiha!" she shouts. "Do you know what we went through? My shirt got burned! Neji's hair was ruined! Lee was dyed pink! Gai-sensei glittered orange! And it was all your fault! We failed our mission because of you, Uchiha Sasuke! So we, Team Nine, challenge you!"

We all stare at her.

So that's what happened to those traps... I did wonder about that.

I try to imagine Neji with bad hair. Then I try to imagine a pink Lee. I barely manage to restrain a giggle. Naruto's and my gaze meet, and we start to grin.

"That was Ri," Sasuke says.

The combined incredulous glares of Team Nine are cast upon me. I give them an awkward grin, trying very, very hard not to giggle. "Uhh... it's true? I'm – pfff – sorry?"

I see the corners of Sasuke's mouth twitch and a strangled sound escapes me.

"Sasuke-san!" Lee shouts. "It is most unyouthful to blame a teammate, a little girl at that, for your crimes! I expected better of a member of the prestigious Uchiha Clan!"

"Really. You expect us to believe you?" Tenten says to me. "You just said Uchiha was your best trapper minutes ago."

Neji snorts derisively at Sasuke. "You are obviously lying. The corners of your mouth twitching give your lie away, and the girl cannot even articulate the sentence."

He points at Sasuke. "You cannot fool these eyes!" he declares.

That's it. The three of us burst out laughing. Naruto howls with laughter, falling down and rolling on the floor. Sasuke bends over, holding his stomach and wheezing. I find myself giggling so hard, I can hardly breathe, and tears gather in the corners of my eyes.

"Stop laughing at us!" Tenten shouts. I manage to take a deep breath and wipe the tears from my eyes, trying to control my giggles, but the instant I see Neji's pissed expression, I crack up again.

"Don't look down on us!" Lee yells, sounding a little helpless.
"Sorry!" I gasp out. "But..." a new round of giggles shakes me.

After another minute, Sasuke manages to right himself, putting on his arrogant smirk. Naruto manages to sit up, still grinning like mad. I take a deep breath.

All three of them glare at us, murder in their eyes.

"You will pay," Neji promises darkly.

I point at him. "You cannot fool these eyes!" I shout, and we crack up again.

"Cannot... fool... eyes!" Naruto gasps out.

"That's it!" Tenten shouts, pulling out kunai and throwing them at us with deadly precision.

Thank God for insane moms and their senbon training. We deflect the projectiles easily.

Lee jumps into motion. "Konoha senp- ack!" he yells as a tiny windmill pins him to the wall.

"That's enough, team!" a deep voice shouts.

I stare. A turtle said that.

A turtle.

"Tenten, you must never lose your temper. Lee, a shinobi must never reveal his techniques unless it's necessary. Neji, you should have stopped your teammates. Are you three prepared to face your punishment?"

"Hey," Naruto whispers. "That's a turtle, right?"

"It certainly looks like one," I whisper back.

"Can turtles become ninja senseis?"

"I don't know. Normally, I'd say no, but this day has been so weird already, I wouldn't be surprised."

A poof of smoke interrupts our conversation. A man appears on top of the turtle, doing the most ridiculous pose I have ever seen. He looks the most ridiculous, too. Like an older version of Rock Lee, minus the puppy-like eyes. "You guys are in the springtime of Youth!" he shouts.

I think I need brain-soap.

"Okay guys," I mutter. "Here's the plan. We'll take small steps backwards without taking our eyes of them, and when we reach the corner, we run like hell. Agreed?"

"Agreed," the boys mutter back and we start inching backwards.

"Lee!" the man who must be Maito Gai yells.

"Yes, Gai-sensei!" Lee answers.

"You fool!" Gai shouts and punches him, a pained expression on his face.

Our jaws drop.

"You are... you are..." Gai says, kneeling on the floor.
"Sensei..." Lee answers.

"Lee!" Big, fat tears start running down Gai's face. A sunset background forms behind him. I hastily bring my hands together and yell "Kai!", but nothing happens.

*What the hell?!*

"Sensei... I... I..." Lee sobs, tears now running down his face, too. I try to disrupt the genjutsu, *but it isn't working!*

"That's enough, Lee, you don't need to say any more!" Gai says.

"Gai-sensei!" Lee shouts, and the two fall into each other's arms. Behind them, waves crash.

*I did not need to see that.*

"Yes! This is what Youth is all about," Gai declares. Behind him, the turtle is crying, too.

"Screw it, let's run!" I whisper.

"But Ri-chan, that's some good stuff over there!" Naruto says, pointing at the hugging green people.

"Hell. No," I say.

Suddenly I feel an intense look on me.

*Shit. He's looking at us.*

"Hello you three!" Gai greets us. "How is Kakashi-sensei doing?"

"Eh? You know Kakashi-sensei?" Naruto asks.

*I told you about Gai yesterday, Ruto... you're hopeless.*

"Know him?" Gai rubs his chin. "Hehe..."

And he's gone.

"People refer to us as Eternal Rivals..." his voice says from behind us. I've turned around and thrown my senbon before I can even think about it. He catches the senbon out of the air.

"50 wins, 49 losses..." he continues, ignoring the fact that I just threw weapons at him. "I'm stronger than Kakashi."

Naruto and Sasuke stare at Gai wide-eyed and just a little bit scared.

"See? Gai-sensei is incredible!" Lee says. Tenten and Neji look at us smugly.

*That just won't do.*

"Did you really glitter orange?" I ask Gai innocently.

Silence. Then Naruto lets out a snicker. Sasuke smirks. I grin.

"Well, it was nice meeting ya," I say, dragging my teammates with me as I turn to leave. I'm so not sticking around for more weirdness. We've fulfilled our team's quota for the coming month. "We accept your challenge, by the way." I throw over my shoulder at Team Nine.
"As if it will be a challenge, little girl," Hyuuga Neji sneers.

"Now, Neji-" Gai starts.

"I am Nara Riko, Hyuuga," I state. His eyes widen.

I doubt there are any Hyuuga in Konoha that haven't heard of me.

"May the better team win."

"Why did Hyuuga Neji know your name?" Sasuke asks as we walk along the hallway to Room 301.

"Because I told Hyuuga Hiashi to mind his manners," I answer.

He stops abruptly and stares at me incredulously. I stop as well and raise an eyebrow at him. **Problem, Sasuke?**

**What the hell did you do this time?**

Naruto's eyes shift back and forth between us. "Who's Hyuuga Hiashi, Ri-chan?" he asks.

"Head of the Hyuuga Clan. Complete asshole, if you ask me," I answer. "I have no idea how someone like him can have two awesome daughters like Hinata and Hanabi."

"Uhh... Ri-chan, why did you tell him to behave? Wait, did he insult you?" Naruto asks. "Because if he did, I'll-"

"Don't worry, I handled it," I say smugly. I start moving again, and Naruto and Sasuke follow. "But thanks for the offer."

We walk in silence for a minute.

"Oi, bastard, you laughed!" Naruto suddenly realises.

Sasuke doesn't answer.

"Like, really laughed, dattebayo! You can laugh!" Naruto yells, pointing at him.

"Hn," Sasuke replies, levelling a less than impressed stare at Naruto.

"No way! Do it again, bastard!" Naruto yells. Then he grins evilly. "You cannot fool these eyes!"

I start giggling again, and Sasuke's lips twitch.

"Hah! I saw it!" Naruto shouts.

"Ruto, stop it," I say.

He gives me an innocent look.

"Don't even try. Your eyes cannot fool me!" I proclaim, and a new round of laughter shakes us. Though Sasuke only smirks this time.

"Maa, aren't my cute little students in good spirits today?" Kakashi asks as we finally arrive in front of Room 301. "So you all chose to compete."
"We're a team," I say, shrugging.

"And you can only compete in groups of three, so it's a good thing all of you are here," Kakashi says.

"Che. We already knew that, Kakashi-sensei!" Naruto says. Sasuke and I smirk.

Kakashi shakes his head at us. "You guys are no fun."

He fixes each of us with a serious look. "Riko. Naruto. Sasuke. Well done. I'm proud of the three of you. You're my team." He steps aside to let us enter the door. "Now go!"

"Yeah!" Naruto shouts, pumping his fist into the air. "Let's go!"

He pushes the door open and runs inside, Sasuke and I following him. In the doorway, I turn around one last time. "Kakashi-sensei?"

"Hmm?"

"You are a pretty good teacher, too. I'm glad to be on your team," I tell him earnestly.

His eye widens, then it curves into his eye-smile. I smile back.

"Here. Take this," he says and holds out Icha Icha Paradise to me. "As a good luck charm."

I beam at him and activate one of the storage seals hidden in my belt and pull out my own copy. "Take care of this for me, then," I say.

He chuckles and we swap books. "Never change, Riko-chan. Now go, your team is waiting."

"See you later, sensei. Oh, and if you see Gai-sensei, do me a favour and ask him about orange glitter, alright?"

I walk into Room 301.

Whoa. I knew there were a lot of competitors... but to see all of them assembled is another thing entirely.

Twenty-nine teams from Konoha.

Ten from Suna.

Seven from Ame.

Two from Kusa and Taki each.

One from Oto.

And all of them glaring at us. I gulp nervously.

"Sasuke-kun, you're late!" a familiar voice squeals, and Ino jumps on Sasuke's back and hugs him from behind. "I've been waiting for you!" she sings into his ear.

I grin at Sasuke's irritated expression. "It's good to see you, Ino-chan!" I tell her, like I haven't been seeing her all week.
The plan is to keep the alliance secret for as long as possible.

"You too, Riko-chan!" she tells me happily, still hanging off Sasuke's back.

"Get away from Sasuke-kun! You pig!" another familiar but less welcome voice yells.

"Why, if it isn't Sakura... big ugly forehead, as usual," Ino replies.

"What did you say?!" Sakura shouts.

"So you three are taking this troublesome exam, too," Shika drawls. Next to him, Chouji munches on some chips. My lips pull themselves into a smile at the sight of them.

"Hey, it's the idiot trio!" Naruto says, grinning.

"Don't call us that. How annoying."

"Nara-chan!" a voice shouts.

*Oh bugger.* It's Fumio, running towards us and waving wildly at me.

"Man, there you are. I was a little worried when you took off like that the other day, but it was obviously an emergency. I hope everything is alright? Hey, it's so cool that we're taking the exams together, wouldn't it be great if the two of us became chunin?" he beams at me.

"Sakura. Fumio. Come over here," a cold voice orders. Ota Eiji, the third member of Team Four, glares at us. "We aren't here to play."

O-kaaay. Someone is cranky, I think as Fumio and Sakura slink off with muttered protests.

Well, I can forgive him if he gets Fumio off my back.

"Found you!" Kiba says as he approaches, Shino and Hinata flanking him. "So everyone made it here!" Akamaru barks at us from his place on Kiba's head.

"H-hello," Hinata says quietly, blushing slightly when she looks at Naruto.

"What? So you three are competing, too. Troublesome..." Shikamaru gripes.

"So all twelve rookies are taking the exam. I wonder how far we will get... eh, Sasuke-kun?" Kiba says in a challenging tone.

"You seem to be confident, Kiba," Sasuke answers arrogantly.

"We trained like hell. We won't lose to you, Sasuke," Kiba replies confidently.

"Shut up!" Naruto yells, pointing at him. "Sasuke might, but I won't lose to you!"

"Sorry, Naruto-kun," Hinata interjects shyly, pushing the tips of her forefingers together. "I'm sure Kiba-kun didn't mean it that way."

"Huh?" Naruto asks. Hinata looks away shyly, blushing even more.

Aww. *Hinata has a crush on Naruto? That's so sweet."

"Hey, you guys," an unknown voice calls out and I tense. "You should be more quiet."
I'd estimate the approaching boy to be about seventeen years old, but he could be older. It's hard to tell. He wears a Konoha hitae-ate around his forehead and round glasses. His hair is ash grey and worn in a ponytail. All in all, a friendly, harmless appearance.

_There is no such thing as a harmless shinobi._

"You're all fooling around like school girls... this isn't a field-trip, you know?" he continues.

**Who is he?**

"Who do you think you are?" Ino says challengingly with just the right touch of indignation.

"I'm Yakushi Kabuto." _Never heard of him. I don't like that._ "Look around you..."

I don't take my eyes off him. Something tells me he is a larger threat than the glaring people around us. And I have learned to trust my instincts.

"Those behind you are from Hidden Rain. They have short tempers. Everyone is nervous about the exam, so quiet down before you cause a scene," Kabuto explains. "Well, I can't blame you... you are just clueless rookies after all. You remind me of how I used to be."

_Such an obvious attempt to ingratiate himself into our group._

I exchange a glance with Shikamaru. He gives a slight shake of his head. I incline my head almost unnoticeably.

We'll try to get as much information out of him as we can.

"So, you have taken this exam before?" I ask in my best harmless voice that should tip off anyone who knows me that I have problem with this guy.

Kabuto scratches the back of his head sheepishly. "Ah, it's my seventh time. The chunin exam takes place twice a year, so it's my fourth year."

_Fake, fake, fake._

"So, you know a lot about this exam?" I ask, making my eyes as big and innocent as I can.

"Yeah," Kabuto says.

"So you must be an expert, Kabuto-san!" Naruto grins.

"But he hasn't passed..." Shika remarks.

"Ahaha, yeah that's true," Kabuto says, scratching the back of his head again. "But, I'll share some info with you cute rookies. With these ninja info cards."

He pulls out a stack of cards.

_He definitely wants something from us. But what?_

"Ninja info cards?" Ino asks.

"In simple terms, they're cards that have information burned into them using my chakra." Kabuto kneels on the floor, placing the cards in front of him. "I've collected information on this exam for the past four years. There's about two hundred cards in total."
"That's quite a lot... I don't like this."

"Do you have information on individuals?" I ask.

"Yes. Who do you want to know about?"

I think for a moment. "Sabaku no Gaara."

*Let's see how much information you could get on a foreigner that's taking the exam for the first time.*

"Oh, you know the name! This should be easy then." Kabuto pulls out a card with a completely unnecessary dramatic gesture and places a finger on it. A moment later, a profile complete with pictures and diagrams appears on it. "Sabaku no Gaara. Mission experience, eight C-ranks and... amazing! He did one B-rank mission as a genin! He's taking the exam for the first time, so I don't have any more info on him. But... it seems he has returned from all of his missions unharmed."

*He's kidding, right? How the hell did he access mission and medical records of a foreign ninja, one of the kazekage's children no less?*

"He did a B-rank and was unharmed?" Shika asks incredulously.

Never mind that. If Kabuto is willing to part with that much information to impress us...

"Can you tell us about the Hidden Sound?" I ask. "They're fairly new, right?"

"Otogakure is the village of a small country that was just made recently, so I don't know much about them. They're rather obscure."

*Bullshit. After what you could tell us about Gaara, there is no way that's all you know about Sound. You are hiding something.*

I exchange another look with Shika.

"Thanks for your help, Kabuto-san." I smile at him earnestly. "I really hope you have more luck with this exam."

"Ahh, thank you," He smiles his harmless smile back at me. "I have high hopes this year."

I wonder if he notices that my smile is just as fake as his.

Kabuto suddenly looks up at the same time I notice a disturbance. He jumps back and two kunai bury themselves in the ground where he just stood. While he is still moving backwards, a genin with bandages covering most of his head wearing a straw raincoat appears before him and swings a metal arm at him.

*Metal arm. One of the Sound Nin...*

Kabuto manages to dodge with more speed than his previous evasion indicated he was capable of. The swing misses him and he looks pleased with himself, but a moment later his glasses shatter.

"What's going on?" Sasuke mutters. "He dodged that."

Kabuto suddenly falls to his knees and throws up.

*I see. Sound, huh?*
"I'll explain later," I murmur back.

"Kabuto!" Naruto shouts and hurries to Kabuto's side. "Are you alright?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," Kabuto rasps back.

_I bet you are._

The three sound shinobi glare down at Kabuto haughtily. "You're not as good as I thought for a veteran who took the exam four years running." The one with the metal arm says condescendingly.

**Kinuta Dosu. Expels sound waves through the device on his arm.**

"Write this down on your cards: 'The three Hidden Sound shinobi: Definite future chunin.'" the boy with the spiky hair orders arrogantly.

**Abumi Zaku. Arrogant and overconfident. Tubes inserted into his arms.**

I step in front of Kabuto and Naruto. Hidden in my wide sleeves, my hands are clutching senbon. As much as I dislike Kabuto, he's still a Konoha ninja and I'm not about to let him be attacked by these guys.

From the corner of my eyes, I notice Shika's shadow flicker and Sasuke shift his stance casually. Chouji puts his chips away and Ino reaches into her pocket while Shino pulls his hands out of his. Akamaru growls. Hinata straightens.

Suddenly, a large cloud of smoke erupts to our right. Some people scream, others pull out weapons. I merely shift my stance so I can keep my eyes on both the Sound Nin and the new threat.

"Quiet down! You worthless bastards!" a voice shouts.

The smoke dissipates and reveals a large man wearing a long dark cloak and a bandanna style hitae-ate. Two long, thin scars mar his face. He stands in front of a group of about thirty shinobi in grey uniforms. Two of them greatly resemble the ones blocking the fake examination room a while ago.

_Heh. So it really was a test._

"Sorry to keep you waiting," the man says unapologetically. "I am the examiner of the first test of the Chunin Selection Exams, Morino Ibiki."

"Turn in you applications, draw a number tag and sit where the number tell you to. Then we will pass out the papers for the written exam," Morino Ibiki says after giving a warning to the Sound Nin.

"Papers...? Written...?" Naruto mutters uncomprehendingly. "WHAT?! A Paper test?!"

I lay a hand on his shoulder. "Don't worry. It'll be fine. Trust me, Ruto," I whisper.

"But, Ri-chan..." he protests.

I smile at him. "Trust me."

He stares at me helplessly some more, then he gives a shaky nod.

Naruto has never been good with written tests. But then, knowing what I do about Morino Ibiki, I heavily doubt this test will be that simple.
I end up seated somewhere in the middle of the room with an unknown genin from Taki to my left and Shino to my right. Neji Hyuuga sits behind me. We observe the people around us.

"Shino," I mumble. He gives the slightest inclination of his head. "Please destroy Kabuto's info cards."

He gives a slight nod again and a moment later, I see a few tiny bugs crawl out of his sleeves.

Ibiki clicks a piece of chalk against the blackboard too get our attention. "This first exam has a few important rules. I will not answer any questions, so listen carefully. You start off with ten points in the beginning. The test is made up of ten questions and each one is worth one point. If you miss one question, a point will be subtracted from your initial ten."

Sounds easy enough. There has got to be a catch though.

"Second rule. This is a team test. Whether or not you pass will be determined by the overall score of your teammates."

Ah. There it is.

Protests sound through the room.

"Shut up! You don't have the right to question me! There is a reason for this. Be quiet and listen."

Oh? How intriguing.

I like this test already. Dealing with head games is something I have become good at.

"The third rule is that during the exam, anyone caught cheating will have deducted two points for every attempt. So there will be some who will lose all their points during the exam and be asked to leave."

I beam at Ibiki. We are being tested on cheating! That is so awesome!

"We'll have our eyes on you, guys..." one of Ibiki's helpers drawls, letting out a tiny bit of Killing Intent. I hear several people gulp.

Ibiki continues. "Those trying to cheat without thinking carefully will only hurt themselves. You are all trying to become chunin. If you are ninja, act like it."

Careful there. Any more hints and it will be too obvious.

"Also, if anyone in a team gets a zero, everyone in that team will fail."

I see Naruto flinch a few rows in front of me.

Don't worry, Ruto. We got this.

"The last question will be given forty-five minutes after the test begins."

So they test our spying skills first, and the last question is another test of some kind. I'm almost willing to bet that we could get through this without writing down a single answer.

That would be really boring though. Plus Naruto might do something stupid.
"You have one hour for the exam," Ibiki announces. "Begin!"

Everyone hastily turns over the papers and starts reading feverishly. With one exception.

Ibiki gives me an intimidating glare. I smile at him and give him a thumbs up. He blinks. I wink at him conspiratorially. Then I turn over my paper and start reading the questions.

Problem one is deciphering a cryptogram. I almost squeal in happiness and look up at Ibiki again to give him a beaming smile. He's still staring at me.

This is going to be *so much fun.*

At least for me. I doubt there are many people here who could solve even one of the problems. There must be some plants among the contenders so they have someone to cheat off of.

I smirk and start writing down my answers using the code from question one. I sure as hell am not going to have someone – Neji - copying my answers. I finish within twenty minutes, turn over my test and lean back in my seat. When Ibiki looks at me again, I give him another thumbs up. He looks rather disconcerted at this point.

Now for the real fun... I almost giggle manically.

I flick my wrists a little so that my sleeves fall over my hands as I join them together to form the Ram seal in plain sight of Ibiki. I focus my chakra and send it out to Naruto. I see him jerk in reaction.

He should now be seeing an illusory version of me telling him the answers to the test.

I see Naruto nod and start to write frantically.

"Guuahh!" a genin suddenly screams, jumping up as a kunai pierces into his test. "W-what is this!"

"You screwed up five times. You fail," one of Ibiki's helpers says. "Teammates of his, get out of here."

Three genin slink out of the room. And soon they are followed by others stupid enough to get caught. Some have to be dragged outside, others try arguing, but in the end, they have to leave.

Meanwhile, I sit there, thoroughly enjoying myself.

*Hmm... I feel like I should be doing more than just sit here and grin at Ibiki...*

An ingenious idea strikes. My hands start to form seals. Two seconds later, one of the ninja from Rain that glared at us earlier starts screaming in terror.

*Demonic Illusion: Hell Viewing Technique.*

"Number Sixteen: Disqualified!"

"No! I swear I-"

The Rain Nin is slammed against a wall by one of the overseers. "Listen, we make the rules. We are the elite chunin selected to oversee this exam. Now leave."

I smirk to myself. Three opponents less. I briefly entertain the thought of eliminating Team Four but dismiss it. I'm not going to sabotage ninja from my own village.
I look around for my next target.

Kankuro raises his hand. Is he volunteering?

"What is it?" one of the chunin asks.

"Bathroom," Kankuro answers sheepishly, and soon, he's escorted out of the room by a chunin whose eyes look just a little too blank to be human.

A puppet. I inwardly applaud the plan and execution of it. Kankuro might be smarter than I thought him to be after the incident with Konohamaru.

I resume my search for a suitable victim to sabotage. Hmm. Suna has a lot of contenders... let's change that.

My target is a muscular boy wearing robes and a scarf around his face. Seconds after I have formed the handseals, he starts giggling uncontrollably. The overseers have to carry him out of the room.

Hmm... maybe I overpowered that one a bit.

"Okay!" Ibiki shouts. "I will now give the tenth question!"

His eyes find me. I give him an expectant look and motion for him to go on. His eyebrow twitches almost unnoticeably.

"But before that, there is one thing I must say... there will be a special rule for the tenth question," Ibiki says in an ominous tone with a dark look that makes everyone except me tense. I merely lean back in anticipation.

This is gonna be good.

The entire atmosphere is ruined when the door screeches and Kankuro comes back in with his fake guard. I give Ibiki a commiserating look that he doesn't see because he's too intent on scaring Kankuro.

"You're lucky," Ibiki tells him with a dark chuckle. "Your little puppet show didn't go to waste."

Kankuro pales. Ibiki is awesome.

"Oh well, sit down," our examiner says. Kankuro complies.

"I will now explain... these are the rules of desperation." He lets out a subtle burst of Killing Intent.

"First you must decide whether to take this question or not."

I raise an eyebrow in interest.

"Choose? What happens if we choose not to?!" Temari shouts.

"Heh." Ibiki chuckles ominously. "If you do that, your points will be reduced to zero and you fail along with your teammates."

So I was right. I could have just left the test paper blank.

Several genin shout at Ibiki. "What does that mean?! Of course we will take the last question then!"

"And now for the other rule... If you choose to take the last question and answer incorrectly, you will be banned from ever taking the chunin exam again."
Whoa. That's kind of drastic... though that's probably the point. We have to choose between relative safety and putting our future on the line.

Kiba jumps up. "What kind of stupid rule is that! There are people here who've taken the exam before!" he yells. Akamaru barks angrily.

Ibiki laughs evilly. "You were unlucky. This year, I make the rules. But you have a way out. You can just choose not to take the risk and come back next year." He surveys us with a dark look on his face. "Now, raise your hand if you do not wish to continue."

I watch as several teams eliminate themselves. Even some foreign teams who really ought to know that Ibiki from Konoha does not have the authority to ban them from taking the exams.

I study Naruto worriedly. He's trembling... not good. Then he raises his hand.

What? Naruto is giving up?

He slams his hand down on his desk. "Screw you! I won't run! Even if I stay a genin forever, I'll become Hokage anyway! I'm not afraid!"

I breathe out in relief, shaking my head at him fondly.

That's my Ruto.

"I will ask one more time. Your life is riding on this decision. This is your last chance to quit," Ibiki tells Naruto.

"I'm not going to take back my words. That's my ninja way!" Naruto answers, not a trace of insecurity in his voice. And in that moment, I can really see the man he will be in the future. I can see the kind of Hokage he will be.

Ibiki looks around the room. "Good decision. Now for everyone still remaining..."

The sound of around eighty people gulping simultaneously echoes through the room.

"...Congratulations on passing the first test!" Ibiki grins at us.

I grin back, taking in the dumbfounded expressions of everyone still in the room.

"Wait, what?" someone asks. "What about the tenth question?"

I listen as Ibiki explains the purpose of the tenth question, of the nine questions before that, the cheating... ingenious. Simply ingenious.

I'm quite proud of myself for seeing through it.

"Information can have greater value than life at times, and in missions and battlefields..." Ibiki rips his bandanna off. "Information can determine the lives of people!"

I stare at the horrible burns and scars, the holes drilled into his skull that he just revealed. My good mood vanishes.

Torture marks. One day, that might happen to me.

I gulp, thinking of how many secrets I have. My old world, my magic, my past... Someday, someone might want to force me to reveal them.
Ibiki continues with his explanations, but I'm not really listening.

Could I withstand torture?

I look at Naruto with Hinata next to him. I turn around and look at Sasuke. At Shikamaru and Ino, at Shino next to me. At all my precious people in this room.

Yes. Yes, for them, I could.

"You have made it through the first test. I wish you guys good luck!" Ibiki finishes his speech.

"Yatta!" Naruto shouts. "Yeah! We did it!"

I shake my head at him exasperatedly, smiling. His happiness drives away my dark thoughts.

We made it.

Ibiki suddenly turns his head to his right. Something crashes through the window with the force of a small bomb. I grip my senbon as kunai bury themselves into the ceiling to...

...put up a banner? What?

"You! This is no time to be celebrating!" a voice shouts.

It's a woman with purple hair wearing a trenchcoat over a mesh outfit that leaves almost nothing to the imagination. "I am the second examiner, Mitarashi Anko!"

I kind of guessed that. The banner behind her proudly displays her name, after all.

She punches her fist in the air. "Let's go to the next exam! Follow me!"

Oh bugger. I sense trouble in the future.
After giving Ibiki a happy wave goodbye, I join the rest of my team as we follow Anko to Training Ground 44.

The Forest of Death. No matter how often I have looked at it from the outside over the past week, it never got any less intimidating. The whole place gives off an ominous feel and a subtle stench of decay. It's as if the forest itself gives off its own Killing Intent.

Ino and I asked around about this place. Some say it was made by the first Hokage and his energy still lingers in the area so that all that lives in there grows to ridiculous sizes and everything becomes more deadly. Others say that it was there before Konoha was even formed, the personal playground of some sage. Other rumours claim that a fuinjutsu accident is responsible for whatever is wrong with the place.

What everyone agrees on is that this place is dangerous.

And that's not counting the twenty-six teams that will be let loose in there.

"Welcome to the stage for the second test, Training Ground 44," Anko says in a sweet voice. "Also known as... the 'Forest of Death'!"

The group of genin stares at the giant trees in apprehension. It's impossible to look further than a few meters into the forest. Between the trees, almost tangible darkness lurks.

I really don't want to go in there. Every cell of my body is against entering.

"You will soon find out why it is called the Forest of Death..." Anko croons.

"Blah, blah," Naruto mutters. Then he yells: "You don't scare me, dattebayo!"

"Ahaha! My, you sure are spirited!" Anko smiles sweetly.

A moment later, a kunai glances off my senbon before it can cut Naruto's cheek. Another three senbon are held in my hand close to Anko's face hovering behind Naruto's shoulder.

I smile just as sweetly at her as she did to Naruto. "I'd appreciate it if you didn't play with my teammate, Anko-sensei."

"Oh my!" she says. "Now what do we have here!"

She looks at me like a cat deciding to play around with a little mouse.

I giggle slightly. "You tell me, sensei."

Naruto between us trembles.

Anko suddenly shifts her stance and holds up a kunai. I'm a moment behind holding up my senbon to the new threat.

"Here's your kunai..." a Kusa ninja wearing a straw hat says, an obnoxiously long tongue holding Anko's kunai out to her from where he appeared behind her.

My instincts scream at me to runrunrun away as far and fast as I can, away from this
man/woman/thing with the dead eyes but I have to stay and protect Naruto and I think if I even move one muscle it'll jump and kill me.

"Why, thank you!" Anko says sweetly. "But you know... don't sneak up behind me unless you want to die."

"I got excited..." the Kusa thing replies. "And your kunai cut my precious hair, so I couldn't help it..."

I should probably say something that makes me seem not scared, like 'How rude of you to not return my precious senbon to me as well,' but I'm too freaked out to talk.

*What is this? What is wrong with this ninja?*

I've seen this person before when I went spying with Hinata. He/she didn't cause this reaction in me then.

Was it hiding his/her dangerousness all along?

"Hehe, this test is going to be fun!" Anko cheers, turning her attention away from us. I see Sasuke and Shika give me a concerned look.

"Now, before we start the second test, there is something we have to take care of first." Anko pulls a stack of papers out of her trench coat. "You've got to sign these so I'm not held responsible if you die, hehe!"

Worried murmurs fill the air.

"You can sign after I explain the second test, and then each team will check in at that booth behind me."

She explains the test to us. We were right, it is about survival, but much more drastic than we expected. We assumed we would just have to survive in the forest, maybe retrieve or guard something, but the rules force us to actually fight other teams!

Each team gets either a Heaven or Earth scroll and is assigned one of the forty-four gates to enter the forest through. To pass the test, one has to get to the tower at the centre of the Training Ground with both kinds of scrolls and all their teammates alive.

And to make passing even less likely, we only have five days to accomplish this. Though a part of me wishes the time limit was even shorter so we wouldn't have to spend so much time in what is going to be hell on earth.

"A final word of advice... don't die," Anko tells us in a flat tone.

I'd really like to run away now.

We walk out of the booth with our Heaven scroll and the gate assignment we drew out of a box – we'll start from Gate 5, which sucks because I'd been hoping we'd get a gate close to the river since it would have lead us straight to the tower and in addition, I'd always have had lots of water available. Unfortunately, our gate is about as far away from the river as it could get.

"Oi Ri." Shika approaches with his team. "We got Gate 27."

"Fuck," I say.
If there is one rule about our team, it is this: Team Seven has absolutely rotten luck.

Our allies start from the exact opposite side of the forest.

"You got Gate 5, didn't you? Troublesome," Shika deduces from my expression.

"Well..." I murmur. "I suppose we could-

"Forget it. We'd never manage to meet up. It'll be crazy in there."

"I don't like this."

"Ri." Shikamaru pins me with a serious look. "We are ninja. We can take care of ourselves. It's not your job to protect us. Worry about yourself."

I swallow and nod.

"Troublesome girl. Come here." He opens his arms and I hug him tightly. "I'll meet you at the tower," he murmurs into my ear.

"Promise?"

"Promise." He lets go of me and fixes a look on Naruto and Sasuke. Something seems to pass between them and my teammates both give him a serious nod.

Must be some sort of boy code.

I hug Ino and give her a few senbon. Chouji gets a hug too and a storage scroll with food and snacks. Then we go our separate ways.

We pass Team Eight and I exchange a wave with Kiba, a smile with Hinata and a curt nod with Shino.

About them, I don't have to worry. Where Ibiki's test was perfect for me, this one is perfect for them.

We walk past Team Four. Sakura squeals some sort of good bye at Sasuke, Eiji glares at us. I hesitate for a moment. "Good luck, Fumio-san," I say.

For all his faults and annoyingness, he's still a good person. I don't want to see him hurt. At least, not too badly.

He beams at me. "Good luck, Nara-chan! Though you probably don't need it! I'll definitely meet you at the tower!"

My smile back is only half forced. "Sure. See you later."

We stand in front of the gate, Naruto bouncing with excitement and punching the air. "Yatta! I'm not going to lose to anyone, dattebayo!" he shouts. Sasuke stands slightly turned away from him as if to say: 'I don't know this guy.'

"So, what's your name?" I ask the chunin manning our gate. It's one of the two who were guarding the fake Room 301. This one has long spiky dark hair and dark eyes. A strip of bandage runs over the bridge of his nose.

"Hagane Kotetsu. You look awfully small to be in this exam," he answers.
"The name's Nara Riko," I shrug. "And I suppose I am small, but really, that's just a word that causes everyone's perception of me to become flawed."

He grins. "You're the brat that told Hyuuga Hiashi to mind his manners."

"Is there anyone that hasn't heard about that?"

"I doubt it. You were the topic of many discussions," he answers.

Ninja. With their need to know everything that's going on around them, they tend to be horrible gossips.

"So is being a chunin fun?" I switch the subject.

He snorts. "When you don't get stuck with a desk job, sure. It certainly is better than catching that cat."

What grand prospects we have.

"Any advice about the forest?"

He gives me a look of mock horror. "Are you trying to cheat by asking an examiner for help? What kind of ninja does that?"

I smirk. "I work with what I have. Besides, you were only an examiner in the first task, here you are only the person opening the gate."

He laughs. "Alright, stay away from the swamps, there's some nasty stuff in there. Don't sleep in the trees, the insects will eat you. And the pretty yellow flowers are carnivorous."

Now that was slightly more helpful then Anko's advice to not die.

"Thanks."

"You're welcome." He looks at his watch. "You ready?"

"Yatta!" Naruto shouts.

"Hn," Sasuke says, which translates to 'Of course, who do you think I am?'.

"Probably not," I admit. "Let's get this over with."

Kotetsu grins. "Good luck in there, and don't get eaten." He takes out a key and begins releasing the chains keeping the gate closed. He looks at his watch, counting the seconds.

Naruto, Sasuke and I fall into ready positions. The faster we get in there, the less are the chances of running into ambushes. And the earlier we strike, the higher are the chances that weak teams are still left for us.

"Three, two, one, go!" Kotetsu shouts and pushes the gate open and the world becomes a blur of colour and then darkness as we run into the Forest of Death.

We've been flying through the trees for about seven minutes when I lift my hand and we halt.

"Let's talk strategy," I say.
"Strategy?" Naruto asks. "Let's find some team, kick their ass and run to the tower!"

Sasuke snorts. "What do you suggest?" he asks me.

I pull a map out of a storage seal on my belt and spread it on the ground. I put it together by analysing the various accounts of people that have already been in this forest. It's probably somewhat inaccurate and there are some white areas, but the general terrain should be about right.

"We should be about here." I indicate a spot on the map. "We have to cover a distance of about ten kilometres to reach the tower. I suggest traveling through the trees here-" I trace a route on the map "and following the river from this point on. Any objections?"

Both shake their heads. "Alright, Sasuke, copy the map with your eyes. You're in charge of navigating us."

I see a brief flash of red as he studies the map with his sharingan. Then I take the map and put it away. "We'll travel in a line formation. Sasuke, you take point, Naruto, you're in the back. If we get pursued, you can send some clones back and delay the enemy. I'll be in the middle, seeing as that's the most secure and I'm still the only one with healing skills and therefore need to stay intact."

"Ne, Ri-chan, who'll take the scroll?" Naruto asks.

**Good question.**

Sasuke is the strongest fighter, but also the most obvious option. Naruto would be suspected because he is the least likely. And I would be targeted in a fight simply because I appear to be an easy opponent.

It wouldn't be a problem if our enemies simply never found out who carries it...

"The less people in our team know who carries it, the safer it is," I say. "So we'll all go to different corners of this clearing with our backs to each other, and one of my clones will hand the scroll to one of us. That way, only the one with the scroll will know for sure who has it."

"That's so smart, Ri-chan!" Naruto grins.

Naruto and Sasuke both move away from me. I take out three scrolls and lay a genjutsu on them so they look like the Heaven scrolls. I pocket one. Then I make two clones and hand each of them a fake scroll.

"You know what to do," I murmur. They nod and move swiftly over to hand the fakes to my teammates while I store the original in a storage seal drawn on the skin of my shoulder. My own fake is stored in my kunai pouch.

I'd like to see an enemy get our scroll now.

"Right, then let's move!" I say loudly when we're ready to move, and we speed through the forest again, Sasuke in the lead.

Three minutes later, Sasuke suddenly jumps back and the next moment, the branch he was supposed to land on explodes.

*An attack, already?*

A ninja flashes in front of me, kunai aimed to stab my throat. I leap back and he misses me but
immediately attacks again.

Sasuke's taijutsu is vastly superior to his, though, and so is mine. My attacker – I recognise a Suna hitae-ate – notices this soon enough and leaps back to bring distance between us.

"Futon: Repuushou!" he shouts and thrusts his hands in my direction. A blast of wind catches me and throws me off the tree. I hastily kawarimi and land in the branches above my attacker.

A little ways away from me, I see Sasuke blasting fireballs at his own opponent, and several Narutos are running around battling someone I can't see. This means I'm on my own and need to finish this quickly in case they need help - not that it currently looks like they do.

I flick my fingers at my opponent who is currently looking around for me. "Water Trick!" I whisper, and a moment later, he blinks irritatedly as the water drops fly into his eyes. It's all the opening I need. In a flash of speed, I'm in front of him, punching at pressure points and he drops to the ground paralysed.

I look to Sasuke's fight, but it looks like he's already finishing up, shuriken with wires attached to them ensnaring his opponent, so I turn in the direction of Naruto who needs no help either. His attacker stands no chance against the multitude of clones.

A few moments later, it's over. One team out of the competition and it's been less than an hour since the test started.

"Dammit!" Naruto growls. "He's got a Heaven scroll, too!"

I sigh. Of course we couldn't get lucky and get the scroll we needed right at the beginning. "Are any of you hurt?"

They answer in the negative. "Are you okay, Ri-chan?"

"Fine." I'll have some bruises from the wind jutsu slamming into me, but that's nothing considering the things Yoshino sometimes put me through. "Sasuke, take the scroll as a decoy."

"Hn," he answers and takes the scroll from Naruto.

"Heh." Naruto grins. "We kicked ass!"

"We should get out of here. Someone will have heard the commotion," I say. "Let's tie them up and haul ass."

We take a short break after an hour of moving. Traveling through the forest was relatively uneventful aside from having to take down a giant bear and skirting around an area that seemed to be infested with enormous spiders if the nets hanging between the trees were any indication. Thankfully, we didn't see any of them.

We munch on our energy bars. I hand both Naruto and Sasuke an apple from a storage scroll.

"Ri. Exactly how much equipment did you bring?" Sasuke asks, sounding faintly amused.

"Uhm..." I say, thinking. "Camping gear, food for a few weeks, medicine, scrolls, a few books, senbon, kunai, shuriken, several rolls of wire, some rope, pranking supplies, trapping stuff, a few changes of clothes for each of us, some ramen of course, blankets, an extra tent, flashlights and batteries, some girl stuff, cooking supplies, hunting and fishing gear and a rowing boat. Oh, and
some playing cards."

Naruto and Sasuke stare at me with blank looks.

"A boat," Sasuke says then. "You brought a boat."

"Well, yes. Kakashi had one with him when we went to Wave, so I thought it would be a good idea to have one available, too," I say reasonably.

Sasuke continues to stare at me.

"Ne, Ri-chan, can I have some ramen?" Naruto asks.

"That's for dinner," I tell him. "Let's try to cover some distance before we find a place to hide out for the night. I don't want to be around when the nocturnal vermin come crawling out of their holes."

"Yay, ramen!" Naruto cheers. Sasuke shakes his head at both of us.

"Let's go," he says, and we stand up.

And out of nowhere, a wall of wind slams into us, a thousand times stronger than what the Suna shinobi from earlier threw at me. So strong, the giant trees shake and chakra isn't enough to glue us to the ground.

Naruto is the first one to lose his footing, his control being the weakest.

_No! Not Naruto!_

I leap off the ground after him, flying much faster through the air than him. And as I fly past him, I kick him into the nearest tree while I get tossed through the air like a leaf, completely helpless, until I slam into the roots of another tree.

~Prey! Smells good!~ a hissing voice whispers.

_What the hell was that? I've got to get back to Nar- Holy fuck, snake!_

I leap aside as the head of a giant snake crashes into the tree I was just slammed against. I throw myself around and jump and bounce higher and higher between the trees, and then out of nowhere the snake's tail slams into me and catapults me directly into the snake's jaws. They close around me just as I finish the handseals for the Kawarimi and then I stand on a tree branch, looking at the gargantuan snake.

_Holy shit._

The snake swallows my replacement, then it lets out an inhuman snake-scream. Its head suddenly turns in my direction and I turn around and _run_. Behind me, I hear branches break under the snake's weight as it hunts after me.

~Prey! Blood, Kill, Maim!~ the voice hisses.

"Shut up!" I scream back.

~Prey shouldn't talk!~

The snake's jaws close around the branch I stood on a moment earlier.
Shit shit shit, I need a plan!

I throw myself around and the snake's jaws miss me by a hair's breadth.

Get rid of snake. Find team.

I kawarimi again and the snake bites into a log. I bounce off trees while it tries to locate me.

~Where are you, little prey?~

The snake is talking to me. This is so beyond fucked up, I don't even-

~Found you!~

And it darts after me again, much too fast to be a normal snake.

A summon?

I can't follow that train of thought as the next five minutes are spent entirely on dodging and evading and trying to not get the fuck eaten.

~Got you!~

I throw myself around in mid-air, but its fangs still rip a long gash into my leg. I land harshly on the ground and immediately start running away, paying no heed to the pain in my leg.

Please don't be poisoned...

A light reflex catches my eye and I immediately switch directions.

Water.

I pour chakra into my muscles and run as fast as I can. I'll only get this one chance.

~Prey! Kill!~

I run onto the surface of a lake.

I really hope my blood doesn't attract any oversized piranhas.

The snake crashes into the water behind me. I turn around and see it gliding towards me.

My fingers frantically form handseals. "Suiton: Suikusari no Jutsu!" I shout, slamming my hands onto the water's surface. Dozens of chains shoot up and bind the snake that's only meters away from me.

I've never had to make so many chains. I can feel the chakra drain from me at an alarming rate. I'll only be able to hold the snake for a minute, tops.

The snake screeches and thrashes and I grit my teeth trying to hold it. "Stop. Fucking. Moving!" I shout at it. It doesn't, of course.

~Kill! Maim! Blood!~ it shouts back and then I feel something shift in my head and a new chain, glowing almost entirely silver, forms out of nowhere and pierces through the snake's eye and shoots out of the other. Blood and other fluids splatter into the water.

I drop the jutsu and stare disbelievingly at the snake's corpse.
Suiton: Suikusari no Jutsu is a defensive jutsu and used to bind opponents. It was not developed for offensive uses. That just now... magic.

_No time to think about that now._

I jump towards the lake's edge. Once I am on land again, I hastily wrap my wound and start running back towards where I hope Naruto and Sasuke are. I only have to backtrack the snake's trail.

_If that was a summon... where is the summoner?_

The answer is easy. _Fighting my teammates. That wind jutsu was to separate us._

I pick up my speed.

We learned about animal summons in the Academy. Normally, ninja keep their contracts secret, but the strongest contracts are well known. Namely, the monkeys, the toads, the slugs and... the snakes.

The snake contract is held by the S-class missing-nin Orochimaru, one of the three legendary Sannin.

_But that's impossible, right? He can't be here, in the middle of the village, attacking a team of genin! The snake was just one of those overgrown beasts that live in this miserable forest._

_What would he want from us, anyway?_

_Fuck. The Kyuubi. The sharingan._

_Oh God. Please, not them, not them. Faster, faster, faster!_

My leg hurts really badly. My head pounds. It's like something broke inside me when I used magic.

Back with the Dursleys, something weird happened around me at least once a month. In Konoha, not so much. There's been nothing until my clones started behaving weird.

Is it possible that I developed some sort of mental block when I killed myself teleporting to this world? And just now, with the snake attacking, I broke through?

Or maybe that snake was poisonous after all and I'm having hallucinations.

_Stop thinking, idiot! Your team needs you! Run!_

I can feel the power rage inside me, like a thunderstorm, and if I let go, it will surely devour me and everything around me.

I bounce off a tree and it shatters. I leap to the ground and run there.

_Faster! Where are they!?_

There are the tracks the wind jutsu left.

_Almost there!_

I almost sob because the magic is thrashing inside me like a wild animal, wanting to be freed from its prison and it _hurts_hurts... If only I can reach Sasuke and Ruto, then everything will be okay, I know it, _please be okay!_

"...if you want to see me again, survive and pass this exam. Of course, my subordinates, the Sound
Trio, are on the way... Kukuku..." a hoarse voice reaches me.

"Never!"

Sasuke!

The voices come from above me and I leap up.

"Kukuku... Sasuke-kun, you will seek me for power!" the bad voice says slimily, and I can finally see them and there's my Ruto pinned to a tree why isn't he moving and the Bad Thing is stretching its neck and it has fangs and it wants my Sasuke and-

The storm inside me explodes and the world goes white.

---

**Sasuke**

The Kusa Nin's neck extends, fangs bared, and he can't move - why can't he fucking move?! – and then a flash of red is in front of him, punching the head away.

Riko.

Only she isn't Riko. Her eyes are glowing bright green, and an unnatural wind whips her hair around her face. Her expression is pure cold fury and nothing like the Ri he knows.

"Oh?" Orochimaru says, an amused tilt to his lips. His neck is back to its normal length. "So you didn't die, after all. But you should have stayed away, little girl!" he says, and his form blurs as he speeds toward Riko's form in front of him.

*No. Not her,* he thinks, but he can't move, can't step in front of her, can't even yell at her to run. *Too fucking weak.*

It happens within a split second.

Riko lifts her arms commandingly and a maelstrom of power surrounds her, whipping around her. His sharingan activates without warning, and he sees strange silvery chakra strands ripping out of her, forming a tornado of raw power around both of them. A horrible screeching sound sounds, impossibly shrill, and then the large tree branch they're both standing on disintegrates into dust as all water is drawn out of it into Riko's vortex of power. The same happens to every piece of wood around them, they are at the centre of the tornado and nothing can escape. And then Riko, held up in the air by her strange chakra just like he is, thrusts her arms out and the tornado of water and power explodes outwards and the screeching sound intensifies to an almost unbearable level until he presses his hands over his ears to try and escape it.

And then it's over. Riko's arms fall and her glowing eyes close. The power holding them both in the air fades and they fall.

Sasuke impacts the ground a split second earlier than Riko's body and he immediately hurls himself forward to catch her.

He looks around disbelievingly. Everything around them closer than thirty meters has been obliterated. He and Riko stand at the centre of a perfect circle of destruction.

The circle ends at the exact distance Naruto's unconscious form hangs off a tree.
Orochimaru is nowhere to be seen. But Sasuke can't imagine him surviving whatever just happened unscathed.

He turns his stare onto the girl into his arms. "What the hell are you, Ri?" he asks her.

Then he notices she isn't breathing. Horror courses through him and he quickly lays her down, fingers searching for her pulse.

Nothing.

"No," he whispers. He shakes his head. "No! Not you!" he yells at her, but there is no response.

He stares at her small, broken form, the sight burning itself into his sharingan. There is a sharp, stinging pain in his eyes, and suddenly the world is a thousand times clearer and he knows his sharingan just advanced another stage.

He doesn't care. It only serves to burn every detail of his Ri's lifeless body into his memory.

No.

He grabs her chin and bends down. Presses his lips against hers and breathes into her. Places his hands against her chest and pushes. Breathes into her again. Still no reaction. He repeats the action. And repeats it.

Nothing happens. He tries again and again but deep inside, he knows it's hopeless.

He's lost her. A dry sob escapes his throat.

Riko is dead. Brilliant, vexing, beautiful Ri.

No. I refuse to accept this. I am not losing her!

His right eye burns.

How can I defeat Him if I can't save even one friend?

The pressure in his eye becomes almost unbearable. Chakra, more than he has ever felt before, wells up in him and courses into it.

You are not dead! It's not real!

"Aahhrgh!" he screams in pain, his hands clutching uselessly at his face as the pain flares up even brighter, until his eye feels like it is being ripped apart and scorched from the inside. The chakra burns.

And then it's over. The eye closes. He takes his hand off his face, shakily prodding at the closed eyelid. He pulls it up and closes the other eye.

Darkness.

His right eye is blind.

No. This can't be happening. No.

Without her, there is nothing left except vengeance. But he can't defeat That Man without his eyes. He can't lose both her and vengeance.
And vengeance he will take. Itachi is now second on his list. Orochimaru will pay first.

A soft groan makes him open his intact eye hastily and stare down at the girl he kneels over.

Green eyes flutter open weakly. She stares at him, confused, tired, uncomprehending. "...S'suke?" she mumbles in a weak voice. Then she lets out a long breath and her eyes slide shut again, but she keeps breathing.

"Ri," he whispers. "Ri!" His hands shakily ghosts over the lines of her face and then settles on her throat, fingers settling on her pulse like they did so long ago, the first time he fought her. The first time he saw her. The first time she saved him.

He swallows.

She gave her life for his.

He sacrificed one eye for hers.

It's a cheap price to pay to keep her with him.

**Orochimaru**

He stands over foolish Anko who dared to attack him with his own techniques. Like a kitten attacking a cobra... he chuckles.

"A-are you here to assassinate Hokage-sama?" Anko demands, forcing the words out of her failing body. How surprising... she can still talk, even after he activated the Cursed Seal.

He frowns a little. The Cursed Seal he failed to give to Sasuke-kun. How disappointing.

The boy had been disappointing at first, barely able to stand under his Killing Intent. But then, after the Kyuubi holder fell prey to him... he licks his lips. Such vigour! Such potential! Such powerful eyes! He decided he wanted Sasuke-kun's body after all.

And then the girl had shown up. What was her name? He hadn't bothered to remember it when Kabuto informed him of Sasuke-kun's team. An insignificant place-filler, he'd been sure of it.

Such a misconception. She'd proven him wrong.

What a delightful surprise!

Such amazing power, to be able to injure even him! Wasted on a little girl, really... he licks his lips.

He'd have to alter her body a little, the small size wouldn't do. And some tests would be in order. He'd have to inform Kabuto at once. He must find out more about her.

Of course, he'd still like to have the sharingan... but there are other ways of integrating it into a body. Danzo and Kakashi are proof of this.

But it would be a pity about the Uchiha's beautiful body...

Mmm... he licks his lips again. What to do?

He looks down at Anko.

"There are two children I want."
I slowly wake up when my body is jostled. I feel so weak, it's like I am back in my hospital bed just after arriving in Konoha.

I draw in a panicked gasp when I remember what happened. There was Naruto, pinned to a tree, and Sasuke being attacked by a monster with vampire fangs and then... nothing.

What happened after that?

I try to call for Naruto and Sasuke, but my throat is parched and I only manage a wheezing sound.

"Ri!" Sasuke's voice says, but I'm incapable of moving my head. He steps in my field of vision and kneels down beside me.

I can suddenly breathe easier. He's alright.

He leans over me, his eyes full of anguish. "Ri," he whispers again.

I don't need my voice when I'm with Sasuke. What happened? Where is Naruto? Are you hurt?

"You don't remember?" he asks. Then he gives a short, unhinged sounding laugh. "You don't remember," he repeats.

What are you talking about? I ask him silently, the panic growing.

"The dobe and I are fine. How are you feeling?" he evades the question.

I give a rasping sound to indicate I could really use some water. He puts his arm around me and helps me sit up and then I'm in his arms and he has his face buried in my shoulder and I can feel him trembling against my body.

My breath hitches. Uchiha Sasuke is hugging me and if I didn't know better, I'd say he was crying, but that's not what Sasuke does, so it can't be real, can it?

I wish I could move and hug him back. I settle for relaxing against him and breathing in his scent.

Fire and thunderstorms, that's what he smells like which really doesn't make any sense, but him hugging me makes no sense either, so I'll ignore the insanity of this moment and just enjoy it.

Eventually, he moves back a little and holds a canteen of water against my lips. The first few sips are painful against my dry throat and I end up coughing up most of it, but it gets better and soon I am greedily drinking.

"What happened?" I rasp.

He tells me about Orochimaru attacking Naruto and him, how they fought him. That Naruto hasn't woken up since taking a glowing hand to the stomach, about himself binding Orochimaru with wires and burning him to what should have been a crisp.

"And the entire time, he was just playing with us," he says, full of self loathing.

"Orochimaru of the Sannin. S-rank missing nin," I mumble. "If any of us had the ability to fight him, they wouldn't be in this exam in the first place."
He looks at me. "You did."

"Excuse me?"

"You showed up and fought him."

"Wha- how- that's impossible," I say, shaking my head. "How would I even- oh shit."

I remember the magic. I remember it going out of control right before my memory cuts off.

*Remember now?* Sasuke asks me silently.

I shake my head mutely. "What did I do?"

"You obliterated everything around us except Naruto."

"Oh," I say tonelessly, because what does one answer to that?

"Your other chakra did that," Sasuke states, obviously having spent some thought on the topic.

I nod. "Out of control. I didn't know that could happen," I mumble.

*Shit. What am I going to do?* I listen into myself. Right now, I can't feel the magic, maybe I exhausted it when I did whatever I did?

We're silent for a little while, both of us mulling over our thoughts.

"There's something else, isn't there?" I ask eventually.

His hand closes around my neck and stays there, feeling my pulse. He stares at me as if he's trying to burn my face in his memory.

"Sasuke?"

"You died."

*Oh fuck.*

There is a small puff of smoke over Sasuke's face, like he's releasing a jutsu, and I stare at his face. His unhenge'd face.

"Sasuke," I whisper. "What happened to your eye?"

Because the right one is closed while the other one is open, and something is wrong, wrong, wrong.

He has his arms around me again. "Don't you ever do that again," he whispers, squeezing me so hard breathing becomes difficult.

"Sasuke, what happened to your eye?" I ask, voice shaking. I start to panic, because he's still not answering.

"Leave it," he says.

"No! What happened to your eye?!"

"Riko, leave it!" he growls. "You're alive, I'm alive, Naruto is alive. It's just an eye. Leave it."
I bury my head in his shoulder and weep.

When we have both sort of calmed down, Sasuke leans me to sit against a wall next to Naruto's unconscious form. It's gotten dark, so I can't really see where we are, but I think we are in some sort of cave. There's water somewhere, I can hear the sound of a creek. "I'll heal your eye," I say.

"I don't think you can," Sasuke answers.

"Then I'll find someone who can. I'm going to fix it, that's a promise," I hiss fiercely.

Sasuke won't say it, but it's my fault his eye is blind. He did something to make me live again and it cost him his eye. **My fault.**

He sacrificed his eye. One of his sharingan. For *me*.

"Hn."

"Just so you know."

He looks frustrated. He makes a handseal and the henge is up again. It's somehow worse than looking at his closed eye.

I don't say that though. I think he doesn't want anyone to see.

"The Sound Team is coming after me," he eventually says, stands up and moves to the cave's exit. "I'll put up some traps."

He moves differently. It's no wonder, his whole perception must be thrown off. It might take a while until he's gotten used to having only one eye.

He'll be fine, though. Kakashi is fine with only one eye, too.

"Need some pointers?" I ask.

He snorts. "I'm on a team with you and Naruto. I know about traps."


He gives a fake snort. "Over prepared, Ri?"

"We totally need all that stuff."

"You brought a boat," he deadpans moving to kneel beside me and looking for the storage seal in question.

"As I said, Kakashi has one, too. You're going to be so glad when we actually need one. I'm so totally going to say 'I told you so.' when that happens, and eventually, it *will* happen."

He activates a storage seal and Kakashi's book appears.

*Oh bugger.*

He stares at the book. Then he stares at me. Then back at the book. "Why didn't I see this coming," he mutters. I give him a crooked grin.
"If you tell anyone, I'll make Ruto give you the Ramen Talk."

He shakes his head at me and stores the book away again. Then he activates another storage seal and this time gets the right one. He takes the scroll and leaves.

As soon as he's gone, I let myself slide down the wall and curl up next to Naruto.

He looks so wrong, motionless like that. Even when he sleeps, he's always active, frowning, drooling or grinning in his sleep, occasionally muttering 'ramen' or 'Ri-chan' or 'bastard'. Or punching and kicking at the air.

Pained, I close my eyes. I'm completely helpless right now. Something is wrong with Naruto and I can't help him. Sasuke is missing one eye and must be exhausted, too.

And the team of Sound ninja is going to come after Sasuke soon.

It's morning when I wake up. Naruto is still not moving, Sasuke sits at the cave entrance, sharpening a kunai.

I groan and force myself to sit up. I fall back halfway, but the impact with the floor never happens because Sasuke is suddenly there to catch me.

"Thanks," I mutter. He frowns at me, hands me a water canteen and I drink.

I look around. Sasuke has been busy. He must have raided my storage seals while I was asleep.

There are some blankets draped under and over Naruto and me, my first-aid stuff is lined up neatly next to us and a small stash of food is there, too. The wound on my leg is neatly wrapped in bandages now.

"There's a storage seal on my left ankle, under the bandages. Can you activate it for me?" I ask, though it's not really a question.

"How many of those do you actually have?" he asks incredulously.

I shrug. "A few."

He shakes his head exasperatedly and activates the seal. It contains a small case with unlabelled pills. Clan medicines. The kind that no one outside the Nara, Yamanaka and Akimichi ever gets access to.

I grimace. This will be highly unpleasant, but I really need to recover as fast as possible. I'll just have to deal with the side effects.

"Give me the purple pill."

I swallow the pill he gives me. The effects are almost instantaneous.

Basically, the pill accelerates the refilling of chakra reserves and healing. That would be a good thing if it didn't also cause the nervous system to become extremely sensitive. This effect makes the process of refilling the chakra and healing the body very, very painful. Due to that, taking this pill is really a last resort option.

I spend the next two hours gritting my teeth and reassuring Sasuke that everything is fine and that this is the way the pill is supposed to work. Needless to say, he's pretty pissed about me taking it in my condition. Even if the pill was designed for people in my condition.
"Get some rest. You look horrible," I tell Sasuke when the worst is over. About a quarter of my chakra is refilled, enough that I could run a diagnostic jutsu over Naruto, though it didn't bring any results. I tried to get Sasuke to let me have a look at his eye, but he refused, so I focused on healing my leg. By some miracle, the snake's fangs didn't rip deep enough to reach the bone, and there is only minor damage to the muscles. It'll sting a little, but I'll be able to walk.

Sasuke hesitates.

"I'll keep watch, and I'll wake you up if we get attacked." I walk over to the cave's entrance and sit down there.

Sasuke picked a good place. The cave we're in is at the base of a rock wall. From here, I can overlook a meadow surrounded by trees. It'll be impossible for any enemy to sneak up on us.

He frowns, but he eventually grabs a blanket and lies down next to where I'm sitting.

"Sleep," I say when I notice he isn't relaxing. I hesitate a little and lay a hand on his shoulder. "I'll still be here when you wake up. I promise."

He doesn't answer, but when I pull my hand away, his snaps up and places it back against his shoulder. I sigh little and let it rest there. I feel him slowly relax under my hand.

Troublesome boy.

For the next hour, I keep my gaze trained over the meadow, waiting for something to happen. I almost wish the Sound team would show up. The wait is killing me. I spend the time by trying to figure out what kind of traps Sasuke set.

He doesn't have Naruto's sheer creativity or my calculations that make my traps so dangerous, but he's a genius with wires and I did give him my trapping supplies, so I'm pretty sure he came up with something good. On the other hand, it was dark and his vision is impaired, so he might not have been able to do much...Plus, our enemies must be skilled if Orochimaru picked them for us, so the traps might not actually work on them. I guess I'll just wait and see.

It's almost noon when they finally arrive.

Their first weapon of choice is a squirrel.

A squirrel with an exploding tag on its back. The poor thing.

I shake Sasuke's shoulder while I throw a few senbon and scare the squirrel into running to where I think our attackers are hiding. A moment later, the one named Dosu jumps out of the underbrush, grabs the poor animal and hurls it at us.

Really. Throwing a squirrel. What is wrong with these guys?

I stand up, catch the squirrel and disable the explosive tag.

"Really," I say in my best arrogant tone. "A squirrel. And you are the best Sound had to offer?"

"Hah," Zaku jumps out into the open, the girl named Kin following. "You'll die. And then we'll kill Sasuke. And the other one."

Oh, you shouldn't have said that, bastard.
Sasuke gets up beside me. "What is your purpose?"

"Oh, you're awake, Sasuke-kun," Dosu says. "See, it's easy. Our mission is to kill you."

"Stop talking! Let's just kill them!" Zaku shouts. The three of them leap into the air, in our direction.

Sasuke throws a few shuriken and I hear the sound of wires snapping. A moment later, a multitude of shuriken is launched at them.

Dosu does something with his metal arm to repel them. Zaku blasts something out of his palms and the shuriken are launched away from him. But the girl, while she manages to twist to avoid getting hit by the weapons, is ensnared in wires and crashes to the ground where she flops around helplessly.

"Nice. One down," I murmur. "I'll take Zaku, you take Dosu. The metal arm sends out sound waves that'll make you nauseous and ruin your balance, so no close combat. First one done gets ramen."

He snorts and takes off. "I want tomatoes."

*Wait, what? Tomatoes?*

I shake the thought off and take off toward Zaku. My leg slows me down a little, but he isn't a taijutsu type and doesn't seem to be all that fast, so I should be fine. His attacks are powerful, but I'm very good at evading and dodging.

"Heh, the weakling wants to fight me? Die! Zankuuhaa!" Zaku shouts, stretching his arms in my direction and pointing his palms at me. A massive gust of wind blasts in my direction.

*Heh. I see.*

I kawarimi and attack him from the side, but he turns around and uses his attack again, and I'm forced to kawarimi another time.

"Stop running, bitch!" he shouts, angered. He starts blasting at me again.

"That's called intelligence. You wouldn't know that," I answer, dancing around his attacks and slowly getting closer. Behind me, I hear the sound of one of Sasuke's fireballs. Dosu won't be a threat much longer, then.

I'm two steps away from Zaku and his hands point at me. "Got you!" he shouts.

*No. Got you.*

I throw myself down, roll under his airwave and get to my feet right under his nose. "You know the weak point of your attack?" I ask as I grab his wrists and pull his body forward, straight into my knee. "It's that you can only use it with your arms stretched," I inform him as the air is driven out of his lungs. "Otherwise the backlash would dislocate your shoulders." I twist his right arm in a way it wasn't meant to twist and let go of the other so I can punch against his stretched out elbow. He screams as the arm breaks.

"I give up!" he screams in pain. "Stop!"

I break his other arm, too. Then I hit a few pressure points and he falls to the ground, paralysed.

"You threatened my team. No mercy," I say. "So how does it feel to be beaten by the weakling, huh?"
"Bitch," he chokes out. "I'm... going...to kill you!"

I press a spot on his neck and he passes out. "Unlikely. Idiot."

I turn around to see Sasuke knocking out the still bound girl. "All done?"

He gives me a smug look. "I was first."

"Right. Did you get their scroll?"

"Earth."

"Bingo," I grin. "Good job. So what was that about tomatoes?"

He turns away. "Let's get out of here."

We leave after tying the unconscious Sound team up and taking all their weapons and supplies. I also swiped the girl's hair ties and hair brush. *Have fun managing your ridiculous knee-length hair now.*

I'm sure she'd be much happier with shorter hair.

Sasuke managed to somehow wake Naruto up and now we're moving through the forest toward the tower. Now that we have both scrolls, we all want to get out of this forest as soon as possible.

Given how weakened we are, maybe we should have found a place to rest, but with all the danger around us, that would be too high a risk.

I lift my hand and we stop. "We've got two more kilometres to go, and there'll probably be ambushes and other teams in the area around the tower. It's just the second day so it might not be that many, but since everyone will want to go to the tower... well, it might get crowded."

"Ne, Ri-chan, should we stop for the night?" Naruto asks. "I know you and the bastard are tired. We can go to the tower tomorrow."

I grin slightly. "No. I have a pretty good plan. We're gonna sleep under a roof tonight."

"Yatta!"

Any ninja with a little bit of sense would be extremely careful in approaching the tower. They'd camouflage themselves with genjutsu, hide their chakra signature and control every step they make so as to not make a single sound. They'd be looking for traps everywhere, turn at every sound and generally drive themselves insane with paranoia.

Team Seven though has Uzumaki Naruto.

Naruto and I laugh out loudly as the three of us run among a wave of around two hundred 'Yatta!'-screaming Narutos through the forest. The one team we encountered hastily jumped out of the way. Any traps in our way are trampled down by the clones. No one and nothing dares to stand in our way.

"Best plan ever, dattebayo!" Naruto shouts, a wide grin on his face.

We soon arrive at the tower and enter.
"Huh," I say, looking around the empty room. "Kind of anticlimactic, if you ask me."

"Now what?" Naruto asks.

Sasuke points to the wall where a banner displaying a riddle is hung.

"If you do not possess Heaven, gain knowledge and be prepared. If you do not possess Earth, run and seek strength. If you open both Heaven and Earth scrolls, dangerous paths turn into safe paths. This is the secret of... It shall lead you on your way," I read out loud. "There are some words missing there."

"What's it mean, Ri-chan?"

"That a ninja has to be both smart and strong and if they lack in one of those areas, they need to work to improve it. No idea about the missing words, though."

"We should open the scrolls. It should be safe now that we're in the tower," Sasuke says.

I nod.

"Alright!" Naruto shouts. "I've got the Heaven Scroll!" He pulls out the fake scroll.

"No dobe. I have it," Sasuke says and pulls out an identical scroll.

"Bastard! I have the scroll!"

I clear my throat. "Actually, both of yours are fakes. The original was with me. I thought it would be safer that way. Sorry for not telling you."

They stare at me dumbfounded. I reach under my kimono and activate the seal on my shoulder. A moment later, the Heaven Scroll is in my hand. "Ruto, open the Earth Scroll, please?"

He snaps out of his surprise. "Right!"

"Wait, Riko. I'll open the scroll," Sasuke suddenly says and takes the scroll out of my hands.

"Eh, why?" I ask.

"It might be trapped. And I know you're tired. It's dangerous," he explains.

"Ne, Ri-chan, the bastard's right. You should be more careful," Naruto immediately agrees.

I find this a bit weird considering Sasuke didn't protest my fighting Zaku, but whatever. No use in arguing. And I really am tired.

"Open the scrolls then," I say, and they comply.

"Eh, what's this?" Naruto asks, staring at his scroll confused. I take a look.

"Summoning type seal! Let go of the scrolls!" I order. They both throw the scrolls away from themselves. The scrolls land on top of each other and then a cloud of smoke appears only to dissipate and reveal...

"Hello. Long time no see."

"Iruka-sensei!" Naruto shouts.
"Huh. Didn't see that coming."

Iruka smiles at us. "You three are early."

"Huh? Why did you come out of the summoning scroll?" Naruto asks, at a loss.

"We chunin are to welcome the ones that passed the second test. And by chance, I was assigned to be the one to greet you three," Iruka explains.

I raise an eyebrow. 'By chance' my ass. Like it's a coincidence that he is the one to greet his favourite students.

"Congratulations. You three pass the second test."

It's been two hours since we arrived and I creep through the corridors of the tower.

According to Iruka, only Team Eight and the Suna Team consisting of Kankuro, Temari and Gaara have arrived here so far, and we have seen neither of them. Considering we arrived late this evening and it is night time now, I'm guessing they must be asleep, just like Naruto and Sasuke were when I snuck out. I left a clone to keep watch over them.

I'm headed to the top of the tower. Iruka told us that the proctor and some of her helpers should be there right now.

I look around the dark hallways of the upper floors. Under one of the doors, light shines through. I take a nervous breath and knock.

The door opens. I blink.


He grins. "If it isn't the little Nara! So you made it, huh? And pretty fast, too."

I grin a little smugly. "We're Team Seven," I say by way of explanation.

"Was there something you needed?"

I nod. "I'd like to report some... suspicious things my team noticed during the last test."

His gaze sharpens. "Come in," he says and moves aside so I can enter.

I step inside and raise an eyebrow in surprise at the room's occupants.

There's Kotetsu's partner who helped him weed out the idiot genin. Then there's an exhausted looking Anko sitting on a couch. Two ANBU. And Hokage-sama standing in front of Anko, smoking a pipe.


"Riko-chan," he smiles at me benevolently. "Congratulations on making it through the second test. I trust your team is well?"

What he is really asking is if Naruto is well. I know that the two of them are close.

"Well enough, I suppose. But Naruto has complained about his chakra acting weird."
And gone is the smile. "What do you mean?" he asks, but it really is an order.

"He mentioned that he needed to focus more than normal to make his clones," I say.

Actually, he'd looked like he was severely constipated when he gathered the chakra to make his Kage Bunshin. He'd had to do the technique three times until he'd made the amount of clones we needed.

"And it's been that way since we encountered the missing-nin Orochimaru in the forest," I say. Anko shoots up.

"What did you say?!" she almost shouts.

"Anko," Hokage-sama chastises. Then he focuses on me. "Report."

"We were taking a short break when a wind jutsu separated me from Naruto and Sasuke. I was attacked by an enormous snake but was able to kill it. When I rejoined my team, a man was attempting to bite Sasuke. I'm not too clear on what happened next as there was an explosion of sorts and I passed out."

I'm not going to say anything about magic with so many strangers in the room.

"Sasuke later told me that the man had introduced himself as Orochimaru. He claimed to have been testing Sasuke's abilities and that he 'wanted him'" I shudder in disgust. "He also referred to the team from Sound as his subordinates. Earlier today, they came after us on a mission to kill Sasuke. We were able to fight them off, though."

The room is silent after I end. Hokage-sama looks grave. "I see. And Naruto-kun?"

"Sasuke said that Naruto went berserk and lost consciousness after Orochimaru slammed a glowing hand in his stomach."

I'm almost certain that Orochimaru must have messed with the seal containing the Kyuubi. Judging from Hokage-sama's expression, he suspects this, too.

"Hokage-sama!" one of the ANBU speaks up. "We must detain Uzumaki at once. It is too dangerous to-"

I'm slammed against a wall before the senbon can even leave my fingers. "You judgmental moron!" I growl at the ANBU holding me, heedless of the kunai against my throat. "He'd never hurt anyone from Leaf, idiot!"

"Quite right," Hokage-sama says. "Let her go."

The ANBU lets me go while I glare at him. "A scroll is still a scroll after a kunai is sealed into it," I hiss. "And Naruto is Naruto and will always be Naruto. And you will likely always be an idiot."

Hokage-sama studies me. "You know," he states.

"About Ruto's furry little problem? It's really not that hard to figure out with all those morons calling him monster and demon in the streets," I answer, still glaring at the ANBU.

Hokage-sama sighs, shaking his head tiredly. He fixes the ANBU with a look. "Riko-chan is correct about Naruto-kun. He is most definitely not a demon. You would do well to look past prejudice and rumours."
He turns back to me. "Naruto-kun is lucky to have a friend like you," he states.

"I'm the lucky one to have him as my friend."

He gives me a warm look. "Thank you for reporting this matter, Riko-chan. I will take a look at Naruto-kun's seal later. You should return to bed now."

I give him a bow. "Thank you, Hokage-sama."

"I must also tell you that the information about Naruto is an S-class secret. Should you reveal it, you will become a traitor to the village."

_Worst kept S-class secret ever._

"Understood, Hokage-sama."

Kotetsu walks me back to our room.

"You're something, little Nara," he says. "Calling an ANBU an idiot to the face and trying to throw senbon at him."

I flush a little. "I don't normally do things like that. It's just that the last two days sucked on an epic level and I don't like people being assholes about Naruto."

"Yep. You made that clear," I can hear the grin in his voice. "I'm really looking forward to seeing you in the third test."

"Yatta," I say flatly. "Beating people up to entertain a bunch of nobles. I can't wait."

"I'll place a bet on you. You're funny."

I raise an eyebrow. "That doesn't make any sense."

"Eh." He shrugs, not caring. "This your door?"

"Yes. Thanks for walking me."

"No problem. See ya 'round, little Nara."

He leaves and I slip into the room silently. My clone sits in a corner serenely, just like I left her. Naruto snores away, lying sprawled out on his bunk bed.

Sasuke is sitting on his bed and glaring at me. He has released the henge, so I can clearly see his closed eye. "Where have you been?" he hisses.

"Reporting our adventure," I murmur back. I walk over to him. "I'm fine, you know?"

He snatches my arm and abruptly pulls me onto the bed. "Sleep," he orders.

"In your bed?"

"You can't be trusted not to run off and do something stupid," he answers.

"Not stupid," I mumble.

"Leaving by yourself in an unfamiliar environment while surrounded by hostiles."
"Okay, so maybe a little stupid. I'm sorry."

I should probably get into my own bed. And tell Sasuke that he really can't keep up the overprotectiveness he's been displaying. But Sasuke's hand is still on my arm, fingers slipping lower to find my pulse. Checking that it's still beating. That I am still alive.

I suppose I can sleep in his bed for tonight.

"UWAHHH! RI-CHAAAAAN! Why are you in the bastard's beepeed?!!"

I shoot up from my sleep, jump out of the bed and throw senbon. "Ouch!" Naruto yells.

"Oh, it's you," I say. "Sorry, Ruto."

Naruto points at me. "Answer the question!"

"Um," I say. "Do you want ramen?"

"Rame- Don't try to distract me!" Naruto yells.

"I have miso ramen, pork ramen, tofu ramen..." I whisper enticingly, pulling out my ramen storage scroll.

"Uhh... no! I don't wa-"

"I'll eat them with Kiba then..." my voice trails off.

"No! You can't do that Ri-chan!" Naruto looks at me horrified.

"Hey Sasuke, do you want ramen?"

Naruto tackles me and rips the scroll out of my hands. He hugs it to himself and looks at me loathingly. "My ramen!"

"Okay, okay. What kind do you want?"

Crisis averted.

"Yo, Naruto, Sasuke, Riko!" Kiba saunters into our room without knocking, Shino and Hinata in tow. Akamaru seems to be hiding in his jacket. "You're eating ramen for breakfast?"

"Not Sasuke," I say, nodding at Sasuke who is munching on a tomato, his henge back in place.

"Where'd you get ramen?"

"I have Naruto on my team," I say with a deadpan look. "I never travel without ramen."

Team Eight joins us on the floor and I pull out some non-ramen food. "Help yourselves."

"Neat!" Kiba grins and grabs some sausages.

"T-thank you," Hinata whispers.

"You're welcome." We all eat in silence. "What's wrong with Akamaru?" I ask, because my favourite dog hasn't even barked a greeting at me.
"Ah," Kiba murmurs with a worried look. "We saw something in the forest..." his voice trails off.

"We witnessed Sabaku no Gaara slaughtering a trio of Rain genin. Why? Because Kiba was curious," Shino says, eyebrows pulled into an annoyed frown. Aburame Shino communicates his feeling solely through his eyebrows.

"Slaughter?" Sasuke asks.

We all listen horrified to Team Eight's recount of their adventures in the forest.

*Not good. Gaara is even more dangerous than I thought.*

Well, I'm more dangerous than most people think, too. And I'm smart. I might be able to figure something out... maybe.

"So how did you do in the forest?" Kiba asks.

We tell him, glossing over the Orochimaru thing. Naruto just tells him about the Grass ninja with the creepy tongue attacking us.

I'm glad he was out of it for most of the fight. Me dying, Sasuke losing an eye... I don't think he'd be able to handle it.

We spend another hour hanging out with Team Eight before they leave to squeeze in some training. Soon after that, Hokage-sama comes and whisks Naruto away, claiming he wants to eat lunch with him and hear about his adventures.

That leaves me alone with Sasuke.

"Let's train," I say. "You need some practice with..." I point to my eye.

So that's what we do. We find an abandoned looking training room and start practicing taijutsu and weapon throwing.

It's not as bad as I feared. Sure, he does misjudge distances sometimes and his aim is somewhat off, but he learns quickly. With practice, he should be alright. I can tell though that he hates the disability.

"Maa, aren't you two busy?" Kakashi's voice says as he suddenly appears between us. We both jump back, kunai and senbon drawn and thrown simultaneously. They only hit a log, though.

"Now, that wasn't nice," Kakashi chides. "But good reaction."

"How long have you been watching?" I ask.

"Long enough. Sasuke, drop the henge," Kakashi orders. Sasuke scowls. "I can't help you if you don't let me."

"I don't need help." Sasuke glares at Kakashi.

"Riko-chan, would you mind leaving us alone for a bit?" Kakashi says, looking intently at Sasuke. I hesitate for a moment. Sasuke won't like me leaving by myself. On the other hand, Sasuke needs to have some sense talked into him, and who better than our teacher for that? Kakashi lost an eye at some point, too. He should be able to understand. Plus, he'll be able to train Sasuke better than I can.

"Alright," I say. Sasuke glares at me. I walk past him and touch his shoulder as I go. "I'll see you later."
Naruto isn't back in our room when I check, so I'm all by myself. Since there is no point in pissing Sasuke off any further by wandering around alone, I decide to stay inside.

Because I have nothing better to do, I start making the room a bit more homelike. Hey, I have over a dozen storage scrolls with all kinds of things, so why not?

The end result is a pretty epic bed fort that could house two teams. Now Naruto won't freak out over my sleeping next to Sasuke since he'll be sleeping on my other side.

I spend the rest of the day reading by myself in there. After a few hours, Sasuke comes in bruised and exhausted and throws himself down next to me. He grabs my hand and puts it on his shoulder like he did yesterday, then he falls asleep.

I let my free hand glow green and hold it over his eye. My heart drops.

He was right. This is not something I can heal. I don't think anyone in the hospital could heal it either.

I doubt I could get Sasuke to go to the hospital with this anyways.

I let the diagnostic jutsu fizzle out and sigh. Finding a cure for him won't be easy, but I made a promise and I fully intend to keep it, no matter how long it takes.

I spend the following two days training with Naruto while Kakashi trains with Sasuke. Naruto's chakra control is back to normal, so Hokage-sama must have fixed whatever Orochimaru did to him.

During the course of those two days, other teams arrive.

Team Nine made it. The Sound team too, much to my and Sasuke's displeasure. Though I take much amusement from the state of Kin's hair.

Shikamaru's team arrives together with Team Four, to my relief. Apparently, they ran into each other and decided to help each other out. They didn't get out of the forest unscathed, though. All of them are dirty, covered in scrapes and bruises and exhausted.

And then there's Kabuto's team. They arrived the morning of the fourth day. I don't see much of his teammates, but Kabuto... he's been hanging around me, giving me friendly advice and trying to covertly fish for information. He even knocked on our room's door and tried to get us to let him in, but I claimed we were having a strategy meeting and couldn't let him join.

Somehow, the bad vibes I got from him when meeting him before the first test got worse. He gives me the creeps. His friendly gaze makes my skin crawl. I tried to avoid him as much as possible and never went anywhere alone.

Sasuke curbed his overprotective tendencies somewhat, but he still refused to sleep without his fingers on my pulse, and when we are in the same room, he always stands close to me.

I didn't really protest this treatment. He did see me - ugh - die after all.

All eight teams are assembled before Hokage-sama, the jounin senseis and the examiners to await the announcement of the third test.

Finally. The waiting was wearing on my nerves, not to mention Kabuto's stalking. I wait impatiently
as Hokage-sama gives a long-winded explanation about how the Chunin Exams are really a replacement for war and how the last test will be a life-risking battle that we'll be fighting for our country's pride and honour, yadda yadda.

Gaara of all people sums my thoughts up quite nicely. "I don't care. Just tell us what this life-risking battle entails."

Hokage-sama looks a bit miffed at that. "Yes. I'd like to now explain the third test, but-

Oh please no, not another monologue!

"Actually," a voice hastily says, and a jounin drops in front of Hokage-sama. "As the proctor for the third test, I'd like to explain."

"...very well," Hokage-sama concedes, and I almost sigh in relief.

The jounin rights himself and turns around to us. He's fairly tall, has shoulder-length brown hair and a senbon in his mouth.

I should so totally carry one that way, too.

"Name's Shiranui Genma," he tells us, and I'm fairly impressed that the senbon stays in his mouth while he speaks. Neat trick, really. "The third test's gonna be a tournament of one-on-one battles, but there's too many of you, so we'll be having preliminary matches and cut your number in half."

Huh? A battle? Now?

Several people protest, but Genma verbally shoots them down with the explanation that the finals would be too long with this many participants and they really can't afford to bore the oh so important guests.

So happy to hear that we'll be putting our lives on the line for some noble's amusement.

"Anyway, we'll be starting immediately. If you don't feel up to it, quit now."

"Uhm... I'd like to quit," Kabuto lifts his hand sheepishly. "I got injured in the forest, and it hasn't gotten better..."

What? Bullshit. If you'd been injured, you would have rested instead of stalking me.

Genma merely nods. "Anyone else?"

No one speaks up and Kabuto leaves the room by himself. I see the jounin and Hokage-sama mutter amongst themselves. Seems I'm not the only one to think that Kabuto withdrawing is very suspicious.

I thought he was trying to spy on us to further his chances for the exams. Why would he quit now?

I'm definitely telling dad to keep an eye on him. Something is off about Yakushi Kabuto.

"We now have twenty-three entrants, so we'll conduct eleven matches. The winners advance to the finals, and the person that's left after the matches advances as well," Genma continues. "This computer will randomly choose the match-ups of each fight."

Sure. Random. As if.
I'd be very surprised if they weren't trying to influence the choice of participants of the finals. No way will they leave it to coincidence when our prestige is riding on this tournament.

Hmm, let's see. They'll want Sasuke in the finals. They won't want two Hyuugas. They'll try to get the stronger clan kids into the arena. They'll try to cut down on the number of kunoichi. They'll want one or two underdogs, but no more.

Where do I fit in this?

I'm a Nara, I'm civilian born, I'm a kunoichi, I'm sort of an underdog. It's impossible to predict who they might pit me against.

Regardless of who I have to fight, I'll give it my all. I finally have the chance to prove myself, to make my family proud and to show everyone what I'm made of.

"Let's start, then," Genma says, and we all stare at the computer. Names flash across it, too fast to read, until the first match-up is displayed:

_Uchiha Sasuke_

vs.

_Tachibana Fumio_

A few days earlier:

_Karin_

"Hey! Where are you?" she screams for her teammates. There is no answer, so she focuses her senses and feels for their chakra. She finds it easily enough, surrounded by three unknown chakra signatures. Hastily, she takes off in their direction to help.

Miles away, an enormous bear licks the wounds Team Seven inflicted upon it as they travelled through the forest.

They beat their enemies – though Isao-kun got injured - and now have the two scrolls they need. Now, a day later, they are traveling to the tower. Time is running out.

"Shigeri-kun, Isao-kun!" she calls ahead to her teammates. "I sense three enemies ahead!"

The team of Rain ninja might have been a problem for most genin, but thanks to Karin's sensing ability, they can take the hiding genjutsu users out before their illusions become a problem. Unfortunately, the already injured Isao gets trampled down by a giant centipede only minutes away from the tower. He lives, but they aren't permitted to take the third test.

She still feels proud. It's thanks to her that they came this far, and she feels as if they are a real team now and not just a partnershift of convenience. After they return to Kusa weeks later, she no longer considers leaving to try her luck elsewhere.
"Nara-chan, I will win this fight for you!" Fumio shouts.

Because that's not embarrassing for me at all.

"Make it painful," I mumble to Sasuke.

"Hn," he says.

"Thanks."

We all leap up to the balconies that overlook the hall the fights will take place in. I stand next to Naruto and Shikamaru places himself on my other side, an arm around my shoulder. The rest of Team Ten are there, too. Kakashi joins us and stands next to Naruto.

I resist the urge to hide my face in my hands when Fumio continues talking. "If I win against you, then Nara-chan will finally see me, and she'll go out with me! I will give this fight my all, Uchiha! Against the power of my feelings, you will be helpless!"

"Yosh! He is such a youthful fighter!" I hear Rock Lee cheer. I want to sink into the ground.

"Indeed he is! Lee, let us cheer him on!" Gai agrees.

"Yes, Gai-sensei!"

"Kami, Sasuke better hurry it up because there will be a bloodbath if they don't shut up soon," I mutter to Shika while Gai and Lee shout outlandish encouragements at Fumio. Add to that the squealing of Sakura and Ino in the background...

"Overwhelm him with the force of your youth! Your love shines in the face of your opponent! Win her heart with manliness!"

"Sasuke-kuuun! Kick his ass! You can win! I believe in you, Sasuke-kuuun!"

"Believe in yourself! Youth shall prevail!"

"Love conquers everything, Sasuke-kun!"

I bang my head against the balcony's railing.

"Ready?" Genma's voice asks. "Begin!"

My head shoots up, eyes locking on Fumio and Sasuke.

Fumio jumps back with a classic kunai throw. Sasuke smirks and blurs from sight, appearing right where Fumio would have landed and landing vicious kick in his middle. Without stopping his movement, Sasuke twists into a spinning kick that hits Fumio in the face. I spy a slightly sadistic grin on Sasuke's face.

Fumio falls to the ground, and before he can move, several shuriken pin his clothes to the floor. He flops around uselessly, trying to free himself. He freezes when a kunai buries itself in the ground so close to his face, a small bloody line appears on his cheek.

"I am sorry, Nara-chan!" Fumio shouts. "Next time, I will definitely beat him and win your heart!"

Gai and Lee fangirl over the youthfulness of this statement.

"Couldn't you have knocked him out?" I ask Sasuke when he leaps up to join us. He only smirks while he shoves Naruto aside and stands next to me.

"Oi, teme! What was that for!" Naruto yells.

"Quiet, dobe," Sasuke answers, still smirking smugly.

Someone enjoyed kicking Fumio in the face.

"Bastard! I wanna stand next to Ri-chan!" Naruto shouts, pointing a finger at Sasuke.

"Quiet, both of you," I order. "They're announcing the next match."

The screen displays the two participants of the next match.

Yamanaka Ino

vs.

Haruno Sakura

"Eh?" Ino asks, taken aback.

This can't be easy for her. Sakura and she used to be best friends.

I wonder what I'd do if I had to fight Naruto. I don't think I would be able to go all out against him.

"Do your best, Ino-chan!" I say nonetheless. She gives me a smile back and leaps down.

The two stand and stare at each other.

"Oi Shika," Chouji says while chewing potato chips. "Who do you think is going to win?"

Shika studies the two girls, a calculating glint in his eyes. "...we'll see."

"Hmm..." Chouji murmurs, looking back to Ino and Sakura who are staring at each other.

"Sakura-chan! Do your best! Don't lose!" Naruto shouts. Right, he had a crush on Sakura. I thought he'd grown out of it, but apparently not.

The girls ignore him.

"Sakura... I never thought I'd be fighting you," Ino eventually says.

Sakura stares back seriously. Then she reaches up and unties her hitae-ate. "Ino, right now I have no intention of fighting over Sasuke-kun with you."

Ino looks a bit confused. "What?" she asks.

"You and Sasuke-kun don't fit together anyway. And I'm completely stronger than you right now. I don't even need to be concerned about fighting you," Sakura says confidently. "I won't lose to you
anymore!"

I raise an eyebrow at her words. For someone who claims not to want to fight over Sasuke, she mentions him an awful lot.

Ino looks pissed. "Sakura, you don't know what you are talking about. The last time I was in a fight, I saw a friend's life threatened and I saw her fighting two ninja by herself and almost die, all to protect Asuma-sensei and me. I couldn't do anything back then... but I'm different now! I've gotten stronger! Don't underestimate me! I am not the same girl I was in the Academy!"

My mouth is dry at the end of her speech. "Ino-chan..."

I remember her crying in my arms in Wave when she thanked me for healing Asuma. How she hated herself for not being able to help. And later, how she comforted me when I was distraught over my first kills, without even knowing what was going on.

"Ino is going to win," I say. Shikamaru nods.

"Eh?" Naruto asks. "How do you know?"

"I just do."

Ino rips her hitae-ate from around her waist and ties it around her forehead at the same time Sakura ties hers around her own. Some sort of symbolic gesture?

Both fall into ready positions. Then they run toward each other, Sakura making two clones.

"I am not the same as back then, either!" she shouts, and in a burst of speed, jumps forward and lands a punch on Ino's jaw that sends her flying. "Stop looking down on me!"

Ino gets back to her feet, wiping blood from her face. "As you wish."

"Way to go, Sakura-chan!" Naruto shouts. "Ri-chan, she's really good!"

*Better than I expected, at least. But I believe in Ino.*

They run at each other again, engaging in a brief bout of taijutsu that Ino ends by kneeling Sakura in the stomach. Then she leaps back and launches a volley of senbon at her opponent who rolls to the side but can't avoid all of them.

*Are those the ones I gave her?* The thought gives me a warm feeling.

"Give up," Ino says. "You can't win."

"Heh," Sakura answers. "I won't lose to a person like you who spends too much time worrying about her hair and appearance!" She launches herself forward again, but her legs give out and she stumbles and falls to the ground. "What?" she asks, trying to get up again, only to fall back down when her limbs won't obey her. "What is this?"

"Those senbon were poisoned," Ino says calmly. "You should be losing the feeling in you limbs by now. In a few seconds, you will start feeling cold and break into sweat. You will be paralysed in another two minutes."

*Whoa, when did she start learning about poisons?*

"N-no!" Sakura shouts. "Impossible. I can't lose to you!" She tries to move again, but can barely
move her arms.

Ino approaches her. "You were right, I spend a lot of time on my hair, and I worry a lot about my appearance. But, Sakura, I put just as much effort into training and getting stronger now." She bends down and holds a kunai to Sakura's neck. "I acknowledge that you are a strong person in your own right. But this fight is my win."

Sakura has tears in her eyes. "D-damn it!"

"Winner: Yamanaka Ino!" Genma announces, and Ino immediately lowers her kunai and pulls a small syringe out of her pocket. She injects it into Sakura's arm.

"You should be able to move again in a few minutes," she says as the medics load Sakura onto a stretcher. Then she leaps up to join us again.

"Good job, Ino," Asuma tells her. "You have really grown."

"Troublesome..." Shika mutters.

"That was great!" Chouji praises her.

Ino beams, eyes full of pride. Her eyes find mine and she launches herself forward and hugs me. "It's thanks to you," she whispers in my ear so softly I barely hear her.

"But you were the one that fought," I mumble back. "You were amazing, Ino-chan."

She lets go of me and smiles happily. "I did it!" she cheers. "I'm in the finals! Sasuke-kun, did you see?"

"Hn," Sasuke grunts dismissively, and Ino swoons because he isn't completely ignoring her.

Some things never change.

"Mmm? Riko-chan, you look worried," Kakashi suddenly remarks, causing everyone to look at me.

I shake my head. "It's nothing."

I just realised that I underestimated this. Everyone has grown since the Academy days, and I don't know what the foreign ninja are capable of.

Shika yawns. "I can hear you thoughts from here. Stop worrying. You're being troublesome," he orders.

I roll my eyes. "Your wish is my command, brother mine," I retort sarcastically. "Oh look, we get to see the foreigners fight now."

Temari

vs.

Tsuchi Kin

"Awesome," I mutter.

"What is?" Chouji asks.
"I like neither of them. No matter which one of them loses, I win."

My bet is on Temari. We took all the Sound ninja's weapons when we left them in the forest, plus Kin just doesn't exude the same sureness Temari does. Sure she seems confident, but more in the way a spoiled child would be. Her opponent on the other hand moves with the poise of someone who has complete faith in her abilities. Her eyes glint as if she knows she has already won.

"That's kind of mean, Ri-chan," Naruto says.

I shrug. "Eh. Better than watching my friends battle."

The two girls walk up and stand in front of each other.

"Temari versus Kin. Begin!" Genma calls out.

The battle only takes two minutes. Kin starts by throwing senbon at Temari which get deflected by a wind jutsu. Temari doesn't even move. So, because she apparently isn't the sharpest kunai in the pouch, Kin tries the same thing that didn't work again.

"This is just a warning, but if I start attacking, you will be finished in seconds," Temari informs her. "You're not skilled enough. Stop trying to look good."

"Hah. The Sound won't lose!" Kin replies, throwing more senbon at Temari.

*Wow. If it didn't work the first two times, why would she try a third time?*

Needless to say, Temari wins in the end. Kin tried two more times to hit her with senbon, then she used a genjutsu that apparently screwed with Temari's perception to the point that she wouldn't be able to tell Kin's location. This was made known to us by Kin herself in a long monologue of explaining her own technique.

Temari shut her up by swinging her giant fan and unleashing an enormous gale of wind that tossed Kin around and cut up her body.

"Winner: Temari," Genma announces when it's clear Kin isn't getting up.

All in all, a rather underwhelming fight. Fortunately, the following fights are much better. Shikamaru wins against an overconfident guy from Kabuto's team who can twist his limbs into any shape. The remaining two Sound guys have to fight each other. Zaku surprises everyone by being able to still move his broken arms, but Dosu can negate his airwaves with his metal arm and once he gets close enough to his opponent, it's over for Zaku. After that, Naruto has to fight Chouji. Except for Sasuke and me, everyone believes him beaten when he gets hit by Chouji's Human Bullet Tank, but he's Naruto, so he gets up and with his clones he kicks Chouji high into the air and then slams him back down with a drop kick, knocking Chouji out and winning the match.

One has to wonder about the strength of his kicks if they manage to kick big-boned Chouji of all people in the air.

"Heh! Ri-chan, now you're the only one of us left!" Naruto grins.

I nod seriously. "Saving the best for last, obviously."

"Oi!" he points at me. "I could take you!"

I laugh. "I could bribe you into forfeiting with ramen. Admit it, it would work."
"Would not!"

"Would, too."

"Not!"

"Maa, as cute as you kids are right now, I hate to point out the fact that it's your turn now, Riko-chan." At hearing Kakashi's voice, my head snaps up to look at the screen.

_Nara Riko_

_vs._

_Tenten_

I sigh. "Seems as if it's finally time to answer Team Nine's challenge... yay," I jump down and walk towards Genma. Behind me, I hear Tenten land and follow me. We position ourselves in front of each other.

"Do your best, Tenten!" Lee shouts.

"You can do it, Ri-chan!" Naruto yells.

"Begin," Genma says, and we jump back, studying each other. However, the tension kind of gets ruined by those cheering for us.

Lee: "Fight, Tenten!"

Naruto: "Kick her ass Ri-chan!"

Gai: "Believe in your power!"

Fumio: "I believe in you, Nara-chan!"

Lee: "Tenten! We're with you!"

Gradually the voices are getting louder, as if the one with the most enthusiastic cheerleaders wins automatically.

Ino: "Riko-chan! Hit her with your 16-hit Combo!"

_Do I have something like that?_

Gai: "Fight with everything you have, Tenten!"

Naruto: "Fight for ramen, dattebayo!"

Lee: "Show your spirit!"

Fumio: "Nara-chan! You are better than her!"

Lee: "No! Tenten is better!"

Naruto: "What did you say, bushy-brows?! Ri-chan is better!"

Gai: "Tenten has worked extremely hard to get this far! Her Youth shines in the face of adversary! A genius of hard work beats a genius of talent!"
Kakashi: "Riko-chan works extremely hard and is talented. She wins."

Gai: "My Eternal Rival! May this fight between two beautiful youthful flowers prove who the better teacher of us is!"

More shouting ensues as the our respective supporters continue to argue in our favour. What Lee and Gai lack in numbers, they make up with enthusiasm.

Tenten and I share a look of exasperation and embarrassment. I feel an odd sort of kinship with her.

"Guess it can't be helped, huh?" I say, giving her a wry grin and making the seal of confrontation. She raises an eyebrow at the gesture that is definitely not required here. I shrug. "Let's do this as Konoha kunoichi, deal?"

She smirks back and mirrors the seal. "Deal. Let's make them speechless," she answers, jumps back and hurls shuriken at me. I lean to the side and let them fly past me.

Tenten lands. Her eyes shift, gauging the distance between me and her, calculating what kind of attack to use.

Chances are, it won't be her best move, but it won't be something too weak either. At the very least, it should tell me what kind of attacks she uses. I know she is a weapons specialist, but I don't know what kind of weapons and in what way she uses them. The field is pretty wide.

Tenten starts running a circle around me – I have no idea what that's supposed to accomplish aside from telling me that she is a fast runner – and pulls out a scroll. Then she jumps high into the air, acrobatically flipping while opening the scroll. She twirls and spins it around herself, seemingly defying gravity, until she spins so far that she turns into a whirlwind. And out of that whirlwind, a rain of weapons is launched at me.

*Whoa.*

I gather water chakra in my hand and throw a water bomb into the hail of steel. When it explodes, the projectiles are scattered and clatter to the floor around me. Kunai, senbon, sickles, a mace, kama, shuriken... oh man. I'm pretty sure most of that stuff isn't meant to be thrown.

Tenten lands and scowls at me.

I smile at her sweetly. "You'll have to try better than that, Tenten-san," I chirp.

"Tenten! Don't let the enemy make you go at her pace! Stay calm! Stay calm!" Lee shouts.

Tenten visibly takes a deep breath and lets it out. Then she pulls out a long stick and runs towards me, obviously going for close combat.

*Bugger.* I'd rather avoid close combat. She was trained by a taijutsu master and she has a weapon. I have no experience in using my sword against a bo and I don't want to cut her up anyways. I don't have time for a genjutsu, and there is no water around. I do have a trump card, two actually, but neither are suitable for this situation.

What do I have?

I grin and jump backwards, keeping out of her reach. Of course, she pursues me relentlessly, swinging her bo at me and hurling shuriken, kunai and senbon at me, but she can't catch me. I jump around like a lunatic, from the walls to the floor to the railings of the balconies – "Hi Shino!" – onto
the statue at the head of the room, somersaulting over Hokage-sama and his group, running along the ceiling in zigzag motions, dropping back down to the floor and darting somewhere else as soon as I touch the ground, completely unpredictable, all the while hurling senbon at her.

After about two minutes of this, we stop at opposite sides of the hall and Tenten seals her bo away, not leaving me out of her sight.

"Boom," I whisper, and the explosive tags I placed during our wild chase go off simultaneously. I dart in during her moment of confusion and we engage in a short vicious taijutsu match during which I manage to knee her in the ribs and she lands a hit on my face.

_Ouch. That's gonna be a nice black eye later._

We separate, eyeing each other from a distance. Then she pulls out two small scrolls, kneels and places them on the ground in front of her, fingers speeding through handseals. "Soushouryuu!" she cries and a large cloud of smoke explodes around us. I jump back immediately.

Next to Tenten, two dragons made of smoke rise into the air, twirling around each other and then reveal themselves to be two very long scrolls. She jumps up in the midst of the scrolls and-

_Oh shit._

That's too many weapons to counter with a water bomb.

I start running again, but no matter where I dodge, she throws weapons in my path and it's only through using Yoshino's training that I get away with only a few cuts while I run.

It's only a matter of time until something hits me, though. There is just too much to evade.

_Time for trump card number one._

I kawarimi.

"Hi Temari-san, hello Gaara-san!" I greet cheerfully as I appear behind them and jump onto the railing, speeding through handseals. "Uo Tsuba!" I shout and the jet of water slams into Tenten who is still in the air. She falls down, her jutsu interrupted. I jump down as well since I'm pretty sure staying near Gaara after startling him is a really bad idea.

Tenten forces herself to get up. "Where the hell did that log come from?!" she asks incredulously.

"Oh, that," I shrug. "I had some logs in my storage scrolls and I placed them around the tower days ago after arriving _before_ your team."

Somewhere in the audience, there is the sound of Sasuke facepalming. I really don't understand what his problem is with my being so well prepared.

Though I didn't expect preliminary exams, so I only hid that one log in this hall.

I see the realisation hit Tenten. "It _was_ you," she whispers. "You placed all those traps."

"Took you long enough. Boy, did you embarrass yourselves." I point at her. "You cannot fool my eyes!" I quote Neji and laugh, echoed by Naruto somewhere above us.

Tenten loses it. "You will pay!" she screeches and leaps up again, but she has no scroll in her hand this time. She swings her hands and there are wires attached and _all_ the weapons from her previous jutsu rise, pulled upwards by wires. Then she swings her hands again and they speed towards me
from every direction.

I don't think I've ever made handseals this fast. "Suiton: Mizu no Tatsumaki!" I scream the name of my unmastered A-rank jutsu.

Trump card number two.

There are several problems with this one. One, I haven't exactly mastered the jutsu yet and I never know how it will work. Two, it sucks up chakra like nobody's business. Three... there is no water around.

The jutsu never really worked for me before, the water tornado always collapsed around me after a few seconds which probably saved me from accidentally dying of chakra exhaustion. The most it should do in this situation is make the water drops in the air around me spin around and deflect the barrage of weapons.

Naturally, this has to be the one time where the jutsu works fabulously the way Zabuza wanted it to. The giant spinning vortex of water materialises out of thin air around me, rapidly spinning. For a moment, it feels incredible, standing at the centre of the tornado, only hearing the roaring sound of the water.

And then the moment is over and the drain hits me hard. The vortex collapses and a few hundred litre water crash down around me, bowling me over and throwing me around like a ragdoll and for a moment, the old trauma resurfaces, but then the moment is over and the water finally stills.

I'm lying on my back, eyes closed, gasping for air, drained of chakra.

I force my eyes open. Over the distance, they meet Sasuke's gaze, who stands on the balcony, staring at me with panic in his eyes.

I'm okay.

He doesn't answer, still staring at me with that fearful look.

I don't have time for this right now. I break the gaze and slowly force my abused body to get up, willing myself not to give in to the fatigue. I feel seriously lightheaded right now.

When I'm back on my feet, standing hunched over and breathing hard, I look around. Water covers the floor, standing a few centimetres high in the entire hall. Tenten lies at the opposite side of the wall, knocked out. Genma kneels beside her, checking her pulse.

I can hear the incredulous whispers around me. I can feel their eyes on me.

I doubt anyone's going to underestimate me now.

"Winner: Nara Riko," Genma announces, giving me an assessing glance. I try to take a step, but my legs are shaking.

I can hear Naruto, Ino, Kiba and Fumio cheer at my victory but the sound seems to come from far away. I sway on my feet and suddenly, Kakashi is there, lifting me up in his arms.

"Let's get you to the medics," he says and carries me away.

I feel a gaze on me that makes my skin crawl and turn my head. A man with a Sound hitae-ate is staring at me with greedy eyes, licking his lips. I shudder and bury my head in Kakashi's vest, curling

The man scares me. And there is something familiar... but I'm so, so tired and I feel cold and wet, and my head hurts. What was it about Sound? Something with snakes...

Kakashi puts his hand on my head. How he does that while carrying me, I have no idea. "Don't worry, Riko-chan. The medics will fix you right up."

I can feel him walk and then place me on something soft. "Sleep, Riko-chan," he says, and I drift off into some sort of half-sleep.
Kakashi places me on something soft. "Sleep, Riko-chan," he says, and I drift off into some sort of half-sleep.

"Troublesome girl," a voice drawls, penetrating through the fog in my head. "Don't use a jutsu if it knocks you out, baka."

*Jutsu wasn't supposed to work like that.*

"Are you staying with her, Shikamaru?"

"Yeah. Go back to the matches, Kakashi-sensei. Your team is worried. I think Sasuke is putting dents into the railing, he's gripping it that hard."

*Then why isn't he here? Oh, right, he's Sasuke.*

I hear someone leave.

"Damn, Ri, you're troublesome. And what's up with you and Sasuke?"

*I died and he watched. And then he made me live again.*

Shikamaru can't hear my thoughts.

Someone else approaches. "Hey, Shikamaru, is Nara-chan gonna be okay?" a mildly annoying voice asks.

"Fine. She's exhausted. Now get lost, you're troublesome," Shika says.

"Right, right. But man, she really was amazing, huh?"

"Sure," Shika pauses. "You are still here."

"Right, leaving already. Oh hey, there's Kabuto-senpai! Hey senpai, can you check on Nara-chan?"

"Yes, of course, Fumio-san. It's what I'm here for, after all," a friendly voice says and I don't like it.

"What are you doing here?" Shikamaru asks. "You left the exam."

"Ahh, I'm a medic and decided to help out the injured here, since I'm not competing. I'll check on Riko-san now."

*Liar! Get him away from me! Please...*

I try to make a sound, but before I can, I feel cold foreign chakra on me and my body freezes.

"What are you doing?" Shikamaru asks.

"I'm just giving her a chakra transfusion. She really exhausted herself, didn't she?"

*Something is wrongwrongwrong I can't breathe what is he doing please stopstopstop...*

*Help me, someone, Shika, Sasuke, Ruto, Dad, Kakashi, please...*
Kabuto is filling me with chakra, but it feels so wrong and cold and it hurts. Suddenly there is a hitting sound and it stops. "What the hell are you doing to her!" Fumio shouts. "That's not a chakra transfusion!"

_Thankyouthankyouthankyou, Fumio._

"Fumio-san, calm down. It's a technique you don't know yet. She'll be better soon."

"Kagemane no Jutsu, success," Shikamaru says and I almost sob in relief, but I still can't get a sound out.

"Ahh, what gave me away?" Kabuto asks.

"Like I would tell you," Shika answers. "Fumio, get Kakashi-sensei here, now."

"Yes!" I hear someone running and then-

I can't breathe. _I'm going to be killed, I'm so scared, help me, they're going to kill me..._ I hear something hitting the ground. Laboured gasps from Shikamaru. A whimper from Fumio, further away.

A chuckle from Kabuto. "Orochimaru-sama, your Killing Intent is splendid as always."

"Kabuto," a hoarse voice says and I want to scream and run but I'm still frozen. "Is she ready?"

"Yes, Orochimaru-sama."

I feel the Bad Thing approach. Orochimaru, Kabuto called it. Cool fingers caress my face.

_Stop! No! Don't touch me!_

"K-kagema-" Shika's voice cuts off and something hits the floor.

_Shika! No! Please..._

"You didn't kill him," Kabuto notes.

"It would have been a waste," Orochimaru answers, his hand still on my face.

"Get your hands off Nara-chan!" Fumio shouts and I finally manage to open my eyes. The man that stands above me is disgustingly pale and has straight, black hair. His eyes are yellow, the pupils are slit, and so, so cold. Inhuman.

_Get him away from me, get him away, get him away!_

"Fumio! Run!" I scream and those disgusting fingers are suddenly on my throat and my voice cuts off.

"No!" Fumio shouts back. "I'm not leaving you behind!"

I see him run towards us, face sweaty and pale, kunai in his shaking hand. Then Kabuto is behind him, punches a glowing hand at his neck and Fumio falls. Kabuto smirks and pushes his glasses back on his nose.

Fumio's sightless eyes see nothing.
Orochimaru turns his attention back to me.

"You are a very special girl, Riko-chan," he says, licking his lips, and I can feel the tears dripping down my face. "I have a gift for you."

And then, faster than I can comprehend, his mouth is at my neck and there's a sharp, piercing pain and then his head pulls back again. He gives me a mockery of a smile.

"You will come to me," he promises. The next moment both he and Kabuto are gone and I'm alone.

And then my neck throbs and there's ice cold fire flowing through my veins and I scream.

---

**Kakashi**

"I must admit, my Eternal Rival, Riko surprised me," Gai says as they watch the interesting match between Aburame Shino and Akado Yoro. It's obvious though that the Aburame has already won.

"Hmm, did you say something?" he asks, and Gai grits his teeth, fire appearing in his eyes. He shakes his fist, muttering something about Kakashi being 'hip' and how this pisses him off.

Kakashi is amused. And pleased. Riko-chan impressed several jounin during the course of the exam, and her fight had been an excellent showing of strength and planning. Though the end could have gone better. To think she did an A-ranked water jutsu flawlessly without any water around... a miracle she was still conscious enough to stand up after the chakra drain hit her.

He chances a side look at his two remaining students. They'd wanted to go to the infirmary with Riko, but he'd ordered them to stay and watch the matches and study their future opponents - for Riko-chan's sake, too. Now their eyes are on the match below them, but while Naruto's attention is riveted, Sasuke appears to not be really watching.

Sasuke. Kakashi worries about him. The boy has been in a dark mood these past days during training, and Kakashi knows it isn't entirely about losing his right eye. But he couldn't get him to talk about it.

He suspects it has something to do with Riko. Whenever he hasn't been training Sasuke, the boy was with her, watching her with an intensity that was worrying. He's seen the brief touches they covertly exchange, how Sasuke sometimes brushes his hand over her wrist and how she seemingly accidentally brushes her hand against his shoulder or arm.

At first he suspected a budding romance – and how cute would that be, Riko-chan and Sasuke – but he noticed soon that that was not the case. No, what Sasuke was doing was assure himself that Riko's pulse was still beating, and Riko was silently reassuring him that she was still there for him.

He's seen this sort of behaviour before, among teammates that had close brushes with death. It had been fairly common during the war. Hell, he and Rin had been like that after Obito... There is nothing at all romantic about it.

He sighs to himself. The members of the team would be training separately for the finals. He just isn't sure if Sasuke can handle being separated from Riko-chan at this point.

"All three of your youthful students in the finals!" Gai continues, oblivious to Kakashi's musings. "I
must train my students harder! If they aren't chunin within the next year, I shall..."

Kakashi's head snaps up as a girl's scream reaches his sharp ears. It sounds terrified, tortured, helpless. Full of rage and grief.

He shunshins immediately, Gai right behind him.

The screams come from the infirmary.

_Riko._

They burst in, weapons drawn, but the fight is already over. Tachibana Fumio lays on the ground, kunai in his hand, eyes opened wide and seeing nothing. Dead. Shikamaru lays on the ground, unconscious next to Riko's bed.

Riko is on the bed, screaming in pain, clutching her neck. Her nails dig into her skin so hard they draw blood.

He body flickers next to her, prying her hand away from her neck and-

_No._

The Cursed Seal stands out against her pale skin.

"Make it stop make it stop make it stop..." falls from Riko' lips, her green eyes wide with fear and pain, looking up at him pleadingly.

"I'm sorry," he whispers and knocks her out with a small spark of lightning chakra to her neck. Her body goes limp.

There is nothing else he can do.

_____

_Riko_

_Where am I?_

I'm floating in nothingness. Everything around me is white.

_Am I dreaming? This better not be another near-death experience. Or actual death experience._

I can hear a child's sobs and look in that direction. It's a little girl with long dark red hair, sitting curled up, knees drawn up to her chest, face hidden as she cries.

"Hey," I say. "Are you okay?" I walk in her direction.

She looks up and I jerk back when I see her face. Bright green eyes, pale skin, scar on her forehead.

She's me. My six-year old self.

She stares at me with empty eyes. "It's your fault," she says in an emotionless voice.

_I'm in my cupboard. Uncle Vernon stands over me, beating and kicking me._

"You're too weak," my younger self tells me.

_Mummy's green eyes stare upwards sightlessly._
"You can't protect anybody."

_Fumio falls to the ground unmovng, never to get up again. Eyes sightless like mummy's._

"If it hadn't been for you, he'd still be alive."

_Sasuke's closed eye._

_Eight-year old Ruto, broken on the ground with Kuramoto standing over him._

_I'm dragged underwater helplessly by the mist-nin._

"You let it happen."

_Bodies lined up on the ground. Dad, mom, Shika, Sasuke, Ruto, Chouji, Ino, Kakashi, Kiba, Hinata, Hanabi..."

"Not real," I whisper shakily.

"But it will be," she says. "Unless you take the power to prevent it!" A demonic grin lights her childish features. One of her hands comes up and slowly rips the skin of her face, revealing a cold yellow eye with a slit pupil. "If only you had power..."

The world around me is consumed by ugly, purple flames, the demonic child standing amidst them untouched, grinning.

The flames reach me and I burn.

---

I open my eyes to a large, empty room. Purple chakra is swirling all around me, inside me. It feels incredible.

I stand up. Throw my head back and laugh. The chakra seems to react and even more of it is released.

I'm invincible.

_More, more, more! I want more!_

I feel a burning sensation on my skin. I lift my hand to my face. There are burning markings on my skin, looking like delicate vines. When they stop glowing, they are black on my skin.

I giggle delightedly. _So pretty! I want more!_

I take a step forward and find that I can't.

"That's enough, Riko-chan," Dad's voice says.

I laugh. "Dad! Look!" I wave my beautiful marked hand at him. "See how strong I am!"

"This isn't you."

My body freezes as shadows creep up my body. "What are you doing?"

My new chakra doesn't like the shadows. More burning marks appear on my skin.

"Stop, Riko-chan."
"No, you stop!" I scream. I force my legs to take one step away from him. And another. "I feel great! Why are you trying to stop me?"

The shadows become stronger and I'm unable to move again. "Enough. We need to seal that mark."

"Why? It makes me strong! I can protect everyone now! Stop holding me back!"

"You brother is injured."

I freeze. "Brother?"

"Shikamaru. Remember?"

"Shikamaru..." I whisper.

A voice echoes in my mind.

"Troublesome girl."

I squeeze me eyes shut, starting to tremble.

"What would your friend Fumio say if he saw you like this?"

"Shut up!" I scream.

"Wanna hang out, Nara-chan?"

"Shut up, shut up, shut up! I hate you!" I whimper, tears falling out of my eyes. My knees hit the ground as the shadows let go of me. The marks recede and I feel so weak and cold all of a sudden.

"Riko-chan," Dad says. He moves closer.

My hand clutches my neck. "Get it off!"

I don't want this thing on me. It's so much worse than the Thing that used to be in my scar.

Dad crouches down in front of me, hands grasping my shoulders. "Riko-chan, look at me."

I stare into his eyes.

"We have no way to get it off of you. We can seal it however. There's a sealmaster waiting outside the door. Alright?"

I nod. "Just make it stop," I whisper.

He moves to hug me, but I lean away. I can't handle touch right now.

Dad sighs and stands up and moves away. I hear him exchange words with someone, and then he and a large man with a mane of white hair and a forehead protector with the kanji for 'Oil' written on it walk over to me.

"Riko-chan, this is Jiraiya. He'll seal the Cursed Seal."

Great. Another Sannin. This one looks nicer, though.

The man aims a beaming grin at me. "A fan! Shikaku, you didn't tell me your little girl was a fan!"

Dad facepalms. "I'm going to kill Kakashi," he mutters.

"So which one is your favourite?" Jiraiya asks me.

"Violence. The plot is great. Is there going to be a book featuring Akemi-sama?"

He grins. "Now that would be telling, no?"

"I guess," I say. I gasp and hunch over as my neck throbs.

"Ah, we should hurry. The seal I'm going to use is the Evil Suppression Seal. It will seal the mark, but it is dependent on your will to keep it that way."

"Understood." I grit my teeth against another wave of pain.

I won't use this power. Those bastards hurt Shika and they killed Fumio. Fumio, who never really hurt anyone, who wanted to become a medic. Who annoyed me at every turn and tried to trick me into dating him. Who died trying to save me.

Such a pointless death.

Orochimaru and Kabuto are going to die. This, I swear to myself.

I grit my teeth, fighting to not succumb to the pain while Jiraiya paints symbols in blood on my skin and around me on the ground.

"This is going to hurt," he says. "But it won't last long."

I nod. "Just get it over with," I force out.

Anything is better than this cold pain that the Cursed Seal sends through my body, the temptation to draw upon its power still strong.

I hear the sounds of Jiraiya forming a long sequence of hand seals. "Fuuja Houin!" he shouts and slams his hand on my neck, and a shrill scream erupts from my throat as white-hot pain ravages my body.

When the power stops after an eternity or seconds, I fall forward and know no more.

I'm alone in a hospital room when I wake up. The calendar on the wall tells me that four days have passed since the preliminaries.

Surprisingly enough, I don't feel that bad physically. Sure, my body hurts like hell, but my chakra levels are alright. I've had worse.

Emotionally...

I escape through the window and run.

I end up in the Clan Forest. I doubt anyone will come looking for me here, and the only ones that can enter are Nara Clan members anyway.
I stumble through the forest, feeling cold and numb. Eventually, my legs give out in a clearing and I have to sit down. That's what I do for the next hours. Sitting there and staring at the clouds, but not really seeing them.

A snout nuzzles my hair.

"Hey Rikumaru," I murmur, lifting a hand up to pat him. He bumps his nose against my palm. "Come to keep me company?"

He lies down next to me and I lean against him, continuing to pet him. "He was going to be a medic," I whisper. "He said he was going to be the best medic ever."

I should be crying or raging or something. But I don't feel much of anything except dull pain. I'm cold inside.

"He was supposed to grow up, find a girl that isn't me and take her to that creepy café with the heart-shaped cakes, get married and have troublesome children," I tell Rikumaru. "He was a good person if a bit annoying."

Rikumaru snorts. "Or a lot annoying," I say. "I don't know how often I've wanted to strangle him."

I hide my face in his fur. "I even wanted to strangle him seconds before he died, when he refused to run away."

And now all I wish is that I'd known Fumio better. That I'd hung out with him at least once, that I had been nicer to him, that I hadn't run away from him that one time in the café. Maybe we could've been friends. Then losing him would hurt even more, but he'd have been happier.

I deserve to suffer. Fumio would still be alive if it hadn't been for me.

"It's all my fault," I echo what the creepy younger me told me.

Rikumaru and I sit like that for about an hour, until he stands up and bumps me with his snout. Then he looks in another direction. I follow his gaze and see dad walking towards us.

"Thanks for the company," I tell Rikumaru. He bumps his nose against my forehead and walks away.

Dad sits down next to me. Neither of us break the silence for a few minutes.

"Is Shikamaru alright?" I ask then.

"Woke up with a headache."

"Does he know about-" I touch my neck.

"No."

I nod. "What about the chunin exams?"

"You can still compete if you want."

"Should I?"

"It's your choice, Riko-chan."
"You don't want me to," I deduce.

"I don't, but it's your choice."

Dad usually knows best. Besides, whoever my opponent is had more time to train and no weird curse to deal with. Not to mention the curse can screw with my head and my medical condition is definitely not the best.

But...

"Hey Nara-chan, wouldn't it be awesome if we both became chunin?"

I clench my fists. "I want to become chunin. I'll compete."

Dad sighs and pulls a few papers out of his pocket. "Here's the match-ups for the finals and reports on the preliminary matches that you missed."

I take them and look through them while dad pulls out some other stuff.

Huh. My first opponent is Rock Lee. From what little I've seen of him, he won't be an easy opponent, especially not if Gai is training him for the month.

I skim over the rest of the papers. In the preliminaries, Shino won against Akado Yoroi, Hinata lost against Neji, Eiji was beaten by Lee, Kiba forfeited when he had to fight Gaara and Kankuro got by automatically. The matches for the finals are Naruto vs. Neji, Sasuke vs. Gaara, Kankuro vs. Shino, Temari vs. Shikamaru, myself against Lee and Ino will have to fight Dosu.

A poofing sound makes me look up. While I was looking through the papers, dad used a seal and some blood from a vial to summon a dog wearing a vest and a Konoha-hitae-ate.

"Riko-chan, this is Pakkun. He'll take you to your trainer for the month."

"Huh? I'm not training with mom?"

"Nah, girly, you're training outside the village," The dog says.

A talking dog. Great.

"With who?" I ask.

"Not allowed to tell you." He turns around on his short legs. "You coming or what?"

I blink, at a loss. So I'm supposed to follow the talking dog to who knows where. Right.

Dad pushes a backpack into my hands. "There's what you'll need. You should stop by the house though and change out of the hospital clothes."

"Yeah. I'll do that," I mumble numbly, somewhat confused. "Hey Dad?"

"What is it?"

"I don't hate you. You're my dad."

He sighs deeply and ruffles my hair, smiling at me. "I know, Riko-chan."

After saying goodbye to dad and gathering some supplies in the house, I follow Pakkun.
"Do you want to say goodbye to anyone?" Pakkun asks me.

"I... no. I don't really want to see anyone," I mumble. "Let's just go."

The dog stops. "Touch my paw?"

I blink. "What?"

"It'll make you feel better! It's really," he gives me a slightly obsessed look and holds his tiny paw out to me "bouncy!"

"Bouncy," I repeat, giving him a blank look.

He shakes his paw a little. "Bouncy! Touch it!"

I suppose he's trying to make me feel better. Not that it's helping, but it's sort of sweet. I reach out and softly touch his paw.

It feels weird. Soft, squishy and bouncy. I giggle a little, despite my grief.

"See? Now carry me."

"Lazy dog. Can't you run on your bouncy paws?"

"I know I'm a cute dog. No need to flatter me."

"That's not what I said."

He gives me the puppy eyes which looks really weird on his not-cute pug-face. Unfortunately for him, I have a high resistance to the puppy eyes due to growing up with Naruto.

"Fine," Pakkun huffs. "See if you can keep up."

Pakkun leads me a few hours away from Konoha to a completely deserted stone desert. There's only dust and stones here. Nothing lives here except lichen, crippled looking trees and dried out looking bushes.

"Are you sure this is the right place?" I ask. "Because I'm water natured and there is no water here whatsoever."

"It's the right place. Come on," Pakkun barks and takes off again, leading me right into the stone desert. We take a break after another hour.

I'm really tired now, and my whole body hurts. But the physical pain distracts me from the emotional. No thinking about Fumio.

I probably missed his funeral. Or will miss it if it hasn't been held yet.

I shake the thoughts off.

After another half hour, we halt in an abandoned village. Abandoned houses, ruins, broken structures... the place is eerie.

"Wait here for your teacher. He'll be here soon," Pakkun says gruffly. "Bye."

And with a poof of smoke, he's gone. "Wait!" I call after him uselessly.
Awesome. I'm in the middle of nowhere, all by myself. And it's getting dark, and this is a desert, it will be cold in the nights. Best to find shelter.

I find a house that looks completely run down from the outside but isn't that bad from the inside. Until I find something better, this will have to do. I sort out the stuff in the backpack dad gave me: some storage scrolls with enough food for three weeks, camping gear, some weapons and my sword. There's a water-ninjutsu scroll, a genjutsu scroll and a fuinjutsu one. And...

*Holy shit. A summoning contract?*

Dad snuck a summoning contract into my backpack.

I knew he has a contract himself, with the moles, but I didn't think he'd give it to me. Though, as I open it, I don't see his name among the ones written there, so this isn't his contract. It doesn't say which animal it is.

I wonder where he got this contract. Maybe in the Clan Archives? Someone from the clan probably acquired it on a mission but already had a contract, or wasn't compatible with whatever this is. Hmm, what could it be?

I hope it's something that can fly.

I decide to summon whatever it is later, since I'm exhausted from traveling. I'll rest for now.

It's the middle of the night when something crashes into my hideout. I jerk up from my sleep, senbon in hand, and run out of the room. Instinct makes me duck, and something large cuts the air above me. I throw my senbon in a spread out manner, hoping they'll hit something, and clinks of metal as they are deflected are my reward. I throw shuriken in the direction and get the hell out of the building.

A kick crashes into my side with incredible power and I skid down over the dry and stony ground. I get to my feet as fast as I can despite the pain, unsealing my sword. There's no water here and I don't have time for a genjutsu, so this will have to do. Unfortunately, it's dark around us and mist is rising up.

Mist. In a desert.

I can't believe Kakashi got *him* of all people to teach me. What did he promise him, eternal protection from the Ramen Talk?

I throw myself to the ground again, lifting my sword above me. Metal screeches and sparks fly as another sword clashes against it with unbelievable force. I roll to the side, avoiding another kick and get to my feet.

I channel chakra into my sword, making it glow an eerie blue, and swing it at where I think my attacker is. He bursts into water. Water clone.

*Shit.*

A mass of water slams into me from behind and I get thrown down and around until I don't know up from down anymore. When I finally lay on the ground, gasping for air, my attacker comes into sight.

*Fucking hell.*
"Your training in Wave almost got me killed," I gasp out accusingly, though since I probably look like a drowned cat right now, my glare might not be all that impressive.

"That was the point, brat," Zabuza growls. "Get used to it."

He lets out an insane amount of Killing Intent and I shudder.

"Get up, brat!" he growls. He swipes his sword at me and I hastily clamber to my feet, shivering in my wet clothes. I get the feeling that under the bandages that cover his face, he's grinning demonically. "Lesson one: Don't die."

I gulp.

I'm really regretting ever blackmailing Zabuza now.

The day of the tournament, Haku shunshins me right in front of the village gates. I could have done it myself, but Haku offered and I don't really want to waste chakra before I fight Lee, even if my chakra reserves have grown immensely.

It turns out that constantly exhausting oneself by training water jutsu in the middle of a desert has that effect.

"Thanks, Haku," I say. "Without you I'd probably be dead."

Zabuza's training was one long torture session. I barely had time to think. I barely had time to even sleep. I had to resort to lay down and get some shut-eye whenever there was a calm minute, until Zabuza decided to kill me in my sleep again. When he gave me instructions, it was usually in the middle of beating me up. When he taught me a new technique, he gave me an hour to practice and then started his attacks on me again. If I managed to do the technique, I got hurt considerably less. If not... well it's a good thing Haku was there.

Haku was awesome. He picked me up when I couldn't move anymore, nursed my bruises and scrapes and taught me the shunshin so I could escape better.

"You are welcome, Riko-san. But Zabuza-sama wouldn't have killed you. He made sure to never seriously injure you."

That's true. I never broke a bone and I only got a concussion once. But my body was one giant bruise for the three weeks of training, I had to heal countless cuts and gashes made by Zabuza's kubikiribocho and I got chakra exhaustion almost every day. Most training days ended with me barely conscious.

The results are nothing to sneeze at, though. My sword skills alone...

"If you say so," I answer Haku. "Guess I'll see you around. When I come to kick Demon-sensei's ass, maybe."

Haku gives me his kind smile. "I look forward to seeing you again. Please send my best regards to Naruto-san."

"Sure. See ya."

"Goodbye, Riko-san."

He disappears in a swirl of wind and leaves while I turn around and walk through the gates. After
checking in at the gate guard's booth, I make my way through the village. It's noon already and the fights should be starting by now, but I still have some time since there will be four matches before my own fight starts. And there is something I have to do before my fight.

I step in front of the cenotaph, eyes scanning the countless unfamiliar names until I find him.

*Tachibana Fumio*

I hadn't been sure if his name would have been engraved here, but I assumed it was, since he died fighting against an enemy of Konoha.

"Hi Fumio," I say, sitting down cross-legged in front of the stone. "I have something to say to you."

I take a deep breath. "You are really annoying. I don't like you and I think you are an idiot. Your constant bugging me is getting on my last nerve." I sigh. "I wonder if, had I ever told you that, you would still be alive."

I shake my head at the stone. "You were such an idiot. Always constantly trying to get me to go on dates with you. Never taking the hint that I did not enjoy your company."

I wipe away a tear. "Damn it, why didn't you run when I told you to? You weren't supposed to die. You were supposed to grow up, find a nice girl that wasn't me, take her to the creepy café and eat those stupid cakes with her, marry her and have annoying children."

I pull out the box with heart-shaped cake I bought a few minutes earlier. "Itadakimasu," I murmur and start eating the way too sweet dessert with tears running down my face. When I'm finished, I get to my feet, staring at the cenotaph.

"I'm going to miss you, Fumio."
I entered the stadium through the medic's entrance and now I'm racing through the hallways to the area the contestants are supposed to wait in. I can faintly hear the audience's noise.

I have no idea what my brother and friends will say once they see me, after one month of separation. They're probably mad at me. I just disappeared without an explanation.

I doubt anyone told them about the Cursed Seal, and I'm not going to tell them anytime soon. I'd much rather pretend that everything is fine. I've hidden the seal with a genjutsu, if only so I won't throw up when I see my reflection.

I know at some point I'll have to tell them, but not during the exams, that would just distract and worry them. Though my disappearing probably worried them plenty already, but at least I have the excuse of training. Naruto will probably buy it, but the excuse won't cut it with Shikamaru.

With Sasuke... the last time I saw him, he was staring at me terrified after I finished myself with my own jutsu. And he could barely go a few hours without seeing me back then.

Yeah, he probably went insane during the last month. Bugger.

I stop running and slip unnotice into the waiting area where the waiting genin are watching the match. None of them notice me.

Huh. Some people are missing.

Naruto and Neji must be fighting right now, neither of them are on the balcony. Sasuke is nowhere to be seen. Neither is Dosu from Sound.

Well, at least I'm not the last to arrive.

I walk up next to my brother and lean on the railing, studying the goings on in the arena. "Yo," I say.

He starts in surprise at my sudden presence. Weeks of constant try-not-to-get-killed-brat lessons taught me some serious stealth skills.

"Ri," he replies. "Where the hell have you been."

"Training outside the village."

"Really."

"Yes. On a completely unrelated note, Haku says hi."

I watch as a thoroughly beaten up Naruto, brimming with strange power, attacks a swirling dome of chakra that must contain Neji.

"Kuso. Kakashi made you train with him?" Shikamaru asks and turns to me. "Shit, what the hell happened to you?"

I have no idea what I look like since I haven't looked into a mirror in weeks, but I doubt it's all that pretty. I definitely don't look like my usual well prepared kunoichi-self. Pretty much all of my outfits got shredded, what I'm currently wearing is the last surviving mesh armour shirt I had, some slightly worn dark shorts and a black civilian t-shirt Haku found for me somewhere. Black bandages are
wrapped around my arms and legs, concealing scrapes, bruises and storage seals. I probably have some nice shadows under my eyes and generally look like someone who's been pushed to her limits nonstop for three weeks.

Demon-sensei only let me rest yesterday. Even he acknowledged that I couldn't go into the arena after three weeks of nonstop training.

I give Shika a sad smile. "Some stuff happened. Training was exhausting. I'm sorry for not being around. I'll tell you all about it later, okay?"

"You better. Troublesome girl," he grouches.

I breathe out. Guess that means I'm forgiven for now. Though I'll have some explaining to do, like how the hell Kakashi managed to get me a missing-nin for a teacher. From what I gathered from snide comments and insinuations, Konoha has been in contact with Zabuza since we ran into him in Wave. After they left us, Zabuza and Haku rejoined the rebellion against the current regime of Kirigakure. And for some reason, Konoha decided to support the rebellion – not openly though, I think it has more to do with supplying them with weapons and medicines. I'm also pretty sure Konoha fields missions to them and cashes in a cut of the pay. This leads to the rebels owing us bigtime.

I don't know any details, but Kakashi pulled some strings to make Zabuza train me as a tiny little favour to Konoha. Dad was probably in on it, too. This whole Kiri-Konoha situation is so convoluted, it requires someone like dad to see through it.

Poor Zabuza. Blackmailed again.

Below us, Neji stands above Naruto's unconscious form, glaring down at it.

"Naruto wins," I state.

"Huh?" Shika asks.

Below us, the clone bursts into smoke and Naruto launches himself out of the ground at Neji, getting him with a flawless hook to the chin.

"How did you know?" Shikamaru asks.

"It takes more than that to take Ruto out."

We both listen as Naruto talks some sense into Neji.

"It's like the Ramen Talk," I say, fascinated. "Only without the ramen."

"Not going to ask," Shika grumbles.

I smile as I look at Naruto running through the arena after his win is announced, the entire audience shouting praises and cheering for him. The smile on his face is heartbreakingly happy.

He's come so far. Dead Last no more.

"And here I thought he was a lame-ass type like me..." Shikamaru complains.

"Lame-ass type?" Shino asks, joining us and giving me a greeting nod that I return.

"Everyone's cheering for him, he's totally a kick-ass type... how troublesome," Shika laments.
I pat his shoulder in sympathy. "There, there," I say. He gives me an annoyed look.

"Riko-chan!" the rest of the contestants finally notices me. Ino beams and jumps forward to hug me. I barely keep myself from pulling a kunai on her at the sudden motion.

Paranoia was a good friend the last three weeks. I fondly remember Zabuza attacking me in my sleep at least twice a day, stalking me in the mist and sneaking up on me at any time of the day. Even Haku sometimes ambushed me.

Belatedly, I notice Lee has been talking to me. I'm not used to conversation anymore. "... youthful fight later!" I catch the tail end of his speech.

"...Sure," I reply after an awkward pause. "What were you saying again?"

Lee looks as if he's going to cry. His eyes are brimming with tears and he presses his lips together tightly. But he looks ridiculously happy at the same time.

So weird.

Was it something I said?

"Hey, Riko-chan, did you hear?" Ino asks, letting go of me. "About Team Four?"

I manage to avoid flinching. "What about them?"

"Something happened to Fumio... well, he died," She says.

"Oh," I say tonelessly.

"And no one knows what happened. It's awful, isn't it? I mean we went to the Academy with him for years. And now he's suddenly gone," Ino says, distraught.

I know how he died. He was murdered by a traitor abusing medical ninjutsu. He died trying to save me.

I can feel Shikamaru's heavy gaze on me. No doubt he noticed my reaction. And he was there in the infirmary when Kabuto and Orochimaru showed up. He was rendered unconscious before he could see Fumio die, but he's smart enough to piece it together.

Soon, he'll be asking me what those two bastards wanted with me. I still have no answer to that question.

"Yeah," I say hollowly. "Awful. What will happen to the team now?"

Ino looks sad. "Forehead said their sensei is training them twice as hard now. She says Eiji is probably going to be Hayate-sensei's apprentice and she's thinking of becoming a medic."

"Medic, huh?" I murmur. Fumio had wanted to be a medic.

"Yeah," Ino says softly. "She really... it's been hard on her, losing him like that."

*If only you were stronger...* whispers through the back of my mind.

*Shut up.* I think back.

Fucking Cursed Seal.
When it was sealed, I decided to never use it again. I thought that since I realised what using it did to me, it would be easy to ignore it.

I was so, so wrong.

It whispers to me in my weak moments. It whispers to me whenever my resolve wavers. It invades my dreams, showing me visions of how strong it could make me. Nightmares of losing my precious people because I was too weak.

The problem is, I do want to become stronger, just not with its help, but the ambition is enough for the curse to not be completely suppressed.

And all that power right at my fingertips... it's so fucking tempting. I'm so scared that someday I will forget who gave it to me. That I'll use it and lose myself.

"Ri-chan! You're here!" Naruto's voice shouts and I let him barrel into me and glomp me. "Did you see? Did you see? I was awesome, wasn't I? Heh, I'm gonna be chunin for sure, dattebayo!"

I hug him back fiercely. "You were epic. I bet you could win this whole thing."

"Really?" he beams at me.

"Yeah. That is, if you can beat me."

"Huh, just you wait! I've got an awesome new jutsu, dattebayo!" he boasts.

"I haven't exactly been sitting around doing nothing, you know." I smirk. "And you've got to beat Sasuke first. Speaking of which, where is he? The next match is between him and Gaara, isn't it?"

Gaara is still on the balcony with us, glaring down at the arena. In the audience, protests and angry shouts can be heard for the next match to start. Some even scream that they only came to see Sasuke fight.

Good to know, assholes. Thanks for your awesome support.

"Yeah, what the heck is that guy doing?" Shika asks, sounding annoyed. "Is he planning not to come?"

Shino calmly states in his weird way: "Confucius said: The wise do not approach the dangerous. A wise decision perhaps?"

"Nah," I state.

Naruto continues, grinning. "He's definitely gonna come."

"It's just Kakashi-sensei's bad influence. I wasn't exactly punctual, either," I remind them. "And Dosu hasn't shown up yet, too."

"He better come soon," Ino huffs. "I've trained so hard to beat him."

"Ladies and gentlemen!" Genma shouts. The crowd quiets a bit. "As the contestant for the next match hasn't arrived yet, we will start the next match instead!"

Shikamaru curses. "That means that my match is one closer!"

He probably planned for the shadows to have a certain length during his fight. Now things will be
harder for him.

"And now, the next match!" Genma announces. "Kankuro versus Aburame Shino!"

"I forfeit!" Kankuro yells.

Say what now? What the hell is he playing at?

Shino's eyebrows convey his anger.

"Huh?" Naruto says, shocked.

"What?!" Shikamaru shouts.

Fuck. Then it's his match next. And the shadows aren't that long, yet.

Temari hops onto her fan and elegantly soars down. "Get down here!" she commands.

Shika looks seriously unhappy. I can already see him contemplating the idea of forfeiting.

"Go for it, Shikamaru!" Naruto shouts and pushes him over the railing. Shika falls down, landing on his back.

Ouch.

Shikamaru stays on his back, staring at the clouds and probably considers murdering my best friend. Or sleeping. Either is plausible.

Apparently, his doing nothing pisses Temari off, so she attacks him before Genma can even start the match. Luckily, Shikamaru is good at running away. It comes in handy when training with Yoshino.

Temari notices this soon enough. After her next attack, her opponent is nowhere to be seen.

"Ne, Ri-chan," Naruto says quietly while Ino cheers loudly for Shikamaru. "Are you okay?"

I should probably have put more effort into appearing fine.

"No," I answer. "I'm not. I don't even want to be here."


This S-class criminal bit me in the neck and gave me the hickey of almost certain death after killing the boy who spent most of his life chasing after me right before my eyes. Now I'm cursed and I might go insane sometime in the future due to that, like maybe during the match that I'll have to fight in less than an hour. The only reason I'm here is because Fumio can't be.

"I'll tell you everything later," I say. "Don't worry. I'm not sick or hurt."

A curse doesn't count as sickness, right? And it doesn't hurt right now.

"But, Ri-chan-"

"Leave it. Please, Ruto."

"I-"
"Please. I'm good to fight. Trust me," I whisper, staring into his eye.

He stares back uncertainly, then he nods. "Alright, Ri-chan. But you better be okay!"

I smile. "Promise."

He nods and we turn back to watching the fight.

Below us, Shikamaru slowly lures and chases Temari close to the tunnel that Naruto dug during his fight. And...

*Checkmate, Temari.*

She's caught.

"Kagemane no Jutsu: Success," Shikamaru announces, a devious grin on his face. He and Temari then walk towards each other, the whole stadium screaming encouragements at him.

*And 3, 2, 1...*

Shikamaru lifts his hand. "That's it. I give up."

And for the first time in a month, I genuinely laugh.

---

I follow after Naruto as he jumps down to yell at my brother.

"Idiot!" he shouts, pointing at Shika.

"Shut up, you super idiot," Shika replies. He looks at me. "You gonna be okay?"


He gives me a pointed look, gaze lingering on my civilian shirt, worn shorts and slightly scuffed mesh armour. My weapons belt and kunai pouch are missing, too. I do have some weapons and other stuff in my pockets and storage seals, but for my usual standards, I am remarkably unprepared.

I'm remarkably unprepared even for a regular genin's standard.

Oh well. I had even less during training with Zabuza.

"Don't worry," I say.

"Yosh!" Lee lands a few metres away from me. "Let us have a youthful fight, Riko-san, my hip rival!"

I stare at him blankly. He aims the thumbs-up-and-blinding-grin combination at me. Next to me Shikamaru smoothes a laugh.

I decide to ignore Lee's weirdness.

"Come to think of it, you're the last one left of Team Nine, aren't you?" I ask. "This fight will decide the challenge your team issued to us."

*Which we have already won for two thirds. Heh.*

"That is right!" Lee admits. "But I shall redeem my team youthfully!"
"You do that," I mutter.

"Ri-chan!" Naruto throws his arms around me.

"Ruto?"

"You'll be careful, right?" he stares at me worriedly.

"Of course," I smile at him reassuringly. "I'll be alright."

*I think.*

"Alright, clear the field," Genma announces. "You two ready?"

Naruto and Shika leap away, leaving me with Lee and our proctor.

"Yosh! I have been waiting for this!" Lee shouts, grinning with gleaming teeth and shiny eyes.

Am I ready?

I giggle. Taking on Lee after weeks with Zabuza?

"Eh. Sure."

"Next battle: Nara Riko versus Rock Lee, both genin of Konohagakure," Genma announces. I start moving backwards. "Begin!"

Lee doesn't waste a single second. "Konoha senpuu!" he shouts and attacks with an insanely fast spinning kick.

The kick only meets air. I just barely leaned out of the way.

Lee starts attacking me again, jumping and flashing all around me, kicks and punches raining down on me from every which direction. None connect. I twist and dance around them, relying completely on my instinct to tell me how to move.

It's only warm-up for both of us. We are just studying our opponent's style.

"You are good," Lee finally states after two minutes of this.

"So are you," I reply. "Your form is impressive, even with you holding back so much."

Lee grins blindingly, giving me a thumbs-up. "Yosh! I shall stop holding back then! Let us begin this match in earnest!"

"Eh. Sure."

Lee makes the seal of confrontation. "We are both Konoha shinobi, are we not?" he says, repeating my words to Tenten during the preliminaries.

I smirk and mirror him. "We are."

Unbeknownst to him, I use the opportunity to channel water chakra while making the seal.

"Mizu no Yoroi," I murmur, and a layer of water covers my skin.
A water armour. It should protect me from the worst of Lee's attacks until I can get out of his range. I found the instructions for this jutsu in the ninjutsu scroll in my backpack. It's a decidedly useful technique.

Lee attacks me again, much faster than before. I start moving faster as well, evading at dodging as much as I can, but a few hits connect but are mostly absorbed by my water armour. Lee too catches a kick to the ribs and a jab to his collarbone, though I'm pretty sure they hurt me more than him. His body is ripped.

I don't stand a chance in close combat. That was to be expected though from an aspiring taijutsu master with Konoha's reigning taijutsu specialist for a teacher.

What little planning I did for this fight included this assumption.

I can win this.

Lee's next kick is double the speed of his previous ones and gets me in the ribs, shattering my armour. I'm thrown ten metres and skid over the ground.

Or not. Shit.

I get to my feet as fast as I can, fingers weaving through seals. "Suiton: Shokushu Rendan Kyouran!" I shout.

Water Release: Tentacle Barrage Fury. This one I learned from Zabuza.

From the ground, eight tentacles made of water emerge around Lee and start attacking him viciously. He becomes a whirlwind of green, kicking and punching at the tentacles, but whenever he destroys one, another uses the opening to slam into him. But one by one, the tentacles are decimated.

While he is occupied, I cast a genjutsu on him that warps his perception and am rewarded with three of the tentacles landing hits on him before he manages to dispel it.

After that, I launch a kunai with a flash tag at Lee, which gives the two remaining tentacles another opening to hit him before they are destroyed. I'm already forming my next handseals.

Lee is breathing hard after defeating the tentacles. He also stands exactly where I want him – over the hole Naruto dug, the hole that Shika used earlier, too. I'm so totally copying him.

"Uo Tsuba!" I shout and blast a jet of water into the hole I stand over.

"Huh?" Lee asks. "Ahh!" he shouts as the water blasts out like a geyser from the hole below him and catapults him into the air. I throw a few senbon at him while he is in mid-air, but he manages to avoid a critical hit and lands gracefully ten metres away from me.

I ready myself for another round of taijutsu.

"Lee! Take them off!" Gai's loud voice shouts.

He better not be talking about clothing.

Lee jumps back and then pushes down his orange legwarmers.

Oh shit, he was talking about clothing! Eww!

Stupid brain.
Lee reveals something tied to his ankles. Training weights. He begins releasing them.

*Hold on... that's not going to make much of a difference, unless... oh bugger.*

I hastily rip off the bandages on my right arm and slap my hand over the storage seal drawn on it. I catch my sword when it appears, strap it to my back with the belts attached to the scabbard and draw it, the dark metal gleaming dangerously in the sunlight.

Lee throws away his weights with an almost careless flick of his hands. They fly lazily through the air and when they fall down...

*Holy fuck,* I think when the weights impact the ground and cause two enormous dust clouds to rise, leaving a deep crater in the ground. Astonished shouts are heard throughout the stadium.

I channel chakra through my sword. "Water Style: Water Chain Sword!" I murmur, and my sword starts to glow light blue with chakra.

Lee disappears from sight, moving too fast to be seen. From my sword, blue glowing chains erupt, some of them wrapping loosely around my body for protection, others staying wrapped around my sword.

In a knee-jerk reaction, I whirl around and swing my sword and my chains catch Lee's punch and wrap around his arms. One swing later, and they throw him into the arena's wall. A moment later and he's gone from sight again. I barely manage to block the next hit, and my chains catch the following punch. Then a foot hits me in the chest area and I'm thrown backwards, dizzy for a moment.

I pour more chakra into the sword, and the number of chains covering me doubles, taking the brunt of Lee's attacks, though I still feel the impacts. I spin once around myself, swing my sword so the chains fly outward, and catch the moving Lee and slam him into the wall once again.

He gets to his feet once again. "I am not going to lose here! I need to prove myself as a ninja, and for that, I must defeat you!"

"So we can't settle this over a nice game of shogi?" I ask. "Too bad."

Lee disappears from sight, a kick hits the chains directly under my chin and I'm flung upwards into the air.

*Too fast! What's happening?*

More kicks and punches hit me, propelling me higher and higher, and if it weren't for the protection the chains give me, I'd be done for already.

Lee suddenly appears behind me, and the bandages from his arms wrap around me and my chains. He twists us in mid-air, and then we are speeding headfirst towards the ground and Lee starts spinning us so fast, I don't know what's happening, and I lose control over my chains and they disappear. And my arms suddenly have room to move due to the chains not being there anymore, and I thrust them forward and my not-chain-covered sword cuts through the bandages binding me and somehow, I manage to not land on my head as I crash into the ground, Lee pushing himself away from me right before that.

I groan as I push myself to my feet, dizzy as hell and hurting everywhere. I cough and blood comes out of my mouth. I run a green glowing hand over my torso. Nothing too serious. Nasty bruised ribs, maybe a little cracked, but it feels worse than it is. My chains protected me pretty well.

"Motherfucking hell," I mutter. "The fuck was that attack?"
My gaze falls on Lee who doesn't look to be in much better condition. He holds himself awkwardly, appearing thoroughly exhausted with drooping eyes and cramping muscles.

*Serves you right, asshole. That hurt, damn it!*

I sheathe my sword and seal it away again. No way in hell am I getting close to Lee again.

...*I can give you power... nothing shall stand before us...* whispers through my mind.

*I'm strong enough on my own, I think back. Leave me the hell alone.*

I reach into the pockets of my shorts where some senbon filled storage seals are hidden and pull some out.

Most of my kunai and shuriken got destroyed during training, but a lot of senbon survived, and I had Haku there who could always supply me with more. Senbon are about the only weapons I'm not short on.

I launch some at Lee who manages to barely avoid them, running towards me again with somewhat halting movements, but I throw more and more so he can't get close to me, and he can't dodge them all. Though I can't keep it up forever. His movements are getting more fluid by the second, and I'm sure he will soon be back to being fast and strong while I still feel like shit, still somewhat dizzy.

I consider forfeiting. My whole body hurts so bad. But then I feel a peculiar sensation, a familiar pair of eyes on me, and even without seeing him, I know he is watching. And some stubborn part of my brain decides that I'm not going to give up because of a bit of pain.

Lee suddenly stops moving, closes his eyes. He lifts his arms, crossing them in front of his face.

When a shinobi closes his eyes during battle, you know he is planning something big. I start moving backwards, bring distance between him and me. I manoeuvre myself in the direction of the puddles my destroyed water tentacles left.

I still haven't shown my best, the ace up my sleeve.

Looking at Lee, I realize I might have to. Because he appears to be bringing out his own. Power surges up around him, incredible strong. Unnatural wind blows his shiny black hair upwards and his skin starts to redden.

I hastily start focusing chakra, form a single seal with my right hand.

*Visible* chakra starts traveling along Lee's body.

*Bloody hell.*

I take a deep breath of air.

Lee whips his arms back, power still whirling around him. His skin is a dark brown-red now, and his eyes are completely white. "Third Gate of Life: KAI!" he shouts.

*Fucking hell.*

He opened one of the inner gates. As a genin. At age thirteen.

On the bright side, the whole thing doesn't look all that healthy. His weird spinning drop move with the bandages must have opened a gate, too, and he looked like shit afterwards. This is most likely
going to have worse consequences for him. But while it lasts... I'm screwed. I have nothing to counter that kind of power. One hit and I'm done for.

I can't fight him.

I smirk. Good thing I won't have to. He just defeated himself.

"Kiriagakure no Jutsu!" I whisper and blow a large cloud of mist out of my mouth. Within moments I'm surrounded by thick, white mist. I can barely see my own feet.

This technique is so much easier outside of the stone desert.

I completely cloak my own chakra until I am undetectable. Then I form another handseal.
"Mizutamari no Jutsu," I whisper almost inaudibly, and my body collapses into a puddle of water, blending in fabulously with the puddles the water tentacles left.

This is my ace. Hiding in the mist.

I learned the two techniques within the space of two days. Demon-sensei hunting me and kicking my ass was a damn good motivation to learn how to hide myself properly. And I practiced sneaking through the mist undetected constantly during my training. Sometimes, it took even Zabuza an hour until finding me.

"Fourth Gate of Pain: KAI!" Lee screams, and then the earth shakes when he starts to move, flashing around impossibly fast into my mist. Where he runs, the ground is torn up, shattering under his steps. The puddle that is me slips into the cracks, hidden even better now.

"Where are you?!" Lee screams, zipping around and through my mist so insanely fast, it disperses, but he still can't see me.

Yep. I'm just going to sit here and hide until he wears himself out. How's that for a smart strategy, huh?

In his current agitated state, Lee can't sense me. Though, to be fair, even in his normal state, he wouldn't be able to. It would probably take a jounin level sensor to find me when I'm cloaking my chakra like I am doing. That or someone with the Byakugan or an Inuzuka.

"RAAAAAHHHHHHHHH!" Lee roars and punches the ground in frustration. The whole arena shakes.

Shiiiiitshiiishshshshsh... I chant in my head as my puddle threatens to slip further into the cracks created by Lee, and I need to apply some serious chakra control to prevent myself from seeping away. While I am not claustrophobic, I really don't enjoy being stuck in small spaces in puddle form.

I think I deserve some sort of award for not running away from the beast that is Lee.

After another minute of hiding myself in mild terror while Lee tears up the arena looking for me, he slows down. "Guahhh!" he groans in pain, and I hear the sound of a body hitting the floor not too far away from me. The insane power he radiated disappears.

I wait another few moments, but nothing happens, so I hastily rise out of my puddle and step out.

Lee sees me and tries to force himself to his feet, but my senbon hit him in strategic points and he breaks down unconscious and immobilised before he can damage himself any more. *Reckless idiot.*
I stare blankly at his form on the ground.

_Huh. I won._

Genma appears and checks Lee's pulse. Then he rights himself again.

"Winner: Nara Riko," he announces, and loud cheers erupt from the stands.

I can't say I really appreciate the noise. I'm not used to it after weeks in the mostly silent desert.

"Nice fight," Genma says. "Some pretty good thinking you did in there."

"All of it improvised," I mutter. "And he was stronger than me."

"Didn't help him any," Genma counters. "He released his ultimate technique, and you just hid and waited it out." He shakes his head. "You got some nerve, kid."

I shrug. "If you say so."

Winning against Lee wasn't really my goal. Becoming chunin is.

_Did you see that, Fumio? Are you watching?_

Gai appears next to Lee just as the medics arrive. "My youthful student..." he says softly, looking down at Lee.

"He's just unconscious and paralysed," I inform the medics and Gai. "I didn't want him to injure himself further. I think he tore up his muscles."

The medics nod, green glowing hands already hovering over Lee. Gai looks down at his student with an inscrutable look.

"Ri-chan!" Naruto's voice shouts. I see him running towards me. "You won! You were awesome, dattebayo!"

I crack a smile at him. "Thanks, Ruto."

"Troublesome girl," Shika mutters as he approaches.

I grin tiredly at him. " Aren't you glad you don't have to fight me now?" I say.

He snorts. "You copied me with that one move."

"Sure worked," I answer unrepentantly. "Oi, Ruto, thanks for digging that hole earlier."

"Eheheheheheh!" Naruto grins sheepishly, folding his hands behind his head. "You're welcome, Ri-chan!"

"So what's the next match?" I switch the topic. "Did that Dosu guy show up?"

"No," Shika says. "Ino's pissed. Wanted to show off her new skills and everything. Troublesome."

"Argh!" Naruto yells, stomping his foot. "What's the bastard doing! Why isn't he here yet?!"

Oh, but he is here. It was his eyes I felt on me. He's been watching for a while now.

I give a slight smile when the wind picks up, forming into a whirlwind, scattering leaves everywhere.
Back to back, Kakashi and Sasuke appear, standing there like complete badasses.

*Now that's how you make an entrance.* I think appreciatively.

A sight for sore eyes. I haven't seen Sasuke in so long. I really missed him.

"Maa, sorry, we are a bit late," Kakashi says. "You wouldn't believe the traffic today."

Genma smirks. "Your name?" he asks Sasuke.

He looks up. "Uchiha Sasuke," he says coldly.

I don't like the expression on his face. I don't like his cold voice. It's different from his arrogant one. His glare shifts to me. I gulp a little, my throat suddenly dry.

*Right. Forgot he's probably mad at me. Shit.*

His eyes pass over me and settle on Naruto. He smirks arrogantly. "You won?"

"Of course, dattebayo!" Naruto grins fiercely.

I'm simply ignored. I feel a pang of hurt at that, even if I deserve it.

I'd rather he say something mean. Words I can handle. Silence is bad.

"Maa, we showed up all flashy and all..." Kakashi says, sheepishly scratching the back of his head. "but could Sasuke possibly have been disqualified?"

As if he doesn't know.

"Geez... your tardiness must be contagious..." Genma sighs. "We pushed Sasuke's fight to the end. He hasn't been disqualified."

"Aahahaha! That's good!" Kakashi laughs awkwardly. Then he looks up at the balcony, his sheepish expression morphing into an inscrutable one. I follow his gaze and see Gaara glaring down at us, an ice cold expression on his face. I turn my head. Sasuke's expression is similar.

"Don't lose to a guy like that!" Naruto growls.

*Okay. Did I miss something while I was gone? What happened with Gaara?*

"Sasuke!" Naruto says loudly. Sasuke surfaces from his glaring. "I want to fight you! So don't lose!"

There is a short pause. "...yeah," Sasuke replies then. Naruto grins determinedly. In the background, Shika mutters 'troublesome'.

The audience cheers at Sasuke's appearance. Fangirls' squeals can be heard from the crowd. I see Ino waving wildly from the balcony.

My fight has been forgotten already.

*I can make them see you. Nothing could stop us...* the curse hisses. I block it out.

"Gaara, get down here," Genma orders the still glaring boy. He moves back and starts walking towards the stairs at a snail's pace. Probably retaliation for having to wait for so long.
Vindictive.

I distantly remember doing something similar when meeting Kakashi for the first time.

"Oi. Let's go back up," Shikamaru grumbles.

"Yeah!" Naruto agrees.

"But this time, we're taking the stairs," Shika says sullenly, turning to walk away while rubbing his shoulder.

"What? You're still pissed that I pushed you down?" Naruto asks, hurrying after him.

I hesitate, looking unsurely at Sasuke who is still glaring at anything but me. "Good luck," I whisper. His eyes flicker to me for an impossibly short instant, but they are closed off and his gaze shifts away the next moment.

His rejection hurts.

I turn around and shunshin back to the balcony.
Invasion

I appear next to Shino on the balcony.

"You fought well," he says, shifting his stance slightly to look at me.

"Thanks."

"You were really cool!" Ino tells me. "But Lee was so strong, too! I bet you'll both make chunin!"

I shrug uncomfortably. I don't actually think Lee will get promoted. He was too reckless with himself. That's not something people want to see in a squad leader.

Did I do enough to get promoted? I did outsmart Lee a couple of times, and I managed to get through the match with minimal injuries aside from some serious bruises. That stunt Lee pulled with his bandages... ouch. I'm lucky nothing was broken. My head still hurts.

I used up a lot of my chakra, but I should still be good for my next match which will be against Ino. With her, it will probably come down to outsmarting her. I guess I could simply overpower her, but that won't get me promoted and Ino wouldn't get to show off her abilities to the audience.

Besides, my goal isn't to win, it is to become chunin. Though the more I win, the higher my chances at getting promoted are.

"So what did Sasuke-kun say? How did he look? Did he say anything about where he was this month? I didn't see him at all!" Ino chatters.

I lean on the railing, staring at the boy in question sullenly. "He didn't say much of anything," I reply. "And he looks fine."

Whatever.

I sit down, deciding to rest as much as possible until I have to fight again. I make my hand glow green and run it over my body and head to reduce as much of the damage as I can without exhausting myself too much. One of my ribs is a little cracked and I can't leave it like that, so I end up spending more chakra than I want on healing myself.

Oh well. I'll live. With a good plan, I can defeat Ino without spending too much chakra. But after her, I'll have to fight either Naruto, Sasuke, Gaara, Shino or Temari, depending on who is left after their various fights, and I'll need a lot of chakra for all of them. I'll probably end up forfeiting then, unless I can come up with something good.

Then again, whoever I'm going to be fighting will be exhausted, too, likely even more so than me.

Well, no use worrying about it now. I need to recover first.

I sit there cross-legged, studying Sasuke who stands in the middle of the devastated arena.

He shut me out. Closed off. Naruto he treated normally, but he barely spared me a glance. And it's not like we could talk or spar it out in the middle of the tournament.

Still, he could have at least looked at me. It's not like I vanished for fun. For shit's sake, I got myself cursed and saw a comrade murdered while I couldn't do anything! The last month wasn't a picnic for me either!
...that's it... how dare he... whispers through my mind, so softly I almost don't realise that the thought didn't come from me.

I bury my head in my hands, massage my temples with my fingers. Take a deep breath to centre myself. "Leave me alone," I hiss through my teeth.

"Riko-chan? Are you okay?" Ino asks me, sounding concerned.

"Headache," I reply. "Hit my head during the fight. You know, when Lee did that drop-me-on-the-head attack."

"Yeah, that looked really nasty," Ino agrees. "Do you need something to drink?"

I look up and give her a crooked grin. "Not from the poison user I have to fight in my next match."


Shino holds a water canteen under my nose. "Take it. Why? Because I believe we will have to fight more than we expected."

I frown. What does he mean by that?

He subtly shifts his stance and his body doesn't block my view on the Suna shinobi anymore. Temari and Kankuro are whispering worriedly, both looking scared and nervous. A complete change from the preliminaries where they were so confident.

Kankuro forfeited for reasons unknown, right before his fight. As the son of the kazekage, that's bound to have political backlash, not to mention it's insulting to the present daimyos who maybe bet on him or came to see him fight. The move also reflects badly on Suna. Temari compensated for it with her performance, but it won't be forgotten.

Why would Kankuro forfeit given the consequences?

Just what is Shino trying to tell me?

I give him a tight nod and take his water canteen, drinking up half of it. "Thanks, Shino," I say. "You're a good friend."

He nods back. When I hand him back his canteen, a small bug covertly crawls onto my hand. I smile grimly and swipe my hand over my ponytail so it can hide in my hair. "Thanks for watching out for me," I murmur.

"Look!" Ino calls out. "They're starting!"

I look down at the arena. Sasuke and Gaara stand in front of each other, Sasuke still has that cold expression on his face while Gaara... grins demonically?

I shiver. That is definitely worrying. I'd pegged him for cold and emotionless, but that look on his face doesn't quite fit with that assumption.

I remember Hanabi telling me that his chakra seemed unstable, weeks ago. Chakra is the mixture of physical and spiritual energy. So if someone's chakra is unstable, what does that say about that person's body and mind?

Nothing good, that's for sure.
But Sasuke is the one fighting him. He's strong. He'll be alright. I hope.

"Begin!" Genma shouts and leaps away from the two contestants.

Gaara and Sasuke stand there for a few moments, assessing each other. Then sand begins to pour out of Gaara's gourd and floats around him. Sasuke jumps back a few steps, a calculating look on his face.

Gaara suddenly hunches over and presses his hand against his head, a pained look on his face. "Don't get so mad at me..." he whimpers. "Mother..."

"What is with him?" Ino asks, a disturbed look on her face. Out of all of us, she probably knows the most about psychological issues.

"His chakra appears more agitated then before," Shino states.

"I hope Sasuke-kun is going to be okay," Ino murmurs worriedly. "But he's Sasuke-kun, of course he'll be!"

It sounds as if she is trying to convince herself more than us.

"Of course," I say, even though I'm worried myself. "Genma-sensei is down there, too. He'll stop the match if Gaara goes too far."

No way will Konoha let its last Uchiha die.

"And besides, we are here, too. If it comes to that, we can help, too," I state.

"Yeah. You're right," Ino answers, sounding relieved. "We'll do that."

Below us, Gaara's sand suddenly falls down. He takes his hand from his face, the tortured look fading into his previous emotionless one. "Come," he orders Sasuke.

"It seems as if he has gotten a hold of himself," Shino asserts.

"Yeah," Ino agrees.

"Hey," I say. "Why are Naruto and Shikamaru taking so long?" I ask. "They should be here already."

"Huh?" Ino asks, looking around. "That's weird."

"The two of them took the stairs," I murmur, realisation dawning. "So did Gaara. They'd have run into him..."

Oh shit. I jump up, getting a little dizzy. Damn head injury. I fixed it, but the fact hasn't arrived in my mind yet. Phantom pain. Damn it.

"Stay here," Ino orders, pushing me down. "I'll go look for them. Shino, stay here with Riko-chan."

We both nod, but just as Ino turns around to take off, the door to our waiting area bursts open and Naruto barrels in without Shikamaru.

"Clone?" I guess, because the original would never leave a friend.
"Yeah!" Naruto's clone confirms. "Boss and Shika went to Kakashi-sensei. They gotta stop the match! Gaara's gonna kill Sasuke!"

"What?" Ino nearly shrieks. "What happened?"


I throw a quick glance at Gaara's siblings. They are indeed looking in our direction.

"There were these two guys that wanted Gaara to lose because someone bet on Sasuke, and he just killed them!" the clone whispers hastily, a disturbed look on his face. "With no hesitation at all! And he'd have killed us if those two hadn't been there."

I glance down at the fight while Ino and Shino interrogate clone-Ruto. Sasuke currently flits around Gaara, testing his defence. Gaara's sand morphs into a clone that starts attacking him with sand attacks. I have a brief moment of panic when Sasuke directly attacks the sand-clone, but then he smirks and disappears from view in a burst of speed.

So fast. Just like Lee without his weights.

"Yes!" I whisper when Sasuke lands a punch on Gaara's face.

_Huh? Are those cracks on his face?_

He controls sand. I guess he uses it like I use the water armour, wearing a layer on his skin to protect himself.

Sasuke stands a few steps away from Gaara, a very arrogant smirk on his face. "Come," he throws Gaara's words back at him.

Gaara looks unstable again.

"If you are not coming to me, I will go to you," Sasuke states and blurs from view again, so fast, Gaara's sand cannot keep up.

"I don't think we have to worry about Sasuke at this moment," I say dryly, watching Sasuke kick Gaara across the arena.

"But, Ri-chan..." the clone protests, and again I get the feeling there is something I'm missing.

"Relax," I murmur, wrapping my arms around the clone. He may not be the real Naruto, but the original will get the memory of the hug later.

The clone hugs me back. "I think Gaara is like me, Ri-chan," he whispers so softly, I barely hear him.

"What do you- oh."

Extremely large reserves. Unstable chakra. Unstable mind.

Jinchuuriki.

Possibly with a faulty seal.

_Bugger._
"Yeah," he murmurs. "A few days ago, I was in the hospital because of chakra exhaustion, and Gaara was there too. He wanted to kill Kiba - his mom kicked his ass in training so he had to go to the hospital, the loser - for forfeiting his match." The clone shudders. "Shika and me stopped him, though. But that's when he said he had something inside him, too."

Damn it. That's really bad.

"If things get bad, I'll shunshin down and stop the fight," I say. "I won't let him kill Sasuke."

I don't ever want to see a comrade die in front of my eyes again.

"You and Shikamaru, stay with Kakashi-sensei," I tell him. "We'll keep an eye on things here."

The clone nods uncertainly. "Alright, Ri-chan."

"Don't worry. Sasuke is strong," I say. "And he has us."

The clone looks a little happier at that comment. Then he dispels in a poof of smoke.

"Those clones are so weird," Ino comments. "They behave just like Naruto."

I grin a little. "That's Ruto for you." I nod in the direction of the fight where Sasuke is busy kicking Gaara's ass. "And that's Sasuke for you."

She squeals, attention instantly riveted on the match.

"Sasuke has improved very much," Shino states.

"Yeah," I agree softly. "He has."

Gaara makes a handseal and the sand forms itself into a ball around him. Sasuke attempts to hit him before the sand closes around Gaara, but he's too late and nearly ends up impaled by spikes of sand. He jumps back again and the spikes retract.

I scoop forward, almost to the edge of our platform, so far, my legs dangle over the ledge. I narrow my eyes and lean forward, focusing on the fighters. There's blood running down Sasuke's fist, a scratch on his face, and more blood on his leg. But nothing serious.

"An absolute defence," Shino states. "What will Sasuke do?"

The question is, what will Gaara do? One doesn't hole up in a sand cocoon that takes who knows how much chakra to maintain unless they have something planned.

"I don't know," I murmur. "But he better break that thing, and soon. I got a bad feeling about this."

If Gaara really is a jinchuuriki... what is he planning?

The sand orb he hides in just sits there innocently. Then sand gathers together into a small ball, floating above it.

I squint a little. "Is that an eye?" I ask incredulously.

"Just what is he planning?" Ino asks.
I chance a look at Temari and Kankuro. Both of them look shocked and a little panicked, eyes glued to the sand ball.

They aren't scared for their little brother. They are scared of him.

Nothing good can come of this. And that ominous feeling is getting worse.

"Shino, you got a soldier pill for me?" I ask.

He hands a small sack to me. I take a pill and swallow it, feeling some strength and chakra return to me instantly. "Thanks again, Shino."

It'll screw with my control for a while, but it's worth the power, I think.

...I could give you all the power you desire... hisses through my mind.

No thanks.

In the arena, Sasuke attacks the sand ball with no results. He can barely make contact before the spikes try to kill him again. His eyes glow red as he studies Gaara's hideout.

"Damn," I hear Kankuro's voice. "When he's like that..."

"I know," Temari answers. "Is he trying to ruin the plan? Damn Gaara."

Shino, Ino and I stiffen.

Plan?

What are they talking about?

I'm starting to think Shino was right. We might have to fight more than we expected.

Maybe we should take Temari and Kankuro out right now. It's three against two, and Temari is already exhausted and at a disadvantage in close quarters, just like Kankuro. But how to do it without attracting attention? I can't use genjutsu since the soldier pill screws up my control.

I wished Shika were here. It would be a piece of cake with him around. Well, Shino is a good alternative too.

I tap my hand against his leg in the basic communication code we were taught in the Academy. Seconds later, two bugs crawl out of his sleeves and fly away. At least we'll be able to keep tabs on those two now.

In the arena, Sasuke runs up the wall and starts making seals. Lightning starts to spark in his hand. A sound like thousands of birds chirping rings through the stadium and he starts to run down.

Whoa, Sasuke. Amazing. So strong and fast...

He speeds down, his lightning-filled hand drawing a trail of distraction after him. He runs straight at Gaara's hideout, narrowly avoiding the spikes, and thrusts his hand into the sand-wall that bursts, sand spraying everywhere like water.

A few moments pass in silence. Then a blood-curdling scream sounds. "Blood! My blood! Guaaaaaahhhhh!"
Gaara sounds terrified.

Sasuke tries to pull his arm out of Gaara's hideout but it appears to be trapped. A moment later, his arm lights up with lightning again, Gaara screams once more and Sasuke pulls his arm out with a pained expression. He wastes no time jumping back.

A claw with blue markings on it follows him, much too large to have fit into Gaara's hideout.

Kami. Is that-

The clawed arm is retracted into the ball. And something in there makes Sasuke look scared for just a moment.

The ominous feeling multiplies a hundred-fold.

Gaara's hideout cracks and then melts into sand, revealing Gaara clutching his bloody shoulder, breathing hard, a crazed look on his face.

That's not good, is it? Huh, I'm tired...

My vision blurs, my mind growing foggy. Feathers fall around me, looking so soft and fluffy, I want to reach out and touch them.

Genjutsu, haha... so pretty...

My head falls forward and then the rest of my body follows. I fall down into the arena. The landing is rather painful which takes care of the genjutsu.

The pretty feathers vanish. Adrenalin rushes through me and I force myself to stand, pulling senbon, my gaze darting around wildly. A smoke explosion goes off where I saw Hokage-sama sitting together with the Kazekage.

Is this the plan Temari spoke of?

 Fucking hell. What's going on?

I cower behind a pile of thrown up earth and stones that Lee created when he opened the gates.

From the stands, I hear clangs of kunai, yells and general chaos breaking out. Thank God the civilians seem to be asleep. The last thing we need is a mass panic breaking out.

I peer around, mouth dry and heart beating wildly.

What the hell is going on?

I spare a brief moment of worry over my friends, but Ino is together with Shino and both should be fine if they stick together. I can only hope. Naruto and Shikamaru are with Kakashi, he'll protect them, and someone will hopefully wake Naruto up.

A giant purple box forms on the roof of the central watchtower. A barrier of some kind. What the hell is that supposed to do?

I shake the worries and fears off. Ice cold focus takes the place of them.

Right now, I need to focus on surviving. Sand is the enemy.
"Stop, Gaara!" a voice shouts. Temari. She and Kankuro are standing beside Gaara, a little ways away from Sasuke.

"I'll kill you!" Gaara growls, taking a step toward Sasuke.

"There's no point in fighting him any longer!" Temari pleads.

"Don't forget our mission!" Kankuro adds, stepping in Gaara's way.

"Get out of the way!" Gaara orders, shoving Kankuro away. "I'll kill him!"

I launch my senbon as hard at them as I can, leaping right after the projectiles. The senbon get deflected by the man I know is the siblings' sensei. Baki, I think his name was.

I land next to the crouching Sasuke.

"What do you three think you are doing? The mission has commenced already!" Baki growls at the three Suna nin.

"Guaahhh!" Gaara groans, hunching over and clutching his head.

I pull a kunai with attached explosive tags from one of my pockets while they are distracted.

"Sasuke, are you hurt?" I ask. "Because I can't fight them by myself."

I can't fight a jounin, period. Unless... the curse gives a triumphant throb.


Genma lands in front of us, eyes fixed on Baki.

Backup. Thank God.

"What in the hell is going on?!" Sasuke growls, pulling himself to his feet, shuriken in his hands.

Gaara falls to his knees, still clutching his head and moaning in pain. Temari kneels next to him.

"The wound is more serious then we thought!"

"Then he can't use 'it'?!" Kankuro asks.

What are they talking about?

Well, if Gaara can't use 'it', whatever 'it' is supposed to be, that's good for us.

"Fool," Baki growls. "That's what happens when you try to turn into the fully possessed form without waiting for the signal."

Fuck. Possessed form? That's what he wanted to fight Sasuke with?

Sasuke came so close to dying.

"Then what are we supposed to do?!" Kankuro shouts. "Proceed without Gaara?!!"

Baki grits his teeth. "Abort the mission temporarily. You three retreat and treat his wounds. Resume the mission when he's recovered enough. I'll join the battle."

No you don't.
I hurl my tagged kunai at the siblings and Baki deflects it but gets thrown back by the explosion. Genma immediately leaps after him while the siblings flee.

"You two go after them!" Genma shouts at us. "Protect the Leaf!"

"Hai!" I answer, grab Sasuke's arm and shunshin us on top of the arena's wall. Then we run after Temari, Gaara and Kankuro.

It's chaos. In the distance, a gargantuan three-headed snake wreaks havoc, the sound of explosions coming from all directions. Smoke rises up everywhere, and the sounds of fighting join the cacophony of chaos.

We run through the streets. The rooftops are too dangerous.

"Incoming!" Sasuke shouts and I throw myself to the ground. Above us, an explosion rocks a house, then two masked shinobi leap out at us from the smoke. I don't think. I just react. My water sword forms in the span of a split second and then the corpse of one of the attackers falls down with a hole in his chest. My water sword is stained red. Blood sword. I whirl around, but Sasuke is already done, his eyes flashing red – since when does his sharingan have three tomoe? – and his opponent lies in front of him with kunai in his chest.

Both have the Otogakure symbol engraved on their hitae-ate. I grit my teeth.

_Orochimaru again, huh?_

Sasuke's and my eyes meet and we are running again, the blood sword dispelling while I run. No time to think about the fact that I took a life again. That Sasuke made his first kill.

This is a battle. This is an invasion. Konoha is at war, and we are its shinobi. Protect the Leaf. The enemies are Sand and Sound.

Soon we reach the forest's edge and we leap from tree to tree after our targets as fast as we can. It's only a question of time until we catch up to them. Kankuro was carrying Gaara before we lost sight of them during the attack. Plus, we are Leaf shinobi. Trees are where we feel right at home. Temari, Kankuro and Gaara are from the desert. They know nothing about forest.

"Stay out of the fighting," Sasuke orders. "I'll take care of the enemies."

"Forget it," I growl. "We have better chances at surviving if we fight together."

"I'm not letting you get hurt!" he growls back.

"And I'm not letting you die!" I hiss.

Sasuke suddenly stops and I nearly crash into him. "What the he-

He grabs my face and then his mouth is pressed onto mine. A moment later, he lets me go just as suddenly as he grabbed me. I stagger back a few steps.

"I- wha- eh?" I stutter. "Huh?"

My brain is short-circuited.

"Come on," Sasuke orders and leaps away again.

What the hell just happened?
I jump after him in a daze. I touch my fingers to my lips. An echo of his kiss still lingers on them.

I didn't imagine that, did I?

I shake my head. This isn't the time to get distracted. But I should probably make a mental note that Sasuke has possibly gone insane.

Honestly, first he ignores me, then he kisses me, and then he runs away. What the hell is wrong with him? Maybe it's mid-invasion insanity?

Great. Now I'm distracted again.

I catch up to Sasuke when he stops to scan the ground for tracks. "This way," he says and takes off again. I run after him.

The ass is pretending nothing's happened. Well, we are on mission. So that's probably a good call. Still...

I shake my head again, shoving the confusion away. I can't afford to get distracted.

"Ruto and Shika will come after us," I say after a minute of running. "Kakashi will get them out of the arena."

Because while they are good, they aren't that good. None of us rookies are prepared to handle the chaos of that kind of battle. And Kakashi can't fight while protecting them. It's only logical he'd send them after us as back-up.

"Leave a clone," Sasuke suggests.

I nod and we stop for a minute next to a small creek. Sasuke looks for more tracks while I make my clone who quickly takes off. Then we run again. By now, I'm really thankful for the soldier pill Shino gave me.

...All the power that you want, right at your fingertips...

No. I won't do it.

We leap through a part of the forest with trees almost as tall and dense as they were in the Forest of Death. It might as well be night given how dark it is in here.

"We're catching up," I note.

"Hn," Sasuke grunts. Then he suddenly shoves me to the side in mid-air. A moment later, an explosion goes off on the branch I would have landed on. Unfortunately, Sasuke pushed me toward another explosive tag and I can barely escape another explosion.

The next few seconds are a race between me and the fire. I hurriedly bounce from tree to tree, outrunning the explosions and evading the wires hanging between the trees.

"Tch," I mutter after finally managing to find a safe place. I inspect myself. Only minor burns and some scrapes, other than that I'm fine. "Sasuke? Are you alright?" I call.

He lands next to me. "Fine. You?"

"Same."
He pulls out a water canteen and holds it out to me. I take a swig gratefully. "Thanks. Damn, those were some well done traps."

"Hn," Sasuke drinks some water, too. "Let's go."

And then we are speeding through the forest again. It's only minutes later that we see Temari and Kankuro with Gaara slung over his shoulder waiting for us with grim looks on their faces. We land on a neighbouring tree, Sasuke positioning himself slightly in front of me.

"We finally caught up," Sasuke states arrogantly. "This is it for you."

"Damn it!" Kankuro curses.

"Uchiha Sasuke," Temari murmurs. "Nara Riko."

"We won't let you escape," I say coldly.

"Hah! Bring it on, then!" Kankuro says, but Temari jumps in front of him.

"Kankuro, take Gaara and run!" She hurls kunai at us that we easily evade. "I will deal with them!"

"But, Temari-" Kankuro protests. "You can't handle them alone!"

"Don't worry about it. This is an important mission for our village! Gaara is more important than I. Now go!" she orders.

Kankuro leaps away.

Sasuke's and my eyes meet. Then he gives me a tiny reluctant nod and turns to throw shuriken after Kankuro. "You are not getting away!" he yells and leaps after him. Temari jumps in his way.

Too late, she notices me running after Kankuro on the branches far below them. She sends a wave of wind after me, but it's too late to stop me.

Without looking back, I charge after Kankuro and Gaara and leave Sasuke to fight Temari.

---

*It was the best choice. I tell myself as I run. He's got his fire jutsu. He can handle her. And she deemed him the main threat, she'd never have let him through as easily as she did me. It was the right thing to do. I need to stop Kankuro.*

Sasuke will catch up to me soon. I need to delay Kankuro and stop Gaara from recovering enough to complete their mission, whatever that is. Given he's almost certainly a jinchuuriki and earlier they spoke of him using a possessed form, I can make a pretty good guess what it is.

No way in hell will I let him near my home to destroy it.

I see Kankuro waiting in front of me. He flings kunai at me that I easily evade. But then he flicks his fingers. I hastily jump off my branch and evade the kunai that he's controlling.

Gaara is nowhere to be seen. Kankuro must have hidden him somewhere.

"Tch. Left your boyfriend behind, did ya?" he drawls.

I refuse to take the bait. I need to focus.
Kankuro flicks his fingers once more and I have to evade once again. I can't allow myself to get hit. I'm almost certain Kankuro uses poisons.

"I will settle this quickly." Kankuro grins.

He has reason to be confident. As far as he knows, I have no idea what techniques he uses while he has seen me fight twice now. Plus, after my battle with Lee, I'm exhausted.

"No. You won't," a calm voice states behind me. "I shall be your opponent."

"Shino!" I exclaim.

He must have followed me with the help of the bug that he placed on me.

Kankuro curses. "You are-" he starts, then he throws himself to the side to evade a shower of needles.

"Ino-chan!"

"Go on, Riko-chan," Ino orders, eyes fixed on Kankuro. "We've got your back."

"We shall come after you as soon as we are done here," Shino adds.

"How troublesome..." I smirk. "Thanks, you guys."

I leap away in search of Gaara. I have a village to protect.

"Hraaaahhh... hraaaaaahhh..." I hear Gaara's rasping breaths. "Mother..."

**Bugger. He's awake.**

We are only a hundred metres away from where I left Shino and Ino to deal with Kankuro.

"Come out!" Gaara screams. "I'm going to kill you!"

That announcement somehow doesn't make me feel more inclined to show myself.

I jump on another branch and peer through the foliage. Below me is Gaara, kneeling on the ground, hunched over, his fingers digging into his head. "Ugh..." he moans. "Ahhhrgh!"

**What the hell?**

I pull out my last tagged kunai. *Please work, please, please work.* I pray as I launch it at Gaara. The kunai gets absorbed by sand. A moment later, it explodes and engulfs Gaara's form in fire and smoke.

Did it work? I step out a little so I can see better.

The smoke dissipates and reveals a shield of sand. My heart plummets.

The sand melts away.

"W-what?" I whisper, staring aghast at what used to be Gaara. Now he's a monster. Half of his face has transformed into that of a- I don't even know what it is. Spittle drips from his deformed mouth. His right arm has transformed into the giant clawed arm that went after Sasuke earlier during his match.
"There you are!" Gaara screams. "Let me feel it!" he thrust both his arms in my direction. "Suna Shuriken!"

An enormous volley of sand bullets is launched at me, so fast, I can't evade and have to replace myself. I land on Gaara's other side, hidden by a tree.

"Come out!" Gaara growls, his words oddly distorted due to his deformed mouth. "Let me feel this excitement! Make me feel alive!"

**Monster.**

Where I stood before I replaced myself, the trees have been obliterated. The sand bullets ripped through them like paper.

**Bloody hell.**

I need to get him away. We are way too close to where Shino and Ino are battling Kankuro. If Gaara had been aiming that attack in the direction of their fight, they would have died.

**Sorry, Shino, Ino. I can't let you catch up with me, after all.**

I step out from my hiding place. Gaara notices me immediately and kicks himself off the ground, his claw-arm stretched out to rip me into pieces. I throw myself to the side at the last second, pour chakra into my muscles and flash behind Gaara's back at the highest speed I am capable off. I grab at Gaara's neck and my hand gets engulfed by sand.

Then I shunshin us away.

---

**Shikamaru**

He was supposed to be a coward. So why is he standing here now, holding eight ninja in his Kagemane no Jutsu?

Oh right. Because he has to make sure Sakura and Naruto make it to Ri. She and Sasuke can't fight the three Sand ninja by themselves. They are good, the strongest of their generation, but so are their opponents.

Shikamaru isn't strong. But he's the smartest.

**Now where is the ninth enemy hiding?**

He hurls shuriken and kunai at his bound opponents. They are intercepted by the unseen enemy's thrown weapons. Soft laughter comes from the dense foliage of a tree.

How troublesome. He doesn't have enough chakra to catch enemy number nine. **Hah.** He sighs inwardly. *I guess this is it, huh? Damn it... I just wanted to do this ninja thing normally, get paid normally, get married to a regular girl who's neither too beautiful nor-

A decidedly unmanly shriek interrupts his inner monologue and ninja number nine falls out of the tree, a red-haired girl wrapped around his head like a monkey. A flash of metal, then she jumps off the falling man who impacts the ground, a puddle of blood spreading around him.

"Yo, Shika-chan!" Riko's clone greets him cheerfully, a bloody kunai in her hand. "Just a second longer, I gotta take care of this!"
And she blurs from sight. True to her word, a second later none of his enemies resist his jutsu any longer. He lets the shadows fade and falls on his ass, exhausted.

"You alright, Shika-chan? You aren't hurt, are you?" Ri's clone asks, biting her lip worriedly.

"No. Exhausted," he answers. "Did you kill them?"

"Nope. That would upset Riko-dono. I only killed the one that laughed, but she'd have done the same. She'd kill anyone that tried to hurt you. Just like you would do for her."

Smart clone.

"I gotta go now, though. No chakra left. Are you gonna be okay, Shika-chan?"

"Yeah. Thanks," he says.

The clone grins at him and bursts into water.

He looks up at the clouds. *I'd have two children, first a girl, then a boy. I'd retire when my daughter got married and my son got a job.*

"Shikamaru!" Asuma lands next to him. "Are you injured?"

His sensei looks around, taking in the forms of the nine defeated enemies. "Good work," he says.

*And then I'd spent the rest of my days playing shogi and go with my sister.*
In retrospect, pulling off three consecutive shunshins right before having to fight an unstable jinchuuriki doesn't seem like the best idea I have ever had. I stand across from a disoriented Gaara, breathing hard and cradling an injured hand that I had to drag out of a very sandy entrapment.

I'm seriously low on chakra, I can't do handseals and my opponent is an unstable jinchuuriki and currently sports a demonic arm. Sometimes, I really hate my life.

Well. I only have to survive until Sasuke gets here. And Naruto, because Naruto is definitely coming for us. I think.

The problem lies with them actually finding me. I have absolutely no idea where I shunshined us to. I'm good with the technique when I have an exact idea of where I am going, but I'm too inexperienced to use it blindly.

Plus, there is the possibility of my magic screwing with my shunsin. It's happened before. I was fleeing from Zabuza and wanted to shunshin on the rooftop of a nearby building. I did make it to a rooftop, but it was on the other end of the village and the moment I landed on it, the whole house broke down. It wasn't half as funny as Zabuza thought it was.

Magic. Unreliable at best, deadly at worst. It tends to make things blow up in my face.

The Gaara-thing blasts more sand bullets at me. I kawarimi and hide myself again.

Hmm. With all the noise Gaara makes, Sasuke and Naruto might not have that much trouble finding us after all.

"Are you afraid of me? Do you fear my existence?" Gaara roars.

Yep. I'm a tiny little bit terrified.

I look up, watching the clouds float over us.

Damn it. I just wanted to be a normal ninja with a normal ninja-life. I wanted to eat ramen with Naruto, spar with Sasuke and play shogi with Shikamaru and dad.

I sigh. Then I step out in plain view of Gaara. A demonic grin twists his features even more.

"You're my prey!" he screams, launching himself at me, claw poised to rip me into pieces. I flip away, bouncing off trees like a rubber ball all around Gaara, so fast he won't be able to catch me. And while I do this, I launch scalding hot water bombs at him from every direction. They explode against his sand shield.

Interesting. Water seems to make the sand clump together and slow it down. That could be useful, but I don't have much water available and creating it from the air is going to drain what chakra I have left. I don't have the means to completely neutralise the sand.

The Curse Mark gives an insistent throb.

Should I risk it?

"Hrwahhhhh!" Gaara screams. "Let me feel!"
His bloodlust saturates the air. It makes me want to choke. Vile chakra radiates from him.

Back to hiding in the trees, I focus green chakra to my hand to heal it enough to make hand seals. "Kirigakure no Jutsu," I whisper and blow mist out to engulf Gaara. Then I launch the next technique. "Water Style: Water Needle Rain."

Hundreds of water needles form in the mist and launch themselves at Gaara. I hear him scream and rage while his sand fends them off. I unseal my sword and focus what chakra I have left.

"Water Style: Water Chain Sword!" I whisper and the chains sprout from my sword and surround me, forming an armour of chains. I dive into the mist, straight at Gaara whose sand is fending off the water needles and becoming useless clumps in the process. I use the opening to swing my sword at him, but some of his sand still works enough to deflect it. I fade back into the mist and make my chains hit him. A pained scream tells me that not all chains missed.

Instinct makes me jump away and I hear what sounds like a truck load of sand crashing down where I just stood. Gaara must have sent the sand to follow the chains to my location.

I swipe my sword again in a wide arc and my chains spread out again and hit something. But then there's an increase in Gaara's chakra, I feel my chains getting ripped. I hastily jump out of the mist and barely avoid getting hit by sand. If it weren't for the chain protection around me, I'd probably have gotten hurt badly.

I hear Gaara rage and scream. After a moment of contemplation, I abandon the mist – I'd rather keep an eye on him. I can't only rely on instinct to avoid his attacks. Also, I'm now too low on chakra to maintain the mist. My chakra supply isn't completely empty, but anything bigger than a water bomb is impossible, unless I-

No. I won't use it.

Fighting Gaara is out.

Well then. Time for a little game of hide and seek.

I vanish between the trees, masking my presence completely. All I have to do is keep Gaara occupied and therefore away from the village. I don't actually have to outright fight him. I'm just going to make myself a nuisance until my team gets here.

Hurry up, Naruto, Sasuke.

I creep through the foliage and silently leap from tree to tree. I'm really glad for my stealth training now.

"Come out!" Gaara screams. He appears even more crazed than before. A tail has been added to his monstrous appearance. "Show me your strength! Prove my existence!"

Uhh, no. Definitely not.

I palm a few senbon and throw one at him, then I quickly leap to another tree and throw another. I repeat the action until my hands are empty. Gaara looks around wildly, slobber dripping out of his deformed mouth.

"Was that all?!" he shouts. "Are you afraid of my existence?"

My staying hidden seems to frustrate him. I pull out more senbon and launch them at him from the
shadows. I can't think of anything else to do. Direct attacks and close combat would be suicide. His chakra is too unstable for a genjutsu to hold. I barely have any chakra left.

Gaara's chakra spiking is the only warning I get, then hundreds of sand bullets shoot outward from him in every direction, obliterating everything in their way. There is no safe place to kawarimi to. I run down my tree in the hopes that I'll be safer lying on the ground.

I almost make it.

I'm about ten metres from the ground when the tree is ripped apart under my feet and I fall, sand bullets flying all around me. I curl myself into a ball while I fly, hoping to present a smaller target. I feel my civilian shirt getting ripped and a burning pain across my back. My arm is slashed open. I scream as white hot pain explodes in my left leg. I fall to the ground in a heap of flesh, whimpering in pain. I roll and crawl under the remnants of the roots of the tree I fell from and hide myself in a small depression in the earth. Around me, the sounds of falling trees and general destruction and chaos attack my ears. Wreckage and dirt falls on me and around me. I scream when what seems like half a tree crashes onto the root I'm hiding under, but it holds. But I'm imprisoned now, and there is barely any light.

I focus a tiny bit of chakra to my hand to light it up. Then I inspect my injured leg. There's a deep gash on my lower leg, blood running down at an alarming rate. I won't be able to move with that. Not that it matters, I'm stuck here anyway.

_Fucking hell. It hurts!_

I pull off the remnants of my shirt and rip it into makeshift bandages. From the debris, I grab some sticks and then wrap my leg as tightly as I can, using the sticks as a makeshift splint. The leftover bandages I tie around the gash on my arm. There is nothing I can wrap the wound on my back with, but from what I can tell, it's a mere scratch. I still had mesh armour to protect me.

Small mercies.

Slowly, the loud sounds of destruction cease. I hear Gaara's loud, deranged laugh, shouting something about killing me.

I mask my presence and chakra – not there there's much left to mask – and burrow deeper under the roots.

_I've done all I can. The rest is up to you..._

"Sasuke," I whisper.

The loud sound of a thousand birds chirping resounds and then Gaara screams.

Sasuke's voice is ice cold. I've never ever heard it sound like that.

"Where is Ri," he says.

"...you who is strong... you who has comrades... you who is like me..." Gaara rasps. "Once I kill you, I will be the one to have destroyed all of that... only then can I prove my-

"Where is Ri."

Gaara's chakra spikes.
"Get down, Sasuke!" I scream. A moment later, crashes and explosions sound. I feel the vibrations in the ground beneath me. The leaves of the tree parts near me tremble.

_Shit, what happened? Is Sasuke okay?_

I try to get up, but my leg gives out underneath me.

_Damn it. I can't see what's going on! And if I kawarimi out, I'll be dead meat!_

I almost sob in relief when I hear the sound of birds again. "Chidori!" Sasuke yells while Gaara gives an unintelligible battle cry. Then I hear Gaar laugh.

_Nonono, not Sasuke, please be alright! Please don't leave me!_

"Yes! Defeating someone strong enough to hurt me... that will prove my existence!"

_That means he's still alright, doesn't it?_

"Hahaha, more, I want more!"

_Damn it, if only I were stronger..._

...I can give you what you need... we'll crush Gaara... you'll never have to fear again... the mark throbs.

I hesitate.

...how can it be wrong if it is to save your precious ones? To protect your home? whispers through my mind. _Are you not willing to make this sacrifice for them?_

I press my hands over my ears as if that could shut up the voice.

"You are going down here," Sasuke says calmly. "I will make sure of it."

I take my hands down.

_That's right. Sasuke is here. I just need to have faith in him._

"You're weak!" Gaara growls. "Your hatred isn't strong enough!" He goes on in that manner for a minute, telling Sasuke exactly why he'll lose. I want to jump up and shout that true power comes from protecting people, that power means nothing if one is all alone in the end. But I can barely move, and giving my position away while I'm so helpless would be a very dumb move. Bad enough that I screamed earlier.

At least, Sasuke can focus on fighting now that he knows I'm still alive.

I manage to pull myself into a sitting position and listen to the fight above me. I don't hear the sounds of birds chirping again, but I hear Gaara scream and rage at Sasuke, which means he's still alright. But Gaara's chakra levels only seem to increase and several times I hear Sasuke grunt in pain.

I join my hands together as if praying. _You can do it, Sasuke._

"Die!" Gaara screams. Then there is a hitting sound and a moment later, I feel something heavy impact the ground.

"Bastard!" Naruto shouts. "Is Ri-chan alright? And who the hell is that?"
I almost cry when I hear his familiar voice. Thank God he made it here alright.

I don't hear Sasuke's answer because someone is moving the branches above me. I tense and palm my senbon. I may be immobile, but that doesn't mean I can't still fight.

"Are you sure she's in there?" a girl's voice asks. It takes me a moment to place it, mainly because usually it's much shriller. It's Sakura's. How unexpected.

"I smell her in there," a gruff voice answers.

"But what if she's..."

"Pakkun?" I ask. "Is that you?"

"See, she's fine," Pakkun grumbles. "Oi, girly, we'll get you out of there. Are you hurt? I smell blood."


"Riko-san!" Sakura speaks up. "Can I move these branches without putting you in danger?"

I shift back as far as I can. "Yeah. But hurry up."

Soon, light peeks through the branches and then Sakura slips through the hole she created and kneels next to me. She sucks in a sharp breath when she sees my injuries.

"Can you move?" she asks when she sees my leg.

"Move, yes. Walk, I don't think so."

She grabs my arm and puts it around her shoulders. I grit my teeth as she half-carries me out of the wreckage. My injuries are bloody painful.

I gape when I see the outside. The place is wrecked. Dozens of trees lay on the ground in pieces, ripped apart by Gaara's attacks. I was so incredibly lucky that I survived.

The sounds of fighting and Gaara's roars as well as multiple Naruto-battle cries sound from close by, but I don't see them.

"Naruto and Sasuke lured him away," Pakkun informs me. "So you'd be safer. Come on, we need some cover so we can take care of you."

I listen tensely to the sounds of battle while Sakura cleans and rewraps my wounds. Earlier, she made me swallow some blood and chakra replenishing pills.

"Thanks, Sakura," I mumble.

"No problem," she murmurs back, casting a worried look in the direction the sounds of battle come from. "Are Sasuke-kun and Naruto going to be alright?"

"They're strong," I say, not really answering the question, but Sakura looks relieved anyway.

The truth is, I'm nearly out of my mind with worry, I hurt like hell and the Curse Mark isn't helping with its insistence that I should use it. But the one time it took over, I was ready to hurt dad. What if I decided to use it and hurt my comrades instead? I can't take the risk.
"Shouldn't we help?" Sakura asks.

"Forget it," Pakkun answers. "I'm not a fighter, you are out of your league and Riko's out of commission. We'd just be in the way."

...not if you had power...

Sasuke and Naruto can fight him. I answer unconvincingly.

We sit there in tense silence. Then I look up, alarmed. "Pakkun, are they coming closer?" I ask.

I get my answer a moment later when a monster radiating vile chakra bursts through the trees. There is nothing left of Gaara in its features. It screams in rage when it sees us. A wave of sand speeds at us and Sakura grabs me and jumps away, Pakkun following, but the moment we touch down on the next tree, the monster that is Gaara leaps at us, one claw outstretched and he's so fast there is no way to escape we are going to die no I don't want to die I want to live-

...all the power to save them, just let go...

Okay. Just this once.

The mark burns and power rushes through me and then I move. One moment we are on the tree branch, the next I've grabbed Sakura and Pakkun and we are fifty metres away from Gaara on another tree. Sakura still has her arms around her head as if to block Gaara. Then she looks up and blinks at me, horrified.

"R-Riko, you-"

"It's fine," I say calmly.

My whole body and face are covered in burning markings. A deep gash in my left shoulder and upper arm drips blood on the ground. At least, the curse seems to be making the blood move more sluggishly, so I'm not in much danger of bleeding out. My injured leg gives out underneath me and I fall to my knees.

Some power. I'm still half dead. At least I have chakra now. And my mind seems to be clear so far.

"Ri-chan!" Naruto's voice shouts and then he leaps through the trees straight at Gaara, forming the familiar seal for the kage bunshin. "You bastaaaard!" he screams.

"We need to get out of here," Pakkun states. Sakura doesn't move, still staring at me, but her eyes are wide and glassy. She's going into shock.

I grab them both and shunshin them a few hundred metres away, heedless of the pain in my leg. The burn in my body that is the curse numbs it. "Run away," I order when I dump them on the ground.

"Oi, girly, what do you think you are-"

Running is annoying. My injured leg makes me stumble more than once. I can't heal it because I won't have the necessary control with all that new chakra. So I just get up and keep running after I fall.

Ahead of me, a gigantic chakra gathers. I run up a tree to see what is going on.
My mouth drops open at the sight of the demon rising. Sandy colour, markings, tail... In its forehead, a small figure seems to be sunk into the monster. Gaara.

"Bloody hell," I whisper. *How are we supposed to defeat that?*

And then a giant toad appears in a poof of smoke, another small figure standing on its head. Naruto.

I guess now I know who he learned from during his training month. *Bloody hell.*

The earth shakes as the giant toad jumps at the monsters start fighting. Earth quakes, raging gust of wind, torrential rain... They are like a force of nature. But the toad appears to be on the defensive, especially after losing its sword which now sticks out of the ground. Gaara is just too strong.

But there is nothing... I can... do...

I jump down and start moving in the direction of where I left Naruto with Gaara. I need Sasuke.

I leap from tree to tree, trying to avoid using my bad leg. The earth quakes don't make my progress easier. Then suddenly, Temari appears, running away from the fight while I head towards it.

We exchange a look. Then Temari leaps past me and continues her flight while I run towards the fight. "Sasuke!" I call, so incredibly relieved when I see him staring at the two gargantuan fighters with wide eyes.

He turns to me. "Ri." His eyes widen at the markings on my skin.

I land next to him and promptly, my leg gives out and I nearly fall off the tree, but Sasuke grabs me and yanks me back against him. "What the hell are you doing?" he asks. "What are those marks?"

"Do you trust me?" I ask.

*Of course.* His eyes answer.

I throw my arms around him in a fierce hug, and then I shunshin us directly to where the toad's enormous sword sticks in the ground. Right into the middle of the battle.

"What the hell, Ri?!" Sasuke yells. "We're going to-"

I grab his hand and drag him to the sword. "When I say so, I need you to pour as much lightning chakra as you can into it, okay?"

"What?"

We're both catapulted into the air when those two monsters jump and land again. The Gaara-monster is now a mere twenty metres away from us.

I fight down the fear and run to the giant sword. Place my hands on it and focus every last bit of curse-chakra I have left. Pray for my magic to actually listen to me for once. *Water Style!* I scream. *Water Chain Sword!*

And I pour it all into the toad's sword.

The chains – marked with the same vine patterns that adorn my skin - that burst out are enormous. They speed towards the Gaara-monster and wrap around him, chaining him and making him immobile. "Now, Sasuke!" I shout.
Sasuke appears next to me, laying his hands over mine. Lightning passes through them and into the sword and the travels along my chains. It's not enough to electrocute Gaara, but it will keep my water chains from being absorbed by sand. The Gaara-thing screeches in rage.

*That's your opening, Ruto. We’re with you.*

The toad charges the monster and Naruto leaps from its head and runs at the small Gaara-figure. Sand surges up to squish Naruto, but I let my chains burst into water and the sand becomes useless clumps and Naruto can throw himself forward, grab Gaara and head butt him which is probably a lot more effective than punching him given how hard headed Ruto is.

The effect is instantaneous. The body of the monster starts to dissolve into sand, screeching in protest.  

"Yes!" I hiss. Then all my strength leaves me and Sasuke catches me as I fall to the ground. He hauls me up and leaps away to avoid getting caught by a tsunami of sand. Meanwhile I feel the burn of the curse as it recedes and the markings disappears into the mark, taking with them all the warmth in my body. I shiver, my teeth start chattering.


"Stay awake," Sasuke orders he stops moving and sets me down. Then he grabs my hair, pulls my head back and forces a pill between my lips. "Swallow."

I do as ordered. "Wha's sat?"

"Chakra replenishing pill. Ri, I need to stop the bleeding in your shoulder."

"Okay."

"I don't have any bandages."

"Oh."

"I'm going to use fire chakra to burn it closed."

I nod sluggishly. Fire chakra. That should warm me up again. My whole body feels so numb. Sasuke moves behind me and places a hand on my wound. I feel it heating up. At first it's nice, but soon it starts to burn until it's unbearable. I scream in pain as he drags his burning hand over my wound. It seems to take forever. I sob in relief when it's done.

"It hurts," I whimper. Sasuke pulls me against him and mumbles an apology. Then he picks me up and hoists me onto his back piggy-back style and puts my arms around his neck. I bury my face into the crook of his shoulder. "Stay awake," Sasuke growls again and starts running, where to, I don't know and I don't really care anymore. I'm so tired and it hurts so bad. But if I fall asleep, Sasuke is going to be mad at me again and in all this insanity, he's the one thing that makes sense.

"Ne, Sasuke," I mumble weakly. "Why'd you kiss me earlier?"

No answer.

"Mmm, wanna sleep..." I slur.

"Because I wanted to," Sasuke growls. "Don't sleep!"
I giggle a little, a warm fuzzy feeling in my chest. The cold is gone. "M'kay. You smell good."

Sasuke snorts.

"Where're we goin'?"

"Naruto fell down here somewhere."

"Ruto won," I mumble, a tired grin spreading on my face.

"Hn. Not by himself."

I giggle. "Yup. We saved him. Can I sleep now?"

"No."

"Killjoy."

Sasuke lands on a branch and sets me down. I hear Naruto's familiar voice below us and smile.

"The pain of being alone... it's unbearable, isn't it?" he says, and my smile fades. "Your pain... I understand it, so much it hurts."

It hurts me, too. Ruto's voice is so full of old pain. I feel something hot drip down my face. Then Sasuke leans closer and I stare up into his eye – when did he release the henge? - as he wipes my tears away. There is pain in his eyes, too. I can't stop crying, because their suffering is my own. Because back then, I was lonely too. And now I'm not and I'd do anything to never feel that way again.

"But... I have precious people now," Naruto continues. "I won't let you hurt my precious people! If you do... I will stop you even if I have to kill you!"

More tears drip down my face.

"Why..." Gaara rasps. "Why?!"

"My loneliness... that hell... they saved me from it and they acknowledged my existence. They are the most important... that's why."

My body shakes with silent sobs as Naruto puts his and my pain, our reason for fighting, to always keep going, into words. I just can't stop. It's too much, everything, the stress of the exams, the constant worries, Fumio, the curse, the killing, the invasion, the injuries, the demon that is Gaara and now the torment of my past. I look up helplessly into Sasuke's eye, begging him to save me from all this heartache, because I can't take it anymore.

"It's okay," he murmurs, putting his hand on my forehead. "You can sleep now."

His one eye shifts into the sharingan and then I know nothing anymore.
After waking up in my room alone and reading the note left next to my bed, I force myself to my feet and slowly get dressed. My injuries were treated, but only to the point where I can walk and move about. I'm assuming that the medics had to save their chakra and couldn't heal me completely because of that.

The note dad left next to my bed informed me that the invasion is over, with Sand and Sound retreating, and that my family and friends all made it through alive. They are now helping clean up the village, which explains why I was alone in my room.

The note also informed me of Hokage-sama's death. And that's the reason why I write a note of my own to leave on my bed and then, after throwing on some clothes and stuffing some things into my bag, make my way into the village instead of resting like I should.

I enter Naruto's apartment after a depressing walk through the damaged village. There were wrecked houses, torn up streets, shuriken and kunai sticking in walls everywhere, bloodstains... at least they cleaned up the corpses already.

Naruto sits on his bed in only his boxer shorts, bandages and Band-Aids all over his body. The look in his eyes as he stares at the ground before him is sad and empty. He looks up when he hears me enter.

We stare at each other. The I hold out my arms, and his face crumples, his eyes fill with tears and he jumps up and falls into my arms, sobbing. I manage not to fall over and manoeuvre us onto his bed where Naruto wraps himself around me, buries his face in my shoulder and cries until he has no tears left and falls asleep.

I end up staying at Naruto's place for the following days. He isn't dealing too well with the loss of his surrogate grandfather. He needs the comfort.

My family is alright with this. Shikamaru dropped by, handed me a sleepover bag and then hugged me so hard I could barely breathe. I returned the hug just as fiercely. Dad visited briefly, the stress of the last few days showing on his face, to ruffle my hair and give me a backpack filled with storage scrolls - probably so I won't get caught by a fight unprepared again. Mom came and brought us food.

I'm so glad they made it through the invasion alright.

During those days with Naruto, I stick to his side constantly. We help with the clean-up of the village though I'm not able to do much, still weakened. I take him out to ramen, I cook him food, I watch him train.

On the third day of my stay, we put on the funeral clothes we were given and go to the funeral of
Hokage-sama and the memorial service of all those fallen in battle. As if by a silent agreement, we walk past our training ground on our way where we find Sasuke. The moment I see him, I throw myself into his arms. I haven't seen him since waking up. And while I was busy comforting Naruto, I barely found comfort of my own.

The three of us go to the funeral together after that. Fittingly enough, it rains throughout the whole service, as if the skies cry in our place, because as ninjas, we aren't supposed to cry. The only one who does so openly is Konohamaru who isn't a ninja yet.

I can't even imagine what Konoha is going to be like without Hokage-sama. I didn't know him well, but he was the one who offered me a home here. After missions, we'd go see him. He was just always there. He'd sometimes show up at Ichiraku's and treat Naruto and me to ramen. One would run into him in the streets and exchange a greeting and a few friendly words. He belonged to Konoha like the trees and the monument do. To imagine him gone... it's impossible.

After the funeral, I take Naruto and Sasuke to the Clan Forest. We sit down in a nice clearing in silence.

"Do you remember that one time we skipped class and ran into Hokage-sama at the dango shop?" I ask.

Naruto gives a choked laugh that sounds close to a sob. "Yeah, and he ended up treating us. Kiba's face was priceless, dattebayo."

I smile softly. "Or when he came to class and you showed up in a Hokage costume."

Now Naruto grins for real. He leans his head against my shoulder. "And then you made me a Hokage hat out of paper."

And so we sit there and trade memories and stories of Hokage-sama. After that, all three of us go to Ichiraku's for dinner and then have a sleepover at Naruto's place. And for the first time since getting cursed, I feel at peace.

After all, I'm not alone.

I move back to my own home a day after that, since Naruto has cheered up considerably. I still see him every day though, either during clean-up missions or in team training which started up again after the funeral. Though with the missions, whether we see each other depends on where we are assigned to help out. Naruto usually ends up helping with construction while I am often sent to help at the hospital. They need every helping hand right now.

On this particular day though, I'm helping out with repairing the damages at the Academy along with the Academy brats. I'm currently restocking the medicines in the Academy infirmary.

"Skipping work, Hanabi-chan?" I ask, turning around.

"How did you notice me?" she asks sullenly.

"Training," I answer. "My teacher had the most interesting training methods."

She looks like she wants to ask but doesn't want to look uncool by being curious. I reach out and ruffle her hair. She glares. "Stop that."

"I've missed you," I tell her.
That stops the glaring. "Eh?" she asks, confused.

"I've missed you," I repeat. "I'm glad you are okay."

"I didn't miss you," Hanabi says bluntly, though there is a very light blush on her face.

"Of course you didn't," I agree.

"I watched you fight during the finals," she states. "You did well, senpai. I think even father was impressed."

My head snaps up. "You were in the arena? Are you alright?" I give her a quick once over.

"I'm fine," she says. "Father got us out of there quickly."

I decide I believe her and nod in relief. "That's good. So are you skipping out of work?"

She glares, annoyed. "We are supposed to fix the blackboard. But Konohamaru found some chalk and now they are all drawing on it and making these screeching noises, it's a disgrace. I'd rather spend my time doing something useful."

That sounds like Konohamaru alright. At least he's coping with his grandfather's death.

"Alright. You can stick with me. Here, I'll tell you all about these medicines..."

I meet Naruto at Ichiraku's for lunch. When I walk in, he's in his boxers, apparently searching for his meal coupon. I raise an eyebrow in amusement. Never a dull moment.

"I know I had it, dattebayo!" he rambles. "It's got to be here somewhere." He looks into one pant leg.

"Well, Naruto-kun, no meal coupon, no ramen," Teuchi-jiisan says sternly, though his eyes twinkle amusedly. As if he'd ever let Naruto go unfed.

"Have you checked your forehead protector?" I ask as I walk in.

Naruto's face lights up. "Ri-chan! You're a genius!"

"Well yes," I say, flicking a strand of hair out of my eyes in playful arrogance. "Of course I am. Thank you for pointing it out."

A minute later, we sit at the counter with our food in front of us and Naruto back to being fully dressed.

Seriously. Who strips in the middle of a restaurant? Naruto, that's who.

"I put it in there so I wouldn't lose it during training," Naruto explains what I already figured out.

"And are you going back to training after the meal?" Teuchi asks.

"Yes, dattebayo!" Naruto points his chopsticks at him. "I gotta get stronger!"

Teuchi dumps a second scoop of noodles into his bowl.

"Eh?" Naruto asks.

Naruto beams at him. "Thank you! Itadakimasu!"

I smile at their interaction. I've missed this peacefulness so much.

"So you really do eat ramen all the time..." a vaguely familiar voice muses behind us. I turn around. It's Jiraiya, the man that sealed the Cursed Mark for me.

"Ahh! Eho-Shennin!" Naruto shouts with his mouth full of noodles. Then he swallows. "What are you doing here? Oh, this is my best friend Ri-chan! You aren't allowed to be weird around her!"

And that coming from the boy who strips in restaurants... troublesome.

"Ah?" Jiraiya fixes me with a look. "Is that so?"

"Yeah, dattebayo!"

"Don't worry, Ruto. We've met before," I say dryly.

"Eh? How? When?"

Oh, you know? He saw me half-naked when he sealed the curse that the guy who killed your surrogate grandfather gave me by biting me in the neck.

I shrug. "Long story. Tell you later?"

As in, much later. Like never, if possible.

"Oho! You didn't tell me you had a cute girlfriend, gaki!" Jiraiya waggles his eyebrows at Naruto.


"Oi!" Naruto shouts, pointing at Jiraiya. "Stop saying weird stuff around Ri-chan!"

"Yes, yes," Jiraiya says in a placating tone. "Eat up your ramen, gaki, you are coming on a research trip with me!"

Eh?

I walk with Naruto and Jiraiya along the streets.

"Why do I have to come on a research trip with you, Ero-sennin?" Naruto asks.

"No, this isn't a normal research trip!" Jiraiya says. "There's a woman I have to ask some questions, so I have to find her."

"I have no time to waste on your perverted stuff. I gotta train!" Naruto answers, sounding like a complete brat.

"That's too bad, Ruto," I say. Jiraiya shoots me an inscrutable side-look. "Jiraiya-sama is a very strong and famous ninja, you could learn a lot from him. Then again, you are already so amazing, you don't really need to learn moves stronger than Sasuke's Chidori from him..."

Naruto's ear twitches.

"Well, Jiraiya-sama, you might have more luck if you asked Uchiha Sasuke to assist you in your no doubt incredibly noble and dangerous quest..."
Jiraiya looks decidedly amused now. "Hm... I guess Sasuke will do. Where do I find him?" He takes two steps away from us.

"I changed my mind!" Naruto shouts. "I'll go! I'll go pack my stuff now! Don't leave!"

And he shoots away, leaving a dust cloud in his wake.

Jiraiya sweat-drops. Then he sighs and chuckles. "Geez...such a cute brat..."

"Jiraiya-sama?" I say. He turns to me. "I'm assuming you have your reasons for taking Naruto out of the village. I'm not going to ask. But please make sure he's safe." I'd ask if he'd take me with him, but I don't want to leave my family and Sasuke at the moment. And I don't think he'd take me along anyway.

He gives me an assessing look. "Just like your father, too smart for your own good, aren't you?"

"Thanks."

"Seal holding up alright?"

I don't answer.

"I see," he sighs.

"You said the seal you used depends on my own will power. Is there any way to tie it to someone else's will instead?"

Because if the seal relied on Naruto's willpower, it wouldn't ever break.

"I'm sorry, Riko-chan," he squeezes my shoulder.

"Not your fault." I sigh. "I'll just have to deal with it. How troublesome."

I turn to walk away. "Thanks anyways. Take care of Naruto."

After seeing Naruto off at the village gates, I slowly walk along the streets, watching the people around me. When I look at stare at the clock in a nearby restaurant, I realise hours have passed while I dawdled along.

Somehow, I feel a little odd. I've been feeling out of sorts since waking up after fighting Gaara, but I blamed it on exhaustion. But I've mostly recovered now, and I still feel weird. I can't put my finger on it, though. It just feels like my head is a little fuzzy.

I'd blame the Cursed Seal, but it's been oddly quiet the past few days.

I shake my head at myself and lean back to look at the clouds. It's odd, my life is so calm right at the moment. Nothing crazy is happening. No mortal perils. No insanely strong enemies to defeat.

"Riko!" I blink as Sasuke lands right in front of me. I take one look at his distressed face.

"Oh hell no!" I mutter. "And just when it was so peaceful!"

"Where's Naruto?"

"Left on a road trip with the guy that trained him for the finals," I answer.
"Where did they go?!" he nearly shouts in a mixture of anger and panic. Great, a hysterical Sasuke. Wonderful. Just what I need.

I narrow my eyes. "Calm the hell down and tell me why you want to know."

"I don't have time for this!"

I slap him.

He stares at me incredulously. Good, he's back to his senses.

"What happened?" I ask.

"You slapped me."

"I know that, I was there. I meant, what happened that you have to find Naruto?"

"Just tell me where he is!" he yells. "Damn it, Riko!"

"Why?"

"Because the man that murdered my family is after him!" he shouts.


Sasuke grabs my shoulders hard. His eyes bore into mine. "Tell me where he is, Ri."

"Jiraiya mentioned Shukuba-machi, the lodging town," I whisper. Sasuke takes off. I stare after him, still in shock. Then I shake myself and run after him, unsealing weapons from the seals on my arms. I figured out how to do it without having to undo the bandages covering them.

"What do you think you are doing?" Sasuke asks with a glare at me when I catch up.

"Same thing you are doing," I growl. The village gate is now in sight. I grab Sasuke's arm and shunshin us out. We keep running.

"Who is after Naruto?" I ask.

Who murdered your family?

The look on Sasuke's face is dark. His eyes filled with crazed anger. I don't like this Sasuke. He's like a twisted version of himself.

"Uchiha Itachi," he growls.

______________________________________________________________________________

We arrive in Shukuba-machi not long after that. And, because nothing ever is easy, it's a lodging town filled with hotels, and as if that wasn't bad enough, there is some sort of festival going on. The streets are crowded.

Sasuke curses. "We can't check every hotel."

I rub my temples. I have a headache. "Let me think," I murmur. "Jiraiya will want to stay inconspicuous. So he won't go to an expensive hotel, and nothing too shabby either. It'll be one with lots of rooms and guests where they have a crowd to hide amongst. Most likely in the crowded part of the town, definitely not in the better parts. With Jiraiya's reputation... probably close to the red-
light district."

Sasuke stares at me. "What?" I ask. He just shakes his head and takes off with me hurrying after him. We run through the city and when we see a hotel fitting the criteria, Sasuke runs in and ask if Naruto and Jiraiya are staying there. I'm not sure if asking "Are a stupid-looking blond boy and a white-haired man staying here?" is the best course of action, but I don't have a better plan.

Why didn't I go to a jounin for help back in the village? Right, because once Sasuke said Naruto was in danger, I didn't really stop to think. And Sasuke would have run off without me.

But Naruto should be safe, right? He's with Jiraiya. But still... we should at least warn Jiraiya.

Damn it, my head hurts. My neck now, too.

At the next hotel, the clerk tells us that someone fitting Sasuke's description of Naruto and Jiraiya is staying there. We hurry to the room he points us to, but it turns out to be the wrong persons. Damn it. We run back into the streets and continue our search. After trying three more hotels, we are again pointed to a certain room.

*We need a plan. What if this Uchiha Itachi is already there? What if we are running straight into the middle of a fight? What rank does Uchiha Itachi have, anyways? Probably S-rank, right?*

I throw a look at Sasuke. From the expression on his face and the activated sharingan, I doubt I could get him to stop and listen to a plan even if I actually had one. But a plan is somewhat useless if we don't know what we are walking into.

Well, never let it be said that Team Seven isn't good at improvising.

We run up the stairs. A faint voice reaches my eyes. "...cut off a leg or two, Itachi-san."

*Fucking hell, there is more than one.*

We flash into the next hallway. Between Naruto and us, two men wearing black cloaks with red clouds on them stand with their backs to us.

*They were talking to Naruto. They want to cut his legs off.* My fists clench.

"It has been a while... Sasuke," One of them says in a calm, emotionless voice. The other turns slightly in our direction.

*Fucking hell, it's Hoshigaki Kisame.*

Zabuza did mention him and his old comrades from the Seven Swordsmen a few times during my training, mainly in reassuring sentences such as "Mangetsu would have eaten you for breakfast," and "Kisame would shave you to ribbons."

Haku showed me Kisame's bingo book page. He's S-ranked and labeled as extremely dangerous, the strongest of the Seven Swordsmen. Anyone below jounin rank is advised to flee.

We are so screwed.

"Uchiha Itachi..." Sasuke growls dangerously.

"Eh?" Naruto asks, staring at Itachi aghast.

"Yare, yare..." Hoshigaki Kisame muses. "Indeed, today is a special day, isn't it? This is the second
time I have seen another sharingan."

The look on Sasuke's face... I have never seen anything like it. Like he's possessed. There is nothing but single-minded hatred in his eyes as he stares at Itachi. "I will... KILL YOU!" he states, and his voice is so dark and cold, it scares me.

"Hou... sharingan," Kisame muses. "He looks similar to you. Who is he, Itachi?"

There is a slight pause. "My younger brother," Itachi answers then, and I forget to breathe.

Younger brother.

Sasuke's clan was wiped out by his own brother.

His own brother put that look on my Sasuke's face.

Everything inside me goes cold.

"I heard the entire Uchiha Clan was wiped out... by you, Itachi-san," Kisame says thoughtfully, an evil grin on his face. I study his mimic, analyse his words. Sasuke will be going after Itachi. That leaves Kisame to me and/or Naruto.

I see Naruto gritting his teeth.

"Like you said," Sasuke growls. "I've lived hating you. I've lived only to kill you."

Itachi finally turns around. I note how similar he looks to Sasuke. But the look in his eyes is completely different. So blank and distanced, like nothing that happens here even matters to him.

A chidori, springs into existence in Sasuke's hand, blowing his hair from his face and illuminating it, making him seem like someone else, someone dark and malevolent, someone not Sasuke. I raise my hands to protect myself from the incredible energy pouring off his blazing hand.

"I HAVE LIVED FOR THIS!" Sasuke screams, a crazed look in his eyes. I'm frozen. It feels as if I've lost him.

"Chidori..." Itachi murmurs softly.

And I know that Sasuke is going to lose this fight. I know that the only reason we aren't dead yet is because we are so pathetic compared to them that we aren't even worth crushing.

Sasuke runs at Itachi screaming in rage, dragging his blazing hand along the wall next him, and I run after him, unsealing my sword and knowing fully well that it might be the last thing I ever do.

There is a loud crash and Sasuke suddenly stops, his lit up hand caught by the wrist in Itachi's. I swing my sword at him, but it is intercepted by another one, much larger and wrapped in bandages. And then Kisame swings it and he's so strong, my own sword flies out of my hands, and then Samehada bites into my shoulder and I shriek in pain as I am thrown into the opposite wall while my shoulder is shredded and my chakra eaten up. I hear Naruto scream my name and I swear I hear Sasuke's voice as well.

I look up dizzily as I see another chidori spring up in Sasuke's free hand and see him punch it in Itachi's direction, but Itachi just shifts his weight and Sasuke is thrown into the wall. Around Naruto, a shroud of vile, red chakra forms, pressing down on me, but Kisame swipes his sword through it and it disappears.
"Now..." Kisame says, grinning. "Should I chop off a leg or an arm?"

Itachi appears in front of Sasuke, murmuring something I don't hear, sharingan staring into sharingan.

There is no hope. We are powerless.

Except I am not.

My previous headache resurfaces with a vengeance and the magic boils in my blood. My neck burns and the burn spreads over my body, filling me with power. Both enemies' heads snap around to me as I, still sitting on the ground, lift my hands and purple glowing chains marked like my skin form from the air and wrap around them. I see my reflection in Uchiha Itachi's so empty seeming eyes. My eyes, reflected in his, glow a bright green.

Then I feel Kisame's sword rip through my chains and sucking away my power while my gaze is caught in Itachi's eyes. He dissolves into a murder of crows that fly all around me while I am suddenly bound by my own chains. I shriek in pain as they squeeze me so hard my bones break. Itachi's upper body forms itself out of crows, hovering in the air above me, still surrounded by the cawing birds.

"I see. I had not expected another Uzumaki," he states, looking down at me with his empty, empty sharingan eyes, so much colder than Sasuke's. "And it appears you distract my foolish otouto from his ambition."

I whimper in pain, tears leaking from my eyes.

"Unfortunately, I cannot let you live, young Uzumaki."

A shuriken appears in Itachi's hand and then speeds towards me, aiming for the space between my eyes. As if in slow motion, I see it coming closer and closer.

My arm snaps up and the shuriken buries itself in my flesh. The chains fall off me. "I'm a Nara, asshole!" I spit out, the genjutsu broken by my magic, how I did it, I have no idea. The air flickers as I see reality once more.

I blink in surprise. The floor and walls are covered in soft, pink flesh, it kind of looks like we are in the inside of... ugh. Let's not think too hard about that. No one else is near, but I hear voices from around a corner. I recognise Jiraiya's voice which means we should be somewhat safe now.

My Cursed Seal seems to be stuck. I don't feel any sort of power anymore, but the marks are still there. Great.

I bend to the side and vomit. When I have stopped throwing up my Miso Ramen, I look up again, which is when I see Sasuke a little ways away from me, hanging half absorbed by the fleshy wall. The henge is undone, and blood streaks are under his one eye, as if he'd cried tears of blood. The look in his eye... oh god.

"Sasuke?" I ask, my voice trembling. "Hey, Sasuke?"

No reaction. I can see him still breathing, but his eye... it might as well belong to a corpse. It's like he is dead, but still breathing. He's broken.

"Come on, say something!" I whisper. "Please!"

I hear people approach. Naruto and Jiraiya. I don't look at them. My gaze is glued to Sasuke's limp
form. I blink tears away as the flesh covering the hallway recedes and Sasuke falls forwards limply, landing in Naruto's arms. He leans him against the wall while Jiraiya watches. Then a kunai suddenly flies past us, followed by a cry of "Dynamic Entry!" and something green and youthful appears out of nowhere and kicks Jiraiya in the face.

I don't really look at them while Gain and Jiraiya talk. My eyes shift back to Sasuke.

I only perk up when Jiraiya starts talking about him. "...take him to the hospital... fractured rib... mental damage..." I clench my fists, dark rage welling up in me, directed at Uchiha Itachi for doing this to him, Jiraiya for not being there, myself for being so weak.

Naruto yells something about going after those two bastards. It seems like a good idea to me. I'm going to kill them. I could rip out one of that man's eyes and give it to Sasuke. And that fucking sword Samehada, I want it.

Jiraiya shoots the idea down, though.

"Take Sasuke to the medical squad, Gai," Jiraiya orders.

" Hai! Kakashi was attacked with the same technique and is unconscious right now. We don't know when he will regain consciousness," Gai answers.

I clench my fists. So they got Kakashi-sensei, too.

Jiraiya is going to end them.

Gai stares down at Sasuke, a sombre look on his face. "It is when a student is injured, that from the bottom of my heart, I wish for her to be here. She could surely help."

"That's why we are going to look for her," Jiraiya states.

"What?" Gai asks, shocked. "Her? You will bring her back?"

"I'm going with you," I say.

Everyone whirls around to look at me. I guess they kind of forgot about my presence. Or failed to notice me in the first place.

"Ri-chan!" Naruto yells, sprinting towards me. "You're hurt!"

No kidding.

I force myself to stand up, leaning heavily on the wall. My shredded shoulder hurts like hell. At least the splitting headache is gone.

What was up with that, anyways?

"Ri-chan, are you okay?"

What a stupid question.

I slump over and fall against the wall completely. "I just need to rest a bit..." I say, blinking black spots in my vision away. Chakra exhaustion, once again.

"Girl, you need a hospital," Jiraiya informs me, walking closer. He studies the markings on my skin with a serious look. "Then again... it might be better if I keep an eye on you."
"You don't take me with you" I hiss "and I'll look for Tsunade-sama by myself. I'll drag her to Konoha by her hair if I have to, and if it's the last thing I do."

There is nothing I wouldn't do to save Sasuke.

"But Ri-chan, you're hurt!" Naruto protests. "Just leave it to me, I'll find her for you, dattebayo!"

I don't answer, not taking my attention off Jiraiya.

Jiraiya sighs and rubs the bridge of his nose. "Fine."

I nod, looking back at the unresponsive Sasuke.

*I will save you, I promise silently. I will not lose you.*

---

**Itachi**

He and Kisame flee after escaping from the Sannin's jutsu. On the outside, he is as stoic and expressionless as ever. But his mind is whirling.

It has been an eye-opening day.

First, he and Kisame visited his old home, his beloved village. It angered him, to see the destruction the invaders wrought upon it. To think Orochimaru would really attack...

Then they were confronted by Sarutobi Asuma and Yuuhi Kurenai. Hatake Kakashi, the man he knows is his little brother's sensei, showed up, too.

He and Kisame handled them easily. But by then, their fight had attracted the attention of Maito Gai and others were sure to follow, so they fled. He'd rather not hurt his former comrades after all. Besides, he had already found out that the Kyuubi jinchuuriki was no longer in Konohagakure.

And his objective of reminding Danzo of his presence had been accomplished. The man now knows not to go near Sasuke.

Soon after that, they located Uzumaki Naruto in Shukuba-machi, guarded by the Sannin Jiraiya. It was not Itachi's preferred course of action to place a woman under a genjutsu to lure the man away, but it was necessary. It gained them easy access to the their target. It all went according to their plan.

Until Sasuke appeared. It had been a shock to see him. He hadn't planned for it. But it served well to test his brother's strength.

At first Sasuke exceeded his expectations, but his power is still nowhere near what he will need to have in order to defeat Itachi. And while he used the chidori well, he was lost in rage and hatred. To think his brother, who had adored him so much, would look at him with such loathing... it had hurt him, even though it was to be expected.

Then the girl had joined the fight. He had been pleased to see her follow Sasuke into battle without hesitation. Sasuke found a good comrade. But when he realised she was marked with Orochimaru's curse, he knew he had to remove her from around Sasuke. And when he realised that she was a member of the Uzumaki Clan which Kisame surely would have realised as well, he knew he had to kill her in Akatsuki's name. A budding sealmaster could not be allowed near the jinchuuriki. And it is important that he keeps his cover.
Even if she seems to be under the mistaken assumption that she is a Nara. The chains and the red hair gave her true heritage away.

The moment she was hurt, Sasuke had forgotten about revenge. He had tried to protect her instead. Itachi had been sure he had instilled the goal of vengeance in Sasuke's mind back when he was young, but apparently he wasn't quite thorough enough back then.

It cemented his decision to kill the girl even further. If she were gone, there would be one more person for Sasuke to avenge and no one to distract him from his goal. It might even trigger the Mangekyou Sharingan in Sasuke.

How was he to know that, unlike what his studies of the clans had told him, she was not weak against genjutsu like most Uzumaki? How was he to know that Sasuke had already gained the Mangekyou?

The girl had broken his illusions – not an easy feat. His brother had used Amaterasu against him, and Itachi had barely been able to extinguish the black flames.

Jiraiya had arrived then, and Itachi knew he had lost his chance to kill the girl. But he could still make sure to set Sasuke's priorities straight by placing him in the Tsukuyomi and forcing him to realise his lack of strength.

It was then he noticed that Sasuke was blind in one eye. He recognised the traces of using Izanagi, the Uchiha kinjutsu that costs the user one sharingan.

What could have forced his brother to sacrifice one of his eyes? Izanagi is used as a failsafe to escape death. If Sasuke used it... who was it that had threatened his otouto's life to the point where he had to use this technique? Was it Orochimaru? Had Danzo already made a play for him? Was it a mission?

*This demands investigation,* he decides as he runs alongside Kisame until they find one of the Akatsuki hideouts – it's merely an underground shelter, but it will do for a short rest.

Kisame takes Samehada off his back and removes the bloodstained bandages around it.

The sentient sword is giving off odd noises. After such a long time with Kisame as his partner, Itachi knows the sword quite well, and he recognises the sounds it makes as... satisfaction? Itachi has never heard the sword sound quite so happy before.

He raises an eyebrow minutely – did the Kyuubi's chakra taste that good to the sword?

"It was that girl's blood," Kisame growls, apparently jealous. Not even when *he* feeds Samehada does it make these noises.

"A notable trait of the Uzumaki was their ability to heal others and sharing their life force through letting them bite them," Itachi states. "It appears this pleases Samehada."

Further evidence of her heritage.

She cannot fool his eyes.
I wake up in an unfamiliar bed in an unfamiliar room with familiar people around me.

"Ri-chan! You're awake!" Naruto yells and I groan as his voice echoes in my head.

"Someone please hit Jiraiya," I mumble. There is a hitting sound and a shout of "Oi! What was that for!"

"'cause you were supposed to watch out for Ruto," I mumble, trying to push myself into a sitting position and failing when my arms give out under me. My left upper arm and shoulder are wrapped in bandages and still hurt like hell from being hit with Samehada. And I have chakra exhaustion again. Though this time it wasn't my fault. That damn sword... "Where the hell were you?"

At least the curse markings have receded. Fucking hell, I used it again.

"Ahh, well..." Jiraiya says sheepishly, stepping into my field of vision. "Never mind that, how are you feeling?"

"Like I've been thrown around by S-ranked ninja. Oh wait, I was." I glare at him.

"Eheheheh..." he laughs awkwardly. I stare him down coldly. How dare he laugh when Sasuke- "I'll just get us something to eat," Jiraiya says and flees the room. I don't expect him to come back anytime soon.

"Ri-chan, are you okay? Are you hurt?" Naruto asks. "Do you need anything?"

A doctor and a year of vacation. And painkillers. And a cure for the curse. And most of all, Sasuke back.

"Some water would be great."

After drinking, I unseal some medical pills and swallow them. Chakra replenisher, blood replenisher, pain suppressors and I'm good to travel.

Apparently, Jiraiya doesn't think so, though, and insists on carrying me on his back. I'd rather walk. Not being allowed to move means I'll be alone with my thoughts, and at the moment, they scare me a little. But the rocking of Jiraiya's steps in combination with my exhaustion soon lulls me into a sleep that is plagued by hissing voices, red eyes and Sasuke, screaming in pain.

I wake up when we reach a city. There's another festival going on here which makes Naruto really happy and me really angry, because I don't want to see people celebrate when I'm so miserable and Sasuke is suffering. Jiraiya dumps me at a hotel, rewraps my shoulder and orders me to rest. Naruto on the other hand he tells to go out and have fun. After Naruto has run outside happily with the promise of bringing me food, I tell Jiraiya acidly to at least have a clone watching over him, considering how S-ranked ninja are after him.

"You blame me," Jiraiya realises. I don't deny this. It's true. If he'd been there, Sasuke wouldn't be-

"In the genjutsu, Itachi said something weird." I switch the subject. "He thought I was an Uzumaki."
Jiraiya frowns. "You're not?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Surprising," he murmurs. Louder, he says: "The Uzumaki Clan was once known for using chains made of chakra. Most of them also had red hair, much like you. You don't exactly have their facial features, though..."

"So you thought I was one just because I have red hair and use water chains? Sorry, but those are a water jutsu Nara Yoshino taught me," I ask. And then the magic mutated them into something different, I add silently.

Jiraiya nods. "You might have some of their blood in you, even if you aren't aware of it, you know?"

I snort. "Highly unlikely."

I come from a different world after all. And where I come from, there are no clans.

"Why would Itachi want to kill me for possibly being an Uzumaki?" I ask. And standing in the way of Sasuke's ambition, whatever he means by that.

Jiraiya sighs. "The Uzumaki were famous for their sealing skills. In the end, that was their downfall. They were obliterated during the last war."

"Oh," I murmur. It would make sense to kill a possible sealing master. Fuinjutsu can be extremely dangerous in the hands of a master. "Is Naruto a member of the Uzumaki Clan?" I ask.

He doesn't have red hair, he has no skills whatsoever in sealing due to his horrible calligraphy, and the only chains in his vicinity are mine. So it's unlikely.

"He has some of their blood in him, yes," Jiraiya says. He stands up. "You should rest now. We'll be staying in this town for a while. I might even teach you a thing or two, if you are well enough."

I raise an eyebrow.

I get the most interesting teachers. The copy-ninja Kakashi, the Demon Zabuza and now the Sannin Jiraiya.

Training starts the next afternoon. Jiraiya takes us to a meadow that is hidden by trees. There, he gives Naruto a water balloon and explains to him how to burst it by moving the water with chakra. He demonstrates this.

"Hey, that looks like Ri-chan's water bomb!" Naruto exclaims.

"What?" Jiraiya asks, apparently having anticipated a different reaction. He turns to me. "Water bomb?"

I form one and throw it at a tree. "I can make them boiling hot and combine them with senbon, too," I say.

"Hmm," Jiraiya hums, scratching his chin. Then he presses one of the water balloons into my hand. "Explode this."

I frown at him and comply. The balloon bursts.
"Interesting," Jiraiya muses. "You aren't rotating the water to do that, aren't you? You're just forcing it outward."

"I could do it with rotation, too," I say. Jiraiya hands me another water balloon. I focus my chakra and make it rotate the water inside the balloon in every which direction until it bursts.

"Hmm," Jiraiya muses. "You might just learn this technique, too."

"What technique?" I ask.

"Ahh, I will tell you later once Naruto and you have completed the basics," Jiraiya waves the question away. "At the moment, you're too exhausted to train stage two. I'll find something else to teach you, though. Gaki-" he addresses Naruto. "you know what to do," he points to the heap of water balloons.

"Yatta! I'm gonna train until the water boils!"

"You do that, gaki," Jiraiya says and drags me away. "So, what do you want to train? We can't do anything too chakra-intensive yet."

I think for a moment. "You're a sealmaster, right? I started learning about seals recently, but I'm having some trouble with the theory."

"Seals, eh?" Jiraiya gives me a look. "You know, that won't help with people assuming you're an Uzumaki."

I shrug. "Kind of too late for that. Itachi already wants me dead."

And isn't that wonderful?


The next few days are spent with Naruto practicing popping the water balloon until his hands are so twitchy I have to use medical ninjutsu to ease the strain. I give him some pointers on manipulating water, but since Naruto doesn't appear to be water natured, I can't help him much.

While he does this, Jiraiya tutors me in fuinjutsu theory. For now, I learn about all kinds of storage seals, like ones where I can store water in or those that are activated by blood and not chakra.

Fuinjutsu is exhausting. I doubt I'll make a career out of it. But with Naruto being a jinchuuriki, I figure I should at least be adept at them. Besides, I like my storage seals.

Keeping busy is good. It prevents me from thinking about Sasuke. Even Naruto can't really comfort me when my thoughts go to that dark place and the Cursed Seal starts growing hot. The thing isn't talking at the moment, but that's really only a matter of time.

Today I want to try something else, though. I'm finally rested enough to do it.

"I'm going to sign a summoning contract today," I say, waving the scroll at Naruto and Jiraiya.

"Eh? You got a contract?" Naruto asks.

"Dad gave it to me," I say. "But I never got around to signing it."

"Oh?" Jiraiya takes the scroll from me and scans it.
"Do you know what animal it's for?" I ask.

"Try it out," he says instead of answering.

I shrug and spread the scroll out. There's only been three summoners before me, and from the looks of the scroll, that was a long time ago. I bite my finger and sign with my blood.

"The seals are Boar, Dog, Bird, Monkey and Ram, right?" I ask.

Jiraiya nods. "Use as much chakra as you can."

I nod and do the seals, anticipation filling me. My own summon! Though I shouldn't be too hopeful, we might not even be compatible... I pour chakra into my hand and slam it onto the ground.

"Kuchiyose no Jutsu!" I yell. A puff of smoke, and then-

"We're compatible," I say, staring at the cutest rabbit I have ever seen.

Haku is going to be so jealous. He loves rabbits.

The rabbit wears an open white kimono with the kanji for 'rabbit' on its back, glasses and two red caps on the tips of his ears. It has blue fur and floppy ears that are tied together like a ponytail. And it's fluffy. I want to hug it.

We stare at each other.

In the background, I hear Jiraiya mutter: "That was a better first attempt than yours, gaki."

"Shut up, Ero-sennin!" Naruto whisper-yells.

"You!" The rabbit yells, pointing its paw at me. "You!"

"Yes?" I ask, staring at it starstruck.

"I was in the middle of copulating! How dare you summon me?!"

I blink. *Wait, what?*

"You wanna be the rabbits' summoner?"

*On second thought...*

The rabbit glares at me and sniffs haughtily. "You'll do. You aren't allowed to get a secondary summon and don't you dare call on me during the next four hours, and never between 8 pm and 10 am in general. Those are my copulating times."

And with that, the rabbit dismisses itself. I stare at the dissolving smoke, mind blank.

"Bwahaha!" Jiraiya's booming laugh rips me out of my thoughts. I turn and find him and Naruto rolling on the ground, laughing so hard, tears are rolling down their faces.

"But but but..." I say helplessly, flailing my arms around. "I want a different summon!"

"Ahahaha, Ri-chan!" Naruto laughs. "You shoulda seen your face!"

"It's not fair!" I stomp my foot. "You get the toads of terror, and I get a randy rabbit. What the hell? And I wanted a flying summon!"
"But you're the one who said you were compatible." Jiraiya waggles his eyebrows at me.

"Because he was cute! That could have happened to anyone!" I protest.

"Ne, Ri-chan, maybe they aren't all like that," Naruto tries to console me. "Try summoning another one."

I sulk.

Sometimes, I really hate my life.

The day after the Epic Summoning Fail, Naruto announces that he's managed to explode the balloon. He demonstrates this by waking Jiraiya up with it. It almost amuses me.

Naruto did it by using both hands to move the water with his chakra. Trust Naruto to come up with his own way of completing an exercise.

Back when I started learning water manipulation, it took me months to get to a point where I could have done this exercise. Granted, Naruto isn't exactly using water manipulation, but it's still impressive. He managed to think up a way to compensate for his lousy control. I can tell Jiraiya is impressed, too.

That day at our temporary training ground, Jiraiya hands us both a rubber ball that he says is about a hundred times tougher than the water balloon. And we are supposed to burst it like we did the water balloon.

I frown, staring down at it. There's no water inside. How am I going to do it? I calculate how much chakra it will take to burst it. Bugger.

Well, Jiraiya did mention it was an A-ranked technique. Those things are no joke. The last time I used one... ugh.

Jiraiya leaves us to our training to do whatever he does in his free time. He better be trying to find Tsunade.

Two hours later and I lean back against a tree, breathing hard. "Damn it!" I wheeze, flexing my aching fingers. "This shit's hard!"

"You okay, Ri-chan?" Naruto asks, sitting down next to me. "Don't push yourself too hard."

"It's fine, Ruto," I mumble. I lean my head against his shoulder. "I want to get stronger. I have to get stronger."

"Yeah," Naruto says. "Me too."

We sit there in silence for a minute. "Say, Ri-chan..." Naruto hesitates.

"What is it?" I ask, looking up.

"Did you know about Sasuke's eye?"

I lean against him again. "Yeah," I say softly. "It happened in the Forest of Death. Sasuke did something to save me. It happened then."

"Why didn't you tell me?" Naruto asks, sounding hurt.
"Not my place to tell you, and Sasuke hates talking about it." I sigh. "For what it's worth, I'm sorry."

"You know you can tell me anything, right, Ri-chan?" Naruto asks.

"Yeah," I say. "I know. Thank you."

Naruto nods, a determined look on his face. "Don't worry about the bastard. We're going to find that Tsunade person, and we'll make her help him, dattebayo!"

Now would be the time to tell him about everything that's happened to me, everything I haven't told him. About Orochimaru, Kabuto, Fumio's death. Where I'm really from. About magic and Cursed Seals.

I can't do it. I can't dump all this shit on him. He lost his grandfather barely a week ago, he was attacked by nuke-nin and Sasuke and I were hurt right in front of him.

I won't selfishly put all this on his shoulders. It's not like he could do anything. It would just make him sad and angry, and I'm sad and angry enough for two, though I do better around Naruto.

"Yatta," I say weakly. "Come on, let's go back to training." I make my hands glow green and run them over his arms so they'll stop trembling. I do the same for my own.

If nothing else, this training will be great for my reserves.

"Damn it!" Naruto yells, falling to the ground, staring at his trembling fingers. I jerk up. Naruto's jacket falls off my shoulders.

Huh. Must have fallen asleep. I've been so tired lately. And that odd feeling is back. But I still don't know what it is. I've just felt off-key for the last days.

I walk over to Naruto and grab his hands. Twitchy fingers, chakra burns, spasms. "You should have woken me up," I chide. "This must hurt pretty bad. You aren't doing yourself any favours suffering on your own." I run my medical ninjutsu over his arms. I can't really do anything for his overused chakra system, but I can soothe his twitching muscles and ease the pain. "When we get back to the hotel, bathe them in hot water. I'll give you some herbs that should help."

"Yeah. Thanks, Ri-chan," Naruto mumbles contritely. "I'm not making any progress at all!"

"More than me," I mutter. "Your rubber ball at least deforms a lot more than when you started. Mine still only twitches. And it's been over a week already."

"Every time I let my chakra flow down my arm, it hurts. The more I increase the amount of chakra, the worse it gets," Naruto complains. "The thing won't pop unless I make the chakra explode in the blink of an eye!" Then his head snaps up in realisation and he grabs his ball and channels an ungodly amount of chakra into it. "Uoohhhhh!" he yells, his face contorting in pain.

"Naruto, you're hurting yourself!" I yell. "Stop!"

A hole appears in the ball and it deflates. I blink. "You did it!"

"Well..." Jiraiya's voice says from behind us. "It looks like you made progress."

"Meh," Naruto grumbles while I run another medical ninjutsu over his arms. I'd probably get a lot more training done if I didn't have to heal Naruto and me every other hour. "I only made a hole. It didn't explode."
"Come on, don't be stubborn," Jiraiya says. "Here." And he holds out two popsicles to Naruto and me while keeping one for himself.

"Eh?" Naruto asks, staring at the popsicle. Then a ridiculously happy smile spreads on his face and he takes it and starts eating. "This is good!" he says, grinning happily.

At least one of us is happy.

"You've come a long way on your own," Jiraiya says, smiling while eating his own popsicle. I follow suit. "Once you've gotten this far, the rest is just a simple trick. Give me your right hand."

I listen attentively while Jiraiya first draws a small spiral on Naruto's hand and then explains how it's supposed to help him concentrate.

Concentration, huh?

I have the concentration part down, what I lack is the ability to push out that much chakra all at once. It feels like setting my own arm on fire from the inside.

I grit my teeth and start practicing again.

I have to get stronger.

I wake up late the next day, my arms heavily bandaged and feeling awful. My neck burns and there is that odd feeling again, only stronger now. Like an itch under my skin. I feel weak and nauseous.

Why is it so hot in here? Someone ought to open the open the window of our hotel room. I'm alone, though. Jiraiya is either information gathering or living it up or both, and Naruto probably decided to let me sleep in and train on his own for today.

My throat is dry. I should drink something. I push myself up on my injured arms. Pains shoots through them and I fall back with a small cry. I clutch my shoulder. The wound Kisame caused with his chakra-eating sword was healing alright the last time I checked. But now, it feels like it's burning.

I rip off the bandages covering the injury and curse. The skin around the wound feels hot and inflamed. Pus and other fluids leak from the wound even though I made sure to disinfect it and took medicines every day. I try to focus some healing chakra, but it wavers and fizzes out in my hand.

Shit.

And why is it so warm in here? Damn it, my head hurts. I groan and kick my blanket off me, but it does little to alleviate the heat.

I think training is out for me today.

I wake up from a fitful sleep when I feel a big hand on my forehead. I open my eyes. Jiraiya kneels beside me, staring down at me with a concerned look.

"You have a fever," he says.

"No kidding," I croak back. He inspects my shoulder, now looking worried.

"This was fine a few days ago," he states, poking at the inflamed flesh.
"I feel weird. And my neck hurts. My head, too," I whine.

"It's a good thing I found a lead on Tsunade," Jiraiya states. "She'll have a look at you." He rewraps my shoulder skillfully. Then he gathers what things we keep in the room, throws me on his back and leaves the room through the window.

I fall asleep again, face buried in Jiraiya's white mane.

I slip in and out of fitful sleep while Jiraiya carries me on the way to Tanzaku-Gai. Naruto is busy trying to not explode a balloon while combining the chakra rotation and power he learned during his exercises into one. It's not going too well.

Every once in a while, he runs to Jiraiya's side to ask how I am doing, which I answer with "Really tired" or not at all.

I have no idea what's wrong with me, but it's getting worse. My head is spinning and I can feel the impact of every step Jiraiya takes jarring my whole body. The light hurts my eyes, so I keep my head buried in Jiraiya's hair and my eyes closed.

My head feels like it's going to burst, my shoulder feels like it's on fire and the Curse Mark throbs. My whole body aches.

I chance a look despite the hateful sunlight when we enter the city. Jiraiya is talking about his old teammate. "Tsunade is short-tempered and impatient, you know," he says while Naruto blasts himself off his feet again. "We need to hurry, or she'll leave before we find her."

"Oh yay," I say weakly. "Short-tempered and impatient. Wonderful. And you're letting her near Ruto?"

"Oi! What's that supposed to mean?!" Naruto yells and I hide my head in Jiraiya's mane again, as if that would help me escape the awful loud noise.

Jiraiya pats my arm reassuringly. "If nothing else, she should be able to help Riko."

"Then what are we waiting for?" Naruto shouts enthusiastically and I hear his steps running ahead. Jiraiya chuckles and begins to move again. "How are you holding up?" he asks quietly.

"Still alive," I answer. "What's wrong with me?"

I'm scared. Ninjas aren't supposed to get sick. Better immune system and all that. So this is something serious.

"I don't know."

"It hurts."

"Bear with it just a little longer."

It's not like I have a choice. I'm stuck hanging on Jiraiya's back.

"I'm glad you aren't bony," I tell him.

He chuckles. "Good for you."
"You aren't so bad. You gave Ruto ice-cream."

"Are you still mad at me?"

"Yes."

"That's too bad," he sighs.

"Tsunade can heal Sasuke, right?" I ask. "And Kakashi-sensei?"

"If anyone can, it's her."

"Alright then."

Sasuke must be hurting a million times worse than I do. Whatever Itachi made him see... it broke him. His lifeless form, that look in his eye, it still haunts me, whether I'm asleep or awake. Even if – I mean when he wakes up, he might not be the same anymore.

So I bear with the pain while Naruto explodes balloons and the people of this city go about their noisy business. It's a tourist town, so it's fairly loud. The worst is when Jiraiya asks around for Tsunade in a gambling den. All those machines with their shrill noises are torture.

And Tsunade is nowhere to be found. Damn it all to hell.

At least now we're walking through a calmer area. The only noisy thing is Naruto. "So where's the castle?" Naruto asks. Jiraiya starts and stops walking. Then he jumps up on a rooftop.

I blearily open my eyes. "Someone killed the castle," I say, looking at the enormous heap of rubble.

I wince when Jiraiya yells down at a passer-by. "Hey you! What happened there?"

"You guys should run, too! There's a demon beast up there!"

"Oh Kami, not again," I whine. "I've had it with the fucking monsters."

"A hu-huge snake!" The man says after Jiraiya asks for details. "Toppled the building instantly!"

"Oh Kami, not again," I whisper.

"Ri-chan?" Naruto asks. I whimper and shake my head, hiding in Jiraiya's hair.

I don't come out again. I just listen to Jiraiya and Naruto talk while they inspect the ruins and determine that we just missed Tsunade. They take a look around the city once more.

"Hey, isn't this a bar?" Naruto asks.

"Information is always found in places like this," Jiraiya says while we enter. "Plus we can eat he-hey! Tsunade?!"

"Jiraiya!" a woman's voice exclaims.

I whine. "Please don't shout."

"What are you doing here, Jiraiya?" the woman asks.

"Finally, we found you," Jiraiya sighs as he starts moving again. He grabs me and sits me down on a bench, then slides in next to me. Naruto follows.
I stare blearily at the two women in front of me. Both of them are young, one of them with dark hair and a pretty face with kind eyes, the other one blond with striking gold-brown eyes and a really large chest. I can't stop staring at it.

There's tense silence while we sit there, Jiraiya and Tsunade staring at each other while they drink sake from tiny cups. Tsunade appears to be drunk already.

I wonder if alcohol would help my headache.

"What a day... seeing old acquaintances everywhere," Tsunade finally mutters.

"Orochimaru?" Jiraiya asks, though it isn't really a question. I don't know why the pretty dark-haired lady looks so surprised he knows. Giant snakes aren't exactly inconspicuous. "What happened?"

"Nothing much. We just said hello," Tsunade says. "What do you want from me?"

"I will be direct with you," Jiraiya replies. "Tsunade, the village of Konohagakure requests that you become the Godaime Hokage."

I blink. Alright. I didn't see that coming.

Naruto chokes on his food.

"Have you heard about the Third?" Jiraiya asks.

"Orochimaru killed him, right? I heard, he told me."

I clench my fists under the table. So the murderer really is here.

"Orochimaru killed Jiji? Who is this Orochimaru?" Naruto asks, a distressed look on his face.

How can he not know? How the hell can he not know?

Because I keep secrets from him, I realise guiltily. Because I wanted to protect him from the world. But still, Orochimaru is a name we were taught about in the Academy.

"The remaining Sannin," Jiraiya says.

"Why?! The Sannin are Konoha ninja, right?" Naruto asks and I cringe at the volume. Naruto's loud voice echoes through my head.

"Who is this kid?" Tsunade asks disinterestedly.

"Uzumaki Naruto," Jiraiya answers with a calculating look on his face.

Tsunade looks at Naruto, assessing him. She probably knows about his jinchuuriki status.

"You didn't answer my question! Who is this Orochimaru guy who killed Hokage-jiji?!" Naruto's fist hits the table as he shouts his question. I wince at the noise.

"Forest of Death," I croak, slumping against Jiraiya. "Grass ninja. Can you please not shout?"

"Eh?" Naruto asks. "Forest of Death? But..." his voice trails off as he remembers. Probably puts two and two together about the snakes in the forest and the one earlier in the city.

"And who is this?" Tsunade asks, raising an eyebrow at me. Her eyes narrow as she studies me.
I wonder if I look as bad as I feel. If so, I should probably go back to hiding in Jiraiya's hair.

"Nara Riko," I answer.

"And what do you mean she's going to be Hokage, Ero-Sennin?" Naruto asks, still in that kami-damned loud voice.

Tsunade reaches a glowing hand out and puts it on my forehead. Her eyes narrow and her gaze bores itself into mine. "What happened to you?" she asks sharply.

I laugh bitterly, the sound echoing painfully in my aching head. "You want a list?"

Her eyes narrow even further.

"Ahh, Tsunade, we don't know what's wrong with Riko. She's been sick since earlier this morning. It's a good thing we found you, isn't it?" Jiraiya says.

"That's been going on for longer than today," Tsunade states. I feel chakra seep from her hand into my head, dulling the pain. My vision grows fuzzy and soft and all noise seems to come from far away.

When she pulls her hand away, I slump over and fall unconscious.

Jiraiya

He stares at Tsunade with a grim look on his face. Riko lies in his arms, sleeping peacefully for once.

Such a small little thing.

Life hasn't been kind to her. But she seems to be one of those people who, when they get beaten down, just stand up, dust off their clothes and go on. But the beatings leave scars on her. Often, he sees the darkness in her eyes. But there is light, too, so much of it. It's there, whenever she is with Naruto, joking around, eating together, training side by side.

He knows Orochimaru's curse is taking its toll on her, but he thinks she might just be able to overcome it. Possibly. So long as she isn't put under too much stress. He'll try to help her as much as he can. After all, if she doesn't succumb to the curse, it's a victory against that bastard Orochimaru, isn't it?

Tsunade walks over and grabs her by the scruff of her neck. She throws her to Shizune, who hastily catches her. "Take her to our hotel," she orders.

"Oi!" Naruto shouts, looking beaten up after his short and one-sided fight against Tsunade. "You can't kidnap Ri-chan! And you can't throw her around!"

"If I don't treat her, she will die," Tsunade says.

"W-what?" Naruto asks. "B-but Ri-chan can't die!"

"Gaki, go find us a hotel," Jiraiya orders. "I saw one down the street that looks alright. I'm going for a drink with Tsunade."

"But she needs to treat Ri-chan!" Naruto yells. "And I wanna stay with her!"

"Gaki, Tsunade knows what she's doing," Jiraiya placates him. "Riko-chan is safe with her."
At least, he hopes she is. Tsunade has changed, and with Orochimaru in town who has already made contact with his old teammate, it's risky leaving the girl with her when the bastard has already made it clear that he has way too much interest in her.

But Tsunade said Riko would die, and she would never joke about that, no matter how bitter and jaded she has become. So there's no choice.

He takes her to a small stand and orders their drinks.

"So what's wrong with Riko?" he asks.

"Is she an Uzumaki?" Tsunade asks, not answering the question.

"It's peculiar, isn't it? It's almost like looking at a young Kushina and Minato when she and Naruto are together." Until they open their mouths. Then the illusion is shattered.

"Tch. Sentimental old fool," Tsunade says.

He sighs. "Riko is not an Uzumaki. The similarities are coincidental."

Riko had definitely believed to be telling the truth when she claimed not to be an Uzumaki. But there is still the possibility of her not being aware of it... he should ask Shikaku about it. He would know.

What he can tell is that she lacks the infamous Uzumaki temper. Oh, she does have a temper, but she doesn't get loud like Kushina did and Naruto does, she gets vicious. And she does have talent in fuinjutsu, but it is not the ingeniousness the Uzumaki possessed.

But that hair... and the chains...

"Stop avoiding the question. What is wrong with Riko?" Jiraiya asks again. He'd thought her sickness had been a result of her wound becoming infected, combined with exhaustion from training. Certainly nothing life-threatening.

"Her chakra system," Tsunade says.

"What do you mean?"

"She has a third kind of chakra besides the spiritual and the physical component. It doesn't come from her chakra circulatory system, it rests in her blood instead," Tsunade explains. He raises his eyebrows in surprise. He hadn't known Riko had a Kekkei Genkai. It would explain Orochimaru's interest, though. "The different chakras are already unbalanced. She could deal with that, though."

"But with the Cursed Seal, any balance is gone," Jiraiya finishes for her.

Tsunade nods. "The chakra in her blood is attacking the curse chakra, but since that is tied to her normal chakra system, the spiritual and physical are being attacked, too, and that's what's causing her condition. Her physical injuries and mental stress don't help."

Jiraiya nods in understanding. Chakra reflects the mental and physical state of a person. And body and mind reflect the state of the chakra.

If Riko's different chakras turn against each other, her body and mind will break.

"Can you help her?" he asks.
Tsunade gives him an offended look that would have intimidated him had he been twenty years younger and she not drunk and tired. "Of course."

He breathes a sigh of relief. "That's good. She'll still have the Curse Mark, though, right?"

Tsunade nods. "I will have to keep her close to me until I deem her stable. That means she'll spend the week with me."

And there goes his relief.

Tsunade and Riko together could either turn out very well or very bad. Poor Shizune.

Chapter End Notes

In case you are wondering about Riko's magic attacking her chakra, I figured that the Cursed Seal always leaks a small amount of curse chakra into the chakra system, to influence her and corrupt her slowly, you could say. So the magic attacks the curse chakra and the normal chakra gets caught up in the attack.
I should really try to fall unconscious less often. It can't be good for my health, I think as I fight my way into consciousness. Though it's not my fault this time, Tsunade knocked me out.

At least it wasn't a missing-nin this time.

I lay still while I feel around for any chakras in my vicinity. Neither Naruto's nor Jiraiya's presence is anywhere near me. Instead, there are two unfamiliar chakras in the room. Both are fairly large. One feels soothing and peaceful, the other strong and close to violent. Like calm before a storm. And I think the person is already muting their chakra.

I guess they must be Tsunade and her attendant. What was her name again? I missed it when we were in that bar.

I squeak when something bumps and sniffs my ear. I shoot off from my seemingly asleep position. It was a pig. I stare at it blankly.

"So you are awake."

I turn to look at Tsunade who towers over me, staring down at me with those striking eyes. Her boobs are right in front of my face. I try not to get distracted by them. They are just so big.

"Yes?" I answer questioningly. "Where's Jiraiya-sama and Naruto?"

Tsunade's delicate features tighten at the mention of their names. "Around," she spits out. Then she turns around sharply and leaves the room – a cheap hotel room, as far as I can tall.

"How are you feeling, Riko-san?" the other woman asks, hands already hovering over me and checking with diagnostic jutsu.

I blink in realisation. "Not bad, actually," I say. All my injuries are gone. I check my shoulder. A fine net of scars covers it, barely noticeable. My headache is gone, as well as that odd feeling I've had for weeks now. I feel... normal.

"That's good," the woman says, sounding relieved. "You'll have to forgive Tsunade-sama, she is under a lot of stress at the moment."

I shrug. I'm used to rude behaviour. "Don't worry about it. What was wrong with me anyways?"

"Ahh, yes. You were in quite a serious condition, Riko-san. You have a unique chakra system that was already unbalanced, then with the introduction of another chakra through this" she taps the mark on my neck. Crap, the genjutsu I used to hide it is gone. "Well, your system attacked itself and your body couldn't quite handle it. See, it's like this..."

And she launches into a long explanation about my chakra system. Some of it is new to me, other things, not so much. From what I understand though, she and Tsunade managed to stabilise my condition for the moment and will be keeping me with them for the rest of the week to make sure I don't relapse.
"Your system was trying to purge the foreign chakra from your body," Shizune – she finally introduced herself – explains. "Unfortunately, it also attacked your normal chakra which affected your body quite badly."

"So you and Tsunade-sama stopped it," I state. "What I don't understand is, why did this happen now? I've had this thing I point at my neck. "for months now."

"You were a ticking time bomb, brat."

I dart around to Tsunade. I hadn't even noticed her enter the room again.

"Tell me, did you fuck up your chakra system recently? That would have been the trigger," Tsunade asks.

"You want a list?" I ask, thinking back to Kisame's chakra eating Samehada, using the Cursed Seal and magic against Itachi and Kisame and before that against Gaara, straining my regular chakra to its limit again and again during Demon-sensei's training, using an A-ranked technique against Tenten – the list is long. Add to that the physical and emotional stress that I've been under – that I still am under...

Exhausting myself during training with Jiraiya was probably the last straw.

*I do realise that I have exceptionally bad luck, I think to myself. But this is ridiculous even for me.*

Tsunade raises an eyebrow. "Maybe later."

"Thank you, Tsunade-sama," I say. "You saved me."

"Tch." Tsunade turns away with a disdainful expression. "It's not like I had a choice. Jiraiya made me do it."

I roll my eyes. I doubt anyone can *make* Tsunade do anything. "Thanks anyway."

Tsunade ignores me. "Shizune!" she barks.

"Hai, Tsunade-sama!" Shizune snaps to attention, giving me an apologetic look.

"We're going out. I'm going to win my money back today."

"But Tsunade-sama, we can't."

"You!" Tsunade points at me. "You will be carrying Tonton."

The pig oinks.

I hate my life.

We return to the hotel after a few hours of watching Tsunade gamble away a small fortune. At some point, I gave Tonton back to Shizune since the poor woman seriously looked like she needed to hug something.

Back in our room, Tsunade makes me drink some medicine and then I get send to bed like a little girl. Not by Tsunade but by Shizune. Apparently she thinks me a frail and delicate little thing that absolutely must not overexert herself. Unfortunately, she is also too nice to say no to, so I go to bed. I hear her come in a few hours later, and soon, she is deep asleep. Or as deep asleep as a ninja can be,
anyways. I'm pretty sure she is jounin level, considering whose apprentice she is.

However, she's no Zabuza, so when I get up and sneak out of the window, she doesn't stir.

"Where do you think you're going?" Tsunade's voice asks. I turn around. She reclines on a nearby rooftop, a cup of sake in her hand.

"Catching some fresh air," I answer. "I'm not tired."

"Bullshit," she says.

It is. I just can't sleep. The nightmares will come, and there is no Naruto to snuggle up to when I wake up from being haunted by either Sasuke's crazed anger or his lifeless form.

"You're awake as well. So you have no room to talk," I reply evenly. I walk over to her and plop down next to her, leaning back to look at the stars. It's not as nice as cloud-watching, but still nice.

"Why did Jiraiya bring you here?" Tsunade asks after taking a sip from her sake. "I understand why he brought the loudmouth brat, but there is no reason for your presence here."

I stare up at the stars.

Jiraiya fears our power. He's standing in our way! hisses through my mind. Fucking seal won't shut up. He wants you to be weak!

Jiraiya also trained me and helped me when I was sick, I think back.

"I don't care if you want to be Hokage or not," I say to Tsunade. I feel her surprised gaze on me. "I invited myself along because I need you to heal my – someone I care about."

I still have no idea what Sasuke and I are. It doesn't feel like friendship, it's more than the bond between teammates, and he kissed me. 'Because I wanted to,' he said. Which doesn't really explain anything but still makes me smile when I think about it.

I wonder if he'll ever kiss me again. The thought comes into my head out of nowhere.

As if. He doesn't care about you! He only cares about his killing his brother! The seal spits its venom. He never thought about you when he tried to kill Uchiha Itachi!

I don't care! I mentally shout back, shocking the seal into silence.

I don't care if Sasuke doesn't care about me. I don't care if he wakes up only to hate me. I just want him to be alright.

"So if you don't want to come to the village, that's fine. I'll bring him to you. Just tell me when and where."

"Even if I betray the village and heal Orochimaru?"

My head snaps around to look at her in shock. She stares back at me, an almost cruel expression in her eyes.

Orochimaru. The cause of almost everything that's wrong with my life. He killed Hokage-sama. He hurt Shikamaru. It's his fault Fumio died. His fault Sasuke only has one working eye. He put a curse on me. He hurt Ruto.
I want him to die a very painful death.

But there's only one answer I can give Tsunade, because there's nothing I wouldn't do to save my precious ones.

"Even then," I say, staring into her eyes, meaning every word.

"We're the same, then," she says, looking up at the stars.

"Are we?" I ask. "What did Orochimaru offer you to make you heal him?"

What kind of injury did he suffer anyways? As far as I know, Kabuto is a medic and since I doubt Orochimaru would surround himself with second-rate ninja, he must be a damn good one. If Orochimaru needs Tsunade to heal him then Hokage-sama must have kicked his ass thoroughly before he died.

"None of your business."

I shrug and get up. "Fair enough," I say. "For what it's worth, I think you wouldn't make a half bad Hokage."

"Get lost, brat," she says, but there's no venom in her voice. She just sounds tired.

I follow her advice and leap away.

It isn't all that hard to find Naruto's training place. All I had to do was walk around the city's borders and keep my eyes open.

I shake my head and smile fondly when I see Naruto's worn out form on the ground, deep asleep. A dried out tree before him is marked with traces of his training. "You little idiot," I mutter. He doesn't stir. "You've got a hotel room, you know?"

I unseal a blanket from a storage scroll. Then I carry Naruto over to a grassy patch and place it over him. He doesn't wake up. I sit down next to him, running a green glowing hand over his arms. I'm not supposed to use much chakra, but this little is fine.

I sigh and lay my hand on his forehead. His temperature is fine, a little too warm maybe, but that's normal for Naruto. "Ri-chan?" he mumbles sleepily, his eyes fluttering open.

"Sleep," I whisper. "You need to train tomorrow, right? So you win your bet against Tsunade." Shizune told me about that, too.

"Mmm," he mumbles, eyes closing. "Love you, Ri-chan."

I still in surprise. It's the first time he's ever told me that. Of course, I knew already, we've been best friends for ages, and really, he's as much a brother as Shikamaru is. But still, it gives me a warm feeling to hear it.

"Love you too," I whisper back. He grins happily, already asleep. I smile, bend down and kiss his forehead. "So very much."

I stay there for the rest of the night and keep watch over Naruto's sleeping form. When dawn breaks, I slip away and back into Shizune's and my shared room.

The two hours of sleep I get are peaceful for once.
"Hey girly," a smarmy voice addresses me. "How about playing a little game with us?"

It's the third time since we arrived at this casino someone asks me this. It's disgusting. To them, I'm an innocent girl of twelve years at most, and they want to take advantage of that.

I've had it with them. Besides, I'm bored to tears.

I smile my most disarming sweet smile. "But I don't know how to play..."

The man grins a greedy smile. "Aww, don't worry! We'll teach you all you need! It's easy once you know the rules!"

"Really? You're so nice!" I reply.

"Riko-san, I don't think that's a good idea," Shizune cautions.

"Ahh, Shizune, let her," Tsunade interjects. "It's her money."

I give Shizune a victorious smirk and join the group of players – not Tsunade's group, though. I fork some money over to the guy that exchanges it for chips. Soon enough, I'm playing. Losing, too.

They can't know that playing against a Nara is never a good idea.

Card games aren't all about luck, otherwise I wouldn't be playing. Card games are also about numbers and probability, about being observant and having a poker face.

After about three lost games, my opponents are grinning smarmily and suggest I should borrow some money. I decline and suggest another game.

I win. I win the next one too. The one after that I have a seriously bad hand, so I let myself lose, which relieves the other players immensely. The game after that, I win again.

After about two hours of playing, I am the richest person among our group of players and decide to call it quits. "That was fun!" I tell them cheerfully. They stare at me as if they want to kill me. It makes me smile.

Maybe now they will be more careful about seducing children into gambling.

I skip over to Shizune, a briefcase filled with money in my hand. "How's Tsunade-sama doing?" I ask. She gives the briefcase a disapproving frown.

"We're leaving, Shizune," Tsunade says before I can get chewed out. For all her faults, she's got good timing.

I sneak out after Shizune's fallen asleep again. Tsunade sits on the balcony, drinking again and inspecting a deck of cards.

"Seems rather pointless to play by yourself," I say.

She starts dealing out the cards. I take them and we start playing.

"What are you going to do with your winnings?" Tsunade asks, not actually sounding interested.

I shrug. "Don't know yet. Probably buy some weapons, medicine, books... treat Naruto to Ichiraku's,
buy my dad a new shogi board for his birthday. Probably donate some to the clan clinic as well, given how much medicine they waste on me."

She snorts. "You get hurt a lot?"

"You have no idea," I say, my voice sounding bitter.

We play in silence. I win.

It becomes a sort of ritual during the following days. During the day, I'm stuck going to whatever gambling den Tsunade picked and watch her play and lose. I myself don't play again since I actually do respect the shinobi taboos somewhat. Afternoons, I study and train with as little chakra as possible. Tsunade and Shizune check me over regularly to make sure my chakra system isn't about to crash again. I also have to drink medicine before going to sleep. Nights, I sneak out to play a game of cards with Tsunade and we talk a little with me subtly sneaking in comments about Konoha, like mentioning Ichiraku's, the hot springs, the monument. I even mention Tora-chan, which startles a laugh out of her. Apparently, during her time, there was a seriously annoying panda bear the new genin had to catch frequently.

I hope it's enough to make her remember good times in the village. I hope it's enough to make her miss it just a little. Because even though I said I wouldn't care about her becoming a traitor so long as she heals Sasuke, I'd much rather have her come back with us. I like Tsunade.

After winning whatever game we were playing, I leave to watch over Naruto sleeping at his training place. At sunrise, I leave and slip back into bed to catch a few hours of fitful sleep.

I feel like I should be doing more, but I can't think of anything that doesn't involve training, but I'm not supposed to use much chakra until Tsunade clears me for it. Thankfully, I think I won't be stuck with boredom much longer since Tsunade said I only had to stay around her for the week, so it should be fine to use chakra after that. And today is the last day of the week.

This evening, Shizune took off to somewhere and left me with Tsunade. It's kind of nice not to be sent to bed early. Now Tsunade and I are playing card games in her room.

"Are you alright?" I ask. "You seem tense."

She plays her hand. I raise my eyebrow. She actually won this time. I fork over the chocolate I bet.

Somehow, Tsunade doesn't seem happy about winning. But if she didn't answer my question before, she definitely won't answer if I ask the same question again.

How troublesome.

A knock sounds at the door. Tsunade gets up and opens the door. It's Jiraiya.

"What do you want?" she asks.

"The moon's out. Want to go get some drinks?" he asks. "I'm paying."

"One moment," she says, stepping back. "Riko needs her medicine."

She disappears into her room for a minute and comes back with a glass filled with what looks like water. "Drink up," she tells me like she did every evening we've been stuck together. Obediently, I drink it – like always, it tastes bitter.
Jiraiya and Tsunade leave.

I wait for a few minutes, then I get up so I can head on over to Naruto. Or I try to, anyways. The moment I stand up, a wave of vertigo hits me and I have to grab my chair so I don't fall over. "What the-" I whisper, my tongue feeling oddly heavy in my mouth. I take a stumbling step, but my legs feel weak and I fall on my ass.

Tsunade slipped me a narcotic. The bitch. Why would she do that?

"Even if I betray the village and heal Orochimaru?" her words from a week ago echo through my mind.

"Fucking 'ell," I mumble, stumbling over the words. I'm having a hard time keeping my eyes open.

What do I do? What do I, damn it!

I can't counter a narcotic. But maybe, just maybe... I unseal my small bag of pills and swallow a soldier pill. Hopefully, it will make the effect of the narcotic pass faster.

My eyes fall closed and I fall to the side. Everything goes black.

---

Kabuto

He follows Orochimaru-sama as they speed through the forest on their way to meeting Tsunade. To be honest, he hopes she refuses. It will be so much more satisfying for him to persuade her to heal his master.

Orochimaru-sama speaks up. "It might be problematic if we were interrupted during the negotiations..."

"What do you suggest, Orochimaru-sama?" Kabuto asks.

Orochimaru's eyes shift to him, a small, cruel smirk playing around his mouth. "You can kill Tsunade's attendant."

Kabuto draws his kunai and speeds off, an identical smirk on his face now, too. Tsunade's attendant showed such insolence during their first meeting, after all. Killing her will be a pleasure.

The first place he looks for her is the hotel she and Tsunade had been staying in.

It is not Shizune he finds there.

---

Naruto

He pokes the sleeping Shizune. "Oi," he says, and when nothing happens, he repeats it louder. "Oi!"

Shizune shoots up, startling him. "Oh no! What time is it? No, what day of the week is it?!" she asks frantically, panicking.

And she had seemed so calm and nice earlier. "Monday," he answers, hoping she won't freak out any further. At least she isn't throwing needles at him. "Why?"

"You body's feeling okay already?" Shizune asks, looking at him weird. "You should have slept for two days, you were so exhausted."
That makes him grin. He unwraps the bandages around his hands and shows her the healed skin. "I only need a night of sleep to recover from most injuries, dattebayo!"

It's one of those things that make him awesome. Ri-chan always takes longer to recover. Which always makes him wish he could do that awesome healing stuff she can do, but he doesn't know how, and Ri-chan said he'd need perfect chakra control for it, and those control exercises are sooo boring and annoying.

He'll just get stronger so he can protect her and then she won't get hurt anymore!

"More importantly, where's the old hag?" he asks. "Today's the deadline for the bet!"

"Then you were successful in learning the Rasengan?" Shizune asks him.

He balls his fists. "It's not complete yet, but I'll get it right when I show her!" he yells determinedly.

And then the old hag can heal the bastard and they can all be a team again, and Ri-chan won't be sad anymore. 'cause even though she tries to hide it, he's her best friend and of course he'd know when she's unhappy. Silly Ri-chan, thinking she can fool his eyes!

It's one of those fundamental truths in life. The sky's blue, ramen is awesome and Ri-chan is his friend. And he always knows when she's sad.

Shizune makes a weird face and jumps up. "Naruto-kun, stay here!" she yells and runs to the window, throwing it open. "Huh?" he asks.

Shizune's so weird.

He jumps up when he sees something whiz past her face – a kunai! Someone is attacking Shizune!

"You are-" Shizune starts. Naruto runs over to her and rips the window open wider. "Who is it?" he shouts, standing in front of Shizune, 'cause even if she's weird, she's a nice lady, so he's gotta protect her.

"Shizune-" Ero-Sennin gasps, looking as sick as Ri-chan did when he last saw her, but Ero-Sennin said she's okay now and he knows she was there at his training ground, so he knows Ri-chan is fine now. Ero-Sennin isn't, though.

"Damn that Tsunade," Ero-Sennin gasps while Shizune checks him over – she can do that healing stuff too! "She put drugs in my sake. I can't mold chakra well, and my whole body is numb. Can't even throw kunai."

"You're so uncool!" Naruto shouts. "You're always bragging how great you are and going on about the shinobi taboos! But then you go drink sake and do stuff with women and now you're poisoned! Did she get you with a perverted trick, you stupid perverted sage?"

"cause really, that's so lame, dattebayo! He'd never fall for those tricks! He's the future Hokage, believe it!

"Shut up!" Ero-Sennin yells back, but Naruto doesn't back down, 'cause he knows he's right, he always is. "Tsunade is still a medical specialist, regardless of her current state. Only she could make a tasteless, odourless drug that works against other ninja... I didn't expect her to poison me, even if I was slightly drunk."

Shizune gives Ero-Sennin some water that he greedily gulps down. "Jiraiya-sama, how are you
"feeling?" she asks. Really, she's too nice to that old idiot.

"Better. Thank you, Shizune," the old guy answers. "But then, I've only recovered to about thirty percent so far."

Naruto grits his teeth. That stupid old hag, what's she playing at? Kuso, no one explains anything to him! If only Ri-chan were here-

"Oi!" Naruto suddenly jumps up. "We gotta get Ri-chan! She's with the old hag, isn't she? What if she got poisoned, too?"

"No, no, Naruto-kun!" Shizune jumps up as well. "Tsunade-sama wouldn't do that! Besides, Riko-san probably hasn't even woken up yet, she tends to sleep in. She wouldn't have been in Tsunade-sama's way, so she should be alright."

Huh? Ri-chan sleeping in? Nah, that can't be right. Ri-chan almost always gets up early.

"Hey, Shizune," Ero-Sennin says, before he can tell them that.

"Yes?"

"You're going to tell me what you guys talked about with Orochimarunow," Ero-Sennin says with a dark look on his face.

Naruto starts. "Orochimaru?" he asks. That name again. The guy that killed Jiji. Ri-chan said he was the creepy guy they fought in the Forest of Death. The one with the long-ass tongue.

Shizune looks like she's going to cry. "I wanted to believe in Tsunade-sama, that's why I didn't say anything. But-" she stands up. "we have to hurry now. Please follow me! I will explain while we move!"

"Alright," Ero-Sennin says.

"I'll go too!" Naruto yells quickly 'cause he's not gonna be left behind! "But Ri-chan! We've got to tell her, too!"

"Riko-san was very sick until recently," Shizune admonishes. "The last thing she needs is a fight."

Naruto backs down. His best friend won't be happy about it, but if it's better for her... he's just gotta fight for both of them!

They arrive at the meeting place, but the old hag and Orochimaru are nowhere to be seen. And the whole place is devastated. A deep crater is in the middle of the road, so wide, even the buildings nearby have crumbled.

"What the hell?" Naruto asks, shocked.

"Whoa... looks like Tsunade-hime's gone pretty wild!" Ero-Sennin says appreciatively.

"Where did they go?" Naruto asks. Somehow, he's got a bad feeling about all this. Especially since he's here without Ri-chan. He looks around for a clue to Tsunade's whereabouts and steps straight onto her jacket.

The pet pig sniffs the jacket. "Tonton, which way?" Shizune asks.
So Tonton's a ninja pig! That's kind of weird and kind of cool. Toads are cooler though, dattebayo.

"Buuuuuh!" the pig squeals and takes off with them following close behind.

They arrive just in time to throw a smoke bomb between Tsunade and the guy about to stab her.

"Jiraiya!" the old hag gasps out.

"It's been a long time, Jiraiya," a man with long black hair standing a small distance away says. Next to him on the ground, covered in snakes, lies-

"Ri-chan!" Naruto yells. He's ignored. "Give her back!"

"Ahh, I can't do that. She is already mine," The man says, smiling and licking his lips.

Naruto growls. That's bullshit! Ri-chan is *his* friend! And she belongs to Team Seven! Not to this bastard with his evil smirk.

"You look evil as always, Orochimaru," Ero-Sennin says before Naruto can say anything more, and why won't anyone help Ri-chan? What did they do to her? He looks to his companions and his gaze catches on the guy that had been attacking the old hag – silver hair, glasses...

"Ahhhh!" he shouts in surprise. "Kabuto-san?"

"So you know him," Ero-Sennin states, just before he's shoved away by the Tsunade-baachan as she attacks Kabuto-san, who slits his wrist and sprays blood all over her. Tsunade freezes, a horrified expression on her face. Kabuto punches her and she falls back, only to be caught by Shizune.

"Hey, hey, what's going on?" Naruto yells, because he can't process this, he has no idea what's happening. "Why's Kabuto fighting Tsunade?! And what does that bastard want with Ri-chan?"

Kabuto's a Konoha ninja, right? He even tried to help them before the first test, and he was really nice those few days they had to wait in the tower for the preliminaries. So why is he attacking the old hag who is also a Konoha ninja?

"You are so thick, Naruto-kun," Kabuto says with a weird grin, and Naruto flinches. He hates being called stupid. "That's why you will never measure up to Riko-san or Sasuke-kun."

He jolts. What's his deal with Ri-chan and Sasuke-teme?

"Look at his hitae-ate!" Ero-Sennin speaks up. He does. Huh? That's the symbol of- "He's one of Orochimaru's subordinates!"

"That's right," Kabuto says. "I'm a spy for the Sound."

Naruto is at a loss for words. Spy? No, that can't be right! "Y-you're lying, Kabuto-san," he says shakily.

"Naruto-kun, I have concluded something from your data," Kabuto continues, his voice now cruel. "You have no talent in becoming a shinobi."

Naruto starts. Then he balls his fists and grits his teeth. Too often he's heard those words, but they aren't true, he *knows* he can be a good ninja! He's gonna be Hokage, dattebayo!

*Tsunade-baachan... Ri-chan... I'm going to save you!*
"Even if you put that scary face on, you're just a cute little genin that's out of place," Kabuto drones. "It's true, we expected something from the monster inside you. But next to the Legendary Sannin, you are worthless. You're like a small bug, and if you interfere, I'll-" he gives a smug, triumphant grin. "kill you."

"Why you!" Naruto screams and starts to run at him, Ero-Sennin shouting something after him, but before he can take more than three steps, something crashes into Kabuto, throwing him ten metres away. In his place stands-

"Ri-chan? You're okay!" Naruto grins and runs to her side. "Listen, we gotta-

Her hand strikes out and he's suddenly flying backwards, landing hard on the ground. He shakes his head, what happened just now? Because he thinks Ri-chan just hit him, but that can't be, Ri-chan never hurts him, she's always nice to him! Except when she's throwing stuff at him, but that's different!

"Don't get in my way, Naruto!" she growls, not even looking at him. And he knows that that isn't Ri-chan, because she called him 'Naruto', and Ri-chan never does that, she always calls him 'Ruto' which gives him that warm fuzzy feeling in his chest every time he hears it, no matter how many years she's called him that.

And she never has that expression on her face, that mean, hate-filled look she fixes Kabuto-the-traitor with, the same as Sasuke right before-

And what are those burning things on her skin? Damn it, what's happening?

"Hello, Riko-san," Kabuto says, getting off the ground and dusting himself off, righting his glasses. "It has been a while."

"You are dead," she answers, her voice ice-cold.

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**Riko – minutes earlier**

The moment I wake up, I know something is wrong. The last thing I remember is Tsunade leaving me drugged in our hotel. So why is there grass underneath me?

My instincts are screaming at me to get up and run away as fast as I can. I don't listen to them. I hear the sounds of fighting and Tsunade's voice yelling, so I force myself to stay.

"Ahh, Riko, my dear. I see you have woken up."

The voice coming from next to me is familiar and it fills me with rage. But before I can get to my feet and attack that bastard, he hisses "Sen'ei jashu!" and I'm ensnared by whispering snakes. I struggle against them, but it's no use.

The Curse Mark burns against my skin and I hiss in pain.

"Are you enjoying my little gift? A pity it was sealed, don't you think so?" Orochimaru asks me in a conversational tone.

"Go to hell!" I growl, glaring up at him, powerless.

"I can give you all the power you can imagine," Orochimaru echoes the curse's whispers. "Together, nothing could stop us. Anything you desire will be yours."
Take the offer. He will make us great... the Cursed Seal hisses.

"Never!" I hiss, the hatred burning hot in my veins. I try to mold chakra or magic or something so I can kill the fucking bastard, but the snakes seem to seal not only my movements but my chakra as well. And I can't feel the magic, either. I glare up at him as if I could set him on fire with my eyes.

He looks down at me, frowning. "That is regrettable, but you will come with me today in any case."


A smirk curls around his lips. "Be quiet now, my dear," He flicks his fingers and the snakes' hold on me tightens. I gasp in pain, struggling to breathe. Orochimaru turns to look at whoever is fighting.

I don't think I can get out of this without help. But from the sounds of it, everyone is occupied.

~Caught!~ a snake hisses.

~Smells good!~ another pipes up.

~Tasty!~

They slither around me, their flickering tongues tasting my skin.

~Just a tiny bite...~ one whispers in a wistful tone.

I chance a look up at Orochimaru. He isn't paying attention.

I don't think he understands the snakes' whispers. I'm pretty sure these are lesser summons that aren't capable of human speech, their intelligence seems too limited for that, just like with the big snake in the Forest of Death. But back then, it understood my words, so maybe... maybe I can speak the snake language. It isn't that unusual, after all. The Inuzuka understand dog's language and the Aburame communicate with their bugs all the time.

It's worth a try, anyway. All I need is a little room to move.

~Let me go.~ I whisper to them. I chance another look at Orochimaru. He shows no reaction. So what sounded like normal speech to me must have blended into the snake's hisses to him.

I suppress an unhinged giggle.

Kami, this has got to be the most insane thing I have ever done, trying to escape from right under the Snake Sannin's nose by negotiating with snakes.

The snakes still just a little.

~It talks!~

~It talked to us!~

~How can it talk?~

I whisper: ~Oh great serpents, my family has served your kind for generations. It is an honour to behold your greatness.~

~It really does talk!~ one snake exclaims.
~It respects us!~
~As it should!~

A snake's head slithers around to hover before my face. ~Greetings, speaker-child.~

~I am honoured, oh scaly one.~ I hiss back. ~I have long heard of you greatness, but the stories pale in the face of reality.~

The snakes appear flattered. They start to hiss about the snakes' greatness and how they are never respected as they should be, but I'm distracted because I hear Naruto's voice, and then I hear Kabuto talking too and I'm going to kill him.

~Oh great serpent, please let me go so that I may spread word of your greatness among my people.~ I hiss.

~It wants to leave!~ a snake hisses.

~But it cannot!~

~We want to keep it!~

Great, now a couple of idiot snakes want me as their pet. I don't have time for this!

I let my body go limp.

~What is wrong with it?~ they hiss.

~Don't die, speaker-child!~ they tell me in panicked tones.

~I can't breathe.~ I whisper weakly. ~Loosen your grip, oh great ones. Then I will be better.~

~Do as it says!~

And just like that, I have room to move and access to chakra again. I speed through handseals and my body dissolves into water, sliding straight out of the snake's grips. A moment later, I stand again and shunshin into Naruto's direction, just in time to hear Kabuto's words to Naruto: "I'll kill you."

And the hatred and rage explode in me.

I see Naruto lay motionless while Sasuke is attacked by Orochimaru.

I see Fumio's death flash before my eyes.

I see Sasuke's closed eye.

I feel the burn spread over my body, feel it making me cold inside. Feel the power it gives me. I crash into Kabuto, throwing him backwards. I distantly notice Naruto running up to me hear his voice say something, but a kunai whizzes towards us, so I shove him away.

"Don't get in my way, Naruto," I growl.

Nothing matters but killing Kabuto.

"Hello, Riko-san," Kabuto says, getting off the ground and dusting himself off, righting his glasses. "It has been a while."
"You are dead," I hiss, my voice ice-cold. I feel the burning marks settle on my skin and I run at Kabuto, trying to hit him, punch him, scratch him. But the bastard is fast, smirking while he evades me and deals attacks of his own that I ignore. I'm too strong to be bothered by his pathetic attacks.

A part of me knows I'm completely out of control. A part of me screams at me that I need to stop, that I'm turning into a monster, but I don't care. I feel amazing. No one will stand in my way now.

To kill Kabuto, I will gladly become a monster. More than anything, I want to see his blood, crush his bones, burn his corpse! Tear him limb from limb, make him scream in pain for what he did to Fumio-

"What would your friend Fumio say if he saw you like this?" a voice echoes through my mind. And for just a moment I freeze. It's enough of an opening for Kabuto to punch me in the face. I fly backwards, but I still don't feel any pain, only that cold fire in me that makes me so strong.

I get to my feet, smirking. "Was that all?" I ask, forming handseals, but then suddenly pain – why is there pain? - blooms across my face and I fall backwards, but someone grabs the front of my shirt and holds me upright.

"Give me back Ri-chan!" Naruto yells at me. His blue eyes glare at me in anger, but behind the anger, there is fear, and that is so, so wrong, he shouldn't be looking at me like that, oh god, what have I done-

I clutch at my neck, whimpering in pain as I try to force the curse to recede, but it doesn't want to, it's like it's put tiny hooks into my skin and I'm ripping them out with every millimetre I gain, and it's the hardest thing I've ever done, because I don't want to lose that feeling of being strong and not scared. "Ruto," I whimper, staring into his eyes, because he's my anchor to reality and sunshine and warmth and good things.

I fall to my knees, exhausted, when I have finally forced the curse back. It feels like it took hours, but it can't have been more than a few seconds, because Kabuto is still where he was before, like everyone else. Naruto grabs me and jumps, putting me down next to a shivering, unresponsive Tsunade.

"Ruto, I'm so sorry," I whisper, shivering, feeling cold and empty now that the power has left me.

Naruto gives me a grin and a thumbs up. "Ri-chan, I'm gonna protect you. So you just sit here and get better, alright?"

Kami, I don't deserve his friendship. He's a million times too good for me.

"Okay," I whisper. Naruto takes his jacket off and throws it over my shivering form. It feels warm.

"Shizune, you fight the guy with the glasses," I hear Jiraiya say in the background. "I'll fight Orochimaru. But before that, I need Tsunade to do something about the drugs in my body."

So I'm not the only one that got drugged. Good to know. Though I doubt Tsunade used the same poisons on us. What knocked out a Sannin and causes him problems even now would probably have been lethal for my small form.

"The effects of the drug will most likely last for a while," Shizune answers. "Even I can't do anything about it."

"What?" Jiraiya yells and calms himself down immediately. "Fine. I guess I'll have to fight like this."
Thank God Orochimaru isn't in a good condition either and can't use his arms. Otherwise, we'd be completely screwed.

"What about me?" Naruto asks.

"You guard Tsunade, Riko and the pig."

Naruto nods. Under different circumstances, he'd probably insisted on fighting. Now he just pulls a kunai and takes position in front of Tsunade and me while Jiraiya and Shizune step forwards.

Damn it, I hate being weak.

Jiraiya bites his thumb and speeds through seals. I see Kabuto taking blood from Orochimaru and do handseals too.

"Kuchiyose no Jutsu!" they yell and slam their hands on the ground simultaneously.

Shit, I think as I take in the two giant snakes opposite us, Orochimaru and Kabuto standing on one of the heads.

Double shit, when I see the tiny toad that Jiraiya's technique produced. Jiraiya's and Naruto's horror-stricken faces would have been amusing in a different situation.

"Looks like you're still the same idiot I remember," Orochimaru drawls, smirking. "I know you have no talent, but that? Looks like Tsunade did something to you."

"Then I'll-" Naruto yells and bites his own thumb. "Kuchiyose no Jutsu!"

I facepalm when the smoke dissipates to reveal another tiny toad. Man, I think my normal bad luck with techniques has finally spilled over and started to affect the people around me, too. I wish I could turn that into a weapon.

Orochimaru says something else, and then, lightning fast, the two snakes attack and Naruto and I leap away, Shizune grabbing Tsunade and fleeing in another direction. Below us, the two snakes' heads bore themselves into the ground, rocks and debris exploding around them.

Looks like I won't be able to stand back and let Naruto handle everything.

"Ri-chan! You okay?" Naruto yells over the noise.

"Fine!" I shout back, scanning our surroundings. "Don't worry about- oh shit!"

A giant snake's head emerges from the dust cloud below us and before we can even do anything, its jaws close around us.

"Water Chain Jutsu!" I scream desperately, the silver glowing chains forming and wrapping around Naruto and me, keeping us from falling down the snake's esophagus. We get thrown around horribly as something on the outside impacts the snake and it shakes its head wildly, but I don't let go.

"Kage Bunshin no Jutsu!" Naruto yells, and the space gets filled up with Naruto copies that form clone chains connected to the cavernous walls of the snake's maw and keep us from swinging around wildly. They dispel, just like my chains, when our surroundings are jarred, like the snake's head slammed onto the ground. Naruto grabs my hand and we hastily scramble upwards to where a sliver of light is visible. Naruto somehow forces the snake's jaws open wide enough for us to climb through and escape to the ground. But the snake isn't quite done with us. Its giant head slams into us and
flings us into the air. I scream Naruto's name as I'm catapulted over a large rock while Naruto is smashed into it. I slam into the ground and scramble back to my feet, running back where I just came from, because I'm not going to be so pathetic anymore, I'm going to get my shit together and fight. I jump over the rock and land next to Naruto's motionless form. I breathe a sigh of relief when I feel his pulse beat strong under my fingers, but there's no time to heal him. Shizune's going to be killed by Kabuto if I don't do something, and Tsunade seems to be rendered helpless by fear.

But Kabuto is strong, I realise that now. Jounin or even elite jounin level, much stronger than me for sure. I can't fight him while still dealing with the aftereffects of the curse, protecting Shizune and without help...

I take Naruto's jacket off and throw it over him, then I bite my thumb and form the handseals. "Kuchiyose no Jutsu!" I yell and slam my palm to the ground. The blue rabbit appears.

"What do you want again?" it asks me, annoyed. "I was just about to-"

"I don't want to know!" I growl. "I need help protecting those two women from that guy with the glasses!"

The rabbit huffs. "Well, I hope you don't expect me to solve all your problems from now on. And really-"

"Screw you," I say and take off, unsealing my sword. I flash right next to Tsunade and swing it against Kabuto before he can touch her.

So what if he's stronger than me? I'm a Nara.

With all this curse and invasion business, I'd almost forgotten who I am.

Kabuto leaps backwards, smirks and rights his glasses. "You fight on the wrong side, Riko-san. You cannot beat me."

I laugh. It feels so good to be me again. "And whatever made you think I'd switch sides? You're the traitor, not me."

Kabuto grits his teeth. His hands start to glow blue. Chakra scalpels. Best not to get hit with that. I swing my sword as he leaps towards me and keep him at a distance, but he's damn fast and I still have Tsunade to protect. And I'm not at my best, still exhausted and cold from forcing the curse back.

After a minute of fighting, Kabuto jumps back and dives behind a rock. I frown. What's he planning?

Too late, I leap backwards as he surges up from the earth, glowing hands striking at my chest, but a blur of blue slams into him and his hand only brushes my torso, causing a searing pain, and he still gets my leg. It instantly gives out beneath me when I land. I drop to my knees, coughing.

"Sheesh, there was no need to be rude," The blue rabbit says to me, waving its now gauntlet-encased paw. "I'm Kyuuri."

"Riko," I croak, kneeling on the ground. Damn Kabuto cut my muscle. I can't stand up and I can't breathe right. "Thanks for the save."

"Eh." The rabbit Kyuuri shrugs. "You better give me a few days off after this."
"As if a no-name summon like that could save you," Kabuto drones, smirking again. "You're not going to win!" he runs at us and Kyuuri speeds through handseals.

"Earth Release: Stone Guard Creation!" he shouts and slams his paws on the ground. A multitude of stone rabbits rises from the ground, all of them launching themselves like small bombs at Kabuto who jumps back and hastily defends himself, cutting through the rabbits with his scalpels, but some still hit him. Those rabbits are damn fast and agile.

"Take that, you asshole!" Kyuuri shouts, shaking his paws at Kabuto. Then he makes a paw seal. "Earth Release: Rabbit Bomb!"

The remaining rabbits explode around Kabuto who stumbles out of the ensuing dust cloud and falls down, his glasses cracked.

Okay. That was seriously awesome. Might not be such a bad summon, after all.

"Not bad," I say appreciatively.

"And don't you forget it!" Kyuuri says, dusting off his fur. "Sheesh, I'll need at least three days of copulating to recover from this. Don't you dare call me!" And with that, he dismisses himself.

I feel my eyebrow twitch. Stupid, rude rabbit!

A kick slams into me and I'm thrown into Tsunade. "To think I'd be forced to use my regeneration against a mere genin..." Kabuto says, standing over me, not a scratch on his skin.

Regeneration. Of course he had to have regeneration.

I force myself into a kneeling position by using my sword as a crutch, covering Tsunade as good as I can. Senbon fly from my free hand, but Kabuto deflects them all with an irritated expression. "I'm getting tired of you!" he yells and pulls his fist back to launch a punch that is sure to knock me out.

It never connects. Naruto is suddenly in front of me and Tsunade, Kabuto's fist caught on his hitaeate. Naruto doesn't even waver, even though his blood drips down on the ground. "Cut it out, you bastard! You aren't touching them!" he growls in that dangerous voice that only ever comes out when someone he loves is threatened. "I'm going to end this!" he yells, gathering chakra in his hand and forming it into a rasengan. He throws himself forward to slam it into Kabuto, but the bastard evades and cuts into Naruto's leg like he did mine, and he falls down just like me.

Kabuto is too fast, Naruto and I are injured and I can hardly stand up or even breathe, plus I'm pretty much out of chakra. Damn curse.

The odds are seriously against us. I hunch over and cough. Blood sprays on my hand. Damn it, I won't be able to keep going much longer.

Kabuto starts droning on again about how Naruto is never going to amount to anything as a ninja, how he could never be Hokage. While the arrogant ass blathers on, he starts beating and kicking Naruto with that cruel expression on his face and I can't do a fucking thing, it's all I can manage to stay upright. Still, I gather channel into my sword that I have stabbed into the ground so I can cling to it and not fall over. It starts to hum and glow.

Kabuto frowns as Naruto forces himself to his feet again in front of us, slowly and painfully, his blue eyes dark with determination.
"W-Why?" Tsunade asks shakily. "Why is he getting up again?"

"Tsunade-baachan," Naruto says, hands forming a familiar handseal. "I'm going to take that necklace that you promised me." One shadow clone pops into existence next to him.

"F-for my sake..." Tsunade murmurs, shell-shocked.

"Ri-chan, watch my back," Naruto tells me.

"Troublesome, Ruto," I reply weakly, gripping my sword tightly.

Kabuto grabs a kunai and storms toward Naruto. "For that insolence, I'll kill you!" he shouts.

Tsunade screams: "Stop it! Run! Get out of the way, Naruto, Riko! You're going to die!"

"Nah," I say. "Water Chain Sword."

The silvery glowing water chains burst from the ground below Kabuto, wrapping around his legs and holding him in place. It took me some time and all my leftover chakra, but I managed to direct the chains from my sword through the earth. Naruto catches Kabuto's hand, blood spraying over him as Kabuto's kunai stabs through his hand. He doesn't even flinch.

"Until I become Hokage, I refuse to die!" he declares, so certain and sure of himself, his light and determination shining so brightly, I feel like a fool for ever doubting him, for ever thinking I had to protect him.

Naruto is so strong.

"You won't be able to escape this one..." Naruto says, holding out his free hand. My eyes widen when the clone starts forming a rasengan in it, this one looking absolutely perfect.

"Amazing..." I whisper.

"Rasengan!" Naruto shouts, slamming the glowing sphere of spinning chakra into Kabuto, and the force destroys my chains, but that's alright, I have no chakra left anyway. Coughing up more blood, I stay hunched over my sword, blearily watching as Kabuto gets blasted backwards straight into a boulder. I can't imagine him getting up after that kind of attack.

"Did it..." I mumble tiredly. "Damn it, didn't want to black out again..." my grip on my sword loosens and the ground comes closer, and then I fall onto it and everything goes black.

Chapter End Notes

Long chapter... Hmm, Ri was unconscious three times in this one if you count the chapters beginning, that's got to be some kind of record. Well, I suppose it's better than her dying (again)...

On a side note, 'Kyuuri' is Japanese for 'cucumber'. I decided to give all the rabbits vegetable names.
When I finally come to, I'm hanging on Jiraiya's back, and for a moment, I think we're still on the way to Tsunade. But then I see her walking slightly ahead of us with Shizune, Naruto telling her something that involves a lot of gesticulating and his bright Naruto-smile, and the memories of our fight come back.

"Finally awake, aren't you?" Jiraiya asks.

"Yep," I say. "How long was I out?"

"A few days. Tsunade kept you knocked out. Something about you not being able to take care of yourself."

"Nice," I say sarcastically. "I love being unconscious."

"How are you feeling?"

"Not bad," I answer. I grin to myself. I managed to control the curse! No doubt it'll be back soon enough, but hey! Small victories. "How long until we reach Konoha?" I ask.

"Only a few hours."

I smile. Home, finally. Tsunade will heal Kakashi and Sasuke, and I'll see my family again.

I'll probably get lectured. I just vanished for almost three weeks. Maybe I should have sent them a message. Though Gai probably told dad that I was accompanying Jiraiya and Naruto.

"Want to walk?"

"Can I?" I ask.

"Sure. Physically, you're fine."

That's the advantage of traveling with the best medic in the Elemental Nations, I suppose. When she isn't drugging me or knocking me out, anyway. "Then I'd like to walk."

The moment my feet touch the ground, I'm bowled over by Naruto who latches onto me. "Ri-chan! You're awake!"

I groan and hug him back. "You're so troublesome, Ruto."

He pulls back and grins down at me. "Heh. I missed you, Ri-chan!"

I smile back. I missed myself, too. "I'm right here, Ruto."

We arrive in Konoha after a few hours where Naruto and I immediately get ditched by the adults who want to go see the elders.

"Damn it!" Naruto yells. "She's supposed to help Kakashi-sensei and Sasuke-teme! I'm going after her!" And with that, he takes off.

I sigh exasperatedly, looking up at the clouds. Then I follow after him at a slower pace, walking
through the familiar streets. The damages of the invasion have been repaired, but traces are still visible. But it looks like Konoha again.

"Is you taking off for weeks without a word now becoming a thing, Ri?" a voice says behind me and the next moment, I've turned around and hugged Shikamaru, breathing in his familiar scent.

He puts his arms around me. "Troublesome girl," he mutters, and I feel something uncoil in my chest. I'm home.

I hear a low chuckle above me and then a hand ruffles my hair. "My cute little brats," Dad's voice says and I let go of Shika and jump up, throw my arms around dad's neck and bury my face in his shoulder, blinking away a few tears when he puts his arms around me and hugs me back tightly. I feel like that little girl I used to be, back when everything was alright and my days were spent training for the Academy and playing shogi.

I blink away a few tears. "Missed you, Dad," I whisper.

"Missed you, too, Riko-chan," he murmurs back. "Next time, send us a message. We were worried."

I nod. But I'm going to do my damnedest to avoid a 'next time'.

Dad lets go of me and scans me from head to toe. "You look well," he says, and I know he's not just talking about me being physically fine for once. I feel lighter, better, healthy. It's the combination of Naruto's company, the high from having won against the curse, the happiness at seeing my family and the hope that Tsunade will heal Sasuke and Kakashi.

I smile at him and Shika. "I'm glad to be home."

"Where were you anyways?" Shika asks me, a hint of reproach in his voice. I pretend not to hear it as I answer: "Helping convince the new Hokage to actually take the job."

"New Hokage, eh?" Dad muses. "I guess we should go to the Hokage Tower then."

"Who is it, anyway?" Shika mutters as we fall in step next to each other.

"Someone troublesome," I murmur back. "I'll tell you all about it later. Everything."

"You better."

At the tower, Naruto has already found Tsunade when we arrive. Dad immediately greets her and they start making small talk about the deer and medicine and whatnot while Shika and I join Naruto.

"Who's that young woman?" Shika asks with a suspicious look at Tsunade.

"Hmm? That's the new Hokage," Naruto answers distractedly. "And she's really fifty years old!"

Shikamaru's dumbfounded face makes me laugh. He hits my shoulder, grumbling 'troublesome' at me. I poke him in the side in retaliation.

"Well, I'm sure I'll see you later," Tsunade says a little louder to dad and starts walking away. "Take care of your girl there, no training for her for the rest of the week. And after that, only if I've cleared her."

I sigh. I messed my chakra system up again while fighting Kabuto. But Tsunade said I should be fine if I listen to her advice for once, so I'll deal with it. I could use a break anyway,
"What did you do this time, Ri?" Shika asks.

I shrug. "This and that."

"Oi Shikamaru!" Naruto throws over his shoulder as he runs after Tsunade. "Let's meet up later! I'll show you my cool new jutsu!"

Jiraiya hits him. "What kind of ninja shows off his jutsu, you idiot?" he scolds as they follow Tsunade. I stare after them.

"Go already," Dad says. "Tsunade is going to heal your teammates now, isn't she?"

I look back at him. "I'll be back for dinner, alright?"

"Troublesome girl," Shikamaru mutters. "Don't be late."

I smile at them and run after Naruto and company. "No promises!"

The hospital. I smile wistfully. The last time I was here, I was trying to talk to Fumio about the Rookie Alliance.

None of us became chunin in the end. Damn invasion screwed everything up.

We walk inside. A few questions to the receptionist later and we are moving along the corridors to Sasuke's room.

I'm nervous. I've wanted so badly to find Tsunade so she can heal him, and now that it's happening, it doesn't feel real. It feels as though something horrible is going to happen just to keep Tsunade from healing Sasuke because fate kind of hates us and good things rarely happen just like that. Not with the combined bad luck of Team Seven's members.

My heart starts beating harder the closer we get to where we were told Sasuke's room is. Unlike Naruto who gets more excited with every step he takes, I get more nervous. I wipe my sweaty hands on my clothes and swallow when we are finally in front of his door.

Tsunade just walks in, but for me, crossing the threshold seems like a monumental step.

I stare at Sasuke's motionless form in the hospital bed. It's like a punch in the gut, seeing him like this, all alone in this empty room. At least there are some flowers in a small vase which means someone cared that he was here.

I feel guilty for not being there for him. Even if I had to come with Jiraiya to bring Tsunade back, I hated myself for leaving Sasuke here alone. His face is so pale and drawn. It makes me want to cry, seeing him here so vulnerable and helpless.

Tsunade steps closer to him and puts her already glowing hand on his forehead, closing her eyes in concentration.

_Come on, Sasuke. Wake up, please!_

I grab Naruto's hand and squeeze it, unable to take my eyes of Sasuke's face. Naruto squeezes back.

Sasuke stirs. My breath hitches as he grimaces and then slowly opens his eye. I stumble closer, letting go of Naruto's hand as Sasuke mechanically sits up and then just stares at the blanket before him. I reach a hand out to touch him, to verify he's really there, but it falls back limply to my side –
I'm too scared that he'll slap it away, that he'll hate me, that he won't be my Sasuke anymore.

"Well, let's leave him alone for now," Tsunade says and I look up at her helplessly.

"That's right! You gotta help Kakashi-sensei next!" Naruto says loudly, grabbing her and dragging her after him. "Come on, Baachan!"

I move to stumble after him mindlessly, but a pale hand shoots out and snatches my wrist, keeping me in place. I hear them leave, but I'm frozen, staring at Sasuke who is still staring at the blanket in front of him with that dead look, his hand on my pulse. I feel myself tearing up, but I can't cry, I need to be strong. "Sasuke," I whisper brokenly. Distantly, I hear the others leave us alone.

I move slowly to sit at his bedside. He never shows a reaction except a tightening of his grip when I move. "I'm not leaving," I murmur reassuringly. His grip doesn't loosen.

We sit there in silence. It's uncomfortable. I can't take my eyes off of him and he won't look at me, he won't even move. "Do you want to hear about my Epic Summoning Fail?" I ask. He doesn't answer. "I'll take that as a yes. And I suppose it wasn't a total fail in the end, Kyuuri turned out to be kickass in the end, for all his faults. See, my dad gave me this contract..." I babble on mindlessly about my summon, just to fill the silence. Sasuke never reacts.

"Just so you know, I expect you to get a flying summon now so I can fly around with it," I finish. Soon, the silence starts pressing down on us again.

"Keep talking." My head snaps up at hearing Sasuke's almost inaudible voice, sounding so exhausted and tired. I keep the relieved smile that wants to steal itself on my face down.

"I won a bag full of money when I went gambling with Tsunade. See, these scumbags wanted to seduce me into gambling – which they succeeded at now that I think about it – anyway it made me mad so... yeah I agreed to play with them..."

I tell Sasuke stories for hours, not even stopping when my throat starts to hurt. I only tell him about happy and stupid things: Pranks Naruto and I pulled, about that time when Shikamaru and I found out where our parents hid the alcohol, how mom and I trained infiltration by transforming into the other and ended up scaring Shika to death... anything I can think off that doesn't have bad things in it. At some point, I crawl onto the bed and lean against Sasuke's pillows since my arm that was held out to Sasuke was starting to hurt. I look at Sasuke. His eyes have slipped closed and his breaths have deepened, but I kept talking, hoping it would make him dream of happier things than whatever Itachi made him see.

A soft knock sounds on the door and I look up. A nurse enters.

"Sakura?" I ask in surprise. She starts.

"Riko? What are you doing here?"

"Ruto and I only got back to the village today," I answer softly. "We were looking for Tsunade-sama with Jiraiya-sama, so she could come and heal Sasuke and Kakashi-sensei."

"Yeah, I heard," Sakura murmurs, now more quiet and apparently remembering that I'm one of the few girls that didn't chase after Sasuke in the Academy and therefore not an immediate threat to her love life. "Tsunade-sama is amazing, isn't she?" She sounds wistful as she says this.

I nod. "Did you bring Sasuke those flowers?"
She nods defensively. "So what of it?"

I shrug. "Thanks. I'm glad he wasn't alone."

This startles her.

"So you're a nurse now?" I switch the subject.

"Yes, I want to become a medical ninja," She says, determination shining in her eyes. "I think I could be good at it."

I think so, too. But is she doing this because of Fumio or for herself? Time will tell, I guess. And it's not like I have room to judge. After all, I wanted to become chunin for Fumio.

"Anyways, visiting hours are over, so..." Sakura fidgets awkwardly. "You should probably go."

I look at the clock, surprised. Damn, I lost track of time. If I hurry, I might only be a few minutes late for dinner. "Right, I'm going," I say, carefully extracting my wrist from Sasuke's grip. "Uh, see you later?" I ask.

She gives me a small smile. "Yeah, sure."

It's odd. She's so different from the girl I used to beat up in taijutsu classes for being mean to Naruto. She has grown, as a ninja and as a person. We never really got along, but now, after the invasion, after facing Gaara together... Academy grudges hardly matter anymore.

"Hey..." I say hesitantly. "I'm sorry about Fumio."

It's the first time I've ever said this to anyone. I know it's not my fault he died, at least not completely, but it feels like it is.

Sakura looks a little taken aback. "Uhm, yeah. Thank you," she answers.

*This is so awkward.*

"Anyway, thanks again for being there for Sasuke," I say hastily. "Bye."

I jump out of the window without waiting for her reply.

I walk into the kitchen and immediately have to dodge mom's butcher knife. To be fair, she didn't throw it at me but at dad who ducked under it. It just happened to fly in my direction just as I came in.

"I can always come back later," I say, looking at the knife now embedded into the wall.

"Don't leave me alone with these troublesome people," Shikamaru orders. The urgency of this statement is destroyed by the fact that he currently looks half asleep with his head on his arms.

"Riko!" Mom says. I quickly move towards her to hug her, breathing in her familiar mom-scent.

"Hey Mom," I murmur. "I'm home."

"Welcome back," She says and pushes me to sit down. "You need to eat. You look half starved. What were you thinking, running off after your injuries from the invasion only just healed? Really, and you got yourself injured again right after, not just once, but twice. If you were allowed to train,
I'd be pulling out my whip right now, young lady!" She continues chewing me out while she puts
food on the table. I grin fondly when her back is turned. It's so good to be home.
Dad kicks me under the table when she turns back around and I quickly hide my grin. Mom looks at
us suspiciously. I give her an appropriately contrite look. "I'm really sorry, Mom. I won't do it
again?" I say, doing my best impression of Naruto's sad puppy look. I'm not as good as he is, but
mom's look still softens.
"You need to be more careful with yourself," she says sternly. "Now eat."
And that's that. Shika stares at me jealously. 'Not fair,' he mouths. I give him a smug grin in return.
'Ninja,' I mouth back, pointing at myself. He rolls his eyes. 'Troublesome,' he tells me silently.
Home, sweet home.
After dinner, I drag Shikamaru to the tree we used to watch the deer from back when we were kids.
From the distance, I see Rikumaru and his herd. I give him a wave. I could swear he nodded back at
me.
"So," Shika states.
"So," I reply awkwardly, fidgeting.
"Talk," he orders.
"Right..." I murmur. Where to start? "So. Back in the Forest of Death, we were attacked by this
Grass ninja, you know the one Anko-sensei threw a kunai at, the one with the tongue? Yeah
anyway, I almost got eaten by a snake, but I have this weird power, well it's sort of like a kekkei
genkai... anyway..."
"So basically, you got your ass kicked and cursed by whatever S-ranked missing-nin you ran
across," Shikamaru sums up my stammering. Seriously, I can't tell stories to save my life. I pretty
much told him everything backwards. "And you aren't exactly from the Country of Birds."
"You knew that already," I say.
He gives me a deadpan look. "I didn't think it was quite so extreme."
That's one of the many awesome things about Shikamaru. I never have to say anything outright, I
can just say something and he'll piece the rest together. I didn't tell him tell him I was from a different
dimension. He figured it out himself from what I didn't say, which was a lot. To think he'd actually
reach the right conclusion…
It'll be harder with Naruto and Sasuke. But the parts about where I'm really from I can't tell them
while we're in a village full of ninja. Well, maybe in the Clan Forest. The risk of being overheard is
minimal there. But I'd rather wait a little more. Sasuke has enough crap to deal with and I'd rather tell
both of them at once. That shit is hard to talk about.
"And you didn't tell me this earlier because...?" Shika asks, an eyebrow raised.
"I don't know?" I say.
"Try again."


'There was never a right time?' I ask.

'Not good enough.'

'Because I'm a troublesome idiot and should have trusted you more?' I try.

He nods. 'That's better.'

I laugh. It comes out more as a sob, though. I'm so relieved that I finally told someone.

'Come here, you troublesome girl,' Shikamaru grumbles and opens his arms. I crawl over and snuggle up to him. He puts his arms around me. 'Welcome back, Ri,' he says. 'Don't leave again.'

The next day, I get up early. I plan to go to the hospital when visiting hours start, so what I want to do will have to be earlier than that.

I walk into Yamanaka Flowers.

'Welcome to- Riko-chan!' Ino greets me from behind the counter. 'You're back!' She vaults over the counter and hugs me. 'Where've you been?'

I shrug. 'Road trip with Naruto and Jiraiya-sama. We went looking for Tsunade-sama.'

'Yes, I saw her yesterday!' Ino tells me. 'Is it true that she healed Sasuke-kun?'

I nod. 'He's awake now. I doubt he's completely healed, though. Anyway, is your father here somewhere?' I ask.

'Uh, he was in the back, last I checked,' Ino answers me, surprised. 'Why?'

'I just have something I want to ask him.'

'Hang on, I'll take you to him,' Ino says, hanging a small 'Back in five minutes' sign on the door of the shop. Then she leads me through the back of the shop. 'Daddy, Riko-chan is here to see you!' she calls out. 'Daddy?'

'I heard you,' Inoichi says from behind us and Ino shrieks and whirls around.

'Don't do that!' she yells and huffs embarrassed. I grin.

'Hi, Inoichi-san,' I greet. 'I need your advice on some stuff.'

Inoichi raises his eyebrows and tells me to follow him. Ino shoots me a curious look and returns to the shop.

'What can I help you with, Riko-chan?' Inoichi asks me when we sit down in a small sitting room.

I pull down my collar. 'This,' I say, baring the Curse Mark at him. 'I need your help.'

I walk into Sasuke's hospital room after knocking on the door. He doesn't even look up when I enter. I sigh and arrange the flowers I brought – a pretty bouquet of jasmine branches that Ino had ready for me when I left Yamanaka Flowers – in a vase. Another bouquet of red roses from Ino is put into another.
Oh Ino, I think exasperatedly. Red roses stand for love.

Jasmine means 'friendly and graceful', if I remember correctly. I like that meaning of my name.

"Here, I brought you some reading material. Don't worry, it's not Icha Icha," I say, dropping some scrolls and books on the night stand next to the bed. "Though I'd let you borrow my copy if you're interested…"

Sasuke snatches my wrist and pulls me onto the bed. How does he do that? He wasn't even looking at me and still caught my arm.

I sigh and lean against him. "I wanted to bring a shogi board, but I have a splitting headache, so no playing for me," I mumble.

To say Inoichi was extremely concerned about me hearing the curse's voice would be an understatement. He immediately made me sit down and performed his mind reading jutsu on me, though this time I passed out instead of living any of what he saw. Guess he worked on that after what happened with me.

"You are going to come here every day, mornings and evenings," he ordered after lecturing me for taking so long to ask for help. "I'll teach you to defend your mind. For now, I've put some blocks into your mind, but they won't hold long."

Hence the headache. But the blocks work, I haven't felt this much like myself in a while.

Sasuke leans over me to grab a scroll. "Sleep," he orders me.

"No, it's okay-" I protest, sitting up, but Sasuke pushes me down again and glares at me, so I give in. I don't want to upset him, I'd be kicked out of the hospital if that happened. "Alright," I mutter. "But don't think I'll give you any of the tomatoes in my bag."

Sasuke snorts, which I decide to take as a sign of him recovering. I nestle down in the pillows and close my eyes. "Missed you like crazy," I whisper. I feel him squeeze my arm once and smile slightly. "I'm glad you're back."

I wake up when I feel someone shaking my shoulder. "What is it?" I ask, sitting up and stretching. I haven't slept that deeply since before the Chunin Exams.

"Ri-chan, you gotta explain some stuff," Naruto – when did he get here? – tells me seriously. Sasuke has a similar look in his eyes. I bet those two talked while I was asleep. It says something about how much I trust them that I didn't wake up from even that.

I sigh. "I know."

Silence.

"Well?" Sasuke asks, sounding annoyed at actually having to talk.

"Are you being an idiot again and thinking we won't be friends anymore like in Wave?" Naruto asks. "Cause that would be stupid, dattebayo."

"That's not it," I say and sigh again. "I can't exactly talk about it here." I cast a look around the hospital room.

"When," Sasuke demands.
"Next time we're out of the village," I say. "Promise." I hold out a pinkie finger to Naruto and Sasuke each. Naruto's face immediately brightens and he hooks his in mine. Then we both stare expectantly at Sasuke who is eyeing my hand like something poisonous.

"You gotta hook your pinkie in, bastard!" Naruto explains, holding up our joined hands. "Like this!"

"You're not getting out of this," I say. "Unless you don't want me to tell you…"

I could swear I heard Sasuke growl when he finally hooks his finger into mine and then lets go as if my hand is on fire. I laugh. "Don't worry, I don't think anyone besides us saw you doing something uncool like a pinkie swear!"

"Pinkie swears aren't uncool!" Naruto protests. "They can't be broken, ever!"

I grin. "Exactly."

"So, bastard, when're you getting out of here? They're letting Kakashi-sensei out later today, so we can have team training again!"

_Oops. I forgot to visit Kakashi._

Sasuke returns to glaring.

"We don't exactly know…" I say. "They said something about keeping him here for 'observation'."

As if he was some sort of study object. Those people suck. Technically, Sasuke could leave today, he's healthy enough. But because of his status as the last Uchiha… well.

Naruto looks disappointed.

"Hey, don't look like that." I smile at him. "He's only stuck another two days at most. And it's not like we could do much in team training anyways. Tsunade banned me from training for the week, remember? And Sasuke will have to take it easy, too."

"You could still come!"

He's right. Team training isn't about training, it's about the team. I make a quick decision. "Alright. Team training tomorrow at our usual place. Don't be late."

"But the bastard's in the hospital, Ri-chan."

"Team training tomorrow," I repeat. "Mandatory for all members."

"Eh? But."

Both Sasuke and Naruto look confused now. I grin at them. Then I grab Sasuke's hand and drag him after me off the bed. "Come on. If Kakashi can leave, so can you. Ruto, think you can henge a clone into Sasuke?"

Naruto's confused face is replaced by a beaming mischievous grin. Sasuke stares at me incredulously.

"We're breaking you out," I explain, the thrill of pranking making me grin excitedly. Naruto makes a clone that immediately transforms into Sasuke. "Come on!" I drag the real Sasuke with me out of the door. "See you tomorrow, Ruto!"
"Later, Ri-chan, bastard!" Naruto calls after us and then strikes up a one-sided conversation with the very sullen acting fake Sasuke.

"Where are we going?" the real Sasuke asks unenthusiastically as he lets himself be dragged through the corridors by me, sounding like he'd rather be doing anything but this.

"I forgot to visit Kakashi, so that's where we're going." I grin at him. "Come on, be happy! You're getting out of the hospital!"

"Hn."

I actually have no idea which room Kakashi's is, so we have to open a few doors along the corridor – I figure he must be at least on the same floor since he and Sasuke suffered from the same damage. Sasuke doesn't look as if he's enjoying sneaking around and evading the nurses as much as I do, but I doubt he'd rather lie around in his hospital bed by himself. And if he really wanted to, he could leave.

"Hey Kakashi-sensei!" I chirp when we finally find the right door. "Are you sneaking out, too?"

Kakashi is standing suspiciously close to the open window when he should probably be in bed. He gives us his eye-smile. "Maa, Riko-chan, you are a bad influence on Sasuke."

I giggle. "Mandatory team training tomorrow, don't be too late."

His eye curves even more. "Understood," he says and vanishes in a whirl of wind and leaves.

"Well, that was a short visit," I state.

"We're leaving. Now," Sasuke orders. I inwardly smile at his use of the word 'we'.

"Alright!"

We end up at Sasuke's house. Sasuke's looking a little exhausted now, so I make him sit down while I cook a late lunch. There isn't really any edible food left in his fridge, but I find some conserved goods, and with the tomatoes in my bag, I can make a decent meal. I'm a pretty good cook, thanks to mom.

We eat in silence. Sasuke looks deep in thought, so I don't break the silence. After lunch, we do the dishes together, still not really talking.

"Why can't you train?" Sasuke asks eventually when we're done.

"Messed up my chakra system," I answer. "Should be fine in a few days though. Until then, I'm not allowed to use chakra. Tsunade-sama threatened to put chakra seals on me if I didn't listen."

"So taijutsu is fine?" he wants to know.

"Light exercise is alright. Not sure how she defines light exercise, though… she is a Sannin after all," I grin. "Think you're up for a spar?"

Sasuke smirks. What do you think, Ri? His eyes say.

He turns around and leads me through a few rooms and then outside. Behind the house, there's a training field, with targets for kunai and ninjutsu, boulders and trees, wires spanned between them indicating traps. There are some craters and rubble where Sasuke obviously practiced fire jutsu and chidori.
"We're taking it easy, though," I caution. "I really want to avoid getting my chakra sealed by Tsunade."

"Hn," Sasuke answers and falls into a fighting stance. I do, too, but I don't wait long to leap forward and aim a light jab at a pressure point on his shoulder, but he merely shifts his stance slightly so I miss my target. He grabs my arm and traps it against his body, then he twists and I'm thrown to the ground, but I manage to sweep his legs while I fall, and then we're both rolling on the ground, punching and kicking and fighting to get up while trying to keep the other down. Unfortunately for me, I'm at a disadvantage since Sasuke is physically stronger and heavier, so soon enough I end up lying on my back with my arms trapped and Sasuke sitting on my chest. I buck and try to throw him off, but Sasuke merely shifts his hold and now I've lost because his hand is at my throat and his face is inches from mine, and I stare up into his eye, feel his breath on my skin, and my heart is beating way too hard. Wait, is his face coming closer?

Some bird – a hawk maybe – screams above us and we both flinch. Sasuke leaps off of me and backs a few steps away. I jump up and take a few steps backwards too, my heart still beating too hard. Somehow, I feel oddly disappointed.

Sasuke clears his throat. "You alright?" he asks.

"Yeah," I answer. "Fine."

There's an awkward pause. I have no idea what to say. What the heck just happened? "Right, uh..." I say. "It's getting late, so... I have an appointment later..."

I might as well go to Inoichi early.

"Right." Sasuke looks away, frowning. I curse myself. Maybe I shouldn't have gotten him out of the hospital. There at least he wouldn't have been completely alone, he'd have had people close by. Here though he is completely isolated.

"I could come back later?" I offer hesitantly. "It'll be late, though."

Sasuke looks back at me. Then he nods curtly.

"Right, I'll be going then," I say. "See you later, and don't overdo it if you decide to train."

Normally, developing the kind of mental defences you need would take you months, sometimes years of meditation," Inoichi explains to me, fixing me with a penetrating stare. "However, you don't have that much time available. So we will be doing this differently."

I'm starting to get an ominous feeling. Still, if this will help me not lose control anymore, than I'm up for anything.

"I will be entering your mind, and we will work on your defences there. It won't be pleasant for you. You'll see things you'd rather keep hidden and you might learn things about yourself you might not have wanted to know. If you can't deal with that, say so now. This kind of training is risky."

"I can do this," I answer determinedly. Tanzaku-Gai was a wake-up call. I've got to learn to deal with this curse.

"Very well," Inoichi says and steps behind me. He places his hand on my head. "Ready?"

"Yes."
Chakra seeps into my head, and then our surroundings blur away.

I look around. I'm standing in the middles of what looks like a garbage dump. Heaps of objects tower over me. There's a pile of books, a heap of weapons, some of them broken. A mountain of paintings. A pile of doors and windows, made from all kinds of materials. And – oh god. Three bodies, lined up. The two men I killed in Wave country. The nameless shinobi I killed during the invasion. I hastily look away, swallowing hard.

I guess things like that were what Inoichi meant when he warned me about this training.

Between the mountains of things, buildings stand, some of them ruins, most of them looking horribly neglected. There's a ruin of the Dursleys' house in Privet Drive. In the distance, a building that I think is the Shinobi Academy. A ruin I don't recognise.

The ground is covered in murky water, the entire place shrouded in mist.

*So this is my mindscape. I'd imagined it to be more glamorous.*

I hear splashing steps behind me and turn around. It's Inoichi walking towards me. He casts an appraising glance around.

"Well, we have a lot of work to do."

---

I walk into Sasuke's house with stumbling steps. My head hurts, a deep, throbbing kind of pain.

I let myself into the house with the key Sasuke gave me. It's dark inside. Inoichi and I were in my mind for hours, sorting through heaps of rubbish and memories. Inoichi showed me how to construct doors and rooms where I can hide things behind. The first thing I put away were those bodies.

We barely made a dent, though. There's just so much to sort through, and what we saw today was only the beginning, according to Inoichi. The real issues, the deeper memories we haven't even found today.

I guess I should be thankful for that. My current headache is bad enough as it is.

"Ri," Sasuke's voice says and the light flickers on. He isn't wearing his henge and his one eye studies me carefully. He looks like he was already in bed.

"Hey," I answer. "Hope it's not too late."

*It's not,* his eye says. He studies me. *What happened?*

Inoichi's training happened, but I don't say that. Instead, I shake my head and walk over to him slowly. Before my eye flashes the memory of our confrontation with his brother. Of him, controlled by hatred so much that he was barely recognisable. Of that dead look in his eyes afterwards. Of him helpless in the hospital bed.

I stop just before him and lean my head against his shoulder, putting my arms around him. He stiffens, but then he puts his arms around me too. "Can I stay with you tonight?" I whisper.

I feel him hesitate, but then he nods. He leads me through the house and up some stairs into a room.

I look around curiously. *This is where Sasuke lives.*

The room is large, with one wall made of glass, a glass door leading onto a large balcony. Wall
scrolls hang on the wall, a cozy looking armchair stands in a corner. There's a small shelf with books and a TV. I smile slightly when I see our team photo framed on top of it.

Sasuke drags me to the large bed that stands against the wall, placed so that the one lying in it can easily see the room's door and the windows. For once, it's me that's refusing to let go of him.

Inoichi's training dragged up some memories that make me want to never, ever let go of Sasuke. I know it's irrational, but it feels as if he'll disappear the moment I let go of him, so I don't. It's not like he can protest, that would make him a hypocrite.

I kick off my shoes and slide into bed next to Sasuke. I feel him put an arm around me and draw me closer to him, not quite hugging me, but close. "Goodnight, Sasuke," I murmur.

"Goodnight."

I have to get up early the next day for my next appointment with Inoichi, but I leave a note for the still sleeping Sasuke after carefully extricating myself from his hold that shifted into a full-on hug sometime during the night.

It was kind of nice to wake up like that... I shake the thought off and go downstairs where I help myself to some breakfast, making sure to leave some food for Sasuke as well. He must have gotten some groceries during the time I wasn't here yesterday.

After mind-training at Inoichi's house, I go to our team's usual training ground. The headache this time isn't that bad, Inoichi figured we should take it easy in the mornings so I won't be too bad off during the day. Evenings will be harder, though.

Naruto and Sasuke are already there when I arrive, Sasuke staring broodingly into the river and Naruto hopping around on the water, apparently trying to catch fish with his bare hands, for some unfathomable reason. I grin as I sneak up on them. Then I jump onto the railing of the bridge and launch some senbon at them. Naruto yelps, trips and falls face-first into the water. Sasuke manages to barely avoid the projectiles.

"Really, Ri?" he asks, and I laugh, because I love my team so much and I have missed this.

"Really," I answer. Naruto gets out of the water, sputtering and cursing. He points at me.

"I'm gonna get you back for that, Ri-chan!" he shouts, and I laugh even more.

Then I flee into the forest, because he's making the Kage Bunshin seal, and I really don't want to be glomped by dozens of dripping wet Narutos. And while I turn to run, I see the ghost of a smile on Sasuke's face.

The week passes. Early mornings and late evenings are spent with Inoichi in my mindscape, trying to sort through everything and construct some defences. After that we have team trainings where I can only watch due to being banned from training. Afternoons, I hang out with my team or Shikamaru and his team – I haven't played shogi against him in forever. I have backlog demands.

Shikamaru and I are in the middle of a shogi match on our porch when a chunin – I recognise Kotetsu's partner – arrives and tells us to accompany him to the Hokage's Office. We exchange a confused look, get up and follow him.

When we enter Tsunade's office, we can immediately tell that something important is going down.
Several jounin and chunin are lined up along the wall, among them Morino Ibiki, Mitarashi Anko, Genma, Asuma and Kakashi. Our guide joins Kotetsu who is there too.

Given this particular selection of people, I'm guessing this has something to do with the Chunin Exams.

Shikamaru and I stand in front of Tsunade who is fixing us with a very serious look. I resist the urge to fidget or say something Naruto-like such as: 'What's wrong, Baachan?'

"To tell you the truth, I have no idea what to do," Tsunade begins. "There were some opinions that there should be no promotions this time since the final exam was interrupted." She pauses, letting us reach our own conclusions.

My heart starts beating faster at the word 'promotions'. Are Shikamaru and I going to be promoted? Fierce hope rises up in me. Fumio… I think wistfully.

"However, I have heard that the Sandaime Hokage was extremely impressed with both of your fights, so much so, he considered recommending you for chunin status. All of the feudal lords watching, as well as the examiners, agree with this," Tsunade continues. Wild hope surges up in me. I will have some peace of mind over Fumio's death.

"Nara Shikamaru," Tsunade announces. "In your case, there isn't anything more to say about it. Keep up the hard work and do not bring disgrace to Konohagakure. Congratulations. From this day on, you are a chunin."

I don't listen while Shikamaru unenthusiastically mumbles his thanks.

What did Tsunade mean, 'in your case'? Is my case different? Shit, what is it this time?

"Nara Riko." Tsunade focuses her eyes on me now. "Your case is different. According to the reports, you have excelled in every test the examiners threw at you, and your strength is well above genin level. You even formed an alliance with other teams. Your performance has shown that you have every quality we look for in our chunin." She pauses and I swallow. I sense a 'but' coming.

"But I cannot, in good conscience, promote you just yet," Tsunade continues. My heart drops. "And that is because you have now repeatedly relinquished control to the Cursed Seal. I'm sorry, but we cannot give the responsibility of leading a team to someone who is not fully in control of her mental and emotional faculties."

I want to cry, because I know she is right, I can't be trusted. I want to scream and rage because it is so unfair that Orochimaru ruined this, too, for me, because he's even ruining what I wanted to do for Fumio. I know I'd be a good chunin!

"I underst-" I start, but Tsunade interrupts me.

"However… We must consider that there were extenuating circumstances in all the cases you did use the seal – be it to protect your friends or to defend against opponents far stronger than you. And I did see you fight the seal's influence successfully in Tanzaku-Gai. Yamanaka Inoichi also reported to me that you are making quick progress in learning to defend your mind against its influence."

I stare at her, not daring to hope. I wished she would get to the point and just tell me the decision she made.

"Our decision is as follows," Tsunade finally says after another pause. "Nara Riko, you will not be
made chunin today. Instead, tomorrow, you will undergo a test of our choosing and we shall see if you are ready for promotion or not. That is, if you accept this proposition."

I'm speechless. I didn't see any of this coming. I thought no one was getting promoted because of the invasion. Then the promotion is already in my grasp, and I have to prove myself yet again. And this time, I have absolutely no idea what kind of crap will be thrown my way. I have no idea what to prepare for.

This might become harder than the tests of the actual exams. It definitely won't be a normal test considering I'm still not cleared to use chakra.

"I'll do it," I say. "I'll prove to you that I'm ready."
"Our decision is as follows," Tsunade finally says. "Nara Riko, you will not be made chunin today. Instead, tomorrow, you will undergo a test of our choosing and we shall see if you are ready for promotion or not. That is, if you accept this proposition."

"I'll do it," I answer. "I'll prove to you that I'm ready."

How do I always end up in these situations? I ask myself as I let myself be led somewhere blindfolded by Kotetsu. I think we're walking through some corridor, judging by the quality of sound. But really, all I know for sure is that we're in some sort of building that is either underground or has really good air conditioning.

I want to ask Kotetsu where we are, where we are going and whether the test will be painful, but I don't because it would make me look like a scaredy cat. And if I want to be chunin, I have to act like one. So I walk after Kotetsu stoically, senses stretched to the max.

At least Tsunade cleared me for chakra use this morning, though I'm not allowed to overdo it. But then, I doubt I'll need A-ranked techniques for this test, I've already proven my fighting abilities. No, I'm certain will be tested will involve the Cursed Seal, since that is what's preventing them from simply promoting me in the first place.

Yippie. Curse business.

So troublesome.

Kotetsu stops moving. "Here we a- argh!" His voice cuts off and I try to rip the blindfold off of my face but a sharp pain zings through my neck and I fall.

When I come to, I'm alone. I'm lying in a corridor by myself, cold white light from the ceiling lamps illuminating my surroundings. On the floor, bloody tracks indicate that Kotetsu was dragged away by force.

I hate my life.

What do I do? I can't feel any chakras around, but I'm not the best of sensors, so I might be missing something. If I call for help, I'll alert the enemy that I'm conscious. I can't run and look for someone else to help because Kotetsu has been taken and time might be limited for him. I'm on my own.

Why did they – whoever it was - take Kotetsu and leave me? Maybe because he, being a chunin, has more information? But then, why leave me alive?

This whole thing doesn't add up at all. What the hell is going on?

Regardless, I have someone to save. So I follow the bloody tracks hurriedly, not bothering with stealth. There is only this one corridor to follow and no way to hide. And whoever the enemy is, they already know I'm here, even if they might not know I'm conscious again.

Senbon are in one of my hands and my sword is carried on my back ready to be used. I feel the Curse Mark throb, but like Inoichi taught me, I focus on what mental defences I have and the throbbing stops. My mind stays clear and focused as I noiselessly move along the corridor until I
reach a junction where the hallway splits in three different paths, all looking the exact same with their white walls and floors and the cold white light. I follow the one the bloody tracks lead into.

The blood is still fresh and red. Not much time has passed since the ground was bled on. It gives me hope that Kotetsu will still be alive when I find him.

I turn a corner and stand in front of a door that stands slightly ajar. The bloody tracks lead inside. I steel myself, taking a deep breath. I place a genjutsu on myself to shift awareness off of me, though it won't fool anyone for long, and press the door open. I swiftly step inside and-

**Blood.** So much blood. It's everywhere, the metallic scent overwhelming.

The remains of what used to be a person – or maybe several persons, there's so much *oh god please no!* – are distributed over the large room, formerly white walls and floor died red. My eyes start to sting and my senbon clatter to the floor, making a clinging sound that echoes in the silence. I stumble inside, closer, I can't help myself as I stare at the heap of body parts. Even though I want to run, I approach them, unable to control my steps. I'm distantly aware that my breath comes much too fast and makes me lightheaded, but it doesn't matter.

When I move forward, I step on something. I look down.

It's a necklace. Mechanically, I bend down and pick it up, letting the stone on its end dangle in front of my face, hypnotised by the way it catches the light despite being stained with blood. It seems familiar. I've seen it before.

A brief memory of Tsunade bending over my to heal me in Tanzaku-Gai flashes through my head. Her breasts were right in front of my face and between them, this necklace hung. This is the necklace that she gave to N-

*No. Nonononono. It can't be-

"Hello, Riko-san," a friendly voice says behind me, and I whirl around. Behind me stands Kabuto, the white light reflected off his glasses so that I cannot see his eyes *what's he doing here kill him kill him kill him*- 

"Naruto-kun fought well. But it wasn't enough in the end."

A guttural scream tears itself out of my throat as I lunge forward, attacking Kabuto with my bare hands. He evades me easily but I don't stop, stopping means thinking and *no no no!*

"Too weak, Riko-san," He smirks, righting his glasses. "Perhaps I will see to your brother next."

A glowing hand hits me and I fall down on the bloody ground. I stare up at him, snarling.

"But then, you have power, don't you? All you have to do is let go."

The Curse Mark burns, promising power and vengeance. A part of me screams at me that it's wrong to use it. I shake my head, to shake off the curse's influence or quiet that voice, I don't know. Kabuto kicks me in the midsection and I catapulted backwards, sliding on the slippery ground, coughing.

"Pathetic," Kabuto sneers, leisurely pulling out a scalpel and strolling toward me and I decide enough is enough. Let's see if some curse-reinforced chains won't take care of this bastard who hurt-

On the ground next to me, green-blue light twinkles. *The necklace. It must have fallen out of my hand when I attacked.*
"Give me back Ri-chan!" Naruto's voice echoes in my head. I stare at the necklace, focus on the way it catches the cold white light and turns it into something beautiful. Something tugs at the edge of my mind.

The Mark ceases to throb and I stand up, the necklace in my hand. I put it over my head and stare at Kabuto. "I won't," I say. "It's wrong. I'll fight with my own power. I don't need some curse's help."

"Oh?" Kabuto smirks, lifting the scalpel in his hand. "I do not believe you. You will succumb to the temptation." And with that, he runs at me.

I don't move as he plunges the scalpel into my shoulder. It passes through me, followed by Kabuto. "What?!" he exclaims.

I turn to him. "You aren't real," I say softly. "None of this is."

He lowers the scalpel and drops his fighting stance. "So you saw through it," he replies.

"This was the test, wasn't it? To see if I'd lose control again. In reality, I'm lying in a hospital bed with some genjutsu masters around me and Inoichi's hand on my head."

"How did you know?"

"The necklace," I explain. "It's reflecting the light even though it's covered in blood. Also," I smirk. "Kabuto wouldn't be in that good shape if he'd really fought against Naruto."

Fake-Kabuto smiles, and makes a handseal. "Well done," he says and my surroundings blur into darkness.

I open my eyes. I am indeed lying on a hospital bed. Tsunade is there with Shizune right by her side. Also present are Morino Ibiki, Mitarashi Anko and Izumo and Kotetsu – I can't help but breathe a sigh of relief at the sight of Kotetsu. Next to me stands Inoichi, a calming hand on my shoulder. Kakashi is on my other side, righting his hitae-ate – he must have been the one to place me under the genjutsu.

"Just to remind you," Inoichi says, "you agreed to this test, so you aren't allowed to hit any of us."

I glare up at him, not saying anything.

"Nara Riko," Tsunade says, ignoring my anger. "You pass the test. From now on, you are a chunin of Konoha."

My breath leaves me in a burst.

Chunin. I did it.

I give all of them a tight nod, then I get up and walk out. I should probably have said something along the lines of 'thanks, I'll do my best' but I'm too angry about the cruel test they put me through to do anything but not scream at them.

I go to the cenotaph and sit down in front of it. I sigh, letting go of my anger.

"I hope you're happy now," I say, looking at Fumio's name. "Sorry I didn't bring any cake."

I lean back, looking up at the clouds. The sun warms my face. Do I feel more at peace now that I
reached this goal I set for myself? Fumio is still dead and my life is still a mess.

But the fact that I finally did something to pay Fumio back for sacrificing himself for me makes me feel a little better.

Someone lands next to me. I tilt my head and look up at Kakashi. He's looking at the cenotaph, his head respectfully inclined. Finally, he lifts his head.

"An odd place to celebrate, Riko-chan," he muses.

"I don't feel like celebrating."

Kakashi inclines his head in acknowledgment. "You will have to, though. As your sensei, I'm treating you to a celebratory dinner."


Kakashi gives me his eye-smile. "Of course. You might also be interested to hear that you will still stay with Team Seven."

I start. "They could have taken me off the team?" I ask, horrified. I never even contemplated the possibility.

"But they haven't. You're young and inexperienced, so you're staying with us to learn from me and learn to lead a team."

I sigh in relief. Leaving Team Seven would have been a catastrophe. At least this once, disaster avoided me.

"Do you think I'm ready to be a chunin, Kakashi-sensei?" I ask. "Because against the opponents I've had lately, I was completely helpless."

Kakashi rests his hand on my head, eye-smiling down at me. "You'll make a fine chunin, Riko-chan."

I smile back at him. "Okay then."

"So you passed, Ri?" Shika's voice drawls when I get home.

"What gave it away?" I ask sarcastically. "The flak jacket?"

Kakashi gave it to me before he left, presumably to tell Naruto and Sasuke about team dinner.

"How was it?" Shika asks.

"Troublesome," I reply. "Aren't you glad you aren't the only chunin?"

Shika smirks. "I am. Imagine being the only one. They'd have made me do everything."

I giggle. "That would have been fun to see. Wanna play shogi?"

"Sure."

And that's how we, Konoha's newest chunin, spend the rest of the afternoon.
Naruto is already there when I arrive at Ichiraku's. I run up to him and draw him into the tightest hug I can manage, burying my face in the collar of his jumpsuit. He hugs me back immediately. "Ri-chan?" he asks. "What's wrong?"

I release him. "Nothing," I say softly, taking in his orange clad form, the spiky blond hair and his blue eyes. The necklace around his neck. "I just felt like hugging you."

"You're weird, dattebayo," Naruto says and grins. Then his eyes widen and he points at my jacket. "Is that-?!"

I grin and nod. "I got promoted."

"Whoah! Ri-chan, that's awesome, dattebayo! Damn, now you're ahead of me!" He laughs. "We gotta fight sometime!"

I grin too, getting infected by his enthusiasm. "Now you've got to listen to me when I tell you to do something!"

**Fat chance of that happening...**

Naruto beams a proud grin at me. "You're awesome, Ri-chan!"

"You're chunin?" Sasuke asks from behind me and I turn around. The look in his eyes is unreadable. It doesn't seem too happy.

A brief memory flashes through my head, of him and me before the Chunin Exams, his self-loathing because he thought he hadn't been nominated, because he felt powerless. I guess it's the same thing now. Maybe even worse because I was actually made chunin while he wasn't.

I step up to him and hug him. "You'd have made a better one," I whisper into his ear. Then I step back, smiling at my two teammates. "Look at it like this: No more D-class missions. And with both Kakashi and me on the team, we'll get even higher-ranking missions. Now who wants ramen? Kakashi-sensei's treat."

"Yatta!" Naruto shouts enthusiastically, the tension dispersing. He punches his fist into the air and runs into Ichiraku's.

I look at Sasuke. "You didn't get promoted only because your match against Gaara was interrupted by the invasion. Look at the bright side, you get to go on chunin missions while still receiving training from a jounin sensei without having to worry about any extra responsibilities." I grab his hand. "Now come on, we've got ramen waiting for us. If we hurry, we can eat our fill and then run and leave Kakashi with the bill once he shows up."

"Kuchiyose no Jutsu!" I shout the day after in our family training ground and slam my hand down. It was way past time that I trained with my summons.

A lime green rabbit appears. Unlike Kyuuri who is about half as tall as me when he stands upright, this one is small even for a rabbit. It's ridiculously cute, too, with its floppy ears that peak out from under a helmet, its black kimono with a lightning bolt sewn onto his back and the running shoes that match its gloves.

The rabbit looks at me, shrieks and faints.

I facepalm.
The rabbit's eyes flutter. It is quite obviously awake, but apparently pretending to still be unconscious.

Why, oh why couldn't I get a normal contract? I ask myself. Out loud I say: "I know you are awake."

The rabbit shrieks again, jumps up, runs away and instantly smacks into a tree.

I facepalm again.

"So, this rabbit-summon got injured running headfirst into a tree," Inuzuka Hana states incredulously while she runs her glowing hands over the green rabbit. I brought it to Konoha's animal hospital.

"Yep," I say.

"That is so stupid," Hana deadpans. "A regular rabbit would be smarter."

"No kidding. My summons are nothing but trouble. The other one I've met so far only thinks about 'copulating'."

"Is that what they call it these days?" Hana asks, grinning.

"Not funny. At all," I grumble. "So, what's wrong with it?" I nod at the rabbit.

"He's only got a concussion. He'll wake up in a few hours," Hana explains. "Make sure he doesn't move around too much."

I nod and take the rabbit which now sports bandages around his head in place of its helmet. After a moment of contemplation, I place it on my head and focus some chakra to glue him to it. I like my arms free.

"Thanks, Hana," I say. She waves me off.

"No big deal. You wouldn't believe the fuss most people who come here make over their injured ninken." She shakes her head. "Or their pets. I swear, if Madame Shijimi shows up with Tora one more time, I'll personally-"

I never get to hear what Hana will do to the Fire Daimyo's wife and her pet when one of her co-workers calls her away in a rather panicked voice. Right on cue, a loud howl and screams are heard from the waiting room, followed by answering howls, barks, meows and bird's shrieks. It sounds as if a zoo got out of control.

"Damn it! Not again!" Hana shouts and sprints away, her ninken following. "I'm gonna kill those fuckers!"

I raise an eyebrow. And here I thought she had chosen a rather peaceful job for the normally so adventurous Inuzuka. Obviously, I was wrong.

I get up and move through the corridors of the animal hospital. Unlike the normal hospital, this place has wide corridors, lots of opened windows with little bird perches near them, and the walls and floors are made of wood, scratches and claw marks telling a history of animals passing through.

"Riko? What are you doing here?"
I turn around and grin. "Hi Kiba! Hey Akamaru-chan!" I greet them. Akamaru barks a greeting from his perch on Kiba's head.

"Is that a rabbit on your head?" Kiba asks, too weirded out to ask for a hug like he normally does. "A lime green rabbit? Is it a summon?"

"He ran into a tree. The tree won," I answer.

"That is so stupid," Kiba states. "A regular rabbit would be smarter."

I laugh.

"What?" Kiba asks.

I shake my head. "Nothing. I'll see you around, alright? I'm expected for dinner and mom might kill me if I'm late again."

Kiba shudders. He knows a thing or two about scary moms. "See ya, Riko. Hey, that bushy-eyebrows guy from Hinata's cousin's team has been asking around about you. Wants to fight you or something."

"What did you tell him?" I ask.

"Shino sent him to the old people's home. Why? Because he would have been troublesome to you," Kiba tells me in a sarcastic tone.

"Nice," I say appreciatively. "Those old folks will keep him busy for a while. Tell Shino thanks, will you?"

"Sure," Kiba says and then grins. "So, chunin?"

I smirk and brush some not existing dust of my flak jacket. "Shika, too."

"What! That lazy idiot?!" Kiba exclaims. "Damn it! Hey, come by for training some time. We gotta fight."

I shake my head at him. "You're so troublesome."

Kiba laughs. Then he waggles his eyebrows at me and spreads his arms. "Hug?" he asks hopefully.

"You're incorrigible," I state, rolling my eyes before shunshining away.

"There's a green rabbit summon on your head, Ri," Shikamaru says by way of a greeting when I arrive at home.

"He got a concussion," I answer. "I'll just put him up in my room, then I'll come down to dinner, alright?"

Shika shrugs. "Sure."

After the meal I walk up to my room and check on the troublesome rabbit, then I settle in for some studying and reading. A few hours later, I notice the rabbit stir. Considering the reactions he has had to me so far, I decide to pick him up to prevent him from running again. Hana said he shouldn't move around too much. Also, he might run into a wall.
The rabbit's eyes open. Again, he shrieks and tries to jump up, but I grab him by the scruff of his neck and hold him away from me while he squirms, trying to punch and kick at my hands. Damn, the little bugger is flexible.

"Help!" he shrieks. "I've been kidnapped! Help!"

I facepalm with my free hand. It's starting to become a common reaction to my summons. "I'm your summoner, you moron."

The rabbit stills. "Oh," he says.

"You have a concussion, so don't move around too much," I advise him.

Wrong thing to say. "You gave me a concussion?!!" the rabbit screams, starting to squirm again and crying for help.

"Wow," I state. "You're an idiot. You got the concussion when you ran against a tree!" I raise my voice over the shouting. The rabbit isn't even listening anymore at this point. "Fine," I hiss. "You brought this on yourself."

I gather a water orb in my hand and dump it over the rabbit. Sputtering, it stops shouting. "What was that for?!" he asks. "I'm injured! You can't do that to an invalid!"

I snort. "First of all, you got the concussion from running against a tree headfirst. Second, a little water will not make your concussion any worse, but your punching and kicking will. So stop that."

The rabbit sniffs haughtily. "Set me down, summoner," he orders, crossing his arms in front of his chest.

"My name's Riko."

"Set me down, Riko."

I roll my eyes and do as I am told. The moment I let go, he shoots off toward the door, but it doesn't open outwards. I lunge after him, but the rabbit starts zipping around my room, knocking over lamps and books and creating general chaos, all the while shouting: "You will never catch me alive!"

Damn if that rabbit isn't fast. Like, lightning fast. I guess that's what the lightning bolt on the back of its kimono means.

The rabbit cackles. "I am Flash Ninjin Seven! You shall never catch me!" he shouts and promptly trips over the cable of the lamp on my nightstand, sending it crashing to the ground. He himself nearly faceplants into the wall, but I manage to grab him before that happens.

He looks up at me. "Whoops?" he says weakly. Then he makes a big show of fluttering his eyelashes and pretending to faint. "...I feel weak..." he moans and lets his eyes fall shut.

I snort. "Hell, no. I'm not setting you down."

The rabbit's eyes open to glare at me.

"No," I say firmly. I pick up some wayward hair ties from the ground and tie him up with them. Then I set him down on the bed.

"This is kidnapping!" the rabbit protests. "I strongly protest this treatment!"
"So your name is Ninjin?" I ask. "You are the wrong colour for a carrot."

"My name is Flash Ninjin Seven!" The rabbit proclaims proudly, his ears perking up. "I am the fastest of the Rabbit Clan! I am the one who runs swiftly and silently! No one can catch me!"

"I just did," I point out. "What does the seven mean?"

"Oh. That." The green ears droop. "Ninjin's a popular name, 'cause we like carrots, so a lot of us have it. Number seven was free when I was born."

I stare at Ninjin. "I'm not even going to comment on that."

"But I'll be the greatest Ninjin!" he shouts, pointing at me. "I shall-"

A knock sounds on my door and dad enters. Ninjin shrieks once again and jumps up to hide behind me. How the hell did he free himself from the hairties?

"Hey Dad," I say. "I fully blame you for this."

Dad gives me a bemused look. "I heard screaming."

I reach behind me and hold up a struggling Ninjin. "Troublesome," I say, pointing at him.

Dad raises an eyebrow. "I see. Do try not to make too much noise. Your mother was quite annoyed."

I cringe. "Alright."

Dad gives me a smile. "Have fun then, Riko-chan." He ruffles my hair, both of us ignoring Ninjin's fearful whimpers, and then steps outside.

"You know," I say, looking at Ninjin. "If you want to leave so badly, you can always dismiss yourself."

Ninjin stares at me. "Oh," he says.

"So unless you want to stay and help me clean this mess up…"

The green rabbit disappears in a puff of smoke before I can even finish the sentence. I flop back onto my bed.

_I want a new summon._

"We have a mission tomorrow," Kakashi announces to me three days later. The boys already left after team practice.

I raise an eyebrow. "Already? I'd have thought they'd wait a little with sending us out, what with you and Sasuke having been in the hospital for so long. Not to mention my own health."

"Someone left me to pay for a week's worth of ramen."

"You said you were treating us," I argue.

"I said I was treating you."

I shrug. "Whoops. So, we're going on mission because you're broke? It doesn't have anything to do with the village's image after the invasion?"
"Exactly. You evil girl."

As if. Kakashi has been an elite jounin for ages which pays really well, plus he never spends too much money on himself which means he has a lot of savings. He's just messing around.

"So what kind of mission is it?" I ask.

Kakashi hands me a scroll. "Escort detail. Make sure you three meet the client tomorrow, the details are in the scroll."

I stare at him. "So, my chunin status makes me your errand girl now?"

He eye-smiles at me. "Smart girl. Here are your movie tickets," he says and disappears in a puff of smoke.

I groan. "I'm not even going to pretend that this makes any sense whatsoever," I mutter to myself as I make my way to follow after Naruto and Sasuke.

The following extra can actually be considered part of the main story and takes place during this chapter and the previous one, but I couldn't fit it in, so you guys get it in the form of a side-story instead. As always, thanks for your continued support, you are awesome.

Fun fact about Ninjin: His name means 'carrot', if you haven't guessed already. His character is based on the word 'scaredy cat', which exists in German, too, but if one translates the German word directly into English, it's 'scaredy rabbit' or 'scaredy hare'.

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**Side-story**

*In which Riko asks for advice, Shikamaru reveals his dark side and Naruto fears for his ramen.*

"Say, Mom," I start as we chop vegetables for this evening's dinner. "Hypothetically, if some guy suddenly kissed me with no warning, what should I do?"

That kiss Sasuke gave me has been on my mind a lot lately.

Mom's knife slams into the chopping board and part of the cucumber she was cutting goes flying. She doesn't pay it any attention as she turns toward me. "Who," she orders.

"Uhh…" I say intelligently.

"Punch him."

"Uhm…"

"And remind me to teach you the water whip."

"Hey, Ino-chan!" I greet as I walk into the flower shop after my lesson with Inoichi. "How have you been?"

"So bored!" Ino complains, raking a hand through her hair. "Nothing ever happens!"

"Aside from chunin exams, invasions and a new village leader?" I ask, raising an eyebrow.
"Aside from that," Ino says, nodding seriously. "How are you? Anything new?"

I shuffle my feet a little. If anyone would know what I should do, it would be Ino, right? All I need to do is avoid mentioning that it was Sasuke that kissed me.

"Say, Ino-chan… if a guy suddenly kissed you, what would you do?"

Ino shrieks first, then squeals. "You got kissed? By who? When? How was it? Why are you only telling me now?" She leaps over the counter and lands in front of me. Seeing the slightly manic look in her eyes, I start inching toward the door.

"Uh…"

"It was Naruto, wasn't it?" Ino says, a knowing glint in her eyes.

"What?!" I nearly shriek.

Naruto? Eww!

"Oh come on! I saw you two in Wave! I'm a Yamanaka, you can't fool my eyes."

A choked laugh at her unfortunate wording seems to cement her opinion.

"Don't deny it! You can't be that close and not have something more going on!"

"But, Ino-chan, Naruto and I-"

"Oh, you two are so cute together! Don't worry about the fact that your friendship will change if you go for it, friendship is a great base for a relationship!"

"But-" I protest, but Ino is on a roll.

"You should totally have slapped him after he kissed you. And then you should have kissed him. Trust me, I know about these things."

I flee out of the door. Is there no one sane I can get advice from?

---

I end up at a small tea house where I decide to eat some dango and drink tea.

"Hey!" a vaguely familiar voice exclaims. "You're the Nara brat!"

I look up. It's Mitarashi Anko, the proctor for the second test of the Chunin Exams.

_Hmm… maybe she could help me? Sometimes, a stranger's opinion is better than a friend's._

"So, how're you doing, snake bait?" Anko asks as she invites herself to sit with me and steals one of my dango.

I wince at the nickname. I really hope it doesn't stick.

"Say, if a guy suddenly kissed you with no warning, what would you do?"

"Ohhh…" Anko looks like a cat that's very much looking forward to eating a mouse. "First, punch him. And then leave. And after that, find out his habits, where he lives, where he works and then get him alone… in a dark alley…" she licks her lips and I start to inch away from her. "And then…" she giggles, playing with a kunai – when did she even pull that? "If he's hot, mmmh… oh yeah…" she licks her lips again, gaze unfocused. "But if he's not, well…" she twirls the kunai around.
I slap some money on the table and run. 

*Note to self: Stay far away from Anko.*

---

**Meanwhile:**

"Forehead, did you hear? Naruto kissed Riko-chan!"

"No way! Riko and Naruto?! That's so… are you sure?"

"Oh yes! She told me herself!"

"Told you what?" a lazy voice drawls.

"Hey, Shika! Riko-chan told me that Naruto kissed her!"


Ino hesitates. "That Naruto kissed her?" she asks, a little unsure.

"Told you what," Shika repeats.

"Uh… Naruto kissed Riko-chan?"

Shikamaru turns around and walks away with very controlled steps.

---

**Back with Riko:**

I kick a can away as I walk along the streets. At this rate, I'll never get any useful advice.

"Halt! Riko-san!" a voice shouts. Rock Lee drops down in front of me.

"I'm sorry, did you want something?" I ask, giving Lee a blank look.

"My hip rival!" he grins, teeth gleaming. "I have come for a rematch!"

"Sorry, busy," I say. "Don't you have another rival?"

"Neji-san is my Eternal Rival! But I have already fought him yesterday. I have been hoping for a youthful rematch since my loss in the Chunin Exams!"

"So… I'm the hip rival and Neji-san is the eternal one?"

"Yes!" Lee says, giving me a thumbs-up.

"So my rival status is only 'hip', not 'eternal'?" I ask hopefully.

Lee just laughs, apparently taking this as a joke.

Still, 'hip' is better than 'eternal'. Then again, both are 'troublesome'.

"Maybe later," I say. "I've got stuff to do right now."

And I disappear in a puff of smoke.
"Hey, Hanabi-chan…" I start after a training session with her – I missed spending time with the adorable brat.

"Yes, senpai?" Hanabi asks eagerly.

I hesitate. "Never mind. You're too young."

---

**Meanwhile:**

Naruto skips happily into his apartment, whistling after completing his daily training. He's very much looking forward to eating a dinner of ramen.

Suddenly, he can't move anymore. "Huh?" he asks.

"Uzumaki Naruto," a cold voice states.

"Oi, Shika, what're you doing?" Naruto yells angrily. In reaction, shadows start creeping up his body. "Hey, stop that!" Naruto shouts, freaking out at the cold sensation of the shadows on his body.

"I ask the questions," Shikamaru growls. He's sitting in one of Naruto's chairs, the light from the window at his back making his face appear dark. "What are your intentions towards my sister?"

"I- wha- huh?" Naruto asks dumbly. "What're you talking about?"

Shika chuckles darkly. The shadows tighten on Naruto. "I did not want to do this, but you leave me no choice."

Shikamaru may take after his father in almost everything, but he is also very much Nara Yoshino's son. And no one can do scary like her, in his opinion. He places the box with Naruto's ramen reserves which he spent over an hour collecting from all the stashes the boy had hidden around his apartment. He pulls out an explosive tag. "Talk, or your ramen are toast."

"No!" Naruto shrieks, taking a step towards Shikamaru despite the shadows binding him. Scowling, Shika tightens the shadow binds. "Not my ramen! I don't know what you are talking about!"

"So you continue to deny kissing Ri?" Shika asks darkly.

"Yes! Wait, what?" Naruto pauses. "Eww, you thought I kissed Ri-chan? That's, that's," he waves his arms around. "Ri-chan's not a girl! Well, she is, but not a *girl* girl! She's like a sister!"

Shikamaru pauses and studies Naruto. "If you didn't kiss her, who did?"

Naruto stills. His eyes widen, then they narrow. "I dunno, but I'll find out," he growls.

---

**Back with Riko:**

I am at the hospital for my medical check-up with Tsunade and Shizune.

*One more try,* I decide.

"Say, what should I do if someone kissed me without any warning?" I ask.

"Punch him," Tsunade immediately answers. Her gaze flicks to me. "Who's the guy?"
"Tsunade-sama!" Shizune protests. She turns to me. "You don't have to punch him."

"Bullshit," Tsunade says. "Someone kisses you without permission, you punch them."

"Violence does not solve problems!" Shizune protests.

"She wants to punch someone, let her punch someone," Tsunade states.

"I don't actually want to punch him," I interject. "All I wanted was some advice."

"Oh? Well, then just do whatever feels right," Tsunade shrugs dismissively. "You're healthy. Get lost."

"Tsunade-sama!" Shizune protests. Then she smiles at me. "Do you like the person in question, Riko-san?"

The question throws me off a bit. Sure, I like Sasuke. But I'm pretty sure that is not the 'like' Shizune meant.

"Uhm…" I say, trying to come up with an answer.

"That's not a no," Tsunade says shrewdly.

"I gotta go!" I say abruptly and stand up to hurry out of the room.

---

**Meanwhile**

Jiraiya sits in a bar, disguised as a generic chunin so as to better eavesdrop on the village gossip. As Konoha's spymaster, this is his duty.

It doesn't hurt that the bartender is a quite buxom young woman and that he really likes gossip. Plus, sitting in a bar requires him to drink alcohol.

He perks up when he hears his future apprentice's name.

"…heard the Uzumaki brat kissed that Nara girl. You know, the redhead," one ninja says to his neighbour.

"Tch, don't tell me you didn't see that coming! Those two are always together!" the neighbour replies.

Jiraiya starts to giggle. Really, Naruto and Riko? He actually didn't see that coming, but given how close those two are… he sighs wistfully. Young love. So adorable.

Actually, it wouldn't make for a bad plot for a future novel. He could introduce their characters in the one he's currently writing, as two children with a bond of friendship. A little bit of foreshadowing, and then he could write a book about their friendship turning into more… in the midst of adventure, intrigues and nefarious plots, of course.

Hmm, he's never written a red head as his main character before… oh, the potential…

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**Back with Riko:**

For some inexplicable reason, I feel a cold shiver run down my spine. I look around, but I can't
detect any threat around me.

_Weird_, I think.

I shake my head and enter the gate to Sasuke's residence. I find him behind the house, training. I watch for a few moments as he gracefully runs through kata, every movement controlled and perfectly executed.

He finishes the kata and straightens. "Ri," he states. I'm not surprised he noticed me. I wasn't trying to hide my presence, and Sasuke is more attuned to it than pretty much anyone else.

"Hey," I say, stepping forward. He watches my every movement.

My fist flies forward and is caught in his hand.

_What the hell, Ri?_

"I was told I should have punched you for kissing me during the invasion," I answer the question in his eye. "It was widely agreed that this would have been the appropriate reaction. I don't really get it, but if that's some sort of girl rule…" I shrug.

Sasuke snorts.

"But I don't really want to punch you," I continue.

Sasuke tilts his head a little. _What do you want to do, then?_

"Just do whatever feels right," Tsunade had said, which was the most helpful advice I got from anyone.

"This," I whisper, stepping closer to Sasuke. Then I stand up on my toes and press a kiss to his cheek. He stands perfectly still, not moving a muscle. His eyes never leave me. I duck my head a little, feeling my cheeks growing warm.

"I just- uhhm- " I stutter. "I mean, thanks for being my whatever."

And before it can get any more embarrassing, I shunshin away.
Normally, I dislike lying, especially to Naruto. However, there are instances in which doing so is perfectly acceptable. This is one of those.

"I have absolutely no idea what you are talking about," I state, looking Naruto straight into the eyes. "How did you even come up with that?"

Naruto stands in front of me, arms crossed in front of him, glaring at me. "Who kissed you?!" he demands to know.

"Stop being troublesome," I order. "It's none of your business."

"Yes, 'cause you're my friend and I gotta protect you!" Naruto yells, pointing at me. "What do you have to say for yourself, young lady?!"

My jaw drops. "Did you seriously just 'young lady' me?" I ask incredulously.

"Who kissed you?!"

I groan and hide my face in my hands. Naruto's been at this for ten minutes while we wait for Sasuke to arrive. There's just no reasoning with him.

"…and Shikamaru said-

"Damn it, shut up!" I snap, looking up. "If I need your help, I'll ask for it, but this is a private matter and none of your business. The same goes for Shikamaru."

At least now I know why my brother kept giving me those weird looks during dinner yesterday. I'm almost glad I get to leave the village for a mission. Hopefully, Shikamaru will have forgotten by the time I'm back.

Yeah. Very likely.

"Sasuke!" Naruto shouts. "Someone kissed Ri-chan! We gotta do something!"

I give Sasuke a desperate look that says 'Don't say anything!' which seems to amuse him greatly, not that Naruto notices, being too caught up in his idiotic mission of protecting me from the 'evil kissing fiend', as he called him.

"And what does Riko have to say about this, dobe?" the evil kissing fiend asks. I give him a grateful look.

"She's being stupid!" Naruto complains, flailing his arms around. He kind of looks like a demented chicken. "You gotta help watch her!"

My jaw drops for the second time that day. "You've got to be kidding me!" I exclaim. "Hell no!"

"Fine," Sasuke says, ignoring me.

"Don't go along with him!" I shriek. "Damn it, you assholes!"

"It's for your own good, Ri-chan!" Naruto argues. "Really!"
"And what's your excuse?" I ask Sasuke. He just smirks.

I'm pretty sure he just wants to annoy me. That, and he's smug about Naruto not even suspecting him.

"Tch," I growl. "We've got a mission. And because you guys suck, I'm not going to tell you what it is. You fuck up, see if I care."

Kakashi left leading our team to the port town where we're meeting the client to me. We'll be meeting him there. 'Practice for leading missions', he called it. I'm pretty sure that he's just being lazy.

He hasn't left us completely alone, though. Oh no. We have extra protection.

"Carry me!" Pakkun orders.

"You're a ninja dog. You can walk," I reply, scowling.

"Wow, someone got up on the wrong side of the basket..." Pakkun mutters.

"Hey, Pakkun!" Naruto greets the dog. "Ri-chan won't tell us where we're going!"

"We're going to watch a movie," I growl. "Now shut it."

I walk up to the guard booth at the village gate to notify the guards of our leaving.

"Hello, Kotetsu-san, Izumo-san," I greet. "Uzumaki Naruto, Uchiha Sasuke and Nara Riko, heading out." I hand them the slip of paper that has the Mission-ID, our destination and our signatures on it.

"First mission as a chunin!" Izumo exclaims with fake enthusiasm. "Excited?"

"I can hardly contain myself," I reply in a sarcastic tone while Kotetsu jots down the exact time of day on some form and then hands it to me to sign.

He grins at me. "Can we congratulate to something?" he asks mischievously.

I stare at him blankly. "My promotion?" I ask, signing my name.

"No, no!" Izumo waves that comment aside. "We heard Naruto finally confessed to you!"

My jaw drops again. "What?" I ask in a strangled voice.

"On the Hokage Monument no less. Who knew that squirt could be so romantic... Now, you two, behave on the mission, alright?" Kotetsu answers. He waggles his eyebrows at me. "Don't get carried away!"

"But we aren't- Naruto didn't-" I sputter. "It's a misun-"

"Now get going, little Nara!" Kotetsu orders. "The mission calls!"

"Butbutbut-" I protest helplessly, flailing my arms around uselessly.

"Sorry, we'd chat more, but the next group wants to head out. See ya soon, good luck on your mission!" Izumo says and then turns to a jounin that is just now stepping up to the booth, the ninja of his group waiting in the background. I have no choice but to go.

"What's wrong?" Sasuke asks, studying my expression.
"Nothing!" I snap. "Everything is fine!"

I launch a few senbon at Naruto. It doesn't make me feel better.

"Oi! What was that for!"

"Nothing!" I hiss. "Let's go!"

Kami, am I glad to get out of the village.

We arrive at the town where we're meeting the client a few hours later. The trip was surprisingly eventless. It makes me kind of wary.

We find the cinema soon enough and Pakkun dismisses himself.

"Quick question," I announce. "Does anybody else find it weird that Kakashi-sensei got us tickets to a movie in a town hours away from Konoha? I mean, how did he even get these? And when?" I wave the movie tickets around.

"Huh, now that you mention it...," Naruto muses. "But it's Kakashi-sensei!"

"Hn," Sasuke agrees.

"Right, just checking," I mutter.

"Why're we watching a movie right before we meet our client anyway?" Naruto asks. "Ri-chan?"

"Wouldn't you like to know," I state. "Now if you promised to back off about-"

"Never, dattebayo!"

"Then you'll have to wait," I finish. "Come on."

We enter the cinema, show our tickets and then go find our seats – Naruto wanted to watch the movie from the ceiling for training purposes, but Sasuke and I managed to convince him not to. It would have been really embarrassing if someone thought we had snuck in to watch without paying.

Soon, the movie starts.

I've been looking forward to this. I've never ever watched a movie in a cinema, only on the television in our living room. Soon, I find myself captivated by the movie. The actors are really good and the story is inspiring, if a little cheesy. Only the fighting scenes are a bit awkward for us ninja to watch. Still, it's a great movie. Now, if only Naruto would stop shouting encouragements and warnings at the characters on screen...

When we step out of the cinema and head to where Kakashi told me we would meet him, Naruto is raving on about Princess Fuun, the heroine of the movie. Incidentally, the actress that plays her character, Fujikaze Yukie, is the person we were hired to guard, not that Naruto knows that.

"Man, that was so great!" he chatters. "She was like 'I won't give up!' and then-"

"So if she kissed you, should I lock you up and have Sasuke guard you for your own good?" I ask.

"-and then Fuun was all awesome! I wonder if there are any princesses like her around," Naruto continues, not listening. "Any ninja would be proud to fight for her!"
"Dobe," Sasuke says evenly. "It was just a movie."

"So no one is going to acknowledge my words?" I ask incredulously. "You're just going to ignore me and my sound arguments against being guarded by you idiots?"

"This is the meeting place?" Sasuke asks.

I glare at him and Naruto. "No ramen and tomatoes for either of you. Unless there's a rabbit named Tomato, that one you can eat."

I might be a tad little unhappy with the rabbits after the Flash Ninjin Seven fiasco. It took me over an hour to fix the mess in my room.

"But Ri-chan!" Naruto protests.

"Unless you back off."

"Never!"

"Dobe. Ri. Quiet," Sasuke orders and we instantly shut up, recognising his 'We're on a mission and trouble is near, you idiots' – voice.

I scan our surroundings. Damn Naruto for distracting me.

"What's wrong, bastard?" Naruto asks.

"That," I answer, pointing at the ground. It looks like a few dozen horses ran over it. Which makes no sense, this area should be deserted and most definitely free of horses. It's the centre of town, after all. I groan, rubbing my forehead. "Another adventure. Yay. Let's go investigate. Kakashi's probably not going to show up for another half hour anyway." Sasuke gives a jerky nod while Naruto enthusiastically runs over to the tracks and follows them into the city.

What could a herd of horses be doing in the middle of town? I ask myself as Sasuke and I follow Naruto.

It's pretty easy to find out where the horses went. While there are hardly any tracks left on the firm ground of the streets, knocked over carts and whispering people tell us exactly which path the horses took. I catch a few whispers from the surrounding people about a group of riders and stop to ask what happened.

"A group of riders in black armour was chasing a young woman! Knocked over my cart, too!" The man complains. "But that lady sure was a looker! Think I saw her in that movie, Princess Fuu or something."

"You mean Fuun?" I ask, frowning. Then my eyes widen in realisation and I run after my teammates with a "Thanks, Ojii-san!" thrown over my shoulder.

"Ruto! Sasuke!" I yell at them as I catch sight of them chasing after a group of riders. Naruto is already spamming out clones to catch them. 'Princess Fuun' is nowhere to be seen – she must have succeeded in her escape from her bodyguards, then. "Stop!"

"Eh?" Naruto protests. "But look what they did!" He sweeps out his arms at the chaos the riders left in their wake.

I ignore him and walk up to one of the riders, a brown-haired man with small round glasses. "My
apologies, Asama-san. It appears there has been a misunderstanding." I turn to my teammates.
"Guys, this is Asama Sandayuu-san, the client for our mission."

"Huh?" Naruto asks.

"You must be the Konoha ninja I hired, then. I'm impressed," Sandayuu states, studying the many clones and us. I wonder how he can see with those tiny glasses. Unless they are just for decoration?

I keep myself from flinching in surprise when Kakashi suddenly materialises directly behind me, putting his hand on my head. "That is correct. We were assigned the mission you commissioned. But perhaps we should discuss the details somewhere else?"

Sandayuu nods. "That might be for the best. Please follow me, I will take you to the director."

We follow Sandayuu as he leads us through the city to the film studios. The rest of the bodyguards left to further search for Fujikaze Yukie.

"Our mission is to escort and guard Fujikaze Yukie while the sequel to the movie we just watched is filmed in the Country of Snow," I explain to Naruto and Sasuke as we walk through the busy studio and approach an old man with an authoritative air who's talking to a blond guy carrying a megaphone. "She's the actress that plays Princess Fuun."

"That's right!" the blond says, apparently having caught the tail end of my explanation. "It's the first time we're filming overseas. Fujikaze Yukie plays the most important role. Unfortunately, she's very much against traveling to the Country of Snow."

"I'm terribly sorry," Sandayuu apologises, bowing sadly. He glances at us and explains: "Yukie-sama has been trying to escape ever since she heard we were filming in Snow. I have yet to convince her of the necessity of cooperation."

"Necessity?" I ask curiously and just a tiny bit suspicious. Surely, a professional actress of Fujikaze Yukie's calibre wouldn't have a problem filming overseas? There might be something more going on.

Oh, who am I kidding? We're Team Seven. There's always something more going on.

"Yes. We will be filming at Snow Country's famous Rainbow Glaciers," the blond guy who has yet to introduce himself explains, pointing at a photo of said glaciers. "It was Sandayuu-san's recommendation to film there. It is said that in spring, the glaciers shine with seven colours, like a rainbow."

"That is nothing more than a myth," Kakashi interjects. "There is no spring in Snow Country."

"There's always winter there?" Naruto asks horrified.

"Snow Country is fairly far away…" Sasuke states.

"Don't worry," I say cheerfully. "I packed for you two." I pat my belt that once again hides a multitude of storage seals, just like the black bandages wrapped around my arms from wrist to elbows. My short white battle kimono with the Nara Clan symbol sewn on the back in grey – I wasn't in the mood for anything colourful, and I wanted to blend in with the snow in Snow Country – conceals a multitude of senbon and kunai, just like my light grey shorts. My kunai pouch is filled with explosive notes and also holds medical pills. Man, it feels good to be prepared.

"Kakashi-san, was it?" the old man – from his clothes and demeanor, I'm guessing he's the director –
speaks up. "I heard you've been to Snow Country before."

"A long time ago," Kakashi answers, not saying anything further.

*Curiouser and curiouser,* I think.

Steps approach behind us. A hand leans casually on the back of my seat and I surreptitiously palm senbon beneath the wide sleeves of my kimono. I'm sure it's just a civilian, but being careful never hurt anybody. "I heard Snow Country is a poor nation," a man's voice says, and I turn around. The man that stands behind me aims a gleaming smile down at me and then at our group.

One might call him handsome, I suppose, and a lot of women probably go crazy over his smile, but not me. His grin may be gleaming, but I've seen better - Gai's and Lee's Good-Guy grins for one. And nothing in the world beats Naruto's sunshine-and-ramen grin.

"That's true," I tell the actor. "Their economy collapsed a few years ago with a change in regime. They do have very advanced technologies though," I reiterate what I researched after I heard where our mission was going.

"Hopefully, they'll have heaters!" one of two approaching actors jokes. "I don't really like the cold."

"You gonna run off like Yukie, then?" his friend retorts.

I narrow my eyes while the actors continue to rib each other good-naturedly. From the sounds of it, Yukie is a brat. Bugger.

"Yukie doesn't know the meaning of the words 'ambition' or 'motivation'," one of them explains for our benefit. "And she's really quite... helpless."

"But she was born to be an actress," the director cuts in. "She doesn't slack off when it comes to work. I don't care about an actor's private life," he says in a slightly scolding tone, looking at the three actors. "I won't complain as long as she's great in front of the camera." He pauses. "Come to think about it, she only started running away when it was announced that we'd be filming in Snow Country."

*So Sandayuu wants us to escort an actress to a country she's vehemently against going to. To a location he suggested, and as her manager he's probably aware of whatever issue with Snow Country she has.*

*Not suspicious at all.*

"Why only then?" Sasuke asks.

The director shrugs. "I wouldn't know. Anyways, please help find her. We're scheduled to leave tonight, and I'd like to have this mess sorted out by then."

We step outside the studio, Sandayuu in tow. "Ne, Kakashi-sensei, what should we do?" Naruto asks.

Kakashi looks at me.

"I'm *not* your errand girl!" I snap.

"Maa, Riko-chan, you need to practice your leadership skills." Kakashi eye-smiles at me in a very annoying way. "I've decided that you're leading this mission. I'm only an observer until things start
"getting out of control."

"It almost sounds like you expect them to," I say sarcastically. "Fine." I turn to Sandayuu. "Where does Yukie-san normally turn up after she runs away?"

Sandayuu shifts a little uncomfortably. "We have found her in bars once or twice before. My apologies for the inconvenience…"

I snort. "Don't worry about it. We picked our current Hokage up in a bar."

Sandayuu opens his mouth, then closes it. He's finally starting to look doubtful. I ignore him and turn to my team. "Naruto, make some clones and check the bars in town, please. And henge them, it might freak the townspeople out if dozens of you were running around."

"Sure, Ri-chan!" Seconds later, dozens of henge'd Naruto's run off into the streets.

Hmm. Maybe I should have specified that he shouldn't take the rooftop-route. Now the townspeople probably think they're being invaded by ninja… oh well, tomorrow, we'll be gone anyway.

It's a half hour later when Naruto finally calls out: "Found her!" and starts leading us through the streets into the poorer part of town until we finally reach a nameless rundown bar – definitely the shady kind, and not where any woman should be going by herself unless she knows some very effective self-defence. We enter cautiously.

Inside, it doesn't look any better. This is the kind of bar where people go to drown their sorrows. I wrinkle my nose at the unpleasant atmosphere and the smell of alcohol. Why anyone would willingly enter a place like this, I have no idea.

Fujikaze Yukie sits at the bar, a small cup in front of her, looking bleakly at a necklace hanging from her neck. She takes a sip from the cup and I narrow my eyes at her sluggish uncoordinated movements. She's definitely sloshed. I bet if we left her alone for another hour, she'd pass out and all we'd have to do was get her on the ship and leave town. She wouldn't be able to run again in the middle of the ocean, that's for sure. I'm almost about to suggest that plan of action when I see a man in a dark corner of the bar get up and drunkenly walk in Yukie's direction. Granted, she sits fairly close to the exit and anyone wanting to leave would have to pass her, but something tells me that this man's gaze, invisible under his cap, is focused on Yukie. Something about the man sends my senses tingling. I palm my senbon.

Naruto jumps inside, right to Yukie's side. "Finally found you, Princess Fuun!" he shouts. The man veers away from Yukie and walks closer to us. I follow him with my eyes, not letting him out of sight while listening with half an ear as Naruto berates our charge for getting drunk in a place like this. I

The man walks past us and out the door. I turn around to watch him leave. "Kakashi-sensei," I murmur. "Was that-?"

Was that an enemy or just my imagination?

He puts his hand on my shoulder. "Don't worry about it for now." I feel Sasuke stepping up next to me, a reassuring presence.

I nod jerkily, turning back to Yukie and Naruto when I hear Yukie's drunken, high-pitched laughter. "Actress? Great?" she mocks. "It's the worst job ever. You have to follow other people's scripts all the time and live in a world filled with lies!"
Kind of like a ninja, I think. But she chose her profession, just like us, so she shouldn't be complaining.

"Truly stupid," Yukie says disdainfully, staring into her cup, looking lost and lonely.

"Come on, let's get you home, Neechan," Naruto says gently, taking a step towards her.

Yukie abruptly turns to him, almost falling of her stool from the sudden movement. "You're annoying! Hurry up and disappear!" she yells.

"That's enough," I say coldly, stepping up to them, Sasuke right behind me. "Get yourself under control, Fujikaze-san."

The woman only gives me a scornful glance and turns back to her cup. I narrow my eyes. I doubt there's any reasoning with her at this point. And if she's mean to Naruto, well, it's her fault if I don't feel inclined to be gentle either.

"Yukie-sama!" Sandayuu pleads. "Our ship is departing soon! Please, we need to hurry!"

"It's okay…" Yukie says, and Sandayuu looks hopeful, not noticing the cruel undertone in her voice. "I'm not going to board," she continues, downing the rest of her sake.

"What are you saying?!" Sandayuu yells, a note of panic in his voice, and I decide I've had enough of Yukie's behaviour.

Our mission is to escort her to Snow Country. As long as there is no lasting and visible damage… I nudge Sasuke. "Do you mind?" I ask. He gives me a look that says 'are you stupid?' and taps Yukie's shoulder. She whirls around, probably with another scathing remark on her lips, but it dies out when she looks into Sasuke's sharingan eyes. Her eyes widen, then they go unfocused and slide shut. I catch her as she finally falls off her stool limply.

I expected someone, at least Naruto, to protest this treatment of her, but everyone just watches with sombre looks.

It leaves a bad taste in my mouth to start the mission this way. It seems like a bad omen.

"Right." I clear my throat. "Let's get her to the ship."

Two hours later and we're sailing. We deposited our charge in her room – being the lead actress, she gets the best room of course – and then helped the film crew get everything on board. It went quickly with the help of Naruto's clones. After that, everyone settled in for the night, with the exception of some members of the ship's crew and me – I volunteered for first watch since Naruto worked hard earlier and Sasuke used his sharingan while I only gave orders.

I'm pretty sure Kakashi is awake, too, but he's staying out of sight.

After doing a security sweep – everything calm and nice – I sit down at the very front of the ship, letting my feet dangle over the railing. I close my eyes and breathe in the salty ocean air, enjoying the breeze in my face as I listen to the sound of the three-master cut through the waves below me.

So much water. I open my eyes, taking in the moon- and starlit ocean. So beautiful.

It's at this moment I realise that I'm over my trauma. I want to jump onto the water and run next to the ship, I want to dive down and explore the depths of the sea, I want to make the water whirl and
dance around me. I laugh quietly, happily. This mission might be troublesome, but for this moment alone, it's worth it.

The next morning, the three of us plus Kakashi watch as the film crew sets up cameras, painted backgrounds, spotlights, make-up tables and whatever else is necessary for whatever they have planned. Kami, I'd never want to work in this business. Way too troublesome for me.

"Now, Riko-chan, Naruto, I believe I should congratulate you two?" Kakashi muses, eye-smiling.

"No," I growl.

"Congratulate us?" Naruto asks, confused. "What're you talking about?"

"Nothing," I snap. "He's talking about nothing. And I'm sure he'll stop doing that right now!" I make a whip sound.

Kakashi flinches. I really need to learn the water whip.

"But Ri-chan-"

"So, let's talk about our roles in this mission," I cut him off. "Naruto, you get to protect Yukie."

"But I don't like her!" Naruto complains.

"Poor you," I answer. "Sasuke, you get to blast shit if we get attacked."

"Hn," Sasuke smirks.

"Not fair, dattebayo!"

"I get to kick ass and heal you idiots when you get injured," I continue, undeterred. "And Kakashi-sensei gets to swoop in and save the day when this mission goes to hell."

"Maa, Riko-chan, it almost sounds like you expect it to," Kakashi teases.

"I wonder why," I say sarcastically. "It certainly doesn't have anything to do with our client's suspicious behaviour."

"Eh?" Naruto asks.

"Anyways, folks, this is an A-ranked mission. We have yet to find out why exactly it was labelled an A and not B-ranked mission, so be on your guard. We don't know who the enemy is, but it's obvious there is one." I give them a serious look. "Something is going on here. It has something to do with Sandayuu, Yukie and Snow Country, and I'm pretty sure things will start going to hell soon, but I have full faith in our team. We can do this."

"Yatta!" Naruto cheers. "Of course we can! We're Team Seven!"

Sasuke smirks. Nice speech, his eyes say.

I roll my eyes at him.

"Well said, Riko-chan," Kakashi pats my shoulder awkwardly. Then he takes his book out and strolls away.
"So, team meeting over," I declare, clapping my hands. "Now, I know I promised I'd tell you about certain things once we got out of the village, but I'm sure you understand that we'll have to wait until we have a little more privacy than this." I gesture to the chaos of the movie set. "I promise I'll tell you as soon as I can."

I hold out my pinkie. Naruto immediately hooks his in. We look at Sasuke expectantly.

"No," Sasuke says. "Once is enough."

I roll my eyes at him. "Don't be such a stick-in-the-mud."

"Yeah, bastard! Pinkie swears are awesome!" Naruto agrees.

I grab Sasuke's hand and pull it to Naruto's and my joined hand. He tries to pull it back, but Naruto helps me. "Resistance is futile," I state. "Now pinkie swear."

Sasuke makes a very annoyed sound and very reluctantly hooks his finger in ours, glaring all the while.

"There, that wasn't so bad, was it?" I tell him brightly. He glowers at me. You're annoying, Ri. And you're troublesome.

From somewhere inside the ship, a high pitched shriek sounds.

"Guess Yukie woke up," I deduce. "Do you guys think she's going to be mad?"

The door leading into the ship's interior flies open and Yukie, barefoot and wearing pyjamas bursts through. "What is this?" she shrieks, staring in abject horror at the deck of the ship, the mast, the sails... she makes a distressed noise and sinks to her knees, looking miserable. Sandayuu comes out, puts his hand on her shoulder and speaks to her urgently. Then he helps her up and escorts her back inside.

"Oh yeah, definitely mad, once she gets over the shock," I state.

Yukie eventually came outside again, refusing to talk to anyone. She only listened to her instructions and then sat down at the make-up table where she's now looking into the mirror while her make-up and hair are being done.

Meanwhile, our team is watching. Naruto bounces up and down excitedly, commenting on everything he sees without really expecting an answer. I sit on the railing, bored already. Sasuke leans next to me, his mood somewhere between annoyed and bored, his dark eyes taking in everything.

I watch, mildly interested, as they start to shoot scenes from the movie. I'm actually impressed until Yukie interrupts a touching scene of her grieving over one of her fallen warriors so Sandayuu can put eye drops in her eyes because she is incapable of crying. Now, that would be excusable, but the way she is such a brat about it... I really can't stand her attitude.

The situation doesn't improve over the next few days. The novelty of watching the actors at work wore off after the first day and boredom took its place. Being cooped up on this ship with so many other people is getting on all of our nerves. Plus, Naruto is clingy and started glaring at any male that isn't part of the team if they even look like they want to talk to me.
It's kind of hilarious that the only one he seems to trust with me is Sasuke.

Sometimes, I run on the water next to the ship when I need to escape, and I relish the silent moments during the night when it feels like it's just me and the ocean. Kakashi occasionally joins me, but we don't really talk during those moments.

The weather grows colder. Much colder. Warm, light grey leggings and fingerless gloves are added to my outfit and my shinobi sandals get replaced by warm ninja boots, as do Naruto's and Sasuke's. It's still way too cold for me.

Naruto has no problem with the cold. Due to his incredible large chakra reserves, his temperature is always a few degrees higher than a regular person's. Sasuke's is, too, due to his fire and thunder nature. Kakashi is Kakashi.

I on the other hand… Ninja can use a technique to keep themselves warm, but it takes concentration and it wears on the reserves. Since I want to save my power for the mission, I limit myself to using it once every hour. In the meantime, I abuse Naruto as my human heater. The nights, I spend cuddling up to either him or Sasuke, depending on who isn't on patrol shift.

I can't even enjoy the nights anymore. They're way too cold.

This mission is starting to kind of suck.

A loud dismayed scream causes me to shoot up from the bed. The problem is, I was wrapped in Naruto's arms and a blanket and Sasuke's hand was on my wrist, so everyone wakes up and tries to jump out of bed, and we all get entangled and fall to the floor.

"Damn it, Ri," Sasuke mutters, shoving Naruto off him, who just mumbles something like: "Awhahuh?" and blinks owlishly. I groan and get up, rubbing my backside. Then I remember what woke me in the first place and hastily grab my cloak. "Didn't you hear the scream?" I ask.

"What scream, Ri-cha-haaaahhh-n?" Naruto mumbles, interrupted by a huge yawn

"Director! It's terrible!" sounds from upstairs.

"That scream," I state. "Doesn't sound like anyone is dying, though. I'll go check the situation."

I arrive on deck, Sasuke right behind me – like me he slept in his clothes, unlike Naruto who was still looking for his clothes when we ran out the room - and instantly see the problem. A humongous iceberg is in the way of our ship. Ahead of us, the director and his assistant are discussing something. Unseen by them, Kakashi casually leans against the railing, reading his book.

I shiver in the cold morning air. Not that the daytime makes a significant difference in temperature around here, it's always cold. "Sasukeeeeee?" I whine. "I'm cold."

"Hn," Sasuke says dismissively. *Deal with it.*

"And you're cold, too. Heart of ice," I grumble. "As chunin and mission leader, I order you, lowly genin, to serve as my human source of warmth."

"Abusing authority already?" Sasuke asks, sounding faintly amused.

"Warmth. Sometime today," I order. He rolls his eyes – he's wearing his henge – and pulls me
against him. Then he puts an arm around my shoulders. A moment later, I feel him use chakra and
the air around us warms. I sigh blissfully and lean against him. "If I'd known you could do that with
fire chakra, I'd have stuck with you and not Ruto from the start."

He snorts. "Don't get used to it."

"Yes, yes," I say insincerely, relaxing in the cocoon of warmth Sasuke made for us. I should
probably scold him for wasting his chakra like this. But it's just so comfortable.

Kakashi lands in front of us, eye-smiling. "Maa, aren't you two cute together?" he asks.

Sasuke attempts to shove me away. It doesn't work. I've glued myself to him with chakra.

"What's going on, sensei?" I ask. "Aren't we going to sail around that iceberg?"

"The director wants to use the location," Kakashi explains.

I groan, scanning the iceberg. Snow drifts, icy ridges, snowy slopes. Millions of hiding places. "That
thing is a security nightmare." I shoot a look up at Kakashi. "I've got a bad feeling about this. If
there's going to be an ambush, it'll happen here."

Kakashi nods. "Be on your guard. I'm coming with you and handle any jounin level opponents."

"Got it."

Naruto, Sasuke, Kakashi and I have spread out around Yukie while everything is made ready for the
shoot. It's even more of a security nightmare than I thought it would be. The place is impossible to
overlook, we're not allowed to move freely because we could disturb the set and there are people
everywhere, running around without a care for their safety.

Also, it's way too early and way too cold. I've abandoned my cloak so I can wear my sword on my
back. I'm starting to regret that decision.

"Alright, we're going to roll!" someone shouts after the actor that plays Princess Fuun's antagonist
Mao has reached his position on an icy ridge, accompanied by people that are now straightening his
clothes and giving last-minute instructions. "Scene 36, cut 22! Action!"

I palm my senbon with one hand and shift my stance, ready to draw my sword with the other. If I
were an enemy, I'd attack during the movie shoot.

Mao steps forward and laughs evilly at Princess Fuun and her supporters below him. "So you made
it here, Princess Fuun!"

"You're… Mao!" Yukie /Princess Fuun exclaims. She and her supporters draw swords. More banter
is exchanged between her and her antagonist.

I tense. My senses, honed by Zabuza's training, are tingling. Someone is watching us.

I sign a warning at my team. Naruto and Sasuke are behind me, so I can't see if they saw the
warning, but I see Kakashi right his hitae-ate, signalling that he got it.

"None of your worthless men are a match for me!" villain-actor shouts, pointing at Yukie. The icy
pillar behind him explodes.

I draw my sword in one fluid motion, making it glow with chakra. Then I leap forward, landing next
to Kakashi in front of Yukie. I sense Naruto and Sasuke flank us, slightly behind. We're forming a protective half-circle around Yukie. "What're you doing?!!" some idiot civilian who apparently hasn't noticed we're under attack shouts behind us.

"Civilians, back on the ship!" I order. "We're under attack."

The smoke from the explosion dissipates. A man stands there – bony and thin face, long lilac hair in a ponytail. He's wearing some sort of white-blue full body suit – an armour? On his shoulder, there's some sort of metal device where what looks like a yin-and-yang symbol is embedded.

The man crosses his arms and smirks arrogantly. "Welcome to the Country of Snow," he greets.

"You're-" Kakashi murmurs, sounding shocked.

A curvy woman, also wearing that weird suit in addition to a helmet appears on an ice pillar, pink pigtails sticking out of the helmet, her green eyes glittering cruelly. "Welcome back, Princess Koyuki. You did bring the Hexagonal Crystal, right?"

Koyuki? She can't mean- oh bugger, I think as I see Kakashi turn around to look at Yukie, eyes wide with realisation.

I turn to the left where a large man surges up from the snow. This one has purple hair, puffy lips and cruel dark eyes. He too is wearing that weird armour, the contraption with the yin-and-yang symbol on his chest. Some sort of metal gauntlet encases his lower left arm and hand. He laughs. "I've gotta hand it to you, Hatake Kakashi. This is the closest we could get to the princess."

"Oh boy," I drawl. "An ambush. I so did not see that coming."
"Fubuki, Mizore, you get the princess," the leader of the enemy's squad orders. Then he leaps down. Kakashi instantly jumps into motion to meet him.

"I've got no idea what's going on-" Naruto growls, pulling out a kunai. "-but it feels like a movie."

I groan. Sometimes, Naruto's sense of humour is really dumb.

"I'll protect you, Fuun-hime-neechan!" he finishes.

I scan our enemies. "You two, take on the girl and protect Yukie. I'll fight the big guy and draw him away," I order.

"But, Ri-chan-" Naruto starts.

"Take care," Sasuke says.

"You too," I whisper. "Yukie-san, get out of here! Naruto, get clones to protect her!"

I don't wait for an answer and run at the big guy who is now taking out a snowboard. Damn, that gives him a mobility advantage. He jumps on the board and speeds toward me. I stop moving.

"Water Style: Water Chain Sword!" I yell and launch the chains at him.

The chains impact his armour and dissolve into water. My opponent doesn't even falter. I jump out of the way and swing my sword as he glides past me. However, it only makes a small rip in his armour instead of the wound I planned to cause him.

_Fucking hell. That armour ain't normal. What do I do?_

The guy turns and accelerates toward me again. I curse as I leap away and aim senbon at his face, but he just lifts his arm and brushes them away.

So, the armour protects him from my sword, my senbon and my ninjutsu and he has that snowboard to help him move in the deep snow. What do I have? I focus chakra to my feet so I can stand on the snow. Snow walking can't be too different from water walking.

The man jumps toward me, off the board and tries to hit me – for his size, he's damn fast. But I'm faster, so I leap back and his fist hits the ground instead. It shatters under the impact, ice and snow spraying everywhere. It doesn't stop my opponent, he comes after me relentlessly and I have to dance away and around his attacks.

_Damn it. One hit from him and I'll be done for. What can I do?_

I smirk and jump backwards again. We've almost reached the shore.

"Do you see?" the man asks between his attacks. "You can't defeat me while I have this chakra armour!"

I laugh. "And still, you fail to hit me even with your armour. Pathetic." I flip back gracefully. The ice cracks beneath my feet, but it holds.

My opponent steps back on his snowboard and shoots towards me, shouting: "Don't look down on Snow ninja!"
I toss a kunai between us. "Boom," I whisper, and it explodes. The ice bursts apart and the man falls into the gurgling black water, howling. I hurl another few tagged kunai into the water, causing huge water explosions.

Did I get him?

Cables shoot out from under the water, hooking themselves into a large ice floe. I curse and jump towards it, cutting the cables with my sword, but the man's head is already breaking the water surface, the rest of him will soon follow. At least, he seems to be a little disoriented and he hasn't seen me.

I can't let him out of the water.

I grit my teeth. No other choice then.

I jump into the icy water, pouring chakra into my body to regulate my temperature. Damn it, it's still too cold. I dive down, focusing water chakra like Kakashi taught me so I can breathe, then I whip my arms back and surge into my opponent's direction, the water propelling me towards him. I grab his ankle just as he's attempting to step onto the water surface and drag him back down, deeper and deeper into the dark until he kicks my hand off. He attempts to swim upwards, to get away from me because we both know that underwater, he can't win. And soon, the cold will make him unable to fight. It will do the same to me, but he's been under longer.

I make the water propel me above him, forming handseals. "Uo Tsuba!" I shout. On land, a jet of water would normally come out of my mouth. Underwater, it's a pressure wave that pushes the Snow ninja deeper under. His armour might as well not exist underwater.

However, the metal hand that shoots from his metal gauntlet and grabs my arm, nearly crushing it, certainly does. The ninja swings his arm and I'm tossed against the underside of a large ice floe. The impact hurts, but since the water resistance slowed the toss, I'm fine. I've had much worse in the past.

A short distance away from me, I see my opponent struggling towards the surface, his movements becoming sluggish. He's been in the cold too long. I close my eyes, take a deep breath. "I'm sorry," I whisper. Then I shoot towards him. He sees me coming and kicks and punches around himself in an attempt to keep my away, but I'm faster and stronger at this point, so I grab him and pull him deeper down again, intending to keep him down until he's unconscious.

But then, he suddenly has a kunai in his hand and there's an explosive note on it that's already burning, and I hastily let go of him, place my feet on his chest and launch myself off him, towards the surface. Below me, the explosions sounds, impossibly loud underwater, the shockwave and scalding hot water catching and burning my legs before I can outswim it. I scream in pain as I break the surface and grab an ice floe to support myself. I drag myself on it, whimpering.

The icy air on my wet clothes and skin is painful. It feels wonderful on my burnt legs though.

I look back in the water. That was a suicide attack. No way did he survive that.

Damn it.

I shove the guilt away. No time for that now. I struggle to my feet, gritting my teeth against the pain and the cold.

"Riko, get away!" a familiar voice yells. Kakashi. A shadow falls on me and my eyes widen because an enormous narwhale made from ice is falling down on me and there's no choice but to leap into the water again while my floe is crushed behind me. I get tossed and turned, sucked down by the
currents the whale causes. I fight very hard to stay conscious, but the cold is getting to me now. Still I manage to get to the surface and pull myself up on another floe again. I manage to focus chakra to draw the water off my skin and clothes before they freeze on my body. Then I start running. In my current state, I'd definitely fuck up the shunshin and drop myself in the middle of the ocean.

Behind me deafening crashes sound, the ice groaning before it bursts apart. I chance a look behind me and immediately run faster, pouring chakra into my abused legs, trying to get away before the two giant narwhale's fight crushes me. Already, the ice beneath my feet is breaking.

_Fuck, they're going to sink the iceberg! Damn, would it kill them to be a little more considerate?_

A hand grabs my shoulder and then there's the familiar whirl of a shunshin around me and Kakashi and I appear on an icy pillar. Shocked, I watch as the entire iceberg breaks apart. Kakashi shifts his hold on me so I'm fully in his arms and nimbly dodges icy shrapnel. Finally, he shunshins us on the ship. "F-f-fuck," I whisper, teeth chattering. "T-that was a c-close one."

I groan and slump against Kakashi who is currently righting his hitae-ate. He frowns and puts his hand on my forehead. "Riko-chan, you're ice cold."

"T-took a l-little b-bath," I force out.

"Of course you did," Kakashi deadpans as he sets me down.

"Ri-chan!" Naruto shouts and then crashes into me, wrapping his arms around me. I groan, losing my balance, and brace myself for the impact with the ground.

It never happens. Sasuke is suddenly behind me, his hands pulling me to the side and the only one that goes flying is Naruto. "That's what you call taking care?" Sasuke growls. Goody, he's fine.

"I'm n-not h-hurt, aren't I? And I g-got the guy," I state. "A-and I r-r-reached my p-personal goal of n-not p-p-passing out a-gain." Sasuke frowns and takes off his cloak to wrap it around me. It's still warm from his body. And it smells like Sasuke. I happily pull the cloak tighter around me. "Mmm, w-warm," I murmur.

"Ri-chan, are you okay? You aren't hurt, right?" Naruto babbles worriedly, hands flitting around helplessly. At least he isn't trying to bowl me over again.

"F-fine. Just c-cold," I answer. _And a little bruised and boiled_, I mentally add.

A hand rests itself on my head. "And you're going straight to bed now. We're having a meeting with the client in an hour, rest and warm up until then," Kakashi says in a deceptively friendly tone. Oddly enough, it reminds me of my mom. "Sasuke, go with her. Naruto, you're staying with me."

"But-"

"She needs rest," Kakashi says firmly, implying that he thinks letting Naruto around me would not be restful for me at all. I disagree, but whatever.


_Whoa, Sasuke is reassuring Naruto. Will wonders never cease?_

Naruto gives Sasuke an uncharacteristically hard look. Then he nods. "Alright."

_And Naruto isn't making a fuss about protecting me himself. This might be a genjutsu._
Sasuke grabs my arm and directs me toward the door that leads into the ship. I'm glad he doesn't pick me up to carry me. In front of the film crew, that would just have been embarrassing – like I'm some damsel in distress when I just defeated a ninja with some sort of almost invincible armour.

The moment we're out of sight though, he does pick me up. I glare at him. "I can w-walk," I insist, mentally cursing my chattering teeth. Sasuke doesn't deign to answer as he swiftly carries me to the room our team shares. I was actually offered my own room – the perks of being a girl – but I refused. Now Kakashi uses it.

Sasuke dumps me on the bed unceremoniously. I kick off my boots and roll my leggings up.

"You said you weren't hurt," Sasuke growls, staring at the swollen red skin – it looks like a really bad sunburn. At the very least, my boots protected my lower legs, and the leggings protected me from getting actual boils. Still, it hurts like hell.

"Ruto would have freaked out," I explain while running green glowing hands over the injuries until the skin is only slightly reddened. Then I unseal a small jar and clumsily rub salve on it – my hands are still shaking from the cold. When I'm done, Sasuke grabs the jar from me, places it on the nightstand, then shoves me back on the bed and pulls the blankets over me. They aren't warmed up yet, so they don't help any against the cold. "I'm cold again," I whisper and make my eyes as big and pleading as I can. My puppy eyes have nothing on Naruto's or Haku's – not that the boy even realises it when he makes them – but they're still pretty good.

Sasuke merely gives me a condescending look. Doesn't work on me, Ri.

"Killjoy," I mutter. "I really am cold."

Sasuke sighs, annoyed. Then he lifts the blankets and slides in next to me. I give him a grateful smile and snuggle up to him. "T-thanks," I whisper. Already, I can feel him heat the blankets with his chakra. Soon, I feel myself unfreeze. "How'd your fight go?" I ask.

"She got away," Sasuke answers sullenly.

"Mine didn't," I answer softly, pressing my face into his shoulder. "I did to him what that man in Wave tried to do to me. But I swear I didn't want him to die." My voice breaks on the last word.

Sasuke shifts his hold so he has his arms around me. My head is tucked securely into the crook of his neck. He rubs his hand over my shoulder, offering me silent comfort. I sling my arms around him tightly. "Can we stay like this for a while?" I ask.

"Hn."

"Thanks."

Reality eventually catches up with us in the form of Naruto barging in. Luckily, we heard him when he barrelled down the corridor to our room and Sasuke had enough time to get out of the bed and sit on the chair next to it, so we don't have to explain our resting arrangements. That would have been… troublesome.

"Come on, come on, come on!" Naruto chatters as he pulls the blankets away. Damn him. "Or we're gonna be late!"

"Yes, yes," I grumble, letting him pull me out of the bed and drag me after him. A minute later, we arrive at the meeting room. Sandayuu and Kakashi are already there, so are the director and his
assistant and Fujikaze Yukie. Or Princess Koyuki. I'm looking forward to hearing the explanation for that. We sit down next to Kakashi. Now it's civilians on one side of the table and ninja on the other – clear fronts.

There is a minute of silence as everybody taxes the other side.

"You knew, Sandayuu, didn't you?" Kakashi finally asks pleasantly.

"Yes, I did," Sandayuu answers.

"Did you even think about what would happen if she returned to the Country of Snow?" Kakashi wants to know.

"There was no other way to get the princess to this country," Sandayuu justifies his actions.

"How about someone explain what the hell is going on?" I ask cheerfully. "Cause we were attacked an hour ago and you never told us about enemies you knew would be coming. Or Yukie-san's status. Or anything, really." I beam at him. "Don't you think that was a tad little inconsiderate of you?"

"Yes," Sandayuu answers. "I'm sorry-"

I jump up and slam my hands on the table. Sandayuu flinches back. "I don't want to hear your constant apologies! Explain yourself!" I growl, the smile wiped off my face.

"Riko-chan, calm down," Kakashi orders. I sit down, glaring at Sandayuu who hastily starts explaining. "The actress Fujikaze Yukie is merely a front. In truth, she is the princess of Snow Country, Kazahana Koyuki-sama, the country's rightful leader." He takes a deep breath and continues. "I first came to serve her when she was just a young girl. I served the former daimyo, Kazahana Sousetsu-sama, Koyuki-sama's father." He pauses. "Snow Country was a small and peaceful nation. Sousetsu-sama was a good man and a devoted father, he doted on the princess. But those idyllic days passed. Ten years ago, Doto, the younger brother of Sousetsu-sama, hired ninja from the Village Hidden in the Snow and instigated a coup d'état! He murdered Sousetsu-sama, Kazahana Castle was burned to the ground. Princess Koyuki was believed to have died…"

Sandayuu's voice breaks.

Kakashi takes over. "I was on a mission in Snow Country at the time. My team couldn't fight them back then, we had to retreat. I took the princess and fled with her."

"When I found the princess still alive and acting in movies…" Sandayuu says softly. "I was overjoyed. She was… she was alive!" he sobs.

"I should have died back then," Yukie finally speaks up emotionlessly.

"You mustn't say such things!" Sandayuu exclaims. "We prayed and hoped you were alive!"

"I'm alive, but my heart is dead. After that day, my tears dried up."

Such melodrama.

Sandayuu wipes his eyes. "I became Fujikaze Yukie's manager and bided my time for the day I would escort her back to the Country of Snow," he finishes the story, ignoring Yukie's words.

And obviously, that day has finally come. However, I question the wisdom of forcing her back here. It could do more damage than good.
"So you were just using us the whole time?!!" The director's assistant exclaims.

"I apologise for fooling you!" Sandayuu answers. "But… this is for the sake of the people of Snow Country!"

*Again with the apologies. He could have gotten us all killed and all he has to say is 'sorry'? Well, fuck you too.*

Sandayuu runs forward and throws himself down before Yukie. "Hime-sama! Please overthrow Doto and take your place as the rightful leader of this country!"

*He's kidding, right?* I almost laugh at the ridiculousness of his request.

Yukie stares at his kneeling form, her face betraying no emotion.

"I will give my life to protect you! Please, take up arms and rise with us!"

*It was us that fought today. It was us that could have died today.*

Rage simmers in me, but I wait for Yukie's reply.

"No thanks," she says. Sandayuu looks up, shocked. "You've got to be kidding!" she continues. I kind of feel like applauding her but I haven't forgotten what a bitch she has been the past week.

"But the people of Snow-" Sandayuu exclaims.

"Who cares about them?" she returns.

"Princess-"

"Will you give up already?!" she hisses. "No matter how much you try, you can't beat Doto."

*And three, two, one…*

Naruto slams his hand on the table and stands up. "Quit talking like that!" he growls. "He's devoted his life to realise his dream! I'll deal with anyone who badmouths him!"

"Naruto-san…" Sandayuu murmurs, astonished.

"Ruto's right," I interject before the situation can escalate, because Yukie looks like she's going to say something mean again, and Naruto is already pissed. "However, Yukie-san has valid concerns. Sandayuu-san, I understand how important this is to you, but you've placed all of us in danger with the way you manipulated us. It's not that big a deal for us ninja, we knew this was an A-ranked mission, but you've gotten the film crew and the ship's crew involved, too, and that is unacceptable. You also can't expect Yukie-san to 'take up arms' and 'overthrow Doto'. She's never had any fighting training in her life."

"I can defend myself!" Yukie hisses.

"Not against trained fighters, you can't," I disagree. "Any fighting will be done by us ninja. And save your damned apologies, Sandayuu-san, this is our job. We're still going to complete our mission."

Naruto would mutiny if we abandoned the mission. I can tell Sasuke wants to stay and fight, too – running away just isn't his thing, plus he probably wants to finish that woman he fought. And I doubt Kakashi wants to retreat a second time from Snow. Besides, it's not like I'd leave a whole country at the mercy of some tyrant. I just don't like how Sandayuu manipulated us. That fight would have
gone a whole lot differently had we known in advance about our opponents.

"I'm not setting foot on Snow Country! I won't go against Doto!" Yukie glares at us. "It's useless!"

*Kami, this lady needs a Ramen Talk.*

"Please, princess-" Sandayuu pleads.

Suddenly, the director speaks up. "We are able to dream because we don't give up hope. And because we dream, there is a future. Now isn't that wonderful? It's the perfect theme for our movie."

I raise my eyebrows in surprise.

"Director?!" the assistant exclaims. "We're going to continue filming?"

"I told you before, this movie is going to change everything!"

My eyebrow raise higher.

"But-"

The director smiles. "Think about it, how often can one film using a real princess?"

"I see… the publicity would be amazing! The movie is sure to be a hit!"

*Great. More people to protect. These guys have no survival instincts whatsoever.*

"Unfortunately, there's only one course of action," Kakashi speaks up, finality in his voice. "As long as Doto knows about her, there's nowhere to escape. We have to fight. That's the only way to survive."

Yukie looks away sullenly.

"Okay!" Naruto exclaims. "Let's continue this mission! Princess Fuun's gonna return to Snow Country and thrash the evil mastermind!" he grins.

"Don't joke around!" Yukie interrupts. "This isn't a movie! There are no happy endings!"

"You can change that anytime with determination!" the director yells which shuts her up.

"Normally, we'd go back to the village and get reinforcements…” Kakashi muses.

"That's a waste of time. We can handle it ourselves," Sasuke speaks up, daring us to contradict him.

"He's right," I say. "If we leave now, we'll have to deal with pursuers, and the time it'll take to go back home and then come here again will only give Doto time for preparations. He might even go into hiding somewhere we'd never find him. We need to handle this ourselves, and fast."

"Then it's decided." Kakashi nods.

"Yes!" the director agrees enthusiastically. "We're going to continue filming! We'll create a movie with a happy ending!"

"Damn right!" Naruto yells.

I don't share their enthusiasm. Considering a whole country is at stake, I don't even care about some movie.
We drive through a long deep cave in some kind of cross between a car and a snowmobile. At the end of the cave, there's supposed to be the hideout of those ready to rebel against Doto.

With us in our vehicle is Sandayuu. Yukie sneered something about being 'sick of us' and demanded to travel in another car. Since ours is the most likely to be attacked, what with it containing us, Kakashi allowed it.

"Long ago, there were railroad tracks here," Sandayuu informs us.

"What's a railroad?" Naruto asks.

"A kind of transport system," I answer. "Basically, there are railroad tracks and on them a large vehicle called a 'train' travels."

"Huh. Sounds weird," Naruto says. "Where are those track thingies?" he asks, pressing his face against the window.

"Covered by ice," Sandayuu answers.

Our conversation is interrupted when we finally leave the caves. Our car halts and we step out in the snow. Looking around, I see we're on a high mountain. Above us are cliffs, and where the ledge we're parking on ends, the bluff gapes. We're at least a kilometre up.

"Alright, let's start filming!" the director yells the moment he exits the vehicle he travelled in.

I wonder how he can even focus on filming. One has to admire his devotion to his job.

"Director! Terrible news!" We turn and see the assistant running towards up. "Yukie has escaped again!"

"Oh wow," I mutter. "Escaping in the middle of nowhere, with these temperatures, knowing she's being targeted. Is she trying to kill herself?"

"Riko, Naruto, Sasuke, we'll split up and look for her. If you find her, use the radio," Kakashi orders and we all pull out communication devices. "No clones, Naruto. They might attract attention."

We nod and scatter. I inwardly curse Yukie. I could have been in our nice, warm car, drinking tea. Instead, I now have to chase through a snow covered forest and freeze my ass off. If she was trying to commit suicide, she should have just taken a knife.

Aaaand the Cursed Seal is poisoning my mind again. Wonderful.

I focus my mind and block the seal's influence. That shit is the last thing I need right now.

The ear-phone of my communication device cracks. "Found her," Naruto's muffled voice says.

"Got it," I reply. Similar responses from Kakashi and Sasuke follow. "See you in a few minutes."

I'm the first to arrive back at the shooting location. I spot the director and Sandayuu and start moving in their direction.

I look around warily as I walk toward them. This place isn't exactly ambush material, but there are no certainties. Who knows what the enemy has in store.
A quiet creaking noise makes me look down. Where I stand, the icy ground is rapidly melting, to reveal… oh shit. Railroad tracks.

I lean down and touch my fingertips to the metal. Chakra runs through the rails, melting the ice. I jump up, looking around. Behind me, I hear Sandayuu address the film crew with a panicked voice. "He's coming! Everyone, hurry and run. It will be terrible if you are found!"

After a moment of confusion, the crew hastily moves to hide. "Sandayuu-san, where are you going?" someone yells. I turn around to see the man run up the mountain and disappear.

Is he going to the rebel's hideout? He said it was somewhere around here… doesn't matter now. I need to take cover.

I run up the mountain. Halfway up, I stop, take off my cloak and seal it away, then I unseal my sword and strap it to my back. After that, I crouch down behind a rock. From here, I can overlook the rails, but I can't be seen from below.

I frown. I'm the only ninja currently here. I'm not too worried about Sasuke and Kakashi, but Naruto might run straight into an attack.

I hear the hoot of a train. It's coming from the caves. Moments later, Naruto shoots out from the caves' mouth, Yukie on his back. He throws himself from the rails just as the train bursts through. He and Yukie tumble into the snow.

I resist the urge to facepalm at his entrance.

The train halts about fifty metres away from them. Lucky me, I'm positioned right above the wagon closest to them.

"It's been a long time, Koyuki," a distorted voice says. It's coming from a large man wearing robes, talking into a microphone. The man that Kakashi fought earlier stands next to him. "Come closer and let me see your face."

Yukie kneels in the snow, a helpless look on her face. Then Naruto gets up and stands protectively in front of her, glaring at the speaker.

He must be Kazahana Doto, I think. I look around. There's a lot of snow… I could drop an avalanche on them if they are distracted enough.

Suddenly, dozens of tree trunks slide down the mountain and crash into the middle of the train. On the cliffs, about fifty men appear, wearing samurai armour and weapons. Sandayuu is one of them. "Everyone! Princess Koyuki needs us!" he shouts. He thrusts his fist into the air. "Victory is ours!" His warriors mirror the gesture, their war cries filling the air.

I inwardly curse. No, you idiot, death is yours if you do this! Can't you see the ninja waiting for you?!

While Sandayuu continues his speech – something about waiting years for this day and how they are finally going to bring Doto down – I cast a genjutsu on myself so I won't be noticed. Man, am I glad for my white clothes now. I'm a lot harder to see in this snow.

Applying chakra to my feet, I sneak on top of the snow over to the warriors, making sure to stay crouched down and behind boulders and snowdrifts as much as possible. I can't risk discovery. At least, the enemy is distracted by the rebels. And doesn't appear nervous at all, which means they have some kind of ace up their sleeves. It doesn't bode well for our side.
And I am currently walking right into the line of fire. Oh hell.

The warrior start to run down to the train, swords and spears brandished, war cries on their lips. I jump up and start to run, too, but-

I manage to jump in front of Sandayuu's band just in time.

 Along the wagons of the train, wooden shutters slide open, revealing what looks like… shelves. There is a sort of clacking noise, multiplied by the hundred, and then thousands of kunai are shot at us like bullets, and there is no way I can save them all, but I have to try. My fingers twist themselves into handseals. "Suiton: Mizu no Tatsumaki!" I scream the name of my A-rank jutsu, and from the snow around me, an enormous tornado of water rises, whirling and spinning around me, the rush of standing in the middle of it surging through me. But I learned from the fight with Tenten, so I cancel the technique after ten seconds. The water crashes down and reveals-

 I lift a shaking hand to my mouth. It's a massacre. The snow is died red with the blood of fallen warriors. Only a handful is left standing, most of them huddled behind me. A dry sob escapes me. Doto's laughter rings in my ears, way too loud.

 My gaze snaps up when there is another clacking noise and oh shit they're firing another barrage at us!

 Thump. Thump. My heartbeat is too loud in my ears. I see the kunai fly at me as if they are in slow motion. There is that odd buzzing right under my skin, like voltage, and I've felt this way before, back in the Forest of Death and-

 I thrust my hands out and the kunai freeze centimetres from my face. Not just those aimed at me, but all of the hundreds of kunai launched at us. I stare at them in shock. My eyes are reflected a glowing green in the weapons' polished surfaces.

 The strength leaves my legs and I drop to my knees. The kunai fall to the ground, too.

 Magic.

 I see Doto frowning at me. Then Sasuke is in front of me, launching kunai with explosive tags attached to them at the train wagons.

 "Sasuke." I croak. He turns around to me, a wild look in his eyes. I point at the snow covered ridge to our right. "Avalanche," I say. He grabs a fuuma shuriken from his backpack, ties a few explosive tags to it and hurls it in the direction I pointed to. Moments later, an avalanche crashes down on the train. I'm just glad the film crew already fled.

 The train hoots and then starts to move. Unfortunately, it wasn't thrown off the mountain by the avalanche. Seconds later, it's out of view. Breathing a sigh of relief, I force myself to my feet – I feel drained, but I still have some chakra left.

 Sasuke is suddenly next to me, steadying me. "I'm fine," I say shakily, trying not to look at the dead all around us. "Look for s-survivors." He doesn't listen and instead scoops me up, jumps down and deposits me next to Naruto. Then he's off again.

 In the distance I hear another explosion and briefly wonder if that's Kakashi's doing.

 "Ri-chan!" Naruto exclaims, jumping forward to pull me into his arms. "Are you okay? What was that with the kunai?"
"No idea," I murmur. "Absolutely no clue."

It's not even a lie.

I stand next to Naruto while we watch his clones, Kakashi and Sasuke search for survivors of the massacre. There are precious few. So far, the only ones are six people that happened to stand behind me when I pulled off my A-rank jutsu.

Six. Six of fifty. Way too few, and yet their survival means so much.

"This is the result of not giving up," Yuki's emotionless voice sounds from behind us. Naruto and I turn around to her. "If they hadn't defied Doto, this wouldn't have hap-"

I cut her off with an ice-cold water bomb to the face. Then I flash in front of her and grab her collar. "Shut the fuck up!" I snarl into her stunned face. In my mind, memories of my biological parents flash, their sacrifice for me forever burnt into my mind. They, too, refused to back down for the sake of someone else. "You make me sick! Say another word, and I'll-

"Riko-chan, we need you here," Kakashi's voice sounds from behind us. "There's another survivor, but he's hurt. Also, don't kill our charge." *Even if it's tempting, he leaves unsaid.*

I growl and let go of Yuki, shoving her so she falls on her ass. Then I whirl around and rush over to Kakashi, Sasuke and two members of the film crew who are carrying one of the warriors on a stretcher. I swallow hard when I see that it's Sandayuu. They set him down and I kneel next to him, my hands lighting up in light blue with a diagnostic jutsu. I feel Sasuke's familiar presence move behind me, and then a warm cloak drops on my shoulders.

Right. I'd forgotten that I took off my cloak in preparation for the fight. With all the adrenaline, I didn't notice the cold.

"Princess..." Sandayuu weakly murmurs. Yuki approaches and kneels on his other side. "Forgive me... for involving you ... in such a thing," he wheezes. "It was because of you... that I and all the others... were able to keep believing. You are... our princess... so please, believe in yourself... as I do. You are... our hope..." his voice trails off. Yuki stays silent.

"It's fine, it'll be fine, don't talk," I whisper, running my hands over his body. Information on his injuries fills my head and I bite my lip, almost despairing. "It'll be fine," I repeat, blinking away tears. "I won't let you die, I promise, Sandayuu-san."

The light from my hands turns into a gentle green. I lose my sense of time as I heal the worst of his injuries even though they are way above my capabilities. He isn't as bad off as Asuma was back in Wave, but Asuma was a ninja with strong chakra, and Sandayuu is only a civilian. I feel the chakra drain from me while I stop the bleeding in his lungs and stomach – I don't have enough chakra left for more, and I can't pass out mid-mission. My team needs me.

Finally, I pull my hands back. "He'll live," I croak. "If he's stubborn enough."

"That's awesome!" Naruto grins at me. Then his smile fades when he sees the look on my face. "Ri-chan?"

I shake my head. "It's fine, I'm just really tired. He needs to get to safety and rest." We wait while crew members carry Sandayuu away.

I don't tell him that Sandayuu will never walk again, even if he survives. It can wait.
My failure to save him, to save everyone, it stings. I'm not good enough.

"Well, are you satisfied now?" Yukie asks. "Let's go home. If you stay here, that," she points at Sandayuu's motionless form. "will happen to you, too. So let's go home!" With that, she turns and starts walking away. I stare after her, feeling dead inside. I don't have the energy to get up and shove her off the cliff like she deserves.

"Go home where?" Naruto growls while Sasukereaches down, grabs my arm and drags me to my feet. I wonder how he knows I need to be standing right now instead of kneeling. Then he hands me an energy pill that I swallow greedily.

Yukie stops walking when she hears Naruto's question.

"This is your home! If you want to go home, defeat Doto and go back to your own home with your head held high!" Naruto snarls angrily.

"You know nothing," Yukie answers. "Spring doesn't come to this country! The tears have frozen over and hardened our hearts."

"Not Sandayuu's. He kept on believing in you, even sacrificed himself," I say coldly. "But you, you're the worst. There will never be any happiness for you if you keep on running. And you know what? You deserve that."

She whirls around to me, eyes flashing with rage. "Will you stop this nonsense?! I'm going home!" she turns around again, walking away. Naruto runs after her, shouting at her to wait. He grabs her arm, but she snatches it back, whirling around again. "Leave me alone!"

No one answers, because in that moment, a giant airship comes into view behind her. I shift my stance and grab my senbon.

A Snow ninja appears in a door and shoots something at Yukie. She screams as cables pull her up into the airship's gondola. "Shit!" I yell, jumping forward as I see the female Snow ninja from before glide through the air on wings attached to her armour. She launches a kunai barrage at us, and there's something attached to them-

We all leap away as they hit the ground and icy spikes explode from them instantly, a deadly forest of sharp ice shooting up. I jump backwards, but I'm unsteady on my feet and not fast enough to completely escape. An icy lance catches on the cloak I'm wearing and I get dragged into the air. I manage to free myself, but before I can escape, someone grabs my leg and I'm suddenly dangling upside down from the female Snow ninja's hand, her chakra making my skin stick to hers. I lose sight of the airship, the last I see of it is a blur of orange flying after it. Far, far below us, the landscape passes, the ledge where the rest of my team is quickly growing smaller as the distance increases. I kick at my captor, but she only laughs. "You'll pay for killing Mizore!" she crows maliciously. She suddenly veers left and I blanch.

The bitch is going to slam me into a mountain, and if that doesn't kill me, I'll splatter on the sharp rocks below.

"I'm not going down without a fight, bitch!" I scream, pulling my leg down abruptly. Her hand is stuck to my leg, so it gets pulled down. I surge up and grab it, twisting and turning and then I'm sitting on her back between her wings while she spits curses at me. She tries throwing me off by pirouetting and it works, but I manage to grab one of the tips of her wings as I fall. We start plummeting toward ground.
"Let go!" she screams. Then she suddenly grins maliciously and forms the tiger handseal. "Ice Release: Swallow Snow Blade!" she shouts. A single ice swallow forms itself and shoots in my direction. I lift my free hand to protect my face, but that was never the target. It shoots toward my other hand, cutting my arm with razor sharp wings. I cry out at the sudden pain, and my hand loses its grip on my enemy's wing.

Her flight rights itself and she flies off while I plummet to my death.
My hand loses its grip. The Snow ninja's flight rights itself and she flies off while I plummet to my death.

Shit, shit, shit! is all I can think as I fall, squeezing my eyes shut. I twist my fingers into seals, desperately scrounging up some chakra – I barely have anything left. "Water Style: Water Armour," I whisper, feeling a layer of water coat me. Just in time for the horrible impact. I crash into the ground, the air is driven from my lungs and for a moment, all I do is gasp for air. Then the pain hits and I curl into myself, or I try to. I can't move. Not because of the pain but because I'm engulfed in snow. I must have fallen straight into a heap of snow. Lucky me.

Of course, my lucky break doesn't last. Too late, I realise what an impact on a snow covered mountain means. The snow is already shifting, moving. I try to scramble upwards, to get out of the snow, but weakened as I am, I don't stand a chance against the force of nature an avalanche is. I get tossed and turned around and around, lose all sense of orientation and direction. I can't breathe, ice cold snow is all around me, burying me alive and crushing me at the same time. I scream, but then I have snow in my mouth and I'm choking, coughing, trying to get it out, and it's cold and it hurts, and I feel something snap inside me. I hear the sound of a loud explosion, and then I faceplant into the ground, finally lying still. I groan and force myself to my feet. Everything hurts, and I'm way too cold. Belatedly, I realise there is no more snow suffocating me.


I'm at the foot of the mountain, standing in the middle of an earth crater. Where the crater ends, enormous walls of snow tower above me like a dome, light only falling through at the very top.

I was in the middle of an avalanche and magic saved me. My knees hit the ground as exhaustion hits me. I feel dizzy.

I'm never calling magic useless again.

I shake my head, trying to get rid of the dizziness. No time to think – I have to get out of here. I have no idea where I am, I have no idea where my team is with the exception of Naruto who is probably on the airship and far, far away from me. Right now, I'm on my own in the middle of nowhere, and if I don't get moving soon, I'll freeze to death.

First things first. With trembling fingers, I assess the damage to my body. By some stroke of my incredible luck, I got away without any broken bones, though my ribs are so bruised, they might as well be broken. But I think can walk. The problem is the exhaustion. My chakra is seriously low after pulling that A-rank jutsu and healing Sandayuu. Add to that the fact that I used magic twice...

Damn it. I don't want to die here!

Shivering, I open my kunai pouch and pull my small case of medical pills out. I swallow a nutrients pill, followed by a glucose pill for energy. I lay off the painkillers since I need my wits about me. And hopefully, the pain will keep my awake.

Feeling a tiny little bit better, I stare up at the dome of snow. It looks like it's frozen in motion, like it
should crash down any moment but is held back by something.

_That would be magic, _I think. _And if I get really unlucky, it'll stop holding the moment I touch it. And then I'll get buried under tons of snow. I doubt I'd survive that a second time._

Which means I'm stuck in here. Well, I could try waiting until I've recovered enough chakra to gather water, and then I could push it into the snow walls where it would freeze and make them into ice walls... but that would take ages and a ton of chakra, and it's so bloody cold I'd freeze to death before I was done. Maybe I could make a fire that would melt the snow walls and the melted snow would then freeze to ice, but there's nothing to burn here. I have a small camping stove, but that would never be enough... though maybe I could unseal the boat in my sealing scroll, make it into kindling and burn it... but that wouldn't last long either.

Shaking my head, I unseal some dry clothes and hastily change into them while I think. Then I slap my forehead in realisation and pull out some storage seals from the bandages on my arms.

"Please work," I whisper, placing them onto the ground and taking a few steps back. Then I make the tiger seal. "Kai!" I yell, and the seals explode, unleashing hundreds of litres of water in a torrential wave. The snow walls groan, but at his point, I've jumped onto the water, letting it carry me up. The walls start caving in, but I quickly toss some kunai with explosive notes up, and when they explode, the snow gets flung outwards and away, and then I'm free, icy cold air hitting my face, and I leap up and away, landing on the deep snow, but by now I know how to run on top of it, and I manage to get to what looks like a treetop peeking out of the snow - the rest of it is buried. Hastily, I grab onto it.

I look around. Everything around me is covered in snow, only treetops peeking out. Behind me is the enormous hole in the snow that I just crawled out of. Snow is still crashing down into it. Over me, the mountain towers. I can clearly see the path the avalanche took, a dark scar on the otherwise snow covered mountain. The sky above it is a dark grey - it will be nighttime soon.

"Now what?" I ask. Of course, there's no answer.

I grab my sword and cut some branches out of the tree I'm holding onto. Then I use wire to tie them together to makeshift snowshoes which I tie to my boots. That done, I grit my teeth and start walking in the direction I think the airship disappeared into, not that I'm too sure about my sense of orientation. But anything is better than standing still.

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It's been around two hours of mindless walking through the snow. Two hours of trying to not give up, trying to make myself think warm thoughts and not worry about my team, of blocking out the Cursed Seal that started hurting after an hour.

I'm at my limit. Twice, I stopped to put on more clothes, but I just couldn't get warm again. My movements have become sluggish and slow and I have no idea where I'm going, sometimes I think I'm walking in circles. My compass is no help either, the needle just turns in circles - I'm probably right in the middle of a magnetic field. I have long since traded the avalanche area for a snow desert wherein I didn't need the annoying snowshoes anymore, and everything looks the same here.

If only there were forest here. I could set it on fire and warm up again. I'd probably get ninja company real fast, too.

Finally, I let myself slump against a boulder. _One minute. Not longer. _I tell myself, sitting down. _Or I'm never getting up again._
I don't feel the cold anymore, which I know is a seriously bad sign. With uncoordinated fingers, I pull out my small case of medical pills again. I swallow two nutrients pills and a soldier pill, then I lean back and wait for the effects. But in the back of my mind, a voice whispers to me that it's hopeless, that I'm going to die here, frozen to death. Tears leak out of my eyes, freezing on my face. "D-d-dam-nit," I whisper through numb lips. I bury my face in my cold gloved hands.

Suddenly, I notice light seeping through my hands. I take my hands down and blink owlishly.

Before me, in a cloud of golden light, a rabbit hovers. A mint green rabbit. With wings. "Hi there!" it squeaks cheerfully and waves at me.

I blink. "W-what the h-e ll was-s in t-those p-pills?" I ask.

The rabbit giggles. "I'm the Flying Mint Bunny!" it informs me, fluttering right to my face. It touches its paw to my nose. It feels warm. "I've come to cheer you up!"


My eyes are falling shut. A sudden pain in my nose makes me open them again. "Don't fall asleep!" the hallucination chides with its annoying squeaky voice.

The rabbits are going to haunt me until I die, I just know it. Or maybe I'm already dead and this is a rabbit-angel.

"I'm c-c-old. And lost. And so t-tired," I mumble.

The rabbit lands on my shoulder. Then it gives me a rabbit kiss on the cheek. "You better now, Riko-chan?" it asks.

"No," I reply.

The rabbit tries again. "Now?"

"No."

"And now?"

"No!" I snap.

The Flying Mint Bunny looks dejectedly. A tear rolls out of its eye. Great, now I feel guilty. I wipe the tear away and the moment it touches my skin, golden light flashes and wonderful, amazing warmth runs through me. I gasp, my mouth dropping open.

The rabbit gives me another kiss on the cheek. "And now?"

"Yeah," I whisper. "Warm again."

The bunny jumps from my shoulder and flies a circle around me. "Yay!" it cheers. "Let's play something!"

"What the hell are you?" I ask.

It stops in front of my face. "I'm the Flying Mint Bunny!" it answers. "I make people happy!"

"Uhuh," I answer, doubtful. "You have wings."
"For flying!"
"Are you one of my summons?" I ask, at this point so weirded out I can't even freak out anymore.
"I've come to cheer you up!"
"Yeah, you said that," I answer. "Why?"
"'Cause you were sad!"
"Aha."
"Let's play something!"
"Do you have a name?" I ask.
"Flying Mint Bunny!" it answers, flicking my nose. "Silly Riko-chan!"
"That's your name?" I ask.
"Yep! But the others call me 'Boss'!"
I stare at it. "You're the rabbit's boss summon?!" I shriek.
"I'm the Flying Mint Bunny!"
Kami, it's like talking to a mildly stupid brick wall.
This is the rabbit in charge? That explains so much.
"Look, my friends are in trouble, I have no time to play, I'm sorry," I say apologetically, hoping it won't cry again. "I have to find them. So you can just… go home?"
"Ohhhh, that's bad! I'm gonna help you!" the FMB says.
"How are you going to do that?" I ask, raising an eyebrow. "By 'cheering me up'?"
"Yes!" it squeals, and I facepalm.
"Look, I'm thankful and all that you saved me, but-"
"Let's go!" it interrupts me, hops on my back and glues its paws to me with chakra, and then we're leaving the ground.
"Aaahhh!" I scream while the FMB bats its wings and pulls me higher and higher into the air, its paws glued to my back with chakra. "We're flying!" Then I realise what's happening and laugh. "We're flying!"
"Yippiieee!" the FMB squeals and shoots forward and wild laughter bursts out of me.

Rabbits are the best summon ever, I decide as we fly in the direction of the mountains. Granted, they aren't exactly what I had in mind when I thought about flying summons, but… this is amazing.

In the distance, a large fortress made of black stone comes into view. Damn, that thing is ugly.
"Set me down over there, between the boulders!" I shout, pointing a spot that overlooks the castle
"Okay!" the Flying Mint Bunny says cheerfully. Soon enough, we land. Hiding behind a boulder, I scan the fortress. "What're you doing?" my companion asks.

"Hide!" I hiss. "Someone's coming!"

Below us, two Snow shinobi land.

"Hi there!" the FMB chirps and flies down in all its mint green glory, circling the shinobi. I facepalm and jump up to defend it, but then I notice the shinobi haven't even turned around. The damn rabbit is right in front of their faces and chattering away, and they don't even notice.

They can't hear or see it... I grin as I watch the oblivious shinobi leap away, presumably to patrol somewhere else. This has potential.

"Why couldn't they see you?" I ask.

"Oohh, only special people can see me!" the rabbit replies cheerfully. "I'm really happy you can! Can we go play now?"

Special people, huh? I wonder what it means by that.

"Who was the last one that could see you?" I ask. "Was he tall, with hair like a pineapple and scars on his face?"

The Flying Mint Bunny giggles. "Yep! I gave him our contract! Had a good feeling about him, you know, Riko-chan? Even though he was drunk." I raise an eyebrow. Dad, drunk? The rabbit continues, flying circles around me. "But he didn't remember the next day and he couldn't see me when he was sober, and he already had a contract, so that didn't work out. But now you're here!" it lands on my shoulder and bumps my ear with its nose. "Can we go play now?"

Dad not remembering, yeah right. He probably just thought the FMB was too troublesome to deal with or he really couldn't see it without alcohol. But it he hadn't remembered, he wouldn't have given me the contract - he knew I really wanted a flying summon. I'll have to remember to thank him later.

I grin and pet the rabbit's head. "Alright. Say, FMB-chan, do you like hide-and-seek?"

The Flying Mint Bunny, for all its awesomeness, turns out to be kind of useless as a scout. Sure, it can't be seen by normal people that aren't under the influence of alcohol, but it also sucks at reporting. Or any ninja stuff, really.

"And it's really ugly in there, all gloomy. Can we play something else?" it asks.

"I have to get in there," I say. "Come on, did you find an entrance that isn't guarded?"

"I thought we wanted to find people and play!" the rabbit complains. It can't seem to grasp the concept of 'enemies'. Or 'danger'.

"Forget it," I mutter. "Listen, I can't play now. I'm a ninja on a mission. We can play later, alright?"

The rabbit looks down sadly. "Does that mean you don't like me anymore? I exist to cheer people up! I'm a failure!" it wails.

"No, no!" I say hastily, irrationally panicking. "You're definitely my favourite rabbit, and you were a
great help already! I'm so much happier than before, I'm totally cheered up! I just really don't have time to play. I'll summon you when I have more time, and then we'll play, okay? Please stop crying!"

It sniffs and looks up tearfully. "Really?"

"I promise."

The rabbit cheers up instantly. I breathe a sigh of relief. "Okay then. But I'm not a summon-rabbit, Riko-chan, I'm a cheer-up rabbit! I'll come when you need me!"

The Flying Mint Bunny does a little pirouette and disappears in a flash of golden light.

"Cheer-up rabbit," I repeat disbelievingly. "What the fuck."

What a weirdo. I'll need to ask a sane rabbit about it.

…there are no sane rabbits. Bugger.

Oh well. I don't have to make sense of everything. I already knew the rabbits were weird. The important thing is that I've got flying summon.

No, wait. The important thing is that I have a mission.

My plan is to sneak into the castle to look for Naruto and wait for the rest of my team - sooner or later, they will show up here. That, and I want to take out Doto. It won't be easy, he'll be guarded by Snow shinobi, but if anyone is stealthy enough to sneak in, it's me. I learned from the best, after all.

The problem lies with getting into that monster of a castle. It's crawling with Snow shinobi.

I place a notice-me-not genjutsu on myself, then I quickly make my way down to the castle, taking care to stay behind boulders. I've long since switched my clothes to black ones that should hide me well among the dark rocks of the mountains. My chakra is cloaked, my steps are noiseless, my presence completely hidden. Once, a patrol passes right over me and doesn't even look in my direction.

I smirk. This is easier than I thought it would be. Thanks, Demon-sensei.

I'm now mere steps away from the towering castle walls, hidden in a cramped space between two rocks – being small has its advantages. Patiently, I wait twenty about minutes, studying the patrols. I'm aware there are probably guards high above me, but I'm counting on the fact that they won't look down directly, that they'll focus more on the distance. Besides, the castle is humongous, there's no way they can keep surveillance over every last inch.

The next patrol passes and I wait a second after they've disappeared from view, then I leap into motion. Noiselessly, I scurry over to the foot of the castle and swiftly run up the outer wall, ignoring my aching body. I only have a few seconds, then the next patrol will be there.

I make it just in time to hide on the roof of an unmanned watchtower – here I can't be seen from below, and the high wall is at my back, so I can't be seen from above either unless someone leans over and looks down directly. I count the seconds it should take for the patrol to pass, then I continue scaling the outer wall until I've reached the top. From there, I dive beneath a cart that holds a bunch of metal rods – I have no idea what they are needed for, but it's a convenient hiding place.

I hold my breath as I see the feet of two guards walk past – no shinobi this time. After they're gone, I run into the opposite direction they took until I reach a slim door – I nearly overlooked it when I
studied the castle from my outlook point while waiting for the Flying Mint Bunny to report.

Of course, the door is locked, but that means nothing to a ninja. Pulling out a senbon, I slide it into the lock. A few wriggles later and the door is open, just in time for me to slip through and close the door before the next patrol passes.

I'm inside.

Now the hard part starts.

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I hastily run along the ceilings of the castle corridors – it's safer, people rarely look up, not even shinobi do unless they suspect a threat.

I've made my way into a part of the castle that appears to be a factory – there are a bunch of miserable looking workers, manning enormous furnaces and forges, hammering metal parts, the loud noises of machines drowning out anything else. Grime and soot covers the workers, the ground, everything.

The only good thing about the place is that it's warm, hot even. Still, I'm glad to leave it behind.

I stop and stare, peeking through the next door. I knew the castle was enormous, but this... the castle was built on a mountain, but I had no idea that it continued into it too, it wasn't visible from outside. I'm looking down at a large cavern, with walls frozen over by ice that will give the ice-manipulating Snow shinobi a very troublesome advantage. The ground below is incredibly far away, one could probably stack five Hokage Towers on top of each other and they'd still not reach the ceiling.

I'm pretty sure I'll need to get across the cavern to get into the inner part of the castle where I suspect Doto is. The only way to do that is to walk across the narrow ice walkways spanning the cavern, right under the eyes of every Snow shinobi currently there. There is absolutely no way of getting across unnoticed, which means I'll have to bullshit my way through.

I drop the genjutsu and use a henge to make myself look like a large Snow shinobi, face covered by a helmet. Then I walk purposefully across the walkway at a controlled pace, making sure to get the pace just right to appear too busy to talk but too slow to signal any kind of emergency.

By some stroke of luck, no one stops me. I guess that's the disadvantage of having so many shinobi here, not everyone knows each other. However, the door I need to pass through to enter the inner part of the castle is guarded.

"Password?" the guard – another generic Snow ninja – asks in a bored tone.

"Guard control!" I snarl in an aggressive tone, my henge'd form towering over the man. "State your name, rank, ID!"

The man blanches and stutters out his answer. I purposefully relax my stance a little. "All in order. Keep your eyes open. An impostor has infiltrated the castle." And with that, I move past the man into the inner castle while he's still thrown off balance.

I mentally pat myself on the shoulder for managing to pull that off. However, I doubt it would work again - the closer I get to Doto, the more dangerous the guards will become. That's why I decide to drop the henge and cast my genjutsu again. After doing that, I take to the ceiling again. In this part of the castle, the ceilings are higher and the corridors wider. They are also more heavily decorated which makes staying hidden even easier, especially since they aren well lit - for me, who is used to navigating the mist, these are ideal conditions.
Now, if only it were a little warmer...

I barely encounter anyone while I creep along, using every available shadow to keep myself hidden – something all Nara are taught in excess. Finally, I stand in front of two doors so large and grand looking, they can only lead into an important hall. I bite my lip. Should I go in there?

Well, certainly not through the front door. There's got to be a ninja entrance if it's an important room. Now, how to go about finding it...

I start and dart behind a pillar when I hear a noise. Steps. I sense the chakras of three people, two fairly large, the third one average, and it feels familiar… it's the female Snow ninja that dropped me. I ball my fists. That bitch. Fubuki, I think she was called. At least, the one that fought Kakashi addressed his companions as 'Mizore' and 'Fubuki', and since she blamed be for Mizore's death, she must be Fubuki.

Another chakra belongs to the remaining ninja, the one that Kakashi fought. I have no idea what his name is, but I know he's the leader of their squad. Definetely a jounin, and very dangerous - I remember the giant ice narwhale that nearly crushed me well.

The third chakra belongs to Kazahana Doto, and fucking hell, his chakra is strong, not civilian level at all. I doubt he's gone through the kind of training ninja from hidden villages go through, but it's obvious that he's a dangerous opponent, too dangerous for me with my depleted chakra levels and exhausted body, not to mention his guards. The only thing I've got going for me is my stealth and the fact that they feel too secure in their surroundings to check for threats. Their arrogance probably comes from ten years of ruling unchallenged. I might be able to launch a surprise attack, but I need to wait for a good opportunity.

It will come. Sooner or later, my team will show up. That's when I'll attack, when the enemy is distracted. Until then, I need to keep an eye on the situation. Which means I need to get into that room.

In the end, it wasn't that hard. I was right, there was a ninja entrance. There were also niches meant for hiding ninja, but I steered clear of those – can't risk an enemy suddenly joining me there. Now I lie on my stomach between the jaws of a hideous giant dragon statue, overlooking the entire room – it took some serious manoeuvring and timing to get in there undiscovered, and it was incredibly risky - on look up, and they'd have seen me.

But the risk was worth the results. The chances of me being discovered in here are practically zero. No one would ever suspect someone in here, most people wouldn't even fit inside. From here, I have an excellent view over the hall, which appears to be a throne room. Doto took his place on a rather tasteless throne placed on a high dais. Save for that and the ugly statue, the room is empty.

Currently, Fubuki and the other ninja, whose name I have since learned is 'Nadare', are kneeling before Doto.

"Soon, my plans will come to pass," Doto drones on. "The treasure hidden in the glaciers will be mine."

Such a generic arrogant villain. Maybe he could volunteer some more details for me? Perhaps with a nice, old-fashioned villain monologue?

"Doto-sama," Nadare says cautiously. "Koyuki won't betray you?"

Wait, what? Koyuki? Betray him? They are enemies!
"I know her well. She will bring the Hexagonal Crystal to me. Her acting will fool even the Konoha ninja."

Oh bugger. It's a trap!

I have to keep myself from doing something stupid. Right now, the smartest thing is to stay hidden. I know about the enemy's trap. I can thwart their plan.

"The Konoha ninja will pay!" Fubuki growls below me.

Doto clucks his tongue. "Patience. You will have your chance."

"They should be here soon," Nadare remarks casually. "With the girl's death, Kakashi will hurry here to avenge her."

Oh, I'm not as dead as you think, and you'll regret what you did. I will not be an instrument to harming Kakashi. You won't lay a finger on him!

But now I'm worried Kakashi and Sasuke think I'm dead. But no, they don't know that for sure, they only saw me get dragged off. I'm sure they haven't given up on me. Still, they must be worried sick.

A distant sound reaches my ears – explosions.

They are here.

"So it has started. Soon, my plans will be realised," Doto states. Right at that moment, a Snow ninja runs into the throne hall and kneels before Doto.

"Kazahana-sama! The prisoners have escaped and enemies have infiltrated the castle!"

"More than one prisoner?" Nadare asks. "Who besides the princess escaped?"

"The orange-wearing Konoha-nin, sir," the man answers, sounding slightly weirded out that a ninja would actually wear that colour, and I want to laugh out loud. Naruto's alright and he's coming. The infiltrators must be Kakashi and Sasuke.


Kami, he's disgusting. I haven't forgotten how he laughed after shooting down all those warriors, delighted at the bloodbath.

He's going to pay.

Fubuki and Nadare flash away, presumably hiding in the niches I found earlier. The light goes out and the dais with Doto on his throne is hidden in darkness. I tense my muscles so I can leap into motion instantly. I had to put my sword away to fit into my hiding place, so I carefully start forming a short water sword, taking care to mask my chakra.

A minute later, Kakashi, Naruto and Sasuke run in, lead by Yukie. I glare at her in disgust. She led them here. Spineless coward.

With a clanking sound, a spotlight flashes on, illuminating Doto. He stands up to look down at them disdainfully while they stare in shock. "Doto," Kakashi murmurs.

"Good work, Koyuki," Doto praises, his words startling my friends. Yukie straightens, then she runs
forward. My team moves to stop her, but the Snow ninja dropping down prevent them from going after her. I tense my muscles, but the right moment hasn't arrived yet.

Yukie runs up the stairs and drops something into Doto's hand – it looks like her necklace. It must be the Hexagonal Crystal Doto talked about. "It seems you have forgotten!" she announces, turning around to look down at my team with a victorious smile. "I'm an actress!"

I frown. Something doesn't fit here. In all the time I've spent in her company, Yukie never smiled unless she was in front of the camera.

"Exactly," Doto says with his oily voice. "It was all an act put on by Koyuki."

And then Yukie pulls a small sword and stabs him. "Yes. It was all an act," she whispers. My jaw drops.

_Holy shit. I didn't see that coming._

"D-damn it!" Doto growls through clenched teeth, and then one of his large hands closes around Yukie's throat, lifting her off the ground.

"Nee-chan!" Naruto yells in panic.

I crawl out of my hideout, run up the wall and then across the ceiling, not bothering with stealth – everyone's attention is riveted on Doto and the struggling Yukie. She's saying something about knowing she was going to die, how she wasn't going to run anymore. Naruto is yelling at her, but now I'm directly above them, and I drop down. Doto's eyes widen as I land on the dais, my water sword gleaming as it swings toward his neck. He shifts his stance and holds Yukie in my way, using her body as a shield. "Coward!" I spit at him and change the direction of my sword strike, and then Yukie falls down, Doto's hand still clutching her throat but no longer attached to his wrist. Doto shrieks in pain, flailing his arms, and I surge forward with my water sword again, but it shatters into droplets of water against his chest.

Shit, he's wearing chakra armour under his robes! I realise, and the shock costs me dearly. One of Doto's arms crashes into my chest, drives the air out of my lungs and sends me flying into a wall, and damn it, that hurts! I crash to the ground, distantly hearing people shout my name, and I think I pass out for a short time, because when I open my eyes again, Doto is standing only a few steps away from me, smirking triumphantly, his robes fallen off to reveal blue-and-black armour. Yukie is struggling in the hold of his right hand, but he doesn't even notice as he glares at Naruto who is on the ground – he must have charged and gotten hit.

"Now, let us go, Koyuki. Beyond the rainbow!" he mocks Yukie's catchphrase from the movie cruelly. He lifts his free hand-

_But I cut it off! That can't be! How-?_

But it's not his hand. It's a replacement, made of what looks like… black ice? _Shit, shit, shit!_ I think as the ceiling above him explodes and cables shoot out from his armour, pulling him and Yukie upward.

"Dammit!" Naruto yells. "Sasuke, take care of Ri-chan!" He throws a kunai tied to a rope at Yukie's outstretched arm. It loops around it and then all three are pulled through the crumbling ceiling and out of sight. I curse and force myself to my feet, not very intent on getting buried alive again. But then Sasuke is there. He hastily picks me up and leaps away with me in his arms, dodging wreckage or letting Kakashi kick it away while he runs into the castle corridors where Snow ninja are already
waiting, shooting cables at us, but they never hit – Sasuke is much too fast for them, even with me weighing him down. And then they yell in fear as Kakashi rips into them, but I can't see what he's doing anymore as Sasuke carries me away, through corridor after corridor and down stairways, dodging enemies or throwing kunai at them. I help him out as best as I can with my senbon, and then Sasuke tosses a kunai with an explosive tag at a wall and blows a hole into it, and suddenly we're tumbling outside into the crisp night air. Sasuke touches down on the roof of a watchtower and I use the opportunity to slip out of his arms and land on my feet. I keep holding onto his arms though, and then I shunshin us out to the distant edge of the forest. We don't stop running for the next five minutes.

I'm just about to suggest a small break because I think I've cracked a rib and can't breathe right, and I'm sure we must have lost all pursuers anyway, when Sasuke abruptly halts. "What is it?" I start to ask but then I'm suddenly pressed against him, squeezed so tightly in his arms, it hurts.

"Damn it, Ri," he forces out, his voice pained.

"Can't breathe!" I gasp, squirming against his hold. He lets go of me abruptly and then my face is in his hands and his mouth is on mine. I freeze.

It's different from last time. That was over so fast, I barely had time to realise what was happening. This… it makes my knees weak and my heart flutter. It feels like I'm losing the ground under my feet. I grab onto his shoulders to steady myself, and he takes his hands off my face to draw me closer until I'm pressed fully against him.

Finally, he pulls away but keeps his arms around me. He leans his forehead against mine, his breaths unsteady. Mine are, too. I stare up into his eyes, barely visible in the darkness of the night.

The distant sound of an explosion breaks the moment, cruelly reminding me that we are still in the middle of a mission, that Naruto is who knows where and enemies might attack us any moment. "We should go," I whisper, resisting the urge to touch my still tingling lips. "Doto is heading to the Rainbow Glaciers."

Sasuke gives me a sharp nod. "Are you injured?"

I shake my head, keeping quiet about my ribs. "Nothing too serious. Just bruises and exhaustion. I haven't gotten much rest." Come to think about it, the last time I got some sleep was during the night before we landed on that iceberg for filming. I haven't really rested in over twenty-four hours.

"I'll handle fighting. You do support," Sasuke decides and I nod in affirmation. Then we head off.

It's been a half hour of running. Kakashi joined us for a few minutes only to tell us that he was going to take care of Nadare and leaving Fubuki for us, and that we should head to the glaciers.

"We're being followed," Sasuke says curtly.

I nod, casting out my chakra sense. "From above. Fubuki's using those wings on her armour to follow us. Good thing we have trees to cover us."

"I'll take care of her," he answers.

"Understood."

I wouldn't be of much use in a fight right now, anyways. I should save my chakra for healing.
Something whistles through the air and Sasuke and I leap to the side. Where we were moments before, icy spikes explode from the ground.

It seems Fubuki has caught up with us.

I throw myself to the ground instinctively as she narrowly passes over me, gliding on her wings and skilfully manoeuvring around the trees. A sudden glare of fire illuminates the forest and Fubuki rips her arms up to protect her face from Sasuke's fire ball. I use her distraction to run up a tree and hide between the leaves. I don't want to get in Sasuke's way, and maybe I can figure out a way to support him.

"Ninjutsu doesn't work on this armour!" The Snow shinobi jeers. "Neither does genjutsu! You can't defeat me!"

Sasuke merely pulls out his shuriken in response.

"Now, I might let you live…” she taunts. "if you hand over the little redheaded bitch."

Sasuke's eyes flare red. "Wrong thing to say," he says, cold rage ringing in his voice, and then he disappears from view. Fubuki shrieks as one of her wings is suddenly wrapped in wires – I didn't even see Sasuke throw his shuriken. Her flight disrupted, she crashes into a tree and falls to the ground, but before she can reach it, Sasuke has flashed behind her. I stare wide-eyed as he grabs her and first rips the wings off, then subjects her to a vicious combination of kicks and punches, ending with her slamming into the ground, her neck bent at an awkward angle.

I drop down from the tree and run over to him. "We're done here," Sasuke says, the rage still apparent in his voice.

"Are you alright, Sasuke?" I ask timidly. He just killed a person. I know it wasn't his first kill, but that doesn't make anything better. I would know.

"Fine," he growls.

"But you killed-

"I don't care." I flinch as he reaches out with his hand that just took a person's life and holds it against my throat. His eyes still glow sharingan red, full of rage. "She hurt you."

I swallow. "Okay then," I whisper, wondering if it's the right thing to say but unable to think of anything else. I pull out an empty scroll and unseal a sealing brush. "I'll just… take care of the body."

I quickly spread out the scroll and paint the seal for body storage, Sasuke watching with his sharingan still active, copying my movements and the seal design. As soon as I'm finished, he grabs the scroll and walks over to Fubuki's body. A moment later, she's gone and Sasuke puts the scroll away. "Come on," he orders.

We take to the trees, much more comfortable with tree hopping than running on the ground. Sasuke suddenly stops. "What is it?" I ask. He points forward.

"What is that light?" he asks. Not too far from us, the night sky is lit up by what must be an enormous light source.

"I don't know, but I bet that's where Doto and Naruto are," I state. "Let's hurry."
The light is coming from six monoliths, arranged so they form a circle, a circle that is occupied by Naruto, Doto and Yukie. We arrive just in time to see Doto move to punch Naruto straight into the icy ground with his black ice-hand. The force causes the ground to shatter, revealing black water underneath that Naruto falls into.

Sasuke and I don't even need to look at each other to know what we have to do. In Sasuke's hands, a chidori springs into existence and he runs to attack Doto while I run to the water hole Naruto disappeared into, my sword drawn and glowing with chakra. I stab it into the water. "Water Style! Water Chain Sword!" I scream and send the glowing chains into the dark water, mentally willing them to find Naruto and haul him up.

I look up when Sasuke suddenly flies past me and slams into a boulder, grunting in pain. Blood leaks from his mouth. Enraged, I turn to Doto who is smirking triumphantly, not noticing that there's a large crack in the yin-and-yang stone of his armour. "As if that level of technique would be effective on me!" he crows. "You are next, girl! You'll pay for cutting off my hand!"

I hiss at him. "I'm going to cut off your head next! You're the one that's going to pay!"

The water in the hole starts glowing red and I feel an enormous chakra building up just as my chains finally wrap around something. I rip up my sword, my chains surging up, and at the end of them, Naruto hangs, eyes glowing red and his fangs elongated, his fingers held in a familiar seal. I make my chains let go of him as dozens of clones appear in the air, all with the same furious expression on their faces. Doto staggers back in shock but doesn't hesitate for long to form handseals of his own. "Twin Dragon Blizzard!" he yells and two giant black dragonlike forms surge from his body, ripping into the clones as they circle around each other and unleash a tornado of icy wind. I jump in front of Sasuke and swing my sword so the chains form a protective dome around us.

When the tornado finally fades, Doto stands there, laughing just like he did after watching the rebels slaughtered. "It's over!" he shouts. "It's all over!"


Because Naruto's chakra hasn't faded one bit. From the dust cloud Doto's tornado whipped up, his voice sounds. "Not done yet!" The dust dissipates, revealing two Narutos forming a rasengan. "It's only over when justice prevails and evil loses, dattebayo!" he yells, and I shake my head at the cheesy line.

"Naruto! I believe in you!" Yukie's voice yells, and I finally see her standing half-hidden behind a boulder. I'd kind of forgotten all about her. "You're the strongest ninja Princess Fuun believes in!"

"Definitely a victim of the Ramen Talk," I mutter, watching Naruto run at Doto and shove the rasengan in his chest. Sasuke snorts tiredly. Then he gives a wet cough. I turn around sharply, letting the chains fade – the danger is over, Doto was just slammed into one of the monoliths. I let my hands light up green and run them over Sasuke's body, biting my lip. "I was looking forward to not passing out, y'know?" I mutter as I feel my already meagre reserves dwindle while healing his broken ribs. "Killjoy."

Sasuke snorts again.

"You're buying me ramen for this." I glare at him weakly as my technique fizzles out. Sasuke sits up. "I'm going to faint," I inform him, my vision dimming already. "Please catch me..."

Then everything goes black.
Chapter End Notes

Additional disclaimer: I do not own the Flying Mint Bunny. It snuck in from Hetalia.
Something tickles my nose. I snort a little and open my eyes. The culprit was Naruto's hair.

Casting a quick look around, I see it's night time and we're in some sort of infirmary – Naruto must have snuck over into my bed. Or sleep-walked, from the looks of him. He isn't waking up anytime soon.

I decide to ignore my aching and exhausted body and sit up – I know it's only bruises, soreness and exhaustion. However, my body doesn't want to be ignored, so my arms give out halfway and I fall back onto the bed – or would have fallen, had a familiar pair of hands not caught me. "Hey Sasuke," I croak – my throat is dry. "Got some water for me?"

Sasuke helps me sit and then hands me a water canteen. I gratefully take it and drink it all up. After that, I lean against Sasuke, exhausted by even this simple action. He puts his arm around my shoulders.

"What are we doing, Sasuke?" I whisper. "What are we?"

I feel him draw me closer to him. "I don't know, Ri," he answers quietly.

Not a very satisfying answer, but in a way, it makes me feel better that he's just as clueless as I am.

"So, what now?" I ask.

He shrugs. "We'll see."

"Whatever feels right, huh?" I murmur. I lean my head against his shoulder and close my eyes, already falling asleep again. "Okay."

The next morning is spent reporting everything that happened –editing out the magic parts - to Kakashi and Sasuke. Naruto is still asleep, snoring away happily on the bed next to me.

"Flying Mint Bunny," Kakashi states in a deadpan voice.

"Flying Mint Bunny," I confirm. "And I made it to the castle, so it wasn't a hallucination caused by the intake of soldier pills in combination with an overdose of nutrients pills."

"Alright, Alright," Kakashi answers. "And then you decided to infiltrate the castle by yourself."

"And it worked," I say smugly. "No one noticed me until I showed myself."

"You missed my point, Riko-chan." Kakashi eye-smiles at me, but not in a very nice way. I shift closer to Sasuke, who's sitting next to me. "You do not infiltrate enemy castles guarded by ninja on your own, is that clear?" He lets out a sharp burst of killing intent.

"Okay?" I squeak nervously. "I won't do it again unless absolutely necessary?"

"Good, good," he muses. "Now, I'm sure you are very tired and want to rest for the next week. In fact, you probably don't even feel like leaving this room…"
"You're grounding me," I state in a flat tone. "Right?"

He pats my head while I glower at him. "Smart girl." He takes out his book and strolls out of the infirmary.

I groan and lean back on the bed. "He was right," I say, giving Sasuke a wry grin. "I really am tired."

He gives me a deadpan look. _Then sleep_, his eyes say.

"G'night, then," I murmur and close my eyes.

I spend most of the following days in my bed resting. It's a nice break from my usual chaotic life. It's not like I'm getting bored, I have books and scrolls to read, Sasuke is around most of the time and Naruto woke up, so he's around, too, and no one ever gets bored around Naruto. Currently, he's chattering away about the preparations for the festival that will be held in honour of Yukie's – or rather, Koyuki's – return and her taking over as daimyo. This is the scene that Sasuke walks in on, and I notice immediately that he's… tense.

He walks over to us and slaps a seal down on the nightstand next to my bed. A transparent sphere of chakra forms around all three of us.

_Sasuke activated a privacy seal._

_Oh bugger._

Naruto jumps up and then the two of them stand in front of me, staring me down. "Talk," Sasuke says.

"'Bout what?" I ask, trying to stall. Damn it, I didn't see this coming.

Sasuke doesn't deign to answer.

"We just want the best for you, dattebayo," Naruto says earnestly, his blue eyes big and sad. It's not the puppy eyes, but it's close.

"I know," I hedge. "It's just, I need some mental preparation! You can't jump this on me."

"Bullshit," Sasuke says, glowering at me.

"Really, Ri-chan, don't you trust us?" Naruto asks, making his eyes even bigger and sadder.

"What the hell are you running away from?" Sasuke demands.

"Come on, Ri-chan, we're worried 'bout you, dattebayo!"

I groan. "Did you rehearse that?"

Naruto freezes, a cornered look on his face. Sasuke twitches. "Caught ya, didn't I?" I ask, reluctantly amused.

Naruto decides to abandon the good interrogator/bad interrogator script and points at me dramatically. "You pinkie-swore! Twice! You can't break a pinkie-promise!"

I give him a soft grin. "I know that." I scoot back on my bed and indicate the space in front of me.
"Come on, sit. This might take a while."

"And we're your friends and your team, we have a right to know, and if you don't tell us, we'll tickle - wait, what?" Naruto interrupts his rant. "You're giving up?"

I laugh at the dumb face he's making. "I wasn't aware I was fighting in the first place, Ruto."

"Damn it," he sulks. "I had another speech prepared."

I smirk. I think I just narrowly avoided a Ramen Talk. I only enjoy those when they involve actual ramen.

Naruto crawls up on my bed and after a moment, Sasuke awkwardly joins. Now we're all sitting cross-legged in a circle, the boys staring at me expectantly. Suddenly, my tongue feels as if it's made of lead. I stare down at my hands, fiddling with them nervously. "So…" I mumble. "Uhm…" A pale hand shoots forward and grabs my fiddling hands. I blink and look up.

"Stop that," Sasuke orders, looking a little annoyed. Then he draws his hand away.


Do I really have to tell them this?

I shake the thought off. Out of everyone, Naruto and Sasuke deserve to know the most. Besides, I made a pinkie-promise.

"I'm from somewhere really far away. Like, there are no ninja, only civilians, and technology is a lot more advanced than it is here, even more than in Snow Country," I continue cautiously, eyeing the boys. Naruto looks unsure, Sasuke is still frowning.

"Why hide it?" he asks.

"I… uhh… didn't travel to Konoha by normal means…" My voice trails off. "Like… my biological parents had a kekkei genkai, sort of… and I have it, too."

"But you said you didn't have one!" Naruto protests. I wince.

"I lied. I'm sorry," I whisper, looking down. "It's just- I don't- I never wanted it! It's dangerous and I have no idea how to control it and there's no one who can teach me, and I really just wanted to be normal. Just Riko." I look up, blinking so the burning in my eyes will go away. "You understand that, right, Ruto?"

Naruto stares at me, his big blue eyes full of understanding and compassion. It makes me want to cry even more. "Yeah, I get it, Ri-chan," he says, reaching out to poke my shoulder. "Don't do it again, stupid."

"'kay. I promise," I mumble. Then I continue. "My parents were killed when I was just a year old. I got dumped on my mother's sister and her husband."

I haven't thought about Petunia and Vernon in ages. But now that I have to talk about them, that I have to remember them… my hands tighten into fists.

"What happened?" Sasuke asks cautiously, gaze fixed on my fists.
"Yeah, did something happen to them and you had to go into hiding?" Naruto asks. "Is that why you tell everyone you're from Bird Country? Oh, was it because of your kekkei genkai? Like, in Kiri they hunt people with them? Hey, what does yours do?"

I stiffen more with every word he says. I open my mouth to interrupt him, but no words come out. I wish I could spare Naruto the truth. In his mind, family is supposed to love and support one another. I know that he knows that sometimes, it doesn't work that way, he's heard Haku's story after all. But he still has that ideal of a perfect family in his head, and sometimes, I see him watch the children in Konoha walk through the streets with their families and do simple family-things, and he gets the most heart-breaking expression in his eyes. I usually drag him to Ichiraku's when I notice it.

"Shut up, dobe," Sasuke orders. "Ri?"

I clear my throat and look to the side. It's easier than looking at them. "They didn't treat me well. I… ran away when I was six."

"They hurt you," Sasuke states, his voice sounding dark and dangerous. My gaze snaps back to him. He's trembling with rage and his eyes, one real and one a mere illusion, glow sharingan red.

Seeing him like that shouldn't give me a warm feeling in my chest. It really shouldn't.

"Ri-chan?" Naruto asks, sounding unsure and helpless. "Did they really hurt you?"

I take a deep breath and let it out. "Yes."

"Who?" Sasuke hisses. "Who are they?"

"You can't get to them, even if you try," I say tiredly. "Vernon and Petunia Dursley are far, far away from here."

"Where?" Naruto growls. A hint of red appears in his blue eyes, which worries me a little.

"A world away," I answer wearily.

"Don't joke about this!" Sasuke snarls.

"I'm not," I say calmly. "I told you I didn't come to Konoha by normal means."

"What d'you mean, Ri-chan?" Naruto asks.

I sigh. "I'm… uh… sort of… from a different dimension. I kind of… accidentally… teleported myself to Konoha. To get away from there."

Silence. Naruto's eyes are bulging out. Sasuke seems frozen, staring at me like he's seeing me for the first time. I decide to just ramble on.

"I come from a country called England. There are no ninja over there, and no one knows how to use chakra. But some people, like my parents, have powers. But it's got nothing to do with chakra. They can use magic."

"Magic," Sasuke repeats. "Magic doesn't exist. This is a joke," he says mechanically.

"Over there, most people believe that, too, the ones with the ability to use magic stay hidden, hardly anyone believes it's real. My relatives weren't magical and they hated anything 'unnatural'. I think that's why they disliked me so much."
Naruto suddenly grabs me and pulls me into his arms, pressing me against him tightly. He's trembling, and I can feel a hint of the Kyuubi's chakra coursing through him. He buries his face in my neck. "You really are like me, huh?" he mumbles.

I put my arms around him. "Yeah," I answer, my voice sounding rough. We stay like that for a minute or five. Sasuke doesn't interrupt, looking like he's trying to puzzle something out.

"What do you mean, 'like you', dobe?" he asks eventually, sounding suspicious.

I draw myself out of Naruto's arms so I can look at him. He has a troubled look on his face. "Uhh…" he says.

"I think you should tell him, Ruto," I say tiredly. "Might as well get it all out in the open."

Naruto presses his lips together and scowls. Now he's the one staring at his hands. "I've got the Kyuubi inside me," he says and then looks up to stare at Sasuke challengingly. "The Fourth Hokage didn't kill it, he sealed it in a child that night. That was me."

Sasuke stares at him. Naruto stares back defiantly, but there's a hint of fear in his eyes, fear of rejection and condemnation. I don't think he has anything to worry about when it comes to Sasuke, though.

"Didn't make you smarter, did it, dobe?" Sasuke finally says. I breathe a sigh of relief.

Naruto stares at him in disbelief, then he barks a short laugh. "Shut up, bastard!" he yells.

They turn back to me when I fail to smother a laugh. "Don't mind me, carry on," I say between peals of unhinged laughter.

"Are you okay, Ri-chan?" Naruto asks, sounding a little freaked out.

I laugh some more. No idea why, there's nothing funny to laugh about.

"Ri. Stop." Sasuke says warily, and something about his tone gets through to me and I stop laughing.

"Sorry," I say, a little breathless.

"Magic," he says. "That's what that other chakra you have is."

I nod. "I can't control it. It just… happens, sometimes. I'm going to try and figure out how to use it, but it'll probably take time."

"That would be so cool, if you could teleport yourself!" Naruto grins. "Like the Fourth with his Hiraishin!"

I snort. "I don't think I'll be able to learn that. When I came here… it was hard on my body and I nearly died. I doubt my body will ever let me do something like that again. Anyway," I continue before they can question me about nearly dying – or actually dying, not that they need to know that bit. "The only ones who know are my dad, Yamanaka Inoichi, Shikamaru and now you two. I'm pretty sure they told Tsunade-sama and maybe Kakashi, but neither have said anything so far. Please keep it to yourself. If it gets out, I might be targeted."

Actually, I don't see how much worse it could get than it already is, but I'm not going to tempt fate.

Sasuke gives a sharp nod and Naruto grins and says 'okay' and that's that.
"Now for the hard part.

"So you remember that freaky snake guy, Orochimaru?" I ask.

Sasuke stiffens, his eyes flash red again. Naruto growls.

"Well, he gave me this." I pull down the collar of my shirt. Then I cancel the illusion hiding the Cursed Seal. "Apparently, he's taken some sort of interest in me."

"What is that?" Naruto asks shakily. Sasuke just glowers at it.

I sigh exhaustedly. "It gives me power, but it comes with a price, it poisons my mind. You've both seen me use it before, when those markings appeared on my skin?"

"That's what that was?" Naruto asks. "Back in Tanzaku-Gai? You didn't act like you, then. You were."

"I wasn't myself," I say, glaring at my hands darkly. Then I perk up. "But thanks to you, I managed to control it." I give him a small grin.

"When? When did Orochimaru give it to you?" Sasuke growls. I briefly wonder if he'll eventually pass out if he doesn't turn the sharingan off.

"After the preliminaries," I say. "In the infirmary," I clench my fists. "Fumio… tried to stop him. Kabuto, he-" I clamp my jaw shut as a wave of anger rolls over me. I grit my teeth and squeeze my eyes shut. White-hot pain suddenly flares in my neck and my hand shoots up to clutch at the seal. I shove the pain away and make myself focus, force the burning away with sheer willpower.

Trembling, cold sweat all over my body, I open my eyes. Naruto and Sasuke are staring at me in mute horror.

"Ri-chan?" Naruto asks unsurely.

"Anyway" I say shakily. "that's the whole secret. If you don't mind, I'll go get some fresh air now." I climb off the bed and stumble over to the door on my bare feet. When I glance back at my team as I leave the room, Naruto looks shell-shocked and Sasuke is scowling at his hands.

I find myself wandering slowly through the cool stone corridors. They're completely deserted, all the Snow shinobi left with the fall of Doto.

The stone under my bare feet is cool, but no longer freezing cold. Those six monoliths where we fought Doto turned out to be part of an enormous heat generator, powered by chakra and capable of influencing the entire country's climate. Doto activated it with Yukie's Hexagonal Crystal under the assumption that he'd find Snow Country's treasure. Now spring has finally arrived in the Country of Snow. People are celebrating throughout the land, both the change of climate and the fall of Doto.

All in all, our mission was a success, I decide as I pull myself up on a large windowsill. From here, I can overlook the place the coronation ceremony will be held. It's currently swarming with people making preparations for Yukie's – I mean, Koyuki's inauguration as daimyo.

I lean back against the wall and close my eyes, mouth twisting with bitterness. Not everything turned out so well. There's the dozens of rebels Doto had massacred. I was right there and could still only save a handful of them. Sandayuu still hasn't woken up from his sleep, and maybe he never will. Even if he does, he'll be bound to a wheelchair for the rest of his life.
Yet another person I failed to save. Just like Fumio.

"Maa, Riko-chan, did you forget you're grounded?" Kakashi's voice asks from next to me.

"I told Naruto and Sasuke everything," I answer tiredly, not bothering to open my eyes. "I needed some privacy. Haven't had much of that lately."

"How did they take it?"

I sigh. "It'll be okay. For now. I think they both hate the fact that they weren't there to protect me."

"And how are you doing?" he asks.

"I keep seeing all those people die," I say softly. Kakashi squeezes my shoulder.

Finally, I open my eyes and peer up at him. "Can I ask you something personal?"

"It depends on the question, Riko-chan," Kakashi answers warily.

"Did someone ever sacrifice themselves for you?"

Kakashi stills, his one visible eye going unfocused. It's obvious the answer is 'yes'. Suddenly, I hate myself for asking such an intrusive question. It breaks my heart to see Kakashi like this.

I sit up and throw my arms around Kakashi's middle. "I'm so sorry," I whisper. Slowly, I feel Kakashi's stiff body relax. He puts an arm around my shoulders and pats my head awkwardly.

"I'm sorry, too," he says sadly.

I look up at him. "How do you deal with it?"

He sighs. "I don't. Not really."

I let my head drop against him again. "That's really, really sad."

"It is." I feel him pick me up. "You should be in bed, Riko-chan. Don't be so reckless all the time. You didn't even put on shoes."

I squeeze him a little tighter. "Yes, mom."

Kakashi chokes and I laugh sadly.

I fell asleep while Kakashi carried me back to the infirmary, and when I wake up the next day, he tells me I can go and watch the inauguration ceremony and enjoy the festival with my team.

Naruto and Sasuke arrive soon after. Naruto immediately pulls me into a fierce hug, mumbling "Love you, Ri-chan," into my ear. I return the hug just as fiercely and tell him that I love him, too. When he finally lets go off me, I turn to Sasuke who is just staring at me as if he's making sure that I'm really there. I offer him a tentative smile. He doesn't return it, but I think I see something akin to relief in his eyes.

We're all going to be okay, someday.

The four of us go to the inauguration ceremony together. It's basically a lot of speeches, ridiculous ceremonial clothes, a parade and lots pf cheering citizens. It's exhausting, and halfway through, I start
leaning against Sasuke.

I like the festival better. It's like the whole populace is determined to banish the misery of Doto's reign firmly into the past by making everything cheerful and colourful. There are all kinds of food stands, music, dancing, games… Naruto runs around excitedly, wanting to try everything out, and soon he's out of sight. Kakashi gets lost between a few bookstands, and suddenly, it's just Sasuke and me.

Feeling really awkward all of a sudden, I rack my brain for something to say. I absolutely refuse to talk about the weather.

Sasuke grabs my hand and starts leading me through the festival crowd.

"You're holding my hand," I state, befuddled.

"So you don't get lost," he answers, sparing me a quick glance. "You're tired."

"A little," I admit, shrugging as if it's no big deal. The truth is, I should probably still be resting, not playing around at festivals. After all, I did completely exhaust myself, both with chakra and magic, I nearly froze to death, took a bunch of pills and cracked a few ribs.

"Come on," Sasuke pulls me after him until…

"Ramen!" I cheer when I see the ramen stand Sasuke is headed to.

"Hn."

Impulsively, I stand on my tiptoes and press a quick kiss to his cheek. His head whips around to me so fast, he'll probably get whiplash. I beam up at him. "Thanks, Sasuke." I whirl around and skip over to the ramen stand. "One Miso Ramen, please!"

"Coming right up!" the man behind the bar says. Next to me, Sasuke climbs up on a stool. For his standards, he looks mildly freaked out. It makes me grin smugly.

I wonder if he feels like I did the first time he kissed me.

"So…" I speak up hesitantly. "Are we okay?"

He turns to face me fully. I stare into his eyes in trepidation, worrying my bottom lip between my teeth.

"Yes," he answers firmly. His hand finds mine again, and I suddenly have the oddest feeling in my stomach – it doesn't feel bad, though. A little like when I fell from the sky, but in a good way. Briefly, the memory of our second kiss flashed through my mind.

I clear my throat. "Okay then," I say, hastily looking away. My cheeks feel a little warm.

Thankfully, the chef places my bowl of ramen before me, so I have an excuse not to talk. Sasuke orders a bowl of tomato ramen for himself and soon, we're both eating in companionable, if a little awkward silence.

He never lets go of my hand.

"What's your name?" he eventually asks.

"Riko," I answer. "But it used to be Jasmine. They mean the same thing, actually."
"Yasumin," he repeats, frowning.

It feels odd, hearing my old name again after all this time, and from Sasuke of all people. Actually, it doesn't sound too bad.

"I prefer Ri," I state. "But I don't mind if you call me Jasmine sometimes." I give him a quick smile. His lips tip up a little bit.

We finish our food and hop off the stools. Sasuke slaps some money on the counter and glares at me when I take out my purse to do the same. "I'm paying," he says.

"But-" I protest as he drags me away from the ramen stand.

"For healing me," he clarifies.

I blink in surprise. Right, I'd told him he was to treat me to ramen for making me pass out, back at the glaciers. "You remembered," I say, astonished.

"Hn."

"Well, uh, thanks, I guess," I say, still a little stunned. "So, what now?"

"Do you need to rest?"

"Probably," I answer. "But come on, how often is it that we get to be, I dunno, just normal?"

He says nothing.

"Yeah, that's what I thought. Come on, I can rest later!" I grin up at him again.

He sighs. "Fine," he says curtly and lets me drag him back into the crowd.

We spend the next few hours looking at performers, listening to music, looking at books and eating snacks. There isn't much talking, our surroundings are too loud to hear each other's words unless we yell, and neither of us is too fond of yelling. And as we slowly make our way through the crowd, I start noticing something.

There are a lot of couples around, not surprising at a festival. I see a man paying for his girlfriend's meal. I see couples walking through the crowd hand in hand, sometimes exchanging smiles for no apparent reason. I notice girls drag their reluctant boyfriends around, chattering excitedly.

Oh.

Oh.

"Oh!" I squeak.

"What?" Sasuke asks. I'm pretty sure this festival is wearing on his nerves. He's only here for me. Treating me to food, holding my hand, letting me drag him around, doing coupley things.

Hence, oh.

I look up at him and have my second epiphany of the day.

I don't mind. At all. Which means…
"Oh," I say again tonelessly.

*I might kinda, sorta, like Sasuke. Like, not as a friend."

"What?" Sasuke snaps.

"Uhh… nothing?" I answer, hoping that my voice only sounded that squeaky in my ears.

"Liar," Sasuke glowers at me. "What is it?"

"Really!" I wave my hands awkwardly, inwardly – and probably outwardly - panicking. "It's nothi – oh my god a giant purple rabbit!" I yelp, jumping back from the large stuffed animal hanging from the roof of some gambling stand. I stare at it in horror.

Next to me, Sasuke makes an odd, choked sound. I whirl around to him, making sure not to turn my back on the vile purple thing. "Did you just laugh at me?!" I demand.

Sasuke coolly raises an eyebrow. A smirk plays around his lips and his dark eyes are dancing with amusement.

"Rabbits are evil," I lecture him, entirely serious.

His smirk widens.

*I'm sure they are,* his eyes say.

"It's not funny, asshole!" I hiss, glaring at him.

*I'm so scared,* his eyes mock. I kick at his shin, but he merely shifts his stance and tugs at my hand, so I end up tumbling against him. I jump back as if he's on fire, willing my face not to blush.

Oh bugger, this is going to be troublesome. I have a crush on Uchiha Sasuke.

Awesome. I realised it like two seconds ago, and now it's all I can think about. Oh hell. At least, he stopped questioning me. All hail to the stuffed rabbit, no matter how creepy it is. I give it one last glare, then I drag Sasuke after me, away from it.

Oh bugger, I'm dragging him around again. I should probably let go of his hand, but then he'll notice, and I can't tell him! Oh bloody hell… what do I do?!

I avoid meeting Sasuke's gaze. He has a troublesome tendency to read my thoughts right from my eyes.

"Uhm, when did Kakashi say to meet up again?" I ask, glad my voice doesn't sound too nervous. Sasuke gives me a suspicious look anyway.

"In ten minutes," he answers.

*Which really translates to an hour in Kakashi-speech. Bugger. How am I going to survive until then? Shit, shit, shit…*

"Oh, look!" I exclaim, pointing to where the crowd is busiest. "Dancers!" And I drag him there. With all the noise and action around us, conversation is impossible. The downside is that all that noise gives me a headache, but whatever.

About half an hour later, Sasuke decides we should be going to the meeting place. He doesn't see fit to inform me of this, however, he just starts dragging me out of the crowd. I decide not to protest. Conversation with Sasuke has suddenly become something resembling a death trap. I'd rather
summon a rabbit.

Thankfully, once we get to the meeting place, Kakashi and Naruto are already there, in conversation with the newly inaugurated daimyo Kazahana Koyuki.

"The generator was not fully developed, but if we continue researching it, Snow Country will soon be known as the Country of Spring," she's explaining to them.

"Great!" I say enthusiastically, inconspicuously drawing my hand out of Sasuke's. "I can so get behind that plan."

It wasn't exactly intended as a joke, but Koyuki laughs as if it was. Good to know she thinks me almost freezing to death is that funny.

"Nee-chan, what about the movie?" Naruto asks. "I wanna know how the story ends, dattebayo!"

She laughs again. "Wait until the movie is out. I'm not retiring from acting. I can do both, be a daimyo and an actress!" she holds up a movie script with a very familiar title, smiling happily.

Kakashi lifts a trembling finger. "That script is-" he starts to say in a strangled voice, but Koyuki cheerfully says her goodbyes and flounces off. "Icha Icha Paradise!" Kakashi finishes.

I narrow my eyes at Koyuki's retreating form. "If she ruins it, I'll strangle her," I hiss.

Sasuke snorts. "As if a daimyo would star in that… thing," he sneers.

I glare at him, violently suppressing thoughts on how good looking he suddenly seems. Damn crush. I need to get rid of it, soon.

"It's not like you actually read the books, no?" I ask sweetly.

Sasuke gives me a slightly condescending look. "Of course not," he states.


"I forgot to get an autograph!" he wails. "Damn it!"

"I already got one," Sasuke states smugly.

My jaw drops. Naruto's and Kakashi's do, too. Sasuke just stands there, deceptively aloof, an almost unnoticeable curl to his lips the only thing giving away his amusement at our expense. He holds out an envelope to Naruto, who takes and opens it with a confused expression.

"Huh? Ahhrrrgh!" he yells when he sees the contents.

It's an autograph, written on a photo of a heavily bandaged Naruto, drooling in his sleep. In the picture, Koyuki kisses his cheek with a fond expression.

"Couldn't you have used a better picture?!" he complains.

"Doesn't anybody else find it weird that Koyuki goes around kissing twelve-year old boys while they sleep?" I muse.

And more importantly, did Sasuke just prank Naruto?

Then I realise something. "Ahh!" I yell and point at the picture. "Naruto was kissed! We need to lock him up for his own good! Sasuke, you need to help watch him!"
All three of them give me deadpan looks. "That's completely different, Ri-chan. You're so stupid sometimes," Naruto informs me. I bristle, but before I can say anything, he pulls something out – a storage scroll. "Look here, I won something for you!"

A puff of smoke, and then Naruto holds…

The giant stuffed purple rabbit.

_No. Just no._

"Here!" Naruto beams at me and holds the rabbit out to me. I stare at its beady eyes and don't move an inch.

"Ri-chan? Don't you like it?" Naruto asks, his big blue eyes turning sad.

_Oh bugger, not the puppy eyes! Resist, Riko, don't look at him… damn it._

"Of course I like it!" I force a grin and Naruto breaks into a relieved smile. "Thanks! This is just what I've been missing my whole damn life!" I cheer and force myself to hug the creepy thing.

"Excuse me for a moment," Sasuke says politely and disappears.

"Huh? Where'd the bastard go?" Naruto asks, confused.

"No idea," I mumble.

_Only hiding to laugh his ass off, I bet._

Chapter End Notes

Finally finished the movie. Boy, that was troublesome.

I noticed something after watching it for what had to be like, the tenth time. In the ending song, following line appears:

After I chased a rabbit.

I kind of had a laughing fit when I saw that.
I smile brightly as the familiar gates come into view.

Almost home.

The one and a half weeks it took to travel back were… stressing. There was the fact that I'm still a little impaired and travelling exhausted me, but mostly I was just on edge, what with that annoying crush on Sasuke. It's like he's there every time I turn around. Normally, I wouldn't mind, but it's hard trying to act normal all the time. It would be easier if Naruto weren't around all the time, too. He's taken the job of guarding me against evil kissing fiends - and now regular fiends as well - up again, and it's just plain annoying. I'm almost considering telling him that Sasuke was the one to kiss me – his face would be hilarious, that's for sure – but he might become even more troublesome. Not to mention what it would do to our teamwork.

Naruto's presence keeps Sasuke from asking questions, though, and I know he's suspicious. Thankfully, it'll be easier to evade him in the village.

After checking in at the guard booth, today manned by two chunin unknown to me, we make our way to the Hokage Tower. Minutes later, we stand before Tsunade where Kakashi and I – well, mostly I, Kakashi is lazy – give our report, Tsunade's eyebrows rising higher and higher the longer I talk. She takes a deep swig of sake once I finish.

"You weren't kidding when you said you got into trouble a lot," she finally states, scowling. "I expect detailed reports from all of you. Now get lost and get your health checks at the hospital! Riko, Kakashi, stay behind."

"See you tomorrow at team training," I mutter to the boys as they leave, Naruto grumbling about 'baa-chan leaving him out of the loop, dattebayo'. My heart skips a beat when Sasuke's hand brushes my own as he passes.

Now that I've realised my feelings, small things like him touching my wrist or our silent conversations, things that used to be so normal and that I never thought twice about now seem so incredibly significant to me. It's troublesome.

"Is something the matter, Hokage-sama?" Kakashi finally asks when the boys are finally gone.

Tsunade waves me over to her. Raising a curious eyebrow, I step closer. "Health check," she explains, running a glowing hand over me.

"You kept me because of a health check?" I ask curiously. "Not that I don't appreciate it, I'm not too fond of the hospital."

She scowls at me. "I'm inspecting your chakra system, brat. You do remember your previous health problems, right?"

"How could I forget?" I mutter.

She finally pulls back. "All in order, but do make sure to take some medicine for chakra exhaustion."

"Yes, Tsunade-sama." I step back to stand next to Kakashi.

"Now, I didn't just keep you two of Riko's health," Tsunade folds her fingers and rests her chin on
them, her piercing eyes boring into us. Shizune's face as she stands slightly behind her is solemn. "We have been having trouble at the borders – Kumo and Iwa appear to be testing how much our strength has decreased after the invasion."

I suck in a shocked breath. The only reason for them to do that… are they preparing for war?

"I don't need to tell you how alarming this situation is," Tsunade states. "For that reason, I have sent most of our jounin to fortify the borders and beat back the attacks. However, they need reinforcements. Therefore, Kakashi, you will rest up today, and tomorrow, you will travel to join the forces under the command of the Jounin Commander."

My insides grow cold. Dad is the Jounin Commander. That means… oh god. He's in the middle of what might become a war zone – what might already be a war zone in all but name.

He'll be okay. I try to reassure myself. He's strong, and Inoichi and Chouza will be there with him. It'll be fine.

"Riko, you will temporarily be the leader of Team Seven. I expect the three of you ready for your next mission in four days." She pauses. "That is all. Dismissed."

I mutely turn around and mechanically walk out of Tsunade's office, Kakashi right behind me.

"Are you alright?" he asks once we're outside.

"You'll be careful out there, won't you?" I say by way of an answer.

He squeezes my shoulder in comfort. "Of course. Do you want me to give your father a message?"

I give him a grateful smile. "Just tell him to take care and to come home soon, okay?"

He nods. "I will. You take care, too, Riko-chan."

I nod mutely. Kakashi gives me an awkward wave and then disappears in a puff of smoke. I start to make my way back home. Looking around, I notice there aren't as many ninja around as there used to be – normally, one can't walk down a street without seeing at least three flak jackets. But now, I hardly see any.

"I'm home!" I call out as I enter our house.

No answer. Shikamaru is probably on a mission and mom must be busy, maybe at the hospital.

Normally, I'd relish the solitude after such a long time on mission, but after I just heard about dad fighting at the borders… well, a little company would have been nice. I could probably look around the village to find someone to spend time with, but everyone is likely on missions. It's already afternoon, so the Academy is out, too, and I don't feel like dropping by the Hyuuga Compound to see Hanabi. She's probably training with her father at this time of day, anyway.

I guess I'll just go train.

I scowl at the rubber ball in my aching hand. I hadn't exactly planned on continuing rasengan training considering what happened the last time I tried learning it, but I walked past a stand selling toys and saw these rubber balls, and it hit me that I really didn't like leaving the technique unfinished. Besides, I saw how strong a jutsu it actually is when Naruto hit Doto with it.

So here I am, trying to burst the damn balloon. I'd forgotten how frustrating and painful the exercise
"Okay, Ri. Think," I mutter to myself, rubbing my temples. "This isn't working."

I completed the first stage of rasengan training in seconds – water manipulation is second nature to me. But there is no water involved in the second stage, I have to release an insane amount of chakra through my hand to burst the rubber ball – and I don't have Naruto's insane chakra stores, much less his stamina. Or pain tolerance.

Suddenly, I start to laugh. Really, the solution is so easy, it's a miracle I didn't think of it before. I grab the rubber ball and focus. "Come on!" I whisper. More and more I pour into my hand, until it feels like it's on fire, and then-

The rubber balloon bursts with a loud bang, water spraying everywhere. I laugh out loud, shaking my aching hand.

All I had to do was create water inside the balloon to destroy it. I grin at the shreds of rubber.

I'm going to make my own version of the rasengan – it might not be as strong as the original, but it'll be mine and it'll be awesome.

The next day, I meet my team at our normal training ground.

"Kakashi's late," Naruto grumbles.

"He won't be coming. Tsunade sent him to the border – there've been attacks by Iwa and Kumo shinobi, and our ninja needed reinforcements," I say tiredly – I didn't get much sleep yesterday, too busy worrying about dad.

"Attacks?" Sasuke asks, frowning.

"I don't know details. Tsunade said something about them testing our strength after the invasion." I sigh. "Anyway, she made me temporary team leader. We're going on mission in three days, so I figure we should all do individual training and stuff. It's not like I can really teach you anything."

"Are you okay?" Naruto asks suddenly, staring at me.

I shrug. "Dad's at the border, too." I give him a sad smile. "I guess I'm just a little worried."

"Oh." Naruto falters. I mentally scold myself for telling him. I know Naruto would give anything to have a family to worry about, too. So would Sasuke. I shouldn't be complaining.

"I'll be fine, though." I smile at him. "He's strong and really smart, he'll be back in no time at all. Now, what are we doing for team training? Hide-and-seek? Ninja style of course."

Naruto's face lights up. "Alright, dattebayo! You're it!" And he runs into the forest. Halfway there, a dozen other Narutos poof into existence.

"I didn't say start yet!" I yell after him. I turn to my right. "Sasuke, you're it- oh, very funny," I grumble when I see the space next to me is already empty. I throw up my hands. "You guys are troublesome and I'm kicking your ass!"

"Catch us first!" a dozen Naruto voices echo from the forest, followed by immature laughter. I scowl.

"Fine, if that's how you want to play it…" I hiss, pulling out my senbon.
Time to put some of Demon-sensei's lessons to *enjoyable* use.

Three days later, we're standing in front of the Mission Assignment Desk while Tsunade leafs through files with available missions. Naruto and Sasuke glare at me while she does this.

"Don't tell me you're still mad," I say.

"You cheated!" Naruto yells and points at me.

"Duh. Ninja," I say, pointing at me. "And we were playing ninja style."

Sasuke is still scowling at me. He took me using Kirigakure no Jutsu as a personal insult to his sharingan. Stupid, prissy doujutsu user. Can't believe I'm *still* crushing on him. So far, it hasn't evolved to fangirl levels, but it's worrying anyways. I shudder to think about what might happen if anyone found out.

Tsunade slams her fist onto the desk. "If you're quite done!" she snaps. She holds up a scroll. "This is a B-ranked mission. You three will be guards to an important figure."

"A princess?" Naruto asks excitedly at the same time that I say: "Not a princess, I hope.", which makes him glare at me more.

"I'm not letting you three near another princess," Tsunade deadpans. "Anyway, this mission might evolve into an A-ranked mission."

"Oh bugger," I mutter under my breath.

"Who are we guarding?" Sasuke asks warily.

"No clue," Tsunade says. I open my mouth to speak up, but she's faster. "*Not a princess! Do you even know the paperwork you caused me*?!" Tsunade explodes.

I close my mouth. Tsunade visible takes a deep breath to calm herself. "In the allied Country of Tea, the Todoroki Shrine Race is held every four years. Your mission is to guard one of the runners."

*Must be an important race if they hire ninja for protection,* I think.

"The messengers asking for this mission were attacked by an opponent's spy, a ninja, on their way here."

I frown. No wonder she thinks this might become an A-ranked mission. Damn it, this time I'm responsible for everything with no Kakashi to save us.

"For further details, ask Boss Jirochou of Tea Country. He's the client for this mission and an old friend of mine," Tsunade finishes. "Now get lost, you're supposed to be in Tea Country by the end of today!" she throws the scroll to me, stands up and sweeps out of the room. Did she come in only to give us our mission? She must have a lot to do, what with the troubles at the borders.

I clear my throat. "Meeting in a half hour at the gates. Pack light," I order, ignoring the crippling pressure of responsibility.

I'm a chunin and therefore, I'm in charge of making sure we all survive. I can't allow myself to falter.

---

A few hours later, we arrive at the border to Tea Country.
It certainly lives up to its name. The first tea house is right in front of us only a minute later. "Anyone hungry?" I ask. "We've got some spare time before we're supposed to meet the client."

"Yes!" Naruto crows, punches his fist into the air and takes off.

I facepalm. "I didn't mean you should run off like that, you idiot," I mutter. Straightening, I shoot a bright smile at Sasuke, determined to act normal. "Let's go!"

He glares at me.

"You can't still be mad," I state incredulously. "It was just a little mist, a few water needles, some pressure points and a water storage seal," I pause. "And a flash tag, but only Naruto fell for that."

He's still glaring. It's beginning to unnerve me.

"Seriously, are you alright?" I ask.

"What's wrong with you?" he growls.

I frown, taken aback. "Nothing."

"Liar."

I roll my eyes, feeling rather annoyed. "Well, I'm going to drink some nice, calming tea now. You're welcome to join once you're done being troublesome." I sweep past him.

Inside, Naruto is already waiting, scanning the menu with a grin. I sit down opposite him, my back to the wall, sort of hidden in a shadow. The last thing I want is to sit opposite Sasuke – I'd have to look at him. That would be bad for my sanity.

Said boy comes in a minute after, a broody glare on his face. I tell myself he doesn't look ridiculously handsome in the light and that he's too troublesome for me to be crushing on anyways, besides he's my teammate and can't stand all those girls that like him. Also, if we actually got together, unlikely as it is, I'd be dooming myself to the most painful end of them all: Death-by-jealous-fangirl-mob. I shudder inwardly.

Sasuke and I are fine as we are. Nothing has to change. I don't want anything to change.

At least, that's what I tell myself as Sasuke sits down next to me.

The hostess, a portly motherly looking lady, comes by to take our orders. I mechanically order some Jasmine tea – pun unintended – and dango and listen with half an ear to my teammates' orders. I'm busy inconspicuously scanning the establishment for threats. The messengers our client sent was attacked by some ninja and I won't let my guard down.

I absentmindedly thank the hostess as she returns with our orders.

There's only one other person here, sitting in a corner. It's a boy a few years older than us, with brown hair and eyes. And he's glaring in our direction while he carves a piece of wood with a pocket-knife.

Wow. We've been in Tea Country for all of five minutes and already pissed someone off. Awesome.

I take a sip of my tea – delicious – and feel out his chakra. Larger than a civilian's, lower genin level maybe. And I might be wrong, but it seems he hasn't been using it actively in a long time. He can't be the ninja that attacked the messengers, and he definitely isn't any sort of threat to ninja of our
I still keep my eye on him as he shapes the piece of wood slowly into a wooden senbon which he sticks into his mouth. Then he stands up, puts on his cloak and grabs his hat – a large straw hat – exchanges a quick word with the hostess and walks in the direction of the exit. Since we sit close to it, this means he'll have to walk past us. And judging from his glares earlier, he plans to confront us.

I narrow my eyes. Bad idea.

At first it looks like he's just going to walk past us, but then he stops at our table. "To be drinking tea so carefree on a beautiful day like today… being a ninja must be a peaceful occupation," he says in a condescending tone.

I almost laugh.

"What did you say?" Naruto growls, taking offense at his tone. Sasuke frowns at the stranger.

"The village of Konoha must be a very peaceful place," the stranger continues. "The ninjas are all stupid-looking," he grins maliciously.

I quench a spark of anger. I refuse to take his bait, unlike Naruto who jumps up. "What did you just say?!" he yells, slamming his hand on the table.

"Listen up!" the boy yells, his wooden senbon falling out of his mouth. "I hate ninja! If you wander around Tea Country any longer, I won't let you go unharmed!"

Threatening a team of ninja, how very dumb.

"If you want a fight, you're on!" Naruto shouts back, shaking his fist.

I sigh and stand up, my teacup still in my hand. "Enough. Naruto, sit."

"Huh?" Naruto asks.

"Oh!" the stranger exclaims as he sees me – did he not notice me in my corner? "I never knew such pretty girls lived in Konoha! I take back everything I said!"

I freeze, a memory of Fumio flattering me flashing through my head. But this isn't Fumio, the friendly idiot who couldn't take a hint, this is a an arrogant jackass who's insulting my village. And he's got some nerve, hitting on a ninja, a chunin to boot. Granted, I'm not wearing my flak jacket at the moment – I haven't figure out where to put my storage seals on it yet – but it's just bloody stupid.

"I'm Morino Idate," the boy says, oblivious to my inner turmoil. "What's your name? I'm sure it is as beautiful as you are." He gives me a winning smile, and for a moment, all I see is Fumio's face and I hate the boy named Idate for it.

Naruto takes a deep breath in preparation for an angry rant. From the corner of my eyes, I see Sasuke glaring at Idate. But before either of them can say anything, I speak up, my tone icy and emotionless. "Morino-san," I say. "You didn't pay for your tea. Do it now and leave."

The boy freezes, then whirls around to run away. Unfortunately for him, I was prepared for it – it was so obvious he was going to push the bill on us. My fingers snap forward and jab a pressure point on his neck. He stumbles and falls flat on his face, momentarily paralysed. I take a measured step forward, drinking a sip from my teacup still in my hand. Then I place it neatly on the table and bend down. My hands ghost over his body until they find his purse. I pull out enough money to pay for a
decent meal and the most expensive tea brand I saw on the menu, plus a nice tip, and let the purse fall on Idate carelessly. "Hostess-san?" I call out to the lady who was oblivious to our confrontation. "This boy forgot to pay." She bustles over, frowning while she takes the money I hold out to her.

"He said you would be paying for him, that you were his friends," she murmurs. Then she glares down at Idate who is currently awkwardly getting to his feet, the effects of my attack already wearing off. She grabs him by the ear. "You should be ashamed of yourself, young man!" she starts scolding him while she drags him the rest of the way to the exit. "Don't think you will be welcome here again! I have half a mind to give you a nice hiding!"

I tune her out while I calmly sit back down in my corner and continue to drink my tea. Sasuke and Naruto are staring at me.

"Haven't seen you like that in a while," Naruto finally says. I finish my tea and grab a dango stick.

"It has been a while," I agree. I haven't really had to use my mask of arrogance since my first year in the Academy, save for that one time at the Hyuuga Compound. "What an ass."

"I can't believe he was hitting on you!" Naruto suddenly explodes. "And he was gonna leave us to pay for him! What the hell's his problem!"

I start nibbling on my dango. "Some people are just mean."

"What the hell was with you?" Sasuke asks, staring at me.

Right. Sasuke has never seen me like that, all icy and arrogant.

I give him a noncommittal shrug. "My first year in the Academy, I was placed in a class full of civilian born children, probably because I have a civilian background myself. Anyway, as the only clan child in that class, and Top Girl to boot… you do the math." I give him a wry smile. "It got better when Naruto and I became friends, though."

Sasuke is looking at me as if he's seeing me in a new light. I can't figure out what he's thinking. I will myself not to blush and eat up the last of my dango.

"Yeah!" Naruto grins. "Ri-chan never ate ramen before she met me!"

I nod. "That's right. I'm the very first victim of the Ramen Talk. But enough of that, finish your food. We have another hour of travel before we reach Degarashi Port."

A little more than an hour later, we sit in a traditional room on tatami mats in front of Wasabi Jirochou, the head of the Wasabi family. He's a large man with shaggy grey hair and dark grey eyes. He seems nice enough, with laugh lines around his eyes. So far, I can't sense any dishonesty from him.

"Everyone, thank you for coming," he says.

"Tsunade-sama sends you her best regards," I say politely. Technically, she didn't send anything, but she did say he was an old friend, that's about the same thing. "I'm Nara Riko, chunin, and these are Uzumaki Naruto and Uchiha Sasuke."

"Ahh, yes!" the man laughs. "I trust Tsunade is well?"

"I don't think Konoha has ever had a Hokage quite like her," I say blithely. "But let's talk about the
mission. We were told the messengers you sent were attacked by ninja. Why is that?"

"Yes, to tell you the truth… do you three know about the Todoroki Shrine dedication ceremony?" he asks.

"No, what's that?" Naruto asks interestedly.

"Every four years, we hold a dedication ceremony at the Todoroki Shrine, using the treasured Ryoko jewels," Jirochou starts. "Initially, it was just a simple dedication ceremony, but over time, it has become a festival race where the one to reach the shrine first will dedicate the jewels." He pauses. "Recently, it has become more serious. See, in Degarashi Port, there are two rivaling families, the Wasabi and the Wagarashi Family. Both of these families have long since been in dispute over which one should rule the city. The disputes became increasingly violent, even the townspeople were caught up in the fights and got hurt, until our daimyo intervened. Under his supervision, a meeting was held, and eventually we reached an agreement: The ruling family would no longer be decided by fighting, but through a competition."

"The Todoroki Shrine Race," I deduce.

_What is it with us getting caught up in these things all the time? First we have to save Wave Country, then Snow, and now here we are, saving a city in Tea Country. It's not even funny anymore! At least this time, the client is up front with us._

"Yes. Four years ago, the Wagarashi Family won after hiring a ninja. I have received word that they have hired a ninja once again this year. So we sent messengers to Konohagakure to request this mission, but as you are aware, they were ambushed and the majority of them killed. Please," I start in surprise when Jirochou bows before us. "Lend us your strength. We cannot afford to lose this race."

I lift my hand to stop Naruto from agreeing so I can think this through. Jirochou is asking us to help decide an entire city's fate after all. And he could be tricking us, just like Sandayuu did, and like Tazuna did to Shikamaru's team. Who knows, the Wagarashi Family might be saying the exact same thing to whomever they hired.

But… my gut says to believe Jirochou. Plus, he's an old friend of Tsunade's. And there's no denying that the Wagarashi did send an assassin after his men, which makes them seem seriously dislikeable in my book.

I turn to look at my teammates. Sasuke nods. Naruto glares at me, daring me to give Jirochou a 'no'. I give him a grin and turn back to Jirochou. "We'll do it. Leave it to us."

Jirochou sits up to give us a relieved smile. "You'll take the job?"

"Who are we guarding?" Sasuke asks. Jirochou beams at him and claps his hands. One of the paper doors slides open to reveal… oh bugger.

Idate-the-jackass.

"Did you call for me, boss?" he asks, then he sees us. "Huh? Ahh!" he shouts, pointing at us.

"You!" Naruto yells. The two glare at each other.

"Oh, so you know each other!" Jirochou says, delighted.

"You could say that," I mutter.
"That makes things easier," Jirochou decides, oblivious to the tension.

Not bloody likely.

I dumped 'guard-Idate-the-jackass' - duty on Naruto for the rest of the day since he wouldn't shut up about him trying to flirt with me which was seriously annoying. Or rather, Sasuke and I took off while the two were yelling at each other. Now we're walking through the streets and I curse myself for not dumping Idate-duty on Sasuke.

Sasuke and I alone. It's bad for my sanity.

"Oh, look!" I point at a shop window. "Action figures of summons!" I grin and skip inside.

There are miniatures of Tsunade's boss slug, Jiraiya's boss toad and – my mouth curls in disgust – Orochimaru's boss snake. There's also a miniature of Tsunade's pet pig Tonton, a toad I don't recognise, and a rather grumpy looking Pakkun. I smile fondly and take the figure out of its case to inspect it.

"This makes you happy?" Sasuke asks, sounding confused.

"No rabbits," I say by way of an explanation and sigh blissfully. "Mmm, I think I'll get the snake. Then I'm going to paint it pink and stick senbon into it, and then I'll send it to Orochimaru."

Sasuke snorts. I shoot him a quick grin. "Was that a laugh? I do believe it was a laugh."

He rolls his eyes at me. I shake my head and inspect the price tags. "Damn, expensive," I mutter softly.

Apparently not softly enough, because the sales lady speaks up. "I'm sorry. I don't like selling them for that price either. But ever since the Wagarashi became the ruling city… well…"

Kami, it's like Wave all over again.

I smile at the woman and point to the action figures. "I'll take them all."

The woman stares at me, flabbergasted. I unseal a purse from one of my storage seals and count out the right amount of money. "Can you wrap them as gifts? Not the snake, though. I have plans for it," I say cheerfully.

"But," the woman says in a strangled tone. "You can't- they're so expensive-"

I smile at her. "Don't worry. I've got the money, I went to a gambling den with the Hokage."

Her mouth opens and closes mutely. "Well?" I ask.

She grabs the figures and starts wrapping them.

Sensing a weighty stare on me, I turn around to Sasuke. "What?" I ask.

He shakes his head. "Hn," he says.

I frown at him in confusion. I don't get it, spell it out.

Suddenly a crash sounds form the street. Both Sasuke and I whirl around, my hands automatically going to where my senbon are. "P-please forgive me!" a man cries out, sitting among broken wood.
Three men, large and thug-like, stand in front of him.

Bullies. I hate bullies. I glare at them.

"You bastard, who do you think you need to thank to be able to work, eh?!!" one of them yells. "Are you going to go against the Wagarashi Family?!

The man on the ground lifts his hand, as if to ward them off. "No, n-not at all, but I need you to pay me or else-" he whimpers, terrified. I clutch my senbon so hard, it hurts. These guys-

Sasuke brushes his hand against mine. "I'll handle this," he murmurs into my ear and then strides over to them before I can even say something.

"You sure don't learn!" one of the thugs growls, cracking his knuckles.

"P-please stop!" the man on the ground pleads.

"Shut up! I'm gonna beat you up!" the thug shouts, grabs the man's collar and yanks him forward to punch him.

The punch never connects. Sasuke is suddenly there, the punch caught in his hand. Sasuke doesn't even budge. "W-who are you?" the thug grunts out, obviously in pain as Sasuke squeezes his fist.

"Get lost before you get hurt," Sasuke orders calmly.

So cool.

"They're from the Wagarashi Family! Run away before you get hurt!" the sales woman from before screams to Sasuke, wringing her hands.

"It's fine," I murmur to her, barely audible over the sound of the bullies' enraged cries.

Sasuke ignores them and shoots a look back to me. Our gazes meet, and he smiles at me – so briefly, I might have only imagined it, but so beautiful, it couldn't have been my imagination. Then he turns back to the bullies.

I can't take my eyes off him as he gracefully sidesteps punches and kicks, makes the attackers run into each other's hits and trips them into walls. He doesn't even need to throw a single hit.

He's amazing.

The bullies run off after paying the victim the money they owed him, the surrounding people singing Sasuke's praises. I approach. "My hero," I murmur and smile up at him.

I think I'd like to kiss him now.

"That was amazing!" the sales lady half screams next to us, and I blink and snap out of it. I feel my cheeks growing warm.

"I'm gonna go get my purchases," I mutter hastily and retreat into the shop. Out of sight, I slap my cheeks a few times.

Ri, you are in so much trouble.
The race starts at dawn the next day. I'm pretty sure the entire city showed up to cheer on the runners who are currently doing stretches a few metres away from us.

"Whoa, so many people!" Naruto looks around. "Ri-chan, what kind of race is this?"

I pull out a map and spread it out for him. "They start here in Degarashi Port, then they have to get to Nagi Island by boat," I gesture out towards the ocean that is faintly visible from where we stand. "After that they have to collect the Ryoko Jewels at the Modoroki Shrine. From there, they have to run to the Todoroki Shrine on Oouzu Island where the goal is," I give him a grim smile. "Those are the only rules. Shortcuts, attacking an opponent, traps… they're all allowed."

"Eh, don't worry so much!" Naruto grins. "We're awesome, we can do this, dattebayo!"

"So hiring ninja is within the rules," Sasuke states.

"Heh, I wonder what the ninja the others hired are like," Naruto muses.

"They're probably watching us," I murmur, looking around uneasily. "I've been feeling watched since we got here."

"Huh? Where?" Naruto asks, looking around. Sasuke does, too, but he's less obvious about it.

"If I knew that, I'd be less worried. Or more worried, depending on who's watching," I deadpan. "Good luck spotting anyone in this crowd."

"You three can just leave and go sightseeing," Idate looks up from his stretches to glare at us. Or rather, at Naruto and Sasuke. He avoids looking at me altogether, probably because he doesn't want to be reminded of the humiliation of being beaten by a girl. "Don't follow me."

"What?!" Naruto yells.

"I'm telling you, I don't want you to get in the way!" he says condescendingly.

"You-" Naruto growls, raising his fist.

A mechanical voice, coming from a speaker, interrupts him. "Ladies and gentlemen, we will now commence with the Todoroki Shrine Race." The crowd quiets. "The representative of the Wasabi Family is Morino Idate!"

Cheers sound, mostly from the group standing around Jirochou. I frown.

Morino?

…nah, they can't be related.

"And running for the Wagarashi Family is Fukusuke, the messenger!"

The cheers for Fukusuke are much louder – mainly because the group around the Wagarashi Family head is rather uncivilised about their cheering, plus I'm pretty sure the townspeople want to avoid negative attention from them. Either that, or Idate is just that unpopular.

With his attitude, it wouldn't surprise me.
"On your mark…"

The two runners drop into ready stances. The gate in front of them opens, revealing two boats waiting for the runners at a modest pier and a gorgeous sunrise, a scene I can't enjoy because I'm busy looking for threats. I know someone is watching us, someone who isn't just a spectator but an enemy.

"Start!"

Idate and Fukusuke take off through the gate.

"Let's go!" I yell and we take off after them.

Fukusuke runs down to the pier. Idate turns to the right, and runs away, out of the city.

"What the-!" Naruto yells. "The hell're you doing?!!"

"Is he running away?" Sasuke asks darkly.

"We'll follow him," I decide. "Maybe he has a plan."

---

_Damn, Idate is fast. Ninja fast. I'm almost entirely sure he's had ninja training._

_Morino… that name…_

Idate runs along the road at the edge of the forest with us following relatively close behind but, at the moment, unable to catch up. That will change later, I heavily doubt he has ninja stamina, but at the moment we're stuck staring at his ass.

"Oi! The sea's the other way!" Naruto screams. "Come back!"

"Who'd go back!" Idate yells back.

"Save your breath, Ruto," I advise. "He won't listen."

"That bastard! Old man Jirochou is relying on him!" Naruto rants.

"Which is why I think Idate has a plan. Jirochou doesn't strike me as someone who'd place his faith in someone without reason," I give him a tight smile. "And if I'm wrong, we get to beat him up. Either way, we win."

Naruto growls, annoyed. "It's still not right, dattebayo!"

I shrug and focus on running. I'm fast, but my stamina isn't the greatest. I can keep the pace we're going at for a few hours, but after that I'll either need a break or a soldier pill.

Ahead of us, the road enters the forest. Good for us. Home advantage. We take to the trees immediately.

About an hour later, Naruto the stamina freak has caught up to the slowing Idate. Sasuke and I have to pace ourselves more, so we're still a little behind, leaping from tree to tree while the other two run along the ground. The road they're taking runs along the cliffs, which means they should be careful to not fall off. Unfortunately, they aren't. I can hear their arguing clearly. It's damn annoying.

"Why did you come this direction?" Naruto demands.
"Shut up! It's none of your business!" Idate yells back.

"What's with your attitude?"

"I said shut up!"

They continue to run, now dangerously close to the edge. Neither of them are slowing down.

"Watch out!" I yell when Idate's feet only narrowly avoid the gaping abyss.

"Maybe they haven't noticed yet!" Sasuke suggests tightly

"Genjutsu," I murmur, eyes narrowing. "We need to get down there to break it. Naruto doesn't know how."

Below us, Idate suddenly stops. His hands form the tiger seal.

My jaw drops. Idate can dispel genjutsu? Yeah, he definitely had ninja training and-

"Shit, not that way!" I scream down at them as Idate runs straight ahead, like he's going to jump straight off the cliff. Naruto runs right after him, but stops when he hears my voice.

Idate doesn't. He runs straight off the cliff like a lemming. Fortunately, he's caught by Naruto, dangling from a rope. Either he broke out of the illusion or left its area-of-effect.

Sasuke and I jump down and grab the rope to pull both of them up. "Damn it, that was close," I say shakily.

"To layer two genjutsu like that…" Sasuke murmurs. "Our enemy must specialise in it."

"We'll have to- damn it, you two, will you stop moving!" I yell. "We're trying to save your lives here! And shut the hell up!"

Two minutes later, the two of them sit on the cliff safely, sulking, while I roll up Naruto's rope.

"Quit doing unnecessary things. I didn't need help," Idate says in a blasé tone of voice. Naruto jumps up to yell, but I'm faster.

"I'm sure you didn't. Being the smart and strong person you are." Idate preens for a moment. Then I add, "Lemming-kun."

He whirls around to me. "Shut up!"

"Don't talk like that to Ri-chan! And we saved you, you should be saying thanks, you bastard!" Naruto yells.

"You only saved me because it was your mission! I don't need to say thanks for that!" Idate yells back.

"Why, you-

"Stop it, Naruto," Sasuke orders. He must be really fed up. "He's right. But," he looks at Idate coolly. "Unless you want to die, stay with us."

I send Sasuke a grateful look. He doesn't see it though, too busy staring Idate down.
"Tch." Idate turns away and starts walking.

"Hey, aren't you going back to Degarashi Port?" Naruto demands.

"You idiot," Idate answers. "I'm going to keep heading north."

I tilt my head. "Are you going to sail over from a different port?" I ask.

He looks back with a smug grin. "Well, yeah. It's faster."

"I wonder," Naruto grumbles. "We can't trust him, dattebayo."

Idate blows up again. "That's why I hate ninja!" He takes a deep breath to compose himself. "During this season, a seasonal wind blows in this area. I noticed it back at the starting line, when I saw the clouds, that that wind was coming. Besides, there's a current that moves straight from the northern port to Nagi Island." He grins and taps his head. "I'm much smarter than you guys."

"Nah, Ri-chan is smarter," Naruto says at the same time that Sasuke mutters "Doubtful," under his breath. I stifle a laugh.

Idate glares at me condescendingly. Stupid chauvinist lemming.

"Whatever," he snorts, turning away.

It takes another half hour of running until we reach the northern port. It's more of a beach than a port, though.

Idate scans the sky and then looks into the distance. "That over there is the halfway point, the Modoroki Shrine. We can reach it in about an hour. Wait here for a moment." He runs up to a fisher's hut and knocks. "Jii-san, I'm here," he calls. "It's Idate of the Wasabi Family!"

An old man opens the door. "Oh, I was waiting for you," he says with a friendly voice.

"Things are going as planned. I'm here to borrow your boat," Idate informs him.

"It's all prepared!" the old man answers and points at a boat swimming on the water. "It's the fastest boat around here."

"Thank you."

"No problem. I owe Jirochou a lot. Don't lose to the Wagarashi, Idate-kun. I don't like their ways."

Idate nods. "Leave it to me!" he grins. "I'm the Wasabi Family's best follower, Idate-sama!"

"Sure talks big," Naruto mutters.

"He's still a stupid lemming," I agree.

"Hn," Sasuke says.

The boat cuts through the waves beneath us. I smile, breathing in the ocean air, feeling the sun on my face. The helm feels smooth in my hand, the wood worn from years of usage. I decided I'd steer the boat since I have the best grasp of the ocean. Naruto and Sasuke are taking care of the sails. Idate stands at the bow and looks ahead, doing pretty much nothing.
I narrow my eyes at him. He's definitely had ninja training, and his surname is Morino. I don't think it's a coincidence. Though how Awesome Ibiki can be related to the Idiot Lemming, I have no idea.

"Ne, Ri-chan, why're you staring at that idiot?" Naruto demands as he approaches.

"Because he must have had ninja training to attain that speed of his," I reply. "Plus, his chakra is lower genin level, not civilian."

"Hah!" Naruto barks out a laugh. "There's no way that idiot could be a ninja!"

"Look who's talking, usuratonkachi." Sasuke smirks as he approaches.

Naturally, Naruto blows up. "Bastard!" he yells, pointing at Sasuke. "I'm a great ninja! I even made it to the finals of the Chunin Exams!"

Idate whirls around. "You made it to the main fights of the Chunin Exam?!" he asks incredulously. Now, what would he know about those?

"Yeah, that's right!" Naruto brags. "If it weren't for the invasion, I'd have won the entire thing!"

Right. Sure he would have.

"Tch. You must have had an easy examiner. The level must have really gone down," Idate dismisses maliciously and turns back to look at the sky.

I narrow my eyes at him. He knows entirely too much.

Time to test something.

"I know, right?" I smirk. "That Morino Ibiki's test was really easy."

Idate whips his head around so fast, he probably gave himself whiplash. "What did you say? My brother is alive?"

"Brother?!" I ask incredulously.

"What are you saying! Of course he's alive!" Naruto answers. "And his test was really hard, dattebayo! He asked this really strange question at the end of the first test and-

"He's really alive?" Idate interrupts, fierce hope in his eyes.

An arrow whizzes past him and buries itself in the wood. I whirl around and pull out a kunai.

Shit, I was distracted and let my guard down.

"What?" Naruto yells. "What's going on?"

"It's an ambush," Sasuke says calmly, looking over the railing. I follow his gaze. There's a ship sailing right behind us. It must have been hidden with genjutsu.

I study it. I see three people, wearing rather unflattering beige jumpsuits and rebreathers. One of them lifts a crossbow, and then a volley of arrows rains down on us, which we deflect easily enough. I suppose I should be relieved that Idate can defend himself somewhat. It certainly makes things easier.

I curse inwardly as multiple clones grow from the wood of our boat like creepy mushrooms. "Ri,
Naruto, the real one is hidden among them!" Sasuke calls out, sharingan glowing red.

"Kage Bunshin no Jutsu!" Naruto yells, and then his clones attack every single of the illusory clones. One of them breaks free and jumps over the railing. That must have been the real one.

First wave defeated.

The second wave arrives a moment later, water clones this time. Are they trying to wear us out? We fend them off, but there's a lot of them, and we have someone to protect in addition to having to fight them.

And then black oil starts to rain down on the ship.

*Damn it, they're going to set the boat on fire.*

"Ruto, Sasuke, guard the lemming!" I order. "I'm going to take care of them!"

"But Ri-chan!" Naruto protests.

I smirk at him. "Ruto, have a little faith in me. We're on the ocean. I'm not going to lose."

I don't wait for an answer and leap over the railing to land on the water between the two ships, already forming the familiar seal. "Kiri-gakure no Jutsu!" I whisper, and thick mist rises from the ocean to envelope the enemy's boat. Unfortunately, it does nothing to stop the burning arrow that streaks toward our oil-covered ship and sets it on fire. Soon, it'll sink. I can only hope that Naruto and Sasuke will get Idate safely to shore while I take care of the enemies.

"Bugger!" I mutter as I run toward the enemy's ship. "Water Style: Water Needle Rain!" I murmur, entering the mist. I hear cries of pain as the water needles rain down on the blinded enemies, but then I hear the sound of two people jumping into the water, which means only one of them is out of commission. Not good. They were wearing hitae-ate with the Hidden Rain symbol engraved on them, they used water clones and wear rebreathers, so they are probably skilled in fighting underwater.

*Seriously, what is it with me and underwater battles lately?*

"Mizu Bunshin no Jutsu," I whisper and a clone rises gracefully from the water. "You know what to do," I murmur to her, handing her a prisoner storage scroll. She heads over to the ship to take care of the one still on it. I make a few preparations and wait.

I was expecting it, but when the hand grabs me from below and drags me underwater, I'm still startled. I'm dragged under for about twenty metres, then he hovers in front of me to gloat. Moron.

*But where's the third one?*

"Lucky. In the water, we're invincible," the Rain ninja crows, his voice metallic through his rebreather. I make a big show out of pretending I can't breathe. He laughs maliciously. Then he forms a seal – a very familiar seal. "Mizu Bunshin no Jutsu!" he yells and about ten water clones form to swim towards me, kunai brandished.

I kick off towards the surface, but they're faster and cut off my way. Not that I was trying very hard. "Give up, Konoha-scum!" one of them yells. They are now only moments away from hitting me. Even the original has come close.

Now! 
I squeeze my eyes shut and set off the flash tags I put on my clothes before being pulled under. Even with my eyes closed, the light is blinding. I hear the Rain ninja cry out in surprise and pain.

Taking him out after that is easy enough. I grab him and drag him to the surface where my own clone is waiting for me. I hand her another prisoner storage scroll and leave her to take care of the enemy I knocked out. Meanwhile, I scan our surroundings for the last remaining Rain ninja, but I can't find him.

_He must have gone after the boys_, I realise, gritting my teeth. My clone hands me the scrolls and dissolves. I stow them away and start running toward the shore.

I'm fairly close to the shore when I pick up on Naruto's chakra. It's coming from far underwater. I curse and prepare myself for yet another underwater fight, but then Naruto's chakra spikes and a swirling maelstrom forms in the water. Moments later, Sasuke's head breaks the surface, Naruto's following close behind. I breathe a sigh of relief. They're both alright.

I help them get up, and then we head towards the shore together.

"You sent Idate ahead?" I ask.

"He would have gotten in the way." Sasuke says.

I nod. "Sensible."

"Ri-chan, are you alright?" Naruto asks.

"I'm fine."

We reach the shore and split up to look around for Idate. By now, it has started to rain, so the visibility conditions suck. Plus, it's entirely likely that Idate has run off again and I'm almost about to suggest leaving this place behind to head to the temple where he's supposed to pick up the jewels when I hear Naruto call out "Idate!" in a panicked voice, and my heart drops. I race in the direction of his voice, Sasuke joining me a moment later.

I curse when I see the scene. Idate is lying on the ground at the feet of an unknown ninja, breathing shallowly. The ninja – tall, longish green hair, skin tight suit, Rain hitae-ate, opened umbrella in his hand – smirks condescendingly while Naruto stands before them, trembling with rage. "Damn you!" he growls. "Are you the boss of those Rain ninja from before?"

"As I thought, they couldn't handle this mission… it seems Konoha's genin are indeed tough." The way he says it, it sounds like an insult. "But, as genin, will you be a match for me?"

"Shut up!" Naruto shouts and jumps at him, Sasuke following right after. I leap to Idate's side while the stranger is distracted by them. He isn't conscious, his body riddled with senbon… but those shouldn't have put him in that bad a condition. No vital areas were hit.

_Poison?_

Suddenly, an enormous pressure falls down on me and I slam to the ground. "Gah!" I cough out. From Naruto and Sasuke, I hear similar exclamations. Shit, that guy used a strong attack if it got all of us. Some sort of wind jutsu.

"Just as I thought, weak. I will send you to your deaths, the same way I did Idate," the man says.
Huh, he knows Idate?

The man folds his umbrella neatly and puts it on his back. Then he pulls out senbon. "There is no reason for me to waste any chakra on measly genin."

I'm a chunin, bastard... shit, this isn't good. I can't get hit by that, if I do, I might not be able to heal the others... damn it...

I channel chakra into the water under and on my body. Can't risk handseals. Water Style: Water Armour! I feel the water slowly creep over my body and over my skin just as the enemy throw his needles.

"Ri-chan, duck!" Naruto shouts. "Gah!"

I throw myself over Idate to shield him. Needles hit my armour, but they don't break it, not that the asshole knows that.

"Those are Amegakure's special poison needles. No matter how strong your body is, you'll leave this world in minutes," said asshole informs us.

"Don't take us so lightly!" Naruto forces himself to his feet but falls back with a pained groan. I tense my muscles. The man has his guard down, if he would just come a little closer, I could hit him and take him out.

Suddenly, cheers and applause sound in the distance.

"It seems Fukusuke has reached the Modoroki Shrine..." the Rain ninja muses, turning away from us. "Die, gasping for breath! It's the perfect way for genin brats to die!"

And then he's gone. Just like that.

I release my water armour and rise to my feet. "What's with all the hate on genin?" I grumble.

"Ri-chan!" Naruto exclaims. "You're okay!"

"Your surprise at this is mildly insulting." I pause. "But entirely understandable, given my track record." I give him a slight grin. "I managed to use a Water Armour to protect myself. Now shut it, I need to figure out how to treat your injuries. But you can pull the needles out yourselves."

"Man, your bedside manner sucks, dattebayo," Naruto mutters.

I ignore him, activate a storage seal and pull out a poison kit. "Let's see..." I mutter, rooting through the contents to the sound of clinging senbon. "Judging from what he said, he used a generic premade poison that's common in Amegakure... there must be something in here for it. Somewhere. Man, why aren't these labelled..."

"Ri, are you sure you know what you're doing?" Sasuke asks warily, his voice sounding strained. The poison must be getting to him.

I ignore his words. "Aha!" I pull out a small jar with pills. "I'm pretty sure that's it."

"Pretty sure?" Sasuke inquires with a doubtful look.

"As in, almost sure?" Naruto asks nervously. "Like, not absolutely sure?"

"As in, fairly sure," I answer cheerfully. "Don't worry, I'm gonna test it on Idate first."
"Uhh… Ri-chan…" Naruto starts.

I force two pills between Idate's lips. "He should regain consciousness soon. Here, take two pills each." I throw the jar to Sasuke.

He glares at me while he takes the pills. "You were messing with us," He hands the jar to Naruto. "Did it amuse you?"

"Very much," I grin at him. "See, the jar is actually labelled. It says clearly: 'Antidote to common poisons from Amegakure'."

"It's encoded," Sasuke deadpans.

"Eh," I shrug. "Come on, let's go somewhere dry to wait for Idate to wake up. He probably needs a healing session, too."

We find a nice, dry cave not too far from the beach. Sasuke makes a fire while Naruto stands guard and I treat Idate's wounds – he still needs to finish the damn race. With that speed of his, he still has a chance to win. Besides, the lousy weather must have slowed the other runner down, and if the guy assumes that Idate is already out of commission, he won't put in as much effort into running.

"Hey, I think he's waking up!" Naruto exclaims.

Indeed, Idate's sitting up, grimacing.

"How're you feeling?" I question.

"Where is he? Where's Aoi?" Idate asks.

"Disappeared," Sasuke answers. "So that ninja is called Aoi?"

Idate turns away, face closed off.

"You know him," I state.

"…He was my teacher back in Konoha," Idate finally says. "He betrayed the village and became a jounin in Amegakure."

I clench my fists. *Another Kabuto, I see.*

"Damn it!" Idate punches the ground. "After I came all the way here-"

"Shut up!" Naruto yells. "It's still too early to give up! More importantly, you're a former Konoha ninja?"

*Is he a traitor, too?*

"Tch. I've completely forgotten about Konoha. Ever since that day I threw away my home country…"

"Explain," I growl.

*So help me, after this race I'm kicking his ass.*

"I… failed the first Chunin Exam test and didn't know what to do," Idate murmurs, lost in memories.
"Aoi… he tricked me into believing there was another way to become chunin – by stealing a scroll and a weapon that belonged to the Second Hokage. But he was working for Amegakure the entire time."

"Stealing a scroll, now where have I heard that before?" I mutter under my breath. Naruto coughs awkwardly. Sasuke throws us a curious look.

Idate pays us no attention. "I ran away from the village after that and I never returned. I'm a weak-willed guy who can't do anything right," he says, full of self-loathing. "But Boss Jirochou trusted me! I still haven't done anything to repay him when he believed in a guy like me. I-" his voice breaks.

Oh great, now I'm sympathising with him. And Naruto has his 'he's just like me'- face on.

"I'm really good for nothing!" Idate sobs.

Got that right, you lemming. Damn it, stop crying!

"Make him stop crying!" I hiss at Sasuke. He throws me an incredulous look.

"I run around in circles, never finishing what I start. Aoi was right, I don't have the right to live!" Fat tears drip down Idate's face.

I never know what to do when people cry. Fortunately, Naruto does.

"You idiot!" Naruto yells. "There's one person who believes in you, right?!" he grabs Idate and shakes him. "One is enough! The race isn't over yet!"

"But-" Idate murmurs self-pityingly.

"Get up!" Naruto drags Idate to his feet. "Ri-chan healed you, so you don't get to sit around and cry!"

"But my opponent is probably at the Modoroki Shrine already!" Idate protests. I roll my eyes and stand up to say something, but Sasuke grabs my wrist and pulls me down next to him.

"Leave that to Naruto," he murmurs.

"Excuse me?" I ask blankly.

Sasuke rolls his eyes at me. "Ramen Talk," he explains.

"Ahhh," I murmur in sudden understanding and turn back to the two others.

"Don't give up!" Naruto yells in Idate's face, holding him by his collar, his blue eyes fixed on Idate. "Boss Jirochou's waiting for you, right?! Give it your all!" He throws Idate back to the ground. The poor lemming stares up at him like he's hypnotised. "If you give up here, you'll be a loser for the rest of your life! For the sake of the one waiting for you! Show me your true strength!"

Newly found resolve hardens Idate's eyes. "Naruto! Take me to Modoroki Shrine!"

Naruto's brainwashing powers never fail to astound me.

"Hell no," Naruto answers. "Ri-chan healed you, walk by yourself!"

"Eh?" Idate looks down at his legs. "Wha- huh?"

"Hn."

"Seriously, my rabbits are smarter."

"Hn."

"Except for Ninjin."

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A/N: Hey everyone! Thank you for your continued support!

Also, here's a new omake, because you're so awesome.

**Omake**

**A gift for Orochimaru**

"Hi there!" the Flying Mint Bunny squeals as it flies into a certain Sannin's batcave. Not a very cheerful place, but Riko-chan promised she'd play with it if it gave a gift to one of her friends, and its purpose in life is to make people happy, so there.

Sadly, neither the Sannin nor his – or is he a she? Humans are so weird – bespectacled friend notice it.

"I've got a gift from Riko-chaaaan!" the FMB sings. "Enjoy!"

It drops the neatly wrapped package on the Sannin and disappears in a cloud of golden light.

---

Orochimaru hisses in pain as something drops on his injured arms.

"Kabuto! What the hell?" he wheezes.


"Do not deny it!" Orochimaru hisses. "You and I are the only ones here!"

"But Orochimaru-sama, I didn't-!"

"Enough! Give that to me!"

Kabuto bends down and retrieves the package. Bemused, he notices the wrapping has small little snakes drawn on it.

"Would you like to keep the wrapping paper, Orochimaru-sama?" he asks.

"Why would I do that?" Orochimaru hisses impatiently.

"There's a note attached," Kabuto remarks, forgoing an explanation.

"An explosive note?" his master asks suspiciously.

Kabuto scans the note. "Uhh… no. It appears to be a note from an admirer."

"What?!"
"It says: 'Dear Orochimaru, may this humble gift bring you as much joy as it did me.'" Kabuto reads out loud. "It isn't signed."

"Open it!" Orochimaru orders.

Kabuto hastily complies with his master's wishes. A moment later, both of them stare incredulously at the package's contents, held in Kabuto's hand.

It appears to be a miniature of Manda, the snakes' boss summon. Painted neon pink. Skewered with senbon, a rather comical pained expression drawn on his face. It's covered in orange glitter.

"What the hell!" Orochimaru shrieks, his voice taking a rather high pitch. "Take that out of my sight immediately! And find the one responsible and bring him before me!"

"Yes, Orochimaru-sama!" Kabuto says hastily and runs over to the trash can, planning on dropping the thing into it and throwing an explosive tag behind. Unfortunately…

"…I can't, Orochimaru-sama," he admits. "It appears to be glued to my hand."

It took Kabuto three days to find a chemical solution to neutralise the glue. It took a week until Kabuto finally dared to come under Orochimaru's eyes again.

The pink snake was later dissolved in acid and the incident was never spoken of again.
"Those are some really high stairs..." I mutter, staring up at the hill the temple is located on. "We don't all have to climb up. Idate and Naruto, you go."

"Why me?!" Naruto whines.

"Because you're the stamina freak," I say. "Besides, there's no need for us all to go up, there's an audience there and you won't be attacked under that many eyes."

"Ri-chan, you're lazy."

I shoot a grin at him. "Actually, Sasuke and I are going to scout ahead and clear the road for you."

"Not fair!" Naruto yells. "I have to climb stairs while you and the bastard get to kick ass!"

I snort. "Oh shut it. You can let us kick ass for once. Now hurry up, Idate is already halfway up."

"Whaaaat?!!" Naruto shouts and whirls around. "Wait up! Idate! Ri-chan, bastard, you better not get hurt!"

And gone he is. Sasuke and I take off, too.

*Oh shit, I'm alone with Sasuke. Act natural, act natural...*

"What is it?" Sasuke asks suspiciously.

"Nice weather today, huh?" I answer. *Oh god, Ri, of all the dumb things to say, you had to pick the weather? What is wrong with you?!*

Sasuke gives me a deadpan look and doesn't dignify the question with an answer. I cough a little. "We should hurry up. Or Naruto will catch up and steal our thunder."

Sasuke gives me an annoyed side-glare. *We're going to talk about this later.*

"Sure," I say while thinking about how much I'd rather summon a rabbit.

It's only ten minutes later that we see the other runner, Fukusuke, running ahead of us on the dirt road. I pull out a few senbon. "Let's give those Wagarashi-asholes a taste of their own medicine," I suggest. "It'll either draw out the enemy or take that guy out. Either way, we win."

"Hn," Sasuke agrees. We pick up our pace. The guy is fast, being a messenger, but he's also a civilian and exhausted. We catch up in no time at all and I launch my senbon.

*Clang!*

Aoi is suddenly in front of us. I only see a flash of yellow light, then a searing pain burns through my chest and I'm thrown backwards. Sasuke just barely manages to catch me before I hit the ground.

"Ri, are you alright?" Sasuke asks urgently.

"The hell was that!" I cough out, glaring at the Rain ninja. In his hand is a brightly shining sword. As I watch, it shrinks until he only holds what looks like a sword hilt.
"Quite impressive," the man says condescendingly. "You survived my poison."

I groan and drag myself to my feet with Sasuke's assistance. Then I sink into a fighting stance, Sasuke right next to me.

"How useless," Aoi remarks. "There is no way anyone can withstand the very sword that the Second Hokage was known to have used, the Thunder God Sword, least of all two measly genin."

I giggle. Sasuke shoots me an incredulous look. Aoi glares at me like I'm some kind of unappetising insect.

"No, no, please continue!" I say, genuinely amused. After Gaara, Orochimaru, Kabuto and Itachi...

"You're very entertaining."

The sword flares again. Really, it's impressive, but it's still just a sparky sword, and I doubt the Nidaime Hokage actually used that tacky thing that often. He was known for something else. Something that I have in common with him.

"Sasuke," I mumble, trading a glance with him. He gives me a curt nod. I understand, his eyes say.

Aoi grits his teeth, feral expression in his eyes. "You damn Konoha genin. I am going to make sure of your deaths this time."

I pull out my own sword and hold it in front of me, smiling cheerily at him.

"What good will that do!" Aoi yells, finally losing his composure. His sword sparks again. "The Thunder God Sword cuts through anything! With it, I'm invincible!"

"You are a pitiful man," I say pleasantly. "You disgusting traitor."

"Shut up!" he screams and throws his umbrella up in the air where it starts to rapidly spin. "Senbon Rain!"

A rain of needles comes down on me. I laugh and start evading, twirling and bending out of the way like I'm dancing, clangs sounding when I deflect them, not a single one hitting me. "This brings back memories!" I call out to Aoi. Out of the corner of my eyes, I see Sasuke throw something, and then the umbrella explodes.

Heh. Leaf: 1, Rain: 0.

"You're the one who can't win," Sasuke states calmly.

"Tch. Such things... helping one another, trusting one other, defending on another, they irritate me," Aoi replies arrogantly. "Only weak people need others to fight together with. That's why they believe in one another so easily, and that's why they are so easily betrayed. Weaklings like you should run for safety."

"Do you ever stop talking?" I ask.

"You will never be able to defeat me, Rokushou Aoi, jounin of Amegakure, in possession of the Thunder God Sword!"

"I suppose not," I sigh, then pause. "I'm referring to you being silent for once. Not to whatever you just said, I wasn't really listening," I clarify.

"You little-!" Aoi grits out, lifting his sword, but then the familiar sound of bird's chirping rings and
Sasuke runs at him, stretching his lightning filled hand out in front of him. Aoi manages to bring his sword up to block it, and for a moment the two ninja are frozen in a stalemate. Then the yellow light from the sword flares and Sasuke is engulfed in lightning. With a guttural cry, he's thrown to the ground.

**No way. That damn sword is stronger than chidori!**

"Sasuke!" I yell, but he's already getting back on his feet, charging with a kunai in his hand. They trade blows and for a moment they look evenly matched, but than that damn sword flares again and Sasuke is flung backwards again. I see him shakily struggle to his feet, but Aoi got a good hit in.

I see red.

**You don't fucking hurt my Sasuke.**

"So it's true," Aoi says smugly. "The last Uchiha is the weakest of them."

"Shut. Up," I growl and charge, my sword glowing with chakra. "Water Chain Sword!" Chains burst from my weapon, heading straight for my enemy, the enemy that hurt Sasuke, but he slices through them like they're butter. I let the remaining chains burst into water, making it spray everywhere so he has to protect his eyes from the drops, and then I'm on him, swing my sword at his neck, and he only barely manages to jump back. I leap after him, keeping him on the defence.

"You," I hiss, filled with rage. "Do not hurt my friends!"

"You can't win, you stupid little genin bitch!" Aoi yells, swings his word and sends and arc of lightning at me. I dive under it and swipe my sword at his legs, causing him to leap up high so as to not lose his feet.

I'm on him almost immediately, my sword slicing through the air. His eyes widen as I draw a cut on his cheek. We land and I'm after him, swing my blade, evading his strikes, never stopping to get hit by more than sparks. I see the shock in his eyes, shock that he's the one on the defence, shock that he's losing.

Yes, his sword is immensely dangerous. But he himself is only mediocre at wielding it – he swings it around like a bat. I, on the other hand, was taught by one of the Seven Swordsmen.

**You're going down, asshole.**

From the corner of my eye, I see Sasuke creeping up on Aoi, obviously looking for an opening, but we're both moving so fast that getting between that is too dangerous – any attack could hit me too, or he'll get sliced by me or electrocuted by Aoi.

Aoi backs away from me yet again and then Sasuke is there, attacking with a kunai, but he's weakened and Aoi kicks him into a tree. I attack with a scream, and Aoi smirks and swings his sword.

Terror fills me as the Thunder God Sword comes down on Sasuke's slumped form and he can't evade!

"Kawarimi!" I scream, and then the blazing sword is an inch from my face, just barely held off by my own blade. I grit my teeth and try to force it back. All I can see is bright yellow lightning and Aoi's cruel grin, his eyes filled with anticipation at my impending demise. "I'm… not going… to lose here!" I force out between gritted teeth, flood my arm muscles with chakra and abruptly push my sword against his. For a moment, I see panic in his eyes when it's forced back.
Then my sword breaks into pieces.

My eyes widen in shock as his sword stabs forward, its course slightly diverted, and pierces into my shoulder.

I scream as the searing, shocking, sizzling lightning engulfs me, burning me from the inside out. But then it suddenly stops and I slump to the ground, twitching and trembling. I hear bird's chirping again and light flashes, bright even through my closed eyelids. I force my eyes open. Sasuke is there, fury twisting his features as he pushes an incredibly bright and loud chidori against Aoi's sword. Shock paints the man's features as he's forced back by the sheer power of Sasuke's assault and he pushes the Thunder God Sword harder against the chidori.

Crack!


I get to my feet. Muscles scream, legs tremble. Channel chakra into my arm, it hurts so bad, ignore the pain. Take a step forward, then another. Accelerate, run unsteadily at the man threatening my Sasuke. Make the chakra in my hand into something else. Make it move.

Aoi turns. Shock fills his eyes. He lifts his sword as if in slow motion. I bring my hand forward.

"Riko-Rasengan!" I scream. The perfect sphere of ghostly glowing blue chakra-and-water hits the sword. For a second, the blade holds. Then it bursts into pieces. My hand surges forward and the whirling sphere digs into Aoi's chest and contracts. Then it explodes into water, all that chakra, it throws Aoi back and away, through a tree and then he's gone from sight. It throws me back, too, but only on my ass.

I hit the ground, barely managing to catch myself on my trembling arms. I try to blink away the black spots in my vision. "Sasuke?" I call out weakly. "You alright?"

"Yeah," his voice says. I hear his steps approach, slower than normal, and then he's kneeling next to me, gently helping me sit. "Where's your medic kit?"

"Kunai pouch," I mumble. I feel him fumble around, then he pushes a pill into my mouth. Energy pill, a part of my mind spits out. "There are prisoner and body storage scrolls in one of the seals on my belt, d'you mind taking care of Aoi?"

"Hn," he murmurs, finds the seal in question and pulls out the scrolls. Then he picks me up and leans me against a tree. His hand grazes my cheek once, then he's off. I sigh softly in relief.

At least I'm not unconscious for once.

Sasuke and I sit on the ground, leaned against a tree. Aoi is sealed into a scroll, still barely alive. One traitor less running free.

"Bastard killed my sword," I mutter unhappily. "Mom gave that to me."

Sasuke's hand finds my wrist and squeezes. I sigh and lean my head against his shoulder briefly, breathing in his familiar scent. Then I straighten and pull a summoning seal I was given at the Hokage's Tower out of my kunai pouch. "D'you mind?" I ask.
Sasuke bites his thumb and channels chakra into the seal. A messenger hawk appears. I write down an encoded message and put it in the small tube on its back. The hawk takes off. Hopefully, someone will soon come to take all the prisoners we took off of our hands and get us medical assistance, too, because I doubt I'll be healing anyone anytime soon. Being electrocuted screws with my chakra control, not that I have any chakra left to control.

Sasuke is in a better state than me, but that's not saying much. Neither of us are going anywhere anytime soon.

"Ri-chan! Bastard!" a familiar voice yells and I look up.

"Yo, Ruto," I say weakly and wave. "Don't mind us, keep going."

"You're hurt!" Naruto yells and runs over to us, Idate close behind.

Idate looks around wildly.

"Aoi's gone. We kicked his ass," I say. "Go on, you have a race to win. I'm gonna kick your ass if you lose this after all the trouble."

"Leave clones," Sasuke orders.

Naruto bites his lip. Then he reluctantly makes two clones. "You better be there soon!" he growls.

"See you later." I smile at him. "Now go!"

"Bastard, you watch out for Ri-chan!" Naruto orders, and then he and Idate are off.

We arrive at the Todoroki Shrine draped over Naruto's clones' shoulders. Idate stands victorious at the top of the stairs, cheering citizens all around him.

"Good," I mumble, barely able to keep my eyes open. I'm so damn tired. Using an unfinished A-rank technique while injured, how stupid of me. In my defence, I was seriously out of it. "I'd be very mad if he'd lost after everything."

Things are kind of a blur after that. I'm distantly aware of the judge trying to get Idate disqualified because he received healing in the middle, but then some dude who is apparently the daimyo or something shows up and says there's no rule against healing. Then he chides the judge for being partial and pulls out a picture of him that apparently proves that accusation, and the judge is lead away in shame. The Wagarashi Family leader is scolded, too, because of their harsh and unfair rule.

In the end, the Wasabi become the new ruling family of Degarashi Port. The Wagarashi Family is disbanded.

Kind of makes me wonder if the race was necessary at all.

After that little drama, I'm half carried to the house where I fall asleep before my head hits the pillows, Sasuke and Naruto right beside me.

It's only a day later that a messenger comes running to tell us that a ship from Konoha has come to get us. Sasuke supports me as we walk to the port. When we arrive, Naruto and Idate are already there, talking.

"I've caused so much trouble," I hear Idate saying as Sasuke and I come closer. "I'm sorry."
Naruto just laughs and waves him off. "Well, it's time to say goodbye, Idate."

Which is when at the top of the ship's landing Morino Ibiki appears. "I've come to take in the wounded and prisoners," he says impassively.

"Over here, Ibiki-san!" I wave my hand. Sasuke and I hobble over to the ship.

"A-aniki?" Idate exclaims, his eyes wide.

He's ignored. "Where are the prisoners?" Ibiki asks.

I throw him my prisoner storage scrolls. "Two genin from Amegakure and a missing-nin from Konoha by the name of Rokushou Aoi, sir," I report.

A kind of dark gleam enters Ibiki's previously blank eyes at the mention of Aoi. "Good work, chunin Nara."

I grin at him. "Thanks."

"E-ehh?!" Idate exclaims. "Chunin? You?!"

I facepalm. "Just shut up, Lemming-kun."

"Get on board now," Ibiki orders.

"Yes, sir," I say, and Sasuke and I hobble on the ship. I do my best not to stumble. It took me a lot of effort to talk my teammates out of putting me on a stretcher.

I smile when Sasuke pulls me just a little bit closer.

"Aniki! Wait, Aniki!" Idate yells after us. I strain my ears to listen.

"Who are you?" Ibiki asks blankly. "The one who called me brother died three years ago."

Well that takes care of the whole Idate-the-missing-nin issue, I think. We arrive on the deck. Some other ninja are here as well, but no one I recognise.

Ibiki turns around after that exchange and walks up after us, smiling to himself.

"He's just a big softy," I mutter to Sasuke who chokes. "I mean, look at him."

"Hn," Sasuke coughs out.

The ship starts to move and Sasuke makes me sit down. In the background, I hear Naruto and Idate shout their cheesy goodbyes at each other.

"When we get back," Sasuke murmurs to me. "We're going to talk, Yasumin."

I swallow dryly.

Yasumin.

"You, talking?" I answer nervously. "I'd like to see that."

His hand brushes my throat. I swallow and look up at him. Kami, his face is so close.

He smirks faintly and leans back. "I'll get a medic for you."
I clear my throat. "Right. Thanks."

Great. Now I'm terrified of returning.

I seriously dislike hospitals. Mom finished chewing me out for getting hurt an hour ago, right after Tsunade healed me - and she chewed me out, too, - and now I'm stuck in the hospital room alone while the rest of my team is checked over. The ticking of the clock is driving me insane. The sound of kids playing outside while I'm stuck here is even worse.

Then there's the fact that Sasuke's threat of talking to me looms over my head.

The door opens and salvation enters. "You're troublesome, Ri."

"Get me out of here, Shika," I whine and do my best Naruto's-puppy-eyes impression. Shikamaru gives me a deadpan stare.

"I hear you got electrocuted."

"Did you also hear about how I captured a genin team and a jounin missing-nin? About how much ass I kicked? Along with my team of course."

"Not worth you getting hurt over." Shika comes closer and sits down next to my bed. "Troublesome girl." He pokes my shoulder. I try to poke him back, but he leans out of reach. Scowling, I sit up and swing my feet over the edge of the bed. Shika pushes me back down. "Bed rest," he orders.

"I can rest in my own bed." I glare at him. Then I poke his shoulder. He rolls his eyes at me.

"You're going to sneak out the moment I turn my back, aren't you?" he asks.

"You can bet on it." I answer.

_I'm so not waiting around for certain doom, aka Sasuke's Talk, to find me while I'm stuck in a hospital bed._

He groans and stands up, stretching. "Guess it can't be helped, then. You'd break you neck falling out of you window."

I raise an eyebrow. Either he's going to knock me out or help me get out of here. Knocking me out would be less troublesome for him, but helping me might get him a decent shogi match.

"You're lucky I'm in the mood for shogi," Shikamaru mutters and helps me get off the bed. "If anyone asks, you escaped completely by yourself."

"Have you heard anything from dad?" I ask while we play.

"He's at an outpost near the borders to Grass and Waterfall. They're dealing with Iwa there. I don't know any more than that."

I nod. "Kakashi-sensei was sent there."

"Good. He's strong."

"What about Hidden Cloud? Tsunade-sama said that they were causing trouble, too," I ask.
"Don't know." Shikamaru lifts his shoulders and lets them fall. "Asuma was sent there, but that's all I know."

I sigh and move one of my pieces. "What a mess. I don't think we have any jounin left in the village. I've hardly seen any chunin!"

"We have to beat Iwa and Kumo back quickly, or else we'll seem weak," Shika explains. "There was no other choice."

I sigh. A part of me wishes I were there with dad and fighting the enemies. The other is just glad to be far away from there. "How's the rest of your team?"

Shikamaru sighs like an old man. "Troublesome. Chouji needs more confidence and Ino needs to learn when to shut up."

I grin. "So everything normal?"

"She won't shut up about you kissing." He pulls a disgusted face, but his stare is calculating. "Care to share?"

I stare at him, horrified. "Not you too. Naruto is bad enough."

"I'm your brother," he deadpans.

"You're troublesome," I return. I push another shogi piece forward.

"Just tell me, Ri."

"What does it matter? If there was a bingo book for personal issues, mine would be labelled Double S-Class with a note to flee on sight!" I snap. "I'm not exactly relationship material!"

Shikamaru glares at me, pausing in his next move. "You really think that?"

"Tell me it isn't true," I return.

"Idiot."

I tilt my head in consideration. "Maybe so. It doesn't change the fact that I have several S-class sized problems."

And so does Sasuke.

"It's Sasuke, isn't it?" Shikamaru says.

My head snaps up. "How'd you know?" I ask.

"Ha. So it _is_ him."

I blink. I got tricked. "Damn it!"

He sighs, annoyed. "I don't like him."

"Like I said, a relationship is unlikely," I state, ignoring the sting of my own words.

He groans. "You're troublesome and I can't believe I actually have to say this." His calculating gaze connects with mine. "I don't like Sasuke but he _is_ one of us, and that means that he won't run from
your problems. And if he does," he pauses. "I'll kill him."

"You-" I start, then shake my head. "I don't know what to do!" I cry. "Nothing makes sense anymore!"

Shikamaru scoffs. "You're an idiot, Ri."

"Well, what do you think I should do?" I ask. "Mr. I-know-everything."

"Hell no, I'm not getting involved in this," he answers. "Too troublesome. I'm just going to have a little talk with Sasuke."

Oh shit, then Sasuke will find out!

"You will do no such thing," I growl.

Shikamaru raises an eyebrow at me. "I will."

I take a deep breath and play my trump card. "I'll tell mom."

Shikamaru pauses. "Damn it!"

I spend the next two days in the compound, studying and reading or looking at clouds in the Forest with Shikamaru and Rikumaru. It's relaxing and peaceful.

I also try to call up magic, unfortunately without success even when I try to send kunai at the stuffed purple rabbit Naruto won for me. I affectionately named it 'Devilbunny'.

But today is Friday which used to be Sasuke's and my sparring day before everything got crazy, and as much as I'd like to avoid Sasuke, bailing on that is not something I'm willing to do. It'd feel like a betrayal. Besides, there's never any talking when we spar.

Sasuke isn't there yet when I arrive so I just start warming up while I wait. It's when I'm in the middle of stretching my calves that he arrives.

I whirl around and block his kick to my head. Use my momentum for a spinning kick of my own which he blocks just like I did his. For a moment, we're frozen in our movements, our gazes locked. Then things become a blur of dodge-hit-weave-spin-duck-jump-kick and I lose all track of time, lose all thoughts in my head. Nothing matters but me and Sasuke.

I missed this. I needed this.

For the first time in a long time, I'm free.

Harder.

My fist flies at Sasuke's face. He leaps back one moment and the next he's behind me. A sharp pain blooms in my ribs.

Faster.

I spin away from him, his hands brushed aside by mine. I follow with a kick.

Stronger.
My kick hits him in the side and he staggers back. I fly after him and he grabs me and flips me on the ground.

Better.

We roll over the ground. A knee hits my side, my elbow finds his jaw. Then we're on our feet again, whirling around each other.

Spinning kick at his head. He ducks and swipes my supporting leg. I twist in mid-air, grab him and drag him down with me. He lands half on top of me.

His hand at my throat.

Mine on his neck.

A draw. After years of fighting him, I've finally managed to fight him to a draw.

I can feel his fast, harsh breaths on my face. Our noses almost touch, so close are our faces. His eyes, one wide open and one closed, are all I see. His hand on my throat feels like it burns my skin. His skin under my hand feels cool, but his pulse is going as fast as mine.

Wild joy burns through me and my face breaks into an ecstatic smile.

I close the distance between our faces and press my lips against his. He makes surprised noise, then his hand slides in my hair and the other around my waist, crushing me to him. My hands cling to his shirt.

I fit against his body perfectly.

Finally, he draws away and drops his forehead against mine, the metal of our hitae-ate clinking together. Our gazes are still locked. I've never felt as close to anyone as I do in this moment with Sasuke. Nothing matters but this feeling of belonging, stronger than ever before.

The moment is perfection.

A smile curls around my lips as I skip along the street lined by trees on my way home. Sasuke and I parted ways a short while ago. Neither of us said one word during our entire encounter.

I lift my fingers to touch my lips.

Somehow, my insecurities concerning Sasuke seem so silly now. I'm not going to run anymore. Our connection, it's special. It was that way when we were both children battling our own demons, when we only acknowledged each other as an outlet for our pain, as kids trying to outrun the darkness. It grew when we slowly got to know each other as persons, when we started to talk and understand each other until it shifted into something else.

It scares me. We're both still so young, even if we have braved things most adults never do. But at the same time, I like it, how it makes me feel.

Smiling, I look up at the bright moon, remembering how it felt to be in his arms, how he looked at me. I can't even find words to describe it.

A shadow falls on me and I look up. For a moment, I can't process what I'm seeing. Then I leap back and launch senbon at the four shinobi silhouettes flying at me with the moonlight at their back. Clinks sound as they are deflected. I flare my chakra, but I doubt anyone will come. Sasuke will
already be out of sensing range and the village is pretty much devoid of jounin and ANBU who'd come to my aid normally. The street is deserted. I'm going to have to handle this myself.

My feet touch the ground again.

I'm surrounded.

*This is bad.*

I inspect the newcomers. All are in their teens, maybe two or three years older than me. There's an extremely large boy, another one with way too many arms, a red-haired girl and another boy with grey hair and dark lipstick. A second head seems to grow out of his neck. *What the hell?*

All of them wear Otogakure's symbol on their hitae-ate.

*This is really bad.*
"We're the Sound Four," the grey-haired boy informs me, smirking. "I'm Sakon of the West Gate."

"I am Kidoumaru of the East Gate," the many-armed one declares.

"Jiroubo of the South Gate," the large one continues.

"And Tayuya of the North Gate," the girl finishes.

My eyes widen as they blur from sight. I grit my teeth and clench my fists.

Kidoumaru flashes in front of me and throws a punch at me. I twirl out of the way and flip over him, kicking the one named Sakon in the process. Then the large one is on me. I groan at the impact as I barely catch his punch. I manage to flash away.

My arm is numb from defending against the punch.

My body is exhausted and hurt from my spar with Sasuke.

I still have chakra exhaustion from the last mission.

_Shit, shit, shit. This isn't looking too good._

The girl named Tayuya attacks me from the side. I manage to catch her arm and hurl her at the other three. A clattering sound, and only four logs are lying there. My eyes dart around wildly.

They appear in the trees lining the street, forming a loose circle around me. Their smirks are condescending and clearly say: "You're pathetic. You can't win."

Dread wells up in me. There are four of them. They are strong, and judging from their team name, they are the Sound team. Orochimaru's best.

They've come for me.

The one named Sakon crooks his finger at me with a smirk. "Well? Come one," he taunts. "I'll play a nice melody from you broken ribs. Do, Re, Mi, Fa, So, La, Ti, Do…"

No idea what that's supposed to mean, but I don't want to find out.

I force myself to push away the fear and make myself focus. An unnatural calm comes over me and replaces the dread. My eyes dart between my opponents. I form a seal. "Kirigakure no Jutsu," I whisper and blow a cloud of mist out of my mouth, let it surround me. Then I crouch down and hide my presence. In my hand, a water sword forms.

A sound pierces the night, the sound of a flute. Too late, I try to cover my ears.

The world has already turned blood red. Ropes snake around me and wrap around my limbs, pulling them away from my body until I'm immobilised. I try to flood my system with chakra to break the genjutsu and for a moment, it works, but then the flute's song continues and I'm caught again. And now it's not just ropes, now the flesh is melting from my arms, leaving only bone, and I know it isn't real but it hurts so much that I scream.

My sword melts back into water and there's little doubt in me that my mist must already be

_Vanish_
dispersing.

Pathetic. Too weak. I can't go down like this.

I grit my teeth against the pain and form a scalding hot water bomb in my hand. Then I let it burst. I hiss in pain as my hand is scalded, but the world returns to clarity once more, and the lasting pain keeps me anchored to reality. I throw myself down when Sakon suddenly appears in front of me, roll to the side and try to swipe his leg.

"Do!" he yells. "Re!"

I scream again as I'm thrown back into the ground, my chest breaking. Hurting.

"Mmm, your bones have a light tone…" Sakon grins.

Nonononono, I can't lose here! Get up, Ri!

I roll to my feet. Manage to jump away before the one with too many arms can hit me. His cheeks blow out while I'm airborne and he spits something at me. I twist in mid-air. "Uo Tsuba!" I yell and spit out a small jet of water that catches whatever it was that he spit. My feet hit the ground and what feels like a wall--Jiroubo's shoulder--slams into me and drives all air out of my lungs. My bones creak as I'm thrown against a tree and slump down, my vision blurring. I vaguely see them come closer.

Four handseals.


I see the large one drop, howling. The one next to him yells, desperately patting his flash with his many arms. The grey-haired one hisses and freezes in his tracks. But the girl, she only falters a little, then she brings her hands together. "Kai!" she yells. Then she's in front of me and her foot hits my head. Pain blooms and I'm thrown to the side. I land on my side awkwardly, try to get up, fail. I'm too weak.

I watch them approach in terror. Sakon bends down and grabs my leg. With no apparent effort, he picks me up, lets me dangle upside down from his hand. "Ha!" He says. "Why does Orochimaru want a weakling like her? Kimimaro had much more potential." He smirks down at me cruelly. I cough and spit a glob of blood at his feet. His face twists in anger and he throws me against a tree. "If you stay in this shitty village, you'll stay weak. You'll never become powerful. You're just going to rot," he tells me.

"Come with us," the girl continues. "That way… Orochimaru-sama will give you power."

The mark on my neck throbs. I'm too dizzy to block it out.


No. I squeeze my eyes shut. Tears leak out of my eyes.

Ruto. Shika. Dad. Fumio. Sasuke. To them, I'm Ri-chan, Ri, troublesome girl, Riko-chan, Nara-chan, Yasumin.

I open my eyes. Clench my fists and smirk up at them. "Over your dead body."
I release the curse, draw out its power for me to use. Burning vines creep over my skin. I jump at Sakon, faster than I've ever been. And then my back hits the tree and I'm gasping for breath, staring up wide-eyed.

Disgusting marks, looking like crawling worms, cover half of Sakon's face. "You're not the only one Orochimaru-sama likes." He smiles a disgusting condescending smile. Vaguely, I'm aware of my own curse withdrawing. "You shouldn't be using the Cursed Seal so recklessly. It seems you can control it to an extent, but if you release it like that... it will slowly invade your body. From the looks of it, it's still in the first stage, so it's only spreading slowly... but when it has completely taken over your body, you will lose yourself." His grin widens. "Forever."

"Instead of the Cursed Seal giving you power, it merely transforms you into Orochimaru-sama's slave forever," Tayuya informs me. "To gain something, you must throw something else away."

"Shitty job of advertising you're doing," I croak. I receive another kick in return.

"This village is nothing more than a cage. You should just break those worthless bonds," Sakon says. "You will gain even greater power..."

"No thanks," I answer. "Go to hell."

"Ha!" the one named Kidoumaru laughs a laugh that makes my skin crawl. I'm getting a feeling of foreboding. "You don't get a choice!"

"See..." Sakon continues. "Orochimaru-sama prepared for this eventuality." He pulls out a syringe. It gives me shivers just looking at it. "Your reluctance won't be a problem anymore once we give you this. The drug was modified just. For. You." He laughs.

My insides go cold. "No..." I whisper in horror.

*Help me, someone please help me...*

"It'll forcefully increase the curse's state to Level 2. It'll then dramatically increase its contamination speed and you'll die. But don't worry!" Again that disgusting laugh. "We'll make sure your 'death' will only be a temporary coma." He leers at me. "We'll take good care of your body."

"Quit yer yapping, birdbrain!" Tayuya snarls. "We're wasting time. Just put the bitch under and let' get out of this shitty village!"

"Tayuya, a woman shouldn't talk like that," the one named Jiroubo chastises her.

"Fuck off, fatass!" she snaps back.

*Kami, they can argue like that while threatening me with- oh god, I don't want this!*

"Enough!" Sakon growls, and they shut up. He approaches with the syringe in his hand. I try to scramble back, but Jiroubo kicks me down and plants his foot on my chest. My ribs creak. I can't breathe. Desperate, I bury my fingernails in his leg and try to pry him off, try to twist and squirm away. It's not working, it's not working! Sakon comes closer and closer and I want to scream, but all I get out is a hoarse gasp.

Sakon kneels beside me. I feel the cold metal prick my neck. "No, I gasp out. Tears flow down from my eyes. I shake my head wildly. "No!"

He only grins. "Now, now. You'll thank Orochimaru for this when it's over. I bet you won't even
"recognise yourself!"

"No!" I shriek. Magic leaks out of me, throws Jiroubo off of me, but Sakon still holds me down. I hear him yell –*close to me, too close!*- but I can't hear it over the rushing in my ears. I thrash in his grip, lashing out wildly, hit something-

A sharp prick at my neck. I still.

*No.*

Something cold drips into my bloodstream.

*No!*

Cold. Shiver. Pain. Icy shadows crawling in my veins. All power leaves me. I curl into a ball, whimper in terror. My muscles convulse. Someone grabs me and puts me into something.

I'm being pulled under into an icy sea of blackness.

I don't come up for a long time.

---

**Sasuke**

He's on his way home. Thinking about Riko. Or Yasumin. The girl that almost beat him in a spar earlier. Who kissed him afterwards and looked at him as if he was her whole world.

(*He wonders if he looks at her like that. It feels like it, sometimes.*)

A distraction. That's what she is. Always had been, since he first talked to her.

He'd dismissed her at first glance. Small, shy, she'd seemed. Just another girl to annoy him. Next to Naruto's loudness, she'd faded away. He distantly remembers feeling some vague interest when another girl failed to intimidate her, but nothing more than that.

There'd been more important things to worry about. He had to get stronger, had to get better, had to catch up to *that man.* Nothing else mattered.

He rarely let himself feel anything besides hatred and anger.

(*Crushing loneliness and pain, a gaping, bleeding void in his soul. Nightmares haunting him even during the day. So much energy spent trying to not remember that night.*)

The next time he remembers taking note of Nara Riko had been during a ninjutsu lesson. They were supposed to use kunai in a chakra control exercise. Iruka had offered to give her one, but it had been unnecessary.

She already carried one, concealed by her clothes.

He'd started watching her then.

(*A distraction from the memories. A puzzle to pass the time with. Anything to keep the darkness away.*)

There were several things about her that didn't make sense to him.
While she possessed some measure of skill, she always seemed scared. She was good at hiding it, but he saw through it. She never relaxed. She usually sat in the back of the classroom. The only ones she ever turned her back to were her brother and Uzumaki Naruto. The most noteworthy anomaly, perhaps, was that she was terrified of Sasuke himself. Riko went out of her way to avoid his eyes and never talked to him. She was a nervous wreck.

He'd come to the conclusion that she was wholly unsuited to becoming a kunoichi and dismissed her once again. He had more important things to focus on.

Months later, she'd come back into his life with a vengeance. He'd been training in a secluded training ground.

(Training until he dropped, that's the only way he'd get some semblance of sleep. He couldn't rest, ever. The nightmares were always at his heels.)

Her showing up at his training place had confused him. For one thing, it was secluded and as far as he had known, no one but him used it. For another, Nara Riko tended to avoid him, and here she was, without any of her constant companions around.

She'd stumbled through an awkward explanation, looking ready to bolt the whole time she spoke. And then she'd challenged him.

(Stupid. He's an Uchiha, the best of the best. Elite. She's just some pathetic weakling.)

He'd accepted the challenge, of course. Uchiha never backed down from a fight.

It was supposed to have been over quickly. It hadn't been.

He'd been so, so wrong about her. She was no weakling. Nara Riko was all swift, flowing movements, more dancing than fighting. She kept up with him. Had evaded his kicks and sidestepped his punches, weaving around them like a ghost.

(Hit her, kick her, hurt her! She mocks him, just like he did! Make her pay!)

The fight had been darkness and pain and freedom. It had ripped him open and left him raw and bleeding, but it gave him a connection to someone. He still wasn't quite sure what exactly he'd battled, wasn't even sure if he had really won. It hadn't felt like it when he'd knelt above her, her throat under his hand, so damn fragile. He'd seen the pain, the same crushing darkness in her green eyes that he sees when he looks into a mirror.

He hated her. She made him feel.

But those moments during their fight where he felt free, where he had a connection to another human being, he craved those; so a week later, he fought her again. And the week after that, and the ones following them.

(He hates her even more for that. Uchihas don't need others.)

(If he watches her in school, it's only because he's observing her for weaknesses. Nothing more.)

(He doesn't care about her. She's only a means to make him stronger.)

She'd been placed on his genin team, together with Uzumaki Naruto, the Dead Last. Another distraction, that one. At the very least, he and Riko should be enough to make up for the dobe's idiocy. And she wouldn't hold him back.
(He isn't happy about the team assignment. He isn't!)

(He doesn't want to spend more time around her. Fighting her is enough. It's bad enough how well she knows him already.)

That's what he thought at the time. And he was right, she didn't hold him back; in fact, he learned several things from her. He just wasn't sure if those things were worth the trouble she brought with her.

She amused him. Made him have fun. She started to tell him things. Made him want to tell her things, too, not that he ever did. She became someone he could rely on.

And he noticed that he worried about her when she was in distress. He found himself annoyed when she pretended to be fine when she really wasn't. He wanted to be someone she relied on, too.

Distraction. Dangerous.

She makes him forget the important things.

(He can't care about her. Caring will only end with pain.)

(Their silent conversations mean nothing to him.)

But then the Wave Mission had happened. And seeing what it did to Riko, first seeing her break down with worry over her brother, then her collapsing after she healed the dying Asuma – he realised he'd failed. He did care about her. He'd decided to stay away from her once the mission was over, but then they'd come back after the fight on the bridge to find her injured and weak at the house. And when she woke up, she hadn't been the same. She'd put up a good front, but nothing that could fool him. He knew her. He'd seen the new darkness in her eyes.

He couldn't deny that he'd been pleased when she told him about her first kills before she told her brother and Naruto. Sure, she'd snapped at him, but she'd also allowed him to see the darker feelings she harboured, the ones she normally kept hidden.

After that, he'd started watching her more closely. He brought her to his house on a whim, let her in just a little bit.

Thinking back, that day was when he decided he wanted her in his life as more than a sparring partner and teammate.

It was during the Chunin Exams that he realised just how much he cared about her, how much she had come to mean to him. At first, the exams had seemed like a game. He'd been arrogant and overconfident, he knew that now. They'd made it through the first test easily. They'd easily defeated a team in the second one.

Then Orochimaru had come and Ri had gone and died. For him.

It had changed everything.

His thoughts are interrupted when he finally arrives at his house. It stands there in the moonlit night, no windows lit, no sound heard save for the wind rustling the leaves of the surrounding trees. No one waiting for him. Sasuke scowls. Why didn't he go with Ri? He should have walked her home and finally gotten some answers out of her. She's been behaving odd lately, and with Ri, that can't mean anything good. And her avoiding him is damn annoying.
He casts another look at his dark and empty house, then he turns around and leaves the way he came. His thoughts turn back to her.

After she'd died and he'd brought her back, he'd clung to her. He hadn't been able to help it, had to reassure himself that she was still there, that her heart was still beating. Every moment he let her out of his sight, he was scared he'd find her lying on the ground, cold and pale and not living. When they'd finally made it to the tower and they'd been separated so Kakashi could train him, he'd nearly gone insane. And after her fight in the preliminaries, when she'd collapsed from exhaustion, he'd thought his heart stopped.

And then she'd vanished. She hadn't been in the infirmary and he couldn't find her at the hospital. Kakashi barely told him anything. And he'd decided that enough was enough.

He would stay the hell away from her. Caring about her only hurt him. He'd make sure she survived, but other than that, he forbade himself from any contact with her.

His resolve didn't last long after he saw her again in the finals of the Chunin Exams. First, when he saw how she defeated her opponent, he'd been proud of her and his resolve had faltered. When he saw her hurt look at his dismissal of her, it almost broke. After the invasion commenced and she refused to let him fight by himself, it shattered.

So he kissed her.

*(Spur of the moment. Just the adrenaline and thrill of the fight, the stress of the invasion. And he hadn't seen her in so long. It meant nothing.)*

Later, after the fight, when she'd been helpless, weak and hurt, he'd been the only one able to protect her. And for once, he'd felt strong.

That feeling hadn't lasted long. After the invasion, he'd overheard that that man had been in town and was after Naruto, of all people. So he'd grabbed Ri and made her tell him where the idiot was. Revenge would finally be his. He'd lived for it.

*(She hadn't even hesitated. She just ran after him, right into the danger.)*

He failed. Itachi beat him like it was nothing and when he looked into his eyes… no. He can't think about it.

*(All of them falling, dead killed murdered somuchblood wake up wake up wake up-)*

She'd been there when he woke up. Hadn't asked questions, just talked to him for hours about nothing and everything, had been his anchor to reality. It had felt right, having her next to him. She and the dobe had even broken him out of the hospital later. At his house, she'd cooked for him and sparred with him, and he'd almost kissed her again.

*(He likes her. No use denying it anymore. He'll just have to keep her around so she'll be safe.)*

Later that night, she'd come to him, looking drained and defeated. And he'd realised that maybe, she needed him as much as he needed her.

*(It had felt so right, having her in his arms while she slept.)*

Sasuke walks past their training ground and takes the road leading to Riko's Clan Compound.
He wonders when it was that he started to think of her as his.

Was it in Snow Country, when he kissed her for the second time after she'd been separated from them again? Or when she told him her given name? No, it had been earlier. Somewhere between him taking her to his house for the first time and bringing her back from death. Or maybe it was when they were still so young, after their first fight, when he put his hand on her throat.

Regardless of when it was, Ri belongs to him, and it is way past time he made that clear to her. He won't let her run from him anymore.

Suddenly, he feels something tug at his senses – something he has felt twice before, once in the Forest of Death and once in Snow Country. A crackling sort of energy, raising the hair on his arms.

Ri's magic. Something's wrong. He breaks into a run without thinking.

He doesn't have to look far. He doesn't have to look at all. They come to him. He stops in his tracks as they land in a half-circle in front of him.

Sasuke counts. Four enemies, from Sound. A red-haired girl, a man with six arms, another with two heads and a large man carrying a barrel with seal-tags on it. Ri is nowhere to be seen.

"Who are you," Sasuke demands, shuriken appearing in his hands.

"We are the Sound Four," the one with the two heads answers, smirking.

One by one, the four of them introduce themselves. Then suddenly, they move from sight. Kidoumaru appears in front of him, tries to punch him with one of his many fists, but Sasuke grabs his arm, twists and pulls, and then the man goes flying into the girl trying to sneak up on him. The other two try attacking him simultaneously from the sides, but a moment later, they crash into the other two, causing a dust cloud to well up. When it dissipates, all that remains are logs.

He clenches his fists and turns to the four standing behind him. "If you want a fight, I won't hold back," he threatens, deadly calm.

The one who called himself Sakon sneers. "Don't talk big, weakling." He crooks his finger at Sasuke. "Come on!"

Sasuke doesn't move. "What do you want," he growls.

"Tch," Kidoumaru scoffs. "I feel like killing this weakling for being so hesitant!"

Sasuke narrows his eyes, one real, one only an illusion to mimic the real one.

"Hah!" the girl, Tayuya, jeers. "The weakling knows he's outclassed!"

Sasuke still refuses to move, his glare levelled on the enemies. His mind is racing.

"As long as you stay in this village, you'll never amount to anything." Sakon smirks condescendingly. "You'll never get stronger."

"Come with us," the girl continues. "That way… Orochimaru-sama will give you powers."

"Like Riko," Sasuke states darkly, his mind flashing back to the times he saw Ri with her skin covered in vine-like markings, standing when she should have been taken out already, unbothered by injuries, strange, intoxicating power swirling around her. He remembers seeing the seal on her neck. He remembers the look in her eyes as she told him and Naruto about who gave it to her.
"So you have seen it," Sakon muses, grinning. "She's already accepted Orochimaru-sama's invitation, you know." He raps one fist against the barrel. Sasuke gaze fixes on it.

She is inside. He doubts she went willingly.

"You might become even stronger than her…" Kidoumaru drawls. "Even strong enough to beat Uchiha Itachi."

Sasuke jerks, his eyes widening. \textit{Itachi. Revenge. Power. All he's ever wanted, offered to him. And Ri…}"

"Don't forget your purpose. You are an avenger," Tayuya murmurs enticingly. Sasuke grits his teeth, his fists clenching so tightly, it hurts.

"This village serves as nothing more than a prison to you. Just break those useless bonds," Sakon continues. "Doesn't it anger you, to see all of them becoming stronger while you are held back? Especially," he strokes his hand over the barrel. "Her. Come with us, and you will attain even greater power."

"Decide now," the large man carrying the barrel speaks up for the first time. All four of them stare at him, as if they already know his thoughts, as if they can see right through him while he stands there, deliberating his options.

In the end, he doesn't really have to think about it. He makes his decision. Levelling an impassive gaze at them, he lifts his chin. His voice is cold.

"Let's go."

He reaches up and pulls off his hitae-ate. With a careless flick of the wrist, he throws it away.

The full moon shines over the empty alley. The shinobi are long gone.

At the base of a tree, the light reflects off of a lone hitae-ate.
Lily

The Sound Four and Sasuke have been traveling for hours. Morning has broken. Hardly any words have been exchanged between the travellers, safe for an explanation to Sasuke about what is currently happening to Riko. He hasn't said a word since.

Sakon suddenly stops. So do the rest of them. "Dammit… this means trouble."

"One…" Tayuya murmurs. "No, two of them."

"They're coming!" Kidoumaru yells, and all of them throw themselves out of the way. Two Konoha jounin land before them.

"You are Orochimaru's…" one of them murmurs. A large, weal-like scar mars his face.

The other one's eyes are fixed on Sasuke who returns the look impassively as he stands beside Kidoumaru and Jiroubo. "On your way from Konoha, eh?" he muses, deceptively calm. The senbon in his mouth barely moves while he talks. "What's inside the barrel, Sasuke?"

Shiranui Genma doesn't get an answer.

"Fighting two jounin…" Kidoumaru murmurs and smirks. Black swirls begin to creep over his skin. Similar marks wander over his teammates' skin. Sasuke's eyes start to glow red. "This might be a bit of a challenge."

"No answer?" the scarred Konoha jounin, Namiashi Raidou, asks.

"Shut up, trash!" Tayuya growls back. "Just die!"

"Don't underestimate Leaf shinobi," the other jounin warns calmly, his gaze still fixed on Sasuke.

A moment later, Sound and Leaf clash.

In the ensuing battle, Sasuke supports the Sound. It is his sharingan that finally takes out Genma.

Riko

It's dark. Cold. I can't move, can't see anything, can't hear anything. I'm not even sure I'm breathing.

Am I dead?

No. My heart is still beating painfully hard in my chest. It's the only part of me that I can still feel.

I wish I were still comatose.

It's impossible to tell how much time is passing. All that exists is the cold creeping in my veins.

Hopeless.

No. I know there's still hope. There's still… I have… someone? The names are… they are… it's… what?

I panic. My heart starts hammering even harder in my chest.
I can't remember. What was I trying to remember in the first place? What happened to me? What-?

What is my name?

Who am I?

I try to scream, but I can't feel my body, can't find my voice, can't anything. There's only coldness and I think I'm crying in terror though I can't feel any tears. There really is no hope. There is only cold nothingness, helplessness and fear. And this gaping empty void in my chest, as if my heart was cut out, even though I can still feel it beating, pushing the emptiness though my body with every beat. If I could, I'd scream.

"Pathetic," a cold voice sneers. My heart skips a beat, then beats on twice as fast.

My surroundings shift. I'm standing up to my waist in icy black water. Around me tower mountains and buildings, but they're covered by black, leafless vines, each as thick as my arm, that are crawling over everything like snakes, as if they want to suffocate the entire place. Everything is shrouded in thick, dark mist.

The whole place somehow seems familiar, but it feels wrong. Poisoned. Too cold. And those vines…

Under the water, something snags my ankle. I shriek and rip my leg up, then I hastily take a few steps forward, fighting against the icy water that seems to push against me. I turn my head and my eyes widen in fear.

The vines are moving, creeping towards me like snakes on a hunt. "No," I whisper through numb lips. I turn around and force my body to fight against the water, force myself to think beyond the pain in my chest. Every step is a struggle, every movement drains me and the cold is numbing and slowing me down. Something snags my wrist, but I yank my arm away. The places where the vine touched it are left bloody. A moment later, a vine wraps around my thigh. I try to rip it off, but more come and wrap around my waist, my arms, my ankles, anything they can reach. I cry out in pain and try to fight against the vines, but there's too many and I'm weakening fast. I whimper in fear when I see the blood leaking out from under the vines. It feels as if they are drinking my blood. Like they are sucking me dry. "Nonono," I whisper. "Stop!"

The vines start pulling me somewhere. I try to resist, but I lose my footing and fall into the icy water. Sputtering, I come up again, struggling as good as I can, not that it does any good. Water gets in my nose and mouth, making it impossible to breathe, and the vines are now wrapped so tightly around my body that they're choking me.

It's futile. And what am I fighting for anyways? There's only pain and struggle here. No way out.

I squeeze my eyes shut, go limp and let the vines just drag me. Giving up is easier. Maybe I'll be left alone if I don't cause trouble. All I want is to get out of here, wherever 'here' is.

I open my eyes when I feel myself being dragged on dry ground. I'm being pulled towards the ruin of a house, a house that seems eerily familiar. All the vines seem to sprout from here, like it's the root of an enormous plant. A sick and sinister looking hedge surrounds the house. I'm being dragged through high grass, its blades slice against my skin.

Even if I still had the will to fight, I wouldn't be able to anymore. I'm too injured and weak and I don't know what is going on. Terror paralyses me on top of that.

A dry sob escapes me.
"Pathetic," the voice from before sneers again. I look around wildly but can't see anyone.

The vines drag me into the ruin through the damaged wall. My eyes widen when I see the inside.

It's a cavern, a thousand times larger than the outside suggested. I can't even see the ceiling. The walls are covered with the crawling vines, slithering over them like snakes. Flickering violet flames hover in mid-air and illuminate the place with an eerie glow. In the middle of the cavern is a monolith that glows a vile purple, and from its base the vines seem to sprout. There's a symbol engraved in the centre of it, three comma-like marks placed together.

This is the origin of all the wrongness. And this is where the vines are dragging me. And I know I absolutely must not touch that stone, or it will all be over. I start struggling again, but it's weak at best.

"No!" I scream, trying to stem my feet into the ground, claw my fingers into the ground. "Stop, no! Help!" A vine slings around my neck and cuts off my voice. My movements grow weaker until I'm just hanging limply in the vines' grasp.

Ten metres until I reach the monolith.

Five.

Two.

One.

The vines hoist me up. My back hits the stone.

White-hot knives pierce every cell of my body. My bones are on fire, my head must be splitting. Ice cold shocks roll over my body. There's a high ringing in my ears, as if someone is screaming, some animal, because surely, no human is capable of making sounds like that.

*I want it to end… to black out… to die…*

And then the pain is gone. I'm left hanging limply, tied to the monolith so tightly, I can't even move my little finger. The only thing that isn't covered by vines is my face.

"Just a reprieve, I'm afraid," that same voice I heard before informs me. The vines shift a little and then my head is pulled up so I can see who spoke.

It was a girl. She is beautiful, in a terrible, merciless way. Her hair is a shockingly intense dark red and reaches her hips in wild tangled waves. Her eyes are yellow, with snake-like slit pupils. Her skin is a dark grey and on her forehead, a white mark shaped like a lightning bolt shines forth. Her lips are black and currently pulled into a cruel smile.

"W-Who are you…" I wheeze through numb lips.

She laughs, a high, cold sound. Her eyes glint with madness. "Ahaha! The irony…" she saunters closer. "I am you."

"Wh-wha?" I force out.

She laughs again. "Or rather, I will be you." A hand reaches out and brushes against my cheek. "I'm that which you have always rejected about yourself. Oh, I was never strong enough to influence you greatly, you never repressed your hatred and anger that much… until Orochimaru-sama gave me this
power. This *amazing* power." She takes her hand back to stare at it reverently. An unhinged smile lights up her face and her gaze falls back on me. "Not that you remember… I shrouded your memories."

Desperate rage fills me suddenly. "Give them back!" I scream at her, launching myself forward, struggling against the vines. "Give them back to me!"

Without warning, the pain flares up again, all consuming, worse than anything, like every cell of my body is being scorched, electrocuted and frozen all at once, and then pulverised and put back together again. This time, I know the screaming is coming from me.

When it ends, I'm hanging limply in the vines, staring blankly at her feet. I feel her gently lift my chin so that she can look into my eyes. My gaze just drifts unfocused over her forehead until it lands on the lightning bolt. "Aww, poor you. Don't you just want it to end?"

*I do.*

"Just close your eyes and give up…" she croons. "Because you won't ever leave here."

"No…" I whisper weakly.

"Oh yes!" Cruel glee fills her voice while she strokes my skin. "You'll spend the rest of your existence chained to this stone, tortured until there's nothing left of you."

"Don't…" I whimper.

Suddenly, she lets go and slaps me. The sharp pain sort of brings me back to myself. "You piss me off! I hate you! So weak and pathetic, but still never staying down! *I hate you!*" she shrieks. Then she closes her eyes and takes a deep breath. When she opens her eyes again, she smiles at me. "You know, I wanted to keep you around a little more, so you can suffer a little bit, but I think I'm just going to erase you now."

"Please…” I plead desperately, not knowing what exactly I'm begging for.

*I don't want to disappear. I don't want to end. I want to know what you made me forget.*

She merely laughs cruelly. Vines begin to sprout from her arms, but these have *mouths*, gaping open and revealing sharp teeth. "Say bye-bye now!" She thrusts her arms forward and the vines shoot towards me. A moment later, I scream as they bite into my body.

And then the vines burst into golden flames and it stops. A soft hand lays itself on my forehead, so *familiar* and warm, it makes me relax instantly. The vines fall off my body and I slump forward, only to be caught in warm arms. I sob and close my eyes when I draw in a familiar scent, a scent that says *home – warmth – safety.*

"I'm afraid I can't let this continue," my saviour says.

"You!" *she* hisses.

"Me," my saviour returns. I feel the hand stroke my hair. "Let's get out of this depressing place, alright, sweetheart?"

There's a brief sensation of weightlessness, and then the whole *feel* of the place changes, like we just teleported somewhere different. The air feels clean and warm and I can see brightness even through my eyelids. The hand on my head seems to drive all the cold and bad out of my body, makes the
weakness go away. "Open your eyes," the voice murmurs gently. The warm arms holding me withdraw from my body and I gasp and open my eyes.

My knees hit the ground when I see the person that saved me. I start to tremble, my eyes fill with tears. I don't know the woman before me, and yet she is so very familiar, so beloved that something inside me surges up and expands until a word falls out of my trembling lips. "M-mama?" I ask. And then it's as if a floodgate opened and memories come streaming into my mind, of all my precious people, all my loved ones, all that she made me forget.

Sasuke. Ruto. Shika. Dad. Mom. Kakashi. Fumio. Ino and Chouji, Kiba and Shino, Hinata and Hanabi and so many more and I'm hunched over and sobbing into my hands, and I can feel Mama's arms around me, whispering softly into my ear and rocking my gently, her hands stroking my hair.

"I love you so much, Jazzy," she whispers.

"Love you too," I sob in return.

Eventually, I calm down enough so I can look at her. "Is it really you?"

She gives me a sad smile. "No. I'm merely an echo of your mother, imprinted into your soul to protect it. I'm so much less than what your Mama ever was. Call me Lily."

"But-" I protest desperately. I want, no, I need her to be my Mama. She shushes me.

"We don't have much time before she finds this place. I need you to concentrate."

I look up at her tearfully.

"You want to see your friends again, don't you? Your family? To return to your life?"

"But I only just found you!" I protest.

"I'm not real!" she returns forcefully. I flinch back. Calmer, she continues. "I'm merely an imprint of your mother's love and magic that was left on you when she sacrificed herself for you."

"I've always wanted to meet you!" I tell her. "Even if it's only an echo, you're real to me!"

She smiles at me, but her bright green eyes, so much like mine, are sad. "And I want you to know, your Mama and Papa loved you more than anything. I know it's hard, but I need you to listen."

That look in her eyes, so full of love and sadness, convinces me more than anything that I need to listen to her.

I wipe my tears away and nod, even though it breaks my heart. "Okay, Lily," I whisper.

She nods, her eyes shining with regret. "You probably know this already, but we are currently in your mind."

"But it's been taken over by the curse, right?" I continue for her.

She gives me a grim look. "Taken over? You're still here, aren't you, Jazzy? And you have me."

"You can free me from the curse?" I ask, desperate hope rising up in me.

"It's not that easy," Lily says. "The curse is too strong."
"But there is a way to beat it." She looks at me seriously. "And it's the only chance you have at saving your soul."

"What is it?" I ask warily.

"You have to return to that cavern," Lily says. "And you have to defeat her."

My mouth goes dry at the thought of going back to that place. Of facing her again. Of feeling that pain again, of losing my memories again.

Lily puts her hand on my forehead once more. It calms me down a little. "It will be different this time," she tells me.

I shake my head. "She has control over my mind! She already took my memories once, what if."

"Are you giving up?" Lily interrupts.

I stare at her. Shake my head slowly, uncertainly.

"What do you fight for?" Lily asks me. "Tell me!"

"I…" I hesitate. "My family. My friends."

"But that's not it, is it?" Lily demands. "You aren't convinced, are you, Jazzy?"

"I am!" I protest.

"What do you really fight for?" Lily glares at me, her green eyes flashing. "This weak, insecure damsels in distress act isn't you! Tell me, where did the girl that faced down two missing ninja to protect her friend go? That always got up from the ground, no matter what fate threw into her way? Tell me what you're fighting for!"

"I-"

"Tell me!"

"Myself!" I yell. "I fight because I can't stand the thought of losing anyone! I protect them because I love them! I'm doing it all for myself, because without them, I'm nothing!" I take in a deep, shaky breath and glare defiantly at Lily. "And I'm going to win against that thing because I want to return to them. Is that what you wanted to hear?"

"It's not about what I wanted to hear, it's about what you needed to realise," she returns.

"Yeah, well, I still have no idea how I'm going to win," I mutter, rubbing my forehead. "Kami, this is the freakiest death-experience I've ever had."

Lily clears her throat. "About that… do try to limit those. This is the fifth one already. It can't be good for your health."

"This one actually wasn't my fault," I grumble. "And the other four were because I'm a walking time-bomb with my magic. Seriously, how do I control that stuff? I don't even have a wand."

Lily clicks her tongue. "You don't need a wand to use magic. It's all about intent."
"Well, that's going to make Killing Intent really awkward in the future," I deadpan.

She lightly swats me over the head. "Not that kind of intent, Jazzy."

I raise an eyebrow at her. She sighs. "Where do you think your instinct comes from?"

I blink. "What?"

She smiles at me gently. "The source of your instinct is your magic. All those times your gut warned you of something, it was because your 'intent' was to protect yourself or your friends and the magic followed that intent. Every time you used magic, it was because of your intent to save someone." She hesitates. "I'm not quite sure about this, but I think in this world, magic is harder to control."

I frown at her. "What do you mean?"

She shakes her head. "I don't know. But every time you use magic here, it's something big. It's like there is something in the air that makes it harder to do magic and only lets it happen when there's enough to power a small bomb."

I wreck my brain for an explanation. "Natural chakra..." I murmur. "Maybe it doesn't like magic..."

"What?" Lily asks.

I shake my head. "Never mind." I get up on my feet. "So how do I get down there? I've got an evil curse-mutated alter ego to beat up."

She smiles at me, pride in her eyes. It makes me feel ten feet tall. "I'll take you." She draws me into her arms. "I'm very, very proud of you, Jazzy," she whispers. "I love you so much."

"I love you too, Mama," I mumble into her shoulder, drawing in that familiar scent, trying to engrave it into my memory. Her embrace is so warm, so soft, so gentle and caring. It's over all too soon. She smiles at me sweetly.

"Ready?" she asks.

"Probably not," I answer and give her a crooked grin that probably looks more like a grimace. "Let's go."

She grabs my hand. "Jazzy," she says seriously. "bravery isn't the absence of fear and strength isn't the quantity of power. Never think that you're a coward or weak."

I breathe out and straighten my back. "Yeah," I answer, my voice sounding rough. "Thanks, Lily."

Lily squeezes my hand. There's the weightless sensation again, like I'm free falling, and then we're back inside the cavern. She is waiting in front of the monolith. In the time that I was gone, the number of vines seems to have doubled.

I take a deep breath and draw my hand out of Lily's after squeezing it once more. Then I step forward.

"Come to face your doom?" she lets out a laugh that she abruptly cuts off. "I'm going to end you and take my rightful place in the world."

Delusional. Insane. Dangerous.

I flash behind her, form a water dagger in my hand and stab it at her. She whirls around and blocks it
with a water sword of her own. My eyes widen when I see my own technique used against me.

"Surprised?" she asks with a smirk. "I am you. Everything you can do, I can do. And because I am more than you, I will win."

"Whatever, Dementia," I reply, tired of addressing her as 'her'. Then I throw myself out of the way of a barrage of carnivorous vines. From then on, I can't get a moment's rest because the vines are everywhere, on the walls and the floor, chasing me or laying in wait for me. My blood drips on the ground, gashes in my skin the casualties of brushes with them. I swing my water dagger, now expanded to a sword, to cut them, but for every one I take out, five more replace them.


Meanwhile, _she_ stands on the monolith, directing the vines with her arms like a deranged conductor, laughing madly.

It's not looking too good for me. I hiss in pain as I evade a carnivorous vine by grabbing a normal one and swinging myself away. A swish of my sword, and two vines fall to the ground, but more come after.

I tire of this losing battle I'm fighting.

_Hold on a minute, how can I use a water sword in my mind? There's no chakra here…_

I narrow my eyes and focus. My water sword turns into a real one.

"What?!" Dementia shrieks, incredulous rage pouring from her.

"You may have control over it at the moment," I say, whirling around and cutting away at the vines. "But this is still _my_ mind."

I throw myself out of the way of another barrage of vines. They're coming from everywhere. I'm sure that if I take out Dementia, it'll stop, but I need to get closer to her. But how am I supposed to do that? I barely have time to think.

_The only choice is…_

I cut another vine, but from below, another bites into my thigh. I cry out and cut it, then I rip out its maw still sunk into my flesh. Whirling around like a dervish, I cut a path through the vines towards _her_. She sneers at me and balls her fists. That same moment, _hundreds_ of vines crash into me, wrap around me and choke me, bite into my skin. I scream in pain, my sword lost in the mass of plants. They hoist me up and carry me over to the monolith, let me hang right in front of Dementia who now stands on a platform of vines.

"This is the end!" she hisses, her yellow eyes narrowed in hatred. She pulls her arm back, a sword forming in it.

"It isn't!" I growl back. I squeeze my eyes shut, push the pain away, and then I draw out that resolve that Lily made me realise, the will to fight, the will to protect. I feel something surge up inside me, and when I open my eyes, hundreds of white glowing chains are sprouting from my skin, wrapping around the vines that held me and ripping them away from me. I'm left standing on a platform of chains, covered in blood, chunks of my flesh missing.

_Her sword is sticking deep in my chest._
My sword has gone straight through hers.

"W-wha-?" she whispers incredulously. "What did you do?" she screams. "What have you done?!"

"I needed to get close to you. So I let the vines catch me," I wheeze.

"WHY?!" she screams. "Why hurt yourself? Why do you ALWAYS sacrifice yourself?!"

"Because," I say. "If the alternative were to happen, I wouldn't want to live at all."

"I HATE YOU!" her features twist, making her barely recognisable. "I HATE YOU!"

Vile, purple energy radiates from her, travels down her sword and slams into me. I scream as the cold wrongness spreads into me and my head fills with images.

**Mama dead on the ground.**

I growl in pain and counter the memory with an image of Lily, the love and warmth she radiated, her sweet, gentle smile.

*Uncle Vernon's meaty fists rain down on me. His cruel words slice into my heart.*

Dad ruffling my hair and taking me to see the deer, Shikamaru playing shogi with me, mom training me every day and making me strong, her giving me my sword.

*Me, lonely in class, pierced by judging eyes, weighed down by their stares.*

Naruto and I, sitting at Ichiraku's, sharing ramen, laughing together. Him giving me my first ever hug and saving me from the dark memories.

*Naruto, bloody in the sparring ring.*

Ruto, standing victoriously over Mizuki. Beating Neji through sheer determination. Standing proudly against Gaara. Him slamming his rasengan into Kabuto, into Doto. Overcoming the odds time and time again.

*Me, helpless under Kuramoto's fists and kicks.*

Me, fighting against Sasuke over and over again, growing stronger every time. Overcoming my limits and fighting him to a draw.

*Naruto and Sasuke deserting me during the bell test.*

Naruto and Sasuke, sitting on each of my sides, shielding me from the world.

*Two Kiri missing-nin, dying under my hands.*

Ino and Asuma, alive and healthy because I protected them.

*Sasuke on the verge of breaking, holding onto my wrist, one eye closed forever.*

Sasuke holding my hand in Snow Country and treating me to ramen.

*Fumio dying in front of me because he tried to save me.*

Fumio's smile, his constant asking me out. Tricking me into that creepy café. Him telling me about medical ninjutsu. Him, *alive.*
And so it goes on. For every bad memory, every darkness Dementia throws at me, I have an answer. The purple energy is slowly pushed out of me, and my own sword starts to glow white, the glow reaching her chest and trickling into her. She writhes in agony, whimpers in pain. "Damn it, why?!" she screams. "I'm stronger! I'm more than you! You are weak!"

"Because for every dark memory, every bad and bitter feeling that created you, I have a hundred good ones," I answer. "And unlike you, I do not stand alone."

"No!" she screams. "I won't disappear!"

"Of course not," I say. "You're a part of me. The only thing that's got to go is Orochimaru's influence."

Her knees buckle under her as she falls. The white glow from my sword has completely taken over her body that's now becoming translucent, then transparent. "No," she sobs one more time, then she's gone.

In her place, an enormous white snake composed of hundreds of smaller snakes is left. But the face, those eyes…

"Orochimaru…" I whisper in horror. The snake hisses, then it shoots towards me. I stumble back, and then Lily is in front of me, white-golden light streaming from her hands. The light engulfs the snake. It screeches and writhes in pain, but seems unable to flee. Around us, the cavern starts to crumble, the vines shrivelling up. A large crack goes through the monolith.

"Jazzy," Lily says softly and turns her head back to me, a heartbreakingly sad smile on her face. "I'm glad I got to meet you, sweetheart."

"What are you saying?" I ask, voice trembling. "Why are you talking like that?"

Lily's skin starts to shine with a soothing, ethereal light. Her smile doesn't waver. "I love you, sweetie. I'll always be with you."

"No!" I scream. I take a step forward, but the power radiating from her throws me back. She shines so brightly now that I have to lift an arm to shield my eyes. "You aren't sacrificing yourself for me! Not again!"

"I will become a prison for this curse," her voice floats around me. "No longer will you have to fear for your sanity. You will be free."

"No!" I scream, tears running from my eyes. "Don't do this!"

"There is something you need to know. Your fate is entwined with that of your original world. Someday, you will have to make a choice."

She pauses.

"I will always love you, Jazzy."

Light engulfs everything and takes me away.

I wake up to absolute darkness. I know I'm back in my body, tucked into something dark and way too narrow. I gasp for breath, push against the walls. I think I'm in a coffin of sorts. For a moment, I panic, thinking I've been buried alive.
Then power wells up in me, incredible, amazing power. My body feels as if it's burning with it. I can see the glowing, vine-like marks creeping over my skin, glowing like fire in the darkness. They aren't creepy like they were in my mind, these are delicate and beautiful. They spread and spread over my skin until everything is covered and I feel something pushing painfully against my back from inside me. Magical energy churns in my gut, crackling and burning, thrashing inside me like a wild animal.

*Shitshitshit, what's happening, I thought Lily killed the curse, dammit what's the magic doing-*

The power bursts from me and obliterates my prison.

Light hits my eyes, blinding me. I stand in the middle of a small crater, engulfed in a dust cloud. Stretching my senses, I detect five presences around me, and one of them is extremely familiar.

Sasuke.

*What's he doing here? Was he taken, too? Then why is his chakra still strong and fierce?*

I hiss when the power inside me flares again and bursts from me in a shockwave that reduces the ground to rubble. I can feel it expand in all directions. I can feel it nearing Sasuke. I grimace, reach out with my mind, searching for control. Snag the edge of the wave, grab it, pull it back, pull it all the way back, and the power returns to me and I drop to my knees in the crater that has formed around me.

I stand up on somewhat shaky legs, mentally completely exhausted. Stare at my hands. The skin is completely silver-white. My hair is loose and brushes my waist in a tangled mess of dark red waves. As I watch, it glows red and then the vine-markings recede from my skin, withdrawing into my neck. My head feels lighter, too, as my hair reverses it's growth until it hangs at its normal length of just past my shoulders.

*Okay. I'm officially freaked out. I thought Lily and I got rid of the curse. I thought-*

I think back to those last painful moments with Lily – *grieve for her later, now is not the time* -, back in the deep recesses of my mind and soul. She said she'd become a prison to the curse, not that she'd destroy it. Which means it's still there.

Minus Orochimaru's influence. Plus, apparently, a little bit of magic. Like, enough to power a small bomb.

*Bugger, I'm a freak.*

I sense my enemies and Sasuke surrounding me.

"We have been waiting for you, Riko-sama," I recognise Sakon's voice. "It was decided that you would be our new leader."

I almost laugh. He thinks I've succumbed to the curse. *Think again, bastard.*

I lift my eyes from my hands. Pull up a façade of cold arrogance. "Is that so," I reply. "Good on you. What's Sasuke doing here?" I turn my head to my right where Sasuke stands.

"He's coming to serve Orochimaru-sama in exchange for power," Sakon informs me.

Sasuke's and my eyes meet. My face betrays nothing. "So you have decided to disobey the rules? You know what that makes you, Sasuke."
"I don't care about the damn rules," he replies impassively. "There's only one thing that matters to me right now."

"I see," I answer. "That's… enlightening. I'm glad we talked about this."

"And another thing…" he says. "You cannot fool my eyes."

"No…" I murmur. "I never could. Neither could you fool mine."

Our eye contact breaks. In the space of a split second, lightning flares in Sasuke's hand and a water chain grows from mine. Sasuke leaps and I yank, and then there were only three enemies. Kidoumaru falls over, blood spurting out of the hole in his chest.

Sasuke and I land back to back.

"Can't leave you alone for one second, Yasumin," he mutters.

"Didn't ask to be kidnapped," I murmur back. "So what do you say, ready to head home?"

"Yeah," he says. "Sounds good, Ri."

Though, staring at the three remaining enemies glaring at us, I have a feeling it won't be that easy. That it will be a long time until I see Konoha again. But somehow, with Sasuke at my back, I feel like I can face anything that fate throws at me.

Miles away, Shizune heals her injured comrades.

Raidou coughs under her green glowing hands. "Uchiha Sasuke… traitor…" he forces out.

"What?!" Shizune yells. "No, don't talk, Raidou-san."

Genma chuckles weakly. "That guy's no traitor."

"G-Genma, he-" Raidou protests.

"If it weren't for him, Sound would have killed me for sure. Don't know what his game is, but he's no traitor."

"Shizune-san, I'll follow them!" Iwashi, the remaining teammate, announces.

"No!" Shizune immediately protests.

"But-"

"Raidou-san and Genma-san need medical treatment as soon as possible. I need you to help me carry them back to the village. We'll inform Tsunade-sama and send out a retrieval team."

"Iwashi," Genma speaks up. "he's safe. They think he's their ally. And you saw him fight. He'll hold out until backup comes."

With a stricken look, Iwashi gives in to his teammates.

Village of Konohagakure, eight a.m. (five hours before)

In a deserted street, a timed explosive tag hidden under a lone hitae-ate flares. An explosion shatters
the silence.

As fate so will, Inuzuka Kiba is currently walking his dog Akamaru close by.

A half hour later, a team lead by Nara Shikamaru is assembled at the front gate of Konohagakure. It consists of Uzumaki Naruto, Akimichi Chouji, Inuzuka Kiba, Hyuuga Neji and Rock Lee.

In Inuzuka Kiba's hand is a hitae-ate with Uchiha Sasuke's scent attached to it.

"Let's get them back," Shikamaru says. "We've wasted enough time."
Battle

Otogakure, eleven a.m. (two hours before)

It doesn’t show on his face, but Yakushi Kabuto is tense and worried. The curse placed on Orochimaru-sama by Sarutobi Hiruzen is advancing faster than even the worst-case calculation predicted. It's already too late to wait for Riko-san. He had to convince his master to transfer to a spare body – a heavy setback for Orochimaru-sama' plans.

On top of that, he can't shake the feeling that all is not going according to plan with the acquisition of Uchiha Sasuke and Nara Riko. Which is why he is currently in the medical bay, looking over the instruments monitoring a certain patient's health.

"I was not called, again," a voice wheezes out from said patient, his face hidden under medical seals, tubes inserted in his mouth. "Kabuto-sensei, I am-

"Your job is to take care of your body. Your duties are already over," Kabuto interrupts. "Kimimaro, you are no longer a member of the Sound Five."

"I still…"

"We have already found you successor."

Kimimaro has no answer for this, but his silence says it all, the anguish at being replaced so easily, the wistfulness, the longing to be of use to Orochimaru-sama one more time. His resentment at being confined to a bed while his master's most important mission is executed without him.

"She possesses a seal of equal power to your 'Seal of Earth', the 'Seal of Heaven'. Not only that, she holds an ability last seen in the Nidaime Hokage and also a powerful bloodline limit. And there is a very real possibility of her having Uzumaki heritage." Kabuto chuckles softly. "I wonder who is stronger… you or her…"

Definitely Kimimaro, at least at this point in time.

Kimimaro twitches. The heart monitor registers a spike in his heartbeat.

"What's wrong?" Kabuto asks. "Don't excite yourself too much!"

Kimimaro groans. Blood leaks from the corner of his mouth. "How long do I have left?" he asks.

"Don't talk anymore…" Kabuto advises in that soft, soothing tone that would make any shinobi feel like a useless child.

"I've recently realised that everyone is given life for a reason," Kimimaro says. Unbeknownst to him, Kabuto smirks. "Everyone has something important to accomplish."

"I understand what you're trying to say, and Orochimaru-sama is certainly in a great deal of pain, the situation has never been so critical before." Kimimaro twitches again. "But I must say this: What can you even do as you are now? You've lost your purpose as Orochimaru-sama's container."

Kimimaro says nothing. Kabuto knows he has already won. All he needs to do now is lay out the bait.
"Right now," he continues. "We have a new container on her way to this village." He pauses. "Well, they are running late…"

On one of the monitors in front of him, he observes Orochimaru transferring to another body.

_Now he will have to stay in that body for the next three years… but we still have next time!_ he thinks.

"I must agree…" Kimimaro says, oblivious to his thoughts. The tubes and seals begin to rip as he forces his dying body to move. "I no longer have the capacity for the soul transfer… in fact, it is quite difficult to discover my purpose now that I've lost everything." Finally he sits. "But I finally understood. Although she may not be me, I will bring the new vessel here, even at the cost of my own life. This is how I'll show my thanks to Orochimaru-sama and my way of atoning for my uselessness."

A victorious smirk glides over Kabuto's face.

"Very well. Take reinforcements with you."

Kimimaro may be the strongest fighter currently in Otogakure, but Nara Riko has a way of overcoming the odds. And Konoha ninja never leave one of their own.

Better to be safe than sorry.

Present time, near the border between Fire and Rice Country

Three against two. Orochimaru's best versus Sasuke and me.

And because Fate is a bitch, I'm swordless, unarmed and just came straight from being tortured by my evil alter ego. My clothes consist of a green shirt over mesh armour and shorts. At least Sasuke seems to be alright.

"Traitors!" Sakon hisses.

"Can't betray what I was never… argh… loyal to," I grit out. Within me, magic churns. My chakra reserves are overflowing, too. Combined with the mental exhaustion… not good. I'm a ticking time bomb.

"Impossible!" Tayuya yells. "The drug that Orochimaru-sama personally developed-

"Failed." I smirk at her.

"Earth Style Barrier: Earth Dome Prison!" Jiroubo, standing in my blind spot, yells and slams his hands on the ground. With a curse on my lips, I whirl around. The ground around Sasuke and me surges up. We both leap up and outside, but suddenly Tayuya is in front of me. I twist in mid-air to avoid her punch and manage to block her kick, but the force of it sends me straight back, right into Jiroubo's jutsu. I land on my feet only for Sasuke to be sent crashing right into me.

The earth closes over us. We're imprisoned. I bite my lip to force the fear down.

After my experience in that coffin-thing, I really don't like being stuck in a dark enclosed space again. Dammit, now is so not the time to develop claustrophobia.

"Sasuke, are you alright?" I ask, my voice sounding just a little bit higher than usual. He grunts in response and pushes off of me.
"You?" he asks.

"Peachy," I answer as I work myself back to my feet. I stumble in the darkness, but Sasuke's arms catch me and then I'm pressed tightly against his body, his arms around me. I sling my arms around him and cling to him just as fiercely, my face buried in his shoulder.

"Damn it, Yasumin," he murmurs.

"We need to get out of here," I whisper back. I feel him nod and let go of me. Taking a step back, I reach a hand out to feel for the walls of our prison. From the corner of my eyes, I see the tell-tale red glow of Sasuke's sharingan. A moment later, it vanishes.

"It's sucking out our chakra," he says.

I bark out a short laugh. "Good, I have chakra overload."

"I'll take Jiroubo and Tayuya when we get out of here. You deal with the other one," Sasuke decides.

I nod, then remember he can't see in the dark without his sharingan. "Right. Come here. I'm gonna destroy this thing." I feel him step closer. "Do you think we'll get backup soon?"

"Hn. I left my hitae-ate with a timed explosive tag."

*That's a maybe, I guess. Better than a no, at least. I don't know how long we can hold out.*

"We need to get somewhere with water," I say.

"Valley of the End," Sasuke answers. I start.

"We're this close to the border to Rice?" I ask in dismay. "Damn it, we absolutely can't cross over. A rescue team won't be able to follow us beyond the border. And Sound would never let us back into Fire."

"Hn," Sasuke replies.

"Okay. Let's get out of here," I whisper, my fingers twisting into handseals. Chakra surges up in me, too much for me to control. "Suiton: Mizu no Tatsumaki!" I scream, and throw my arms around Sasuke so we won't get separated should my A-rank jutsu go out of control. Around us, with a howling sound, our prison is filled with ghostly glowing water that starts to whirl around us faster and faster, making a horrible shrieking sound as it comes into contact with the earthen walls. I gasp at the feeling of sheer raw power around us.

I can't control it.

With a scream, I thrust my arms out and will the technique to stop and with an incredible groaning noise, all of it explodes outwards. The walls of our prison are blown away, the remains launched like canon balls.

Well, that's one way to stop a technique.

"Ri, come on!" Sasuke yells, grabs me and jumps out of the crater that formed around us. We land and I follow him blindly on weak legs. Expelling that much power at once must have been a shock for my system. At least I don't have the chakra overload problem anymore. And I can feel my body adjust quickly, my strides becoming faster with every step I take.
A glint to my right catches my eye and I throw myself to the side to evade a kunai. A moment later, an explosion sends me flying. I roll over my shoulder and get to my feet again, scooping up some rocks at the same time. Without missing a beat, I’m running after Sasuke again, who throws me a look, determines me to be fine and turns to the side to throw a shuriken. A curse and Tayuya leaps into sight, right in the path of one of my rocks which hits her cheek and makes her stumble.

The earth under our feet groans and breaks apart. For a moment I scramble to find my footing, then I manage to get my foot onto a rock and launch myself into a tree. Unfortunately, Sakon is already waiting for me there. I hurl the rest of my rocks at him which he bats away with his hand, but in that moment of distraction, I gather a water bomb in my hand and slam it straight into his face so he stumbles back. From the side, shuriken suddenly whiz past me and straight at Sasuke. Side by side, we leap through the trees, always alert and watching out for the next attack. Sasuke presses a few shuriken and kunai into my hands, followed by an explosive tag, and the second the sound of Tayuya’s flute rings through the air, I toss one, the explosion ripping through the genjutsu and granting us yet another escape.

We keep running and jumping and I can feel Sakon running parallel to me, closing the distance quickly. Shuriken don’t keep him away and neither do kunai. I can still remember how he completely trounced me in Konoha, so when I see him lunge for me, I leap forward, as far as I can, and then the ground vanishes beneath my feet and I vault over the cliff, down down down, the sparkling surface of water coming closer and closer and with a yell, I crash through the surface. The cold is a shock, but the water welcomes me in its embrace and I instantly feel better about our chances. I sense for Sasuke’s presence, then I push off and climb out of the water next to him.

The Valley of the End is breath taking. Over us tower the statues of Uchiha Madara and Senju Hashirama, their hands forming the seal of confrontation. Between them, a waterfall, glittering in the sun and creating small rainbows. For a moment, I forget how dire the situation is and lose myself in the scenery. But I’m reminded when a dark shadow falls over us.

Kind of hard not to remember when a gigantic lump of earth is dumped on me and Sasuke.

"Chidori!" Sasuke yells and leaps with a lightning-filled hand at the giant rock which shatters and sprays shards and rocks outwards and away from us. Large waves surge up from the impacts in the water, nearly causing me to lose my footing. From the cliffs surrounding the valley crumble more rocks as they are hit by the rubble.

Sasuke lands next to me. Together, we face the enemies. Tayuya and Sakon stand about fifty metres away from us, livid looks on their faces. Jiroubo is nowhere to be seen which makes me think that he’ll continue to drop earth jutsus on us from above.

Not good. We're outnumbered, our opponents are seriously strong and they haven't even begun to use their Cursed Seals yet which I know they have.

Tayuya pulls her flute out of her tunic. "You shits!" she growls out. "I'm going to end this quickly!"

Sasuke and I answer with impassive looks. I focus on Sakon who is to be my opponent. Sasuke will watch my back and take care of the other two.

"What does Orochimaru want with me?" I ask. The longer we stall, the higher our chances of getting backup in time rise.

"Why don't you come and find out!" Sakon yells and runs at me.

Well. So much for stalling. "Water Style: Tentacle Barrage Fury!" I yell. Around Sakon, eight water...
tentacles shoot up and start to attack viciously.

Even Lee got hit when I used the technique against him, and he is a taijutsu specialist. Sakon is good, too, fast and efficient, but he is not Lee. Water splashes and obscures him from sight briefly, a moment that I use to flick a look at Sasuke whose battle has moved away from us. Currently, he's blowing an enormous fireball at Tayuya while evading large rocks raining down on him.

Okay. Sasuke is fine.

Sakon's chakra suddenly spikes and the feel of it shifts into something vile and more powerful and I feel my technique getting ripped apart.

Okay. I am not fine.

The water obscuring Sakon from my sight settles down and reveals him, worm-like marks all over his body, his face livid. "You bitch!" he screams. Fast, much faster than before, he lunges for me and I don't have time to call up another water jutsu. I jerk up my arms to block his punch and haul my free fist back to counter attack but-

"Aaagh!" I yell as I'm thrown back into the cliffs, the pain of multiple punches biting my skin.

_How did he do that? I blocked him!_

Sakon smirks.

"Kuchiyose no Jutsu!" Tayuya's voice yells and I inwardly curse when I see the three monstrous beings appear behind her. The moment of inattention costs me because suddenly, the cliff above me collapses into an avalanche of mud rocks that crash down on me. I manage to curl up and protect my head, but damn it, it hurts, hurts, hurts. I think I hear Sasuke yell my name, but then I'm knocked underwater and the only thing I can hear is the sound of rocks crashing and the gurgling water. I gasp, my air escaping, and flail my arms, but then a rock hits my head and knocks me back to my senses. As my blood seeps into the water, I remember that I can breathe underwater and that it takes a lot more to finish me.

I yank my arms through the water and accelerate, my hands forming seals, a plan forming in my head. "Mizu Bunshin no Jutsu," I murmur and four clones form to swim beside me. Two of them veer off, the remaining ones dive with me until they are right under Sakon. I swim a little further and then accelerate until I burst through the surface, facing my opponent. "You won't take me alive," I tell him coldly.

"Ha! Trash like you shouldn't talk big!" he yells and runs forward.

"Now!" I yell.

"What the-" Sakon's shocked face is obscured as dozens of large chains burst out from under him. To my left where I sent the other two clones, two of Tayuya's monsters are being bound, too. Sasuke's and my eyes meet and he gives me a nod, then he turns and runs at Tayuya. I turn back to my opponent, a water sword forming in my hand.

Sakon is wrapped in chains, completely immobilised. I run at him, sword poised to run through him. From the corner of my eye, I see something orange drop down – Jiroubo, but he's too far away and too slow to catch me. With a yell, I appear before Sakon and stab my sword forward, but suddenly, I can't move my arm.

"W-what?" I whisper, shocked at the sight before me. From Sakon's shoulder, the torso of another
Sakon emerged, his hands clutching my wrists and keeping me from moving.

"Shoulder Charge!" Jiroubo rumbles and all the air is driven out of me. The other Sakon lets go of me and I hurtle through the air until with a scream I crash into the rock face again. I feel it splinter under me, a cloud of dust and rock splinters surging up. The back of my head hits the rock and all goes black.

A sharp pain in my back awakens me. I blearily open my eyes. Everything is so blurry and grey. Dust is all around me. I seem to be stuck in a rock wall.

Pain stabs again in my back. And not only there, everything hurts. I'm certain that I have a cracked rib.

"Get her. That piece of trash isn't getting up," a voice orders.

I blink. Then my eyes go wide as I remember where I am and what is happening.

_Oww. Shit, I can't move, dammit it hurts, I'm pathetic, no, they are coming, I don't wanna…_

I bite my lip and use the pain to focus.

I'm not dead yet.

The familiar burn spreads from my neck, filling me with power, and I let it spread farther and farther. The painful pressure in my back grows worse and worse, but I don't let it stop. My senses sharpen and the skin on my face stretches, my muscles burn and bones creak, and something pushes against my shoulder blades from within me, and it hurts-hurts-hurts-

"She's using the seal! Get her, fast!"

and then something rips through my back, through my shirt and destroys the rock behind and around me, pushes me to my feet as I yell in pain.

Jiroubo suddenly jumps through the dust cloud, his face marked with black arrow marks, his fist flying at me.

_Slow._

When did he get so slow?

I catch his fist in my hand. Damn, while he's slow, he's still strong and drives me back one step.

No matter. My kick to his chest catapults him away. I step out from the dust cloud after him. Shocked faces turn to me. Closest to me is Sakon, him and his doppelganger facing me.

I see myself reflected in the water under me. White skin, green eyes so bright they almost glow, with slit pupils and the skin around them pulled back which makes them look feline and exotic. Dark red hair to my waist in wild tangled waves.

Two large black leathery wings protrude from my back, cruel claws attached to them. They look like a demon's wings, or like what I imagine a dragon's might look like.

Jiroubo growls, the marks on his skin glowing red and spreading. When they settle, his skin is a reddish brown with warts all over his body. His hair has grown longer and the white of his eyes has turned black, the irises a cold yellow. With a roar, he storms toward me.
So slow.

I flash before him and kick him in the chest. He stumbles back, but I don't let up on my assault. Hit follows after kick follows after knee after elbow. I run up his large body and vault of his chest when I sense something approaching and in mid-air catch Sakon's punch in my hand, only two other fists suddenly break out of his skin an shoot toward my face. With a snarl, I twist my body and throw him away, sending him into the water. I land and skid backwards.

"Alright, Ri?" Sasuke asks, appearing beside me. He's breathing hard and his clothes are scuffed, but other than that, he doesn't look hurt.

"Never better," I answer with a grim look, every breath stabbing at what I'm now sure is two cracked ribs. Sakon climbs out of the water to our right, only he doesn't look like Sakon anymore, rather he looks like a demon with a sharp horn protruding from his forehead, fangs and brown skin. His doppelganger matches that appearance. Both their heads are facing us now. In front of us is Jiroubo, cracking his knuckles. Tayuya stands to our right, with long red hair, horns, yellow eyes and brown skin, demon summons hovering behind her.

"So that is the Cursed Seal," Sasuke states grimly, flashing a side glance at me. "Yours is different."

"Magic," I answer. "This isn't going too great. These guys are monsters."

"Hn," Sasuke agrees.

Our chances of winning are somewhere around zero. While my chakra just increased tenfold, so did theirs, and there are four of them, not three like I assumed. And they have a lot more experience in using it.

Tayuya is the first to make a move. An eerie melody sounds from her flute and her summons suddenly attack, and those things are fast, much faster than Jiroubo. One of them swings its club down on us, another flies at us right behind it and just like that, Sasuke and I are separated again. I dodge the third demon, narrowly avoid its strikes, but its flailing fists catches on one of my wings and send me skidding back on the water. With a pained grunt, I jump back to my feet, only to throw myself to the side to dodge its drop-kick by a hair's breadth, the surging water sending me flying. The pain in my chest is getting worse.

A shadow falls on me. Demon number one is descending on me, his club swinging down on me. I jump up and forward, right at him. "Riko-Rasengan!" I scream and slam a perfect orb of glowing water-and-chakra into its chest. It sinks in with a shrieking noise. Then it explodes inside its chest and the thing is ripped to pieces from within and dissolves in smoke. Behind me, I hear the sound of another chidori and when I turn, I see Sasuke ripping through the two remaining summons. I can't afford to be distracted, though.

Again, a shadow falls on me. I look up and throw myself around to run. Behind me, an enormous pillar of rock crashes down and the water surges up under my feet and sends me flying, straight at the Sakon-thing. I hastily form seals. "Uo Tsuba!" I yell and spit out a large jet of water, the backlash throwing me back onto the violent water. The water jet splashes against my opponent who jumps forward as if it isn't even there. With a curse I leap backwards, forming a long water sword in my hand, but when I swing it down on him, he suddenly separates into two people, one half of their bodies covered in plate-like scales. "Heh," one of them growls. "We're good brothers. Ukon usually stays asleep inside me and only wakes up for battles. He has the ability to extend his arms and legs from any part of my body, as you know-

I swing my sword at his head. His scale-covered arm snaps up and destroys it.
"I'm going to lose."

They lunge at me simultaneously from the left and from the right, their armoured fists pulled back to crush me into pieces.

"But I'm taking you down with me!" I yell and jump forward, right into their attack. With a twist of my hip, I throw myself around so Sakon/Ukon's attack is caught by my wing – kami, it hurts! – and plunge a water dagger into the other's chest right as his fist crashes into the arm I lifted to block. I can feel the bone breaking and I scream as I'm thrown back, crashing through the water's surface, but I manage to somehow struggle upwards again, pulling myself to a crouch on the surface. To my right, Sasuke is fighting both Jiroubo and Tayuya, whirling around faster than I've ever seen him, shuriken and fireballs flying with incredible force. To my left drifts the lifeless body of either Sakon or Ukon, the water beneath him slowly turning red.

The other one is nowhere to be seen.

"You'll pay for that," his voice growls right into my ear. I freeze in terror.

His grotesque visage is growing right out of my shoulder.

"You'll pay for what you did to Sakon!" he screams, and I feel something reach inside me, feel it grab.

Feel it squeeze.

"Guaahhhhhhrgh!" I scream, the pain worse than almost anything that I've ever felt. But what really shakes me is the sheer violation of having him torture me from the inside.

"Yes, scream, trash!" Ukon hisses. "I'll make you wish you had never been born!"

"Ri!" Sasuke yells, sounding panicked. I look at him helplessly as he takes a step in my direction, but Jiroubo cuts him off and Tayuya is summoning more demons behind him.

Ukon squeezes again. "Ughhh…" I whimper, hunching over, tears falling from my eyes. "No…"

I feel him shift his grip inside me and cry out again when he pulls at my cracked ribs. "Sasukeeee!" I scream.

"Ri!" he yells back.

"I'm going to cut him to pieces right before your eyes…" Ukon croons into my ear.

In front of my inner eye, Fumio falls under Kabuto's hand.

Never again.

I scream as my ribs break under Ukon's grip.

Magic explodes from me. The water around me surges up into towering waves that head away from me like a shockwave. Ukon yells as he's ripped out of my body and flung away with such force, I doubt I'll see him again any time soon.

"Sasuke!" I yell. "Sasu- ugh." I cough into my hand, and when I pull it away from my mouth, it's bloody. Hastily, I channel healing chakra to my hand and press it to my chest.

"Ri!" Sasuke drops down next to me. He looks exhausted and there are scrapes and cuts all over him
and a nasty bruise on his face, but his clothes are still dry which means that my mini-tsunami either avoided him or was avoided by him.

"Ribs," I groan out. "What about-"

"Bitch, I'll kill you!" Tayuya, bleeding from her head, screams, one horn shattered, as she drops down a short distance away, Jiroubo right behind her, holding himself awkwardly. "I'm gonna fucking kill you!"

"Keep healing yourself," Sasuke orders. "I'll handle this."

"Hn," I mumble. Already I can feel the curse receding. I groan in pain as my wings retract and I'm left trembling, weak and vulnerable. "Take care."

His hand brushes over my hair once in a comforting gesture that says 'I'll protect you'. He takes a step forward.

And then, suddenly, it's not just Tayuya and Jiroubo anymore. In front of them appears a pale man with white hair, his face emotionless.

And above us on the cliffs are a dozen Sound shinobi. And not just the generic kind that all look the same, no, most of these guys look like monsters. Some have extra limbs, others weird skin colours, fangs and claws or grotesque figures.

Shit.

Sasuke tenses, shuriken in his hands. And the look he gives me says: I'll protect you to my dying breath.

I wish you wouldn't, I answer.

Liar.

And in this situation that is so very hopeless and desperate, my lips pull themselves into a smile that says: I love you.

And he smiles back.

"K-kimimaro…" Tayuya stutters, her expression fearful.

"You were late," the man named Kimimaro interrupts. "Also… where are the others? Once, we were the Sound Five…"

"W-why are you…? Your body-"

"I am no longer moving with my body… What moves this body is my dying will," he answers Tayuya's stuttering.

An enemy who is even feared by his own teammates and whose eyes are those of someone who is ready – no, who knows he's going to die. Plus a dozen Sound shinobi and Tayuya and Jiroubo.

And our side has me, with a broken arm and ribs, and an exhausted Sasuke.


Kimimaro lifts his arm and lets it fall. "Intercept and dispose of them," he orders, and just like that, the dozen Sound shinobi are gone and what little hope we had is crushed.

But maybe… maybe we can stall for time. I'm already healing myself.

Kimimaro's gaze falls on Sasuke with mild interest. Then it falls on me and sharpens. It makes me shiver in fear. "You damaged her," he remarks to Tayuya. "You damaged a part of Orochimaru-sama's dream."

I recoil from him, ignoring the pain in my chest. His eyes are so empty and void. He doesn't look at me as a person, and that scares me. "What does Orochimaru want with me?" I ask.

His impassive stare is still levelled on me. "Orochimaru-sama has already completed the jutsu of immortality. In order to acquire all the jutsu in the entire world he needs time… Immortality doesn't necessarily mean the immortality of his body… he must replace his body with a newer and stronger one before his current one succumbs. You, Nara Riko, shall be a vessel for Orochimaru-sama's dream."

I stare at him with incredulous disgust. "You people have issues."

Something white and spiky grows from Kimimaro's long sleeves. He lifts his arms and falls in a fighting stance. "Foolish girl, unable to see the greatness that is Orochimaru-sama. Soon, you will understand."

Sasuke tenses and steps in front of me. "You won't touch her," he promises darkly.

Finally, Kimimaro takes his eyes off of me. "You as well are a part of Orochimaru-sama's dream. Your eyes shall see it come true."

"I'll go blind before that," Sasuke states and I know he is dead serious. He's done it before after all.

"I shall deal with you first, then," Kimimaro decides. And just like that, he and Sasuke move. So strong, so fast, so flawless… I have never seen Sasuke move like that before. It's like he can foresee Kimimaro's every move before he executes it. But Kimimaro is just as fast and flawless.

They break apart, staring at each other. Sasuke is breathing hard and bleeding from several gashes. Kimimaro only has a scratch on his cheek. And from his body, spikes protrude. Bones. This man has a kekkei genkai that allows him to manipulate his bones.

Dangerous.

"Katon: Housenka no Jutsu!" Sasuke yells and breathes several fireballs out at Kimimaro who evades them expertly.

"Is this the limit of your ability?" he asks. "It is no wonder that Orochimaru-sama only requires your eyes."

Sasuke smirks and pulls his hands back. Wires glint in the sun as the shuriken hidden in the fireballs loop around and wrap Kimimaro in wires.

"Pathetic," the man says. Bones break through his skin and cut the wire off before Sasuke can even launch his Dragonfire technique.

Damn it. This guy is on a whole different level, I think as I watch Kimimaro pulls a blade made of bone out of his shoulder.
"Tayuya, Jiroubo. Capture the vessel. I shall deal with the Uchiha." He pauses. "And do not damage her."

I wonder if I should hold a kunai to my throat and take my own body hostage. It might be a good last resort.

Lightning starts to coat Sasuke's hands like a watered-down version of the chidori. "Ri. Can you fight?"

I give him a grim look and let my healing jutsu fizzle out. "Of course."

"Good."

And he and Kimimaro clash again. I can't even follow them with my eyes, they are that fast. Where Kimimaro hits, blood splatters, where Sasuke attacks, bones burst. But I can't afford to pay them attention because Jiroubo and Tayuya are closing in on my kneeling form.

"Suiton: Suikusari no Jutsu," I whisper and place my hands on the water, force chakra through my arms even though one is broken. Dozens of chains burst from the water beneath their feet and wrap around them. "Ugh." I squeeze my eyes shut against the pain. The two of them are still so strong with their Cursed Seals. How can they draw that state out so long? Mine receded after five minutes.

To my right, Kimimaro's chakra spikes.

"Give up, trash!" Tayuya screams. I groan and pour more chakra into the technique. But damn it, Jiroubo is breaking through my chains.

Too strong.

More chakra. Make them tighter.

"Agh!" Tayuya gasps. "You bitch!"

And then, suddenly, I feel my power sucked out of me and my chains burst. "You are going to be my next meal," Jiroubo promises darkly, his hand glowing with the chakra he drew out of my chains. He leaps up and brings his fist down on me.

And I do something that Zabuza specifically warned me never to do.

"Suiton: Mizutamari no Jutsu," I whisper, Jiroubo's fist an inch from my face, and my body dissolves into water and drops into the lake.

I'm endless. I'm untouchable. I'm the lake, the river, the water. In this state, there is no pain, no exhaustion. I can feel them on my surface, their steps like raindrops, but they can't touch me. I can see them from below, the large boy, diving into me while the girl yells and curses. The pale man, dark markings all over his body, sharp bones protruding from his ribs. I can see the bleeding boy in front of him, hands filled with thunder.

His blood drops into me. Something tugs at me.

That boy…

He's important.

The pale man stretches his hand out and suddenly, the boy cries out and drops, more blood dripping from small but deep wounds. But still, he gets up again. The man once again holds out his hand and-
I surge up between them as a violent wave and they fall backwards, the white haired man trapped in a glowing cocoon of water. With a gasp, I fall back into my human body again and it feels like a shacklie. I gasp for breath and cough up water, whimpering in pain.

I'm never doing that again. If it hadn't been for Sasuke, I'd have lost myself in the water.

"Damn it, Ri," said boy mutters as he steps up beside me. His eyes are fixed on Tayuya and Jiroubo who are now running toward us. Sasuke leaps over me, shuriken brandished.

I gasp as the cocoon of water Kimimaro was trapped in breaks and a monster emerges. Dark grey skin, black-and-yellow eyes, six large bone spines protruding out of his back, a long bone-spiked tail and two dark black curved like markings under his eyes. The expression on his face is cruel as he advances on me. From his back, he draws out his spine.

I force myself to my feet. I still have some fight and chakra in me.

Kimimaro lunges and swings his spine like a whip. The good thing about his transformation is that he isn't as fast as before, the bad thing is that he's a lot stronger. I manage to avoid the hit – I know a thing or two about dodging whips – but the wave that surges up from the water as his spine-whip hits it sends me flying on my back, right beside the waterfall. For a moment, I black out, and when I open my eyes, he stands above me, the blinding sun at his back. He lifts his spine-whip and I squeeze my eyes shut. Listen to it whistling through the air, ready myself for the pain.

It never comes. I hear it crashing against something and open my eyes wide.

Sasuke stands over me, bloody and exhausted. The look on his face is angry and dark, unlike anything I have ever seen before, not even when he faced Itachi. The henge on his face is dropped and his one sharingan glares in a malevolent dark red, only it has changed. The tomoes are gone, instead, three red ellipses form a star with his pupil at the center. The air is charged with chakra.

Around us, something forms from it. It looks like… a ribcage, and Kimimaro's spine is wrapped around one of the ribs.

Sasuke and I stand inside a skeleton made of chakra.

Kami, Sasuke is doing this?

"You won't touch her!" he snarls.

"We shall see," Kimimaro says impassively. Something forms on his arm, a drill-like bone spear. "I see you only have one sharingan. Orochimaru-sama will be most displeased."

Sasuke snarls at him, half-mad with rage and pain.

We're running out of time. The chakra cost of this thing we're inside must be enormous, and once Sasuke collapses, it'll all be over. Already the skeleton seems to be crumbling, parts of it flaking away from the bones. And I can't sense any help coming for us.

"This is the thickest bone in my body. It will easily pierce through your pathetic defence," Kimimaro promises and lifts his spear. Sasuke growls. I feel his chakra surge and spike and I know he's pouring every last bit into this skeleton-thing that suddenly looks a lot more solid.

Kimimaro lunges forward and his spear crashes into the skeleton's ribs. Pierces through, is stopped
again. Cracks appear on the weapon. And then, releasing an enormous shockwave, the skeleton shatters and Kimimaro is thrown back. Enormous waves roar through the valley. Sasuke drops down next to me, eyes half closed, barely clinging to consciousness. "Damn it," he whispers.

I stretch my senses. Tayuya's chakra has vanished completely, Sasuke must have killed her. Jiroubo's is still there, a short distance away. Kimimaro's is still strong, even though it's flickering. A fourth one is coming closer – Ukon.

Instinct tells me that by the time help arrives, it will be too late for us.

Our time is up.

But Orochimaru hasn't won yet. We'll only have lost when Orochimaru has us in his clutches.

An idea forms in my mind.

It's dangerous. Suicidal. Hopeless. The chances of success don't even exist.

But there is no other way. As long as my soul is still in my body, as long as Sasuke and I are still alive, I'll keep fighting.

Ukon prowls closer to the waterfall where that murdering bitch and that double-crossing bastard are cornered. Oh, he'll enjoy cutting her to pieces, she bitch who took his brother, the only person he ever cared about, his other half, from him. Only her suffering will quench this thirst for revenge, will fill that emptiness that Sakon left.

Yes, he swears he'll not rest until her bloody carcass is lies brokenly before him.

He'll have to kill Kimimaro first, but that bastard won't be kicking much longer. Jiroubo won't be a problem, weak trash that he is.

Ukon will have his revenge. He takes another step forward.

"Huh?" he growls.

Mist. Thick, white mist is rolling in from the waterfall and filling the valley. He can't even see his own hand. But he can still sense chakra. There is no way the murdering bitch will make it past him and the remaining Sound Five, not with the Uchiha as deadweight unable to hide his chakra in his state. The way to her Leaf-trash friends is blocked. That bitch won't ever see her home again.

Grinning madly, Ukon takes a step further into the mist.

It dissolves.

And the valley is empty of Nara Riko and Uchiha Sasuke.

Ukon's scream of rage echoes miles wide.

An enraged scream shatters the silence of the forest that I'm running through, the by now unconscious Sasuke draped over my shoulder. Darkness falls over the densely wooded mountains as the sun sets. Cold bites my skin, my ripped shirt doing nothing to warm me.

Help won't find us here.
Turning around will get us killed. We'd never get past the Sound ninja. The way back home is blocked.

Sasuke and I have crossed into Rice Country.

**Shikamaru**

"Let's go, Akamaru! Gatsuuga!" Kiba yells and throws himself forward, spinning and accelerating. The Sound ninja doesn't stand a chance. "Yeah, awesome, Akamaru!"

"Good work, Kiba, Akamaru" Shikamaru says wearily, appearing from behind a tree, bloody and exhausted. By his side walks Temari from Suna.

There was no end to those Sound ninja. All of them were either chunin or jounin level with monstrous abilities. And Shikamaru's group had gotten separated. He'd only just managed to stick with Kiba. If it hadn't been for the allies from Sand arriving, it could have ended badly. Even so, he knows Lee and Neji are out of commission, having faced two opponents who used destructive sound waves that left their eardrums shattered and poisonous mist that left their muscles twitching. Chouji, too, is hurt. All of them are injured and exhausted.

Shikamaru can still work with that - somehow, he could make it work. What he can't deal with is the rain.

Of all the times, it has to be now that it's started to rain. Rain means tracking Ri is impossible.

He clenches his fists and glares up at the sky, refusing to cry from frustration. There has to be a way to find them.

"UWAAAHHHHH! A DOG!" a shrill voice screams and rips him out of his thoughts.

"Argh, get it off, get it off!" Kiba yells and falls off the tree, something neon green clinging to his face.

"What the hell is that?" Temari asks, aghast.

"What the fuck!" Kiba yells and finally manages to pry the thing off his face.

"Leggo of me!" a neon green rabbit shrieks, kicking at the hand holding it. Akamaru barks.

"Uwahhh! Get it away from me!"

It's the first time Shikamaru has ever seen anyone scared of Akamaru.

The rabbit continues to scream until Kiba shakes it. "Hey! You're Riko's idiot summon that ran into a tree!"

The rabbit stops screaming. "I was in a fight! Kidnapped from my home! Fleeing from certain doom! I'm not an idiot!"

Shikamaru grabs the rabbit by the ears and takes it from Kiba. "Owww! Watch where you're touching! Those ears are sensitive! *Sensitive*, you brute!"

He shakes the dumb thing. "Where is Ri."

As if he hasn't figured it out already. If his sister sent a message, that means she got away and is somewhere he can't reach her. And that means she was forced to cross the border. He just hopes
against hope that he's wrong.

"I strongly protest this treatment!"

He shakes the dumb green thing harder. "Oww! I don't know where she is, but I've got a message! For whoever has her boyfriend's headband!" the rabbit pauses. "That's how I found you, you know? Smelt it, my nose is awe-"

"He's not her boyfriend!" Shikamaru snaps. He takes a deep breath. "The message," he growls.

"You know, you don't have the headband. And you're mean. I'm not sure I should trust- owiiiiieeee! InacaveShesaysdon'tgoafterherandtworooksandaknightbringhertotheYaguracastle!"

"What," Shikamaru asks darkly.

"She was hiding in a cave and she says don't come after her and two rooks and a knight bring her to the Yagura Castle!" the rabbit sniffs. "Meanie!"

"What's that supposed to mean?" Kiba asks, frowning. "A code?"

"Shogi," Temari answers and Shikamaru looks at her, surprised. "They're shogi terms."

"Which means the message is for me," he states. He frowns at the rabbit. "She's safe?"


"Not her boyfriend," Shikamaru mutters. He pushes the rabbit into Temari's hand who eyes it with a disgusted expression. He crouches down and brings his hands together so he can concentrate.

**Two rooks and a knight.** Can't refer to persons, she's only got Sasuke with her. Refers to movements then. Rooks move straight to the side or for- and backwards. Knights jump two squares forward and one to the side, and they ignore intervening pieces. On a map, that would bring her to either Waterfall, Grass or Fire Country.

**Yagura Castle.** The strongest defence in the game, the safest position for the king, protected by a well-fortified line of shogi pieces… considering in this game of shogi, Riko and Sasuke are the 'king' that has to be protected, her message means she's going to where she thinks she'll be safe.

His sister is going to where the borders of Fire, Waterfall and Grass meet.

Shikamaru gets up. "We're getting the others and then we're going back."

"Huh? But Ri-"

"Has crossed the border. It's troublesome, but we can't reach her and she's asking us to have faith in her. That doesn't mean we can't help her, though. We're going to clean up the rest of the Sound ninja. And you," he grabs the rabbit from Temari. "Are going to take a message to my father. Tell him Ri's coming."

"Owowowow I don't wanna!"

After a little bit of persuading from Shikamaru, it turns out the rabbit actually has always wanted to meet his summoner's father and it'd be overjoyed to take a message to him and please don't kill it, get the dog away from it and watch those ears they're sensitive.
They watch the rabbit's tail end disappear. The thing is fast.

Akamaru barks.

"Yep," Kiba agrees. "We better send a real messenger. It's so going to run into a tree."
The cave tunnel is narrow, dark, and water drips through cracks and holes in the ceiling, causing the ground to be covered in water. I move soundlessly through it though I needn't have bothered; with the constant rain no enemy will hear me. I won't hear any enemy either.

A few steps more and I leave the water-covered ground behind as the tunnel takes a turn upwards. Another few steps and I reach the cave I left Sasuke in while I went out to gather food and secure the perimeter.

He's still unconscious. With a small sigh I kneel beside him and feel his forehead. No fever, good. I spent a good chunk of chakra treating the worst of his wounds after I found this place two days ago, but there's an almost bone deep gash in his arm that I couldn't heal completely and there's nothing that I can do for his exhaustion. And with how cold and wet it is, we'll be lucky if he doesn't get sick. We desperately need clothes, medicine and blankets. At this rate, I'm going to have to do something dangerous to get those. The mountainous region we're in is crawling with Sound patrols.

And considering the freedom of movement they appear to have, I'm fairly sure that Otogakure is the hidden village of Rice Country. Go figure. I hate my luck.

"R-ri?" a weak voice murmurs. Confused obsidian eyes blink at me.

"Sasuke!" I whisper-exclaim. "You're awake!"

He groans and attempts to sit up. I hastily hook my arm behind his back to support him. Finally, he sits with the cave wall behind him supporting his back. "W-where…?"

I give him a pained look. "Rice Country. Sorry. How are you feeling?"

He gives me a weak deadpan look. "This how you always feel?"

I give a choked laugh and sling my arms around him. "I'm glad you're awake," I murmur. "I was worried. You were unconscious for three days."

"Hn," he murmurs. I feel him bury his face in my shoulder. "What happened?"

"I had to get us out. The way back home was blocked, so… Rice Country." I pull back and look at him. "You need to eat and rest. I want to leave here tomorrow. We're still close to the border and the area is teeming with enemies." I pull a few edible roots and some fruits I found out of the pockets of my shorts. "Here. I'd have gone hunting, but we have no way to cook. Can't find any dry wood with this damn rain."

He nods and takes the roots from me. I pretend not to notice how unsteady his hands are and how slowly he chews while we eat. "Three days?" he asks.

I nod. "The first day I brought as much distance as possible between us and the valley. That's when it started to rain, too, which is probably a good thing since it erased our tracks. Found this cave the second day and holed up here. The Sound ninja showed up this morning. They're looking for us."

Sasuke finishes his food and looks at me. "You need sleep."
No kidding. I haven't slept at all since the fight at the valley – I couldn't allow myself to. With Sasuke helpless, I couldn't risk sleep. Luckily, I found some herbs to chew that helped me stay awake. Herbs can only do so much, though. Still…

"You need it more," I reply firmly and push him down. "Next time you wake up, we're leaving."

…I can hold out a little longer.

He glares at me defiantly, but it's only minutes later that his eye closes and his breathing deepens. I try to get comfortable sitting next to him – but not too comfortable lest I fall asleep, too. Shivering in the cool air, I rub my arms.

_Five minutes. Just five minutes of sleep_, a part of me pleads. I shake my head to shut it up.

It would only take one second for us to be caught.

Sighing, I lean my head back against the wall and close my eyes in misery. Our situation is beyond hopeless. In addition to it being cold, wet and us being hunted, we're going to have to sneak through Rice Country, somehow cross the border to Fang Country and flee across the whole completely unfamiliar country so we can cross the border to Waterfall Country from where we need to sneak back into our home country. Then we're going to have to locate the outpost dad is stationed at, in an area that is probably crawling with ninjas from Iwagakure just looking for weak Konoha ninja. All with Sasuke at his weakest and myself tired out and exhausted, not to mention the pursuers that are sure to be following us.

I shudder thinking about Ukon and Kimimaro. I'm really hoping I won't see them again, but I'm not holding my breath. Kimimaro did say that he was moving with his dying will, which in the worst case means he won't rest until he has found us. And as we are now, we could hardly fight them.

Stop thinking about it, I order myself. Doesn't help you any.

I think about Naruto instead. About warm hugs, eating ramen, about laughing over pranks so hard we end up crying. We would finally stop, only to look at each other and burst out laughing again. I think about Shikamaru, mom, Ino, all my friends, all that I have to return to.

Kami, they must be so worried. Or mad. Yeah, they're probably mad at me. I don't even know if Ninjin managed to deliver the message, and even if he did, I have no idea if it'll ever reach Shikamaru who can figure it out.

Night has fallen. It's been seven hours since Sasuke woke up. I stayed by his side the entire time, fighting against heavy eyelids falling shut every other minute. At this rate, I have no idea how I'm supposed to protect us from enemies when Sasuke and I leave here tomorrow. I might fall asleep before we ever see them.

A shiver runs down my back and my head suddenly snaps up. Something in the night has changed. Like the atmosphere suddenly became charged; with what, I can't tell.

Noiselessly, I rise from my place on the ground and palm a kunai I swiped from Sasuke. Stretching out my senses, I scan for any presences, but there's nothing. Frowning in the darkness, I first arm the makeshift traps in the tunnel I came from, then move to the back of the cave and follow a different tunnel upwards, leaving more armed traps behind me.

When my feet no longer meet stone but wooden roots, I know I have reached the tunnel's exit, a small hole at the base of a rather crippled tree. I cast out my senses again, but there's still nothing.
However, that unsettling feeling won't go away. It's putting me on edge, and there's no way I'm not going to look for the origin of it.

Silently, I climb up the tree's roots and emerge at its base, concealed by the skeleton of a tree that has fallen on it long before Sasuke and I ever arrived here. Crouching behind it, I cast wary looks around but can't find anyone in the darkness. Nothing seems to be wrong. Carefully, I creep around the trees, channelling chakra to the soles of my feet so they won't make noise on the wet ground.

No one here. And yet, I know that I have company, capable of hiding themselves completely from me. I know I'm being watched, that they already know I'm here as well.

But if so, wouldn't they attack me immediately? I'd think it was fairly obvious that in my current state, I can't win a serious fight.

"Come out," I command and step into the open, kunai in hand.

Nothing happens. I take a deep breath, close my eyes, breathe out. Maybe I'm too tired and stressed. I must have imagined it.

I open my eyes and look straight into the red, red eyes of Uchiha Itachi.

The world stops. Stops, and starts again in black and red. I draw in a shaky breath, tied to a wooden cross.

Notrealnotrealnotreal, I chant in my head.

"Don't take this the wrong way," I say. "But I really don't want to deal with you right now."

"Nara Riko," he intones, lifting a sword.

"That's me," I agree. "You know, if you're going to scare me, don't use a sword, use a whip."

And here I go, mouthing off to an S-rank criminal who's already tried to kill me before. Kami, what is wrong with me? I knew I should have caught some sleep, after all.

"Though, you're plenty scary on your own," I continue. "So, what gives? Are you here to kill me?"

He stares at me. I glare back, an alarming lack of fear making me bolder than would be wise.

"You will answer my questions. Answer right, and you walk free," he finally says.

What, no torture? Like he tortured Sasuke until he was comatose for a month?

"Ask away," I snarl. Might as well see what he wants.

"Tell me how Sasuke lost his eye," he commands.

I blink in surprise. Of all the questions he could have asked… I thought he'd ask about Naruto. I wouldn't have answered, of course. But this question?

"I don't know," I answer truthfully. "I wasn't conscious. What do you care, anyway?"

Itachi suddenly stands before me, the tip of his sword against my throat. A sliver of fear finally makes itself known. "When," he orders.

"Chunin Exams, Forest of Death," I tell him. "His eye was like that when I woke up after
No need to tell him that it was my fault Sasuke lost an eye. Itachi doesn't need to know how important I am to Sasuke.

He lets his sword sink. "Orochimaru," he repeats impassively.

I tilt my head. "Why do you ask?"

The world shifts back to normal. I drop to my knees and gasp for air, rub my arms and legs to make sure the ropes tying me are really gone. Frowning, I look up at Itachi.

*Why did he let me go? What's his game?*

"Not going to kill me?" I ask.

He looks down on me and says nothing.

"Look," I growl. "I haven't slept in three days. I'm hungry. It's raining. I'm in no mood to figure out your very own special brand of Uchiha-speak. What do you want from me?"

Still nothing. I hold his stare, the wheels in my mind turning.

He turns to leave.

"I get it," I say to his back. "You need me to protect Sasuke. You have some sort of evil masterplan for him and that's why you aren't killing m-"

Red eyes.

Then blackness.

---

I shoot up from the ground, gasping for breath, casting a wild look around.

The cave around me is silent. Sasuke is sleeping semi-peacefully, a frown on his face. I release a long breath. Stupid me, I fell asleep.

"Weird dream," I mutter to myself. I cast a look up at the cracks in the ceiling. From what I can tell, it must be somewhat close to dawn. Time to move, then. I get up, stretch a little, and walk over to Sasuke, shake his shoulder gently. "Wake up," I whisper. "We need to move."

He groans softly and opens his eye slowly. "Ri," he mumbles, his voice rough from sleep. I smile at him.

"Good morning," I murmur. Turning, I reach for the tiny pile of edible roots and hand him some. "Eat up," I tell him. "I'm going to do a security sweep. We're moving once I get back."

He nods and looks at me. *Be careful, Ri.*

*Of course,* I answer and give him a tight smile.

Once outside, I weave between rocks and trees, all senses stretched out. I guess that's the good thing about accidentally falling asleep, my brain works again. Noiselessly, I creep around a large rock, careful not to disturb loose rocks under my feet.
I'm entirely unprepared for the sight waiting for me behind the rock. So much so, I jump back with a yell and draw a kunai.

I needn't have bothered. The three dead Sound-nin won't hear me anymore. I swallow drily and step closer to inspect them. One was obviously stabbed. I can't tell what the other two died of, but their eyes, the only things their masks don't cover, are wide open and terrified.

Something white catches my eye. A piece of paper, pinned to a rock by a shuriken.

_Travel north-west._

I start trembling. It has nothing to do with the cool rain that has faded into a light drizzle.

It wasn't a dream after all. Itachi killed those people and left them here for me to find, a blatant message of 'You need me'.

Kami, he carried me back last night. He was around Sasuke! He could be watching right now!

"Okay," I whisper, a shaking hand running through my loose hair. "Okay, calm down, Ri. He's not gonna kill you and Sasuke. He wants him alive for some fucked-up reason and you're his best chance at his survival. He's helping you. He's _helping_ you. So calm down!" I bite down on my lip so hard I taste blood. It helps me somewhat focus. I walk over to the dead enemies, shunt the revulsion to the back of my mind and start looting their corpses.

Weapons, wires, explosive tags. No food pills, soldier pills or ration bars. I can't bring myself to divest them of their clothing.

When I'm done, I run straight back to Sasuke. "We're leaving, now," I declare while handing him a stolen kunai pouch and forking over some weapons. His eye widens when he sees them. He can guess that I didn't find them growing from trees.

"Are you hurt?" he asks.

I look at him while I distribute the weapons – shuriken to him, senbon to me, kunai for both of us. There's no way I can tell him about Itachi being around. Not here, not now, maybe not ever. Sasuke has already proven that he can't keep his cool where that man is concerned and the last thing we need is him going crazy.

"No," I answer. "I'm fine. But we need to get out of here." I help him stand and drape his arm over my shoulders.

"I can walk," he snarls at me.

"Not for long," I reply evenly. "Trust me, I know a thing or three about chakra exhaustion."

He glares at me, but I refuse to drop his arm. Instead, I start moving through the tunnel and he has no choice but to come with me.

"Direction?" he asks when we exit the tunnel.

I take a deep breath and release it. "North-west."

Without Itachi, we'd have already gotten caught. So I don't think I've got any choice but to trust him.

I already decided a long time ago that there was nothing in this world or any other that I wouldn't do to save my loved ones. I once told Tsunade that I wouldn't care if she became a traitor if only she
helped Sasuke recover from the mental torture Itachi put him under. It doesn't really make any difference that the traitor whose help I'm accepting now is Itachi himself.

We travel the whole day and yet if feels like we aren't making any progress at all. The terrain looks the same everywhere: mountains and crippled, ugly trees. We can't travel fast and have to take a lot of breaks. Plus, after an hour, I'm pretty much carrying Sasuke which isn't all that much fun with my still bruised ribs and aching body that I didn't have the chakra to heal aside from my broken arm after the fight in the Valley of the End, making our escape and healing Sasuke.

"You need… break," Sasuke wheezes for the third time. I chance a look at him. His skin is pasty and his eyes unfocused. I'm pretty sure what he means is that he's the one who needs the break, it's just that his damn pride forbids him to say it.

"Just a little more," I murmur back, like I already did twice before. I stop for a moment and adjust his arm around my shoulder. "Almost there."

He just nods tiredly. I feel a stab of worry – again – because he should have glared at me and been stubborn about it. Sasuke giving in is a bad sign.

A branch cracks and I flinch and whip my head around. Nothing there. I release a breath and shake my head at myself. We haven't encountered any enemy shinobi at all which I'm sure we have Itachi thank for. In a way, it's a good thing Sasuke is so out of it, otherwise he'd definitely have asked uncomfortable questions by now.

I find a tiny cave as night falls. The moment I set Sasuke down, he slumps and closes his eyes, out cold. My heart drops when I check his temperature, he's burning up. My worst expectations come true when I take a look at the wound on his arm. The area around the injury is swollen and hot to the touch, the wound itself is open and leaking pus.

An infection. I can deal with cuts and burns, but an infection this bad… I don't know what to do. I don't even know where to start. Infections aren't a common ninja problem, our immune systems are stronger since we have active chakra. The only time infections ever happen is when the ninja has chakra exhaustion. If I had medical supplies, I could figure something out to help Sasuke, I'd need disinfectant, antipyretics and something for his exhaustion – even some decent food would do. Blankets to keep him warm are needed. But here, in the middle of enemy territory, I have none of those things available.

A sick Sasuke equals a dead Sasuke in this situation.

I bury my face in my hands and slump against the wall. "Okay," I whisper to myself. "You saw a village a few hours back. Maybe you can get medicine there… but you can't leave Sasuke… it's too dangerous…" Sasuke next to me makes a small distressed noise in his sleep. I lean over and rub his hot forehead. "Shh, it's okay," I murmur. "I promise I won't let you die." He relaxes a bit as I speak to him. It breaks my heart to see him like this when I'm incapable of helping him.

I make my decision. "I'll be right back," I whisper to him. "Get some rest, okay?" I bend down and kiss his forehead. Then I relieve him of most of his weapons – he wouldn't be able to use them anyway. I give his helpless form one last, lingering look, then turn away and stride out of the cave. Outside, I subtly flare my chakra. A moment later, Uchiha Itachi stands a short distance away from me, like he's been there the entire time and I just didn't notice him.

I don't bother avoiding his eyes. "He's sick. It's bad," I tell him. "I'm going to get him medicine."
There's no reaction from him. As I leave, I don't bother with saying anything more either.

All I need from him is protection for Sasuke while I'm gone.

Not having to carry Sasuke around, it only takes me a little over an hour to locate the little village hidden away in the mountains. Sneaking in isn't hard either, not when I've already broken in castles. But unfortunately, there isn't any medicine to be found here. The tiny house with the sign in front declaring it to be the village's hospital is glaringly empty and obviously hasn't been in use for a long while.

I decide to look around for a warehouse. I might at least find some food and blankets and clothes. I refuse to let this venture have been completely in vain.

It's when I scout out the village that I see a cart loaded with bags of rice, covered against the rain. And where there is a cart, there must be a road, and roads have to lead somewhere, in this case possibly a place where the rice can be sold. A place where I might find an apothecary or hospital.

It isn't all that difficult to find the one road leading out of the village. After a half hour of running though, I start having doubts. What if I'm wrong? What if I can't find any medicine? What if the next settlement is days away and I take too long? What if, what if, what if... but it's only minutes later that I reach a small rural town and stumble upon a warehouse where I find backpacks, blankets, clothes and food within moments. And soon after that, I find a hospital that should have all I need to make Sasuke healthy again. There's just one problem.

It's guarded by Sound nin. I spy two watching the entrances and another two patrolling. Orochimaru's cronies must have guessed that Sasuke and I might need medicaments and are now guarding the hospitals in hopes of catching us. I inwardly curse and withdraw to look around in town for a doctor, a herbal shop or anything that might have the things I need, but there's nothing.

Hospital break-in it is. Hidden on a nearby rooftop behind a chimney, I study the movements of the enemy ninja. I circle around the hospital and file away information on entrances, exits, windows. I detect two more enemies, lying in wait on the roof of the hospital.

This might be more dangerous than breaking into a castle after all. Back then, the castle was too large for the guards to monitor everything. This hospital is entirely different and there is so much more riding on my success.

I'm going to have to be ruthless.

When I finally make it back to our temporary camp, I'm exhausted, my clothes are drenched in blood and rain and all I want to do is sleep. I can still feel the blood of my enemies spill warm under my fingers as I slit the throats of the first three of them, the ones who never saw me coming. By the time number four sounded the alarm, I was already in the hospital, rooting through their drawers in search for Sasuke's medicine. Number five and six fell prey to traps I set at the entrances I knew they would use because by then I knew their patterns. I was then surprised by enemy number seven who was apparently patrolling inside the hospital, which, in hindsight, I should have been prepared for. It looked pretty bad for a moment there, but when I stumbled in a lab full of chemicals, I managed to cause an explosion that took care of him.

Number four was lying in wait for me outside the hospital but fell for a trick with a bunshin. A few senbon later and he was no more.
Seven kills in the course of one night. Because I couldn't allow myself to have mercy when they would have none with me, because Sasuke's life was riding on my success, because I couldn't allow any survivors when they would have come for us with an army as back-up. But no matter how much I try to rationalise, I can't help but hurt for the lives lost tonight.

Am I ever going to be able to kill without feeling this way? Do I ever want to be?

Itachi sits waiting at the entrance of the small cave. I walk past him without a word, kneel next down to the curled-up Sasuke and grab his arm, push a syringe into it. Put a pill into his mouth and make him swallow it, rub salves on his injuries. Wrap him in blankets. Stare at him for a moment, as if he'd miraculously wake up and be perfectly healthy instantly. Of course he doesn't.

I manage to peel off my dirty clothing and put on clean ones, not that it makes me feel any less foul, then I curl up next to Sasuke and am asleep before my head hits the ground.

When I wake up, I'm instantly on alert. Only Sasuke's chakra is around, so I open my eyes and sit up. A blanket falls off my shoulders.

Sasuke sits at the cave's entrance in the exact spot Itachi sat in earlier. For a moment, I wonder where he went. I'm sure he's still around.

"How long was I out?" Sasuke asks with a croaky voice and turns to look at me. He's still way too pale and his chakra seems to be weak, but his eyes are alert and focused. The worst of the infection must be over then. Thank kami I found the medicine in time and thank kami for his recovery. Finally, something good happens.

"Since yesterday evening," I answer as I walk up to him. A look at the light outside tells me it's somewhere around afternoon. The rain has finally stopped. "At least, I think it was yesterday. Who knows how long I was asleep."

He nods and pulls me to sit next to him. His fingers find my pulse on my wrist, a gesture so familiar that it gives me an instant sense of comfort. I lean against him and sigh. "What a mess," I say.

"Where are we going?" he asks.

"To where my dad is," I answer. "This is probably a really selfish thing to say, but I'm glad you're here with me."

He doesn't answer. Just pulls me a little closer to him so that my head rests on his chest. "We need to get out of here soon," he murmurs.

"Are you okay to move?" I ask. I feel him nod. "Okay then."

I give myself a moment to soak up as much comfort from him as I can, then I extricate myself from his arms and stand up. Together, we eat a meagre meal, gather what few supplies we have, and get going.

It takes us three days to reach the border to the Country of Fangs. Not because of the distance; at ninja speed, we'd have reached it in a few hours. No, the reason it takes so long is because we have to dodge and skirt around Sound patrols. While Sasuke is recovering, he's still too weak for a fight, it saps all his energy to travel. And I'm not going to risk either one of us getting hurt.

Every thought I have is centred around survival. Is that plant edible, was that sound in the distance an explosion or just falling rocks, can we sleep in that cave or should we find somewhere else… I'm
running myself ragged. The only rest I get is when Sasuke insists on taking watch.

The closer we get to the border, the more enemies we have to avoid – of course they'd try to keep us in this country they seem to have so much influence in.

We're looking down at the strip of land where the Country of Rice meets the Country of Fang, framed by two high, snow-capped mountain ranges.

Hopeless. That's what it is. Around the border, all forest has been razed to the ground. Groups of ninja are stationed at guard posts in distances of about 500 metres from each other, more groups travel between the small posts. Sneaking past them will be impossible. And that's not the worst. From here, I can clearly see the light hair and the posture of Ukon at the centremost of the guard posts.

Silently, Sasuke and I withdraw.

"We need to try somewhere else," I say, remembering how Ukon tortured me from inside my body. "We're not going near Ukon. No way."

"We could try to cross over the mountains," Sasuke says with a considering look. "Might be guarded less."


There's a road into the mountain range we chose. It leads up a mountain and if I remember the maps I once studied correctly, it's a pass into Fang country. Naturally, it's guarded, but not as heavy as the strip of border we saw earlier. It's still somewhat hopeless.

"There's no way we can do this unnoticed," I say, examining what is visible of the guards. "The best we can do is sneak in as far as we can and blast through once we do get noticed."

Sasuke nods. "Can you hide us with genjutsu?"

I frown. "Won't be perfect if we're moving at the same time. But yes, it could work."

We look up at the mountain. It seems so daunting. How are we ever going to get past it?

How can we not? There's no choice. The consequences of getting caught are unacceptable.

We set up camp in yet another cave – we're lucky there are so many in this mountainous region – and spend the next three days and nights staking out when the shifts change, how the lighting changes over the course of the day, how they move, all those details that might save our hides later.

It is when it's my turn to observe that he appears again.

"Tomorrow, at sunrise," he says.

I spare Itachi an annoyed glance. "I was wondering where you went."

"Do not fail, Nara Riko."

"I know. I won't." I shoot him another look. "Does that mean you'll be gone once we cross the border?"

I feel a tiny pang of sadness at the thought. Because no matter how evil I know he is, how much I
hate him for what he did to Sasuke… I still relied on him. I trusted him with both Sasuke's and my life. And such sentiments leave a mark. Some extremely small part in the very far back of my mind thinks of Uchiha Itachi, S-rank missing-nin and mass murderer, as a comrade.

I'm not going to analyse what that says about me.

"Do not fail," he says again. And then he's gone.

Even without Itachi's input we'd have moved at sunrise. It means we'll have the sun in our backs. And it'll be the time of the tail end of the night shift, when the guards are wary and tired. The chances of getting past them, hidden under my genjutsu, are a little higher than zero that way.

According to our calculations, we have a window of ten minutes to get to the top of the mountain before enemy reinforcements will arrive. Once at the top, we can use explosives to close off the road behind us by causing a landslide. After that, all bets are off. We have no idea what's waiting on the other side.

I'm really hoping that Itachi will have done something so we won't get caught on the other side of the pass.

"Alright. I can't believe we're doing something this crazy without Naruto," I say with trepidation, shouldering my backpack. I take a step forward. "Let's go."

"Ri," Sasuke says and holds me back. He looks at me seriously. "When all this is over."

It sounds like a promise.

"Yeah," I whisper. "When all this is over."

We start running. My fingers weave themselves through seals and soon, we're hidden beneath an illusion. Our enemies might see a flicker in the air, and maybe our toes sticking out of the illusion, but we're hoping that they'll dismiss it as a trick of the light.

We reach the foot of the mountain just as the first rays of the sun grace the mountain. The guards never see us coming. They don't even have time to scream when well placed hits against their pressure points take them out. We position them in inconspicuous places so that it looks like they are still guarding, then we run on.

Nine minutes left.

Eight minutes left.

There are the hidden guards, hidden in the earth like moles to each side of the road. We slow down so can I focus harder on my illusion and so we can make sure we don't leave traitorous tracks.

Seven minutes.

Six minutes.

Hide behind a boulder, cloak chakra, don't look, don't even breathe while the patrol passes to check in with the hidden guards we just left behind. Run as soon as they have their backs to us.

Five-and-a-half minutes left.

We're halfway up the mountain. A wall of rock blocks the way forward. Sasuke's fingers speed
through seals and then a clone of him appears to our left and attacks the ninja guarding the blockade. They instantly lock on him and attack while I, unnoticed, place explosives on the wall. They've just noticed that the Sasuke they attacked was a fake when the wall explodes into dust and shrapnel. I drop the illusion covering us – it's useless now that we've been noticed – and we hurriedly move to knock out the enemies while they are disoriented in the dust cloud. Then we're running again, as fast as possible.

Two minutes left.

Four ninja drop down in front of us. Three others appear behind us - the patrol we just avoided. I might be wrong, but I thought there would be at least double than that number. Itachi's doing? Hopefully, otherwise it means we're going to be ambushed.

Sasuke doesn't miss a beat. A dozen shuriken leave his hands in quick succession. Some ninja evade the shuriken and get caught in wires. Some manage to even evade the wires.


None are left standing after my technique.

One minute left.

We reach the top.

"Earth Style barrier: Earth Dome Prison!" a loud voice thunders, a voice we have heard before. Around us, the earth surges up to form a prison around Sasuke and me.

"Kawarimi!" I shout and replace myself with a rock.

"You shall not pass!" Jiroubo yells. "Shoulder charge!"

I nimbly flip away and chance a look back the way we came. Already I can see the reinforcements for the Sound arriving.

Thirty seconds left. Sasuke attacks Jiroubo with a kick that sends the man flying. I launch senbon at his form, but he raises an earthen wall. Cursing, I land next to Sasuke. "We don't have time for this!"

"I know!" he yells back.

"Earth Style: Earth Mausoleum Dumpling!" Jiroubo's voice shouts from behind his wall and with a rumbling sound, the mountain starts to tremble. Sasuke and I retreat as the very earth seems to lift. The earth wall Jiroubo is behind crumbles and we see what he's doing: He's lifting the very surface of the earth up into a gigantic lump of earth that is guaranteed to flatten everything in its path.

Sasuke and I retreat backwards, but it's so bloody obvious that it won't be enough to evade that thing. Jiroubo throws the giant lump of earth. Twenty seconds left.

Earth. My eyes widen as I remember that I know someone that can deal with earth. I bite down on my thumb and slam my hand down. "Kuchiyose no jutsu!" I shout.

"What? What?" Kyuuri looks around, startled, his glasses hanging askew. Also, not dressed.

Whoops.

A dark aura gathers around my summon.
The strongest Killing Intent I've ever felt used to be Orochimaru's. Now I know Orochimaru has nothing on blue and fluffy Kyuuri.

"Woman," he growls. "I told you never to summon me before 10 am."

"Uhh, sorry?" I say lamely and take a step away from him. Kyuuri starts trembling with anger as a shadow falls on us. The giant lump of earth is about to squash us.

Kyuuri explodes with rage. "RAHHHHHHHHH!" he leaps up at the earth dumpling. "I'M GONNA TEACH YOU NOT TO INTERRUPT A THREESOME YOU MISERABLE SHITS!" He runs upside down along the underside of the dumpling. "RAAAHHHH! THIS IS CAERBANNOG, FUCKERS!" I can't see exactly what he does next, but the earth dumpling shatters into a million pieces. I grab Sasuke who's just standing there in a sort of horrified stupor.

"Time's up!" I yell and drag him after me.

"KYAHAHAAHA I'M GONNA SMASH YOU INTO SMITHEREENS!" Kyuuri's voice shouts after us. He's completely lost it. "EARTH STYLE: SWAMP OF THE UNDERWORLD!"

Behind us, an ominous blubbering noise sounds which makes Sasuke and I run much faster along the road until it starts going downhill again. We keep running, down-down-down. Before us, Sound ninja jump out of their holes to stop us, but when they see us, they pale, turn, and run. I chance a look back and see the reason.

We're followed by a giant mudslide.

Kyuuri must be really mad at me.

"Faster!" I scream.

We keep running after we reach the foot of the mountain. Keep running long after we have left the mudslide behind us. Through forest and fields, across lakes and rivers. It must be afternoon already when we finally draw to a stop, bending over to catch our breaths.

I look at Sasuke. Sasuke looks at me.

We burst out laughing; incredulous, relieved laughter. "We made it!" I gasp out.

"Your summon is insane!" Sasuke answers.

"I know!" I laugh harder. "So are we! I can't believe we made it!"

"Your rabbit tried to kill us!"

"I told you my summons are weird!"

"That's not the right word."

I stop laughing and beam up at him. "I said this before, but I'm really glad you're here with me, Sasuke."

He smiles at me, one of those beautiful, rare smiles he gives when he's just himself and happy. My breath hitches when he reaches out to tuck a strand of my hair behind my ear. When all this is over, his eye promises.

"Yeah," I say. "When all this is over."
Chapter End Notes

About the Caerbannog thing, I first imagined Kyuuri screaming 'This is Sparta!' and then I watched Monty Python and the Holy Grail which features the Killer Bunny of Caerbannog, and well... there you go. Kyuuri's battle cry.

When did all the rabbits become so insane? I swear every time one weasels into the story, it gets worse.


The Country of Fangs is a lot nicer than the Country of Rice we just came from. It's covered by light forest, the steep peaks that give the country its name jutting out. The best thing about it is that it has its own ninja village, Moyagakure, which means the Sound ninja can't hunt us freely like they did in Rice. Oh, I have no doubt that they will still come after us, but we won't be as swarmed. They'll move in smaller teams as they hunt.

"I bet the remaining Sound Four are going to come after us. That's Ukon and Kimimaro, right? Since I'm pretty sure Jiroubo suffered Death-by-rabbit."

Sasuke snorts.

I snicker. "Imagine going to the afterlife and meeting your dead ancestors, and they ask you how you died and you say: 'I was killed by a sexually frustrated bunny.' Is there a more embarrassing way to get yourself killed?"

Sasuke smirks. "To be killed by the sexually frustrated rabbit you summoned."

I cringe. "We're still alive! Kyuuri didn't kill us! …you're never going to let me live that down, are you?"

"Hn."

"Just wait til you get your own summon. I'm going to laugh so hard when they embarrass you."

"They won't."

"Oh yeah?" I raise an eyebrow. "With your prickly personality, you'd hit it off with the hedgehogs. Or the porcupines."

He trips me. I fall forward, roll over my shoulder and get to my feet again.

"My point exactly," I grumble.

It's been two days since our grand escape from Rice Country. At the moment, we're following a road through the forest, disguised as civilians. We wouldn't want to draw the attention of the ninja of Moyagakure, and at this point we're fairly sure that our pursuers lost our trail – for the moment at least – so we can temporarily afford a slower pace.

Being on the run is currently surprisingly boring. Hence, we're having this ridiculous conversation.

"I could definitely see you with a duck summon, what with your hairstyle," I say and receive the death glare. If looks could kill…

Hm, Sasuke's probably could. The sharingan is neat like that.

"Still better than your rabbits," he answers with a faintly disgusted expression.

"Touché."
I really can't imagine a summon being more embarrassing than my rabbits. Kami, I hope Itachi didn't see Kyuuri going berserk. I mean, it's not like I care what someone like him thinks about me, but still… it would be so embarrassing.

I pause. "We suck at acting like civilians."

"Hn."

"Right, we're only trying to fool any Moya ninja we might come across. Can't trick Sound, what with my hair. And your hair, come to think of it."

Another death glare.

"What?" I ask. "Your hair is fabulous. Troublesomely so."

He gives me an incredulous look. I grin at him. "It even beats He-Whose-Eyes-Cannot-Be-Fooled's hair." I pause. "Hey, did your lips just twitch? Were you just about to laugh? Are you amused?"

"Annoyed."

I laugh. "We're fugitives on the run, chased by an entire village of ninja, coveted by an S-rank criminal who wants to pluck out your eye and take over my body, and all you are is annoyed?"

"Because you are annoying."

I stop laughing. "But you're still here with me. You still came for me when I needed help," I say.

Sasuke flicks a glance at me and then gives a miniscule twitch of his shoulder which is his equivalent of a shrug.

"And yet I don't even know what your favourite colour is," I muse. "Mine is red. It used to be blue, but blue now reminds me of rabbits because, you know, Kyuuri is blue, so I switched it for green. Then Ninjin ruined green for me, so I decided on red for a favourite colour." Frowning, I add: "This rabbit aversion is growing to ridiculous levels."

"You don't say," he answers with a smirk. "It's green."

I blink. "What's green?"

He rolls his eye. "My favourite colour."

I beam at him in delight. "You shared information! About yourself!"

Sasuke just gives me a disgruntled look back and picks up the pace.

"Wait!" I almost yell and hop after him. "What's your favourite…"

We stand next to each other, looking down at a large river. A river flowing rapidly in the direction of Waterfall Country.

"My, if only we had a boat," I muse. "If only one of us carried a boat with them like Kakashi does. It would be so helpful in this frankly awful situation. It would solve sooo many problems if we had decent means of transportation. We could rest while still making progress! Why, oh why did neither of us have the foresight to bring-"
"Ri," Sasuke interrupts. "Shut up."

We travel close enough to the river for me to have water close by but far enough away so the rushing sound won't drown out the noise of enemies sneaking up on us. After the two days of relaxed traveling, we now pick up a harsh pace through the wilderness.

It's only been a little over two weeks since I was taken, but it feels like it's been years. We're both weary and hungry, our nerves frayed, tension running high. However…

"I don't care what you say, I'm taking a bath in that hot spring," I declare, staring longingly at the natural hot spring forming a small lake that we stumbled over. "Nothing you can say or do will deter me."

Sasuke rolls his eye at me. "Two hours. Then we're leaving."

I blink. "Wait, you're not going to say anything about how I haven't got my priorities straight, how we're hunted by a small army of Sound ninja and should keep moving without rest until we finally reach my dad, how taking a bath might get us worse than killed?" I ask.

Sasuke's gaze flicks over to the hot spring. "We can afford a short break. We haven't rested since crossing the pass."

I grin. "You're right. Our current lifestyle isn't very healthy, is it? I guess it can't be helped…"

Sighing theatrically, I walk over to the hot spring, take off my weapons pouch and slide in with my clothes still on. I sigh blissfully as my muscles relax and the stress falls off of me for a few precious moments.

A splash sounds and I open my eyes lazily. Sasuke sits across from me, leaning back against a rock.

"If the fangirls ever find out about this, I'll die," I say blandly. "I'm at the hot springs with Uchiha Sasuke."

He smirks. "And sharing the mixed bath, no less," he replies. I laugh.

This is the most peaceful it's been since I got kidnapped.

Now would be the moment to tell Sasuke about Itachi helping us. But I don't want to ruin the moment. And can I really afford to have Sasuke distracted from our current situation? Plus, I'd rather tell dad first and hear what he thinks about the whole thing.

So I'll wait.

On the other hand… he probably wouldn't forgive me if he found out later and figured out I'd kept it secret from him. At the very least, I'd lose his trust, especially since he knows I've kept secrets before.

But he'll be so angry that Itachi was this near, that we owe him our lives...

I shake my head in disgust at myself. Am I really this much of a coward, that I'd keep something this important to myself just because I'm scared Sasuke will throw a tantrum?

And what if I don't tell him? Then he won't know that Itachi has some sort of evil plan for him and he'll be caught unprepared and most likely die, and it'll be my fault.

That settles it.
"What?" Sasuke asks, sounding annoyed. I look up.

"Huh?" I ask.

He gives me a deadpan look. Apparently, I wasn't exactly subtle with my hard thinking.

"I've just decided that I won't keep something secret for your own good," I announce. "Now I'm trying to decide if I should chain you up before I tell you, just to be safe. Because yes, it is that bad."

He stares at me, waiting. I nod to myself. "Right, no chains before you actually blow up," I decide.

"Yasumin," he growls impatiently. "Tell me."

"Okay, okay!" I take a deep breath. "The third day after our escape, after you'd just woken up… That night… someone showed up. Knocked me out later and when I woke up in the morning, I thought it was just a dream. He left a message though, so I figured out that it wasn't a dream pretty quickly." I shudder, thinking about the corpses Itachi left for me to find.


"I followed his directions. He took care of any patrols around us that day. Meanwhile, you were getting sicker and sicker and by the time I found us an acceptable shelter, I knew something was really wrong with you. But I didn't realise how bad it was until I checked your wounds and saw that your they had gotten infected. It was… really bad. So I left you with him and spent the night getting medicine for you." I shudder again, thinking of the horrors of the night I became a murderer. "I was… so scared that you wouldn't be there anymore when I returned, that he'd whisked you away and I'd never see you again… but he didn't. And I gave you the medicine and you got better so I decided it was fine to trust him for the moment. It wasn't, though, no matter how I look at it, trusting him was not and will never be anything close to fine…"

"Who," Sasuke growls. I think on some level, he already guessed the answer. It's not that hard to figure out given how reluctant I am in telling him.

"I didn't see him again until the evening before we crossed the border, though I knew he was around. He showed up that evening while I was out scouting and told me when we should move. I figured he hadn't gotten us killed yet, so why not trust him again? And it worked, we made it through. I think he decimated the enemy's backup to help us…"

Sasuke has gone motionless and cold. I can't read his eyes anymore. I'm starting to regret telling him.

"Tell me who it was, Riko!" he suddenly roars, jumping up, his eye taking on a red sheen just shy of the sharingan. Something painful twists in my chest. I've only seen him lost to rage once before and I'd hoped I'd never see it again.

"Calm down, Sasuke," I order, getting to my feet, careful not to move too quickly. Surreptitiously, I channel chakra into the water. "I'm not your enemy."

He sneers at me. "Aren't you?" he spits out venomously. I flinch at his tone. "Then why are you acting so scared of me, Riko? JUST TELL ME THE FUCKING TRUTH!" he shouts. "Was it or was it not Itachi?!"

"It was," I confirm.

Even though he was expecting it, Sasuke still flinches and recoils from me with a horrible, betrayed look on his face, only visible for a moment until it's replaced by cold, hateful contempt. "To think
that you of all people would betray me like this, Riko..." he says tonelessly.

"Sasuke, please-" I start.

"NO!" Sasuke screams, his eye now a full sharingan. "SHUT UP! How could you?! HE obliterated my entire family! What would you know about how I feel?!"

Shocked, I reply. "I do know what it feels like to lose."

"You're nothing like me!" he yells, lost in rage. "You were only an infant when your parents died! And then you replaced the parents that you lost with new ones! You never cared about them the way I did about mine! The likes of you can never understand what it feels like to lose everything you held dear!"

Each word he says slices into me like blades made of ice, leaving me unable to breathe. "Stop," I plead, my voice barely more than a choked whisper.

"Where is he?!" he demands, jumping out of the water and looking around with a crazed look. "I'm going to end it tonight, once and for all!"

I straighten my back. "You can't," I say and step onto the water. "I won't let you."

He turns back to look at me. A part of me dies seeing the hatred in his eye that isn't enough to conceal the confused hurt of a boy that has suffered more than anyone ever should. "So that's how it is, Riko? You'll stand in my way to protect him?"

"No," I answer. "I'll stand in your way to protect you."

His body goes rigid and his features twist with rage. "He's destroyed everyone I ever loved. And now he's turned even you against me."

"No, that's not-"

"You know, for a while, I thought I could walk a different path... but in the end, I'm an avenger. Revenge has always been my purpose of living." He stares at me in contempt, then he turns sharply and walks away. My mouth drops open as unimaginable pain slices through me.

Sasuke is leaving me.

I slam my hands down on the water and dozens of chains sprout from it and form a cage around us. Another few wrap around him. "I said," I hiss. "I won't let you!"

He turns to look back at me. I don't even recognise him anymore. "Riko..." he sneers. "You're annoying." A flash of white light and the sound of chirping birds and he slices through the chains holding him. I grit my teeth and send the cut off ends of the chains after him once more. He destroys them like it's nothing.

"Sasuke, listen to me-"

He snarls and sends a fireball at me. I curse and counter it with a jet of water. The techniques collide with a crash and steam fills the air, obscuring him from sight. The next moment, Sasuke is behind me, an arm around my neck cutting off my air. I slam my head back into his face and he stumbles back.

"Damn it, listen to me!" I yell. The chain cage around us tightens so Sasuke won't be able to leave
the water we stand on. But he's beyond all reason now. He jumps on a rock and slams a hand full of lightning into the water. "Aaargh!" I scream as my muscles convulse and I collapse to my knees. My chains burst and water rains down on us, not that we weren't drenched before.

Sasuke flashes behind me again. Does he not want to see my face while he defeats me? But he's made a mistake. We're still on water and I still have chakra, which means I can still do water manipulation. I make a large wave surge up under his feet so that he loses his balance. I manifest more chains to bind him, but he leaps away to land on the rocks at the shore of the steaming lake. I withdraw the chains and make them wrap around me so that they form an armour.

"Damn it, fight me seriously!" he yells. "Enough with your damned chains!"

I get to my feet on trembling limbs. "I refuse to fight you. I don't want to hurt you any more," I answer softly. He flinches. The hatred and anger in his eye flicker for a moment.

"The likes of you couldn't lay a finger on me," he hisses maliciously.

"That's not the kind of hurt I mean," I return evenly, trying to keep the tremble out of my voice.

His face contorts with anger. "Then I'll just make you fight me!" he yells, hands speeding through seals. "Katon: Goukakyuu no Jutsu!"

My eye widen in shock as an enormous fireball is blown at me – no, not at me, at the water I'm standing on. I have no choice but to leap out of the lake as Sasuke's technique hits and water and steam explode everywhere. I throw myself behind a rock, mind racing.

How did things turn out like this? I knew he was going to be mad, but this… I underestimated his hatred for Itachi. But even as crazed with anger as he is, he isn't trying to seriously hurt me. So far, he's only tried to incapacitate me. But I need to stop this. Fireballs and explosions won't go unnoticed for long.

But how can I stop this? Sasuke won't listen to reason, right now, he's like an injured animal lashing out at everyone approaching. I'm lucky he's too angry to run away.

The sounds of shuriken whizzing through the air interrupt my thoughts. I evade via kawarimi since Sasuke's shuriken usually come with wires attached to them. But now I'm out in the open and Sasuke is right in front of me. "Fight me seriously!" he roars.

"Because you can't bring yourself to hurt me unless I fight back instead of evading and using chains?" I ask, and again, he flinches which means I hit the bull's eye. I know he's still in there, I just need to make him listen, somehow. "I refuse to attack you."

"Then I'll make you!" he shouts. His hand lights up again with lightning. Not enough to kill me, but it'll certainly put me out of commission.

"Itachi left after we crossed the border. He's long gone," I tell him. "If you leave now, you'll be found by enemies and die or worse."

"I don't care! I-"

"But I care!" I yell back, finally feeling anger rising in me. "I care about you! When you were sick, I killed for you! I murdered for you! Seven lives lost because I couldn't stand the thought of you dying, and you're going to throw your life away in a bid for revenge?!"

Something akin to shock flits across his face, but it's gone as soon as it appeared. "I didn't ask you to!"
I never fucking wanted you in my life!" he shouts back. "I'd die for you, and you go and betray me-

"What was I supposed to do!" I yell. "Fight him? Let you die? I was trying to fucking get us through this alive because that's the only outcome I'll accept! And you know what? I'm not sorry for letting him save us! I'm not sorry we're still alive!"

"I'D RATHER DIE THAN BE SAVED BY HIM!" Sasuke screams and runs at me, his lightning-filled hand ready to hit me. "YOU SHOULD HAVE LET ME DIE!"

My anger evaporates. Shattering sadness takes its place, and with it comes firm resolve. As Sasuke reaches me, as his hand stabs at me, I smile. And let his hand pierce through my shoulder.

The pain hits instantly. Lightning zings hotly through me, my own blood splatters against my face, feeling oddly warm on my skin. But the only thing I see is Sasuke's frozen form before me, his shocked face, soon filled with horror. "Wha - why – Ri – you didn't dodge – why didn't you-"

My legs give out from under me and I stumble forward, my head hitting his chest. My hands weakly grab at his shirt. "Dying is overrated. I'd know," I mumble into his chest, blinking as my body starts to shut down from pain, stress and chakra drain. "And you say you'd die for me, but I don't want you to. Dying for someone is easy. Dying is escaping. Try living for someone, through it all: good, bad, thick, thin, side by side… that's the hard thing…" my voice grows weaker, my lips numb as I speak.

"Damn it, Ri!" he yells, sounding panicked. I feel him grab my shoulders.

"…so let's try living, 'kay?" I manage to finish just before blackness claims me. In the distance, I hear Sasuke scream my name.

I dream.

I know I'm dreaming. Because I know Fumio already died, so he can't be here to damn me for not saving him, for being so weak and pathetic. And the corpses of all those I've killed wouldn't be trying to drag me with them into hell with their skeletal hands and laughing skulls. But knowing I'm dreaming doesn't stop me from screaming and crying and fighting them, doesn't mean that my heart isn't being torn in two.

And suddenly, the dream disappears. First, everything fades to black and I wonder if I've actually died this time. But there's a light in the darkness, coming closer, like a window it shines. Moving shapes are behind it. And the window widens, I tilt forward, and suddenly, I fall headfirst into a whirl of colour and shadow.

"What the-" I mumble as I get to my feet. Blurred shapes around me come into focus, though everything seems hazy, without definition, the colours without vibrancy.

I'm in a hallway, the architecture like nowhere I've ever been before. It almost seems… I frown. It looks medieval, like in pictures I saw in books a very long time ago. On the walls, portraits and tapestries hang, but their contents are blurred. I can't see where the corridor leads in either direction. It's like it only exists around me. Twenty metres away from me, it fades into darkness.

And then two people enter my field of vision. The first person is blurred, like everything else, but I can tell she's tall and female, wearing long, swishing clothes. Her back is ramrod straight. The second person is mostly hidden behind her.

They walk past without noticing me, as if I don't exist. And the surroundings move with them. As they walk, the more of the hallway comes into existence in front of them and behind them, it fades
into shadows, so I scramble to follow them before I fade, too.

My attention is now on the back of the second person. A girl. And unlike everything else here, she is not blurred, on the contrary, there is an almost painful level of detail to her.

She is small, the older woman dwarfing her petite frame. A dark red mane of hair hangs to her hips in wild waves, a stark contrast to the black cloak billowing behind her. Her steps are fast and graceful, her head held high. And something tells me that whatever this dream is, it's about her.

I can tell the taller one is saying something, but no sound reaches my ears. Neither can I hear their steps or anything, really, except my own breathing.

The two walk with fast steps until they reach a large door and enter. I follow them in.

From what I can see, it appears to be an infirmary. Another blurry woman is bent over someone on a hospital bed.

The red-haired girl stands frozen, staring at the bed next to them. Frowning, I walk around her to inspect what she's looking at.

It's another girl, her features only slightly hazy. About my age I'd guess, with soft features and bushy brown hair. And she might as well be a wax doll as she appears to be frozen mid-motion, her brown eyes glassy. She can't be dead though, her skin tone appears too healthy for that.

A light reflex catches my eye and I look up. The tall woman is holding up a small mirror, saying something to the red-haired girl. My gaze shifts to her and for the first time, I see her face. And recoil in surprise.

She looks like me. She is me, I can clearly see the scar on her forehead, the high cheekbones, the face, and the eyes, the green, green eyes. But at the same time, she isn't me, her hair is too long, her skin too white, her body too thin and frail-looking. And the expression in her eyes, oh kami, it takes my breath away. They are almost glowing with ice-cold fury, two pools of green fire, unforgiving and terrifying as she stares at the motionless girl on the hospital bed, not sparing even one look at the still talking woman. And suddenly, she turns on her heel and sweeps out of the room and the scene dissolves into shadows.

My cheek is lying on something soft, warm and familiar-smelling. The front of my body is pressed against something moving, my arms are slung around someone's neck. And my shoulder hurts like hell.

"You," Sasuke growls. "Are the most idiotic, dumb, moronic, senseless, stupid and reckless idiot I've ever met."

I pull at his hair. Hard. "That coming from you," I growl back, shoving the remnants of my disturbing dream to the back of my mind. "Cannot be taken seriously."

"You were supposed to dodge, Riko!" he snaps.

"And you were supposed to not fucking attack me, Sasuke!" I snarl back. "What the hell was that?"

He doesn't answer.

"Hell no! You aren't getting out of this one!" I hiss. "What. The bloody hell. Was that?!"
"I don't fucking know!" he snaps, his voice full of self-hatred. "I got angry and then it was like I wasn't even in control anymore and I hurt you!" I feel him tremble.

I pull at his hair again. "Yeah, you fucked up big time. But you weren't trying to seriously hurt me and we both know that I could have dodged that attack."

"Why didn't you?!" he hisses.

"It made you stop, didn't it," I state. "And I made sure you wouldn't hit anything too important that I wouldn't be able to heal. I had to stop you quickly because we are still being hunted and our little row might have attracted attention. Speaking of which, are you piggy-backing me at breakneck-speed just because you're in the mood or did they find our trail again?"

His silence says it all.

"Well, shit," I say. "By the way, Itachi didn't save us, he was just making sure that you'd be around a little bit longer since he has an evil masterplan that involves you."

"What plan," he growls out.

"I haven't a bull's notion," I retort. "I'm only telling you so you know about it and can prepare and not just run off in a fit of temper straight into you death. Oh, wait, that plan only works when you actually let me finish talking! Damnit, Sasuke!"

"Riko-"

"As soon as we get home, you're going straight to Kakashi-sensei and telling him exactly what happened today," I say with a steely undertone. "Now set me down so I can heal myself."

He complies. I grit my teeth against the chakra drain of the medical ninjutsu. Damn it, chakra exhaustion is the last thing I need.

When I'm done, Sasuke hands me a nutrients bar which I devour greedily, afterwards washing it down with some water. Then I climb on Sasuke's back again and we're off.

Sasuke and I have stopped talking. Neither of us know what to say beyond strategies and plans. Sasuke is drowning in self-hatred and walking on eggshells around me. And I'm still hurt and angry about what he did. Hurt because he attacked me. Angry because he told me I should have let him die.

And so, wordlessly, we cross the border to Waterfall Country and make our way through the wilderness towards where the border of Waterfall, Grass and Fire meet. This is the final stretch of our flight, and from now on, it's an all-out race. Our enemies must be getting desperate, because if they don't get us now, there's a good chance they never will.

We don't have time to rest. We barely have time to eat. Both of us know that if we pause, we'll be found. Every step we get closer to our destination is a small victory. So far, we got lucky. But we're Team Seven. Eventually, our luck had to run out.

One moment, we're running through a forest. The next, the ground under us explodes. I'm thrown off my feet and sent spinning through the air like a rag doll until I no longer know where up is and where down. My ears are ringing and I'm dizzy, but the worst is that I can't see what happened to Sasuke. I feel someone grab me, then a sharp pain in my neck, and all goes black.
There's a sour taste in my mouth. It's the first thing I notice when I wake up. The pain hits a moment later and has me gasping for breath.

"Finally awake," a voice croons, a voice makes me want to curl into myself and whimper in terror.

Ukon. Oh god.

Something cold and sharp slides over my neck and then upwards to trace the contours of my face. Something warm drips on my skin. A small, terrified sound escapes my throat.

"Open your eyes, darling, or I'll rip off your eyelids," Ukon whispers, his blade gliding over my face. "I've been hunting you for so long, just so I can see your terrified eyes…"

No. No no no no no. This can't be happening. But when I open my eyes, he's there in front of me, grinning madly, an insane glint to his eyes. And I'm… oh god. I'm pinned to the trunk of a tree by kunai sticking out of my arms; my feet dangling over the ground. Thin streams of blood drip down. Chakra suppression seals are stuck to my limbs.

"Mmmm," Ukon muses, his grin widening into something grotesque. "Yes, Aniki, I shall finally avenge you…" he lifts his knife to his lips and licks the blood off. "Do you like that terror in her eyes, Aniki? But… IT'S NOT ENOUGH!" he suddenly screams and stabs his knife into my shoulder, right where Sasuke already wounded me.

"Now, what shall I saw off first, Aniki?" he asks, then tilts his head as if listening to a voice only he can hear. His grin widens so much, it splits his face in two. "Yesss," he hisses. "Let's cut off her ears!"

We're all alone. It's dark, I can only see the silhouettes of trees around us. No help is coming. Oh god, what happened to Sasuke?

Ukon comes closer with his torture-knife, and I regret. I regret that I won't eat ramen with Naruto again. That I won't play shogi with Shikamaru, won't train with mom, won't stroll around in the Clan Forest with dad again. And most of all, I regret that I'll never get the chance to really tell Sasuke that I love him.

Cheh. Pathetic, a voice says in my head, and when I blink and open my eyes again, I'm standing on a wooden platform over the surface of a lake, mountains of objects towering above me. And there's a new building, a glowing white dome that dwarfs even the mountains, illuminating the scene with gentle, white-golden light. But I can't focus on that, because before me stands Dementia, my inner darkness.

"Thought you disappeared," I say tiredly.

She snarls at me. "Came back again. What the hell do you think you're doing?! You're just gonna give up?"

"It hurts so bad," I whisper. "And I'm so tired."

She laughs. "Oh, this is rich. You fought me so hard, and now you're giving up because that idiot Sasuke went nuts, some second-rate psychopath wants to cut off your ears and you're sleep deprived." Suddenly, all traces of amusement are wiped from her face. "Do you know what that is?" she points at the glowing dome. "That's Lily. That's the prison she became to save you. And this is how you pay her back? This is how you pay back everyone that's ever sacrificed something for you? By giving up?!" she shrieks.
I stare at the glowing building. Lily...

"Bravery isn't the absence of fear and strength isn't the quantity of power," she'd told me. "Never think you're a coward or weak."

I clench my fists and look up at Dementia. "Why are you helping me?" I ask.

"Funny story," she says. "I'm whatever you don't want to be. And lately, you haven't wanted to be very nice."

"Are you saying you're the nice one now?" I say disbelievingly.

"You shut off your emotions to kill all those people. You shut off your bloody instinct of self-preservation, you suicidal bitch!" Dementia glares at me. "Who do you think they ended up with, huh?"

"Oh," I say. "Can I have them back?"

The last thing I see is her fist burying itself in my chest.

I open my eyes and take a deep breath, feeling complete. Ukon is still approaching with his knife and I'm still in pain and so bloody weak, but I'm not going to give up. I'm going to survive.

"I don't like that look in your eyes!" Ukon suddenly screams. "Why don't we just cut them out, Aniki?!"

"No," I whisper. "I want to live."

I'm completely immobilised and my chakra is sealed, but there's a tree full of liquid right at my back, and I can somehow sense the water in it. So I reach out and pull.

The stem of the tree behind me explodes into water that crashes down on me and Ukon. The upper half of the tree comes falling down on us and I just barely manage to throw myself to the side, behind another tree. Hastily, I tear the chakra suppression seals off my bleeding arms, ignoring how much I hurt. And then, on instinct, I rip one of the kunai out of my upper arm and hold it out, and with a disgusting squelching sound, it lands in the eye of Ukon who was just lunging at me.

"Ahhh," I whimper and start trembling at the horrific image. The temporary strength leaves my injured arms and the corpse falls on me. With a scream, I scramble to push it off me, grab another kunai and sink it into Ukon's chest, again and again and again, sobbing and unable to stop until a firm hand grabs my wrist and wrestles the kunai out of my hand. A scream escapes me and I leap to my feet and whirl around, at the same time ripping another kunai out of my arm to stab the new threat, but that wrist, too, is caught and I stare into Sasuke's tired eye.

"I've got you," he says calmly. "You're safe, Yasumin."

A sob escapes me and I crumple against him. He lets go of my arms so he can put his around me. My hands clutch at his bloodied shirt as I gasp for breath, trying to inhale as much of his familiar scent as possible. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, I love you, you're okay, are you hurt..." the words fall from my lips without any coherency.

He rubs my back comfortingly. "I'm sorry, too. Breathe, you need to calm down and breathe, we've got to get out of here."

I force myself to take in a deep breath and release it slowly. Make my fingers release his shirt one by
one, draw away from him. Then we stand in front of each other; him, weary and bloodied, his

clothes singed and a burn on his leg, me with kunai sticking out of my arms and drenched in blood,

eyes wide and frightened. Kami, I must look a fright, but Sasuke still leans down and presses his lips

against mine briefly. They feel dry and chapped, but soft at the same time. "I love you, too," he says,

and somehow, the words give me enough strength to pull myself together enough for coherent

thoughts. I manage to not have my legs give out as he pulls the remaining kunai out of my arms and

shoulder and ties them with strips of cloths ripped from his shirt.

Our heads snap up simultaneously when we feel multiple chakras approach and then we're running-

running-running. The lighting changes from dark to grey to brightness and we keep going. I pour

every last bit of my reserves into my muscles, ignore the fact that my wounds are dripping blood all

over Waterfall Country. Keep running keep running keep running, I chant to myself. Because if I

stop, I'll fall. And if I fall, I won't be getting up, not this time. This is the end.

I can't tell how long we have been running. I lost track of time before the sun even rose which must

have been hours ago. My body is on autopilot, all that matters is don't stop don't stop don't stop. So

when a wall of rock surges up in front of us, I barely manage to register it in time to swerve to the

side so that I only hit my shoulder, but unfortunately, it's the injured shoulder. And kami, it hurts. My

legs crumble under me and I roll and skid over the ground until I hit a rock, and I'm unable to get up,

my body unable to move, all reserves and then some used up. And then Sasuke is in front of me,

shuriken in hand, facing the three people that have suddenly appeared wearing dark red clothing and

brown vests. The symbol on their hitae-ate, where was it from again? Not Sand. Not Kiri.

Rock. It was the Hidden Rock.

One of the men stumbles back. "Sharingan! He has the sharingan!" he yells. "That's an Uchiha!

Capture him alive!" I frown. Sharingan? Why does that seem like such an important thing… another

of the man suddenly leaps forward at Sasuke, but before he can reach him, a blur crashes into him

and sends him tumbling. Another three people land in the clearing, musical notes displayed on their

hitae-ate, and they immediately attack the Rock ninja. And then another man strolls into the clearing.

He looks like death. He's only skin and bones, matted white hair framing his face, ribs sticking out of

his thin body haphazardly. His sunken green eyes stand out against his darkened skin, glinting

fanatically. He says nothing as he pulls out a bone from his shoulder and stabs it through both a

Sound ninja and the Rock ninja behind him. For a moment, all battles stop as everyone stares at what

used to be Kimimaro. Now he's little more than a walking corpse, animated only by his dying will.

And then his eyes fall on me and he starts walking in our direction. A fireball from Sasuke is easily

evaded and almost carelessly, without taking his eyes off of my helpless form on the ground, he

points his hand at Sasuke. Something small and white shoots out and Sasuke stumbles back a step,

but he still throws his shuriken at Kimimaro. They bounce off his body like it's made of stone. He

doesn't even falter and flicks his fingers at Sasuke again.

And right in front of me, Sasuke falls. I don't know how he still has the strength to try and get up

again, but it's not enough. Again he crumbles to the ground.

"No," I whisper. "No!"

Kimimaro comes to a stop in front of us, Sasuke kneeling in front of him, a kunai lifted vaguely in

his direction in a last show of defiance. I try to move, but I don't manage to so much as twitch.

Kimimaro lifts his bone-blade over Sasuke. His mission was to bring me to Orochimaru, and while

he wanted Sasuke, too, right now he is in the way. And there is nothing I can do to stop him from

killing him. A tear runs down my face and a terrified scream escapes my throat.
The blade comes down. And stops an inch from Sasuke's neck. Someone crouches down next to me and ruffles my hair. A sob escapes me at the warm feeling that envelopes me. "I'll be right back, Riko-chan. Your old man has just got to take care of something troublesome, alright?"

"Dad," I choke out and look up at him, unable to say anything else. He gives me a grim smile.

"I won't be long," he tells me and steps away from me, past Sasuke who is still kneeling with his kunai lifted, though I'm not sure he's even still conscious.

Something obnoxiously green hops from dad's shoulder and lands next to my head. It promptly stumbles against the rock I was thrown against, too. Lucky for him, Flash Ninjin Seven is already wearing bandages around his head. And his ears. Why are his ears bandaged?

He slaps my head with his tiny green paw. "You're the suckiest summoner ever and I'm leaving now!" he declares haughtily. "Bye." And he vanishes with a popping sound, leaving behind an unnecessarily large smoke cloud.

I barely pay him any attention, my eyes still on dad even though my vision is shutting down. I try desperately to cling to consciousness, but it's futile. Everything is going black already.

The last thing I hear is dad's voice.

"I don't think I've ever been more motivated to kill someone, you scum that hurt my daughter."

Chapter End Notes

Hmm, why was Ninjin wearing bandages? Did he perchance run into a tree? We shall never know...

As for Sasuke going nuts, that was the Curse of Hatred at work. Though, with that wake-up call, he'll be a hell of a lot more cautious in the future. I'm sorry, it had to happen. Just because Ri is around doesn't mean all his issues have magically gone away. He's still a bit of an emo, sort of.
I blearily open my eyes and blink against the bright light of the ceiling lights. There are people around me, but nothing really registers. Everything is fuzzy and I feel like I'm floating except everything feels so heavy and painful and then the world goes black again.

It continues like that. Sometimes I stay conscious longer, sometimes I don't. I drift between bouts of feverish hotness and shivers from coldness. Sometimes I register voices around me, telling me to hold on, that they're there for me; other times it's silent. At times, there's a hand ruffling through my hair. I like that hand.

I know the things I see aren't real. There are times the world turns red and black. Other times, I'm running without moving forward. A man with a demonic grin plunges a knife into me over and over again. I see my loved ones die in any kind of manner. Vines choke and chain me. Sometimes, the nightmares are interrupted and I see the red-haired girl-that-is-me-but-not again, only for a few seconds and I almost instantly forget what she was doing, the information drowned out by nightmares of giant snakes with cold yellow eyes or other horrors.

When I finally wake up, weak and drained, I'm not quite sure where I am and if the infirmary room I appear to be in is real. Any second, it'll fill up with blood and drown me, or a corpse might come in and kill me the same way I killed the person it used to be way back when I wasn't in hell.

I try to sit up and fail. That doesn't happen in my dreams. In those, I can either move fine or not at all. So maybe I'm awake? If I am, then…

My gaze darts around wildly. I breathe out a relieved sigh when I see Sasuke, asleep on a chair beside my bed. He looks fine, if a little pale. He's breathing. He's okay. A choked sob escapes me but he doesn't stir.

"Riko-chan," someone says. I flinch and curl into myself until it registers in my mind that I know this voice and that it means that I'm safe. I try to relax, but my heart is beating way too hard for it to work and I can't seem to breathe in anything but short, painful gasps. "Shh, it's okay, you're safe," that same voice murmurs soothingly. A hand – I know that hand – rubs my back gently.

I don't know how long it takes me to calm down. It seems like forever. All the while that voice continues to murmur reassurances to me – "You're safe, I'm here, it's alright," – until my breathing is normal again and the trembling has stopped.

"Dad?" I ask tiredly and inwardly wince at my voice. It sounds too young. Like a child's.

"I'm here, Riko-chan," he answers. I hear him step around me so he's on my other side. Now I can see both him and Sasuke at the same time.

"Hey," I whisper.

Dad cracks a smile. He looks tired. "Hey," he answers. "How are you feeling?"

I blink up at him. "Is Sasuke okay?" I ask with a glance at the still sleeping Sasuke.

"He's fine," Dad answers. "Wouldn't leave your side. Understandable, given what you two went through. Still..." he suddenly smirks. "Something I should know about?"

"Um," I say intelligently. "I kind of, sort of, like him a lot?" When he isn't acting crazy, at least. But
nobody ever said relationships are easy. Are Sasuke and I in a relationship?

Dad chuckles and ruffles my hair. "As long as you're happy."

I blink slowly. "Shouldn't you, I don't know, threaten him or something?"

That's what usually happens in Icha Icha. Not that I can say that. Even if Dad knows I read the novels, I can never talk to him about them. Ever.

Dad chuckles again. "I'll leave the threatening to your mother and brother. They are much better at it than I am."

We shudder simultaneously.

"But that isn't to say that I won't… get even, should he hurt you." Dad adds with a weird glint in his eyes. Now I know who Shikamaru got his vengeful streak from.

I laugh weakly. "Thanks, Dad."

He smiles down at me, but then seriousness overtakes his features. "Tell me what happened."

"Didn't Sasuke report… never mind," I mutter.

"He told us some of it," Dad answers. "But I suspect it wasn't everything."

"He's not much of a talker, is he?" I chuckle a little. "And he was out for a part of the whole... thing."

"Start at the beginning," Dad orders.

"Right," I pause. "Wait, how long was I out?"

"A while. Your injuries were troublesome."

"Ugh," I groan. "Okay, so what happened is that Sasuke and I were training and I walked home after that. And then these four Sound Ninja showed up. I tried fighting them, but well… I was exhausted and they were seriously strong. So they drugged me and stuffed me into a barrel, to accelerate whatever the Cursed Seal was doing to me and make me Orochimaru's mindless slave. And then— you know what? Just get Inoichi to read my mind."

"Lazy," Dad comments with an exasperated grin.

I give him a tired grin back. "I've earned the right to be."

He sighs, all amusement draining away, leaving only fatigue. It's not a look I've seen on him before. "I suppose you did," he murmurs.

"You look tired," I tell him. "Go get some rest."

Dad barks out a short laugh and ruffles my hair. "Don't worry about me. You're the one in the hospital bed, Riko-chan."

I crack a small grin. "Imagine that, me in a hospital bed." I sigh. "What's going to happen now?"

"We'll resolve situation with Iwa and then take Sasuke and you back to Konoha with us."
"Huh," I say. "You're keeping us here?"

"I'd rather take you back to Konoha personally." He sighs. "You are in no shape to travel right now, anyway."

I study his tired face. "How badly was I hurt?"

Dad raises an eyebrow at me. "You tell me."

I look away. "On second thought, I'd rather not talk about it."

"Riko-chan." His voice sounds rough. "You had torture wounds."

"I'm fine," I answer, looking up again.

"No, you're not." Dad sighs and rubs his face. "You were kidnapped, tortured, and who knows what else happened that Sasuke didn't tell us about. Or even knew about."

"…Point taken." I let my head fall back on the pillow and close my eyes. Damn it, I'm exhausted. "Seriously, I'd rather have my mind read than talk about it. Inoichi can probably make more sense of it than I can."

"That bad?"

"Worse." I crack an eye open. "But I really am okay. I'm- I did what I had to. Yes, I'm going to have some serious nightmares about it, but I've been worse."

"That's reassuring," he mutters.

"I'm still alive. Sasuke is still alive. We got away," I say. "And now we're here, safe and – well, not exactly sound. But you're here and where you are, Inoichi and Chouza are too, and I heard Kakashi was at this outpost, too, so we're going to be fine. Okay? I just… need a break."

He sighs. "You're troublesome."

"Please, Dad."

"Alright." Dad sighs once again. "I suppose you deserve a break. Inoichi can read your mind tomorrow. For now, rest a little more, okay?"

"Thanks," I whisper and close my eyes, already half asleep. "Love you, Dad. I'm glad you're here."

"I love you, too, Riko-chan."

Sasuke isn't there the next time I wake up. Dad isn't present either, instead…

"Kakashi-sensei?" I rasp.

He looks up from his book. His eye crinkles into an eye-smile that seems way too happy and cheerful to be real. It creeps me out. "Good morning, Riko-chan."

Is it morning? The room I'm in has no windows, so I can't tell. I'm pretty sure we're underground. That would be the easiest way to keep a military outpost hidden.

I clear my throat. "Where's Sasuke?" I ask warily.
"I sent him away to eat breakfast."

We stare at each other, me tense and wary, him smiling happily and creepily. I wait for him to say something. The silence stretches into minutes, until-

"Riko-chan, you told your father about Icha Icha," he says. His smile gets even happier. "Didn't we have a deal?"

Oh bugger.

"I didn't," I declare with utter conviction.

"Maa, Riko-chan, you shouldn't lie to you sensei," Kakashi chides.

"I really didn't," I say. "Really."

His smile gets creepier. Pink flowers form in the background. Kakashi positively sparkles. Forget Gai's Sunset of Youth, this is scarier.

"I swear I didn't tell him," I try again. "Honest. Team Seven's honour."

The sparkles dim a little.

"But I did tell Jiraiya. While my Dad was in the room." I grin maliciously. "Because we did have a deal, and you broke it first. So whatever Dad did to you, you had it coming."

Kakashi's flower background poofs away. I make a mental note to learn that illusion. It's awesome.

"What are you talking about, Riko-chan?" he asks nervously, but still not dropping the smile. Now it's my turn to smile creepily.

"You didn't protect me from my evil, evil teammates that day." My smile is so sweet, I must be getting cavities. "Whom I had just pissed off by throwing senbon at them."

"But Riko-chan!" Kakashi exclaims with fake surprise. "It was all in good fun! They just wanted to play a little!"

"Yeah right," I deadpan. "Sure."

We engage in a smiling contest. The flower background makes a comeback. I give Kakashi a thumbs up and a sparkly grin. He winces. "Please don't ever do that again," he says.

"Hah, I win!" I smirk. "So what did Dad do to you?"

Kakashi buries his face in his hands.

"That bad?" I ask curiously. I sense future blackmail material.

"He made me babysit your rabbit," Kakashi moans.

My eyes widen in horror. "I take it back, you didn't deserve that. Kami, I knew Dad had a vengeful streak, but that's just plain evil."

"It wouldn't stop talking! It cried all the time! My nindogs aren't talking to me anymore because of that thing! I tried shutting it up with Killing Intent and it fainted!"
"Well, it worked, then," I try to cheer him up.

"Everyone laughed at me!"

"Why didn't you just tell Ninjin to dismiss himself?" I ask with a confused frown.

"He didn't want to leave!" Kakashi cries, waving his hands about wildly in an attempt to visualise exactly how horrible a charge Ninjin was. "He said: 'This Flash Ninjin Seven will not leave until his shitty summoner has been found!' Then he demanded to be given carrot soup."

"...you didn't have any, did you?" I ask hesitantly. Kakashi drops his head in his hands again. "He's gone now, though. So please cheer up?" I ask hesitantly, mentally praying for him not to cry. I'm pretty sure that the kind of torture that makes Kakashi cry has yet to be invented, but my rabbits just might do the trick. They are just that awful. "And Ninjin isn't even the worst of my summons."

"It gets worse?" Kakashi sounds horrified.

I think back to Kyuuri going berserk.


Then again, Kakashi might like Kyuuri. After all, I'm pretty sure that rabbit could tell an Icha Icha novel from first person point of view without lying or embellishing even once.

The door to the hospital room opens.

"Sasuke," I murmur when I see him stand there staring at me. Something in my chest uncoils. We spent so much time together, us two against the world. Not having him near me was unsettling, even though Kakashi told me that he was fine.

"Ri," he replies with obvious relief in his voice. "You woke up."

I give him a weak grin as he approaches. "Yeah," I answer for a lack of anything better to say. "Are you alright?"

"Worry about yourself," he replies and drops down in the chair he was asleep in when I woke up last night. I reach a hand out to him, or rather, I try to; the best I manage is a twitch in my heavily bandaged arms. Luckily, Sasuke understands and carefully wraps his fingers around mine.

"How are you feeling?" he asks me, just as my stomach grumbles loudly. His lips twitch.

"I could eat," I deadpan.

"Maa, then Sasuke will have to get you something to eat, Riko-chan," Kakashi pipes up happily.


"Ah, but Riko-chan is to have a jounin as protection around her at all times, Sasuke. I can't leave," Kakashi eye-smiles at him. "While you're at it, tell her father that she's awake."

Sasuke's glare intensifies. I squeeze his fingers and he looks at me. "Go," I mumble. "I'll be fine."

He studies my face intently. I give him another weak smile and he nods sharply. A moment later, the door slams shut behind him.

"Kakashi-sensei? Is he really alright?" I ask, absentmindedly missing the warmth of his hand in mine.
Kakashi gives a noncommittal shrug that tells me absolutely nothing. I sigh. Since I doubt I'll get a clear answer out of him, I try another question.

"Did he tell you about-"

"Hurting you? He did." Kakashi's good mood vanishes and rubs his face tiredly.

"He didn't mean to," I say. "That- I don't know what that was, but it wasn't him."

"I know he didn't mean to but depending on how you look at it, that makes it worse. He doesn't have himself under control," Kakashi explains wearily. "Especially since the one he hurt was you of all people. You're very important to him, which you know better than me."

I sigh again. "So what now?" I ask. "I mean, after we get back to Konoha."

Kakashi shrugs again. "He'll be taken off the active roster."

"And then?" I ask. "Special training or something? Psychological care?"

Kakashi fixes me with a look. "This stays between us, Riko-chan. Since Akatsuki went after Naruto, preparations have been made to send both Sasuke and Naruto on training trips for an extended amount of time. We won't be going back to Konoha to stay."

It's like a punch to the gut.

"You're dissolving Team Seven?" I force out.

"Temporarily." Kakashi sighs again.

"Who are they going with?" I ask in a strangled voice, if only to say something that isn't loud and vehement protest.

"I'll be taking Sasuke. Naruto is going with Jiraiya."

"What about me?" I whisper.

"I don't know," Kakashi says. "I'm sorry, Riko-chan."

"It's okay," I say mechanically. "Actually, no, it's not okay, but let's pretend it is. It's not like there's anything we can do about it, is there? Unless you can take me with you."

"I'm sorry," Kakashi apologises again. "But what I can tell you is that you'll definitely be taken off the active roster, too. And there will probably special training for you, but I don't know who you will train with. I'd tell you if I knew."

I just nod, unable to process that someday soon I'll have to say goodbye to Naruto and Sasuke for years.

"I'm only telling you this so you can mentally prepare yourself. I know you don't like surprises, especially not ones like this," Kakashi warns me.

"Are you going to tell Naruto and Sasuke, too?" I ask.

"No. Naruto isn't one for long term planning and Sasuke would only brood."

I nod my head mindlessly. "How many years will you be gone?" I ask listlessly.
"Two or three. Maybe more, maybe less. However long it takes to train them to an acceptable level."

Two or three years. The most I've ever been separated from Naruto since becoming friends has been the month of training during the Chunin Exams. Or maybe it was this whole kidnapping and running away business, depending on how long I was unconscious.

How the hell am I supposed to deal with them leaving me behind?

"How much time do we have left until you leave?"

"For Sasuke and me, a few weeks at most. Naruto won't leave as soon, Jiraiya has to make some preparations first."

I nod numbly. Only a few weeks. Damn it.

The door opens again and in comes Sasuke, followed by Dad and Inoichi. "Hey," I greet, pasting on a smile. It's probably not very convincing, but I can blame my mood on my physical condition if anyone asks. I'm pretty sure that Kakashi was not supposed to tell me about the future training trips, which makes me all the more grateful that he did.

"Hey," I greet. Sasuke nods at me, sets a tray with food down on my bed, and helps me sit up. Then he demonstratively sits down on the chair next to my bed with a glare at the others in the room, his expression clearly saying, *I'm not leaving and you can't make me.* It makes me smile a little

"How are you?" Dad asks me, his expression somewhere between wary, amused and approving at Sasuke's actions.

"Never been better," I reply sarcastically, all the while wondering how I'm supposed to eat when I can barely move my arms. Someone's going to have to feed me. "Am I giving my report to Inoichi now?"

"Hello, Riko," Inoichi greets me. "It's good to see you awake."

"Good to be awake, I think," I answer. "Let's get this over with."

Sasuke next to me tenses but takes no action as Inoichi nods and steps towards me. "This will be a little different from the other times I was in your mind," Inoichi warns me. "You're going to pass out and you won't feel a thing. I suggest you eat beforehand."

"Can't," I say, looking pointedly at my bandaged arms. Inoichi has the grace to look sheepish.

"Ah, yes," he answers. "I'll come back in a half hour, then. Enjoy your meal."

I look doubtfully down at the tray on my bed. Miso soup, a small bowl with rice, mushy vegetables, and some dubious looking mash of brown colour. "Yum," I mutter as he leaves the room. Well, at least it'll taste better than what Sasuke and I ate while on the run. And it's sure to be full of nutrients and vitamins.

"Riko-chan, I have to go to a meeting," Dad says apologetically.

"It's fine," I reply and give him a weak smile. "See you later?"

"Of course." He gives me a strained smile back and then leaves the room. I stare after him worriedly. Dad looks so exhausted and tired. I doubt he rested last night after we talked, even though I asked him to.
"Maa," Kakashi's voice rips me out of my thoughts. "It seems Sasuke will have to feed you, Riko-chan." He sounds infuriatingly happy about this.

Sasuke and I give him twin death glares. Kakashi eye-smiles at us. His flower background is back, too. Seriously, I need to learn that.

My stomach growls and ruins our standoff. Kakashi chuckles. "Sounds like someone's hungry, Riko-chan! Sasuke, you know what to do!"

I decide I'm never going to summon a rabbit ever again. This is all Ninjin's fault.

Inoichi comes back after a half hour like he said he would. Kakashi sits in his corner, obnoxiously happy, reading his book. Sasuke and I meanwhile are busy not looking at each other.

Kami, that was the single most embarrassing half hour of my entire life and I'm glad that I'm going to pass out in a few minutes.

"Is Dad okay?" I ask, because if anyone would know, it's Inoichi.

"He's exhausted. Everyone here is," Inoichi answers. Now that I'm looking more closely, he looks tired, too. "Ready, Riko?" he interrupts my observations.

"Knock yourself out," I mumble.

"Very funny," Inoichi quips and puts his hand on my forehead and all goes black.

Sasuke and Kakashi aren't in my room when I open my eyes again. Instead, there are Dad and Inoichi. And sensing for any chakras near, I note Akimichi Chouza's presence outside, most likely guarding the door.

"Is this going to be one of those conversations?" I ask. I don't actually know what I'm talking about but it seems like the thing to say.

Dad sits down next to me on the bed, his hand ruffling my hair. "Forgive me, but I'm going to have to ask you to break a few rules and do something troublesome for me."

"Okay," I say.

"I'm going to ask you to keep certain things out of your report and, if asked, to lie about them. Even if it is Tsunade-sama asking."

I blink. "You want me to lie to the Hokage?"

"She will be told those things, but precautions need to be taken. Inoichi and I will handle it."


He raises an eyebrow. "Alright?"

"Alright," I confirm.

"Should we be concerned about your non-aversion to rule breaking?" Inoichi asks wryly.

"You just read my mind, you tell me," I retort. "So what is it that I'm supposed to keep secret?"
"Two things," Dad says seriously. "The developments with your Cursed Seal and the interaction with Uchiha Itachi."

I nod. "Sure, I can do that. But what about Sasuke? He knows some about that stuff, too."

"We have already told him to keep the information out of his report," Inoichi answers. "He thinks it's because Uchiha Itachi is such a high profile criminal."

I frown. "You make it sound like it isn't."

Dad sighs. He does that a lot these days. "It is, Riko-chan. It's just not the only reason."

Frowning, I decide I won't get more answers than that at this point in time. "Why am I supposed to keep quiet about the Cursed Seal thing? That's a good development, isn't it?"

Inoichi and Dad exchange a quick look. Inoichi nods and Dad sighs again. "Riko-chan, do you remember the last two times I asked you to keep quiet about something?" he asks, choosing his words carefully.

"Vividly," I reply.

The first time was when I had just arrived in this world.

"No one can know. Only the Hokage, Inoichi and I know that you aren't from this world. Should certain men find out about it, you'd be better off dead. Especially if they learn that you had the power to send yourself from one world to another."

And the second time was after I got attacked by Kuramoto and my former teacher attempted to cover it up, back when I was so very young.

"He was gonna take me away to someone."

Dad looks suddenly very, very serious. "You absolutely must not mention that to anyone, do you understand? Not even Shikamaru," he says so quietly, I barely understand him.

So, judging from what Dad just said, there must be a connection: the person that I would have been taken to, the one who absolutely mustn't know. And that, obviously, is the person Dad wants to prevent from knowing about the things he told me to keep secret. The question is, who is it?

My mind flashes back to that one time after the Wave mission when I went to see Dad in his office and met Shimura Danzo.

When he's gone and I've closed the door behind him, I turn to Dad. "What the heck just happened?" I ask, mildly freaked out.

"Don't worry about it, Riko-chan. Be a good girl and sit down," Dad says.

That man made my skin crawl. And what Dad said back then was practically an order to be on my guard around him. But I can't go around suspecting a man who's been loyal to Konoha for generations on a hunch. The notion alone is stupid.

"So what's the problem?" I ask. "An infiltrator, a conspiracy, a traitor?"

Dad and Inoichi exchange another look. "That's a bit above your level," Dad finally says, ruffling my hair.
"But it won't stay that way, will it?" I retort. "Not forever."

"Riko," Inoichi says seriously. "This isn't something you want to be involved in. You have enough on your plate already."

"It's not like problems will just vanish if I ignore them," I counter. "And it concerns me, doesn't it?"

Silence follows my words. Finally, Dad sighs. "It does."

Inoichi speaks up again. "You're too young and inexperienced to get involved. Your father and I don't even know what we're dealing with in this matter. What we can tell you is that dealing with it is going to be dangerous. Equivalent to at least an S-ranked mission. Do you still want to be involved?"

I swallow, feeling trepidation. Inoichi's expression softens. "You shouldn't have to deal with this, Riko. You're only twelve years old, you haven't been active as a ninja for even a year."

"It's not like you told me all this just for kicks, right?" I counter. "There is no way out of this mess."

"There is," Dad disagrees. "Inoichi could seal your memory of this conversation. You would just go on with your life like this never happened. You would probably live a happier life if you took that option."

"No one would blame you if you did," Inoichi says gently.

"I would blame me," I reply firmly. "And maybe I'd be happier, but I'd just be running away. I don't want to do what's easy. I want to do what's right."

"Troublesome," Dad sighs and ruffles my hair. "You should rest now. We'll talk more when you're ready."

I wonder what I've gotten myself into this time. At least, I'm doing it willingly. And Dad and Inoichi won't actually get me involved until I'm strong enough to handle whatever it is we're dealing with.

"Okay," I mumble and close my eyes. Seconds later, I'm asleep.

Three weeks. That's how long it takes until we can go home. During that time, I recover and try to prevent myself from dying of boredom. It's not easy, especially when Kakashi takes Sasuke out for training and leaves me with whoever is available.

"So, is that supposed to be a cat mask?" I ask the annoyingly taciturn Anbu.

"No." The answer is clipped and I detect mild annoyance in the voice of my current guard. Finally, a not-emotionless reaction. I wait in the hopes of a more eloquent answer. My hope is in vain.

"So what is it supposed to be?" I finally ask.

"A lion," he answers.

"Ahh," I say in realisation. "A lion, how could I not see that? Sorry, I'm seriously bad at guessing the animals corresponding to Anbu masks. I honestly thought you had a kitten mask."

"...you're not the only one," Anbu Lion answers reluctantly.

"Wow, that must suck," I commiserate. "Pass me the salt, will you?"

That's right. Once I was allowed to be out of bed, I quickly discovered that I wasn't allowed any
freedom of movement. Out of sheer boredom, I decided to help in the kitchens. Now I'm extremely popular with the ninja staying at the outpost. Dad joked that he wasn't quite sure if they were so eager to protect me because of comradeship or because of the food I provide.

"Of course, Riko-san," Lion says and hands me the salt.

"Maa, that smells good, Riko-chan," Kakashi muses from behind us, startling poor Lion.

"Senpai!" he exclaims.

"Hello Kakashi-sensei, Sasuke," I greet, aiming a smile at my teacher and the teammate slightly behind him who looks like he's been put through the wringer. "How was training?"

What wouldn't I give for being able to go out. Scratch that, what wouldn't I give for a minute in private with Sasuke? Or a minute in private at all? I'm climbing the walls in here.

Sasuke shrugs sullenly while Kakashi eye-smiles and pats my head. "Fine, fine," Kakashi answers. "No need to worry."

"I wasn't worried until you told me not to worry," I retort and point a wooden spoon at him. "What am I not supposed to worry about?"

"Nothing at all," Kakashi answers blithely. "We're going home tomorrow."

The spoon falls from my hand. "Seriously?" I exclaim.

"Your father just told us." Kakashi eye-smiles some more as a goofy grin overtakes my features. "He's currently busy making preparations and organising everything, but we're going home tomorrow."

"Awesome!" I grin. I'll finally see Naruto again, and Shikamaru, and Mom, and everyone else! Kami, there were days when I thought it would never happen.

"I suggest you go pack," Kakashi says.

"Like I have anything to pack," I snort and look down at my oversized clothing. Needless to say, no one could find clothes my size in the entire outpost. Sasuke had more luck than me of course.

"Well, then just continue cooking!" Kakashi suggests and blatantly steals a rice ball. I punch his shoulder half-heartedly. He just laughs and strolls away, dragging a struggling Sasuke after him. "Tenzo, watch out for Riko-chan, alright? We wouldn't want her to get in trouble this close to returning home, would we?"

"O-of course, senpai!" Anbu Lion stammers.

"Tenzo, huh?" I shoot a glance at Lion after Kakashi and Sasuke have left.

"That is not my current codename," Tenzo replies primly.

"It's better than 'Lion'. Though I do like lions," I answer. Then I grin again.

Tomorrow, I'm going home.

Travelling with Dad, his team, Kakashi, and Sasuke proves to be only insignificantly more freeing than staying at the outpost. For one, I'm only allowed to walk for short distances. For another, I can't
take two steps without someone showing up ready to catch me if I fall. It's annoying. I'm thoroughly glad when the gates of Konoha come into view, though I can't help but look around for any attacking ninjas ready to take me away again. But there are only my current companions.

We step through the gates. No earthquakes happen, no lightning strikes down, no tornado carries us away.

I'm home.

I'm home.

"Ri-chaaaaaaAAANNNNN!" someone screams in the distance, rapidly coming closer, and then something smashes into me and I'm on the ground with my arms full of sobbing Naruto.

"WherewereyouIwassoworriedareyouokayImissedyoudattebayo!"

"Hey Ruto," I mumble and bury my face in his hair, breathe in his familiar scent. "I'm home."
Reunions

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It takes the combined effort of Sasuke and Kakashi to pry Naruto off of me for long enough for me to stand up. A moment later, he's latched on to me again, rambling all the while.

"...bastard Shikamaru wouldn't let me look for you and Kiba couldn't find you and you were gone forever! And Baachan wouldn't send out a search party! And after one day, they wouldn't even let me into the tower again, I had to break in because she wouldn't talk to me anymore, and then she made me go on missions! What if you'd come home while I was gone? And-"

"Ruto," I mumble into his shoulder, hugging him a little tighter. "Thank you for not giving up on us."

He sniffs. "Of course! You're Ri-chan and Sasuke-teme, you had to come home, dattebayo!"

I blink my own tears away, glad that my face is hidden in Naruto's shoulder. "Did you wait for us at the gates the whole time?"

"Always when I wasn't on a mission," Naruto replies.

"I missed you," I whisper in a choked voice. "I really, really missed you."

"More than ramen?" Naruto jokes weakly, apparently trying to lighten the mood.

"Always," I answer. "But I really could use some ramen." He laughs wetly and finally draws back from me, though his hands still clutch my shoulder. Frowning, he studies me.

"Ne, Ri-chan, you look like shit," he informs me seriously, which causes Sasuke to cuff the back of his head while I burst out laughing. And once I've started, I can't stop. Tears gather in my eyes and I bend over clutching my stomach. When I finally have myself under control again, Naruto, Sasuke, Kakashi and Dad are looking at me warily. Inoichi on the other hand doesn't look too surprised.

"Ne, Ri-chan, are you alright?" Naruto asks me worriedly. Sasuke stares at me questioningly. Oddly enough, Dad has the same look on his face. It almost sends me into hysterics again, but I settle for smiling at them.

"Yeah," I say happily. "I've never been better."

Naturally, Sasuke and I get dragged straight to the hospital by Dad and Kakashi while Inoichi and Tenzo go report to Tsunade. And who waits in front of the hospital?

"Shikamaru!" I cry out and run forward, straight into his arms.

"Goddamnit you bloody stupid reckless moronic idiot," he mutters into my ear. "Troublesome doesn't even begin to describe how much of an imbecile you are."

"I missed you so much," I whisper.

Shika lets go of me to study me, much like Naruto did earlier. I raise an eyebrow at him.
"So, waiting in front of the hospital?" I ask.

He gives me an inscrutable look. "The most likely place to find you in," he says morosely. I wince.

"I'm working on it!" I protest, conveniently forgetting that I didn't evade a low-powered chidori on purpose. Shikamaru gives me a look that clearly tells me he doesn't believe me.

"We're going to talk later," he promises darkly. Then he turns around. "Sasuke," he states warily and pulls me a little closer.

"Shikamaru," Sasuke replies in exactly the same tone. Naruto's eyes dart around between the two confusedly, probably wondering where the tension is coming from. Dad and Kakashi look way too amused to actually do something.

Meanwhile, I'm in Shikamaru's arms, craning my head so I can see Sasuke, feeling awkward as hell while they glare at each other. I clear my throat. No one reacts. "Hospital," I remind them.

"Just a second, sis," Shikamaru placates me in a tone so deceptively friendly, Mom would be crying tears of pride. The only thing to make it even creepier would be a flower background.

"Does this have to happen now?" I ask. "Whatever 'this' is?"

Naturally, I'm ignored. I'm also incapable of escaping my idiot brother's clutches because of his stupid shadow jutsu. I send a pleading look at Dad, but he's studying my brother with a frown on his face, so no help there. And Kakashi apparently still holds a grudge over the rabbit-sitting thing that was in no way my fault. Naruto is way too confused to be of any help.

"I'm pretty sure Tsunade-sama wants to see me in the hospital bed when she arrives..." I bait them. Shikamaru stiffens. "Well, as long as you take the blame for the delay, I suppose it's fine."

I feel rather smug when Shika reluctantly lets go of me, with a pointed look in Sasuke's direction, who in turn looks supremely unbothered, even if I can see his hackles are raised.

"Well, let's get you checked into the hospital," Dad says, looking oddly disappointed, the traitor. Just like Kakashi who has the nerve to shoot me a 'why-do-you-ruin-my-fun'-look at me, to which I answer with a 'I-can-summon-a-rabbit-anytime'-glare. He gives an odd little twitch and turns away.

Well, at least I'm not the only one with rabbit-aversion. Though I'm a bit concerned that it appears to be contagious.

We're led into the hospital and from there, to the high-security wing. It looks exactly like the rest of the hospital, only with seals on the doors, and I'm pretty sure there are ANBU around.

"Don't I feel special now," I mutter.

"You're always special," Shikamaru grumbles back. "Are you even sick? You look fine."

"I am fine," I reply with a glare at Dad's back.

"You're not," Sasuke disagrees. "You were comatose for five days."

Shikamaru glares at me.

"That was then! Weeks ago!" I protest, glaring back. "I'm fine now!"

"Ne, Ri-chan, you should let Baa-chan check you out!" Naruto metaphorically stabs me in the back.
"We're just really worried about you, dattebayo!"

Damn Naruto's puppy eyes. It's so much harder to glare at him than at Shikamaru or Sasuke.

"...Fine!" I hiss out. Naruto's face brightens and he beams at me.

"So what happened to you?" he asks. "We were all on a mission to save you but there were a bunch of Sound guys and we all got separated and then Shikamaru and Kiba suddenly showed up and said something about a rabbit and that we were all going back because the weather was bad-" Naruto interrupts his rant to throw a dirty look at my brother, who pinches the bridge of his nose.

"We did not terminate the mission because of bad weather, you idiot," he says slowly. "We left because Riko and Sasuke crossed into Rice Country which is not allied with Fire. Also, Kiba lost their trail. By the way," Shikamaru reaches into his pouch and pulls a hitae-ate out. "This is yours, I believe." He holds it out to Sasuke.

"Hn," Sasuke utters and takes it from him.

"He says thanks," I translate, which earns me an annoyed look from Sasuke.

"But!" Naruto protests. "We could have found them! Just because you-"

"You think I liked leaving my damned sister to flee through three different countries with a Sannin after her ass?" Shikamaru snaps back. "There was no choice! All of us, and that includes you, were injured, if Temari and her brothers hadn't shown up there would have been deaths! I was trying to save everyone's lives!"

I stare at the arguing boys with wide eyes. Sasuke shifts closer to me and I send him a helpless look. They could have died because of me! Sasuke shifts closer to me and I send him a helpless look.

They could have died because of me!

They didn't, he answers. None of this is your fault.

I'm about to object, but then I hesitate.

It isn't my fault. I never asked for any of this. I was always just trying to keep my loved ones safe.

The realisation takes a small weight off my shoulders.

...And when in doubt, I can always blame Orochimaru. Amazingly, that thought actually makes me feel better, even though it has the snake fucker in it.

Thanks, Sasuke, I tell him wordlessly. You're right and I'm an idiot.

He smirks smugly and doesn't contradict me. Itannoys me, so I shift my attention to Shikamaru and Naruto who are now in a staring contest.

Well, if we were to wait for someone to win, we'd still be here tomorrow and Tsunade would be very pissed at waiting that long. So I take a step forward, intent on stepping between them, which would have worked out if not for the fact that my legs are still a tiny little bit weak which means that when I set my foot down, I sort of sway in place.

Dammit.

Kakashi suddenly scoops me up in his arms, and judging by his eye-grin, he's doing it for the single purpose of embarrassing me.
"Ri-chan! Are you okay?!!" Naruto exclaims, and Shikamaru shoots me a worried look. Sasuke on the other hand looks like he very much wants to roll his eyes while Dad looks faintly amused.

"I hate you so much right now," I hiss at Kakashi. Louder, I say, "I'm fine, set me down."

"No, no, I think I will carry you to your room, my poor injured student," Kakashi declares blithely as he starts walking down the corridor and through a door into a hospital room. "The strain of the journey must be catching up with you, poor thing!"

"I hate you so much right now," I repeat. "As soon as I can, I'm summoning my rabbit."

He drops me.

On the bed, but it's still not a nice thing to do.

"Scratch that, I'm going to summon two rabbits," I threaten. "Did you know that there are at least seven Ninjins in total?"

"Maa, Riko-chan, let's not do anything hasty, alright?" my teacher says nervously. I smirk.

"I don't know… I'm feeling vindictive today."

"Ahh, Riko-chan…"

"You could always apologise," I advise. "Or you could just run to another country before I've refilled my reserves and come back in a few years, hoping that I'll have forgotten, which I won't have."

Kakashi nods sagely. "I'll take the second option."

"Your choice," I mutter, making a mental note to have a rabbit at hand as soon my chakra reserves are back to normal. Preferably not Kyuuri.

A commotion outside the room catches my attention, there's a crash and Naruto yells something unintelligible. Then the door crashes open, revealing Tsunade in all her furious, big-chested glory. "Nara Riko!" she roars. I resist the urge to run far away as she strides over to me.

And pulls me into a hug.

What.

The hell.

It would be nice if she weren't smothering me with her female assets. Thankfully, she releases me as sudden as she caught me in her arms.

"You," she says slowly. "Are very, very lucky to be alive, young lady."

"Don't I know it," I mutter.

"For the foreseeable future, ANBU Lion will be guarding you while you are not with either your father or sensei." She flicks her fingers and Tenzo suddenly appears. He holds something out to me that looks like… a seed? I stare at it blankly.

"You need to swallow it," Tenzo says helpfully.
"The heck is that?" I ask suspiciously.

"It'll allow him to track you should you… get lost again," Dad says. By now, the rest of our group have entered, with Naruto sporting a big lump on his head, which explains the crash we heard earlier.

I reach out and swallow the thing. Meanwhile, Tsunade starts checking me over with her green glowing hands. Whatever her diagnostics tell her has her frowning. Wonderful. With my luck, I probably screwed up my chakra system again. Or maybe it's about the various injuries I've received, like bleeding out all over Fang and Waterfall Country, the torture wounds, or whatever.


"Inoichi read my mind," I say vaguely, which makes Naruto blink in confusion and Shikamaru look at me sharply. "Do I have to?"

"I want to hear it from you," Tsunade orders. I bite my lip and cast a look around. Tsunade's eyes soften a little. "Everyone else, out!"

"But Baa-chan!" Naruto protests, but Kakashi grabs him and Sasuke on his way out, though he casts a wary look back at Tsunade. Tenzo disappears, Inoichi follows Kakashi outside. Which leaves me with Tsunade, Shikamaru, and Dad.

"I said everyone," Tsunade snaps. "Get lost!"

Shikamaru doesn't move. Neither does Dad. I appreciate it, I really do, but I don't think I can get a word out of my mouth as long as they're here. Just… no.

"It's fine," I say softly. "Tell Mom I'm back, go sort stuff out, I'll be okay, I just-" don't want you to hear about the most painful experience of my life. I don't say it out loud, but to my family, I might as well have. A shadow flits over Dad's face briefly, and Shikamaru clenches his fists and stares at the ground with an angry, helpless expression that I wished I knew how to take off his face. But I don't and there's nothing I can think off that will make anything better for the people left behind to worry about me.

Silently, they leave the hospital room, leaving me staring after them until the door falls shut behind Shikamaru. Tsunade activates a privacy seal and then settles in a chair next to my bed.

"So," she says calmly. "Spill."

Talking about everything makes it real. I'd have rather pretended that it was all just a long bad dream.

It takes a while. Some things just tumble out of my mouth without any coherency. Other things, she has to coax out of me with patient questioning. Then, there are times I'm completely incapable of speech, and she has to calm me down. I have a near-panic attack when I try to tell her about Sasuke attacking me and can't tell the difference between what really happened and the nightmares I've had.

Tsunade just listens, not batting an eyelash. And then we're finally done and I feel so, so tired, weary to the bone. I blink slowly, trying to fight the exhaustion.

"You're a goddamn mess, Riko," Tsunade mutters. "Get some sleep."

Waking up at home is… surreal. Especially with Sasuke nowhere in sight or sensing range. After our mad escape through three countries, we did get used to being apart again for a few hours at the
outpost, but even then we shared a room. So it's disconcerting being in my room by myself upon waking up.

It's the first time I've had any time to myself in over a month.

I find I don't like it much.

After minute of lying around on my bed, I get up. I've got to find out what happened after I fell asleep, I've got people to see, friends to find, ramen to eat. And for the first time in ages, actually fitting clothes to wear. I've *missed* that.

An extended hot shower later, I walk down to our kitchen after pulling on an outfit consisting of a long-sleeved mesh-armour shirt under a wide black t-shirt, brown shorts and sandals. A weapons belt with stitched-in storage seals filled with senbon goes around my waist, a kunai pouch around my thigh.

I feel like me again.

Mom is in the kitchen with Shikamaru, Dad is nowhere to be seen – probably at work.

"Riko!" Mom exclaims, drops a wooden spoon into a pot, and hurries towards me. A moment later, I'm enfolded in her arms.

"I'm home," I whisper hoarsely. "Sorry I took so long."

She just holds me tighter. "Don't do it again. I swear, I'm going to put you through training *hell*, young lady!"

"Let's wait until she's cleared from medical leave, yes?" Shikamaru drawls from his place at the table. "Or at least until after breakfast."

The word 'breakfast' kicks Mom right out of Hugging-Mode into Normal-Badass-Mom-Mode and she lets go of me to push me down in a chair. I throw Shika a dirty look, I wouldn't have minded being hugged a little longer. "Sit," Mom orders. "Eat. You're only skin and bones. I *swear*, every time you leave the house, you come back looking like death! You are not standing up from the table until you've had at *least* two helpings! Shikamaru, make sure your sister eats enough!"

"Yes, yes," Shikamaru answers.

"One yes is enough, young man!" Shikamaru rolls his eyes while I smile to myself. I've missed my family *so much*.

After we're done eating and I've thanked Mom for the food, I make my way over to the door.

"Where do you think you are going, you troublesome girl?" Shikamaru asks tersely.

Good question. And the whole overprotective brother thing is going to get old very fast. I mean, he's always been protective of me, but it feels like he wants to lock me up in a tower to keep me safe. While I appreciate his intention… Hell. No.

"I've been cooped in a tiny outpost for weeks with little to no privacy," I say mildly. "I'm going for a walk in the Clan Forest."

He stands up abruptly. "I'm coming with you."

I tilt my head in consideration. "You can walk me there, but I want some time by myself. Since the
The forest is about the safest place in Konoha, there shouldn't be a problem with that, no?"

He growls in frustration. "Riko…"

"Is that alright, Mom?" I ask.

"Of course," she says. "Do remember to pick up some herbs, I'm running low."

"You shouldn't be alone!" Shikamaru growls.

"I haven't been alone in seven weeks! I need to be alone!" I retort. "I admit I'm not well and my head is a bit of a mess, but I'm not broken and helpless. And there's an ANBU guard around. So can you please drop it and go back to being my lazy brother?"

He makes a frustrated noise and storms past me out of the kitchen. A few seconds later, the front door slams closed.

"Damn it." I let myself fall back into my chair, scowling to myself.

"It had to be said," Mom remarks, though she doesn't look happy.

"It's just… I need him to be himself. Not…" I gesture in the direction Shika ran off in. "That."

"That being a stressed angsting boy who wants to protect you from the world by locking you up and throwing away the key?" Mom asks.

"How bad was it while I was gone?" I ask.

Mom sighs. "He was mission leader of the team sent to retrieve Uchiha Sasuke and you."

"I… may have heard something about that earlier," I mumble. Then I look up, eyes wide. "Wait, Naruto accused Shikamaru of-"

"Yes," Mom nods. "Shikamaru had to decide between saving his sister or leaving her to save herself so that his team would survive."

"That's..." I whisper and can't speak on. I feel sick. A choice like that… I think I'm going to throw up.

No wonder he's so angry.

"He should never have had to make a choice like that," I whisper, staring at my hands. I know it's not my fault, but it feels like it is.

"No, he shouldn't have," Mom agrees. "He shouldn't even have been on that mission, emotionally compromised as he was. Unfortunately, there wasn't any other qualified chunin available."

"It's not fair," I say quietly.

"It never is," Mom says harshly. "It wasn't fair that Orochimaru had you and Sasuke kidnapped, it wasn't fair that you were pushed to the point that you had to flee the country, it wasn't fair that you were hunted like animals. But you go on. You get pushed down, you get hurt, but at the end of the day, you claw yourself back to your feet and you move on until you're sure that everyone that matters is safe. It's one of your strong points, that resolve."

"Strong?" I ask bitterly. "I'm not strong. I get hurt all the time, my mind is a goddamn mess, and I'm constantly scared and I have some extreme anxiety issues."
"Yes," she says. "Your greatest enemy has always been yourself. And yet, you found your way home, against all the odds."

"I did," I say. "And I'm glad I did, I really am; but it doesn't feel like a victory. I still needed saving in the end, Sasuke was going to die right in front of me, and if Dad hadn't come, we'd be dead or worse."

"So get stronger," Mom says flatly. "Then next time, you'll be the one doing the saving."

"It sounds so easy when you say it like that," I murmur. "When it's going to be hard as hell and take years. Which I won't have, because Orochimaru will come after me again."

"If it's easy, you're doing it wrong," Mom deadpans. "Focus on getting better, we're going to train when you're healthy again."

I sigh and get up from my chair. "Thank you, Mom. I'll be going on that walk now."

"You do that. Also, you're going to have therapy sessions with Inoichi, so drop by at Yamanaka Flowers."

Yay. Therapy. I can't wait.

"Sure," I answer. "See you later."

My feet take me into the Clan Forest where I wander around aimlessly until I find a nice clearing to sit down in.

Mom is right, I have to get stronger. Much stronger. I am, at some point, going to have to defend against Orochimaru and Kabuto. Akatsuki, consisting of S-ranked criminals, is going to come after Naruto, so I need to be ready to fight against them, too. Then there's the whole mess that Dad and Inoichi are involved in, which according to them is at least an S-ranked mission, if not worse.

I need training. And Mom is a great teacher, but she's still just a chunin, even though she definitely has jounin skills. She hasn't been an active ninja since Shikamaru was born. So her training me is only a temporary solution.

And then... Orochimaru could send his minions after me at any moment – hell, he could send Kabuto and I'd be done for. Which means I'll need to train at a secret location, or go on a training trip like Naruto and Sasuke will do with Jiraiya and Kakashi. But I don't think the village could afford to send another high-profile ninja away when they'll already be missing Kakashi. And then there's the fact that there are hardly any water-users in the Village – at least, not ones that both have it as their primary nature like I do and are strong enough to keep me safe and instil the skills I need.

So what are the alternatives?

There's ANBU. That's anonymous, everyone has masks. It'd certainly make it harder for Orochimaru to track me down, and I'd definitely get some serious skills drilled into me.

It would also screw my head up even more than it already is.

And the last option... a protection program. I'd be brought to a secret location, guarded 24/7, while having carefully monitored training.

That's not a pleasant option either. I'd rather take my chances with ANBU.
Damn it, why does my life have to be so bloody hard?

I get distracted from my steady descent into self-pity when Rikumaru strolls into the clearing. Slowly, I sit up on my haunches so as to not startle him. "Hey, friend," I murmur. "I'm back." Rikumaru approaches me and I carefully get to my feet and reach out my hand. He bumps his snout softly into it. Taking that as permission to touch him, I start patting his fur. He closes his beautiful dark eyes contently. Then he opens them and turns his head to look behind him.

Shikamaru is approaching, the look on his face both wary, defeated, and tired. It hurts seeing him like this.

Rikumaru takes this as his cue to leave, having accomplished his goal of leading my brother to me.

"Hey," I greet quietly.

"Hey," he returns. An awkward silence ensues in which neither of us quite knows what to say.

"Mom said to find her some herbs," I finally say hesitantly.

"Let's go," he answers tersely.

We trudge along in silence. I shoot my brother side glances while he avoids looking at me at all.

"How are you?" I ask finally when the silence grows to be unbearable.

"Fine," he answers flatly, still not looking at me.

I stop walking. "The truth, please."

He stops moving, too, and finally turns around, his expression blank, his eyes guarded. "I'm fine. Glad you're back." He shrugs. "All's well."

"Don't insult me by lying to me," I answer. "You're not fine."

Something sparks in his eyes. "Yes I am."

I stay silent for a little while. "If you don't want to talk, that's okay. I'm here if you change your mind. But stop lying. It only makes me more worried about you."


"What's that supposed to mean?" I ask.

He turns away. "Let's go find those herbs."

"You can't just say something like that in that tone and then not explain it," I protest. "Why wouldn't I be worried?"

Another bitter laugh escapes him, and my brother should not sound like that. "You're such an idiot."

"You aren't making any sense," I answer.

He suddenly whirls back around to me, eyes sharp with anger. "Says you, the girl that was first kidnapped, chased across three countries, apparently badly hurt enough that she was comatose for five days. Damn it, Riko! This is the third time you've disappeared for weeks and come back hurt and sad and tired! What the hell?!"
"It's not my fault!" I yell back.

"You don't think I know that?" he roars. "It's not your fault! It's mine!"


"I was the reason we were to slow, because I was playing for caution when you were fighting for your life! I was the one who couldn't save you! I was the one who aborted the mission and abandoned you to your fate!" He shouts. "My sister! You don't think I see how you hate me? You can't even stand to be in the same room with me! Everyone's the same way, I see how they look at me, 'the guy who abandoned his sister'. I'm-I should-"

I sock him in the face. Not lightly, either. It throws him to the ground, blinking up at me in shock.

"That," I growl. "Was for saying that I hate you."

"I- What?" he asks in shock.

"You're my brother" I yell, breathing hard. "I trust you more than just about anyone else! You're the first person I've ever called family! How could you even think something like that?! You didn't abandon me, I'm the one who ran away because I didn't have enough faith that anyone would come save me when you were probably right behind us! You- you're the only one who hates you!"

His expression crumbles, and he sags forward, clutching my shoulders desperately. We sink to the ground together, and all I can do is hold him while his body shakes with sobs, tears running down my face silently.

And privately, I think to myself that I might not be the only one who needs therapy.

After Shikamaru fell asleep on me, I somehow managed to get him back to the house where Dad helped me get him to bed. The look on his face was just as defeated as Shikamaru's was earlier.

"What's wrong?" I asked him.

He just ruffled my hair with a smile. "Nothing for you to worry about, Riko-chan. Do you want me to walk you to Inoichi's?"

I'd much rather have crawled into my bed, or better yet, Shikamaru's, and slept the rest of the week away. I've had enough drama, and I'm tired.

"Sure, thanks," I said, and now we're walking into Yamanaka Flowers where Ino stands behind the counter. And promptly shrieks upon seeing me, vaults over the counter, and hugs me stormily, sobbing and talking a mile a minute.

I only manage a weak smile that she doesn't really see what with her sobbing, and pat her back.

It seems none of us are quite alright.

Five days later, I make my way to the cenotaph, ready for some peace and quiet.

"Hey Fumio," I say softly, sitting down cross-legged and searching for his name on the dark stone. "Long time no talk."

Is it weird that he's more important to me in death than in life? But then, him dying for me… it's just,
if I forget about what he did for me, it'll be like he didn't matter. And I can't allow that. Maybe someday I'll be ready to let go, but not now.

"It hasn't even been six months since you died," I murmur. "It feels like a lifetime."

I lean back on my hands, looking up at the cloudless sky. This place is so peaceful. Even though I'm the only one here – well, with Tenzo just in sensing range – I don't feel alone.

"I'm really tired," I say. "Drained, I guess. It's just, I thought I could finally get some rest, and some quiet and comfort. But instead I'm the one comforting everyone else. Shikamaru alternates between being angry at the world and hating himself. Dad seems constantly exhausted and sad. Mom said it's because he feels helpless because of me being kidnapped and tortured and stuff, and Shikamaru tormenting himself. I try to be there for him, but it doesn't seem to help any.

"Then there are Ino and Chouji, who are walking on eggshells around me. Ino constantly asks me if I'm alright, and I have to reassure her, and Chouji gives me those worried looks when he thinks I'm not looking. Team Eight is on mission, which is sad because I think they would treat me normally. Shino at least, for sure." I pause to take a deep breath. "Sasuke is avoiding me. I don't know why. Maybe he's the same as Shika, blaming himself for hurting me, or Kakashi told him about taking him away for training. So much for the 'When all this is over,'–promise. Stupid bastard.

"Naruto is… fine. He's awesome, even. He makes me laugh, he gives me hugs whenever I need them. It's just, sometimes it's exhausting to see how he's trying so hard to make sure I'm happy and safe. We used to be able to have some silence in our friendship, you know, just strolling along the village together and not talk, just… walking and being together. And that's gone. He's trying to fill every bit of silence with chatter, and I love him for it, but I just-"

I sigh.

"I just want everything to go back to normal," I admit quietly. "Stupid, like anyone could just get over this stuff."

I shrug and shut up, enjoying the scenery. Finally, somewhere I don't have to pretend to be okay, or reassure anyone. I stay there about half an hour, until Kakashi shows up. "Yo," he greets.

Another person who I haven't seen all week, though I guess he was probably busy and not just avoiding me.

"Hey." I return the greeting. He just stands there awkwardly, looking like he really wants to say something but doesn't quite know how to go about it.

I slump tiredly. "How soon are you leaving?" I ask softly.

I guess now I know why he's been avoiding me. Probably wanted to make saying goodbye easier or something stupid like that.

"Tomorrow, at five a.m. I'm sorry, Riko-chan."

"Wow, that's soon!" I laugh awkwardly, then sniff. I turn away and wipe my sleeve over my face. "I'll come see you off. Can you leave me alone for a bit?"

"I'm not looking," he says. "So don't feel bad for crying."

And so Kakashi stands there silently while I finally break down over everything that's been going wrong since I was taken away. It's more than anyone else has offered me, besides Naruto.
I find Sasuke at his house. Or rather, behind his house, placing seals on the walls and windows. Once activated, no one will be able to enter his house without permission.

"So," I say. He whirls around and I get a kick out of his surprise. "One last spar before you leave?"

A smirk steals itself onto his face and then he disappears from view. I flip back, narrowly evading a kick. I try to swipe his legs when he lands, but he sees the attack coming and dodges it. A moment later, he's behind me, his fist aimed at my neck. I shift my weight and fluidly turn around to face him, tilting my torso a little so that his fist narrowly sails past me.

Suddenly channelling chakra to my feet, I leap forward, too fast for him to evade. Then my arms are wrapped tightly around his body and my face is buried in the crook of his neck. Sasuke freezes for a moment, but then he relaxes and his arms settle around me as he returns the hug.

"Cheater," he mutters. "You aren't supposed to use chakra."

"Ninja," I retort, hugging him a little tighter. My eyes are stinging a little. "We do cheat occasionally."

"I'll have to remember that," he answers softly.

I don't know how long we stand there, just holding each other for the last time before he leaves. My heart breaks a little with every moment that passes.

Kami, what will I do when he's gone? But I shove the worries away. There are better ways to ruin the moment. I take a deep breath and scrounge up all my courage.

"Hey Sasuke, do you want to be my boyfriend?" I ask into his shoulder.

He chokes.

"Now that's a nice reaction," I deadpan, looking up at him.

"What," he wheezes, his eye wide. "Did you just say?"

"Well, you weren't getting around to asking me out," I explain. "I thought we should clear that up before you leave."

"Stop talking about me leaving," he murmurs. Then his lips are on mine and I lose all track of time.

Eventually, I pull back a little and look up at him. He leans his forehead against mine. "I'm going to miss you," I whisper. His hand brushes against my cheek which I take to mean that he returns the sentiment.

"I have something for you," Sasuke suddenly says and pulls back. His hand grabs mine. "Come with me." He leads me into his house and makes me wait in his living room.

After a few minutes of standing around awkwardly, I get worried that he won't come back. And the bastard didn't give me a clear answer. I think a kiss is a pretty strong indicator of a 'yes, I want to be your boyfriend', but I'd really like a clear answer, because what if I'm wrong? I mean, I really like him, and I know he likes me, too.

I guess I'd just like to have some reassurance since he's leaving for a couple of years.

Kami, what am I going to do?
"Stop freaking out, Ri," Sasuke's voice says from behind me. I whirl around.

"Where the hell did you come from?" I demand. He gives a pointed look at the door behind him, which isn't the door he left through.

"Oh," I say tonelessly, colour rising to my cheeks.

Man, I suck as a ninja, not even noticing a bloody door.

"Ri?" Sasuke asks, looking amused. I school my expression into something neutral and will the blush to disappear.

"Yes?" I say, like I didn't just make an idiot of myself.

He holds something out to me, a longish item wrapped loosely in dark blue silk cloth, and suddenly my throat is dry, because I know what that is. Gingerly, I hold out my hands and let Sasuke press the object into my hands. I send him an unsure look, but his dark eyes are fixed on the wrapped item in my hands.

I swallow dryly and carefully unwrap the silk cloth to reveal a sheathed katana. The sheath is black and undecorated, the handle is wrapped in black cloth and well-used. It feels just right as I wrap my hand around it and draw the blade.

It takes my breath away. The slender slightly curved blade, glinting sharply in the light, the wavy line running from the hilt to the tip that indicates where the hardened part of the blade that also contains the sharp cutting edge begins. It isn't entirely flawless; there are hairline scratches on it, showing that this is a sword that has already seen battle. It feels perfectly balanced in my hand.

The sword Mom gave me was amazing, but this- this is a masterpiece.

"Its name is Shingi To Giri," Sasuke says.

"Loyalty And Honour," I translate. "Sasuke, are you sure you want me to have-"

"It was my father's," he cuts in, his face unreadable as he looks at the blade in my hands.

My mouth snaps shut as I try to process that.

His father's sword.

His father's sword.

Sasuke has given me his father's sword.

I slide the sword back into the sheath and give Sasuke a bow. "You honour me," I murmur. "I'm- I'm very moved." I blink against the hot feeling in my eyes as I straighten up again.

"Yeah, well," Sasuke mumbles awkwardly, not looking at me. "Don't break it."

"I won't, I promise," I say. "Um, I have something for you, too. I mean, it's a bit lame after you giving me your father's sword, but well, uhh..." my voice trails off as Sasuke rolls his eye and holds his hand out. I search through my pockets until I find the small green bag tied to a string and give it to him. "It's a good luck charm for travellers," I explain. "There are pieces of wood with seals carved on them inside, like one to keep you warm, and to help mask your presence, stuff like that. Uhm..." my voice trails off as he pulls a small piece of wood emblazoned with a big seven. "And that's so you don't forget us," I add.
"You made all this yourself?" he murmurs, inspecting the small bag. In a fit of courage, I stitched a few jasmine blossoms on it.

"Yes?" I answer, studiously avoiding his eyes until he grabs my chin to make me look at him.

"Thank you," he simply says as he pulls the string over his head and hides it under his shirt.

"You're welcome," I mumble. "Uhm, do you think I could crash here tonight? Then I could come with you to the gates tomorrow morning to see you off…"

"Yes," Sasuke says, then suddenly smirks. "To both questions."

"Both questions?" I ask, frowning in confusion. "I only asked one – oh. Oh."

I kind of want to punch the smug smile off his face.

But then, that would be kind of a bad thing to do when he just agreed to be my boyfriend, wouldn't it?

Sasuke wakes me the next morning, backpack packed and ready to go.

"You should've woken me earlier," I mumble, rubbing the sleep from my eyes while I crawl out of Sasuke's bed. He only shrugs sullenly.

We walk to the gates in silence. The sun hasn't even risen yet, so the air is chilly and the sky only just beginning to brighten.

All too soon we arrive. Naruto is already there, looking sad. For once, even he is speechless.

Kakashi is on time. I'd have preferred it if he'd been late. Like, years late.

"Maa, no long faces, my cute students!" he says with fake cheer. "We'll be back before you know it!"

He turns to Naruto. "Naruto, remember to eat something other than ramen or you're going to stay a shrimp forever."

"Hey!" Naruto protests. "I'm not a shrimp, dattebayo!"

Kakashi ignores him and turns to me. "Riko-chan, keep your chin up. You're a strong girl with a lot of potential. Don't waste it. And when you're down, you know what to do."

"Read Icha Icha," I sigh.

"Wait, you corrupted Ri-chan!" Naruto yells while pointing at Kakashi.

"She corrupted herself, dobe," Sasuke snorts.

"Bastard!" Naruto shouts. Then he suddenly sniffs. "You guys better come back soon!"

Sasuke only nods.

"Maa, this is goodbye, I guess?" Kakashi muses.

"Temporarily," I answer softly. "Like Ruto said: Come back soon."
Kakashi eye-smiles at us and turns, walking over to the gate and thus giving us some privacy. Sasuke turns to Naruto first.


"You bet I'm gonna kick your ass when you come back, you bastard!"

Sasuke faintly smiles, then he turns to me and our eyes meet.

There are no hugs, no kisses, no tears. No goodbyes.

"Go already," I say.

He does.

Naruto and I are left staring at his back as he joins Kakashi. The two grow smaller and smaller as they walk away, and then they are gone and only half of Team Seven is left. My hand brushes against the handle of Shingi To Giri at my side for comfort.

"So, you and Sasuke?" Naruto finally asks. I blink.

"You actually figured it out?" I ask. He looks at me like I've said something incredibly stupid.

"Ri-chan, we're best friends! I've known since Snow Country!" He pauses. "You coulda told me, you know?"

"You were already being troublesome about that kiss thing," I defend myself. Naruto starts, then he points at me.

"AHHH! I totally forgot!" he shouts, and I start to laugh.

"Only you, Ruto," I say, shaking my head. Naruto stares at me indignantly, but soon a grin overtakes his expression.

"I'm okay with you and Sasuke being like 'this'," he informs me, holding up his pinkie finger. "Sasuke is okay for a bastard. Not good enough for you, though."

"That gesture is so weird," I mutter, then pause. "I'm glad to hear it. Thank you, Ruto."

"But I'm totally going to kick his ass and become Hokage, dattebayo!" he declares. Then he holds his hand out to me. "Ramen for breakfast, Ri-chan?" he asks hopefully. "My treat."

"That sounds horribly unhealthy," I remark as I slip my hand into his. "Let's do it."

Naruto laughs, his smile like sunshine. He has done the impossible, he has taken my mind off of Sasuke's departure and actually made me laugh. Two years suddenly don't seem so long anymore.

"It's almost like old times, isn't it?" I muse as we walk through the slowly awakening village hand in hand. "Just you and me and ramen."

"Good times," Naruto declares. "Your treat tomorrow!"

I laugh. Sasuke is gone, but today is still going to be a good day. I'm going to hang around with my best friend in the whole wide world, talk bullshit all day, and eat ramen; and there is nothing in the world I'd rather do.
Chapter End Notes

Leporiphobia is fear of rabbits.
In the weeks following Sasuke's departure, Naruto is sent on a slew of missions, none of which last longer than a week, most of them even less than that. Meanwhile, I'm confined to the village, stuck with having to do therapy and spending time with Shikamaru, who's been ordered to take a break from active duty.

So Naruto gets all the fun of catching criminals, free cities from missing-nin and eat the Curry Of Life – okay, I'm glad I wasn't there for that one – and exterminating ghosts.

Neji and Tenten must have had a field day on that last mission, since Naruto is terrified of ghosts.

At least, I was cleared for training the week after Sasuke left. Naturally, Mom made good on her promise of putting me through training hell. Which has the nice side effect of keeping me from feeling too lonely with half of my team, including my boyfriend, gone.

Boyfriend.

I still can't believe Sasuke and I are together. It makes me giddy one moment and frustrated the next when I remember that he'll be gone for at least two years.

Though now is so not the moment to think about that, considering…

"Too slow!" Mom yells.

…considering Mom has her water whip out.

I flip backwards and launch a Water Bomb at her, but Mom's whip cuts through it long before it even gets close to her. The whip hits a nearby tree and blasts a large chunk of wood out of it.

"I appreciate your idea of motivating me to be faster," I gasp out, gluing myself to the underside of a branch. "BUT ISN'T THIS A BIT EXTREME?"

A hiss of air is my only warning and I drop from my branch as a clone appears on it, swinging a whip that cuts through the entire branch, which falls down right after me. I twist around in mid-air so I can leap away right after landing, but then the ground below me suddenly transforms into ominous black mud.

Okay, this just got messy.

I toss three kunai with explosive tags into the mud and kawarimi away.

The result is beautiful. Fire, mud and wood spray everywhere with a resounding boom. When it's over, everything in the clearing we trained in is covered in a thick coat of black sludge; the ground, the trees, their leaves, everything except the large crater in the ground.

For a moment, everything is silent, then Mom steps out from behind a tree, apparently not having been able to entirely evade the explosion, seeing as her right body half is seriously muddy.

"Alright, that's enough for today," she calls out. "Come out!"

Yeah, hell no.

Like I didn't notice there's someone else around. That mud-technique was definitely not Mom's – her
secondary chakra nature is thunder, not earth. My guess is that Mom terrorised some poor guy - my money is on Tenzo - into helping her terrorise me.

I'm so not going to walk down there when it's so obviously a trap.

Besides, the point of the exercise was to come up with an escape strategy against an opponent stronger than me. Seeing as that wonderful explosion covered my replacement technique wonderfully and destroyed any evidence of me using it, I think I did well. And now I'm nicely hidden between an assortment of rocks, chakra cloaked and pretty much undetectable – I'd be stupid to give up that advantage.

Then again, staying in the same place for too long isn't exactly smart, either.

Besides, I'm hungry.

About twenty minutes later, I find myself at Ichiraku Ramen. It wasn't all that easy to evade Mom and her mysterious helper while escaping the training ground, but I have the incredibly useful advantage of being extremely good at stealth. Also, I doubt they'd expect me to take off into the village to eat ramen.

"Hi, Teuchi-jiisan!" I greet as I enter. "Two bowls of Miso Ramen, please."

"Coming right up, Riko-chan!" the man in question calls back. "Fresh back from training?" he asks with an amused look at my slightly scuffed and muddy outfit.

"You wouldn't believe just how fresh." I grin at him. "Don't be surprised if my Mom shows up to beat me up – I mean, to give me training."

He laughs. "As always, working hard. Will Naruto also be coming?"

"You mean, should you get ten bowls ready for him?" I ask with a raised eyebrow. "No, he's on a mission. I'm sort of on vacation."

"Ahh, I see." Teuchi places my order in front of me. "Here you go. Enjoy your food."

I thank him with a smile, break my chopsticks, and start eating.

Ahh, ramen. Just what I need right after a training session with Mom.

"Well, someone looks happy," a familiar voice remarks behind me. I grin and turn around.

"Hello, Iruka-sensei." I tilt my head. "Shouldn't you be at school?"

"Lunch break." Iruka gives me a wry smile. "It's less noisy here."

I laugh. "I can believe that. Would you like to join me?"

"Of course."

Iruka places his order while I happily slurp my noodles. "How have you been? I heard about the… incident."

I shrug. "There are good and bad days. I'm getting better though, and my family's been great. Mom's training me, I spend a lot of time with Shika, play shogi with Dad… I just miss my team. Naruto's always gone on missions these days, and who knows where Kakashi-sensei and Sasuke are."
"Ahh, yes. They went on a training trip, no?" Iruka asks, distractedly thanking Teuchi as his order is placed in front of him.

"Yeah," I say. A twinge of sadness makes me drop my smile and I brush my hand over my sword, like I've done every time I've thought of Sasuke not being here. "It's weird, half of the team is gone, and Naruto isn't around all that often anymore, either."

I suppose I should try to get used to the feeling. Naruto will leave soon, too.

"Well, I actually wanted to ask you something," Iruka says. "The teacher for Encryption & Decryption passed away recently. You're a chunin now, and that was your best subject when you were still an Academy student, so I was wondering if you'd be willing to take over that class for a while. You seemed to enjoy teaching a few months ago, and since you're stuck at the village… you don't have to if you don't want to, but-

"Seriously?" I ask. "When can I start?"

Iruka blinks. "You'd do it?"

I give him a smile. "Yes! I've been feeling so useless, stuck with doing nothing but training. You're my saviour!"

Iruka laughs. "Well, I'd have to take care of some paperwork and go over some guidelines with you, but the sooner you can start, the better. We're spread a bit thin at the Academy these days."

I grin. "I've got nothing but time."

I get home in the early afternoon, paperwork and curriculum in my hand. On the porch, someone left a small bowl with milk.

"You do realise that Tenzo isn't a kitten, right Mom?" I ask as I walk into our kitchen. "That's supposed to be a Lion mask."

"Really? I couldn't tell," Mom says, bewildered. "Oh well. Good job on hiding from us earlier. Where've you been?"

"…blending in with citizens," I fib. "Uhm…" I wave the papers in my hand. "Iruka asked me if I wanted to work at the Academy for a while. Encryption & Decryption."

Mom raises an eyebrow. "Do you think you should do it?"

I hesitate. "I think… it would be good for me."

"Well, if you think so…" Mom says. "Though you should clear it with Inoichi."

"He said a while ago that I should find something to do besides training. Teaching a bunch of brats counts, right?" I ask. Mom looks unimpressed. I sigh. "I'll ask him later, alright?"

Mom nods. "See that you do. And don't think your having job will make me let you slack off in training."

"Wouldn't dream of it," I mutter. "Troublesome."

And so, three days later finds me in a classroom with Iruka, a bunch of munchkins staring at me with
big eyes. A lot of them I still recognise – there's Hanabi-chan, who gave me the cold shoulder at first after my return until I explained to her what had happened, after which she forgave me for not being around and told me she wouldn't be keeping me from training. Also in the class is Udon from the Konohamaru Corps, though the other two members aren't around – Encryption is one of the subjects that are taught in smaller groups and have people from various different classes attending.

Also in the class is my younger cousin, Nara Chie, easily recognisable by her pineapple ponytail and her sleepy expression. As far as I know, she lives with her grandfather, who is Dad's uncle/cousin/something. I've seen her at a few family gatherings, though I didn't talk to her much – she tends to sleep through those meetings.

"I'm sure some of you remember Nara Riko," Iruka's voice rips me out of my musings. "She will be your temporary teacher in this class. Please hello to Riko-sensei."

A chorus of "Hello Riko-sensei," rings through the class. A few of the kids are whispering to their neighbours, probably asking them about me – not everyone here knows me. But there's a girl in the back row that is staring at me with big, hazel eyes from under a mop of fluffy chocolate brown hair. I've never seen her before, but she seems so familiar…

I clear my throat to introduce myself. "So, yeah," I say awkwardly. "I'm Nara Riko. I like my precious people and ramen. I dislike bullies and rabbits. My dream is to become strong enough to protect everyone I love. Also, I dream of all of you doing your homework and not playing pranks on my person. If you do prank me, I will prank you back. You have been warned."

Iruka grins. I kept my involvement in Naruto's pranks secret throughout my Academy years, but I'm fairly sure that Iruka at least suspected me.

"You heard Riko-sensei. Be good, she isn't as nice as me," Iruka tells the children. "And I'll hear all about how you behaved, so don't you dare cause trouble." He turns to me. "I'll leave you to it now. I'll come by after the lesson is over. Thank you for doing this, Riko."

"…I can't get over being called Riko-sensei. It's weird," I mutter back. Iruka smiles at me.

"You'll do fine. See you later, if I take any longer, my class is going to blow the building up."

"Ahh," I say. "Konohamaru's experimenting with gunpowder now?"

"Got it in one," Iruka mutters back, then he turns and hurries out of the room, leaving me with a dozen nine-year olds.

"So…" I say. "You all know my name now. I figure you should all introduce yourselves, too. You," I point at a random boy sitting in the front row. "You can start."

One by one, the children introduce themselves. I listen attentively and mentally take notes.

The girl that stared at me earlier is the third to last to introduce herself.

"I'm Tachibana Aimi," she says with a soft, sweet voice. Then she suddenly smiles a wide, innocent smile, and says something about liking flowers and making her brother in heaven proud, but I don't really hear her over the thoughts screaming in my mind.

Tachibana. That's Fumio's surname. She is... she is...

I never knew Fumio had a little sister. And now that I know, it's so bloody obvious. The hair, the eyes, that smile… the way she stared at me. She looks so much like him, it hurts to look at her.
Kami, Fumio had a little *sister*, and he's dead because he tried to save me, but I'm alive and I'm here and I'm her teacher and I *don't know what to do*.

The remaining two kids introduce themselves, but all that I note are their names.

"Alright," I say mechanically. "Since I don't know your current level, I've prepared a little test for you so I can find out." A series of groans sounds through the room. "Don't worry, it won't be graded. And the one who does best," I give them a grin. "Gets an all-you-can-eat coupon from Ichiraku Ramen."

The groans are replaced by excited whispers and determined looks. With the exception of my cousin Chie, who just lets her forehead drop on the desk in front of her.

I hand out the tests. Most of the students start working immediately, determined to win the prize. Fumio's sister takes the test, still staring at me with those huge hazel eyes, looking like she wants to say something but can't get the words out. That's a problem Fumio never had. His mouth always ran away with him.

I give her a tight smile and move on to the next person.

When all the papers are handed out, I sit down on the desk and watch the kids work. Most of them are still reading the questions while chewing on their pens or biting their lips. Hanabi stares at the paper in front of her so determinedly I'm surprised it hasn't caught on fire. Fumio's sister has a pen in her hand, it moves over the paper swiftly. Chie's head still lies on her desk, I don't think she's even looked at the test.

I flick my fingers in her direction and a small water projectile hits her skin. Her head snaps up and her eyes focus on me in what will be an impressive glare when she's older but right now looks kind of adorable. I give her a pointed look and she rolls her eyes and pulls the testing paper toward her. A moment later, her eyes snap back to me with a sharp look. I wink at her, she suddenly smirks back and starts writing.

Apparently, she liked that I gave her a more… challenging test than everyone else.

But it doesn't help me decide what to do about Tachibana Aimi. And I have to do *something*. I owe that to Fumio. But what can I do? I don't really have the time to look after her, I hardly have time for even Hanabi.

My thoughts get interrupted by a very familiar squeaky voice that makes me want to slam my head into the nearest brick wall.

"Hi there!" the Flying Mint Bunny squeals as it flies into the classroom.

*Oh God please no,* I think.

"Riko-chan, let's play!" it exclaims, doing a pirouette in mid-air, followed by a barrel roll.

*Let's not play.*

"Hide-and-Seek is fun!" The stupid thing flies in a circle around my head. I do my best not to acknowledge it, lest I look like a lunatic for talking to things only I can see. "Or Fox-and-Rabbit!"

"Later," I hiss softly. "I'm busy!"

"Ohhh, what are you doing?" It stops flying around and instead settles on the teacher's desk, wings


"Okay! Later!" The Flying Mint Bunny hops off the desk, flies around the room a few times, then it disappears in a golden cloud. I stare after it blankly. Thankfully, no one else noticed-

A soft giggle interrupts that thought.

Tachibana Aimi is giggling into her hands, wide eyes fixed on the spot where the Flying Mint Bunny just disappeared.

Well.

Shit.

The next day, I still have no idea what to do about Fumio's little sister, so I decide to just sort of wing it. Maybe I could ask Hanabi to keep an eye on her. Or Chie, though she might be a bit too lazy to actually do something.

"So," I clap my hands, the entire class' attention fixed on me. "The ramen coupons go to…"

Technically, they should go to Chie. But I doubt she wants the attention, if the threatening death glare she's levelling at me is any indication.

"Hyuuga Hanabi and Tachibana Aimi!" I announce. "You two have both reached the highest score, so you each get a coupon."

Hanabi shoots a sharp look at Aimi, who just blinks and gives her a sort of dazed smile back. Which seems to tick Hanabi off. The question, how did that weirdo get such a high score, is practically written on her forehead.

Well. It's better than outright disdain.

I clap my hands again to draw the class' attention back to me.

"Okay, let's get on with the lesson!"

"Riko-sensei?" Hanabi asks after class. "Can we go eat ramen together?"

I grin and ruffle her hair, making her jump back with a glare. Her hands run over her head to smooth the displaced strands, not that she needed to have bothered, her hair always looks perfect. "Don't do that!" she hisses.

"Sure, I'll go." I grin at her. "I haven't spent much time with you lately, have I, Hanabi-chan?"

"I don't mind," she mutters back, looking away with a light blush on her face. "It's not like I missed you or anything."

I sigh. Who does she think she's fooling?

After classes are over for the day, Hanabi and I make our way to Ichiraku's.

"So tell how you've been," I tell her after our food is placed in front of us. "I only know you've been
"doing well at school."

Hanabi shrugs. "Konohamaru is annoying. His," she sniffs disdainfully, "friends, even more so. They're loud and unmannerly."

I chuckle. "I can imagine. I've seen them in action. But, Hanabi-chan, friends are important, you know. And my best friend is a loud idiot who's obsessed with ramen."

"But Naruto-senpai is different!" Hanabi exclaims. "He's strong, Konohamaru is just loud and brags all the time! And transforms into," she scrunches her face up in disgust. "Naked girls."

I stare at her. "Naruto invented that move, you know. Oh kami, he taught that to Konohamaru?" I bury my face in my hands. "I swear, if he gives him an orange jumpsuit next, I'm going to do something drastic. I don't know what, but it'll be drastic, and I'll make my brother help me."

"Uh… Riko-sensei?" Hanabi asks hesitantly. "Are you alright?"

I look up. "Yes, yes. So, what else is new?"

"I tried talking to Nara Chie, since she is your cousin." Hanabi sniffs haughtily. "It was disappointing. She is lazy, unambitious, and rude. Nothing like you."

"…more like my brother," I mutter. "Hanabi-chan, don't be so quick to dismiss someone. Many people have hidden strengths."

Hanabi looks doubtful, but nods. "There is another girl named Tachibana Aimi. Her academic scores are close to mine, though her performance in practical classes is abysmal."

"Huh," I say. I didn't even have to ask Hanabi about Fumio's sister. "Have you tried making friends with her?" I ask.

Hanabi looks appalled. "No. She's weird."

"How so?" I ask curiously.

"She's…" Hanabi frowns. "Oblivious to everything around her. Always stares off into space, distracted by the smallest things. She doesn't even get it when someone insults her, just looks confused like an idiot! And she still gets good test results! It's vexing!" Hanabi rants.

…Doesn't sound like Fumio at all. Except for the 'oblivious idiot' part.

I should probably stop thinking of her as 'Fumio's sister'. Aimi is her own person.

"That does sound weird." I laugh. "Keep an eye on her, alright?"

Hanabi throws me a suspicious look. "Why?" she asks.

I shrug. "You never know who you might end up on a team with. And she does sound interesting," I fib.

Hanabi looks annoyed. "Fine. If you insist."

I reach out and ruffle her hair, feeling a little guilty for manipulating her. "Thanks. You're the best, Hanabi-chan!"

"Stop messing up my hair!"
Encryption & Decryption lessons only take place twice a week for each group. Which means I didn't expect to see Tachibana Aimi again for five days; but two days later, after classes are over for the day and I'm cleaning up the blackboard, the classroom door opens and she strolls in.

"Hi," she says. "I was wondering if we could talk about my dead brother. And the flying rabbit, but mostly about my brother. Though the flying rabbit is pretty interesting, too..." her voice trails off as she stares into space.

Oh God.

Now that was a conversation opener.

"Uhm," I say. "Well."

Her eyes focus back on me. "Hmm?" she asks.

"Uhh..." I shift my eyes away from her face. Those sad eyes of hers are huge. They might just reach Naruto's puppy-eyes-level. "How about we discuss this over ramen?" I ask.

Aimi blinks in confusion. "Discuss what?" she asks.

I stare at her. She stares back. "...your dead brother?" I ask. "You came here to talk to me about him? And the Flying Mint Bunny?"

She blinks once. Slowly. "...yes. Ramen."

Oh wow. Now I know why Hanabi thinks she's weird.

BECAUSE SHE IS.

"Well!" I say with fake enthusiasm. "Let's go to Ichiraku's!"

"Uhm..." Aimi whispers shyly, shuffling her feet. "I forgot your name."

...Wow. Just wow. I suppose I should be impressed she actually made it to the classroom to talk to me, with that kind of attention span.

Somehow, the fact that she can see the Flying Mint Bunny doesn't strike me as shocking anymore.

"Just follow me," I sigh and turn to the door. "And I'm Nara Riko."

Her expression lights up. "Okay!" Then she pauses. "Where are we going again?"

I facepalm.

"So, about Fumio-nii?" Aimi asks after our meals are in front of us.

"What do you want to know?" I ask warily, absentmindedly stirring my noodles with my chopsticks. Her eyes focus on me and suddenly seem all too knowing and far more intelligent than before. And I wonder how much of her previous demeanour was a façade.

"I want to know how he died," she says.

I sigh and place the chopsticks down. "Classified," I answer.
"But you know, don't you?" she asks. "It wasn't really an 'accident', like Mama and Papa were told, right? He went to that competition, and he died, and a month later we were invaded. There's a connection, isn't there."

I raise an eyebrow. So she isn't as oblivious as she acts. Good to know.

"Is that what they told you? That it was an accident?" I ask, trying to suppress a disgusted expression at the thought of Fumio's death being labelled an accident, when he should be remembered as a hero. Aimi only shrugs and looks away.

"Mama and Papa are civilians," she says softly. "Accidents are easier for them to accept than murder."

And then she starts serenely eating her Ichiraku's Special Surprise Ramen.

Kami, there is something wrong with this girl.

"Murder, huh?" I murmur. "I can't tell you what happened. But what I can tell you is that your brother died trying to save… someone. From a criminal a thousand times stronger than he was."

Aimi pauses in her eating and sighs softly. "Fumio-nii always was a little stupid," she answers quietly, weary in a way no seven-year old should be.

"Don't I know it," I mutter. "He was also… he was brave. A hero. I… wish I had known him better."

"He talked about you a lot," Aimi tells me. "Are you sorry that he died for you?"

I close my eyes. "More than you can ever imagine," I whisper. "How did you figure it out?"

She slides down from her stool and walks away. "Because he always said that he'd die for you," she throws at me over her shoulder. "See ya. I'll ask you about the flying rabbit some other time, Red-sensei."

...Great, she forgot my name again.

When I get home, Nara Chie is lying on the porch in all her nine-year old Nara-glory. She lazily cracks an eye open as I approach.

"So how did your talk with Crazy Aimi go, Neesan?" she asks.

I throw up my hands in exasperation. "Damn it! What is wrong with you?! You're kids! You should be playing or something, or sleeping! Not-" I flail my hands around, unable to come up with a way to describe what I mean. "-be like that!"

"Troublesome," Chie snorts. Then she yawns and closes the one eye she had open.

"What're you doing on my porch, anyway?" I ask.

A snore is my answer.

I facepalm.

"Kids these days," I mutter.
A week passes. I decide Hanabi-chan is the best kid ever, being (mostly) respectful and hardworking. Compared to Chie, who can best be described by the word 'uncute', and Tachibana Aimi who is just plain… weird, Hanabi is an angel. Always does her best in school, unlike those kids who only ever sleep (Chie) or stare into space vacantly (Aimi).

Naruto returns from his mission, and so do the rest of our former classmates. And they don't leave again, because apparently, there aren't any awesome C-rank missions available, so they have to do D-ranks or whatever administration comes up with to keep them busy. Which leads to the current situation.

All of us rookies with the exception of Shikamaru are assembled in Tsunade's office. Team Gai is there, too.

And Naruto is throwing a tantrum.

"No! No! No! No way in heck, dattebayo!" Naruto yells.

Can't even curse properly, so adorable.

"Why should I have to do some babysitting mission like that?!" Naruto shouts at Tsunade, who looks mildly annoyed.

Oh boy. He probably shouldn't piss her off when she's the one assigning the mission. It could turn out baaaaaadly.

The mission being to take a team of Academy brats and watch over them in a survival exercise for two days and one night.

"I don't care what you say! I refuse, Baachan!" Naruto growls.

"The team organisation has already been announced to the students," Tsunade says calmly and holds up official-looking sheets of paper.

"Don't care!" Naruto retorts brattily. "I want to train, get stronger and-"

"-I'll become Hokage someday, dattebayo?" Tsunade finishes sweetly. Naruto freezes. "A Hokage would never betray the expectations of his adorable juniors, would he? To become a squad leader, issue instructions, protect the life of your men and promptly carry out your mission… I thought this mission I'm giving you guys would be ideal practice for becoming Hokage."

"Hook, line, and sinker," I mumble. Tsunade shoots me a warning glare. "What? He isn't listening anyway." I nod at my best friend who is clenching his fists and staring at the ground.

"Ideal practice for becoming Hokage…” he mutters. "Ideal practice for becoming Hokage…”

I raise an eyebrow at Tsunade. "Told you so," I mouth.

She looks mildly disbelieving. "Well, Naruto, if you're going to be like that, then I guess it can't be helped, I'll have to find someone else, it's too bad-"

"NO!" Naruto screams, waving his arms frantically. "Kidding, kidding, kidding, just kidding!" He lunges forward and snatches the papers from Tsunade's grasp. She smirks victoriously. "Say so sooner, Baachan! Practice for becoming Hokage… yeah, yeah, that sounds nice, dattebayo…"

"He fell for it," Kiba mutters disbelievingly from next to me. "He actually fell for it." He snorts. "So
"Now then! My adorable team members are…" Naruto announces excitedly. Then his expression falls as he reads the names on the paper. "NOOOO!"

Yeah. Judging from his reaction and recalling how few Academy brats he knows… it's probably the Konohamaru Corps. AKA the most annoying group of kids in the whole of Konoha.

Tsunade smirks. "You meet your teams tomorrow at ten."

I raise my hand awkwardly. "Uh, Tsunade-sama, why am I here? I'm off duty."

"And I'm Hokage, and I feel sorry for you." Tsunade raises an eyebrow at me. "You get a team to lead, too."

"A mission? Really?" I grin. "Thank you! I was getting bored!"

"Yes. Hyuuga Hiashi would not allow his daughter to join in an overnight camping trip unless she was guarded by a chunin." Tsunade rolls her eyes. "Which you are. And I hear you get along with him fabulously. So you have the honour of leading her team."

"Wow. You're such a good person. I'm touched," I deadpan, but can't contain an excited grin. I get some exercise, an actual mission, and time with Hanabi, awesome.

"Hanabi-sama, guarded by her?" Hyuuga Neji speaks up and glares at me. "I would sooner leave her with Naruto!"

"Oi! Don't talk like that to Ri-chan – Hey! What's that supposed to mean!" Naruto – predictably - shouts.

"It means," I say nonchalantly. "That Neji-san is a bit of a sore loser, since his team lost the bet and we proved ourselves to be stronger than them, when we kicked their asses during the chunin exams."

I get the Death Glare from two thirds of Team Gai. Lee on the other hand frowns at Neji. "Neji-san! A man must accept his losses. It is most unyouthful to say such things!"

Neji's glare at me intensifies. "I merely doubt her ability," he says in a measured tone.

"Right," I deadpan and point dramatically at him. "Because Your Eyes Cannot Be Fooled!"

Naruto and I high five and break into juvenile laughter. Neji's cheeks darken and he abruptly turns and marches out of the office with a "By your leave, Hokage-sama," thrown over his shoulder.

"What the hell," Kiba mutters. Naruto and I just laugh harder.

Ahh, good times.

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**Sidestory: Chapter 48 in Itachi's POV**

It doesn't take long for the rumours of the Sound going after two genin of Konoha to reach Uchiha Itachi.

It's so very obvious who those genin must be. Nara Riko, who carries the Cursed Seal and whom he failed to kill – though he didn't put as much effort into trying as he could have – and Sasuke, his younger brother.
He needs to find out what happened and where Sasuke is now. Orochimaru cannot get his hands on his brother.

He tracks them to Rice Country. They weren't easy to find, but he used to be an ANBU captain and as skilled as the two of them are, they aren't at that level. Yet, anyways.

It's deep night when he finds their hiding place, an underground cave. This close, he can sense their chakras – Sasuke's barely there, Nara Riko's weakened as well. He contemplates sneaking in when, with some mild surprise, he registers a tiny spike in the girl's chakra, and soon after that, she starts to move.

Did she somehow sense his chakra? Impossible. Even Kisame can't find Itachi when he doesn't wish to be found. And yet, when the girl silently climbs out from the base of a tree, it's obvious she is ready for a fight. Though, judging from the weariness of her movements and the dark shadows under her eyes, she wouldn't win, and she knows it.

Still, in her state, how did she even detect his presence?

"Come out," she orders, a kunai in hand. With his slowly deteriorating eyesight, she is hard to see in the darkness, but he can see the tension in her frame, the glint of her eyes. After a moment, she closes them and breathes out, likely questioning her own instincts in consideration of her exhaustion. A part of him wishes he could leave her alone. But there is a question he hasn't been able to find the answer to, and he is sure that Nara Riko has it.

When she opens her eyes, he stands before her and pulls her into the world of Tsukuyomi. He chooses the same setting that he did to interrogate her teacher, but where Kakashi stayed silent, a girl her age probably won't. Not for long, at least.

"Don't take this the wrong way, but I really don't want to deal with you right now," she says, and the lack of fear in her voice, her eyes, her entire demeanour while tied to a cross in the hell he has created startles him. She isn't faking it either.

He lifts his sword. "Nara Riko," he intones emotionlessly.

"That's me. You know, if you're going to scare me, don't use a sword, use a whip," she answers. "Though, you're plenty scary on your own. So, what gives? Are you here to kill me?"

She glares at him. He stares back, completely at a loss.

Nara Riko isn't scared of him.

What is he supposed to do now?

In the end, he just asks her his questions and receives an answer with no resistance at all from her, and he is certain that had she not wanted him to know, he could have tortured her all he wanted, she wouldn't have said one word.

It's… impressive. He may have underestimated his brother's teammate.

Her knees hit the ground as he releases her from Tsukuyomi. It appears Riko has reached her limit.

"Not going to kill me?" she asks with a surprised frown.

He really should, he thinks as he looks down at her. And yet…
"Look," she snaps. "I haven't slept in three days. I'm hungry. It's raining. I'm in no mood to figure out your very own special brand of Uchiha-speak. What do you want from me?"

He marvels at the fact that she's still not showing any fear of him.

It would be such a waste to kill her.

And she might be useful. It's not like Sasuke would ever accept his help, even in these dire circumstances. Hers on the other hand... though, not in her current state. If she doesn't rest, she won't be able to protect Sasuke.

He hasn't really registered that he had turned to leave when her voice sounded from behind him. "I get it. You need me to protect Sasuke. You have some sort of evil masterplan for him and that's why you aren't killing m-"

Her motionless form slumps to the ground, fast asleep, and his heart is beating a little too hard.

He really should kill her. That guess... hit a little too close to the truth.

The kunai is in his hand, but his hand refuses to move. Indecision mars his features. Finally, with a sigh, he lets the blade sink.

He'll postpone the decision for now.

Itachi watches Riko the next morning. She's... interesting. After the initial shock of finding his message, she ruthlessly loots the corpses he left for her to find, and soon after, she and Sasuke are on the move. He can't deny that he feels a tiny sliver of satisfaction when she moves in the direction he suggested. He can't think of any other Konoha ninja who would have done that. Even more surprising, she made the decision to follow his advice not based on fear of him but of her own free will.

He watches her and Sasuke the whole day – when he isn't taking care of enemy patrols - and feels his respect grow. The girl carries his brother for almost the whole day, hardly taking any breaks even though she's injured herself. It doesn't look like she's even considered leaving him behind, which most people would have done, even if they didn't act on it.

She's devoted to Sasuke.

When night falls, Itachi sees the girl settling them down in a small cave, and he leaves them so he can patrol. But the moment he feels Riko flare her chakra, he heads back.

She stands there, waiting for him. She is armed, and she looks straight into his eyes as she tells him that she intends to find medicine for his sick brother. Then she leaves without waiting for a reply.

Itachi is stunned. She looked into his eyes.

The last person to ever do so willingly without a hint of fear had been Shisui. Even his own father had feared Itachi's eyes.

By the time he's shaken off his stupor, Nara Riko is long gone and he can't tell her that he was going to take care of getting medicine. And then he feels Sasuke's weakened chakra fluctuate and realises why she went herself.

It's so that he can protect Sasuke. Because there's no way that she could win an all-out battle. And if
she doesn't come back, then unlike her, he'd still be able to take Sasuke to safety. She was taking measures for the event of her death.

Itachi decides not to kill her.

Riko is gone the whole night and only arrives at sunrise. Itachi is relieved to see her alive. He'd half expected her not to come back, but here she is. Drenched in blood, eyes glazed with exhaustion, on her face the look of a ninja coming back from a mission that was Too Much; but she is still in one piece and only has minor injuries.

He wonders how strong she really is.

Riko stumbles past him. Even in her state, the first thing she does is check on Sasuke's health and give him the medicine she successfully retrieved. Only after that does she take care of her own state. Moments later, she's dead to the world, apparently trusting him to watch over them while she sleeps.

What a curious creature she is.

He seeks her out days later, under the guise of giving her orders for their escape from Rice Country. The truth is that he knows she doesn't actually need his input, she and Sasuke already have everything planned out.

No, he wanted to see if she'd look into his eyes without fear again.

"I was wondering where you went," she says, giving him an annoyed look.

Annoyance. She is annoyed at him. He, an S-ranked missing-nin and mass murderer, appears before her and she is annoyed. It's surreal.

"Do not fail, Nara Riko," he warns her.

"Does that mean you'll be gone once we cross the border?" she asks. And he thinks he must be imagining it, but there is a hint of sadness in her voice. But that's impossible.

Itachi feels a tiny pang of regret, too. Nara Riko is a puzzle, and he doesn't like leaving it unsolved.

And he'd have liked to talk to her more.
"Are you sure this is a good idea?" Shikamaru asks while I wrap dark bandages around my hands and arms. He's wearing civilian clothes and looks supremely unhappy.

"Well, I've made a full recovery, I've trained a lot, and Tsunade decided that I have to do this so Hyuuga Hiashi will be put into a bad mood," I answer.

"That wasn't a yes," he answers warily.

"I wasn't a no either," I retort. Then I sigh and wrap my arms around him. "Relax. It'll be fine. I'll be back by tomorrow evening. The area we'll be in has been secured. They wouldn't even let me out if it weren't for that, not to mention Hanabi-chan. Also, Tenzo will be following me from a distance, I'm sure."

He sighs. "Troublesome girl."

"Are you going to be okay?" I ask, drawing back to give him a concerned look. "I could stay here."

He leans his forehead against mine. "Don't worry so much. Just come back soon."

"I'll do my best. We'll play shogi when I'm back, okay?"

I arrive perfectly on time and quickly find Hanabi. Who's standing with two other girls. Namely, Nara Chie and Tachibana Aimi, also known as 'Crazy Aimi', according to Chie. How did I not see this coming?

Naturally, Hyuuga Hiashi wouldn't allow his perfect daughter to associate with boys, of all things. And who is the one that has to suffer for it? Me, that's who.

"Oh, hello," Aimi greets me airily. "Your hair is red."

"You don't say," I remark. "Good morning, you three. It appears we're stuck together. Let's all get along, ne?"

Chie yawns.

"What was your name again?" Aimi asks politely.

"This is Riko-sensei," Hanabi hisses. "She has been our teacher for weeks!"

"Hi, I'm Aimi," Aimi answers. Then she looks around. "Why are we here?"

"Great," Chie drawls. "I'm stuck with Perfect Hanabi and Crazy Aimi. This is going to be SO MUCH FUN."

"Be polite, you three," I chastise.

"Of course, Riko-sensei," Hanabi says immediately.
"Che. Troublesome," Chie grumbles.

Aimi stares off into space.

Well, that's as peaceful as it's going to get in the foreseeable future, I guess.

But I so need to come up with something to corrupt Hanabi. Something that will really piss her father off.

Iruka calls for our attention. "Everybody here?" he asks. "Good! Then we're leaving."

We arrive about an ten minutes later in an area set up next to one of the smaller gates in Konoha's wall. Behind it, the forest looms. Kami, it's been so long since I was allowed outside.

"Come on, line up," I tell my team when the other kids start assembling in lines before their respective squad leaders, who in turn are lined up at the front. I make my way over to Naruto's side, who stands before Konohamaru, Udon, and Moegi. My temporary team trails behind me – that is, Hanabi hurries after me, and Chie drags Aimi after her, who doesn't look as if she knows what's going on.

Behind us, Iruka has put up a large map of the area. He and several other Chunin stand next to it.

"I will now begin the explanation of the outdoor training," Iruka begins once everything has quieted down. "It will be conducted over two days and one night." He points at a spot on the map. "This is the spot you will all be heading for. The Great Stone Face of Warudakumi on the summit of Mount Takurami."

Now that's some name, I think as I study a copy of the map in my hands.

"You will all start from different starting points, which I and the other instructors will take you to. The team leader will not take routes other than those indicated on the map," Iruka continues. "This is to ensure the safety of the students. Along the way, there will be obstacles such as instructors disguised as enemy ninja, as well as traps and the like."

Tenten a few steps away from me flinches violently at the mention of traps. I feel my lips twitch. Ahh, good memories...

"You Academy students should be able to safely evade them if you act according to the instructions of your team leaders."

Rock Lee gives his charges a blinding grin and a thumbs-up. The three boys simultaneously sweat-drop.

"You'll see the Stone Face of Warudakumi after you cover about eighty kilometres. The teams that bring the secret document hidden there safely back to the village will have completed the training upon crossing the finishing line. There is only one secret document, so this will be a competition with the other teams." Iruka smiles at us. "That will be all. Approach an instructor when you're ready to leave."

"All right!" Naruto yells. "We'll finish first, no matter what!"

"Yeah!" Konohamaru, Moegi, and Udon shout while simultaneously punching their fists in the air. Cute, that.

Meanwhile, in my team, Hanabi stands rigidly at full attention, Chie looks half asleep, and Aimi's
eyes are avidly focused on a butterfly. "Alrighty, are you all-" I start, but then I'm interrupted.

"Oi, Ri-chan!" Naruto yells. "I'll wait for you at the finish line!" He snickers. "Don't take too long!"

I stick my tongue out at him. "Don't get lost, Ruto! Last one treats me to ramen!"

"Deal - hey! The heck's that supposed to mean?! Treat you to ramen?!"

I laugh and turn to my team. "Everyone ready?" I ask.

"Yes, sensei," Hanabi declares. Then she casts a side look at the rest of the team. "But I am not sure about them."

Some focus returns to Aimi's eyes. "Uhh, where are we?" she asks.

"We're going on a two-day camping trip," I inform her.

"Oh." She frowns. Then her face clears. "Your hair is red."

"So you have mentioned," I answer. "Are you ready to travel?"

"Mmm," she hums.

Chie yawns. "Eh, you're probably over-prepared anyway, Neesan."

Hanabi glares at her. "You ought to be more disciplined," she hisses. "This is an important training exercise, and I have every intention of winning. Riko-sensei and Naruto-senpai are competing as well, and I will not lose against Sarutobi's team." Her nose wrinkles in distaste. "It would be a disgrace."

"Trououuuublesome," Chie drawls. "I guess it'd be pretty dumb to lose against that guy."

"Who is Sarutobi?" Aimi asks dazedly.

"Tell you on the way," Chie says. Then her gaze fixes on me. "Lead the way, Neesan."

We follow one of the instructors for about twenty minutes until we reach a dirt road that leads through a few fields into the forest in the distance. The instructor jots something down on a piece of paper, then he tells us, "Alright, you can start now," and vanishes in a shunshin.

"Right," I clap my hands. "We're going to move in line formation. I take point in case of an ambush, Aimi is behind me, Chie behind her, and Hanabi at the end, since she's the best fighter out of you three. Hanabi-chan, use your Byakugan from time to time to watch out for traps and ambushes, alright?"

"Understood!" Hanabi actually salutes. I strongly resist the urge to ruffle her hair and fail. "Don't do that!" she hisses at me as she jumps away, a light blush on her face.

"Alright, let's go!" I order.

And off we march.

Traveling with the three girls isn't actually all that bad. They trail behind me like little ducklings and listen to every word I say when I point out plants and traps – not that there are many of those. More
annoying are the packs of wolves, but that's nothing we can't deal with.

By now, it's late afternoon. I lean back on my heels and look up into the sky. On the horizon, dark clouds have appeared, and the air feels charged up.


"Shall we set up camp, Riko-sensei?" Hanabi asks. The veins around her eyes are bulging while she uses her Doujutsu. "There is a large hollowed-out tree we could comfortably stay in."

"Sounds good," I agree. "Are you alright? You've been using the Byakugan a lot today."

"I'm fine." She looks away.

"Ne, White-Eyes is so strong," Aimi whispers loudly.

"Don't call me that!" Hanabi says sharply.

"But I forgot your name, and I like your eyes," Aimi answers earnestly. Hanabi's mouth opens. Then it closes.

"I'm Hanabi," she mutters.

"Uuhh," Aimi says distractedly. "Oh look! A caterpillar!"

"That's a poisonous centipede," Chie points out. "Don't touch it, Crazy Aimi."

"Sure thing, Pineapple-chan!" Aimi says cheerfully.

We head on over to the tree Hanabi pointed us to and start setting up camp – Chie collects some edible plants, Hanabi removes branches and rocks so we can comfortably sit, and Aimi... well Aimi...

"What are you doing," I ask monotonously.

"It's a pitfall!" she explains.

"Uuhh," I say.

"Moron," Chie drawls as she trudges back from her scavenging trip. "No one's ever going to fall for that."

Aimi only giggles. "Just wait until it's finished!" she almost sings. It's the happiest I've seen her, ever. And I don't have the heart to tell her to stop.

"...Just make sure you cover it afterwards," I finally say. "Tell me when you're finished, I'll place a genjutsu over it so it won't be seen."

Aimi's smile could light up the entire forest. "I will, Red-sensei!"

Later, we sit around a camp-light in our tree-cave. Outside, the rain falls down heavily, drowning out pretty much any other sound; but inside, it's dry and warm. We eat the food Chie found and cooked and listen to the rain fall. Aimi sighs softly. "This is nice," she mumbles happily from under her blanket.

"You are weird, Crazy Aimi," Chie drawls with a smirk, to which Aimi only giggles. Hanabi says
nothing, but she does look somewhat content, which is rare for her.

"Like any of us are normal," I snort. "Normal is boring, anyway. Any of you want ramen?" I unseal a few ramen cups from my arms.

"Over-prepared," Chie snorts from the futon she shares with Aimi, clutching a pillow.

"Shut it, Pineapple-chan," I shoot back. She half-heartedly glares at me.

"You brought a futon," she deadpans.

"If you're complaining about it, you can sit on the ground." Hanabi sniffs haughtily. "I for one appreciate the comfort."

Chie leans back on the futon. "…Naaaahhh. It's comfy…" she sighs happily.

Kami, those kids are so cute. At the moment. When they're not creepy all-knowing geniuses.

Of course, Hanabi-chan is always cute.

Suddenly, I sense something. Or more like, a flicker of something that's gone the next moment. My head snaps up. "Hanabi-chan, Byakugan," I order.

Her hands twist into the Ram Seal. Veins around her eyes bulge. "Three people," she murmurs. Aimi gets up from the ground and stands next to her. Chie fiddles with the camp light and suddenly, it shines three times as brightly. Our shadows dance merrily on the walls.

"Well, Iruka-sensei did say they were going to test us," I sigh as I get up from the ground and walk over to the cave entrance. "Considering we have Hanabi-chan here, they wouldn't make it so easy for us, would they?"

"Ufufufuhhh…” Aimi suddenly giggles. "Are we going to play?"

I decide not to comment on that incredibly unfitting question and step outside, the girls right behind me. And then we wait.

One moment, it's just us four. The next, three people drop down around us noiselessly. They wear dark clothing and face masks, and they have cloaked their chakras.

"I suppose this is where we show you all that we've learned today?" I muse.

I do not get an answer. Instead, they simultaneously take one fluid step forward and draw kunais.

And here I thought they'd use something nonthreatening, like bats and sticks or something. Then again, Hanabi and Aimi share the top rankings in their Academy year, and Chie is a Nara. And then there's me, the chunin. Naturally, Iruka wouldn't go easy on us, would he? Though, he isn't part of this group.

Regardless of who they are, in this exercise, they are the enemy. And I will treat them as such.

The ninja take another step forward.

And beneath the feet of the ninja to our right, the ground gives and he falls straight into the pitfall. Aimi bursts into delighted giggles as a loud splash sounds – the trap must have run full with water. But not only that. There is the sound of wires snapping and pulling, and suddenly a lump of something shoots up from the trap, crashes against a tree, and then the enemy dangles, trussed up
…And also mildly disturbing. How the hell did she pull that off?

The two remaining ninja have paused in their movements, looking at their captured companion. Then they turn back to us and lift their kunai simultaneously. I narrow my eyes. Test or not, sharp weapons is going a bit far.

They blur from sight, and I waste no time in grabbing the three children and leaping up, up, up, into the darkness of the tree canopies where I set them down. "Stay," I murmur in a whisper so low, only they could hear. "You need me, you yell. I'll come save you, no matter what." And then I leap back to the ground.

A swish of air is the only warning, then one of the enemies is in front of me, his kunai inches from my shoulder when I block it with the sword Sasuke gave me. Shingi to Giri's blade starts to glow blue.

"Water Style: Water Chain Sword," I whisper. Chains burst from the blade. The enemy tries to jump back, but it's too late. The ghostly glowing chains snake around his arms, his body, his legs until there's no way for him to move anymore. Then my sword slices through the air, and the chains move with it and slam the man into a tree with a sickening crack. The chains dissolve and he crumples to the ground.

One down. One to go. I sheathe Shingi to Giri so I have both my hands free. And then throw myself back when a rain of fireballs comes down on me from above. Time slows as I dodge fiery bomb after bomb. Shit, I can't fight like this!

I throw myself behind a tree, form a seal.

"Kiri-gakure no Jutsu," I whisper. White vapour blows out from my mouth and fills the area with thick mist until it feels like I'm standing in the middle of a cloud. Fireballs still crash down around me, but the aim is lost and it's much easier to evade them. However, it doesn't solve the problem that I have no idea where the enemy actually is.

But I can guess that he's somewhere above me. And I can sense the three girls a safe distance away. No need to hold back.

You really picked the wrong weather to attack me, I think, as the rain continues to fall. So much water…

"Water Style: Water Needle Rain," I murmur. And then it doesn't just rain water and fireballs anymore. It rains needles instead, everywhere. They rip through the leaves, and hit trees and ground in a rapid staccato, and there is no way to escape, for anyone. And the fire extinguishes as the remaining man crashes through the canopy, riddled with watery projectiles. He bounces off the ground and doesn't move again.

I breathe out. All three down. A moment later, the three girls drop down next to me. "Using ninjutsu is a bit much for a test, isn't it?" Chie mutters and kicks the unconscious ninja who threw fireballs at me.

"You don't know the kinds of things they sometimes do to test us," I respond drily.
"What do we do with them?" Hanabi asks.

"I've got prisoner storage scrolls somewhere..." I mumble and start patting my pockets. "Wait a sec..."

A choked gasp has me looking up with senbon in my hands.

There's a fourth ninja.

Standing behind Aimi, holding a kunai to her throat.

"Surrender," he says in a deep, threatening voice.

I raise an eyebrow at him. "I'll be having words with the administration. This is going way too far for a test against Academy brats." Though I'm starting to have my doubts about the test theory. It's going too far.

"Surrender. Drop your weapons," the man intones. And then he freezes.

"The hell we will," Chie drawls. "Funny thing about Naras, attack us during the night and all we have to do is light a light and bam! Shadows everywhere." She smirks, the light of the lamp at her back making her appear as if she stands in a demonic halo. "Crazy Aimi is ours." She grits her teeth and forces the man's kunai away from Aimi's neck. Sweat stains her brows, because shadows or not, she's still a child with small reserves. But then Hanabi is there, veins bulging around her eyes as she furiously attacks the enemy.

"Eight Trigrams Sixteen Palms!" she hisses. Pained gasps escape the man as her strikes forcibly seal his tenketsu and he falls to the ground.

The fours of us stand there, looking down at him.

Well. Iruka sure is going to be impressed with us. And- wait. What's that on his hand?

"Isn't that the poisonous centipede from before?" I ask, mildly freaked out.

Aimi bursts into giggles again. "Ufufu, I kept it since it's cute," she says serenely. Then, with a smile, she asks, "Is he going to die a painful and miserable death now?"

I knew there was something wrong with her.

"Nah." Chie kicks the man into the stomach. "Not for two days. But his skin will turn green in a few hours. It'll probably look really funny."

"The poison appears to be very slow-working," Hanabi informs us. "We should be able to complete the exercise before he dies."

My jaw has dropped open as I scramble for words. With a click, I snap it shut.

"...Right!" I clap my hands. "This is a mildly disturbing situation. Apparently, the three of you are borderline psychopaths! Girls, we don't want him to die. We're going to find whoever is in charge of security and hand them off, and then we can complete the exercise, if you still feel up to it."

Aimi frowns. "But it's raining."

"It's not like he's going to die immediately," Chie reasons. "We can take our time. Warm up, eat something, wait till the rain is over."
"But we want to win!" Hanabi interjects.

"Girls! Go inside and warm up," I order. "I'll... clean up here." I cast a look around the campsite. There's the guy that was caught in Aimi's trap, hanging from the tree like a too-large piñata, the ninja that I smashed into a tree via water chains, Fireball Dude whom I neutralised by making it rain needles, and the last one that was decimated by three pre-teen girls and a centipede.

Now how the hell am I going to explain four almost-dead instructors to Iruka?

After fifteen minutes, the area looks as good as new. The enemies are all safely sealed away, the pitfall is filled up, futon, pillows and blankets are back in their respective storage scrolls, and I dried off the kids' clothing and gave them rain coats. They are too large for them, but at least they'll stay dry.

It's at that point that Iruka suddenly appears. "Good, you're all safe," he says in relief. "The exercise is cancelled due to the storm. Riko, please lead your team back to the village."

"Understood." I salute. "Sensei, we have successfully captured the assailants sent to test us." I wave a scroll at him. "They did get a bit... damaged in the process. I'll hand them off at the hospital. You know, so they won't... die."

Iruka frowns. "I didn't send any team. My group of instructors was going to test every team personally."

I blink in surprise. "Well, I did think they were going a bit overboard..."

"Explains the fireballs," Chie remarks.

"And the kunai," Hanabi adds helpfully.

Aimi just giggles creepily.

"What?" Iruka exclaims. "Are you three alright? What happened?"

"...they showed up and we defeated them?" I ask. "Sorry, I thought it was a test."

"What kind of tests have you been doing?!" Iruka yells.

I give him a deadpan look.

"Right." He calms down. "I forgot who I was talking to."

"I'll just hand these guys off to my Dad, then," I decide. "Girls, we're going back."

"Yes, you do that," Iruka says faintly. "Just out of interest, how many enemies were there?"

"Four," I answer.

"Right, right." He looks a little green in the face. "I'll inform the rest of the teams now. And then I'll be having words with the security group. Kami, this is going to be a nightmare."

Oh yes. Hanabi's father is going to go ballistic. A team of enemies, going after his daughter in a training exercise that was supposed to have been perfectly safe? Heads will roll. As they should. How the hell did the information get out that we were going to be here? Who were these guys, even? I found no identification on them, nothing to indicate their village affiliation.
But what I do know is that they weren't after Hanabi. They were after me. From the start, they targeted me. Hanabi would have just been a bonus to them, I'm sure.

Were they from Sound? But that doesn't fit. Sound folks are arrogant and talk more, and they carry their village insignia proudly. These guys… were stealthy. Probably specialise in assassination and espionage. If they hadn't severely underestimated us, it could have turned out extremely badly.

Dad sure is going to be interested in this.

It's three in the morning when I arrive at home after walking the by then bone-tired kids to their respective homes. By now, the rain is really coming down and I'm drenched in water.

I knock on my parents' room's door. "Dad?" I ask. "There's a… situation."

I hear something shuffle inside and a muffled complaint from Mom. A minute later, the door opens before me to reveal Dad, who looks like he's just rolled out of bed. Probably because he did.

"You're back early," he remarks and ruffles my hair. He has to wipe his hand off afterwards since my hair is soaked. "What happened?"

I hand him the prisoner storage scrolls wordlessly. Dad sighs deeply. "I'm going to have a sleepless night, aren't I?"

"Looks like it," I mumble. "Sorry. Uhm, one of them is, according to Chie, going to die in a few days. He came into contact with a poisonous centipede."

"…I'm really looking forward to hearing your report," Dad mutters.

"Believe me, you really don't," I deadpan.

Later, after Dad has disappeared with the prisoner scrolls, presumably to make sure Inoichi doesn't get any sleep tonight either, I slip into my brother's room after changing into pyjamas.

"Back already?" he slurs as I crawl under the covers of his bed, sleep-addled mind working way slower than normal.

"I said I'd do my best to be back soon," I whisper, leaning my head against his shoulder. "This is probably not what I meant by that."

"Something happen?" Shika asks. I sigh deeply and shift a little closer to him.

"Tell you tomorrow."

In the aftermath of the incident, I have to recount the events at least a dozen times: For Tsunade, for Inoichi, for Morino Ibiki, for Dad again, for Shikamaru, and for Hyuuga Hiashi. Twice.

What fun.

As a result, Hanabi is no longer allowed outside without an escort. Neither am I. Either Shikamaru or Mom stick with me wherever I go, despite the fact that Tenzo can follow me around from a distance and that I'm hardly going to be attacked in the middle of the street.

Another consequence of the attack?
Chie, Aimi, and Hanabi have now apparently become best friends. I don't know if I should be happy about that or terrified. Really, if they all end up on one team... I feel sorry for their sensei. And their victims. And anyone who happens to cross their path.

"Hurry up and get to jounin," Chie orders as we walk home together, Shikamaru on my other side.

I stop short. "Hell no," I declare. "Do you know the trouble I went through to even get to chunin? I'm so not repeating that. I'm going to stay a chunin forever."

"But we'll need a jounin sensei!" She protests. "Don't be troublesome!"

"Not my problem, and – will you stop laughing, Shikamaru?" I glare at my brother, who isn't even trying to hide his snickers. "And besides, any team with Hanabi on it will end up with an experienced Hyuuga as a sensei. Not, I gesture at myself. "A girl with lousy luck who also happens to be somewhat unpopular within the Hyuuga Clan. Also, I'd be surprised if you girls all ended up on one team. All-girl teams are rare."

"You leave that to us," Chie replies breezily. "We're going to eliminate any other prospective sensei."

"You will do no such thing!" I almost yell.

"Yes, yes." She yawns. "So hurry up your career. You need to be jounin in two years."

And she flounces off.

"Will you stop laughing, Shikamaru?!"

Naruto is the next one to leave the village. It doesn't come as much of a surprise, but it still feels like a punch in the gut when he tells me over ramen that Jiraiya told him to pack his things.

"But, I want to stay!" Naruto jabbers on. "I promised Sasuke-teme that I'd watch out for you, and I never go back on my word!"

"Wait, what?" I ask. "Why would you- it's not like I'm incapable of taking care of myself! Making you promise that, that's so idiotic, and overbearing, and stupid, and... entirely something Sasuke would do, actually."

I do not find it sweet. I do not.

"But Ero-Sennin said that those Akatsuki-bastards are after me, and if I stay here then everyone will be in danger, and those guys... they're strong." He looks down at his hands. Then he looks up again, his eyes burning with determination. "I'm going to get strong enough to kick their asses, dattebayo. So I want to go with Ero-Sennin. But, I don't want to leave you alone." Then his face breaks into a grin. "So you gotta come with us!"

I almost spit out my noodles. I end up coughing and hitting my fist against my chest. Teuchi-jiisan hands me a glass of water.

"Ruto," I say in a choked voice, but he grabs my hand and interrupts.

"It'll be awesome! We're gonna see tons of places and meet lots of people, and we're gonna get really strong and then when we come back everybody will be like, 'Wow, they're awesome!' and I can kick Sasuke's ass, and then they'll make me Hokage, dattebayo!" Naruto beams at me. I cough a little to
hide my laughter.

"I think you derailed from your original speech a bit, there," I remark. "When did this conversation become about you kicking Sasuke's ass – not that I don't fully support the goal, what with him making you promise something so idiotic – and becoming Hokage?"

"Ehehe," Naruto laughs sheepishly. "So whatcha say?"

My smile fades. "Naruto… I don't think it'll work like that."

Naruto's grin falls. "Of course it will, dattebayo!"

I shake my head. "It won't. Jiraiya has things to teach you. If I came with you, I'd just be looking on from the side-lines. I, I need to stay here and figure out my own training."

"But you'll be all alone!" he protests. "I don't want that. I don't want to leave you here alone!"

"But I'm not alone!" I force a smile on my face. "I've got my family, Ino, Chouji, Kiba… I've got a job at the Academy. I won't be alone! And besides, someone needs to protect the village with you on the road, right?"

Naruto pushes his ramen away and stares at our entwined fingers. "But I'll be alone, too," he whispers sadly. "You're, you're my best friend! My family! I don't-" he furiously wipes his sleeve over his eyes. "I don't want to-"

I jump from my stool and throw my arms around him. With a choked sound, Naruto buries his face in my shoulder. "It's going to be okay," I whisper, blinking against my own stinging eyes. "It's just a few years. You'll be back in no time. It's, we can do it. We're gonna have tons of stuff to tell each other when you get back, Ruto."

"Do you really have to stay here?" Naruto whispers.

"Do you really have to leave?" I murmur back.

He sniffs. "This sucks."

"We're going to kick some Akatsuki ass when you come back," I agree. "It's all their fault."

"Right. And that snake bastard's, dattebayo."

"I'm going to miss you," I whisper. "So, so much."

"Miss you more, Ri-chan."

Unlike Sasuke and Kakashi, Naruto and Jiraiya don't leave at the crack of dawn, but in the early afternoon. I watch them go from a nearby rooftop, hidden in shadows, since Naruto asked me not to come see him off – said he didn't want to cry in front of Jiraiya.

But when they're just past the gates, Naruto turns around, waves at the village, and yells at the top of his lungs, "See you soon, Ri-chan!" as if he knows I'm there, watching.

God, he's such a sappy idiot.

I step out of the shadows and wave back. "Ruto! Come back soon!" I shout. He laughs loudly, turns around, runs after Jiraiya.
And then he's gone and I'm the only one left.

Somehow, it feels like the world just ended.

The following week, I throw myself into work, training, and clinging to my brother.

Naruto is gone.

Sasuke is gone.

It feels like the weight of loneliness is going to crush me.

It's late evening and Shikamaru and I are playing shogi in his room when Mom knocks on the door and proceeds to come in without waiting for an answer.


"What was that?" Mom demands sharply.

"Nothing," my brother says hastily. Mom eyes him suspiciously but lets it go to turn to me.

"You've been ordered to the Hokage's office," she tells me.

"This late?" I ask incredulously. "Why? Did something happen?"

"Shikamaru and I will walk you there." Mom's tone brooks no argument.

I stand before Dad, Shizune, and Tsunade as the latter tells me the plan for me.

"You're kidding, right?" I ask Tsunade. She returns the look, dead serious.

"I assure you, I am not joking," she snaps back. "It's the best plan we have!"

"It's a horrible plan!" I retort. "Seriously, on a scale of one to ten, one being a bad and ten being an awesome plan, this is a 'Naruto'! Those plans only work for one person, and it isn't me! Who the heck came up with this?"

"Your father," she answers. "And it's the best plan we have!"

I groan and bury my face in my hands. "That's not very reassuring! I mean, Kiri? As in, the Bloody Mist?!"

Now how am I going to talk them out of that idiocy? This has got to be some kind of joke.

"Yes," Tsunade says, speaking slowly like I'm some kind of idiot. "That is what I just said."

"They are trying very hard to change their image," Shizune throws in helpfully. Not.

I look at Dad, seeking help. Fat chance of that since he apparently came up with this lunacy.

He sighs. "What do you know of the situation in Water Country?" he asks.

"There's a civil war going on. On orders of the Fourth Mizukage Yagura, people with bloodline limits are being hunted and slaughtered. There's also a rebellion against Yagura, among its members
Momochi Zabuza and his apprentice, Yuki Haku," I answer blandly. "Do you want to hear the stuff I'm not supposed to know about, too?"

"Yes, please." Tsunade taps her fingers on her desk, a sweet smile on her face, her left eye twitching. "Tell us your source, too, while you're at it."

"Konoha's been supporting the rebellion, supplying the rebels with weapons, medicine, and missions our village did not want to be officially connected to. We've been cashing in on a percentage of the profits, too." I pause. "I heard it from Demon-sensei – I mean, Momochi Zabuza, during the training month before the finals of the Chunin Exam. He used a lot more swearwords, though."

"That is correct," Dad says. "Not too long ago, the Mizukage vanished and did not return. The rebels seized control of Kirigakure and Terumi Mei was named the Fifth Mizukage. The civil war was declared over. The ninja of Kiri are now spreading the word that any shinobi, with or without kekkei genkai, is welcome to join their forces."

"There are stipulations, of course, concerning missing-nin and people that have betrayed their village," Shizune pipes up. "But essentially, Kirigakure is recruiting to compensate for their heavy losses."

"You can see where this is going," Tsunade states. "For your own protection, you are going to leave Konoha and join the forces of Kirigakure under the guise of a homeless ninja hoping for a better life. They've already agreed to the plan."

"How the hell did you manage to talk them into that?" I mutter. "Never mind, I don't want to know."

"You'll blend in with their forces well enough, with your water nature, and you'll be able to develop your water jutsu better than you could in Fire Country," Dad tells me. "And you'll be hidden from Orochimaru over there. He'd never think to look for you in another village. We'll have him chasing false trails, too. You should be reasonably safe in Kiri."

"Reasonably," I echo him. "Except for the fact that just because they declared the civil war over, doesn't mean it really is. I doubt Yagura's supporters and the bloodline haters just surrendered. They're probably still fighting, trying to take Kirigakure back." I glare at them. "Your best plan is to send me into a warzone?!"

They just stare back at me, saying nothing. And at last the penny drops.

"That's it, isn't it?" I whisper, aghast. "That's why you had me train under Zabuza. That's what he trained me for! You've been planning to send me there from the moment the Cursed Seal was put on me!"

This... this...

"I was only taking precautions, just in case. It was easy to see that Orochimaru would come after you," Dad finally says. "And it was equally obvious that he had at least one informant in the village. The invasion showed us that even ANBU can easily be infiltrated." He looks at me seriously.

This can't be real. This isn't happening.

"And even knowing that and taking precautions, you were still abducted," Tsunade continues. "The Sound Four shouldn't have been able to infiltrate the village so easily, even with most of our forces fighting at the borders. They had inside help. Which means," she clenches her fists. "That Konoha isn't safe for you."
"Not to mention the recent… incident," Shizune adds, hugging Tonton to herself.

"No," I whisper. "No! I – I can't leave here! This is my home!"

"And then what?!” Tsunade asks sharply, hitting her desk with her fist. "Keep you locked up here? Put you under constant surveillance? Tell me, how much time do we have until you go insane under those conditions?!

"Tell me how much time it'll take until I go insane separated from everyone I love!" I counter.

Tsunade only snorts. "You aren't that weak."

"Riko-chan," Dad says gently. "Do you trust me?"

"That's a stupid question," I whisper. "The one I don't trust is me. Dad, I don't think I can do it."

"I believe in you, Riko-chan."

I deflate at hearing his words. "I'm… I don't…"

I can't leave. If I leave, I won't even have Shikamaru with me. I'll be all alone. No family, no friends, no Konoha. No nothing.

"You can't stay. Orochimaru will come after you again. Whoever was behind the recent incident will, too. People will die to protect you," Tsunade informs me bluntly. "Can you live with that?"


"Answer the question," Tsunade orders.

Can I live with another Fumio dying for me?

"No," I answer. "I can't. Not ever." I look up at her, like my entire world isn't falling to pieces around me. "When am I leaving?"

"We aren't going to send you unprepared," Tsunade informs me. "You'll receive training in one of our facilities. As you are now, you probably wouldn't survive. Never mind that, you wouldn't even pass for a Kiri ninja."


Without waiting for a reply, I stumble out of the office, all grace gone from my movements. I feel lightheaded.

They are sending me away. Dad is sending me away. I'm being kicked out. I'm not wanted anymore. I'm-

I'm all alone.

"Ri?" Shikamaru asks when I stumble out into the corridor. "What happened?" He catches me in his arms. I grab onto his vest and lean into him.

Well, maybe not all alone.

"I agreed to do something troublesome," I whisper. "Shika, you're going to be so mad at me."
Chapter End Notes

So that's it. The last chapter. Only the epilogue to go now.

I just... Wow. It's been amazing, writing this. I never expected Growing Strong to become so popular. Thank you every one. You're great.

Also: There is no relation between Luna and Aimi.
Shikamaru is the one to walk me to the village gate to see me off. Everyone else I've already said goodbye to.

My feet are dragging, and not just because the sun hasn't even risen yet.

*I don't want to go.*

Konoha is my *home*. Leaving like this feels awful. Like I'm being kicked out. Like I'm fleeing from what I love.

But I'm not fleeing, aren't I? Vanishing like this protects them. I'm just going to be someone else for a little while. When I return, everyone will still be here. Naruto and Sasuke might already back by then.

We reach the gate. The guarding booth is suspiciously empty – just so that no one will see me leave. Which means we need to make this short.

"So," Shikamaru says. "Here we are."

I nod mutely, a lump in my throat preventing me from speaking. Of all the goodbyes, this one is the hardest.

He studies my form. Nondescript, worn black clothing. Slouched stance. Haggard body. No earrings, no hitae-ate, hair dyed a few shades darker and in an uneven cut that makes it look completely messy. Scars and Cursed Seal hidden under a genjutsu tied to a seal. By the time I arrive in Water Country, I'll be dirty and weary from traveling. Just another homeless genin with hopes of joining Kiri.

*I don't want to go.*

"Think you'll be okay?" Shika asks.

*No.*

"Yes," I say.

And I *will* be alright. Physically at least. The two-month hell that was actually partly an ANBU training course gave me an edge few people in Water Country have. It was mostly centered around taijutsu, escape tactics and undercover work. Customs and culture lessons were drilled into my head, sensing and awareness were trained, survival skills. I was put under sleep deprivation, had to build up some poison tolerance, had to memorise countless facts and strategies. Among other things.

And torture training. Or, as they called it, 'building up pain tolerance'. Like I can't guess what it was for.

I hope I'll never need it.

"So," I say and force a smile. "Guess I should go."

He suddenly grips my shoulders, hard. His eyes drill into mine, "I don't care how long you stay away. I don't care in what state you return. Just return. Please."
I swallow down a sob. "Promise," I say and hold out my pinky finger. He hooks his in. With a muffled sob, I throw myself into his arms. "I'm gonna miss you, Shika," I whisper.

"I'll miss you too, you troublesome girl," he answers. Then he pushes me away. "Get going, Ri."

I nod and wipe my eyes. Damn it, I need to stop crying. Kiri ninja don't cry.

"Well then," I say. A goodbye is on the tip of my tongue, but I hold it back. This is not goodbye. "I'll be back."

"See you soon," he answers. We stare at each other for a moment. Then we both turn around sharply and march away. Him, back into the village. Me, through the gates and away from it.

It's the end of an era and the beginning of a new one.
Hey folks!

So, uh... chapter title should already tip you off that this isn't an actual chapter, but if you haven't seen it... here we go.

I'm sure everyone's noticed that my update speed in the recent months... years... has kinda slowed. Drastically. The reason is that it's gotten very hard for me to write this story.

**JUST TO BE CLEAR, I AM NOT ABANDONING GROWING STRONG.**

No way. It's my baby. I love it so much. The problem is, when I started writing, I was a very inexperienced writer. As in, it's the first writing project outside of school assignments that I ever did. As a consequence, the Growing Strong series is full of things that when rereading it make me cringe. A Lot.

So many tropes I no longer stand behind, so many worldbuilding issues, subplots that never went anywhere... don't get me wrong, there's a lot of good there too. I'm not ashamed of it.

But it deserves better. So much better than I could give it at the time.

Therefore, for the past... six months? I've been rewriting. And I will continue to rewrite. The entire thing is getting an overhaul.

And (drumroll) the first chapter of the Growing Strong rewrite has been posted today! Just minutes ago! You'll find it under the same title as before on my profile.

I *am* sorry that I won't continue the original versions. I know a lot of you were looking forward to the next chapter. Especially considering the place I stopped...

Bear with me a little longer?

I'll leave the old versions up, because I know they mean a lot to so many of you.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](mailto:drop by the archive and comment) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!