Flames of War

by PikaPixie

Summary

Fire, death, and destruction. The world was burning down around her, crumbling to ashes beneath her feet. And she was alive. This was war. This was her. This was exactly what she had signed up for... but maybe she should have read the fine print. Sequel to SOT

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
Survival

...~ It was almost more fun than she had expected it to be- the clothes, the hair, the dressing-up. Even if it was the second time around. ~

...

The air, Mai thought, should have been silent, charged, static. The atmosphere of a carefully planned ANBU assault, hinging on success or death, waiting for the command, the right moment. Fear bubbling underneath an attempt at stoicism, adrenaline pulsing just below the mask, but always with the detached knowledge that this was do or die so you couldn't think about screwing up, only, only, your orders.

But that wasn't what this was.

The air was charged, all right, but in the most opposite way: people were excited. It was loud, it was angry, there was noise everywhere; shouting and screaming and shoving like a party with all of the rawest emotions shinobi could scrounge through their trained-in emotional blocks.

It was...

Exciting.

She grinned, the feral grin she was so known for, and she could feel the way her face stretched, curling with adrenaline-sweat already.

"You okay?" Eishi said beside her. "You look a little... uh..."

Eishi looked tense and serious, face drawn into a lithe, flat stone. It could have passed for a porcelain mask, as pale as he was, despite his tan. He was gripping the handle of the war fan on his back. It seemed the energy in the air was making him nervous where it made her apprehensive, and she realized, again, how different she was from her friends. Innocent Eishi, who hadn't seen death until Pein's Assault...

"Yeah." She shook out her fists, dropped them on her hips. "We're heading out soon, guess I'm just getting a little anxious to start."

"Ten minutes," he muttered, then gave a wreak, wry little grin to match hers. His forehead protector flashed in the sun against his pink hair. "Ten minutes until the biggest war the shinobi world has ever seen. How about that, huh?"

"How about that," she agreed.

"Mai-chan, Eishi-kun!" someone called over the pure noise, the ruckus of excited ninja and terrified newbies and jostling crowds, and Mai glanced around until she caught the bob of tall Shiragiku's pale blond shoving through. He was probably being polite, too, saying excuse me and thank you as he did so. As he got closer, she could see the big brown pack on his shoulders, a symbol of the medical division, but she could also make out one of the pouches on the back of his belt that held the pointy knuckle duster poisoned blades.

"Shiragiku!" She waved three fingers in a halfish-way and Eishi blinked.
"Shiragiku's here?" he asked about two seconds before their teammate pushed past two or three
more shinobi. "Oh!

"Sakura-san said I could come over."

"Not to stay, I'm guessing," Mai sighed. "We could really use you, you know."

"What can I say, Mai-chan," he said in that soft, unassuming way that she could barely hear. "I'm
not the fighting type."

"Bull," she said at the same time Eishi scoffed. "You're just not violent."

"There's not much of a difference, is there, Mai?"

He'd dropped the suffix, but that happened sometimes. At his statement, Mai's smile dropped and
she thought of Fumiko, looking almost intimidating in her shinobi attire, seals ready and blood full
of steel.

"Guess not." Then she grinned again, and punched his shoulder. Shiragiku winced but smiled.
"Hey, we're Otokaze- Team Nine. If we cross up, we've gotta fight at least one fight together,
yeah? Make a name for ourselves."

"Yeah, let's get in some bingo books," Eishi chimed, grinning now as well despite the adrenaline-
blush in his face. "I'm sure all these shinobi are watching each other, might as well impress them
now."

"Yeah, Shira," Mai said, and tugged on his low ponytail, knowing there would be no retaliation-
hers was strung along with razor wire. "Shiragiku, the blond rattlesnake of the Sand."

Shiragiku laughed, a light little bell-sound. "Perhaps, Mai-chan. I think we should focus on
surviving, though. Plenty of the dead are honored with battle-titles, and I would rather you both
stay alive."

"I would rather we both stay alive, too," Mai quipped off, then almost flinched at the loud sound of
the massive gong at the base of the mountain she couldn't see, signaling the beginning of the
separation. Part of team nine- team Otokaze- Mai and Eishi- would be headed toward the Land of
Lightning's peninsula, and the lone member, Shiragiku, would join the main medical camp
somewhere else.

"Oi," Eishi said, reaching out and gripping Shiragiku's arm in some weird version of a handshake,
and Shiragiku's fingers gripped back. "Good luck, man. And be careful. Medics are targets."

Shiragiku nodded. "Mai-chan," he said, and reached out with his free hand to hold her elbow. His
skin was lukewarm and dry. In turn she reached for Eishi, and the three huddled. "Take care of
yourself. And Eishi-kun."

"Hey!" Eishi protested, but before he could argue further, Mai had nodded and grinned sharp again
and the gong had rung twice; and Shiragiku had to leave. He did so with all the grace of the hebi
she'd accused him of being, and he vanished into the crowd.

"Mai-chan, take care of Eishi-kun!," Eishi mimicked in a high pitch, grumbling. "Jerk."

Mai laughed, and put her elbow on his shoulder, as the shinobi around her started to move into
ranks, swarming like bees. "Don't worry, Eishi-kun," she teased. "I've got your back."
Instead of scowling, his face hardened, indiscernible. "And I've got yours," he said, solemnly. "And when this is over, let's go to that stall you like, the one with all the fruit. My treat."

Mai studied his face, because he hated that place. His eyes were unreadable, a dark azure that almost looked grey if caught in the right light; and his lips were relaxed into a thin line. Eishi, she realized, was scared. For himself, for her, for Shiragiku, for everyone. But he was ready, and he was willing. Eishi, Mai knew, was brave.

"Let's," Mai agreed, but then there was no more time for talking, and they were going to get trampled if they didn't get a move on. "You ready?"

"As I'll ever be."

"Good enough for me," she said with a half-smirk, and she dropped her arm. "Let's run."

... And even the festival itself- with the bright lights and the music and the games- especially the festival- was different, new, special. ~

Shiragiku hadn't been wrong to worry after their stupid, blockheaded, salmon-touched teammate, who had already almost died twice in the span of maybe thirty six hours or less.

The first time had been understandable. A minor pause for break after running so long, a quick step-off into the woods for food that had ended in nearly being killed by, well, some weird white thing that looked like a flytrap. Their division leader had immediately sent word to Intel about the breach, but thank Kami Mai had wandered into the woods afterwards to see what had taken him so long.

But the second time...

"Not even Fumiko has ever fallen during shunshin, you dolt," Mai groaned.

"I'm sorry!" he grouched, rubbing salve onto his broken wrist- the war hadn't even truly started yet and the idiot had a broken wrist- and his words were muffled by the long trail of white bandage fluttering between his teeth. "I just tripped, that's all! It's fine!"

They were running. They were running again with everyone else because Eishi had been an idiot and Mai was damn well not falling behind because of that, so he was bandaging his wrist along the way and hoping to find a medical ninja after they reached their destination at the peninsula cliffs.

... It belonged to them, from the cotton candy to their first kiss. ~

Running took a lot more concentration for her than it ever had for anyone else.

Right-left-right-left became a mantra, a heartbeat. Bum-bum-bum, especially at shunshin speed. If she messed up or fell out of step, stumbled or tripped while she tried to eat a chakra pill, she could literally kill herself. It would be the equivalent of falling out of a full-speed train, only with less distance to the ground and a greater likelihood of snapping her own neck if she fell on her face.
The others talked while they ran, but Fumiko could only sometimes listen to their voices. Snippets of Neji and Hinata, a few terse words from Karui, the loud voice of their commander. She could barely think her own thoughts at this pace, faster than she'd ever moved before and longer. It only took them days to reach their destination- halfway across a country in days!

There was no time for rest, half a day at most. Not even time to make a campfire, only eat two chakra pills and hope it didn't make her sick. It hadn't been long before they got their first orders: Intercept the mobilization of white zetsu moving underground.

Fumiko knew what a zetsu was. She knew all of the most recent intelligence, had scoured it, had reread every printed bingo book Sunagakure had for the whispers of the Reanimation Jutsu revived and researched every possibility for the white chakra-stealing creatures known as Zetsu, not that there was much of that. They might be human.

She didn't want to think about that, crouched in the bushes. She didn't want to think that she was about to try and murder a bunch of odd-looking human beings who could be being controlled just like the Reanimation ninjutsu victims.

"You alright?"

Her hands were wet, and at the voice Fumiko looked down from the main clearing where Kitsuchi and Kurotsuchi were preparing to unearth the entirety of a white zetsu army, and realized she was squishing the leaves between her fingers and getting green all over her hands. Chlorophyll, she remembered dimly from her civilian grade school science class.

Another test she had aced on photosynthesis. "Yeah," she said back, shaky. "Just... nervous."

Kumiko pursed her lips but said nothing else, turning her green eyes back to the clearing. To Fumiko’s right was a man she didn't know who had the looks of an Oto shinobi, judging by his clothes. He said nothing, hadn't since they'd all been put in this specific place together to lie in wait.

Kind of an odd ambush, Fumiko knew. Why would they be hiding? It wasn't like, logically, the element of surprise would do anything against an army of white zetsu. She’d never realized there were so many- she thought maybe tens or twenties until word had come back that a Byakugan user- not Neji or Hinata, someone she'd never met- had seen thousands upon thousands moving under the earth.

Enough to match their Allied Forces, it seemed. Again she turned her eyes to the clearing, which had taken a few hours to clean so thoroughly. Fumiko had helped, knowing earth ninjutsu, while Neji scouted ahead with his Byakugan to predict the arrival of the swarm. They didn't have any chakra, that much was obvious, or she would have noticed them before.

There was chakra everywhere, of all different kinds of colors, vibrancies and states of anxiety. Hinata, Neji, she knew. The rest she didn't know, save for a few, Karui whom she’d just met, the two Rock ninja in front of her by a hundred yards on the other side of the clearing. It was enough to overwhelm her if she tried to pick them apart, like listening to too many radios playing different songs all at once.

Amazing, she thought, staring at the father-daughter duo, that there were so many already. So many zetsu. So many enemies. Where had they been all this time?

There wasn't time any more to ponder it, though. The war, her first real war- not her first battle, really, because she’d fought Akatsuki before and survived because she was a good liar- was about to start, and she was part of the first-lines, an insignificant part of the general melee. She reached
back over her shoulder, and her staff made an odd sound as it withdrew, clack-clack-clack of wood on armored metal.

Deep breath in, long breath out. She could feel sweat beading on her face and ignored it, just like she ignored her already rampant exhaustion buried underneath the twitchy buzz of soldier pill overdose.

"Earth Style Erupt!"

The voices were unexpected in the quiet, but the rumble underneath her knees wasn't. Earth Style Erupt- Doton: Opening Earth Rising Excavation- a B-rank jutsu in which the earth rose, quickly enough to catch inside with jags and sharp edges and those who weren't destroyed were pulled up by the force of constantly undulating pulses of earth. A volcano, with victims as the lava.

The sky darkened with white as they spilled and flew, like discolored ants, from the bowels of the earth.

... ~ They immediately found their way to the dancing-floor, in the same place as before, which made it even better; Fumiko gravitated there even as she enjoyed the games and shows and sights. ~

... Gaara couldn't, honestly, say he was surprised when Mu summoned his father back from the dead.

Rasa had been powerful. Arguably the most powerful Kazekage that had ever lived. It made sense that Kabuto, Orochimaru's old lackey, would summon him if he could, and no doubt his father's soul was conflicted enough to control.

But that didn't make it any easier. If his Third Eye could have cried, he might just have let it. His father, whom he'd never thought he would ever see again, not in this life or, hopefully, the next. His father who had betrayed him, hurt him, hated him, who had tried to kill him and destroyed him from the inside out until all he could think about the man was hate, hate, hate.

He watched, frozen, as his father crossed his arms, watching the other former Kage quarrel and bicker, his expression one of calm stoicism as though he wasn't surprised, either, at being brought back to life. Typical of his father Rasa, the Fourth Kazekage- just like Gaara remembered him being.

Arrogant, level-headed, cold. The same man who had calmly threatened the life of his best friend to coerce him into acting like a normal, well-developed child and controlled jinchuuriki at a dinner with the Wind Daimyo. The man in love with ideology, the survival of the village as a whole.

Gaara shivered, a twitch uncaught by those who followed him, and missed, missed, missed the radiating warmth and heat from Fumiko's skin. No doubt if she was here with him, she would be just inches foot-to-foot from him. "Kami," she would say. "Rasa. Gaara..."

But he was alone to face this man.

And he could not hesitate. Not if he wanted to save her life and Mai's life and his siblings' lives and the lives of everyone he cared about and everyone he didn't know. Not if he wanted to help save the world.

"There are four," he murmured to his surrounding company, far below him on the rocks. "And
among them is my father."

...~ They found a table, dropped their prizes and things, and a slow song was already on; Fumiko had jumped on the opportunity and less-than-dragged Gaara out on the mat. ~

...The beach.

It wasn't the first time she'd seen it, but the second. Technically, the third, but the true second time, she'd been unconscious and trapped inside an eternal nightmare. The horrible memory- the pain, the rawness, the agony that came with her smeared recollection- conflicted with the memory of the first, of seeing her sister happy, pleased, dancing in the white froth as they waited for their boat.

So Mai, hiding behind her ANBU training, had no real attachment or detachment to the beach. It evened out, she reasoned to herself. Became nothing but a battlefield to be.

They had waited for hours. Hours and days, waiting for anything from headquarters. Mai knew her muscles were coiled tighter than the spooled razor wire she fought with- another harsh, revealing clue to her bastard lineage- but she couldn't help the automatic laziness to her limbs, the careful constructed image of who she used to be and was without her paranoia.

She wanted to fight, needed to. Needed to put a face on her punching bag.

She needed to be useful. Useless was unacceptable. She knew she was strong. And she wanted to use it. Her mind, her instincts, were hardwired for battle, for intuition, for death and killing and hurting. Not that she was cruel. One would think she was as a Katon user- but she didn't let anyone burn. At least, not for long. But she remembered darkness, heartbeat spiking with the gasp of her breath, drowned by the sparking crashes of metal-on-metal-on-skin.

Fighting for every inch, that was how she felt alive.

And the time wasn't wasted. After asking everyone they had found a ninja with Mystical Palm jutsu to fix her stupid best friend. There was already sand in her hair. At least there was sand- almost a home field advantage. ANBU- in training or not and especially then- were not above skidding, sliding, kneeling and swiping the ankles in a fakeout to kick up sand and blind the enemy. Eishi could do the same, make whirlwinds of yellow.

And Mai had helped fortify the shores with massive iron spikes, slammed them into the ground while Doton users trailed behind her, locking them in place with stones underneath the sand.

The peninsula was odd-looking, with a white, pristine beach bordering the intense crags of Lightning's rocks. Even stranger now that the spikes were laid about.

"I wonder when they're coming," Eishi whispered.

"I wonder who they send," Mai returned, and he frowned.

"Those white things," he said. "Reanimated shinobi?"

They were both leaned back against the rocks, facing each other. Eishi faced the beach, and Mai, the mountain of craggy stone. Routine for team Otokaze and their go-to three point star, never caught off guard- only with two points this time. Everyone, she noticed with distaste, was starting
to relax.

Always on your guard. Rule Eighteen of shinobi, two of Shadow Corps. But it couldn't be helped, not when so much time had passed. It was either relax, or be overrun with anxiety and paranoia.

"How many," she mused. "I hope a lot."

"I've never asked this before," Eishi said suddenly. "What do you like to do, Mai?"

"Do even do anything other than train?" Kankuro's face flashed in her mind, streaked with purple.

"And what else? You train, you hang out in the Tower?"

"I like to watch the sun," she said softly, uncharacteristically so- even she knew that. She drew up her knees. "Rise and set."

"Wow." Eishi sighed, like a collapsed shrug with his shoulders going down. "I kinda don't think I was expecting you to say something like that."

"Like what?" she snapped, and there went all the softness. "I can't be normal?"

"I kind of always thought," he said with a dry smirk, "that you weren't human. At least not entirely. I guess I was just making sure."

"Twenty questions," she said with a barking laugh. "What's your favorite color?"

"Red," he said.

"What? Seriously?" She laughed again, delighted. "Me too!"

"My turn," he said. "What-"

Mai's nerves zapped, spine zinging straight. Her muscles flexed, hands leaping to the rock behind her, but she didn't stand, crouching. She could feel the fishnet's pattern against her skin, her arms, the irregular bumps of her stomach and it's many scars. The temporary mirth in Eishi's eyes sputtered and died like she'd stepped on an ember.

"What is it?"

Odd, odd, odd things she could sense, odder and as rushed as the spikes in the sand. But it was chakra, and it was behind her, in the ocean.

"They're here," she said.

...

~ Their song didn't come on, but under the pretty lights of starlight and moonlight and lamplight and Gaara looking at her like she was starlight and moonlight and lamplight, every song felt like their song. ~

...

Despite being thrown and scattered and smashed onto open ground, it hadn't taken the zetsu long to recover and regroup, but by then the Allies were already among them, ripping and tearing and fighting.
They died just like people did, but they had no chakra so they couldn't, she wouldn't let them be human. So she spun and ducked and rammed her spear through them, bashed their skulls in with her weight, tripped them over with her prosthetic into other ninjas' attacks.

Medics, she knew, and learned, were dangerous, dangerous fighters.

She stumbled away from one, falling hard, but rolled on her shoulders as it swung some weapon it'd stolen from another dead ninja and pushed with her hands, ungracefully setting back on her feet and the thing was unbalanced, overshot, and she stood quickly and swung her unscrewed staff so the chain wrapped around it's throat and pulled it, not even looking startled when she flat-palmed it's forehead.

It's neck snapped, and the zetsu fell.

No time to dwell and she spun, screaming, pushing with one arm the kunai of her staff into a stomach. It hit her anyway- was there pain for these things?- and she reeled.

"Eight Trigrams- Air Palm!"

The zetsu along with several advancing others spiraled away, slamming into more of their kind. Fumiko winced, palming her already swelling cheek, but there wasn't even time to thank Hinata for her help before she was rotating, footdowngogogo- and slapped an exploding tag on the neck of another and- Tiger- Hare- Boar- Dog- earth slammed half a foot barely out of the ground underneath just one if it's feet.

Fumiko braced, ducked halfway, as it landed among it's own and exploded with the range of a flashbomb's light. That had hurt her reserves, she noticed with a numb observation. But she'd killed at least ten.

In the back of her mind, she just kept thinking, It's starting- it's starting- it's starting- gogogo- it's starting- and that pushed her forward like a pill. This was why Mai liked the fight, she realized now. There was no time for doubt, no time for fear, no time for anything but unconscious thought.

It made her heady, heartbeat like thump-thump-thump and blood like pulse-pulse-pulse and mind like move move move until she was just a hot, injured, nervy weapon.

She hated it, but there was, of course, no time to think.

She stabbed another and it grabbed her arm. Fumiko yelped, reeled, was trapped, and almost felt another zetsu slip beside her. She didn't even flinch, surprisingly enough, just reached desperately into her thigh pouch, ripped out her kunai with enough force to tear the fabric, and with a shaking, twitchy-vibrating grip she slammed it back into the zetsu's eye.

Enter through eye, into skull's hole, into brain. Death.

They had bones, they had parts. No intestines, she'd learned, no blood, but brains, hearts, lungs, larynxes.

It fell. And as it did she pulled out the kunai and it made an odd noise like sticky dango sauce that made her want to throw up, but instead, she flipped it in her fingers and impaled it in the chest of another coming at her left. Pulse-pulse-pulse and the leering zetsu's hands were freezing cold without chakra and she grabbed it with her now free hand and the hand of the arm it was trying to break and braced, pulled, slid it over her shoulder.

She'd gotten stronger since she had done that last, and it skidded a few inches to her other side,
dying from her stab but she grabbed the staff anyway, yanked it out, and dropped on the creature with all the force of a girl with a seal in her hand. It twitched, jerked, straightened with the lightning's electricity, and was still.

Fumiko dropped the useless seal and ducked away as the body sparked and a zetsu came her way, one two three of them. But her balance failed her, prosthetic slipping on the loose soil, and she crashed face first into the ground.

Gasping, spitting, she tried to get up, and then pain blew up in her scalp as something yanked on her ponytail, throwing her on her back instead of her stomach. She slid, felt rocks pass by under her flak and then it was on her, hands around her throat, and she panicked because not again please-

Something white hit the zetsu and it was ripped violently away from her with a sound like grinding metal and earthquakes.

"Here," someone, Kiba, said, "Get up, come on!"

Dazed, she reached out her hand for his, and he pulled on her with enough force for her shoulder to burn, but she flew up and stumbled behind him and was thrown back into the fight the second, or before, that she caught her balance. There were so many, too many, but if she stopped she would die and violently because not a lot of them had weapons in their hands.

... ~ In the back of her mind, she knew it would end. But that was okay too- going back home. That only brought peace and love and safety under their sky-blue bedsheets, dreams. Maybe Gaara would rest too. ~

...

"Looks like enough," Mai commented, lined up on the shoreline's mountain. "To keep us busy for a while."

"Looks like enough," Eishi muttered, looking a little pale, "to wipe us out."

Mai swept it with a critical eye. She wished Fumiko was here, to gauge the strength of reanimated shinobi she didn't recognize at all. She would have been able to quip them all off, one-two-three, with a list of strengths and weaknesses to boot. There was no way to tell how well they would do- Mai knew none of these shinobi and none of those shinobi, only the numbers.

"Right," she hummed. "Wish I'd taken the time to learn Raiton; they're all soaking wet. My fire won't do much while they're all wet like that."

"Think they die?"

"Of course they die," she scoffed. "At least, the white ones do."

"Think they... think?"

"Eishi," she said sharply. "This is war. This is a real fight. This is like Konoha. People are gonna die, and a lot of them. If you don't want it to be you and everyone back home, focus. Mourn later, feel afterwards. You got it?"

Eishi flinched. "..."
"Did you hear me," Mai demanded, "Chuunin?"

"I hear you," he said.

"We'll win this."

"How do you know that?"

"If we went into this fight thinking we weren't gonna make it," she answered, drawing one sword out of it's sheath halfway and staring at her own reflection with hard eyes, "Then we wouldn't go into this fight, would we?" She scoffed. "Everyone thinks they're gonna be the only survivor."

They were getting closer. A few even stepping out of the frothy waves.

"Mai-"

"By the pricking of my thumbs," she murmured, and she felt her mouth stretch again into that anticipating grin. "Something wicked this way comes."

"Move in!" Darui below them snapped, and she tensed before Eishi could even ask what she'd meant by that, dropping her sword back down into it's sheath. "Lightning style-" Yes. "Black Panther!"

It shot like a sentient bolt of real lightning, darkened as though in the middle of the night, and snarled like a wild animal. The jutsu dove into the ocean, and the air filled with the sound of screaming as they fried alive, and one by one they fell fell fell, save for one or two that burst in the neck and shoulders like popcorn.

"Hell yeah!" Mai screamed and it ripped like fire out of her throat. "Take that!"

"Never mind," Eishi managed, and readied his fan, click, click, two moons. "They can definitely die."

Black Panther struck again, but lost it's advantage as the zetsu and hundreds of shinobi and creatures leapt, water raining down like the beginning of a Suna downpour. "Above us!" someone screamed needlessly and suddenly, there were weapons everywhere, and upside-down hailstorm of kunai and senbon and expendable swords.

Well, she thought. Maybe better dry them off a little.

Tiger, her fingers twisted, Boar, Horse.

Breathe breathe breathe!

Eishi realized what was going on and braced, leaning back against the rock as she brought her hands up.

"Katon: Fire Piercing Annihilation!"

...

~ Even so... she wouldn't have minded if this dance- or this one, or this one- just happened to last forever. ~
Neji burned like a lantern flame, blue and wide and flickering.

Fumiko could see him out of the corner of her eye as she fought, scraping for every inch and every breath. Everything hurt—the kunai wound in her forearm she’d mistakenly blocked with, the bruises on her face and everywhere else, the burn from her own exploding tag that left embers in her flak vest. At least she was alive.

They were coming out of the ground like they were made of it, sometimes right under her foot, and it was impossible to tell sometimes whether she was stepping on bodies or emerging zetsu and it almost made her cry to admit she’d stabbed both and there was eye fluid on her wrist and fingers and blood on her skin.

The ground bubbled to her right, three shinobi in the midst of it screamed and were taken out immediately. Fumiko flinched, pivoted, and brought down her arm, slamming the fingers of her opposite hand against the seal on her glove. Water exploded freely and it almost pushed her down but she stayed up, and with a Dragon she had it up and suspended to their knees and rushing like a whirlpool.

Her control failed and it fell but they were soaked and it still flowed at their ankles, and she reached into her satchel with a hurried gasp and brought out a rolled scroll, let go with two fingers so it unfurled in front of her, bit her thumb and swiped it.

The air crackled with lightning.

"I'm sorry!" she screamed to the dead ninja in the way and the water fizzled.

Fourteen zetsu dropped. The other two sunk back into the ground. Again, she dropped the useless seal.

For a second she wasn't surrounded, and it was long enough to hear another cry, close. Gripping the kunai wound, she ducked and stumbled-slash-ran to the injured woman with two zetsu falling on her like they were going to eat her.

Fumiko dropped her bloody palm to her glove and ran through the smoke that followed, fingers grabbing securely around a new staff. Her old one had been swallowed underground by another's Doton attack, taking down her zetsu opponent with it. Fumiko set her jaw and swung without a sound. The first zetsu fell like a smashed pumpkin without issue, and the other turned on her and leapt.

Rolling, rolling, rolling, the breath beating out of her with every collision, she tumbled with the zetsu, losing her staff in the process. They stopped and it was on top and weapon kunai crap—!

Fumiko jerked her head sideways, and the blade skimmed the side of her face and ear. It burned along the trail like fire.

"Get off!" she yelled at it, and it grinned in a leery way, teeth bigger than they should be and gappy. One of her hands shoved against it's jaw because she knew already it would literally eat her chakra away and the other dug through her satchel for another seal or something and instead as it's stomach opened into tendrils; she grabbed a scalpel and she yanked it out and shoved it and—

Hesitated before sticking it through it's white neck. That was wrong, that was cruel, that was—

It grabbed her wrist against it's face and slammed it into the rock, against a stone and she screamed
and plunged the scalpel through it's throat. The zetsu wheezed, and she swung up her prosthetic leg to off-balance it and they rolled, and she was on top, and she punched it and punched it and punched it until it stopped moving.

Shakily, she stood, pulling the scalpel out as she did. Her knuckles pulsed, and from the sting, she knew the skin there had split and bruised. The groaning caught her attention again and she turned away from the beaten grotesque thing on the ground to the beaten, breathing person writhing on the dirt, laid out from shoulder to hip, eyes pinballing.

Fumiko dropped to her knees, knowing she might not get up again. "I got you," she shouted, and pulled her satchel on her lap and tore it open. "I'm sorry, I'm really sorry this is going to hurt."

She cut away the flak, threaded a needle, stuck four inflammation and clotting seals against the woman's skin, and set to work. The woman screamed and spat and Fumiko had no other choice but to slap a knockout tag on her forehead and she quieted, lolling.

Another three shinobi had found her and, from the sound of it, were warding off the zetsu, so with barely shaking fingers Fumiko finished the job. She couldn't use ninjutsu without wasting chakra but she could help this person survive to get to the medical unit. She hadn't wanted to knock her out, now it would be maybe an hour before she even woke up and they couldn't spare a shinobi to bring her away.

But she had been in pain. Just an average woman, with brown hair and tortured blue eyes.

Fumiko's eyes widened, and she gasped.

Fingers closed around the woman's neck, with just a wrist out of the earth, white and cold. And then it jerked, and the upper half of the woman's body shoved through the earth.

"No!" she screamed, but she was already dead.

The first patient Fumiko had ever lost.

...

~ Gaara smiled at her lightly, face flushed both from the attention of the crowd and from all the dancing. "Having fun?" ~

...

Mai jumped off that cliff like she had wings, smashing it to pieces with her chakra, and Eishi followed.

And they fought like demons from hell in those spikes, twisting and twirling and she was pretty sure she jumped off his fan once, focusing entirely on the white zetsu.

No different than me, she thought. No different from anyone else I've killed.

Mai spun and dropped, kicked the footing from an enemy. There was a waver from behind and she left the fallen opponent to Eishi, whirling and bringing up both crossed blades to meet another.

The zetsu sneered at her.

"Who'd you steal that from?" she grunted, angry, pushing.

"Someone," it rasped, and she nearly lost her grip on her blades in shock.
"Shit!" Mai cursed. "You talk? Are you human or not?"

It's creepy yellow eyes glimmered with vicious intent, like it wanted to rip her throat out, which it probably did. "Not exactly," it hissed, like it wanted to be intimidating. Mai huffed, blowing a bit of hair out of her face, then grinned.

"Good," she said. "I don't even have to feel bad about this, then."

Mai slanted the angle of her top sword, and it slid across the zetsu's blade to run straight through it's chest.

It gurgled, and slid away.

Whirlwind fighting. Hitting, kicking, punching, hissing and spitting, rolling like cats across the ground, but mostly stabbing and slicing and decapitating. Mai lit the ground under their feet and they burned like torches, screaming until Eishi or someone else or even herself killed them for good, blew fire in their faces. The came in droves, in hundreds, and she attacked them like an animal.

A zetsu grabbed her arm in the melee, and she grabbed it right back around the wrist and yanked hard, grunting, and the creature came off it's feet and swung like a baseball bat into two others and then the ground, and there was the twiggish sound of snapping in it's arm and back and the thing fell limp.

Eishi appeared at her back, handheld fans out. "Tired, yet?"

"Not on your life," she breathed, screamed, maybe. "I'm ducking!"

Formation three, one Shiragiku had come up with to name what the trio did often. Mai dropped, lithe, and the zetsu overstepped, expecting a face to punch and it found nothing but Eishi's handheld fan, blinding it, and the other, across it's stomach.

Mai rolled back, stood on Eishi's new other side, and stabbed another, ripped the blade out through it's side into another soft white body, but stopped when she hit a rib. It screamed at her and she snarled, throwing herself at it, and they fell in the ocean. The water was cold and shocking and drenching as she drove her elbow into it's nose, once, twice, and it died, brain slushed.

She yanked her sword out and sheathed them, whirled and punched a zetsu in the face despite it's towering height. The tide sloshed over her feet, back and forth, up and down the sand.

Eishi was in trouble on the beach sand with four and pinned by spikes, and she rushed them with a battle cry, fingers dipping into her back pouch and coming out with wire that snagged and bit her fingers as she unspooled, weaving in between Eishi and one zetsu, dropping the middle of the wire and wrapping it around and around the base of a spike.

Shunshin, and she was air, a breeze, death.

She stopped, panting, smiling, wire twined around her fingers.

Eishi glanced her way, bleeding from a shallow would on his arm, clutching it. Just for theatrics, she grinned wider, said, "Burn in hell if you have souls," and pulled the wire taut before clasping the fingers of one hand.

Tiger.
Flames ran along its length, cauterizing and cutting and burning through and they fell in charred pieces with a smell like BBQ and a sound like a thousand dying cats. The wire fell loose, and Eishi threw her a wild-eyed but steady look. "Thanks."

"Don't thank me yet," she said, and her wild triumph slotted slightly as she glanced. Barely anyone left on the beach, zetsu or no, and there were bodies in the ocean. There were places filled with dust and raised sand, and jutsu sparked among it. The rest of the fighting was on the cliffs.

The sand melted underneath her feet, and suddenly they were surrounded.

"Did you seriously just say that?" Eishi protested, snapping his hand fans shut and tucking them away before grabbing the fan at his back. "Did you seriously just jinx us, again?"

"Hey, this is not my fault!"

She stabbed one and it fell.

Eishi blew three away.

They kept coming.

They fought and snarled but this was the last of whatever force was pushing somehow, and they separated, swarmed. It wasn't life threatening yet—she fought and burned and sliced and burned and—

Oh.

Burned.

...

~ "Always having fun," she agreed, and giggled. ~

...

There was a hole in Fumiko's flak jacket, and if she didn't get three seconds to heal herself, she was going to bleed out.

But that wasn't important. At least now she knew the jagged lines on their stomachs could do more than just wrap, they could actually stab. Not that she could do much with that information, trapped like she was like a bird in a gilded cage against the dirt.

Her body burned as it lost chakra and she wanted to scream like she was on fire, but she couldn't only gasped.

Last jutsu until she took another pill, and she was out, but she was also about to die.

She wiped her glove and stuck a fist straight into the zetsu's gaping open stomach, and it exploded. Submerged, Fumiko barely managed to keep the water together and it wanted to run free, but it went spherical and she floated in the center of it for less than a second, barely lifted from the ground, cloudy red streaming from her wounds. She choked, and it burst free on her command, blasting like a soundwave.

As it bowled over zetsu, even though she was lying on her back, she curled her fingers into Tiger.

"Doton: Earth Flow River!"
She hoped, somewhere, that they drowned.

Her ears rang and for a second, the world swam out of focus, finally quiet, and she laid there in the mud, feeling it seep into her clothes and hair and open wounds. Oops, she thought distantly. Too much chakra.

"-iko-sensei! Fumiko-sensei!"

The world didn't snap back into focus so much as slide there, dirty and blurred. Numbness coated her side, where the zetsu had impaled her. But she recognized the voice. Where...?

"I thought you were dead!"

"Ame?" Her vision was clearing, warmth seeping into her bones as Ame shared her chakra. "Aren't you at the... medical..."

"No," she shouted over the noise of an explosion somewhere. "I moved!"

"Soldier pill," Fumiko muttered.

Not seconds later she felt it on her tongue and grimaced, accidentally swallowed it whole, but that was fine. And she flooded again, with warmth and fatigue and pain but electricity, and she sat up.

"-knew something was going to go wrong, so Sakura-san asked some of us to fan out to the other divisions," Ame was saying. "I'm so glad I got here in time, sensei. I saw you, you're great- ugh!"

Fumiko continued to roll, taking Ame with her and leaving another shinobi to take on the zetsu, still exhausted. Fumiko sat up, dizzy, aided by a still-surprised Ame. "Move into the back," she said. "You don't know how to fight, Ame. I need another pill or more."

"I have a medic's rations." Fumiko ate two more from the proffered pack, ignoring the way it hurt, and stowed the rest away. Now she could stand without trouble since Ame had fixed her stomach, although it seemed that was all she'd fixed, if not boosted her chakra a little.

Something touched her shoulder, and Fumiko flinched, whirling.

The shinobi grabbed her kunai hand before she could stab him in the solar plexus. "Fumiko-chan!" he barked. "You're on the go- reinforcements to the first division! Get moving! You, medic-"

Flustered, Fumiko stumbled through the ranks, buzzed like she'd drunk black coffee and ready to fight but confused, until she saw shinobi gathering, regrouping toward the edge of the battlezone. Reinforcements, she thought. To the First Division?

Her eyes widened, and she picked up her pace.

Mai.

...

~ "Good," he said, all velvet and softness and quiet. ~

...

"Eishi! Right here, right now- formation seven!"

"Now?" came his squeaky shout. "You want to do it here?"
"No, Eishi," she yelled, "I want to let them regroup and surround us like kindling and kill us both! Yes I want to do it here!"

"Okay!"] Mai heard, and probably he muttered jeez under his breath, and a batch of clouds darkened over their heads, wind whipping from a space to her left. Several zetsu bowled into the sky, only to be slammed down by the forming currents of wind.

Mai mostly aimed her oil at the tornadoes as they came down but she wasn't exactly perfect in her aim, and she watched with satisfaction as it splattered all over the zetsus' stupid green heads. More picked up in the blast of wind, flying up.

And Mai bit down on a soldier pill, breathed, and let herself explode.

The air turned hot and searing, tornadoes catching fire and ripping havoc and they screamed and burned and smashed into the ground. Mai's grin vanished, and she had half a second to hear the roar of rushing water and feel that awful pulse-pulse of pure hatred.

"Eishi, fly!" she screeched over the vortexes, and did probably the stupidest thing she'd ever done in her life: jumped into a tornado of fire.

It burned, blistered and ripped but threw her into the air as it vaporized into steam, colliding with the water that gushed into the clearing with the force of ten hundred Lees smashing into the ground, demolishing stone and disfiguring everyone there, squashing them like ants under a boot, zetsu and shinobi alike.

In the air, she hovered, mouth dropped open, and couldn't breathe for the pain on her skin.

And then she fell, spiraling towards the water where she would drown because she would either black out from pain or be slammed against a rock and be knocked out and either way, she was inhaling water and being crushed.

But she jerked in midair, screamed.

"I got you," Eishi said from atop his fan as it swooped towards the stone, fingers clasped around her wrist. "Thanks for the warning."

She gasped then they slammed into a wall, Eishi having closed his fan at the last second, and she barely caught her footing on the edge of the cliff but again, Eishi caught her before she went pinwheeling into the frothing, rushing water below. Mai almost swallowed her tongue and grabbed the burn on her shoulder, wincing, and turned is disbelief towards whatever it was that had just taken out more than a third of their forces.

And paled.

Eishi's eyes followed her line of sight.

"Shit," he swore. "Is that-"]

"Naruto?" Mai breathed. "No- it can't be."

"That's a nine tails," Eishi gasped. "Yeah, that's definitely a nine-tails."

But it was small, looking the way Naruto had when he transformed during the Invasion of Pein. Fatter than Naruto was, and with wild-looking hair swallowed by the tails. The entire thing was a pulsing, writhing mass of red and black swirling, giving off that horrible hate that tried to bring
Mai to her knees. It was standing on the water, looking pissed as hell.

"What did Darui do to tick that thing off?" she groaned, then gasped slightly, looked down to assess the damage.

Okay, so she hadn't jumped into the fire. She would've lit like an oiled lamp. But she'd been close to it, swirled into the vortex of hot air between the two as they neared each other, and it'd left nasty burns on her right shoulder and face and both forearms. Her legs were hot against the superheated leather but it hadn't caught and instead had protected her skin.

Manageable.

The water below ebbed and fell away into the ocean, leaving behind bodies impaled on the spikes and laid out in the sand, more dragged out into the saltwater.

"I don't know," Eishi said. "But whatever it is I already don't like it."

"It's too late for that!" the thing screamed, boomed in a way that rang between her ears like she was inside a bell, and she clapped her hands over her ears along with Eishi. But then her eyes widened and she sucked in a breath when it's tail moved, wavered.

"Break your fall with chakra!"

"What?"

Mai braced herself and tackled Eishi over the side of the cliff, rocketing toward the sand and feeling the power burn her back like flames as the tail tore up the middle of the beach below them and then smashed through the stone, dragging through where they had just been standing.

Oh, this was going to hurt too, wasn't it?

Bam! The air punched out of her lungs and the sand mushroomed around them as they hit hard, Mai under Eishi, but nothing snapped. There was going to be a bruise the size of her entire body in a few hours but she could stand, and she did, stumbling to the side and heaving up a wheezing Eishi by the arm.

It wreaked havoc on the beach, tails slapping and grinding and smashing. Mai knew better than to let it touch her even with a grazing glance, and so she ducked and springboarded off rocks and dragged, dragged, dragged Eishi's ass around with her, him yelping all the way.

She could sense it. In flashes, if she closed her eyes, she could see it, and so for once she relied entirely on the sensory skills she'd been taught by Yami, Squirrel-taicho, and didn't open her eyes, focusing on the chakras, her chakra and Eishi's and the nine tails' and everyone on the beach and zigged and zagged, like she was watching the screen of a video game and dodging with her characters.

There was the small business of inanimate objects, but she let her intuition flood, her last-second senses. And Eishi yelled at her every now and then to watch out for that spike!

People screamed and died.

Mai thought nothing of engaging the thing.

Finally she tumbled as Eishi shoved her down, into the ocean. She rolled to scream at him, but then blinked when she saw him locked with a still-alive zetsu, hand-fans open and blocking attacks. Mai
whirled against the water, chakra buoying her hands above it, spun like a dancer so that her legs swept the zetsu's out, and Eishi came down like an avenging angel and the zetsu's grinning head rolled into the surf.

He stared and stared and stared at the headless, bloodless corpse with the spine sticking out, and she reached up, grabbed his wrist, and yanked him into the water, letting herself sink.

The nine-tails thing had stopped, and was surveying a part of the barricade to her far left, just off the center of the beach. She didn't know if it could sense chakra or not, but she masked her weak reserves anyway and Eishi, sensing this, did the same. They huddled on their stomachs in the shallows, letting the waves flow and ebb over the backs of their heads.

Her lungs screamed for air with exhaustion and water, but the salt felt good against her burns after a while.

"The Kohaku no Johei. That used to be ours," it rumbled. "I see. They're going to try to seal me away, are they?"

"What's the plan, Mai?"

Her mind spun with pain, exhaustion and bubbling hatred the nine tails chakra evoked, but she tried, because they always relied on her. Mai, what's the plan? Eishi and Shiragiku had followed her against orders to a mission end. She always, always got them through.

"I- I don't know yet," she admitted gruffly. "We can't fight it. It's talking to someone, though- someone who can seal it away. Just wait, and don't let it see you."

"Yeah," Eishi said. "Okay. Sounds good-"

The monster lashed out, made the ground shake along the beach. But when the dust settled, hiding rocks gone, Mai could pick out Darui- five Darui's, actually, each with some weird barrel thing. The Kohaku no Johei? It didn't look like much- but where had he even gotten it?

"Hey."

Mai jolted and spun, catching the surprised-looking kunoichi around the neck with her legs and knocking her over before Mai realized it wasn't a zetsu, just another ninja who had crawled through the surf and masked their chakra to avoid the nine tails' wrath. Mai immediately untangled herself, sitting up in the water on her knees.

"What? Who are you?"

The girl coughed. She looked maybe sixteen. She picked herself up from the water. "Mitsuwa, yes? You're on fire unit, let's go."

"New plan," she told Eishi. "I'll be right back."

Eishi nodded, and Mai rose above the water. The chakra pill she pulled out was mostly dissolved, but she ate it anyway, got half a boost, and followed the girl who moved like a pixie across the water, tap-tap-tap and then leaped as the call rang out and they joined their remaining comrades.

"Fire-style squad- protect Darui!" Mai raised a hand in unison in half a Ram and took a deep, deep breath, hoping to Kami she wasn't about to die but ready. "Now!" the man yelled. "Let's go!"

There was a rush like her and Eishi's fire tornadoes, rumbling and heady, and a blast of heat like
The monster screamed as it blasted him in the face, and as soon as her stream ran out Mai disrupted her chakra, grabbed the two on either side of her and disrupted theirs too, and fell like a stone through the surface of the water just in time to feel the tail of chakra smash into the space above the water, slapping shinobi and destroying their bodies.

For a second she trailed bubbles, stared with narrowed eyes at the milky white-blue surface of the water despite the way it burned her eyes, heard the screams. Then she let the shinobi she had saved go and swam back up to the surface, praying neither of them were from Suna and thanking every Kami she’d ever learned about that she’d taught herself to swim.

Her head broke water and she gasped, treading water. The nine tails thing was stumbling around under the force of a water style unit's attack, and the water sloshed under it's feet like cyclones. It wasn't long before she heard two more gasps, and the people she'd saved bobbed beside her in the water, the sea streaming through their hair and down their faces.

A man and a woman, both older than her. She couldn't tell where they were from.

"You okay?" she gasped in a way that she meant to snap.

"Yes," the woman rasped.

"Yes, thank you," the man said shakily. Bodies floated about them in the water, dead and almost-dead, from the nine tails creature's attack. Again the water bubbled and rumbled as the earth rose, trapping the beast in a cage of earth. It started to close, and Mai shook her head to rid her bangs of blinding seawater and started to swim towards the shore.

She felt the other two follow close behind her. There was a tingle in the water as Darui’s screamed Double Black Panther zapped the inside of the trap, but it wasn't enough to hurt her in the surrounding water as they reached solid footing and stumbled out of the sea. Things were quiet for a second longer, and Mai scanned the beach to take count of shinobi.

The cube of stone exploded, and Mai found herself thrown into the ground with a searing pain in the small of her back.

Not searing, she supposed. Mildly agonizing. Shrapnel must have gotten through; maybe her fishnet had ridden up or torn. She reached back, crouched on her hands and knees in the sand, and pulled out a fist-sized chunk of stone, feeling warmth on her skin as blood trickled free.

There was a scream of pure rage from the water, a growl mixed with an explosion. "ARRGH! I'LL TEAR YOU APART!"

All hell broke lose then.

Rock exploded and beach exploded and water exploded and it wasn't just tails, the thing was running around like an avenging angel on four legs and destroying everything in sight. She was standing out in the open on the beach with two water-logged shinobi. The entire face of the mountain burst in a massive mushroom cloud of dust and collapsed.

Mai didn't scream, and she didn't flee in panic. She took a deep breath, assessed the situation, and then she put her hands together.

"Kage Bunshin no jutsu!" she yelled, loudly enough to draw the rampaging thing's attention, and felt her throat go dry as it focused it's entire seething energy on her little cloud of smoke and then she ran, hoping, praying despite the tingling tiredness in her chakra coils that it would go after any of her other seven clones and not her.
Where the other clones ran back toward the ocean, fanned and climbed spikes along the beach, she herself ran towards the people. Draw away, draw away, draw away...

It bellowed and barreled towards the water.

She stumbled straight into a set of arms. "Baka," Eishi yelled at her, "What's wrong with you, are you insane?"

She let herself fall against his side, scanned with her chakra as he jumped the mountain face. She was shoved behind a crop of rocks off to the side, passed from hand to hand until she was lying on a towel and someone had their hands on her back wound and her burns. Mai gritted her teeth, and felt the bursting of each and every one of her shadow clones after less than seconds.

She didn't lie for long, as soon as the muscle healed and she had a little more chakra to spare, Mai got up, waved them off. Her soldier pills still sung in her blood despite her shadow clones, she had room for more.

Mai froze at the cliffside, knowing when she did that she shouldn't, that she was a target.

The beach was gone.

It was just water, water and a few outcroppings of stone. Far below the nine tails ripoff roared, standing on a bit of rock just big enough to hold it, tails writhing. Far below, dust speck bodies floated and hung off the rocks, and Mai could see severed and only-visible limbs scattered like sprinkles across the battleground.

"Damn it," she whispered. "It took out everyone."

A hand clapped her shoulder. "You're nuts, I hope you know."

"I know." She shook her head, sensing the masses of shinobi still hiding, fighting somewhere in the rocks, and there were still even zetsu alive. "Those two that came out of the water with me- did you see them?"

"With the medics," Eishi said. "Funny, they were asking about you, too."

...

~ "Good," she echoed, and smiled, leaned in on her tippiest toes. ~

...

It was chaos.

Fumiko had seen pictures of the Land of Lightning's peninsula. A long white, sandy, pristine beach, with seashells and dolphins and sunsets, winding along a ragged cliffside. Picture-perfect, a place on anyone's bucket list.

Those pictures were precious now- relics of the past.

Because the peninsula was nothing but a bowl of water, collapsed stone, and dead people, with a nine-tails cloaked Gold or maybe Silver brother thrashing through the survivors.

She'd healed herself somewhat along the way- and wasn't that a feat, water-walking in shunshin while healing cell damage, it was enough to make her eyes cross. But the only thought in her head now was Mai Mai Mai Mai. Her sister was alive, had to be, wouldn't let herself get killed.
The ninja waiting at the peninsula started to scream at the sight of her unit, broken away from the fight against the zetsu to reinforce them.

"Reinforcements!"

"We've been waiting!"

"Now we can keep fighting!"

Her foot hit the sand, and immediately she had to twist away from a zetsu that tried to punch her, ducking and kicking up sand with her prosthetic, but before she could reach up for her final replacement staff in it's sheath, another shinobi took it down.

Kitsuchi, their division leader, had gone ahead; she could feel him near the explosion that was the nine tails cloak, and while it was distracted she followed the rest towards the white-haired man Darui, who gathered them behind a massive outcropping of stone. Fumiko could see when she turned around the masses of injured, in the open save for the blocking stones at the edge of the cliffs.

She would go there when the fighting was done, but for now, she joined the others on the water's surface. Below the water, shifting in rays of sunlight, she could see the ruined beach. Kitsuchi soon joined them as the former first division held a perimeter.

"HQ has a plan," Darui announced. "We'll strike at Kinkaku with the Ino-Shika-Cho formation. Until they get here, we have to hold- this- location!"

Six days into the war and another massive battle, but if Ino, Shikamaru and Choji were coming, then it would be over soon. So she cheered with the rest, without a smile but with a swell. She'd survived this much already.

She leapt into the fight with the rest of them- stumbled, anyway- and engaged along with one other shinobi she didn't know from Mist with three zetsu, whose stomachs opened threateningly. One gashed forward, but she sliced the ribby looking flesh with the kunai and they fell limp like dead snakes, sinking into the water. And then it hit her, and she was grappling. The Kiri nin called the water to drown the other two.

Good idea, she thought, and let herself fall through the surface, grabbing the zetsu' ankles as she did so, a mirror of their own attacks. It plunged, and the bubbles streaming her mouth congealed like a mouthpiece over her lips.

The zetsu retaliated, but even though Fumiko couldn't swim, she could breathe. Eventually it stopped struggling, but Fumiko found herself too low to buoy herself back up.

Even before she could start to panic, she was floating back towards the surface at a speed faster than natural as her air turned stale, and she broke the surface like a cannonball, flailing into the air and screaming, but before she could crash back into the water on her way down she felt arms underneath her knees and shoulder in an abrupt, slightly painful jerking stop.

She gasped, looked around, and realized the Kiri nin had saved her.

He set her back on her feet on the water. Her chakra was burning out, and she ate a soaking wet pill. As soon as she could properly breathe again, she gasped and put a hand to his shoulder.

"Thank you," she wheezed.

He nodded. "Tenshin," he said.
"Fumiko. Duck!"

He did, and she swung her staff as a spear, but the water bobbed and she flew off balance, impaling the shoulder instead. The zetsu screamed but his stomach opened and moved to break every rib under her useless flak-

Two glints of light appeared, like magic, through the hole of the zetsu's gaping stomach, and it gurgled, and one of the light streaks withdrew and reappeared in the chest, and the zetsu was skewered like pork.

Both lines withdrew, and the zetsu fell into the water, mostly dead, drifting away underneath Tenshin's feet.

"Hell," she heard. "I'm so damn glad you're still alive."

Fumiko felt her lips break out in a smile despite the situation, and she gasped with relief. "Mai!"

Mai grinned, a sword in either hand, looking like she was glowing, burned to blisters on one side of her face and parts of her arms, bruised, bleeding; her shirt was torn, and the low ponytail had come loose, although it still sparkled with razor wire. And then Eishi was behind her, equally beaten up but not burnt, with a nasty looking scratch through the side of his flak, from a zetsu, most likely.

"Fumiko-san!" he yelped. "You're reinforcements?"

"Let's hug later!" Tenshin yelled, and the three from Suna nodded before dashing off and Fumiko felt the hurt deep in her heart to go opposite her sister, but Mai didn't need her help, and someone else might.

It was five minutes later and she was backed against a cliff one-on-two when Ino-Shika-Cho arrived, and she watched them stare the monster down hundreds of yards away in the bowl of the new ocean pool.

"Everyone, cover them!" Darui yelled, and when everyone reached into their pouches or kunai, Fumiko (who had neither the range nor the skill, nor the supply for that) pulled out a seal labeled shrapnel on the outside of the roll.

She opened it up with a sound like loosened string, braced it against the length of her half-raised arm, and gave an almost apologetic look to the zetsu in front of her before biting her thumb and sliding blood across the seals length.

Her back slammed against the rock with the force of three sealing marks bulleting sharpened rocks the size of zetsu heads, and she couldn't even force it to aim a particular direction but it joined the hailstorm of kunai and weapons as exploding tags in the barrage started to explode. The zetsu had been shredded.

"You're wimps," she heard from the cloud of dust and chakra-smoke. "As if you could take me down!"

But Choji had already rolled in, and he vacuumed the dust away to reveal a startled-looking grappling Kinkaku. He was thrown away, but immediately the monster-man froze with his hands in the air, and Fumiko smiled triumphantly at the sight- Shikamaru's Kagemane jutsu activated. Even that didn't last, though, and Kinkaku roared.

"One petty trick after another!" He struggled, twitched, moved, and then snapped free. "This is nothing! I can break this!" And he did, stumbling back with heavy footing with a smug roar. "Die!"
"Shikamaru!" Fumiko yelled, but the tail stopped by what looked like inches or less from cleaving her shogi buddy's head clean out of existence.

"Phew," the monster said. "I got him. Mind Transfer Jutsu complete!"

Darui hefted a barrel, and close as she was to him she recognized it instantly. The Kohaku no Johei, one of the five treasured tools of the Gold and Silver Brothers. She'd done an essay on those tools once. Now everything made sense, and she gave a relieved grin and sighed.

Ino-Shika-Cho.

"Kinkaku!" Darui called.

"Yes!" Ino called back quickly, and then Kinkaku screamed as he started to warp, clinging to everything he possibly could, from rocks to skidding water, so loudly that Fumiko's ears rang and rocks fell from the shattered cliffside.

"Ino, come back now!" Shikamaru yelled sharply, and then all was quiet as Darui sealed the last of the Gold and Silver brothers inside for good.

There were a few minutes of regrouping, and noise from the remaining ninja, and then Kitsuchi stepped forward. "Units six through ten, you help the injured get to the rear! And the rest of you-follow me!"

Fumiko, of unit Five, darted through the cheering shinobi to help and head back to the medical unit set up on the top of the cliff.

...

~ The kiss was light and soft and playful, and not all-consuming like the last time they kissed here. It tasted a little more like dango sauce, and she could feel the sores on her mouth against his flawless one, but they didn't stop kissing and they didn't stop dancing. ~

...

"Eishi, now!"

"Right!"

She wished she knew what the masked, frothing mass of black wires was, but it spat air and was surrounded by zetsu so it was probably an important thing to take out.

Eishi threw the war fan, and it spun like a straight-shot boomerang on the wind, clearing a path through the zetsu and blasting through the creature's wind attack. Mai's clone that had shouted straightened, smirked, and exploded into smoke as a zetsu stabbed her through the middle.

She had to say, being a fan felt odd, wind sliding over not-quite skin until she blinded the mask with another burst of smoke and then there was fire and it burned and made an unholy not-screaming sound and she brought her foot forward with a grunt, grinding her heel into the porcelain.

It shattered under her sandal and dissipated in a way that she wasn't expecting, so she tumbled into the side of a cliff, spinning until she hit back-first into the rock with her feet in the air and slid towards the ground headfirst.
Rather than helping, Eishi just laughed and let her scrabble backwards at the rock, yelping and managing to land on her stomach in a pretty solid faceplant, dust rising around her. The water lapped around her shoulders, barely more than a few inches above ground level.

She grumbled swearwords at him as he finally moved to help her, still laughing his stupid jerk ass off, grabbing his hand and letting herself be hauled back to her feet, after which she promptly swept out his ankle and sent him toppling into the water.

"Not so funny now, eh?" She laughed at his wet-puppy shocked expression, but as he shook out his stringy wet hair, she looked back toward the battlefield. Seeing nothing on the water save for a few dying zetsu, she closed her eyes and flared. Ino-Shika-Cho was fighting a reanimated shinobi. At least thirty of the original First Division remained fighting unknown enemies; chakraless zetsu, and a hundred more from the reinforcements, fighting more of the black-bodied masks and the similar-natured reanimated shinobi she didn't know the name of.

The most people were flickering away by one of the masks, probably water-natured, and she let her eyes open.

"All right, Eishi, up and at'em," she ordered, swiveling to face her chuunin teammate. "We've got another mask and-"

"Jackal-chan, your execution was perfect."

Every muscle in her body locked, and Eishi's eyes, which she stared at, darkened with confusion and then alarm, staring past her shoulders toward the ocean. No way, he wasn't, she would've sensed him, her skills had to have improved enough to-

There was a sound, another waver, a feeling, and Mai whipped, twisting to the side and raising one hand with a kunai from nowhere- liar, her back belt pouch- and blocked. The shuriken clanged, both of them, one shooting down and slicing into the water and the ground underneath, the other careening away and smacking broadside into the cliff.

It clattered, the noise sharp in Mai's ears, and she let her kunai fall to her side.

The ANBU funeral was a cruel one, at least in Suna. The body was preserved by unknown means until the time came, and was attended only by the Captain and the deceased member's teammates, their taicho, shishou or students. The most vulnerable of those- the students, or perhaps just the newbies- were tasked to destroy them, preferably by burning with jutsu, but also by matches if the nature was wrong, which it tended to be in the Land of Wind.

But there was a reason. Mourning, guilt... it was harder to be haunted by someone you knew was dead- no, gone- someone who was dust as dust as dust.

She'd watched his mask and his skin crumble away under her own fire.

Yami was gone.

This man, with his achingly familiar armor- the dark brown half-sleeved jacket covering the shadows of collapsible breastplate, the arm guards bigger than hers, loose tan pants that bunched at the ankles, hiding his shinobi sandals with the steel bottoms. Two pouches, one on either leg, and she knew there were two other big ones on his belt. His mask was missing.

A gaunt face, not thin, not round, no pointed chin. Very plain and ordinary with military cropped black hair in a slight widows peak that spiked slightly, shaggy at the back of his head. Unshaved stubble dotted his face, and for the first time she got a really good look at his facial features, blunt
nose, thin lips, yes; but particularly his eyes, almond shaped and a deep, unusual shade of burgundy.

Olive skin, she noted, but she'd known that already; he didn't wear gloves.

"Great form as always," he said, "Mai."

"You know this one?" Eishi said warily, and her throat went even drier. This one. One of many.

Nothing in his life/Became him like the leaving it. The words came unbidden to her mind, but she kept them stubbornly off her tongue. He died/As one that had been studied in his death...

When she said nothing, Yami sighed.

"I would like," he said in his drawling way, "for you to stop me, Mai."

And then he blurred, moving for the kill.

...

~ And so they danced through the rest of the night. ~
... 

~ It had been easy, really, breaking into the Academy during lunchtime. As simple as her plan. ~

Shiragiku sighed and smiled, standing up away from the supply room floor with a fresh basket of imported Chigusa herbs his mother had sent in droves. He closed and latched the crate shut to keep out the bugs and cicadas buzzing around at night, picked up the basket and turned to leave.

It was dark in the storage room- or rather, storage tent. The main base of operations for the Logistical Support and Medical Division was more or less a large base camp, not unlike those he had made alongside Mai-chan and Eishi-kun under Otokaze-sensei's watchful eye. It was filled with tents, marked with numbers and stakes tied with colored strings.

Most injured to least injured, infectious and not, chakra exhaustion versus injuries. Each tent swarmed with specialized medical ninja ready to respond to anything within their particular set. Shiragiku knew a decent amount of healing techniques, and had a big enough store of chakra to go throughout the day healing those with Mystical Palm, but even so, he liked to rely on herbs, work with poisons.

So he mostly dealt with those patients brought in with infected wounds, wounds coated in poison or the strange, persistent residues of nine-tails attack chakra who were just coming in, which was the reason for running out of herbs in the first place. Those wounds worried him, and most of the identification on those particular ninja labeled them as part of the First Division- his teammates' location.

He pushed away the unzipped flap of the tent into sunlight. It was hours until dusk still; and the day had been long. There had been more injured today and the day prior than any of the rest of the weekdays; and more severely so as the fights progressed. Shiragiku heard bits and pieces from the ninjas- white zetsu escaping, swarms and droves of them held off by the first division, fights against shinobi brought back to life, fights against Ginkaku and Kinkaku, the treacherous Gold and Silver brothers of the Cloud.

He was halfway to his own tent, buried in his thoughts, when he heard Sakura-san. "Shiragiku-kun!" she called, and, blinking, he looked up without a word to see her jogging his way from the direction of her own tent.

"Hai, Sakura-san?"

She caught up, eventually stopping to stand just in front of them. The warm breeze was springy and almost humid, warm enough for pushed-up sleeves, and it reminded him of the greenhouses in Suna. The wind pushed against Sakura's untied hair, which meant her tent wasn't horribly busy that she'd left mid-treatment.

"Shiragiku-kun," she said. "New orders from Intel. We need to send out more medical ninja to the battlefields- we've lost a lot. And I figured-" Here she smiled, a kind smile, though not gentle- "You keep asking after the First Company- would you like to deport there?"
It would mean, of course, throwing himself into the thick of battle, just as he'd tried to avoid all his life. Mai-chan and Eishi-kun hadn't yet circulated through the medical base, but that meant nothing; there were any range of reasons why they wouldn't have fallen back- Mai's stubbornness, an influx in enemies, death. But he'd known he would fight eventually- it was the reason, after all, for learning his clan jutsu, and for carrying on his belt his chakra blades.

"Of course, Sakura-san," he said, and bowed slightly. "I'll head out as soon as I bring these to Tent Nine."

... 

~ Pick lock, sneak past teachers, check her sensei's file box, sneak back out and lock door, maybe change a few things here and there along the way. ~

... 

Instinctively she feinted in his direction and dropped, but she froze before the crook of her foot could catch his ankle.

"Are you all right?"

She couldn't speak, still coughing water from the bottom of her lungs, but she nodded somewhat, enough. Mai could hear the water lapping at the lake's black edge, could see it flickering with white starlight. Underneath that, she could hear footsteps in the grass, getting quieter and quieter.

"Can you breathe all right? Did they hurt you?"

"T-Taicho, you- hafta-" The water that purged out of her throat was disgusting and freezing cold. Water streamed into and out of her eyes, but she was too stunned to cry. She'd almost drowned.

"Rattlesnake has them."

"But."

"I won't let them come back again and try to kill you."

Shit, she thought. 

Mistake.

Mai tried to scramble away because he had whirled just around her obstacle body, but she didn't make it far enough or to her feet before his sandal caught her stomach, and it was like she'd been stabbed; the air punching out of her lungs, and she wheeled into the air, spinning, until she hit the water a few feet away with a splash and rolled.

It was another second before she could gasp, a few more before she could properly breathe.

"Taicho," she gasped out, and struggled to get to her hands and knees, stomach pulsing like a lengthwise sword wound. Against her own better judgement, she looked at him, and his expression was impassive as hers when in pain. He didn't move, though.

"I can't control myself," he said, but didn't apologize, and for good reason. Mai winced. That had been stupid, rookie, cowardly. "I have to defend myself and kill shinobi."

Mai coughed, wiped at her mouth, and shakily got all the way to her feet. Eishi, a few yards away, looked uncertain and worried. Never one to jump into a fight, she knew. And was glad. This was
an ANBU assassin unit leader, if Eishi tried to engage him... "Where did you come from?" she muttered. "How did you-

"I woke up," he said simply.

"Mai, what's going on?" Eishi said warily, reopening his fan to three moons at her distress. "Who is this?"

"Weasel-taicho, who is this?"

She looked distrustfully at the larger man, face covered similarly to her own. The mask was stupid, and she cold tell right away her training taicho was about to announce him as 'this is squirrel' because the mask had goddamn buckteeth.

"This is Squirrel," Weasel announced, and beneath her mask, Mai rolled her eyes. "He'll be your specialization teacher from now on. Squirrel, this is Jackal-chan. She wants to be an assassin."

War or not, it was still against the law to tell him and she could be imprisoned for doing so, so instead of answering she pulled out her swords. I know him best, her mind said. I know his moves, his styles...

You're here...

It buzzed in her mind like a swarm of painful, stinging bees. You're here. You're actually, really here even if you're not alive I burned you and I remember the way you cooked rabbits, taicho. Mai despised it but the weakness was there.

Apparently the movement was aggressive, because once again he vanished, just a ripple in the air. Behind, he always attacked form behind- she spun, met him kunai-to-blade, and got a good look at his eyes. Immediately her muscles burned with the effort, blade shaking.

"Eishi!" she snapped. "Get a sealing team, get-" She didn't move quickly enough when he suddenly dropped the kunai and let her sword carve into his shoulder. Mai was too shocked by the bluff to react, and there was another erupting pain in the side of her face; she skidded minus one blade and reeling, tasting blood on her teeth. Scrambled, she had to take the half-second to blink and raise her sword.

It was like sparring with Lee, here-and-there and everywhere all at once, only he was actually trying to kill her and almost cut her eye out with her own sword. She tried, twisting this way and that and pulling a kunai to make up the difference, but they only clanged once. Mai staggered this way and that, but despite her desperation she couldn't land a hit, and she didn't know if it was because she wasn't strong enough or she just couldn't-

The pommel of her own sword caught her across the jaw, and she twirled like a ballerina, stumbling and tripping over her feet until there was a quiet second, and air breathed at her neck. Her eyes widened.

Pain erupted in her left shoulder blade- it had to be on fire, he had to be using lightning style, something. Mai screamed and there was a solid, steel-strength collision to her kidney at her back, and she sprawled.

"Mai!" she heard Eishi scream and knew it looked bad, could already feel warm blood slipping into a puddle from the exit point at her chest, near her arm; angled through her back in a way that it barely missed going straight through her breast. All at once nausea slammed into her brain and she threw up bile and blood, barely managing to lever up on her elbow.
"Don't do this, Jackal-chan!" her former taicho commanded her from where he stood. She screamed again, or maybe it was more like a wet groan, when he pulled her own short tanto out of her shoulder. "I know how strong you are. Fight!"

"You're dead!" she cried (snapped, ordered). "You're dead!"

"Fight or die along with me."

She tried to pull herself away with her right arm, feet scrabbling to get high enough on the ground for purchase, but then she felt his foot rising; it skimmed her side and she rolled, ignoring the fire, ignoring the pain, eyes rolling, but she rolled, and the ground splintered under steel and chakra, water splashing across her body.

But there was no more dodging. It was like Kankuro's booby traps- nowhere to go and the blade falling toward her throat. But this time there was no Kankuro to wake up and save her ass, no puppet strings to shove the weapon away. Blood splashed between her eyes and down the bridge of her nose, dripping off the tip of her own sword.

"Fuuton: Great Breakthrough!"

There was a great rushing sound like an incoming wave, and Mai was lifted from the water to spin once, twice in the air, not too high; before falling hard back in face-first. She hadn't been the focus of that attack.

Mai spluttered, yanked her nose above water. Yami had been violently gusted away, slammed into a far cliff a good twenty or so yards away.

"Eishi," she breathed disbelievingly, and looked towards him, where he stood defensively with his fan open three moons wide, one hand on the fan, the other on the hilt. "That was aggressive- run-!"

"Get up, Mai!" he snarled and she flinched, blinked. "You're fighting like a punk; get up!"

"Listen to your teammate," Yami called, and earth crumbled as he jumped down onto the water once more. Water rustled softly as he walked along its surface. "Don't let your emotions rule you."

"B-but... easy for you to say, taicho!" she groused, gritted her teeth, tried to push up and succeeded. "You literally can't be ruled by your emotions, you-... you..."

"You can't be ruled by your emotions, Jackal-chan," Squirrel-taicho said softly.

She could feel their eyes on her, all of them. Rattlesnake, Lizard, Coyote, she could feel them staring through their creepy white masks painted with blacks and oranges, creepy grins plastered across the porcelain with shadows. But it didn't matter.

She hadn't learned much by way of healing but she knew this worked sometimes, this up-and-down to make the heart start up again and-

"Stop, Jackal."

Mai didn't stop, and she could feel wetness trailing, flurrying down her face violently underneath her own mask, could feel her nose stuffing and mucus running down her lip and a headache starting to form between her eyes from the congestion. He had to wake up, he had to, there was no way she'd just disappeared someone it didn't matter if there was a sword hilt in his ribcage.

Maybe Yami could control himself to an extent and maybe he couldn't, but whatever the reason he
stopped just in front of her. Mai could feel the swell of her cheek and face where he'd hit her.

He'd done her much, much worse. Nearly killed her before in training spars.

She never had been able to beat him.

"If you can't control your emotions, use them." His eyes flickered to the side, where Eishi stood heaving, pissed-off looking and determined, as she stumbled to her feet, stumbled backwards, a few steps away. "He is your teammate, right? From your genin team. Do you want me to kill him, too?"

"Stop, Jackal."

There was blood all over her hands, bathing red all the way up to her elbows in a way she hadn't expected it to spray when she stabbed the man. "T-taicho-..."

"Stop!"

"Heh." She felt her lips quirk in a grin, could feel the blood trickling down from her lips. She probably looked like a ghost or a smiling corpse, with blood staining all of her teeth. "He hasn't died yet, has he?"

"Are you seriously insulting me right now?" Eishi demanded. "I just saved your life!"

She slanted him a hard look, and Eishi quieted, leaving her head to spin in silence.

"You have to clean it properly, Jackal-chan, or else you'll poison yourself." He held out a clearish, mucus-covered buldge of flesh. Mai wrinkled her nose, but leaned closer over the decapitated snake to see. "This is the poison sac. If you even get the mucus from these in your mouth in the desert, you will die."

"Great," she said. The snake's colored skin was dark, illuminated by the flickering flames of the campfire. It was dark out, with only stars to guide by. Orion, and the rest. She was still learning. "No trial by error I guess."

She couldn't tell if he smiled or not behind his mask. "Not if you're alone."

"Dammit!" she cursed, throwing down her coil of razor wire, eyes stinging at the pain in her ripped up palms. The training room was silent, empty save for them. "I'm not going to get this! Let's just do something else already, taicho!"

"Giving up already?" he said impassively, like he was only mildly interested. "That's not like you at all."

"This is stupid, that's all," she huffed. "Razor wire isn't practical."

"That," Squirrel-taicho said, "Was a very bad lie. You really have to work on that."

"I can't beat you," she said, facing him, and the words were sour in her mouth. "I'm going to lose. I'm going to die."

His arm moved and she reacted, one arm blocking her sword with her arm guard, and it cut in with the force, nearly splintering it in half but it held. Her other hand she used to clap against his fingers, one final remaining shuriken in hand, to block his half-fingered seal, and she could feel it slicing into her palm. Shuriken weren't meant for blocking, but his lightning style would make her explode
at this range.

His arms trembled with exertion, and she started to give, lips curling in concentration. "Then die," he said, although it sounded sad and prickly. "Die for your friends and for your world. After all... that's what I did."

"Gomenasai," she said suddenly, voice low. "Sensory-nin expert?"

"Goshuushou sama desu," he said solemnly. "Squirrel-san was the best sensor-nin ANBU has or ever will see."

Underneath her mask, Mai's eyes and nostrils flared.

"No," she said. "Forgive me my disrespect, Captain-sama, but Squirrel-taicho was too good to be defeated by a- a-" she struggled with the words bastard son of a bitch- "A traitor, surrounded by his own unit."

"Jackal," he said, and he sounded tired. "I'm sorry. If you wish, you can visit the ANBU morgue. You have permission to lock the door and remove your mask."

"One thing you have to remember, though," he said, and Mai could hear the slapping sounds of feet on water and the swishing of air and wind. "It's okay to let our friends try and die for us, too."

"Get your head-" Eishi yelled, and his fan came down at her shoulder with waves of wind-blades, "in the game!"

Suddenly her blade clattered to the ground, sliding out of her arm guard, and her arm bounced with a sudden absence of crushing force as her former taicho's arm split in three, leaving him with the stub of an elbow. It looked like paper, and it started to reform with shreds like confetti. The hand he'd tried to use for jutsu flashed sideways.

"Get your head in the game, Eishi! Move! Move!"

The ground under her feet erupted, paper bombs flaring into a delayed reaction. She shoved at him and Eishi stumbled forward towards Otokaze-sensei not that far away, just as she skyrocketed upwards, both from her jump and the force of the explosion.

"Mai!"

When she finally hit the ground again, she couldn't feel her legs, her hearing was shit and she really could tell that her shirt was literally on fire, but for some odd reason she couldn't pull a solid thought together to roll over. She could feel the dirt sliding under her skin as she was dragged from the growing circle of fire.

"Mai! Mai- What do I do? Mai!"

Push back, foot up. Solar plexus.

The kick didn't have nearly the effect she'd expected. The force of it pushed him away, yeah, but he didn't stumble over, didn't fall. Inwardly, she cursed- he couldn't feel pain, he didn't have breath. Pressure points wouldn't work, there were no bones to break, no extreme-pain places like the kidney to exploit.

This was an invincible, unkillable shinobi.
Fumiko had researched all about those things, reading scrolls and books on the Second Hokage Tobirama's jutsu and mission reports on Orochimaru's techniques she'd requested from Tsunade and Hidan and Kakuzu's techniques just in case they were similar and talked about the technicalities over breakfast and bounced ideas off her infants while they breastfed. She'd determined long before it was announced that they would need to be sealed.

She reached back into her pouch. Not much, honestly, two more coils of razor wire, a small-issue kunai with barbs, a few exploding tags and chakra pills. Her fingers brushed against the hard ball of paper like a flashbang that Fumiko had given her just before the separation. There was only one and it wasn't fast, the way it'd been described to her.

He would need to slow way, way down.

She touched a hand to her shoulder, and it came away bloody. One sword beside her on the ground, one fifty yards away and, that close to the edge of the cliffs, probably twenty feet underwater or more. Her eyes moved to Eishi, who rolled his eyes at her, probably not noticing in the blink of an eye how close he'd just been to dying.

Yami straightened, and as his muscles tensed, Mai spun, and let the side of her foot smash into her best friend's chest, who, with a surprised grunt, flew barely two feet off the ground and ten or fifteen feet away from the battleground, rolling the last five or six until he came to a splashing halt. Then, she turned and took a deep, burning breath, and faced her former teacher.

... 

~ There was a rumor going around that the senseis were setting kids up for careers- suggesting them to people in the field, putting their names out there. Dead-setting them on that path without consultation. ~

... 

Kankuro didn't let his expression change. Deidara had finally gone silent, and that left him focus to sweep his eyes across the plain of grass, a clearing smack in the center of a forest. Not much of a place for an ambush...

But then, this wasn't one.

These people- shinobi- they didn't need one.

"You as well, Granny Chiyo?" he murmured. Chakra fizzed in his fingers, but he didn't move Sasori's limbs at all, unsure of the possibilities of failure, success. Or even if these shinobi would attack them.

Chiyo, Hanzo the Salamandar, and Kimmimaro, along with one other shinobi he didn't recognize, with dark glasses and strange facial features.

"Well, Kankuro," Chiyo said. "That was very nicely done- it appears that you've managed to outdo Sasori."

He couldn't squash the faint bit of pride that bloomed at that- Chiyo, the sour-faced bitter woman who'd refused everyone, convinced in the destruction of humanity itself, Chiyo who had rejected his every attempt to get stronger or to have her teach him to be stronger- complimenting him.

But she was dead, and if Kabuto so decided she would also try to kill him. And Hanzo- he didn't even want to begin to run the scenarios in his mind, a surprise attack division against Hanzo, who
had named the three Sannin and spared their lives.

"Hey! If you're reinforcements here to help me, then get me out of here!" Deidara yelled, voice made tinny by his puppet prison, and Kankuro wanted to sigh. "It's stuffy! I'm about to explode! Hmph!"

"No, you're wrong," Hanzo said bitingly. "You're stuck in there precisely so you can't explode, explosive-style boy."

Deidara muttered something he couldn't make out, and then all at once he was thrashing uselessly, voice raised, the puppet rocking like a wooden toy horse. "But you don't have to put it that way! Hmph! Urgh!"

"I consider both the Akatsuki and the shinobi of the five great nations to be my enemies," Hanzo said coolly. In all his time seeing grainy photographs and reading descriptions of Hanzo the Salamander, Kankuro had to admit he'd expected his voice to be raspier, more fitting of the respirator on his mouth. But it was deep, clear. "I don't really care to help either of you. But with this disgusting jutsu controlling me, my body moves against it's will."

The reanimation jutsu again, he thought, not letting his lips curl down into a frown. This threw a wrench in every single one of their plans. As if Granny Chiyo weren't dangerous enough, these guys are scary too. It sure doesn't help that we split up our fighting force.

It would be nice to have that redheaded girl here with that teleportation jutsu.

"Listen up," he said in a low voice. "We retreat on my signal, you got that?"

"Roger that."

When that was going to be, Kankuro had no idea. They had all stepped into the open, and there was no way to retreat without being spotted. As soon as they turned tail, these reanimated shinobi would come after them with all the fury of generations lost. He wasn't a tactical genius like Shikamaru, or even a gutsy luck-of-the-draw like Mai.

Kankuro- and he would admit this to very few- was a very regular shinobi. Oh, he was good at puppetry ninjutsu. Yes, he was charismatic and yes, he had good instincts; he should have died a thousand times over. But he knew- knew and was humbled by the fact- that he could lose under overwhelming circumstances. Hanzo, Chiyo and Kimmimaro were overwhelming circumstances.

He had beaten Sasori of the Red Sand because of the varied skills of his teammates, and he was not too proud to admit that he would've died one-on-one, with or without Deidara along for the ride. He could think on his feet, but that was close to all he could do. So he would retreat, because varied skills or not Chiyo had taught Sasori, Hanzo was a living legend and Kimmimaro according to his brother could turn his damn spine into a weapon.

The man who had almost killed Sabaku no Gaara, save for a sickness that killed him. And now he was immortal.

"Hanzo the Salamander," he said, to buy himself time to think of a plan with over a one percent chance of survival or less. "I've always wanted to meet you."

... ~ And supposedly it was all in the roll-calls. ~
Eishi didn't know who this was. He didn't know why Mai called him Taicho or why he called her Jackal-chan or why she had had such a hard time getting herself into the fight, something she'd never once had a problem with before.

Harsh was how Mai did things. Harsh and quick and sterile. What he'd said might have been mean, but it was true- even if she always was called on to be the strong one, she was the strong one and maybe it was wrong to always expect that but hey, this was war, as she'd so often reminded him. Mourn later, feel afterwards.

In all their years together as a team- even as classmates- Eishi had seen her fight a lot. Fight enemies, fight friends, fight him. People twice their age, their size, their skill set. She almost always came out on top, or at least, gained the respect and wary notice of whomever she fought. And now more than ever, Eishi had seen her fight for her life.

It was terrifying, exhilarating to fight by her side. Mai fought like she had claws and canines, like her swords were parts of her arms and fire part of the air she breathed, like she never regretted the necks, bones, bodies she snapped and broke and impaled. She would make a good jonin, and if she wanted, he had no doubt she could be Kazekage someday, a dream he himself had once nursed. But she wouldn't. Because Mai hated politics and everything they stood for. As Kazekage, all she would be able to do was offend everyone. Mai was a soldier- a general- where Gaara was a leader. She followed her own orders, but that included the orders she received. Mai was a shinobi of Sunagakure, and he got the feeling she was proud of that.

But this was a completely different level than anything he'd ever seen. On missions, Otokaze-sensei always took the dangerous ones on. In Konoha, they had been separated. In Suna, she'd only used her fists, and only once or twice. Never had he seen her life truly threatened up close- not like this. Her wild grin was gone, replaced by a solidly determined expression that shifted into desperate, grimacing snarls.

When he could see her.

They bounced and ran and jumped. The water didn't so much as splash, the stone chip at all, but dust flew at their points of contact, metal rang. Fire blasted, lightning blasted, tags exploded along the cliffside, triggered by hastily set wires and thrown on the backs of rocks. The explosions, he was sure, were Mai's doing. They blurred like mirages.

Eishi could run that fast easily. But he couldn't come close to fighting at that speed- he'd broken his wrist at that speed, just from tripping on a badly placed stone in unfamiliar territory. Until this war, he hadn't even known his teammate could swim. She was tired, she was injured, she was deadly. He wanted to help. When he hit that guy, Eishi had felt strong.

It seemed all he'd really done was remind her he was even there. A nasty tables-turned because she hated feeling weak with every cell in her body, and being told off by someone whose life she'd saved multiple times? But there was also that dark streak of protectiveness he had come to rely on.

That stupid streak had gotten them equal parts nearly killed and loved by strangers. To Mai, there was collateral damage, yes, but then there was worthless, wasteful collateral damage. And then... there were her friends. He was her friend. Her taicho, or whoever that was- he was collateral damage.

So Eishi watched them move and run and stayed away from them, tucked into the rock Mai had
kicked him into. And he would yell at her for that later, but for now he was content to stop, dress his own wounds. He wished Shiragiku was here, both to help him with his herbs and magic spells but also to see their teammate. Shiragiku had fought with her, alongside her, something nobody in the Academy had ever seen.

He remembered that day. In particular. Ambushed by enemy ninja who thought they were a different team, thought they were an escort for some person or another who was important to someone. Mai had saved someone- some random child in the line of fire. Shiragiku had yammered the entire mission about protocol and orders and Mai had damned them, saved a child and survived.

And after that it was just unquestioning loyalty. Moreso than Eishi had ever shown.

"Eishi-kun! What's going on? Who is Mai-chan fighting with?"

And there went his hearing. He was losing too much blood. He had to stop watching Mai fight and focus more on that pesky little leg wound. Just a slash, really, but it was bleeding pretty badly.

A thud beside him made him flail away, thinking it was Yami or even Mai at that point would have scared him- but it wasn't. The figure knelt, reaching back for one of his calf pouches as he did so. "What did this?"

"Ah- my fan, if you'd believe it," he admitted sheepishly with a little smile and a blink as he realized that Shiragiku was there. "I'm not very good at the whole flying thing yet."

"I see. It shouldn't be dangerous, then, unless the water infected it." Rather than cut the fabric away- because it was protective and that would be stupid- Shiragiku pushed the ripped parts of his pant leg away to expose the wound, and skimmed his fingers along the cut. "No muscle damage. Who's Mai fighting?"

"Dunno," he said. "But you should really watch this."

"I've seen it," he murmured, and popped a handful of leaves in his mouth. Around the cluster, he mumbled, "Was she injured at all?"

"Yeah. Pretty bad. She got all burned, and that guy stabbed her in the back." He frowned. "Literally. Like all the way through." Eishi yelped at the sting when his teammate spread a palmful of gunk across the bloody tear, then cursed. "Damn it, Eishi! A little warning!"

"Sorry, Eishi-kun." He took the bandage from Eishi's fingers and measured a length out, tearing it with his teeth before setting to work. "So you have no idea who that is?"

"She calls him 'Taicho'," he said. "He calls her 'Jackal'."

"I see." His green eyes were unreadable, but he looked back towards the fight even as he tied off the bandage. Eishi winced. "We were lucky to get Mai-chan on our team, eh?"

"No kidding," Eishi sighed. "Look at her go."

Snippets of words could be heard from the shunshin mirages, and Eishi had heard them before, but oftentimes it was too blurred, too windy, not enough context. But he could see Shiragiku listening with a calm, frightening intensity, head tilted toward the general direction of the bowl. A lot of it was just Mai swearing, anyway, at the stab wound in her chest.

"What is she trying to do?" Shiragiku murmured. "I don't understand. He can't be injured."
"Mai always has a plan," Eishi reminded him. "Or at least a pretty good chance of surviving."

His words turned sour on his tongue, however, when a screech ripped through the already war-ridden air, and from the sky between the cliff ridges, Mai hurtled towards and smashed into the ground with a great spray of water and stone. The black-haired man with arm guards just like Mai's let himself fall, landing lightly on the water beside her.

He hadn't gone unscathed, not that it would last for long. The arm Eishi had cut off once had been cut off again and was still forming, along with portions of his cheek, chest and torso. Paper fluttered around him like a cloud. Eishi heard Mai groan, saw her turn, lifting her shoulder in an attempt to stand, unaware after an impact like that of her taicho's presence.

Eishi moved to stand, but thumped back against the rock at an arm that pushed him back. "Stay off that leg for now," he said.

"Shiragiku?" The blond-haired ninja stood, and Eishi blinked, eyes widening. "Shira, don't-"

His teammate nodded, as if to himself, with a tight expression on his face, and then he turned and took off, not even in shunshin. His hands came together in front of him, and the ground beneath the water the revived ninja started to bubble, and the water frothed, and smoothly he jumped out of the way as vines erupted from the earth.

Shiragiku took point in front of Mai, who still struggled and spat and cursed. His vines, forgotten, sagged slightly just to his right, held slightly up by the thickness of their trunks- like tree saplings at most.

"Your jutsu is slow, Chigusa," he said. And then, almost as an afterthought, he added, "You're so young."

Eishi flinched. Chigusa? So he recognized Shiragiku's jutsu, knew his family name. So he was from Sunagakure, then. And he was powerful. But Eishi had never seen this jonin, if that's what he was, or any level of shinobi that looked or sounded remotely like this man.

Who was he?

"Perhaps," Shiragiku admitted. His hands went backward, to the blade sheaths on his belt, and pulled both his chakra blade dusters. With a quick movement, he had poison vials clicked into each one, quick, methodical, yanked from his tunic; Eishi had seen it a thousand times. It didn't matter that the venom would have no effect- it was the intent.

"Shiragiku," Mai gasped, and struggled to push up, limbs shaking. Now that she had stopped moving, it seemed like the exhaustion of her speed and pain of her injuries were finally making an appearance- like sitting down and being unable to stand back up. She coughed; Eishi saw no blood from this distance but recognized the wet sound. "What the hell-"

For probably the first time in his life, Shiragiku attacked first, surging forward and slashing, then bending backwards nearly in half to avoid the other shinobi's movement.

It wasn't like Mai's fight, full of raw power and intense, but it was fast and it was close. Like there was a drawn circle, Shiragiku stayed in one place, skirting around and around and ducking and dodging and making useless, poisoned cuts on the reanimated ninja's calves, stomach, back. Meanwhile Mai wobbled to her knees, one hand pressed tight to the wound in her shoulder.

Her eyes rose and he could see the pain in them even from where he stood. She made a snarl with her lips, drawing back and exposing all her teeth.
Get him out of there.

But there wasn't anything he could do from this distance unless he ran and joined in, which was pretty stupid if she wanted neither of them to fight. And even so, whatever Shiragiku had used on his leg was slowly draining all the feeling out of it. Eishi wondered if he'd done that on purpose.

Shiragiku was quick, for sure. Quick and flexible. But he was going to get his head knocked off, he was only a chuunin, and barely at that. Eishi ignored the fact that he'd done the same thing and reached into his thigh pouch for one of his handheld fans, because maybe he could swipe it from here and maybe cut something else off this guy and-

There was a small sound, a tiny little Oof.

Then a splash as Shiragiku bulleted into the water headfirst and was still.

... ~ But there hadn't been anything of the sort in the file but an actual stupid rollcall, with checks in every present student's box. The only thing of interest had been a weird, piratish-looking gold coin taped to the manila folder. ~

... ~ Shiragiku!" Mai screamed, and managed to almost fall but instead pushed over onto her feet. It wasn't that he wasn't moving, he could be unconscious or in pain, that was all, and his face wasn't in the water, but she could see her taicho raising his hand and knew that the strategic solution to preventing Shiragiku from trapping him with vines was to hit him long range and electrify the water to kill plants.

It was a wobbly half-circle she careened in, vision blurry but getting clearer and clearer, so sharp it almost burned as she let her sharingan take over unconsciously because she could see his hands making Boar- Ram- Snake and knew that in two seconds he could finish with a Horse- Dragon and this was-

"Raiton: Electromagnetic Murder!"

... ~ As much as it pained her, though- it looked expensive and come on she'd snuck into the teacher's file box to see it- she left it there, just closed the file and put it back and closed the drawer. That way, no one would know she'd been there. ~

... ~ His blurry vision lit blue, and Shiragiku blinked rapidly, knowing the vertigo was temporary and he couldn't breathe because of the impact, so there was no need to panic, it would fade in a few seconds.

But that opinion changed rather quickly when he could see straight again, and there was lightning chakra coming out of that man's hands everywhere, spraying like a visible, crackling, angry wave of sound. He was in the open, he realized, and on top of that, ankle-deep water that lying down sideways like he was almost covered his nose.

He tried to sit up, but the seconds hadn't passed yet that would let him breathe.
Birdsong filled his ears, and he could hear probably Eishi yelling something he couldn't hear over
the sound of electricity. He could feel the hair rising on his arms and neck, the water starting to
tingle as the jutsu dipped into it, and the world got brighter and brighter until he couldn't really see
anything but blue-white and he wasn't able to scream, because he still couldn't breathe.

Shiragiku had seen an eclipse, twice. Once with his family, his brother and sister and mother and
father outside with an unnecessary telescope on the roof of their home. Every one of them, as
children, had been up past their bedtime to see it. The second time, he'd been with Eishi, Mai and
Otokaze-sensei, not on a mission, but a late training session.

He remembered the way it darkened, turned the world black. The moon, his mother had explained
to him, had covered over the sun- eclipsing it. That blocked the light from shining off it's surface,
and so the sky and earth bathed in the darkness of night.

His eyes were wide open when Mai skidded in front of him and, conversely, covering from his eye-
his umbra- the light of the lightning, stretching a shadow lengthwise yards beyond him in the
water, which was getting hotter and starting to sting and vibrate against his fingers and through his
blood.

Unlike an umbra, however, in it's total darkness, Shiragiku looked up, and he saw red and black
and swirling.

For a second he thought perhaps she didn't feel any pain, because she wasn't screaming, or even
moving at all, just standing there staring at him with lightning sparking like a full-body halo
around her, but then he realized she was twitching, shaking; and she was bleeding from where she
must have bit her tongue, and her sharingan eyes were wider than he figured was possible for
humans.

The air got hot, unbearably hot and now the water was causing him real, intense pain. There was a
violent flash, and then the chirping stopped, the lightning stopped, and his umbra got smaller and
smaller until with a splash, Mai hit the water face-first just in front of his legs.

Her back was scorched, with strange red pulsing wherever he could see skin, and her clothes
smoldered like the tip of a cigarette where it still remained; he could see the bandage she used in
place of a bra ripped in half and similarly burning, charred. Her hair floated in the water.

Shiragiku figured that if he tried, he would probably be able to breathe.

It was another few seconds until Mai's loose fingers fist ed slightly, and slid underwater like she
was going to move, that he realized she could breathe even less than he could. With a cry he fell
forward on his hands, crawled closer, took her by a mostly unburned, uninjured shoulder and rolled
her over.

Now Mai screamed, a loud, gasping thing that ran up and down his spine, like she was choking on
it. Where he touched her, Shiragiku's skin burned with residual lightning transformation.

"I- I didn't mean to-..."

Knowing his face looked desperate, Shiragiku looked to see her taicho ghastly pale.

"Mai! Shit! Shira! Is she breathing?!

Splash-splash-spash. He could hear Eishi's limp in the water, and then he was in front of both of
them, giant war fan in hand. It was black in a few big spots, and Shiragiku realized he'd probably
used it to block the lightning wave that had swept the area.
"I'm- f-f-fine," Mai rasped, as her mouth continued to shake, muttering through her locked jaw. Her Sharingan eyes flickered away, like she didn't want him to see it. She had awakened the ability in both eyes; and he had seen it in her face when she'd nearly fallen in front of him into the lightning's path: three tomoe in the left eye, two in the other. They spun slowly.

"M-Mai-chan-"

"Shira, s-sh-shut up," she murmured. "I've g-got a p-plan g-g-goddamn this t-t-twitch-ching-" She shook her head like she was clearing it. "H-help me stand u-up."

Against his own better judgement- it was in bad way to let her do anything, she could have brain damage, he needed to find and disinfect and clean and wrap the entry and exit points, she was already injured- although it seemed the lightning had cauterized her bleeding wounds- he helped her to sit, and then to stand, and then gave her one of his own chakra pills.

She wobbled. Shiragiku, not to waste time, put his palms flat against her back and started to heal. His Mystical Palm would last for hours, but he knew he probably had only minutes while Mai told them her plan until she took off, or tried to. Healing the nerve damage could mean the difference between a well-executed crazy plan that worked and realizing halfway that her arm didn't work right.

"Eishi," she said. "Tight in a little, but keep the wind up if he gets closer."

Eishi took a few steps back.

"Okay," she said. "I-I have the sharingan. I'm sorry I didn't t-t-tell you guys before-" She was panting a little between words, and one eye ticced erratically. "B-but-"

"I knew."

Shiragiku blinked in sync to Mai's sudden silence, and for a half second, the green glow about his fingers faded. But then he caught his senses and went at it as thoroughly as before, sealing cells and muscle fibers and muscles and skin. But Mai said, "Wh-what?"

Eishi looked over his shoulder at them, half-smirked, fan still raised between him and the shinobi. "At the battle in Konoha," he said. "When you were dying. You were sharingan almost the entire time."

...  
~ Nobody had believed her, of course, without proof, so the day had been a fairly uneventful save for that. Until, at least, the walk home. ~

...  

They were running.

Well, jumping, but running was an accurate enough term. A tactical retreat is what it would be called later, on paper, by himself and the rest of his Surprise Attack ambush platoon. They fled through the trees, staying together, unfortunately being given away every ten seconds by Deidara, who was a broken record: "I said I wanna get out of here!"

"It's no use!" a platoon member, Hoheto, cried. "We can't lose them!"

"Tango! Get HQ," Kankuro ordered. The older man nodded, made the necessary hand signs. He
muttered to himself under his breath; a habit whilst speaking to another in his mind. Kankuro doubted they would be able to send someone to help in time, but even if there was no one close, Headquarters and Intelligence needed to know what was going on in case they all fell off the map.

Not that he intended to let that happen.

But still.

He could hear the reanimated shinobi bickering behind them, just yards away. Mainly Chiyo and Hanzo, and really Kankuro couldn't say he was surprised at that, with Sunagakure's Honorable Grandmother involved. He could feel Deidara struggling through his chakra strings, the puppet vibrating and rocking midair in his efforts.

They were keeping a good distance, he thought. Far enough and erratic enough to avoid most of the ninja weapons, with enough variation in skills to prevent Chiyo from using chakra threads on any of them, Kimimaro from hitting them with bone weapons. If they kept up they would hit another clearing, and then a mile and a half of forest to the nearest medical base camp.

He frowned. Not that he wanted to lead them there. So where...?

A vibration in the air had him jerking, barely catching his footing on the next branch, and there was the telltale scent of chakra smoke. He knew that smell well, from Temari's countless hours of practicing her Weasel summons.

"Do it now, Ibuse!" he heard from behind him. Hanzo's deep voice.

Every member of the platoon, by some horrible freak of a coincidence, was in the air, mid-jump with no branches directly below them, when the cloud of poison gas hit them, coating the air itself in purple. Immediately, his nose burned, his eyes flamed, he could feel his throat contracting within seconds. He dropped like a weighted stone, hitting the forest floor.

His knee smashed into a tree root, but that didn't matter. He coughed into his hand, praying internally that it didn't start to hack blood, wiped at his watering eyes. At the pain in his insides he couldn't focus on his chakra threads, they'd already failed; he hoped that Deidara hadn't been released in the fall.

He resorted to poison because he was tired of chasing us? he thought, managing to pry an eye open to try and glance around through the purple smokescreen. His eye flickered to his hand, already shaking with the venom's effects. Damn it- I should be resistant to poison-! But my body's going numb.

The purple fog in front of him darkened to reveal a shape, an incoming threat. He pushed aside the numbness and the burning and lifted one hand, picking up Deidara who was yelling for reinforcements and part of Sasori, who raised defensively. A tree crashed and shakily he stood, ignoring the non-poison fire in his knee.

But he only had one hand, and two options. Release Deidara and pick up the Sasori puppet to fight without it's charge, or keep his puppet closed and die because that frog was the one who'd shot the poison wasn't it and-

"No!" there wasn't time to make a decisions, Hanzo the Salamander had come to kill him. He remembered a line he'd once read- A shinobi's life is not measured by the way he lives, but the way he dies.

He didn't want to go out from a blade.
There was a ringing clang, and for half a delirious second- too much poison really- he thought Mai was there with her blades, and panic grabbed his chest. But there was no snark, no insult, and Kankuro's eyes flicked to see Mifune, head of the Samurai, leaping from behind him, and managing to push Hanzo back several feet by the butt of his blade.

"Lord Hanzo I presume," Mifune growled out, more intensely than Kankuro had heard from his voice or even his demeanor yet. "My name is Mifune, leader of the samurai. And I wish to battle you!"

Kankuro didn't realize he was falling until the leaves crunched under him and his knee flared with pain. There was a rattle behind him like thousands of pieces of armor coming on and off each other, but his head was starting to swim, and this time when he coughed, his hand ran warm with blood.

... 

~ "Who are you?" she asked the tall man in an animal mask kind of shaped like a weasel's face who had appeared out of pretty much nowhere suspiciously. Everyone new what an ANBU Black Ops ninja looked like. ~

... 

"You knew?"

"Yeah."

"And you d-d-idn't say anything?"

Eishi shook his head, brought his fan down. Yami stumbled back from his advance. She knew she didn't have much time left and if he couldn't get close he would use lightning again. Eishi wasn't practiced enough to isolate his more powerful ones but he had known her most guarded secret.

"You would've just shut me out, Mai," he said. "I figured either you'd tell me when you were ready or you wouldn't at all. Makes no difference to me."

Mai shook her head. It was foggy, a little, and there were still little thrills running through her blood. Her back was fire itself despite Shira's work, and she'd been on fire before. She knew exactly how that felt. The water had done more harm then good, cooling her bandages and clothing scraps to the damaged skin. But pain was just waves, and if she stopped swimming she would drown.

Go go go.

"New formation, guys," she said, ignoring the topic for the time being, shelving it for later, if they survived. "I'm g-gonna need both of you and it might n-not work."

They nodded, and so she started. She explained it quickly, quietly, and Eishi kept up the wind to block her former taicho's hearing. Even in her own mind, she could visualize all the ways this could go wrong. A lot of it depended on how well and how much Shiragiku's jutsu had healed her in the time it took to explain, but also on Fumiko's prototype, Shira's speed, her own speed, her taicho's intelligence.

And it depended on her sharingan.

When she finished, both Eishi and Shiragiku were nervous. She could feel it in Shira's palms, and
see it in Eishi's knitted brows.

"You're nuts."

"Only one shot," Shiragiku said.

"Yeah, pretty much." she admitted. "But guys, he's gonna kill us if we stand around much longer."

"And after this," Eishi said sternly, "We are all spending a long long time relaxing in the main medical base, got it?"

"Sure. You guys ready?"

Shiragiku's Mystical Palm stopped and he pulled away. Mai winced, biting her lip, but rode the wave of pain that followed, smaller than it had been. After a second of hesitation, Eishi sighed, then nodded.

"All right then, Team Nine," she said, and Eishi's fan snapped shut with a decisive snap. "Let's pierce."

"Jackal," Yami warned.

"Yeah, taicho," she said, and made a fist with one hand. "We'll put you down. And by the way..." She rolled her shoulders and reached back into her pouch for a roll of razor wire, slipped her hand in the middle of it like a bracelet. "My name is Mai."

"Your eyes," he said.

"That," she returned, "is all your fault."

And she attacked. It hurt like hell, and brought tears to her unblurable eyes, but she attacked, she darted, she jumped up and swung down in a crushing roundhouse kick that brought the heads off microfiber practice dummies with plastic spines.

He blocked it on his arm guard, and so she shifted, planning to either springboard off the limb or tear off his arm with the force of her attempt. But he was immortal, and he was strong, and she sprang into the air and landed, almost disastrously, near one of her swords. Water crashed behind her as she skidded to a stop, dropping her hands to the stone and digging in her nails before grabbing it by the handle and straightening.

But she sheathed it, and went instead for the inner lip of her arm guard, coming out with knucklesfull of senbon the size of her pointer finger. She threw them, and they glimmered like spiderwebs, but he dodged both the first throw and the second, and in a mirror of her earlier attack brought his foot down at her head. She ducked, rolled- momentarily stopped at the pain of the rocks and water at her back, but she rolled and stood before he could step on her face and break her nose and send cartilage into her brain.

"You've improved," he said, not even slightly out of breath to her gasping in pain. "Not many can stand when I hit them with that."

"One more scar," she managed, and darted in with a chakra-charged arm, threads of razor wire unwound halfway in her fingers. He dodged, and kept on running, spinning around her person like was his specialty and his mantra- kill from behind kill from behind kill from behind. She was counting on that mantra and on every one of his old habits. So she spun with him, blocked his kunai with her wire, watched his chakra with her eyes.
This was her first fight with the sharingan. The one with Sasuke hadn't counted- he'd knocked her out before she had a chance to even tell what style he used on her own. And the world was out of balance; more intense and magnified and clear on her right peripheral than her left, and both clearer than she was used to. But she could see when he would move and where, even if her body was in too much pain to react with the necessary speed.

It was giving her a migraine on top of everything else, but it was helping. Slightly. Maybe.

Her back hit stone, and she cursed, dropping just as he punched forward with his kunai.

Here we go, Eishi.

She drew her sword and spun the hilt across her palm as that rushing-water sound ripped through the air, but this time, prepared, her old teacher just cut through it with his kunai, filtered and sharpened with untransformed chakra. Automatically, at this distance, with an enemy within his grasp, he wouldn't- couldn't- go after Eishi, but with at least three other weapons on his person he was clear to take him out that way.

His arm snapped out, kunai flying, and Eishi yelped, readying his fan. The blade was coated and sharpened with chakra, though, it would cut through his wind and the paper of his fan. "Eishi!" Mai yelled and stood, reared her arm back, and threw her sword in cartwheels in his direction. With a flash of sparks, the kunai dropped, sword flashing past Eishi's head and burying itself halfway into the ground behind him.

"You're fighting me," she growled, and brought up her hands. "Katon: Flame Bullet!"

He bent like a freak of nature piece of spaghetti, and as soon as the flames passed flipped away, hands-feet-hands-feet-hands-feet until he finally stopped, sliding smoothly across the surface of the water like a frozen pond.

Hands back up, she peeled away from the cliffside and followed. Ram- Snake- Tiger. This one she didn't call out, mainly because it made her feel stupid to admit out loud that she was actually using the clone technique in a fight against an A-ranked ANBU assassin. She felt nothing but a chakra pull as it colored on either side of her, one-two-three clones aside from herself.

They mirrored her hands again and inhaled, bringing hands to lips. "Katon: Great Fireball!"

In the sharp contrasts of light, she could see the disbelieving look on her taicho's face, like, really? I can see which massive balls of light aren't giving off shadows.

One more. Her clones ran ahead of her, still giving light to follow her flame attack that he would dodge, probably either under the water or sliding left to avoid a possible attack by Eishi; both would work, it didn't matter. She crunched quickly on a half a soldier pill, thought hard on the crystal-shiny memory of the blue lights and hand signs of Raiton: Electromagnetic Murder, and took a breath.

Boar- Dragon- Ram- Snake- Tiger.

... ~ "You left it there," he said rather than answering. "The first in a while not to get caught for stealing it." ~

...
Yami honestly couldn't believe she had just sicced intangible clones breathing shadowless fire at him.

He really really hoped she had a plan and wasn't just desperately out of chakra because that would just really be incredibly insulting.

But it was Jackal- his student. His mind scattered to figure out the trick, the plan, but here they came: four Jackals- Mais- each breathing fire that was slowly dissipating after he dodged left to avoid the real one. His eyes flicked again to check but yes- not, not, shadows, not, not.

He lunged the second the heat was gone against his will and stabbed Mai through the chest as she turned to face him.

Unexpectedly, she smiled, and grabbed his wrist.

"You feel just like paper," she said softly. "Taicho."

And then she exploded with blue and crackling and lightning, and the body he'd been given, deep below the surface, straightened, froze. A lightning clone? But she had never learned Raiton, had never even shown the most mild interest in learning any other nature transformation but fire.

He knew it would fade in seconds- he was better than others with paralysis, had been electrocuted before, had the wild popped-vein scars all over his body to prove it. Whatever this body was.

But then his straight limbs snapped together at-attention, and he could feel the wetness of freshly-watered plant stalks slithering across his skin, and then with a distinctly uncomfortable feeling like a pulse of nausea, two solid spikes jammed through his midsection like an X's lines.

He tried, he struggled, his mind went through the options.

He was trapped. Maybe not for long, but he was trapped.

"Nice, Shira, hold him there!" Splash-splash of non-chakra assisted, exhausted sloshing rounded him, and then there was Jackal in front of him, grimacing more than grinning but trying. 'Shira' must have agreed because the thick vine trunks impaled deeper, exiting out of his body like spears and more smaller ones wound around his limbs.

"How did you do that?"

"Easy, taicho," she said, and tapped her temple, indicating to her eye. "I learned it from the best."

"You- copied me?" he asked disbelievingly, could feel it coloring his voice. "But I didn't use a Raiton shadow clone."

"Nope," she said, digging one hand through her back pouch that he had seen. It seemed she was wearing bits and pieces of her ANBU armor- the arm guards, the back pouch. The rest of it he remembered from seeing her around the village, save for the torn fishnet of her ruined outfit. "But you sure did use a Raiton. Ouch. Same basic hand seals usually."

"You just learned how to use Raiton?" He could feel the tingling fading, knew she had to get a sealing team quick, but he couldn't help himself: he was curious. "With your sharingan?"

"Oh, it hurt, and I think I did it wrong," she said. "But it worked."

"And how aren't these plants dead?" he demanded lightly. "I can feel the electricity in them, too."
"You know the Chigusa have a kekkei genkai, but you don't know what it is, do you?" she asked, wincing. "There's a reason they aren't overpowered like a wood-released Senju. They don't use Earth and Water Release. It's Earth and Wind."

Her hand came away, gripped around a small, kiwi-sized ball of fabric like sealing paper. Her hands were torn from the wire she'd used so oddly and bloody, so already it was starting to unravel like it'd been activated.

"What is that?"

"A present from my sister. You met her-"

"In purgatory."

"Right," she said and swallowed, wiping absently at the blood on her lip before dropping the ball. Paper ran like a sentient thing, like a Northern Star, and seals on each strand popped to release more, and slowly they rose, but too slowly. Mai, it seemed, knew these plants wouldn't keep him long enough to be sealed, because she hadn't moved yet.

"You're planning to seal yourself?" he said sharply. "You-"

"No such thing, Squirrel-taicho," she said, and in her hand was a final bit of wire, no longer than the length of her arm. With no time to spare, because his arm came loose from the binding and darted for her face, aiming for her temporal artery in the neck-

The attachment to his fingers vanished momentarily, arm falling uselessly to the water.

Immediately his old student stepped on it to keep it from rolling out of the slowly rising paper barrier.

"The way it was explained to me, this thing is gonna go sphere, and then it's gonna snap shut like a vaccuum bag," Mai said. "And we only really have a few more seconds if it works. So first thing's first, I need to say something. Your cat died. I found the old bastard dead in your bedroom."

Yami blinked.

"But I got a kitten. Her kitten. Call him cat." Again she viciously brought her wire down as his arm reformed, then took off the wrist and hand of his other arm as it broke free. "He's okay- back home."

More vines took up the job of prison, but he could tell it wouldn't last long, not if this thing was going to close him all the way in. It would cut through them from below.

Jackal studied him soundlessly for a moment, then let go of the wire with one hand, reaching back into her pouch again. Instinctively he tensed, but slackened again when she came out with a small blue book, the size of a sealed bag of a six-pack of kunai. Without the book sleeve, it was just small and blue, with SEREITO emblazoned across the front in small, capitalized gold print.

"What should be spoken here, where our fate, Hid in an auger-hole, may rush, and seize us?" she murmured. "Our tears are not yet brewed."

"I'm glad you found that," he admitted. And, as she put it away silently, nodded. "And I'm glad you weren't with us that day, Mai. It would have been a huge loss to Suna. You've grown into a fine kunoichi."

She blinked rapidly, eyes still on the ground.
"You'll make a great sensei someday."

"Maybe," she said, hoarse. "Goodbye, taicho. In the next life."

Reaching back with her other hand, she pulled on air behind her back. Blood cut her palm, and he realized it wasn't nothing- there was wire wrapped around her torso. With a jerk, and a grunt, she was gone, yanking out just as the paper closed after her.

...

~ "What are you talking about?" ~

...

"Oof!" Water soaked into her already wet leather pants, and again into her lightning entrance point, which hurt like a bitch, as well as the landing. She brought a hand to her head, feeling dizzy from the eyes-down. "Ughh..."

"That was stupid!" Hands grabbed her shoulders, and she had to bite down on her lip to hide the gasp. Immediately they dropped, and fingers unwound the pressure from her torso. "I almost pulled you out of there without your stupid signal, you almost got sealed, dumbass!"

"I knew when it was gonna snap," she muttered.

There was another splash, probably Shiragiku falling over.

"Like hell you did. You're something else, you know that?"

"Was that a compliment or an insult?" Her eyes were fluttering, sharingan released in the seal circle. Mai glanced up at it, and saw the mummy of her taicho, scrawled with seals, lying on the ground. Kami only knew how Fumiko had managed to do that- probably she'd studied the sealing teams' techniques and mimicked them.

"I don't know yet. Now get up, we're going to the infirmary, all of us."

"... I can't."

"What do you mean, you can't?" he demanded.

"I mean I can't!" She scowled. "I can't- I can't stand."

"... Oh." Without another word- for good reason, she might have knocked out his teeth if he'd tried to tease her- he wound one of her arms over his neck and stood carefully, palming her side to keep from pushing down on her new scars-to-be. As uncomfortable as it made her, she had to lean against him.

That Raiton had burned her from the inside out and used up the last of chakra not fed to her sharingan. She hoped to everything she could think of that she hadn't destroyed any chakra pathways with that stupid risk.

"Yo, Shiragiku! You good?"

"I..." He wasn't good, probably, he was kneeling on the ground and panting like he'd been stabbed through the lung. "I'm all right."

"Come on, Mai."
Her feet dragged, everything hurt, and he sagged slightly under her weight, but that way okay, except- she glanced back, saw her sword tied with razor wire, embedded in the ground. Her other was somewhere in the water, outside the lip.

"I want my swords."

"I-"

"I want my swords."

"Whoa," Eishi said suddenly. "Who is that?"

With the last of her failing vision, she glanced upward. And blinked. Then sighed.

"I don't know how," she said. "Or why, or when. But that is Akimichi Choji."

...  
~ "You," he said. "During recess tomorrow, do it again. Meet me there." ~

...

"It's all right," Fumiko soothed. "You'll be fine."

Her patient didn't reply, but he relaxed slightly. His fingers slipped away from her wrists, and she continued the healing process, blinking away her exhaustion. This was okay- better than the fighting.

She hoped Mai was okay. But no one had come saying she was dead and she hadn't yet passed through the rounds. Chances were, she was with Choza or Darui or someone cleaning up the last of the white zetsu with her teammate Eishi, if not Shiragiku, whom she'd seen briefly passing through. Or maybe Choji was helping her, Choji with his wide, massive, beautiful wings.

She would heal him afterwards, if she could. He was her patient. But this was no pill. He was in Body Expansion and had the wings of one a hundred times larger, and they didn't eclipse the sun, but filtered it into rainbows, like the prism hanging from her neck. For all she knew, there wouldn't be any ill effects at all.

Which might have been good. She wiped the sweat from her forehead, hands fading back to a pale tan. She was fairly close to empty. The injured man was sleeping on his cot now, at ease without the pain of the massive wound in his chest.

"Fumiko-san, another one," Tsuki said (Tsuki, a medic she'd never met from Kusa).

"Right, Tsuki," she said, and made to stand or at least shift to a different cot. Instead, she wavered.

"Fumiko-san? Fumiko-san!"

Oh, she thought, staring up at Choji's pretty blue rainbow-wings. I'm on the ground.

With a sigh, she let herself close her eyes.

...

~ And in a blur, he was gone. ~
Chapter End Notes

Trying to remember everything that happened in this chapter. So! Mai learns lightning release and fights her previous ANBU master, Squirrel.

BTW, there are character pages for both Fumiko and Mai Mitsuwa on Naruto OC Wiki.

MAI'S SHARINGAN: NOT SUCH A WELL-KEPT SECRET AFTER ALL! Eishi saw it switch to second stage during the invasion of pein while she was dying and thought Fumiko was dead. She just wasn't coherent enough to realize he was there. (I left hints! Like... two. But I DID)
The fighting was far from over, although it was definitely ending. With Choji the size of a Kage Tower and seething with power so great that it bled out of his shoulders, teammates by his side and with the help of the Allies no less, it didn't take long to dispatch the last of the zetsu and reanimated shinobi.

It was hard to move. Everything hurt, except for what was numb. Mai couldn't fight and she hated it; hated leaning on Eishi's side as they battled their way to the medic-nin, Shiragiku and his dusters guarding them from attack. Team Otokaze passed what looked suspiciously like Dan of the Leaf- a figure even she remembered from her History and Battlefield Tactics classes- being sealed inside a barrier, random scattered shinobi fighting, Choji helping pin down what looked like a Hyuga.

Despite her protests, Eishi stayed for none of these battles, taking her instead straight to the infirmary- a bunch of tatami mats filled with injured, medics flailing all over the place, a few of the Units of the Second Division who'd been assigned to helping the injured without having any medical skill setting up tents to prepare for the coming night.

People murmured as she limped inside, Eishi still holding her up. Mai let her tired, drooping eyes drift across the crowds of decimated shinobi and drained medics who stared back at her, never meeting their eyes; brushing over their faces and positions. It was no different from Suna at all- her mind flashed to the memory of swaggering through the streets despite her bandages and boots and sling, the attention from people who realized she was a shinobi-

What did she go through? And she survived?

It was less gratifying now that she was being dragged, but she was worse off than she had been after Pein's attack. Mentally, as her feet dragged through the soaked, flooded sand, toes scraping across stones and shattered spikes and dropped weapons, water seeping through the soles of her shoes only slightly less than blood, she had taken stock, and was prepared for most of what the medics would throw at her.

Burns across her face, shoulders, arms and legs- half-healed across her face already; a medley of third and second-degree, not to mention the lightning-strike wounds and burns. Minor gashes and scrapes, a stab in her right arm that would probably scar from a kunai that had broken through her fishnet, the shrapnel wound in her back. Stabbed clean through the chest and shoulders. Probably a broken collarbone. Damage from her own hastily used Ninja and Razor Wire.

And chakra exhaustion. Mai sensed none of the medical ninja or shinobi- nothing but the wisps in her own body. So she knew she was deprived, even aside from the waves of familiar exhaustion and deep aching pain that followed that particular ailment.

On the bright side, she was less close to death than she had been during the Invasion of Konoha by those Pein-Akatsuki freaks. In more pain, yes, and probably more likely to be crippled for the rest
of forever, but less close to dying all together. Eishi was limping as well, redness seeping through
the impromptu first aid on his leg, and hunched slightly where he'd been hit across his torso.

It was for the best they stopped fighting, she tried to think. Eishi needed new flak. She needed new
clothes. Shiragiku probably needed a few soldier pills, if there weren't enough med-nin to replenish
him naturally. And it was almost finished anyway.

Shiragiku stopped momentarily behind them, hopefully to tell someone about the wrapped mummy
seal in the cove. As soon as they stumbled into the thick of the hive, a single medical ninja
approached them. And she was a trained medical ninja- older looking, foreign, and she didn't grab
at them, for good reason- Mai, with her shot nerves and pain, probably would have stabbed her.

"What in the world-" she exclaimed over the mild din.

"We need a mat," Eishi threw back.

"Not with those injuries you don't," she muttered, and Mai looked sharply up at her after realizing
her head had been lolling towards her shoulder, eyes dragging across the ground. Seriously? She
was probably the most injured person here save for two or three- not that she wanted special
treatment but you try getting struck by lightning you old-

"You need a tent," the older woman finished anxiously, fingers reaching out to ghost over Mai's
face. She was certain heat pulsed out of it, certain if not from fever than by her burns. Then she
pulled away, jerked a hand over her shoulder to indicate a nearby white sorry excuse for a lean-to.
"Or you'll be infected and full of pus by tomorrow morning."

On her other side, away from the danger, Shiragiku sidled closer and took her other arm. Tucked
into his belt were her swords, one pulled from the depths of what used to be a pristine picturesque
beach at least fifteen feet submerged. His blond hair was matted and sweaty, but hadn't yet fallen
out of it's ponytail as hers had. As far as she could tell, he wasn't injured, but his clan jutsu had
destroyed his reserves, and his face was extremely focused as he walked, staring at his feet.

She recognized that look: Right. Left. Right. Left.

"I don't need any more help," she muttered crossly, ignoring the race of pain that shot through her
body as he moved her arm. Again her eyes drifted, and she thought maybe she had a concussion.

"Of course not," he agreed as they started to move after the medic-nin towards the tent. Eishi
beside her ignored or didn't notice the stares and quiet whispers among those not busy or crippled
with pain or unconscious.

"Don't p-patronize me," she said sharply, then winced at the twitch.

"Never, Mai-chan."

"Stop trying to walk," Eishi snapped, almost amusingly irritated. "It isn't working. You're only
tripping me."

Wasn't it? Again Mai looked down, because yes she was trying to help and carry at least some of
her own dead weight, but she couldn't really feel her legs save for a few thrills of pain. And it was
ture- they flopped slightly, more to the left and right than forward.

Mai felt a furrow crease between her eyebrows, and frowned. She really, really, really hoped her
tenketsu were okay, and the majority of her numbed out nerves. She'd used Raiton, yes: but she'd
used it wrong, and she wasn't sure if she'd made lightning with her chakra or made her chakra into
lightning, all of it, inside her, or maybe she'd barely done it and ruined herself. And her former Taicho's Raiton could have fried more than just her skin.

It would suck, ultimately, to be jutsu-crippled or physically crippled for the rest of her life fighting someone who was already dead. Even if that someone was Squirrel-taicho.

Note to self: Sharingan was not reliable. Just another reason to never use it again.

The medic nin pushed open the tent's flap, then held it from inside to let them through. It was a decent size considering it was a little over halfway constructed, with four mats, two already occupied by unconscious shinobi she didn't recognize being tended by a nurse. It smelled less like antiseptic and medicine, as a medical base camp usually did, and more like dirt and blood and sweat and piss.

Fan-freaking-tastic.

She bit her tongue despite its already mangled state as her teammates eased her down onto a spare mat away from the other two injured, both of them awkwardly shifting to put her down on her knees, and then gently let her drop towards the mat, lying on her stomach. All she could do was turn her face to look at them.

"I'll send someone to tend you," the medical ninja said to Eishi, and moved to sit by her side. "Wait outside."

"No."

The med-nin scowled.

Mai felt pain in her back, like bandaids peeling off open wounds, but it was negated by the healing that followed. She shuddered slightly, let her eyes shutter closed as Shiragiku set to work picking and digging the scraps of clothing and bandage out of her skin. She could barely see his expression, tight and grim-faced.

"You're not authorized to-"

"I apologize," Shiragiku said softly. "But I am authorized to help, and I would like to take this out of her wounds so I can disinfect them. She was exposed to seawater."

"I am perfectly capable of-" the doctor began hotly, but cut off at Mai's literal growl, eyes sliding back open like they were weighed down with lead. Her vision was starting to swim.

"I don't think she likes you," Eishi informed the med-nin with a straight-faced kind of smugness in his tone, matter-of-fact, as Shiragiku continued to tear away the cloth. At this point he had cut away most of her shit and loose pieces of inner covering, and somewhere, mildly, Mai knew that she was naked from the waist up, unless you counted the bits fused to her.

But her chest was to the ground and they both had mothers, they could very well deal with it.

"Ma'am," Shiragiku murmured. "She won't sleep without someone familiar. We need to stay here. We can take care of ourselves."

"I-" the nurse hesitated. "I don't-"

"There should be another medical ninja here," he said. "Fumiko-san?"
Yeah, she thought, Fumiko; where's she anyway? Fumiko was her med-nin just as Shiragiku was her med-nin.

"Fumiko-san?" The doctor paused for a moment, thinking. Mai struggled to stay aware, shaking against the pain, mostly in her shoulder and the marks left behind by lightning. "She's unconscious. Chakra-deprivation. She's being tended now..."

Stupid sister, her mind muttered. Everyone else's med-nin too.

Eishi shifted closer, directly into her line of vision, injured leg dragging across the dirt floor next to her already damp mat. She looked at him, eyes almost pained by straining them upwards at the corners to see his face, but let them flicker to the bloody stain across his flak as he set to work detangling the wire from her hair.

"Send her when she wakes up, if she isn't busy," Shiragiku said. "This is her sister."

"What happened to her?"

"She sealed a reanimated shinobi, but was badly injured in the process."

"She got hit by lightning ninjutsu," Eishi said far less eloquently. "Like, full on. And got stabbed. And jumped in fire. And-"

"I think she gets it," Mai managed to spit.

"You shush."

"You--" she started, and probably would have said something extremely rude if not for the medical-nin's interruption.

"I'll send someone immediately to help," the nurse decided. "Those shoulder wounds need attention."

It was a dedication to her terrible shitty state when Mai realized she couldn't hear the woman leaving. She tried to blink away the blurriness but her eyes stayed closed longer than she wanted, and she breathed through her nose in frustration, a hiss.

"You should sleep," Eishi said, and she knew he was worried and also that he would stay in the tent because he instantly slipped into his familiar nervous rambling. She remembered it. "You'll be fine, Shira will get all this crap off and someone else'll heal the rest of you, you'll be out fighting again in no time, all limbs accounted, you won't even twitch we'll definitely need your help--"

It was to that stupid, annoying drone, surprisingly, that she finally, unwillingly slipped into darkness.

...

~ Shikamaru sighed. Mai had been getting more and more irritated throughout the game, but this topped any match previous. She didn't have the patience for Shogi. "Because those are the rules." ~

...

It was a while before Fumiko woke up.

At least, she was pretty sure. It had been bright out when she passed out. Now the sky was stained a pretty shade of sunset, in some places shadowed in the thin sunlight remaining. It would be dark
soon.

Her head hurt like she'd whacked it on the bottom of a table, and she winced. It was another few seconds of letting her eyes adjust to being open and reaching her hand up to her forehead before she realized that there was someone hovering over her face, and that once again her skin was warm with escaping chakra, and there was no soldier-pill buzz.

"Fumiko-san," the stranger said. "It's good to see you awake."

"Eh?" she slurred.

"Oh, you passed out. But everything has settled down now."

"Did we- um, did we win?" she squinted in the faint light. Choji's wings were gone from the sky.

The male medic smiled. "Our fight- yes."

"Good..."

"I've healed most of your injuries," the man said, and pulled his hands away from her torso. "You've been asleep for a while now. You should be all right to rejoin the ranks when we're called to fight. I suggest changing."

He helped her to sit up, not because she needed it but because she was still a little tired. All around her there was noise, and as she looked about, Fumiko saw overnight-tents and tatami mats seething with healing injured. Shinobi milled about with bandages tied around all their limbs, medics moved from mat to bloody mat.

"Am I needed anywhere?" she asked, glancing back at the medic's black eyes. Now that she was lucid she recognized his Konoha-styled war outfit. "How many injured are there? What's our number?"

The ninja merely shook his head at her. "Go change," he said. "If we're needed, you need solid flak and armor."

Fumiko sighed. "Right. Yeah. Of course. I guess I'll ask my commander what to do when I'm done. Where's my thing?"

Before she could realize how absolutely vague that was, the medic handed over her prosthetic and sock, both of which were cleaned of blood save for a few stains in the wood that made her cringe. But she needed it, and so she set to putting it on, thanking the man and pulling the sock up over her stump.

"I need to go and help the others," he said, and picked up her sheath, which had been lying beside her, which she took, putting down her prosthetic. The staff was still in there- which was fantastic, because she had a feeling this war wasn't over yet and this was her very last one. "Stay as long as you need."

She smiled at him, but before she could say anything aloud he had nodded and stood, jogging toward a nearby shinobi five or six mats down from where she sat.

She felt much better now that she'd had at the very least a few hours of sleep, but Fumiko was a little surprised she'd woken up after so short a time. Usually she slept at least a full six hours or so. Her body still hurt, scrapes and mild cuts left alone save for being disinfected and wrapped. There was a bandage on her forearm and around her forehead and stomach, flak jacket gone along with
her ruined fishnet.

It was fine, she had sealed away a bunch of extras. The first, second and third Great Wars had lasted for months at a time individually, sometimes years. Fumiko made a mental note as she finished tugging on her prosthetic to find Shikamaru and ask him about the progress of tactics. Surely he knew what was going on all across the Land of Lightning.

And speaking of which, she needed to find Choji as well. And Mai; if the fighting was over she was probably here as well.

Fumiko stood, feeling the flakiness of sweat and blood in her shirt and pants. She worried her lip slightly as she looked over the massive amounts of injured, but hurried towards a blue tent- a non-medical based tent that she could change in and maybe find some water to rinse the dirt and blood and mud off her if she could.

Inside, she found two other shinobi, one male and one female, both in various states of undressed. They barely spared her a glance as she stepped inside and closed the tent flaps. Both were injured in some way; she had a bandage around her head and part of her face, covering one eye, along with various others, and he was tending a bandage around his ribs stained in red.

The silence bothered her, and so as she knelt to dig through her medical bag for her supply seals she tried to make some kind of light conversation. "How is everything? The medics wouldn't tell me our numbers."

"Hell of a lot smaller than we were when we started," the male muttered. His clothes were a type she was unfamiliar with, although she recognized the headband tied around his arm, glinting like the "Shinobi" hitai-ate on his forehead. An unfinished arrow- Takigakure, Village Hidden by a Waterfall. "Even with reinforcements added."

In her bag she found her headband and only then realized it'd been taken off for her bandage. "At least we won. Nobody died in vain."

There was a violent thudding sound as the woman- no identifying headband in sight- threw down her own bag. "Yet."

"Don't lose hope yet, Yumi," the Takigakure shinobi said.

Fumiko studied her unraveled strip of seals for a moment before lying it against the ground and putting a hand over one at a time as she needed them. Both of the shinobi in the room flinched at the first Unsealing, eyes darting for the noise and source of the smoke, but relaxed when it was only fresh clothes.

They were quiet again as she tugged on a new fishnet top. She considered asking them about the lovely sunset, wondering if they would just glare at her or not but not having anything else to talk about but death and other assorted dark things, but before she could, the woman spoke.

"If it wasn't for that kid, we'd both be dead anyway. That Silver brother Kyuubi thing would've killed us."

The man made a noise of agreement, wincing as he tightened his bandages. "First time I've been saved by someone who looked like they could be in the Academy."

"Who?" Fumiko asked curiously as she flipped her hair out of the white t-shirt. At first they didn't answer, startled-looking, and she reached for her flak, still kneeling. "There are a lot of young kids here that I saw."
"Some little girl," the Takigakure- they both must have been from Takigakure if they knew each other- man said. "She was on our fire style squad. She pulled us underwater before the tails could hit us."

Fumiko blinked, mind running through the squadrons she'd helped piece together. First division had fire squad, unlike the Second- fire, water, earth and wind squads- and there were maybe twenty in the fire squad, but she couldn't recall if there were any really young kids, but...

"Black hair," she mused. "Short swords?"

"You know her?" Yami asked, looking curious now herself. She looked older for sure, old enough to be her and Mai's mother. So did the other shinobi. Fumiko zipped up her flak vest and laughed.

"I would hope so," she said. "I think it's my sister."

... 

~ "The rules are stupid," she growled, banging a piece down in frustration after having hovered it over the board for a minute. "I thought this was supposed to be like a real general's game- like the other side would let you move your King away!"

... 

Nobody knew anyone else's name in the base camp that hadn't known each other coming it. It was a jumbled mix of shinobi and samurai, all from different Lands and villages and cultures. The only way to find someone in particular was to either peruse the entire set of lines of mats and tents or ask every medic you saw about the general description of the person.

Fumiko had done both for a while before finding Mai's tent. The sun had set hours before that, in between changing and helping and figuring what was going on, and looking for Mai. But eventually she'd found an older looking woman, the subunit leader of First Division's battlefield medicine squad, who nodded at her description, made an interesting little sour expression, and pointed her towards the right tent.

She fumbled for the zip in the darkness, eager to get out of the biting cold- not nearly as cold as it got in Suna, but at this time in Suna she was accustomed to long-everything thick pajamas and warm blankets and Gaara. It was smart and not at the same time, putting up these tents- an eyesore on the cliffs and easily spotted, but ideal for keeping the conditions away from injured shinobi.

There were two lights in the tent, lanterns set in the middle on a small table. The soft yellow glow spread in a circle, not nearly covering the entirety of the tent's floor, but making it possible to see at least the outline of everyone inside. There were no nurses or med-nin inside, only one injured, sleeping shinobi on the far end, and the figures near the mat closest the entrance.

Two sets of eyes winked at her: pupiless green and dark blue. They weren't huddled so much as hanging out around the sleeping- maybe unconscious, those two things were completely different- figure lying stomach down on a mat, with a thin blanket across her back. Really thin- it was too cold for a blanket like that, tent or no tent.

As her eyes adjusted, after the eyes came both heads of unusually colored hair; pink and white-blond like jewelry gold. Shiragiku spoke first. "She wakes up more if the blanket's too heavy."

"What?"

Her back," Eishi said in a voice like a frown. "We asked someone to find you ages ago- didn't they
"No," she said, and then hurried to the mat, dropping next to Eishi- because Mai was sleeping on a mat in an unfamiliar area in the middle of the war surrounded by strangers. "What happened to her?"

"We, um- we ran into someone called Squirrel," Eishi said, and scooted aside so she could pull back the blanket. Fumiko motioned for a light, it was only another few seconds of rustling before Shiragiku handed her the handle of a lantern. Fumiko sucked in a breath just as Eishi finished, "Yeah, it looks pretty bad."

The light cast hollow flickers across her back, tanning her darkness. But it was enough, in the direct area around the lamp, to see the jaggedy still-in-the-healing-process sticky-looking flays of skin, the Lichtenberg tree branches crowning her shoulder and creeping down her back, disappearing underneath a white, almost-fresh bandage around the opposite shoulder blade.

Fumiko moved the light up. It swung gently with the movement, stretching shadows up the side of the tent. It was dead quiet save for a few calm calls and orders from outside and the noise they made themselves.

There had been burns on her face, it looked like, and there was still the color of a bruise, but no swelling. She'd been healed already, if only most of the way.

"Is this-" Fumiko hesitated. "Is this- Raiton? How-"

"She saved me," Shiragiku interjected. "I tried my best, but I'm afraid it isn't really my... my specialty. She was already worried about her tenketsu, and I didn't want to hurt anything else."

"Tenketsu?" Fumiko pulled the blanket completely away from her shoulders, and realized she didn't have anything on at all save for the skimpy bandaging that should have wrapped around her chest, but spared her back instead. It was still too cold, but that didn't matter as she put down the lantern and let her hands light up green. "Why was she worried about her tenketsu?"

"She was-" the poison-specialist began, but cut off suddenly. Fumiko glanced a quick look up and realized Eishi was glaring at him over the mat and Mai's prone form. "She-" he tried again and wavered once more. "Um..."

So she was going out on a limb here, but- "I know about Mai's sharingan."

Eishi let out something like a startled grunt. "She told you? Seriously?"

"She didn't mean to." Fumiko, now a little worried that her tenketsu would actually be damaged, because Mai tended not to worry about things until they were actually problems, let her chakra seep past the flesh wounds and muscle damage to sense and poke around her chakra flow. Her brow furrowed in concentration. "It was- sort of an accident."

"An accident?" Shiragiku asked quietly.

"At the Summit," she returned. "Fighting Sasuke- she went so far she kept her back to me, but Sasuke pointed it out."

"Bastard," Eishi muttered.

Fumiko hesitated, feeling the frays. But there was no permanent damage. This- this she could heal in a few hours. "What- what happened?"
"She tried to use Raiton," Eishi clarified, pointing to one of his eyes. "With her sharingan thing. I guess she did it wrong, or something. She made a clone with lightning."

She had to start with the pathways and tenketsu, otherwise the muscle wouldn't heal right and anyway, it was better for her reserves to start returning now rather than later. She could get another med-nin later to replenish it more fully. So Fumiko started with that, feeling her chakra not so much spiral as flow into her sister's body. The tension lines in her face faded somewhat.

Someone- Eishi- sighed with relief. "Kami, I thought she was out."

"Out?"

"Of the fight," he clarified. "It'd kill her to stay here."

In her mind, Fumiko ran back through the conversation in her head just to make sure she hadn't missed anything else that could be a problem, other than the broken bones and open wounds and lightning burns and chakra issues. They had run into someone named-

And then she froze.

"Who did you say she fought?" she asked softly. "Who was it?"

"She called him Taicho," Shiragiku said grimly, and Fumiko knew in that instant he'd already figured that out. It seemed like Mai's teammates knew more about her than she'd thought.

"Yeah, and he was wicked strong," Eishi continued on, oblivious. "Dunno how I had no idea who he was- a Jonin like that-"

You wouldn't have, she thought, but kept it off her lips because that was illegal, and focused on the healing. He wasn't a Jonin. He was invisible. He was- an ANBU. Mai's teacher.

Mai... 

... 

~ "Unless you trap him." He moved his piece. "Then he wouldn't be able to move."

... 

Over the course of a day, she carefully healed Mai's tenketsu, fixing where it was dry and cracked and jumpstarting the energy with her own, moved on to her muscles and sealed most of the stab wound in her shoulder and the two broken ribs and broken collarbone, and inner bruising and bleeding on her back, hidden beneath the horrible burn marks. It was tedious but not rushed despite her speed- with her sister, Fumiko would never rush.

So she sealed capillaries and a Gate point Mai had somehow burst open, and she knitted together the tissue in her stabs new and old until they closed shut with different levels of permanent and not-permanent scarring, coaxed the concussion away and carefully rerouted chakra flows to where they were needed most and then releasing them when she needed to.

Mai didn't wake up once, although in her fever-state she'd spoken in her sleep and flinched. It was dark by the time she had everything down to skin-wounds, and by then she couldn't heal anymore, both way too exhausted to risk trying and also low on the fumes needed to activate it.

So the strange lightning-marks, black at every exit and entry point, of which there were many, red
and burned and in some places bubbled (although she'd healed most of that; the bubbles) snaking from her right shoulder all the way down to almost her hips, and across parts of her left shoulder, too- those stayed. And when they healed, Fumiko knew they would leave scars, artistic-looking tree branch-esque scars that overlapped each other.

It would be... intense, was maybe the right word. Here now, healing her, Fumiko could pick out old scars: scars left behind from the Invasion of Pein and being impaled, scars left from being stabbed and scratched and scraped, a scar that ran down her front from the side of her chest to her belly button. There were marks on her back and her stomach and her chest, and her legs, too, Fumiko knew; and there was a new one on her shoulder that would stay forever.

And of course, the scar on her mouth. That scar was her trademark.

When all was said and done, Mai, as a human being, would look terrifying just beneath her shirt.

Finally Fumiko had to sit back, vision swimming slightly. Not chakra exhaustion, she wouldn't pass out; but close- she needed another pill. She'd eaten too many, she knew that. But she wasn't sick yet. She would, too- in a minute. In a second. Just a second.

Shiragiku, who had been tended already for the same level of near-chakra-exhaustion, silently picked up where she'd left off, because what was left- skin wounds- were easy, even for beginners. It was strange watching her sister's skin seal shut under someone else's hands. Like magic. That must be what other people saw when they watched her do it.

Eishi helped in his own way- cleaning the dirt off her face and less injured spots, administering painkillers in the ways Fumiko showed him how and when, even just responding uselessly when she muttered out her dreams, which seemed less and less like dreams as time wore on and more like nightmares.

"Thank you," Shiragiku said, and that pierced her dizziness, enough that she blinked and looked up and smiled.

"No problem," she said, and rubbed at her eyes. "I can get, um, Hoshiko to- um... ah! Replenish her chakra, and finish up." She shook her head again to clear it, then looked at Eishi, still smiling. "And she can fix you up, too."

"You should rest," Eishi said. "A nap'll do you good."

"Yeah, maybe..."

"Like, before you pass out."

She snorted before laughing, then crawled over to the mat nearest the three of them. "Just a short nap," she told them, knowing it was useless and that her body would wake up when it decided to wake up. "Then I can take a military rations pill and be good to go. Have..." Fumiko yawned as she laid down. "Have any of you heard from Gaara?"

"Nah," Eishi said. "Just fought and came here. Haven't come across any fourth-divisioners yet."

"Okay," she said.

And in an instant, she was asleep.
"Yeah, but you lose all your pieces," Mai grumbled, crossing her arms and looking again at the board. But it was what she said next that caught his attention. "In a battle- screw strategy- if someone can take out the leader they should risk that, instead of every other person on their side!"

It was late- or perhaps very early- when the medical ninja returned for Fumiko-san, who luckily had woken up a few minutes prior. Although Shiragiku hadn't yet had to try and wake his teammate's sister, he'd heard stories about her unbelievably stubborn irregular sleep cycles; a side effect of sleeping as little as a host of Shukaku without the demon's power.

At first he thought it odd they came for her, specifically, especially considering she wasn't actually a part of the Logistical Support and Medical Division- unlike himself, and he actually hadn't been sought out yet- but then they explained that Ino-Shika-Cho- the Konoha-nin who had fought the Gold and Silver brothers- had specifically requested her, and he understood.

Ninja, as he'd learned, did not tend to care for strange healers. He himself had noticed his own habit of gravitating to the same wings of the hospital, or simply being healed by his family. Tactically, it made sense: Shinobi weren't to trust those they didn't know, both for their loyalty and capability of healing. He did find it surprising that she was on such close terms with a team from Konoha, but Fumiko-san was a very friendly person and seemed to draw friends like a flame attracted moths.

She gave them a sleepy little wave, still yawning from her nap, and left the tent after sparing one more furtive, concerned look at Mai. The tent fluttered closed, and it was actually brighter without the night sky to swallow the lanterns' glow.

Shiragiku sighed and glanced up at Eishi, who seemed to be struggling not to nod off, determined to stay awake until, he guessed, Mai woke up. Whether it was majorly from fear for her wellbeing or fear that she would lash out upon awakening Shiragiku didn't know, although his suspicions lay with the former. Their Sensei had once told them that for a Genin team of barely over a year, they were unnaturally close.

Mai had immediately replied that she was the only normal one there, citing Eishi's hair and Shiragiku's hair and skin tone as unnatural by both universal and Sunagakure standards. And then Eishi had barked out a You're unnatural in every way possible, Mai, who are you to talk?! And they had fallen to fighting like dogs.

Most others at that point would have questioned Otokaze-sensei's judgement, but Shiragiku treasured those memories. A natural wallflower, some of his favorite times had been spent watching his team interact with each other, training, fighting together, squabbling. They all three worked well together around their sensei: Shiragiku had grown to know their mindsets, limits and moves, and they had in turn learned his, and thus they fought and worked together like a well-oiled machine, squabbling or not.

He had always known, as well, that Mai was leagues above them. In skill, yes, but there was also something in her eyes he had only seen before in old ninja- a burning, an anger. Mai had always gone farther and further than anyone else he knew. Her fight with what had to have been an ANBU- the only logical explanation for his strength and virtual lack of identity- and what also was obviously her teacher- which made his teammate an ANBU or ANBU trainee, but he would dwell on that later- had only proven that.

Looking at her now, he wondered what had made her the way she was. Injured on a mat, far worse
so than those two or three times their senior couldn't admit to for the second or third time, thirteen years old and with more scars than he would have even expected; this was the first time he had seen her without her shirt.

Yes, she had been bullied, and tormented and hurt as a child; he had watched from a distance as she cowered and cried out and hid underneath her arms and eventually snapped and hollered and lashed out. Cowardly, yes- but he'd been a scrawny child, and selfish in his own way; he'd wanted to stay invisible. He had seen others under the same conditions- but they had all turned out different; some frightened and some quiet and others had dropped out of the Academy all together.

Mai alone had transcended. Shiragiku had never approached, interested and curious despite himself but unwilling to go to that high place alongside her and be singled out by the masses. He remembered being pleased to be put on her team. Now, knowing her strength and her dumb luck and her intense values he was ashamed of his younger self.

"She said our names again," Eishi mused.

"It didn't sound very pleasant," Shiragiku said quietly back. It sounded horrified.

"Guess not."

They lapsed back into silence. Uneasy without a purpose and snapped out of his thoughts, Shiragiku leaned forward on his knees and set back to healing the few remaining wounds: less on her back and more focused on her burns and slashes. He couldn't heal them all the way and she would be injured upon awakening, but Mai would easily function with bruises and lacerations and scrapes.

"I need to learn to do that," Eishi grumbled.

"What- Medical Ninjutsu?" Shiragiku smiled lightly. "What for?"

"This, duh." He snorted. "This loon's always getting hurt. And hurting me, now that I think about it."

"She has saved our lives before," he pointed out.

"And teased us incessantly about it afterwards," he argued. Shiragiku said nothing, and eventually Eishi sighed, blowing a few pink strands out of his face. "I know, I know."

He didn't quite know what Eishi meant by that, but he took it to be positive. Because Mai protected them, and that made them her friends- and Shiragiku was glad of that if nothing else. She would be a terrible enemy.

All at once the green around his hands faded, and he frowned. He was getting too used to chakra exhaustion if he couldn't sense his own limits... "I'm out of chakra again."

"Um, I think we're completely out of pills." Eishi shrugged, then leaned back in a sitting position to grab at the pouch next to Mai's waiting shirt and bandages, unsealed from the bag she'd brought along with her and left behind in a fringing base camp nearby. It was a fairly large pouch, one Shiragiku had never seen until the war but was certain Mai had worn before. "Mai probably has a million, though- you should've seen the way she was knocking these things back."

He pulled the flap open before Shiragiku could think to tell him not to, and then frowned. "What the..."
"What?" Shiragiku asked despite himself, leaning forward over Mai with his hands braced on his knees. "What is it?"

The first few things Eishi pulled out and set aside he expected: a used seal, a coil of plain and a coil of razor ninja wire, what looked like a small, black barbed kunai without a grip. There had probably been more, but Mai had used and lost most of them between the last time he'd seen her and now. But then Eishi’s hand came out with a little blue rectangle, and he blinked a few times in surprise, leaning closer.

"It's a book," he said. It was small, the size of a pocket bingo book. It looked old as well, with a broken spine and the worn corners of the casing.

"No shit," Eishi said, more disbelievingly than offensively, directed more towards himself; a question. "I didn't know she could even-"

"What book is it?" he asked curiously. Instead of answering, Eishi flipped it around. In tiny, capitalized gold block letters was the name Seireito, a title he recognized from his civilian cousins’ coursework.

Eishi flipped it back around and opened it to a random page, and then another, and then stopped. "I recognize this," he exclaimed, pointing to a single line. "She's said this!"

There was an odd noise, a strangled groan. Shiragiku froze, and he saw Eishi do the same, eyes widening, as their teammate's arms started to move between them, elbows jabbing up as she slid her hands to push herself up. "Ow," Mai muttered.

At the last second, Eishi seemed to try and backtrack, shoving the book down towards the pouch, but it was too late. Even just waking up, Mai was alert enough to notice the sudden movement and her head turned automatically. Shiragiku had the grace not to flinch.

"What are you- in my space," she grumbled. They sat back. Eishi, mistakenly, tried again for the pouch, and her eyes tracked the movement. "Is that- that's my- you went through my- Nagasawa, you are so-"

... 

~ Shikamaru blinked, opened his mouth and then closed it. He looked up, startled out of his tired drifting thoughts, but Mai was already picking up a piece- a Rook- and wasn't paying him any attention, muttering under her breath. ~

... 

Granted, she had been gone for about a day and a half… but still.

What had she missed?

Satomi was in a wooded area near division One's medical base, a few miles from the coast, waiting for Kankuro and the rest of the surprise attack division to be released from the infirmary. If she had to guess, she'd place the time at around quarter to eleven at night, although, no one was asleep, given the circumstances.

Even if they wanted to get some shut eye, it would prove difficult considering, the screaming undead man trapped inside of a puppet.

In context or out of context, that statement sounded strange.
Apparently most of the Akatsuki had been revived by some guy named Kabuto- the name sounded familiar. And then she remembered- ah, yes- he'd worked for Sasori while he was still alive. A sleeper agent. A spy.

"Yo, Satomi!" the young man's voice called out from his entrapment.

And, that's back, wonderful…

"What is it, Deidara?" the swordswoman responded in an exasperated tone.

"Why'd you go turn coat on the Akatsuki, hm?"

"The Akatsuki was not what I had originally perceived it as."

"Is that right? You should let m-"

"Save your breath, I am not releasing you."

"Damn you hm!"

...

~ "But what," he asked, despite himself, "happens if he gets away and you get killed?" ~

...

"I know it's crazy, but I think that's the first time I've ever actually seen you guys in formation," Fumiko commented. "I just wish I'd been closer- Choji, wait a sec to eat, ne?"

"But I'm hungry," he whined. Nevertheless, he put the bag down forlornly. Fumiko smiled and went back to Shikamaru's minimal injuries. As a long distance fighter, he'd kept as far away from the enemy as possible- mostly the problem was chakra exhaustion, but even that was scant: Shikamaru knew his limits, and he knew how to make them stretch.

Ino was a little more banged up, mostly from what looked like fall blows but with a few minor cuts. But she probably didn't even feel them. Choji- well, she hadn't looked at Choji yet, but aside from being way slimmer than normal he seemed fine. But she still wanted to check before he went eating back the weight.

"Closer?" Shikamaru made a noise like an aborted snort. "Any closer and Kinkaku might just have killed you."

"I could say the same," she demurred, wrapping a length of bandage around his wrist and tying it off. "Nice timing on that, by the way, Ino."

Ino preened. "I've been practicing."

They all four were sitting alone in a tent put up just for Ino-Shika-Cho by reverent grateful shinobi who probably would have died without their interference in Kinkaku's rampage and the various other reincarnated shinobi. They each had their own cot, and Fumiko a chair. It was dark, but it would be getting light out soon. Fumiko hadn't yet broached the topic of Asuma, whom she'd heard they had fought. She knew that would be sore.

"Anyway, from what I saw you guys were literally perfect," she said. "That's gonna go down in history, you know."
"I'm just glad we got there in time," Shikamaru sighed modestly. "Otherwise it could've been all over."

"Yeah," Choji agreed, and his hand crept again for the bag of chips. "If your dad hadn't sent us all over here, that thing probably woulda killed a lot more people than it already did. But I wish we could've got here earlier..."

"Your dad?" Fumiko leaned back. Shikamaru rotated his wrist, and, satisfied, immediately lay back on his cot with his hands behind his head. Then it clicked. "Oh, right- he's the Chief Battle Strategist, isn't he? He's just as smart as you, Shikamaru."

"Smarter," was his immediate reply.

"More motivated," Ino challenged with a smirk. "That's the difference."

Shikamaru said nothing, only sighing.

"All right, Choji, let me see you," Fumiko said, and scooted her chair to his little bed. "Just a diagnostic. Do you feel strange at all? Lightheaded? Does your stomach hurt?"

"Hungry."

She laughed, and he smiled happily as she reached to put her hands against his stomach. The green glow was lost against his thick red clothing, but she could feel it as it stretched and spread. The feedback was normal, with none of the damage she had seen all those years ago after eating an Akimichi Red Pepper Pill.

"Will you be able to do it again?" she asked curiously. "Do you think?"

He shrugged. "I guess so."

"Well, you look fine," she decided. "Not malnourished or starving, no inner bleeding I can find. Have at it."

Almost before the words could leave her lips he was munching away at his bag of potato chips, and she smiled before moving on to Ino, who held out her arms as she pulled the chair over. They were small, she would be able to heal them completely without issue. With one gate closed, tops, and she would be able to open it straight after.

"You look pretty good yourself, Fumiko," Ino said conversationally as a thin wound on her forearm sealed shut. "I heard you were fighting with the Second Division and then against the zetsu here, right?"

Fumiko didn't look good, and she knew it. Although she'd changed into fresh clothes, the only things that'd been healed was her chakra exhaustion twice over and the life-threatening stab wound in her torso. She was still burned down one side, and there was a bloody bandage on her forearm she needed to change, with tinier wounds across her skin, and she was bruised and scraped and dirty all over. There was blood in her hair and on her glove and her bags were more profound than they'd been in years.

But she knew that wasn't what Ino meant. What she was saying was, you're not dead, and as Mai would have interpreted, you look like you kicked ass.

"Yeah," she agreed. "Thanks."
"I know Gaara was really worried about you and everything," Choji said in between one bite and the next without swallowing. "But you're definitely tougher than you look."

"Looked," Ino disagreed. "She used to be harmless." And she flashed her a grin.

But Fumiko's mind had snagged on Choji's Gaara. "Oh, yeah- have you heard about them?" She moved her hands away, and without a word Ino turned around on her cot so Fumiko could get at her back, which had a big ugly green and yellow bruise from some broadside, or maybe another fall, poking out a shoulder of her top. "The Fourth Division, I mean."

"Yeah," Shikamaru said. "According to Gaara's intel, last I heard, they were staking out a few reincarnated shinobi, all of them former Kage." Fumiko opened her mouth, about to say, oh, which ones? but then Shikamaru suddenly sat up, something akin to distress on his face, like he'd said something he didn't mean to.

"What?" she asked, concerned. "Are you-"

Former Kage, her mind murmured back at her, like an echo. And her eyes snapped all the way open.

"He's-" she squeaked, and the green around her fingers sputtered and died. "He's- Rasa's-"

"Shikamaru," Ino snapped.

"Gaara's dad is there?" Fumiko found herself reaching for the prism around her neck, half-expecting it for the first time in a while to feel rougher than it was. Her mind was already whirling, grinding out a the Fourth Division was sent to the southern edge of Lightning, and I'm at the peninsula. He's on the other side but if I skirt I can- "They're going to fight?"

... 

~ Mai scowled and looked up like she would try and bite him, but stopped at the curiosity in his face and clamped her mouth back shut. She shrugged her shoulders stiffly, restlessly. ~

... 

"- read Seireito-"

"- weren't supposed to find out, you nosy little-"

"Why not? Gah! Leggo me! You're gonna hurt yourself!"

"I'm gonna hurt a lot more than myself, you little-"

"Suna Ninja Team," a voice barked out, and Mai paused in throttling her teammate, and he took the opportunity to breathe. Shiragiku simply sat gracefully beside them, knowing better than break it up because he'd been in her bag too. Brats.

It was a middle-aged looking man with light colored hair and tan skin holding open the tent flap. It was light out now, she realized- the sky lit with pinks and oranges and light blues. His face was serious.

"Yeah?" she muttered, holding an arm instinctively in front of her chest despite the thin bandages. Now that she stopped, her back burned and smarted, but considering she hadn't been able to feel her own chakra in some places or walk on her own before this was a huge improvement. "What's up?"
"We were wondering if you had any idea where Fumiko-san was," he asked.

"I already told you, she didn't desert!" snapped an irritable voice that Mai placed instantly: Yamanaka Ino. "She left to find Gaara-sama!"

"It was my fault," drawled a deeper tone, even more recognizable.

"Wait- what happened?" Mai asked, and released her teammate, who coughed and rubbed his neck and skidded a few feet away for distance. Behind the man-with-blond-hair, she could see Ino's glare and Shikamaru's lazy mournful droop, and now could feel Choji nearby. "What about Gaara?"

The man-with-blond-hair opened his mouth to speak.

And the world started to shake.

There were screams nearby. Man-with-blond-hair stumbled, and Mai heard Choji yell out over the rumble.

"What is that?" she yelled. "What the hell's-"

There was a loud sound, like a tiger's roar on illegal steroids. It wasn't louder than the din and the shaking, but for some reason it hurt, and she slapped her hands over her ears and snarled, rolling fluidly to her feet. Her back was just a dull throb underneath the bandages. On her way out she grabbed a shirt, and was already shrugging it on as she reached the flaps.

Man-with-blond-hair moved quickly out of her way, and Eishi and Shiragiku followed her out of the tent right on her heels. She looked right first on instinct: for some reason things always attacked from the right first- but there was nothing. Then she looked left.

Her eyes widened, and she swore. "What is is that thing? Shit! It's huge!"

It was huge: bigger than Kinkaku and second-stage Shukaku and quite a damn few buildings she'd seen in her lifetime- and it wasn't even close to the medical base.

"What is that thing?" Ino echoed. "It's even bigger than Choji!"

"I have a bad feeling about this," Shikamaru murmured.

"So much for relaxing," Eishi groaned.

"Choji!" a voice roared from nearby- Choji's father, already fully expanded. Mai looked over at him and realized his shoulders were already bleeding blue, and he took off in the direction of his father, followed closely by his teammates without a word. "Come here!"

"Come on," Mai yelled over the noise, pinning the final button at her throat. She wasn't wearing any fishnet or wire, but that would have to do; there wasn't time and her teammates had had the sense to leave her belt sheathes on. She grabbed the pouch out of Eishi's hands and clipped it to her belt. "Shiragiku, Eishi, move out!"

"Yeah!"

"Right!"

They followed her as she wove through the tents quickly. They were temporarily slowed as soon as they made it out of the encampment when suddenly the massive thing started to run, faster than
Mai would have thought possible for an assailant of that size to move, but it was blocked by the massive forms of Choji and Choza, who slammed into it, Choza blocking it off with a staff.

It was massive, Mai noted as they neared. It almost looked like it was made of wood, with humanoid features, even a long fold that looked almost like clothing draped over it's legs. It had a twisted angry-looking face. She grimaced slightly at the throbbing in her back as she moved but ignored it, drawing her swords and ducking down for speed.

Other shinobi followed nearby, healed ninja and members of the Second and First divisions that had been guarding the medical base, waiting for orders. The ground was broken, dust drifted in ripples that suggested the monster's roars had created shockwaves.

Suddenly there was blue as Choji rammed towards the creature with a fist drowned in whatever Akimichi energy made up his wings, and the world shook again with the blows, forcing her and her teammates to stop and put up their arms to block the wind that whipped up, Mai crouching and digging her heels into the soil. Farther ahead and closer to the- whatever it was, shinobi were literally blown away in clouds of dust and wind.

Choji stopped moving forward; attack stopped cold. As soon as the wind stopped Mai surged forward and could hear the footsteps of her teammates behind her- but then suddenly the creature roared again and Mai stumbled and veered like she was drunk, grabbing at her ears so her swords stuck straight into the air, forcing her eyes to peel open.

She gasped at the sight of leveling ground, of dust rising on the edge of a circle of flat dusty ground. It was coming up fast, and shinobi were falling and ripping apart in the wake of it. Her eyes darted left and right, and there wasn't any real cover aside from a sealing barrier that didn't look like it would withstand a shockwave of that magnitude- but it was the only idea she had.

The dust cloud was getting closer. Mai turned her head to look over her shoulder. "Go toward the barrier! Shunshin! Get behind it and get on the ground!"

They cleared the side just as the ripple overtook them, and Mai dove into the dust, slamming her eyes shut. Immediately she could feel the battering of energy as the barrier dissolved, and it slammed her broadside, sending her spinning into the air and slamming back into the ground again and again; she couldn't put her hands in front of her face or even see where she was going and so she just fought to stay focused after each blow to the head.

Mai had never been skiing, but she'd heard that the scariest part of wiping out was not knowing if you were going to hit something hard on the way down. The thought hadn't even passed all the way through her mind- Kuso shit ow please don't let me hit a- when she slammed with her back into what felt like a big ragged outcropping of rock.

Over the sound of the soundwave- like being trapped in the middle of a sandstorm- she couldn't hear her breath spitting out of her lungs, but she definitely felt it, and all at once she couldn't breathe as she was smashed into the rock, drilling through it like a stone. Mai was certain she was going to smash all the way through it and then hit something else on this joyride from hell, but then everything stopped, the dust settled. Rock crumbled lightly around her body.

The wave had passed over her.

It was dark in the rock for the first two or three minutes it took her to get her lungs to expand again, but finally, gasping and coughing, she managed to pull and dig herself back to the battlefield, peeling out and eventually falling back to the soil with momentary noodle limbs.
She wiped the sand and dust out of her eyes, hair still drifting slightly with the remnants of wind, and squinted at the blood that came back on her palm. Stumbling back to her feet, she looked around and found a handful of other dazed-looking ninja, and far more bodies than that; eight or nine dead to every living. Eishi and Shiragiku were nowhere to be found, but that was about as surprising as waking up to sandstorms in Suna. They'd been blown away.

Immediately she reached out with her chakra to find them, and only sensed Eishi right away. Shiragiku had ended up much farther back than either of them. The ground rumbled just beyond the smokescreen of dust, and she made her way to Eishi fifty or so yards away, who she found just getting up, pushing a body off his pinned legs with a sick look on his face.

"It's coming," she said, grabbing his hand and hauling him up.

"Yeah, I'm okay," he grumbled. "You?"

"I think I reopened every wound on my back, if you wanna know so bad. But yes."

Cruunch. Cruunch. Whatever that thing was, it was getting closer. She could make out the dark silhouette of it beyond the raised dust, but aside from that could feel it's massive chakra. Cnnch-PHOOM. Cnnch-PHOOM.

"Get back!" she heard from somewhere behind her. "Everyone retreat to the coastline!"

"Man, that thing blew away Choji," Eishi said as he finally steadied himself. "Insane."

"It's headed to the coastline," Mai muttered, eyeing the thing warily. "Why?"

The ground rumbled again, and Mai could feel the jutsu coming, chakra seething in the earth; a last-resort kind of ninjutsu that spent every cent of strength you had. And then it moved, and Mai could see now that the dust had mostly cleared the solid eggshell stones as big as the statue itself that smashed into either side of it like a trap. But the monster put out its two hands and stopped them in their tracks.

"Okay," she said. "Back to the coast like he said, we'll find Shira along the way. I think I know what this thing wants-"

"Yeah-"

And so she ran and he followed her, but their footsteps were lost in the crackling sound that rang like cracked sheet ice through the air. Mai risked a glance back to see the pincer stones falling apart under the strength of the beast- it wasn't going to work.

It roared again, and her eyes widened when the spires on its back burned blue, and the orbs sang like birds.

She turned back around to scream, "Get-" But it was too late.

The ground dissolved under their feet, kicking up and collapsing under the lightning. Depending on where you looked the air was blue or white or earth, and the air hissed with electricity as they were flung into it, pinwheeling. She could feel it dancing on her skin and her heartbeat spiked, body throbbing with a phantom pain like no other she'd experienced before. The world tilted.

The wind filled with lightning and screaming and smashing and Mai only hit the ground once, and she screamed and she prayed to Kami that she wouldn't go over the cliff or die from the pebbles and boulders that pressed in on all sides; smacking her around like a pinball, or get hit directly with
one of those volts. She would explode.

When it stopped again, she hit the ground hard and skidded, out of breath and feeling skinned alive, blood still zinging with the memory of electrocution and tooth-sized stones in her mouth that she accidentally crushed biting down in pain and shock on impact.

Her ears rang, a decibel above the lightning's sparking. It took a full minute or so, pushing slowly but steadily up to put her knees shakily beneath herself, for her hearing to return, a steady increase in volume. Mai went from her knees to her feet and staggered slightly, then shook her head, unbalanced on the demolished ground.

It was moving again. For once Mai let her eyes spin red and looked at it, vision cutting through obstacles like dust and debris and bodies to see the thing heaving itself out of the earth- the stupid thing had partially buried itself, along with countless others.

She coughed. Tasted rather than felt the blood that came up with it and dribbled down her chin. Goddamn, everything hurt again.

"Eishi!" she yelled, and because she'd been blown back again, "Shiragiku!"

No answer. Her eyes cut through everything and picked out chakra, back and forth, and she spun a slow pirouette, arms spread and crouched warily. One other shinobi got to his feet nearby. No one else in the vicinity did.

There. She focused on the spot she'd almost passed by, seeing his familiar body structure and the blocky form of his war fan. Relieved, she killed her eyes and picked her way closer, sliding down an upturned hunk of stone like a slide to reach him. Eishi was coated in dust like a forgotten knickknack, but didn't seem too injured aside from mild bruises, scrapes and gashes.

Mai kicked at his shoulder, not lightly. "Come on, get up, Eishi," she said roughly, masking the pant in her throat. "Gotta get to the coast and get that Kohaku no Johei thing."

Eishi didn't stir. Mai sighed loudly, ignoring the smashing sound nearby and the shadow that passed over her, and knelt after sheathing his swords. Now was literally probably the worst time for him to have been knocked unconscious. She took hold of his collar and lifted him slightly so his head dangled.

"No time to be taking a nap," she said loudly, and shook him once. "Wake up, buddy."

Nothing happened, and so she dropped him again. He was hurt. Maybe there was damage she couldn't see? Despite the raging battle, she looked up for a medic, or at least someone to move him back to the base, ducked to avoid shrapnel from another crunching attack from the statue- had it jumped that powerfully?- and looked again, reaching automatically for his wrist as she did so.

Maybe it was because she'd done this a hundred times before, but at first she felt his heartbeat.

The world slowed at the same time that it rumbled, and she dropped from a crouch to her knees.

Mai grabbed at his face and jerked it to see, and his eyes made her suck in a breath deep enough to make her cough, sharp, and then she gasped only twice before leaning all the way over his body to slap him, hard. No, no, no, no! No!
"Eishi!" she snapped, and slapped him again.

His eyes were blank and unseeing, a dull dark blue like the polluted water at the swamps, the depths of them emptier than a grave, staring through her and past her but not at her, half-covered by his stupid pink hair as his head jerked back and forth and finally Mai stopped hitting him and his cheeks were red and she was shaking. His lips were parted slightly, eyes wide open.

Somebody stepped on the heel of her foot and it hurt, but she ignored it, unzipped his flak halfway and pushed down hard on his chest, one, two, three times- she felt a rib snap like a vibration in his skin- and then pinched his nose and breathed down his throat.

Nothing happened.

She did it again.

His lips were colder the second time around.

"Eishi," she gasped, breathing strangled. Her voice, quiet without air, was certainly swallowed by the screams and clangs and rush of war. It had nothing on her crashing heartbeat, trying harder and harder to thump out of her throat as her anxiety rose. She slammed a fist down on his chest.

"Yarou! Eishi! Wake up! Eishi!"

No way he's dead, she thought wildly. He can't be- won't be-!

And her stupid traitorous brain whispered, "You know, I've thought of my own funeral before."

"No!" she snarled, but her memory ran away from her and locked onto the thought. "Like, what I would want it to be like, who I would want to be there. Pretty stupid and morbid, I guess." He snorted. "But, like, I know what kind of incense I want burned... which picture I would tell them to use... what clothes I want to wear. You know?"

"Get up, kid!"

Mai ignored whoever it was that had said it and wiped at her face, feeling the spiders of nausea that came with suppressing emotions, and reached back into her belt pouch for the scroll she'd stuck in from the medical base.

"Listen to us, talking about our funerals like a bunch of weirdos."

"Just remember, Mai. Desert Sage. She remembered the hot sand, the pain in her foot from stitches and cacti spikes. "If I can trust anyone to make sure those prudish bunch of idiots get at least that right, it's you."

She snorted. "Oh, please. Don't be dramatic."

"Seriously, though." His eyes closed again, and he sighed, hands behind his head. His giant folding fan rested at his other side, Mai stretched out beside him on the burning hot sand like a tanning bed. She could feel her skin withering away, but Eishi seemed perfectly at ease.

"I am being serious." This time her laugh was a little more sincere, toes of her good foot curling into the sand. "We won't die. Who're we up against- that loon and a couple of Akatsuki, right? With the Kage and Naruto and everyone from Leaf on our side?"

Mai didn't really use scrolls often, but the situation called for it. She needed to make it disappear. He needed to go away, get out of her face and stop smelling like sand and seawater long enough for
her to stop hyperventilating and tuck things away, had to-

Had to keep him safe.

She slid it open, new papyrus-paper that crinkled, and turned the ink towards the ground, and draped it across his chest. Little circles darkened on the page and she told herself it was sweat, that her blindness was dust.

"I have to be on a team with her?" Eishi waved his hands erratically in front of him, head shaking so fast it could've been in shunshin, voice high with puberty and panic. "She'll kill me!"

"First I'm going to become the strongest Jonin, and then I'm going to be Kazekage!"

She muttered something over him, a blessing maybe, or a curse. Then she pressed her shaking fingers to the paper and pushed a bit of her chakra into the pre-made Body Seal she'd never expected she would make the time to use.

There was a flash of light and the acrid scent of chakra smoke that billowed into her face, and her hands pressed flat against the ragged ground, one higher than the other. Mai coughed, raised her arm to cover her nose and told herself that the tears running down her face were a result of the white-purple smog.

Then it faded away and for a moment Mai stared at the scroll, average-sized and yellowed, lying on the crushed ground draped over a crack with the rock smashed and raised up, mutilated by the statue's shockwaves and raging. There was a splatter as someone fell face first into the ground on Eishi's other side; the back of the seal piddled with new blood. She ignored it. Her fingers turned it over without her permission, ink-up.

It was uniform, a standard-issue piece with a cramped-looking ink-style, exactly like many others she'd used before. There was another in her bag; with an empty space in the circle rather than a name. Who knew how many bodies she'd sealed- it was the easiest way to dispose of one after all; burning it left the corpse trapped in hammerspace forever.

But now the straight, boring, intricate kanji and lines and circles made her angry, heat bubbling up from somewhere deep inside her. What right did those black marks have to represent her friend- to write him off as just another casualty?

Shiragiku's face came unbidden to her mind, smiling and laughing at one of many fights in Team Otokaze; Eishi pinned to the ground and Mai twisting up his arm like she would snap it. Otokaze-sensei stood not far off, a smile on his own face, not calling the practice spar.

It felt good, the kissing. It tasted kind of like the sand in the air and the dates her mother used in pie, which was odd, but the contact, the closeness felt nice- warm on warm, but maybe that was just her irritation.


I'm going to tear you apart.

The earth shook beneath her feet from the force of the statue's rampaging, and she didn't quite snap out of her furious daze; vision stained red, she quickly rolled up the scroll and tied it off, tucking it carefully into her back pouch and cinching it shut.

The realization was slow as she stood, ears ringing away the screaming and the crushing and the roaring and the orders and her pounding heartbeat, not like a fire but a sparking coal, singing and
eating away at her from the inside, curling the flesh and the shock and making it burn and smoke and blacken. The anger ignited at the very core of herself.

Her jaw clenched, and she could feel the way the muscles bunched, could hear her teeth click and grind as the shaking overwhelmed her and popped veins out in her trembling fists, bleeding palms.

What right did that monster have to kill him? What right did the bastard who summoned it have to start a damn war in the first place, to decide carelessly that nothing was important and to destroy hundreds of lives, to wear a stupid mask like he was some kind of messiah and pretend like he was saving them all from the void? To steal the Biju, to almost break her sister, almost kill her brother- it was his fault her Taicho was dead, his fault the world was in strife, his fault every best friend had turned into a damn red shirt, even hers.

She grabbed at her hair, stumbled away from the bloodless little spot her best friend had disappeared from. She didn't know if she was crying anymore, didn't care about the familiar burning in her eyes and the way her vision cleared away the blurriness.

What right?

None. None at all.

She could feel the weight of the seal in her bag like it was branding through the fabric.

"Stupid Salmon-head!"

"Dead-last, you're dumber than me!"

The world compressed, and she wiped her face, and she took a breath, and the bile in her throat disappeared and her stomach or her heart or something finally caught and lit and raged and there was only the statue and that mask she couldn't see and the Body-scroll in her back pouch and the fire, fire, fire.

...  
~ "I don't know," she said, not even acknowledging that he'd said 'you' and not 'they' even though he knew she'd caught it. "But what if he doesn't?"

...

Mai had never learned to dance fire on skin other than her hands, and even that was after hand seals. Shiragiku had only ever seen her actually on fire once or twice, after exploding tags blew or training went awry, but it was never bad.

It looked like she was on fire now, despite the complete lack of flames. He could picture the anger seething off her skin and licking through her wild hair, boiling her wounds; imagined her every footfall left a charred print behind in the rock and soil. That, later, would be how every artist in the immediate vicinity would depict her in their interpretations, and how she would be described in stories, legends.

Mai was angry.

He didn't know why, didn't know truly if he wanted to.

She was walking- no, marching, stomping- towards the place the statue raged in the bowl of the coastline. Her posture was nothing but pure fury, and he imagined if he was closer he would see
her shaking: there was no room in the way she stood and stepped for fear or hesitation or even confidence- there was only wrath.

In paintings, pictures and memories, a path would be cleared, people would see the fire and the ire and let her pass. But in reality, here, now, there were people in her way and she shoved them aside, yards in any direction if they tried to stop her, and there were stones that crumbled under her sandals the second they came into contact with them. Shiragiku was not a sensor-type, but he knew Mai's chakra well: and it was swelling, blooming, bottling underneath her skin until the pressure forced it out.

His teammate was on the warpath, and she was going for a kill.

It crossed his mind to stop her, because she was going to get herself killed, burning her way past the piles of dead bodies and slabs of rock, not close to a shunshin but steadily making her way closer and closer and closer, but then the thought withered away. Instead he ducked down into a run, dusters in hand, and chased.

"Hey!" she screamed when he was nearly to her, weaving out of the way of other shinobi, and stopped. On the edge of the bowl at the coastline's clifftop, she was just ten yards from it, level with it's head, a speck in comparison. "Hey!"

He was close enough to see her, the way her face twisted in hatred, and he knew she was about to do something terrible, bring judgement like a fiery wraith from Hell to all the unfortunate disbelievers in her path. Her hands went up- he was closer, could pick out how they drew near her mouth as she signed.

Tiger- Ram- Boar. Her hands settled in a Horse and in his surprise Shiragiku almost stumbled, because she'd never had the capacity despite her great chakra-stores to do that, she had come up with her own ninjutsu to make up for this one thing she never had learned how to cast.

Fire Style: Majestic Destroyer Flame. Great Fire Annihilation.

He had to stop at the heat that pulsed, ravaged. She looked golden in the light, flamelight flickering off her tanned skin like polished bronze. And it grew and grew and grew and pushed her back and her hair back and her eyes were hidden from view by shadows impossibly not burned away.

The statue screamed.

...~ She put her rook down, moving it from what had been a regular check he'd moved into accidentally in his distraction to the space his King had occupied, without letting him move away. It was against the rules, but he said nothing as she stood and mumbled a "screw this," before leaving. ~

...Mai screamed and the fire burned through her, hollowed her out from the inside, scorching out from her blood and lungs and heart, billowing from her mouth like an explosion. It burned her cheeks and fingers and made her eyes sting as they dried out in seconds but she ignored it, glaring forward into the wall of flames that erupted in front of her like a blooming flower of fire, growing and growing until it was huge, bigger than any fire she'd ever seen, ever made. Tears boiled on her face and then evaporated.
"This is a new generation. We're different. You're proof of that. Mai is. We all are."

There was nothing but the burning and the fire, and she could feel it eating her and grabbing at her hatred but she wouldn't let it go until he died he was going to burn until he burned in Hell.

"You're an idiot. Stop it. Go get Shira to bandage that before you bleed out."

She could hear the noises beyond the roar of flames, people screaming, didn't care if there was someone in the crossfire, one or two, their lives would be ruined anyway, someone they knew had died, someone they knew would go insane, they would wake up with nightmares forever. And she relished darkly in the way the beast shrieked, the way it turned in her flames like it was dying.

"I give! Give! I SAID GIVE!"

She was disappearing, Mai could feel it; sensation slowly draining away into the fire until only the heat and the grief and the hate remained, like her soul was churning out that flame and vanishing. Her mind said you're running out of chakra and her gut said I don't care.

"Hey, you're gonna be a general or something someday, Mai. Don't leave us behind, yeah?"

Eishi was going to have Desert Sage at his funeral because there was going to be one, because this was ending- now.

"You can't be Kazekage. Only people who make their own way can be Kazekage. You're just a bully who does what everyone tells him to."

Suddenly there was a thunderous noise, not like a roar or a scream but a pulse, and then a rush of smoke, and her fire went up like a vacuum and died as she ran out of fury to give. The air cleared and shimmered with heat and her teeth clenched with frustration as she realized it was gone, that nothing was burning, and no one had died; and her eyes welled again and blurred again and dimmed and she clenched her fists and tottered.

"Damn it," she moaned, voice hoarse.

Nobody caught her and she landed hard.

The sun had come up during their battle.

... 

~ He didn't look after her, staring instead at his taken King and the Rook in it's square. The difference, he thought, between Shogi and reality, was unpredictability. And, he thought immediately afterward... A fear of losing pawns. ~

...
And this is it for already written chapters. If you're somehow caught up already, you have to start waiting for chapters just like everyone else!

Also.... Eishi. Kill me please.

Next chapter will be Part 1 of a Mai’s Past series.

If you want more of my works, I'll be posting non-TOF series things, although some oneshots include TOF characters
...  

My mother used to tell me that my name- Mai- was unique. That she'd taken two words- Ma, real and true, and Ai, affection and love, and put them together. 真愛. Without the kanji, everyone thought I meant Dance- teachers, classmates, strangers. I didn't care at first. It was just a name. It was kind of cool, because Gaara had the same mark on his forehead as on all my school papers.

There are a lot of jutsu with the name Dance included in the title- Karamatsu no Mai. Kugutsu Suiton: Yōu no Mai. Mikazuki no Mai. Fūton: Hanachiri Mai. Hundreds, probably. But none, so far as I know, with True Love. After a while I decided: it was a stupid name- fitting maybe for my sister, who loves everyone at first sight. But me- I don't like anyone. I barely have any friends. I can't forgive the people who wronged me. I'm the broken sister, the angry sister, the bitter sister.

My teammates and sensei- Shiragiku, mostly- they told me once that my name was more fitting than I realized. True Love, they said. Not all-consuming baseless love. When I loved someone, they told me, I loved someone. Like my sister, and Gaara, and my Taicho, and my team. Not frivolous love, but earned.

I guess that's true. I've been told I go unnecessarily ballistic when someone messes with my friends and family- and for good reason. (Assholes.)

But it hurts. That's the one damn unsung villain- love hurts.

Maybe I don't want my fucking name anymore.

Maybe my Sharingan hurts too much.

But if I've learned one thing through everything that's happened, it's that a Shinobi endures- a good one, at least. And that shit happens, and there isn't a goddamned thing you can do about it. So I'll just say it.

My name is Mai.

...

5

It had been a regular day so far.

Mai had stayed home with her mommy 'cause it was a weekend and she didn't have to work at the doctor place. They'd spent the day making a chili pot to last them the week- Mai enjoyed the adding and stirring, even though she'd gotten chili powder in her nose.

Fumiko-nee had gone away with Yoshiki and a couple of their other friends a few hours ago even though it was really hot outside. Now it was getting dark, so she would be home soon, and Mai couldn't wait- she'd promised to help her learn to draw today. Mai had already drawn things ahead of time, though, and she wanted to show her nee-chan those, too.
Tomorrow would stink because mommy was going to work and daddy was going to work and Fumiko-nee was going to school so she would have to go to old Oba-san Jin's apartment for the day, and Oba-san Jin never did anything fun. So Mai was determined to get the best out of today...

... at least until Yoshiki came running through the door at dusk yelling and being really loud and looking scared. There was sand on him like he'd rolled on the ground for a long time, and it fell onto the carpet as he waved his arms around and yelled to get her parents' attention.

Mai looked with wide eyes at her father, who for some reason didn't scold Yoshiki for getting sand all over the floor. "What?" he said instead. "Slow down. What happened to Fumiko?"

"Fumiko-chan- she- and the monster kid, they-"

Her daddy put his book down and leaned forward on the couch futon, suddenly looking alert and scared-looking like Yoshiki. "Slow down," he said again. "Did you say- do you mean Gaara?"

Yoshiki nodded. Now her mommy was coming out of the kitchen, wiping her hands on her red-spotted apron. Mai stayed back, stepping into the corner near the lamp so the shadow pushed over her. Gaara- the boy her parents told her never ever to talk to- be nice to everyone else but stay away from him, he'll hurt you.

"Yeah," Yoshiki said, and took another big breath to get back the air he'd spent on panicking. "Gaara attacked us while we were playing soccer- he got her! She's still there!"

Her daddy said a word that was bad and her mother said nothing about it. Mai's heart thumped loudly, and she felt like it might 'splode like the papers ninja used in the sparring fields she liked to watch at. Was Fumiko-nee in trouble?

...

~ "Up! Pick her up!" ~

...

No matter how loudly Mai protested nobody left to find her sister. They stayed on the futon and looked surprised and cried after telling their upstairs neighbors and the people next door about what happened. Daddy every once in a while said he would kill someone and that just made mommy cry worse.

She cried, too, because she was getting scared and everyone was acting like Fumiko-nee was never coming back ever.

Yoshik stayed as well, even though he'd never been allowed to stay over this late. No boys after nine o clock, those were the rules. But so was 'Fumiko-nee has to be home by seven o' clock for dinner' and that hadn't happened yet, either.

It was dark- way past Mai's bedtime, but she was too worried to be excited- when the door opened again, and everybody jumped. It opened real slow and careful, but then Fumiko-nee poked her head through the door with a sheepish grin. When she opened the door the rest of the way Mai could see all the ouches and scrapes on her arms and legs.

"Fumiko! You're alive!" her mother said really loud. Fumiko-nee opened her mouth but then her dad said, "How did you escape?"

Mai didn't know that word, but she didn't feel like asking. Instead she tried to wriggle out of her
mom's hold to go hug Fumiko-nee- because she'd gotten away from the monster boy!- to no avail. She sniffled and cried, "Yoshiki said Gaara got you!"

"Gaara didn't kill me," Fumiko-nee said, and gulped. "He... he's really nice, actually..."

"What?" her parents and Yoshiki yelled. Yoshiki stood up and stomped across the room until he was standing in front of her sister, grabbing her shoulders hard. Mai couldn't see his face, but his voice was really angry. Fumiko-nee tried to move but he didn't let go.

"You didn't," he said in a low, serious voice, "make friends with a demon."

Her mother gasped, burying her head into Fumiko's father's shirt, crying things like "My stupid daughter" and "curse her soft heart." and that was weird because Fumiko was super smart. Mai frowned. Soft heart? How could a heart be soft?

"He's not a demon," Fumiko-nee said defensively. "He was just born with it."

Mai didn't know what 'it' was, but 'it' sounded bad. Maybe 'it' was the monster thing? She would have to ask later, maybe tomorrow when everyone wasn't so upset.

"He tried to kill you!"

"Not really. You all just made him really upset-"

"He tried to kill you!"

"-because you were treating him like a bad guy," Fumiko-nee finished. "He was just trying to give us back the ball, not attack us at all, not kill us. All he wants is a friend, Yoshiki! Can't you-"

Mai jumped really high when Yoshiki reached out and slapped her across the face. After a second her sister's face turned shocked behind the hair that covered it, and it didn't take long for the skin to turn red. You weren't supposed to hit people! But her parents said nothing and so Mai kept quiet because if that rule was broken who said nobody would hit her, too?

"You can't be friends with him," Yoshiki said.

"But, Yoshi-"

"Enough!" her daddy roared, and Fumiko-nee jumped. Mai cringed away from him, scrambling over her mother's lap to the other side. "You've upset your mother, you made us believe you were dead, and worst of all, you risked your life!"

"D-"

"Go to your room!" he yelled. His face was red. Fumiko-nee's face still looked really surprised, and she stared at them. She was starting to cry, Mai saw it. Then she ran away before Mai could say anything out loud, and a few seconds later there was the loud slam of a banging door.

It wasn't long until Mai had to go to bed, and she was asleep the second her mom put the blanket on top of her, troubled by the way her sister had been treated and the way everyone had been so upset.

... ~ Mai-chan? Mai-chan?- She's not resp- ~

...
Mai woke suddenly to the sound of screaming.

It was louder than anything she'd ever heard except for a sandstorm. She jumped up and scrambled out of her bed even as the screaming suddenly stopped, but paused in the hallway with wide eyes. There was red all over everything, and Fumiko-nee was lying on the futon really still with her eyes closed, and her mommy was doing something to her leg to make it bleed more.

She clapped her hands to her mouth, edging slowly into the room so her parents wouldn't see her. It smelled like metal, and the scent made her suddenly sick; and so she darted to her corner and sat down and pulled her knees up to her chest, hiding her face. Occasionally she peeked up, but the futon's back was facing her and her mother was kneeling; there was nothing to see but the blood on the floor.

Eventually her mommy stood up, hands and arms covered in bright red like marker ink to her elbows, like dress-up princess gloves but wetter. She wiped her forehead, and it tracked red across her face, but she didn't seem to notice.

There was a few more minutes of silence, and then her daddy went to the door and opened it. At the sound of conversation, Mai stood, slowly, and against the wall she could feel her skin shaking like she was cold, which she wasn't, even though it was probably freezing outside.

Her daddy moved away, and Mai gasped quietly at who stepped inside before putting her hand over her mouth.

Gaara. Don't talk to him, he'll hurt you and you'll die. That's what her parents said and her friends said and Fumiko-nee's big-kid friends said, too.

It was the first time she'd ever really gotten a good look at him. She'd only ever seen him from a distance- red hair, she knew, and that poncho. But now she noticed that his skin was white so he looked like a ghost- paler than anyone she'd ever seen before! And his eyes were blue, and he didn't have any pupils. They were right. He didn't look like any person Mai had ever seen.

Was he even one?

He was bleeding from a mark on his forehead that looked like it really hurt- stuff like what her parents wrote on papers and things. It was coming down his face like he was crying out of his hairline. But he didn't seem to even notice it, lips pushed together so they turned white, too.

"Why did you cut it off?" he said, quietly, and his voice was not what Mai expected: it didn't match the way he looked. It sounded like her friends' voices but even-kid-dier. Higher. His weird eyes were trained on the futon.

"Because it was dead. There were no nerves, or much skin left." her mother answered in a shaky voice. Mai didn't know what nerves were, but where was her sister's skin? Skin, she knew, was really important.

"Oh." Gaara seemed to hesitate, fidgeting his hands slightly. "Will... will she be okay?"

"Because it was dead. There were no nerves, or much skin left." her mother answered in a shaky voice. Mia didn't know what nerves were, but where was her sister's skin? Skin, she knew, was really important.

"Oh." Gaara seemed to hesitate, fidgeting his hands slightly. "Will... will she be okay?"

"We'll have to see about getting her a peg for her foot," her father grumbled, "but yes- she'll be fine with some painkillers."

"Thank- thank you," Gaara murmured. He twisted his hands together uncertainly. "Fumiko- when she found me, she told me that you wouldn't let her back home. I was so worried."

"Not that she cared," someone else said suddenly and she jumped, pushing closer into her dark
corner, but it was only Yoshiki, who walked inside. "Not that she cared at all about what we had to
say."

"She was just making sure I was okay," Gaara said. And Mai nodded, because that was something
her sister would do. To her surprise, there was water on his face when she looked again. "I thought
she didn't want to be my friend anymore, when she did. She found me... at a really bad time."

She frowned, remembering her sister saying Gaara wasn't bad. That he was nice. She wasn't a liar
but... maybe he'd tricked her? And hadn't he hurt her- wasn't that why she was hurt? Hesitantly she
stepped forward. Gaara didn't seem to notice her at first, until she got closer to the futon, where the
metal smell was strongest.

"Why are you crying?" she asked, in the quietest voice she had 'cause she was hoping a little bit
that he wouldn't hear her, but he did, and she met his eyes and glared at him. "Is it because you're
bleeding?"

Gaara blinked, and then reached up and touched the bleeding spot. When he brought his hand back
down, he almost seemed surprised at the redness on his fingers. He looked back up at her.

"Mai," her mother said sharply, but Mai didn't run back to her corner or duck under the futon like
she wanted to. She swallowed. He wasn't in pain, so- why was he upset?

"Tell me," she demanded, and despite the way her arms were shaking her voice came out loud, too.

"She almost died," Gaara said with difficulty. "and I don't want her to get hurt."

It took a second for Mai to respond, she was so startled. Then she pushed her lips together the way
he had and took a breath. "But she got hurt," she said bossily, pulling her lips down in a serious
way. "Does that make you sad?"

"I-" He paused for a really long time. Mai thought she was a good judge of whether people were
lying or not- and when she lied she stopped like that- but he just looked confused more than
anything else. "... yes."

"Okay," she said, and stayed behind the futon. I don't trust you.

But okay.

...

~ "Did you see? Did you see what she-" ~

...

Fumiko-nee didn't go to school for a long time. She was always either in her bed or on the couch.
As far as Mai knew, she couldn't even crawl.

She left all the time, though, with mommy, going to the hospital and coming back. Her leg looked
strange, ending a little bit after her knee, and with the bandages on it looked kinda like the top
round part of cactuses without the needles. And she was always hurting, face red and scrunched
even after she took medicine.

When the bandages came off, Mai went into her room until they went back on, because the red raw
scraped look of the end of the leg made her feel sick and she didn't like it.
Gaara was always around.

She couldn't leave her room most days without seeing him, hovering in the doorway or sitting on the couch with Fumiko-nee or in her room or something. They were always talking and talking about random things, and he helped her with her bandages.

Mai was in her room more often than not now. She almost wanted to go to old Oba-san Jin's just to get away from him. Something about him felt not right, and it scared her. She could feel it when he got too close. He was scary, dangerous. That was what her mommy said and she believed her now.

... "Like a demon!" ...

One day Mai came home from old Oba-san Jin's house with her mommy and got a nasty shock when she was greeted at the door by Fumiko-nee, who was standing.

Wobbling, teetery, and kinda looking like she would fall over at any second had Gaara not been holding her elbow, but standing, which was totally different from the rest of her month lying down.

It was... weird. The new leg-thing. It was made of wood and looked like a pirate-peg, and it was covered in sticky black Velcro, winding around her leg and her knees and every once in a while it fell off, and if Gaara wasn't there there would be a scream and a crash and she'd fallen over.

She still didn't go to school for a while. Mai watched intently every other week as her mother wrote absence notes to Fumiko-nee's civilian school, the same school she was supposed to go to. And Yoshiki stopped by her school after being at the Ninja Academy all day and brought her all the work she had missed, which her sister worked on diligently day after day.

Mai wondered if Gaara went to school. It seemed like he was always here. If he didn't go to school, then how did he learn anything? He was probably just skipping like Fumiko-nee was, except Mai never saw him doing any homework or tests or classwork things unless he was helping her sister with some.

Mai had a secret. Something she hadn't told her mommy yet.

She wanted to go to the Ninja Academy.

She was supposed to be enrolled in the Civilian school the next semester, but she didn't want to go there. Spying on both places, she saw the Civilian kids doing boring things and learning maths and bumbling around on the playground. At the Ninja Academy, the playground was a jungle gym and targets for throwing knives and blades at, and the older kids did exercises while standing on the walls or roof. They ran laps and sparred hand-to-hand and used ninjutsu.

Mai always noticed the grown-up ninja coming and going from the village, coming and going. And she saw them on the roof-tops and drinking drinks together in places she wasn't allowed to go yet. They seemed so mysterious- and they must have seen all kinds of places and done all kinds of things; if she asked they would tell her about visiting the Land of Stones or the Hidden Rain village and they would show her scars from fights against dangerous enemies.

The most interesting thing she ever saw a civilian grown-up do was teach 'civvie self-defense' and even the littlest kids at the Academy could do the exact same things. All the civilian adults sold stinky fish and newspapers, rotting vegetables and stupid toys on the sides of the streets or had
boring jobs with a lot of paperwork, like her dad.

But it wouldn't happen. Her parents weren't ninjas, and they wouldn't send her to a school for ninjas. Mai would go to the boring school and end up teaching self-defense classes.

Fumiko-nee was friends with kids from the Ninja Academy, including Yoshiki. They told her she wouldn't be able to do it anyway, that she was too small and weak to be a ninja. That it was for big kids. At this rate, Mai wouldn't even learn civvie self-defense.

... 

~ "She saved our lives! It was after the brothers-" ~ 

... 

It was tense at the dinner table like it always was when Gaara ate with them. Not like he ate a lot, or he was rude. But Mai still sat as far away from him as she could.

She could still feel it. Whatever was wrong with him. Even from where she sat.

They all picked at their food, except for Fumiko-nee, who ate just as much as usual. She was going to school again, and was always busy now, sometimes gone all day at Gaara's house doing homework or something, Mai wasn't sure.

Mai took a drink of her water, fingers tight against the plastic cup, and glanced warily over at Gaara. He saw her, blinked and looked over, and Mai quickly looked back down at her steak bits.

Why couldn't Nee-chan feel it?

... 

~ "Give her space! Move! Sir, please, watch her neck-" ~ 

... 

6

Mai was sullen at the market all day, barely letting her mother drag her around by the arm, buying pencils and papers and big grey erasers, cardboard folders with stupid designs on the front. But it didn't matter. Her mom had bought them anyway.

She was going to the Civilian school.

Now she was in her room. Mai refused to look at the bags of stupid school things sitting on her bed or the empty pink backpack her mother had insisted on. She wasn't going to pack it. She was rebelling.

There was a knock on the door, so light Mai wondered if whoever had done it had drummed their fingers against the wood instead of their knuckles. But she didn't answer.

"Mai?" That was he sister's voice. Mai scowled. "Mom wants to know if you're ready to eat."

"No. Go away."

"She's been sad all day," Mai heard, a whisper on the other side of the door, and she stiffened. That meant he was there. "I don't know why."
The door opened suddenly, because she wasn't allowed to lock it.

At first she thought it was Fumiko-nee. But then as the footsteps got closer, Mai recognized the stuffy, angry feeling of Gaara's chakra (it was chakra, she'd read it in a book at the library) and she tensed.

He stopped. The way she was sitting, with her chin tucked against her knees, she could see his shirt, but not his face. He'd taken off his poncho for the heat, then.

"If you want to go to my school," he said softly, to Mai's absolute shock, "Then you should say so."

"What? Your school?" Now Fumiko-nee was coming in too; the door creaked with the movement as she leaned heavily against the door and gripped the knob, limping. "Mai, do you wanna go to the ninja school?"

"I can't," she said petulantly, and looked up to scowl at them both, despite the way her eyes slid away from Gaara's figure and how she didn't really want to make faces at her sister and so she glared at the wall between them instead. "Mom n' Dad won't let me."

They looked at each other. Fumiko-nee nodded.

"Hold on. I'll be back," she said, and vanished out the door, clunky wooden peg-leg thunking against the ground with every second footfall. Mai could hear her walking from anywhere in the house. Gaara in front of her hesitated, leaning like he would follow, but then settled back onto his feet to stay.

He looked weird without his poncho. The freaky rings around his eyes darkened with only his black t-shirt on, and his white obi looked so misplaced with the rest of his dark clothes. He didn't have any eyebrows or dots in his eyes, something Mai knew everyone else had- and the color of his eyes were unsettling; she couldn't figure out if they were green or blue. And who had red hair? What even was with that?

And he exuded confusion, half that awful angry stuff and half- or maybe less than?- something different. Not nice, really, just quieter. When he moved, the sand moved, so that outside it looked like the ground was trying to swallow him up and inside it looked like the air was moving.

This 'Gaara' person her nee-chan was friends with felt not right.

In the street, other kids ran away from him. Adults did, too. And they stared at him without even thinking it was rude. They said he was 'evil' and Mai didn't really know what 'evil' was, but it couldn't be good if her mother covered her ears in the market-place when she talked about it. And he carried that weird container thing on his back everywhere he went.

"So you want to be a ninja?"

Mai jumped, caught staring, at the sound of his voice. He didn't sound angry. He always spoke so quietly- like he was afraid of getting looked at if he talked too loud.

"Ye," she grunted.

"Why?" Gaara smiled at her oddly. He was talking just to talk, Mai could tell.

Mai hesitated. "Because I want to do things," she said after a little bit, fingers tightening against her legs. "I want to do exciting stuff and go lots of places. Civvies don't do that."
Gaara hummed, but didn't say anything.

And then her Tou-san yelled her name.

...

~ Shiragiku, Mai thought. He sounded angry, more inflection than she'd heard from him yet. Did he know? Did he know? Her soul was pounding like a heartbeat. ~

...

"Welcome to Sunagakure's Ninja Academy," the ninja teacher said. He was a big person, with really dark skin too. He looked like a ninja, with his pouches and pockmarks. "Soon you will begin your first day here. But first, I will assign you to your teachers. After this, you will be shinobi in training. This means that you must always be diligent, always work hard, and always serve your village with all of your ability."

Diligent?

Mai rubbed her arm nervously. She was crowded in a group, and every once in a while someone jostled. She was wearing her regular old brown shirt and red shorts and old civvie sandals that had used to be Fumiko-nee's, but mom had said they would go out for new ninja clothes the next time she got paid at work. She had her dumb pink backpack with civilian school supplies in it, and two kunai Gaara had given her.

Everybody here was bigger than her. Most of them were boys. Some of them already had weapon pouches on their arms and legs, and little scars on their hands that Mai knew went together with training. She felt out of place, like a speck disappearing in the water.

But she was here.

And she could work hard and protect the village like a real ninja, even if she didn't quite know what diligent meant.

...

~ It hurt. ~

...

Mai hated crying.

She hated it because her nose clogged and ran and her body jerked and she couldn't seem to get three words out with starting back up. She hated it because in gave her a headache and because it made her mouth feel like it was full of glue and turned her eyes red and puffy. She hated it because it meant she was weak.

Ninja didn't cry.

"It's okay," Fumiko-nee soothed from where she knelt in front of the chair Mai sat on. "It's not that bad."

Mai winced at the way her knees stung where her sister patted them with disinfectant-wet cotton balls. They were red and raw the same as her hands from being smashed down into the ground over and over. Her left knee already had band-aids on them. Fumiko-nee was still working on the right.
She sniffled again.

"You should tell a teacher when they bully you," Fumiko-nee said.

She would not. That made her weak too, getting grown-ups to fight her battles. That's what all the other kids said. Not that she really fought- she didn't know how to yet. PT wouldn't start until the second semester. "Okay."

Her sister peeled the wrapper off a big square bandage and smoothed it over the biggest scrape. Mai didn't even want to think about going to school tomorrow and trying to write with her bleeding hands, bandaids or no bandaids, but still she let Fumiko-nee take one and set to work, biting her tongue at the way it burned.

Nobody was home yet but them, Fumiko had picked her up from school. She was being bullied, too, Mai could tell- the bruise on her arm was a hitting-the-wall-or-ground bruise. She had two on her back, so she knew what they looked like. But Fumiko-nee never ever cried.

There was a sharp sound that didn't come from her sister's mouth, a kind of gasp or inhale, and Mai looked up to see Gaara gripping the wall of the archway into the kitchen. His fingers were a different color than the rest of his skin, whiter.

She hadn't even felt him coming this time. Weird. Mai looked away.

"What happened?" he said sharply before Fumiko-nee could even look up to see who had made the noise. Before she could say she'd fallen off a step or something like that- which wasn't necessarily wrong, but it was more like 'tripped off' then 'fell'- her sister cut in, wrapping her wrist and palm with a long white bandage that was soft but hot against her skinned cuts.

"Mai got tripped on the Academy steps."

"Tripped," Gaara repeated again, slower. "Or got tripped?"

Fumiko-nee said nothing, just kept wrapping. After a second, she put the clip in to hold the bandage in place, and then pulled more out of the box of regular sticky bandaids for her fingers. Mai squirmed uncomfortably, not just because it hurt, but because Gaara was making a face she didn't want to look at.

"It's fine," she muttered.

"No it's not," Fumiko-nee chided her.

Gaara said nothing as she started on Mai's other hand.

... Everything was jarring, like when she had a hangover, blurry and she couldn't see, and voices slurred together, whispering like ghosts somewhere outside her closed eyes. ~

7

Mai packed her backpack as slowly as she possibly could, but it only took so long to pack up when the only paper you had on your desk you'd turned in. It was really just one folder and one pencil she had to put away. She tried to zipper really slowly instead, but even that ended quickly when the
sensei started glaring at her.

And then she shouldered her bag and headed out into the hallway, peeking. Mostly empty, except for a few stragglers. Mai wondered if they were all trying to wait super long to leave just like her. But either way, she had to go out.

"Maybe they won't be there," she said out loud, walked toward the door that would lead to the hallways outside. They didn't tease her every day, after all.

She reached for the door, and it flew open to meet her, smacking her hard in the face and chest so she shrilled and fell back on the floor. "Sorry," she said quickly, reaching her hand up to her nose. "I didn't mean to- oh."

"Oops," came a high voice. Laughter.

Fantastic.

She tried to get back up, but smacked back down when a backpack hit her in the stomach, landing on her lap. It wasn't that heavy, but it'd startled her. It was a real ninja backpack- dark colored yellow that rippled in the light just like sand. She looked up at Ayumi- a popular girl in school that Mai honestly didn't even think was all that pretty, with her pug nose and spaced out teeth.

Ayumi was two grades ahead of her. Mai didn't even know why she'd started hating her, just that one day she was on the sidelines when a pink haired boy smacked away her homework folders in the hall, and then suddenly BAM, like it was an invitation and she'd joined in.

"Carry my stuff, please," Ayumi said, studying her nails with the sloppy runoff on her skin like she could see her stupid overapplied dark lipstick in the reflection. She looked like a pig, Mai thought to herself. With makeup applied by a mole. "I have a lot of homework today, I think it's just too heavy."

Mai very deliberately, knowing this was gonna suck, picked the bag up by the strap without standing, held it out to her side, and dropped it on the floor. "Carry your own books," she muttered, looking away.

"What was that?"

"I said I like your hair today, Ayumi."

Mai didn't know if it was the sarcasm or the fact she hadn't picked up the bag that tipped her off, but Ayumi narrowed her eyes. "My okaa-san straightened it," she said prissily, probably because she couldn't figure out for sure if she was insulting her. Which she had been, but Ayumi was a stupid pig-mole with uneven mascara. "You should try it sometime. Take care of all- that."

Mai stood. Wanted to kick Ayumi's perfect backpack across the hall and then throw it in the trash, but didn't feel quite that defiant. Frustration filled her up. She was a ninja! Just because Ayumi was older than her didn't mean Mai had to be so weak! "I need to get home," she said, dropping her eyes somewhere to the left of Ayumi's face. She ended up looking at her friend instead.

"Someone needs to take care of your dumb hair," she said. "Do you even brush it?"

"Hey, Ayumi. How about a haircut?" said the other one- she didn't even know his name. Mai felt her eyes widen.

Ayumi glanced over, and Mai thought maybe she had caught the sarcasm and had just been teasing
her as her hand went down to the pouch on her waistbelt. And oh no, she could hear more footsteps, and she doubted it was the teachers.

It was probably more of Ayumi's stupid boy classmates. The ones that liked her mole makeup.

"Hold still a minute, Hon," Ayumi said sweetly, came out of her pouch with a two-edge kunai Mai had learned about in her class that very same day. Maybe when the younger kids learned about the weapons, the older kids got to use them?

The footsteps stopped suddenly. Mai took a step back and Ayumi followed.

And then they were back, a quick tap-tap-tap way closer than they had been. There was a yell, like the way she had yelled when the door hit her in the face, and a loud sound as the kunai fell and scraped against the ground.

Ayumi's form folded in front of her, and then hit the ground at Mai's feet back-first. The older girl tapped her hand quick-like against the ground, probably out of habit from losing a million PT spars.

Gaara looked Mai right in her shocked eyes, and lifted Ayumi's hand further up, chopping his other hand like a snake against her wrist. Ayumi dropped the blade, and it smacked against the tile.

There was another sound, cracking-like, and a yell as the boy pulled his now bleeding hand away from Gaara's sand, where it'd cropped up behind his head to protect him.

Ayumi and this boy were two years ahead of her, yes. But Gaara was three, and Gaara was also scary, and really strong.

...  
~ There was nothing left inside her, and she remembered being angry, and couldn't remember why, just remembering that she'd been angry, just now and all through her entire life. ~

...  
"Can you teach me?"

"Huh?" Gaara turned around slowly, like he wasn't used to people talking to him during lunch. "Mai?"

"Can you teach me?" she repeated. She did not shy away from him, did not look away from him, did not let his freaky chakra scare her. Mai straightened. She couldn't help the nervous way she clutched her left arm, but she tried to look like she wasn't afraid.

"Teach you what?" he asked quizzically, and seemed a little surprised. (Mai had not spoken to him once since he'd helped her in that hallway, Gaara thought. And not much besides. He scared her, just like he scared everyone.)

"How to fight," she said, and he frowned.

"You're learning that, aren't you?"

"Not fast enough," she disagreed, shaking her head. "Not good enough. I want to fight like- like you fought."

...
~ When she hadn't been angry, Mai remembered being afraid. Always afraid of everything, her own shadow, losing everything no matter how hard she tried to hold on, stupid Sasuke, stupid sharingan. ~

Mai blew out a puff of air, tried again to focus on Toyotomi-sensei's words. But it was a drone. He was writing definition lists on the board with an irritatingly squeaky piece of white chalk, things Mai didn't really see the point in defining. Things deriving from chakra- which had no actual definition aside from 'Spiritual and physical life energy'.

Looking down at her notebook, Mai could see the first two or three copied words: Ninjutsu: one of the three main jutsu categories. Utilizes chakra to preform various ninja techniques, directly underneath that was an underlined SUBCLASS, where she had gotten halfway through Shape Transformation before giving up on the sentence entirely.

Toyotomi-sensei had gotten way farther than that while she stared at him, thinking offhand about her training with Gaara tonight, and the training ties prior. Slowly but surely she was improving, Mai could see it in her PT spars. She was a good fighter for her age, Toyotomi-sensei had said so.

On the board their were words like Nature Transformation, Senjutsu techniques, medical ninjutsu, sealing jutsu, barrier jutsu. Ugh, this sucked. She wanted recess or something. Fumiko had made her lunch. A bento, with chilies in it just like Mai liked it, and rice-

"Mai-chan."

"Eh?" My raised her head up from her palm, blinked a few times at the teacher. "Yeah?"

There was muffled laughter. Mai wanted to sigh again, because that could only mean she'd been asked a question. Toyotomi-sensei frowned at her in disapproval. "I asked if chakra has any correlation to Taijutsu."

"Well, duh," she muttered. Then, louder, "Yeah, Sensei. You don't need it, but it can make you stronger."

"Mai! Homework!"

Mai groaned loudly. Hopefully loudly enough to be heard from the kitchen.

"Don't make that noise at me! You've been home alone since noon!"

"I'll help you," Fumiko-nee said. Her textbook pages crinkled as she dropped her knee, and Mai could see she was working on some kind of notes- she'd been home for a half hour and already had five or six pages done. "I help Gaara sometimes, I should be able to figure it out."

"It's dumb," she said. "I don't get it."

"What is it? Maths?" she asked, and Mai winced. It was math. Formulative stragetics on the battlefield- how to throw kunai into certain winds, how to ricochet based on angles. Things Mai
could not do on paper.

"I don't need help," she repeated.

"Come on," Fumiko-nee said, closing her textbook and tucking her pencil behind her ear. It stuck oddly out of her shoulder-length brown hair, but Mai knew it wouldn't fall out. Somehow it never did. "Gaara helps you with your fighting stuff. Lemme help with your schoolwork."

"Mai-

"I've got it, mom!" Fumiko called back, dropping her book on the floor and carefully picking herself up, using the wall she'd been leaning against to stand. She hobbled over to the bed with her peg-leg, wobbling. Mai frowned.

"Where's your crutch?"

"Must've lost it," she replied easily.

Mai looked away, tapping her fingers against her knees. There was no way to lose a crutch vital to walking. "Did you tell Gaara?" she said softly.

Fumiko didn't really hesitate so much as pause, then grinned. "Nah," she said.

"Do..." Mai hesitated as Fumiko reached across her lap for her backpack to grab her homework folder. She bit her lip, chewing on it long enough to draw her sister's attention, who paused in unzipping her bag. "Do you want me to-"

"No," she said. "You don't have to fight if you don't want to. Now. Oh- is this what you're having trouble with?"

Mai hesitated. Just for a second, she hesitated. Somebody had stolen or broken her sister's crutch, and she was a ninja-in-training, she could do something about it. She had to, it was her job.

But the resolution was fleeting.

She would never do it. Mai wasn't brave enough.

"Yeah."

...

~ "-nothing left, she's not producing anything more-" ~

...

"Mai, are you hurt?"

She made a noise that made it impossible to deny that she was hurt- and it didn't matter anyway, Gaara wasn't blind and his sand had drawn blood- but she didn't want to stop. "I'm- I'm fine. Let's try that again."

"Are you certain?"

"Yes, yes, Gaara. I am bleeding." She blew air from her cheeks with a frustrated hiss. "Big whoop. I bleed more when I'm cooking food. I want to learn to do this thing without dying."
Gaara looked at her uncertainly, and Mai felt the slightest bit of guilt. He was nervous. He didn't ever seem to like training with her- he was afraid of hurting her, which made sense- he hurt people on accident all the time. But she needed to be able to do this. "... All right."

... 

~ Sharingan, sharingan, sharingan. ~

...

Thunderstorms were stupid and they shouldn't have scared her.

But they were loud in a way that sandstorms weren't, and sometimes they made the floor flood and killed people trapped outside and darn it, they were scary and she was not staying in her bed alone for another second whether Gaara was sleeping with her sister or not.

She climbed out of bed, flinching as another crack of lightning lit up her bedroom, then fled down the hall to her nee-chan's bedroom.

...

~ It fed on pain and sorrow and fear, like some leech. Like some goddamn leech sucking all the feeling out of her limbs so she flopped like a dead body and Shiragiku was screaming in her ear- ~

...

"What if we get caught?" Mai whispered, more to herself than her sister, who was crouched next to her as close to the bottom of the bleachers as they could get underneath them.

Fumiko just shrugged. "I haven't yet."

"How often do you do this?"

"Every week or so."

'This' was apparently sneaking into her school to watch Gaara during his class' graded spars. It had been dumb luck that Mai, halfway through the hall's bathroom door and the only one not in class, had seen her walking toward the gym like there was nothing weird going on.

Mai frowned. She'd skipped class to follow at her sister's insistence, but... What if they got caught? She'd probably get detention and everything else. "But-"

"Shh," Fumiko warned just as the teacher called Gaara's name.

He got up from his spot on the other side of the bleachers- all alone; all the kids were crammed up on the right side. Mai understood why they were on this side- with so many kids, nobody would see them through the cracks but- well, she felt kind of bad.

Gaara was not a bad person. A scary person, yes, who looked strange and felt terrible, but not a bad person.

The other kid was just some random, a boy she didn't know by name or even by face, and he looked absolutely queasy like he would puke on his shoes, but still standing straight.

And then the whispering began above them, bets and terrified exchanges and calling out to the boy on the gym floor with Gaara. Mai very carefully closed her teeth together so she could clench them
without them grinding, because- what? Did they think Gaara was gonna kill this kid?

The spar was called, and the other boy hesitated for only a fraction before leaping forward at Gaara, who stood motionless, hands at his sides like a soldier. He didn't have to move at all, Mai realized: he barely had to breathe.

She had never seen him fight this close before.

...

~ It was the only thing that hurt beside her veins, yanking nothing from everything to feed it, and her eyes burned like- like- like they would take the whole world down in ashes. Like she would burn the world straight down. ~

...

"But if we put a seven here..."

"No, it still adds up wrong."

"Aw."

Mai shuffled into the living room, mind steaming shut on her plans. She was done. She was done with everyone at her stupid school making a fool out of her. That was it. Screw practice spars- this was done. But not at this very second. At this very second she was just kinda tired and sore and wanted to put her backpack away and see what Gaara and Fumiko were playing on the couch.

She did just that and then squeezed up between them on the couch. Gaara made way, keeping a few inches' space between them as he always had. Fumio was trapped against the arm of the couch, so she just grinned and said, "Sudoku?" And held out a little pad of paper with a grid half-filled with numbers, and Mai wished she hadn't come, but she was stuck now.

"Nope."

"Four," Gaara said suddenly and reached out over her to point. His voice sounded weird lately, getting kind of scratchy like he was sick and lower. "Four goes there."

"Oh, yeah! And two goes here then!"

Mai pulled up her legs and crossed them to scoot up farther into the couch to watch them work.

...

~ Her mind was swimming, swimming with pain and rage and fear. ~

...

"I said leave me alone."

"Oh, c'mon, dead last, don't be such a drag." Eishi said, with a stupid little grin on his face.

"Yeah, Mai-chan."

She stopped walking, fingers clenching closed on her backpack strap. Something was making her heart pick up speed. Her skin got a little warmer, even in the high noon sun's blast. Mai could feel the way her toes kicked up the sand as she did so.
Eishi and his friend stopped, surprised. Usually she ran away, tried to ignore them. An unsuspecting classmate gave them a dirty look for blocking his path on the playground and went around, some kid in her grade with average skills, she didn't know his name.

"I don't know if you're deaf or dumb," she said, voice not even shaking or anything, and looked up at the sky, shading her eyes against the sun with her free hand. "Either way, I guess I should cut you some slack."

"What did you just say?"

"Deaf, then." She moved one foot, shifted so she turned around slightly, and dropped her eyes. Maybe she should've kept up her hand, since Eishi's salmon-head was reflecting light like a kunai metal. "Can you read lips? Leave- me- a- lone," she said slowly.

"You got a lot of nerve to-"

She laughed unexpectedly, a quick burst that faded instantly, sounding harsh and a little spastic, but then Mai managed to school her face back to something calmer, if not a little mean. "Nerves," she said. "What do you know about nerves, picking on a girl half your body weight, debu?"

Wow, she'd only seen that color on kids with heat stroke.

"Bah. I'm going back inside. It's hotter than an oven out here," she said, and turned around. "Sayonara, manuke!"

Her mind was pinwheeling despite her calm, swaggered body language. That had been too easy. Had she really been putting up with that kid- that annoying little idiot who thought he was cooler than the seniors? With his stupid pink hair it was amazing he didn't get bullied. Hah! she thought viciously. Take that! Take that! I can stand up for myself!

Gaara had walked her through several different kinds of lessons and exercises since they'd started training. training for personal stamina, tai chi, kata and running for speed and flexibility, sparring and weights for raw strength, other kata techniques for weapon and taijutsu form, different jutsu, spot-what's-wrong for seeing the unseen.

Non-chakra sensory techniques using only sound and instinct.

She jerked to the right to avoid the hand going for her backpack. He wants it? She thought, heady and mad all of a sudden, pulling down the strap of her bag as she slid, heart thrumming like woah. Then lemme give it to him instead.

She whirled without stopping, foot twisting in the sand; brought up her arm with two texbooks, three binders and two training weights and shuriken each worth of stuff flying upwards, nothing compared to trying to fend off Gaara's heavy sands. Eishi didn't even see it coming, overbalanced from his grab- his form was wrong! why would anyone even reach that far in a fight?- and looked more surprised at the fact he'd missed than by the backpack slamming into the side of his skull.

It didn't really make a noise, the impact dulled by the thick shinobi fabric of her new green bag. Eishi didn't fall- well, at least he wasn't an awful fighter, she thought grudgingly, although she'd already known that; Eishi was up in the top tenth percentile of the Academy for Taijutsu- but he stumbled backward, grabbing for his head, looking startled.

"Finish what you start," she remembered Gaara saying. "If it's not practice, finish what you start or they'll come back."
Mai dropped her bag, raised both of her arms. Step forward, set foot in sand until it stopped, pull arm back into bow-and-arrow stance.

Well, if she could hit a dummy.

Mai released, a sharp, practiced 'hah!' slipping out of her lips out of habit, knowing that her fist was set correctly but that this would still sting like a mother even as she hit up square into the middle of Eishi’s face. That made a sound- already off balance, there was no way for the bully to catch his footing, and he fell like a flagpole in hard wind, straight down.

He made a weird little shrieking noise that sounded like words, clutching at his bleeding face. Mai drew up from her formal stance, shook out her hand, and grinned a little. "Your face sucks to punch," she told him, and she thought maybe he cursed, but it was muffled.

... 

~ Fuck, shit, Kuso, damn, son of a mother, she thought, prick, jerk, shite, Kami, please, stop it, stop it. ~

... 

8

"You look like an idiot."

Kankuro blinked, straightened from where he'd been leaning against the wall waiting for Temari. She was supposed to be there almost an hour ago, but he wasn't giving up yet- if he didn't keep training, they wouldn't be able to go to the Chunin Exams without making a fool of themselves. Who had said that? Who as even in the living section of the Kazekage Tower whose voice he didn't recognize?

He was also the only other person in the hall, which meant someone had just called him an idiot.

He turned his head, ready to snark something mean, but couldn't really think of anything to say when he saw a kid standing there.

Like. An actual brat. Younger than his eleven year old brother by at least two or three years. She looked disgruntled, with gnarly black hair down to her shoulders and a red top with brown shorts. Her shorts had a hole in both knees and looked patched to hell, but she had a kunai holster on her thigh and shinobi sandals on, so she couldn't be a civ kid.

Noticing his glare, she raised both eyebrows, crossed her arms. "What?" she challenged. "You do. Like some kid got loose with kaa-chan's makeup."

"Damn brat," he muttered under his breath. "What are you doing up here, huh?" he said, ignoring the way she mimicked 'damn teenager' in a higher pitch. "You're not allowed up here."

"Says who?"

"Says me."

She grinned like she'd heard a good joke. "I'm here to train with Gaara," she said, and laughed when his face paled underneath the facepaint. She raised one hand to tap her cheek. "So you can run along, me."
Wake up, wake up. Mai imagined Shira's voice and heard Eishi's and wondered if this heat was the sand, if she was sweating from the damn burning noon sun, they were laughing, if she could just open her eyes she knew it would all just be a nightmare.

Someone was making strange noises in her house. Normally Mai wouldn't care because Gaara was sleeping over and Gaara was probably the strongest person there, but the noises were coming from Fumiko's room, where Gaara was supposed to be, so Mai got nervous.

Terrified but trying her hardest to ignore it, she got out of bed, winced at how cold the wood floor was. She needed to get a carpet in here.

All was going well until she got to the door- nothing had jumped out of the dark, she hadn't been murdered, attacked; or even tripped on anything- but then she froze.

Bad bad bad bad, her mind screamed. Run run run!

She was dead. Mai was as good as dead, she was going to die because that thing was gonna kill her before she could take a step, it was going to crush her and eat her and she wouldn't even have time to make a sound, squish! Dead.

Her hands started to shake first, and then her arms, and her whole body until she was trembling and there were tears in her eyes. The doorknob shook with the force. Kami, she was scared, and she didn't even bother running away because she wouldn't make it.

"... stop. Stop, stop, wake up!..."

Mai flinched at the unexpected voice, getting louder and louder through the hum of pure fear and death death racing through her blood, seeping through her skin. Fumiko? Her mind was stuttering in and out, heart beating a hole in her ribcage, but Fumiko-nee didn't sound that scared.

"Gaara-..."

Mai rested her forehead on the door, taking heavy breaths, pants. She hadn't realized she was sweating until she did that, because the door felt freezing against her suddenly flushed skin, but it helped. Righted her brain.

Where's this coming from? she tried to rationalize, teeth chattering together. I'm not afraid, I'm not afraid... this is not my fear...

Before she could think about it again, she twisted the knob and slammed against the door to make it open. In the hallway that stink was worse- a thick ooze that filled everything. Again she tried to fight through it- not mine not mine I am not afraid- taking the slowest steps she'd ever taken, trying not to fall, trying to force herself to breathe.

Eventually she made it to her sister's door, where the voices were different now: her sister was not alone.

"You're dead I killed you get away- Hide- Fumiko hide get him out of my head get him out- I hate you-"

"Gaara," Fumiko's voice said, pushing through the meaningless babble. "Come on, wake up now."
Come on. All the way, yeah. Gaara, your eyes are changing. It's okay, Gaara, everything's fine, we're safe."

The light was on in the room, peeking out through the bottom of the doorway. This was where it was coming from, that foreign rage and fear that made her want to die before whatever was inside inevitably killed her.

She opened the door.

Something was writhing on the bed, and for a second, Mai was too terrified to figure out what it was, lungs freezing over and heart stopping and everything went blurry as her eyes fought to the top of her head. She was choking on her own tongue.

But then it faded a little- whether because the ooze was going away a little or because she was fighting it, Mai didn't know which- and her senses returned.

Gaara. It was Gaara, she could see his hair and familiar clothes he must've kept on before going to sleep. But he looked different- one of his arms was a different shade, sand clumping together on his fingers. It was coming from him.

I was right I was RIGHT- her mind shrieked, pinning the fear on him. Monster MONSTER-

"Wh-what's happening to him?" she managed to force, voice going high with fear.

Fumiko's head jerked from where she sat on the bed beside him, trying to shake him awake. "Mai?" she said. "Mai, I- Gaara. Gaara, Mai's here. Can you feel her?"

He'd stopped babbling, more mumbling that wasn't quite words, but he stopped to make an odd noise, a quiet keening her parents wouldn't hear from their side of the house as long as this craziness in the air didn't wake them up.

"Gaara, you're scaring her. There you go. Yeah. We're at my house. You're okay. You just fell asleep for a little, you're okay. Nobody's here but me and Mai."

For a long long time, it seemed like, Mai stood there, petrified in the doorway, watching Gaara cry and lose his mind until eventually he started to quiet, started to make sense, and the sand started to crumble back to the bed. A long time before he let her sister go, a long time before he sat up and looked at her, eyes red and puffed and bloodshot.

A long time before she forgot that look, how terrified it was, nervous, ashamed. The way he said "Mai, I-" before fading off, staring. And then Fumiko cut in, talking, soothing, and Mai escaped out the door, fear no longer leading her movements, and fell back against the wall outside her door, just sitting and listening and breathing hard, heart beating.

There was a monster in her brother.

... ~ "We're almost to the medic's tent, Shiragiku-san." ~ ..

Mai sighed, sat down in her bed, still shaking slightly from her father's angry tirade. Yes, she'd
helped Fumiko pack her things and find dried foods for ration. Yes, she'd broken the lock on the window for her sister to climb through, and yes, she'd very deliberately distracted him from going into the bedroom. No, there's literally no say in what she does now.

Deal with it, Dad.

Yare, yare, she thought tiredly, pulling out a pencil and paper from her headboard with the homework supplies. It'd been almost a week and a half and he was still going off every other hour.

To: Fumiko and Gaara

How're things going in Konohagakure? What's it like? In the Academy I heard it's mostly leaves and trees and stuff, so I bet it's really different from here in Suna. Bring me back something cool, Fumiko!

How close are the Chuunin Exams to being done? I bet Gaara's dominating as always. As for me, I stopped failing that one class, so that's good. Gaara, I also finally figured out that stupid Clone Technique. We should work on Shadow Clones when you get back, because these things are basically useless. Also kick ass.

Dad's still freaking out, but don't worry about that. He won't do anything about it but make a lot of noise.

- Mai

The letters were slow, a few days in between each other, but they came. Asuka was probably tired as hell, but the bird stayed the night wherever it brought the next letters to before taking off the next morning.

Fumiko was quick to reply, of course. Dear Mai, her letter read, We just got your letter this morning. Gaara's doing great in his fights, but did you know he could actually get hurt? I'm serious! I just wrapped his bandages ten minutes ago. He says to tell you hello. It's amazing here. It's all really green, and the air is completely clean. There are trees everywhere! The colors are just incredible. The other Genin are all really strong, and I think I'll be good friends with some of them. I'm bringing them my chocolate fudge brownies tomorrow. I hear you've succeeded in your technique! That's great, but if you haven't already, please don't use it to attack Eishi. With love, Fumiko & Gaara.

To that one she didn't even bother adding the recipient name. Was she seriously- no, of course she was. Fumikowas probably going to come back and be pen pals with everyone in Konoha.

But she was troubled by I just wrapped his bandages ten minutes ago. Okay, hurt was surprising but not, like, traumatizing, because contrary to popular belief Gaara was a human, sand or no sand, demon or no demon. It was probably possible. Technically if Gaara got wet, that was an issue in itself, but that was never a problem in Suna.

But how badly did he get hurt? What had happened to the other guy? Was he dead? No, Fumiko wouldn't have been quite so lighthearted if Gaara had killed someone in peaceful tournament. But it never ended well when Gaara got stressed or angry during battle- the one time she'd actually been there when that happened was not exactly enjoyable.

So she replied quickly, asking all such questions and being sarcastic as usual because seriously, Fumiko? Also of course not. Why on Earth would I antagonize poor innocent Eishi?

Bleh.
Time passed slowly after that. Letters came and went over the span of a month. School was boring and full of jerks, and without Gaara and Fumiko around home wasn't much better. Thinking about it, they were basically her only friends. Which was a little sad, but fuck societal expectations because they also coincided to being the only two cool people in Suna close to her age.

Or maybe in general, if one included her mother.

...

~ "Her heartbeat- she doesn't have a pulse-!" ~

...

When her siblings returned, it was unexpected and also kind of terrifying, because they hadn't been supposed to come back for at least another week according to Fumiko's most recent letter, and also because they were all seriously injured in some way, extremely dehydrated and sunburned, and had been found nearly passing out close to the village.

When she heard, it was through the principal at the Academy. It was standard procedure she guessed to tell a kid when their family was put in the hospital, whether it was the ninja school or the civilian one.

She ran to the hospital. She didn't know how to shunshin yet, but she could run pretty damn fast by regular standards, and plenty of practice with obstacle dodging and sometimes she could wall-walk.

Mai was at the hospital within ten minutes of hearing the news: her unconscious siblings and Kankuro and Temari were at the hospital with serious injuries caused by unknown assailants.

She rushed inside and up to the desk, ignoring a two-person line in favor of grabbing the stupid too-tall rim of the attendance desk and hauling herself up. It was just like the pull-up bars on the playground.

"Mitsuwa Fumiko and Fuma Gaara," she said.

"What?" the clueless attendant asked, confused.

"Patients," Mai grunted, keeping her weight in her stomach. "They just got admitted?"

"Just a minute, um, ma'am," the woman said. "You should wait for your parents to-"

"They're my siblings," Mai hissed, leaning forward. Her elbows bowed out slightly, shaky from the movement. Mai could hear the people behind her grumbling, but she didn't really care. "I-"

"You're not related to that child," she said sternly.

"Not by blood," Mai said, and brought her knees up too to kneel on the counter top. The woman looked shocked. Everything in Mai's body knew this was against the rules, that she was being rude, that she should wait her turn, but it was quieter than usual. She overwhelmed it, overruled it. "Let me see them or I'll tell Gaara you tried to stop me from seeing my hurt sister."

Needless to say, she got their room numbers.

...

~ "Then transfer chakra!" ~
Mai didn't know why she got so mad when people shied away from Gaara—when they whispered to each other right in front of him. She'd used to do it, after all, and it happened to everyone, even the most wallflower kids in the freshman grades. Most of these kids didn't even know what they were talking about, just spitting out whatever they'd heard their parents wussing about.

But god damn, did it get under her skin. He was a damn ninja. He could hear every single word they were saying and these brat kids surrounding her probably knew it, too. They gave her a berth as she shifted and glared, but not by much.

"Hey, stop shoving," one boy with a turban around his head muttered.

"Hey, stop being an asshole," she shot back, because blah blah blah, Gaara could destroy the village if he got angry! I don't wanna be on his team! Wah, wah. Damn right he could, she thought, disgruntled. You're all lucky he's freaking even sane at this point.

"Idiot," the boy said finally, but it was too sad to even try to one-up. He turned away, and she threw her hands up in frustration, puffing out an annoyed sigh.

"You're all idiots!" she called, and made to push her way through the crowd. They knew where she was going and they'd heard her, and so her classmates moved out of her way, whispering at her as she went, nervous titters and warnings and scathing orders. Fuck them.

Eventually they all scattered to their respective choices after she stood up in the front with Gaara. More went to Temari than Kankuro, although a lot of it seemed to be gender-split between them, girls to Temari and boys to Kankuro. Must've been a role-model thing.

Mai pursed her lips as the last of the children filed themselves away, then flicked her eyes to Gaara, who had closed his, looking resigned. It had always hurt him, she knew. That they were scared of him. He'd almost gotten used to it. Konoha had been a total change of pace, and now- ugh, now Mai almost wished he hadn't gone, because now the pain was back that he couldn't form a bond with strangers.

"Don't worry about it, Gaara," she tried, putting a hand on his arm. "Like I said before, they're all just a bunch of idiots who believe whatever their parents spout."

He didn't respond, just made a little sighing noise between his teeth, and she frowned. Mai had never been any good at this part of friendship— the part where you comforted them. She was too blunt. She opened her mouth to try again, but clicked her teeth shut as a shadow stepped up alongside hers.

Matsuri. Mai didn't know this girl personally, but knew of her. She was in the failing percentile with her in most classes: enough that the final could pull them through, completely bypassing any and all praise. The only difference was that Mai was known among teachers as a quick physical-learner and hands-on fighter, and Matsuri was known for being skittish and having random anxiety attacks.

"E-excuse me," she stuttered, and Mai thought maybe she might pass out. She was twisting her fingers together. Gaara's eyes had opened, and now he watched her guardedly. "Will you be my sensei?"

Mai blinked. Gaara blinked. Everyone blinked, because what in hell—oh this was rich, the shy little
wallflower coming straight up to Gaara and all those big bad ninja-in-training that thought they were the First went all the way around the table on their way to Kankuro to avoid him.

"Are you sure you want that?" Gaara asked quietly, but damn if Mai was going to let her out of this once she agreed. He might be giving her an out, but she sure as hell would not. Gaara needed this.

Matsuri looked terrified and uncertain out of her mind, but she didn't flinch. "Please teach me!"

"Nice, kid." Mai laughed delightedly and thumped her back, grinning wider when Matsuri actually stumbled. "Some actual backbone. Good to see."

...  

~ She was trying. She was trying to wake up in the desert- but something was tugging- it hurt- the pain was keeping her tied in sleep, a pain that started in her heart and ended in her eyes. ~

...  

Mai shoved him and scowled. He didn't really give, just skidded on the sand a few inches.

"Bug off," she said. "I'm so sick of you I could puke."

He put his hands up nervously. "They pushed me," he said defensively. "I swear they just pushed me."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yes!"

Mai glared over at 'them' a group of three boke who probably didn't know the difference between a senbon and an exploding tag. Kami, she hoped they all got put on the same team together without a kunoichi. They would stay Genin forever. "And why would they do that?"

"How should I know?" he challenged.

She looked at him, unimpressed.

"Go on," one of them called. "Kiss your girlfriend!"

Eishi blushed to the roots of his hair, looking mortified. Mai could feel the way her eyebrows shot up.

"Excuse me?" she said indignantly in their direction, put her fists on her hips. "I wouldn't date anyone in this damn school, bunch of morons. Fuzakeru na, before I bust your faces."

"S-sou janai!" Eishi yelled back at them, balling his fists. "She's not my girlfriend!"

Loud arguments were like blood in the water, and a couple of curious sharks and minnows wandered over to see what was going on, having heard the conversation. They abandoned weapons and training in favor of the coming bloodbath, and Mai wanted to smack herself. Of course none of the Sand Siblings were here.

This is not worth swords, she told herself. This is not worth swords, this is not worth swords...  

Now 'they' came closer, flanking Eishi, and she'd never actually felt bad for this kid, but well that kind of must have sucked. "Aw, what is it," a boy with black hair said patronizingly. "What's
wrong with our buddy Eishi?"

"He's stupid, mean, and has pink hair," she listed off, raising one hand to count on her fingers. "Has too many groupies, doesn't have a brain, and won't get anywhere out of the Academy. Also, I hate all of you pretty much."

"Wow," one said, with a snicker. "Harsh."

"You sure you're not just scared?" one taunted, and damn it she knew he was trying to get a rise but she was not scared of anything anymore, so fuck him. "You're already kinda an ugly looking girl, what if you can't kiss, too?"

"You know what?" she snapped, because she was about to kill all of them and wanted them to know it. "Fine!"

And she reached out, grabbed his shirt, and before he could flinch, yanked him down to her level.

...

~ "Shiragiku-kun, I know you're upset, but I have to check the dilation-" ~

...

Mai guessed Matsuri was sort of like her friend now.

They didn't really hang out other than in-class training, one-on-one when they both stayed behind. Matsuri didn't step in when Mai got into fights, and Mai didn't always fight her battles. But Mai taught her the way Gaara had taught her- minus the sand, of course- and Matsuri tried hard.

"Right, you know what this means?" she had said.

"What?"

"When we get back, we're gonna train ourselves into the ground. Now that you know how to use that Dohjo of yours, it would be pathetic if you got kidnapped again. Next time you'll kick their asses to the Land of Snow."

And boy was Matsuri getting good with that little needle-rope. She could deflect swords with that shit now- deflect swords, deflect shurikenjutsu, catch limbs running in shunshin, and stab through wood. Her Taijutsu was improving as well, but her ninjutsu was still subpar. She was working on an actual move of her own: Certain-kill Treasured Tool Meteor, which basically meant she worked a crap-ton on her chakra control to be able to launch up into the air and throw it at you.

And it was great, a few times, catching her with a foul mouth, especially since she blushed afterward.

At the moment they weren't working with weapons at all, just going over kata techniques together since Matsuri hadn't quite yet gotten the hang of it. Mai was falling out of Tai-chi as an actual fighting style, but it was great for practice: muscle buildup and memory, stamina training, and discipline. And there were variations for her swords as well. They worked on it for nearly an hour, and then went their separate ways home.

...

~ "No! Leave her eyes alone!" ~
When Fumiko told her Gaara's ambition, Mai both couldn't believe it and couldn't believe she hadn't thought of it first.

Gaara would make the most perfect Kazekage, she couldn't believe the Elder Council hadn't already approached him about it. He was from the direct line of the Fourth Kazekage, which gave him a leg up, not to mention that he was easily the strongest ninja in Sunagakure. In the Land of Wind- well, he was probably the strongest of that, too, and that could be easily tested.

He wanted to be accepted by the people- and he had no qualms about work. Gaara could work, work, work, she remembered him from his school days, and from helping her classmates and his siblings grade papers and plan curriculums.

The Council had had him created to become an Ultimate Weapon- a defense for the entirety of Suna. Well, now they could deal with Gaara's peace-loving consequences, because those old fart council members needed a check, fast.

So when Fumiko told her Gaara's ambition, Mai set right to work. She enlisted Matsuri's help and set about convincing her entire school, starting with the Jonin and Chuunin teachers who respected him and appreciated his and his siblings' contributions, set them on infecting those not quite so keen. Then she and Matsuri set out to the students: honey and vinegar.

She went with Fumiko to advocate to the hospital, and to the training fields to talk to those ninja she respected, the old ones who told her stories as a child, the younger ones who'd just become Chunin in the Exam before the one Suna betrayed. Those too old to hold a grudge and those too young not to see the impact Gaara had made. Mai talked to little kids in the street when they followed her around out of boredom, their parents when she finally found them.

And when Fumiko came with the petitions, well, Mai did it all over again, and with some kind of mixture of honesty and violence managed to get more than enough on her end. Fumiko got most of the signatures- from the sellers in the market-place and Old Oba-san Jin and patients she was and had cared for, random strangers she befriended on the streets and the workers in Kazekage Tower.

Temari, Kankuro and Baki pitched in too, going on random stranger-signings with Fumiko and her and doing their own things as well, with Temari going to her friends and peers, Kankuro to the Puppet Corps.

Gaara probably did the least amount of propaganda, but he made up for it in the sheer amount of work it took to apply for the Kazekage position. Paperwork out his mind, and physical tests and emotional evals. Mai knew Fumiko helped him with that, but still. It was horrible just to look at the papers in their rooms. And he acted as a temporary Jonin-sensei to at least three different Genin teams.

And then the Council were assholes and declared a month long waiting period until voting.

At least they got to visit Konoha.

~ Mai could hear about a bed but felt nothing, only slightly less gravity slamming her down. There was something gross in her stomach- poking, prodding- oh god, people were dying everywhere, why weren't they waking her up- ~
Her skull pounded. It felt like a concussion and a migraine and a headshot from a set of brass knuckles.

On top of that, she felt like puking for an hour and passing right out afterward. Everything was just so slightly off, not quite blurry or a few millimeters to the left, just wrong for no reason.

Shunshin was evil, so she walked like a stumbling zombie all the way to the Kazekage Tower, ignoring the odd looks from passersby and kids. Gaara had said Kankuro dealt with this at least sometimes, so shit, she hoped he had something better to say than 'take an advil.'

Finally she made it and pushed through the door. It was hard to remember how to use the stairs, and she bumped and cursed her way up to their floor, praying nobody would try to stop her from going to an unauthorized floor- that they would recognize her enough to let her by without attempting to engage in any kind of noisy human interaction.

Mai got all the way to the living quarters floor and managed to get off the stairs without falling back down them. Shit, she was hammered. She couldn't even remember drinking that much, goddamn, it shouldn't be this bad. Mai was going to kill the Jounin who'd offered her the stuff.

She counted off doors until she got to Kankuro's: a plain hinged door with no resemblance to the freakshow of a puppet studio inside. From the hall, she couldn't smell the metal and oil, but even though she'd only actually seen inside his room once or twice, Mai remembered it like he was holding a can to her face.

Ugh.

She raised up a hand and smacked the wood open-handed, then had to stop at a wave of blood that pulsed in her ears. With her free hand Mai grabbed the doorframe, and bit her tongue as she waited for the pain to subside, the pounding.

Once her vision cleared, she lifted her hand again and banged it against the door with the side of her fist. Nothing happened- no one stirred inside, and she made some kind of pained noise of impatience, an eh-hh that sounded wounded. Mai hit the door a little harder and didn't stop, wanting to yell but knowing if she did it would probably knock her into the door.

"Kankuro," she muttered, probably not any louder than her knocking. "Baka-Kankuro, wake up already."

Her hearing must've been off, because the door suddenly gave way without her hearing anything. For a second her muddled brain thought it'd disappeared. But then something wrapped around her fist, and she squinted at it blearily. Another hand.

"Finally," she mumbled crossly.

"What?" he said. "And what's wrong with you?"

She scowled at his stupid sleepy face and pulled away her hand. "What do you think?"

"Who in hell gave you alcohol?"

She didn't really remember, just that it was a Jounin with a somewhat-blurry face that was probably a male and a couple of colors after that. But she didn't want to say that. "None of your business."
He raised an eyebrow at her. "Okay. And so why are you at my door?"

"Gaara said you do." She gestured randomly into the air near his chest, her head. "-this.

...  

~ "-our teammate, he probably knows why she did it, but I can't find him-" ~

The place Gaara wanted to use was big. Considering that this was Suna- it was big. It was only so massive because it was unfinished, Mai knew, because the floors hadn't been put in all the way and then had been taken down. So it looked like a hollowed-out apartment building meant for twelve or so families or more.

It was big, and it was empty, and it was disgusting, but Mai also knew that if anyone could make this place spectacular it was her sister and all her crazy-skilled art, her restless cleaning.

It wasn't really like Gaara to do something so big like this- give someone a building as a present in a place where overpopulation and space was an issue. But at the same time, she guessed it made sense: Fumiko didn't have enough space in an overly large bedroom for all of her things, and since it was becoming a hazard- get another space.

It probably had helped a lot that he was Kazekage.

There was dust all in the air that pressed against her nose and made it wrinkle. It was hot as balls with the sunlight pouring in through the thousand freaking windows, baking on the inside, but it wasn't like she wasn't used to heat. Actually, this was pretty tame.

The Genin team was coming soon to clean the place up, and then she would finally be able to give up this 'hey let's hang out every second you're not working Fumiko' act, and fall back into her old schedule, get some more training done. All said and done, though, Fumiko was easy to surprise, because she never suspected anything was off.

Class had just ended, so she wasn't even skipping, just... curious. She hadn't seen this place yet.

...  

~ Mai tried to speak, to explain, to say there was a psycho on the loose in her nightmares, that Eishi hadn't been avenged, that he was in her back pouch, that death was calling her into a dream, but she just slurred, just made a noise like pain pain pain. ~

...  

Mai twisted, spinning on her heel in the sand like a top. Both of her opponent's fists slipped past her chest, and instead of slamming her other foot down to stop herself, she whipped it out, catching the back of the other girl's knee so she toppled.

But Noriko was one of the scrappier kunoichi of her class. She was losing, but she was going down fighting. The brown-haired twat reached out with her kunai, flailing and yelping on her way down, and Mai didn't have enough time to both process the move and put down her foot to regain balance before the circled hilt slammed into her ankle.

She fell, because she was only standing on one foot, and cursed the whole way down. But unlike Noriko, who was only scrappy, Mai had training and remembered it in battle, and so she tucked to land on the round of her shoulder and rolled as soon as she made contact, sand flying up her nose and in her ears. Pain flared in her ankle, but she ignored it, scrambling up on her hands and knees as
soon as she had purchase and leaping.

She hit Noriko just as the girl pushed off the ground, and then it was over, Mai's knee in her back and the other stable on the ground, one hand twisting out the kunai and the other smacking her face back down into the sand.

"Take that," she huffed.

Noriko tapped at the ground quickly, almost drumming her fingers.

"Match end," their sensei announced a few yards away off to the side. Her classmates watched on from behind him. Mai liked fighting out here in the arena much better than inside her Academy gym- outside had resources, outside had sand and wind and walls and rocks, and her every move didn't echo. "Winner Mitsuwa Mai."

Mai let go of Noriko's hand, who immediately scowled, looking like she might jump her anyway despite the call. Every match her stupid classmates thought they could beat her out, shut her up. Fuck them. She'd beat them all into the ground.

As she stood, Mai grunted, eyes going wide with surprise as her right ankle tried to give, and almost stumbled back down on her butt. She tried to catch her face, hide the sprain, but her sensei had already seen her wobble.

"Dachi-kun. Help take Mai-chan to the infirmary," he said, writing in his clipboard.

"Toyotomi-sensei!" Mai protested angrily, hands fisting at her sides. "I have two more spars!"

"Tomorrow," he said dismissively, and she bristled, shot a killer at Dachi, who looked like he'd run out of luck.

"Sensei, I think she can make it on her own," he said, and his words were a strange combination of hateful and anxious. She didn't know why they hated her, but she went with it, matching them; she understood why they were nervous, strove to encourage it.

"Nonsense," Toyotomi-sensei said. "Haruki, Toshi, you're up."

Mai muttered curses under her breath, flipping up her finger at her sensei's back as she hobbled toward the sidelines. Dachi followed like an obedient pet, went so far as to try and go under her arm to help her walk, but she slapped away his hand with more force than necessary. "I can do it myself," she grumbled, and knelt next to her bag, shoving in her hand to yank out a roll of bandage.

She unwound a length, ripped it with her teeth, and wrapped it around her ankle- poorly, but it didn't really matter if she was going to the hospital. For a sprained ankle. Rrgh- and tied it off before tossing it back in her bag that she picked up by the strap and stood, content to aggressively limp her way to the hospital as Dachi tried to pretend they weren't walking together.

...

~ "What? Mai-chan? She- she said something." ~

...

Halfway to the hospital, Dachi had to go back to get a slip from Toyotomi-sensei to prove that he'd sent them. Mai didn't wait up, because if she had to ditch the one part of school she actually liked, she was damn well going to get her stupid ankle wrapped, not stand around like a fool limping out
of the way of pedestrians.

The hospital wasn't really that busy. It was the middle of the day, and not really sandstorm season. The only people coming in and out were ninja and the occasional reckless civilian. There wasn't a waiting time at all- in and out, and they didn't even need Dachi's dumb slip, because Mai had been in and out of her a million times from little injuries.

So she went straight to a doctor and they chakra-scanned it, did a lot of talking- because it wasn't broken but rules and laws and blahblah school payment for checkups parental permission blahblah- and called in her mom to settle everything, and eventually wrapped up her ankle.

But of course, Mai got stopped before she could even make her way out of the examination room. As a shinobi-in-training, it was standard for her to get annual physicals to make sure nothing was being messed with- that her chakra was flowing properly, that she wasn't getting chronic wounds, that her bones and muscles weren't being damaged by incorrect training.

It took way too long, in her opinion. Yeah, it was great she wasn't going to be crippled forever in any way because of these checks, but they took hours. Which sucked. But it was going just as it always had- she was lying on a patient's bed on top of some seriously crackly paper in just her undergarments, and they'd been going through all the normal steps, telling her as they went what was going on, asking questions.

And then the nurse stopped.

Mai hadn't been paying much attention to what they were saying. They did their thing and she did hers, just kind of zoning off into space thinking about her spars tomorrow and the history homework she had to do that night. But of course she was keeping aware of the chakra they had inside her, and stuff like that, because that shit could go way wrong.

So when it stopped moving- up, down, up, down, checklist, checklist, checklist, Mai noticed.

"What?" she said warily, cracking an eye open to stare at the nurse, who was frowning down at her stomach or something. "What is it?"

"Probably nothing, dear," the woman hummed. But she pulled away, pausing her examination, and Mai opened both eyes, narrow. Something was definitely wrong. "Can I ask if you've started your menstrual cycle yet? And if so, how long it's been since your last cycle?"

"I haven't started yet," she answered. "What's going on?"

The woman pursed her lips. "I'll be right back," she said.

Mai never went back to school.

There were tests upon tests upon doctors upon nurses, chakra-specialists and physio-specialists and civilian doctors and ninja doctors. Miles of words she didn't really understand, a million and twelve questions she couldn't always answer. Her mom came again from where she'd been working. Mai was passed from person to person, room to room.

Maybe it was because she was a kid, but no matter how many times she demanded to know why everyone was panicking, nobody explained anything further than "We don't know anything for sure, honey" or "it's probably nothing" even though it was obviously something, there was no way those doctors actually believed that.

But again, she wasn't stupid. Every question they asked and test they ran had something to do with
her menstrual cycle or her ovaries or fallopian tubes (Mai didn't know what those were but figured they had something in common with her menstrual cycle and ovaries).

She was getting scared. This wasn't damage so far as she could glean—this wasn't an injury or something life-threatening, but it was something that made her mother start to snuffle and it was also something the doctors and nurses as a whole seemed extremely distressed about and it had something to do with her nonexistent period.

In the midst of the tests her brain kept coming back to that, the way that first nurse had stopped, foreign chakra pushing and settling right below her stomach, right above her legs. Bouncing around the few presentations she'd had in school on the topic that honestly she'd mostly ignored.

Her mind said no, more violently than she would have expected, even though she didn't really know what was wrong yet. She had a sneaking suspicion, that was all. But just the thought of something being wrong with— with that part of her made Mai feel sick to her stomach, a symptom the doctors were immediately all over.

Finally it was all over, but Mai almost wished it wasn't—there had to be more tests, more theories, more ideas. Other possibilities. Other things this could be. Her ankle still throbbed despite the mild painkiller she'd been given. She was back on that stupid goddamn paper and it crinkled and crumpled under her ass every time she shifted. That sharp, sickening hospital smell jabbed her nose, like ammonia and shots and air freshener.

She didn't know how her mom could stand to be here. Mai wanted to leave and she'd only been here a day. That smell was getting on her nerves. Why did the doctors only wear white? What the hell? It was unnerving and made them all look like bad messengers. Everyone here was sick. She kept rubbing her elbows, a nervous habit she thought she'd bit.

Mai knew it was bad, because her mother was with her when they told her.

"Miss Mai," he said, like he thought he was treating her like an adult, with his head-wrappings and stupid white clothes. His watch was ticking like a fire alarm. "We've run—well, I'll be honest. We've run multiple tests, and I think we can honestly say for certain that you have premature ovarian failure. It doesn't appear to be genetic, or—"

"Premature ovarian failure," she repeated, voice feeling hollow in her throat and in her ears.

"Are you sure?" her mother said anxiously, wringing her fingers together. She was biting her lip, something Fumiko did when she was nervous. Her mother was wearing white too, Mai noticed. She shifted. The paper tore loudly against the bottom of her leg and she jumped, cursing a lot less softly than she intended, and it scared her mom, who flinched in tandem.

Her heart was flipping off her ribs, and Mai couldn't figure out why. She was having a hard time looking this doctor man in the eye, had her breath always been that warm? It wasn't hot enough in here. They were in a damn desert. Why was it so cold in here?

"What does that mean?" she asked, and there was a little snort of laughter that bubbled up with her breath, pushed out by her heartbeat. "I can't—what, I can't have kids?"

"We think so, Miss Mai."

Pulse. Pulse. She could feel it in her brain. There was a heartbeat in her stomach, in her chest, in the bottoms of her arms. "Okay."

"Mai—"
"Mom, I'm gonna head home. I've got a crap ton of homework to do, and I've been here, like, all
day. Dachi's probably pissed at me," she said, and immediately knew that was wrong, because she
never volunteered to do homework. "And Fumiko'll be home soon."

"I'll go with you," she said. "Just let me sign out and-"

"No, no," Mai insisted, sliding off the seat. The doctor was looking at her weird, like he'd been
expecting her to burst into tears or some stupid shit like that. God, what? She'd come here for a
freaking sprained ankle. Had she ever even been worried that she'd never started her period? "You
have to work, it's fine. I can get home from here. Scuse me," she muttered, pushing past the doctor
and out the door without another word, not caring that she was still dressed in a nightgown.

Her mother didn't follow, and Mai heard her hushed urgent voice through the door as it banged
shut.

... ~ "We need infusers-" ~ ...

... Mai barely made it inside, having tripped twice from her stupid ankle and stupid running and
scraped up her knees and arms and elbows, banging through the door, and bouncing off the
corridor wall. She smacked the door shut, knowing Fumiko would be here soon and not bothering
to lock it, and she made it to her room and closed the door and Mai wailed.

... ~ Fingers poked places she thought she couldn't feel, hotspots of pain and made them worse. ~ ...

12

"The Founders' Festival?" Mai read off, lowering the strawberry tart she'd been eating to her plate.
Then she shrugged. "Yeah. I've been to it. It's a blast, right up until everyone gets hammered."

"Ooh, but it would be so much fun!" Fumiko squealed. Her face was all excitement and joy and
hysteria, and she clapped her hands together, unable to contain it. Her sister could put new levels
on the word happy, but it'd been a while since Mai saw her so excited. "We could get all dressed
up and play games and dance and hang out! And eat cotton candy!"

"Uh, I've never seen them serve-" Mai started, but Temari banged an elbow into the side of her
boob. She hissed.

"Uh, yeah, sounds like fun," Temari said.

"Ow!"

Fumiko had found them together in the kitchen. They hadn't really been doing much, just lazing
about on a Wednesday night and eating some leftover tarts. Mai actually didn't have any
homework to do, and she'd already trained enough for one day, so finding the tarts had been nice.
And then Temari had come in, grunting and griping about Konoha and all her troubles.

Mai rubbed her ribcage, shooting Temari an irate glare, who just shrugged and smirked in return.
"Anyway, Fumiko, I don't think we'd actually be hanging out. You'd be hanging out with Gaara all night. And festivals just aren't his thing."

Fumiko bit her lip, and Mai winced at the way she just deflated, hesitation crawling all over her face. "You're right, actually."

"I'm sure he'd go if you asked him," Temari wheedled. "Especially then."

She brightened. "Yeah," she said, and grabbed a strawberry tart from the plate. "I'm gonna go ask Gaara now!" Fumiko paused, thought for a moment, then grabbed another. "And see if I can make him eat."

Then she dashed out the door with a quick goodbye. Mai could hear that stupid spring in her prosthetic all the way down the hall- she really neede to get that thing replaced.

She glanced over at Temari. "What, do you want to go, or something?"

"It seems like fun," Temari answered back breezily, raising another tart with the delicate air of some kinda noble. "Why not? Besides, Fumiko wants to, and Gaara really needs to get out."

Mai blinked. Then blinked again. And then straightened from where she'd been leaning against the island. "No way," she started accusingly. "Are you doing this for Fumiko or Gaara, or are you doing it for both-"

"An elder sister has her duties," Temari replied, shrugging, with a wide smirk. "I am my brother's keeper."

And Mai stood from the barstool she'd been sitting on, abandoning her unfinished tart. "Nope," she decided as she crossed the kitchen to the door. "I'm not going to be a part of this. This is too-"

"Come on, you can't say you don't-"

"Much!" she finished, and slammed the door closed behind her.

... 

~ She was floating, floating and things weren't hurting anymore and woah, were those drugs or was she still dying? It was hard to tell, even in the dark everything was spinning. ~ 

... 

"I've gotta say, Fumiko, you're better at a girls' day out than I thought you would be," Temari said from the dressing room. "You've got a good eye for color, at least."

"Thanks!"

Mai frowned down at her kimono, a shiny red with a gold and fire-orange pheonix stitched down her side, trailing fire just a shade darker than the rest of the fabric from it's body. It looked fantastic in the mirror: it was tight and form-fitting, a little short, but not revealing. The red went with her tanned skin and black hair.

"Hey, I dunno if I like this dress thing so much," she called out, knowing someone would hear on the other side of the curtain.

It was the day of the festival. It might not have been the best idea to wait until the day of to buy dresses, but Temari had insisted it was the only way not to get the same thing as everybody else.
Mai didn't really care either way as long as she could wear something red.

Sliding as someone, probably Temari, pushed open her curtain. "I wouldn't be surprised if you've never worn a dress before." she snarked. "You're not exactly girlish."

An uncomfortable silence permeated the dressing rooms then, during which another curtain slide opened and closed. Mai pursed her lips, trying to find a way to answer that without sounding pathetic, and had just decided on who needs dresses when you have swords? when Temari spoke.

"What? Really?"

"Do you want a different one, Mai?" Fumiko asked, somewhere to the left of Mai's little stall. "Huh. Is yours too short too?"

"No. I look hot," she complained, dropping a hand to her hip and glancing herself over again in the mirror. Man. She needed to wear these things more often. But it was tight- uncomfortable almost-and there was no pockets or loose spaces. "But how are you supposed to put weapons in this thing? Or run? It's shortish and the fabric is thinner than decent oxygen in this village."

"You'll get used to it," Temari said sympathetically. "My suggestion? Use bladed hair sticks to put your hair up in a bun. They can kill rather nicely."

That was actually a good idea.

"I was thinking more along the lines of sewing pockets for my senbon," Mai admitted grudgingly as she slid aside the curtain and stepped out, feeling odd in her nice dress and battered shinobi sandals. "But I like your idea better."

"Why are you bringing weapons to a festival?" Fumiko said, fance looking not quite alarmed, but confused. "It's not like somebody's going to attack us."

Temari admired her soft purple, regular length short-sleeved kimono sewn with small black circles and a yellow obi. "It's a kunoichi thing, Fumiko. Actually, you of all people should be carrying a weapon." She nodded. "I think I'll get this one."

Fumiko frowned quizzically as she stepped back behind her curtain to change back into her clothes. "Wait! Why me?"

"Why you?" Mai sighed. "And here you have the brain, sister mine. Because you're practically Gaara's- now the Kazekage's- extra phantom limb. I know you hate shinobi tactics, but hey, crude can get the job done."

"It's a festival." she protested. "Festivals are supposed to be- supposed to be- festive! Not bitter."

"Best time and place for an assassination attempt," Temari muttered before she could, voice muffled by the curtain. "It gets dark, lots of people, lots of noise, lots of drunk people falling. Nobody would notice. Or a kidnapping. No one would realize someone was missing in that kind of throng."

"Ah, leave it," Mai said dismissively, waving a hand in the air like she was clearing it as she noticed Fumiko's forming distress. "Gaara will be there the entire time anyway. He'd be too uncomfortable to be alone for long. He'll notice if anyone shady gets close. Gaara's a hell of a shinobi. Besides, Fumiko knows all the side affects of deadly poisons, right?"

"Yeah," she answered, still sounding confused. "I studied them. But-"
"Right," Mai said. "You'll be fine then. Also, don't leave your drink anywhere. And if and when the lantern lights turn into pretty colors and every joke sounds funny, don't listen when people offer to take you home."

"Why?" her sister asked curiously. There was a folded haori in her arms, but Mai had seen it before her sister went in and knew she wouldn't keep it.

Mai shook her head. "Just stay with Gaara."

Fumiko shrugged, smiling again, and let the subject drop completely. "Okay," she said, and with that, she glanced down at the dress, and turned to head back out into the sea of dresses and humans.

... 

~ Eishi was dead, shit, fuck, she thought dazedly through the pain even as it faded, didn't know if she managed to say it, hoping she hadn't- god, there was chakra everywhere- I can't die I can't die I can't-~

... 

After clothes they bought shoes. (Or shoe, in Fumiko's case, and she got one dark blue slipper.) Mai herself hated everything except a pair of black boots that reached halfway up her thigh, because it was the only thing without heels that weren't flats.

After shoes they got their nails done, which had been an event but it wasn't her fault she almost stabbed someone, it was that guy's own damn fault for touching a random shinobi from behind without warning. Still, she liked the way her nails turned out, just a plain red, even if they felt a little odd from the paint, looked a little too prim compared to their previous ragged-broken state, all rounded out and smooth.

Fumiko got blue to match her dress, with little white clouds painstakingly drawn out on her thumb and ring fingers of both hands. She'd also gotten her one foot done, which Mai personally thought was a waste, considering her shoe was close-toed- she wasn't getting her feet done, not when they weren't gonna show. Temari got hers clear with white trim, something that somehow took longer than both Mai and Fumiko's combined.

After nails, hair. Hair and makeup.

Makeup felt horrible, so she asked for less and less until she could barely feel it. Luckily they didn't touch her with that weird skin-paling stuff, but her eyes were lined with black and dark brown, something that admittedly made her look kind of mysterious, and made the little gold flecks in her eyes seem huge, and lip gloss that tasted like plums.

She'd also managed to convince the hair woman to use the hair sticks Temari had lent her, sharp things that could slit a throat. Which was fantastic, because Mai had gotten used to having weapons on her person, and had been a little nervous about spending a whole night without any. All the lady could really do was wrangle it into some kind of weird fishtail-looking thing that ran down the back of her head but didn't dangle. It stuck out everywhere, but with some hair gel and spray, it looked okay, she supposed.

Temari had found another way to solve the problem of having no weapons- they'd passed by a merchant selling ninja-fashion goods. A small, white 'silk' fan gilded with green and red flowers and purple trim. Folded steel, of course. Bladed, of course. She could take someone's head off with it. But it matched her dress.
She had to admit she was actually getting kind of excited as well. There was something about dressing up that set the stage for whatever it was you were dressing up for. They chided each other as they walked back to the Tower- Don’t get sand in your pedicure! Careful not to wipe your eyes! Watch where you swing your fan!

She wondered how this festival would go.

...

~ "No!" someone wailed, and it was familiar, and she wanted to comfort, but suddenly there was pain in her head and she screamed at the way everything was white, everything was skin and fabric and darkness and noise- ~

...

Fumiko reached for the door to the kitchen. Behind her, Mai and Temari shuffled impatiently, having waited for her to struggle up the stairs after them, but unable to leave- she was making dinner. Or at least the snack before greasy junk food at the festival.

It opened too quickly; Mai jumped a little as her sister's hand shot forward through the door, but relaxed when Fumiko just sorta punched Gaara by accident, looking startled. Gaara was- fidgeting, a weird, slippery nervous smile flickering on his face.

"Uh!" Fumiko grunted with surprise. "Oh, hi."

"What's wrong with you?" Mai asked bluntly, not quite frowning. Was he just nervous for the festival? It was all Temari's fault for making it awkward.

"Fumiko, watch your nails," Temari warned. Then: "Oh. Not bad, Gaara."

Gaara was dressed formally. He wore a red yukata-style outfit with white trim. His hair was combed to the side to fully expose his kanji and completely uncover his cerulean eyes, and he looked distinctly uncomfortable, but there was still that nervous, almost impatient smile. Had he been waiting for them to come back?

There was icing on his nose.

"Hello. Fumiko. You all look nice. I like your hair."

"Thanks!" Fumiko beamed. "So, why is there icing on your face?"

"Oh. Um."

"It's about time you got back," Kankuro said, coming up behind Gaara and startling him. "Gaara's been pacing a frickin' furrow in the ground. He made food and didn't burn the kitchen down."

"Kankuro!" Gaara protested and turned slightly to look at his older brother, and for a second he looked so normal, anxious and so close to whiny he sounded like an ordinary teenager in sunday clothes and not the kazekage, that she laughed.

Gaara looked stricken for a second, torn between confusion and embarrassment, then quickly turned and fled. Kankuro barely avoided being bowled over, stepping to the side. He raised his eyebrows. "Well. That was weird."

"Oh... I didn't mean to-"
"I got this, Fumiko," Temari said, and brushed past her brother to find her other one. Gaara had fled into the kitchen—there was nowhere really to hide, unless he could somehow fit himself in the empty bottom shelf of the pantry.

"So." Mai prompted in the silence that followed. "Back to the subject of 'didn't burn the kitchen down'."

"Oh. Right." Kankuro stepped out and slid the door shut behind him. "He asked your mom for some recipe for cake. When I saw it it was crammed with notes. Step by step instructions so he couldn't possibly screw it up."

"Gaara made cake?" Mai frowned, thinking back to all the times Fumiko had tried to teach Gaara to cook: always fire, always messes, always things breaking or sparking. "I dunno if he's supposed to make cake."

Kankuro shrugged. He too wore a yukata, only his was deep purple with a few swirling designs Fumiko couldn't quite decipher in slightly lighter shades of purple. His was put on messily, all crooked. Kankuro's brown hair was combed but still stuck up. It was weird to see his face without all the purple makeup, and how long had it even been since Mai saw him last without a hood? "Smelled okay. Wouldn't let me touch it, though."

From the kitchen, voices floated. "... mean it's a girl thing? I... at me."

"Idiot. She... looked cute. ... wasn't laughing at..."

Kankuro sighed. "I'm so curious. But she'll kill me if I go in there."

"Well, I'm getting dressed." she announced, hefting the bag with the one little headpiece Temari had made her get. "Kankuro, I'm using your room. Don't you dare go in."

"Hey! Why mine?"

"'Cause I sure as hell am not using Gaara's," she said. "And Temari and Fumiko have to get dressed too."

Kankuro crossed his arms. "Do whatever you want." Then he coughed, "Girls."

"I'll stab you," Mai said cheerfully. "Then I'll stab you again for making me mess up my hair."

Tense silence.

Kankuro snickered nervously.

Then she smiled—grinned—at him and turned to walk down the hallway to Kankuro's room, swinging the plastic bag at her side as she went, whistling because she knew it would unnerve him.

... 

~ "This- this is-" Mai couldn't hear it over her own screeching but she could read the medic's lips and it burned it burned it burned worse than fire—"This is the Uchiha's-" ~

...

There was a moment when they all almost walked in on her, but she'd avoided it with lots of yelling and throwing a puppet leg at the door.
Now she was all changed and ready and things, just waiting around in the kitchen with everything else while Fumiko scarfed a piece of the cake Gaara had made- it looked super amateur, sure, compared to the things Mai knew Fumiko could make, but it didn't look like it tasted horrible or was poisonous or anything.

Mai cast a dubious glance, though, at the rest of the kitchen, which was just a straight up disaster zone. There was flour on the counters and on the floor, spilled eggs and milk and cocoa powder. Mixers and bowls and cake pans were scattered across the cabinets, trailing food, and there was icing on the floor. It smelled like chocolate and burned Pam cooking spray. Gaara had used more or less the entire kitchen. That stupid smell was driving her nuts.

Gaara had somehow managed to even get it on the ceiling. How had he gotten food on the ceiling? ...

"I said get off!" It was a roar, and there was a crash, and there was blessed void, and suddenly the pain was gone completely, her eyes were clear and weren't sucking all the pain from her skin- ~

They had an hour left until the festival officially started, but it ran all night, so there wasn't really any rush. Gaara was nibbling on a now cold plate of soba noodles he'd found in the fridge, and Kankuro just looked kind of bored. Temari, like her, was sniffing at the air and checking out the battered kitchen.

Fumiko had blue icing smeared of her face. She'd eaten a little more than half of the entire cake, although granted, it was pretty small. She laughed with Kankuro as he joked around just for something to do, food in her mouth still. Gaara was being completely the opposite of subtle, flat-out staring at the side of Fumiko's head like he was trying to shoot her with lasers.

"Hurry up, Fumiko," Mai whined, stretching out on the table from where she sat on one of the stools. "Eat it later!"

Fumiko laughed. "Okay, okay," she said. "I'm gonna go get dressed then."

She got up and grabbed her bag peeking blue fabric and skip-dragged herself out of the kitchen. "Thanks for the cake, Gaara!" she called happily, giving a little wave, and then disappeared through the door.

Gaara seemed to relax slightly as Temari started to put it away, grabbing ceran-wrap from a drawer, but before she could, Kankuro stabbed a fork into some of it and stuck it in his mouth before she could protest. She did so, very loudly, but then paused when his eyes widened. "Kankuro?"

"Blech!" he made a coughing sound, spitting into his hand. "What the heck?"

"That's rude!" Temari chided. "Fumiko liked it just fine."

"Fumiko is crazy," Kankuro muttered, and she cuffed him on the ear with her closed fan. Mai stood, padding over curiously to look at the thing, chocolate with messy blue icing. It didn't look that suspicious, but... she carved a piece out with her newly painted fingernail and popped it in her mouth. "Ow! Fine! You eat it, then!"

Oh shit. Oh, this was great.

Gaara came off the island, looking concerned. "What do you mean?"
"I mean it's- it's-

"Salty," Mai said, licking her finger, cringing at the taste. There was even salt in the icing. "Like really salty." Her nose crinkled, and she stuck out her tongue. "Salt and chocolate. Ew."

"What?"

Now Temari had tried some too, and she gagged. "Holy-" She swallowed. "I mean- ugh, screw it. How did she eat this without flinching?"

Gaara, looking absolutely like a ghost or like someone had told him he'd lost his job as Kazekage and couldn't get it back, stepped forward and, instead of just taking their word for it, went to try it himself.

And spat it right back out on a little paper plate, wiping his tongue.

Mai just laughed, wiping her sticky finger off on a napkin already crumpled on the table. "Gaara, where's the sugar you used for this?"

He led her to the counter with the flour and the sugar and the salt. He pointed.

Mai tasted some of it on her finger. "Fumiko does all of the cooking, right?"

"Most of it."

"She has, like, a super-sense when it comes to ingredients," she said sympathetically, nodding as her suspicions were confirmed. "She doesn't need to label things. I did the same thing once. With my cereal." She nodded at the container. "Yeah, that's not sugar, Gaara. That's the salt."

... 

~ "What's going on in here?!"

...

After a few more disasters, they finally went out to the festival itself, which looked just like it had the other two times she'd come to the thing: bright, loud, full of people.

She split off from the group, heading to go find some games she could win- because there were some that shinobi just crushed, like any kind of throwing/aiming game, balance or strength game. So she looked for her classmates, because they flocked to those places.

She won a few water guns, milk bottles and a shit ton of dart games. The civilians threw them weirdly, drew them over their shoulders and tossed them forward, instead of just throwing them. It was like senbon but with a little more resistance, some ring toss games.

It was fun calling out the game-riggers. The dart games with dull darts that she still popped balloons with, the weighted milk bottles that she just broke, even with the crap cork balls they gave her. And the festival-goers always finished the fights she started, the game-hosts glaring and yelling after her as she stepped away from the forming angry mobs each time.

Most of the things she won she just gave to random kids walking around, the ones that didn't win anything in the games or whose parents wouldn't let them play, because what was she supposed to do with stuffed animals and blow-up hammers and swords? She got a few strange looks from parents, but the kids seemed to like her just fine.
And then she came across Kankuro again, and damn him because he had alcohol on his breath and in his hands and she thought, why not?

Well, she didn't exactly have a tolerance built up, considering she'd only ever drank two or three times and only one of those had been without restraint. Really, she blamed it on Kankuro letting her have it without any kind of fuss.

Either way, the whole world blurred, glowing with the lanterns and the Christmas-light knockoffs, and the music was a soundtrack and they found themselves on the dance floor after what she would later estimate to be hours of nothing but laughter and games, food, dares and general horsery.

She'd taken a few dance classes before at the Academy, and she liked it. Dancing was a lot like fighting, really: certain steps and certain patterns, rushing around the dance floor and each other without letting anything go wrong; movement and heat and energy. And aside from learned dances there were some kinds of moving that just came from music.

Kankuro was a better dancer drunk than Mai ever would have thought, and though they stumbled occasionally he followed her back onto the floor for every fast beat. And Mai was drunk, and she knew she was drunk, but she was high with it and everything felt amazing. Fuck boundaries. Screw the rules.

So when he kissed her, she didn't really have the sense to do anything else but go with it, because dammit, it felt good, warm and sensual and things tingled when he did that, and for some god-damned reason he tasted like motor-oil, and he smelled like it too, and her brain was somewhere on Venus but not anywhere in this festival.

And when it was over they laughed and danced and danced and had another drink each and danced.

... 

~ As the pain went away Mai was swept away, less and less numb and more or more nothing, and to a chorus of yelling and chaos, she finally relaxed, wanting to cry, wanting to scream. ~

Yeah, she regretted everything.

Ow. Ow. Fuck.

What was this? She didn't recognize- what was she lying on? A couch? This wasn't her couch.

No, hold on. It wouldn't have made sense if she was home either. Mai didn't remember going anywhere the night prior. She pushed past the headache, but only managed to pull up dancing and games and manicures and dress shopping. She didn't remember passing out, but something had definitely shorted out of her short-term.

"Oh, you're up," a voice said from somewhere, she had no sense of space or time to judge with.

"What in the-" she started to groan, hands finally pulling away from some shit strangling blanket to push over her yes because everything hurt, her muscles and her eyes from the light and the smell of motor-oil- but then something about the voice and the heavy smell just spiked a migraine like a railroad pike as she remembered hands and lips and lights. "... Shit."

"Yeah, I know. I forgot you don't drink much. There's advil in the kitchen."

Not the hangover, dumbass, she thought, and from Kankuro's affronted grunt, probably said out loud, too. "I- did you-? How much did I-"
"Oh," he said. Something squirmed in his voice, a forced kind of nonchalance.

It felt like her eyes were going to explode, so she didn't bother opening the or sitting up, didn't waste her energy and strained breath making a face or sounding angry, no matter how angry she was. "Y-you thought I'd forget."

"Um," he said. "Can you?"

"Why?" she drawled, grinding her palms into her eyes. She was probably going to throw up in a second, but at the current moment that wasn't important. She didn't smile, but she kind of wished she could, wished she could open her eyes to see how he was reacting. God, he'd seriously kissed a drunk twelve year old. What the hell? "Are you embarrassed?"

"We were drunk. That's all."

If Mai could've laughed, she would've. But it hurt. It was true, she rationalized. She remembered most of it now, even if the audio/visuals were jacked. She remembered knowing it was him, deciding not to care, knowing she was too buzzed, deciding it felt good. They were drunk and they were dancing, and that was all they wrote.

"Question," she muttered. "Gaara and F-fumiko-"

"Yeah, that part happened, too," Kankuro said. Something clanked loudly, and he swore. Mai grunted in protest, trying to remember watching her siblings kiss. Wait. No. That sounded wrong. Whatever. She was dropping all this kissing stuff. It was going under 'drunk memories' next to that one party after Gaara got the Kazekage position.

"Why are you not in pain?"

Mai could just see him shrugging, with that stupid smug smirk. "Just more tolerant than you, I guess."

... 

~ And she sank down into nothing. ~

...

Chapter End Notes

So I can't even remember everything that happened in this, but I know there are things I left out, like Mai helping kids find their parents, and a few other things I lost when I lost my planning sheet

NEWS! I'M GOING TO MEGACON! I along with Lily (who will be cosplaying MAI) and for one or two days, MY FAMILY. Who know nothing about anime but want to go anyway. XD

I would love to meet anyone who wants to say hello!
COMMENT BELOW!

So as you can see, the tween is a little strange. This is because unlike previous
chapters, this one is like a flashback, where in the others, the tweens were the flashbacks. So here, the tweens are in the present.

That monologue thing at the beginning has a purpose. In my mind, the last chapter was the end of an episode, and this was the beginning of another. So Mai passed out in the last chapter, and here, to the beat of the tweener, she monologues as she's being carried off, and it fades into her memories.
Disappearing wasn't as hard as Mai thought it would be.

Sure, it probably helped that Gaara as the Kazekage had promised to cover for her- dying down search requests and general panic, pausing investigations into theories of foul-play or defection or kidnapping. And, more importantly, Mai knew, quelling her older sister's own searching and questioning.

But still. She'd just packed up all her stuff- most of her clothes, her shurikens, an empty punching bag, for Kami's sake; food and a first-aid kit from the kitchen. Her parents hadn't noticed a thing, even though she'd had to go in and out of her bedroom to get half the stuff in plain sight.

Which was a little disturbing...

Either way, Mai fancied she'd vanished like Suna wind: harsh and present and then, nonexistent-not to be seen again until the next storm. Nothing but a pair of blades left behind- much to her chagrin- but Weasel-taicho had been adamant that she wouldn't use them at all for the majority of her training- something about not specializing in anything until the last month, blah blah blah.

Still, Mai worried. In this sterile white room, full of shivering children and pre-teens letting the silence and the isolation get under their skins- they'd been waiting for at least fifteen minutes or more, but it was impossible to tell without a clock or watch- she found herself, instead of being concerned over the training, thinking about Fumiko, wondering what she was thinking, what she was doing. They'd been waiting for at least fifteen minutes or more, but it was impossible to tell without a clock or watch.

And what about those quiet kids at the Academy? What were they going to do? Disappear into the woodwork for the rest of the semester? And she knew her mom would worry, at the very least.

But eventually, her mind tired of the topic, moving on to other things. Because if Gaara told her not to worry, Fumiko would, if not stop worrying, than trust she knew what she was doing; her mother would be comforted by Fumiko and Gaara's acceptance, by the way the searches died down, because her mother trusted them and knew Gaara as Kazekage wouldn't let the matter drop without reason.

And those kids could deal. They would've had to get off on their own sooner or later, anyway, if they were going to be ninjas.

So her mind wandered. Although she kept her posture- a relaxed standing position with half her fingers in her pockets, her bag strap slung across her chest in case they stood here long, feet spaced to the length of her shoulders for balance in the case of sudden movement- Mai looked over at the others, some of whom she recognized and quite a few she didn't.
Civilian children? Family of established ANBU members? The orphanages, perhaps? Those she recognized from school-most faces in the crowd, students she'd never spoken to, but some she'd come toe to toe with, some at the top of their classes-kept stealing looks in her direction, and she could see the distaste, the shock. Yeah, suck it, assholes. Dead-last her ass.

She wondered how long they would last-if they would at all. The other instructor had told them what would happen if they couldn't keep up, if a recruit was seen as incompetent: instant expulsion from the program...and a total memory wipe of their time spent down in the underbelly of Suna. Mai didn't know how they did that, or if it was a bluff, but either way, she had no intention of getting expelled.

It didn't matter what they did, what they threw: she could fight, she could finesse, she could utilize a dozen different fighting styles, unlike her Academy peers, who as far as she had seen only knew Academy Standard and maybe a family style on their own, a very Suna-style that would go to shit in any other climate than an arena and desert.

She'd been trained by the Kazekage since she was a brat getting bullied by some big bad freshman, the smallest bug in a chain of lizards, birds and rattlesnakes. Now she was at the top: the bottom of her academics, but only because it bored her, and it was useless, and these recruiters had seen that: had noticed how she wriggled under the curve, how she dominated her fights, how she scrapped in the hallways and the back of the playground for survival.

It wasn't about school, and it wasn't about skill: it was about tenacity, the capability to survive, the ability to win. You could flunk every year, so long as you passed the final. You could pass the final exam in the last year, yet be sent back to the Academy if your sensei so chose.

A girl broke first: two rows, seven children over, a teenager from the looks of it. A stranger. Dirty blond hair, blackened skin. A strange combination of inheritance. Mai was snapped out of her thoughts. "What's going on?" the girl whispered nervously. "Why- why is it taking so long for someone to get here?"

"They're doing it on purpose," someone else side-mouthed, and it took everything Mai had not to smack her own forehead. Idiots. "Just wait a little longer."

And then silence reigned again. Mai focused on the cracks in the walls, on the way there wasn't any dust under the door or her feet. The way these unfamiliar clothes rubbed oddly: thick cotton or maybe canvas, black for both the short-sleeved shirts and long, tied-off pants. The texture was gross: almost hot for some reason, feeling tight and too heavy.

Her hair was tied back, washed over and over and combed, and although it still bounced and curled, it wasn't wild or ratty. Her weapons were gone, in a lockless wooden box underneath a tatami bed with a wooden frame two inches off the floor. It made her itch to not have so much as a senbon on her person. She was in the first row, perhaps not the best place to be, strategically: as an ANBU in training the whole point was to learn to seep into the shadows.

But damn if they wouldn't see her face first, if they were gonna try and put a mask on it.

As if she'd summoned them with the thought, the telltale slide of a traditional door against the floor. Her ears perked, heart thumping erratically for four or five beats at the sudden noise in correlation with her stray, almost rebellious thought. The door went sideways, revealing probably the most inconspicuous looking body type in Suna: not thin, not fat, not toned: shapeless, with a height that, if you added up all the heights of Sunagakure's male citizens and divided it into an average, would probably fit him right down to the decimals.
His clothes were light, unlike their own, brown or tan, her eyes couldn't seem to decide. When he moved, Mai realized, as she had realized before, that his clothes could be mistaken for dunes shifting in the breeze. His bone-white mask, thin and, well, weaselly, was painted with burnt oranges and blacks.

She tried to look at his eyes, but as they had before, the mask's shadows covered them.

"Right then," he said. His voice was rough and kind of scratchy, a common occurrence in Suna: from the blowing sand, the howling storms, the way the air was never quite clear. But it betrayed, at least, his age, to a certain degree: he had to be at least in his thirties or forties with that voice, given he'd grown up in the village. "All of you have been chosen, as you well know, to participate in our pre-Black Ops conditional training program. Aside from our own observations of your conducts, there are no criteria for you to follow that you know of, so you will have to exceed beyond expectations in everything you are taught."

He paused, like he was waiting for someone to speak, but there was only tense silence. This was what made those top-of-class types nervous: there wasn't a rubric or milestones. This wasn't a peacemeal project, and it was as cutthroat as they got, with a less than twenty percent pass rate.

He didn't nod, or give any sign of a reason for pausing. "You will be staying with us for the next three months. During this time, none of your family, friends, or peers will know where you are, or what you're doing. If you make I until the end of the program, you will be released to a teacher and training unit, depending on the specialization you wish to pursue, several of which you will practice and train in. Until then, however, you will be trained by several ANBU members, including myself, Hare, and Ferret.

As you know, you will be trained and tested in several aspects of shinobi life and secrecy. I'll be blunt: you will be and have been pitted against your fellow trainees. None of you have been picked for your names or your influence- all of you will stay or be ejected on your own merits, so pay attention, and don't get lazy or let your guard down. Do exactly as you are told. If you don't pass the final tests, or are otherwise ejected during any part of this process, then you will be sent home, without any memory of what happens here."

"Weasel-san, sir," someone interrupted from her row, all the way on the opposite end. "Three months passes the Academy entrance exams."

"In accordance with the current Kazekage, as well as the previous," Weasel stated, "If you pass the final tests as an Academy student, you will be added to your class's graduation roster. If you are ejected before the exams, you will be put back in your classes to catch up, pass or fail. If you, however, make it to the end of this program, and don't pass our finals... you will have officially missed and, as consequence, forfeited your chances of graduation."

Well, shit. That hadn't even crossed her mind.

Fuck.

Okay. Original plan still stood. Pass the damn ANBU exams to become an official trainee. Also pass her Academy exams as a joint. Because no way was she failing out and going back.

"Be aware that there is a serious chance of injury in this program, both temporary and permanent, with varying levels of severity. It's rare and highly unlikely, but there have also been incidents of accidental death. Unless an injury becomes life-threatening, you will be required, after basic first-aid training, to dress and care for your own injuries."
"Death?" The word sounded like an accident, squeaky and airless. "People have died?"

Mai was willing to bet that under the ask, Weasel was looking extremely nonplussed. Because duh. Even the Academy had a few accidents through it's lifetime. There was just something about weapons and hasty first-aid that tended to cause loss of life. And competition, as well.

"You may retire to your respective bunks after this briefing is over," he continued. "And decide whether or not you wish to stay. No one yet will have noticed your absence. If not, your beds have already been assigned. You all will be sharing rooms separated by gender, and you will not be locked in at night."

And that was that. They were dismissed, and unnecessarily Weasel led them all back to their shared rooms, with the rest of the day off to do as they pleased- tomorrow the training would start.

The room itself was basic and minimal: medium sized, square, white, concrete flooring. The beds were made with flimsy wood and tatami mats that didn't look the slightest bit comfortable, and there were a total of six in this room, three on each side.

There was a place for her punching bag to hang, along with several other hooks curling out of the ceiling splitting the room in half, but Mai didn't. She would wait until tomorrow: see if there was a better place, a better time. Besides, these strangers made her uncomfortable. It was going to suck trying to sleep for the next two months.

"Hey, you," she heard right before her backpack hit the bed. Canned foods rattled as soon as it did, the bag rolling fluidly from an upright position to a side slouch on the rough-looking brown blankets. She wasn't about to be starved into mindless failure. On her own time, Mai finally turned to face- whoever it was.

And oh, this was going to be great. Shibata Noriko.

"Dore, dore," she greeted with a grin. "Irony's a bitch, eh?"

"How did you get in here?" Noriko said hotly. "You've been the dead-last aho since year one!"

"Aho?" Mai kept her tone jovial, crossing her arms and leaning back slightly so she was almost sitting on the bed. It was hard, but she pushed the immediate need to cream this priss in the nose. "Not doing useless pork work and flower-picking electives doesn't make someone a dumbass, Noriko. Not being able to pick out the same feint after the fifth time, though, kinda makes me wonder."

Noriko's face turned red, and Mai knew she wouldn't last here. "You little bitch!" she spat, like that was the worst possible insult she could come up with. "Just because you did well in spars doesn't excuse being lazy in class! You couldn't pass a third year sp-"

"Yet here we are," she muttered, rolling her eyes. "On the same playing field. I hope you make it through, Noriko, to the end- we'll see how high and mighty you are when you're repeating eighth year."

"You're only here because your sister's boyfriend is the Kazekage," Noriko huffed, crossing both arms and throwing her chin to the side. Bad move, Mai thought, absently to the rush of violence that flooded her veins with fire. Don't look away from the person about to- "I don't care what Weas-"

And suddenly she was yelling and a couple other girls were yelling and Mai's knees slammed into the hard concrete floor with a tingle that shot straight through her back, but that she ignored in
favor of the girl underneath her, whose shirt was fisted in her one hand and her hand was caught in the other, twisting, but Mai was about ready to let go and sock her right in her tanned little-

"No Toyotomi-sensei here," she hissed. "No older sister's boyfriend to keep me from-"

"Hey, what's going-"

"Get off me!"

"Oh no, asshole, you started this," Mai spat. "Before I smash your teeth in, I want you to get this through your skull: I'm a better fighter than you. You should hope you don't get me in any kind of spar here, you better have one hand on your medpack every damn second-"

"Hey, hey, easy-"

Whoever was trying to put a hand on her shoulder was about to get their wrist broken. Mai snarled and smacked it away, letting go of Noriko's hand, which immediately joined the other in clawing at Mai's hand pinning her down, but it wasn't any use. In her blind rage Mai felt none of the ret welts rising on her skin. "Screw off!" she barked, before raising her fist back up.

"Get this crazy-"

"Gaara would never put someone in a place like this without knowing they could handle it," Mai snapped, leaning to get in her face, despite the hands grabbing at the back of her shirt. "ANBU protect the village from dangerous shit, you baka, and putting some wannabe kid in that can blow up in your face! He's the Kazekage and- he- knows- what- he's- doing!"

...

~ They were rushing towards the tents, the smoke from the statue not quite faded and the heat and spare flames from Mai's attack not quite dissipated, and there were injured everywhere, under his every footfall, but Shiragiku could not- ~

...

None of Noriko's friends had made it to this point, and the rest of them were similar enough to herself that they understood an old fashioned anger tussle, and so Noriko had nobody to fawn over her black eye or split lip. The ANBU instructors paid it no mind, and treated her exactly as they did everyone else.

Every time Mai saw her stupid face, saw the welts on her own hand or felt the bruises on her stomach from the way Noriko lashed out with her feet when the other girls had finally managed to pull Mai off her, she seethed, hit things a little harder.

Goddamn. Mai wanted more curse words, more ways to call Noriko scum. How dare she say that-like Gaara would put her or the people around her or the village in jeopardy just because she was Fumiko's kid sister.

And going past that insult, there was the fact that Noriko thought she wasn't capable; that she was just some stupid dead-last at the bottom of the rungs, like she couldn't beat her class into the ground for saying things like that, like having a pretty perfect report card had something to do with being a ninja.

But still, Mai pushed it to the side save for the adrenaline of the anger. Shuriken, kunai, senbon sharpshoot practice, all different sizes and styles and weights, manipulation of ninja wire, poisons
and their properties and natural remedies, five different styles of hand-to-hand, non-elemental jutsu, acrobatics. There was more to be learned, from evasive maneuvers to elemental affinities to tracking to chakra suppression.

The first week was just a blur of practice and training and burning muscles. Apparently her body could do wild things even though it wasn't supposed to, and she had a fire nature yet to be worked at, and senbon were dangerous as fuck. There was studying, too, something she hadn't expected, yet was more relevant than she had ever thought studying could be.

Chemical reactions in the body to poisons and airborne afflictions central in specific parts of the Five Great Elemental Nations. The body itself, all of the sensitive points and the parts that drew inner blood and bile, the easiest spots with the softest bones and tissues. Decapacitating versus killing. An extensive version of chakra they hadn't taught in the Academy.

This, she studied. Even though it frustrated her, even though she wasn't used to memorization and if you asked, she wouldn't be able to do much more than successfully hit the part, not be able to fix anything, not like her sister could. She worked.

There were traps and strategies to learn, trip wires to figure out how to use. Taijutsu and ninjutsu and genjutsu avoidance and manipulation, which she sucked at, but the rest of it was almost fun, except for the wounds and getting the crap beaten out of her every single day. They didn't eat much, never stopped moving, never having time to slow down except to sleep, and even then, they were allowed to keep at it in the training rooms.

Even then, sleeping wasn't always... well.

The first time it happened was during the second week- just a random Tuesday or Thursday, she couldn't remember which. She'd been exhausted, overworked with a wrapped calf muscle tear that hurt like an absolute bitch and probably would for a while after that, completely skipping bags and reps for the night and probably the rest of the week in favor of just collapsing in bed with everyone else.

Two people had already been kicked, one boy and one girl. Noriko sill remained, a fact Mai intended to make a reality. She thought she was doing pretty well herself, keeping up with the rest and maybe passing forward in her own right, but these civilian kids were absolutely badass and she definitely was going to have to work for her memories.

So she'd fallen asleep, hoping her calf would be better in the morning and knowing it wouldn't. Deep and dreamless, something that was turning more and more like her sister's, which was concerning. And she couldn't really even remember what time it was, not that there was a way to tell with lights out, just that she'd woken up to pain in her neck and fingers over her mouth and nose.

She'd flushed with the most panic she ever had before, thinking that maybe she was failing- because candidates disappeared in the night unofficially- or that maybe other trainees were jumping her- or that something else entirely was going on, because it didn't matter what the hell was going on, there was a knife on her throat and she could not breathe, could not-

Mai had lashed out, using her feet to both attack and shove herself down from the looming threat, to sink down into the mattress, get that blade away from her jugular. With both hands she grabbed not blindly at his grip but reaching one hand up toward the elbow and one down to the hand holding the blade, and shoved her thumbs down into each, maybe not so effective when this guy had a grip on something, but she was kicking something and nothing was happening so it was worth a damn shot.
The hand retracted. By maybe half an inch, but favoring the elbow she was trying to puncture with her bitten-off fingernails. She needed to sharpen those, she thought wildly, with a kind of detached panic, as she still couldn't breathe; or stop cutting them down so short.

And then it was over. There was a breeze, cold, swirling the dry chilliness into a flurry that made her shiver with the blankets askew. There was nothing to follow, nobody to track, they were just gone into the darkness, leaving her to struggle to a somewhat sitting position, hacking on oxygen, grabbing at her throat less for the wound and more for the shock of breathing; to punch her chest hard, eyes squinting to stay open.

Now the other girls were waking up, some from her muffled shout and some from her gasping. And they hustled out of bed, some asking what had happened and one going to the door to check it. The lights flickered on.

But they had been alone.

And then, as the weeks progressed- Mai guessed it had only taken so long for it to start happening because they wanted the trainees to both be too exhausted to sleep lightly without cause and believe that bed and sleep and dorms were a safe place- it happened more and more, random girls randomly crying out in the night. Mai swore she could hear the boys through the walls at night.

It worked. As much as Mai hated and hissed and snapped, wanted the sleep, it worked. Slowly her sleep got lighter, soon she was jolting herself awake from even nodding off. She spent longer training, had to balance between exhaustion, functionality and sanity.

They only caught her twice more.

... 

~ He leapt nimbly over a protrusion of rock, cracked and charred from the waves of lightning that had separated the three of them in the first place. He was watching for Eishi-kun, yes, but Mai wasn't- ~

... 

It didn't really take long to figure out how to survive.

Literally.

The best ways to wrap a wound, the best kinds of applications: stitches, bandages, or gauze?- what each thing in the first aid kit was, how to detect the anti-coagulants and other nonlethal poisons the instructors sometimes dipped their weapons into. How much to eat or drink depending on how much blood you've lost, learning to ration her rations. The differences between a bad sprain and a break, how to kick with a busted leg and punch with a busted arm.

This was the place where the lines of her old, structured fighting blurred. There was no such thing as Suna Standard, Academy Standard, old fashioned Katas as she'd been taught: it was just dirty fighting versus clean fighting, desperate fighting versus confidence.

Some of them helped each other. For points, for favor, for passing, Mai would dominate in her spars, perhaps overly so, but then afterwards, she, maybe along with someone who was not Noriko, would help bandage, fix, plug. Enough so that they wouldn't die- or enough that they could continue to participate, because the first boy to refuse training for even a day due to injuries- even though the ANBU allowed it, suggested it as an option- had been dismissed.
One and a half months had passed. Mai wondered briefly how everyone was doing up above the sound of water, but usually she was more focused on not letting anyone else, instructor or student or whoever the hell, steal her food or her supplies, on different regimes, different combinations of available lessons to take, a balance between improving what she sucked at and perfecting whatever she rocked.

Somehow, by some kind of fate or unfair Karma, Mai hadn't yet been placed in with Noriko or one of the other girls who she hated now in the bracket spars held weekly. She was also pretty annoyed that the spars were all gender-separated when their training wasn't, because there were quite a few males who she wanted to beat the snot out of.

But she said nothing, because sometimes the hot-headed ones vanished.

Their numbers were dwindling; even though the group, gender-mixed, had started out with more than she originally realized- she was pretty sure there'd been different briefings held and then everyone had been shoved together- they were dropping fast. Mai was curious what would happen if the time came for final testing and there was only an odd handful of trainees left, but figured the ANBU knew what they were doing.

... ~ Whatever had happened to make Mai-chan so- angry- vengeful- powerful- he wasn't sure, but he did know she hadn't been in any condition or had any amount of the chakra necessary to perform the jutsu she had just used, and he didn't care the Brothers were secured and now she was- ~

... Yoga.

A word she'd heard tossed around before between Kunoichis and female classmates mostly, something she knew about but didn't really have an opinion on one way or the other, since she'd never really tried it.

But it was an available lesson in the room full of instructors and noise and mess, and she was too beat up to take anything more physical than that, too tired to try anything mental.

"Finally," the woman said once she'd approached the set of four thick looking tatami mats, one of the few instructors not wearing a mask. Mai wondered about that, too, if there were non-ANBU people brought in for specific classes like this that had nothing to do with shinobi style training. Hell, maybe she was a civilian or something, Mai didn't know or care.

"Finally?" Mai let an eyebrow raise, knew the unmasked teachers were actually human. "Finally, what?"

"Finally, someone shows up to do some goddamn yoga," she muttered. "I don't even know why they asked me to do this, none 'a you students care about flexibility. Don't even. You look like crap. That's the only reason you're here."

Mai didn't deny it, just shrugged. The lady wasn't wrong for sure. There were bandages on her head, on her arms, butterfly bandaids on her face, bruises marring every other few inches on her body. She didn't look scraggily like the others yet, even though blood loss and insomnia were draining her personal food stores more than anticipated, she still had some non-regulated food and knew she would for at least a few more weeks; but she looked bad.

"Anyway," the woman said, waving a hand and rising to a crouch from where she'd been sitting in
seiza on her mat. "I'll take you through some basics for now, and you can decide if you want more tomorrow."

It hurt, the stretching, the holding, the weird, awkward positions. But it was easy, to an extent, so Mai followed her examples- cobra and pyramid and several kinds of Warriors, something called a "King Pidgeon Pose" which was a stupid name but was kind of a terrifying way to bend, half lotus crow, chakra bond pose, and a few others.

Training ended while she was in the middle of a "Handstand Scorpion", panting for breath in short bursts and trying to keep her balance with her feet dangling over her head. The instructor woman was having no difficulties at all.

When the call went out for rations, Mai let herself fall forward, catching on her feet and flipping back upright in a crouch. The woman, probably a civilian, went about it much differently, drawing her legs slowly back over her center of gravity where they'd come from, and lowering herself down.

"Not bad, kid," she said appreciatively. Mai knew her face was red from blood, could feel the heat of it in her cheeks and nose. "Not bad for a beginner."

~ Mai was dying. ~

... The night before their first scheduled mixed-gender spar, Mai finally ran dry on her personal food stash.

Well, pretty much. She had like two energy bars left, but she would save those for the next time she got slashed, or something. She could survive on the rations just fine for the next month and a half.

Instead of letting her face fall at the unpleasant thought, Mai simply nodded to herself and zipped the bag back up before sliding it under her bed. There were seals on it now, that she'd made during practices and studies, so nobody would be able to mess with it, but still, she didn't want the other four girls in the room at present to realize she was having an issue.

Noriko still remained. Two of the remaining three were civilian kids, one a clan child. Not many left. There would probably only be six or seven kids left for the final when all was said and done. Mai knew that they were only initiating this old 'train kids for ANBU' thing because of the Konoha Crush and the number of Black Ops they'd lost there, so it was odd they would cut so many.

But then, for all she knew they had other facilities, other groups. And she knew they couldn't afford crappy members. Maybe they would all pass the damn exams.

Her stomach stung whenever she moved, burning like a line of fire all across the healing rip of skin from the side of her boob to her belly button. The stitching was shoddy, but it would hold: the best she could've done in the dark, with her limited knowledge of stitching in the first place. It would probably scar bad, but that was fine, it was on her stomach, under the shirt.

As she rubbed it, her stomach rebelled, making little noises of hungry protest, but Mai ignored it. Fumiko was going to have a field day with her when she went back home, whether she made it or not; with all these nicks and gashes and bruises and damage, the way she was mattt with sweat all the time and had circles to rival her sister's from lack of sleep.
Now she would lose even more weight, on top of that. Of course she'd already lost some, she was training like a maniac and clawing for survival, but it wasn't too horrible, not like a few others who hadn't thought to bring outside supplies.

And Gaara would worry, too. Even if he was the one that let her come here, to this place, he wouldn't be able to quell that, Mai knew. Minus the violence, minus the anger she knew he once dominated, just the worry, the concern.

Oh, well. Mai flopped on the bed, not bothering to get under the covers, because although it got freezing at night, the dumb heavy blankets restricted way too much movement for her tastes. It was a sleeping night.

Without waiting for lights out, she slipped into a doze to the swishing of the ever-constant water towers above them, knowing she would wake at the smallest scuff.

...~ Flurries of conversations, their only sign of life a strange flickering underneath Mai's eyelids, her heartbeat was dead and her skin was freezing and Shiragiku would not, refused to let them open her eyes, her most closely guarded secret- ~

...

She was losing.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

That should've knocked a tooth out, but it hadn't, just made her dizzy and she staggered into the floor like a plow. This kid had improved since the Academy, for sure. She'd bitten her tongue, she noticed with a kind of offhand annoyance. Great. Now she tasted like blood.

And then he was on her, ruthless, and she tried to roll, but he saw the trick and shifted at the last second to end up on top of her anyway. So she lashed out with her fists, but he caught that too, and so she bucked and writhed but physics and gravity sucked ass and he was heavier than her, had a balance in his planted knees.

She was not gonna lose the first fight against a boy here, she was not gonna be that person. She opened her mouth, to howl, to roar, even while knowing they were being watched, because she was losing, dammit, if she could just roll him, or connect with something, or get her hands free, but this freak was solid as freaking titanium steel- but before she could, he leaned, reaching out to pin her wrists, getting to close to her livid twisted face.

"Not so tough now, are ya?" he said like a murmur, probably hoping the instructors wouldn't hear.

She slammed her heels against the ground where they'd been skidding and sliding, and arched her back, but it didn't dislodge him, just knocked him forward a little, until he was sort of on her chest, face closer. Fuck, if she could just get to the blunted kunai in her side pouch-

Ugh, she could smell rations and unsupervised nighttime on his breath- did this kid brush his teeth? Even as she turned her face away, she strained at her arms, knew she couldn't get them loose.

"They're gonna call it," he said tauntingly. "What are you gonna do?"

"This," she snarled, and lurched, smashing her forehead into his face with all the strength she could get pinned. It made a cracking sound as it connected, and he made a little grunting noise like uh!, head snapping back, eyes squinting with pain. But he didn't let go, face twisting in rage, and she
had a second to think oh shit before he jabbed his knee down in her solar plexus.

She had to work hard not to yell out, gasping, and he got down in her face again, lip turning up at the blood she could taste peeking out of her lips. "Nice try," he grunted. There was blood on his forehead, on hers too, it would bruise there, and her eye, and her jaw where he'd punched her. She couldn't reply, still gasping like a fish, feeling fire in her stomach like he was breaking her ribs. "How do you like that, huh? Give! Give! They won't call it unless you give."

Why'd you get back in my face again, dumbass?

Despite herself, despite her lack of air, Mai forced herself to grin, forced herself to pull her eyes open despite the way this kid's face was swimming. Her leg moved, just as his face started to soften with confusion.

He'd moved his leg.

At the same time that she flung her foot over his back to hold at him, she lurched one more time, this time latching her teeth on his nose, not as hard as she could, but hard enough to draw blood. And yes, because he wailed and tried to pull back, tried to get away, and let her other leg get around him, too, and then he tried to sit up and she got both her hands back and she leaped at him, still biting, tasting more blood in her mouth, and smashed him on his back.

He screeched, and she let go of his face, wound up and clocked him so his head bounced, one more time and he stopped struggling.

"Match end," Weasel-taicho said, with no inflection in his voice.

It took a second for her to get to her feet, slow and steady, a combination of the fist/floor impact to her head still ringing around in her skull and the deep, aching throb that was basically her entire torso keeping her barely hunched. Other things hurt too, her scalp where he'd pulled her hair, a few other points of contact where they'd tussled.

He was still unconscious, blood all over his face, both from his forehead, hers, and the wound on the bridge of his nose, dots oozing like vampire marks. She could've done way worse. She could've ripped it off, could've kept going instead of stopping when she felt the cartilage. But no. He was an asshole, but she wasn't gonna tear his nose off for a spar.

Slowly, unsteadily, she raised a hand to wipe the blood out of her mouth, thinking maybe she should spit, because foreign blood tasted nasty. Then she looked up, at the fact that there wasn't a sound in the room other than her muffled panting.

They were staring. Well, the instructor sort of always looked like he was, what with his mask, but the other trainees were staring, some with respect, some almost slack-jawed, and others sporting various shades of white.

Yeah. That's right. I'll bite you in the damn face, she thought challengingly.

Ow.

...

~ People pressed forward, in awe, in shock, in morbid curiosity, to see their hero, the one who had forced Madara's retreat, to figure out if she was dead or not. Their eyes showed surprise at her figure, sorrow at her condition, and they reached for her. ~
It was during a game of tag that she decided to be an assassin.

She'd played tag before: lights out, no holds barred maze setting with minimal traps and every other trainee inside, each with a seal on different vital points. No one person had the same point marked; her own this time was the Sartorius muscle at the closest point to her femoral artery. Nobody knew each other's seals, this game was about observation and quiet and shadows, and soundlessness.

It was one of those games she just learned to be good at.

The seals lit up and burned off when activated, so the point was to find a fellow trainee, figure out where there seal was, and hit it hard enough with physical force and chakra to turn it on. The trainee who lost their seal was disqualified, and was probably also in a lot of pain, depending on the point used. Negative reinforcement, she guessed. You lose, it damn hurts.

She'd gotten her clavicle fractured that way. Sheesh.

Anyway, it was while she was stalking a trainee, a boy who seemed to still be looking nervously both for a tail- he was bad at that part apparently- and someone to follow, waiting for the pale white flash of seal paper in any of the ways he moved, when she realized she was enjoying herself, high up near the top of the maze walls, sticking like a tree frog, following unsuspecting victims around.

She could win, she could win, she could win...

This was an assassin's game. They played games all the time now, games that reflected various ANBU positions, probably to help them figure out what they would specialize in if they passed. Poison? Assassination? Infiltration? Sabotage? Tracking, offense, defense? Personal security unit or mission freeloader?

Mai had never killed anyone, despite threatening a thousand times to do just that throughout her lifetime. But she knew that, as an ANBU, once she was off parole, she would. Even as a ninja, one didn't go very long without killing. And she was prepared for that.

Might as well do it in a way she was good at.

She'd just made the decision, smiling quietly to herself, when she saw it: the black on white, hidden on his left forearm- so that's why he'd been favoring it, it wasn't injured, his point was an ulna.

So she crept a little closer- he'd stopped, was peeking around a corner- raised her blunted kunai that channeled chakra, and tensed for the quick jump and shunshin. She would have to run after this, even if he didn't yell the seal was blinding in the darkness; they would be on her in seconds, if she was quick enough they might pick some of themselves off...

Silence was the opposite of everything Mai stood for.

Maybe that was why they never saw it coming.

...~ Shiragiku had to fight to merely bark, had to try not to attack them, he would do the same if it were him- if she was- someone like- ~
Oh, she couldn't deal with this.

Mai had found she could put up with a lot of shit, but she just couldn't handle this: the stupid buck teeth on her apparent Taicho's stupid mask. Squirrel? What kind of assassin specialization would be squirrel? She looked distrustfully at the larger man, face covered similarly to her own. She wouldn't know his face, and he wouldn't know hers, unlike Weasel. Although she had no official mask, this one was just blank, like the paper-mache thing civvie kids made in Art class.

"Weasel-taicho, who is this?" she said, keeping her tone dull. The mask was stupid, and she could tell right away her training taicho was about to announce him as 'this is squirrel' because the mask had goddamn Buck. Teeth.

"This is Squirrel," Weasel announced, and beneath her freezing cold mask, Mai rolled her eyes. "He'll be your specialization teacher from now on. Squirrel, this is Jackal-chan. She wants to be an assassin."

Squirrel simply nodded. "We'll see," he said.

"Trainee," Weasel said blandly. "You will train under Squirrel for one month, and then will come time for your exams. You will still train with the other trainees, but the majority of your day will be spent with Squirrel-san. Listen well."

"Hai, Weasel-taicho," she said, and he was gone.

"Well," Squirrel said. "You've made it this far. Let's see what you can do."

~ They made it to the tents, dropped her down on a cot, ran about for medicines and med-nin and miracles, and somewhere between transfusions and injections someone touched Mai's face, and she wailed like an animal, like she had before. ~

Oh, finally. Mai hadn't realized how much she missed her blades until she got them back.

Well, not the same ones. But these ones were sleeker than her Academy issues, even with all the care she'd taken care of them- made with better metals, better grips, better weights; although it took some getting used to, as she swung them around and around, slashing at solitary targets and shadow clones alike, it felt like she'd gotten her arms back.

Squirrel worked her hard in every aspect of the word. Some nights she didn't go back at all to sleep. But he was a strange ANBU: one of the few she'd seen who reflected any kind of sense of humor in the mask. Not much, but there.

Her blade sunk in cloth; the thing gutted and spat shredded wood chips like a dying animal. And, with a quick glance behind, Mai realized that was the last one, no more shadows, no more dummies. She pulled the blades out and inspected the "wounds": probably fatal, one in the center of the chest and the other slammed through the side of the stomach.

But she'd missed the heart.

"In a fight, this would be a victory," her taicho mused. "They would be incapacitated. But if there
had been another enemy, you might be in trouble having to kill this one first."

Behind the mask, Mai scowled, knowing it was true, and fought hard to keep from scuffing her foot angrily against the ground. Damn it. She'd been so close. "Hai, Taicho," she murmured with a grit in her teeth. "I'll keep that in mind."

... 

~ And for once, Shiragiku snapped. ~

...

As time wore on, closer and closer to the final exams, everything finally started to settle, both into a routine and into her bones, like a drifted pile of sand. Get up, if you're early enough wash up, eat rations, go to group training, go to selective training, eat rations, go to individual training with her Taicho, go through her own personal kata and workouts after hours in the selective training room, go to bed, sometimes sleep. Spars on weekends.

It was a routine, but it was far from an easy, mindless one. It seemed like she was always tired, always just out of breath, always missing a step as of late. There was never time or was to replenish chakra as she learned more and more how to use it, and god damn it, she was not a med-nin, so injuries piled faster than they could heal. Some of the other kids were learning medical ninjutsu, she knew; could tell by the way their rib snapped one day and they could walk fine the next. But she had no patience or capability of it.

Still, she tried. She kept up, more than kept up, despite how badly it hurt, despite the way she could feel her body protesting the combination of caving and swelling from training and hunger- or if not hunger, then going farther then what the hard tack and chocolate and lentils could really give her. And it was working.

Mai could feel it working, could sense the way she didn't have to think to fight, the way her body could do anything she wanted it to no matter how anatomically incorrect, how she had no qualms cutting her hair to keep it from getting grabbed. Once she wasn't weak, once she was healed, once she had graduated, Mai would be able to go anywhere, do anything, fight anyone.

(A delusion of grandeur, maybe, but who the hell cared?)

Anyway, she dealt with it without more than maybe a little grumbling and some curses. She didn't cry in the night like some of the younger recruits, if she fell she got back up, she killed a shit ton of dummies the right way. They did survival runs miles out in the harsher parts of the desert, played their games, practiced their career tracks, and slowly shrunk in number until on the day of the exams, there were only seven left.

Seven recruits, only two girls and five boys- this included herself, Noriko, Hiroshi, Mokichi, Kansuke, Hitoshi, and Taro. If Mai were brutally honest with herself, she would admit to actually liking nearly all of them: aside from Noriko, they were tough, scrappy, resilient, resourceful, and more or less friendly enough. Unfortunately Noriko was also most of those things, however much it pained her to admit, but Noriko was different in that where they wanted to succeed, she only wanted to beat.

Of course that said a lot about Mai herself since she wanted Noriko to fail for purely petty reasons even though he wouldn't remember any of it if she did, but still- Noriko was just a jerk. Even if she did make ANBU, even if she was good at it, she just didn't care- it was ambition that drove her, a need to be right and better than everyone else. Not stronger, just better. Noriko wouldn't die for
Mai couldn't recall if seven was a lucky or an unlucky number, only that she'd heard somewhere it was one or the other, but she guessed it didn't really matter. Even if she was superstitious— which she wasn't, in any way, superstition was stupid— if seven was lucky, they would all pass, and if it was unlucky, they would all fail, which was really unlikely; after all this they would at least want one new recruit.

No matter what, she was leaving the facility today: whether it was with all her memories intact, or all-around failure of an ANBU trainee who didn't even know why he had to redo a year at the Academy. Something gross flipped over in her stomach at that thought; her spine shivered uncomfortably whenever she remembered amidst packing and preparing and chatting with the other kids. Oh, shit, right. Oh, shit.

She could do it. She could do it. She could do it. Fuck the odds. As long as she was stubborn she could do it. So Mai forced herself to exude confidence, felt it flooding through her blood like adrenaline, and she grinned all morning long. This wasn't some stupid multiple-choice test, she had this.

So she tied on her mask and waited and exploded like a tiny little star over and over and wondered what her sister's face would look like if she woke up at home with no memory of the last three months and wondered what it would be like to put this mask on for a mission and what it would feel like to punch Noriko and Ayumi and Eishi through a wall.

She was dressed strangely, clothes she'd picked out two weeks ago for training with her taicho, to get used to their feel and not rely on the scratchy canvas clothes. A half-sleeve armored fishnet shirt that touched the crooks of her arms and thick cropped black top pinned by a leather chestplate armor, exposing the brutal scarring on her stomach but protecting the skin with fishnet. A black half-sleeve crop jacket with no zipper that almost reached her elbows and did reach the hem of her half-shirt, with a popped collar that at least felt somewhat like her regular shirt.

Her forearms were protected with black arm guards identical to her Taicho's, hands covered in thin black gloves that disappeared fingerprints. Mai also wore loose black pants that didn't quite touch the tops of her sandals, which bothered her a little for multiple reasons, one being that she was used to her pants being tight and another that stupid inch of skin not covered by either shoe or pants, but it was necessary she not style herself like, well, herself. Aside from that, the only baubles she had were two large pouches at her back and a single kunai holster strapped to her right thigh.

And, of course, her mask, but that went without saying.

All in all, she hoped it was efficient: armored enough to protect most of her vitals, different enough not to be linked to her everyday outfits, minimal enough to keep out of her way. And the pants had deep pockets with seals she'd had the sealing assistant stitch inside them to hold her tantos once she had them: again, it would be a tell.

Mai wasn't used to it yet, but hopefully, she would get a chance to.

And so she waited, and she waited, and she ate with the others and palmed extra chocolate without the instructors noticing, flipped and flipped a kunai and a senbon and whatever else she could get her hands on until finally she was called in.

The room was dark, pitch black, but Mai could sense chakras all around her. She tensed, and the door slammed shut behind her.
He roared and lunged, crashing to the floor with the other med-nin, and amid the cries of surprise and shock he heard Kankuro, and he heard a final keen from his dying teammate, and he was grabbed by the arms and hauled back up -

It was hot.

The heat, which she didn't usually mind, was making her sweat - which she also usually didn't mind all that much - and that made the few remaining bandages on her torso and arms itch like the devil. She scratched at it absently, still not-so-quietly furious at her predicament.

At the top of a random watchpost, with the glaring shimmer of Suna's heat wafting up around them, and waiting for their sensei -

With goddamn Nagasawa Eishi.

Which Kami hated her so much that they'd thought this was an acceptable turn of events? She'd just gone through Pre-ANBU training, for Kami's sake, couldn't something cut her some slack for once?

It had been worth it - for maybe fifteen minutes, mind - to see his stupid salmon face when he realized she'd not only reappeared but magically passed and was sitting in orientation to be sorted into a team. Same with a bunch of other losers. And lo - guess who hadn't been there?

Noriko.

The euphoria - she'd passed, she'd won, she was in the program and fucking Noriko wasn't, everyone in this stupid room had been flabbergasted at her mere presence, she was a ninja, finally - had quickly been stomped on when team Nine - Otokaze's lot - was called out.

Mitsuwa Mai.

Chigusa Shiragiku.

And just as she'd been sizing up Shiragiku, the pale blond kid with the loose clothes that always carried flowers about, whose eyes had just widened like he was having an aneurysm or some shit -

Nagasawa Eishi.

Ugh.

The other kid, Shiragiku, she didn't much mind - or care about one way or another. He'd been a shadow in the Academy, mostly average in everything except maybe poisons if she remembered right - and he was a Chigusa, so that much was obvious. Basic combat and toolery hadn't cast much light on a particular skill other than that.

And he was quiet as hell, too. Hadn't said a word yet, but Mai could feel him staring constantly, a burning, uncomfortable feeling that made the skin underneath her sweat prickle until he looked away. She had just made up her mind and was about to whirl and bite this blond girly-kid's head off because what is your goddamn problem you little -

But then, unceremoniously and with only the slightest blur and flare of chakra to announce his
appearance, their sensei appeared. Mai huffed and smacked back down into her seat, arms crossed, fingers tapping at her elbows, and glared at him.

He looked young enough, with darkened skin and a blocky facial structure. His hair reminded her slightly of Naruto's in it's impossible gravity-defying spiked height, only it was brown, though his eyes were pinched the way Naruto sometimes looked. Their sensei- Otokaze, was his name?- wore the most basic of uniforms, dressed in an almost brown longsleeved turtleneck and pants, with a flak vest over his chest and torso.

He smiled slightly.
"Well, hey there, Kiddos," he said. "You're early."

Shiragiku nodded slightly. Mai gave no answer, and Eishi just shrugged. Otokaze's smile didn't waver.
"Well, we're going to be stuck with each other for quite a long time, I suppose," he said, and clapped his hands together lightly. "So we should get to know each other better. My name is Hirase Otokaze. I'm a regular Jonin here in Suna, and I enjoy stargazing and collecting whistles. I don't particularly like practicing water-style or getting caught in sandstorms."

"I'm sorry, did you say you collect whistles?" Mai's brow furrowed. She wasn't exactly trying not to scowl, but it would probably be better if she didn't.
"Yes. Whistles. Good for signaling," Otokaze nodded, either not noticing or caring that the question had been pointed and barbed with sarcasm. "Different kinds make different sounds at different frequencies. You can call different people or alert different situations."

Mai blinked. Eishi said, "Huh."
"Now," Otokaze said cheerfully. "Each of you tell me your names, likes, dislikes, and biggest goals."

For a second nobody said anything, so Mai sighed irritably. Bunch of pansies. "My name's Mitsuwa Mai. I like training, I guess, and fighting. And I don't like-"

Eishi muttered something rude at her likes comment, and she whirled on him, a snarl ripping across her lips and raising her hands to snatch at him. He made a small sound and attempted to slide away, not quite managing it, and she caught at his hair. "- Eishi!" she snapped, then tagged on, "And stupid people."

"And your goals?" Otokaze prompted, not particularly reacting to Eishi's yelps nor their tussle. "What do you want to do with your life, Mai?"

Finally she shoved at him, angry now, body aching and not yet completely healed. It was hot. And she was starving. "Get stronger," she said. "And take whatever title comes along with that."

"You want to be Kazekage, then?"
"Hell no. Too much politics. I'll leave that to Gaara." Now she did scowl.

"Well, good. Nice to meet you, Mai. You seem... interesting. Now, Eishi, how about you next?"

He puffed up his chest, although his cheeks were still flushed from effort and there were red fingernail marks on his arms and cheek. "My name's Nagasawa Eishi," he said proudly. His head
shifted to look at the teacher and his hair flashed neon pink in the sunlight, blinding her. "I like using my fan and lying down in the sun. I don't like-" Here his jaw worked for a second, and she stared dead at the side of his face, daring him to say it. But he didn't. ",water," he said instead. "Or sandstorms. As for my goals- First I'm going to become the strongest Jonin, and then I'm going to be Kazekage!"

Mai's eyes widened, and then narrowed. And then she was barking with the smallest burst of laughter, maybe a little mean, but warranted. Eishi? Kazekage? Hah! He wouldn't have survived one second in Gaara's place whether he was the strongest freaking ninja on the planet!

"What?" he snapped, head whipping to glare at her, and she met it, protective instincts flaring. Because maybe he hadn't been trying to insult Gaara, but she took it as such, because this brat was completely underestimating her big brother.

"You can't be Kazekage," she said, and there wasn't really a lot of anger in her voice, but it was fierce. "Only people who make their own way can be Kazekage. You're just a bully who does what everyone tells him to."

For too long of a pause, there was silence. Eishi's eyes widened at her words, and then his lips thinned, and she figured any second he would start changing color or Otokaze would intervene or they would get into a fight- please, please- but then another, quieter voice cut in, smooth and breathy like water lapping in the Reservoir.

"My name is Chigusa Shiragiku," he said. "I like growing flowers and plants in my family's greenhouses. I don't like conflict, much, but I can hold my own. And I want to..." Here he trailed off slightly, and he cast an odd look at Mai, who, distracted from the tension, narrowed her eyes at him slightly. Why did he keep looking at her? "I want to become a strong ninja, and protect the village."

"Is that all?" Otokaze questioned, still with that stupid little smile like two of his brand-new students hadn't almost torn each other to shreds. When Shiragiku only nodded, a pale blush dusting across his face, their teacher announced, "Well, I like all of you. You still have one last test, but something tells me you'll all pass- and that we'll all get along quite nicely."

...~ And Mai was silent. ~...

...~ ...

...Hey guys...

First of all, I'm so, so sososo sorry for the wait. I've been going through some times, some really good and some really bad, and life just kind of got in the way. My motivation to write each chapter is slowly draining, but I swear, this story is both far from over and far from being abandoned!

It didn't help that I had two ideas for Mai's final pre-ANBU exam and couldn't decide on which- I ended up using neither XD I originally intended to go into much more with team Nine's training and first missions and etc, etc, as well as Mai's first missions on an ANBU squadron, but between the wait I'd already put you guys through, the amount of people who honestly don't like Mai all that much, and my lack of patience for it, I just ended it on this nice little bit.
I personally love Mai and how much she's grown. I've attempted to show how absurdly childish most of her anger was as a child; even though it was usually warranted, Mai tended to overreact. Massively. To everything. But there was a righteousness that she's always had, even as a kid- a bit of maturity nobody else her age has had.

I also want to explain Shiragiku a little bit, because I keep hinting that he basically stalked her and admired her as a child like a male Hinata. This wasn't always the plan, and only appeared gradually as Shiragiku's character fleshed out in my mind. As a kid, he was meek and weak and knew it, and so he didn't stand up for himself or others, trying to hide and keep out of sight. So he kind of admired- and was confused and concerned by- Mai's power and brashness. So no, he's not in love with her or any of that, he's just always kind of looked up to her, the kind of idol you know you'll never be like but that you always want to be like and that you think about in the worst times to motivate/inspire yourself.

Anyway, I've ranted. Forgive me for the wait, and maybe the next wait, but I promise- promise!- you'll all, if not get excited during the next chapter, get very emotionally invested, even if it's just being angry with me. (NO CHARACTER DEATHS. I think.)

Sneak peek:

"Those stupid freaking flowers," he said, and his eyes went skyward to the point that she didn't think he was talking to her anymore. "What was I even- you didn't even care."

Mai stilled.

Flowers.

The... Dahlias?

"No," she said, shaking her head. "No, that wasn't you. That couldn't have been you."

Chapter End Notes

Also a brief bout of hopeless!depressed!Mai that made me very upset to write

Review! (Please? I miss you all.)

EDIT: Added the tweener oops
Dahlias

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

...

~ Okay, so maybe he wasn't as drunk as he was pretending to be. ~

...

It was too dark for shunshin, Fumiko knew that.

There wasn't enough chakra in her system to either maintain a shunshin anyway or even summon Shaapu, and there wouldn't be for hours, and she was out of pills; Fumiko knew that, as well.

Gaara was about to face his father.

Fumiko knew that, too.

And that fact trumped every other fact of the current moment, because Rasa had ruined Gaara's life before he was even eight, ruined it more before he was even a proper teenager- and really, he'd ruined her best friend's life before he was even born.

Gaara was above it all now, Gaara had grown, they both had grown, and she helped where she could, hid the pictures, cleaned the rooms, supported his every endeavor, soothed the nightmares, words almost forgotten, four or six or ten year old words filled with venom to the absolute brim.

And no, Fumiko couldn't shunshin, and no, Fumiko couldn't summon a bat, and it was dark, and there were rocks, these were all things she already knew. And she refused to hurt herself or be slowed down and captured for deserting if anyone was following her, however unlikely that was.

But she would not let Gaara be alone for this. Even if she couldn't help, even if she had to escape, even if they tried to use her. Gaara had started alone, maybe, with his father and frightened siblings, but he wasn't alone anymore, and she wanted him- Rasa- to see it.

She wanted Rasa to see everything he'd missed out on, she wanted him to see that he had changed, that Gaara had friends now, bonds he would die for, and yes, she wanted him to see that Gaara was Kazekage, but more than that, she wanted him to notice Gaara's control, Gaara's acceptance, Gaara's strength over what remained of Shukaku, physically and no.

Gaara's father had not broken him, and she wanted him to see that she had very little to do with it, that it was Gaara, and that he'd missed out on a son worth loving.

And she wanted Gaara to know that despite his strength not being her doing at all that he was not alone, that he would never be alone, that he would never face anything alone. He'd helped her with her floundering relationship with her father, because he'd wanted to and because he loved her, and now she was going to return the favor, whatever it took.

And so she didn't shunshin, and she didn't summon a bat. Fumiko merely ran, panting and cramping, stumbling in the dark, barely any moonlight to go by, following her instincts and the general direction she'd wrangled from guilty Shikamaru because he got it, he understood.
Once a civilian...

She wondered what Rasa would think of her, now.

I'm coming, Gaara.

...

~ But he was definitely drunk enough for this to seem like a good idea. She probably wouldn't even remember, right? ~

...

Mai woke up quickly, opened her eyes very slowly.

Her dreams tugged away, leaving the darkness behind her eyelids startlingly clear. Her heart thudded hard, once, twice, and then calmed to a regular cardiac arrest. Still she kept her eyes closed, closed as she became aware of the rough tatami cot under her body and the way the blanket bunched uncomfortably on one side, near her hip; she was lying on a bump.

She didn't let her eyelids flutter as she sifted through the memories for hints of dreams and found none. I'm asleep, she told herself sternly. She wasn't ready to worry about the missing pouch-scroll- that should have been throbbing on her back against the bed. She wasn't ready to worry about the familiar chakra signature beside her. Mai wasn't ready to wonder where she was or how she'd gotten there.

I passed out, she thought anyway. Chakra exhaustion. I'm in a medical tent.

Thump-thump-thump. Mai's heartbeat raced and she focused on it, only it, and it slowed quietly to a sluggish whump. whump. whump... Her eyes were still closed. It was working; she was tricking the signature beside her.

"Mai."

Shit. Fuck. Go away.

The tenor said nothing else, but it was there, waiting.

Eishi...

He was dead. He was dead and he'd been murdered, she didn't even know how, he'd just died in the heat of battle alone without backup god damn it, she hadn't even seen a fatal goddamn wound on him, just scratches that could've been caused by tree branches.

She was angry, angry, angry. There was rage to spare from her last waking moments, her foggy memory-lane dreams. It pulsed in her blood and heated up her skin. But still she pretended to sleep, because she wasn't ready to fight.

Mai was tired.

Sad.

Beneath the angry, she was sad.

It ached.
She hurt with a burning, deep phantom pain somewhere she didn't know where, someplace between her stomach and her soul. She knew him. Shit, she knew him. Eishi was someone. He was someone and he was a peacemaker but irked so easily and he was a pansy and he was brave and his hair was pink and his skin was tan and his eyes were steel blue.

He had a blind spot at his left shoulder blade and a habit of putting his foot forward in the direction he planned to attack. He feinted right, always. Could never beat her in practice spars, could eat a kage-size Michiru's Comet Fire chili in under seventeen minutes and had the picture on the booth wall alongside hers to prove it. Loud noises didn't scare him but wasps did.

Fumiko said his chakra was blue.

Dark, deep blue.

Before she knew it she had sniffed, once only, and the anger drained away in the silent tears that kamikazed down her cheeks and into her ears to her wild hair. She wasn't sobbing, just quietly crying without moving, just pretending to sleep. Give sorrow words: The grief- "that does not speak whispers the o'erfraught heart and bids it break," she said quietly and accidentally and didn't know if that was all she'd said.

"What?"

"Give sorrow-"

"I heard you the first time."

"This is stupid, Kankuro."

"What happened? You're crying."

Without the anger, the righteous burning fury, she felt empty. Cold. Full of water like a clay basin. Numb like there was ice melted in her veins.

"This whole war is stupid. Stupid."

"Hey. Hey-"

She let him touch her, first her arm and then, hesitantly, her face, and the tears kept coming.

"Why are we fighting?" she said and opened her eyes now. He wasn't leaning over her and she had to turn her head to see him, and realized he was injured too, he had to be: his hood was gone, makeup washed off, brown hair still tousled from the fabric. "Why are we even fighting?"

He looked tired and strained. Kankuro looked younger without his makeup on- something she'd noticed before but never really registered. Or, maybe not younger- more vulnerable. More exhausted.

Kankuro had a mask too, and she knew how that was.

"... Are you okay?" Kankuro said, unnerved, probably, by the tears and the plaintive kind of dullness she could hear in her own tone, and that scared her, too. Mai knew he was expecting her to snap and be hysterical and scream do I look okay to you, Baka-Kankuro, but she didn't, just looked at him and felt the tears, oddly cool, trailing on her cheeks.

She searched for her anger, and the closest thing she could find was a throbbing in her wrist and on
her skin and she was hurt. Pain felt a hell of a lot like anger.

"Eishi's dead," she said. Wanted to look at the flap of tent above them but didn't. Looked instead right at Kankuro's face, into his coal-colored eyes that mirrored her face back to her in the lamplight and the dulled sunlight shoving in through the sides of the tent. Stared.

"Oh." he said, dumbly. And then: "Shit."

There was a long, not exactly tense, moment that she didn't fill on purpose, and uncomfortable now, Kankuro said: "I'm sorry."

She scoffed at that, anger or no. 'I'm sorry'. Everyone said 'I'm sorry'; strangers said that before a person was cool in their grave. People who hadn't even seen them die. Like they cared, like the dead person was someone to them. Like they knew his favorite color was red.

"It gets better."

She stiffened. "It was better a long time ago," she snapped, without bite. "I got over it. I got over it."

She didn't know what 'it' was but she sure as hell did know that she was done with crying over dead people.

"They said you'll be able to fight in a few hours," he slicked, tilting his head slightly, black eyes that looked much smaller without the hood to match them drifting to the exit flaps. He didn't look back. "They said they needed you, completely wasted a couple mednin giving your chakra back and fixing your ribs. But your wrist's still sprained."

Her wrist was sprained.

She might have laughed if it didn't hurt so much to breathe.

Instead she sat up, pushing behind her at the cot and lifting to sit normally. It took real effort to cross her legs indian style, and it took too long not to worry nervous Kankuro, who she didn't blame at all for being wigged out. I want to be pissed, damn it, she thought, clenching her fists and staring at the way the skin stretched. What's going on with me?

Kankuro, probably remembering the anger she'd forgotten, grinned weakly, tried somehow to prod: "What happened to 'Mourn later, feel afterwards'?"

"Fuck that," she said, suddenly, viciously, and then her voice hitched and she yelled "Fuck that! Fuck that!" without any anger and it was like kissing someone while you were bored and her tears stopped and she heaved one breath, two. Clenched her fists again.

"Urusei," Kankuro said sharply to match her pitch. "Someone's gonna come in here!"

"Fuck you!"

Her body moved and she was being gripped on both arms, Kankuro was staring her in the face. "Stop it, Mai," he said. "I don't know what the hell's wrong with you but if you haven't noticed, we're in the middle of a damn war. Those mednin said they needed you, so pull it together!"

Now there was anger. Not the right kind, but it was there, and it was hot. "Pull it together?" she muttered darkly. "Pull it together? Pull- pull it- together?" She reached out and grabbed his stupid black shirt with both hands, saw the bandage on her left hand and wrist and felt where it was sprained and drew her lips back. "Pull it together, Mai! Be the strong one, Mai! This is a-"
goddamn war Mai!

Kankuro didn't let her go, but said "What?" Like a challenge.

"You say it like I don't know! Like I didn't tell everyone that! Like I haven't stepped on five million dead people like doormats! Like I haven't nearly died at least six times!" She could feel her face turning red. "Everyone needs me! Eishi needed me, and what happened- he died, I sprained my-

"Fumiko needs you!"

"-wrist and I can't- what?"

"Nobody's fighting yet," he said. "You chased that thing off before it could get the Tools. Listen to what I'm saying- you can't fight, you need to slow down and rest. But damn if Fumiko comes back here with Gaara and you're staring at nothing like some kind of mourning ghost."

"Fumiko's- what- Fumiko's-" and Gaara, her mind supplied. And Shiragiku and Sensei and Naruto and Kankuro and Temari and Baki and mom and Hajime, Hiroki, Kiba Matsuri Ino Choji Shikamaru Hinata everyone.

When our actions do not/Our fears do make us traitors.

"Weak," Sasuke snorted above her. "You can't even save yourself, let alone them."

That bastard was- and she'd been so close, her fire had nearly incinerated him! He'd killed-murdered- Eishi- half of her division people she'd shared rations with- people she didn't even know and he was still going. Still alive, unfreaking harmed. He was going to try and kill everyone in the entire world and she was sitting on her ass.

She moved, legs going over the side of the cot. Her feet were bare against the soil. It smelled like blood and smoke and salt. They were still on the coast. Kankuro stiffened, pushed on her arms, and she stiffened, pushed on his neck, forced him to let her stand up and she did.

"There's nothing to even fight!"

"Not here there's not," she said.

"Just- ugh! Stop! You've done enough for now!"

"Not until he's dead," she said, and it came out like a growl. Her heart pounded thmpthuthump- and her eyes burned and Kankuro flinched and the fire came back as she thought of her siblings and of the fighting starting back up here and Eishi would've told me to kick his ass.

Kami, hatred was heady.

I came into this to protect everyone, she thought. ... As many as I can!

Kankuro wasn't two inches from her, and he was still holding one of her arms. With the other she reached for the table with the lamp beside where she'd been lying, grabbed her hitai-ate and tied it on and her belt pouch, ignoring his odd look, like he couldn't breathe either. The headband was covered in new scratches and nicks, the fabric torn on one side and burned on the other. It was stained with dried blood behind the metal plate where she'd hit her head; she could feel it.

Her eyes shifted down to her pouch, and she looked at the beat up material. It felt like canvas to her damaged fingers, which, she realized, were bleeding. A lot of things were bleeding. No wonder the
medics wanted her to stay put: they’d replenished her chakra and did practically nothing else, although she could feel stitches under her headband where she’d cut herself... they itched.

"I said quit," Kankuro snapped, and she let something wry pull up one side of her mouth.

"And since when-" Mai deftly swung the pouch around and clipped it to her top sheath belt, then rolled her shoulders. They had put her fishnet and a new shirt on over top the bandages she could feel winding across her chest and stomach and one shoulder. White peeped out of her sleeveless top where her Taicho had stabbed her. "- has that ever worked?"

Instead of grinning back, he scowled. "What's your deal?"

She shoved him and he stumbled. "You know exactly what my deal is!"

"Just listen to me for two seconds!"

"Fine," she said, jerked from one foot to the other, and crossed her arms. "You have two seconds."

"Okay, first of all-

"Two seconds is up." She pushed past him and only made it two steps before her injured wrist jerked and she spun back around, gasping, and felt her face twist angrily at the way her fingers shook and whitened as he squeezed, forcing the dislocated joints farther apart until it didn't feel like a sprain. "Ow! You son of a-

"Hurts, right?"

"I'll be fine!" She grabbed his arm with her free hand. "Let me go before I break yours back!"

He let go, and she winced. Dropped his hand.

"Listen to me," he said again.

"Fine. What is so goddamn important that-

"You can't get yourself killed," Kankuro said, in such a final, biting tone that she bristled, took a half-step back away with one foot.

"And why not?"

"Because you can't!" he snapped without questioning that she hadn't denied the possibility of death. She wasn't going to die- but if she was, what right did he have in it? "I won't let you."

"You won't let me?" She scowled, threw her hands up.

"That's right," he muttered. "I won't let you. Freaking insane-"

"Hey!"

"-psychotic lunatic, why did it have to be you?"

"H-" she started again, could feel her face turning red like the fire in her stomach, but then she paused, frowned, leaned away from where she'd been getting in his face. "Me? Why did what have to be me?"

Kankuro's face reddened in something almost like rage, but not quite. "Nothing."
"Oh, no, you don't, mister 'I won't let you'," Mai hissed, put her fists on her hips even though her wrist hurt, and leaned into his space, rising on his toes to get closer to his face. "What? What did I even do, huh? Bastard."

He made a noise in the back of his throat, shoved her away by the shoulders. "Your stupid-everything! Always being a brat and saying whatever the hell comes into your head like you don't even care that everyone thinks you're insane! Never ever brushing your hair or-"

"My hair?" Mai sputtered incredulously. Kankuro looked angry, but none of the stuff he was saying was making any sense, enough that she scowled and tried to run through it again in her head to see if she'd missed something, and came up with nothing. "What the hell does my hair have to do with anything?"

"Those stupid freaking flowers," he said, and his eyes went skyward to the point that she didn't think he was talking to her anymore. "What was I even- you didn't even care." Mai stilled. Flowers. The... Dahlias?

~ And she liked alcohol, and apparently she liked this too, and it kind of felt like she was trying to eat him- definitely like she'd done this before, even though he was pretty sure she hadn't. ~

~

Otokaze couldn't help but think that they needed more people for this- or at least, more qualified people. Because he and the other four transporting these things to a safer rendezvous were all Jonin, yes, but only two of them were even ANBU, and the man who tried to steal them in the first place had killed at least a few hundred people with his summons alone.

So if they were jumped by anything other than zetsu or maybe a reincarnation- basically, their survival probably rested on being severely underestimated beyond reason- then they would probably all die, or at least lose the Tools anyway.

Still, this was their mission- to move the sealed Gold and Silver Brothers closer to HQ, where they would be met by other shinobi who could take it the rest of the way. The coast was too dangerous, keeping it there would have been asking to be attacked and slaughtered again, and Otokaze knew, truly, that his student- his literally insane, reckless, powerful student- probably wouldn't be able to fend it off again.

So their best chance was moving it, under cover at night, in a small group, so as to remain unnoticed.

Because, really, no number of regular shinobi would be able to keep these things safe if something really, really wanted them from the other side. It was almost embarrassing, really. One of the biggest wars in known history, and not only had all the nations combined to fight it- a force yet unheard of in this living plane- but their enemy was only one or two and puppets.

And they were holding on by the skin of their teeth, relying on those few who'd jumped the gun, who were the armies combined twice-over, the division leaders, the Kage, a few stand-alone, mostly younger children from Leaf, and Cloud, and Stone, and then there were his students,
surprises from the Sand that no one had expected— even him.

He hadn't seen Mai, but he had seen her flame. And before he’d left, he'd seen her battered, mangled body before they started healing, the scorch marks from fire and lightning, the wide open wounds from combat, spattered bruises spreading from broken bones and inner bleeding. Unconscious, flocked by protective friends.

And yet, knowing his student, she would be fighting the second they gave her enough chakra to stand.

Truly, they shouldn't have been the ones picked to move the Tools— old, persnickety shinobi who hadn't completely believed in the new generations, not in a time of peace. But the efforts simply couldn't spare those few shining stars, one in a million sparks that kept the Allies alive.

Otokaze sighed, toying with a high-pitched whistle in between his fingers, long and slim and silver. This far, he didn't know if anyone would hear it, but still, if trouble came, he would blow it— hope an Inuzuka or Sensor were close by, that someone was listening for it, hear in the middle of nowhere, almost to Lightning's border but between two Allied bases.

"You okay, buddy?"

Otokaze sighed again, mouth flitting into an easy smile. "Course. Just wondering how much longer."

"At least another day. We probably won't get there until nightfall tomorrow," the Sound Jonin muttered sympathetically. He hefted the barrel, shrouded with Genjutsu to look like a traveling trunk. Something that, unfortunately, only reminded him of his student's sister, kind and bubbly and curious. The Kazekage's partner. Where was she, in all of this?

"I hate this," a fellow sand-nin muttered, and Otokaze agreed. The terrain was too unfamiliar to be comfortable, not with the stakes, the enemy, how they were. "We're like sitting ducks, out here. I feel like we're just holding our breath and praying nobody finds us, it's pathetic."

Otokaze made a sympathetic noise. The shinobi from Kiri, with his strange hair and sharp teeth, merely shrugged, looking shifty and uncomfortable. "That's because that's exactly what we're doing."

An uneasy silence fell then, sparking between the group, too unacquainted and naturally suspicious to delve further, with too much going on to distrust each other.

It was maybe an hour or two later that he felt it, the tingling of familiar chakra he'd grown so fond of, tinged with memories of gakis and squabbles and exhaustion and good times.

He stopped, and so the others stopped, looking at him quizzically. There was no doubt it was headed for them, and Mai knew his whistles, so he raised it to his lips and blew hard, listening to the faint sound it provided like a sharp snap through the air. There. Now if it was a trick, he's done all he can, and if it's real, she knows.

And it's not much longer before he hears, "Sensei!"

The others jump, having felt the presence and tensed, not expecting familiarity. There were a few telltale puffs of dust and dirt kicking up between the rocks, closer and closer, and then she materialized, bandaged and bruised but alive, grinning.

"Mai-chan," he acknowledged.
"Fancy meeting you here," she said. Her eyes flicked to the cargos held by the other shinobi in his party, and she frowned, eyes narrowing. "Are you stupid? Out in the open like this?"

"It's the fastest way to base."

"I'm sorry," the Sound-nin said tensely. "But who exactly is this?"

"My former student." He turned to look her in the eye. There were her swords, and her headband tied to her forehead, bloody. Her skin browned as ever, wiry muscles peeking through. "What are you doing out here?"

"Looking for the nearest fight," she replied easily. "But I guess I could help you guys out, since you're bound to draw one anyway. This place sucks, there's no cover anywhere."

"And Eishi? Where's he?"

It was half a beat of smiling before she answered, "Still back at base, the coward. 'We should rest' he said." She rolled her eyes. "Yeah, rest, like we're not fighting in a war..."

Ah, there it was.

Somehow, it saw him coming just in time and spun away with a sputtering, "Sensei!"

"Mai hates honorifics," he said, turning, blades out. His whistle was forgotten on the ground. "That was your first mistake. Chan, even less. That was your second." Only Shiragiku gets away with it.

Mai scowled. Her eyes bled into something lighter, but otherwise kept her figure. "Clever, aren't you?"

"And Eishi would've never let her leave alone," he continued, "Nor would the real Mai have let him stay back. That was your third. You're outnumbered, whatever you are."

Finally, her skin started to whiten, gaining a bit of height, and she spread her hands, green seeping into the roots of her hair. "Am I?" it said grandly, and he knew, shit, he knew, as the ground started to bubble he knew, his group yelling out in surprise, Otokaze knew.

But he was a shinobi, and that of Suna, above all. A Suna shinobi did not stop fighting, they endured into death, they went down without ever stopping trying. That was honor.

And so would he.

...

~ She pulled away and grinned at him, all teeth and sharp eyes and drunken confidence, and God, since when could she dance? How had he never see her dance? ~

...

"No," she said, shaking her head. "No, that wasn't you. That couldn't have been you. You didn't even know about them until-" She lost her words, nearly choking as her face paled, feeling her stomach freeze over. "What?"

Dead silence answered her. Kankuro's face turned redder.

"This is a joke," Mai murmured, and suddenly there was nothing inside her but calm, and a fear that it was a joke. "This- it has to be..."
"It's not," he said tiredly.

"You-" The message was burned in her mind: The Florist said these would fit your 'eclectic personality' the best. With a Love, comma after, no name signed on the bottom. "Then... you..."

"This is the worst time for this," Kankuro said, and his face looked tiredtiredtired but still kind of red with embarrassment. "It was stupid. I knew it was stupid. I meant to say something, but I..."

Suddenly Mai was aware of their proximity- she'd been in his face, jamming back in after he'd pushed her, pulling him down by the shirt, which she was still holding. She'd never felt awkward about being close to someone unless she didn't like them, and even that depended on whether or not she was allowed to argue with them. But... But this was...

This was freaking surreal. No. She was dreaming.

"... Flowers."

"Yeah."

"For you...?"

Asshole! She thought but didn't say, mouth dropped open. You pretended you had no idea-! All that time- I thought it was a joke! I thought it was a stupid prank!

I thought no one could ever...

How was she supposed to handle this? What was she supposed to do? She wanted to flee- not because she was scared but because she was still itching to fight and get away and run and help. But- but she didn't know what she was feeling. Only that her face was getting warm in a way it usually only did when she was piss-angry. Love, the note had said.

Love.

It'd been too many seconds without her saying anything, just staring at him with her open mouth gaping like an idiot. But her brain had shorted. She'd let go of his shirt, but he hadn't yet straightened, still close. "You- I..."

"I know it's weird," he said, and all that angry pissed-offed-ness had seemingly vanished. Well, at least now that whole you can't die, I won't let you shit made sense. "I mean- you're like five years younger than me... Thirteen. And I'm, like, eighty percent sure you hate me anyway. I tried... I mean I wasn't trying to-"

"Stop," Mai said. "Oh, shit, just stop talking."

Kankuro immediately blanched. "Sorry."

"Kami, what am I..." She pushed back her bangs, feeling the metal plate of her forehead protector under the heel of her palm. She really needed to sit down. "What am I supposed to do with that?"

"Nothing," he said quickly, putting up his hands. "Just- agh. Just go ahead and- go fight, or whatever. Forget I said anything."

"What? No." Mai pushed her hand farther back up her head, eyes flicking to the floor, and then looked up at him. Up, he was taller than her. This- was awkward. This was super awkward. But it- it was almost- "I mean, I just- how long?"
It felt good.

"I don't know," he said, grimacing.

"I never thought..." She muttered. "... Anyone..."

How could he possibly like her? What was there even to like? She was mean and cold and irritable and looked like a boy and never dressed up and was messed up and cynical of everything. She didn't express well. She wasn't any good with feelings. Was she supposed to be? She had a scar on her face and had almost flunked out of the Academy. He was like eighteen.

What did he see?

Dammit, she was flushing like she had a fever, and something was jumping and skittering in her gut. Stop being such a girl. Or no- be a girl- shit, she looked like a mess, she- she needed to get back on solid ground. Mai faked a weird little snort and grinned. "You would bring this up here of all places-"

And he made an irritated sound, and suddenly he was really freaking close, and his hands were on her shoulders and for half a second she went to raise up her hand, block him, because in the suddenness of the movement it felt like she was being attacked. But then she froze, hand going back down, dangling; his hands moved from her shoulders to her face as he kissed her.

It was over just as quickly as it began, just a quick peck, almost platonic. She was sure she looked like a landed, dumb fish.

He pulled away, looking somewhere not at her face, but she grabbed his shirt so it bunched up in her fist, and just like she had Kankuro flinched because that was an attack move. But she didn't punch him. "That was not," she said, "a very good kiss. Just saying."

He snorted then, looking unable to help himself. "Seriously?"

"No offense." She let him go. "Shit." He didn't move again. She caught herself thinking that was too close- if he does it again I can't try to hit him.

If he does it again?

"Is- is this too weird?" he asked, then laughed a little. "I wanted- I wanted to say something like 'I wanted to do that at least once' but then I decided not to. You probably would've, like, left. Or punched me. Or both."

"Yes- no?" It'd been a long time since Mai had felt so uncertain. She didn't even know that she ever had. God, if he was- but what if he wasn't? It didn't feel like he was just messing with her. If he wasn't messing with her- then- She hated the way that thought made her feel, airy and guilty because shit I'm supposed to be avenging Eishi not... feeling like- "I mean I can-" She tried to play it off, tucking her thumbs in her belt sheaths. "I can deal with it. Yeah."

"Good to know." Kankuro said faux-lightly, and then shivered oddly like a grimace. "Hey- um, this is totally the wrong way to do this. Place. Bad timing. I mean I know you lost your teammate- and everything's so messed up right now. And both of us could die. Or the entire world."

Mai winced. "Yeah...?"

"I mean I wasn't planning to do this at all. I never thought you- shit."
"Spit it out, would you?" Mai grumbled, curious despite herself- hopeful? Was he asking her out? If so this totally was the wrong place for this, but it would figure stupid Baka-Kankuro would do this. What would she say? If that what he was even asking, she chided herself. But maybe- well, she could... give it a shot. All the signs were there.

Okay, she thought. Yes. Sure. Duh, stupid.

"You're nuts," he started, and in her shock Mai blinked. "You're also an idiot sometimes. You're too young, and you're annoying, mean, and you get pissed off over stupid shit. I can't have one second of quiet when I'm within a twenty foot radius of you. And-"

"Are you going somewhere with this?" she said sharply, drawing away again, letting go of his shirt like it was molten. "Cause let me tell you, I-!"

"Can you maybe marry me?"

... 

~ And somewhere he'd seen Gaara and Fumiko kissing, too, and maybe everything was just falling into place and MAI would remember everything and he could finally say the thing. ~ 

... 

Every inch of his skin was crawling, there was anxiety twisting, hot nerves exploding into the bottom of his stomach, filling him from the inside. For once, Gaara felt much too warm, pure adrenaline zipping through his veins, like it had from his nightmares, those times past, like it did when Fumiko screamed in the night, death, death.

Fear.

Still, he did not show it, arms at his sides, listening quietly as the others bounced back and forth, nervous, deciding what to do- to wait? To attack first? To risk another sand-eye or scout? But Gaara wasn't really paying attention, fingers curling.

It was irrational. Yes, he could die, but he'd been close to death before, closer, without this much hindrance, but at the same time, he understood why, as much as he hated it. It was a bone-deep reaction, a trigger he'd thought he'd lost years ago, born from anxiety and hatred and paranoia for his life and those of the few he could say he loved, back then.

It felt like, however, he should at least be angry. He'd been angry for most of his life, at the world, yes, and his tormentors, and his demon, at the others in his village, and no matter how much it'd faded- he felt tired, lately, more melancholic and exhausted than angry when it called for it- he still remembered the hatred he'd held for his father.

It was crushing and hot and freezing, and it had often filled his waking moments. He remembered his hands shaking, teeth pressing into dust; Gaara remembered trying not to snap at poor Fumiko, who only ever tried to help, trying not to cry at every new stain of a human who tried to kill him, why?

It had been his father's fault that Gaara became everything that Rasa hated about him, so why did he blame him for it, why did Gaara have to watch his back constantly, he was nine, ten, twelve, it wasn't fair and why did his mother hate him, why was this his life?

But there wasn't anger now. Only fear. Fear of what, he wasn't exactly sure- of what he would find, his father unchanged even in the afterlife. Of that voice, that tone of voice that he'd grown terrified
and fearful and hateful of (the way he'd hidden them in empty rooms when Gaara heard the footsteps in the halls, Fumiko, shh) Or fear that, perhaps, his father would think little of him and all that he'd accomplished...

That he wouldn't be able to beat him?

What if, after all this time, he wouldn't be able to win? All of his growth and accomplishments, hardships, sorrows, losses, happiness, fights- would they be fruitless?

It had begun with this man that he had a hard time still calling father. And it couldn't end with him.

He found himself wishing, in the midst of a debate on strategy and life-or-death war tactics, something that could change the course of the world forever, that Fumiko was here to tell him what to do, what to think, calm his mind and raging heart.

He wished they were twelve, thirteen again, the reason for his broken psyche and being hated near universally buried six feet underground in a plain box just big enough to hold him, when there was less to be confused about, just the absence of a thing to hate intensely, a small crisis compared to this.

And wishing made it worse, because the way the bracelet on his wrist soothed him, tricked all of his positive triggers into thinking she was here, into relaxing at the familiar feel of her chakra, into feeling that she was in a space he could protect her, was fighting with the way his mind knew that she was miles and miles away at a different fight that had just exploded, that she was one in thousands, that she could be dead, dying, hurting without him even knowing.

He couldn't focus. He was spread too thin. Family on the field, family at home, none close enough to defend. The only family within sensing distance was Rasa, of all the people he couldn't handle, of all the feelings he couldn't have in this exact moment.

But still, Gaara breathed, and he didn't react, because the fears were irrational, and Fumiko had died once before, and this didn't feel like that, not by a long shot. She was okay- alive. And at the moment, squabbling toe-to-toe, fighting for inches like they were, the enemy had no reason to attack the Hidden Villages, and Rasa had only ever subdued Shukaku, and Gaara was not Shukaku.

He was not who he had been before.

...

~ Probably not. But a guy could dream. ~

...

The world stopped spinning. No, seriously- it stopped spinning; time stopped and Mai couldn't breathe or hear her own heart beating or think a properly coherent thought.

What?!

She stared at him, speechless, utterly incapable of language, knowing if she tried to words it would come out one big jumble of jack shit. So instead she let her shocked face do it, her literally slacked jaw and wide open mouth and wide open eyes, like, I can't believe you just said that.

Which was fine, because Kankuro’s face looked a whole lot like I can't believe I just said that.

An impasse. A big word Mai hadn't learned until she was probably out of the Academy, but there
was no other word for it. Neither could speak. They just stared at each other. Something crazy was happening in her body, this lightheaded anxiety that twisted her inside-out and made it feel like the world had bottomed out under her feet, and she couldn't tell if she was supposed to be flying or falling.

Finally, Kankuro broke the silence. "Y'know, given that the world doesn't end in an eternal Genjutsu..."

Mai's first attempt to speak had her tongue getting in the way, and she bit it, and cursed. The second attempt came out much clearer. "Let me g-get this straight," she said, putting both her hands up and looking down to their feet, nerves and shock betrayed by her trip. "So you've supposedly been in love with me since I was- what- eleven? T-twelve? And you're the one behind the dahlias- and now you're confessing in the middle of a warzone... and proposing?"

"... Yes?"

"Shit." Mai blew out a slow breath, cheeks puffing out, long and disbelieving. "Okay. One second and I'll be able to respond to this."

Nearby, someone screamed, probably from some injury getting poked or prodded or operated on. They both jumped, spooked, nerves shot all to hell or maybe the moon. Her head shot back up. It still smelled like ashes and blood, piss and dust and saltwater. She was still barefoot, could feel the grainy dirt under her feet, and a bandage wrapped on the small of her back rubbed uncomfortably against her still-too-hot lightning marks.

The noise seemed to have sparked movement in Kankuro, who tilted his head like he was listening to the footsteps, the yelled orders, the harried conversations outside, and looked off to the side like he could see right through the canvas barrier. A gust of wind was making something flap, probably a nearby tent. From here, Mai could barely hear the ocean.

"We can talk about this later," he said, and she blinked. "For now you can-"

"I can't have kids," she blurted, but it came out steely and hard, a challenge, an accusation. She narrowed her eyes at him and crossed her arms. "Totally sterile, never once had a period or PMS, contrary to popular belief. I also refuse to ever live in the Tower, can't clean up for shit, both house and clothes-wise. I'm not some stupid housewife."

"Um- what?" Kankuro, caught off guard, frowned, confused. "You can't- ohh. Er. Okay?"

"Okay?" she said suspiciously. "That's it?"

"Um. Yes?" Kankuro shifted, hands going to his pockets, looking at her with his eyes narrowed too, like she was asking a trick question. She realized now, suddenly, that his puppets weren't even in the tent.

"And you're just fine with that?"

"Yeah," he said, and shrugged. Raised an eyebrow. "Do I look like I need a bunch of gakis running around under my feet? No thanks. And you clean up fine, by the way."

Secrets. There were secrets at the back of her tongue, trying to shoot right out of her mouth and see if it changed his mind. Her sharingan. Her position as an ANBU. That she'd kept the dahlias and transferred them in a new pot and gave them fertilizer every other week. That she probably had PTSD on a few levels if the symptoms were anything to go by.
So she tested that water. "I have the sharingan. Eishi triggered full-stage."

"I was- planning on freaking out later?" Kankuro phrased it almost like a confession, lifting one hand from his pocket to rub at the back of his head. "A bunch of us saw it when you got here. A nurse opened up your eyes."

She remembered that. The memory hurt. "And you're just okay with that, too?"

"What are you getting at, eh?" Now there was a little bit of annoyance creeping into his tone, exasperation. "There's nothing you can say that I haven't tried to tell myself already. Apparently I'm stupid."

"You've always been stupid," she muttered. Hesitated.

"Hey! Come on!"

Silent, Mai mulled everything over in her head. And it was stupid, and crazy, and wouldn't last, but she made a decision, and reached back into her pouch, came out with that wrapped papyrus scroll tied off with a flimsy little string. There was blood on the outside of it, brown with age. She brought it out, looked at it for a second. Then held it out to Kankuro, to the empty space between them.

Wary, Kankuro reached out, hesitant like it was a trap, which it almost was. "What is it?"

"A body sealing scroll," she said. "Eishi."

And he flinched and Mai swore to Kami if he'd dropped it she would've killed him, lost it on her high rise of emotions and ripped his throat out. But he didn't, catching himself, and brought it closer to inspect, grimacing at the blood.

"I want you to give that to Shiragiku," she said.

"Okay," he said, and paused. "And what about-"

"If you don't die, then I won't either. Yeah?" She blinked hard, like her thumping heart was tears and she was trying to push it back. "And I swear, if you back out, cheat, or tell me this entire thing was a joke, I will literally fucking murder you. Screw Gaara. No one would know."

Kankuro opened his mouth, and air came out. Stunned like a flounder fish.

"Okay?" she demanded.

"That would be stupider," he said slowly, carefully. "Than liking you in the first place, wouldn't it?"

"I guess so. Okay, then."

"And what about-"

Mai nodded, feeling that for all her brash tone she might keel over and puke. "I'm gonna go find Fumiko, you give that to Shira, and neither of us die, and then we'll figure shit out when we win this war."

"Right." He seemed to hesitate for just a second, mulling something over, eyes dark. "She'll be looking for Gaara, probably. Something's happening down there- inside of Lightning. The Kages are assembling..."

His face darkened slightly, losing a bit of the sickly pale tinge of confession.

"And?" she prompted.
Kankuro's fingers curled absently around Eishi's sealing scroll. "According to the latest intel," he said finally, and Mai was on the balls of her feet, leaning on her toes, ready to bolt. "Our father's with them."

"Shit."

"Yeah."

"Shit." That explained Fumiko's AWOL, completely unlike her responsible, complacent older sister. Something in her heart kicked; for once, whether it was anger or apprehension or disgust, she couldn't tell. "Fuck. Okay. Okay! Why fucking not!"

And she turned her head, put out an arm to push away the tarp doors, and darted out into the salty air.

...

~ "Hey," Mai demanded, pulling hard on the shoulders of his sleeves to get his attention again, annoyed. "You're messing me up." ~

...

It wasn't until the horizon started to turn pink that Fumiko felt her extra strength returning, enough to curl inside her instead of just spitting straight out of her skin in thin waves, and it wasn't until the thick clouds rolling across the sky started blazing oranges and blues that she felt enough tingling to safely use.

And it wasn't until the sky itself finally started turning blue that she got the Summoning right.

"Sightseer," the bat greeted.

"Shaapu," she said, almost out of breath, but not quite.

"I was wondering when you would summon me." He still looked disgruntled, but not as hostile as he'd used to. "I still think you're a sneak, human, manipulating your loophole."

"I need help," she said, cutting off that argument or angry rant or whatever it was about to become before it started. "Please, I need to find Gaara, it's important."

"Why is it always that Sand-human? You lose each other much too quickly."

"No, I know where, I just-" Fumiko flailed her hands for lack of explanation, hoping it conveyed. "Speed, I need to get there faster, before it starts. Please, Shaapu."

"Before what starts?"

"There's gonna be a fight," she said. "I know, I know, there are fights everywhere, but I need to be there."

"Why?"

"Because I do, Shaapu, please," Fumiko begged, taking another step forward. "It's Gaara's father, Shaapu. He's the one that caused- everything, the, um, the Fourth Kazekage."

The bat was silent for a moment, and for a crazy second, Fumiko contemplated just jumping on the temperamental bat's back and not letting go until he decided to help, because she couldn't miss this
fight and she was going to if she tried to make it on foot. But then Shaapu shook his head, ears
twitching, and somehow Fumiko caught it, the faint vibrations in the air that painted her picture to
the animal.

"Family," he mused. Fumiko scratched at the leather above the chakra stone strapped around her
wrist, feeling Gaara in her senses. It was so strange, feeling him right beside her, yet knowing he
was too far away. Everybody was stretched. Her, Gaara, Mai- all in different places, the Siblings
even farther. "Does he love this shinobi, Sightseer-child?"

"No," Fumiko said. Gaara was not the kind of person to love for blood. It wasn't logical. He wasn't
like she was- maybe he hadn't let Rasa go, but in no way did she delude herself that any part of
Gaara loved his father. "No, he doesn't."

"And does this shinobi love the Sand-human?"

Good question, Fumiko thought ruefully. She'd asked that herself a million times, more since the
twins had arrived, hundreds of hours spent pondering dead nights and nightmares and Gaara's rare
tears, shattering glass and shadows. How could any one not love their child? How could anyone
hate them? How could anyone do what they had to a child like Gaara, how had it been that
everyone in Gaara's life- his father, his uncle, his mother- had conspired to misery?

But they had done those things. And Fumiko was wired differently, she loved without reason and
believed in love in return, but she knew people. And she understood logic, patterns, and she knew
that sometimes, it just wasn't okay. But Rasa had died when she was twelve. He had died without
explanation, and without more than three proper conversations to their names.

"Well?"

"I don't know," Fumiko admitted. "I really don't, okay? I...

"Her hate lives on in you. You were never loved, Gaara."

"Just, stay away from him, okay?"

"... A memory. That's what he is, isn't he?"

"I know there's many in the younger generation that look on him favorably; all those blinded by
their admiration. But let's not bother with pretenses- most of the village looks on him in fear, no
one really believes in him!"

"Just help me," she said at last. "Please."

"Does it bother you that he kills innocent people?"

"... Fine."

...~ It took his buzzed brain a few seconds too long to realize she meant dancing, even though they'd
been kissing- how long had he zoned out, again? Maybe he wouldn't remember this tomorrow... ~

They would attack.

Gaara and Ohnoki together and alone, his promised first line of defense- protecting his people from
those who they used to adore. They drew ever closer to the Division's location, and Gaara had scattered sensoring sand across the entire area, potentially a waste but these were some of the most powerful shinobi of the ages, and Gaara refused to underestimate them.

Waiting, Gaara raised three fingers to touch his fading kanji, the scar underneath the paint.

He could still feel Shukaku's absence, some days more prominently than others. Gaara could feel it in the way he tired, in the way he bled and hurt, and he could feel it in the empty spiderweb paths where Shukaku's power had once forced through him, pulsing in every cell, and the power's absence was unsettling if he thought too much about it- it made him want to scratch under his skin.

He supposed this was how it felt to be human, completely, how he should have always felt. He wasn't empty- but had been filled too much and now was normal.

But still, he had more power himself than he ever had with Shukaku, power and control, not in the quantities he'd had as a child but so much more skill than the monster had ever allowed. And that was his advantage against his father, Gaara thought. The Fourth Kazekage's "front-lines" strategy had been the Playing Possum Technique- unleashing Shukaku's rampage.

And likely, that's what he would be expecting now- Shukaku, who couldn't form a battle strategy worth a hundred yen, who craved death and destruction on all and any sides, uncontrolled and angry. If you could subdue Shukaku's sand, it was over. But he'd been dead for almost five years, and things had changed since then.

He was facing the Fifth Kazekage of Sunagakure, the Golden Child, Gaara of the Desert, along with all of his allies to fight beside him. This emptiness was what made him strong- his mind was clear, and had been since the demon's extraction.

He could thank Akatsuki for that, at least.

Gaara's ears twitched, hand lowering and eyes darting instinctively in the direction of the breach, much closer than it should have been, inside the outer reaches of his senses, and for a split second, his chakra coiled.

And then he was turning in shock to face the erratic, lumpy footsteps. It had been too long if it took him that long to recognize it, even though it had been a week, two at most.

"Gaara!" Fumiko shouted over the distance, waving a hand over her head to grab their attention, as if they wouldn't have been able to sense her rapidly approaching chakra. "Ohnoki!"

There were fading curls of smoke behind her, Summons residue, and she was injured and dirty and her chakra was at dangerously low levels, but there she was, when she should have been miles and miles away, a days journey or more.

Ohnoki seemed just as surprised and wary, and Gaara followed his lead- he knew the stories of impersonators and tricksters of the enemy, taking on the form of allies beyond even the capability of a henge, mimicking chakra.

Fumiko, like she could sense his suspicion, stopped a few feet away, metal slipping a little in the sand, and he was angry now, upset at a circumstance that would cause him to doubt this, because he wished and here she was but it was probably a trap. It seemed too personal. The one thing in his life he could trust completely- and he couldn't.

"It's me," she said, raising her arm. The blue stone in her bracelet glinted. "They can only steal chakra and change with it, not make new stuff. Unless you fought a zetsu and it lived, I wouldn't
Gaara didn't know if he wanted her here or not, but his body decided for him, classical conditioning set deep in his marrow. Just a fraction of his anxiety slowed, sluggish, sank away, and it was enough. And he moved his arms, opened his stance, and Fumiko grinned, jumped to grab at him, tucked her face in his clothes.

He didn't care that Ohnoki was beside him, at least not yet; it was the longest period of separation they'd had since his death, and never with this much stress and worry and fear, this much blood. The closest they'd come to this before was the Invasion of Konoha and that was nothing, that was days.

Her smell was off, but not in an alarming way. There was no lavender or pastry, no faint traces of turpentine clinging to her paint stains. There was only dirt and sweat and the copper scent of her own blood, and it made his nerves slither, but she was alive, and not horribly injured.

How time had changed them, he thought, that 'not horribly injured' had the same effect as 'safe'.

"I heard about Rasa," she whispered, and the reminder should have pained him but he only hummed in response, feeling relief because finally someone knew, she knew what was happening inside him even though he was acting, she had been there.

Despite himself, he said, "You should've stayed."

"Yeah." She laughed a little, muffled. And then she pulled back, not enough to move his arms off her, but enough to see his face. "I know, I know. I'm the worst shinobi ever."

Gaara wanted to say I missed you, and he wanted to say that he'd wished for her, and he wanted to say how utterly relieved he was because he was not used to bearing burdens alone and she'd just picked up her parts again, but Ohnoki was there; Gaara could feel his displeasure like an aura. So instead, he just said, "I'm glad that you're okay," barely soft.

Her tipped smile told him she hadn't been worried about his well being, not superficially. She'd trusted him to take care of himself. "I had to," she said in lieu. "I wanted him to see me, too. Cheer you on, yeah?"

"Pardon," Ohnoki grumbled.

"Sorry!" Fumiko's smile softened from a grin to a sheepish kind of knowing smile as her eyes flicked over to the earth user. "It's just, a family thing, you know? We go way back."

"You'll be of no use here," he said.

"Probably not," Fumiko said agreeably, fingers still dug into his clothing. "But I'm not here to fight, Ohnoki. Don't worry."

Gaara could tell the Tsuchikage still didn't like being addressed without proper honorifics, but also that the old man recognized that this wasn't the time or place for it. Instead he looked to Gaara with an exasperated kind of look in his eyes. "You're too soft to be a Kage," he said, though without any real petrol. "Control yourself."

It was Fumiko that pulled away, and patted at his front with filthy, bloodstained hands to smooth out the rumpled she'd caused. The back of his head ticked boxes, taking stock of her injuries. There was a wrapped gash on her left forearm, dirtied and dark with dried blood, and varying degrees of serious burns up her right side, probably extending down into her flak. She favored that whole
side- and there were scratches on her face, bruises everywhere, blood on her skin and caked in her hair, a healed head wound. And she was tired.

But she was okay. The biggest problem he could see or sense was her deprivation, probably from overuse of medical ninjutsu or the Summoning that had brought her here or both, so he reached into one of his belt pouches inside his clothes and handed her a packet of soldier pills, which she accepted gratefully.

"Thanks," she said, and ate two immediately. Fumiko shivered and then refocused on the situation. "Okay, so what's happening?"

"The opposing Kage are nearby," he answered immediately. "We're going to launch a frontal attack before they can reach the rest of the Fourth Division. I have sensoring sand scattered around the vicinity."

"Gold Dust plans?" she prompted. "Anything?"

"Split them up," Gaara said. "My father is expecting Shukaku, not me. I can outmaneuver his Dust."

"Sealwork?" she suggested.

"Do you have any?"

"Of course," she said with a thumbs up, and patted her bag. "Always do. Okay, who all's here? I didn't ask before I... left. Rasa and who else?"

"The second Mizukage, the Third Raikage, and Second Tsuchikage," Ohnoki cut in before Gaara could respond, annoyed, but Gaara could sense the same bemusement he found in the expression of any who saw their more serious interactions. Whether he was impressed or judgemental, however, Gaara couldn't tell. "Any ideas, child?"

"Okay." Gaara could see thoughts in Fumiko's narrowed eyes, and she bit at her bottom lip. "You guys know them already. Mu, though- how are you going to-?"

"I'll engage him directly," Ohnoki interrupted. "Once most of the threats are sealed away, I'll signal the rest of the Division for assistance, and he will be grossly outnumbered."

"All right." Fumiko chewed harder, and Gaara wanted to stop her, but it wouldn't be much use. "That's- that's probably our best bet. Gaara, whenever you think is best," she said, shifting her gaze at him, and he nodded.

"You'll know."

"Right," she said. "The place I just came from just got hammered with zetsu and reincarnated shinobi, so I know a little bit about them. If they don't want to attack you, they won't- except in defense, okay? So I should be okay as long as you guys are the bigger threats. Something tells me the Kage aren't going to be super happy to be fighting for Akatsuki."

Gaara felt the tingling.

"They're here," he said. "It's time."

"Shoot, sugar," she said quickly, looking in the direction his eyes had flickered to. "Okay, well- good luck. Gaara." She looked him dead in the eye. "Settle this. Finally. But. You're you, and I'm
here, and that won't change. I'll stand by you while you're fighting. Got it?"

"Yes," he said.

"Good." She nodded, and then, sneaking a quick glance at Ohnoki, bounced to steal a kiss quickly before backing away. "Love you."

"You, too."

"Go," she said, and Gaara nodded.

It was time.

...

~ "Sorry," he said. Maybe he'd kiss her again, and regret it later. "Keep dancing." ~

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Chapter End Notes

HI GUYS. OH MY GOD.

I've had like 80% of this chapter written for the last month, but then just couldn't get back into it until randomly today during one of my breaks- hopefully this continues!

Anyway. MAI AND KANKURO GUYS AM I RIGHT. XD I've had that particular scene written/planned for at least a year, and just broke it up to use in this chapter. The tweener is from that first festival, if that wasn't obvious... The flower guy is revealed! Nobody actually guessed this surprisingly, some ship Kankuro and Mai but for whatever reason everyone thought it was Eishi!

Next chapter will include the long awaited GAARA VS. RASA. Also, it was fun because I read through most of TOF again to get some of the sentences for brief flashback thoughts. I ALSO originally planned to write Deidara escaping in this chapter, but I think I'll leave it out. IDK, I might later, or might not.

Sorry for the wait- I read and appreciate every review, and reply to all non-guest reviews, and it really helps guys, it does! Also, I had a guest offer to draw the twins, yes that's still available! However, please make an account or PM me some way of contacting you so we can talk.

REVIEW! ENJOY!
It was a while before Kankuro managed to bring himself to do anything substantial.

He waifed around from place to place, not quite sure anything about healing and so unable to help, bringing things here and there, running a couple messages. But his brain was still in a state of shock, and not from poison overdose residue. Okay, maybe partially from the poison, but that wasn't the point.

He had no idea what the hell had possessed him to say the things he had, only that her quiet despair had been just a little too much to handle properly. He'd never seen her more forlorn, so the opposite of aggressive. She'd given up. For just a brief moment, Mai had given up, and it had scared him.

But at the same time, all grave, mind-numbing musings and discomfort aside, she'd basically accepted his proposal.

What?!

Or had she really? She'd been vague. And completely surprised and caught off guard; he'd similarly never seen her so unbalanced. So maybe he'd misunderstood, or she'd botched up her words? And why, why Kami, had he asked her to marry him instead of out on a date like a normal person?! Even if the world was practically ending, that didn't make asking a thirteen year old to marry someone any less weird!

And so Kankuro felt a bit conflicted, maybe a quarter giddy and a quarter confused, but he was also half somber and professional. They were in a war. Hundreds of people could be dying at any given second, and most of them would never be found, acknowledged or properly remembered. There was a high possibility of them losing, and Mai had just lost her best friend, and potentially her sensei as well, as his unit had missed their rendezvous time with the other base.

He hoped, Kami he hoped, that they'd just gotten lost or held back for whatever reason, and not that they had been ambushed halfway there and the sealed Gold and Silver brothers stolen back, because those brothers could wreak havoc across the Nations and finish the war up themselves, and also because Kankuro had seen them off from a distance and knew Otokaze was in the small unit, and damn it all Mai did not need that, too.

Eventually, though, he forced himself to look for that head of white blond hair flitting about, caring for others. Shiragiku had been in and out of Mai's tent, fluttering like a nervous butterfly, saying again and again that he hadn't yet found Eishi amidst the panic and that units were still searching the injured on the battlefield and he'll be here as soon as he can, Kankuro-sama, Mai-chan.
Mai, unconscious and dreaming unpleasant dreams, had only moaned in response.

Give it to Shiragiku, she'd told him, as if that were easy. (Easy enough, he supposed, a small base camp and only so many medics left standing, it really shouldn't have taken him this long.) As if he hadn't pushed "tell families and teams about the deaths of their comrades" to after the war (if they won) in order to save space in his mind for battle strategy, as if he'd been expecting to have to do this already, least of all with someone as close to his life as this.

Nevertheless he looked, scroll held tight in one hand in case he jostled or the wind blew or the blood started to scrape off- and eventually he found him, resting and wrapping his own wounds from the battle, a few burns from the proximity to the statue's lightning, a few scrapes from being thrown around like a rag doll. He looked up as Kankuro approached, sensing footsteps, and smiled, relieved.

Shiragiku stood quickly, eager to abandon his steady work. A bandage fluttered untaped in the wind from his forearm; and slowly as it waved it began to unravel, winding down his arm. He didn't seem to notice or care. "Is she awake?" he said quickly, reaching to brush a bit of hair from his eyes, headband nowhere in sight.

"Yeah," he replied, and damn it, Shiragiku looked so relieved, all soft smile and relaxing posture. The half sleeve he'd pulled up for wrapping fell, trapping the bandage against his skin so it stayed.

"Good," he said. "I'm glad. How is she? Her eyes? Did the medics do well enough with her chakra replenishment therapy?"

"She's... fine," he said. "Physically at least."

"Kankuro-san-?"

"Look, Shiragiku, I gotta tell you something." The other boy's head tilted slightly, eyes narrowing in suspicion. Kankuro knew his voice sounded strange, even to his own ears; for once at least he wasn't going to try and change it. Shiragiku knew he wasn't invincible. "Mai... uh, she... she told me to... well, she left to go after the battle in the Fourth Division segment-"

"What?" He straightened, and Kankuro knew that if he said the word, if he said she needed help or wanted him or was in danger, he would bolt, just like she had. "Why?"

Kankuro cut himself off. There was a silent moment, and Shiragiku seemed to realize something was wrong and Kankuro couldn't get the words out.

At last, Shiragiku said, quietly, in one of the softest tones he owned- "Does this have anything to do with Mai's attack?"

Another long quiet.

Mai's attack, the one he'd heard about from every on hand medic and visitor and concerned shinobi after Mai's status. Majestic destroyer flame, annihilator of battlefields, killer of wielders. Most stories had it she'd snapped- that she'd been running same as everyone else, but then lost her mind; or gained some sort of spiritual, godly knowledge, merely walking up to the enemy that had just ravaged their numbers, the land, the victories, and calling out to it.

She was angry when she did it, that every shinobi had seemed to agree on. Angry and vengeful, without fear. Mai had called to the creature and, ignored, unleashed a technique she had never once managed, let alone mastered.
So, yes, Kankuro thought, this probably had something to do with that.

He hated to think about it, but suddenly he realized that Eishi's death might have saved the entire First Division and all who had arrived to aid it. He wouldn't tell Mai that, if she came back. But it just might have been true.

Instead of speaking, because no, Kankuro decided, he was not a herald, of good news nor bad, he was just a soldier in a war, he held out the scroll for Shiragiku to take or stare at or burn or whatever he pleased because it was Shiragiku's, now.

It was their teammate, after all. Mai had trusted him to deliver it, not for him to keep it, not for him to mourn... Although he had been just a kid, just a very brave kid enamored with Mai's sparks, who believed he could do it as long as his teammates stood beside him. Kankuro wondered if Mai had stood beside him. Probably not, he thought. If she had been she would have died before him.

The other shinobi glanced at it, then looked up at him, confused, before reaching out hesitantly to take it. There was a freeze right as Kankuro pulled his fingers away, revealing the rusted brown splotches on the ridges of the paper, and too late Kankuro remembered that he was only fourteen.

Slowly, Shiragiku pulled at the cord, and it came off with a few tugs and digs, Mai's rough knotwork from the battlefield. He could imagine, with that grungy thread, how grimy her hands had been with shinobi dirt, how scraped, how calloused. How little she had cared except to take care of that scroll.

The scroll furled open, barely.

Just enough to make the name in the center visible.

Shiragiku's breath hitched suddenly, choking off, a sharp inhale and no exhale, and he didn't breathe. His eyes widened, green and pupilless, and the younger boy started to shake, so minutely Kankuro might not have noticed had he not been paying such close attention, had his hair not been so long, his skin so pale in the shadowed med-camp's light.

"... I see," he finally said, with some difficulty, breathing halted. "Th-..."

He inhaled sharply, held his breath again.

"And Mai..."

Kankuro could pinpoint the moment he gave up on the illusion. His shoulders tensed like they would shatter, and his body heaved, and he slammed the scroll closed without rolling it. One shiny track down his face, and then another, and then he ground the heels of his hands into his eyes to make it stop. A strange noise escaped him, not of any particular emotion. With the movement, the bandage finally unraveled, slightly pinkened in places with blood or ointment, and hit the ground.

"Mai wanted me to..." He was throwing blame, making the news not be his fault. Kankuro stopped. Shiragiku didn't seem to hear him, one hand moving to his hair, pulling the tail out even more, flyaways stabbing out through his fingertips. With the other he held the scroll over his mouth, for lack of anywhere else to hold it, really. Kankuro sighed, a small, quick sound.

"I'm sorry."

And then he turned around, because if that were him about to break down in the corner of camp, he would want them to turn around, and walk away, and leave him to whatever demons their words had created, and so he turned around, and he left, and there was a small sound of impact from
behind him- the soft rise of dust around knees.

And then he could hear when Shiragiku finally lost the rest of his composure a few moments later as he turned the corner of a tent: a weak, high, broken wail of a cry, thin and soft and mourning.

Kankuro left him to his demons.

...

~ He looked at her, pained, blue eyes wide. Eight was too young for eyes like that, she thought. ~

...

Mai hurt, but it was manageable.

It was warm here, traveling along the grounds of Lightning, but getting colder as she got further from the coast, despite the sunlight. The stones and great crags seemed to block the light and lead the winds, but at least they would hide her from view if things went sour, if someone showed up, if who knew what the hell could happen in this kind of a war happened.

She couldn't connect to Intelligence, as hard she tried; she knew the signs but had no affinity or training for mind jutsu just as she didn't for Genjutsu, but she would figure out where she was going. She'd reviewed the plans before, where the different companies were stationing at across the country, and even though characters on a map were less specific than actual coordinates, she would find them.

The fighting would lead her there.

She didn't jog, despite knowing she should maintain her energy, despite knowing that it would be a day at least to find them. She ran, full speed shunshin, like her life was in danger, and she didn't stop except for the occasional glance at sunshine and shadows to keep up her direction.

And her mind knew what to do- of course it did, it always did. She'd trained it to. It kept track of her movement, and catalogued her aches and pains as they flared against her movements. What would slow her down? What would go away, and what wouldn't?

Fumiko had been there to heal her- Mai knew that much, even in her feverish, unconscious, half-deluded state she could recognize her sister's chakra working through her system, and Shiragiku's as well; they had tried their damndest to get her back into functioning order, not even mentioning the medics who had tried to spike her chakra after her attempted decimation of the statue.

(In the back of her mind somewhere she hoped she'd charred it's limbs off before it teleported, and maybe in her wicked fantasies that maybe the flames had curved or climbed or curled enough to incinerate or cripple for life with third degree skin removal the bastard who'd been controlling it, but she knew she hadn't. It'd gotten away, and so it's puppet master had been lucid enough to make it do so.)

And so her scars hurt, the fresh ones, anyway; and parts of her joints ached like an bitch, and sometimes her head swam. And, of course, her stupid wrist was still broken, or sprained, or whatever the hell- but she had her chakra, and though her back still pulsed with traces of imaginary lightning, she was in fighting condition.

Mai was in top fighting order, and yeah, maybe her body would do the right things and kill the right monsters, but her mind was not clear.
What was physical was running on base instinct.

And the rest of it wanted blood.

She almost didn't care whose. A zetsu's, maybe, or a thousand zetsus', though they didn't bleed. Or, maybe, an Akatsuki- Deidara, or one still living enough to feel pain, she would gladly rip all of them into bloody shreds and throw their bones into the ruined coastline that this war had destroyed and make an example out of it. Or Kabuto, whom she'd heard the name of in terse conversation between her siblings.

But there was enough. There was enough vengeance that in her blind anger she would let any of them go to get her hands on Tobi, or Madara, or whatever his fucking name was, she really didn't give a damn anymore, and she didn't care if he was already dying or if someone had ripped off his legs already or if someone had tied him up defenseless and said wait he deserves a fair fight, she would tear his skin off, tie his muscles together, rip out his kidneys.

Pin him down with her swords, she imagined, and whatever other weapons he had that he'd used to kill her friends and family and her entire race, and jab out his eyes with her thumbs, take his nails off. And maybe either rip his fucking heart out so that he lived just long enough to see it or burn him to death with a pike of wood through his gut, she hadn't yet decided.

And the thoughts didn't really scare her. They had, once. She'd questioned them, their morality, had wondered what she'd do if left to her own devices if she ever had someone she hated enough to really go through with it.

But, whatever. Whatever the reason, they didn't. Not anymore. She'd gone through enough, done enough, fought enough and tried enough and known she was a goddamn psycho for long enough that she just really didn't care anymore, he deserved it, damn it, and Eishi didn't. Nobody on this Earth deserved it more than that masked man did.

Mai knew that most of the shinobi in this war- the older ones, at least, and those who'd lost in it- would probably want the same things, and logically she knew, beneath the flames of anger running through her blood, that she wasn't even as crazy as she liked to think, and that violence, revenge, destruction- it was all human nature, they all shared it in common.

But she was going to get to him first, or she was going to die trying.

Still, she knew, if it came down to it, she needed to find Gaara and Fumiko first, because damn it all- she would choose them over Eishi. She would choose them over anyone else. She needed them to make it because if they didn't-

Well, she didn't know what then, did she?

And if what Kankuro had said was true then not only was Gaara going up against some of the strongest shinobi in history, but he was also going up against his messed up, unloving bitch of a father, who by all rights was even worse than hers, because at least her father loved them, somehow. At least her father had never tried to kill them- and at least her father had never purposely infused a demon into her gut.

And so yeah, she figured Gaara was going to have a rough time. And it wasn't fair. That bastard was dead. But then so'd been her Taicho, and every other reanimated shinobi unfairly dragged from the afterlife (although to be honest she hated Rasa almost as much as she hated the masked man and if he were real she'd rip him to pieces, too, for the things he'd done to her nee-san).
And on top of everything else, Fumiko had "deserted"- code for, was going to get herself killed trying to be emotionally supportive of her goddamn other half. And Mai was, really, glad she was, because Gaara needed to be on his A-game for this level of a fight and he fought better with Fumiko nearby, as a strategist, an anchor, a partner, and if need be, as an incentive.

But still, that didn't mean she wasn't going to get herself hurt or worse, and it didn't mean Gaara wasn't going to get himself hurt or worse, and god damn it Kami knew very well that she couldn't lose them, too. She just couldn't.

And so Mai ran, and she seethed, and she planned, and she prayed.

...  

~ "Hide it." ~

...

They had fallen back as far as they could, and now, Fumiko realized, they had all been cornered. They could flee to the sides, but that would lose them the peninsula.

"The first thing the two of us should do is launch long range offences," Ohnoki said. "And see how the enemy responds."

Gaara's eyes moved to hers, saying he agreed, asking anyway. She was stood on a bit of sand- barely anything to Gaara now, he hardly had to think to leave a half plot of sand hovering in the air nearby him, the sand was wont to do that on it's own anyway. She knew, somehow, that she wouldn't be attacked so long as she remained a bystander which- as much as she knew she would want to try and help, Fumiko also knew she wasn't on the level required for this kind of a fight.

This was a fight between Kage. Fumiko would help where she could, but she would also stay back, and let Gaara and Ohnoki handle the fighting. She wasn't stupid- the reanimated shinobi were meant to strategize the best plan of attack, survive, and kill anyone or anything that opposed them, and if they saw her as a threat or potential route of escape, they would take it.

So she would only do what she came here to do: to advise, and to support, and to be seen.

"Yeah," she agreed, because planning was what she did best. "Most of them are long range, so it probably won't do much, but you can scope them out, I guess, or maybe try and push them back a little. Hm. Long range versus long range..." Fumiko wrinkled her brow. "It might work- no, it can. Just be careful."

"Yes," Gaara said.

"Ohnoki," she said, because he was looking annoyed again but also because he was the oldest living Kage and he'd fought a few wars in his time, and many more battles than them. "Should you meet them there to hold the Fourth Division back, and give yourself space to retreat, or let them come here?"

"Meet them halfway," he said at last.

"Okay. Cool." Fumiko nodded. "I'll just- stand here, Gaara, so don't worry about me, I'll only be a few yards away from where you stop, so. I won't walk off it."

For a split second, amusement flitted across Gaara's face, and exasperation, but then he nodded, and then shifted his attention to Ohnoki. "I'll start with a destructive attack," he said, already
looking more like himself—looking steeled and steady for battle. "One that my father will believe is
Shukaku. It may make them wary."

"As you say," Ohnoki said with a curt nod. "Let's go, then."

They traveled, not far by any shinobi means, but far enough that they could retreat ground without
jeopardizing the Fourth Division with collateral from the fight. Still, the Fourth Division would
probably be able to see them, with their chakra-enhanced senses.

And then they went faster, Fumiko crouching slightly on her bit of sand, used to the travel, set to
meet the reincarnated Kage as early as possible to prevent them going any farther. Ohnoki flew
beside them, just ahead of her, and just behind Gaara.

As they went, Gaara scattered sensory sand, tracking the entire area. It flew ahead of them, with too
little chakra to be detected very fast. And- and even Fumiko felt it when they got close, and she
shivered because reanimated chakra felt wrong. It felt wrong... and Rasa's chakra had always felt a
little wrong to her, a little too cold, a little too dark. Like Sasuke's, but less intense.

She realized with a crawling feeling that, Gaara besides, she was about to face a dead man whom
she hadn't seen for almost five years. Not since they were children, or since Gaara still had the
Shukaku pinned inside him, or since she'd looked him in the eye in almost-casual conversation
days after he'd tried to have her murdered.

They had grown since then, she thought, but it would be strange, and surreal, because Rasa had not.

And she also thought, not quite bitterly- maybe a little sadly, tracing her gaze to Gaara, who looked
determinedly ahead, wind whipping his clothes and his hair- that he wouldn't have much turmoil
trying to kill them again, would he?

And then they got close enough, and Gaara raised his hands and clapped them together. She knew
what he was doing three or four signs in- Sand Tsunami, Quicksand Waterfall Flow, a chakra
costly move but one that would immediately have Rasa's Dust out, as planned.

The sand around them rumbled and jumped up, building itself as it tore out of the earth. Lightning
was a good place for Gaara, she thought. Wind had the sand, but lightning had the sediment and
rock formation for endless sand creation and mineral reinforcement. At this moment, between skill
and time and environment, she wondered if this was his strongest Sand Tsunami to date.

And it surged forward, tumbling over itself with a roar and growing faster every other second.

There was a great collision and the sand snarled into contact, predictably, with a shimmer that
spread throughout the wave, almost like glitter. Gaara moved forward alone with it, dodging flying
rock and great crashes of sand and gold dust, and as it settled into great waves and sparkling dunes,
she could make the four out, could spot the colors of their chakra even before they'd been spotted.

Gaara was tense, but trying not to look it, resigned to the fight. He crouched, hands ready for
attack.

There was a moment of silence.

And then the sand at the Kages feet jumped, although from here, Fumiko couldn't make out the
jutsu. Thoguh it might not have even been one, she mused. It might have just been Gaara.

Ohnoki moved, blurring ahead. Fumiko's sand drifted closer, near an outcrop of rock, but not in the
thick of the fight. Enough that she could hear, though. Enough that she could witness and be
"You're an old man, Ohnoki!" Mu said suddenly, jerking before Ohnoki could complete his Dust style jutsu, which- yeah, they'd expected that, but still she'd hoped it would work. "You owe your whole life to Dust style!"

And then, together, they chanted, "Dust Release: Detachment of the Primitive World!"

(And somewhere inside despite herself Fumiko beamed at that fantastic jutsu name, detachment of the primitive world, what a beautiful way to say it destroyed boundaries and/or human beings.)

Two opaque bursts of light- almost too quick to spot but shaped differently, one rectangular and the other like a cone, opaque and bright- collided in the middle and exploded into a brilliant white that hurt her eyes, and Fumiko brought up a hand to squint beneath and block the debris thrown up by the fusion.

As it faded, Ohnoki moved to hover by Gaara, who watched carefully, and who also must have studied on Ohnoki's technique boundaries, because her sand floated just a few feet from the edge of the crater left behind, half-towers of rock crumbling to dust a yard away.

"Father," Gaara called, arms folded. "It's been a while."

"Yes, Gaara," Rasa replied. Fumiko blinked, not realizing how much she'd memorized his voice- if she'd heard it on the street she might have recognized it even in a throng. Deep, and calm, and flat. Like scissors cutting a thick piece of paper. His eyes narrowed. "But where is Shukaku?"

He doesn't even believe there's a chance of Gaara fighting without Shukaku, Fumiko thought, tense in- tense in anger. The elders were right- Rasa truly believed that Gaara could never control it- that he was nothing on his own.

"He is long gone," Gaara responded, standing taller. "And I... I am no longer the Jinchuuriki you created."

There was a silence and Fumiko counted the seconds. A cold breeze blew in- it was nearing dusk, but the sun was still high in the sky for now. Sand blew, outside of Gaara's control, or maybe not. She waited.

"You are no longer a Jinchuuriki, Gaara?" he said, and it was either a sneer or actual exclamation of surprise. "What do you mean?"

"Some time ago, those who now control you removed Shukaku the One Tail from me," Gaara said, without a single tremor in his voice. Fumiko winced quietly, automatically. "And in doing so killed me."

Rasa reacted violently, with a bodily step back. Something escaped his mouth, maybe a gasp.

She was so, so happy that Gaara had lost his tormentor, his literal demon, and that he finally got to think and act freely and of his own will and that he could sleep without nightmares and- Fumiko blinked hard thrice- everything had worked out for the better, but Fumiko didn't like thinking of that day, week, month. There was too much in the memories that she didn't want to understand.

"But thanks to the assistance of Granny Chiyo and my friends, I was revived, and am still alive today."

Thank you Granny Chiyo, she thought, almost instinct whenever she thought of the elder. She
hadn't yet had a day go by where she hadn't prayed, nor a week (until now) that she hadn't visited the plain little headstone.

"You mean Granny Chiyo did that for you?" he sounded incredulous, and his face did something angry in his confusion. "Wait! Hold on. You said friends?" His stance grew slacker with surprise, though his hands fisted. He was sniffing for a lie. "Are you telling me that you actually have friends?"

"You didn't think he'd have any friends?" the previous Mizukage said with almost a hint of disbelieving amusement. "Did you really think that your son would just be alone this whole time?" He put up his hands in almost a contemplative shrug. "He was a kid! Everyone had friends at that age."

"Six, father. Six times you tried to kill me," Gaara said. That we could prove, Fumiko tacked on mentally. That we knew he'd planned before the attacks. There had certainly been more than six. She'd been ten and used to planning defense strategies before guessed assassinations. "Each time, my fear and hatred of you increased. But I no longer harbor any hatred for you, father. Now, I'm even able to understand why you did it."

Fumiko looked away from him, down. She looked halfway at Rasa, who had noticed her before, and now glanced her way. Fumiko didn't try to school her expression. She never had.

"I've become the Kazekage," Gaara continued. "It is a leader's duty to eliminate threats against one's village... We must protect it."

And this must have been the last straw for Rasa, who looked stricken and shell-shocked and still, a little, like he believed Gaara was lying. "What did you say?" he managed. "You are... Kazekage...?"

"And that's not all of it," Ohnoki said, and now Fumiko looked up again, surprised. "He's also been named Commander in Chief of the Allied Shinobi Forces, and leader of a battle regiment. Despite his young age, he not only calls himself Kazekage, but has the respect of the other Kage as well!"

"Well, that makes a lot of sense," Mu said. "I thought it was odd that I sensed chakras from so many village types all together. Just imagine- shinobi allied in a united force."

"Well, apparently what you lack in eyebrows, you more than make up for it in charisma," the other said, approving. "Hmm! Actually, come to think of it, I'm just the same!"

Mu turned to face him. "Then explain that sorry excuse for a moustache."

"Hmph!" The second mizukage turned, annoyed. "If you're going to kill us, then I suggest you start with the mummy here! I'll be more than happy to cheer you on!"

"So he's your son then, is he?" the former Raikage crossed his arms and grunted in approval. "Well, he's a fine shinobi."

Rasa just stared at them, looking as impassive as he always had looked before. It was something that always drove Gaara's opponents insane in battle- the total lack of an emotion on one's face, a lack of tells, of weaknesses. Except Rasa had always worn that mask, and Gaara- at least they could tell that Gaara would never give up.

Still, she knew what he was thinking about.

She could feel it in the way her stump of a leg ached with phantom fire, and in the way her ears grew warm like they did when someone talked behind your back, and by the way Rasa's Dust
writhed, like he was trying to defend himself, or was remembering defending himself in the past.

"You should have given him another chance," she said, suddenly in the stretching quiet. The Kage looked at her, surprised, but Gaara did not turn. He'd probably known, somewhere, that she would speak. There was a hint of tears in her voice, but not enough to make it crack. "You should have waited, Rasa, to call him a failure. Gaara was a child- if you'd had such a power at seven, would you have controlled it, knowing everything hated you to death- including the monster inside you?"

"After all this time," Rasa mused quietly, looking almost through her. "You stayed with my son."

"Yes," she said. "And you always wondered why, didn't you?" Some strange thing was rising in her chest, heat and liquid. "I would have forgiven you back then, but now, Rasa, I don't understand. I have a child- I have two! And I love them with everything I have, and how could you..."

Fumiko fell silent. She didn't have to finish.

"My son understands, and yet you, just a bystander, do not?"

"If I understood," Fumiko started, not sure where her words were going to end. "If I was like you... Then I wouldn't be here. And Gaara might still be alone. I get it, okay. I get that you thought he was dangerous- he was. But you don't know why..." Fumiko shook her head. "People aren't just experiments, Rasa," she said, "Or figures. We can't be computed. And we can't survive without love."

Now Gaara looked back, finally, and his eyes were soft. There were things, still, that she wanted to say. But she wouldn't. She didn't need to. Because she'd been right before: Rasa was dead. She was kicking a memory. And maybe he would give Gaara closure, and maybe he wouldn't, but Gaara knew what she wanted to say, and that was all she needed.

But she looked to Rasa, and she stared him down as he took in her words.

Gaara has surpassed you.

He has become everything you said he never could.

"Love, you say..."

Another quiet blew through the battlefield. The other reincarnated Kage looked on somberly, waiting for the inevitable shoe to drop, wondering if she would speak, or attack, or if their jutsu would take effect. But she did nothing, and they waited. Gaara looked forward again, sand beginning to curdle from his gourd.

"It seems this reanimation jutsu... may actually have something of merit to it after all." Rasa said at last, and finally he tensed. The spell broke. "Come show me. Let me determine once again what you might be worth, Gaara. Can you defeat me or can't you?"

Fumiko closed her mouth, lips pursing a white line, and then she bit her lip, hard. So that was what it was to be Fuma Rasa, she finally accepted. Everything needed to have material, judgeable worth... fine. She pitied him, then, above all else.

He wouldn't understand. Even if he lost, and admitted he had made a mistake, it would be for all the wrong reasons.

"Yes, Ohnoki." Mu said. "You must stop me. Against Dust Style, the number of opponents doesn't matter. You're the only one who can stop me."
"I'm aware of that," Ohnoki snapped.

Perhaps this was personal for him, too.

"And also... you must remember what I taught you about what happens to allies after a victory. Once the war is over, the alliance is, too. It becomes a fight for the spoils of victory. That is what truly decides what village is the victor."

The Mizukage sniffed and raised an accusing finger. "Hey, knock it off, Tsuchikage! You're just playing dirty now!"

"I won't let that happen!" the Raikage said angrily, jabbing a finger back, too.

Ohnoki raised his chin. "I have no intention of doing any such thing, Lord Mu- not at all!"

"I see!" Mu exclaimed, sounding pleasantly surprised. "So it seems you didn't actually turn into a stubborn old geezer."

"I wouldn't be so sure yet," the Mizukage said with a snort. Then he faced the battlefield. Fumiko leaned with one hand against the rock crag. The sand would hold her up, and the rock, like Gaara had likely planned, would give her shelter from the angle of the fight. "In any case, we aren't in control of our own bodies right now. We've been set to automatically counter whatever jutsu the enemy tries to use against us. So hurry- kill us and return us to the netherworld. We'll even tell you all our powers and weaknesses!"

"But still, it's going to be up to you to stop us," the Raikage advised gravely. "And it isn't going to be an easy task."

Fumiko slipped her hand into her pouch.

Without warning, Gaara's sand snapped fully out his his gourd with a sound like taught cloth, and it whipped ahead to start the fight off with a bang. Rasa's Dust rose instantly in response, two perfect mirrors of a coiled snake leaping forward to attack, offense colliding in the center with an explosion that shot sand into the air around and kicked up a wind, and suddenly, under the sun stood on Gaara's sand, Fumiko almost felt like she was home.

The battle had begun.

Gaara's sand leapt to engulf, hands grabbing and stretching around the rim of Rasa's dust. (Fumiko remembered that Dust.)

At that exact moment, Ohnoki gestured backwards. "Move out!" he barked, loudly enough that it would travel back to where the Fourth Division stood in wait, and Fumiko knew it would be only moments before they rumbled over the sand.

Moments it was. With a riotous cheer they appeared, sliding into the crater, the battlefield, and Fumiko wanted to join them, but her place was here, standing ready, for Gaara's battle.

The reincarnated Kage rushed forward to counter, and they smashed into each other, misshapen and immediately violent, shrouded by the curling fight above their heads, Gaara's sand twisting further into his father's Golden Dust.

"Now," he said, raising one hand. "Sand hail."

And they dropped like stones. It was a derivement of Sand Shuriken, a jutsu Fumiko remembered
well. She touched her ribs where they had cracked under the impacts. And now Gaara was even more powerful. And Fumiko knew she'd been weak then and was still weak now- but she knew what Gaara could do.

He was smarter then his opponents.

Rasa's Dust raised to counter- either because for some reason each reanimated shinobi was programmed to counter every attack no matter who it was aimed at (which she thought was unlikely) or that whoever was controlling them knew that it was better to protect the group with such a wide long-range jutsu ability than to only fight one shinobi.

And that made sense.

But it was also a mistake.

Gaara's sand smashed down into the barrier like a fist, and Rasa's Dust spread instantly, an umbrella from Gaara's crushing hail.

Rasa suddenly reacted seemingly to nothing, jolting violently in an attempted- but botched- leap backwards, and Fumiko smiled. And then the sand rose around him, twisting at the top, instantly tying Rasa down with a force that would break any ordinary shinobi's every rib and joint.

And slowly the sand rose around the others, too, and Fumiko readied herself for what was to come, hands tensing on her bag, but then she paused in shock at what the sand was doing.

Karura...

Why was Gaara doing that? Why recreate his mother's image- the only picture he'd had that Fumiko had hidden upon his request? Because each reincarnation was restrained by tight hands, encapsulated on a mother's breast of sand, held tight. But what was the point?

She looked at Gaara in confusion, and saw his expression, and she realized: he wasn't.

Before she could think too much about it, Rasa grunted loudly enough that she heard it through the rush and pull of sand, and his one free arm came down midair. The Gold Dust he'd used to block the Hail gathered taut in the center like the bottom of the top half of an hourglass, and then it jolted down, golden lightning.

Hands of sand raised to protect Gaara from the blow, curling around his figure.

Automatically.

Gaara still looked somewhere else, she couldn't tell from where she stood- not kept up with the fight, though, in shock. He wasn't looking at Rasa, but the way his sand fell and moved.

Something clicked in Fumiko's mind, but she didn't know what it was.

"You have truly grown up... Gaara."

Fumiko's head jerked from Gaara's face to stare down at Rasa, who was steadily being buried alive- or dead- or in between, whatever reanimation was- and whose arms were now restrained- and then back to Gaara, whose face fell like a landslide.

"What parents need to do... is to believe in their children." Rasa wouldn't meet his eyes. "That one simple thing... is the real treasure."
Now Rasa looked up, but not at Gaara. Instead, his head tilted to stare at the face, the body of the woman in the sand, fully formed from the waist up, fading into the desert of sand below that. It looked almost as if she were embracing him, Fumiko realized. As though she was holding him safe in her arms. And the hands protecting Gaara had been growing and now—now they were also Karura, Gaara's mother...

What was happening?

"Isn't that the whole truth of it, Karura?" He sounded tired, and none of this made any sense. Karura... Gaara's mother. Why was he speaking to her now? "Now I see it clearly. I didn't possess the ability to judge the true value of things."

"... What do you mean by that?" Gaara's voice was quiet and, for the first time in this fight, vulnerable. He wanted an answer.

"No matter what," Rasa said in lieu of answering, "The sand will always protect you. But that is not Shukaku's power... it belongs to your mother. It's Karura's."

For a fleeting moment, warmth enveloped her, warmth like clouds of hot Suna air clinging to her arms and chest and face like glitter—almost an embrace.

For only that single second, Fumiko felt like she was being drawn into her mother's arms.

No. It couldn't have been.

He wouldn't have...

"Your mother... loved you!"

And she could feel it in her heartbeat, a slash through her soul. In that second, something healed and something snapped, and Fumiko thought maybe she hated Rasa, but she was too caught up in the shock and in Gaara's shock and in the fact that it shouldn't be shocking but she wanted to weep with relief because Gaara's mother loved him, Gaara was loved from the very beginning.

The protection had tormented him—some sick irony they guessed, the monster that hated him keeping him alive to kill his host body in possession someday... but all this time, it had been Karura, his mother, keeping him safe from harm... like any mother would do for their child. No matter what.

"Father, did—did you really just say that... Mother loved me?" And he sounded seven again, scared and afraid and hurt, but at least Yashamaru loved him still, at least his mother had loved him, at least he still had the picture.

Fumiko jolted.

Yashamaru was lying, she realized. That means...

"... That day, long ago... When Yashamaru came after me..." Gaara looked like he would be sick. He was coming to the same conclusion she had.

"I told Yashamaru to lie to you then," Rasa said. And he looked regretful, but not ashamed, head down in thought. "He was merely following orders. I had to see if you'd lose control of the Tailed Beast inside you if you were distraught, for the sake of the village... If there was anyone Yashamaru truly hated, it would've been me, and not you. I'm the one who forced Yashamaru's pregnant older sister, Karura, to suffer the sealing of Shukaku the Sand Spirit. But Yashamaru was
a consinate shinobi... he was loyal to me, and a reliable ANBU Black Ops for the Sand. He followed my orders for the sake of the village."

He paused again in thought. The battle still raged across the battlefield, but Fumiko strained to hear what was being said.

"It was all a mistake. Sometimes it seems like every single thing I did was a mistake. I burdened you unnecessarily. I arbitrarily decided that you held no true value to our village, or to anyone. I took away your future by making you a Jinchuuriki, robbed you of your mother, and poisoned you against her. I took away everything... your ability to know or love others. I even tried to take your life."

Rasa's voice remained steady, though laced with something strong. With every word Gaara's face grew more and more distressed, more and more disbelieving and confused and like his carefully supported world was crumbling to dust around him, and Fumiko wanted nothing more than to somehow jump the distance, or control the sand herself and go to help him, but she couldn't.

"In the end, as a parent, there is just one thing that I gave you." Finally, Rasa looked up, but not at her. He looked straight at Gaara. "The only thing you got from me was a broken heart."

And that was it.

For the first time in years, she felt discomfort pulling at her soul.

Gaara was crying.

In response, Fumiko lost her composure, tears sliding hot down her face, and she dropped to her knees against the sand from Gaara's gourd beneath her, and she put her hands to it, and watched it absorb the little dark spots that bloomed where she cried.

"Your mother loved you," she said, more to herself than anyone else, and didn't know if Gaara heard it or felt it or knew she'd even thought it. Her breath hitched and she brought a hand to her mouth. "Your mother loved you, Gaara-! She..."

The sand she knelt on curled around her fingers, squeezing gently, and then released. Fumiko lifted her hand and saw the papers she'd crushed there, and she sniffled, but picked them up again and, softly, released them to the air to sink down into the sand below. It moved slowly, pulsing like a heartbeat, every Karura working off of the other.

"Mothers are powerful," Rasa said softly, still above the scuffles of battle. "Yours believed in you, and protected you, even after death. She's the one who made you what you are today. She allowed you to reach your destined role, as Kazekage... and to make friends... she gave you bonds with your siblings and community... all the things that I took away from you.

"And as your father... all I ever did was torment you. I don't even deserve to be called your father."

"My mother was definitely a-amazing..." Gaara's voice cracked on the word and Fumiko flinched with it, but she wiped her eyes and looked up at him, and Gaara was smiling. He was smiling like he was relieved. He was smiling like a weight had been pulled off his shoulders- or a pain had finally gone away. "But, this is the first time you have given me medicine, father."

And Rasa smiled, as the seals revealed and released themselves in the bodies of sand holding each shinobi reincarnation, catching each other's chakras in a tight web. And then his eyes shifted, and he was smiling at her, and maybe she still thought he had taken the easy way out, even if she thought he was trying to justify his actions to himself, even though she thought it was unfair that he
didn't love his child until Gaara's mother revealed her will...

Protect him.

He smiled at her, and she nodded back.

I will.

And then Rasa's face was swallowed in sand and he was sealed, he was gone again. The Gold Dust still above him, a last-ditch attempt at freedom before his shock, collapsed in a heap around the battlefield, kicking up a storm of dust, leaving behind only the statues of Gaara's mother mid-embrace, seals scrawling black kanji across their fronts and backs.

And it left the others still fighting, Ohnoki crying out in triumph, a thousand shinobi screaming.

And it left her, kneeling on the sand by the tip of a rock, and it left Gaara, standing silently and staring at the sealed form of his father, who, in his last moments after death, had given him something Fumiko never could.

His parents' love.

...

~ "Anywhere?" ~

...

"Shh, shh, shh," Hanako murmured under her breath.

It was quiet in the Kazekage's living halls save for the whining of the children and occasional meow or grunt from Cat, who weaved in and out of bedrooms as she pleased, ever searching.

The twins missed their parents, that much was obvious. There was no consoling them- only getting them from one feeding to the next nap in a cycle; but Hanako didn't care. These were her grandchildren, and they missed their parents, their brave mother and father who had gone off to war to save the world.

Even Fumiko, her little pacifistic baby, who never wanted to hurt anyone, and tried to save insects from inside the house, unless it was storming out. Little Fumiko who had always been startled by thunderstorms. Her child at heart Fumiko who baffled people daily on how smart she really was under all that positivity.

Grown up Fumiko, with shadows under her eyes that weren't just from a lack of sleep anymore.

Both of her children- or all three of them, really, she was kidding herself if she didn't admit that Gaara was practically her son now- had turned out to be powerful and smart shinobi, of all things... her daughters coming from a completely civilian home. Mai she had expected, Mai had been strong from close to the very beginning- and strong-willed.

"And Mai, too," she cooed to herself or to the twins. "Don't you miss your auntie Mai, too? They'll be fine, I promise."

She ducked under the mobile to pick up the fussier twin from their crib; though she could hold both, they were fussier when they could hear each other's discomfort. She rocked him slowly. He was bigger than he had been when they all left. His features had shifted a bit as he grew, too, and
Hanako could pick out more of Fumiko in them, though their hair was still a dark red, brown eyes ringed with black.

She wondered how long this war would take.

She hoped not that long. And she hoped everyone came back safe.

She could promise the little ones that their parents and aunt would return, because they didn't understand her promise or the implications of it, and they wouldn't know if she ended up breaking it.

"Sleep, little pigeons, and fold your wings, little blue pigeons with velvet eyes..."

...

~ "Anywhere that I won't find it, please, Fumiko." ~

...

"Yes!" the sealed Mizukage called up, face still free, along with his long, striped coat collar.
"These seals will stop us! That was very nicely done there, young Kazekage!" And then he stopped. "Hm? What's going on? No! Somebody stop this! I wanna be sealed away now!"

The Raikage broke free in a sudden blur of blue lightning, smashing through the frontal seal and the sand it held tight. "It's out of our control!" The Raikage shouted. "Our bodies are programmed to counter the enemy's jutsu!"

And the Mizukage, despite his struggling, broke free just seconds later, water seeping through the sand and dislodging her seals. Ugh, stupid. She knew he was water based and the Raikage lightning, she should've accommodated with elemental seals... but she didn't have any, and had run out of inks to draw with, not that she would've been able to. They would have seen her, and immediately taken her for a threat.

Still, that was-... That was Rasa down, at least.

The two escaped reincarnations slammed into the Fourth Division, setting up immediate dust storms in their wake. From her perch high above Fumiko heard the sound of the impact, weapons clanging, shinobi shouting. Temari barked an order and they formed a claw to surround them, separating them far from Mu, who was still locked in battle with Ohnoki, having been lead away, according to plan.

Meanwhile, the first bare line in the fight against the previous Mizu and Rai Kages lay on the ground in various states of injured and, Fumiko suspected, dead. They formed a wary circle around the two, but backed up slightly at the Mizukage's next words.

"Hey! Do not underestimate my jutsu! You seriously need to stand back- for real! Now here are all my weaknesses- for real. ... Yes, for real. Listen! I use shadow style. In other words, that means Genjutsu! And my summoning..." He suddenly bit his thumb, slapping his palm to the ground in front of him and releasing a furl of black kanji that striped out around him and immediately burst with summoning smoke. "- is a giant clam!"

The impact knocked at least ten shinobi off their feet.

"And I'm a lightning style user!" the Raikage barked, body already zipping with blue chakra. "Line up your earth style shinobi to use them as a shield, and attack with your wind style shinobi!"
"Great," Temari yelled out almost sarcastically and Fumiko was grateful, still half in tears, that at least war didn't change everything. "Thanks for the intel. You have any other details you can tell us?"

"I'm not in control of my body. There's no time for more talk- come on!"

And he leapt away over their heads to begin. Fumiko could see Temari immediately turn to give orders to those around her, but couldn't hear what was said. Slowly she stood, steadying herself, drying the last of the tears on her face, and straightened. There was still fighting to be done- and a lot to lose before this all was over.

Her sand moved suddenly, and then- "Are you all right?"

She almost laughed. "Are you?"

Gaara studied her carefully, eyes not even rimmed with red. And then he nodded.

"We'll talk about everything later," she said. "But- I'm not going back, Gaara. I'm staying with you, and the Fourth Division. Help fight Mu if you have to, but I'll help here. I'm done... being separated."

"All right," he said, barely above a whisper. "But be careful. Please."

"I will be." She touched his wrist, the bracelet there. "It's Genjutsu, anyway. I'll be okay, Gaara. Just-... Love you. Now put me down."

"You too." And Gaara didn't say anything else after that, understanding sparking between them like little lightning strikes. They could always talk to each other without words, and this was, maybe, the most important time not to say anything at all.

She wasn't leaving, and they wouldn't be separated again. They needed each other close by, no matter her technical jutsu skills. And she was going to fight as she had decided to fight, and they would work through it all when, when, they won this war.

Her sand dropped to the floor and settled into the ground just as the Raikage soared out of sight. As she stepped away, it drained into the sky, to Gaara.

"So, do you have a strategy, Fifth Kazekage?"

"I'm leaving you in charge here," Gaara said in response, speaking directly to his Regiment. Murmurs of shock rippled through the group, anxiety bubbling to the surface.

"Hey, hey; hold on! What kinda tactic is that?" the Mizukage cried. "Didn't you hear me? I am a shadow style user! This giant clam can cast a Genjutsu over a very wide area! It makes you see illusions! Physical attacks won't work!" He took a step forward on the top of his giant clam, which Fumiko could barely see, up on the outskirts of the group. It really was giant. "I'm talking about a mirage!"

"I can tell you have no desire to kill," Gaara said.

"No! Of course not! Why would I?!" His voice darkened. "I can't stand the idea of being manipulated by another jutsu user! That's why I want you to seal me as quickly as possible, Kazekage!"

But he was already floating away, to the Mizukage's indignant 'hey'!. "Deal with him," he said, and
then turned and was tracing away through the sky too quickly for her to track.

The shinobi called out assent and assurances, an accidental insult slipping through, and while the Mizukage raged, Fumiko leaned to the nearest shinobi to say, "Gaara is leaving to help Ohnoki; we're gonna have to deal with this by ourselves. Pass it on, if you can."

"I'm counting on you!" the Mizukage shouted as the shinobi around him cheered suddenly, prepared. "Show me what you can do!"

And then blobs of flesh came crawling through the clam's shell and bubbled, and then spurted a sickly grey smoke- a neurological toxin, likely, if it was a physical form of Genjutsu used by an animal summons and remotely controlled by the Mizukage, unless that was already an illusion. She brought her fingers up, prepared to release as everyone nearby readied their weapons.

"Good! Now you look like you mean business!" The Mizukage reared his head back to yell. "Listen up! I'll tell you one more time! Attacking the me you see before you is completely pointless!"

And then the smoke engulfed everything, and Fumiko decided that that, at least, was real.

... ~"... Okay, Gaara." ~ ...

It was getting dark now. Soon it would be night across the country, and she'd be running in the dark.

She would be sweating if she gave the sweat time to form before moving on, but the air she generated against her face in shunshin was cooling enough as a substitute, and less messy, less easy to track.

Not that it would matter anyway, if she was about to turn a giant cliffside into what she thought she was about to turn into in which case-

"You guys," she snarled, and rounded the bend, shooting straight into the surprised horde of zetsu waiting to 'ambush' her at full speed. "Picked the worst person-" With a flash her swords were out and she was flying off the ground and the rocks and the zetsu. "to slow down!"

It didn't take long in her riled state to take them down, give or take a few reckless close calls or zetsu fading into the ground and coming up behind her. Her attacks were cleaner than ever, fueled with lunges and anger, and her blades sliced perfect shears out of their skin, and eventually they all stopped moving long enough to be set on fire.

One she cut the head off of dropped immediately to it's knees, and it's stomach gapped wide in its death, spilling out a person whom it'd been feeding on the chakra of for who knew how long, her surprise was just enough time for the last zetsu to think it had a chance of escape, and it bolted and her head snapped toward it, and she screamed and bolted after it in a shunshin, not even bothering to stop, just slamming into it with the force of a steam train.

Her body didn't like it, but she killed the zetsu instantly with a messy snap of the neck and then just for good measure she breathed fire on it and left it smouldering into rotted flesh piles as she went to check on the dropped shinobi.

Dead.
Mai made a disgusted face as she pulled her hand away from his neck, gritting her teeth.

Another person dead.

She shut that down quick. If she focused on anybody else's death other than Eishi's, then she was going to go batshit crazy and off herself. No, she needed to focus all of her attention on finding Gaara and Fumiko and whatever fight they brought, she had energy she needed to use, and maybe they would bring that stupid masked man-

She searched the body, stocking on a few ration sets and waters as well as weapons the zetsu hadn't bothered to take for itself, just a few kunai and a paper bomb, but it was better than the literal nothing in her back pouch.

The body was male, and much too large to take any clothes from. From the looks of it he was from a small village, one whose style she didn't recognize immediately and so didn't care to. She did wonder, though, where the zetsu had gotten him from.

Popping the flare from his bag, she set it down near his body, something you were supposed to do if you happened to get the chance separated from a group attacked by enemy shinobi/zetsu/dead reincarnations/whatever the hell else this war threw at them- something she didn't think she'd do but dammit-

... she didn't know why she was doing it.

As soon as she was done she sealed the body with his identification tags and left it beside the flare to be found, or not, by any patrolling scouts or summons, or maybe just to attract more zetsu, who wouldn't be all that interested in a dead body, anyway.

It was getting even cooler. Mai shivered through her fishnet, not really from the cold.

And she ran again, abandoning for someone else to find a scattering of charred zetsu corpses and a single body scroll.

...

~ And it was a shame to hide it away, because Gaara's mother was so pretty, it was hard to imagine her as a hateful person. But she'd hurt Gaara so badly, and Fumiko would do anything to make him happy again. ~

...

As he traveled Gaara worried, but as he always worried; in the back of his mind.

They would be fine. Genjutsu, while formidable, was more of a defense than an offense, and Fumiko if not several other shinobi would know how to deal with it, given that they hadn't all gone to fight against the former Raikage.

And... he trusted Fumiko, as she had wished him to, to protect herself. She wasn't stupid, nor was she slow, but the opposite- had she been inclined towards violence or arbitrary use of life, even with her physical disabilities, Fumiko would have made a formidable shinobi and opponent. And now, with that same will to fight she had always so passively lacked, she wasn't quite the same person Gaara had once defended from the world.

He needed to get over or at least box those thoughts away for a later time, along with the lingering emotions and residue of his fight with his father, Rasa, the Fourth Kazekage, who had neither hated
nor loved him until the very end, inspired by his mother, who had-

He could sense Ohnoki's chakra up ahead, but Mu was nowhere, despite Ohnoki's deprivational exhaustion.

There, Ohnoki was falling from the sky, fast.

Gaara had come in perhaps a split second too late, if the Dust Release orb glowing just two yards away above him pointing at his face was anything to go by. He prepared to twist away on his sand platform, already formulating a plan to move Ohnoki, who had fallen into a sand platform that formed beneath him, out of the line of fire he left open by moving himself.

And then his eyes widened, moving beyond the imposing figure of Mu, who had appeared from nothing.

Is that...?

He saw the shining blue of the jutsu, and it couldn't be- yellow golden power flickering across his form like white hot flames and trailing in his wake, body curled offensively to smash down on the enemy below him, headband tied securely to his forehead.

... Naruto?

...

~ And so she buried the picture in the sand outside, knowing it would get swept away forever. ~

...

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Chapter End Notes

Hey, guys. I really don't have much of an excuse for this one (well, I do, i just found my journal again last week [and took pictures of the pages in case i lose it again, so dw, guys] and my mom's computer is crap most of the time and makes me nervous to write on, I cant use the school computer due to having to watch anime while writing this one, and as just a general rule I don't write at my dad's house...)

But mostly it's just me being a bit demotivated, but i got to working on a 20-song-each playlist for all of my OC's (if you have any song suggestions, shoot!) and it got me thinking about what I wanted from the next scene, so I braved my mom's computer and... actually, I started at like, eight, and it's about six minutes to 3 AM rn, so I've been at it for a while.

I was literally almost crying while writing this, like I had actual tears and sniffles, my odler bro thought I was insane . But that's good! Because that means I got into my writing again (something that hasn't happened frequently lately) and that I liked what I was doing.
Also my neck is sore and my shoulders hurt. Don't write at a desk for seven hours straight, kids.

Oh, btw, funny story. I actually had planned to call this chapter "a mother's love" back when I first planned it before I started FOW, and I didn't realize until literally halfway through writing this that the episode of the main Gaara V Rasa is actually called "a father's hope, a mother's love"

Also hope you guys like the little juxtaposition of Gaara's forgiveness and Fumiko's disapproval that'll be there for a LONG time Rasa messed up bad and I don't thin he redeemed himself, it sounded like personal excuses to me like, come on, you only love your kid when you realize his mother loved him, BS PARENTING

Anyway, thank you to the two guests who have reviewed me recently, asking for more, I wish I could give you love!

I hope you guys like this one, it's been a long time coming.

Review!
The Artist that Blooms

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

~ "I don't know. I'm not scared exactly, I- I want to fight, I guess, with Mai and the others... It's just-"

A slight shimmer in the air, a faint shift in perspective, that was all that heralded the effects of the Genjutsu.

But it was enough. The clam had shifted suddenly from Point A to Point B without any movement in between the two spaces, and that was enough to know that the clam and Mizukage she was seeing wasn't the real ones, just as he'd warned them. This was a superimposed area-wide genjutsu, just like her demonic illusions.

Then the foreign senses filled her ears, and she had no collection of where the real enemies could've possibly been.

Fumiko backed up immediately, bringing her hands up into Ram and sharply jerking her chakra.

"Kai!"

Release!

Nothing happened. The world continued with that faintest tint, a dull luster of sunlight not quite to-life. Fumiko frowned as the other shinobi advanced, searching her systems for the problem, waiting, for now, to use her darning stitch chakra technique and close a gate.

So this was a Genjutsu she'd never dealt with, then, just like she'd expected, Fumiko accepted grimly. A neurological toxin excreted from the clam's siphons. An obvious one that, as she'd guessed from the fact that despite the Mizukage's saying it was a Genjutsu attack and stressing the uselessness of physical attacks, he never seemed to lose his confidence that it would be a hard battle to win, was hard to break just by noticing- because it was physical.

So then her body wasn't being interrupted by foreign chakra, but the foreign chakra had rearranged something in her mind to make her brain give her the wrong signals- but it couldn't be permanent. Fumiko's mouth set in a line, and she steadied herself, feet apart, hands still set in Ram, alone on the battlefield.

The shinobi around her threw their weapons with a battle cry, metal and jutsu slicing through the air, rushing towards the alleged figure of the Mizukage, who had jumped from his clam in a frontal assault.

No, it had to be ongoing, minutely changed as their environments changed around them. Genjutsu
were complicated techniques to wield for a reason- if there was a way to just throw chakra at somebody and mess up their brains without having to minutely control the environment constantly for movement, perception, and multiple senses, then it would already be an easy-to-make seal.

So she could figure it out, Fumiko knew. She was a medic, she knew how brains worked, she just had to find where the illusion was and redirect the chakra pathways to it, flood it out with her own chakra, regain her mind's ability to correctly decode the light, sound, sense and smell signals she was receiving from her environment and tell her where the danger was coming from.

But she still had to worry about the Second Mizukage, because he wasn't a pushover. She didn't know much about him, or any of the Mist for that matter- rumor had it that even members of the Hidden Mist didn't know much about their clans' jutsus and past leaders' attacks, the village was so secretive about it's abilities.

But she did know he was water style based, as most in the Mist village tended to be, and now that he used a summoning to release and help direct a shifting physical Genjutsu attack. And while she didn't know his specific skills, she did know that in past history, he'd been remembered for vicious battles with Mu in previous wartimes, as well as with those who opposed him.

He was a former leader of the Bloody Mist, so she couldn't underestimate his ability to decimate them all.

The area was tense, few words spoken, as they waited for the aftermath of their attack. Fumiko knew that likely, nothing had been hit but the stone and sand surrounding the illusion-shinobi, but still, he was very still beneath the piercing blades. Was he being theatric- had somebody found his real body- was he distracted?

Like she'd woken him with her thoughts, his still Genjutsu form opened it's eyes, and to a palpaple shock amongst the shinobi, stepped away and through the weapons pinning him to the rock crag behind him. She readied herself, taking stock of her weapons- not that they would do her much good until he started using physical attacks.

There were a few faint exclamations of surprise, a nervous "R-really?"

Fumiko took a moment to study him. In illusion form, he had the same characteristics as his physical body- he had been a tall man in life, with long arms and legs, with baggy clothes, striped black on purple to hide his limbs. His skin was pale, face gaunt and blocky, with high blond hair and the forever unsettling eyes of a reincarnated shinobi: black, with a slightly blacker pupil.

Likely she wouldn't be able to fight him in a physical battle. She was too small, not quite lithe enough. But- from the way he'd escaped earlier- and that he'd never used Genjutsu until his clam had been summoned- She got the idea that maybe he wasn't actually a Genjutsu wielder, merely the summoner and puppet master of one.

"Do you people know how to listen?!" the Mizukage growled in annoyance. "I told you that attacking this me is completely useless! This me is only a mirage!"

"So?" another shinobi cried, confused. "What should we do then?"

The Second's face twisted in disbelief. "Are you kidding me?" he exclaimed. "First, you need to defeat my giant clam!" He looked to the illusion of his clam, indicating the hissing siphons. "It's the one that's been creating the mirage all along. It's shell is hard- use large scale weapons, or paper bombs!"
Fumiko's hands went to her pouch, eyeing the clam doubtfully. Normal sized clams were hard to break without using tools, she thought. And a clam that size, with the same material or made even stronger fused with such a a large Summons' chakra- she figured a few paper bombs and Fuma Shuriken weren't going to be able to shatter it.

The shell was large and light-colored, with dark brown patterns in smaller outlines of the clam's shell until the four squiggled dashes representing the village of the mist in the very center. The clam itself oozed out of the shell, siphons exhaling Genjutsu gas and the foot hanging out the other side. They might do better attacking the siphons of the real clam, she thought, given that it couldn't excrete from another part deeper down-

"... Yes, but..." the same shinobi from before said, unsure.

"What is it?" the reincarnation snapped.

"We used all our weapons in the last attack, see?"

"Ugh..." The Mizukage beckoned forward. "Just hurry up and retrieve all your weapons already!"

Fumiko didn't move- she had neither a weapon to retrieve or a desire to be too close to the Mizukage. If Rasa had been a long distance fighter, and the Raikage a short-distance lightning user, with Mu to utilize Dust Release, then that likely meant the Second Mizukage was a middle range attack user, or something of that variation.

And she trusted the Second Mizukage well enough- because really he just seemed miserable and desperate to be sealed away- she didn't at all trust whoever was puppeteering him and, likely, seeing and hearing everything the Mizukage saw and heard.

So while the others ran forward to yank their weapons out of the solid crags of rock, Fumiko closed her eyes and concentrated.

Okay, she could do process by elimination. Which parts of her brain were responsible for image, scent, and touch receptors? The likelihood of the Genjutsu perfectly recreating the wind in this area was small, so it probably wouldn't be very strong; and if she could release her sense of touch and sense first, she might be able to pinpoint enemy chakras.

Okay, Fumiko, she thought, front to back, what won't be affected?

Frontal lobe was personality, mostly, and not anything sense-wise. Ventricles, brain stem, and probably not the thalamus, she decided, and frowned. A majority of the brain lobes and individual sections served multiple purposes, so a lot of them could potentially have traces she would need to look at. The Parietal lobe would definitely be attacked- whether or not there were multiple affected areas, that was the main culprit for sensory translation to the body.

She was distracted by a loud explosion, the release of chakra along with a collision of weapons on soil. A mushroom cloud of dirt and sand and dust poured into the sky, to the slight victory of the shinobi around her, until the clam inevitably appeared somewhere else.

Fumiko bit her lip. Attacking what they saw wouldn't do them any good.

"Damn it! I can't stand this anymore!" The Mizukage's illusion was behind them. Fumiko didn't bother turning. If he attacked, likely it would be that the illusion attacked from somewhere else to leave them open for the physical, so it didn't do any good to break her concentration for no reason. "Are you even listening to me? I told you that the clam is an illusion!"
"Attack in all directions!" Fumiko shouted aloud so that everyone would hear her, and they turned all around her, surprised. Still she kept her hands up in Ram, and closed her eyes again. "We can't see it! We don't even know if it's in this area anymore. You'll only exhaust yourselves trying to attack what you can see."

"Yes, good!" the Mizukage said, clapping his hands together. "Listen to her!"

"But that could take too long!" another ninja called.

"Attacking what we can see'll get us nowhere," she said. "Just- give me some time, okay?"

"Why?"

"What are you-"

No, she didn't want the Mizukage to figure out what she was doing. She could feel his eyes on her back, however illusionary. "Give Gaara time," she said, a bit more sharply than she intended, but still mild. "If we can't defeat him, then Gaara or one of the others will come to help us, but we have to try before the Mizukage is forced to attack us!"

"Right!" someone said suddenly, Fumiko didn't know her. "Everybody! Form a perimeter, keep track of where you attack, and keep it methodical! You guys- keep an eye on the illusions! You- girl from the Sand, hurry with whatever it is you're doing!"

She straightened, finally finding traces of something amiss- yes, in her parietal!- "Hai!"

"Go!"

"Yeahhh!"

As the others moved into action, bolting again for their weapons, Fumiko regained control of her parietal lobe again, surrounding the offending chakras with her own and suffocating them, healing the clogged pathways until they were clear again. She risked a glance at reality, opening her eyes tentatively, and found everything violently askew, but still, she was trapped in the images- it was making her nauseous; she had to close her eyes again.

What else? What else?

The wind was different, blowing from two minutely different directions, and her vision had been blurred with doubles, that was a good sign. She couldn't sense anything but the Fourth Division, but that could still just mean that she didn't have control over her sensory abilities yet.

Now she had a system of attack. Fumiko smiled.

Occipital, Temporal, she thought, and maybe cerebellum, to keep my balance in a world that isn't real.

While she worked, she heard the calls of the others, grunting and throwing and collecting, moving slowly in a circle around them. Everything was going well- she had almost cleared herself, Fumiko was sure she could break this Genjutsu, and then maybe direct the others to the real clam and Mizukage.

And then, suddenly, there were screams.

With what little senses she had right now, caught between worlds, she heard the splashing of water
and the calls of the Mizukage to get out of the way. She opened her eyes, wanting to throw up or cry, and her eyes and head smarted.

"Oh, I hate being used like this!" he yelled, surrounded but what looked like a variety of bubbles seeping out of the ground to the air and racing across the field. "It's my Water Balloon Jutsu! Defend yourselves!"

Sugar.

She couldn't run or dodge like this, she would plow into the ground!

So she dropped, trying to erase the last of whatever remained of the clam's toxins from her occipital and temporal lobes, to regain her full sight and sense of depth and balance. But she could hear well enough now, and tried to stay low to the ground, because some of these attacks were definitely attacking invisibly while illusions came from another direction, and some were real and some were fake, and others lined up perfectly.


She was splashed with water from a nearby impact against the ground beside her.

"What are you doing?!" someone yelled at her, and from another direction someone grunted with the force of impact. These bubbles were stronger than they looked, however pretty they were...

There!

A familiar rush, like someone had pressed a reset button on her spine, and everything in her body shifted back to where it had been before. Fumiko opened her eyes. Shinobi ran in all directions from bubbles that rose from the ground, and she could no longer hear the Mizukage's illusion, as he and his clam were gone- both from her mind and from the battlefield all together.

Her stomach sank a little. They were gone, off somewhere else.

Fumiko rolled to avoid a bubble that slammed into the rock she'd been knelt on.

But it was chaos, shinobi didn't know where to go or what to block. This scale of a jutsu would probably have a pause, Fumiko guessed. Highly chakra intensive alongside a Summoning and wide scale Genjutsu drain, he would need a minute, especially since he didn't actually need to attack, not at all in danger himself.

A shinobi went down nearby. These weren't deadly, she realized- just incapacitating.

"I've broken it!" she called, not sure what she was going to do next- she couldn't run off to find the clam without the others and they weren't getting anywhere like this, they were trapped like fish in a barrel, and all those bubbles needed to do was hit someone's chest or head the right way- what could she do?

There was no way she could release everyone else- it would take too long, and there were too many of them to keep still, and it wasn't like she could focus with-

A bubble took her out at the knees, and she yelped as she fell, limbs stinging with so much force that she gasped and had to stay on the ground for a moment, unmoving. "Ugh," she grunted, and she tried to stand, but it hurt, it hurt it-

Was this oil?
Never mind, she had to find a way to-

She grabbed a shinobi nearby and though he yelped she shouted her name and tried to do something, but it didn't work. She had to let go of him lest they both get targeted, and he bolted, and Fumiko screamed a warning to nearby shinobi, but they either didn't hear her or didn't understand.

There was no way to disrupt it or clear their sights without the Genjutsu immediately taking over again- the mist still hung in the air, like a smog or a residue- Why did it have to be such a long range area jutsu?

And at the same time that the barrage started to slow, it clicked, like a flash of inspiration.

What if she could do it in reverse? Instead of trying to release the Genjutsu, why not cast one? She could see.

And she was one of Sunagakure's top Genjutsu wielders-

And her style of Genjutsu would override any physical aspects of the brain, since that was what it did already! As long as none of them tried to break it, it would maybe work- but Kami, there were so many of them. She'd never made such a complicated Genjutsu for so many people before- she would have to give them the entire world from their perspectives.

Still, she had to try.

The ground was drying up beneath where she assumed the Mizukage's mirage stood. She wondered if he'd noticed her yet.

Yin Release: Darning Stitch Chakra Technique.

She felt her Eighth Gate close without ceremony, and so she clapped her hands together into a Hare. The surrounding shinobi still standing were talking aloud to nothing, likely the illusions.

"Sympathetic Illusion: Mirror World!"

Fumiko had practice with this, with giving somebody almost the same world that they lived in, but with minor changes. She'd done it to the sensei at Gaara's Academy. She'd done it to the trainers and to people that attacked her. She'd done it to Deidara.

She could do it again. She could do it on a wider scale.

She felt her chakra spread, loose on her skin as it always was, perfect for her jutsu. And she felt it collide and swirl with the shinobi nearest her, and so furiously she began painting, taking their sights that she could see and arranging accordingly to what was actually there, superimposing upon the Clam's Genjutsu.

They startled, and it spread and- and she couldn't do it, she couldn't go that far, it didn't work-

"What's happening?"

"What is this?!"

"They're gone- what's going on-?"

Ugh, it hurt, and it was straining, she didn't have the chakra control for this! She didn't have the
chakra control to maintain a jutsu so far from her body with perfect illusionary accuracy, it was too easy to bust through, it would fall to pieces the second she lost concentration...

Too easy to bust through- wait.

Fumiko looked at her hands, no doubt blurring the vision of the few shinobi she'd managed to capture, staring at the balancing Hare. That made her Genjutsu stronger- between that and one or two of her Gates being closed, she could create a powerful, stable Genjutsu that, even if noticed, would give trouble breaking out of. And she'd used it on attackers, and she'd used it on Deidara...

But she hadn't for the Academy instructors, or Sasori and- and did she remember her chakra being able to go farther from her body without her Gates closed?

Did she?

It doesn't have to be strong, she realized suddenly with a snap, because they don't need to escape! It doesn't have to be strong...

It just had to be right.

Slowly, she released her Yin technique, allowing the barrier bottling her chakra and letting it flow more thickly through her pathways to dissipate, and once again her chakra ran wild, licking out of her skin at a mild pace, escaping from her center to the air, warming her instantly, as it always did. And she coaxed it from herself and from the people she had caught already, and she let her hands fall apart, no hand sign in place, and moved them like she had as a small child- instinctively. Where did her chakra want to go- let it follow her lead...

Her body cooled without the excess chakra, but she took a deep breath, eyes wide open to see in front of her.

"What I see is real," she said, voice barely raised in her concentration, but she amplified it in their illusions, double-speak. "I broke the Genjutsu for myself, and I'm using another Genjutsu on top of yours. The Mizukage and his Clam aren't here. We must find it before they attack again."

...

~ "It's okay, Eishi," Fumiko said gently. "I'm sure everything's gonna be okay when this is all over." ~

...

Haru watched her movements from where he stood, thunderstruck at the sudden shift in his vision and hearing and touch. Even his periphery was wider than it had been.

He had seen the Lady before, walking through the village alone or with others, typically the Lord Gaara himself or her younger sister Mai, although he'd never really met any of them. And he'd heard along with all the rest of the ninja that she would be fighting alongside them, and while he'd respected her guts, he'd also thought she was stupid.

Haru was old enough to remember them before Gaara became anything more than a frightening prospect of violence, and- and as he had remembered it, she'd been fairly useless, in shinobi actions, at least, and she had been physically weak (and still could be considered such, although she'd definitely improved, because wasn't she supposed to be in the Second Division close-range?)
But his Lady was...

She was moving as the Lord Kazekage might while attacking with his sand, although with slightly smoother movements where Lord Gaara’s were jerking, arms spreading out and coming together and going over and under each other as she, he assumed, somehow directed whatever kind of Genjutsu this was, too active to be an area-set. They could move like this.

There had to be at least a few hundred people she was assisting, maybe more, it all depended on how many had gone to help with the former Raikage reincarnation’s sealing in another area. He hadn’t known it even was possible to cast such a Genjutsu without a Summons, least of all for her.

"I can walk like this," she spoke, out loud or in his mind or ears he couldn't tell, though her mouth was moving, he really knew nothing at all about Genjutsu- not many in Suna really did at all. But he likened this to a desert mirage. Maybe more of them should learn. "But please don't... jostle me."

Her brow furrowed in concentration.

"... I can't... sense like this. Can anyone find the Mizukage?"

"I can!" someone called.

"So can I!"

"It's over that way, my Lady!"

"I'll lead you!

Most of the Fourth Division had been comprised of Suna shinobi; between Fuuton and Doton's generally long-range attacks, they were the majority, and so he wasn't surprised that so many of their number recognized her. You couldn't live in Suna and not know of the Fifth Kazekage's Lady.

And so they shouted at each other and picked up their weapons and their injured and followed the few sensory-nin who could sense from whatever distance the Mizukage stood at, and Fumiko behind them, to supplement the Genjutsu she was giving them with the surroundings they approached, and the rest of the division behind her.

He was careful not to try and break it, because he didn't think that would be good for his Lady's concentration.

He hadn't known that she had more than dabbled in Genjutsu as just another medium for her ever-famous artworks, nor had she known she could use sensory techniques at all. Surely she'd never meant to use it for defense or fighting- that much was obvious in everything she'd done back home. Had she mastered ninja techniques for fun, or understanding?

How much had she learned, and never used?

...

~ "But aren't you afraid?" he asked curiously, leaning on the countertop as she cooked. Fumiko moved the pan, meat still sizzling from heat, to a cold burner, and turned to face him. He looked perturbed. "Of, you know... dying?" ~

...

Naruto crashed down, three-pronged Rasengan attack (one that Gaara didn't recognize) bearing
down at a terrifying speed on Mu, who hovered in place for only a split second before darting to the side, just a half second before Naruto's delayed "Yes!"

Naruto hurtled past him, then turned his head slightly as he passed, scowling. "Damn it!"

There wasn't any time to question Naruto's appearance in the war where he wasn't supposed to be, nor the lack of Killer B, who'd been supposed to take watch over him and keep him out of harm's way. They were in the middle of a battle with a Dust Style user, and they couldn't spare the time to be surprised.

Ohnoki seemed to realize this at the same time, turning his head to bark, "Lord Mu is a sensory shinobi!"

"Gaara!" Naruto yelled, not yet releasing his Rasengan attack and free-falling towards him. "Sand!"

He raised his arms immediately, seeing Naruto's intention, sand whipping to obey, slicing through the air as quickly as he could command it to. It balled up and built at the end until it was just big enough as Naruto came down on it, and he was glowing with a ninetails power Gaara had never seen on him before, pure energy zipping out to catapult off his sand platform, sending him flying back towards Mu.

"Dodge this!" Mu said, and Gaara wasn't sure if he was trying to be beaten or not, hands cupping together and glowing with an immediate light telltale of his Dust Release attack. "My jutsu is faster than yours-!"

Naruto's arm seemed to band, and then shot forward with what was actually more ninetails energy, flashing his Rasengan instantly to Mu's form. With a growl he powered forward through the air, leveraged by his power and momentum, and Mu jerked into the sky with the impact, wind and chakra crackling around his figure.

"This is-" Naruto pushed harder, and then, leveling with Mu, sent the arm in a deep bend. ",- A planetary Rasengan!"

And then Mu was slamming down, catapulted by the force of Naruto's cloak's shove. Wind came so strongly it was blinded white, and with the turmoil Mu smashed through and destroyed a crag, spinning, and then plowed into the ground with the force of a falling building, smashing through the soil and stone for several seconds until with a loud clap he skidded into Ohnoki's waiting palm.

Immediately there was a cloud of crushed stone and flying dust as he gained the weight of a thousand boulders, and as it settled, Gaara found him half-folded in the position he had fallen in, unable to move with his body's sudden gravity. He looked at them, and without clear access to his face, Gaara couldn't tell what he was thinking as he swooped closer.

"Thanks to that," Ohnoki said aloud, "You're so heavy now that you can't even raise your arms."

And then he stood, grunting as he tried to stretch his back into some kind of working order, but was distracted as Mu mused, "You used to hate the other villages." His eyes slid toward Ohnoki slowly. "And yet now you work with them so well."

"And yet now you work with them so well." Ohnoki smirked. "I've learned that it's worth living a long life," he said, "If you can enjoy change."

Before the tables could turn again, Gaara raised his hand without a word, sending the sand swirling upwards with a buried Seal to capture him permanently. Mu uttered a final warning as it did so, the ending cut off by the enveloping sand, but Gaara had no intention of letting his guard down yet.
Let what may come, come.

There was a moment of silence after the sealing completed, and then in dropped Uzumaki Naruto, landing lightly on his feet beside the sealed mound of earth, glowing brightly and grinning just as much. He pumped his fist, oblivious to Gaara's stare. "Nice!" he yelled out. "Way to go, Gaara!" Then he glanced over at Ohnoki, still grinning. "Oh yeah," he exclaimed, "And you were pretty awesome over there as well, Shorty-gramps!"

Naruto gave him a thumbs up, and Ohnoki stared back, unimpressed.

"I am the Tsuchikage, you know," he said. "Have respect."

"What are you doing on the battlefield, Naruto?" Gaara exclaimed, finally letting his face slide into something a little more disbelieving, stressing his words with his hands. Naruto's grin stayed for a second as he processed, and then faded into a toothless smile as he realized he was in trouble, thumb still raised. He looked away sheepishly out of the corner of his eyes. "Why are you here?"

"Ehh, hehe, well..." He put a hand to the back of his head, still grinning abashedly. "I, uh... it's a long story."

"You'd better be able to provide an explanation good enough to persuade me," Gaara muttered loudly, displeased.

"That's not possible," a voice spoke into his mind, and Gaara straightened, eyes widening in his surprise. He still wasn't used to Intelligence Corp randomly interjecting into his thoughts. "So I'll do the talking. This is Nara Shikaku, at HQ. Lord Tsuchikage, Lord Kazekage, you were in the midst of fighting, so I thought I'd save the complicated talk for later."

"All right," Ohnoki said. "We're all ears. But the fighting's not over. We must head out soon."

Again he hovered into the air, and Gaara glanced at him, uncertain of his capabilities of flight at the current moment, but he seemed fine for the time being. "You can brief us on the way."

"No," she said. "Not really. I mean, a little, but war. I'm glad I worry about that." ~

It wasn't very far ahead of them, and Fumiko was relieved.

She couldn't quite tell whether or not she was in pain, but she was seeing and sorting and correcting and painting several hundred perspectives all at once inside her head, based off what she saw ahead of them, and so her eyes had to be open and she had to focus on the outside world as well as them, and on not falling or tripping. The mist was still heavy in the entire area- if she dropped them they would immediately be consumed again.

She was pulsing like a heartbeat- connected to hundreds of chakra systems at once. She was freezing, but felt the heat of her chakra in every person's senses. And Fumiko was tiring quickly-losing more chakra then she was making, considering how little her body maintained.

But she was doing it. One foot in front of the other in front of the other, eyes not crossed. Her body was shaking from the mixed attention, and they might've been missing a person or two in their visions, but they would see the clam, and enough of the fight to survive one another.

The colors in these worlds weren't as vivid as she was used to painting in a viewer's periphery, but
she couldn't help that.

Fumiko could hear them all walking behind her, several hundred footsteps following her following sensor-nin. And she was getting a migraine but everything was a little surreal, a little tipped, and she couldn't quite believe what was happening, but the small part of her that wanted to realize her situation needed to be saved for potential battle strategy because she didn't have enough space in her head to be thinking about leading a group dependent on her jutsu, she was going to pass out.

She couldn't sense anything in her state, not surrounded and entangled with so many chakras that she didn't recognize, but the sensor-nins stopped her without touching, simply raising their hands up.

"What now?" one whispered. She could see the clam from here, but not the Mizukage, who was likely either on top of it or behind it (and she was careful not to think too hard about those images lest they accidentally leak into the shinobi's sights.) She still doubted that they could break the shell, but...

"We have to stop the Genjutsu first," she muttered, barely even a whisper in real life, mostly just air blowing past her moving lips. "I can't do this forever."

"We should try and ambush it all at once," a man suggested from behind her.

"He probably already... knows we're here," she said. "You can't... mask your chakras with me..."

Her vision swam for a moment, and a few shinobi rubbed their eyes, looking at her concernedly, but then it cleared again. She wondered, somewhere in her subconscious thought, if their crystal ninja eyesight was tainted by her below-average civilian vision.

"He already has tried to help us!" Another man called from somewhere far behind her. "We attacked again and again, and he hardly used a jutsu. We just have to be faster this time!"

"Yes!"

"Now that we know where the real ones are -"

"This should be easy!"

"We'll get it done before Lord Kazekage returns!"

Despite herself, Fumiko managed a smile, and she would've laughed if she didn't think it would break into their senses, or even if she thought she could make the sound. "At the very least," she said, "We can... hold them off."

"Are you all right, miss?" one of the sensory nin asked just as she felt something warm trickle down onto her lip. Blood. She'd gotten a nosebleed.

In response, she directed one of her gently waving arms to point at the clam, hoping it sent a clear enough message: Go. There wasn't any plans for this- they had found the clam, and now their best bet was to try and destroy the shell or push past the foot to the inside as best they could. All she could do was get close enough to keep the right things in their eyes.

He nodded, then looked out at the following behind her. "All right! We're heading out! If you have any paper bombs, now's the time- but save your sealing weapons for the Mizukage!"

Another riotous cheer rose behind her, and they swarmed on all sides to begin the fight. They were
there before her, already attacking, a few of them missing from shaved areas Fumiko had made a little too big or a little too small, but mostly the blows were solid. Fumiko got herself close enough to see, wished Gaara was there to get her a little higher for a better vantage point, and focused.

At least, she thought, the Genjutsu being cast by the clam was giving them proper surroundings already that she could work with- they had a periphery, she just had to add the things the clam erased or tried to move. If all they had was darkness or everything was flipped around, she didn't think she'd be able to do it.

Bombs and weapons smashed and exploded into the clam's top and sides, but they only did minimal damage once the smoke cleared. As the shinobi moved, so too did her chakra, occasionally slipping out or fading from one or two ninja completely. Her arms were in constant motion, pulling it back and sending it out and holding in place.

"Good job!" the Mizukage yelled over the chaos, and it rung in her ears from the hundred or so that heard him. "How did you break free? Oh, it doesn't matter! Go on, you need to use a lot more force than that!"

Fumiko's nose was still bleeding. After what seemed like hours- but likely was only five or ten minutes- she'd come to the conclusion, thoughts snatching from one task and person to the next, that this wasn't going to work. They needed more force, they needed more shinobi without chakra exhaustion, they needed-

And like a thunderbolt Gaara's chakra hit her senses, because it didn't matter how occupied her brain was to the brim, she would sense that for a mile or more. At the same time, the bubbles rose again, and Fumiko gritted her teeth, widened her stance. This was going to be impossible, she realized. She could add the clam and raised Mizukage to the sight of those she couldn't see, but she wouldn't be able to show everyone where every bubble was-

The Mizukage shouted a warning, and the bubbles slammed through the air, and she painted as many as she could to the people it was aiming for, a group to the front off to her left, and at the same time somebody in their periphery saw a bow and arrow and it gave her an idea and she was overwhelmed.

"Sew- shut- the- siphons!" she managed, and couldn't bring herself to make it more coherent.
"Sew- close- siphons!"

"Siphons?!" someone yelled back in a nasally voice, "What's a-

The bubbles were feet from the group of shinobi-

The ground erupted and with sounds like chakra coated kunai blades slamming through practice targets back home, bubbles slammed and blew up against solid walls of sand that spun to meet them. Fumiko couldn't turn or look or move.

There was a blissful silence then. Fumiko's ears were ringing. Blood dripped from her chin, and she didn't know if she was biting her lip unconsciously or if her nose was still bleeding from the pressure.

And then Gaara's sand oozed into mud. All at once she saw Gaara's hand in someone's eyesight- his!

Did she have Ohnoki too? Fumiko didn't know, just kept as many connections as she possibly could active.
"Hey! It's Lord Gaara!"

"Finally!" the Mizukage huffed. "What took you so long? I hope this time, you'll be able to seal me!"

"Gaara-

She didn't know how many people she was talking to, just that she was making words in people's sound translations.

"Yes, I intend to," Gaara said from somewhere above.

"I'm looking forward to it," the Mizukage said, and then bubbles wreaked across the sky towards him. Fumiko jumped back suddenly, trying to catch him in her periphery and- there! The bubbles attacking him were a part of the illusion, she realized with relief, he could see them in the clam's Genjutsu, which she let seep through.

The sand jerked to defend him, seeping into mud also, and then there was a sharp twang and the whistle of several kunai, and an arrow and knives sprouted just below the tip of an exhaling siphon, effectively pinching it shut. Gaara fell to the ground before anyone could react, landing easily on his feet, and the Mizukage hadn't seen or heard.

"Commander!" a shinobi cried happily, and more bubbles instantly seeped out of the ground and snapped towards them. Gaara flicked his hand up sharply from where he crouched, and sand leapt to the ninjas' defense, but was smashed apart by the watery bubbles of oil too quickly to block the attack completely. There was an explosion of force and dust that cratered into the earth and sent ninja flying in every direction and- Fumiko was glad she hadn't been standing there, she didn't know if she could activate this whole Genjutsu again-

Somehow she saw him glancing her way. She moved her arms. Still, the bubbles hadn't killed, only severely injured. She took what she saw and she dropped the shinobi who were suddenly too injured to fight, gaining a little concentration only to lose it with every new sound and scent that appeared in every vision.

The mist dissipated slightly. She couldn't find Ohnoki.

"Don't look elsewhere!" the Mizukage barked at Gaara's distress- the bubbles were attacking everyone, and they were screaming and- Fumiko moved, wobbled into the side of a stone crag, tried to stay protected- "Pay attention!"

There was the sound of thrashing water on sand, and another explosion, and she had more focus. Fumiko was on her knees, to look injured or small or out of sight, she would take what she could get.

"Someone get the other one!"

Nobody moved. There was too much open space, too many injured.

"Hey." the Mizukage said in a low voice, "Is that all you got?"

Gaara only panted. She didn't know what his plan was, but- where was Ohnoki? Unless they were planning to- But Ohnoki couldn't see. Maybe, though, he could attack the general area that everyone was surrounding? Had the shinobi left any weapons embedded in the-

The siphon? Could he see it?
She would have to wait and see, for now it was all she could do to keep up the illusions.

"You guys are useless." the Mizukage spat, and Fumiko detected real anger now, frustration. The Mizukage was distressed- and for good reason. If her body was being controlled and forced her to attack innocent people, and the only ones who could stop her were too weak to do it...

"Gaara, he uses w... water and oil."

If Gaara heard her, he didn't react, only watched Mu carefully through the half collapsed, congealed mess of his attempted shield.

"... You tried to stop Mu, first, didn't you?" the Mizukage muttered. Then he snapped, turning around and jabbing his finger in Gaara's direction. "You always have to take out the strongest opponent first! That's what winning a battle is all about!"

"We did," Gaara said.

"Oh, please!" the Mizukage said after half a second of disbelief, bringing up his fist. "It's obvious that I'm the stronger one! I mean, that Mu guy looks like nothing more than a half-dead mummy! Am I right?"

Gaara paused. "Maybe," he admitted. "However, appearances can be deceiving. You are strong."

"Hmph!" the Mizukage put a hand on his hip, facing Gaara completely. A few shinobi struggled to their feet. Some were unconscious all together. "So you finally understand... Augh- wait! What do you mean by appearances can be deceiving?!!"

Gaara was silent.

Somebody in Fumiko's web of shinobi looked up, and Fumiko saw Ohnoki hovering on a platform of Gaara's sand, and the bright light that sang from his fingertips and then faded half a second later. She couldn't think of why, because something warm was flooding her ear in trickles, and she couldn't keep this up much longer, but everyone who could still move, especially Gaara, needed to be able to see any incoming attacks, and if she stopped now, she wouldn't be able to start again.

She realized sand was kicking up around the edges of the clam.

Ohnoki dropped from the platform, fist coated in stone, and reared back.

"Ah, I see," the Mizukage said, finally noticing, too late for his bubbles to have any effect. "But there's just one problem..."

Ohnoki smashed into the clam, and the impact, while not breaking anything permanently, smashed the top half into the bottom half of the shell, pinning the siphons shut. Two seconds, and the clam, distracted and disabled, was visible. The Mizukage leapt to the top of the clam, and to Ohnoki.

"That weak little punch won't be nearly enough, little Ohnoki," he teased. "Put some power into it! You're not using Dust release. You must be out of juice."

"You forget that I'm not the little Ohnoki from long ago that you made fun of," Ohnoki snapped. And then: "Earth Style: Superweighted Boulder Jutsu!"

There was a great rumbling sound, and then something loud and delicate like splintering glass. "Not bad, Ohnoki!" the Mizukage cried, sounding euphoric and a little surprised. "Not bad at all!"
The clam exploded from the pressure, pieces flying everywhere.

The repetitive effects of the clam ninjutsu faded, and whatever residual chakra was left behind in the brains of the shinobi had nothing to show them, nothing to control them, and the Genjutsu was gone. It would fade from them on it's own, unnoticed. Fumiko's arms went still.

And then all at once she released everything with a gasp, letting her chakra dissipate into the surrounding air.

She fell forward slightly, already having been on her knees, elbows hitting the ground in front of her and hair draping over her face. She couldn't raise herself any further just yet- her mind was screaming from the empty space, senses reeling from the switch of hundreds to one set, and her chakra immediately warmed again, hiding beneath her skin in bare increments as the rest escaped.

She couldn't seem to catch her breath and everything was spinning, but it would fade in a second. Everything in her body had to readjust.

The dust was clearing from the implosion, and Fumiko managed to look up, sweating, still shaking, and she saw Ohnoki on the ground in a similar position to her own, on elbows and knees. His back, Fumiko realized, and in her state it seemed almost hysterical, except it wasn't. Ohnoki had thrown his back.

"In my heart, I always knew that you would become Tsuchikage someday," the reincarnated Mizukage mused, stepping from the worst of the clouds of dust. He stopped just behind where Ohnoki struggled to stand. The Mizukage sighed. "But just look at you now- you're nothing more than a stubborn old fool with a bad back. I'll admit that punch had some real power to it, but you overdid it and put yourself out of commission."

He shook his head disapprovingly, and his arm came up seemingly without him even noticing, fingers curling in something that looked like kids playing with foam dart or water guns.

"Ah! Hey- hurry up and escape, wouldja?! This is the Ozoki clan's Watergun Jutsu-" his voice strained with the effort of trying to control his own body, to no avail. "Go on, I can't stop myself!"

There was a sharp sound, the twang of a rubber band or something similar. Fumiko didn't see what was probably the water that shot off his pointer finger, but she saw the way the Tsuchikage's body jerked and she screamed, "Ohnoki!" and managed to struggle to her hands.

There was a thud as Ohnoki's body hit the ground. Tears started to bead in her eyes, despite the faint dizziness ringing in her skull still.

"I told you, you fool," the Mizukage growled, arm still outstretched. "I told you you were way to old for this kind of thing now!"

And then suddenly, Ohnoki's figure imploded, and Fumiko realized, with no small amount of shaky relief- Sand Clone. She hadn't seen that move in years. It wasn't often lately Gaara had to resort to it.

The body collapsed and the color faded, and then just as quickly as it fell it surged upwards to wrap around the Mizukage violently and constricting, much to the reincarnated Kage's shock. She glanced to Gaara- she could breathe a bit better, now, and hear- and saw Ohnoki hovering into the air on a sand platform beside him. Gaara looked injured, now that she had the capacity to focus on his figure, but all right.
She breathed a little sigh of relief to herself. Mu, wielder of dust and destruction, eraser of battlefields- he and his jutsu were nothing to be trifled with or taken lightly and- if a few scratches were all the damage he took from that kind of fight, Fumiko would take it.

"Hmph," the Mizukage mused to himself as the sand wrapped tighter and thicker around him. "This kid is going to be seriously big."

Enough shinobi had recovered now to stand behind Gaara as the sand began to close, and they threw kunai tagged with seals into the barrier, but- "No, it's not working!" one shinobi called in frustration as the sand began to droop. "That slime is keeping the sand from sticking together!"

Still, Gaara tried again, arms snapping. The sand wrapped around the Mizukage again, and another sphere curled out of the ground around it for air distance and time to release the kanji chakra in the next round of seals, and then another and another until it was so thick and tight it could be used for home foundation. Gaara and Ohnoki's platforms sped backwards as it grew and grew and then suddenly it packed together like a center of gravity into a pyramid.

"Grand Sand Mausoleum!"

"Quickly," a shinobi called, "Throw all the sealing tags we've got at him!"

Kunai flew and whistled from all directions, Fumiko could hear completely again, and although she still had a twisted gut and felt like she would puke, that was partly from hunger. A few more seconds and she would be able to stand up again-

"There's no way that his slime can keep up with this much sand," the leader of what was likely the fourth division's secondary sealing team said to those with him, who had thrown the tags. "Now, activate the sealing chains!"

They put their hands together into quick signs, and black webbed out from each tag to wind with each other, and soon the pattern spread across the entire pyramid. "Yes," Fumiko gasped, and she stood, leaning one hand against the crag beside her and finding her legs strong.

"Good," Ohnoki said, hand still pressed to his back. "Looks like we've got this fight won!"

His words immediately soured on the air as no later than they'd left his mouth, the mausoleum Gaara had created glowed violently like a small sun, and then imploded in a cloud of scalding steam and smoke that engulfed the area. Fumiko leaned against the crag completely, holding on and holding up an arm to protect her eyes, although it stung and snapped at her skin.

When it faded Fumiko coughed, finding the air again, and glanced up only to freeze at the sight of the face in the clouds, forming a horrifically smirking face with narrowed eyes. Immediately she blanched and looked back down, a trained habit, and her breath quickened at the sight- but her obsession with clouds was going to get her killed- she looked up again, hesitant and fighting herself, just enough to up and run for Gaara and the band of shinobi surrounding him.

"What the hell is that?" a ninja cried.

"Could it be another Genjutsu?"

"Genjutsu?" Gaara echoed, staring up into the sky, but then Ohnoki shook his head.

"That's no Genjutsu," he said grimly. "That's the Infinite Explosion Ninjutsu of the Mizukage! It gave my predecessor Lord Mu some real trouble. It's the Steam Imp!"
She made it to the side of Gaara's cloud but, aside from pausing to glance at him, made no attempt at his attention. She didn't know, for once, what the jutsu Ohnoki had mentioned was, and she didn't know how quickly or with what it would strike.

Carefully she brought a hand to her ear and glanced at her fingers, now smudged at the tips with red. So her ear had bled, too- but it seemed to have stopped along with her nose. She was fully functioning again- tired, but finally alert and in control of her surroundings.

There was a small patter then, like the release of rain, but then something hard and cold and small smacked against her arm, her shoulder, and Fumiko squinted up at the sky in surprise. It was hailing. She'd never seen hail before.

Gaara seemed similarly confused, as did, Fumiko guessed, most of the Sunagakure shinobi in the area.

"Hail...?" someone breathed.

Ohnoki turned his head to face Gaara. "All the moist air that was forced upward by the steam must've been cooled in the upper atmosphere and turned into hail," he said, and Gaara blinked at him, and then glanced back forward at a strange howling noise, like wind whipping through buildings.

Something was forming a few yards in front of them, and Fumiko had to squint as it seemingly phased into existence, slowly becoming more and more solid-looking. It was a small but wide-around copy of the Mizukage, with a wider, younger-looking face and mischievous or malicious eyes that looked scribbled on with black crayon, and shorter, spiked blond hair.

Steam billowed from it's sleeves almost invisibly and it immediately got smaller, looking shrouded in steam that wafted lightly around him.

"It's shrinking!" a ninja called out, confused.

They watched it until it seemed to reach a stable size, and the steam subsided slightly. Why? Fumiko chewed her lip. Ohnoki had called it the "Steam Imp Jutsu" and it'd been started by the area around the Mizukage erupting into enough steam so hot that it was able to rise quickly enough to cause an instantaneous area-wide hailstorm. Despite it's mostly solid-looking form, if that was hot and the hail was cold, was that why it'd shrunk a little, steaming?

"What is this?" Gaara wondered aloud to Ohnoki, who seemed to know exactly what was going on.

"It's a clone comprised of oil and water taken from the Mizukage's body," he answered. "The exterior surface of it's childlike form is composed of oil, while it's interior is water. It's special feature is that it can both heat up and cool down easily- when it moves around, the oil on its surface increases the temperature precipitously, which in turn causes rapid vaporization of the water inside- resulting in a steam explosion! And when the hail cools it, it shrinks back down to it's original size and is ready to explode again!"

"That could be really dangerous," she said, thinking about all the mild to severe steam burns she'd gotten cooking, and the way some of her exposed skin had turned pink in the Imp's creation. "That much steam at a close range- it could cook you alive."

Ohnoki nodded. "Don't underestimate it."

As they watched it, the Imp suddenly sprouted a blade on its right arm, growing out of nothing-like a huge half of a battle-axe blade. It was bigger than his arm. Fumiko tensed, and dropped
slightly, lowering her center of gravity, tensing in preparation for quick movement.

She still had her Bakuryou strapped to her back, and several other, smaller weapons besides in her bag but she didn't think they would do much against something congealed from oil and water. She wondered how much damage the jutsu's blade would actually do- would it cut, or simply act like a bludgeon?

The hail smarted against her skin where it hit. It smelled like cold air and a humid kitchen.

It jerked forward and someone warned, "it's coming!" Fumiko abandoned her weapons, not yet knowing how they were going to stop it but knowing she would be better off just trying to avoid it for now.

Gaara's arm shot forward, and the sand rose around them to dart forward in massive explosions of sand around the Imp, but it was too fast for him to catch, and then all at once it was among them. Their number had been severely weakened by the Mizukage from the previous fighting, and the injured were farther back, out of the way; so there was less for this imp to get through.

It smashed into one and knocked out another, and then Fumiko jumped back from Gaara's to give herself space to move. It came at her, blade raised, but balked and bounced against a bit of sand that had raised and hardened to meet it. She risked a look at Gaara, who was looking back, alarmed, and the Imp darted past the blockage and Fumiko rolled forward to duck beneath it before standing again.

Bored, it flew past her, nearly brushing her arm in the process. Fumiko stumbled but didn't fall. Shinobi ran in chase of it, but it stayed just ahead, always with that strange grin on its face.

"The real Mizukage should be somewhere nearby," Ohnoki said. "Don't bother with the Imp- just go after the original." His sand rose, Gaara giving him a better vantage point. "Another feature of this jutsu is that it greatly weakens the caster while in use!"

Gaara looked over to her, and Fumiko straightened. "Can you sense him?" he asked, which had about ten other questions wrapped up inside it, about the jutsu she had cast and the way there was blood on her face, and he was asking after her current capability and even her ability to sense at all.

"Yeah- if he's nearby-" She clapped her hands together and focused. Colors flickered to life in her mind's eye in various shades of pained and scared and determined- the Division itself, all with different, specific colors- and she stretched. Then her eyes snapped open, and she pointed to the icy pale yellow chakra she'd seen. "There!" she called and, seeing the obstacles, "behind those rocks!"

Ohnoki turned immediately, and then fell, clutching his back.

"Gaara, leave Ohnoki here," she ordered, jogging back to them, and then pointed away. "Go and try to seal him, let me try and help with your back, Ohnoki," she said, turning her attention to him. Gaara nodded once, and then his sand zipped off, followed closely by other shinobi. She reached up to touch Ohnoki's platform, and it sank gently to her level.

Fumiko risked a glance at the Imp, who still skittered around, just beyond the reach of the ninja that had chased it. Again it stood before them, grinning widely.

"Hurry, child," Ohnoki grunted, "Do what you can."

"Right," she set her hands against his back and they immediately oozed green. Fumiko winced. "Oh, Ohnoki, what've you done to it?" she murmured, and then set about to gently prodding at his spine and the nerves surrounding it. She raised her voice as she worked to call, "Keep it away from
us, if you can!"

"Hai, Lady Fumiko!"

"Right!"

"C'mon guys!"

"Tell me when this pain here goes away," Fumiko said, tapping a spot with her finger. "That's what's keeping you from moving-"

"What's happening?"

"Is it me, or is it getting bigger?"

Fumiko glanced over and yes, it was growing. Ohnoki grimaced. "The more it moves around, the faster it heats up and vaporizes the water inside," he called. "The hail stopped, too- another explosion of steam is imminent-!"

From here, she could at least see the sealing of the Mizukage, which must have finally worked. But even as the mausoleum finished forming, the Imp was gone, dashing towards where Gaara and the others stood sealing off the pyramid.

"It's going to stop the sealing," Fumiko said urgently. She hadn't even noticed the hail stop- was it going to try and explode by Gaara? His sand would be useless to protect him even for a second, the steam would melt it away without issue-

Ohnoki sucked in a breath, and for a second Fumiko thought she'd hurt him, and then he said, "That's it, child, you've gotten it."

"Good!" she pulled her hands back and backed away, fixing to run to where the Imp had gone. "Ohnoki, don't strain it or it'll happen again, and it'll still hurt, okay?"

She didn't wait for an answer, just turned and bolted in shunshin, mind whirling. The hail had stopped, but the air was still heavy, which meant that it could be turned on and off at will- which meant that it had to still be cold enough to freeze just a little above their heads.

So if they could make it hail again or rain again or something, right before the Imp exploded, they could neutralize or stop the impact completely. Oh, why didn't they have any other water-style users in the Fourth Division? Why hadn't she thought that through? She should've realized-elemental differences- even if those handful of water users had been on standby in a long range, they still should've had them.

The tags were gone when she reached them, tip of the pyramid darkening with the Mizukage's slime, and the Steam Imp hovered beside it. She glanced worriedly at Gaara- how many of these had he made? How much chakra had he used between their fight with Rasa and now?

But he seemed okay, if a little run ragged, so she had to let it go for now.

The Mizukage's head pushed out from the pyramid, and then ducked down for a second to avoid an angry shinobi's influx of shuriken. Then he popped back out again, grinning slightly. "This really is a perfect little hidey-hole!" he exclaimed.

Ohnoki, still on Gaara's platform of sand- much to Fumiko's relief, Ohnoki could stand but needed to stay inactive for as long as possible- came finally from where the Steam Imp had risen to the
Mizukage's side in the beginning.

Gaara stared him down, but the Mizukage only lifted his head. "I was once one of the five Kage, too, you know." Then he glanced back down, looking almost- pleased? Fumiko would never understand how shinobi, Mai or Naruto or whoever, could enjoy their fights, like they were playing a board game amongst friends. "As long as I have my oil, your sand jutsu simply won't be able to touch me. Unless, of course, you can seal me up real quick!"

"That does seem to be the case," Ohnoki allowed.

"Now!" the Mizukage shouted, looking excited. "How are you going to take me down, then?"

Ohnoki raised his hands up slightly. "Honestly, I was hoping you'd tell us!" he said, exasperated.

Fumiko found it a little strange how easy Rasa had been to beat compared to literally every other Kage they had fought. She'd known they would win that fight, but- had Rasa always been that weak, or was Gaara just that strong now? Or both? Had they just been afraid of him or whatever it was they'd felt because of how he'd looked to them as children?

"Hmph..." The Mizukage paused in thought, and then grinned widely again. "Nah, I've changed my mind, I'm done with all of that," he said. "Sorry, everyone!"

"You were cooperative until just now," Gaara said, voice raised with his authority. He sounded tired, but not like he would fall, or that his fighting ability would be hindered from it. He still sounded strong. "What, have you decided to help the enemy?"

"Nope! Wrong," the Mizukage announced. "I mean, I am a former Kage, after all. And actually, I am still helping you out! Only in a different way."

Gaara leaned forward on his sand, frustrated and wary. His fingers curled into fists at his side.

"Which way is that, exactly?" Ohnoki snapped.

"If you can't beat me using all of your abilities, then you're worse off than I am, you old fool!"

Fumiko wanted to call out that they actually had a lot more people to fight before they won this war and that if the Mizukage shortened their number or depleted their chakra then they'd be in no shape at all to defeat anyone else after him, so his argument only made sense if the enemy would let them take a week long vacation from the war to replenish- but then the Imp leapt down into the fray again, Gaara and Ohnoki dodging to the left and right on their sand to avoid it.

It hit harder than she expected, and the ground heaved, and Fumiko's feet left the soil. She was thrown back in a cloud of dust only to land a few yards away, breath smacking out of her lungs. She could hear Gaara's sand rushing, though, and so pushed up on her hands to see what was going on before shakily standing again as the dust cleared.

Gaara's sand was pounding into the Imp, now the size of the crags surrounding them, and it seemed to casually push back- likely the sand was sliding off it's oily exterior before it could really stop it. The Imp was nothing more than slowed despite the force Gaara was using, and Gaara was quickly forced to retreat backwards on his sand platform, still with his arms raised, trying to shove it back.

"It's going to explode!" someone yelled above the chaos.

"Just when I thought I'd found the Golden Child of the five Kage," the Mizukage huffed.
Fumiko darted forward. She had an idea, but-

"Kazekage!" the Mizukage snapped, angrily. "You're just an ordinary child!"

Gaara was right in front of it, and his sand was rising to surround them all even though he was still in the open, and the Imp was growing and beginning to smell like burning deep-fry. It was too late for her to think. She was there and she put her hands up and there wasn't time to try and raise an Earth Wall-

She wondered if Gaara knew she'd slipped through his protective shield.

There was a sharp hiss.

Her hands flew into Boar Ram Dog and she blew into her cupping hands and felt her chakra fly into it and spun for the momentum. Gaara tensed and he was going to get a direct hit to try and do something he was planning, and she didn't know what it was but the air was cold and the water she pulled from it would be cold and as the Imp started to glow she reared-

"Gaara!" she yelled for warning. And then: "Suiton: Hahonryū!"

... "How can you not be worried?" he exclaimed, flinging his arms up. "I mean, you're the same as me- worse than me, even, you've got no real training. Not like us anyway..." ~

... Shiragiku's eyes hurt.

That was all he could think of: his eyes hurt. They were tired and dry and they itched, and they were just sore.

He was sat in his tent, waiting for somebody to come in or not with some poisoned wound or another, and his face was warm from blood and since-dried tears, and he thought maybe he was going to puke, or wake up suddenly.

He didn't know what to do, or what to think, so he just sat there.

Eishi was dead.

Mai was gone.

Otokaze-sensei, and the Tools, were missing, and declared MIA.

And here he was sat, safe enough in the middle of a war, waiting for a non-severe wound to come strolling in through his tent's flaps. A wrapped gash on his arm itched, but he didn't scratch it.

They were barely Chuunin, he thought, as he had a thousand times since the day began. They hadn't been properly tested, nor trained...

Their team had been together for just a little over a year, merely a fraction of a fraction of the time an average team got together, let alone those who graduated into Chuunin and were placed in units together. And now it had already been torn apart.

He'd locked the scroll away in a small box amongst his supplies, both to keep it out of the way and to keep it safe from any damage or loss. He was still too much in shock to think about what would
happen later, but at that moment, all he could really think about was how little time they had all
gotten together in the long run.

Did he wish they'd never come here?

That answer would have to wait, he supposed distantly. It would have to wait on Mai, who had
likely saved a hundred lives and could go on to save hundreds more. But at the same time, did that
excuse it? Would he honestly accept victory in this war as a suitable substitute for his teammate's
life?

Shiragiku really wasn't sure.

His musings were interrupted by the zipping sound of his tent flap opening up. Shiragiku stood
immediately, wiping his eyes of any fresh tears that had made their way into his eyes while he'd
been lost in his thoughts. He headed for the supplies in the back of the small tent.

"You can sit," he said aloud. His voice was a bit croaky, but that could be passed off as disuse or
adaptation to the strange coastal air. "What kind of wound do you have? What caused it?"

"It's on my leg," the shinobi said, and Shiragiku froze in his crouched position rifling for herbs, the
vertebrae in his spine locking. "I don't think it's poisoned, but they said to come here in case it was
infected."

"... I s-see." His voice swooped, and he grabbed a random herb that had nothing to do with
infection and stood, and he turned, and oh. Oh, he hated them. He hated the Akatsuki, and he hated
Madara. He hated this war.

He didn't know that he'd ever felt hatred before, but right now, he wanted to break someone's neck.

Eishi grinned at him easily, looking suspiciously like he had before they'd met up on the coast
during Mai's fight with her previous ANBU Taicho, with the same wounds, in no other states of
healing or worsening. The henge was using the wound he'd seen caused by Eishi's fan, trying to
pass it off as a recent injury.

What did they want? To infiltrate the medical camps?

Well, they should have been more careful.

He understood Mai a little better, now.

"Hey, are you all right?" the impostor asked, and it was an impostor, because Mai wasn't careless
enough to think a random body was her teammate's and seal it wrongly. She would do everything
to prove it hadn't been him before giving up.

Shiragiku smiled slightly, and let his tired, aching eyes speak for him. "Oh, yes," he said, and
gestured to the little table, where it sat obediently. "I just... lost a close friend today."

"Oh. I'm sorry about that," it said, and it sounded so earnest with his voice that Shiragiku's heart
ached. The sound of it made his eyes water. He stepped up with the herb, and wondered how this
thing was so stupid that it was blindly accepting that he hadn't ground or mixed it with anything.
"We've lost so many people in the fighting."

"We have," he said softly.

And then, as it looked away towards its leg, his face twisted, and he snapped the fisted herb
forward to punch it in the face as hard as he possibly could. And it fell, shrieking its surprise, from
the chair, which clattered loudly as it was knocked over, and Shiragiku was on it in an instant,
abandoning the shattered pieces of the random plant bulb he'd grabbed and going for his blades,
and he stabbed it and he stabbed it and he stabbed it, screaming angrily, until it stopped moving for
good.

His breath sucked, and he was crying again. He was hyperventilating. He was going into shock
again.

Eishi's smashed face folded and moulded until it was a softer, more pliable substance, white and
with wide teeth and green hair, and this wasn't a henge. He didn't know what it was but it wasn't a
henge and the zetsu could transform.

In seconds his tent was swarming and bursting with concerned and startled med-nin and shinobi
who had heard his enraged yelling, and they pulled him off the damn zetsu and to a seat and shined
lights in his eyes and asked him questions that he physically couldn't answer, and he was trying not
to cut their throats out as they touched him and talked to him and led him to a mat to lie down.

He didn't want to lie down. He wanted to go back in time and grab onto Eishi before the statue
blew them away.

... ~ "Eishi," she said. "We're capable enough, aren't we?" She smiled, nudging her shoulder against
his. He glanced at her, unsure. "Besides... we both have people who want to protect us, ne? People
who would never let us get hurt." ~

...

The water wheel she threw grew just as the Imp exploded, and she didn't know if it worked
because the world turned white and the impact as water hissed against steam mixed with the force
of the explosion hit her full-on and smashed her backwards just seconds after she'd released the
technique. She flipped into the air, and she hit the ground hard, and something in her shoulder
screamed and she plowed into the shield of sand Gaara had created to protect the Division.

Her eyes crossed, slightly, as she looked up, but she had enough focus to see what remained of the
giant-imp-sized wall of water she'd expanded just in front of it as it exploded just before it
collapsed, rushing into the earth. Steam still hissed upward, forced to go in every direction but
forward, but judging from the mud on the ground, hadn't expanded much farther than halfway
between them and the Imp. It'd only gotten through some of the water.

Fumiko took deep breaths, trying to regain the air impact with the ground and shield had stolen
from her, and as she sat up, clutched at her left shoulder that, judging from the horrible pain, she'd
probably dislocated. Her arm hung limp.

Still, she could hear the murmurs of surprise from behind the split-second sand shield she'd seen
coming, and then, all at once, from the softer, less dangerous cloud of steam and smoke that had
come from her freezing jutsu meeting steam, a sphere of sand- that Gaara must have known
wouldn't have saved him from the Steam Imp's level of water-based destruction- came shooting
into the open.

He wasn't taking the time to figure out where the water had come from, but was taking advantage
of his lack of injury to immediately go on the offensive and, Fumiko realized, he had a plan. She
could see it in his speed.
The hail started again, in smaller cubes and spheres than before. They pinged against the stones and on the ground, and she took advantage of it, scooping a handful from where they had landed beside her and gripping them to her dislocation. The second the Division members came around the shield, she was calling for help.

Gaara's shield split in three, a platform and two offensives.

She couldn't hear the Mizukage from here- still a bit dizzy from impact and such a massive drop in chakra all at once. Still, she wasn't yet close to total deprivation. She could still fight.

The Imp was shrinking with the hail and residue of Fumiko's defense, and settled again at the tip of the pyramid beside the Mizukage's exposed head. Again, it spurted a blade to go on the attack, and Gaara's arm jerked forward instantly to counter, sand dashing forward around him. Still, almost faster than she could track the Imp leapt and sprung from each one, dipping and dodging through the air straight at him.

Gaara flew above her head, dodging around the head of his Karura shield, and the Imp smacked into it once before backing up and going around to continue the chase. Now Fumiko couldn't see what was going on, trapped on the wrong side of the defensive shield, and so she gritted her teeth and stood, leaning her good shoulder against the wall of solid sand in order to hobble towards one end and turn the corner.

It took too long, a few tense minutes, and in that time she could hear the scuffles and impacts of Gaara's attacks and defenses. Either way, she cleared the edge, and managed to catch a hit Gaara expelling into sand- a clone.

Fumiko didn't look at the ground, unsure if the Imp or the Mizukage could see her and unwilling to give him away. The hail had stopped again, she noticed with some unease. It could explode at any moment, the more it dodged around Gaara's attacks...

A shinobi saw her struggling and jumped up to meet her, seeming to just realize she'd been left out of the shield- or, more accurately, that she'd squeezed through it as it formed.

"Are you all right?" he asked, "What happened?"

"My shoulder is dislocated," she said through gritted teeth. "Try- ask around and see if anyone here knows anything about medical practices."

"Right- of course."

And he helped her to sit heavily against the sand Karura shield, underneath one of her arms so she could see both sides of the shield, and Gaara came from the ground, the growing Imp oozing out of his clone's grabbing attack to splatter on the ground and then reform like a kid's toy goo. Before it could move again, Gaara's hand shot out, natural sand from the ground mixed with his own worming up the Imp.

"The speed of your sand is no match, you'll never catch him! So what-"

And then he broke off, and seemed to notice the same thing Fumiko had a split second earlier: Gaara had caught it.

Sand whirled up the Imp's body as it attempted to expand, coming together like a thick web until it finally closed over it's entire body in a tight, constricting ball. It immediately began to expand and crack as the Imp's insides heated up, and pieces of it shattered away.
"But, either way," the Mizukage sang. "Kaboom!"

Steam exploded through the holes with a force like a volcano, whistling like a teapot on the stove. And then the noises stopped: the cracking of hardened sand and spitting steam silenced, leaving only the quiet wind the smoke had left behind.

And then the steam and dust faded, sinking into the air and into the ground. And Gaara's sphere, for a moment, was intact, to Fumiko's shock.

And then it started to crumble away, but left inside was merely a statue of the imp- a half-exposed golden replica.

Gaara had... gilded it?

The fight with Rasa, she realized. How much Dust had been left behind in his sands after mixing attacks with his father's? Just how hot was that Steam Imp as it exploded?

Gaara looked up, finally done, hand falling to his side. "There was gold dust hidden inside that Sand Clone from earlier," he called coolly up to the still-trapped Mizukage in explanation. "I took advantage of that thing's heat to melt and then bond the gold to it. Gold is about twenty times heavier than water- which is why it's movements had become sluggish."

And why it slowed down so much, Fumiko realized. Despite the pain reeling in her shoulder, she grinned.

There was a long silence, the Mizukage shocked. But eventually, he spoke again. "But still- why didn't the Imp explode, then?"

"The sand that I mixed with the hail was enough to cool this thing down," he explained, reaching up to touch his probably cold sand, and he was a genius, Fumiko thought with a wide beam. Since the hail was ice and not water, it hadn't turned his sand to mud in the time it took him to attack, so it hadn't mattered that the hail disappeared. "Gold also has good thermal conductivity, which came in handy for chilling it's water vapor and steam."

"That was well played," the Mizukage said with a smile. "Truly an act worthy of a current Kage. I'm impressed you came up with such a strategy. Wait a minute..." He studied Gaara for a moment silently. And then he smiled again, pleased. "I guess you really are a Golden Child after all."

And then Uzumaki Naruto skidded to a stop next to them, appearing from thin air in the speed with which he shut off his shunshin. "Are you all right, Gaara?!" he yelled, fists clenched and looking tensed for battle.

"What's the news on your end?" Gaara asked, much more calmly.

Fumiko only at that moment reacted, mind spinning. What in the world was Uzumaki Naruto doing here? He was supposed to be hidden away with Bee to protect Kurama, not on the battlefield looking as though he'd already taken blows! Gaara didn't seem awfully concerned about his sudden unexpected appearance either- had something happened while he had left to fight Mu?

"We sealed the Third Raikage," Uzumaki Naruto said, straightening. "We saw that something had exploded, so I ran here faster than Temari and the others to help out."

"I see." Gaara turned to look at him. "We are almost done, too."

"Good," Uzumaki Naruto said with a nod. He looked wired, like at any second he would bolt. "But
"Hold on- where's your enemy?"

"Look at that," the Mizukage teased by way of introduction. "You really do have friends!"

"Huh?" Uzumaki Naruto glanced up. "Woah! What-! What is he?" he exclaimed, sounding extremely startled. "He's got a really weird body!"

"No, no," Gaara said. She could hear the smile in his voice, but guessed it wasn't on his face. "That's my jutsu."

The Mizukage chuckled, tickled. "Kazekage," he said. "Well, I see that you're the smart one out of your friends." He paused, and then said, a bit more seriously, "You make a good pair."

After a heartbeat, Gaara brought his hands up to finish the jutsu again. Fumiko gave out the last of her strong red sealing tags to the passing shinobi from the secondary sealing team, as they'd used theirs up trying to seal the Mizukage previously- when she stopped by a medical tent next, she would have to sit down with some paper and ink and make more.

The Mizukage was sealed without too much more ceremony, and in that time a shinobi approached to help with her shoulder. He was young, and his clothes spelled Sound village. She wasn't surprised that a sound-ninja would know a little healing- their land was lush in places, and the village small, founded by Orochimaru, genius doctor of the Leaf.

"H-hello," he said softly, like she would spook. "Are you all right?"

She smiled at him tiredly to reassure him. With her shoulder reset and a chakra pill, she would be okay to fight again. Between several small attentions with medical ninjutsu from herself and others, most of her larger wounds had been healed, although the bandages remained to prevent any possible infection or reopening. A sling would probably be ideal, but this wasn't the place for one- so she would just have to be careful.

Gaara approached her as the shinobi reorganized themselves and sorted out the wounded for first aid, joining with a few who had come ahead of those ninja who had helped to seal the reincarnated Raikage.

Fumiko had helped the Sound-nin lie her down properly, directing his actions, and a second after he pulled gently but firmly on her arm, the bone snapping back into place with an audible clack, Fumiko grunted with pain and looked up to see him crouching down beside her.

"Fumiko," he said, and it managed to sound affectionate and admonishing and worried at the same time. "What happened? How are you?"

"I'm okay, Gaara," she said. The pain in her arm had diminished dramatically in just those few seconds, so she raised her hand to probe it, and then briefly soak it with healing chakra, just to erase the weakness. His face was bruised, and there were a few bloody scrapes on his neck and arms, but aside from that, he looked healthy. "I just landed on it wrong, that's all."

"That's not what I meant," he muttered, and Fumiko snickered. He reached out a hand to touch her face, fingers tracing around one of her eyes. Then he looked up at the Sound-nin, who looked not quite sure what to do with himself. Oto and Suna shinobi never tended to get along well, if only from awkwardness. "Thank you," he said.

"O-of course," he said, nodding furiously, and then he stooped a little to help Gaara lift her back up into a sitting position to catch her breath, and then he smiled at her, bowing his head for a moment. "Thank you for everything you did," he said. "Sunagakure certainly produces more and more
powerful shinobi."

At this, Gaara glanced at her quizzically, but waited to speak until after she'd thanked him and he was gone. "What happened?" he asked again, helping her all the way to her feet so she could search her bag for a lost chakra pill. "What was that jutsu you used, to reveal the clam?"

"It was just a Genjutsu," she said. "I mean, a really big one, but-"

"You don't have nearly the chakra control or level needed for that wide of an expanse of shinobi," he said, frowning softly in confusion. "And yet, afterwards, you could sense chakra, launch a C-rank Suiton ninjutsu, and still have the capacity for healing?"

"I don't think I really- used any more chakra for that Genjutsu than I lose normally," she said, curling her nose slightly in thought. "I don't really- I don't know what it was, really. I just kinda- took what was already falling out and- made it do stuff."

Gaara's brows rose, and he used his thumbnail to scrape a bit of dried blood from the space above her lips.

"It was a lot of people at once," she admitted.

"Hey! Fumiko-chan!"

She glanced away from Gaara to see Uzumaki Naruto bounding towards them enthusiastically, and he caught her in a huge hug that lifted her off the ground and spun her in a circle. She laughed, a delighted "Uzumaki Naruto!" spilling happily from her lips. She didn't know why he was here, but she would most certainly hug him back.

And then he froze, and Fumiko's momentum had her jerking sideways a bit, clinging to his neck. "Aw, crap!" he exclaimed. "Are you hurt or something? Should I not be doing that? Haha, sorry, Gaara," he tacked on, and then Fumiko slid from his arms to the ground, a bit dizzy- but in a good way.

"I'm fine, Uzumaki Naruto."

"Woah! Was your ear bleeding?" He poked the side of her face lightly.

Fumiko grinned. "Just a little. What are you doing here, Uzumaki Naruto? How's Kurama? How'd you seal the Raikage?" Behind her, she heard the Karura shield collapsing, and turned slightly in Uzumaki Naruto's light hold to see Gaara pulling it apart, dragging his original sands back into his gourd. He was watching them out of the corner of his eyes.

"That's a lotta questions," her friend laughed. "What about you, huh? What are you doing in the Fourth Division?"

"I had to, Uzumaki Naruto!"

"Uh-huh."

"Hey, you're not supposed to be here either!"

"Wh- that's a long story! I'm totally allowed to be here now!"

"Uh-huh," she echoed, and Uzumaki Naruto huffed before stepping back and crossing his arms indignantly. "I think she spends too much time with her sister," he muttered to Gaara, who stepped
lightly to stand beside them, work done.

Gaara smiled slightly, and shook his head. A bit of hair fell into his eyes, but she didn't bother brushing it back up. He was kind of filthy anyway. "We'll have to head out soon," he said. "There's more fighting to be done if we're going to win this war."

"Yeah, yeah," Uzumaki Naruto said.

Eventually, the sealwork was properly protected, the rest of Temari's subdivision of Wind and Earth style users, and Fumiko had a bit of a chance to find somebody with ink to both reinforce the mausoleum to prevent the Mizukage's oil from seeping it apart again as well as work on some new seals while Gaara spoke to an Intelligence shinobi alongside Uzumaki Naruto and Ohnoki, surrounded by the Division.

"Relay our current battle status to HQ," he said. Fumiko was sat on the ground painting her seals and still paying attention to the Division's happenings nearby three or four injured who hadn't yet recovered, in case they needed her help. Gaara had been right- they'd need to leave again, to support or search out the next big fight.

"Yes sir."

"You fought well against the former five Kage, everyone," Ohnoki said, stepping forward. The Division was set surrounding her, Gaara, Ohnoki, Uzumaki Naruto and Temari, but whether it was in a defensive position or if they were just congregating in search of orders, Fumiko wasn't sure. "Victory is ours on this battlefield."

"Okay." Temari said. "Instruct the wounded. Get them to the medical teams. All those who can still fight, stand by for further orders from HQ!" Then she glanced down at Ohnoki and, in a quieter voice, said, "Lord Tsuchikage, you should seek medical attention too."

"No! I'm totally fine, all right?"

"Listen," Temari said with a teasing smile, putting a hand on her hip. "Make sure you don't overdo it, old man."

"Don't you treat me like some doddering old fool," Ohnoki snapped. Fumiko looked up from her sealwork as the paint pulled together in tight seals underneath her palm, considering. He was still in pain, but there wasn't much she could do for a bad back aside from keep it from going out- Ohnoki was old, and that was just how it worked. "I could still take on you young ones- augh!"

Fumiko blinked as Sari and Matsuri each picked him up happily by one arm.

"Here you go," Matsuri said cheerily. "We'll take you over to medical corp to get you all checked out."

"L-" in his shock Ohnoki fumbled for a moment, and then he scowled. "Let go of me, you dolt! I can walk fine on my own."

"You really should just accept that you're old," Sari said with an equal pleasant smile on her face. It seemed the euphoria of victory hadn't yet left the group. Fumiko smiled. It hadn't left her, either. They'd defeated four out of five previous Kage level shinobi consecutively, and dark was only just now falling. They had suffered casualties, Fumiko knew, and while that was sobering, it wasn't yet in vain. "There isn't any shame in it."

"How dare you! I am the Tsuchikage, you know!"
"Yeees, I heard you say that yesterday, too."

"Lord Gaara, why don't you come by and visit later, 'kay?" Matsuri said as the two girls turned with Ohnoki still dangling between them, still smiling.

"Let me go I said! Didn't you hear me-?! Aughh!"

Fumiko winced at the audible sound of Ohnoki's back crackling again.

"This way," Sari sang.

"My back!"

"Please, stop squirming," she said over the sound of the Tsuchikage's pained whines. "Seriously."

Another seal done. Fumiko smiled as they walked off with Ohnoki in the direction of the nearest medical corp base, followed closely by those who carried other wounded, and stacked it on top of the small pile of seals she'd already completed- her good strong red ones, that she'd made prototypes of and tested them with chakras like Gaara and Uzumaki Naruto's for the level of difficulty to remove- and by her final draft, they hadn't been able to at all.

She probably should've gone back with the wounded to medical corp, and she might possibly be of more use there or even rejoin her actual Division, but she'd meant what she said. She was staying here.

"So, Naruto," Gaara said as Ohnoki's noise died down from the distance, turning slightly to face the blond. "You're a clone, aren't you?"

"Huh?" Fumiko glanced back up at him from her new sealwork. She hadn't been able to sense the difference. "Really?"

"Yeah," he said.

"And where is your original to be found right now?"

The Uzumaki-Naruto-clone paused, and then closed it's eyes in concentration. Fumiko looked back down to her painting- she needed to make enough for her and for the Sealing Units to tag their kunai with, and any other extras she could squeeze out in that time- but kept her ear open as Uzumaki Naruto explained the situation. He had several clones en route to every known battlefield, as the zetsu were beginning to wreak havoc in their mimicry.

Uzumaki Naruto, however, through the power and cooperation of Kurama the Nine-Tails, could sense ill-intent among all creatures- and thus had discovered that he could pick apart the real from the hiding. That was why he'd been allowed to go into the battlefields, and would be arriving at the front-lines of every fight come morning.

She glanced down at her wrist as she worked- and the charm there. So far as they knew, zetsu couldn't hold or use more than one person's chakra at a time, so she and Gaara were safe so long as they didn't empty the stones. How fitting, she thought, that for the two of them, even when foes were disguised as friends, they could still wholly trust each other.

Soon enough, though, it was dark out, and the Division was forced to seek better cover and set up camp. Fumiko passed out a handful of red seals to each shinobi in the First and Secondary sealing squads in the Fourth Division, as well as to Gaara and Uzumaki Naruto, and kept the eight extras to herself. She'd gotten quick at sealwork, practicing endlessly before they had even broke out for the
war, to make sure she could make seals quickly and efficiently under time constraints.

She talked with Gaara for a while into the night as the moon brightened in the sky, exchanging stories of their fights and accomplishments, touching shoulders and legs as tightly as they could while sitting on-watch. Uzumaki Naruto's clone may have been able to separate the zetsu from shinobi, but that didn't mean he could see the entire encampment. They could still be attacked.

Eventually, taking into account her and Gaara's different, scattered knowledge of the battlefields and fights taking place there, she decided to seek out the Intelligence shinobi. Perhaps now, later at night when most forces would be taking cover, Shikaku or one of the others would have time to speak with her.

Gaara walked with her. She was wearing a medic's coat, lent to her by one of the other kunoichi for warmth, having abandoned her flak for the night with the rest of her things. Gaara was all right in his battle-clothes, which were thick and dark-colored and long. Not many were sleeping- after all, those taking watch could very well be zetsu or killed and replaced by zetsu.

It just wasn't safe.

"I wonder how Mai is doing," she pondered aloud to Gaara as they walked. "She was injured the last I saw her, but by now, she's probably been healed fully, unless something happened to the medical camp."

"She's probably fine," Gaara said. "She's capable."

"Maybe they'll be able to patch me through to her. It'd be nice to check in, y'know?"

"Yes," Gaara admitted. "Mai is a good fighter, but... I still worry."

"Me too," she sighed, and reached up to tug on her necklace bag. "And everyone else, too. I know we won't be able to talk to or find all of them- but still. This war is huge, Gaara. Our friends are everywhere."

"Aa."

"Do you think..." she mused. "D'you think they'd be able to put us through back home?"

Their footsteps padded quietly through the camp. Fumiko had replaced and oiled the springs in her prosthetic, so they too were silent, for once. She almost missed the sound. Gaara looked far away in thought, and so Fumiko waited, waving to a small group of shinobi as they passed them.

"No," Gaara said finally. They were almost to the right tent. "I don't think... that'd be wise."

"I don't either," she confessed, picking at the sleeve of her coat. "It's just wishful thinking, I guess. They're fine, anyway."

They stopped in front of the tent, probably one of the few that was actually occupied, the shinobi inside either in contact or recovering chakra for continued connection use. Fumiko pulled open the flap- she didn't even have to duck, like Gaara did- and poked her head in so as not to startle.

She startled anyway, the shinobi jerking his head up to glare at her.

"Hi," she said. "I'm not a zetsu, I promise."

Gaara came in at her other side, lifting the left flap. At the sight of both of them together, the man
relaxed. (Or maybe he just figured no way had a zetsu fought Gaara and gotten away with his chakra, but eh.) "What is it? Am I needed?"

"Yes and no?" Fumiko stepped inside, followed closely by Gaara, who glanced back outside before letting his flap fall closed. "I kinda wanted to see if I could talk to someone at HQ for a full report, but you don't have to. Just if you're not busy."

"Oh," he said. "Of course, of course. Come and sit down."

Gaara watched him carefully as she did so, not quite suspicious enough to try and make him prove his realness, but also not relaxed enough to sit alongside her, off his guard. He stood near the front of the tent, hovering by a fabric wall.

He made the necessary hand signs and then touched her forehead lightly, and Fumiko closed her eyes as they patched her through.

"Hello?"

"This is Yamanaka Inoichi. Who am I speaking with?"

"Mitsuwa Fumiko," she said. "From the Second Division, but, um, I'm with the Fourth now."

"Hmm." His telepathic voice sounded unimpressed, but not surprised. "What do you need? Has something happened?"

"No," she said, "Everything's fine. I was wondering, though, if there was time to talk with someone about everything going on on the battlefields? I know everyone's trying to figure out zetsu, but I mean like, how the battles went."

"I can patch you through to Nara Shikamaru. He's been briefed already, and is currently on standby for Naruto's arrival."

"Yes! Yes, that works." She wanted to talk to Shikamaru anyway- he'd been in the encampment when Fumiko left, so he probably knew what Mai was doing or if she was okay, even if he'd moved battlefields. It'd been a few days since they'd last spoken.

"Patching now."

"Inoichi? What's going on? Is there new intel?"

"No, Shikamaru, it's me," she said, and allowed Inoichi to focus most of his attention elsewhere.

"Fumiko? What-?"

"Everything's fine here," she interrupted before he could ask. "We're all camped down for the night, and you probably already know what's happened here with the four Kage. I was just patching in to see if anyone could fill us in on everything else, too."

"Of course," he said. "Is Gaara with you?"

She glanced up at him, and smiled at his questioning glance. "Yeah."

"Good. What do you know already?"

"Not much," she admitted. "I've been moving around and fighting since I left the First Division, so I haven't actually made it to a briefing yet. I only know what happened there and here. But
"Shikamaru- do you know what's happened to Mai?"

There was a silence.

"Shikamaru?"

"There was a battle there," he said finally. "With a Summons creature along with Tobi. Mai fought well, and was admitted for further injury, but the last time I saw her, she was okay. Just a little beat up."

Fumiko sighed. "Well, that's a relief. Where are you now?"

"Still at the western coast," he answered, his thoughts sounding distracted- he was looking at something else. "We're keeping watch over Dan Kato's barrier, waiting for Naruto in case any zetsu infiltrated our numbers. They've thrown everything into chaos."

"Okay." Fumiko nodded. "Now, tell me what's happened."

Shikamaru filled her in on the battles that had already occurred since the war's beginning, glossing over or summarizing the parts she'd been in or known about already. The Surprise Attack division had come across and captured Deidara and was in the process of fighting Chiyo, Kimmimaro and Hanzo (and similarly confirmed that the souls of reincarnated shinobi could be dispersed by putting their worldly struggles and concerns to rest, leaving them at peace) and several other skirmishes had erupted all over lightning's coast. The original fight against the zetsu that she'd been a part of in the Second Division had finished with relative success, as had theirs against the Gold and Silver brothers, which were now considered missing.

That much was worrying. "Missing?"

"Yeah." Shikamaru's voice sounded tired in her mind. "A unit was supposed to move them, but they missed their rendezvous by almost three days now. We can only assume the brothers have been recaptured at this point."

"That could be really bad, Shikamaru."

"Yeah, I know, but there's not much we can do about it right now. We don't have the people to spare to go looking for them, nor the trust. There are just too many zetsu- and our forces have been almost halved with casualties."

Fumiko flinched. Halved... That was, what? At least forty thousand dead, probably more. Kami. "O-okay." She had to pause to clear her throat before she did something dumb, like start to cry. "What else?"

"The Daimyo were attacked, but so far the Protection Squad have been successful in driving off the enemy. Aside from that, several other reincarnated shinobi have been tracked down and sealed. All that's left now, if everything goes according to plan, is to locate Tobi and anyone protecting or aiding him, and ending the war and it's advancements."

"Good," Fumiko said firmly, nodding to herself.

"Yes." Shikamaru paused for a moment, likely speaking to someone else, a background chatter in her head she couldn't quite make out. After a few moments, he returned. "We heard about your role in sealing the Mizukage. You did well, Fumiko."

"Thanks, Shikamaru. But it was Gaara who ended up sealing them, and Ohnoki broke the clam. I
"A little bit of help can go a long way," he said sagely. "Anyway, Ino and Choji wanted to give you their congratulations on your fight. You've grown a lot since we met at the Chuunin Exams. You've been nothing but an asset to our forces so far." Before she could respond, surprised, Shikamaru vanished again before returning. "I have to go now, Fumiko-chan. Another time. Good luck to you."


The connection cut out without Inoichi saying a word, and the Intelligence shinobi leaned back. Fumiko rubbed her face, feeling immensely tired all of a sudden. Over forty thousand dead...

"Come on," Gaara's voice said from above her, and she looked up to see him reaching out a hand to help her up. "We should get some rest. There's more to be done when morning comes."

She took it gratefully and heaved to her feet, prosthetic balancing after a moment, and then turned to the Intelligence shinobi. "Thank you," she said earnestly. "That was really helpful."

"Any time, Miss Fumiko."

As they stepped out and walked back towards their tent, Fumiko noticed dimly that it was fully dark out now, and probably much later than when they'd come. Her mind was spinning. They were winning, but...

"What's wrong?" Gaara said quietly, shoulder bumping her own. "What did Shikamaru say?"

"We've won all the battles set out to us," she said. "As of right now, we're maintaining the coast and peninsula, and here, too, of course." She paused. Gaara waited. "The Gold and Silver brothers are MIA, and so's the squad that tried to move them, so there is that. But right now, everyone's fine that we know, that we know of. Most of the major shinobi and zetsu numbers have been taken out or sealed, so once Uzumaki Naruto's clones get out and get rid of fake zetsu- as long as nothing else happens- all that's left to do is find Tobi, or Madara- whatever- and his followers."

She tried to smile. They were doing well.

"But?"

She looked away. "We've lost so many people, Gaara," she admitted. "Shikamaru said we've probably halved our entire force, or more."

Gaara was quiet. "And what else is bothering you?"

Fumiko actually smiled this time, albeit a little wearily. She hadn't really thought she could keep her worries from him, but this was just a reminder that she probably never would. He knew her too well to be tricked by positive points and bright sides. "It's Tobi," she said. "I just... I don't think we're going to be able to just... hunt him down, you know?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, his goal wasn't really to destroy us all, was it?" Fumiko murmured, thoughts going back to the Kage Summit. "He wanted... to save us all, or something. To put us in an eternal Genjutsu... not to wipe us out."
"So?"

"So..." Fumiko shook her head. "So it just feels like all this stuff he's throwing at us, all this fighting, it isn't really part of his endgame. He's just stalling, waiting or preparing for something... his Infinite Tsukuyomi, whatever that turns out to be. Something just doesn't feel right about all this... winning. Not when the Gold and Silver brothers have been recaptured, yet we're all sitting quietly without any trouble, waiting for Uzumaki Naruto. He's not stalling anymore, unless that's what his zetsu are doing. So what's he planning?"

"...I see." Gaara was pensive for a moment. "You're probably right, Fumiko," he said quietly. "Now that you say it aloud... it is strange."

"It just- it bothers me. All of these losses, and I feel like we haven't even seen the worst of it yet..."

They reached their tent, empty, since they didn't have to share with anyone else, given Gaara's status as Regiment Leader. Gaara didn't really have to worry about impostors- he had scattering sand around the barrier of the camp, so unless someone was already inside the encampment, nothing would be able to sneak in; plus, Gaara slept like a sentry- waking instantly upon a new presence, friend or foe.

Gaara held open the tent flap for her to pass through, and then closed it behind them both. The tent was dark, and Fumiko shrugged off her coat and busied herself with lighting a dim lamp for more silhouette in case they needed to move around in the night.

"We're going to be all right," Gaara said softly as she tried to flick it. She stopped, hands resting on the lamp, and looked at it. Oil sloshed in the base. Fumiko sighed. "I mean it," he continued. "I'll admit that I don't know what will happen before this war is over... but we'll be all right."

Fumiko flicked the lamp again, and it caught. The soft light lit the room just enough to see by, and she turned. Gaara's dark hair and pale skin caught the lantern's glint, as did his eyes, but his close swallows it up.

"I believe you," she said. "But I'm still... scared. What's Infinite Tsukuyomi? To 'unify the world'," she said, quoting Tobi's words at the Summit, "To make it without hatred, or war... to make it without anything at all. Living forever in a dream... Tsukuyomi is meant to be a nightmare. What kind of peace is that?"

"We don't have to find out," Gaara said, and knelt beside her. The light casted strange shadows across his face.

"No," she agreed, but she knew Gaara knew what she was thinking- and that he didn't really believe it. If Tobi really was Madara, a sharingan user, with the power of the as of yet unrecovered seven biju... the chances of ending the rest of this war peacefully were incredibly slim. "I'm tired, Gaara."

"Then sleep," he said immediately, recognizing and gracefully accepting the subject change. "Worry in the morning, Fumiko. Rest for now."

"Okay," she said.

Fumiko crawled into the thin covers over one of the mats, and Gaara sat beside her to pet her hair. She closed her eyes, pretending to cast away the troubles and the situation and the environment. It was just Gaara's fingers through her hair, and his comforting chakra right next to her, and the warmth of blankets and oncoming sleep. "Are you going to sleep?" she asked in a small voice as
she started to drift away.

"Eventually." He didn't pause in his movements. "Go on, Fumiko. Sleep. I'll keep you safe."

"I know," she said. "Goodnight."

She barely registered his quiet "good-night," before she was asleep, mind slipping into something dreamless and peaceful.

...

"Yeah," Eishi said. Looked away, out the kitchen window. "You're probably right." ~

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Chapter End Notes

Hey guys!

I'll be honest and say that I'm so excited to have finally written this chapter, "The artist that blooms." It's a very important chapter for Fumiko, to show her development since becoming a pacifist and even highlighting her pacifism even as she learns to take her limited skills and unusual chakra (that to anyone else would be a hindrance) and use them to the best of her ability.

Most of Fumiko's greatest assets in fighting are purely defensive or neutral- her Genjutsu, supplementary and nonlethal, her smarts, her water-style, which she mainly uses in this chapter as a shield for others (because really, that much steam- which is literally hot water- would have actually dissolved Gaara's sphere and part of his defense to save the fourth division) and sealwork, which again in this chapter is used to properly seal away threats, her medical prowess and sensory abilities, all skills that she tends to use in a nonharming way.

Fumiko is growing into herself, and learning to use her own capabilities to their fullest extent in her own way, rather than focusing on being "strong" or "like a shinobi". Because she's not a shinobi- she's just trying to protect people she loves. In this chapter, a lot of people realize that she's incredibly strong in her own ways.

At the same time, the war deeply disturbs her- they lost forty thousand people (in one or two days in the original, however in this it's been weeks) and she believes truly that the worst is yet to come, and she doesn't know what to do, but she's trying.

That said, this is similarly showing just the actual loss and fear in this war- Eishi is dead, and it has demolished Mai and Shiragiku and affected Kankuro, and yet Fumiko and most of the forces who knew him don't even know he's died. Shiragiku, for once, is angry, and Mai is even worse off. A lot is happening in this chapter.

I'm writing this just two days after the last chapter was posted- I'm on a roll guys!- but
I probably won't be posting it until later in the week for pacing. Next chapter: Madara's appearance. Fumiko's strength is tested- and checked into place, because she's still weak compared to everyone else.

I've changed a few timelines in this, PS, to make it more realistic, and I'm trying hard to keep track of morning-afternoon-dusk-nighttime, so let me know if you catch any mistakes with that.

Also PS, still working on a playlist for this story and it's characters! Please, shoot me ideas!

If you have any questions or want to discuss headcanons or any part of this story with me, don't hesitate to review or PM my inbox! I generally respond within a few hours to any comments made in both of these manners.

In case you're curious about the Genjutsu Fumiko used in this chapter:

Sympathetic Illusion is what she calls the style of Genjutsu used with her chakra defect. She's named two: Sympathetic Illusion: Mirror World, which is basically what she used against Deidara, making the actual environment around the opponent seem normal, while in reality is capable of mildly controlling there Yang chakra and move their physical bodies. The other is Sympathetic Illusion: Mirage, which is basically every other purely Yin-based Genjutsu she uses nonviolently.

The one here that she develops will be called Sympathetic Illusion: Double Vision Technique, which allows her to split her environment with someone else. In this case, if she were to call it out, it would be "Sympathetic Illusion: Three-hundred Double Vision Technique" as the number call increases once it passes one other person and herself being affected.

I don't know if yall remember but Darning Stitch is what she uses to seal up ger gates! ^^

I HAVE TWITTER GUYS REPEAT, SOCIAL MEDIA IS ACTIVE. So if you follow me there at PikaPixie1, tweet at me to let me know it's one of y'all, and I'll start tweeting update plans and story info!

ALSO IMPORTANT NOTE: I SEVERELY cleaned up my profile and now have an interview! :D GO CHECK IT OUT

ALSO AGAIN POLL ABOUT FUMIKO VS DEIDARA GO TO IT GO

Please review, I'd love to hear your thoughts!
By the way, guys, I highly suggest you watch the anime or read the manga for the fights in this war, as I haven't touched on them all and they can be much more powerful in the anime than my story. This chapter spans episodes 321 to about halfway through 333, with a lot of battles that aren't touched upon, such as Naruto vs the reincarnated jinchuuriki.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

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~ She was good at quiet. ~ 

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"Summoning Jutsu!"

The earth shook around Mu, and with a great whipping of dark power that Fumiko could feel in her soul and a shot of chakra that snapped her hair back, a hollow block sprouted slowly from the ground, like a coffin.

Fumiko gasped and took a step back from the rock she hid behind. How was Mu still casting jutsu—he'd been sealed by Gaara and Ohnoki and Uzumaki Naruto! And what kind of Summons was that, anyway? It looked like solid concrete.

Dust filtered through the air. Mu stepped back as it sank back into the ground, watching his Summons silently.

And then she felt it: something cold and slimy and hard. It made her skin shake, and she was barely standing, staring at the box- it was emanating some evil chakra of some kind, a curdling chakra that was dark and deep and moved constantly, slowly, absorbing the life around it like a wide pit of quicksand or the depths of ocean mud.

"Finally," a low voice hissed, calm and darkly pleased, smooth like a knife would be smooth against a blade sharpener. She heard footsteps and then, straining forward despite her fear and squinting her eyes, she saw a figure stepping through the dust and out of the coffin. "It seems you have managed to successfully groom that brat Nagato."

Nagato?!

"I never imagined the next Summoning would be..." Mu cocked his head up. "If I'm not mistaken, you are... The caster of the Reanimation jutsu has a keen understanding of war, to think of using you..."

The dust was clearing- she could see him better now, but still her vision blurred on it's own, her bad eyesight seeping through. It was a tall man, with wide shoulders and a powerful build, wrapped with dark red and black armor. His hair was wild and uncontrolled, as black as his gloves, and his skin was pale and cracked from reanimation. But she couldn't make out his face.
"Did you say Reanimation jutsu?" the stranger with the bad chakra breathed, staring down at his hands in contemplation. He sounded alarmed. "Then this is not the Rinne Rebirth jutsu?"

Fumiko swallowed, forced herself to focus on his chakra... where was everyone? Where was she..?

She had to bite her tongue to keep from crying out as his power rushed over her, shorting out her thoughts and her fear and all common sense except that she could not let this man find her. He was emanating Killer Intent without even attempting to implement it- such an angry, evil soul- and it was crushing her. And- and his chakra- the shaking was even worse. His chakra was-

How could anyone possibly be that strong?

How could anyone have that much chakra?!

He stepped closer to Mu, and out of the shadows. She was going to die. She was going to die. This man could and would kill them all, and he would enjoy it; he could ravage everyone, all forty thousand of whoever hadn't already died in this terrible war and then destroy the villages, down to the last child.

Was this... Infinite Tsukuyomi...?

He stepped into the light...

Fumiko jolted upright, all the way out of her cot and into the cold air outside the blankets, but then screamed as she fell without her prosthetic, tipping sideways and crashing into the floor.

Or- not, she realized, panting heavily, eyes whirling in her skull to find the evil man- because she didn't believe in evil but he was evil- she'd landed on- sand? Where were they? What was happening? Where was-

She flailed, and the sand wrapped around her limbs in a flash before she could kick over a lit lamp sitting on a side crate, gentle but firm to hold her relatively still, and she was starting to hyperventilate-

"Fumiko," Gaara said. Where was he? Was he okay? Had the- "Easy, Fumiko. You were dreaming."

"Wh-what-"

"You were having a nightmare," Gaara soothed, and his fingers replaced the sand at her arm, pulling her hand towards himself. Now he was in her line of sight, and even though she was still in a state of panic, that strange man's gross chakra still sticking to her soul like oil, she stopped moving, breath hissing in and out of her clenched teeth, trying to fix her eyes on his.

He murmured at her for what was probably several minutes, slowly but surely releasing her into his arms limb by limb to keep her from hurting herself, and she babbled in spurts, mind spinning with fear, but eventually he had her, and her body was pliant and loose, having relaxed in pieces.

The first thing she coherently recognized besides Gaara's presence was the little bit of light filtering through the tent's fabrics. It was morning. Gaara was still mussed from sleep, she realized as she gripped at him, minus his coat and battle-gear.

"He was so bad, Gaara," she choked, muffled by his shirt, and he pet at her hair easily.

"Who was?" he asked softly.
"I don't- I don't know- but-" She shook her head to clear it. Parts of her still shook. "It was like- his chakra itself, it was- Killing Intent, he-"

The small tent flooded with light suddenly and she shrieked as a voice yelled, "What is it?! Who's screaming?!" and all at once she dissolved back into tears, sobbing quietly, terrified of nothing.

"Temari," Gaara said through gritted teeth. "Everything is fine. Go back outside."

"What- oh." There was a pause. Gaara's hand retracted from her hair to join the other in wrapping firmly around her back, protective and sheltering. He shushed her quietly, unashamed in the face of Temari's awkward shuffling, somewhere off to Fumiko's right. "She was... dreaming?"

Gaara's silence was telling enough, and Fumiko could feel his displeasure emanating through his chakra in waves.

But she didn't leave, and Fumiko was distinctly aware of her presence, unable to focus.

"What?" Gaara finally said flatly.

"I'm sorry, Gaara, but..." Temari cleared her throat. Fumiko could hear the clank of her war fan against something solid. "It's midmorning now. Naruto has successfully weeded out all of the impostor zetsu, and I think we should pack up camp in order to be ready for HQ's next orders..."

"Fine," he said, still sounding annoyed, but keeping his voice and tone at a low, quiet volume.

Finally Temari left, and Fumiko didn't see the long glance they'd shared before she stepped back and let the tent flap fall again, putting the tent back into a softer, shadowed light.

She wanted home. She wanted warmth. She wanted her twins and her sister and her mother.

Slowly Gaara's hands moved, fingers trailing up and down her now tense back. "It's all right," he said gently. "She's gone now. Nobody's here, it's just us."

"H-he..."

"It's just us, Fumiko. Easy..."

"Mu..." she muttered, becoming slightly more aware by the second. "Mu summoned... someone."

"Mu's sealed," Gaara said reassuringly.

"No," she said. "I still feel it..."

"Feel what?"

"His chakra," she said, and then she frowned, still hazy but actually awake now. "Why do I still feel it...?"

"Let's get some breakfast," he said. Traced down her side. Fumiko's head was lolled into his neck, and she was slowly becoming more aware of their surroundings: they were both knelt on the ground, somewhere a few feet from the sleeping mats. The air smelled like wet soil and dust and campfire food, wafting encouragingly from somewhere outside. "You'll feel better."

"Yeah..."

Gaara was slow in moving, standing up in increments, and Fumiko didn't know whether to be
embarrassed or relieved at how versed Gaara had become in the aftermath of Fumiko's nightmares—but either way she was grateful for the steady change from sitting down to standing up, with no pressure to move quickly if she didn't want to.

Another five minutes, and she was clear-minded and ready to head out of the tent and see other people without having an anxiety attack, so they both shrugged on their flaks and armors and Fumiko grabbed her bag on the way out. Still, Gaara stayed pressed close to her side as they made their way to the small group of fires in the center of the encampment, where a few shinobi were crouched and stood around them, passing out warm rations to the Division.

Eating shinobi were scattered about in various states of prepared, some more alert than others. More ninja, who had probably eaten earlier, were all around the camp taking down tents and rolling up tatami mats and blankets to be sealed away. Chatter filled the air; despite the tense atmosphere it was also one of victory.

Whatever Fumiko had felt before had dissipated nearly entirely, and what remained clinging to her mind she had rationalized was probably just the fear from the dream imprinting it. Sometimes the bad feelings from her dreams lasted for hours at a time— it wasn't a big deal.

Still, that had been such a strange nightmare, nothing like the usual ones. Nothing had been there that already frightened her before the nightmare, not even her friends to suffer. Just a strange man with a figure she didn't recognize and a chakra she hadn't thought her mind would've been able to conjure on its own.

"Miss Fumiko-san," the ninja at the pots greeted, and spooned something like stew into a bowl. It smelled good— for such a barren country, the cooking shinobi were all from Hidden Cloud, so they must have been the ones to search for and cook food with their rations. "Good morning."

"Good morning," she said cheerily, taking the bowl eagerly. Her muscles were a little sore, still, from tensing like strung wire, but up until that nightmare she'd been sleeping well, so she felt better than she had the night before.

He nodded and then turned his attention to Gaara, who also took a bowl. "I suggest you two get cleaned up after you eat," he advised. "Who knows how much time we have left before we have to head out again."

"Yeah," Fumiko admitted, pinching a bit of her hair, which was greasy and sat frizzily in a flat, matted mess of dirt, sweat and traces of blood. Her skin and even her clothes and bandages really weren't in any better shape. "We will. Thank you."

They wandered off to eat, sitting together a little off to the side and away from the majority of the eating shinobi.

She was almost done eating— she apparently was starving— and they'd talked normally together about the weather and upcoming strategies and guesses at the next deployment, when a shadow cast long over the bit of flat stone they sat on. Fumiko looked up and winced, because yeah— Temari had walked in on her attack this morning.

"Good morning, Temari," she said mildly.

Gaara as well looked up at her, and at the warning in his gaze Fumiko put a hand on his shoulder. He looked over at her, judging carefully, and she smiled a little— it's okay.

He huffed out a breath, but acquiesced, leaning back slightly.
He remembered what it was like to be caught by someone other than her with a nightmare. It just... wasn't a pleasant feeling, embarrassing and insecure, and not being sure how the other, new person would react. But she trusted Temari well enough, and figured anyway that she probably wasn't even here just for that.

"Good morning," the eldest Sand Sibling said, still a little awkwardly. Temari understood nightmares and trauma, but visible weaknesses, not as much. She'd already known about Fumiko's nightmares- had probably heard them before through the walls of the Kazekage family hall of the Tower- but, thinking back, likely had never seen one with her own eyes. "Are you... all right?"

"Yeah," she said, and smiled at Temari to reassure her. "I just, you know, needed a minute for reality to come back."

"... Oh." Temari was dressed for battle and ready to go, and Fumiko guessed her tents and supplies were already taken down and packed up. "Well, I'm sorry for barging in this morning. I just heard you scream, and with the zetsu problem..."

Fumiko waved her off. "Nah, Temari. It's okay, I promise."

"If you're sure." She turned her attention to Gaara. "We're almost ready. I've had Tenji begin contact with HQ, and camp deconstruction is almost done."

Gaara nodded. "Right. Thank you."

Temari hovered for a moment, gaze flickering between them. And then she sighed. "Whenever you're ready, Gaara."

Then she straightened, and turn to march away towards the shinobi still working on tents. Fumiko sighed a little, leaning lightly on Gaara's arm. He shifted to accommodate, setting his bowl down on his other side.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah," she said. "I just- I wish it didn't weird people out so much when I..." she hesitated and scrunched her face up, searching for the right words. "... freak out, I guess. I mean, aren't nightmares a normal thing? I know they are."

"They are," he said reassuringly. "I know plenty of shinobi with frequent night terrors."

"I know. I just-" She laughed a little. "I think I'm just a little stressed out. Everything's just weird right now."

Gaara didn't really say anything for a moment, just letting her relax for a few minutes. It did wonders to calm the last of her nerves that could be calmed, and then he stood, offering a hand to help her stand, which she accepted. "We should get everyone together and brief them all," he said. "Or at least prepare them to leave."

"Right."

An hour later, everything was packed up and settled down, and everyone was fully dressed, armed, and energetically replenished, and they were curled in a loose, thick circle around her, Gaara, Uzumaki Naruto's clone, Temari and Ohnoki, who had returned with Matsuri and Sari from the medical camp in the early morning.

"So what's the plan?" Uzumaki Naruto asked. "What do we do now, Shorty-gramps?"
"I told you before, I'm the Tsuchikage!" he snapped irately.

"We should rendezvous with another Company and keep fighting," Temari suggested.

Ohnoki turned to her, face settling into something more serious. "Our real enemy isn't all the reanimated shinobi," he said. "It's Madara."

"You're right," Gaara agreed. He was a bit cleaner now, him and Fumiko having washed off the blood and grime from their skin and hair as best they could as well as rebandaging Fumiko's mild wounds with fresh dressings. "This war will not end until he's brought down. Our target should be Madara."

"Octo-pops and the real me should be heading over this way right about now," the blond clone said, nodding. "Once I get here-"

Fumiko froze, a sudden pulse zapping through her bones. It had been getting more prominent, she realized, but slowly, as if it had been casually strolling- and she hadn't noticed until this flare, making itself known-

"Fumiko?"

"What is that?" another sensory shinobi cried, cutting Gaara off.

"Fumiko, Imata, what are you sensing?"

"It's-" she whirlled, stunned, to face it. Gaara tracked her gaze, alarmed. "It's him- from my dream-"

"It's right over there!" Imata shrieked, jabbing his finger upwards in the direction Fumiko was staring at. She could understand his panic- even masked, that chakra was a terrifying thing.

But- why had it been in her dreams?

Had she sensed it in the middle of the night?

Had it warped into her subconscious- and that was why it'd stuck with her all morning, because it had still been nearby?

And then a figure stepped out towards the edge of the tall rock formation they all turned to look at, and after a second Fumiko recognized him- Mu. But this wasn't Mu's chakra, she accepted grimly, not even bothering to wonder how she'd known in her sleep that he hadn't been sealed properly.

"What now?" Gaara said quietly.

"Hm?" Ohnoki narrowed his eyes.

And then Gaara seemed to register- "The Second Tsuchikage!"

"I thought you sealed him away, Gaara!" the clone said tersely.

"Impossible!" Ohnoki exclaimed. "In that state he managed to fragment himself?"

This caught Gaara's attention, though Fumiko still trained her eyes above, waiting, watching, for that strange man with the evil chakra to appear. She wouldn't be caught off guard- not by that. She needed her mind to stay clear. "What do you mean?" he asked suspiciously.

"Lord Mu was able to split his body," Ohnoki explained quickly, still looking up at the
reincarnated Mu from the corner of his eye, who hadn't yet moved except to stand in their line of sight. "And in doing so, he created clones- no, not clones; it's closer to say that he splits his body into two pieces, although each one only has half his normal strength."

"N-no, I don't mean him," Imata stuttered, voice shaking. "Someone else is here!"

Gaara looked at her sharply but she couldn't reply.

"What? Really? There's another one?" the Uzumaki Naruto clone exclaimed.

"N-naruto," Fumiko managed, and he snapped to attention as he realized she hadn't said his full name. She was keeping the shaking in her voice to a minimum, even though she could feel his chakra spreading like a mire across the entire area. "If you can really sense ill-intentions- brace yourself."

"Wha-?"

And then he came into view over the stone.

Ohnoki sucked in a tortured breath. "But that one is-!"

"What? Who is it?" the shadow clone demanded, crouching defensively, not sure what he was meant to be fighting.

"... So he's come," Ohnoki muttered.

"That must be-" Fumiko swallowed, sidestepped closer to Gaara, shivering. She could see him more clearly now, outside of her dream and in reality. His face was cut with sharp lines, a single crack running through it, and his hair hid most of the right side of his face, draping down to his mid-back. It looked like Mai's might, had hers been any thicker. "Mai was right, the masked man was never Madara. He wasn't- he wouldn't have been able to mask this f-from me."

"Are you saying-?" he said harshly under his breath, caught by surprise.

"This is-" Fumiko said. "It has to be Madara!"

"Indeed," Ohnoki breathed. "That- is Uchiha Madara."

"The masked man?" Naruto questioned, voice hard. "I thought- this is what he was under the mask, hiding-"

"No." Fumiko hissed vehemently, and Naruto flinched.

"But he looks exactly the same as he did before," Ohnoki said, in a state of disbelief.

"What is going on here?" Gaara said, low, almost to himself.

"Whaddaya mean?" Naruto said seriously, muscles tense.

"Take a close look at his eyes," Gaara instructed. His face was a mask of disbelief. Fumiko couldn't make out the man's eyes from down below, so she nudged him silently. "He's a reanimated shinobi. The reanimation jutsu brings the dead back to this realm. Which means he's been dead..."

"I knew it," Fumiko whispered hysterically, "I knew it, he came out of a coffin in the ground!"

"Wait just a second," Temari demanded, sounding shaken. Her eyes were narrow. She smelled a
rat, but didn't know where it was coming from. "HQ reported Madara elsewhere, approaching in the other direction with a bunch of Jinchuuriki! Isn't that correct?"

"That must be Tobi," Fumiko said, the loudest she'd managed since sensing the horrible power again. "That Akatsuki- he was lying! He wasn't Madara- he was planning to summon him- with Rinne Rebirth..." she said the last part quietly, thinking hard.

That means... when Nagato and the Peins attacked... something went wrong.

Tobi had to change his plans.

"There's no mistaking it," Ohnoki said gravely. "That's definitely Uchiha Madara. He's the one I fought against back in my younger days- but then... who could possibly be the man... behind the mask?"

"So... if that guy up there is the real Madara, that means that the guy who we thought was Madara... wasn't actually him?"

"Yes," Gaara said, face taut and wary and worried, and Fumiko knew that was partially her fault, fear aside- he trusted her sensory abilities, and for her to call someone bad or evil... "So it seems."

"You used to utilize the Akatsuki," Temari said to Ohnoki, stood behind him defensively. "So can't you speculate on what the identity of the masked man might actually be, Tsuchikage?"

"There's no one I can think of right now," he said tersely, putting a foot back, arms up, ready for a fight. Fumiko flinched- would he attack with no warning? Was that Madara's style? "But honestly it really doesn't matter who he is- whatever his name, we still need to stop him!"

The two shinobi on the cliffs seemed to pay them no attention at all- as though if they attacked suddenly it would make no difference and, Fumiko realized- had already known, had known since her dream- that it wouldn't. She knew of Uchiha Madara, Ghost of the Uchiha, unearthly rage, ravager of thousands, destroyer of the tree- one who had stood against the Senju, one who had demolished entire war efforts without a scratch.

Knowing all of that, she would have been scared. But knowing was very different from seeing- and from feeling. She grabbed onto Gaara's sleeve, gripping so tightly it hurt her fingers, and his head whipped into a side-glance, staring at the side of her face. She tore her gaze from Madara, eyes wide and face pale, trying to plead; and now Gaara was on edge, and she knew why. Wished she hadn't caught his attention, but hadn't been able to help it.

She was scared for his life if he fought. She wasn't sure, with much more than just a sliver of doubt, that Gaara could win or even successfully retreat from this. Mitsuwa Fumiko had a horrible feeling about this.

And that, above everything else, was what seemed to finally scare him.

Gaara's chakra shifted, sand hissing quietly, and she let him go, and she prayed.

His sights moved to the casually conversing pair on the clifftop, and his arms jerked towards each other, crossing over his chest. The sand roared from the ground to the left of the enemy and shot towards them almost faster than could be tracked or survived, but they vanished into shunshin just as it collided. The stone rumbled, and the sand stayed tense in the air.

"Guess we can't take them that easily," Gaara said.
Madara appeared midair, shunshin slowing, to land almost casually on the ground before the stone he'd stood on. He didn't fully straighten, knees bending slightly, hands raised just so, fingers curling into claws. Fumiko couldn't breathe. His chakra had become active- everyone could sense him now.

The silence was deafening with the knowledge that it was about to violently end.

He looked up, and even from her spot farther away, she could see his sharingan- not what stage, but she could very well guess. Mangekyo Sharingan- capable of everlasting nightmares, inhuman speed and strength, near prophetic foresight. Just the sight of it made her already rabbit heart jack to dangerous levels. Her blood was running strangely, hot with adrenaline and cold with fear.

A cloud- of course it was a stupid cloud- drifted over the sun above them, casting an ominous shadow beyond Madara that quickly raced over the Company. Madara seemed to blur into something ethereal or hellish, hair fizzing in and out of the darkness, though Fumiko knew it was just her imagination.

Nobody moved, even as Madara began to step forward, painfully slowly and deliberate, eyes locked on the allies. Fumiko heard vaguely somebody praying behind her under their breath. There was a clacking sound as weapons were pulled from sheaths. Somehow, Fumiko had the sense of mind, even as Madara's speed increased until he was dashing towards them, to pull out her Bakoryou staff, knowing it would do nothing.

"Here he comes, guys," Naruto warned unnecessarily.

"Whatever happens, don't look directly into his eyes!" Ohnoki yelled, and that seemed to break the silent spell, the entire Division at once preparing for attack. It seemed silly, Fumiko thought distantly, even as Gaara moved to stand slightly in front of her, that so many would be so afraid of one single shinobi.

Battle cries rose all around her and the shinobi surged like a tsunami wave around her. Gaara disappeared from her side, and she was forced to move or be trampled, although now she couldn't even see Madara in the throng- but she could sense him well enough, and heard the moment of impact between the first of the allies and Uchiha Madara himself.

It was catastrophic. Sounds of destruction ravaged across the battlefield, and Madara dashed through the great mass of them, shinobi screaming as he did so, seeming not even to move yet still incapacitating and, Fumiko realized with a sickening revelation, killing them merely upon impact.

Fifty dead and then he turned and leapt to another corner of them all, and she could see him through the throng, throwing ninja around like a bunch of rag dolls or paper practice boards, easily ducking and dodging and ripping without much more than an excited look on his face. He was playing.

It was just screaming and the gross sounds of breaking bones upon contact.

She didn't know what to do. She couldn't fight, and felt like a cornered animal standing where at any second him and his sharingan eyes could see her. Waves of air and sound spasmed around him with his power as he moved- there was a strange chakra sound and suddenly Naruto was beside her, in three, and with some crushing kind of relief she found Gaara and Temari as well.

Gaara tensed to fight back, but Temari held up an arm. "Wait," she said below Madara's range of hearing, quiet but intense. "You and the Tsuchikage need to recover first." She looked over at the Narutos with hard eyes. "Use that mode instead of your Shadow Clones," she barked.
"Truth is, I can't right now," a Naruto admitted, and faced her even as the other two stayed on guard. "I used up my chakra in the earlier fight!"

Temari halted, and gritted her teeth.

Fumiko could hear a ringing, ripping noise and oh, dear lord Kami, Madara had gotten hold of a sword. She took a small step back, unable to run, unsure what else to do.

He caught something in the air and slapped it into a nearby shinobi, impaling the offending thrower with his own weapon and then turning to kick the shinobi he'd tagged with such force that he flew several yards away before landing amongst others, but Fumiko couldn't see what it was until he exploded violently into fire in light, an expanse of people screaming in pain and fear, instantly killing many.

Madara disappeared into the smoke that billowed over the area then, invisible to all but her senses, and if Fumiko took the time to try, she would see the speed at which he killed, the correlation between his ugly sounds and the disappearance of ally chakras. She couldn't close her eyes, but could feel the panic coming on, tried to swallow it down like bile.

No, no, no, not here! she thought desperately, hysterically, holding her bakuryou so tightly she thought she might break it in half, shaking completely. Rarely did her panic attacks arise without nightmares, and now was the worst possible time- but suddenly all she wanted was to curl into a ball and scream, or go silent in total petrification. Not now! Not now!

We're going to die we're going to-

The dust cleared, but the silence was just Madara holding someone by the throat. From where he stood, Fumiko should never have been able to hear what she said, but he did. For a split second it was the only sound in the world.

"You want to dance with me as well?"

There was a ripping, tearing sound that Fumiko recognized, and for some reason it snapped her out of her trance- afraid but functioning. Temari's wind ninjutsu, she realized, roaring over the plain, and by some miracle it smashed into Madara, caught off-guard, and he was flung into the sky far from those he'd decimated. He landed on his feet, though, and stood calmly.

"Do not," Temari snarled, and Fumiko realized she'd jumped away from them to attack, "Underestimate me!"

And then there was fire: terrible fire.

She wasn't close enough to it to join the rank of those who ran forward to douse it, wasn't sure that she would've even if she had been. A tsunami- Wall fo Water- rose to meet it, and it far from doused it- merely kept the flames from leaping over them, keeping it at bay until either they failed or Madara's jutsu ran out.

The air turned scalding and it burned, steam and debris and impact force from the chakra dashing over the Company, and Fumiko had to brace and lift an hand to keep from losing her balance or an eye. And then it ended, and the roil of steam hissed loudly enough to hurt her ears, and they were all blind- and Fumiko wondered if that had been his plan all along.

... 

~ Mai had been trained in quiet, whether it was literal stealth on the mission field, or just in the
middle of the night, after nightmares, from pain. You couldn’t hear her cry. ~

...Mai wasn’t even sensing, and she could feel the death that permeated the battlefield.

This wasn’t winning or losing. This was decimation. This was complete obliteration of hundreds and thousands- and there was only one enemy chakra she could pinpoint.

And it was nasty as hell. The chakra itself seemed angry and violent, Killing Intent in a condensed form of power, and it flooded ugly and bruised across the entire area. It was dark, and disgusting, and it was reveling in the pain it caused.

But Mai was not the same little girl she had once been, frozen by a chakra that tried to tell her she was dead already, just accept it.

No, Mai was done with shit like that. She was done with this war, she was done with this death, she was done with these bastards enjoying the agony they ripped across shinobikind. She was done with running, and done with the fire blazing into her friends.

A wall of water rose to meet it, and the area erupted into steam, blinding everyone except, Mai thought, some kind of sick grin spreading across her face, for sensors. She was done with being afraid. Mai was finished with skirting death.

She would meet it head on.

Whoever they were fighting vanished into the steam, and Mai closed her eyes, as she had for the ninetails power. All around her chakra flickered like burning candle wicks, all drowned out and smudged by the forest fire rampaging over them, and to her left she sensed a stone and to her front, that he was taller than she was, and beyond him, the huddle of blind shinobi he was going to murder in succession.

And so she jumped, launching off with her chakra, not even bothering to pray that she would connect. She was all physical now, no more crying or screaming and no more worrying or trying and it was just go, go, GO.

Her feet planted, and she was done with being the silent, invisible ANBU, and so she screamed as she spun down, a feral screech, the farthest from a battle-cry she’d ever heard- a death-call from an animal. He turned in tandem to it and caught her ankle immediately in a crushing grip she didn’t take the time to feel, and she snarled and spat and snapped, gashing her teeth and using the momentum to surge forward with a crushing roundabout punch that he also caught.

Without a thought, Mai’s eyes went sharp and clear and burning, strength fueling into her limbs as she copied him and copied Naruto and copied everyone she’d ever seen before with those eyes, without a thought her free leg came crashing forwards, body twisting, wrenched shoulderblade singing in pain, and by some miracle, by some something, her knee smashed into his face.

He didn’t make a sound, but the rage in his chakra was palpable, the petty anger at something that hadn’t even really managed to cause him pain. Instantly he whipped about, and she was flung away with the centrifugal force, still blinded white by the steam, skin burning, and he hurled her as he whirled by his grip on her leg, sent her pinwheeling through the air at a speed she’d never reached before in shunshin.

She skimmed the ground first, for a split second that at her speed skinned the flesh off her hands and shoulders and face, and then with the impact she violently tipped, turning over so fast she
didn't even leave the ground, flipping and plowing down into it, stone and rock immediately ripping into her skin wherever it wasn't guarded.

Mai didn't stop to register the pain, just forced herself out in a way that caused rock to crumble and shoot away from her, coming back out of the earth like some froth-mouthed creature, arms out, fingers curled into claws, and tipped forward, flipping off her hands in time to avoid something exploding at her back, throwing her forward- fire.

She went with the force, somersaulting midair, and coming to a skidding halt on the ground without even a wobble in her screaming ankles, screaming knees, screaming wounds, kicking up dust and stone and a lone weapon, pushing away the hand of a dead man beside her.

The enemy had already moved on, and she could hear him razing ninja to their knees and to their deaths.

Mai didn't have a death wish.

But that man damn well did.

She didn't care about her fucking sharingan anymore. If it helped her kill this son of a bitch she would take it. She could feel them spinning, fast and hard, swirling to match her emotions, her anger, and she caught his figure and this damn steam meant nothing at all to her and her ears rang with screams and the sound of her swords pulling out of their sheaths.

She came at his side, slightly behind, knowing he was a reanimation but also not giving a shit anymore. He met her with a blade of his own, stolen from another, and with her burning eyes she could see his mild surprise, some shocked curiosity and it just pissed her off that he wondered how she wasn't dead yet to his swings like she was some kind of lab rat, some cute anomaly to him.

She bellowed and somehow it made her even angrier that he didn't respond. He said something about her eyes but she didn't hear him, didn't care, couldn't hear anything but the fighting and the blood pounding through her ears. The sharingan, she knew, somewhere deep in the back of her mind, was the only thing keeping her alive.

She slashed, she ducked, her muscles burned white hot with movement she wasn't used to, and then something came and she moved to block it- and then something happened that she didn't quite understand- the kick stopped halfway and fell as he kept his balance. It seemed like her brain took several seconds to process the noise, some kind of lag that made her pause, like-

Sand?

A double-dutch move snapped her out of those thoughts immediately- one she couldn't slip between. In an instant Mai decided to take the hilt instead of the blade, and with an impact that knocked all the breath out of her, shot backwards, feet digging into the ground with the attempt to sew her feet down still to the ground with chakra and keep from flying into the air again, but it didn't matter.

Even as her form surged back, Madara moved again to continue his leisurely ripping through the Shinobi Alliance.

...

~ She didn't really know why she'd come back here, though, if she was trying to be silent. Here in the hospital with Kankuro. ~
Fumiko ran to where she sensed Gaara, sheathing her unused Bakuryou, and there was another medical ninja there, and she realized- Gaara was chakra-deprived. Chakra deprived against the strongest known shinobi in the world, next to Tobirama or, perhaps, if Tobi had told even some truths, the Sage of Six Paths.

She couldn't fight, but she could heal Gaara, who could.

Somewhere a sensor yelled, "Here he comes!"

She didn't see him, but she sensed him as well as the comets of fire that suddenly erupted from the sky, raining down on the Division members. She screamed, and was far from the only one to do so. The entire world erupted into noise- the comets landing, the ground shaking and rumbling, the sounds of explosion; people screaming for their lives, Madara again ravaging through the forces.

Too close, Fumiko suddenly saw with a dawning, horrible fingers tensed on Gaara's back, even as the other medical ninja stood strong, healing from a distance, as one could do with normal chakra. His fighting was among them- he was nearly next to them.

Something roared nearby from where the noise erupted, something familiar but that made her spine feel slimy. That wasn't a human sound- but it wasn't animal either.

She readied herself, but couldn't hope to see him in the mixture of dust and steam, couldn't even hope to pick apart his chakra source from the smog of it that surrounded him. So she kept her weapon to the noise, tried to keep an eye on the flames- and then there was a more familiar sound, one she would recognize anywhere- the sound of weapons clanging against solid sand.

She looked down for a moment at Gaara, who was straining, knowing he wasn't yet healed yet utilizing everything he could until he was, protecting people he likely couldn't see any more than sense. All he could probably feel, she realized, was Madara's overwhelming, overlapping dark, evil chakra, and she didn't stop him, only tried to heal faster- something she knew even while trying that she couldn't do.

Just a few more minutes, and Gaara would be able to-

There was another scream, more furious than hurt, and Fumiko thought it must still be fighting until suddenly a shape darkened in the steam and stumbled backward, barely catching it's footing- the ground rumbled at it's ankles, it'd been pushed or hit hard enough to send it skidding through the ground, no matter how much chakra they latched to the ground with.

She sucked in a surprised breath, unsure how it hadn't fallen back, leaning forward in a crouch, elbows poking back but arms forward, clutching-

"Mai!"

Her sister didn't even respond, didn't so much as twitch towards her voice. Something was wrong with her face, Fumiko realized as Mai took two steps back out of the rubble she'd created, out of the steam and with just enough clarity that Fumiko could make out her expression. Except, despite it being in clear view, she couldn't make out her expression- something trapped between a mannequin's blank stare and the wild fury of a tempest.

She was glaring forward, and Fumiko realized she had recognized that screaming- the voice behind it, the lungs. But the anger was beyond what she'd yet heard from her sister before, and- the steam clinging to her skin glowed slightly about her face, tinted red-
Gaara's head snapped to the side at her voice, chakra coloring with surprise and panic.

Was- Was her sister-?

Mai made again to bolt, and Fumiko saw the forming bruises marring her skin, rapid and darkening and telling of internal bleeding and breakage. There were slashes of red on her neck, through her hair, and she was skinned pink up the side of her body, even through the protective fishnet sleeves, clothes torn. She didn't quite seem to feel anything, though sharingan spinning and teeth glowing white.

"Mai!" she yelled again, "Mai, no!

Her legs blurred briefly- and the ground leapt at her feet, rolled, and she smashed softly into the ground as it padded to meet her.

Her face turned, and Fumiko felt pinned by those glowing eyes, like an insect on a viewing board.

"Gaara!" Mai screeched. "Let go of me!"

Fumiko met his eyes, and wasn't quite sure why they nodded at each other or what conclusion they'd reached, but somehow, still, she knew what she was meant to do. She forced herself to pull her hands away, to let Gaara engage.

Run away. Run away. Run away.

She tried to say something else- something like go, or something like be careful, or maybe come back, but her voice was lost in the thrall, and whether Gaara heard her over it, she probably wouldn't ever know. But it didn't matter. Anger roiled from Gaara and his chakra, at the unjust murders of his people, careless and in such a quantity they wouldn't hope to find them all.

"We're going to be all right. I mean it... I'll admit that I don't know what will happen before this war is over... but we'll be all right."

Gaara was enraged, and he spared no glances backwards at Fumiko's darting form to surge forward as his sand did, raising his voice to howl, as she hadn't heard him howl since the old Chuunin exams. "You will go no further!"

Sand erupted like a mad thing, crashing in a tidal wave at Madara, whom she couldn't see escaping over the and itself, through the veil of dust, but she assumed he had, from Gaara's snarls of frustration. The sand fired over and over in a rapid side by side succession, sharpening into massive spears, dashing towards Madara, who dodged them all, and hit the ground- and even Fumiko could see the sudden expansion of blue chakra- Naruto's giant rasengan.

The third Naruto sat a little farther down from her on the battlefield, and Fumiko thought maybe he'd snapped before she realized what he was doing- staying still as the other clones attacked. He was going to try and use Nature Energy, she realized, and enter Sage Mode. Gaara backed up as his sand finished their violent attacks, leaving it up to the other clones.

Mai was thrashing, mad. "Mai!" she yelped, falling quickly to the ground and grabbing at her hands. "Mai! Mai, Mai-"

"Get off-"

"Mai, it's me, it's-"
"Massive Rasengan!" she heard, and then, "Earth Style: Mobile Core!"

The dust blew away sharply, dashed apart by Naruto's cutting wind-style Rasengan, and with a new visibility Fumiko watched as Madara shot into the air on a sudden rise of stone, tugged into almost a crouch by the gravity, right into Naruto's range, who screamed in rage and brought it down with another explosion of dust that sent a shock wave threw the air.

There was no keeping her balance this time, and Fumiko was flung into the air, yelling in surprise. Her landing was violent and unceremonial, still amidst the slashing, pressing wind of Naruto's fight, and she couldn't stand, and couldn't really feel one of her legs at first, vision swimming- but it hadn't worked, Fumiko could see that before her eyesight properly returned.

She recognized the blueness that pushed away Naruto's impossible rasengan, swirling purple. Susano'o.

Ohnoki was yelling something nearby. Fumiko couldn't remember exactly what Susano'o was. But she didn't have time to think about it, or to process- there was a shining light that cut away the rest of the dust and sand, and the Susano'o roared, a sound like a tailed beast rampage- a giant armored man, Fumiko realized. Something in her mind clicked the image like a camera and she saved it, wondered, in some state of shock, if she would draw it later, or see it in her nightmares.

It was bigger than any moving thing she'd ever seen before- bigger than a building, and just as wide. The Naruto clones, sent flying, were caught in hands formed of Gaara's sand, and before he could even be brought down, power crackled through the air, swords of light or lightning exploding from it's hands into existence- both of them big enough to crush before they cut.

She'd been thrown away from Naruto and Gaara and the others, and so had no idea either of where they were or what they were planning. She wasn't sure if Mai had remained, if Gaara's sand had held or blown away between the wind and Gaara's potentially waning concentration in the smaller things as he tried to keep the Susano'o pinned.

At least, a small voice whispered- the voice who had suggested maybe it wouldn't be so bad to stay back home for the war, maybe Gaara's right- You're farther from the fighting now...

Lights flashed as jutsu were launched, far ahead where the Susano'o raged, slashing it's massive pseudo-swords through shinobi like so many blades of grass. Without even trying Fumiko could sense the great loss. If they somehow survived this, their number, should she take the time to count it, probably halved again: and if they lost, and this... creature made it to the other battlefields- they would dwindle out completely.

This one undead man could end everything.

But no, she tried. No, she had to believe in everyone, and especially in Naruto and Gaara. They could do this, she shouted internally, determined. The odds were slim, not impossible. They'd been in impossible situations before and survived- they could do it again!

The swords ravaged like lightning strikes, and still jutsu seemed to glitch against the figure, but the allies didn't give up. Fumiko sensed no deserters. They all were standing together.

She nodded, once, took a breath, pulled out her Bakuryou, and despite the pain in her leg, began the dash forward towards the thick of the fighting. She wouldn't do this again, she thought determinedly. She wouldn't run or hide, or be a coward while others protected her! Not while she could do something- not while she was a shinobi!
Suddenly sand erupted from the ground, and whirled around the Susano'o armor, curling and suddenly snapping tight, tying it down. It moved, slowly and in jagged jerks, to pull away, but the sand held fast, great creaking and straining noises that she could hear from across the warzone seeping out.

But then they stretched, and suddenly collapsed all at once under the pressure of the two other arms that had sprouted from it's armor. All four arms raised, and the two that had just formed glowed and sparked and sprouted yet more swords, so that four great beams of light shone above it's head. They spread, and Fumiko had the sense of mind to skid to a halt as they came down hard, and try to bolt in some kind of last-second shunshin to the side to avoid the roil of feedback slashing through the ground.

She tripped immediately, but had gotten enough momentum in those few seconds to fling herself from one of the lines of fire, landing hard between two, the power from the swords each gashing a single line and leaving the rest with only wind.

Shinobi screamed. Shinobi flew through the air. The ground was littered with bodies, hundreds of bodies, people she had connected with during her Genjutsu, people she had fought beside, and rested beside, and talked with casually over breakfasts.

People with dreams, who had died to save them from dreams.

Fumiko stood, shaky, and glanced at all the carnage before noticing Gaara and Naruto just a little ways behind her. Gaara's face was twisting again in anger, hands raised from the sand he had tried to protect them with. He didn't seem to notice her among the others.

This was a Gaara fighting for his life. This was a Gaara with too much to worry about at one time.

This was the Fourth Kazekage, dubbed Golden Child, leader of the Fourth Division and named sub-commander of the entire Allied Force. This was the Gaara who understood why threats had to be eliminated- and this was the Gaara that didn't need her right now.

And so Fumiko turned her eyes away, back towards the fight, and then retreated as Naruto's voice called out the command, towards Gaara, but only for direction and okay, maybe a little bit for comfort, but knowing he would go. They locked eyes momentarily as she approached, Gaara recognizing her at last, but then she made to pass, just in time for Ohnoki to slap his hands to Gaara's gourd.

"Go, Kazekage!" he barked. "Earth Style: Lightened Boulder Jutsu!" Fumiko paused, slowing to almost a complete stop, and flashed him a smile. The weight of the sand didn't make much difference in reference to it's power- but it would make it even faster. "I've made all the sand in this area lighter as well," he said.

Gaara seemed to test it, and the sand fluttered out in a light cloud faster than usual, as though he hadn't been expecting it, chakra braced for something more difficult. It spurted like a geyser from his gourd.

"With sand this light..." Gaara realized as he watched it rise, flexed his power. "There's no limit to what I could do."

She reached out, touched a hand to his arm, and nodded at him. "Go now," she said. "Be careful."

Gaara didn't smile back- there was too much already weighing on his conscience, too many strategies spinning through his brain, too much war settled into his bones for now, but that was
okay. Instead, he nodded back, and she believed him- as frightened as she was, Fumiko believed that he would be cautious with his life.

And then she jumped backwards, well beyond what would be the collateral damage of this level of a fight. Her heart was still pounding from the decision to fight, and she felt some strange combination of relief and disappointment that she'd been forced to retreat before she could make good on that big of a choice, still holding on to her weapon along with everyone beside her, prepared in case everything went wrong.

Without further pause Fumiko took off, one way, another way, looking for Mai, who must have calmed down and who couldn't have been killed by the Susano'o's blades, there was no way she was that reckless- but she'd seemed-

Naruto's clones had raised their hands, and now what looked like a bigger version of the Rasenshuriken was spinning in the air between them. Fumiko wished she knew what they were planning- wished their was some way she could help, or help the other shinobi that had to fall back for it's wake. But she trusted Naruto, and she very much trusted Gaara with her life.

Gaara spread his arms, and the sand licked forward towards Madara's rampaging armor shield, dashing like an angered snake, thick and tough and quick. "Naruto!" he yelled, and as the sand gushed out of his gourd, adding ever still to the growing attack, Naruto followed it, Rasenshuriken in hand, face set in a hard scowl and the corners of his eyes dark with sage power.

More sand rose from the ground and then she could no longer see the battlefield over the expanding force of Gaara's offense, and it smashed like a tidal wave or solid wall sandstorm over the Susano'o, and the sound whited out any other, swarming it from view and holding it in place.

Gaara knew Susano'o better than her- he'd fought against it, along with Uchiha Sasuke, while she was unconscious, though still protected from the sand. Still, she'd had him tell her everything and explain as much as he could- because nobody really knew where Uchiha Sasuke's allegiances lied, and so it was a definite possibility that they would have to fight him in this war- and so she knew his sand had no effect- so what-?

And then suddenly, Madara flew out from the side of Susano'o's armor, flung violently by the arm, trapped in a whip of sand, and Fumiko jumped, eyes wide. Sparse cheers came up from the shinobi surrounding her, and- Fumiko wanted to giggle hysterically, disbelievingly. Was the Susano'o actually open on the bottom?

"Go!" Gaara roared, and his voice snapped out across the area like he was shouting into a microphone. "Naruto!"

Naruto howled, a battle cry, and the light surrounding him flared and grew as he leaped to meet their enemy, brightening until Fumiko was getting flashes of dying, the moments before the darkness, when vision was gone, and flashes of that night Deidara stormed the village, nearly leveling it as Konoha had been leveled. The world shone, and Naruto's ringing "Rasenshuriken!" overpowered the grind of Gaara's sand.

Naruto twisted, and the jutsu left his hand and flung through the air, glitching through her vision with it's speed and the way the air it fizzled warped around it.

The rushing stopped under the chakra released upon contact, Gaara's sand dissipating as Susano'o vanished and as he was blinded, losing his grip on Madara, and then all was quiet save for the ringing of Naruto's heady jutsu. Fumiko covered her eyes out of instinct against the light, and it burned into her corneas, and she was unbalanced, and blind, and just for a second, completely dead.
And then it ended, the noise fading into the gentle spitting of her own ears clanging echoes, and the light faded and faded and then suddenly, it was gone.

When the spots finally faded from her eyes, Fumiko dropped her arm enough to see, and at the lack of Madara in the sky, felt something trembling in the space between her collarbones, fluttering into her throat.

Had they done it? her mind whispered. Had- had for once it been that easy-?

And then she heard it, ears pricking upwards: the gentle trickle of falling sand.

Her eyes followed the sound, down and down and down until they lit on the now desert-esque ground Gaara created wherever he fought- a distinct advantage for those who fought beside him from the desert, used to the shifting ground...

She didn't think that would really help them, now.

Madara was completely unfazed.

He was stood on the ground, one hand out facing where me must have- had he caught Naruto's ninjutsu? That had damaged the reanimated Raikage, that had done damage to countless impossibly strong opponents, that should have ripped Madara in half- and the last of the sand that had trapped him slid off his other wrist and to the ground.

Even his armor, non-reanimated material, was intact. It hadn't even touched him.

The thought alone filled her senses with horror. It hadn't even touched him- so he hadn't just caught the ninjutsu, gloves not even ripped but- he'd managed to absorb it. He'd managed to completely dissipate Uzumaki Naruto's Rasenshuriken with only the chakra hovering around his palm.

Just what... what even was Uchiha Madara?

"He..." she heard Temari stutter. "He absorbed that jutsu!"

"But... but that's..." Naruto's voice was weak with shock. "How come- that Madara guy- possesses Rinnegan eyes?"

The world rocked around her. Fumiko almost lost her footing at the mention of Rinnegan- Rinnegan on Madara? But- if Madara had ever had Rinnegan- surely they would've known? No- he hadn't had it! She knew everything there was to learn about Uchiha Madara- and he hadn't ever held the Rinnegan power!

Purple fire still raged from the swords' power, gashes ripped into the earth. Hundreds of shinobi lay dead all across the ground, in various states of gory and gruesome. Medical prowessed ninja ran to help them, others regrouped, still more ran to collect fallen or stolen weapons, some from the bodies of their allies. But Madara paid them no more mind, simply jumping back up to the stone to converse once more with the reincarnated Mu.

In the remnants of the chaos Fumiko looked around wildly, and caught eyes with another doing the same, just standing there, the both of them, not knowing what to do, not knowing why to try.

Mai.

She was a little farther off, some distance away, standing nearby a crater and a string of purple fire, surrounded, as Fumiko was, by bodies, and blood, and carnage. Her face looked lost, momentarily
confused, or maybe she was going into some kind of emotional shock.

The anger on her face, from before...

And then it happened again. Fumiko wanted to cry.

Both their eyes snapped away from each other, shooting instead straight to Madara, whose aura again flared with purple, clothes and hair rippling as arms of Susano'o energy again flared to life around him, curling and weaving to life around him. But this time was different- it was bigger, yes, and louder, and looked more solid, but it had two faces- two half-bodies fused at the backs, both with their hands up in signs.

The fanged, horned creatures stared on either side, unseeing. Fumiko took a step back unwillingly, overwhelmed, unable even to swallow. Her teeth tightened together. Could Madara increase his jutsu- could the Susano'o itself cast with chakra?

And then every thought left her head, and some strange kind of detached peace crawled over her. For the first time in a long time, she stared at the sky. Why shouldn't she? There was nothing more she could do. She was... done. What was the point in being afraid of clouds when the entire world, by the end of today, would end up going down in smoke?

Why fear a death she couldn't possibly avoid?

It wasn't even a meteor, Fumiko mused in her shock, some dormant, base kind of fear slithering up her gut into her throat. It was a moon, a planet, something no human could have possibly summoned or produce, something no chakra could have possibly created, or pulled from the sky. She hadn't ever seen something so big, and there was no way that her slowing brain could think of that could possibly stop in in time, could possibly do anything to break it apart so it didn't kill them all before it hit the ground.

Oh, Gaara...

Her mind ran like a movie reel. She wasn't sure if she was seeing her life flashing before her eyes, or if she was planning what she would've said to her kids, to Mai and her mother and father, to her friends, had they been nearby, if they met with her again in the afterlife.

It was everywhere, the chakra, and it drew liquid from her eyes unknowingly.

We... couldn't do it...

And now she was crying in earnest, face crumpling just enough. They'd tried so hard. They'd done so much. She'd been willing to give up her life for it. It had seemed impossible that a force like that, driven with power and soul and strength, could be foiled so easily by just one person.

The air displaced around it in sonic booms. It seemed, she thought distantly, like if they all just scattered, they would survive, because it couldn't possibly be that big. But she knew her speed. She knew Gaara's speed, she knew Mai's speed. They wouldn't make it.

Murmurs of panic and peace rose around her.

And then a speck, Ohnoki, was flying up towards the meteor, and Gaara seemed finally to snap out of the same trance she'd been in, because from somewhere, she heard his voice: rough and ragged and desperate and loud. She could imagine his face, wild, teeth bared. "Everyone!" he bellowed, and it seemed impossible that his voice carried as far as it did. "Get as far away from here as you
Again Fumiko froze.

And then fingers wrapped around her wrist and she was pulled, suddenly, shoulder jerking. Without thinking she followed, stumbling to keep up and upright, prosthetic slipping through the sand. For another moment her eyes trailed back over her shoulder even as she ran, and she saw the meteor, and saw the way it shuddered against it's own speed, and wondered what Ohnoki was doing, how it was slowing-

"-on!"

Like she was underwater Fumiko felt her eyes draw forward, and then her strange reality shattered, speeding back up to real time. Noise slammed against her ears. The stone rumbled, and Gaara yelled gutturally behind her, sand rushing in a great stream, crude hands, heard it slam against the massive moon.

"Mai!" she cried, and Mai's face was hard as she sprinted forward, fingers in a death-grip on her wrist. Her eyes still burned red.

"Just run!" she howled above the din. "Just run, come on-

The noise started to slow, but Mai didn't stop running. She ran as others stopped, ducked and darted around them like obstacles in a course, dragging Fumiko behind her just above a shunshin speed. Crackles of falling stone sounded at their backs, but- had it possibly-?

Fumiko risked a glance back, face white.

How had they possibly-?

It looked like some strange, childish rendition of a tree without details, with a wide, round circled top of the small moon and a thick, gnarled trunk of sand, branches curving a third of the way up it- they couldn't even see the entire meteor, half of it was still trapped behind rings of clouds it had created-

She wanted to go back for Gaara, this had to be destroying him, it-

In front of her still running, Mai risked a glance back and then braked hard, feet skidding against the ground even as she turned, and Fumiko slammed into her with the force of a bird hitting a window, Mai catching her, unmoved.

She gasped out, surprised, but couldn't quite strangle the words out before Mai snarled, "Go down!"

"Wh-what?"

"Underground, Fumiko!" Mai shoved her back, pointed down, looked more panicked than Fumiko had ever seen her, eyes wild. "As far as you can, right now!"

Fumiko hesitated only for a second, not sure what was happening, but then snapped out of it, hands going into a jutsu sign. Water seeped around the dirt surrounding their feet, the earth softened, she set to letting it burrow-

And then Mai jumped on her back, knocking her down, and before her back hit the ground Fumiko had the sense to keep her jutsu going, going, going- Mai wanted down and deep and she wanted it
fast, adrenaline had her set on gogogo-

The earth sealed up above their heads and they fell down, down, down.

"Make it bigger!" Mai shouted in the darkness of the earth. "Make it wider, go straight down!"

The earth rumbled as it obeyed, if only slightly with Fumiko's waning chakra, but there was a yard or two in any direction and they freefell, warm air slipping past them, and cut off from the world, for a few long, stretching moments, it was quiet. She could feel the blood on Mai's skin and clothes, it seeped through as she clung to Fumiko's back.

And then the world itself began to shake, a great rumble that tried to cave everything around them, shaking and heaving and screaming like tearing metal, the apocalypse, the meteor landing anyway, the earth itself cracking down the middle.

Fumiko screamed, Mai yelled out, and they fell.

...

~ She supposed it was maybe because she wanted to be near someone she hadn't lost, someone who was too injured to move enough to catch her in the act. ~

...

Gaara could barely hear. Something in his left ear felt wrong, felt wrenched, but that didn't matter in the great scale of his body, of his chakra, of his sand. Everything pulsed, alive, and dead, and he couldn't even look up to see if he'd saved Temari in time, couldn't even collapse the crushed sand barrier the rest of the way, half collapsed to the ground, just a shaking mess of blood and sweat and dirt.

All around them, stone cracked and fell, dust hissed in the wind.

Hands touched his sides, his shoulders, and in his state he couldn't sense or smell. It had to be Temari- at least he'd managed to save her...

His brain was catching on something that made his shaking worse, but he wasn't quite sure what it was, every thought loose. Slowly- his perception of time was skewed, he thought, perhaps, that he was concussed from the pure pressure- somebody rose him, and he could see Temari's face. it broke into something relieved, but it was no smile.

They could still be dead men walking.

She helped him to stand, lead him to where, he realized, several other survivors were huddled- and there was more relief at that, Gaara didn't think he could have handled being the only ones left alive when he had failed to protect so many more. Something still wasn't clicking properly in his brain, something edged by the sight.

They huddled around the Tsuchikage's prone form, and managed to raise him, just enough. Madara, it seemed, he thought bitterly, was taking stock of his carnage from some other vantage point, merely enjoying the view of five or six survivors straggling, struggling to join together, raise each other back up.

Eventually most of his senses returned, though Gaara still on occasion had to shake his head to clear it.
"Is everyone all right?" he managed. The dust was clogging his throat.

The others nodded. Temari merely sent him a sideways glance that he didn't quite understand.

"Gaara..."

He didn't get the chance to respond before suddenly Naruto's clone had fallen to his knees, clutching at his stomach painfully, responding to no one's cry of alarm. Gaara looked around in jerking movements, but through the dust, without his senses fully restored, he couldn't see anything, let alone find who was responsible.

"It's them!" the other Oto shinobi, who had to have been a sensory nin, yelled suddenly, whirling. "They're toward four o' clock-!"

And then there was another great rumbling sound and Gaara flinched automatically, a reflex he hadn't indulged in a fight since...

Their heads all jerked to the source- probably, he thought with some sense of despair mixed in with hot anger and hatred, from the direction Madara was now, fully reformed from the damage of his own attack.

And then the ground began to erupt, massive trunks of massive, pliable trees sprouting and pulling from the ground, whipping forwards in a great number, and Gaara didn't even move because- it wasn't possible- and they erupted from all around them, the crust of the ground smashing like eggshells where they emerged. He was playing. He was playing with them.

"He's able to use Wood Style?" the Intelligence shinobi said a rhetorical call to the wind. Gaara was sure their faces were twisted with the denial that came from helplessness- there was nothing they could do against this kind of power. All they could do was watch. Battered like they were, Gaara knew he didn't need this much of a jutsu to kill them- he just wanted the show of it.

"I guess this is it for us then," the Oto shinobi said, voice resigned, face still one of stubborn defiance. Naruto's clone gritted it's teeth.

The giant roots thundered from the earth, sprouting trees and ravaging the stone around it as it rushed towards them, some twisted wave that would crush them to vapors finer than those. He could see in Naruto's eyes that he wanted to save them, his close friends, but there was nothing worthwhile he could do except to be defiant of their deaths.

But Gaara would be defiant. If only Madara and his allies remained on this Earth then they would remember that the shinobi they had killed hadn't given up until their last breaths. They would remember him. He stood, and slowly, the others followed, unsure what to do. But Fuuma Gaara, Fifth Kazekage, leader of the Fourth Division and of the Great Battle Regiment, would not die on his knees.

And then Naruto dashed forward suddenly. "Naruto!" Gaara yelled- had he gone insane? Would he be swallowed up by the branches as a final stand? Gaara supposed it didn't truly matter: this Naruto was only a clone. Perhaps there was hope then, with him gone somewhere else.

But Naruto ignored him and cried, "Multi-shadow clone Jutsu!"

Smoke erupted around his figure as he multiplied from thin air, five, ten, a hundred more. Gaara blinked, shocked, lips parting- there was no way the clone had had enough chakra left for that, so how on earth...? And then their hands glowed with power, each even without the assistance of another, and then they billowed.
"Giant Rasengan!" their voices chorused. "Rasengan Barrage!"

Finally Ohnoki stirred. Blood curdled from his closed eye.

There was a great creaking and cutting sound, a thousand plants being groomed, snipped, smashed to splinters. The air filled with chakra stain and wind, and then, the miraculous- the roots and trees began to fall, toppling to the sides and back as though by ax.

But then the sound of released clones filled the air as one by one those who hadn't been destroyed in the attack disappeared, exploding into wisps that vanished on the wind by the hundreds. Eventually, the original clone was left and fell to it's knees, exhausted and depleted.

"Naruto, thats enough. I'll take over from here," Ohnoki said suddenly, lowly.

"Lord Tsuchikage!" Temari yelped sharply, startled. Gaara, however, said nothing, merely shifting in his stance. "You're too injured- you're in no condition-!

"I have a chance to reclaim myself now," Ohnoki murmured. "I've still got enough energy to do that, believe you me." He was silent for a moment, taking in air with slow, steady breaths. "I'll fight him."

"What?" Temari exploded, "That's crazy! You're already falling apart!"

Madara and Mu leapt from their perch to a closer vantage point atop the smashed trunk of a Wood Release giant root. It didn't seem like the Naruto clone could move, and so Gaara ran forward- to protect him? To pull him back? He wasn't quite so sure exactly for what reason, but he did so, with what feeling remained in his legs.

"That's too bad," Madara admonished. "I wanted to try out more jutsu!" He crossed his arms like a petulant child. Gaara couldn't believe this creature was the one that possessed such incredible power- that on par with a Kami. "But I don't think you can dance anymore, Ohnoki."

There was a pause then, for just a moment. The final of the dust cleared. Gaara, still assisting Naruto, could feel the struggle in his own mind, behind the mild concussion, to put together whatever it was he was forgetting. It had something to do with the wide expanse of destruction and slaughter around him- something that made his panic gauge spike rapidly.

"What's that look for?" Madara said inquisitively, as an adult would to a young, begging child asking for a sweet. "I already showed you how different our strengths were long ago, remember?"

"For all these years, we shinobi have done nothing but do battle," Ohnoki said, voice hard. "We have continued to fight for the sake of our nations and our villages. We just take what we want from our enemies without a single thought or care! We take from them, and they take back from us again and again in an endless cycle! Too many times now our hatred has caused all-out war!"

"But that is simply the way that life is," Madara said calmly. His eyes were cool, almost bored. "I can't believe you've lived as long as you have without learning a single thing from the past."

"I've lived longer than you, and been around the block enough to learn twice what you have," Ohnoki spat. "It's because I've experienced pain from the past that I can even consider what would be best for the future!"

"And yet, this is the Fourth Great Ninja War," Mu mused, almost condescendingly. "Is this what's best?"
Behind him, Ohnoki tensed. "This war is different than the others," he hissed defiantly. "This time we're all fighting the battle together, in order to achieve something more than the petty differences that we fought over before."

Finally Naruto was okay to stand without being in danger of dissipation, and Gaara stood carefully, abandoning his scattered thoughts for now, one of his arms slung over Gaara's shoulders, and he held Naruto's chest and back to keep him steady on his feet. Ohnoki continued behind him, seemingly spurred by the action.

"By watching youngsters like them, I've learned that time doesn't just flow and pass us by- though slow in pace, the world does accrue its past experiences... and grow steadily towards peace."

"That is where you are wrong," Madara corrected, leaning back slightly on his heels, Rinnegan eyes narrowed slightly. "The world does not need to grow any further. It should slumber in peace under the Genjutsu of the Eternal Tsukuyomi."

"Madara," Ohnoki said pointedly. "Long ago, you forced me to forsake myself..." He grunted as Gaara and Naruto both began to turn, Gaara casting an eye behind them, and struggled to stand, but with the help of the Intelligence shinobi managed to get to his feet. "... However, I shall win against you here- I will reclaim myself! And you shall be the one... who will slumber!"

And then he fell sideways, unable to support his own weight. Lightened sand shot from Gaara's gourd to cushion him- something automatic that Gaara had learned over his childhood, his closest friend falling constantly- he wasn't even sure if the rescue had been intentional- and then his mind jarred.

Fumiko.

Had she...?

Horror and premature grief flooded through his blood, afraid and fueled by ice. But- but he knew what it felt like when she was dead and- Mai. She hadn't just been a figment of his imagination, had she? Feral and wild and enraged- had she as well-?

He turned his eyes again to Madara, and decided that no, they weren't dead, they couldn't possibly be, and with the sudden clarity that followed his recollections of fear Gaara knew that either way, this shinobi had to be defeated.

"Come with me," he told Ohnoki, "And I'll help you reclaim yourself."

"I've found that the aged usually complain when those younger than they are dote on them too much," Temari said with a low smirk, some kind of defense against their impossible situation. She was Suna in her blood- and would die before she knelt in defeat. "Don't you think that's true?"

"Heh," Ohnoki managed. "I'll allow all of you to meddle this one time."

"Hmph!" Madara said darkly, straightening. "Still have some dance left in you."

"For my soul's sake," Ohnoki grunted. "And for the future- I shall take you down here and now!"

Madara and Mu sped into shunshin then, prepared to strike them down in that instant. Gaara tensed, stood ready to fight- if any survivors remained hidden beneath the stones- wherever Fumiko and Mai must have been- he couldn't give up this area or his life. His sand rose.

And then some brilliant glare filled his vision, like a small sun unfurling before his eyes, and
Gaara gasped, dropping his head down, unable to even cover his eyes from the harsh explosion without dropping Naruto's clone. There were two massive sounds of impact—collisions between shinobi.

What was happening?

It only lasted for that split second, blind sun spots seeping into his vision, and Gaara squinted forward to see what had happened—and was too shocked to make anything other than some kind of startled gasp—two shinobi had appeared from nothing in the brilliant white light, mid-attack, and pushed Madara and Mu back from their assault—

Tsunade of the Leaf and Raikage A.

"I had already relayed our coordinates to HQ," the comms Intelligence shinobi said.

"Reserve Seal: Release." Tsunade barked, fingers curling in Tiger as wisps of energy curled around her damaged form. "Ninja Art: Mitotic Regeneration Jutsu!"

"Are you okay, Tsunade?" A said tensely, straightening, his eyes never leaving their opponents. Though the dust was still high in the air, Gaara could see nor sense any other arrivals (although now as his senses fully returned, he could sense survivors—still not Fumiko or Mai) but with these two new additions to the fight, four of the five Kage were now on scene.

Were they meaning to summon the other? It might have been, Gaara realized with some clarity, that the only shinobi capable of defeating and sealing Madara would be the strongest from every nation—the greatest shinobi of the current age—the Five Kage, with the inclusion of Uzumaki Naruto.

"Yeah," she responded grimly.

"Granny Tsunade is here?" Naruto's clone exclaimed, and then was quiet in thought until—

There was a sharp sound behind them, air weaving quickly, and Gaara snapped his head about to see Terumi Mei, the Mizukage, stood in the rubble between three Leaf shinobi—another instantaneous teleportation. How was it possible?

The Five Kage were now fully assembled. Though Ohnoki was weak, Gaara sensed the power still curling within him, remaining by either force of will or stubbornness, Gaara wasn't sure, nor did he care. They would need everything they had for even the highest chance of victory on this battlefield.

"Well, seeing that everyone here is still alive," Mei said smoothly, arms still crossed in a passive stands that Gaara knew she could snap out of at any half-second. "I guess we made it in time."

"Now I can finally let loose," the Raikage growled, "And it's about damn time, too."

"All right," Tsunade said. The chakra smoke around her faded on some faint breeze. "I'm ready to go now as well."

"I must say," Ohnoki said, and Gaara could detect his gratefulness in the relieved breath of his voice. He himself remained silent, eyes forward, but he knew—he likely would have died in mere minutes if aid had not arrived. "It is truly worth living a long life."

He stepped forward, and Ohnoki, slightly recovered, hovered at his side to stand together with the Kage against their mutual enemy. Madara had not yet moved, merely watching curiously. Gaara
could feel all their chakras spreading and bubbling in anticipation.

This was what he'd envisioned, proposing peace at the Summit so long ago. He'd been spat at, and laughed at and ignored, but now it had all come to fruition. The Five Kage, leaders of nations that had warred and fought and hated for generations of generations before them, and who had been expected to war and fight and hate for generations and generations to come, stood together shoulder to shoulder as equals to fight for humankind itself, for the betterment of the world.

If they won- and Gaara took great comfort in this, took incentive in the thought- then they would be at war no longer. There would be peace. And there would always be those that rose against it, he would easily admit: but there would be peace on this earth, and those who stood to protect that peace.

"This is perfect," Madara exclaimed, without a single shift in his expression. "You all will make this test of mine worthwhile."

Tsunade stepped backwards and to Gaara and Ohnoki's backs, and for a moment Gaara wasn't sure what she was trying to do, but then he felt the gentle- but now rushed- feeling of healing ninjutsu, rapidly healing and replenishing whatever it could before the inevitable attack came.

Gaara very carefully did not flinch, just gazed resolutely forward. He would find them.

"Thank you for this, Princess," the Tsuchikage said beneath his breath so only they could hear.

"I'll heal the two of you," she said, and then barked, "Raikage! Mizukage! You buy me some time while I finish this up."

The Raikage immediately stepped forward, figure blazing with blue, flickering lightning that sizzled the air, like it had been roaring beneath his skin, chomping at the bit for release. "Let's go, Mizukage!" he roared, and Mei stepped up nearby him, hands raised in preparation for her most powerful techniques.

"Right!" the Mizukage affirmed, and then immediately went on the offensive, launching a Lava style attack that served a double purpose- forcing Madara to retreat slightly to avoid and crashing down over the remained Wood Style obstacles, incinerating them to make the battlefield clearer once again.

The Raikage vanished with all of his great speed to attack where Gaara couldn't see, and the Mizukage continued launching Lava jutsu. Vague sounds of battle rose from here and there, but Gaara focused on allowing Tsunade's foreign chakra to enter fully into his system and on sensing the area for other chakras.

"Whadda you think, is he still okay?" one of the Leaf shinobi murmured from farther back.

"Doubt it," another said, sounding slightly breathless. "You've seen what they're capable of. Keep watching."

"There's no way for us to join the fray and help."

"Look," the Intelligence ninja said. "Why don't all three of you come with me, and we'll go after the other one. Help me out!"

Ahead of them, Gaara watched as Mu struggled to stand up, thrown by Tsunade's entering attacks in a way Madara hadn't been, surrounded by a splintered mess of wood that he'd crashed through.
"Is that the guy?"

"Follow me. Let's go!"

The sound of them leaping into shunshin rang in Gaara's ears. He glanced over at the remaining Oto shinobi, the one who had sensed Madara's and Mu's presence on the battlefield, as Tsunade healed him. "Sensor," he said, and the shinobi jumped, looking nervous and tense. Gaara didn't blame him- this was the kind of fight he shouldn't have been present at. That he'd survived the meteor at all was a miracle.

"Y-yes sir!"

"Can you sense any other survivors that I cannot? I've managed to locate six others."

"Oh! Of course..." He put his hands up together in a balancing sign, and then closed his eyes for a moment. "Yes, Kazekage. There are more survivors, though not many, and some appear to be in bad shape..."

Gaara extended his arm towards him, and the shinobi jumped a little, eyes darting open.

"Are there any like this?" he asked quietly. Behind him, Temari sucked in something like a sharp breath. Gaara could feel Ohnoki and Tsunade's eyes boring into him, but ignored it, waiting.

The Oto shinobi blinked at him for a moment, brows furrowed with confusion, and then he seemed to recognize the bracelet, with the small chakra stone- something a sensor would notice. "Is this... another chakra than yours?"

Gaara nodded. The Oto shinobi reached out, just a little hesitant, and hovered his hand above it before closing his eyes to sense again. A long moment passed, and then another one, and Gaara's heart started to beat rapidly at the sensor's silence. Likely if he sensed nothing he would try, and try, and try, so as to desperately find some trace to please his superior...

And then the shinobi's eyes flicked open.

"Yes, sir," he breathed. "Below the earth- there are two. I almost didn't sense them at first- they're so far down."

Gaara let out the breath that had caught up in his throat, something numb releasing into his bloodstream, warm and trembling. Temari, as well, breathed out a shaky sigh of relief, and put a hand on Gaara's other shoulder for a moment, opposite Tsunade's healing, before withdrawing once more.

They were both alive.

"Thank you," he told the shinobi quietly, pulling back again his arm, glancing down at the stone- no indicator of death, it would have remained the only relic of chakra had she died in the attack. "Really."

"Um- of course, Kazekage." He nodded, looking unsure whether to look uncomfortable at the privacy of his request or relieved to have found someone the Kzekage, his battle regiment leader, had asked for specifically. "It's- they must have gone underground before the second meteor hit... there's no way they could've gotten down so far otherwise. Like they knew..."

Gaara's mind flashed to what seemed almost a hallucination of Mai, uncaring of wounds and distance and chances, roaring like some unearthly demon creature, uncaring or recognizing of her
own siblings- and it flashed to her blood red eyes. She'd seen the second meteor behind the first before it hit, and had Fumiko drop them both far below the earth for protection.

The Raikage appeared again to stand before them, glaring at the destruction their battle had caused. Tsunade moved one hand to each of their backs as the healing became less and less intensive, Gaara feeling his wounds dissipating and now his chakra replenishing rapidly.

"How much longer, Hokage?" A demanded.

"Just a bit!"

"But Granny Tsunade," Naruto's clone exclaimed. "Are you okay? Whenever you use that forehead mark jutsu, you get really old and you fall down!"

"It's different from when I fought Pein, Naruto." she explained tersely. Her chakra itself felt ready to be used, bursting at the seams. "I've only healed myself so far. And none of these wounds are very troublesome. I have more than enough chakra."

"Great," he said. "So does that mean you can heal me too, Granny Tsunade? I may be a clone, but I can't afford to disappear yet! I can join you!"

"That's not necessary," she snapped determinedly, and Naruto sucked in a breath behind them. Gaara looked back, sympathetic but waiting, watching. If he disappeared now, his original would know what was happening, and be able to react accordingly. If he stayed, it would just be a dance of trying to heal him on ever verge of collapsing into smoke. Naruto was strong... but if he was to join this battle, they would need Naruto, and not a clone.

Against Madara, it seemed, a clone would not be enough.

"Why not?!"

"Naruto, you must understand," the Tsuchikage said. "This war is no longer being fought only to protect you."

He was silent for a moment, opened his mouth to protest- and then the earth exploded violently where Madara had so briefly disappeared, erupting with a great noise and crash of force, wood style falling away, hardening lava breaking apart and sizzling.

Again, Madara's Susano'o rose into the air, dripping lava, but Gaara took comfort in the fact that now it was more defensive than offensive- he needed Susano'o to avoid their attacks and the Mizukage's burning pools of lava.

"You know, I normally prefer men who are hard to melt," the Mizukage mused coyly. "But in your case, I think I'd have to pass."

"He can counter me even at my full speed," the Raikage gritted out.

The Susano'o armor's arm reared back, and then smashed into the area before the two attacking Kage. Dust and stone and wood shards flew wildly, their own weapons, shrapnel and blinding powder. The Kage retreated back towards where Gaara and Ohnoki healed.

"I'm gonna have to get faster," the Raikage decided aloud. "And thus have the power to crush your defense!"

"How is your defense?" Madara countered, arm crossed within the purple glow is is Susano'o.
Gaara wondered if that was the color for Madara's chakra, decided that no, from Fumiko's reactions to both her dreams and in realistic exposure to Madara's aura, that no, it couldn't have been anything quite so ethereal.

Gaara took that question as a warning, and the second that the Susano'o again raised it's arm, dropped to touch his hands to the ground, sent his newly lightened sand gushing into the air, stone fusing with it as he did so, to harden instantly before them, thick and daunting and, hopefully, impenetrable. Beside him, to Gaara's surprise, Ohnoki followed and beneath his shield of sand rose a stone golem, solid and strong.

Gaara heard the impact of powerful attacks, projectiles of energy thrown like shuriken, and forced his chakra to maintain in defense throughout the sand, thankful for Tsunade's near complete healing.

"Do you understand now?" Ohnoki asked sternly, question directed to Naruto. "This has become a battle to protect each other."

"I wanna fight Madara too!" Naruto's clone exploded, raising both fists in anger. "I can help you!"

"A defensive wall of sand and stone?" Madara's voice rang out from beyond the defenses, sounding pleasantly surprised. His Susano'o rumbled as it moved. "Also quite impressive!"

Ohnoki stood abruptly, and Gaara followed. "Right!" the Tsuchikage commanded. "It's time to go on the offensive! Now, Mizukage, Raikage, listen to me well!"

Ohnoki explained quickly, and barely had gotten the last words out to prepare before the Susano'o power smashed through their defenses, crushing it to pieces- and Gaara immediately swept his arm up in an attack that sent sand spiraling into the Susano'o to push it back, and Gaara saw the weapon Madara had used to destroy the barrier- another set of long swords of energy.

It brought them crashing down onto his sand, scattering it, and under the cover Gaara jumped into action, sand platform hardening instantly below his feet to send him shooting into the air, already down on one knee for stability, hands thrown up for attack the second Madara and his jutsu came into his sight.

The sand rose around it, picking up stone and debris along the way, and closed over the chakra as well as it's physical form. This was a longshot, and only the beginning of Ohnoki's plan with a fleeting hope that this initial sealing would somehow work, despite the fact that it hadn't for just the reincarnated Mizukage. Gaara jammed his hands close together, but Madara fought him, and Gaara's arms strained.

Still, the pyramid began to loosely form- in time for something to glow at it's center. Blades of light cut through the cracks that formed under the pressure, and then it imploded all together, sending Gaara flying back. But still, he'd hopefully given Ohnoki time to finish explaining the finer details, to prepare the other Kage.

Gaara hit the ground just shy of hard, the sand beneath his feet and in the air around him softening in time for impact, slowing him midair in preparation for the impact. The landing jarred his knees and nothing else, and he was ready to leap back from the next attack from the massive swords.

Behind him, Ohnoki said, "Mizukage!"

The world went blind, for once, not of Madara's doing or planning, but in the Hidden Mist's infamous hidden mist jutsu, coating the air in white, thick mist that clung to Gaara's clothes and
hair. With the barrier, Madara wouldn't be able to use his Rinnegan to its full extent, unable to absorb what he couldn't see.

Gaara sensed Mu's chakra- something with which he was becoming all too familiar with- as it appeared before them.

"Let's do this, Raikage!" Ohnoki said, perched now on A's back, prepared to use lightening and superweight attacks on his figure for aid. With the loss of weight, the Raikage would become faster, with the added weight, his attacks even more powerful than before.

"Right."

They blurred- Gaara already hadn't much seen them in the mist, he was relying on his familiarity with their chakra to keep track of their locations around him, an advantage from months and months of planning and meetings and close proximity with each other that Madara just didn't have. They could sense each other better than Madara could sense them.

There was a sound of massive attack impact- the Raikage had begun his assault on Mu.

And again- light flashed now, cutting through the mist at Madara's Sunaseno'o, and Gaara heard it: the cracking as if of a spine as the Susano'o collapsed, shattering under the force of a superweighted Raikage A's lightning-charged punch. It fell hard even as it started to crumble, causing the earth to shake, dust to rise and blind the battlefield even further, rocks kicking into the air.

The Kage reassembled beside Naruto as the rubble settled, a moment to regroup before Madara recovered enough to launch an offensive.

"Granny, c'mon, would you heal me already?!" Naruto's clone demanded angrily.

"Just calm yourself and listen to me, Naruto," Ohnoki declared. He had regained his color, movement and ability to fly once more, and now seemed back in fighting shape. Tsunade really was a master healer among healers. "You see, this war that we're now fighting... In the beginning I only agreed to join the Allied Shinobi Forces in order to get rid of the Akatsuki. But... as I battled alongside all of you, I started feeling quite differently than I had in the past.

"Now I want to be here- as the Tsuchikage of the Allied Shinobi Forces! In the exact same manner that some shinobi villages would choose to be desperate and autonomous are now changing... they are becoming one. So perhaps the shinobi world system which thus far has only bred hatred, can change as well. Naruto..." Ohnoki looked the clone in the eyes, hard.

"Please, let all of us deal with this Madara. I swear we'll finish him off! It'll be our first step in stopping the curse of hatred we've all been under until now. Like Madara, we Kage are also guilty of stirring up hate in the past. It's our responsibility to make things right! Rest assured, and leave this to us." With this final assurance, Ohnoki floated forward, and put a hand gently on the clone's shoulder. "And you... you go and take care of the other Madara, my boy. That act will become the first step in promoting hope for the future."

"The old one or the new one, it doesn't really matter. Only by defeating both Madaras will we be able to bring this war to an end," Tsunade said fiercely, eyes glinting. "We will all defend you by fighting on this battlefield, so protect us through your actions by fighting over there on that battlefield!"

Naruto's clone stared at them, stunned, and then closed his eyes, head dropping slightly. Tsunade
continued, and as they spoke, Naruto again rose his head to hear them and listen, blue eyes clear and sharp.

"Now, Clone Naruto, I entrust you with this message from all the Five Kage..."

And together, as one force, Gaara with a fire in his voice that had carried with him since his first steps towards peace, and protection- no, that had carried with him since he swore as a young child to protect those he loved and held dear- the Five Kage made a promise.

"We'll win!"

The Naruto's eyes sharpened, and then, without another word, he crossed his arms and exploded into smoke, leaving them to their promise.

...

~ She could hear him shifting occasionally, trying to see what she was doing on the floor beside his bed, but knew he couldn't. ~

...

It was deathly silent so far down underground. When they didn't speak, there was nothing but their breaths, and the small chips of stone that broke off from the ceiling of their small hidey-hole and into the stone around it.

Fumiko was still breathing hard, a little, out of shock, and from the sheer number of chakra that had instantly flickered out throughout the rumbling of a connected meteor that- hadn't they stopped it? She'd seen it stopped- but the little bit of hope and sanity her heart clung to was that she could feel Gaara above, as well as a few others, including Ohnoki and, thankfully, Temari. Naruto's clone had also survived the attack.

Once the roar of tearing ground above them, shaking ground around them had finally stopped, there was only the occasional grumble from above, evidence of some milder earth ninjutsu, or something else of the sort- though "milder" meant nothing this far down, any jutsu Fumiko could still hear from where they sat was a massive jutsu in itself. She could still feel Madara's horrible chakra, so she could assume there was still fighting above.

Fumiko wasn't sure if there was a Kami- only that there was an afterlife, and that there were an awful lot of coincidence in earth and chakra that suggested the presence of one- but still, she found herself praying batedly under her breath on and off as the urge struck her, hushed whispers of panic and pleading and peace.

By all rights, she should've been dead.

The only reason she was alive was Mai, who hadn't yet deactivated her sharingan, to Fumiko's immense surprise, and instead was lying back on what space remained below them, feet raised against the stone Fumiko leaned her back against, head tipping upwards the other way, like she was in a hammock. Fumiko guessed she was watching what she could of the fight, eyes flickering back and forth occasionally.

Mai tolerated her small bouts of prayer, her nervous babbling, indulged her occasionally in the status of their friends and allies. Mai as well could sense- a strange skill that Fumiko had known, abstractly, that they both possessed, but had never really reconciled before in her mind as an ability that both Mitsuwa sisters shared. Somehow she'd thought that they had nothing, really, in common on the battlefield.
Nobody else had died as of yet, but they were weakening and growing and weakening. Others appeared, chakras Fumiko recognized but couldn't explain appearing instantaneously on the battlefield, and even Naruto's clone disappeared - which was bad news in itself for the battle as a whole, if they could defeat an Uzumaki Naruto.

Finally, Fumiko decided to break the silence for good.

"Mai," she whispered, huddled against the stone. Her chakra was gone, depleted nearly entirely between everything that had happened that day and such a fast, draining descent with earth and water ninjutsu. She was cold, and a little wet and muddy, and somewhere along the line, her hair had come loose - perhaps the band had snapped - and was settled over her shoulders and the stone around her legs. "How did you know?"

"Know what?"

"Know that the meteor hadn't been stopped?"

Mai didn't break eye contact with the roof of their shelter. "It was stopped," she said. "Well, the first one was, anyway."

"The first one?"

"Whoever that guy was-" Mai's eyes narrowed. "He summoned a second meteor behind the first. It probably smashed through the first one and doubled the impact. There wasn no way Ohnoki and Gaara could've stopped that, and no other way for us to protect ourselves from the fallout..."

"But- but how did you know it was- oh."

"Oh," Mai echoed. "Yeah. I saw through the first one and realized it was there while we were running."

"Your... sharingan."

"Yeah," she said again, but for once didn't really sound annoyed or defensive about it. Just a little tired, and exhausted. Fumiko wished she had a chakra pill, or even just some food, or anything beyond the meager first aid kit supplies she'd used to treat Mai's many wounds.

Her face was bruised and the skin split, burned and skinned across her body, she'd been impaled by what looked like stone, judging from the dirt that had remained in her wounds, not to mention straight up chakra exhaustion. In a pinch she could still fight, but any more than one or two jutsu... But aside from the occasional grimace, it didn't seem to much bother her.

"Why are they still active?" Fumiko asked hesitantly, unsure where this was going to do, or if Mai was going to snap.

"Because I need to see the fight," she said gruffly. "Just sensing isn't enough for me."

"No, I mean..." Fumiko blinked uncertainly. With what chakra remained in her body, she was keeping tabs on Gaara's chakra, vaguely aware of the others, enough to know if someone had died. "I thought you never wanted to use it unless... absolutely, life-or-death necessary?"

Mai sighed. "I don't like it," she admitted. "But I do have it, and... people knew about it that I didn't expect to... and it's- I wouldn't rather die than use it. And I... I wouldn't rather others died than use it."
Fumiko jolted, or maybe she froze. Had she ever even... thought about it like that? That she could save lives with the power she was too ashamed and angry to use? From Mai's expression, it seemed that she hadn't ever thought of it like that, either.

"I would be dead if I hadn't used that jutsu," Mai continued. "And so would you. And so would Shiragiku."

"Shiragiku?" Fumiko's brows furrowed confusedly. "Do you... do you mean from the fight with the reincarnated shinobi? What about Eishi?"

"Eishi," Mai said, more a muse than the beginning of an answer, like she was saying the name for the first time, intrigued. Her eyes, again, flicked to the side, following a fight Fumiko couldn't see. "Eishi's dead, sis."

Fumiko jerked at that, lunged to her hands and knees to see Mai's face better. "What?"

"He died in the fight against the Statue the masked-man summoned," she said quietly. "I don't know how. We got separated. My sharingan didn't save him then- because I didn't use it except to find his body."

"Mai," she said, horrified. "There was nothing you could've-"

"There was plenty I could've done." Mai shook her head. "But that's- I can't do that to myself right now. Right now, there's plenty more I can do, and one of those things is be a better asset. I'll damn whatever they say about me, if I can save their lives..."

It wasn't vindictive. This wasn't Mitsuwa "I saved your life so respect me" Mai, this was more like a quiet thought, a relief to have saved lives, despite what the punishment would be in the future. This was a Mai with regret.

"Mai, I..." Fumiko was too stunned to elaborate further than that. She just didn't know what to say- how to respond to Mai's lack of rage, this shift in her driving force. "What happened, then... With Madara...?"

"So that's the real Madara, then? The reanimated shinobi?" Mai gave some soft, scornful laugh. "I knew it wasn't that masked man... I don't know, I was just- I was just pissed. At myself and at him and at the masked-man for what they've done to us, and whoever the hell else's fault this all is. And I just... didn't care. I didn't care about anything except that... not even dying."

"Why'd you stop?" Fumiko still was whispering. For some reason, she couldn't raise her voice. "You were so... it was terrifying, Mai. You looked me in the eyes and didn't know who I was, or didn't care."

"The meteor," she said. "That damn- that was insane. That was Kami power. There wasn't anything I could do to help anyone- and then I saw you, and you looked so afraid..."

"I was afraid," she admitted. "And I wasn't, at the same time. I just..." Fumiko shuddered. She'd just completely accepted imminent death, and the scariest part was, she hadn't been wrong. If Mai hadn't been there, she never would've thought in her level of panic to hide beneath the ground, and she would've been dead- there wouldn't have been anything left of her.

"Yeah, same." Mai grinned, whether for some semblance of normalcy or real mirth and disbelief, Fumiko didn't know. "I really thought for a second that-" she raised a hand and snapped her fingers, a sharp sound that echoed off the tight walls. "I was dead."
"You wouldn't die from a meteor," Fumiko teased.

"Ha! You lot all say I won't die from anything, don't you? Geez. How would I die?"

"I don't know," she said. "But like, some way that isn't with everyone else. You wouldn't be the
shinobi who died in the Fourth Division, you'd be... Mitsuwa Mai, who went down fighting."

"Yeah?" Finally Mai blinked, but didn't otherwise take her eyes away from the scene. "... Someone
told me once, not to die like a stupid idiot, because I should die in, like, some great blaze of glory
on a war zone."

Fumiko had a guess on who that person had been, so she didn't ask about it. "So what do we do
now?"

"I," she said, "Really don't know. I guess I'm waiting to see if things go really bad. It's been close a
few times... but they're doing all right. They're hanging on. If they need me, in a way that I
wouldn't just be in the way, I'll have to go up there."

"You aren't in any condition to-"

"And you're not in any condition to heal me," she said flippantly. "So not too much else we can do
about it, eh?"

"I guess not, but-"

"Message from HQ: Reinforcements!" The voice sounded in her head, and she recognized it as
Inoichi's. Mai swore in surprise, but then stopped to listen. "We now have the upper hand.
Uzumaki Naruto is standing firm. The ones we must protect at all costs, Naruto and Lord B, are
fighting with everything they've got on the front line of this battle."

Fumiko and Mai exchanged startled glances, Mai finally tearing her sharingan eyes from the earth.

"Where are they?" Fumiko whispered, and Mai shook her head.

"Gai and Kahashi are there too. Everyone in the Allied Forces: I need all of you to add to their
mighty hearts. Amplify it, with your mighty hearts! If you do, I promise you victory."

And then the transmission was over. Fumiko sat up. "That was so short," she muttered curiously.
"Did he say allied forces? How many people did he connect that with?"

"I don't know," Mai said, suddenly tense. She crouched forward on her haunches, head tipped all
the way back on her neck like she'd broken it, staring hard at the earth, and the fight, above. "But
they're in serious trouble now."

Gaara's chakra had stagnated in a way that, for some reason, hadn't really concerned her. But
suddenly, at Mai's alarm, she realized why- because that was Gaara's chakra when he was asleep,
and usually, that feeling comforted her, but right now- had he been knocked unconscious? But then
she realized, focusing on the others-

Everyone was asleep. Their chakra was heavy.

"Mai-" she said, voice suddenly frightened. Gaara was up there.

"I got this," her sister said, and Fumiko's sudden panic doubled. Again she wanted to cry, wondered
when she had become so emotional, but all-consuming fear had only rested in her heart a few
times, and she didn't think she would ever get used to the way it ripped her insides to shreds.

"Mai, you can't-

"And you'd rather me leave him to die?" she demanded, and Fumiko flinched, hard.

"N-no, I-

"I don't wanna put you on the spot here," she said. "But I gotta go and I need you to let me out."

"Then-" Again she swallowed hard, reached back for her staff in it's sheath that she somehow hadn't yet lost. She had no chance, but Mai was right- she couldn't sit here and do nothing while her friends fought a losing battle. "I'll come with you, Mai!"

"No," Mai snapped. And then she seemed to catch herself, sucking in a breath, eyes closing, and then looked at her, and for a second there was no sharingan, it was just Mai's brown, speckled eyes and the golden chakra that rested beneath. "You need to stay down here and recover. Any chakra you get we're gonna need when we win- dying taking out the enemy is not on my agenda. We'll need a healer."

"But-

"You're not on par for an offensive fight against Sasuke," she said, "Let alone Madara. Your Genjutsu will mean nothing."

"You can't-

"I can. I swear to you, I can!"

"You'll die!"

"I don't fear death as long as I can die to protect someone that needs saving. I want to die with no regrets." Mai's brown eyes burned, and her fists clenched. Her presence seemed to fill up the tiny space; despite how hunched she stood, she was standing proud, standing bravely. And then she paused, took one heaving breath. "That's my ninja way!"

Fumiko stopped, and she slumped fully back onto her knees.

Your ninja way, Mai...?

Mai had never had a nindo- at least not in a concise sense. Nothing really had driven her to fight or live except to survive and to prove herself stronger, and even just because she enjoyed fighting. She'd always had a protective streak, but that was if she could protect, not the reason behind her actions.

Fumiko clenched her fists against her knees.

"... Don't die," she said desperately. "Please, don't die, Mai."

"Heh." Mai smiled at her, and again her eyes seemed to bleed, staining red. Her sharingan tomoe swirled, a fully active three-comma mature-stage, something Fumiko hadn't noticed until now. Mai had fully awakened her sharingan, fully blooded, and... and she seemed okay with that. "I'll do my best, you know."

Shakily, Fumiko raised her hands to form a sign. Mai touched a palm to the roof of their hideaway to make it easier.
"Close it up behind me," she said. "And use your sensory technique to bring me up somewhere hidden, so he doesn't know you're down here. That guy..." Mai's expression darkened. "It seems an awful lot like he fucking enjoys hurting people, and toying with them, so he can't know you're here."

"Right..."

"And, sis." Fumiko didn't remember the last time Mai had called her sister so many times in one conversation, and she wasn't sure if it scared her or made her happy. "Something... weird happened back at the base camp, before I came here." Mai smiled, a real smile, small and soft but not cynical or sacrificial. It looked foreign on her face. "If for some reason I can't- tell Kankuro I meant to keep my promise, got it?"

"What do you mean-"

"Fumiko," Mai said exasperatedly. "Just pass it on if you have to, got it?"

"... Okay, Mai." she said, and readied her hands. "Here we go. Doton: Hiding like a mole!"

Mai jerked, tugged by the hand, and then she was gone, disappearing into the earth above them, rock and soil sealing back up behind her as she rose. Like Fumiko never existed- like Mai would appear from nowhere at all.

...

~ Mai was hunched on the floor of the hospital room, crying silently, more heaves than tears, curled around her Taicho's mask, gripped to her chest. ~

...

As she came out of the ground, gasping a breath before fully emerging, Mai's first thought was that it was damn hot.

She'd never been in this kind of heat before- not even at the most record Suna temperature. The only thing that came close was being actually on fire. Her second was that there was a strange smell on the air, sweet, cloying flowers that she immediately didn't trust, not with this much fire ravaging the area, and so she clapped a hand over her nose and mouth, grimacing as the ground spat her out the rest of the way.

As soon as she was out, crouched low to the ground, Mai checked back to ensure the ground looked seamless behind her, and as she watched it sealed shut, with only the smallest cracks to suggest anything had happened there at all- and judging by what remained of the area, Mai thought as she surveyed the destruction, overturned, demolished stone, ragged, half destroyed forests, the whole place in flames and glowing red from heat, it wouldn't really matter.

Nobody would notice her entrance in all this destruction.

First she looked up, to make sure she hadn't been seen coming out from the earth, and narrowed her drying, burning sharingan eyes at the cover of trees. She could see Madara's chakra, but had no idea if he was staring down with his sharingan or not, whether he really thought they were anything more than dead.

As satisfied as she could get right then, sweating bullets and counting the seconds before she needed to breathe again, she finally looked towards the chakras she and Fumiko had sensed- her sister must have tried to get as close to them as possible.
Her eyes widened at the sight: all five Kage, laid out side by side as if someone had set them there for sick decoration, passed clean out, but whether it was from the sweet flower scent in the air or the rapid decline of oxygen snatched up by the flames, she didn't know. If they didn't move, though, she did know they would roast, get degrees of burns from the red-hot ground they laid on that even Tsunade of the Leaf would have trouble healing.

Mai up and ran for them, unable to hear her own footsteps over the roaring of the flames and crackles of snapping wood, and knelt first at Gaara's side, shaking his shoulder, cursing at his thick clothing in this heat. He didn't stir, and neither did Tsunade beside him. Damn it. She didn't know Suiton!

The air was thick with something sparse and strange, so Mai didn't dare breathe yet. She stepped away from the Kage and squinted up, flickering about with her sharingan eyes, until they caught upon something strange: giant flowers, emitting chakra-laced pollen spores...

Fumiko would know what it was, but Mai damn well had a guess. That was what had knocked all the Kage out, and what would get her too when she finally needed to take a breath, or she passed out trying to hold it.

She couldn't use Katon, not here. It would either be cancelled out by the lack of oxygen or make everything worse, and if anything was going to destroy the wood, it was going to be the fire already raging around them, not her own flames. She needed something more solid.

Her sharingan shifted. She risked moving her hand from her face, closing her throat to keep it from somehow getting into her system, and signed quickly. Boar- Ram- Snake- Horse- Dragon.

Raiton, she thought, Electromagnetic Murder!

The chirping almost rose above the fire's chaos, but not quite- she could still hear it, though. It tore through the air, ripping into the branches, destroying one bud and sending logs and spitting fire smashing to the ground. Mai recoiled, retreating backwards from the falling rubble, and then glared at it with her sharingan. Not enough, she growled internally.

She needed to get at least most of the buds, try and get some fresher air down here- even if it would make the flames rise even higher, it would hopefully both wake the Kage up from their pollen-comas as well as give them an escape route to clear air.

There was nothing more she could do besides try again. She refused to call for Fumiko with her chakra, if her sister came up here and Madara saw her... besides, she didn't yet have the chakra to do much of anything against this kind of expanse of fire.

Boar- Ram- Snake- Horse- Dragon.

Raiton: Electromagnetic Murder!

She fired again and again and again, the only Lightning Jutsu she had copied perfectly and that she would risk using, but a long-range area-wide attack that was at least doing more than some would. Over and over and over. But she was losing it; she needed to breathe- starting to stumble back, vision swimming.

Raiton!

Raiton!

Raiton!
She could see the sky when she finally fell. Instinctively, her mind thumped her heartbeat, and the smallest bit of air slipped through her nose, and then it was too painful to hold it in: that little bit of air had strained her lungs and now- she was forced to cough, hands flying to her mouth mid-jutsu to control the wracking coughs of asphyxiation.

The second she did, softness seeped into the edges of her vision, and then the grey beginnings of darkness.

No! I was so close! Not-...!

Her body suddenly was too heavy. She fell, first to her knees, and from there, to her hands on the ground, struggling to breathe now with the fire. Her skin was burning where it touched the scorching stone below her.

... yet...!

"Ughh..."

Mai was on the verge of unconsciousness when she heard movement, managed to sluggishly turn her head, arms wobbling from the effort of keeping herself elevated. Somehow Ohnoki had managed to rise, a burning red coal of a stone clutched unfeelingly in his fingers, and was for that moment looking at her struggling to stand, to stay awake. Everything was going pliant.

The moment ended, and his hands clapped together, then raised to the air. Mai's eyes widened at the high ring that followed, tearing through the air, and the bright light that formed just in front of him, breifly cone-shaped before-

It billowed like a sheet and then expanded, and then shot forward with a sound like metal sliding against another, a terrible sound that knocked through her ears and bounced in her skull, something she recognized somewhere but couldn't quite recall.

It cut instantly into the minimal damage she had caused, and then went around as Ohnoki spun, and, Fumiko realized, he was cutting the top of their domed forest prison like one might cutting around the stem of a pumpkin for Halloween carving.

And then it bubbled, and exploded, completely obliterating the surrounding woods into nothing but carved trunks with the brightest flash of light that Mai had ever seen, equal only to the instantaneous destruction of Konoha during the Invasion of the Peins. It was too bright for her eyes, let alone her sharingan eyes, and she gasped in some kind of intense pain, momentarily blinded, her sharingan winking out to protect her sight.

Above her Ohnoki rose, she could sense him, still maintaining whatever the hell style that incredible jutsu was, ever-expanding, but she couldn't see what was going on yet, eyes streaming tears. She growled in pain, rubbing frantically at her closed eyelids, even as the drowsiness and heaviness began to fade. She couldn't yet hear anything above the sound of that jutsu-

And then it cut off, and the light faded. She opened her eyes, and for just a moment it seemed incredibly dark before her eyes began to adjust, and she didn't bother waiting to reactivate her sharingan, not knowing how long she had until they drained all her chakra and not yet caring. The jutsu cleared all spots left in her eyes, and as Ohnoki faced off against Madara beyond the wall of cut wood- Mai could see their chakras through the Wood Style- she scrambled to turn around and struggle to her feet, hitting immediately into a shaky run towards the other four Kage, in various states of awareness.
"Gaara!"

Gaara's eyes snapped from the destruction to her, but for a moment the other Kage paid her no mind, staring instead at the destruction Ohnoki's jutsu had left behind. The attack had even erased the flames- like it had just deleted the entire area from existence.

"Th-- this is..." the Mizukage breathed.

"Nice job, Ohnoki!" the Raikage called, and Mai looked up as Ohnoki turned midair to face them.

"Good, you're all awake," he said. "Right then- let's get on with our counterattack!"

"There he is now!" the Raikage snarled, gazing in the direction of Madara. Mai set her jaw. If this was Madara, she thought, then she could accept this. This kind of power... it couldn't have possibly been anyone else.

Gaara seemed to put her presence and the exposure of her sharingan aside, though she felt his chakra flare in search of her sister, calming when she didn't appear in his radar. Still hidden. The other Kage, seemed to inhale sharply at the sight of her face, but all inevitably looked instead to Madara's direction, and Mai followed suit.

Mai was an ally.

Madara, however, was not.

"You dance well..." Madara mused, and then he made to turn. Mai could see the wisps of matter reforming what Ohnoki's jutsu had destroyed. As Mai looked closer, eyes cutting through his figure, Mai paused, and then narrowed her eyes.

"What the hell is that?!" she yelled, loudly enough for the Kage to hear- and then he turned fully.

"However," Madara continued, unfazed by either her voice or sudden presence. Likely he'd noticed her lightning flickering between the branches. Mai could feel the shock emanating from her allies.

"Your step is still too weak."

There was a face on Madara's chest. A face. On. His. Chest. It was white with zetsu matter, like some freak, mad scientist experiment. Something had been hewn to him- somebody's power added to his own.

The Wood Release, she realized. Could it have been that...?

"Is that-" the Raikage choked in his surprise. "The First Hokage's face?!"

"I didn't want to believe it," Tsunade muttered. "But- that's why he can use Wood Style!"

Madara continued to slowly reform, and Mai knew all odds said they were probably doomed unless they had the resources to seal him. No reanimated shinobi could be overwhelmed with offensive power alone- they needed to be immobilized. Even his clothes were reforming around him, pointless armor seeping to begin to cover over Hasirama's face.

"Now where did you come from..." Madara mused, and Mai straightened. His gaze was cutting but curious, as it had been during their brief scuffle before, and it made her just as mad now as it had then- Mai bristled, but held herself in check. "Descendant of Uchiha?"

The other Kage tensed, casting her sideways glances where she stood just in front of Gaara. Mai
fought the instinct to deactivate the sharingan, hating the way it tugged on her chakra, gave x-rays of those around her, but holding firm. She needed them.

"I'm no descendant of yours," she spat.

"Oh?" He seemed amused by this. "But you share our sacred bloodline jutsu, child."

"I'm a shinobi of the Village Hidden in the Sand," she said, lifting her chin. "And a member of the Allies, but I'm no Uchiha."

Gaara took a step forward closer, something that Mai interpreted as comforting, though he didn't touch her. She knew why- in front of an enemy like this, relationships beyond allies would be exploited. Madara was the type of shinobi to smash spirits.

"As you say," Madara said dismissively. "But we are still family by blood- shame." He was silent for a moment, and somehow Mai had nothing to say because he was right, but she didn't need to prove to him why he was wrong- at least not with words.

Suddenly, apparently losing interest in Mai's eyes and sudden appearance, he turned his head to Tsunade. "You there," he said. "Female medical ninja. You have it-" Madara raised a casual hand to point towards the face on his chest. He seemed too flippant to be real. "His blood runs through your veins, doesn't it?"

Tsunade grit her teeth. "And what if it does?!" she demanded.

"Then I will..." Madara mused. "... take you down first."

Tsunade blinked in shock, breath hitching.

"Taking out a unit's medical ninja first is a well-established tactic," the Mizukage said. "Surely you don't think we'd let you pull something like that so easily?"

"You're wrong," Madara corrected her. "The reason that she's first is that she's a descendant of Senju Hashirama. Your medical ninjutsu is only strong enough to defer death for what essentially amounts to a meaningless period of time. It's pathetic compared to what Senju Hashirama was able to accomplish. He could heal wounds... without even weaving a single sign. In every jutsu he attempted, he was in a class by himself. Everyone viewed him as the ultimate shinobi..."

Madara smiled slightly, almost a smirk. "And I once fought a battle against him, putting my own life on the line. Compared to that, this is nothing."

The armor finally fully sealed, covering over the creepy face completely. Mai tensed. As Madara spoke, he crossed his arms, voice for some reason growing more snappish, annoyed and angry. "So even if you are his descendant, what do you really have to offer- just what can you hope to do in this battle?

"You cannot use Wood Style. You're medical ninjutsu doesn't even come close to his- and most of all, you're merely a weak woman." He lifted his head scornfully. "Weakness of any kind completely revolts me. A weak Senju disgusts me even more!"

"I think you've rambled on for long enough," the Raikage said, something spiteful burning just below his low tone.

Tsunade stepped forward, level with Mai, who really couldn't decide whether it was worth the effort being absolutely fucking pissed that of all things Madara was a misogynist at a time like this.

"I am a descendant of First Hokage Senju Hashirama," she said, voice strong, expression set. "I
don't use Wood Style, that's true. My medical ninjutsu... is pathetic compared to the First Hokage, who didn't need hand signs. And, it is also true that I am a woman." Suddenly her tone changed, more lilting and teasing, and Mai glanced over to see Tsunade was... smirking. "A woman... but I am not a weak woman, far from it. Physical strength isn't everything. There's something else- something passed down to me from the First Hokage- and that gift is what my true power is!

"Don't dare underestimate..." Tsunade raised an arm defensively, prepared to be attacked. "The Will of Fire!"

The Will of Fire. Something Mai had heard about in passing, but never really thought much of- it was resolve in it's purest form- and bravery, resilience. She didn't think much of the phrase "Will of Fire" the same that she didn't "Will of Stone" but she didn't discredit the meaning behind it, not in the slightest- all of Mai's fights she had ever fought had been battled with, won with that kind of will.

In Suna, there was no Will. There were the rules of Shinobi and the rules of ANBU, and there was being a ninja. Suna shinobi had to always possess a will- weak shinobi had no place in the ranks. It was fighting until your last breath or last limb or drop of blood, and it was holding out under torture, and it was standing up with your hamstrings severed and attacking with no chakra left. It was a burning lack of surrender. And if Madara thought so little of that... then even if they all died here, he wouldn't win this war.

He would be overwhelmed.

"You seriously believe that you can beat me with Hashirama's Will of Fire?" Madara said this with some kind of lilt at the end, some humorous disbelief. He'd been expecting a hidden jutsu, bloodline, something of Hashirama's that the Hokage had been hiding. "Power is not simply Will- power is only the ability to make things happen."

Like my eyes, Mai admitted to herself, but didn't waver. But eyes like mine have been beaten before!

"You're wrong," Tsunade snapped, marching forward, and Mai found resemblance between them, as she had marched towards her inevitable death to destroy the Statue. "The Will of the dead reveal it's true power in those that they have left behind. I used that Will to develop my medical ninjutsu. From that came medical ninja and medical law!" Tsunade clapped her hands together, fingers twisting some hand sign Mai couldn't see from behind.

As Tsunade continued to speak, Mai could feel some strange power coming off her, some shift in her chakra, as though it had suddenly multiplied, or opened to reveal that it was denser on the inside than originally pegged. She didn't realize why until black marks began to creep over her arms and legs, and likely her face- from that diamond, she realized. This was the Jutsu the Hokage Queen of Slugs had used to survive instant teleportation.

"Rule number one: a medical ninja must never give up on treatment until their patient draws their dying breath. Rule two: a medical ninja shall never go to the front lines of battle. Rule three: A medical ninja should always be the last of their platoon to die! This is what I teach my students. But- there is actually one more rule. Rule Four says-! a Medical Ninja who masters the Art of Mitotic Regeneration: One Hundred Healings- may break the first three rules!"

There was some charged pause, and Mai heard the others' breaths hitched as hers did. Tsunade was strong. A medical ninja- who would stand tall against death.
"The One Hundred Healings Jutsu?" His face was uncertain and suspicious, brows drawn and teeth bared. "I have never heard of it!"

"A Forbidden Jutsu only for me." Suddenly, the warning gong- battle start- Tsunade jumped from her spot on the stone, chakra leaving cracks and crater where she had stood, and soaring towards Madara on the land above- "It means: I'm the only Medical Ninja allowed to do battle!"

Madara uncrossed his arms, shifting his stance to meet her. "Ohnoki's Dust Style may have dissipated the pollen- but one medical ninja won't make a difference."

"Four wasn't working so we'll try five! Don't you dare think that I'm an ordinary medical ninja!"

There was a massive slam, an unstoppable force meeting unmoving object as Tsunade's fist slammed into Madara's sudden defensive Susano'o armor.

And then it started to crack.

Around her, the Kage jumped into action, the Raikage shouting "Let's go!" before leaping in a fizz of electric blue and sparking chakra, followed by the others. Mai hung back, unsure what she could do, watching keen for an opening. Madara retreated and fired a Katon, met immediately by the Mizukage's Water Style. They battled, the Raikage and Ohnoki preparing for attack and aara steady nearby with his sand, and Mai was left searching.

She wondered on that Susano'o. Would she be capable of learning that someday?

Did she even want to?

A nearly unbreakable shield... at what cost? Was it from Sharingan- or Mangekyo?

All at once, barraged between the Raikage and Tsunade, the Susano'o armor shattered and Madara was sent slamming through the air, the sounds of impact and crushing stone marking his pathway behind the stone. Mai narrowed her eyes, and jumped to meet them, landing light on the higher ground of rock where Madara had stood. He didn't look harmed, but was standing in a crater caused by his velocity.

They'd gotten him. Even just once- he'd been tossed.

"I will admit it," he said, sounding angry now. "You are undoubtedly not weak, woman. However... if you step in here and die, all the other Kage will as well. Since you're the only one who's able to heal them..."

Tsunade scoffed, again with that strange smirk playing across her lips. "That's only if I die!"

The other Kage jumped down to the wood she stood on, standing firm. Mai wondered if he even noticed her presence any longer.

"Well, Hashirama." he said. "I don't know exactly what it is that you've left to all your followers, but this falls short of your abilities. If you were going to let your underlings take over, you should have at least taught them how to resurrect you, as I have done. Instead, all that's really left of you now is just a life force inside of your cells that yet cling to me... just as all that's left of my little brother is... the visual prowess of his eyes, which are now mine."

"That's why..." Tsunade mused, but Mai just flinched, surprised. Little brother? It was hard to imagine this thing being born at all, let alone having a baby sibling. But- if Madara had had an unwavering Mangekyo in life, the slowly blinding technique of strength... Her eyes flared,
fingernails digging into her palms so they bled in her sudden rage. He'd...! "That's why you're completely wrong!"

"The only thing that has ever truly passed down, of course... is hatred."

And then he seemed to pause, eyes flicking down.

The other Kage tensed on their feet. Mai dared to draw closer.

"... A spy?" he mused.

What?

The earth beneath his feet rumbled, and then continued to rumble for several long seconds, nothing really happening, as though her were attacking below the earth. And then suddenly, it shook hard just beside him, in front of the cliffside he'd been slammed into- and then it cracked, a spiderweb, before flying into chunks at the snake of wood that whipped out to stand beside him, not particularly big or particularly terrifying...

Mai's eyes widened.

It was wrapped around Fumiko's writhing form, pinning her arms to her sides, leaving her kicking and struggling just above the ground.

...

~ Her eyes were wide open, some strange instinct that she had no say in, sucking in every detail of the dirty hospital floor and her scuffed blue sandals, unhindered even by the blurriness she could feel in them. ~

...

For a second, Gaara didn't really breathe, mind still wrapping around the scene.

And then Mai came shooting from the cliff just above, not even making a sound, leaping through the air like an angry tiger with claws outstretched, eyes flaring a bloody red. She was immediately deflected, momentum shifted as Madara smacked her away, and careened into the tangle of thick wood below where the Kage stood.

And then the terror finally lodged in his navel.

Fumiko made some small sound as her face shifted from confusion to making eye contact with Madara, whom Gaara felt flaring his chakra with real, intentional Killer Intent, perhaps just for theatrics or amusement. Fumiko's eyes rolled, head starting to loll, panting in some kind of primal fear, unable even to scream. Her gasping was hoarse, as though there was some kind of piercing shriek trapped in her throat.

Gaara flung his arm out, sand spitting and hissing and roaring-

Madara dodged it and dodged it and dodged it again. His sand screamed with speed, and then-Madara's damn Susano'o armor flared to life, deflecting his attack, sealing beneath his feet- he wasn't stupid at least- and effectively caging himself in with Fumiko still shivering, world whacked, held by that wooden snake.

"Come on," he said to her. "And what were you meant to do, in a fight like this?"
And then, with Fumiko seeming unable to draw breath, the wood snapped her around, curling in on itself until it was small and encasing, a solid wood cocoon suspended midair, and Gaara wondered why he didn't just kill her instantly, knew it was because he seemed to like to play, seemed to meet Gaara's eyes with some kind of smile, seemed to remember them standing together when he first arrived back on the earthly plane.

No.

"Madara, there is no point in killing that child," Oonoki said warily, hovering just a few feet above the ground now.

The other shinobi didn't answer. Mai was screaming something profane from below but seemed to be trapped.

Gaara's body went stiff, muscles strained like they would snap. His mind was a mush and jumble of half-finished thoughts, and everything in his body felt wrong- his blood was rushing too fast, his skin was frozen cold, his lungs refused to take a full breath, and everything pulsed uncomfortably-like he was short-circuiting; a malfunctioning machine.

The other four Kage were very still in their stances, shooting each other uncertain looks. Tsunade, Gaara was certain, was genuinely worried for Fumiko's life, but the others, Gaara also knew, were most likely only truly concerned about the outcome of the battle- although likely they, too, had been touched by Fumiko's presence in their lives, growing attached as everyone seemed to, around her.

Gaara licked his dry lips anxiously. Madara seemed to notice, cutting his white Rinnegan eyes to Gaara's ordinary teal ones, curious but knowing. Gaara said nothing, eyes locked on him and his deadly fingers. He didn't like the way he was being scrutinized, some curious toy or another-making bets with himself how Gaara would react or not.

He was scared. Scared that if he said a word his voice would crack, scared that it would reveal his feelings. Like somehow not speaking would prevent Madara from knowing- Fumiko was his world. His sun. Kami, she was...

It was a useless stubborn hope- Madara had almost been a Kage. Yes, maybe it had been a long time ago. But you didn't get that far without learning how to read people. You didn't get to be a ninja without being able to pinpoint an opponent's weaknesses.

No way out except to hope for a miracle that he knew wouldn't come.

...

~ She didn't know what it was, didn't want to find out, had run from ANBU quarters without even looking in a mirror. ~

...

She couldn't breathe.

It was ringing in her skull, his chakra, and only vaguely did she realize there wasn't any air, that it was getting too warm and that she was lying on some kind of rough wood, and it was dark-everything else was focused on what remained directly outside her prison-

No- she needed to think- what had just-?
She'd been underground- and then-

Fear.

What was he going to do? What- she was trapped with Wood Style, Fumiko realized with horror.
She'd been afraid and then- oh God, was she going to die, was he going to crush her- Fumiko
caught herself praying that she would pass out from lack of oxygen first.

Already she was woozy. Dark spots bloomed in her vision. She blinked to clear them, tears blurring
her vision even further, but if anything they only darkened, more flickering into existence like
black wavering light bulbs, only smaller, each the size of a fingernail maybe, merging together.

Shapes formed from the blotches right in front of her eyes. An arm, a leg, a head and shoulders,
another arm, another leg, then long hair and a torso. All at once the blackness began to discolor,
and it was like a 3-D technicolor puzzle, the last few pieces of darkness fluttering to fill in the
spaces.

Satomi was really not quite big enough for this small prison with her already in it, but it was
enough that she was crouched over Fumiko's form on her hands and knees.

"S-Satomi?!

"Fumiko-san!" Satomi immediately slapped a hand to her shoulder. Despite her situation, despite
her fear of death, Fumiko hesitated to really trust her, though it was hard to think with Madara
pressing down on her mind- "Grab onto me- Let's go!"

"Why..." She bit her lip. "Why should I trust you?"

"There is no time," Satomi said, fingers curling into Fumiko's shirt- Fumiko didn't know if she
actually needed to be held onto for the jutsu to work or if she was hesitant to use it against her will.
Her eyes were pleading. "We must leave now or you will die! Please, Fumiko-san, I know you are
angry with me, but you have to trust me now!"

"But... But I-"

"I never meant to hurt you or Gaara-san!" Her voice was sharp but trembled slightly, somehow
mitigating it's urgent tone. "I swear it on my life and my village! Let me fix my mistake, Fumiko-
san- please!"

"Satomi..." Fumiko winced as again that chakra flared. She couldn't even bring herself to search for
Gaara's or Mai's chakras outside her small prison, find some last comfort before her death, over it's
inevitable disgusting dank.

"Perhaps you cannot trust me any longer, but see it this way- if you die here... Do you really want
to put Gaara-san through that?"

"Gaara..."

Gaara. Gaara would... She had to get out of here. For his sake as well as hers. Satomi knew... was
trying to protect him too. But she'd worked for the Akatsuki! This war was against the Akatsuki!
The Akatsuki had...

Satomi had...

"Yes. Gaara. Now come with me, before we both die!"
"Satomi," Fumiko said, just as the chakra within the wood- some kind of life energy, almost, though still tainted by Madara- flared from its inactive state. There was no time to wonder what that meant. "I..."

...~ Mai tried to focus on Kankuro's chakra, wide and soft despite his injury, something friendly and comfortable that she knew well, as opposed to this strange thing ripping up her insides, tearing from her eyes. ~

...Madara, still smiling slightly, almost a smirk, clenched his fist.

There was no time to do anything other than scream, but still Gaara whipped forward on his toes, raising his hands, trying to do something somehow; the sand jumped to his will again, too late, too late, far too late.

The word was a howl.

"No!"

...~ She'd seen death before, but she hadn't known loss- ~

..."I trust you!"

...~ Mai could hear the fan above her head in its lazy circles, doing nothing but shifting the air about, cut off another loud suck, a desperate attempt by her body to get air around her choked sobs, tried to focus on everything else but the smell. ~

...Thick spikes erupted through the cocoon's surface, piercing through every available inch of wood. The Wood Release had stabbed itself from the inside out and from all sides, like Kankuro's Iron Maiden technique in reverse.

Impaled on one needle point was a mangled chunk of metal from the hook of the prosthetic that had been forced through the walls. Bits of fabric poked through, a bit of gauze, blurred by the swirling purple screen of Madara's Susano'o.

Gaara's breathing shallowed.

Mai's screaming increased in volume, hardly even words any longer.

There was blood on some of the tips, dripping slowly like cold rain or molasses.

The air was still and silent, rank with Mai's distress, but that hardly seemed like noise- almost like a flaring chakra. It seemed to thicken and compress, filling Gaara's lungs with poison and a whisper of oxygen that slipped through his parted lips.
"I'm afraid she can no longer dance," Madara said.

Gaara could feel his eyes widen to the point of bulging, mouth gasping open and closed like a fish. His arms and sand fell limply. His heart thumped painfully in his chest, adrenaline draining from his body.

Even the Raikage for once was silent, stunned by the pointless show of violence, staring with wordless disgust at Madara, levels of disbelief stark in his sudden quiet. Eventually he would react, eventually they would all react, but for now, there was only a ringing silence.

Gaara inhaled, feeling fever on his skin and tremors in his chest and arms and legs and sickness in his core, face twisting painfully, ready to shriek curses.

Not her.

Please, Kami.

"Just give up, Kazekage," Madara said in his flat, toneless voice. "You can still have her in your dreams."

He felt sick. Completely sick, like he would throw up.

No, he thought numbly. No. No.

"Madara," he said in a whisper, his voice terribly quiet, barely a rumble in his chest, but still the ninja heard him, and said nothing. Gaara didn't see him, he was focused toward the dripping sphere and no longer cared if Madara took him by surprise. "You..."

He hadn't completely figured out what he was going to say next when the spots began to form in his eyes.

They drew together just beside the Susano'o grotesque bit of impaled wood several yards away below him, almost a trick of the light, into two human-sized blobs that took on human-shaped limbs and parts and pieces. As they came together they lightened, colored, turned skin and clothes and hair and eyes and mouths.

Fumiko gasped, going limp in Satomi's arms and puking barely half a foot from their shoes. As soon as she was done, she started to cough, and drew huge, ragged breaths, gulping air down like water.

Her and Satomi both were riddled with long slashes of blood, Fumiko more so, and she was leaning completely against Satomi, prosthetic gone save for a single stubborn piece of wood no bigger than her hand sticking to the sock. Their clothes were slashed, and Fumiko's sheath was gone from her back, likely shattered in the cocoon.

He could still hear Mai, half-sobbing in relief and rage, but for half a second Gaara couldn't do anything but stare. In his surprise, Madara paused without attacking, leaving the wood to stand on it's own, the Sunsano'o disappearing without his need. And then: "Fumiko."

It was breathless and a sigh and relief and his voice was almost like a purr the way it rattled out of his chest. Fumiko. She was alive.

She looked up at him, grimacing in pain, chest heaving, the side of her face drenched in blood from some thin cut, her hair matted and sweat dripping across her skin and one eye squinted shut, vomit trickling from the corner of her mouth and Gaara thought, Kami, she's beautiful.
"Gaara!" she cried, and the spell snapped.

"Get her out!" Gaara roared. "Satomi, if you've ever wished to atone for what you did, get Fumiko out of here!"

Satomi nodded. "Yes!"

"No!" Fumiko called out, voice hoarse from being sick, "No, Gaa-

Her body- along with Satomi’s- pulled itself apart into blackness and then disappeared completely just as the sharpened roots gashed out of the ground they had stood on just seconds before.

... 

~ Her eyes flickered, on, off, out of her control- stop, she screamed at them in her head. Stop!

...

Being pulled apart and put back together again wasn't the most pleasant of feelings- Fumiko didn't know how Satomi did this constantly or so quickly.

Disappearing, scattered, and then- coming back together again in a totally different area. Just the scene shift alone was disorienting, let alone having your molecules ripped apart forcibly. She stumbled backwards for a moment, unbalanced from both her destroyed prosthetic and sudden nausea, vision swimming, and if she hadn't already thrown up before, she probably would've again.

It didn't really look all that different here, at least- except that the battle zone she'd come from had been ripped to shreds and coated with torn, massive roots of Wood that she recognized but really didn't want to take the time to think about Madara having- just stone and dust and rock formations high into the air.

Satomi had brought them to a completely deserted area, probably far from any of the fighting zones. How she'd known they needed help, Fumiko didn't know- but found that she deeply appreciated. Satomi could teleport through Susano’o…

The other shinobi- samurai? Wandering traveler?- grabbed her arm again quickly to steady her, and immediately Fumiko's only supporting knee gave out, forcing them both to sit. Her brain was spinning, mouth gross.

"It is okay, I was ill the first time I traveled as well," Satomi said in some way of comfort, crouched awkwardly beside her, hands on her knees.

She said nothing at first, merely trying to regain her bearings. The cuts from the Wood Style prison stung hot, but none of them were very deep, considering what was meant to happen. That was the fourth or fifth time she'd thought for certain she would die and… and honestly, she still wasn't used to it, heart racing, breathing shallow.

How she could have a panic attack at Madara's chakra but not on the idea of shaved death was a mystery, but, at least, she didn't have to have another breakdown with a literal near-stranger sitting next to her.

Fumiko didn't know much about Satomi- she never really had, not even when she'd been kind of psuedo-friends with her. She liked chocolate chip cookies and her art style, she had red hair and a giant sword and could disappear and reappear at will, with great sensory abilities… but that was it. Satomi probably knew more about her than the other way around, considering the circumstances.
And at least at one point she'd worked for Akatsuki.

So why…?

She wiped the blood from her face, feeling it smear across her cheek, knowing that the bleeding hadn't yet stopped, but at the moment incapable of finding butterfly bandages in her medical satchel to dress her wounds. Blood coated the side of her hand, bright red and warm.

"Why do you keep… helping me, Satomi?" she finally managed, mind trying to pull away from worrying about Gaara and Mai, genuinely curious. She found, with some kind of relief, searching through her emotions that at least right now, in this moment, she harbored no bad feelings about this kunoichi. "You hardly even know me. We only met once before… everything happened."

Satomi still seemed uneasy, eyes flicking away from where she knelt before flicking back again, face tense and uncomfortable.

"I did not intend to do any of the things I did to you," she said, brushing a bit of long hair out of her face. Her chakra was dancing, and although Fumiko still associated it in some way with that month, it was still pretty to listen to, all tumbling and bright and mixed together. "I had no choice... well, I did, but-"

"No, I get it," Fumiko said, shaking her head with some kind of small laugh. "I just mean- you keep showing up everywhere, trying to help me. Is this your way of apologizing, or something?"

"Um. Yes?"

"You don't really seem like an Akatsuki."

"That is because I am not!" she protested immediately. "The Akatsuki are powerful- at any moment refusing to help might have meant my death..." Satomi wilted slightly. "And... I considered them almost my friends, for a while."

Fumiko winced.

"I know they were not, but... they were not all bad. Sometimes, I believed..."

"You're pretty lonely, huh?" Fumiko said, looking down. She picked with her hands, fingers touching together, and bit her lip. "I'm sorry for- freaking out all the time. I should've let you explain, I just-"

Satomi fell into a sitting position, eyes wide, looking startled. "What? No! I helped cause the death of several people you cared about by betraying you. And I did show up unannounced in the nursery for your children... honestly a mistake. And I took too long in returning- it seemed like trickery, but I promise you, I simply had not known Gaara-san survived. As soon as I did, I tried to come back. Any normal person would have been frightened of me."

"Maybe." She paused for a moment, before finally looking back up at Satomi, who was staring steadfastly in front of them. "What? No! I helped cause the death of several people you cared about by betraying you. And I did show up unannounced in the nursery for your children... honestly a mistake. And I took too long in returning- it seemed like trickery, but I promise you, I simply had not known Gaara-san survived. As soon as I did, I tried to come back. Any normal person would have been frightened of me."

"Of course. When I sensed Madara's chakra..." Her expression darkened. "It was a mistake to bring him back. I do not know what they are thinking. They cannot control him..."

"I hope everyone is still okay," she said quietly. "I think I ruined everything. Mai wanted me to hide, but I guess he saw me out."
"They only have to hold out until the Reincarnation jutsu is released," Satomi said encouragingly, face shifting from grave to awkwardly concerned. She didn't seem to know what to do with her hands. "Somebody is already on their way to defeat it. They'll be fine."

"I hope they hurry then." Her fingers clenched together. "Gaara and Mai..."

"Will be fine," she said. "If you feel as though something is wrong, I will return to help them myself."

"Thanks."

"Yes," she said. "Now, you should probably address your injuries. I have chakra pills from ration with me if you need them- here- and while I know battlefield medicine, I am not proficient enough with Medical Ninjutsu to care for our wounds-"

And then her eyes flickered mid-sentence, brows drawing together, and Fumiko sensed it at the same time. She didn't recognize it but did, like a familiar face you couldn't quite place, and followed her gaze.

And froze.

"-so you should probably-" Satomi was continuing, not seeming overly concerned with what they were seeing.

Fumiko stood suddenly, feeling the rapid release of energy from the chakra pills she'd swallowed as well as the mild illness both from blood loss and travel by Satomi. Her eyes locked on the figure darting through the stones below them, sporting a red cloak and long blond hair tied up to cover part of his face..."- Fumiko-san-

She dissolved into shunshin.

...

~ And then they did. ~

...

Chapter End Notes

Hey guys! Still not abandoning!

Actually I've had this finished for the last four days, tweener and all, except for that last scene with Satomi which was a collab with Lily who's been super busy lately, so I took the liberty of writing it myself and will change if she wants me to.

THIS IS SO LONG

So. Madara happened.

Jesus, I forgot how insane he is in this XD he just decimates everything in his path like
Fumiko's dream was in fact partially prophetic, but only because Mu and Madara were in a close enough range for her to pick up on unconsciously as a sensor, the way your alarm clock might incorporate into your dreams because it's going off in your room without waking you up.

Some cute Gaara/Fumi fluff because things needed to calm down for a second

Mai's sharingan and Nindo. I was very careful about this, as while Mai still doesn't like her sharingan, she now is beginning to realize that no matter what it makes people say or think- like how she might not be as strong as she is without it- she can still use the technique to save herself and others, instead of letting people die and hurt just because she's embarrassed.

She just wants to die for something good, that's all, guys. She really doesn't want much at this point.

I know the Fumiko scene with Madara was kind of dramatic, but that's because I wrote/planned it ages ago and then it became essential to the rest of the plot so I had to leave it, though I did heavily edit it to make it more believable.

Next chapter: Fumiko vs Deidara! Kage vs Madara! Who will survive?

Working on it as we speak

PLS VOTE ON MY POLL FOR DEI VS FUMI

Review!
The Battle of Hatred

Chapter Notes

Fun fact, I was originally gonna call this "Artist vs Artist: the Battle of Hatred" but realized how actually important the non-DeivsFumi scenes are, like Mai, Kages, guys.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

... ~ "I've decided! Let's build our settlement right here!" ~ ...

"Ah! Fumiko-san, wait-!

She should have known she would go after the blond Akatsuki reanimation- of course she would, it was Deidara, the one who had hurt her.

Fumiko paid her no heed, leaping from the side of the crest of rock they sat above on, all the way down, rolling into a shock-absorbing landing before immediately jumping to her feet, despite her injured leg and prosthesis.

Satomi tensed, fizzed black at the edges.

But she didn't really know what she could do against a reanimated shinobi herself- avoid the dodges and blows, but she had no way of stopping him from exploding, nor could she seal him away. She could try and delete with him into hammerspace- but she wasn't sure how she would without a clear destination in mind. Deidara couldn't be killed, so her swordsmanship would be useless.

And then they were fighting. Deidara seemed distracted for whatever reason, and Satomi would take advantage of that- she couldn't take Fumiko away now, the young girl would never forgive her for it- but Deidara had been running for a reason. Satomi could sense those far behind, who were chasing after him- it had to be the sealing team.

So Satomi would bring aid to her.

... ~ "Huh?" ~ ...

Without really thinking about it, Fumiko lunged, mind crossed between how much she wanted this nuke-nin to disappear for good and not knowing where he was going or what he was trying to do, who else he was trying to kill this time.

She didn't really think it would work, and thus wasn't more than vaguely irritated when he dodged around her, sending her skidding into the ground on her hands and feet, but she kept herself stable.
Deidara paused a moment as she stopped, dust kicking around her, likely confused by her sudden appearance, and the way she was caked in blood from several shallow cuts.

Fumiko could read it on his face, the distracted curiosity: don't I know you from somewhere?

And similarly, she could see the moment when it clicked, some kind of strange smile spreading across his face. He looked strange standing by himself in the middle of Lightning Country environment, eyes warped by Impure Reincarnation. She couldn't remember ever seeing him on anything other than his flying clay creations, his 'art.' He looked smaller. Weaker.

Even though she knew that wasn't true, she still took courage from it.

"Ah," he said, "It's you then."

If there was any one person in the world that Fumiko had ever truly hated or truly feared, it was Deidara. He wasn't the strongest shinobi by a long shot- he relied too heavily on his clay and was susceptible to her Genjutsu, and really had kind of disappeared without preamble- nothing like Hidan and Kakuzu or Tobi or Madara, or any of the other Akatsuki, really.

But.

The fact remained that explosions and sky views gave her anxiety, that there was white light in her nightmares, nose clogging with the earthy smell of clay. He'd robbed her of peace and sleep and art, and nearly had robbed her of Gaara permanently, something she couldn't forgive.

"You were captured," she said.

"And then I escaped," he replied, as though that were obvious, which it kind of was, given his current state of freedom. "I kind of thought you'd be dead by now, hmph."

"You thought wrong," she snapped. Something shivered in her body at her tone.

He flapped a hand at her dismissively. She flinched at the mouth she could see there on his palm, white teeth flashing in the sun. "Whatever. Hey, it was nice catching up and all, but I gotta go, hn. I heard Sasuke's around, and I'm gonna blow him up, yeah."

"Sasuke?" she spluttered. "Sasuke hasn't been seen since the Summit!"

Deidara ignored her, and she recognized the motions of his hands, tucking into his cloak- although now it was just red, not Akatsuki any longer- for his clay, letting his hands chew. He turned away, not really seeming bothered by her seething.

"Hey! You're not going anywhere!"

"And who's gonna stop me, yeah? You?" Deidara snickered and she bristled. Her weapon was gone, destroyed in Madara's jutsu, and it had been the last one sealed into her glove, but that wasn't all she had.

"I've knocked you down once before," she said, taking a step forward. Fumiko was taking one from Mai's book, mimicking her fighting talk, unsure whether she was feeling the anger herself, but it felt like she didn't care. "And I've gotten better since then!"

Now Deidara turned, and though his voice remained strangely jovial and flippant, she could see in his visible eye the anger there. He hated Genjutsu, she remembered, and probably hated her for it, too.
Well, good. It was mutual. She hoped he'd died under a Genjutsu.

"And I killed your Kazekage once before," he snorted, lips curling at the way she blanched, physically flinching in her stance. "And now I'm unkillable, you know, it's disgusting but I can't die."

"Shut up!" Fumiko's hands clenched into messy fists. Her knee and shoulder still throbbed from her fight with the Mizukage, but she could manage it. "You didn't kill him! He's still alive!"

"I'm sure I could fix that, yeah."

Her vision blinded, jaw snapping shut. How dare...!

Deidara lifted a hand, and she didn't recoil from the clay she saw there in his palm, readying herself to leap away in case he threw something explosive at her. She couldn't let him make her angry- though she'd already failed- if she was just careful, she could avoid the explosions, catch him in a Genjutsu, and keep him steady there until whoever had initially captured him returned in chase.

He tossed the bit of clay in his hand to the air after messing with it a little bit, and with a poff it erupted into a familiar-looking bird, off-kilter and strangely proportioned, white all the way through, and then leapt to the top of it, grinning down at her. She straightened defensively, hand going to her glove, but then the giant bird flapped its wings once, twice, and started to lift off.

"Hey!"

"I'll blow you up later, yeah!" he taunted. "Right now I've got bigger fish to fry."

Fumiko set her jaw.

She wasn't the same Fumiko he'd fought against before- no plans, no chance, her only form of backup some half a day away and not big enough to do any damage at all. She was well enough equipped now to deal with a long-range reincarnation shinobi, well enough equipped to seal him away if the opportunity arose, well enough to at the very least survive, at the very least hold at bay.

Fumiko was well enough equipped to give chase to the flying Reincarnation.

Thank goodness, she thought as she bit her left thumb, for once not even really wincing at the sharp pain- honestly her shoulder hurt worse right then- that Satomi gave me chakra pills.

"Kuchiyose no Jutsu!"

In the smoke that followed, sensing her enemy's gaze and her own blinded anger, Shaapu gave no protests to being summoned- this was what they'd agreed on, after all: aid in battle. She could feel the muscles in his wings as he took off, and leaned down into him to minimize wind resistance, and they shot into the air.

... 

~ "And there we'll make it so kids don't have to kill each other." Hashirama waved his arms excitedly. "And- and we'll create this awesome school where kids can train and grow up to become stronger! Assign missions that fit people's abilities- and their strengths too!" ~ 

...

It was suddenly, the second after the two had vanished, that Tsunade attacked, lunging forward at a
speed even Gaara had issue tracking, and punching through Madara's body, obliterating half of it instantly. Before she'd even pulled back, the wisps of reanimation again scattered to reform and heal.

"Kazekage!" The Raikage roared, Ohnoki still on his back. "Do it now!"

Gladly.

Gaara really hadn't felt anger like this in a long time.

He raised his sand without a word, eyes hard, and it rushed on either side of him and all around, and from the ground beneath Madara's feet, and as Tsunade kicked away, springboarding off Madara's armor, Gaara sealed him in, like a pearl within a clam.

(What he wanted was for Madara to be alive and feel pain so he could smash his sand barrier together and make him burst.)

But Gaara was angry, not stupid. That wouldn't help anyone now, nor would it sate him. The second the sand closed around him Gaara formed a hand sign, hoping that somehow this seal above the others would work and it would be over and he could go and find where Satomi had taken Fumiko- hopefully far away from here.

He felt the seals churning through his sand, gifts from Fumiko herself to the Sealing Teams, the strongest she could muster up with only ink and blood and dirty paper- which was still strong enough for this. Chakra kanji laced together even as the sand hardened, the fastest he'd ever completed a pyramid seal.

"Grand Sand Mausoleum!"

There was a pause. Gaara waited for the inevitable moment that something would happen, searching for some signs of life within his sands, movement or chakra or jutsu. But there was nothing. His body was still too tensed with adrenaline and anger to relax, but he managed a small step back on the trunk he stood on.

"He's been sealed," he said aloud.

"All right!" Tsunade said with a grin, equal parts victorious and relieved.

And then there was a sharp sound, the only second of warning they got before Tsunade was suddenly impaled through the stomach by a blade of pure chakra, curvy and wicked, like a decorated athame.

Nobody spoke. Gaara couldn't find the breath to.

And then the wood beside Tsunade crackled and split, revealing Madara, swathed in his chakra as he rose like a spectre into the air. "The one you sealed away," he said casually, "Was a Wood-style clone, just like the one Hashirama used to use. It was well-made." As he spoke, Tsunade as well began to rise, the made cutting through the wood higher and higher until the Susanoo's fist was revealed. "My visual prowess made me the only shinobi to ever see through that powerful ruse.

"It's over for the rest of you Kage," he continued, looking impassive. The Susanoo rose the rest of the way out of the ground, revealing that it was only the arm and sword. From below, Gaara could sense Mai, quite for now but struggling to free herself. It would likely be only another minute more. "Now then... which one of you should I take down next?"
And then Tsunade stirred. With a guttural cry, she smashed one hand through the blade beneath her stomach, snapping it in half, and with her other as she fell punched through the wound to shove out what remained impaled. The glowing tip of the chakra blade flew into the air behind her, coated in blood.

And then she whirled, grabbing the blade tip, and with another war shout, spun hard and slammed it into the Susano'o armor that suddenly sprouted around Madara's figure. It crackled under the pressure, and Gaara had enough time to look surprised, eyes widening, before another Susano'o hand formed by Madara's feet and shot upwards to attack, forming a jutsu that slammed into the Hokage and sent her smashing through a rock several yards away, demolishing them with a bang like a bomb going off.

Gaara flinched.

The Susano'o hands faded around Madara, though the ribcage-like armor remained, and he watched passively but curiously as Tsunade rose again despite her injury, shoving off a bounder that should have crushed her. Gaara tensed, ready to help, and beneath them there was a crackle-snap of wood that betrayed Mai's freedom.

"How can you still move?" Madara exclaimed, even as Tsunade again rose her head.

"Like I told you," she said. "I'm different- the medical rules don't apply to me!"

"Regeneration without weaving signs," Madara said, sounding pleasantly surprised and perhaps even mildly impressed. "I see. So that is the true nature of your jutsu that you mentioned in Rule Four, is it? Just like Hashirama's ability."

"I had hope that I'd be able to catch you off guard with this, but..."

"There's no way you can kill me with my own jutsu," he said, amused.

"Heh!" Ohnoki spat, coming down a distance behind him. "Then I'll use mine!"

Dust Release glowed in his palms. Tsunade's healing had done it's job well- it seemed even the Tsuchikage's back was giving him no trouble. Before Gaara had any time to shout the attack unleashed, at first seeming to blaze through Madara's figure instantaneously, as it was meant to. The Raikage crowed out in approval.

But then their eyes adjusted slightly to the light, and Madara was standing at the tip of the jutsu, almost causally absorbing it with his Rinnegan power, as he had absorbed Naruto's clones' Giant Rasengan.

"Have you gone senile, Ohnoki?" Madara shouted over the sound of Particle Release demolishing the molecules in the air. "The Rinnegan can absorb all jutsu, remember? Ninjutsu such as that will not work against me! If you want to kill me, you need to hit me hard, physically- take me down and seal me away, you know that!"

"But my Particle Style attack from earlier grazed your chest!" Ohnoki cried in confusion. "There's no way the Atomic Dismantling Jutsu failed!"

"Oh, that?" Madara seemed to wave him off. "I merely wanted to reveal Hashirama's hidden face to all of you right then. I was hoping that doing so would douse your morale, but it seems to have done the opposite, and boosted it instead!"

"Bullshit!" That was Mai, leaping up to a higher vantage point, still looking torn but standing tall as
she landed, lower than the other Kage. "You got caught off guard, you didn't have time to absorb it- didn't you?"

"I have a question for you," Tsunade interjected before Madara could respond, but Gaara realized Mai was right- he'd seemed surprised that they had survived the fiery pollen prison at all. He'd meant to kill them in that attack, not continue the battle.

"Hmm?"

"Yes it's true that you outwitted is with the Wood Clone that you used," she admitted. "But from another angle, you could say that we managed to corner you into having to substitute your clone for yourself!" She wore a knowing smirk. "Am I wrong?"

Madara's face finally shifted, if only slightly. Gaara didn't even need the facial change to recognize the anger in his chakra.

"Well, it is five against one after all," he said grandly after a tense pause, voice going strangely dramatic, almost simpering.

"That's because we must win no matter what happens!" the Mizukage spat, taking a defensive step forward. "Now don't go calling us cowards or saying that we're being unfair to you," she continued, voice hard. "In truth it's merely a testament to your might- you are Uchiha Madara."

"No, I won't call you cowards," Madara said, faux-offended, as though the thought itself were madness. His hands came together. Gaara's fingers twitched, prepared to fight in an instant. "And as for five to one, it's a nice ratio for games!"

The wood he stood on began to sprout nubs around him, but quickly enough Gaara realized those nubs were forming humanoids identical to Madara and- wood clones. He was creating wood clones to fight against them all.

In seconds, each Kage was surrounded by five Wood Clones, Gaara whipping to face those that had come from behind him. Temari had already gone, collecting survivors to go towards the nearest medical base camp- she had been gone before the pollen attack. Mai, however, was left alone- whether out of deference to bloodline or because he didn't consider her worthy of fighting against, Gaara wasn't sure.

He had no idea what she meant to do here- and likely she didn't either, she just simply hadn't been able to leave them to die.

"Now it's five to one the other way," he said, and Gaara hoped Mai didn't shoot back with a "can't you count, you stupid bastard, you're an extra," even as he continued talking, a mocking lilt to his tone. "And don't say this is cowardly. You are the Five Kage. And so- I have one question for you... Would you prefer for all of these clones to use Susano'o against you, or not? The choice is yours!"

"Fucking shut up, you asshole!"

... 

~ His eyes lit up as he leaned forward, gazing out at the vast forest expanse. "Have superiors, who are able to properly assign ranks to commissions. A place where kids don't have to be sent into harsh battle fronts." ~

...
The moment they ripped through the cloud, smoke rushing off their figures, she saw Deidara's eyes on her, surprised. Though his bird continued flying, he twisted around to face her, hands already flying to shape his next bomb, hair whipping in the wind. She realized his scope was gone- could he still see long distances in death?

"I really don't feel like dealing with you right now," Deidara shouted over the sound of the air, "But if you're gonna be so annoying I guess I'll have to, hn!"

His arm dashed like he was throwing kunai, and Shaapu banked in a violent roll, twisting his wings into his body. The clay spiders missed them, shooting past and being left behind to explode after they passed at the speed they traveled, Fumiko's eyes watering slightly, and as the bat's wings snapped back out she caught in her sight two more small clay creatures- and Shaapu still straightening out.

"Art is an explosion!" Deidara yelled, bringing his hands together. "Katsu!"

She immediately rose her hands, sucking wet air from the sky- really, going up was to Deidara's disadvantage- Tiger- Ox- Tiger- Rat.

Suiton: Water Bullet!

The jutsu shot forward, swallowing Deidara's explosives so they burst into steam that poured from the sides of her rapid torrent of water, much bigger than her first meager managings all those months ago as she'd first tried learning it, tiny spheres compared to the gush of water punching into existence. Although it wasn't on par with some other shinobi, it was still a viable attack and still Deidara swore and had his bird dodge- a fast movement she recognized.

If he could outmaneuver Gaara's sand in life, he would certainly outmaneuver her water in death.

She fired off another one anyway to keep him from forming another bomb and to make him back off, his bird attempting to shoot away, keeping tabs on her chakra stores to plan ahead. "Shaapu!" she said as soon as he was out of hearing range. "I know it's hard to dodge but I need to get closer! If I can catch him in a Genjutsu-"

"Hai, Sightseer!"

His wings shot into action, immediately yanking them forward with a sudden burst of speed, at first tipping down to get beneath the other shinobi- something Fumiko realized would make it harder for Deidara to aim- and then curving up sharply to hover at his right even as Deidara was forming another bomb between his fingers, shaping it into some sculpture or another.

She didn't want to give him time, though, and waved out her left hand in his direction, the chakra fizzing outside of her skin into the air pulsing around her before jumping into Deidara's body, and for a second he froze as she painted her own death by explosive bomb.

And then Deidara's mouth twisted, and he was free, glaring at her with both eyes, one hand lifting to move his hair out of the way of it. Fumiko, caught off guard and way too close, could only flinch backwards. "I really hate that, you know, yeah!" he growled.

He'd noticed. How had he noticed? The world hadn't been shifted strangely at all so far as she knew, she hadn't even had a hand sign to mask, he'd been intending to blow her up with it anyway so what about doing it in his dream had triggered him to-?

"I'm not stupid!" Deidara howled angrily, raising his fist to shake at her, almost comically in any other situation. "You wouldn't have flown right up next to me without having some way of
"Oh," she said. "You're smart."

Something she'd already known, or at least expected, given that he was a part of the most feared criminal group thus known in the Nations and had to be killed by Uchiha Sasuke, and he'd known defensive tactics and strategies during his fight with Gaara, but still, it was something so simple that she'd overlooked- stupid move, Fumiko, she thought harshly, you would've figured that out, too!

"Now, see my art! Art is an explosion!"

Close range.

Not only would she explode at this range, but there wouldn't be anything left behind of her, either. And Fumiko was distinctly aware of Shaapu beneath her, whose muscles were in the beginning acts of tensing to flee, and of Deidara, who would likely escape to the side on his giant bird, despite how strangely it seemed put together for an avian-

She had about three seconds to respond. Shaapu wasn't going to move in time, not with her on his back, not with Deidara right there.

Fumiko's mind went, almost dazedly, to Asuka, the messenger hawk she'd left behind back in Suna. She'd studied him, drawn him a thousand times, studied his anatomy and compared it to that of the other birds and the birds in textbooks, and now she remembered them clearly.

Just because Deidara's bird defied common conception didn't mean it could defy physics. It was still flying, flapping its great wings, taking the wind currents and pockets of air into account just as Shaapu was, because if Deidara's chakra was capable of flight he wouldn't need such a thing at all.

"I've been inside your head before, Deidara!" She took some kind of strange pleasure from the way his face twisted angrily at her words, some hot thing that was vaguely uncomfortable in her chest, but she didn't stop. "I know how it works!"

"You don't know anything, yeah!"

"You're wrong!" Now she threw her good leg over Shaapu's back and tied it to his fur with chakra to keep from falling to her death, ignoring his startled warning of "S-! Sightseer!" Facing Deidara fully now, hands braced against his back, she didn't smile. Wind whipped hair into her face. "I know a lot of things!" she said, and that was just enough to make Deidara pause of of confusion or maybe curiosity.

She tensed her legs.

"And one of the things I know," she said, "Is how birds' flight works!"

And he went, "Huh?" just as she jumped him, disconnecting instantly from Shaapu's back and yelling for the bat to duck away. Deidara stumbled slightly- there wasn't too much farther he could go on his flying jutsu- and chucked the bomb at her midair and made a hand sign. "Katsu!" he screeched.

But she hadn't been aiming for him, and so fell out of its path by a few solid inches. It exploded before she could hit the bird, but luckily didn't throw her off it and into the open air all around and between them, leaving her to latch onto the base of the bird's neck, fingers digging through its soft clay flesh and half-dangling off the right side.
"What do you think you're doing, un?!"

Fumiko ignored him, reaching out for the wing right beside her as it flapped down violently, curving from its master's explosion. She hadn't fully thought this through, she realized, was only just now accepting that she would go down too, but she also knew a bit about proper falling techniques and velocity midair herself, and she didn't have any other choice, and so she grabbed a handful of clay feathers.

Avians commonly had a few special feathers in their wings, particularly on the very tips and on the undersides, that helped control flight and balance midair, shifting minutely and utilizing the currents in the air as they went. That was why Deidara's birds were so big- it was the only proportion where the wing length could stabilize it, and it was light enough, being completely hollow on the inside, that it would act as a normal bird.

In the aviary, when messenger hawks were injured whether from natural predators, other birds attacking them from other villages, or even just the various obstacles in a bird's way to get to and from its destination- they clipped the outer flight feathers so they couldn't try to take off and hurt themselves while they healed. On regular birds, they got most of the feathers grown back by their next molting.

A clay bird, on the other hand...

Fumiko pulled and they came easily, with only a little resistance, a layer of chakra holding it together that disrupted against her skin just as regular Genjutsu did. Immediately the bird tilted violently to the right, leaving her scrambling to dig both hands into the bird's skin and leaving Deidara to scream in some high-pitched kind of startled that, again, was almost comedic in nature, as he flailed not to be thrown off.

They hurtled in a steep fall, and she couldn't sense Shaapu anywhere nearby. Maybe fifteen, twenty seconds until impact, she realized, looking down, and then wrenched her head back up at Deidara, who hadn't fallen off and seemed to be trying to form another clay creation to ride- Fumiko reached up with one hand- fifteen, fourteen, thirteen- and violently wrenched his reality.

Deidara cried out. It'd taken him five seconds to break out of it last time- but at least ten to make another bird.

Nine, eight, seven-

She let go and sent her hands flying, faster than she had any other jutsu before, turning midair to face the ground as she fell so that the water would fly back up into her body. The sight of it, stones and soil rushing to meet her, gave her an intense and immediate vertigo she likened to falling off the Suna boundary wall.

Snake- Ram- Horse- Hare- Ram- Horse- Hare- Snake- Ox-

Five, four-

She smacked at her sealed glove, releasing a sudden spurt of water, and then clapped her hands together immediately, just ten feet or less from the ground when the jutsu took hold, curling around her body and hardening densely. She couldn't breathe and so held her breath, but right now, breathing was less important than not hitting the ground and full impact with nothing to soften it.

Fumiko closed her eyes hard just in time for the impact- she'd been almost two seconds off in her estimations- and it was jarring but not even close to deadly, just her insides snapping violently
towards the ground as her momentum stopped- more nausea than pain, and a faint headache that immediately rooted behind her eyes.

Suiton: Water Prison Technique.

It bent inwards a little with gravity, its own speed pulling it down, and then, like a bubble pressed too hard, burst on all sides and left her gasping and coughing on the ground, mostly unharmed, water streaming from every part of herself as she struggled up to her hands and knees, the ground turning to mud around her. One of the clay feathers lay seeping in it beside her, turning glossy and mashed.

Thank Kami she'd taken that list of C-rank jutsus and below to study from when she finally got the hang of Suiton. Maybe she didn't have enough chakra to cast a lot of them in succession, but they seemed to be doing her some life-saving good.

Immediately she scanned the area with eyes and chakra alike, saw the demolished bird's remains almost a full yard away- small projection changes midair really did a lot for distance- and didn't see but did sense Deidara and his flare of angry, disgruntled and yes, injured chakra. It wouldn't last long, given his current state of undead, but it was something.

All she had to do was stall for the sealing team that had lost him, all she had to do was try and seal him if she could.

She already knew that lightning diffused his explosivity completely, and she had a few seals for that- that wouldn't really Seal him away, but would, if he was restrained, keep him from blowing himself up, something he either hadn't seemed to think of yet or didn't want to bother with for some reason.

Another split-second to act, and she managed to pull up what was probably the only B-rank she could manage- Earth Style Wall.

Tiger- Hare- Boar- Dog.

A thick wall erupted from the ground in front of her- at least lightning country made Doton a little easier, the entire place was made with rocks, it was like using Suiton while standing in the middle of a river- and immediately exploded, Fumiko throwing her arms up for protection against the shrapnel, eyes streaming with dust.

Her clothes were heavy with water, hair soaked, and she had to pull the clumped strands away from her eyes to see him now, arm and parts of his torso fizzing white with whatever jutsu allowed the Reanimations to instantly heal themselves. He was standing on the crumpled clay of his bird- he must have used it to try and lessen his impact.

His greyed-out eyes were dark and angry. He'd been distracted before, searching for Sasuke and continuously trying to escape rather than fight, but now he looked intent on seeing her dead.

Great.

"Katsu!"

She again raised her arm, given no time to weave hand signs, and touched her hand to one of the seals there briefly before bracing to let the water gush out uncontrolled, no jutsu to guide it, just as Deidara's bomb detonated.

It wasn't quite enough to neutralize the following explosion, and Fumiko was thrown violently
back with a cry, steam and stone fragments slamming her into the air for a few speeding seconds before hitting the ground again, already-present wounds screaming against the way her body rolled and bounced off before another explosion lit nearby with searing heat, shattering the ground beneath her and shooting her back once again.

She didn't manage to hit the ground again, instead colliding with something hard, but warm.

Fumiko wheezed in something like a breath and looked up before freezing.

Shaapu.

The poor bat had been hit by the earlier bomb or its fallout from the sky and fallen. His barrel-chest heaved, one exposed wing flapping weakly up and down in spurts. She could smell it on him- the singed scent of fire and the tang of blood. Somewhere she couldn't see, he'd been injured.

It didn't seem life-threatening.

But she didn't care.

"Shaapu!" she cried, immediately twisting, ignoring the fire in her ribs and insides, the way her ears rang slightly. She scrambled to his face on her hands and knees, put a hand on his cheek. His eye, round and a brown faded white with blindness, flickered about. "Shaapu, are you okay?"

After a moment he huffed, "Yes." It seemed to hurt doing so, seemed to have something to do with the fast his chest wasn't moving up as far as it could have for breath. Probably he'd broken ribs like she had. "My wing..."

One wing was pinned and, she realized, was probably the one that got hurt in the explosion. "Go back," she demanded, feeling her throat start to close. This was her fault. "Go back now!"

"Its not- time yet," he panted. "I can't- pull myself."

"You can't go back on your own?" He was that injured? Or was it to do with his wings- that he now had to wait for his Summoning to wear out and be brought back forcibly? "Oh, Shaapu, I'm so sorry-"

"That's really cute, un."

She whirled, still on the ground, throwing her arms out instinctively despite the fact that Shaapu was too big to bodily protect. "Leave him alone!" she snarled, with some aggressive undertone she didn't recognize. She couldn't remember the last time she'd had to protect another being.

"Sightseer..."

"That was a nice trick you pulled," he said, and though the words were complimentary his face was dancing with some kind of dark humor, hidden anger. It sounded more like she was being made fun of, or warned. "Too bad it got your friend hurt, yeah?"

Fumiko tensed, inhaling sharply. "Stay away."

"I don't have to get close," he said, and then she noticed what looked like a string in his palm, but that she recognized instead as the centipede he'd used invading Suna. It blew up at each body segment, and was too big for her to block. "To blow you both up."

Her eyes widened slightly.
There was a small noise, then, that drew her attention, and as she tracked it, her arms dropped in
shock.

Shaapu's free wing was moving slowly, tip grazing across the ground, dirt sliding up onto the skin
membrane. One of the digit fingers in his wing was coming closer, painfully slowly, and Deidara
let it, even as some kind of disbelieving tears started beading and slipping out of the corners of her
eyes.

"Shaapu..."

The wing settled briefly in front of her, and then slid up her legs, pushing her down into a sitting
position, tucked against Shaapu's neck.

He was protecting her. Shielding her from a blast he knew would shred through his wing anyway
and kill them both. He said nothing, but when her head jerked back, he was watching her carefully,
eyelid drooping beside her as she assumed he started to lose consciousness.

"Well," she heard Deidara say. "That's sweet, I guess." Then he raised his voice, a deliberate taunt.
"I'll be sure to give the Kazekage your regards after I kill Sasuke! Hey, be glad- you're going to be
made into pure art, a fleeting explosion!"

Light filtered through the skin of Shaapu's wing. She could still smell his burnt flesh. She'd known
the bat Summons hadn't ever really hated her, known it was something of a front, but she also
hadn't thought he'd ever been particularly fond of her, either. Was this some kind of peace offering?
Some truce before they both died?

She couldn't let him die here. She couldn't let anyone die here- not herself, not Shaapu, not even
Sasuke if that's who Deidara was after and if he was even here, or anyone else who got in Deidara's
way as he went.

"Ahh, and you must be the girl I saw earlier. The lover." Deidara said, seemingly unconcerned.
"Sasori's spies didn't say much about you, I'm afraid. Hmph."

"Too bad it got your friend hurt, yeah?"

"I'll be sure to give the Kazekage your regards after I kill Sasuke!"

Mitsuwa Fumiko had felt anger before, despite being known for her forgiveness. Fleeting moments
sprinkled throughout their childhood as she learned to let it go, during battle at cruelty, at Shukaku
when they were children. She had been at her most angry when Gaara was taken, her most
vindictive when Yoshiki kissed her without permission, her most righteous when her father
denounced his own grandkids.

She had always been angry at Deidara, even at her most peaceful. And Akatsuki, too, but his face
was what appeared in her mind at the word, his face, the clouds, his giant bird carrying Gaara
away even as she lost consciousness in the middle of a desert, faking her death like a coward- and
then she'd been mad at herself.

But never had she ever felt quite this much anger at one time, quite this much burning fury.

Is this what it's like, she thought as she brought her hands up into Hare, not bothering to close her
eyes, to be like Mai?

Deidara was immediately caught, and she didn't bother making it look like his own preferred
reality, more focused on knocking him down and cutting him apart to keep him that way. She
stood. Shaapu's wing fell away despite how he strained it, and then slumped, and that only made her madder.

Deidara broke free, reared back his arm again-

And froze.

And broke free and froze, and broke free and froze, all the while as she stepped around Shaapu's wing and towards the terrorist, and then Fumiko didn't bother with hand signs, flinging her arms about. She found him jerking in tandem as she mixed it with Mirror World.

No, she thought. No, because Mai was never this afraid.

He managed to shove his arm forwards, and she screamed in some kind of desperate fear and some kind of heated anger, snapping one hand to the side as she gripped his chakra again, and it was enough that Deidara's wrist twisted, the bomb going off somewhere to her left.

He was learning how to counteract her Genjutsu, but his freedom never lasted long. Because nobody was immune to it, nobody could stop it, only break away from it, leaving the chakra still squirming in their system, like he was prying her fingers off one by one and every time he moved to peel off the next one the other came back down.

She felt like she was burning, heat licking at her insides, lips curling and eyes narrow, shivering or shaking from adrenaline or fear of death, fear of him, fear of his bombs, fear of his place in her past. Water slid down her chest from her hair and dripping headband, oddly noticeable. She didn't think she'd want to see what her expression looked like in that moment.

Fumiko wanted to snap his neck, even though she knew he was a reincarnation. She wanted to fuse him into the ground, wanted to tear off his stupid hands, didn't want to bother sealing him, wanted to finally make him leave her alone, wanted to sleep, wanted to skygaze, wanted to paint for people again.

"Fears are fears," she remembered reading or maybe watching somewhere. "Slay your demons when you're awake, they won't be there to get you in your sleep."

...  

"Haa!" Madara grinned. "You do realize it's only you, spouting such nonsense?" ~  

...  

"Well answer me- would you like all of these clones to use Susano'o or wouldn't you? It's your choice."

Mai seethed at his tone, condescending and mocking. She sure as hell wasn't going to let herself be bashed by somebody using powers grafted to their chest- he hadn't been nearly this powerful in life. He was a farce.

And she wanted to say it to his face, but that would be asking for trouble. Just because she was pissed off that he apparently didn't think her worth clones of her own to fight against didn't mean she wasn't going to take advantage of the fact that he hadn't.

No one spoke. Pride, Mai knew. They all had it. None would ask for less, and it seemed ridiculous to ask for more- it was a completely rhetorical question and Madara knew it, a tease; he'd known no one would speak.
She almost wished Fumiko was here. She would've probably said something like "we'd prefer not to fight Susano'o, actually" and from her it wouldn't be a declaration of defeat, just a literal fact and Mai wanted so badly to say it herself, but she wouldn't.

The thought of Fumiko, however, merely made her angrier. She could feel her own chakra losing its control- and was surprised Madara hadn't acknowledged it with at least one or two opponents for fun.

"None of you have any answers, do you?" he said sadly, as though they'd been playing a game or some equally stupid shit. "Then I'll have to provide an answer for you."

As expected, one by one the clones lit purple, each nearly the strength of Madara itself, chakra expanding around their figures to tower over the Kage as monsters. She didn't know as much about techniques as her sister did, but she knew well enough about Wood Style- the only clone aside from Shadow Style that could take damage and still retain it's form.

"... no way..." the Mizukage breathed, figure wilting slightly.

"Damn him," the Raikage snarled.

The armors grew faces and limbs and ribs, and Mai didn't know if she had any attacks powerful enough to crack through them- she doubted it. She was strong, but she was no Tsunade, no Raikage A.

The only thing she could do that had any feasible chance of success was literally to attack Madara himself, but all it would take was for him to activate said armor and again she would be useless. He hadn't used Susano'o in their brief scuffle before the meteor- because he hadn't needed to. He'd been toying with them all- and was still toying with them.

Mai smiled grimly. He had to know this was overkill.

"They'll use it." Madara's tone lilted at the end, and Mai clenched her teeth.

"Damn him," the Raikage muttered again.

"Each of us must take on five," the Mizukage affirmed.

"It's five to one," Gaara said. "Not including the original and Mai."

"Not quite..." Ohnoki paused. "It's twenty-six to six."

"Lord Tsuchikage?"

"We're not alone- we'll guard each other's backs and coordinate our attacks." Ohnoki's voice was strong. At least he and the Raikage, along with Tsunade, would have some chance at breaking the armors. If they attacked together... it could work. "We are the Five Kage!"

The others gave an immediate agreement, most nodding. She looked up at Madara without raising her head, and knew that he was listening to them speak to each other, and letting them anyway. "Yeah," Mai said. "I'll help where I can."

A beat. And then: "Let's go!"

Without a word the five Kage leapt into shunshin at the Susano'o that towered above them.

It didn't take long for them to be completely overwhelmed, but still they continued fighting. Mai
did what she could without putting herself in lethal danger—well, any more lethal danger than she was already in just by being here—throwing blades and punches to shift attacks, stopping the Kage’s harsher falls, distracting Susano’o clones as they regrouped.

She was hurt, and badly too, if she remembered the difference between the pain scales, but for now she was still able to stand and move quickly, so that was enough for her. If Gaara could seal Madara away, then they would be able to go see healers, or whatever the hell. But until then, she would help defend the other Kage.

Somehow she hadn’t died yet, and was fairly certain it was due to her sharingan.

It was incredible what they could do, now that she was allowing them to work and especially now that they were both equally developed into third-stage. She could predict the movement of a Wood Clone well before it acted, and her physical prowess already granted her the speed, ability and instinct required to react accordingly. Just because these clones had sharingan didn’t mean her own didn’t work.

She could sense their chakra. She could see their movements—she could even predict their jutsu and its exact style and technique by the way the chakras moulded inside of them, though she could still see no difference, somehow, between the wood and original Madaras, despite the obvious reasoning that she should have been able to tell the difference between wood and faux-flesh.

Still, she could predict attacks by watching, and see everything in her periphery at once just by backing up.

The Susano’o thundered as they walked, the earth shaking. What she assumed was still the real Madara still stood placidly in place at the top of his pollen attack’s broken wood style, watching them like some interesting sports’ play.

"Mizukage!" she yelled, "Above!"

But it wasn't quick enough for her to move out of the way, caught midair, and Mai was too far away to help. Gaara, however, was right there to halt her fall with sand when she was pummelled into a nosedive by a Susano’o’s giant fist and move her out of the way of another attack, slipping her away into a crevasse to recover.

Gaara by far had the greatest advantage in this fight, as he couldn’t be caught off guard, the sand once more as always rising to face danger without his even being aware of it. The Susano’o's blade smashed into it, but didn't break through, and Gaara whirled, arms rising to block and then fly, armor himself for a mid-air impact that sent him flying to hit the ground hard beside the Mizukage.

Mai glanced over to the others, who seemed to be doing well enough—well, if Tsunade being technically impaled twice through the middle by massive chakra blades and yet still bearing down on Clones with enough force to smash their hulking figures in the ground, and the Raikage casually holding one Susano’o's fist where it was trying to smash him into the ground counted as "well enough."

But- "Raikage!"

He slumped with Genjutsu, and she made to bolt in their direction as the Susano’o raised its blade but—earth smashed through the ground and wrapped around him, yanking him away from danger. Ohnoki. They were all right so far.

So she turned most of her attention to Gaara and the Mizukage, still struggling to rise.
"Gaara," she said, sheathing her tantos momentarily to help him sit up. "You guys okay?"

He made some kind of strange eye contact with her. Mai didn't like that look one bit- it was lacking in the hellfire that had burned since Fumiko and Satomi's departure. "Yes," he said. "But, at this rate..."

"Shut up Gaara," she said. "Up you get. You too, Mizukage."

"Get up- Fellow Kage!" Ohnoki cried. "We fight a battle to the end, no whining, no complaining!!" As he spoke, finally Gaara managed to rise, a little slumped as Mai supported his side. The sand began to help, creeping over his skin to give him leverage. "We are the Five Kage, so choose final words that will not shame the title you hold!"

"Yeah, listen to the old man," Mai grunted, eyes flashing about. "I was told I wouldn't die like this."

He looked at her a moment, and then nodded.

"Mizukage, you good?" As soon as Gaara was standing on his own again, she went again for her blades.

"Hai."

"Okay," she said. "So we haven't killed more than three, so what? He hasn't killed even one of us yet. Now come on- they need our help."

"We entrusted Naruto to fight his battle, and we swore to win this fight that he entrusted to us- no matter what!" As Ohnoki spoke, they joined him, A, and Tsunade back in the open before the clones, with careful shunshin. Gaara and the Mizukage landed a little roughly, but didn't stumble further. "Don't forget that! And there is one more thing- each each and every shinobi has entrusted us with one duty- all of us have to be worthy of the title Kage!"

Ohnoki raised his hands to use Dust Style even as Tsunade stepped behind him to begin healing.

"Eh, Tsuchikage," Mai said. "I'll tell you which ones are using Rinnegan."

"Right! Princess- I need more!"

"You don't have to tell me," Tsunade muttered darkly in concentration.

"All the ones in the middle are clear!" Mai snapped out, glaring at the faces and colors of the clones and their chakras. "Avoid the two in the left corner, they'll dismantle the entire jutsu! Now, before the others activate it!"

"There's not much chakra in me. This could be our last stand!" His Particle style glowed into his palms. "Dust Release: Detachment of the Primitive World!"

The jutsu escaped and then expanded harshly into a perfect cube almost too bright to look at for her oversensitive eyes, but she stared into it as the landscape caught in the blast disintegrated. The clones evaporated instantly, but one of them-

"The real Madara escaped backwards," she said. "His armor threw him out!"

The Mizukage came steady behind them, the Raikage beside her, and she weaved several hand signs before shooting water from her mouth. The cube of particle style opened in the center to
make it room- Mai hadn't even known it could do that- and it formed into a dragon's head that enveloped Madara immediately. Mai watched intently, grinning as he began absorbing the technique, because for a sharingan user he sure was bad at checking his surroundings.

The sand rose around him, snaking over his limbs and wrapping to seal. She saw it now as the Raikage added to the Mizukage's water-style with lightning jutsu, electrifying the water- if he continued absorbing the water jutsu, with the gold she could see in Gaara's sand, he would be sealed, and if he stopped the sand, he would be paralyzed long enough to be disintegrated with Ohnoki's Dust Release and then have his pieces sealed away by Gaara's sand before he had a chance to reform.

Ohnoki didn't even have to pause in his jutsu, continuously firing, because Tsunade had the power to heal him instantly and replenish chakra as she lost it with the power hidden in the seal she'd saved them all with back during Pein's Assault on Konoha. And with her sharingan to see through the attacks themselves and give warnings- there was no way he'd be able to blindside them.

Damn, she thought. The Nations should've made peace a long time ago if this is the result.

"You can't hold us off for long!" Gaara roared above the lightning. As Mai watched, her sister's seals erupted from the sand, swarming like snakes or ants around the bulge of sand. She wondered how many more of those Gaara had. Probably a ton, knowing Fumiko's sealing speed.

"Don't you see!" Ohnoki cried over the noise. "This is the full power of the Five Kage!"

And then everything went wrong at the same time. Mai backed up slightly, said "Wai-" as Madara's chakra flashed in his coils, but before she could finish or the Kage could register her warning, the sealing sand ball exploded into mist against Madara's purple Susano'o chakra.

Mai couldn't hear him speak, and nor, she imagined, could any of the other Kage, but with her sharingan activated she could easily read his lips.

"Even the Five Kage are nothing compared to the power that I wield!"

She froze at the power that pulsed then, a purely physical reaction to the immense density of his chakra, as though it had a gravity of its own as it formed some kind of thing, rising from his skin and expanding around him to form a blue figure with dark red eyes, curling on all sides with power. It was much bigger than they were- the size of the meteor or more.

Dread formed in the pit of her stomach.

This is it- meet the Perfect Susano'o!"

"... It's huge," Tsunade murmured anxiously. The Raikage and Mizukage's jutsus faded in tandem, and even Gaara dropped his arms- his sand there had been obliterated into nonexistence as if Ohnoki himself had destroyed it. Only the Tsuchikage and Mai's jutsu remained activated, the dust style glowing, Mai's eyes red beneath the hair falling over her hitai-ate.

"This- is this-" The Mizukage seemed thunderstruck, voice warbling. "A true Susano'o?"

And then Madara's lips read, "Not quite."

He raised his up hand sharply, and with a rising of power that rumbled the ground they stood on, the Susano'o's features twisted sharply, gaining armor and yellow flashing eyes, face elongating into some monstrosity or another even as it grew again.
It now resembled a shinobi or a samurai, with traditional armor similar to Madara's own and two hilted swords with a kind of old-style mask for a face. Beside the remains of the meteor, it looked even bigger than it likely was. Now, against it's raging chakra, that purified Killing Intent, and with Tsunade drawing away her replenishment, Ohnoki slowly dropped his hands, the Dust Release bubbling away.

"The big one's chakra has stabilized," Ohnoki said under his breath, and then stepped back, breath catching.

"He's just so strong," Tsunade said, the frustration in her voice prominent. "I can't believe Grandfather fought someone like him!"

"Well stop boosting his ego, would you?" Mai finally snapped, head whipping to face them. She didn't think she looked intimidating at all to them in this moment- Mai was a thirteen year old girl about to fall over from her injuries, it didn't matter what her eyes looked like. But still they startled at her hard expression. "He has the sharingan too, you know! He can read everything you're saying!"

She turned again to face the Susano'o, even as her body tried to make her tremble, even as her mind began to accept, running plans and strategies in her head, that there really wasn't a way to win this. "Just all of you quit it. At the very least we'll keep him here long enough that by the time he gets to everyone else, the Reincarnation technique will be released. It's no use whining now- like you said, old man. He'll kill us either way, unless we get him first."

She felt a hand on her shoulder, and knew it was Gaara.

"Don't tell me to leave," she said, already sensing his intention. He knew they were going to lose, but unlike her, he was starting to accept it as truth. She wasn't going to let him pull some stupid martyr bullshit. She turned her face from his hand, and it slipped away like she'd burned him. "I thought you were cooler than that, Gaara."

"I already explained this to all of you," Madara said. Somehow it was carrying over to them-somehow the Kage could hear his words. "Only Hashirama could stop me. And he is... no longer with us." His Susano'o's arms raised to unsheath a sword, slowly. "Though, in a way... you could say that that actually works out better for you, because..."

Without warning- it was too fast even for her fully developed sharigan eyes to pick up, from no movement to the-ground's-erupting-into-magma, sword blade tearing into the earth with enough speed and power to raise volcanoes from the earth, and then, suddenly, send them all blowing violently backwards in a tumble of tearing stones and chakra residue that immediately broke several bones in her body, and Mai screamed with them as they flew across the battlefields.

Out of them six, Mai was the only one not to land on some semblance of her feet, smashing hard into and through a raised stone, and then into the ruined ground behind it, spinters carving into her skin from the wood there. For a moment she lay there, stunned, sharingan deactivated, unable to breathe or think.

The other Kage managed to sit up or stand, and she heard, "Impossible..."

"... It's just me." Madara's voice this time, sounding satisfied. "So after all this, the maps will only need to be redrawn a little bit."

"He split the mountain!"
That was what finally roused something in her mind to function once more, raising her head with some difficulty to see what had happened and blanching as soon as she laid eyes on the destruction left behind and sucking in a sharp breath. "Tch...!"

She couldn't see the Kage through the stones, and so attempted to move, but nothing really happened aside from some parts of her body shaking. "... Damn it...!" The rock she had blasted through crumbled into dust and shards, and she had to turn her head away, coughing, before peering back, eyes slitted against the dust raised around the entire area.

"This is... Uchiha Madara's strength...?" Ohnoki's posture wasn't even defensive any longer, wide open. "Then why... earlier...? Why did you hold back against us?"

"What adult would go full force when fighting mere children?" She could imagine his eye-roll, but could no longer clearly see his face. There was more than just a trickle of blood on her mouth, coating her tongue and spilling out over her chin. Mai couldn't quite breathe. "But anyway, are you finished now?"

A footstep pounded through her skull, rattling her prone form against the ground as it shook beneath the impact. Another sounded, and her eyes refocused- when had they blurred?- to see the Perfect Susano'o moving closer, one massive step after another, and none of the Kage moving to stop it. And so she looked down, sucked a breath in and then out, strained on her arms to try and lift herself.

There was some give. Her limbs felt like oil jello set on fire, but she was moving in the right direction.

Another step.

Her chest left the ground.

Another step- but this one was different, smaller and light, a clap compared to a giant drum.

"It may be true that we're stumbling in the dark right now," Ohnoki's voice rang out. He'd stepped forward. "But we're also close to the light at the end of the tunnel!"

His voice cracked slightly, but it was enough. It was something.

Mai got her arms beneath her, and then her legs, and then she was pushing up, somehow getting closer towards being on her feet, and glanced at the Kage as she clutched at a nearby rock for leverage. They were all standing now, ready to fight to their deaths.

For some reason, a tear slipped down her face, probably doing nothing to the mucked dirt and grime and blood there.

They were probably going to die here.

Gaara...

She wobbled as she left her knees, and then suddenly stabilized, rising the rest of the way to her feet. Shocked, she glanced down at herself to see Gaara's sand supporting her, helping her to stand. She tried to step away from it- Gaara needed all the sand and concentration he could get- but she couldn't.

And then the sand did something unexpected.
It curled almost gently around her limbs and skin, underneath her clothes and through her hair and then hardened there, still pliant to her movements. Mai's eyes widened.

Sand armor.

She looked to Gaara, stunned, who looked backwards, just slightly.

She would stand.

His eyes stayed on hers for another second longer- and then she managed something like a nod, and he nodded back before turning away.

Come on... come on...

Chakra flared to life behind her eyes.

"Here of all places!" Ohnoki finished, and once more his posture was ready. Mai, as well, jumped to join the Kage where they stood and fell into a basic kata stance. She could still fight. She could manage this.

"... My Susano'o is destruction incarnate," Madara said after a moment's pause. "A single stroke of the blade contains enough power to smash all things in this universe. It rivals even the tailed beasts. Be crust and be gone, Kage," he said. "You, and your pathetic philosophy."

He raised his sword. Mai braced- Gaara's sand armor would do nothing against this and he knew it, and she knew it. He was letting her stand. He was letting her stand to meet her death, instead of on her knees.

And now she looked at him, with her sharingan eyes, and contemplated turning them off for it, but didn't. Any chance was still a chance... She allowed herself, this one time, to pause in a battle she couldn't win to sift through old memories, to look at Gaara and remember being young again, looking up to him, to remember fighting with him and for his name, to remember joking around and training and sleeping together during thunderstorms.

She remembered her big siblings, and she hoped Fumiko survived this war.

You really are the coolest... she let herself think, smiling just a little, although he wasn't looking back at her, staring intently at their enemy. ... big brother.

...

~ "Yeah? What about you?" ~

...

He didn't know what to do or how she was doing it or why he couldn't keep her chakra out, but she was getting closer and closer or was that another Genjutsu just making it seem like she was? Damn it, he hated these things, these fleeting masterpieces, these vicious artistical rivals. He couldn't even tell what was real or reality anymore, just continuously freed his eyes and continuously threw his bombs, and some seemed to hit but then she would be fine.

Deidara couldn't even fall, the increments in which he could move were so short he didn't get the time to think to.

He didn't know what was happening.
She was weak. Deidara knew she was weak, had fought her before, had gathered her intel from Sasori-no-Danna's spies and knew that at least when he'd been alive she hadn't even been a registered ninja, and even just a second ago she had been too weak even to stand up, a pitiful attempt to protect something else against a person who could demolish the entire area.

He regretted now not using his Ultimate Art right away- even if he hated that he was reformed each time, he now had no way of activating it at all; it took more concentration than this crazed civilian-girl was letting him have as she grew ever-closer, drenched completely in whatever water style she had used to not die in the fall she'd caused, with a ripped-up flak vest and torn fishnet half-sleeves, for some reason a white shirt stained with red where it was visible.

Somehow she hadn't lost that stupid satchel, either, of what he assumed was medical supplies and an oddly undamaged, new-looking prosthetic that was singed with faded embers in one spot from the explosions that had thrown her back. Her hair was tied in what he took as a mockery of his own, without the long bangs to cover her eye, though the bags did well enough for that- her forehead protector glinted with the shine.

He did, however, recognize her face. A lot of people had looked at him like that throughout his life, angry widows and children and parents and comrades. It was almost amusing, really, how angry they got, how scared they were of his explosions, except- this was actually causing him some trouble now, it wasn't funny-

And she was a Seal master, as well, judging by the sleeve of pocketed seals on her arm, something difficult to produce, a sealing method Sasori-no-Danna had used as well. Which meant this could end seriously badly for him- and the last thing he wanted was to be trapped in that stupid puppet again-

Another explosive seemed to magically miss, thrown in her direction yet exploding far away. Deidara felt the way his face twisted, mouth down and eyes narrowed.

"You don't know how strong I've become!"

It was a ringing sound, and he really couldn't, as frustrating as it was, tell if it was coming from her mouth or a Genjutsu. His eye worked furiously to counter.

"I'm done with you!" She slashed an arm downwards and disappeared, reappeared closer, his own fingers singed, a small crater at his right in the ground, footing uneven. The Reanimation started to fix itself. "Just go away!"

And then, distracted by her angry tirade, that stupid civilian artist girl slipped up.

Deidara broke free and, explosive clay already formed in his hand, finally managed a clear shot without her messing with his body and it flew right at her startled face, her arms rising to defend herself or weave a seal, but he wasn't taking any chances.

His hand shot up in a seal. "Katsu!"

It exploded, not quite all the way in lethal range, but it had the intended effect- burned her face and skin beyond complete healing and smashed her back into the ground before she had the time to weave another Genjutsu or protective water shield.

She screamed in pain and he set to having one of his palms chew more clay- he still had a lot left. He'd nearly died in that invasion of Sunagakure against the Jinchuuriki there because he hadn't brought enough clay, so he had enough stored away to last him three of the battles with Sasuke that
had killed him- and stepping in some faux of a leisurely walk.

He hadn't known that Reanimation bodies could sweat, or feel exhausted, but he did. He supposed they could only have so much chakra- you couldn't create chakra from nothing, after all. The bookworm had made it with the souls of the dead, who had once possessed it.

"Haa," he sighed, coming up to where she writhed on the ground, crying from pain, and stopped far enough away to her side that she could both see him and explode without too much damage to his person. "It seems you've lost, hmph. You didn't stand a chance after all."

He looked up as his palm worked, ignoring her cries. Deidara could see the injured bat from here- he wondered if it was dead. Good riddance, he thought. Bats were such ugly creatures, not artistically designed at all. And then it was finished, and he formed a quick spider- no use really, wasting any more clay than he had to on this one barely-kunoichi when he had Sasuke to kill.

He tossed it, made a hand sign, and the spider formation almost unceremoniously expanded to land on her face and explode. Her hands paused for a split second where they'd been hovering by her injured face. Deidara grinned.

And then her arms burst into water, the rest of the body quickly following suit.

A water clone?!

He took a step back, head whipping to the side, closing his right eye to search for where-

Deidara tripped suddenly backwards, and he looked down in shock to see a hand sprouted from the earth, yanking on his right ankle, fingers wrapped tightly enough that her nails would've drawn blood had he been completely alive.

His foot sank into the ground down to his knee, and he fell backwards, smashing into the ground. He had no prepared clay, couldn't fight the enemy physically while she was underground- and there she was again, arms shooting from the ground to grab at his flailing left arm and then disappear with it beneath the soil, practically fusing him with the rocks without damaging him and enabling him to reform.

He managed to connect with her hands the next time they rose by his other foot, kicking hard, but she simply unearthed farther, head coming out of the ground with some pained gasp, and fell on it, disappearing once more as though under the water, leg in tow.

Deidara bellowed in frustration, prepared now that he was still to use his ultimate technique. Let her bring his other arm underground- she couldn't seal away his explosions! She did just that, arms buried to past his elbows in solid rock at strange angles, and he thought viciously, she'll be right beneath me when I explode!

And then she erupted from the ground directly to his right, only coming halfway out of the earth, buried beneath her torso. Again her face was twisted with some kind of determination, and she brought her raised left hand down directly on his chest.

Damn it! he thought wildly as he recognized the racing feeling of electrical-based chakra. "No!" he yelled, twisting against the ground, but he was stuck, and couldn't explode, and with her other hand she reached into his cloak and tore away the stores of clay there, throwing the pouch a far distance before phasing back into the soil and coming out with a kunai blade.

"It's a chakra transforming seal," she said, almost triumphantly had she still not been so angry, hovering above him, still halfway underground. Victoriously, perhaps. A necklace was dangling
from her neck, a cloth pouch soaked through. Deidara howled. "As long as I touch it it will continuously produce lighting style chakra- you're done, Deidara!"

...~ "It-" Madara's grin softened into something different. He nodded. "It sounds pretty good." ~

..."Lord Tsuchikage, it's unfortunate, but..." The Mizukage's voice was high with tears that didn't form. "I think this is the end."

"Silence, Mizukage!" A snapped. "I'm not going to give up yet!"

The sword came down.

And then Mai noticed something peculiar. A whiteness to Madara's chakra, a fading.

She looked away from Gaara to watch in shock as the Perfect Susano'o began to fail, whittling away as Madara began to sink to the ground, glowing slightly. And then she realized what was happening, seeing the foreign chakra within his head begin to wobble-

The Reanimation jutsu was dissipating.

They'd... done it!

"Something has happened to the jutsu caster," Madara muttered just as the other Kage, too, seemed to realize what was going on.

"What is this?" the Mizukage stuttered, bewildered, as the light around Madara's figure grew and then burst into the sky. It hurt her eyes like Ohnoki's particle style had hurt her eyes, but the sound it created was almost pleasant to her ears, soft and singing. "That- that light surrounding him-"

"Yes!" Mai crowed, and the sound tore out of her throat painfully, but she didn't care, bringing up a fist and grinning wildly.

"The Susano'o is gone," Ohnoki said. "The debris from the reanimation is swirling in a whirlwind around him. Without a doubt, this means-"

"Yes, it would appear that the Reanimation Jutsu has been released," Madara said, voice like an annoyed sigh. Mai tensed slightly, the sand armor tightening with her muscles. He seemed weirdly unconcerned...

"What?" the Raikage exclaimed. "It has?!"

"But how?" Tsunade asked sharply. "We haven't even located where Kabuto is! It's too soon!"

Tsunade shook her head, perplexed, and crossed her arms. "Even if Kabuto was found... to be able to stop this jutsu- who could've done it?"

"Maybe the jutsu has a time limit," Mai suggested, "Or somebody found him out while he was casting and caught him off guard or something, but why do you guys care?"

"It doesn't matter," Ohnoki agreed, and then glanced again to Madara's glowing form. Mai could actually see his chakra beginning to dissipate with the Reanimation. "Whoever did it is a hero that saved the Shinobi World. It seems the heavens haven't forsaken us yet."
"It appears that you have able shinobi on your side, too," Madara allowed. "It can't be helped."

At his tone, Mai's eyes narrowed, and she took a half step closer to Gaara on her left. Voicing her thoughts, the Mizukage wondered, "He planned for this?"

Ohnoki, several feet in front of them, suddenly tensed. "Stay on guard," he warned, and as Madara leaped from his place to attack them, one hand weaving into a jutsu sign, shifted his stance for defense. "He's planning a final strike before he disappears- so watch out!"

From his mouth erupted small balls of flame that formed into blazing dragon heads, the heat of which she could feel even from several yards away, like small suns. Immediately she ran forward, signing rapidly and stepping up beside Ohnoki to bring her one hand up, the other dipping into her back pouch for the shuriken she'd stolen from that corpse the horde of zetsu had killed.

She threw them in a volley just as she blew fire, chakra peeling from her hands to stick to the shuriken even as the flames wrapped around them, and she had complete control of where they went. Behind her the Mizukage warped her chakra in the beginnings of a water technique, but it wouldn't form in time.

**Katon: Pheonix Flower Shuriken jutsu!**

You want five on one? she thought vindictively, carefully having thrown five for every one head. Fine! That's a fun ratio for games!

They slammed into the attacks, repelling and dispelling the intense balls of flame with a great roar of fire and rush of dying, swallowed oxygen, shuriken slicing through the flames her fire helping starve it all midair, and in the flare that remained Tsunade leapt, hands coated in chakra in a final attack, one chance at pushing him away long enough for him to disappear and die again-

And then as Mai watched, flames dying, Tsunade's coursing extra chakra banded around her coils like a second skin flickered out, and then she was falling, hundred healings seal finally used up. She was losing consciousness even as she fell, a dead weight Gaara would catch in his sand.

But it didn't matter. They'd bought enough time- she could see his spirit rising into the air, his stolen physical body beginning to reveal itself beneath the debris of reanimation material- Mai cupped the burns in the corners of her lips from her sloppy jutsu, already prepared to collapse as soon as Gaara removed the sand armor that seemed to read her every movement.

And then the reanimation material paused- and clamped back down on Madara's spirit like it had eaten him, and it was reformed.

"What?!" she yelled, confusion clear in her voice and then- "Tsunade!"

"Damn it!" Ohnoki managed to say behind her, the only thing he had enough time to do.

The Raikage with his incredible speed leapt to aid, but Mai could see both their trajectories even as he tried, there was no possible way he would make it before she was cleaved in half, no self-healings left within her jutsu-

And then there was a flash of light, a sudden chakra with no body she could see that zapped into the air and then- was in front of Tsunade. There was a sound of cutting flesh, and then Tsunade was away, somewhere else as though she had simply jumped there.

"Hokage! You alright?" A shouted, and Mai's eyes narrowed.
Her seal had just returned at once. The foreign chakra was gone.

What had happened just then?

Tsunade turned. Madara was still glowing as his body tried to release the reanimation, but somehow he was stopping it or stalling it or turning it off—she could see it within his head, within his chakra. "Your vitality has returned," he said curiously. "Did you receive chakra?"

For whatever reason, Tsunade chose that moment to smile. It wasn't a grin or a smirk or a disguised grimace, but a real smile Mai might have found on Fumiko's face, with clear eyes and a smooth face. "I got to see an old friend for a little while," she said.

"Well, you'll be with them again soon enough."

Had it been a soul—a soul released from the Impure Reincarnation? Somebody Tsunade had once known, who had returned with the last of his time to transfer his remaining chakra into replenishing her muscles and her seal?

"Wh-what—what is going on?" the Mizukage said, baffled, completely lost somewhere. Mai shifted her stance to glance back at them, scowling hard, feeling something breaking in her chest. Would they die or wouldn't they? "Madara's chakra, which had started to separate from his body, is now clinging fast to it! He's still reanimated?"

"But how?" the Raikage demanded. "Why won't he disappear? I thought the reanimation jutsu was undone!"

Gaara's jaw was clenching visibly, teeth slightly bared, and she understood his anger. They'd been so close—this wasn't getting the rug pulled out from underneath them, this was struggling to avoid death only to find yourself injured and tired back at the beginning of the battle.

"The Reanimation jutsu," Madara said, having safely landed again on a curl of ragged wood, "is a jutsu that summons back the dead. There is really only one risk to it."

"What risk?" Gaara growled, and Mai turned again to face Madara, but tracked backwards, eyes trained on his still mildly glowing figure, taking several steps back towards Gaara. She had the Kages' backs in this fight, but would above all else stay beside Gaara.

"As long as they know the correct signs to weave," he said, "a Reanimated shinobi can actually rescind the reanimation jutsu's Summoning contract from their end."

"They can rescind the contract?" Tsunade's tone was cutting.

"And when that happens," Madara continued, eyes sliding slowly back and forth, a wide sweep to catch each of their attentions. When he reached Mai, she shifted her own eyes to the side of his face—she wouldn't stare directly at another sharingan user's gaze. She'd already learned that lesson. "You end up with the biggest problem of all: an immortal body with infinite chakra, on the move without any way to control or restrain it."

"You don't mean..." Ohnoki breathed.

"Tell the jutsu caster...to never use a forbidden jutsu like this carelessly." And with that final statement—as though he actually expected they would be able to tell Kabuto or whoever the hell was behind this after he tried to kill them—his hands flew into a rapid weave-pattern that Mai's eyes tracked and stored, and then one hand slammed down palm-open into the ground.
"Reanimation Jutsu: Release!"

There was a bright light that faded again almost instantly, and there stood, Mai accepted with a darkness weighing down every limb with a sudden exhaustion beyond that she'd ever felt before, a calm and collected Madara, arms crossed.

This had just gone from "hold him off and try to seal him" to "seal him or lose the war when he inevitably makes his way to the rest of the Allies and smashes every last living person into misty red clouds."

"But how? How is this possible?"

Anger flared in her navel at the Mizukage- all she'd done was ask forlorn question after forlorn question, stating the obvious- Uchiha Madara was seemingly invincible and indestructible. But Mai fucking hated repetitively rhetorical questions in a row- she got it, okay, they were gonna die, now could she please shut up about it instead of continuously rubbing it in her face?

"Your ridiculously juvenile jutsu cannot hold me back. Don't you get it by now, after fighting me for all this time?" He finally glanced down towards his own feet, seemingly completely disinterested from their fight now. "Now then, you have seen the Perfect Susano'o- and everyone who lays eyes on it dies, or so they say. I'm almost embarrassed to have to do this again- I already used it once, but... my interest is waning, thanks to the interference. So perhaps I ought to go and retrieve the Kyuubi instead."

Naruto!

"No," Ohnoki hissed, and he raised again, hovering above Madara to look down at him, force his eyes to raise.

"Lord Tsuchikage!" the Mizukage called in a weak tone, flinging one arm out away in despair. "I'm sorry, but this is beyond us, we cannot stop him!"

"We still have to fight him," Ohnoki growled, some kind of desperation in his tone that Mai could feel thumping in her heart. "We must stop him right here!"

"Mizukage," Mai said at last, letting her eyes slide to the older woman. Her clothes had been demolished, as had Mai's, and there was a strange sheen in her eyes as she met Mai's glare- true fear. This Kage feared death. "Stop talking about us dying already, would you?"

Madara slowly uncrossed his arms, moving his hands instead to rest on his hips, as if he was exhausted with their insistence and this entire thing was just a hindrance. "How pitiful you are," he sighed.

It was over faster than she'd expected it to be.

They battled.

The Mizukage fell.

They battled.

The Raikage fell.

They battled.
Mai battled as she never had before, still trying to remain supplementary but unable to avoid having to fight herself. She even got a few good hits in- blasts with fire and lightning and once even with Taijutsu, but Madara only reformed and was never still enough to seal, and it was all Mai could do to keep her eyes on Gaara and Tsunade, the two most important people in this fight, all bias aside: the sealer and the healer.

Mai had known the second she recognized the pattern that she was going to die.

But as long as at least one of the Kage lived, there was a chance.

And even if they failed, Mai wanted to give them that chance.

With her sharingan eyes, she saw what would happen. The Susano'o would falter just a moment- and wood would shoot from the earth.

Gaara's sand wouldn't be fast enough, not with the chakra blade of the Perfect Susano'o bearing down above him, not with two Kage incapacitated and the others thoroughly engaged. Even if he'd sensed the attack, there would be nothing he could do against it.

And so she did, instead.

Fueling chakra into her legs and feet, Mai dashed into a shunshin, perhaps not the fastest she had ever activated but the most aggressive, the most focused, and Gaara didn't really have time to notice her- if he'd sensed her, he hadn't had the time to react at all. She twisted, feet skidding and then lifting from the ground, and yelled his name.

The sand didn't stop her.

Mai smashed into Gaara's side, and he was sent staggering away, falling hard and sliding through the dirt, letting out a startled cry of alarm, low and panicked. She'd never managed that kind of blow against him before- not even in their most serious training spars.

And then she felt it- a burning, shooting, searing pain erupting in her back, her gut, the front of her torso, and then in the rest of her as she collided with the remains of the meteors, wood splintering into her wound as it rushed into the stone through her body, and she screamed with the agony of it, fire, worse, lightning, worse, she was teetering on the edge of passing out, this was the worst pain she'd ever experienced.

In the background, Mai didn't quite manage to register the noise that followed: the Kage banding to lessen the Perfect Susano'o's sword impact, and they must have succeeded because it was nothing like those other times at all. Her vision faded, going greyscale and then completely dark.

And then it slowed, and stopped, leaving her burning and throbbing and numb. In some part of her brain she realized her body was completely limp, body incapable of even writhing in pain. Her shoulders slumped, body curving slightly against the stone, around the wood, as it held her there. Sound slid in and out between her ears, but it was all nonsensical.

She couldn't stand it. It was too much.

And then, all of a sudden, as a headache slowly disappeared, it wasn't. Mai realized it didn't hurt.

Shit... she thought. Her mind was sliding. Her ears phased out the sound of battle, ringing at first with Gaara's screaming of her name and then only with the song from the release of the reanimation ninjutsu- or its attempt, anyway...
Is this... dying?

No way...

... like this, then?

As it faded, she found herself only feeling the leeching cold of the meteorite, blind and deaf. Deeply her body pulsed, not quite uncomfortable, and her eyes finally slid closed, more a feeling than a change in perspective.

At least I saved Gaara... for a little while longer.

Eishi, I didn't...

I meant to keep my end. But...

Her body was warming. Mai felt fuzzy around the edges. The blackness of her sight was lifting or lightening, not adding any true color, but it was better than being lost in the dark.

Heh... you know...

Mai wondered if her smile carried through to her physical body. She hoped so.

This... isn't so bad.

...

~ "Well," Hashirama said grandly, sitting beside Madara on the cliffside. He raised an arm to indicate everything in front of them. "Then it's decided!" ~

...

Deidara spat at her angrily as he ranted, but she couldn't care less.

Once more, that had been the last of a safe amount of chakra. All that was left now was what seeped softly from her skin, perfect for her seal, so long as she didn't move her hand from it. She couldn't even get herself out of the ground at this point, had she tried, but she couldn't bring herself to care.

There was blood seeping from wounds both from Madara and Deidara's attacks, and from her mouth- she thought maybe something in the fall had damaged her internally, nothing she couldn't fix with medical ninjutsu after some rest- and she could feel her Shinobi headband coming undone beneath her ponytail. Deidara had already healed from any damage, but he was trapped.

She had him.

She beat him.

She raised her free arm, kunai clenched in her fingers.

"Oh, go on then, hmph! It won't do anything! I won't die!" Deidara crowed, half parts amused and taunting, half parts enraged. "I'll live long after this stupid war is over and you're all dead, yeah!"

"Shut up!"

"Do it! Or are you scared? Do I scare you, hmm?"
Of course he scared her. He'd caused her an unimaginable amount of pain he probably would never be able to process- she doubted highly that he'd ever cared about anybody before in his life aside from himself- and nightmares for months, even in the middle of a war she was having nightmares. But she was too furious to care- and yet something was holding her back.

Jeering had a hard time getting under her skin- after all, she'd been getting jeered at practically since she started school, ever since making friends with Gaara. It wasn't really his taunting making her angry, it really was just his face- they were so close, she could see every detail that had previously been blurred from his distance. His eyes were blue and lined and slanted, skin smooth. Young. Loose hair from her tail draped on his collarbone.

... Was she?

She wanted to do it, she wanted to stab him in the face, or maybe the neck to keep him from talking anymore, but did she really... feel like it?

She'd wanted to for so long her brain was urging her now- of course she wanted to, of course she was scared, of course she was angry, she had been all this time, of course she was now! And she should've been.

And she was.

But...

Her mind flashed to the battle with Rasa as she glared down at him, teeth clenched, blade poised. Just how much she'd pitied the man who loved in parcels, who loved in numbers, who thought he hadn't really done anything wrong. And she'd been angry at him, too, for hiding the fact that Gaara's mother loved him, of all things. It seemed almost trivial.

And as she thought, Fumiko became aware of her stance, tense and curled over her opponent like a creature in the midst of pouncing, mouth furiously twisted, fingers wrapped around a blade handle. From a distance, she probably looked feral, or perhaps just... deadly.

Mitsuwa Fumiko had felt anger before... but she wasn't really deadly.

Her face fell slightly. Being angry was like- it was like being trapped in an attack, like she wasn't really aware what was... She looked back at the damage their fight had caused, the mud and crumbled earth and charred craters- and Shaapu in the distance, she'd been herself enough to push away from him.

Had she really done all that? Had she really won this fight? Now the adrenaline was starting to wear off, leaving her shaky and shocked that she'd survived. When had she gotten to the point of being able to fight an Akatsuki and not only live but win?

No, that hadn't been like Mai... that had been Gaara, fighting with Shukaku screaming in his mind, anger and fear... and bloodlust.

"I'll do it again, hn!" Deidara ranted. His hair as well was coming loose, and he looked unhinged in the way a child would look unhinged- less like he was dangerous and more like he was throwing a tantrum. "I'll destroy your entire puny village when Kabuto wins this war- he told me I could!"

Again she raised her blade- and he gave some schadenfreude grin, knowing if she tried it wouldn't do anything.

And then she let her arm drop, stabbing it into the dirt beside his face, sinking halfway down the
blade. And then her elbow was down, resting on his chest, and she dropped it, fingers releasing, tingling from the cut off blood flow.

The anger was gone.

Gone.

She felt like singing.

"I think," she said, exhausted from the fight and slipping adrenaline rush, but still giving a small smile anyways, "That I forgive you now, Deidara."

"What?!"

Fumiko laughed. She laughed so hard she cried.

And then, ignoring Deidara's bewildered tirade, she heard someone yell, "Fumiko!"

"I'm over here!" she called, voice still raggedy, but she wiped her face with her now empty hand, keeping the other firmly pressed against the seal keeping Deidara duded, despite how much he struggled.

The air on Deidara's other side, a few yards off, filled with darkness. Satomi. She'd wondered where her friend had gone- it seemed as though to find backup. Kurotsuchi tottered slightly, as did some of her division members, but none reacted as violently as she had, merely blinking away the nausea.

"Holy shit, Fumiko!"

"Kankuro," she said with a relieved smile. "Hey..."

"How did- What did-"

At Kankuro's appearance Deidara moaned angrily. "No! I won't get stuck in that stupid thing again, un!"

"He can't explode," she said at their wary glances. "I've got a seal on him effusing lightning chakra into his system. It's safe."

Another shinobi took on the job of pouring chakra into her seal, and Satomi and Kurotsuchi helped to dig her the rest of the way out of the ground as Deidara was sealed, leaving behind a small, crumbly crater as they pulled her out. She immediately slumped to the floor in a sitting position, too exhausted now to stand, but still looked over to Shaapu, who hadn't yet disappeared. Likely he had another ten, twenty minutes to wait.

"Kurotsuchi..." Fumiko said slowly. "Can you send someone over to help my Summons? He's injured..."

"Oh- of course, Fumiko-san."

"What happened here, Fumiko-san?" Satomi asked worriedly, left alone with her as the Stone kunioichi rushed off to find Shaapu help. "I tried to hurry, I really did."

"Mahh, I just... won, I guess?" she smiled tiredly. "Lots of Genjutsu."
Madara laughed again. "Yeah!" he said, and caught Hashirama's eye. "We'll build it right here."

Chapter End Notes

... So.

Fumiko as a shinobi.

Mai as a shinobi.

They're quite the sibling pair, aren't they?

As for the poll, winners go to the ones who chose that she would win, but ultimately give into her pacifism and spare him- despite his painless edo tensei body! Hating just... isn't in her. She isn't built for it.

Mai... Mai will die for exactly what she believes in, even if the effort she dies for fails- as her taicho did, and as, possibly, Eishi did.

A lot relating to hatred in this one- Fumiko, Mai and Gaara's experiences with hatred and fear, and the different ways they react to it, as well as an excerpt from "Hashirama and Madara" that has a lot of the same themes. Madara himself is a conduit for hatred. I feel like it's a powerful theme in the Naruto series, especially Shippuden, and in Madara's character, so I wanted to explore a little with that, so... this was the result.

That's... kind of all I have to say, you guys. Please let me know what you thought- about any of it. I really do appreciate every review I get, especially with as much effort as I put into this story. So please tell me what you enjoyed or didn't, especially about this one- I'm in love with how it turned out.
Together

Chapter Notes

I still suggest this on my fanfiction because formatting

See the end of the chapter for more notes

...

~ "Fumiko?" ~

...

They moved her in a whirlwind as night began to fall, stones still crumbling through her clothing.

Fumiko was exhausted. She hadn't had time to heal or even ask to be healed, Shaapu disappearing before she could speak to him either, still bleeding from a thousand small cuts. But there was no sure way to know if their fight had been seen by enemy ninja or zetsu, and so Kankuro took no chances.

Her vision was phasing in and out, some mild haze she normally associated with the moments right before she passed out standing up, but then she never fell quite asleep, whether from her jackrabbit heart, injuries, or worry for the Kage and Mai, she didn't know.

Satomi had brought them far away when she had taken them from the Kages' fight, near the cusp of acres of forests- they had to have been nearby a shore or large lake, stones dissipating into hard soil. Fumiko couldn't sense Gaara or her sister at all, let alone the other four Kage or- at least- Madara.

Thank goodness for small mercies.

Despite her increasing, constant concern that was a hair from blowing into full-on panic- she wasn't quite sure but was pretty positive she was in some state of shock, hadn't quite processed the real and present danger she had left them all in, or how impossible to defeat Madara really was- she was falling asleep on her feet.

Gently, and a little distrustfully, Kankuro took up the job of carrying her and pulled her away from where she leaned on Satomi, having set up his puppet now so it would stay closed without his needing to power it with more than a few fingers. With her small build, he could carry her like a child, helpful at least so he didn't have to try and hinder the seals on his back.

She hummed tiredly into his shoulder. He smelled like Lightning Country's permeating dust and cleaning oil, and slightly like antiseptic. He'd been near a medical camp recently. He was warmer than Satomi, even if the shoulders of his Flak vest were less comfortable, and she started to feel herself drift off.

"Nah, don't sleep yet, Fumiko," he said, to the chorus of Deidara's curses. "We need to get you checked out first, okay?"

"Mmm..."
"Come on," he laughed. It was a light laugh - a little too light, with an undertone of stress and actual concern for her wellbeing. Fumiko wondered tiredly when the last time he'd laughed was. "You can't win a fight against an Akatsuki and then go die from a concussion."

"I know," she muttered into his hood. "But m'sleepy."

"I'm not surprised," he admitted. "There's like, nothing coming off you at all. You're a little chilly."

She needed to focus a little more. Fumiko was tired - but she was also a medic, and she knew probably even better than Kankuro did how much she absolutely couldn't go to sleep, even if she didn't think she had a concussion. So, to distract herself, she pushed away from the fuzziness, trying to blink her eyes open. "What's going on?"

"We just found you," he answered, and she could feel him shift as he turned his head to glance at her, changing his grip. She smiled at him slightly as they made eye contact. "And now we're going to a safe spot-

"No, no," she said. "M'not forgetting things, I mean- what's going on with the efforts?"

"Oh." Kankuro paused for a moment, face going unreadable, and looked back where they were going, lead on by Kurotsuchi and a few others, who would break off back to their division as soon as everything was settled again. "Well, according to latest intel, Naruto and Killer B are fighting against the other Madara," he said at last. "Everyone else is pretty much done fighting or regrouping, except-

"For Gaara and Mai and the others," she said quietly.

Kankuro nodded.

There was silence.

"Hey, I'm sure they'll be fine," he tried after a moment. "They're the five Kage, after all, and Mai's with them."

She didn't really find that comforting, though. Mai had gone up because they'd been losing, even after admitting the ongoing fight was probably beyond her, admitting that she was more okay with death for different reasons, and the last she'd seen of her sister had been through fleeting flashing moments of pure, oppressive fear-

"Mai said to tell you something," she said suddenly, eyes jolting open again with the recollection. "Before she left to fight with the Kage- I mean, we were underground and-"

"What? Wait, wait, tell me all that later." Kankuro paused for a thoughtful second, before saying carefully, "What did Mai say?"

"She said- well, I might not be supposed to tell you yet, she said not to tell you unless she couldn't-" Her mind was fogging slightly, the forest trees at the edges of Kankuro's clothes blurring with the moss. Everything was green and blue. "But she said that she meant to keep her promise- or means to, I guess..."

Kankuro stiffened. He didn't relax.

"That damn idiot," he said under his breath.

"That," Suddenly she was close to tears, fingers clutching at Kankuro's clothing where she could
find it away from his Flak, "That means s-she thinks she could die, doesn't it?"

He took a breath.

"Nah, Fumiko," he said. "No, she's just not used to making promises."

She quieted, taking to listening and occasionally letting Kankuro she was still awake, but she wasn't settled. A few years ago, maybe, she would've believed him. A few years ago her faith had been unshakeable. But now... As desperately as she wanted to take Kankuro's word as law, she couldn't.

Eventually they made it somewhere Kankuro deemed safe, and one of Kurotsuchi's men, a healer, stayed behind as the others broke off to help her out where Kankuro had sat her leaning up against a tree. Her cuts and scrapes were healed over, blood and dirt sponged off, and she was given blood replenishment and chakra pills. Yazu found the spot in her knee that had twisted and put it back to rights. He stared at her eyes and asked her questions, decided she had a concussion but a minor one.

As she became more and more herself, livening as she regained her strength, Fumiko became aware of Deidara's loud whining from Ant, which Kankuro casually guarded.

At least, with everything else going on, she found she wasn't worried about him anymore. It didn't matter if he was dead or gone by anybody's hands, his name was no longer an issue- Fumiko wasn't scared of him any longer. She could beat him, Gaara could beat him. Deidara wasn't even evil, or bad- he acted more like a teenager having too much fun to be responsible than anything else.

It felt... good. Nice. Hate was poisonous- something that didn't feel good but for some reason you couldn't stop growing and growing and tainting everything you do and say and feel. Here she was, sitting against a tree just two or three feet from where Deidara thrashed and hollered, chakra in plain sensory view, and she didn't care.

"Arigatou," she said with a friendly smile as the divisionary member, Yazu, finished, and as the bitter taste of the pills and medicines finally started fading down her throat.

"Of course, miss," he replied with an equal smile, settling back onto his haunches to relax slightly in front of her. Some of Fumiko's old bandages, dirty and stiff and black, had finally been removed, and it felt nice to be even somewhat clean again, even though she just barely qualified as such.

"Arigatou," she said with a friendly smile as the divisionary member, Yazu, finished, and as the bitter taste of the pills and medicines finally started fading down her throat.

"Of course, miss," he replied with an equal smile, settling back onto his haunches to relax slightly in front of her. Some of Fumiko's old bandages, dirty and stiff and black, had finally been removed, and it felt nice to be even somewhat clean again, even though she just barely qualified as such.

"Hey, you're the Kazekage's Lady, right?"

"Um," she said, surprised. "Yeah."

"Huh. Wouldn't have expected you out here fighting reanimated shinobi." He shrugged lightly, not really seeming too concerned. "Not many of the Kages have Lords or Ladies now- Kazekage's the only one so far as I know. Usually they stay back."

"Yeah, well." Fumiko laughed slightly, reaching to toy with her bracelet. "He wanted me to, but I couldn't just stay home, you know?"

"Fair enough."

"I'm going to go do a perimeter," Satomi said suddenly from where she had been quietly sat in seiza nearby, observing. She stood. "I should be back soon. Kankuro-san, are you all right watching him for now?"

"Yeah," he said, nodding. "He's not really a threat anymore."
Satomi nodded and glanced over Fumiko's way, gaze questioning. She smiled at her and waved a hand for her to go on, and then Satomi did just that, not pulling apart into blackness but instead just turning around and walking off into the woods.

Kankuro seemed to wait until the sounds of her footsteps faded away before glancing over at her and Yazu, seeming to notice her perked expression.

"Oi," he said. "You feeling better now?"

"Yeah!" Fumiko grinned at him. "I could take down Deidara again!"

"Hey, shut up, un!"

Yazu started laughing, a fit that caught over to Kankuro and her, which seemed to incense Deidara even further, but they didn't really pay him any attention, giggling amongst themselves for what seemed like hours before eventually petering out for oxygen. Kankuro stepped over lightly before kneeling, still turned to see his Ant puppet in his periphery as it banged around.

"So," he said casually. "You gonna tell me what happened? How'd you end up all the way over here anyway?"

Fumiko paused, the temporary mirth fizzling out of her chest like ice water poured over a coal. She sighed, and brushed a bit of hair away from her face, eyes darting off to the side and taking in the expanse of trees. In the darkness of night, the woods looked endless.

"It's a long story."

"Well," he said. "We've got plenty of time, and I for one want to know every detail of what happened with that." Kankuro pointed a thumb backwards at Ant, grin still on his face, though she could see in his eyes that he understood why she was hesitating.

"Yeah," she agreed.

And so Fumiko started from the medical base camp, leaving after learning from Shikamaru that Gaara was about to face off against the reincarnated Rasa. She explained the fight itself, and the revelations Rasa had revealed to them before being sealed away, and she described the fight against the Mizukage, glossing over the actual theory and fact behind her Genjutsu (as Kankuro's eyes glazed slightly when she tried to explain) and how that had led them to the real fight, where Gaara and Ohnoki had arrived again to finish the sealing.

She told him about the Steam Imp and her dislocated shoulder and how she'd jumped out to help, casting a shield of water in front of the Imp itself as it exploded, and about the Mizukage's last words to Gaara as the sand finally sealed away. Kankuro listened intently, nodding along, face shifting during her description of Rasa and souring at their struggles, but was quiet.

Fumiko summarized the night of resting, only telling about her nightmare because it'd been somehow prophetic, and then launched into a babbling, stuttering mess of an attempt to tell Kankuro about Madara's arrival, trying and failing to describe his chakra, and the fight that had ensued. Mai's sudden arrival and Madara's summoned meteors, quite literally falling underground once Mai saw the second meteor above with her sharingan.

She hesitated, and then quietly told him about their conversation under the earth. Fumiko didn't know what was going on between Kankuro and Mai, but it seemed to be important, from both of their behaviors.
Mai leaving, herself too injured and tired even to summon the ability to sense them beyond the fact that their chakra existed still, and then her own sudden peril as the earth itself came to life around her, wood snapping shut around her arms and slamming her through stone and dirt to surface above, immediately hit with Killing Intent from direct eye contact with Uchiha Madara.

(He hadn't cast a Genjutsu, and she didn't know why. Maybe because she was too weak to waste the effort on. Maybe because he wanted the Kage to see her fear rather than just knowing it existed in her mind. Maybe just so she was awake when he finally killed her.)

She talked about Satomi, and how she could feel Gaara and Mai's chakras flaring in tandem with their emotions, and how the wood had carved into itself, attempting to rip her to pieces- how she'd hesitated long enough to get both herself and Satomi nearly skinned alive.

And then she told him about teleporting, and fighting Deidara, how she'd kind of lost control of her own emotions and went in swinging, about summoning Shaapu to chase and taking his bird down, and the brief scuffle that followed. Upon further prompting she went into detail on her Genjutsu and the reason she hadn't been hit with any explosives, as well as her water-clone and Hiding Like A Mole Techniques.

It seemed like she talked for hours, the sky growing steadily darker. Yazu started a fire while she told her stories, set up rations without bothering to search for outside food, still listening intently. Even Deidara had quieted, if only to fume at her descriptions of their fight.

"And then you guys showed up," she finished. "And good timing, too. I couldn't even dig myself out of the ground at that point. I would've just been stuck there until someone came back. I guess Satomi went to find you?"

"Yeah," he said. And then: "Damn."

"Agreed," Yuzu said and nodded. "Not bad at all, Suna Lady."

"She's a Genin, you know," Kankuro told him, voice unrecognizable between surprise and pride. She let out something like a startled burst of laughter as he spoke. "Wasn't even official until like a month before we left."

"What about you?" she questioned. As long as they talked she wasn't so sick with worry, so Fumiko jumped to keep the conversation going, eager to hear his side of the story. "What happened since I last saw you?"

"A lot," he snickered.

"What happened with you and Mai?"

"Um," he said, and instead of tensing seemed to- it was hard to tell in the dark but was he blushing? "Also a lot."

"Wait."

"No."

"Wait."

"Fumiko-"

"You finally told her?"
"You knew?"

~ He'd been looking for a good bit, along with her panicked mother and a few helpful staff. She'd disappeared somewhere in the confusing sea of hallways, managing to vanish between one doctor and the next. ~

Fumiko glanced up at the sky, testing herself. Her mind was clear, chakra more or less restored and wounds gone. Her muscles were achy and bruised, but aside from that she was okay to fight, when she next got the chance to. She would probably go to sleep soon, now that her concussion was nearly gone and she'd managed to change into spare clothes she'd sealed away, but was nervous that if she did she'd wake up from nightmares with her current levels of anxiety- and she wasn't sure if Kankuro, Satomi or Yazu would be able to help if she did.

Satomi had returned from her perimeter with little to report, so it seemed like for the time being they were stuck watching Deidara.

She talked with Satomi for a little while, learned a little more about her village and her chakra and sealing, Deidara yelling angrily as a constant background noise to everything they did. They talked about the reincarnated Itachi who had broken the seal in his head and left to find Kabuto, the man behind the jutsu, as they had been close and she'd seen him along during the war.

She even talked with Deidara some, about art and the meaning of it. Fumiko agreed that there was art in brief flashes and in single moments, but disagreed on virtually everything else. He was hurting people, animals, village stabilities. But he didn't seem to realize it.

"Nothing is truly fleeting," Fumiko mused, toying with the prism crystal she'd taken completely from her neck. It was useless in the dark to reflect the light, but was comforting to roll around in her palms. "If you think about it."

"You don't know what you're talking about!" Deidara hissed. "What do you know about art?!"

"A lot, and your spies already told you that." She smiled, though he probably couldn't see it unless he was intensely staring at her through one of the slits between Black Ant's blades. "I'm not saying your explosions aren't art, but I'm saying that what you do is permanent in a lot of ways."

"What?!"

"I mean, think about it," she continued. She found herself not actually trying to upset him- just curious. Just wanting to give her opinion, from one artist to another. "The physical damage you cause is long-lasting. Even if it gets fixed, anything big will leave traces for like, ever. And if you think about the mental effects- I mean, you changed my life forever, and lots of other people's, too."

"Necessary sacrifice," he said, but it was strained.

"And explosions aside, there are always memories for fleeting things." She remembered seeing dances, seeing movies, seeing blooms on cacti, all those times curled up with Gaara knowing the next day was going to be busy, every moment she spent with Gaara period, and the rest of her friends and family. Every moment disappeared forever, but she remembered most of them, fondly or no, just like they had memories too.
"Shut up already, would you?"

"I do affected landscapes," she told him. "And a lot of other things too, but mostly painting."

"Hmph."

He avoided all other attempts at conversation. Kankuro waved her off and said, "Leave it."

They ate. They waited. She still didn't sleep.

Fumiko busied herself instead with resealing water into her glove's seals, one at a time, Yazu aiding her with maintaining her chakra so stay at optimum. There was nothing she could do with her lack of weapons to reseal, stuck now with just the one remaining, but at least with her strength restored her she could still fight with jutsu. She got halfway through, one seal filled in all compartments, the other just started, when Deidara spoke again.

"Come on, let me out!" Deidara whined angrily, knocking about inside Black Ant's stomach. "I've had it! I'm done! I'm completely fed up! I'm gonna explode any second now, hmph! You okay with that?!"

"Please," Kankuro said with a wide grin. Fumiko knew he was probably enjoying this- after all, Deidara had made him feel helpless and weak on more than one occasion. "We've got you sealed with Raiton- exactly so you can't explode. So just shut your trap- face it, you're nothing more than a dud."

Deidara growled angrily. Black Ant shook again with his thrashing. "There's no such thing as a dud when it comes to art!"

And then he was silent. There was a strange sound, like feathers or tearing papers, and Fumiko looked up to see the Ant's joints glowing with white light from inside of it. Her eyes widened, breath hitching, and she scrambled immediately to her feet, all thoughts of sleep abandoned.

Was this-?

"No way!" Kankuro yelped, taking a half-jump backwards in his shock. "He's gonna explode?!"

"No," she said even as the light expanded, raising into the air beyond her sight and cutting past the dark clouds. It was even more brilliant in the nighttime, Fumiko thought. This returning of souls... was beautiful. She followed its light, gazing upward, listen to the gentle ring like a high bell who's vibration never stopped, a soft sound, gentle.

"I see..." She heard it from the Black Ant, quiet. "It looks like the bookworm has been taken out... hmm."

"... it was a dud." Kankuro lowered his hand. "Don't scare us like that."

"Bang!" Deidara yelled, and Kankuro really jumped. Fumiko glanced down again to see his startled expression and despite herself, giggled. The Black Ant shook once more, and then was still. "Nothing I do is a dud!" It was his blond hair that surfaced first, and then the rest of him, a translucent spirit. As he came free from the Ant, he gave one final smirk- and then was gone, dashing after the lights in the air. "True art... is indestructible!"

Black Ant burst open, spilling out a corpse showered with reanimation material like packing peanuts in a shipped box. Despite knowing that the man was dead, she still stepped to him and knelt as the light faded around them, and put a hand on the shinobi's eyes.
"... Scaring us like that..." Kankuro muttered behind her. And then- "Ah! Granny Chiyo!"

And then he was gone, dashing into the air above and past her, leaving her with the other remaining Surprise Platoon member and the corpse.

Her ears rang with the sound of souls being released back into the afterworld, and looking up she could see lights- great columns of dazzling white light that disappeared into the sky. Other shinobi being released- like Granny Chiyo.

Granny Chiyo.

"Kankuro, wait!" she cried, and to Satomi and Yazu's surprise, turned and dashed int he direction he had disappeared in.

"Fumi-" she heard at her back, but it slipped away as she struggled to match Kankuro's speed. Forests like this, with tripping roots and stones, had never been friendly to her shunshin.

"Do you think-" she started, voice raised against the wind whipping her hair back, but he spoke over top of her, barely even sparing a glance at her appearance.

"Let's just hope we make it in time," he said breathlessly.

Her prosthetic skidded sharply on moss but she didn't fall, crouching low, arms coming up for balance, just a mild stutter but enough of a scare that she didn't take the time to reply or agree, just focused on her footwork and Kankuro's leading back.

After what felt like just a few zipping moments Kankuro dashed to a sudden halt, almost anticlimactic- Fumiko nearly crashed into his side, she hadn't even realized they were flying into a clearing until they were in the middle of it.

It was just a small copse between battered looking trees, but in the center glowed two of those brilliant lights, swallowing the disintegrating bodies of Reincarnation possessed corpses. In the back of her mind she catalogued the chakras, other presences in the tiny clearing, but her immediate attention was on Chiyo-baa-sama, almost gone already, separating from her vessel.

"Granny Chiyo!" Kankuro yelped, almost hissing in his haste. She glanced, down, seeming surprised- not that Fumiko could really blame her.

"Kankuro," she said. "And Fumiko."

Fumiko caught her balance, foot and metal sinking solidly into the grass, and caught Chiyo's gaze- probably the first time it ever looked so soft, the first and only time she could remember the elder to be happy to see her.

She was so close- close enough to touch. Instinctively she reached out, fingers spreading like she would take Chiyo-baa-sama's ethereal hands and pull her back down to the ground, but she didn't bother stepping forward, despite the aching need to- Chiyo was leaving.

She didn't need to look over at Kankuro to know he mirrored her expression- sad and confused, a child who didn't understand why their parent had to leave, helpless to do anything. But- they'd mourned, once. And they weren't children.

"Chiyo-baa-sama," she said. It felt like her voice should have trembled- matched her closing throat- but it didn't, only coming out a little softer than intended.
"Kankuro," Chiyo said again even as she began to raise, still with that small smile. "I entrust you with the puppet master techniques."

Kankuro straightened. When he spoke, his voice was quiet and solemn, heavy, if words could seem so. "I gladly accept," he murmured. "Granny Chiyo."

She needed more time than just these seconds. Never in all the times Fumiko had thought about what she would say to her if she got the chance had she considered only being able to say one sentence.

She wanted to say thank you, but it wasn't enough, and likely she already knew that much. It wasn't a worthy phrase to send her off with- the Saviour of the Sand, Puppeteer of Life, Chiyo of Ten Puppets- but what did you say to someone who had seen your life crash and shatter like a derailed train, only to give their life to set it right?

It was looking like she wouldn't be able to say anything at all, and she scrambled for something, anything, and just as she was giving up and opening her mouth to shout her desperate thank-you, just to say something, because maybe it wasn't enough but it was better than nothing- Chiyo spoke.

"I see," she said to Fumiko, "That you have used your lives well. Good."

"I-" I bowed for you, she wanted to say, and I address you how you always wanted. We are doing our best she wanted to shout, our best to unite this world and end its hatred and we are doing our best by each other, yes, Chiyo-baa-sama, we are trying.

But she knew that them, standing there before her to pay their respects, surrounded by a dying, flaming world they were fighting to protect, already proved that. Chiyo would tell her it was a waste of precious breath.

"Yes," she said instead. "Thank you for our lives."

"Hmph." And then she smiled wider, a mischievous glint in her old eyes that Fumiko recognized. "Now there's no need to play possum anymore!" she crowed, and then-

That was it.

She was gone.

The light lasted a little while longer, alongside the other, and she watched as it began to fade, shrinking, and suddenly Fumiko was reminded of dusk, pausing in her work to stare at the last slivers of midday sun sliding across Gaara's desk, chasing his pen, before finally disappearing into nothing.

She breathed.

Her hands lowered back down to her sides.

"It's over," Kankuro said, though he sounded more weary than anything else. Still, as she glanced sideways at him, she spotted the relief in his face- tired relief, but still it lightened the burdens in his eyes.

"It's over," she repeated, and it felt strange on her tongue. "Sugar. It's actually over."

Without the reincarnation jutsu this war was a couple remaining turncoats and a man in a swirly orange mask. The zetsu wouldn't last long, not with the forces freed from Madara and all the other
powerful shinobi that had been fighting against their will.

She cracked a grin and Kankuro snorted but followed suit, and she was so very very tempted to jump him and crawl up by his neck and give him the biggest hug she ever had, but she wouldn't because he was a serious shinobi and there were a few others scattered about watching the scene who'd been fighting the reincarnations in the first place, and-

And Kankuro shifted invitingly with a roll of his eyes and she squealed and threw her last thought out the window. He was warm and squished her hard, heartbeat thudding through his thick clothing. A cheer went up around them.

It was over, they were done, they could go home. She could hold the twins, they could mourn the dead, she could paint, they could sleep, she and Gaara curled up in the early mornings, unafraid of nightmares, because now they meant nothing.

She jerked back suddenly to look at Kankuro who startled and loosened his grip enough to let her lean back without dropping her.

"Woah, where's the fire?" Kankuro joked.

"It's over," she said urgently, in her haste unable to form what she needed to say fast enough. "The jutsu's been released- Ma- Madara's gone- they-"

His eyes widened and at the same time they cried out, "Gaara!"

"Mai's still there too," she said all in a rush, scrabbling to be let back down to the ground, "And all the other Kage!"

"Shit," he swore, "I can't believe we forgot-"

"Do the HQ thing," she said, "Rally up the troops and get them ready to finish the last sweeps, I'll go find them, I can heal them if I need to."

She saw the hesitation, the immediate need to bite back something stubborn.

"And, sis. Something... weird happened back at the base camp, before I came here." Mai smiled, a real smile, small and soft but not cynical or sacrificial. It looked foreign on her face. "If for some reason I can't- tell Kankuro I meant to keep my promise, got it?"

"She said- well, I might not be supposed to tell you yet, she said not to tell you unless she couldn't- But she said that she meant to keep her promise- or means to, I guess..."

Kankuro stiffened. He didn't relax.

"That damn idiot," he said under his breath.

You finally told her?

"I'll have Satomi bring them back as soon as they can move if they can't already," she promised, and he made a noise like a growl or a sigh.

"Ugh," he said, "Fine."

Because she could heal and he could not and he could lead and she could not.

"I'll see you soon, Kankuro!"
"Just go already, would you?"

She turned and bolted, and the second she hit the trees her mind started to scream.

Were they okay? Were they all alive? What had happened? Had they even managed to seal Madara at all or had they just held him off until the seal released? She didn't know whether to be elated or terrified and ended up just kind of wanting to throw up as a happy medium.

She almost ran straight into Satomi, skirting at the last second as her chakra registered and almost flying into and off-course airborne spin as she started to glance off a tree, but Satomi like a snake turned and grabbed her arm with two hands to avoid a break, spinning with her to follow the momentum, and she hit the ground instead.

"Ow," she gasped, "Oops."

"What-" Satomi seemed to finally be registering what had actually just happened and who was lying half restrained on the ground and immediately let go, moving to help her up. "What was-where did-"

"No time to explain," she said, wincing at a long scrape along her arm. The ground was unforgiving. "Satomi, you have to take me back to the Kage! Please, right now!"

"I- I should not," she said nervously. "It- It is dangerous-"

"The Reanimation Jutsu's been released," she said. "It's been released for everyone! The war's almost over! Madara's gone, but they could be hurt or-"

Worse.

"I-" Satomi's eyes went solid. "Yes, I can do that."

Tears nearly sprung to her eyes, but instead she grabbed onto Satomi without giving Kankuro a chance to react, and braced herself for the disappearing. It felt like being shredded to pieces under anesthesia, wide awake, and then the shreds being flung from a catapult faster than light, near instantaneously reforming, a sensation like being welded back into a whole person.

Fumiko spared only seconds feeling nauseous and stumbling from Satomi's grip, forcing herself not to retch, and then tried to pull herself back together enough to look up.

Oh, no.

No.

No.

"Gaara!" she screamed, startling Satomi beside her. "Mai!

"What happened here?" Satomi said quietly to the air, eyes flicking about. The landscape was in ruins, an amalgamation of twisted, snapped, charred wood and shattered stones and blood, flooded with water and cooled lava stone. Any direction revealed an injured Kage or the chakra trace of one, all of them unconscious, flung about carelessly as they'd fallen, one by one.

"Gaara!" Fumiko cupped her hands around her mouth, frantic. "Gaara! Mai!

No answer. Her mind shorted out the Kage, shorted out Satomi, didn't even bother to look for Madara if he still somehow remained, but instead forced her legs to bolt, scrambling up stones and
oddly shaped trunks, chakra pulsing out in search. Not good, not good- there was so much dying here, every chakra she sensed were dredges stuck to corners of souls, save for Satomi's and her own.

And then she found it and immediately let go of the boulder she'd been uselessly trying to shove out of her way, letting it smash back down where it started, kicking dust into the air. It was too quiet, a dead, stagnant silence that swallowed her sharp cries immediately, echoing them off the battlefield. "Gaara!"

She slipped a little, landing hard on a turned stone she'd meant to run down and sliding instead, and hit her knees skidding at the bottom, a twisted floor of survived Wood Release plants, thick green vines braiding around each other, each bigger than she was. Laid out on one, flat on his stomach facedown and with no response whatsoever to her chakra's distraught calling, was Gaara.

His arms were flung out in front of him, one limp near the top of his head and the other farther out-he'd fallen unconscious either in the act of trying to catch his impact or from the pain of landing. The stone in his bracelet glinted sharply against the light.

The only part of his clothes not destroyed was the red tie that attached him to his ruined gourd, holding loose, the gourd itself leaning to the side and nearly pulling Gaara's body up with it. Sand flaked off the cracks and spaces of missing chunks, a puddle of it already scattered beneath him.

Already, Fumiko saw evidence of gashes and bruising and broken limbs, his entire form unnatural, blood seeping between rips in his clothing and the top of his head. And still, he'd fought before with worse injury than that, and Fumiko wasn't even bracing herself for the injury that had taken down Sabaku no Gaara, Fifth Kazekage, but instead feeling with some numb awareness the pulsing heat in her chest and harsh hyperventilation that heralded the potential arrival of absolute panic.

She yelled again and scrambled to enough of a position that she could scrabble over the vines on her hands and knees, and some keen, distressed noise escaped her when she saw the pool of blood curdling around him, slipping off the vine to seep in between the Wood releases to the real ground somewhere far below. It was still red as his hair, and so he hadn't been here long, but...

But that was a lot of blood for a human body to lose.

"Gaara," she said, voice shaking, and touched his shoulder. "Gaara, hey-" She leaned back slightly and fumbled in her pouch for a kunai, and cut the taut cord running above his body. It snapped easily, and the gourd rolled away, settling in a shallow groove between two vines with an audible thunk. Then she threw the blade aside and pushed him over with some difficulty, struggling with his dead weight, but finally he flopped over on his back.

Fumiko froze, heart stopping in the span between two breaths.

"Oh, Kami. Oh, no, oh, no, Gaara, can you hear me? Gaara?"

He was mangled, torn apart inside and out, right side half gone and bloody. Whatever had ripped through him had just barely missed the bigger part of his stomach, though she could see it, pink and dusted with soil and slightly ragged at the end closest to the rest of the damage. Most of his liver was gone and that was the source of most of the blood, half internal and half on the ground, and his transverse and ascending colons were destroyed and smashed, all leaking blood and strangely colored fluids.

Coarse ribs were completely exposed, muscle and gore clinging to them like a row of half-finished drumsticks, one snapped with half of it entirely missing, two others fractured, and his lung was
deflated and sheared. The damage- this was irreversible, likely he was already dead, there was nothing that could heal him fast enough, too many things in this would kill him before anything got done.

In seconds she was drenched from her knees down in his blood, but she didn't care, hands flailing. She couldn't even begin to staunch the bleeding, there was nothing she could press down on or plug. Fumiko leaned her head down on his chest, face streaming, looking for something, anything, because at least one lung wasn't functional and checking his breathing would be next to useless. He wasn't gasping, wasn't struggling, wasn't showing any signs of life-

His heart, like some eternally suffering thing, an unplugged machine with the residue of sparks that still kept moving for another half second, an old toy that spoke in demon-tongues, wasn't beating so much as slightly wheezing, moving with a disgusting sound, with way too many gaps and stutters between each heave, but he was alive.

Fumiko found in one painful second that she took no hope from that. There was nothing she could do but try, an exercise in futility, and waste and waste and waste her chakra until he finally died right in front of her, in excruciating, unfathomable pain the entire time.

She grabbed at her face, at her hair, trying to regain some kind of control over her body, breathing loud and spastic and sticking in her throat, eyes going unfocused. She could feel blood streaking across her face and seeping where she was clutching at her hair, every muscle locked and she was forcing herself not to rock, because she had to focus, she had to focus, she had to focus-

"Fumiko-san! Fumiko-san!"

Fumiko realized she had started to scream, an unbroken fluctuating screech with no end, and yet she couldn't stop, even as Satomi came running, some archaic curse slipping from her mouth at the sight of the carnage.

"Fumiko-san, I- it is-"

She couldn't even say all right. There was nothing in this situation that would allow shallow comfort. Nothing was all right, they were in the middle of a war, the five Kage were down and on top of that Gaara was down, and even a child could guess he couldn't be healed, and Mai was missing and she was losing her mind, it was skating away just out of her grasp, and everything was turning some strange color she didn't recognize and nothing was all right.

"We have to try and heal them, Fumiko-san, do you understand that?" Satomi was saying, fingers snapping blurrily in front of her eyes, trying to catch her attention. "We need the Five Kage to win this war, and we must rejoin ranks soon-"

Fumiko did not give one single damn about the rest of the world, and Satomi seemed to realize that, mouth clamping shut, darting eyes frantic.

The burning feel of stomach acid and food rising past her stomach jerked her whole body with a spasm, and not a second after she practically collapsed away from Gaara- she could do this at least, she could do this one thing, she could not throw up on him- she was heaving, dark liquid stained with rations, half splattering across the wood and half seeping away between the cracks, and Satomi recoiled.

And now she was sobbing, sobbing and shaking, throat burning, somehow swaying even though she was already on all fours. There was a hand on her back, Fumiko could sense distantly, and another moving her hair, but all that was sticking was the blood coated across her hands, the rancid
smells of fluids not meant to leave the body smarting in the air, the splinters tearing up his wounds in her mind's eye.

And then the hand disappeared, and the second it did she dragged, trying to pull away from the sick, back to Gaara's side. There was no way in her current state to feel or listen for another pulse, her hands were shaking too badly, the blood in her ears roaring over her own spastic breathing. She would just have to guess then, she thought hysterically. At least she'd been granted this small mercy, she could just pretend he was alive, she wouldn't know when he was finally dead, she wouldn't, she-

She would, she had, and she keened at the thought of that pain, that freezing pain of her heart disconnecting from her soul, snapping through her again, tearing her in two, she couldn't do it, it would kill her-

The hands were back, and had been for a while, the source of some of the shaking. They grabbed her wrists, pulling her hands away from Gaara's wounds where they sputtered some weak shade of green, some strange halfway thought of a worthless attempt, but what did she care about dying from chakra deprivation if it was a lost cause anyway, they didn't need her, none of them needed her, not as much as they needed him.

So she struggled and hissed, almost slipping through the tightening grips with herself slippery in bloodstain, and it took a while of struggling and hissing before she realized she had stopped being wrenched and for her vision to clear away again and she found one of her hands on a dark red, wet fabric, and she watched it there for a second, confused, Satomi's pale fingers still clamped around the wrist, and then she became aware of her other hand, spread half a foot away from the first and on a similar stain of fabric, and then the darkness edging her vision lightened just slightly and-

Tsunade.

"-de is the only one who can do it," slipped through the white noise of roaring and ringing clouding her ears. And then a few heartbeats later, "-alive longer than he will, you can heal this, Fumiko-san, do you understand? Can you hear me? Fumiko-san-"

She could feel some part of her mind scrabbling and she understood this, somewhere, but her focus snagged on the feeling of her wet cheeks and the way Tsunade's spine was snapped in half, in two, and that it looked how she was afraid of feeling.

"-ing to find Mai-san," Satomi said, and suddenly her voice cleared into sharp clarity. "You must work quickly, Fumiko-san, and do what you can until the Hokage-sama can assist you. I will bring your sister here, and then I will lend you my chakra. Fumiko-san, try to hear me; breathe, you must-"

"I-" Fumiko managed and her voice was a cracking wreck even though she couldn't have been here for long. "Y- ye- Yeah, I-"

"Yes? Yes? Fumiko-san, do you understand me?"

Fumiko had always been smart in her life, at least up until this point, and she knew that that probably wouldn't change. It wasn't arrogance, it just stemmed from her want to learn and ability to retain what she did learn, and the experience of just understanding things quickly over and over and over. If Satomi had been speaking to her in codes from Iwa, an hour ago, she would have figured it out, she had formulated battle strategies mid-attack, she had outsmarted two Akatsuki on three separate occasions, she had defeated Nara Shikamaru in both Go and Shogi.
And some part in the back of this smart mind was still accepting and processing and analyzing what was happening, some few neurons still receiving the sounds and sights and smells beyond what her current consciousness could pick up on, because despite a panic attack her brain was fine, her ears and eyes and olfactory systems were still in perfect working order.

Similarly, she had always been a hopeful sort of person, even in the most desolate of situations. (this was an exception, this was the exception, there was nothing to feel about this, this impossibility-) As long as there was anything- or sometimes even if there was nothing- she could make it work, she could turn it around, she could put hopeful smiles on other faces.

And now these two parts of her, these two massive members of her core personality, perhaps two of the first things said if a friend were describing her to a stranger- smart, and hopeful- collided hard and she gasped, the fog clearing, and she became again aware of her rapidly galloping heart and the heat flaming in her chest and shoulders in panic, the pain in her eyes and bleeding mouth, the hoarse scrape of breath in her throat.

Her vision sharpened. The fog about her ears lessened, just enough, just enough as her brain brought to the forefront of her panic that there was still a chance here.

"Yes," she said to Satomi firmly, and the other girl flinched back in shock. Fumiko looked back down to Tsunade, tired Tsunade's old face, the Hokage's eyes dragging down like dripping ink on wetted paper. But even so Tsunade was managing something like a smile, some breathless support.

Her Seal was not gone yet, a barely visible fragment. But she was, impossibly, alive. Even though her injuries were technically more fatal than even Gaara's- by all rights Tsunade should have been dead the moment her spine disconnected- Tsunade of the Leaf, Queen of Slugs, Hokage of Konohagakure, had an affinity for healing unmatched by even the kami.

She wouldn't die from this, not for a long time yet, and that meant she could be healed.

And that meant that there was a chance for Gaara left.

She would have to work quickly, though, and around the slippery feeling still oozing between the spaces in her brain. She peeled off her bloody, useless glove, finding her hands had stopped shaking, and stuffed it into her bag, which she pulled from her shoulders to thump softly to the ground beside her. "Go, Satomi," she said. "Go find Mai, I can handle this on my own for a little while."

"Hai," Satomi said, and straightened up before leaping to a branch high above their heads.

She set to work, first heaving the second half of the body to touch the first, pulling tags from her bag that supported faster regeneration of the flesh, but healing the actual wound wasn't her priority. It was too extensive and would take longer than Gaara, and likely Mai, had left. It was a selfish thought, she realized, with an offhand kind of guilt. She loved Tsunade. But right now, that wasn't the most important thing.

This wasn't going to be even close to sanitary or regulation acceptable. They were in a dirty area, Tsunade had been here for way too long, and Fumiko herself was covered in someone else's blood. But it was going to have to work.

"Tsunade," she said gently, meeting her eyes. She was old, and frail, looking far from her age, looking older than Chiyo-baa-sama in her passing hours. The jutsu had drained her to dregs. "I don't know if you can understand me, or respond if you can, but I'm going to focus on your Gate and pathways, okay? Once those are healed, your Seal will naturally pick up the chakra that starts
to form, and you'll start to heal."

Fumiko dropped her hands to the top of the split of skin, two sides shoved together, likely not even close to precisely aligned. It was still bleeding, lukewarm pressure bubbling up between her fingers, but slowly. Tsunade had been injured longer than Gaara had been, and it seemed as though at this point there was hardly blood left to lose. She was living off the chakra stored within her seal.

Her fingers started to glow, and the healing chakra sunk immediately, draining into Tsunade's wounds. She continued to talk, breathlessly, hoping Tsunade could hear her, thinking she was. She wasn't telling the Sannin anything she didn't already know- Fumiko was using child's play compared- but it still helped, and cleared somewhat the strange buzzing that still wrapped around her spastic heart.

"Once you have enough," she said, focusing on pulling together the fine spiritual fibres that had frayed and snapped apart, "You'll have to summon a little bit of Katsuyu, all right? I don't have enough to help everyone, I- I c-can't help everyone here. Katsuyu can stabilize the other Kage, and me and Satomi can give you more than you'll lose in the effort, and you'll heal, okay? And, and then, we can help everyone else."

She had never done this extensive of a network healing. The closest she had ever come was Mai, in the tents, after the battle with the Statue, her pathways fried all across from her ill-used jutsus, and even then the damage had been considerably minimal. It had taken her days, then, but that was focusing on the blood and muscle and skin, as well.

But Tsunade didn't need all of them for operation. She needed enough, for Katsuyu, and enough for her Seal to do more than just keep her alive in the same stagnant state of injury. Once that happened, Tsunade's own chakra would help her to heal them, as would the slugs she summoned. Fumiko didn't know how many that would take. She didn't know Tsunade's body well enough to guess.

But she would go for as long as she could.

...

~ She was supposed to be here to shadow some of the medical staff- get some tips on her ever-increasing healing abilities, watch regular healing ninjutsu in the process, practice a little on some dead fish, but she left one doctor's shift to meet her next and never quite made it there. ~

...

Satomi did not swear at the sight of the youngest Mitsuwa, pinned to stone far above ground level, impaled with a grown root, blood dripping like rain from the hems of her clothes and slipping down the stalk that had likely killed her. She did not swear, but her breath caught in her throat, and it was close enough.

Despite this, she still raced up the side of what looked like a crashed meteor, sprouting signs of the fight with a Wood Style user, and stopped when she reached the small girl.

There she was, half-dangling from the root or branch or whatever terrible thing Madara had summoned. It was not bark-coloured as it should have been, not for a long way down, where the blood dried before it could drip any farther. Her red shirt had absorbed too much, half-noticeable save for where it had dried, steeped most of the way up to her shoulders, even though it had entered through her lower back.
Aside from the killing blow, she was wounded further: there were signs of broken bones in bruised, unnatural angles, and there were tears and gaps in her skin, exposed by tattered clothing. One shoe was mostly missing, save for the torn top strap which somehow remained hooked around her ankle, and her netted clothing had been mostly bashed to shreds, in some places impaled to the skin of her arms.

The hair hung back from her face, head lolling backwards. Her eyes were closed, mouth trapped in some strange smirk.

Satomi touched her gently, one hand going to support her head slightly and take the strain from the muscles in her neck, the other arm she put firmly against the back of Mai-san's knees, so that when she teleported and righted herself, Mai would be fully held and would not fall.

Satomi pulled them apart, and pulled them back together again at the bottom of the meteor, immediately lowering to set Mai carefully on the ground. Successful, with blood stained across her torso from the short time it had touched Mitsuwa Mai's wounds, she glanced up to where the root remained, still covered in blood and fluid, but no longer chunks of skin, no longer pinning a victim.

It was creepy, in a way, a giant arc of blood painted against an empty rock.

Dragging her eyes away, she pulled away some of the fabric clinging thickly to the gaping wound, and again caught her breath on some kind of word when she saw it: darkening quickly, with dirt or infection Satomi couldn't tell, and pulverized all the way through. It almost looked clean, cauterized, save for the jagged edges, the flesh caving under pressure to dangle within.

Mai's chest did not visibly move. Apprehensively, she reached to touch the side of her neck, pressing on the pulse point there, and felt nothing. Mai-san's skin was the same temperature as the surrounding air, fairly warm and dry, and Satomi didn't know enough about healing to be able to tell if that meant she was dead and her flesh had simply adjusted to the temperature, or that there was still some sort of life beneath it.

Did she dare bring this- whatever remained of her friend's beloved sister- to Fumiko-san now? She was fragile, unbelievably so, and it had taken nearly twenty minutes to even bypass the girl's wild panic enough to be heard, enough to be physically seen through her terror. If she brought her a body now, would she collapse, would she cease, could she even find the coherency in her mind to remember how to heal?

Logically, she knew she should wait, go back to Fumiko-san now and help her complete the healing, and then, when the job was over, allow them to look over Mai-san. But the problem here rested solely in her own ignorance: she didn't know if Mai-san was alive or dead. If she hesitated, this girl who might be alive would surely die in the time it would take.

But if she were dead, there was a chance it could ruin everything.

How strange it was to be making this decision. Herself a lone Ronin, uninvolved with the loyalties of the lands for so long, now struggling to make a choice that might change the course of human history. The Kage were necessary to this war, and without them, the Allies would surely lose. The only one capable of healing them was dying, the only one capable of healing her was teetering on a precipice Satomi couldn't begin to understand.

But there was life in the balance. She was not Kami. She could not decide to ignore a life for the greater good- but could she decide to ignore the lives contained within the greater good for just this life?
This would all be easier, she bemoaned, if she knew Fumiko-san better. Was her love for Gaara-sama greater than her love for her sister? Did it even work like that- was she more dependent on her lover than Mai-san? Who did she need more? Which couldn't she stand to lose, or would either shatter her soul?

She was practically blackmailing her. If she did not heal Tsunade, then her dearest loved ones would certainly die. Satomi didn't doubt that the outcome of the war, the survival of mankind, in this moment exactly, was not the forefront of Fumiko-san's motives. And now she was contemplating attempting to control what she felt and how she acted, even while she was unsure if the possibility of a chance had stabilized her already or not.

But...

The longer she waited, the more she rendered her choice obsolete.

But Satomi already knew, as much as it pained her, as much as she knew she might grow to regret this.

The survival of mankind was not the forefront of Fumiko-san's motives- but it was at the forefront of her own. She craved forgiveness and companionship, yes, but neither would mean anything in a world where everyone was dead. She would rather everyone live to hate her than die by her own hand, and she would rather live herself than jeopardize this fight, and she had her own people to protect.

Satomi sighed, hefted Mai-san once more in her arms- still, silent, possibly still alive, stubborn Mai-san- and disappeared.

...

~ Of course he was worried- a crawling itch under his skin, a kicking drive that made his feet rush a little faster than they had to, added a little urgency into his tone the longer this went on- but he was always worried if she wasn't right there, and sometimes if she was, what were the chances anyway that this was serious, that this was- ~

...

It was working.

As the gateways connected and became available, chakra trickled through them, not yet building. The gateways, at this moment, were the most important part: the gateways created the chakra, at the core, which had been ripped to shreds. Once the gates were had been rebuilt, chakra would slowly fan out into the pathways, like a started heart would try to send blood into the veins attached. Then she could start on the paths...

She tried not to rush, tried not to imagine Gaara's nonexistent labored breathing, catching herself tensed to the point of pain, physically bracing for an incorporeal agony that she sensed on the horizon. It was making her feverish, and her breath trembled, but she couldn't afford at this stage to mess up. If she did, and had to backtrack, then there was no way...

Just a little longer, Gaara, she prayed. I know it hurts, I know it, but just a little longer, please...

Darkness gathered in the top of her vision, and she didn't need to look up from her work to know Satomi was arriving. Anxiety jumping in her throat, she chanced a quick glance upward- and gave a distressed sound at her loneliness.
"Did you-" Fumiko's brow creased in concentration. "Mai, did you-

"She is safe, Fumiko-san," Satomi assured her. "Unconscious but mostly uninjured. I have hidden
her safely until the Hokage's summons can be released."

Fumiko let out a breath she'd been holding since, really, Mai had left her to join a fight miles out of
her league. Of course she was, she chided herself, of course Mai was alive, she was much to
stubborn to die from this. It didn't matter who she was fighting. Nobody outmatched her sister, not
when Mai decided that they wouldn't.

She didn't let her fingers clench, or her concentration slip too much, but she smiled slightly, and
knowing her face looked frightening in her shaking, bone-deep fear that none of this would work,
looked back down and said, "Thank you, Satomi."

"Of course."

There was a note in Satomi's tone- something too low- but there wasn't time to ask if she was okay.
There just wasn't any time left.

"I need your help," she said, spitting out the words. Here we go, she thought, here we go this is it.
This is the only chance we get. "In my bag there's a few unopened packs of seals, I need you to take
those out. Can you wrap gauze?"

"Yes."

"Okay." Fumiko huffed out air. Another gateway connected, she was so close. Satomi wouldn't
know it but with that breath, Fumiko yanked together a second gate, now immediately colder and
more tired but determined. Healing power rushed from her skin. "Don't bother stitching unless it's
severe, not if we're getting a healer. Focus on stopping the bleeding, use the bandages, use the
barrier seals. If they're in shock use the bag with the green strip, if they've lost too much blood use
the red, if they're heart's too weak use the yellow, and use the blue on all of them, that's chakra
replenishment."

Satomi, startled, tightened her grip on the bags she had taken, the plastic crinkling beneath her
fingers.

"If they're in a lot of pain," she continued, "Use the needles, there's a pack of painkillers in there.
Don't use the knockout tags or- we don't want too many seals working at once, okay?" Satomi
nodded. "The chakra could interfere and we just- we can't afford a rebound in energy. Don't use
more than three types of tags at once- prioritize the best you can- but you can use four or five of
one type depending on the severity."

Satomi was silent.

"Satomi, did you get that? Do you need me to repeat it?"

"Ah- no." Hesitantly, the samurai repeated, "Try not to stitch, use the- which ones are the barrier
seals?"

"Unlabeled, tied up with string. I made those on the field, I didn't have time to wrap them."

"Okay, use the barrier seals and bandages to stop the bleeding, no stitching, shock is green, blood
is red, yellow is heart support, blue is chakra. Blue on all, no more than two more on either, but-
but I can put four of the same down if it is bad?"
"Yeah, you got it. Don't forget the painkillers if anyone's conscious. Find all the Kage, move them if you have to- try not to, though- and just..." She gave a weak smile. "Do your best."

"And when I'm done..." Satomi eyed the bubbling healing chakra coming from Fumiko's hands. "I'll lend you my strength, to help you go faster."

"Right," she agreed, felt Gaara's presence burning behind her, like she could sense his exact position and state and breath, when really she couldn't even sense more about his chakra than that it existed. "... Can you..."

Satomi, ever perceptive, saved her from revealing her selfishness. "I'll start with Gaara-san first, then find the others."

"Thank you..."

They worked in silence after that, and after some time Satomi finished her work and, without a word, disappeared, chakra fading from the immediate vicinity, to find the other Kage, and try to keep them alive and relatively not in pain until Tsunade was available.

"I'm sorry," she murmured to Tsunade in secret, knowing, still, that Tsunade could probably hear her, but pretending she would not. "I really am... I really hope... that you'll be okay, and... that we can win th-this..." She'd never really stopped crying, but now it refreshed again, invisible against the blood. "And I kn-know that this is the opposite of... what a Kage should believe, but I th-think you'll understand, that I need Gaara more than this... world, I- I- I guess..."

The gates were completed, and so she moved on to the pathways, and could feel the slight tingles of foreign chakra against her own that revealed Tsunade's body was beginning to help in the repairs. Tsunade seemed to watch her, eyes open in some state of wakefulness.

"I hope we don't... die, I still have the twins b-back- back- back home, and family, and friends, and the entire future, I hope... Kami, I hope... nobody else dies... and that we can live but-" Her voice hitched- "but I don't care if I'm t-trying to heal him just to die next to me... if the time comes... you know? I just..."

Fumiko couldn't bring herself to continue. She barely knew what she was trying to say herself.

Maybe an hour passed, maybe two. Satomi didn't return.

She was sweating from exertion and stress, mind tightly leashed in place, burning with the thought, always, that there had been no pain yet.

And then, finally, Satomi returned, looking dirtier and slightly more exhausted but no worse for wear. "Everyone is still alive," she said as she knelt down on Tsunade's other side. "Not exactly stable, but... alive."

There was that odd note again, but Fumiko didn't question it.

"Put your hands over mine," she said, and Satomi did. Immediately Fumiko's jutsu shifted, brightening, more solid than it was with her chakra alone, and a slight breeze rippled from the dual use of chakras. A distracting and somehow, in all of this, pleasant thought darted through her mind: it was almost like she was following Chiyo-baa-sama's footsteps, taking from someone who wanted to help, to heal someone who could change the course of history.

It wasn't quite the same, though. She was working to save herself, as well.
But it was going to work. With each passing second, she got more excited, more and more of Tsunade's systems healing themselves faster, and now her own work was steadier, with Satomi's help. It was still slow, grueling work, but soon, soon. Soon she would have enough to drain herself, to coherently use a majority chakra to summon her healing slugs.

Satomi's chakra was indescribable, moreso than even in sensory perception. It didn't feel like one person's chakra- it felt like oils and water, seeds and stones, separate sparks of a flame- many, not one. Partway it felt perfect for healing, and also partway like she had never even given chakra before. Either way, it worked, and she could think about painting it later.

Painting it later.

This was working.

Her knees cramped from sitting, back aching from the slouch, her one foot totally numb and asleep, and they were both starving, unrelenting, but finally, again long after night had fallen and passed, the sun rising again, Tsunade hissed a sound, just barely a rasp, not even words. Still, though, Fumiko understood as movement brushed the bottom of her leg.

"Satomi," she said, voice hoarse from disuse and past tears, screeching. "Help Tsunade perform Summoning."

She braced herself for the withdraw of Satomi's chakra, which she had been relying on for almost an entire day. It was a sharp, cold shock for it to be missing, but thanks to the Ronin samurai's incredible reserves, Fumiko even still had a healthy store of her own to lean on.

Impossibly, despite the time that had passed, Gaara was still alive. He had to be in so much pain, and it ripped her apart, how much he was suffering, dead and alive at the same time. There was no but, no but he was alive, not for this. A tiny, secret part of herself, she knew even now, would always be sorry she didn't have the guts to just... take it away. But she couldn't, and she could accept her weakness. She had accepted it a long time ago.

She ad been about to send Satomi on rounds with food to try and feed the wounded Kage when Tsunade had started to stir. Now, the samurai guided her hands through the motions, Tsunade's body weak and dying but her chakra networks sufficiently healed enough.

(It was strange to think that, all this time healing later, and Tsunade was still ripped in half. This was the first time she hadn't tried to heal with healing in mind.)

There was a billow of smoke that enveloped all three of them, whipping out across the plain, and then Fumiko's hands rested not on the Hokage but the slimy back of a slug suddenly appeared, splitting itself as it came into existence with the summoner's intent, spreading a line across Tsunade's body, and likely a good chunk of slugs moving to latch onto any nearby chakras in distress.

Breathing hard, Fumiko fell back to sit, and looked behind her to where Gaara rested, almost close enough for her to lean against. If she laid back, her head would rest against his chest. For a second, she was tempted.

She sighed in unbelievable relief. There were two slugs on him, both the same size as the ones coating Tsunade's wounds. He could make it. There was a chance- and now, it was a good chance.

"Fumiko-san," a Katsuyu spoke in her breathy voice, giant and towering above Tsunade. The edge of her tail almost brushed Fumiko's puddle of sick from before, but she didn't seem to mind or
notice. "And you, as well. Thank you for your help."

"Of course," she said.

Satomi said nothing, only nodding, face growing troubled with a frown. She glanced at Fumiko in a strange way, but she ignored it and asked instead, "Is everyone going to be okay, Katsuyu? Have you found them all? All the five Kage were here, including my sister, Mai."

Satomi's breathing seemed to totally stop, body stilling like she was meditating in seiza.

"Yes," Katsuyu said. "They are all close to death, but all six shall recover, strength permitted."

"Oh Kami," she said, hands again shaking at last now that healing wasn't necessary, though now out of relief rather than terror. It hit her hard, and right in the head, and she almost keeled from dizziness, the heat gone immediately, heart still pounding in the wake of the terrible adrenaline. "Th... thank you... thank you so much, I can't..."

"I know you have gone through a great ordeal," Katsuyu whispered out. "But I'm afraid I must ask you to continue supplying the Lady Tsunade with chakra, so that she might heal."

"Oh..." It was impossible to mask the strain in her voice, the disappointment, but she swallowed it anyway. "Of course, I-"

"Go," Satomi said, and looked like she had been hit hard with relief as well, nearly boneless with it. "Go and sit with Gaara-sama. I have more chakra to give than you- save your own."

Fumiko's gates, falling back apart, gave her back some warmth, and the shivering subsided somewhat. She came close- incredibly close, impossibly close- to weeping again, but she did not. Only managed a grin, her first since arriving at this awful battlefield. She might've lunged for Satomi for a hug if it weren't for the slugs and her own desperation, and yes, already she was crawling away, turning to drag her sleepy, protesting limbs those few feet backwards.

Exhausted, and with a nod from the Katsuyu on his chest, Fumiko slumped over, dropping her head to the slight groove of his shoulder, tucking there like she would going to sleep. She flared her chakra in warm greeting- a waste, maybe, but, she hoped, some bare comfort to Gaara in his agony.

She stayed awake as long as she could, to monitor, to seep chakra into Gaara's skin to aid his healing, to mutter words that might've been comforting were he capable of hearing them. But fear, she had learned, was exhausting. It left her tired and high. Not to mention the amount of energy she'd expended in the healing, how little sleep she'd already gotten.

Mai still hadn't been moved here, likely because of whatever injury had caused complete unconsciousness as Satomi had said- probably a head wound- but Katsuyu's constant murmured assurances and updates of the Kage kept her placated, and eventually, finally, she slipped off to the growing thrum of Gaara's red-blue chakra.

...

~ He paused as he opened another door- what should've been an empty outpatient room, a few hallways down from where she should've been and where they'd looked first, and suddenly he realized what had happened, and Gaara wanted to laugh at himself as the mild tension finally swept from his body. ~

...
Mai's first thoughts were less words and more the absolutely intense sensation of pissed off that fueled the fury crawling through swear words; she felt fuck damn shit before the words could really form in her mind, before she could remember what they meant.

She didn't know how long she existed in fuck damn shit purgatory before finally it evolved to fucking OW, and then life was pain for probably an hour or two, god damn it, everything hurt like a bitch, a deep, throbbing ache, even though she still couldn't feel her body. The roaring pain didn't fade, not really, but her brain did boot up a little, enough that she went from darkness to the shadows beneath her closed eyes.

She still couldn't open them yet- which was beyond frustrating, but she managed not to scream, waiting, waiting, throwing all of her willpower at her stupid eyes and getting more and more angry and determined the more she came to consciousnesses because these were her stupid eyes, if they wanted to be unfairly powerful against her will couldn't they at least open up?

Before they did, something trickled into her still half-asleep outrage, some grating sound like whispers against her ears, or maybe Cat was snuffling them again, that shit felt gross- but it was that thought that finally broke through the fog of her controls, because Cat wasn't here.

"-king up, Mai-chan?"

A long groan escaped from her throat, barely containing a legitimate, curdling scream. Oh, she hurt. She hurt so bad.

"Be still," the mysterious voice advised, although it niggled familiar in the back of her mind. "You are still very lethally injured."

"... wwwwhhhhaaat..."

"You were impaled with Wood Release," the voice said in answer. "And left for so long that your body had been rendered catatonic in shock. You have several broken bones of varying severity and open lacerations, torn muscles and ligaments, as well as other injuries. You are quite lucky. When I appeared, you were dead."

That snapped her mind back into gear real fast.

"What?" This exclamation was immediately followed by an extreme coughing fit that slicked her throat and ripped and tore from her lungs, leaving her wheezing. She was blind, still, but becoming aware of the bubbles popping behind her throat, the deep taste of iron and rotted salt. The pain tore from one side of her to the other, ripping across her nerves like flames over fuses. "Ah- ah-"

"Your heart had recently stopped," it said, sounding relieved. "But I managed to restart it before permanent damage to the brain could occur. Do not worry, little one. You are safe now."

Okay, this was too much.

Work, you pieces of shit eyes.

And suddenly, like magic, they did- peeling open with enough difficulty to cause immediate and blinding pain, starbursts of multicolors that seemed to ring with sound and immediately dredge up vomit to the back of her throat, not caused the least by the little cracks of light that filtered in from the ceiling, a mass of living branches.

As they focused, slowly, and with plenty of actual cursing this time- vocally and internally- Katsuyu came into focus, and for just a second she thought oh yeah, I got impaled by a giant bug,
before she remembered with a jolt of alarm that that had been a long ass time ago.

"Ahhh..."

"Your memory should return soon," the slug, who now of course she recognized, said gently. "As the pain fades, your body will begin to function properly again."

"Right," she rasped, and her voice caught like she hadn't had a drink in a week.

"You shouldn't speak yet."

Yeah, screw that.

"What's happening?" she demanded, voice barely above a gravelly whisper. The words twisted something in her gut and she convulsed, body trying in vain to curl up, muscles snapping to sudden attention, knees starting to rise to come smack her in the face but no, she was too weak, and Katsuyu too heavy. So instead she laid there, gasping for breath, vision stained.

Katsuyu gave a small sigh. "I am healing the Kage," she said. "And you included. It has been nearly two days since your fight with Madara."

Since her fight with...

Shit.

"Oh, son of a-" This time she really did scream, first catching as she wanted it to behind her tongue and then shrieking past it, though not quite as shrill as her body begged it to be. "Ah... ahhhh... aw, hell... I... did we..."

"You lost," Katsuyu said apologetically. "From what Tsunade is telling me, the release of the reincarnation jutsu was interrupted, and your fight continued. You were injured in the battle, and though it continued long after that, all of the Kage were eventually defeated... however, none of you were killed."

Oh, Madara, you cocky bastard, she thought, actually insulted. It was all coming back now, in traumatically painful flashes, corrupted with the pain of her- death? It didn't matter- and of course, of course he'd left them there to die instead of already dead. She wasn't even grateful. Glad to be alive, yes, but really, damn that guy to hell, him and his stupid dancing metaphors and cruel looks and condescending laughter.

Ugh.

She didn't dare try to look, one because she might pass out if she tried to lift her head and two because, with bile already rising in her throat, she didn't know if she could stomach whatever it was that had potentially killed her. So she let it loll instead, dry eyes taking in her surroundings: definitely not the rock she'd been pinned to. Mai frowned at the branches above her, and around her; she was lying on a bit of stone padded by fabric, some kind of cloak- that might've been a sleeve.

And then she had a thought.

"Hey, you- you- said th-that everyone is alive, right? Th-the Five Kage?"

"Hai."
"Okay, what about- did another girl come back? You might- remember her, from Konoha-"

"Miss Fumiko?"

"Yes," Mai said, and the words shoved all the air out of her lungs. "Yeah, uh, she's- is she-"

"Fumiko-san is fine," Katsuyu affirmed, with something like- affection in her tone. Damn, Fumiko made friends with literally everything. "She helped to heal Tsunade-sama to enough health to summon me. I have been healing with the help of a young lady named Satomi for the last few hours, though, as Fumiko-san has fallen asleep."

"Does sh-she know where I am?" Because that was really weird, that she would be sleeping with Mai missing. But maybe she wasn't missing- Mai couldn't sense anything in her current state of fucked up, maybe she was closer to them than she thought, maybe she was hidden or being sheltered.

"No," Katsuyu responded. "Although Satomi-chan does, as she was the one who found you previously. Your sister is currently sleeping off a severe panic attack as well as several consecutive hours of healing."

"Panic attack?"

Katsuyu accepted her angry growl with grace. "All I know is as Satomi-chan explained. Fumiko-san had a severe mental breakdown when she arrived, as the Kage, and consequently her friend Gaara-sama, were grievously injured beyond her capability to repair."

"... Oh. And Sh-" Mai had to stop herself from saying shorty-sama in her anxiety, the affectionate nickname would be lost on Katsuyu. "Gaara's okay? A-and F-fumiko's with him?"

"Yes," she said kindly. "I'm afraid I'm not receiving much chakra for healing- Tsunade's seal is barely existent, as is her natural chakra, I am being supplied solely by Satomi-chan to heal six fatally injured patients... so, it may be a few hours until you are well enough to move."

Mai groaned again.

"As I recall," the Katsuyu continued before she could retort with a sorry, no, "You are not a patient to follow instructions. Now that I have had ample time to fix all damage and concussion within your brain, I am now going to put you to sleep, so to speak, to speed up the healing process."

"Oh, like hell are you-ouuuuu..."

"Sleep well, Mai-chan."

She drifted in and out of dreams, then, never quite at the cusp to get back to fuck damn shit, but it was pleasant enough, if not frustrating- reality slipped from her fingers, and slipped from her fingers, and slipped from her fingers, again and again and again, and always there was the pain, a swell of nausea and discomfort that welled to yank her from dreams, but always a heavy weight settled her back in, over and over.

It was timeless and warm, and each new dream faintly retained something from the last, all having to do something with the color white and the orange tangs of citrus, an overall sleepy feeling that reminded her of pillows and heat.

Mai wasn't aware when, exactly, she came back into consciousness, just that at some point she realized that the haze of new wakefulness had replaced the haze of forced sleep, and she jolted with
a snap to fully conscious, small realities sluicing sharply through the thick molasses of her thoughts, gasping slightly. The cold stone. Hot pain. The wet, cool feeling of Katsuyu and her squirming chakra. Faint, muggy breezes slipping over her face.

Blood still pooled around her lips, now that she had the wits to feel it, new trickles seeping to fill in dry cracks that flaked off as she curled her mouth in disgust. One ear was ringing faintly, breath rattling in her throat like the air was rusty.

It didn't hurt as much this time around, she noted with some relief, although it still hurt a lot, all things considered. She groaned, and it didn't make her want to cry. It did not. Fire still bit viciously into her side, but it had faded somewhat, leaving her to focus, unfortunately, on the pileup of shattered, snapped, chipped, fractured, bruised, abused bones and tissues left behind. Again, it took some time just to open her eyes, but at least this time it wasn't from exhaustion.

"You know," she croaked. "R-really, just, just fuck you, Katsuyu..."

"You've been asleep for just below a full day," Katsuyu said by way of greeting. "About ten hours."

"Ten hours..." She frowned. "I am.. pretty damn healed for just ten hours."

"Yes." Here, Katsuyu's eyes shifted, her strange puckered mouth somehow pursing with distaste. "A short while ago, Orochimaru and his associates arrived, and-"

"WHAT?!"

Mai was up with a roar that almost sent her puking over her legs, half-dislodging the slug and causing a ripping pain to shoot through her abdomen where the Wood Release had hit that zapped through her entire system, lighting up her injuries. She grunted back another yell of pain- and only half succeeded- curling over herself, hand accidentally slapping the slug's slimy side instead of her wound, and she swore in surprise, hand jerking away.

She didn't even pause to question the pain any further than pure visceral reaction. "Why?" she demanded. "How? What did that bastard-"

"As of now," Katsuyu said, "It appears that he is on our side, and has greatly aided Tsunade back into full health, which means that the other Kage will finally be fully healed soon, as will you. I'm afraid that I should go back to Sakura, soon, though I will explain to you first the situation."

Mai decided to shelve her disbelief for that moment, but now she was definitely getting out there, right now, she didn't trust that bastard for a second. "To... Sakura?"

"Yes," the Katsuyu confirmed. "It was Sakura-sama that summoned me from the woods. I merely locked onto Lady Tsunade's chakra when she finally managed to reach out to me, thanks to Miss Fumiko."

"Okay," Mai said. "You said the others are healing?"

"Yes, currently."

"And I'm guessing," she said dryly, "That since I'm awake, that means I can move?"

"Yes."

"There was humor in there," Mai mused, grunting as she struggled to stand. Although it hurt like a.
bitch, it was at least localized to a few major spots, instead of just everywhere like after Madara's attacks. Katsuyu had healed a lot already- broken bones mostly sealed, sprains and tears righted, internal organs regrown and sealed. The only things that truly remained were pure flesh wounds- cuts and some larger gashes and bruises- a few busted bones in less important areas, and of course the not completed hole in her abdomen, which from what she could feel had, at least, been sealed at her back entry point. "I heard it."

As she finally managed to stand, vision whiting out slightly at the edges, she glanced down at what remained of her wound. Holding Katsuyu with one arm, she moved her briefly, and wrinkled up her nose at what she saw.

It was still open, all right, and there was still peekings of raw internal flesh beneath the wires of muscles still pulsing with healing. Blood actually sloshed out as she stood, draining down the leg of her pants.

"Gross."

"Tsunade-sama will heal your injuries faster than I am capable, as merely a conduit," she said.

"Right." She couldn't resist the urge to roll her eyes. "Hey, is Fumiko still asleep?"

"No. She is awake and fully revitalized by Tsunade."

"Hookay," she breathed. Her knees were shaking as she supported herself, and she moved with a lunging sort of limp, pressing Katsuyu to her wound as both a pressure wrap to stop the blood and because she was still healing it as Mai stumbled forward. It was light outside, she could see it, once again, through the gaps between the Wood Release, so she had slept entirely through the night at least.

It was just luck, probably, that had formed this mini-cave to begin with. Madara hadn't really been focused on more than destroying the landscape for attention, so there were plenty of Mai-sized gaps for her to fit through, and she slid out with some difficulty, swearing and tripping and swaying but refusing to hit the ground- she knew from experience that if she fell now it would be infinitely harder getting up, and the pain would temporarily paralyze her.

"I cannot believe," she muttered angrily, not really to Katsuyu but to whatever was or wasn't listening. "That I have been completely impaled twice. Not even by swords, no! B-but giant ass freak of nature bullshit!"

Katsuyu, wisely, said nothing except, "The others are up ahead."

Mai arrived just in time for what must have been Gaara finishing up being healed. She wanted to call out, at the sight of them, her brother and sister alive and well, but she didn't- she hung back, just for a second, not hiding her chakra presence but not advertising her arrival.

Tsunade was knelt over him, hands against his torso and covered in blood from her fingertips to almost halfway up her upper arms somehow and soaked up completely into her pants, and it didn't even look like she'd healed anyone else yet. Mai went a little cold at the thought, but- maybe it wasn't Gaara's blood, maybe...

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Fumiko was right beside her, up by Gaara's head- almost too close, pressed up against Tsunade's side to watch the progress. Gaara was awake, face twitching with mild discomforts, head rested in her sister's lap. The other kage were some distance off, being tended by that freak with the red hair, all still unconscious, probably, and fairly dead, but each covered with at least one slug. Katsuyu
"Hummed.

"Gaara?"

"I'm all right," he responded, and from that small, tired smile on his lips, Mai could tell he'd answered that question several times already. Despite this, Fumiko still nodded hard, looking awestruck, huddling even closer.

"Gaara..."

"It's all right."

She couldn't wait anymore. Probably she'd missed the freakout of Gaara waking up, if it was really as bad as Katsuyu had said.

"Fumiko!" she called, taking a hard step forward and almost losing her upright position. She was a little dizzy, still. "Shorty-sama!"

Their heads both jerked in tandem, and Fumiko's face broke out like the sun, absolutely beaming, and oh, kami, she was crying, Mai realized, she was crying and from the looks of it, had been for quite some time. "Mai! Mai! You're awake!"

Gaara lifted his arm slightly, fingers raising. Come here. His eyes, even from here, spelled deep relief.

She realized that the last he'd seen of her had been bleeding out from an attack meant for himself. She knew that no amount of someone else telling you they were okay could bring you back from that.

So she raised a shaky hand in a two-fingered wave, grin splitting her face the way she knew would set them at ease.

At least until they saw the blood beneath Katsuyu.

"Mai!"

Suspiciously, Mai noted that at the horrified cry Satomi, from where she conversed quietly with the other Katsuyu, flinched hard.

Mai really didn't blame them for the way their faces bleached of color. She wasn't much better than Gaara in terms of bloodstains- it soaked completely through most of her pants, and though they were black it sheened in the new light, and squeezed from the hems as she walked and stood, covering her one bare foot; and it was plain to see on and under her mangled shirt, a mess of gore and new bright blood over old brown blood, stiff in her shirt like starch.

It was all over her face, and pooled completely on her back from lying down, dyed her hair in ombre. She looked like a walking, talking corpse, and smelled like one too.

Tsunade, for her part, only looked up to give her a cursory glance before looking back down. "You," she said conversationally to Gaara, maybe as distraction from her grisly appearance, or maybe she'd interrupted a conversation. "Should be dead."

"Yes," Gaara agreed quietly.

"You shouldn't have been able to withstand that level of damage for two minutes, let alone two
days."

In response, Gaara merely shrugged against Fumiko's legs. "I don't recall how I didn't die," he admitted. "Only that I did not."

"Well," Tsunade said. "You're healthy as a horse, for now."

Hesitantly, Fumiko lifted her hands away. Gaara lifted himself tentatively, and finding no resistance, rose all the way to a sitting position even as Mai drew closer, Fumiko's hands lifting grabbily towards her.

Oh, damn.

"What happened to you, Gaara?" she exclaimed, taking in the half-there clothes, the wide, ugly tear of scar tissue beneath the shreds of his shirt, the puddle of blood completely surrounding all three of them that, honestly, looked like all the blood a shinobi of Gaara's stature could even hold. He looked exhausted, an air in his eyes that ran beyond physical necessity.

She knew that look.

He'd been in pain for a very long time.

To save Tsunade the trouble she just plopped down next to them, hissing in outrage as her body rebelled, Tsunade making way. Subtly, she leaned against her sister, just a small brush of skin. She was fully warm, fully charged, perfectly fine, save for some pretty serious tears and singes in her blood-soaked clothing. Gaara, too, seemed perfectly all right save for his significantly more ruined clothes, and Mai was pretty certain they didn't have spares with them.

"What happened to you?" Fumiko said worriedly, hands going instinctively to heal before backing off for Tsunade to take her place. "Satomi said you were- unconscious, but fine-"

"Satomi's a goddamn liar," Mai muttered in annoyance. "I apparently actually died for like, three seconds."

Fumiko went white. "She said..."

There was a long pause, both of them waiting for her response, Gaara's eyes narrowing in tandem with Mai's own, both throwing glances Satomi's way. The samurai- predictably, Mai wanted to sneer- was looking in the opposite direction.

"Did she-" Gaara started finally, danger flashing there in his eyes, but Fumiko shook her head.

"I'm not happy she did it," she said at last, "But I get why she did. We couldn't afford you not healing, Tsunade. I'm just glad... they got to both of you in time."

Mai sighed in relief as the wound sealed, near instantaneously healing, like there was a violent wrench and then it was closed and then another wrench and hey, it wasn't tender anymore and then wrench, most of her other wounds were gone, bones snapping together, veins and muscles weaving back to strength; bam, matching twisted scar and done. With the sudden lack of agony came an opposite but equally powerful rush of chakra and strength, racing to fill her cells and muscles, and Mai twisted her hands into fists and then back loose again.

"Thanks," she said, and reached back into one of her- miraculously still remaining- back pouches, and there was a small pop before she pulled out a spare netted top. Hers had been pulverized, she could feel it tearing into her skin everywhere. She tossed it on the ground between them, then
reached back, another small burst of warm smoke huffed against her fingers and she was holding what she hoped was a left shoe.

"You're welcome," the Hokage said tersely before heaving to her feet. "I'm going to tend to the others now," she said. "Get yourselves sorted out."

"R-right, yes," Fumiko said, a grateful smile on her face. "Thank you, again-"

"Stop thanking me for doing my job," she barked- though, Mai noted, with some traces of gratitude in her tone- and then left to deal with the others.

Mai, again, unpinning her top, searched around with eyes and chakra for Orochimaru, but he seemed to be gone, if he was even ever there in the first place. As she shrugged off her shirt and set to picking out the metal from her skin, Gaara glanced her way quickly in alarm and then relaxed- as, she realized, he registered that she was wearing bandage wrap around her boobs.

"Gaara," she said, a grin creeping out across her face, "Thanks, big bro, but I'm way past that."

He flushed slightly. Fumiko laughed, still, in a mild way, crying. She didn't seem to notice.

Swiftly enough she removed the fishnet, pulling it over her head and shoulders, and replaced it with the new stuff, ignoring the small cuts left in the wake of the process. While she did they filled each other in on the passed events- she and Gaara explaining what they still remembered of the fight with Madara, and Fumiko, bashfully, giving a quick blurb version of her fight with Deidara.

"Ha!" she howled, and thumped Fumiko on the back, who seemed pleased. "Oh, I wish I could've seen it. Go, Sis, go!"

Gaara seemed, although just as proud, slightly more troubled. "You did well," he said.

Fumiko snorted. "You mean I did something dumb."

"Well of course it was dumb," Mai cut in, finally shrugging her ruined top back on and starting to repin it closed- what parts of it could be repinned. She hadn't found shirts important enough to be sealed away for backups outside of her packs, and so she was stuck with a mass of blood and fabric tatters, but a shirt, in the long run, wasn't necessary. At least she had another pair of pants. "Most cool things are."

Gaara smiled faintly, and damn it, wait, don't you dare-

"You would know," he said, and, yeah, okay, she'd walked into it.

"Hey," she said, "I probably saved your life, admit it."

It wasn't as funny as it could've been- it still rang a little short of even dark humor, the scars literally still too fresh; but still they laughed, and it was enough. Eventually they all got to their feet, changed into any spares they had and wiped as clean as they could be- although all three of them would be bloody until they could get to a med camp and properly clean off- and joined the largest Katsuyu, who started telling the story of the front lines as Tsunade began her rounds.

Her good mood didn't last very long.

"It's not over," Fumiko said as she listened, sounding crushed. She leaned against Gaara's shoulder. "I really thought..."
"No," he agreed, "Not yet."

They were silent for the rest of the debrief, but everyone's thoughts were loud enough to see, let alone hear.

The other Kage were in a bad enough state that, as much as she hated it, Mai started to hate Madara a little less, because really- unless he'd deigned to drop down from his high-ass horse and feel each and every one of their necks for pulse, he could've without a shadow of doubt thought they were all dead. He'd ripped Tsunade in two if Fumiko was to be believed, which went without saying.

Her heart was still thudding painfully, and occasionally she found herself breaking into cold sweats- reactions to her debilitating hellfire agony just a half hour prior, and every other debilitating hellfire agony she'd experienced since the war had started regurgitating back into her phantom senses at the sight and smell of blood and gory carnage, the air slick and rank with blood and spilled intestine. And at least one of them, in their pain, had pissed themselves- it was sharp with dehydration, Mai could smell it.

But she could deal with that. It was just weird being completely healed from the crippling throbs of death pains, all heat and rushing waves of torture, in a few minutes rather than a few months, nothing more and nothing less- her body was just confused and it would catch up to the fact that she wasn't dying in a ripping, tearing gush of blood and intestinal linings so painful that she couldn't feel half the sensation and was still slavering like an animal soon enough.

And the Kage were healing. Miraculously, impossibly, not a single one of them had died, through some shared gene of irrational stubborn bullheadedness possessed between the six of them. According to Katsuyu, three of them- herself, Gaara, and the Raikage- had been reduced to no heartbeat at all, surviving on the last cold smears of five or six sputtering brain connections, for way longer than they should have been capable.

Ohnoki had stopped breathing. Tsunade had gone into almost comatose shock. The Mizukage had fared the best out of them all, but still was taken down with lethal injuries that she should not have survived.

The fact that the remaining three injured were all completely stable and well on their way to being in perfect fighting form was yet another stroke of impossible luck. (It wasn't enough to convince her that there was a Kami out there. Too much terrible shit happened too much of the time, and this war was too awful, the Ops too dark, history too tangled up for it. Too many good people had been hurt.

But she pondered.)

Their survival, as spectacular and completely, utterly impossible it was, was all well and good. However, as Katsuyu talked, outlining the grim outcomings of the battle, the casualties already lost, the growing wave of total devastation snapping and writhing and pouring from enemy lines, the darker and more tense the air grew with a silence that, if Mai hadn't already seen them face certain death with the strength of nations, she would have pegged as hopeless.

They had long since annihilated their capacity for hopelessness.

They had survived just to, probably, die before the sun fell again. But it didn't matter, not really. Not when she'd already accepted she was going to die and been cheated on her faith. Her heart was pounding with the physical crack speed of relief, but she didn't let it trick her: it meant nothing. Survival was a fluke wrapped in her sister's steadfast refusal to let Gaara die.
Maybe she would pull through the whole war, maybe she wouldn't. She was damn well trying, though.

She sighed, sensing the fight and not wanting it, rolling her eyes sky high.

"I need to go there," she said. "Now."

It didn't last long, the battle of wills. She won, as she knew she would, because she wouldn't fight beside the Kage when they returned anyway, and help now instead of later could always make a crucial difference on the front-lines. The Five Kage needed to stay together while they healed and Fumiko- she offered to come, or tried to, but Mai didn't let the words finish forming in her mouth.

Her sister's eyes were still quaking like a baby deer's, unsteady and glazed with frailty born from shock trauma. She'd been shaken- she needed just a little more time, as much as could be bought for her, and Gaara, as well, seemed to realize this. He'd scared her, and badly. They couldn't separate now.

Hugging her, because she wouldn't let Mai leave with anything less, she caught eyes with Gaara- Gaara, still leaning almost into a limp from a pain he remembered so desperately and blindly that it didn't matter whether or not he still felt it, Gaara, standing slant just a foot away, enough to talk out with the Kage but close enough to still sense Fumiko's body heat, let alone stay close enough to soothe- Gaara, with enough pained determination in his eyes that she knew it would blow him out at the knees if Mai turned herself up dead at the end of the war and still he'd let her leave- and waited as he seemed to fault his own breath, before finally inhaling and giving her a firm nod.

Then, of all people, she noticed the Tsuchikage watching and narrowed her eyes at him, daring, challenging. She knew that look and didn't understand it. He was looking at her sharingan eyes, veiled completely behind her regular iris, and he was looking at her lightning style, tied permanently into her back, and he was looking at her mouth that had hissed and snapped at them with vitriol, and he was looking at how she'd struggled until Gaara aided her in facing down her death with a raging, twisted snarl.

She knew the look because she got it a lot, from strangers, from colleagues, from her closest friends and most violent enemies. It was this bitch just won't die and this psycho just won't STOP, it was do you know how to shut your mouth and you're gonna die because you don't know when to shut up and play dead.

She didn't understand it because of all people he probably got it the most himself, this man who was too old to be the Tsuchikage, who fought a life and death war with a bad back, who spat acid, however wrong or right he was, to anyone he didn't like, even if it wasn't the time. But, she supposed, he was also the same man who laid down and surrendered facing Madara, and the same man who stared at her back in utter, damning confusion as she tried to save their lives.

Maybe it was meant to be flattering.

Maybe he was prematurely lamenting the death of a promising soldier.

Who the hell knew.

She pulled away, sensing the throes of emotional exhaustion in Fumiko's almost imperceptible trembling, and gave her the most confident, white-toothed grin she had in her arsenal. It seemed to work well enough, even if the set of the deep, dark purple blotches beneath her eyes overbalanced her weak, high-watt smile.
"I don't like this," Fumiko admitted, arms wrapping around herself. She swayed slightly, even though Tsunade along with restoring her chakra (and, Mai suspected, balancing a few rowdy chemicals in her mind) had already eased away the violent bruising where her flesh met the prosthetic. "I feel like we need to stop... separating."

"Yeah, I know." Mai grimaced. "Don't got much choice, though."

"Be careful," Gaara warned before her sister got the chance. For a second, for the first time, Mai thought they looked alike- expressions pulled exactly.

"Hai, hai." She punched Gaara's arm in what was probably considered light enough to be camaraderie. "You guys, too."

She spared the rest of the Kage nothing but a long glance and returned nod. Hopefully they joined the battlefront soon, hopefully they didn't die as soon as they hit, hopefully it made a difference when they showed up. That was all she could spare them: respect for the change they could be in the tides and for what they had already survived.

"I despise you," she said to Satomi as she turned to face her, who had been hovering just behind her as the decision was made, also itching to leave, to escape the hurt stares and from the guilt that followed her. She was the easiest way to the big fight, but still, some gallows part of her brain wanted to just punch her teeth out. She hated this turncoat, this feeble excuse for a Ronin warrior, this manipulative freak of nature who kept slapping her sister into a crazy spin every time she was balanced on a high wire.

From what Mai could piece together, she'd tried to throw her life away to prevent emotionally compromising the only Healer on hand, and honestly Mai didn't give a shit- she'd have done the same- but even as Satomi grew more nervous Fumiko grew more comfortable in her presence and it pissed her off.

She would never trust this fox as long as they lived.

Satomi sighed, reaching out a hand for her to take, which she did. They were going to try jumping, as the former Akatsuki called it, teleporting multiple times to reach an extremely far away destination. "I know."

And then her world tore itself to pieces.

...

~ She was sleeping. Fumiko had just tried to sneak a nap, curled up in a hospital bed in the dark next to quiet equipment, and obviously she'd underestimated her body, because she'd been missing for almost an hour. Gaara flicked the light on, took a minute to just look at her in disbelief and amusement. ~

...

"What is it, kitty? I just got them to sleep, don't wake them up again. I thought you were in Gaara's room?"

"Mew."

"I know, honey. I miss them too."

"Mrr..."
"... I hope they're okay..."

~ Finally he smiled slightly and shook his head, not even bothering to try and wake her, just moving instead to just pick her up gently, her head lolling out against his neck as he went to find her mother to tell her he was bringing her home. ~

Chapter End Notes

Yes I'm alive

I feel like I'm always saying sorry because I'm always POSTING SO LATE

Enough about lamenting how my ability to update has shifted from once or twice a week to once every two or three months let's just, let's just kill that right, now, uhhh

Anyway, I'm sorry about that horrible cliffhanger! I actually forgot about that, can you believe? It's just that I know everything that's going to happen, and have discussed it so much at length with friends that I uh, I kinda forgot that you guys didn't know Mai wasn't dead

oops

And that last bit would've looked much better cinematically. Like. That five second scene back home after some intense action, quiet twins tired mum lonely confused kitty cat. But I still included it anyway

So, not my longest chapter ever (Wordcount without author's note is 18,114) but I felt like this was a good stopping point- I actually moved a few scenes that were supposed to end this to the beginning of the next chapter, because the way this one was written I just feel like it will flow more.

To the guest OwlGirl (on Fanfiction): yes, I'm sorry. Otokaze is dead, and nobody in the series knows it yet except the zetsu who killed him. I meant it to be obviously implied, my bad. Yeah, that's definitely an english saying, yes, I NOTICED how crazy different this is going to veer from the unexpected Boruto series (and after all my hard work making it mostly canonically acceptable!) And THANK YOU MUCHES for your kind words!

Review!

End Notes

And this is where I'm all caught up for now: behold, the Fourth Shinobi World War.
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!